



A BILLIONAIRE

Rebel

M.S. PARKER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A BILLIONAIRE REBEL

THE HOLDEN BROTHERS 2

M. S. PARKER

BELMONTE PUBLISHING, LLC

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Published by Belmonte Publishing LLC

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The Holden Brothers Reading order

Thank you for reading *A Billionaire Rebel*, the second 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 (This Book)
3. A Billionaire Dom (Coming January 31)

One

Jude – 1993

It's the shortest sentences that can often rock our worlds to the core.

I love you.

I hate you.

Go away.

I'm pregnant.

It'd been a week since Heidi Titan had stood here in my office and uttered those words. Her husband, Mark, had only been in jail for two days then, held there after I'd filed an assault charge.

He'd punched me just once, and even if it hadn't been for Heidi, I wouldn't have let it go. I wasn't his usual choice for a punching bag. Like most abusers, he preferred targets who didn't hit back. Unfortunately for me, it was better for Heidi if I filed charges instead of beating the shit out of him.

One of these days, he was going to pick a woman who could kick his ass, and not a single person on this planet would feel sorry for him. It couldn't happen soon enough, in my opinion.

Then, two days ago, someone had paid Mark's exorbitant bail, and he'd been released. The judge I'd talked to after Mark's arrest hadn't been able to justify denying bail completely, not for a single punch and some vandalism. Mark had no criminal record, and his reasons for wanting to hit me were the sort that most people could at least somewhat identify with.

I'd fired him from his job, and he thought I was sleeping with his wife. Not giving him any bail at all would've made it look like I was getting special treatment because I had money. The amount had been big enough that I'd believed he had no way to pay it.

Unfortunately, I'd been wrong. He'd gotten the money or collateral from somewhere.

I scowled at my computer as if it held answers for me. I'd been staying late at my office ever since Mark had been released. My wife, Rachel, was still convinced that I was having an affair, either with Heidi or with some other woman, and my absence only made her suspicions stronger.

She didn't believe I was staying here to prevent Mark from showing up at our house and causing problems there, and I'd even tried to convince her that I just needed some space from her. Still, she stubbornly clung to the idea that I was cheating.

If Mark's asinine behavior cost me my marriage, I would make it my life's mission to make him miserable.

Someone buzzed at the front door, distracting me from my problems for only a few seconds. The security camera over the door showed a police officer in full uniform. I groaned. He couldn't be here for anything good.

I hit the button to unlock the door and started going through the things I needed to take home with me. I had a personal bathroom attached to my office, complete with shower, but I'd only brought two changes of clothes with me. Not to mention that my couch was murder on my back. I needed to go home tonight.

I wasn't above walking out to my car alongside the cop. I was in good shape for my age, but that wouldn't mean anything if Mark decided to use a weapon. He'd had a bat the last time he'd shown up here, and I'd been lucky he hadn't come after me with that instead of a fist.

"Mr. Holden?" The cop knocked on my open door.

"Come in." I glanced at the name on his uniform, not bothering to stand or offer him a seat. "How can I help you, Officer Miles?"

"Approximately ninety minutes ago, Mark Titan filed a missing person report for his wife, Heidi."

I leaned back in my chair. "Heidi's missing?"

"Mr. Titan says that, after being released on bail, he went home and found her gone. He tried to report her missing that same day but was told that he had to wait as there were no signs of foul play."

I frowned, thinking through all the possibilities. "Was her car there? Maybe she just left him. The guy's a bit of a jerk."

"Her car, keys, purse, and other personal items were all in the home."

"All right," I said, meeting his gaze full on. "Why come talk to me?"

I was fairly certain I already knew the answer to that question, but I wasn't going to assume. Besides, that seemed like a reasonable question to ask under the circumstances.

"Mrs. Titan worked here?"

"Some. She was a temp, filled in for various people when they were sick or on vacation."

“And Mr. Titan worked here too?”

I shook my head. “He did, but was let go after an incident in the workplace.”

“What incident?”

“It was an internal matter.”

I wasn't about to drag Lulu into this. She'd put up with Mark's lewd comments and gestures for weeks before bringing them to my attention. My secretary didn't need the cops digging into her life.

I'd seen all too often what the law did when a woman accused a man of that sort of thing. She'd be labeled a liar or a slut or told that something she'd done had brought it on herself. It wouldn't matter that I'd had strict harassment policies set up from moment one. It'd take one word from Mark, and they'd think Lulu killed Heidi out of jealousy.

When it became clear that I wasn't going to give him anything else, he moved on, clearly annoyed. “Do you know where Mrs. Titan is?”

“No.”

“Mr. Titan believes that you do.”

“That doesn't surprise me,” I answered honestly. “Mark thinks his wife and I were having an affair.”

“Were you?”

“No.” I rubbed my thumb on my wedding band. “I'm married.”

“Happily?”

I gave the cop a tight smile. “Not at the moment, but that doesn't mean I've been having an affair.”

“It doesn't mean you weren't.”

“True. But I wasn't sleeping with Heidi. I've never slept with her or kissed her or flirted with her or did anything that wasn't completely professional.”

“But your wife believes that the accusations are true.”

I sighed. “Unfortunately, yes, she does.”

“Would Mrs. Holden have confronted Mrs. Titan about the rumors?”

I was beginning to wonder why they hadn't just asked me to come down to the station. Despite the initial pretense of letting me know that Heidi was missing, it was clear this was an interrogation. Maybe they thought if they asked questions here, I'd be less likely to ask for a lawyer.

“I don't believe so,” I said. “Rachel yells when she gets mad, and she can get intense, but she's not a violent person. Besides, I don't know how much

she *actually* believes it, anyway.”

I considered telling him that she’d been accusing me of having an affair with a woman from church before the incident with Mark and then realized that would probably only make me look more suspicious.

“Do you and your wife have a prenuptial agreement?”

I gritted my teeth and reminded myself that he was just doing his job. “We do. Most couples like us do.”

“You mean couples where the man’s on his second marriage and has a lot of money that he doesn’t want his wife to get if he decides to go for wife number three?”

I leaned forward, eyes narrowing. “If you’d done your research properly, you’d know that I didn’t divorce my first wife or cheat on her. She died.”

Color flooded his face, and I felt better knowing it was inexperience or ignorance rather than cruelty or manipulation that had prompted his line of questions.

“I’m sorry.”

I turned off my computer and stood up. “You’re welcome to read the agreement if that will convince you that I would’ve had no motive to make Heidi disappear even if we had been having an affair. Which we weren’t.”

“We have to ask.”

“I know.” I picked up my things. “Let me guess, Mr. Titan is the one who thinks I had something to do with Heidi’s disappearance.”

The officer nodded, falling into step next to me as I walked out of the office. “He’s saying that you did something to her, and that’s why no one knows where she is.”

“Investigate all you want,” I said, “but make sure you’re looking at Mark too. If anyone was going to hurt Heidi, it would’ve been him.”

“Are you saying you have evidence that he hurt her?”

I stopped just this side of the door. “I’ve seen her come to work with long sleeves in the summer, with bruises that have vague or ridiculous excuses. I wasn’t her confidant, if that’s what you want to know, but I’m not an idiot.”

“But you didn’t call the cops.”

I gave the young man a hard look. “Unless I’m mistaken, the only way Mark would be held accountable would be for Heidi to file a report and follow through on pressing charges. I have resources for all of my employees if they find themselves in those types of situations, but there is only so much I can do, especially if all I have is speculation.”

When he looked away, I opened the door and walked outside. I may have understood the reasoning behind laws regarding who could or couldn't press charges for certain crimes, but I hated how those laws often limited protections. Like how in most states, stalking wasn't technically a crime.

"Jude Holden!"

I didn't even have to turn to know who was yelling my name. I felt the cop step up next to me as I turned. Mark looked like hell...and he looked pissed about it.

"Mark, you shouldn't be here." I kept my voice even and calm.

"Where the fuck is my wife?!" He pointed his finger at me, and I could tell he wished it was a gun. "What did you do to her?!"

"Mr. Titan." The cop stepped in front of me, holding one hand up with his palm out in the universal sign for 'stop.' His other hand was at his side, hovering over his gun. "You need to leave. You can't be here."

Mark stopped in his tracks, but he didn't leave. "He did something to my wife! My Heidi! He was fucking her, and now she's gone!"

"Mr. Titan, you need to go. We're looking into your wife's disappearance. You need to trust us to do our job."

Cursing loudly, Mark turned and stomped away, leaving the cop shaking his head and me wondering how long Mark planned to keep this up. How long would it take for him to realize that he would never see Heidi again?

Two

Damon

For a native Texan, August in Las Vegas felt like home. Weather-wise, at least. Nothing else about this city and the one where I'd grown up were the same.

A trio of women with sequined bikinis and little else smiled at me as they passed, their eyes and bodies promising all sorts of pleasures...for the right price. I smiled back at them and nodded politely, but I wasn't really interested.

I supposed some people preferred sex to be a business transaction, but I'd personally never gotten it. I wasn't one of those people who thought sex was only for being in love, but I wasn't about to pay for it either.

Besides, I didn't need to.

I paused for a moment, staring up at the billboard in front of me, taking the cowboy hat from my head to wipe away the sweat. Messy dark blond hair, baby blue eyes, tan, dimples, some scruff...yeah, that was me all right. Damon Holden. Lead singer of the country band, Holden. Writer and performer of multi-award-winning hits "Heartbreak Collision" and "Up All Night."

In the past three years, I'd been to the CMAs, Billboard Music Awards, and the Grammys, and we'd had at least one nomination at each both times. We'd lost a couple and won a couple. Critics liked us for the most part, and we never had any problem selling out stadiums.

According to anyone who was anyone, and everyone else too, Holden was going places.

"Is that you?"

I turned toward the voice, already smiling as I pulled the hat back down on my head. One of the things that had contributed to our success was that we didn't really have a target audience. People of all ages liked our music. At any one event, I could sign autographs for kids and their grandparents, squealing groupies and people who'd just wanted to try us out.

A kid about ten or eleven was staring up at me in awe. He pointed to the

billboard and asked again, “Is that you?”

“Billy, what have we said about talking to strangers?” A harried-looking woman with a sunburn scolded the boy and then looked up at me. “I’m sorry, he...”

Her voice trailed off when she saw where her son had been pointing just over my head. Her eyes darted back and forth between the sign and me.

“Damon Holden, ma’am.” I held out a hand as I let a little Texas drawl into my words. “So, to answer Billy’s question, yes, that’s me.”

She shook my hand, still staring at me. Behind her, a man and another boy – this one probably in his early teens – came back through the crowd. When they realized who I was, they were eager to shake my hand too.

It went from that to pictures and autographs, and I hoped that I didn’t smell like the alcohol I’d had with my little brother, Deklin, less than a half hour ago. I didn’t like getting drunk, but I wasn’t opposed to being buzzed, especially when I didn’t have an event the next day, and I was indeed buzzed at the moment.

“We were at your concert last night,” the teenager said.

“Did you enjoy it?” I asked as I handed him the hat I’d just signed.

He nodded. “I want to do that. Be in a band. Like you.”

“Do you play an instrument?”

“Drums. I got them for Christmas, and I practice every day,” he boasted.

Judging by the wince on his parents’ faces, he was telling the truth. “That’s good,” I said. “You have to stick with it if you want to make it a career. I love what I do, but it’s a lot more work than people think.”

“Really?” He sounded more surprised than put off.

I nodded. “I started playing the piano when I was five, and guitar not long after that.”

“Five?!” The other boy’s eyes were wide.

“I have a natural talent for music, but I have to practice even now. It’s like with anything you do. If you don’t practice, you won’t be as good as you could be.”

“I read somewhere that you went to college.” The dad joined the conversation, and I wondered if it was because his son had used wanting to be a musician as an excuse for not preparing for college. The parents were going to love me for this one.

“I did. Texas A&M. I have a music degree, and if I hadn’t gone to college at all, I never would’ve gotten this far.”

“Really?” The little boy looked skeptical, his brother thoughtful.

“Really,” I confirmed, adding a serious expression for good measure. “It’s good to dream big, but you have to be willing to put in the work.”

After imparting that little bit of wisdom, I did another round of handshakes and excused myself. It was getting late, and I had someone else to meet – if she hadn’t left already. I doubted she would have, but I didn’t like being thought of as one of those asshole celebrities who acted like my time was so much more important than anyone else’s.

Not that I was a celebrity.

Sure, that particular family had recognized me, but recognition didn’t necessarily mean talent. Though I supposed that being a celebrity didn’t mean I was talented either. Without naming names, I could think of plenty of untalented people who had tons of fans.

I didn’t think I was completely untalented, but I wasn’t who everyone else thought I was. Three-and-a-half years had passed since Holden had signed with one of country’s biggest labels, and I still wondered if the others were going to realize that they could do so much better than me.

I pushed that thought aside the way I always did. It’d be back, but I refused to dwell on it. Life was too short. I wanted to enjoy what I had for as long as I had it.

Which was the sleazy reason as to why I’d stayed in Vegas for the week between our two concerts instead of going home to Houston with the rest of the band. Well, that and the fact that Dad had been getting on my case recently. He’d never really approved of the whole music thing, and it seemed like ever since Deklin graduated with his MBA, all Dad could talk about was bringing me into the family business to babysit my little brother.

If he wasn’t careful, Deklin would soon realize that Dad didn’t trust much of anyone when it came to Holden Enterprises. If Grandad hadn’t brought Davin in to be CFO, Dad probably wouldn’t have even considered it.

I’d met with Deklin at the Bellagio restaurant since he and Grandad had been staying there, but now I was going back to mine. After last night’s concert, I’d spent some time talking to a few groupies who followed Holden on tour, and a new one had caught my eye.

I wasn’t one of those sleazy guys who preyed on innocent girls, but I wasn’t a monk either. When I felt like hooking up, if a woman was of age and willing, I had no problem with us having fun. Drug-free fun. If the rest of the band wanted to indulge in some pot from time to time, I wasn’t going to

hassle them about it, but I didn't do drugs, and I didn't sleep with women who were high.

When I walked into the hotel bar, I half-expected her not to be there, but a quick scan of the room revealed her to be at the bar. She had a drink in front of her – one of those colorful, fruity things – but she looked like she was spending more time playing with the little umbrella in it than she was drinking it.

I stepped up next to her and said her name, smiling as she turned toward me. Her dark eyes were clear, and her smile genuine. That was one of the things that had drawn me to her instead of one of the other women who'd been hanging around. It wasn't innocence, exactly, but an honest-to-goodness thirst for life. An excitement that she'd have had if she was going to the movies or a museum or simply sitting at home.

"I was beginning to think you were gonna make a liar outta me." Her Southern accent charmed me as much now as it had last night.

"I'd never do that, Ivy." I leaned down and kissed her cheek, giving her the smile I'd perfected in high school. "Enjoying your drink?"

"It's a virgin."

I almost choked on my spit. "What now?"

"The drink, sugar. It's non-alcoholic. Virgin." She winked at me. "Not me, though. I ain't been one of those since junior prom night."

I laughed, and the last little bit of darkness that had been hanging over me dissipated. It had always been like that for me. Even in the worst of times, I could find something to laugh about, to smile about. I'd always made Deklin and Grandad laugh. Mom too. Dad and Davin had been harder, but sometimes they laughed as well.

"I've got a room here," I said as I held out my hand. "Want to join me? It's okay if you don't."

She put her hand in mine and stood. A few people looked our way as we walked toward the elevators, but for the most part, they were all focused on whatever it was they were doing. One of the things I loved about this hotel was that they offered a level of discretion that I couldn't always get in other places.

I wasn't one of those musicians who did crazy stuff, but with my dad's strict religious views, even something as simple as taking a woman to my room would get him riled up. I didn't want to be woken up tomorrow morning with a call telling me how I'd disgraced the family name or some

shit like that.

Ivy's red curls bounced as she walked, and her steady stream of chatter made me smile. The simple act of watching and listening to her pushed thoughts of Dad back to Houston, where they belonged.

When we got inside my room, I closed the door and said, "Would you like me to order something? Champagne? Wine?"

"No, thank you."

A shirt hit the floor even as I was turning, and by the time I got around to face her, she'd wiggled out of her cute jean miniskirt too, leaving her in a pair of pink cowboy boots and matching pink panties and bra, both showing off her curves to their best advantage.

"All right, sugar, your turn. Let's see what you're packing."

I was more than happy to oblige.

Three

Jae

I stepped out of the shower and began toweling off, grimacing as the August humidity made my skin damp again almost immediately. The building's air conditioning was ancient and pretty much just kept us from having heat stroke most of the time.

On days like today, when South Houston's temperature was already ninety and promised to reach double digits before noon, the best we could hope for was that nothing broke down. It'd be miserable trying to sleep tonight if the air went out.

I wrapped my towel around me and reminded myself that it wouldn't do any good to worry about what may or may not happen. I couldn't do anything preemptively, and anxiety would only distract me from what I had to do today. Fortunately, I was good at compartmentalizing.

My sister was waiting on the other side of the door, her short curls still a mess, and her light blue eyes sleepy. She nodded at me and yawned as she went into the bathroom, the usual extent of our morning conversations. Neither one of us were natural morning people.

I changed into my work uniform, such as it was, and ran a comb through my hair. I'd cut it to my shoulders a few months ago to make it easier to manage and found that I liked how it looked. I pulled my still-wet hair into a ponytail, dabbed on some lip gloss, and then scowled into the mirror.

I had one of those faces that made people think I was barely eighteen instead of my actual twenty-two. A little bit of makeup helped with that. Too much, and I didn't feel like me.

I chose eyeshadow nearly the same pale blue color as my eyes, and when I was done, I barely glanced at the finished product. I wasn't trying to look older to attract attention. I just needed customers to see me as someone capable of handling whatever they needed rather than a student with a summer job.

By the time I went out into the tiny kitchen slash dining room that made up the main area of the apartment, I could smell the coffee Jamie had already

started. When she'd first moved in with me, we'd set up routines that allowed us to accomplish everything we needed to in the most efficient ways possible. For example, whichever of us woke up first would shower while the other made the coffee we both needed to function.

Having her for a roommate had been more enjoyable than I'd expected it to be.

"Bre'f'st!"

I smiled as Kevin came running into the room as fast as his little legs could handle. At two-and-a-half, he was a bundle of energy and far too smart for his own good.

And I loved him to pieces.

He launched himself at my legs, cackling that wonderful laugh of his. I ruffled his dark brown hair, so much like mine and Jamie's. Add in those big blue eyes of his, and he was the spitting image of his mother at his age.

"Want cakes, Aunt Jae," he demanded.

"Oh, you do, do you?" I laughed and set down my coffee to pick him up. "What did Mommy say?"

He stuck out his bottom lip. "Cereal."

"Then that's what we're having." I put him in his chair to keep him out of trouble and then set about getting him breakfast. There were times when I could be the spoiling aunt, but on a normal day, I made sure I always backed what Jamie said. Being a single mom at nineteen was hard enough. She didn't need me working against her.

By the time she joined us, I'd gotten Kevin started on breakfast and was in the middle of making my lunch.

"You're getting off at five, right?" she asked before kissing the top of Kevin's head.

"Right. And you're dropping him off at Mom and Dad's before your interview?"

Jamie nodded, her mouth tightening. She was good at hiding her emotions, but I knew her well enough to see her anxiety. "You're sure it's okay for me to take the car?"

"Of course. And don't worry, they're going to love you," I assured her.

"Sure," Jamie said. "A high school dropout and teen mother who's worked as a waitress her whole life."

I narrowed my eyes and pointed at her. "Or they'll see a woman who worked her butt off being a single mom while getting her GED and working

at the same time.”

She gave me a half-smile. “Thanks.”

I could tell she didn’t quite believe me, and it hurt that she thought so badly of herself. Sure, our parents hadn’t been thrilled when Jamie had gotten pregnant at fifteen, and they hadn’t been overjoyed at her decision to keep Kevin, but they adored their grandson and never made Jamie feel like she wasn’t loved. Sure, there were times they butted heads with us, especially when it came to Kevin, but I suspected that would’ve happened even if she’d been married and in her twenties when she’d given birth.

“I’ll bring Kevin straight back here, and I’ll wait up to hear how things go.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said. “I don’t want you being up if I get caught up with a lingering customer.”

I waved a hand dismissively as I drained the last of my coffee. “Let me worry about that. You just nail that interview, and we’ll talk about how to celebrate.”

She rolled her eyes, but I was used to it. She’d grown up a lot since finding out she was pregnant, but there were moments I still saw my smart aleck little sister.

I kissed Kevin’s cheek. “All right, little monster. I’ll see you at Nana and Papa’s later, okay?”

“K.”

I grabbed my lunch and purse and headed out to the bus stop. The heat was already stifling, and I hoped the bus had its air conditioning working, or it would be a hellishly long ride to work. Fortunately, the bus was cool when I stepped onto it, and when I arrived at the little plaza that housed the music store where I worked, I was cool again and in a decent mood.

Which disappeared the moment I saw the guy leaning against the wall next to the door. Spencer Patronzi was two years older than me and absolutely gorgeous to look at. Shaggy jet-black hair, light brown eyes, and dimples were the icing on top of the tall, athletic cake.

If only his insides matched the outside.

“Looking good there, Jae.” He pushed himself off the wall and sauntered up to me with that obnoxious swagger that some guys had when they thought the world revolved around them.

I wished I would’ve recognized that for what it was before I’d dated him.

“Good morning, Spencer,” I said politely. His parents owned the jewelry

store at the other end of the plaza, and being rude would only make working here difficult, both for me and for Starla O’Byrne, who owned the music store.

He came up behind me, getting into my personal space. Not close enough to touch me, but still closer than I wanted him to be. If I reacted, though, he’d just laugh, so I picked my battles.

If he put his hands on me, all bets would be off.

“Those pants make your ass look amazing.”

I ignored him and unlocked the door. After I slipped inside, I turned to close the door and lock it again, but Spencer stuck his foot out and stopped me from closing it.

“I have work to do.” I kept my voice mild.

“Come on, Jae. Why don’t you let me in, and we can have some fun before you go to work?”

There were so many reasons why I’d never do that, but none of them would do anything to improve the situation, so I didn’t bother. My brain was racing, trying to find the best way to handle things, when a car pulled into the parking lot.

“Starla!” I called out as soon as my boss got out of her car.

She was beautiful. Long white-blonde hair, olive eyes, six feet tall and slender. Supermodel material.

And she was vicious.

Something I’d been extremely grateful for on more than one occasion, none more so than right now. Spencer saw her and backed off immediately. He grinned and winked at me, trying to pretend like he was tucking tail and running because of Starla, but I knew it for what it was. Whatever got him out of there was good for me, though.

“Morning, Jae,” Starla said. “Need me to take out the trash?”

I laughed, pushing the door open to let her inside. “Good morning, Starla. Impeccable timing.”

“I see that.” She locked the door behind her. “Ready to get to work?”

“Always.”

Four

Damon

One of the biggest reasons I preferred rooms on the top floors of hotels was how much quieter it usually was. Most of the places I stayed were nice enough that their walls weren't paper-thin, but outside noises leaked in nonetheless, especially traffic noise.

The farther from the street, the less it was an issue. I wasn't one of those 'must have complete silence' sort of people, but when I was working, the fewer extra background sounds interrupting my thoughts, the better.

I could've worked back home, but sometimes I liked not having any distractions. Here, I could order food when I wanted it or just go downstairs for a meal. It was easier to shut the world out than it was when people knew I was home.

I had the excuse of mileage to keep me from seeming rude when I turned people down for social engagements. I was all for a good party or hanging out with friends, but when I wanted to focus on my work, I liked not having to make excuses.

Writing was hard enough as it was.

With a sigh, I scratched out the last couple words I'd written. Dammit. I just couldn't get this stupid lyric the way I wanted it. I knew what I wanted to say, but getting it to fit was impossible.

I stood up, my back cracking as I stretched. I'd been up for a couple hours and hunched over the desk almost as long. My stiff muscles protested the movement, and I walked over to the kitchenette to loosen them up. I was also still working out the kinks from last night. It had been well worth it, though.

Ivy had been insatiable and just the right amount of demanding. What could have been a nice but forgettable half hour or so had turned into almost two hours of athletic and creative fucking. The best part had been that, only a few minutes after we were finally done, she'd asked to use the shower, then left without me needing to sweet-talk her into it.

I was usually pretty good at choosing women who understood that an invitation to my room didn't mean a relationship. Sure, I'd had a few casual

girlfriends over the years, but never anything serious. I wasn't interested in that. I never led them on, and I always treated them with respect, but every once in a while, there'd be someone who thought I just hadn't met the right woman yet. Still, considering how many women I'd been with, the number who disliked me was surprisingly small.

My breakfast leftovers were in the fridge, and as I heated them up, I hummed the opening bar of the new song I'd been working on. We were supposed to end our current tour before Thanksgiving, then cut a new album after the first of the year, but I didn't know if we had enough quality content yet. Everyone contributed something, but the bulk of the work came from me, and I was struggling more than usual.

Maybe that was the problem, I mused as I carried my food back to the desk. Maybe I needed to encourage the others to write more. They'd never expressed any interest in taking on more of this side of the business, but maybe they just hadn't wanted to speak up. Sometimes, I wondered if, because the band had my last name, the others didn't feel like they had as much input as they would've liked.

I stared at the sheet in front of me as I finished my breakfast. There had to be a way to word what I wanted to say that would fit. I just needed the right words. Song lyrics were like poetry, often appearing simple, but a lot more difficult to write than most imagined. Word choice was key. A word not only had to have the correct denotation and connotation, but also fit the rhythm and rhyme.

I popped the last bagel bite into my mouth and reached for my guitar. I'd bought it in college when I'd decided that this was the career I wanted to pursue, and it was still the one I used when writing, even if I didn't always use it on stage. Some men babied their cars. For me, it was my guitar.

The chord sounded off, and I frowned. Tuning it was second nature, and I let my mind go to the place where it was just music, my fingers moving as I listened for the right sound. When it was tuned to perfection, I smiled and began playing through what I'd written so far. It was a simple medley, the kind that would stick in people's heads, but the meaning I wanted to pull from the words would be deeper, more complex.

An alert on my computer told me I had an incoming Skype call, and a glance at the time made me realize I'd forgotten about the conference call with the rest of the band. Our next concert was this Friday, so they'd come back to Vegas on Thursday, but we needed to touch base before then.

“Hey, Damon. You look like shit.” Bair Appleton grinned at me. He was Holden’s drummer, and I’d found him playing in a bar in Austin more than a couple years ago. With his scruffy black beard and multiple tattoos, he looked more like a biker than a former rancher, though I was more than a little glad that he didn’t ride a motorcycle considering how irresponsible he’d gotten with his drinking lately.

“Thanks, Bair,” I said dryly, ignoring the crumpled beer cans I could see all around him. I turned my attention to the blonde in the next screen. “Kalini.”

“Damon.” She was only a couple years younger than me, but tiny. The first member I’d recruited, she could play pretty much anything with strings. “Looks like you got an earlier start than these guys.”

“Hey, I was up early and working too.” Kentucky native Hawk Youngen was called ‘Holden’s Heartbreaker’ because he was good-looking and never dated. Some people speculated that he was just discreet. Some people thought he was gay. I knew he was in love with Kalini. The jury was still out as to whether or not she knew it.

“You were washing your car.” The gruff words came from our bass player, Otis Kritzer. At thirty-three, he was the oldest member of the group and the only one with kids. A former Navy Seal, his wife had divorced him shortly before he’d retired. He didn’t talk about it much, but we all knew it bothered him. At least she worked with him when it came to visitation with their three kids.

“She’s a classic,” Hawk protested. “And she deserves to be treated like a queen.”

I laughed along with the rest. I’d chosen them for their talent, yes, but I’d known they were the correct choices when we’d all sat down together for the first time and we just clicked. When we were like this, I knew that my greatest contribution to Holden, more than my replaceable talent or the writing I did, had been bringing the five of us together.

“Have any of you talked to Cathy since you’ve been home?” I asked. “How’s she doing?”

“She’s miserable.” Kalini laughed. “Two weeks until her due date and she already made four people cry. Diana called to ask me if we could take her with us until the baby’s born.”

Bair let out a low whistle. “Damn. I thought she was scary when she wasn’t pregnant.”

“Hey, that scary got us five percent more than any other artist who ever signed with our label,” I reminded them.

Hiring Cathy Hendrix as our manager had been the second-smartest thing I’d done. I only hoped she’d want to continue after the baby was born. Her wife planned on staying home to raise little Zack, but things could change. Whatever her decision, we’d support her the same way she’d always supported us. Whole-heartedly.

“All right, Damon,” Kalini said. “What’ve you got for us?”

Not nearly as much as I’d hoped.

Five

Jae

“Have a good day and enjoy your new horn.” I smiled at the father and daughter as I handed over the receipt.

“I’m sure she will,” he said, giving the little girl a fond look as she hugged the French horn case to her chest. She’d informed me it was the only thing she’d wanted for her seventh birthday.

The bell over the door rang as they left, the girl’s bright chatter carrying her the entire way. They’d been the only customers, so when the door closed behind them, it was far too quiet again. Starla liked to play a different style of music each day, and today was classical. Beautiful, but I’d always thought that hot and sunny days were better suited to rock or country.

I closed the register drawer and glanced at the clock. Five minutes until the end of my shift.

“You can leave early.” Starla came up to stand next to me. “You know I never mind as long as we’re not busy and someone else is here.”

I raised an eyebrow as I leaned against the counter. “You trying to get rid of me? Hot date?”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, Jae. That’s exactly what I’m trying to do.”

I grinned as I shrugged. “It could happen.”

“And rainbows could fly out of my ass.” Starla hopped up on the stool behind the cash register. “You know the only dates I ever have run on batteries.”

“Are there any other kinds?” I asked with a laugh.

“None worth having.”

We wouldn’t have talked like this if we’d had customers in the store, or if any of the other employees had been here, but Starla and I were friends as much as we were employer-employee. Aside from Jamie, she was my closest friend. I didn’t mind that, though. I’d rather have two great friends than dozens of mediocre ones.

“You picking up Kevin when you leave here?”

“Jamie’s working a late shift,” I said. “She had an interview this

afternoon.”

“I hope she gets it.” Starla pulled up the time clock on the computer. “She knows I’d find a position for her if she wanted to work here, right?”

“She does.” I typed in my code and hit ‘clock out.’ “I think she really wants to get a job on her own. Show our parents that she’s going to amount to something.” I shook my head. “I wish she’d see that she doesn’t have to judge herself on our parents’ standards.”

“Hon, if we easily could shake off the influences of our parents, the world would be an entirely different place.”

“Good point.” I reached under the counter and retrieved my purse. “I’ll see you Wednesday.”

“Have a good night.”

It hadn’t gotten any cooler since the last time I’d been outside, and I grimaced as I jogged to the bus stop. Normally, I didn’t mind carrying Kevin the two blocks from my parents’ house to the bus stop, but this heat was already brutal. Maybe one of my parents would drive us back to the apartment, but I didn’t like asking them to do it.

Maybe Jamie wasn’t the only one who had issues with what our parents thought of us.

I was practically soaked in sweat by the time I knocked on the door, and swallowing my pride was looking more appealing every minute. The curtain covering the slim window moved, and I caught a glimpse of warm brown eyes right before the door flew open, and my baby sister flew at me.

I hugged her, walking us inside with her still in my arms. When she finally let me go, she held up her hand in her favorite sign, the easily recognizable one-handed “I love you.” I did it back, even though there wasn’t anything wrong with her hearing.

Jetta had been diagnosed as autistic when she was four, and now, at fifteen, she still didn’t speak, but she did communicate with us using simple sign language and pictures. We didn’t have long conversations, but what we did say was always meaningful.

“How was school today?” I asked, signing the words as I spoke.

Good. She grabbed my hand and pulled me into the kitchen where I found Mom at the stove while Kevin and my grandmother sat at the nearby table. I took a few seconds to appreciate the scene, noting how little had changed since my own childhood.

Then Nana noticed me. “Your hair looks like you rubbed a balloon on

your head.”

“Um...thanks?” I went over to where Mom was stirring something that smelled great. I gave her a kiss on the cheek and then did the same for Nana. Kevin got a kiss on the head, but he was too engrossed in the game he was playing to acknowledge me.

“He slept for about an hour after lunch,” Mom said, glancing over at me with eyes nearly identical to Jetta’s. “Then had a banana for a snack after he woke up.”

