



# All In

COMPLICATED PARTS TRILOGY BOOK THREE

# ASHLEY JADE

ALL IN - BOOK THREE OF THE  
COMPLICATED PARTS SERIES

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ASHLEY JADE

# Contents

[Dear Reader](#)

[All In](#)

[Three years earlier...](#)

[Preston](#)

[Three years later...](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

Preston

[Chapter 2](#)

Kit

[Chapter 3](#)

Preston

[Chapter 4](#)

Kit

[Chapter 5](#)

Preston

[Chapter 6](#)

Kit

[Chapter 7](#)

Preston

[Chapter 8](#)

Kit

[Chapter 9](#)

Preston

[Chapter 10](#)

Kit

[Chapter 11](#)

Preston

[Chapter 12](#)

Kit

[Chapter 13](#)

Preston

[Chapter 14](#)

Preston

[Chapter 15](#)

Preston

[Chapter 16](#)

Kit

[Chapter 17](#)

Preston

[Chapter 18](#)

Kit

[Chapter 19](#)

Kit

[Chapter 20](#)

Preston

[Chapter 21](#)

Kit

[Chapter 22](#)

Preston

[Chapter 23](#)

Kit

[Chapter 24](#)

Preston

[Chapter 25](#)

Kit

[Chapter 26](#)

Kit

[Chapter 27](#)

Kit

[Chapter 28](#)

Preston

[Chapter 29](#)

Kit

[Chapter 30](#)

Kit

[Chapter 31](#)

Preston

[Chapter 32](#)

Kit

[Chapter 33](#)

Kit

[Chapter 34](#)

Preston

[Chapter 35](#)

Kit

[Chapter 36](#)

Kit

[Chapter 37](#)

Preston

[Chapter 38](#)

Kit

[Chapter 39](#)

Preston

[Chapter 40](#)

Preston

[Chapter 41](#)

Kit

[Chapter 42](#)

Kit

[Chapter 43](#)

Preston

[Chapter 44](#)

Kit

[Chapter 45](#)

Kit

[Chapter 46](#)

Preston

[Chapter 47](#)

Preston

[Chapter 48](#)

Kit

[Chapter 49](#)

Kit

[Chapter 50](#)

Kit

[Chapter 51](#)

Preston

[Chapter 52](#)

Kit

[Chapter 53](#)

Preston

[Chapter 54](#)

Kit

[Chapter 55](#)

Preston

[Chapter 56](#)

Preston

[Chapter 57](#)

Kit

[Chapter 58](#)

Kit

[Chapter 59](#)

Kit

[Chapter 60](#)

Preston

[Chapter 62](#)

Preston

[Chapter 63](#)

Kit

[Chapter 64](#)

Kit

[Chapter 65](#)

Preston

[Chapter 66](#)

Kit

[Chapter 67](#)

Kit

[Chapter 68](#)

Kit

[Chapter 69](#)

Kit

[Chapter 70](#)

Preston

[Chapter 71](#)

Kit

[Chapter 72](#)

Kit

[Chapter 73](#)

Kit

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Gamblers Anonymous](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Ashley Jade](#)



## Dedication

*For Preston and Kit who not only waited patiently for me to complete their story...but saved me.*

*Multiple times.*

*Thank you for choosing me to tell your story.*

*And to the readers who also waited patiently, I truly can't thank you enough.*

*Thank you for not giving up on me.*

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**All In - Book Three of the Complicated Parts Series**

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## Dear Reader

Dear Reader,

This is a three-book series previously titled: Complicated Parts, Book 1, 2, and 3.

Have no fear, Preston and Kit are still very much, “complicated.” I just wanted to make the titles more appealing and not have any confusion with the Complicated Hearts duet.

I hope you love Preston and Kit just as much as I do. I call these my “soul characters” for a reason and I’m so excited for you to meet them.

Hang in there, I promise they’re worth it.

XOXO

Ashley Jade

All In

BOOK THREE OF THE COMPLICATED PARTS SERIES

Three years earlier...

## Preston

I've always hated hospitals. Which I suppose is pretty ironic, given my fondness for gambling and all.

However, the stakes here are much higher than any at a poker table.

And the risk isn't worth the reward. Not when it's life or death.

With a heavy sigh, I lean back in my chair. The ominous energy in the small NICU waiting room does nothing to ease my anxiety.

Quite the contrary...it makes me want to jump out the nearest window and escape.

Too bad the forceps squeezing my chest won't let me.

Not until I know how he is.

Once the initial shock of what I was seeing passed and my brain processed that Becca was bleeding and the baby was in trouble, I jumped into action and grabbed a doctor walking down the hallway.

Everything after that is one big blur. Becca started crying. Hordes of medical people rushed in. Terms like elevated blood pressure and hemorrhaging were thrown around until *finally* someone in charge declared an emergency cesarean was the best option to save Becca.

Save *her*. Not the baby.

"What about *him*?"

Evidently, the fucked-up thing beating in my chest didn't get the memo that the baby everyone was ignoring was no longer mine and therefore not my problem.

Unfortunately, the question I barked out was never answered because

Becca's grip on my hand went limp, and her eyes rolled back.

That's when I was kicked out and someone led me to the waiting room.

The only update I've been given since then was that Becca's condition had progressed to fair, but she couldn't receive any visitors yet. When I asked about the baby, I was told to sit tight, and someone would find me.

But it feels like an eternity since then, and I'm tired of fucking waiting. A little over twenty-four hours ago, this baby was mine. I have a right to know how he's doing. I have a right to know *something*.

Even if what they tell me is the outcome I've been refusing to let myself think about.

"Fuck this shit."

My outburst earns me a few looks from the people in the waiting room, but I pay them no mind as I walk over to the locked doors.

Given I'm not medical staff, my only option is to wait for someone to come out so I can push past them and go in.

The opportunity arises a moment later, and I seize it, much to the horror of the woman I bulldoze.

"Hey! You're not allowed to come in here without permission," some nurse with a faint accent I can't pinpoint hisses.

"I have been waiting for *hours*," I growl, beyond irritated. "Someone was supposed to give me an update, but no one has. I need to know what—" I stop when I realize he doesn't have a name. "What happened to Rebecca Dragoni's baby?"

The nurse's expression softens. "I understand your frustration, but this area is for parents and immediate family only. Same goes when it comes to sharing any confidential information."

My ears ring with fury, and something painful stirs in my chest. Just yesterday, I *was* his family.

Dammit, this isn't fair. None of this is fucking fair.

Fate—the cruel bitch—didn't take the months of unconditional love I've accrued for my son with her when she ripped him away from me.

But, Christ, I wish she had. Things would be a hell of a lot easier.

"I'm..." My throat constricts, and I have to clear it. "It's complicated..." I let my sentence trail off because divulging the ins and outs of this messed-up situation isn't going to garner me any brownie points. "I'm family, okay?"

It's risky. For all I know, Becca may have already told the staff the truth, but it's the only hand I have to play.



The woman's eyebrows draw together, assessing me. "I wasn't aware, but I can't tell you anything until I know your relation to the—"

"I'm his father." The words are out of my mouth before I can process what I'm saying. All I know is, if she doesn't tell me what happened in the next two minutes, I'll no longer be responsible for my actions.

"You're the father?"

"Isn't that what I just fucking said?" I kick a nearby garbage can, sending it sailing to the other side of the hall. "And here I thought nurses were supposed to be relatively smart."

When she stays silent, I leer at her. I'm so close to the end of my fuse, I can feel my hands tremble with the urge to wrap them around her neck and squeeze until she either tells me what I need to know, or her head detaches from her body like a *Pez* dispenser.

"I'm gonna need you to calm down."

The flat delivery of her statement and blasé stance make it clear my attitude isn't affecting her in the least. Broad is a seasoned pro.

My teeth grit as I silently curse my bad luck. The nurses moseying around us are all donning scrubs with cartoon characters and have sweet smiles plastered on their relatively young, cheerful faces. But not her. No, *Nurse Ratched's* at least twenty years my senior, and her scrubs are about as bleak and uninviting as the expression on her face currently is. Whatever sympathy she had for me is now long gone.

Outright flirting with her won't work, but I'm a desperate man at the end of his rope, so I try the next best thing. I level with her.

"Look—" I glance down at her name tag, and I honestly don't know whether to laugh or shake my head because I'm certain getting past her is harder than trying to get past the actual pearly gates. "*Neveah*. I know you're trying to do your job, and I respect you for—"

"The mother never mentioned anything about a father." She crosses her arms. "And while I believe your intentions are good, you will not be getting any information until I can verify who you are and get permission from the mother."

I match her stance. "I know it's probably been a while, thus you may have forgotten how it works, but it takes two people to make a baby." My eyes narrow. "Now tell me what happened to my son. Or better yet, point me in the direction of someone more competent so I can hear it from them and then report your dumb ass to the hospital."

She raises a finger. “Threaten me all you want. I’m still not letting you go near that baby without approval.”

Hearing it confirmed outright makes the room sway. “He’s alive?”

Her eyes widen like a deer in headlights. “Did someone tell you otherwise?”

“No.” I shake my head. “I was with her when she started bleeding and up until the doctor said she had to have an emergency cesarean and kicked me out of the room. But like I said before, no one told me anything about the *baby*. Only that Becca’s condition has improved.”

She sighs again. This time there’s no mistaking the hint of compassion in her expression. “I’m sorry, I didn’t know. No one mentioned you came here with her.”

*Not exactly*, but I don’t bother correcting her. I’m too busy heading down the hallway.

“Not so fast. I still have to make a phone call and check with the mother about this. Do you have identification on you?”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I chuck my wallet at her.

I can hear her count to five as she walks over to the reception desk and picks up the phone.

“What is taking so long?” I bark after another minute goes by.

She presses a button on the switchboard. “I’m on hold.” I can tell her patience with me is wearing thin.

*Good*. Maybe now she’ll hurry the hell up so I can see him.

All I need is a few minutes to make sure he’s okay, and then I’ll leave and be out of her hair.

I can’t make out what the person on the other end of the line says, but whatever it is has the nurse frowning before she cups the phone and looks at me. “I’m sorry, but I’m going to have to ask you to go back out to the waiting room until I can get to the bottom of this.”

*Get to the bottom of what?* There’s nothing to get to the bottom of. He’s alive.

Unless Becca told them the truth, and she doesn’t want me seeing him.

*Fuck*.

Before Nurse Ratched or anyone else can stop me, I sprint down the hallway. I thought there would be one large room with hordes of babies and a glass wall, like in the movies, but a sign ahead clues me in to the fact that the rooms down this hallway are private, NICU family suites—which means

Becca's probably down here already, and I need to make this quick before she goes ballistic.

Undeterred, I trudge on, stopping when I notice Becca's last name preceded by the words 'baby boy' scrawled on a small dry erase board.

I pay no mind to the nurse who jostles to her feet and asks who I am when I enter. All of my attention is on him.

Every step I take toward him causes my heart to thump painfully against my chest...only to freeze entirely as I peer inside the clear contraption that's hooked up to various monitors.

None of the baby books I read nor the four Lamaze classes I attended with Becca equipped me for this.

Jesus, he's so tiny.

And his tiny body is attached to all sorts of tubes and wires...poking and prodding his skin. Skin that's so frail it's nearly translucent. His little eyes are closed, and I have no idea if they'll ever open.

My knees buckle, and I have to brace an arm on the incubator to stay upright.

He's not the healthy, vibrant baby I've been anticipating meeting for the last few months. He's sick, small. *Utterly helpless.*

And it wrecks me in ways I wasn't prepared for.

*This is all my fault.*

My hatred for his mother and my obsession with someone else destroyed him.

Because that's what I do...I destroy things. Objects...people. *Myself.*

Everything that's ever been mine.

*But he was supposed to be the exception.*

He was supposed to be perfect, strong...full of life. The one thing I did right in this world.

He's not any of those things, though.

He's not crying.

He's not moving or responding to my presence.

He's not even breathing on his own.

A guttural noise rips from my throat, and it sounds so foreign that if it weren't for the pain slicing through my chest, I'd think I hallucinated it.

Heart full of lead, I open my mouth to ask the nurse a question, but an authoritative voice behind me bellows, "You need to come with me."

I spin around to face two security guards. Just when I'm debating

throwing a few punches, because it would feel so fucking good to hit something right now, Nurse Ratched says, “That won’t be necessary.”

She quickly ushers them out of the room then whispers something to the other nurse who follows behind them.

I’m about to ask her what’s going on, but she hands me a badge and motions to a large chair in the corner of the room. “Why don’t you have a seat, and I’ll get you some water? Seeing your baby in this condition can be very overwhelming.”

I decline her offer and turn back to him. There’s no way I can be worried about my own comfort when he’s...barely living.

“He’s so small.”

I don’t realize I’ve spoken the words aloud until she says, “Two pounds, seven ounces.”

I wince, but she smiles. “That’s actually good news. Given his weight, the doctor on call thinks he’s a little older than what her doctor originally thought. He’s closer to twenty-nine weeks instead of twenty-seven.”

*Twenty-six weeks and five days*—I want to shout—but I snort instead. “Yeah. Sounds about right.”

I’ve done the calculations so many times I’ve lost count. At the bridge when Kit had asked me how long I’d been seeing Becca, I told her four months...but the more I thought about it, it didn’t add up. Or rather, the sex part didn’t.

Back then, it had been four months since the first night I met Becca at Buster—my bookie’s—house during some get-together he was throwing for a sports game. But I didn’t have sex with her that night.

At least, according to our forty-second president’s definition, I didn’t.

Becca ended up following me into a bathroom and blowing me while I waited for Buster to give me my winnings.

She gave me her number before I left, but I never called.

And I probably wouldn’t have, if I hadn’t bumped into her one night at a casino approximately thirty days later.

And the next night.

When it happened the third night in a row, I asked her if my dick was so magically delicious that it somehow turned her into a full-fledged stalker.

That’s when she confessed she was a lackey for her uncles and on official business—stalking me—for them.

Evidently, they were concerned with my month-long winning streak and

wanted to know if my hands were dirty.

Not one to disappoint, I decided to make the most of the situation and got my hands real dirty by fucking their niece turned spy.

Only...it wasn't her pussy that I fucked against my car in the casino parking lot that night. It was her ass.

I didn't grace her Venus flytrap with my dick's presence until I decided I was into her and we became a thing a week or so later.

So while it had been four months since we first met and she blew me, it had only been about two and a half months since we became an item and started having sex regularly.

She was already twelve weeks along when she told me she was pregnant.

Shit thing is, I'm not sure I would have thought about the sex timetable in depth if it weren't for Kit's question. Which is saying something...because numbers are a specialty of mine.

When I reminded Becca at the first ultrasound that twelve weeks equaled three months...not two and a half, she said it was impossible to nail down the exact date of conception. And her doctor—the quack—backed her up. He said it was a hypothesis based on her cycle and what information she'd given him.

Information that lined up perfectly with the first time we had sex.

A little too perfectly. Because what the fuck are the odds that the first time you have sex with your new girlfriend—protected sex at that—you get her knocked up?

According to the box of condoms, I had...less than two percent. And given I'd never fucked her without a condom, even after she announced she was expecting, I'd have a better chance of winning the lottery than my sperm swimming up her snatch and going for gold.

However, I'm a gambler, therefore I know better than anyone that even a royal straight flush never guarantees victory...and a simple high card doesn't always mean defeat.

Sometimes the odds don't mean shit, and fate has other plans.

Sometimes what you thought was a bad hand turns out to be a blessing in disguise.

And sometimes...you lost everything.

“Why isn't Becca here?” I turn to the nurse. “She's his mother, shouldn't she be with him?”

It comes out harsh, but I don't give a fuck. Someone needs to be here for

this baby to make sure he's okay. He already came into this world without a father, he shouldn't have to be without a mother, too.

"She's still recovering."

"I was told she was stable." When the minutes stretch, I ask, "Has she been by to see him at all?"

"Not yet." The nurse averts her gaze, and a pit forms in my stomach. "Sometimes it takes the mother a little time to come around."

"Come around? Are you shitting me?" I gesture to him. "Did anyone tell her how sick he is?"

Becca's negatives far outweigh her positives, but she's not so much of a bitch she'd ignore her ill newborn son. I know that much.

"She's aware."

"Then what's going on? Why isn't she here?"

"She needs a little more time to recover." Nurse Ratched's smile doesn't reach her eyes. "I'm sure she'll feel better tomorrow."

"Tomorrow?" I seethe. "He needs her *now*."

I don't give a shit how tired Becca is, the only thing she should care about is him.

"Babies respond well to positive energy. The best thing you can do for your son is relax and be there for him while his mother recovers."

My teeth clack so hard I'm surprised a few don't break, but I take a breath and sit down in the chair anyway. "I'll take that water now."

She nods and gives my shoulder a squeeze before she leaves.

"I'm just staying until your mom comes down, okay?" I move the chair closer to the incubator so I can keep a better eye on him. "Then I'll leave."



"You should go home and get some rest."

"No."

The nurse, who is starting to act like her usual Nurse Ratched self again, frowns. "The nurse who relieved me said you haven't left his side, Preston."

I cross my arms and stare her down. "That a problem for you?"

She sighs. "No, but it could be for you. You haven't slept, showered, or eaten since the moment you stepped inside this room last night."

My eyes drift to him. "I think his color is a little better."

She nods. “Hopefully we’ll be able to wean him off the ventilator soon.” She reaches inside the glove box attached to the incubator and touches his hand with the tip of her gloved finger. “You’re doing great, baby boy.”

*But he’s still not out of the woods.* He needs his mother.

Tamping down my annoyance, I rub the knot forming in my neck. “Any news on whether or not she’ll be down here *tonight*?” I don’t bother holding back the bite in my tone.

When Becca still didn’t show up this morning, I told the doctor I was dragging her down, but he said she didn’t want any visitors. He also let it slip that she refused to breastfeed or talk about the baby.

He wouldn’t go into any more detail after that, though.

Becca’s got another day of this shit before I go up there and strangle her with my bare hands.

There is no one else this baby needs more than her, but as usual, she doesn’t give a damn about other people’s wants and needs. She’s the most selfish person I’ve ever met...and that includes me.

Sure hope his real father is a goddamn monk. Otherwise, this poor kid got dealt a horrible hand in all aspects of his life.

The sad expression on Nurse Ratched’s face has my hands clenching at my sides. “No. She’s still resting.”

The look I give her tells her exactly what I think about that. “Can’t you force her to come down here? Or at least force her to stop being a cunt and feed her son?”

She walks over to the sink and washes her hands. “From what I’m told, she’s pretty adamant about not wanting to see him. On the bright side, we were able to obtain some donor breast milk.” The forceful way she rips the paper towels from the dispenser tells me she’s almost as irritated as I am when it comes to Becca’s bullshit.

“What kind of mother doesn’t want to see or feed their child? I thought a mother’s need to protect their offspring was automatic?”

“Not always. This kind of thing happens more often than people think, unfortunately. Postpartum can be serious and devastating for all parties, and it’s not uncommon after a traumatic birth.” A small smile touches the corners of her lips. “But he has you by his side, and that’s a great thing.”

She’s about to walk out of the room but pauses. “Oh, before I forget, the doctor will be talking to you about blood transfusions shortly.” When I freeze, she adds, “Don’t worry. I know it sounds scary, but it’s standard

procedure with babies who were born prematurely. His red blood cells are a little low to begin with, and because we're doing lots of tests, he's not able to replenish what he's losing quick enough."

"I guess you should probably go through with it then." The pit in my stomach widens when I realize... "Do I need to go to the lab?"

If that's the case, me and this baby are both screwed.

She shakes her head. "No, we already have special blood that's been processed for infants. The only thing you have to do is talk to the doctor and sign a few forms."

The panic in my chest dissipates, and I release a heavy sigh. "Oh."

She shifts her weight from one foot to the other, studying me. "Are you okay?"

I walk back over to the chair. "I'm fine."

"Is there someone I can call for you? A family member, or—"

"How about you just do your job and focus on him?"



*Beep. Beep. Beep.*

An ear-piercing sound has me jumping out of the chair so quick I barely have time to process where I am or what's happening.

Until I look over and notice his skin has a bluish tint to it.

Instinctively, I slam the call button, but nurses and doctors are already rushing into the room in one big wave.

Before I can say a word, I'm pushed out of the way. My heart's in my throat as I watch them touch him, stick needles in him, and call out things that my brain is too frazzled to understand.

*Fuck.* I should have been paying better attention, not falling asleep on the job.

I make my way over to them, but I'm ordered to go sit in that god-awful waiting room again. When I start to protest, two security guards not so kindly show me the way.

And that's where I spend the next few hours...in the waiting room.

Stuck on the outside...

While the fucked-up thing beating in my chest is on the inside with him.





“It wasn’t your fault.”

I glare at Nurse Ratched. “I fell asleep.”

“You haven’t slept in almost forty-eight hours. Give yourself a break.”

“What if he’d died?”

“He didn’t.”

“He could have.”

“But he didn’t. The blood transfusion is helping, and we’re trying a different medication for his lungs. He’s doing better.”

Relief fills me, but it’s short-lived. “I’m gonna stay out here. He’ll be better off that way.”

“That’s not true. He needs you.”

I level her with a stare. “For what? What is it that I’m doing that you or any of the other nurses can’t?” I look at the exit sign. “I’m only making things worse.”

Becca has the right idea by keeping her distance and not getting attached. That way when it happens again and he dies, she won’t be inconsolable.

She won’t lose everything.

*Including the things that were never yours to begin with.*

“Preston, wait,” the nurse calls out when I start walking.

When my footsteps slow down, she leads me out of the waiting room and down an empty hallway.

“I know it’s scary, and it may not seem like you’re doing much, but believe me, you are.” She puts her hand on my cheek. My first instinct is to recoil, but the gesture feels motherly rather than romantic. “This happens with premature babies all the time. Some days are better than others. Today was a bad day, but he’s stable now. Don’t blame yourself for what happened. And don’t give up on yourself or your son, because he is fighting so hard.” I shake my head, but she grabs my shoulders. “Don’t make the mistake of checking out when you’re the only good thing that little boy has right now.”

I run a hand through my hair, gripping the short strands. “I can’t...I’m not...” A tsunami of hopelessness rushes through me, and I have to flip the script and channel it in to rage so I can keep my shit together and not crumble in front of her and whoever else is watching us.

Alive or dead, this baby isn’t mine. I’m not his dad...I’m not his anything.

*But I wanted to be.* Which is so fucked because when she first told me she was pregnant, the only thing I wanted was him *and* her gone for good.

Until I saw the ultrasound.

Suddenly, this *thing* I'd been dreading and hating for ruining my life was everything I never knew I wanted...for reasons I'll never understand.

I slam the wall with my fist. The anger pumping through me is so thick it's like lava.

I'm so fucking mad at Becca for being a conniving whore and taking him away from me.

I'm so mad at Kit for asking me that goddamn question on the bridge that planted the seed of doubt, then turning around and fucking everything up by making me have feelings for her.

But most of all? I'm mad at myself for believing the illusion.

"Feel better now?" Nurse Ratched asks after I take my second swing at the wall.

I look down at my swollen knuckles. "No."

There's only one thing that can dull the roar.

I feel around my pockets for my wallet and keys. "Take care of him."

"Wait."

I push past her, but her next statement stops me in my tracks.

"What if I told you I knew something that may help?"

"Unless you're about to tell me there's a secret casino in this hospital, I doubt it."

"All I need is ten minutes."

I spin around. "Thanks for the offer, but I'm not really in the mood to fuck a cougar wearing scrubs that are probably older than I am."

Her expression sets. "Don't flatter yourself, boy. I said ten minutes, not two. Now mind your elders and come with me."

Begrudgingly, I follow her past the locked doors. Only, instead of heading into his room, she turns down another hallway and brings me to a closet.

Then she hands me soap, a towel, and a pair of scrubs in plastic wrapping.

"What—"

"Through there is a private shower for parents." She points to a door. "After you wash up, change into the scrubs and come find me."

"Why?"

"You'll see."

With that, she walks down the hallway.



“Absolutely fucking not.”

Nurse Ratched sighs. “I’ve already cleared it with the on-call doctor. He thinks it’s a great idea, and we should have done it sooner.”

“Then the medical community has monumentally failed because you’re both out of your goddamn minds. There’s no way in hell I’m letting you take him out of his Easy Bake Oven and hand him over to me. Not only is he still hooked up to machines, but he almost died a few hours ago.”

And if I screw this up and make him even worse, I’ll never forgive myself.

“Calm down,” she whispers. “He picks up on your temperament and energy, remember?”

“No, he doesn’t. He doesn’t even realize I’m in the room. You know why? Because he is a baby stuck in a bubble. Which is exactly where he should stay because he is sick.” She opens her mouth, but I cut her off. “I swear on everything you love, if you take him out and something happens to him, I will fucking kill—”

A long, grunting, squeaky sound cuts me off mid-sentence. “What’s happening?”

Her hand goes to her heart. “He’s crying.”

“He can’t...he hasn’t.”

“He *is*.” She lifts the top of the incubator and coos at him. “Told you he responds to you.” She gestures to the chair. “Now take off your shirt and get comfortable.”

I shouldn’t be doing this. He’s not my baby. He’s not my problem.

He’s not my...

“Holy shit.”

There’s a crying baby on my chest.

“Breathe, Preston. You won’t hurt him.”

My eyes narrow. “Really? Because I highly disagree. One wrong move and he’ll end up worse.”

“You need to have some faith in yourself.” She adjusts his wires and tubes. “I know you’re not going to harm him.” She puts a pillow behind my

head. “And he knows it too.”

The woman is out of her fucking mind; but given I’m not able to move and there’s a sick baby laying on me, there’s not much I can do. “Any particular reason I had to take my shirt off? Or does the visual make it that much more enjoyable for the nurses?”

She dims the lights. “It’s called kangaroo care. The skin-to-skin contact helps stabilize him by regulating his heart rate, breathing, and temperature. It will also prevent infection and promote weight gain.”

“All that from sleeping on me?”

She nods. “Yup.” She pulls a phone out of her pocket and presses a few buttons. “Dads can only do it for an hour at a time, though.”

That’s strange. “Why?”

“Because you don’t have breasts.”

Horrified, I look down. “If you get hungry, do us both a solid and don’t suck on my nipples, okay? Not only will you be disappointed, but it will make shit weird.”

She laughs. “It has nothing to do with hunger. Breasts naturally adjust to the baby’s temperature. Since men don’t have breasts, he’ll overheat after an hour.”

“Guess I’ll add that to my list of why breasts are the third greatest thing in the world.”

“What are the first two?”

My voice drops to a whisper. “Not in front of the child, Nevaeh.”

She rolls her eyes. “And here I thought your son was the infant.” She purses her lips. “Come to think of it? How old are you? You can’t be a day past twenty-one.”

I’m not usually one for conversation, but I don’t want to be left alone with him. “Close. I’ll be twenty in a few weeks.”

She juts her chin at the baby. “Let me guess. His mother was your first serious girlfriend, and one night you got swept up in the heat of the moment and forgot to use a rubber.”

That gets a laugh out of me. “Hardly.” I point to my face with my free hand. “Do I look like an idiot?”

Leaning against the sink, she wrinkles her nose. “No, but you do have quite an air of entitlement about you.”

I grind my teeth. “So I’ve been told.”

*By a certain pink-haired, angry girl who most likely wants me dead right*

now.

“So do you go to college? Have a job?”

“Jesus. Are you a nurse or my mother?”

She holds up her hands. “This isn’t an interrogation. I have a daughter around your age, and I know how busy her schedule is these days.”

Disbelief roots me to the spot as I take in her flawless dark skin and pretty features. I know I joked that she was old, but not *that* old.

“Why? Is she another teenage pregnancy statistic, too?”

This nurse is asking too many questions, and in my experience, the best way to make someone stop is to turn the tables around and ask them a few.

She straightens her spine. “No. At least I hope not, because her father would raise hell.” When I give her a look, she says, “She lives in Louisiana with him. That’s where my family’s from.”

To say I’m confused would be an understatement. “Shouldn’t that accent of yours be more Southern than French?”

A small smirk tilts her lips. “It’s not French. It’s called Louisiana Creole. But you wouldn’t be the first to confuse the two.”

That’s...interesting.

“Why doesn’t your daughter live with you?”

Judging by her body language, my question makes her uncomfortable, but she answers anyway. “I made a lot of mistakes when I was younger. Wasn’t really fit to be a mother back then...and by the time I got my act together and was ready to be, she already had one.”

“You gave her up for adoption?”

She gives her head a shake. “No. I ran off shortly after she was born, and her dad stepped up to the plate. A few years later, he fell in love with someone else and got married.” She looks away. “To my childhood best friend.”

My eyes widen. I thought my brother’s dating life was complicated, but this woman could give him a run for his money.

“Shit. That...sucks.”

She looks at the ceiling. “It hurt like hell at the time, but as strange as it sounds, it forced me to get my life together. The way I saw it, I had already lost them both, but I still had a daughter. And if I finally made her a priority instead of an option, maybe she would come around and make room for me in her life and eventually forgive me. It took a long time, and there were a lot of bumps and bruises along the way, but we’re at a good place now. She calls

me once a week to catch up, and we talk about school, boys, and her friends. Sometimes she even comes here and stays with me for a few weeks whenever she needs a break.”

“Why did you walk out on her?”

I know the question is out of line, but I can’t help myself.

The groove in her forehead deepens. “At the time, I thought I was doing the best thing for her. But looking back, I think I was running because I wasn’t ready to change my life or who I was. I didn’t want to give up doing all the bad shit I was doing because it’s how I coped...and I thought if I didn’t have that, I wouldn’t be able to deal, and I’d fall apart.” Her eyes fill with tears. “I loved my baby and her father more than I ever loved anyone or anything, I still do...but I didn’t love myself back then. It was easier to run away than face my demons.” Her shoulders slump. “But the thing about running away from your problems is, the longer you’re gone, the harder it is to come back. Before I knew it, days had turned into weeks and weeks had turned into years, and I had missed all the good stuff. The stuff I was supposed to be there for.”

“Do you regret it?”

She looks me in the eye. “Every day of my life. Those are years and memories I’ll never get back.”

“What was the point of coming back then?” When she gives me a look, I say, “No offense, but the way I see it is, if having a relationship with your daughter and putting your life back together was only going to remind you of all the bad shit you did and things you missed out on, you would have been better off not going back in the first place. You already lost the guy you loved and your kid to your best friend, so why not just let everyone live in peace?” I look down at the baby on my chest. “Why settle for a portion of them when you know you’ll never have the whole thing? Why walk straight into the fire when you know you’ll only end up getting burned?”

“Because when life hands you a second chance, you take it and hold on to it with everything you’ve got.”

“Why? Second chances don’t change what happened.”

“You’re right, they don’t. But second chances are better than no chances. And while it doesn’t erase the past or rewrite history, it gives you the opportunity to fix the damage...build a stronger foundation.”

A squeaky cry fills the room, and I freeze. “What exactly am I supposed to do with him for the next forty-two minutes?”

“Anything you want. You can hum or sing.” When I grimace, she says, “You can sleep or talk.”

Anxiety shoots through me like a cannon when she walks toward the door. “You’re leaving us *now*? He’s crying.”

“He’s probably fussy because all our talking is disturbing his quiet time with his daddy.” She cocks her head in the direction of the exit. “I’ll be in the next room, but I’ll pop in every few minutes to check on you. You’ve got this. Spend time with your son. Bond and make memories.”

When her footsteps fade, I look down and whisper, “I’ll tell her the truth in a bit. I’m just waiting for your mother to pull her head out of her ass and visit you.” His crying comes to a halt, and the hum of the machines fades into the background. “She’ll be here soon, but until then you’re stuck with me.”

I swear he squeaks his disapproval.

“I know I’m not your number one choice, but I’m trying.” I draw in a ragged breath. “And for what it’s worth, I’m not usually sorry about much in my life, but I am sorry I did this to you.” I shift in my seat. The loathing I have for Becca is smothered by a massive dose of stone-cold reality. “I shouldn’t have fought with your mom and stressed her out...not while you were in there. But I promise, as soon as your mom is ready to see you, I’ll leave you alone for good. I’ll never hurt you again.”

He grunts and I reach between the wires and rub his back with my finger. “Trust me, kid, you dodged a bullet. You don’t want someone like me for a dad. I’d be the second-worst father in the world. The first being my own, but we won’t talk about him.”

Or maybe we *should* talk about him...because no one ever tells kids the truth.

“I know I’m not your dad, but I feel like I should be honest with you since no one else will. The world is a messed-up place. It’s crawling with monsters who want to do horrible things to you.” My insides coil. I must be more sleep deprived than I thought considering I’m talking about this shit. “But there are also dragons, and the dragons protect you from monsters and other bad things.” I inhale sharply, silently wishing I could shield him from all the evils in the world. “So how about we make a deal? I’ll be your dragon and look out for you while I’m here...but you have to keep fighting, even after I’m gone.”

I cringe when his crying picks up. “Christ, I really suck at this. It’s a good thing I’m not your dad because at this rate we’d end up in Mexico with a

gram of cocaine and a few strippers for your first birthday.”



“Let me guess, she won’t be down today, either.” My stomach turns to lead as I wait for Nurse Ratched to answer.

Her gaze darts past me to the incubator, but I don’t miss the way her lips press into a tight line. “Afraid not.”

I watch as she jots down something in her notepad before she coos at him for the next few minutes.

I know I should be grateful he’s getting some kind of motherly attention, but it only makes me more pissed that Becca’s not the one giving it to him.

“She won’t even name him,” I roar, my blood pressure rising. “How much longer is she going to keep pretending he doesn’t exist?”

I mutter a curse when he begins crying.

The nurse wasn’t kidding. This kid seems to have a sixth sense when it comes to my moods. When I’m annoyed or angry, he cries. When I’m relaxed...he’s content.

Unless he has a wet diaper or someone pokes at him while he’s sleeping. Then he’s about as ticked off with everyone on the planet as I am.

After she gets him to settle down, she looks at me. “I’ll call Becca’s counselor and ask him to find out if she wants you to go ahead and give him a name without her.” She scrunches her face. “Now that I think about it, someone from the office should be visiting her soon to collect the information for his birth certificate.”

The hairs on the back of my neck lift. “You know what? Forget I said anything.”

I’m rocking the boat as it is by pretending to be his dad. It goes without saying that me not being listed as his father on the birth certificate is going to raise some red flags.

It’s bad enough I already signed a few authorization forms so he could receive treatment.

Rubbing my palms together, I draw in a breath. I should probably call Asher and warn him that I may need bail money because I’m pretty sure the shit I’m pulling is a crime of some kind.

Then again, it’s not like Becca is going to get up off her ass and take care



of her son.

No one else is here for him. *Just me.*

“It’s been four days, Preston.” She pats my shoulder. “I’ll be back in a little bit, okay?”

I open my mouth to object, but she’s gone in a flash.

Rising from my seat, I walk the few short steps to him. “Well, that went great. Let’s hope for both our sakes your mom is feeling better and has a name picked out for you.” I stick my hand inside the compartment of the incubator. “But just in case, do you have any requests?”

Given he can’t speak, the low hum of the machines is my only answer.

A small laugh escapes me as I stare down at him. “Not to be a dick, but you kind of look like a wrinkly old man. Maybe I should name you *geezer*.” Remembering what the nurse said about touch being important, I run my finger down his arm. “If you end up becoming a famous rapper, you can invite me to one of your shows and thank me for not having to use a stage name.” My chest grows tight as grief sharpens its claws, reminding me what I’m about to lose. *What I’ve already lost.* “Maybe after your show, we can grab a beer. You can tell me how great your life turned out, and I can remind us both that me not being your dad worked out for the best. Sound like a plan?”

He grips my finger with his entire fist, and once again I’m taken aback by how tiny he is. I never knew something so small could be so strong.

When I asked how long he’d be in here for, I was told it would most likely be until his original due date. To say I was alarmed is an understatement, but they said that’s standard for premies.

Which, I suppose, is why I told the guidance counselor from Yale I was officially dropping out when she called me this morning, inquiring about my excessive absences.

Looking back, I probably should have told her I was a hostage at the Woodside School shooting so they’d grant me leniency.

*Then again, leniency isn’t what I want.*

Freedom is.

And now that he’s finally dead, I have it. Which means I get to do whatever I want with my life.

“Like hang out here with you.”

His grip on my finger goes slack, and the drowsy look on his face tells me he wants to sleep. “We’ll finish deciding your name later. Enjoy your nap,

geezer.”

“Jameson.” I turn as Nurse Ratched comes in, appearing wary. “That’s what Becca’s counselor said she named him. The birth certificate was filled out early this morning.”

“Jameson,” I muse, turning my attention back to him. “Not bad. It goes down smooth and doesn’t get you drunk too fast. Solid choice of whiskey for a few rounds of poker.”

“Preston.”

“Relax, it’s not like I’m gonna slip him any.” Jameson, who’s wide awake now, grips my finger again as I peer down at him. “At least not until you can hold your own bottle and stop pissing your pants.”

“That’s his full name.” She stands next to me. “Jameson Preston.”

“His middle name is *Preston*?” I grind out, white-hot rage fogging my vision.

Back when my mother found out she was pregnant with Asher, my pompous father demanded Asher and every future son share his first name. However, my mother—concerned with keeping up appearances and all—detested the idea and said it made our family sound like low-class hillbillies. She suggested Spencer be our middle name instead.

Needless to say, I’ve always hated my full name. *It’s another permanent reminder that there’s no escaping him.*

I grind my teeth so hard I’m surprised they don’t turn into powder. During our one and only discussion regarding baby names, I told Becca I didn’t care what we named him. My only request was that he not have *any* part of my name.

Chalk it up to being superstitious, but I didn’t want the bad omen touching him.

“Fucking bitch.”

As if on cue, Jameson cries, like he knows his cunt of a mother put a hex on him.

Nurse Ratched shoots me a look of horror. “What—”

“Nothing,” I mutter, silencing her.

She studies me like I’m a new strand of bacteria under a microscope. “It’s a nice na—”

“Why don’t you do us both a favor and shut—”

I don’t finish that sentence because an alarm starts beeping, Jameson’s tiny limbs start twitching, and his face turns blue.



A red haze clogs my vision as I march down the hallway.

*I'm gonna kill her.*

I'm not joking, either. The sensation to put my hands around Becca's neck and squeeze the life out of her is so potent my palms are itching.

Then again, if I murder her, Jameson won't have a mother. Not that he has much of one now, that much is obvious.

Bypassing the nurse's station on her floor, I take a sharp left down another hallway. The rage inside me is bubbling like a volcano that's about to explode and endanger everyone within a fifty-mile radius.

Jameson did nothing to deserve the bullshit he's being served. *He's innocent.*

My heart stops cold when I enter the room to find her dressed, packing various things into a bag.

Packing. Like her son didn't have a seizure a few hours ago and isn't fighting for his life.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" She turns to face me. Her puffy eyes and unkempt appearance throw me. "Not that it's any of your business, but I've been discharged."

"I heard." I inch closer, refusing to let her disheveled demeanor distract me from why I'm here. "You know, while I've been hanging out with your sick son. Your son who you haven't even bothered to see since the delivery room. Your son who had a goddamn seizure four hours ago and isn't doing too well."

Becca's smile is so callous, I wish she was a dude so I could wipe it off her face with my fist. "That's pretty funny coming from you of all people." She crinkles her nose. "Considering *you're* the reason he's so sick in the first place."

It's a low blow, but she's not wrong. I know the part I played in this. The guilt gnawing at what's left of my conscience won't let me forget. "My fuckup doesn't explain yours. Why do you keep ignoring him?"

"Kind of like how you ignored me for months?" Her gaze flies to my hand around her wrist. "You're hurting me."

I tighten my hold. "You're hurting *him*. Hate me all you want, but don't take it out on him. It's not fair."

“Why do you care anyway? You’re not his father.” She jabs my chest with her free hand. “You didn’t want him, remember? You wanted *her*.” She yanks her wrist from my grip. “I only agreed to let you visit him so you could see the damage you caused firsthand. But your time is up. My baby isn’t a pawn, Preston. You don’t get to choose him or me when it’s convenient for you.” She shoves me, but I don’t budge. “Now run off to your little dyke bitch who won’t even give you the time of day.” Her eyes become tiny slits. “I hope you make her fall for you like I did so you can mess up her life like you did ours.”

Her words send a bullet of white-hot pain through the center of my chest. Becca may be a manipulative, vindictive bitch...but she’s right.

Kit Bishop was my house of cards destined to collapse. An obsession I couldn’t shake. A bad bet with terrible odds.

*The girl who ruined everything.*

If I hadn’t been so busy lusting after her, Jameson wouldn’t be suffering...because I wouldn’t have wanted to hurt his mother to the extent I did.

However, Kit’s not the one to blame for all this. *I am*. I’m the reason he’s in the hospital in the first place. My actions, driven by hate for Becca and obsession for Kit, are responsible for his suffering.

An innocent child is left paying the price for my malicious transgressions.

In a way, I’m no better than my own father.

However, I’m not leaving this room without setting her straight about a few things. Leaning in, I whisper, “For the record, it wasn’t him I didn’t want...it was *you*.” I give her a callous smile of my own. “Lucky for me, I no longer have to deal with you or your psycho jealousy and desperation.” I run my thumb over her tense jaw. “Too bad Jameson can’t say the same, and he has the utter misfortune of being stuck with a mother who doesn’t know the first thing about being one.”

My statement has the intended impact. The sharp sting from her hand across my cheek makes me grin wider.

Until she says, “The next time you go near my son, I’ll have you arrested.” She presses a finger to her lips. “On second thought, why wait? I’ll call the police right now and tell them you’re a sick pedo who shouldn’t be around children.” She tosses her head back and cackles. “God, you should see your face right now. Priceless.” Her expression goes slack. “Newsflash,

Preston. I'm not a pathetic pushover like your little lesbo. Keep pushing me, and I will end you." She picks up a pitcher of water and throws it at me. "Stay away from him."

It would be more humane if she ripped out the organ inside my chest and rolled it around in glass before setting it on fire.

"He takes a nap every ninety minutes or so, but according to the nurses, that's normal for preemies. He can't see anything more than shapes and shadows right now, but he reacts to the tone of people's voices. He's not too fond of his doctor, but there's a nurse named Nevaeh—she's the charge nurse in NICU—he likes her a lot. She takes good care of him."

I stop when I reach the door. "He hates it when they poke at him, but if you let him hold your finger and talk to him, he's less fussy, and it makes it easier for the staff to do what they need to."

With that, I walk out.

Once again, I forgot the cardinal rule.

*The house always wins.*



"Preston."

Ignoring the familiar voice, I trudge out the hospital doors.

"Preston, *wait!*" Neveah yells, her footsteps picking up.

Paying her no mind, I head for the cab waiting out front, but she catches up to me before I get in.

"What's going on? Becca called down to the nurses' station a few minutes ago demanding your visitation rights be revoked."

"Sounds about right."

I don't even know why I'm so upset in the first place. I knew it would come to this. *I just hadn't thought it would hurt so much.*

Fortunately, I know something that will make it better.

"Mohegan," I tell the driver as I get into the back seat.

"Whoa, hang on a minute." She wedges herself between me and the door when I try to close it. "I know it sucks, but don't run away. Jameson needs you. Becca can't keep you from your son." She pulls a card out of her pocket and hands it to me. "This is my personal number. I happen to know a great lawyer who specializes in family court and custody rights. You have options

—”

“No, I don’t.” Since I have nothing left to lose and there’s no way to untangle this web I’m caught in, I tell her the truth. “I’m not his father.”

Her eyes widen. “I don’t understand—”

“Goddammit,” I shout, my chest recoiling. “I received the DNA results the day before he was born, and I...”

“You *lied*.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Why—”

“I wanted to make sure he was okay, and once I saw how sick he was...I couldn’t leave him.” After feeling around my pockets for my cigarettes, I light one. “Even though I know he’s not mine, I kind of feel like I’m his. Like he needed me to protect him.”

And despite having every reason to...

*I couldn’t walk away.*

I’m not sure what Nevaeh sees when she looks at me now, but it has her eyes filling with tears. “I think—” The sound of her pager beeping cuts her off. “I have to go back in, but call me tomorrow, okay? My shift doesn’t start until the afternoon. We can meet for coffee and talk about this some more.”

“Can’t.” I close the car door and motion for the driver to pull off.

*I’m leaving town tomorrow...*

For good.

Three years later...

# Chapter 1

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Preston

“*I* fucked up.”

The muscles in my chest draw tight as I stare at the marble headstone with the name *Nevaeh* scrawled in a serif font above her birth date and the day she died.

A little over a year ago, she had a heart attack in the parking lot while walking out to her car after her shift ended. Given she worked at a hospital, you'd think she would have been in good hands.

But alas, the fuckers couldn't save her in time.

I went on one hell of a bender after her daughter Charlotte called to tell me the news.

So much so, I ended up missing the funeral. The only thing I remember was waking up next to some annoying as fuck chick who was bugging out because she was in Vegas for her bachelorette party and ended up cheating on her husband-to-be with me, but that's neither here nor there.

“I got married,” I tell her, even though she's not listening on account she's goddamn dead. “To *Kit*.”

Twenty-four hours after I left town, I ended up caving and calling Nevaeh to find out how Jameson was holding up.

She urged me to come back and talk to her face to face, but I was dead set on never stepping foot in Connecticut again.

Until Jameson's condition became worse a few days later...and I received a hysterical phone call from Becca in the middle of the night.

I jumped on the next available flight back.

Fortunately, Jameson ended up being okay.

Nevaeh, however, chewed my ass out again shortly after I left for the second time.

She said even though he wasn't biologically mine...I was *his*, and he needed me in his life.

She was right.

Ergo, I ended up working out an agreement with Becca. I'd help her out with whatever she needed as long as I was allowed to come by and see Jameson one weekend a month.

Even though Nevaeh had managed to find Becca an apartment in her building and I knew she would give me updates, I wanted to keep an eye on Jameson myself to make sure he was doing okay.

To my surprise, Becca ended up agreeing. On two conditions:

One—I stay true to my word about helping her out financially.

And two—I stay away from Kit Bishop.

Because in Becca's psychotic eyes, she was the one responsible for hurting her son.

It took every ounce of willpower I possessed to remind her that Kit wouldn't hurt a fly, and if she needed someone to lay the blame on...she was talking to him.

But there was no point.

I wasn't going to waste my time defending someone who hated my guts to the person who was using the only *other* person I gave a fuck about as my very own weapon of mass destruction.

Becca had the better hand, and my only option was to fold.

*For Jameson.*

"I know," I mutter, because dead or not I can practically hear her reading me the riot act. "But I didn't have a choice."

Yeah, that's bullshit. I *could* have let Kit marry someone else.

"It's only for a year, and she's giving me two million at the end of it."

Most of which will go to Jameson.

I stand when a taxi pulls up. "Hate to cut this short, but I'm meeting Becca and Jameson for lunch." Idly, I run my finger over her name, wishing like hell I could tell her all this shit in person. "I know what I'm doing, Nevaeh."

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

Nevertheless, shit will be a hell of a lot less stressful now that I gave Kit yet another fucking reason to be ticked off with me.

I'm about to walk to the taxi, but I remember that getting married isn't the only thing I need to confess.

“Sorry for fucking your daughter.”

In my defense, it was only because Becca kept putting the moves on me during one of my monthly visits and wouldn't take no for an answer. It was three in the morning, and I didn't want to shell out the money for a hotel room, so I walked a few doors down and asked Charlotte—who ended up moving into her mother's apartment shortly after she died—if I could crash on her couch.

They must have spiked the water in the apartment building with ecstasy that weekend because Charlotte wanted in my pants, too. Given she was easy on the eyes and I needed a place to stay...I accommodated her with my dick.

Twice.

Not that Nevaeh would give a shit about my justifications.

I'm in the back seat of the cab and halfway to the diner I'm supposed to meet Becca at when I pull out my phone.

Well, the new one courtesy of my wife who's supposed to be pissed at me.

**Preston: You got me a phone.**

Dots appear at the bottom of my phone screen and then disappear before appearing again. Kit's been in New York for two days, and this is the first time we've spoken.

To say I was surprised to receive a delivery this morning would be an understatement.

**Kit: It wasn't supposed to arrive until tomorrow.**

**Preston: Why?**

**Kit: I don't know. That's what the guy told me when I ordered it.**

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

**Preston: I meant why did you get me a phone?**

I grit my teeth. Kit shouldn't be buying me phones. She should be

refusing to talk to me. *She should hate me.*

Things would be a hell of a lot easier if she did.

**Kit: Because I didn't have your number. Now I do.**

Before I can respond, another text comes through.

**Kit: Most people would say thank you.**

And another.

**Kit: If you don't like it I can get you a different one.**

**Preston: FFS. You even babble when you text.**

She sends me the middle finger emoji and I can't help but laugh.

And then that hollow feeling is back with a vengeance. Reminding me of what I can never have.

The dots disappear, then start up again.

**Kit: I miss you.**

The organ that belongs to her strains. It takes way more willpower than I thought it would not to reply to that text.

But I can't. *No matter how much I want to.*

I can't let her fall for me.

Stepping out of the cab, I slide my new phone into my pocket.

*Because I'm a liar.*

I take out my old phone and make my way over to the parked car.

*A thief.*

The car door opens, and I sink down to my haunches. The muscles in my chest pull tight when tiny arms wrap around me, and for a moment, nothing else matters. "Hey, bud—"

"You're late," Becca snaps, cutting me off. "We've been waiting for over ten minutes."

*And I've destroyed everything that's ever been mine.*

## Chapter 2

Kit

“*H*i. I’m Amber.”

I’m trying to focus on what she’s saying, but all my attention is drawn to the huge pair of boobs with pale pink nipples standing at attention.

*Yup.* Definitely still a lesbian.

Trying not to swallow my tongue—or drop my cup of coffee—I clear my throat and look up. I knew Porn Rub shooting their new videos in the studio right next to my temporary office would be a distraction, but I didn’t think it would be *this* bad.

“Hi, I’m Kit.”

The beautiful blonde raises one perfect eyebrow. “Are you fucking with me?”

I blink, unsure of what she’s implying. “No? Why—”

“Your name, silly.” She smiles and the action only makes her even hotter. “It’s kind of ironic since you work for Pretty Kitties.”

Safe to say I officially feel like a dumbass.

“Right.” I bring my palm to my forehead. “Duh.”

She giggles a little, causing her boobs to jiggle ever so slightly. “I have to go back to the studio to finish filming, but it was nice to meet you.” Walking backward, she gives me a sly grin. “Hope we run into each other again.”

*Mamma mia.* Is she flirting with me?

My brain temporarily short-circuits as I scrutinize the thought. “Roger that.” I raise my cup of coffee. “Tallyho.”

Her pretty face scrunches in confusion and that’s when I realize the

clusterfuck that just came out of my mouth.

Fuck a duck.

“I mean...bye.”

With that, I quickly dart into my office, close the door behind me, and slump against it.

“Smooth, Kit. Real smooth.”

My cell phone vibrates with an incoming text and I practically jolt as I fish it out of the pocket of my jeans.

Disappointment sinks like a brick in my chest when I see a text from Breslin asking how my *new job* is going instead of a text from my asshole husband.

Then again, I shouldn't be surprised, considering the way we left things before I came to New York.

Or rather—the way *he* left things.

The organ in my chest twists as I think back to the way Preston ran out of the room while I was naked and vulnerable...

Ready to do the unthinkable.

For *him*.

Turns out I'm not just terrible with women.

Sighing heavily, I make my way over to my desk so I can set up some new ads for Pretty Kitties.

I'm about to plop my ass in the chair when there's a knock on the door.

“Come in.”

I regret those words the moment it opens and I see Jess standing there. Looking gorgeous as always.

She offers me a warm smile that I don't return. “Hey.”

“Hi.”

She's been nicer than usual lately, and I can't help but think that it's only because of what transpired in Vegas.

*I never should have signed that stupid NDA.*

Then again, if I hadn't, I'd be unemployed. So there's that.

“I have a surprise for you.”

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her I have no interest in her *surprises* because the last one involved drugs and that douchebag Jared, but then I hear, “Dang. He's pounding her like she's the end of a ketchup bottle. Get it, honey.”

My face lights up at the sound of Juan's voice. Last I checked, he was

supposed to stay in Connecticut since he's in sales, but I guess Jess had a change of heart and brought him here.

"Hope you don't mind sharing your office," Jess says as Juan prances past her toward me.

"Hello, gorgeous."

Meeting him halfway, I wrap my arms around him. I've only been in New York for a couple days, but I don't know anyone else here aside from Jess, so it's been lonely.

Especially since the bag of dicks I'm married to is ignoring me.

"You have no idea how happy I am to see you."

The crack of my voice takes us both by surprise.

"Don't cry," Juan says after our hug ends. "This office looks dreadful, but I'm gonna fix this place up and decorate."

*Oh, man.* I open my mouth to remind him that gussying up a temporary office is a waste of time, but telling Juan not to decorate would be like telling a fish not to swim.

"Let's start with getting some light and fresh air in here." Before I can stop him, he walks over to the window and opens it. "Hello, New York! Your boy has arrived!"

"Suck my dick," an aggravated voice below him bellows in response.

"Please, bitch. You *wish*," Juan yells out the window.

Jess laughs. "I'll leave you two to get settled in."

I dart my gaze in her direction before the door closes. "Thank you."

She gives me a small nod, and there's no mistaking the flicker of guilt in her brown orbs before the door clicks shut.

After his verbal sparring match with the random person on the street is over, Juan ambles to the empty desk on the opposite side of the room.

"Spill the tea, girlfriend."

I start telling him about the studio next door and that there's a big coffee break room down the hallway that we all share, so running into naked porn stars is a daily occurrence, but he shakes his head.

"I meant about you being married...to a *man*."

Oh. *That*.

Suddenly the room feels way too small.

"Do you want coffee?" I make a beeline for the door. "Awesome sauce. I'll go get us some."

"Seriously?" Juan whines. "Come on. You have to tell me what's up."



Thinking quick, I blurt, “On second thought, how about some food? I’m starving and there’s this awesome restaurant right down the street that has these incredible empanadas.”

“Kit.”

*Dammit.* Distracting him with food almost always works.

“Seriously, Juan. They melt in your mouth. I’m not sure what they do to the beef and cheese, but—”

“Stop trying to change the subject.”

“Then stop asking me about my husband,” I snap, but immediately regret it when his face falls.

“I thought we were friends,” he whispers to the floor.

*Fuck my life.* I feel lower than dirt.

“We are.” I decide to be honest with him. “I’m just...I’m not ready to talk about Preston.”

*Because it hurts too much.*

## Chapter 3

Preston

“*D*ammit. Would you sit still, Jameson?” Becca snaps when he reaches for her orange juice again.

“He wants some of your OJ,” I inform her, even though that’s fucking obvious to anyone with half a brain.

Her eyes narrow. “It has way too much sugar and he’s hyper enough already.” Sighing, she looks down at him. “Fine. If you want some juice, then you need to use your words and *tell* Mommy.”

Yeah, that’s not going to happen.

Tamping down my annoyance with her—because she knows damn well that pushing him to speak when he doesn’t want to only makes things worse—I signal the waitress. However, I’m too late because Jameson reaches for the juice again...this time knocking it over in the process.

“Goddammit,” Becca shouts as she reaches for some napkins. “That’s it. You’re going in a highchair.”

I quickly get up from the table and scoop up Jameson who’s making grabby arms for me. “Come on, buddy. You can sit by me.”

Unlike his mother, my tolerance for the three-year-old is much higher.

I order two orange juices from the waitress when she appears, much to Becca’s dismay.

“We can take him to the park after so he can burn off the sugar high.” Reaching into my pocket, I pull out the plastic dragon figurine I picked up at the toy store earlier and hand it to him. “Look what I found in my pocket.”

His eyes go wide as he pretends to make it fly around the table.

“Say thank you,” Becca utters.

I start to tell her he doesn't have to, but the waitress comes back with their juices.

Another long sigh leaves her. "I'm gonna book an appointment with a specialist soon."

I take a bite of my burger. "For what?"

She looks at me like I'm an idiot. "For Jameson." Her eyes close. "There's something wrong with him, Preston. He should have started speaking by now."

Irritation prickles along the back of my neck. Not only because she's talking about this stuff in front of him, but there are times when he speaks.

Granted he doesn't say much, and it only happens when he and I are alone...but it's something.

Which means he's capable of talking. He just doesn't want to.

"He's fine. He probably just hates people."

And who the fuck could blame him? Society fucking blows.

She rolls her eyes. "Maybe, but I need to make sure he isn't retard—"

"Becca," I grit out, my voice low and lethal.

Not only do I not want Jameson hearing his own mother calling him that, the word sets my teeth on edge since my father used it frequently.

I can feel Jameson's big brown eyes staring up at me curiously, so I relax my features. "Eat your chicken nuggets so we can go to the park."

He debates this for a moment before scrunching his face and pushing his plate away.

I can tell Becca wants to yell at him, but I hold up a hand. The kid practically lives off chicken nuggets, meatballs, and pancakes, so the fact that he hasn't taken more than a nibble out of one means something is wrong.

I grab a nugget off his plate and bring it to my mouth. Almost immediately, an off-putting taste hits my tongue and I spit the remnants into a napkin. No wonder he doesn't want any.

I signal for the waitress again. "These taste like ass."

"I'm sorry about that," the waitress says when she comes back to our table. "I'll bring the little man a new plate."

It won't matter. His experience has already been tainted so he won't trust that the new ones won't taste like shit, too.

Jameson might not be mine, but he's so much like me it's uncanny.

I turn to him. "How about some pancakes instead?"

He mulls this over for a bit before giving me a small nod.

Becca makes an irritated noise in her throat as the waitress walks off. “I wish you would have just *told* me you didn’t like them.”

A frown mars his face, almost like he’s disappointed with himself for not being able to speak and upsetting his mom.

But he shouldn’t be. He’ll talk when he’s ready.

Or not.

Whatever happens, we’ll deal with it and figure out a way for him to communicate his needs and wants.

I motion to the toy dragon. “He’s cool, huh?”

The smile he gives me chips away at the ice around my heart.

“Where are you staying this weekend?” Becca questions suddenly, catching me off guard.

I used to crash on her couch during the weekends I visited Jameson, but since she’s been even more persistent about getting into my pants, I’d been staying at a nearby motel.

However, seeing as I’ll be stuck in Connecticut for the foreseeable future now, I have to come up with a story that will pacify her and explain my presence.

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that.”

She stops picking at her bowl of cottage cheese. “What’s up?”

The one benefit of me living here again is that I’ll get to see Jameson a lot more.

As long as Becca never finds out about Kit. The muscles in my chest draw tight. *And Kit never finds out about Becca.*

“I’ll be staying in Connecticut for a while.”

“Okay.” She arches a brow. “Why?”

Here goes nothing.

“My mom is sick.” The irony that I’ve used a woman I haven’t spoken to in years as a cover-up story *multiple* times lately isn’t lost on me. “She needs someone to take care of her.”

I’ll give Becca credit because she isn’t half as dumb as she looks. “What’s the catch?”

“There’s no catch,” I deadpan because acting dubious will only make her buy it that much more.

“Bullshit.” She places her spoon down. “What’s in it for you?”

I lower my voice a fraction, like I’m about to let her in on a big secret. “She’s contesting my father’s will. Apparently, she found a good lawyer who

thinks she'll win the case against Asher...especially now that she has cancer." I shrug. "She offered to split it with me if I agreed to be a character witness...and stick around and make sure the private nurse she hired doesn't kill her before she can collect."

I can practically see the wheels in her head spinning. "Interesting." She picks up her spoon again. "To tell you the truth, I never understood why your dad left most of his money to your brother. It should have gone to your mom since she was his wife."

Anger swells hot in my chest. It should have gone to *me*.

She brings the spoon to her mouth but pauses. "How much money we talkin' here?"

I resist the urge to tell her there is no *we*, but I can't because as always, she's got the better hand.

And he's currently sitting right next to me, playing with his new toy dragon while he waits for his pancakes.

"I don't know," I settle on. "It depends what the judge decides...and how much of it my brother spent while he had access to it."

She snorts. "Knowing the pampered asshole, it's probably all gone."

I fight the urge to wrap my hands around her neck and squeeze until she shuts the fuck up permanently.

I'm allowed to talk shit about my brother. Not her.

As if sensing I'm about to lose my composure, she holds up her hands and exclaims, "I'm just saying, it's pretty crappy how he has all this money and never once offered to give his own brother a dime of it. He's a greedy bastard."

She reaches across the table for my hand, but I yank mine back and change the subject. "How's school going?"

Guilt colors her features and she averts her gaze. "Fine."

A snarl works its way up my throat. "Becca."

I'm footing the bill for her to attend beauty school in hopes she'll have a steady job to support herself and her son.

Which means she better not fuck it up.

"I was sick last week and missed a few days." She chews her bottom lip. "But don't worry. They said I can still make up the hours before I graduate this summer."

I open my mouth to offer to babysit while she does, but the waitress arrives with Jameson's pancakes.

He makes no move to eat them which only frustrates Becca. “Eat your food.”

Wary, he peers up at me.

Realizing what he wants, I pick up my fork and take a bite. Unlike the nuggets, they taste fine.

“All good.”

Visibly pleased with the news, he grabs the fork out of my hand and takes a small bite. Then another.

I relax against the booth. *Crisis averted.*

“I’m gonna go to the bathroom,” Becca announces, getting up from the table.

After she’s gone, Jameson cocks his head.

It’s so faint, I almost don’t hear it.

“Hi.”

I’ve done a shit ton of various drugs over the years, but nothing compares to the high of when he talks to me.

*Except her.*

“Hey, bud.”

“Mama.” His brows furrow and I can tell he’s struggling with his next word. “Mad.”

Fucking hell.

“Not with you,” I assure him. “She’s just...worried.”

I can tell he doesn’t understand what I’m saying and that only makes me feel worse.

He makes grabby hands for me, so I pick him up and place him on my lap.

“She wants you to talk to her like you talk to me.” I kiss the top of his blond head. “But you don’t have to talk to anyone if you don’t feel like it, okay?”

I make a mental note to convince Becca to put the so-called *specialist* on the back burner because I don’t think forcing him to speak to a stranger when he isn’t ready will help matters.

Besides, he was a premie which—according to my research—means he’ll be a little behind when it comes to certain things.

He’ll catch up, though.

But even if he doesn’t...we’ll deal with it.

When I look up, I see Becca approaching the table, her red talons typing a

mile a minute across her phone screen.

A second later, Jameson starts wheezing.

He's healthy, which is a miracle considering how early he was born, but he does struggle with a severe case of asthma.

"Becca."

I need her to stop texting and give me his inhaler.

"Shit." She finally places her phone down and digs through her purse, her eyes wide with panic. "Fuck."

"You don't have it?"

It takes everything in me not to reach over and throttle her.

"I do." She looks around the diner as if it will magically appear. "Somewhere."

I can feel my blood pressure rising with every labored breath Jameson takes. Swiftly, I reach into my wallet and toss some money on the table.

Her apartment is only ten minutes away, but ten minutes feels like a goddamn eternity when a kid can't breathe.

"Move," I bark to some man trying to enter the diner as I'm walking out to the parking lot.

"Give me your keys," I grunt behind me when I reach Becca's car.

I'm strapping Jameson into his car seat when the mask he uses for his inhaler catches my eye. Fortunately, I spot the inhaler along with the spacer on the floor of the back seat next.

Relief washes over me as I place the mask over his mouth and press down on the canister.

"Good job, JP."

"I told you I had it," Becca says behind me.

Only because I made sure to put an extra one in her car a few weeks ago.

After I'm sure Jameson is able to breathe again, I turn to face her.

"You're supposed to keep one in your purse at all times."

I know it's not my place to tell her how to be a parent, but this isn't the first time she's forgotten his inhaler while we were out.

My anger rises. Maybe if I show her what it's like to not be able to breathe for a few minutes, she'll finally get it through her thick fucking skull.

"Jesus Christ," she yells. "It's not like I intentionally forgot it."

I cross my arms and stare her down. "Fascinating how you still have your phone."

Her eyes narrow. "What is that supposed to mean?"



“You would never leave your apartment without your precious phone, yet you somehow managed to leave behind the one fucking thing that could save your kid’s life.”

“Seriously?” She rolls her eyes. “Give me a break. I’m doing the best I can here.”

Her best isn’t good enough. *Not when it comes to Jameson.*

When I make no move to agree with her, her expression turns furious. “In case you forgot, you’re *not* his father, Preston.”

Her words are like a bullet straight to the fucking heart.

Because she’s right. I have no claim to him.

I’m just a guy who would do and give up anything in order to keep him safe, happy, and protected.

I’ve tried to convince myself to walk away from the bullshit because even though he’s worth it...Becca isn’t.

But every time I attempt to...I can’t.

I hit her with a bullet of my own. “In case you forgot, you’d be living in an alley somewhere begging for scraps if it wasn’t for me.”

I don’t feel bad throwing what I do in her face, because I don’t do it for her.

I do it for him.

Her gaze falls on Jameson who’s playing with his new dragon, oblivious to the argument we’re having. “*I wouldn’t be.*”

I don’t like the eerie tone of her voice or what it implies. “What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing.”

I grab her arm when she tries to open the car door. “What the fuck does that mean, Becca?”

“You’re hurting me.”

*She’s hurting him.*

“It doesn’t mean anything.” Her eyes close. “It’s just...it’s not easy being a *single* mom.”

A deaf man can hear what she’s really inferring.

“Not this shit ag—”

“If you actually cared about us and wanted the best for Jameson, you’d give me another chance.” Her eyes turn glassy. “I could make you happy, Preston.” Her voice cracks. “*We* could make you happy.”

Fuck. Round and round we go.

I feel like I'm trapped on the world's most fucked-up carnival ride.

I've thought about giving in to Becca's demands more times than I care to admit over the years.

Hell, there was even one night when I did.

But fucking hell. I *can't*.

Because no matter how much I care about Jameson, the thought of being with Becca makes me want to stick my head in a bucket of bleach and ammonia.

Balancing the best I can on this tightrope of shit I've created, I give her the same answer I always do.

"You know I'm not ready for a relationship." I ignore the white-gold band burning a hole in my pocket. "It's best we both focus on Jameson and get our shit together."

Tearing her arm away, she blows out a breath. "Yeah...okay."

With that, she climbs inside her car and starts the engine.

I walk around to the passenger side, but she halts me. "Sorry, change of plans. I have to go take care of some *shit*."

I'm about to tell her I'll watch Jameson, but she reverses out of the parking lot.

I didn't even get a chance to say goodbye to him.



"Can you go the other way?" I tell the Uber driver when I see the bridge approaching.

Not only does the bridge remind me of Kit—who I'm forcing myself not to think about right now—I want to check out the actual neighborhood so I'm more acquainted with my surroundings.

He promptly makes a U-turn and veers down a side road.

Moments later, we turn down a street and pass a few gated mansions.

The guy whistles. "Must be nice to be loaded."

I open my mouth to tell him it isn't all it's cracked up to be—and not to expect a bigger tip from me—but a moving truck parked next door to Kit's

parents' house snags my attention.

Given the movers are transferring things into the house instead of out, it seems my wife has some new neighbors.

I don't think much of it...until a familiar golden lab runs onto the street with what appears to be a football jersey dangling from his mouth. The driver slams on his brakes in the nick of time, narrowly missing the mutt.

*You've got to be shitting me.*

## Chapter 4

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Kit

*C*losing my eyes, I turn face down in the pool and spread my arms out as wide as I can. The summer sun beats down on my back as a weightless feeling takes over.

*I wonder if this is how they died after their plane fell out of the sky a few months ago.*

*Floating peacefully into oblivion without any pain.*

*I really hope so.*

*Water fills my ears and I realize I forgot to wear my earplugs. I'm about to get out, because if I come down with another ear infection, my Nanna will blow a gasket, but there's a tight grip around the back of my neck and a force propels me deeper into the water.*

*Panic sets in as I open my eyes and flail my arms, desperate to get some air into my lungs. That only makes it worse, though. My eyes sting from the chlorine as I look around the pool floor and my chest burns from the lack of air.*

*A wave of dizziness washes over me as the flight drains out of my body. I close my eyes again, giving in to the woozy feeling taking over.*

*Suddenly, the force is gone, and I hear someone screaming as I'm pulled out of the water.*

*"What the hell is wrong with you?" my Nanna yells.*

*I'm about to tell her it wasn't my fault and I have no idea what happened, but it's not me she's yelling at.*

*It's my Uncle Garrison.*

“Kit?” a voice calls out, snapping me out of my thoughts. “Are you okay?”

Crap.

“Yeah.” I shake my head, feeling like an idiot for zoning out. Especially in front of *her*. “Sorry.”

Amber gives me a smile, one that makes me feel warm all over.

Pretty girls have always been my kryptonite.

Unfortunately for me, Amber is hotter than the damn sun.

And for some strange reason, I think she might actually be into me because we’ve been bumping into each other *a lot* today.

Unless she has a severe caffeine addiction.

Either way, it doesn’t matter because she’ll be gone soon. Evidently, Porn Rub only hires the *talent* to stay and shoot multiple videos for a week...and then off they go.

“Tomorrow is my last day here,” she says as if reading my mind. “Me and a couple of people want to go out for drinks to celebrate after we wrap up, and I was hoping you could come.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to decline, because getting wrapped up in a beautiful girl is the *last* thing I need right now...but it’s not like this is a date.

At least, I don’t think it is.

I clutch my cup of coffee tighter. “Can I bring my friend Juan?”

Juan can be my safety net and make sure I don’t do something stupid.

Like get drunk and take her back to my hotel room.

“Sure.” She moves closer and I get a whiff of her flowery scent. God, she smells so good. “As long as you’re there, I don’t care who you bring.”

I swallow hard. She’s definitely screwing up this *not a date* notion I had.

“I uh...I should probably get back to work.”

Despite saying this, my feet don’t move. Something Amber notices.

“Or you could stay here...with me.”

*Dammit*. It’s like dangling a bone in front of a dog.

“I—” The sound of my phone ringing cuts me off and I quickly fish it out of my pocket.

A weird twist infiltrates my chest when I see *Hubby* flash across the screen.

“I have to take this,” I tell Amber as I dash out of the coffee room.

“Hey,” I answer. “What’s up?”

“I don’t know what kind of shit you’re trying to pull, but I am not the

motherfucking one.”

His voice is low. *Lethal*.

Uh-oh.

I open the door to my office. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

He snorts, but it doesn’t sound jovial. It sounds threatening.

“You really expect me to believe you had no idea about my brother and his little entourage moving into the house next door.”

Record. Freaking. Skip.

“I’m sorry...*what?* Asher, Breslin, and Landon are living next door?”

That’s definitely news to me.

I’ve spoken to Breslin a few times this week. You’d think she would have mentioned something so *important*.

A gruff sound of irritation leaves him. “Looks that way. Yesterday my Uber driver almost ran over their dumb dog.”

My heart sinks. “Oh, my God. Is he okay?”

I swear I hear him growl. “The dog is fine, Bishop. I, however, am *not*. You better fucking take care of this. Because if you don’t...the deal is off and I’m out.”

I rub my temples, trying to thwart off the headache he’s giving me. “I’ll try, but I’m not exactly sure what I can do about it. It’s not like I can march over there and demand they leave the house they just bought.”

“The fuck you can’t,” Preston barks before the line goes dead.

Juan’s eyes are wide when I catch him looking at me. “Everything okay?”

Nope.

Everything is *not* okay.

## Chapter 5



Preston

I'm going to fucking kill him.  
As if it wasn't bad enough that my pinhead brother moved next door, I'm watching him jog back and forth in front of the driveway of Kit's house, like some kind of creepy voyeur.

When his dog raises his hind leg and takes a piss on the gate blocking them from entering and Asher praises him, I've decided I had enough of his shenanigans and storm out there.

"Get the fuck off my property before I call the cops."

Never in a million years did I think I'd become one of those, *get off my lawn* sissies, but here we fucking are.

My brother—who doesn't look at all offended—smiles and waves. "Howdy, neighbor."

"Don't *howdy neighbor* me, dipshit. Get the hell off my property."

He rubs his chin, pretending to think about this for a second. "Last I checked, this isn't *your* property. It's Kit's."

"And last *I* checked, Kit was my wife," I remind him. "Or have you taken one too many hits to the head?"

"Your *fake* wife," he grits out.

I cross my arms and stare him down. "Legally our marriage is *very* real."

"So real you keep lying to her about being in contact with Mom when you're really getting your rocks off with some other chick?"

Here we fucking go.

Last time we saw each other it resulted in a full-blown fistfight, given he put two and two together and figured out I lied to Kit about the woman on the

phone being our mother when it was actually Charlotte.

However, my brother must still have a sense of loyalty to me because he hasn't spilled the beans to her.

Yet.

"What I tell my wife is my business, not yours." I point. "Now go."

His expression turns solemn. "Kit's a good person. She doesn't deserve to get hurt."

I hate that he's right.

But if I tell her the truth, I won't just hurt her...

*I'll obliterate her.*

"You seem to have forgotten Kit's a lesbian. Ergo, she doesn't give a shit where I stick my dick. You shouldn't either." I pull my phone out of my pocket. "I wonder how quick the cops are in this town."

"Dammit, Preston. Why do you hate me so much? What did I do?" His face falls. "How do we get past this?"

That's the thing. *We can't.*

"You can start by moving back to New Orleans, you fucking stalker."

He feigns offense. "I am not stalking you. I've been looking into acquiring some more property during my off-season, and this house was a great deal." He wags a finger. "You can thank your wife for asking us to help her move in because that's when I saw it was for sale."

*Bullshit.* Knowing Asher, he probably knocked on the door and offered the previous owners triple what it was worth just to ensure he could keep tabs on me.

I point to my face. "Do I look like I was born yesterday?"

"No, but you look like someone who keeps pushing away his brother. A brother who would do anything in the world for him." His shoulders slump. "I'm begging here, man. Just tell me what I did wrong so I can fix it."

It takes everything in me not to punch him in order to let out all the anger and frustration his presence is causing me.

"I don't want you to fix it. I want you to go back to your new house, pack up your shit, and take your ass back to New Orleans."

Hurt splashes across his face and he turns on his heel. "Come on, Picasso."

I'm relieved. Until he stops walking.

"Fine. You want me gone? Done. But I want something in return. Actually, make that *two* somethings."

“This isn’t *let’s make a deal*, asshole.”

Snorting, he turns back around. “Bullshit. Everything is a deal with you.”  
He has me there.

“Start talking.”

He ticks things off with his fingers. “One—you have to tell Kit the chick she heard on the phone wasn’t our mother. And two—you have to tell *me* why you’re so angry with me.”

I can’t do either of those things...especially the latter.

“Fuck off.”

He holds his arms out wide. “I guess you’re stuck with me then, little brother. Or should I say...*neighbor*.”

## Chapter 6

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Kit

“*Y*ou should have told me you moved, Breslin.”

“I was going to, but it was supposed to be a *surprise*.”

I pin the phone between my ear and shoulder as I finish typing up a scheduled Facebook post for Pretty Kitties. “Mailing a box of cupcakes to my house is a surprise. Sending me flowers is a surprise. Lighting a bag of dog poop on fire and leaving it on my front stoop is a surprise.” Albeit a shitty one. “Deciding to move to a different state and into the house next door to me isn’t a surprise.”

I can tell I’ve hurt her because she goes silent.

“I didn’t mean it like that. I’m happy I’ll be able to see you more often now...it’s just. Prest—” I catch myself and go with our secret code name instead. “*Princess Monet* isn’t happy about it.”

“Oh well. Maybe if he wasn’t using my best friend for her inheritance and refusing to tell his brother why he disappeared for three years without a trace—and then came back acting like said brother was lower than scum—we wouldn’t have to keep an eye on you two.”

I really shouldn’t be surprised by her statement, but still. It hurts that she thinks I can’t handle Preston on my own.

“I don’t need a babysitter, B.”

I’m expecting her to argue, but she doesn’t. “Asher wanted to move back so he could look out for his brother. Because he’s his family.” Her voice fills with trepidation. “And I agreed because you’re *my* family, Kit. We might not be blood, but you’re my sister.”

My heart squeezes because I feel the same way about her. I just hate that

*she* feels like she has to watch my every move.

I'm about to tell her this, but then she says, "And because I love you, I want to be there to pick up the pieces after he hurts you. Because he *will* hurt you, Kit."

*He already has.*

It's hard not telling her what happened the night before I left for New York, but I know it will only make her hatred for Preston worse.

And seeing as she's living next door now, I wouldn't put it past her to march over there and castrate him.

I clear my throat. "Well, you don't have to worry about that anymore because we've decided to put the kibosh on it."

Her voice is entirely too happy for the next words she delivers. "You're getting divorced?"

"No. We're just..." I glance across the room at Juan who's listening intently given the curious expression on his face. "Not doing the extra stuff anymore."

"So, no more kissing buddies?" Breslin questions and I can't help but detect a note of skepticism in her voice.

"Yup." I begin setting up some ads for the new quadruple x vibrator. "There will be no more of that."

"Kit?"

"Yes?"

"Did something happen?"

I hate lying to her, but talking about it will only make the woeful feeling gnawing in the pit of my stomach worse. "Nope. We just decided doing that stuff was...complicating things. Blurring the lines." I wave a hand. "Making everything murky."

"Right."

She starts to follow that up with something else, but I cut her off.

"Sorry, B. Gotta go. Juan is having an issue with his computer and I'm pretty sure he just broke the copy machine."

Juan raises an eyebrow as I hang up the phone.

"Guess it's not just me you're dodging," he murmurs.

I glance at the clock on the wall. It's only nine-thirty, so my lunch break isn't for another three hours, but I really need to clear my head.

"I'm starving." I get up from my desk. "There are these amazing breakfast sandwiches on the upper west side."

“That’s at least forty minutes away, isn’t it?”

*Exactly.*

“I’ll drive fast.” I grab my keys and purse off my desk. “If Jess asks where I am, cover for me.”

“Fine, but you owe me.”

“I’ll buy you *two* sandwiches,” I tell him as I exit my office.

And bump right into Amber.

Crap on a cracker.

Her face lights up when she sees me. “Hey.”

“Hey.” I hold up my keys. “Sorry, can’t talk. I have to go run a very important errand.”

She frowns. “Oh, okay. I have to go back in and shoot a scene, but maybe we can talk later?”

Since I can’t think of any excuse not to, I concede. “Sure.”

Brushing past her, I make my way to the elevator. As I press the button for the parking garage, I wonder if I should call Preston to check up on how the *renovations* my Nanna insisted on having done to my parents’ house are coming along.

However, if I do that, I’ll have to deal with him being extra grumpy because of the situation with his brother.

Which isn’t fair because it’s not like *I* had anything to do with their decision. I was just as blindsided as he was by the news.

Gritting my teeth, I step out of the elevator and amble in the direction of my car.

Swear he can be so damn stub—

White-hot pain permeates the back of my head, stealing the strength from my knees and the breath from my lungs...

And then everything goes black.

## Chapter 7



Preston

*I* watch four men carry cedar planks through the front door. “What are those for?”

Paying me no mind, they make their way down the stairs leading to the basement.

Assholes.

Kit said she had no problem with them revamping the exercise room downstairs, but they don’t need wood to replace a few machines.

I follow behind them.

“One of you better answer me. *Now.*”

The one in charge lets out an irritated sigh. “The owner wants us to build a sauna down here.”

I’m not opposed to the idea, but Kit might be. “I don’t recall discussing this.”

“That’s because you’re not the owner.” The guy shrugs. “Look, man. If you have a problem with the sauna, I suggest you take it up with the woman who’s paying us to do our job.”

I’d rather swallow battery acid than deal with that old bat. Or her jack-off sidekick.

Reaching into my pocket, I pull out my phone. “Don’t do a damn thing until I call my wife.”

The men groan as they drop their supplies on the floor, no doubt wondering where the fuck my balls are.

Tough shit. I know how important this house is to Kit, and I made her a promise that I’d look after the renovations. These chumps can wait a few

goddamn minutes.

She picks up after the fourth ring. “They want to build a sau—”

“Hello,” a male voice answers.

“Who the hell is this?”

“My name is Peter. I’m an EMT. I believe we have your wife in the ambulance.” There’s a short pause. “According to her driver’s license, her name is Kit Bishop? Is that correct? And are you her husband, or is there someone else I should contact?”

My brain scrambles as I process his words.

“Yes, that’s her name and yes, I’m her husband. What happened to her?”

And why the fuck are they asking *me* these questions instead of Kit?

