



SHE WAS ALWAYS  
MEANT TO BE MINE

*Bad* DATE,  
GOOD *Dad*

FLORA FERRARI

# BAD DATE, GOOD DAD

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A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS

BOOK 335

# FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

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## BAD DATE, GOOD DAD

**I'm a girl with no experience, and even I know this is the date from hell. When a knight in shining armor intervenes, I'm overjoyed. Only problem? It's my date's dad.**

I don't think my night can get any worse after the worst first date ever. Then my date gets the bright idea to try to kiss me. Of course, that's not the worst part.

The worst or best part, depending on how you look at it, is Fletcher Jacobson. He's older, the hottest man I've ever seen, and my date's father.

When his son tries to kiss me, he looks *pissed*, like he's ready to fight. Then things get awkward fast. Fletcher clearly didn't know.

I want him so badly, but my friend tells me this could all be a fleeting romance. He's coming on way too strongly. I've never even been kissed. *Almost* kissing his son is the closest I've come.

I want things to work so badly with Fletcher, but how can they when James won't leave me alone?

**Caught between father and son, I don't know which to follow—my head or my heart.**

*\* Bad Date, Good Dad is an insta-everything standalone romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

## NEWSLETTER

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## CHAPTER ONE

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### Samantha

I stand outside the restaurant, wondering if the people walking by realize how embarrassed I am. My cheeks feel like they're burning. Realistically, are random passersby going to stop, look at me, and think, *Oh, that woman seems embarrassed?* I'm not even sure I should be embarrassed, honestly. I was ten minutes early. A light rain has started to fall, but I dread going inside again to find an empty table.

When I walked into the restaurant and told them my date's name, the woman frowned in this kind of pitying way. Or maybe it's just my pessimism twisting her features into a pitying shape. Either way, I panicked, mumbled that I'd forgotten something, and ran out here.

It's my first date. I didn't want to do it, but my friend Lexi encouraged me to give it a try. I'm twenty, and I've never been on a date before. I've never felt the urge, and it's not like I've had men knocking down my door. I've always been okay with that. I live a life of isolation with my canvas and my imagination, listening to music or sometimes playing chess.

I look at my phone. It's almost been fifteen minutes now. I'm not sure how long to wait. We don't have each other's numbers. Lexi wanted it to be a blind date. She said, probably correctly, that I'd spend too much time researching him online if I knew his name beforehand. I'd scour the internet

to diffuse the anxiety, trying to prepare myself mentally.

God, I sound pathetic. I shouldn't have to prepare myself mentally for a date. It's something women do every single day all over the world. It's natural. The rain starts to pick up. I wedge myself closer to the wall, getting some shelter, but occasionally, the wind blows a haze of rain into my face.

"Samantha?" a man says.

I look up. I hope my reaction doesn't show on my face. It's not that he's ugly or anything like that. He's over six feet, built lean, wearing a well-fitting suit with dark hair stylishly slicked to one side. He doesn't have acne or any other reason for this feeling inside of me or *lack* of feeling. If anything, he's probably out of my league, but there's no attraction on my part. I'm starting to wonder if I'm asexual.

"Yes," I say after a way-too-long pause. "James?"

He smiles in a cocky way, stepping forward with a short bow. "At your service."

I almost snap that he *wasn't* at my service for the fifteen minutes he left me standing in the rain. I wait for him to apologize or at least address it somehow. Lateness is so annoying, but I get it. Life happens, but it's *super* annoying when somebody's late, and they don't even feel the need to comment on it.

"Shall we go inside?" he says, looking at me as if to say, *Why are you waiting out here anyway?*

If Lexi were in my position, she'd comment on his lateness. She wouldn't let him smooth over it as though nothing happened.

"Sure," I reply, feeling weak, *being* weak.

He tries to place his hand on my back as we head for the door. I subtly, but very purposefully, take a small step sideways. There's no reason to be touching when we've just met, especially after the lateness. Maybe that makes me a prude. I don't give a damn.

He swaggers over to the hostess's desk. He doesn't look at her when he

speaks, talking like an entitled trust fund kid. I only know a little about him. He and Lexi went to the same martial arts gym as teenagers. Their families were friends. His mom died a few years ago, but that's all I know.

"Yes, that's right," he says condescendingly. "A table for two."

He's speaking as though the hostess is slow.

"Right this way," she says, a woman a few years older than me with a blond ponytail tied tightly. She gives me a look; no words are needed. She's calling James a douche. I think I agree, but what option do I have? Run from the restaurant right now and sprint for freedom?

James pulls out my seat. He brushes his hand against my arm and shuffles it into the place. He's being so touchy-feely. Maybe this is normal on dates.

Sitting opposite me, he grins. "Shall we get something to drink? Some wine, maybe?"

"I'm twenty," I tell him.

He laughs like I've just said the funniest thing in the world. When he sees I'm serious, he narrows his eyes. "Don't be a dork, Samantha."

I cringe. There's no freaking way I'm letting him pressure me into drinking. "I'm not in the mood for alcohol, anyway."

"On a date?" he says, still with a subtly pressuring tone. "When's the better time for a drink? Or don't you drink?"

"I drink occasionally," I tell him, "but honestly, I'm not into party culture."

"Are you religious or something?"

"Not really," I say. "I just... I don't like not being in control. I don't like all the stuff that comes with party culture."

"Stuff like what?" he says, pressing the issue.

Surely, he should just accept I don't want to drink and move on. I'm no dating genius, but I don't see how it's necessary to keep pressing and pressing this issue. He stares expectantly. He wants an answer.

“Casual sex,” I tell him, hoping that makes it clear we won’t be having any first-date escapades. “Hangovers. Waking up late.”

“Do you mind if I get a drink?” he says, gesturing to the waitress. “You can have a juice box or something.”

I wonder if he thinks he’s better than me just because, if we were to take a survey, most people would agree he’s more physically attractive. He’s not attractive to *me*, and even if he were, that wouldn’t give him the right to be so casually dismissive.

“A glass of red for me,” he says, “and my date will have...” He gestures at me.

I almost stand up and leave the restaurant. There’s something so offensive in the handwave, though I’m fairly sensitive. I don’t want to overreact. Maybe I’m overthinking this. I have to *try*, at least.

“An orange juice, please,” I say. When the waitress leaves, I ask, “Busy evening?”

“Not really,” he replies.

“Oh,” I say. “I just thought... You know, we arranged to meet at eight.”

“What time is it now?” he says almost aggressively.

“Eight twenty,” I tell him.

“Twenty minutes? Pfft.” He waves his hand again, and that *really* pisses me off. It’s like the idea I’d be concerned about lateness is a joke to him. He’s giving me a preview of what sort of long-term partner he’d make if I ever made that mistake. Not-so-subtle indicators that he’d chip, chip, and chip away at my self-respect until he could treat me however he wanted.

“It felt longer than that in the rain.”

“So what did Lexi tell you about me?” he steamrolls my comment before I even finish talking.

*Give him a chance*, Lexi said when arranging this date. *I know you can be very particular.*

Particular is code for me liking routine and order. For example, I enjoy not being hungover because I like to paint during dawn. On the East Coast, with the subtle gradations of the lighting, it makes for an interesting challenge.

I decide to make an effort to force a smile. “You used to train at the same martial arts gym. Kickboxing, right?”

“Well... yes...” He grips the table, leans back, and aims a shit-eating grin at me.

“What?” I ask.

“Just... Well, I trained. She did her best. You can’t blame her. She’s five and a half feet without an ounce of muscle. However, it’s good for fitness, even if she couldn’t use it in a real fight.”

“I watched her spar a few days ago,” I tell him. “She seemed to know what she was doing.”

“Was it against a man or another woman?” he asks, seeming angry for some reason.

“A man,” I tell him. “There’s a martial arts gym just around the corner from the college campus. He was around her size. They both landed strikes on each other.”

“He was probably going easy,” he says dismissively.

I lean forward, shaking my head. “It didn’t *seem* like he was going easy. His entire face and neck were red, and he was so tired. It was for five minutes, and toward the end, he could hardly breathe. Lexi was still light and agile on her feet.”

“Ah, conditioning,” he says, nodding. “Fitness means a lot in the fight. If he hadn’t been tired... Look, here are our drinks. They’ve even given you a cute little straw.”

I almost stand up. Maybe I should. If somebody was listening to this date, I wonder if they’d be yelling at me to get out of here, to stop letting him disrespect me. Social situations are so difficult to navigate sometimes. Walking through the steps in my mind—making an excuse, standing up,

walking from the restaurant, finding my car—all feels so confusingly overwhelming.

“So,” he says, grabbing the menu. “What are you in the mood for?”

## CHAPTER TWO

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### Fletcher

I sit in the dog park, an ache in my gut, thinking of Loki. As crazy as it would seem to some people, that energetic Jack Russell was my best friend in the real sense—not just *man’s best friend*. He was at my side every day, and now, because of *my* mistake, he’s gone.

It happened last week in this very park. I was playing fetch with Loki, his black-and-tan body trembling in anticipation every time I told him to stay and wait for me to throw the ball. Then, on the other side of the park, a druggie started to have a fit, frothing at the mouth, and the whole deal.

We were the only people in the park, so it wasn’t like I could let the bastard die, but Loki’s a reactive dog. I knew that if I led him over to the man, he’d go crazy, panicking at the man’s strange movements. He’d start barking. Maybe even sprint away. Loki is a rescue. I got him four years ago. Bad things happened to him before he was mine. I’ve trained a lot of it out of him, but it’s hard to change a person fully or a dog.

So I made a mistake. I tied his leash to the park railing to deal with the convulsing man. I’d seen him before, lurking under the tree, smoking out of a pipe. He was friendly enough to me, but then, most people are.

After I’d called *911* and stopped the prick from choking to death, I turned and saw a man grab the leash from the railing. I started running so damn fast,

even faster than I did overseas, with more fire pulsing through me and rage. The hooded motherfucker was lucky I didn't reach him in time.

He bundled Loki into the back of a van and drove away. I got the license plate and immediately hired several PIs to chase it up. So far, nothing. The cops don't care. Or, if they do, they're so underfunded and overworked, and there's so much crime, there's not much they can do.

I'm constantly waiting for my cell phone to ring. Dog thefts and illegal sales have risen recently. I looked it up after they took my dog. All I need is a location. If one of the private investigators called me up and said, *He's here*, I'd go in, ignoring the law. I'd get my dog back, and if I discovered they'd hurt him...

Am I willing to go to jail for this? Honestly, yeah, I am. I don't care anymore. My nights are filled with screaming. I flinch way more often than I should. I'm forty-one, and I feel old. Ancient. My body is fitter than it's ever been. I punish this mental weakness with physical activity. Workouts that would make some men's ears bleed. Loki would run hills with me, but even he would sometimes rest at the bottom, watching me with disbelief in his shiny, accepting eyes.

"Evening, Fletcher," Miss Appletree says, causing me to look up.

She's a kind, elderly British lady with a mean Chihuahua who hates almost everybody. I lean down, offering her dog my hand as I do my best to smile at the lady. It's not her fault I'm ready to attack the whole world right now. Rascal, a fitting name, trots over and starts sniffing and licking my hand.

"It's been a while," I say.

"I've been in London. What a trip! Where's your little Loki?"

I sigh, then tell her what happened.

"Oh, good Lord," she says. "How absolutely awful! They just *took* him?"

"Don't let this little Rascal stray too much."

"I won't. Yes. Thank you. Perhaps I should put a notice up on the message board?"



“The message board?” I ask, scooping up Rascal when he whines. He curls up in my lap. Dogs are so much simpler than people.

“You are funny, Fletcher. I’ve told you there’s an online message board for this park. Of course, the perpetual lone wolf wouldn’t join something like that.”

“Guilty as charged, Miss Appletree,” I say, stroking Rascal behind the ear.

“You’ve got the magic touch,” she replies. “He hates most people.”

I laugh gruffly. “We have that in common.”

“Oh, please. You’re as friendly as they come.”

“With you, maybe. I try to be.”

“What are the police doing?”

“Nothing,” I tell her, “but I am. I’ve hired three private investigators, the best in the city.”

It’s costing me more than one hundred dogs would. That’s what James said when I told him. He had no concern in his eyes. It gets me thinking about the nightmares again, all those years overseas, not there for my son, with his mother twisting him into this entitled shape. Or maybe he was just born that way.

“If you find them, what will you do?”

“If it was Rascal, what would you want me to do?” I ask.

She bites down. Her eyes flash with a hint of violence. Regular people have never had to unlock that part of themselves. They’ve never had to learn just how brutal they can be when the world forces it on them.

“Bad things,” she says quietly.

“Then you’ve got your answer,” I reply. “They better hope if I do find them, they haven’t hurt—”

“Please, Fletcher. I don’t want to think about that.”

Regular people rarely want to think about the darkness in the world, and there is so much of it. So much misery. So much agony. So much abuse. “Fair enough.”

“I hope you find him,” she says, “and don’t worry. I’ll be putting a message up, warning everybody else.”

I can tell she wants to get going. All this dark talk is too much for her, especially when she’s recently returned from holiday. I place Rascal on the ground. He whines and tries to climb up on my leg again, but then Miss Appletree secures his leash, and they go on their way.

I shouldn’t let myself feel bitter about Miss Appletree and her eagerness not to hear about the dark parts of the world. Yet I can’t help but feel a little pissed about it. I should’ve learned to stop this type of thinking a long time ago. Even one-tenth of the hell I’ve glimpsed would send any of these regular people insane. The operations I’ve been on. The monsters I’ve met.

Sitting on the bench, I let time pass. I’m good at simply waiting somewhere, even waiting for nothing. I’ve explored my own avenues to find the van or any whispers of a dog theft ring, but this isn’t like overseas. I haven’t got assets on the ground. I haven’t got connections. I’m a retired Special Ops man. I’m a gym owner. I’m not the operator I once was.

When I hear Miss Appletree let out a yelp, I’m on my feet immediately. I jog across the park to find her standing toe-to-toe with a man at least two feet taller than her. He’s almost as tall as me. He’s got an entitled smirk on his face. Shamefully, it reminds me of my son James’s. The smirk falters when he spots me.

“What’s the issue?” I ask. Rascal stops growling momentarily to glance up at me but then carries on, glaring at the man.

“I simply asked him to pick up his dog’s mess.”

The dog sniffs around a bench, an overweight animal that looks like it hasn’t experienced meaningful stimulation in weeks or months. “And what did he say?” I ask.

The man is looking at me in a way I’m familiar with. It’s how bullies often look at me, praying they can turn me into their friend and I’ll somehow side

with them even if they're completely wrong. I ignore his wannabe-pal grin—the coward.

“He said I should mind my own business and swore at me.”

“Easy, lady,” the man grunts. “I was just saying you didn't give me a chance to pick it up.”

“Where's the mess?” I ask Miss Appletree, stepping forward so the man knows to back the hell up. It works. He steps away from her, probably sensing how completely goddamn fine I am with this turning ugly. I'm almost hoping it does. I almost want him to pull a weapon.

Miss Appletree gestures. “By that tree there.”

It's a good twenty yards away. “If you were going to pick it up,” I say, finally turning to the man, “and if the issue is she didn't give you enough time, why is it all the way over there, friend?”

My tone has become so dark. I'm so, so ready. I want this to happen. The world doesn't make sense. It's all chaos. When I feel this tickling down my spine, a faint imitation of what I felt overseas, suddenly, I see everything clearly. Putting this bastard in his place would be no difficult thing.

“I...” He decides to go the tough guy route, puffing himself up. “Just lay off it, man.”

I step closer to him but don't go toe-to-toe like people often do in confrontations. It's a mistake. I don't know if he's tooled up. Maybe he's a better boxer than me and will piece me up, but I can kick him in the gut at this range. Leap in with a jab and then grapple him. Let him feel he's not as big as he thinks he is.

“Pick up the shit,” I growl. “Or I'll make you fucking eat it.”

I can tell how unusual this is for him. He must be six-two. He rarely meets people my size who aren't scared of him. He thought he could bully Miss Appletree and get away with it because he always gets away with it. Bad people often do.

However, this man understands how badly it could go for him. He swallows

and turns away. "Like I said, I was going to anyway."

"Then we don't have a problem."

I stare at him as he walks away, praying for him to turn back, but he doesn't. He bags the mess and then leaves the park.

"Are you okay?" Miss Appletree asks, sounding just as frightened as he did.

"I'm fine," I tell her, but I don't sound fine. I sound like a man ready to set the whole world on fire.

## CHAPTER THREE

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### Samantha

I'm done pretending this is okay. James has been so dismissive and boring. He's spent the entire date talking about his new car and all the parts he's going to install. This would be fine if he didn't scowl at me whenever I asked a question. Apparently, I'm here as a one-person audience to listen to any speeches he feels like giving.

When the waitress asks if we'd like dessert, I probably answer too quickly. "No, thank you. Just the check will be fine."

James narrows his eyes at me. All evening, he's had that subtly mocking smirk on his lips, like I'm a joke, and he's barely holding back laughter. "In a hurry?"

"I promised my mom I'd play Scrabble with her."

He shakes his head. That's something else he's been doing a lot. The few times he's given me a chance to speak, he shakes his head as though meaning to dismiss whatever I'm saying before I can even say it. "That doesn't seem very urgent."

"My mom is sixty-one," I tell him. "I want to spend as much time with her as possible."

Again, with that smirk. “Your mom is sixty? So she was forty when she had you?”

“Yep,” I say, grateful when the waitress appears. I reach into my pocket, taking out my purse.

“Please,” James said. “It’s on me.”

“No, let’s go halves.”

I don’t want him to think I owe him anything. He seems like exactly the sort of person to pout and whine when I refuse to give him what he wants. Maybe, in his mind, this date has gone well. Perhaps it’s leading to something more. All I’m thinking about is telling Lexi how terribly this date went.

After paying the bill, we head outside. “Well, this was nice,” I say. “I’m parked just down there.” I nod toward the nearby lot.

Big mistake. He beams and nods. “Me too. Let’s walk together.”

I don’t see any way to say no to this. Maybe I need to work on my social skills. *Maybe?* After this evening, it’s a fact that I’m nowhere near as forward as I could be. We walk toward the lot. He gestures at his car, a black racer-type vehicle with a few custom adjustments. “See what I’m talking about? She’s a beauty, isn’t... Oh, *dammit.*”

“What’s wrong?” I ask, my car keys already in hand, ready to get the heck out of here.

“Look,” he snaps. “I’ve got a flat. I thought I patched it up earlier. I don’t have a spare, either.”

“Oh,” I say, wanting to add, *I really don’t care.* “I guess you should call a cab and come back when you have a spare tire. Anyway, this has really been —”

“I’ll get my dad to give me a ride,” he cuts in, as he’s been doing all night, constantly interrupting me when I speak. Or try to. “Could you wait with me, please? Please? He won’t be long.”

The *please* sounds so desperate. I try to make myself say no, but it’s like the words won’t come out of my mouth. “Okay,” I sigh.