“Banana and peanut butter,” Nana corrected.

“Yes, Mama,” Mom said, her eyes twinkling.

I loved Nana, but if I’d had to live with her, I would’ve gone nuts. Whatever she thought, she said, and it had nothing to do with age. She’d been that way as long as I could remember.

“Where’s Dad?” I plucked a grape from the bowl and popped it into my mouth.

“School, of course,” Nana said, slapping my hand when I reached for a second grape. “You’ll ruin your dinner.”

“School already?” I waited until Nana looked away and then snagged another piece of fruit.

“School starts on the twenty-sixth,” Mom said. “Today’s the first of his in-service days.”

Dad had been teaching high school math in the Houston public school system since he’d graduated from college, and he was one of their best teachers. I wasn’t just saying that because he was my father either. He routinely had students crediting him for why they’d been able to graduate, and more than one had gone into teaching due to his inspiration.

He was a great father too. The fact that I’d never managed to get more than a B in any of my math classes could have been a point of contention, but he’d simply encouraged me to do my best the way he did with all of us girls and reminded me that we all had our own talents.

Jetta patted my arm and held up a picture of a cat.

“You’re getting a cat?”

She frowned and hugged the picture.

Ah. “You *want* a cat.” I glanced at Mom, who shook her head. “And Mom said no.”

“Persephone has never liked cats.” Nana put the last puzzle piece into place and leaned back in her chair. “We had one when she was a girl, and she

used to torment it mercilessly.”

“I seem to remember it scratching me every time it got a chance,” Mom countered.

I smiled as the bickering continued, the familiar sound comforting. The only things missing were Jamie and Dad. We’d gone through a year or so of strained family gatherings around Jamie’s pregnancy and the first couple months of Kevin’s life, but the more time that passed, the more things found a new normal. It might not have been the future Mom and Dad had pictured when we were kids, but it was still a good life.

Six

Damon

I'd worked my ass off this week but only had two songs to show for it, and I was only satisfied with one of them. Not thrilled, but satisfied. I knew that not every song an artist put out was going to be amazing, but that didn't mean I didn't want to create the best possible music every single time.

Which was why I'd been here at the venue since eight o'clock, trying to see if being on stage would prompt something, help me find what was missing in the second song. We weren't going to sing either of the new ones tonight, but I liked to sometimes do a sound check with something new just to get the others' thoughts on it. Sound checks often felt pointless, at least to me, and if I could combine brainstorming with concert preparation, it made me feel like we were using our time wisely.

"What time did you get here this morning?" Bair asked as he joined the rest of us on the stage. "We've got a pool going. I said ten."

I rolled my eyes. "Eight."

"Dammit," Bair muttered.

"Pay up!" Kalini held out her hand. "Come on. Don't make me take it from you."

Anyone else, seeing a woman who wasn't even five feet tall threaten three men who could easily bench-press her, would've laughed. The men in question, however, immediately dug into their pockets and gave her what they owed.

"Now that everyone's had their fun at my expense, do you guys think we can get some work done?" I asked, shaking my head at them.

Bair flipped me off but went to the drums while the others went to their instruments. The grin on his face made me laugh. One of the things I loved about these guys was they knew how to mix humor and hard work. Even though I sometimes worked longer hours, I never felt like they weren't pulling their weight.

Everyone else was already in position, having come in an hour or so ago to set everything up. As routine took over, it was easy to slip into the place

where I moved as a part of a team, each of us doing the part that was uniquely ours.

I loved my family, and I would do anything for my brothers, but there were times when I was with the band that I felt like they understood me far better than anyone back home. I'd never felt like I really...*fit* there. Not Houston, but the Holden family. They supported my career, but it wasn't the same as feeling like I belonged with them.

"I like that," Kalini said after I finished my check. "Are you thinking about keeping it that way?"

"I'm not sure." I liked the feel and sound of it with just a guitar and a voice, but I was always hesitant to suggest a song stay that way.

I'd put the band together and been the financial backing in those years before we'd been signed, but I never wanted the others feeling like it was all about me. I sometimes wondered if they regretted pushing me to use my last name for the band since it seemed like that made everyone assume that I was the one 'in charge.' Sure, I kept us on track and organized, more since Cathy had gone on maternity leave, but they were four of the most talented, hardest working people I'd ever met.

"You should," Hawk said from where he was sitting behind the keyboard. "I think it'd be a mistake to try to force it into something more complex."

"I agree," Otis said as he set his bass down. "Just play it like you did here."

I looked at Bair, who shrugged.

I shrugged in return. "I'm game for whatever you want to do."

"Then it's settled," Kalini said. "That one's all yours."

I strummed my thumb over the strings. "All right, but if you guys change your mind, tell me."

Kalini rolled her eyes and turned to the sound guys. "We all set?"

One of them gave her a thumb's up, and we were done until the concert.

"We're going to hit a couple casinos before tonight." Bair came out from behind the drums.

"Maybe you should catch a nap," I suggested. "Your eyes are pretty blood-shot. Rough night?"

I couldn't smell alcohol on him, but I knew his eyes weren't red because of lack of sleep. Everyone did. What had started out as him indulging because he'd caught his wife cheating on him was fast becoming an unhealthy way of coping with life in general.

Having gone through something similar, Otis had tried telling him about better ways to deal, but Bair had blown him off. Cathy had said she'd talked to him about it before she'd gone on maternity leave, but nothing seemed to have changed. I'd probably need to step in if things didn't get better soon.

I really hoped it didn't come to that.

"I'm fine." His normal cheerfulness sounded forced, and I wondered how long it would be before he couldn't pretend anymore.

"Are you going to come with us, or have you had enough gambling this week?" Hawk asked, his attempt to change the topic obvious but welcomed.

"You guys go ahead," I said. "I think I figured out what I need to tweak to make this work."

It was an excuse, albeit an honest one, but no one called me on it. I was all for good, clean fun – and great, dirty fun too – but whenever I got it in my head that I needed to find ways to improve, nothing could distract me. They were pretty much the only ones who realized that about me.

My family never thought I could be serious about anything. Part of that was my own fault, I knew. I'd never let them see that part of me when I was growing up, so any attempt to do it now would only lead to them thinking I was playing a joke on them.

As the others cleared out, I pushed everything else out of my mind and brought all of my attention to the notes and words in my head. I needed this to work. I needed it to be perfect. Maybe, just maybe, if I managed to get it exactly right, I'd finally lose the feeling that I was fooling everyone into thinking that I had any talent at all.

* * *

I caught the towel one of the roadies threw at me and gave him a quick *thank you* before wiping the sweat from my face. Anyone who'd spent any time on stage would agree that it never mattered how much the air conditioning ran at a venue, performers would be sweating by the end. Nights like this always made it worth the effort, though.

"That was fucking awesome!" Bair practically bounced down the stairs behind me. "Two encores!"

He threw his hands into the air like he'd just won a boxing match, and I joined everyone else in laughing at his antics. For once, I didn't think alcohol

had anything to do with why Bair was grinning and clapping roadies on the shoulder.

Tonight had been one of the best concerts we'd ever had, and that was saying something. The crowd's energy had been off the charts, feeding into us and looping back to them until the entire stadium had practically been buzzing with electricity.

"That was amazing," Otis said, his smile stretching from ear to ear.

It was rare to see him smile like that, no hint of an edge to it, and that meant almost as much to me as the roar of the people still cheering for us.

"It was," I agreed. "You guys hit every beat, every note."

Otis shook his head, laughing at me. "You gotta start taking credit where credit is due, man."

"We need to celebrate." Bair's interruption kept me from having to come up with a response to Otis's statement. "We're in Sin City. Let's have some fun!"

"Let me guess," Kalini said, appearing with Hawk. "Strip club?"

"Jealous?" Bair slung his arm around Kalini's shoulder. "Don't worry, we'd prefer to see you strip if you're offering."

Hawk shoved Bair's arm away from Kalini. "Don't be an ass."

"But I'm so good at it." Bair lunged for Hawk, who dodged him.

The two began wrestling around, scuffling and cursing. Hawk was usually pretty even-tempered, but the one way to get under his skin was to harass Kalini. If there was something Bair liked almost as much as drinking, it was antagonizing Hawk.

After another minute of watching the two scrapping, Otis sighed and intervened, just like he always did. He grabbed the backs of their shirts and yanked them apart, giving them both a shake. All three were laughing, a little disheveled but not any worse for the wear.

"Done measuring your dicks?" Kalini asked mildly.

"Yup," Bair announced cheerfully. "I won."

"Fuck off," Hawk muttered.

What would it be like, I wondered, to have that sort of easy, joking relationship with my brothers? Granted, these guys weren't biological brothers, but they spent more time together than a lot of adult siblings did.

"So, are we going out?" Bair asked as Otis released his shirt. "We're in Vegas. Let's party!"

"I could go for a couple drinks," Otis said. "Isn't this why we'd decided

not to fly out until Sunday morning? To give us some time to have fun before we go home?"

"I'm actually leaving tomorrow morning," I said. When they looked at me, I explained, "Cynthia's birthday party is Sunday afternoon. I don't want to miss it."

"Sure, sure." Bair grabbed me around the neck and rubbed my head like I was a child. "You just don't want to be seen with us. Afraid we'll ruin your good family name."

I drove my elbow into his gut, knocking the wind out of him and making him stagger back. "Yes, Bair, that's exactly it."

"Can't really blame him," Kalini said. "You are an asshat, Bair."

He grinned and made a sweeping bow. "But a dashing one, you have to admit."

The banter went back and forth as we headed out for the half hour or so we usually did autographs at the end of every show. Once that was done, I'd go back to the hotel to finish packing and get some sleep. My flight was scheduled to leave first thing in the morning.

It was time to go home. For now, at least.

Seven

Jae

One of the things I loved about working here was that it rarely got crazy. Times we ran specials, like Black Friday, we usually had to have three people in the store, and when we did inventory, Starla sometimes scheduled two, but the rest of the time, we could usually handle everything alone, so we generally only had a half or quarter shift overlap.

Which was why being scheduled to work alone until close today wasn't strange. Normally, I didn't mind this shift, especially on the quiet nights since I rarely had much in the way of silence in my life. This evening, however, I wished Starla had scheduled someone with me, or someone else entirely.

After Starla had left a few hours ago, Spencer had shown up. He hadn't come inside, just leaned against the hood of my car and stared at the store. Then he'd disappeared for a little while, only to come back and stand closer, looking in through the windows.

Almost twenty minutes ago, he'd made his fifth pass, this time waving at me when he walked by. The jewelry store closed in an hour or so, and I hoped that meant he'd leave, but there was always the possibility that he'd decide to actually come inside and make his harassment a little more personal.

But I'd be damned if I let him intimidate me into changing a single thing about me or my life.

Which meant I needed to start cleaning the glass cases around the store. I let myself fall into the familiar rhythm, my mind pleasantly blank. It could have been a few minutes or a half an hour later when I heard the door open. My heart gave an unsteady thump. He'd come in. Shit.

I turned, ready to greet Spencer with professionalism, even if it wasn't genuine...except it wasn't Spencer.

Over six feet, muscular, and tan...*damn*. The expression 'a tall drink of water' immediately came to mind. Then he smiled, dimples deepened next to his mouth, making all sorts of things inside me squirm. Even though a cowboy hat covered a good portion of his face, he was devastatingly

handsome.

He looked familiar, but it took enough of an effort to greet him without sounding like an idiot. I wasn't about to make it worse. I didn't need to know why there was a hint of recognition.

"Are you okay?"

For a moment, I thought I'd start drooling or something equally embarrassing, so I kept my gaze focused on his throat instead of searching for his eyecolor in the shadows of the hat.

"You look like you were expecting someone else." His voice held a hint of Texas, but it was faint enough to tell me that he'd worked at losing it. "Someone you weren't looking forward to seeing."

I gave him a tight smile. "You just startled me, that's all. How can I help you?"

He gave me a puzzled look, an amused expression on his face. What, exactly, was so funny, I didn't know, but it wasn't my concern, not unless it affected why he was here.

"I need a new guitar."

I nodded, pleased to have something to do. "Over here."

He had already started moving to the right section, and I wondered if he'd been here before or if he'd seen the guitars before I'd turned around.

"Is there something particular you're looking for?" I asked. "Acoustic or electric?"

I'd found that asking questions this way worked a lot better than asking if he was a novice or amateur or professional. People tended to either vastly over-estimate or under-estimate their abilities. Asking questions about types and brands helped me gauge what would work best for him, even if he didn't know.

"Acoustic-electric. I want to try something new, and I usually stick to one or the other. I think a hybrid might give me what I'm looking for."

Well, that probably meant price wouldn't be an object. Not if he already had at least two other guitars and was looking for a third just because he was looking for a different sound or look. Now, I needed to figure out whether or not he actually knew what to do with those guitars or if he was some spoiled rich boy wanting to spend daddy's money on a new toy.

"Do you have a particular brand preference?"

He didn't answer right away, running his gaze across our selection in a way that told me he wasn't trying to feign being knowledgeable. He was

genuinely assessing each one.

“I’m looking for something different than what I usually lean toward.” He pointed at one. “What’s your opinion on this one?”

“Takamine. Part of their Legacy series. Cedar top, maple body, rosewood fretboard.” I lightly touched the glossy black surface. “It’s a beautiful instrument. Rich, full sound. Springsteen uses it, if you’re looking for an example of professional use.”

He gave me a sideways look, as if I was missing something important. “Would you recommend it?”

“It depends on what you want to use it for,” I said. “That’s a solid performance piece right there.”

“What would you use if you were writing music?”

I thought for a minute, looking over our inventory, and then pointed. “Breedlove Solo Concert.”

“Why?” He seemed intrigued by my choice.

“The second hole.” I picked the guitar off the wall. “You’ll be able to hear exactly what the audience would hear. Plus, you said you wanted something different. Solid cedar and rosewood give a darker tone.”

He held out his hands, and I passed the instrument to him. The way he held it told me that he knew what he was doing. He ran his thumb along the strings, then made a couple adjustments before doing it again.

I didn’t rush him, enjoying the experience of watching and listening to someone who clearly had a good ear and knew how to tune a guitar. I couldn’t even count the number of times I had someone come in and pretend like they had a clue, only to break a string or leave a guitar so badly out of tune that I spent an hour fixing their mistakes.

“That’s a good sound,” he said after several minutes. “I’ll take it.”

“Excellent. Do you need anything else? Picks? Extra strings?”

I went through the usual business patter as he selected the strings he wanted and a few other things as well. By the time we reached the register, I was sure he had everything he needed. I rang him up and gave him his total. He held out a credit card.

“Thank you,” I said as I took it. I glanced down to catch his name before I ran the card through and nearly choked on nothing.

Damon Holden.

Damon Holden.

No wonder he looked familiar. Aside from the fact that he came from one

of Houston's wealthiest families, he was the founder of Holden, one of the best country bands of all time.

Heat flooded my face as I realized how stupid I must've sounded with my questions. Those strange looks he'd given me made a lot more sense now. I was such an idiot! Not only had I made a fool of myself in front of an insanely talented musician, I'd done it in front of my favorite musician.

A quick glance at his face showed his lips twitching, as if he wanted to laugh but was trying to be polite. He lifted his hat and swiped at his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt.

Perfect.

The very least I could do for him was finish the transaction without being completely unprofessional and apologizing for not recognizing him. Everything I'd ever read about him said that he was a really nice guy, but I wasn't going to take advantage of that. He'd come here for a guitar, not to have some stranger fangirling over him.

I ran his card, put in the necessary information, and then handed the card back. "If you could just sign here." I slid the receipt across the counter and then set a pen next to it. He signed and handed it back. I put his copy of the receipt in the bag with the strings and picks and then held it out. "Have a good night."

"I will." He gave me that pulse-pounding smile of his and then headed out.

I kept it together until the door closed behind him and then buried my face in my hands. I sincerely hoped Starla never found out just how awkward I'd been. I'd never hear the end of it.

One person, however, needed to know every detail.

I reached under the counter and pulled out my phone. I could've waited until I got home, but I never knew if Jamie would be awake or not. She worked herself too hard most of the time.

You're never going to guess who I just sold a guitar to. Damon Holden.

Eight

Damon

Cynthia's birthday party had been more awkward than usual since Deklin had decided to bring his new girlfriend, Sofi, and Dad had invited Deklin's ex-fiancée, Aurelia. Still, I'd been glad to see Deklin taking my advice about not rushing into marriage with Aurelia. She was a good kid, but Deklin had proposed out of a sense of duty to the family, and that wasn't a good reason to get married. Except I'd watched how Deklin was with Sofi, and I wondered if he was in deeper than he should be with that one too.

Those had been the thoughts that had chased me into a dreamless sleep.

A loud, jarring sound jerked me out of the darkness, and for a moment, I was disoriented, wondering where I was. Then I remembered I was home and the ringing was Kalini's ringtone. That got me awake enough to reach for my phone. She'd never drunk-dialed me or called this late unless something big had happened.

"Kalini?" I barely got her name out before the sound of her crying hit me. I sat upright, fully awake as adrenaline flooded my system. Something was wrong. She never cried, and definitely not like this. "Kalini? What's wrong?"

"There was an accident. It's bad. Really bad."

I could barely understand her through her sobs. "An accident? Who? Are you okay?"

"I'm not hurt. I was in the cab in front, and the guys were behind me, and something happened. Their car flipped, and someone hit it, and the cab wouldn't stop until I screamed at him to get over. I ran back, and it was awful..." The words poured out of her in a horrified rush, her voice hoarse and choked.

"Where are you?" I yanked on the first pair of pants I grabbed and reached for a shirt.

"Houston Methodist. Damon...please...I..."

"I'm on my way," I promised. "I have to hang up now, but I'm coming. Hang in there. I'm coming."

I shoved my phone in my pocket and ran. The drive to the hospital was a

blur as I went as fast as I dared. My mind raced as my body moved on autopilot. I'd known that the band was getting in tonight, which probably meant they'd been coming from the airport.

She'd just said the guys, which meant more than one, but not necessarily all three. And it probably wasn't as bad as it sounded. She'd seen the accident happen. Of course she'd be freaking out.

At least it'd happened here. If the guys needed to be hospitalized for a couple days, they were near family. They might need some help for a while after they were released. I'd take care of that.

After I got an idea of how long they'd be recovering, I'd talk to the label. Cathy too. I hoped Kalini hadn't called her. The last thing we needed to do was put stress on her and the baby, especially since it didn't seem like we knew much. I'd tell Kalini I'd take care of all of it. She'd need support as much as anyone else.

I couldn't imagine what she was going through, having seen something like that. If one of the guys was with her, he could probably lend his support since he'd have an idea of what she was going through. Except if one of the guys had been there, she probably would've let him call instead of doing it herself, which meant she was most likely alone.

Why hadn't I stayed with them? Cynthia would've understood.

My head ached by the time I pulled into the parking lot. I parked in the first space I found, locking my doors automatically as I jogged toward the doors. I hurried through the near-empty waiting area and stopped at the front desk. "I'm looking for Kalini Volek. She came in with a car accident."

"One moment." The receptionist typed something into her computer, and I tried not to get impatient. She wasn't dawdling, and it'd be wrong to yell at her for something out of her control.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

"Are you family?"

Dammit!

"Damon!"

I turned in time to catch Kalini as she dove into my arms. She took deep shuddering breaths, and all I could do was hold her and hope that it wasn't as bad as the feeling in the pit of my stomach seemed to think it would be.

"Where's Hawk?" I asked. "Otis? Are all three of them together?"

"Mr. Holden." A man in scrubs came over to us. "If you and Miss Volek could follow me."

I didn't bother asking how he knew who we were. I just wanted to know what happened.

"Mr. Youngen has been asking for Miss Volek." The doctor took us back into the main ER and into a small room where Hawk was sitting on a hospital bed.

"Hawk!" Kalini immediately went to him.

He grabbed her, the relief on his face more than the pain. "I was so worried."

The doctor closed the door, and his expression was grim when he turned back to us. "I know this is highly unorthodox, but I thought it best to let you three be together while I gave you an update."

Shit.

"Where are Bair and Otis?" I asked, doing my best to keep from sounding demanding.

"Mr. Kritzer is in surgery," the doctor said. "His injuries are severe, and the next few hours will be critical."

Kalini caught her breath, and Hawk swore. I clenched my hands into fists, bracing myself for the rest.

"I'm sorry, but Mr. Appleton was pronounced at the scene."

Pronounced.

Pronounced.

The word echoed in my brain, my mind refusing to understand it until Kalini let out a wounded cry, and I had to acknowledge it. I didn't seem possible, but...

Bair was gone.

Nine

Jae

I wasn't wearing a nicer shirt than I usually wore to work in hopes of seeing Damon Holden again. He'd bought everything he'd needed in that one trip, and if he came back, it'd most likely be to return the guitar, and that wouldn't be a good thing.

Even if I did want to prove to him that I wasn't a complete moron.

"Nice shirt," Jamie said as she came into the kitchen. She yawned and reached for the coffeepot. "Don't think I've ever seen you wear that to work."

I rolled my eyes and ignored her as I finished putting together my lunch. I'd told her about my encounter with Damon Holden, and she'd been teasing me about it ever since. I was starting to wish I'd kept it all to myself.

The TV turned on, the volume low to keep Kevin asleep for a little while longer.

Jamie's gasp had me turning even as what the newscaster was saying finally processed.

"...death of thirty-year-old Bair Appleton has shocked the country music world. He and two other members of the award-winning band, Holden, were coming from the airport when the tire of the town car they were in blew and the driver lost control."

I sank down in the closest chair. Damon couldn't be one of the other two in the car last night. He hadn't been coming back from the airport since he'd already been in Houston.

Unless he'd been the driver.

No, they would've used Damon's name if it'd been him.

"Former Navy Seal Otis Kritzer is in critical but stable condition. Kritzer is the bass player..."

"Jae, are you—"

"Shh." I didn't take my eyes from the screen.

"Sources say that Hawk Youngen wasn't seriously injured, but he hasn't been released from the hospital. Kalini Volek, the only female member of Holden, was in a cab ahead of the car holding her bandmates and has

declined to comment...”

“Vultures,” Jamie snapped. “The girl saw her friends’ car wreck, and someone *died*.”

A picture of Damon appeared on the screen. “*Lead singer Damon Holden was not with his friends at the time of the accident and has declined to speak with us.*”

I turned the television off. I didn’t want to see anymore. My heart was already breaking for Damon and the rest of the band. I couldn’t even imagine what they were going through right now. I’d never lost anyone that close to me.

“That’s awful,” Jamie sat down next to me. “I mean, even if you hadn’t met Damon the other day, this would’ve been horrible. Those poor families.”

“He was married,” I said quietly. “Bair Appleton. Caught his wife cheating a few months back and filed for divorce. It was messy.”

“I remember. It was all over the news.” Jamie stood up and took my coffee cup back to the sink. “Shit.”

I spun around. “What?”

“Jetta’s going to flip.”

“Shit,” I echoed. She was right. Our baby sister loved Holden, and Bair had always been her favorite. She was going to be devastated.

“I’ll call Mom,” Jamie said. “You need to get to work.”

I pushed my hair behind my ear. “You’ll have your hands full when Kevin gets up.”

“And I can handle all of it. Talking to Mom and taking care of Kevin.” She put her hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “Go to work. Talk to Starla.”

I wiped at my cheeks, surprised to find them damp. “Are you sure?”

“Go.”

I gave her a hug and went back for my lunch even though I doubted I’d feel like eating any time soon. I didn’t know Damon, and a single conversation didn’t change that. Still, I hurt for him. I just kept seeing that smile he’d given me right before he left, and knowing that he wasn’t smiling right now struck me in a way that nothing else ever had.

My emotions must’ve been written all over my face because the moment I walked into the store, Starla was right there.

“You look like someone ran over your dog. If you owned a dog.” She turned the television off, but not before I saw a reporter in front of the Houston Methodist ER. Not surprising that she’d be watching coverage. I had

a feeling most people in Houston were doing the same thing.

“I met him,” I said as I put my purse behind the counter. “Damon Holden. He came in here Saturday evening to buy a guitar.”

Starla’s eyebrows shot up. “You want to say that again?”

“Damon Holden bought a guitar from us.” I leaned against the counter. “I didn’t even realize who he was until he handed me his credit card to buy it.”

“That’s who bought the Breedlove? I saw the receipt but didn’t really look at the name.”

I nodded. “I talked to him for a couple minutes about the guitar, then some small talk, nothing important, but he smiled and...” I had to stop talking as a lump formed in my throat.

“That sucks,” Starla said. A thoughtful expression crossed her face. “We should send something to the band. Flowers, maybe.”

“Flowers?”

Starla reached for her cell phone. “Yes, but I don’t think we should have them delivered. I think you should take them personally.”

“I don’t know him,” I said. “We barely talked.”

“That’s not the point.” Something in her face softened. “From what I’ve heard, Damon Holden doesn’t have a lot in the way of friends outside the band, and he’s going to feel like he has to be there for them right now rather than anyone being there for him.”

Her statement surprised me. “He seemed friendly enough.”

“Oh, that’s probably the truth,” she agreed, “but there’s a difference between being friendly and having friends. He comes from one of the richest families in the city. That doesn’t exactly make for the sort of guy who makes friends easily.”

I frowned at her. “You sound like you know that from personal experience.”

She winked at me. “I have a whole lot of past that I haven’t gotten around to sharing.”

“Do you know the Holden family?” I asked, suddenly curious.

“Only by reputation,” she said, “but my mom’s family comes from old money in Vermont. I spent enough holidays with them to know that having money comes with its own set of problems.”

If anyone other than Starla had told me that, I might’ve scoffed at them. She wasn’t poor, but I knew how hard she worked. Nothing had been handed to her on a silver platter. I might not be able to understand what she meant,

but I trusted that she knew what she was talking about.

“So, you think I should take flowers to the hospital and offer to be Damon’s friend?”

She glanced at me. “I think you should take flowers to Holden Enterprises so they’ll get to him and he can see that someone cares but isn’t asking anything from him. And if he wants to reach out, then you can be his friend.”

I didn’t know why Starla thought Damon would want to talk to a virtual stranger just because I sold him a guitar and then gave him some flowers, but if I could make him feel like someone cared about him personally, I’d do whatever Starla thought I should do.

* * *

Starla had ordered a simple arrangement, something that acknowledged grief without being overly familiar. The card, she’d left to me. I kept it simple.

We are so sorry for your loss. I signed with the store’s name, then added a PS on a whim. *If you ever need a quiet place or the comfort of music, you’re always welcome. Jae.*

Before I could second-guess my addition, I thanked the cashier and picked up my purchase. When I arrived at Holden Enterprises, there were a few news vans out front, but they didn’t look like they were getting too close. None of them bothered to look at me twice as I carried the flowers inside, probably thinking I was just a delivery person.

The moment the elevator doors opened, I went to step inside, only to find myself walking straight into something solid and good-smelling.

“Sorry.” I flushed as I looked up. Golden blond hair, pale blue eyes, athletic build...shit, it was one of Damon’s brothers.

“Delivery?” He didn’t smile, but he didn’t look angry, either.

“Sort of.” I held up the flowers. “I work at Starla’s Music. Your brother, Damon, bought a guitar the other day, and we thought we should send our sympathies...” I suddenly realized I was babbling. “Sorry.”

He gave me a searching look and then held out his hands. “That’s kind of you. I’ll make sure he gets them.”

“Thanks.” I smiled as I gave him the flowers and card. “I’m really sorry to hear about his friend.”

“We are too.” A shadow passed over his face, and then he seemed to give

himself a mental shake. “May I ask why you brought these here instead of the hospital?”

“We didn’t want the media thinking that we were trying to cash in on a tragedy. And we didn’t want to bother anyone at the hospital. We figured if we brought them to you, he’d get them at some point and wouldn’t have to feel obligated to have a conversation with a stranger.”

After a moment of awkward silence, I turned and walked away, telling myself that I shouldn’t be disappointed that I hadn’t spoken to Damon directly. He probably wouldn’t have remembered me anyway.

Still, I couldn’t stop thinking about that last smile he’d had before he’d walked out of the store, and I wished I could see it again.

Ten

Damon

I hadn't been this exhausted since my mom died. The bone-deep weariness of grief and helplessness I felt now brought all of those memories flooding back, piling onto my shoulders until I felt like I might break under the weight. But I couldn't let anyone see any of that. Not when other people needed me to be strong and upbeat for them. I usually didn't have any difficulty maintaining a positive outlook, but as the day wore on, it became harder and harder to keep smiling and telling people it was going to be okay.

Now that Hawk was asleep and Kalini had come back, I should've been able to go without feeling guilty, but I still lingered in his room, not wanting Kalini to feel like I was abandoning her.

"You look like shit," she said, her voice pitched low to keep from waking Hawk. "Go home. Get something to eat, shower, and sleep."

"Are you sure?"

Kalini gave me a quick hug. "Yes. Hawk's parents will be here soon, and Otis's sister rode up in the elevator with me. His ex's probably going to stop in first thing in the morning and see when she can bring his kids. No one's going to be alone."

We didn't talk about Bair. His dad and two of his brothers had gotten in from Austin sometime around five this morning. I'd called Mr. Appleton myself, not wanting the doctors or the police to break the news.

I'd reached out to Cathy next, glad Kalini had been with the police while I'd made both of those calls. By the time I was done, I'd had a new respect for what Dad had been through when he'd told my brothers and me when Mom died.

"Cathy said she's going to stop by tomorrow," I reminded her. "Diana will probably bring her since Cathy's not supposed to be driving, but I think that's a good idea, her having Diana with her."

"She knows about – knows how the guys are doing?"

"She does. Knowing it and seeing them, though..." I let my voice trail off.

Neither of us needed that to be explained. Knowing Otis had been in surgery hadn't been the same as seeing him with all the tubes and wires, seeing his body taped and sewn up.

"Are you sure you're going to be okay?" Kalini said. "Being alone?"

"I'm actually going to go see Davin. He texted me, said I should stop by the office."

I'd been surprised, honestly. I'd thought he only paid attention to business news. Grandad had called this morning. I hadn't heard from Dad at all, but I doubted he even knew what was going on.

"Really?" Kalini looked impressed.

"Shocked me too," I admitted. "I figure I'll see what he wants, then get some sleep. Perfectly fine to do alone."

She nodded, her momentary distraction from Hawk over. I could feel her wanting to go back to him, and I wasn't going to keep her from his side. I'd watched the two of them dance around each other for years, though I didn't think Hawk had realized yet that Kalini liked him as much as he liked her. Maybe something good would come out of this tragedy, and they'd finally admit their feelings for each other.

"Take care of him," I said quietly. "I'll check in tomorrow. Call me if there's a change in either of them or if you need me for something."

She agreed, and we parted ways, her back to Hawk and me out to my car. It wasn't a long drive to Holden Enterprises, and the closer I got, the more the drive was automatic, and the less I had to think about it. I felt like I was in a daze, as if nothing about the world was real or clear, and the haze was definitely preferable to the pain lurking beneath.

Only two cars were in the parking lot when I arrived. One was Dad's, and the other was Davin's, and both were expected. I doubted either of them ever left before seven or eight o'clock at night. I didn't bother to go to Dad's office.

I loved my father, but the last thing I wanted right now was a lecture on whatever sin Dad would think was responsible for my friend's death. Maybe he'd actually be decent about it, but I wasn't in the mood to play the odds.

Davin was behind his desk when I knocked on his door, but as soon as he saw it was me, he stopped whatever he was working on and came around his desk to meet me.

"I'm sorry to hear about Bair." He gave me one of those half-hugs that he used sparingly. "How are the others doing?"

I sat down on the couch, surprised when Davin took the seat next to me instead of at his desk like he usually did on the rare occasions I'd come here to talk to him. It shouldn't have surprised me, though. He may have been a workaholic, but he genuinely cared about us.

"Hawk is going to be fine," I said. "Some cracked ribs. Lots of bruises and scrapes. He has a pretty bad concussion, so they want to keep an eye on him a little longer, but he might be able to go home tomorrow."

"And Otis? Does his family need anything?"

One of the things that made Davin so good at his job was his ability to remember names and facts about people. He wasn't always the most charming person, and his naturally serious demeanor didn't generally ingratiate people, but he always managed to make people feel like they were individually important.

"He'll be okay," I said, "but recovery's going to be a bitch. He'll probably be in the hospital for a few weeks and who knows how long he'll need help after that. His ex-wife is up here right now, but I don't know how long she'll be here."