“We’re not sure. A security guard found her unconscious in a parking garage and called 911. Does your wife have any medical conditions? Is she a drug addict or—”

“No,” I growl, the heavy feeling in my chest growing worse with every passing second. “What hospital are you taking her to?”

“Presbyterian.”

“I’m on my way,” I tell him before I hang up.

I’m about to call a cab, but then I realize that will take too long. The drive from here to New York is already two hours, and I can’t afford to waste any more time.

*I need to get to her.*

But I don’t know how I can...because I don’t have a car.

Fuck.

“I have to make a quick run to the store because we forgot something,” a voice calls out behind me.

That’s when I remember there’s a work van sitting in the driveway.

“Give me your keys.”

The guy looks at me like I’m crazy. “What? No.”

I shove him against the wall and wrap my hand around his throat. “I wasn’t asking. Either hand over your motherfucking keys or never take another breath again. Choice is yours.”

His eyes go wide as I tighten my hold. I can tell he wants to protest, but he’s in no position to.

“They’re in my pocket,” he chokes out.

I swiftly fetch them out and release him.

“You’re fucking crazy,” he coughs as I run out the front door.

He's right. I am crazy.  
*Especially when it comes to her.*

## Chapter 8

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Kit

“*G*ood news is the CT scan showed no permanent damage,” a doctor informs me. “I’m still waiting on a few more lab results, but as long as those come back normal, I’m inclined to say you probably just have a mild concussion.”

“Oh, thank God,” Juan says beside me, dabbing his eyes with a tissue.

With the way he flounced in here crying and carrying on after I called him, you’d think it was *him* that got hit over the head instead of me.

“Does that mean I’m free to go soon?”

The doctor mulls this over for a bit before answering. “I’d really like to keep you for observation.”

*Nuh-uh.* Not happening.

“I feel fine, doc,” I assure him, because the last thing I want to do is stay here so they can poke and prod around some more. Or worse, leave me by my lonesome for hours and then charge me up the ass for my extended *visit*.

“I suppose as long as you have someone who can accompany you back to your hotel and watch—”

“I do.” I link hands with Juan. “Right?”

Juan nods. “Of course.”

The doctor starts to leave, but pauses. “I almost forgot. A detective wants to speak with you about what happened. I told him it would be fine as long as you’re feeling up to it.”

“Bring ‘em on in.”

The quicker I get this over with, the better.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Juan questions.

“Yeah.” I shrug. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Juan blinks. “Gee, I don’t know. Maybe because someone *attacked* you.”

I understand his concern, but for all I know, it was an accident.

Okay, maybe not an accident, but it’s New York City. People are weird here. It was probably just a random mugger.

Although, my purse wasn’t stolen...so there’s that.

Then again, maybe the security guard scared him and he took off running.

“I know you’re worried, but I’m fine.”

Heck, better than fine. I’m *lucky*. Because Lord knows it could have been worse.

Much worse.

He looks like he wants to object, but a man wearing a suit yanks back the curtain. “Ms. Bishop?”

Um...*rude*.

“Can I help you?”

“Hi, I’m Detective Rissler. I’d like to ask you a few questions about your attack.”

“Sure.”

He looks at Juan. “I’d like to speak to her alone.”

Juan starts to get up, but I stop him. “I’d like him to stay if that’s okay.”

Not because I’m nervous, but I know Juan is and I’m kind of hoping the detective will help ease his fears a little.

“Fine.” He ambles to the end of my bed and pulls out a small notepad. “The attack happened in the parking garage of your job, is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t see the attacker?”

“Nope. Whoever it was, came up behind me and that was it. Lights out. I don’t even know what they hit me with.”

“I see.” He frowns as he looks down at his notepad. “And you work for a company called...” His eyebrows rise to the ceiling. “Porn Rub?”

“No,” I correct. “I work for a company called Pretty Kitties.”

He makes a face. “You’re a porn star—”

“No,” I correct *again*. “I’m the social media manager for Pretty Kitties.”

“And what exactly does that entail?”

“Well,” I begin, not bothering to hide my annoyance at his judgment. “I

set up ads for the toys we sell and try to garner engagement with potential customers. I also speak to customers online and answer any and all questions they may have. I answer emails, too.”

I inwardly shudder because *technically*, I now do that for Porn Rub as well.

“And when you engage with customers online, do you engage as yourself or do you use an alias?”

“I engage as the page. I mean, sometimes I tell people my first name, but that’s it.”

“Have you ever had a disgruntled customer?”

Juan and I exchange a glance because there was one woman who ended up shocking herself, but that’s because she used her vibrator in a bathtub. Which it specifically said not to do on the box it came in, so it was really her own fault.

“We don’t have many of those. If anything, we get a *lot* of thank-yous.”

His lips twitch. “I see.” He clears his throat, his expression becoming serious again. “Ms. Bishop, can you think of anyone who might want to harm you?”

I shake my head. “Nope.”

“What about your husband?” Juan hisses.

He can’t be serious. Preston would never hurt me.

“Yeah, right. Pres—”

The detective looks up from his pad. “Husband?”

Fuck a duck.

“I recently got married. However, my husband would never harm me.”

Well, physically anyway.

The detective doesn’t look convinced. “Where is your husband now?”

“He’s at our house in Connecticut. Well, technically my parents’ mansion that I inherited in my Nanna’s will. Or rather, *hoping* to inherit after she passes. However, she insists on having renovations done and Preston, my husband, is watching to make sure they don’t do anything drastic. At least, I *hope* he’s watching them, because he has a bit of a gambling problem and he’s been known to disappear on occasion—” I stop talking because none of this sounds good for Preston. Or me.

I fold my hands in my lap. “My husband’s at home.”

“Let me get this straight,” the detective says. “Your new husband—who has a gambling problem and has been known to disappear—is at home in the

*mansion* you're hoping to inherit in your grandmother's will."

I swallow hard. "That's correct."

Juan's eyes look like they're about to pop out of his head. "Seriously, Kit?"

The detective blows out a heavy breath. "Forgive me, but I need to make sure I have all the facts here. I'm assuming you come from money. Is that right?"

"Yes, my parents were wealthy before they passed. However, my grandmother inherited all their money. Not me."

*Not yet anyway.*

His brows knit together. "I see."

My eyes ping-pong between them. "Look, I've watched plenty of *Dateline* so I know how bad this sounds, but I assure you, Preston had nothing to do with this. I trust him more than I've ever trusted anyone in my life. He would *never* hurt me." I'd offer to call Preston to prove it, but talking to a detective might make him freak out and go on the lam. "I'm pretty sure my assailant was just a stupid mugger that the security guard scared off before he could take my purse."

Despite the detective appearing unconvinced, he doesn't press the issue. "In that case, there really isn't much we can do." He writes something down on his notepad. "I'd like to talk to your husband, but since he lives in a different state that will be difficult. I suppose I can call over to the precinct near you and have the case transferred, but—"

"It *wasn't* my husband," I assure him.

He starts to hem and haw, but fortunately his phone rings. "I have to take this, but—" He hands me a card. "If you think of anything else that might help, please don't hesitate to contact me. In the meantime, I'm going to see if I can get ahold of the surveillance tapes in the parking garage."

"Groovy."

As soon as he walks out, a nurse comes in. "All your tests came back normal, so the doctor said you can be discharged. I just need to take your IV out first."

I happily hold out my arm. "Have at it, sister."

She laughs as she makes quick work of removing my IV. "You'll need to take it easy when you get back home, okay? And if you notice anything unusual, or anything starts to hurt, you'll need to come right back."

"Sure thing."



After handing me a few discharge papers, she leaves.

I can feel Juan's eyes burning holes into me as I reach for my stuff.  
"Ready to blow this popsicle stand and get back to work?"

He looks at me like I've sprouted another head. "Are you deaf? The nurse just told you to take it easy."

I wave a hand. "I can relax when I'm dead. Besides, I have a shit ton of work I need to do at the office."

He looks up to the ceiling and huffs. "What you need is *rest*."

I hop off the bed. "I'm pretty sure you're not supposed to sleep after a concussion."

"I'm pretty sure that's just some old wives' tale," he counters.

That may be true, but I really don't feel like going back to my empty hotel room.

Because when I'm alone...all I think about is *him*.

I hike my purse up my shoulder and head out. "I'm going back to work, Juan. End of story."

"Anyone ever tell you you're crazy?" he grumbles behind me.

Yeah...the person I'm trying my hardest not to think about.

## Chapter 9

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Preston

I grind my molars as I get out of the van and head toward the elevators.

Evidently, the hospital decided to discharge her. Only, she didn't go back to her hotel like she was supposed to because I had the guy at the front desk call her room a few dozen times while I knocked on her door so hard I nearly broke the damn thing down.

I'd try her cell again, but every time I do it goes straight to voice mail.

Which is why I'm currently walking into the building Kit works in.

I'm out of fucking options, and if I don't talk to her soon and see with my own eyes that she's okay, I'll scorch the earth and burn it to the goddamn ground.

Since I have no idea where I'm going, I have to stop and ask a security guard for directions.

The fact he just spouts them off without even so much as asking who I am only further proves how unsafe this shithole is.

After pressing the button for the third floor and stepping out, I amble over to the woman sitting at the front desk who's filing her nails.

"I'm looking for my wife."

"Sure thing, handsome. What's her name?"

"Kit Bishop."

The woman stops filing and arches an eyebrow. "Kit Bishop is your *wife*?"

"Did I stutter?"

I'm debating shoving that nail file up her ass when she points to a

hallway. “Her office is the second door on the left.”

I waste no time barging in.

Only to find she isn’t here either.

“The studio you’re looking for is two doors down,” some guy sitting at a desk on the other side of the room says.

“The woman at the front desk told me this was it.”

“Yeah, well, the woman at the front desk is an idi—” He stops typing on his keyboard and looks up. “Well, *hello there*, gorgeous.” He gets up from his chair and prances over to me. “I’m Juan.”

That makes sense. Kit’s talked about him a few times and he definitely fits the description.

Giving me a wink, he leans in a little too close. “Do you start shooting today or tomorrow, sexy?”

I have no idea what the fuck he’s talking about.

“The only thing I’m going to be shooting is *you* if you don’t tell me where Kit is.”

That wipes the flirty smile off his face. “Kit?” His nose screws up and he takes on a defensive stance. “I’m sorry, who are you?”

“Her husband.”

His jaw nearly hits the floor. “*You’re* her husband?”

It’s all I can do not to ram my fist through the wall. “For fuck’s sake, is everyone deaf around here? Yes, *I’m* her husband. And you have about two seconds to tell me where the hell she is before I lose my shit.”

To his credit, he doesn’t back down.

“I’m not telling you anything until you tell *me* your whereabouts this afternoon.” He zigs a finger through the air. “Kit said you were staying at her parents’ house. In Connecticut.”

“That’s right. But then I called her phone this morning and an EMT picked up and told me they were taking her to the hospital.”

He purses his lips. “Mmhh. You really expect me to believe that?”

Is he for real right now?

“I don’t care what the fuck you believe, shithead. Where is Kit?”

Swiping the air with his finger again, he shakes his head. “Sorry, tough guy. I’m not telling you.” He walks back over to his desk. “But I *am* telling security to remove you from the building.”

I didn’t want to have to do this, but he’s given me no choice.

It takes me all of two seconds to grab him by the collar and shove him

against the wall.

He lets out a high-pitched shriek that could rival one of Ariana Grande's high notes. "Please don't hurt me."

"I won't. As long as you tell me where my wife is."

"She's in the coffee room at the end of the hall."

"I'm sorry, Kit," he cries out after I release him.

My blood pressure rises with every step I take. I assume she's okay since she's here, but I don't know that for a fact. And while Kit and I couldn't be more different from one another, the one thing we have in common is our stubbornness.

The last place she should be right now is at work.

She should be resting. She should be...

My chest recoils when I find her.

Pressed up against the wall, kissing some half-naked blonde.

## Chapter 10

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## Kit

I'm pouring myself a cup of coffee when I hear footsteps behind me.

"Holy cow, are you okay?" Amber questions.

*Crap.* Evidently news of my assault has spread throughout the office like wildfire.

I take a lengthy sip of my coffee because I didn't get a chance to have much caffeine today and I desperately need some.

"I'm fine. It's just a concussion."

Her features pinch in concern and she moves a little closer. "I can't believe someone attacked you."

"Yeah, it sucked." I shrug. "But I'm okay."

"Does that mean you're still coming tonight?"

*Oh, boy.* As much as I want to, it's probably not a good idea. Fortunately, getting attacked in the parking garage gives me the perfect excuse to skip out.

"I'm not sure. I'll see how I feel later and let you know."

I start to brush past her, but she catches me by the elbow. "Can we talk for a second?"

I place my coffee on the table next to me. "Sure."

I'm grateful she at least has a bra on this time. Not that it does much to hide her awesome figure.

She blows out a shaky breath. "At the risk of coming off clingy, I like you, Kit."

I bite the inside of my cheek to avoid saying something I'll regret—like

how can she be so sure she likes me when she doesn't even *know* me?

Then again, that's the purpose of asking someone on a date, isn't it? To get to know them.

"I think you're really cute and interesting," she continues, closing the distance between us. "I don't know if you're just playing hard to get...but whatever you're doing is working because I can't get you off my mind."

Vaguely, I hear the sound of someone screeching in the distance.

"Did you hear that?"

Amber gives her head a shake. "No." She leans in, cupping my cheek. "Am I the only one feeling this thing between us?"

Usually, I really dig the assertive approach. Especially since it's almost always *me* who's the clingy one.

And if this was a month ago, I'd be all over her like white on rice.

"Amber—"

"Wait," she whispers, placing her finger over my lips. "Before you finish that sentence...let me do this."

Next thing I know, her lips are on mine.

And while I should be enjoying this kiss, because she's gorgeous and sweet, and knows *exactly* what she wants.

All I can think is...

*She's not him.*

I'm about to break the kiss and let her down gently, but when I glance up, a pair of dark gray eyes are staring down at me, piercing straight through my heart like an arrow.

My vision turns hazy, causing everything to shift out of focus.

Except *him*.

"Preston?"

The second I utter his name, he's gone like a flash of lightning in the dark.

For a moment, I'm convinced I'm hallucinating due to being hit on the head earlier, but the intense, indecipherable feeling in my chest tells me he's here.

Or rather, he *was*.

"Preston." I chase after him like a kid chasing an ice cream truck.

I know he hears me calling him, but his footsteps pick up speed, like he can't get out of here fast enough.

Picking up my pace, I sprint past him, blocking the elevator. "What are



you doing here?”

I can feel everyone’s eyes on us. Including Juan’s.

“I came here to make sure you were okay.” The look he gives me feels like a dagger to the heart. “But *clearly* you’re doing just fine.”

I’m not sure how he knows what happened, but it doesn’t matter. His anger is practically coming off him in waves as he reaches past me and slams the button for the elevator.

“Why—” I stop talking when I put the pieces together.

He walked in on Amber kissing me.

And now he’s mad.

But he has no right to be mad.

Not when he’s the one who walked out and left me.

Not when he’s leaving me...*again*.

“I can explain—” I start to say but he doesn’t give me a chance to because the elevator doors open, and he steps inside.

Every part of my body aches to join him, because then he’ll have no choice but to hear me out...

But I’m always the one chasing him. *Begging for scraps*.

Preston once told me I couldn’t lose something that belonged to me, but I’m not so sure that’s true anymore because I feel him slipping farther away with every breath I take.

*He didn’t want me.*

And even though it shouldn’t hurt, because I shouldn’t want him either.

It does.

It hurts so fucking much I feel like I’m drowning in the pain.

Tears prickle my eyes as I reach for my necklace.

However, it’s the glimpse of stark hurt I catch in *his* eyes before the elevator doors close that cracks what’s left of my already fragile heart.

Chest heaving, I slam the wall with my fist, hating him for making me feel all these things.

“All right,” Juan calls out behind me. “Show’s over.”

My tears threaten to spill over, but I squeeze my eyes shut. The last thing I want to do is fall apart in front of all these people.

Juan seems to sense this because he places a hand on my shoulder and whispers, “You got it?”

I shake my head, because I don’t got it. Not even close.

But I force myself to pretend like I do as I walk back to my office.

“You’re shaking,” Juan says after he closes the door behind us.

*Only because I refuse to let myself cry.*

Not even when he wraps me in his arms. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him honestly, because it’s the truth.

However, I leave it at that because as much as I love Juan, I can’t tell him this.

Shame snakes up my spine. *I can’t even find the strength to tell myself.*

Because then I’ll be kicked out of the club. The one that accepted me with open arms and no questions asked.

And my homophobic grandmother will win.

And I’ll lose the parts of myself that I’m desperately trying to hold on to.

*Because it’s all I have left.*

“Well, if it’s any consolation,” Juan says with a sad chuckle. “I’m having a shitty Valentine’s Day too.”

I peer up at him. “Today’s Valentine’s Day?”

His face screws up. “Yeah. How did you not know that?”

Because I try not to pay attention to the made-up commercial holiday designed to make people feel like crap because they’re single and have no one to spend it with.

But that isn’t what has me cursing under my breath.

It’s the realization that today isn’t just Valentine’s Day...

It’s Preston’s birthday.

## Chapter 11

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Preston

*I* bring the glass of whiskey to my lips. “Call.”  
The guy sitting across the table smirks and I realize I’m about to get fucked.

Especially since I’m only holding a pair of twos.

When the dealer calls the river and—*surprise*—the asshole reveals he has a straight, I signal the waitress over so I can order another whiskey.

I’m hoping if I drink enough, it will help erase the image of Kit making out with some girl from my cerebellum.

“Two more whiskeys,” I tell the petite blonde.

“You got it.”

I stare at her ass as she walks off. From the back, she could almost pass for Kit.

Something deep inside my chest knots, because I know damn well there is no one out there like Kit Bishop.

Just like I know that no matter how much I want her...I can never fucking have her.

*It’s not in the cards for me.*

“Call.”

I’ve got another shit hand, but it doesn’t stop me from trying my luck anyway.

Because Lady Luck is my mistress—cruel, cold, and calculating when she wants to be. However, just when you’re ready to say fuck it and walk away, she opens her pretty little mouth and sucks you off like a dirty, filthy whore.

And that's exactly what keeps you crawling back for more.

The waitress places two glasses of whiskey in front of me, and I down both of them. The amber liquid burns as it slides down my throat, and I hope like hell it will be enough to numb the acid burning a hole in my chest.

It's ironic how I walked in there wanting nothing more than to see her... only to walk out of there, never wanting to lay eyes on her again.

"Keep 'em coming," I tell the waitress.

The guy next to me raises out of nowhere. Given he hasn't raised once this entire game it should be enough of a warning for me to fold.

But it's my birthday, and Lady Luck owes me one after the shit day I've had.

Only, the bitch doesn't deliver, and I end up losing another hand. Leaving me with a little over three hundred bucks left to my name.

*Just enough to play one more round.*

The waitress—who I can't help but notice has been eyeing me all night—comes back with another whiskey.

I look down at my cards. I have a jack of spades and a queen of hearts. Not bad, but high cards don't mean fuck all until you see how the rest of the hand plays out.

After the flop, I end up with a ten of spades, a five of hearts, and a nine of diamonds.

I take another sip of my whiskey as I debate whether or not to cut my losses.

Fuck it. *In for a penny, in for a pound.*

My knuckles knock against the table. "Check."

The turn reveals a jack of hearts. Not bad, but not great either. However, if the river gives me another jack, there's a chance I may just win this round.

I bring my glass to my lips and finish the rest of my drink as the rest of the table places their bets.

"Raise," the man sitting across from me declares.

This motherfucker. Unlike the guy sitting next to me, he's been doing a fuckton of bluffing this evening.

Since I'm positive my night can't get any worse, I call him on it.

"All in."

Once again, my thoughts drift back to Kit as I wait for the river.

I have no reason to be so irate, because unlike her—I knew what I was getting into when I agreed to marry her.

And yet, here I fucking am. Drinking my sorrows away because I caught her hooking up with someone else.

I should have walked away when I had the chance. I should have folded...

*Goddammit.*

“Must be my lucky night,” the guy exclaims as he reveals his full house and the entire pot goes to him.

I want nothing more than to wipe the smirk off his face when he collects his winnings and I’m left with nothing more than a few dollars.

The waitress sidles up beside me. “Can I get you another whiskey?”

I must be drunker than I thought because she looks even cuter now. Hell, if I squint a little, she almost resembles Kit. *Almost.*

Shooting her a smile, I hand her a dollar bill. “That depends. What time does your shift end?”

I notice a faint blush creeping up her neck. “It ended five minutes ago.”

“Do you have a car or should I get an Uber?”

She hikes a thumb behind her. “My car is in the parking lot.”

I stand up then, swaying a little with the movement. “Your place or mine?”

“Is it okay if we go to yours? I still live with my folks.”

Placing an arm around her shoulders, I glare at the bastard who took all my money. “Looks like you’re not the only one getting lucky tonight.” The men at the table chuckle as I salute them. “Evening, gentlemen.”

“What’s your name?” the chick questions as we make our way out of the casino.

“Preston.”

The man, the myth, the legend...

*The fuckup.*

“My name is Meagan,” she offers, despite me not asking.

“Nah,” I tell her as we enter the parking lot. “Tonight, you’re Kit.”

*My favorite illusion.*

She giggles. “Like a kitty cat?” Reaching over, she runs her nails down my stomach. “Want me to purr?”

I don’t give a fuck what she does as long as it gets me off.

Everything becomes a blur of pink as she leads me to her car.

She’s not Kit...but she’ll do.

## Chapter 12

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## Kit

*I* slam my palm against the steering wheel when the jackass in front of me slows down. “Come on.”

It’s bad enough I’ve spent the last four and a half hours stuck in traffic while trying to get home, now the guy ahead of me wants to morph into a human snail.

*I hope he didn’t leave.*

Because while Preston has absolutely no right to be upset with me for a kiss I didn’t even want, I hate the thought of hurting him.

Especially on his birthday.

Which is why I asked Jess if I could cut my stay in New York short. She protested at first, but considering I was attacked in the parking garage, she relented. She just asked that I finish out the rest of the workday since it’s Valentine’s and plenty of people would be looking for a little *self-love*.

By the time I pull into the driveway, it’s after eleven and I’m so tired from the events of the day *and* sitting in traffic, I opt to leave my luggage in the car.

I breathe a sigh of relief when I reach the front door and find it unlocked.

*He’s here.*

At least, I hope so because when I walk into the kitchen, the lights are off.

My stomach coils with nerves...but then I hear it.

“Kit.”

*Oh, God.* His voice is nothing but a faint, tortuous rasp...as if he’s been curled up in a ball of misery...waiting for me.



I follow the voice, ready and willing to hash everything out because I hate fighting with him.

However, what I see after I round the corner and enter the living room nearly brings me to my knees.

*Like the woman in front of him.*

A river of pain infiltrates the empty spaces around my cracked heart. For a moment, I'm transported back to that moment in the hospital room, because the sight of Becca pleasuring Preston while simultaneously shattering my soul is something I won't ever forget for as long as I live.

Aside from my parents dying, it was the single most painful experience of my life.

Until now.

Heart crumbling like cheap plywood, I watch as Preston lolls his head to the side and sways, looking so oblivious to the fact that I'm here it would almost be comical if it wasn't utterly heart wrenching.

After what feels like an eternity, his heavy-lidded eyes open slightly. If he's surprised to see me standing here, he doesn't show it. Quite the opposite.

He looks *pissed*.

His jaw clenches as he grips the back of the couch to steady himself. "Miss me, angry girl?"

His rough voice is every bit as arrogant as he is...it's also slurred. He's been drinking.

The woman kneeling in front of him freezes, no doubt caught off guard.

I drop my gaze to where she is since looking at him hurts too much.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd take my husband's dick out of your mouth and leave."

Gasping, she scrambles to her feet. "I'm so sorry." She spins around to face me while Preston zips up his jeans. "I didn't—"

"It's not your fault," I assure her, because it's not.

It's *his*.

We stand there glaring like two enemies who want to obliterate each other as the girl gathers her purse off the floor and runs past me.

A moment later the front door slams shut and there's nothing but silence...and the sound of my heart slowly breaking.

A surge of agony floods my system, because I don't understand how we got here.

Or why he *keeps* hurting me.

All I know is I'm no longer origami, bending and folding...I'm crumpled up paper. *Discarded like a piece of unwanted trash.*

"Why does it make you feel so good to hurt me?"

My voice sounds like it's been rolled around in broken glass and stepped on.

Which is exactly how I feel.

Every single emotion that I stopped myself from feeling earlier crashes to the surface and overflows, like a dam breaking.

A ragged breath leaves him and his eyes widen, as if he finally comprehends the catastrophic damage he just caused.

"Kit."

He tries to sidestep me when I walk past him, but I push him away.

"Don't."

I don't want to be anywhere near him right now. I *can't*.

Because he cut me too deep this time...

And I won't give him the satisfaction of watching me bleed out.

## Chapter 13

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Preston

“*K* it.”

I try to reach for her again as she races past me, but she’s too quick...and I’m too drunk.

I expect her to run in the direction of the bathroom, because that’s where she holed herself up during our last blowout, but she bypasses it and runs into her old childhood bedroom instead.

A minute later, loud angry girl music fills the house, drowning out the sounds of her cries.

Chest tight, I stagger to the room and bang on the door.

She might have been the one to start this war...but she sure as hell wasn’t prepared for the way I ended it.

In my defense, I didn’t expect her to come home tonight. I figured she’d be off gallivanting with the blonde I caught her playing tonsil hockey with.

“Open the door,” I shout, but the music is too loud for her to hear me.

Defeated, I rest my forehead against the wood of the frame. “Goddammit.”

The song comes to an end, and the sound of her guttural cries before another song cues up again makes my chest hurt.

I don’t understand why she’s having a meltdown, but it doesn’t fucking matter.

All that matters is that she’s in there falling apart...

*Because of me.*

If I was smart, I’d pack up my shit and leave. Take advantage of the get out of jail free card I’ve managed to snag.

If I was smart, I wouldn't be kicking down her door in a fit of rage and desperation.

But I'm not smart...

I'm just a man who realized he messed up again.

*And hurt the only woman he's ever given a fuck about.*

She doesn't even flinch as I inch my way through the splintered wood and enter the room.

Reaching over, I shut off the stereo. "Kit."

She tilts her head ever so slightly and I notice her eyes are puffy and mascara streaks have stained her damp cheeks. "Go away."

Her voice is broken crystal, the jagged pieces cutting into the hollow cavity that's otherwise known as my heart.

"I don't—"

"Stop." She curls into herself, clutching her knees to her chest as she rocks back and forth on the floor. "I want you *gone*."

It's the first time she's ever asked me to leave.

*And the first time I've wanted to stay.*

"I'm sorry," I tell her, even though I'm not quite sure what it is I should be apologizing for.

She clenches her hands into fists and pounds the wood floor. "No, you're *not*."

I kneel beside her. "You're right. I'm not."

My response only makes her cry harder, so I grab her chin, forcing her to look at me. "But only because I don't understand why you're so upset right now." A cocktail of anger and jealousy brews in the pit of my stomach. "Last time I saw you, you were making out with some blonde—"

"I didn't want to kiss her," Kit interjects. "Amber kissed *me*, but by the time my brain could catch up with what was happening, I saw you standing there...mad as hell."

*Well, shit.*

"I was mad as hell because an EMT picked up your phone when I called you this morning and told me you were unconscious. I couldn't get to you fast enough. However, when I finally did...you were swapping spit with—"

"Are you serious right now?" She looks at me like she wants to set the world on fire just to watch me burn. "You have no right to be upset about that. In case you forgot, you were the one who rejected *me*, remember?" Turning away, she buries her face in her hands. "I was willing to do anything

to make you feel better that night, Preston. *Anything.*”

I know...which is exactly why I couldn't let her.

Kit didn't want to have sex with me because *she* wanted to.

Yet, for some strange reason, she's coming apart at the seams, acting like a woman scorned.

“So that's what this is about?” I question, trying to connect the dots. “You're upset because I rejected you?”

“No, you asshole.” Another tear streams down her cheek. “I'm upset because when I came back home to see you for your birthday, I caught you with your prick in some woman's mouth.”

A wail filled with pure agony leaves her.

The sound unhinges me, and I can't help but pull her close. However, Kit's having none of it because she places her hands on my chest and shoves me.

“No.”

My head spins as I try to assimilate what's going on here, but it's not adding up.

“I'm sorry I'm not attractive enough for you,” she chokes out. “I'm sorry I'm not good enough for you to screw—”

“Jesus Christ,” I roar, because she's got it all wrong. “You're *too* good for me, angry girl.” Reaching over, I brush her mascara streaks with my thumb. “You're also the most gorgeous thing I've ever laid eyes on.”

Hell, everything about this girl does it for me. Her looks, her body...her quirky, sassy, *emotionally volatile* personality.

It all draws me in like a moth to a motherfucking flame.

Problem is, she can't say the same about me.

Which makes her jealousy—because I'm positive that's what this is now—even more perplexing.

Her breath hitches, but then she scowls and pushes my hand away. “I bet you said the same thing to the woman who gave you a blow job in my parents' living room.”

“I didn't,” I tell her honestly. “But if I did...why would that bother you so much?”

Her mouth opens and closes before clamping shut.

“Kit.”

Brushing me off, she gets off the floor and starts to leave, but I scoop her in my arms and head toward the bed.

“Say it.”

Her addicting scent surrounds me like a fog as she presses her cheek against my chest, her body going slack against mine as we sink onto the mattress.

“You *know* why,” she rasps after another minute.

“I’m not sure I do,” I state, getting to the root of it. “Because every time I’ve asked you if me sleeping with other women bothered you...you told me no. Hell, you practically *encouraged* it.”

“Because I didn’t know it would,” she whispers. “Not until I walked in and saw it with my own eyes.” A drop of wetness hits my skin and her voice cracks. “It reminded me of the time I saw you and Becca, and—”

“Noted,” I interject, because Becca is the last person I want to talk about. Especially with her.

She peers up at me. “It hurt like hell, Preston.”

Both her confession and the vulnerability in her expression thaws the ice around my cold, black heart.

“My intention wasn’t to hurt you.” The next words out of my mouth should be difficult, but they come out with ease. Because anything that hurts her...hurts me too. “But if me hooking up with other women bothers you this much...I’ll stop.”

She parts her plump pink lips in shock. “Seriously?” Her nose scrunches. “Are you sure? Because you have needs and that isn’t really fair to you—”

A growl of frustration escapes me. “For fuck’s sake. Make up your damn mind. You either don’t care if I hook up with other women, or you do. You can’t have it both ways.”

Especially if it’s going to result in her having a mental breakdown over it.

“I don’t want you hooking up with other women,” she says in defeat, as if she’s lost a silent war within herself.

*That makes two of us.*

“Deal.” I run my fingers down her spine. “See how easy that was?”

Her eyes narrow. “Asshole.”

I start to smirk until I shift and something digs into my back. Reaching underneath me, I pull out what appears to be a headless stuffed animal.

“What the hell is this?”

Her eyes light up. “That’s Eddy the teddy.” She pouts her lips as she pets his stump. “Or rather, he was until he had an unfortunate humping incident

with the neighbor's dog and I had to rename him, *Shreddy* the teddy."

I can't help but laugh. "That sucks."

"Yeah." She yawns. "I was a wreck when I found him, but my mom was able to salvage what she could and sewed him up for me. She offered to get me a new one, but I didn't feel right about replacing him. Just because he was damaged didn't mean he was unlovable."

Something sharp and abstruse rolls in my chest with those words.

She yawns again. "It's been such a long day. I'm beat."

I want to kick myself because I almost forgot about her getting attacked today.

"What the fuck happened in the parking garage?"

She opens one eye. "Hmm?"

"The parking garage," I repeat with edge. "What. The. Fuck. Happened?"

"I'm not really sure. Someone hit me over the head with something while I was walking to my car, and the next thing I knew I was waking up in an ambulance." She yawns. "I'm pretty sure it was a mugger."

She says it like it's no big deal, but it is.

"Why didn't you call me when you woke up?"

She worries her bottom lip between her teeth. "I don't know. We were fighting and I guess..." Her sentence trails off and she shakes her head. "Doesn't matter."

The hell it doesn't. "You guess what?"

"I was afraid you wouldn't care." Her gaze snaps to mine and the pain lingering there steals my breath. "That I'd lost you."

She couldn't be more wrong.

My fingertips brush the nape of her neck and I tug the poker chip she wears on a necklace out of her shirt. "You can't lose something that belongs to you, remember?"

"I know." Sadness twists her features. "But I felt you slipping away." Closing her eyes, she nuzzles my chest. "I'm so tired."

"Want me to take you upstairs to your bedroom?"

"No."

I look around the bright pink room filled with various toys and stuffed animals. The fact she came *here* instead of going upstairs when she broke down stirs something inside me.

Her next words are so faint, I almost don't hear them.

"It's ironic that I caught you in the living room...because I felt like I died



in there.”

Her statement is a sucker punch to the gut. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not sure what it means,” she whispers. “And I know you deserve more than that, I just...”

I don’t *deserve* anything from her, but I’ll gladly take whatever parts she’s willing to give me.

*Because I’m a selfish bastard.*

“It doesn’t have to mean anything.” Hell, our relationship has always been complicated and difficult to decipher, why put a label on it now? “You’re Kit and I’m Preston. That’s all that fucking matters.”

Her lips curve as I get off the bed. “You make it sound like we’re some kind of dynamic duo.”

I stroke the edge of her jaw with my thumb. “That’s because we are.”

I’m about to walk away, but she reaches for my hand. “Stay.” Her teeth dig into her lower lip and she bats her eyelashes. “And snuggle.”

“I don’t—” I clamp my mouth shut because it’s a losing battle.

But at least it ends with her in my arms.

Suppressing a sigh, I slip back into bed and wrap my arms around her tiny frame.

Because I’d do anything in the world for this girl.

*Except tell her the truth.*

## Chapter 14

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Preston

“Can you grab my luggage from my car and bring in the mail?” Kit calls out from the kitchen where she’s scrambling—or rather, *burning*—eggs.

I pinch the bridge of my nose. *And so our newfound married life begins.* Next thing I know, she’ll be asking me to go to couples yoga and pick out curtains.

Gritting my teeth, I trek over to the front door and yank it open.

A shiny gift-wrapped box with a big bow on it snags my attention.

“You didn’t have to get me a present,” I tell her as I bend down to pick it up.

A rush of anger surges through me when I read the tag and see ‘*Happy birthday, asshole*’ scrawled in Asher’s sloppy handwriting.

I’m about to walk over to the trash bin and dump it, but curiosity gets the better of me, and I unwrap the box.

A very expensive and very *gaudy* diamond Rolex stares back at me.

Not only is it flashy and hideous, it’s not my style.

However, it’s very much *his*. Nausea turns my stomach and I have to fight the urge to punch a hole through the wall. *And our father’s.*

As if sensing I’m about to spin out, Kit enters the foyer. “I didn’t get you a present.” She whistles when she catches sight of the watch. “Wow. That is...”

“Tacky as fuck?”

“Not *you*.” Her face scrunches. “Who’s it from?”

“The scumbag next door.”

A sound of frustration leaves her and she looks up at the ceiling. “You mean your brother?”

“My name suits him a lot better.”

She peers inside the box. “There’s something else in there.”

I dig out the fabric on the bottom and unfold it.

I let out a grunt of annoyance as I take in the T-shirt with Picasso’s mug on it. Directly underneath the lab’s wagging tongue, the words—*Number One Uncle* are printed in big, bold font.

“What the fuck?”

Granted it’s better than the first gift, but not by much.

Kit clutches her stomach and laughs. “Holy shit. That’s priceless.”

She’s clearly amused by my brother’s antics. But I’m not.

“Give me your car keys.”

Her laughter comes to a halt. “Why?”

Because unlike Asher, his gift isn’t completely useless to me.



“You can’t be serious,” Kit exclaims as we walk inside the pawnshop.

“You’re really gonna hock your brother’s present?”

“Yup.” I march up to the man standing at the counter and slap the Rolex down. “How much can I get for this?”

The guy looks at me like I’m certifiable as he studies it. “Damn, man. You sure you really want to give this baby up?”

“No,” Kit says beside me. “He doesn’t.”

“Yes,” I hiss, glaring at her. “I *do*.”

Earlier today my old bookie Buster called me. I’m not sure how he got my number, but he said he got word I was back in town and his buddy was looking for another person to fill a seat at an underground poker game he’s hosting at his house tonight.

I would have hocked the Rolex anyway, but his invitation gave me even more of an incentive to do so.

The guy picks up a loupe and scrutinizes the watch. “It’s in excellent condition.”

“I know.” On account it’s new and all.

“I’ll give you five grand,” he says after a minute.

I know Asher paid at least triple that for it, if not more.

Plus, the buy-in alone starts at a grand.

Annoyed, I point to the bezel. “Those diamonds might be tiny, but they’re *real*. That makes it worth a lot more than a regular ol’ Rolex.”

“You’re right,” he agrees before flipping it over. “But the inscription takes away from the value.”

“Inscription?” I snatch the watch back. “What inscrip—” A grunt of exasperation leaves me when I see: *My Favorite Brother* engraved in script.

*I’m your only brother, jackass.* And that shit definitely puts a damper on its worth.

Kit, who’s peeking over my arm, clutches her chest. “Oh, my God. Preston—”

“Can it, angry girl.” I look at the guy. “Lots of people have brothers.”

He thinks about this for a moment before taking it back and giving it another once-over. “Eight grand. But that’s my final offer.”

“Nine.”

I can tell he wants to argue, but he knows I can get even more selling it online.

Problem is, I need the money *now*.

“Fine.” He jerks his chin toward the back room. “Give me a minute.”

The moment he leaves, Kit turns to me. “Preston.”

“Don’t start. It was my gift, therefore it’s mine to do with as I please.”

She blows out a breath. “I know, but...” A wrinkle forms between her brows. “This is going to make things even more awkward later.”

Safe to say she’s piqued my interest. “Why? What’s happening later?”

She averts her gaze. “Nothing.” She points to something on the other side of the shop. “Wow, look at those.”

I catch her wrist before she can walk away. “Cut the shit.”

She turns to me, her expression resigned. “Fine, don’t get mad, but I kind of, sort of...maybe invited Landon, Breslin, Asher, and Picasso over for dinner to celebrate your birthday—”

“You did *what*?” My statement lashes out with the force of a whip and Kit flinches.

“I know you’re having issues with him, but I figured since they live next door now maybe—”

“Maybe *nothing*, Kit. You promised you wouldn’t get involved, yet here you are...inviting him to dinner like everything’s fine and dandy.”

But it's not. *Far from it.*

She drops her gaze. "You're right. I'm sorry. I guess I was hoping..." Her voice trails off, but then she finds it again. "Look, I understand that you don't get along with Asher, but they're still *my* friends. Being forced to stay away from them isn't fair."

As much as I hate to admit it, she's right. Just because I want nothing to do with them, doesn't mean I have a right to keep her from the people she deems important.

"Fine," I relent. "Have your dinner."

She eyes me skeptically. "Are you sure?"

No, but making her tiptoe around me and Asher's shit will only drive her to drink.

Doesn't mean I have to talk to him when he's around, though.

"As long as you don't force me to do anything I don't want to—like talk to the fucker—everything will be fine."

She holds up her free hand. "You have my word."

The man comes back out with an envelope and I remember I have a poker game later, which means I get to skip this shitshow altogether.

"On second thought, it doesn't matter. I have other plans tonight."

Taken by surprise, she blinks. "What plans?"

I quickly sign the form and seize the envelope. "Poker game."

Her disappointment is tangible when we walk out of the shop. "Oh."

I can't help but notice the scowl on her face as we make our way to the car.

"Is that a problem, wife?"

"No, *husband*. Everything's peachy."

She opens the passenger door to get in, but I take hold of her waist, spin her around, and press her against the car.

"You sure about that?"

A furious blush graces her cheeks when I drop my head and run my nose along the column of her neck, inhaling her.

"What are you doing?"

*Calling her on her shit.*

A small gasp leaves her when I trail my fingers down the side of her stomach, stopping when I reach the waistband of her leggings. "Are you wearing your big girl panties today?"

A crinkle forms between her brows. "Huh?"

“My guess is no.” Gripping the material, I snap the elastic against her skin. “Because if you were, you’d tell me you’re pissed about me playing poker tonight instead of pulling this passive-aggressive shit.”

That scowl is back with a vengeance. “Fine. I’m pissed you’re playing poker tonight...happy?”

Hardly, but at least she admitted it.

“As for what kind of underwear I’m wearing...” Wrapping an arm around my neck, she bites her lower lip suggestively. “I’m not.”

My cock twitches and my body throbs with lust. “Is that so?”

Suppressing a groan, I skim her hip bone with the pad of my thumb. “It’s my birthday weekend,” I remind her, inching closer to the holy grail between her legs.

“I know.” She clamps her hand over mine, stopping me right before I can make contact. “But you have a poker game to attend, remember?”

With that, she shoves me away and gets inside the car.

*Well played, angry girl.*

## Chapter 15

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Preston

I'm trying to focus on the game, but a pair of round, dark eyes are staring up at me from underneath the table.

I thought the watch Asher got me was the most hideous thing I've seen today, but I was wrong. This wrinkly, droopy-faced bulldog with a big ass head and a massive underbite definitely takes the cake.

I try to shoo him elsewhere, but he opens his mouth and huffs. A stream of drool pools on the floor, narrowly missing my shoe.

"Can you take your mutt upstairs?" I grunt to the guy sitting across from me, because being watched like a hawk and slobbered on is seriously fucking-up my concentration.

The owner—whose name is Darius—appears offended. "Nah, man. Killer is my good luck charm. Besides, he loves poker."

*Killer?* I want to laugh because he doesn't look like he could hurt a fly. Except with his looks.

I bum a cigarette from the guy seated next to me and light it. "Whatever." I look at the dealer. "Check."

A moment later he flips over the card for the turn and four guys curse.

Given I have nothing worthwhile in my hand either, I'm right there with them.

"Fold."

The rest of the men do the same and the pot goes to the guy on the left of me.

I'm down a thousand bucks right now, but I know if I focus, I can make some damn good money tonight.

My mind flits back to the text message Becca sent me earlier.

She wants to enroll Jameson in preschool because she thinks it will be good for him and help with his *shyness*, but she doesn't have the money to do it.

Bringing my cigarette to my lips, I check out my new cards. I have a two of spades and a seven of diamonds.

In other words...jack shit.

However, I decide to wait and see what the flop brings before discarding them.

Unfortunately, it's only a five of hearts, an ace of hearts, and a king of diamonds. I can try to bluff my way through to the end, but I'd rather save that move for later.

"Fold."

I pick up my glass of whiskey, but think better of it because the ugly bulldog—who's still staring at me—is ruining my focus enough already.

I finish my cigarette and wait for the round to be over.

New cards are dealt, and after the flop, I'm holding an ace of hearts along with a ten and jack of the same suit. It's fucking beautiful, but I don't let myself get too excited because I know not to count my chickens before they hatch.

Across the table, I notice a twinkle in Darius's eye. I guess his hand shows promise too.

A clench of anticipation tightens my gut when the dealer flips over the turn and it's a king of hearts.

"Raise," Darius declares suddenly, moving the bulk of his chips up.

Four guys fold right then, but one of them hesitates briefly before making the wise decision to withdraw as well.

"Man," the guy next to me begins. "This reminds me of the time when I had an ace and a king, and my opponent had a two and a three. There was an ace on the board, so I thought I was golden." He brings his cigar to his mouth. "The turn was four...and then guess what happened next?"

"The river was five," I mutter.

He slaps the table, causing the chips to rattle. "How'd you know?"

Because I've heard this *bad beat* story a thousand times before, and I know he's only reciting it to throw me off kilter and make me second-guess myself because he's friends with Darius.

But it won't work, because if Lady Luck has my back and the river is

what I hope it is...there's no way in hell I'm losing.

Smirking, I push my chips forward. "All In."

Darius takes a sip of his drink, not looking the least bit nervous. "Care to make this a little more interesting?"

Given this is a poker game in someone's basement, it isn't sanctioned. Therefore, the typical rules don't apply.

"What do you have in mind?"

Grinning, he looks around the table before focusing on me again.

"We each throw an extra five grand into the pot. Winner takes all."

The guy next to me whistles. "Interesting indeed."

Adrenaline courses through my veins like a live wire. This is the rush I live for. The *thrill* I play for.

The moment when the underdog becomes the motherfucking victor.

"Where's your money?"

He juts his chin at the ceiling. "It's upstairs in my safe. I'm good for it."

I shouldn't do this because if the river fucks me and I lose...I'll leave with nothing.

But then I think about Jameson and how if I win, I'll be able to pay for his preschool.

I think about Kit and how she's been cooking terrible food all day long for the birthday dinner she set up for me.

A weird twist goes through my chest and I make a silent vow that if the river ends up in my favor...I'll do the smart thing and leave.

"Deal."

My heart pounds and I find myself holding my breath as the dealer flips over the last remaining card.

## Chapter 16

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Kit

“Well?” I ask after everyone’s taken a bite. “How is it?”  
I spent all day cooking for Preston’s birthday dinner, and I’m hoping it turned out all right. A twinge of sadness goes through my heart. *Even though he’s not here.*

Breslin’s the first to speak. “It’s good.” She shoves another forkful of lasagna into her mouth, and she must really like it because she closes her eyes and groans. “So good.”

Landon gives me a smile. “It’s interesting how it has this kind of pungent, sharp aftertaste. And the crunchy center really brings it together.” Pushing his food around his plate, he takes a sip of his water. “However, I think it could use a little hot sauce.”

“It could use a little *Chinese food*,” Asher chimes in, reaching for his sports drink.

“Asher,” Breslin hisses.

Landon gets up from the table and slaps Asher’s back. “I’ll get you some hot sauce, jock.”

“Wait,” Breslin says before she stands up and follows him. “I need hot sauce, too.”

Rolling his eyes, Asher hikes a thumb behind him. “Those two are not getting hot sauce.”

“They’re not?”

An unpleasant feeling fills my stomach, because I don’t want them christening my parents’ kitchen.

Asher points his fork at me. “Have you tasted this lasagna yet, small

fry?”

I give my head a shake. I was so focused on what they thought, I haven't tried it myself.

Shoveling some onto my fork, I bring it to my mouth. The moment it hits my tongue, I start dry heaving.

Reaching for my napkin, I spit it out. “Holy crap. That's *disgusting*.”

I'm not sure what went wrong. I followed the recipe to a T.

“Yes,” Asher agrees. “Yes, it is. Which is exactly why they're both in the bathroom hiding out in order to avoid coming back here and having another bite of that shit.”

Can't say I blame them.

I look over at Picasso who's happily munching away on his dog food in the corner. “Lucky.”

I swallow the rest of my water, hoping it will make the aftertaste less bitter. “Why didn't you go with them?”

Taking another bite of his lasagna, Asher pats his flat abdomen. “Because unlike them, I have a stomach made of steel.” He glances around the dining room and drops his voice. “And I wanted to talk to you.”

*Awe, crap.* I was afraid this might happen.

“Look, Asher. I know you want to fix things with your brother, but you really need to respect—”

“This isn't about Preston.”

I relax against my chair, feeling ten thousand pounds lighter. “Okay, then. What's up?”

There's an impish glint in his eye when he grins. “I want to propose to Breslin and Landon.”

Excitement rushes through me and I find myself smiling, too...until I realize.

“I hate to be the one to break this to you, but legally you can't get married.”

“Yeah, I know,” Asher says with a sigh. “But I still want them to know how much they mean to me. Which is why I need *you* to help me throw a big party so I can propose to them and we can have a commitment ceremony.”

“Are you sure a party is the best way to do that?”

Landon might not mind, but Breslin *hates* being in the spotlight.

He beams. “Hell yes. I want *everyone* to know how much I love them.”

I can't help but get a little misty-eyed, because that's so romantic.

“Of course.” I whip out my phone so I can start jotting things down and planning. “When were you thinking of doing it?”

“Three weeks from today.”

Geez. Talk about short notice.

“Okay. That’s a little quick, but we can totally make it work.” I type a few notes into my phone. “Location?”

He looks around. “How about here?”

I chew my lip as I ponder this. The renovations should be done by then. Especially since I told them they were only allowed to remodel the exercise room in the basement.

“We can definitely have it here. Approximately how many people do you want to invite?”

He starts ticking things off with his fingers. “Well, there’s my football team, so that’s fifty-five people right there...plus their wives and girlfriends.” He makes a face. “Some have both though, so make sure to *only* invite the wives. There’s also my coaches, the general manager, and the equipment managers.” His face lights up. “And we definitely have to invite Coach Cranes and his wife. I’d also like to invite my agent and some of my sponsors.”

My head’s spinning by the time he’s finally finished rattling off his list of invites.

“Given it’s happening so soon, I’m going to need you to give me all their emails, so I can send out e-invitations.”

“Not a problem.” He looks at his watch. “Can we order Chinese now? I’m starving.”

“In a minute. First, I need to know how you plan on doing it.”

A sly smirk lines his lips. “Damn, small fry. And here I thought you were strictly pussy.” His voice lowers. “Landon and I both believe in ladies first, so we usually take turns going down—”

I cover my ears with my hands. “That’s not what I meant, you nincompoop. I was talking about the proposal.”

“My bad.” He drums his fingers on the table. “I was thinking it might be kind of cool if I popped out of one of those giant cakes.” I’m about to remind him that this is supposed to be an engagement and not a bachelor party when he says, “But knowing them, they’d probably like it if it was a little more... intimate. What do you think?”

Closing my eyes, I try to envision the perfect proposal for the three of

them. “There’s a pool and a gazebo in the backyard. I can place some floating tea candles in the pool and line the gazebo with a bunch of twinkling lights. I can also have Complicated Hearts playing from a small speaker I set up. How does that sound?”

A grin stretches his mouth. “Perfect.”

I start to speak, but the sound of the doorbell ringing cuts me off. A second later, I see Landon and Breslin run by as they make a mad dash for it.

“We’ll get it!”

“I’m sorry,” I hear Breslin say theatrically. “I don’t think you have the right house.”

“What’s that?” Landon chimes in. “The house number they gave you doesn’t exist, and you think we should take it since it’s your last delivery of the night?”

There’s a long pause...and then.

“I mean, it would be such a shame to waste all this delicious food.” Breslin clears her throat. “Not that Kit’s lasagna wasn’t *amazing*.”

Asher snorts. “Amateurs.” He cups his hand over his mouth. “Stop pretending like that was a surprise delivery. Kit knows her cooking tastes like ass on a humid day.”

*Ouch.*

The two look sheepish when they finally slink back into the dining room...carrying two bags of what smells like heavenly Chinese food.

“You could have just told me you didn’t like it.”

Guilt colors Breslin’s face. “I know you worked really hard and I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.” Her lips go flat and her green eyes narrow into tiny slits. “Especially since *he* couldn’t even bother to be here.”

Since I’m not in the mood to hear her drone on about how much she hates Preston, and then have Asher grill me about why his brother hates *him* so much, I announce I’m going to get some clean plates from the kitchen.

Landon follows close behind me. “I’ll help.”

I walk over to the cabinet and take down four plates. “I appreciate the offer, but I got it.”

His voice drops to a whisper. “I know, but I wanted to talk to you.”

Oh, boy.

On the bright side, Landon is my safe zone. Unlike the other two, he has no beef with Preston and to my knowledge he hasn’t made any derogatory



comments about us getting married.

“Shoot.”

He looks around the kitchen before he speaks. “I want to propose to Breslin and Asher and I was kind of hoping you could help.”

Heavens to Betsy. He has *got* to be kidding me.

“Gee, you don’t say.”

He frowns. “Do you think it’s a bad idea?” Worry lines his face. “Or that they’ll say no?”

“No,” I quickly reassure him. “I think it’s a great idea. And I don’t think they’ll say no.”

I have to stop myself from cringing because I honestly have no freaking idea how I’m going to keep Asher’s surprise proposal a secret now.

I place the stack of plates on the island. “What’s your plan?”

He shoves his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “That’s the thing. I don’t really have one. I just want them to know that even though we can’t legally get married, I’m committed to the both of them. Forever.”

The breath I was holding leaves me in one big whoosh because if he doesn’t have a plan, that means I can still make this work.

“Perfect.” I place an arm around his shoulders. “Picture this.” I sweep my free hand from one side to the other. “I throw you a big party right here... exactly three weeks from today.”

“Why would I need a big party—”

“Because you want *everyone* to know how much you love them,” I grit through my teeth. “Now pipe down and let me finish.”

He raises a dark eyebrow. “Okay. I’m listening.”

“You have a point, though. This should be an intimate moment between you three, so at some point during the shindig, you will ask Breslin and Asher to go out to the backyard with you so you can talk. However, prior to that, I’ll have set up floating candles in the pool, and twinkling string lights in the gazebo.” I smile. “Along with a speaker that will be playing the song you wrote for them.” I wink. “Nice touch, right?”

A slow grin splits his face. “It’s perfect.”

I whip out my phone. “Now, since it’s such short notice, I’ll need you to email me a list of who you want to attend the party so I can send them all e-invitations.”

He thinks about this for a moment. “That’s gonna be hard. I don’t really have a lot of friends.”

Crap. *Therein lies the rub.*

“Come on, Landon. You’re an indie rock God. You know plenty of people.”

“Followers don’t count.” He drums his fingers along his chin. “Fine. I definitely want to invite *The Resistance*. Oh, and Mrs. Cranes and her husband. Obviously, my manager Dylan and her fiancé Jace. And my buddy Oakley and his girl Bianca.”

I type this all into my phone next to the mile-long list of people Asher wants me to invite. “Consider it done.”

He grabs the dishes off the island. “Thanks for your help, Kit. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

I wave a hand. “Don’t mention it.”

A spasm of guilt nips at my belly as an image of me being hauled to an elevator zips through my head.

*It’s the least I can do.*

“So,” Asher says after we walk back into the dining room. “Where is my brother?”

Reaching over the table, I pick up the container of egg rolls and plop two on my plate. “At a poker game.”

Beside me, Breslin huffs. “Surprise, surprise.” She pauses, as if pondering something. “How is he getting all this money to gamble?” Before I can answer, her eyes go big. “I know you care about him, Kit, but—”

“He didn’t get it from me,” I defend, trying my hardest not to look at Asher.

Oblivious, Asher wipes his mouth with a napkin. “What did he think of the watch I got him?” His lips twitch. “And the T-shirt.”

I clamp my mouth shut because while I don’t want to lie to Asher, it’s not my place to tell him that his brother pawned his gift.

Breslin, however, knows me like the back of her hand. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” I stuff an egg roll into my mouth. “These are really good.”

The look she gives me tells me she doesn’t buy it, but before she can press me further, the front door opens and Preston strides inside the house...

Carrying a bulldog.

Although *carrying* is a stretch given he’s holding the poor thing like it’s a bomb.

The four of us exchange a baffled glance because what the hell?

I’m the first to speak. “Why do you have a dog?”

Preston places the pooch on the floor and points a finger at it. “Stay.”

A stream of drool leaks down his jowls as he lays down with a huff, like he’s thoroughly annoyed with Preston.

*Can’t say I blame him.*

“Relax.” He swipes the remaining egg roll off my plate and brings it to his mouth. “He won’t be here long.”

Annoyance bristles through me as I stand up, but it’s hard to be aggravated when a pair of big puppy dog eyes are staring up at you.

Sinking down to my haunches, I pet his white and brown wrinkly head. “Hey there, cutie.” The dog licks my hand, and I can’t help but smile because he’s absolutely precious.

But given Preston isn’t exactly a dog lover, his cuteness does zilch to explain how he ended up in my dining room.

Snapping out of my fog, I peer up at my husband. “Let’s try this again. Why is there a bulldog in the house, Preston?”

“It’s not like I wanted to bring him here,” he begins. “I had no other option.”

“Oh, man. I *gotta* hear this,” Asher mutters and Preston glares at him.

“Start talking,” I grit through my teeth because I need to know what the hell is going on.

He blows out an irritated breath. “So, there I was in the middle of the poker game. I was down, but not by a lot.” He takes another bite of his egg roll. “My cards were all shit, but then Lady Luck decided to throw me a bone because I had an ace of hearts...along with a ten and a jack.”

I’m not sure what that means, but Landon must because he exclaims, “Nice.”

A grin stretches his mouth. “I know. But I knew not to get too excited until I saw what the turn would bring.”

He may as well be speaking a different language because I don’t understand any of this.

“What was the turn?” Asher questions, appearing fully invested in Preston’s story.

Not bothering to look at his brother, Preston answers, “A king of hearts.” His tongue finds his cheek. “Anyway, this motherfucker Darius found his balls and decided to raise while everyone else folded.”

“So why didn’t you fold, too?” Breslin questions.

“Because he just secured the king of hearts,” Landon replies. “All he

needed was for the last card to be a queen and he'd have a royal flush."

*Yikes.* Given there are fifty-two cards in a deck, that seems like one hell of a risk to me.

Preston nods, turning his attention to him now. "Exactly. Which is why I decided to go all in." His jaw tics. "But guess what that asshole did next?"

Landon rubs his chin, thinking. "I mean, what else could he do besides go all in, too?"

"It was an underground poker game."

Landon scrunches his face and adjusts his glasses. "I don't follow."

That makes two of us.

"If it was a sanctioned poker game, the only option would be to go all in with the money we were already playing with...but since it wasn't, he decided to shake things up a little and raise the stakes."

Breslin's eyebrows shoot up. "By offering up a *dog*?"

Asher laughs. "Brings a whole new meaning to *bet the farm*, huh?"

"Would you two shut the fuck up already?" Preston says with an irritated growl. "He didn't bet the damn dog. He suggested we each throw an additional five grand into the pot. Winner takes all."

Landon whistles. "Damn."

"I know." His nostrils flare on an indrawn breath. "It was a gamble, but I was optimistic the river would give me my queen."

My stomach sinks because it obviously didn't turn out that way. "But you lost."

His grin is cocky, causing those dimples of his to deepen. "Nah. I ended up winning." His smile falters. "Not that it mattered."

That only makes me more baffled. "What do you mean?"

The tendon along his neck strains as he looks away, his brows drawn tight. "When Darius suggested we up the ante and I asked him where his money was, he said it was upstairs in his safe." Eyes darkening, he runs a hand over his mouth. "However, it turns out the fucker was overly optimistic about his full house because he only had five *hundred* bucks in his safe...not five thousand."

Breslin and I exchange a confused glance, because while this Darius guy sounds like a tool, it still doesn't explain why I'm currently petting an adorable bulldog.

"That sucks, but I'm having trouble understanding how you ended up with a dog."

“Darius said it was his good luck charm.” Preston shrugs, like the next words he delivers make perfect sense. “So, I had no choice but to take him.”

## Chapter 17

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Preston

“*W*hat do you mean you *took* him?” Kit questions, looking like she’s ready to wring my neck.

“Relax.” I finish my egg roll and reach for another. “It’s only until Darius gives me my money.”

I clench my teeth against the rush of anger that billows in my chest. *The shiesty motherfucker.*

“Let me get this straight,” Kit says. “You’re holding an innocent dog as collateral?”

She’s making it sound a lot worse than it is. I could have beat the bastard to a bloody pulp or chopped off one of his fingers and shoved it up his low-life ass. The only reason I didn’t was because he assured me he’d get the money together.

“I can’t believe you stole a dog,” Breslin chimes in.

Here we fucking go.

“I didn’t steal him. I’m giving Darius a week to come up with the money.”

Plus interest.

All things considered, I’m being generous here. If he pulled that shit back when I still worked for Campanelli, they would have skinned him alive.

Kit’s hazel eyes narrow into tiny slits. “And then what?”

“The mutt goes back to his owner, I’m five grand richer, and everybody’s happy. The end.”

“What if he doesn’t?” This from Landon.

It’s a solid question because I haven’t really given it much thought.

“I don’t know.” I plop a dumpling in my mouth, mulling this over. “I drop him off at the pound and—”

A gasp of outrage leaves Kit and she throws her arms around the dog protectively. “Oh, my God. *No*. What is the matter with you?”

Breslin snorts. “Listing those things would take all night.”

I give her the finger before directing my attention to Kit. “Darius will give me my money.”

My hands clench at my sides. *Or else.*

Kit doesn’t look too pleased with that answer, but she’s too distracted by the ugly dog who’s happily licking her cheek to press me about it. “I can’t even with how cute you are. What’s his name?”

I pick up the glass of water next to her plate and take a sip. “Killer.”

Her features scrunch. “What?” Cooing at him, she takes his wrinkly face in her hands and presses her nose to his. “There’s no way this sweet baby is a killer.”

I’m about to tell her not to get too attached because he won’t be staying long, but then she says, “You can be Lola while you’re here.”

I choke on my drink. “*Lola?*” I might not care for the mutt, but she just verbally neutered him. “I suggest you take a look under the hood because he most definitely isn’t a Lola.”

“I don’t care.” She wraps her arms around his thick neck. “He’s Lola while he’s here.”

Some battles just aren’t worth it. “Fine. Call him whatever you want. I don’t give a shit.”

“I have some extra dog food, bowls, and toys you can use,” Breslin says as Picasso comes over and begins sniffing the bulldog. “I’ll bring them over in a few.”

“That would be great, thanks.” She scratches Picasso behind the ears. “And thank *you* for sharing.”

The lab doesn’t look the least bit happy about it.

“How’d you get the money to play poker?” Asher questions suddenly, his eyes falling to my wrist.

“None of your business,” I bite out, directing my focus back to the only person in the room I can tolerate. “Anyway—”

“You’re not wearing the watch.”

Asher’s not as dumb as he looks after all because I slowly see the wheels turning in his head.



“Who wants cake?” Kit announces, jumping to her feet.

“I’ll take some.”

On second thought, if Kit made it...I should pass. Seeing as they’re all eating Chinese food instead of the lasagna I saw her making earlier, I’m guessing it was about as palatable as her burned eggs.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Asher bellows, despite me paying him no mind. “You sold the watch?”

I look at Kit who’s staring at her shoes. “What kind of cake?”

“Stop ignoring me and answer the damn question.”

I oblige, but only because I want to see the wounded expression on his face when I do.

“Yes. I sold that hideous watch.”

My brother looks like he’s been sucker punched in the nuts. *Mission accomplished.*

Smirking, I divert my attention to my wife again. “Chocolate? Vanilla \_\_\_”

“How could you do that?” Breslin yells.

“Well...” I give her a shit-eating grin designed to piss her off even more. “I drove to a pawnshop, walked in...and then sold it.”

“He had it engraved for you,” Landon says softly, disappointment in his tone.

“I’m aware.”

“Dammit, Preston,” Asher grinds out, scrubbing a hand down his face. “That watch was an heirloom.”

*Well, shit.* If that’s the case, I probably could have gotten more for it.

A sick, bilious feeling rises up my throat when it hits me. *Heirloom.*

I thought the watch was his style. Correction—*their* style.

My stomach churns as a haze of red fills my vision and all the oxygen gets sucked out of my lungs.

Breath coming out in hard pants, I pick up the nearest object and throw it at his head.

Asher ducks in the nick of time, causing the plate to crash against the wall instead. “What the hell—”

“Get the fuck out,” I roar, breaking another dish so I can shove the jagged piece into his jugular and watch him bleed out onto the carpet.

*Just like I did.*

Blood whooshes in my ears as pain slams into my ribcage before

radiating throughout my entire body...like I'm being crushed by a force that's too big—*too powerful*—for me to stop.

“Preston.” I vaguely hear Kit whisper as I stalk out of the room.

But it's too late.

I'm trapped inside a place she can no longer reach me.

*No one can.*

## Chapter 18

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## Kit

I have no idea what happened just now. All I know is that I've never seen Preston so mad before...aside from the time Asher tried to force him to talk while he was handcuffed to my bed.

"Are you okay?" Breslin asks, rushing to Asher's side.

"Yeah." Although it's clear by the look on his face that he's still shaken up about what transpired.

I don't blame him. It was like it was taking every ounce of Preston's willpower to physically stop himself from killing his brother.

Question is...*why*? Because there's no way all that rage he exhibited was over a stupid watch.

Dropping to my knees, I shoo the dogs away so I can collect the larger pieces of the broken plates off the floor before sweeping up the smaller ones. Luckily, neither my friends nor the pups were injured.

"Something is seriously wrong with him," Breslin snaps. "He had no right to go after you like that."

I'm about to point out that technically he didn't *go after* him, but a shard slices my finger at the same time something else occurs to me.

"You said the watch was an heirloom, right?"

"Yeah." Asher huffs out a breath. "Why? You think that hissy fit of his was because it wasn't brand new?"

"No." I wrap a napkin around my finger. "Was it your dad's?"

He nods.

In that case, I think I understand why he was so mad. Once again, I find myself defending Preston because no one else will give him the benefit of the

doubt.

“Why would you give him a watch that belonged to an asshole who treated his kids like shit?”

Breslin opens her mouth to defend her boyfriend, but nothing comes out. Probably because she knows I have a point.

Asher runs a hand over his scalp and sighs. “I was trying to extend an olive branch.”

When I give him a look he says, “I know he’s still pissed that our father made me the primary beneficiary before he died. Hell, it was the last thing we spoke about before he left town and disappeared off the face of the earth for three years. Giving him the watch was my way of letting him know that I’m still willing to split the money with him. Provided he quits gambling.”

Good Lord. He should have just *told* him that then.

Not that Preston would have listened.

“Clearly that backfired.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

“Look, Kit,” Breslin cuts in. “Asher might not have thought his gift through fully, but his heart was in the right place.” She points in the direction of the stairs. “Preston had no right to throw a dish at his head. He could have seriously hurt him.”

“Well, Asher seriously hurt Preston by giving him a watch that belonged to an asshole.”

I realize my argument is weak compared to hers, but I wish she would cut him a little bit of slack.

She laughs, but it’s devoid of humor. “Right. It hurt him so much he pawned it in and then lost the money gambling.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Technically, he won.”

Again, not the best argument, but it’s all I’ve got.

“Jesus.” She throws up her hands. “Do you even hear yourself right now?”

“Okay,” Landon interjects. “That’s enough.” He reaches for Breslin’s hand. “Let’s go home before one of you ends up saying something you’ll regret.”

I can tell Breslin wants to argue some more but she pulls a leash out of her purse and calls Picasso over.

I slump against the front door after they leave. I hate fighting with her, but it’s inevitable because Asher doesn’t use his brain before he acts.

Not that Preston is any better because he's the most impulsive person I've ever met.

Closing my eyes, I blow out an exasperated breath. I have no idea how these two will ever work their issues out when Preston makes it impossible.

Aggravated, I march up the stairs, intending to lay into my husband about his pigheadedness.

However, what I see when I turn the doorknob to his bedroom jams my vocal cords and nearly brings me to my knees.

Preston's leaning against the headboard, his expression vacant as a wave of violent tremors pummel his body.

"Preston."

Even though his eyes are open, he doesn't register my presence.

He's completely withdrawn...unresponsive.

A band of sorrow tightens around my heart. It's like he's in a trance... being held hostage by a force he's unable to escape.

*And I can't get to him.*

Running over to the bed, I fold my arms around him, letting him know he's not alone. That he'll *never* be alone.

Because whatever his demons are...

They're mine, too.

Growing desperate, I cradle his face in my hands. "Tell me what's wrong."

But he doesn't.

*He can't.*

"Tell me how to fix this."

*Fix you.*

I might not understand what's happening right now, but I feel his pain as if it were my own and I want nothing more than to make it go away.

Securing my hold, I hug him as tight as I can. So tight, I feel his heart beating wildly against my chest.

So tight, he knows we're forever fused together and that I'll never, *ever* give up on him.

"It's me and you," I remind him, tracing little circles up and down his damp back. "Until the end."

A raw, agonizing sound escapes him and he drops his head, nestling in the crook between my neck and shoulder.

A surge of anger runs through me as I trail my finger along the scar on his

head. I hate that Asher gave him a watch that once belonged to that abusive piece of shit.

But not nearly as much as I hate that even in his death...the bastard still tortures my Preston.

“Come back to me.”

*I need you.*

“Please,” I beg, my voice cracking with unshed tears because it feels like I’m losing this battle and he’s slipping farther away. “Please don’t leave me —”

Strong arms wrap around my frame. “Kit.”

Relief floods through me like a tidal wave as I breathe him in and press my lips to his scar. “Talk to me.”

I know his father beat him, but maybe talking about it with someone he trusts will help.

Disappointment sinks like a brick in my chest when Preston goes silent again. However, I know forcing him to do something he doesn’t want to will only make things worse and push him away.

“I’ll give you some space,” I say after another minute passes. “But I’m here for you.” My stomach coils as I let him go. I wish he’d lower his walls and open up to me, but it’s like praying for rain while you’re standing in a desert. “Always.”

I turn to get off the bed, but he wraps his fingers around my wrist. “Angry girl.”

“Yeah?”

A jolt goes through me when his hands cup my face and he crushes his mouth against mine...kissing me like I’m the only thing that matters to him.

Briefly, I contemplate putting a stop to it because the last time we did this it ended with a bruised heart and ego, but I can’t. He’s like an undertow dragging me down. Rendering me helpless with every insatiable glide of his tongue.

We become a ripple of frantic breaths and desperate sounds. I wrap my arms around his neck, wanting more.

He groans low and pained, his rough hands running up and down the length of my back, pressing me against him as he explores every inch of my mouth.

Another deep growl assaults my ears, followed by an angry bark. I’m so swept up in this moment it takes me a second to register that it didn’t come

from him.

When I break the kiss and look down, I see Lola glaring at Preston, ready to pounce.

“For fuck’s sake.” Visibly annoyed at being interrupted, Preston narrows his eyes at the pooch. “She’s *mine*.”

The bulldog doesn’t agree with his declaration though because he barks again. This time baring his teeth.

I roll my eyes when Preston bares his right back.

Reaching down, I give Lola a scratch behind the ears. “Relax, baby.”

I turn back to Preston. “I’m gonna bring him downstairs.”

I’m about to stand, but Preston cups my face again. My heart somersaults when he brings our mouths together for a second time. Only unlike his last kiss, this one is soft and gentle.

Almost like he’s confessing and apologizing at the same time.

He leans his forehead against mine, his voice a rumble of smoke and ashes. “Thank you.”

Lola barks again, but I ignore him because the intense, haunting look in Preston’s eyes holds me captive.

I don’t understand how someone can be both transparent and a complete enigma at the same time, but that’s exactly what he is.

Despite his claims that I know him better than anyone...Preston’s still a mystery.

And that fucking terrifies me.

“For what?”

Too quickly, he averts his gaze, severing the conversation I was hoping we’d have before it can even start.

“What happened?” he questions suddenly, examining the cut on my finger that’s still bleeding.

“I was picking up the broken dishes and a piece nicked me.” I lift a shoulder in a shrug. “It’s not a big deal.”

His dark brows draw together as his expression transforms from concern to something ominous. “Stop cleaning up my messes, Kit.” He pins me with a dark, sinister glare. “You’ll only end up hurt.”

The punch from his proclamation—or rather, *warning*—hits me smack dab in the center of my chest.

I start to pull my hand away, but he brings my finger to his mouth.

Tiny hairs on my arms stand on end and prickles dance along my skin



when he begins sucking the wound, his eyes never leaving mine.

The action is strange and a little disturbing. *Intimate.*

I should probably be grossed out, but I can't seem to tear my gaze—or my finger—away.

“If you're trying to scare me off, it won't work,” I whisper, finding my voice.

Anger illuminates his face, and he drops my hand. “Trust me, Bishop, if I wanted to scare you off, I'd know *exactly* how to do it.”

“Is that so?” Determination fills me and I call him on his bluff. “Do your worst, Holden.”

With a smirk, he edges closer, pressing his thumb to my lower lip.

I almost want to laugh because his kisses don't scare me anymore. They do the opposite, drawing me in like a moth to a flame.

I close my eyes, eagerly awaiting the feel of his lips...but it never comes.

Instead, he pushes me until my back meets the mattress. His lean, muscular frame hovers above me like a looming storm cloud as he settles between my thighs and his mouth finds my neck.

My heart is beating so hard it feels like it's going to pound right out of my chest and into the palm of his hand. “Prest—”

The sharp sting of teeth scraping the hollow of my throat silences me. My mind spins, breaking off in a hundred different directions when he thrusts, and I feel how hard he is.

His deep voice is taunting. “Scared yet?”

*Petrified.*

But this time, it's not just because of the obvious—having sex with a guy.

It's the aftermath that terrifies me.

Because the last time we were this close, and I was this vulnerable...

*He left.*

I'm not so sure I can survive his rejection—or abandonment—a second time.

His head descends, stopping when his mouth is level with my breasts. “Say it.” Long fingers toy with the buttons on my shirt. “Or I'll rip this fucking sweater off and suck on your little pink, puffy nipples.”

*Jesus.* A furious blush stains my cheeks. Not only because he's recalling in vivid detail what my nipples look like, but he's being so vulgar...so *crude.*

Even still, I refuse to give in.

“Last chance, Kit.” He bites one of my nipples through the fabric, and I jolt, causing my pelvis to brush against his erection. “Say it...or I’ll tear your panties off, spread your legs, and make you take every hard inch of my cock.”

He was right before. He knows exactly how to scare me away.

*Which lines to cross.*

*The things I’m not ready for.*

I open my mouth to tell him he made his point, but the sound of the doorbell ringing halts me.

Pressing my hand to his chest, I shove him away. “I have to get that.”

His tongue finds his cheek as he pushes off me. “Of course you do.”

I let his comment roll off my back as I make my way to the door.

“Bishop?”

His lips curl in a menacing sneer when I turn around. “That wasn’t my worst.” Those gray eyes darken. “Far from it.”

My stomach knots because deep down I know he’s right.

I pat my leg, gesturing for Lola to come with me. “Noted.”

Lola follows close behind as I jog down the staircase and open the front door. I’m expecting Breslin to be on the other side of it, but unfortunately, she’s not.

I fold my arms across my chest when I see my Nanna’s assistant standing there. “Isn’t it past your bedtime, Reggie?”

“Reginald,” he corrects, turning his nose up at Lola in disgust. “I apologize for the late hour, but I’m here on official business.”

“Official business?” Instantly, nerves spiral in my belly and I clamp a hand over my mouth. “Oh, God. Is she...did my Nanna pass?”

I know the doctors said she didn’t have much time, but I didn’t think it would happen so fast.

“No,” he says quickly. “She is, however, requesting your attendance tomorrow for brunch.” His lips flatten and he makes no move to hide his displeasure. “You and your *husband*.”

It’s all I can do not to roll my eyes because as always, they’re both so histrionic. “You could have just called, you know.”

“I did,” he says snidely as he smooths his tie. “You didn’t pick up.”

Vaguely, I remember hitting the ignore button on my cell *twice* as I was making the lasagna.

“Fine. Brunch tomorrow...got it. Is that all?”

He shakes his head. “No. She also wants to ensure you made an appointment with your gynecologist—”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Breslin snaps as she walks up the path to the front door. “Tell that homophobic old bag to fuck the hell off and worry about her own vagina.”

At that, Reggie’s eyes widen. “Excuse you.”

“Excuse *you*.” Breslin yells a little too loudly. “Kit’s vag is none of her fucking business.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Same goes for the neighbors.” Fearing Preston might overhear and question why my Nanna is requesting that I see a gyno, I shoo Reggie back and close the front door behind me. “You can go now.”

Reggie clears his throat. “Very well. I’ll see you at twelve tomorrow.”

“Don’t come back, asshole,” Breslin shouts as he struts to his car.

After he’s gone, her focus is back on me. “What the hell is going on?”

“Nothing—” I start to say until I remember she’s my best friend and I shouldn’t keep secrets from her. “My Nanna has one more stipulation before she gives me my parents’ estate.”

She raises a brow. “What kind of stipulation?”

I toe the wood of the porch with my sneaker, unable to look at her as I whisper my next words. “The kind that involves me seeing a gynecologist to make sure I’m fertile.”

“*What?*” Breslin screams so loud I jump.

Surging forward, I place my hand over her mouth. “Preston doesn’t know and the last thing I need is for him to hear me telling you.”

She protests, but fortunately it’s muffled by my palm. Taking hold of her elbow with my free hand, I rush us over to the gate.

“You can’t be serious,” Breslin whisper-shouts when I remove my hand. “That bitch has no right to force you to sleep with a man and have a baby.” She stomps her foot. “This isn’t *The Handmaid’s Tale*. It’s your body, dammit.”

No argument here. “I know.”

She breathes a sigh of relief. “Good. It’s about time you told that witch to stop manipulating you and kick rocks.”

I study the rose bushes on the side of the house. “Yep.”

“Kit,” Breslin presses, her voice laced with concern. “You’re not actually

considering going through with this, right?”

“Of course not,” I assure her. “I’m just going to make her think I am.”

Rubbing her forehead, she looks up at the night sky. “Why in the world would you do that?”

As usual, Breslin doesn’t understand. The estate is all I have left of my parents, and while I know my Nanna is manipulating me right now, *I’ll* be the one who gets the last laugh.

“I’m this close to winning, B. Besides, she’ll be dead soon.” When my best friend gives me a look, I add, “It takes nine months to have a baby. And that’s only if I magically get knocked up the first time—” I stop talking when her mouth drops open. “Which won’t happen, because there’s not going to be a first time.”

“Right.” Slipping the strap of the canvas bag she’s carrying off her shoulders, she hands it to me. “Here’s the stuff for Lola.”

“Breslin,” I call out when she starts to leave. “I know you’re upset—”

“I’m not upset. I’m scared shitless.” Her green eyes glisten with tears when she faces me. “Because I’m watching my best friend—my *sister*—walk off the platform and right into an oncoming train. And no matter how hard I scream or how fast I run so I can try to stop the inevitable...I can’t.”

*She’s right.* I told myself not to enter the station...yet, here I am, teetering on the edge of the platform like it’s a tightrope.

*About to fall.*

“Preston is a train,” I agree. “A big, scary train that very well may crush me.”

“Exactly—”

“But he won’t.”

Preston may taunt, tease, and provoke me in an attempt to push me away, but I know he would *never* intentionally hurt me.

“How can you be so sure?”

I tell her the truth. The one I feel in my marrow.

“Because I trust him.”

While he’s not exactly a noble, moral person...he also never pretends to be. He’s cruel and reckless on his best days—but I see the parts of him no one else does.

The good hidden underneath the wreckage.

Preston is a train. Barreling into me full force.

But what Breslin doesn’t realize is, he’s not going to destroy *me*...

Because he's too busy destroying himself.

And not saving him from his own self-destruction isn't an option.

*Even if it means losing myself in the process.*

Breslin closes her eyes. "I know you want to see the good in everyone. It's one of the many things I love about you, but—"

"I don't *want* to see the good in him," I interject. "Believe me, it would be so much easier if I couldn't." Because then I'd be able to walk away and give up on him like everyone else does. "But we have a connection."

"Because of the shooting."

I nod, then shake my head. "Yes...and no. I used to think it was that, but it's more." *So much more.* "It's a bond that can't be explained...an anomaly."

*My anomaly.*

"I get why you don't trust him," I continue, my voice cracking because not having my best friend support my decisions hurts like hell. "But I need you to trust *me*."

Her arms enclose around my frame, wrapping me up in a hug. "I do trust you."

"Then stop making it so hard to tell you things."

The pain in her voice is palpable. "You can tell me anything, Kit."

"No, I can't. Not anymore." Backing away, I wipe my tears with my sleeve. "You said you would try not to be so judgy, but..."

"I haven't been doing a good job." She blows out a heavy breath. "I'm sorry."

"I don't want you to be sorry. I just want you to be my best friend...even when you think I'm making a huge mistake."

Because some mistakes are worth it.

*Some mistakes aren't mistakes at all.*

"Okay," she whispers. "I will try my hardest to rein it in. For real this time." Inhaling deeply, she runs a hand through her hair. "What's been going on with you and Princess Monet?"

Our secret code name for him has me smiling, despite my next words. "He's driving me crazy."

"Why?"

I take a deep breath before I begin. "Well, for starters he showed up to Pretty Kitties unannounced after some asshole hit me over the head while I was walking out to my car and knocked me unconscious—"

Outrage colors her pretty face. “What?”

“I know, you think he would have at least called before barging—”

“Who the hell hit you over the head? And why the fuck didn’t you call me?” She holds up a finger. “And don’t you dare tell me I’m being a judgy bitch right now. This is *serious*, Kit.”

My shoulders slump in defeat because there’s no use arguing. “I know it sounds dramatic, but the police think it was a mugger. Fortunately, the security guard scared him off before he could steal anything.” I squint, afraid she can sense my little white lie. “Okay, fine. The detective thought it was Preston.”