He grins and takes out his phone, but his demeanor changes as he brings the cell to his ear. He's no longer the cocky, confident man he was just moments ago. His shoulders slump. He lowers his voice. "Dad, I've got a flat. I was wondering if I could get a ride. Yeah, I'll text you the address. No, I don't have one. I know I should. Yeah. Okay. Thanks."

When he hangs up, the change back is just as noticeable. He swaggers over to me, standing so close I can smell his cologne. I make a point of taking a few steps backward.

"Did you have fun tonight?" he asks.

I *really* don't think this is fair. I've made a point of being polite, but now he's putting me on the spot. He's basically asking me to lie to him. I wonder if most people in his life do just that: lie to his face about all his shortcomings and let him go on. I try to tell him, *No, I didn't. You were rude, selfish, and boring.*

Instead, I let out a shaky laugh. I sound pathetic, even to myself. I'm not sure how to phrase this without hurting his feelings.

Thankfully, he doesn't wait for a response. "Because *I* did," he says. "I can't believe I haven't said this sooner. You're beautiful, Samantha."

There's something rehearsed in the way he says it. I can imagine him saying this to many other women with the same tone and intonation and everything.

"Thank you," I mutter, ensuring there's a few feet between us.

Why don't I just *leave*? My car is just across the lot. I wouldn't even have to say anything. So what if he thinks I'm rude? It's not like I ever want to see him again anyway. It's as though some warped social responsibility is gluing me to the spot.

"I mean it," he says. "Your figure... damn. Me likey curves."

I have to go back in my mind to make sure I heard him right. Did he really just say, *Me likey curves*?

"I know some men don't," he says, "but to me, you're perfect."

"Thank you," I say again.

He laughs. He sounds borderline maniacal. It's like he needs me to reciprocate this somehow. I won't say things I don't mean just to protect his ego. I don't think that's fair.

"How long until your dad's here?" I ask.

He scowls again. "A couple of minutes, probably. He was at the park. It's not far from here. I don't even know why he was there."

"At a park?" I can think of ten reasons why going to a park is enjoyable, but maybe that's just the artist in me.

"It's a dog park," James says, "but his dog was stolen recently."

"Oh my God. That's awful."

"Is it?" James grunts. "It's just a dog. I know it's sad, but the way Dad's acting, he's lost his son. Lost *me*."

"How long has he had the dog?" I ask.

"I don't want to talk about this," he says, stunning me.

Is it really that simple? All you have to do is confidently proclaim you don't want to speak about something, and then you don't have to?

"I really should get..."

Before I finish my sentence, he steps forward right into my personal space. He reaches down as though to touch my hips. Is he seriously going to try to kiss me? We have zero chemistry, negative chemistry, actually. I take another step away from him. Soon, I'll be backed against the car.



## CHAPTER FOUR

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### Fletcher

As I drive into the parking lot, my world changes. I'm not sure what to make of it. It's like I'm on an operation again, with one task in mind, and I'll doggedly chase that task until it's completed. Now, the task is to claim her. Own her. She's mine.

She's backing against a car, but I don't see the car or the man approaching her. I only see her. She's got shoulder-length brown hair. She's wearing a modest dress that nevertheless outlines her curvy shape. Her cheeks seem flushed, but it's difficult to tell from here. I try to apply reason. If I'm not close enough to see if her cheeks are red, how can I be so sure she belongs to me? How can I know she's mine and always will be?

Hell, I feel alive. Hot blood is pumping through my veins. I don't even think as I bring the car to a stop and quickly jump from it. Somebody's backing my woman up against the car. Even from here—did I just call her *my woman*?—I can tell she doesn't want it from her body language. When she raises her hand to block him, that snaps something in me. Nobody touches her except me, especially if she's trying to make them stop. There's no damn way I'll stand for that.

I run across the lot, knowing on some level I should slow down. I'm flooded with war, possession, and even jealousy. It's all new to me, except for the

pumping of violent intent. Running across the lot, I grab the man and spin him around, ready to break his nose or snap his arm. I'm about to pull my fist back when I see my eyes looking back at me. Everybody says James has the same type of blue.

"D-Dad?" he says.

I lower my hand, glancing over his shoulder at the woman. *My woman.* His date. Oh, fuck.

"What are you doing?" James goes on.

"What were *you* doing?" I growl. "Because it looked like you were about to push this woman against a car and try to kiss her, even when she was trying to make you stop. Is that how you were raised?"

It's not a rhetorical question. The truth is, I wasn't there for much of the raising.

"I..." He shakes his head slowly. "No, we-we're on a date."

"Wait in the car," I snap.

Part of me wishes he'd fight back more, even with words. Maybe he thinks I don't know how tough he tries to behave around other people. I've seen the swagger and how he changes when it's just him and me. He nods, bows his head, and skulks away.

"Are you okay?" I ask the woman.

Up close, I can see the strands of hair across her face and her wide, green eyes. I was right. Her cheeks are slightly red.

"He didn't do anything," she murmurs. "Just before you came, I told him to stop, and he was about to. He was stepping away from me. He was, uh, presumptuous but not predatory."

What an achievement that is for a father. Damn, I wish Loki was here.

"Good," I say, knowing that isn't any sort of achievement at all. Maybe I should throw a party for my son to presume to kiss a woman, not *prey* on her. Anyway, I'm a hypocrite. She's making me feel like a predator, a wild jungle

cat eager to find his mate.

I haven't even thought about dating since James' mom passed. I've focused on Loki, the gym, and trying my best with my son.

"What's your name?" I ask, trying to mask the huskiness in my voice, the need that won't stop pumping. Just being this close to her is a risk. I'll push her against the car and press forward. Maybe she'll shove her hand against my chest. I'll keep pushing and claim those slightly parted lips.

"Samantha," she says in a soft voice. I immediately imagine her saying *I do* or whispering something steamy in my ear. My manhood aches as I glance down at the curve of her hips in the dress, almost feeling her fullness in my hands, feeling her lust. I want to hold her so damn bad. "You?"

"Fletcher. It's nice to meet you," I say lamely. I'm stalling for time. I want to be with her longer, but I don't have any reasonable excuse for that.

"And you," she replies.

"Will you be seeing James again?"

I have to ask this part. If there's a chance they're going to become boyfriend and girlfriend, will I be able to handle it? I just saw them *almost* kiss, and I was ready to throw my own son across the parking lot. I'd never hurt him, obviously, but the impulse was there.

"I don't think so," she says, telling me everything I need to know.

He must've shown the douchey, slightly condescending part of himself. It's the part of him that disappears when we're together. Then, he can be curious, interested, even self-deprecating. It's as if he has to put a shield up with the rest of the world, but what if it's worse than that? What if he's outright cruel?

"Ah," I say, *still* standing here with absolutely no excuse.

"I'm sorry about your dog," she says after a moment, almost as though *she's* looking for a reason to hang around too. "James told me what happened."

"I'm sorry too," I say. "Wherever he is, he doesn't deserve what's happening to him."

“Have you reported...” she trails off, gesturing behind me. I turn to find James standing outside the car, waving at me. If I had an excuse to be standing here, talking with Samantha, I’d tell him to wait patiently, but what possible reason could I have?

She’s around James’ age, so half mine. She’s so, so young. Her youth bursts through her features in that nervous blush. She’s got her hands clasped in front of her, giving her a withdrawn, shy look that makes me want to draw her out.

And that dress... My balls swell when I think about pulling it over her head, revealing her curvy body. I’d squeeze her hips with enough force so she’d know that she belongs to me. Only me. Not my son and nobody else.

“It was nice meeting you,” I tell her honestly.

It’s insanely difficult to turn away from her, walk across the lot, and climb into the driver’s seat. There’s this new urgency inside me, roaring to grab and claim her. For life. Forever. I’m panting when I start the engine, gripping the wheel hard like I’m getting ready to snap it off.

“I’m sorry, Dad.”

“Why are you sorry?” I ask.

“Back there, I just wanted to kiss her. I wasn’t...”

“Wasn’t what?” I growl, knowing I should try to be more like his mom, softer, more understanding, but that’s never me. If he were anybody else, he’d be picking his teeth up off the ground for approaching her like that.

“Going to kiss her if she didn’t want me to.”

“Learn to read people,” I say fiercely, pulling out of the lot before I lose my resolve and speed back to her. “Too many people are too shy, nervous, or accommodating to say *no*. They’ll go along with whatever you want, even if unsure. Learn to read them.”

“How?” he asks quietly.

“Watch them. Think about *them*, not yourself.”

He turns to the window. He can probably sense us getting closer to the old argument about selfishness. I left the military just before his mom passed away from cancer. He was seventeen, already himself, but I've done my best to correct some of the mistakes his mom made. It's not that simple. They were *my* mistakes, too. I should've been there, but when I was an operator, it was all I could afford to think about. I'd be dead otherwise. Or is that just more of an excuse?

"She didn't like me, anyway," James says.

I almost breathe a sigh of relief. Not that it means much. What am I going to do? Find her, grab her, kiss her? She's so much younger than me, with so much less life experience. She wants somebody young and exciting, somebody to start her life with. She won't want a man with gray in his hair and agony in his eyes.

"You'll find somebody else," I tell him gruffly.

"Yeah," he mutters. "It's just rejection doesn't feel good."

"You went on one date. It didn't go perfectly. It's not the end of the world."

"Maybe it's the end of *my* world."

He's on the verge of throwing a tantrum. I bite down, jaw aching, wondering how Margot would've dealt with this. The sad truth is, she probably wouldn't have. Or she would've babied him. I hate the whine in his voice. He wouldn't last two seconds in my old life. Maybe I'm a sexist bastard, but I don't think men should whine like that.

"If that's how you feel," I tell him, "you need to take a long, hard look in the mirror. One bad date shouldn't send you into a spiral."

"I'm not in a *spiral*," he says, again with that whining tone.

"I love you, James," I tell him.

He scoffs. "Need to remind yourself, do you?"

"I love you," I repeat, "but it's time to grow up. It's time to accept—"

"Mom is *dead*. Will you cut me some slack?"

He yells when I abruptly pull the car over at the side of the road. Turning to him, I sit up taller, glaring down. He shrinks in his chair. He's too tall, too strong to be behaving like this.

"What did I tell you after she passed?" I snarl.

"D-Dad..."

"Tell me," I snap, hating the fact my own son seems frightened of me. I've never hit him. I've taken out men who've laid their hands on their kids many times. I've never bullied him. He's just soft. "*James.*"

"To never use it as an excuse," he mutters. "It will make me weak. It will turn me into a victim, and I can't afford to be a victim. There are too many bad people in the world."

"Exactly," I snap.

He softens, eyes glistening. "You're not a bad person, Dad. So why can't I be weak with you?"

I don't have a good answer for that. I've never been the lovey type. I try my best. I say the right words, but when it comes to that deep emotional connection, if anything, I try to avoid it. Feeling might mean bringing it all back, the stuff I've seen, the absolute inhumanity of humanity.

Ignoring his question—I'm not a good man—I pull away from the sidewalk. I turn on the radio. We drive, saying nothing else.

My mind goes to Samantha, her youthful eyes, her just-about-tamed hair, and her wide hips. My mind goes to an impossible future: Samantha waking me on a lazy Sunday morning, our children laughing from deeper in the house, and the smell of bacon tickling my nose. A life I never imagined I could have.

We're almost home when my cell phone rings.

"Would you answer that, son?"

"Okay, *Dad.*"

He often does this when I call him *son*. Once, he told me I was trying

artificially to create a father-son dynamic way too late. The worst part is I can't exactly tell him he's wrong. He takes my phone from the glove compartment and puts it on speaker.

"Mr. Jacobson?" the man says. "It's Charles Malone."

"Good to hear from you," I tell the private investigator.

"I thought you'd want to know. I've got a lead on the van and a description of the driver. He pawned it off at a chop shop soon after the kidnapping. My thinking is these fellas, they steal a vehicle, use it for a few jobs, then send it to the chop shop for some extra dough."

"How much?" I ask.

He laughs. "Beat me to it. To chase down this lead, I will need to call in some old favors with my buddies in blue. Five should cut it."

"Half now, half after you give me something concrete."

"Fair enough."

"I'll send the funds. Keep working. Don't sleep if you can help it. If you need manpower, day or night, you call me."

"Something tells me you're not afraid of a fight, Mr. Jacobson."

It's worse than that, I almost tell him. I'm *waiting* for one.

After hanging up, James quietly says, "I hope they find him, Dad."

I reach over, wondering if this is what regular fathers do, those without emotional holes in their chests. I touch his shoulder. "If they'd taken you, I wouldn't stop," I tell him. "I'd turn this city over. I'd kill an entire army. Remember that."

It's all true. Despite a man's personal feelings, it's his duty to protect his family. I'd do it for James just as I would for my and Samantha's children.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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### Samantha

I don't have to wonder if I'm asexual anymore. As I drive home, my body is sizzling. My core burns hotly to the point I want to press my legs together tightly, my sex aching, my belly warm and tingly. When Fletcher walked quickly across the lot, my entire life changed configuration.

The constellation of *me* would never be the same again. His hair glistened as he approached. He was wearing a T-shirt and faded blue jeans; the clothes hung off his huge build. His piercing blue eyes stared deeply and protectively into me when he grabbed James and spun him around.

It was true, what I told Fletcher. I said *no*, and James had begun to back off with genuine concern in his eyes, but Fletcher didn't see that or care. When he spun his son around, he looked shocked for a moment. Did he think it was somebody else? Was he that keen to protect me?

I try to tell myself it had nothing to do with me specifically. He would've helped any woman he thought was in danger. The conversation after, even if we didn't really say anything, had a glow of intimacy my conversations rarely do. No, *never* do.

Maybe it's all one-sided, but as I drive toward the suburbs, my clit feels crazy sensitive. It rubs hotly against my panties. I don't masturbate much. Now and then, I will, mainly to see if I can enjoy it, but I never think about anybody



specific, just vague, faceless steaminess.

Now, my fantasies spiral with a specific face in mind. I imagine Fletcher grabbing my hips and pushing me against the car. I imagine him driving his lips against mine, moaning huskily as he presses his manhood against my body. I imagine the feel of his lust, how hard he'd be for me, just for me. I can't think about another woman touching him.

Jeez, am I going nuts? As I get closer to my house, I try to push away these silly thoughts. I try to remind myself that I no longer exist, as far as Fletcher is concerned. I was a bad date for his son. That's all.

Mom's waiting for me in the living room when I open the door. I stop quickly. I was heading for the stairs with a vengeance, desire bubbling through me. My hand is desperate to slide down between my legs, rub slowly at first, then faster, as I sink into the steamy fantasy, the impossible dream.

Mom smiles when she sees me. She already has the Scrabble board set out. In the light of the lamps, her wrinkles stand out more. She's recently had a bad bout with the flu. She's never been the healthiest person. Her smile fades a moment later. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did you forget?" She's already leaning forward, ready to clear away the board.

"What?" I say, trying to laugh it off. "No, obviously not. I've been looking forward to this all night."

I join her at the table. Usually, I do pretty well against Mom, but tonight, she schools me. I don't stand a chance. If I had the letters, every one of my words would be the same—*Fletcher*.

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I sit at the edge of the gym, stroking my brush across the canvas as Lexi hits the heavy bag. She's on the taller side, built athletically. We became friends during our still-life course last year. I still think it's funny she took that course because Lexi is rarely still.

I'm trying to catch the frenzy of her workout on the canvas, the play of the sunlight slanting into the gym. This is the same gym James goes to, but I've

never seen him here or his dad. I would've remembered that.

It's difficult to focus on my work, Lexi's dyed purple hair bobbing behind her in a ponytail. Last night, after Scrabble, I did it. I locked my bedroom door, closed my eyes, and disappeared into dreams of Fletcher. By the end, I was rubbing between my legs so hard it felt like I would create sparks. Then, after, it felt so hollow. So *not-him*. I want the real thing.

"Was the date *that* bad?" Lexi says, wandering over when the round buzzer goes off. We've been talking between bouts, picking up where we left off each round.

"Worse," I say, smiling.

"You don't seem too upset." Lexi wipes herself down with a towel. "I'm sorry, though. I knew James could be a douche, but I didn't think he'd be *that* rude."

I wonder if I should tell her what he said about her fighting training, but that would create needless drama.

"Maybe he was just nervous," I say.

"You don't have to make excuses for him," Lexi replies. "Nervous or not, he shouldn't have left you waiting, and if he *had* to be late, then he should've apologized, at least. It's just common courtesy." She takes a breath, glancing up at the round timer. "How can you paint me when I'm moving around?"

"I'm not trying to copy you one-for-one," I tell her. "It's more about inspiration."

The buzzer goes off, and she returns to the bag. I try my best to focus on my work and use Lexi's flurries to fuel the flow of my paintbrush. It's so tempting to let my brush take a different direction and paint Fletcher's firm muscles instead—his tight arms and big, powerful hands. Imagine those hands smoothing up my legs toward my center, making my thighs ache.

Somehow, the round is over already.

"At least he stopped when you told him *no*," Lexi says. "Small bar, right? Say no, back off. Maybe it proves he's a socially awkward dweeb and not,

you know, a monster.”

“Or maybe he’s just a monster who hides it well,” I counter.

Lexi puts her hands on her hips, breathing hard. “It’s possible. I hope not, though.”

“Are you close with him?”

She shakes her head. “Not really, but he was always a nice enough kid. He never really tried in practice, but he was friendly. No offense, but I set you up because I thought he was bland.”

“None taken,” I joke.

She gently touches my arm, then whips it away. “Sorry, I’m sweaty.”

I laugh. “It’s fine.”

“I don’t think *you’re* bland. I thought, for your first date, it might be good to go with somebody who doesn’t have an overwhelming personality. You said his dad picked you up?”

I nod. “Yeah. Fletcher.”

“Fletcher Jacobson,” Lexi says, and I don’t like her tone. She’s got the playful glint in her eyes I recognize from countless other conversations, the glint that tells me, in no uncertain terms, that she feels attraction toward him.

My instinct is to throw my brush at her, tear my canvas to pieces, and toss myself into a world-record-level temper tantrum. I can’t think about Lexi with Fletcher. In my mind, insanely, he’s already mine.

“He’s something to look at, isn’t he?” Lexi says, sitting cross-legged on the floor. Her heavy bag session must be over.

“I don’t know,” I murmur, purposefully focusing on my painting.

“You didn’t notice?” Lexi laughs. “He used to come to class sometimes. He’d coach, or he’d hit the bag in the corner. There was always this intensity in everything he did.”

Just like in my fantasies last night...

“It was like he wanted to kill the bag. I had a crush on him.”

“Had or *have*?” I ask, trying to keep my voice as casual as possible.

“Aren’t we a little old for crushes?” she laughs. “Maybe I’ve just got daddy issues.”

One of the reasons Lexi and I bonded so quickly is that we both went to college in our home city for similar reasons. Her dad walked out when she was thirteen, and she wanted to stay here to be with her mom. My dad passed when I was fifteen, and I wanted to stay for the same reason.

“But do you?” I ask. “Still like him?”