"If there's anything I can do – Holden Enterprises *or* me personally – don't hesitate to ask." Davin stood up and picked up a flower arrangement I hadn't noticed when I'd first come in. "I don't want to forget to give you these."

"You bought me flowers? They're, um, lovely."

He set them in front of me. "No, asshat." He gestured to the card. "This afternoon, I was getting out at the lobby when this short brunette almost bowled me over. She had the flowers for you. Said something about you buying a guitar from her?"

The brunette from the music store. Her image flashed into my mind. I'd liked the way she'd handled herself, but that didn't explain why she'd brought flowers to my brother here.

"I asked her why she came here," he continued. "She said she didn't want to disturb you guys at the hospital and figured I'd make sure you got them."

I took the card and opened it, more than a little curious to see what she'd written. *We are so sorry for your loss. Starla's Music. P.S. If you ever need a quiet place or the comfort of music, you're always welcome. Jae.*

Jae. It suited her, I decided. The personal offer at the end was nice. If she'd come to the hospital and made a big deal out of being there to 'comfort' the surviving members of Holden, I might've thought she was coming on to

me in an attempt to take advantage of the situation. Besides the circumstances, my gut said she wasn't that sort of person.

"Do you think she's trying to pursue you?"

The fact that Davin was thinking along the same lines as I was spoke volumes about how cautious we'd always had to be about the people we let into our lives.

"I don't. She was perfectly professional when we met."

"But you think she's attractive?" He sounded more curious than anything else.

"I'm not blind," I said dryly.

"Have you heard from Deklin?" He changed the subject. "Dad said he's back in Vegas for some reason."

"He texted me this morning after the news went public," I said. "He asked if I wanted him to come home, but I told him it wasn't necessary. There wasn't anything he could do."

Davin got up and went to his desk. He opened the bottom drawer and drew out a glass decanter and two glasses. After pouring a bit of rich amber liquid into each, he returned to the couch and gave me one of the glasses.

"Don't tell Dad."

I gave a smile that probably looked more like a grimace and then drained the glass in a single drink. It burned and warmed all the way down. The chill I'd had since getting Kalini's call eased a bit.

"Does this mean you're going to be staying home for a while?"

Shit.

"I hadn't even thought about it, honestly," I said. "Not really. I mean, my head knows that this is going to have serious repercussions, but the rest of me can't handle trying to figure it all out. Not when I'm still trying to wrap my head around what happened."

Davin shook his head. "I can't even imagine. Do the cops know what happened?"

I shrugged. "I talked to Benny, and he said the word going around is that a tire blew, which caused the car to swerve, and it hit something that was on the shoulder."

"I didn't know that you and Benny still talked."

"We keep in touch," I said. "I get him tickets when I'm here for a show, and sometimes, I ask him to help out if one of my guys does something stupid."

“Like when Bair decided it would be a charitable service to feed the homeless wearing nothing but a very thin apron.”

The memory hurt even as I laughed. It would be like this a lot, I knew. Good memories that would cause as much pain as joy...until one day, the hurt was less. Right now, though, I didn't want to reminisce. I wasn't ready for more than this.

“By the way, if you want to crash at my place, you're welcome to,” he said. “The press probably has your place staked out.”

Dammit. I hadn't thought of that. I sighed.

“I think I'm going to head out.” I stood up and picked up the flowers. “Maybe I'll go over to the music store and thank them.”

“The offer for a guestroom at my house stands as long as you need it.” He clapped his hand on my shoulder.

“Thanks.”

As I went back down to the lobby, I decided that I liked my idea of going to the store. I'd said it on a whim, but now I was going to follow through. I found that I liked the thought of seeing Jae again. We hadn't spent a lot of time together, but something told me there might be a bit of a spark there. Besides, I'd liked how she'd talked the same way after she figured out who I was as she had before.

As I walked across the parking lot, a rumble of thunder rolled just as it began to pour. Perfect. The storm just made me more determined to find Jae and thank her for giving me something pleasant to think about during a shitty day.

Eleven

Jae

I stood at the window, looking out at the storm. The electricity had gone out a few minutes after I'd finished cleaning the apartment, so I'd taken a bath by candlelight and let myself enjoy the rare phenomenon of having the apartment to myself.

Jamie was working late, and Jetta had convinced our parents to let Kevin sleepover. Since Jetta had been upset by the news about Bair Appleton, Mom and Dad had given in to the request for a school-night slumber party when they usually would've made her wait until the weekend. I loved Jamie and Kevin, but having a little peace and quiet for a change was nice. As was being able to take a bath without my nephew needing to use the toilet or wanting to tell me something.

At least the rain seemed to be cooling things off enough that I'd be able to sleep without the air conditioner if the electricity wasn't back on in a couple hours. I'd be more comfortable with it on, but the heat would be manageable, at least. I didn't, however, want to even think about what would happen to the food in the fridge and freezer if it was out until morning. We didn't have a lot that would spoil, but there was enough that replacing it would put a dent in our budget.

I pushed the thought aside. There was no use worrying about it. I couldn't make the electricity come back faster or afford to buy a generator. The best I could do was keep the freezer and fridge closed as much as possible and hope it would give us some extra time.

I turned away from the window as a flash of lightning filled my candle-lit apartment. I'd originally planned to watch some television that wasn't kid-friendly – something Jamie and I hardly ever got to do – but since that was out, I was going to enjoy some uninterrupted reading. I'd need more than the two candles on the kitchen table to do that, though.

I'd just found the flashlight when someone knocked on the door. Pleasantly surprised that someone was coming to check on me, I opened the door a crack to see if it was a neighbor or the super.

It was neither.

“Mr. Holden?” The words were little more than a gasp.

His smile was as beautiful as I remembered. “Damon, please.”

He was soaking wet and looked so completely miserable that I unlocked the chain and opened the door wide enough for him to come in. Maybe it was foolish of me, but aside from the fact that I’d never heard anything but positive things about him, after the day he must’ve had, I doubted he’d tracked me down to do me harm.

“I didn’t know it was going to rain.” He looked down at the puddle forming on the rug I kept in front of the door.

“It’s all right,” I said. “Let me get you a towel.”

This had to be a dream, right? There was no way Damon Holden was standing in my apartment while I went to get him a towel. I must’ve fallen asleep in the tub, and this was all a dream, prompted by the storm and the weird last couple days.

Except when I came back from the closet, Damon was still standing on the rug, except now he was in his bare feet. His wet clothes clung to him, making me blush as I couldn’t help noticing how absolutely magnificent his body was.

“Here.”

He toweled off his hair and then did his best to dry his clothes too.

“I’d offer you something dry to wear, but there’s a slight size difference between the two of us.”

He gave me a crooked smile. “I appreciate the thought, nonetheless.”

“Please, come sit.” I gestured toward the kitchen table. “The electricity’s out, but I can get you something to eat or drink.”

“I’m fine,” he said as he moved to sit down. “Actually, if I’m being honest, I’m not really hungry.”

“Well, I just made these red velvet muffins, and you’re welcome to have some if you change your mind.” I brought the plate over to the table and set it in front of him. “I’m sorry about your friends.”

“Thank you.” He reached out and put his hand on my wrist.

A jolt went through me, and I caught my breath. Suddenly, I was all too aware that I was only wearing a pale yellow chemise top and a pair of boy shorts, putting only the thinnest of cotton between us.

“You didn’t need to send flowers, or write what you did,” he continued, his thumb brushing back and forth on my skin. “And I appreciate that you

were thinking of my friends' families when you took the flowers to my brother instead of the hospital."

"It was Starla's idea," I admitted. "Both the flowers and taking them to Holden Enterprises."

"The *P.S.* in the card was from you, though."

I nodded, my body humming with tension. I didn't know if he realized he was still touching me, but it was almost all I could think about.

"Thank you," he repeated.

When he let me go, I sank down in my chair, hoping the light was dim enough that he couldn't see my hands shaking. I'd never had such a strong, physical reaction to someone before. Not a positive one, anyway.

He broke off a piece of muffin and ate it, his face lighting up as he chewed. "This is amazing."

It was my turn to thank him. "Eat as much as you like. I made plenty."

I took one of my own, and we ate in comfortable silence. The food helped my stomach stop doing flips, and I regained my composure. He hadn't come here to just thank me for the flowers. He could've done that in a dozen different ways. A thought occurred to me, and I frowned.

"Can I ask how you knew where I lived?"

"Oh." He sounded embarrassed. "I went to the music store, and you weren't there. Your boss gave me your address."

My eyebrows shot up. Starla had given my home address to someone? Okay, he wasn't just anyone, but it wasn't like he was my boyfriend or something like that either. Just being famous didn't mean he was a good guy, even though everything I'd heard suggested just that.

"I shouldn't have done that," he said, scowling. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I was thinking. I shouldn't be here."

He made as if to stand up, and I put out my hand to stop him. His arm jerked when I made contact, but he didn't pull away, making me wonder if he felt the same electric connection I did.

"It's okay. Starla's a good judge of character. I trust her." I stood. "Besides, I wouldn't have let you in if you being here bothered me." I went to the fridge. Despite my previous thought about keeping it closed, I needed something to drink. "Do you want some milk to go with the muffin?"

"Sure," he said. If my change of subject had surprised him, he didn't show it. "Thanks."

I'd just set his glass in front of him when I stepped right on a small

puddle of water. Before I could stop it, my foot slid out from underneath me, and I found myself being unceremoniously dumped into Damon's lap.

Fortunately for me, he had good reflexes and caught me before I rolled right off onto the floor.

"Are you okay?"

Wow. He smelled really good. Like I wanted to put my face against his neck and just breathe him in until he was the only thing I could smell.

"Jae?"

I blinked, my name processing where his question hadn't. "I'm okay. I just slipped."

I didn't make a move to get up, and he didn't let go of me. Ten seconds became twenty, became thirty, and we still sat there, neither one of us making the first move. I was aware of his clothes soaking into mine, but even that couldn't make me move. I should have been uncomfortable, quick to get away, but I felt safe here. Protected.

I wet my lips, and his eyes dropped to my mouth. I had only a moment to realize what he was going to do, and then he was kissing me. His desperation poured into me, the need for something or someone to offer to take the pain away, to let him, for as long as possible, forget that he'd lost a friend and his life had irrevocably changed in a span of twenty-four hours.

Leaning into him, I held on to the front of his shirt, wanting more, wanting to do whatever I could to make this even the slightest bit more bearable for him. Then he pulled back, his eyes dark and breathing heavy. He didn't push me away, but I felt him distancing himself.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that." He tucked my hair behind my ear. "I came here to thank you, not take advantage of you."

"You're not," I assured him. "I'm an adult and fully capable of telling you no."

He shook his head. "I shouldn't be seeking comfort from a stranger."

"Knox," I said with a soft smile. He gave me a puzzled look. "My last name, it's Knox. I'm twenty-two and grew up here in South Houston. Now we're not strangers."

He laughed, but the pain and sadness never left his eyes.

I suddenly wanted that more than I'd wanted anything else. I wanted to chase those shadows away, even if only for a short while. I didn't care that he was famous and rich, or that we'd barely spoken. He was a good man, and he was hurting.

I'd never had sex because I didn't want it to be only about lust. It didn't need to be love, but I wanted to feel something more than just attraction.

Compassion was more than lust or attraction. A desire to give him some sliver of peace was more.

I stood up, and he let me go. A polite mask slipped onto his face, and I put my hand on his cheek, startling him enough for it to fall away again. "Let's get out of these wet clothes."

I held out my hand and waited to see what he would decide.

His palm slid across mine, and long, strong fingers curled as he stood. He looked down at me, his free hand cupping my chin and keeping me from turning away.

"Are you sure this is what you want?" His thumb ran along my bottom lip. "I'm not looking for a relationship."

I moved his hand to press my lips against his palm. He sucked in a breath, and I felt a surge of pride that I could make a man like him react that way. "Just tonight. No expectations. Nothing more than you accepting the comfort I'm offering."

He nodded, and I led him down the dark hallway to my bedroom. Jamie and I both kept battery-operated nightlights in our bedrooms to keep Kevin from being afraid when the electricity went out, and the soft blue glow was all the light we had as I shut the door behind us.

I reached for the bottom of his shirt, knowing that if I thought too much about it, I might have second thoughts, and none of them for any real reason, just the types of fears that came with overthinking. I pushed the wet material up, feeling the muscles in his stomach jump under my fingertips, and then his hands were there too, helping.

Peeling the shirt off, he dropped it to the floor and then reached into his pants pocket for his wallet. From it, he produced a condom and set it and the wallet on my nightstand.

Even in the dim light, I could see the ink on his skin. Initials – CRH – were over his heart with a pair of dates under the letters, and when he bent over, I could see an intricate cross ran the length of his spine and across his shoulders. I had a sudden urge to trace every line.

His eyes met mine and stayed there as he undid his jeans and let them fall to the floor too. I heard him kick them away, and then he reached for my shirt. Only after I'd removed my shorts did he let his gaze drop. I did the same, drinking in the sight of him, sculpted muscles, and the perfect amount

of hair. I followed the trail from his belly button down, my body clenching painfully when I reached that long, thick shaft. He was beautiful, every inch of him.

“May I touch you?” His voice was rough but low, a rumble that reminded me of distant thunder.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak, not when the air was thick with electricity and sex. My nerves were stretched wire-thin, and my body throbbed impatiently for what it had never experienced.

He placed a hand over my breast, the heat of his skin scorching me, burning through to the place where embers were building to flame. His other hand went around my waist to the small of my back, pulling me to him as his mouth covered mine. Every place our bodies touched made me come alive in a way I never expected. His cock was hard against my stomach, his lips soft against mine. The tip of his tongue flicked against the corner of my mouth, and I opened to him. His tongue swept inside, plundering, promising.

I lost myself in his kiss, his touch. My hands explored his body, wanting to memorize every inch of him because this would never happen again, and I never wanted to forget it. When he lowered me to my bed, he held his weight off me as he dropped a hand between my legs. I gasped at his touch, and he made a pleased sound, his mouth moving down my throat. Skilled fingers stroked a place where only mine had been before, and he brought me to orgasm faster than I’d ever reached a climax on my own.

The moment I came, he took my nipple in between his lips, each pull of his mouth seeming to take a direct line through my body to where a finger had slid inside me. He eased me through my orgasm before pushing back onto his heels. I heard a ripping sound, and then he was back.

“Is this what you want?”

My brain recognized that his question wasn’t merely about consent, but about making sure that I actually *wanted* this rather than simply being okay with it. I reached up to his face, and he turned his head, kissing my palm as I’d done to him. I ran my fingers through his wet hair and then down to the back of his neck.

“I want you.” I reached down between us, taking him in my hand.

“Fuck.” His eyes closed for a second, then opened, pupils so wide that only the barest hint of blue could be seen. “Jae...”

“It’s okay,” I said as I lined him up. “Take what you need from me. I want you to. I *need* you to.”

The last word became lost in a cry as he surged forward, burying himself completely. My nails dug into the back of his neck, and my entire body stiffened. My eyes closed, back arched, and everything stopped. No breath, no pulse. The entire world hung motionless for a moment...and then he said my name.

“Jae.” He pressed his face against my throat, teeth worrying at the skin there.

“Please, Damon.”

He pulled back, almost all the way, and then pushed forward again. Each stroke was slow and deep. I’d expected something fast and frantic, a desperate need for release that could only come in a rapid building to a sudden explosion. Instead, he undid me piece by piece until there was only him and me and the way we fit together.

I clung to him, nails leaving my own marks on his body as surely as he was marking me, branding me from the inside out, until I knew I’d feel him forever. I’d be bruised and aching tomorrow, long after the pleasure faded, but as he took me over the edge again, as he groaned my name and came, I knew I’d never regret it.

Twelve

Damon

The sound of someone moving around pulled me from sleep, and the disorientation continued even after I opened my eyes. I was in a bedroom that was smaller than my bathroom at home, and it definitely wasn't a hotel.

A lamp was on, but a faint glow through the curtains suggested that it was morning. I was in a bed I barely fit in, and if my brain was processing my situation correctly, I was naked.

Then I saw her, and it all came flooding back.

The frantic call from Kalini and the rush to the hospital.

Learning that one friend was dead and another badly injured.

The phone calls and talks with doctors.

But underneath all that horror and grief was the memory of Davin's concern and the flowers that'd been delivered to the office. The note offering a quiet place. A trip to Starla's Music where another kind woman gave me a warning and an address.

A warning that I was pretty sure didn't cover me having sex with her employee.

Those memories rushed through me as well. How kind Jae had been. The feel of her in my arms. The taste of red velvet and her. The way her eyes had darkened when she'd held out her hand to me. Her confidence when we'd undressed. Silk skin under my hands and moans of pleasure when I'd touched her. How she'd taken everything I'd given and asked for nothing in return. The way she'd fallen apart around me, beneath me.

Fuck.

I was getting hard just thinking about it.

I sat up, opening my mouth to suggest that she come back to bed so I could show her just how grateful I was for last night, but the moment she turned around, I knew that wasn't going to happen.

"Morning." Her voice and smile were polite, but I sensed that something was off, and I didn't think it was because she hadn't put on a shirt yet.

I'd never realized how sexy a simple cotton bra could be.

“Morning.” Damn, I sounded rough.

“I’d offer you a shower and coffee, but I’m in a bit of a rush.”

Her hair was damp, and her clothes were the sort of business casual that she’d been wearing when we’d first met, cluing me in to the fact that she probably had to go to work. As much as I would’ve enjoyed being with her again, I didn’t want her to get in trouble with Starla, especially considering how kind both of them had been to me.

“Not a problem.” I swung my legs over the side of the bed and bent down to grab my pants. “Thank you for last night. I don’t know how I would’ve handled being alone.”

I turned toward her as I buttoned and zipped my jeans, grimacing at the clammy feel of them against my skin. She wasn’t looking at me, instead rummaging in a tiny closet for something. My gaze immediately went to her ass, and my fingers flexed, wanting to feel those firm muscles again.

“Thank you for trusting me.” She straightened, cheeks flooding with color when she turned around and realized what I’d been doing. “I’m sure someone in your position has to be careful who he...spends time with.”

A moment stretched between us, surprising me with how comfortable it felt, but then she cleared her throat and shook her head.

“I really do need you to leave before Jamie wakes up.” She frowned. “I’m sorry, that was rude.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s okay. I understand.”

If this wasn’t the sort of thing she did often – and I was fairly certain I was right that she didn’t – I could see her not wanting to have to explain things to a roommate. I grabbed my shirt, putting it on as I followed her out of the bedroom.

I hadn’t seen much of the apartment last night, and now I realized there wasn’t much to see. It was nice, but small, especially for two people. Then a picture on the wall caught my eye. A kid. One with dark hair who looked enough like Jae for me to assume that he was related. Jamie. Not a roommate then, but a kid. Now her rushing me out made even more sense.

If I’d been dating her, finding out she had a kid would’ve bothered me, but this was just one night. A distraction from everything else that’d been going on in my life. A good one, but still only a distraction. Since she wasn’t asking me to meet her kid or trying to find out when she’d see me again, I felt safe in assuming that she really did understand this was it.

“Have a good day,” I said as I put on my shoes. I leaned down and kissed

her cheek. “And, again, thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She didn’t offer to walk me downstairs, and I didn’t ask.

This was the best way to end things, where all we had were good memories, and I didn’t have to let her down gently when she asked for more.

* * *

If I’d known I was going to stay the night with Jae, I would’ve taken the bag I kept in my car, if only to have a fresh change of clothes, but it was still early, and I needed a shower, so I went home. I didn’t linger, but I didn’t rush either. The doctors wouldn’t do their rounds for another hour, which meant I most likely wouldn’t learn anything new until then.

By the time I arrived at the hospital, I almost felt normal again. It was amazing what a change of clothes and strong coffee could do.

I went to Hawk’s room first. He was awake already, looking better than he had the last time I’d seen him, smiling as he talked to Kalini. I paused in the doorway, watching them for a moment. They looked good together, and I wondered if the accident would be enough to convince them to stop waiting around.

Before my lurking could become creepy, I gave the door a sharp rap. “Morning.”

“Hey!” Hawk grinned at me, then winced as the scrapes and cuts on his face stretched with the movement. “Damn. I hate that smiling hurts.” His expression darkened. “That was a shitty thing to say. I shouldn’t be smiling.”

Kalini took his hand, the set of her jaw saying that if I said anything about the gesture, she was going to kill me. Slowly.

“You do not get to feel bad because you survived.” Her voice was fierce. “Bair would kick your ass if he knew you were doing this.”

“She’s right,” I agreed, coming farther into the room. “And since he’s not here, I’ll do it for him if you don’t knock it off.”

“I can’t remember it,” he said, the words almost pouring from his mouth. “The accident. I remember getting in the car and then waking up here. Nothing between.”

“That may change.” Dr. Crawford came into the room, looking like he’d stepped out of a soap opera or something. “Or it may not.”

The look the doctor threw Kalini's way made me grit my teeth, but she'd told me more than once that she didn't want any of us guys fighting her battles, so I kept my mouth shut. Besides, with the way she was looking at Hawk, Doc Crawford wouldn't even register on her radar.

"I have good news," the doctor continued. "Everything has come back with good results, so I think we can start the paperwork to get you discharged today. Now, you'll still have to take it easy until those ribs heal. Don't push it."

"I'll make sure he doesn't," Kalini said. "I'll be there as long as he needs me."

The look on Hawk's face said it all. He was always going to need her.

"I'm going to go see Otis," I said, feeling like the odd man out. "Give me a call if either of you need anything at all."

"We will," Kalini answered for both of them. "Let Otis know we'll come see him before we leave."

"I will."

As I walked down the hall to the elevator, I knew that I needed to start making plans, calling people, getting questions answered about what came next.

I hadn't asked Bair's dad about a funeral or memorial service. Even though Bair had technically moved to Houston, the band traveled enough that I knew he'd still thought of Austin as home. The record label would most likely plan a memorial here, but I wanted to make sure Bair's family was okay with it before we made any official arrangements.

We'd have to figure out what to do about the band. It wasn't my primary concern, but I was going to make it my responsibility, not just because I was the one who'd put the band together, but because the others didn't need to worry about any of that. I'd make sure they were all taken care of.

When I reached the Intensive Care Unit, I stopped at the nurses' desk to make sure it was okay for me to see Otis. The head nurse said he was awake, but to keep the visit short. He still needed his rest.

"Ready to stop lazing around?" I asked as I walked into his room. "If you wanted a vacation, you could've just asked."

"Have you seen Hawk?" His voice was hoarse, and that somehow just made him look even worse.

"They're letting him go home today. Kalini's taking care of him." I crossed to the chair next to his bed. "I think they're finally going to move

past friendship.”

“About time.”

I nodded in agreement. “I won’t bother to ask how you’re feeling because you look like shit.”

“Thanks. You’re too kind.”

I kept up small talk for a bit, neither of us talking about Bair. Since Otis hadn’t asked about him, I was going with the assumption that someone had already told him what’d happened. Maybe I was being a coward, but I didn’t want to have to tell him. Making that call to Bair’s dad yesterday would haunt me for the rest of my life. I didn’t need to add telling Otis to my nightmares.

It wasn’t long before he started nodding off. After he’d jerked awake for the second time, I stood up.

“I’m going to head out. Kalini and Hawk plan on stopping in before they leave, but don’t force yourself to stay awake. I’ll check in tomorrow, but call me whenever you want, even if it’s just to talk because you’re bored.”

“Like I’d ever be that bored,” he mumbled, already half-asleep before he finished the sentence.

I checked my phone as I rode the elevator down to the lobby and saw that it was a little past twelve. My stomach growled, alerting me to the fact that I was hungry. I’d grabbed a protein bar when I’d gone home this morning, but I’d long since burned away those calories. It wasn’t until I reached into my pocket and got my car keys that I realized something was off. By the time I reached my car, I’d figured out what it was.

I didn’t have my wallet.

I sat in my car, running through my morning until I realized that the last time I’d seen it hadn’t been this morning, but last night. In Jae’s bedroom.

She’d said she was going to work, but I didn’t know if she came home for lunch, or if she had a babysitter watching her son, so it made sense to stop by the apartment first rather than the store. Besides, I was too restless to do anything else at the moment.

Luck, it seemed, was with me since a minute after I knocked, the door opened partway. The woman looking at me with suspicion had curls and was slender where Jae was curvy, but the resemblance was unmistakable. Before I could say anything, her light blue eyes widened, and recognition dawned.

“You’re Damon Holden.”

I smiled. “I am. I was here last night, with Jae.”

“Shit.” The curse was low, but then she glanced behind her, guilt flashing across her face.

“Mommy!”

A little boy’s voice came from behind her, changing my assumptions from this morning. The kid had called this young woman *mommy*. Her, not Jae.

“I don’t want to bother you,” I said, pushing aside the other thoughts. Jae’s personal life wasn’t any of my business. “I left my wallet here.”

The young woman gave me a hard look, then seemed to come to a decision. A moment later, she unhooked the chain lock and opened the door. “Come in. I’m Jamie, Jae’s sister.”

Jamie. Sister and nephew to Jae, who lived here with her. That’d teach me to make assumptions.

“I’m guessing it’s in her bedroom since I haven’t seen it out here.” Jamie went over to where a dark-haired boy sat at the same kitchen table I’d sat at last night. “Kevin, you wait here. I’ve got to get something from Aunt Jae’s room.”

I grinned at the kid, and he beamed back. He was going to be a heartbreaker when he got older. I’d never seriously thought about having kids, but every once in a while, when I saw one like him, I wondered what it would be like to be a dad.

Jamie returned from the bedroom after only a few seconds and came over to hand me the wallet. When I went to take it, she kept her hold on the other side, her eyes narrowing.

“I’m hoping this means you used protection.”

She wasn’t talking loud enough for the kid to hear, but there was no mistaking the intensity in her voice.

“We did.”

“If you hurt my sister, I’ll cut off your balls and hang them on our Christmas tree.”

“Noted.” She let go of my wallet, and I put it in my pocket. “Jae is an amazing woman.”

“She is,” Jamie agreed. She looked away and then looked back at me again. “Did you...did you make it good for her?”

I blinked. Not the question I’d been expecting.

She flushed, but her embarrassment didn’t change the stubborn set to her jaw. “Her first time. It should have been good for her. She deserved that. Did

you make sure she enjoyed it?”

First time?

It hit me with an almost physical punch. Jae had been a virgin.

Fuck.

Thirteen

Jae

Tuesdays had never been very busy, which meant I'd spent most of the day here by myself. Today, I was especially grateful for that. I enjoyed the solitude on regular days, but I knew that if Starla had been here for more than a few minutes, she would've figured out that something had happened to me last night.

As it was, I'd almost held my breath when she'd come in a few minutes ago, but she'd gone back to her office after greeting me and making sure I didn't need anything. She'd be gone for probably another twenty minutes or so, which gave me plenty of time to worry about what to say when she inevitably asked why I couldn't stop smiling.

Sure, I'd had a bit of panic this morning when I'd woken up next to Damon, and the reality of what I'd done had hit me. Funnily enough, it hadn't been the losing my virginity part of things that had had me scrambling to get in the shower, but rather the knowledge that if I hadn't been able to get Damon out before Jamie had woken up, I would have had a lot of explaining to do, especially since Kevin wouldn't have been around yet to interrupt any delicate questions.

I didn't regret what I'd done, but I wasn't ready yet to talk about it, not even with my sister.

The bell above the door dinged, and I looked up from where I'd been doodling on a piece of paper. The greeting died before it left my lips, the sight of Damon Holden walking toward me short-circuiting my thought process. As he came closer, I realized that he wasn't smiling. He didn't look angry, but there was something serious about his expression. My first thought was that something had happened to one of the other members of his band, but I didn't see new grief in his eyes.

"Hey." I mentally kicked myself for that eloquent statement.

"Hi." He leaned on the counter, then straightened. "Is it okay if we talk for a minute?"

"Sure."

Now I was worried. Maybe after having the day to think things over, he wondered if I was going to be weird about what'd happened. Weird, or something worse. I'd never heard about him having problems with exes, but just because I hadn't heard it didn't mean it hadn't happened.

"I'm not sure how to say this other than just to be blunt about it." He scratched the back of his head, like he needed something to do but didn't know what. "Why didn't you tell me you were a virgin?"

My jaw dropped, and I gaped at him. Of all the possible things that he could've said, *that* question had been nowhere even close to my list.

"How...what...shit." I flushed. "I'm not expecting anything from you, and you didn't pressure me into anything. It just felt...right, in a way that it hadn't ever seemed before."

He studied my face for a moment and then relaxed. "I wasn't prying or snooping. I forgot my wallet in your room, so I went back to your apartment to get it."

I didn't need him to finish the explanation. "Jamie told you." I barely kept the groan that was building inside me from escaping.

"She wanted to know if I'd made it good for you."

I heard the unspoken question, and it just made my face burn hotter. "I didn't fake anything, if that helps."

"Good." He grinned. "She may or may not have also threatened to remove certain body parts and use them as holiday decorations if I hurt you."

I sighed. "I'm the big sister, but she's always been worried that someone was going to hurt me somehow."

"Her son's father?"

I nodded. "She's never talked about who Kevin's dad was, but since he's never been in the picture, we've always assumed that things ended badly between them. Probably a one-night stand at a party or something like that because she'd never mentioned a boyfriend."

"If you ever find out his name, let me know because I'd like to kick his ass for not accepting responsibility."

The words might've seemed flippant coming from someone I didn't know that well, but Damon was one of the most genuine people I'd ever met. That sincerity made me want to be honest too.

"Thank you," I said, "for asking me instead of making assumptions and getting pissed off."

It was nice to know that my judgment of his character was holding true.

Maybe I didn't have awful taste in men. Spencer had been a mistake, and one that had burned me for a long time, but if nothing else, Damon proved that there were good guys out there and that I could recognize one when I saw him.

I just wished I'd figured that out before I'd gone out with Spencer. It'd been more than three years ago, and I was still dealing with him being an asshole. I couldn't help wondering just how things would've been different if I'd turned him down the first time he'd asked me out.

Fourteen

Damon

What sort of people had Jae been around if she felt like she needed to thank me for not getting angry and yelling at her for not telling me about being a virgin? It wasn't like I'd shared my sexual history with her before we'd gone to bed. Honestly, the only reason I'd brought it up to her at all was because I'd been worried that I'd been too rough with her.

And now she was frowning. Just a little frown, but enough of one to make me curious.

“What are you thinking about?”

She blinked, coming back from wherever her mind had gone. “My ex. He was a real jerk, that's all.”

That's all? After she'd acted like it was strange for me to have treated her with respect and acted rationally? I almost asked her to explain, but then I saw her gaze go over my shoulder, and her entire body went stiff.

I half-turned, following where she was looking. In the parking lot was a guy who had *sleazebag* written all over him. I'd been around enough squealing fans to recognize that he was good-looking, but that smirk on his face made me want to knock out a few teeth.

“Is that him?”

“Yes.”

My Dad and Davin would have my ass if I went out and punched a guy in the face without him throwing the first punch, and the record label had enough to deal with right now without me adding any antics to the mix. Which meant my original impulse needed to be curbed.

But that didn't mean I couldn't do something to wipe that smarmy expression off his face.

I leaned over the counter, wrapping my hand around the back of Jae's neck to pull her toward me until our lips met. I kept the kiss soft and public-appropriate, but the zing of electricity that went through me was anything but appropriate. I let her go far sooner than I liked, not wanting to press my luck.

“I probably should have asked first,” I said.

“I had time to stop you if I hadn’t wanted you to.” Her cheeks were stained pink, and her eyes sparkled.

It’d been too dark last night for me to see her reactions this well, and I wondered what it would be like to make love to her when I could see everything. Every inch of soft skin bare for my pursual. And no one else had ever gotten to see or touch her as intimately as I had. Not even the asshole ex.

The moment I heard the bell above the door ring, I knew it was him. Even if I hadn’t guessed he’d be pissed about my little show, the expression on Jae’s face would’ve been enough to tell me.

“I wouldn’t bother with the tease. She doesn’t put out. I can direct you to some of my better leftovers.”

I turned toward him, ready to gently escort him back to the parking lot and hope that he put up a fight, so I’d have an excuse to knock him on his ass, but Jae put her hand on my arm.

“He’s not worth it.”

“What did you say, bitch?” He came farther into the store, his face red.

“Watch it—” I took a step forward despite Jae’s warning hand, but I didn’t have to go any farther than that because, at that moment, Starla emerged from the back room.

