



THE HOLDEN
BROTHERS

A BILLIONAIRE

Dom

M.S. PARKER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A BILLIONAIRE DOM

THE HOLDEN BROTHERS 3

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THE HOLDEN BROTHERS READING ORDER

Thank you for reading *A Billionaire Dom*, the final book in my new series, *The Holden Brothers*. Each book is about a different brother and can be read standalone, but I highly recommend reading the books in this order:

- [1. A Billionaire Gentleman](#)
- [2. A Billionaire Rebel](#)
3. A Billionaire Dom (This book)

ONE

JUDE

TWENTY-SIX YEARS HAD PASSED, AND WHILE HEIDI TITAN WASN'T IN MY thoughts every day, I did think about her now and again. When I did, I always saw her the same way. Golden brown hair cut in the latest style – or at least the latest style from back then – and pretty blue eyes. Slender and delicate-looking, she'd looked like a stiff wind could blow her over, but she'd always been stronger than she appeared.

I'd seen that strength the first time I met her, and I'd always admired it about her. Each time we met, I'd see another piece of herself that she'd kept hidden away.

I sighed and set down the picture I kept in my desk. Cynthia knew about it, but she'd never asked who the woman was or why the picture had been there during the course of our entire marriage. My ex-wife, Rachel, hadn't been as trusting. Heidi hadn't been the first woman Rachel had accused me of having an affair with, and she had been far from the last.

“Why did you name him after me?” I murmured, rubbing my forehead. “You didn't think that keeping him from knowing anything about his father, but giving him my name wouldn't someday bite *someone* in the ass?”

Frustrated with someone I couldn't argue with, I stood up fast enough to make myself light-headed, and I grabbed the back of the chair to steady myself. Most of the time, I rarely thought about my age, but I was really feeling it this morning. Actually, if I was going to be honest, I'd started feeling it last night when I'd gotten a visit from Heidi's son.

Seventy-eight.

When had *that* happened?

Some days, when I woke up, I half-expected to see Dorcas sleeping next

to me, and she'd been gone for nearly four decades. Not because I wished she was there. Not in a real way. I missed Dorcas, but the pain had long since faded to nostalgia and wistfulness.

I loved my current wife as much as I'd loved my first wife, but they weren't really that much alike. I'd been a completely different person when I'd first met Dorcas than I had been when Cynthia and I first met.

I walked over to the window behind my desk. It was the first day of September, and while that might've signaled 'fall' to a lot of people, it didn't in Houston, Texas. We'd recently had a big storm, but the sun was out today, and it promised to be as hot as ever.

"Why didn't you reach out?" I was aware I was talking out loud to someone who wasn't there, but since I couldn't exactly talk to Heidi, this had to suffice. "I know I told you it wasn't a good idea, but you could've done it when there was still time to say goodbye."

I turned around at the soft knock on my office door. Cynthia smiled at me from the doorway, her light brown eyes warm. Even in her casual clothes, with her long, dark hair pulled back in a braid, she made my heart beat faster. No matter what other people thought, she wasn't a trophy wife or a gold digger. She was just a woman who made me happy.

"You're still thinking about him, aren't you?" She came over to my side and took my hand. "You didn't sleep much last night."

"No, I didn't," I admitted. I kissed the top of her head. "I have to admit, with everything that's been going on in the past couple months, I would've thought I was unshockable. Then JP Ives showed up at our front door."

"It has been a strange couple of months," she agreed. "Between Deklin's engagement to his half-sister and you deciding to play matchmaker with a showgirl, anyone would have a headache. And that doesn't even address all of the insanity surrounding Damon. You're lucky you haven't keeled over from a heart attack."

I chuckled and shook my head. "You really do have a way with words."

She leaned against me. "Nice to know my Masters in English from Brown is good for something."

"Have you given any more thought to going after your doctorate?" I asked, taking a little detour in our conversational path.

"I have," she said, giving me a knowing grin, "but this isn't what we're talking about."

Dammit.

“Come on, Jude. This kid showing up out of nowhere has you rattled.”

“It does.” I sighed. “Rattled and sad. Never meeting JP was always the way this was supposed to go, but I hadn’t imagined that Heidi’s death would send him my way.”

“Do you wish you would’ve stayed in touch with her?”

I shook my head. “No. She needed a clean break.”

“It’s okay to be sad.” She squeezed his hand. “And it’s okay to want to help JP.”

“I do,” I said. “And I will. I’ll look after him and protect him as much as I do Davin, Damon, or Deklin. I owe that to Heidi.”

“You’re also doing it because you’re a good man, Jude Holden.” She kissed my cheek. “Don’t you ever forget that.”

As she left, her words echoed in my head. One of the many reasons I loved her was that she saw the man under the money and under the name. She was wise enough to know I was far from perfect, but she knew I tried my hardest to be a good man.

I just hoped everyone else would see that too.

TWO

DAVIN

I IGNORED THE “FOR LEASE” DESIGNATION AND PULLED UP THE PROPERTY information. One of the first things my grandfather had taught me about the family business was that just because something wasn’t listed as being for sale didn’t mean a negotiation couldn’t change things. Sometimes, it didn’t take much to convince an owner that selling was a better bargain than renting, but it was always best to go into all situations prepared for things to be difficult.

As the CFO of Holden Enterprises, the company’s money was my business. Eventually, I’d replace my father as the CEO, but having had accounting as my minor when I went to Columbia for my MBA meant that being installed as the Chief Financial Officer after Granddad retired had just made sense. More sense than Dad being in charge of the company’s finances.

I loved my father, but our relationship was...complicated. I knew my brothers thought Dad and I were close, but I sometimes wondered if Dad was ever close with anyone. Damon and Deklin saw only that our father and I worked long hours at the same business, not that we rarely talked about anything other than business

Even as a kid, one way or another, it’d always been about business. The grades I would need, the skills I had to master, the degree I was expected to earn. For as far back as I could remember, each time report cards came out, my brothers and I had been sat down with our parents to go over our grades and discuss the areas we might need help.

Mom had always been the one to work with my brothers while Dad had assigned himself to me. By the time I’d gotten to junior high, I’d pushed myself hard enough that Dad had let me stop our extra study and homework

sections – as long as my grades hadn't slipped.

I shook thoughts of the past out of my head. There was no point in dwelling on the past. I usually didn't have a problem keeping my focus on the here and now, but for the last couple weeks, I'd found myself drawn back there, wondering at the path my life had taken and what would have been different if I'd stepped out of line at some point instead of always doing what was expected of me.

I'd deliberately made each decision that had led me to this point in my life, and I'd done it all with my eyes wide open. I wasn't a weak person, manipulated into things I didn't want to do. This was the life I'd chosen, no matter how I'd been groomed to take over the family business.

It wasn't regret, exactly, that had me thinking about the past. Over the last few weeks, both of my brothers had completely turned their lives upside-down. The baby brother who'd only ever wanted to be a part of Holden Enterprises had defied our father's wishes for a marriage to the daughter of a wealthy family friend and instead chosen a former Vegas showgirl with a four-year-old son as his fiancée. Going against Dad's strict religious views, Deklin was moving Sofi and Dallas here to Houston to live with him before he and Sofi married.

Then there was Damon. He'd always done his own thing, pursuing a career in music even when Dad hadn't approved, and eventually forming Holden, one of the biggest country bands in the last few years. Now, Holden was gone, having been dissolved after a car accident had left one band member dead and others injured. In the middle of all that, he'd met Jae Knox, a woman who'd made him re-evaluate everything.

That reminded me. I needed to talk to the PR department. Damon had called me this morning to tell me about a story that was in the process of breaking. Jae's ex had attacked her at the store where she worked, and then he'd come after her at her apartment.

Damon had assured me that everyone was okay and that it was a clear-cut case of self-defense, but the paparazzi didn't always like the truth if they could come up with a more sensational lie. Either way, the PR department needed to prepare a statement.

If we pretended nothing happened, chances were that someone would decide that meant we had something to hide. I'd intended to take care of it at lunch, but I'd gotten caught up in an article regarding new pricing trend predictions.

I picked up the phone and pulled out the notepad where I'd written down the information Damon had given me. Half the time, PR's job was to correct misinformation since fact-checking stories before going to print seemed to have gone out the window nowadays.

I wasn't even thirty yet, and I sounded like an old man, I realized.

At least the people Grandad had hired for public relations knew how to do their job and do it well. Less than fifteen minutes later, I was off the phone and satisfied that whatever the media threw at us, we could handle.

With that out of the way, I went back to my research regarding the commercial property I was going to recommend the company make an offer on. Rumor had it that a massive online retailer was looking for a new place to house their corporate offices, and Houston was on the shortlist.

The building had only a handful of companies already renting space, and I believed that a little rearranging would allow me to pitch a large enough portion of the building to accommodate the retailer. The current renters might be opposed to the idea at first, but I was confident I could put together an incentive package for each one that would eliminate any objections.

Someone knocked on my door, and I answered without looking their way. "Come in."

I finished the last word in the sentence I'd been reading just as my door closed. Annoyed, I turned toward my visitor, ready with a reprimand regarding making assumptions about whether or not I wanted my door open...a reprimand that fell away when I realized the person standing in my office wasn't an employee.

Willa Ross. Tall and slender, with short copper curls and light blue eyes, she was exquisite. She had flawless skin, with a peaches and cream complexion that I enjoyed leaving a mark on. A true masochist, she always begged for more.

But she had absolutely no right to be in my office.

"I thought you would like a surprise, Master." Her voice was sultry. A voice that could make a man hard with just a few words.

I was too pissed at the impudence she demonstrated, coming here without my permission, to have any thought of arousal yet. She'd have to do better than that. I stood up and came around my desk to tower over her. Her heels put her just under six feet, but I was still taller.

"You decided, on your own, to show up at my place of business?"

She squirmed under my gaze, dropping her head and clasping her hands

in front of her like she'd just remembered the proper sub position. Except I knew she hadn't forgotten. Her training as a sub predated her coming to Euphoria, the BDSM club where we'd met, and I suspected she'd dabbled in the life before she'd even been old enough to get into a club.

Suspicion was all it was, though. I didn't talk about myself, and I didn't ask about them other than how it pertained to sex. Knowing they liked bondage or that they'd only been in the lifestyle for a year was important. Knowing that they'd lost their virginity to their high school sweetheart at sixteen was of no interest to me.

"Is my surprise the only present, or do you have something else to offer me?" I let my annoyance seep into every word.

Her hands were shaking as she untied the belt of her wrap-around dress, but I had been with her often enough to know that it was anticipation and desire, not fear, that affected her. As the dress slipped from her shoulders and pooled around her feet, I ran my gaze down her body.

The sheer teddy she had on under her dress revealed that she wore nothing else but her heels and her piercings. Two silver hoops in each ear matched the ones through each nipple and her bellybutton. Though from where I stood, I couldn't see her clitoris piercing, I assumed it had a silver hoop as well since she usually matched her jewelry precisely.

I'd heard the story about that particular piercing the second time we'd fucked. She'd had it done on stage on her twenty-fifth birthday, though not at Euphoria. I'd first seen her putting on a show with another woman at the club while a crowd watched. Exhibitionism was definitely one of her kinks.

I could have pressed the issue, asked her why she'd come here when she knew that it was crossing a line, but I didn't. I already had a pretty good idea what she was thinking. She was the type of sub who purposefully did things she knew she wasn't supposed to for one simple reason...she wanted to be punished.

While there was a certain kind of appeal in that, I wasn't a sadist, and I wasn't looking for anything more than the occasional hook-up. I wasn't exclusive with anyone, but I did occasionally go back to the same sub if I knew she was into whatever I happened to want at the time. Willa had been one of those.

I needed to address that, but I'd give her what she came here for first.

"Do you remember your safe word?"

It didn't matter how long a woman had been a sub, or how many times

I'd slept with her, I always started every session with the same question. Aside from the fact that I never wanted to misread consent, I covered my own ass by asking.

Having a name like mine and money to go with it, I couldn't risk someone trying to blackmail me by saying I'd forced them into anything. If every partner I'd ever had said I asked about their safe word, my word had credibility.

She nodded. "Yes, Master. *Summer.*"

Satisfied, I grabbed the neckline of her teddy and ripped it straight from top to bottom. To her credit, she didn't even flinch. Tearing off her clothes wasn't exactly a new thing for us. The other couple times we'd fucked, she'd wanted me to do the same thing. It turned her on...and I didn't mind it either.

I reached out with both hands, pinching the hoops between my thumbs and forefingers. She shivered but didn't speak or move. I twisted them, turning and pulling both until her fingers twitched. A slight reaction, but it was one of her tells, letting me know I was getting close to her pain threshold. I held the hoops for a moment longer, and then released them.

"Bend over the chair. Hands on the arm." I gestured to the chair next to me.

She immediately moved to obey. I couldn't draw this out like I did with most of my sessions, but I wasn't about to rush through her punishment just so I could fuck her.

I admired her long legs and her firm ass as I pulled off my belt. The first time we'd fucked, I'd learned that spanking her with my hand was more likely to bruise my hand than it was to hurt her. She could not only take a lot of pain, but she *enjoyed* a lot of pain.

At the club, I had my choice of various types of whips, floggers, canes, and the like. I didn't keep toys in my office. My belt, however, would do.

I flicked the end of the belt against one cheek, not hard enough to hurt, but a warning about what I was going to do. And a reminder of how this worked.

"Please, Master."

I waited. She knew she had to say more to get what she wanted.

"Punish me, Master."

There it was.

I tightened my grip on the end of the belt and swung. The crack of leather against flesh was familiar and made everything else fade away. My focus

narrowed to each red stripe the belt laid down, each time Willa thanked me for it. I lost count after twelve strokes, but I didn't have a specific number for this particular infraction, so I was winging it.

When her entire ass was the deep sort of red that would definitely turn into a bruise, a thin sheen of sweat coated her skin, and her muscles were trembling. She was about ready to come just from this alone.

"Good girl," I said as I ran my hand over her back. "You didn't miss a single one. Your punishment is done."

"Thank you, Master." Her voice was shaky, confirming how close to orgasm she was.

I retrieved my wallet from the top drawer of my desk and took out a condom. If we'd been at the club, I would've wound her tighter, playing with her piercings until both nipples and her clit were swollen and throbbing, then I would've fucked her. We weren't at a club, though. We were in my office, and she was just going to have to come on my cock or not at all.

She let out a little yelp when I drove into her, but then it was all moans and pleas for me to fuck her harder. I ignored her. Unless she used her safe word, I didn't care what she said.

All my attention was on the wet heat of her clutching me, tightening around me as she finally climaxed. Three strokes, then a fourth, and I came too. I dug my fingers into her hips, my eyes closing as I let myself have that moment of release.

It was over too soon, and then I was back in the present, remembering that I was at work and that Willa had just shown up here without invitation or warning.

She made a sound as I pulled out, holding onto the chair as her knees buckled. I took the condom into the bathroom and did a quick clean-up. When I came back out, she was leaning against my desk, her torn teddy framing her body.

The smile on her face said that her being here wasn't exactly a whim. She'd done it because she either hadn't heard or hadn't cared about anything I'd said regarding my lack of desire for anything outside of impersonal sex.

"Get dressed." My tone wasn't harsh, but it was flat. I wasn't going to get angry at her, but I wouldn't coddle her either. I hadn't led her on, and I wasn't going to shoulder the responsibility for her issues.

Her smile faltered. "I thought you might want to go to a late lunch."

"I told you where the lines were," I said, picking up her dress and laying

it across the back of the chair. “And you didn’t respect that.”

“Punish me.” She went down on her knees. “Please. Punish me, and it’ll all be okay.”

“No, Willa. That part of my life and this part of my life are separate. Get dressed and leave. We won’t be doing this again.”

I walked around my desk and took my seat, ignoring her pleas for me to reconsider. If I gave her the slightest bit of attention, she would take it as an apology, and I didn’t need to give her one. Once she figured out I wasn’t joking, she’d do as I asked, and I could go back to work.

THREE

LINSEY

“GET YOUR FUCKING FINGER AWAY FROM YOUR MOUTH!”

Without looking up from my screen, I took the aforementioned digit and pointed it toward the source of the order.

Kasey Lee, my best friend and roommate, let out a peal of raucous laughter, rocking back in her seat.

“I’m glad you find my anxiety amusing.” My voice was dry but without any malice. She and I had met two years ago in Denver, and six months ago, I’d come with her to Houston. The two of us, we understood each other.

“Hey, you’re the one who asked me to help you stop biting your nails.” Kasey stood up and stretched her back by bending backward until her long black hair brushed the floor.

Kasey was somewhere in her early thirties, but her tiny stature always had people wondering how she was allowed to work in a tattoo parlor, let alone own one. She wasn’t just a businesswoman, though. She was an artist, and her own golden skin was covered with work of her own design. She made one-of-a-kind art that couldn’t be found anywhere else. In fact, we’d met when she’d designed and given me the tattoo that covered my back.

“I didn’t know you were going to yell at me every time my fingers got near my damn mouth.” I crumpled the piece of paper I’d been jotting random notes on and threw it at her.

She caught it and tossed it back. “What’s next on my schedule?”

I flipped through my programs until the spreadsheet for the schedule appeared on my screen. “Jessica Barker,” I read. “Consult only. She’s bringing in a design of her own.”

Kasey sighed. “I really hope it’s better than the last person who brought

in a picture they drew.”

I winced, remembering the awful drawing of a dog that a rather drunk mechanic had brought in after his dog’s funeral. It’d taken fifteen minutes for us to figure out exactly what he was trying to say, and another fifteen to get him to understand that K’s Phoenix policy disallowed tattooing of inebriated patrons. He’d come back two weeks later, stone-sober, asking for her to fix what a less-than-scrupulous artist had done after he’d left here.

The phone rang, and I reached for it. “K’s Phoenix. How can I help you?”

Kasey grinned, and I flipped her off again. I worked here on occasion, and she thought it was hilarious when I had to sound polite and professional. I supposed, with my purple-streaked hair and numerous ear piercings, it was a little funny to see me acting like a secretary, but it wasn’t like we were at some country club or wealthy doctor’s office. We were in a lower middle class part of the city, at a tattoo parlor that catered to people who looked more like Kasey and me than they did a run-of-the-mill Texan.

“Yes, we have an opening tomorrow at three,” I said as I scanned the schedule. “Unless you have an artist preference.”

It took me a couple more minutes to get things worked out, and by the time I hung up the phone, Kasey’s next appointment was here, and the pair disappeared into the back. Things were generally quiet first thing on a weekday, which was why Kasey usually worked it alone. Sunday through Thursday nights, she had a second artist come in. Most Friday nights and all-day Saturday called for three people. And all of that was with me working the counter. Not bad for a shop that’d opened only six months ago.

Technically, I didn’t work for K’s Phoenix. I came in when she specifically asked or when I had time, and she paid me in cash. I wasn’t off the grid, but I was trying to stay a ghost. Employment records and tax returns made it far too easy for someone to track. Someone like me, actually.

Speaking of which, I had work to do.

I hid the program that held the schedule and appointments and then went back to my research. Saturday night, one of Kasey’s artists, Brighton, had called in and quit without warning. She’d ended up having to call in Tiarra Mendoza to cover Brighton’s shift, and no one had been happy about that. When she’d made her first hires, Kasey hadn’t asked me to look into any of her employees, and I’d foolishly left it alone because it was her shop, and I hadn’t wanted to overstep.

Fuck that.

If she wasn't going to look out for herself, then I had to do it for her.

I would've seen it coming with Brighton if I'd done the work beforehand. On paper, his employment record looked good, but a little digging had uncovered a past that was less than reliable. Unpaid parking tickets from Houston to Dallas and owed child support – times two – going back more than two years. It hadn't taken much after that to figure out his pattern of moving to a new job every time his past caught up with him, and his wages were in danger of being garnished.

Asshole.

I should've gone with my gut when she'd asked me what I thought of him because I'd never liked the guy. He'd been arrogant and condescending to everyone but Kasey, and only when she wasn't around. I hadn't said anything, though.

Now, I planned on putting everyone under the microscope and telling Kasey the moment I thought something was off.

Tiarra Mendoza had come back clean. Mid-twenties with some shadows in her past, but nothing that set off any warning bells. A military brat, she'd traveled all over the world as a kid and spoke three languages besides English. She'd be more likely to hurt herself than someone else. I'd keep an eye on her, but Kasey didn't need to be worried about this particular artist.

Boyd Maze was on the schedule for tonight. Around the same age as Tiarra, he was Kasey's first hire. He was a nice guy, sociable enough for people to feel comfortable with him permanently inking their skin, but not the sort of talkative person who ended up dragging out things simply because he couldn't shut up.

He'd gotten arrested for a drunken disorderly shortly after his twenty-first birthday but had been let go with probation. Since then, he'd steered clear of the cops, with the exception of a couple parking tickets and one speeding ticket.

Kasey had been looking for a replacement for Brighton and had an interview scheduled for thirty minutes from now. I wanted to get an idea of who Mary Jo Walton was before she got here. The name alone was enough to give me pause, but I wasn't going to judge someone by something so superficial. She could have the craziest name in the world and be the perfect fit for K's Phoenix. I was just being overly picky.

And overly protective.

I wasn't close to many people. One person, in fact. I was friendly to Boyd

and Tiarra, but I kept them at arm's length. Kasey was the only person who'd managed to get past my walls, and I suspected she'd probably be the only one to ever do it. I wasn't about to let someone take advantage of her or hurt her. She said she could take care of herself, but there was no harm in giving her back-up...even if she didn't know I was doing it.

FOUR

DAVIN

ARTISANS RESTAURANT WAS OUR GO-TO FOR BUSINESS LUNCHESES, BUT AFTER listening to Theodore and Loretta Ciardi attempt to order in French, I was considering changing to an American steakhouse where they couldn't massacre the language.

At least that was the hope. Anything seemed possible with these two, and I was willing to wager that most of it wouldn't be good.

"...then I ask him, 'Am I paying you to think or am I paying you to hand me my nine iron?'" Theodore Ciardi threw his head back and laughed. One meaty hand hit the table and nearly knocked over his glass of wine.

I forced a laugh and reached for my glass to avoid having to draw it out. I was grateful they didn't share my father's strict religious views because I doubted I would've made it this far into the dinner if I'd had to do it without alcohol to take the edge off. Wine was barely cutting it, though. I had a feeling I was going to need something a lot stronger by the time lunch was over.

"My Teddy tells the best jokes, doesn't he?" Loretta Ciardi leaned against her husband, pressing her large – and obviously fake – breasts against his arm with all the subtlety of a cat in heat.

Fortunately, I was spared from having to answer when our waiter appeared to top off our wine. He smiled politely at Loretta when she reached out to put her hand on his arm but didn't drop his gaze to the considerable cleavage she was putting on display.

I made a mental note to give him an extra big tip. It wasn't easy to walk the fine line he had to tread. Too far one way or the other could get him into trouble that I understood far too well.

“Now, Davin, I understand that it’s your grandfather who started Holden Enterprises.” Theodore finally brought up a subject I could talk about without that balancing act.

“He did,” I said. “He and my grandmother were married when they were twenty and built the company together from the ground up.”

Loretta blinked rapidly at me. “But they’ve retired?”

There was no way to make this less awkward, so I stated it outright. “My grandfather has. My grandmother passed away before I was born.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry!” Loretta leaned across the table and reached for my hand.

I casually picked up my fork and took the last bite of my entrée as if that had been my goal rather than simply wanting to keep out of her reach. I’d figured out a while back that if I ate at a leisurely pace, taking the time to set my utensils down during the pauses, I could use the pretense of picking them up again and taking a couple more bites to stall or distract. It also worked when I was trying to avoid having someone touch me.

Being the eldest son from a well-known and wealthy family meant I had more than my fair share of women throwing themselves at me. I was also self-aware enough to know that a majority of straight women found me attractive. Some of those women didn’t seem to understand that not all men liked strangers touching them as a part of their flirting technique.

I liked women, but I’d never been fond of the kind of flirting that seemed common in my social circles. I much rather preferred a straightforward approach to sex. An arrangement between two people for mutual satisfaction.

I didn’t see the point of dancing around it when we both knew what we were after. Women who wanted more weren’t people on whom I wished to waste my time. I wasn’t looking for a wife or a soulmate or a girlfriend.

I liked my neat, orderly life. Relationships just made things messy.

“Your grandfather is still living, though?” Loretta asked.

I wished I could tell her that if she’d simply paid attention to what I’d said, she’d know the answer to that question, but I knew I couldn’t say that. Dad had no tact when it came to dealing with people. No matter how much I would’ve liked to speak my mind, I had to be the diplomat and choose my battles wisely.

Repeating myself about something so trivial wasn’t even close to important enough to bicker about.

“He is. Seventy-eight and going as strong as ever.” I forced myself to

make eye contact this time when I smiled, moving my gaze from Loretta to Theodore in the hopes that she'd take the hint that I wasn't going to return her flirtations.

"Did he get remarried after your grandmother passed?" Theodore wrapped his arm around Loretta's shoulders and pulled her against him. His hand hovered over one of her breasts as if he was contemplating groping her right here at the table.

"He did. Twice, actually. Divorced wife two about thirteen years ago, and then met Cynthia. They've been married for eleven years."

"Never made it to double-digits myself," Theodore said, "but Loretta and I are coming up on year eight, so I might get there yet."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Loretta's expression tighten for a moment before smoothing out. Based on the amount of plastic surgery she appeared to have had done, I was surprised she could make much of an expression at all.

If I had to guess, I would say there were thirty years between her and Theodore. A May-December romance like Grandad and Cynthia, but where Cynthia was the furthest from a trophy wife as she could be, Loretta...well, I wasn't the kind of person who liked to make judgments about other people, but from what I'd observed, she seemed to be every stereotype of the pretty younger woman married to the rich older man.

Which meant she was already thinking about the fact that she would be getting too old for him soon. I wondered if she was thinking about whoever she'd replaced. Was she already as old as Theodore's last mistress or wife had been?

"What about you, Davin?" Loretta asked. "Have you ever been married?"

"I have not." I made a discreet gesture at a passing waiter.

"Seeing anyone?" She fluttered her eyelashes at me and wet her lip with a slow sweep of her tongue.

"I keep my private life private." I looked up as our waiter approached with the dessert menu.

"May I recommend the Tarte des Soeurs Tatin?" He pronounced the dessert with the sort of accent that made me think he'd practiced it. "It's quite divine."

"Would you like dessert?" I asked to be polite, but I hoped Loretta and Theodore would decline. I was ready to go back to my office, where I wouldn't have to make small talk or pretend to be enjoying myself. Sure, it

was part of my job, and when I took over as CEO, I'd probably still have to do this, so getting used to it seemed like a good idea.

Then again, I could probably delegate to Deklin if I moved him up to CFO after Dad retired. If he could handle it. I still wasn't entirely sure he had what it took to do this job.

Especially now that he had a fiancée and a potential stepson. If my brothers and I had learned anything over the span of our life, it was that Holden men weren't much good at making time for both work *and* family. Grandad had been decent about it, but Dad had, quite frankly, sucked.

"I'd love some dessert."

The fact that Loretta looked at me when she said it made me think she didn't really want actual food for dessert.

Great.

"I could do with something sweet too." Theodore leaned toward his wife and kissed her, one of those embarrassing, open-mouthed kisses that people really shouldn't do in public. When he finally sat back with a smug look on his face, he looked up at the waiter. "I thought I saw something that looked like cheesecake on that menu."

I guessed that meant we were getting dessert.

FIVE

LINSEY

THE GIRL KASEY HAD HIRED YESTERDAY, MARY JO WALTON, WAS WORKING the desk at K's Phoenix today, which meant I was working from home.

It still felt strange saying that. *Home.*

I'd spent a year before meeting Kasey moving from place to place. Before that, I'd gone from apartment to trailer to house to drug den and back again. The first time I'd ever really felt like a place could be home was my first night in the apartment I shared with Kasey, and even then, it had taken me months to accept it.

When we'd moved to Denver, I'd worried that feeling would disappear, but it hadn't. As terrifying as it was for me to realize just how close Kasey and I had become, I couldn't deny that it was more her than a place that was home for me. She was the best friend I'd ever had and was probably the best one I'd ever have. And for someone who'd always been proud of her independence, that freaked me out.

Which was why I was doing what I always did when I was freaking out about something.

I worked.

Not 'answering phones and getting paid under the table' work, but my *real* work.

I'd spent hours at the library as a kid. It'd been one of my few constants, and it'd been cheaper for my mom to drop me off there than actually pay for a babysitter. So, I'd read a lot, and when I hadn't been reading, I'd been on the computer. By the time I turned twelve, I'd switched things around so that the majority of my time had been on the computer rather than with my nose in a book.

The first place I'd ever hacked had been my school to change an *A* into a *B* on my report card. I'd figured that if I'd dropped my grade by a letter, it hadn't been illegal. Not even close to logical, but most adolescents weren't exactly known for their logic.

I'd messed around in various school systems a few more times over the years, mostly using it as a playground to learn in, but it hadn't been the only thing I'd hacked as a teenager. Getting away from my shitty life had required money, and I'd never stayed in the same place long enough to get a regular job. I still remembered the first time I'd realized how I could get the money I needed.

My mom never watched the news, but one spring night, the guy she'd been dating at the time had been following a local story about the owner of a construction company who'd been giving kickbacks to someone on the city council to get various contracts.

That night, the news story was about how much money the bribed official had made and how much profit the owner of the construction company had made. In the middle of the interview, Mom's boyfriend made a comment about how someone should take all of their money because, if they were found innocent, they'd be able to keep all of their dirty money.

That was the first time I'd stolen, but it hadn't been the last. I hadn't been greedy, though, taking only what I'd needed at the time. Then, when I'd arrived in Denver, I'd heard a story about a woman who'd used her hacking skills to solve crimes and help people. I hadn't even considered that what I did could be used for more than just getting money, but when I'd heard about this woman, everything had changed.

I'd started looking for bigger companies who profited from corruption and taking huge chunks of money, sending them to organizations and charities that helped people. Women's shelters. LGBTQ allies. Adoption and fostering advocates. Suicide prevention.

About two or three weeks after I'd started 'collecting donations,' I'd seen a news article online about a missing kid and how there hadn't been any leads, not because the police didn't have a suspect, but because they hadn't had the evidence they'd needed to get specific search warrants. It'd been a Catch-22.

They'd needed to have access to certain things in their suspect's life to get evidence that he'd been a kidnapper and killer, but they'd needed evidence to get the authority to delve deeper into the man's life.

Four days after that story aired, the police had received an anonymous envelope with print outs of said suspect's phone records, car GPS coordinates, and financials. The guy had ended up cutting a deal and was now serving a twenty-five to life sentence.

Now that I'd settled into Houston, it was time to find areas where I could help. While I'd looked into active, current cases before, the front page of the newspaper – Kasey insisted on having an actual newspaper delivered every day – had a story about all of the cold cases in Houston and how the new police commissioner intended to start a task force to focus solely on cold cases.

I didn't know a lot about police procedures, but I felt pretty safe in assuming that one of the things this task force would do was for people to come forward about certain cases. They'd be looking for tips, and I could offer anonymous ones based on information I gleaned from less-than-legal means.

I pulled my feet underneath me so that I was sitting cross-legged on the couch and hunched over my laptop. Not the best position for my posture, but surprisingly comfortable at the moment. I ate another spoonful of raspberry yogurt and left the spoon in my mouth as I used both hands to run a search, then followed the first link.

I ran my fingers through my hair, still not quite used to having it quite this short. When I'd decided to streak my light brown hair with deep purple, I'd gotten it cut as well. Drastically. I'd gone from having hair to the middle of my back to something that was a mix between a pixie cut and an undercut. I loved it, but it still sometimes caught me off-guard that most of my hair was gone.

I'd used an app to find it, and that thought made me wonder about some of the technology used to age pictures of suspects or missing kids. Seeing people out of context often made it hard to recognize them. I assumed the same principle applied to disguises.

Sometimes, it was the simpler disguises that worked best. People liked to mock how a pair of glasses kept people from realizing that Clark Kent was Superman, but there was some truth to it. I once watched an old spy show where the main character wore a bright red wig when she went undercover, and people paid so much attention to the color of her hair that they hadn't paid attention to her facial features.

The second website I went to pulled my attention away from hair and

disguises. An entire site that listed all missing person cold cases in each state and had the ability to narrow down to counties. Texas was vast and populated enough that trying to find Houston-specific cases through my usual methods would've been difficult. Not that I necessarily needed to only research cases where I lived. I just thought of it as how I got involved in my community.

Sometimes, I was tempted to search my own name, see if my mom had ever reported me missing. I'd told her more than once that I'd planned to leave, and I'd left a note, so I wanted to believe that she'd known I'd left of my own free will, and she'd wished me the best. Experience, however, kept whispering to me that she hadn't given me a second thought.

"Focus, Linsey," I muttered. I knew better than to fall down that particular rabbit hole. No good would come of it. I'd chosen Kasey as my family. Biology didn't mean shit.

This was where I'd start hunting, I decided. Instead of trying to find a bad guy, I'd look for those who may or may not have been victims of foul play. If I found them, I could determine why they'd left and decide what to do on a case by case basis. If what I found led me to believe they were dead, I'd turn my attention to the suspects in the cases.

That decision made, I began to make a list, writing the names and information out long-hand so that I could organize everything at once. I'd found it also helped my brain to go over things more than once to allow the information to sink in. I'd start with the first ten and see what I could find.

1. Allyson Gaskins, age 24. Last seen walking down Travis Street on 12/3/88.
2. Heidi Titan, age 26. Reported missing by husband Mark Titan on 8/1/93.
3. Solomon Travis, age 52. Last seen in Houston Heights by stepson...

SIX

DAVIN

I'D NEVER BEEN MORE RELIEVED TO PART WAYS WITH ANYONE THAN WHEN I'D finally been able to say goodbye to the Ciardis earlier today. They'd lingered over their desserts, their innuendos going from bad to worse as they drank an entire second bottle of wine between the two of them. If I hadn't known how much money Theodore had, I might've thought they were just trying to squeeze every dime possible out of me.

My family didn't come from old money, but we weren't from a poverty-stricken background either. Grandad had grown up in a comfortably middle-class family, and it had only been the untimely deaths of his parents that had allowed him to grow Holden Enterprises without taking out any loans.

Still, one of the reasons we had always been more-or-less accepted into the more exclusive ranks of high society was that we had class. We conducted ourselves with dignity and restraint, especially in public. Even Damon, who'd never really been a part of the business side of things, knew how to behave himself and not disgrace our family name.

Loretta and Theodore had none of that. He was a third-generation oil man, which should have put the two of us on the same playing field, so to speak, but that was definitely *not* the case. He was crass and vulgar, which was bad enough, but what made things even worse was that he clearly thought his money allowed him to behave however he wanted, without repercussions.

Always a generous tipper, I'd left more than I usually would have simply for having to put up with that pair, though it could've been worse. Judging by the way Theodore had groped his wife, I probably would've been put into an uncomfortable position if a woman had been waiting on us instead of a man. I

doubted it would've been out of character at all for him to have made inappropriate jokes or even slap a waitress's butt.