Luckily, she’s too tired and cardio-high from her workout to hear the desperation in my voice. I’m unsure what I’d do if I saw adventurous, dyed-hair, *fun* Lexi on Fletcher’s arm. Realistically, I shouldn’t do anything. I shouldn’t care, but I can’t ignore that I do a lot. I can’t ignore the fact that thinking of them together hurts.

“I wouldn’t kick him out of bed,” she says, “but dating a man *that* old... I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

I should agree with this. My dad was fifty-seven when I was born. He and Mom had an amazing relationship. Mom often talks about it. Their sixteen-year age gap didn’t cause them any problems until it did, and Dad wasn’t there anymore. He left us alone.

“But he’s not old, old,” I say.

Lexi grins. “What does that mean? I’m young, young. He’s old, old.”

“He’s *older*,” I say, knowing I need to be careful. I’m pushing this point far too strongly for somebody who doesn’t care. “But it’s not like he’s some old man. He’s fit. He’s healthy. He’s experienced and mature.”

“Are you sure *you* don’t have a crush on him?” Lexi asks.

I laugh it off, gently guiding my brush across the canvas. “I literally saw him for a minute or two. It’s hard to develop a crush in that time. It’s just that age gaps aren’t the end of the world.”

This is my copout, implying I was talking about my dad.

“I’m not saying that,” Lexi says, getting the message I intended to give, a red herring if there ever was one. “But it would be complicated. He’s twice our age, Sam, more than, technically. He must be forty-one or forty-two. Imagine if we started dating.”

“Then he got older, got sick, and passed away. I get it, okay?”

Lexi stands up. “I’m sorry. I’m an ass. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You haven’t,” I tell her. At least, not for the reasons she thinks, anyway.

“Are you sure?” she asks doubtfully.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Really. It’s just I wonder if I’ll ever find anybody. If I’ll ever *want* anybody.”

Maybe I could tell Lexi right here how I feel, all the whispers of the future blooming to vivid life in my mind like fresh paint, but I know her. I know she’d try to make me see sense. Heck, it’s what she *should* do. It would be the only reasonable response to so much silliness. That’s why I don’t tell her. I don’t want to be convinced. Let me live in this delusion for a little longer.

## CHAPTER SIX

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### Fletcher

Charles Malone is a short man wearing a scuffed-up leather jacket. He's around my age, but he's lived differently. I can tell. A cigarette hangs from his mouth as he approaches me in the park, and his belly peeks out the bottom of his T-shirt. I try not to judge him. Not everybody has had to keep their body in tip-top shape for their career.

It's been two days since the date. Two days of dreaming about Samantha. Two nights of lying in bed and listing all the reasons I can't be with her. She dated my son. She's half my age. She'd never want me. She's too innocent for somebody as messed up as me. Then, after I finish the list, I start stroking my manhood anyway.

My mind fills with fantasies of Samantha, using the short minutes I spent with her as fuel. Her hips in that dress, her shy smile, her tempting green eyes... Even now, as Charles gets closer, my cock begins to stiffen as I think of her. I need to focus.

"Afternoon," Charles says, stubbing his cigarette out on the trashcan and then dropping it into the tray.

I nod. "What've you got?"

"The name of the man who took your dog and his address."

Already, I'm mentally preparing for what I'm going to do. I'll need to be careful. I haven't got the law or the government on my side here. I haven't got backup, but I don't give a damn. Every day I'm apart from Loki is another day that I can't even think about what could be happening to him.

"But," Charles continues, "he's already ditched the apartment. It looks like he's on the move. There's a lead—a business card for a motel outside the city. One of the other residents mentioned that Zack Taylor, the dog thief, often stays there."

"Okay. How much for you to come with me?"

Charles bites down and sucks in a breath. "We're getting into tricky territory here. We can't lay siege to a motel. We should really hand this over to the cops now."

"The cops are struggling to handle crime as it is," I snap, with way more edge than usual. It's not seeing my woman, not being with her, holding her, and living in the realm of unproductive daydreaming. "By the time they check this out, Zack will be long gone. I'm going either way, but I'd feel much better knowing I had backup."

"You're ex-military, right?" Charles says.

"Something like that," I grunt.

"Don't you have any buddies who could help you?"

"Maybe I do," I snap, "but I'm not asking them."

There are at least five guys I could call up who'd make the trip, but they've all got families, wives, kids, and new lives. Of the three who are no longer in the service, they all have PTSD. I don't want to trigger any of that crap.

"Twenty," Charles says after a pause, "but I can't hurt anybody. I'm there if things get so bad that your or that dog's life is at risk. That's it."

I nod. "Okay, good. Let's get rolling."

Charles hesitates. "What, now?"

"Every second I spend doing nothing is another second they've got my dog,"

I snap. “So yes, now.”

Charles swallows. “Half now, half later, like last time?”

“Yeah,” I say, turning away. “We need to swing by my place first. There are some tools I need to pick up.”

The war drum is beating deep inside me, the reverberations traveling through my body, preparing me for what I have to do. No, not *have* to. I don't have to do this. I want to. I need to. Not just to save my dog. Not just to distract myself from how mopey James has been today but to unleash some of this fury. The rage I feel knowing, deep down, that I'll never get to be with the only woman I want.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

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### Samantha

“Sammy,” Mom calls up the stairs. “There’s something here for you.”

I turn down my music, pushing away from the desk. I’ve spent the last two days focusing on my latest art assignment. I’m doing well at college because I’m more interested in my studies than partying and having fun. I’m not sure that’s a good thing, honestly. My peers seem to have way more social skills than me.

Walking downstairs, I find myself trying *not* to think about Fletcher. It’s a game I’ve been playing with myself ever since the last time I saw him. How long can I go? I’ve lost every single time. I don’t think I’ve made it longer than a minute.

Mom is beaming at the bottom of the stairs. She looks vibrant and youthful today. Next to her, there’s a huge bouquet of red roses on the table. Suddenly, my heart starts beating quickly, and my thoughts spin over and over. Fletcher somehow found my address and arranged these flowers. He feels the same! He wants everything I want!

“There’s a note,” Mom says. “I haven’t read it, of course.”

“But you *want* to,” I reply with a smile. “Come on, it’s okay. We’ll read it together.”

I wonder what he's going to say. Maybe he's going to ask me for a date. We can forget about my bad date with his son and pretend it never happened. This is just going to be about *us*. The scent of the flowers fills me up as I reach forward and take the small note.

My belly drops as I read. My eyes begin to sting like I'm going to cry. I feel that weak. It's not from Fletcher.

*I'm sorry for the other night. Give me a second chance? James x*

"Who's James?" Mom asks.

"The man I went on a date with a couple of nights ago."

"You went on a *date*?" Mom gasps, and I remember I haven't told her yet.

"Yeah, but it went terribly. He was rude. Or maybe I was distant. I don't know, but I don't want to give him a second chance. We didn't have any chemistry at all."

And he's my crush's son, but I'll leave that part out. I'm almost scared to say it aloud, especially with all the hints Lexi keeps dropping. She seems convinced she's seen right into my heart. She thinks she knows how badly I want Fletcher. The thing is, she *does*. She read me easily during that conversation we had at the gym.

"Should I put these in some water?" Mom asks softly, sensing I don't want to talk about it. Mom is good like that.

"Sure, thank you," I tell her, tossing the note in the wastebasket.

"How does he know where we live?" Mom asks, reaching for the flowers.

It's funny. Before, when I thought Fletcher might've sent them, I didn't care how he found the address. The fact that he did would've been enough, romantic even, thinking of him going through all that effort, but she's right. How the heck did *James* find out where I live?

"We're not publicly listed," Mom goes on. "You know what Dad was like."

When Dad was a kid in the fifties, his family was the victim of a stalker who'd targeted his mom, my grandmother. Since then, he's tried to be

anonymous, including taking our address off public registers.

“I don’t know,” I murmur, a shiver moving up my spine, an entirely different species of shiver to the ones Fletcher sends whispering over me.

Mom looks out the window. Her posture tightens. She and Dad were married for so long that, even if Mom never experienced any of the stalking, she shares a lot of his fear or *shared* since he’s not around anymore. Rest in peace, you beautiful, funny, wonderful man.

“Anyway,” she says, making an effort to be breezy. “Let me put these in some water.”

When I return upstairs, I see I’ve got a few missed calls from Lexi. “Do you want to come out tonight?” she asks. “I know partying isn’t your thing, but there’s a gallery opening downtown. There’s free champagne upon entry. I’ll take both, and you can be a good student and appreciate the artwork.”

I’m almost tempted to say no, but what else am I going to do? Hang around here, thinking about Fletcher? Or wonder just how the heck his son found my address?

“Sure,” I reply, “and who knows? Maybe I’ll go a little nuts.”

When I get out, I don’t go nuts. I have a sensible—some would say boring—time studying the artwork and making jokes with Lexi. When she moves on to a club, I get a cab home, and the whole time, I’m staring out the window, pathetically praying I see Fletcher.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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### Fletcher

I wake with a pounding headache. After heading to the motel last night and getting nothing, I returned home, hoping to sleep. Then came the usual nightmares, the evil stuff, the never-let-me-rest shit. It's tolerable when I've got Loki sleeping at my side, his small body curled into me. This morning, I miss him so much. He'd usually sense my mood, whine, and lick at my face or hands.

Standing, I head into the shower, deciding to go to the martial arts gym for the first time in months. I've been hitting the regular gym and lifting weights to maintain my size, but that's it. Otherwise, my life has been simple: managing my gyms, spending time with my son, and trying not to think about anything.

After a shower, I walk to James' room and knock on the door.

"Yeah?" he says, voice heavy with sleep. It's just past eight a.m.

"I'm going to the gym. Want to join?"

"It's early, Dad."

"It's not that early."

He groans. "Later."

I sigh, wondering if I should kick the door down and drag him out of bed. It's the no-nonsense attitude my dad would've taken with me, but it's not as though eight a.m. is *that* late. Plus, he's twenty, a man now. If I push too hard, we might not have a relationship at all. Or maybe that's another excuse.

Charles and the other PIs are chasing up the motel lead and using their networks to monitor for any sign of Zack, the dog thief. I'm waiting for the call, knuckles tingling as though preparing me for violence.

On the way to the gym, a warped sense of pride touches me. Last night was the first time I didn't pleasure myself thinking about Samantha. It was only because I was so torn up about my dog and the lack of leads. Even now, as I drive, I can't stop my thoughts from straying to her curvy young body, the light in her eyes, as if she's ready to start a new adventure—yeah, with an old man.

After parking, I step from the car, stop, and do a double take. I must be so tired that I've started to hallucinate. I'm sure I can see Samantha sitting on a foldout chair on the green opposite the gym, an easel in front of her. Rubbing my eyes, I lean over my car's roof. She's still there.

She's wearing a baggy sweater and loose-fitting jeans like she's trying to hide her figure, but there's nothing she can wear to hide it from me. My manhood starts to tingle as my feet carry me toward her. Her hair is tied up messily, giving her an artistic, sexy look.

She's so involved in her work that she doesn't notice me until I'm almost right on top of her. Well, close to her. Not *on top* in the way I'd like. She gasps, jerking her paintbrush, causing paint to splatter over my shirt.

"Oh my God." She leaps to her feet, drops the brush, and rushes over to me. "I'm so sorry. I didn't expect..."

She's got her hand on my shirt, rubbing at the paint with her bare hand. It pushes through the fabric, her hand and palm burning against my skin. It's the first time we've touched. I'm almost howling. It's like our bodies are talking to each other.

She seems to realize what she's doing, laughs cutely, and steps back. "Uh, sorry."

“You don’t have to apologize,” I growl, almost adding, *You never have to apologize to me*. My chest is burning from her touch. My manhood is getting hard, my base throbbing as I imagine her warm palm wrapped around it. “What are you working on?”

She bites her lip and looks at the ground. Strands of her brown hair have come loose. She looks so cozy and small in the baggy sweater. A flush creeps down her neck. She must feel awkward talking to the father of the man who gave her such a bad date.

“A school project. College project.”

I wonder if she’s correcting herself because she doesn’t want to seem too young. That gets my mind racing into steamy possibilities. Is there a reason she doesn’t want me to see her as too young? Is she interested?

“Can I take a look?” I ask.

She swallows, nods, then kneels. For a crazy moment, I think she’s going to bring those gorgeously nervous lips to my manhood, start kissing, stroking...

Then she picks up the brush she dropped and gestures at the canvas. “Uh, sure, but it’s not done yet. There’s something very interesting about how the light plays with this gym.”

I walk around the canvas to get a proper look at it. She’s captured it perfectly. No, it’s more than that. The gym is just a stone structure in the middle of some greenery and a parking lot, with the cityscape in the background. It’s so familiar to me, but she’s made it look new.

“So, your verdict?” she asks. When I tell her what I was thinking, she smiles in the most captivating, adorable way. It makes me want to lean down, kiss, and hold her. “That’s exactly what I was going for. Familiar but unfamiliar. That’s basically what this whole gym project is about. Taking an everyday space and trying to bring out its special qualities. There are so many special things in places people rarely look.”

I stare hard at her. “I agree,” I say huskily.

She bites her lip again and glances at the ground. I almost reach forward, touch her chin, and guide her gaze back to me.

“Have you painted inside, too?” I ask.

“Yeah. My friend Lexi. I’m not sure if you know her.”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

“Dyed hair? She’s been coming here for almost ten years, I think.”

I think a moment longer. “Yeah, I think I know who you mean.”

“I’ve been painting her,” I say. “Or moments. Snippets. It’s an interesting project.”

“It looks like you’re doing a great job,” I tell her.

“Thank you, Mr. Jacobson.”

“Fletcher,” I say fiercely, hating the idea of us being formal with each other.

She licks her lips as if trying to tempt me, but there’s nothing staged or forced about the gesture. “That’s an interesting name.”

“My dad was a bow hunter,” I say. “He’d make his own arrows. It’s called fletching, hence the name.” It’s far easier to talk to her than with anybody else, including my own family. I wonder what that says about me. Or her. “I guess he wanted me to follow in his footsteps.”

She smiles up at me. We’re standing so close. It would be the most natural thing in the world to reach down and loop my arms around her waist, pull her right up against me, and let the intimacy explode between us. “But you didn’t?”

“In my old line of work, a bow wouldn’t have done much good,” I say.

“You were in the Army, right?” she asks. “Lexi mentioned something...”

“More or less,” I tell her.

She laughs softly. “What does that mean?”

I grin. It feels so easy with her. For a second, I can forget that Loki’s out there somewhere without me. “I was in Special Forces. My job was to sneak around in places I wasn’t supposed to be, doing things I wasn’t supposed to

be doing.”

“Does being that tall make sneaking hard?” she asks with a small laugh.

“You’d think so,” I say, “but it helped out a lot of the time. I could pose as a rich American douchebag bodybuilder more than once. You’d be surprised by how many people will approach you in a bar and comment on your physique.”

If somebody approached *her* in a bar and commented on *her* physique, I’d have to leave the premises or end up catching an assault charge. I know that for a fact, and I know it’s wrong. It’s tough. I never usually experience this lack of control.

“What about you?” I ask. “What do you want to do when...”

*When you grow up*, I almost say, as if I need to call any more attention to our age gap. I need to remember that just because I feel all this heat and closeness, it doesn’t mean she sees this as anything other than friendly chitchat with the gym owner.

“You leave college?” I finish.

“It’s bad,” she murmurs, “but I haven’t thought that far ahead. I just think about the next assignment, the next piece.”

If I had my way, she’d never have to worry about what she’s going to do ever again. She’d be a mother, an artist, and anything else she wanted, never having to concern herself with money.

“Any news on your dog?” she asks a moment later.

“Nothing substantial,” I say. “I’ve got a few leads but nothing so far. It’s...”

“What, Fletcher?” she asks when I trail off. Usually, this is the point where I’d shut down. Close off all the emotion so I didn’t have to think about it.

“Eating me up,” I whisper, hardly believing I’m saying this. “Thinking about him out there alone. Wondering where I am, and all the stuff these sick bastards could be doing to him...”

She reaches out and touches my hand. More warmth sizzles through me, but



this is just as much emotion as desire. She looks up and meets my eye. She looks so scared. She looks downright terrified, but she holds my hand tighter.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispers. “It’s awful. He doesn’t deserve that.”

## CHAPTER NINE

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### Samantha

As pathetic as it might be, this is probably the scariest thing I've ever done. It's like I can feel the pain radiating through him by holding his hand. He squeezes tighter onto my hand, neither of us commenting on how odd this is, two strangers talking and touching like this.

My heart is beating so freaking hard. It was a soul-shivering shock when he suddenly appeared beside me. I was so lost in the work. It was like he teleported there. One moment, nothing, and then *poof*, there he was.

"What's his name?" I ask.

Fletcher smiles sadly. His blue eyes have a faraway look. In his shorts and T-shirt, every muscle is taut, as if ready to hurt the people who took his companion. I imagine him filling with the same intensity if anybody ever touched our children.

"Loki," he tells me. "A Jack Russell rescue. I got him when he was four. He's eight now. He's a good dog. A good friend. As pathetic as it might seem, he's my best friend."

"That's *not* pathetic," I say. "It's beautiful."

He smirks. "Nobody's ever called me beautiful before."

A second later, the smirk drops. He withdraws his hand. I feel like I've just been punched in the gut, which must be the overreaction of the century. Fletcher is looking over my shoulder. I turn and spot the reason he let my hand go. James' fancy racer-type car is pulling into the parking lot.

James jumps out, wearing gym gear. When he walks over, Fletcher steps away from me. I understand. He doesn't want his son to know... know what? That we were holding hands? Is there anything wrong with that? It's not like anything will ever happen between me and James.

"Thought I'd join you after all," James says, nodding at his dad, then looking awkwardly at me. I think about the flowers and the fact he somehow discovered my address. "Hey, Samantha."

"Hello," I reply politely, wishing he wasn't here so I could touch his dad again. Does that make me a little nuts?

"What are you two chatting about?" he goes on.

"Loki," Fletcher says, "and Samantha's art project. She's based it around the gym."

Fletcher suddenly seems like a different person, withdrawn and stoic. His eyes show none of the emotion they did just a few moments ago. It makes me wonder if I've read too much into this exchange and blown it out of proportion.

"Poor pup," James says. "Uh, Dad, can I meet you inside?"

He's giving Fletcher the side-eye, implying he wants time alone with me, but that's the last thing I want.

"Actually, I was just about to leave," I say. "I've done enough for this morning. It was nice speaking with you, Fletcher. Bye, James."

"And you," Fletcher says, in that cold tone.

I quickly pack away my easel as Fletcher and James head toward the gym. Just before he walks into the building, Fletcher turns and stares at me. He stares into me, through me. It's like he's silently telling me this exchange meant something to him, however minor other people would find it. It was

real. Or maybe that's too much hope on my part.

Packing my stuff into the trunk, I get into the driver's seat. When I start the engine and hear that telltale stuttering noise, I know it's busted again. Dammit.

## CHAPTER TEN

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**F**letcher

“Head in, son,” I tell James. “I need to check something.”