“Get out.” She pointed at the ex.

“Fuck off, dyke.”

“I’m going to kick his ass,” I was half a step ahead of Starla.

“No. Jae, take Damon to the back while I deal with this.”

Starla’s voice didn’t leave much room for debate, and I wasn’t about to insult her by acting as if she couldn’t handle things, no matter how much I hated not laying the bastard out.

“Just yell if you need either of us,” I said, reluctantly following Jae into the back of the store.

Starla didn’t even look back at us, but I doubted Jae would’ve left her alone with the ex if Starla would be in danger. The insults and obscenities cut off suddenly, and I wondered if it was because he’d stopped talking or if Starla had shut him up, but Jae didn’t seem worried or even curious.

When we ducked into a small room that appeared to be part storage closet and part breakroom, she closed the door behind us and leaned against it.

“Sorry about antagonizing him.” I wasn’t sorry for kissing her, but I was sorry that it’d had the results it did.

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry,” she said. “Spencer’s parents own the

jewelry store in the plaza, and sometimes he decides this is a better way to spend his time when he's supposed to be working."

Hell. No.

"Why haven't you or Starla called the cops on him yet?" I held up a hand as I realized how demanding that question sounded. "Sorry. That came out far too harsh. It just surprises me that, after how Starla was just now, that she hasn't done anything."

Jae looked away, and it clicked.

"You asked her not to."

She looked back at me, her eyes narrowing. "He has money, okay? Not like you and your family, but enough that I'd be lucky not to be the one arrested. Besides, he hasn't physically threatened me. All he's done is run his mouth."

"There are anti-stalking laws," I said. "I can give you the number of a good lawyer."

"Don't." She reached out and touched my arm. "It's not that I don't appreciate you wanting to help me, but that's the kind of uphill battle I just can't take on. Not right now, anyway."

I closed the rest of the distance between us to put us close enough for me to feel the heat radiating from her. She tilted her head back so that we could see each other's faces, and the urge to kiss her surprised me with its intensity.

"Then tell me what I *can* do to help."

"Nothing," she said with a sigh. "Not unless you can make me forget the last fifteen minutes happened."

I grinned, letting my intentions show on my face as I leaned down to put my lips next to her ear. "Challenge accepted." I lightly bit down on her earlobe, my stomach clenching when she sucked in a breath. "Anytime you want me to stop, just say the word. You're in charge."

She shivered, and I pressed my lips against the side of her neck. Damn, she was responsive, her combination of innocence and sensuality a heady mix. How many ways could I make her scream and beg and writhe, if I only had the time?

As I moved my mouth down her throat until I had to nudge aside the collar of her shirt to get to skin, one of my hands was between us, working on the button and zipper of her pants. She gasped, either from the way my teeth were worrying at the space where her shoulder and neck met, or the fact that my hand had found its way past her waistband. Whatever the reason, the

sound made my cock harden.

I ignored it. This wasn't about me. She'd taken care of me last night, and now I was going to take care of her.

My middle finger slid between her lips, brushing over her clit with feather-light touches. I had no plan to draw this out, but if I moved too fast, the friction I planned to use to make her come would be painful. With short strokes, I teased her clit until it began to swell, and my finger became slick with natural lubricant.

"That's my girl," I murmured the words, hardly aware of what I was saying or what I meant. At the moment, it felt right. I'd worry about any misunderstandings later. "Let me make you feel good."

She nodded, one of her hands coming up to grab my shoulder. Her breath glided across my skin as she panted, stifling every sound but the softest of moans and whimpers.

"It's all right," I continued, adding my ring finger to my middle one so I could rub them on either side of her clit. "I've got you. You're safe. You can come whenever you want to."

Her hips rocked against my hand, the sweetest mewling noises coming from her. I could feel the tension in her body building with each pass of my fingers.

"You're in control, Jae. Come on my fingers if that's what you want. Tell me how you want me to touch you."

"There, there." Her hand moved to the back of my neck, nails digging in as she ground down on my hand.

Crying out my name, she climaxed, and I decided in that moment that I wanted more of whatever this was. I didn't know what that meant other than the fact that I was determined that this wouldn't be the last time I saw what she looked like when she orgasmed. The next time, however, I wanted my face between her legs when it happened.

Fifteen

Jae

My head was tingly. Wait, no, *everything* was tingly.

I started to wonder why it was dark and then realized my eyes were closed.

And then I remembered *why*.

Fuck.

I opened my eyes and found Damon hadn't moved. In fact, his hand on my waist was the only thing keeping me steady. When I smiled and nodded, he gently kissed me, and then took a step back to give me room to breathe.

I moved to one of the chairs as he went to the sink to wash his hands. I needed to go to the restroom and clean up, but my knees were too shaky at the moment to trust. I wouldn't need long to recover, but I'd do it better sitting.

Before the silence could get awkward, Starla opened the door, her expression unreadable. Her gaze shifted from me to Damon and back again.

"I kicked Spencer out and told him if he stepped foot on my premises again, I'd press charges, but that's not going to stop him from hanging out in the parking lot."

I was grateful she hadn't commented on the fact that I probably looked guilty as hell. As much as I'd needed it, I shouldn't have let Damon do that to me when I was at work.

As if she knew what I was thinking – and our friendship suggested that was highly likely – she gave me a small smile.

"I'd rather you not be here if I have to call the cops," she said. "You only have forty-five minutes left of your shift, but I want you to leave now. You'll get paid for the full hour, and it won't come off your sick days."

"I don't want to leave you hanging," I protested.

"You're not." Her voice was firm. "None of this is on you. Don't put the blame on anyone but that asshole. Understand me?"

I nodded, my eyes burning with unshed tears. I hated that I'd brought this into my friend's world, into her place of business. I wasn't responsible for

Spencer's actions, but if I hadn't been stupid enough to date him, none of this would've been happening. Nothing she could say would change it.

"I mean it, Jae." She crouched in front of me and took my hands. "When I was your age, I was living with a boyfriend who used to abuse me. I made all sorts of excuses for him, blamed myself. It wasn't until he broke my arm that I left him, but he kept coming after me. It took him nearly killing me for him to get arrested and put away for assault. I'm not letting it get that bad for you."

"Starla." I didn't know what to say, so I leaned forward and hugged her. "I'm so sorry that happened to you."

"It's in the past," she said as she pulled back. "I'm more concerned about your future. I need you to go home and be safe. I've already called the people who did our security camera, and they're going to come out and install two more in the store and two outside. We get him on tape hanging around, harassing you, and it's no longer your word against his."

"I hate that you think you have to do this."

She stood. "No apologies, no blaming yourself. I should have done this months ago."

"I'll drive her home."

I'd forgotten that Damon was here. "You don't have to do that."

He put his hand on my shoulder. "Spencer could be looking for your car." Shit. He was right.

"Okay." I didn't like it, but I wasn't going to make this worse for them. If this made them feel better, I'd agree to it.

Besides, my nerves weren't settled enough yet for me to feel comfortable driving any time soon.

"There's a back door that we use to take out the trash," Starla said to Damon. "Bring your car around there. That way, if Spencer's watching, he'll just assume you left alone."

Damon nodded and went back out front.

"I like that one," Starla said, watching him go. "He's a good man, Jae."

She left then, giving me time to attempt to collect my thoughts.

She was right about Damon. He was nothing like any man I'd ever met before. Strong, both physically and in his personality, but not overbearing. Funny but not flippant. Confident, but not arrogant or condescending. He didn't make apologies for what he wanted but didn't force his desires on others. At ease with fame, but personable. Protective, but willing to let people

stand on their own two feet.

There had to be flaws somewhere because no one was that perfect, but everything I'd seen so far had pointed toward a man who was worth getting to know, and I hadn't met many of those.

I still had those thoughts running around in my head when we pulled up in front of my building, and perhaps that was why, on impulse, I blurted out an invitation.

"Would you like to have dinner with me?" He looked surprised, but not put off, which prompted me to add, "Well, it wouldn't be just me. Jamie and Kevin will be there too, but you've already met them."

"I have." He smiled. "If you're sure..."

"I am."

"Then I'd love to." He moved the car into a parking space. "Your sister won't mind?"

"I doubt it. We don't have people over, so she'll be surprised, but I don't think she'll mind."

I knew my sister well. When we got to the apartment, and I invited Damon in, she reacted pretty much the way I'd imagined she would. Widened eyes and raised eyebrows, but she greeted Damon with a smile. When I walked by, though, she grabbed my arm.

"You and I are going to have a talk when the freaking lead singer of Holden leaves, starting with you answering the question of why you didn't tell me you had sex with Damon freaking Holden?"

If Kevin hadn't been in the living room, her language would've been a lot more colorful. Our conversation was going to be interesting, to say the least. I liked that she seemed to approve of Damon – she wouldn't have let him anywhere near Kevin if she didn't – but I hoped she wasn't reading too much into it.

There was no need for both of us to be disappointed if this was as far as things would go.

Sixteen

Damon

I'd never spent much time with kids, but Kevin was easy to like. I hadn't hesitated to accept Jae's invitation, not ready for my time with her to be over, even if it wasn't going to be just the two of us.

I'd liked my first interaction with Jamie, and my positive opinion of her grew the more I watched her with Jae and with Kevin. I knew she was younger than Jae, which meant she'd most likely been a teenager when she'd had her son. Even though Jae clearly loved her nephew and he listened to her, Jamie was the parent, and Jae didn't interfere.

Watching the three of them interact made me realize that money wasn't the only difference between our families, and I couldn't help but be a little jealous of what they had.

As our night came to a close, I took Jae's hand, and she walked me downstairs, still smiling at how Kevin had insisted he wasn't tired even as his head had been nodding. I hadn't wanted to make it harder for Jamie to put him to bed, so I'd been the one to suggest it was time for me to go, even if I wasn't quite ready to leave Jae's presence yet. She soothed me in a way no one else ever had.

"Are you working tomorrow?" I asked.

"Until six," she said. "Starla's going to be there the whole time since we have some inventory to go through, so you don't need to worry about me being there alone."

"Am I that obvious?"

"Sometimes." She chuckled. "What about you? Plans for tomorrow?"

The weight of my almost-forgotten grief landed on my shoulders again. "I have to talk to some people about what's going to happen with the band."

"Do you have to be the one to do it?" She put her hand on my chest as we stopped by the front doors. "It doesn't seem fair to expect you to do it all."

"Thank you." I put my hand over hers. "For caring. For helping me these last two days. I don't know how I would've gotten through any of it without you."

She blushed. “You would’ve been fine.”

I put a hand on her cheek. “I mean it, Jae. If I hadn’t gotten that card from you, I don’t know where I would’ve gone after the hospital yesterday. I know I wouldn’t have gotten any sleep. Being with you kept me sane.”

“You call or stop by anytime,” she said. “If you ever need to, you can reach out to me.”

I bent my head and brushed my lips across hers, a kiss far briefer and more chaste than I wished it to be. If I could do anything I wanted right now, it would be to take her home with me and pretend that the outside world didn’t exist.

I stepped back, unsettled by the strength of the desire to act on that impulse. Even when I’d dated in the past, I’d never felt an urge to spend that much time with a woman before.

“Have a good night,” I said as I forced myself to step outside.

The muggy heat had broken with yesterday’s storm, but this was still August in Texas, so it wasn’t exactly cool. The air-conditioning at home sounded good, but I wasn’t ready to be alone. At some point, I’d want to be alone to think, but I wasn’t there yet.

Deklin was in Tahiti with his new girlfriend, Sofi, and I wasn’t about to talk to my dad. I considered going to see Jude and Cynthia, but then I remembered how good it had been to talk to Davin yesterday. Our personalities had always been different enough that we’d never been the natural friends some siblings were, but the differences had always allowed us to get along without butting heads since we’d never competed with each other.

I texted him first, not wanting to drive to his place if he was at the office, or vice versa. To my surprise, he was already home. Since I already had the codes to his security system, he told me to come in on my own because he was heading to the shower after his workout. The fact that he didn’t say that he was busy told me I’d made the right choice of where to go.

I called his name when I came inside just to let him know I was there, but when he didn’t answer, I figured he was still in the shower. He’d moved in here only a couple years ago, and since I’d rarely had a reason to come here, I hadn’t really looked around much. That would keep me occupied while I waited.

This place was huge. Not as massive as Grandad’s house, but at least ten thousand square feet. Why Davin needed all this space when it was just him,

and he was barely ever here, I didn't know. I supposed he could've been thinking of starting a family someday, but it would've shocked me to hear of it.

He'd never struck me as the kind of man who cared much about that sort of thing. The wife and kid part of family, at least. Maybe he'd learned from Dad that if he wanted to put his entire focus into work, it'd be better not to have anything else requiring his attention.

I wandered through the library, impressed but not surprised by his vast collection. I'd always appreciated literature from an artistic point of view, but I'd never been much of a reader. Deklin read a decent amount, but I often wondered how much of it was because Grandad and Davin liked to read. Growing up, it had been common at family events to see Davin sitting in a corner with a book.

Dad had hated it. If Davin was going to read, Dad wanted it to be the Bible and non-fiction from his select list of approved religious figures, not the murder mysteries and crime thrillers that Davin had always gravitated toward.

Across from the library was Davin's in-home office, but I just peeked in and moved on rather than taking a closer look. I didn't know much about the family business, and I didn't want to risk messing something up.

As I closed his office door and turned, I saw that the hallway didn't dead-end like I'd originally thought. A small corridor next to the library led me to another door. I was no architect, but I thought the room must've been tucked away, maybe a panic room for the original owner. Now intrigued, I opened the door...

And my jaw dropped.

What. The. Fuck.

I was still standing in the doorway half a minute later when Davin appeared behind me.

"You know, Grandad would say to close your mouth or you'll start catching flies."

My jaw snapped shut, and I turned, guilt immediately hitting me even though I hadn't done anything wrong. Davin didn't sound upset, but he'd always been the type of man who kept his emotions close to the chest.

"Go ahead in." He jerked his chin toward the room. When I didn't move, he stepped past me. "Seriously, Damon, it's okay."

I followed him, looking around at the small room. Well, relatively small.

Compared to the other rooms in this house, it was small. The more I looked at it, though, the more I realized that it was actually a little bigger than Jae's bedroom.

That was where the comparison ended, though, because nothing else was even close to the room where I'd woken up this morning. Aside from the fact that there was a bed in this room, there were no similarities at all, including the type of bed he had.

Tall posts at each corner with hooks and metal rings at the top. What looked like leather cuffs at each corner. A padded piece of furniture sat at the end of the bed, but it didn't really look like a bench or any other thing I'd ever seen in a bedroom before.

Then there were the handcuffs and other sorts of restraints laid out on the top of a chest of drawers. The walls were bare, but I had no doubt those drawers held some pretty interesting items.

"Well," I broke the silence. "This wasn't what I'd expected when I decided to check out your house while I was waiting for you."

That got a chuckle. "No, I suppose not."

"So, you're into S&M?" I asked. It felt a little weird, asking my brother a question like that, but it was definitely a distraction from everything else.

"That's one name for it," he said. "I went to a club with a date on my twenty-first birthday. It just...clicked." He gestured for me to go with him out of the room. "Want a beer?"

"Sure." I followed him. "You went to a club here in Houston?"

"I did. It's not around anymore, but there's another one I go to now when I need to let off some steam."

It was funny. While this was technically a whole new side to my brother, the more I thought about it, the more questions he answered, the more it made sense.

And the more I wanted to know.

Seventeen

Jae

Jamie was sitting on the couch when I entered the apartment, and I knew we were about to have the talk that she'd promised me earlier. A part of me had been hoping that she'd still be in with Kevin, and I'd be able to have a night to think about things before she started with her questions.

With her being right there, though, it would've been rude of me to try to brush her off, especially since I'd brought this man into our home, not only once, but twice. Three times if I counted him coming back for his wallet.

"I'm guessing there's a story as to how you went from 'I sold a guitar to the lead singer of Holden' to 'I lost my virginity to Damon Holden.'" She tucked her feet up under her on the couch. "I'd like to hear it."

"Well, you know that I went to work yesterday after we saw the news about Bair Appleton," I began.

I explained how Starla had convinced me to deliver flowers to Holden Enterprises and about the comment I'd added to the card. How it'd brought Damon here when he hadn't been able to face going home. I didn't go into detail about the sex itself, but I gave her enough that she knew it'd been my idea to have sex. I didn't want her thinking that Damon had taken advantage of me.

"And today?" she asked when I ended with getting him out of the apartment this morning. "After he came back for his wallet?"

"He came to the store." I leaned over and poked her arm. "Seems someone let it slip that he'd been my first."

She had the grace to look embarrassed. "I just wanted to make sure that he took care of you. How was I supposed to know that you hadn't told him?"

"He was cool about it," I assured her. "He asked me why I didn't tell him, but other than that, he didn't yell or accuse me of tricking him or anything like that."

"Good," Jamie said. "I told him if he hurt you, I'd cut off his balls and use them as Christmas decorations."

I laughed. "He mentioned something like that."

She shrugged. “He’s hot, rich, and famous. Someone had to put him in his place.”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s a good guy, Jamie. I mean, a *really* good guy.”

“I think so too,” she admitted. “And I was glad to see you bring him here, officially introduce him to us.”

“This accident has hit him really hard,” I said. “I mean, it’s more than just the loss of a friend and two being injured. I think he feels responsible. Like if he’d been there, he could have stopped it.”

“That’s crazy,” Jamie said. “The tire blew. Having another person in the car wouldn’t have changed that.”

“Maybe he thinks he should have picked them up at the airport, or that they would’ve taken a different car.” I pulled my hair out of my ponytail. “My heart just breaks for him, Jamie.”

“But that’s not all it is, right? This isn’t just some sympathy thing.”

I considered downplaying my answer, but this was Jamie. I could always be honest with her. “No, it’s not.”

“Good.” She leaned forward and squeezed my hand. “I hope you plan on seeing him again. I like the two of you together.”

“He’s not looking for a relationship, and I’m not going to be that woman, the one who thinks that just because we had sex, we’re a thing.”

She smiled as she stood up. “I don’t know, Jae. I wouldn’t count him out.”

Her words echoed in my head while I showered and followed me into bed. They were still dancing around when I finally fell asleep.

His hands were hot and his mouth hotter, all burning my skin as he explored every inch of my body. Teeth nipped and scraped, making me squirm and writhe, surprising me with how much I enjoyed the edge that it gave the pleasure.

A part of me wanted him to bite harder.

Two thick fingers slid inside me, twisting and curling as his thumb stroked my clit. With one hand, he drove me toward climax, but I didn’t want to come on his hand. I wanted something thicker. Longer.

I rolled onto my stomach, moving up on my knees, silently begging him to fuck me. He laughed, and the sound caressed my skin like liquid silk. His fingers on my hips were my only warning before he slammed into me, driving all the air from my lungs. He gave me no chance to catch my breath, no chance to think. Taking me hard and fast, he became my anchor, holding me

on Earth while sending me skyrocketing into space.

My body began to shake, unable to handle a single sensation more, but he didn't let up, pushing me over the edge again and again until all I could do was hold on and hope that I survived...

Eighteen

Damon

When I'd stepped into the lobby, I'd expected to be taken to a conference room where PR and the legal department would give me a run-down. I'd be doing it alone since Cathy's doctor had forbidden her from taking part in this meeting. Well, she'd actually been given a choice. She could come to the meeting, or she could go to Bair's memorial service tomorrow, not both. I'd touched base with her this morning to make sure I could properly represent the interests of the entire band and didn't doubt that I'd be able to handle anything.

As I sat down across from Z Christensen – the label's president – I had to admit that I was impressed that he was directly involved. In his mid-fifties, Z was class personified, from the distinguished silver in his black hair to the tastefully expensive suit he wore. Next to me was his sister-in-law, Haje Alcala, vice president of the label, looking just as polished.

"First, let me say how sorry I am about Bair," Z said. "Losing a friend like that is always difficult."

"We've already reached out to his family to let them know we'll pay for his funeral costs," Haje said, her dark eyes troubled. "We're not making that public knowledge but wanted you to know since we assumed you'd most likely be looking to help them financially as well."

"Thank you," I said, surprised by their generosity. The Houston memorial service was being sponsored by the label, but since Bair's death hadn't been the fault of the label or something that had happened at a show, I hadn't expected anything else. Especially since it wasn't like any of us were underpaid to begin with.

"We've also set up a fund to cover anything Otis needs during his recovery," Haje added. "Anything the insurance doesn't cover. Bills. Basic living expenses. The same for Hawk."

My expression must've given away my shock because Z gave me a sad smile.

"When I was nineteen, a friend of mine got signed to a label, and

everything he got in those first couple checks went to his family and to help his community. Then he got sick. The label declared him in violation of his contract, dropped him from their insurance, and then demanded he pay back what they'd given him." Z shook his head. "After he died, his parents couldn't afford a casket to bury him in. They ended up having to sell their house because the company came after them for the money since he'd bought the house for them."

"Bastards."

"First thing I did when I got this label going was promise myself I'd never screw over my artists like that. Second thing I did was drive that label out of business and take those money-hungry sons of bitches for every penny."

"How is this not public knowledge?" I asked, trying to figure out why I'd never heard this story before.

"Because I made everyone sign an NDA, and they knew I'd ruin them if they broke it." Z grinned, but there was very little humor in that smile.

"We've also made anonymous donations to everyone else injured in the accident." Haje brought the conversation back to the present.

The fact that they'd kept the label's name out of it made my respect for the two of them grow. No one would've thought badly of them if they'd simply done it quietly but still acknowledged that the money was coming from them.

Haje continued, "We also wanted to let you know what we were doing to reassure you that, no matter what ends up happening with the band, we're going to do right by all of you."

"We held an emergency meeting yesterday evening," Z said. "Haje, myself, legal, PR, HR, and our top investors. A lot of options were discussed, but we didn't decide anything because you deserve to have a voice in this as well."

They'd already gone above and beyond what most other labels would've done in this situation, but I had a feeling I wouldn't like at least a few of the suggestions that were coming.

"Some of our people wanted to start looking for replacements on Friday, then bring you and Kalini in to begin rehearsals on Monday so you could pick up the tour in two weeks without missing a show."

Only the fact that I could hear the anger in Z's voice kept me from saying anything yet.

“Z and I told them in no uncertain terms that we would *not* be doing that,” Haje said, the edge to her words telling me she felt the same. “We, and several others, felt that canceling through the beginning of October would be the best place to start. Of course, we’d offer refunds for those who’ve purchased tickets, and probably add in something else as a bonus.”

I nodded, hating the idea of disappointing fans, but knowing that the true fans would understand. Bair’s death had hit them hard too.

“If there’s anything you want me specifically to do or donate, just ask,” I said. “Memorabilia, autographs. If you want me to call people to personally thank them, I’ll do it.”

Z and Haje exchanged glances.

“There was something we wanted to talk to you about,” Z said. “Tomorrow at the service, we’d like you to say a few words.”

I’d actually anticipated that, though it didn’t make the idea of sharing any easier. Put me in front of people at a concert, and I was fine, but I didn’t know if I could handle telling people about my friend and how much I missed him. I was still processing it myself.

But I wasn’t even going to consider saying no.

“Of course.”

“We also wanted to ask if you would be the voice of the band when it comes to the press. No party line we want you to keep to. Anything you don’t know an answer to, you can say that. We just don’t want anyone thinking that we’re trying to hide something. There’s no conspiracy here, and we don’t want people making one up just because we’re trying to respect the privacy of our artists.”

I could see how much she didn’t like asking it of me, but I understood where she was coming from and agreed with the principle behind it. People had been in shock, and reporting about what’d happened had fed that. Now, people wanted to know more. Specifically, *how* it’d happened.

Had the tire been faulty? Had the person responsible for the maintenance of the vehicle missed a problem with the car? Had there been something on the road that should have been removed by a third party? I’d heard those questions being bandied around on the radio while I’d been on my way here. I had no doubt they’d be out in full force tomorrow at the memorial.

“I’ll do it,” I agreed. “If Bair’s family is okay with it.”

“They are,” Haje said. “I asked them when I called about covering the funeral costs. They agreed and said that they hoped you would do it because

they trusted you and liked you.” Her smile was tight. “They said Bair had always spoken highly of you.”

My gut twisted. I hadn’t known that Bair had ever talked to his dad or brothers about me. I’d been such a shitty friend.

Z leaned forward. “Now, the other options we discussed. From what we’ve heard about Hawk’s injuries, he’ll probably be fully recovered by September, but it still remains to be seen how long it will be before Otis is able to think about traveling again.”

“I don’t think any of us are ready to even think beyond tomorrow,” I said honestly. “And I don’t think the physical recovery is all that will come into play. I’m sure there’s going to be some serious issues with travel, not just for Otis and Hawk, but Kalini too. She was right there when it happened.”

Haje winced, the compassion on her face clear. “Of course, we won’t rush any of you into anything. We’ll call to check in, and at some point, we’ll ask for a meeting to discuss things. If any of them happen to ask you, please let them know that.”

“I will.”

We chatted for a few more minutes, but the important stuff had already been covered. Until the others were up to making decisions about the future, there wasn’t really anything else for us to discuss.

After leaving, I ran through a drive-thru, eating on my way to the hospital. Even if Otis’s ex-wife had visited a couple times, I wanted to visit, let him know that I was here for him. When I reached his room, it wasn’t his ex who was there, though. It was Kalini and Hawk.

“You look better than the last time I saw you,” I said to Hawk as I leaned against the empty bed next to Otis. “Probably helps not being interrupted by nurses every couple hours.”

“Definitely an improvement in care.” Hawk glanced at Kalini, who blushed.

“That is so unfair,” Otis complained. “You get to have Kalini cooking for you, taking care of you, and I get a sponge bath from a nurse who looks like my Uncle Alphonso.”

“Ouch.” Kalini laughed.

I agreed. We’d all seen pictures of Uncle Alphonso.

“How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Not too bad,” he said. “These are some seriously good drugs.”

After a few minutes of the sort of casual talk that had always helped us

distress after rough shows, Kalini asked the question.

“Did you meet with the label?”

“I did. They want me to say something at the memorial service tomorrow.” I started with that and then moved on to the rest, knowing that absolutely nothing about this conversation was going to be easy, but it was necessary.

The world hadn’t stopped because of our tragedy, and one day soon, we would have to figure out where we were going next.

Nineteen

Jae

Work had been blissfully quiet all day. Just enough customers to keep me from being bored, but not so many that I felt frazzled. I'd also made a few pretty good sales, which I pointed out to Starla every time she teased me about staring off into space every now and then.

I couldn't help it. The dream I'd had last night had been so vivid, so intense that my body still tightened every time I thought about it. I'd actually climaxed hard enough to wake me up, and my muscles had trembled for nearly a quarter of an hour after. I'd almost been too nervous to go back to sleep because I hadn't known if I'd have the same kind of dream, and as much as I'd enjoyed it, I dreaded another one. I'd meant it when I'd told Jamie that I didn't think Damon was looking for a relationship. I didn't want to hope for something I could never get.

When I wasn't helping customers or trying not to think about my dream, I was wondering how Damon was doing. Starla'd had the television on most of the day, and I knew it was in part because she knew I'd want to keep tabs on what was going on. The network coverage on Holden had lessened, but the announcement about Bair Appleton's memorial service tomorrow had given the news and entertainment outlets plenty to talk about. There'd been plenty of speculation about what the band was going to do next, but no official word.

"How long do you think it will take Spencer to start coming around again?" I asked as Starla came out of the back and leaned against the counter next to me.

She shrugged. "He'll probably wait until I'm not here, so we're going to be scheduled together for a while. Maybe he'll get bored."

If he hadn't gotten bored after more than three years, I didn't think a few weeks of me working with Starla would do it. Personally, I figured he'd be more likely to do something really stupid, and our new security cameras would catch him. Whether or not the authorities would do anything about it was another story.

Maybe he'd be arrogant enough to do something when Damon was around, and the presence of a member of the Holden family could prompt a stricter response than the hassling of a mere mortal.

The door opened, and I stiffened, only to relax when I saw Damon walking toward me. A thrill went through me, and I couldn't bring myself to quash it. I liked that he'd sought me out again, even if it was just for a distraction from what was going on. I would enjoy the time we spent together and keep the memories for after it ended. No expectations and no regrets.

"I'm going to go straighten the shelves," Starla said with a grin. "Behave yourself."

I glared at her as she greeted Damon in passing.

"She seems happy," he said as he leaned across the counter to give me a brief kiss.

"At my expense," I muttered.

He chuckled. "How's your day been?"

"Just busy enough to be distracting," I said. "How was yours?"

His expression sobered. He reached out and took my hand, his thumb brushing across my knuckles. "Hard," he said finally. "The label's being great about handling everything even though I know they want answers about where Holden will go from here. They're making sure everyone's taken care of, including the families and the other people injured in the accident."

All right, I was impressed. "Wow. That's really nice of them."

"Yeah, and they're not publicizing that they're doing it either." He sighed and straightened, releasing my hand. "I went from there to see Otis. He's doing better, but he's still got a long way to go before he'll be anywhere close to ready to decide if he still wants to be a part of Holden."

I could hear the frustration in his voice, and it prompted me to walk around the counter and give him a hug. Almost immediately, his arms went around me, and he relaxed. We stood that way for a couple minutes before he released me. I took a step back but didn't go far.

"Thank you." He kissed my forehead. "I needed that."

"My pleasure." Heat flooded my face as my response prompted memories, some real, some from my dream.

Judging by the grin on Damon's face, he had an idea of what was going through my mind. Instead of teasing me about it, however, he asked, "Any problems with Spencer today?"

"No, but Starla's been here the whole time, so it's not unexpected. He's

basically a bully and a coward.” I made my tone dismissive, but I wasn’t sure if Damon believed I was actually that nonchalant about it.

“Do you want to do something when you get off work?”

“I’m watching Kevin tonight while Jamie’s working. You’re welcome to join us if you want.”

I made the offer sincerely, but I never expected him to take it. He was a nice guy, but Kevin had to be my first priority, which meant I couldn’t be completely focused on distracting Damon from all of the shit going on in his life.

Yesterday, it’d been a fairly impulsive invite, and he hadn’t had anything else to do. Today, he could go find another distraction that offered a more enjoyable evening than babysitting a toddler.

“That sounds great.” He gave me that wonderful smile that made his entire face brighten. “What should I bring?”

“Oh, um, I don’t know. We’re having grilled cheese and tomato soup. Not exactly the sort of thing you pair a wine with.”

His eyes sparkled with humor. “I’m not much of a drinker at all, and I wouldn’t bring alcohol to a dinner that included a kid. Well, not until a fifth or sixth date. By then, all bets are off.”

He winked at me, and my knees went wobbly. “Dessert?” I blurted out, unsure if I was asking him to bring it or offering myself as it.

“Is ice cream okay?”

“Chocolate is Kevin’s favorite.”

“All right. What time do you want me there? Your car is still here, right?”

“It is,” I assured him. “I get off at six, but my mom’s watching Kevin at my place and is supposed to start dinner so Kevin and I can eat not long after I get home. Six-thirty?”

“Perfect.” He caught my chin and pulled me toward him for a slower, more thorough kiss.

I must’ve had a stunned expression on my face because he looked pretty smug as he headed for the door.

“Damn,” Starla said. “You’ve got it bad.”

Yes, I did. I just hoped my heart could survive it when it was over.

* * *

I shouldn't have been nervous. Damon and I hadn't only slept together. I wasn't deluded into thinking that we were soulmates – if I even believed in that sort of thing – but there was an intimacy to the things he and I had shared, something beyond just the physical. I was comfortable enough with him to have done things I'd never done before, but that didn't do anything to keep my stomach from twisting itself into knots.

“Are you sure you're okay?” Mom asked as she picked up her purse. “I can stay if you need me to.”

“I'm fine,” I said. “You can go home.”

I managed to not sound annoyed, even though I hated going through this every time Jamie or I had to call on our parents to help out when it wasn't planned. They didn't think that, even together, both of us could possibly know what was best for Kevin. Or rather, they didn't think Jamie could raise a kid, and I apparently couldn't babysit one.

“Grilled cheese and tomato soup, Jae? A boy needs more than that.”

I raised an eyebrow and kept my voice even. “Actually, Mom, I'm pretty sure it hits at least three of the food groups, and it's what Jamie and I planned for his dinner tonight.”