“Yeah, right.” Skepticism fills her tone. “Preston would never do that.”

I try to hide my shock, but fail. “Well, I’ll be damned. Look who’s coming to his defense.”

“Just because he would never physically hurt you doesn’t mean—” She makes the motion of zipping her lips. “Never mind. Go on.”

“The detective is checking the security cameras to find out who it was. But like I said before, I’m positive it was just a mugger.” I chew my thumbnail. “Anyway, an EMT told Preston I was unconscious, so he rushed to New York to make sure I was okay...but then he caught me kissing Amber in the coffee room.” I give my head a shake. “Technically, she kissed me, but I didn’t want her to. Not that I had a chance to tell him that because he got pissed and left...and that’s when I remembered it was his birthday.”

“Which explains why you came back from New York early.”

“Yup.” I force air into my lungs. “I wanted to see him and explain that what he saw was a misunderstanding. However, when I walked in the door, I caught him with his dick shoved down some blonde’s throat—”

I stop talking because Breslin’s face is redder than her hair and she looks like she’s going to blow a gasket any second.

“Yes, I know—bad Preston.” I hold up a hand. “But in his defense, he did ask multiple times if him hooking up with other women would bother me, and I always said no.” I fold my arms around myself as my heart clenches. “Because I didn’t realize it would...until I saw it.”

“Wow,” Breslin says softly. “That’s...big.”

“I know.” I swallow. “He promised he wouldn’t hook up with any more girls.”

I can feel her assessing me. “Other than you.”

“No,” I start to say, but then I remember what happened earlier. “Maybe.

It's complicated." Which only makes me more confused. "It's nothing serious, though. We're just occasional kissing buddies."

She looks unconvinced. "Mmhh."

"It's true," I defend. "Random, make-out sessions are as far as it goes."

It's as far as it will ever go. *Because he has a penis.*

Breslin doesn't say a word, but she doesn't have to, I read her loud and clear.

I get why she's doubtful. Kissing often leads to more and I *almost* let myself go there once. But it's not going to happen again.

"I'm not going to have sex with him." I wag a finger at her. "And you're sounding awfully judgy right now, missy."

She holds her hands up innocently. "I haven't even said anything." She starts to walk away, but pauses. "Just promise you'll tell me if...you know."

It's like she hasn't heard a single word I've said. "No, I don't know... because there will be none of that."

"If you say so," she sings as she opens the gate. "Love you. Call me tomorrow."

I mutter a curse as I make my way inside the house at the same time Preston comes down the stairs.

"I'm not having sex with you," I blurt out and his eyebrows shoot up to the ceiling.

"Okay."

"I know I almost did, but you were right, it wasn't because I wanted to." My heart coils as I continue, but I don't want to give him false hope or mixed signals. Which means I need to be completely honest about how I feel. "I know it's not fair, because you have needs...needs I don't want you to fulfill because the thought of you being with another woman kills me." He tries to speak, but I'm not finished. "I'm sorry, the only thing I can offer you is kissing." I gesture to my cardigan. "And maybe some over the sweater action." I look up, feeling so confused and exposed it physically hurts. "I'm sorry my rules don't make sense...that *I* don't make sense." I want to crawl in a hole and die when a tear streams down my cheek. "I'm sorry it's not enough."

*That I'm not enough.*

His long strides close the distance between us in no time. "Look at me."

*I can't.* Shame surges over my skin because I've become the kind of person I despise.

The difficult, complicated kind.

Preston tips my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. “It’s enough.” The heat of his stare is so strong—so potent—it charrs my bones, turns me to dust. “*You’re* enough.”

Everything inside of me stops when he bends down and his lips graze mine in a featherlight kiss, like he knows I’m so fragile the slightest bit of force might break me.

“Thank you,” I whisper.

“For what?”

For understanding. For not demanding I give him more. For not treating me like a leper.

“For letting me be me...” I brush my fingertips against his strong jaw, in awe how someone with such sharp, *masculine* features could be so undeniably beautiful. “And for you being you.”

We stand there staring at each other for what feels like an eternity before the sound of a horn honking outside breaks our trance and he takes a step back.

“That’s my cab.”

I feel like I’ve been dunked in a vat of ice water. “Cab? You’re leaving?”

“I’ll be back later,” he assures me, but it does nothing to quell the uneasiness rising up my throat.

“Where are you going?”

He opens the front door. “Casino.”

My uneasiness turns to full-on dread.

“Wait.” I scan my brain for something that might make him stay, but I’ve got nothing. Especially since it’s his birthday weekend and he’s a grown man who’s entitled to make terrible choices. “Don’t go.”

A sound of annoyance leaves him. “Christ. Not you too.”

“I’m sorry,” I say instinctively, although I have nothing to be sorry for. “I was just hoping...”

“Hoping what?” he says when my sentence trails off.

I give him total honesty because I know he’ll be able to see through any bullshit.

“I was hoping we could hang out. Maybe watch a movie and gorge on the rest of the Chinese food.” Fidgeting, I talk faster. “I baked you a cake. It probably tastes like crap, but everyone deserves a cake for their birthday, so I made you one. I know you want to gamble, because that’s your thing and all,



but...I'm asking you to choose me instead. Just this once."

It feels like a century passes before he finally speaks. "What kind of cake?"

"Vanilla." I begin, recalling the various *Betty Crocker* boxes I picked up from the grocery store. "Chocolate...strawberry...pineapple."

He blinks. "You made four different cakes?"

That *was* the plan.

"Not exactly." I wince because my baking skills aren't up to par and I highly doubt it will entice him enough to stay. But dammit, I tried. "I wasn't sure which one would be your favorite and I was pressed for time, so I kind of mixed them all together and hoped for the best."

Shaking his head, he closes the front door. "Fine, but we're watching *Fight Club*."

"Deal," I say quickly, my tone failing to hide my excitement. "You go to the living room and set up." I head toward the kitchen. "I'll be there in a jiffy."

I hear him grumble behind me as he walks away, but I can't help but smile because he chose *me* over poker.

The lights are turned down and the movie's gearing up on the big-screen TV when I join him on the sofa a few minutes later.

After placing the cake down on the coffee table and belting out my version of "Happy Birthday", I hand him a fork, hoping like hell it came out better than my lasagna did.

No such luck though because Preston looks like he just guzzled sour milk.

Embarrassment hits me square in the chest and I seriously regret not buying him a cake at the store. However, to my surprise, he takes another bite and smiles.

"Thank you."

On second thought, maybe it's not so bad after all. I did slather a shit ton of frosting on it.

Curious, I take the fork from him so I can try some. I grimace when a variety of tart and *burned* flavors assault my mouth at the same time. None of them good. "Lord have mercy. It's *awful*."

I vow right there and then to never bake another cake again for as long as I live.

A laugh rumbles out of him. "I'm pretty sure dog shit tastes better." His

expression becomes serious and he shifts on the couch to face me. “I appreciate the sentiment, though. No one’s ever gone through the trouble of baking me a cake before.”

Sadness sinks like a stone in my chest, because there’s something so heartbreaking about that. My mom always baked my birthday cakes when I was little, only unlike mine, hers were incredible.

Clearly, I didn’t inherit her awesome culinary skills.

Reaching between us, I squeeze his hand. “I just told myself I’d never bake another cake again.” I give him a small smile. “But I take it back. I’ll bake you a birthday cake every year.”

Because I want him to know someone cares about him.

The corner of his mouth curls. “Please *don’t*.” I’m insulted, but then he moves closer, his gaze drifting from my eyes to my lips. “I hate my birthday.” His thumb glides over my jaw. “Although this one turned out to be my favorite.”

My heart takes flight when he leans in...at the same time Lola jumps on the couch, firmly wedging his body between us.

Laughing, I pat his head. “Hey, buddy.”

“Cockblocker,” Preston grumbles under his breath before he presses a button on the remote and the movie starts.

“By the way.” I reach for the throw blanket to drape around myself and Lola. “We have to go to my Nanna’s for brunch tomorrow.”

His jaw bunches and I know he’s pissed. Heck, I can’t blame him. I don’t want to go either.

“Don’t worry,” I assure him. “Everything will be fine.”

## Chapter 19

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Kit

“Next time keep the canine at home,” Reggie says snidely, turning his nose up at poor Lola before leading us out to the veranda.

It seems my furry friend isn't well liked by many, which makes no sense because I adore the shit out of him.

I take in the extravagant place settings and table décor when we enter the patio. “Where is she?”

Reggie makes a sweeping motion with his hand, indicating we should sit. “She's finishing up with her doctor.”

I can't help but wonder if things have gotten worse...or why my stomach drops at the thought. Even though I have every reason to hate this woman, she's still the only family I have left and I've always held on to this stupid notion of hoping our relationship would get better one day.

“Is she okay?”

“She has cancer,” Reggie responds, his tone making it clear he thinks I'm a moron.

“I know that—”

A maid wheels my Nanna onto the patio, so I clamp my mouth shut.

Preston, however, doesn't. “Speak of the devil and she'll appear.”

Nanna glares at him before looking at Reggie who gestures for the help to start serving us.

I'm taking a bite of my eggs when she hands her notebook to Reggie.

The tips of his ears turn pink as he reads it. “Madam, I don't feel comfortable using that kind of language.”

Nanna stabs the notebook with her finger, making it clear she doesn't give a flying fuck that he's uncomfortable.

*No surprise there.*

His uneasy gaze lands on Preston. "She would like to know if you've fu —" He clears his throat. "Consummated your marriage with her granddaughter."

I start choking so hard Preston has to reach over and slap my back.

"Oh, my God," I sputter. "That's none of your business."

Rolling her eyes, she snatches the notepad and scrawls something else on it.

Reggie pins me with a look as he speaks. "It is if you want your parents' estate."

Just like that, whatever sympathy I felt for her before vanishes into thin air.

Preston crosses his arms and stares her down. "You're a fucking cunt."

Reggie gasps. "You are out of line."

He narrows his eyes at my grandmother. "What's out of line is forcing a person to have sex against their will."

I can't help but notice the wicked smile on her face as she slides the notebook across the table.

*It wouldn't be against her will if you knew how to court and seduce a woman, you inept shithead.*

Good Lord.

Preston leaps up from his chair with so much force it hits the floor. Thinking quick, I hook my fingers into the belt loops of his jeans, yanking him back before he can dive across the table and strangle her.

"Trust me, he knows how to seduce me," I blurt before I can stop myself.

My cheeks heat because I can feel everyone's eyes on me.

*And because there's a kernel of truth to it.*

I can tell she wants to press me further, but her attention shifts to Lola who's laying on the floor next to my chair. As expected, she doesn't look thrilled by his presence either.

"We're dog sitting for a friend," I explain, giving him a piece of bacon off my plate.

The rest of brunch continues in uncomfortable silence and the moment the staff starts clearing the table, I nudge Preston with my elbow, silently

hinting we should make a run for it. However, when we push our chairs back, Nanna snaps her fingers.

Reggie sighs. “Your grandmother hasn’t given you permission to leave yet. We still have pressing matters to discuss.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Preston mutters as she scribbles on her notepad.

“What pressing matters?” I start to ask, until I remember. “Oh, that. It’s been taken care of.” Grabbing my purse and Lola’s leash, I jut my chin toward the exit. “Let’s go.”

Preston stands, but I don’t miss the curious expression on his face.

“Very well.” Reggie picks up the notebook. “Madam would like you to be pregnant by next month.”

I feel every ounce of air whoosh out of my lungs.

“*Madam* can shove that notebook up her wrinkly ass,” Preston growls beside me. “That’s not fucking happening.”

Reggie’s annoyed gaze falls on me. “Your wife has already agreed.”

“Bullshit.” Turning his head, he looks my way. “Kit would never agree to that.”

My mouth goes dry as I glare daggers at my Nanna. “I agreed to *try*.”

She waves a hand like there isn’t a difference. However, I can’t argue the semantics with her because Preston storms out of the room.

Giving Lola’s leash a little tug, I charge after him.

By the time I catch up with him outside, he’s already on the phone... calling a cab.

Panic rises up my throat. “I’m sorry.”

Angry eyes the color of storm clouds peer down at me as he hangs up. “Fuck you.”

I deserve that.

He starts to walk away again, but I latch on to his arm. “You have every right to be mad, but it’s not what you think. I didn’t agree to give her grandchildren. I only agreed to try—”

“Try to let me fuck you?” he snaps, low and angry. “Christ. It was bad enough when I thought you were going to sleep with me that night out of pity, but it’s fucking repulsive knowing you were going to force yourself to do it because of *her*.”

His words are the equivalent of a whip and I rear back. “The agreement had *nothing* to do with that night.” I swallow thickly, a razor’s edge away from crying because he’s got it all wrong. “Wanting to make you feel better

was what prompted me to almost...you know. Not pity. And definitely not her.”

I just wanted to console him in whatever way he needed me to.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” I whisper, heart in my throat. “But I didn’t want you to freak out and run away.”

“So you could trap me.” He jerks his arm away and if looks could kill, I’d be dead. “You’re unbelievable.”

“You know me, Preston. I would never do that.” A heavy weight settles in my bones. The thought of him not trusting me hurts far more than I thought it would. “I honestly didn’t think it would be a big deal because we’re not having sex.” I follow him down the driveway when he walks away. “I just wanted to make her think I would be open to trying so she’d give me my parents’ house.” My heart sinks as I continue. “If she offered anything else, I would have told her to go fuck herself...but it’s the place where all my best memories with them are.” A sharp pang of hurt strikes my chest. “The only place that makes me remember what it feels like to be loved.”

Which is exactly why my Nanna dangled it in front of my face like I was a starving dog and it was a big, juicy steak.

It feels like an eternity before he stops walking and turns to me. “The only thing worse than being pitied is being used.”

My heart squeezes because I didn’t mean to hurt him, but it’s obvious I did.

“I would never, ever use you.” I cringe because technically I am using him, but not like *that*. “Not without your permission.”

He searches my face, his expression giving nothing away. “We can’t be a team if you keep me in the dark about shit.”

“You’re right. It won’t happen again.” I hold up three fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

His mouth quirks a little. “You were a Girl Scout?”

I wince because my brief stint didn’t end well, but I don’t want to lie to him. “For about two weeks.” I draw in a deep breath. “Long story short, we went on a camping trip. I was too scared to go out into the woods all alone to pee in the middle of the night. I tried to hold it, but unfortunately, nature won, and I ended up peeing in my sleeping bag. Needless to say, everyone in my tent made fun of me, and it spread around like herpes to the rest of the troop...the rest is history.”

His forehead creases. “Bastards.”

*Amen to that.* “They all called me Pissy Kit.”

He starts to speak, but a cab pulls up at the end of the driveway. “Gotta go.”

I don’t want to nag, but I hate not knowing what he’s up to. Then again, I’m pretty sure I already do.

“I could have given you a ride.”

Not that I want to enable him, but perhaps I could have talked him out of gambling on the way there.

He strides in the direction of the cab, but then pauses and walks back. For a moment I’m excited that he’s changed his mind, but my hopes are dashed with his next statement.

“I don’t want kids.”

I blink, not understanding why he’s telling me this when I just told him I was lying to my grandmother about babies. “Okay.”

Blowing out a breath, he grips the back of his neck. “I’d do anything for you, but that’s where I draw the line.” His serious expression grows harsher. “Promise me you won’t ever cross it. No matter what your evil grandmother threatens you with.”

*Whoa, Nelly.* Although I’d like to have kids one day, asking Preston to be the sperm donor is a bit much.

“Promise.” I shrug. “Besides, I plan on going the turkey baster route.”

His eyes nearly pop out of his head. “Kit—”

“Not with your little soldiers,” I assure him. “I meant in the future with a random spermicle.” I tap my chin. “Unless Demi Lovato wants to adopt instead, which is totally cool, too.”

Visibly relieved now, he laughs, flashing those pearly whites. “Good luck with that.”

“Laugh it up, chuckles, but it will happen,” I tell him as he ambles to the cab again. “Demi’s my soul mate.”

*But what if she’s not?*—my heart challenges as the cab fades into the distance.



## Chapter 20

Preston

I'm pissed that she lied to me.

Which is hypocritical as fuck considering I've been the one keeping shit from her.

Then again, I never claimed to think rationally when it comes to Kit.

Blissfully oblivious to my internal plight, Jameson continues playing with his new toy dragon.

Becca ended up calling me when I pulled up to the casino and asked if I could watch him for a bit so she could make up some hours at beauty school.

Given I haven't seen him since she drove away in a fit of rage, I wasn't going to turn the offer down.

The muscles in my chest draw tight as I watch Jameson run around the empty park, flying his dragon through the air. He looks so happy, I can't help but smile.

I don't want kids...

*But he's the exception.*



I'm not sure how he managed to get ice cream everywhere but in his mouth. Then again, I should have known better than to give him a cone.

Shaking my head, I take Jameson out of his car seat and grab some wipes out of his diaper bag so I can clean him up. "You're a mess. Next time I'm getting you a bowl."

He grins as the cab peels out of the parking lot and I sink to my haunches, attempting to remove the layers of stickiness he's covered in.

Becca's gonna kill me for returning her son with a sugar high, but it was worth it to see his eyes light up when I presented him with his chocolate ice cream cone.

"Daddy."

I freeze, everything around me spiraling as I process what he just called me.

To my knowledge, he's never said that word before. Hell, he barely says any words at all.

Logically, I get why he'd assign that name to me...seeing as I'm the only father figure he knows.

But fuck, it cuts like a goddamn knife.

"Daddy," he says again, completely unaware that he's continuing to drive the knife right through my cold, black heart.

I know I need to correct him...because it's the right thing to do.

*I just don't want to.*

"JP." My next words feel like jagged pieces of glass slicing my throat. "I'm Preston."

The jovial smile on his face tells me he doesn't comprehend what I'm saying, and that only makes it worse.

His focus turns to the tattoo on my arm. The one I got after I settled in Vegas because even though we were thousands of miles apart, I'd never forget him and I'd find a way to keep my promise to always protect him.

"Dragon."

"That's right," I tell him. "That's your dragon."

My guts twist and my chest becomes so tight it's difficult to draw in air.

*But I'm not your dad.*

After cleaning him up the best I can with the wipes, I take his hand and walk inside the apartment building. Becca should be home soon, which means I'll be able to head back to the casino.

After using the spare key she gave me, I open the front door. Instantly, a horrible stench fills my nostrils. I soon find the cause of it when I stumble upon the piles of garbage bags stacked in the kitchen.

Along with a sink full of dishes and empty cardboard boxes on the counter...with hundreds of ants enjoying all the crumbs.

Unfortunately, the living room isn't any better because it's full of clothes,

toys, food wrappers, and dirty pull-ups.

This place looks like a goddamn bomb hit it.

Jameson plugs his nose as he tries to clear a space to sit on the couch.

I open a window to let some fresh air in and the flies out.

Becca was never an immaculate cleaner—same goes for me—but this is way past her usual clutter, unfolded laundry, and dirty dishes.

It looks like a fucking dumpster. Which is exactly where all those garbage bags should be.

I scrub a hand down my face as I debate my next course of action. Becca's clearly struggling, but it's not fair—or sanitary—to let Jameson live in this filth.

As if on cue, the front door opens.

Only, it isn't Becca like I was expecting...it's Charlotte.

She waves a hand in front of her face. "Ugh. It smells even worse than yesterday." Her face lights up when she spots Jameson on the couch. "Hey, cutie pie. Let's go to my apartment."

"It wasn't like this when I was here last month. What the fuck happened?"

She reaches for Jameson's hand. "Don't know." She chews her lip. "Although if I had to guess I'd say it probably has something to do with her new boyfriend."

That's news to me. "What new boyfriend?"

Her uneasiness makes her Louisiana Creole accent thicker. "You're a good guy, Preston, but I really don't want to get between whatever you two have going on."

On some level, I get where she's coming from. On the outside, it seems like Becca and I are tangled up in some kind of complicated situation.

But that's not accurate, because my feelings for her are quite simple.

I can't fucking stand her. So much so, I often think of ways I could kill her and make it look like an accident.

However, I care about her son more than I've ever cared about anyone or anything. *Aside from Kit.*

Which is why his cunt of a mother is still breathing.

"There's nothing going on between us. My only concern is Jameson."

She nods sympathetically. "I know how much you care about him."

"Good." My eyes narrow. "Now that we're on the same page, I need you to tell me whatever it is you know about this new boyfriend of hers. Right the

fuck now.”

The last thing I want is for Becca to bring some scumbag around Jameson.

She takes a cautious step back. “I don’t know much...not even his name. All I know is that she’s been spending *a lot* of time with him because she’s been asking me to babysit even more than usual.” Grabbing a few of Jameson’s toys along the way, she walks toward the front door. “She’s on a date with him now, but she said she’ll be home around twelve if you want to ask her yourself.”

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention. “She told me she was making up hours at school.”

An *oh shit* look washes over her face. “I...um...I’m gonna take Jameson to my apartment.”

With those parting words, she scrambles out the door.

It takes everything in me not to punch a hole through the fucking wall.

I don’t, though because while it might make me feel better, it won’t help Jameson.

But I know something that will.

Which is why I spend the next six hours cleaning up his mother’s mess.

## Chapter 21

---

Kit

“We’re almost done, handsome.”

I give Lola—who’s currently trying to claw his way out of the tub while I bathe him—a pat on the head.

Tonight is the engagement party and I want him to look and smell his best.

We’re not on the same page, though, because he jumps out of the tub, quickly scampering past me and out of the bathroom.

But not before vigorously shaking all the excess water off him.

“Dang it.”

Preston said Darius would come up with the money to get his dog back soon, but Lola’s been here for three weeks already. Not that I mind.

Well...until now.

Chasing after him, I follow the wet trail he left down the stairs.

I find him barking at Preston who’s holding a power drill while standing in the doorway of my childhood bedroom.

“What are you doing?”

Glaring at Lola, he brings the drill to the hinges. The noise only makes Lola bark louder.

The muscles in his arms flex as he picks up the damaged door and leans it against a wall. “The party’s tonight, right?”

I nod, watching in wonder as he picks up a new wooden door and lines it up with the frame. “Yeah, but—”

“Do you want people wondering why your door was kicked in?”

“Well, no—”

The sound of the drill cuts me off for a second time.

Seeing as Preston said he wouldn't be attending. Or as he put it—he'd rather gouge his eyes out with a rusty screwdriver than go to this shitshow, I'm surprised he did something so nice and helpful.

Especially since he's been even grumpier than usual lately. I thought it was because of what happened with Asher that night, but I'm not so sure anymore.

All I know is he seems super stressed about something. *Distant.*

He's also been gone a lot lately...no doubt gambling.

Nerves coil my stomach because I really hope he's not in trouble again. The last thing we need is another Campanelli situation.

"Preston?"

He stops drilling. "What?"

Sometimes talking to him is the equivalent of walking on eggshells. I don't want to say something that will upset him and make him leave.

I'm so tired of tiptoeing around the elephant in the room, though and the longer this silent dance of ours continues, the more my exasperation grows.

"If you're in trouble, you can tell me."

His forehead creases. "What makes you think I'm in trouble?"

Talk about a loaded question.

"Um...well," I begin, unable to stop myself from fidgeting. "You've been extra cranky lately. You've also been gone...*a lot.*"

He places the drill on the floor, and that strong, stubbled jaw of his sets in irritation.

I avert my gaze because I can't bring myself to look at him directly. He's like an eclipse, fascinating, all-consuming...

And liable to cause permanent damage.

*It shouldn't be like this, though.* Not with us.

I've always been able to tell Preston anything. It's part of the reason I feel this unexplainable connection to him.

There are no pretenses between us. We're messy and fucked up. But we're *real*.

So why am I afraid to confront him about this?

*Because you might lose him*—my mind unhelpfully chimes in.

"I'm worried about you," I utter, forcing myself to meet his eyes.

I can't keep pretending that him gambling to the extent he does is normal when it's not.



I didn't want to be added to the list of people who give him grief for it, because I want him to know he has someone in his corner who will never judge him for his flaws, but it's clear this is way past a harmless hobby.

And the more I ignore it...the more I enable him.

He crosses his arms over his chest. "I'm fine."

I seriously hate confrontation, but this has gone on long enough.

"You have a problem," I tell him, hoping my tone conveys how serious this is.

But it doesn't because he snorts. "The only problem I have is with that damn dog. I'm giving Darius one more week—"

"This isn't about Lola," I interject because I don't want him to change the subject or skirt around it. "This is about your gambling addiction."

There. The Band-Aid's ripped off.

Preston's brows rise, his expression a mixture of confusion and annoyance. "Gambling addiction?"

It's hard to believe Preston isn't self-aware enough to know what I'm referring to. He's the smartest—and most brutally honest—person I know.

"You go to the casino almost every day."

His eyes darken. "And?"

Not backing down, I draw in a deep breath. Maybe presenting him with some facts will make him see things more clearly.

"You were living in a run-down motel room in Vegas because of your gambling." I begin ticking things off with my fingers, even though I'll probably run out of them by the time I'm finished.

"You were almost killed by Russian mobsters...and Campanelli on separate occasions because of your gambling." I press my thumb to my chest. "You almost got *me* killed because of your gambling." He tries to speak, but I'm not done. "You moonlight as a *sugar baby* for old women because of your gambling. You stole an innocent dog because of your gambling." My voice drops to a whisper because I know the next one is a sore spot for him. "You no longer have a relationship with your brother because of your gambling."

A vein in his neck bulges and his features tighten with contempt. "Are you done?"

Not pressing the issue any further would make things easier for him. Because then he wouldn't have to come to terms with his addiction and deal with the underlying issues that caused it.

“I’m not trying to condemn or attack you. I’m just trying to make you see why it’s a problem so you can do something about it.”

For a moment I wonder if I’m being too hard on him and if this was the wrong approach, but before I can scrutinize the thought any further, he surges forward and grabs my chin. Not enough to hurt me, but enough to make sure he has my undivided attention.

“I don’t have to do shit.” His furious gaze burns right through me. He’s so angry he’s vibrating with it. “Fuck you and fuck whatever this is. I’m *done*.”

Before I can blink, he stalks toward the front door, evading me and the conversation.

Everything inside me goes haywire because this is exactly what I was afraid of and if he leaves like this, there’s a high probability he won’t ever come back.

“Let me guess,” I call out as I follow him. “You’re running off to the casino.”

I’m doubling down, but I can’t bring myself to stop. If I could make him realize that gambling his demons away only breeds new ones, maybe he’d potentially get some help.

But I’m probably wasting my breath because his drug of choice is still pumping through his system...rendering him unable to understand how this is ruining his life.

I refuse to give up on him, though.

I grab his arm when I catch up with him. “I care about you, Preston.” My heart pounds like a scared mouse trying to flee from an approaching snake. “So much.”

“Spare me your intervention bullshit.” He spins around with so much force I almost lose my footing. “For a moment I thought you finally woke up and realized what a fuck up I am.”

“You’re not a fuckup. You’re someone who needs help.”

*Help and support.*

Shooting me a sardonic smile, he pinches my cheek. “And there she is. The girl who doesn’t have an ounce of self-preservation because she’s so desperate to be loved she’ll accept anything.” He bares his teeth. “Your pathetic little martyr act isn’t attractive. Stop being so weak and grow a goddamn backbone.” His face goes slack. “I’ll be back for my shit after the party.”

Hurt people...hurt people. I know this.

Yet his words still sucker punch me in the chest. "I guess we've reached the part where you push me away because I dug too deep and called you on your shit. *Shocker.*" I poke him with my finger. "I might crave love and be too sensitive for my own good, but at least I'm honest about who I am and own it...which is a hell of a lot more than I can say for you, you fucking coward."

To anyone else, he would appear unfazed, but I *know* him. The flash of challenge in his eyes tells me my arrow hit the intended target.

Anger colors his words as he leans in, his tone threatening. "I'm *not* a coward."

"Then for once in your life don't run away." A lump fills my throat. "I know it's scary and uncomfortable to talk about your issues and open up to someone, but you're safe with me."

He backs up, putting several feet between us. "It's not me I'm worried about."

Despite what he thinks, I'm a lot stronger than I look. Losing both your parents and having a grandmother who hated you for something beyond your control will do that to you.

"I can handle it."

He doesn't look convinced, but I don't have time to dwell on that because he turns to the front door. "I'll be back later."

"Where are you going?" I ask, even though I'm fully aware.

I watch the muscles in his back coil underneath the dark fabric of his shirt. "Don't ask questions you won't like the answers to."

My heart twists and drops, making its objection known.

"I never thought someone as tough as you could be controlled by a deck of cards and some chips."

It's a cheap shot, but I'm out of options.

"That's where you're wrong," he snaps, his voice gruff. "It doesn't control me...I control *it.*"

That isn't the way addiction works.

"Fine," I counter, my brain scrambling, frantically searching for some way to get him to stop gambling. Even for a little while. "If you really have control over it like you claim, then quit."

He looks at me like I've sprouted another head. "Why would I quit something I enjoy?"

*Because it's destroying you.*

"Because you're in denial about the hold it has on you." He was right earlier, I am desperate. Desperate to find a way to help him. "But if you prove me wrong and stop, I'll make it worth your while."

*That gets his attention. "Make it worth my while how?"*

I'm not really sure but I'm on the verge of inheriting more money than I'll ever be able to spend in a lifetime.

"I'll give you anything you want."

Disbelief washes over his face, almost like he can't believe the words I just blurted out.

That makes two of us.

"Let me get this straight. You're trying to persuade me to stop gambling by propositioning me with a *bet*."

Sometimes you have to fight fire with fire. However, when he puts it that way, I'm positive this idea isn't just stupid, it's morally wrong.

But if it doesn't work and he can't abstain, he'll no longer be able to deny he has a problem.

And if by some small chance it *does* work...maybe it will show him that he doesn't need to gamble and there are healthy outlets he can utilize instead.

As crazy as it sounds, I can't seem to find a downside.

"It's a little unorthodox," I admit. "But what have you got to lose?"

"How long?"

The fact he's even thinking about taking me up on this is unexpected, but a step in the right direction.

I mull over his question. A few weeks is too little time, and a year might be too overwhelming and make him pump the brakes.

"For the rest of our marriage."

Before my brain can calculate how much time we have left, Preston grumbles, "Nine months, three weeks, and two days."

Science should really study that brain of his. "Sounds about right." I hold up a finger. "But if you slip up once, the deal's off."

"But if I succeed..." He moves closer, his stare turning molten as he slowly drags his gaze up and down my body before settling on my face. "You'll give me *anything* I want?"

I don't even realize he's cornering me until it's too late.

I figured Preston would want more money, an expensive sports car, maybe a time-share on an exotic island somewhere...but it's clear by the way

he's looking at me like a starved man who's just stumbled upon his favorite meal, I was wrong.

Very wrong.

Rough hands curl around my hips and my knees nearly buckle when he runs his nose along the length of my throat, inhaling me. "Answer me, Bishop."

Nerves flutter in my belly when his teeth clamp down on my skin, sucking and biting so hard I know he'll leave a mark.

But I don't care. Because I'd do anything in the world for him.

*Even that.*

"Anything," I squeak out as a mixture of apprehension and heat swallow me...

And the doorbell rings.

Juan agreed to come over and help me set up for the party because he's way better at that stuff than I am. As usual, he's Mr. freaking punctual.

"Juan's here."

Preston makes no move to unhinge himself from me, though. The hand on my hip glides to my cheek, lighting every nerve ending I have along the way. His mouth hovers over mine, his bottom lip ever so slightly brushing my top one.

"Deal."

## Chapter 22

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Preston

“Am I interrupting something?” Juan asks, his gaze resting on Kit’s flushed cheeks.

“Yes.”

“No,” Kit says at the same time, ushering him inside. “I’ve been waiting for you to get here.”

Juan looks like he wants to say something else, but his eyes widen as he looks around. “Holy shit. You weren’t kidding. Your parents were loaded.”

I clear my throat, issuing a silent warning because I know every time someone brings up Kit’s parents it pours salt in the gaping wound.

Kit gestures for him to follow her, and Juan lets out a loud squeal when we enter the kitchen. “Oh my God. I *love* this kitchen.” Before Kit can say a word, he pulls out a notebook. “But as much as I’d like to fawn over this beautiful house some more, we have a lot of work to do.”

He rattles off a list a mile long and I can tell Kit’s overwhelmed as fuck by the time he’s done.

Which is why I don’t bitch when I end up getting tasked with shit.

As much as I can’t stand my dumbass brother and want to throw a brick at his fat head, tonight’s a big night for him.

I also know how important it is for Kit to make everything perfect for them, because that’s what she does when she cares about you.

She supports, she accepts...

*She sacrifices.*



I pace back and forth in my room, my mind—hell, my *palms*—itching with the urge to play poker.

But I can't for the next nine months, three weeks, and two days.

*What the motherfucking fuck was I thinking?*

Running my hand along my scalp, I groan. Every drop of blood pumping through my veins is begging me for another hit.

I can smell the cigarettes and cigars burning, see the colorful bright lights, hear the slot machines...feel the felt table as I push my chips forward and flip over my cards.

*I have to get out of here.*

I pick up my phone, hoping Becca's feeling generous tonight and will let me see Jameson.

We ended up getting into a huge fight due to her lying about making up hours, and the state her apartment was in before I cleaned it, which led to her banning me from seeing him for two whole fucking weeks. Fortunately, Charlotte took mercy on me and let me come over a few times while Becca was out with her new boyfriend.

She picks up on the third ring. "Hello?"

Tiny hairs on the back of my neck rise when I hear the slur in her voice, along with all the commotion in the background. "Where are you?"

"Out."

My fingers tighten around the phone. "Yeah, no shit. Is Jam—"

"Who are you talking to?" a deep voice bellows in the background.

Something about his tone rubs me the wrong way. God help him if he ever talks to Jameson like that, because I will remove whatever teeth he has with a rusty pair of pliers and make him eat them one by fucking one.

"Tell that boyfriend of yours to mind his business before I rearrange his face."

"Relax, baby face." I'm about to remind her I'm not her fucking baby face, but then she says, "It's Jameson's father."

I freeze as my worst nightmare comes barreling into me full force.

I always knew there was a chance he might come back into the picture, but I didn't think Becca would start dating him.

Then again, she's not the sharpest tool in the shed.

It's a struggle to breathe as visions of Jameson hanging out with a man who abandoned him—a man who isn't me—zip through my head.

On some level I realize it's selfish of me to not want this for him because



every kid deserves to have a family, but fuck if it doesn't send a bolt of jealousy—and concern—blazing through me.

The asshole missed the first three years of his life, what makes him think he has any right to waltz back in?

He doesn't deserve Jameson.

"Tell that sperm donor to go fuck himself," I hear over the extension.

That doesn't make any sense. Not unless...

"What the hell is he talking about?" I snap, wondering if she's so drunk she's now spewing fictitious shit.

Then again, Becca doesn't have to be intoxicated to spin her webs of deceit.

"Hold on. I'm going to the bathroom."

A few seconds later the music dies down.

"Sorry—"

"Why did that asshole call me a sperm donor?"

I hear her fiddling around with something. "Because that's what I told him."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't want to tell my new boyfriend that I have an ex-boyfriend who still hangs around me and my kid. It's weird and it would only make him think he couldn't trust me."

I have to stifle a laugh because she can't be trusted.

Nevertheless, I get where she's coming from. Not only is the dynamic hard to explain...it's even harder to understand.

A strange sense of relief fills me because it's much better than the alternative scenario I had in my head a minute ago.

*The one that ended with me losing him.*

"Where's Jameson right now?"

"With Charlotte."

"Again?" I question, not bothering to hide my annoyance.

"Yes, *again*. Where else would you like him to be?"

"I don't know. How about with his mother?"

She huffs, like I'm wrong for even suggesting such a thing. "It's Saturday night, Preston. I'm allowed to have a life."

Going out on the weekends is one thing. Spending more time *away* from your kid than with him is another.

"He sees me more than he sees you."

It's frustrating as fuck how she doesn't seem to comprehend that being a parent isn't a recreational activity. It's a lifetime commitment.

"You're right." For a moment I think I've managed to finally knock some sense into her, but then she says, "I think you and Jameson need to take a break. I'll let you know when and *if* you can see him again."

Panic curtains the edges of my vision and the walls feel like they're closing in. "Be—"

The line goes dead.

I call her back, but it goes straight to voice mail.

"Goddammit."

Rage spirals through me, and I throw my phone. It hits the wall with a loud thump, shattering the screen.

*She's ripping him away from me.*

"Whoa. What's going on?"

I whip around at the sound of Kit's voice. She's standing in the doorway of my bedroom, concern marring her pretty face.

I become worried for an entirely different reason.

How long has she been standing there? How much did she hear?

Given my balls are unharmed, I presume it wasn't much.

Still...it was way too close of a fucking call.

"Did you forget how to knock?"

She doesn't bother hiding her offense. "I tried, but you didn't answer. Then I heard a loud bang followed by you yelling." She turns on her heel. "I wanted to make sure you were okay."

I catch her elbow before she can flee the room. "Did you want something?"

"Huh?"

"Why were you snooping outside my door?" I clarify.

Yanking her arm away, she spins around. "I wasn't. I came to tell you that the party starts in ten minutes, so if you want to escape without running into a bunch of people, now's your chance." Her nose scrunches. "You're awfully defensive right now. Were you planning on doing something you shouldn't?"

*Here we fucking go. I knew this bet was a terrible idea.*

*But the reward was way too tempting to turn down.*

"No." The opportunity to kill two birds with one stone has now presented itself, so I take it. "That was a bookie of mine on the phone. The odds for an

upcoming basketball game are phenomenal, but I told him I had to pass.”

Her expression softens. “I guess that explains why you were so upset.”

I nod and the smile she gives me nearly stops my fucking heart.

“I’m proud of you.”

She shouldn’t be. The odds that I’ll fuck up and disappoint her are far greater than the *phenomenal* ones I fabricated a few seconds ago.

Despite my earlier claims, I’m fully cognizant of the profound influence gambling has over me, and the trouble it’s caused me...

And my exceptions.

*I just can’t bring myself to stop.*

Reaching down, Kit gives my hand a squeeze. “I know it’s hard, but we’ll get through it.”

The contact heats my blood and I rake my gaze over her frame. I figured she’d be in a dress or some shit because that’s what most chicks wear to parties.

But not Kit.

She’s in a pair of tight jeans and a white top that shows off her toned, flat abdomen. The black blazer with rolled up sleeves should make her look like a character from an ’80s sitcom, but somehow she makes it work. Even with all the black shit lining her eyes.

Unable to resist, I trace the crest of her high cheekbone with my thumb. I want to run my fingers through her hair and drag her mouth to mine, but it’s pulled back in some kind of messy braid concoction.

“You look good.”

More than good. She’s gorgeous—so perfectly imperfect—she still steals my breath every time I look at her.

Her long lashes sweep upward and a faint blush colors her cheeks.

“Thanks.”

Fuck. I want her. *Badly.*

So much it consumes me.

But as visceral as the urge to bury myself balls deep inside her is...it’s not why I agreed to the bet.

I’d never fuck her unless I was positive *she* wanted me to.

However, one day my house of cards will crumble.

Because I’m going to tell her the truth.

Not only will she be destroyed, she’s going to see me for exactly what and who I am.

And when that happens, I'm going to want something even more than I want her body, money, or poker...

*Her forgiveness.*

## Chapter 23

---

Kit

“*I* should go.”

Am I telling him...or myself?

Definitely the latter. Because the way he’s looking at me right now—like I’m the only one in the room is seriously screwing with my head.

Then again, technically I *am* the only one in the room. Well, other than him.

Holy cannoli. *Get a grip, Kit.*

But I don’t. Instead, I mock punch his shoulder. “Catch you on the flip side.”

I’m about to leave, but he catches my wrist.

“Why are you acting weird?” He makes a face. “Well, weird for you.”

*Because you’re giving me butterflies.*

Little, itty-bitty, baby ones. But still butterflies, nonetheless.

Especially now that I see how hard he’s trying to better himself.

For me, but most importantly...for *himself*.

I rub the knot forming in my chest with my free hand. “I have some indigestion going on.”

“Kit.”

I want to look away, but I can’t...

Because he sees right through me.

However, I’m so not ready to talk—or analyze—these teeny butterflies and what they might mean.

So, I give him another truth.

“I want you to go to the party.”

I know he'll refuse, but I also know how much it would mean to Asher if he did. Plus, who's to say he won't eventually repair his relationship with his brother and look back one day and regret not being there for one of the most important nights of Asher's life?

*I'll be damned.* Preston looks like he's actually considering it.

“What are you willing to offer?”

*Say what now?*

“Offer?”

He takes a step closer, and then another, caging me in with his body until my spine meets the wall behind me.

“For my attendance.” He braces his hands on the wall on either side of my head. “What do I get out of it?”

My heart sinks because it seems I've created a monster.

“You're unbelievable.” I jab a finger in his chest. “Not everything has to be a wager.”

His lips quirk up at the corners, like my annoyance amuses him. “But I like making bets with you.” Inclining his head, he skims his nose along my jawline. “Christ. You smell good.”

Ignoring that comment, I square my shoulders. “You don't get anything.”

*I just want him to be there.*

I'm about to wiggle away, but he cups my cheek.

“Okay,” he drawls after a minute. “I'll go.”

I'm so stunned my jaw drops. “Really?”

He nods but a muscle in his chiseled jaw bunches, as if he's aggravated with himself for caving in.

I look at him dubiously. “And you're not expecting anything in exchange?”

He shakes his head, but then stops abruptly. “On second thought, there is one thing.”

It's all I can do not to roll my eyes, because I should have known there'd be a catch.

“What—”

His mouth crashes against mine and I swear I feel the floor crack and shatter underneath me, but there's no way that's possible because he's still kissing me.

And I'm kissing him back.

On a moan, I sag against the wall. All my defenses weaken with every hungry stroke of his tongue.

Preston doesn't just kiss...he *consumes*.

Like I'm the air he can't seem to get enough of. The secret he's determined to uncover.

The craving he'll stop at nothing to satisfy.

And knowing how much he wants me only makes me burn hotter until I go up in flames.

I open my mouth wider, willing him to take whatever he desires as I satisfy my own exploration, gunning for those dark, gruff sounds he makes.

I hear them when my teeth graze his bottom lip before sucking it. However, I'm not prepared for the way my skin jolts when his knuckles drift to the underside of my breast...testing. *Teasing*.

He lingers there for a few seconds, like he's giving me time to redirect him...but I don't.

My head spins and my breath comes out choppy as I fight for control. Control I don't have because he's seized every last bit of it.

Which is why I don't stop him when those big, rough hands squeeze my tits.

His low, gruff voice cuts through the room as my nipples turn to glass. "Is this okay?"

When I don't answer, he goes still, his hands still firmly cupping me as we exchange the same erratic air.

Preston's never struck me as the type to ask permission for anything, and I'm not dumb enough to believe he's decided to be a gentleman right now.

He's asking because he wants to hear me admit that I like his touch.

I open my mouth, but the words feel like they're jammed in my throat.

*And conceding will wipe away all the parts of me I love.*

The parts that make me *me*.

Fortunately, I don't have to acknowledge defeat because the doorbell rings at the same time I hear Juan shout, "Kit. People are here!"

"I have to go."

Giving my boobs one last grope, he kisses a path up my neck, stopping when he reaches my ear. "Who's the coward now?"

His words are the equivalent of ice water, but I'd rather jam a knife in my jugular than let him know there's any truth to them.

Wrapping my hand around the back of his neck, I bring him in for another



kiss. However, the moment his lips part and his tongue touches mine, I pull back and whisper, “Eat my shorts, Holden.”

His gaze travels down to my chest, lingering there long enough I feel his stare between my thighs before slowly trailing back up to my face.

“I’d much rather eat your pussy, Bishop.”

There’s no way to hide the flush that creeps up my cheeks as I leave the room.

*Or the stupid butterflies that come back with a vengeance.*



Juan fans himself with a napkin. “Hot butter on a biscuit. I’ve never seen so much eye candy in one place before.”

I can’t help but laugh as he shamelessly ogles Asher’s teammates.

There’s so much freaking testosterone in the room I wish I could open a window and air it all out.

“It’s better than Christmas morning,” he continues, plucking an hors d’oeuvre off a tray a nearby waiter is holding.

I open my mouth to warn Juan that most of them have wives or girlfriends, but Landon approaches, looking like he’s about to puke.

Can’t say I blame him given he’ll be popping the big question soon.

Along with his boyfriend.

“There’s a lot of people here,” he notes. “A *lot* of people.”

He’s not wrong. Between the never-ending list of people Asher wanted me to invite, plus Landon’s list...there are over four hundred in attendance.

It makes me even more grateful that my bestie is an introvert and can’t stand most humans.

*A quality she shares with my husband.*

I take a sip of my champagne. “Yeah, but you know how Asher is...the bigger the spotlight, the better.”

He smiles in that way that only someone who’s truly in love can. “True.” His brow crinkles. “But Breslin keeps wondering why you threw such a big party for Picasso.”

Yep. I figured that might happen.

Given I needed a good excuse to host this shindig, and Picasso’s birthday just so happens to be tomorrow, I told her I was throwing a birthday bash for

her pooch.

“Don’t worry,” I assure him. “She knows how much I love my nephew.” I give him a wink. “Plus, she’ll figure out it was all a ruse soon enough.”

“Yeah.” He jams his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “Think she’ll say yes?”

“If she doesn’t, *I* will,” Juan cuts in, eyeing him like he’s a decadent dessert.

I nudge him in the ribs. “Abso-fucking-lutely.”

Breslin might be reserved, but not when it comes to her feelings for Landon and Asher.

Landon opens his mouth to say something, but a guy claps him on the back.

“What’s up, man?”

The blond looks like he walked right off the cover of a surfer magazine, and the brunette standing next to him looks like a Victoria’s Secret runway model.

“Oakley,” Landon says with a grin. “I wasn’t sure you’d make it.”

Oakley swipes a pot sticker off a tray. “I’m always down for a party and free food.” When the gorgeous girl next to him gives him a look, he adds, “Congrats, by the way.”

“Not yet.” Landon winces. “I still haven’t...you know.”

“Handed over your balls?” Oakley offers and Juan laughs. “It’s not so bad. I gave Bianca mine a few months ago and we’re still going strong.” He winks at the brunette. “Show him the goods, baby girl.”

With a bright smile, she eagerly holds up her hand, gesturing to the beautiful gemstone on her left ring finger.

Oakley drapes his arm around Landon’s shoulders. “Relax, brother. I’ll give you a few pointers that will get you laid *and* engaged before the party’s over.”

Landon opens and closes his mouth like a fish before shrugging and following his friends. “Screw it. I’ll take all the help I can get right now.”

I find myself laughing as the three of them walk away.

“He’s adorable,” Juan drawls as Asher whizzes by us.

“This party is the tits *and* ass, small fry.”

His loud statement has some people standing nearby chuckling.

“You’re welcome,” I tell him as a few of his buddies call him over.

“Damn,” Juan says. “That Breslin is one lucky bitch.”

“Yeah, but so are they.”

Breslin’s stubborn and tough as nails, but she’s also the best friend anyone could have.

I’m looking around for said best friend when Juan says, “On second thought, no one here is as lucky as *you* are, honey.”

I blink, not understanding. “Me? How so?”

Juan’s stare snags on something. “That husband of yours is an asshole, but holy hell, he’s the epitome of big dick energy.”

I follow his gaze across the room to Preston who’s currently standing on the outskirts of a group of guys who are talking. The sleeves of his white button-down shirt are rolled up, exposing those veiny muscular forearms. However, it’s the way his sharp jaw is clenched in contempt that holds my attention.

As if sensing my stare, he turns his head, locking those harsh eyes on mine with an intensity I feel in my bones.

Heat floods my system, and for a moment, it’s like we’re the only two people who exist on the planet.

“Damn, girl,” Juan drawls. “The sex between you two must be fire.”

I choke and sputter my champagne. “I’m sorry, *what?*”

He slaps my back. “Come on. Don’t tell me you’re not hitting that.”

For the love of ducks. “The only thing I’m going to be hitting is *you* if you don’t stop accusing me of having sex with my husband.”

I become acutely aware of just how strange that statement sounds.

Juan’s perfectly shaped brows rise with incredulity. “You seriously haven’t slept with him yet?”

“There is no *yet*.” I tap my chest. “Loud and proud card-carrying member of the gay community, remember?”

He thinks about this for a moment. “Yeah, but...*you know*.”

I reach for another glass of champagne because I seriously need it right now. “No, I don’t.”

Unless Preston manages not to gamble for the next nine months.

Then I’ll *definitely* know.

Juan leans in a little, like he’s about to tell me a secret. “It’s not a crime to experiment.”

“Experiment?”

He rolls his eyes. “Come on, Kit. Don’t tell me you’ve never—”

“I’ve never had a real-life penis inside me, nor do I want to,” I hiss. “Now

can we please drop this conversation?”

He holds up his hands. “Fine”

That’s when it occurs to me. “Wait a minute.” I turn to him. “Are you saying that *you*...you know.”

He nods. “Yup.” A smirk lines his lips. “Twice.”

I’m pretty sure my mouth hits the floor because Juan is gayer than a peacock sprinkling glitter and waving a rainbow flag during a gay pride parade.

It’s one of the things I love most about him. He never hides who he is or tries to fit the mold of what society thinks he should be.

“Twice?”

“Mhhh. The first time was in high school with a girl I forced myself to date so I could get my father off my back.” He laughs to himself. “And the second was because the girl was intriguing as hell and I thought there was a chance that maybe I liked coochie...or at least hers. That wasn’t the case, though.”

I’m speechless.

On second thought, not really.

“And that’s exactly why I won’t be going there with Preston.” *Unless* he wins the bet. “I don’t have to eat Casu Marzu to know it’s disgusting, and I won’t like it.”

I expect him to agree, but he doesn’t. “It wasn’t as disgusting as I thought it would be. It actually felt kind of good.”

Needless to say, I’m confused as fuck. “Come again?”

“In the end it wasn’t my cup of tea, but I don’t regret it. Being with those women taught me a lot about myself and helped clarify things.” He jerks his chin in the direction of my husband. “Maybe Preston can do the same for you.”

“I don’t need to *clarify* anything,” I defend, my voice raising two octaves. “I’m a lesbian.”

“You say that like it’s a defense.”

I pop a hand on my hip. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

His face softens. “Look, I’m not attacking or accusing you of anything. I’m simply saying that it’s okay to be confused—especially when someone comes along and challenges everything you *thought* you knew about yourself.” He squeezes my hand. “No matter what you do or don’t do, I’ll never judge you.”

His statement has my heart swelling and then beating like I've just done two hours of intense cardio.

"I'm scared," I whisper, surprising myself with my candidness.

He squeezes my hand harder. "Trying new things can be awkward and terrifying."

"It's not that." When he gives me a mystified look, I spill my guts. "I've never had a bond with anyone like I do Preston. However, the pull I feel toward him doesn't include what he has below the waist."

He thinks about this for a moment. "How do you know if you don't test the waters and try it out?"

He doesn't get it. Preston isn't a used car or an expensive dress you can return.

*And some things can't be taken back or undone.*

"If I allow myself to go there with him—and *surprise*—it turns out his dick isn't some kind of magical unicorn that can turn me straight, I won't be able to chalk it up to a life lesson and keep it moving...because it will hurt him." I close my eyes. "And then I'll lose him."

And I'd sacrifice just about anything to keep him.

"Have you told him that?"

I shake my head. "He'll just deny it."

Because nothing hurts Preston Holden.

Nothing penetrates his wall of steel.

Juan places his head on my shoulder. "Maybe you're right." He tilts his head to glance at me. "But maybe you'll also be missing out on the best experience of your life if you don't."

I used to think like that...afraid if I didn't take the leap and jump with my arms wide open that I'd be missing out on something great.

But in the end, falling only leads to heartache.

Only this time, it won't be my heart that breaks.

It will be *his*.

And I'd rather die than ever do that to him.

"Well, I'll never know. Because I'm not willing to lose him. *Or* who I am."

"You won't lose who you are—"

"Yes, I will," I interject. "My grandmother loathes my *gayness* so much she used to punish me for it. She legitimately hates me for something I can't control. Something that doesn't hurt her or anyone else. Something that's a

vital part of who I am. Something I'm *proud* of...despite how much she told me I was a sinner or how sickening me being queer was. So, if I give her what she wants..." A sharp pain infiltrates my chest. "It goes against everything I believe in...everything I am." My throat closes in on me and I swallow hard. "Then *she* wins."

*And I lose.*

"Oh, God. That witch really did a number on you." He wraps me up in a hug. "I'm sorry, Kit."

"Don't be." As much as I love Juan, I don't want his sympathy. However, I do want to change the subject since it's putting me in a bad mood. "Can we please—" I stop talking when I notice Juan's no longer paying any attention to me. All his focus is on a group of men across the room.

I wave my hands, but it's no use. "Earth to Juan."

"Sorry, boo." He saunters away. "I'm about to snag me an NFL star."

It's on the tip of my tongue to point out that other than Asher, only *one* person has ever come out as gay while actively playing in the NFL. I don't want my friend to end up being a dirty little secret because he deserves so much more than that.

However, he's already making his way toward the group.

The same group Preston's been giving the stink eye to.

Instinctively, I find myself staring at him.

On paper, I shouldn't find him attractive. He's tall with broad shoulders, strong arms, and chiseled features.

He's rude and vulgar.

He's stubborn and crass.

He's...punching one of Asher's teammates.

Heart racing, I run across the room as fast as I can. By the time I reach him, it's turned into a full-blown fight.

You'd think a bunch of burly NFL players would be strong enough to break it up, but they're all keeping a wide berth.

Then again, Preston's downright scary right now and every time I take a breath, his fist collides with the guy's face.

However, the moment I see the guy punch Preston, I lose my marbles.

Faster than a speeding bullet, I jump on the asshole's back. "Touch him again and I'll set fire to your balls."

He tries to throw me off, but someone—make that *someones*—wedge themselves between us.

“What the fuck is going on?” Asher booms as he and Landon take hold of Preston’s arms and drag him away.

“Holy shit.” Breslin runs up to me. “What happened?”

I honestly have no idea.

The guy spits blood on my clean floor. “This piece of shit punched me out of nowhere.” He glares at Preston. “What the fuck is your problem?”

Asher bares his teeth. “Call my brother a piece of shit again, Rivera and I’ll be the one punching you.”

Rivera’s eyes widen. “Don’t start with me, man. This was all him.”

“Liar,” I yell. “Preston wouldn’t go after anyone for no reason.”

Breslin clears her throat.

“Not *usually*,” I amend, turning to my husband. “What did this prick do to you?”

Preston rolls his arms, freeing himself from Landon and Asher’s hold.

“Care to share with the class?” Breslin asks after a few seconds pass.

Evidently not because Preston stalks off without another word.

Rivera lifts his shirt to his bloody nose. “Your brother’s a fucking psycho.”

*Not unless provoked.*

Breslin closes her eyes and sighs. “I’m sorry—”

“Maybe he just doesn’t like homophobic assholes,” Juan sneers, coming to stand next to me.

When everyone turns to look at him, he adds, “I didn’t hear all of the conversation. Just the part where he said, *‘The limp-wristed cocksucker loves staring at my junk while I’m showering.’*”

Rivera tries to deny it, but one of the men in the group steps forward. “He’s telling the truth.” Frowning, he exchanges a look with some of the other guys. “It’s why none of us stopped your brother from kicking his ass.”

Breslin launches her fist into Rivera’s face so hard I hear something crack. “*You’re the piece of shit, asshole.*”

Can’t say the bastard doesn’t deserve it.

Landon grabs her waist when she gears up for a second one and Asher takes the opportunity to shove him. “Get the fuck out of my house. *Now.*”

Probably not the best time to point out that technically this is *my* house.

Snorting, Rivera takes a step back. “No problem. You’ll be hearing from my lawyer.”

Asher narrows his eyes. “Pussy.”

He cackles. “Says the fa—”

Landon grabs him by the collar. “I suggest you listen to my boyfriend and get the fuck out, or so help me God, I *will* fucking slaughter you.”

I cross my arms. “And *I’ll* make sure the media gets wind of your homophobic slurs against your teammate.”

Some of his fans might not care, but at least the world will see him for exactly who and what he is.

The jerk finally takes the hint and strides toward the front door.

Asher looks around the room before addressing Rivera one last time. “Just so we’re clear, I’ve never looked at your junk.” Giving him a malicious shit-eating grin, he adds, “They don’t make magnifying glasses for something so small.”

A few people chuckle and I signal for the DJ to start playing music again.

“What a scumbag,” Breslin says before her expression turns guilty. “I’m gonna find Preston and thank him.”

Asher blows out a breath. “Me too.”

When they turn to walk away, I nudge Landon. “Do it.”

“Now?” he mouths, gawking at me like I’m insane.

I nod. Neither Breslin nor Asher will be expecting a proposal right now. Especially after *that* drama.

Plus, I don’t think it’s a great idea for them to talk to Preston right now. That’s like pouring gasoline on a raging fire.

“Wait,” Landon calls out. “We need to talk.”

Concern mars Breslin’s features. “Are you okay?”

He gestures for them to follow him out to the backyard.

And I look for my husband.

I assumed he’d be upstairs, but thanks to Lola, I find him hiding out in my childhood bedroom.

His back is facing me, but it’s obvious how upset he is by the frantic way his shoulders keep rising and falling...like he’s crying so hard he can barely breathe.

My heart clenches because I hate seeing him in pain, but I’m so proud of him for defending his brother against that douche canoe.

I make my way over to where he’s standing. “Hey—”

A giant wave of terror washes over me when I see his puffy, blotchy face. For a second I think it’s because of the fight, but then Preston makes a



choking motion with his hands.

*Oh, God. Oh, God. Oh, God.*

“Help!” I scream at the top of my lungs as he staggers back, clawing his throat as he fights for air.

I have no idea what happened, but his lack of oxygen and the way his face, lips, and eyes are swelling is scaring the shit out of me.

I’m on the phone with an emergency dispatcher when it hits me like a ton of bricks. “I think he might be in anaphylactic shock.”

Back when we were trapped in the elevator, Preston mentioned he was allergic to seafood.

“I’ll be right back.” Racing out of the room, I run over to the DJ and snatch the mic at the same time Asher, Landon, and Breslin come back inside. “Does anyone have an EpiPen? It’s an emergency.”

Their dazzling smiles wipe clean off their faces as they sprint over.

“What’s up?”

“Are you okay?”

“What happened?”

There’s so much panic flooding my system, I can’t answer their questions. All I want to do is get back to Preston and help him. Fortunately, a woman runs over with an EpiPen in her hand and I quickly motion for her to follow me into the bedroom.

Preston’s swelling and wheezing has amplified by the time we barrel inside and for a moment I can’t help but think the worst.

Luckily, the woman stabs him in the thigh with the pen. My relief is short-lived though because his symptoms don’t improve.

“Maybe it’s not anaphylaxis?”

“No, it is,” Asher says, the fear in his voice palpable. “But his is bad. Sometimes it takes two.”

I turn to the woman. “Do you have a second one?”

My heart drops to my stomach when she shakes her head, but I jump into action, issuing orders like a drill sergeant. “The ambulance is on the way, but in the meantime…” I look at Breslin. “Go to the bathroom upstairs and grab the Benadryl from the medicine cabinet.” I eye Landon and Asher next. “You two start knocking on our neighbor’s doors and see if anyone has an EpiPen.”

Plopping down on the floor next to Preston, I squeeze his hand. “Everything’s gonna be okay.” Holding his gaze, I touch his cheek with my

free one. “It’s me and you. Until the end, got it?”

He’s still wheezing so bad he can’t speak, but I know he hears me because he tightens his grip.

A moment later, Breslin returns with the Benadryl and EMTs burst into the room. Fortunately, *they* have tons of epinephrine and Preston’s wheezing finally subsides.

Unfortunately, he refuses to let them take him to the hospital to be checked out.

“You have to let them take you, Preston.”

His jaw clenches as he sits up in the bed. “No.”

*Stubborn ass.* “I’ll go with you.”

“You might have a rebound,” one of the EMTs tells him.

Preston looks like he wants to ram everyone’s head through the wall. “I’ll take my chances.”

“Come on, Preston. You need to go,” Breslin urges and Asher and Landon nod in agreement.

His broody demeanor strengthens. “What part of *no* don’t you people comprehend?”

“In that case, we have another call we have to get to,” the second EMT declares while looking at me. “There’s nothing more we can do here since he’s refusing to go to the hospital.” He surveys Preston. “You really should have an EpiPen.”

Dark gray orbs narrow. “And you really should go fu—”

“Thank you so much for helping him,” I interject, giving my ungrateful husband a dirty look. “We appreciate it.” I whip out my cell phone after they leave. “Fine, Holden. Since you refuse to go to the hospital, you give me no choice.”

Asher raises an eyebrow. “What are you doing?”

“Put the phone down, Bishop,” Preston grumbles.

Not a chance.

“Hey,” I greet Reggie when he answers. “I’m gonna need to borrow Nanna’s doctor again. Preston ate some seafood and he’s severely allergic. We called an ambulance and they helped stabilize him, but he refuses to go to the hospital. I want to make sure he’s okay.”

“Jesus Christ,” Preston grits out. “I’m *fine*.”

Reggie sighs and I can practically picture him rubbing his forehead while silently cursing my name. “Very well. I’ll make the arrangements.”

“Thanks, Sugar Bear. You’re a real one.”

Preston’s expression sours when I hang up. “I don’t need to see a fucking doctor.”

Sometimes dealing with him is like dealing with a toddler.

On second thought, I’m pretty sure toddlers are way easier.

“You almost *died*,” I inform him because it’s evident he’s forgotten.

It doesn’t faze him one bit, though. He simply shrugs like it’s no big deal.

Like his life doesn’t mean anything.

*Like losing him wouldn’t utterly destroy me.*

“I thought you cared about me.” I draw in a shaky breath. “But that can’t be true, because if you did...you’d know losing you would be the worst thing that could ever happen to me.” My voice cracks under the weight of my emotions. “You’d know that I wouldn’t—*couldn’t*—survive it.”

*It would shatter all my broken parts until there was nothing left.*

His expression softens. “Kit.”

“It would obliterate me.” Tears sting my eyes as the sadness within me rises. “But you don’t give a shit, because you’ve made it crystal clear that this connection between us is nothing but a joke.” My friends are watching me with pity now which only makes it worse. “And I’m the punch line.”

I turn to leave, but Preston’s pained voice halts me. “Come here.”

I ought to walk right out that door so he can experience how much it sucks when the person you care about the most discards your feelings like you’re nothing more than trash.

But I don’t.

Instead, I run into his open arms.

Because I care about him. *So damn much.*

The moment all four of my limbs wrap around him, the dam breaks and my tears fall like rain. “I wish I could hate you sometimes.”

Then it wouldn’t hurt so much whenever he upsets me.

*It wouldn’t feel like coming home whenever I’m in his arms.*

He buries his face in the crook of my neck. “I wish you could hate me, too.” Clutching me tighter, he inhales sharply. “I’ll see the stupid doctor, okay?”

The sadness in my chest dissipates. “Promise?”

“Yeah.” He tilts my chin, forcing me to look at him. The space between us constricts, as if we’re all alone in our little bubble and nothing else

matters. “You’re not a punch line, angry girl.” Cupping my face, he brushes my tears away with his thumbs, his mouth mere centimeters from mine. *So close, yet so far.* “You’re—”

Asher clears his throat, popping our bubble. “Should we leave?”

Breslin pokes him in the bicep. “Seriously?”

Landon’s face scrunches. “Way to ruin the moment.”

Asher shrugs. “My bad. I just wanted to know if the party was over or not.”

“No,” I say over my shoulder at the same time Preston grunts, “Yes.”

That’s when I remember. “Congratulations.”

The three of them beam, and then Asher and Landon look at each other and laugh. “It got a little complicated—with *both* of us proposing and all—but in the end it all worked out.”

I’m about to ask for all the details, but the doctor walks in. “Your grandmother said someone had an issue and needed to be seen.”

That’s putting it mildly.

“Yes.” I gesture to Preston as I get off his lap, but he tightens his hold, ensuring I stay right where I am. “He’s the patient.”

“Ah. We meet again.” The doctor places his suitcase on the bed beside us and fetches his stethoscope. “What happened?”

“Seafood happened,” Asher chimes in, much to Preston’s dismay.

Sweet baby Jesus. “Why don’t you three go and enjoy the rest of your engagement party.”

They start to decline, but I assure them it’s fine.

Begrudgingly they leave, but Asher lingers by the door. “I’m glad you’re okay.” He stuffs his hands in his pockets, looking like a fish out of water. “I appreciate you kicking Rivera’s ass before. It meant a lot—”

“You can show your appreciation by getting the fuck out.” Preston’s glare is filled with so much venom, I wince. “Now.”

Whatever hopes Asher might have had about repairing his relationship with his brother are dashed once again.

He looked so defeated when he leaves the room my chest hurts.

As if anticipating my potential badgering, Preston’s eyes lock on mine with a punch I feel in my gut. “Don’t start.”

I concede, but I’m not letting him off the hook so easily. We’ll discuss this another time.

When he’s not going through a medical emergency.

“Can someone explain what happened?” the doctor asks, looking thoroughly annoyed we haven’t gotten to the point of his visit yet.

I know Preston won’t talk, so I do. “He has a severe seafood allergy and went into anaphylaxis. The first EpiPen didn’t work, but the EMTs showed up shortly after and he was better.” I send a glare his way. “He doesn’t want to go to the hospital, though.”

“I see.” His forehead creases. “I’ll need to examine you, but I can’t do that when…” He raises a brow, hinting that I’m blocking him from doing his job.

Preston grunts in protest when I get off his lap. “Sorry.”

The doctor places his stethoscope on his chest. “Young man, do you have something against hospitals?”

“Aside from the fact you have to wait an eternity to be seen and when you finally are, they charge an arm and a leg for subpar care?”

The doctor doesn’t disagree. “Point taken.”

I look on as he takes a few more vitals and examines him. “How long have you had a shellfish allergy?”

“It’s not just shellfish, it’s all seafood.” He glowers. “And since I was nine.”

He writes something down on his notepad. “I assume you must have eaten something at the party that you weren’t aware contained seafood.”

Preston gives the doc a nasty smile. “Gee, you think?”

“Preston,” I hiss.

As usual, he’s being rude to someone who’s only trying to help him.

Preston shrugs. “I asked the waiter what was on the tray and he told me it was meatballs.”

“Wait a minute.” My mind flits back to the meeting I had with the caterers last week. I remember specifically requesting that they not serve any seafood since Breslin hates it and Landon isn’t too fond of it either. “That’s…weird.”

Why the hell would there be seafood when I explicitly asked for there not to be?

“I know. Who the hell makes meatballs with seafood?” Preston pulls a face. “Then again, I’m asking the wrong person considering *your* culinary skills.”

I let that dig roll off my back because I’m too focused on what happened. “No. What’s weird is that when I sat down with the caterers to plan the menu

for the party, I told them I didn't want any seafood served."

Preston doesn't seem too concerned about this. "Shit happens, Bishop. People fuck up all the time."

Yeah, but deliberately not doing something I requested is not only a dick move and poor customer service...their mistake almost *killed* him.

My guts twist with anxiety. "I don't know, something feels off."

Although I can't think of a single reason why anyone would go out of their way to harm Preston.

Preston snorts. "You're being paranoid. It's not like they slipped rat poisoning into my food."

He has a point. Plus, it's not like I mentioned his allergy to them because I didn't think he was attending.

"Maybe it was the chef," the doctor supplies.

When we look at him, he adds, "My wife hired a fancy private chef for a party we hosted last year, and he was difficult to say the least. Not only did he have a short fuse, he refused to alter some of his recipes for our guests." His face scrunches. "He was one hell of a cook though."

"See?" Preston buttons his shirt. "You can take your tinfoil hat off now."

Still feeling upset, I cross my arms. "Fine, but I'm leaving them a shitty review on Yelp."

The doctor places his stethoscope in his bag. "Your heart rate is a little high right now, but that's to be expected. Other than that, all your vitals are within normal range." He takes out his tablet and begins typing something. "I want you to take some Benadryl and I'm sending a prescription for an EpiPen to your local pharmacy." He gives Preston a stern look. "Ensure you carry it with you at all times because if this ever happens again, you might not end up so lucky."

I feel all the color drain out of my face with that statement. "I'll make sure he does."

Nodding, he starts for the door. "You should also consider wearing a medical bracelet."

I'm glad his back is turned so he can't see the *fuck that* expression on Preston's face as he leaves the room.

I pick up the Benadryl bottle and the cup of water on the nightstand. "You heard the man."

Despite looking like he wants to fight me tooth and nail, he swallows the pill. "There. Happy?"

Not really, because something else isn't sitting right with me.

"Preston?"

"Kit?"

I expel a breath. "You were in a houseful of people."

His stony expression gives nothing away. "Okay."

My heart sinks like a stone as I deliver my next sentence. "But you didn't ask anyone for help." I look around my childhood bedroom. "Instead, you came in here...alone."

He doesn't say a word, but he doesn't have to. I read him loud and clear.

He didn't seek out help—not even from me—because he didn't want anyone to see him helpless and vulnerable.

*He'd rather die.*

The thought has my chest tightening to the point of pain because no one should ever feel like they have no one to turn to in this world, and I want so desperately to be that person for him.

Stepping between his open legs, I place my hands on his shoulders. "Look at me." When he does, I whisper, "I can't force you to trust me because that's something only you can determine." I trace the structured line of his jaw, my fingers trailing the faint stubble. "But I'm here and I'm all yours...for however long you want me."

Folding his arms around my waist, he slumps forward, causing his forehead to rest against my chest. "I'll always want you." There's so much agony in his voice it takes my breath and then gives it back. "That's the problem."

My previous conversation with Juan flashes through my head like a warning sign...

Along with the memory of me hugging my knees to my chest and praying for God to fix me while I was trapped in the basement, thanks to one of my Nanna's punishments.

I wanted so badly to be normal...

*To be loved.*

But once I finally found my strength and realized I didn't need to be fixed because different didn't mean broken, I vowed to never let anyone make me feel like I had to conform to what they wanted me to be ever again.

However, in this moment I find myself wishing I could turn myself inside out so I can give him what he needs.

*Be the solution instead of the problem.*

“I’m sorry.”

Calloused fingers bracket my chin, his gentle hold in contrast to the severe look in his eyes. “Don’t ever be sorry for being you.” His chest lifts on a breath and he holds my stare. “There’s nothing wrong with you, angry girl. Not a damn thing.”

As much as his words bring me comfort, they also cause me to hurt. “It’s not fair.”

“What’s not?”

I stomp my foot in frustration. “I’m a giver, dammit.”

He looks at me like I’ve sprouted another head. “I’m gonna need you to walk me through this one.”

My shoulders sag with an expansive sigh. “You know the right things to say and do to make it better and give me what I need so I don’t go off the deep end, but I can’t do the same for you.”

Not being able to do that for him in return breaks my heart.

His expression grows pinched. “What makes you so sure about that?”

“I don’t know.” It’s a difficult question to answer because I can’t exactly pinpoint it. “It just seems that way.”

“Well, you’re wrong.”

I blink, caught off guard. “I am?”

He merely nods, but it’s enough for me.

Grinning, I entwine my arms around his neck. Knowing he considers me his person too is the best feeling in the world. “We’re otters.”

The hands that were skating down the length of my back come to a stop. “Otters?”

Reaching behind me, I grab his hand so I can prove my point. “Otters hold hands so they don’t drift apart and lose each other.” Emotion catches me by the throat and my voice quivers. “I don’t ever want to lose you...so I’ll always hold your hand.”

For a moment I think he’s going to tease me and tell me I’m being corny, but he doesn’t. “I don’t want to lose you either.” A dimple graces his cheek. “But I’m not so sure this whole otter thing will work out given they eat a lot of seafood.”

Shoot. I didn’t even think of that. “We can be vegetarian otters.”

That gets a laugh out of him. “You’re so weird.”

“And you’re so...”

*Giving me butterflies.*



Untangling myself from him, I sprint across the room like my ass is on fire. “I’m gonna go out there and check on things. Be back in a bit.”

I draw in several deep cleansing breaths once I’m on the other side of the door.

*The stove is hot—my mind warns me.*

But for once, I don’t want to chase the burn.

*Because we’ll both go up in flames.*

## Chapter 24

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Preston

My eyelids feel weighted down by bricks as I glance at the clock on the nightstand. It's barely after midnight, but the party must be over because the noise downstairs has died down. After Kit went back to the party, I ended up going up to my bedroom and passing the fuck out. Not long enough, though, because I'm up now.

Muttering a curse, I reach for the Benadryl and swallow another pill. Usually, I don't give a shit about following doctor's orders, but since I can't gamble anymore, I might as well sleep.

I'm rolling over in bed when the door opens. I'm about to cut into Kit about not knocking again, but my words fall by the wayside when I see her. Sporting a pair of cow print footie pajamas and holding a bright pink tote bag, she gives me a warm smile. My gaze falls to the pillow stuffed under one arm and the headless teddy stuffed under her other one. Next to her is a drooling bulldog who's eyeing my bed with keen interest.

"What are you doing?"

With a determined glint in her eye, Kit marches inside. "Lola and I want to keep an eye on you tonight, so we're crashing here and having a slumber party."

The fuck they are.

"I'm fine," I bark, but she's already pulling the comforter back and climbing into my bed.

Her fruity, addictive scent surrounds me like a fog and it's all I can do not to lean over and bury my face in her hair.

On second thought, maybe this isn't such a bad idea after all.

The dog attempts to jump on the bed next, but I snap my fingers and point to the floor. “You sleep down there.”

Kit frowns and he huffs, but I don’t give a shit. Only one animal is allowed in my bed and it’s the cow.

Kit sets up shop beside me, pulling various items out of her tote bag and laying them out on the bed.

I eye her skeptically. “What exactly does this slumber party entail, because the only ones I’ve ever had didn’t include clothes.”

Not that I’m opposed to stripping her down and having my way with her. Although this Benadryl is kicking my ass, so my impressive skills might not be up to par.

It doesn’t matter, though because Kit’s quick to shut that idea down. “There will be none of that, mister. But there are lots of other fun things we can do.”

Kit’s idea of fun and mine are night and day, so that’s doubtful.

“Like what?”

She holds up a bottle of pink polish. “We can paint each other’s nails.”

I’d rather *swallow* nails. “Hard pass.”

Digging through the tote, she pulls out a few small jars. “Okay. We can give each other facials then.”

I wouldn’t mind giving her one, but unfortunately for me, her idea of a facial and mine are *very* different.

“Pass.”

Frustrated, she shoves the girlie crap back into the tote and drops it on the floor. “Fine. We can order a pizza and tell each other secrets.”

A sharp twist of reluctance clenches my stomach because my secrets will crush her.

“Pizza yes. Secrets no.”

It’s clear she’s not pleased with this answer either by the way she pouts. “Oh, come on. There has to be something you want to know about me. There’s still stuff I want to know about you.”

For fuck’s sake. What other information could she possibly want? She knows more about me than anyone else does.

Tucking my arm beneath my pillow, I peer up at her. “Like what?”

I’m in dangerous territory, but I don’t want her to feel like she can’t trust me.

“I don’t know.” I can see the wheels in her head spinning as she chews

her bottom lip. “What was your first kiss like?”

I tell her the truth. “Sloppy and painful.”

Her nose scrunches. “Painful? Why?” Her face falls and she clutches her chest. “Oh, God. Did she break your heart?”

That’s laughable. “No. She had braces and a bad case of halitosis.”

“Oh. That’s...” Her voice trails off.

“The only reason I did it was because I lost a bet to Jimmy Fernsby in fifth grade and kissing the ugliest girl in class was the unfortunate penalty.” I waggle my eyebrows. “Sure made *her* year, though.”

“God, you’re the worst.” Slipping under the covers, she turns her body toward me. “What’s the best date you’ve ever been on?”

Once again, I give her the truth. “The ones where I took them to the casino and they left me the fuck alone.”

“How romantic.” She averts her gaze and picks at a piece of lint on the comforter. “How did you lose your virginity?”

“I unzipped my pants and stuck my dick inside her cunt.”

“No, you asshole,” she says in exasperation. “I meant, how old were you? What was it like?”

For me, sex is nothing more than a biological need to be satisfied. Sure, it feels fucking great while you’re doing it, but any details about the women I’ve been with aren’t important enough for me to store in my brain’s database. Quite the opposite, actually. My encounters all blend together.

“I was fifteen.” That much I can still recall. “I don’t remember much else...aside from thinking it was the best three minutes of my life.”

“Wow.” Her forehead creases. “That’s kind of...sad.”

“Don’t worry,” I assure her with a wink. “I’m able to last a lot longer now.”

She rolls her eyes. “Not that. I meant that it wasn’t special enough for you to remember.”

I’m not bothered by it. “I’m a guy, Bishop. Sex isn’t special for us. The only thing we care about is getting our dick wet.”

Her expression falters. “Right.”

Silence stretches between us, and it’s evident by the way she’s frowning that my last statement upset her.

My gaze drifts to the small pink heart tattooed on her upper arm.

Much like the tattoo, Kit wears her heart on her sleeve, and something tells me sex is always special for her.

“How did you lose yours?”

A small smile curls her pouty lips. “When I was seventeen, I got a fake ID so I could go to a gay bar.” Her smile fades. “I wanted to experience what it was like to be in a place where I was truly accepted. A safe place where nobody would judge me for being different...because they were, too.” A faint blush colors her cheeks. “Anyway, there was this woman. She was older and a little rough around the edges, but there was something about her that captivated me. I sat at the end of the bar and watched her for most of the night, trying to gather the courage to talk to her. In the end, she approached me first.”

No surprise there. You’d have to be clinically brain dead not to notice Kit Bishop.

“We talked and danced...made out a little in a dark corner of the club.” Her lips part on an inhale. “Things heated up so much we went out to her van.” She traces little patterns on the comforter with her finger. “I was petrified I was going to screw something up and ruin the moment, but it was perfect. She was so kind and tender...so patient. It was one of the best nights—best *experiences*—of my whole entire life.”

Jealousy bolts through my gut like the twist of a dull knife. Not only because Kit’s talking about having sex with someone who isn’t me. But because that woman was able to give her something I never can.

“What happened after that? Did you see her again?”

She nods. “I went back to the club the next weekend hoping to run into her.” She goes silent for a beat. “When I saw her, she was kissing another girl.” Pain etches her features, and it’s as if she’s reliving the moment in real time. “It hurt so fucking bad.”

I don’t hit women, but I feel the sudden urge to track the bitch down and make an exception to that rule.

Draping my arm around her, I draw her close. “I say we kill her and then scatter her body parts all over the world so they never find her.”

She jolts. “What?”

“Just say the word and I’ll make it happen.”

She rests her head on my chest. “You’re crazy.”

She’s not wrong. I lose my damn mind when it comes to her.

A surge of tiredness engulfs me, and I close my eyes. “Hate to be a party pooper, but I took some more Benadryl earlier and it’s starting to kick in.”

I’m drifting off when I feel her grip my hand. “Sweet dreams.”

## Chapter 25

---

Kit

Juan pops his head over my cubicle. “Come out with me after work.”

I look up from my computer. “Okay.” Tapping the buttons on my keyboard, I continue typing up a reply email to a disgruntled consumer. Evidently, she’s upset she only had one mind-blowing orgasm instead of the ‘countless’ she was promised on the ad. “Where are we going?”

“I don’t know. A bar. Maybe a club.” He sulks. “I haven’t gotten laid since the party last month, so I need you to be my wing girl tonight.”

Wait a minute...

I stop typing. “You had sex with someone at the engagement party?”

His grin is coy as he pretends to examine his nails. “Yup.”

Well, shit. This is definitely news to me.

“Who?”

He flutters his eyelashes. “Told you I was gonna snag me an NFL player.”

Safe to say he has all my attention. “I need the deets. How was it?”

His lips pull into a pout. “Nice body, small dick...*bad* kisser.”

Ugh. That seriously sucks.

I open my mouth to tell him I’m down for tonight, but Jess shows up.

Along with that weasel Jared who blatantly leers at me like a creeper.

I’ve been counting my lucky stars since I’ve been back in the Connecticut office because I haven’t seen much of them.

Sadly, my luck’s run out.



“Hey,” Jess says, her eyes ping ponging between me and Juan. “Can you two go pick up some refreshments for the staff meeting this afternoon?”

Juan and I exchange a *what the fuck* glance because being the gofer isn’t in either of our job descriptions.