The truth is, I’ve just looked out the lobby window and saw Samantha step from her car and take out her phone. Something’s clearly wrong with the vehicle. Maybe it’s fate playing games with us. Throughout my career, I often toyed with the idea of fate. I’ve been far too lucky, far too many times.

“Uh, okay,” James says, walking up the stairs that lead to the main gym.

I head back outside, my heart pumping harder the closer I get to her. It’s been literal minutes, maybe even just *one* minute, yet it feels far longer than that.

“Car trouble?” I ask.

Samantha looks up, the corner of her lip twitching. It’s like she’s as happy to see me as I am to see her. I should be cautious and stop reading so much into every gesture or expression, but I can’t help it. I don’t *want* to.

“It’s been messing me up for a while,” she says. “Mom’s already eaten through most of her savings to help me with college.”

I nod. “How about I give you a ride home? Then I’ll arrange for somebody to come and look at it.”

Her mouth drops open, making her look so cutely shocked I almost kiss her right now. The only thing that stops me is that James could be watching us through the window. Even without kissing her, how will I explain giving his date a ride home?

“Are you sure?” she asks after a pause.

“I wouldn’t have offered otherwise,” I reply. “Maybe you could pay me with one of those paintings.”

“Some payment,” she mutters.

“It *is* some payment,” I say fiercely. “Your work is brilliant. You should have some confidence in it.”

“You’ve seen one painting,” she says quietly.

“Maybe you could show me more,” I reply, not quiet at all. I’m letting out too much of the fierceness rumbling inside me, the scorching need that dominates me whenever I’m close to her. Or even when we’re separate, come to think of it. I gesture toward my car. “Shall we?”

“Uh, yeah, okay, thank you.”

“Just give me a second...”

*To tell my son*, I almost say, but instead, I let the sentence hang and then turn back to the gym. She can assume I’m doing some admin task, something unrelated to the steam we will share. I find James waiting for me at the top of the stairs.

“I’m giving Samantha a ride home,” I tell him. “Her car is busted.”

James narrows his eyes at me. Is that jealousy I can feel radiating from him? This is a messed-up position to be in, in competition with my own son. If I were a good person, I’d read his discomfort and tell Samantha to find her own way home, but I can’t fight this hunger. Or maybe I don’t want to.

“Oh, okay,” James replies.

“I shouldn’t be long,” I tell him.

“Why are *you* giving her a ride?” he asks.

It's difficult to answer this. I definitely can't be honest. Outside the gym, somebody makes a loud banging noise. Or maybe it's a car. It pisses me off, my reaction. I duck, turn, reaching for my hip like there's a goddamn gun there. Gritting my teeth, I let my hand drop. It's annoying as hell when that happens. James sees the whole thing, frowning. I know he probably wants to say something, but I don't want to talk about it.

"Good publicity for the gym," I say. "That's a decent reason for giving somebody a ride, eh?" I try to play it off as a joke, but James is watching me closely.

"Yeah, sure," he says after a pause.

I turn away and walk back down the stairs. James has never mentioned Samantha before. He didn't say anything about having a crush on her or anything like that. As far as I know, they had one date, and that was it, but what if James has wanted her for a while now? What if I'm betraying my own son?

The moment I see Samantha standing near my car, awkwardly carrying her art supplies, I'm able to let these concerns go. I find myself actively letting everything else drift away.

Approaching her, I take the art supplies from her arms. Our hands touch. That warmth pulses into me, making my balls swell, my manhood stiffen, and my mind erupt with all the things we could do together. No, we *will* do together.

After stowing her stuff in the trunk, I open the passenger-side door for her. She looks at me from beneath her eyelashes. Overseas, I'd often read novels. I read that phrase many times. I've never actually seen it in real life until now. Her gaze is turned down, and she looks up nervously. She's so, so beautiful.

"Thank you," she murmurs, getting in the car.

I walk around the other side, glancing over at the gym. James is standing in the window, watching us. I lift my hand and wave. He turns away without waving back.

If I needed a sign he's not taking this well, I've got one. So, what sort of father does that make me? But nothing's happened, I assure myself. Try to.

Nothing's happened, and nothing's going to.

"You can put your address in there," I say, nodding to the GPS.

"Okay, cool," she replies. "So you don't, uh, know my address already?"

"Why would I know where you live?" I ask, confused.

She leans forward to the GPS unit, entering her address. "Oh, no reason."

The comment is confusing as hell. I can't think of why I'd already know where she lives. Once the GPS gives me directions, I pull out of the lot. She clasps her hands in her lap like she's working out some tension. I have to fight the urge to reach over, separate her hands, and let her know she doesn't have to—

*Bang.* The windows are blown in. I lean across the car and put my arm protectively over Samantha. We're at a red light. No, the windows haven't blown in. What was the noise? I scan the area. There are some assholes on the street corner lighting small fireworks. Lighting them and laughing like tough guys when a mother and her young son leap out of the way.

I punch my door open and walk over to them, not thinking, ready for murder.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

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### Samantha

I can still feel the pressure of his arm laid protectively over me. Behind us, cars are honking their horns, but Fletcher doesn't care. There are four men on the street corner, gangster-looking-type people, honestly, covered in tattoos and with a nasty way of looking up and down the sidewalk, like they're waiting for somebody to challenge them.

I slide into the driver's seat and guide the car to the side of the road, doing my best to wedge it against the sidewalk awkwardly. Then I jump out and follow Fletcher. Why? What do I think I'm going to be able to achieve? It doesn't matter. I want to be there for him.

"Relax, guy," one of the men says when I approach. He's taller than the others, has a tattoo of a bloody dagger on his neck, and teardrops under his eye.

"Why the fuck are you setting off fireworks here?" Fletcher growls. He doesn't seem even a bit worried until he glances at me, then his expression changes. Am I going crazy, or is that a protective glint I see in his intense blues?

"Why does it matter, big man?" another one says, laughing for no reason. "If you've got a problem—"

“If you finish that sentence,” Fletcher cuts in, “then it’s war. Then we go, and when we go, we don’t stop until we can’t fight anymore.” He takes a step forward, filled with more rage than I’ve ever seen anybody, fists clenched at his sides. “What’s it going to be?”

One of the men laughs, but then the leader turns and glares at him. I can’t see Fletcher’s face, just his back rising and falling with deep breaths. I can’t see his eyes, but I bet they’re piercing, clear, and ready. Terrifying.

When sirens sound a few streets over, it gives the men an excuse to gather their fireworks and run away. I’ve got no doubt about what would’ve happened if things had gotten violent. I’m not certain Fletcher would’ve won, but he would’ve fought.

“Sorry about that,” he says, turning to me.

I shake my head. I can *still* feel that warm protective pressure across my body, his powerful arm shielding me. “You don’t have to be.”

“Sometimes I just…” He walks toward the car without finishing the thought.

“Just what?” I ask once I’m in the passenger seat.

“It doesn’t matter,” he says, starting the engine and pulling out of the spot.

“Oh, okay.”

We don’t say anything for a while as he keeps driving. Minutes pass. I’m not sure how many—too many, anyway. The GPS indicator shows us getting closer and closer to my house. It’s like being on the date again, only in the sense there’s something I want to say, but there’s this *shield* inside of me blocking it like I’d have to force the words out.

I can do it, can’t I? I’m not *that* pathetic? I can ask a simple question.

“You can tell me,” I say, speaking so quickly it’s a miracle he can make out the words.

“Tell you what?” he asks.

“What doesn’t matter,” I murmur, purposefully staring out the window so I don’t have to look at him. “I mean, that noise. The way you reacted.”

“What about the way I reacted?” he says, his tone cold.

I swallow. I wonder if I’m being way too forward. He reflexively put his arm over me to keep *me* safe, but it’s probably not specific to me. He would’ve done the same with any passenger.

“I don’t know,” I murmur.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” he says gruffly. “You don’t have to be embarrassed. Don’t worry. I won’t bite.”

*Unless you want me to*, I imagine him saying.

“I just wonder if it had anything to do with your service, that’s all.”

He brings the car to a stop outside my house. That drive happened *way* too quickly. We must’ve been sitting in awkward quiet for at least ten minutes. Now I can feel him looking at me. I *feel* it as if his gaze is tattooing my skin.

Something forces me to turn and look at him. It’s like this tingling tinge of destiny, as crazy as that sounds. But *everything* seems crazy with Fletcher, every single thought bursting to life in my mind.

“It’s happened twice this morning,” he says, his tone still cold. “Sometimes, I hear a bang. Sometimes, I react like I’m still over there. It’s not a fucking big deal. It’s just something that happens. It’s never caused any problems.”

He glares down at me. I’m sure I can see some vulnerability behind the hardness in his expression. His vein bulges in his neck as if he’s about to erupt.

“I’m not saying it’s a problem,” I murmur. “But...”

“You don’t have to be afraid to *talk*, Samantha,” he snaps, sounding disgusted with the idea that I’d have to hold anything back from him. I don’t see how he can sound so shocked, though. This is literally the second time we’ve ever spoken.

“But it must be horrible,” I go on. “Living on the edge. Always waiting for something bad to happen.”

“But what if that had been an explosion? Or a shooter? What if I was relaxed

about the whole thing instead of trying to shield you? Then you would've..." He bites down. "It's my job to protect you."

His words light me up. I never expected him to say something so intimate. "Is it?"

"To protect regular people," he says, and the starlight in my silly, immature soul turns to dust. "That's what a soldier does. A good soldier, anyway. If I embarrass myself by reacting like that, then I'll take that. It's worth the risk."

"How often does something like that happen?" I murmur.

"It happens, Samantha," he growls. "The world is a nasty, dark place. Some things I've seen... Hell, I wouldn't inflict it on you. There are monsters, sheepdogs, and wolves. The wolves are ruthless. They'll do anything, *anything*, to the sheep. That's why sheepdogs have to be ready."

"Is that what we are, regular people? Sheep?"

Fletcher gestures out the window toward the end of the street. "Take that man, for example."

A youngish man walks down the road, looking down at his phone, sucking on what looks like a colorful disposable vape pen. "What about him?"

"Do you know how easy it would be to rob him? He's not even looking where he's going. He's not aware of his surroundings at all."

"So because he doesn't have situational awareness, you need to be ready all the time? Never let yourself relax?"

He flinches like my words have hit a sore point. Everything in me tries to force me to turn away from his gaze. His glaring doesn't let up. It's like he's going to yell at me for attempting to chip away at his emotional walls. Since I have no frame of reference, it's difficult to know if this type of conversation is strange, considering it's the second time we've ever spoken.

"It's better than the alternative," he grunts. "Better than not being ready."

"But can you be ready and still relax a little? Maybe there's a middle ground."

“In war, there’s no middle ground. Only under the ground and above it.”

“But you’re not at war, Fletcher.”

He sighs darkly. “It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m talking out of my ass. I’m talking like I’m always ready, but I wasn’t ready for the prick who took Loki. I wasn’t aware then. I wasn’t ready then.”

“You can’t beat yourself up about tha—”

“I *can*,” he snaps, “and I will. It’s my fault. He’s my dog. He relies on me to keep him safe.”

I expect him to mention that we’re at my house now. Shouldn’t I be getting out, thanking him for the ride? Instead, he sits back in his seat as if he’s not in a rush. I remember James standing in the window of the gym. Fletcher waved at him, but he didn’t wave back. I wonder what Fletcher would think of the flowers James sent me, but there’s no point telling him that.

“Anyway...” He smirks. “Enough of that miserable stuff. What are your plans for the rest of the day?”

“I told Mom I’d clean the house. She’s out all day at this bingo event. She loves bingo.”

When I mention Mom being out, Fletcher leans slightly toward me. It’s not an exaggerated closeness, but I’m sure there’s a shift. In his mood, too, the way he looks at me.

“When will she be home?” he asks.

I shrug. “Not for hours yet.”

He swallows, looking me up and down. I’m sure of it. “Ah,” he says.

“Yeah,” I mutter.

I *still* don’t reach for the door handle, and Fletcher says nothing about me leaving. We sit in silence, but somehow, it’s not awkward. I wish I could reach past his silver hair and into his mind, his thoughts. Maybe there’s some desire there. Or perhaps he’s just waiting for the dorky, no-social-skills woman to get the heck out of his car.

“Have you got more paintings inside?” he asks.

I bite my lip, then let it go. That’s a bad habit. As a kid, I once chewed my lip so badly it bled. I haven’t done it in years, but something about Fletcher brings the old coping mechanism back. Everything he says sends a shiver of implication through me—shivers of pure heat.

“Y-yeah,” I say. “Quite a few.”

“Show me some,” he says. “I want to see if the rest are as brilliant as the gym piece.”

I’m so relieved he’s just come right out and said this. It removes any doubt and second-guessing. Even if this *is* just about my paintings, I’ll take that. I’ll savor it. It’s not like he’s dreaming about the same future as I am, anyway. Even if there’s desire here, it won’t be *that* sort of desire on his end.

“Okay,” I say, a warm feeling moving through my belly. A tiny voice whispers from deep inside me that this could be the start of everything, the first day of the rest of our lives.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

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**F**letcher

As we walk toward the house together, I fight the urge to reach down and place my hand on her sweet, round ass. She's walking just ahead of me, hips swaying naturally, highlighting her curves. Something about what we just shared—I never talk about that stuff—made me feel so close to her. I'm amped up as if I've just been in a gunfight.

She unlocks her door and turns to me with a quick, nervous smile. Her eyes have a wide, excited look. Or maybe I'm projecting. My manhood is hard already, my base aching, seed rushing up my shaft.

"What sort of paintings did you want to see?" she asks, turning to me at the bottom of the stairs.

The house is quiet, making me feel like we're the only people who exist, the only people who matter. I could reach out and grab those thick hips, pull her perfect body up against mine, press forward, and let her feel my rock-solid dick. The only thing stopping me is that I have no clue how James really feels about her.

"Anything you want to show me," I tell her, wondering if she knows I'm talking about way more than the art.

She nods, turns, and walks up the stairs. I'm such an animal. I watch her walk

up the stairs away from me, giving me an even better view of her big, juicy ass. It's like my body is roaring, *We shared some emotion. Now it's time to make her pregnant. Now.*

As pitiful as it would seem to other people, that talk we had about overseas and my reactions are more than I've ever shared. It makes me feel closer to her than she would probably believe. Maybe she'd think I'm a psycho. Maybe I am.

She returns a minute later, holding some rolled-up canvases under her arm. She looks at me in that shy way, head down but eyes up, making me think of her staring up with those big tits out, waiting for me to own her, claim her.

Leading me into the kitchen, she unrolls one of the paintings. I step forward, standing close to her. Her perfume and her natural scent tempt me even more. I'm so close to touching her. With an effort, I try to focus on the painting instead.

It shows a car parked on a hill during nighttime, the stars vivid, the car's headlights exaggerated as they glow down the hill. The level of detail on the vehicle is impressive.

"How long did this take?" I ask.

"Oh, hours and hours and hours. A long time."

"It was worth it," I tell her. "Let me see another."

She shows me two more, one of a garden and a portrait of her pink-haired friend, but I almost lose it when she shows me the fourth. I almost flip the table. It's a painting of a naked man.

"Not that one," Samantha mutters under her breath, reaching forward to snatch it away.

My hands are shaking. My head is pounding so hard.

"It's okay," I say, but my voice is shaky.

She glances up at me. At the angle we're standing at, she has to turn slightly. If I took one step to the side, I'd be able to drive forward with my hips, lean down, and press my manhood against her big, juicy ass.



“Did you... paint this from a real-life model?”

“It was a nude modeling thing—Lexi’s idea. Honestly, I felt awkward the whole time. I’d never want to do it again, but I decided to do my best anyway.”

I swallow, my head hurting, pounding with tension. “Well, you did a good job.”

I take a step away from her, warning myself to calm down. I’ve been on edge far too much lately. First with Loki, and now with my woman, but I can’t leave this alone.

“You’re not doing this again, though,” I growl, making it a statement rather than a question.

“No,” she murmurs, turning to me now. “It was a onetime thing...” She trails off in that telltale way like she wants to say more, but it’s as if she’s afraid. Of what? Me? Or the idea of saying something embarrassing?

“What?” I ask curtly.

“It’s just...” She swallows. “You seem really mad about it. Are you against nude modeling or something?”

“I don’t give a damn what people choose to do,” I tell her, “but...”

I need to stop right now. I need to think of James. Before I go any further, I should at least find out how he feels, how deeply, how intensely. Still, it can’t be deeper or more intense than the feelings flooding me. Stepping forward, I reach out, knowing I must stop, but I can’t. Hell, I don’t want to.

She lets out a gorgeous gasp when I grab her hips in both my hands. Fuck, she’s curvier than I expected. There’s so much fullness in her hips. I press through her sweater, feeling her body, her thickness. “But you’re not doing it again,” I snap. “You’re not going to sit in a room with another naked man again.”

*Because you’re mine, you belong to me, and I’d kill any bastard who tried to touch you.*

She gasps again when my touch tightens even more. I can’t hold back.

“Fletcher,” she whispers, and I’m unsure if she’s asking me to back off or keep going. Maybe the intensity is too much for her, but I don’t give a damn.

Leaning down, I guide my lips to hers while pulling her perfect body toward me. Just before we kiss, she moans, and I know she wants it. Maybe she doesn’t *need* it in the same way as me, but she wants the kiss, at least—the heat. I smooth one hand around her body, savoring every voluptuous inch. When I start massaging her ass, my cock gets fully hard, precome leaking from my tip.

She kisses me slowly, nervously, like she’s never done it before. I take the lead, find her tongue, indulgently tasting her. Her ass is so full. Fuck. I want to bend her over, strip her naked, grind my shaft between her ass cheeks as I reach around, play with her slit, and get her ready for my dick.

She moans when I lift her off her feet, placing her on the table and letting me drive my crotch between her legs. I can feel her eagerness through our clothes. I grind up and down, groaning as my dick gets hotter, the pleasure closer.

Breaking off the kiss, she stares up at me. “The curtains are open,” she whispers.

I turn and realize she’s right. The open curtains show the street. Luckily, nobody is out there right now. If somebody was, if somebody saw her being so sexy, I can’t even think about what I’d do. I step away from the table, rush over to the window, and close the curtains so violently it’s a miracle I don’t tear the railing from the wall.

When I return to her, I can’t help myself. I grab her sweater and start pulling it over her head. She lifts her arms after a moment. Every movement of hers is tinged with nerves. I can feel them burning from her. Maybe a better man would slow down here, but I can’t think straight when I remove her sweater and see her white tank and pink bra underneath. It’s more intense than the haze of battle. It’s the haze of desire.

I groan, grab her top, and pull it down, revealing her full breasts wedged together in her bra. There’s so *much* of her perfect curviness. With a snarl, I grab her bra and pull it down, revealing her pink, big, sexy-as-fuck nipples.

“Oh, fuck,” I growl, leaning down, massaging them, taking one in my mouth and sucking so I can feel it responding with lust.

“Fletcher,” she moans, moving her hand over my shoulder.

“What?” I say, looking up at her, praying she doesn’t say *stop*.