The look Mom gave me said she wasn't happy, but she wasn't going to argue anymore. At least not tonight. It was an ongoing battle with them, and it wouldn't be solved any time soon. What could still end up happening tonight was that I could really end up on my mom's shit list by her finding out that I'd invited a man over to the apartment.

She wouldn't care that I was an adult or that it was *my* apartment. She'd just see an irresponsible woman inviting a stranger into the house where she was alone with a toddler. The only thing that made it bearable was that her meddling was more about protecting us than it was about not trusting us.

“He's not going to settle down for dinner with me until you go home,” I pointed out.

She gave me an annoyed look but went over to where Kevin was sitting on the floor and kissed his head. “I'll see you later, sweetie.”

“Bye, Nana.” He didn't even look up from the blocks he was stacking.

I waited until after she was gone to rush into my room, calling to Kevin that I'd be right back. I wasn't going to change into anything too dressy, but I didn't want to be in my work clothes all night. Jeans and a t-shirt were fine, even if I would've liked to finally do something that required me to wear something nice or sexy.

Nope. I shook my head. I was not going to think about sex when my nephew was waiting for food. I wasn't irresponsible for inviting Damon here, but I would be if I neglected Kevin because of it.

"Hey, kiddo, ready for dinner?"

"Yes!" He jumped up as I walked into the room. "Cheese!!"

I laughed, picking him up and putting him onto his chair. The boy loved his cheese.

I was just flipping the sandwiches over to toast the second side when Damon knocked on the door. At least, I assumed it was Damon. I was smart and cautious enough to check before opening the door.

"Something smells great." He kissed my cheek, lingering long enough to whisper in my ear, "I'm sure the food smells pretty good too."

I blushed and took the ice cream from him. "Behave yourself."

He held up three fingers. "Scout's honor."

I rolled my eyes. "Kevin, we have a guest for dinner. And he brought ice cream."

Kevin cheered, and Damon was a hit. Such a hit, in fact, that I kept having to remind Kevin to eat, but the two of them were so cute together that I couldn't really be annoyed. When we finished and moved to the couch, Kevin sat between us, but Damon didn't seem the least bothered that the closest we could come to touching was when the arm across the back of the couch allowed his fingers to brush against my hair.

It didn't take long for Kevin to nod off, but I let him stay where he was for a little while longer, both to ensure that he was thoroughly asleep and to give Damon and me a little bit of silence to see how it felt. To make a memory.

Maybe he didn't need the extra time, but I did. When all this was over, I doubted he'd ever want to think about this time of his life again. The best I could hope for was him to fondly remember that he'd had a pleasant distraction during an awful time.

"I'm going to put him down," I finally whispered, getting up.

"Want me to take him?"

I smiled and shook my head. "I've got him."

Usually, Jamie or I put Kevin to bed and read him a story, but sometimes, he was allowed to fall asleep in front of the TV, but only after a bath and brushing of teeth. Neither Jamie nor I commented on the fact that we usually had those 'special' nights after a stressful interaction with one or both of our

parents.

Once I got him settled and lingered an extra minute to make sure he didn't wake up, I stopped in the bathroom to catch my breath before going back out to join Damon on the couch again. His arm was still stretched across the back, but when I sat down next to him, he wrapped it around me and pulled me even closer.

"Everything good?" He kissed my temple.

"Perfect."

The kids' movie was still playing, but I'd watched it a dozen times with Kevin, and I was paying more attention to the feel of Damon's hand moving up and down my arm. I doubted he was engrossed in the cartoon either, but neither of us said anything or even looked away from the screen.

Not even when his arm dropped to my waist, and his fingers slipped under the bottom of my shirt. I put my hand on his leg, moving it from knee to mid-thigh with the same rhythm that his fingers slid back and forth across my skin.

The simmer of heat between us grew until the credits ran, and I decided I wanted more. Using his shoulders for leverage, I pulled myself onto his lap and covered his mouth with mine.

It took him about three seconds to realize this was actually happening, and then he was kissing me back. His hands slid down to my ass, squeezing before moving up and under my shirt. I burned wherever he touched me, throbbed at the place where our jeans kept us apart.

He groaned into my mouth when I rocked against him, and I ground down harder, shivering when his teeth sank into my bottom lip. His hand tightened on my breast, and I ran my nails down his chest, wishing he had his shirt off, and I could do that on bare skin rather than through his shirt.

"Fuck," he growled as he pulled his mouth away from mine. "Jae, if you don't stop that, I'm going to come in my pants."

"But I want to come," I said breathlessly. I rolled my hips, and he cursed again, his eyes closing as his head tilted back.

Damn if that wasn't the sexiest thing I'd ever seen.

Well, aside from Damon naked. Or coming. Or...dammit. It was just him. Laughing, smiling, serious, protective, passionate, and so much more. He was the whole package, and while his confidence said he knew it, he hadn't crossed into entitled arrogance.

If I wasn't careful, I could fall in love with him.

Before I could become properly horrified at that particular revelation, I heard a key in the door.

“Shit. Jamie’s home.”

I scrambled to get off Damon, tugging down my shirt as I tumbled onto the couch. He pulled a pillow onto his lap, and I resumed leaning on him but kept my hands to myself.

His arm across my shoulders was nice, but I couldn’t help wishing Jamie had been running late. Then again, maybe it was better this way. I didn’t even want to think what would’ve happened if Damon and I had kept going right here on the couch, and Jamie had caught us wearing a little less.

“Hey.” Jamie’s eyes widened at the sight of Damon sitting next to me. “Nice to see you again.”

“You too.” Damon’s smile was a little strained, and I wasn’t sure which would be worse, Jamie thinking it was because of her, or Jamie finding out it was due to the fact that he was trying to hide an erection under a decorative pillow.

“Did Kevin eat his dinner?” She turned her attention to me, the little smile on her lips telling me she was glad Damon was here with me.

“He did.” I stood and followed her over to the fridge. If Kevin hadn’t been sleeping, I would’ve stayed on the couch with Damon. “We also had a very small ice cream snack.”

“Mom was that bad?” Jamie asked as she put her lunch bag away.

“She wasn’t happy with our dinner selection.” One of the things Jamie had insisted on when she’d first moved in here was that we shared all information pertaining to Kevin, especially when it came to our parents. I couldn’t try to protect her from the things that might hurt her feelings.

Jamie rolled her eyes. “Please tell me she didn’t know Damon was going to be here.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t think either of us was prepared to deal with the explosion that would come after *that* particular revelation.”

“You know I’m okay with him being here, right?” Jamie said, glancing over to where Damon was still sitting.

“I wouldn’t have invited him otherwise.” I gave her a sideways squeeze. “One of these days, Mom and Dad are going to acknowledge what a great mother you are, and then they’ll feel awful at how harsh they’ve been.”

She sighed. “I’m just hoping it doesn’t take them until Kevin graduates from high school.”

“It won’t.” Even though I was trying to reassure her, I didn’t entirely believe it myself. I loved my parents, but it was rare for them to admit when they were wrong, especially Mom, and she was always the more vocal of the two.

“I’m going to go take a long shower,” she said.

“Hey,” I hesitated, then pushed on ahead. “Do you mind if I ask him to stay? I get it if you don’t want to risk Kevin seeing Damon during the night or in the morning—”

“Of course.” She hugged me. “You’ve already given up so much for Kevin and me. I never want you to feel like you need to put your life on hold. Especially when you have someone like Damon Holden waiting for you.”

At some point, I was going to have to work on her guilt for feeling like she’d trapped me or was keeping me from doing what I wanted, but that was a conversation for a different time.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” She waved a goodnight at Damon and then disappeared into her bedroom.

“I take it that was my cue to go.” Damon stood and stretched, his shirt rising up enough to show a strip of firm muscles and a hint of those sexy v-grooves at his hips.

“It doesn’t have to be,” I said, butterflies fluttering in my stomach. “You can stay longer if you want. And we don’t have to stay out here.”

His eyebrows went up. “Jamie’s okay with that?”

“She is.” I reached out and took his hand. “But it’s okay if that’s not what you want to do.”

He had Bair’s memorial tomorrow, after all.

“I’d love to stay.” He stood a step closer to me. “And I have a favor to ask.”

The hint of vulnerability in his eyes immediately told me that this was important.

“All right.”

He hesitated for a moment, and then asked, “Will you go with me to Bair’s memorial tomorrow? I don’t want to go alone.”

Emotion welling, I put my free hand on his cheek. “Of course.”

The relief on his face twisted things inside me that had nothing to do with lust or physical desire. At some point, wanting to help him had become wanting to take care of him, and that was a dangerous road to be on. Except I

didn't think I could stop, not without walking away, and I wasn't strong enough to do that.

Twenty

Damon

I'd been thinking of asking her to go with me tomorrow since I'd left her at the store to get ice cream, but I hadn't wanted to say anything when Kevin had been awake. The last thing I needed to do was be responsible for a toddler asking what a memorial service was. But after the kid was in bed, I'd been enjoying just sitting with Jae, not talking or even thinking. I hadn't realized how much I'd needed some downtime, and I hadn't wanted to interrupt it.

Then she'd climbed on me, and everything else had fled my mind. If her sister hadn't come home when she did, we might've both ended up getting off without taking off any of our clothes.

Now, as she led me to her bedroom, I was glad I'd taken a moment after she'd asked if I wanted to stay to ask her to come to the service with me. With that off my mind, I could enjoy the rest of my night with her.

I closed the door behind me, and she turned on a lamp, casting the entire room in a soft glow. When I'd woken up here the other day, I'd been more focused on finding my clothes and not so much on the décor, but now I had the chance to look.

Damn.

A *Slippery When Wet* Bon Jovi poster hung between Stevie Nicks and Carrie Underwood. More than one Blake Shelton and Fleetwood Mac. Album covers and concert posters. The walls were covered with them. And among them were several Holden album covers. Actually, *all* of our album covers, and not just the more recent ones after we'd signed with the label.

"Wow. How did I miss this before?" I asked. "And how in the world didn't you recognize me the first time we met? Are you secretly a Hawk groupie?"

Her eyes narrowed, and she pulled her shirt over her head, tossing it at me. "Do you want to discuss my music tastes, or do you want me to keep taking off my clothes?"

I winked at her. "Can't we do both?"

She pointed at me. “Get naked, or I’ll kick you out and take care of myself.”

No way in hell was *that* going to happen.

I yanked off my shirt and reached out to grab her wrist. She let out a yelp that I muffled as I greedily took her mouth. Her free hand grabbed my waistband, then slid around the back. I made a sound in the back of my throat, dropping her wrist so I could get my hands on her ass.

Damn jeans.

She shoved her hands under the back of my pants, startling me with skin on skin. The bite of nails on my ass made me growl, and I picked her up, palming firm cheeks as I moved us over to the bed.

She worked on her bra as I tugged on her jeans, cursing them quietly as she laughed. I managed to get them off, going to my knees for the final bit. Then I curled my fingers behind her knees and yanked her to the edge of the bed, making her laughter fade away. I reached up and hooked my fingers in the waistband of her panties, then paused, letting my gaze travel up her body to get my first good look at her.

Her skin was flushed, her lips slightly swollen and parted. Her nipples were tight, a beautiful dusky color, and I was eager to have them in my mouth, but there was something else I wanted to taste first.

I kissed the inside of each thigh, and then gripped her hips, holding her in place as I ran the flat of my tongue between her legs. She gasped, and I smiled.

“You might want to cover your mouth,” I suggested. “Don’t want to wake anyone up.”

The moment my tongue went between her folds, her moan was muffled, telling me she’d followed my suggestion. As I used my tongue to coax all sorts of sounds from her, a question popped into my head: had Davin ever used something to quiet a partner? I pushed the question away, determined to be in the present, but I knew it’d come back to me later, the way other questions had appeared in my head on and off since my discovery.

I slid my tongue inside her, shifting my position so I could use my thumbs to hold her open for better access. She squirmed, the tension in her body building until I suspected she was close to coming. What we’d done on the couch had wound us both up, and she was ready to explode.

A hand came down on my head as I sucked on her clit, and her grip tightened when I pushed two fingers inside her. Keeping her clit between my

lips, I flicked my tongue back and forth across the swollen piece of flesh until her entire body went stiff, her back arching. Her pussy clenched around my fingers as I eased her through the orgasm, letting up only when she went limp, hand falling away from her mouth to allow the sound of her panting to fill the room.

It was almost painful to stand up, the motion making my clothes chafe against my cock. I kicked the last of my clothes aside and tore open the condom wrapper.

“How aren’t you the most arrogant man on the planet?”

Jae’s question surprised me, and I looked down to see her grinning at me with a lazy smile. Her gaze dropped to where I was rolling on the condom.

“You’re good for my ego,” I said.

She rolled her eyes as she pushed herself farther up the bed to get her legs all the way on the mattress. “You’re gorgeous, and you clearly know what you’re doing. That alone is enough to be cocky about.”

I chuckled as I moved onto the bed. “I like your word choice.”

She laughed, her eyes dancing. “Of course you do.”

I leaned down to kiss her, and she parted her lips, tongue slipping into my mouth. I took advantage of her exploration to fill my hands with her breasts, fingers, and thumbs plucking at her nipples until she was squirming again.

I tore my mouth away from hers and kissed down her throat and collarbone on my way to her breasts. She moaned as I took her nipple between my lips and the sounds became louder.

“Shh,” I murmured before scraping my teeth across the sensitive skin.

“Please,” she begged. “I want you inside me.”

It wasn’t easy to work the first inch into her without taking my mouth off her, but I managed it, a shudder running down my spine at the wet heat scorching me. Her hands clutched at me, legs wrapped around me, urging me deeper. I groaned as I surged forward, filling her even as her pussy molded around my cock.

I rested for a moment, and then pulled back, raising up a bit so I could look at her. “Grab behind your knees and pull your legs up to your chest.”

She did as I asked, her eyes going wide as the change of position allowed me to slip deeper. I bit the inside of my mouth to keep from cursing out loud. She felt better than anything else ever had, and I wanted to make her feel the same way.

Despite the urge to take her hard and fast, I made each stroke slow and

deep, bottoming out before drawing back until only an inch was still inside. She pressed her lips together, unable to cover her mouth while still holding on to her legs.

Watching her try to control her responses reminded me again of the conversation I'd had with Davin. The thought was fleeting, though, because nothing could distract me from her for long.

I curled over her to reach her mouth, changing my thrusts to shorter, shallower ones, but we were both close enough that it didn't take much to tip her over the edge again. She let go of her legs, and they splayed open.

I drove into her two, three times, and then followed, the climax racing through my body as I held her tight. When my legs started working again, I'd clean myself up, but I didn't plan on going anywhere farther than the bathroom. Unless she asked me to leave, I would stay right here next to her for the night.

Twenty-One

Jae

I wiped the condensation from the mirror and stared at my reflection, as if it'd give me an idea of how I was supposed to handle today. The only funeral I'd ever been to had been for a friend of my grandparents, and I'd only gone because Mom had said the entire family had been expected to come. At eight- or nine-years-old, it'd been more boring than sad.

Today would be nothing like that. Bair Appleton hadn't been a friend, but he'd meant something to a lot of people, and he'd been a friend to someone I cared about. He'd also been young and died suddenly in a way that could've happened to anyone. The grief I felt wasn't for my own loss, but in sympathy to those who'd always have an empty spot in their lives because he was missing. It was hurting for seeing others' pain.

And I didn't know how to be that person with all the attention that would be on me today. I didn't want anyone thinking I was trying to pretend I'd known Bair, but I also didn't want to look cold. Not because I particularly cared what the media would say about me, but I didn't want anyone coming after Damon for anything I did or said.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Calm and composed was what Damon needed. Someone he could lean on rather than worry about. I wouldn't give him cause to regret asking for my support today.

I'd managed to snag Jamie before she'd left for work and get her opinion on what to wear. Now, as I slipped into the simple navy-blue pencil dress, I was glad I'd asked. I didn't have many dresses, and the only black one I owned was a sweater dress. It was the third week of August, and I was afraid I'd pass out if I wore that one. I'd been worried, though, that even with the modest scoop neckline and just under the knee hemline, I'd look too casual.

I kept my makeup and hair simple, leaving only my shoes to add before I was ready to go. We had to stop by Damon's place for him to change yet, and I felt guilty for how much I was anticipating seeing where he lived.

"You look nice." Damon kissed my cheek, his expression already distracted.

“Thank you.” I squeezed his hand but didn’t hold it. I didn’t want him thinking I was using this to put on a public display. Today was about what *he* needed.

I only hoped I’d be able to recognize what that was when I saw it.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to drive?” I asked as I slipped on my shoes. The heels brought me up to his shoulder.

“No, I’d rather not leave my car at your place. I have a driver coming to pick us up. That way, we don’t have to worry about parking at the service.”

Neither of us talked during the drive, and I wondered if he was still trying to decide what to say or if he was blaming himself for not having been there when it’d happened. Survivor’s guilt. I couldn’t imagine going through that alongside the grief of losing a friend.

Damon had a penthouse, which wasn’t surprising, nor was the fact that it was easily more than twice the size of my apartment and my parents’ place put together. He told me to make myself at home while he disappeared down a hallway, but I wasn’t about to go exploring. If he ever invited me back, I’d love taking a look around, but this wasn’t the time for it.

Still, what I could see was magnificent. We were on the top floor – of course – and the view of the city’s skyline from the massive glass French doors was incredible. West-facing windows made me wonder what it would be like to watch a sunset from here.

“Do you want anything before we go?” Damon asked as he walked out of his bedroom, still fidgeting with his cufflinks. His tie was crooked, and it made my heart hurt because I’d never seen him look anything but impeccable, even when he was casual. He had to be torn up to have missed straightening it.

“I’m fine.” I went over to him and reached up to fix his tie. His eyes met mine, and he couldn’t hide the emotion roiling inside him. I smoothed down the front of his shirt and then put a hand on his cheek. “Don’t worry about me. I’m here for *you*.”

His lips curved ever so slightly, but the partial smile didn’t reach his eyes. He brushed his mouth against mine. “Thank you.”

The pain in his eyes was still there when he took my hand, but the slump of his shoulders seemed different, as if my reassurance had made the weight somewhat easier to bear.

A town car was waiting for us downstairs, and the driver opened the back door. Damon slid in first and then held out a hand to help me. After I was

settled next to him, he laced his fingers between mine and rested our joined hands on his knee.

“Where’s the service being held?” I’d completely forgotten to ask before.

“St. Mary’s something church,” he said. “Bair’s mom raised him and his brothers Catholic, but he hadn’t gone to a service since she passed. His dad asked if we could have the memorial service in a church because that was what his mom would’ve wanted.”

His voice was flat, not in an unemotional way, but more like he had to recite things as facts to keep from losing control. I squeezed his hand, regretting having asked the question. I vowed to do better.

I’d known the press would be at the service, and that they’d be interested in the unknown woman on Damon’s arm, but I hadn’t realized how different *knowing* and *experiencing* were. The driver opened the door from Damon’s side this time, allowing him to get out first and to be the one to help me get out without looking as awkward as I felt.

I heard the murmur of voices before I saw anyone, and I was glad that people were at least being respectful enough not to shout. Then I straightened, tightening my grip on Damon’s hand as I saw all the cameras on us. Big news cameras, cell phones being held by hand. Everyone was watching as we walked toward the front doors of the church.

“Damon!” Someone called out, breaking the almost-silence. “Who’s your friend?”

He stopped, and I felt him tense, but his voice was calm when he spoke. “I’ll speak to the press after the service, as the press release already stated. Anyone unwilling to be considerate as they wait is welcome to leave before security is forced to escort you away.”

Without another word, he started walking again, and I had to hurry to stay in step with him. I didn’t ask him to slow down, though. I was feeling guilty enough that someone had asked about me already. As much as I knew he wanted me here, maybe it would’ve been better for him if I’d come in separately or even stayed away.

While no one else yelled at us, I could feel the eyes on me and imagined that a lot of the buzzing whispers following us was speculation about who I was and why I was there. Once inside, Damon steered us toward where two familiar faces stood together.

Kalini Volek and Hawk Youngen were holding hands, which surprised me, but didn’t seem to faze Damon at all. The media was going to have a

field day if they saw. They'd always loved speculating about which of the men Kalini was hooking up with or if she was secretly a lesbian. Some of them got pretty nasty about it too.

"Otis is pissed the doctors won't let him out for the service." Hawk shook Damon's hand, then turned to me. "Hawk Youngen."

"Jae Knox." I gave him a polite smile and hoped neither he nor Kalini thought I was trying to cash in on a tragedy.

"Kalini Volek." She gave me one of those half-hugs that celebrities perfected, warm, but polite.

"Jae was kind enough to come with me today," Damon said, reaching for my hand again. "To help me get through it."

They smiled at me, but I knew they were going to reserve their judgment for the moment. I'd do my best to show them I would never hurt Damon, no matter where things ended up with him and me. It was nice to know that he had such good friends.

"We should go find our seats," Kalini said. She held out a program to Damon. "It's about ten minutes until it starts, and we'll want to be available if Z or Haje need to talk to us about anything last minute."

"Thanks." He looked down at me. "Ready?"

I nodded, and we fell in behind Kalini and Hawk. I could do this, be here for him the way he needed me to. If nothing else, he would know that he had a friend he could count on. No matter what.

Twenty-Two

Damon

It was over.

I felt relief that it was done, that I'd gotten through both the prepared speech I'd given in front of everyone, as well as the press release I'd read and the subsequent questions after the service. Kalini and Hawk had offered to stand with me, but I'd told them that they didn't need to get caught up in all the questions. Taking that burden from them had been the least I could do.

Besides, Jae had been there for me the entire time. Of course, that'd meant several of the questions thrown my way had been about her, but I'd simply answered the first one by saying she was a friend and then deflected the rest, reminding them why I was here: to honor Bair Appleton, a talented and fun-loving man whose life had been cut short.

It wasn't until after we'd finally made it back to the car and were waiting in traffic that it suddenly hit me that I might've hurt Jae's feelings when I'd simply called her a friend. We hadn't talked about what this was or what we were, but I could've handled it better.

"What's wrong?" she asked before I could say anything. "Is there anything I can do?"

"I need to apologize to you."

She frowned, confusion written on her face. "What for?"

"When that first reporter asked who you were, I shouldn't have just said a friend and left it like that. It was dismissive and not even close to describing how grateful I am having had you with me this past week."

She put her fingers on my lips, and I stopped talking. "I am your friend, Damon. I'm the one who should be apologizing. That question never should have been asked in the first place. Today is about you honoring and saying goodbye to Bair. I'm here for *you*."

The relief made me close my eyes. "Thank you."

She leaned against me as she kissed my cheek, then took my hand when she settled back into her seat. I couldn't begin to describe what it was like, sitting here with her and knowing she had no expectations, no ulterior

motives. Supporting me like this, in this situation, wasn't even close to what I'd asked of previous flings or casual girlfriends. Something this heavy usually came with a more serious degree of involvement.

I opened my eyes. "Would you like to come home with me? For the night, for a few hours. It doesn't matter." I paused before adding, "I'm not ready to be alone yet."

She thought for a moment, and I appreciated that she hadn't immediately said yes. I didn't want her making some snap agreement because she felt sorry for me. I was assuming a certain level of sympathy simply because she was that sort of person, but I still wanted her to *want* to be with me, circumstances aside.

"I have to work tomorrow," she said. I had a brief moment of disappointment, but then she added, "We'll have to stop by my place so I can pack a bag."

"No problem." I leaned forward and tapped on the glass separating us from the driver. I gave him Jae's address and then settled back in my seat. She leaned against me, and I put my arm around her shoulders, liking the way she felt as I pulled her against my side.

I enjoyed being with people, and that included women even when it wasn't about sex, but I'd never had this...tranquility before. Not with anyone. Not with my family or the other members of the band. Jae calmed the restlessness inside me in a way that no one else ever had. I'd always been an energetic person, but even when I did eventually get tired, I'd always had this need to fidget and thoughts bouncing around in my head.

Jae calmed all of that. I was emotionally drained, and having her next to me helped me simply *be*.

Thanks to traffic, it took us nearly a half hour to get to her building, but I didn't mind. There was no reason to rush today. I drifted in and out of that place that wasn't quite sleep but still allowed me to rest.

With Jamie and Kevin both gone, the apartment was quiet when we went inside. I lingered in the main room while she went to her bedroom to collect what she needed, and found myself staring at the couch, remembering what had started there last night.

"Did I tell you about what I found in my brother's house?" The question was out of my mouth before I realized I was going to say it out loud.

"No, you didn't. What was it?"

Answering that question honestly had a variety of possible responses,

some good and some not. At least the one thing I didn't have to worry about at all was her going to the press. I could trust her implicitly on that front. She'd already shown she had no interest in that aspect of my life.

"A sex room."

Silence.

I snorted at her non-response. "Apparently, he got into the whole BDSM lifestyle when he was twenty-one and went to a club. Like anything else he gets involved in, Davin did all sorts of research, figuring out what he wanted to try, what he wasn't interested in. The man doesn't dabble."

"Wait, you're talking about Davin?" She sounded as surprised as I'd been. "As in CEO of your family's real estate business, serious older brother, *Davin*? I thought you were talking about Deklin. I mean, I know he does the whole business thing, but I can picture him being into that kind of thing more than I can Davin."

"Are you picturing my older brother in leather and chains?"

"No! I just mean—"

I laughed at the immediate and horrified response, as relieved as I was amused. I didn't like the idea of her thinking of either of my brothers in any sort of sexual manner. "I'm just teasing you."

"Davin just seems really strait-laced."

"I guess that's part of the reason why he likes it," I said. "It gives him an outlet. A place where he doesn't have to be what everyone expects him to be. He's not a pushover, and he won't do anything he doesn't agree with, but when it comes to how people perceive him, he puts a lot of pressure on himself. Our family's reputation is important to him."

"It's hard being the oldest sometimes," she said softly.

For the first time, I wondered how hard her parents had been on her because of Jamie having a baby so young. I'd heard her and Jamie mentioned a younger sister who still lived with their parents, which meant their dynamic was similar to my brothers and me, with Jae being in Davin's position and Jamie in mine. I just hoped her parents weren't strictly religious like my dad because I could only imagine how he would've reacted to an 'out-of-wedlock' teenage pregnancy.

"Does that mean you've got some secret kink or fetish you're not telling me about?" I laughed as I said it, but then when she didn't respond, my amusement died away, and I wondered if I'd offended her.

I was just getting ready to apologize when she came out of her room.

Since she was now only in a matching black satin bra and panty set, it made sense that it took me nearly half a minute to realize that she was holding something in her hand. Or, more accurately, what was dangling from her index finger.

Handcuffs.

My jaw dropped, and every thought I'd had in my head suddenly vanished.

She burst out laughing and came toward me, twirling them on her finger. "My little sister, Jetta, wanted the three of us to dress like Charlie's Angels for Halloween last year. I've had the costume in my closet ever since."

"Please tell me there's a full leather bodysuit in there." I caught the other end of the handcuffs and pulled her toward me.

"You want me to put clothes *on*?" She shook her head, her eyes twinkling with good humor. "Then I definitely didn't accomplish what I set out to do."

I raised an eyebrow. "And what was that, exactly?"

"To tempt you to find another use for a costume prop."

Desire made me catch my breath. "How long will Jamie and Kevin be gone?"

"Hours."

I liked the sound of that.

I tugged on the handcuffs, and she let them go, still grinning. The smile turned to a surprised yelp when I spun her around and put a cuff on one wrist. I almost had the second one latched before something occurred to me.

"Do you have the keys?"

"They have a latch release," she said. "Gives new meaning to the phrase *safe sex*, right?"

I chuckled and snapped the second cuff into place. "On the way back to my place, I'm going to need to stop and pick up more condoms."

"Think you're going to get lucky again?"

I walked us toward her bedroom as I answered, "Oh, I think you're the one who's going to get lucky. Many, *many* times."

She was still laughing when we reached the bed, but when I put my hand between her shoulders and bent her over, it turned into something more like a moan. I gripped the cuffs in one hand and ran my other one over the curve of her ass.

"Damn, Jae. You look good like this." I gave her hip a little smack, not even hard enough to turn her skin pink, but she gasped. I thought it was a

good sound, but I wasn't about to do anything to make this amazing woman uncomfortable in any way. "If I do anything you don't like, just say the word, and I'll stop."

"I will," she agreed.

Being bent over like this couldn't be comfortable, but I was confident I could give her enough pleasure to make the discomfort worth it. If I didn't drag it out too long. Still, I didn't want to hurt her.

I nudged her ankles apart and slid my hand down between her legs. She moaned, and I smiled. I loved that sound. I moved a single finger beneath the damp fabric and pushed the digit inside her. She was wet but still tight. I moved my finger up to her clit, and her body jerked when I touched that little bundle of nerves. Half a dozen small circles with light pressure was all it took to get her squirming.

"Please, Damon," she pleaded.

I lowered her to the bed to rest on her chest and shoulders for a moment while I unzipped my pants and rolled on the condom. I didn't even bother to push my pants down. With one hand, I grabbed the handcuffs, and the other pulled aside her panties to allow me to slide the tip of my cock up and down for a moment to slick the condom before guiding it where we both wanted it.

"Fuck," I groaned as I buried myself in her with one quick thrust.

She cursed, her entire body shaking as we both took a second to adjust to us coming together. I waited long enough to give her a chance to tell me to stop, and then I was moving. Using her restrained hands as leverage, I drove into her twice, then paused, worried that I was being too rough, but her moans and whimpers turned into words.

"Damon...fuck...so good..."

I drew back and then thrust into her, taking her as fast and hard as I dared. Except her pleas made it clear that I didn't need to hold back.

"Harder...please, don't stop...fuck...fuck..."

I was already wound too tight, and her encouragement just made it worse. I wasn't going to last long. Before I could even try to get her there with me, I lost control, swearing as I came. I curled forward over her back, bracing us with a hand on the bed as I pulsed inside her, wave after wave of pleasure coursing through me.

My knees went weak, and I took us both to the mattress, finally back in my head enough to wrap an arm around her to get my fingers between her legs and finish her off with just a few rough passes, holding her tight as she

climaxed and wincing as her pussy clamped down on my softening cock. A shudder ran through me, an almost mini second orgasm.

What Jae breathed out a few moments later summed it up for me too.

“Wow. Intense.”

Twenty-Three

Jae

In my entire life, I'd never almost walked into a door until half an hour ago when Damon and I had walked out of my apartment. He'd laughed, but it'd been the sort of good-natured laugh that I couldn't help joining in, despite the fact that my face was burning with embarrassment.

I refused to be embarrassed about sex, though. Sure, my parents hadn't exactly been the type of people to casually talk about sex, but the one thing my mom had always pushed with us girls was to never be ashamed of who we were or what we enjoyed.

She probably hadn't been thinking in terms of me embracing being handcuffed and bent over my bed for sex, but that didn't mean she wasn't the one who'd encouraged me to never be ashamed of what I wanted or liked, no matter how traditional or unconventional.

My head was still spinning when we got to Damon's house, and I gratefully accepted his hand to help me out of the car. He took my bag, and we went up to his condo, making small talk about music and the take-out we'd picked up at the family-owned Italian restaurant two blocks over.

We didn't talk about what he'd gotten at the pharmacy across the street from the restaurant while I waited for our orders or about what we'd done at my place. We talked about Kalini and Hawk and how Holden had come together. We didn't talk about the handcuffs he'd tucked into his jacket pocket.

Right now, we were talking about work.

"Did you know Starla before you worked for her?"

"No, but it only took a few minutes talking to her for us to become friends. It was one of those rare, instant friendships." I picked up my empty plate and carried it into the kitchen, neatly spinning out of his way when he tried to take the plate from me. "I can clean up after myself, thank you."

He came after me with his own dishes in one hand and wrapped his free arm around my waist, picking me up. I shouted, nearly dropping my plate. He just laughed and carried me the rest of the way to the kitchen.

“Put me down! You’re going to drop me!” I kicked my legs.

He popped me on my bottom. “I am if you don’t quit squirming.”

Still, despite my movements, he managed to keep a grip on me and get the dishes put into the sink. Once both of his hands were free, he lifted me onto the counter, which put us at the same height. I hooked my hands together behind his neck and spread my knees to allow him to stand between them. His hands slid up my thighs, and I shivered.

Damn, the things this man could do to me.

The problem was, I admitted as I looked into his eyes, it wasn’t only my body that he effected. My heart gave an unsteady thump, and I told it to behave itself. I wasn’t going to fall for Damon Holden. I would enjoy our time together, and hopefully, get to keep a friend when he moved on. I had no illusions about how different our lives were.