“No problem,” I tell her, because like it or not, she’s the one who signs my paychecks.

She gives me a saccharine smile that doesn’t reach her eyes. “Thanks.”

I swivel my chair back around, but she clears her throat. “Kit?”

“Yeah?”

“I’d like you to go now please.”

“Sure thing.”

After they step out, Juan hisses, “When did we become interns?”

I almost spill the beans about what happened in Vegas, but I can’t because I signed that stupid NDA.

Sighing, I shut my computer down and grab my purse. “When I pissed off the bosses.”



I examine the items in the shopping cart. “Do you think this is good enough?”

I’m not really sure what Jess meant by *refreshments*, so I just grabbed a couple of dips and vegetable platters from the local grocery store.

Shrugging, Juan unwraps another candy bar and takes a bite. “If not, it’s their own fault for dumping it on us.”

True dat.

“All right, let’s go check out.”

Juan clutches his stomach. “Oh, girl. Wait a minute.”

“What’s wrong?”

Grimacing, he tosses his half-eaten candy bar at me. “I have to drop the kids off at the pool.” He takes off running. “I’ll meet you in the car.”

I zero in on the four empty wrappers in the cart. Juan’s chocolate addiction could give *Willy Wonka* a run for his money.

“That’s what you get for eating so much sugar.”



I cradle the phone between my neck and shoulder so I can load the grocery bags into the trunk of my car. “This Saturday’s not gonna work for me, Reggie. I’m going wedding dress shopping with Breslin.”

“But your *grandmother* is requesting your attendance for brunch.”

He says it like she’s the queen of fucking Sheba.

“Tell her I’m sorry, but I’m not blowing off my best friend. I’ll have to take a rain check.”

“Fine,” he grumbles. “I’ll let her know you’re unwilling to oblige her.”

Good grief. “Thanks, sugar pie.”

I hear his usual huff of annoyance before the line goes dead.

I’m placing the last bag into my trunk when I notice a car speeding down the lane I’m in. I assume the driver is going to slam on the brakes any minute—because *hello*—but the vehicle accelerates.

And it’s headed straight for me.

“Whoa,” I shout. “Slow dow—” Adrenaline mixed with pure fear floods my system and I dive out of the way.

A loud crashing sound assaults my ears as the black SUV smashes into my shopping cart before taking off.

*Holy shit.* What the actual fuck was that?

“Oh, my God!” Juan screeches, darting across the parking lot. “Are you okay?” He drops on the ground beside me. “What happened?”

That’s just it. I don’t *know*.

Everything happened so quickly I could barely register what was going on...let alone see the driver or take down a license plate.

“Ouch.”

White-hot pain shoots up my ankle and when I look down, I see that my favorite pair of jeans are ripped at the kneecaps and there’s a stream of blood oozing out.

That said, a scraped knee and twisted ankle is so much better than the alternative.

Even still, the whole thing was utterly terrifying. Especially since the driver showed no signs of slowing down.

My insides lurch. It was like they *intentionally* wanted to hit me.

“Juan?”

“Yeah?”

“I think someone tried to run me over.”

## Chapter 26

---

Kit

Head spinning and legs still feeling like Jell-O, I open my front door.

I told Juan I wanted to make a pitstop at home so I could change and get cleaned up before heading back to work.

I catch Preston jogging down the staircase as I enter the house. *Shit.*

His eyes go big as he takes in my bloody ripped jeans. “What happened to you?”

Ignoring that question, I hobble my way toward the kitchen. “Do we have any ice?”

“Don’t know.” Preston’s hot on my trail like a bloodhound tracking a scent. “Answer the question.”

I open the freezer and take out an ice pack, but Preston snatches it out of my hand.

“Kit.”

*Fuck a duck.*

I take a deep breath. Then another.

“Okay, don’t freak out. But I think someone kind of, sort of...tried to kill me.”

Preston’s expression morphs from concern to shock...and then anger all in the span of a few seconds. “What do you mean you think someone tried to *kill* you?”

“Well,” I begin, taking a seat on a kitchen stool. “Jess sent me and Juan out to get refreshments for our staff meeting today.”

Preston places the ice pack on my knee. “Go on.”

“I was putting the groceries we got into my trunk when I saw a car speeding toward me. I yelled for them to slow down because they were going really fast, but they slammed on the gas instead.” A swell of anxiety rolls through me. “If I hadn’t jumped out of the way in time, they would have run me over.”

“Christ.” His nostrils flare on an indrawn breath. “Did you or Juan get a good look at the driver or license plate?”

I shake my head. “Juan wasn’t there, but everything happened so fast I didn’t have time to.”

Hell, I barely had time to register what was going on.

Those gray orbs darken. “What do you mean Juan wasn’t there. Where the fuck was he?”

“He left to use the bathroom while I took the groceries out to the car.”

It’s clear he doesn’t like that because a muscle in his jaw bunches and the hand holding the ice pack tenses.

“That’s...” His voice trails off and his eyes become tiny slits. “Motherfucker.”

“Motherfucker *what?*” I probe, because the ominous look in his eyes is giving me the heebie-jeebies.

He slams the ice pack on the counter. “Where were you going when you were attacked in New York, Kit?”

“I was heading out to get breakfast for me and Juan.” I’m seriously having trouble following whatever his train of thought is. “Why?”

“That’s a hell of a coincidence, don’t you think?”

Good golly, Miss Molly. The implication would be laughable if he wasn’t so serious.

“Hold the phone. You think *Juan* had something to do with this? Are you crazy? He would never hurt a fly.” I place the ice pack back on my knee. “Hell, if anyone has it out for me it’s...”

Record. Freaking. Skip.

A vein in Preston’s neck bulges. “It’s *who?*”

He was right. There is a common denominator here, but it’s not Juan.

It’s my *job*.

Clutching my stomach, I hop off the stool.

I knew Jess and Jared were snakes. They made that clear with what they did to me in Vegas *and* by forcing me to sign that NDA, but I didn’t think they’d go as far as to try and off me.

Although, I *did* threaten to start World War three if Jess fired me...so there's that.

"Start talking," Preston barks.

"I can't." I hate how weak my voice sounds, but I'm so screwed. It's bad enough they manipulated me into silence. Now they're trying to wipe me off the face of the earth just to ensure it. "It's...I..."

"Look at me." When I do, he utters, "You can tell me anything."

He's right. He's my husband.

*My Preston.*

Not to mention, he already knows what they did to me because I told him *before* I ever signed the NDA.

"Do you remember why I ended up in your motel room that night in Vegas?"

The tendons in his neck coil. "Yeah, because your boss is a conniving bitch who gave you drugs and then took advantage of you."

I peer down at my bloody knee because I'm too embarrassed to look him in the eyes when I say this.

"Yes. But what you don't know is...Jess and Jared had me sign an NDA afterward."

God, I seriously regret not ripping up the paper and walking out of that office with my middle finger in the air.

"Why the hell would you ever agree to sign that?"

His harsh, critical tone makes me flinch. "Because I'm a fucking idiot, okay?" I swallow the lump in my throat. "Jess made it sound like it was all just a misunderstanding and I was being dramatic. She said they didn't force me to do anything and me claiming to be a victim would be insulting to all the women who have been raped." I wring my hands. "As much as I hate to admit it, she's right. I was able to walk out of that hotel room in one piece. So, when she suggested we all put this behind us and told me I would keep my job if I signed...I agreed."

A trail of tension rides down his jaw as he clenches his hands and begins pacing. "That's fucking bullshit." Suddenly, he stops moving. "A nondisclosure agreement can't be enforced when it's used to conceal a crime."

Before I can process what he's saying, he storms out of the house.

I quickly hobble behind him. "Where are you going?"

I can practically see smoke coming out of his ears as he stalks out to my

car.

Snarling, he yanks my driver's side door open and gets inside.

Juan, who's sitting in the passenger seat, flutters his fingers in a dainty wave. "Hello."

I barely have time to scramble into the back seat before Preston's peeling out of the driveway. "What are you doing?"

Preston remains silent the entire car ride.



I tug on Preston's sleeve when he marches through the doors of Pretty Kitties. "Don't do this."

I get that he's mad. I am too. However, these are dangerous people so I don't think confronting them in person is the best way to fight back.

Thankfully, the office is empty when he barges inside.

This doesn't deter Preston, though because he wanders down the hall and starts opening doors. *Dang it.*

"Let's call the police and let them handle this."

I might as well be talking to a wall, because he kicks open an office door.

I'm relieved that it too is unoccupied.

"Where are they?" Preston trudges down the hallway like he's on a SEAL team mission, leaving no room or cubicle unchecked. "Where the *fuck* are they?"

Juan fans himself. "Goodness, he's sexy."

I'm about to tell him that this is so *not* the right time to ogle my unhinged husband, but Preston reaches the end of the hall and swings open the double doors of the conference room.

A conference room that's flooded with employees.

Everyone turns to us, no doubt wondering why a madman is disrupting their staff meeting.

Juan points to Jess who's standing at the head of the long table. "There *she* is." He then points to Jared who's in the seat next to her. "And there *he* is."

*Freaking Juan.* "Jesus, Juan."

Smoothing his suit jacket, Jared stands up. "Can I help you?"

Faster than a speeding bullet, Preston marches over and punches Jared in

the face so hard he stumbles back several feet. “You worthless piece of fucking shit.”

Everyone gasps, including me. “Preston.”

Outraged, Jess swivels her gaze my way. “You *know* him?”

“He’s her husband,” Juan unhelpfully declares.

*Freaking Juan.*

She blinks, clearly taken aback by this news. “Husband?”

Moaning, Jared places his hand over his swollen eye. “Someone call the police.”

“Good idea.” Preston glares daggers at both of them. “This way I can tell them you’re fucking predators who drug and assault their employees before trying to kill them.”

Jared opens his mouth to speak, but Preston wraps a hand around his throat. His grip is so tight Jared’s turning purple. “I’m gonna make sure you never touch her again, you sick son of a bitch.”

*Oh, no.*

“Let him go,” I plead.

Not because I don’t think Jared deserves it, but because I don’t want to see Preston in a jail cell for murder.

Jumping into action, I try prying his fingers from his throat, but his hold is airtight. *Literally.*

“Please stop. *Please.*” Dread coils my insides with every passing second. “For me.”

When that doesn’t work, I do the only thing I can think of.

The one thing that *might* snap him out of his violent haze and get through to him.

Clutching my stomach, I let out a desperate, agonizing wail. “Stop hurting me!”

Preston spins around, releasing his hold, and Jared slumps down the wall, sucking in air.

Alarmed, Preston looks me over, checking for signs of injury. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not.” Palming his cheeks, I hold his gaze. “I know you’re angry, but I *need* you to calm the fuck down before you do something that will make me lose you for the next twenty-five years.” I place my hand over his heart. It’s pumping so fast it feels like it’s beating right out of his chest. “Don’t do that to me.”



*Because I won't survive.*

Jess approaches Preston like one would approach a ticking bomb. “Look, I don’t know what you think happened, but we did *nothing*—”

“Nothing?” Preston turns his lethal stare on her. “Is that why you made her sign an NDA?”

“An NDA she clearly violated,” Jared mutters from his place on the floor.

Preston’s boot goes sailing into his stomach. “Motherfucker, do you *want* me to kill you?”

“Preston,” I hiss. “Enough.”

Jess rubs her temples. “Okay, it’s clear this is all one big misunderstanding. Let’s go to my office so we can talk.”

I’m about to tell her there’s a better chance of pigs flying than me signing another one of her NDA’s, but Marge stands up and addresses the room. “It’s not a misunderstanding. They assaulted me too.” She glares at Jared. “When I threatened to press charges, they said they’d release the naked pictures this asshole took of me while I was passed out.”

The guy next to her stands. “Jess offered me drugs one night while we were partying at a club. I didn’t think anything of it, until I woke up naked in Jared’s house and couldn’t remember anything that happened. When I said I would go to the police, they threatened to release the video they took of me sucking his dick.”

My mouth drops open and bile surges up my throat. *Oh, God.*

Up until now, I thought I was the only employee they manipulated.

Finding out that they’ve been violating and blackmailing my coworkers is nauseating.

“Smells like a lawsuit to me,” Preston sneers as two police officers enter the conference room. “You can kiss your company goodbye.”



I drop the box filled with crap from my former office in the foyer and head into the kitchen. “I need a drink. You want a beer?”

Juan shakes his head. “No, but I’ll take a mimosa.”

“We don’t have any champagne.” I open the freezer and pull out the bottle of Absolute. “But I’ve got vodka.”

“That works.”

I take the orange juice out of the fridge then fill two glasses with some ice.

Juan looks around the kitchen as I prepare our drinks. “So, where do you think your husband disappeared to?”

Shortly after the police took the reports and left, so did Preston. I figured he needed some time to cool down, but seeing as he’s still not home and isn’t answering his phone, I’m not so sure.

“I have no idea.”

My stomach twists with dread. *I really hope he’s not gambling.*

Exhaling a deep breath, I gesture for Juan to follow me into the living room.

He makes himself comfortable on the couch and flicks on the television. “Big dick energy *and* a hero complex. That’s so hot.”

I plop down next to him. “Yeah, he was awesome...but now I’m unemployed.”

Juan places his head on my shoulder. “Me too.”

## Chapter 27

---

Kit

*I*ron tentacles wrap around my lungs and I scratch and claw at the hand around my throat. “No.”

His grip tightens, crushing my larynx. White-hot fear envelops me as I struggle to breathe.

*One wrong move and I'll fall.*

A callous smile twists his lips. “I need a favor.”

Trickles of ice-cold terror zip down my spine when I feel the cold metal from the barrel of the gun dig into my temple.

Vomit works up my throat and my legs turn to rubber...because I know what happens next.

*I know how this ends.*

Reaching behind me, I clutch the railing for support...

Only this time, it isn't there.

I freeze, realizing the only thing preventing me from plummeting to my death is the hand around my throat.

Hollow, empty eyes stare back at me. “I want you to beg.”

He eases his grip just enough to let me speak. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of caving into his demands, but I don't want to die, either, so I concede.

“Please don't kill me, Kyle.”

I reach for my poker chip, but he beats me to it.

“No.”

*I can't lose him.*

Determination races through my veins as I dig my nails into his skin,

trying to pry his fist open.

“Watch out.”

His deep, familiar voice wraps around me like a security blanket and I snap my head up.

Preston extends his arm, reaching for my hand, but it’s too late...

*I’m already falling.*

“No!”

I hit the water so hard my skin burns and my lungs compress.

I kick and pump my legs, trying to get to the surface, but I can’t...

*Whatever you do. Don’t open your eyes.*

“Kitty.”

No.

“Kitty cat.”

My stomach churns at the sound of my uncle’s voice.

“Here, kitty, kitty,” he teases.

“Leave me alone—”

The metallic tang of blood filling my mouth causes me to gag. When I make the mistake of opening my eyes, there’s nothing but a haze of red.

And body parts.

A scream tears out of me when I see my father’s head float by.

His lifeless eyes are wide with panic and his pallid face is twisted with horror.

My insides convulse and a sharp pang of sorrow shoots through me.

That’s how he looked when he died...utterly petrified.

Big ugly sobs wrench out of me. The pain of this grief is unbearable, and every ounce of fight drains out of my body.

*I’m sorry I couldn’t save you.*

“Wake up, Kit.”

Preston?

The water’s so murky, I can barely make out his face...

*But I feel him.*

He shoves his poker chip into my palm. “It’s me and you, angry girl. Until the end, got it?”

I grip his hand, holding on to it for dear life. “I’m so scared.”

Cruel laughter chills me to the bone and I’m paralyzed with fright as Preston’s face transforms into my uncle’s.

“You should be.” He rips the poker chip out of my hand. “Because he

can't save you.”

## Chapter 28

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Preston

The sound of scratching outside my bedroom door rouses me from sleep.

Opening my eyes, I scan the dark room. “Go away.”

The scratching picks up...followed by a bark.

*Dammit.* Kit said she’d take care of the dog...and that includes letting him out in the middle of the night.

Muttering another curse, I get out of bed and slip on a pair of boxers.

The mutt barks again, his scratching becoming more frantic.

*Fucking hell.* I knew telling Darius to forget the money he owed me in exchange for keeping the ugly, drooling mongrel was a mistake.

I only did it because I saw how happy the damn thing made Kit and how attached she is to him.

She’s already lost so much in her life, I didn’t have the heart to rip away another thing she loves.

But as the scratching continues—along with the barking—I’m seriously regretting that decision.

I swing open my bedroom door. “You’re testing my patience, asshole.”

I expect him to bolt downstairs so I can let him out, but he doesn’t.

Visibly anxious, he leads me down the hall...where I hear screaming coming from Kit’s room.

Instantly, my body jolts into action, ready to go in there and tear whoever’s hurting her from limb to fucking limb.

Another blood-curdling scream erupts from her when I enter the room and look around. She thrashes against the mattress, her small frame



shuddering like a tree in a hurricane as she clutches her poker chip for dear life.

*Shit.* She's having a nightmare. So much time has passed since her last one, I figured they stopped.

Evidently, I was wrong.

Slowly, I approach her bed. "Kit."

"No." A choked sob rips from her throat, and she kicks her legs. "Please don't kill me."

As always, seeing her like this is the equivalent of someone cutting my chest open.

I flick on the light on the nightstand. "Wake up, Kit."

Her voice is a raw shredded scrape as she flails around the bed. "Preston."

"I'm here."

She doesn't register that, though because she lets out an ear-piercing wail that fucking crushes me.

When she yells for me again, I waste no time wrapping my arms around her.

She struggles for a few seconds, kicking and floundering, but then she wilts.

"Preston?" Her body feels like ice despite her sweat soaked skin. "Is it really you?"

She looks so dazed and weak, my chest knots. "It's me, angry girl."

Those hazel eyes go wide with panic. "It wasn't before. He tricked me—"

"It was just a bad dream," I assure her. "Besides, you know I'll always keep you safe."

I expect this to comfort her because it did last time...but it has the opposite effect.

Her tremors escalate. So do her sobs.

"You won't." Breaking out of my hold, she grips her hair and cries out, "You *can't*."

A range of emotions barrel into me at once. Anger, offense...and finally, resolve.

I'm not a moral, upstanding citizen and I sure as fuck never claim to be, but I'd protect this girl with my life without a second thought.

I grab her by the shoulders, forcing her to forget that damn nightmare and focus on me. "There's nothing in the world that I wouldn't do for you, angry

girl. *Nothing*. Do you fucking hear me?”

She shakes her head, making it clear my words didn't penetrate. “He said you can't—”

“I can and I *will*,” I roar, causing her to jump.

I don't care if God himself came to her in that nightmare and told her otherwise, as long as the fucked-up organ in my chest is still beating, I'll always protect her.

Through any means necessary.

She nods slowly, appearing to finally grasp my words...and then she slumps against me—her soft sobs filling the room.

*Jesus fucking Christ*. She's tearing me wide open.

I close my arms around her, pinning her to my bare chest. Her heart rate and breathing are erratic, and I'm hoping the close contact does the trick and calms her down.

It doesn't, though. If anything, her heart beats faster.

*Mine too*.

I trace circles up and down her spine, trying to ignore the rush of lust that pulsates my groin whenever my fingertips brush over those little indents above her ass.

Goosebumps break out over her skin and I suppress a groan when her teeth scrape my shoulder.

I know she needs to be consoled and even though that shit isn't in my DNA, I'm trying my best, but fuck...she's playing with fire.

“Preston?”

“What?” It comes out with more bite than I intended.

Her voice is a broken, helpless whisper. “Make me forget for a little while.”

Those are the very same words I said to her that night.

Only this time, it's not me asking.

It's *her*.

Just like that, whatever self-control I had evaporates.

Blood rushes hot and thick through my veins as I dig my fingers into her ass and place her on her back, ignoring all the red flags and flashing warning signs blazing through my cerebellum.

Last time we were in bed together she was wearing cow footie pajamas, but that's not the case now.

She's in nothing but a thin white tank top and white cotton panties.

Leaving little to the imagination.

I situate myself between her thighs, eliciting a sharp gasp from her. “Preston.”

She utters my name like a prayer she’s pleading with me to answer.

I run a knuckle down her cleavage, and she arches her back, granting me the visual of watching her nipples harden through the delicate fabric of her top.

*Christ.* I’m barely touching her but she’s responding like she’s having an orgasm.

I bite back a groan, the thought now compelling me to go on a mission to find out exactly what kinds of sounds she makes when she comes.

Leaning in, I hover my mouth over her nipple, intentionally teasing her. “You want my mouth here?”

Generally, I don’t question what women want in bed. Hell, I don’t need to. However, I’m not giving Kit a free pass to chalk tonight up to being seduced against her will.

I want her to acknowledge every move I make because *she* fucking asked for it.

Because she wants it, too.

Kit nods, but it’s not enough. I want to hear the actual words.

“Say it.”

“I…” She swallows. “I want your mouth there.” A shiver wracks her frame. “Please.”

I’m not done pressing her buttons just yet.

“Then what?” I give the fabric a little flick with my tongue. “Do you want me to taste them?” Enclosing my mouth around the bud, I pull it into my mouth before releasing it with a wet pop. “Suck them?”

“Yes.” Her eyes close and her sigh is expansive, like she’s defeated. “All of that.”

*There it is.*

Slowly, I shove her tank top up her stomach, taking in every sliver of buttery skin I uncover. Last time we were in this position it was dark, and my head was too fucked up to enjoy the visual.

But that’s not the case now.

I’m hard as a rock by the time I tug the material over her head, and her breasts are on full display.

A flush colors her cheeks, and her arms fly up to cover herself, like she’s

embarrassed.

But she shouldn't be. Kit's not rocking a double D, but her tits are perky, and those pink puffy nipples drive me out of my goddamn mind.

In other words, "They're fucking perfect."

I've told her this before, but she must not have gotten the memo.

Plumping her tit in my hand, I draw her nipple into my mouth, taking urgent, greedy pulls that have her clutching my shoulder. "Oh, God." Small needy whimpers fill the air when I give the same attention to the other one. The sound is a hard tug on my cock. "That feels so good."

It's about to feel even better.

I begin the slow, torturous descent down her body, stopping to lick and suck every inch of soft skin I come across.

I intend to explore and learn all her favorite spots tonight. Store them in my database as arsenal so I can drive her crazy whenever I want.

"Preston," she hisses when I bracket my hands around her waist and tongue her belly button ring.

I'm not sure if it's in warning because I'm edging closer to the holy grail between her legs...or because she likes it.

My gut tells me it's both.

My thumbs sweep over her ribcage and I do it again. "Keep saying my name."

Swallowing audibly, she looks down the length of her body at me. When our eyes lock, I bite the tender skin under her navel, leaving a mark. Her back bows as I do it, jerking like she's a puppet on a string and I'm the master.

Suppressing a groan, I move onto her lower stomach, but pause when a tattoo I've never seen before catches my eye. Upon further inspection, I see the words, '*Love me,*' scrawled in black ink.

I brush my thumb along the elegant cursive.

The statement is so vulnerable. So unguarded and candid.

*Just like Kit.*

Instinctively, I press my lips to it. The little tremors coursing through her grow stronger. My mouth finds her hip next, the bone razor sharp under silky flesh.

That's when I notice there's yet another tattoo I've never seen before.

Her entire upper right thigh is covered in what appears to be brightly colored scales.

"Are those fish—"

“Mermaid scales,” she interjects, her chest heaving.

Vaguely, I recall her yelling something about refusing to walk on land after our encounter on the side of the road.

I want to ask her what it meant, but something tells me the answer won't bode well for me right now.

Instead, I focus on the area commanding all my attention.

The air between us crackles and sizzles as I zero in on the white cotton outlining of the shape of her cunt. My dick twitches, growing harder when I notice the damp spot on the crotch of her panties. “Fuck.”

Inclining my head, I rub my nose against it, inhaling her arousal.

There's a sharp intake of breath before she exclaims, “I'm not ready to have sex.”

“Get out of your head, Bishop.”

Because fuck knows my biggest cockblock isn't her sexuality...it's her mind trying to convince her it's wrong to want something that both our bodies are physically aching for.

That said, even if she was begging for my dick to be balls deep inside her right now, I wouldn't do something she deems so important until she knew the truth.

*I owe her that much.*

Another rush of white-hot lust sizzles up my cock when I inhale her again. Her heady scent and the wet spot on her panties grows with every passing second, imploring me to take things further.

I replace my nose with my mouth, causing her to tremble before she whispers, “Preston, please.”

“Relax. I just want to make out.” A sigh of relief leaves her...until I tug her panties down with my teeth. “With your pussy.”

*Fuck me.* Her bare pussy is smooth, those plump, pouty lips glistening with want.

*Begging me to taste it.*

Her brows furrow as I jerk the cotton down her legs. “This isn't fair to you,” she babbles. “I won't be able to reciprocate, and that would make me a selfish asshole.”

She's not a selfish asshole...but I am.

“Fine. If you don't want this.” Clamping my hands around her thighs, I spread them as far as they'll go, exposing every part of her. *All her shades of pink.* “Tell me to stop.”

Her head lolls back and she fists the pillow under her head. “Preston.”

I nip the inside of her thigh. “Tell me to *stop*.”

Closing her eyes, she sucks air between her teeth, her entire body quivering. “Preston.”

Every time she says my name, it comes out a little more desperate.

I plant a kiss on her pussy, right above her swollen clit. “Tell. Me. To. Stop.”

But she won’t...

Because she can’t.

“That’s what I thought.” I lick the length of her slit before teasing her entrance with the tip of my tongue. “Now shut the fuck up until you’re coming on my face.”

Her addictive taste fills my mouth as I part her lips, stretching her with my tongue.

My hunger is insatiable, and I greedily explore every inch of her, leaving no part untouched. The coil of anxiety around her snaps and a low moan escapes her when I suck her lips before plunging my tongue inside her tight little hole.

Her voice is a needy, breathy rasp. “Holy shit.”

My dick pulses, releasing itself from the opening in my boxers and straining against the mattress. Groaning, I thrust against it as I lick her, trying to alleviate the pressure. It doesn’t work, though. My cock is now acutely aware that her actual pussy is even better than the illusion and he wants in.

I have to remind us both that this isn’t about me.

The second my tongue touches her clit, she arches upward, propelling herself against my jaw as she grabs the back of my head, keeping me right where she wants me.

A helpless whimper cuts through the air when I circle it and she squirms, like she can’t handle the pleasure. “Oh, God.”

I curl my hands around her hips, holding her in place as I eat her with measured sucks and flicks designed to bring her to the finish line.

“Don’t stop.”

I plunge a finger inside her and curl it after locating the spot that I know will make what’s about to happen even more intense for her.

When her clit pulsates on my tongue and she starts clawing the back of my head, I peer up at her.

I want her to look at me as she falls apart—to acknowledge that *I’m* the

one doing it to her. This way she can never deny her attraction to me...or the way her body responds to my touch.

That doesn't happen, though because her eyes are still squeezed shut as she rocks against my mouth.

Her cry is guttural as she comes, the throaty sound shooting straight to my cock as she writhes underneath me and I taste her orgasm.

Knowing she's extra sensitive, I lick her once more, causing an aftershock to ripple through her body.

Those hazel eyes remained closed as she sputters a curse.

I get off the bed, fisting my raging hard-on through my boxers.

I'm almost out the door when I hear it.

"Don't leave me."

I'm about to make a jab about her being clingy, but I don't want to hurt her.

"I'll be back in ten minutes."

Hell, make that five since I still have the taste of her lingering in my mouth.

She pulls the sheet around her, covering her naked form. "Promise?"

Despite knowing I'm going to climb back into bed with her, I exit without giving her a response. It's a dick move, but she didn't give me everything I wanted tonight, either...

And it has nothing to do with the erection I have to take care of.

## Chapter 29

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## Kit

Taking a scrunchie off my dresser, I pull my hair into a ponytail.

The action reminds me of the way I grabbed Preston's head as he gave me one of the most intense orgasms I've ever experienced.

And just like that, a wave of warmth washes over me like a tsunami.

I smack my head. "Get a grip, Kit."

After I heard Preston leave my bedroom early this morning, I tried to convince myself that the events of last night were nothing but a dream.

A very hot, very *complicated* dream.

However, the hickeys on my body and the slight ache between my legs caused by him spreading me out for so long while he went to town, proves it was very *real*.

Real...and sexy as hell.

"*Now shut the fuck up until you're coming on my face.*"

Sweet baby Jesus in a manger. Who would have ever thought *I'd* like to be man-handled?

*No, no, no, no, no.* With a side of *no*.

I pull the laces of my running shoes tight before tying them. I'm hoping going for the world's longest run around the neighborhood will help me chill the fuck out.

So Preston went down on me. Big freaking deal. I've been on the receiving end of oral sex lots of times.

*Preston has a penis*—my mind unhelpfully taunts, as if I wasn't aware.

Nevertheless, the thing between his legs—the one he never expected me

to take care of in exchange for giving me pleasure—wasn't the most surprising part about what transpired.

The most surprising part...

Was that I liked it.

*A lot.*

Then again, how could I not? He's really good at it.

I figured I'd have to give him some helpful pointers along the way...like where to find my clit.

Or that no matter how tired his mouth and jaw got, he needed to maintain a steady rhythm once I told him x marks the spot, because once the orgasm ship has sailed...it hardly ever comes back.

But Preston didn't need my help.

Nope, he ate my pussy with more skill and precision than a majority of the women I've been with.

Very dedicated to the cause, that one.

I trek downstairs so I can fill my water bottle and head out for my run.

However, the moment I enter the kitchen, I find him there. Leaning against the counter while drinking a cup of coffee.

Huh. I never pegged Preston for a coffee drinker.

Then again, I never pegged *me* as someone who would ever let a man perform cunnilingus on me.

Oh, hell. Cue the awkwardness.

I tiptoe past him on my way to the fridge, hoping he doesn't spot me and the universe has finally granted me the much needed superpower of invisibility.

No such luck, though because Preston's eyes track my every movement. "Where are you going?"

"Out for a log." *What?* "Jog," I quickly correct as I end up overfilling my bottle and water sloshes onto the floor. "I'm going out for a jog." My laugh is every bit as jumpy as I am. "Because log wouldn't make any sense."

Much like the way my brain is short-circuiting. Or the way those stupid, relentless butterflies start buzzing in my tummy whenever I look at him.

Maybe it's time I see a doctor about that. Because that can't be normal.

*Shoot.* Perhaps I have some kind of intestinal parasite.

There's a sliver of amusement on his face as he places his coffee cup down on the counter.

And then he's stalking toward me. "You seem a little tense."

I back up, trying to put some distance between us, but that only makes me do this weird Irish jig thing in an attempt to circle around him.

“W-why would I be tense?”

*Damn him.* Damn him straight to hell for turning me into a stuttering idiot.

“I’m fine, okay?” I snap, because I know Preston and he’s liable to make a dig about how hard he made me come last night. “Tallyho.”

Dear God, I did not just *Tallyho* him.

I’m almost out of the kitchen when he grips my waist and spins me around.

“What are you doing?”

My water bottle crashes to the floor when he pins me against the counter.

Wrapping a hand around my nape, he sucks my bottom lip into his mouth. “I want you.”

Those three words—uttered with so much raw hunger—causes a bolt of pleasure to shoot between my legs.

“Preston.” It comes out like a pathetic squeak.

Grunting, he tugs my sports bra down, exposing my breasts.

“I had these in my mouth last night.”

His rough voice—and the vivid memory—makes my insides coil and my head spin. I feel like his prey...helpless to stop him from taking whatever he wants from me.

A sharp whoosh of breath leaves me when he dips his head and sucks a nipple into his mouth, his tongue flicking and licking like he’s slurping melted ice cream from a cone.

“Pres—”

I gasp when he shoves his hand down my leggings.

“Tell me to stop.” His hand slips inside my panties where I’m wet and warm. “I fucking dare you.”

Just like last night, my vocal cords are on hiatus...well, apart from the moan that escapes when he cups me.

I close my eyes as he runs a calloused knuckle down the length of my slit...

And then his movements come to a complete stop.

“What—”

The hand on the back of my throat moves to the front. While his grip isn’t suffocating, it’s tight enough to let me know he’s the one in control.

Those intense eyes lock on mine as he pushes a finger inside me, and then another, stretching me.

However, it's the way he's *looking* at me while he does it that makes my heart pound right out of my chest.

His all-consuming gaze is needy. *Dark*. Demanding every ounce of my attention.

My breath comes out in quick, short pants against his lips as he pumps his long fingers, proving he's every bit as skilled with those as he is his mouth.

I utter another moan when he moves onto my clit, rubbing and strumming me into oblivion.

My eyes close with the first stirrings of my orgasm, but he holds on my neck tightens, forcing me to meet his predatory stare as I come.

I convulse, gripping his shoulder for dear life as the first wave slams into me, followed by another. This encounter is even more intense somehow. It feels like he filleted me wide open and took pieces of my soul that have always belonged to him.

I sag against the counter after the last wave subsides...and then I feel it. There's no hiding his own physical reaction to what happened. It's hard and demanding in his jeans.

I look down at the large bulge, my mouth going dry with nerves. "Oh...um."

I really hope he's not waiting for me to do something about his little—or should I say *big*—situation.

"I got it handled, Bishop."

He edges away and that awkward feeling is back, which is bizarre because it's never awkward between us.

Then again, he's never had his mouth and hands on my lady bits before, so there's that.

Apparently, I'm the only one experiencing this weird energy, though because Preston picks up my water bottle and places it in my hand like nothing happened.

"Thanks," I stammer, my brain feeling like scrambled eggs.

"Anytime." A vulgar smile curves his mouth, and he licks his fingers. The very same ones that were just inside me. "Enjoy your workout."

With that, he walks out, leaving me even more bewildered.

*Mamma mia.*

Is this like...a *thing* now?

A strange, awesome thing where he gives me orgasms and doesn't expect anything in return.

Should I be shaving and waxing on a regular schedule?

Do I go out and purchase some sexy underwear?

And most importantly...

Why do I like it so much?

Not just the acts that lead to the mind-blowing orgasms, but that *he's* the one doing it.

A horrifying feeling grips me by the throat and nearly knocks me off my feet.

Am I, Kit Bishop—level expert and certified, proud lesbian—attracted to *guys* now?

There's only one way to find out.

I take off running in the direction of Breslin's house.

Because when you're having an identity crisis, you need your best friend to help you sort it out.

Breslin opens the front door after my second knock. "Hey." Her face falls as she takes in mine. "Are you okay?"

No. I am most definitely *not* okay.

"Something happened." Panting, I brace a hand against the doorframe for support. "And now I need to kiss you."

It's the only way I can figure out what's going on.

Her green eyes become saucers and she looks at me like I just told her aliens have invaded the earth. "What?"

A pang of guilt flitters through me when I spot the engagement rings on her left ring finger.

"You're right. I have to get permission first."

I barrel past her in search of Landon and Asher.

I find them in the kitchen munching on sandwiches.

"Hey, small fry. What's up?"

I waste no time getting down to business. "I need to kiss your fiancée."

Asher freezes, his hero hanging in midair. "Huh?"

Landon chokes on his food. "Come again?"

Breslin enters the kitchen and I eye the three of them, hoping they'll agree to let me go through with my bizarre—but very necessary—request.

"I know it sounds crazy and I'm so sorry for asking, but it's really important that I kiss Breslin."

They must sense how crucial this is for me because they all exchange a glance and Landon nods.

Asher, however, rubs his chin. "It depends." His eyes find Landon's and they share a look. "Can we watch?"

Breslin rolls her eyes, but I don't care who witnesses it as long as I get the green light.

"Sure." I turn to Breslin. "Thank you."

Worry pinches her face. "Will you tell me what's going on after this?"

"Yes."

I know this must be as weird for her as it is for me because we've never crossed this line before. I consider her my sister, and I know she feels the same.

However, I need someone with two X chromosomes, and she fits the bill.

To my bestie's credit, she doesn't cringe or shy away when I lean in. Her lips are soft and plush, and I taste a hint of the cherry ChapStick she always uses. Our mouths part and our tongues lightly touch, and while Breslin is a good kisser...

I don't feel any butterflies.

"Well?" she says after our kiss ends. "Did that help?"

*I'm broken.*

I shake my head. "No." Another thought occurs to me. "I need to kiss a guy."

This way I can find out for sure if my newfound attraction is for the entire male species...or just one in particular.

Asher takes a massive bite of his sandwich. "Slow your roll there, small fry. I know I'm a famous football star and it would give you some stellar bragging rights, but I'm *not* kissing my brother's wife."

Fair enough.

I survey Landon and realize *he's* actually the perfect choice to test my theory on.

Just like me and Preston, we share a bond that no one else will ever be able to understand because they weren't in the school shooting that day.

A shooting where they *both* saved my life.

I wave him over. "Landon, you're on deck."

Appearing uneasy, he looks at his partners. "Are you sure about this?"

"*Positive*," I insist, even though I don't think his question was directed at me.

“You agreed to let her kiss me.” Breslin shrugs. “Go ahead.”

Stuffing his hands into his pockets, Landon walks over.

I pucker up. “Lay one on me, Parker.”

“Wait,” Asher says when Landon bends down. “No offense, but we’re not looking to make this a square. This is a one-time only service we’re providing.” He gestures to Breslin and Landon. “These two are mine.”

I nod my understanding. “Got it.”

“Okay.” He motions as though he were a king granting a request. “You may proceed.”

Landon’s lips aren’t as soft as Breslin’s, but his kiss is impossibly tender, like I’m a fragile piece of glass he’s afraid might break. His hand goes to my cheek and I part my lips. The flick of his tongue against mine is gentle, but while Landon is *also* a good kisser...

I still don’t feel any butterflies.

I’m contemplating what all this means, but a rough, familiar voice has the hairs on the back of my neck lifting.

“I caught your stupid dog taking a dump—what the *fuck*?”

Landon and I jump back like we were just caught with our hands in the cookie jar.

There’s so much vehemence rolling off him that even Picasso darts out of the room.

If looks could kill, the one he aims at poor Landon would be the equivalent of a bullet piercing his heart. “Why are you kissing my wife?”

Before I can answer, Asher steps in front of Landon. “More like why is your wife kissing *my* fiancé?” He points to Breslin. “Correction. *Fiancées*. Because she played tonsil hockey with Breslin, too.”

A deadly growl rips through the air...and then Preston’s fist goes sailing into his brother’s face.

Breslin’s palm flies to her forehead. “Oh, my God.”

“Dammit,” Asher whines. “*I’m* the only one who didn’t kiss her.”

“You also didn’t stop them from doing it, asshole.”

I go to grab the roll of paper towels off the counter because Asher’s lip is bleeding, but suddenly I’m airlifted and thrown over Preston’s shoulder.

“Whatever this shit is, it ends right the fuck now.” His voice is downright lethal. “She’s *mine*.”

“I know you’re upset,” I state as blood rushes to my head and he marches out of the house.

Preston isn't having any of it, though because he snarls and growls all the way to our front door.

"It's not what you think," I tell him as we enter the foyer and he puts me down.

"So you didn't kiss Breslin and Landon?"

In addition to animosity, there's also something else laden in his tone. *Hurt.*

I feel lower than dirt because that's the last thing I ever want to do to him.

"I...um." I swallow hard, trying to formulate an explanation that conveys that yes, I did kiss them, but it wasn't like that.

"Let me get this straight." His nostrils flare and a muscle in his jaw bunches. "I'm not allowed to hook up with anyone else, but *you* are?"

"No." Remorse is a bitter pill to swallow because he has every right to be mad. "It was an experiment. You see, after last night, and this morning, my head was—is—all screwy. I needed to figure out what it meant so I went to Breslin's house and asked to kiss her." I prattle on, only stopping to inhale a quick burst of air. "Of course, I needed to get Asher and Landon's permission first. Reluctantly they agreed—well, Asher asked if he could watch before he did—and Breslin and I shared a kiss. But it didn't provide me with any answers, just more questions. Then it dawned on me that I was going about it all wrong. I needed to kiss a guy—"

"Stop babbling," he interjects, but I can't. I need him to understand.

"Asher opted out, which was totally cool with me because Landon was the perfect choice seeing as we share the same bond that you and I do. Well, not the *same* bond, because ours is...you know. But he saved my life that day, too. Anyway, Landon and I kissed...and that's when you walked in."

He silently studies me for what feels like an eternity. I open my mouth to provide him with a better explanation—hopefully one that won't make him so angry—but then he speaks.

"What was the result?"

"Huh?"

"You said it was an experiment." A crease forms between his brows. "What was the result?"

My heart hammers in my ears. "Oh. Well, they're both good kissers...but they're not you." My chest contracts and my belly buzzes, just like it always does whenever he's near. "You're the only one who gives me butterflies,



Preston.”

Reaching for my necklace, I grip the poker chip. My admission changes everything between us. I feel it the way you feel autumn approaching before the leaves change color and the air turns crisp.

“I don’t know what it means.” I lift my gaze to his. “All I know is, I’m your exception...and you’re my anomaly.”

He takes a step closer, and then another, invading my space.

And I welcome it, because I want whatever this is.

The moment our lips meet, the butterflies swarm with a vengeance. I cling to him for dear life as his urgent tongue collides with mine, never wanting this feeling that only he can give me to end.

“Don’t ever kiss anyone but me again,” he grunts between deep, consuming kisses that have my head spinning.

“Promise.”

It’s a vow I’ll never break.

My spine meets the door as his mouth finds my neck. “You’re mine.” His fingertip traces the long line of my collarbone and I fight back a shiver. “All mine.”

I know.

But it’s the knowing smirk on *his* face as he drops to his knees that seals my fate.

I’m so lost in him I don’t know how I’ll ever find my way back.

*Not sure I want to.*

He tugs my leggings and panties down in one swift motion. “Eyes on me, Bishop.”

I couldn’t take them off him if I wanted to.

## Chapter 30

---

## Kit

I'm filling up the tub so I can give Lola one of his much-needed baths when the doorbell rings.

His relief is tangible when I reach over and turn the water off. "Saved by the bell." I kiss the top of his smelly head. "For now."

After giving me a slobbery kiss, he takes off running, no doubt hoping I'll put this whole bath business behind me.

I trudge down the stairs and open the front door.

Landon's standing on the other side of it.

"Hey."

"Hey." I don't know what to make of the expression on his face. "Do you have a minute?"

I gesture for him to come inside. "For you? Always."

Hands in his pockets, he looks around the foyer. "Is your husband home?"

Can't say I blame him for being cautious given Preston was a straight-up caveman the last time he saw him.

Fortunately, Landon doesn't have to worry about a repeat episode.

At least not right now.

"Nope. He's out running some errands."

Errands he didn't go into detail about, but we've been joined at the hip—or rather, another body part of mine—for days, so he probably wanted some alone time.

I force myself to keep my *clingy* in check.

Space is good. Healthy.

Who am I kidding? Space freaking blows.

If I had it my way, I'd spend every waking second with him because he makes me laugh just as much as he frustrates me, teaches me new things, makes me feel safe and secure...

And gives me mind-blowing orgasms.

"I was hoping we could talk," Landon continues, pulling me from my thoughts.

"Sure."

"About the other day..." he begins, but I'm quick to put the kibosh on that.

"Whoa, Nelly. That was a one-time thing."

Confusion pulls at his face. "I know, but—"

*Uh-oh.* "I know I'm a fantastic kisser, but we can't—"

"I'm not here to kiss you again, Kit," he interjects, looking thoroughly frustrated. "I'm here to talk about *why* you kissed me."

"Oh." I lead him to the living room. "You should have started with that."

He plops down on the sofa and I take the chair across from him.

"I *tried* to."

"Right." I tug my bottom lip between my teeth, feeling embarrassed. "I'm sorry I kissed you...and your fiancée. I was going through some shit and it seemed like the right solution at the time. I should have never put you guys in that position. It was really selfish of me."

Which seems to be a frequent trait of mine lately.

"You don't have to apologize." He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "I get it."

I'm not exactly sure what he means by that, but I appreciate him being so gracious about it. "Thanks."

"Kit?"

I reach for the bottle of water on the coffee table. "Yeah?"

"Do you remember the conversation we had when I got back from England? The one that helped put everything into perspective for me."

I feel the color drain from my face, because that conversation is one I'll *never* forget.

It's what led to us both being in the cafeteria when Kyle showed up with a gun and unleashed his mental affliction on innocent people.

I forced Landon to buy me food in exchange for giving him advice, but in the end, it cost him so much more.

*He almost died because of me.*

“I’m sorry.” I press a hand to my quivering stomach. “I’m so sorry.”

Landon reaches for my hand. “No...shit. I didn’t mean to make you think about *that*. I was hoping to help you the way you helped me that day.”

My mouth drops open. “*Help* you? Landon, I almost—”

“You didn’t.” He taps his chest. “It was *my* choice to grab a bite to eat with my friend and *my* choice to take on Kyle, remember?”

No matter how many times he reiterates that, I’ll always feel like I’m to blame.

I stand. “Do you want some water?”

“No.” Sighing, he rises off the couch. “I wanted to talk, but I kind of fucked that up.”

I feel guilty for a whole new reason now. He saved my life, therefore I owe him.

“I’m sorry.” My ass hits the chair. “Let’s talk. I’m all ears.”

He returns to the couch. “I’m guessing you kissed me and Breslin because you’re confused about your sexuality.” His face goes slack. “I’m probably overstepping, but you really helped me that day, and I’m hoping I might be able to do the same for you. Given I’ve been in your position before.”

I was willing to talk about anything with him...except this.

However, his last statement leaves me puzzled. I know Landon identified as straight before Asher, but he adapted to bisexuality effortlessly. Heck, they were already bumping uglies before Breslin’s trip ended.

“No offense, but I don’t think you can help me with what I’m going through. The conversation we had was about you loving Asher and Breslin and how you shouldn’t feel like the third wheel because they loved you, too...not your sexuality.”

Not that I would have minded giving him advice about that. He just didn’t need it.

Which makes this even more humiliating to talk about with him.

He *joined* this community while I’m creeping toward the exit signs.

I feel like a traitor.

“Maybe it didn’t seem like it to you, but things were really confusing for me before I figured it out.”

That’s the thing. He figured it out.

I’m afraid I never will. Or worse...I do, and my Nanna wins.

Blinking back tears, I curl my arms around myself. “I’m glad you worked

out what box you belonged in, Landon. Truly, I am.” My voice cracks. “But I don’t fit anywhere anymore.”

My box is empty...the contents discarded on the floor in one giant mess I can’t seem to clean up.

He frowns. “That’s just it. I don’t belong in *any* box.” Reaching over, he tips my chin. “You don’t either.”

“But I’ve spent my whole entire life defending and protecting my box.”

*Ugh.* That sounds all kinds of wrong, but he knows what I mean.

“While finding your box can be liberating...the walls can still close in on you. In my experience, boxes and labels do more harm than good, especially when none of them fit, because it can make you feel even more alienated.”

That’s *exactly* how I feel.

“I get what you’re saying, but calling myself bisexual doesn’t feel right to me, either.”

“I know. That’s what I meant when I said I *get* it.”

Say what now?

“But what about Asher—”

“*Asher* identifies as bisexual.” Blowing out a breath, he continues. “I’m in love with a man and a woman and I will proudly shout it from the rooftops. I also know that as a result of that, most people would probably refer to me as bisexual, because it’s an easy assumption to make. I’m fine with that, but it isn’t the label I’d personally choose for myself.”

Wow. “Okay, I’m really gonna need you to explain.”

He scrubs a hand down his face. “The first time I met Breslin it was a supersonic punch to the balls. I’ve *never* been so physically attracted to another person before, and that attraction only grew when she opened that stubborn mouth of hers and I got to know her.”

I cringe as I recall when they first started dating. The attraction was *definitely* mutual.

So much so this poor roommate needed to invest in better earplugs.

His brows draw together in deep thought. “It wasn’t like that with Asher, though. I could barely tolerate being in the same room with him he irritated me so much.”

That’s news to me.

“Then how did you end up in love?”

A small smile touches his lips. “We were forced to deal with each other because I was tutoring him. Tutoring led to me getting to know him...

whether I liked it or not. However, the more time I spent with him, the more our connection grew and I found myself drawn to him. I tried to brush it off at first because it spooked me, but it was too strong.”

Amen, brother.

“Like a force beyond your control. One that makes you feel powerless, but it’s okay because nothing else has ever made you feel so complete.” I close my eyes. “It’s like the universe molded him just for you because all your parts fit together.”

And you’ll do anything to keep him forever...because he’s your other half.

*The part that makes you whole.*

“It’s exactly like that.”

I can’t believe I’m about to confide in him about this, but it turns out he was right. He *gets* it.

“Whenever Preston’s gone, it feels like a vital piece of me leaves with him.” I inhale but can’t fill my lungs to capacity. “It’s like I can’t really breathe until we’re together again.”

He nods. “That’s how it is with Breslin and Asher. The universe doesn’t feel right until all three of us are together.”

And there’s the monumental difference between our situations.

“Wouldn’t that make you pansexual?”

“No, because that would imply I’m attracted to all kinds of people regardless of their sex. I’m not, though. While I can admit another guy is good-looking, Asher’s the only man who does it for me.”

*Yup.* I can honestly say that I’ve *never* been attracted to a guy before Preston, either.

“I wonder what that makes us?”

“Human?” His nose scrunches as he ponders this. “Although, technically speaking, I think it’s demisexual because our sexual attraction only comes after we’ve made a strong emotional one.” He gives his head a shake. “But that’s not the point, Kit. Labels and genders don’t matter. Love is love and you deserve to be with the person who makes you happy.”

He’s right, but I can’t tell him how much sense he’s making because I’m too focused on something else he said.

“You said sexual attraction...not physical.”

He adjusts his glasses. “It’s pretty much the same thing.”

Not quite.

I shift to the end of the chair. “Can I ask you a super personal question?”

“More personal than what we’re already talking about?” He must see how alarmed I am because he agrees. “Shoot.”

“You and Asher...was he the one who made the first move? You know, sexually?”

“Yeah.”

“And just so we’re clear, by first move, you mean...”

Now he looks slightly uncomfortable. “He gave me head.”

“And after that happened, did you return the favor?”

He thinks about this for a second before replying. “No.”

“And he was okay with that?”

“Yeah. He made it clear he didn’t expect anything in exchange. He knew what a big deal it was to me and gave me time to process.”

Well, damn. That’s reassuring.

“So, Asher’s cool with you never reciprocating.” Feeling a thousand pounds lighter now, I slap my knee. “Man, *that’s* a relief.”

Although, poor Breslin. Girl has to do double the work.

Confusion contorts Landon’s features. “I don’t quite follow.”

“You said Asher didn’t expect anything in return. Hence he’s okay with never being on the receiving end...right?”

He blinks. “I said he didn’t expect anything in return that night, Kit. Not permanently.”

*Dammit.* I was hoping this was some kind of hidden altruistic Holden gene we were blessed with.

Nerves bunch in my stomach. “Crap.”

I can feel Landon studying me, but it’s clear he doesn’t have any idea why I’m so troubled by this. “What’s wrong?”

Here goes nothing.

“Preston’s been giving me orgasms nonstop and I haven’t returned the favor.” Leaping out of the chair, I pace the carpet. “He’s not pressuring me or anything, but it can’t go on like this forever, right? Sooner or later it’s gonna be time for me to pay the piper.” Hell, he deserves it for all the work he’s been putting in. I stop pacing and look at him. “How much time went by before you finally felt the urge to put a penis in your mouth?”

“The next morning,” he deadpans.

A garbled noise leaves me. “Jesus. You *animal.*”

“Calm down,” he says with a chuckle. “I’m sure everything will work



out.”

No, it won't.

“I get off on making women come,” I yell, much to Landon's shock. “It's kind of my kink.” My hand finds my chest. “But with Preston...it's not...I don't...” My throat prickles with impending tears. “What if I *never* have the urge to reciprocate?”

What if I lose him because of it?

Landon gets off the couch and walks over to me. “Relax. It will happen when it happens.”

Easy for him to say, Mister I-reciprocated-the-next-morning. “What if it doesn't?”

His expression softens. “I don't know.” Pulling me in, he drops a kiss to my forehead. “What I *do* know is that the two of you have a bond that's unbreakable. Have faith in that, okay? The rest will fall into place.”

He's right. Preston and I are stronger than superglue when we're together. There's nothing we can't work through.

I wrap my arms around him. I'll never be able to repay him for saving my life...or for what he did for me today.

“Thank you for making me feel a little less alone and a lot more understood.”

He rests his chin on top of my head. “Mission accomplished then.”

“Not this shit again,” Preston snarls, making me jump.

“Rein in the caveman,” I utter as we separate. “We were just hugging.”

Crossing his arms, he stares Landon down. “This is now the second time I've caught you pawing my wife. Suffice it to say my lifelong debt to you is on thin ice.”

Landon holds up his hands. “It's not like that. I just came over to talk to my friend because I thought I could help.”

“You *did* help.”

That piques Preston's interest. “Help with what?”

*Shoot.* I give Landon a look, silently begging him not to say anything.

“I'm gonna go,” he states at the same time I blurt, “Dancing.”

We were so not on the same page with that one.

Preston glowers at me, and Landon takes the opportunity to escape, but not before he says, “Just so we're clear. You don't owe me anything.”

That all too familiar flash of guilt flickers in Preston's eyes before they turn hard. “You're a terrible liar, Bishop.”

“I’m an even worse dancer, which is exactly why I enlisted Landon’s help.” A twinge of guilt twists my guts because I never want to lie to him. Especially about the important stuff. “Okay, you got me. Landon came over to talk to me about my sexuality.”

Our silence is heavy, filled with so many unanswered questions and what-ifs.

And then he’s coming toward me.

The second he lifts me into his arms and I wrap my legs around his waist, all is right with the world and I can breathe again.

He drops us onto the couch, but I don’t let go of him.

“I hate that there’s a war waging inside you whenever I’m touching you.”

It *used* to feel like that, but it’s becoming a lot less complicated.

I used to be ashamed that I liked his touch and unwilling to accept what that might mean.

That’s not the case now.

“Not anymore.” My palm glides along his veiny forearm. “I like the way it feels whenever you look at me.” His gaze traps mine and heat floods my system. “And I like it when your hands are on my body.”

A helpless sound leaves me when his knuckles graze the side of my breast. “Just my hands?” Inclining his head, his lips find my neck. “Or my mouth?”

His teasing has my skin breaking out in goosebumps. “Both.”

His big hand tunnels under my shirt until he’s cupping me. “I want to suck these.” Tiny sparks of pleasure ripple through me when he undoes the button on my jeans with his free hand. “And then I want to work my way down until my tongue is buried in your tight, little cunt.”

He pinches my nipple. “Take off your shirt.”

I’m about to comply, because he’s making me hotter than the Sahara... but a nagging feeling unfurls in my gut.

While I enjoy everything he’s doing, I can’t help but feel like I’m abusing his generosity and being selfish.

However, I know Preston, and if I bring this up to him, he’ll just tell me it’s not a big deal.

But it *is* a big deal. He deserves someone who can reciprocate sexually.

Therefore, I have no choice but to buy myself some time by telling him an age-old fib that many women before me have told their husbands when

they're not in the mood.

“As great as that sounds, it's not a good time.” When he raises an eyebrow in question, I add, “It's shark week.”

He mulls this over in his head for a bit, not looking nearly as disturbed by this information as I hoped.

“I have some *killer* cramps.” Scrambling off his lap, I head toward the bathroom, mortified by the final nail I'm about to put in the coffin. However, I don't want to leave any room for him to work his seduction tactics on me because I'll fold like a cheap lawn chair. “And the period shits.”

Preston makes me happy and leaves me beyond sexually satisfied...

And he deserves the same in return.

## Chapter 31

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Preston

Nothing will test your patience like a toddler who refuses to eat his dinner.

“Come on, JP,” I urge, pointing to the plate of eggs I made him. “You like eggs.”

Up until now at least.

He shakes his head, making it clear he won't budge.

Wondering if there's something wrong with them, I take a bite.

They taste fine. But alas, he's not interested.

“No eggs. Got it.” I turn to the fridge in Becca's apartment. “How about I make you some chicken nuggets?”

It's a solid choice given they're his favorite.

When I look over to gauge his reaction, I see him scrunch his face and shake his head.

*Fuck.* Back when he was two, he went through a phase where he would only eat animal crackers for three weeks straight. I really hope we're not headed for a repeat episode.

I run down the list of his choices.

“Bagel?”

Headshake.

“Pancakes?”

Headshake.

“Pasta?”

Headshake.

“Animal crackers?”

Headshake.

That's promising at least.

"Oatmeal?"

Headshake.

Christ almighty. This is going nowhere. I'm running out of options here.

Scrubbing a hand down my face, I mutter, "Why don't you point to what you want to eat, and I'll make it for you."

In hindsight, I probably should have started with that.

Climbing off the stool, he walks over to the fridge and points to the freezer.

I open it. There's not much in it aside from the chicken nuggets and ice cream I bought him.

And the bottle of alcohol Becca bought for herself.

Of course, Jameson indicates he wants the ice cream.

"Sorry, bud. You're not having ice cream for dinner."

It's clear this isn't what he wanted to hear because he deflates.

Before I can explain why I'm saying no, he stomps his foot and points to the freezer again.

It's a battle of wills as we stare each other down.

He reminds me so much of myself right now it's almost eerie. *Stubborn little shit.*

Sensing he's about to have a full-on temper tantrum, I kneel down so I'm eye level with him.

"I know you're upset, and that's okay. I get upset when people tell me no, too." *Especially Kit.* "But I'm not saying no to be mean or hurt you. I'm saying no because you need to eat something healthy before you can have dessert." I wipe the tear rolling down his cheek with my thumb. I know he's only crying because he didn't get his way, but it still fucking guts me. "I'll make you a deal, okay? You eat some of those eggs and I'll give you some ice cream."

I can tell he doesn't want to cave, but the power of ice cream wins out.

A moment later he climbs back onto the stool and takes a bite of the eggs.

"Thank you." I lean over and kiss the top of his head, grateful we reached a settlement before it turned into a meltdown.

After he's finished with his eggs, I give him his scoop of ice cream as promised.

Given I've been trying to save and stretch what little money I still have left from my gambling days, we've been spending a lot of time at the apartment lately.

I'm about to suggest we watch some cartoons before it's time for him to go to bed, but the front door opens.

Becca said she wouldn't be home until after midnight, so I'm surprised to see her.

Surprised and annoyed because as usual she comes in like a wrecking ball.

Cursing up a storm, she tosses her jacket on the floor and throws her purse on the counter, knocking over the bowl of ice cream Jameson was enjoying.

"What happened?" I grit through my teeth, scooping out more ice cream for him.

Do I actually give a fuck? No.

Will letting her vent drop her from a hurricane three to a one while her son looks on with big, innocent eyes? Maybe.

Sidestepping me, Becca opens the freezer and takes out the bottle of gin. "I got into a fight with my boyfriend."

Do I give a shit? No.

Do I want to know if whatever he did could impact Jameson somehow? Hell yes.

"Why?"

She takes down a glass from the cabinet and pours herself a generous portion of gin. Then she grabs Jameson's juice box and squeezes some of the juice into it.

I grunt my disapproval. Loudly.

She pats him on the head like a dog and hands it back to him. "Thank you, baby."

Poor kid lights up like a firework.

"The stupid idiot got arrested for soliciting an undercover cop for sex and expects *me* to bail him out," Becca blurts out.

"Jesus," I say through laughter, because what the hell? "What the fuck kind of guy are you hanging out with?"

Genuine hurt splashes across her face. "It's not funny, Preston. He cheated on *me* with a hooker. *Me*."

"Technically it was with a cop," I correct, which only makes her more

irate.

She drains the glass. "Fuck you."

Not even with my worst enemy's dick.

But now that she's dropped the deadweight, she can focus on what's important.

Her son.

"I know it sucks, but it's a good thing."

She folds her arms. "How so?"

I look at Jameson who's gone back to his ice cream. "You don't want someone like him around JP." My gaze swivels to the living room where her beauty school bag is still stuffed into a corner. It hasn't been touched in weeks. "Kicking that loser to the curb means you can concentrate on school and your son." I look at her. "You're a smart girl, Becca." And by smart? I mean manipulative. "Stop messing around with these fuck-boys who don't give a shit about you because they're only going to bring you down."

Which in turn will negatively affect Jameson.

"You're right." She smiles. "I almost forgot how good you were at talking me off the ledge."

Sadly, I wasn't aware she was on one...

Because I would have pushed her off it.

Talk about a missed opportunity.

She saunters toward me. "No one cares about me and my son like you do."

Her son? Without a doubt. Hell, I'd die for the kid.

But *her*? I care about Lola's dumps more than her.

I only said that shit so she could pull her head out of her ass.

"Becca," I grunt in warning because she's got that look in her eyes.

The one she thinks will lure me into her bed when it has the opposite effect. It makes me want to run the fuck out of here as fast as I can because she reeks of desperation.

She doesn't get the hint, though because she's standing a little too close for comfort, trying her best to look sexy.

Back in the day she was attractive...beautiful even.

But all I see when I look at her now is a sad excuse of a woman who can't take care of her son properly because she doesn't have her shit together. She's too busy partying and chasing deadbeat guys.

Too busy being selfish.



Once upon a time Becca Dragoni was beautiful...but now she's the most hideous thing I've ever seen in my life.

"Come on, Preston." She presses her palm to my chest. "I *know* you still want me."

The only part of her I want is sitting at the counter eating his ice cream.

And she won't hesitate to rip him away from me if I don't play my cards right.

"I don't think this is a good idea."

She leans in so close I can smell her cheap perfume. "I bet Jameson does. I'm sure he'd love to have a real family." Rising on her tiptoes, she nips my earlobe and presses her body flush against mine. "A real dad."

Fuck. She went straight for the kill shot.

The same one that made me give in last time.

Until I woke up the next morning and felt sick to my stomach because there's no way in hell I could ever make it work with her.

"Becca—"

"You can pretend I'm her," she whispers, showing just how low she'll stoop to get what she wants.

I'd pity her if I didn't hate her so much.

I bite back the impulse to inform her that won't be necessary because I have Kit...and the real thing is so much better than the illusion.

And light-years better than what *she* could ever give me.

But I know Becca well enough to know that not only was the remark a last-ditch effort to get me to fuck her...it was also another one of her tricks designed to make sure I'm not still hung up on Kit.

I have to tread carefully.

"You don't have to pretend to be her."

Fuck. I need an excuse to tack onto that. One that will put a stop to this shitshow but not a stop to my visits with Jameson.

I shoot him an apologetic smile because he's it.

"But Jameson is in the room, so we can't."

"Oh." Instantly, she backs away and I welcome the loss. "I'll put him to bed."

Before I can protest, she scoops Jameson off the stool. "Time for bed, baby."

He still has twenty minutes left before his bedtime, so he's not happy about this.

*Sorry, buddy.* I'll make it up to him during our next visit.

The second she's gone, I book it the hell out of there.

Becca will be pissed that I left her high and dry, but I'll text her later and tell her I had an emergency.

I'm heading for the staircase when I hear her screech, "What the fuck, Preston?"



After slipping my wedding band back on my finger, I head inside the house and make a beeline for the kitchen so I can grab a beer.

"You're such a good boy," Kit coos from what sounds like the living room. "Here's another one."

Curious what her and that damn dog are up to, I close the fridge and make my way to where she is.

I find her sitting on the floor in front of the coffee table that's littered with stacks of folded papers and envelopes.

Appearing focused, I watch as she stuffs one of the papers into an envelope before turning to the bulldog who happily licks the seal for her.

Aside from bath time, he worships the ground she walks on.

*That makes two of us.*

"Wait." She picks up a book of stamps and tears one off so Lola can slobber on that, too. "Don't forget the stamp."

Kit's not a slave driver, though because after he does all that, she gives him a treat. "Good boy."

I can't help but laugh because she's so fucking weird in all the best ways.

My laughter gives me away and she shifts on the floor to face me. "Hey." She places the envelope she's holding on the table. "You've been gone all day. Where were you?"

I'm running out of excuses. There's only so many errands I can say I'm running before she starts to suspect something is amiss.

Like me gambling...which is hard as fuck not to succumb to.

Especially now that I can't indulge in my new favorite pastime...playing with Kit's pussy.

Apparently, she's having the world's longest period.

Either that or she's intentionally shutting me down...which makes no

fucking sense because I *know* she's into it.

"Preston?" Kit questions, still waiting for an answer.

The lie leaves my lips before I can fully think it through. "I went to see my mom."

It's clear by the way her eyebrows rise up that this surprises her.

*Ditto.*

"Your mom? I thought you said she was bad news?"

No, *she* said she was bad news. I just didn't bother correcting her because she wasn't wrong.

I take a long swig of my beer. "We're working on our relationship."

The irony that I've been continually using a woman I haven't spoken to in years and doesn't give a flying fuck about me as an alibi isn't lost on me.

I'm running different scenarios in my head so I can formulate a story about how we're rekindling our imaginary relationship when the doorbell rings.

I go to answer it, but I hear several pairs of footsteps walk through the foyer.

A moment later Breslin, Landon, and my pinhead brother come barreling into the living room, holding what appears to be takeout bags.

"Why are you guys constantly at my house?"

Every fucking day I'm forced to see at least one, if not all three of them.

I don't mind Landon so much—as long as he keeps his lips and hands off my wife—but the other two never fail to set my teeth on edge.

"Because they're my friends," Kit says, as though this should be obvious.

I tamp down the urge to walk over and slap my brother upside his big head just for breathing.

I'm seriously regretting not hightailing it the fuck out of here when I had the chance when Kit utters her next words.

"So, am I ever gonna meet your mom?"

Before I can answer, Breslin makes a face and says, "Only if you want to go to Boca Raton."

And yet another reason I can't stand Kit's BFF. Not only does she watch over Kit like a Pitbull, she's too damn nosy. I don't need her filling Kit's pretty head up with garbage about how she shouldn't trust me.

"She's actually in town now," Kit says with a quick glance in my direction. "Preston saw her today."

"Really?" Breslin turns to Asher. "Did you know she was in town?"

Nosy *and* suspicious.

She'd make one hell of a poker player.

I lock eyes with my brother from across the room, my glare leaving no room for misinterpretation. *I'll fucking kill you.*

"Yeah," Asher answers, turning back to his fiancée. "I forgot to mention it. She's here visiting a few friends." His nostrils flare when he eyes me again. "And apparently her youngest son."

I'm sure everyone else is misconstruing his resentment as a result of being snubbed by our mother, but I know the truth.

He loathes being in the position of having to lie for me.

Tough fucking shit. As far as I'm concerned, it's the least he can do.

Breaking up the tension, Breslin gestures to the coffee table. "What's all this?"

Lola licks another envelope for Kit. "I'm sending out résumés. And yes, I know digital is the way to go, but I figured sending them old school would be a nice touch." Her sigh is expansive. "I've been unemployed for five weeks already. I need to find a job soon, or I'm gonna have to resort to stripping."

Over my dead fucking body. And even then, I'm sure my ghost would shut that shit down, too.

The trio exchange a bemused glance before Landon expresses what they're all thinking. "Aren't you going to be a billionaire soon?"

"Yeah." She holds up a stamp for Lola. "But I'm not a billionaire *now*."

My palms itch with need. If she would just let me go to the goddamn casino, I could win enough to get us by.

Asher starts pulling some containers out of a bag. "Well, me and a few of my teammates are actually looking to hire someone to run all our social media accounts. Let me make a few phone calls and set up some interviews so they can meet you."

Kit frowns. "I appreciate that, but I don't need a handout."

That's right, angry girl. Tell the bastard to kick rocks.

"No, you need a job. And *we* need a good social media person." Despite Kit's protests, Asher stands. "I'm gonna make those phone calls."

I don't miss his not-so-subtle nod as he passes me on his way out of the living room.

I'm ninety-nine percent positive Asher won't rat me out, but I'm not about to roll the dice on the one percent that he will, so I give him this one.

"I'm gonna take a shower."

I follow Asher out the patio doors leading to the backyard. He waits for me to close them before he speaks.

“Where were you really?”

He must have taken a few too many hits to the head because I owe him nothing. Least of all an explanation for my whereabouts.

“None of your goddamn business.”

He runs a hand down his face, appearing thoroughly frustrated with that answer.

Good.

And then his gaze turns menacing and he leans in close. The trademark Holden gene making its appearance.

“That girl trusts you, asshole. You better *not* fucking hurt her.”

If I was a weaker man his words would have the intended impact of coming across as a threat.

But they don't.

Not only because he doesn't scare me, but because hurting Kit has never been my intention, so we're on the same page as far as that goes.

“You should spend less time worrying about my marriage and more time worrying about your career.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

I slap his stomach, knowing my next words will hit him where it hurts. “Your off-season is almost over, and you gained twenty pounds of pure fat. You should put down the junk food and hit up the gym.” I give him a shit-eating grin. “Unless you want to lose another playoff game.”

He tries to act like my comment doesn't bother him, but I know it got under his skin.

His entire body stiffens before he heads for the patio doors.

However, he pauses right before he exits.

“You should probably take that shower, little brother. You reek of cheap perfume and lies.”

His comment lands in the center of my chest with the force of a punch.

After he's gone, I lift my beer in a silent toast.

*You win.*

## Chapter 32

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Kit

*I* press the button on the treadmill, cranking it up a few more notches so I can run faster.

Fast enough to let me focus on not dying instead of a shirtless Preston who's lifting weights a mere seven feet away.

I thought having the downstairs gym remodeled would be a good thing.

It's the worst.

Filling my lungs, I force my feet to keep up with the rapidly moving belt.

Force myself not to look at the beads of sweat dripping down his sculpted torso.

Force myself not to look at the gray sweatpants that are slung dangerously low on his hips...displaying those razor-sharp V cuts above his groin.

Force my gaze not to slide down to the faint trail of hair that disappears into his sweatpants.

Sweatpants that showcase the outline of his big...

"You look a little flushed."

I snap my head up. "That's because I'm running."

Trying to give my body another physical outlet to benefit from since I still won't let Preston give me another orgasm. I have a sneaky suspicion he's starting to suspect something is wrong, though because my fake period has lasted for eleven days...so far.

However, the way I see it, it's only fair.

We're a team. Which means I don't get to reap all the benefits while he's left servicing me on a regular basis.

Because I'm not a selfish jerk.

I slam the button again, causing me to run so fast I almost trip and fall on my face.

Preston, who's now doing this thing that makes his abs ripple, smirks. "You good over there?"

I grip the sides of the treadmill. "Yup. Just trying to get the blood flowing."

Oh, it's flowing all right. Flowing straight to all the places it shouldn't.

Suddenly, he stops moving.

His dark, hungry gaze travels up and down my body in a slow, sensual perusal, making me feel naked and exposed.

"I'm going in the sauna."

The suggestive tone of his voice and the carnal look in his eyes makes it clear it was an invitation.

*Oh, hell.* Maybe we can work out an arrangement where he gets me off once a month.

*No.* Because then I'd still be taking advantage of his...aptitude.

Besides, I'm sweaty and gross.

It would be wrong.

But *why*? Why would it be wrong to let him touch me in that way only he can and make me come?

Why would it be wrong to give in to this desire I have for him?

*Fuck it.*

I'm a good person, but I'm not a saint.

I'm a hot-blooded woman with needs, dammit. Needs he's more than capable of satisfying.

I slam the button on the treadmill, causing it to stop so abruptly I stumble forward.

My head feels lightheaded and the floor dips beneath me as I make my way to the sauna.

A dense fog envelops me the moment I step inside.

It's not a gigantic sauna like you'd see at a swanky fitness center, but it's roomy enough to fit twelve people inside comfortably. A single large wooden bench wraps around the expanse of it. Not that I can see it because the steam factor in here is set to ten.

I take a step forward, tripping over something in the process. When I look down, I see his sweatpants and boxers on the floor in a messy pile.



I feel lightheaded for a whole new reason then.

“Are you naked?”

His deep voice cuts across the humid, smoggy room. “It’s a sauna.”

*Duh.* Can’t really say I blame him for going commando because my shorts and sports bra are sticking to me like a second skin right now, weighing me down.

“Right.”

I take an anxious step forward, and then another until the clouds of fog that were separating us break free and I see him.

He’s leaning against the wall, sitting on the bench with his legs spread nonchalantly...naked as the day he was born.

I freeze, keeping my gaze trained on his face. It’s not that I’m not curious...I just don’t want the thing between his legs to ruin the moment and cause me to flee.

He crooks a finger at me. “Come here.”

My heart feels like it’s beating ten times faster than it was when I was on the treadmill as I make my way over to him.

“Hi.”

Curling a hand around my waist, he gently pulls me forward until I’m standing between his parted legs.

“Hi.”

His thumb skates down the length of my stomach before disappearing into the waistband of my shorts, caressing the skin there.

My breath hitches because I feel the contact *everywhere*.

“Lift your arms.”

When I do, his fingers find the hem of my sports bra and he pulls it over my head. It hits the floor behind me with a loud slap.

His pulse thrums against his throat as he palms my breasts, his thumbs rolling over my nipples until they’re hard enough to cut glass.

A pained sound escapes me when he brings one to his mouth and sucks, taking eager little pulls that turn me into putty in his arms.

His index finger slithers down my torso until it hooks inside the band of my shorts and he slowly tugs them, along with my panties, down my legs.

Gripping his shoulder for balance, I step out of them and kick them to the side.

And then I’m naked, too.

Those smoldering eyes drink me in from head to toe like I’m a gorgeous

piece of artwork before settling on my face. “You’re perfect.”

That’s not true. My body has flaws just like everyone else’s, but in this moment, I’ve never felt more beautiful...or turned on.

I can’t take it anymore, so I close the distance between us and kiss him. When our mouths meet, it is urgent and intense...fire and ice. He feeds me his tongue in taunting strokes as his hand makes its way between my legs.

The sensation of his finger slipping inside me and the dark, gruff noise he makes as he does it is enough to knock me off my feet.

As if sensing this, his free hand goes to my hip, steadying me.

My eyes close and my head lolls back as pleasure takes over.

“Preston.” His name on my lips is a plea for him to never stop.

Because no one has ever made me feel this good.

His teeth graze the skin of my neck and he adds another finger, sliding them both in and out in long, quick motions.

He’s like a drug pumping through my veins, bringing me to new, uncharted heights.

On impulse, I look down. A current of heat rushes through me as I watch the tendons in his forearm flex while he finger fucks me. My thighs tremble and wet sounds fill the space between us.

The heel of his palm grinds against my clit with the perfect amount of pressure.

I clutch his shoulder as the first spark hits. “Preston.”

A moment later, my orgasm sweeps through me like a blazing fire and my body spasms...

Then I see it.

It holds my attention, like a car accident you can’t look away from.

“I’ll be back.”

Preston’s gruff voice cuts through the air like a sword and he makes to stand.

I know he’s going to the bathroom so he can take care of his erection, and while I should be appreciative, something about that seems a little unfair and imbalanced.

Preston’s seen me unravel under his touch. He knows what I look like when I come undone.

He knows me in a way I’ll never know him.

I don’t want him slinking away and hiding from me...I want to see him.

All of him.

“Don’t go.”

A muscle tics in his jaw and he releases a frustrated sigh. “I’ll cuddle with you in a few minutes. I have to take care of this.”

I should probably be overjoyed that he finally used the term cuddling, but I’m too fixated on his dick.

I’ve seen a few before...mostly in porn and two in person thanks to a stalker at a frat party and walking into a men’s bathroom to pee once because the girls’ line was too long.

While they don’t frighten me, they also don’t evoke any other response in me.

It’s just a piece of anatomy that men have.

But with Preston it’s different...because this one belongs to him.

And I can’t help but wonder what it’s like when that band of control around him snaps and he lets go.

My words come out in a ragged whisper. “Touch yourself.”

“That’s what I’m—”

“While I watch you.” My heart flutters in my chest and I swallow hard. “Please.”

I don’t know what to make of his expression. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

I want to experience this.

Gripping my hips, he positions me so I’m straddling him. “Fine. But I want a good view.” With that, he pushes me to the edge of his lap and opens his legs. I’m about to ask what he’s doing, but it becomes clear as my thighs spread apart.

He’s getting a good view, all right.

So am I.

Long and thick, his cock stands at attention, the shiny, wide head coming just past his navel. Veins run down the length of his shaft, and below that sits his weighty balls. I always knew Preston had a set of metaphorical big ones, but now I know he has a physical pair to match.

But the most unexpected thing about all this is...it doesn’t turn me off.

Quite the opposite actually. If Preston’s cock was a dildo or strap on...his is the one I’d choose.

I inhale a sharp breath when he wraps his hand around his shaft, giving it a slow, languid stroke.

He watches me beneath heavy lids as he does it, his own breathing

becoming labored.

Witnessing him do this is so personal I almost feel like I should look away...but I can't. He has all my attention.

"What do you think about when you do this?"

I want to know what's running through his head. Does he have well-constructed thoughts? Memories? Or is it just quick flashes of naked women?

His voice is a gravelly rumble, his intense stare an arrow piercing my heart. "You."

I try to speak, but his admission has rendered me speechless.

His nostrils flare and his eyes turn molten. "I think about your tight little pussy. The way it feels. The way it smells. The way it tastes."

His movements pick up speed and he jerks himself hard and fast.

"I think about the little whimpers you make. The way your mouth opens and your forehead creases...almost like you're in pain. I think about how wet you always are for me before I even touch you, and how much wetter you get when I do. I think about the way your clit pulses on my tongue or fingers when you're close. The breathy, desperate way you moan my name when you come and how I'm the lucky asshole responsible for making you feel so good."

*Whoa.*

Hearing him say all those things unhinges something inside me and before I have time to talk myself out of it, I place my hand on top of his.

"Don't stop."

Brows furrowing, he lets out a low groan that goes straight between my legs.

God, that sound. It does things to me.

I'm like a fiend, needing more of this addicting elixir he's giving me.

More of *him*.

When we're on the upstroke, I let go and wrap my hand around his base.

Satin heat fills my palm, pulsing in my grasp as I take over.

"Fuck." Pleasure contorts his sharp features, and a strangled groan leaves him. "I'm gonna come."

It's the only warning I get before a thick spurt of hot liquid streams onto my stomach. I squeeze it one last time, causing Preston to grunt and shudder as another spurt of liquid trickles out.

However, it's the moan that comes out of *me* while this happens that

surprises us both.

I was convinced that the sexual part of our relationship would remain one-sided because I'd never have the urge to reciprocate.

But I was wrong, because not only did I have the urge.

I *liked* it.

## Chapter 33

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Kit

Heat floods my body as I move my fist up and down, gunning for those gruff, husky sounds Preston makes when he's close to coming.

I'm rewarded a few seconds later. "Christ, angry girl. You're *really* getting good at this."

Shooting him a sly smile, I kiss a path down his sculpted stomach. I'm not cocky about a lot of things, but being a great lover takes the number one spot on my list of talents.

"You should see what I can do with my mouth."

Our gazes clash and we both freeze.

I just put something in my mouth all right...my damn foot.

It was a careless slipup, but the way his lips part on a ragged inhale, his Adam's apple bobs—and the cock in my hand twitches—makes it clear he's very interested in finding out.

Fuck several ducks.

I give great oral when it comes to women, but I don't know the first thing about giving a blow job. Other than it's poorly named because you don't *blow* on anything.

I feel like I've had one swimming lesson—okay, a *few*—and dropped into the deep end.

*Sink or swim, bitch.*

Nerves flutter in my belly as I inch closer. The desire is there, because pleasuring Preston is *such* a turn-on, but I don't want to do something wrong and screw this up.

Maybe I should remind him that our little bet is still very much intact. Although his prize at the end is intercourse...not a BJ.

*Dammit.* I'm in a pickle. I wouldn't be nearly as freaked out about this if I at least had some iota of how to make it good for him.

Reaching down, he cups my cheek. "Kit—"

The sound of his *secret phone* ringing cuts him off and he reaches for it. "I have to take this."

I've barely rolled off him before he's sprinting toward the bathroom.

I don't know whether to feel grateful his mom just cockblocked us or upset.

I suppose I'll go with grateful since it's less draining.

Although, I'd be lying if I said him leaving the room whenever he talks to her didn't hurt a little.

I know they're working on their relationship, which is great. I just wish he'd at least introduce me to the woman.

According to Asher, I'm better off not meeting her. Evidently, she's an uppity, money hungry bitch who only cares about keeping up with appearances.

Which I guess makes Preston's motives for keeping her away from me easier to understand. He did once say he didn't want her taking advantage of his rich wife.

But still, if she's changing for the better—and I assume she is since she wants to work on her relationship with her son—I'd like to give her the benefit of the doubt and meet her.