“That...” She swallows, her face bright red. “Feels really good...”

My dick gets even harder, somehow. For a moment, I think I’m going to explode in my pants. My balls are flooded with seed. I need to fuck her so badly it hurts.

I start sucking her nipple again while smoothing my hand up her leg, but the jeans are too thick. The denim stops me from properly feeling her. Still kissing, I grab her jeans, fiddling with the button.

“H-here,” she says, reaching down, smoothing her hand over mine, and grabbing the button.

Once she undoes it, I unzip the jeans and pull them down. She leans back, straightening her legs, letting me do it. Her underwear is tangled up with her jeans. Oh, fuck, her pussy is wet for me, her hole winking, glistening. Her clit looks so goddamn ready for everything I will give her. Her lips are as full as her perfect figure.

I throw her jeans on the floor, then drop to my knees. I can’t stop. I won’t. I don’t care about my son right now at this moment. I’m a monster. I’m a bastard. I don’t care about *anything* except the tangy scent of her as I kiss up her thigh and the small whimpering sounds she makes the closer I get.

How did we get here? We were talking about art. It’s happening so fast. I hope I make her young body pregnant when I drive my rock-hard dick into her tight hole. I’m burning for her.

“Oh, oh, oh,” she whimpers when I finally reach her pussy. I sink my hands greedily into her thighs, opening her legs and sliding my tongue from her entrance up to her lips to her clit. Her legs tremble when I pay special attention to her tight bud.

I lick her slowly at first, listening to her moans, driven on by them. She

sounds like she can't believe this is happening, and I can't blame her. I can hardly believe it, either. Paper crinkles softly as I lick her quicker. I realize she's lying on her paintings.

Quicker and quicker, I lick her eager pearl. Then I bring my finger to her entrance and circle it, still consuming her clit simultaneously. I suck it into my mouth, obsessed with the taste of her. My mouth is flooded with the tanginess of her. I could feast on her for days. Fuck, I'm addicted already.

Slowly, I slip my finger into her. She grips me so tightly. The base of my shaft aches as I imagine driving into her with my cock, her walls squeezing around me. Is she going to be able to take my dick? She's tight as hell, but her body was made for me, just for me.

"Fletcher," she moans, with urgency in her voice.

I stop. "What's wrong?"

"No." She gasps. "I'm... I mean..."

I smirk, looking up into her red face, her frantic eyes. "Don't get shy with me now, my perfect painter."

The nickname makes her flush even more. I could spend the rest of my life just trying to make her happy and consider it a life well spent. "I'm close to, you know..."

I love her shyness. Pressing my face against her pussy again, I taste her juices, licking her clit, finger-fucking her eager hole, and feeling her tightness pulsing around me. Her body is talking to me, her hole pulsing, telling me she's getting closer, closer...

Then her legs tremble so much the table starts to jolt up and down. Several paintings fall to the floor. Her moans come like music, the perfect noise. I fuck her eager young hole with my finger, hard, over and over, while consuming her nub. She spills out her hot juices all over my tongue as I open my mouth wide, licking her core, lips, and everything.

When she's done, I stand up, staring down at her, top and bra tangled around her belly, her thighs wet with her release.

“I need you now,” I growl, stepping forward and reaching for my pants.

I pull them down, then yank my underwear down. My manhood springs free. I’ve never been this hard before. My head hasn’t been in this much of a haze before. I can’t think about anything except her slit, so tight, so ready.

“Fl-Fletcher,” she moans.

“Yeah?” I groan, leaning down to guide my dick to her entrance.

“I...” She bites down and shakes her head. “It’s nothing.”

“What?” I growl, stroking my tip up and down her folds, spreading her wetness from her hole to her clit and all around, then staying at her hole, teasing her entrance.

“No, it’s nothing,” she says, more confidently now. “Let’s do it.”

“You want it,” I groan. That’s not a question. “You fucking need it as badly as me.”

“Yes,” she moans.

I push against her, feeling her spread open for me, but not enough. She’s all tense. I groan and push a little harder, but when she gasps, it’s different from the other times. I don’t want to hurt her. My job is to protect her. I pull back slightly.

“It’s fine,” she snaps. “Just...” She takes a breath like she’s steeling herself. “Just do it.”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I snarl. “You need to relax.”

As soon as I say this, I wish I could take it back. I’m talking to her like an ass.

“It’s hard to relax when you’re a virgin!” she snaps, sitting up, her breath coming quickly.

A virgin... Oh, fuck.

I won’t ever be able to let her go now. When I saw her, I knew she was mine. I knew nobody else could ever claim her. I knew I had to have her, but there

was a thought, deep down, that she could never be *just* mine. Everybody has a history, but now, I see it clearly. She belongs to me, just me.

“Lie down,” I snap. “I’m taking your virgin hole. I’m fucking *owning* your tight slit.”

She lies back slowly, nodding and biting her lip, but I can feel the tension in her body when I push against her again. Maybe it’s the environment and the fact it’s her first time. The savage part of me just wants to drive deep, push into her tight hole over and over, fuck her hard until she pushes past the discomfort and starts creaming down my shaft.

Yet I can’t hurt her. I never could. Using all my self-control, I step back, shaking my head.

“I’m sorry,” I say. It’s the first thing that comes to mind.

She leaps to her feet, grabs her bra and top, and roughly pulls it back into place. Tears are in her eyes—the last thing I ever want to do to my woman. She looks down at the paintings on the floor, then roughly rubs her face.

“I...” She rubs her face again when more tears start to fall. “Just... just leave, okay? *Just get the hell out of here!*”

She screams, waving her hands at me. I try to step forward, to take her shoulders gently. I’ve pushed her too hard, too fast. I should’ve taken things slower with her, giving her a chance to get used to this connection. Even now, it’s hard to control myself with her naked thighs on display.

She takes a step back. “I mean it. Just go. Please.”

I hate leaving her here when there’s so much up in the air between us, but I can’t see a way to fix this rift, at least not now. Yet I know she’s mine. I know she belongs to me. I know she’s the only woman I ever want or need, but she’s deadly serious. She glares at me like she hates me.

Turning away, feeling like a failure, a coward, I head for the door. I can still taste her on my lips.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

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### Samantha

“Are you okay, sweetness?” Mom asks later that day while we’re eating dinner together.

I’m not sure how to answer that. I take my time chewing my food, giving myself time to think. The steaminess with Fletcher was even hotter than I could’ve imagined. When he laid me down on the table and went between my legs, the orgasm was otherworldly. I’m still sore from it now like my body wants more. No, it’s not *like* it wants more. It does so badly, pestering me to go find him.

When it, I, the sex, didn’t work—when it *failed*—it just made me feel so inadequate. He wanted me. We were ready to make it happen, and then I couldn’t give him what he wanted. I know I don’t *owe* him anything, but I wanted to do it so badly. I wanted to be with him. I still want it, even if I yelled at him to leave.

When he saw the naked painting, he started to burn with possessiveness. It was all over him, the heat, the belonging. He said I couldn’t *ever* do it again, as though we’re going to become some long-term thing.

“You’ve been quiet,” Mom says, dragging me from my thoughts. I haven’t replied. I’ve just sat here, wondering what I could’ve done differently. “We can talk if you like... about anything.”

“Anything,” I repeat, pushing my pasta around the plate. “I’m not sure about that.”

“Try me,” Mom says.

I look up to find her smiling at me. There’s an almost desperate quality to the smile. I can read the expression fairly easily. Recently, she told me, *“Sometimes, I regret how old I was when I had you. I would never regret having you, but I wish I’d been younger, more able to connect with you.”*

She’s been trying to do just that lately, and I’ve done my best to engage, but talking about college is way different from admitting I got steamy on this very table earlier. That’s one reason the house is spotless and smells so fresh. Another is that it was easier to focus on the cleaning than what happened between me and Fletcher.

“Do you want the truth, Mom?” I ask.

She lays her fork down. “Of course...”

I take a breath, wondering if I’m really going to do this, but I can’t explain it to anybody else. If I told Lexi, she might get jealous. She’s also got a crush on Fletcher, probably like every woman who ever freaking meets him. He could be with one of them now.

“Remember the date I went on?”

“The bad one,” she says, nodding.

“Well...” I swallow. “It’s kind of crazy. Earlier today, I ran into his dad.”

“Your date’s dad?”

I almost snap, *That’s what we’re talking about, right?* But it’s not Mom’s fault I’m so on edge. “Yeah,” I reply, “and things got... well, intimate. I really like him. I think he likes me, too, but I’m unsure where to go from here.”

“Wait a second.” Mom massages the bridge of her nose, a familiar gesture. She’s struggling to fit what I’m saying into her head. “How old is he?”

I remember what Lexi said. “Forty-one or forty-two. Somewhere around



there.” More than twice my age. Twice my experience. I wonder if he was pissed at us not being able to have sex, but I’m not here as some freaking sex device for him to use, even if I wanted it badly. I still want it.

“Twenty-one years older than you,” Mom says.

I give her a look, wordlessly saying, *Are we seriously going there?*

She reads the look and shakes her head. “Don’t make this about your father.”

I drop my cutlery. I almost leap to my feet. I seriously need to calm down. Maybe life was easier when I wasn’t so involved with people—just light, color, and brushstrokes. “I don’t see how you can disapprove.”

“I never said I did.”

“You didn’t have to.”

She sighs. “Explain what this courtship looks like so far.”

*Courtship* is just one of the many words that show Mom’s age. On top of simply being older, she’s also an old soul like me. “We’ve met twice. We’ve kissed.” I won’t mention the rest. “But things are complicated. His son is sending me flowers, so that’s no good. And...” *I can’t give him what he wants.* “I’m not sure he wants the same thing as me.”

“What do *you* want?” she asks.

I hesitate, finding it difficult to look her in the face. I don’t think she’d judge me, but she’s clearly worried, and maybe she’s right to be. “Remember what you said about meeting Dad? The moment you saw him, you saw *me*. That’s what you said. You saw a future family.”

“It’s true,” Mom says.

“Well, ditto,” I laugh, but nothing’s funny. It’s more like I’m trying to expel some awkward energy. “The second I saw him, I knew I wanted him, Mom. I knew I wanted a family. I don’t want to date around. I don’t want to party. I’ve found my man, and that’s that.”

“Oh, Sam,” Mom says.

“Why, *oh, Sam?*” I snap. “It’s the same thi—”

“No, it’s not,” she replies. “I was twenty-eight when I met your father. He was older than me but not *twice* my age, and I was a grownup.”

“I *am* a grownup,” I snap. “I thought you were going to be supportive.”

“You’ve met this man twi—”

“You knew right away!” I stand up, the chair screeching.

“Please sit down,” Mom says. “We can talk about this civilly.”

“But you’re against it already. You don’t even want to give us a chance.”

“I want you to be careful,” Mom says. “I’m not saying you can’t see this man. I’m aware that, legally, you can make that decision yourself. However, there’s a big difference between what happened between me and your father and what you’re describing. What if this man does this often? Finds younger women, *very* young, and manipulates them?”

“Who said anything about me being manipulated? I felt all of this before I even knew who he was!”

Mom sighs, rubbing the bridge of her nose again. She shakes her head sadly. “That’s what I’m afraid of. A forty-two-year-old man has so much more experience than a woman your age. You’ve never had very many boyfriends.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” I slowly sit down, feeling foolish standing here, getting all amped up.

“A lot, actually,” Mom retorts. “When I met your father, I’d had relationships. I was world-wise to a point. I knew what I felt for your dad was real and not just...”

“Just what?” I snap when she cuts herself off. “*What, Mom?*”

“When you’re young, your first crush hits you hard. It makes you see the whole world differently, but then it wears off. You wake up and realize perhaps you weren’t as perceptive as you initially thought.”

“So you think I’m blinded by a crush?” I say.

“I think you need to be *very* careful,” Mom counters. “You’ve always been a

withdrawn, sensible person. This is out of character for you. You're in danger of being swept away by your emotions. You can hate me for saying that if you like, but I think we both know it's true."

There's nothing I can say to this. Objectively, I know she's right. I know what I'm feeling makes no sense. I guess it just hits me so hard because, deep down, I assumed she'd instinctively side with me. The age thing aside, what I feel is so similar to what happened with her and Dad.

"You make some good points," I mutter, "about previous relationships and not having experience. I get that, but I feel so sure, Mom. I feel so—"

The doorbell cuts me off. Mom frowns. "Are you expecting visitors?" Ever since Dad passed, anything out of the ordinary causes Mom to become defensive and anxious. An unexpected visitor is up there on the list.

"No," I say. "Maybe it's a salesperson or something. I'll go check."

Or maybe, I'm secretly hoping, it's Fletcher. He's come to reconnect after all the drama earlier. With each step toward the door, I feel my sex rubbing against my underwear. I've showered since the steaminess, but I can still feel the impression on my body.

Opening the door, I'm greeted by a courier holding a large bouquet of flowers, even bigger than the last ones. There's another note with these. From James. *How about a second chance?*

"Are they from *him*?" Mom asks.

The way she says *him* almost has me snapping again. If these were from Fletcher, I'd be joyfully punching the air.

"No," I say. "They're from his son."

Mom frowns *again*, deeper this time, almost comically so. She has a very expressive face. One thing I remember most vividly from my early childhood is the exaggerated faces she'd make at me. "Is there any reason his son is sending you so many flowers?"

"I don't understand it," I reply. "It doesn't make sense. We had one bad date. I don't know why he won't just leave me alone. I'm going to call Lexi."

“Why?”

“I’m getting James’ cell number. He has to know this isn’t okay.”

I go upstairs, grab my phone, and call my friend. She seems curious about why I want James’ number, but then she gives it to me. When I get ready to make the call, there’s a pit in my belly trying to stop me from doing it. It’s the same pit that opened on the date the countless times I tried to interrupt his douchebaggery.

I almost don’t press *call*, but I have to.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

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### Fletcher

I sit in the living room, staring at the TV, at the World War II documentary, not paying attention. James sits in the chair. It's difficult to even look at my son after earlier. At least, I tell myself, he doesn't want Samantha, my perfect painter. Even if he does, it's not in the same way as I do.

His cell phone starts to ring. He answers and clears his throat. "S-Samantha?" he says.

I sit up. I can't help it. I've been thinking about what we did and her taste all day. I've been thinking about her reaction, like she was angry with me for trying to push her too fast, and my virgin had every right to be.

"Yeah," James says. "No, a PI. Because I wanted to be romantic. No. What? Just give me a second chance. Because... because..." He sighs, slamming his phone on the coffee table. "Fuck."

"What was that about a PI?" I ask, sitting forward.

James runs a hand through his hair, groaning. "Did Samantha say anything about me earlier when you gave her a ride?"

This is exactly the sort of messed-up conversation I wanted to avoid having. "No," I say truthfully. Hopefully, he doesn't ask me anything else. Hopefully,

he doesn't ask if I kissed her, touched her, and want to do it all again.

"She's overreacting," he says.

"Why did you mention a PI?" I press.

"It's nothing. It's just... I wanted to send her flowers, so I hired a PI to get her address. Now she's acting like I've tried to rob her or something."

I clench my fists and breathe slowly, trying not to flood with rage. He's my son—my baby boy. Holding him in my arms for the first time was the happiest day of my life, even if I knew I had to return to work soon. I'd have to become cold soon.

"She doesn't sound like she wants you to send her flowers again," I say slowly.

"I don't get why she won't give me a second chance."

"Why do you *want* a second chance?" I growl.

"Because... because..." He shakes his head as if he hasn't given this any thought. He can't give me a reason. I could give a thousand for why I want her, need her. "I just don't see how that *one* date has to define me. She thinks I'm some asshole. I was nervous. I wasn't very nice. I get that, but I can be better."

"But what about her?" I say. "I hear a lot of *me, me, me*. What about *her*?"

"What do you mean?" he asks.

"You must have reasons for wanting her, specifically," I say. "It can't just be about proving something to yourself."

"She's a nice person," he shrugs. "She's friendly. She's pretty. I don't know. Is it that bad, sending her some flowers?"

"If she's asked you to stop—"

"I'm not some stalking *freak*," he snaps. "If she's not interested, she can go fuck herself anyway."

I have to physically turn away from him and look out the window onto the

street. Surely, this is one of the most twisted positions a father could be in. I can't let any man speak about my woman like that, but what if the man is my son? My only child?

"Don't be cruel," I say after a pause, composing myself.

"Whose side are you on?" he snaps. "You're supposed to be *my* dad."

"I am your dad," I growl.

"Then act like it." He stands up quickly and marches from the room.

I'm tempted to go after him, but I know nothing good will come of it. We've had similar arguments before. Less recently, but they happen from time to time. It's my fault, I know. I was so distant for many years, letting Margot raise him when I should've been more involved, but how could I? I was overseas.

He's left his phone on the table. Am I really going to do this?

If such a thing as the Worst Father of the Year Award existed, I'd be guaranteed first place. Leaning over, I pick up his phone. The screen hasn't locked yet. From my Special Forces work, I can remember a cell phone number with a glance. It's lucky. The screen auto-locks just as I commit the number to memory.

Taking out my phone, I wonder if I should call my woman and explain. *Don't think*. A voice from the past snaps into my mind. He was an old martial arts instructor half my size and not extremely athletic, but his timing and positioning were superhuman. If he ever thought my attention was waning, he'd pop me with a stiff jab right on the end of the nose.

I take that same ethos now, walking to the bottom of the stairs, looking up for any sign of James. Is it wrong that I'm keener to ensure my perfect painter is okay than my son? Does that make me a terrible person? I'm not sure I'm ready for an honest answer to that.

"Hello?" she says.

"It's me," I tell her. "Fletcher."

"Oh..." A pause. "Hey."

“Are you okay?” I ask. “I heard what happened between you and James.”

“I’m fine,” she replies. “I just don’t want him sending anything else to the house, that’s all. I’m not interested.”

“Good,” I say fiercely.

“Why is that good?”

*Think, think.* It’s the opposite of the martial arts ethos. I need to engage the reasonable part of my brain to stop myself from going too far. I need to put my son first. There’s so much I need to do, so much I’m neglecting.

“Because I want you for myself, Samantha,” I snarl, “but you knew that already.”

*I wanted you the first moment I saw you,* I almost add, but I don’t want to scare her away or for her to yell at *me* to get away again.

“I need to see you again,” I go on.

“I don’t know. My mom doesn’t approve.”

“Your mom knows about us?”

“Is that a problem?” she responds sharply. “Or did you want to keep us a secret?”

“No, it’s just... James.”

“What about James?” she says, her voice just as sharp. I think of her facing threats to our children with the same ready attitude. She’s going to be such a fierce mother.

“If he knew something was happening between us—”

“So you plan to get me into bed secretly, make sure nobody ever knows, and then slink away? Is that the gist of it?”

“What? No. Where the hell is this coming from?”

“I don’t know what’s happening between us,” she says, “but I don’t want to sneak around. I don’t want you to be ashamed of me.”



“I could *never* be ashamed of you, Samantha,” I snap. “You’re beautiful. You’re funny. You’re kind.”

“We don’t even know each other,” she says quietly, as though trying to convince herself.