“Are you sure you’re okay with what we did earlier?” He looked concerned but was still touching me, which meant he wasn’t asking because I’d done something to make him think I wasn’t good with it, but rather because he was a decent man who wanted to make sure he hadn’t accidentally pressured me into something I didn’t want.

“I’m great with it,” I said honestly. “In fact, I’m pretty sure my brain didn’t start working again until just a few minutes ago.”

“Really?”

I rolled my eyes. “You don’t have to sound quite so pleased with yourself.”

He laughed, and I finally saw the last of the shadows of today disappear. “Come on, when people bring something new into the bedroom, and it’s good – not just good, but *great* – I think I have a right to be pleased.”

He hadn’t used the word *couple*, but what he’d said meant he at least saw us as something more than just fuck buddies for a week. I refused to read more into it than there was, but it did make me want him again. And the idea that popped into my head was far too appealing not to try.

“Now, there’s an interesting expression.” He leaned in and brushed his lips across mine. “What are you thinking about?”

“Dessert,” I said, putting a hand on his chest and pushing him back. I hopped down from the counter and went to the fridge. If he was disappointed in the apparent change of direction, he didn’t say anything. “I noticed you had some ice cream toppings in here. It would be a shame for them to go to waste.”

He still didn't appear to get it until I grabbed the waistband of his pants with one hand and brandished the can of whipped cream with the other. Then his eyes went to the sort of deep blue that came with hot summer days and scorching sun. He leaned back against the counter as I went to my knees. I pulled his underwear down with his pants, and he pulled his shirt over his head, leaving me with a mouth-watering view.

"Are you sure modeling isn't your true calling?" I asked as I ran my hands up his muscular thighs, the hair rough against my palms. "Like nude modeling for artists? Because *damn*. Michelangelo would've loved you."

Damon smiled wide enough for me to realize how deep his dimples really were. He usually kept a bit of scruff on his cheeks, but he'd shaved his face smooth this morning. For the first time, I could really see the resemblance between Davin and him.

"I couldn't be still that long."

I thought about it a moment and laughed. "You're right." I picked up the can of whipped cream. "But you'll stay still for me while I enjoy my dessert, right?"

He reached down and caught my chin, running his thumb along my bottom lip. "Darlin', if it means I get to have my cock in your mouth, I'll do anything you want."

His drawl was thick and sweet, making me shiver. I could get addicted to this.

The first bit of whipped cream made him curse. "It's cold," he complained.

"Aww, poor baby," I teased. "Need me to warm you up?"

I didn't wait for him to answer before I licked it off. He put his hands on the counter, fingers curling around the edge. This time, he didn't say a word as I covered his skin, the weight of his gaze never leaving me.

Putting my hands on his thighs, I leaned forward and took the tip of him between my lips. Sucking off the sweet cream made him swell and thicken in my mouth. I took my time, ignoring the ache in my knees and jaw.

I'd never actually wanted to give someone a blow job, but the first time I'd seen him naked, I'd wondered what it would feel like, taste like. Now, I'd never be able to eat whipped cream without thinking of him.

I licked off long swipes before going back to clean each inch more thoroughly. By the time my hands joined in, one of them wrapped around the base of his cock and the other playing with his balls, his entire body was

tense and ready to explode.

I ran my tongue from root to tip, tracing the thick vein before circling around the head. This time, when I took him in my mouth, I let him slide across my tongue until I couldn't take even another millimeter.

"Jae, darlin', please," he groaned.

I loved that I could make his accent come back full force.

A hand came down on my head, and I let him hold me in place, trusting that he would let me go if I needed him to. His touch was firm but not aggressive, and it made something inside me take notice. Maybe next time I'd ask if he wanted to be a little more forceful. The idea of letting him take that control appealed to a deeper part of me.

"I'm going to come," he warned, his voice strained.

In response, I lightly touched my teeth to his skin, and his entire body jerked as if he'd gotten an electrical shock. Then he was filling my mouth, his fingers tightening in my hair. When he relaxed, I pulled back, looking up at him as he slipped from between my lips.

"That," he panted, "was the hottest fucking thing I've ever seen."

I blushed and took the napkin he offered to wipe my mouth. "We're going to need to shower. It was fun, but messy."

"Not yet," he said with a grin. "I haven't had my dessert yet, and I'm in the mood for chocolate syrup."

Twenty-Four

Damon

It was hard to believe how much had changed in a week.

I'd woken up only a few minutes before, but I hadn't needed to get up to see that Jae was gone. The note on the pillow next to me had been short, but not abrupt.

Heading to work and didn't want to wake you. Reach out if you need anything. Jae

And she'd put a little smiley face after her name.

It'd been the smiley face that had made me start thinking about how different my life today was than it had been a week ago. Then, I'd been in Vegas, getting ready for a concert. I'd gotten laid during the week, but nothing memorable. My friends had all been alive and healthy. My only concerns had been Bair's drinking and my frustration with the songs I was writing.

Now, my life was in an uproar. One of my friends was dead, one was still in the hospital. The band would never be the same again. We could go on, but it would be a different group, unique in its own ways.

Then there was whatever was going on with Deklin. He'd gotten engaged to a woman he'd barely known and then broken up with her to be with some showgirl from Vegas. Last I heard, they were in Tahiti together.

And nothing had turned my life upside-down quite like Jae Knox.

After I'd licked enough chocolate off her body to kill my desire for sweets for a week, we'd had sex in the shower, then watched a movie while we were in bed. We'd had sex one more time before finally falling asleep, and I'd been so exhausted, I hadn't even dreamed.

I closed my eyes and sighed. Laying around wouldn't help me figure out what I was going to do today. Or tomorrow. Or at any point in the future now that things were up in the air in every area of my life.

My stomach growled, making me realize that I was hungry. Breakfast was something I could do, and I didn't need to think much to do it, especially since I had a few pastries somewhere. A day lounging around the house in

flannel pants and eating junk food actually sounded pretty appealing.

I'd just finished my second apple Danish when someone knocked on my door. I was halfway to the door when I realized the doorman would've made Jae wait until he buzzed up. She'd only been here once, and I hadn't put her on my list of people allowed to be sent up immediately. That limited the possibilities of who my guest could be.

I opened the door and found Kalini on the other side. "Come on in. Let me go grab a shirt."

"Mind if I pour myself some coffee?" she asked, following me.

"Help yourself."

I grabbed the first clean shirt I found and put it on while I went back into the kitchen. She was already sitting at the kitchen table, and I almost could've convinced myself that this was just a normal Friday in Houston, that Kalini and I were just waiting for the guys to get here since she'd always arrived several minutes before the others to anything.

Except there was a new sadness in her eyes that I knew was reflected in mine.

"How's Hawk doing?" I asked, wanting to start with something that would at least be positive.

"Good." She blushed but didn't look away. "We're both good."

"I'm happy for you," I said honestly. "Both of you."

"He has a doctor's appointment later today, but it should be the last one," she added. "I had to threaten him about today's appointment. He's convinced he doesn't need a head CT because it was just a concussion and football players get them all the time."

"How are his ribs?"

"Good. Healing the way they're supposed to."

"Have you heard anything from Otis? I planned on going to see him later today."

"He's good," she said. "Hawk called him yesterday. I guess his sister's trying to convince him to get transferred to a hospital near her. He isn't sure he wants to do that, but he knows he's going to need help when he finally gets out."

"Doesn't she live in Phoenix?"

"She does." Kalini looked down at the mug between her hands. "I don't think he wants to be that far away from his kids, but I don't think he wants to have to hire anyone to help out either."

“Z and Haje said they were going to reach out to the guys about making sure they have whatever they need.”

“They did.” She looked back up at me, and I knew we’d reached the real reason she’d come by. “And both Otis and Hawk appreciate how they’ve been handling things.”

I sensed a *but* coming.

She took a deep breath, as if she had to brace herself for what she was going to say next. “Hawk and I have been talking, and we’ve decided that we want to step back from music for a while. Maybe for good.”

It felt like a punch to the gut. “You’re both quitting?”

“We wanted to talk to you before we went to Z and Haje or even to Otis with this.”

A few moments of silence followed, stretched and thickened as I tried to slow my racing thoughts.

“There’s more, isn’t there?” I asked, certain I didn’t want to hear it, but equally certain that she needed to say everything she’d come here to say.

“We think we should dissolve Holden.”

And the hits kept coming.

“We can’t replace Bair. We all know that. And who knows how long it would be before Otis could play again, let alone travel.” She wiped at her eyes with a shaking hand. “If he even wants to. Hawk and I...it’s hard to get in a car. We both keep seeing it.”

I had my own share of survivor’s guilt for not having been with my friends, but I couldn’t imagine what the others were going through. Kalini had seen the accident, known while it was happening that her friends might not survive. And there’d been nothing she could have done to stop it.

Even though Hawk insisted that he didn’t remember the accident, other things I’d learned about the accident made me suspect that Hawk and Otis might’ve watched Bair die while waiting to be rescued. If that was the case, I hoped Hawk’s memories would never come back.

“It makes sense,” I said finally. I gave her a tight smile. “I hate the idea of losing you guys, but I get it.”

“You’re not losing us.” She reached out and squeezed my hand. “We’re not walking away from *people*. We just don’t think music is our life anymore. We’ve loved being a part of Holden, and we probably would’ve stayed in it for a couple years or more if nothing had happened, but I don’t think it ever would have been as hard for us to walk away as it would be for you.”

Without Holden, it wasn't as if I had much of a choice about leaving music, but I wasn't about to say any of that. I didn't want Kalini to feel any guiltier than she clearly already did. None of this was her fault. If it was anyone's fault, it was mine. I was the one who'd brought us all together.

"You shouldn't, by the way."

"I shouldn't what?" I asked.

"Walk away from music," she answered. "You should take this opportunity to change things."

"Change things how?"

She smiled at me. "You should go solo."

I blinked. "I should do what now?"

"Go solo." She was grinning now. "You're a gifted musician, Damon. You could do this on your own. You don't need a band."

I quickly steered the conversation elsewhere, not wanting to be rude and argue with her. I appreciated her vote of confidence and the compliment, but I knew she was wrong. The only thing that had made it possible for me to make music had been the four talented people I'd found. I couldn't do it on my own. I just wasn't good enough.

Twenty-Five

Jae

I hadn't expected to hear from Damon so soon after leaving his place yesterday morning, which meant I'd been honestly surprised last night when he'd called and asked me to go out with him this evening. Somewhere unique, he'd said. A favorite place he liked to go.

Even though I knew better than to read too much into it, my heart had given a leap. Him bringing me into his house had made me feel like he trusted me. Being at the memorial service with him had told me he wasn't ashamed to be seen with me. But this was him specifically asking me out so he could take me somewhere that meant something to him.

I didn't want to get my hopes up or have any expectations, but it was getting harder the longer I was around him. If I got hurt, I'd have no one to blame but myself.

That was a comfort, I supposed. Damon would always be the good man I knew him to be. I would just be the idiot who hadn't listened to her head like the intelligent woman she was supposed to be.

Right now, however, I had another problem I needed to focus on.

I had no idea what I was supposed to wear, and Jamie wasn't here to help me. I wanted to look nice, but my idea of nice and a billionaire musician's idea of nice were probably not the same thing.

Finally, out of desperation, I settled on a light blue corset-style dress that Jamie had gotten me for Christmas but that I had yet to wear. A just above the knee hemline flared out enough that it made walking easy, but not so much that I worried I'd flash someone if I turned too fast. A pair of dressy sandals completed the outfit. When I looked in the mirror, I had to admit that even when Jamie wasn't here, she still helped me.

That didn't, however, stop me from being nervous until I opened the door and saw that Damon was in dress slacks and a dark short-sleeved shirt that emphasized his broad shoulders and chest. He'd grown some scruff since he'd shaved for the memorial service. Seeing me notice it, he rubbed his hand over his chin.

“Should I have shaved?”

“No.” I went up on my toes and kissed his cheek. “I like it.”

He captured a lock of my hair and twisted it around his finger. “I like your hair down.”

I blushed. “Thank you. I usually wear it back when the weather’s hot or if I’m working. It gets in the way otherwise.”

His hand brushed my jaw as he released my hair. “Seeing it down makes me think of what it looks like, spread out on my pillow when you’re beneath me.”

My jaw dropped.

Well, damn.

A sheepish smile curved his lips. “Did I embarrass you?”

“Surprised me,” I clarified.

“Hopefully, it won’t be the first time tonight.” With that cryptic statement, he held out his arm. “Shall we?”

Until now, I hadn’t realized how much of the time we’d shared so far had been spent worrying about him. He wasn’t through grieving, I knew, but he seemed better than he had before. Whether it was the closure that had come with the memorial service, or the simple fact that he’d been stressing about it and now it was done, he looked like something heavy had been taken from him.

Being wrapped up in watching him, I completely missed that we’d arrived at our destination until Damon parked. Except it didn’t look like a parking lot exactly. There were only a couple cars here, and we were behind a building.

“The owner lets me park back here with management,” he explained as we walked toward the front of the building.

It was only then that I saw where we were. Glitter Karaoke. I’d heard of it, but it was beyond my budget. Not insanely expensive, but still more than I could afford at the moment. Good reviews, but definitely not the kind of place I imagined Damon wanting to go simply because he must get mobbed with requests to sing.

His grip on my hand tightened as he opened the door and we went inside. The way the hostess greeted us told me she didn’t just know him by reputation, and the fact that her clear attraction to him didn’t cause her to give me dirty looks made me already like the place.

“Your usual table,” she said as she took us to a fairly private corner. We

could see the stage but weren't in direct line of sight for most of the other customers. After taking our drink orders, she left.

"I've been coming here for years," he said as I opened the menu. "People recognize me, but no one ever gets too pushy. Sometimes I sing, and everyone usually likes it, but it's never expected of me, and no one asks. I'll probably get a half dozen to a dozen autograph requests and maybe a couple selfies, but it's never anything that takes over my night."

It must have been hard for him, not only being known as one of the Holden Enterprises heirs, but also an award-winning musician. He could never know who liked him for him or go out in public without risking a mob scene. He wasn't one of those celebrities who courted the spotlight, but rather treated it politely and hoped it would do the same in return.

It didn't take long for me to see the truth of what he'd said. After we ordered food, a guy who looked to be in his mid-twenties came up and shyly asked for a picture, quickly adding that he was sorry for interrupting our date. I'd reassured him and taken the picture with his phone.

The warm smile Damon sent my way told me it'd been the right thing to do and say. Other women might've been upset at the interruption or flaunted the fact that they were Damon's date, but that wasn't me. I enjoyed seeing that he was respectful and sweet in every aspect of his life. I had no doubt all he would need to do was ask and security would make sure he wasn't ever disturbed, but he hadn't done it.

"The food here is amazing," I said as I finished off the last of my meal. I very much preferred quality over fancy names.

"It is," he agreed. "Pretty much everything they make is great."

The lighting shifted, catching my attention. Damon grinned, clearly knowing what that meant. Based on the gleam in his eyes, I had a sneaking suspicion I knew what was coming.

When the first person took to the stage to sing a decent rendition of "Wind Beneath My Wings," my suspicion was confirmed. I really hoped that meant I'd get to hear Damon sing.

"What do you want to sing?"

My head snapped back. "What was that?"

His smile widened. "I heard you singing next to me at the service. You have a great voice."

Shit. I'd forgotten about that. Kalini had sung the one Holden song where she took the lead, and I'd sung along with her, more under my breath than

anything else, but he'd still apparently heard me.

"I liked the song," I said, my butt still firmly planted in my seat.

"You love music," he countered.

"I do." I finished my water. "But I don't sing in front of people."

"Stagefright?"

"No. I just...I just don't." I twisted my napkin. "I mean, I sing Christmas songs with Jetta or lullabies to Kevin, but I don't do the whole stage thing."

He leaned forward, curiosity on his face. "Okay, whatever it is that has you looking like that, I want to know."

"Looking like what?"

"Like there's something going on in your head that's more than being too shy to do karaoke."

I narrowed my eyes. "You are far too observant."

"But I'm not wrong."

I sighed, knowing he wouldn't let this go. It wasn't like it was some deep, dark secret.

"I thought about becoming a musician, or doing something in music," I explained. "Maybe even a music teacher. But I couldn't take a risky job. Education used to be the 'fallback' job, especially for anyone in the arts, but it's not a stable field anymore, especially not music or art."

He frowned. "You should be able to pursue your dream."

I smiled, touched at his frustration on my behalf. "You're not spoiled, Damon, but you also don't understand what it's like to live paycheck to paycheck. You've been fortunate enough to have the means to go after what you want, which is great, but not all of us have had that luxury."

He looked frustrated, but not at me. "Is it hard to work at the store? Helping people who might be doing what you wanted to do?"

I shook my head. "I don't see it like that. My family needed me to have a job that was financially solid. I'm working on an associate degree in accounting. Online classes and only one or two at a time, but I'll get there."

He studied me for a moment, then stood and held out his hand. "Come on. Sing with me. You're not backing out of your commitment to your family by sharing something you love with me."

Was that what I'd been doing? Not letting myself do anything that could possibly remind me of what I'd given up because I felt like I'd be betraying the promise I'd made to myself that I'd do what was needed of me and never look back, never be bitter or resentful?

Heart thumping in my chest, I took his hand and let him lead me to the stage. While everyone had been polite and respectful about approaching Damon, the moment people saw where he was going, they cheered. I heard a few surprised mutters, probably wondering who I was, but no one sounded annoyed.

“What do you want to sing?” he asked. “My one request is that it not be a Holden song. I consider that cheating when it comes to karaoke.”

“How about ‘Summer Nights’ from *Grease*? Or is that out of your range?”

He raised his eyebrows. “I’ll have you know that I once played Danny at college for a day as a dare.”

“I think you’re full of it.”

Our little debate had been caught by the microphones, so Damon turned to the customers-turned-audience. “Should I prove her wrong?”

A resounding *yes* sounded, with applause and laughter mixed in. The lights made it impossible to really see anyone, but that made it easier for me to focus on Damon as the music started.

I couldn’t believe I was going to do this.

Twenty-Six

Damon

Last night hadn't gone the way I'd expected, but I'd enjoyed every minute of it. I'd thought I'd really screwed things up when she'd told me why she didn't sing in front of people, but then I'd convinced her to do something she loved.

And she'd been amazing.

Beyond amazing was how we'd sounded together. The first time I'd played and sung with the other members of Holden, it'd been like something had clicked each time. With Jae, it'd been more than a click. It had felt like every time we'd had sex, like she was a part of myself I hadn't realized I was missing until I'd found her.

When I'd kissed her goodnight, it'd been harder than I liked to leave, but spending all of our time together wouldn't necessarily be a good thing. No matter how much we enjoyed being together, we did need some time away from each other.

Which we'd had overnight, this morning, and the early part of the afternoon. Now, I was bringing flowers to her at the store and planned on hanging out through the end of her shift. I'd actually called Starla to make sure she would be okay with it, and she'd told me I was welcome to hang out at her store as much as I wanted, especially since she knew I could keep Spencer away from Jae. I liked supporting local businesses – that was what had taken me to Starla's Music in the first place – but I admired how Starla's first thought was to keep Jae safe and not how she could use my presence to boost sales.

Someone was already in the store when I arrived, and Jae was talking them through the points of various brass instruments. I slipped inside, smiling at her when she looked my way. She looked surprised, but when she smiled, I breathed a sigh of relief that my appearance hadn't annoyed her.

I waited until after she'd rung up a French horn before heading to the counter. She came around, her face lighting up when I held out the flowers. Usually, I used flowers as a way to gauge expectations in the women I dated,

but I'd brought these today without any motivation other than wanting to see her smile. Still, it was good to know that she wasn't one of those women who thought the price of a man's gifts should be in direct proportion to the number of zeroes in his bank account.

"These are lovely." She kissed my cheek. "Thank you."

"Starla said sunflowers are your favorite."

"They are." Jae touched one of the petals, a soft expression on her face. "Growing up, every Valentine's Day, no matter how tight money was, my dad always bought flowers. Six roses for my mom, and two flowers for each of us girls. Jetta would get stargazer lilies. Jamie always wanted daisies."

"And you wanted sunflowers."

"And I wanted sunflowers." She glanced toward the door. "Let me go put these in water. Do you mind keeping an eye on things for a minute?"

"Not at all." I watched her disappear into the back and then turned to the new keyboard display.

I ran my fingers over the keys, tested how they felt when I pressed on them. I unplugged the headphones and let the sound fill the store. Nice. I picked out a simple tune, listening carefully. Satisfied, I played through one of my songs.

"Looking for a new keyboard?" Jae asked as she came over to stand near me. "Starla said this one was professional quality."

"It is," I agreed. "I'm not in the market for one right now, though."

"Does that mean you just came here to give me flowers?"

I moved until I was right in front of her and took her hands. "I wanted to spend some time with you, maybe talk, maybe just watch you work. I called Starla to make sure it was okay that I was here."

"You did?"

"I didn't want to cause any problems for you at work."

"Thank you." She stretched up toward me, and I bent my head, meeting her halfway.

The kiss was simple and sweet, but it managed to be more than all the other kisses I'd had with any other woman. When I raised my head, the dazed look in her eyes made me smile. I loved that I could do that to her.

"I had fun last night," she said. She took a step back, and I reluctantly let go. "I was surprised you wanted to sing when you just finished a tour."

"There's no pressure at karaoke," I said. "It's okay if I forget the words or miss a note."

“That makes sense.” She moved behind the counter and retrieved some cleaning supplies. “Do you do all of your practicing at the studio?”

“I do some at home too, but we generally use the studio when it’s the whole band.” A sense of loss rose up in me, and I turned back to the keyboards. I ran a scale, the muscle memory in my hands doing most of the work.

“I’m sorry.” Jae touched my elbow. “I didn’t mean to make you think about Bair.”

I shook my head. “That’s not it. I miss my friend, but I want to be able to think about the good times we spent together.”

“What is it then?” she asked as she went to the closest display case. “Feel free to tell me it’s none of my business.”

I knew I shouldn’t say anything, especially since none of us had talked to Z or Haje yet, but I didn’t want to carry this alone. “You can’t tell anyone this, not even Jamie.”

She studied me for a moment and then nodded. “All right.”

“We’re going to dissolve Holden.” Somehow, saying it out loud to someone who wasn’t in the band made it more real. “Kalini and Hawk have decided they want to move on from music, and with Otis in the hospital for who knows how long...” I let the words trail off. She didn’t need me to spell it out.

Her arms went around me. “I’m so sorry.”

I returned the embrace, closing my eyes and taking the comfort she offered. “I wouldn’t have wanted to replace anyone anyway. It would’ve been different if they’d left under other circumstances but like this...I just can’t see anyone but them being Holden.”

I didn’t know how long we stood there, but neither of us moved until the door opened and someone came inside.

“I’m looking for—” The woman’s voice dropped off suddenly, only to return when we turned toward her. “Fuck me sideways! You’re Damon Holden!”

I laughed and gave Jae a nudge forward. “I am. And this is Jae Knox. She’s going to help you with whatever you need today.”

Jae’s cheeks were red as she crossed to where the woman stood. I hoped she wouldn’t be embarrassed enough to ask me to leave because I had a feeling this lady was going to call some friends, and the next hour and a half were going to be insanely busy.

I moved back to the keyboards and began to play. At least I could offer some distraction for anyone who might be waiting for assistance. I was glad I'd decided to come. Being with Jae made it easier to accept that my life was changing direction, and I knew it was because I wanted something different with her. I wasn't quite ready to put it in words, but it was the sort of thing that I'd never even thought about with other women, even ones I'd dated for a few months.

My brothers were going to have way too much fun with this.

* * *

People had been coming in steadily for the past hour, and I kept encouraging them to buy something to support a locally owned business and the arts. After the first fifteen minutes or so where people had been packing in but not buying anything, I'd offered autographs to anyone who bought something and pictures with people as they left. A little charm went a long way to keep the traffic flowing.

Now, we were in a bit of a lull, and Jae leaned back on the stool behind the cash register with a sigh.

"Next time you stop by, I'm going to make you an honorary salesperson," she said with a laugh.

I grinned at her. "Maybe this is my true calling."

"Damon Holden, working at a music store." She shook her head. "No, you've got a bigger future than that."

I suddenly wanted to ask her if she was going to be a part of that future.

"Music isn't done with you," she said. "You should go solo."

"What?" It came out a little sharper than I intended.

"You wouldn't be abandoning your friends," she said. "You said yourself that Holden is breaking up. Why can't you transition to a solo track? I'm sure the others wouldn't just understand. I think they'd be thrilled."

For the first time, I gave someone the real reason I'd never tried it. "I'm not good enough."

"Bullshit." She smiled as she said it.

Before I could argue, the door opened, and Starla appeared. "Well, if it isn't Houston's cutest new couple."

"Starla." Jae flushed.

Starla held up a newspaper. “You two got your picture in the paper. Then there’s the video of you guys singing together last night. It’s gone viral. It won’t take long for people to figure out where you work, Jae.”

“About that...”

The door opened again, and five giggling teenage girls came in. I couldn’t hear their whispers, but I had a pretty good idea why they were here.

“Why don’t I tell you about the deals I’m making for you and Jae can help these girls before clocking out?” I returned the guitar to where it had been hanging. “I also left you a list of the instruments I played and what I thought of them. Feel free to use my name and any quote you want.”

Starla eyed me. “All right, music man. You’re officially on my good side.” She took my arm. “Let’s talk.”

Twenty-Seven

Jae

The apartment smelled amazing. Jamie'd had a rare day off, and we'd planned for homemade pizza and a movie for the three of us. We'd had it on the calendar since Wednesday, and I'd been looking forward to it as much as Jamie and Kevin had.

I'd been a little worried when Damon asked if I wanted to go out for dinner, and I'd explained to him that I already had plans, but he'd simply smiled and told me to enjoy myself. For all of ten seconds, I'd felt guilty for not inviting him, but then he'd said that he needed to get his head together for his meeting tomorrow afternoon with the record label.

As much as I'd enjoyed my time with Damon over the past week, I couldn't deny how much the idea of a night home with my sister and nephew appealed to me. While I changed out of my work clothes into something more comfortable, I could hear Jamie and Kevin laughing and talking, the familiar sounds relaxing me.

When she'd first asked to move in with me last year, I'd worried that the two of us living under the same roof again would be a return to our childhood and adolescent sniping at each other, but it hadn't. Having Kevin had been a turning point for her. She still enjoyed having fun, but it wasn't a priority anymore, and where that fun came from was different now too. The teenager who used to complain if she had to stay home any Friday or Saturday night now reveled in a weekend home with her son.

"Cheese!" Kevin shouted as I joined him and his mom in the kitchen. In one chubby little hand was what had most likely been shredded mozzarella cheese and was now just a smooshed ball.

"Are you eating the cheese?" I asked as I kissed the top of his head. "Isn't the cheese supposed to go on top of the pizza?"

"Is good." He shoved the cheese into his mouth, smacking his lips.

"At least I never have to worry about him not getting enough calcium," Jamie said as she opened the oven door and checked the pizza.

"The boy does love his cheese," I agreed. I went to the cabinets and took

out three plates. “So, Kev, did you have fun with Mommy today?”

“We ride dragons.” A look of intense concentration came over his face as he tried to figure out if he could reach a few shreds of cheese that had fallen to the table.

“That sounds like fun.” I glanced at Jamie, who was laughing. “How do you ride dragons?”

He gave me one of those toddler looks that said I was clearly not as cool as his mom. “Sit on back and rawrr! Dragon fly!” He flapped his arms, rocking from side to side until he almost tipped over his seat.

“Kevin,” Jamie said, warning in her tone. “What did I tell you about dragons?”

He sighed. “No dragons at the table.”

“You take away all of his fun.” I laughed. “How did dragons come up?”

“Jetta and Mom were showing him dragonflies.”

“Ah.” Everything became clear. “Did you become the dragon?”

“I did,” she said. “I just hope he outgrows it before he breaks my back.”

As I finished setting the table, I couldn’t help wondering if, by the time Kevin was too big to climb on Jamie’s back, she’d have someone in their lives who could take her place as the human jungle gym. She hadn’t dated anyone since finding out she was pregnant with Kevin, and aside from a few comments here and there about good-looking celebrities, she hadn’t mentioned any particular guy she was interested in.

Neither of us were the kind of women who felt like we needed a partner to be complete, but there had to be times it got to her, being a single mom so young. Not for the first time, I wanted to slap some sense into the kid who’d gotten her pregnant and walked away. It wasn’t like I thought they had to get married or anything like that, but he should be bearing some of this responsibility too.

My phone rang, stopping my thoughts before they could become too maudlin. A quick glance showed an unknown number, and I sent it to voicemail. Most likely, it was a sales call, but there was also the possibility that a reporter had gotten my number.

They’d left here sometime after the memorial service, but they’d been back this evening, I assumed thanks to the picture and the video of Damon and me. They hadn’t seemed to connect Jamie and me yet, which was good. The last thing she needed to worry about was the press hounding her at work with questions about my love life.

“Sales call or your fan club?” She took the pizza out of the oven and set it on the cooling rack.

“My what?”

“Fan club.” She used the knife to point to the window before cutting the pizza. “Have you and Damon talked about how you’re handling the questions about the two of you?”

“We haven’t,” I admitted. “Honestly, I wasn’t sure I was going to see him after the memorial service. I’m trying not to have expectations.”

She brought over the cooling rack with the pizza on it and took her seat to Kevin’s right. I sat across from her. We ate in silence for the first few minutes, and then she set down her slice.

“You deserve to have expectations, Jae.” Her voice was soft, and she picked at her crust. “I’m the last person who should be giving dating advice, but I don’t want you to ever feel like you can’t have what you want because Kevin and I are here. I’ll move back in with Mom and Dad before I’ll let you lose something you deserve.”

I reached over and put my hand on hers. “There’s no way in hell I’m letting you move back in with Mom and Dad. There’d be a homicide within a week, and none of you would look good in prison orange.”

She laughed, and the shadows fled. “That’s a very good point.”

My phone rang again. Another unknown number. I sent it to voicemail and then turned my ringer off. I didn’t want anything interrupting our family night. If someone really needed to get ahold of me, they’d call Jamie when I didn’t answer. If it got too bad, I’d have to look into changing my number, and I didn’t want to do that, but I refused to think about that now. We had pizza to finish and a movie to watch.

By the time I went to bed, I was glad I’d ignored my phone all night. Twelve calls from unknown numbers and no voicemails. I was starting to think I might need to ask Damon how he handled reporters because ignoring them didn’t seem to be working. There was still the chance they were robocalls, but considering that they’d started the day Damon and my picture was in the paper and a video of us was making its way around the internet, my money was on paparazzi.

Twenty-Eight

Damon

I appreciated Z and Haje agreeing to meet in the private hospital room where Otis was now recovering, but this still wasn't a meeting I wanted to have. I understood and agreed with what we were going to do today, but that didn't make it any easier to accept.

Otis was talking with Kalini and Hawk when I knocked on the door. The guilt on his face told me that they'd been talking about the dissolution of the band. I smiled at him and took the seat next to Hawk.

"It's all right," I said before he could say anything. I didn't want him to feel like he had to apologize. "Shit happens, and this is the best way to deal with one part of it."

Another knock at the door and the meeting became official. Z and Haje were joined by the label's lawyer, Mr. Banks. I'd never gotten his first name, and he wasn't the type of man to let anyone use it anyway. I hadn't had much interaction with him, but what little I'd had always rubbed me the wrong way.

Everyone exchanged basic greetings and then settled in for the discussion none of us wanted to have.

"Let's get this out of the way," Z said. "We've always been more than satisfied with Holden's work, and we're willing to do whatever it takes to do what's best for all of you."

Shit.

I didn't have to look at the others to know that they were thinking the same thing. It would've been easier to do this if they'd been assholes about things.

Even though it hadn't been my idea, I knew they were going to defer to me. I'd put us together. I'd take us apart.

"We appreciate everything you've done for us," I said. "Since we first signed with you and even more over the last week."

Haje's smile tightened, and I knew she understood where this conversation was headed. Mr. Banks's expression had barely changed, the

slight narrowing of his eyes telling me he'd figured it out too. Z was the only one who hadn't gotten it yet.

"We can't make it past this," I said, letting my feelings about this bleed through my words. "I'm sorry, but Holden is done."

Silence stretched out, broken only by the sounds of the hospital outside the room.