I'm reaching for the glass of water on the nightstand when Preston comes back.

"I have to head out," he tosses over his shoulder as he walks to his closet. "My mom's having car trouble. She's stuck on the side of the road a few towns over."

"Oh." I bolt up in bed. "Should I come with?"

I don't know the extent of her car trouble, but an extra set of hands can't hurt.

He quickly buttons his jeans and tosses a T-shirt over his head. "No."

Before I can ask any more questions, he stalks out the door.

Only to come back a moment later.

His gaze lands on my mouth before he seizes my jaw and bends down to kiss me. The first brush of his tongue steals my breath. The second makes me



want to beg him to stay.

All too soon, he's pulling away. "I'll be back later." Shooting me a panty-dropping smile, he gives me another quick kiss. "We can pick up where we left off."

*Uh-oh.*

That nervous feeling comes rushing back as I watch him leave.

*Houston, we have a problem.*



I nearly jump out of my skin when the doorbell rings.

*It's go time.*

I eagerly rush to the front door and swing it open.

Juan and Breslin are standing on the other side of it...both have worried expressions on their faces.

Juan's the first to speak. "Are you okay?"

"You said there was an emergency," Breslin adds, looking behind me.

I quickly usher them inside. I don't know how long Preston will be gone, so we don't have tons of time. A few hours at most.

"I need your help." I lead them through the foyer, past the kitchen, and finally, to the living room.

Their eyes go wide with shock and what I'm guessing is a whole lot of confusion.

Well, not so much Juan since he's seen most of the lineup thanks to being a former employee at Pretty Kitties.

I gesture to the smorgasbord of cucumbers, carrots, bananas, dildos, strap-ons, and butt plugs I've laid out on a large table.

I wasn't sure what they'd require for this, so I made sure to put out a little bit of everything. Kind of like a buffet.

"I need you to teach me how to give a blow job."

The way I see it, they're the perfect ones to do it. Juan because he's a guy...and gay. And Breslin because...well, she has *two* to blow regularly.

Their responses are polar opposites.

Juan rolls up his sleeves, ready to get to work. “Let’s do this.”

Breslin takes a huge step back. “You know I’d do anything in the world for you, but this is a little...”

I get where she’s coming from. First, I’m storming over to her house demanding to kiss her and her fiancé...and now I’m asking her to teach me how to suck dick. Breslin is a reserved introvert by nature, so I’m sure this is a lot for her to take.

“I’m sorry, B. I know this is out of your comfort zone, but I really need you.”

She pinches the bridge of her nose. “Okay. I’ll do it.” Wincing, she looks around. “Is Preston home? Because that’s a deal breaker. Giving you some tips is one thing. Watching you use those tips on *him* is...” She shudders her disgust.

I wave a hand. “No worries. He’s out with his mom.”

Juan rubs his palms together. “Now that *that’s* settled, hold on tight. Master Juan is going to teach you everything you need to know and then some.” *Master* Juan runs his finger down the line of toys and produce. “First thing’s first. What exactly are we working with here?”

I’m puzzled because I figured he’d be the one telling *me* that. “I don’t know. Pick whatever you think is best.”

He places his hand over his heart. “My sweet summer child. I’m assuming you want to learn the art of fellatio so you can please that sexy husband of yours, right?”

I nod my head. “That’s the plan.”

“Then we should work with the closest representation of his actual cock.”

Breslin cringes, but it makes total sense to me.

After eyeing all the selections, there’s one clear choice. The biggest dildo at the end of the table. Truth be told, I’ve never used it before because it’s a little...intimidating.

“This one.”

Juan’s eyes go big. “Oh, honey. How’s your gag reflex?”



“Deeper,” Juan urges.

“Don’t forget to squeeze the balls from time to time,” Breslin instructs. “*Especially* when he comes.”

“But don’t squeeze *too* hard,” Juan adds. “Some guys are sensitive.”

Good Lord. This is *a lot* to remember.

“You have to take it deeper,” Breslin utters. “You’re barely past the tip.”

For fuck’s sake. I’m *trying*. It doesn’t help that my knees are killing me. I better learn how to get good at this because I refuse to be in this god-awful position for too long.

Reaching down, Juan strokes my cheek. “Relax your mouth, peaches. You’re all wound up.”

That’s because a mouth isn’t supposed to open this wide.

“You can try humming,” Breslin suggests. “Sometimes it helps loosen everything up.”

Humming “The Star-Spangled Banner”, I’m able to slide down a little more.

Breslin gives me a thumbs up. “There you go. That’s *much* better.”

“Good girl,” Juan praises.

I shoot him a dirty look.

He shrugs innocently. “What? You never know, he might say that in the heat of the moment.” He strokes my cheek again. “Okay, now I’m gonna tug your hair and Breslin’s gonna stand behind you and push down on your head until you choke. Try not to freak out.”

Say what now?

The moment they do, the dildo slides farther down my throat and I start gagging.

“Yes!” Breslin shouts. “Atta girl.”

Juan smiles. “*Now* we’re getting somewhere. You’re doing great, sweetie. But take it deeper.”

“Suck it,” Breslin adds, even though I’m *still* gagging on this thing.

“What the hell is going on in here?” a voice that sounds a lot like Landon’s booms behind me.

Oh. My. God.

The three of us freeze and I can only imagine the poor visual Landon is subjected to right now.

Me on my knees sucking a giant dildo Juan’s holding in front of his crotch while his free hand tugs on my hair.

And let's not forget his fiancée Breslin who's bringing up the rear and pushing my head up and down.

Standing, I wipe the drool off my chin. "I got the urge."

He doesn't look nearly as thrilled as I thought he'd be for me. "Glad to hear it, but why the fuck—"

"Kit asked Juan and I to come over so we could teach her how to give a blow job," Breslin interjects.

Landon's lips twitch as he processes this. "*That's* the emergency you were referring to in your text message?"

She gives him a sheepish shrug. "That's what Kit called it."

I wipe my mouth again. "It's not going well, though. I keep gagging."

Landon blinks. "That's a good thing."

"Thank you," Juan says emphatically. "*That's* what I keep trying to tell her."

*Aye caramba.* Where I come from, that's never good. If you're gagging anywhere near a girl's nether regions...it's time to book it the hell out of there.

Walking over to us, Landon grabs the dildo. "I'll give you a few pointers."



"You're doing so good," Breslin praises as she pulls on my hair. "So good."

"Don't forget to use your hands when you get tired," Landon instructs from the back. "And eye contact. Eye contact is hot as hell."

"But not creepy eye contact," Juan adds as he drives the dildo down my throat. "You do *not* want him to think you're a stage five clinger who's trying to suck his soul through his dick. Look away every so often."

Breslin tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. "And don't forget to swallow." She makes a face. "It's an acquired taste, but you'll get used to it."

They've got to be kidding me.

Holding the base, I disconnect my mouth so I can speak. "Wait. I have to

swallow that stuff?”

“Yes,” all three of them yell at the same time.

“It’s rude if you don’t.” Juan snaps his fingers. “Now get back to work.”

I’m starting to understand why they call it a blow job.

Suppressing a grumble, I unhinge my jaw and take it into my mouth again.

Juan bats away tears as I try to put everything I’ve learned to good use. “I feel like a proud Papa. He’s gonna lose his damn mind when you put it on him, girl.”

*I hope so.*

I’m sucking, gagging, and stroking my heart out when a deep voice bellows, “What the *fuck*?”

Dammit. I have *got* to start locking the front door.

“Asher,” Breslin says as I get off the floor. “This isn’t what it looks like.”

Looking positively horrified, he wags a finger at the four of us. “So, you weren’t pulling Kit’s hair while that—” He points to Juan. “Dude shoved a dildo down Kit’s throat and he—” He points to Landon. “Pushed her head down from behind?”

“Okay, yes. That’s exactly what we were doing,” Breslin deadpans. “But not for the reasons you think.”

He crosses his arms over his chest. “You said Kit had an *emergency*.”

“I did.” I pull my bottom lip between my teeth. “I wanted to learn how to give a blow job.”

Asher’s mouth opens and closes like a fish before he shakes his head. “You know what? The less I know about this shit, the better. The last time you enlisted our help it earned me a punch in the face.”

“Sorry.”

Palms up, he starts walking backward. “I was *never* here, okay? I have enough issues with my brother. I don’t need to add teaching his wife how to give head onto the list.” Halting his steps, he rubs his chin. “Although, we are brothers, so we’re genetically wired to like the same kind of blowies.”

Landon adjusts his glasses. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure it doesn’t work that way.”

Asher thinks about this for a moment. “I’m pretty sure it *does*, but that’s beside the point.” Eyebrows crashing together, he wags a finger at me. “That shithead doesn’t deserve good head from you, you hear me?”

The four of us exchange a confused glance.

“Why doesn’t Preston deserve good head?”

Breslin backs me up on this. “Lord knows I can’t stand your brother, but he makes Kit happy. I think it’s time we learn to accept their relationship and support them.” She pops a hand on her hip. “Unless there’s something you know that we don’t.”

“No,” Asher defends. “I know nothing.” He goes back to finger wagging. “Except that *you* shouldn’t give your delicate flower away to just anyone, small fry. You save that for someone worthy of it.”

I can’t help but laugh. “It’s a little too late for that. My cherry was popped a *long* time ago.”

In a van outside of a club. Although the vibrator she used was tiny compared to Preston.

He backs away again. “Fine. Do what you want.”

*Oh, boy.* “I know you and Preston don’t have the greatest relationship right now so your opinion of him isn’t the best, but I really care about him.”

Asher nods. “I know you do.”

“He cares about me, too.” I inhale a breath. “Sorry for upsetting you. I just wanted to make it good for him without embarrassing myself in the process.”

“Got it.”

With that, he walks out.

Only to come back a minute later.

“The sloppier the better.” Finger wag. “Also, tease it a little bit. We like the oven preheated, too.”

With those parting words he leaves...*again*.

## Chapter 34

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Preston

It's just past three a.m. by the time I walk in the door. Charlotte was running some errands with Jameson while Becca was out with her on again boyfriend when her car started smoking.

She pulled over on the side of the road and called a tow truck, but they were taking their sweet ass time getting there. She didn't want to force a toddler to wait it out with her, especially in the summer heat, but Becca didn't pick up her phone. So she called me.

Unfortunately, her car was fucked beyond what I could fix, but I scooped Jameson up and brought him back to the apartment. Becca told Charlotte she'd be back around eight, but evidently, she lost track of time because she stumbled inside at two forty in the morning.

I was so disgusted with her I didn't even bother arguing.

Sometimes I think about calling the authorities, but I know there isn't much they can do. Becca always leaves him with a capable adult when she's gone—i.e., me or Charlotte—and as far as I know she doesn't bring the partying around her son. Something I'm grateful for.

That said, even if they removed him from her care, I'm not sure the alternative would be much better. He'd be stuck in the system...a system that wouldn't give me any rights to see him or find out if he's okay.

I want to adopt him, this way I know he'll always be taken care of, but Becca would never go for it because then she'd lose her bargaining chip against me...her financier.

Unless I one-upped her and cut her a check for two million.

I'd like to think no amount of money would ever make a mother give up



her child, but I know that's not the case.

Bottom line, Becca's not cut out for motherhood.

Jameson needs someone who's willing to put him first.

I trek up the staircase, wondering what story I can spin to explain why I'm home so late.

When I enter the bedroom—a bedroom we now share since I moved my stuff into it last week—I find her curled up in a ball in the middle of our bed.

Lola's lying on the floor beside her, snoring loud enough to wake the dead.

The muscles in my chest draw tight with regret as I approach her. She's wearing some lacy pink lingerie getup, and there's makeup on her face. Her loose hair is fanned out over the mattress, the pink tips the same color as her sexy bra and panties.

She looks like a goddamn wet dream come to life, but knowing she did all this for me only makes me feel like an even bigger dick.

I'm not worthy of that beautiful, pure heart of hers.

The heart that still wants to believe the best in everyone, even after they've hurt her. The heart that refuses to give up on those she cares about, even when she should. The heart that makes this fucked-up world a much better place.

She's everything I'm not. Kind to my cruel. Forgiving to my vindictive. Honest to my deceptive.

She stirs when I pick her up, but not enough to wake. Tossing back the covers, I place her back into bed. I get in behind her and my arms find her waist, tugging her closer.

*Because I'm selfish.*



A beam of sunlight peeking through a crack in the curtain—and the sound of Kit's off-pitch singing in the connecting bathroom—rouses me from sleep.

I'm about to get up, but then she enters the bedroom. Her hair is still damp from the shower and she's wearing a baggy T-shirt and sweatpants. Even though she looked hot as fuck in the lingerie she was in last night, she looks even more beautiful now.

Her pretty face scrunches with concern as she peers down at me. "Is

everything okay? You got in so late I didn't hear you come in."

*Fuck.*

"No...yeah." That only makes her more confused. "It is now."

She's clearly waiting for me to follow that vague statement up with something else, so I add, "My mom's car trouble turned out to be a car accident."

She clutches her chest. "Oh, my God. Is she okay?"

"She's a little banged up, but otherwise fine. We were in the hospital for a while, though."

Crawling into bed, she lays her head on my chest. "I wish you would have called me. I could have met you up there."

I breathe in her fruity scent and run my fingers down her arm. "Most of our time was spent waiting for the doctor to check her out. There was no point making you come up there just to sit around with us."

She kisses my chest, her pouty lips landing right above the organ beating wildly for her. "You're a good son." Something passes in her gaze. "Asher said she was in town for a short time to visit some friends. She's been here for a while now."

Fucking Asher.

"Yeah. That was the plan. But she decided to stay a little longer. Especially now that she has a broken leg."

Her mouth drops open. "That's awful. You said her injuries were *minor*?"

"Compared to the possibility of dying, they are. The doctor said she'll make a full recovery."

Wanting to switch topics, I roll us over so she's pinned underneath me. "You dressed up for me last night." Burying my head in the crook of her neck, I kiss her there. "I'm sorry I wasn't here to enjoy it." Lifting her T-shirt, I make my way down her body. "I'll make it up to you."

*With my fingers and mouth.*

Her eyes close and a small whimper leaves her when I pull her shirt and bra over her head and stick my face between her tits. However, when I try to take it further than that, she stops me. "Aunt flow is in town." She averts her gaze. "For real this time."

I want to question why she lied to begin with, but I'm pretty sure it had something to do with feeling overwhelmed by the physical direction our relationship took. Something she appears to no longer be struggling with.

Thank fuck.

I'm about to suggest we jump in the shower, but then she says, "Doesn't mean I can't take care of you, though."

I should say no, but my cock jumps in and makes the decision for me.

"No argument here."

Switching places, we move so she's on top. I squeeze her tits as she runs her palms down my stomach. I'm so hard that when she pulls on the waistband of my boxers, my cock eagerly springs out. Ready to get the party started.

After pulling my boxers off, she wraps her hand around me. The first stroke has me groaning. I wasn't kidding when I told her she was getting good at giving hand jobs. I never thought I'd look forward to one past high school, but I ardently welcome Kit's touch.

Especially when she starts planting open-mouth kisses down my stomach. White-hot lust rushes through me, but I tell my dick to chill the fuck out and be grateful that the hand jerking him is hers instead of mine.

The idea of giving a blow job had Kit looking utterly petrified yesterday and I'm not about to insist she do something she's clearly not comfortable with.

But that all changes when her movements come to a stop and she grabs her pillow...

Then kneels on the floor.

Unless she suddenly feels the urge to pray, it's clear what she's gearing up to do.

And if I had any doubt about her intentions, I don't when she removes the elastic band from her wrist and ties her hair back.

Yup. I definitely know *that* move.

Sitting up in bed, I shift to face her. "Kit."

I can sense she's nervous, and although endearing, I don't want to make her feel like she has to do this.

Not only will it ruin the experience for her...one wrong move on my part will ensure she never has the impulse to do it again.

Reaching down, I cup her cheek, forcing her to look at me. "Don't do something you don't want to."

Determination shines in her eyes as she wraps her hand around my cock. "I want to."

*Fuck.* If I were a stronger man, I would put up more of a resistance.

But I'm not.

I've wanted this girl ever since she scowled and tried to kick me off her bridge.

And my want for her has only grown as the years passed.

Pursing her lips, she grazes the head of my cock, giving it a little kiss. I nearly come from the sensation alone.

"Ki—"

Words die in my throat when her tongue sweeps over the tip, lapping up the drop of precum.

Her big hazel eyes lock with mine as she stretches her mouth around me, giving me a soft suck.

I try to sit on my hands, because the urge to fist her hair is too strong, but then she relaxes her throat and takes me deeper.

And I'm a fucking goner.

Groaning, I buck my hips, shoving my dick down her throat. Not only does she welcome it without resistance, she alternates between hard and light sucks, driving me out of my goddamn mind.

I'm so lost in her, so fucking high off what she's doing, I swear I hear her hum the first few bars of The Star-Spangled Banner.

She takes me so deep I hit the back of her throat and she gags.

"Yes," I urge, wrapping her ponytail around my fist. "*Fuck yes.*"

A helpless sound leaves me when I look down. Her mouth is full of my cock, her eyes are glassy, and there's drool running down her chin.

I don't know how the hell she's so fucking good at this, especially given it's her first time, but I thank my lucky stars.

Her mouth is a warm, wet and sloppy taunt. Heaven meets hell.

Fucking perfection.

Shivering heat licks down my spine as the feeling of what she's doing overtakes me.

Instinctively, I tense, bracing for the possible flashbacks from the worst day of my life to seep in and poison one of the best experiences I've ever had.

But Kit holds my gaze, silently willing me to keep our connection in this moment. *To stay with her.*

My abs clench and my balls draw tight. I give her the customary shoulder tap to let her know I'm close so she can move out of the way. Then it occurs to me that Kit doesn't know about the shoulder tap.

“I’m gonna come.”

Instead of stopping, she sucks me harder, giving my balls a slight tug in the process. *Jesus.*

The groan that rumbles out of me is so loud I’m surprised the windows don’t rattle. “Fuck!”

I shoot down her throat so hard and fast some of the liquid leaves her mouth and dribbles down her gorgeous tits.

The sight combined with the gentle kiss she gives the head of my cock has me shuddering as I fall onto the bed.

“Fucking hell, angry girl.”

“Fucking hell *good*. Or fucking hell *bad*? I mean, I know you came, but is there anything I can improve on?”

She’s gotta be fucking with me right now.

Propping myself up on my elbows, I stare down at her. “Are you sure you’ve never sucked dick before? Because that was some supreme head.”

She grins. “Nope. Yours was my first.”

And *last*. Because the thought of Kit doing that to another guy is enough to send me into a blind rage.

Standing, she places her pillow back on the bed. “I wanted to make it good for you, so I had Juan and Breslin come over and teach me.” Laughing to herself, she places her bra back on. “And Landon.”

I have no idea how I’m supposed to feel about that. On one hand, the thought of them schooling my wife on how to give a blow job doesn’t sit right with me.

On the other? It was for my benefit.

Because Kit wanted to ensure she knew how to please me.

My stomach twists with something that feels a whole lot like guilt. I should be the happiest guy in the world right now, but—*I don’t fucking deserve her*—has become a constant loop in my head.

The feeling only amplifies when Kit climbs on top of me. “So, I’ve been thinking...”

I grip her hips as she straddles me. “About?”

“Us.” Her vulnerability is palpable. A real-life thing I can reach out and touch. “I know the year isn’t over yet, but no one’s ever made me as happy as you make me.”

Her words are a sucker punch to the gut. “Okay.”

She worries her bottom lip between her teeth. “I guess what I’m trying to

say is...I want to be with you. After this thing with my Nanna ends.”

It feels like she’s carving my heart out with a dull knife.

Because if I can convince Becca to agree to give me Jameson at the end of all this, I’ll have no choice but to tell Kit the truth.

She swallows thickly. “I’m probably coming off super clingy and freaking you out.” She starts to move off me. “I’m sorry. I’ll give you some time—”

“I want your clingy.” I yank her back. “I want *you*.”

Her smile is so bright it rivals the sun. “You do?”

The thought of her thinking otherwise fucking kills me.

I brush my thumb over her cheekbone, memorizing every perfect feature on her perfect face. “Till death do us part.”

There are tears welling in her eyes now and I hear the hitch in her breath. “Till death do us part.”

Wanting to secure our fate, I play the only card I have. The only thing on earth that’s ever been strong enough to make me take a temporary hiatus from gambling.

“About the bet...”

Uneasiness spreads across her face and her body goes tense. “I know you want to win so you can collect your *prize*. Heck, I want it, too. But you’ve been doing so good, Preston. Please, just stick it out until the end.”

I fight the surge of dread clawing my insides. “I will, I promise. As long as *you* still promise to give me whatever I want at the end of it.”

I can survive without ever having sex with Kit. It would fucking suck and I’d want to ram my skull through a wall every goddamn day. I also have no doubt that my visceral need for her would bring me to my knees.

But I could survive it.

What I *can’t* survive...is her not forgiving me and losing her.

She places a hand over her heart. “I, Kit Jameson Bishop-Holden, solemnly swear to give my husband Preston whatever he wants as long as he doesn’t gamble for the next five months.”

*And fourteen days.*

However, there’s something else I’m more focused on. “You added Holden to your name.”

Her mouth lifts in a coy, incandescent smile. “Of course, I did, silly. You’re my husband.”

My chest tightens and a swell of warmth floods through it.

“Yes, I am.”

Leaning forward, she burrows against my chest.

I wrap my arms around her, holding on to her with everything I’ve got.

*Because I’m afraid one day I’m going to lose it.*

## Chapter 35

---



Kit

“Come on, Lola.” I give his leash a little tug, but he spreads out all four of his limbs, going splat on the floor like a pancake. “Exercise is good for you.”

I was hoping to get him to go for a run with me, but it’s clear he isn’t having it.

Poor thing looks like he’s being dragged to the torture chamber.

“Fine, lazybones.” Sinking to my haunches, I unclip the leash from his harness. “You’re off the hook today, but tomorrow we jog.”

He licks my cheek. “Flattery will get you nowhere.”

Who am I kidding? I fall for Lola’s kisses just as much as I do my husband’s.

“Who wants a belly rub—”

I’m cut off by a knock on my front door.

“It’s me,” Breslin says from the other side. “Can I come in?”

Like she even needs to ask.

“Of course. Mi casa es tu casa.”

My front door swings open and Breslin barges inside, looking all kinds of upset.

*This can’t be good.*

I sprout up. “What’s wrong?”

She looks around the foyer. “Where’s Preston?”

“He’s visiting his mom.”

It’s been two weeks since she broke her leg in the car crash and he’s been going over there daily so he can take care of her.

I'm sad I can't help, but he said she loved the basket of goodies I sent him over there with last week. I'm hoping when she's feeling better he'll cave and I'll be able to meet her.

Breslin's forehead creases. "Kit, I need to talk to you."

The serious tone of her voice has my anxiety spiking. "What's up?"

When she starts pacing, I know it's bad because Breslin isn't a pacer.

"I stole Asher's phone last night and called his mom."

That's...a little weird. "Why?"

"Because I thought it was odd that she was here spending *all* this time with her youngest son but couldn't spare a second to see her other son." She stops pacing and looks at me. "As awful as it sounds, the woman is nothing but a gold digger. From a logical standpoint, it just didn't make any sense that she wouldn't try to repair her relationship with Asher who's loaded, yet was suddenly acting like mom of the year to Preston who's...you know. The whole thing just seemed off. So, I called her."

So many thoughts run through my mind at that, but she reaches for my hand. Like she knows her next words will pull the rug out from under my feet.

"Kit, honey. She said she hasn't seen Preston in years. She's been in Boca Raton this whole time."

My first impulse is to deny it, because while Preston has no problem deceiving others, he'd never lie to *me*. Plus, we're in such a great place right now and I have no reason not to trust him.

"Nope." I shake my head. "I don't know why she told you that, but I'm sure there's an explanation for it."

Maybe she hates Breslin. Maybe she doesn't want to see Asher because she's pissed he inherited her husband's estate.

Maybe *she's* the big, fat liar pants on fire.

But then my mind flashes back to all the times he's walked into the house late and how whenever that damn phone rings, he doesn't hesitate to leave.

While I have no doubt that Preston cares about me, there's always been one thing he cares about more.

*The one thing he loves.*

My stomach twists sharply, and I have to lean against the wall for support. "Oh, God."

"I'm so sorry," Breslin says. "Trust me, I've *never* wanted to be more wrong in my life."

My mind races. Gambling makes sense, and it doesn't.

"He gets these calls on his secret phone a few times a week. Every time it rings, he stops whatever he's doing and runs out the door." I rub my temples, willing this all to make sense. "Obviously it's not his mom like I thought, but it can't be a casino calling him, right? That would be bizarre."

About as bizarre as me thinking I could trust an addict to quit his drug of choice in exchange for sex.

God, I feel like such a fucking fool.

Breslin winces. "Casino? Doubtful. Bookie? *Definitely*. Asher said he used to have a couple on speed dial. In fact, after he left town, he had the PI he hired talk to this Buster guy Preston dealt with regularly." Her eyes narrow. "And let's not forget his little stint with a certain bookie at Woodside that put Asher directly on the chopping block."

I inwardly shudder. *Vincent Dragoni*.

Ignoring the sharp zing of pain that last name produces, I force myself to take a deep breath and process all this.

The secret phone makes a whole lot more sense now.

"Okay, so he's obviously still gambling." I wipe my sweaty palms on my leggings. "I want to confront him about it, but without proof..."

"He'll just deny it," Breslin fills in.

"Exactly. And it's not like I can track down whatever bookie he's dealing with so I can catch him red-handed."

I also can't be at multiple casinos simultaneously, either.

She chews her thumbnail. "No, but there is a way you can track *him*. Put a secret app on his phone while he's in the shower."

As sad as it is that it's come to that, it's not a bad idea. "Okay—" I deflate when I realize. "Nope. I can't. Preston changed his pass code shortly after I told him I was snooping." I hold up a finger when it hits me. "On his secret phone. Not the one I bought him."

Heck, he doesn't even have a passcode on that one. However, he does bring it with him everywhere since it's the number I use whenever I call or text him.

Leaning down, Breslin gives Lola a scratch behind the ears. "That'll work. We can hop in the car and follow him the next time he leaves." She squeezes my hand. "I'm sorry, Kit. This situation is shitty, and I know you're hurting."

"Yeah." My hands fist at my sides as a pang of ache shoots through me.

“Dammit. I *want* to trust him, B. I want this all to be some horrible misunderstanding where we find out his mom is the one lying for some reason, but...”

“Your gut is telling you that’s not the case.”

“My gut is telling me there’s something else he deems more important than me.”

*And it hurts like hell.*

However, Preston isn’t the only one who lied. “Asher covered for Preston. He said their mother was in town visiting friends.”

And now his comments about Preston not deserving good head seem *a lot* more sensible.

He knew Preston was still gambling behind my back.

A deep frown mars her face. “I know. Unfortunately, Asher’s always been Preston’s enabler. The one time he tried putting his foot down about gambling Preston skipped town for three years and came back with one hell of a grudge.” She hangs her head. “I think Asher was so desperate to fix things and have his brother back, he was willing to do just about anything... including lie to us on his behalf.” Her gaze sharpens. “He’s at training camp, but when he comes home tomorrow, believe you me, I’m going to let him have it.”

She gives Lola one last scratch behind the ears. “I have to go home and break the news to Landon, but I’m right next door if you need me, okay?”

I give her a hug. “Thanks.”

“I wish I didn’t drop this bomb on you.” Her eyes close as we break apart. “I can’t believe I’m about to say this, but I truly believe Preston cares about you in his own way. He’s just...an addict. And that means he’ll continue to hurt the people in his life until he decides to stop for good.”

I look down at my shoes, hoping my best friend won’t judge me for what I’m about to say. “I hate that he lied, but I also know it’s only because he has a serious problem. Gambling aside, he would *never* intentionally hurt me.” I curl my arms around myself. “As long as he agrees to get help, I won’t give up on him.”

I hate his addiction, but I know there are more parts to him than that.

*And those parts wouldn’t betray me.*

She turns toward the door. “I’ll support you with whatever you decide. I was planning on going to the studio in the morning so I could finish up a portrait for a client, but I’m gonna get it done tonight so I can be free all day

tomorrow. Call me the moment he leaves, okay?"

"Okay."

The second the door closes behind her, the first tear falls.

And they don't stop falling until I hear Preston walk into our bedroom during the wee hours of the morning.



"I'm gonna head out," Preston says from the doorway.

I've been trying really hard not to blow my cover about my intent to follow him, but it's hard.

I roll over in bed. "Deuces."

"Angry girl?"

I scowl. "What?"

I hear footsteps coming toward me before I feel the mattress dip. "What's going on with you? You've been in a bad mood since you woke up."

"I'm just tired." I mock cough. "I think I might be coming down with something."

Like a bad case of the swindling husband.

His fingertips skim the length of my spine and I fight back a shiver. "Is there anything I can pick up for you while I'm out?"

Yeah. Pick me up a husband who *doesn't* gamble.

I roll over and face him. "If I asked you to stay with me today, would you?"

Would he choose me over poker or sports bets or whatever the hell it is that he's wagering on these days?

Because I'd choose *him* over anything.

Hell, I pretty much did.

My heart thuds when he palms my cheek and his gaze locks with mine. "My mom said she really needs my help today. But I'll see if I can cut out early, okay?"

He looks so torn right now, like he's being split in two. I'd almost believe him if I didn't know better.

"Okay."

He leans down to kiss me and for the very first time...there are no butterflies.

Because I know he just looked me right in the eyes and lied.



I clutch the steering wheel. “How did Landon take the news?”

“Turn left,” Breslin instructs. “And Landon’s pissed. We’ll all have to sleep in separate bedrooms tonight.”

I cock my head to look at her. A little too much, though because I almost run over a woman walking her dog. “Sorry.” I shoot my gaze out the windshield. “Why? Is Asher mad at you for calling his mom? Because you didn’t do anything wrong, B. He’s the one who lied.”

It seems to be a shared Holden brother trait.

“I know.” She sighs. “But we have this rule where if one of us is mad at the other, we *all* have to sleep in separate bedrooms. This way no one feels like it’s two against one.”

“But you and Landon are both mad at Asher,” I point out.

“Yes, but it’s still not right for me and Landon to sleep in our bed and kick Asher out of it because we’re angry with him. That will just cause resentment and jealousy. Therefore, we all have to separate.” She looks down at my phone. “Turn right here.”

I veer down yet another residential street. “Are we close?”

“According to this, we are. After you pass this stop sign, make another right.”

I press on my brake when we reach the stop sign. “I told him I was sick to see if he’d stay, but he told me his *mom* really needed him.”

“Bastard,” Breslin mutters before she expels another sigh. “So, do we have a plan?”

“I think so.”

“Mind clueing me in? After you make a left at the next stop sign.”

I spent most of the night thinking about how I was going to confront Preston.

The best *plan* I can come up with is putting my heart on the line and hoping he makes the right choice.

“Well, after I catch him in the act, I’m sure he’ll be defensive.”

“Definitely,” she agrees. “Most people are when they’ve been caught doing something wrong.”

“Right. And *my* response to his defensiveness will be compassion and honesty. I’m going to tell him I care about him and that I’m willing to work it out, but *only* if he gets help. I’m also gonna remind him that he has people who love him and will support him while he’s going through this.” I eye Breslin. “Right?”

I know she’s not his biggest fan, but I’m hoping she’s willing to stand by him.

He’s going to need all the support he can get.

“If he’s serious about getting help and he does, then yes. I’ll be in his corner. Turn left. This is it.”

I’m confused when we pull up to a local park.

“Are you sure that app is legit? I figured we’d be going to a shady warehouse or a sports bar.”

“Yup. According to the tracker Preston’s GPS coordinates haven’t changed in the last ten minutes so he should be here.”

I wonder where I can park so he won’t spot me before I can confront him.

As if reading my mind, Breslin says, “Park by the oak tree on the far side of the lot. He won’t be able to see you, but you can still see him through your driver’s side window. Also—” She digs around inside her massive purse. “I brought us some binoculars.”

I pull up to the spot and shift my car into park. “You really thought of everything, huh?”

She shrugs. “Strike too fast and he’ll come up with an excuse. You need to catch his ass at just the right time.”

“Yeah—” An important thought occurs to me then. “Breslin, how the hell are we going to catch him *doing* anything? If he’s meeting a bookie here, he’s just going to slip the guy some cash and bounce.”

At least if he was at a casino, I’d be able to walk up to the poker table he was sitting at.

I can tell this hadn’t occurred to my *Louise*, either. “I don’t know.” She hands me a pair of binoculars. “At the very least you’ll be able to let him know that you know he’s not with his mom like he said he was.”

True dat.

Lifting the binoculars to my eyes, I look out my driver’s side window.

“There he is,” Breslin says, and sure enough, I spot Preston standing by a bench near the swings.

My heart squeezes, still desperate to believe the best in him. “Maybe we’re wrong. Maybe he’s been lying to me because he needs space, and this is where he comes to take a breather. We both know I have a clinger problem.”

“Clingy is never a *problem* for the right person, Kit.”

I hate that she’s right.

“He’s glancing at his watch.”

“Bookie’s probably running late,” Breslin chirps.

“This is stupid,” I say after ten minutes go by. “The person he’s meeting obviously isn’t coming.”

I’m about to put my binoculars down, but then I see a little boy run over to him.

I don’t think much of it...until Preston kneels down and hugs him like he’s his entire world.

“What the hell?” Breslin exclaims.

What the hell is right because that child definitely isn’t a bookie.

I study the boy wrapped in his arms. He has blond hair, and he doesn’t look to be a day over four.

I chew the corner of my lip, pondering. “How old do you think that kid is, Breslin?”

And more importantly, what’s his relationship to Preston? Because they’re obviously very close.

A strange jolt of panic spirals through me.

No. It can’t be.

But then a woman with long blonde hair, mile-long legs, and bright blue eyes walks over to them.

The same woman who used to hold my heart in the palm of her hand...

*Before she smashed it to smithereens.*



## Chapter 36

---

Kit

“*P*lease, talk to me,” Breslin whispers as I pull up the driveway leading to her house. “You haven’t said a word since we left the park.”

“That’s because there’s nothing to say.”

The second I realized what my husband’s really been up to, self-preservation took over and I left.

He’s been lying to me this whole time...but not because of gambling. Because of *her*.

The harsh, cold realization has my vision blurring.

“He’s with her,” I choke out, unable to bring myself to utter her name.

I feel like I’m rolling around in broken glass, the jagged edges slicing through my heart...causing me to bleed out.

Breslin wraps her arms around me. “I’m so sorry. So fucking sorry.”

So am I.

I’m sorry I asked him to marry me.

I’m sorry I ever trusted him.

*I’m sorry I gave him my heart.*

Sometimes you can want something so bad, you’d give up anything to have it.

And God knows I wanted him—wanted *us*—more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life.

I try to take a breath past the crushing weight on my lungs, but it’s impossible.

It feels like I’m physically dying.

While they circle around me, pointing and laughing...because they played the shit out of me.

Punching the steering wheel, I force myself to swallow back tears, because neither of them deserve it.

My survival instincts kick in with a violent lurch. I need to put as much distance between them and me as possible. The farther, the better.

“I have to go.”

Breslin’s face fills with panic. “Don’t leave, Kit. You can stay with me.”

I shake my head. “No.”

I appreciate the offer but staying with her is way too close to the fire. I’ll be reminded of Preston every time I look at his brother.

Who knew what he was up to and still protected him.

Grabbing her hand, I give it a small squeeze. I get why she’s worried. Last time my heart was obliterated, I cut off all contact and she had to pick me up from a jail cell.

“It won’t be like last time,” I promise. “But I have to get away.”

I *need* to detach from reality.

Because the pain of his betrayal is so brutal—so fucking excruciating—I won’t survive it if I don’t force myself to go numb.

It feels like something inside my soul broke.

*And I’ll never get it back.*

I can tell Breslin doesn’t like it, but she understands. “Okay. But please call me. Even if it’s just to tell me where you are and that you’re safe.”

“I’ll text you once I get to wherever it is I end up.”

A place where he’ll never be able to find me once he realizes he lost his cash cow for good.

“Can you watch Lola until I get back?”

I hate the thought of leaving him behind, but I’m in no position to take care of him right now.

“Of course.”

We say our goodbyes and then I start the drive to my grandmother’s house...

So I can inform her our agreement is off.



“Are you well?” Reggie questions as I brush past him in search of my Nanna.

No, I’m not.

I find her in the living room waving around a cigarette. Her eyes widen when she sees me.

“I need a divorce.”

No point beating around the bush.

Nanna and Reggie exchange a flabbergasted look and then she reaches for her notepad.

*If you get a divorce, the deal is off.*

“I know, but...” My voice cracks.

*I’m losing everything.*

Frowning, she scrawls something on her notepad and holds it up. *What did he do?*

My chest coils and I shake my head. Saying the words aloud will steal what little strength I have left and bring me to my knees.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m *done*.” My feet turn on their own accord, desperate to flee. “I’ll pack my stuff and get out of the house.”

I don’t have a lot of time, so I’ll only be able to grab the essentials.

And then I’ll contact Barry.

“Wait,” Reggie calls out behind me.

“I’ll give you my keys after I move out.”

“No, Kit. Please *stop*.”

I swallow the ball of irritation lodged in my throat. There’s nothing he or my grandmother can say to change my mind about this.

Grinding my molars, I turn to face him. “What?”

“Your grandmother was going to Hawaii this afternoon, but her doctor advised against it due to her deteriorating health.” He looks at her and she waves a hand, indicating he should continue. “She wants you to go. The plane is already fueled and ready.”

I start to decline because my Nanna’s *gifts* always come with a price.

However, it’s the look in her eyes when she turns her notebook around that gives me pause.

For the first time in a long time...she’s looking at me like I’m her granddaughter.

Like she truly cares and wants to help me.

I read the words on the pad.

*Take some time for yourself and clear your head. We'll handle everything when you get back.*

I should say no, because the thought of sipping fancy cocktails on a beach in Hawaii while my life is imploding is absurd.

However, I was already planning on leaving.

Might as well go somewhere that's been booked and paid for.

*And miles and miles away from him.*

## Chapter 37

---

Preston

*K*it's car isn't in the driveway and the house is empty when I get home.

She mentioned she wasn't feeling well this morning, though so maybe she ran out to the pharmacy.

Not sure why she took the dog with her.

Then again, those two are attached at the hip.

I place the container of soup I picked up on the kitchen table and dig my cell out of my pocket so I can call her.

It goes straight to voice mail.

Figuring she must be in a shitty service area; I call her several more times over the next twenty minutes.

Every time I do, the same thing happens.

Given her best friend is our neighbor, I head over to my brother's house.

Breslin opens the door after the third knock. I'm relieved when I see Lola beside her because it means Kit's inside.

"Kit's phone isn't working."

I go to step inside, but Breslin stands in front of the door, blocking me from entering.

We aren't friends, but I thought we were past the hostility.

Evidently not.

"I don't know what your issue is, and I don't really care. I just want to see my wife."

Breslin stands firm. "Kit isn't here."

That's...unsettling. "Where is sh—"

White-hot pain spikes through my balls and I crouch over. “What the fuck?”

“If you ever go near Kit again, I’ll take a machete to them.”

To say I’m puzzled would be putting it mildly. I know she hasn’t been the biggest fan of our relationship, but this is straight-up bullshit.

“Go near her again? Are you out of your fucking mind? She’s my *wife* —”

Sharp shooting pain slams into my nuts for the second time.

When I keel over, Breslin takes the opportunity to slam the door. It hits my head with a force that makes my teeth hurt.

“Fuck!”

Rage punches through my chest and I bang on the door. If this bitch thinks she can keep me away from Kit, she’s three fries short of a goddamn Happy Meal.

Fortunately, it’s Asher who answers this time.

“Where the fuck is my wife?”

Eyes narrowing, he crosses his arms. “I told you not to hurt her.”

*Christ.* He’s smoking the same shit Breslin is.

“I would never—”

“You goddamn *liar!*” Breslin shouts behind him, looking like she’s gearing up to attack me again. “We saw you at the park with Becca.”

The words invade my ears and travel through me like a bullet, causing every bodily function of mine to shut down.

Asher’s saying something, but I don’t hear a word of it.

All I can focus on is Kit.

And how much she’s hurting right now.

*Because of me.*

I wanted to be the one to tell her.

*It should have been me.*

“Where is she?”

I swear to God if he doesn’t fucking tell me, I *will* kill him.

His shoulders slump. “I don’t know.”

I’m not fucking around. I will wrap my hands around his throat and squeeze until he gives me her location.

“Bullshit.”

“It’s *not*,” he defends. “Breslin won’t tell me anything.” Guilt slashes his face. “She called Mom and found out I was lying about her being in town.”



I flick my gaze to Breslin because that's his shitstorm to deal with. I have my own to handle.

"Tell me where she is. *Now.*"

I always swore I'd never hit a woman, but I will straight-up punt her ass across the goddamn lawn if she doesn't start talking.

Her furious stare locks with mine. "You've always been the most selfish person on the planet, but I actually believed you cared about her."

"I do—"

"Cut the shit, asshole. If you truly cared, you never would have done that to her. *Ever.*" She wedges herself in front of my brother. "I'm not telling you a damn thing. Now get the fuck off my property before I call the police."

With that, she slams the door and locks it.

I strike the wood so hard my knuckles bleed. "Give me my damn dog."

"No!" she screams from the other side. "You lost him, too."

Blood rushes through my ears and I grip the doorframe.

*I'm not losing her.*

I just have to find out where the fuck she is so I can tell her everything.

I take off running when it dawns on me.

*There's only one person who keeps tabs on her.*

## Chapter 38

---

Kit

The private bungalow suite my Nanna booked is huge. It has a luxury bathroom, a giant bed in the loft upstairs, a living room, and its own separate entrance.

It also has a gorgeous view of the ocean.

Gripping the railing of the balcony with one hand and clutching my cocktail glass with the other, I peer down. There's a tiki bar set up on the beach below, along with a DJ and a dance floor.

The sounds of people having fun fill my ears and my eyes drift to a man who's twirling a woman around the dance floor. Every time he pulls her close, he kisses her, and she smiles like she can't get enough of it.

A few feet away there's a different man with his arms wrapped around a woman as they snuggle in a lounge chair. He's whispering something in her ear that has her clutching him tight...like she wants to spend every waking moment right there in his arms.

Across the way from them, I spot two men grabbing a drink at the bar. After the bartender serves them, they click their glasses and kiss. They're both wearing T-shirts that say, *Just Married* and it's obvious they're having a great time on their honeymoon.

There once was a time when seeing happy couples would have me longing to find my own soul mate.

*Someone who wouldn't let me crash.*

But not anymore.

Because now, I know the truth.

Falling in love is never worth it.

Because if the fall alone doesn't kill you...the inevitable heartbreak will.

The stove was hot, and I knew it would burn.

But I touched it anyway.

And now the organ in my chest is being cremated.

As it should...because it no longer works.

I bring the glass to my lips and take a sip. The tart taste of cranberry mixed with vodka hits my tongue and I wish room service would stop taking forever so I can add more liquor to it.

*Numb out the pain.*

Then again, I don't need alcohol to do that.

He once told me illusions were your mind's way of saving you when reality kept trying to break you. A way of giving you something to believe in when you didn't have anything left.

I think I understand what he meant now.

My reality is full of pain and despair...but my illusion can be whatever I want it to be.

And right now? I choose to pretend that my heart is still intact.

That I'm strong enough to get through this.

*That Preston Holden didn't break me.*

The sound of someone knocking pulls me from my thoughts.

I race down the stairs because I know there's a bottle of vodka with my name on it chilling on ice.

I eagerly swing open the door. "About ti—"

Words die in my throat because room service isn't on the other side.

*He is.*

## Chapter 39

---

Preston

*A*s always, Nanna Satan was a pleasure to deal with. After hitting me with her notebook a few times, she told me to go fuck myself with a rusty screwdriver and choke on some poker chips.

Or rather, she had Reggie tell me that.

Eventually, she caved, though and told me where Kit was. Hawaii.

I didn't enjoy the twelve-hour flight crammed between two people while hearing a baby cry bloody murder nonstop...but it was worth it to be in the same vicinity as her again.

I've had a lot of time to think on the plane, and even though I know what I did was wrong...I also know Kit. Her heart is as big and deep as the ocean. Once I tell her about Jameson, she'll understand.

Then she'll forgive me, and we can go back home.

Put all this shit behind us and continue our lives together.

It feels like an eternity goes by before she answers the door.

"About ti—"

Those hazel orbs widen with shock and for a moment I think she's going to slam the door in my face...but she doesn't.

I cut to the chase. "I'm sor—"

"Perfect timing," she interjects.

It takes me a second to realize there's someone standing behind me.

I step inside the room as she grabs a large bottle of vodka off a room service cart. "Let me get my purse."

I follow close behind when she walks into the living room. By the looks

of things, it's clear her grandmother spared no expense.

"I know you're upset. You have every right to be."

She snatches her purse off the coffee table without so much as glancing my way.

"Kit."

Still paying me no mind, she walks back over to the door and tips the guy.

The second he leaves; she makes a beeline for the bar in the living room and starts mixing a drink that contains far more vodka than juice.

I try a different tactic. "I never meant to hurt you."

Holding up a finger, she takes a long sip, nearly draining the entire glass. "Do you want one?"

The only thing stranger than her question, is the bland expression on her face.

Kit's the most emotional person I've ever met. She feels *everything*—good and bad—at the highest level perpetually.

I came here fully expecting to have to console her while she cried. After she reamed me out, of course.

Yet, she's acting like nothing's wrong. *Like she doesn't care.*

"No. What I want is for you to listen while I explain."

Giving her head a shake, she scrunches her nose. "Yeah, we're not gonna do that."

Yes the fuck we are.

"I know you're upset. But if you would just listen—"

"No!"

She screams it so loud I'm sure the people on the other side of the resort heard it.

Swiping a tote bag off a chair, she takes a deep breath. "I have plans."

Frustration billows in my chest. "Fuck your plans. I'm not leaving until you let me explain."

She turns on her heel, dismissing me and the conversation I was trying to have.

I chase after her.

"Goddammit, angry girl—"

A laugh that's devoid of humor cuts me off. "Angry girl." Her shoulders rise in a shrug, her vacant expression giving nothing away. "That's the thing, Preston. I'm *not* angry. I'm not anything."

I study her features as I stare her down, looking for a hint that proves

what she's saying is bullshit, so I can call her bluff.

But there's no sign that she's upset. No indication that she's even irritated by my presence.

She seems empty and hollow inside.

*Like me.*

It's as if the real Kit is concealed by armor I can't penetrate.

"Kit." It feels like there's glass lodged in my throat. "*Please.*"

"I know it was a long flight, so you're welcome to stay and sleep on the couch," she says in a blasé tone before gesturing to the bar. "There's liquor over there so help yourself." Not missing a beat, she advances toward the door. "I hear the casino downstairs is great." Her steps falter as she pulls a small stack of papers out of the tote bag and turns to face me. "Oh, and there's one more thing."

"What?"

She shoves the papers in my hand and only then do I see the faintest trace of pain in her eyes...but it's gone just as quickly as it appeared.

And then *she's* gone.

My chest caves in as I leaf through what appears to be documents and register that they're divorce papers.

*Divorce papers she's already signed.*

The dull ache in my chest spreads when I notice the date next to her signature.

We got married exactly seven months ago.

*Seven.*

Pain rips through my gut as the realization hits me with a force so great it steals the air from my lungs and sends everything spiraling.

I've destroyed everything that's ever been mine...

*Including her.*



## Chapter 40

---

Preston

*K*

it never came back to the room last night.

I waited up, hoping she'd have a change of heart...only to realize the sun had risen hours before and she still hadn't returned.

I spent most of the morning and afternoon looking for her but came up empty at every corner.

Just when I was starting to think she'd left for good, one of the resort workers told me she'd signed up for some walking tour of the nearby cliffs and waterfalls.

It's strange given Kit has an immense fear of heights, but at least she's still here.

Or so I thought. Because when I finally tracked down the tour she was supposed to be on...Kit *wasn't* with them.

I was two seconds away from making the tour guide swallow his teeth, but then he told me she'd stayed back at one of the cliffs.

It takes me a half hour to make my way to the one he said she'd be at. Relief washes over me when I spot her...followed by an inundation of remorse.

Hugging her knees to her chest, she's sitting all alone near the edge of a cliff stationed above a massive waterfall, wearing the same tank top and shorts she was in last night.

The vibrant pink sunset illuminates the two large angel wing tattoos on opposite sides of her shoulder blades that move with every unstable breath she takes.

A stab of anguish cuts through me because she looks every bit as dejected as she did the night we met on the bridge.

And even though the circumstances are different...the same people are still responsible for hurting her.

Only this time, I won't walk away and leave her crying.

No matter how hard she tries to push me away.

I'm fixing this and getting her back.

I walk in front of her, blocking her view of the waterfall so I have her undivided attention.

However, she's the first to speak.

"The tour guide said only one out of three people survive if they jump off this cliff."

Those are shitty odds, but we have much more important things to discuss.

She's not done talking, though, and what she says next...isn't something I was prepared to hear.

"That night on the bridge was the worst pain I'd ever felt since my parents' death. The agony of what Becca did hurt so much, I didn't think I'd survive it. I didn't *want* to." She curls forward until her forehead rests on her knees. "I went there that night to join my parents, because even though I have no problem falling in love, no one can ever seem to love me back."

My chest recoils as I register what she's telling me.

*Christ.* I had no idea she was contemplating ending it that night.

"Ki—"

"But then *you* showed up out of nowhere and you looked exactly how I felt...miserable. It was like there was an intrinsic thread linking us together. I assumed it was our mutual pain caused by the same person, and even though I was supposed to hate you...I couldn't. Because you gave me the one thing I desperately needed that night." She looks up at me. "You gave me hope, Preston. You made me feel like I was supposed to go on living because someone out there would eventually love me."

If there was ever any doubt as to whether Kit Bishop owned the fucked-up organ beating in my chest and was capable of making me feel something no one else ever could...it no longer exists.

"And then the school shooting happened." She inhales a shaky breath, as if summoning the strength to continue. "I thought I was going to die...but you saved me. *Again.*" There are tears in her eyes now and it rips right

through me. “I guess I’m just trying to understand how a person who could save me from death multiple times...could hurt me so badly I wish I was dead.”

A deep, wide burn spreads throughout my chest. I never wanted to hurt her, but I did.

So much so she feels like dying would be less agonizing.

“If you would let me explain everything, you’ll realize that was never my intention.”

She shoots me an accusatory look. “How do I know you’re not just gonna lie again?”

It’s a valid question given the position we’re in. However, the fact I’m standing here pleading with her to hear me out should tell her otherwise.

“You think I would have chased you all the way to Hawaii and up this waterfall just to risk losing you for good?”

Hell, if I wanted to lie to her again, I could have saved the money on airfare and made a phone call.

The look she gives me is punishing, designed to put me in my place. “I think you’d stop at nothing to manipulate me as long as it benefited you.”

She’s got me there. I *would*.

But I’m not manipulating her now because I’ve learned my lesson. From here on out, it’s total honesty.

“Tell me how to fix this.”

Whatever she wants, I’ll gladly give it to her.

Her expression cuts me to the bone. “You can’t. *Broken things never work as good as they used to.*” The words I once said feel like a slap. “You taught me that.”

“We’re not broken.”

Because it’s not fucking possible.

We hit a wall...but we’ll get over it. Just like we always do.

The resolve in her voice pins me to the spot. “We’re *nothing*.”

Deep down she knows that’s not true, so I call her bluff because I’m sure as fuck not folding.

With her, I’m betting max and going all in. Because what we have is worth the risk.

“That’s bullshit, angry girl. You and I will never be nothing. No matter how much you try to convince yourself to hate me or how hard you try to push me away...you can’t.”

For the same reason I can't.

*She's my exception...and I'm her anomaly.*

"I just need you to listen to me."

Hell at this point, I'm contemplating getting down on my knees and begging.

But I don't have to...because she finally folds.

"You have three minutes."

## Chapter 41

---

Kit

What am I doing?  
Walk away, Kit. *Get up and walk away.*  
But I can't.

Maybe I'm a masochist, but I need to know why he did what he did.

*Why he hurt me so fucking bad.* When I trusted him with everything I had and gave him every part of me.

Not wasting a second, Preston starts talking. "Right after you walked in on Becca and me at the hospital, she started hemorrhaging and they took her into emergency surgery. They weren't sure if her or the baby would make it." His face goes slack, but there's no hiding the torment shadowing his eyes. "It had been just over twenty-four hours since I found out he wasn't mine, but the feelings I had for him didn't go away. I needed to know he was okay."

If he's telling the truth, I can't fault him for that. I know all too well that feelings don't just disappear overnight.

No matter how much you may want them to.

"The first time I saw him, I felt like I was gonna pass out from the shock." His voice is a painful whisper, like every word is physically ripping him to pieces. "He was so small and fragile. So *weak*. He was barely hanging on."

The thought of an innocent, helpless baby being so sick makes my chest cave in.

"Becca wasn't coming down to spend time with him, though." He runs a hand down his face. "He didn't have *anyone*."

And just like that, my sadness turns to anger. I thought even her self-

centeredness had its limits, but evidently not.

“So, I stayed...because I didn’t want him to be alone. I told myself it would only be a few hours—or until Becca made an appearance.” A ragged breath tears out of him. “However, the more time I spent with him, the harder it became to leave. He wasn’t mine, but we had a connection.” Gray orbs the color of catastrophic storm clouds peer down at me. “The kind I’d only experienced once before.”

As much as I want to find fault with what he’s saying and use it to fuel my rage against him...I can’t.

There’s no way in hell I’d ever be able to leave that poor baby, either.

So while I can’t condemn him for staying—or for the bond he developed with an infant fighting for his life—it kills me that it also strengthened his relationship with Becca.

*And they became one big happy family.*

My back teeth meet with a bitter clack. I’m so disgusted with myself I feel sick.

Stupid, naïve me just had to come along and beg Preston to marry me in exchange for two million dollars.

God, how they must have laughed when they realized they didn’t even have to concoct a plan to get one over on me. I handed them a perfect one tied up with a pretty bow.

All Preston had to do was stay married to me for a year.

Bile rises up my throat, followed by a surge of fury.

*They probably figured they could get more money if Preston made me fall for him.*

My nails dig into my skin as I speak through my rage. “So, you decided to make it work with Becca and use me. Got it.” Standing, I wipe the dirt off my shorts. “We’re done here.”

“I never tried to make it work with that cunt,” he grinds out with so much venom I freeze. “She’s been the one using *me* and my connection with Jameson.”

I shouldn’t trust a word he’s saying since he’s already proven he can look me in the eyes and lie.

But if there’s one thing I know about Becca...it’s that she’s the queen of manipulation and using others to get what she wants.

“What do you mean?”

“I give her money so I can visit Jameson once a month.” He must sense



the next question burning on my lips because he quickly adds, “Back when I lived in Vegas. The visits have been a lot more frequent since I moved back to Connecticut.” His face twists with shame. “As long as I still abide by her contingencies.”

God, how I hate that word. Because it’s never a provision or stipulation. It’s always a *punishment*.

“What contingencies?”

“Like I said, I have to help her out financially.” His jaw clenches. “I also have to stay away from you.”

Holy...wow. If what he’s saying is true—and my gut tells me it is because I *know* Becca—that’s beyond warped.

However, I also know Preston. Or at least I *thought* I did.

Either way, he’s not the type to submit to someone’s demands.

“Why would you agree to that? It’s basically extortion.”

His expression turns grim. “Because me supporting her helps Jameson *and* ensures I get to see him.” Glancing up at the sky, he grips the back of his neck. “I’d be lying if I said there wasn’t a time when I fell for the poor single mother act she pulls. It’s all bullshit, though, because me and the babysitter take care of him more than she does.” His stare finds mine again. “But whenever I give Becca shit about her parenting, she gets pissed and revokes my visits with him.”

My heart sinks because that’s not fair. Not only to Preston, but Jameson because it’s clear they adore each other.

Hence, she’s hurting her son, too.

Jesus. This whole thing is just sad.

Sad and *strange*.

It’s almost as if Becca and Preston are in the middle of an awful custody battle and she’s using Jameson as a pawn.

“She’s treating you like you’re his father.”

Which makes absolutely no sense because he isn’t.

An ugly snort leaves him. “Only when it’s convenient for her.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to remind him he has no ties, so he’s free to walk away from her bullshit...but the pure longing in his eyes has a knot forming in my chest.

He doesn’t even have to tell me he wishes he was Jameson’s father. It’s so palpable I *feel* it.

And now I can’t help but wonder.

“Did you ever sleep with her after Jameson was born?”

It’s obvious Becca’s still holding a torch for Preston given her *contingency* is that he stays away from me.

But does Preston still have any lingering feelings for her?

Becca is a manipulative bitch...but she’s also the mother of the child he has such a strong attachment to.

*The child he wishes was biologically his.*

My stomach bottoms out when Preston averts his gaze...like he can’t bear to look at me.

“Yes—”

“Stop,” I interject, because I honestly can’t handle it. “I never should have asked. I guess I was just hoping that maybe...” I shake my head. “It doesn’t matter.”

It doesn’t change anything.

I’m about to walk away for a final time, but he wraps a hand around my wrist.

“It happened once, a couple of years ago.” His expression fills with so much disgust that for a moment I think he’s seriously going to puke. “She got in my head one night while I was in town for a visit. Started spewing shit like how happy Jameson would be if I was his *real* dad. That he deserved a real family—and if I genuinely cared about him like I claimed—I’d be with her because it’s what’s best for him.” His Adam’s apple bobs. “When I woke up the next morning, I was so nauseated I couldn’t fucking breathe. Not only because the antichrist herself was lying next to me, but because I knew with every fiber of my fucking being that it was a mistake. No matter how much I care about Jameson—and trust me, I do—I can’t be with her. I *can’t*.”

He utters his last statement with so much conviction, whatever rebuttal I was gearing up to make vanishes into thin air.

Yet, his admissions still aren’t going to fix things between us.

Yanking my wrist from his hold, I cross my arms. “That explains what you were doing with Becca. But it still doesn’t explain why you lied to me.”

I get that Jameson is important to him and he didn’t want to jeopardize never seeing him again due to Becca’s ridiculous rules...but he didn’t tell *me*.

I’m not saying it would have been easy to digest, but I was never even given the chance to make heads or tails of it. He didn’t respect or care about me enough to be honest and let me make my own decision.

Instead, he continuously kept me in the dark about something so

important.

*He let me fall...all while knowing I was headed for a crash landing.*

Just like Becca.

“I didn’t tell you the truth because I finally had a chance with you, and I didn’t want to fuck it up.” The veins in his neck strain against his skin as he continues. “It was selfish of me, but I’ve wanted you ever since I saw you on that bridge and I spent *years* believing you’d never feel the same...until you did.” His voice drops to a hoarse whisper. “I didn’t want to lose you.”

Just like that, my stupid, foolish cadaver heart attempts a resurrection... because it so badly wants there to be some morsel of truth in what he’s saying.

But even if there was...it wouldn’t be enough.

I’m tired of accepting crumbs from people.

Tired of being a lightweight.

Tired of being burned.

I idiotically assumed it would be different with Preston. Not because he’s a guy, but because he saved my life multiple times.

I figured that meant he cared, and I was as important to him as he is to me.

I had faith that the connection we shared was so strong nothing could ever break it.

I thought I finally found my safe place to land.

*But he’s not.*

“The irony.” Whatever remnants of my heart that might have been left behind are permanently destroyed as I rip off my necklace and give him back his poker chip. “You lied because you didn’t want to risk losing me, but in the end, you lost me because you lied.”

His head jerks like I slapped him before he stares at the poker chip in his palm.

I see the exact moment the realization that he’s lost me for good sets in because the pain etched on his face feels like a kick to the stomach.

He rubs the spot over his heart, like it physically hurts as he staggers back...

A little *too* close to the edge.

“Watch out.”

Zapping out of his trance, he tries to right himself, but the rocks at the edge of the cliff give way.

Panic claws up my chest and I surge forward so I can grab his shirt.

“No!”

He tries to push my hand away, but I grab his.

And then he’s falling...

*And so am I.*



Pressure tightens against my ribs and we hit the water so hard my ears pop.

I kick my legs, trying to get to the surface, but I can’t...it feels like my head is stuck in the spin cycle.

I’m so dizzy.

*Whatever you do. Don’t open your eyes.*

My lungs burn as they expel my last bit of air. I’m not gonna make it.

*I always knew this is how I would die.*

There’s a sharp tug on my shirt. “Kit.”

No.

A strong arm wraps around my waist and I’m pressed against something hard and wet. “Angry girl.”

Air fills my lungs. *Preston.*

Lifting my head from his chest, I peer up at his face. “We’re alive.”

*Holy shit.*

“What the fuck were you thinking?” A growl leaves him and he punches the water, causing it to splash both of us. “You almost died.”

“So did *you*,” I point out, my hand fluttering to my chest where my heart is still pounding wildly. “But we beat the odds.”

I can’t help but smile because not only that...

I survived my worst fear.

Oblivious to my euphoria, Preston’s face contorts with anger. “The odds were terrible. One in three, Kit. One in *three*.” He grabs me by my shoulders and shakes me. “I could have lost you.”

My smile deepens. “But you didn’t.”

He clasps my face in his hands, his intense gaze roaming over every inch of my face. “I didn’t?”

“No. We’re ali—”

His mouth captures mine.

Everything around us becomes one big whirl as he secures me in his arms.

I melt against him, too afraid to let myself think.

All I can do is *feel*.

Our kiss is brutal, overflowing with every single emotion we've ever felt for one another.

His teeth nip my bottom lip, coaxing me to open my mouth wider so he can explore me farther with his tongue. When I do, the butterflies come buzzing back with a force so strong, it makes me dizzy.

I scratch my nails down his back hard enough to leave marks as we steal each other's air.

"I'm sorry," he rasps, his voracious lips moving from my mouth to my jaw as he palms my breast.

*What are you doing, Kit?* –my mind questions like a bright neon hazard ahead sign.

*He's going to lie and hurt you again.*

The thought is a sucker punch to the sternum, and I shove him with every ounce of strength I possess.

Preston frowns in confusion. "What's wrong?"

Nothing's wrong. Quite the opposite since my brain is finally overruling my dumb heart.

"I can't..." Moving my arms and legs, I swim away. "I *can't* do this."

Trudging out of the water isn't nearly as fast—or as graceful—of an exit as I hoped, but I manage to make it out in record time.

I glance around, trying to gather my bearings so I can figure out the fastest route back to the resort.

This way I can pack my things and leave.

Storm clouds roll in, eclipsing the sunset as thunder booms in the distance.

A nearby sign tells me the resort is only a half mile away, so I head in that direction.

Lightning flashes through the darkening sky as I pick up my pace.

And then it starts pouring.

Preston's deep voice roars something behind me, but thunder rumbles again, drowning him out.

It's just as well, though. There's nothing he can say or do to change my mind.

I gave him my heart and he ripped it to shreds.

I won't make the same mistake I did with Becca and grant him the opportunity to do it a second time.

I won't settle for less than I deserve.

Preston isn't my anomaly like I thought. If anything, he's worse than the others. Not just because he lied—because even though his reasons don't excuse his dishonesty—I can at least wrap my head around why he did it.

What I *can't* overlook is that he's made it perfectly clear since day one that the organ in his chest is nothing but a vacant cavity.

Therefore, he's incapable of ever giving me the one thing I need.

Continuing this merry-go-round with him is pointless because it leads to nothing.

Except me getting hurt. *Again.*

I hear his footsteps gaining momentum behind me, so I break out into a sprint.

It doesn't work, though, because he's still hot on my heels. "Look who's the one running away now."

Relief fills me when I see my bungalow up ahead.

"Goddamn right I'm running. As far away from you as I can get."

And as soon as Barry processes those divorce papers, all ties between us will be severed for good and I can move on from this mess.

A flash of lightning illuminates the sky. "You fucking coward."

That does it.

I stop so fast he nearly slams into me as I turn to face him. "Excuse me?"

I'm a lot of things, but a coward isn't one of them.

That's *him*.

Because unlike my soon-to-be ex-husband, I own my shit. And no matter how terrified I might be of something bad happening...I'm still willing to put everything on the line and take the risk.

I don't obscure, calculate, and dissect all my moves like he does.

I'm not afraid to fucking *feel*.

Lifting my chin, I put several feet of distance between us. "I am *not* a coward."

"Yes, you are," he growls as the heavy rain batters us. "All you've ever wanted is right here, and you're running away from it." His gaze traps mine and his expression becomes one of sheer obstinance. "It's flawed and fucked up...but it's *real*. Because you, Kit Bishop, deserve the real fucking deal. The

constant, unwavering, selfless, for better or worse, never goes away and they'd do anything to see you smile kind of love."

Instantly I'm transported back to that night on the bridge where he first uttered those words.

*The ones that saved my life.*

He swallows hard, like whatever he's about to say next terrifies him, but he's determined to say it anyway.

"I told you someone was gonna come along and give that to you. I said they'd crash right into you and never let go." He strikes his chest with his fist. "That person is *me*."

The organ in my chest awakens with a forceful thump before kicking into overdrive. "What are you saying?"

He stalks toward me like a predator. "I'm saying that I love you, Kit. That I've *always* loved you...even before I knew what love was." The groove in his forehead deepens. "I can't promise I'll never fuck up again, because we both know I will. But what I can promise is that I'll spend the rest of my life proving you can trust me, because from this day forward it's complete and total honesty...even when the truth hurts."

A trembling breath leaves me as his words reverberate inside my chest and spread through my marrow. "You *love* me?"

The force of his stare pins me to the spot. "I love you."

They say something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can cause a typhoon halfway around the world.

*They were right.*

Only, the typhoon is right here in front of me.

And even though I should walk away because it has the power to annihilate my heart and soul until I'm nothing but a speck of matter...

I hurl myself into the eye of the storm.

The fall down was turbulent...filled with bumps, bruises, scars, and burns along the way that were so brutal we almost lost each other.

But in the end...he caught me.

*Just like he always does.*

His mouth crashes against mine as another roll of thunder rumbles above us.

I lock my legs around his waist and he wraps his arms around me, anchoring me to him before he starts walking.

"Say it again," I choke out between fervid kisses.

He threads his fingers through my wet hair. “I love you.” His gaze darts over my face, bouncing from my lips to my eyes. “So fucking much.”

Every time he says it my chest feels like it’s going to crack wide open and spill everything I feel for him.

“Preston.” My pulse echoes in my ears. “I—”

“No.” He clasps my chin. “Not until I earn it.”

I want to tell him that’s not how it works...but he’s right.

I’ve always jumped into love headfirst—and even though I know exactly how deep my feelings for him run—I don’t want to tell him something so significant until I’m positive he won’t lie to me anymore.

“Okay,” I whisper against his lips. “But say it again.”

I feel his mouth curve. “I love you.”

“How mu—”

The intensity in his kiss answers my question.

I tremble when his hand wraps around my nape and his tongue assaults mine with greedy strokes, like he’ll never get enough.

The air is so thick with tension I feel it sparking between us like a bomb that’s about to explode.

I’m so far gone I don’t even realize we’ve made it back to the bungalow, until he pins me against the door.

The sky lights up as his mouth trails along the column of my throat. “Tell me to stop.”

My eyes flutter closed as he drags his teeth over my pulse point. “Not a chance.”

“You have to.” Grinding his cock against me, he pounds the wood beside my head. “I want to fuck you so bad I don’t have the strength to stop myself.”

The desperate hunger in his tone sends a wave of heat between my legs. “So don’t.”

A slow, threatening smile spreads across his lips and he gathers my wet tank top in his hands. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you, angry girl.”

My breath leaves me in a startled woosh when he tears the material down the middle.

Groaning, he shoves my shorts and panties down next, stripping me bare. The cool night air on my damp skin along with the finger he plunges inside me has me shivering.

Taking pity on me, he opens the door with his free hand...while his other



continues working me into a frenzy.

Not breaking our connection, he advances on me, his steps intent and steady, his gaze scorching hot. "That's it." His smirk is downright wicked as he spins me around, pressing his erection into my lower back as he curls his fingers. "You're almost there."

He's not wrong. I'm so close I barely register that we're heading up the staircase. All I can focus on is his touch.

"Preston."

The bolts of pleasure shooting up my spine cause my knees to buckle before they give out. Thankfully, I manage to grab the railing before I split my face open.

I expect Preston to usher me up the stairs, but he kneels a few steps below and kneads my ass cheeks apart, exposing all of me.

A ragged groan tears out of him. "*Fuck.*"

His warm breath gusts over my sensitive flesh before his tongue comes out for a taste.

I know right then and there that we don't stand a chance of making it to the bedroom.

Which is just fine by me.

Little tremors of need have my thighs quaking. "Preston."

The sound of him tugging down his zipper is so loud it's deafening. "I know."

The head of his cock nudges my slickness and I hold my breath, awaiting the invasion.

But it doesn't come...because he turns me over.

"I need to see you."

The stairs dig into my back as I reach for his shirt and pull it over his head. It's not fair for only one of us to be naked.

Instinctively, I glance down. His open jeans hang around his thighs, and that long, thick cock is standing at attention.

*For me.*

My pulse quickens as I watch him wrap his hand around it. "Spread your legs."

I eagerly do what he says.

The muscles of his abs coil as he rises over me, lining himself up with my entrance.

A whimper lodges in my throat when the wide tip of his cock pushes into

me, but it quickly becomes a cry of impatience when he stills himself.

“I don’t want to hurt your tight little pussy.”

My tight little pussy can take it. “*Please—*”

A strangled gasp leaves me when he juts his hips, working his way deeper. I force myself to breathe through the sting of him stretching me as he fills me up with every inch of him.

Oh, God. This feels way different than I thought it would.

*So right.*

Like I was constructed for him and he was created for me.

Our gazes clash and the hunger I see in his sends shivers along my skin.

“You’re inside me.”

His lips brush mine and we exchange the same jagged, choppy air.

On impulse, I clamp his dick, never wanting to lose him or this feeling.

A rough, disjointed sound tears out of him and he pounds the step above my head. “Jesus *fucking* Christ, Kit.”

He lifts his hips, withdrawing his cock. “I’ll make it up to you the next round.”

I’m about to ask what he means...but then he starts moving.

His thrusts are hard, fast, and frantic...each one better than the last.

I’m so wet every push and pull between us is amplified.

His hands slide under my butt, drawing me closer as he ruts into me. Every time he thrusts, he grunts low and deep, like he wants *more, more, more.*

That makes two of us.

The sensation of him sliding in and out of me is so intense—so overwhelming—it shakes me to my core.

“Don’t stop.”

He’s like a conductor, directing and controlling my pleasure. All I can do is submit as my vital need for what he’s doing takes hold of me.

“I...” My heart beats so fast it thuds in my eardrums. “You’re killing me.”

And I’m willingly letting him because it feels so damn good.

My lips part on an inhale and his tongue dips inside my mouth, taking greedy licks as he fucks me senseless.

The delicious friction sends me into a tailspin and the knot of tension building inside me tightens.

I buck my hips against his, chasing the rush. “Preston.”

I finally understand the meaning of seeing stars when he grinds against my clit.

I'm so close. *So fucking close.*

As if sensing what I need, he maintains a rhythm that propels me to the finish line.

I claw his shoulder blades as my orgasm comes to a crest that unleashes in a series of waves that have me clenching him for dear life.

My climax must set something off within him, because his thrusts grow even more wild and his cock pulses inside me.

Pleasure moves across his strained face and he comes with a hoarse, feral groan.

He collapses on top of me and we both fight to catch our breath. His heart pounds like a freight train against mine and I run my fingers along his sweat soaked back, unsure of what to say because I'm rendered speechless.

All I know is I feel profoundly different. *Whole.*

Rising up on his forearms, his lips curl into a satisfied smile.

"You creamed my dick, Bishop."

I'm stuck between wanting to laugh in agreement because it's true and scowling because of his crudeness.

But that's Preston.

My husband.

My soul mate.

*My missing part.*

"Bishop-Holden," I correct.

He slumps against me, burying his face in the crook of my neck. "Damn right. Because I'm *never* letting you go."

He better not.

A lump fills my throat. "Say it again."

My whole body shivers when he whispers, "I love you."



The sounds of our breathing fill the dark room as we lay on the bed we finally made it to, our naked bodies tangled around each other.

Gentle fingertips skim down the length of my back as I nuzzle his chest, listening to his steady heartbeat.

“Tell me about the mermaid scales.”

The random question throws me, but I oblige. “My first kiss—and first grope—was with a guy I was locked inside a closet with.”

I feel his entire body tense.

“I let him do it because I didn’t want everyone to know I was different. I wanted to fit in and be normal.” I wince with shame. “But the whole time it felt wrong and unnatural. Like I was a mermaid forced to walk on land. Only I couldn’t...because I had a big fin instead of legs like everyone else.” My bottom lip trembles as I recall how lonely I felt. “My Nanna was always trying to chop off my fin, but all I ever wanted was to swim freely in the ocean.”

Which will never happen now...because I found the one thing worth sacrificing my fin for.

Preston’s fingers bracket my jaw. He’s studying me like I’m a puzzle he can’t quite figure out. “You told me you didn’t want to walk on land when we were on the side of the road.” The rough cadence of his voice rolls over me like syrup as he places his palm over my frantic heart. “You never asked if I would join you in the ocean.”

Something inside me cracks and mends all at once.

“You want to join me in the ocean?”

Shifting, he moves between my parted thighs. His cock twitches against my pussy and I angle my hips to give him better access. “I’d follow you *anywhere*, angry girl.”

Emotions threaten to spill over, but he surges forward, filling me to the hilt with a single thrust that makes us both groan.

Heavy exhales permeate the space between us as he pulsates inside me. His movements are impossibly slow, like he wants to make this last forever.

I want this to last forever, too.

My vision blurs as I stare up at him. “Say it again.”

His hands slide under my ass, bringing us closer. “I love you.”

My heart takes flight, because I’ll never get tired of hearing him say that.

All my senses come alive with every inch of him and I arch my pelvis with his next thrust, taking his cock as deep as it will go.

“*Christ.*” A low grunt leaves him and his eyes close, like he’s trying to fight a battle he’s already losing. “This is torture.”

“So fall with me.”

I want to see him let go again. Feel him lose control while he’s inside

me.

The muscles in his broad back coil as he pumps hard and fast, hitting a spot that makes my toes curl.

Then there's nothing but choppy, desperate breathing as we fuck, the chemistry a thick, palpable current running between us.

When I come, I feel like I'm dying.

And when *he* comes...I feel like I'm reborn.

## Chapter 42

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Kit

Every muscle in my body aches as I flop onto the mattress. I have no idea what the record for the most sexual encounters in seventy-two hours is...but I'm positive we beat it.

I look over at Preston who must be as exhausted as I am because he's passed out cold.

I wonder if it's possible to die from having too much sex.

Then again, it probably keeps you alive longer because it's good cardio.

The sound of my phone ringing interrupts my thoughts. I don't even have to look at the screen to know it's Breslin.

I've sent her a couple vague texts, but I know if she doesn't hear my voice soon, she'll send a search party to Hawaii.

Springing up in bed, I grab my cell off the nightstand.

Then I sneak off into the adjoining bathroom so I can return her call.

Breslin answers after the first ring.

"I've been calling you for days. Are you okay? What is happen—"

"Princess Monet came here the other night."

I'm hoping using our secret code name for Preston will lighten things up a bit.

No such luck.

"That's it. I'm hiring a hit man."

Three days ago, I might have considered taking her up on that offer.

"That won't be necessary." I tug my lip between my teeth, trying to think of the best way to tell her. "We kind of...made up."

*A lot.*

She's silent for a few seconds...and then.

"What the hell do you mean, you made up? I know you care about him, Kit, but what that douchebag did is unforgivable. His lying, cheating ass deserves to rot in hell—"

"He was wrong for lying, but it wasn't for the reasons you think. He didn't cheat on me."

However, it's not my place to explain everything to her without Preston's permission, so I'm caught between a rock and a hard spot.

"What do you mean he didn't cheat?" she screeches over the receiver. "I saw that no-good rotten bastard with Becca, the giant thundercunt—"

"Breslin, I really need you to stop freaking out because I have to tell you something important."

She's my best friend, so it's practically my duty to tell her I had sex. Plus, I *really* need to talk to her about it.

"What's going on?"

"Um..." I walk in a circle around the bathroom. "I had sex...with a penis." I shake my head. "Well, with Preston. Who you know...has one."

An irresistibly *big* one that I can't seem to get enough of.

Breslin's sharp intake of air fills my ears. "Wow. That is...holy shit. Are you okay?" Before I can answer, she adds, "Hold on. Did he pressure you into doing it? Because I will kill—"

"No," I spit because Preston would never. "I was a *very* willing participant."

I can tell this equally relieves and shocks her, because she goes silent again...and then.

"How was it?"

My face splits into a grin as memories of the last three days fill my head. "It was life-changing. In the *best* way." Squeezing my thighs together, I wince. "Well...except..." my voice trails off because it's a little embarrassing.

"Except what?" Breslin presses.

Here goes nothing.

"It's a lot messier than I thought it would be."

There's no point in even wearing underwear anymore because his man juice dribbles out of me like a never-ending river and ruins them.

Granted, it's a small price to pay for the incredible, electrifying sex we have, but I'm hoping Breslin can clue me in on a solution so I can better



manage the issue.

“Messy? Why—” Breslin starts to say before she makes a choking sound. “You didn’t use a condom?”

*Condom.*

I’m not stupid, I know those rubber things are useful...even lifesaving.

But *I’ve* never had to worry about using one before.

The only protection I carry around in my purse is a dental dam that I’m pretty sure is expired.

A wave of panic floods my system. “There was a lot going on, and...*shit.*”

How could I be so careless?

Fuck a motherfucking duck up the ass. You’d think *Mister I-don’t-want-babies* would have done us both a solid and suited up.

“Okay, here’s what you’re gonna do,” Breslin says in a tone that’s far too calm for this conversation. “Go to the local pharmacy and get Plan B. It prevents anything from happening before it even starts, so provided your husband doesn’t have any STDs, you’ll be fine.”

I feel like she just gave me the cure for a terrible disease.

“Plan B. Got it.” I head for the door. “Not all heroes wear capes. I’m going right now.”

“Wait,” Breslin says. “One more piece of advice.”

“What?”

“Don’t forget to pee after sex. It helps prevent UTIs.”

UTIs are the *least* of my worries right now.

“Roger that.”

I hang up with her and swing open the door.

I’m so preoccupied with ordering an Uber *and* looking for the carry-on Breslin packed for me, I almost crash into a naked Preston...who’s eating a sandwich.

Winking, he swats my behind. “Don’t worry. Just refueling. I’ll be ready to go again soon.”

Damn him and his devil dick, because *that’s* what got us into this mess.

I locate my luggage on the other side of the room.

“No rush.” Kneeling, I grab the first few items I can find. A T-shirt and cut-off shorts. “I’ll be back later.”

His brows lift. “Where are you going?”

I quickly get dressed. “To the pharmacy.”

“You okay?” He jerks his chin toward the bathroom. “You were in there for a while.” He makes a face. “Is it the period shits?”

I rue the day I ever told him that because I’ll never live it down. “*I wish.*” Then we’d be in the clear.

My comment only confuses him. “Huh?”

I glare at my husband. “We didn’t use condoms.”

Oblivious, he gives me a lopsided grin. Deep dimples and all. “I know. It’s awesome. Ten out of ten, would highly recommend.”

Preston is the smartest person I’ve ever met, but it’s clear our sexcapades must have destroyed a few brain cells.

“Preston,” I say slowly, drawing out every syllable so he gets it through his big, fat, gorgeous head. “We had unprotected sex.”

I see the moment the light bulb goes off because he turns white as a ghost. “Wait.” His throat bobs on a swallow. “You’re not on birth control?”

And here I thought Asher was the dumb Holden brother.

“I’m a lesbian,” I shout as my frustration comes to a peak. “Why the hell would I be on birth control?”

His smirk is far too sexy for the current topic of discussion. “You weren’t a lesbian last night. Or this morning.”

Pfft. *Semantics.* “That is neither here nor there.”

“It’s *very* here and there, Kit.” Plopping down on the bed, his expression turns serious. “If you knew you weren’t on the pill, why the fuck didn’t you stop me?”

It takes a staggering amount of willpower to *stop* myself from slapping him. He was there. He knows why.

“Because I wanted the D!”