“Then let’s get to know each other,” I reply.

“My mom thinks I should take it slow. She thinks I’m rushing into things. I’ve never even had a boyfriend.”

I swallow. Her comment puts our age gap under a rifle scope of examination. I’ve lived an entire life, had a career, had a child, taken lives, saved lives. She’s still at the start of her journey, but could we start a new journey together?

“Let me take you out,” I say. “A date. No funny business.”

I’m sure I can hear her smiling, but maybe that’s wishful thinking. Her tone gives nothing away. I’m going insane, man. I can *hear* her smiling, but her tone is the same. How does that make any sense? She’s messing with my gray-haired head.

“There was nothing funny about earlier,” she says.

“You’re right,” I reply. “And about earlier, you don’t have to be—”

“I’m not ashamed,” she says quickly, but I think she’s lying. “It’s just a lot all at once. Nobody has ever, uh, seen that part of me.”

My cock stiffens, and my balls are tingly like my seed is trying to escape. Knowing that nobody else has seen her perfect slit and nobody else ever will make me even hungrier to claim her. Own her. Take her over and over and hurt anybody else who tries. Even my own son?

“When are you free?” I ask.

She pauses, then sighs. “I need some time,” she says. “Mom’s never given me bad advice. She doesn’t give much advice, but when she does, she’s usually right. If she says I should wait, then I think I should.”

“Wait for what?” I say, trying not to sound needy.

Neediness is sickening in a man. Desperation is a surefire way to turn any woman's interest into disgust, but the truth is, I *am* needy. Hungry. I'm starving for my perfect painter.

"Wait and see," she replies vaguely. "I'm sorry."

I swallow. There's so much I want to say. I could drive to her place right now, but she deserves respect. "Yeah," I tell her. "I understand."

After hanging up my cell phone, this dark cloud consumes me. I sit on the couch and stare at the black-and-white footage on the TV, opening and closing my hands. It's something I'd do before an op. Open and close my hands, focus on that movement, nothing else, a mindfulness thing. Focus. Now, there's only one thing I want to focus on.

Thirty minutes later, James walks into the room and drops into the chair.

"Do you want the truth, Dad?" he says, staring at me with red eyes. Has he been crying?

I sit up and nod. "Always."

"I love her," he whispers. "Okay? I *love* her."

The first time he says it is like a kick in the gut. The second time is like a haymaker right to the jaw. Suddenly, I'm full of adrenaline, urgency pulsing around my body, roaring at me to do something, but I don't know what.

"You barely even know her," I say hypocritically.

"I've known *of* her for months," he says. "I've seen her around the gym. I've seen her with Lexi, too, at the college campus downtown. Before I even asked Lexi to set us up, I had a crush on her. Ha, a crush. It's way more than that. Honestly, Dad, I don't know what it is, but I can't get her out of my head."

I run a hand through my hair, just like James often does. I wish Charles Malone would call me and tell me he's finally found where Loki is. Tell me to bring weapons because it's going to get bloody. It would be so much easier than this.

"So, what are you going to do?" I ask.

“Try to win her over. Try to make her love me, too.”

“You can’t force somebody to love you,” I say.

He stares at me miserably. “I know that, Dad.”

Oh, damn. That’s the worst of all. An emotional knife slips through my ribs. “I love you, son. Nothing will ever change that, but I think you should leave Samantha alone. Definitely don’t send anything to her house again.”

“We’ll see,” he says, picking up his cell phone and leaving the room.

Once, feeling helpless was a foreign concept to me. There was always a next step. There was always a definite direction. Whether it was bullets, blood, or tactics, I had a path, but now I sit here, feeling useless, staring at the TV.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

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### Samantha

“Brilliant, *exceptional* work,” Professor Haywood says, giving me the first bright sparks of emotion for the past three days, which is, not coincidentally, the last time I spoke with Fletcher. Professor Haywood has laid out all my gym paintings on a large table. “But...” She taps her manicured fingernail against her chin. “I remember you mentioning a bird’s-eye-view piece. I don’t see it.”

That was going to be my last painting, the finisher for the entire project. Since telling Fletcher I needed some space, I haven’t had the courage to return to the gym and risk seeing him. The only reason I asked for space is because Mom advised it. If I see him again, the emotions will sweep me away.

“I didn’t have time to get around to that one,” I say lamely.

Professor Haywood takes off her glasses and cleans them on her colorful dress. It’s a gesture I’ve seen her do many times in class. A gesture that means she’s about to deliver some criticism. I steel myself for it. I was far too sensitive when I first started college.

“That seems like a defeatist attitude to me,” she replies. “The deadline isn’t for five days yet. You’ve painted quicker than that many times. Is there any way you can finish the set?”

“I...” Swallowing, I try to think of a reasonable excuse. I’m not about to give my professor a quick rundown on all the drama in my life right now. “Would it make a difference to my grade?”

“Ah.” Professor Haywood grins. “I can’t give *too* much away. Let’s just say that a complete ensemble is far, far, far more preferable.”

So that’s her basically telling me yes without saying it outright.

“Can you do it?” she asks me.

I nod. No matter what, I want to do well in school. Even if I’m behind the other students in extracurricular activities and preparing for after college, I’m doing well in the class itself. I’m near the top. I love the work, and I want to stay on this path. So that means risking seeing my man again. No, not my man. Just *a* man. A handsome, steamy, muscular, perfect older man who will make all my dreams come true.

“I think so,” I tell her.



My car is still in the garage, so Lexi gives me a ride to the gym. Two nights ago, I told her what happened between me and Fletcher. She watched me with her mouth wide open, her eyes matching saucers. When I was done, she did something heartwarming and reassuring. She put her hand on my shoulder and said, “*I want us to pretend I never had a crush on him, and for the record, I don’t anymore. I support you. I want the best for you.*”

It’s good to know I don’t have to worry about *that* particular piece of confusion. Lexi parks but doesn’t get out of the car right away. Glancing over, she asks, “Do you want me to check if the coast is clear? I don’t want you running into any nasty surprises.”

A *nasty surprise* is the last way I’d describe my man. If anything, I’m longing to see him. “I think it’ll be okay. Just don’t tell Mom if I go all googly-eyed.”

“You really like this guy, huh?”

“That’s an understatement. Mom thinks I’ve lost my mind. She thinks I should be careful.”

“I agree with the careful part,” Lexi says.

“Have you seen Fletcher with other women before? Has he got a reputation as a playboy or anything?”

“Not that I know of,” Lexi replies. “But if he *was* a playboy, it’s not like he’d do it at the gym, right?”

“Yeah, fair point,” I mutter, absolutely hating the idea of being just another notch on my man’s belt. “Let’s head in. I know you’re keen to get your workout started.”

She grins. “How can you tell?”

“You look ready for some action, Lexi.”

She raises her fist, winking. “Always.”

We walk toward the gym. It’s quiet today, meaning I can set up in the corner. I clamber awkwardly onto the cabinet where they keep the spare gloves and pads. It gives me a slightly elevated view, but I’ll still need to use my imagination to portray the area effectively.

As Lexi gets into her workout, I focus on my work. I try to imagine life before I saw Fletcher, before I kissed him, before everything. It shouldn’t be *that* hard, considering we’ve only met twice, but it feels borderline impossible. It gets even more difficult when I see him standing there.

He’s at the top of the stairs, wearing shorts and a T-shirt, the silver in his hair catching the sunlight slanting through the windows. My breath catches, and I wish he’d stay like that and let me paint him and bring out his strength and handsomeness.

Slowly, he walks toward me, right past Lexi. She shoots me a side-eye look as if asking if I need help. Mom was right, though. My emotions are already coiling around me, telling me I’m stupid for trying to stay away from him and pretending I don’t want or need him.

“Fancy seeing you here,” he says with a casual smirk, drawing me under his

spell again. “Working on another masterpiece?”

He’s speaking lightheartedly, maybe because the gym is quite busy. I’m sure I can see the heat in his eyes, captivation in his expression. He walks even closer, reaches over, and touches my hand. Just for a moment, like he can’t help himself. Sizzling energy sparks up my arm.

“Y-yes,” I say after a pause, struggling to hide my lust, need, and hunger for the future. “Well, not a masterpiece.”

“Don’t undersell yourself,” he says. “You’re my perfect painter, remember?”

This could be a line, a way to continue his seduction. Then after, he’ll leave and pretend it never happened, and I’ll be left a crying wreck, wondering where it all went wrong. That’s what Mom seems to think, anyway. I meant what I said to Fletcher on the phone. I’ve always valued Mom’s advice.

Even so, I smile. I can’t help it. “How could I forget?”

He grins. He’s not touching me anymore, but he’s close. He doesn’t seem ashamed. It’s not like he doesn’t want anybody to see.

“How have you been?” he asks.

“Good,” I tell him. “Keeping busy. What about you?”

“The same,” he replies.

“Any news about Loki?”

He shakes his head and bites down. “Nothing yet. I’m trying not to lose hope, but each day…”

He doesn’t have to finish the sentence for me to see how badly this is messing him up.

It feels so weird sitting here knowing what we did. The heat between us feels far away as he frowns down at me. I’m almost sure there’s something in his eyes, a spark like he wants to let it lead to an ignition that will consume us both. If it *is* there, and it’s not my imagination messing me up, then he’s keeping it well hidden.

A moment later, though, the smile returns. It’s like he’s constantly at war

with himself. I'm the one who told him to back off. I hear Mom's voice in my head, telling me to do the same here, to make it clear I'm not going to fall so easily under his spell.

"You are so, so talented," he says.

I flush and shake my head, reminding myself this could be a line. "I've barely even started."

"I know. You've got so much time to improve on your natural talents."

I laugh, gesturing at my canvas. "No, I mean this piece. I've barely even done any sketching."

"Well," he smirks, "it's the best sketching I've ever seen." His smirk falters. He steps closer. For a blistering second, I think he's going to kiss me. He lowers his voice. "Have you received any more gifts from James?"

"No," I murmur, "but..." I wonder if I should tell him this part.

He stares icily. *Not* telling him doesn't feel like an option when he's looking at me like that.

"I've had a few phone calls from withheld numbers. I didn't answer except one. They *kept* calling." I remember staring at my phone yesterday, praying it was Fletcher but not having the guts to answer it. "So finally, I answered. I think it was James. He sounded drunk. Or angry. Or maybe both. He asked me if I think I'm better than him. I just want him to leave me alone."

Fletcher looks like he's about to burst. His fists are clenched, causing his forearms to bulge. I get the sense that if James weren't his son, he'd do something drastic about this. Or maybe, yet again, it's my imagination wishing he cared this much.

"That's not good," he says after a long pause. "Let me talk to him."

"You don't have to do that. It was two hours of calling, then nothing. Like I said, I think he was probably drunk. He hasn't sent me anything else."

"He shouldn't be bothering you at all," he growls. "You went on one date. It didn't go well. That should be the end of it."



I agree, obviously, but I don't want to hammer the point too enthusiastically. Whatever else is true about James and his douchebag antics, he's still Fletcher's only son. *Not for long...* Oh, if only. Deep inside, something aches in me, wishing it was true.

"What are you doing later?" he asks huskily.

"What do you mean?"

He laughs, looking down at me with an indulgent smirk. I can tell he's partly trying to hold back some of the fire, but he can't help but let some of it show. There's a tension all through him that makes me wonder what he's thinking, if he's thinking about *us*, the heat we shared, all the steaminess in our future, too.

"I mean a date, Samantha," he says fiercely.

"I..." This sounds so lame, but it's the only defense I have. "I told my mom I wouldn't rush into anything."

"Let me talk to her. I'll make it clear my intentions are pure."

"Are you being sarcastic?" I ask. "Sometimes, it's hard for me to tell."

"No," he replies.

"It's just... pure intentions after..." I can't say it, but my body sizzles at the memory, his mouth against my sex, his hands holding me in place like he was getting as much pleasure from the act as I was.

"I know. I got carried away. That's why a date is a good idea. Somewhere public. Somewhere that you can't tempt me."

I smile, even as my cheeks flush. "So *I* tempted *you*?" I say.

"You're tempting me right now," he says breathily. "Every second I look at you, you're tempting me."

"I must be doing it by accident, then."

"That's what makes you so beautiful. Everything is natural."

"I..." *I should talk to Mom about this*, but that is so lame. Maybe she thinks

my emotions are sweeping me away, but in the midst of this heat, that doesn't feel like a bad thing. It doesn't feel like I should be ashamed. It feels right. "I'd like to go on a date, but I don't think you need to talk to Mom." *Yet.* "What about James, though?"

"What about him?" Fletcher asks.

"Won't he be mad?"

Fletcher reaches out and touches my hand again. Electricity pulses between us. Connection, heat, desire. I can't believe this is all in my head. I can't believe he's not experiencing this, too. I refuse to accept that he's some playboy taking advantage of me. It doesn't feel like that, but what if I'm wrong? I tighten my grip on his hand, listening to feelings instead of thoughts.

"He'll have to accept it," Fletcher says.

"You're going to tell him?" I ask.

"Don't you want me to?"

I think of how he sounded on the phone, his bitter voice with anger. James might throw a major fit if Fletcher tells him, forcing Fletcher to choose between us. This is so selfish of me. "You don't have to," I say. "It might make things awkward. Anyway, it's just one date, right?"

For a fleeting moment, this seems to make him angry, but then he nods. "Exactly," he says. "It's just one date."

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

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**F**letcher

“Just one date,” I mutter as I drive toward Samantha’s house. It’s not *just* anything. It’s so much more.

When I saw her in the gym, it took everything in me not to rush over, grab her, and grind my manhood against her eager, young, fertile virgin body. Seeing her sitting on the unit with her legs folded and flushed cheeks made me think of her pink and needy pussy. Fuck, I’m getting hard. I’m forgetting about everything else. Even my son. Even Loki. All I can think about is my woman.

I park down the street, like she asked me to do via text. It makes me feel seedy as I take out my phone and message her to let her know I’m here. I should approach the door and introduce myself to her mother. As I wait, I try not to think about what James said. He said he *loves* her. Love. He’s made it clear by his calls that he’s going to pursue her.

So what the *hell* am I doing, exactly? My thoughts start to spin. I see James as a little boy, looking up at me with a smile everybody said was similar to mine. I remember Margot whispering, “He looks just like you,” with that desperation in her eyes, that need for me to be human, to feel something. Sometimes, maybe often, I don’t think I’m a good person.

I can push all that aside when I see Samantha walking up the street. She’s

wearing a blue dress that hugs her hips and shows off just enough of her thick legs to make my balls swell. She's straightened her hair, giving her a sophisticated look. Stepping from the car, I open the passenger-side door. "Thank you," she says softly, looking at me under her eyelashes, the look that drives me feral.

Before she climbs in, I lean forward and brush my lips against hers. I only mean for it to be a quick kiss. She hesitates for a moment, but then the heat swells between us. We push together with more heat, more purpose. She grabs my body and presses her fingernails through my shirt.

"We should probably stop," she says, breaking the kiss off breathily.

"Why's that?" I ask, holding my face close to hers, savoring her breath moving over me.

I can feel her smile against me. "Because..."

"Don't get shy now, my perfect painter."

"What if we *can't* stop?" she whispers, sounding as if she has to force the words out with difficulty.

"Fair point..." I slide my hand down to her hip, gently nudging her toward the car.

Once I'm in the driver's seat, I can't stop myself from leaning over and kissing her again. Deep inside, I imagine James glaring at me, hating me, but my woman's right. I can't stop. The kiss gets deeper. I smooth my hand up her leg. We're in public. Anybody could see us, but I want her sappy slit so goddamn badly.

She grabs my wrist, stopping me before I slip under her dress. "F-Fletcher," she says, moaning. "I thought this was a date. Not just..."

I lean back with an effort, looking down at my woman. The nerves in her eyes are easily readable. "It is a date," I tell her. "You just make me so crazy, but I'll try to be good."

She smiles shakily. She seems on the edge, always. On the edge of lust. On the edge of anxiety. "Me too."

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She doesn't comment that I drive her to the far, far side of the city. She's a smart woman. I'm sure she knows it has to do with the fact that I don't want James or her mom to spot us together. As I lead her into the Italian place, I keep my hand on her back, struggling not to smooth my touch lower and grip her thick ass. I want everybody in here to know she belongs to me.

We have the VIP table on a small balcony overlooking the rest of the restaurant. The angle gives us privacy. Across from us, the chandelier sparkles, catching light. Italian jazz plays through the speaker system, the music relaxing despite my inability to understand a single word.

"This is great," Samantha says, looking around with a big grin on her face.

*Better than the restaurant my son took you to?* I wish these thoughts would get the hell out of my head.

"I'm glad you like it," I say.

The waiter approaches. "Can I start you off with some drinks?"

"Is it okay if I just have a soda?" Samantha asks me, not looking at the waiter. Anybody else might take this for rudeness, but I spent my career reading people. She's too nervous to look at him. She's so cute it hurts.

"What kind?" I ask her.

"Uh, orange."

"Orange soda for my date. In fact, two orange sodas. Thank you."

The man nods and leaves.

"I feel like this place is too fancy for me," Samantha says a moment later.

That almost makes me roar like *anything* could be too fancy for her. "Get used to it," I tell her. "Unless I massively mess this date up, you're going to places way fancier than this."

She bites her lip, then lets it go, seeming annoyed with herself.

“What’s up?” I ask.

“Who said anything was?”

“You, Samantha. I’m always watching you. Always reading you,” I laugh gruffly. “I didn’t mean for that to sound threatening.

She laughs, shaking her head. “It didn’t. I have to stop biting my lip, that’s all. It’s a bad habit.”

“Is it? It makes you look hot as hell. Horny as hell.”

She looks down at the table. “You’re so naughty.”

“I know. I know.” I hold my hand up. “Scout’s honor. Only date stuff from now on.”

“I don’t even know what people talk about on dates,” she laughs. “I’ve only ever been on one.” She bites down again and again looks pissed at herself. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to apologize. We didn’t even know each other when you went on that date.”

“Still, it’s awkward.”

“It doesn’t have to be,” I say fiercely. “Let’s forget about all that. Tell me about yourself.”

“What, everything?”

I lean forward, smirking. “Yes, everything.”

She laughs again, a sound so sweet I’ll always want to earn it. “You know, it’s funny. I’m not even sure what I would say.”

“In my old job, we had cover stories, fake lives. Before each operation, we had to list the traits of our character. A loner type, went to college to study business, dropped out because his girlfriend left him... Maybe you should give me *your* cover story.”

“Okay.” She sits up, causing those big, beautiful breasts to jiggle slightly, my shaft getting hard. I force myself to look into her eyes instead. “I’ll try. My

cover story is that I've always been the quiet, shy one. I've always found it hard to connect with people. I'm not sure why that is. Sometimes, I think it's because I see the world differently. Sometimes, it's because I think I'm just plain weird. Am I doing it right?"

She looks at me with adorable nervousness. Yet, even now, I can't turn off the savage part of my mind. *Am I doing it right?* I can imagine her saying that in so many other situations, looking up at me wide-eyed, my hard dick just about to slip between her lips again. I try to focus on the now—the date.