My diplomacy wouldn't have extended that far, and I probably would've ended up in jail until the threat of a lawsuit or exposé would've gotten me released. As it was, I was determined to take appropriate measures should I have to meet with Theodore and Loretta again.

Personally, I hoped they'd decide to take their business elsewhere. Dad wouldn't like that at all, but I didn't like the idea of a long-term relationship with someone who thought he was better than everyone else. Still, unless I had a reason Dad would accept, he'd expect me to defer to his ruling, and he wanted the Ciardis's business. For someone who claimed to have strict religious views, there were times when I wondered what Dad really believed because the words he liked to preach didn't always match up with his actions.

What that all boiled down to was that we'd probably be offered their business, but I had a feeling it wouldn't come without a few perks to sweeten the deal. I could only wonder if I'd be able to live with what they wanted or if I'd have to go against Dad. I could also go to Grandad because, even though he was retired, he still had veto power, but I didn't want to do that either.

All the ways this could go wrong ran through my mind in a never-ending loop, distracting me from the work I needed to get done. I rarely had a problem focusing, but the combination of dislike for the Ciardis and the stress of worrying over whether or not I'd end up working with them for the foreseeable future had managed to do it.

I needed to decompress, or I would have a harder time than usual sleeping. With it only being Tuesday, one bad night could disrupt my entire week. Normally, I worked late every night during the week, and if I had to destress, I did it on Saturday. Today, however, I made an exception.

I considered just working out, but I knew that wouldn't be enough. I needed something specific. My lunch had been late and filling enough that I wasn't hungry, which meant I only had to go home first if I planned on changing my clothes. Where I was going, however, had a different sort of dress code than most other places, and my suit would be right on point.

Euphoria was Houston's best and worst kept secret. The average person in the city wouldn't have heard of it, but for a specific group of people, Euphoria was like the Holy Grail of clubs. Easily the hottest BDSM club in Texas, it competed with the likes of Leather and Lace, Club Privé, and Erotas.

While the club was open to the public a few days a month, most of the time, the only way to gain entrance was to either have a membership or be the guest of a member. The cost was high enough that the clientele definitely stayed in the top tax brackets. With their quality and discretion, however, it was worth every penny.

I handed my membership card to the doorman, even though he greeted me by name before I held it out. He scanned it and then gave it back. With a smile, he opened the door and wished me a good night.

Thanks to the security measures Euphoria took to ensure that their patrons were well-protected, I was able to let my guard down as I made my way to the bar. Well, as much as I ever let myself be unguarded, anyway. While I didn't have to worry about anyone exposing my sexual predilections, it was a little harder to threaten gold diggers with lawsuits.

I didn't need to worry about that, really, especially since I wasn't looking for anything outside of this, but that didn't mean I wanted to waste my time with anyone who was only after money.

The bartender nodded at me, and I held up two fingers. His name was Henri – pronounced the French way – and he'd been my bartender more than once over the years. He was one of those good ones who remembered people's drinks. A minute later, he slid me a glass with two fingers of Jameson Irish Whiskey.

I sipped at the amber liquid and leaned back against the bar to watch the room. It wasn't as busy here tonight as it was on the weekends, but there were still a few dozen people mingling around. Some were in suits and other business outfits, while others wore more traditional clubbing clothes. Slinky dresses and fitted shirts. Then there were the others who looked like societal stereotypes in leather and chains. Most outfits were obscenely expensive.

Some were Dominants, like me, while others were subs. Some switched between the two. Others preferred defining themselves as tops or bottoms without a Dom / sub aspect. And there were those who preferred to not label themselves at all, as fluid with their kinks as they were with their sexuality. Euphoria was a place where all of us could be free to be who and how we wanted to be.

A few of the other patrons made eye contact as they passed. Never the subs, though. They were all too well-trained for that. Of course, there were new subs on occasion, but even they had the sort of furtive looks that gave away what they were. I didn't see any new ones tonight, but I didn't mind. I

wasn't looking for someone to train or show the ropes to.

A statuesque blonde with a demure smile and a sheer white dress sauntered past me, the sway in her hips designed to capture attention. Even though she didn't say a word, my gut told me that she knew who I was. Not something I wanted to deal with.

The redhead who came next wasn't as tall, but she had more curves. A saucy expression said she'd be the kind of sub who'd deliberately disobey because she wanted to be punished. I'd had enough of that with Willa.

A brunette who looked like I could break her in half.

Another brunette, but this one seemed skittish.

A blonde who gave dirty looks to the other women.

Apparently, I knew exactly what I *didn't* want, but had no idea what I actually *did* want.

By the time I finished my drink, I was ready to go. The restlessness I'd felt was still present, humming in my blood and across my nerves, and I hadn't found anything here that could possibly help. Usually, a session with a good sub would burn off that excess energy, but no one appealed to me.

The only thing I hated more than this tight-skin feeling was wasting time. At least if I was at home, I could be doing something productive.

I paid for my drink and headed back outside without interacting with anyone else. Even though I'd come here to find someone to have sex with, I suddenly didn't want to talk to a single person.

As I stepped outside, I decided against going to my car and instead decided to take a walk. The sun was almost gone, but the air was still thick and humid, the heat only slightly less oppressive than it had been earlier. It wasn't enough to send me into the air conditioning of my car, though. I needed to move.

I'd made it a block when something in the shadows caught my attention. Several somethings, actually. Two shady-looking figures following a smaller figure away from the lights of the club.

SEVEN

LINSEY

AFTER NARROWING DOWN MY LIST OF POSSIBLE CASES AND CREATING MORE detail profiles on each, I was more than ready to take a break for dinner. And since I was an awesome friend, I packed up some food and took it to Kasey at work. Well, mostly because I was an awesome friend, but a little bit to clear my head too.

When I was a kid, I hadn't always wanted to be at home – okay, I'd *rarely* wanted to be at home – and not having money had limited my options. So, I'd walked. A lot. Since the boyfriends my mom had moved in and out of our lives had all lived relatively close to each other, I'd been able to expand the area I'd known until I'd memorized four and a half miles total, alternating the routes I'd taken every so often.

Walking had become my coping mechanism whenever I was stressed or just needed to think. Or not think, which was more often the case than not.

I was trying not to think now. Or rather, I *had* been trying not to think. Then I'd noticed the two guys across the street staring at me. Lecherous creeps weren't anything new, but Houston was still new enough to me that I paid more attention to my surroundings than I would have in other places where I'd lived.

The pair whispered something to each other, their voices too quiet for me to know what they were saying, but the expressions on their faces were easy enough to read. I fully expected them to cat-call or something of that sort, but they went straight to creepy step number two. Following me.

I didn't change my pace or acknowledge that I'd seen them, but I edged closer to the buildings I passed, using their windows to keep an eye on the men behind me with my peripheral vision. I wasn't one hundred percent

positive they intended anything more than intimidation, but the moment they made a move, I'd have to be ready to respond.

I slipped my hand into my purse, grateful for the design of the new bag that allowed me to do it without alerting the men behind me. A design that also had a hidden pocket where I kept my taser.

I'd gotten one as soon as I'd turned eighteen and had carried it no matter where I went, even in cities where it was illegal. My safety was more important than a law that would protect an attacker. Fortunately, I'd never had to use it – and I hoped I wouldn't have to tonight – but at least in Houston, it was legal.

I'd gotten this particular design because it'd come with a blinding light and didn't look like a gun. The last thing I needed was an altercation with police, where they thought I was the bad guy.

One of the problems with not knowing the area as well as I eventually would, was that I was caught off-guard when the club I passed was the last business before a series of seemingly empty warehouses.

Shit.

As soon as I thought it, the footsteps behind me quickened.

Fuck!

I spun around, pulling out my taser as I went, flicking the switch with my thumb to turn on the light. If they thought it was just a bright flashlight or something along those lines, it'd give me a few extra seconds of surprise, though I hoped I didn't need them.

They both took a step back, clearly startled that I hadn't behaved like a normal mark, and tried walking faster. I wasn't in heels or anything, but I wasn't going to stake my life or health on being faster than two men who both likely had longer strides than mine. I'd rather bet on a piece of technology to give me an advantage.

“Back. Up.”

“Whoa!”

“Hey!”

They both put their hands up, but neither one looked nearly concerned enough. In fact, they looked more amused than worried, and that pissed me off, which was good because angry was better than scared.

“Somethin' wrong here, sweetheart?” The taller of the two men kept his hands up but shifted his weight as if preparing to take a step forward. His Texas drawl had that easy-going rhythm that always seemed to naturally go

with the sound, but it grated on my nerves rather than setting my mind at ease.

“You’re following me.” My mind raced through the instructions that had come with my taser, reassuring myself that I did remember all of them.

“Mind lowerin’ that light, miss? It’s awfully bright.” The shorter, stockier man touched the brim of his cowboy hat, pulling it lower.

“I think I’ll leave it right where it is,” I said. “The two of you need to go back the way you came.”

“We ain’t doin’ no harm.” The tall one took a step forward. He squinted his eyes against the light but otherwise gave no indication that it affected him.

“Walk away,” I repeated the command, “or someone’s going to get hurt.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

I still had my eyes on the tall one when the stocky one moved. I pivoted toward him, pressing the button that triggered the electric charge. Blue-white light and a loud snapping sound responded immediately, stopping the man in his tracks as the electricity made contact. His body stiffened, then convulsed as he fell to the ground.

I’d practiced with it and watched videos to see what would happen if I ever had to use it in real life, but real practical application rarely matched up to observation or expectation. What none of my preparation had taken into account was what to do if there were more than one would-be assailant, and the second asshole wasn’t discouraged by the sight of their friend being tasered.

A hand closed on my arm.

“Bitch!”

He yanked me around, and I almost stumbled. My taser fell from my hand as I struggled to stay on my feet. If I fell, it’d be all over. As long as I was standing, I could still fight.

“Let me go!”

“I don’t think so, sweetheart.” He raised his free hand, and I knew he was going to hit me.

Even as I lifted my arm to try to block the blow, it never got that far. The arm in the air suddenly had a hand on it. A fist slammed into the man’s head, and he dropped, nearly taking me with him.

EIGHT

DAVIN

I CAUGHT HER WITHOUT THINKING ABOUT IT, MY ARMS CURLING AROUND HER small waist and pulling her toward me. She crashed into my chest, her head tilting back so I could see her face, and everything froze for a moment.

Even in the dim light, I could see her eyes were a rich chocolate brown, the sort of eyes a man could lose himself in, as cliché as that sounded. She had delicate features, but there was nothing weak about the slender body pressed against mine. In fact, the only word I could think of as being even somewhat accurate to describe her was *fierce*.

She pushed against me, and I immediately released her. She'd just been attacked – or close enough to – and the last thing she needed was to feel like I was crowding her. I took a step back to put a little extra room between us.

I started to tell her to take it easy, but one look at the fire in her eyes told me that'd be a bad move. She didn't need me soothing her. Whatever fear she'd felt was already anger, and if I tried to tell her that she was safe or one of the other usual platitudes used in these types of situations, she'd probably turn the taser on me.

Her gaze didn't waver from me as she bent to pick up the weapon she'd dropped. The light was still on, and she pointed it at me but didn't put it in my eyes, which gave me hope that she'd realized I wasn't here to hurt her.

I didn't raise my hands, but I made sure they were kept in plain sight as I asked, "Are you okay?"

"I am." She sounded wary, but not defensive. "Thank you."

Before I could add anything else, she turned and began to walk away. It took my brain a moment to catch up, and then I went after her. "Aren't you going to call the cops?"

“No.” She kept walking without even looking in my direction.

“Miss, are you sure this is safe—”

The words died as she spun around, taser still in hand. “I’ve got enough juice in here to fry your balls if you don’t leave me alone.”

My hands went up. A threat to my manhood was something to take seriously.

“I just want to make sure you’re safe.” I gave her a small smile. Not so large that she’d think I was hitting on her, but enough that she could see I meant well. “I’m Davin.”

The blank expression on her face told me she had no idea who I was, which was both surprising and...nice. I wasn’t about to try my luck by adding my last name.

“I’m Linsey. And I can take care of myself.”

I motioned to the taser still pointed at me. “I can see that.” I slowly lowered my hands. “And that was an impressive bit of self-defense back there, by the way.”

“Nice punch,” she said, a hint of a smile playing about her sensual lips.

What the hell was I thinking? *Sensual*? She’d just tased a man and threatened to do the same to me.

“Can I give you a ride anywhere?”

I wasn’t sure who the question surprised more, her or me.

“You think I’m going to get in a car with you because you told me your name?” She raised an eyebrow.

“Wherever you’re going, I’ll take you there and drop you off. And I’ll keep my hands to myself the entire time,” I promised.

Even as I said it, I couldn’t help imagining what it would be like to have my hands all over her. What those eyes would look like while I sucked on her nipples or fingered her to orgasm.

Fuck.

Not even close to appropriate.

Her smile widened as if she could read my mind. “What if I don’t want you to keep your hands to yourself?”

I blinked. This was not how I’d seen my night going when I’d left my house for Euphoria.

Strangely enough, it seemed like it was going better.

Well, for Linsey and myself. For the two guys behind us, not so much.

“My car’s in the parking lot of that club.” I gestured toward Euphoria. “If

you want, I can take you inside and have someone vouch for me. Or I can call you a cab, or whatever ride service you want.”

“I’m fine walking.”

“I’m sure you are.” I didn’t want her to think that I was just being argumentative, but the more I thought of her walking in the dark alone, the more I disliked it. “Do it for my sake, then. I’ll worry about you unless I know you’re safe.”

“It sounds like you won’t be satisfied with just putting me in a taxi and sending me on my way.” She put the taser back in her bag, but her hand stayed on it. “Maybe you need to tuck me into bed, just to be sure.”

A jolt of desire hit me like a punch in the gut. I’d felt nothing for the women I’d seen at the club. They’d been dressed to attract attention, to show their appeal. Linsey, however, wore a worn-looking Clash t-shirt and a pair of denim shorts that didn’t even make it to mid-thigh. Her ears were lined with rings and studs, but her face was piercing free. Mostly makeup free too, from what I could tell. She looked absolutely nothing like the women I usually associated with, either professionally or sexually.

She studied me for a moment before speaking. “I’ll tell you what, Davin. Let me take a picture of you, your car, and your license plate. I’ll send them to a friend of mine...and *then* I’ll let you take me home.”

Smart. Even if she wasn’t telling the truth, it was a good threat. No one who wanted to hurt her would allow their identity to be sent to someone else. It’d be easier to find another target rather than risk that she was telling the truth.

“All right,” I agreed. “Do you want the picture of me now or at my car? We might have better light closer to the club.”

“Now works.” She held up her camera and snapped a picture.

I waited while she sent it to her friend, not stepping forward until she smiled at me. I gestured toward the club. “Shall we?” I fell in step beside her, and we made our way down the sidewalk.

“You don’t really look like the clubbing type,” she said as we crossed in front of Euphoria. “Or is it more of a ‘gentlemen’s club?’” She made air quotes with her fingers.

“It’s not a strip club,” I said honestly. I couldn’t help grinning, though. Euphoria wasn’t a strip club, but it definitely wasn’t the sort of club Linsey was thinking of, either.

She gave me a sideways look that said she didn’t quite believe me, but

she didn't call me on it. Instead, she went back to her original observation. "I can't really see you dancing to club music."

"What do you see me doing then?" I asked, curious.

She thought for a moment before speaking. "I'm not sure yet. You're more than you seem."

With that enigmatic statement, she fell silent. We walked a few more feet and found my car. I waited while she took a few pictures and sent those off as well. When that was done, she walked around to the passenger's side and gave me an expectant look.

I hit the button to unlock the doors, and we both got in. She gave me her address, and I expected a quiet ride, but as soon as we got on our way, she started asking questions.

"Did you grow up here?"

"I did." Something about the way she asked it told me that her answer wouldn't be the same. "Where did you grow up?"

A shadow passed over her eyes. "All over. My family moved around a lot."

"Military brat?"

She shook her head. "Just liked to move."

I had a feeling there was more to the story than that, but this wasn't an interrogation or even a date. I was giving someone a ride, and that didn't give me the right to press her for personal information.

"What brought you to Houston?" I asked. "Work?"

"Sort of. My roommate and I were living in Denver. She decided to come here, and I came with her."

I wasn't sure if *roommate* meant something other than exactly what it was on the surface, but again, it wasn't any of my business. Just because I thought the look she was giving me had a little heat in it didn't mean anything. I refused to be the creep who hit on the woman he'd saved from a bad situation. Well, helped to save. She'd done half the work herself.

"My family's been in Houston since it was the Republic of Texas." I didn't say it to sound arrogant. It was just the truth. "It's in my blood."

"Does that mean you're a football fan?" she asked. "I mean, I've only been here for six months, but I already feel like I'll be asked to leave if I don't go to a single game before the year's up."

I laughed, and the sound surprised me. Usually, my younger brother Damon was the only one who could do that.

“I like it well enough, but I don’t get to games as often as I’d like,” I admitted.

“Did you play?”

I felt the corners of my mouth tighten. “Just with my brothers. I ran track in junior and senior high school. Football would’ve taken up too much time, and I had to keep an eye on my grades. Had to keep them up.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught her looking at me with the kind of hard look that made me feel like she could see all the way inside me. Fortunately, we had arrived at her apartment building, and I pulled into the parking lot.

“Thanks,” she said, reaching for the door. She stopped before opening it. “Do you want to come up? My roommate will be at work until late.”

This woman had surprised me more tonight than most other women had in days or weeks.

“You want me to come inside?”

She grinned at me. “I don’t know about you, but all that tension has me pretty wound up. I need to get rid of some excess energy, and I wouldn’t mind doing that with you.”

My night was suddenly looking much, *much* better.

NINE

LINSEY

HOT. DAMN.

Or maybe it was more like *damn hot*.

He was in a suit that probably cost more than my rent for three months and looked like he'd just stepped off the cover of *GQ*. Golden blond hair that I wanted to run my fingers through and a build I couldn't wait to see without clothes. Gorgeous pale blue eyes and a strong jawline. But it was the dimples that'd finally done it for me. I was a sucker for dimples, and he had great ones.

Okay, maybe it was stupid of me to invite a guy up to my apartment because he had dimples, but I could've had a worse reason, right?

Besides, it'd been six months since I'd gotten laid, and tonight's near-death – or at least near-assault – experience had left me feeling like I should make up for lost time.

Still, I wasn't stupid. I'd sent the pictures of Davin, his car, and his license plate to Kasey. Now, as I led Davin up the stairs to the second-floor apartment, I sent a text to Kasey, letting her know that I'd invited my sort-of savior into the apartment.

Another roommate might've freaked out about how I'd met Davin, but Kasey wasn't like that. After all, how different would it have been if I'd met him inside the club he'd been at instead of down the block? Women took men home from clubs all the time. I was just taking one from outside the club.

"Kasey and I are clean, but not exactly neat," I said as I opened the door, and he followed me inside.

"Your house, your rules," he said. "I'm assuming Kasey knows I'm

here.”

“She does.” I hung up my purse, leaving the taser in its pocket. A self-defense teacher I once had made sure the entire class had all understood the dangers of guns and tasers being used against us. I didn’t think Davin was a violent guy but having my phone close by – just in case – was a better idea than having a weapon that could possibly be used against me. “Would you like something to drink?”

“I’m not really thirsty.” He took a step toward me, moving with a deliberation that curled my toes.

I smiled. “Good. Me either.”

Another step with his eyes locked on mine, and a shiver went down my spine. In the five years since I’d started having sex, I’d never had someone look at me with that depth of intensity before. He didn’t rush me, and I knew he was giving me opportunities to change my mind with each move forward. The thrill that raced across my nerves, however, made sending him away the last thing on my mind.

As he closed the remaining distance between us, I found myself holding my breath in anticipation. His hands cupped my face, holding me still as he brought his mouth down on mine.

I’d thought I’d correctly read the energy and power this man had, but I realized now that I hadn’t understood him at all.

His lips were hard against mine, teeth sinking into the bottom one before his tongue soothed the sting. Fingers raked through my hair, then curled around the back of my neck. His other hand moved to the small of my back, pulling me flush against his body. The hard line of his cock pushed against my stomach, and the analytical part of my brain short-circuited.

I grabbed his suit jacket and shoved it off his shoulders. He shook it free, and his returning hands landed on my ass. He lifted me, and I wrapped my legs around his waist, trusting him to keep me from falling. Pushing my tongue between his lips, my fingers worked at the buttons on his shirt, ignoring the ones that popped free.

I had a feeling he had the money to replace a shirt.

My hands were greedy on his skin, and I pulled my mouth away from his to feast on it with my eyes as well. A tattoo with initials and two sets of dates was over his heart, and if we were ever to do more than hook-up, I might’ve asked who those belonged to, but right now, I was more interested in getting him inside me.

“On the right.” I attacked his neck and lips with teeth worrying over the skin. I felt his muscles bunching as he moved us down the hall and into my bedroom, and I couldn’t wait to see them, feel them under my hands.

He dropped me on the bed without warning, but he was taking off his clothes, so I didn’t complain. I scrambled out of mine as well, tossing them behind me before twisting onto my stomach to reach for my bedside table.

“I’m guessing extra-large,” I said as I grabbed a condom. “Most guys who say it are lying, but I’m betting you’re the real thing.”

“You’re betting right,” he said, his eyes scanning my body. “Nice ink.”

I grinned as I rolled back toward him. “Thanks. Kasey did it.” My eyes took a long, languorous look at the Adonis in front of me.

My imagination hadn’t done him justice, and I had a good imagination.

I let out a low whistle as I reluctantly brought my gaze back to his face. Not that it was a bad face, but that body? *Damn.*

“Didn’t peg you for a Tolkien fan.”

I shrugged. “As prone as I am to wander, it seemed to be a good motto.”

He plucked the condom from my hand and his other hand wrapped around his cock. A couple strokes, and he was even bigger and harder than before. I licked my lips and dropped a hand between my legs. My fingers slid over soft skin, and I found myself already wet.

“I didn’t say you could touch yourself.” His words held a growling undertone that was the sexiest thing I’d ever heard.

The command should’ve pissed me off, but something about the combination of it with how he carried himself and the heat in his eyes just turned me on even more.

“Then make me a better offer.”

Without taking his gaze off me, he ripped open the condom wrapper and rolled the latex over his erection. He leaned over me and grabbed my wrist, not hard enough to hurt, but applying enough pressure to stop my fingers from moving. As he took the other one and raised both my arms above my head, my breath came faster, and my nipples tightened.

That was hotter than it should have been.

I spread my legs as he leaned over me, wiggling as he pinned my hands over my head. The tip of his cock brushed against my skin, and I made an impatient sound. One eyebrow raised, and the corner of his mouth quirked up in amusement.

“Want something?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Fuck me, or I’ll go find someone who...FUCK!”

He filled me too fast and too much, and I fought against his hands as lights danced in front of my eyes. Every cell in my body lit up, vibrated, screamed. I could feel him inside me, above me. I could feel...*everything*.

“Linsey?”

Coming back to my senses, though no less electrified, I wrapped my legs around his waist and locked eyes with him. “Don’t stop.”

The hesitation on his face sparked something wicked inside me. I shifted my hips and squeezed him. His eyes squeezed closed, and he cursed, his grip on my wrists increasing to the edge of painful. Energy thrummed between us, making it hard to breathe.

He gathered himself quickly and began to move. Back, and then driving forward until he hit the end of me. Sparks of pleasure and pain shot through me, and I wanted more. It took us a couple moments to find our rhythm, but once we did, we pushed our bodies forward, relentlessly chasing release. Faster and harder we came together, the only sounds in the room of flesh against flesh and our harsh breathing.

His free hand dropped to my hip, fingers bruising as he tried to bring us closer than physically possible. My nails raked across his shoulders and down his back, close to breaking skin. He growled and bit my lip, then sucked it into my mouth. I gasped and writhed, my desperation growing with the pressure building inside me.

And then I was coming, harder than I’d ever come in my life, and my vision was graying out, and Davin was coming too, his body stiffening against mine as he buried himself deep.

As I felt consciousness slipping away, I reminded myself that no matter how good this was, once I could think again, I needed to make sure Davin left. This was fucking. We weren’t ‘sleeping together.’ He’d leave, and that’d be it.

Meanwhile, I’d enjoy the bliss while it lasted.

TEN

DAVIN

I NEVER WOULD'VE DESCRIBED MY LIFE AS AVERAGE OR NORMAL, NOT WITH the money I'd always had available to me, and not with a brother like Damon, but I didn't think of my life as anything particularly exciting either. Even my involvement in BDSM wasn't anything exceptional. I tended to view it the same way other people might view golf or tennis. A physical and mental relief from stress. Nothing more.

Last night, though...

I couldn't stop thinking about it. Shorter than I would've liked, but more explosive than it should have been. A large part of what got me off as a Dom was the domination itself. Teasing, edging, pushing the limits – all aspects of foreplay leading up to the main event.

All the control I usually wielded, however, had vanished beneath the need to simply be inside her. She hadn't needed any of the rest either, though the way she'd responded to me restraining her and how she'd equaled me in intensity, her body moving against mine, made me think she'd be open to visiting my world, if she wasn't already a part of it.

Another thing that made me think she'd be worth considering as a potential recurring partner was how quickly she'd gotten me out of her apartment.

She hadn't been rude about it, but it hadn't been embarrassment either. She'd been fine with what we'd done. It was more like matter of fact. We'd finished what we'd come together to accomplish, and then it was time to move on.

I could not only understand it, I appreciated it. It was the same sort of reasoning that I had after sex. She'd just recovered faster than I had.

I frowned. I hoped that didn't mean I hadn't given her as much pleasure as she'd given me. The thought stung not only my pride but the dominant part of me that considered it my responsibility to care for a sub in every way while we were together. Especially one that pleased me as much as she had.

Before I could get too caught up in that train of thought, my assistant buzzed the intercom.

"Mr. Holden, there are two detectives here to see you." She did a good job of keeping the curiosity out of her voice, but I was curious enough for the both of us.

Then I remembered how I'd met Linsey and realized that one or both of the men last night had probably been conscious enough to recognize me.

Shit.

"Send them in."

The two people who came into my office looked more like TV versions of detectives than actual detectives. The guy was the younger of the two, with strawberry blond hair and one of those annoyingly charming smiles that warned me he was going to be either the good cop or the sarcastic cop.

The woman was blonde too and a knockout. I was willing to bet the majority of men – and a good number of women – between the front doors and my office had watched her walk by and thought about what she'd be like in bed.

Fortunately for me, I wasn't thinking that when I stood up and held out my hand. "Good afternoon, Detectives."

"Mr. Holden." The woman shook my hand first. "I'm Detective Mitchells, and he's Detective Hacker."

Even though I was fairly certain that I knew why they were here, I wasn't going to offer them information until I knew for certain. "How can I help you?"

"Can you tell us where you were last night?" Mitchells asked. She took a notebook from her suit jacket.

"Can you tell me why you want to know?"

Detective Hacker's smile widened. "What's the problem, Mr. Holden? If you weren't doing anything wrong, you don't have anything to hide, right?" He winked at me. "Unless you were at some strip club or something. But even then, that's not illegal. Hell, not even embarrassing anymore."

Great. He wasn't just a smiler. He was a talker too.

"I was here until about six o'clock, then went to a club for a few hours. I

had a drink, then went for a walk.” I stopped there. If they wanted more, I wanted some information first. Since Linsey hadn’t wanted to call the cops, I needed to know how much they already knew before I decided what else I’d give them.

“And?” Detective Mitchells tapped the top of her pen on her notebook.

I put my hands in my pockets. “And I’d like to know why you’re requesting my whereabouts.”

“I don’t–”

Detective Mitchells held up her hand, cutting off whatever the other detective was going to say. “Two gentlemen were found unconscious in an alley. After waking up in the hospital, they identified you as their assailant, Mr. Holden.”

That answered that question.

“I went for a walk, like I said I did,” I picked up where I’d left off. “I’d gone less than a block when I saw three people. Two men and a shorter, slender figure I learned was a woman. The men were following the woman, and my gut said they were up to no good–”

“Your *gut*?” Detective Hacker smirked.

“Yes, Detective.” I kept my voice even. “Normal people do occasionally get flashes of intuition. Especially when it concerns a pair of men following a woman down a shadowy sidewalk.”

The smirk disappeared, and the detective clearly wasn’t pleased with my response. Mitchells, however, just made a motion for me to continue.

“Before I reached them, she turned around with what I thought was a flashlight and pointed it at them. They talked. I don’t know exactly what was said, but I assumed it was something along the lines of her telling them to leave her alone. She then used a taser – what I’d thought was just a flashlight – on one of them. He hit the ground, and she tried to leave. The other guy grabbed her arm. She told him to let her go. I was close by then, and when he didn’t let her go, I hit him.”

Detective Mitchells raised an eyebrow.

“After that, Linsey and I went home.” I purposefully kept the statement vague.

“Linsey.” Detective Hacker said. “That would be the young lady you rescued?”

“I don’t think ‘rescued’ is the right word,” I said, wanting to smile at the thought of what Linsey would say if she heard him say that. “But, yes, Linsey

was the young woman who was almost assaulted by the two men in the hospital.”

“Does Linsey have a last name?” Detective Mitchells asked.

“I’m sure she does, but I don’t know it. We didn’t exchange last names.” We did, however, exchange some other things...not that I planned on telling them about *that* part of my night. “Do you really need to talk to her? I mean, they identified me, right? Not her.”

My desire to protect her surprised me. I wasn’t going to hide what I knew, but if I could handle this situation, I would.

“Mr. Holden, I hope you understand that we need to talk to *everyone* involved to get a clear picture of what happened.” Detective Mitchells’ expression didn’t change, and I found myself unable to read what she was thinking.

Interesting.

Or it would have been interesting if I hadn’t been focused on Linsey.

“I drove her home,” I said. “Before I went back to my place. I can give you her address.”

“Thank you,” Mitchells said after I told her where Linsey lived. “We’ll be in touch, Mr. Holden.”

I smiled as they left my office, but it faded as soon as they disappeared. Linsey hadn’t wanted to call the cops last night, and I was starting to regret that I hadn’t talked her into it. What we’d done had been self-defense, but not having called the authorities made it look like we had something to hide.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my forehead. I didn’t have any way to warn Linsey, and it wasn’t like I really had to *warn* her. She hadn’t done anything wrong. Neither of us had. But I didn’t like the idea of her being blind-sided.

“What’s going on?”

I opened my eyes to find my father standing in my office. “Dad?”

“Why are there police here?” He wasn’t yelling. He actually sounded like he was trying to keep his voice quiet, as if no one would notice that the cops were here if he didn’t say it too loudly.

“They just wanted to ask me a few questions.” Dad knew I wasn’t a saint, but if I kept things quiet, he usually didn’t bug me too much. Being at a BDSM club was not even close to *quiet*.

“What could you have done that would warrant them to come to our business in the middle of the day?” His cheeks were red.

He wasn’t going to let this go until I explained, so I did it quickly – and

without mentioning Euphoria. Or the sex with Linsey. With each word I said, I watched his tension ease. When I finished, he let out a sigh of relief.

“I’m glad you wanted to help this stranger, but I’m even more glad that it’s all over, and you’re done with it.”

“I hope so,” I said. “Once the detectives talk to Linsey, it should be an open-and-shut case.”

“Whatever it is, we can spin your part if we have to.” Dad shook his head. “You’re the good guy, no matter what. Coming to the rescue of some girl wandering the streets in that part of town at that time of night.”

I resisted the urge to remind him that it had barely been nighttime. As if that mattered.

“Girls like that.” Dad shook his head. “They’re just asking for something bad to happen.”

“Excuse me?” My full attention snapped back to him. “*Asking for it?* She was walking down the street. What about that is *asking* to be attacked? And even if she had been doing naked cartwheels, it still wouldn’t mean she deserved it.” I shook my head this time. “Damn, Dad. I thought you were better than that.”

As soon as I finished, I waited for him to explode at me. I didn’t regret a single word of it, but I never talked to Dad like that. I was a diplomat, calm, and cool-headed.

Judging by the expression on his face, I’d surprised him as much as I surprised myself. The thing he didn’t know, however, was that my outburst wasn’t entirely about general misogynistic victim-blaming.

It was about *her*.

ELEVEN

LINSEY

KASEY WOULDN'T STOP GRINNING AT ME, AND I WAS GOING TO THROW something at her the next time she popped her head out of her little room.

I'd feigned sleep when she'd gotten home last night, not ready to talk to her about what'd happened between Davin and me. The sex had been amazing. The best I'd ever had, and while I hadn't made it to double-digits with my number of partners, I wasn't exactly inexperienced. It hadn't been the sex that'd thrown me, though.

It'd been the panic that hadn't come when we'd both finished and took a couple minutes to rest before I kicked him out. Or, rather, asked him to leave. Maybe asked wasn't the right word...

"Linsey, you've got some drool on your chin." Kasey bumped her shoulder against mine. "Thinking about that big dick you got last night?"

I glared at her. "Sometimes, I really hate you."

She laughed, drawing attention from a pair of multi-pierced twenty-somethings who were arguing over whether or not they should get matching nipple rings.

"You're the one who gave me the details," she said.

"Because you asked," I countered.

"True." She grinned. "And if I'd gotten fucked half as good as you apparently did, I'd be drooling too."

"Excuse me, is one of you Linsey?"

I pegged them as cops the moment I looked up. Detectives or undercover, but after how Davin and I met last night, I was leaning toward the former. So much for me keeping the police out of things.

"Hi, I'm Kasey Lee, the owner." She shifted so that she was half in front

of me. “Why are you looking for my employee?” She asked it with a smile, but there wasn’t anything friendly about it.

“As her employer, you don’t have any right to know.” The male detective had a smug expression that made me want to slap him. “But you can be charged with obstruction of justice if you don’t answer our question.”

“Actually, she did answer your question.” I stepped around Kasey. “You asked if one of us was Linsey, and she told you who she was. Then she asked you a question. Pretty sure that isn’t obstruction of justice.”

“Oh, really? What law school did you graduate from?” he asked, turning his attention to me. The derision in his eyes as he ran his gaze over me from head to toe just pissed me off even more.

“It doesn’t take a law degree to know that, while obstruction is generally defined as someone interfering with the workings of the courts, the threat of charging someone with it is only as good as the follow-through.” I hooked my thumbs in the belt loops of my jeans. “And no prosecutor would waste their time for someone who asked a question. So, get off your fucking high horse and tell me what you want to talk to me about.”

Color flooded his face, and he started to sputter. Before he could spit out whatever insult or threat he was choking on, the female detective spoke.

“I take it you’re Linsey?”

“Linsey Keller.” I crossed my arms and hoped I didn’t look too defensive.

“I’m Detective Mitchells, and he’s Detective Hacker.” The dismissive tone in her voice when she said her partner’s name made me think that she wasn’t too fond of him. “We have two men in the hospital who claim that Davin Holden assaulted them. Mr. Holden said that he was with you.”