And now I want the B.

“Don’t worry. Breslin told me how to pump the brakes before the car starts.”

He blinks. “Come again?”

“Since I don’t have a time machine, I’m going to the pharmacy to obtain some emergency contraception.”

His relief is tangible. “Thank fuck.”

I scowl. “And a big box of condoms.”

That sexy smirk is back. “Make sure you get MAGNUMS.”

*Cocky bastard.*

I hustle toward the door, but my next thought has me backtracking. “I

need you to do something for me while I'm gone."

"Anything."

Good. This should go off without a hitch then.

"Call Breslin and tell her the truth."

His face twists. "Fuck that."

Dammit. I knew it couldn't be that easy-peasy.

"Come on. My best friend legitimately hates your guts right now and my life would be so much easier if she didn't."

But the only way to squash this beef between them is for Preston to be honest with her about what's going on with Becca.

"Not only did she refuse to tell me where you were and slam the door on my head, she kicked me in the balls. *Twice.*"

I'm about to point out that maybe she did him a favor considering the reason for my pharmacy visit, but then he grumbles, "Fine."

Walking back over to him, I kiss the tip of his nose. "Thank you. It seriously means a lot."

Truth be told, their hatred for one another would be comical if it wasn't such a problem. Neither of them will ever admit it, but they're far more alike than they realize.

They're both insanely stubborn, cynical, introverted, highly suspicious of others...and extremely protective of those they care about.

Hell, I basically married my best friend.

I start to leave, but Preston grabs my waist. "Not so fast."

Uh-oh.

I'm expecting him to tell me he changed his mind because he's a stubborn ass, but what he says next sends a current of warmth to my heart.

"I love you."

That earns him another kiss. This time on the lips. "Then call her."



According to Preston—after she screamed her head off—the conversation with Breslin went fine.

Which basically translates to—they'll never be bosom buddies, but they're willing to tolerate each other for my benefit.

Thus, it turned out about as good as it could have.

I study his profile as we lie side by side on the bed, him staring at the ceiling, me staring at him.

As great as this *honeymoon* turned out to be, we're going home tomorrow.

Back to reality.

Whatever *that* is because I don't have the faintest idea anymore.

I don't understand how I fit into his life or how any of this is supposed to work.

"What's going on in that head of yours?"

My skin jolts at the deep, throaty sound of his voice.

I trace imaginary patterns on the bedspread with my finger. "Just thinking."

"About?"

*Everything.*

"You," I whisper, my chest twisting. "Becca. Jameson."

I close my eyes as I recall the conversation where I told Becca my middle name. She loved it so much she declared *Jameson* would be the name of our future baby.

Guess she was telling the truth. Apart from the baby being *ours*.

In the past, that thought would have sent me into a depression for days, but now there's a whole new reason for the heavy sadness weighing me down.

Preston might not be his dad, but Becca's son is important to him.

Whether I like it or not...my ex and my husband are forever linked.

Preston's chest lifts on a breath. "You'll never see either of them. I'll make sure of it."

It becomes painfully obvious what that signifies.

"Because I'm your dirty little secret."

Just what every woman wants to be.

A bitter laugh escapes me because it's the mistress who's supposed to be the paramour...not the wife.

Then again, we have a habit of doing things in the opposite order.

Preston must not see the irony in our situation, because he isn't amused. "You're not my dirty little secret."

"What am I then?" I'm lashing out now, but I can't seem to stop myself. "Exactly what role am I supposed to play? Am I your wife? Your clandestine lover? Your roommate with benefits? The business associate you fuck?"

Shifting in the bed, he turns to face me. “You’re my *everything*.”

That’s impossible when I can’t have all of him.

When *I’m* the one being shoved into the shadows because of *her*.

“Then why do I feel like nothing?”

“What do you want, Kit?” His voice is a painful rasp that slices through the wall I’m trying to build in order to protect myself. “What else can I do to prove how much I love you? I already risked my relationship with Jameson for you.”

That might be true, but so is the reverse.

“You also risked your relationship with me for him.”

But Jameson isn’t the problem. He’s an innocent child.

The problem is *her*.

The color drains from his agonized face. “You want me to abandon him.”

It doesn’t come out like a question. It comes out like a devastated resolution he’s forcing himself to make. One that renders him inconsolable.

But that isn’t what I want.

I touch his shoulder. It’s meant to be reassuring, but he reacts like I burned him.

“That isn’t the solution. Jameson should be in your life.” Not only because of the bond they have, but because it sounds like Jameson seriously needs him. “I just don’t want *Becca* in your life.”

Hell, another dimension would still be too close for comfort.

“I don’t want her in my life either, but I don’t have a fucking choice.” My heart aches when he rolls back over and returns his stare to the ceiling. “It’s like you and Jameson are hanging off the edge of a cliff...but I can only save one of you.”

When he puts it like that...the decision is easy.

Only one of us is an adult. Therefore, one of us needs him more.

“I’d want you to save Jameson.”

I’d be irate if he didn’t. So much so I don’t think I could be with him.

He tilts his head. White teeth flash as he bares his teeth. “I’d want to throw *myself* off it.”

A heartbreaking pang fills my chest. Because a world without Preston isn’t a world I could live in.

Which means I need to find a way to come to terms with this new reality.

I reach for his hand, entwining our fingers together. “No one is going off anymore cliffs, okay?” Moving closer, I drape my free arm around his

midsection. “It’s a little rough for me right now, but I’ll learn to accept it.”

His deep sigh fans my forehead. “That’s not fair to you.”

Perhaps. But sometimes in life there are situations where there is no fair outcome for all involved.

And sometimes the only solution is for everyone to get a little of what they want...not the whole enchilada.

“Tell me about Jameson.”

I can tell my request throws him for a loop, but then his face lights up and he starts talking. Telling me all sorts of interesting things about a little boy I’ll never meet.

And I listen, soaking everything up like a sponge.

Because what’s important to him...is important to me, too.

## Chapter 43

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Preston

*M*y wife is a fast learner who picks up new skills quickly. However, the concept of time is clearly something she never quite got the hang of.

We were already running late to the airport, thanks to her striking up a conversation with a couple in the elevator on our way to check out.

And let's not forget the never-ending chat she had with our driver about his two cats.

Or her incessant requests that we stop for some iced coffee.

And now? The culprit is shirts with pink flamingos. I figured the tiny giftshop was small enough that her *quick look around* wouldn't be too distracting, but I was wrong.

I glance at my watch as the minutes continue ticking by. "Our flight leaves in a half hour."

She waves a hand. "Relax. It's a private jet. They'll wait." Bringing the straw from her iced coffee between her lips, she continues leafing through the rack. "You need this shirt."

Gritting my teeth, I glance down at the one I'm currently wearing. The one I had no choice but to accept from her because the only thing I came to Hawaii with was my keys, wallet, and the clothes on my back.

It too, has pink flamingos on it. Along with flowers and pineapples with sunglasses.

I'm burning it the second we get home.

"I *don't*," I assure her.

"Fine." Frowning, she walks over to another rack of Hawaiian shirts. I



mutter a curse when her eyes light up. “But you definitely need *this* one.”

The shirt in question has at least four different patterns running through it. It’s missing the pink flamingos, but worry not. It has plenty of palm trees, flowers, pineapples...and a gigantic parrot smack dab in the center.

It’s so hideous it makes the one I’m wearing look like *Armani*.

“Hard pass.”

“Really?” She crinkles her nose at the parrot. “But he’s so cute.”

I love her. God, do I fucking love her. But she’s seriously testing my patience.

“We’re late.”

It’s like I’m speaking a different language.

“Breslin might like it.”

Breslin wouldn’t be caught dead in that, either. Not unless she takes it to her studio and throws a gallon of paint over it first.

Kit taps her chin. “Then again, it isn’t really her style.”

I’m not sure how this monstrosity could be *anyone*’s style.

“Angry girl.”

“You know who might like it?” she says to absolutely no one because I might as well be the wallpaper. “*Landon*.”

Landon would pretend he did for her benefit, but he’d sure as fuck never wear it.

“Doesn’t really go with his rock star schtick,” I mutter, glancing at my watch again.

The plane leaves in *twenty* minutes now. If it was a commercial flight we’d already be boarding.

“Yeah. You’re right.” A little wrinkle forms between her brows. “Man, this sucks. I really wanted to find this guy a home.”

“It’s a shirt, Kit.”

“I know but it’s interesting and the parrot is adorable.”

“So why don’t you get it for *yourself*?”

“I don’t know.” She chews the corner of her lip as she ponders this. “It doesn’t really fit my vibe.”

Hell. At this point we’ll be here until they close.

“You know who’d love it?”

She cocks her head to look at me. “Who?”

“My brother.”

Payback’s a bitch. Asher gave me a shirt with his dog on it for my

birthday. He's getting the ugly parrot.

Grinning, she takes one off the rack. "You're right. This is totally his style."

*Finally*, she runs over to the cashier.

Worry etches her pretty face when I join her at the register.

I'm probably going to regret asking this because it will lead to yet another pit stop, but it's obvious something is bothering her.

"What's wrong?"

She hands the cashier her credit card. "We didn't have sex today."

The cashier coughs.

I want to remind her the day isn't over yet, but I'm not inclined to discuss our sex life in the middle of an airport giftshop.

"Can we shelf this until later?"

"We might not have later." She turns to face me. "It's our *honeymoon*, Preston. It's bad juju not to have sex every day of it."

I didn't get the memo about this being our honeymoon—or about this *tradition*—but Kit's clearly upset about it.

She furiously signs the receipt. "You'd think being superstitious yourself you'd understand why this is such a big deal. Especially since we're about to get on a plane."

Okay, then. This is less about sex and more about her fear of flying.

"We didn't have sex the first night we were here," I remind her, hoping it will ease her anxiety.

"I know and we fell off a *cliff* the next day."

She's got me there.

The cashier's eyes widen as she sticks the shirt in a bag and hands it to Kit. "Have a nice day."

"Not until my husband fucks me," Kit snaps before heading for the exit.

As usual, I chase after her. "We can have sex on the plane. I've always wanted to join the mile-high club."

Picking up her steps, she looks around. "No. I hate flying so I won't be able to relax enough to fully enjoy it."

Oh, I'll make *sure* she does. "Challenge accepted."

Her lips turn down in a frown when we reach our terminal. "I'm serious." She chucks her coffee into a nearby garbage can. "Besides, it needs to be while we're still here." Suddenly, her eyes light up and she takes hold of my hand.

I'm about to ask her where she's taking us, but I have my answer when we stop in front of a men's room.

"I'm not fucking you in an airport bathroom where there's a high probability someone will walk in and interrupt us."

Granted, it's a small airport and there aren't many people around.

However, the thought of someone catching us and me having to stop what's now my favorite addiction isn't something I'm down with.

Then again, not even the jaws of life could pry me from Kit once I'm inside her. So, there's that.

"We'll lock the door," Kit declares, leading me into the bathroom.

I glance at my watch. "Our flight leaves in ten minutes."

Her pussy is unquestionably the best I've ever had, but there's no way I'll be finished in that amount of time.

She locks the door behind us. "We'll make it quick."

Whatever reservations I had vanish when she tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear and utters, "Where do you want me?"

I want her everywhere. On the floor. Against the wall. On the sink. Hell, even the toilet.

There's no limit to my hunger for Kit. It's insatiable.

Closing the distance between us, I peer down at her. "I want you creaming my cock."

A faint blush colors her cheeks. Even though she won't say it, I know my dirty talk turns her on.

I toy with the thin strap of her tank top, watching her nipples harden under the white fabric. "While you scream my name."

I slide the strap over the curve of her shoulder. When it's halfway down her arm, I give it a sharp tug and her tit pops out.

As I drop my mouth to her nipple, I grab her hand and place it on my growing cock. "You want this?"

She fumbles with the zipper on my jeans. "Yes."

My mouth is at her ear as I push her hand away. "Beg."

Her body doesn't lie, but I want to hear her say the words. To know that she wants me so deep inside her, she'll never get me out.

*That she's just as obsessed with me as I am with her.*

"I need you inside me." Her breath is a shallow gasp. "Now."

As luck would have it, she's wearing a denim skirt, granting me easy access.

“Lift up your skirt.”

Her pulse thrums in her neck as she bunches the fabric in her hands and raises it past her thighs.

Sinking to my knees, I zero in on her little pink thong. There’s a wet spot forming that I want to lick up. “Show me your pretty pussy.”

My cock jerks when she moves it aside, exposing glistening swollen lips.

I trail my hands up the back of her thighs, easing them apart. “I need to taste you.”

“There’s not enough time—”

I slide my tongue between her slick lips.

A sharp moan leaves her, and she shudders. “Oh. God.”

I grab her hips, bringing her closer. “Fuck my face.”

It’s an order, not a request.

Her hips rock against my mouth as I eat her without finesse, stretching the walls of her pussy with my tongue. Feasting like I’ll never have another meal.

Whimpering, her hand curls around the back of my head as I suckle her clit with the right amount of suction to get her off.

“Fuckity *fuck*.”

Her juices drip down my chin as a strangled moan tears out of her and she convulses.

Sagging forward, she pants, “Jesus. That was—”

I stand. “We’re not done.”

Seizing her waist, I turn her toward the sinks. Then I give that sweet little ass of hers a firm smack. “Bend over.”

She obeys, gripping the edges as she raises her pert bottom for me.

I spread her cheeks, holding her open. This way every time I look down, I’ll see my dick gliding in and out of her tight cunt.

“Condom,” she croaks as my head nudges her opening.

I’ve never had a problem using them before. Hell, it was a prerequisite. But now that I know how much better it feels going bareback, it’s a goddamn hindrance.

A very necessary one.

Fortunately, the optimist in me managed to grab two out of the box before she packed them.

I tear the foil open with my teeth. “You need to get on birth control.”

If not, I’m getting a vasectomy.

“I’ll make an appointment with my gyno.”

Fisting my dick, I work my crown inside her. “Make it soon.”

As in yesterday.

“I’ll call—”

A throaty sound escapes her when I drive forward, sinking into her warm, wet heat.

*So fucking perfect.*

Kneading her ass, I work my dick slowly, drawing out each stroke. Every time I withdraw, I see her arousal coating my cock. The torment is equal parts heaven and hell, but I need to maintain control.

“More,” Kit urges, her tone laced with desperation as she clamps my cock.

A shivering heat licks down my spine and whatever control I had goes out the goddamn window.

I pump in and out of her with relentless thrusts that end with my balls slapping her. “Is this what you want?”

Her raspy moan fills the room and she bucks her hips like she’s starving for it.

“That’s it.” I grab her tits, squeezing them as I fuck her. “Take this cock you begged for.” Her wetness seeps down my sack and I give it to her harder. “Every fucking inch.”

I slide my hand down her torso, stopping when I reach her clit. It throbs when I circle it with my thumb.

Hissing, she clutches my cock like she never plans to let go. “Preston.”

The needy way she moans my name as she squeezes me sends sharp pangs of pleasure up my spine.

I fist her hair with my free hand, tugging her head back until my lips find her ear. “Come on this dick.”

Her chest heaves and her breaths grow more frantic. “Oh, God.”

Blood rushes through my veins when she moans my name again, milking me as her entire body jerks.

I sink my teeth into her neck, sucking the tender flesh as she rides out the rest of her orgasm, bringing me along with her.

My abs clench and my cock pulsates for what feels like a goddamn eternity. I shoot my load so hard I shake with the force of it.

Our eyes meet in the mirror and there’s a coy smirk lining her lips. “Aren’t you happy I dragged you in here?”

She has no fucking idea.

I kiss her shoulder blade, tasting the hint of salt from her sweat soaked skin. "I love you."

I never thought I'd be capable of loving *anyone*, but I was dead fucking wrong.

Because I didn't destroy Kit Bishop...

*She destroyed me.*

## Chapter 44

---

Kit

We're an hour late for our departure by the time we're finished screwing.

"Sorry," I tell the driver as we climb into the golf cart bringing us to our plane. "Time kind of got away from us."

*Twice.*

Preston slips his arm around me in the back seat and I sink against him, laying my head on his chest.

Every strong beat of his heart reverberates through me and I inhale, filling my nostrils with the lingering scent of us.

I came here broken...but I'm leaving whole.

Smiling, I nuzzle closer. Every time I move, there's a slight soreness between my legs...a reminder of the phenomenal sex we had while we were here.

*Shit.*

"Preston?"

"Yes, Kit?"

I recoil. "We had sex. *Lots* of sex."

The driver swerves a little.

Preston's heart rate picks up. "Is telling strangers about our sex life a kink of yours? It's fine if it is. I'd just appreciate a heads-up beforehand."

I close my eyes. "It's not a kink. It was a *mistake*."

I don't realize how that sounds until I feel him tense.

"Not a mistake in the sense that I regret it," I quickly assure him. "Trust me, I don't." I swallow. "There's still five months left before the bet ends..."



but you already cashed in your reward.”

As proud as I am of Preston for staying strong, I don’t want this to derail his progress and give him an excuse to go back to gambling.

However, what he says next leaves me flabbergasted.

“Sex wasn’t the reward I wanted.”

“Uh. I was there, remember? I distinctly remember every word of that conversation.”

There’s a hint of amusement in his tone. “Then you should recall telling me my reward for winning the bet was you giving me whatever I wanted.”

“Exactly—”

“*You* assumed it was sex...but you were wrong.” Peering down at me, he smirks. “Not that I *didn’t* want to have sex with you. There was just something I wanted even more.”

I’m at a loss as to what that could possibly be because I’ve given him *everything*.

“What’s that?”

When he speaks, his voice is a shredded rasp. “Your forgiveness.”

That doesn’t make any sense. “My forgiveness? For wh—” A shaky breath falls from my lips when I realize. “Oh.”

*That.*

“I always knew there would come a time when I’d have to tell you the truth. No matter how much I didn’t want to.” Emotions swim behind those dark gray eyes. “But the thought of losing you...” his voice trails off, like he can’t bear to say it.

“You didn’t.” My throat tightens. “I’m still here.”

Am I upset that he lied? Yes.

Do I want to have faith that he’ll never do it again? Also, yes.

But only time will tell.

“I want you to finish the bet,” I whisper. “But not because you want my forgiveness. I want you to finish for *yourself*. You’ve been doing so good and I think if you stick it out...”

*He’ll realize he doesn’t need to gamble ever again.*

I burrow against his chest, holding him tighter than I’ve ever held anything. “It’s your decision.”

One I can’t force him to make.

His voice is so low it’s barely audible. “I’ll stick it out for the next four months and twenty-five days.”

The countdown he's keeping is a little alarming, but pride swells in my chest anyway. "Really?"

The hand splayed on my stomach twitches. "Yeah." He kisses the top of my head. "I love you."

My heart hammers at his words. I take in the clear blue sky and the colorful scenery for the very last time. It's perfect here.

*We're perfect here.*

I'm not ready to break this blissful bubble we're in.

"I don't want to leave," I say into his shirt.

His fingers skim the side of my neck, causing goosebumps to break out along my skin. "Me either."

A gust of resolve rolls through me, and I pop up like a jack in the box. "So why don't we stay for a couple more days?" I walk my fingers up his torso. "We can go back to the bungalow...use the rest of those MAGNUMS."

*Stay in our happy place.*

He gives me a lopsided grin. "Sold."

A moment later, the golf cart pulls up in front of the plane and a woman wearing a crisp navy uniform greets us. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Holden. My name is Delilah and I'll be your flight attendant today."

I should probably feel guilty for sending them back home—especially after making them wait for us—but the thought of spending more time here with my husband fills me and my girly bits with a rush of exhilaration.

"I'm sorry for the short notice, but we've decided we're gonna stay here for a few more days."

It's clear our sudden change of plans makes her uneasy because her smile falls. "But your grandmother said she was expecting you tonight."

Can't say I blame her for not wanting to face the wrath of my grandmother. Having a root canal is more pleasurable than dealing with her.

I open my mouth to tell her that if my Nanna knew why we were staying longer, she'd be thrilled, but Preston beats me to it.

"Tell her this inept shithead is courting and seducing her granddaughter." The hand on the small of my back drops to the curve of my ass. "Repeatedly."

The flight attendant's eyebrows shoot up. "Very well. We'll unload your luggage and bring it inside."

Given we don't have much, it shouldn't take long.

Preston's fingers entwine with mine as the driver turns the golf cart

around. “Do you want me to call the resort and book the room?”

“Sure.” I flinch because *holy expensive*. “Just make sure they charge it to my Nanna again because those bungalows cost a fortune.”

I’m sure she’ll have no problem footing the bill for a few more days once she finds out that we’ve kissed and made up.

Preston’s lips twitch as he brings his cell to his ear. “Yeah, I’d like to book a private bungalow for four nights. I’d also like to have a bottle of your most expensive champagne delivered every hour, around the clock.”

“Nice touch,” I tell him after he hangs up.

His mouth is a hot caress along the shell of my ear as we enter the airport. “The way I plan on touching you later won’t be.”

His dirty promises make my heart race...but then I realize.

“Lola.”

Visibly confused, he plops down in an empty chair while we wait. “What about Lola?”

“I have to call Breslin and tell her we’re staying longer.”

Walking over to the large glass window, I take out my cell phone and dial her number.

She picks up after the second ring. “Hey. Are you home?”

I cradle the phone between my neck and shoulder. “Not exactly.”

“Why? What happened? Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine. But I was hoping you could watch Lola for a few more days.” Glancing out the window, I watch the crew unload my luggage. “Preston and I aren’t ready to leave yet. We’re...you know...”

“Still screwing like rabbits?” she offers.

*No lies detected.* “Yep. Pretty much.”

She laughs and I’m so happy my bestie and my husband aren’t at each other’s throats anymore. “Have fun on your honeymoon. I’ll take care of Lola.”

“Thanks, B. You’re the best. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

My stomach grumbles as I hang up my phone and I realize I skipped breakfast. Although I *did* have some coffee and a whole lot of Preston, but that doesn’t count as sustenance.

“Do you want to grab a bite to eat—”

A loud, deafening boom assaults my ears and the entire building shakes as a kaleidoscope of bright colors eclipse my vision...

Because our plane just exploded.

## Chapter 45

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Kit

*H*ugging my knees to my chest, I rock myself back and forth on the airport floor. I wish I could wipe the horrific images of fire and smoke from my mind, but it's all I see when I close my eyes now.

A lump fills my throat and tears run down my face. *None of the flight crew survived.*

I overhear Preston arguing with some airport workers, trying to get some more information about what happened, but they don't know any more than we do.

Which is nothing.

I want to scream, but it's stuck in my throat. I want to wake up from this terrible nightmare...but it's reality.

Brawny arms wrap around my frame, holding me so tight it's almost suffocating. "Deep breaths, Kit. In and out."

It's not working.

"The plane we were supposed to be on *blew up*," I choke out through sobs. "People died."

*Just like my parents.*

"I know," he whispers into my hair.

Acid burns up my esophagus and terror cloaks around me before my guts twist with an inundation of awareness.

The airport personnel might not know what happened...but I do.

*I feel it in my bones.*

Tilting my head, I peer up at Preston. "It was him."

I thought it was Jared and Jess who were responsible for my attacks...but I was wrong.

There's only one person who would do this.

One person cold-blooded and heartless enough to try to kill me the same way he killed my parents.

Preston doesn't argue with me. Instead, he clutches me tighter, like he's been thinking the same thing.

"Angry girl." He cups the back of my neck, pressing his forehead against mine. "We have to go back home."

He's out of his damn mind. "What? Why?"

Going home will just make us sitting ducks while my uncle plots his next attack.

His features sharpen and the murderous look in his eye sends a shiver down my spine. "Because *I'm* going to end this."

## Chapter 46

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Preston

Trying to convince Kit to get on a plane after she watched the last one we were supposed to be on blow up wasn't easy. Even after I stressed that commercial flights had a lot more security measures than private jets and were therefore safer.

Eventually, she caved, but she trembled in my arms the entire flight home.

While I thought about how to protect the girl I love so I can keep her safe.

I bang my fist on the front door, debating if I should kick it in instead. "Open up."

"You don't have to do that," Kit says behind me. They already know we're here."

As if on cue, it opens.

Reggie clears his throat. "Please come in. Madam has been expecting you."

"No shit." Brushing past him, I make my way through the house with Kit in tow.

I find the old bag of bones in the dining room waving around a cigarette. It takes everything in me not to shove it down her throat and make her choke on it.

White-hot anger races over my skin as I grip the handles of her wheelchair and spin her around.

Behind me, Reggie gasps. "Sir."

The look I give him makes his mouth clamp shut. *Smart man.*

Baring my teeth, I grab the armrests of the chair. The decrepit bitch better have the right fucking response...because the *wrong* one will result in me slitting her goddamn throat and watching her bleed out all over this Persian rug with a smile on my face.

“Did you know?”

She reaches for her notebook, but I throw it across the room.

I don't need her bullshit scribbles to know whether or not she's lying. I can tell when people are bluffing by what they *don't* say.

I grab a fistful of her thin white hair, causing Reggie to take a step forward and Kit to hiss, “Preston.”

I'm not backing down. Fuck that.

I need to know how deep Nanna Lucifer's abhorrence for her granddaughter is and where her loyalties truly lie.

And God fucking help her if it's not with Kit. I'll use methods of torture they haven't even invented yet.

“Are you aware that your son has been trying to kill your granddaughter?”

A skilled liar has no problem looking someone in the eyes while they do it. Sometimes it's to intimidate you...other times it's to subliminally manipulate you into thinking they're being honest.

Nanna doesn't do that, though. The bitch straight-up shrugs.

Like her granddaughter's life is of no importance to her.

I'm about to strangle the living shit out of her, but Reggie squawks, “You're not asking the right questions, sir.” He swallows hard. “Madam had her reservations about her son, but...”

“But *what?*” I seethe.

Frowning, he gives her a look of disapproval. “She didn't want to believe he was capable of doing something so evil.”

Kit's snort is indignant. “Wow.”

There might be some validity to that, but her refusal to acknowledge the truth still doesn't let the cunt off the hook.

“Did you have anything to do with that plane blowing up?”

Her shoulders slump and she averts her gaze.

“Look at me, Nanna,” Kit demands.

The old woman lifts her head, regarding her granddaughter.

Good choice.

“Did you try to kill me?”

The way her voice cracks punches straight through my heart.  
A brief flicker of sadness flashes in her grandmother's eyes as she shakes her head, but there's also something else lingering there...

*Shame.*

Like deep down she knows Kit's been right about her uncle this whole time.

She motions for Reggie to fetch her notebook from the floor. After he hands it to her, she writes, *What makes you so certain it was him who blew up the plane?*

For fuck's sake. Her denial is revolting.

However, I think I've figured out a way to verify he's the person behind Kit's attacks.

"I can prove it."

This piques her interest. *How?*

I look at Reggie. "Has he contacted her since the plane blew up?"

"Not to my knowledge."

I eye Gullible Granny. "Has he?"

She gives her head a shake.

"Good. Then I want you to call your son. Tell him Kit died in that plane crash and you're so distraught you're changing your will and giving all the money to charity in her honor."

This way, him being the next of kin won't mean shit.

"What?" Kit squeaks behind me. "Why?"

"Because then he'll think his plan worked." I hold Nanna's stare. "And he's going to come after *you* next."

I can tell this makes her nervous because her eyes go wide with panic.

She'd have no reason to be on edge if she truly thought he was innocent.

I think back to the question she scrawled on her notepad during our first meeting. The one she didn't want Kit to see.

Even though Kit already knew the answer.

"You once asked me if I would protect your granddaughter and I told you with my life. Now it's time for you to do the same." Leaning down, I get close to her face. "We're gonna prove he's the one doing this. But this time, *you're* the target."

## Chapter 47

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Preston

*R*eggie hangs up the phone and addresses his boss. “He took the news surprisingly well, madam. He sends his condolences and said to call him if there’s anything you need.”

Shooting me a dirty look, the old prune pencils something on her notepad. *See? He’s innocent.*

Beside me, Kit bristles.

Crossing my arms, I lean forward in my chair. “He’s playing you because he doesn’t want you to suspect anything, you fucking moron.”

Pressing her lips into a tight line, she lights a cigarette and begins waving it in front of my face.

“Well, we called him,” Kit says. “What do we do now?”

“We wait.”



Biting her nails, Kit paces back and forth in the library we’re hiding out in. “What if this doesn’t work? What if something bad happens?”

I take the gun I brought with me out of my waistband. “The only thing that’s gonna happen is karma.”

I’ll make sure of it.

She stops pacing and peers down at her shoes. She looks so vulnerable right now, so pliable, it tears me wide open. “I’m scared.”

In two strides, I’m hauling her into my arms.

“I would never let anything happen to you.” I touch the poker chip hanging off the thin silver chain. I put it back on her neck the other night while she was sleeping. Because it belongs to her. *Just like I do.* “Ever.”

She places her hand over mine. “What about you?”

“I’ll be fine. As long as you promise to stay in the room the whole time.”

I can tell she wants to protest, but it’s not up for debate.

“I’m not fucking around, Kit. I can’t focus if I have to worry about protecting you.”

She blows out a breath. “Fine—”

The doorbell rings and I signal for her to keep quiet. The last thing I want is for him to figure out we’re still alive and have the upper hand.

I hear the front door open followed by Reggie’s voice. “Hello, sir.”

“Has the lawyer been here yet?” a male voice who I assume belongs to Garrison, barks.

Kit and I exchange a glance. The fucker wasted no time getting down to business.

“No, sir,” Reggie says. “He’s scheduled to arrive in a few hours.”

“Oh, for Christ’s sake,” Garrison mutters. “Where the hell is that stupid, senile woman?”

“Follow me.”

The sound of heavy footsteps heading toward the dining room makes my trigger finger twitch. I want nothing more than to put a few bullets into the head of the fucker responsible for causing Kit so much pain.

“Hello, Mother. I’m sorry to hear about Kit. I know you were very fond of her.”

At that, Kit makes a face.

“I understand this is a trying time. Especially with you being sick and all. However, you need to stop being foolish. You and I both know the money should go to me.” The sound of a gun cocking makes the hairs on my arms rise. “Or *else.*”

I can’t hear what the old bat says given she can’t speak, but I assume whatever she wrote pissed him the fuck off because he snarls, “I don’t give a damn that you’ll be dead soon. I didn’t go through the trouble of planning my brother’s murder or kissing your wrinkly ass for the last sixteen years just so you could give all my money to *charity.*”

And there it is.

A sad, painful sound leaves Kit and she sprints out of the library before I can stop her.

“*Your* money?” she screams as I follow her into the dining room. “It’s my parents’ money, you evil piece of vile shit.”

*Goddammit.*

Garrison spins around, looking like he’s seen a ghost.

“What the hell?” He points his gun at Kit who looks like she’s getting ready to charge him. “How the *fuck* are you still alive?”

I quickly yank Kit behind me and aim my gun at his head. “Surprise, motherfucker.”

Two things happen at that moment.

One. A shot rings out.

And two. A bullet pierces Garrison’s skull.

But not from my gun...

From Nanna’s.

She holds up her notepad as his lifeless body drops to the floor. *You were too slow, you inept shithead.*

Kit groans. “Seriously, Nanna?”

Tucking my gun away, I narrow my eyes. “Nice shot, you old bag.”

## Chapter 48

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Kit

It's been three weeks since my grandmother blew my uncle's brains out.

Preston keeps asking how I'm holding up. Not because he's dead—but because the asshole confessed to murdering my parents before he died.

Truth is...I'm kind of relieved.

Obviously, not that my parents were killed because that will always devastate me, but that my gut feeling about Garrison being the one behind it was right.

And while the truth won't bring them back, and there is no amount of justice in the world that will make losing them hurt any less...I feel validated.

I look up at the clear blue sky.

If guardian angels truly exist, I know I have two amazing ones watching over me.

Hopefully they'll help me nail this job interview.

Nerves flutter in my belly as I ring the doorbell. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to wear, so I went with a pencil skirt and a white button-up.

Classic professional.

Unless my potential boss has an aversion to the pink in my hair. In that case, he can go fuck himself.

I'm debating whether to ring the doorbell again when it opens.

"Come on in," Landon says. "Asher's finishing up a phone call, but he'll be done any minute."

Did I want to accept Asher's offer to be his social media manager? No.

It's a terrible idea to mix business and friendship. However, the more I thought about it, the more opening up *my* own social media company made sense.

Two players on Asher's team have already hired me and it's going good so far.

I figure adding Asher to the list would not only give me more experience, it would be a hot selling point to other potential clients.

"Is Breslin at her studio?"

Leading me down the hallway, Landon nods. "Yup. She's working on a few paintings for an upcoming art exhibit, so she's been super busy."

I'm glad Breslin's still chasing her dreams. It gives me the push to chase mine.

Landon knocks on the door of Asher's office. "Sir, your three-o'clock appointment is here."

My eyebrows rise. "Sir?"

Asher insisted we have a *proper* interview to make it legit, but I didn't think Landon was in on it.

Landon's lips twitch. "He likes it when I call him that."

Yeah. I definitely didn't need to know that.

"Send her on in," Asher barks from the other side.

Landon opens the door and gestures for me to enter. "After you."

Asher's sitting in his big leather chair at his desk, looking thoroughly frustrated with whoever's on the phone. "That's not gonna work, Joe. Repeat after me—*seven* figures. Not four." He slams the phone down and looks at us. "My agent sucks balls. And not in a good way." Standing, he extends his hand. "Hi, I'm Asher Holden. And you are?"

*Oh, boy.*

I shake his hand. "Kit Bishop." I bite back a smile. "Holden."

"Awesome last name." He gestures for me to sit in the chair across from him. "Can my secretary get you anything? Water? Soda?"

I look at Landon who isn't amused. "I'm good. Thanks."

Landon starts to leave. "I'll let you two have your interview."

"Don't forget to let me know when my driver arrives," Asher barks before his tone softens. "Also, I love you."

Landon shakes his head, but there's a big grin on his face as he shuts the door behind him.

Asher waggles his eyebrows. "My secretary's hot as fuck, huh?"

I'm not really sure how to answer that, so I just stay quiet.

And things turn awkward.

We haven't spoken much since I found out he lied for Preston.

Truth be told, I'm hurt that he did. I thought we were friends.

*Family* even.

I notice he's wearing the shirt I bought him, so I use that to break the ice.

"You're wearing the shirt."

Plucking it from his body, he looks down at it. "Of course, I am. I love it. It's my new favorite shirt."

I sit up in my chair. "Really?"

"No." His expression evens out. "It's the ugliest thing I've ever seen." He gives me a sheepish shrug. "I'm sorry for not having your back. I should have told you Preston wasn't talking to our mom. It's just..."

He doesn't finish that sentence, but he doesn't have to.

"I'm your friend...but he's your brother."

"Exactly." He blows out a breath. "Can't stand the asshole right now, but I'd still do anything for him."

"Like lie to me about him seeing Becca behind my back."

He swipes a finger through the air. "Now *that* I didn't know. I thought it was a random skank he was screwing on the down low."

I don't know if that was intended to make me feel better, but it doesn't.

"Right." I stare at the carpet. "If you knew it was Becca, would you have told me then?"

"No," he says without any hesitation. "But I would have dropped some major hints to Breslin so *she* could tell you." His gaze turns inward. "I'm sorry I wasn't a good friend. I was just trying to be a good brother."

As much as I hate what he did. I understand it.

"I know. Truth be told, if Breslin was seeing another guy behind your back and asked me to keep it a secret from you, I would."

He pales. "*What?*" His mouth opens and closes like a fish. "Is she?" Standing, he clutches his chest, looking like he's two seconds away from passing out. "I know she's been at the studio a lot lately, but—"

"Relax," I tell him before he has a heart attack. "Breslin isn't cheating on you."

Relieved, he plops back down in his chair. "Thank God. I felt like I was gonna die."

I glare at him. "Doesn't feel too great, huh?"

“Point taken.” This time he looks genuinely sorry. “If my brother ever put me in that position again, I’d...”

“Still keep his secret,” I finish for him after a few moments pass.

He sulks. “Send smoke signals.”

I really don’t want to rip into him about this anymore. It was a shitty situation, but it’s over.

I give him a small smile. “Smoke signals work for me.”

He swallows, looking all kinds of uncomfortable. “How is he?”

It kills me that Asher has to ask how his own brother is doing. Especially when he lives right next door. But alas, I don’t think Preston’s grudge will be going away anytime soon.

“He’s good.” Emotion tugs at my heart. “He isn’t gambling, but he’s been spending a lot of time with Jameson.”

His expression becomes forlorn. “Yeah, Breslin told me. Well, not much because she doesn’t know much.” He scrubs a hand down his face. “I feel like my brother has this secret life I know *nothing* about.”

That makes two of us.

“Yeah.”

He brings a mug to his lips. “How are you handling it?”

“His secret life bothers me because I’m not part of it. But that kid... Preston’s face lights up every time he talks about him.”

And his happiness makes me happy. Which in turn helps me deal with the situation.

“For what it’s worth, his face lights up every time he talks about you, too,” Asher murmurs with a shake of his head. “Man, I never thought I’d see my brother in love. I presumed he was incapable of it.” His blue eyes cut to mine. “But then you came along.”

There’s a weird twinge of sadness in his voice and I don’t know what to make of it.

Asher takes a slow breath, as if choosing his next words carefully. “I thought marrying you was a huge mistake, but it turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to him.” He shifts forward in his seat and the stark emotion on his face pins me to the spot. “Thank you for saving my brother.”

My chest expands so much it feels like it’s going to crack.

Asher claps his hands, jolting me. “All right. What do you say we get this interview started, huh?”

It’s a little hard to switch gears after *that*, but I clear my throat and fold

my hands on my lap.

“Absolutely. Anything you want to know about what I do and can provide, just ask.”

“Cheetos or Doritos?”

I was prepared to discuss marketing and social media footprints...not snacks.

However, this is Asher’s interview so he’s running the show.

“Um...Doritos.”

He rubs his chin. “Nacho or cool ranch?”

I squint, hoping my choice is the right answer. “Cool ranch.”

He slaps the desk. “Yes. *Finally*. Everyone always says nacho is superior but that’s basic bitch shit. Cool ranch has way more flavor.” His stare turns skeptical. “If you were a vegetable, what would you be?”

Seriously? “None of them.”

This intrigues him. “Why?”

“Because no one really likes vegetables, so no one would eat me.”

Oh, hell. I walked right into that one.

Asher smirks. “Damn, small fry. Points for creativity.” Picking up a pen, he writes something down on a pad. “What are your hours?”

Finally, a legitimate question. “Since I primarily work online and from home now, my hours can be whenever.”

“Nice. I admire the hustle.” He taps his pen. “What does Breslin love most about me?”

I’m not sure if I should tell him what he wants to hear, or be honest.

I go with honesty. “You saw her when no one else did.”

He waves a hand, indicating I should continue. “And?”

“Your big heart.”

“And?”

“Your ability to make her laugh and not take everything so seriously.”

“And?”

*Ugh*. What he wants to hear it is. “Your looks.”

“And?”

Oh, for the love of God. “Your...you know.”

He snickers. “I just wanted to see how many things I could get you to list. But hey, bonus points for those last two.” He holds up a finger. “Final question.” He does a dramatic drumroll on the desk. “Who’s your favorite Holden brother?”

“Preston.” *Obviously.*

He winces. “Ah. Points off for that.” Grinning, he opens his arms. “But everything else checks out. You’re hired.”

I jump up. “Really?”

“Yup. I’ll send you my login info for all my accounts tonight.”

“Perfect. I’ll get started the second you do.”

He stands. “Awesome.”

There’s a knock on the door before Landon walks in. “Your driver’s here to take you to the airport.”

Walking across the room, Asher grabs a duffel bag off the floor. “Thanks, rock star.”

“Where are you headed off to?”

Maybe I can make a post about it and generate some engagement with his fans.

“Camp.” He gives Landon a kiss. “I’ll be back in a week, though.”

“Have fun.”

I can’t help but smile on my short walk home because things are *finally* starting to come together.



“Who’s the best doggie in the whole wide world?” Rubbing Lola’s belly, I lean over and kiss his wet nose. “And who’s gonna go for a run with me soon?”

At that, Lola rolls back over and huffs, making his objections known.

“Come on. It won’t be *that* bad.”

I’m about to get his leash, but I hear the front door open.

Jumping to my feet, I race out of the living room so I can tell Preston the big news.

I’m sure he won’t be thrilled because of his animosity toward his brother, but once he sees how excited I am about it, I know he’ll be happy for me.

“Guess wha—”

Words die in my throat when I enter the foyer.

Preston’s home...but he’s not alone.

Jameson’s blue eyes are huge as he looks around in wonder.

The alarmed expression on Preston’s face tells me he’s just as surprised

to see me. “I thought you had an interview?”

“I...uh...” I peer down at Jameson again. “It was next door, so it was quick.”

“Next door?”

“Yeah.” I can’t stop staring at the little boy holding Preston’s hand. “Your brother hired me to be his social media manager.”

“When were you planning on telling me about this?”

“After I got the job.” I peel my gaze away and look at my husband. “What are you doing here?”

Last I checked, it was *forbidden* for Preston to be around me. Obviously, we’re not following Becca’s dumb rule, but with Jameson being here...that might pose a potential issue.

Preston gestures to his T-shirt and I realize it’s covered in what appears to be colorful vomit. “I took Jameson to the carnival and he went a little crazy with the cotton candy. He ended up puking on me...exorcist style.”

*Eek.*

My eyes flick back to the boy. “Are you okay?”

I know Preston said he doesn’t speak, but I don’t like the thought of talking about him like he isn’t here when he’s right in front of us.

Jameson doesn’t answer, but he’s eyeing me with keen interest. No doubt wondering who the hell I am.

Preston ruffles his hair a little. “He’s fine. Aren’t you?”

Jameson gives him a nod and Preston leads him up the stairs. “I’m gonna change real quick and then we’ll be gone.”

I want to tell them to stay because Jameson is no longer a mythical creature. He’s here and he’s real.

And I want so badly to get to know the kid my husband adores.

I’m trying to think of possible suggestions that might make them stay when the doorbell rings.

Landon’s on the other side of it, looking sweaty and disheveled. “*Please* tell me Preston is home.”

As if on cue, Preston comes back down the stairs.

Landon’s eyes are saucers when they land on Jameson. “Never mind.”

He’s about to leave, but I halt him. Preston might not be able to help, but maybe I can. “What’s up?”

He blows out a breath. “I’m converting the basement into a music studio, and the speakers I ordered ended up coming early. I need some help moving

them into the house.” He hikes a thumb behind him, gesturing to the storm clouds rolling in. “Sooner rather than later.”

That seems easy enough. “I can help.”

His face scrunches. “No, you can’t. The speakers are not only wide and bulky, they weigh more than you do.”

I’m strong but not *that* strong.

His eyes shift to Preston. “It’s why I came here to ask if you could assist.” They drop to Jameson. “But I’ll figure something else out.”

I can see Preston mulling this over in his head. Landon isn’t the type to ask for help. *Ever*. Not to mention, he saved both our lives.

Which is no doubt why Preston agrees. “I’ll give you a hand.” He looks at Jameson. “We’re gonna go to my buddy Landon’s house for a little—”

“I can watch him,” I interject before I can stop myself.

When Preston snaps his head up, I quickly add, “You’ll be preoccupied so it will be hard to keep an eye on him. You know how it is with kids, turn your head for two seconds and something terrible happens.”

That so wasn’t the right approach because Preston shuts me down immediately. “I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Please,” I beg, my heart taking the reins. “It won’t be for long.” I look at Landon. “Right?”

“Ten minutes tops.”

I turn to Jameson. “We can watch cartoons.”

This piques Jameson’s interest because he leaves Preston’s side and comes over to me.

That makes Preston cave, albeit reluctantly.

“Fine.” He sinks to his haunches. “I’ll be back soon, okay? Have fun with...” He looks like he’s swallowing nails. “Kit.”

The fact he told him my name makes my chest close up...because he didn’t have to.

Heck, a big part of me wishes he didn’t since it’s a huge risk.

*But he did.*

And it means more to me than he’ll ever know.

Preston gestures to the backpack Jameson’s wearing. “His inhaler is in there.” His expression turns serious. “If he starts wheezing or coughing—”

“I promise if *anything* is off, I will give it to him.”

“And then come get me.” He leans in to kiss me but thinks better of it. “I’ll be back in a few.”



When the door closes behind them, Jameson and I stare at each other.  
*Holy awkward.*

“Hi.”

I’m grateful when Lola joins us and Jameson’s face brightens.

Kneeling, I give Lola a scratch behind the ears. “This is Lola.”

He looks equal parts fascinated and uncertain.

I kiss Lola’s nose. “Don’t worry. He’s a big mush. You can pet him if you want.”

Confirming this, Lola sniffs him before licking his hand.

Smiling, Jameson pets him.

I can’t help but study him as he plays with Lola. There’s no question who his mother is because he has Becca’s blond hair and bright blue eyes.

Her smile, too.

Only unlike Becca, there’s an innocence about him. *Purity*. Because he hasn’t been jaded by the world yet.

*Or his mother.*

He’s also way quieter than *she* ever was.

It’s weird seeing someone who looks identical to the person you hate... yet you don’t feel an ounce of aversion toward them.

“You have a really cool name,” I tell him. “Jameson is actually my middle name.”

I expect him to be fully interested in Lola, but every so often I catch him looking at me...dissecting me just as much as I’m dissecting him.

A daunting feeling rises within my chest.

What if he ends up hating me because he thinks *I’m* the reason Preston and his mom aren’t together?

*Chill the fuck out, Kit.*

This is only our first—and sadly, probably last—meeting. Ergo, I’m jumping the gun.

The only thing I can do is be myself while getting to know him.

Jameson stops petting Lola and rubs his tummy.

*Uh-oh.* “Does your belly hurt? Are you gonna be sick?”

The kid *did* just throw up a shit ton of cotton candy.

He shakes his head. “Hungry.”

I breathe a sigh of relief, not only because he talked, but because that’s something I can easily handle.

I gesture for him to follow me into the kitchen. “Come on. Let’s go find

you a snack.”

“Do you want some popcorn?” I ask as I hoist him on top of the marble island.

He shakes his head.

I set his backpack down on the counter. “Chips?”

Headshake.

Perhaps he wants something healthier. “How about an apple?”

Headshake.

“Banana?”

Headshake.

“Mac and cheese?”

Headshake.

Heavens to Betsy. I know Preston said he was picky about food, but I didn’t think it would be *this* hard.

Sadly, we don’t have any animal crackers or chicken nuggets in the house. I suppose I *could* make him pancakes...but then he might never go near them again.

Wait a minute.

“How about some ice cream?”

Preston said he loves it and I just so happen to have some rocky road in the freezer.

Jameson isn’t into it, though, because he shakes his head again.

*Shit.* I thought that was a surefire winner.

Growing out of options, I suggest, “Peanut butter and jelly?”

He scrunches his face, pondering this.

I’m just thankful it’s not an outright *no*.

After what feels like an eternity, he nods.

I make quick work of pulling out the loaf of bread, jelly, and peanut butter so I can make sandwiches for both of us.

I’m so focused on the task, I’m not fully aware until after that I not only cut the crust off the bread...I’ve also cut them into fours.

*Just like my dad.*

“Sorry,” I murmur as I hand him a plate with his sandwich. “I should have asked if you wanted the crust taken off. I can make you another one.”

Not looking at all put off, Jameson picks up a square and takes a bite.

I should probably have him sit at the kitchen table, because that’s the *correct* place to sit when eating...but that’s no fun.

I hop up on the island. Then I grab my plate and sit crisscross applesauce.

Jameson seems riveted by this, and a moment later, he's sitting opposite me, copying my stance.

Now facing each other, we proceed to dig into our sandwiches.

My heart compresses, but for once it's not followed by a swell of sadness. The memory makes me smile.

"I used to sit like this with my dad while we ate PB and J sandwiches, too."

Curiosity fills his face and I realize I've stuck my foot in my mouth. *Crap on a cracker.*

Do you tell little kids about death? That seems kind of...*intense.*

Then again, I learned the cold, hard truth when I was eight.

I want to spare Jameson, though, so I simply say, "He's an angel now."

Thankfully, Jameson doesn't ask any follow-up questions.

Wanting to lighten the mood, I decide to do something else my dad used to.

Whenever I wandered into his office, he'd do the robot skit. It basically consisted of him freezing and then moving his arms like a robot whenever I poked him. It was corny and silly, but it was our thing and it always made me giggle.

I bring my sandwich to my open mouth like I'm going to take a big bite. Then I freeze.

It takes Jameson a minute to catch on, but sure enough, he pokes me with his finger. Moving my arms mechanically, I switch positions. This time, I freeze mid-bite.

Jameson laughs before he pokes me again. Sandwich still hanging from my mouth, I move one arm up and extend my other one out to the side.

Highly entertained by our little game, Jameson cracks up and pokes me again.

I'm shifting positions when I notice Preston standing in the entryway of the kitchen...staring at us.

I'm not sure how long he's been here, and I have no idea what to make of the expression on his face.

I freeze. For real this time.

Which only makes Jameson laugh harder.

There's an amused glint in his eye when he walks over to us. "What are

you two up to?”

Not wanting to disappoint Jameson, I stay in my robot character...which irks Preston.

Jameson loses it completely, though. Laughing so hard he clutches his belly.

After catching his breath, he pokes me again while looking at Preston, showing him it's what you have to do to get me to move.

Preston plays along, jabbing me in the stomach. I move my arms bit by bit until I'm covering one of my eyes with my hand and the other is on Preston's nose.

Preston tries not to crack a smile but fails miserably.

Getting a kick out of Preston's reaction, Jameson decides to join in on the fun. Now Preston has *two* freezing robots to deal with.

“Oh, no. Not you, too.”

He pokes Jameson, but Jameson's gaze locks with mine in solidarity.

*We've got this.*

Only we don't, because Preston grumbles, “That's it.” Before he proceeds to tickle Jameson.

My partner in crime folds like a cheap lawn chair, laughing so hard I'm afraid he's going to have an asthma attack.

Preston must be thinking the same thing, because he stops and focuses on me.

I brace myself for the tickling...but it doesn't come.

Instead, those lips curve into a sly smirk. “I know exactly how to get *you* to surrender.”

Cupping his hand around the back of my neck, he brings his mouth to mine. I try to resist, but the second he nibbles my bottom lip and traces it with the tip of his tongue...I'm a goner.

Damn him.

“Victory tastes good,” he murmurs against my lips before edging away.

I'm about to demand a rematch, but he glances at his watch. “Shit. We gotta go.” His gaze cuts to mine. “Becca wants me to have him back early so she can take him out to dinner tonight. Evidently, she wants him to meet her boyfriend.”

*Otherwise known as her latest victim.*

I keep that comment to myself, because Jameson's here.

“Can I borrow your car?”

“Of course. Keys are on the table in the foyer.”

“Thanks.” There’s a sharp tug in my heart when Preston takes Jameson off the island and sets him down. “Come on, bud. Time to go home.”

*I don’t want them to leave.*

Preston swipes his backpack off the counter. “Say goodbye to Kit.”

I kneel so I’m eye level with him. “I had a lot of fun.”

*Wish we could do it again.*

The tug in my heart becomes a full-blown ache when he reaches over and touches a strand of my hair. “Pink.”

Preston rocks back on his heels.

“It’s my favorite color,” I explain.

Smiling, he turns his attention to Preston and they head out.

I follow them to the front door, my heart sinking a little more with every step they take.

Preston grabs Jameson’s car seat off the foyer floor. “I’ll be home in a little while.” Leaning down, he kisses my forehead. “Hopefully.”

“Bye, Jameson,” I whisper when the door opens.

Jameson gives me a little wave. “Bye, Pinky.”

Everything hurts as I watch them walk down the driveway hand in hand.

*Don’t leave.*

## Chapter 49

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Kit

“So how was it?” Breslin questions from her side of the couch.  
We’re currently lying on opposite ends of it with heating pads on our stomachs because mother nature is a twat and periods are the devil.

“It was great. I was nervous it would be weird, but we ended up eating sandwiches on the kitchen island and playing the frozen robot game me and my dad used to play.”

Breslin gives my leg a small squeeze.

“When’s the next time you see him?” Juan questions from the floor, where he too has a heating pad on his tummy.

My stomach twists and it has nothing to do with cramps. “Never.”

It’s been a little over a week since I met Jameson, and just like I thought, Preston doesn’t want there to be an encore.

Jameson hasn’t said my name in front of Becca, but according to my husband, the more he sees me...the greater the likelihood.

Breslin and Juan exchange a sad glance.

“Why?”

“Preston thinks it’s tempting fate.”

Juan pops up. “Tempting fate *how*?”

“Because Becca, the giant thundercunt has forbidden Preston to have any contact with Kit. If he does, she’ll revoke his visits with Jameson,” Breslin explains.

Juan’s mouth falls open. “That’s...she can’t do that. I mean, you’re married and he’s—”

“Not his father,” I remind him. “Therefore, he has no rights.”

Which is completely erroneous because Preston really does take care of Jameson more than his own mother does.

Heck, she couldn't even make time to take her son out to dinner like *she* wanted. Preston didn't come home until after two that night because *that's* when Becca walked in the door.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Preston said Jameson was really upset about it because he was looking forward to spending time with his mom.

*He* ended up taking him out to dinner to try and cheer him up.

I absolutely hate that Jameson is experiencing what every other person in Becca's life has experienced.

Becca hurting adults is one thing. But hurting a child?

“That's so fucked up,” Juan says, taking the thought right out of my head.

“Beyond fucked up,” Breslin mutters.

Juan lays back down. “At the risk of sounding dense, why don't you guys tell Jameson not to say anything about the visits between you two? You said he doesn't talk much anyway.” He inspects his nails. “Given Becca's a shitty mom, it's all the more reason he should be surrounded by people who care about him.”

Yeah, I tried that approach with Preston. It didn't go well.

After he barked my head off that a child should never be forced to keep a secret for an adult, and he was *disgusted* that I would ever suggest such a thing...he stormed off and slept in his old room.

The next morning—after he was calmer—I explained that I honestly didn't think of it that way and assured him I'd never do anything to cause Jameson distress. I was just desperate to figure out how I could be in Jameson's life *and* make sure Preston's visits weren't taken away.

But alas, there isn't a solution.

This situation freaking blows.

“It's not right to ask Jameson to keep secrets.”

“Yeah, that's a good point,” Juan says before he sighs. “Man, this sucks.”

“Tell me about it—”

I bring my finger to my lips when I hear the front door open. I'm not keeping anything from Preston, but it's been a little tense since our blow out the other night and I really don't want to have another fight.



On the bright side, he must feel somewhat bad for laying into me because when I asked him to go to the store, he didn't protest.

Looking positively exasperated, he treks into the living room holding two grocery bags.

With a grimace, he reaches inside one of the bags and chucks a box of tampons at me. "Here." Glaring, he hurls another box at Breslin. "You have two fiancés. Next time make one of *them* fetch your feminine products."

She rolls her eyes. "You were going to the store for Kit anyway."

"Yeah, because *her* pussy is the one I'm fucking. Hence, it's the only one I'll take care of. Consider this a one-time courtesy." White teeth flash with a vicious smile. "You're welcome."

"Thank you," I tell him to which he just grumbles.

*Yup.* Still tense.

"They were out of rocky road." He plunks a tub of ice cream on the coffee table. "I got you peanut butter fudge."

I bat my eyelashes. "What about the chocolate?"

More grumbling.

Reaching into the bag again, he pulls out a few chocolate bars. He tosses three to me and one to Breslin.

Juan makes grabby hands. "Excuse 'em wa. Where's *mine*?"

Preston makes a face. "Come on, man."

"What?" Juan pats the heating pad on his stomach. "I have sympathy cramps."

Preston looks at me.

Biting into a candy bar, I shrug. "I don't know about the cramps, but he definitely gets bitchy."

Juan nods. "Facts."

Preston snatches one of my candy bars and throws it at him. "Here." Palms up, he backs out of the room. "I'm tapping out of this *Ya-Ya Sisterhood* shit and going upstairs. If you need anything else, get it your fucking self."

With that, he stalks off.

Juan reaches for the ice cream. "Are we sure he doesn't have his period?"

*Certainly seems like it.*



I'm in such a crabby mood the forty-five-minute hot shower I took didn't do a dang thing to help.

I hate fighting with Preston. I hate that I can't come up with any kind of resolution.

I hate *Becca*.

Opening the bathroom door, I pad into the adjoining bedroom so I can put on my jammies and go to sleep. I startle when I see Preston sitting on the bed...looking about as miserable as I feel.

I pull my robe tighter. "I thought you were working out downstairs?"

He gives me a sour look. "Didn't help."

I'd ask if he wants to talk about it, but the last time we had a serious conversation he bit my head off.

Untwisting the towel from my hair, I walk over to the dresser. "I'll be out of here in a minute. Just let me grab some cloth—"

"Kit."

I close my eyes. "I don't want to fight, Preston."

"I don't want to fight, either."

"Could have fooled me," I mutter under my breath.

"Angry girl."

I swear his lips twitch when I scowl. "What?"

All traces of amusement fade and he crooks a finger at me. "Come here."

Damn my softy ass because I concede. Those dark eyes roam over every inch of me as I walk over to where he is. Apparently, not close enough though because he curls a hand around my hip and maneuvers me so I'm standing directly in front of him.

"I don't like when I don't have control."

I'd laugh if it wasn't for the serious expression on his face.

That's an understatement if there ever was one.

"This situation with Jameson...I can't control it and I fucking *hate* that."

My heart sinks because I don't like it either. "I know."

His head falls forward, nuzzling my chest. "I don't want to lose him, and I don't want to lose you. But I feel like I'm gonna lose *both* of you."

I run my fingers over his scalp, attempting to soothe him. "You won't ever lose me."

And I *really* don't want him to lose Jameson.

"How do you feel about conjugal visits?"

I blink, taken aback. "Huh?"

He wraps his hands around my wrists, stopping my movements before he lifts his head.

“Killing that bitch is the *only* way I can cut the noose she has around my neck.”

I’d think he was just venting and speaking out of anger if it wasn’t for the downright homicidal look in his eyes.

“It doesn’t even have to be brutal—although, I’d prefer it.” His smile is as lethal as his words are. “I can just slip some antifreeze into her drink. I’ll make sure Jameson is with the babysitter so he doesn’t have to witness it.”

“You’d be a prime suspect,” I inform him because he’s talking crazy. “Which means you’d most likely get caught.”

His voice is utterly sinister. “It would be worth it.”

Whoa. He is definitely *serious* about this.

But as awful as Becca is...murdering her isn’t the answer.

Sadly, it will only cause even more problems.

“Let’s say you kill her.” I palm his cheek. “Then what? I get to visit you on the weekends for the next twenty-five years. Although let’s face it, you’d probably get more because she’s a woman and a mother, so a jury and judge would be inclined to throw the book at you.” I hold his gaze. “Jameson will be put into the system. Probably some foster home located God only knows where, and you won’t stand a chance in hell of finding out because *you* killed his mother.”

I run my thumb down his jaw. “Which would only confuse and hurt him—and possibly teach him that it’s okay to kill—because his hero did it.” I bring our foreheads together. “Doing that only takes care of Becca. What happens to *us*?”

Because we need him.

He closes his eyes. “That’s where I get stuck.”

“You wouldn’t just be killing Becca. You’d be killing me and Jameson, too.”

His tattered breath fans over my skin. “I could hire a hitman for two million and the three of us can run off to another country. Live happily ever after.”

That won’t work either.

“You really think you can tuck him in, kiss his forehead, and promise you’ll keep the boogie man away from him every night all while knowing *you* were the one responsible for having his mother killed?”

A lump fills my throat. “He might not figure it out at first because he’s too young, but one day he *will*. I know he will because I’ve been that kid, Preston. I know what it’s like to have an adult look me in the eyes and try to pretend like everything was fine when the feeling in my gut told me *he* took my parents from me. And even though you’re nothing like my uncle and you have justifiable reasons for wanting her dead. Jameson might not see it that way. There’s a very good chance he might hate you for it...just as much as you hate Becca.” I cup his jaw. “Does your hate for her outweigh the love you have for Jameson? If so, let’s pack a fucking bag and do this.”

He doesn’t even have to answer that because I *know* it doesn’t.

His shoulders slump with a heavy exhale. “I hate this.”

Kissing the top of his head, I pull him close. “I know you do, but we’re in this together.”

When he hurts...I hurt.

I’m about to suggest we get into bed because we both could use some rest, but then his lips find my neck, nipping and teasing.

As much as I want him, aunt flow is in town and she’s one hell of a cockblocker.

“It’s not a good time,” I remind him, internally cursing mother nature.

Ignoring me, Preston’s mouth travels lower, grazing my collarbone. “I bet I can make you feel better.”

I *know* he can. However, I also know there’s a high probability it may turn him off.

Granted I don’t have a heavy flow, but *still*.

His hands find the knot on my robe and he unties it. “Tell me where it hurts.”

Oh, it hurts all right. Especially when he pushes the robe open and sucks my nipple into his mouth.

“How about I give you a blow job?”

“How about you be quiet while I play with your pussy?” he counters, running a finger down my stomach...getting closer.

I place my hand on top of his. “Trust me, you don’t want to do this. I’ve earned my red wings and it wasn’t all it’s cracked up to be.” I mean it wasn’t horrible, but it wasn’t exactly incredible, either. That said—as a woman, I knew what I was getting into beforehand, so I was fully prepared for the expedition. Preston has *no* idea and I really don’t want to tarnish his favorite body part of mine.

“It’s a little rusty and tangy—”

“This is a first,” he grits out.

“I know,” I agree. “Which is exactly why I’m trying to impart my wis—”

“The first time I’ve had an erection *and* a migraine at the same time,” he interjects. “Stop babbling.”

“But—”

“You really think some blood is gonna scare *me*?”

Evidently not since he’s still determined to trudge down this path. *Stubborn ass.*

Eyes narrowing, he curls a hand around my hip. “I want you.” My insides clench when he brings a finger to his mouth and licks it. “Now shut the fuck up so I can have you.”

His tenacity has my reluctance fading. However, I’m acutely aware of my tampon. “Don’t unplug the drain—”

Words die in my throat when he drags his thumb over my clit. “Is this where it hurts?”

I don’t just hurt. I fucking *ache* for him. “Yes.”

Every inch of me tightens with desire when he makes slow, torturous circles around the throbbing bud.

I moan, bracing my hands on his shoulders. “That feels so good.”

“I’m just getting started.”

That’s the only warning I get before he drops to his knees.

*Whoa nelly.* “Pres—”

The tip of his tongue replaces his finger, lightly swirling my clit...driving me out of my freaking mind.

Whatever worries I had evaporate because *all* I can focus on is what he’s doing to me.

The way my hips rock against his jaw. The feeling of my clit pulsing in time with my heartbeat. The rough sounds he makes as he flicks me.

The unabashed whimper that escapes me when he pushes his sweatpants down and his cock springs out. Long, thick, and dominant.

He sucks hard, sending a wave of pleasure skittering through my system.

I close my eyes, getting lost in the feeling. “Oh, Go—”

He tears his mouth away...right as I’m reaching the pinnacle.

The loss is so jarring I could cry. It feels like he just brought me to the top of a roller coaster but didn’t let me feel the drop.

There’s a tug on my tampon and before I can register what’s happening,

he's grabbing my waist...steering me so I straddle him.

"I want you sitting on my cock when you come."

And just like that, I'm cruising up the coaster again, full speed ahead.

Until I remember.

"Condom," I squeal, silently cursing my gyno because she's been on the world's longest vacation.

"Already on." A carnal grunt leaves him as he grabs my hips, impaling me on his dick. "Ride it."

And I do, I ride him so good we both moan, equally desperate to get to the finish line as the carpet burns our skin.

I reach it before he does. Curling a hand around his neck, I shamelessly fuck him, chasing the rush of pleasure.

"Fuck, yes." His voice is a gravelly rasp as I squeeze him. "Milk my dick."

I come so hard my whole body vibrates as I bite his shoulder.

I'm on the comedown when he raises his hips, thrusting hard and fast.

Wanting to mess with him like he did me, I unstraddle him.

His eyes snap open and the growl that rumbles out of his chest is pure frustration because he was so close. "What the fu—"

"Turnabout is fair play," I tell him, yanking off the condom. "But don't worry. I'll let you come..." I lower myself until I'm positioned over his erection. "In my mouth."

"Fuck—" Whatever he was going to say next turns into a savage groan when I draw him into my mouth.

I suck him hard and fast, taking him deep while I do.

Glancing up, I soak in the sight of him. His head is thrown back, his lips are parted, and the tendons in his neck flex against his skin. Knowing I can make him feel so good is such a turn-on.

A raw, husky sound leaves him, and he presses down on the back of my head, keeping me right where he wants me. "Deeper."

Tears sting my eyes as he hits the back of my throat, but I don't stop. Saliva trickles down my chin as I brazenly gag on him, wanting to drive him crazy the way he drives me.

He juts his hips, writhing into my mouth. "Jesus Christ."

Strong thighs tremble. "Suck the cum out of me." The force on my head increases. "Every last fucking drop."

Those toned abs contract and he comes with a hoarse cry. I swallow the

salty liquid, staying with him to the very end.

“Fucking hell.” I watch his chest rise and fall as he catches his breath. “You’ve ruined me.”

I stand so I can get cleaned up. “You make it sound like a bad thing.”

He follows behind when I walk into the bathroom. “It’s not.” I’m about to turn on the shower, but he presses me against the glass door. His kiss is downright possessive and I feel it down to my toes. “I love you.”

My heart feels like it leaped right out of my chest and straight into his.

*Because he’s ruined me, too.*



My ear is pressed against Preston’s chest, listening to the cadence of his heart as I drift off to sleep. I’m happy he opened up to me earlier, but I can’t help but feel like there’s still something he’s holding back.

Not *lying* to me per se...just camouflaging.

And not just right now. From the first second we met, I sensed a darkness in him. A heaviness I could never fully grasp. A pain he carries that I don’t fully know the source of.

Because he won’t ever talk about it.

I press my lips to his ribcage. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

He doesn’t speak for so long I assume he fell asleep...until he murmurs, “I’ve told you every significant thing about me, Kit.”

I’d like to believe that, but the weighty feeling in my chest tells me he hasn’t.

I want to trust Preston, though. *Have faith in him and us.*

“Okay. Just know if there’s ever anything you—”

The sound of his not-a-secret phone ringing cuts me off. I glance at the clock on the nightstand. It’s just after midnight.

Preston brings it to his ear. “Let me guess. Becca still isn’t home.”

Instantly, I know it’s the babysitter. Poor girl. Not only is she in nursing school which is hard enough, Becca pretty much expects her to take care of Jameson whenever.

Whenever meaning when Preston’s not around...which he usually is.

“What?” Preston bolts up out of bed with so much force I bolt up with

him. "That can't be right." He grinds his teeth. "Yes, I know your mom was a nurse and you're in nursing school. I'm not doubting your ability to take a fucking temperature, but one-hundred and six is crazy. Maybe the thermometer is broken."

*Yikes.* That temperature is extreme.

He gets off the bed. "He wasn't feeling good yesterday, so I had him rest and gave him fluids. He didn't have a high fever, but I told Becca I was concerned, and she promised to take him to the doctor today. Evidently, that didn't fucking happen." Groaning, he scrubs a hand down his face. "Did you give him Tylenol?" He pinches the bridge of his nose. "Yeah, it should have kicked in by now."

Oh, man. This definitely isn't good.

I get out of bed when he walks over to the closet. "Fuck that. I'm not waiting for Becca to get home. Bring him to the hospital. I'll meet you in fifteen and take over from there, okay?"

Tugging on a pair of jeans, he hangs up and looks at me. "I have to go. Jameson's really sick."

"I heard." Running over to the dresser, I pull out some clothes so I can get changed. "I'll drive you."



## Chapter 50

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Kit

Nothing will rip your heart out like a sick child who's crying.  
Or watching the person you care about most in this world  
come apart at the seams while he tries to comfort that child.

Preston's so focused on Jameson he hasn't even told me to leave yet.  
Which is good, because I want to be here.

Given it's the middle of the night, the hospital isn't crowded. However,  
they still don't know what's wrong with him, so we're stuck waiting in a  
room in the ER. Fortunately, it's private, but that's the only good thing about  
it.

Everything else sucks.

"It's okay," Preston whispers as he cradles Jameson in his arms. "They're  
gonna give you some medicine that will make you feel better."

Jameson shakes his head. Every tear that falls down his face feels like a  
twist of a dull knife. "No medicine."

Shifting on the bed they're on, Preston kisses the top of his head. "I  
know, bud. But we gotta get you better."

Jameson starts wheezing again, so Preston picks up his inhaler and brings  
it to his mouth. "Deep breath. Good job."

The nasty cough rattling in his chest makes me wince.

My husband looks at me then and the sheer helplessness in his eyes kills  
me. "Can you find out what's taking them so fucking long?"

I jump out of the chair so fast it hits the wall behind it. "Absolutely."

After sprinting out of the room, I hightail it to the first person in scrubs I  
see. "I know you're busy but there's a *very* sick kid waiting for you people to

do your damn job.”

Her eyes widen. “What’s the patient’s name?”

“Jameson Dragoni. He’s in room five. You *have* to do something.” My eyes drop down and I notice the letters RN along with her name. “If you don’t, I’ll report you to your supervisor, *Amanda*.”

Never in a million years did I ever think *I’d* become a Karen, but when there’s a sick child on the line...nothing else matters.

That gets her attention. “I’ll see what I can do.”

“Thank you.” A spasm of remorse hits me square in the chest. “I’m sorry for being a bitch. It’s just...he’s *really* not feeling good.”

She shoots me a sympathetic smile. “I get it. I’m a mom, too.”

I open my mouth to tell her I’m not his mother, but then she says, “I’m gonna track down the doctor assigned to him.”

*Fuck it.* I’ll be whatever it takes to get him seen. “Thanks.”

Preston’s giving Jameson a nebulizer treatment when I come back into the room. “I spoke to a nurse. She’s gonna get the doctor.”

Relief crosses his face. “Finally.”

Peering down at Jameson, I gently run my palm along his head. “Hang in there, baby.”

A few minutes later, a guy wearing a white lab coat breezes inside the room with a nurse in tow. “Hello, I’m Doctor Robbin.”

“Took you long enough,” Preston grumbles. “What’s wrong with him?”

The doctor frowns. “According to the X-ray, it looks like pneumonia.”

“*Pneumonia?*” Worry fills his face. “He wasn’t even that sick yesterday. How did it get so bad so fast?”

“People who have asthma are not only more susceptible to pneumonia, it tends to hit them quicker and harder. Especially children.”

Preston mutters a curse. “I *knew* I should have taken him to the doctor myself instead of trusting Be—”

“Preston,” I cut in.

Jameson might be sick, but he’s still alert and actively listening to every word of this conversation.

The doctor clears his throat. “I’d like to take some blood work and start an IV as soon as possible.”

Upon hearing *that*, Jameson rips the nebulizer mask off and shakes his head. “No!”

“Come on, JP,” Preston urges. “The medicine will make you feel

better.”

Jameson isn't having it, though. The closer the nurse gets to him, the more he kicks and screams. “No medicine!”

“It's very important we do this, little guy.” The doctor calls another nurse into the room then looks at Preston. “If he won't cooperate, we'll have to restrain him.”

Now it isn't just Jameson freaking out. It's Preston, too.

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” He lurches up. “Restrain him, I fucking dare you. I'll make you eat your goddamn teeth, asshole.”

I'm right there with him. This poor baby is already going through so much. “Aren't there a few things we can try first before resorting to *that*?”

The doctor huffs. “I understand you're upset, but he needs to be treated.”

The nurses approach, trying their hardest to get him to calm down by making silly faces and giving him a toy.

When that doesn't work, I jump into the mix and do some robot moves. While that manages to make him smile briefly, he goes *ballistic* when the nurse takes out a needle. “No medicine!”

The doctor and nurses exchange a sad glance.

“I'm sorry,” the doctor says. “But we'll need—”

“I've got this,” Preston growls. “Everyone back the fuck up and be quiet.”

Then, to *everyone's* sheer bewilderment, he whips off his shirt.

“What are you—” I stop talking when he turns a crying Jameson around so he's lying against his bare chest.

All traces of frustration disappear from Preston as he rubs gentle circles up and down his back. “I know you're afraid, JP. But I'll never let anyone hurt you.”

“No medicine,” Jameson says, although he's a *lot* calmer now.

“I know you don't want medicine.” Preston presses his lips to his head. “Do you remember why you have a dragon?”

Jameson nods. “The dragon protects me.”

My heart folds in on itself. I thought Preston got a dragon tattoo because it was cool looking.

Not because it was his thing with Jameson.

“That's right,” Preston says as Jameson touches the tattoo on his bicep. “The dragon protected you when you were a baby and the doctors needed to give you medicine to make you big and strong.” Pure agony slashes his face.

“And now they need to do that again.” He visibly swallows. “I know you’re scared, but your dragon is here and I’m here. We won’t let anything bad happen to you. I promise.”

Jameson releases a shaky breath, solely focused on Preston’s tattoo now. “Dragon.”

“That’s right,” Preston says softly, waving the nurses over with his free hand. “That’s *your* dragon. Keep looking at him. He’ll keep you safe.” His eyes squeeze shut. “We both will.”

The nurses quickly rush to the other side and jump into action.

It’s clear Jameson doesn’t like what’s going on, but his eyes don’t leave the dragon...

All while Preston holds him tight, whispering that he’ll protect him over and over again.

My chest spasms and a lump fills my throat as memories pierce my heart. I’ve seen that look before.

It’s the look of unconditional love from a parent who would do *anything* in the world for their child.

It’s exactly how my parents looked at me.

And how Preston always looks at Jameson.

They might not share the same DNA, but Preston *is* his dad.

“All done,” Preston tells him as they finish up. “You were so brave and strong. Just like your dragon.”

The doctor clears his throat again. “We’re going to admit him as soon as a room on the pediatric floor opens up.”

Preston clutches him tighter. “For how long?”

“It depends how well he responds to the antibiotics. A couple of days at least.” He turns on his heel. “I’ll return after the blood work comes back.”

“Prick,” Preston mutters under his breath.

I pull my chair up next to the bed and hold Jameson’s hand.

“Pinky,” he says between coughs.

Preston and I exchange a humorous glance. *Pinky it is.*

I bring his little hand to my lips. “Is there anything you want?”

Whatever it is, I will walk to the ends of the earth and back again to get it.

Jameson doesn’t answer, but Preston says, “Juice would be good. Apple is his favorite.”

I sprout up. “Apple it is.” I reach for my purse when the thought occurs to me. “I’m gonna hit up the gift shop and cafeteria downstairs.”

This way I can load up on snacks and toys for Jameson.

Preston pulls a face. “I guess we shouldn’t expect to see you until tomorrow then.”

“Very funny.” Leaning over, I give him a quick kiss. “I’ll be back in ten. Twenty tops.” I press my lips to a now sleepy Jameson’s forehead. “I’ll make sure to bring back a PB and J sandwich.”

I start to leave, but Preston grabs my wrist. “I’m glad you’re here.”

I absolutely hate the circumstances, but I’m glad he’s letting me support him and Jameson.

I give him a smile. “I’ll be back soon.”

## Chapter 51

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Preston

Jameson finally fell asleep, so I take the opportunity to gently ease him off me so I can put my shirt back on.

The nurse from earlier pops her head inside. “It will be another couple of hours until he has a room on the floor. I can bring you some extra blankets in case you and your wife want to rest.”

I won’t be sleeping tonight, but Kit might. “Thanks.”

Being careful not to wake him or disturb the IV he has, I get back into bed. He coughs when I lay him back on my chest. The fluidly sound is like a punch to the gut.

I’d give his deadbeat mother a call, but there’s no point. She won’t answer, and if by some chance she actually does...she’ll be too drunk to come up here.

I’ll just call her in the morning and tell her what’s going on.

Not that she’ll give a fuck.

A sad fact Jameson is starting to pick up on.

I’ve tried to shield him as best as I could, always making excuses for her...but it’s only getting worse.

And he’s only getting older.

He might not talk much, but he’s smart. He observes. He *knows*.

It fucking guts me.

Especially because he *wants* her attention. Hell, he’s practically screaming for it...but Becca doesn’t hear him.

No wonder he’s so fucking anxious around her and refuses to talk. He’s probably terrified that if he *does* speak, he’ll say something wrong and upset



her.

And then she'll neglect him even more.

A trail of tension rides down my jaw and I grind my molars. Kit gave some very compelling reasons as to why I shouldn't cut the brake lines in Becca's car, but shit...it's hard.

Every time I see her, I want to bash her head against the nearest wall in hopes it will rattle something in her brain and she'll start being a decent mother.

But she won't. Which is why I need to do something.

Since murder's out of the question—thanks to my wife—I'm gonna approach *gun-toting Nanna* with my tail between my legs and ask if I can have the two million early.

There's no question the money's going to Kit now, but I don't want to have to wait for her to drop dead for it to happen.

Jameson needs me now.

I'm drifting off when a voice slurs, "What happened to my baby?"

My eyes pop open and I come face-to-face with the she-devil herself.

*Fuck.*

Charlotte must have left her a message.

However, the only person I'm more surprised to see than Becca...

Is my old bookie Buster.

"What are *you* doing here?"

"I'm his mother. Where else would I be?" Becca chirps as she approaches the bed.

"I meant him."

Although the same question can certainly apply to her as well. I glance at the clock on the wall. It's just past two in the morning. Otherwise known as her *witching hour* since that's when she usually walks in the door.

Becca yanks a sleeping Jameson out of my arms. "He's my boyfriend."

I have to bite the inside of my cheek to stop from laughing because that's some funny shit. Not only did I first meet Becca at *his* house, he's a bookie... like both her uncles.

Brings a whole new meaning to keeping it in the family.

Which is just one more reason I need to get Jameson *out*.

"What's wrong with my son?"

*Aside from the fact he has you for a mother?*

"He has pneumonia."

“What?” she screeches, waking up her son. “I thought it was just a cold.”

“No, it’s pneumonia. Something we would have found out earlier if you brought him to the doctor like you said you were going to.”

I go to take Jameson out of her arms because he needs to rest, but Becca takes a few steps back, evading me. “Fuck you, Preston.”

That’s Buster’s unfortunate job. *Poor bastard.*

“If you were so concerned you could have taken him yourself,” she prattles on. “I’m sick of you always giving me shit when I’m doing the best I can.” Feigning adversity, she eyes Buster. “It’s not easy being a young mom.”

It takes everything in me not to wring her neck until her eyes pop out. Giving birth doesn’t make someone a mom.

I throw another log onto the fire. Because fuck *her*. She’s pulling this *young single mom* act because she’s in front of her boyfriend, but it’s all bullshit.

“Charlotte said she’s been trying to call you all night, but as usual, you didn’t pick up. Where were you?”

Judging by her skimpy dress, dramatic clown makeup, and her drunken slur, it’s clear she was partying with Buster.

Shooting me a malicious smile, Becca sneers, “Last I checked, my whereabouts don’t concern you.” She regards Buster again. “Told you he was still obsessed with me.”

Now I do laugh. She’s so certifiable it’s impossible not to. “Obsessed with you?” Disgust billows in my chest as I get off the bed. “Last I checked, you were the one trying to get in my pants, and I was the one running out of your apartment like a bat out of hell because *you* can’t accept that I’d rather stick my dick in hydrofluoric acid than your nasty snatch.”

Becca glares daggers at me. “You asshole—”

And that’s when Kit walks in.

To her credit, she plays it cool and looks around like she’s lost. “Whoops, sorry. Wrong room.”

She starts to backtrack but Becca squawks, “What the fuck are *you* doing here?”

“Visiting my Nan—”

“Leave her alone,” I grind out.

I’m so fucking sick of Becca having my balls in a vise.

Sick of her having control over me.

Sick of the moments where I have to pretend I'm not in love with Kit and that she doesn't exist when she's my fucking world.

Becca's lip curls. "Why the hell is that little dyke here, Preston? You knew the deal."

"If you ever call my wife that again, I *will* rip your goddamn tongue out and wrap it around your throat," I roar so loud she flinches.

I relish the sheer shock on her face before it turns to outrage.

Kit takes a step forward, her eyes trained on Jameson, who's acutely aware of all the tension in the room. "Preston, calm down."

She's right. I need to because I hate that he's seeing me like this...

But then Becca starts cackling.

"Yeah, right. There's no way you two are married." Her gaze flits to Kit. "Since when are *you* into men?"