"Keep going," I whisper, eager to learn as much about her as possible. She's my woman, after all.

"If I'm any good at art—"

"You are," I say fiercely.

"It's because I spent all my childhood practicing and thinking about it, nothing else. My parents were older, and they preferred relaxing to days out. So I had plenty of time to learn."

"How old?" I ask.

"My dad was fifty-seven when I was born. My mom was forty-one." My reaction must show on my face because she goes on. "I know. I know. They thought they didn't want to have kids at first."

We pause when the waiter brings the drinks. "Thank you," I tell him. "I'll let you know when we're ready to order food."

"Of course, sir."

"Where was I?" she asks.

"They weren't sure if they wanted kids."

"Yeah, exactly, but they decided they did later in life. It took a lot of trying and a few medical marvels, but then they had me. I've sort of lost the whole *cover story* thing."

"That's okay," I tell her. "I don't want a cover story, anyway. I want *your* story."

I reach across the table and take her hand. Every time we touch, she reacts like the same heat is burning through her, the same heat that pulses in me every time. I'm finding it difficult not to pull her into my lap and let her feel my solid manhood against her round juicy ass, but she deserves romance, too, if I'm capable of giving it.

"I'm happy they had me, but Dad was so *old*. He wasn't like you. Uh, not that you're old." She snatches her hand away, grabs her soda, and starts to sip it as though she needs to give herself an excuse for not speaking.

I chuckle, shaking my head. "Don't worry, my perfect painter. I'm pretty hard to offend. Anyway, I am old, especially compared to you."

"But you're *not*," she says passionately, slamming the glass down. "Fine, you're older than me. I get that, but you're not *old*. You're fit. You're healthy. You take good care of yourself. You're mature and experienced." Her eyes glint playfully. I wonder if she's filled with horny-as-fuck ideas like me. "Dad didn't take care of himself. Mom isn't great, either. Heck, am I?" She shrugs. "I know one thing. I don't want to wait until I'm forty-one to have a baby."

My body responds with an urgent pulse. Even if somebody ran in here with a photo of James and played a recording of him proclaiming his love for Samantha, I wouldn't be able to stop.

"You want kids?" I ask.

"Yeah, for sure," she says, as though the answer is obvious. "Honestly, not to sound crazy, I'd like to have them sooner rather than later. I want to be on the younger side when they're little. I want to be there for them."

I tighten my hold on her hand, hearing the change in her tone and the agony buried in her voice. "You're going to make an amazing mother."

She laughs in disbelief. "Oh, really? What makes you so sure of that?"

"Instinct," I snap.

"Instinct?" she repeats, shaking her head slowly. "So you've got some magic are-they-good-parents instinctual radar or something?"



I must have one because, looking in the mirror, I know *that* man isn't a good parent. "You're damn right I do. I can see how badly you want this. Some people have kids for the wrong reasons. They have kids just to make a point or to trap someone."

I let Samantha's hand go, leaning back and picking up the menu. Suddenly, the jazz seems offensively loud. Somebody is making a clattering sound on the floor below, maybe cutlery or the telltale metallic rattling of weaponry.

"Fletcher?" she murmurs. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," I say. "Just hungry. What're you in the mood for?"

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

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### Samantha

Fletcher cuts into his steak, seeming different from when we did the whole *cover story* thing. When he mentioned some women having kids to trap people, it seemed obvious he was talking about himself. He got angry quickly, his blue eyes flashing with twin flames. Now, he focuses on his steak, cutting determinedly.

I eat a fry, looking at his silver peppered hair, neatly combed, his shirt open at the top to show a hint of chest. Every second, I have to remind myself that this is real. I'm on a date with the most handsome, hottest older man I've ever seen.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

He glances up and smiles tightly. He's closing off. I sense he's good at that. "Fine."

"Oh, okay."

We go on quietly, but then he sighs and lays his fork aside. His expression is so tight like he's trying to hold a lot back. Or maybe he's trying to break through his own walls.

"We can talk," I tell him. "Maybe I'm going nuts, but it sort of seems like

you want to.”

His smirk changes my mood right away. That’s how I know there’s something special here. The moment his lips curve upward, it’s like sunlight bursting through the bleak gray clouds. “You can read me just as easily as I can read you, eh, my perfect painter?”

The nickname lights me up. Maybe my social skills aren’t as terrible as I thought, at least regarding my man. “I think I’m getting the knack of it.”

“Go on, then.” He leans forward, giving me all his attention. It feels like a gift. I warn myself not to get too carried away, smitten, or hypnotized, but it’s difficult. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“I…”

“Don’t hesitate,” he growls. “Just say it, the first thing that comes into your head. I promise you won’t offend me.”

I swallow, weirdly remembering the date with James. All evening, I tried to work up the courage to say what was on my mind, but I couldn’t get over the block inside me. With his dad, though, it feels so much easier. Not *easy*, but not impossible either.

“When you mentioned women having kids to trap people, I thought you were talking about yourself and your late wife—”

“We were never married,” he cuts in. “I’ve never been married. If I ever do, it will be the first time.”

Just like it will be for me... Is that why he said that? To hint that we’ll be sharing that particular first together?

“Okay, your late partner, then,” I say. “That’s what leaped to mind, but I could be wrong.”

I see him trying to close off again. It’s in his eyes and the tightening of his mouth, but then I also see him actively push away the instinct. I could spend so long just watching him, the light dancing in the silver of his hair, shimmering in the blue of his eyes. He’s a piece of living, breathing art.

“We had a one-night stand,” he replies. “It was the only one-night stand I

ever had. I was drunk. I was young. Anyway, after, I went back to work. Three months later, I get a call. It's Margot. She tells me she's pregnant. She can't do it alone. It's either I help her or..." He swallows, clenching his fist around his steak knife. "Maybe I haven't been the best father, but I couldn't stand the idea of losing my baby, even before I knew him. A father's duty is to protect his children. So I did what I thought—hoped—was the right thing. I stood by her. I got her a place. I gave her the chance to be a stay-at-home mom. I think she did her best, but she was too soft with James. She made him too damn entitled."

He cuts off suddenly, as though he's shocked by how much he's shared.

Now, it's my turn to reach across the table and touch his hand. I feel the heat burning through him. He clutches onto me tightly. "You did your best," I murmur. "You were off saving the world."

"Saving the world," he repeats bitterly. "I did my part. I saved some people. I lost others."

"Did you and Margot talk about how to raise James?"

"Yeah. I told her how I felt. She said I should quit my job if I cared that much."

"That's messed up," I snap.

He leans back slightly, head tilted. Is it wrong that I love when he looks at me like this, as if I'm some sort of curiosity? I love fascinating him, intriguing him, challenging him. "You think so?" he asks. "Most people tended to agree with her."

"Did she know what your job was when you... you know?"

"She did," he says, grinning. "You can say *sex*, Samantha."

*My sex tingles at that. My memories return to the table, his manhood between my legs pressing against my virgin entrance. I wanted it so badly. I was pissed at my body for not cooperating with my desire. Next time, what if it happens again? What if I can't ever give him what he wants, what I want?*

"Did she know?" I press.

He nods. “But it’s not like we planned the pregnancy.”

“Even so, she should’ve done her best to raise him in a way that made you both happy. Anyway, raising a spoiled kid is crazy to me. When I’m a mom, I’ll do my best to make them grateful and humble. I’m going to do my best to make them into good people. Or maybe help them become the good people they already are.”

“I couldn’t have put it better myself,” he says passionately. “I meant what I said before. You’re going to make an *incredible* mother.” He pulls his hand away, frowning. “Sorry about this.”

I’m not sure what he’s talking about until he reaches into his pocket and takes out his phone. I guess it was on vibrate. “I would’ve turned it off,” he says, “but—”

“Loki?” I guess. “You want to be ready if there’s any news?”

“Exactly.” He sighs. “It’s James.”

“You can answer if you want,” I say.

“I feel like I *have* to,” he replies. “Lately, he’s been acting strange. Withdrawn. Even more so than usual.”

“It’s fine,” I tell him.

He answers, bringing the phone to his ear. His demeanor changes, reminding me of the date with James, when *his* behavior changed while on the phone with his dad. Fletcher becomes a father with concern etched into his features. I can tell he loves his son, despite the complications, despite *me*.

“No, I won’t be home for dinner,” he says. “I’m...” He glances at me as if to say *sorry*. “Working on some gym stuff.”

It’s not like I can get annoyed about this. I’m the one who said we didn’t have to tell Mom. There’s no reason James should know, either. Still, I can’t help but wish for a life where we can be together openly, without shame or doubt.

“I’ll see you later,” Fletcher says, then hangs up. He places his phone on the table, leans back in his seat, and sighs heavily. “Lying to him doesn’t feel

good. I know he can be an ass. He has his issues.”

“He’s still your son,” I say.

“You’re the last person I’d expect to stand up for him.”

“We had a bad date,” I say. “He was rude, but it’s not the end of the world. It’s not like he’s a monster or something like that.”

“No, I’m the monster,” Fletcher says.

I shake my head, struggling to determine what he could mean by that. Maybe he’s referencing his old job and stuff that happened overseas. “I don’t understand,” I tell him.

He gestures at the chandelier. No, the restaurant in general. Really, he’s gesturing to our date, the fact we’re sitting here together. “Look at us. James would freak if he knew I was here.”

“Would he, though?”

“I think he would.”

“But why? We literally went on one date. We met *once*. Maybe he thought there would be a second chance when he sent me those flowers, but surely he gets the point now. Surely, he understands there was never anything between us, and there never will be.”

“I don’t know.” Fletcher runs a hand through his hair, making me wish I was doing it instead. I want to lean forward, trail my hand all over his body, and forget about the complications forever. “He said something that—” Fletcher cuts off when his phone vibrates on the table. “It’s Charles Malone, the PI.”

“With news about Loki?” I ask.

“Could be.”

I wave a frantic hand. “Then answer it.”

He picks up the phone. I don’t have to ask what Charles Malone says to know it’s serious. Fletcher changes entirely. He frightens me a little. It’s not something specific about him. It’s more about his *aura*. If I were painting him in an impressionist style, he’d be surrounded by dark energy. He looks at

me as if I'm not here, as if he's seeing through me, witnessing something horrible.

"Where?" he says after a pause. "Yeah, I can be there. That's lucky. I'm not far." He hangs up and pushes his chair back. "I'm sorry, Samantha. I've got to go. Charles Malone has found where they're keeping the dogs. It's not far from here, luckily. It would've been an hour's drive otherwise."

That's how long it took us to get out here, far enough from the area, so the chances of seeing James are low.

"Let me call you a cab," he says.

"What?" I sit up. "No way. I'm going with you. I want to make sure Loki's okay, too, and maybe you'll need backup."

He smiles indulgently, but the smile drops when I do something I never dreamed I'd be able to. Something about the date with my man has unlocked doors inside of me. Maybe they haven't been thrown open all the way. Perhaps nerves are still inside me, but I can slam my hand on the table, lean forward, and stare seriously at him.

"Don't smile at me like that. I'm not a little trick pony. I'm not a joke. I'm not talking about *me* running in there with guns blazing, but what if you need emotional support? Or backup in a different way? I don't want to leave you."

"Why?" he growls.

"Because you look ready to kill. You look like you're going to get yourself into trouble."

"The trouble isn't mine," he snarls. "The trouble belongs to the bastards who took my dog."

I stand up. "I'm coming with you. I mean it. Don't try to stop me."

For a moment, I think he's going to tell me no. He glares up at me with deathly intent, that soldier's readiness. Then the corner of his mouth twitches. Is he proud? "Okay, but you're waiting in the car. I can't risk you getting hurt."

"Fair enough," I reply. "As long as you're not alone."

As Fletcher pays the bill, I remember what he said before Charles Malone called. “*He said something that—*” He was talking about James—a reason his son would care about us being together. He said something that *what?* But now isn’t the time to ask. A dog’s life is at risk.

In a strange way, I’m almost relieved we’re doing this. Everything else is so complicated and confusing, but an innocent dog... That’s simple. We don’t have to think deeply about that. Our only option is to save him.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

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### Fletcher

I leave the city by the north exit, my girl sitting beside me, wringing her hands together anxiously. I almost told her what James said about falling in love with her at first sight. I was on the cusp of revealing it when Charles called, giving me notions about fate again. It was like fate didn't want me to ruin what Samantha and I have.

Now, I speed through the outer city, breaking into the countryside with more fields than built-up blocks. My GPS tells me we're only a mile away. Sweat coats my body, my heart thudding, but only because Samantha is here. Bringing her was a mistake. I shouldn't feel anything right now except ice-cold intent.

It's there, my usual fierceness. When the time comes, I can switch off my feelings, fear, and everything else, but what if somebody threatens my woman? I'm not sure I'd be able to be calm. Hell, I almost tore my son's head off, and that was before Samantha and I had even kissed.

"Fletcher," Samantha murmurs. "I think you should slow down."

I glance at the speedometer. I'm going almost a hundred, and there's a turn coming up. She's right. I'm not alone now. If I hurt my...

I slow the car, breathing heavily. "Sorry."

“You don’t have to be,” she replies.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” I snarl. “I never want to hurt you.”

Maybe the *never* is going too far. It implies a lot about the future. If I *never* want to hurt her, does that mean we’ll be together *forever*?

She reaches over and places her hand on my arm. “You won’t. Jeez, you’re burning up.”

“Charles said he could hear barking from inside the farmhouse,” I tell her, hearing the thunder in my voice.

“Does he know that Loki’s in there?”

“Not exactly, but he knows the asshole who stole my dog is part of this dog-theft ring. There’s a good chance unless they’ve already sold him. Or…”

I can’t think about the *or*. I’ve seen what happens to animals when evil bastards get their hands on them. I’ve seen it too many times and with far too much vivid detail.

“Don’t think about the *or*,” she says, as if reading my mind. “But if it is the *or*, then do whatever you must. Just don’t get arrested.”

I take her hand, bring it to my lips, and kiss her softly, tasting her skin. “That’s the best advice you could’ve given me. Thank you, Samantha.”

She keeps her hand on my arm as I drive, maybe to remind me to stick to the speed limit. Finally, we turn off the main road onto a dirt track, the car bumping up and down as we drive between tall trees. I spot Charles’ car. Charles is leaning against it, smoking a cigarette.

I take a moment to turn the car around so it’s facing the way we came. “When I leave, get in the driver’s seat,” I tell Samantha. “If you hear shooting, drive away. If I’m not back in ten minutes, drive away. If—”

“What if you need help?” she cuts in.

I turn, my mind filled with so many twisted images. I see my perfect girl in situations she will *never* be in. I won’t allow it. Echoes of the stuff I saw overseas, all the viciousness, but pushed onto my woman.

“You are *not* helping like that,” I snarl. “Not with the fighting. I refuse to put you at risk. If that’s a problem, I’ll drive you home now.”

“And leave Loki?” she asks.

“I’d hate to do it,” I snap, “but I can’t risk you.”

*I can’t risk our future. I can’t risk our marriage. Our children. Our family.*

She nods, squeezing my hand. “Okay, Fletcher. I get it. I’ll stay here.”

Leaning forward, I press my lips against hers. I’m not sure what’s waiting for me in that farmhouse, but there’s a chance this is the last time I’ll see my woman. I kiss her deeply, my hand resting on her leg. I purposefully keep it close to her knee so my fierce hunger doesn’t get out of control. Even now, when my thoughts should be elsewhere, there’s a chance of that happening.

“Good luck,” she whispers when I end the kiss.

Leaving the car is an effort. Before I met her, I only thought about getting Loki back. Now, instinct tries to keep me here, near my woman. Protecting her is my number one priority, always—protecting this *stranger*. Yet, I don’t think of her as a stranger. Maybe it’s sad, but I’m more intimate with her than I was with the mother of my child. I’ve shared more. I’ve been more open.

Charles is wearing his scuffed-up leather jacket. He’s lighting another cigarette as I approach. “Farmhouse is half a mile that way.” He nods down the path.

“You got a tool for me?” I ask.

He frowns. “I’ve got a couple, but I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Are they both registered in your name?” When he makes a face, I say, “If anything happens, it’ll disappear. Nobody will ever trace it to you. You have my word and add it to the bill.”

He sighs, then nods. “Fair enough, but I think we should call the cops.”

“You’ve worked with the cops enough times to know there’s no way in hell they’re sending a unit out here who’ll get the job done. Maybe a detective, *maybe*, to see if it’s legit, and then there will be days, maybe weeks, while

they try to get a warrant. No. Fuck that. Loki could be in there, and even if he isn't, you said you heard barking.”

Charles swallows. “Lots of it.”

“That’s reason enough to get moving. Get me the tool and then wait here. There’s more cash in it if you keep her safe.” I nod toward my car. “Whatever happens, you can’t let anybody hurt her.” Dammit. Emotion is entering my voice again, a dangerous ingredient when bloodshed is on the table. “Are we clear?”

I only realize I’m being threatening when he takes a step back, looking at me like he thinks I’m going to take out my anger on him. He swallows. “Yeah, w-we’re clear.”

“Good.” I can’t afford to be sorry or care. Just focus. “Get me a weapon.”



I hear the barking before I see the farmhouse. With each step, I try to push Samantha from my mind. I try to tell myself she doesn’t matter. It’s cruel, but it’s what I had to do when I was overseas. On an operation, I couldn’t ever think about my son. Not thinking of Margot was easy. Maybe that makes me a bad man. It definitely made me a bad boyfriend, but not thinking of James was more difficult.

If anything, keeping Samantha out of my head is the hardest. Despite knowing that Loki and those other dogs need me, I still want to turn back and get Samantha as far away from here as possible. Bringing her was a mistake. I’m sure of that now, but I’ve heard the barking. I can’t turn back.

I crouch behind a large tree, peering around the trunk. The sun is just beginning to set, and everything is turning dusky. There’s a man in front of the farmhouse, a surprisingly large structure, the big double doors closed. I can’t risk firing from here, maybe if I had a rifle, but I don’t, just this pistol. I need to know if there are more men on the outside. I can’t see any cameras. I hate doing jobs without proper intel.

Moving from tree to tree, I skirt around to the rear of the farmhouse. There

are two more men out here, one sitting on a hay bale, smoking a cigarette. The other has a rifle in his hand. Their torsos seem unnaturally bulky. I think they're wearing body armor. I'll be in a good spot if I can get a rifle and some of that body armor.

I wait, taking a moment to diffuse the flame that started burning in me the first time I saw Samantha. She was like a painting herself, every part of her so damn vivid—even her personality. Life wasn't real before her. Maybe that had its downsides, like being too comfortable in hell, but it let me disconnect to do what needed to be done. It was easier when I was a cold bastard.

Now, I'm a professional. There's a job to be done. After a few minutes, one man wanders to a nearby bush to take a piss. He's about fifteen feet from the first man holding the rifle. He slings the rifle back to reach into a front pouch and takes out a pack of cigarettes.

I wait until one hand is on the zipper, and he looks away. Then I sprint faster than a man my size should be able to.