I doubted Davin would’ve just said he was with me and left it at that, but I understood that they’d want to hear my version of what happened without Davin’s version of events influencing my account.

“He was,” I said. “Yesterday evening, I brought Kasey lunch here and then headed home. I’m not sure how long I was walking when I saw two men watching me. After I passed them, they started to follow me until I finally turned around to confront them. I have a taser, and I pulled it out, using the flashlight part of it at first. I told them to leave me alone. They argued with me, and one of them moved forward. I used my taser on him. The other man grabbed my arm and wouldn’t let go. That’s when Davin appeared. He punched the man. We then went back to his car, and he drove me home.”

I wasn’t about to share where things went after that. If Davin had told

them, they'd ask me to confirm it, but something told me that he wasn't that sort of guy. Besides, us having sex didn't change any of the facts relevant to the incident in question.

"So, you just left two unconscious men on the sidewalk and went home with a stranger?" Detective Hacker asked. "If Mr. Holden was, in fact, a stranger."

"He was." Now, I was doubly glad I hadn't said anything about Davin and me having sex. Even though it had no bearing on what had happened, Hacker would use it against my credibility even more than he was using my appearance right now.

"Is there a reason you didn't call 911?" Detective Mitchells asked.

"I have a bruise, but that's it," I said, pulling up my sleeve so they could see the finger-shaped bruises on my upper arm. "They didn't steal anything either. I didn't want the hassle of filing charges."

"But they needed to go to the hospital," Hacker said. "Weren't you worried about that?"

I gave him a cold glare. "At the very least, they were going to mug me. I wasn't exactly concerned about their health."

"Are you saying they deserved what happened?" Hacker's voice took on an accusing tone.

I opened my mouth to say *hell, yes, they did*, but an elbow in the ribs stopped me.

"Does Linsey need a lawyer?" Kasey asked.

"It was self-defense," I said. "Besides, they couldn't have been unconscious for long since they clearly got a good enough look at Davin to name him."

Wait. They'd seen Davin and knew exactly who he was? Did that mean he knew them? Had he set me up? That didn't feel like the truth, but I filed it away under things to investigate after the cops left.

"Do you want to file charges?" Detective Mitchells asked. "If they try to sue Mr. Holden, having criminal charges against them would make it less likely that they'd win anything."

I thought for a moment, glancing over at Kasey. She, however, was smiling at Mitchells and didn't even look my way. Clearly, she wasn't worried.

"How about you tell them that if they agree not to sue anyone, I'll agree to not filing assault charges. Davin shouldn't get caught up in legal shit just

because he helped me.”

Mitchells studied me for a minute, her expression unreadable. Finally, she nodded and closed her notebook. “All right. We have a few more things to check, but we should be able to work things out without much more from you or Mr. Holden.”

Kasey leaned forward, a familiar gleam in her eyes. “I should get your number, just in case Linsey needs to contact you.”

Hacker’s jaw dropped, but I just smiled. It was good to see Kasey interested in someone again. Her ex had done a number on her head.

“Here’s my card,” Mitchells said, holding out the little rectangle to me. “For any case-related matters.” She glanced at Kasey. “My private number... I only give that out when I’m not working.”

Kasey came out from behind the counter and gestured toward the door. “In that case, K’s Phoenix is open until two a.m. Why don’t you stop by after you’re off and give me your number then?”

Hacker was still gawking at them as Kasey escorted them out of the building, but I’d stopped listening to my friend flirting when it’d popped into my head that I’d heard the last name Holden before. Not Davin Holden, but Jude Holden. He’d been listed in the cold case file of Heidi Titan, one of the missing women from Houston.

Maybe the two weren’t related, but my gut said that wasn’t the case. Jude Holden had been a rich business owner twenty-five years ago. Davin had money and had to be fairly well-known around Houston since my attackers had recognized him.

Dammit.

“Well, your night was a little more exciting than you led me to believe,” Kasey said as she came back to the counter. “You said there was some trouble, and Davin helped you out. You didn’t say you were almost attacked and that one of Houston’s biggest names was your knight in shining armor.”

“I didn’t want to worry you,” I said. “And I didn’t know who Davin was. Honestly, I still don’t know.”

She stared at me. “Are you joking? Davin Holden. Heir apparent to Holden Enterprises. Billionaire and the city’s most eligible bachelor. Older brother to Damon Holden, the musician.”

“The lead singer of...” I slapped my palm against my forehead, feeling like an idiot. “Holden. Right. How did I miss it?”

Kasey grinned. “Well, from what you said, his naked body was pretty

distracting.”

I laughed because she was right, but in my mind, I was trying to figure out just what I’d gotten myself into.

TWELVE

DAVIN

MATTIAS CONDE AND I HAD KNOWN EACH OTHER SINCE WE WERE KIDS. HE was six or seven years older than me and was a third-generation lawyer. His grandfather had represented Granddad when the business first started, and he was getting ready to take over for his dad, who'd be retiring within the next year or two.

While he took an extra case here and there, Holden Enterprises was Conde & Sons' primary client, which meant we'd spent a lot of time together. We weren't close, exactly, but we were more friends than acquaintances.

Either way, he was the person I needed to call after my visit from the cops. While I didn't think I needed a lawyer, I did think it was a good idea to let one know what'd happened. That was why Mattias was on his way up right now.

While I waited, I found myself wondering what Linsey had said to the detectives. I'd been trying to not think of her since they left and writing down my account of what'd happened as Mattias had suggested had helped. Now that I was done, however, she was on my mind again.

I'd left my door open, and Mattias came in without knocking.

"I have to admit, you were the last Holden I would've thought I'd need to have a lawyer-client meeting with about something other than business matters." He grinned at me.

I was pretty sure there were times when my dad wished Mattias was his kid instead of me. I mean, besides being a lawyer, he married his high school sweetheart, and they had three kids. Dad was still waiting for weddings and grandkids. Then I remembered that Deklin was engaged to a woman with a son. Instant grandkid.

It'd been a weird few months.

"Yeah, well, I didn't think I'd be in this position either," I said.

"Did you write everything down like I told you?" Mattias asked as he set his briefcase on the chair.

"I did. And made three copies like you asked." I handed him a stack of papers. "Are you going to tell me why?"

Mattias took the papers and signed all three, putting the date and time on each. "If the detectives want an official statement, this will be it. We want the story to be the same every single time."

"It's not like I have anything to hide." I leaned against my desk. "It was self-defense on Linsey's part and me protecting her."

"With those mitigating factors and the fact that you only punched one of them one time, it shouldn't be difficult to get anything criminal dropped if that should happen." Mattias's smile was gone, and he was all business now. "And we want to get charges dropped as soon as they're filed because the longer this stretches out, the worse it will be for your family's reputation and for the company."

I frowned. "I saved a woman from being attacked. How could that be bad for the company or my family?"

"You know as well as I do that a good PR firm can turn anything on its head."

Shit. He was right.

"You think they're going to sue me?"

"I think they'll use the threat of pressing charges to force you to settle," Mattias said matter-of-factly. "Because your only other option will be to fight it at a trial. At the trial, a defense attorney who wants a chance to take down a wealthy family will make it sound like you're a privileged white man who hit a young man driven to a life of crime because he was poor."

My eyebrows shot up. "Seriously?"

"And you having a black attorney, even one as fine as me, won't win you any points."

I sighed. "I didn't do anything wrong."

It was the truth, but I knew the truth didn't always mean that the good guys won. I wasn't a great guy, but I was a *good* guy. And being a good guy could cost my family far too much.

If I had to, I'd settle instead of insisting on a trial to make sure the truth was known. For my family. They came first. Always.

“...took her home, right?”

I gave myself a mental shake as I realized Mattias was still talking to me. “Sorry. My thoughts got away with me for a moment. What were you saying?”

“This Linsey you helped, you said you took her home, right?”

I nodded, trying not to think about what had happened after I’d taken her home. That would distract me even more.

“My advice is to go to her. Let her know what might be coming.”

“I’m sure the detectives have already talked to her.”

“To find out what happened. She needs to know that these guys might come after her.”

A stab of fear went through me. “Do you think they’ll try to hurt her? I should talk to the detectives again.”

“She doesn’t sound like the kind of person who’ll be intimidated into changing her story.”

I thought of the fierce expression on her face when she’d turned on me with the taser. “No, she isn’t.”

“But is she the sort of person who could be bribed into it?” Mattias held up his hand to stop the protest I automatically started to make. “If those men offered her a percentage of a lucrative settlement, would she accept it if the only thing she had to do was change her story?”

“No.” I didn’t even have to think about it...and then I realized that I actually *did* need to think about it. I didn’t know her. Hell, I didn’t even know her last name.

As much as I hated the idea that Linsey might be the type of person who’d do something like that, the truth was, I couldn’t answer that question. Just because I knew what she looked like when she climaxed didn’t mean I knew a single thing about her character.

“I’ll talk to her.”

And I’d pretend that the idea of seeing her again didn’t conjure memories of her naked body and the way she’d felt underneath me. No matter how much she turned me on, though, I wasn’t going there again. Not when there was so much on the line.

Family came first.

Always.

THIRTEEN

LINSEY

I WAS GLAD KASEY HAD SUGGESTED THAT I FIND DAVIN AND LET HIM KNOW that I'd talked to the detectives because that meant I didn't need to feel weird about wanting to talk to him. About what'd happened. Not anything else. If Kasey had made the suggestion with it in her mind that Davin and I would somehow end up together again, that was on her, because that wasn't what I wanted at all.

That was why I was wearing the same denim mini-skirt and a black corset-style halter top that I'd worn to K's Phoenix earlier today. I liked the way it showed off most of my back tattoo, and since I'd planned to be at the shop most of the day, it had seemed like a good idea. Heeled sandals and a silvers Celtic knot necklace made it a little dressier than my usual outfits, but I hadn't felt like being completely casual when I'd woken up this morning.

It had nothing to do with Davin.

None of my inner monologue did anything to dispel the butterflies in my stomach as I opened the door to Holden Enterprises and stepped inside. A nice two-story building, it didn't look like the multi-billion-dollar business everyone claimed it was. If people's reactions to me over the years had taught me anything, however, it was that appearances could be deceiving.

Not knowing how tight the security was here, I went to the receptionist's desk and ignored the sideways look the security guard at the door gave me. I wanted to make a snarky comment about how I couldn't possibly be hiding anything dangerous in this outfit, but that would've been disrespectful to Davin, and I didn't want to do that.

"Hi." I gave the receptionist my politest smile. "I need to speak to Davin Holden."

She returned the smile, but it was clearly just a professional one because it didn't completely cover the judgment in her eyes. "Do you have an appointment?"

"I don't, but if you could let him know that Linsey Keller needs to talk to him, I'd appreciate it."

"I'll do that." She pointed toward a row of chairs. "If you'll have a seat, I'll let you know when he can see you."

I gritted my teeth but thanked her and then went to find a seat. After twenty minutes, the nerves I'd been experiencing began to turn to annoyance. Some at Davin for keeping me waiting, but mostly at the people giving me disapproving looks as they walked by.

I wiggled my fingers at the security guard when he looked my way for the fifth time and barely resisted the urge to flip off the receptionist when she did the same. The other people could've been employees or clients, but either way, their stares of disapproval were rude. For all they knew, I was some heiress here to invest in Houston real estate.

Most people thought the way I dressed and everything that came with it was due to a desire for attention. Maybe that was the case for others, but for me, this was just who I was. I didn't see why my expression of myself was less appropriate than a man in a three-piece suit or a woman in an expensive cocktail dress. But it'd always been like this. By the time I was an adult, I'd just stopped giving a fuck.

I was who I was, and if someone didn't like that, too bad.

By the time Davin stepped into the lobby, every muscle in my body was tense, my hands curled into fists so tight that my nails dug into my palms. My jaw ached from clenching it, and I was ready to go off on him. I'd passed the point where I would've been satisfied with simply leaving, and now, I wanted to confront him.

Except the shock on his face as soon as he saw me was genuine, and the smile he gave me reached all the way to his eyes. He hadn't known I was down here; I was sure of it. And he was glad to see me.

That went a long way toward soothing my spirit. I'd hated the idea that he'd be the sort of man who fucked a woman one day, and the next, be too good to acknowledge her existence. Not that he owed me anything at all. There was just a difference between going our separate ways after sex and a snub. My impression of him as a decent man had been accurate, after all.

"Linsey." He held out a hand when he reached me but didn't shake it.

Instead, he squeezed my hand and bent down to kiss my cheek, surprising me with the gesture.

Okay, seeing the shock on the faces of the receptionist and the security guard made up for them having left me waiting down here.

“I talked to the detectives about what happened.” I took a step back and told myself that I didn’t still feel my cheek tingling where his lips had touched. “I didn’t tell them that we slept together, though.”

“I didn’t either,” he said. “It didn’t change anything about what happened, and it wasn’t any of their business.”

I got the impression he was trying to tell me that he hadn’t been attempting to hide that we’d been together, but that would’ve been awkward to talk about in general, let alone right now. Besides, it wasn’t the important thing.

“Exactly.” I tugged on a chunk of purple hair, a nervous tell I’d picked up since trying to stop biting my nails. “Anyway. I told them that you only hit that guy after he grabbed my arm.”

“I figured you’d tell the truth,” he said. “You didn’t have to come here to tell me that.”

He sounded amused, and it made me smile. “You’re right. I actually came here because they told me who you were, and I was worried those guys might try to sue you. I wanted to know what I could do to help.”

“My lawyer said the same thing. I was actually supposed to find you and talk to you about it.” He looked at his watch. “It’s getting late. Do you want to grab some dinner, and we can talk?”

I doubted I was dressed for the types of restaurants he frequented, but I *was* hungry. “All right.”

“Did you drive?” he asked.

“I did.”

“Would you prefer to ride with me or drive separately?”

I liked the fact that he asked rather than just telling me what to do. “Just tell me the address, and I’ll meet you there.”

Less than half an hour later, I walked into the Taste of Texas with Davin. In Denver or New York or L.A., a steakhouse wouldn’t have been the first choice for a...whatever this was. But we were in Texas, and steak was a thing down here.

Actually, I appreciated the fact that we were at a nice but not pretentious restaurant. He could’ve played up how much money and influence he had,

but he just seemed to want a good steak. And the people here didn't give me any funny looks, so that was a point in their favor, though it might've been because of who I was with, but I'd take it.

We made small talk where he asked about places I'd lived, and I asked what the CFO of a real estate company actually did. Then, after we'd ordered, I brought us back around to the reason I'd come to find him in the first place.

"By the way, I told the cops that if those thugs agreed not to sue you, I wouldn't press charges against them."

He stared at me for a minute before asking, "Why would you do that?"

I tried not to be offended by the hint of suspicion in the question. He didn't know me, and a guy with his money probably dealt with a lot of assholes.

"Because you helped me," I explained. "If people think they're going to be sued for helping someone, fewer people would do what you did."

"I appreciate that." He looked like he couldn't quite wrap his head around my reasoning. "But you deserve to have them answer for what they did."

"It could've been worse," I said with a shrug. "Besides, they probably wouldn't get in much trouble anyway. Aside from some bruises on my arm, it's not like either of them managed to hurt me."

"They bruised you?" His voice dropped to something dark and dangerous. And so fucking hot.

"It's okay." I smiled at him and turned my arm so he could see it. "See, not that bad."

He reached out like he wanted to touch me, but then pulled his hand back, a faint flush creeping under his tan. "I would've hit him harder if I'd known he'd done that."

Oh, yeah. This protective thing he had going on was *definitely* hot.

FOURTEEN

DAVIN

WHY HADN'T I KISSED HER GOODNIGHT?

Or more.

That thought had been going around in my head from the moment I'd gotten in my car Wednesday night and driven away from the restaurant. I'd enjoyed dinner with Linsey more than I'd enjoyed a meal with any other woman in a long time.

The conversation had been easy, and neither of us had taken offense when we'd steered away from one topic or another. The current between us had buzzed bright and hot. The few times we'd touched – a brush of our fingers here, a bump of my arm against hers when we walked – had felt like a jolt of static electricity.

Despite all that, when we'd finished our decadent desserts, I'd walked her to her car and said goodbye. I'd kissed her cheek in greeting when I'd seen her in the lobby at work, but I hadn't even managed anything like that before walking away. I felt like I was thirteen again, taking Catriona Wheeler back to her dad's car after we went to the movies.

I didn't like being flustered, especially not when it came to women, and that had thrown off the rest of my week. I hadn't been able to concentrate on anything. Little things that shouldn't have even caught my notice annoyed me. Things that should have brought me relief barely registered.

Yesterday afternoon, the detectives had come back to my office with good news. The two men who had gone after Linsey had disappeared. Apparently, when the detectives had mentioned a good case for both self-defense and defense of another, then added that if a civil case was pursued, I could possibly countersue for slander, both men had left against medical

advice and completely vanished.

I was glad for the positive outcome being reached without a lot of legal hassle, but I was still restless. Unsettled. Off-balance. Like something had happened that had completely thrown my life out of whack.

I wanted to be able to blame it on a phone call I'd gotten from my younger brother, Damon, a few hours ago, asking if I was a member at Euphoria. He'd accidentally discovered my 'playroom' recently, and I'd told him that I went to a club in Houston, but I hadn't given him a name.

He'd asked the usual curious but polite questions, but at the time, I hadn't even considered that his interest might be anything more than wanting to get his mind off his budding relationship with Jae.

Apparently, my brother had been doing some of his own research since then, and that was why I was currently filling out the necessary form to bring Damon and his girlfriend, Jae, in as my guests. Both of them looked a little nervous, but they were hiding it well, Jae a little less so than my brother.

I'd been the same way when I'd gone to my first club, and that'd been just around the time things in the BDSM world had exploded into the mainstream. People in my world had various opinions of whether or not that was a good thing, or if it was accurately represented, but I stayed out of those types of debates.

In my opinion, as long as it was consensual and safe, it wasn't anyone's business to police or judge what others were doing or thinking. And it wasn't on any of us in this lifestyle to meet the expectations of those who'd only gotten their information from fiction.

I'd had that talk with both Damon and Jae before I'd brought them here, making sure they understood the reality of what they'd experience versus how it was often portrayed in fiction. I knew Damon well enough to know that he'd probably already figured it out, but the last thing I wanted was for either one to be so uncomfortable that they felt weird around me afterward. If they didn't like it, that was fine, but I didn't want to fuck up my relationship with my brother.

"Here are your visitor passes." I handed the pins to them.

"Really?" Damon looked at the gold and black *E* pin.

"It's how people know who to look out for as much as anything else," I explained. "The club usually does a good job of weeding out the assholes, but some slip through, and some know how to get close to the line without crossing it. Members make sure visitors aren't taken advantage of."

Damon helped Jae clip the pin where it would be the most visible and then tucked some of her dark hair behind her ear. The gesture made my stomach clench. The two hadn't known each other long at all, and they kept looking at each other like no one else existed. And it wasn't just the 'first lust' sort of looking, either. What those two had went beyond mere physical attraction. I'd seen it with my youngest brother, Deklin, and his fiancée, Sofi, too.

How had both of my brothers found the same thing over the course of just a couple months? It didn't make any sense. It shouldn't have been possible.

Yet the evidence was staring me right in the face.

They were in love.

As we went through the second set of doors, I pushed those thoughts aside. If they were happy, I was happy for them, but I wasn't looking for the same thing. I wasn't interested in love. Coming here wasn't about love, at least not for me.

"Let's go to the bar," I suggested. "We can get a drink, and you can take a look around without being in the middle of everything. It can be a little overwhelming at first."

Damon took Jae's hand, the easy smile on his face hiding the hint of anxiety in his eyes. It was strange. I'd always been the big brother, but Damon had never seemed to really need me to take care of him. There were three years between us, but he and I had always seemed more like we were both the oldest. I took care of Dad and the business. Damon took care of Deklin. At least until we grew up, and at that point, we'd all taken care of ourselves.

This was the first time I'd ever really felt like he needed my help, even if it was with something fairly simple.

"I like the music," Jae said with a grin. Her pale eyes shone with humor, and I realized that the song that'd just come on was one of Holden's hits.

"I have to admit," I said, chuckling, "it's a bit disconcerting, being in the middle of something sexual, and having your little brother's voice suddenly come over the speakers."

Damon laughed and leaned down to whisper something in Jae's ear. Judging by the way her face flooded with color, I assumed it was something pretty dirty. My admiration for her grew when she said something back that made his eyes light up with heat and happiness.

A spark of something unfamiliar flickered inside me.

Was I...jealous?

“What can I get for you?” The bartender was new and blonde. A gorgeous blonde with a tongue stud and a leather corset. And the way she was looking at me made me think she was offering more than a drink.

Except I wasn't interested.

Dammit. Not again.

FIFTEEN

LINSEY

I'D ALREADY CHECKED OUT A HALF DOZEN CLUBS AROUND THE CITY SINCE arriving here. I wasn't exactly a social person, but there was something about losing myself in a crowd of dancing bodies that helped turned off my mind. Euphoria, however, wasn't a regular club.

I'd never gone to a BDSM club in any of the places I'd lived, and I hadn't exactly thought of myself as into S&M, but the more I'd thought about it since I'd first heard of the club, the more I realized that I actually liked a lot of things that could be considered BDSM.

And that was how I found myself being signed in as a visitor by the same woman who'd told me about the club in the first place. Sherry had apparently been a member here since it first opened. I still wasn't entirely sure how we'd ended up having that particular conversation, though. Kasey might've prompted it since she was convinced that I'd been spending too much time by myself, and I might've been annoyed with her about it if she hadn't been right.

Sherry had assured me that I didn't need to dress in any specific way, and once we were inside, I saw that wasn't entirely accurate. Style was optional, but everyone in here had to look good. No ratty clothes or the type of casual dress that'd be acceptable at a bar. My strapless black dress and three-inch heels fit right in, and no one even glanced twice at my hair or piercings, but if any part of me had looked cheap, I had a feeling I would've been out on my ass.

After I assured Sherry that I'd be fine by myself, she inserted herself into a group of dancers and disappeared from my sight. The place was busy, but not so packed that I couldn't breathe, which I liked. The music was good too.

The song playing right now was from the group Holden.

Of course, that made me think about Davin, and then...there he was.

At first, I thought he was a figment of my imagination. A good-looking guy with a slight resemblance who my brain decided to pretend was the hot rich man I'd had sex with.

Then he turned to face me, and our eyes met. Recognition, followed quickly by surprise, turned to appreciative heat as he ran his gaze down my body and then back up again. By the time his attention was back on my face, I was only a few steps from him.

When I was close enough to hear him, he said, "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Whatever you're having."

He raised an eyebrow and gestured over his shoulder to the bartender. She gave him an appreciative look, but still smiled at me when she handed over the drink. If the rest of the staff here was like her, I might have to see what a membership cost.

"I have to admit, I wasn't expecting to see you again," Davin said. "And certainly not here."

"The surprise is mutual," I said, taking the glass he held out. Our hands touched, and a shiver went through me. "But I can't say I'm not glad to see a familiar face."

Someone cleared their throat, and I finally realized that Davin hadn't come here alone. For a moment, I thought he was with the brunette, but then I saw the man standing at her side. Damon Holden.

"Hi." He grinned at me and stuck out his hand. "I'm Davin's brother, Damon."

I shook his hand. "Linsey Keller." I wasn't sure if offering my condolences would be appropriate for this time and place, so I turned to the woman and offered her my hand.

"Jae Knox."

"They wanted to visit Euphoria," Davin said. He gave his brother a meaningful look. "And now they're going to go explore on their own."

Damon nodded and grinned, "Yes, we are." He put his arm around Jae, and the two of them started for the dance floor.

When Davin turned back to me, I could see questions on his face, as well as the conflict about if or how to voice them. "Just ask." I smiled. "Worst I'll do is tell you it's none of your business."

He laughed, his relief evident in the sound. "I've never been in a situation where I've slept with a woman, taken her to dinner, and *then* met her here." A tension I hadn't realized he'd been holding trickled away. "You're a visitor. Does that mean you're new to this world, or just to the club?"

"It's the first time I've specifically been looking into BDSM," I said. "I tend to prefer things rough, which you already know, and I'm generally game to try new kinks, but I've never considered myself part of the group as a whole."

"Are you here with someone?"

I didn't need him to clarify the question. As a visitor, I had to have a member bring me here, but that didn't necessarily mean that I was *with* that person. "A woman I met at work is a member. She's dancing right now."

"Do you want to dance?" He closed the remaining distance between us and everything else faded into the background.

"You dance?" I didn't try to hide my surprise.

One corner of his mouth curved up, and he put a hand on the small of my back. "Occasionally, it's good foreplay."

At least I now knew that he and I had the same goal in mind. I might not have come here to get laid, but I wasn't about to turn him down, not when I knew how hot the sex would be.

I nodded, and he escorted me to the edge of the dance floor. He turned me until my back was flush against his front, and I could feel the hard length of him pressing against me. I rocked my ass back, and he cursed, grabbing my hips and holding tight. My back arched, and I stretched my arms up along his chest. He bent his head, and my fingers found the soft, short hair at the base of his skull.

I closed my eyes and let the thrumming beat of the music tell me how to move. Davin moved with me, our bodies finding the rhythm of each other with an ease that surprised me. It wasn't like we were doing some complex dance moves, but still, I'd danced with people who couldn't even sway in time with the music.

One of his hands slid up my side to my ribcage, his thumb brushing the underside of my breast. His mouth moved to my ear, tongue flicking out to tease one of my piercings before he spoke, voice a low rumble that made my core ache.

"Anywhere you don't want me to touch while we're dancing?"

I thought about it for a moment before shaking my head. I was happy to

let him take the lead. He knew the rules here, and I trusted him to stop if I asked him too. The idea of a little exhibitionism turned me on. Maybe more than a little, if things went that way.

The hand under my breast slid up and over, my nipple already a hard, little point. He squeezed, and his teeth nipped at my ear. “You’re not wearing a bra, are you?”

I shook my head. “Don’t need one in this dress.”

His grip on my breast tightened, and his other arm wrapped around my waist. “You might think differently if I decide to tug this top down right here.”

A thrill of excitement went through me, and I dug my nails into the back of his neck. He let out a hiss of air and yanked me around to face him. His eyes blazed like nothing I’d ever seen before, taking my breath away, moments before his kiss stole the rest of my air.

Deep and thorough, he kissed me like he had all the time in the world, and this kiss was the only thing that mattered. By the time he raised his head, I was clinging to him because my legs were too weak to keep me upright. *Damn*, the man could kiss.

“I need you to pick a safe word.” His voice was rough. “Something that will let me know, in no uncertain terms, that I need to stop.”

My head spun for a moment, and then I blurted out, “Roses.”

If he thought my word choice was strange, he didn’t mention it. Instead, he took my hand, laced his fingers between mine, and then led me to an alcove in the shadows.

The club had been designed that way, the outer edges having curves and corners and overhangs, all things strategically placed to allow people to see or be seen as much or as little as they wanted. Padded and lushly upholstered furniture of various sizes sat against the walls and in those spaces, but I also saw more than one piece of furniture that didn’t look comfortable at all. I supposed that was the point.

The one Davin took us to didn’t have anything scary looking nearby, but it was a little more visible than some of the other ones. I didn’t know what, exactly, we were going to do, but I had a feeling it was going to push my limits. That thought excited me more than worried me.

He sat down, tugging me onto his lap so that I was sitting sideways on his legs. I buried my fingers in his hair and crushed my mouth against his. His tongue tangled with mine, and the hand not currently on my shoulder slid up

the inside of my leg until his fingers were just under the hem of my dress. The sensitive skin there hummed, little tingles of pleasure racing up my nerves as his fingers stroked my thigh.

When he broke the kiss, his hand slid across the top of my back, tracing the falling leaves tattooed on my skin there.

“Do you want to take this into a room?” he asked. “Or would you like to stay here?”

His hands continued to stroke my skin, telling me that he wasn’t asking if I wanted to stop, but rather *where* I wanted things to continue. “Where do you want me?”

The hand between my legs moved higher, and I spread my legs a little wider, letting his fingers brush against the damp silk of my panties. I let out a moan, grabbing the front of his shirt.

In a move fast enough to make my head spin, he turned me to straddle his lap, my knees on either side of his thighs. I was aware that the change of position had rucked my skirt up high enough to expose my ass and the skimpy panties I’d put on a couple hours ago.

Then he hooked a finger in the front of my dress, and a shot of adrenaline went through me. When we’d been dancing, he’d made a comment about exposing my breasts, and I could see in his eyes that he wanted to follow through. I gave him a slight nod, every muscle in my body tensing in anticipation. Using just his finger, he pulled down the top of my dress until my breasts came free.

Before I could be embarrassed, he leaned me back and lowered his head until he was able to take a nipple in his mouth. My eyes wanted to close as his teeth and tongue worked over my sensitive skin, but I forced them to stay open, wanting to watch. I gasped as he sucked on my nipple, the pull of his mouth as deliciously wicked as the heat.

I was vaguely aware of an audience, but I didn’t care about anything but how good his mouth felt moving across my skin. He nipped and sucked on my breasts, alternating between little sparks of pain and bursts of pleasure until the two blended together into that same intense feeling that had existed the previous time we’d had sex.

“Look at me.”

I hadn’t realized my eyes had closed until his command cut through the blissful fog in my head. I opened my eyes and found him staring at me. His gaze locked on mine, and I felt his hands between us. He didn’t say what he

was doing, but it didn't take a genius to figure it out. I appreciated the fact that he was in control enough to put on a condom without me needing to mention it.

A few seconds passed, and then his hands were on my hips again, pulling me forward and up. I grabbed his shoulders, steadying myself instinctively. I felt him hot and hard against my leg, and then the tip of him nudged at my panties. I reached down and pulled them out of the way, immediately dropping down as he drove up.

We came together hard, and I saw stars. Ignoring everything else, we moved together, hips rolling against each other, my legs working as I went back and forth, up and down. The motions were automatic, a dance as much as what we'd been doing on the floor a short time ago.

I wasn't thinking about what I was doing or what he was doing. Not thinking about point or counterpoint. It was the way he felt inside. How he filled me the right way. The friction in all the right places.

And knowing that people were watching us.

I couldn't deny how much that excited me. How much I liked knowing that there were women wishing they were me. Probably more than one man too. They knew he wanted me. Knew that the sounds he was making were because of me. *My* body turned him on. Out of all of the women he could've had, he'd chosen *me*.

That heady thought, combined with pressure building inside me, sent me skyrocketing into ecstasy.

SIXTEEN

DAVIN

A SHUDDER WENT THROUGH HER, AND THEN SHE CAME, CRYING OUT AS SHE curled forward. I wrapped my arms around her, burying my face in her neck as her muscles tensed around me. I was close to my own release, turned on almost to the point of pain, and all I wanted to do was completely lose myself in her.

And the entire time, I was aware of the eyes on us. I'd initiated the exhibitionism, and it'd gotten her just as hot as it'd gotten me. I liked the people knowing that she was mine, that I was the man who made this sexy, amazing woman call out in pleasure.

But even as I finally climaxed, there was one dark thread of thought that wouldn't quite disappear.

Watching was one thing. If anyone tried to touch her, I'd rip their hand off.

Just the idea of someone wanting to share her made me see red, and I'd never been truly jealous like that before.

Sharing had never been one of my kinks, but it wasn't a hard limit for me either. If a previous partner had ever asked me to share her, I would've negotiated limits to give her what she needed.

I couldn't even contemplate doing that with Linsey.

I held her closer while we came down, running my hand over her hair, my other hand moving up and down her spine. I concentrated on the feel of her, the scent of her. I absorbed every detail about this moment because if I let my mind dwell on anything bigger than those individual things, it'd start spiraling off that little streak of possessiveness and jealousy, and I didn't know where I'd end up.

She shifted on my lap, and I loosened my hold on her. She leaned back enough to pull the top of her dress back up, hiding the marks I'd made on her breasts. After she had the top in place, she raised her head to look at me. Her face was flushed and her eyes sparkling, leaving no doubt that she'd enjoyed herself.

"That was amazing," she said as she climbed off my lap, smoothing down her dress as she went.

"It was," I agreed. Ignoring any lingering members of our audience, I removed the condom and wrapped it in tissues from the box on the floor. Tucking my cock back into my pants, I stood, mind racing as I tried to figure out what to say next.

"I'm supposed to help Kasey close tonight," Linsey said. "And I need to clean up before I go, so I'm going to head out now."

Okay, I hadn't seen that coming, though I probably should have considering how fast she'd gotten me to leave the last time.

"Do you need a ride?"

"Nope." She kissed my cheek. "Maybe I'll see you here sometime in the future."

"Maybe..."

She was already walking away, leaving me staring after her and wondering how things had gotten all jumbled up in such a short period of time. In a daze, I went to the restroom and cleaned up before returning to the bar and ordering another drink. I sipped it, barely registering the taste. I'd managed to regain enough composure to keep my emotions off my face, but the chaos inside me was as strong as ever.

It'd been a mistake to have sex with Linsey again. I should have just offered to show her around and turned her down if she asked me to dance or do anything else. I wasn't normally averse to sleeping with someone more than once, but the connection Linsey and I had experienced the first time should have been warning enough to keep me from wanting more. Or, at least, to keep me from acting on wanting more.

"Have you been sitting here this whole time?"

I looked up at the sound of my brother's voice. "Not the whole time."

"That's good."

Damon was clearly preoccupied, but I didn't mind. He and Jae were flushed and beaming, which I took to mean that this experience had been exactly what they'd been looking for. Before we left, I'd ask if they wanted

me to sponsor them for memberships, but it wasn't a conversation we needed to have right at this moment.

The two of them deserved to enjoy their first time here. Regardless of whether or not I thought they were moving fast, they were happy with each other, and happiness was all I'd ever wanted for my brothers, especially after what Damon had been through recently.

"Can I get Chimayo and a Vieux Carre?" Damon asked the bartender before turning to me. "Let's grab a table. Jae and I have some questions."

Maybe that'd get Linsey out of my head. It couldn't hurt, at least.

SEVENTEEN

LINSEY

WHEN KASEY AND I FIRST MOVED TO HOUSTON, IT'D BEEN THE END OF winter, and we were coming from Denver, so the warmer weather had been nice. Once the heat had hit, however, it had gotten old fast. Now that we were heading toward autumn, I was looking forward to it finally getting cool. Well, *cooler*. At least it wasn't too bad at night.

I turned automatically when I reached the corner and could see the light from the front window of the shop. It was late, closing in on midnight, but that didn't mean she wasn't busy. It was a Saturday night. Moving people along was one of the reasons Kasey had wanted me to come in to help her close. She didn't want any stragglers, and I wasn't one to play nice when people were standing around with their thumbs up their asses.

My mind wasn't really on the work ahead, though. It felt like it'd been through the blender. Part of it was how much sex with Davin had thrown me. Not because people had watched us. It'd been a little strange, but not in a bad way. The intensity of the connection between us was...unsettling, but it wouldn't have been difficult to deal with if it wasn't for the rest.