"You have a contract." Mr. Banks sounded pissed. "If you breach that contract, we will sue for everything you have."

Z held up a hand, and the lawyer's mouth snapped shut. "I'm guessing that this wasn't your idea, Damon."

"It was mine," Kalini said.

"Ours," Hawk corrected. "The two of us decided together that we want to step back from music."

"The two of you?" Mr. Banks just couldn't seem to control himself. "Maybe you don't understand what breach of contract means, but—"

"That's enough, Banks," Z said sharply. "We have no idea what they've been through. Let them speak."

"I've got at least another two weeks here and months of physical therapy ahead of me," Otis spoke up. "I don't know how long it'll be before I can even hold my bass, much less play."

"How hard is it to replace a bass player?" Banks muttered.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that," I said with a barely-polite smile. "Because if I did hear it, I might be distracted from what's important here."

"We don't want to play with replacements," Hawk said firmly.

"Neither do I," I added. "You're right that this wasn't my idea, but it's the right thing to do. Replacing a single member of Holden would have been hard enough. Replace two, and you change who we are. Without Kalini and Hawk too, the band wouldn't be Holden anymore."

"You're Holden," Z said. "We can repackage. The fans will understand."

"Maybe do a farewell concert," Haje suggested.

The fact that they weren't being rude with their suggestions was the only reason I wasn't snapping at them to respect our decision and stop trying to talk us out of it.

"I can't." Kalini's voice was soft. "I can't get back on stage again. Any time I think about singing, I see the accident. The car skidding, flip—" The word broke off, and Hawk put his arm around her, pulling her close.

"We're not doing it," he said. "Not even a farewell concert. I'm sorry."

We've loved every minute of being a part of Holden, and if things had been different, who knows how long we would've kept going."

"But we can't change anything," Otis said. "We can only go forward from here."

"It doesn't matter what you want," Banks said from between gritted teeth. "You have a contract. A legally binding agreement that says you have a certain number of concerts and a certain number of albums that you are required to produce for the label. Let me remind you that there are penalties—"

I'd had enough from Mr. Banks. Z and Haje looked annoyed, but they were still trying to be diplomatic to everyone. If they weren't going to put a stop to this, I would.

"I think you need to be reminded of something, Mr. Banks." I leaned forward. "I created Holden, and this band means a lot to me, but it's not who I am. Who I am is someone who can take whatever legal bullshit you try to throw at me, or my friends, and bury you in it. You don't have the resources to beat the army of lawyers I can hire. And I won't just countersue the label and you personally. I'll also ruin you in the press. I'll make sure *everyone* knows that you're the one who threatened to destroy people who just wanted to move on after a tragedy."

Color flooded his face, but he didn't say anything.

I looked at Z and Haje. "I appreciate what you've done for us, but if the label is going to follow this asshole's legal advice, then this won't end as peacefully as I'd hoped."

"No worries," Z said. "We won't be pursuing legal action against Holden." He glared at Banks. "And if members of our legal department can't get behind that, then they can look for another job."

"Understood." Banks looked mutinous, but he didn't argue. He slumped in his seat like a petulant child.

"We're sorry to see Holden go," Haje said, "but we understand. This isn't a typical circumstance. We can't treat it like one."

Z nodded. "We'll have the paperwork drawn up before the end of the week."

"I'd like for us to put out a press release at the end of the week," Haje said. "We can send it to all of you before we make it public."

"That sounds good," I said, looking to the others for their agreement.

"If any of you are considering maybe doing some solo work, we'd like

you to come to us first, whether it's next week or next year." Haje looked straight at me when she said it, and I wondered if maybe she – and Kalini and Jae – were right, and a solo career was something I should seriously consider.

But not right now.

Right now, I was going to help my friends through this. Then I'd focus on what came next for me.

Twenty-Nine

Jae

I'd assumed that once word got out that Damon wasn't at the store, our customer traffic flow would return to normal. So far, it hadn't. Granted, we didn't have people lingering as long, but very few had simply walked in, looked around, and then walked out. It wasn't until partway through my shift that I realized people wanted to talk to me because I had been seen with Damon.

Starla had laughed at me when I'd told her, saying she'd wondered how long it would take me to figure it out.

I was just getting ready to take my lunch when I got a text alert. Damon wanted me to call him whenever I was able. One of the few things I didn't like about texts was the lack of inflection. It was impossible to tell from his brief message how the meeting had gone.

"I'm going to call Damon during lunch," I told Starla. "But if you need me, come get me."

"Tell him I said hi," she said, waving me away.

All around the store were signs saying that Damon Holden had used certain instruments or complimented other ones. Considering how much attention they were getting, Damon was going to be on her good list for a long time.

I closed the break room door to block out the noise and took a moment to get my lunch before settling at the table. Damon answered on the second ring.

"I'm not going to get you in trouble with Starla, am I?" he asked almost immediately.

"I'm pretty sure you could do anything you want right now, and Starla would still love you." I laughed. "Sign a guitar, and she might let you have her firstborn."

"I'm not sure if my autograph will be worth more or less by the end of the week."

My smile faded. I couldn't even imagine how hard today had been for him. He'd lost his friend and his dream in such a short period of time. "It's

official then?”

“They’re putting out a press release at the end of the week,” he said. “I think they’re still holding out hope that we might change our minds.”

He’d said *we* and *our*, but I knew this hadn’t been his preference. Even understanding where the others were coming from wasn’t the same as being the driving force behind it.

“Otis agreed with the others?” I asked.

“With the recovery he has ahead of him, I think it was the only thing he could do.” Damon sighed. “The label’s lawyer was a real jerk, talking about breach of contract and all that sort of shit.”

“With Otis right there in a hospital bed? What a bastard!” I put a lot of heat and venom into my words.

“I might’ve threatened to completely destroy the label and him personally if he didn’t back off.”

“Good.”

“I don’t think Z or Haje would’ve gone through with it anyway, but I was tired of listening to his threats.”

“I don’t blame you.” A few seconds of silence passed before I asked, “How are you doing?”

“Honestly, I don’t think it’s really sunk in yet.” He sounded so tired, it made my heart squeeze for him. “I guess Z and Haje aren’t the only ones hoping for a change of heart before the press release goes out.”

I wanted to ask him if he’d thought any more about a solo career, but I didn’t want him to think I was pushing him. Whatever he decided, he had to do it on his own terms and for his own reasons. It wasn’t my place to nudge him in any one direction. I wouldn’t take those sorts of liberties.

“I think the worst part is, I can’t really even be angry at anyone,” he continued. “It seems like a stupid thing to be frustrated about, but it makes me feel like an ass, being mad about the band breaking up when Bair’s dead and Otis is in the hospital. Hawk’s still getting his strength back, and Kalini’s having flashbacks of watching the accident.”

“You can be angry at the circumstances without being angry at the people,” I said. “The situation sucks. Just because you weren’t put in the hospital doesn’t mean this hasn’t completely turned your life upside-down too.”

“Yeah, the guilt isn’t helping,” he admitted. “I’m hoping it’ll be easier once the press release is out. Like maybe I’ll feel like I’m at less of a stand-

still and more like I can move forward without people thinking I'm being disrespectful to Bair's memory or to my friends' recoveries."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I know we've spent a lot of time together this past week, but would you want to come over to my place for dinner? I'll cook, and you can tell me about your pizza and movie night with Jamie and Kevin."

I was tempted to say no, worried about us spending too much time together, but he was still hurting. And I wanted to see him. I had to stop lying to myself – at the very least I was lying by omission – and admit that I'd want to be with him no matter what was going on in his life.

When he didn't need me anymore, I'd still want to be in his life. I could only hope that he would want to continue a friendship with me after this ended.

But it wasn't that time yet.

"That sounds great."

"Did you drive today?" I could hear him smiling.

"No, Jamie took the car. I can take the bus."

"I'll pick you up then," he said.

"Thank you," I said, meaning it. "Starla will let me borrow her car to do a quick run to the store. What should I bring?"

"You wouldn't happen to have those handcuffs in your purse, would you?"

I smiled. "Maybe..."

Thirty

Damon

Jae was going to get sick of me if I didn't quit asking to spend time with her, but I couldn't seem to stop. I'd always been a 'take it or leave it' kind of guy with everything but music. Beer. Sex. And even music had been a drive and not an addiction.

Jae wasn't like that. She was all-consuming. Haunting my dreams and my thoughts. I could hear her laughter. Smell her shampoo. Taste her skin. I didn't simply *want* her. I *craved* her.

I sat in my car for a minute after parking, pleased with how busy the store was. Going inside would probably cause a minor disturbance, but if Jae was right, Starla wouldn't mind. I only hoped I wouldn't end up stuck for an hour while Jae had to wait around. Most of my fans were courteous, especially when they saw me outside professional settings, which meant the odds were in my favor at least.

Then again, maybe I should enjoy it while I had it. After the press release, all anyone would want to know was if I was going to keep singing, and then, once something else took over the news cycle, no one would care what I was doing at all. Right now, they wanted autographs and to know how the others were doing. I could handle that.

A little less than forty minutes later, Jae and I were in my car and on the road back to my place. It'd taken Starla's intervention and a backdoor exit for me to give the customers the slip. I made a mental note to send her a thank you gift tomorrow.

Jae didn't seem upset that we'd gotten stuck after her shift ended, but I apologized anyway. "I'm sorry we got tied up back there. I probably should've just texted you that I was waiting in the car."

"It's fine." She reached over and squeezed my hand. "Your fans appreciate how personable you are, and Starla is loving all the attention the store is getting."

"I just don't want you thinking that fans are more important than our date tonight. I'm not the sort of man who blows off a commitment." I threaded my

fingers between hers. “Sometimes it’s hard to balance everything, but I try very hard to be present in the moment.”

She leaned over and kissed my cheek. “You’re sweet.”

I raised an eyebrow. Sweet?

She laughed, the sound filling my car. “Sweet isn’t an insult, Damon.”

“It makes me sound like a puppy.”

“I’m picturing that now,” she said, clearly enjoying herself. “Floppy ears and big puppy-dog eyes.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You’re having a little too much fun with this.”

“You’re the one who put the idea in my head.”

Good humor carried us through the rest of the drive, and we were both smiling as we got into the elevator. The doors closed, and I crowded her into the corner, putting my hands on either side of her body. The mood between us shifted, not necessarily into something serious, but the humor had heat to it now.

“Did you think I forgot about the handcuffs you may or may not have in your purse?” I slipped my finger under the strap of her purse and tugged on it. “I can think of so many interesting uses for them.”

“Examples?”

I lowered my head and kissed the side of her neck. “I’m particularly fond of one scenario where I put the handcuffs on a hook so your arms are stretched out above your head, and you can’t touch me.”

“You don’t want me to touch you?” She made a pleased sound when I nipped at her throat.

“I want to be able to touch you all I want.”

“And you can’t do that without me being tied up?”

I raised my head and brushed my lips across hers. “I tend to get distracted when you touch me.”

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. Impulsively, I swept her up in my arms, laughing as she squealed and threw her arms around my neck.

“I thought we were going to have dinner,” she said as I walked past the kitchen.

“After,” I said. “Unless you’re not in the mood.”

She pulled herself up to put her mouth next to my ear. “I’m pretty much *always* in the mood when I’m with you.”

Pain in my ear sent a bolt of arousal straight through me, and it took me a moment to realize that she’d bit my earlobe. She grinned at me, looking far

too pleased with herself.

“If you bite, you’re going to get bitten back,” I warned her as I set her down on her feet.

“Promise?” She winked at me.

Oh, this was going to be fun.

“Handcuffs.” I held out my hand.

“What will you do if I don’t have them?” she asked, cheeks pink. “I mean, I never *actually* said I had the handcuffs. I believe the word I used was *maybe*.”

My eyes narrowed. “I guess that means I need to go find something else to use to tie you up.” I pointed at her. “And you need to be naked by the time I do.”

“Or?” She raised her eyebrow. “I mean, if I’m a little slow? I did have a long day, after all.”

I stepped into her space and curled my fingers in her waistband. “Anything you’re still wearing when I’m ready won’t be fit for you to wear home.”

She shivered, her eyes darkening. “Maybe I’ll have to steal something of yours then.”

The idea of her in my clothes should have been laughable given our size difference, but it just turned me on more.

I needed to find something fast.

As I headed for my closet, I couldn’t help thinking about all the things Davin had talked about using for restraints. Nothing thin that would cut into flesh if she pulled at them. Nothing rough that would chafe bare skin. Something that could be easily released.

Ties might have seemed cliché, but I didn’t actually have many options. At least not ones that I was comfortable exploring at the moment. I didn’t want to ruin the mood by fumbling around with belts or whatever. Sometime later this week, I’d call Davin for a recommendation of where to shop.

For the moment, my widest tie would do.

When I stepped back into the bedroom, Jae’s pants, underwear, and bra sat in a neat pile on my dresser. Her shirt, however, was still on.

“I’d already planned to scrap this shirt anyway,” she said with a mischievous smile. She raised her arm and turned so I could see a hole in the material. “I had a slight accident with a screw while trying to put up a new display. It’s not something I could fix and still wear to work. This way, I can

enjoy having it ruined completely.”

How could someone sound sexy talking about something practical?

“Wrists,” I demanded.

She held them out, watching as I tied a simple slip knot. I’d done a little research into the various types of bondage used in BDSM, but I wasn’t even close to comfortable enough to do anything more than this. The last thing I wanted was to scare Jae away by screwing something up. She’d been open to exploring this lifestyle, and I wanted to keep it that way.

“Here.” I tucked the end of the tie in between her hands. “If you feel like you need to get yourself out of it, pull that, and it’ll loosen the knot. Anytime you want me to stop, just tell me.”

She nodded, and I searched her face for any sign of reluctance or anxiety. All I saw was excitement and anticipation. I kept watching her as I undressed, enjoying the way her gaze heated as it ran down my body. She wet her lips, and my cock twitched, remembering how good it had felt in her mouth.

I’d originally planned to put her on the bed, but when I’d gone into the closet, I’d seen something that had made me change my mind. She looked puzzled when I took her away from the bed and into the bathroom, but the moment she glanced up and saw the hook on the door, she figured it out.

It took a little maneuvering, but I was able to get the tie on the hook and her feet touching the ground. Her arms were stretched almost to their limit, but I didn’t plan on leaving her that way for long. My imagination already had a scenario in place.

First, I needed to get rid of that damn shirt.

It didn’t take much to tear it right down the front and expose that silky skin. Her breasts were half-hidden, and I pushed the material to either side. I couldn’t completely take it off with her arms the way they were, but I could get it out of the way enough to feast my eyes and hands on her breasts.

I took a moment to enjoy the weight of her breasts and the feel of her nipples under my thumbs, then I went to my knees in front of her and hooked her leg over my shoulder. She stiffened when I licked her, her eyes closing. I kept my eyes on her face as I ran my tongue between her folds, teasing the delicate skin and then up to that sensitive bundle of nerves.

She moaned my name, her hips rocking toward me. The smell and taste of her already had me on edge. Hearing her beg and curse made my cock ache. I slipped a finger inside her.

“I need more than that. Please.” She squirmed, tugging at her restraints

but never releasing them. “If you’re not going to give me your cock, at least give me two fingers. I’m so damn close.”

If she could put together full sentences, then I clearly wasn’t doing my job.

I added a second finger, curling them to make that ‘come hither’ motion that allowed the pads of my fingers to rub right over her g-spot. Her entire body jerked at first contact, shoving her pussy against my face. I used my free hand to hold her there, aware that the leg not over my shoulder was dangling almost completely free, toes barely brushing the cool tile.

I sucked steadily on her clit, listening as her speech disintegrated into short bursts of words between erratic breaths. When I knew she was close, I withdrew my fingers, chuckling as she swore at me. It wasn’t until the tip of my middle finger rubbed against her anus that she realized what I wanted to do. Her muscles tensed for a second, and I waited for her to tell me *no*. Except she didn’t.

“Need to come,” she pleaded. “Do it. Just make me come.”

Simultaneously, I lightly touched my teeth to her clit and pushed my finger inside her ass. Just to the first joint, but enough to give her an entirely new sensation to push her over the edge.

The back of her head thumped against the door as she came, her body shaking and those magnificent breasts of hers jiggling. I stood up, cupping her ass to help her wrap her legs around my waist. Her elbows bent as I took most of her weight, using my arm along her spine to help. She was still coming when I buried myself inside her.

Her eyes flew open, and I leaned her back enough that I could latch my mouth to a tight pink nipple. I drove into her relentlessly, unable to give her respite unless she asked for it. The way she tugged with her legs, trying to pull me deeper. The wet heat of her squeezing me tighter with every stroke. The way she panted my name as if it was the only word she could still remember. All of it demanded I make her scream with pleasure before I found my own release.

I bit down, worrying at her nipple with my teeth, taking my cues from the sounds she made until I’d found her line between pain and pleasure. The muscles in my stomach clenched, and I knew I was close, but I wasn’t going to let myself go just yet. I needed her to come again.

“Jae, darlin’, please come. I need you to come. Please, baby. Just let go.”

Her back arched, and she slammed her body down to meet my thrust hard

enough that I saw spots. Then she was convulsing, limbs twitching as she writhed on me. In the split second before I followed, I realized I'd forgotten a condom.

I yanked my cock out, her cry of protest barely registering as my cum splattered on the door and floor, some on the insides of her thighs. It took everything I had to prevent my knees from buckling, and I pushed her back against the door, using it to keep us both on our feet. She shuddered in my arms, clinging to me, and I pressed my face against her neck.

I'd apologize for my thoughtlessness as soon as my brain started working again. Or at least as much as it ever did when I was with her.

Thirty-One

Jae

Things had quieted down enough that Starla had decided it was okay for her to take a long lunch, and I was grateful for it. I loved her, but she'd been having far too much fun teasing me for smiling all the time.

I pointed out that I'd smiled before I'd met Damon, and she'd only laughed, saying that it hadn't been the same at all. I loathed to admit it, but she was right. What I'd felt since Damon had come into my life was different than anything I'd felt before. I'd always considered myself a relatively happy individual, but now it was like I was walking on air.

Some guilt lurked in the back of my mind, scolding me for being happy when Damon's friend had died, and his band had broken up. I refused to let it take over, though. I wasn't happy at the expense of others, just as a result of circumstances set into motion by an awful event.

I walked through the aisles, adjusting anything that was out of place. Starla had let it get around yesterday that Damon wasn't going to be a regular fixture at the store, and things had slowed down enough for a breather now and then. When I finished my walk-through, I went around the counter to retrieve some glass cleaner, intending to thoroughly rid every surface of fingerprints.

I set the glass cleaner down when I heard the door open and immediately wished I had a can of pepper spray handy.

Spencer.

"Looking for accessories or instruments?" I asked, forcing a polite smile.

"You might know what I'm looking for if you weren't too good to pick up your phone." He sauntered toward the counter. "And don't give me some bullshit about you blocking my number. I'm not stupid enough to call you from my number."

Anger flared. "You're the one who's been calling me?!"

"I just wanted to congratulate you on your new boyfriend," he said, putting his elbows on the counter and leaning forward. "You must've learned to put out since we were together. Picked up a couple tricks since there's no

other way a guy like that would go for you any other way. I mean, it's not like the guy's lacking for accessibility of cunt."

I curled my hands into fists. "If you're not going to buy anything, you can leave. Or I can call the cops. Starla will be back in a bit, so we could just wait for her."

"Not necessary." He tried to act like he didn't care about my threat, but I saw the flicker of concern in his eyes. Still, he didn't leave. "What I have to say won't take that long."

I gritted my teeth and told myself not to slap him on principle.

"You're going to break up with the singer."

That startled a laugh out of me. "Like hell I am. Now, get out or I'll call the cops."

The smug smile that curved his mouth wasn't exactly the response I'd been expecting.

"You're not going to call the cops or Starla, and you *are* going to dump Damon Holden on his ass."

Before I could tell him what he could stick up *his* ass, he said something that changed everything.

"Because if you don't do whatever I tell you to do, I'll make sure you lose one of the most important people in your life. Namely, that cute little nephew of yours."

My jaw dropped. "Excuse me?"

He grinned, the gesture so malevolent it caused the hair to raise on my arms. "I can't believe she kept the secret this long." He straightened, looking far too pleased with himself. "Not long after you and I went our separate ways, Jamie came sniffing around, flirting with me, throwing herself at me."

I started shaking my head, knowing this couldn't be going where I thought it was.

He shrugged. "I'm only human. She was cute. We fucked, and when I see her a few months later, she's fat. Tells me it's mine, and probably is." His face twisted into something ugly. "If you don't dump Damon, I'm going to sue for custody of my son, and none of you will ever see him again."

Thirty-Two

Damon

I finished washing up my dinner dishes and wondered how I was going to fill the next day. Yesterday and today, I'd essentially locked myself in my studio and gone through everything I had there.

Each instrument, every piece of sheet music. I found three notebooks I'd forgotten about, all full of random stuff. Some of it was nonsense that was pretty much good for nothing. Some of it was mediocre and might be better with a little tweaking.

And some of it was pretty damn good.

Good enough that I felt the need to find out how they sounded. Picking out a few tunes was what had turned a day-long project into a two-day thing, but it'd been good to take things slow, to get away from myself for a moment. So much of what'd happened to me recently had been based in emotion. I couldn't make decisions about my future from a purely emotional standpoint. My music came from inside me, but what to do with it had to have at least some practicality to it.

The desire to move forward from a place of logic also made it a good idea to spend the last two days not seeing Jae. We'd texted and talked a bit, but the physical space had been needed. Not because I didn't want to be physically close with her. Hell, I could spend days in bed with her and not get bored. I just couldn't think straight when I was around her, and to make good choices, I needed to be able to think.

I'd go see Otis tomorrow, I decided. Kalini had called me this morning to touch base and mentioned that she and Hawk had gone to see Otis yesterday. None of us wanted him to think that just because the band wasn't together anymore that we were walking away from each other. Otis, out of all of us, needed to know that we wouldn't abandon him now that things were hard. He'd dealt with that enough.

Maybe I'd get his take on the whole solo idea. As much as I didn't think I had the talent to do it, I hadn't been able to get the suggestion out of my mind. Otis would tell me how it was without worrying about offending me.

My phone rang, and I quickly dried off my hands and reached for it, smiling when I saw Jae's name on the screen.

"Hey, darlin'." I could always get a smile when I let my accent bleed through. "How'd work go today?"

"I can't do this anymore."

Immediately, my heart dropped. Even if her words hadn't been enough to worry me, her tone would've done it. Flat and unemotional, she didn't sound like her. Something was wrong.

"What happened?"

"Nothing." Jae seemed to sigh. "Look, the time we spent together was defined by a tragedy. Now that we're moving past it, it's becoming clearer that we're too different for this to be anything real."

I leaned against the counter. This didn't make any sense. Things had been fine between us when I'd taken her home Monday night and when we'd talked last night. There had to be some reason for this to have become an issue. If it was even the real issue at all.

"What's going on, Jae?" I asked, trying to think of anything that could've brought about this change. "Are the press bothering you? If they're harassing you, let me help."

"They're leaving me alone," she said shortly. "It's just over, Damon. We both knew it was going to end like this. I'm just being the one to pull the plug instead of waiting for you to do it, okay?"

"No, it's not okay." I could hear how harsh my words sounded, but I couldn't soften them. "I thought we were building something real."

"Look, you've got some serious changes in your future, decisions to make."

I heard a tremor of emotion and tried to cling to that. "Jae, I—"

"You should focus on your career. You don't need any other distractions. And I have my family to look out for."

I was losing this. Losing *her*.

"Jae, please, talk to me."

"It's over, Damon," she said quietly.

And the call ended.

I stared at the phone, too stunned to do anything more than that. For the third time in ten days, my world had been completely upended.

Thirty-Three

Jae

Today sucked.

Yesterday had sucked too.

Actually, pretty much everything had sucked since I'd broken up with Damon on Wednesday evening.

Spencer had waited for me to get to work yesterday and had smiled when I'd told him I'd ended my relationship with Damon. Then the bastard had simply walked away, whistling. I doubted this would be the last thing Spencer demanded of me in exchange for not taking Jamie to court for custody, but for right now, my nephew was safe. I just had to figure out what I could do to keep him that way.

The first thought that had come to me had been to get Jamie to file charges against Spencer for statutory rape. She'd been fifteen when she'd gotten pregnant. He'd been twenty. It didn't matter if it was consensual or not.

In Texas, the age of consent was seventeen. Jamie could have stripped naked and sat on his lap, and it still would've been statutory rape. And it wasn't like he could plead ignorance about her age. He knew that Jamie was three years younger than me, and he'd known it back then too.

Except there were all sorts of ways that could go wrong. Spencer could deny ever having had sex with Jamie, and the only way to prove that had happened at all would be a paternity test. Once Spencer was officially named as Kevin's father, he could twist the story to make it seem like Jamie hadn't told him about the pregnancy and then file for custody. He'd play the embarrassed guy who'd been seduced by the flirty teenager and probably get a slap on the wrist, if anything at all.

Statutory rape was difficult to prosecute under the best of circumstances, and this was hardly the best. She'd turned sixteen right around the time she'd realized she was pregnant, and I had no doubt that would be how any defense attorney would refer to her. It wouldn't matter that, either way, she had still been underage. Sixteen somehow ended up sounding a lot older than fifteen.

They'd point out that she'd never said anything to anyone about the consensual encounter, and then they'd tear her apart.

And he had the resources to do it.

If he'd been some random guy, charges might've stuck, but Spencer's family would hire private investigators to dig up dirt on Jamie and our family. He'd have the best law firm who'd bury the prosecution in paperwork if they didn't throw out the case altogether. They'd use the media to paint a picture of a jealous girl trying to ruin a good man's reputation.

The worst part of all of it was, I might've been able to prevent it all if I'd just told Jamie about how pushy Spencer had been that last date we'd gone on, so much so that I'd slapped him and gotten out of his car. Even if she hadn't listened to me then, I could've cast some doubt on his character. If I brought it up this long after the fact, I'd just look like either a sister lying to help or an ex lying for revenge.

I pulled my hair back into a ponytail and smoothed down the hairs curling in the humidity. I couldn't look like I was falling apart, no matter how much that felt like the truth. Things had been quiet at the store, but the press release about Holden breaking up had come out today. I had a feeling we'd have more than our fair share of reporters coming in, hoping to see Damon, settling for pestering me...

"Jae, have you seen Kevin's right tennis shoe?" Jamie called from the main room.

"Did you check under the couch?" My question sounded sharper than I'd meant it to be. Not sharper than how I felt, but more than I wanted her to hear.

I'd always hated people who blamed the victim, but I was struggling to see Jamie as being completely innocent in what'd happened. Yes, Spencer never should have touched her, and that was on him, but she'd pursued him, knowing how old he was and that he and I had dated. Then she'd kept it a secret from all of us even after she'd gotten pregnant. Granted, our parents probably would've gone after him, but she could've gotten child support, even if she did have to deal with joint custody.

Guilt swamped me. Not only guilt over blaming Jamie for what'd happened, but for thinking that sharing custody with Spencer would've been okay. Kevin was better without knowing Spencer, and I was an awful person if I was willing to put my nephew in that position just because it would've meant I could still have Damon.

“It’s not there.” Jamie appeared in my doorway. “Did he bring it in here?”

“No, Jamie, your son’s shoe is not in my bedroom.” I shut my dresser drawer harder than necessary.

“All right,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “What’s wrong? You’ve been snippy the past couple days.”

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. How could I tell her that a stupid decision she’d made three years ago had cost me a man I could have loved? After all, I’d fallen for Spencer’s bullshit too. And it wasn’t like her own life hadn’t been affected by her choice.

“Damon and I broke up, okay? And we’ve got people coming into the store all the time asking about him. It sucks.” I couldn’t look at her while I said it, afraid she’d see that I was hiding something.

“Oh, Jae, I’m so sorry.” She put her hand on my shoulder. “What happened?”

“We’re different.” Feeling like I had my expression under control, I turned toward her, shaking off her hand. “I didn’t really think it could ever last anyway.”

“Jae—”

“I’ve got to go to work.”

I left her in my room, stopping only to tell Kevin goodbye. This beautiful little boy was why I’d get through this without destroying my relationship with my sister. Even if I never forgot how much that phone call to Damon had hurt, even if things between Jamie and I couldn’t go back to the way they’d been, my love for my nephew would remain pure and uncomplicated. None of this had been his choice or his fault. That was something I could cling to when everything else was dark and confusing.

Soon enough, I’d be past all of this. The last two weeks would be a blip on the radar of my life. I’d have too many other memories to bother even thinking about any of this again. One day, I’d be able to listen to Holden without feeling like a hole had been ripped in my chest. One day, I’d see Damon on the cover of a magazine with a beautiful model on his arm, and I wouldn’t feel like throwing up. I’d have my own life and my own goals.

The first step in that direction was to go to work and pretend like everything was fine.

Thirty-Four

Damon

As I emptied my beer, I was grateful that the dinner with Grandad was only him, my brothers, and me. Dad would've disapproved of alcohol with dinner, and even though that was typical of him, it would've grated on my last nerve. My usually easy-going nature had taken a hit after that call from Jae.

"All right, Deklin, you said you wanted us to get together. Spill." Leave it to Davin to say it flat-out like that.

"Okay, so you guys know that I went to Tahiti with Sofi, right?" Deklin began.

"Obviously, I knew," Davin said. "You took off time from work."

"Yeah, I knew." I rolled my empty bottle between my hands, wondering if I should ask for another one.

"Well, while we were there, some things came out." Deklin and Grandad exchanged a look. "Apparently, Grandad hired her to distract me from Aurelia in the hopes that it'd break up the engagement..."

As Deklin told us about how he'd left Sofi in Tahiti in order to come back here and confront Grandad, I found myself wondering what my brothers and Grandad would say if I told them about Jae dumping me.

I'd never been dumped before, which meant they would most likely find it highly entertaining, especially since I wasn't about to let them know how much it had upset me. How I couldn't stop wondering what had really happened to make her break things off with me. How I couldn't stop thinking about her.

"...I told her that I wanted to marry her and adopt Dallas."

I straightened in my seat. I'd missed the middle of the story, but it seemed like I'd tuned back right in time. "You proposed? *Again?*"

"It's not the same thing," Deklin said, his expression far softer than I'd ever seen before. "*Dad* had wanted me to marry Aurelia. I never loved her, not like that, and you were the one who made me realize that it wouldn't be fair to either of us for me to marry her."

"But you love Sofi." I could see the answer on his face and said it as a

statement rather than a question.

“I do.” He smiled.

“You’ve known her for what, two weeks?” I asked, aware of how irritable I sounded. “And she lied to you.”

“I know how it sounds,” he said. “But for the first time in my life, I know what I want for me, not for anyone else.”

I glanced at Davin and wondered if he saw in me the same thing I read in his eyes.

Jealousy.

The press release had come out yesterday, which meant my entire family already knew that my years of living my dream were over. I hadn’t asked them if they’d seen the news. I’d been able to read it on their faces the moment I’d gotten here.

“She’s it for me,” Deklin said.

I wanted to laugh, but not because I didn’t believe him, even if it seemed that way. It was bitterness, pure and simple. I’d been dangerously close to thinking about Jae that way, and she’d left me without a real explanation.

“Deklin, you’re just starting off with Holden Enterprises,” Davin said. “Do you really think it’s a good idea to get involved with a woman who has a kid? A woman who lives, I might add, in a completely different state.”

“That’s part of the reason I wanted us all to have dinner together.” Deklin didn’t seem deterred by Davin’s observations. “I’m going to be looking for a place of my own, somewhere Sofi and Dallas will be comfortable too. Once they get settled in here, Sofi and I will start planning a wedding.”

Davin got it before I did. “You wanted us to know because as soon as Dad figures out you’re living with someone you’re not married to, he’s going to go ballistic.”

“He is,” Grandad agreed.

“But we’ll have your back,” I said. It didn’t matter if I thought he was moving too fast this time. Unlike his engagement to Aurelia, this thing with Sofi was his choice.

“Thanks,” Deklin said with a smile. “I can’t wait for you guys to meet Dallas. He’s such a great kid.”

As he went on with a story about Dallas, I was struck by how my baby brother was handling the thought of becoming an instant father. He was thrilled. Anyone could see it. The life that he’d chosen for himself didn’t look the way I’d always thought his life would be, but it was clearly what he

wanted.