Hazel eyes spark with disgust and she crinkles her nose. "Since my last girlfriend was such a manipulating cunt bag, I figured I'd try something new." There's a wry little smirk on her face when she sticks her left ring finger up. "I enjoyed it so much I married him."

Upon realizing this isn't a joke and Kit's being serious, Becca's mouth drops open...and then she turns her furious stare on me.

"Hope she's worth it, because you'll *never* see Jameson again." The look she gives me is venomous. "Get out."

Her words tighten the noose she placed around my throat.

My guts twist and my chest constricts so much I can't breathe...

And then I fucking lose it.

## Chapter 52

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Kit

**F**ifteen minutes ago, I was heading down to the cafeteria to grab some snacks for Jameson, feeling grateful there was something I could do to help.

Fifteen minutes ago, the only thing I wanted was for him to get better.

Fifteen minutes ago, my husband didn't look like his entire world was going up in flames.

I knew Becca wasn't going to be okay after she found out the truth about me and Preston given her *contingency*, so I was fully prepared for her to be pissed.

However, I thought her son being sick would take precedence and she'd put her anger on the back burner until Jameson felt better.

Not kick out the person he needs the most.

Or rather, *attempt* to, because Preston's not having it.

"You're even dumber than I thought if you think I'm leaving him," he barks so loud I jump.

Becca clutches Jameson tight...but not like a mother comforting her child.

Like he's her pawn.

"I'm not kidding, asshole. You knew the rule and you broke it." Her lips press into a tight line. "Now get *out*."

Crossing his arms, Preston bares his teeth. "Make me."

My heart jumps to my throat. "Becca please think about Jam—"

"Shut up." Her smirk is every bit as vindictive as she is when she slams the call button. "I won't make you leave...but they will."

My stomach bottoms out when Jameson twists around in Becca's arms and makes grabby hands for Preston.

"Don't worry, bud. I'm not going anywhere."

He reaches for him, but Becca leaps back with so much force Jameson's IV almost comes out. "Help!"

*Oh, God.* This is ugly.

And it only gets uglier when Preston lunges for Jameson again. "You're not taking him away from me."

"He's not yours!" Dodging Preston for the second time, Becca looks at the guy who I presume must be her boyfriend. "Do something, Buster."

Coming out of his stupor, he wedges himself between Becca and Preston. "Come on, man. You heard her. Time to go."

Three things happen at that moment.

One. Preston punches Buster.

Two. Several nurses rush inside the room.

And three...Jameson starts crying.

One of the nurses darts over to Buster who now has blood dripping from his nose. "What is going on in here?"

"This psycho is trying to kidnap my son!" Becca shouts over Jameson's cries.

Good Lord.

"That's not true," I cut in at the same time Preston bellows, "A son you don't even want."

Shit. That's definitely *not* something that should have been said in front of Jameson. "Preston—"

"I'm the one who brought him here," he tells the same nurse from earlier. "She was too busy partying. Like always."

Visibly torn, the nurse looks between them. "Okay. Everyone calm—"

"Last I checked it wasn't a crime to go to a party." Expression full of innocence, she looks at the nurse. "I didn't know he was sick. He was fine before I went out for the night. And I would have been here sooner, but my phone was out of service—"

"That's bullshit," Preston interjects. "You're *never* around."

Becca pops a hand on her hip. "You must be blind then, because I'm here right now."

"Enough," the nurse exclaims. "You two need to stop fighting. It's upsetting your child—"

“He’s not our child. He’s *my* child,” Becca screeches. “This asshole is just a babysitter.” She glares at Preston. “And he’s fired.”

Rubbing her forehead, the nurse looks at Preston. “Is that true?”

Preston’s nostrils flare. “No—”

“He’s not his father,” Becca snaps.

*Yes, he is.*

It’s clear by the nurse’s expression that she doesn’t want to deliver her next words, but she doesn’t have a choice. “In that case I’m gonna have to ask you to leave.”

The despair on Preston’s face has my throat prickling with tears.

“I’m not leaving.”

“Then you give me no choice but to get security.” She pops her head outside the door. “I need security in room five.”

Jameson makes grabby hands for him again. “Daddy.”

“He’s not your daddy, baby,” Becca’s sharp gaze cuts to Preston. “You’re never gonna see this scumbag again.”

Her cruel, punishing words only make Jameson more upset.

“Daddy,” he cries out again, trying to get out of Becca’s arms.

Preston squeezes his outstretched hand. “I’m not going anywhere, JP.”

“Don’t touch my son,” Becca seethes as two security guards rush inside the room.

One of them steps toward Preston. “Come with us.”

“Fuck off.”

I touch his shoulder. This is a battle we’re losing and I’m afraid of what might happen if he doesn’t cooperate. “We have to go.”

“I’m *not* leaving him.”

“Let go of the child and come with us.” The security guard grabs Preston’s free arm. “You don’t want to make a scene in front of him.”

When Preston still refuses, I’m jostled out of the way and the second security guard yanks his other arm, breaking his contact with Jameson.

Preston struggles against them as they drag him in the direction of the door. “I’m not leaving him.”

His resilience is so strong, he breaks away and advances on Becca. “You know how much I love him—”

“Leave, or I swear to God, I will have you arrested *and* get a restraining order,” she grinds out. “I’m not fucking around.”

Every ounce of fight leaves his body with those words and he stumbles

back. Once she does that...he doesn't stand a chance of seeing Jameson again.

I'm having serious regrets about talking Preston out of murdering her now. Hell, *I* want to be the one to drive the stake right through her wicked, black heart.

Preston leers at the security guards. "I'm not leaving the hospital. Not until I know he'll be okay."

The more sympathetic of the two guards nods. "As long as you don't step foot in this room again, you can stay in the waiting area. But you need to leave now."

The heartbreak on both Preston and Jameson's faces as Preston heads for the door sends sharp shooting pain through my chest.

I find Becca's spiteful stare as we reach the threshold. The hate I had for her before was nothing compared to right now. "You're evil."

She points to the door. "Out."

"Daddy," Jameson cries between coughs.

Preston's voice is cracked glass. "I'm here."

We begin walking down the hall, but Preston stops midway and punches the wall.

I'm silent as I rub his back, because nothing I say will make any of this better for him.

"Daddy," Jameson cries again, his wails for Preston reverberating down the hallway.

Slumping forward, Preston braces his arm against the wall. "I'm here."

And that's exactly where he stays until Jameson gets transferred to the pediatric floor where we aren't allowed to go.

Even though the only thing that little boy wants is his dad.



## Chapter 53

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Preston

A frown mars Kit's face as she zeroes in on the bottle of whiskey in my hand. "Starting early tonight, huh?"

After filling it to the brim, I bring the glass to my lips. The amber liquid burns my throat, but not enough to dull the pain.

It's been nine days since I've seen him.

Nine days since that heartless bitch ripped him away from me.

According to Charlotte, he was discharged four days ago and he's doing much better. While that's reassuring...it's still not enough.

Kit grabs a bottle of water from the fridge. "Breslin, Landon, and Asher are coming over for dinner."

I down what's in my glass and fill it back up. "Great. I'll be upstairs."

She grabs my arm when I turn to leave. "Come on, Preston. I know you're upset about not being able to see Jameson, but drinking and locking yourself up in the bedroom isn't gonna make it any better."

Wrong. When I'm drunk enough to pass out, I don't have to think about how much I miss him.

*So much it fucking hurts.*

Needless to say, I have no desire to see any of my *neighbors*. Least of all Asher. I'm not sure why Kit doesn't get that.

"And seeing my shithead brother will?"

"No." There's a glint of hope in her gaze as her teeth dig into her bottom lip. "But I'll be there."

Before I can turn her down, she goes in for the kill...wrapping her arms around me.

“I know you’re hurting, but I’m here for you.”

My free hand finds her waist and I lean down and inhale her. Unlike me, she smells like heaven.

And feels like home.

Her arms lock around my neck. “I miss you.”

I miss her, too.

*She’s the only thing that can pull me back from the darkest pits of hell.*

I plant my lips right below her ear as my hand drifts to her ass.

My cock reminds me he exists for the first time in nine days and I want to throw her down on this island so I can take advantage of it. “Take off your pant—”

“Aw, isn’t that cute?” Asher interjects.

I stifle a groan. Not only do I not want to fucking see him...his timing is impeccable.

The numbskull doesn’t take the hint that his presence isn’t wanted, though because he grins and holds up two large takeout bags. “Come on, lovebirds. I got us Mexican.”

“I’ll be upstairs,” I grunt when he leaves.

Kit reaches for my hand. “Don’t go.” There’s a flicker of sadness in her expression. “Stay with me.”

Even though I don’t want to...I fold.

*For her.*



“I bought something awesome today,” Asher declares before stuffing his mouth with food.

My lips twitch because it’s not the cheesy enchiladas and tacos the rest of us are digging into.

It’s bland grilled chicken and veggies. *Enjoy every bite, asshole.*

“Hope it’s not another car,” Landon mumbles. “We’re running out of room in our garage.”

“It’s not another car...not today anyway.” Asher waggles his eyebrows. “I bought a yacht.”

Breslin and Landon exchange a glance.

“Why in the world would you buy a yacht?” Breslin exclaims. “You don’t

even have a boating license.”

“And you get seasick,” Landon adds.

Pausing mid-bite, Asher shrugs. “It’s a status symbol. But I love her name.” He makes flashy movements with his fingers. “*Property of a sexy football God*. What do you guys think?”

“Hope you hit an iceberg,” I mutter under my breath.

Asher looks my way briefly before focusing on Kit. “I’ll send you a few pics later so you can put her up on the gram.”

Kit salutes him. “Aye, aye, captain.”

Asher wipes his mouth with a napkin. “Also, tomorrow they’re installing the tub I ordered. I’d like for you to take a picture of me in it.”

I’m about to remind the jackass that my wife is his social media manager, not his personal photographer, but Kit speaks.

“No offense, but what’s so special about you in a tub?” She jabs the air with her fork. “On second thought, I take that back. Your female and non-hetero guy fans will love it. Make sure to show a little pube.” Her gaze flicks to Breslin and Landon. “If that’s okay with you guys.”

Breslin stabs her enchilada. “After he did that calendar shoot last year there’s very little his fans haven’t seen.”

Landon laughs. “That’s true.”

“Pipe down, you two,” Asher says. “I don’t want Kit to take a picture of me in a tub so my fans can ogle my body. Shit, they do that whether or not I’m wearing clothes. But the tub I ordered is made out of real gold.” He smirks. “I want Kit to take a picture of me in it with all my bling and post it everywhere.”

Landon and Breslin exchange another glance.

“Are you a quarterback or a rapper?” Landon says with a chuckle.

*He’s an imbecile with an overinflated ego.*

“Landon has a point,” Kit agrees. “I’m not sure your fans will respond well to that. It seems a little...gaudy.”

Has she met my brother? He’s the very definition of it.

Reaching for my glass of whiskey, I snort. “Gaudy is Asher’s middle name.”

My stomach twists. Asher is his middle name, all right.

*The apple doesn’t fall far.*

Asher shoots me an irritated look before regarding Kit. “Yeah, I guess you have a point.” He pouts. “I was really looking forward to it, though.”

“You can still do it, baby,” Breslin assures him. “Just keep the pictures a secret.”

I grip my fork so tight it bends in half. *Oh, he’s good at that.*

Underneath the table, Kit rubs my leg. “So, now that Asher’s filled us in on his new yacht and gold tub, what’s been going on with everyone else?” She eyes her best friend. “Breslin, how are your paintings for the art exhibit coming along?” Her stare snags on Landon. “Landon, did you finish your studio yet?”

I appreciate her shifting the topic off my arrogant brother.

*As usual, when I’m spinning out...she centers me.*

Only, this time it doesn’t work.

Because the obnoxious dickhead opens his trap again.

“Oh, shit. I forgot to tell you guys the big news. I was contacted by a toy company doing a real-life hero action figure line.” He grins. “They want me to be one of the heroes.”

The volcano of anger simmering in the pit of my stomach boils over. “Why would they ever think *you’re* a hero?”

He snorts, as though it should be obvious. “Because I’m Asher Holden.”

Christ. He says it like it’s a badge of honor.

*Like he’s proud of being just like him.*

I grind my molars so hard I’m surprised they don’t pulverize. “Throwing a football doesn’t make you a hero.”

*It sure as fuck didn’t make our father one.*

Asher bangs his fist on the table. “What’s your fucking problem?”

The rage I’ve been suppressing punches my ribcage, demanding to be let out.

I stand up. “*You’re* my fucking problem.”

Asher stands up, too. “What? Are you jealous? Is that what this is?”

Far from it. I’d almost feel sorry for him if I didn’t despise him so fucking much.

His head is shoved so far up his own ass he can’t see what he’s become.

Then again, maybe he can.

*Because it’s what he wanted.*

“Why would I ever be jealous of you? You’re nothing but a hypocritical, self-righteous fraud who would do anything to save his own ass.”

*Just like him.*

His expression is a mixture of confusion and annoyance. “What the hell

are you—”

“You covered for him,” I seethe, unable to contain what’s been burning a hole in my chest for years now.

The thing that made me hate my big brother. Who, for the longest time, was the only person I gave a fuck about.

Until he shattered the illusion and I saw him for exactly what and who he is.

The reason monsters flourish in the dark is because of people like *him*.

People who turn off the lights and close the door.

“You covered for a monster who took advantage of a kid and mentally fucked him up.”

Kit rises from her chair. “What do you mean?”

The glare I give my brother conveys what a piece of shit I think he is. “When we were in the hospital after the shooting, I overheard Asher telling the police about what our father did to Kyle. I *also* overheard him offer them a very sizable donation in exchange for their silence about it. This way he could save his own reputation.”

Mouth agape, Breslin stands. “Asher, is that true?”

I can see the flash of nervousness in his eyes despite his next words. “No. He’s lying.”

My vision goes red as white-hot wrath surges through my body. “I’m *not* lying.”

I heard the conversation with my own goddamn ears. He’s just trying to save face because Breslin and Landon are inherently good people, and he doesn’t want either of them thinking bad about him.

Because it’s a long way down from the pedestal he’s put himself on.

And his fall from grace will hurt like hell.

Asher’s icy laugh is cynical. “Why would anyone believe you? You’re not exactly Mr. fucking honest.”

*No one will believe you*—my father’s taunt echoes in my ears.

I’m no longer seeing red...everything around me turns black.

## Chapter 54

---

Kit

The sound of Preston's knuckles cracking against bone is deafening.

Asher staggers back in a daze, and Preston takes the opportunity to shove him into the table, causing a few dishes to fall.

Recovering, Asher swings his fist, but Preston sidesteps at the last second, dodging the punch.

Breslin's panicked eyes lock with mine through the chaos before we both rush toward them. However, Landon wraps an arm around each of our waists, holding us back. "This shit between them needs to get settled. Let them fight it out."

"Are you *crazy*?" we both shout.

For Pete's sake, this isn't Monday Night Raw. Although right now it certainly seems like it.

Barbaric grunts fill the room as they start rolling around, each brother trying to overpower the other.

Thick veins pop out along Preston's neck as he pins Asher to the floor. "I'm gonna break your fucking arm."

Oh, God. This is bad. *Real* bad.

Asher growls, his face red with fury as he gains the upper hand and flips Preston belly down on the carpet.

Preston struggles underneath him. "Get off me!"

Asher doesn't let up, though. "Not until you apologize for threatening to break my arm."

"Get off me!" Preston screams again, only this time the torment in his



voice has Asher jumping to his feet.

Preston pounds the floor with his fist. "Get off me!"

We all exchange confused glances and Asher holds his hands up.

I take a step in his direction, but freeze when Preston lets out a torturous, gut-wrenching sound that makes my heart stop cold.

Everyone is speechless. Too taken aback by what's happening.

My chest feels like it's cracking right down the middle. "Preston."

Faster than I can blink, Preston's on his feet. He looks disoriented, like a feral animal who's been captured and stuck in a cage against his will.

Without warning, he charges toward the front door, only stopping to grab my keys off the table in the foyer.

*Shit.*

Asher blows out a heavy breath. "What the hell just happened?"

I think it's safe to say none of us know.

The only thing I *do* know is that I have to get to him.

"Quick. Give me your keys."

Asher doesn't protest as he takes them out of his pocket and tosses them to me.

I make it to Asher's sports car just as Preston peels out of the driveway.

I quickly climb inside and gun the engine, following him.

My heart's in my throat when I realize he's heading toward the bridge.

*Leaving me.*

I accelerate, inching closer to the back of my car.

Adrenaline rushes through my veins as I press on the gas.

A moment later, we're neck and neck, but the bridge is coming up fast... and it's only one lane.

I know if I don't get ahead and cut him off before he reaches the bridge... he'll be gone for good.

Preston honks his horn as I surge forward, nearly sideswiping him in the process.

My heart races when I crank the wheel, and the tires screech as I spin out, blocking him from exiting.

I scramble out of the car at the same time Preston does.

He's so angry, he's practically vibrating with it. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Emotion clogs my throat when I catch the pained look on his face and the raging storm brewing in his eyes.

What happened before wasn't normal. It was the scariest, most heartbreaking thing I've ever witnessed.

Whatever it is he's bottling up inside is slowly eating him alive.

"What happened to you?"

He rears back and I can tell he wants to reject my question, just like he always does when I broach this topic.

"I know something happened." His pain is so palpable, I clutch my chest as a bolt of anguish fires through me. "I *feel* it." I take a step closer, desperate to reach him. *To fix him.* "Please, Preston. I'm begging you. Please, let me in. Please, tell me—"

"He raped me."

The words are ripped from his throat with such raw agony, he drops to his knees.

Everything inside me stops. My brain. My breathing. My heart.

I was prepared to hear anything. *Except that.*

Preston punches the ground. "Fuck!"

He sounds so broken. *So destroyed.*

My response is instinctive. A gravitational force that pulls me to him.

The moment my arms wrap around his shaking frame, he wilts and a strangled sound leaves him.

I hug him tighter as he falls apart. So tight I can feel every ounce of his pain siphoning out of him and into me.

"I'm gonna kill him."

The swell of violent wrath rising within me is so thick I could choke on it.

I didn't think Asher could ever be capable of something so vile.

*So inhumane.*

But now that I know the truth, I'm gonna make him pay for hurting my Preston.

*With his life.*

His rough voice is a strained rasp. "He's already dead."

I'm confused because Asher was very much alive when I left the house...

*Which means he isn't the one who did it.*

I'd say I'm relieved, but I'm not.

Because a monster still did this to him.

Preston's words from before flash through my mind.

*You covered for a monster who took advantage of a kid and mentally*

*fucked him up.*

I assumed he was referring to Kyle when he said that, but he wasn't.  
He was talking about himself.

*And his father.*

"Oh, God."

Preston grabs my shirt in his fist. "Kit."

"I'm here," I whisper. "I'm right here."

And I'm never leaving.

Cradling his face in my hands, I take in every inch of his face.

His jaw is clenched, and his harsh gray orbs are dry. I'm grateful he's not catatonic...but his detached, indestructible mask has firmly slipped back into place.

My heart sinks to the depths of hell with him as I wrap my arms around him again, wishing I could take every ounce of pain away.

But I can't. Because this isn't something I can fix.

All I can do is hold him...

While I cry every tear he won't let himself shed.



Preston doesn't make eye contact with anyone when we return home.

"I didn't mean to hurt you," Asher says as he passes, his expression equal parts lost and confused.

Head down, Preston makes a beeline for the stairs.

I step in front of Asher when he starts to walk after him. "No."

His puzzlement quickly turns to anger. "What do you mean *no*? He's my brother—"

"He doesn't want to talk to anyone."

Preston made it clear to me before we left the bridge that he had no intention of discussing it with any of them, and I'm going to respect that.

And protect him.

I lock eyes with Breslin, hoping she'll back me up on this. "You need to leave and let him be for now."

Asher starts to protest again, but Breslin and Landon come up beside him.

"Let's go home," Landon urges.

Asher shakes his head. “No. I want to make sure he’s okay.”

“I know, baby,” Breslin whispers. “But right now, you need to give him space.”

Asher looks my way. “Can you at least tell me what happened before? Why he...you know.”

I do know. But there are some things you just can’t talk about.

*Not until you’re ready.*

And it’s solely Preston’s decision as to whether or not he ever discloses what happened to anyone else.

Asher’s going to have to accept that, because I’m not taking that choice away from him.

“It’s not my place.” I hold his gaze. “But I promise I’ll take care of him.”

Even though he doesn’t like being made to leave, my assurance seems to pacify Asher enough that he obliges. “Okay.”

He’s almost to the door when he turns back around. “Tell him I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Landon questions.

Asher looks at his shoes. “Preston isn’t the liar. *I* am. What he said before was true. I paid off the police to keep everything under wraps.”

Preston’s grudge against Asher becomes crystal clear to me now.

Finding out that your big brother—the person you’ve always looked up to—essentially protected a monster who violated you must feel like the worst kind of betrayal.

Not that Asher understands this.

Disappointment colors both his fiancés’ faces before Breslin places her arm around his waist. “Come on. Let’s go home so the three of us can talk.”

Once the door closes behind them, I wander up the staircase and into the bedroom.

I find Preston hunched over the side of the bed with his back facing me.

My heart thuds against my ribs, every beat hurting for him as I climb onto the bed.

The muscles in his back tense and coil. “I don’t want to talk about it, Kit.” His voice snaps like a whip. “*I can’t.*”

I won’t force him. I’ll do—or not do—whatever it takes to show him that he’s not alone.

That I’m his safe space to land...just like he is for me.

I move across the bed and sit next to him. “Okay.” I reach for his hand,

gripping it tight. "Tell me what you need."

I know I can't make this better, but I'll do anything to get him out of the hell he's trapped in.

"You." He tilts his head to look at me. "I need you."

He closes the distance between us, wrapping his hand around the back of my head as he kisses me.

Every swipe of his tongue is a ruthless lash...like he's not only fighting his demons, he's fighting himself.

*Like he has something to prove.*

A sharp push has me falling onto the mattress. He towers over me, his fingers going to the button on my jeans.

Part of me wants to stop him because it's evident he isn't in the right mental place...but I just vowed to do what he needs.

He shoves one hand in my underwear as his other frantically tugs my jeans down my legs.

I try to focus on his touch, but I can't. My mind is too centered on what he's going through internally to get in the mood.

Something Preston notices because he removes his hand. For a moment I think he's going to stop, but then he unzips his jeans and rolls on a condom.

Turning to me again, he pulls my underwear off and presses his hands down on my inner thighs, spreading me.

With a cruel grunt, he spits on my pussy...

And then he rams himself inside me.

I'm not fully prepared for the invasion, so the first thrust hurts.

And the second is so brutal it steals my breath.

"Preston."

His mouth comes down on mine, taking kiss after kiss and thrust after thrust.

Normally I love it when he loses control...but everything about this is all wrong.

His violent thrusts aren't passionate because he wants me.

*It's because he wants to forget.*

A hiss leaves me with his next one, but not because it feels good. It doesn't. Every time he drives himself inside me it feels like a punishment...

Because he's freezing me out.

I know he needs me right now...but he also seems to have forgotten that I need him, too.

Our bodies might be joined, but I've never felt more disconnected from him.

My throat prickles with tears when I look up.

The detached, vacant look in his eyes makes it clear he's somewhere else.

I thought doing this would alleviate some of his pain, but it only made it worse for both of us...because Preston is gone.

And if he's not here while he's inside me, I don't know where I can find him.

"Hey." I grab his face, forcing him to look at me—to be in this with me—but it's like I don't even exist.

I'm nothing more than an outlet for his trauma.

"It hurts," I choke out. "You're hurting me."

And it has nothing to do with his vicious movements.

*It's because I no longer feel whole.*

That seems to snap him out of his haze because he stares down at me and I see the shame flashing in his eyes.

He starts to get off me, but I wrap my legs around him, keeping him inside me. "Don't go."

I don't want Preston to feel like he's a monster...because he's not.

The most terrible thing that could ever happen to someone happened to him.

And I want to be there to take on the pain, so he doesn't have to shoulder it alone.

"Look at me."

He turns his head away in disgust. "I can't."

"Yes, you can." I palm his cheek. "Because I'm your Kit." Kissing his jaw, I whisper, "And you're safe with me."

A shuddering breath leaves him. "I hurt you."

"No, *you* didn't...because that wasn't you."

That was the victim his father created. The one who hurts others because he's hurting.

But the monster doesn't have to win. We can beat him...together.

I press my lips to his throat where his pulse beats wildly. "But you're back, now, and *this* man is the one I want."

The one I live and breathe for...because I wasn't doing either of those before him.

I buck my hips, feeling him thicken with the movement. “Stay with me, okay?”

Entangling our fingers, he holds them above my head.

“More,” I tell him when he thrusts ever so gently, like he’s afraid he’s going to hurt me again. “Give me more.”

Give me everything. *Just stay with me while you do it.*

Picking up his pace, he groans into my mouth. “Kit.”

The sound of my name on his lips—along with the sensation of him pumping in and out—sends shivers through me.

He moans low and gruff as I grow wet around him. “Kit.”

“I’m here,” I whisper.

*And so is he.*

His rhythm slows and he grabs my hips before rising up on his knees.

“What are you doing?”

A whimper escapes me when he drags a calloused hand down my torso and his fingers find my clit. “Making you come.”

Pleasure spikes through me, hot and sharp as he rubs wet circles and his pelvis meets mine with a hard slap.

I close my eyes, writhing against the mattress as he fucks me. “Don’t stop.”

The long fingers on my hip dig into my skin hard enough to leave marks with every deep thrust.

“I’m gonna come.” I clench around him, my body tightening and tingling as he works me diligently.

My orgasm is a crescendo, bringing me to the highest of highs. I reach for him as it fades, needing skin-to-skin contact.

Lowering himself, he settles between my thighs. Our breaths mingle as he gently sinks into me, deliberately holding himself back as not to lose control again.

“Fall,” I whisper, because I need him to know I’ll keep him safe. Just like he keeps me safe. “Fall and I’ll catch you.”

He shivers, surging into me with a growl.

Closing his eyes, he grips the headboard, thrusting hard and fast.

*Jesus.*

The tendons in his forearms flex as he pumps frantically, chasing the high.

A rush of heat swarms my body and I squeeze him in response. My

breaths come out in quick pants as pleasure coils low and deep.

A roar rumbles out of him as he pries another orgasm from me.

I peer up at him on the comedown, and immediately notice something is wrong because he stops moving, his face frozen in agony as he grips the headboard for dear life.

He's in that place again.

Reaching up, I grab his face with both hands. "Look at me." When his eyes open, I whisper, "It's me."

He collapses with a tremor and I wrap my arms around him.

"It's me," I repeat as he buries his head in the crook of my neck and thrusts.

He clutches me as his body goes tight and a guttural sound leaves him. "Kit."

"I'm here," I assure him. "I'm right here."

Little spasms shudder through him when he comes, his open mouth on my neck as he whispers my name.

I draw tiny circles up and down his damp back as he settles.

I used to think love was supposed to be perfect...like a beautiful, flawless fairy tale.

That when you met your soul mate, the universe magically shifted, and everything fell into place.

That being in love meant never experiencing any more pain.

But I was wrong.

Love isn't a fairy tale.

It's getting the best parts of someone...but also getting their worst.

Love isn't always beautiful.

Sometimes it's ugly and painful.

Love isn't happily ever after.

It's the highest of highs and the lowest of lows.

But you're in it together.

Because when one of you hurts, so does the other.

Love isn't flawless...it's imperfectly perfect.

It's taking on their demons and being vulnerable enough to show them yours...because you want every single part of them.

I thought I'd been in love plenty of times, but I was dead wrong.

I've only experienced it once.

"I love you," I choke out, my heart swelling with every ounce of it I feel



for him.

His sharp exhale fans across my shoulder, like he's been holding his breath his entire life...waiting for me.

His voice is gravel when he speaks. "Say it again."

My lips curve against his skin. "I love you."

Another sharp breath leaves him. "It happened when I was seven. After I moved the coffee table..."

I hold him tight as he continues.

Because I wouldn't just walk on land for him...

*I'd walk through hell with him.*

## Chapter 55

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Preston

*I*t's been three days since I told Kit the one and only thing I'd still been keeping from her.

*Introduced her to the monster under my bed.*

I feel like I've been stripped bare and the gaping wound inside me has been put on display.

But Kit's not pouring salt in it by treating me like less of a man...far from it.

She's healing me.

Not with her cooking, though.

I inwardly groan when she places a plate of eggs and pancakes in front of me.

Am I hungry? Yes.

Do I want to eat burned chicken babies and cardboard? No.

But I accept the plate anyway because I know Kit's trying her hardest to take care of me.

She kisses my cheek. "I love you."

The heavy weight in my chest dissipates every time she says it. "I love you, too."

The only thing more astonishing than me saying those words...are hearing them back.

It wasn't something I've ever heard growing up.

Unless I count the two times Asher said it to me...and *both* times I told him to stop being a sissy and shut the fuck up.

The muscles in my chest draw tight with remorse. Jameson won't ever

hear it growing up, either. Not with Becca who only utters those words when she's manipulating someone.

I regret every opportunity I had to say it to him...but didn't.

Kit winces as she takes a seat across from me at the table. "How are the eggs?"

Bringing the fork to my mouth, I take a bite. They're not as burned as they usually are. In fact, it's palatable. *Mostly.*

"They're good."

Her face lights up. "Really?"

Nodding, I take another bite. "Yeah."

"How about the pancakes?"

I dig into those next.

*Big mistake.* Should have stopped at the eggs.

I'm not sure how she managed to make them both rubbery and bursting with ten different flavors that hit you all at the same time, but she did.

She sits up in her seat. "Well?"

That's when it dawns on me that *she's* not eating. In fact, she's usually the last person to eat whenever she cooks. "Angry girl, do you ever taste your food before you serve it to others?"

"No. Why?"

Because then she'd know what the rest of us do. *It's fucking terrible.*

I bring my coffee mug to my lips and take a sip so I can mask the weird aftertaste. "The key to becoming a good chef is tasting the food you make."

"Yeah, but what if I think something's good but other people don't—"

Reaching over the table, I shove a forkful of pancake into her mouth.

"Yuck." She reaches for a napkin and spits it out. "That's *disgusting.*"

So disgusting, not even Lola will take the piece I'm trying to feed him under the table.

Getting up, she takes my plate away and walks over to the garbage can. "I'm sorry. I tried a recipe that I thought sounded good, but I must have screwed something up."

The cute little pout on her face, albeit adorable, means she's beating herself up about it.

"Your eggs are better, so you're getting the hang of it." Or at least the hang of *one* thing that's mostly edible. "Don't give up."

A weird look crosses over her face.

"What?" I press because we're so in tune with one another it's fucking

erie.

She finishes scraping the contents off my dish. “I wasn’t gonna say anything, but Asher’s been calling me constantly. He really wants to know how you’re doing.”

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck lift. “Tell him to mind his business.”

She walks over to the sink. “Okay. I’ll do that.” I see a knot of tension in her back when she turns around. “It’s just...can I say one thing and I promise I’ll never bring it up again after?”

“Go ahead.”

She spins back around. “If Asher knew what happened to you, do you still think he would have paid the police off?” She wrings her hands. “You don’t have to answer me. However, if the answer is no...then I think you should talk to him.” She looks away. “Or not. The choice is yours.”

“You done?” I bite out, because her question hit a nerve.

Asher, my brother—the one who shielded me from our father’s fists whenever he could—wouldn’t have. Hell, he would have killed the bastard long before he died.

But Asher, the self-centered star quarterback he’s now become? *Maybe*.

Either way, I’ll never know.

“Yeah,” Kit says with a little bite of her own. “I’m done.”

She starts to walk away, but I call her back. “Kit.”

“Yes?”

I tell her the truth, because she’s the only one I can be one-hundred-percent honest with. “I don’t know.”

She ambles over to me. “Then don’t you think it might be worth finding out?” Her gaze holds mine. “I will never force you to do anything you don’t want to. *Ever*. But Asher’s extremely upset. He keeps begging me to tell you he’s sorry and to please talk to him.”

I don’t know what to do with that information.

Or rather...I do. But I don’t want to.

Sometimes holding on to the illusion is better.

Convincing myself that Asher was just like our father enabled me to put him in a box marked *do not open* and tuck him away on a shelf.

Because it was easier than admitting that what he did hurt me.

Or telling him *why* it did.

Leaning down, she kisses me on the cheek, but I turn and kiss her mouth.

Her lips part and I explore her deep, taking everything she has to offer because I've never needed anything the way I need her.

Visions of me fucking her on the kitchen table fill my head, but just when I'm about to act on the fantasy, she breaks the kiss.

"Sorry. I think that pancake is messing with my stomach."

*Mine too.*



I love when my wife is right...said no man ever.

Do I want to talk to Asher? No.

The thought of hashing shit out not only makes me uncomfortable...it will require me doing something I absolutely fucking loathe.

Being vulnerable.

But he's my brother. Which means if I ever came down with a disease that necessitates me needing a new kidney or part of a liver...he's the best match.

That alone warrants a conversation.

Breslin answers the door after I knock. Usually, she doesn't bother hiding her disdain for me. Nor do I for her.

"Hey."

There's a softness in her expression that I've never seen before. Well, not toward *me*. It's freaking me the fuck out.

I know Kit didn't tell her, because I asked her not to. Which means whatever *this* is has to do with her front row seat to my psychotic breakdown.

She gestures for me to come inside. "How are you?"

"Is Asher ho—"

"Can I get you something to drink or eat?" she says at the same time.

Goddammit. "Don't do that."

She blinks. "Do what?"

Make shit weird. "Be...*nice*."

The only thing worse than coming here to talk to my brother is Breslin acting like we're besties.

I gesture between us. "You're the bitch and I'm the asshole. That's how this relationship works."

Odd thing is? Kit is my soul mate and the woman I love...

But it's *Breslin* and I who are terrifyingly similar.

Not only do we both know how to hold one hell of a grudge against Asher...we're both stubborn, standoffish people who would burn the world to the ground if anyone hurt someone we loved.

It's probably why there's mutual dislike between us. We cancel each other out.

Breslin's mouth drops open. "You're not an ass—" I give her a look. "Okay, yes you're an asshole." She crosses her arms. "Whatever, I was just trying to show you a little kindness and compassion. Won't happen again."

Thank fuck for that.

"Where's Asher?"

"In his office."

I look around. I've only been inside the house twice and didn't pay attention either time, so I don't really know the layout.

"You gonna show me where that is, Big Red, or do I need to break out a compass?"

"Follow me, prick," she grits through her teeth.

Atta girl. *Much* better.

We pass Landon in the living room on the way. He flies off the couch when he sees me. "Preston, hey." Breslin stops walking and he jogs over. "How are—"

"Unlike your girl here, I actually like you. Granted it has more to do with you saving my life than your personality." I slap his back. "Don't fuck up this friendship thing we got going, okay?"

He exchanges a glance with his fiancée. "Okay."

With a huff, Breslin continues leading me to Asher's office.

"I need you to do something for me."

"Swear to God if you tell me to go fuck myself, I *will* slap you."

"Nah, not that." I smirk. "Not today anyway."

"Fine. What can I do for you?"

"I need you and Landon to get lost for a little while. And just so we're clear, by get lost? I mean leave the premises."

I don't want a single soul overhearing my conversation with Asher.

I'm expecting to have to fight her on this, but to my surprise she agrees. "Landon and I were gonna take Picasso for a walk."

"Great. Go now."

She knocks on the door when we reach Asher's office, but I turn the knob. "I can take it from here."

Throwing up her hands, she walks away.

Asher's on the phone when I walk in, but his eyes nearly pop out of his head when he sees me. "I have to go, Joe. I'll call you back. Fix that contract in the meantime." He hangs up. "Hey."

"Hi."

I look around his office. It's loaded with football memorabilia, but unlike our father's office, there are also pictures of Breslin, Landon, *and* Picasso lining the walls and his desk.

My eyes snag on a picture of us from back when we were kids.

I remember it well. Asher was thirteen, and I was eleven. It was the day he won his first football game.

Everyone was trying to get his attention after the game, but he made a beeline for me who had been watching him from the sidelines...rooting as loud as my lungs would allow me to.

Walking over to the desk, I pick up the frame.

Asher was sweaty as hell and stunk like shit when he put his arm around me, but I didn't care...because he was my first exception.

We weren't just brothers.

We were best friends.

*All each other had in that hellhole.*

Funny how things change.

"That's my favorite picture of us," Asher states.

Given we have less than a handful together, that isn't saying much.

But I know what he means. It was a good day. The first win of what would be many throughout his lifetime.

"Thirty-five to twenty-one," I declare, recalling the score. "You creamed them."

He laughs. "Yeah, but they came back next season and made us their bitches."

"Only because your offense sucked." I place the frame back down. "You were good—great in fact—but you didn't have any protection."

And without protection...bad things happen.

He leans back in his chair. "Well, you know what they say. A quarterback is only as good as his team."

"Right."



His expression fills with remorse. “I’m sorry I paid off the cops. Our father was a monster, and it was wrong of me to try and cover that up.” He scrubs a hand down his face. “It’s just...the way I saw it, between Kyle’s blackmail and dad being the reason behind him blackmailing me in the first place, I figured I was owed something, you know?”

It makes sense. “Yeah.”

“They were dead. I didn’t want them to keep fucking up my life. Especially when I was on the brink of *finally* making my dreams come true.”

Can’t say I blame him for it. I probably would have done the same if I were in his position.

But I’m not.

I’m the kid who was held down and raped when he was seven.

*Because I tried to protect my big brother.*

But that wasn’t Asher’s fault and I’ve never once blamed him for it.

What I do blame him for...is taking something from me that I desperately wanted.

But I can’t make him understand why I’m slighted until he knows the truth.

Problem is...I don’t ever want to utter those words aloud again.

Telling Kit was hard enough.

Telling someone else? That’s a fate worse than death.

“I’m sorry for disappointing you,” Asher prattles on. “Between that and me inheriting dad’s money, I get why you’re so ang—”

“No, you don’t.”

He doesn’t get it.

*And he won’t until I tell him.*

Confusion spreads across his face. “What do you mean?”

I grip the back of my neck. “Yes, I was disappointed that you paid the police off, and yes I was pissed that you inherited his money instead of me... but not for the reasons you think.”

That only makes Asher more puzzled. “I know I’ve taken a lot of hits to the head in my life, but you’re speaking in riddles which isn’t really fair because we both know you’re the smart one.”

I plop down in the chair across from his desk. “I wanted his money so I could take care of Jameson.”

“Oh.” Asher sucks in a breath. “Shit. I wish you would have told me—”

“But mostly, I wanted it for revenge.”

Asher nods in understanding. “Yeah, I get that. We had a real shitty childhood thanks to that asshole, so we were entitled to it.” He jabs the desk with his finger. “Which is *exactly* why I would have given you whatever you wanted as long as you agreed to stop gambling.”

“We didn’t have the same childhood.”

He blinks. “Of course, we had the same childhood. We’re brothers.” His eyes squeeze shut. “I couldn’t protect you from his fists every time and I *hate* that, but I tried.”

Fists were preferable.

Fists I could handle.

Fists would only leave bruises that faded with time.

*What he did left a permanent scar.*

“I know you did.” Swallowing, I sit forward in the chair. “But there were some things you couldn’t protect me from, Asher.”

Shoulders sagging, he nods. “I know. There were times I wasn’t able to stop him from beating the shit out of you. I’m sorry—”

“I don’t mean the beatings.”

“Then what are you talking about?”

The words are trapped in my throat...I just can’t bring myself to say them.

I hold his gaze, willing him to understand what I’m about to tell him because I can’t say it outright. “Some things are worse than being beaten. Some things are the *worst* things.”

*The kind that destroys your fucking soul.*

It’s clear he still doesn’t get it, though. “Okay.” He rubs his head. “Are we still talking about our childhood and dad here? Or something else entirely?”

“Same topic.”

He steeples his fingers over his stomach. “Okay, so what you’re saying is, he did something bad to you.” His brows furrow. “Something that was even worse than—” I see the exact moment it hits him because all the color drains from his face.

His gaze cuts to mine, desperately searching for confirmation.

I give him a quick nod...and then I look away because it’s too fucking much.

Asher stands, clutching his chest like it’s about to explode. “That motherfucker.”

It rumbles out of him with the force of a bomb.

And then...

He goes fucking nuts.

I jerk back as he swipes everything off the shelves before flipping over his desk.

“Asher, stop.”

But he doesn't. Making a noise that's somewhere between a wail and a growl, his fist goes through the wall...leaving a large hole.

*Shit.* That's his throwing arm.

When he winds his arm back again, I get out of the chair and run over to him.

“Stop.”

His fist goes flying, making yet another hole through the plaster.

“Goddammit.” He's gearing up to do it a third time when I grab his arm. “*Stop.*”

A broken sound leaves him...and then he collapses on the floor. Taking me with him.

Asher's always been emotional, but I've never seen him like *this*.

“No wonder you hate me.” He slams his fist against his head. “I was supposed to protect you. That's what big brothers do.”

“It wasn't your fault. And that's not why I'm mad at you.”

He gapes at me incredulously. “How the fuck could you not be? It was *my* duty to pro—”

“Asher, you're my brother, not a superhero. You always did what you could to keep me safe and for that I'm grateful.” I look at him. “There was no way you could have stopped him. Trust me.”

*I couldn't.*

His shoulders rise and fall with his heaving breaths. “How come you never told me?”

*Because I didn't want my demons to become yours, too.*

“I wanted to protect you.” When he opens his mouth, I add, “We both know you would have killed him.”

“Damn right I would have.” Rage lights up his face. “I would have slit his fucking throat.”

Me too...if it wasn't for his bribes that fed my favorite pastime.

“If you killed him, you wouldn't have the life you do now. You wouldn't have a career—”

“I don’t care about that,” he seethes. “You’re way more important than football.”

The words dislodge something in my chest. *Guess I have my answer to Kit’s question.*

He swallows thickly. “Do you hate me because I’m gay? Because *he—*”

“No,” I quickly assure him. Hell, I was the one who encouraged him to be with Landon because I wanted him to be himself and be happy. “The two aren’t mutually exclusive. Gay people aren’t monsters.”

*People who rape are.*

Leaning against the wall, he hangs his head in shame. “But I covered for a monster.”

I nod because that’s the crux of my resentment. “Yeah.”

When he looks up, his eyes are glassy. “Preston, I *never—*”

“I know that now.” I sit beside him against the wall. “He ensured my silence by giving me money.”

Asher tenses. “*What?*”

Shame snakes up my spine. “The fucked-up thing is...I was the one blackmailing him.”

He lifts a brow. “What do you mean?”

“We never spoke about that night, but I knew the deal. As long as I kept my mouth shut, I could get whatever I wanted out of him. Fortunately for him, my favorite habit required a steady flow of cash. Gambling numbed the pain...made me feel like *I* was in control.” A tightness fills my chest. “But everything changed when I found out I was going to be a father, because I wasn’t just responsible for myself anymore.”

I inhale a sharp breath. “I wanted to give Jameson a good life, but I didn’t want that monster anywhere near him, so I decided to cut all ties.” I cut my gaze to Asher who’s listening intently. “But not before I took back every ounce of control he stripped away from me that night.”

“How?”

“During the last conversation we had, I told him to give me all his money. If he didn’t...I’d tell the world exactly what he was. I gave him seven days to transfer it to my account...but then the bastard died and one-upped me by leaving all the money to *you.*”

“Jesus,” Asher mutters as he takes this in. “No wonder you were so pissed.”

He’s right. I was. But there’s more to it than that.

“Yeah. Not only did I *not* get the money, I also didn’t get to make good on my threat.” I grip the back of my neck. “I thought I’d at least get justice of some kind after people found out about him and Kyle...but that didn’t happen.”

Asher took that from me.

“Because I robbed you of that,” he whispers, pulling the thought right out of my head.

“Yeah.”

“Fuck.” He bangs his head against the wall. “I’m so fucking sorry, Preston.”

*I know he is.* “I should have told you...I just didn’t know how.”

Not until Kit came along and showed me it was okay to let someone in.

Sadness dwells in his eyes. “Can I ask when it happened?” His voice cracks with emotion. “You don’t have to tell me. I just want to know where the fuck I was. Why I wasn’t there to protect you like I should have.”

I told him he couldn’t protect me from what happened, but it’s clear he’s blaming himself.

My gut clenches hard. He’s already reacting like a knife has been plunged into his chest.

There’s no need for me to twist it by telling him the argument that led to our father doing what he did was because I was trying to protect *him*.

The guilt will gnaw his insides and he’ll never be the same.

There’s no reason both of us should perpetually suffer.

“It happened while you were at a sleepover,” I lie. “And that’s as much as I’m ever going to say about it, so don’t ask me again.”

He releases a shaky breath. “Okay.” His eyes swivel around the wreckage of his ruined office. “I’m gonna cut you a check right now for every fucking penny. Including what I’ve already spent.”

“I don’t want the money.”

Money won’t erase what happened. *I know that now.*

“You deserve it,” he argues. “It’s the least I can do.”

I don’t want him to *do* anything.

Well, except one thing.

“If you really want to do something for me...be my brother again.”

He rears back like I’ve insulted him. “I’ve never stopped being your brother. Hell, three weeks after you left, I hired a PI to track you down. He spent years looking for you, but always came up empty.”

A laugh flies out of me as I recall the conversation I had with the guy when he did in fact track me down in Vegas. “That’s because I convinced him that the longer he had to scour the earth looking for me, the more money he could get out of *you*.”

Asher’s mouth nearly hits the floor. “That son of a bitch. I paid him a fuckton. And that doesn’t even include all the airfare, food, or hotel rooms I funded. That fucker went everywhere on my dime. I even sent him to Australia for two weeks.”

“Australia?” I question. “Why the fuck would you send him there?”

He shrugs. “I once read an article that said the country was big on gambling. Figured you might be hiding out there screwing some hot Aussie.”

A snort leaves me. “Nah. I was living out of a cheap motel while working for the mob. And the only screwing I was doing were cougars with rich husbands so I could score a few bucks.”

“Jesus.” He expels a long sigh. “I wish you would have called.”

There were moments when I almost did. “I made sure to watch every game of yours.”

This surprises him. “Yeah?”

I can recite the scores and his stats by heart. “Never missed one.” I smirk. “I even bet against you during the playoffs.”

He laughs. “Asshole.” His expression evens out. “Does this mean I have my little brother back for good?”

“Yeah.” I cringe when I look at his bloody knuckles. “You better get that checked out.”

Because if he ruined that hand, his career is over.

“I still have a little time before the season starts.” Examining his hand, he wiggles his fingers. “Hurts but doesn’t feel broken. Ice should take care of it.”

Ice won’t do shit if he damaged it. “Get your ass to a doctor. *Today*.”

I start to stand, but he grabs my arm, halting me. “I know this is probably the least of your worries, but Breslin and Landon are gonna ask what’s going on. I won’t tell them; you have my word. But can you tell me what I *can* say?”

I’m about to tell him it doesn’t matter, as long as my secret doesn’t leave his lips, but given I had him lie to them for me before, I kind of owe him one.

Plus, I don’t think Breslin or Landon would use this information against

me.

“You can tell them.” I narrow my eyes. “Just make sure they never talk to me about it...or look at me with pity. Otherwise, I’ll lose my shit.”

The last thing I want is to be treated like some kind of victim. *Fuck that.*

“Got it—”

The sound of his phone ringing cuts him off and we both look around the rubble for it. I find it near his desk and hand it to him.

He puts it on speakerphone. “What, Joe? I told you I’d call you back, remember?”

“I know, but this is about the sneaker sponsorship,” a male voice on the other line says. “I talked to Sports Zone and they agreed to pay you two point five million, instead of one. I’m sending the new contract over now.”

I’m about to leave and give him some privacy, but then Asher barks, “Two point five? Come on. Rivera got three million and he’s only an offensive lineman.”

*Ouch.* Given Asher’s not just an NFL quarterback, but the quarterback of a team that made it to the playoffs last season, he should be getting top dollar for sponsorships.

What the fuck is wrong with his agent?

“I understand that, but this is a huge sponsorship. I already counter offered, and they accepted it. I don’t think we should rock the—”

Grabbing the phone, I hang up.

This asshole is screwing my brother out of money because he can’t locate his nuts and play some hardball.

“Give me the number for your contact at Sports Zone.”

Eyes wide, Asher pulls it up on his cell and hands it back to me.

Someone picks up after the second ring. “John Fina.”

“Hello, John. I’m calling on behalf of Asher Holden. I know you spoke with his agent earlier, but Asher isn’t signing that contract.”

“I’m sorry,” the guy says, clearly taken aback. “Is there a problem with the new contract?”

“Yeah,” I scoff. “The money is the problem. Or rather, the *lack* of money.”

“I see.” I hear papers shuffling on his desk. “However, that was just a jumping-off point. We’re still willing to negotiate.”

Good. Because *I’m* willing to make him put his money where his mouth is.

“Fine. Does ten million work for you?”

Asher nearly chokes on his tongue.

John inhales sharply. “That’s a little steep…”

Not when it comes to the best.

“You do understand that he’s the league’s top quarterback, right? He also has the top-selling jersey in the nation. Five million followers on Twitter. But hey, if you’re willing to lose all that—”

“We’re not.”

I smile...because I’ve got him right where I want him.

“That’s what I thought. Make it eleven million.”

“You just said *ten*?” John sputters.

The fucker should have accepted my first offer. *Rookie mistake.*

“I raised.”

I can almost feel the bullets he’s sweating right now. “That’s a lot. I’ll have to discuss it with my associates.”

He’s bluffing.

“You know what, John? Forget it. We’re not accepting the deal.”

I’m about to hang up, but then he stammers, “Eleven million. We’ll do eleven million.”

Goddamn right you will.

“Deal. Send Asher the new contract directly and we’ll look over it this evening.”

I hang up and look at my brother. “Your agent sucks. I got you to eleven, but I would have gone down to eight.”

Asher stands. “You mean my *former* agent. Because you just took his job.”

I mull this over in my head for a bit. Fuck knows I could use the money... and a real job.

“That depends. How much does it pay?”

“Ten percent.”

I stare him down. “Fifteen.”

Asher meets it head-on. “Eleven.”

“Twelve,” I counter. “With benefits, since I have a wife.”

Asher snorts. “A wife who’s a *billionaire*.”

Not yet, she isn’t. But even still, I want to make sure she’s taken care of.

I raise. “Fifteen. Take it or leave it.”

Asher knows I mean business because he folds. “Deal. I’ll fire Joe



tonight.”

My lips twitch as I shake his hand. “I would have settled for ten.”

Asher smirks. “I would have done twenty.”

I store that kernel of information in my noggin for the future.

His expression turns serious. “I made a mistake, Preston. But I have every intention of fixing it.”

“What do you mean?”

*Nothing* can fix what happened.

“You’ll see.”

I’m about to ask him for details, but there’s a knock on the door.

“Come in,” Asher says.

“Sorry. Just wanted to let you know we’re back—” Breslin’s jaw hits the floor when she opens the door.

“What the hell happened in here?” Landon questions behind her.

Asher and I exchange a glance...and then we both shrug.

“We talked,” I grind out, leaving it at that.

Asher slaps my back. “Say hello to my new agent.”

Breslin and Landon nod slowly as they process this.

“I’m gonna go fix us some lunch,” Breslin says.

“And then after we can clean up in here,” Landon adds before they walk away.

I head out next. “Get that hand looked at.”

“Wait,” Asher calls out.

I halt my steps. “What’s up?”

“I love you, little brother.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell him to shut the fuck up and stop being a sissy...but I don’t.

“Love you, too.” I reach for the doorknob. “Shithead.”

## Chapter 56

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Preston

“*H*ow is he?” I ask after Charlotte picks up.  
“He’s doing a lot better.”

Despite her words, there’s a hint of hesitancy in her voice.

“What’s wrong?”

She sighs. “He misses you.”

It’s a sucker punch to the chest. “I miss him, too.” I clear my throat. “Has Becca been around?”

At that, she lets out a humorless laugh. “Nope. Jameson is practically living with me full time now. I even took him to class with me the other day.”

*Shit.* “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. I just wish Becca would stop being such a bitch and let you see Jameson.”

Her and me both. “Yeah. I’m still trying to come up with a plan to make that happen.”

Because the one I had went out the window. There’s no way she’ll accept *anything* from me now.

I’ve tried calling her every day since the hospital, hoping she’ll have a change of heart—even though that would require her having one of those to begin with—but she blocked my number.

I’d show up at her apartment, but I’m afraid she’ll make good on her threat about calling the cops and getting a restraining order.

Which means the only thing I can do is call Charlotte every day to find

out how he is.

It's not enough. Not even close.

But at least it's something.

"Where is he now?"

"He's taking a nap, but I can wake him up if you want to say hi."

Probably best to let him sleep. "That's okay. I'll call back tomorrow."

"Okay. Maybe we can meet up for lunch soon so you can see him."

I appreciate it, but her offer is a catch-22.

Charlotte is my only link to Jameson right now. But if Jameson ever mentioned to Becca that she took him to see me...it would cut that off.

Then I'll be left with nothing. It's a risk I'm not willing to take.

"Give him a hug for me, okay?"

"Will do."

Kit breezes into the living room as I'm hanging up the phone. "Stop whatever you're doing and turn on the television."

I grab the remote off the coffee table. "Why?"

She plops down next to me on the couch. "Put it on the sports channel. Right now."

I've only been Asher's agent for twenty-four hours, but the season hasn't started yet and he doesn't have any interviews lined up.

Hell, he can't even practice for the next three weeks due to the mild sprain he gave himself when he punched the wall.

It's a mistake that might end up costing him...because the season starts in twenty-four fucking days.

Pressing a button on the remote, I change the channel. "Are you gonna tell me wh—"

I stop talking when I see my brother on the television. He's dressed in a suit and standing in front of a podium.

The flash of cameras illuminates the room, and I see microphones from all the reporters sitting in the audience.

It's evident he's holding a press conference. Question is...*why?*

I get my answer when he opens his mouth.

"Thank you for coming, everyone. I know this was short notice. However, there's something very important I'd like to discuss." He grips the edge of the podium with his uninjured hand. "Many of you are aware that Spencer Holden was my father."

He can't do this. It will ruin everything he's worked his ass off for.

But it's clear Asher doesn't give a fuck about any of that when he delivers his next words.

"You all knew him as a legend on the field and a smart business owner. What you don't know...is that he was a vile piece of shit and a monster." There are a few gasps in the audience as he continues. "He was a horrible father. He was an evil human being. He was an abuser..." He looks directly into the camera. "He was a rapist." He clears the emotion out of his throat. "Thank you for your time."

Typically, reporters are chomping at the bit to ask questions, but the room is so quiet you could hear a pin drop.

*Jesus Christ.* I know Asher wanted to try to fix this and I appreciate him telling the world the truth...but what it will cost him isn't worth it.

Stomach knotting, I scrub a hand down my face, preparing myself for the slew of canceled sponsorships coming my way. "His career just went up in smoke."

"No," Kit says, her fingers typing diligently over her phone screen. "I'm on his Twitter account right now. People are praising him. They're calling him a hero for speaking out."

My throat constricts and it hurts to swallow.

*They're not wrong.*

## Chapter 57

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## Kit

*I*t's been two weeks since Asher's press conference, and I have been *busy*.

Everyone is reaching out to him on social media, telling him how brave he was to speak out and sharing their own stories. One woman even named her dog after him.

Preston was scared it would ruin his career, but the exact opposite happened.

Because the only person busier than me right now...is my husband.

Ever since becoming Asher's agent, he's been working nonstop on his sponsorships.

And while it's sexy as hell to hear him barking commands and making people bend to his will...it's equally distracting.

I'm grateful he's taken up residence in Asher's office for the rest of the day because I could really use some peace and quiet.

I'm typing up a response to a Twitter tag when I hear the front door open. I'm assuming it's Preston, but Breslin calls out, "Honey, I'm home. Where are you?"

"In the kitchen."

Her footsteps get closer before she appears. "Hey."

"Hey." The aroma from whatever's in the takeout bag she's carrying hits me like a freight train. "What is *that*?"

Smiling, she grabs a couple of forks from the drawer. "I picked us up some lunch. Figured you could use the break and I could use the serenity." She winces as she takes a seat at the island and hands me a fork. "It's like

*Jerry Maguire* at my house right now.”

Yup. Which is exactly why I sent his ass over there.

I love Preston with all my heart and soul, but he is ruthless when he’s working on a deal.

Ruthless and loud.

Taking a well-deserved break, I close my laptop. “What are we having for lunch?”

She opens the large Styrofoam carton and my mouth waters.

“Rice and smothered burritos.”

Thank you, baby Jesus, because I am *starving* and that smells like heaven.

“What have you been up to?” Breslin asks as I stuff my face with some rice.

“Still busy.” I chew and swallow. “I think I’m gonna ask Juan if he wants to come work for me. Between Asher becoming an even bigger megastar and handling my other clients’ accounts, I’m averaging about four hours of sleep a night. If I’m lucky.”

Granted, I’d probably get more if I wasn’t screwing my husband most of those nights, but it’s an awesome stress reliever.

Her nose crinkles. “That’s not good. But hiring Juan sounds like a great idea.”

I shovel some more rice into my mouth. “Yeah, I hope he says yes because he’d be perfect. I just have to remind him not to date the clients.”

Breslin laughs. “Good luck with that.”

“What’s been going on with you?”

She picks at a burrito. “I’m still finishing up the paintings for the art exhibit next month. I’m almost done, though, so all that’s left after that is showing it to the world.”

I give her leg a squeeze. “You’re incredibly talented, B. You got this.”

And I’ll be there cheering her on front and center.

As usual, Breslin doesn’t accept compliments, so she changes the subject. “Any word on Becca?”

Reaching for my water bottle, I shake my head. “Nope. Preston still talks to the babysitter every day, though. I feel bad for her because she’s in nursing school and Becca just drops Jameson off at her door whenever she wants.”

Breslin frowns. “At least *someone*’s taking care of him.”

“Yeah.”



But if Becca wasn't such a bitch that someone would be Preston.

Alas, that's not going to happen.

I fork up some smothered burrito. "Sometimes I want to buy a bus and hit her with it."

Breslin laughs until she realizes I'm not joking. "Have faith, Kit. You know how Becca is. Pretty soon she'll burn that bridge with the babysitter and come running back to Preston so he can take care of her son. This time with no contingencies, because she'll have no one else to depend on."

*I really hope so.*

Preston's no longer spending the nights holed up in our bedroom drinking, but I know he's throwing himself headfirst into his new job to avoid dealing with the pain of losing Jameson.

I'm not convinced the latter is necessarily healthier.

Because you can only avoid your feelings for so long before you reach a breaking point.

I have another bite of burrito, eating *my* feelings. "Anyway, what else is new with you?"

She has a sip of water. "Well, not me per se, but Asher wants to open up a charity with the money the evil asshole left him. Since Preston refuses to accept it, he wants to use it to help others. He's hoping Preston will be on board."

My heart warms and I smile. "I think it's a great idea."

Hopefully Preston will, too.

I spear the burrito with my fork. "Man, this is *really* good—"

Nausea twists my stomach, and a cold sweat breaks out along my forehead.

And that's the *only* warning I get before I'm running to the sink and tossing my cookies.

"I'm so sorry," I tell Breslin when she comes over and rubs my back. "That must have been gross to watch."

"Don't worry about me." Grabbing a paper towel, she runs it under the water and presses it to my forehead. "Are *you* okay?"

I feel a lot better now. "Yeah—"

*Nope.* Survey says that was a lie. Breslin holds my hair back as I dry heave, getting rid of whatever contents might still be left in my stomach.

I wait a few minutes before lifting my head back up. "Better watch out, B. Those burritos are coming for you next."

I move over in case she needs the sink, but Breslin shrugs. “I don’t think so. I feel fine.”

“Just wait.”



An hour later, I look over at her. “What about now? Feel sick yet?”

Breslin rolls her eyes. “Not even a little.” Proving her point, she eats some leftover burrito. “I don’t think it was the food.”

She says that, but *any* minute now she’s going to run to the bathroom.

“If it wasn’t the food, then what was it, smarty pants?”

I love Breslin but she always thinks she’s right. Granted she usually is, but I know those were rotten burritos. And pretty soon she will, too.

“I don’t know.” She chews her thumbnail. “Maybe you caught a bug? You said you’ve been really run down lately.”

Fair enough. I’m about to tell her she might have a point, but I feel her studying me intently before she says, “Maybe you’re pregnant.”

That gets a laugh out of me. “Nope. Thanks to you, we never attend a party without the balloons.”

“Huh?”

“After that scare in Hawaii, we use condoms each and every time,” I clarify.

“Gotcha.” She starts munching on some rice. “Okay, so it’s not that.” She pauses when the fork is halfway to her mouth. “Although...”

I raise a brow. “Although *what*?”

“Condoms aren’t one-hundred-percent effective. Sometimes little swimmers can still get in.”

True, but the odds of that happening are slim to none. Besides, aunt flow came to town. I’m good.

“There’s no bun in this oven, B. I had my period, remember?”

She nods. “In that case, you’re fine.”

I’m debating nibbling on the burrito again, because even though it gave me food poisoning, it was really good, when a thought occurs to me.

The last period I had was the night Jameson went to the hospital.

Thirty-six days ago.

“We’re a little late this month, huh?”

Breslin makes a face. “Not me. I had my period last week.”

That’s strange because once our cycles sync up, they tend to stay that way.

Breslin places her fork down. “You didn’t get your period this month?”

“Relax, I’m not *that* late.”

I feel her studying me intently again.

“In case you forgot, I’ve been going through a lot of stress lately. Between finding out what happened to Preston, Becca being a thundercunt, *and* working my ass off for your fiancé...it’s not exactly smooth sailing around these parts.”

“Okay,” she says. “You’re right. I’ll drop it.”

*Finally.* I’m about to suggest we order more food, but then she utters, “Maybe we should get a test just to be sure.”

I inwardly groan. “I am *not*...” I get off the stool, because I know my bestie. She’s like a dog with a bone. Once her brain grabs ahold of an idea, she won’t let go. “You know what? Fine. Let’s go get a stupid test. This way I can prove your stubborn ass wrong.”

She grabs her keys off the island. “I’ll drive.”

## Chapter 58

---

Kit

Two blue lines stare back at me mockingly.

“I think there’s a problem with the test.”

Breslin gestures to the seven other pregnancy tests currently strewn around the bathroom sink. I was convinced the first one I took was a fluke, so we ran out to get more.

“While I think you definitely need to make an appointment with your gyno to confirm for sure, it’s pretty clear you’re pregnant.”

I refuse to accept defeat. However, I will make an appointment with my doctor. So help her God if she’s not back from vacation yet because I will *sue* the pants off her hiney.

Breslin’s expression softens. “This doesn’t have to change anything unless you want it to. You have options.”

I speak before I can even process my words. “I’m keeping my baby.”

*Whomp.* There it is. A decision has been made.

I’m all for a woman’s right to choose what’s best for them.

However, I can’t imagine getting rid of something that’s half me and half the person I love most in this world.

Granted, Preston will be surprised when he finds out. Especially since he made it clear he didn’t want kids...but that was before we evolved as a couple. Plus, he’s an amazing dad to Jameson, so of course he *wants* kids.

I know in my soul he’s going to love this baby just as much as I do.

I rub my stomach, now fully aware that something is *growing* in there. Something that’s going to change my life forever.

Something that’s going to make me a mom.

Something I can give every ounce of love to.

*Just like my parents gave me.*

My vision blurs and my heart feels like it expands to more than double its size.

*How is it possible to already love someone you've never met before?*

I don't know. All I know is that I do.

I look at Breslin who's tearing up along with me. "I'm having a baby."

She smiles. "You're having a baby."

I'm about to bust out some dance moves...but then I hear footsteps coming up the steps followed by Preston's voice. "Kit?"

*Shit.* I didn't realize we've been in here for so long.

Breslin quickly locks the door and I swipe all the tests into the garbage can.

I have no intention of keeping this from Preston, but I want to wait for the perfect time to break the news.

Breslin opens the medicine cabinet and starts tossing various things into the trash while I wad up some tissues and toilet paper to place on top of it.

"You in there, angry girl?" Preston calls out from the adjoining bedroom.

"Yeah, but..." Panicking, I look at Breslin. "So is Breslin." Preston doesn't say anything, but I'm so nervous he's going to suspect something that I blurt out, "She has hemorrhoids and needed some help."

Glaring daggers at me, Breslin mouths, 'What the fuck?'

'Sorry,' I mouth back.

"Less is more, Kit," Preston mutters as I hear him hightail it out of the room. It's quickly followed by, "A hemorrhoid has a hemorrhoid...how poetic."

Breslin aims her glare at the bathroom door. "You're lucky he's your baby daddy now or I would *kill* him."

"I appreciate you not murdering the father of my child. You're a great aunt and godmother."

Breslin starts tearing up again. "You want *me* to be the godmother?"

"Of course," I tell her as I open the door. "You're my family." I pat my tummy. "And this little lovebug's."

Sniffing, we walk down the staircase hand in hand.

Preston, who's crossing the foyer on his way into the kitchen, raises an eyebrow when he sees us. "Christ. How bad are those hemorrhoids?"

Breslin and I exchange a glance and then she makes a mad dash for the

front door. "Call you later."

Preston eyes me skeptically. "You okay?"

"Yeah." I pull my lip between my teeth. "Are you?"

If so, perhaps now would be a good time to tell him.

Grunting, he walks into the kitchen. "No."

Alrighty then. Abort mission.

I follow him. "What's wrong?"

He ambles to the fridge and takes out a beer. "I'm trying to finalize a deal with a deodorant company, but they keep yanking my dick."

"I'm sorry."

He brings the bottle to his mouth and takes a long swig. "Not as sorry as they're gonna be when I tell them to shove the measly million they're offering up their asses."

Making a fist, I swing my arm from side to side. "That's the spirit."

He places his beer on the island. "What are we doing for dinner? I'm starving."

"How does Chinese sound?"

He makes a face. "I kind of wanted Mexican."

My stomach rolls. *Damn those burritos.*

"Pick something else. *Anything* else."

He shrugs. "Italian?"

I'm about to say yes, but another bout of nausea strikes. Dang it. I thought it was called *morning* sickness for a reason. "Negative. Pick again."

Reaching for his beer, he takes another swig. "Greek?"

"Yes—" Nope. That's not gonna work either. "No, not that."

Growing annoyed, his jaw works. "Thai?"

I start to nod, but then shake my head.

*Lord.* What the heck does this baby want?

"Kit," Preston bites out. "You're being pickier than Jameson right now. What the hell do you want to eat?"

"A burger with pickles, no onions, no tomatoes, a little ketchup, and lots of cheese," I blurt out. "And a side of fries. But not soggy ones. Warm and crispy."

No doubt about it. This baby is *definitely* Preston's because it's just as demanding as he is.

He places his beer back down on the island. "Fine. Phone it in for delivery and order me the same." Leaning down, he kisses my cheek. "I'm

gonna take a shower.”

“Love you,” I call out after him.

He exits the kitchen. “Love you, too.”

I look down at my tummy when I hear him head up to the bedroom. “You have *got* to slow your roll before you blow our cover.”

I want to tell him when he’s calm and relaxed.

Like right after a blow job.

“Dammit,” Preston exclaims, jolting me from my thoughts.

A second later I hear Lola’s *woof* followed by the sound of him running.

Rushing out of the kitchen, I call out, “What happened?”

“The mutt got into the bathroom garbage again. There’s trash everywhere.”

Uh-oh. *Bad, Lola.*

I run up the stairs, but it’s too late.

Preston’s already barreling down them...holding a pregnancy test.

The harsh expression on his face makes it clear he’s *not* happy.

“What the fuck is this?” He advances on me and I have no choice but to walk down the stairs backward. “What the *fuck* is this, Kit?”

The look in his eyes is so cruel. *So vicious.*

I knew he might not be thrilled at first, but I didn’t think he’d be this angry.

I swallow hard. “I—”

He corners me into a wall. “You what? Popped a few holes in the condoms? This way you could give your *Nanna* what she asked for and ensure you got the money after she croaks?”

The fact he’d think I would ever do such a thing is more nauseating than those burritos.

His nostrils flare, his chest lifting and falling with irate breaths. “I had *one* line that I begged you not to cross and you gave me your word that you wouldn’t.”

He’s right, I did. But he seems to be forgetting that it takes two people to make a baby.

“Preston—”

“You *promised!*” he roars so loud my ears ring.

The look on his face is so cold. I feel the chill down to my bones.

I try to breathe through the influx of pain. “I—”

“I don’t want it.” I flinch when his fist strikes the wall beside my head. “I



*don't fucking want it."*

My chest cracks down the center with his heartless words. He's acting like our baby is a horrible curse instead of a blessing.

My eyes burn and it takes everything I have not to curl up into a ball and cry my broken heart out.

I don't know who this person standing in front of me is...but it's not the man I fell in love with.

Because that man wouldn't do this.

Which is why when he opens the front door and walks out...

I let him.

Hand on my stomach, I sink down to the floor. Preston might be gone, but I still have something to live for.

Something that needs me to be strong for them.

*Something else I love.*

"It's okay, lovebug. We're gonna get through this."

*Your daddy might not want you...but I do.*

## Chapter 59

---

Kit

*P*reston's been gone for four days.  
I've thought about going out and searching for him, but what's the point?

*I'm* the one who's pregnant with his child.

And he's made it perfectly clear how he feels about that.

Besides, I have more important things to worry about than his whereabouts.

Like my baby.

After explaining to my gynecologist that I was now married to a man and despite using condoms had seven positive pregnancy tests, she drew some blood work, then asked me to strip down so she can do an examination.

I've just finished putting the paper gown on when she knocks on the door.  
"Are you ready?"

I hop back up on the table and stick the heels of my feet in the stirrups.  
"Yup."

She sits on a stool and wheels herself over to the end of the examination table. "How long has it been since your last period?"

"Forty days."

She thinks about this before she says, "We typically determine how far along you are by your last period, so forty days would make you around five weeks, give or take." She gestures to a cart with an ultrasound machine on it. "I'd like to do a transvaginal ultrasound if that's okay."

*Ugh.* They're the worst. But I really want to make sure everything's okay with the lovebug, so I give her the green light.

“Okey dokey.”

I hold my breath when she lubricates the wand and sticks it up my hoo-ha.

“Now, it’s still very early, so you won’t see much,” she warns me as she moves the wand around. “It’s no more than a sac at this point.” She makes a small humming sound in her throat. “Hmmm.”

I look at the image on the screen. Hmm is right.

“That’s one big sac.”

“Yeah,” she agrees. “You’re definitely further along than five weeks. I’d say almost double that.” She looks at me. “Are you sure you had your period and it wasn’t just some light spotting?”

“Positive,” I tell her. “It wasn’t heavy, but I used a tampon the first day.”

Although now that I think about it...it did end a lot earlier than usual.

“Hmm,” she says again.

Another thought occurs to me and I quickly add up the dates.

Preston and I first had sex while we were in Hawaii, so maybe it happened there.

“I had unprotected sex with my husband sixty-six days ago while on our honeymoon.” Then I remember. “But I took Plan B, so I don’t know *how* I could end up pregnant after that.”

“Okay.” She pulls the wand out. “Let’s chat.”

Standing, she walks over to the sink and washes her hands. “Do you remember your last period before your honeymoon?”

I sit up. “It was about two weeks before. Why?”

A wrinkle forms between her brows. “How soon did you take the plan B after you had unprotected sex?”

I chew the corner of my lip as I think about this. “Three days after. But my best friend assured me it would stop anything from happening before it started.”

*Freaking Breslin.* Turns out she’s not always right.

“I see.” She takes a deep breath. “While that’s exactly what emergency contraception does, it’s more effective the sooner you take it. However, it seems that you were already ovulating during your honeymoon when you had unprotected sex. In this case, the morning-after pill wouldn’t work because an egg had already been released...and then fertilized within those three days. Essentially, you were already pregnant by the time you took it.”

My mouth drops open, and then a rush of panic fills me. “Did I harm the

baby by doing that?”

She gives me a reassuring smile. “No. To my knowledge, there are no studies indicating it will harm the fetus.”

*That’s* reassuring, but I’m still a little baffled by all this. “What about me getting my period? How the heck did that happen?”

It’s common knowledge you don’t get those when you’re knocked up.

“What many women think is their period is actually something called decidual bleeding. It usually occurs within the first three months and happens when a woman would have had her period had she not conceived. It’s usually harmless, but we’ll keep a close eye on you, okay?”

I don’t like the term *usually* harmless, but I’m going to try to think positively. “So how far along am I?”

She picks up a calendar. “About nine weeks.”

I can’t believe this little lovebug has been inside me for over two months and I had *no* idea.

“Is there anything I can do to make sure everything goes smoothly from here on out?”

She picks up a tablet on the table. “Yes. I’m sending a script for prenatal vitamins to your local pharmacy. Start taking them as soon as possible. Also, avoid deli meats, raw fish, saunas, and hot tubs. And make sure you get plenty of water and rest. Your body will be going through a lot of changes during the next seven months so the healthier you are, the healthier the baby will be.” She looks up. “Do you have any other questions?”

I have *tons*, but the most important one is taking center stage.

I lie back down. “Can I see the lovebug again?”



Rolling over in bed, I drape my arm around Lola. He’s no Preston—and he’s a way sloppier kisser—but he’s been keeping me company as the new man of the house.

“Are you excited about having a brother or sister?”

He licks my face, and I laugh. I’m about to go downstairs and grab a snack, but there’s a loud bang on the front door.

Growling, Lola crouches on the bed, ready to attack.

I glance at the clock on the nightstand. It’s just after three a.m.

After putting my robe on, I head down the stairs. Lola follows close behind, keeping guard.

I debate checking the security cameras to see who it is before I open the door...but I don't need to.

"I forgot my keys," a very drunk sounding Preston slurs. "Let me in."

My heart pounds like a jackhammer—desperate to see him—but I force myself to remain strong.

Because it's not just me that I have to look out for.

"Where have you been? And don't you dare lie to me."

Because my intuition already knows.

He's silent for so long I wonder if he left.

But then he speaks.

"At the casino."

The confirmation is a sharp kick to the ribcage. In my gut I knew that's most likely where he was...I just hoped it wasn't true.

"You've been at the casino for *four* days?" I yell, all the hurt I feel coming out in a lash of anger.

Four days he's been gambling...while I've been crying myself to sleep.

Four days he's been gambling...while I was left dealing with the pain of his last words.

Four days he's been gambling...while both me and our baby were left feeling unwanted.

"Yes," he slurs. "Open up. I want to talk to you."

Last time he *talked*, it hurt like hell.

I slap the door. "Fuck you."

I'm so angry, so *wounded* I feel it everywhere.

"Dammit, come on," he screams before his voice drops. "I'm sorry."

He wasn't *sorry* when he accused me of popping holes in the condoms.

He wasn't *sorry* when he shouted in my face that he didn't want our baby.

He wasn't *sorry* when he went out on a bender.

"I was scared." A painful sound escapes him. "Becca...she fucked me up."

That might be true, but he made it crystal clear that while *she's* good enough to be the mother of the child he wants...I'm not.

Hateful tears prick behind my eyes. "You should go back to her."

Because it's obvious he wants no part of *this* family.

He slams the door so hard it rattles. “I don’t want her. I never fucking wanted her. You know that.” His voice drops to a broken rasp. “I want *you*.” I hear his deep inhale. “If you want to keep it, I’ll deal with it, okay?”

My bottom lip quivers as the tears I was trying not to shed run down my face like rain.

Because while I can accept almost anything...my baby deserves better. And it’s up to *me* to protect them.

“There is no baby.”

He didn’t want it, so now he doesn’t have it. Problem solved.

There’s a sharp exhale of breath. “What?”

“I went to the doctor today.” My throat burns with the lie. “I’m not pregnant. It was a false alarm.”

He doesn’t deserve to know the truth. Not until I’m positive he won’t ever hurt my child or make them feel unwanted.

He goes silent for several moments, and then, “Let me in.”

“No.” Pressing my forehead to the wood, I close my eyes. “I’ll give your things to Asher.”

He’s lucky I’m not throwing them out on the front lawn.

A strangled sound leaves him. “No. We are *not* fucking over!” I hear him collapse against the door. “Let me in.”

This is the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do, but I stand firm. “No.”

“I’m sorry.” He smashes his fist into the wood with so much force something cracks. Thankfully, the door holds. “Let me in.”

More tears stream down my cheeks. “No.”

With a roar, he pounds again. “Please, baby. Open the fucking door.”

A bitter snort leaves me. He’s so drunk he can’t even say my name.

I pound back. “No!”

“Don’t do this.” His voice is so withered. *So broken*. “Don’t give up on me.”

Those words unleash a swell of pain so severe my cries become full-on hysterical sobs.

Because even though I should, I can’t give up on him. *I love him too much*.

But I also refuse to give his behavior a free pass.

I always swore I’d never make Preston do anything he didn’t want to, but that was before I became pregnant.

If he wants to be in either of our lives, he’ll have to earn it.

“You need to get help.” I lock the deadbolt on the door. “That’s the only way I’m ever letting you back in.”

With that...I walk away.



## Chapter 60

Preston

Head spinning, I stagger over to my brother's house. Because he's the only one who can help me fix this shitstorm I've created.

It felt like one thing after another just kept piling up...until it exploded. Unfortunately, the blast hurt the person I love most.

The second I saw that test, it was like someone pulled a trigger on a gun and Becca's pregnancy came rushing back in a cruel flash.

Every moment I spent thinking he was mine.

Because I wanted him to be. So fucking bad.

But then Becca ripped that away from me. *Twice.*

I stumble up the porch of my brother's house and slam the doorbell.

My bladder feels like an overinflated balloon thanks to all the liquor I drank tonight. The urge to take a piss is so strong, I stagger to the side of the porch and unzip my jeans...aiming for the rose bushes on the side of the house.

"You have got to be kidding me," Breslin screeches from a now open front door. "What the hell are you doing?"

"What the fuck does it look like?" I snap as my brother and Landon charge outside.

"Jesus," Asher grunts. "I've been calling you for days. Where have you been?"

"From the look and smell of him, I'd say a bar," Landon mutters under his breath.

"Close." I shake my dick and zip up my pants. "Casino."

Their disappointment is palpable.

Huffing, Breslin slams the front door.

Asher pinches the bridge of his nose. "I thought you quit gambling for good?"

I shake my head which only makes everything spin even more. "No. Just temporarily."

Or rather, that *was* the plan so I could get Kit off my back...but I fucked that up.

Asher reaches for my arm. "You're trashed."

I swat him away. "No, I'm not—"

My entire body sways and my ass hits something hard. I look around and realize I'm now sitting instead of standing. *Fuck.*

I fish the pack of cigarettes I bought earlier out of my pocket and light one. Or rather, I try to but I can't seem to get the damn lighter to work. "Motherfucker."

Landon helps me. "Here."

I slap his back. "Always looking out for your boy." Pinching the cigarette between my fingers, I take a long drag and peer up at my brother. "I need help."

"No shit," Asher mutters.

"Kit kicked me out."

Asher and Landon exchange a glance as I continue.

"I saw a pregnancy test in the garbage and flipped the fuck out. Told her I didn't want it...then left and went to the casino to blow off some steam." I take another drag. "Turns out I had no reason to be pissed because it was a false alarm." I stub my cigarette out. "*She's* still pissed at me, though and won't let me back in the house. That's why I'm here."

"You can sleep in the guest bedroom," Asher offers, but I shake my head.

I'm gonna need more than a place to sleep.

"She won't take me back until I get help."

My brother and his fiancé exchange another glance.

"I don't know what that means, exactly, but I don't want to lose her." *I can't.* "So, I need your help."

Asher scrubs a hand down his face. "There's a place about an hour away. It's inpatient."

I reach for my cigarettes again. "Fuck that."

His jaw tics. “The program specializes in addictions and trauma. Which is exactly what you need.”

Hard pass. “No—”

“Kit’s serious about this,” Asher snaps. “If you don’t believe me, ask Breslin.” He holds my gaze. “You’re gonna lose her for good if you don’t go.”

My chest tightens. There’s no way that’s happening.

“Losing her isn’t a fucking option.”

“Good. Then you’re going.”

Asher and Landon grab each of my arms, hauling me back up. “After you get some sleep.”



The next afternoon, Asher pulls to a stop in front of a large villa surrounded by farmland.

“This doesn’t look like a mental institution.”

“That’s because it’s not. It’s a rehab center. And it’s voluntary.”

Thank fuck for that. “See you in a week.”

Then I’ll be back home and everything can return to normal.