To try to decompress a bit before going to K's Phoenix, I'd gotten on my computer and started digging into the cold case I'd chosen as my new project. I kept telling myself that I hadn't chosen Heidi Titan because of the Holden name in the file. It was harder to convince myself of that now.

The short time I'd spent on my computer had revealed that there was indeed a connection between the Jude Holden mentioned in the police report and Davin. Jude was, apparently, Davin's grandfather and the founder of Holden Enterprises. A three-generation family business.

The worst part of it was that it didn't actually change anything. I still

thought about Davin, and I still wanted him. I'd had him twice, and it'd done nothing but take the edge off my hunger for him.

He did things to me that I couldn't explain. Things I shouldn't want, but I did. And it wasn't the sex stuff. I didn't hide the things I was into, and I wasn't ashamed of wanting to try new things. No, the things I was thinking about weren't so easy to describe or label because I wasn't entirely certain what they were myself.

"Hey, Linsey," Kasey called out from behind the counter. "Good timing. Mary Jo just left."

I forced a smile and moved to take the new girl's place. She gave me a strange look, but I shook my head. I didn't want to talk about it yet. We'd have a conversation later, when it was just the two of us. I liked the other workers here, but I didn't want them in my personal business.

The schedule was already up on the store's computer, and as Kasey took her customer back to her room, I looked at the next name on the list. A beefy man with a beard down to the top of his beer gut grinned at me.

"Name?"

"Franky Boomer." He turned so I could see the meaty slab of his upper arm. "I'm getting Martin's name right here." He slapped the bare spot.

"Who's Martin?" I asked, forcing myself to be friendly and conversational. "Your kid?"

"Damn straight. My pug."

I smiled, this one natural. "I'm partial to Springer Spaniels."

"Those are nice ones too," Franky said.

"You're with Boyd." I gestured toward where Boyd was standing in the doorway. "Go ahead over."

The last couple hours flew by, and before I knew it, Kasey was showing the final customer out and closing the door behind him. Tiarra and Boyd had both finished cleaning up ten minutes ago and had already left, which meant it was just Kasey and me to take care of what was left.

She didn't waste any time. "Now that it's just us, are you going to tell me what's going on in that busy head of yours?"

I sighed and didn't even try to deny it. "Remember how I went with Sherry to that club earlier tonight?"

When Kasey nodded, I went on with my story, skimming over the details of my encounter with Davin at Euphoria, but giving her enough to understand why the second half of my night had gone south the moment I'd found the

connection between Jude and Davin.

When I was finally done, Kasey had a serious expression on her face. She leaned against the counter. “Have you found anything to suggest that Jude Holden had something to do with Heidi Titan’s disappearance?”

I shook my head. “I haven’t made it that far.”

“And when that woman disappeared, how old was Davin?”

“Three, I think.”

She straightened. “Then I think you’re borrowing trouble. None of us are our parents. Or our grandparents. If Davin’s grandfather is involved in your case, it’s not Davin’s fault. Separate the two.”

“Easy for you to say,” I muttered. “You’re not the one who has to figure out how to investigate the grandfather of a guy you’re fucking.”

“Does that mean you’re seeing him again?”

I frowned. “No. I mean, I don’t know. We didn’t exactly talk about it. Not that either of us are looking for...” I let the sentence trail off because I honestly didn’t know how to finish it.

“You’re attracted to him,” Kasey said. “And you enjoy having sex with him.”

I answered, even though they weren’t questions. “Yes, to both.”

“You want to figure out what happened to Heidi Titan?”

“I do.”

She shrugged. “Then don’t make it more complicated than that. Be with him when you feel like it. Keep investigating Heidi’s disappearance. Don’t let the two of them mix.”

It sounded simple, but I wasn’t naïve enough to think that it would be even close to easy in practice.

“Linsey, I know you.” Kasey reached out and took my hands. “You won’t be able to live with yourself if you ignore Heidi’s case because of Davin.”

She was right about that.

“But you deserve to be happy too. Davin makes you happy.”

I opened my mouth to argue, but a sharp look from her stopped me from saying anything.

“I’m not saying it’s true love or even that you’ll be friends with benefits, but he makes you happy in the moment, so be happy in the damn moment for once.”

She was right. It wasn’t just when he and I were having sex, either. I’d enjoyed having dinner with Davin on Wednesday. I enjoyed spending time

with him, even if we weren't fucking. I didn't know what that meant for our future, though, not with this Heidi thing.

If there hadn't been this case between us, I would've been fine with Davin and I running into each other whenever. Sometimes we'd hook up. Sometimes we wouldn't. It'd be casual and would last as long as it was comfortable with both of us. Then we'd gradually move on to polite nods and the occasional greeting.

But that wouldn't work now.

At some point, I'd figure out if Jude was involved or not. If Davin found out that I was investigating his grandfather at any point, he'd be pissed. And if he knew, he could blow things up for my investigation too. He could go to the cops and get me into legal trouble.

I was smart enough to cover my tracks, but I'd be burnt on the case. Any 'anonymous tip' that came in would automatically be suspect, which defeated the purpose of what I did.

"Don't give up." Kasey squeezed both of my hands. "But don't choose either. I have complete faith that you can handle both."

"I'm glad someone does," I said with a laugh. "This is just crazy. I mean, what are the odds that in a city the size of Houston, I'd run into the same guy more than once, especially since we have nothing in common. Then there's the even less probable circumstance of the guy I met having something to do with a case I chose from the numerous missing persons cases in this area, even if it's just him being related to a person of interest."

Kasey thought for a minute before touching my hand. "You know I'm not a religious person, but I can't help thinking that when you look at all those 'what are the odds' questions, there has to be a reason. Some higher power or the universe or fate or whatever you want to call it. Something in my gut tells me that this isn't an accident or coincidence."

"So, you think I should carry on with my investigation and let the chips fall where they may?"

"More or less."

"Great." I sighed. "That's helpful."

She grinned so big, all her teeth were exposed. "Now, let's order a pizza and head home. We should get there about the same time the food does."

EIGHTEEN

DAVIN

TRYING TO GO ABOUT MY BUSINESS AS USUAL HADN'T WORKED THIS PAST week, and having sex with Linsey a second time hadn't gotten her out of my system. Not that I'd thought it would.

It wasn't like I'd been trying to get rid of her. I just hadn't expected her to stick with me even harder after the second time. I didn't understand it, and I'd been up most of the night because my brain just wouldn't turn off.

I needed to talk to someone because, if it kept on like this, I'd never get any work done. I'd also probably never get laid again since no other woman had appealed to me since I'd first had sex with Linsey.

Unfortunately, I didn't have a lot of people I could talk to about something like this. Deklin was my brother, and I loved him, but I wasn't so sure I trusted his judgment when it came to this sort of thing. Sofi was great, but Deklin had been engaged twice in just a couple months.

Then there was Damon. He'd gone through something similar with Jae, where they'd intended things to be casual, but it had definitely *not* stayed that way. He'd gone through a hell of a lot more than that over the last several weeks, though, and that made me reluctant to lean on him about this.

As much as I liked Mattias, we definitely weren't close enough for this type of conversation.

Dad was the last person I'd talk to about sex or relationships.

Which meant Grandad was my best option. Going to my grandfather rather than my father wasn't anything new, unfortunately. My dad wasn't a bad guy, but there were times I wondered at the way he saw the world.

Like when he'd manipulated Deklin into dating and then getting engaged to Aurelia Kane. Dad hadn't done it maliciously, but in his mind, what he

saw as being for the best was the only path to take. Grandad was generally more open to how others thought.

Most Sunday afternoons, Grandad and Cynthia had brunch at home and planned their week, read the paper, that sort of thing. It was their slow day.

Even though he was technically supposed to be retired, Grandad didn't have much leisure time. By choice, not necessity. I hoped that with Deklin more involved in the family business, Grandad would cut down his work to something that more closely resembled the retirement he was supposed to be enjoying.

I didn't call ahead, relying instead on Grandad's standing invitation to all of us to visit any time we liked Sunday afternoons. The fact that I was being fairly impulsive was an indication of how much Linsey had gotten under my skin, and I had no doubt that Grandad would see it too. I wasn't sure how I felt about either of those things.

When I pulled up to the house, Grandad was already out front. For a moment, I wondered if he'd somehow figured out I was coming, but then I saw that he wasn't alone. The person standing next to him wasn't Cynthia or a family member either.

Mid-twenties. Light brown hair. Light eyes that were probably blue. Not quite as tall as me, but not short either. His jeans and short-sleeved shirt were too nice for him to have been doing manual work, but not nice enough if he'd come here to interview. Besides, as far as I knew, Grandad didn't have any vacancies that needed to be filled.

He managed his home affairs, but last year, he'd made me the executor of his will and had since kept me up to date with employees and the like. I hadn't been surprised that he hadn't wanted Dad in charge of those sorts of things, but it had surprised me that he'd changed it from Cynthia to me.

Then he'd told me it'd actually been her idea to switch responsibilities. She'd never cared what people outside the family thought about her and Grandad's marriage, but all of us knew that Dad still suspected that she was after Grandad's money. What I hadn't known was that Dad had made a comment to her two years ago that he would do everything in his power to ensure that she had no say whatsoever in what happened after Grandad died.

One of these days, Dad was going to realize that going after Cynthia was isolating him not only from his father but his sons too. At least, I hoped he'd figure it out. I didn't like the thought of how alone he'd be if he didn't get ahold of his paranoia and pig-headedness.

I pushed aside thoughts of what might be and got out of the car. I had more immediate concerns in mind.

“Davin.” Grandad looked strangely flustered. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I can leave if you’re in the middle of something,” I offered.

He shook his head. “No, no. It’s fine.” He gestured to the young man standing quietly next to him. “Davin, this is JP. JP, my oldest grandson, Davin.”

“Nice to meet you.” I put out a hand and received a firm but unaggressive handshake. “Here on business?”

JP glanced at Grandad, clearly waiting for him to take control of the answer to my question. I did the same, curious about whatever was going on between the two of them.

“JP’s the son of an old friend.” Grandad gave JP a tight smile. “And he was just leaving.”

“I was,” JP said, his hands moving to his pockets. “I mean, I am.”

The three of us had another awkward moment before JP turned and walked away. His car was a rental, I realized as I watched him get in, which most likely meant he wasn’t from around here. If he’d come to the office, I might’ve thought he was moving here and wanted to hire us. Just because he was dressed casually didn’t mean he didn’t have money.

Except there was no reason for him to come here to Grandad’s house. Sure, it wasn’t hard to find out where he lived, but it wasn’t like people could just show up at his house and expect to talk to him. Well, some people had been crazy enough over the years to try to do just that, but I’d never seen anyone accomplish it.

JP, however, appeared to have done just that.

“Do I know the old friend?” I asked, genuinely curious and with a growing amount of concern.

“What?” Grandad still looked flustered, which was the first time in my entire life that I’d seen him anything other than calm and collected. Even when grieving, he held himself together.

“Your old friend. JP’s parent. Do I know them?” I followed Grandad into the house.

“Um, no. I don’t think so.” He went into the kitchen. “Do you want something to drink? Cynthia and I are having wine. I can get you a glass.”

He was acting weird, but he wasn’t my responsibility. He was a grown man. If he wanted to have secrets, that was his business. I hadn’t come here

to be nosy.

“I’m good.” I put my hands in my pockets, feeling far more awkward around Grandad than I ever had before. Even more awkward than I had been when I’d come to him for advice about what condoms to buy that first time.

“What did you need?” Grandad asked.

I turned toward him, surprised at the abrupt question. “Um...”

“I’m sorry,” he said with a sigh. “That’s not what I meant.”

He leaned back on the counter, and I suddenly saw myself in him, what I’d look like as an old man. He had a good life, so at least it wasn’t a frightening vision.

“You’re not the type to come by just to visit,” he explained. “So, I figured you had a specific reason why you were here.”

“I do,” I said, rocking back on my heels as uncertainty continued to nag at me. “Is that okay?”

I’d never had to ask that before. Never had to question whether or not it was okay for me to come by to talk to him. I didn’t like it, but I understood it. I wasn’t his kid. He’d done his job, raising Dad. He was supposed to be retired and enjoying his golden years, not dealing with my shit.

“Of course.” He gave me a look that said I was crazy for even asking. His eyes narrowed, and it was as if someone threw a switch. The grandfather I’d always known was back. “Davin, as long as I’m alive, you can always come to me for anything. You understand that?”

I nodded, suddenly having a surreal moment where I felt like I was fourteen again and needed his advice...and then realizing that, no matter how healthy Grandad was, he was closing in on eighty. He could have another twenty years in him, but at some point, he wouldn’t be around anymore.

Fuck.

“You just went serious all at once.”

I shook my head to clear it. I didn’t come here to be morbid. I had no illusions about mortality, but I wasn’t here to think about whether or not Grandad would be around to see Deklin get married or Damon engaged or me...whatever.

“I needed some advice. *Need* some advice,” I corrected myself. “And you’re the one I want to talk to.”

Grandad studied me for a moment and then nodded. “Let me tell Cynthia that I’ll be a few more minutes. You want to wait in the den or the library?”

“Library.”

It'd always been my favorite room in the house, in any house. Books comforted me; they had since I was a kid. Whenever the stress got to be too much, I'd found relief in the pages, a place to hide. Grandad had always understood that about me. It was another way that he and I were alike.

It didn't take him long to talk to Cynthia and then join me in the library. After he settled in his favorite chair, I sat across from him, and he waited for me to begin.

"Tuesday night, I met someone."

His face broke in a smile. "That's great!"

Of course he was happy for me. I'd been the last hold-out. I couldn't let him think this was the conversation where I told him all about the woman I wanted to make a part of our family.

"Some guys were hassling her, and I punched one of them," I admitted. "She tased the other one."

Grandad chuckled. "Sounds like I'd like her."

I couldn't fight the smile, but it quickly slid away as I came to the point. "That's the problem. *I* do like her."

He looked confused. "Isn't that a good thing?"

"You know I don't date, and the women I'm with, liking them...it's not the same thing. I don't hook up with women I can't stand, but it's a narrow timeframe and situation. With Linsey...I enjoy talking to her."

"This is wonderful, Davin." Grandad was still beaming. "I'm so glad to hear that you're thinking about something other than work."

I wasn't so sure I shared his enthusiasm, but that didn't mean he couldn't help me figure out how to handle my problem that I was no longer certain actually was a problem.

NINETEEN

LINSEY

I JOTTED DOWN ANOTHER PIECE OF INFORMATION AND THEN LEANED BACK IN my chair to study my notebook. While I was in the middle of an investigation, I typed out my notes and made a back-up, so I had at least three copies, but I always hand-wrote things first.

Some of it was because, if I wrote it, I remembered it more easily. Mostly though, it was because having it written down gave me the chance to prioritize information, see what fit and what didn't.

Some people used post-it notes on a whiteboard or a wall when they were putting together stories or crimes or whatever else people used them for. Me, I liked using a table when I could.

My newest section of notes had to do with Mark Titan.

One thing I'd learned in the fifteen cases I'd worked over the last two years, suspects were always a good place to start once I had a handle on the details of the crime itself. With Heidi missing, there wasn't much in the way of a crime scene...or an actual crime. No body. No sign of foul play. No way to prove that Heidi hadn't simply walked away from her life.

If something had happened to Heidi, the first place to look was her husband. It had nothing to do with wanting to investigate him first. If nothing turned up with Mark, I'd turn to the next logical suspect, Heidi's boss...and the man Mark claimed had been sleeping with his wife.

Jude Holden.

But Mark came first.

What. A. Bastard.

Social media twenty-six years ago hadn't existed. The internet had been in its infancy. The information available online now about the early 1990s

had been put online after the fact. If I wanted original documents, I'd have to do some non-computer digging. It might get that far, but what I had was a decent start.

Most of Houston's newspapers had their archives online. Most people could get access to those records by paying a subscription fee. Small papers that needed the money, I paid the fees but used fake information. The big ones with overpaid CEOs, those I hacked. On principle.

Mark Titan had made both the big papers and the small papers in the early 90s. The first story had been about Mark's parents, actually. Founders of the Houston Promise of Tomorrow Church, they'd been well-known and well-respected in the community. When they celebrated their fortieth wedding anniversary, the religion section of three papers had written about it, and a smiling picture of them had accompanied the article. With them was their son, and that was how I'd got my first look at the 'grieving husband.'

It wasn't the last picture I had of him. Someone had gotten a nice picture of him storming Holden Enterprises with a baseball bat. The story went that he'd gone after Jude Holden because Jude was having an affair with his wife, Heidi.

That wasn't anything new, though. The police file had said that much.

What it hadn't contained was a tabloid piece that claimed *Mark* was actually the one having the affair with Jude and that it'd been a lover's quarrel. Heidi had been 'disappeared' because she'd caught her husband and her boss together.

If that had been the truth, both Mark and Jude would've had a reason to get rid of Heidi. Coming out in Texas back then would've killed Jude's business, and Heidi could've taken Mark to the cleaners with a divorce.

It was possible, but I didn't think it was probable.

Still, it stayed on the table.

After trashing Jude's car and then punching him, Mark had been arrested. That was public record and had been in the police's file too. That was where I'd gone next, looking into what had gone on with Mark while he'd been in jail.

According to the officers the detectives had interviewed, Mark had spent most of his short incarceration complaining and accusing, but essentially behaving himself. Still, it'd been obvious that he hadn't simply been a man who'd lost his temper because he'd caught his wife cheating. There'd been no after-the-fact remorse or even acknowledgment that he could've handled

things better. It'd been all Jude and Heidi's fault. And on top of Jude having cuckolded him, Mark was convinced that Jude was out to get him.

Unfortunately, there was evidence to support that claim.

Mark had been held with a bail that had been far too high for a single punch and some vandalism, which made me suspect that Jude had pulled some strings. No judge could've gotten away with no bail at all for such minor charges, but since Mark hadn't been arrested before that day, and his actions had been relatively explainable, any bail at all was excessive.

Even if Jude was guilty of influencing a judge for bail, it didn't mean Mark hadn't done something to his wife.

Except the missing person's report had been filed *after* Mark had gotten out on bail. Someone named Taylor Ellison had put up the bail, so I added that name to my list of people to look into after I was done with Mark. Considering the sizable amount of money Taylor had put up, he or she had to be close to Mark. If Taylor was a woman, that would put into question Mark's fidelity. Infidelity on either side would be a motive for murder.

If Heidi was, in fact, dead. Without a body, it was nearly impossible to prove.

I turned the page to look at my notes on the Titan family's finances.

Mark and Heidi had both worked for Holden Enterprises, which had always paid their employees well. Then, Mark had gotten fired, and their income had been cut in half. Based on the house and cars they'd owned, at least one if not both of them had expensive tastes.

One was a 1993 Pontiac Firebird Trans Am and the other a 1992 Honda Accord. Both cars were in Mark's name, and my gut said Mark was the spender, but I couldn't prove that they hadn't purchased the Firebird for Heidi.

By the time Heidi had disappeared, they'd fallen behind on their mortgage and their car payments. The Firebird was repossessed at the end of 1993, and the Accord appeared to have been sold when new charges had been added against Mark, including vandalism of company property. By late September, he had accepted a plea deal that put him in prison for six months. During that time, his house was foreclosed on.

When he was released in 1994, he moved into an apartment in South Houston. The next car registered under Mark's name was a 1987 Chevy Chevette that appeared to have been purchased used and with cash. His place of employment was listed as a local gas station.

By the time Mark had started serving his sentence, leads on Heidi's disappearance had dried up. No hits on her credit cards or withdrawals from the joint checking or savings accounts, though most of the Titan family's credit cards had been maxed out, and their bank accounts had been emptied.

I didn't find any vehicles registered to Heidi at any point after her disappearance. That didn't necessarily mean anything, though. A lot of cities had good enough public transportation that a person didn't require a car.

So, again, nothing conclusive.

After Mark's release, he'd started harassing the police, demanding they find Heidi. People's opinions had varied about the real reason for his pursuit. Some had insisted that he'd genuinely been worried, but others said that Mark had more nefarious motives, not the least of which had been money.

With nothing to come back to, he'd essentially started from scratch. His parents had moved to Florida and lived on a fixed income, so even though they'd claimed loudly and often that Mark had done nothing to Heidi, they hadn't been able to help him financially. What would have helped was the life insurance policy.

Since Heidi was still considered technically alive, Mark hadn't been able to touch it. A lot of people had believed that he'd killed Heidi and had wanted the cops to give him the go-ahead to have her declared dead so he could collect on the life insurance.

That, however, was a two-edged sword. If Heidi had indeed been killed, all Mark would've needed to do to have her declared dead would be to leave an anonymous tip or something like that to lead cops to her body. Not having a body hurt Mark's claim on the life insurance, which made the motive a bad one.

Absolutely none of this gave me a giant neon sign telling me what had happened to Heidi or who was responsible.

"Dammit." I ran my hand down my face. I was starting to see double.

A glance at the clock on the microwave told me Kasey would be home soon, and as if my thoughts had conjured her, her key rattled in the lock. As she stepped into the apartment, the most wonderful smell accompanied her. My stomach growled, and I realized I hadn't eaten all day. Which was probably why Kasey had brought dinner home. She knew I often got too caught up in what I was doing and forgot to eat.

"Take a break," she said as she set the bags down on the table. "Food and sleep will give you a sharper mind in the morning. You'll miss something if

you keep going.”

She was right.

I closed my notebook and stood, my joints popping and muscles protesting. I’d get back to it tomorrow. I’d never forgive myself if I missed an important clue because I was too stubborn to stop for the night.

“Thanks,” I said as I went to the fridge to get something to drink. “I’m starving.”

“Yeah,” she said with a grin. “I know.”

TWENTY

DAVIN

I WAS GRATEFUL FOR THE COMPLICATION WITH EVANGELINE RYAN'S PROPERTY as it'd kept me busy all day yesterday, and I hadn't had a chance to stew over what was going on between Linsey and me. In fact, I'd worked late enough that I'd been exhausted when I finally went home and had fallen asleep without much problem.

When I'd gotten to the office this morning, I'd already felt better. Refreshed and clear-headed for the first time in days. Ready to tackle the remainder of the property issue and get things back to where they belonged for my client.

"I understand what you're saying, Simone, but the fact is, your bank agreed to these terms after having ten days to review them. It's not Ms. Ryan's fault that you put off reading through the terms until the day before the deadline and signed without having finished a read-through." I kept my voice even and firm.

My ability to keep a cool head was one of the reasons I handled things like this instead of Dad, but Simone was trying my patience. We'd worked with her once before, and that had turned into a disaster, but she'd been fairly new, so we'd decided to give her a second chance. There'd be no third.

"Ten days isn't enough time," she protested. "You're not our only client."

"It's the same standard deal everyone gets with Holden Enterprises," I countered, "and you could have asked for an extension. Instead, you rushed, and now you don't like the terms. That's not our concern. You *will* honor the agreement, or we will take you to court."

I didn't like playing the litigation card, but sometimes, that was the only thing that worked.

After a few seconds, she sniffed and I could almost hear her gritting her teeth. “I’ll speak with my superiors and relay our conversation to them.”

There was no doubt in my mind that she saw her comment as a threat. Cool head or not, I’d never responded well to threats.

“When you do that, be sure to let them know that I’ll be more than happy to speak to them directly about the matter.”

My statement was met with stony silence.

“I expect this issue to be resolved by the end of business today. If it’s not, I’ll instruct Ms. Ryan that we’ll be changing banks, and your institution will pay any penalties my client incurs as a result of her project being off schedule. Good day.”

I hung up without waiting for her to respond. As far as I was concerned, the discussion was done. Even if she managed to fix this, I intended to speak with her employers. It’d taken me almost twelve hours to untangle the mess and find out who was responsible. Her name wouldn’t have been buried so deep if Simone hadn’t been trying to hide something. This looked like incompetence, but I suspected it might have been something more. Figuring out what she was up to wasn’t my responsibility, but I did consider it my duty to alert her superiors.

Leaning back in my chair, I closed my eyes and gave myself a minute to release the tension that had built up over the course of my morning. I needed to call Ms. Ryan back, but I didn’t want her to hear the frustration in my voice. Besides the fact that I really didn’t want her to misinterpret it as being directed at her, I also didn’t want her to think there’d been a whole fiasco behind the sale.

She needed to believe that I had taken care of the problem and was capable of dealing with anything else that might come up in the future. There was a fine line between confident and cocky, and tone of voice played into that a lot, especially when on the phone.

The text tone I’d assigned to my youngest brother broke the silence. I frowned, sitting forward. Why was Deklin texting me instead of coming up to see me? Had he taken the day off? Or was it the sort of thing that he didn’t want to say face-to-face?

None of my questions were answered when I read the short message that’d been sent to both Damon and me.

Are you guys free to meet me for lunch? I need to talk to you.

Ignoring the dread gnawing at my stomach, I respected his wish to talk to

us at lunch and told him I could meet him. I'd sworn to myself when I'd gone to college that I'd never put my job above my brothers if they needed me.

Two hours later, I sat down with Deklin and Damon at Truluck's, Deklin's favorite restaurant. Damon and I exchanged concerned glances as Deklin greeted us, his tone serious but not upset. Since he made small talk as we perused the menu, I assumed he didn't want whatever it was he had to say to be interrupted.

Sure enough, after the waiter took our orders and menus, Deklin cleared his throat and folded his hands on the table, nerves bleeding through for the first time. He looked at me and then at Damon, something unreadable in his eyes.

"There's really not a way to ease into this, so let me say it, and then I'll explain." After Damon and I agreed, Deklin said, "Dad isn't my biological father."

If I hadn't seen the anxiety on Deklin's face, I would've thought his announcement was some warped joke. I didn't have to look at Damon to know that he was as shocked as I was. Of all the things I'd imagined Deklin saying, that hadn't even been on my list of possibilities.

"You know how I told you guys that Grandad hired Sofi to break up Aurelia and me? Well, it wasn't because he thought we were going too fast or because he didn't like Dad pushing me into it. She's my half-sister."

I leaned back in my chair, completely...honestly, I couldn't think of a word to describe just how utterly shocked I was. Gob-smacked. Flabbergasted. Staggered. Astonished.

None of them quite got there.

"I've got some questions." Damon found his voice first. "Do you want to explain a bit, or should I just start asking them?"

"Apparently, Mom and Dad were going through a rough patch, and so were Ronall Kane and his wife. It started off with Mom and Ronall going to each other about the problems they were having in their marriages, giving each other support, and at some point, it turned into an affair." Deklin gulped half of his drink before continuing. "They both realized around the same time that they wanted to fix their marriages, not break them completely. That's why the Kanes moved away in the first place, to give them a fresh start. Ronall told his wife. Mom never told Dad, but she told Grandad...when she realized she was pregnant with me. She never told Ronall about me either."

"Which was why he and Dad pushed you and Aurelia together. They

didn't know you were related," Damon said.

"Exactly." Deklin took another drink and cleared his throat again. "Grandad told Sofi. That's why she agreed to help. When we were in Tahiti, Sofi told me about Grandad hiring her, but not about Aurelia. She kept saying that there was more, but it wasn't her story to tell. I flew home and confronted Grandad, who confessed."

"He's been lying to us your entire life?" I asked, still completely stunned. "All of us. Dad. You. Damon and me."

"Trust me," Deklin said, the muscle popping in his jaw. "I let him have it. The only reason I forgave him for the lies was because Mom had asked him to keep her secret."

"Does Dad know now?" Damon asked.

Deklin shook his head. "Grandad agreed that he'd follow my lead on who I told and when. I wanted to get my head wrapped around it a bit before I told you two, and I wanted your input about what to do with Dad."

Shit. That wasn't going to be an easy decision to make. Dad wasn't cruel or abusive, but he wouldn't take Mom's infidelity well at all. I didn't think he'd disown Deklin or anything like that, but I doubted things would stay the same either.

"I can't believe Grandad's lied to all of us."

Damon's statement made my mind flick back to Sunday afternoon when I'd met that stranger at Grandad's house. JP. Grandad's explanation had been plausible enough, but I'd still gotten the sense that he'd been lying to me. Was JP another of Grandad's lies? And what was the truth?

I reached for my glass. JP's identity and why he was over at Grandad's wasn't my primary concern. Maybe we'd have to talk to Grandad about whatever else he was hiding, but right now, Deklin needed Damon and me to help him figure out what, if anything, to tell Dad. And he needed to know that the amount of DNA we shared didn't make him any less my brother than Damon was.

"You know Dad's not going to blame you, right?" Damon said. "He won't be angry at you."

"But he's going to be pissed at Grandad and furious with Ronall," Deklin said. "Or vice versa. It's hard to know which one he'll be madder at."

"Does it matter?" I asked. "Ronall slept with Mom. Grandad hid it from everyone. And he didn't even tell you or Dad when Aurelia first showed up. Hell, he could've talked to Ronall, who could've shut the whole thing down

without revealing anything.”

The intensity in my voice surprised me as much as it did them. I felt betrayed and could only imagine how much worse it was for Deklin. Which made me even angrier since I was supposed to protect my brothers, and I hadn’t been able to do that.

“Grandad and I are working things out between us,” Deklin said. His expression turned pensive. “You know what he hasn’t done, though? He’s never treated me differently or acted like I shouldn’t carry his last name.”

He had a point. As shitty as Grandad’s lying was, he’d never even hinted that Deklin wasn’t as much a Holden as Damon and me. And I supposed if Deklin was willing to forgive Grandad, I could do it too.

“This does solve at least one mystery,” Damon said.

Deklin lifted an eyebrow. “What’s that?”

“How Davin and I are twice as good-looking as you are.”

When Deklin burst out laughing, I knew he was going to be okay, and more than that, we were going to be okay.

TWENTY-ONE

LINSEY

I'D SPENT MOST OF THE AFTERNOON LOOKING INTO HEIDI'S PAST, AND I needed a break. That's why I was at K's Phoenix, double-checking the security systems I'd installed, both the ones keeping us safe in the building and the ones keeping her records and finances safe. I was confident in my abilities, but as reliable as tech could be, nothing was foolproof.

"Nope! No way! I'm done!" A college-age guy stumbled out of Kasey's room with his pants and underwear around his ankles. On one pale ass cheek was a strange squiggle and a little blood. "That fucking hurts!"

"All right, if that's what you want," Kasey said as she appeared in her doorway. She pulled off her gloves. "But in the interest of full disclosure, you look pretty stupid with an unfinished line on your ass."

"You can't say stuff like that!" His face turned red as he pointed his finger at her. "I want to talk to your manager!"

"Well, *peanut*, I'm the owner, so will that do?" Kasey took a step toward him. "You signed, and then you said stop before I finished. That's on you. Now, you either get out, or I'll throw you out."

He stared at her, his jaw hanging open.

"And your dick's hanging out."

I snorted a laugh that turned into a full-out cackle when the guy turned toward me, his little crooked penis wobbling with the movement. He took a step in my direction, tripped over the clothes tangled around his ankles, and fell flat on his face.

By the time Boyd and Tiarra manhandled him out the door, I'd managed to get myself back under control and was only occasionally snickering.

"I'm glad you find this funny," Kasey said as she punched her code into

the cash register. “Because it’s hilarious.”

“You’re not giving him a refund, right?”

She shook her head. “Not a chance in this world.” She leaned over my shoulder and peered at the schedule on the screen. “Looks like I’ve got some time before my next appointment. I’m going to grab some dinner. Want me to bring you back anything?”

On cue, my stomach growled. “I’ll take whatever. You know what I like.”

She grinned at me. “Damn right I do.”

I went back to my laptop and lost myself in the work while the only sound was the buzz of the tattoo machines and the low murmurs of people talking. It wasn’t until the bell above the door rung again that I raised my head, ready to deal with whatever customer had just come in...except it wasn’t a customer.

“Davin.” I closed my laptop as my heart picked up speed. “This is a surprise.”

“Hi.” The small smile he gave me was more about being polite than any genuine happiness. He didn’t look upset, exactly, but there was something... off.

“Are you okay?” I came around the counter as he approached.

Even if the expression hadn’t given me a clue that something was wrong, the fact that strait-laced CEO Davin Holden was standing in a tattoo parlor that was definitely *not* in his part of the city was a pretty good indicator.

“Honestly, I’m not sure,” he said, tugging at the tie around his neck. “I’ve had a strange day.”

Strange didn’t seem to be the word he really wanted to use, but this wasn’t exactly a place conducive to what I suspected wouldn’t be a fun-filled conversation.

“When do you get off?”

I couldn’t help it. The set-up was too easy, and I needed to see him smile again.

“Before you, if you’re a gentleman.”

Surprise flashed on his face, but it was only there for a moment before he burst out laughing. It was a great sound, warming all sorts of places inside me. I took a half step toward him, drawn to him just like I had been every time I was around him.

“What if I’m not a gentleman?” he asked, some of the spark coming back into his eyes.

“Then you better make it up to me more than once.” I grinned at him. “Want to go somewhere where we can find out if you’re a gentleman or not?”

“I don’t want to interfere with your work.”

“Oh, she doesn’t work.”

I turned, startled. How had I not heard Kasey come in?

She deposited two bags of take-out on the counter behind me and then turned around to face Davin, beaming. “Hi, I’m Kasey Lee. Linsey’s roommate, friend, and owner of this fine establishment.” She put out a hand, and Davin shook it. “Linsey helps me out from time to time, but she’s not a real employee.”

“You have a nice place,” Davin said honestly, looking around. I could see the businessman in him taking stock of the building.

“Thanks. I take that as quite the compliment coming from the CFO of the biggest real estate company in Texas.” Kasey picked up one of the bags and nudged the other one toward me. “I’m going to eat in the break room. Davin, you’re welcome to stay as long as Linsey likes.”

With a last little wave at the both of us, she headed for the back of the building.

“I can go,” Davin said, “but I’d really like to stay if that’s okay with you.”

The hesitation in his voice was what got to me. This man wasn’t timid, and for him to sound unsure, I knew something must’ve really thrown him off-balance. Considering what he’d done for me, it was the least I could do for him.

Hell, who was I kidding? I would’ve wanted him to stay no matter what. I cared far too much about his happiness.

“Mind if I eat while you tell me about your strange day?” I asked, reaching for the bag of food.

“Not at all.”

“I would say that you’re welcome to share all of it, but you’re to keep your hands off my lemongrass garlic chicken. Everything else is fair game.”

“Noted.”

He helped me set out the three containers from the bag and then waited for me to find my chicken before reaching for one of the other boxes. I really didn’t get this guy. He had the money, name, *and* looks to get things his way the majority of the time, but he didn’t use it, at least not in a way that made him a bully or even just carelessly cruel like some privileged kids could be.

“So,” I prompted, “weird day.”

“That,” he said, “is an understatement.” He took a bite of food before offering additional information. “I just found out that my brother isn’t my brother.”

“Okay,” I said slowly. I wasn’t entirely sure how I should respond to that.

Davin didn’t appear to need a response as much as he needed someone to listen because the story poured out of him. How his late mother had had an affair, and the only person she’d ever told had been Davin’s grandfather. How Deklin had actually gotten engaged to his half-sister by accident since no one but Jude had known who she was. How it’d all come out and how Davin was struggling with being angry at his grandfather for keeping it a secret for so long.