I was happy for him. He'd found something that gave him purpose. He was going to have a family and a place of his own. He'd figure out whether or not he wanted to stay with Holden Enterprises. Whatever he decided, he'd have support.

"Now that Deklin's shared what's been going on for him, I think it's Damon's turn." Grandad looked at me. "When do we get to meet this Jae Knox we've been seeing all over the news?"

Dammit.

"Ah, well, about that..." I scratched the back of my head. "It wasn't going anywhere with her so we broke things off."

The look on Davin's face said he didn't believe I was telling him everything, but he didn't push the issue.

"That's too bad," he said. "At least it gives you a clean slate to start a new career. Any thoughts on what you're going to do now?"

So much for me not having to talk about it. But it was better than talking about Jae.

"I'm not sure," I said honestly. "I think I'm going to take things slow, deciding what I want to do next. Right now, I just want to make sure my friends are okay. Otis still has a long road to recovery."

"Does he need any financial help?" Grandad asked. "You know we'll help any of them if they need it."

"The label actually took care of all medical bills, and they're paying for any nursing help," I explained. "I'm more worried about him mentally and emotionally. What he and the others went through isn't the sort of thing that can be ignored."

Even as the four of us discussed how to help my friends, I still couldn't quite get Jae out of my mind. At some point, I would need to decide if I could move past this on my own or if I was going to have to figure out a way for me to get some closure for myself.

Thirty-Five

Jae

The weather today reflected how I felt, and I had to admit that it was more than a little comforting. Thick, charcoal gray clouds made this late Sunday afternoon in August look like night in the middle of winter. Flashes of far away lightning and the parking lot lights didn't do much to cut through the sheets of rain.

The storm had the added benefit of chasing away the paparazzi who'd been camped out in the parking lot since the Holden press release. They would've used it as an excuse to come inside if Starla hadn't hung a sign yesterday afternoon threatening reporters with trespassing charges. We didn't mind the people who came in just wanting to meet Damon Holden and maybe take a picture with him, but the people who kept hounding me to answer questions had gotten on her last nerve yesterday.

We'd had exactly four customers today, and I'd been glad for the boredom, especially since each of those customers had purchased an instrument pricey enough to give us a decent sales day. Thanks to that, when Starla had left about an hour ago, she'd told me that if the electricity went out, I could close early. She'd been sick all day, and it'd taken me that long to get her to go home.

I didn't plan on leaving early, even if the electricity went off. I enjoyed the sound of the rain, and I'd brought a book to read. Jamie was home, and Kevin was probably going for a sleepover at my parents' house, which meant if I went home, I'd be alone with her. I wasn't ready for that, not when she was going to keep picking at why Damon and I had broken up. That was a conversation I never wanted to have.

I was at the display case closest to the door when it opened, and I turned just in time to see Spencer flip the deadbolt on the door as he closed it behind him. A sliver of fear cut through me, and I struggled to hide it. I had to think.

He was trying to scare me, and this was a good way to do it. I could threaten him with calling the cops, but the threat would only work if I could follow through with it.

My cell phone was in my purse under the counter. The landline was on the counter.

“You’re not supposed to be here.” I crossed my arms and tried to look intimidating.

“I think we both know that you’re going to give me whatever I want,” he said with a smug smile. “So drop the act.”

I took a sideways step to put me closer to the counter. “I did what you asked and broke up with Damon. Leave me alone, Spencer.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” He moved faster than I expected, his hands slamming against the wall on either side of my head. “This isn’t over. It’s just getting started.”

That little sliver of panic blossomed into something large that threatened to consume me. I fought it back and reminded myself that Spencer was a bully. I’d dealt with bullies before.

“You need to back up,” I said firmly. “Go back to your parents’ store, and I’ll pretend this didn’t happen. If you insist on continuing to harass me, I’ll be forced to follow through on Starla’s threat to have you arrested for trespassing and harassment.”

His eyes narrowed, the color darkening to near-black. “No, you *fucking* bitch. You’re going to give me what you owe me, whether you want to or not.”

He leaned toward me, and I put my hands on his chest before his mouth could reach mine. I shoved him back with all the strength I could muster.

“No!” I kept my arms out and tried to keep my voice steady.

He grabbed my wrists, pushing my arms in as he closed in on me. Adrenaline raced through me, my body admitting what he was trying to do before my brain accepted it. I jerked my knee up, but he turned his hips, and I caught him in the thigh instead of his crotch.

He laughed and squeezed my wrists until I couldn’t hold back a whimper of pain. “Go ahead and fight it if you think it’ll make you feel like less of a whore. I don’t mind.”

I struggled, pulling at his grip without any thought of how to best get free. I just knew I had to get away, or I was going to get hurt.

“Want to know a secret?” Spencer leaned close enough to put his mouth next to my ear.

The backs of his hands pressed against my breasts, and the scent of his cologne made me gag. I had to do something. I had to get away. He didn’t

have a weapon. If I could get out of his reach, I stood a chance of getting to the back door. The phone wasn't an option anymore. He'd catch up before I finished dialing.

Then he said something that made me freeze in place.

“Jamie fought it at first too, but when she finally stopped, she enjoyed every minute of it. I made your little sister's first time memorable, like yours should have been if you hadn't been such a cold cunt.”

The truth crashed into me, knocking the air from my lungs.

Jamie hadn't pursued Spencer. He'd raped her to get back at me for refusing him.

Everything she'd been through in the past three years had been my fault.

Thirty-Six

Damon

I'd been up early, unable to sleep for the fourth night in a row. After thoroughly cleaning my entire place – something I hadn't done for myself in a while – the time after lunch loomed large.

I wasn't used to having much in the way of extra time, and filling it wasn't as easy as it sounded. With the storm brewing outside, going somewhere wasn't really on the top of my list. Fortunately, I had my own home gym, so that was where I went. If I paced myself, I could stay busy for most of the afternoon.

I'd just finished some time on the treadmill when my phone signaled that I had a text message.

When I saw a number instead of a name, disappointment was sharp, but then I saw the first part of the message.

Hi, Damon. It's Jamie, Jae's sister.

I wiped off my face and tossed my towel toward the basket in the corner. I scooped up my phone and opened the message as I sat on the edge of the weight bench to read the entire thing.

*Hi, Damon. It's Jamie, Jae's sister. What the *hell* happened between you and my sister? She's been moping around the last few days and biting my head off. You need to fix this.*

“Dammit,” I muttered. I tapped out a quick reply.

Hell if I know what happened. One moment, things were fine and then I got a call out of the blue to say we're too different and it's over. She didn't tell you anything?

I was cooling down, and that wasn't the best idea if I wanted to keep exercising, but if I was going to finally get some answers, it'd be worth it.

Would you be able to come over so we can talk? I don't have the car.

I assumed that meant Jae was working since there wasn't really another reason for Jamie not to have the car.

I'll be right over.

I stood up, then grimaced. Right. Quick shower first.

Between the shower and the weather, it took me longer than usual to get to South Houston. By the time I knocked on the door, my stomach was in knots. Something had to happen here. Jamie had to have answers. I needed them.

“Hi, Damon.” Jamie opened the door wide enough for me to go inside. She looked troubled. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“No, thank you.” I held up my dripping umbrella. “Where can I put this so it won’t make a mess?”

“I’ll take it,” she said, reaching out.

I took off my shoes as she disappeared into the bathroom. I stuck my hands in my pockets and walked over to the couch. The memory of being with Jae on this very piece of furniture hit me like a punch to the gut.

“Please, sit.” Jamie gestured at the couch. “Kevin’s at my parents’ house, so we can talk freely.”

I wasn’t exactly sure where to start, but I figured straight forward was the best way to go. Jamie, after all, had been quite blunt with me when it came to what she was going to do if I hurt Jae.

“What has she told you?”

Jamie shook her head, clearly frustrated. “Nothing, really. Just that you two were different, and she hadn’t expected it to last anyway.”

“I don’t get it.” I shook my head. “We hadn’t argued. The last time we saw each other, things had been fine. We’d talked and texted since then, and there hadn’t been any sort of disagreements.”

“Maybe something felt wrong, and she just didn’t think that she could say anything.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Jae doesn’t strike me as the kind of woman who wouldn’t speak her mind.”

Jamie gave me a sideways look. “Jae’s different with you.”

“Good different or bad different?” I asked, unsure if I wanted to know the answer.

“Ever since she broke up with Spencer,” Jamie grimaced at the name, “she keeps guys at arm’s length. You, she likes.”

“Liked,” I corrected with a scowl. “Because she wouldn’t have broken up with me if she still liked me, right?”

“Women do stupid things all the time.”

A thought occurred to me. “Do you think she broke up with me because she wants to get back together with Spencer?”

I felt stupid even considering it, but I couldn't help it. Spencer was an asshole, but she'd never reported him to the cops. Maybe it wasn't because of his family's connections and money. Maybe it was because she really wanted to have him back.

"No." Jamie's answer was sharp. "She wouldn't do that. She knows enough about the type of man he is."

Her voice had taken on an edge that made me sit forward. "Jamie?"

She stood, her fingers twisting together. "She wouldn't do that, Damon. Something else has to be going on."

"You don't think he might've started trying to talk her into it?" I asked. "He doesn't seem to be the type to take no as an answer."

The moment my statement registered, she froze, and I knew I'd hit a nerve. I still wanted to know what'd happened with Jae, but my gut said there was something going on here that needed to be addressed.

She spun toward me, her eyes wide and wild. "What did Jae tell you? When did she find out?"

"Jamie, what's going on?" I stood, slowly moving toward her. My stomach sank at the sheer terror in her eyes. I really hoped I was misreading this situation. "What's wrong?"

"Did he do something to her?" She grabbed the front of my shirt. "Why didn't you protect her from him?"

I put my hands over hers but kept my grip light so she knew she could pull away at any time. "Why do I have to protect Jae from Spencer?"

"You said it. He doesn't take *no* for an answer."

Fuck.

"Jamie," I kept my voice gentle, "did Spencer rape you?"

Her entire body shook, and then she burst into tears.

I was going to kill that son of a bitch.

Painfully.

Thirty-Seven

Jae

My chest hurt as I ran up the stairs, too keyed-up to even think about getting into an elevator. My pulse pounded and raced, and I knew the adrenaline in my system wasn't going to last much longer. I barely remembered the drive here, only that I'd pushed the speed limit as much as I'd dared. I had to get Jamie and get us somewhere safe.

I pushed my hair back from my face, the cold rainwater dripping from the soaked strands landing on my drenched shirt. What I really wanted to do was take a hot bath, put on fuzzy pajamas, and curl up in my bed, but that couldn't happen. I'd failed Jamie before. I wasn't going to fail her again.

I heard her crying when I was a couple steps from the door, and it was all I could do to get the key in the lock. How had Spencer gotten here so fast? What was he doing to—?

The door swung open, revealing that it wasn't Spencer standing there with Jamie in his arms.

It was Damon.

"What the hell are you doing to my sister?" I slammed the door behind me as I rushed into the apartment. I hit Damon with both my palms, ignoring the pain in my wrists. He stumbled back, shock on his face as I put myself between him and Jamie. "Get the *fuck* away from my sister!"

"Jae, it's okay." Jamie grabbed my arm. "Jae!"

I half-turned toward her, not wanting to let Damon out of my sight. I'd *trusted* that bastard!

"He was comforting me."

Jamie stepped around me so I could see her and Damon both. He had his hands up, palms out, his expression unreadable.

"Comforting you?"

"Like a brother." Jamie took my hand, her expression pleading. "He's not hitting on me or hurting me."

It took a moment for it all to register, and when it finally did, my muscles began to tremble. I locked my knees and pressed my fingers together to keep

them from seeing my hands shaking. Before I could get Jamie out of here, however, I needed to get Damon gone. He wasn't part of my life anymore, and I wasn't going to drag him into this.

Except he was already here.

I narrowed my eyes, trying to make everything make sense. "Why was he comforting you?"

Her expression crumpled, and all of my guilt came rushing back.

"I'm so sorry." Tears spilled down her cheeks. "I've been lying to you about Kevin's father—"

"I know," I said, emotion flooding my face. "It's Spencer."

Jamie's jaw dropped, and Damon's hands fell. He took a step toward us, but I ignored him for the moment. I owed him an explanation, but it was going to have to be a quick one. And it would come after I let Jamie know we didn't have secrets anymore.

"He came after me."

Damon growled a curse.

"Jae!" Jamie grabbed my hands, her eyes widening as she saw the bruises starting to form on my wrists.

"I'm okay," I assured them. "He said he was going to...." I swallowed hard. "He said you fought him too."

Jamie's eyes were still wet, but she had a small smile now. "I did. Not enough, but I did."

"I managed to get away. Kicked him in the balls." The second time had been the charm rather than the third.

"You're soaked."

A towel came over my shoulders. I hadn't even realized that Damon had moved. He rubbed my hair and then my arms briskly, the heat of his hands warming me as much as the friction.

"I'm so sorry, Damon." I turned around so that we were face-to-face. "He threatened to take Kevin if I didn't break up with you."

"He did what?!" Jamie sounded both furious and afraid, which I understood all too well.

"That's when he told me that he was Kevin's...sperm donor." I refused to use the word *father* to describe him. "He said you pursued him."

"I did not!"

"I know," I said quickly. "Tonight, when he tried to...I learned the truth tonight."

“Let’s get you dried off, and then we can talk about what we’re going to do about Spencer,” Damon said, his voice biting off each word.

Shit.

I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten the reason I’d nearly killed myself to get here. This was seriously messing with my head.

“No time.” I tossed the towel onto the couch. “Jamie, we have to go. We have to get Kevin and get somewhere safe. We’ve been here too long all ready. Damon, you need to leave too.”

“Kevin’s safe at Mom and Dad’s,” Jamie said. “We’ll lock the door here and call the cops.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Damon said, his face an angry mask. “You’re safe here.”

I shook my head. “We can’t stay here. He’s going to come, and he’ll be pissed when he gets here. He might even bring a gun. I just kicked him in the nuts. It won’t keep him away for long.”

“He’s not going to come here,” Jamie said. “He’s never crossed that line in all the time we’ve lived here.”

“He’s not that stupid,” Damon added.

I would’ve argued the point, but that was when Spencer kicked the door open.

Thirty-Eight

Damon

Jae was right, and the moment this was over, I was going to tell her that.

The moment the door came crashing in, I moved between the sisters and the bastard. He stayed in the doorway for a moment, nostrils flaring, teeth clenched, and then he came inside.

“You. Fucking. *Bitch!*” He pointed behind me. “I’m going to make you pay for that cheap shot.”

I needed to get his attention off them and on me. “You’re outnumbered, asshole. How about we give you a head start before we call the cops and you leave right now.”

“Fuck off, Holden.” He didn’t even look at me. “This is between me and the cunt sisters.”

“Yeah, I don’t like that word,” I said. “Or any of the other words you’ve been using.”

“Too fucking bad.”

“I’m not going to let you near them,” I said, motioning behind me for them to move into the hallway. I didn’t know if they listened or not, but I wasn’t about to look away to find out.

“Then I guess I’ll just have to kick your ass first.” He grinned. “Works for me. I’m always more in the mood to fuck after I beat the shit out of someone. Maybe I’ll fuck them together. Make them watch when I do the other one.”

If I’d had any doubt about using violence to take this asshole down, it went out the window with that statement of intent.

He charged at me with a roar that I supposed was meant to intimidate me, but I held my ground. A moment before he hit me, I lowered my shoulder, letting Spencer’s momentum drive his chest into my shoulder. I heard his breath come out of him with a rush and knew I’d hit his solar plexus.

I lifted up, taking him with me. He balanced on my shoulder for a second before I flipped him over my back to the floor. He slammed down, gasping and wheezing. I straightened, expecting it to be over, and then his foot

connected with my ankle, knocking me back and off balance.

“Damon!”

“Get Jamie into your room and lock the door!” I caught myself on the edge of the couch, barely managing to stay upright.

Spencer scrambled to his feet, his face red. “Kill. You.”

The words were almost inaudible as he struggled to get air, but he was desperate enough that I wouldn’t underestimate him. Fury gave people strength to do things that they wouldn’t have had the ability to do otherwise.

“It’s over,” I said, easing my way around to get between him and the women.

Jae hadn’t moved other than to put herself in front of Jamie. I didn’t know if it was fear or sheer stubbornness that kept her there, but I wasn’t going to let either get her hurt.

Spencer reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a switchblade. Jae cursed, but I didn’t look over at her. He’d have to get close to hurt me with that, and my reach was a couple inches longer than his. What had me seeing red wasn’t the threat he posed to me, but rather the fact that he’d probably planned to use the knife on Jae earlier.

“Not so tough now.” He smirked at me.

I ignored the taunt. Spencer was going to assume that I’d react the same way he did, lashing out and losing my temper when provoked. Granted, I had a little less control than I did when it came to someone mistreating others, but in this sort of situation, a misstep could be deadly.

“Walk away now, and I’ll let you live.” He made a short stabbing motion with the hand holding the knife. “Shouldn’t be too hard for you to find someone willing to fuck a rich guy like you.”

“This coming from a man who raped a fifteen-year-old girl.” The words came from between gritted teeth, but I hadn’t lost my focus.

“Come on, we both know it’s not rape if she’s asking for it.”

Before I could even think of a reply to that statement, I saw movement from the corner of my eye. Spencer didn’t notice it until the picture came crashing down on his head. He dropped to the floor amid a shower of glass. I stared at Jamie, who still held the picture frame in her hands. She tossed it aside and glared down at the unconscious man.

“I didn’t ask for it.” She kicked him three times, her foot hitting his upper arm hard enough to bruise. “I. Said. *No!*”

For the second time this evening, she burst into tears. This time, it was

Jae who embraced her, saying things too soft for me to hear.

While Jae comforted her sister, I went into the kitchen to find something I could use to tie Spencer up. The zip ties I found in a drawer worked perfectly, and I drew them tight enough to pinch, but not enough to cut off circulation, though I was tempted.

After I was sure he was secure, I picked him up by the back of his shirt and set him against the wall. I wasn't going to risk him waking up and catching us off-guard. I nudged the knife out of his reach and made sure he wasn't near any shards of glass he could use as a weapon. Only when I was satisfied that we were safe did I take out my phone and call 911.

By the time the operator assured me that neighbors had called about a disturbance and the cops were already on their way, Jae and Jamie had moved to the couch, and Jamie's tears had lessened. I stayed on my feet, ready to act if Spencer so much as sneezed.

"There's something I don't understand." Jae was now speaking loud enough that I could hear. "Why didn't you tell me what happened? I would've believed you. Mom and Dad would've believed you."

Jamie shook her head and wiped at her cheeks. "I know. It wasn't that." She took the tissue I offered and gave me a weak smile. "I fought him, but then he said he would do—" She took a shaky breath. "He said he'd do to Jetta what he was going to do to me unless I let him fuck me. And if I ever told anyone, he'd hurt Jetta worse."

My hands curled into fists.

"I couldn't let him do that, Jae. Even if I'd reported it, he'd have been out on bail, and he would've come after Jetta—"

"I'm going to keep my promise." Spencer's voice drew our attention. He glared at us, blood oozing down his face. "As soon as my parents bail me out, I'm going to fuck your baby sister. And your mom. I'm going to make you watch and then you're going to—"

He didn't get to finish his sentence because before I could threaten him into shutting up, Jae was on her feet, and her fist made contact with his jaw. Spencer's head whipped to the side, thudding against the wall behind him.

"You bitch! You're going down for assault! All of you!"

I put my hand on Jae's shoulder when she made a move to hit him again. "Let me."

She thought for a moment, then nodded and went back to Jae. I crouched down in front of Spencer.

“It’s a shame you fell into the couch when you went after Jamie and Jae. And if you don’t shut up, you’re going to take a few more falls before the cops get here.”

“Fuck you, Holden!” He spat. “You’re all going to jail!”

I shook my head. “You don’t get it, Spencer. You’re used to being the one with enough money and a family name to keep you out of trouble, but compared to me, you’re nothing. Whatever you think your parents are going to do for you, I’m going to come back with something twice as big. You better get it through your head that you’re done. Your ass is going to jail for a long time, and nothing is going to save you.”

I could see on his face that he didn’t believe me, but he didn’t have to believe me. I’d make good on my threat. Even if things between Jae and I were really over, I was going to make sure Spencer was an old man before they let him out. He would never hurt anyone else ever again.

Thirty-Nine

Jae

My head hadn't stopped spinning even though my adrenaline had long since faded.

Spencer had been arrested, but since he had been knocked unconscious, he'd had to go to the hospital. Jamie had given him a concussion, and my right hook hadn't done him any favors. I hadn't let Damon lie for me, though. I'd been honest about the fact that I'd punched him after he'd been tied up. Considering what he'd done, I was pretty sure I wouldn't get in trouble for it. And if I did, it would be well worth it.

Right now, Spencer was at the hospital with a cop at his door, and we'd been assured that once he was discharged tomorrow, he'd go straight to arraignment and then to jail. There was always the possibility of him getting out on bail, but Damon didn't seem to think that was going to happen.

I refused to worry about that right now, though. Tonight, we were all safe. Jamie and Kevin were with Mom and Dad, and now they knew the whole truth about what'd happened with Spencer, from the complete reason I'd broken up with him to the threats he'd made while cops had been dragging him out of the apartment.

The doctor who'd wrapped my hand had given me pain meds strong enough that I didn't feel the bruises on my wrists or the ache I knew would be in my muscles come morning. The physical pain hadn't been the first concern in my mind, though. That spot went to the man sitting next to me.

Damon had only left my side at the hospital when the cops had told us they needed to take separate statements. He'd even refused to have any doctors look at him, saying he didn't need anyone to tell him that he had a couple bruises. As soon as the cops had finished with our statements, he'd come back to me, and he'd been hovering ever since.

Hovering, but not touching.

I wasn't upset with him, especially since I was the one who'd screwed things up with us in the first place, but I wasn't going to wait long to find out if he was just feeling protective or if there could still be something between

us.

He'd asked me to come home with him, which made me hopeful, but I wasn't going to assume anything. For all I knew, he was just being the good man I knew he was and giving me a safe place to stay while allowing Mom and Dad to have time to process this new information. They and Jamie had several years of unnecessary tension to work through.

Neither Damon nor I said anything until we were in his living room.

"Are you hungry?"

I shook my head and then shivered. My clothes were damp rather than soaked, but going from the rain to air-conditioning and back again had left me chilled.

"Shit, Jae, I'm sorry." He put his hand on my cheek. "You're freezing. Let's get you into a bath. Unless you want a shower. Whichever, it needs to be hot."

"Damon..."

"Get out of these wet clothes and into hot water. Use my bathroom. I'm going to find you something to wear."

"Damon..."

He put his finger on my lips and kissed my forehead. "Go. Get warm. Get clean."

He was half a dozen steps away when I finally said the one question that I needed answered. "Are you doing this because you feel sorry for me?"

The shock on his face registered a second before I realized that he was coming back toward me. He took my face between his hands, his eyes blazing, and kissed me. Heat rushed through me, chasing away the deeper chill that had nothing to do with the physical.

"I don't feel sorry for you, Jae." He rested his forehead on mine, and his voice was rough. "I'm in awe of you. Of your strength and your loyalty and your love."

I closed my eyes, tears burning as they threatened to spill. "I'm so sorry, Damon. I didn't want to push you away—"

"I know," he said. "I know."

He wrapped his arms around me, and it was better than any shower could even be. I rested my head on his chest, absorbing his strength. Was it possible that I hadn't done irreparable damage? That we could move past this?

After a few minutes, Damon spoke. "Let's get you into the shower."

I nodded and let him lead me through his bedroom and into the master

bathroom. The only things Jamie and I had taken from the apartment had been our purses, and Damon took mine now and set it on the counter. After turning on the shower, he reached out and squeezed my hand.

“I’ll be back in a minute with something for you to wear when you get out.”

I stood there in the middle of the bathroom, not moving even after the door closed behind him. With him not nearby, I was...numb. Not because I didn’t feel anything, but because I was feeling too much. Having too many thoughts.

The mirror began to steam up, and I finally started to move. I piled my clothes on the floor because I didn’t see a trash can that could fit everything. I didn’t plan on wearing any of it again. I wouldn’t be able to look at them without thinking about Spencer and what he tried to do. Fortunately, they weren’t anything irreplaceable.

When I stepped under the showerhead, I closed my eyes and sighed in relief. The water pressure was amazing, pounding against my tense muscles. I opened them when I heard the glass door sliding open and smiled at Damon as he stepped inside. He joined me under the spray, and I reached out to trace my fingers over the initials on his chest.

“Your mom?”

He nodded, sadness in his eyes. “She would’ve liked you.”

“I’m sure I would’ve liked her too.” I picked up the shampoo and squirted some into my palm. “Turn around.”

He did, and I took a moment to admire the intricacies of the cross tattoo on his back before reaching up to work the sandalwood-scented shampoo into his hair. Despite how insanely good he looked naked and wet, this wasn’t sexual. I couldn’t say exactly what it *was*, but it wasn’t sex.

Not yet, anyway.

* * *

The robe he held out for me was huge, and I smiled as he wrapped me in it. I’d never be able to walk in it, but I didn’t plan to go far tonight. I’d find something a little more mover-friendly in the morning. Or maybe I’d just wear a towel like Damon was right now.

“Let’s get you into bed.” He scooped me up, making me laugh. “I like

when you make that sound.”

I wrapped my arms around his neck. “You do realize I’m completely capable of walking to the bedroom on my own, right?”

“Nope.” He chuckled. He set me on the bed and sat next to me, his expression becoming more serious, more...vulnerable. “You told both Jamie and me that you didn’t think we were going to last. Was that just because of Spencer, or did you really mean it?”

Shit.

“Mostly him,” I said, going for complete honesty. “but a little me.”

He reached over and took my hands. “Did I do something that made you think I didn’t want to be with you anymore?”

I shook my head. “The circumstances that brought us together were just weird, and I didn’t know if things would change once all of that turmoil was done.”

“And it’s not like I have a history of long relationships,” he added.

Relief at his understanding swept through me, but there was still a little trepidation when I confessed, “I was hoping it would, though. Last, I mean.”

The moment I saw his eyes light up, I knew I didn’t need to be worried anymore.

“I want that,” he said, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “I’m not going anywhere.”

I could’ve thought about it. Weighed the pros and cons. Analyzed every aspect of not only this conversation but of everything that had happened today. But I didn’t want to do that. What I *did* want was to connect with him after days of separation.

Gripping his shoulder, I threw my leg over his lap and covered his mouth with mine. He made a sound that twisted things inside me, and I dug my nails into the back of his neck. His teeth sunk into my bottom lip, and I gasped. His tongue flicked into my mouth, and I darted mine out to meet his.

His hands slid under the robe, hot on my bare skin. Up my thighs and around to squeeze my ass. Damn, that felt good. I could feel him through the towel, cock swelling as I rocked back and forth on his lap. The soft cotton of the robe rubbed against my nipples, made them harden.

A finger rubbed the tip of my clit and then moved down to slip inside me. I moaned, and his other hand moved up to grab my hair, tugging slightly until I raised my head.

“I need to get up.” His voice was strained. “Condom.”

I rose up on my knees a bit and then reached down to cup him through the towel. “I’m okay without one if you are.”

His eyes met mine, and he held my gaze for a moment before wrapping his arm around my waist and flipping us over so that I was on my back, staring up at him. Without looking away, he moved the towel out of the way and was inside me with one smooth thrust.

We held our breath, and the world stood still. We were as close as two people could ever be, and I never wanted to feel this with anyone but him. I saw my own wonder reflected in his eyes as he began to move. Each stroke was long and deep, skin against skin as he filled me again and again. As I raised my hips to meet him, my fingertips traced his face, over his cheekbones and jaw, his lips.

Pleasure coiled inside me, building with each passing second, pushing me higher and higher until my muscles were trembling, my nerves screaming for release. He rolled his hips, giving me the pressure and friction I needed to come.

But he didn’t stop, instead pressing on relentlessly, sending wave after wave of ecstasy rolling over me until his rhythm faltered, and he drove deep, adding a jolt of near-pain that made me cry out. I clung to him as his cock pulsed inside me, and his body shuddered against me.

It wasn’t until my mind started to clear that I realized Damon had been talking, soft murmurs of my name, endearments. I stroked my hand down his spine and over the firm swell of his ass, enjoying the weight of him on me.

After a couple minutes, he got up, disappearing into the bathroom and coming back with a washcloth. Once he finished cleaning me up, I slipped under the covers, and he joined me when he returned. We settled next to each other, and it surprised me how easy it was to curl up against his side, ready to sleep.

Or not.

“I’ve been thinking about what I want to do in the future,” he said as he wrapped his arm around me.

“A solo career?” I had to admit, I liked the idea of maybe getting a private concert every now and then.

“Not exactly.” He kissed the top of my head. “I was thinking more along the lines of a duo.”

“Like when Otis is better?”

He chuckled, the warm sound slipping over my skin like silk. “You’re

usually much smarter than this.”

I tilted my head back to glare at him. “Excuse me for having post-orgasm brain.”

He laughed again, a different sort of pleased sound to it. “I guess that means I don’t need to ask if you enjoyed yourself.”

“You don’t.” Feeling a little mischievous myself, I lightly bit his chest.

He growled, squeezing me. “Listen to me, Jae.”

I grinned. “I’ll behave.”

“Good,” he said, “because what I’m trying to say is important.”

I mimed zipping my mouth closed and locking it.

“I want a career singing with the woman I love.” He caught my chin. “And before you really make me feel like an idiot, yes, that’s you.” He brushed his lips across mine. “I love you, and I want us to sing together. Straightforward enough?”

My head spun. “You...” I didn’t know what to respond to first. “I love you too.” Okay, maybe I did know what to say first.

That megawatt smile made my knees go weak. “And you’ll sing with me?”

“I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “The thought of it...I love the idea of it. I just don’t know about the practicality. I’m not sure if I can be away from my family for the time touring takes.”

He put his finger on my lips. “It’s okay. We don’t have to plan the rest of our lives right now. I just wanted you to know that, whatever I end up doing, you’re going to be a part of it, because the one thing I know for certain about my future is that you’re a part of it.”

I didn’t know what to say to that, so I kissed him. We’d work it all out eventually, but right now, I fully intended to have my actions speak louder than any words I could find. We had the rest of our lives to talk.

I smiled as I moved on top of him. The rest of our lives. I liked the sound of that.

Forty

Jude

I was worried about my grandsons.

“What’s wrong?” Cynthia asked as she brought me a glass of Scotch.

“What do you mean?” I took a small drink.

She sat on the arm of my chair and ran her fingers through my hair.

“Come on, Jude. I know you.”

She did.

I leaned against her shoulder. I knew most people didn’t look at the two of us as a real couple. The age difference automatically made us a spectacle. People assumed I was a creepy old man, and she was a gold digger, but Cynthia and I loved each other.

At least the boys got it. Not Walter, but my grandsons. They might not have understood it, but they respected my marriage and were kind to Cynthia.

My thoughts had come full circle.

“Jude.”

I sighed. “Just thinking about the boys. Deklin’s engaged, and at least this time, he seems genuinely happy, but I still worry that all of this with his mother and Ronall Kane will blow up.”

I pressed my fingers to my temples, thinking how closely Deklin had come to getting too close to Aurelia, the sister neither he nor any of the rest of my family knew about. It had taken some doing, but I’d managed to break their relationship up, and while I was glad for it, it had driven yet another wedge between me and my son, Walter. At least Deklin appeared to be happy now. I’d have to settle for that.

“Don’t borrow trouble,” Cynthia said. “Once he’s adjusted, the two of you can talk it over, figure out what you both want to do about it.”

I’d do whatever Deklin wanted to do. I’d kept the secret for my daughter-in-law’s sake, but it had almost destroyed my grandson. If he wanted to tell people, I’d stand by him.

The doorbell rang.

“I’ll get it,” Cynthia said on a tired sigh.

“No.” I stood, leaning down to kiss her forehead. “I’ll go. Why don’t you get us some of that pie you made? We’ll have some dessert before bed.”

She nodded and went to the kitchen while I headed for the front door. Even though I told family that they didn’t need to ring the bell, if they weren’t expected, they often still did.

When I opened the door, however, the young man on the other side wasn’t anyone I recognized, though he did look vaguely familiar. Light brown hair. Light blue eyes.

“Hello. Can I help you?”

“Are you Jude Holden?” he asked.

“I am.”

He lifted his chin. “My name’s Jude Ives, and I think you’re my father.”

THE END

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