Asher looks out the driver’s side window. “The program is ninety days.”

He can’t be serious. I’m not doing this shit for longer than a week. And even that’s too long. “You’re shitting me.”

He cocks his head, his expression serious. “I’m not.”

I laugh without humor because he seems to have forgotten something important. “I can’t stay here for ninety days. Not only is that crazy, I’m your agent, remember? Your season starts in *three* days.”

Hell, he should have been on a plane headed back to New Orleans four days ago.

“I know,” Asher says. “I won’t accept any new deals until you’re back.”

That’s a lot of potential money he’s leaving on the table. “That’s not... you can’t do that.”

Not only is it fucking insane, it’s downright stupid.

“I’m already doing it.” He unlocks the car doors. “Go in there and do what you need to do in order to get yourself better. We’ll all be here when you get back.”

Grumbling, I grab my suitcase out of the trunk.

Asher rolls down the passenger window. “For what it’s worth, I’m proud of you.”

I flip him the bird. I wanted this *help* to be quick and painless, but this shit seems like it will be endless and grueling.

As my brother drives off, I contemplate calling a cab to pick me up.

I could head back to Vegas. Go back to my life.

*Go back to gambling.*

But then I’d lose her...and the life I want with her.

Which means the only option I have is to fold.

*This time for good.*

## Chapter 62

---

Preston

*I*t's been forty-eight hours since I've stepped foot inside this shithole, and I want out.

The first day wasn't horrible. After searching my bags, they showed me to my small private room and had me speak to an admitting nurse and doctor. After that, I went to the dining room for dinner. Food wasn't bad. A little bland, but thanks to my wife, I've had worse.

The second day is where I about lost my shit.

They made me go to group therapy. Everyone sat around in a circle and shared what they were in here for...

And then they talked about their *feelings*.

I promptly got up and left.

And now? Now, these shitheads are making me talk to a *psychosomething* who's evidently a wizard holding the key to my future because if I refuse to speak to him...they'll kick me out.

It's complete bullshit if you ask me.

The fucker pushes his glasses up his big nose. "Let's discuss why your gambling has become such a problem for you."

"It's not a problem for me," I correct. "It's a problem for my wife. Hence, I'm here."

He crosses his legs, showing off a colorful pair of socks with what appears to be tiny fishes on them. Fucking weirdo.

"So, you *don't* think your gambling is a problem?"

Here we go with the psychoanalyzing bullshit. "Only in the sense that it's a problem for my wife." I cross my arms. "It shouldn't be, though because

aside from a few days ago it had been almost a year since I'd stepped foot in a casino."

*Take that, Dr. Freud.*

"Why did you refrain from gambling for so long?"

"For her."

I also figured that once the year was over, she'd realize I had control over my gambling and wouldn't bitch about it ever again.

That didn't fucking happen, though. The first time I went back to the casino, Kit drew a line in the sand.

Gambling or her.

But as much as I love to gamble, I love her more.

*Fish Socks* scratches his chin. "I see."

"Great." I gesture between us. "Then do your job and fix me so I can go back home to my wife."

Every second without her feels like an eternity.

Not to mention, my brother is shelling out a shit ton of money for this place.

"That's not how this works, Preston." Picking up a coffee mug, he takes a sip. "I don't have the magic formula to fix you. That's something you have to be ready and willing to do yourself."

*This fucking guy.* "If that's the case, why are you getting paid to be here instead of me?"

"I'm not getting paid to fix you. I'm getting paid to give *you* the tools to do it."

"Fine." I lean back in my seat. "Let's get this shit over with then. Give me the tools."

The quicker he tells me, the quicker I go home.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but you seem to be looking for a fast resolution."

Nothing gets past him. "That's exactly what I'm looking for."

He places his coffee mug on the table. "That doesn't exist. Therapy isn't a shortcut. It's hard work that *you* have to be willing to put in."

I've had about all I can take of this shit.

"Jesus Christ. It's just fucking *gambling*. Plenty of people do it. Hell, thousands of people go to Vegas each day and no one is throwing them into rehab. You know why? Because it isn't a fucking problem."

I'm not shooting heroin into my veins or smoking crack. I'm playing



fucking poker. Everyone needs to get a damn grip.

He seems unfazed by my outburst. “And alcohol isn’t a problem for people who aren’t alcoholics.”

“It’s not the same thing,” I grit through my teeth. “Playing poker is a pastime. A national fucking hobby.”

He writes something down in his notepad. “That might be true for others, but not for you. In layman’s terms, addiction is using a substance or engaging in behavior even though it causes physical or psychological harm.”

And there it is. “None of which I’ve ever experienced. So, I’m good.”

He scratches his chin again. “You don’t think gambling for four days straight after a fight with your wife is harmful?” He leans forward in his chair. “How about not being able to walk away even though you’re losing money? Or forgoing basic necessities like food because you’d rather use the money in your pocket at the casino?”

I get what he’s saying, but he’s making it sound a lot worse than it is. “Fine. Yes, those things have happened.” Too many times to count. “But it doesn’t happen *every* time.”

“Addiction is a disease like any other. Sometimes there are periods of remission and other times the symptoms don’t significantly interfere with your daily life. But it’s still a disease. One only you and you alone can manage.”

I stay silent.

“But as with all diseases, there’s always a root cause.” He looks down at his notepad. “Your brother said you had an abusive childhood. Let’s talk about that.”

*Over my dead body.* “Let’s not.”

“The only way you can conquer your demons is to talk about them.”

“My father pushed me around sometimes,” I grind out. “I survived. The end.”

“Only it isn’t,” he counters. “Otherwise, you wouldn’t still be suffering from the effects of it.” He places the pad down on the table. “I want to help you, Preston. But in order to do that you not only have to be honest with me, you’ll need to be honest with yourself.” His brows furrow. “Tell me about your childhood.”

My chest coils and it takes every ounce of willpower I possess not to punch this asshole so hard it knocks him off the chair.

Gambling? Sure. I’ll talk about that shit until I’m blue in the face if that’s

what it takes.

Want me to admit I have a problem? *Fine*. I have a problem.

But my father? *What he did*.

Get the fuck out of here with that shit.

There's only one person I'll ever talk about that with and she's not here.

I stand. "Go fuck yourself."

## Chapter 63

---

Kit

*T*ry to zip and button my jeans, but they're not budging past my tiny pooch. "No more jeans for me."  
At least not in this size.

I'm almost twelve weeks pregnant and it feels like this baby is sending me on a roller coaster. One day I'm nauseous and tired. The next day I'm bursting with energy. One day I want to eat ten tacos. The next day I don't want to eat anything.

Having a baby is awesome. *Being pregnant sucks.*

Especially when you're not with the one person you want to be with the most.

When I spoke to the rehab, they told me Preston had to wait two weeks to earn phone privileges. However, he passed his two-week mark four days ago.

I'm trying to tell myself it's not a big deal that he hasn't called because he's working on himself and we need the space.

*But it hurts.*

Fortunately, Breslin and Juan have been keeping me company.

"That's because your uterus is expanding," Juan says, jolting me from my thoughts. "You should probably stick to leggings and stretchy pants."

Breslin nods. "You'll be a lot more comfortable."

*Amen to that.* I tug off my jeans and reach for a pair of sweatpants.

"According to this, your baby is the size of a plum."

When I turn, I notice Juan's lying upside down on my bed while flipping through one of my pregnancy books. "And at twelve weeks you'll also be

prone to headaches and—” He shudders. “More discharge. Gross.”

Yup. Having a baby is a big ol’ bag of fun.

Breslin plays with a piece of her hair. “It’s also the end of your first trimester. Which means you can officially tell people.”

I read her subtle undertone loud and clear.

*Tell my husband.*

And I will...eventually.

I just don’t think telling him while he’s in rehab is a good idea.

I also want to make sure he’s serious about getting help before I do since it’s my job to protect lovebug.

Juan places the book in the nightstand drawer. “Are you gonna tell your grandmother?”

I’d rather walk on glass barefoot.

She already has the satisfaction of knowing I’m married to and in love with a man. I’m not giving her the satisfaction of letting her know she’s going to be a great-grandmother, too.

Screw that.

I take off my sweatshirt because despite it being fall now it’s still hot as hell. “Nope.”

“Whoa,” Juan says as I dig around my dresser drawer for a tank top. “Those things are getting *big*.”

Don’t I know it. It’s the one plus side to pregnancy. In addition to having a baby, I also have tits.

“Pretty soon you’ll have bigger boobs than me,” Breslin says with a laugh.

Not likely. Breslin has watermelons. I’m *just* approaching the orange stage.

I slip my tank top past my head. “No—”

A knock on my bedroom door cuts me off.

“Everyone decent?” Landon says from the other side of my door.

“Yup. Come on in.”

Entering my bedroom, he looks at Breslin. “Our flight leaves in three hours.”

Asher’s football season has officially started. I told Breslin she should move back to their house in New Orleans because it would be much easier, but she refused. She wants to be here for every moment of my pregnancy.

Aside from when Asher has a game. Then she hops on a plane and visits

him for a few days.

“Don’t worry. I’m already packed.”

Walking over to her, Landon gives her a kiss. “Just wanted to make sure.”

“Is Asher nervous?”

He’s playing against the same team he lost the playoffs to last season. Tonight’s game is going to be huge.

Landon starts to speak, but then his phone rings. “Speak of the devil.” He swipes the screen and Asher’s face appears. “You and Breslin getting your asses on a plane soon or what? You know I need my good luck charms.”

He smiles. “Don’t worry. We’ll be there.”

Asher looks around. “Where are you?”

“Kit’s bedroom.”

Asher’s face lights up. “Hand over the phone.”

“Hey,” I say after Landon passes it to me. “How—”

“Let me talk to the peanut.”

Oh, boy.

Asher might not be here physically, but he’s still very much involved. He demands to talk to his future niece or nephew almost daily.

I place the phone near my belly. “Have at it.”

“Hey, peanut. Uncle Asher loves you. Wish him luck on kicking New York’s ass tonight.”

“Don’t curse in front of the baby,” Breslin tells him.

“Babies don’t hear sounds until eighteen weeks,” Juan reminds her.

Asher laughs. “In that case. Wish Uncle Asher luck on kicking their motherfucking bitch asses tonight.”

“Okay, that’s enough.” I move the phone away from lovebug. “I don’t want my baby to be aggressive and hostile.”

“Have you met the baby’s *father*?” Breslin mutters.

At that, Asher’s expression turns grim. “Oh, she has. She just hasn’t told him he’s the father.”

Awkward.

Asher didn’t like it but given my reasons *and* the fact he lied to me for Preston, he agreed to keep the baby a secret from him. Temporarily.

However, it’s clear by his tone that my time is running out.

“I can’t tell him when he hasn’t called,” I point out.

Asher makes a face. “He still hasn’t called you yet?”

“No. Why? Has he called you?”

“Yeah. I spoke to him yesterday. And the day before that.”

*Ouch.* “Oh.” I swallow. “How is he?”

Asher cringes. “I mean he’s still there...but he’s having a problem with his therapist.”

“What kind of problem?”

“According to Preston, the guy is a fish sock douchebag with the personality of a used piece of toilet paper.”

I’m not sure what a fish sock is, but the rest doesn’t sound good. “Can he change therapists?”

“I suppose he could, but I don’t think the therapist is the problem. I think Preston not wanting to talk about what happened is the problem.”

My stomach drops. “Well, he has to—” The sound of *my* phone ringing cuts me off. “Hold on. I have to take this.”

I give Landon back his phone and pick up mine. I don’t recognize the number, but I answer it anyway because it might be a potential client.

“Kit Bishop—”

“Hi.”

His deep, rough voice wraps around my heart and tugs.

“Hey.”

After mouthing that Preston is on the phone to Breslin, I leave my bedroom so I can have some privacy.

“How are you? How’s everything going?”

“That depends.”

“On?”

“What you think about them wanting to kick me out.”

My stomach bunches. “What? *Why?*”

“Because I refuse to participate in group therapy or any of the other stupid shit they keep asking me to do.” He grunts. “But mostly because my prick therapist refuses to take no for an answer.”

“What do you mean?”

“He wants me to talk about my childhood trauma. But I can’t...because it requires me talking about *that*.”

A shaky breath leaves me. “Oh.”

His voice drops. “I can’t do it, Kit. You’re the only person I’ll talk about that with.”

My chest feels like it’s going to cave in. “Preston—”

“I told him that and he suggested you come up here and join us for my

next therapy session.” His breath is a soft rasp in my ear. “I said I wasn’t sure if you would agree because we’re...in a bad place right now. His response was that I needed to try and ask anyway, because between me not talking to him or participating in any of the other bullshit things they want me to do, the *team* doesn’t think I’m a good fit for the program. They’re all douchebags.”

They might have a point. But not because they’re douchebags.

Because Preston refuses to open up and take therapy seriously.

It’s the worst outcome I could have hoped for.

*But he needs me.*

“When’s your next therapy session?”

“Tomorrow at three.”

“I’ll be there.”

With that, I hang up.



## Chapter 64

---

Kit

I'm nervous as I walk through the doors of the rehab center. Although to be honest, it looks more like a resort.

Asher said this place was recommended to him by a teammate he trusts.

It's obvious said teammate is *loaded*.

Not that Preston seems to be enjoying the beautiful surroundings.

After a woman escorts me to a large dining room, I find him sitting at the table.

His hair is a little longer and the stubble on his face looks to be about three days old...but he's still as gorgeous as I remember.

Aside from looking completely miserable.

However, he perks up a little when he sees me. "Hey."

I take a seat across from him at the table, thankful it helps shield my stomach. Not that I have a big belly or anything, but the only person who knows my body as well as I do is Preston. And there are definitely some changes going on that he might notice.

Fortunately, I wore a very baggy T-shirt to cover them up.

"Hey."

He crosses his arms in a way that makes his biceps stand out even more. "This place sucks."

"I know."

"I don't want to be here."

"I know that, too."

His eyes sharpen on me and it feels like all the oxygen got sucked out of

the room. “I miss you.”

*I miss you, too.*

I clear the emotion out of my voice. “Where’s your therapist—”

“This must be your wife,” a male voice says behind me.

Standing, I turn and extend my hand. “Hi. I’m Kit.”

He eagerly shakes it. “Hello, I’m Brad. It’s very nice to meet you. I’m so glad you could join us today.”

Despite Preston’s claims that he’s a douchebag, he looks and seems like a friendly nerd. Kind of like an older version of Landon.

He looks at Preston. “Shall we get started?”

Wordlessly, Preston stands.

And then Brad leads us to his office down the hall.

I take a seat on the couch next to Preston, and Brad takes a seat in the big chair across from us.

“So,” he starts. “I’m sure Preston told you that he’s having some *difficulty* here.”

Beside me, Preston makes a sound of irritation.

“Yes. He’s having trouble opening up.”

“Yes.” He pushes his glasses up his nose. “Normally we don’t have spouses come in unless there’s a specific family session scheduled, but I’ve decided to make a special exception in this case, considering the circumstances. The rest of the team wants to discharge him because they don’t think he’s a good fit for the program, but I think if we could get to the crux of his issues, we’d make some real progress together.”

“Eat a dick,” Preston mutters under his breath.

I nudge him with my elbow. “I’m here to help however I can.”

“Good. Familial support is very important.” He picks up a notepad and pen. “Preston, I understand and respect that this is hard for you. However, nothing you say in this room will ever leave my lips. I’m here to help you, not judge you.”

Preston snorts. “Bullshit.”

Brad sighs. “I can’t force you to talk, but I’d really like it if you would just try to give this a chance. I truly believe you’ll make some significant progress once you do.”

I turn to face Preston. “Please try.”

A groove in Preston’s forehead deepens. “I *am* trying.”

“What was your childhood like?” Brad asks.

*Geez Louise.* He just gets right into it.

“I already told you,” Preston snaps. “It was shitty. End of story.”

This isn’t him trying. This is him locking the door to his trauma and throwing away the key because it makes him uncomfortable.

“Look at me.” When he does, I take his hand. “You trust me, right?”

He nods.

I squeeze it a little tighter, because I’ve got him. “Then trust me when I tell you you’re *not* in this alone. I am right here with you.” I hold his gaze. “Stay with me.”

“What was your childhood like?” the therapist asks again.

Preston’s eyes don’t leave mine. “Horrible.”

“Why was that?”

His jaw tics. “Because my father beat the shit out of me sometimes.”

“I’m sorry that happened, Preston. No one deserves that.” I hear Brad scribbling something on a pad. “Abuse—especially childhood abuse—has a way of staying with us well into adulthood. It shapes us and makes us less trusting of others. But it’s important to know that you did nothing to deserve the abuse.”

Preston closes his eyes. “I moved the coffee table.”

The therapist looks at me. “I don’t—”

“It’s okay,” I whisper. “You can tell him what happened.” I squeeze his hand tighter. “I’m right here with you.”

*And I’m never leaving.*

Eyes squeezed shut and clutching my hand so tight it hurts, Preston finally speaks. “When I was seven, my father was beating my brother Asher. He was ramming his head into the coffee table. Asher’s eye was getting closer to the corner, so I moved the table out of the way. My father didn’t like that, so later that night he dragged me out of bed so he could punish me.”

Preston stops talking.

“What happened after he dragged you out of bed?” the therapist questions.

“I’m right here.”

Preston swallows. “He slammed the back of my head into the corner of the coffee table repeatedly, even after I started bleeding all over the carpet. He told me he would stop if I apologized for getting involved, but I refused. He was hurting my brother and I wanted to protect him...just like he always protected me...” Preston stops talking again.

“It’s okay,” the therapist says. “Take a few minutes. You can continue whenever you’re ready.”

Preston’s silent for so long I’m almost positive he’s not going to say another word...but then he does.

“I was crying because it hurt, and that only made him angrier. He said I was acting like a little girl and that I needed to man up. So, I did. I tried fighting back, but I was too small and he easily overpowered me. He slammed me onto the carpet and...” His mouth clamps shut.

“And then what happened?”

My heart twists and my stomach knots...because I *know* what happened next.

Tears well in my eyes as a deep ache spreads through my chest, but I force myself to stay strong.

Preston needs me, and I will not let him go through this alone.

Wrapping my free arm around him, I pull him close. “I’m here.”

Preston’s voice is a broken whisper. “Then he raped me.”



Brad takes a deep breath. “Thank you for telling me, Preston. I know it wasn’t easy.” He looks between us. “I think Kit should keep attending our therapy sessions for now. It’s evident she provides a safe space for you and given all you’ve been through that’s very important to maintain.” His gaze rests on me. “Is that okay with you?”

It’s more than okay. “Of course.”

He stands. “Good. I’ll give you two five minutes to talk, but then you’ll have to leave.”

I hate that I have to go, but I understand. Preston needs to focus on him, not us.

Brad strides toward the door. “I don’t know if Preston told you, but we’re hosting a family day here at the end of next month. All family members are welcome to spend the day with their loved ones. We’ll provide refreshments and there will be activities.”

Despite the annoyed expression on Preston’s face, I nod. “I’ll be there.”

And depending on Asher’s schedule, maybe he will, too.

“Thank you,” Preston says after the door closes.

“You don’t have to thank me.”

If anything, I should be thanking *him* because he really did try.

A lump fills my throat. “I’m proud of you.”

“You shouldn’t be.” His finger brushes my cheek and I feel the contact everywhere. “I’m here because I fucked up.”

“Yeah,” I whisper, my vision blurring. “You did fuck up.”

*Damn hormones.*

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean those things I said.” He cups my cheek, pulling me closer. “I lost control and freaked out.”

*I should tell him.*

But I’m afraid if I do, he’ll flip out again and it will derail the progress he just made.

I don’t doubt that Preston’s sorry, I *feel* it. But I’m also terrified that maybe he’s only saying he didn’t mean what he said about not wanting the baby because it no longer exists.

I’m afraid that deep down he feels relieved about it.

And if I tell him the truth and he loses it...I don’t think my heart could handle hearing those terrible things again.

“I should go.”

I stand, but he wraps a hand around my wrist. “Do you still love me?”

I blink, completely taken aback by his question because the answer is obvious. “Of course, I still love you.”

“Good.” He gets off the couch. “Because I will *always* love you. And I’m never giving up on us.” My heart knocks against my chest as he leans in...but despite how much I want him to close the distance between us, I press a hand to his chest, stopping him.

“I have to go.”

I know Preston loves me.

But I want him to love *us*.

## Chapter 65

---

Preston

*M*y therapist isn't so bad after all. I wouldn't say I like the guy or anything, but he's pretty easy to talk to.  
Especially when Kit's around.

Her first time here was last week, and now she's here again.

Last week we talked about my father.

This week...we talked about Jameson.

"I can see why you developed such a strong bond with him," Brad says with a frown. "The turn of events are rather unfortunate."

No shit.

I can't even call Charlotte to see how he is because we're not allowed to have cell phones.

Not that it matters because I left *that* one at the house.

I'd try calling her from here, but there's this stupid rule that we're only allowed to contact immediate family. They also punch the numbers in for us to make sure we abide by it.

It's like prison...only you have less freedom here.

I'd ask Kit to call her, but I'm already putting her through so much already.

Asking her to find out about Jameson after I screamed horrible things about not wanting the baby she thought she was pregnant with seems cruel.

Brad stands up. "This was another good session. Keep it up, Preston. You might not see it, but you're making some real progress." He smiles at Kit. "As long as you continue on this path, you'll not only be able to remain in the program, you'll also be granted day pass privileges."



Whoop-de-fucking-do.

I'd rather be granted the ability to press fast-forward so I can leave this shithole for good.

"I'll let you two talk for five minutes."

Fuck this five-minute bullshit. I should be able to be alone with my wife for however fucking long I want to.

Especially when I *know* something serious is going on with her.

Despite her telling me she still loved me last week—and holding my hand through therapy—she's been distant.

I get it, I hurt her. *Again.*

But I'm trying to fix myself and be better.

That has to count for something, right?

Evidently not because she's withdrawn. The only time she'll let me touch her is when we're in a session.

It fucking kills me. It feels like the first time we met all over again because while she has no problem talking about deep shit, she's drawing the line at doing anything physical.

Which sucks because she somehow looks even hotter lately. My eyes drop down to the sweater she's wearing. Maybe it's because it's been so long since I've seen her naked, but I swear her tits look bigger.

Reaching for her jacket, she promptly throws it on and zips it.

*Christ.* Not only will she not let me touch her body, she won't even let me look at it.

Kit heads for the door. "I'm gonna go."

"We still have four and a half minutes."

And I want to spend every second of them with her.

"I'm sorry," I tell her again. "I know I hurt you, but stop shutting me out."

Because as it turns out...I can't take a dose of my own medicine.

*Not from her.*

"I'm not trying to," she whispers. "I just..." Her voice trails off, like she wants to say something important, but she's stopping herself.

But she shouldn't, because she can tell me anything.

Unless she wants a divorce.

I'll torch the fucking earth if she pulls that shit on me again.

"I have to go."

A growl of frustration rips from my throat. "Do you still love me?"

I *feel* it, but I need the words. I need *something*.

For a moment, I think she's going to leave without giving me an answer...but then I hear it.

"I love you so much it hurts."

The words hang between us...and then she's gone.

*I love her so much it hurts, too.*

## Chapter 66

---

Kit

“Can I feel your fundus?”

I glare at Juan from across the kitchen island where we're working. Or rather, where *I'm* trying to work.

“What is wrong with you? No, you can't feel my fundus.” I blink. “What's a fundus?”

He points to his laptop screen. “According to this, it's the top of your uterus. You're fourteen weeks now so it should be starting to show.”

Oh, it's showing all right. I no longer look like I've eaten a big burger for lunch anymore.

I look like I've eaten twenty of them.

Okay, maybe not twenty, but I definitely have a noticeable pooch situation going on. Something I'm positive Preston noticed the other day after his therapy session.

I know I have to tell him I'm pregnant. I *know* this.

It's just...hard. And the longer it goes on...the harder it is to tell him.

This right here is *exactly* why I never lie. It's not worth the trouble and stress it causes both parties.

I close my laptop. “I'm hungry.”

Juan rolls his eyes. “Honey, please. What *else* is new?”

“You being my assistant is new,” I fire back. “Which means you're obligated to order us lunch.”

“*Puh-lease* tell me these bitchy hormones of yours will calm down soon.” He picks up his phone. “What do you want for lunch, boss?” He holds up a finger. “And don't you dare tell me burgers again, because *girl*, I am so over

watching you inhale those like your life depends on it only to run to the sink two seconds later and puke it all up...while *I'm* still eating.”

I get where he's coming from. But man, I was really craving a burger.

I'd tell him burritos, but I will never go near those things again for as long as I live.

“Fine. No burgers. I'll have a meatball parm hero from the Italian place we love.”

That's kind of like a burger. *With sauce.*

He brings the phone to his ear and starts to call in the order.

“Can you ask if they have cannoli?”

I'm craving one something fierce.

Juan picks up a nail file. “Do you have cannoli?”

He nods.

In that case, I know something that will taste awesome. “Can you order two?”

“I'd like to add two cannoli to the ord—”

“Can you tell them to smash the cannoli on top of the meatballs?”

Juan looks at me like I'm crazy. “Ew. Ya *nasty*. Those two things so don't belong on the same sandwich.”

I beg to differ. I'm craving savory and sweet, so it sounds like a great combination to me.

I bat my eyelashes. “Please.”

He stops filing. “I'm sorry, but is there any way you can smash the cannoli on top of the meatballs? Yes, I know that's disgusting, but I'm dealing with a pregnant woman who has gone temporarily insane.” He hangs up. “Anything else you want?”

“Nope. Thanks.”

I look around the kitchen island. I don't mind being in here, but I kind of miss having an office.

Problem is, I want my office on the first floor...and there's only one room down here.

*My childhood bedroom.*

The thought of getting rid of everything is sad...but I'm having a baby. My old toys and stuffed animals can go in their bedroom. Not that I know where *that* will be yet.

*One thing at a time, Kit.*

“You know what we need?”

Juan puts down the nail file. “A spa day?”

“An office.” I get off the stool. “And I know just the place we can convert into one.”

Juan follows behind me. “As long as I don’t have to do any heavy lifting. Because girl, I am *not* about that life.”



Fortunately, Breslin and Landon were able to help me move everything out of my childhood bedroom and put it into the garage.

Unfortunately, it’s taking a bit longer than expected to make the room an office. Over the last two days I’ve had to go out and buy two desks, two computers, office supplies...the works.

“I thought this nesting thing wasn’t supposed to happen until the *third* trimester,” Juan mutters as he and Landon carry a desk into the room.

“Oh, hush. I let you pick out your own desk and the computer you wanted.”

Granted the one he chose is *extravagant* as hell. But hey, whatever makes my great friend-slash-mediocre assistant happy.

Breslin walks into the room and hands me a smoothie. I figure I better start getting some healthy nutrients into this baby before it turns into a fast-food burger.

“It’s coming along nicely. We’ll probably be finished by tonight.”

Smiling, I bring the straw to my mouth, only to cringe when I taste a hint of mango. “Please tell me you didn’t put mango in this.”

Breslin blinks. “But you love mango.”

I do...lovebug *doesn’t*.

Next thing I know, I’m running over to my new trash can. *Ugh*. Just when this whole morning sickness crap was starting to subside.

“I’m sorry,” Breslin says. “I’ll make you another one.”

I shake my head. “No, it’s okay.”

I’m officially adding smoothies onto the forever banned list, along with burritos.

I'm about to ask her to pick me up another burger, but then my phone rings and the number for the rehab flashes across my screen.

I bring it to my ear. "Hey, you—"

"Are you okay?" Preston questions, his tone urgent.

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?"

"Because it's Thursday...and you're not here."

I peer up at the clock Breslin's putting on the wall and curse. I completely forgot about his therapy appointment. *Damn pregnancy brain.*

"I'm sorry. It completely slipped my mind—"

"It's fine," he bites out.

And then the line goes dead.

"What's wrong?" Breslin questions.

*Everything.*

## Chapter 67

---



Kit

*I* made sure to show up twenty minutes early for Preston's next therapy appointment.

Not that it mattered. He's the one giving *me* the cold shoulder now.

For once he spent most of the session addressing *Brad* instead of me.

I suppose it's a good thing, because it means he's trusting his therapist and taking this seriously.

I just wish it didn't feel like he was dismissing me while doing it.

"What he did took away all my control. It emasculated me. Made me *weak*," Preston says. "I fucking hate it."

I reach for his hand, feeling grateful when he laces our fingers together. "You were seven. But even if you weren't a kid, it doesn't mean you're weak." Far from it. Preston's the strongest person I know. "*He* was weak."

Because you'd have to be a pathetic, repulsive shell of a person to ever do that to another human. *Let alone a child.*

"Kit's right," Brad says. "What he did wasn't your fault, and it doesn't make you less of a man. It made *him* less of one."

At that, Preston snorts.

Brad isn't giving up, though. "If I told you I was raped, would you think I was less of a man?"

"No," Preston finally answers. "I wouldn't."

Brad starts to smile, but then Preston adds, "I think you're a wuss because you wear socks with fishes on them."

They exchange a humorous glance before Brad stands up. "This was

another great session, Preston. Thank you for trusting me.” He looks at me. “I’ll see you at the next one.”

“If she doesn’t forget again,” Preston mutters.

“We can discuss that next time,” Brad offers before taking off.

“I’m sorry I forgot,” I tell him. “I really didn’t mean to. I just...I have a lot going on.”

Preston shifts on the couch to face me. “Like what?”

*Tell him.*

“I...” I chicken out at the last second. He’s doing so good and I don’t want to screw that up. “I’ve been really busy with work.”

“Okay. What’s been going on?”

“You know...just the usual.”

He scans my face as if trying to see through my words. “No, I don’t know. You used to tell me everything, angry girl. But not anymore.”

His nickname makes my heart expand and crack at the same time.

“I know.”

A tear escapes down my cheek and Preston brushes it away with his thumb before cupping my face.

“Talk to me, Kit. Hell, yell at me. I don’t care. Just stop whatever *this* is.”

“I’m sorry.”

His Adam’s apple bobs. “Is there someone else?”

His words make my stomach drop. “What? Are you kidding? There could never be anyone else.”

He’s it for me. For as long as I live, I will only ever want *him*.

Although technically he’s not wrong. *There is someone else.*

He brings our foreheads together. “I love you.”

His lips gently brush mine, but when he tries to deepen the kiss, I get off the couch.

“I have to go.”

“Why?” he growls behind me.

Because I love him so damn much...

*And I’m terrified I’m going to lose him.*



My heart squeezes and a flood of grief rushes through me as I turn the knob to my parent's bedroom.

I haven't been in here since the day they died, but everything is just as I remembered it.

The king-size canopy bed that was big enough to fit all three of us comfortably whenever I had a nightmare.

The gold dressers that my mother picked out, but my father hated.

The large photo of the three of us hanging above the bed.

I run my hand over my mother's vanity, touching her hairbrush and lipstick.

I didn't realize it when I was a kid, but my parents weren't perfect.

And neither was their marriage.

There were times when they were sad. Times when they fought.

But they still held on to each other and never gave up.

I plop down on the wooden floor and look around, taking everything in.

I always liked the thought of preserving their bedroom...kind of like a museum that I could visit if I ever chose to.

I rub my stomach. I'll be fifteen weeks tomorrow and I hate that they're missing this.

"You would have been amazing grandparents."

They would have loved this baby so much...with every single part of them. They would have given my baby some great memories filled with laughter and happiness.

They would have watched over and protected them.

I'd like to think that maybe they're in a place where they still can.

I pick up my phone and call Breslin.

"I know I've been a pain in the ass lately, but I need your help again," I say in a rush when she answers.

"You're not a pain in the ass. I'll be right over."

"Thanks. Bring Landon," I tell her before hanging up.

Eyes focused on the picture of us, I stand.

This place is a museum—a place where memories mixed with my grief fill every square inch of it.

But I don't think they would want that for me.

I'd think they'd want me to find a way to make this a happy place again.

*A place where I can feel love.*

They aren't alive, and the thought of my baby never knowing the two

greatest people I've ever met hurts me so much I could stand here and scream until my lungs give out.

But it wouldn't do a damn thing to bring them back.

So, I want to do something positive and constructive instead. Something they'd want.

I want to make this a place where their grandchild can feel their love and protection.

*Just like they would if my parents were still here.*

## Chapter 68

---

## Kit

It took three days for Breslin, Landon, Juan, and myself to clear out my parents' bedroom so we could turn it into a nursery.

"What color do you want the walls to be?" Breslin asks. "I can paint them whatever color you want. I can even create caricatures and animals."

I look around the almost empty room. There's still a lot of work—and a lot of shopping—to be done.

So far, I've only purchased a changing table and a crib.

"Can we keep the color gender neutral for now?"

While I'm dying to know if my baby will be a boy or a girl, I also want to keep it a surprise. It makes everything even more exciting.

"Sure. We can do yellow or maybe a pale green."

"Go with green," Juan cuts in. "No one actually likes the color yellow. Plus, I recently read an article that said it can make babies frustrated. Green is way more soothing."

Thank God for Juan the baby whisperer.

"Green it is—"

The sound of my phone ringing cuts me off. For a moment I'm scared that I missed another one of Preston's therapy appointments, but it's Monday.

Relief fills me when I see Reggie's name on the screen, but it's immediately followed by a swell of annoyance.

He's most likely calling because it's been a while since I've seen my Nanna and she's requesting my presence for brunch. I'm sure she'll hem and

haw about Preston going to rehab, but too bad, so sad.

She'll just have to deal with it.

I answer after the second ring. "Hello, sunshi—"

"Kit." Reggie's voice is filled with more emotion than I've ever heard. "You need to come to your grandmother's house as soon as possible."

I freeze. "Why? What's going—"

"It's time," he whispers. "Please, come quick."



I drove so fast I'm pretty sure I broke at least three different traffic laws.

The moment the door opens, Reggie immediately takes my hand and leads me up the stairs.

"The doctor said it could be moments or hours," he informs me as he opens the door to her bedroom. "But I know she wanted you to be here."

I draw in a sharp breath as I walk in.

My Nanna has always been the strong, resilient type.

*Tough as nails.*

Even after she lost her ability to speak and became too fragile to walk... she was *never* weak.

Seeing her lying there looking so frail and delicate is something I wasn't prepared for.

"I'll give you some privacy," Reggie says, gesturing to the chair he placed beside her bed.

I want to ask him to stay, because I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do.

While I'm thankful she shot my uncle, my Nanna and I weren't close.

Other than the day my parents died; I never felt a single ounce of love from her.

*Only hate for who I was.*

I take a seat on the chair. Then I reach for her hand. "It's me, Nanna."

There's no response to that. Just the faint sound of something rattling in her chest.

"I wish this wasn't happening," I whisper...but not because I'll miss her.

Because we never got to have the relationship that I always longed for.

We never baked cookies in the kitchen while she shared stories from her youth and gave me advice.

She never held me close and told me she loved me.

She never treated me like a granddaughter.

She treated me like the only reason she was keeping me around was because I was the only thing of her son's that she still had left.

I was a responsibility she didn't want.

An obligation she resented being stuck with.

And then I became a person she loathed...because she didn't agree with my sexuality.

Maybe it makes me a terrible person, but I finally have my time to speak without her interrupting or dismissing me.

I finally have my time to tell her *exactly* what I think about her.

"I wanted you to love me so bad, Nanna." My voice grows thick with emotion. "But all you ever did was hate me...because I was different." I close my eyes. "Because I wasn't what you wanted me to be."

I grip her hand tighter. "But you missed out. You spent so much time despising and punishing me...you never got to know me. Because if you did, you would have seen that I'm stronger than you ever were. That I'm eccentric and emotional like my mom...but also introspective like my dad. That even though I wear my heart on my sleeve...it doesn't make me weak. That my sexuality doesn't make me a bad person...it makes me a valiant one because I had to deal with people like *you*."

Tears threaten to spill over, but I force them back down. I've cried thousands of tears over this woman and she never deserved a single one. She won't get any now.

"Every good thing about me is because of *them* and not you. Because they showed me what love was. And that love is the reason I don't hate you, even though I should."

I place her hand on my belly. "But while I don't hate you, I do pity you. Because whenever my child asks what my grandmother was like, I'm going to tell them the truth. Because *that's* the real legacy you left me with." I lean over because I want to make sure she hears this. "You think you won...but you lost."

That hand that I'm still pressing against my stomach becomes stiff and grows cool.

Because you never loved me.

*And now you'll never have the chance.*



## Chapter 69

---

Kit

*F*unerals are supposed to be sad. A time for grief and sorrow.  
A time to remember your loved one before sending them  
off to their final resting place.

I'm wearing a black dress, even though I'm not in mourning.

I'm listening to the priest give a eulogy, even though I don't care.

I'm hearing Reggie snifle behind me, even though I don't share his pain.

I look up at the clear bright blue sky. It's a gorgeous fall day. Damn near perfect. It seems the universe isn't sad about losing her either.

When the priest gets to the part where he asks that the Lord bless her and watch over her...I can't contain my laughter.

*I hope she rots in hell.*

Breslin—who's sitting next to me in the front row—gives me a little nudge with her elbow.

It only makes me laugh harder.

People are gathered here in this cemetery...grieving the life of a rotten woman.

I guess I just find the whole thing comical.

Heck, if I wasn't knocked up, I'd be partying after this.

"Kit," Breslin hisses.

I press a hand to my chest, trying my hardest to stop laughing but I can't.

Doesn't anyone else find this hysterical?

Evidently not, because the priest gives me a stern look before he continues.

*Good God, man.* Put her in the ground and throw dirt over her casket

already.

Only the moment they do...

My laughter stops.



“Kit,” Breslin calls out behind me. “Honey, we’ve been here for two hours already.”

“You can leave.”

“No, that’s not what I mean—”

“We just want to make sure you’re okay,” Landon cuts in.

“We’re here for you,” Juan adds.

I run my thumb over my parents’ headstones, over the words beloved mother and father.

I guess I didn’t realize my Nanna would be buried in the family plot right next to them.

Makes sense.

Seeing as she’s family.

A family I no longer have.

*Because everyone is dead.*

I look at the pile of dirt. I know they need to bury her officially, but I don’t want them to.

Because even though my Nanna was a miserable woman...she was still my family.

And without her, I don’t have any left.

My baby won’t be an orphan. *But I am.*

Maybe it’s the hormones, or maybe it’s because I finally feel genuine grief, but that thought sends such a river of agony through me, I start crying.

So hard I can’t bring myself to stop.

“It’s okay,” Breslin says, rushing over to where I’m still kneeling on the grass.

No. It’s *not* okay.

“Go away,” I choke out.

I love her, and I know she’s only trying to be a good friend and console me, but I just want to be alone.

The tone of my voice must scare her off because she walks behind me

again.

“I’ll give you some space. But I’m right here if you need me, okay?”

There’s only one person I need right now.

*And he’s not here.*

“I’m all alone,” I croak through sobs.

“You’re *not* alone,” Breslin assures me.

It sure feels like it right now.

It’s like my entire world is crumbling and I don’t have a foundation to stop myself from crumbling with it.

A violent sob leaves me. I thought I was strong. I thought it wouldn’t hurt. I thought...

“Angry girl.”

His gruff voice surrounds me like armor, shielding me.

And the arms he wraps around me feel like a safety net.

The only protection I have against the storm raging inside me.

Preston picks me up off the ground and I lock my legs around his waist, breathing him in through my sobs.

“It hurts.”

Tightening his hold on me, he begins walking. “I know.”

I don’t know why it aches so bad.

All I know is that the only thing that can make it better...is right here.

Because even though I want to be alone...

I’d rather be alone with him.

## Chapter 70

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Preston

The *team* wasn't going to grant me a day pass. Not even for the funeral of an immediate family member.

According to them, my progress still wasn't quite up to *par* yet.

Fortunately, Brad stuck up for me and convinced them I wasn't a flight risk or in danger of spending the eight-hour pass they finally gave me at a casino.

Unfortunately, what already took an hour to get here turned into two because of traffic.

Watching Kit fall apart at the cemetery gutted me. Her grandmother was a cunt who never deserved an ounce of Kit's love, but I know it's more than that.

Her Nanna—vile as the crotchety bitch was—was also Kit's last surviving family member.

Not only does it make her the last Bishop standing, it brings the grief from losing her parents rushing back.

Kit doesn't handle loss well. Because when she loves you, she does it with every single part of her heart and soul.

Which means that when something she loves gets taken away...it takes a part of her with it.

And while I don't think she loved her grandmother...not in a conventional way at least. She spent most of her life trying to make that repulsive woman love *her*.

I pull up the driveway of the house and cut the engine.

Kit sobbed the entire ride home, but she seems a little calmer now.  
I'd ask if she's okay, but it's obvious she's not.

"Let's go inside."

She doesn't protest, so I take it as a yes.

After getting out, I walk over to her side of the car and open the door.

"Hold on to me," I tell her as I pick her up.

She does, gripping me so tight the nails she's digging into my back are bound to leave marks.

After unlocking the front door, I enter the house. Lola, who's in the foyer, looks equally confused and excited to see me so I give her head a brief pat.

"Do you want me to bring you upstairs?"

Truth be told, she looks like she could use the rest. I don't think I've ever seen her so exhausted.

Kit shakes her head before burying her nose in my neck.

Okay, then.

"What do you want—"

I stop speaking when her teeth graze my skin.

I move my head to the side, giving her better access as her lips travel up the side of my throat.

"Kit."

It comes out like a warning, because if she doesn't stop, I'm not responsible for what happens next.

It's been too fucking long since I've had her, and her doing this is the equivalent of playing with fire.

Her lips find my jaw, but before she can move onto my mouth, I beat her to it and capture hers.

Limbs still wrapped around me, I back her against the wall as I coax her mouth open so I can taste her.

The second our tongues meet; however, she motions for me to put her down.

As I do, I remind myself not to get mad because she's emotionally unstable at the moment.

But then she sinks to her knees and unzips my pants.

I groan as her smooth hand fists my dick and she kisses my lower abs.

Blood flows through my veins when her tongue finds the head of my cock, teasing me before she gives it a slow suck.

My head lolls back, too lost in what she's doing to stop it because this is

what I need.

Not gambling again is going to be a lifelong struggle that I'll battle with daily.

But living without Kit isn't something I can survive.

I grab a fistful of her hair as she takes me deep, sucking me like she's been craving me just as much as I've been craving her.

"Fuck."

Bracing my hand on the wall, I thrust until I hit the back of her throat. Pleasure sizzles up my spine as she takes me. Every suck and slurp from that eager little mouth of hers feels so fucking good.

*Too good.*

"Stop."

She instantly freezes, releasing my dick with a wet pop.

I take the opportunity to scoop her off the floor. My pants are around my ankles and the walk upstairs to the bedroom is too fucking long.

My choices are either the kitchen or the living room.

I pick the shorter of the two and move us into the kitchen.

I don't know what was on the table, and I don't give a fuck as it goes crashing to the floor and I set Kit on top of it.

My hands find the hem of her dress but when I go to pull it up, she stops me. "Fuck me. *Now.*"

Christ.

I wanted to take my time, but Kit's driving a hard bargain that I'm not stupid enough to turn down.

"Spread your legs."

Reaching between her now open thighs, I move her panties to the side, take hold of her hips, and sink inside her.

The warm, wet grip around my dick makes me groan.

Somewhere between the next few thrusts, it occurs to me that I'm not wearing a condom.

I'm rolling the dice by not stopping to put one on, but the need to be as close to her as humanly possible is at the very forefront of my mind and body.

Kit's too, given the way her hands dig into my ass and the little noises she makes as I fuck her hard and fast.

She's so slick, wet sounds fill the kitchen with every thrust. My abs clench and pleasure pushes through me as I pump in and out of her tight



pussy.

I squeeze her tit, causing her to exhale sharply. Turns out I wasn't just imagining things, because they fill up more of my hand than they did before. Not that I'm complaining.

She raises her hips, like she needs to take every inch I can give.

I give it to her and then some. Rubbing her clit with one hand, I bring her mouth to mine with the other, fucking her with my tongue the same way I'm fucking her.

Kit whimpers and cries against my mouth, and I taste every sound. I can tell she's close because she clamps me like she never wants to let me go.

*I'll make sure she never does.*

Her fingers cling to my shoulders. "Preston."

Moaning, her body arches off the table, her hips meeting mine as she comes.

I'm right behind her. My balls draw tight as I pump into her one last time.

When I come, I give her everything—my trust, my loyalty, my love.

Because she isn't just my exception.

She's my entire fucking universe.

And *nothing* will ever change that.



Kit was so drained after I fucked her brains out, I brought her upstairs so she could get some rest.

In the meantime, I charged my phone so I can call Charlotte.

I creep into the bathroom after it's charged so I don't disturb Kit.

She answers after the third ring.

"How is he?"

I hear her sigh before she says, "He's a little sad lately."

Talk about a kick to the nuts. "Why? What's going on?"

"Well, aside from missing you, Becca hasn't been around much. And I don't just mean her usual coming home at two a.m. routine. She's leaving for *days* at a time now."

Shit.

"I'm sorry, Preston, but I'm gonna need to call CPS soon. Becca might

not be abusing him, but she's definitely neglecting him. And while I love babysitting Jameson, I can't afford to take any more days off from school. I care about him, but I'm not his mother. I deserve to have a life, too."

She's right. Unlike me, who wants the responsibility of taking on Jameson full time, Charlotte didn't ask for this. What she once assumed was going to be a simple weekend job babysitting a neighbor's kid has turned into something that's taking over her life.

Which makes what I'm about to ask her next even more fucked up.

"I understand. But I need you to hang in there for a little longer."

Once CPS gets involved, it's out of my hands. *I can't let that happen.*

At least with Charlotte I know Jameson is being well taken care of.

"Why? Where have you been? I've tried calling you a few times, but you haven't picked up."

All valid questions. However, I don't want to go into specifics because I don't think telling her I'm currently in *rehab* will convey that I have shit under control. If anything, it will only push her to call CPS that much more.

"I've taken on a new job as my brother's agent, so I've been really busy. I'm sorry I haven't touched base, but I can Venmo you some money." Because fuck knows Becca's not paying her enough. If she even is anymore. "I just need you to stick it out a little longer."

"For how long?"

I'm halfway through the program, so I'll need at least another month and a half.

"Two months."

"Two *months*?" she shrieks. "I can't deal with this for another two months."

"I know." A throbbing headache is starting to form between my eyes. "But I'm begging you."

"What happens after two months?"

Good question. Aside from kidnapping him—something I've seriously considered given Becca probably wouldn't even notice—I'm at a loss.

"I'm working out a plan."

Am I telling her the truth? No.

I'm just hoping to buy myself extra time so I can come up with *something*.

"Anyway," I say before she can question me about this nonexistent plan. "Text me your Venmo info. I'll send you money in a little bit."

I can tell she wants to argue, but I also know how much she cares about Jameson. She doesn't want to have to call CPS if she can help it.

"Fine."

"Thanks, Charlotte. I owe you. Give Jameson a big hug for me."

By the time we hang up, my headache has turned into a full-blown migraine.

I open the medicine cabinet so I can take an aspirin...but another bottle snags my attention.

I recognize them because they're the same prenatal vitamins Becca used to take.

I scan my brain, trying to come up with a perfectly reasonable explanation for these pills.

Maybe Breslin's pregnant. She does have double the odds.

However, when I turn the bottle around...it isn't Breslin's name I see.

It's Kit's.

Blowing out a heavy breath, I brace myself against the sink.

I believed Kit when she told me it was a false alarm...because she's never lied to me about anything serious before.

*Until now.*

Question is why the fuck did she lie to begin with?

I know she's not cheating on me—and if she was, it would be with a woman—so the baby's definitely *mine*.

*Motherfucker.* I knew something was going on with her.

White-hot panic impales me. I'm torn between wanting to run out of here as fast as I can so I can head to the nearest casino and wanting to wake her up so she can give me the answer to this burning question.

I'm fucking *pissed* that she lied.

I was being dead serious when I told her I didn't want children. Not only because of my own fucked-up childhood, but I've all but lost one already.

I *can't* go through that kind of pain again.

And if something ever happened...during labor...during *anything*.

I've got nothing left in me that would prepare me to endure that kind of loss again. I'm completely tapped out.

But then I think about Kit being the mother of my child—not a vindictive woman who would use our baby as a bargaining chip—and it feels different.

Still scary as fuck...but it doesn't feel wrong.

The opposite actually. It feels *right*.

Like something clicking and falling into place.

Even though I'm fucking terrified I'm going to be the world's worst father—especially with how I fucked everything with Jameson up—I also know *this* kid has one hell of a safety net.

Because Kit will be the best mother.

I just need her to tell me why she lied.

Then I can assure her that we're in this together.

For better or worse.

Till death do us part.

## Chapter 71

---

Kit

*I*'ve just finished taking off my dress when Preston walks out of the bathroom.

I'm grateful my back is to him as I quickly tug on a pair of leggings and a baggy T-shirt.

I know I need to tell him the truth.

And as much as I'd like to prolong it to avoid potential heartbreak...I can't.

Not only am I not getting any smaller, I hate lying to him.

*I just have to brace myself for the worst.*

When I turn around, I find him staring at me...his expression unreadable.

"How did you manage to get out for the funeral?"

His eyes don't leave mine when he speaks. "Brad convinced the team to give me a day pass."

Bet he doesn't think he's such a douchebag now.

"How much longer do you hav—"

Words jam in my throat when he pulls my prenatal vitamins out of his pocket.

"Why do you have these?"

Oh, God. I can practically taste his anger.

"Why were *you* snooping around the medicine cabinet?"

Granted he lives here...but still.

"Answer the question, Kit."

*I can't.*

Not because he doesn't deserve to know, but because *I* can't handle him

screaming that he doesn't want our baby again.

Ignoring him, I grab my purse off the dresser.

Then I take out my checkbook and a pen.

I met with Barry yesterday and aside from Reggie making out with a cool million, my Nanna left all the money to me like she said she would. He'll be officially processing everything tomorrow.

I quickly make out a check for the two million I promised Preston and sign my name.

This baby doesn't have to be his. I can do it on my own.

It will hurt like hell because I will never love another person the way I love Preston. Not even close.

And God knows I will miss him every single day of my life.

*But at least I'll get to keep some part of him.*

Tears lodge in my throat as I tear the check out of the book.

I never thought I'd choose anything over Preston. *Ever.*

But this baby didn't choose to be conceived.

Someone has to love them and take care of them.

"What the hell is this?" Preston grunts when I hand it to him.

A tear makes its way down my cheek and I quickly wipe it away. "Don't cash it until next week. That's when the money will be in my account."

He glances at me. Then at the check. Then at me again.

If I thought he was angry before, it doesn't even compare to right now. He's downright livid.

"Are you...why the *fuck* are you handing me a check for two million?"

"It's what we agreed upon when you married me." I place my hand on my stomach protectively. "Take it and go."

His tongue finds his cheek. He's glaring at me like I'm positively certifiable. "Are you fucking crazy?"

"Please don't make this any harder."

Because it's taking everything I have not to shatter.

"Make *what* any harder?" The tendons in his neck strain. "Talk to me, Kit."

I try to leave the room, but he blocks the door. "Kit—"

And that's when I lose it.

"Just stop," I yell so loud Preston's eyes widen. "I know you don't want this baby. I get it. I don't need you to look me in the eyes and scream it in my face again." I clutch my chest. My heart is pounding so hard I feel like it's

going to burst right through my ribcage. “Hearing you say it again will kill me. So just go. *Please.*”

His jaw tics and his eyes darken...

And then he rips up the check.

“I don’t want the money.” His expression fills with anguish as he steps closer. “I want *you*...and our baby.”

I feel like he just knocked the wind out of me with those words. “But—”

“I didn’t mean what I said,” he growls. “I *told* you that.”

He did, but I wasn’t sure if he was being serious or just saying he didn’t because I led him to believe it was a false alarm.

Preston isn’t always the easiest person to get a read on.

I cross my arms over my chest. “I thought you were just saying you didn’t mean it because I told you there was no baby.”

He snorts. “I guess I have my answer.”

I’m assuming he means the answer to why I lied. “I also didn’t want to do anything that would hurt your progress and cause you to...you know.”

“Act like a shithead and go on a gambling bender again?”

His slow smile grips my heart.

“That’s putting it mildly, but yeah.”

“Fair enough, but I’m not the only one who acted like a shithead here.”

He gestures to the ripped-up check on the floor. “I can’t believe you tried to pay me off.” Genuine hurt splashes across his face. “Did you honestly think I would go for it? That I’d seriously walk out on my wife and child for money?”

I’d like to think he wouldn’t, but I wasn’t sure. *Not after that night.*

He takes another step, closing the space between us. “Not for two million. Not for ten million. Not for a hundred billion.” He tips my chin. “There is no amount of money—no amount of *anything*—that would ever make me leave you.” He sucks in a ragged breath. “Or this baby.”

And that’s when I burst into tears.

Something that visibly alarms Preston.

“What is it? What’s happening now?”

I start flapping my hands, trying to shoo them away. “I’m pregnant.”

I didn’t think anything could make *me* more emotional, but surprise. A bun in the oven will do it.

His lips curve with a ghost of a smile. “With my baby.”

Still crying, I share his smile. “Duh.”



He looks down. “Can I see?”

I take off my shirt because it’s just easier that way.

Preston drops to his knees, his hands going to my belly that is definitely noticeable now.

“How far along are you?”

“I’m sixteen weeks today.”

I’m about to give him the run down on how it happened, but Mr. Math wizard peers up at me. “This happened in *Hawaii*?”

“Yup. Plan B didn’t work. Your little swimmer had already hitched a ride onto my egg by the time I took it.” I laugh without humor. “Still happy you followed my ass there now?”

He presses a kiss to my belly. “I’d do it all over again, angry girl.”

And just like that, the butterflies are back.

For *real*...because there’s a genuine fluttering in my tummy going on.

What the hell is happening?

Preston kisses my stomach again...and I feel it a second time.

“Holy shit. That’s not possible.”

Preston raises a brow. “What’s not possible?”

“According to baby whisperer Juan, I’m not supposed to feel the baby move until week twenty, but I definitely just felt it. *Twice*.”

Preston doesn’t look convinced. “Are you sure it’s not just gas?”

“Positive.” Because Lord knows I’ve had *a lot* of that. “I know what butterflies feel like.”

Preston gives them to me every time he kisses me.

And apparently our baby, too.

“Fine. Let’s test out this theory.”

He presses his lips to my tummy, and low and behold, it happens for a third time.

“Yup. More butterflies.”

He brings his ear to my belly like he’s trying to hear something. “Now you’re just fucking with me.”

Why would I lie? To be honest, I’m kind of jealous the baby reacted to him instead of me.

“I am not. The baby clearly likes you.”

Which isn’t a very smart move on their part because *I’m* the fun one.

Then again, I can’t really blame them...

*Because I love him.*

“Well, they shouldn’t.” His gaze rests on my belly. “I’m an asshole.”

I cup my hand over my mouth and look down. “It’s true. He is. But his good traits outnumber his bad ones.”

Most of the time.

“I wish I didn’t have to go back to rehab.” His brows knit as he stands. “I feel like I’ve lost so much time. I missed your entire first trimester.”

I missed most of it, too.

I wave a hand. “Wasn’t that great. Trust me. A lot of burgers followed by a lot of puke...and an aversion to burritos that I’ll never shake.”

Remembering what I was doing before I got the phone call about my Nanna; I grab his hand. “Come on, I want to show you something.”

“Where are we going?” he questions as I lead him to the room directly across the hall.

*The room he’s never been in before.*

I open the double doors. “This was my parents’ room...but now it’s going to be the baby’s nursery. What do you think?” I walk around. “I haven’t had a chance to build the crib or get anything we’ll need yet, but I’m hoping when it’s done it will look really nice in here.”

Like a little baby oasis.

I’m confused when Preston sits down on the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re gonna order some burgers.” He grabs the large box containing the crib. “While *I* build this crib.” Taking parts out of the box, he gives me a look that makes my heart skip not one, not two, but three beats before tumbling over itself. “And then I’m gonna go back to rehab, because you both deserve the best version of me.”

And the tears are back again.

“I love you.”

His lips curve. “I love you, too. But don’t do any more in here until I get back. I don’t want to miss anything else.”

*I don’t want him to miss anything, either.*

## Chapter 72

---

Kit

“*I*’m telling you, Juan. Preston made the baby move. There were fluttering butterflies and everything.”

“I know you think so, but that’s not possible.” He slams the maternity book shut and places it on the nightstand next to my bed. “Twenty weeks. That’s when you’ll feel fluttering butterflies.”

Little does he know I’ve been feeling them *long* before I got knocked up.

It’s been three days since Preston went back to rehab and I miss him so much it hurts. Fortunately, family day is only five days away, so I’ll get to see him then.

Asher has some time between games, so he’ll be flying in, too. I asked Breslin and Landon to join us as well because I want Preston to be surrounded by all the people who love him.

“Whatever. I know what I felt.” I rub my belly, because now I’m feeling famished. “I’m hungry.”

Groaning, Juan swings his legs over the bed. “What do you want? And dear God, please let me go pick it up.”

I’m craving the usual, but I want to be considerate. “What would you like to eat?”

“Burritos,” he deadpans.

I hiss and he laughs.

“Just kidding. I was thinking Chinese.”

*Meh.* But I’ll deal. “Chinese sounds good to me.”

“Me, too,” he says while scrolling through his phone. I assume he’s looking up a number for a restaurant, but then I see that he’s on a dating

website.

“I thought you wanted Chinese food?”

Not bothering to look up, he says, “Honey, *you* were talking about the food. I was talking about men.” He holds up his phone, showing me a picture of a very attractive Asian man. “He’s gonna be my future baby daddy. I just know it.”

As much as I want him to find the man of his dreams, the lovebug in my belly really wants her uncle to find food first.

So, I break out the big guns.

“Your future niece or nephew is hungry.”

*That* gets him to put down the phone. “Okay. I’m going.”

I pat my belly and grin. *Works every time.*

“Also, I already told you. You’re definitely having a boy. Trust me on this.” Lowering his head, he cups a hand over his mouth, talking to the baby. “Uncle Juan is always right.”

“Uncle Juan might be right, but he’s also letting you *starve.*”

“Lies.” He jumps to his feet. “I’ll be back in fifteen.”

I look down at my stomach after he leaves. “It will be at *least* a half hour. Better get comfy.”

*I’m* getting comfy when I hear the sound of a phone ringing. Since it’s not mine, I’m assuming it’s Juan’s...only it’s nowhere to be found.

However, the ringing continues. Driving me crazy.

I follow the sound. It’s coming from the nightstand drawer on Preston’s side of the bed.

Sure enough, when I open it, I find his secret phone.

By the time I take it out of the drawer, there are three missed calls from someone named *C*.

I’m not sure who *C* is...unless it stands for Cunt. Otherwise known as Becca.

I’d rather give myself a root canal than deal with Becca, but I also want to make sure Jameson’s okay.

I made Preston give me his new passcode after we got back from Hawaii, so I punch it in.

At the same time the phone starts ringing again.

I bring it to my ear. “Hello?”

I prepare myself for Becca’s voice...but some woman with a French accent speaks instead.

It suddenly occurs to me that after I found out he wasn't talking to his mom...I never asked him who the French woman was on the phone.

"Hi, can I please speak to Preston?" she says frantically. "It's an emergency."

*That* much is clear by the hysterical tone of her voice.

"Preston isn't here right now, but this is his wife. Are you okay? Do you need help?"

"I just found out that my dad got into a horrible car accident. I need to go back to Louisiana right away so I can see him, but I have Jameson."

Oh, shit. This must be the babysitter.

"I'm so sorry to hear about your dad. Where are you now?"

"I'm at my apartment with Jameson. I'm sorry for calling, but I didn't know what else to do. Becca's been gone for two days and she won't pick up her phone—"

"Take a deep breath and give me the address." I snatch my purse and run out of the bedroom. "I'm on my way."

## Chapter 73

---

Kit

*I* finish cutting Jameson's peanut butter and jelly sandwich into fours and hand it to him. "Here, sweet pea."

He promptly takes the plate and runs over to the couch.

I quickly make one for myself and join him.

If someone would have told me that I'd be staying at Becca's apartment for the next consecutive five days, I would have told *them* to save me the shit they were smoking until after I gave birth.

For the first two days...I was in shock.

The third day... I was sad.

And by the fourth day...I was pissed.

Jameson doesn't deserve this. He's an *amazing* kid.

I thought about taking him back to my house—where it's not only cleaner, there's a lot more food—but I wouldn't put it past Becca to try and press kidnapping charges on me.

Provided she ever walks through that door again, that is.

Either way, I'm going to stay right here with Jameson until she does.

He lays against me as we continue watching some show about an animated pig. I'm not really sure what it's about, but Jameson is obsessed with it.

"Want to know something cool?"

Tilting his head to look at me, he nods.

I take his little hand and place it on my belly. "There's a baby in here."

As strange as it sounds, I'm pretty sure Jameson might have already known because he's randomly rubbed my belly a handful of times since I've



been here.

Figured it might be a good idea to let him know there's something baking in it.

He grins, his whole face lighting up like a Christmas tree before he lays his head on my belly.

And that's how we stay for the rest of the morning.



“I’m not the best cook, but I can try to make you some pancakes if you want.”

Jameson thinks about this for a moment before he nods.

*Dear God, don't let me screw this up.*

I had Juan bring me over a change of clothes and some groceries earlier, so we have all the ingredients.

Not that there's much since I'm making it from a box. I don't want to take any chances this time.

After locating a bowl in the kitchen I spent the first day I was here cleaning, I combine some of the powder in the box with some milk and start mixing it to form a batter.

Jameson watches me the whole time, like he's nervous I'm going to screw it up.

*That makes two of us, kid.*

“How many do you want?”

He holds up one finger.

“Okey dokey, artichokey. One awesome pancake coming right up.”

*Hopefully.*

Turning to the stove, I pour some batter onto the pan.

I say another silent prayer when it's time to flip it because that's always the hardest part.

My prayer is answered because it flips beautifully. Sadly, some wires must have gotten crossed along the way, though because the front door opens and in walks the devil herself.

Or should I say...stagers.

*Fuck a duck.*

With day-old makeup, messy blonde hair that hasn't seen a brush in a

while, and a skimpy, wrinkled dress, she looks like the very definition of rode hard and put away wet.

Once upon a time this woman was so beautiful she stole my breath. That's certainly not the case anymore.

I plead temporary insanity because—what the *hell* was I ever thinking?

Her makeup smudged eyes widen when she sees me. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

It's almost comical because I've spent more time in this apartment than she has this week...and *she's* the one who lives here.

“Charlotte had a family emergency. She didn't know who else to call.”

Becca shucks off her heels, only to almost trip over them as she makes her way into the living room. “So, she called *you*?”

I swiftly plate Jameson's pancake and grab a fork. “Here, sweetie. Go in your room and eat this, okay? I'll be there in a little bit.”

“Like hell you will,” Becca snaps as he runs off.

I wait for Jameson to close the door to his bedroom before addressing her again.

“Charlotte called Preston's phone since you weren't picking up *your* phone.”

She pushes past me on her way to the fridge. “Then why isn't he here?”

Oh, I bet you'd like that, wouldn't you? *You skankasaurus.*

“He's out of town,” I settle on because it's none of her damn business where my husband is.

Preston's trying to tackle his demons so his child can have the best version of him.

Which is a hell of a lot more than I can say for *her*.

“Out of town?” She yanks open the freezer and pulls out a bottle of gin. “Is that what he told you?”

I don't say a word as she opens the bottle and proceeds to drink straight from it. *Classy.*

“Pro tip, sweetheart. When Preston Holden tells you he's out of town, it's code for him fucking some other bitch.”

Maybe that was the code when he talked to *her*. But it doesn't apply to me, because the only bitch my husband is fucking is the one she's looking at.

I try to change the subject, because we have *a lot* of important things to discuss, but she slams the bottle on the counter and sneers, “You know Preston only married you because your grandmother is loaded, right?”

Technically, she's right. That's *exactly* why he agreed to marry me. But it wasn't why he fell in love with me.

"She's not loaded anymore. On account of her being dead and all."

That takes Becca by surprise. "Oh."

I can see her working out what this might mean as she takes another sip of her gin.

"Becca—"

"Do you ever think about me?"

Only in the sense that I've thought about all the various ways I'd like to *murder* her.

Crossing my arms, I stay silent as she continues making a fool out of herself.

"For what it's worth, I really did love you, Kit."

It's not worth anything. *And neither is she.*

She chews her bottom lip, like she's trying to appear coy and flirtatious. Too bad it only makes her look desperate and pathetic.

"I still think about you."

Nah. Because that would require her to have something called a conscience.

And whoever was in charge of giving those out on the day she was created clearly skipped her ass.

I grab my purse off the counter as she continues prattling on.

"I think about what a good girlfriend you were. The way you taste. How hard you used to make me come—"

"Great. Now, think about this." I shove the stack of papers into her hand. "Let me know if you need a pen. I brought several."

Somewhere between day three and four, I realized there was only one solution to all this.

Becca doesn't want her son, that much is apparent. But there's always one thing she does want.

Money.

Fortunately for me, I just inherited a fuckton of it.

I also had Barry, the family lawyer, make sure all the i's were dotted and the t's were crossed on the paperwork before he met me here the other day.

Legally, he said we can't offer her money to give up her son...so the papers she's currently reading won't reflect that.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise when her mouth drops open right

before she exclaims, “You want to adopt my son?” Tilting her head back, she cackles. “You’re nuts. There’s no way I’m giving him to you.”

Unfortunately, it’s not because she cares. It’s so she can keep Jameson as her pawn.

I see right through her.

“Here’s the thing. Neglect is abuse, so all I have to do is make a phone call to child protective services and he’ll be taken out of your care. That’s the hard and painful route for both you and Jameson.” I inhale a breath. “The easy route is that I give you twenty million dollars to sign over your parental rights and let me and Preston adopt him.” I stare her down. “Either way, you’re going to lose him. It’s your choice whether you’re poor or rich when it happens.”

Her mouth opens and closes several times before she speaks. “This is...”

For a moment I almost hope she turns me down. Not because I don’t want Jameson, but because it’s sickening that a mother would even consider giving up their child for *anything*, let alone money.

However, I know Becca.

She shoots me her trademark vindictive smile. “Twenty-five.”

*And there it is.*

Do I hate that someone like her is getting a chunk of my parents’ fortune? Absolutely.

But at the end of the day. It’s just money.

What Preston and I will be getting in exchange is worth so much more.

I take out my checkbook. “Twenty-five it is.”

I’m not stupid, just because she signs those papers doesn’t mean it’s officially over.

We still have to go to court and there’s still a waiting period where she can change her mind.

But she won’t.

*I’ll make sure of it.*

“I’ll write you a check for ten thousand once you sign.”

Her eyes narrow. “You just said twenty-five million.”

“I know. I’ll write you a check for the rest after the waiting period is over.”

Grabbing a pen off the counter, she hastily signs her name. “Any other fine print I should know about?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. If you agree not to contact Jameson until after

he turns eighteen, I'll give you an additional five million dollars on his eighteenth birthday."

This intrigues her. "Are you serious?"

"As a heart attack." Tearing the check out of the book, I step into her space. "However, if Jameson wants to see *you*, then either myself or Preston will contact you directly." I hold her gaze. "And if that happens, you better do whatever Jameson needs and answer any questions he may have for you. If not, I will hand that five million over to someone who will make *sure* you do, and trust me, Becca, he won't be nice about it. Are we clear?"

"Yeah. I hear you." She slaps the papers on the counter, and I grab them. "Give me the check."

"It's right here." She goes to snatch it out of my hand, but I pull it back. "You don't fucking deserve him."

And then I throw it in her face.

"I'm sure that will keep you busy for a while so I'm taking him with me."

Jameson's almost done with his pancake when I walk into his room.

"Was it good?"

He crinkles his nose and I take that to mean it was so-so.

I reach for his hand. "I'll work on my cooking skills, okay?"

I've already packed up a few of his favorite toys to bring back home, and I had Juan and Breslin go shopping for some other necessities he'll need.

The rest of the things I'll take him shopping for so he can pick out what he'd like.

I don't look at Becca as we make our way out of the apartment...but Jameson does briefly.

I have no doubt that one day he'll see his mother for what she really is.

And it will crush him.

But Preston and I will be there to soften the fall and pick up the pieces.

We'll be there to love him and protect him. Because he deserves every single ounce of it.

I take a deep breath after I close the front door. *He's ours.*

I'm so happy I could cry, but I'm too busy smiling.

Preston has no idea about this. I was ninety-nine percent positive Becca would agree, but I didn't want to get his hopes up in case she didn't.

I can't wait to see the look on his face when I bring Jameson to family day.

I kneel down so I'm eye level with him. "Want to go see your daddy?"

## Epilogue

***Five months later...***

## Kit

I shove my hand into the bowl resting on my stomach and bring a potato chip to my mouth. One thing that's awesome about being super pregnant is that you have a permanent snack table.

Jameson is snuggling on one side of me and Lola is huddled on the other while we relax on the couch and watch cartoons.

Or rather, *attempt* to relax...because my husband is pacing the floor on the opposite end of the living room while negotiating a deal for Asher. "Five million."

Annoyed, I turn my attention back to the television.

The muscles in my stomach tighten and I feel a slight cramp as I devour another potato chip. *Damn Braxton Hicks.*

Jameson pops his head up and rubs my belly. He's been extremely protective of my little—make that *big*—baby bump. So much so he now sleeps between me and Preston every night.

The cramps settle down and I go back to munching on my chips.

However, five minutes later...I feel it again. A little stronger this time. "Whoa, Nelly."

Nervousness illuminates Jameson's face as he places his hand back on my belly. A couple of months ago we found out he has something called selective mutism. It's a severe anxiety disorder that renders him unable to speak in certain situations. Luckily, we have him in therapy and it's going well. He's finally starting to talk a little more...*sometimes.*

I don't want to freak him out, so I run my hand along his head and say, "It's okay, sweetie."

"He's a fucking action figure," Preston barks from the other side of the living room.

A wave of pressure constricts my back before spreading to my stomach. *Holy Toledo.*

I check my watch so I can time it and sure enough, four minutes later, it happens again. "Oh, yeah. This baby is *coming.*"

Instantly, Jameson bolts off the couch, making a beeline for Preston.

He tugs on his arm. “Daddy, Pinky’s having a baby.”

“You want to play hardball, asshole? *Six million.*” Cupping the phone, he looks down at his son. “Yes, buddy. I know Pinky’s having a baby.” He returns to his phone call. “Call my bluff, you son of a bitch. I dare you.”

I inwardly groan. I *really* wish Preston would tone down the profanity around Jameson.

Undeterred, Jameson tugs on his arm again. “Daddy, Pinky’s having a baby.”

“No, you can’t talk to Asher yourself,” Preston snaps. “You want him, you gotta go through *me.*”

Growing exasperated, Jameson stomps his foot. “Pinky’s having a baby.” I hold my breath as another contraction hits me. *Yeah, she is.*

“*Seven million, motherfucker.*”

Jameson stomps his foot again. “Kit’s having a baby, motherfucker.”

*Ugh.* I told Preston he needed to control his potty mouth, but nope. Mr. Stubborn didn’t want to listen.

Jameson barely speaks as it is, and I have no doubt that most of his words will be cuss words now.

Cupping the phone, Preston looks at Jameson. “Hey. We don’t use language like that.”

*Ha.*

Scowling, Jameson balls his hands into fists. “But Kit’s having a baby. Right *now.*”

Eyes wide, Preston looks at me. “What?”

I open my mouth to tell him we need to go to the hospital, but something inside me pops and a gush of water streams down my legs.

“Christ.” Preston looks absolutely horrified. “Did you just piss yourself?”

Glaring, I have to remind myself that I love my husband more than anything in the world.

“No, I didn’t just piss myself. My water just broke.”

The color drains from his face as he speaks into the phone. “I gotta go. I’m having a baby, motherfucker.”





I'm not sure what the hell I ever did to deserve the excruciating pain brought on by these contractions, but whatever it is...I'm ready to make amends.

The door of my hospital room swings open and a nurse walks in.

*Nope.* She needs to turn around and walk out.

I give her the stink eye. "If you're here to stick your hand up my vagina, you can go to hell."

I've *never* had so many people fiddle with my lady bits before and I'm sick of it.

Preston, who's standing next to the bed, jerks his head in the direction of the door. "Leave. Unless you have an epidural." White teeth flash. "Then by all means, *stay.*"

The nurse eyes the monitor. "Sorry. The anesthesiologist has to give the epidural."

Then she's of no use to me. "Get out! Now!"

She flees as another contraction impales me. This one is so painful I cry out in agony.

Preston rubs my back. "Deep breaths, angry girl."

Deep breaths my ass. Screw him and his devil dick.

"This is all your fault."

A different nurse enters the room. This time with a peace offering of ice chips, so I let her stay.

Preston raises a brow. "How the hell is this *my* fault?"

He's got to be kidding me.

"I was just a happy little lesbian minding my own business until *you* came along."

When he gives me a cocky smirk, I chuck the cup of ice chips at him.

"Okay," the nurse says, standing at the foot of my bed. "I'm just gonna check you real quick."

I grit my teeth as she pokes and prods around down there.

"You're around three centimeters."

There's no way that's possible. "What? We've been here for *hours.*"

"Hell, *I'm* three centimeters at this point," Preston mutters under his breath.

Anger races through me as another contraction makes me its bitch.

Eyeing the nurse, I point to the door. "Get out. Don't come back until you have drugs."

Preston rubs soothing circles up and down my back. "Breathe. In and

out.” Something on the whiteboard catches his attention and he makes a face. “Cross your legs, Kit. You’re not having that baby today.”

The fuck I’m not.

“Oh, yes I am.”

Preston’s jaw sets. “It’s the seventh. You *know* how I feel about that number.”

I pat his hand. “I feel for you, sweetie. I really do.” I narrow my eyes. “But if I have to be in labor until tomorrow, I will set you on fire and watch you burn.”

Ignoring my threat, Preston rubs my belly. “Stay inside, lovebug.”

Baring my teeth, I growl at him as another contraction rips through me.

A few minutes later, a doctor and another nurse enter the room. “How are we coming along here?”

I willingly spread my legs because I need this baby out. “Have at it, doc.”

I soon regret those words because the moment he touches me, *another* contraction happens.

“Seven centimeters,” the doctor announces.

“Goddammit,” Preston rumbles. “You need to put a stop to this. *Now.*”

Visibly perplexed, and a little alarmed, the doctor looks at him like he’s sprouted another head.

I snap my fingers, drawing his attention back to me. The pregnant lady. “Can I have that epidural now?”

He winces. “You might have to do this without it, hun. I think you missed your window.”

You have *got* to be kidding me. What kind of cruel bullshit is this?

“Goddammit!”

Preston stares the doctor down. “You need to stick a plug up there or something. She *can’t* have this baby to—”

He’s cut off by the sound of an alarm beeping.

“What’s that?”

Appearing worried, the doctor looks at the nurse. “We’re gonna need to prep for a cesarean.”

Every muscle of mine goes tight with panic. “What?”

Preston’s panicking now, too. “What the fuck is going on?”

“The baby’s heart rate is dropping rapidly. You need to deliver as soon as possible.”

It's scary how in the blink of an eye you can go from being so excited to meet your baby...to being so petrified you'll never get the chance.

My vision blurs. "Preston."

"I know." Leaning down, he kisses my forehead. "Our reality sucks right now, and unfortunately, we both know I'm not great at providing comfort." He presses the poker chip they made me take off earlier into my palm. "But I'll do my best to get you through this. Because we *will* get through it. Deal?"

I force myself to take a deep breath as the words he said to me when we were trapped in the elevator reverberate through me.

Because I know without a doubt, he'll get me through whatever happens next.

*Just like he always has.*

Emotion clogs my throat and I squeeze his hand tighter. "Deal."

## Preston

Our daughter was born on the seventh at 7:07 p.m., weighing in at seven pounds and seven ounces.

I have no doubt she did it on purpose just to spite me.

Glancing down, I gently rock her in my arms, taking in every inch of her flawless face.

I swore I could never love another woman aside from Kit, but I was wrong.

Love Landon Holden is only a few hours old and she already has me wrapped around her tiny finger.

And I'm loving every fucking second of it.

While Kit and I agreed we should name our baby after Landon if it was a boy—on account of him saving our lives and all—I wasn't sold on the idea of naming her Love if she was a girl.

However, Kit insisted on it. She reminded me that not only was love the one thing she's always wanted...it's what will always keep us together.

I didn't have any argument after that.

I was scared as fuck when they brought her into the operating room, but Kit stayed strong, gripping my hand the entire time while *I* gripped the poker chip for dear life.

Luckily everything went fine. Our daughter is perfect.

Love starts crying at the top of her lungs and I bite back a laugh. Make that imperfectly perfect.

*Just like her mother.*

I look over at Kit who's sleeping next to an equally sleepy Jameson who *insisted* his Aunt Breslin take him up to the hospital so he could see the baby immediately.

Or should I say—*was* sleeping—because Love's crying wakes up Kit who springs up like a jack in the box. "I can take her."

"Nah." Fuck knows Kit could use the rest. Plus, I'm not ready to hand her over yet. "I got this."

After placing her on my bare chest, I sit down on the chair next to the hospital bed.

Rocking her in my arms, I mentally go down the checklist.

Married the girl I became obsessed with after a conversation on a bridge one night—check.

Fought like hell for us and conquered my demons in the process—check.

Got Jameson back and became my son's legal father—check.

Became a father to a beautiful little girl who I have a feeling is going to give me nothing but trouble—check.

Went all in and fell deeply in love with a woman who believes I saved her even though *she* was the one who saved me—fucking checkity, check, check.

I used to think illusions were better than reality. But not anymore.

I was lucky enough to not only get everything I've ever wanted...but everything I've ever needed.

I look at Kit whose eyes are watering as she watches us. "We did it."

"Of course we did." Squeezing her hand, I bring it to my lips. "Because it's me and you, angry girl. Until the end."

## Afterword

**If you liked the book, it would mean the absolute *world* to me if you left a review. It's so hard for indie authors to receive acknowledgment and reviews *really* make a difference for us.**

**Want to be notified about my upcoming releases?**

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**Hammie:** Thank you for pushing me to finish this book. Every word was written for you, because you showed me what love truly was.

*I used to think love was supposed to be perfect...like a beautiful, flawless fairy tale.*

*That when you met your soul mate, the universe magically shifted, and everything fell into place.*

*That being in love meant never experiencing any more pain.*

*But I was wrong.*

*Love isn't a fairy tale.*

*It's getting the best parts of someone...but also getting their worst.*

*Love isn't always beautiful.*

*Sometimes it's ugly and painful.*

*Love isn't happily ever after.*

*It's the highest of highs and the lowest of lows.*

*But you're in it together.*

*Because when one of you hurts, so does the other.*

*Love isn't flawless...it's imperfectly perfect.*

*It's taking on their demons and being vulnerable enough to show them yours...because you want every single part of them.*

*I thought I'd been in love plenty of times, but I was dead wrong.*

*I've only experienced it once.*



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If you or anyone you know is a victim of **sexual assault**, again; I urge and I *beg* you to reach out.

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**For rape & sexual assault victims call:** 212-227-3000

or **email** : [help@safehorizon.org](mailto:help@safehorizon.org)

All calls are kept completely confidential.

## About the Author

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**Want to be notified about my upcoming releases?** <https://goo.gl/n5Azwy>

Ashley Jade craves tackling different genres and tropes within romance. Her first loves are New Adult Romance and Romantic Suspense, but she also writes everything in between including: contemporary romance, erotica, and dark romance.

Her characters are flawed and complex, and chances are you will hate them before you fall head over heels in love with them.

She's a die-hard lover of oxford commas, em dashes, music, coffee, and anything thought provoking...except for math.

Books make her heart beat faster and writing makes her soul come alive. She's always read books growing up and scribbled stories in her journal, and after having a strange dream one night; she decided to just go for it and publish her first series.

It was the best decision she ever made.

If she's not paying off student loan debt, working, or writing a novel—you can usually find her listening to music, hanging out with her readers online, and pondering the meaning of life.

Check out her social media pages for future novels.

She recently became hip and joined Twitter, so you can find her there, too.

She loves connecting with her readers—they make her world go round'.

~Happy Reading~



Feel free to email her with any questions / comments: [ashleyjadeauthor@gmail.com](mailto:ashleyjadeauthor@gmail.com)

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Complicated Hearts - Duet (Books 1 & 2)

Blame It on the Shame - Trilogy (Parts 1-3)

Blame It on the Pain - Standalone