My stomach twisted with guilt, but I reminded myself that it wasn’t the same thing. I was keeping the secret that I was looking into a cold case that Davin’s grandfather might have been a suspect in nearly thirty years ago. And I hadn’t known that the two men were connected until I’d gotten involved with both of them.

If *involved* was even the right word. It wasn’t like Davin and I were dating or anything like that. Granted, I talked to him more than I had with other guys I’d fucked, but sex didn’t equal a relationship just because talking got thrown in the mix. Right?

“It just makes me wonder,” Davin said, “if there’s other stuff he’s keeping from us.”

I finished the last of my chicken and glanced at the clock. Kasey would be coming back shortly, and Boyd wouldn’t have a break for another forty minutes, which meant the breakroom would be empty for a little while.

“Come with me.” I grabbed Davin’s hand.

“Where?” He followed me even as he asked the question.

“You need to clear your head.”

Kasey came out of the back room when we were still a couple feet away, and the grin she gave me said she suspected why I was taking Davin into the back. I narrowed my eyes at her but didn’t say anything. I had no doubt the two of us would talk at home.

Our breakroom wasn’t very big, but it had a fridge, a microwave, a small table, and three chairs, none of which were entirely comfortable, but for this purpose, they’d do just fine. I led Davin to one of the chairs and made him sit, then went back to the door to make sure it was closed.

“There’s no lock,” I said as I turned back to him, “but I think we’ve already established that a bit of exhibition doesn’t bother you.”

His eyes widened. “Linsey, you’re at work.”

I undid the buttons of my shirt while I walked toward him, loving the way his eyes followed the movements of my fingers. “You heard Kasey. I don’t technically work here.” I stopped when my knees brushed his, and he had to tilt his head back a little to look at me. “Besides, I’ve caught her in here with a woman more than once. She’s not going to bust me.”

I ran my fingers through his hair, and his eyes closed. He made a rumbling sound in the back of his throat, and I had to smile. His hands curled around my hips and tugged me toward him as he opened his legs to get me closer. Those strong arms wrapped around me, and he leaned into me, his cheek resting on my chest. The contented sigh that escaped both thrilled and terrified me.

It couldn’t last.

I pulled back just far enough to regain my equilibrium and then went to my knees. Davin’s pupils dilated, and his pale blue irises became nothing more than a thin ring around black.

“I remember what I’m supposed to say if I need you to stop,” I said. “But if my mouth’s too full, I’ll tap your calf twice.”

He looked like he was trying to decide how to respond to my full mouth comment, but I trusted that his nod of acknowledgment was genuine.

His hands slid up my arms as I reached for his zipper, and my skin tingled where he touched me. I’d always enjoyed sex, but I’d never been as aware of my own body as I was when I was with him. It was like something I’d forgotten had suddenly been remembered. Not only his touch but the scent of him. The taste and smell. Each line of his body.

I was in so fucking deep.

My fingers wrapped around his thick shaft, stroking as it filled and grew. I lowered my head and pushed out of my mind everything that wasn’t focused on my task. He cursed when I flicked my tongue against the tip of his cock, and I smiled.

This was going to be fun.

I took the head between my lips and mercilessly worked my way down, centimeter by centimeter until Davin’s hands were fists resting on his thighs. Tension radiated from him, and it fed into the heat growing low in my belly. When I was done, my underwear was going to be soaked, and I’d be ready to

come with the slightest touch.

But that wasn't why I was doing this.

His cock was heavy on my tongue as it edged closer and closer to the back of my throat. My jaw was beginning to ache, and my lips felt stretched too wide, but I was determined to take as much as I could. Slow breaths in through my nose convinced my brain that this was a completely normal way to breathe, and I kept going until I felt my gag reflex threaten.

One hand wrapped around the base of his shaft and began to work in tandem with my mouth as I moved my head up and down. Teeth and tongue took turns on his sensitive skin, and it wasn't long before one of his hands was in my hair. He put a little pressure on the back of my head, and I lifted my eyes so I could see his face. His head was back, a faint sheen of sweat on his skin.

He was close.

I sucked hard on the end of his cock, and his hips jerked, shoving him almost too deep. When he started to apologize, I lightly touched my teeth to his dick, and the apology became a plea for me to never stop.

"I'm so close...please...baby...I'm so close..."

I had a feeling Davin Holden rarely begged for anything, and the sound of him doing it now made me press my thighs together, desperate to ease the ache that came from not working on my own release.

Later.

Right now, I just wanted to make him come hard enough to forget his own name.

I teased his balls with my nails and did every little trick with my tongue that I'd ever learned. In seconds, he was warning me that he was going to come, his voice rough and wrecked. I stayed where I was and let him fill my mouth as he finally let go.

TWENTY-TWO

DAVIN

WHAT THE HELL HAD JUST HAPPENED?

I wasn't only talking about the fact that I felt like my brain had just been sucked out of my dick, either.

I'd come here almost automatically, not really thinking about anything but the fact that Linsey was the one person I actually wanted to see and talk to after the insanity of what Deklin had unleashed. I couldn't wrap my head around it. Not around Mom having had an affair. Not around her having another man's child – *knowing* it was another man's child – and not telling Dad. Not around Grandad keeping it from us even after Mom died.

And Deklin.

I couldn't even imagine what he was going through. There'd been no mistaking the relief on his face when he'd assured us that he and Aurelia had never even kissed.

But none of this was the reason I could barely think at the moment. Nor was it solely the amazing blow job Linsey had given me. It had to do with the fact that she was the person I'd gone to about something so personal, and neither of us had even blinked when I'd started sharing what had happened.

This woman did things to me I couldn't explain.

"I must not have done my job very well," Linsey teased as she stood. She wiped her thumb across her bottom lip, and a jolt of desire went through me. "You still look like you're thinking too hard."

"You went above and beyond," I said, reaching for her hand. "Trust me. When I came here, I wasn't expecting this. Thank you."

The pleased expression on her face assured me that she understood I wasn't exactly thanking her for the sex, exactly, even if I couldn't quite put

together the right words to express it. There was so much she and I needed to talk about, but I wasn't ready for it tonight. What I could do, however, was repay the favor she'd just done for me.

It wasn't like I minded getting her off.

"Come here." I stood and pulled her toward me. She tilted her head, and I cupped her jaw before taking her mouth, my fingers tightening as she grabbed the front of my shirt, holding me close.

I tasted my cum mingled with the spices from her meal and wished we had the time and space for me to return the favor properly. As it was, getting her off at all would be a challenge. Every moment that passed moved us closer to when someone could interrupt us, and as much as I believed Linsey didn't think Kasey would be upset with her using the breakroom this way, I didn't want to risk anyone here thinking less of her because of me.

As I plundered her mouth with my tongue, I moved the hand on her chin to her hair, burying my fingers in the soft, colorful strands. My other hand went between us, working at the button on her jeans until I was able to get them undone enough to slide my hand inside.

She gasped as my fingers pressed down on the damp cotton of her panties, the fabric rubbing against her sensitive skin as my middle finger ran the line right down her slit before pushing in deeper. Even through the barrier of her underwear, I could feel how soaked she was, and my cock started to thicken.

Damn. It'd barely been two minutes. I'd always prided myself on my stamina, but this was ridiculous. I hadn't had this sort of recovery time since college. Not that I'd really had much of an opportunity to use it. I'd always been more focused on school than sex.

Her teeth sunk into my bottom lip as she rocked against my hand, her soft, desperate sounds pulling me from my past into the present. I tightened my grip in her hair, and she moved her hands under my shirt to get her nails on my skin. Thin razors of pain licked across my skin as she scratched me, and I pressed harder on her clit, using the fabric to add a rougher edge to the friction.

It didn't take long for her to climax, and I swallowed her cries as I eased my touch little by little, drawing out her pleasure without turning it to pain. One day, I'd test the limits of what she could handle post-orgasm, but this was neither the time nor the place for that.

When she stopped shuddering, I released her. Before the moment could

become awkward, we both headed for the restrooms to clean up. I didn't doubt that the staff would figure out that we'd been doing something in the breakroom, but at least we'd go back to the front looking as put together as possible, and maybe a little more relaxed.

The smile she gave me when she stepped out of the women's bathroom and saw me waiting for her was a mixture of embarrassment and joy, but not the sort of embarrassment that came with regret, rather the kind where a person was surprised by something but liked it. I wondered if the cause was what we'd done...or the intense connection I could still feel buzzing between us.

I grabbed her hand before she could go more than a few steps. "I want to take you out this weekend."

The surprise on her face made me think I'd completely misread the situation, but then she smiled. Her eyes still held a little wariness, but when she spoke, she didn't seem hesitant at all.

"Let me check with Kasey. The new girl, Mary Jo, has been doing pretty good up front, but this weekend is going to be pretty busy. If Kasey thinks Mary Jo can handle it, she won't need me."

"Great." I smiled and squeezed her hand before releasing it. I didn't want to hang around too long and give Kasey a reason to kick me out. Something occurred to me as I followed Linsey back to the front of the shop. "I need your phone number."

She laughed. "It's weird that we don't have each other's numbers, right? After all this?"

I laughed too. "It is, but has anything about you and me been normal at all?"

As she shook her head and reached a hand out for my phone, I couldn't help thinking that maybe weird was exactly what Linsey and I needed.

TWENTY-THREE

LINSEY

I HATED THIS.

I'd never really felt guilty digging into anyone's past before. If they were connected to a cold case, whatever I found could either condemn or vindicate them.

If it was the first, then I didn't care that I'd been snooping. If it was the second, chances were they'd welcome the clearing of their name. Besides, it wasn't like I shared the information I found with anyone but the cops, and only what was relevant. If I discovered someone was cheating on their spouse or liked kinky sex, I kept it to myself unless it was connected to the case.

Kinky sex, of course, made me think of Davin, and that was where the guilt came in. The life I was currently researching was Jude Holden's, and I couldn't lie to myself about whether or not Davin would be affected by what I found here. If his grandad had done something to Heidi, it'd destroy Davin. If Jude hadn't been involved, but Davin found out what I'd been doing, whatever this thing was between us would implode.

I always tried to be objective when it came to these cases, not letting my personal feelings get in the way of the facts, but with this one, I found myself hoping that Jude was just the victim of a jealous husband. It was the only scenario that would give me even a chance of keeping this thing with Davin going.

The good news was that I'd been able to get into both the business's and Jude's personal email and phone records from that far back. The saying went that nothing on the internet was ever really gone, and depending on the tech people working on the system, that could also apply to records stored on servers. A person just had to know where to look, and I did.

Some of Holden Enterprises's call logs showed calls to the Titan home, but not often, and none were to Jude's personal extension. Since both Heidi and Mark had worked at the company for a while, and then Heidi had continued working right up to her disappearance, it wasn't that strange.

At least half of the employees had used company phones to make and receive calls to and from their homes. Since there was no way to directly prove who had made and received those calls, it didn't necessarily mean that Jude hadn't been careful and used a regular company line, but it didn't prove anything else either.

Jude's business emails were completely clean, and all of them had still been stored. He hadn't tried to hide anything. Not an affair and not any shady business dealings. While that didn't prove he hadn't done anything to Heidi, it did speak well of his character.

At the moment, I was going through Jude's personal emails from 1993. In the early 90s, it hadn't been quite as common for people to have a personal email, so it wasn't a surprise that Heidi hadn't had one. I was looking more for Jude writing to someone about her, but I wasn't holding my breath.

As tech-savvy as he was, Jude was old-school enough that he'd have been more likely to have talked about an affair than to have written about it. Especially since his wife at the time had already suspected he'd been having an affair.

I didn't find any direct mention of Heidi or of any sort of romantic flings, but between the phone records and emails, I did find a name that kept popping up.

Royd Kichner.

A quick search revealed that he was a private investigator, and that gave my investigation another lead to follow. I recorded each communication between Jude and Kichner, laying them out to create a timeline. A few of the emails contained details about the jobs Royd had been hired to do, but they'd been for things like background checks on employees who worked for Jude or Walter personally. Nothing that even hinted at an affair.

Some of the emails, however, had contained cryptic comments like "I found what you're looking for. Call me." Usually, within twenty-four hours, there had been a call between the two, lasting anywhere from five to forty-five minutes.

A handful of those emails and phone calls had occurred around the time Heidi disappeared.

Going into both the company bank records and Jude's personal finances showed that, while Holden Enterprises did use Kichner's services from time to time, the bulk of his payments had come directly from Jude's accounts. While the fact that he hadn't been using company funds to pay for Kichner to do personal investigations, it didn't tell me what those investigations had been.

Royd Kichner himself had a good reputation. Highly recommended. The only negative things I'd found about him had been people angry that they'd been caught doing something they shouldn't have been. Husbands or wives who'd had affairs. People who'd been stealing from their jobs. Someone who'd been involved in a hit-and-run. Nothing suggested he'd dabbled in anything untoward.

But that didn't mean he hadn't made an exception for a client or two, especially since there did seem to be some hints that he didn't always play by the book. More bending the rules than breaking them, but the problem with someone like that was that it was easy to go from bending to breaking.

I leaned back and closed my eyes, rubbing my forehead as if that could ease the headache I'd had from the moment I'd started looking into Davin's grandfather.

I could hack Kichner's files and read through every case that Jude had hired him for, but there was a chance Kichner was old school enough that he didn't keep his records online, or that he'd only started doing so in the 2000s. And while I knew I was good enough to get past pretty much any firewalls people could set up, I wasn't sure it'd be worth the work to get into his system and then go through his files only to find out that he only had paper records.

I refused to let that discourage me, though. Jude had hired Kichner fairly recently, and the airfare Jude had paid for had been from Houston to Las Vegas and back. Kichner was not only still working, but he was still in Houston.

After a moment, I picked up my phone and dialed the number. He answered on the second ring.

"Kichner Investigations, how can I help you?" The man's voice was pleasant enough to make me think he probably wasn't Royd. This guy sounded too much like a receptionist.

"I was wondering if I needed an appointment to come in and speak with Mr. Kichner about a case."

“Not at all,” the man replied. “We do recommend appointments if you need to speak to him at a specific time or if something is time sensitive, but walk-ins are always welcome.”

“Thank you. Have a nice day.” I hung up before he could ask if I wanted to schedule something.

Thirty minutes later, I was being sent back to Royd’s office by the same young man who’d answered the phone. If my abrupt end to the call had annoyed him, he didn’t show it.

The man in the office who rose to greet me appeared to be in his late fifties or early sixties, and his features had the sort of rough, weathered look that came with hard living, and it was only enhanced by the scar through his left eyebrow. His eyes were coal black and gleamed with the kind of shrewd intelligence that told me underestimating him would be a grave mistake.

“Mr. Kichner, I presume.” I put out my hand and appreciated that he shook it without giving me even a hint that he thought poorly of my appearance. “Cecile Charles.”

No way was I going to give him my real name. If he really wanted to figure out who I was, it wouldn’t be difficult for him, but I wasn’t going to just give it to him.

“Please, sit, Ms. Charles.” He waited until I took a seat before sitting as well. “How can I help you today?”

“I have some questions about the work you do.” I studied his face as I spoke but tried not to be too obvious about it. “For example, if I wanted you to find someone, how would you go about doing that?”

“Do you have someone you’d like me to find, or are you thinking about becoming a PI?”

Yeah, he was as sharp as I’d thought.

“A little of both,” I admitted. “But I’m not fishing for tips. I was thinking more along the lines of helping me find the best way to determine if someone had disappeared voluntarily...or if someone had disappeared them against their will.”

He shifted in his chair, and I could almost see the wheels turning in his head. “Well, despite what fiction likes to tell us, most of the time, we work on finding the person.”

“But if someone was going to, say, *disappear* someone else, where would I start looking?” I leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. “I mean, would it be the money trail? A payment made to a legitimate business under

the guise of an overtime bonus or something like that?”

His eyes narrowed. “That’s pretty specific, Ms. Charles.”

I shrugged. “I mean, I guess it would take some overtime to cover for a murder so thoroughly that a body would stay missing even after more than twenty-five years.”

“I have the feeling you’re not being very honest with me about why you’re here.” His voice hardened.

It wasn’t going to take much more for him to figure out where I was going with this, if he hadn’t already. I needed to push a little harder, figure out if he was being defensive because he was guilty, or because he was pissed that I’d accused him of something he hadn’t done.

“You’ve done a lot of work for the Holden family, haven’t you?” I asked. “Jude Holden, right? I mean, you’ve worked for the real estate company a few times, but you’ve also done personal work for him too.”

He stood up, his face and eyes blank, but I could sense the anger underneath the mask. “You need to leave.”

“You did work for him, right?” I stood up too. “Did he have you work on something with Heidi Titan?”

I wasn’t stupid enough to think he’d suddenly confess something, but I did hope he’d slip and reveal something I could use, even if it was just that he hadn’t had anything to do with Heidi’s disappearance.

“I don’t talk about my clients,” Royd said. “Get out.”

I didn’t argue. Even if he did say something incriminating, it wasn’t like I could take his confession to the cops as evidence. Information found through a hack was one thing. Anything he told me without corroboration would be hearsay.

Despite the lack of helpful responses, I wasn’t disappointed. Without saying it, Royd had admitted that Jude was a client, and one he was willing to protect. I didn’t think it was only because Jude was a client either. Either Royd and Jude were really good friends...or Jude was a hell of a lot more dangerous than I’d ever thought.

I *really* hoped it wasn’t the latter.

TWENTY-FOUR

DAVIN

I HADN'T THOUGHT IT WAS POSSIBLE TO DISLIKE THE CIARDIS MORE THAN I already did, but they were proving me wrong already. They'd essentially bullied their way into an appointment by telling Dad that they'd go somewhere else if they had to wait to outline the main points of what they wanted.

I hated people who did things like that, which meant I was already pissed off when Dad said they'd insisted on meeting with me. Remembering how Loretta had leered at me didn't make this any better.

Now, there was this.

"We'll only go with your company if you personally handle our account," Theodore said for the second time, like I must not have heard him the first time since I wasn't falling all over myself, grateful for their insistence.

Like I didn't have plenty of more important things to do at work than cater to every little thing these two would think of. They'd get an agent all to themselves, or maybe someone who was finishing things up on another account.

But Dad would be pissed if they walked away because I wouldn't do what it took to close the deal. We put in whatever work needed to be done because we had a name, a reputation, to uphold.

I wasn't averse to hard work, but I also wasn't superhuman. There really was only so much I could do. "Let's take a look at everything you want us to handle, and we'll see where things can fit into my schedule. As CFO, I don't usually handle entire accounts from beginning to end."

Neither Loretta nor Theodore looked happy by my statement, but I wasn't going to add more hours to my already insane workdays just so they could

feel like they were getting special attention.

The expression on their faces told me they had had other special attention in mind that might make up for my lack of enthusiasm at the prospect of working my ass off for whatever it was they wanted.

“Our lawyer is drawing up the papers about what we want from Holden Enterprises.” Theodore went on, reaching over to put his hand on Loretta’s leg. Since I was the only other one in the room, he didn’t even bother being discreet about the fact that he was pushing up her skirt.

“But here is one thing *not* in the contracts that we have to have before we’re ready to sign,” Loretta said, arching her back so that her breasts were more prominently displayed, something I wouldn’t have thought possible.

I didn’t want to know what she had in mind, but I had a feeling I wasn’t going to get away with not hearing it. I was also mostly sure what it was. They’d been hinting at it from the first time we met. I supposed it was better to finally get it over with.

“I’m just going to lay this out there,” Theodore said. “You know, instead of being tactful like usual.”

I was actually too stunned by this proclamation to even process an appropriate reply. “Um...”

“I want you to fuck my wife.”

Okay. That *was* blunt.

“More specifically, I want to watch you fuck my wife.” Theodore did something to Loretta with his hand that I was glad I couldn’t see. “It turns me on, seeing her with another man. Being fucked in all sorts of ways. I mean, trust me, you haven’t lived until you’ve seen your woman taking it up the—”

“I don’t get involved with clients.” I was going to need bleach for my brain if the conversation kept going this way.

“If you want us to *be* your clients, Davin,” he spoke through gritted teeth, “you’re going to fuck her where I say, how I say, when I say.”

“I’m sorry.” I forced myself to keep my tone polite and professional despite wanting to add a few choice words. “But I’m not part of any negotiations. What you and your wife do is your private business, and I respect that line. I won’t cross it for any price.”

Loretta’s lips twisted into what I assumed was supposed to be a scowl but only made her look constipated. I didn’t care if she was offended by my refusal. The proposition itself was offensive. I wasn’t for sale.

Theodore stood, a flush creeping up his thick neck. “I’d been assured by

your father that you'd do whatever it took to close this deal."

I seriously doubted that he'd told Dad any specifics about what he wanted me to do. Me handling their account personally was the kind of thing Dad would expect. Having sex with another man's wife was something else entirely.

"It's too bad you don't have the balls for it," Theodore continued. "You could've made a lot of money."

I almost said that I'd rather keep my self-respect, but that would've just made the situation worse. At least, this way, I could honestly say that I'd handled the situation professionally.

As expected, less than fifteen minutes after they walked out, Dad stalked into my office and nearly slammed the door behind him, checking himself at the last minute so that it closed naturally.

"Care to explain why the Ciardis just walked past me and said they'd be going somewhere else?"

"Their demands were excessive and unrealistic." I put it as succinctly as possible and hoped he wasn't going to make me spell it out.

"We do what it takes to close the deal, Davin. I thought you understood that." He sighed. "I told them that you'd do whatever it took, and now I look like a liar. I don't like having people question my integrity. The integrity of this company."

"Trust me, Dad. What they wanted would've compromised the company's name a lot more than that."

The look he gave me spoke volumes. I wasn't going to get away with not explaining. All right then. I'd tried.

"I was willing to work with them on their demand that I personally handle their entire account, but I refused to cross the line when Theodore told me that I had to sleep with his wife."

I waited while Dad processed. Finally, he shook his head. "You had to have misunderstood him. No man is going to ask someone to...do that with his wife."

"He didn't ask, Dad. He said that I had to have sex with Loretta while he watched, or he wouldn't give us his business. And he was actually more graphic than that. There was no misunderstanding."

Dad shook his head again. "You missed something. That's the only explanation for it. People just don't do things like that."

I shrugged. It was pointless to push the issue when Dad dug his heels in.

“You’re welcome to talk to them yourself.”

I doubted they’d even take his calls, but at least then he’d see that they were the ones being difficult. Still, I wondered if he’d ever believe me about the proposition.

Dad had always had a strange view of the world. Contradictory, actually. He was a strange blend of cynical and naïve. People were either good or evil, based on what he saw of them and what his own sense of mortality said.

Sometimes, I wondered if he realized how much my presence here kept him from ever having to face the real world, and for the first time, I wondered what he would do if I decided to step back my responsibilities here and make a life outside of work.

TWENTY-FIVE

LINSEY

THE FACT THAT I'D PREPARED A MEAL AND WAS NOW CLEANING UP RATHER than having made something quick was just proof of how much this case was bugging me. I was used to being hyper-focused when I really got into research mode, and sometimes I over-identified with the victims or their families, wanting to do whatever it took to get them found, if possible, and justice either way.

This was different. I'd never hoped that a possible suspect was innocent because I cared about someone in their family.

This was beyond that, though. I was actually thinking about dropping the case and picking out a different one. That would've been a first. I always followed through. This wasn't a stolen car or something like that. This was a missing woman.

"Dammit." I shut the cabinet above the sink and leaned against the counter.

I didn't know what to do.

The sound of my phone ringing was a welcome distraction. Kasey had said she didn't need me to come in or bring her dinner, but she could have changed her mind, or something could've come up to make her need me. Right now, I'd take either one in exchange for clarity about what to do. Maybe she could help me figure it out.

Except that wasn't Kasey's ringtone, I realized as I picked it up. I didn't recognize the number, but when I answered it, I only needed to hear my name to know who was on the other end.

"Linsey."

"Davin." I smiled. Here was a good distraction. He'd called to set up our

plans for a date this weekend like he'd said yesterday.

"Are you at K's Phoenix right now? I don't want to bother you while you're at work."

"I'm not. Just doing some computer work at home." I sat down on the couch. "My schedule's flexible, so whenever you want to go out this weekend, I can move things around to accommodate."

Even as I said it, I wanted to take it back. I hated how needy it made me sound. Like I had nothing better to do than plan my life around a man.

"What about tonight?"

I frowned. "What?"

"Do you want to come to Euphoria with me?"

Something was wrong. His voice didn't sound right. He was abrupt, talking about going to Euphoria tonight instead of the two of us going on a regular date like we'd planned. I didn't know him that well, but it didn't take a genius to know he was a planner and a hard worker. For him to want to impulsively go to a club when he had to work tomorrow meant something was off.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

"Just a lot on my mind," he said. "It'd be nice to have something else to think about. Someone else to think about."

I was glad that he called me instead of going there to be with someone else. Even if we weren't a couple, I didn't like the idea of him being with another woman. If he was going to let someone capture his attention, I wanted that someone to be me. Even if that's all it was.

"When do you want to go?" I asked.

This was a bad idea.

"Can you be ready in an hour?"

"I can."

A *really* bad idea.

"I'll pick you up."

"See you soon."

As soon as I ended the call, my head thudded against the back of the couch. This was fine. I'd been looking forward to our date, and now I didn't have to wait. Plus, I didn't have to worry about him taking me to some fancy restaurant where I'd be out of place.

He'd found a good one before, but could I count on him to do that more than once? Or what if he didn't want to eat for our date? What if he wanted to

do something like go to an art museum or the ballet or opera? I didn't dislike the idea of doing any of those things, but I'd look completely mismatched at any of those places with him.

"Let it go. It's fine." I leaned forward and put my head in my hands. "Stop. Thinking."

I always thought too much. It's why I kept things surface with people. Kasey was one of the few people who'd managed to get close, but she was such a straight-forward person that I never had to guess what she was thinking or doing. I didn't have all these questions going around in my brain when it came to her.

Not like I did with Davin.

Except...when I was actually with him, the questions stopped. And I supposed that was what I did for him too. When he was stressed, when he needed to quiet his own chaotic thoughts, I did that for him.

Tonight, we could do it for each other.

I stood up. I needed to get ready. I might not have had fancy clothes, but I could still make myself look good. First, I needed a shower. Then, I'd put together something that would knock Davin on his ass.

Maybe, at some point, we'd figure out if there was even a point in trying to do something that didn't involve sex.

TWENTY-SIX

DAVIN

LINSEY DESERVED BETTER THAN THIS. BETTER THAN ME CALLING HER UP because I needed the sort of release I could only get at Euphoria, but the thought of sex with anyone other than Linsey wasn't appealing.

I was beginning to think I'd never want anyone other than her.

Especially after she opened her door, and I got an eyeful of what she was wearing.

Leather.

Leather pants with zippers running from waist to ankle on the outside of both legs. A leather corset with ties up the front. A pair of four-inch heels. And a black leather choker with small silver studs.

It took every ounce of willpower I had to not take her right there in the doorway. Then I realized that I'd be able to take her into Euphoria and show her off, and I liked that idea. Last time, I'd shown people that she'd been mine in the moment, but if I walked in with her on my arm and a collar around her neck, they'd all *know* she was mine.

As much as the idea appealed to me, though, I couldn't let her go in there without telling her what it would look like. A choker in my world wasn't just an accessory.

"I love what you're wearing," I said as I pulled out of the parking lot.

"Thanks," she said, glancing my way, "though I feel like there's a *but* coming."

I glanced at her and smiled. "There is. Sort of." I turned left. "If we go in there together and you're wearing that choker, people might think you're my submissive."

"Really."

“It looks a lot like a collar, and it’s fairly common for Dominants in my world to put collars on their submissives to show ownership.”

When she didn’t say anything, I took advantage of stopping at a red light and turned my head to look at her. She was grinning.

“I know that.” She winked. “But don’t panic. I’m not staking a claim to you or anything like that. I just figured it’d be an easy way to keep other people from propositioning us...unless you would want that.”

The thought of someone else approaching Linsey for sex made me scowl. That, however, didn’t bother me as much as the way my heart thumped at the thought of people thinking she was mine.

“Sounds like you’ve done some research.” I steered the subject to safer ground as we kept going.

“A bit,” she admitted. “The whole BDSM thing interests me, and I’m the kind of person who doesn’t like going into something blind. When Sherry invited me to Euphoria, I checked some things out.”

I processed that as I parked behind the club. When she accepted the hand I offered to help her out of the car, I kept it as we walked to the entrance. Her hand felt delicate in mind. She had a large, strong presence that made it easy to forget that she wasn’t quite average height and had a slender build. She wasn’t tiny, but she was small. If I lost control, I could hurt her without meaning to.

I signed her in as my guest and waited for her to fix the guest pin to her top. If she wanted to join the club, I decided, I’d sponsor her membership, no matter what happened between us. I understood what it was like to finally find a place where your desires weren’t shocking, where you could be your whole self, without having to hide any part of who you were. And I liked the idea that she was comfortable here.

“Do you want a drink?” I asked as we walked inside.

“Yes, please.”

The atmosphere was mellower than usual, the music more of a pulsating background than the kind that demanded movement. The mid-week crowd was generally more intimate, made up of people who saw Euphoria not only as a place to be accepted but as a part of their family. I was about halfway between the two mentalities.

I knew a few of them and nodded as Linsey and I made our way to the bar. We each ordered a drink, then settled on barstools to enjoy them. After a minute or two of silence, I decided to say something that had been on my

mind since she'd opened the door.

"I'm surprised at how well you move in that outfit," I said, leaning close to her ear. "It looks like it's been painted on."

"If it had been painted on," she said, her dark eyes dancing, "then you would be able to tell that I'm not wearing anything under it. At all."

All of the blood in my body rushed south, leaving me light-headed. I liked lingerie as much as the next person, but something about the idea of that soft, supple leather rubbing against her bare flesh made me painfully hard.

"Did you have anything specific in mind tonight?" I asked.

"Me?" She looked surprised at the question. "I assumed, since it was your idea to be here, that you had something you wanted to do."

I took her now-empty glass from her hand and set it on the bar next to mine. Then I curled my fingers around the back of her neck, rubbing my thumb in the hollow behind her earlobe.

"There are so many things I want to do to you here." I pitched my voice low, even though I didn't really mind if anyone overheard us. "I can't decide which of the rooms I want to introduce you to."

"I'm game for whatever you want."

The challenge in her words and on her face did something to me. I wanted to push, to see just how far I could take her. I wanted to see the expressions she'd make, hear the sounds. Learn all the different ways I could turn her on.

"Let's see what's open." I stood and reached for her hand.

The two of us headed to the far side of the room where four doors were half-hidden. Each one had a keypad next to it and led to a private room where the club had all sorts of equipment and toys and other things. Every member had a code they could use to access the rooms, allowing the club to know when the rooms were in use, and when people were done with them so they could be cleaned.

The two of us went to the closest door, but the light on the keypad was red, which meant it was being used. The next room, however, had a green light, so I put in my code and led Linsey inside.

"Fuck me."

The words came out in a breath of awe, and I smiled, loving she was impressed.

Euphoria had done an amazing job with all four of their rooms. Each one had a specific color scheme, and this one was purple. Even the blindfolds were in various shades of purple. The toys too. Floggers, whips, and crops

hung on one wall, strap-ins on the opposite wall.

A stockade – like something out of a history documentary – stood in the center of the room and a few benches of various shapes and sizes, as well as a decent-sized sofa. This room didn't have a bed, which made me rearrange my plans for Linsey, but I wasn't discouraged. I could work without a bed.

“Is this scaring you off?” I asked as I came up behind Linsey and wrapped my arms around her, keeping the embrace light enough that she wouldn't feel like I was keeping her here.

“Not at all.” Linsey leaned back against me. “Just tell me where you want me.”

I answered by taking her over to the stocks. “I want you here, where I can keep you immobile and have my way with you.”

She turned around, her cheeks flushed. “I like the sound of that.”

I undid the top and motioned for her to put her head and hands into the stockade. She didn't even hesitate, moving into place and waiting for me to put the top back into place. I clicked it shut, effectively trapping her. My cock pressed against my zipper, and I couldn't have denied how much her position turned me on, even if I wanted to.

“I thought you were going to have your way with me,” she said, wiggling her ass.

I swatted the moving target, chuckling when she yelped. “You should behave,” I said. “You're at a bit of a disadvantage.”

“What if I don't want to behave?”

I circled around to stand in front of her. “You have quite the smart mouth, don't you?”

She grinned. “That's not the only word for it.”

“I think I need to show you what else that mouth is good for.” I reached out and ran my thumb along her bottom lip. Her tongue darted out, and I swallowed a moan.

“I think you should,” she agreed. “And then I think you should fuck me until neither of us can remember our names.”

I reached for my zipper. “That sounds good to me.”

I INCHED HER ZIPPER DOWN, letting my fingers brush against her skin.

She'd tortured me with her tongue until I'd almost choked her when I came. Now it was my turn to drive her crazy, starting with peeling off her skintight pants. Well, not technically *starting* there since I'd already untied her shirt and played with her breasts until she'd started squirming. Now, her nipples were hard and swollen from my pinching and twisting, and it was time to get inside her.

I ran my hand over her newly exposed flesh, running my fingers along the crack between her cheeks until I was able to slip a finger between her legs. "You're soaked."

"Ever since you called." Her voice was hoarse. "Couldn't stop thinking about what you were going to do to me."

I slid a finger inside her, and she gasped. A second finger and a twist made her legs shake, and I smiled. I'd already come once. Now it was her turn. I drove my fingers into her, angling them so that I rubbed against her g-spot with each pass.

"After you come," I said, keeping my tone conversational, "I'm going to fuck you."

"Yes," she moaned. "Both of those. Yes."

I leaned over and bit the top of one firm cheek. She let out a sound that was halfway between a yelp and a squeal. She didn't, however, use her safe word. It apparently wasn't too much yet. My thumb moved back and forth across her clit, not even attempting to gentle my touch. Whatever I'd given her, she'd taken and begged for more.

Which made me wonder...

"Have you ever had anal sex?" When she didn't answer, I slid my fingers out of her pussy and ran them up to her anus. "Linsey...answer me." I circled the muscle there.

"No." She shivered. "I mean, no, I haven't."

"Not tonight, but soon," I promised. "I'll take you to places you've never been."

I moved directly behind her, reaching down to rub her clit hard and fast until she came with a scream. It took me only moments to put on a condom, and then I was sinking into that wet heat over and over again. I drove into her hard enough to put her on her toes, and all she did was cry out for more.

So. Fucking. Sexy.

Despite having come once already, it wasn't long before I felt the pressure building inside me. As my climax hit, I pushed the tip of my finger

into her ass, just to give her a taste of what was to come, and it sent her over the edge with me. As we came together, the thought occurred to me that, maybe, I'd finally met my match.

TWENTY-SEVEN

LINSEY

WHEN WE PULLED INTO ARTURO BOADA CUISINE, I REGRETTED SAYING I'D go to dinner. My all-leather outfit had been intended for Euphoria, not public view. Normally, I wouldn't care if people stared at me, but I didn't want anyone thinking badly of Davin. His reputation reflected on his family name and business.

"We have a private table in the back," he said as he opened my door for me.

"I'm not exactly dressed for a place like this."

He took my hand. "We can go in through the kitchen if you like, but I don't care what anyone thinks about our clothes."

"I'd prefer that, thank you," I said as we made our way to the back entrance.

He said he didn't care, and maybe he thought he didn't, but the last thing I wanted was his name smeared all over the tabloids because of me. He deserved better than that.

Going through the kitchen got us a few curious looks, but places like this expected discretion from their staff, so I doubted there'd be much in the way of rumors. The private room had an entrance through the kitchen as well, allowing us to make it to a table without having to go through the dining area at all. It was simple and elegant, clearly usable for a small gathering as well as a dinner for two.

After we ordered, Davin reached for my hand, frowning as he lightly ran his fingers over the scrapes on my wrist. I shivered, the slight discomfort of my wounds overshadowed by the pleasure I felt from his touch.

"I'm sorry." He pressed his lips to the inside of my wrist. "I should have

checked before we left.”

“It’s no big deal.” My voice came out shaky, and heat flooded my face. A kiss on the wrist shouldn’t turn me on this much. “I’ll put some antibiotic ointment on them when I get home.”

“‘Them’?” He put my hand down and reached for my other one. “Dammit, Linsey. Why didn’t you tell me you were hurt?”

I couldn’t decide if I liked this side of his personality or not. “It’s just a scrape.”

He brushed his lips over my other wrist before asking, “What about your neck?”

I shrugged. “I think the choker protected my skin there. Seriously, Davin, it’s not a big deal.”

He got up and came around the table to stand behind me. I closed my eyes as he undid the clasp on my choker and then ran his fingers along the back of my neck. My breathing stuttered when his mouth followed the path of his fingers.

Someone clearing their throat broke the spell, and a blushing waitress came in with our appetizer.

“Thin-sliced Prosciutto San Daniele,” she said as she set the plate down. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

“No, thank you,” Davin said smoothly as he returned to his seat. After she left, he turned his attention back to me. “I really wish you would’ve told me you were hurting. I would’ve taken care of you.”

I wanted to ask why. Ask if he’d had the same concern for the other women he’d had in similar positions over the years. I wanted to deflect the attention to his concern.

Instead, I answered honestly, “I’m used to taking care of myself.”

Neither of us said anything for several minutes, taking the opportunity to sample the appetizer. The silence between us wasn’t comfortable, exactly, but it wasn’t awkward either. *Charged* was the word that came to mind.

“I was surprised to hear from you tonight,” I finally said, moving us away from the more serious turn the conversation had taken. “Not the call as much as you wanting to go out tonight instead of waiting for the weekend. Is everything okay?”

“Work was...challenging today.”

This was weird. We were sitting in a nice restaurant, having dinner, talking about his day, and trying to pretend that we hadn’t just had kinky sex

at a BDSM club.

“I lost a client,” he continued. “A lot of the people I deal with are self-centered and self-involved, but I handle them. It’s part of the job. But these two...” He shook his head.

The waitress came back with our meals, and he waited until she left again before resuming his story.

“Basically, it came down to the fact that they would only give Holden Enterprises their business if I did something completely unethical.” He paused to cut a bite from his New York strip.

“What is it they wanted you to do?” Realizing that my question might’ve sounded like I was butting in where I didn’t belong, I quickly added, “Feel free to tell me it’s none of my business.”

I ate a mouthful of Farfalle pasta and immediately decided that this restaurant would be where I’d bring Kasey for her birthday. She loved pasta, and this was easily the best I’d ever eaten.

“The guy wanted to watch while I had sex with his wife.”

I nearly choked on my amazing pasta. I swallowed hard and reached for my water, my eyes watering. After I caught my breath, I managed to ask, “Was he serious?”

I wasn’t sure if Davin was amused by my reaction or my question.

“Dead serious. He flat-out said that I’d do whatever he told me to if I wanted his business.”

“What did you say?” I had no doubt that he’d sent them away, mostly because he’d said he’d lost the account but also because he wasn’t that sort of man.

“I told them I wasn’t for sale.” He smiled, and some of the shadows in his eyes left. “They stormed out.” His smile disappeared as quickly as it had come. “My dad wasn’t too happy about that.”

“Really? I’d think he’d be horrified that someone thought they could do that to any employee, let alone his son.”

Davin appeared to be choosing his words carefully as he ate in silence for a minute or so. “My father is...difficult.”

When he didn’t say anything else, I raised an eyebrow and made a ‘more’ motion with my fork.

He sighed. “My dad has very strict religious views, but he’s also pretty naïve about people who do a good job pretending to have similar values. Or at least talk a good game when they’re around him.”

“And that’s how that couple is?”

“I honestly don’t know what they’re like around Dad, but when he demanded to know what I refused to do to secure the account, I told him. He didn’t believe me.” Davin’s tone stayed casual, but I could hear the hurt under the frustration.

“I know a little something about disappointing parents,” I said wryly. “By that, I mean, parents who are disappointing.”

“All right,” he said. “Your turn.”

I shook my head. “You had a bad day. My issues are years in the past. I don’t need to vent about them.”

He reached out and squeezed my hand. “I’d rather learn more about you than rehashing something I’d prefer to forget.”

The sincerity was what got to me. He really wanted to know more about me.

“The short version is, my parents got drunk, and I was the result. Dad became a meth dealer and was in and out of jail until he blew himself up when I was nineteen.”

The shock on Davin’s face was preferable to the pity most people had when they heard about my childhood. I wasn’t looking for him to feel sorry for me. I’d come to terms with my life. At this point, talking about my parents was about as difficult as saying that I’d been born in Curtis, Nebraska.

“Mom preferred alcohol to meth, and I pretty much raised myself.” I took another bite of my pasta. “No brothers and sisters, at least, so when I left, I wasn’t leaving anyone behind.”

“That’s...” Davin shook his head. “Shit, Linsey. Here I am complaining about my dad—”

I held up my hand and shook my head. “Plenty of people had shittier childhoods than me. I survived, and I’m lucky that I don’t have to deal with my parents anymore. If you need someone to talk to about your dad, I’ll listen without telling you to be grateful he’s around.”

He leaned back in his chair, a strange expression on his face. “You’re nothing like anyone I’ve ever met, you know that?”

“Is that a good thing or a bad one?” I asked, stabbing the last of my steamed vegetables. I didn’t like how much I cared about the answer to that question, but I couldn’t help myself.

“A good one.” He smiled again. “A very good one.”

As I took in the way his eyes shone and how much I liked seeing him smile, how much I liked his voice...

Fuck.

I was in so deep.

TWENTY-EIGHT

DAVIN

WHAT DID I KNOW ABOUT THE WOMAN STALKING MY THOUGHTS?

Linsey Keller.

Deceased meth dealer father and still-living alcoholic mother.

That wasn't much, and the more time I spent with her, the more I wanted to know. Except I wasn't sure how to get her to open up. Give me a business deal, and I could manage it, but having a meaningful conversation with a woman I actually wanted to know? I had no clue.

I'd been trying to figure it out all morning.

No. If I was being honest, I'd been trying to figure it out since I'd dropped her off at her place last night.

I'd been tempted to ask her to come home with me, but it was the middle of the week, and the two of us had our own lives to live. We couldn't put the world on hold and spend all our time with each other.

If that was even something we both wanted to do.

I sent off another email and moved to the next one on my list. I'd been so pissed by Dad's reaction yesterday that I'd put off clearing out my inbox before I'd left. Which meant I didn't really have anyone but myself to blame for the mess I had waiting for me this morning.

At least Dad hadn't been by to talk to me. I didn't know if he'd talked to Theodore or Loretta, but it wouldn't have mattered anyway. Even if he now knew that I hadn't lied or exaggerated, I'd never know it. My entire life, I'd never heard Dad say he was wrong. The best anyone ever got was silence. I was hoping that was what was happening here.

An invoice popped up on my screen. Royd Kichner. The name sounded familiar, and as I read the company name, I sat straighter in my chair.

PI.

Of course. Holden Enterprises had a couple various investigators we used to dig into people's backgrounds, research legitimacy of businesses, that sort of thing. We had a firm on retainer, but Royd Kichner had been around before Dad and I had taken over. He'd been one of Grandad's hires, and every once in a while, I'd see one of his invoices come in, usually for something one of the older realtors had hired him to do. Like this quick background check that Lilith Puck had asked Royd to run.

A private investigator.

Someone whose job it was to dig into people's pasts. Wasn't that *exactly* what I needed? Someone who could get me more information about Linsey.

Before I could tell myself that this was a bad idea, I picked up my phone and called.

"Kichner Investigations."

"Mr. Kichner, this is Davin Holden." I tapped my pen on the desk. "I have someone I'd like you to look into."

"Of course." After a slight pause, he added, "I'm a little surprised to hear from you. The work I get from your company comes from people I've worked with for years. I never thought you'd be the one calling me."

"It's actually a personal matter I'm calling on," I said. "I need someone I could trust."

"What's the case?"

"Linsey Keller." I practically blurted her name out. "She's new to Houston, and I'd like to know more about who she is and where she comes from. I know her dad died in an explosion while cooking meth, and her mom's still alive. Oh, and she moved here from Denver with a woman named Kasey Lee, who owns a tattoo parlor."

"All right," Royd said. "I just finished up another case and don't have anything urgent. If you want to put a rush on it, I can."

"Do it." I didn't even hesitate. "Let me give you my private number."

After he assured me that he'd be in touch as soon as he had anything to report, I decided that while I was changing how I did things, I might as well take initiative somewhere else too.

The walk to Dad's office didn't take long, and I was relieved to see that he was behind his desk. I didn't want to have to try to track him down or come back later.

"Davin, is something wrong?"

I shook my head. “I just came by to see if you’d talked to the Ciardis. Because it doesn’t matter what they told you. I don’t want their business, no matter who’s handling it. They aren’t the sort of people we should represent. They’re bullies.”

Dad looked surprised, but he let me finish before responding. “If you believe it that strongly, then that’s what we’ll do. If they reach out to me again, I’ll tell them that we’re not interested.”

TWENTY-NINE

LINSEY

YAHTZEE!

I'd found him. Nearly fifteen straight hours and I'd finally found Mark Titan. Or, rather, I found Mark Biggs. After leaving Houston, he'd traveled to Dallas and then had left Texas altogether. He'd vanished for a few years, then had popped up in Minnesota where he'd filed for a legal name change. Even though it'd been the late 90s by then, he couldn't have known just how big tech would get and how easy it would eventually become to track his progress around the country.

Since the name change, he'd had two ex-wives, one while he'd lived in Safety Harbor, Florida, and the other during more than a decade in Greenville, South Carolina. The first ex had filed a restraining order and had made accusations of domestic abuse. Nothing had come to fruition with those charges, but the divorce hadn't been contested.

The last wife had stayed for ten years, eight of which had been filled with numerous hospital visits and questionable excuses. After she nearly died, he went to jail for thirteen months, and she filed for divorce.

Now, he was in Walhalla, South Carolina, where he owned a junkyard and had a couple drunken disorderly charges. He liked to spend money at a strip club in the closest city, and for the past couple years, that city had an increase in reports of prostitutes going to ERs with serious injuries. Broken noses, jaws, arms, ribs. Far from a smoking gun, but I didn't believe in coincidences. Mark Titan was an abusive asshole, and assholes like that didn't change their spots, so to speak.

But was he a murderer?

I picked up the burner phone I'd bought for this case – I always used

these sorts of phones to keep anyone from tracing calls back to me and to keep people from learning my phone number – and I punched in the number listed for Mark Biggs.

Since most people didn't answer calls from unknown numbers, I already had a voicemail prepared. As soon as the automated message ended with a beep, I used my best 'professional' voice.

"Mr. Titan, this is Debbie from *Crime Solvers*, a blog where we focus on old, unsolved cases and get to the truth. I'd like to hear what you have to say about the disappearance of your wife, Heidi. We know that those in power have silenced you in the past, and we want to give you the opportunity to say your truth and hold the proper parties responsible. And, of course, we'll provide compensation for your troubles."

I hung up and went to get myself something to drink. If he didn't return my call in twenty-four hours, I'd call again, but I had a feeling he'd call right after he got the message. The promise of getting to accuse Jude *and* get paid for it would be too much for him to pass up. That was, if he was the type of man I believed him to be. Everything I'd learned about him painted a pretty compelling picture.

Less than ten minutes later, the phone rang with Mark's number on the screen.

"Hi, this is Debbie. Am I speaking with Mark Titan?"

"It's Biggs now." He still had an accent, but it wasn't pure Texas anymore. "You want me to talk about what happened with my wife?"

"I do."

"It's gonna cost you."

I held back a sigh. "Of course. We wouldn't expect you to revisit such a painful memory without compensation. Once you tell me your story, I'll write a check. How does a thousand sound?"

"Two," he shot back. "And if it goes national, I want a thousand more."

"Done."

I would've agreed to any number. It wasn't like I actually planned to send him money. I saved that for actual victims. Sure, if he was innocent of having killed Heidi, he'd been wrongly accused, but I didn't really have much sympathy for him even if that was the case. I didn't help abusers.

"You coming here or we doing this over the phone?"

"Let's get started now, and then we can decide if a face-to-face interview is necessary."

“If you’re talking to me twice, I want to be paid twice. I mean, I’m missing work for this.”

He was determined to put my self-control to the test, I decided. He wasn’t ‘missing’ anything. Still, I kept a smile in my voice.

“That’s reasonable.” I took a beat, and then asked, “Why don’t you start wherever it is you think the story begins?”

“I knew a couple months before that she was fucking around on me.” He jumped right in. “Working late. Spending time out of the house when I knew damn well her friends weren’t with her.”

She’d probably wanted to stay away from his abusive ass, but I kept my opinion to myself.

“It didn’t take long for me to figure out who she was sneaking around with either. Jude Holden.” He practically spit the name out.

“How did you figure out it was Mr. Holden?”

He barked a laugh. “Wasn’t hard. I followed her a couple times, and every time, her car was at Holden Enterprises. Right there next to his. All cozy.”

“Isn’t it possible she really was working late? Maybe earning some extra money?”

“Why would she need extra money?” He sounded offended. “I provided for my family. I dare anyone to say different!”

“Maybe she was trying to save up for something?” I suggested, keeping my voice as innocent as possible. “A present for you?”

“That bitch only ever cared about herself.”

Now he sounded like a petulant child.

I couldn’t wait to get off this call.

“Does that mean you think she left? Maybe worked the extra time to get together enough money to lea—”

“Fuck you, bitch!” he snapped. “She never would’ve left me. I was the best thing that ever happened to her!”

“I just have to cover all the possible angles, Mr. Titan.”

“Biggs!” He practically shouted it. “My last name is *Biggs*.”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Biggs, of course.” I rolled my eyes. “I’m just doing my job. I’m sorry I interrupted you. Keep going.”

“She didn’t take any of her shit with her. Purse. Clothes. Makeup. That’s how I know she didn’t leave.”

That was a good point. If a woman was leaving her husband in a rush, she

might've left stuff behind, but Mark had been in jail when Heidi had gone missing. She would've been able to pack up whatever she wanted and go.

"See, I figure Jude was done with her, but his wife found out, and he decided it'd be easier if Heidi just disappeared."

As much as I hated to admit it, that made sense.

"And he had the chance, didn't he? I wasn't there, and he figured by the time I got out, the trail'd be cold."

Another point in Mark's favor. He had been in jail when it'd happened.

"He probably buried her in some oil well or something. Not that he'd get his hands dirty. He has all sorts of resources."

Again, that last bit was true.

"I don't know what she saw in him..."

I let him ramble while the pieces all came together in my mind. My stomach churned at the picture it formed. All the shit Titan was saying didn't help either. I wasn't listening with any direct intent, but enough got through to confirm that this man was, indeed, the bastard I'd thought he was from moment one.

"Thank you," I cut him off. "I think I have everything I need at the moment."

"Wh...okay?" Apparently, women didn't interrupt him often enough. "Are you sure?"

"Quite sure," I said. "If I need to talk to you again, I'll reach out."

I hung up before he could say anything else. I'd heard enough to convince me that he hadn't done anything to Heidi. While it wasn't impossible for someone to hire another person to do the dirty work, Mark didn't strike me as a man who thought ahead like that.

"Shit!" I tossed the phone onto the couch next to me.

I loathed the man, right down to my bones, but he couldn't have done it. And he'd made a good argument about who'd had motive and opportunity. Granted, his theories only worked if Jude had actually been having an affair with Heidi. If that hadn't been the case, then everything was up in the air.

But...the affair was still a possibility.

I closed my eyes. *Dammit!*

I never should've gotten involved with Davin in the first place. Okay, so I couldn't have known ahead of time, but as soon as I found out about Jude being Davin's grandfather, I should've dropped one or the other, and the smart thing to do would've been to refuse to see Davin.

Now, I was in too fucking deep, and I didn't know how to get out of it without completely fucking up everything that was important to me.

THIRTY

DAVIN

I FINISHED THE SPREADSHEET AND WENT BACK TO THE TOP TO REVIEW IT. THE accountants would get it next and make sure all my numbers were correct. Technically, I could've sent things straight to them since it was their department, but I preferred to have a hand in almost every project. It wasn't that I didn't trust them, but it was important for a CFO to know about their business's finances.

It was the reason I'd minored in accounting when I'd gotten my MBA from Columbia. I wasn't the kind of person who left all the hard work to others and just rested on the fact that my family had built the business. I'd never give anyone a reason to doubt that I'd earned my place in this company.

Except, now, I was wondering if maybe I could back off a bit. Show the other departments that I trusted them to do their jobs and didn't need to handle everything myself. Stop triple-checking everything and hire another realtor to handle accounts that I didn't actually need to handle.

Maybe then I could have a life.

A knock at the door made me look up. My assistant was taking a late lunch so I'd left the door open a bit. Standing there was a man with a scar over his eye.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"I'm Royd Kichner."

I stood up. "Come in, Mr. Kichner. I wasn't expecting a personal visit."

He came over to the desk, and we shook hands before I motioned for him to sit down. He did, wincing in a way that made me wonder just how tough on the joints being a PI could be.

“I did a deep dive into the background of Linsey Keller, and I thought I owed it to you to talk to you face-to-face.”

That didn't sound good.

“All right.” I leaned back and assumed what I hoped was a casual-looking position. “Talk to me.”

“I met her.”

Okay, that was *not* what I'd expected to hear. I'd thought Kichner would be discreet.

Before I could comment or say a word, Royd continued, “A woman who called herself Cecile Charles showed up at my office, asking about your family. Your grandfather, actually. Of course, I told her to leave. But, when I started looking into Linsey Keller, I found a picture of her. Not a great one, but enough for me to recognize that it was the same woman I'd met.”

I felt like the wind had been knocked out of me. “When?”

“Wednesday afternoon.”

After she and I had met. After we'd first slept together. I told myself that was better. She hadn't tricked me into a relationship. Maybe she just wanted to know more about me, much like I wanted to know more about her.

Then why had she been asking about Granddad?

“What, exactly, was she asking?” My voice stayed calm even as my insides knotted.

“She came in on the pretense of wanting help looking into something herself. Her questions focused on what sorts of things I'd look into, the people I'd talk to, the places I'd visit.”

That made no sense.

“As she got more specific, I suspected she wasn't on the up and up. When I confronted her about it, she named your grandfather. Asked if I'd worked for him, for the company. What types of investigations I'd done for him.” Royd shook his head. “I told her I didn't talk about my clients and then told her to leave.”

“What did she say to that?”

“Nothing. She left. I got the impression that she'd come more to figure me out than get actual information on your grandfather.”

“That doesn't make any sense.” I waited for Royd to give me his thoughts, but he just kept his gaze pinned somewhere over my shoulder. “She and I met last week completely by chance.”

Royd shrugged, his expression impassive. “Maybe it wasn't chance.”

I shook my head. “No, you don’t understand. These guys were following...”

I let the rest of the sentence die as I realized it was entirely possible that she’d staged the whole thing. She could have hired the men to follow her and make it seem like she was in trouble.

Except the cops. They’d been real.

Or had they?

She’d claimed that the reason she’d reached out to me had been because of the detectives, and I’d just accepted it. Had she hired them to give her an excuse to come see me again rather than the usual ‘you left this at my place’ thing people sometimes did?

But she’d asked Royd about Grandad, not me. She’d never even met my grandfather. Why would she care if Royd had ever worked for him? If she was wondering about whether or not I was going to inherit from Grandad, I could see looking into him, but it would’ve made more sense to talk to a lawyer about any legal aspects.

None of this made sense at all.

“I don’t know what this girl told you,” Royd said, “but my gut tells me she ain’t giving you the whole story. I got a lot of experience dealing with people, and she’s a shifty one.”

I nodded absently. “Thank you, Mr. Kichner. Send me your bill.”

“Will do.” He stood up and left without another word.

I appreciated that. I didn’t have it in me to make idle chit-chat just to be polite. I was too busy wondering if Linsey had played me from the very start.

How had it come together? Had she seen my picture somewhere and decided that I looked like the kind of man she could con? Was that what she and Kasey did? Scammed rich men? Had they even lived anywhere else? Had they moved to Houston because of me?

Or had it all been an opportunity thing? Had she recognized me when I’d helped her, and that had been why she’d invited me up to her apartment? Or had it been the cops who’d told her who I was and that was why she’d come to see me? Not to warn me about them, but because she’d thought it was a good way to see if she could keep things going between us?

I’d seen so many people lose their hearts to someone who was just after their money. Was I just another statistic? A man who paid too much attention to the physical and ignored the warning signs?

The longer I thought about it, the angrier I became, until there was only

one thing I could do.

I had to talk to her and find out the truth, even if it hurt. Pain would be better than wondering.

THIRTY-ONE

LINSEY

HOLDEN ENTERPRISES HAD MADE A MISTAKE IN 1991 WHEN THEY DECIDED TO hire a security firm that stored their records online rather than an on-site or off-site server. All three had pros and cons, but by now, people in the security business should have known better.

These guys, however, still had everything right there for the taking. Granted, they had a decent firewall, but in this day and age, private servers were better. At least then, a person usually had to be physically at either the server or at a computer directly linked to the server to get in.

It didn't take much for me to get to their archives, and I half-expected to find that they only went back a couple years. Instead, I found that Holden Enterprises's files went all the way back to the first day the cameras had been installed at the company. I doubted anyone else's files went back that far, but Jude had probably instructed his files be kept until he requested them to be removed. He seemed like the sort of man who had back-up plans for his back-up plans.

To the company's credit, they did at least have things organized by year and then by month within that year. That saved me a lot of time since it meant I was able to go straight to the summer of 1993.

I started in June with the parking lot cameras. If Jude had been having an affair with Heidi, especially after hours at work, there might have been footage of him walking her to her car. It would be the most I could get, I surmised, because any physical contact while in the building would've happened in Jude's office, and there hadn't been any cameras there at the time.

I'd made it halfway through the month without any sign of an affair when

someone knocked on my door. I closed my laptop and did a quick check of the table to make sure I'd put away my latest notes. Kasey had mentioned something about having a friend over for dinner, and it wouldn't have been the first time that a guest arrived while she was still working.

It wasn't Kasey's friend, however. It was Davin, and he looked upset. At least as upset as he ever let himself appear to be, anyway.

"Come in." I stepped out of the way, a little surprised when he brushed by me without a kiss. I wasn't his girlfriend, but it also wasn't like we were platonic friends.

"You went to see my company's PI?"

Shit. How had he found out?

"Yes." I wasn't going to lie to him, but I hoped he didn't push the subject either. That wasn't a path either of us would enjoy taking.

"You lied to me."

"No, I lied to *him*." As soon as I said it, I knew it'd been the absolute wrong thing to say. Somehow, I didn't think the slight distinction would make a difference. Besides, both of us knew that the reason I'd lied to Royd Kichner was to keep my visit from getting back to Davin.

"Enough bullshit, Linsey."

His tone was harsh, and I knew I deserved it. I'd hidden things from him, and to expect Davin to just smile and say it was okay would be unfair, to say the least. I would've been pissed if the situation had been reversed.

But how could I apologize when I was looking into something as serious as a missing person? It wasn't like I was some gold digger out for money or trying to smear the family name. If anything, I was looking for reasons *not* to suspect Jude Holden.

"What is it you want? Money? Looking to blackmail us or something?"

I pushed back the anger that came with the accusation. That would be the natural assumption for someone in his position. I just would've liked for him to know me well enough to realize I wasn't like that.

"I'm..." Shit. How was I supposed to tell him without giving away exactly what I was doing? The majority of it wasn't exactly legal. I sighed. "Look, your grandfather might not be the person you think he is. I'm looking for the truth, but it doesn't look good."

For a moment, I thought he might explode. The expression on his face darkened, and his pale blue eyes went stormy. Then, as suddenly as the emotion had come, it vanished, and he turned to ice. Nothing showed on his

face or in his eyes. The man who'd come to my rescue, who I'd enjoyed being with, now radiated hostility.

I opened my mouth to apologize, to say *something*, but that was when it hit me. "How did Royd Kichner figure out who I was and know to go to you?"

Davin didn't say a word.

I took a step closer. "Even if he did somehow figure out who I was, which is really unlikely based on that single interaction, he should've gone to your grandfather. I never mentioned you at all."

My statements were met with stony silence.

Then things clicked, and my jaw dropped. "You hired him to look into me."

He shifted, crossing his arms as a defiant glint came into his eyes. "I did."

Hurt anger flooded me. "You do that for all the women you fuck?"

"I should've done it sooner," he said, the muscle working in his jaw. "Would've saved me a lot of time."

My fingers curled into fists. "I wish you would've too. I could've been doing something productive instead of wasting my time with you."

"At least neither of us have to worry about wasting any more of our time."

Tears burned, and that just pissed me off. "If you wanted to know anything, all you had to do was ask. I would've told you. Hell, I told you that my dad was a fucking meth dealer who blew himself up! It's not like I didn't tell you stuff!"

Even as I said it, I knew I wasn't exactly being honest. What if he'd asked what I was always doing on my computer? What sort of 'work' I really did? I didn't have a problem telling him family stuff because it didn't matter to me. The work I did mattered. What had happened to Heidi Titan mattered.

"That's a fucking lie, and you know it." His voice was quiet, but not soft. "You can't stand there and say I could've asked you when we both know damn well that I can't trust a single word you say. For all I know, everything you've told me, from your parents to your name, is a lie."

But it wasn't. I hadn't lied about anything. And my work was the only thing I'd hidden from him.

I couldn't tell him any of that, though. Even if it wouldn't completely fuck up my life, he never would've believed me. He'd said it himself, just a few seconds ago. He didn't trust me anymore. If he ever really had in the first

place.

So, I let him walk out of my apartment and didn't say a word.

It hurt more than I liked, but I could handle the pain. Besides, I deserved it. I should have known better than to get so involved. And it wasn't like I'd been nothing but open and honest with Davin. Granted, I hadn't been investigating him, but it didn't matter anymore.

It was over.

Time to move on.

THIRTY-TWO

DAVIN

MY ARMS BURNED AS I PULLED THE BAR DOWN BELOW MY CHIN. A WEEKEND of exercise had seemed like a good way to get my focus back to where it was supposed to be. Except I'd still been thinking about things.

Surprisingly, it hadn't mostly been about Linsey. Sure, some of it had been, but it was mostly the thing she'd said about Grandad. How he wasn't the person I thought he was.

Technically, I already knew that, and so did she. I'd told her all about Deklin's shocking announcement and Grandad's role in what'd happened. Which made me wonder if that's what she'd been talking about. Except it didn't make sense that she would've gone to Royd Kichner about it.

Unless Royd had somehow played a role in what'd happened between my mom and Ronall Kane. Or in keeping it from all of us.

I couldn't think of what part Royd possibly could've played, but that didn't mean he hadn't been involved. Maybe there'd been a paternity test to hide, or maybe Ronall had needed convincing that Deklin wasn't his. Grandad seemed to think that Ronall didn't know, but maybe that was because Royd had made it that way.

The bar clattered as I put it into place, and I grabbed my nearby towel, wiping my face. I stood and stretched, letting my muscles cool down as I headed for my shower. I'd spent most of the day at work, just like I had yesterday, and the only way I'd been able to sleep had been to spend a couple hours in the gym. Hopefully, my work out tonight would help me have at least a few uninterrupted hours of sleep.

Hopefully, I'd wake up tomorrow with a clear head and an idea of what to do about Grandad.

Deklin seemed to be fine with our grandfather and the role he'd played in deceiving his true birth father. How could I do any less when Grandad hadn't hurt me the way he had my brother?

Except...

Maybe Deklin's parentage wasn't the only thing Grandad had lied about. Maybe the reason Linsey had gone to Royd was because he'd helped Grandad with something else that none of us knew about.

Yes, I knew that I didn't know everything about my grandfather's life, and he didn't know everything about mine. If he found out about my sexual preferences, he wouldn't be upset like Dad would, but it might make him look at me in a different light.

Was I the same way? Were there things that Grandad had done or still did that might make me see him differently?

Probably.

But somehow, I didn't think that was what Linsey had meant when she'd said that he wasn't who I thought he was. She didn't judge people by the things they enjoyed. Whatever it was she knew or thought she knew, it had to be something that she knew would be meaningful to me. Because as much as I hated to admit it, she knew me well enough to know that about me.

Shit.

I hated this.

I hated doubting my grandfather, and I hated even more that it was Linsey who'd planted the seed.

As much as this was driving me crazy, there was an easy solution. I could simply drive over to Grandad's house and ask him if there was anything he wanted to tell me, something that Royd would've been involved in. Grandad had seemed genuinely bothered by having kept things from Deklin. Maybe that guilt would encourage him to be honest with me.

And that was if there was anything in the first place.

I closed my eyes as I stepped under the spray of warm water, letting the white noise fill my mind even as the heat helped my muscles relax. I'd gotten in the habit of long showers after stressful days and hadn't realized just how often my days had been stressful until recently. The times I'd been with Linsey, I hadn't felt the need to linger.

Shit.

I needed to stop thinking about her.

It was completely possible that Linsey had been trying to distract me

from whatever scam she had going on. Why should I believe anything she said? She had reasons to lie. Grandad didn't.

Maybe.

Royd wouldn't tell me anything, and there was no way in hell I was going back to Linsey to ask her what she knew. Maybe I couldn't find it out easily after all.

Shit.

Was I making excuses to *not* find out what Linsey had been talking about?

More importantly, was the reason I didn't want to know because I was afraid of what the truth might be?

THIRTY-THREE

LINSEY

ONE LOOK AT MY FACE WHEN SHE'D GOTTEN HOME HAD KASEY OFFERING TO move her date somewhere else, but I'd told her it wasn't a problem. My fight with Davin hadn't changed my plans for the night. If anything, it had made me more determined to get to the bottom of what'd happened to Heidi. It'd be worth losing Davin if I could get answers.

Not that I'd told any of that to Kasey. I'd simply told her that Davin and I had ended things. I hadn't offered details, and she hadn't asked. We trusted each other to be honest about what we needed. If I said I was okay, then she took it at face value and vice versa.

Besides, when I'd seen Kasey's face when her date first arrived, I'd known that her plans for that night had been important. Detective Mitchells – Ilysa – had clearly been as enamored with my friend as Kasey was with her.

I hoped things would work out for the two of them.

I'd spent most of the weekend locked in my room, using my wall to organize my thoughts since I didn't have another surface big enough. Having the Holden name on my wall didn't do anything to help me sleep. Each time I put up more damning information about Jude, I got an unpleasant jolt reminding me how angry Davin had been.

The worst part was, the more time that passed, the more I had to admit to myself that his reaction had been warranted. Yes, he'd hired a PI to look into me, and that wasn't something I had to completely excuse, but I also couldn't use it to justify my having kept important information from him. I'd had options and no one to blame but myself that I hadn't made better decisions.

"Linsey?" Kasey knocked on my bedroom door.

I went to the door and opened it enough to see her, but not so much that

she could see everything I had up. It was best to keep her in the dark as much as possible when it came to my less-than-legal activities.

“I’m going out to dinner with Ilysa.”

“Have fun.”

“Linsey…”

The concern on her face made me feel guilty enough to snap, “I’m working, Kasey. I don’t need a babysitter.”

Her eyebrows shot up, and she pointed at me. “No. I’m not having you lash out at me because you’re too scared to get your shit together.”

“I’m not scared.” Off her look, I sighed, letting out the breath I felt like I’d been holding for hours. “Okay, I shouldn’t have snapped at you, but I’m just tired. That’s all.”

“I call bullshit, Linsey.” Her expression softened. “Look, you miss Davin, and that’s okay, but this isn’t healthy. You either need to go get him back or get over him. Moping won’t help shit.”

I shook my head. “You mean well, but you don’t understand.”

“Then tell me.”

I ran my hands through my hair, grasping at the roots in pure frustration. “The short version is, we both fucked up, and he’s not going to let it go. Besides, it’s not like we were dating or anything.”

“Come on, we both know this wasn’t some one night stand you could walk away from without feeling anything. You care about him a hell of a lot more than you want anyone to know.”

“I’m fine.” I glared at her. “I’m working, not moping.”

She looked like she was going to argue with me, but instead, she just took a step back. “Fine. If you want to keep doing whatever it is your doing, that’s your business. Just don’t lie to yourself that you’re in this all alone because you’re the one not accepting help when it’s offered.”

As she turned to walk away, I closed the door and rested my forehead on it. Great. I’d not only lost whatever it was Davin and I had been building, but I’d caused a rift in my friendship with my very best friend.

This was why I didn’t let people get close. All it did was cause problems. I wished I’d stayed in Denver when Kasey had told me she wanted to move. Or, better yet, I should have left Denver a couple months after getting there like I’d done the other places I’d lived since leaving Nebraska. None of this would’ve happened if I’d just followed my plan to move from place to place, see the world, live a life where I didn’t have to worry about anything or

anyone.

But I hadn't done any of that, and now I had to deal with the consequences.

And if I was going to be honest with myself, I wouldn't have been happy with that life, no matter how much I wished I could've been. I liked being Kasey's friend. I liked that the two of us watched out for each other. Even if the Davin part of things had been a mistake, becoming friends with Kasey hadn't been.

"Dammit," I muttered.

I needed to apologize to Kasey and tell her what was going on. All of it. I'd told myself that the fewer details she knew, the safer she'd be, but that was only an excuse. I was putting her at risk, no matter what she knew or didn't know. No one would believe that she and I had lived together, and moved to a different state together, without her being aware of what I'd been doing all this time. I'd been scared that she'd be angry and leave or that she'd look down on me because of it.

She deserved to know the truth, no matter what her reaction was.

Maybe I'd make her dinner tomorrow and take it to work. The schedule would probably be light enough that we could talk, and if she told me to leave, I'd have time to get my stuff out of the apartment.

The thought of her pushing me away made me sick to my stomach, but I had to quit being selfish and only thinking of how I'd feel. She deserved better than that from me.

But, until I had the opportunity to make things right with her, I had work to do on the Heidi Titan case.

I had one more place to check before I could tie up what I had on Jude. Everything I'd found so far was completely circumstantial. Nothing definitively pointed to him as having been involved with Heidi's disappearance, but there wasn't anything that cleared him either.

With a broad timeframe as to when Heidi had gone missing and Jude having spent much of his time alone in his office at that time, it wasn't possible to have a specific alibi. Not like Mark Titan, who had gone to jail before and been released after the last time Heidi had been seen. It was too big a gap.

The contact between the Titans and Holden Enterprises was easily explained too. They'd both worked for Jude at one point, and even after Mark was fired, Heidi had stayed. There was no way of knowing that any calls

made between the two places had been between Heidi and Jude or Heidi and Mark. Or they could have been calls to and from supervisors, etc.

Royd's employment around that time had been suspicious, but again, nothing that could put a smoking gun in Jude's hand since Kichner had worked for Jude before and since, both privately and with the company.

One of the things anyone who watched or read crime stories knew to do was follow the money. I already knew that Jude had hired Kichner, but now I needed to look for signs of an affair in his financial records.

Jude had been banking with the same institution for nearly fifty decades, and he'd had a personal money manager for forty. I went for the manager's files first since he was more likely than the bank to have credit card spending as well as incoming and outgoing cash.

There were a few specific things I was looking for, comparing 1993 with the previous year when he and his second wife had been on good terms. Meals at fancy, romantic restaurants that had differed from the usual dates and places. Purchases of expensive jewelry that hadn't corresponded with holidays, a birthday, or anniversary. Same with lingerie. Trips for two people when other spending had shown Mrs. Holden had been elsewhere. Strange property purchases or rentals.

I'd already looked at Holden Enterprises's records for accounts Jude had handled back then, but it'd pretty much all been commercial with the exception of a house the then-mayor had purchased. Based on what I knew of Jude's personality, if he'd been cheating, he wouldn't have handed anything off to someone else that linked him to the other woman, especially since his son had been working for the company then. He wouldn't have wanted Walter to get suspicious.

It wasn't until I saw the records for two days after Mark Titan had been arrested that the first oddity caught my eye.

Things moved fast after that, and it was less than an hour later that I was printing out what I'd found, my head spinning. It was possible I was wrong, but my gut said I wasn't.

I had a pretty good idea of what had happened to Heidi Titan, as well as what Jude Holden's role had been. Now, I just had to figure out what to do with the information. It wasn't quite as black-and-white as I'd thought it would be.

THIRTY-FOUR

DAVIN

FALL HAD OFFICIALLY ARRIVED, BUT HOUSTON'S WEATHER HADN'T CHANGED in the least. Even though I was still one of the first ones there, I didn't get to the office as early as I usually did, which was probably why my shirt was already sticking to me under my suit jacket. Or it could've been because all the reasons I'd been late leaving.

I'd forgotten to charge my phone, so I'd had no alarm to wake me. Then I'd been in the shower when I'd realized that I'd forgotten to buy shaving cream – hence the reason I was sporting more scruff than I thought professional. After that, I'd spilled coffee on my shirt and had to change. Then there'd been the traffic, made worse than normal thanks to an accident.

All of that added up to me getting to work in a mood that guaranteed the first person to annoy me would get their head bitten off. When I saw Deklin pulling into the parking lot as I reached the front doors, I reminded myself that I didn't need to go to him and demand to know what else Grandad had lied to us about.

Chances were, it'd just been Linsey talking about stuff she didn't know, but even if she was right, Deklin didn't need to be caught in the middle of this. He'd had enough shit going on in his life recently. Both of my brothers did, actually.

I'd focus on work, and if the opportunity presented itself, then I'd talk to Grandad. I wasn't going to seek him out. This was the best way to handle things.

“Hey! Holden!”

I jerked to a stop at the sound of a woman's voice, turning my head in time to see an angry Kasey Lee bearing down on me. She was tiny, but the

fury on her face had me taking a step back despite the size difference in my favor.

I barely stopped myself from taking another one as she kept coming. She didn't stop until she was barely a couple inches from me, our toes almost touching. Her head was tilted back so she could glare at me while she pointed.

"You hurt my friend." She jabbed her finger into my chest.

"I don't know what Linsey told you—"

"Nothing!" She cut me off. "Linsey didn't say shit about what happened, which is how I know it was something bad because, if it was just two people deciding that they were done fucking, she wouldn't have locked herself in her room the entire weekend and not said word one about you."

Linsey had spent the weekend in her room? I frowned, concerned...and then shook my head. "We weren't dating, Kasey. And what happened between Linsey and me is between Linsey and me."

Kasey poked me again, this time hard enough to hurt. "I don't give a fuck what you think the two of you were or weren't. You hurt her." She leaned in even closer, and her voice dropped until I almost couldn't hear her. "If you come near her again, I will cut off your balls and feed them to you in a mincemeat pie. I don't care who you are or how much money you have. You hurt her again, and I'll hurt you. That simple."

I couldn't say that the threat surprised me as a general thing, but the specifics caught me more off-guard than they should have. I'd just started to think that I should call security when she spun around and stormed away, leaving me staring after her, my jaw hanging open. Fortunately, it was still too early for most of my employees to be here.

But one of them was.

"Who the hell was that, Davin?" Deklin hurried toward me. "Even from out there, I could see that woman was pissed at you."

"Don't worry about it." I started walking again, heading for the elevator. It was only two flights of stairs, but after the morning I'd had, I was already too tired to take a single one.

Deklin followed me. "Seriously, who was that? What did she want?"

I sighed as we stepped into the elevator. I had to tell him. He'd trusted Damon and me with the truth of his parentage, and with what Jude had done. How could I not tell him that there might be something else that Grandad was hiding?

“That was Kasey Lee. She’s the best friend and roommate of a woman I’ve been...seeing.”

“The one Damon and Jae met when they were at the club with you?”

My head snapped around, and I caught him grinning at me. “What did Damon tell you?”

Deklin shrugged, looking rather pleased with himself. “Not much of anything, but he did tell me that you had a lady friend.”

I barked a laugh at the thought of Linsey hearing anyone refer to her as my *lady friend*. “Not much of a lady, and not much of a friend now either.”

Deklin’s smile faded. “So, that’s what it was about. You and the woman Damon met broke up, and her friend is mad on her behalf.”

I scowled. “We didn’t break up because we weren’t a couple.”

Deklin raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure about that?”

I blew out a long breath. “Look, Dek. I don’t know what Linsey and I were, but yes, it’s over. And yes, Kasey is pissed because Linsey and I aren’t whatever we were. But she doesn’t know the whole story.”

“What is the whole story?”

The elevator stopped on my floor, and Deklin followed me off, even though his office was on the second floor. I didn’t say anything until we were in my office, and Deklin had closed the door behind us.

“Do you remember Royd Kichner?” I leaned against my desk and waved my hand dismissively. “Doesn’t matter if you do. He’s a PI and the company’s used him. So has Grandad. I went to Kichner to ask him to find out about Linsey.”

“Big mistake,” Deklin said. “You go digging in a woman’s past, she is not going to like it.” I gave him a look, and he put up his hands. “Sorry. Continue.”

“When Kichner got back to me, he told me that Linsey had visited him. She’d given him a different name and asked him about Grandad.”

“Grandad?” Deklin looked as confused as I’d felt when I’d first heard it.

“When I went to confront Linsey about it, she said that he wasn’t who I thought he was.”

“Who, Kichner?”

I couldn’t tell if Deklin was trying to be funny or was being purposely obtuse. Either way, I answered. “Grandad.”

“What did she mean by that?”

I shrugged.

“What does she think he did?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted. “I need coffee.”

Deklin held out a second cup that I hadn’t seen him carrying. His cheeks were red. “I was going to come talk to you about that club.”

I opened my mouth and then closed it again. How in the world had my sex life suddenly become a point of discussion with my brothers?

“Not important,” Deklin said. “I was just explaining the coffee. Let’s go back to why you don’t know what Linsey meant about Grandad.”

“That’s simple.” I took a drink of the coffee and was pleasantly surprised that it was good. “I didn’t ask her.”

“You didn’t ask her?” Deklin shifted in his seat, a strange look passing over his face. “Davin, did you basically blast her for asking a PI about Grandad but not bother to find out why...and the way you’d found out about the PI was because you yourself had hired him to dig into her background?”

It sounded a whole lot worse when he said it that way.

“I was just trying to make sure she wasn’t hiding something that would hurt our family,” I clarified. “You know as well as I do that people come after families like ours.”

“Was she asking about money? Trying to find out ways to seduce you?”

I shook my head. “Royd just said that she asked about Grandad and some work Royd had done for him.”

“Do you think she was thinking about trying to seduce him?”

I shook my head. “That’s not really her style.”

“So, blackmail?”

I frowned. “That isn’t really like her either.”

“A long con?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Okay, maybe I’ve missed something,” Deklin said, “but how do you know she hasn’t found something about Grandad? It’s not like he’s been entirely truthful with us.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “She shouldn’t have been looking into him in the first place.”

“Just like you shouldn’t have been looking into her?”

“I was doing that to protect us.”

Deklin gave me a look that was more big brother than little brother. “How do you know she wasn’t trying to do the same? That she wasn’t trying to see if being with you would hurt her?”

I stared at him as if the thought hadn't crossed my mind...because it hadn't. I'd heard that she'd gone to a PI, and it'd never even crossed my mind that she might've been trying to protect herself.

"Fuck me."

Deklin gave me a wry smile. "I'm pretty sure you did that to yourself."

He was right.

Again.

"I know I'm the baby brother, and that usually means I'm the one getting advice, but let me give you some for once." He leaned forward. "Maybe you should apologize to Linsey for having your head up your ass and hear her out about why she reached out to Royd in the first place."

"What?"

"Don't completely destroy the best thing that's ever happened to you."

With that statement, he got up and left. I stayed where I was and wondered if he was right. Not the part about how Linsey was the best thing that'd ever happened to me. That was a conclusion I'd already come to, even if I hadn't acknowledged it. She'd never been just another sexual partner, even when I'd thought we'd only have the one night together.

No, the real question was, had I completely destroyed it, or would it still be possible for me to fix things?

THIRTY-FIVE

LINSEY

I'D BEEN STARING AT MY WALL FOR THE PAST FORTY MINUTES AND STILL couldn't quite believe it. Everything I'd dug up, put together like a puzzle, and it made a compelling picture. It wasn't one hundred percent complete, and if I'd planned to send it to the cops right now, they'd have to fill in a few blanks to keep it from being circumstantial.

Except I wasn't sending anything to anyone.

I was still trying to wrap my head around it, honestly. It was absolutely insane, but it made sense in its own way. In fact, based on what I'd learned of Jude Holden, it made more sense than anything else.

My stomach growled, and I suddenly realized that I hadn't eaten anything even though I'd been up all night. Leaving my bedroom, I went to the kitchen and re-heated the pizza Kasey had brought home last night. I also took the last beer and wrote *beer* on the grocery list. I leaned against the counter and polished off my drink and the pizza, not even really tasting any of it. My mind was still on the wall in my bedroom.

The knock at the door startled me out of my head, and I considered not even acknowledging it, but Kasey had ordered a new game, and if it got swiped because I didn't answer the door, I'd have one pissed off gamer on my hands.

I'd once made the mistake of saying something about how anyone who spent hours in front of a screen could eventually beat a video game. She'd challenged me to compete against her in a brand-new game after giving me a week to practice on other games. She'd then proceeded to kick my ass until I'd come away with a bruised ego and a new respect for gaming.

With that thought in mind, I went over to the door.

Except, it wasn't a delivery person.

It was Davin.

"What do you want?" The question was harsh, but I refused to feel guilty about it.

"I want to talk to you. Face-to-face."

He didn't sound angry, but I knew better than to assume he'd go away if I told him I didn't want to talk. He was stubborn and determined, not the sort of person who gave up easily.

I opened the door and stepped aside. "Let's get this over with."

I fully expected him to go off on me again, but instead, the moment I closed the door, the first words out of his mouth surprised me.

"Tell me what you found out about my grandfather."

I stared at him. "What?"

"I want to know what you found out that made you say Grandad wasn't who I thought he was."

I felt like I had a short-circuit in my brain. "You came back here to demand I tell you something you didn't even want to hear about before?"

"I want to understand what made you say it." He stuck his hands in his pockets and began to pace. "What made you do what you did."

"All right," I agreed. If I was going to do this, I was going to do it right. Just because I didn't like to admit when I was wrong didn't mean I wouldn't do it...when it was appropriate. "But first, you need to understand that I'm not going to apologize for going where the information took me. I am sorry that I hid it from you, but it was never about getting dirt on your family or using you for anything. I should have talked to you about it when I realized what we had wasn't a one-off."

His expression softened. "I'm sorry I made assumptions and didn't let you explain."

"I wasn't exactly the most receptive person when we talked," I admitted. "I should have given you the benefit of the doubt."

An awkward silence settled between us, and I had no idea what to say next. Kasey had been right that I cared about Davin, but I didn't know what to do with it.

Davin rubbed the back of his neck. "Look, I'm not any good at this."

"Any good at what?" I asked.

"This." He motioned between us. "The reason I reacted the way I did...it had more to do with how I...*feel* than it did with you asking questions about

my family.”

The air rushed from my lungs. “Me too.” The two words dropped from my mouth unbidden.

He froze. “You too?”

“I’m not any good at this, either.” I took a step toward him, my heart in my throat. “I was hurt that you thought you needed to hire a PI to look into me because your opinion of me mattered. *Matters.*”

He came over to me, a different kind of tension building now. “It still matters?”

I tipped my head back so I could meet his gaze. No more running scared. “Yes. More than I want it to.”

He brushed his fingers down my cheek, and the simple touch made my knees weak. “Why?”

This was it. The moment that would decide things. Whatever was growing here, it was fragile, and unless I wanted to live with regret for the rest of my life, I had to overcome my fear and put it all out there.

“Because I’ve fallen for you, and it terrifies me, knowing that you have the power to crush me.”

One beat.

Two.

His mouth crashed into mine, the force of his kiss rocking me back on my heels. One hand at the small of my back kept me from falling, and the other cupped the back of my head, holding me to him even though I had no intention of going anywhere. I grabbed the front of his shirt, my relief even stronger than my pleasure. I hadn’t let myself know how scared I’d been that I’d never be with him again until this moment.

The need to breathe was what finally broke us apart, both panting and unwilling to let the other go.

“I don’t do well when I’m not in control,” he admitted.

I laughed. “I’m pretty sure I already figured that out.”

“Can we sit?”

We moved over to the couch in a strange sort of shuffle, his need to continue touching me seemingly as strong as my own. When I moved to sit next to him, he frowned and pulled me onto his lap. I leaned against him as he wrapped his arms around me, and it just felt...*right*.

“I put my family first,” he began. “I mean, I always have. Me taking over the business was never a question. It was expected. I never questioned what I

was willing to sacrifice to succeed because I already knew it had to be everything. So, I did what had to be done. Studied. Worked. Didn't make close friends or date. The business became my life. The only little slice I kept for myself was Euphoria, and that was as much a coping mechanism as anything else."

"Because that's where you're in charge, in control," I said softly.

On the outside, Davin looked like he had everything anyone could ever want, but he'd been just as lonely and isolated as I had been my whole life.

"Then, I met you." He shifted the hand resting on my hip, and his thumb slipped under my shirt, found bare skin at my waist. "It was the first time I'd ever wanted anything for myself. I wanted more than just one night and more than just an understanding about sex. Every time I was with you, the wanting got stronger."

I ran my fingers through his hair. "I know the feeling."

He caught my hand and held it as his eyes caught mine. "I didn't just fall for you, Linsey. I'm still falling. Every single minute."

"Me too." I brushed my lips across his. "You're wrong, you know."

He appeared to freeze again, waiting for the hurt. "Wrong about what?"

"That you're not good at this." I put my hand on his cheek. "You did just fine."

THIRTY-SIX

DAVIN

“IS IT STRANGE THAT I’VE MISSED YOU?” I ASKED AS I RESTED MY FOREHEAD AGAINST HERS. “IT’S ONLY BEEN TWO DAYS.”

“I missed you too.”

My brothers were going to have a field day with this. I hadn’t understood it when they’d told me about Sofi and Jae. How they had this connection and how badly it’d hurt when they’d been forced apart. I’d been glad Deklin and Damon had found happiness, and that the women they’d chosen deserved the men my brothers were, but I hadn’t truly gotten it until now.

I cupped her chin, tilting her head up as I bent mine, taking her mouth. Possessing it. Possessing her. Not because I owned her but because she owned me, body and soul. She parted her lips, her tongue meeting mine as she turned to straddle my lap, leaning into the kiss.

My hands moved under her shirt, palms sliding up her spine, down her ribcage, thumbs skimming the sides of her breasts as I realized she wasn’t wearing a bra. How the hell had that escaped my notice?

A soft moan encouraged me, and I brushed my thumb over a nipple, feeling it harden under my touch. Then she rocked against me, and it was my turn to moan. I caught her bottom lip between my teeth and tugged on it, worried at it, before soothing it with my tongue.

Suddenly, she climbed off my lap, leaving my head spinning as I tried to figure out what I’d done wrong. When she pulled her shirt over her head, I realized she wasn’t upset and wasn’t asking me to slow down. By the time I’d taken off my own shirt, she had stripped down to a pair of black, boy-cut cotton briefs, and I had to stop and stare.

“Do you have any idea how sexy you are?” I asked.

She grinned at me and sent a pointed look at my crotch. “I have a pretty good idea.”

I stood and quickly lost the rest of my clothes. “Take your underwear off too.” When she reached for the waistband, I added, “Slowly.”

I wrapped my fingers around my cock, slowly stroking it as Linsey obeyed. The waistband dropped an inch, and she turned, giving me an unobstructed view of the absolutely gorgeous tattoo of falling leaves and a J.R.R. Tolkien quote that covered most of her back.

My eyes trailed the length of her spine and stopped where she was easing the snug cotton over her ass in the most excruciating way possible. After they – *finally* – dropped to the floor, she kicked them away and turned back toward me, not a hint of inhibition or unease on her face.

All thoughts of taking her to her bedroom fled. I needed her here. *Now*. The next round could be in her bed, although we would eventually need a bigger one for all of the things I planned to do to her. Right now, the floor would do fine, even if we did end up with rug burns in some embarrassing places.

I stretched out on the floor, and she moved over to me before I said a word. When I reached up a hand, though, she took it and waited for me to tell her what to do. I guided her toward my shoulders and then curled my hand around her calf. The muscles tightened under my palm.

“I want you on your knees,” I said, my voice rough. “Either side of my head.”

Her eyes widened, heat filling their dark depths as she realized what I wanted. “Davin...”

I put it as bluntly as I could. “I want you to ride my face, make yourself come.”

She shivered. “Fuck.”

“That comes next,” I promised. “Now, be good and do as you’re told.” I winked at her, and she laughed.

Damn, I loved that sound.

She moved over me, and I reached up to grab her hips, more to have something to hold onto than to take control. The moment she was close enough, I licked the length of her slit. She sucked in a breath and settled so that my mouth could reach all the places I craved.

I lost myself in the taste and scent of her, sliding my tongue as far into her as it could go, then moving up to her clit and teasing it. She cursed as I

flicked the tip of my tongue against it, and then I pressed hard, making her hips jerk. I smiled.

Time to make her lose control.

Less than a minute later, I had her grinding down on my face, hips moving in short little jerks as she made the sweetest little whimpers I'd ever heard. Her muscles were tense under my hands, and I could feel her desperation, her need for release.

A touch of teeth and then suction almost hard enough to hurt applied to her clit, and then she was crying out. She slumped over me, gasping as she dragged air into her lungs.

I shifted us, pulling her down my body until her cheek was on my chest, and her ass nudged my throbbing cock. I was dying to get inside her, but I was giving her a minute to recover.

I wanted to have her numerous times tonight, and if I was too rough now, it would limit what we could do later. If she was going to be sore tomorrow, I preferred to have it be after I'd made her come so many times she couldn't see straight.

When she raised her head, her eyes were shining. "Thank you. I needed that."

I grinned at her. "My pleasure."

"Not yet." She pushed herself up and splayed her hands on my chest. "But soon."

She went up on her knees and scooted back until she was positioned over my waist. "Do I need to get protection?"

I shook my head. "Not if you say we don't need it."

We'd both broken each other's trust only days ago, but it never even crossed my mind not to trust her on this. And the sheer affection on her face said I wasn't the only one feeling that way.

When she sank down on me, the sensations took my breath away. She was hot and tight, and our bodies fit together as perfectly as ever. She closed her eyes and arched her back, giving me a view that could make a man die happy.

Running her fingers through her hair, she began to move. It was more dance than lovemaking, and certainly more than fucking.

I reached for her hands, threading her fingers between mine. Our eyes locked, and the embers inside me smoldered, caught flame. We burned together. Soared together. And that was how we came.

Together.

THIRTY-SEVEN

LINSEY

I WASN'T SURE HOW LONG WE'D BEEN WRAPPED UP IN EACH OTHER, BUT WHEN we finally came up for air, I had rug burns, aching muscles, and was in serious need of a shower.

But first...

"In the interest of us being honest with each other, I have some things you need to know."

Davin tucked some hair behind my ear. "You want to talk *now*?"

"Trust me," I said, "this isn't the type of thing that'll get easier to talk about the more we put it off."

He frowned and sat up. "Are you okay?"

I sighed. "Okay is a relative term." I kissed his shoulder. "This, here, between us, this is better than okay. What I need to talk to you about...I honestly don't know if it's okay or not."

"That sounds like it's not a clothing optional discussion." He leaned over and kissed my temple. "Let's at least get some semblance of clothes on, and then we can talk. One step at a time."

I nodded. It sounded like a good plan. One step at a time.

I grabbed his shirt and pulled it on, wanting something that was easy to wear and covered most of me. Besides, I liked having his scent wrapped around me. After he finished doing up his pants, he turned toward me, eyebrows going up when he saw I'd stolen his shirt.

He reached out and grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling me to him. "I like the look of you in my clothes."

I put my hands on his bare chest. "And I like the look of you in only half your clothes."

He leaned down to give me a brief kiss. "Let's talk."

It was time.

I took his hand and led him down the hall.

"We're talking in your bedroom?" He sounded as amused as he was surprised. "Seems backwards, don't you think? We had sex in the living room, and now we're going to talk in the bedroom?"

"There's something there I need to show you." I didn't bother trying to explain because he'd see it in a few seconds, and it'd be easier for him to hear and see at the same time.

I opened my bedroom door and stepped out of the way to allow Davin to see the entire wall. "I've never told you what I do. I can't say *for a living* because I don't get paid for it...well, not exactly, anyway. But there is something I use a particular skill set to do."

"What is all this?" He didn't sound angry, which I took as a positive thing.

"I'm a hacker."

He did a funny double take. "Excuse me?"

"There's a whole story about how I got into it and how I got to what I'm doing with it now, but the part you need to know now is that I investigate cold cases in ways that cops can't."

"Like a PI?"

I shook my head. "Not exactly since it's not like I have a license or anything official. I mostly get information in illegal ways and anonymously get it to the cops."

Understanding dawned on his face. He pointed at the wall. "This is a case you're working on."

I swallowed hard. "It is."

He turned his attention back to the wall. "And that's where you found my grandfather's name?"

"The afternoon before we met, I wrote a list of some of Houston's missing-person cold cases. One of them was from more than twenty-five years ago. A woman named Heidi Titan vanished. She worked at Holden Enterprises at the time she disappeared."

"That's why you went to Royd Kichner? Because an employee of my grandfather's went missing more than two decades ago?"

Still no anger. This was going better than I'd thought it would.

"There's more to it than that," I said. "I picked Heidi's case and started

digging.”

I walked over to the wall and began indicating each point of the case as I explained it.

“Heidi’s husband, Mark, accused your grandfather of having an affair with Heidi. Mark had also been fired from Holden Enterprises. That made Jude his least favorite person. Mark came after Jude and ended up in jail for vandalism and assault. Veronica DuPont, a neighbor, saw Heidi the day after Mark’s arrest. She was the last person to see Heidi.”

Davin tapped on one of my notes. “But because Mark was in jail, he wasn’t really much of a suspect.”

“Correct, and when he got out, Mark insisted that your grandad did something to Heidi.”

Davin ran a hand down his face. “Linsey, I know my grandfather is far from perfect, but I think that’s a bit extreme.”

I held up a hand. “I don’t deal in rumors without support. I dug into things. Looked for connections between Jude and Heidi.”

“And?”

“And I found that.” I tapped on the information I’d spent the weekend compiling.

I waited, letting him read without any commentary. I thought the evidence was clear about what had happened and Jude’s role in it, but I needed to see if Davin saw it too. I wanted his opinion about where things with this case went from here.

He sank down on the edge of my bed. “Wow.”

“My thought exactly.”

He looked up at me. “We need to go talk to my grandfather. He needs a chance to explain himself.”

I nodded in agreement. “But first, we need showers.”

IT HAD BEEN TEMPTING to shower together and linger, but we’d both agreed that closing the Heidi Titan case was more important, even if the information didn’t end up going any further than the Holden family and me. Davin and I needed to get it in the past if we were going to move forward. And I really wanted to move forward.

I tried not to be nervous as Davin and I walked up to the front door of the Holden's family home. I must not have been doing a good job of it because, as we started up the steps, he reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze.

We were in this together.

A pretty woman with long, dark brown hair opened the door, not bothering to conceal the surprise on her face. "Davin. You're not at work. Is something wrong?"

He shook his head. "I just need to talk to Grandad." He glanced at me. "We need to talk to Grandad."

The woman's eyes slid over to me, and then her eyebrows shot up. Surprise wasn't a strong enough word for the expression on her face. It was more like shock. The lack of hostility and arrogance, however, made me think it was more about Davin bringing a woman to meet family than it was about my appearance.

"Hi." I gave her a half-smile. "I'm Linsey."

"I'm Cynthia." She smiled, the warmth of it reaching her eyes and putting me at ease. "Come in. Jude's in the library."

I couldn't help but stare at everything around me as Davin and I followed her into the house. Massive didn't even begin to describe it. Everything was of the best quality. And yet, it somehow managed to be homey rather than ostentatious.

When we reached a T, she stopped. "If you need me, I'll be in the kitchen, attempting to make a pineapple upside-down cake for Moira." She gave Davin and I both another smile before turning to the left.

Davin turned to the right, and I followed. I couldn't imagine living in a place this huge. Even with kids, it just seemed like so much space. But when we stepped into a library bigger than the one from my hometown, I had to admit that one of these would be nice.

"Davin, what are you doing here?" An older man with silver hair and Davin's clear blue eyes came over. "Is everything okay?"

"Sort of." Davin pulled me closer. "Grandad, this is Linsey Keller. Linsey, my grandfather, Jude Holden."

I held out a hand, unsure if *nice to meet you* was appropriate considering why Davin and I were here.

"I'm guessing this isn't just a social call," Jude said after releasing my hand. "Not when it's happening in the middle of a workday."

"It's not," Davin said. He glanced at me, and I squeezed his hand. "We're

here to talk to you about Heidi Titan.”

I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting Jude's reaction to be when we revealed to him the purpose of our visit, but a glimmer of sadness in an otherwise placid expression hadn't been on the list.

“Will you tell me how you know that name?” The question was curious rather than accusing.

“I found it,” I admitted. “I like to work on cold cases, and I've been looking into hers. Your name is mentioned quite a few times.”

“I imagine it would be,” he said. “All right, but I think it'd be better if I only had to do this once. Help me get everyone here, and I'll tell you what you want to know.”

I could read the fear on Davin's face, but he simply nodded in agreement. He was terrified that this wouldn't be something Jude could come back from, but we both knew it had to come out. Secrets like this only festered.

I squeezed his hand once again, reminding him that he wasn't in this alone. No matter what happened, we'd face it together.

THIRTY-EIGHT

DAVIN

GRANDDAD ASKED ME TO CALL DAD WHILE HE REACHED OUT TO MY BROTHERS, which made sense since I'd always been better at managing my father, but it also made me think that part of the reason he'd done it was because he knew that, of all of us, Dad would be the one to have issues with any suggestion of infidelity on Granddad's part. No matter what the truth turned out to be, I had a feeling today wouldn't be easy for any of us.

By the time everyone was on their way, it was evening, and my patience had all but disappeared. Only having Linsey there kept me from going to Granddad and demanding to know what he was lying about.

While I would've preferred a different sort of distraction, Linsey kept me busy in the kitchen, helping Cynthia put together a light supper since we had no way of knowing how late we'd be talking. I just hoped it wouldn't devolve into Dad lecturing me about the fact that I hadn't come back to work after leaving before lunch. Or questions about who Linsey was and why she was here.

That last concern was put to rest when Deklin and Damon showed up with Sofi and Jae. They might be surprised that I'd brought someone with me, but at least Linsey wouldn't be the odd one out, and I could get the easier awkward part out of the way.

"It's good to see you again," I said as I took Linsey's hand and pulled her forward. "Damon, Jae, you remember my girlfriend, Linsey Keller? Linsey, this is Deklin and his fiancée, Sofi Stafford."

My brothers managed to keep their expressions under control while Sofi and Jae greeted Linsey, but I knew they'd want the whole story later. After we heard what Granddad had to say, however, I wasn't sure if my love life

would continue to hold much interest. Linsey didn't seem surprised by my word choice, though, and when she smiled at me, I didn't care what anyone else thought.

Then Grandad came in with a stranger, and all of the focus that had been on Linsey and me shifted. Except the guy with him wasn't a complete stranger, at least not to me. It was JP, the young man who was here the last time I'd stopped by.

Shit.

I really hoped he wasn't who I thought he was. If Dad didn't like the fact that Grandad had married a woman so much younger, he *really* wasn't going to like having a half-brother who was probably Damon's age.

Then Dad came in, and the tension in the room immediately skyrocketed.

Grandad cleared his throat before Dad could say anything. "Now that we're all here, I'd like you to meet JP Ives. Who he is and why he's here will be explained shortly. Let's all have a seat."

When Linsey settled on the arm of the couch where I sat, I wrapped my arm around her waist, and she leaned against me, the movement so natural that it took me a moment to realize why my family kept giving us sideways looks.

Fortunately, Grandad called the attention back to himself before anyone could start asking questions.

"I know you're all going to have questions, but I'm asking that you hold them until I'm done with the story." He glanced at JP, then looked to Linsey and me. "In 1993, a man named Mark Titan was fired from Holden Enterprises for sexually harassing his co-workers. Obviously, that didn't make him very fond of me. His wife at the time, Heidi, still worked for me. One morning, not long after Mark was fired, I found Heidi in the parking lot trying to cover a black eye with makeup. She told me she ran into a door."

Linsey's hand on my shoulder squeezed. She'd been right that Mark had abused Heidi.

"It took a month or so before she trusted me enough to tell me that Mark hit her, usually in places people couldn't see. I tried to get her to leave him, but she was terrified. That summer, she began spending more and more time at the office. One day, Mark showed up and vandalized my car, shouting about how I'd been having an affair with Heidi. At the time, Rachel thought I was cheating on her, so the rumor carried some weight."

Dad was already scowling, but he wasn't interrupting, so that was good.

“I wasn’t. Heidi and I had never been more than friends. I was just an employer who wanted to help his employee get out of a difficult situation. When Mark punched me, I had him arrested for assault and vandalism, thinking maybe I could convince Heidi to press charges against him for abuse. At least, that was the plan until, two days after Mark’s arrest, Heidi came to see me. She was pregnant.”

I felt more than saw my family tense.

“And before you ask, no, I was not the father. I was telling the truth when I said we hadn’t been having an affair. But I was concerned about her. She didn’t have a support system, no one to stop Mark from hiring a lawyer if she tried to take his kid from him.”

The picture was falling into place for me, and I assumed for Linsey as well. The rest of the people here, I didn’t know, but I knew Grandad wouldn’t stop with the story half-told.

“I hired a private investigator to help me set up a new identity for Heidi under a new name, in a new state. I provided her with the money she needed to establish herself. And I helped her disappear.”

A soft breath went out of Linsey.

Grandad, however, wasn’t done. “When Mark got out of jail and found her missing, he blamed me. The cops investigated, but Heidi was an adult, and there was no evidence of foul play. People thought Mark had done something to Heidi because she’d been cheating, but of course, there was no proof of any of that either. Eventually, he moved away from Houston, and the case went cold.” He took a breath and continued, “It was too dangerous for us to stay in touch, but I had my PI set up a way for me to continue helping her financially. I didn’t know anything about the baby or about the life Heidi lived after she left Houston. That is, I didn’t know until a couple weeks ago.”

He looked at JP.

The young man shifted uncomfortably but didn’t look away from any of us. None of us doubted who he was, but we still waited for him to tell his part of the story.

“My name’s Jude Platon Ives. My mom’s name was Mellissa Ives. At least that’s always what I’d thought it was. There’s no father on my birth certificate, and she always said she didn’t know who he was. It made her sad when I asked, so I stopped asking. When I was older, I started thinking that she might’ve been raped, but I never asked.”

This was brutal. I couldn’t imagine what this guy had been going through.

“About a year ago, she got sick, and in the last few days of her life, she’d drift in and out, the pain and medication making her mind hazy.”

The pain on his face brought back how I’d felt after my mom’s death, and I automatically reached up to where my shirt hid the tattoo with her initials. It must’ve been awful for him, going through that alone. At least when Mom died, I’d had my family.

“At one point, she said something about naming me after someone she owed a lot to. I didn’t really think anything of it, but after she died, I was going through her things and found the name Jude Holden on some financial information. I did some digging and found him. I thought he might be my father, so I came here to meet him.”

Silence followed as everyone processed what we’d just been told.

Not surprisingly, Dad was the one who broke the silence. “What do you want from us?”

Grandad glared at Dad. “JP just wanted to know the truth about who his father was. I would think, you of all people, should respect a desire for honesty.”

Dad actually had the grace to look embarrassed. “Sorry,” he muttered. “You’re right. Even when we think we’re lying to protect someone, all it does is hurt our relationship with them.”

I looked up at Linsey and found her looking at me. Our eyes met, and I knew we were thinking the same thing. While I might not agree that even the occasional white lie wasn’t necessary, honesty had to be the foundation of a relationship.

Someone cleared their throat, and for a minute, I thought it was Grandad. Except he was looking in the same direction as everyone else. At Deklin.

Shit. I knew what he was going to say.

“You’re right, Dad. If we want to have a healthy relationship with someone, we can’t lie to them or keep things from them.” Deklin looked at Grandad, who nodded. “Which is why I need to tell you the whole truth about why a relationship between Aurelia Kane and I would never have worked.”

Linsey caught her breath. We hadn’t come here for this, but I couldn’t think of a better time for the truth to come out. If Deklin had wanted to keep it a secret, I would’ve honored his wishes, but after seeing how hiding things from people destroyed trust and relationships, I couldn’t help thinking that we’d be a stronger family once there were no more lies.

“Ronall Kane is my biological father.”

I winced. I wasn't one for sugarcoating but stating it so bluntly was rough.

"Mom had an affair with Ronall. It wasn't long, and they broke it off when they both realized they wanted to save their marriages. Ronall doesn't know."

Deklin took in a deep breath, but before he could continue, Grandad stepped in. "But I did." Grandad met his son's gaze full on. "Cheryl told me when she found out she was pregnant. She wanted to know what I thought she should do. I told her not to tell you."

I kept waiting for Dad to yell, but he just sat in the chair, clearly too stunned to do anything but blink as Grandad and Deklin explained everything that'd happened, including Grandad's sabotage of Deklin's engagement. Sofi flushed when her name was brought into the conversation, but Deklin put his arm around her and whispered something in her ear.

Once everything was out, we all waited to see what Dad would do.

A full minute ticked past, the second hand on the grandfather clock in the corner the only sound in the room. Finally, Dad stood up and walked over to Deklin.

"You are my son." His voice was quieter than I'd ever heard it. "Biology or not, you're my son, and nothing will ever change that." His eyes shone with tears. "I loved your mother more than anything, but I wasn't always a good husband or a good father. I have to live with the consequences of that. But I will never see you as any less my boy than Davin and Damon. You're a Holden. You understand that?"

Deklin was up and in Dad's arms before any of us could finish processing what had just happened.

It was going to be okay.

The truth had come out, and my family was still together. Stronger, actually. Nothing was perfect, and we'd have disagreements eventually, but we were going to be more than okay.

I pulled Linsey down onto my lap. "Thank you," I whispered in her ear.

"For what?"

"For helping my family heal from wounds we didn't even know we had." I turned her face toward mine. "I mean it, Linsey. None of this would've happened if we hadn't met."

"You helped me when you didn't even know me," she reminded me.

"Isn't that the way things are supposed to be?" I asked. "I save you. You

save me right back. Rinse and repeat.”

She laughed and kissed my cheek. “I like the sound of that.”

“I hope you like the sound of what I’m going to do to you when we go back to my place,” I said, leaning in close so no one else could hear the dirty things I whispered in her ear.

Hopefully, we wouldn’t be here too much longer. I didn’t have much self-control when it came to the woman on my lap. I just needed to remember that tonight was only the beginning. We had a future stretching out in front of us, and I intended to enjoy every moment of it.

THIRTY-NINE

LINSEY

HIS MOUTH WAS ON MINE THE MOMENT WE WERE THROUGH THE DOOR. I barely had time to register anything about the first room before he had me in his arms and was carrying me to what I assumed would be his bedroom. I wanted to see his home, get to know that part of his life...but later. Right now, I just wanted him to stop the ache I'd had inside me since he'd started whispering all sorts of filthy things to me while we were at his grandfather's house.

I'd half-expected him to pull over in some secluded parking lot and take me right there. Instead, he'd talked about how weird it'd been to hear his dad saying all that stuff to Deklin and then watching his grandfather and dad go off somewhere to work out some of the issues between them.

I'd assumed that the emotion of the evening had pushed aside everything else, and I'd been okay with that too. Now, I knew he'd intentionally been waiting, drawing out the tension until we were both ready to explode.

We tumbled onto the bed, a tangle of limbs as we tried to get our clothes off without losing contact with each other.

No finesse. No slow, sensual stripping with deliberate touches to arouse.

It was the rough rasp of stubble on his cheeks rubbing against the side of my throat as he worried at the skin there with his teeth. The sharp gasps as my nails scored red lines across his shoulders and chest in my haste to get him naked. The weight of him as he shifted above me, trying to toe off his shoes. The helpless need that had my leg wrapped around his waist, desperate for friction where I needed it most.

His mouth found my nipple, and I cried out as he sucked on it, sending a jolt of electricity straight through me. A hand covered my other breast,

fingers tugging and twisting until I writhed under him, unsure if what I was feeling was pleasure or pain. That was one of the things he'd promised to show me how the line between the two could blur until right was left and up was down.

The air was cool against my damp skin when he moved to kiss a trail between my breasts and then lower, not stopping until he was between my thighs. I had a moment to consider how huge his bed must be before my legs were over his shoulders, and his mouth was on me.

He pushed two fingers into me even as he worked over my clit with his tongue. I barely recognized the sounds I made as I reached down and buried my fingers in his hair. Relentlessly, he drove me toward climax, curling his fingers until he found my g-spot. It took only minutes for me to shatter, calling out his name as my body shuddered with the force of my release.

I made a sound of protest as he removed his fingers, scowling when he laughed. Then his lips were on mine, and I couldn't scowl when he was such a great kisser. The tip of him brushed against my damp skin, and I wrapped my leg around his waist, urging him forward. As much as I'd enjoyed what he'd done with his hands and mouth, I needed to have him inside me.

He reached down and curled his hand around the back of my knee, pulling my leg up until it almost touched my chest. Only then did he break the kiss and lift his head until we could see each other's faces.

With one smooth stroke, he filled me completely. I cursed, every molecule of my body suddenly focused on that throbbing space between my legs. It was too much. How we fit together. The way I felt about him, so much more than simple like and lust. The things he could do to my body. The way his laugh warmed me, and his smile delighted me. The promise of ecstasy that I knew was coming. My muscles trembled, and my mind spun as the sensations and emotions whirling inside me threatened to overwhelm me completely.

"I know," he said as he tucked some hair behind my ear. "It's okay. I've got you. I'm right here."

Those simple reassurances calmed chaos and brought me back to the present. Back to him. Back to the rhythm we had together.

Each thrust went deep, and I arched up to meet him, building the pace until we were both racing toward the finish. Our breathing came in harsh pants that mingled with the sounds of flesh against flesh, our lovemaking becoming our whole world.

“I’m close,” he warned me, the strain on his face telling me how much effort he was putting into holding back the inevitable.

“Come then,” I said, my voice strained as I struggled to breathe. “I need to feel you come in me.”

“You first.” He gritted his teeth, every muscle in his amazing body tense. I shook my head. “You.”

“Linsey.” My name was a growled warning.

I grabbed the back of his neck, my voice cracking as the pressure inside me built. “Dammit, Davin! I *need* it.”

It was that last statement that did it, knowing that only he could give me what I needed. He slammed into me twice, calling my name as he came apart in my arms. My body had already been teetering on the edge, and that last mental push – hearing this man give up his control for me – sent me tumbling over the edge.

How long we floated in that blissful peace, I didn’t know. Only that, at some point, he rolled off me and tucked me against his side. Minutes or hours passed before he broke the silence.

“I love you.”

I heard the hesitation in his voice and knew what it had taken for him to say it first. I raised my head and smiled at him. “I love you too.”

And there it was, that smile that made me willing to do anything for this man.

“I was thinking,” he continued, his hand moving up and down my spine. “What would you think about moving in here?”

“What?”

“I have plenty of room, and you could have your own office, so you don’t have to put stuff up on your walls.” His smile softened but didn’t fade. “It’s okay if it’s too soon.”

Maybe it was, but I didn’t care. “Let me talk to Kasey. Once she finds a roommate to replace me, I’d love to move in with you.”

“You’re sure?”

I nodded, warmth flooding me at the way his eyes lit up at my response. Yes, this was definitely right for us. Maybe people would think we were moving too fast, but based on what I knew of Damon’s and Deklin’s relationships, once the men in this family knew what they wanted, it didn’t matter what anyone else thought.

Besides, I was as eager as he was to move forward together.

“Now that we have that decided,” I said, bobbing my eyebrows, “I believe certain promises were made regarding what you were going to do to me tonight.”

“There were.”

I pressed a kiss to the tattoo over his heart. “Then what’s next?”

“Well, I have this room...”

FORTY

JUDE

TIME WAS A WEIRD THING. WHEN I WAS A KID, THE TIME BETWEEN Thanksgiving and Christmas had felt like a year. Thinking of myself at almost eighty would've been impossible back then. Forty had seemed ancient, and I'd lived nearly twice that now.

Perspective changed with age as well. Things that had appeared vast and impossible to get through sometimes looked small. Events that had seemed insignificant had really been huge catalysts for major life events. Helping a person in need led to a family's reconciliation.

Some things, however, would always be big and important. Meeting each of my wives. Losing the first two in different ways. The birth of my son and my grandsons.

Looking back on this year, I knew everyone here would forever remember it as the year the Holden family changed forever. All three of my grandsons had fallen in love with strong, amazing women who loved them back.

Deklin had found out a secret that could have destroyed him but instead refused to let it change who he was. My son had learned the truth about his late wife's infidelity and the biological parentage of his youngest son...and had handled both with a grace that I never would have predicted. And the son of a woman I'd helped more than twenty-five years ago had given me the closure I hadn't realized I needed.

All in all, it had been a remarkable year.

"You look like you're thinking hard about something." Cynthia sat down next to me. I put my arm around her shoulders, and she leaned into me. "Good or bad?"

“Good.” I pressed my lips to her temple. “Just thinking about how different this Christmas Eve is compared to last year.”

She nodded in agreement, and the two of us settled into comfortable silence to take in the relative chaos around us.

Deklin’s adoption of Dallas Stafford had been finalized yesterday, and the charming child was now Dallas Holden, a fact that he was telling everyone he met. Deklin had confided in me a few days ago that Sofi hadn’t realized how much being around his biological father had terrified Dallas until she’d told him that Mead wouldn’t be around anymore and Deklin wanted to be his dad.

Dallas had taken to the new family dynamic with all the enthusiasm that a four-year-old could muster. Which meant that, at the moment, he was trying to convince his “Gampa Wally” to let him “open just one present please.”

Joining Dallas in the plea was Jae’s nephew, Kevin, who had decided that Dallas was his new favorite person. From the moment the two boys met, they’d bonded. Kevin hero-worshipped Dallas, and Dallas, in turn, was more overly protective of Kevin than anyone else. The boys were going to be a world of trouble as they grew up, and I intended to enjoy every minute of it.

When Damon had suggested inviting Jae’s entire family over for our usual Christmas Eve gathering, Cynthia and I had been glad to do it. It’d taken them a while to look at ease, but right now, they were talking with Walter and appeared to be enjoying whatever the conversation was about.

Jae’s grandmother had gotten ahold of JP, and if the young man’s red cheeks were any indication, she was hitting on him. Jae’s youngest sister, Jetta, had been mesmerized by the tree and was still sitting in front of it, watching the lights alternate colors. The other sister, Jamie, was with Linsey’s friend Kasey and Kasey’s date, Ilysa Mitchells, who Davin had confided was a detective.

This house hadn’t ever been this busy, and I hadn’t realized what had been missing until now.

“So, have you two picked a date yet?” Damon’s voice carried from where he sat next to Deklin.

“Once Sofi gets her spring semester scheduled, we should have a better idea of when we can plan the wedding,” Deklin answered.

“I told him we could just go to the courthouse,” Sofi said, “but he’s insisting on a church wedding.”

“I promised we’d keep it small,” Deklin said, reaching for her hand. “It shouldn’t be too far in the future, though. We want everything settled by the

time Kevin starts kindergarten in the fall. We just need to work around Sofi's spring semester schedule."

I was glad to hear that she was still planning on completing her landscape architecture degree. She had a passion for it and would make a great addition to Holden Enterprises when she was ready. And if she decided she wanted to apply it elsewhere, we'd support that too.

"That's good." Damon looked at Jae, and she nodded. "Can we have everyone's attention, please?"

The kids kept playing, but the rest of the conversation ceased as everyone turned to look at Damon and Jae. He put his arm around her shoulder, and a current of anticipation went through everyone.

"This morning, I asked Jae to marry me, and she accepted."

Cynthia was the first out of her seat, and I smiled as I stood. All of us crowded around the couple, offering our congratulations. When the discussion turned to the ring, Jae took it out of her pocket and slipped it on. I took that as my cue to get something from my office. Cynthia and I had our own announcement to make.

By the time I got back, the excitement had mellowed enough that I didn't feel as if I was interrupting when I called for everyone's attention. Seeing the envelope in my hand, Cynthia came to my side.

"As we head into the new year, Cynthia and I have decided that one of the things we need to do is downsize. We love having everyone here for the holidays, but it doesn't make sense for us to have this huge house with only the two of us. This place needs a family. A growing one." I held up the envelope. "But because we don't choose favorites, you boys are going to make the decision for us. We want the three of you – and your better halves, of course – to talk it over. We've had the house appraised so that the two of you who won't be living here will receive a check equal to the amount."

"You don't have to do that," Davin said, looking as stunned as the rest of them also appeared. "We're all doing well financially."

"We know we don't need to do it," I said, "but we want to. We want this house to stay in the family, and we want to be fair to you boys. I trust that you'll do what's best for all three of you."

As my grandsons came up to thank us, I glanced at Walter, wondering if he'd be upset that I'd skipped over him to give the house to one of the kids, but he was smiling. He'd been doing a lot of that lately, and I liked it. We still butted heads, but since things had come out in the open, the relationship

between him and me had improved.

The boys began talking, and Cynthia leaned over to whisper in my ear. “I think they’re going to decide Damon should have it. I know he and Jae have already been talking about how there might be a day when Jetta, or Jae’s parents and Jetta, have to move in with them. Having a place this size would help Mr. and Mrs. Knox feel less like they were intruding or being a burden.”

I’d married a smart woman.

“We don’t want to step on any toes,” Davin said loudly. “But since everyone’s making announcements, Linsey and I have one too.”

He looked at her, and everyone else did too. Most were looking at her left hand, wondering just how many weddings next year would have.

“I’m pregnant.”

Her words silenced the room faster than anything else could have. Then, a moment later, sound exploded. Davin’s smile stretched from ear to ear as his brothers hugged him, and Linsey flushed when Walter came over to congratulate her.

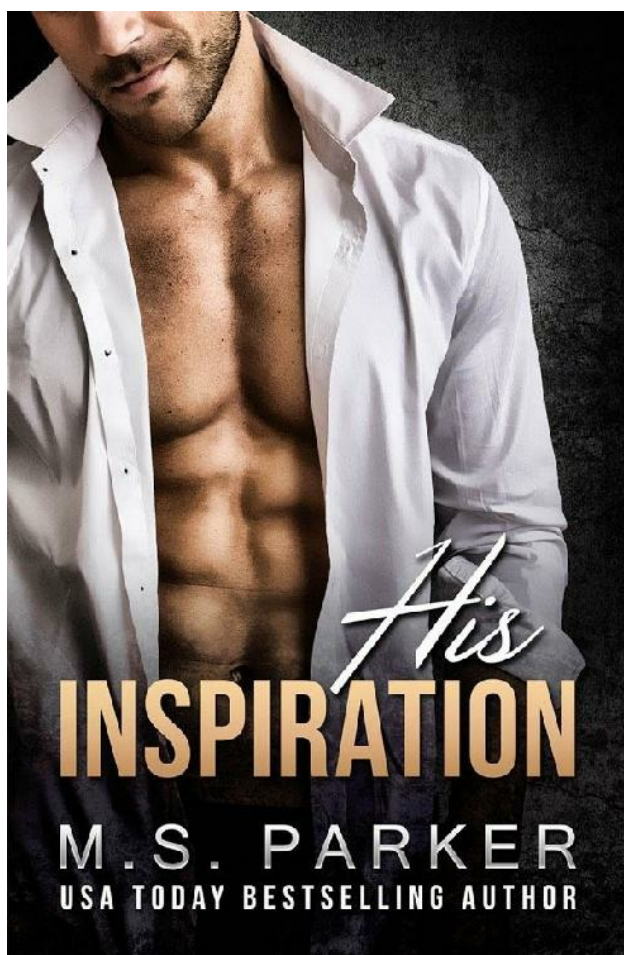
A great-grandchild. A second one, since Dallas was already firmly planted in my heart as the first, but we’d get to be with this one from the very beginning, and I looked forward to that.

It looked like next year was going to be just as exciting and memorable as this one.

THE END

**Turn the page for a preview of His Inspiration, a free book only for my
VIP Subscribers.**

HIS INSPIRATION: PREVIEW



ONE

TRISSA

“I DON’T KNOW WHY THIS SURPRISES YOU. YOU’VE KNOWN ME FOR, WHAT, ten years now?”

I raised an eyebrow at Bevy Kelly, my roommate and best friend. She had one of those poker faces that made it virtually impossible for me to tell if she was joking or serious. The fact that she was one of the smartest people I knew didn’t even factor into the equation since I’d once watched her search for her phone while holding a conversation on said phone.

“Five, Bevy,” I said finally. “Ten years ago, we were both fifteen and living on opposite sides of the country.”

She frowned, a slight crease appearing between her eyebrows. “Huh. I guess you’re right.”

“I have to ask. Were you forgetting how long it’d been since we were in college, making us older than we actually are, or were you forgetting that we’d met in college?”

“I’m not sure.” She smiled, her pewter gray eyes lighting up. “But at least we’re at an age where it’s always nice to remember we’re not as old as we think we are.”

One of the things I loved the most about her was her inability to stay down for more than a few minutes before her naturally bubbly personality chased the darkness away. It wasn’t that she didn’t know how to take things seriously, but rather that she always looked for the silver lining. She was so genuine about it that I never managed to stay annoyed when she did it to me.

“I always assumed that you didn’t know how to drive because a lot of native New Yorkers don’t bother learning since there’s so many public transportation options.” I stood as the timer on the washer reached one

minute. It was all too easy to get distracted when talking to Bevy, and I didn't want to spend the entire night at the laundromat.

Bevy reached for a strand of hair to twist around her finger, then scowled when she remembered that she'd cut her dark blonde locks short to break this exact habit. I would've thought it was a bit drastic a move simply to prevent playing with hair, but I was the one who'd had to help her two weeks ago when she'd cut off circulation in her finger and hadn't been able to free herself.

"My parents wanted me to learn how to drive, even if I didn't need to." She hopped off the out-of-order dryer and came over to join me. We folded our clothes as she continued her story. "I told them I didn't think it was a good idea, but Mom said I needed to know how to drive, in case I was ever kidnapped."

I wished I could say that particular bit of information shocked me, but I'd met Bevy's parents. Francie Kelly had come from the sort of old money, high society family where kidnapping had been an actual threat. Add in the fact that Bevy's father was one of the top television producers in New York and neither of the Kellys was overreacting when it came to their daughter's safety.

"Anyway, she and Dad hired this bodyguard to teach me defensive driving. The kind you'd use when being chased, all that."

Bevy's voice, as usual, carried, and I watched the two older women at the far end of the washer row turn in our direction. I gave them a sheepish, embarrassed smile, but didn't bother trying to quiet my friend. It wouldn't do any good. At least this way, everyone got to hear what was sure to be an entertaining story.

"No one bothered to tell Harris that I also needed to know basic driving skills. I'd never been behind a wheel until I went for my first lesson, and I spent almost two months with Harris teaching me all these maneuvers and tricks." Bevy held up my black cotton bra, a disapproving expression on her face. "This should be hand-washed and hung to dry."

It wasn't the first time she'd told me that. I snatched the bra from her and dropped it in the basket with the other clean clothes. "I would do that if there was a space anywhere in our apartment that wasn't already being used for your lingerie."

She grinned at me and went back to her story. "Anyway, my parents sent me out to take my driver's test without bothering to ask if any of the hours

I'd put in had been regular driving. So the license person got into the car and told me to pull out of the parking space." She shrugged. "Let's just say I'd never heard the phrase 'flunked with flying colors' before."

"How have I never heard that story before?" I asked. "I mean, you'd think it would've come up at some point."

"And when, exactly, would it have come up?" she countered. "When we were being chased by assassins through Beverly Hills?"

I pointed at her. "Your sarcasm, my friend, is much appreciated."

"You'll appreciate my driving if we're ever caught in a car chase."

"I'm sure I will."

The bell over the door dinged as the two older women carried their baskets out. For a moment, I wondered if that would be me and Bevy in the future. Then I remembered that she and her boyfriend, CB, had been talking about moving in together. And that wasn't even considering the fact that she might just decide to go back to New York and leave both me and CB behind.

I pushed those thoughts aside. Planning for the future was one thing. Worrying about what things may or may not happen due to circumstances I had absolutely no control over was pointless. I'd learned that as a kid.

"Does this mean you're going to teach me to drive?" Bevy picked up one of her shirts and folded it in half before dropping it into our basket.

I watched it fall and then looked at her. "Will me teaching you to drive have better results than when I tried to teach you how to fold your clothes?"

"I already knew how to fold my clothes," Bevy countered. "I've just always sucked at it."

"Your parents didn't hire someone to teach you how to properly fold garments?" I laughed as I said it, but I wasn't entirely joking.

She shook her head. "We had a housekeeper who did the laundry, but I had to fold and put away my own since I was a kid. That and cleaning my room were always my responsibilities. I had other chores growing up, but those two things were always mine."

"Is that why your room is such a disaster?" I asked. "You had to spend your childhood cleaning up after yourself, so now you don't want to?"

"Exactly."

My phone buzzed with a text alert, and I fished it out of my pocket.

Thank you for the model heart. It was exactly what I wanted. Love Meg.

I smiled as I hit reply. *I'm glad to hear it, but I can't take all the credit. Kevin told me you'd asked for it.*

“Meg?” Bevyan asked.

I nodded. “I have to remember to give Kevin something extra nice for his birthday. He was exactly right.”

“Meg’s a little scientist,” Bevyan said. “Not surprising. You said she was smart.”

“She is.” I sent off a good night text and put my phone back in my pocket. “Is it weird that I hate what my dad did to my mom and our family, but I love Meg and Madison to pieces?”

“Not weird at all,” Bevyan said. “Meg and Madison are awesome.”

“You’ve never met either of them,” I pointed out.

“Not true.”

“FaceTime does not count.”

“It does too count. FaceTime introductions are just as valid as face-to-face ones,” she informed me. “But I still want to meet the munchkins for real. I’ve met everyone else in your family.”

“Maybe I’ll take them for a weekend in the summer,” I said. “Three days and two nights with an eight-year-old and a five-year-old should cure you of ever wanting to spend time with anyone else in my family ever again.”

“If your teenage brother shooting spit-balls down my shirt during dinner wasn’t enough to chase me away, then I don’t think two little girls would do it.”

“You never did much babysitting, did you?” I asked with a laugh.

“Only child, remember?” She stuck her entire head and shoulders into the dryer and emerged with a single sock. “Dammit.”

“Another deposit for the lone sock drawer,” I said, plucking it from her hand. “Didn’t any of your friends growing up have younger brothers or sisters?”

“Yes, but those families had nannies.”

“Ah, yes, of course. Nannies. Why didn’t I think of that?”

Bevyan threw a wet sock at me. I caught it and tossed it into the dryer. “We’ll get pizza and ice cream and watch Disney movies.”

“Meg’s a vegetarian and Madison is lactose intolerant.”

“Not a problem,” Bevyan said. “I know how to make lactose free, vegetarian pizza.”

“Bevy, I love you,” I closed the dryer door, “but I’ve seen you try to cook. You lost the security deposit because you blew up the microwave a month after we moved in.”

“In my defense, it was the fork’s fault the microwave blew up.” Bevyan pointed at me. “And you’ve never seen me make pizza.”

“True, but you did leave the fork in the popcorn bowl.”

She planted her hands on her hips. “That’s it. We’re stopping at Whole Foods, and I’m making pizza for a late-night snack.”

I was too busy explaining to her the reasons why we couldn’t stop for pizza making supplies that I didn’t notice a third person entering the laundromat until he grabbed my purse off the counter and ran.

“Shit!” I nearly twisted my ankle turning so fast. Bevyan shouted after me, but I was already heading to the door. She’d call the cops, but by then, the thief would be long gone with my purse.

I didn’t have much cash, but it was all in there. I’d worked my ass off for every penny of it, and I’d be damned if I was going to let some jerk run off with it.

I hit the bar on the door with both my palms and it flew open. The sun had already set, but the street lights in this area were surprisingly good. I assumed that because I’d seen him turn right, I’d be able to spot him running away.

And that might have been the case if I hadn’t run into something large and hard before I’d gone more than a couple steps.

I bounced off and landed on my ass, hard enough to jar my spine and clank my teeth together. I’d put my hands out too, and I knew I was going to feel it all in the morning, but I couldn’t let myself feel it now. I didn’t have the time. I let out a string of curses as I tried to pull my feet underneath me, but as soon as I did, white-hot pain shot through my ankle, and it buckled.

“Fuck!”

“Let me—”

I looked up at what I’d hit and found a huge man leaning over me. “What the fuck were you thinking?!”

TWO

JOSHUA

I DIDN'T REALIZE SOMEONE HAD RUN INTO ME UNTIL I'D TAKEN TWO STEPS back and she started cursing at me from the sidewalk. I wasn't the most social of people, but I'd always assumed that I had basic conversational skills for situations such as this. Knock someone down, help them up and apologize.

I stared at her, completely at a loss for words. I couldn't tell how tall she was, but she looked delicate from where I was standing. Shoulder-length jet-black hair and porcelain skin made me think of Snow White, but her mouth was definitely not Disney-rated.

To my embarrassment, my mind instantly went to other non-Disney things she could do with her mouth, and blood rushed south. I clamped down on those wayward thoughts and started mentally singing the Fluffy Bottom jingle. No better way to kill an erection than singing about toilet paper.

She tried to stand before I could offer her a hand but swore again as her leg buckled. A new wave of guilt washed over me as I realized she was hurt. Not just guilt, I realized. An unfamiliar wave of protectiveness hit me too.

"Let me—"

"What the fuck were you thinking?!" she snapped, her dark eyes angry.

My eyebrows shot up. I had no problem taking part of the blame for the collision, but she hadn't been paying attention to where she was going any more than I had been.

"I didn't see you," I said as I held out my hand.

"Are you blind as well as rude?" She glared at my hand. "I was right behind the thief who stole my purse. You managed to not run into him."

I remembered seeing a guy running across the street about half a minute before she hit me, and I turned to look, but he was already gone. He could've

been anywhere. I knew of at least half a dozen alleyways he could've used to get to the next street over where he had too many escape possibilities to count.

"I would've caught him if you hadn't gotten in my way."

I turned my attention back to the girl who was now gingerly touching her ankle. I'd first put her age around nineteen or twenty, but now that I studied her a bit more closely, I added a few years to put her closer to twenty-five than twenty.

And I noticed something else. She wasn't being bitchy because she was some self-absorbed teenager. She was angry at the situation, including the fact that she was hurt and vulnerable in front of a stranger.

"He went across the street," I said as I leaned down to put a hand under her elbow. "I didn't see where he went from there. It's too easy to disappear in this damned city."

She jerked her arm away the moment we made contact, and I mentally smacked myself as I realized that my previous statement wasn't very supportive.

I took in a deep breath and tried again. "My name's Joshua Lexington. I just want to help you up, I swear."

Her eyes narrowed, but she let me set her on her feet, her hand tightening on my arm momentarily as she tested her injured ankle. When she released me, I felt the strangest urge to tell her she could lean on me as long as she wanted.

"Let's go inside, and I'll call the cops while you get off that ankle."

The look she sent my way said that my suggestion wasn't a welcome one.

"I have my phone," she said, her voice softening a little. "Besides, my friend should have called them all ready."

I was surprised at how curious I was about this 'friend' of hers. Was she saying that as a protective measure, something to chase me away if I'd been looking to prey on a lone woman? Or did she have an actual friend waiting for her? A guy who might want something more? A girlfriend, maybe?

What the hell was I thinking?

I shook my head as she turned back the way she'd come. The laundromat she'd come out of was only a couple yards away, but I'd seen the pain on her face when she tried to put down her full weight. A part of me doubted she'd be able to make it even that far without help, but a larger part thought that she'd do it just to prove she could. Whether she'd be proving it to me or to

herself, I hadn't yet figured out.

I followed a few steps behind her, wondering if at any time she'd turn around and tell me to get lost or she'd be calling the cops on me too, but she didn't. She stayed focused on her goal, and the reflection in the glass front of the laundromat showed me the determined look on her face.

I had to admit, I was impressed. She'd charged after a thief, but even after she knew she wouldn't be able to continue giving chase, she hadn't called for help. She said she had her phone still, so she could have called her friend. No one would have thought any less of her.

"Trissa!" A slender blonde came running the moment the girl – Trissa – stepped inside. "What happened?"

"Ask him." Trissa jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Gigantor back there got in my way."

"Gigantor? Really?" I wanted to laugh, but this didn't seem like the best time or place.

She turned toward me as she leaned against a washer, and I saw that her eyes weren't brown or black like I'd assumed, but rather a deep purplish-blue that I'd never seen before. Not in someone's eyes anyway. Her fingers snapped in front of my eyes, and I realized I'd been staring again.

"I said you can go. Bevyan already called the cops so we'll wait for them here."

"What if he comes back?" I countered. No decent guy would've let two young women wait alone in a laundromat after they'd been robbed. I could be a jerk sometimes, but I was close enough to my mother to hate thinking about what sort of guy would do that to her.

"Why would he?" Bevyan asked. "He knows that Trissa was chasing him and that we'd call the cops. If he got away free and clear with one of our purses, why would he risk getting caught?"

Logically, that made sense, but I knew criminals didn't always think logically. "Maybe he'll think that if he gets to you, he can keep you from pressing charges."

"Shit." Trissa's eyes went wide. "My license and my key were in there."

"That settles it," I said. "You two can stay at my place tonight."

"Excuse me?" Trissa's expressive face told me exactly what she was about to say. "You're just a stranger I *literally* just ran into. Why are you any safer than the punk who took my purse?"

I opened my mouth to give her a list of reasons and then realized that

those reasons didn't mean anything if she didn't know that they were true. For all these two knew, I was working with the thief, or I was someone worse than a purse snatcher.

"You're right," I said. When both girls tensed, I quickly clarified. "You don't know me. *I* know I'm trustworthy, but you don't know that. But you two shouldn't be alone tonight."

Why was I pushing this so hard? I didn't know these women. Sure, one of them had run into me, and as a result, had lost the person she was chasing, but I didn't owe her anything for that. I might not have been paying as much attention as I should have been, but neither had she. The only reason she'd been the one of us to get knocked down was the difference in our sizes.

"We won't be," Bevyan said, putting her arm around her friend's shoulders. "We'll stay with my boyfriend."

If I hadn't been looking at Trissa, I might've missed the annoyance crossing her face. Something told me that Trissa wasn't a fan of Bevyan's boyfriend, and Bevyan didn't know it.

"Is he on his way?" As soon as I asked it, I wanted to take it back. Everything I said was coming out wrong, making me seem like I was one of those creepy stalkers or serial killers who lurked in the dark, searching for single women to assault or kill.

"He's working, actually," Bevyan said. She yelped as Trissa dug an elbow into her side. "What? If this guy was going to turn us into lampshades, he would've done it by now."

Fortunately for both Trissa and me, the sound of police sirens filled the laundromat, and we all turned toward the door to watch the blue and red lights flash as a cop car pulled up front. I stepped back, my hands hanging open at my side. I didn't want to get mistaken for a criminal simply because I was a big guy in a room with two women more than a foot shorter than me.

The first cop rushed through the door, eyes wide in a way that made me think this was his first crime-in-progress. The way his hand hovered over his gun worried me as much as the fact that the kid nearly tripped over his own feet as he skidded to a stop. Then his gaze zeroed in on me, and he swallowed hard.

"What...who...I mean..."

The door opened again, and the other police officer came in. I wondered if the exhaustion on his face was from all the nervous energy his partner was putting out or something else.

“I called,” Bevyann announced. “Some guy stole my friend’s purse.”

“Wait, a purse?” The younger guy’s eyes darted from me to the girls and then back again. “I thought it was a robbery in progress.”

Bevyann put her hands on her hips and sighed. “It was when I called. This guy came in here, grabbed my friend’s purse and ran with it. She chased him but had a little...accident.”

“He’s not a little accident,” Trissa muttered, glaring at me. But I didn’t feel the heat of anger in the look this time. When her gaze met mine, pink crept into her cheeks.

No, not anger. Maybe interest? Something else?

“What did you do to her?” The younger cop stepped between me and the girls, cutting off my crazy thoughts. The action made me respect him a little more since I was several inches taller and definitely outweighed him.

I held up my hands, palms out. “I was out running, and when she ran out to follow the thief, we collided.”

“And then you followed her?” Now, the older cop was giving me funny looks.

“She hurt her ankle,” I explained, trying to keep the exasperation from my voice, “and I didn’t think it was safe for the two of them to wait here alone. In case the guy came back.”

“If we take you in, are they going to say the same story?”

How had I ended up a suspect? I’d just been trying to help.

“He didn’t steal my purse,” Trissa cut in. “He’s annoying, but not a thief.”

I huffed out a breath. “Thank you?” I turned my attention from Trissa back to the older cop. “Before she and I ran into each other, I saw someone in a hoodie run across the street. I didn’t get a good look, but he was probably a little under six feet tall and skinny. Fast.”

“Are you sure it was a man?”

“I’m sure,” Bevyann interjected. “I looked over when he first came in. The hoodie was dark gray, and he was wearing blue jeans and sneakers.”

“I saw his hands when he grabbed my purse. He had light brown skin,” Trissa said. “Like a really good summer tan.”

“Anything else? Identifying features?” The younger guy jotted down notes as we answered the questions he and his partner asked.

Now that I’d given them all that I had to offer and they knew I wasn’t involved in the theft, it’d be easy to leave. The cops wouldn’t keep me here,

and the women were safe.

Once they were done here, they'd go to Bevy's boyfriend's house for the night and then deal with changing the locks and canceling credit cards... and why was I even going through a mental checklist of the things they'd need to do? I'd already made this too much of a thing. I had my own life and my own problems. I needed to get back to them.

"Do you need me for anything else?" I asked during a pause in the interview. "I only wanted to make sure that the ladies were safe."

"Can you give me a number where you can be reached if we think of any additional questions?" the older cop asked.

I rattled off my cell number and then headed for the door. I could feel eyes on me as I left, but I didn't turn around. I just wanted to finish my run and go home. It wasn't late, but I'd had a long day already.

I'd cooled down while waiting, so I walked a few feet down the sidewalk and stretched my muscles back out, then bounced on my toes...but didn't take the next step and start jogging.

Dammit.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't walk away and not know they at least made it safely from here to where they'd go next. The cops probably wouldn't escort the pair home unless they asked, and my gut said that they'd tell the cops they needed to finish their laundry or something like that.

Mind made up, I jogged up and down the sidewalk, never going far enough that I couldn't keep an eye on the doors. When I saw the cops drive away after another five minutes, and no sign of the girls, I knew I'd been right.

How had those two survived in LA as naïve as they were? Maybe I was misjudging them, and maybe I was being a little chauvinistic, wanting to protect two young women, but I wasn't going to apologize for it. Not when all I wanted to do was keep them safe. I couldn't explain why I felt so strongly that I needed to do it, but I did. Once I knew they were safe in the boyfriend's place, then I'd go home.

END OF PREVIEW

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