“What the—”

The lack of hesitation allows me to slam him against the wall. I punch him hard in the face once and then raise my pistol to the other man a second before he can raise his. I shake my head and gesture to the ground.

“Now,” I growl quietly. People might've heard the bang against the farmhouse wall, but there's so much barking. The man drops his gun. “Lie down.” I don't even sound like *me* to myself. I sound like the old Fletcher, the robotic operator. It's good. “Now.”

The man beneath me starts stuttering and spitting blood. I slide my hand to his neck and squeeze it tightly, pressing my knee against his stomach. He whines, his rifle probably digging into his back.

“Crawl to me,” I snap.

The man does as he's told. Meanwhile, I pat down the first man at the waist, keeping a terrifying level of weight on his gut. He's pushing against me with both hands. It's necessary to hurt the prick, but I can't say it doesn't feel right. No man should hurt a dog, trap a dog, or steal a dog.

I find some zip ties in the first man's pocket. Goddamn, what do they use these for? Throwing them in the man's face, I press the gun barrel against his forehead. "Tie yourself. Then turn around so I can check."

"I c-c-can't t-t-tie m—"

"You'll do it or have time to think about it six feet under, motherfucker. Go."

It takes almost a minute, but he manages to do it. I flip the other man and tie his hands behind his back, too. Then I strip their boots, shove socks into their mouths, drag them over to the bush, and zip-tie their feet together. Moving toward the door, I aim the rifle, ready for anything.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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### Samantha

“So, what sort of stuff do you paint?” Charles Malone asks, sitting in the driver’s seat of Fletcher’s car, his hand near his hip. I know that he’s ready to draw his gun at any moment. He smells faintly of cologne and sweat and leather from his jacket.

“I experiment a lot,” I tell him, trying to make conversation so this is more bearable. I think that’s why Charles has decided to speak too. “I love exaggerating reality. When I was a kid, I’d always paint a sunset completely yellow, the street, people, and everything.”

I sound like a dork, but I can’t stop. It’s better than wondering if Fletcher... I can’t finish the thought. We were on a date not that long ago. Life feels so unfair.

“My daughter used to paint,” Charles says, fiddling with the cigarette behind his ear with the hand not primed at his hip.

“She doesn’t anymore?” I ask.

“She passed ten years ago tomorrow,” Charles says with a resigned sigh. “She was around your age, Samantha.”

“I’m sorry,” I tell him. “That’s awful.”

“Home invasion. She’d started a new job, nothing fancy, just waitressing. Apparently, she was bragging about her tips to a friend in a café. Some scumbags overheard and followed her. They wouldn’t believe she’d left the tips at work in her locker, but she had.”

There’s so much pain in every word, but he never takes his eyes off the forest or his hand from his hip.

“I’m so, so sorry. I just... I can’t...”

He smiles sadly. “It’s okay. Nobody ever knows what to say. I don’t know what to say myself. Being out here, looking out for you, I guess it reminded me

of—”

Suddenly, reality becomes a painting, but it’s three-dimensional. I’m inside it, watching as the hyperreal red erupts from Charles, the glass glittering and fracturing, spraying me. The bullet hits Charles in the side, soaking his clothes. I’m screaming in slow motion on the floor, my hands over my ears as I try to make sense of this. There’s more shooting. I try to slow everything down even more and give myself time to think and plan.

“Run,” Charles croaks. “Ru—”

There’s another loud *bang*. That jolts me from the car. I leap out, hearing gunshots and yelling. I don’t know if it’s me or somebody else yelling. The world is a canvas, and I’m a shaky-handed brushstroke trying to brave my way through it.

I run into the forest, trip, almost fall, and catch myself. My legs are aching, but I keep going. Tree bark sprays in a photographic *snap* across my vision as a bullet must hit a tree. I don’t even know where I’m running, just forward, hearing more shots.

Then I see a dog running at me. I must be hallucinating. Maybe one of those bullets hit me. I’m sure it’s a Jack Russell terrier with a thin black-and-tan body and ribs showing but tail pricked and eyes alert. Then, a moment later, my man is there. He roars something at me and waves a hand.

*Get down.* I hear this as if it’s coming from outside a glass globe. There’s no



sound, my ears ringing. I drop to the ground and put my hands over my ears, pressing small pieces of glass into my skin, but there's no pain.

*Bang-bang-bang.* Is that Fletcher firing or the other man? Suddenly, something warm licks at my face. There's fire. It's a bomb of some kind. Maybe time's gone *super* slow, and I will experience a universe worth of death. Oh God, this is awful.

No, it's not heat. I'm going nuts. I can't breathe. It's a dog's tongue eagerly licking me. I reach up and hold desperately onto his small body. It must be Loki. He's licking me and trembling and whining like he doesn't know what else to do. I'm crying, I realize, so freaking useless in a crisis.

I jolt when something brushes my shoulder—the man's gun. Then I hear Fletcher's voice. I turn and see him staring at me, speaking slowly. "It's okay. There's nobody else. I got the ones at the farm, and that bastard's gone. Nobody's going to hurt you."

I hold Loki tight to my chest. "Ch-Charles," I whisper. "They shot him."

"Let's go get him, then." He takes my hand. "Can you stand up for me?"

"Just go help him!"

"No," he snarls. "I'm not leaving you behind. I'll never do that. Either we move together, or we don't move."

Loki wags his tail in my face as though he's trying to speed me up. With an effort, I climb to my feet, holding onto Fletcher's forearm. He helps me up, looping his arm around my waist and holding the gun with his other hand. Distantly, I can hear dogs barking.

"Are they okay?" I gasp.

"They will be," Fletcher snarls. "About thirty of them in there. All the bastards holding them captive are tied up, but God knows for how long. We need to call in backup now."

"The cops?" I ask as we run through the forest together, Loki running at our feet.

"Yeah," he replies, "but we won't be here when they arrive."

We run back to the car. Charles Malone is on the hood of the vehicle, his shirt off and in his hand. He's pressing it against his side. Fletcher guides me to the passenger seat and sits me down. I ignore the small pieces of glass pushing against my behind. Loki leaps up into my lap and curls into a small ball. Instinctively, I smooth my hands over him. I can feel the anxiety radiating from him.

"How bad is it?" Fletcher asks.

"Not... lethal..." Charles wheezes. "But need... hospital."

"I've got a first-aid kit." Fletcher looks into the woods, teeth gritted. "It would've been easier to execute those bastards."

"Are any dead?" Charles asks.

"One, maybe. I had to. The one who shot you. He was going to kill my..." His what? His woman? "Samantha."

I hug Loki close to my chest, wishing I'd been more capable when the mayhem went down. I could console myself with the fact that I've never been in a situation like this before, but that feels like a weak justification for how I behaved: the screaming, the running, the absolute inability to think, plan, or anything at all. I'm still on the edge, my breath coming fast.

"Samantha," Fletcher says a few minutes later after patching Charles up. Though he still looks terrible. His face is pale, with blood dripping down it. "You need to drive Charles' car. Can you do that?"

I sit up and nod.

"But you have to focus," he says fiercely. "After everything, I can't lose you. You can't crash."

"I can do it," I say, gritting my teeth. "I promise. I won't mess up."

---

Loki sits on the passenger seat as Fletcher guides us back to the city. I expect him to drive to a hospital. Instead, he takes us to what looks like a garage

from the exterior. I focus on driving, the familiar movements feeling almost alien. When we get inside the garage, there are no cars, no tools, just a big, seemingly empty room. Fletcher leaves the car and gestures for me to follow.

“Come on, boy,” I whisper, feeling numb and distant, as though all this has happened to somebody else. It’s difficult to convince the panic screeching through me that all of this actually happened to *me*.

Fletcher helps Charles into a door off the side, leading to what appears to be a surgeon’s table.

“Whoa...” Charles doesn’t sound good, his voice raspy. “Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Yeah,” Fletcher snarls. “This is the only way to avoid problems with the cops. Trust me, Charles. You’re a good man. You protected my girlfriend. I’m not going to hurt you.”

When he says *girlfriend*, Loki whines as though he approves. Fletcher looks up at me and smiles tightly. I can read the message in his intense blue eyes. *I mean it. You’re the only woman I want.* Is that what we are now, officially a couple? Considering everything else, it should be a minor concern, but it feels so freaking significant, so *right*.

“What about the dogs?” I ask, sitting on one of the small chairs that line the walls.

“Called in from the road, then ditched the cell,” Fletcher says, setting Charles up on the table. “They’ll find the dogs, the zip-tied men, and the body.”

“Is he dead?” I asked. “The man who was shooting me?”

“I’m not sure,” Fletcher replies. “I caught him twice—once in the leg and the other in the shoulder. He may be alive.”

“Cops aren’t going to be launching an investigation into him,” Charles says, groaning as Fletcher peels away the temporary bandage he applied at the scene. “Scumbags like that, they ought to give you a medal.”

“I’m not taking any chances,” Fletcher replies. “I’m wrecking both our cars.”

“Better reimburse me,” Charles says, laughing gruffly.

Fletcher laughs just as darkly. “I think a bonus is in order, too.”

“Amen.”

Fletcher glances up at me with a tight look of emotion. His eyes are filled with purpose. I get the sense he wants to keep staring at me, just like I want to keep staring at him. If Charles wasn't here, I know I'd be in Fletcher's arms right now. He'd hold me tightly, and I'd press myself against him, feeling his powerful heartbeat and profound sense of protection and support.

Loki clammers up onto my chest, licking my cheek. I'm not sure why, but then I realize I'm crying. It feels like a delayed response. With the shock gone, I'm able to fully experience the terror and the doubt, knowing it all could've been taken away.

“It's okay, boy,” I whisper. “I'm okay.”

Loki clearly doesn't believe me. He whines and licks me as if he wants to take away some of the pain.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

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**F**letcher

I stand at my apartment window, looking out on the east side of the city, the skyline, and the sea. It's been several hours since the craziness in the woods. The apartment has two bedrooms. Charles is currently recovering in one, dosed up on strong meds, with an IV in. He was lucky. The bullet hit his side but went straight through, and the second hit his leg and might give him some trouble, but nothing that time can't fix.

Behind me, I can hear Loki chowing down on his food. I've fed him several small portions so he doesn't get overwhelmed. In the reflection of the window, I can also see my woman. She's changed into the simple T-shirt and sweatpants I gave her, a couple sizes too big.

Holding the phone to my ear, it rings a couple more times before James answers. "Dad?"

"Evening, son," I say.

"You painting the town red tonight or something? It's almost midnight."

I try to make my voice sound lighthearted, as though none of this has affected me. "Something like that," I reply. "I won't be home tonight."

"You're being very mysterious," he says, laughing. "Are you with a lady?"

I grit my teeth and repress a sigh. Life would be far better if this weren't so damn complicated. "Something like that."

"Is that your new catchphrase?"

I try to laugh, but it comes out sounding so fake. "Maybe it is. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know."

"Okay, uh, cool. If you *are* with a lady, I hope I can meet her. It's not like you to date. She must be pretty special if you're making an exception."

"I'll keep that in mind," I say vaguely. "Love you, James."

"Love you too, Dad."

I hang up the phone and then join Samantha in the seating area. Loki finishes his food and leaps up into my lap. I gently stroke my hand over his body, emotion pounding into me when I feel his warmth, anxiety, and fear like he's wondering if he'll have to return to that place.

"The news stories have started," Samantha whispers, looking shell-shocked. She's had a shower, her hair tied up, looking beautiful despite the chaos. She nods to the laptop on the coffee table. "*Unknown Vigilante Frees Captive Dogs. Three Men Tied Up—One Injured in War on Dog Farm...* There are more."

I nod. "So the man didn't die, then."

"That's good, right?" Samantha looks at me with so much pain in her eyes. She didn't deserve any of this.

"It's good because the police won't be looking for a killer. It's bad because any man who tries to hurt you deserves to be in the fucking ground." I lower my intensity when Loki whines. "Sorry, boy," I whisper, stroking him under the chin.

"Will the men talk to the cops? Describe us?"

"I doubt it," I reply, "but it's possible. Luckily, I don't have any tattoos, and there was so much mayhem. I'd be surprised if the cops came knocking on my door. I'd be surprised if the cops cared enough to launch a full-scale investigation into this."

“What will they do with the dogs?” she asks.

“Shelters. Those with chips will go back to their owners.”

Samantha stands up and paces nervously around the coffee table. Every movement of hers shows the aftershocks of what happened. It’s like she can still hear the gunshots. She sits next to me and shuffles close. I lift my arm and wrap it around her, holding her tightly, wondering what I would’ve done if I’d lost her.

“How’s my girlfriend feeling, hmm?” I whisper, kissing the top of her head.

When her laughter comes, it’s a gift, even if she sounds choked up and ready to burst into tears, scream, or get up and run again. “So that was serious, huh? I thought that might’ve been in-the-moment talk.”

“Is that a yes?” I ask.

She looks up at me, eyes sparkling with emotion, a soft smile on my woman’s face. “You didn’t ask me, but it’s a yes.” She frowns.

“What’s wrong?” I shake my head. “Sorry, stupid question.”

“I just... It’s just the way I reacted when all that stuff happened. I never thought about how I’d handle myself in a crisis like that. I guess I hoped I’d be a bit more useful.”

“You were useful. You drove Charles’ car.”

“Whoopee!”

“Don’t downplay it,” I growl. “You’re a civilian with no military training or experience in violence or gunfights. It’s different from the movies. People think they’ll behave a certain way, but they rarely do. It’s not your fault. Hell, it’s better *not* to be experienced in that stuff.”

“Thank God you were there,” she says softly.

*I always will be*, I almost reply, but then Loki leaps down and starts running in anxious circles. He whines and moves toward the door.

“I think somebody needs the bathroom,” I say.

“Can I come?” she asks. “I don’t want to be alone.”

I think about it for a moment, not seeing any risks. I’m taking the pistol, just in case. After seeing my woman so close to the end, I know I can’t let her go. Hell, I *knew* before, but this is a different type of knowing. This is destiny. This is love.

“What’s wrong?” she asks as we walk toward the door together, her hand in mine. She must’ve felt my hand go suddenly tight.

“Nothing’s wrong,” I tell her honestly. “You’re safe. Loki’s safe. Maybe everything’s going to work out.”

I probably shouldn’t add the *maybe*, but I can’t speak with the level of confidence I wish I could. My son and his so-called love for Samantha are still the issue. He watched her from afar, nursing his desire for *my* woman. I’ll never get over the confusing sensation of feeling protective of Samantha when it comes to my own son.

Leaving the apartment, we walk down the street. It’s quiet this late at night. We’re nowhere near the center of the city. Loki sniffs cautiously, walking far closer to me than he usually would.

“So,” she says, her voice laced with irony. “Did you have a fun date night?”

I laugh and squeeze her hand again. “I can honestly say it’s been the most eventful date of my life. Not that I’ve got much experience.”

She laughs again. It sounds slightly forced, but only a little. “You can’t talk about lack of experience. That’s my deal.”

“I didn’t date,” I tell her, “before I met you. I didn’t even really date Margot, and after her, I focused on my work.”

She hugs closer to me when two men walk toward us, both of them with their hoods pulled up. I’m in no mood for bullshit tonight, so I stare at both of them, letting them see I’m willing to do bad things if they force me. They cross the street.

“I keep waiting for the bullets to start flying again,” she whispers.

*Welcome to my world*, I almost say, but I don’t want to be weak and bitter.



“Is that what it’s like for you?” she asks, reading my mind in her uncanny way.

“Pretty much,” I say. “I like to think of it as being ready.”

“It’s exhausting,” she whispers.

“I won’t argue there, but *you* don’t have to be ready, Samantha. I’ll do that for both of us. You can relax. I won’t let anything happen to you. I won’t let anybody hurt you. I’m going to protect you.”

*Forever.* Why can’t I just say it? Do I really think she’s going to run from me now? Tonight? No, maybe not, but she could bide her time, then decide this has all been too much. With *forever* stacked on top of the craziness, she may say she needs time, distance, and space. I can’t give her any of that. I need her close to me, where I can watch over her. Where I can know, every single day, I’m ready to beat the shit out of any man who touches my woman.

Once Loki has done his business, we head back to the apartment.

“We’ll sleep together tonight,” I say.

Samantha stares at me wide-eyed. “Uh, *tonight?*”

“No...” I say *no*, but my dick is pulsing hard, my balls swelling. Despite everything—or maybe because of events fueling the urgency—my body is roaring at me to claim her now. “I mean, literally sleep together. There are only two bedrooms, and I’m not letting you out of my sight. But if you don’t want to sleep in the same be—”

“Are you kidding?” she snaps. “I don’t want to be alone. I don’t want you to be alone, either.”

I take her hand and lead her into the bedroom. Loki follows us, looking around the room, then whines and leaves. I glance at Samantha and then follow him. Loki curls up outside the door in the hallway, looking toward the entrance as though watching for threats.

“Is he okay?” Samantha pokes her head around the threshold.

“This is how he sleeps at home,” I tell her. “Watching the door. I think it comforts him.” Leaning down, I stroke my hand gently over his ears. “Good

boy, Loki. You're a very good boy. Back to your old self already, huh?"

He licks my hand and looks up at me. People say dogs don't have human emotions. Intellectually, I know they're right, but I see pride in his dark eyes as he looks up at me.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

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### Samantha

I lie with my back to him, cuddling as close to him as possible. We've been like this for an hour now, but sleep seems so far away. When he said we would *sleep together*, I thought he meant sex at first. I knew I wouldn't be able to do it tonight.

That's what I *thought*, at least, but now I can feel the heat of his body. I can feel his manhood pushing against my back. He's been hard almost this entire time. Sometimes, I'll hear the quality of his breathing change, as though he's trying to calm himself down. Then he'll get a little softer, but soon he'll groan and push against me, his cock getting stiff.

I shift against him, wriggling in the bed so his manhood pushes against my ass instead. Nerves try to coil around me, stop me from moving against him.

He groans gruffly. "What are you doing, baby? Because it doesn't feel like sleeping."

Despite everything, I'm able to laugh. It shouldn't be impossible. Every time I've laughed tonight, I've thought the same thing. How the heck are we doing this? How the heck are we *enjoying* life right now?

"Maybe something about being in bed with my boyfriend makes it difficult to sleep," I say.

He wraps his arm around me tighter, pressing our bodies together. He shifts against me, his cock grinding like he wants to slip through my clothes and find my core. I remember wanting it so badly last time, but my body refused to cooperate.

“Don’t tempt me,” he says. “You’ve been through a lot tonight.”

“You’ve been through a lot,” I counter.

“But I’m used to it. What happened tonight... I’ve seen worse, done worse. Much worse, in fact.”

I shiver, remembering the sounds of the bullets. After Fletcher tended to Charles, he checked my face. In the furious madness of the moment, the glass seemed like it spit all over my face and cut into me. Luckily, it’s all surface scratches.

“I can’t even imagine that,” I murmur.

“Good,” he says, kissing the back of my neck. He’s done that several times. Each time, it sends a shiver of pure belonging through me. “I don’t want you to be able to imagine it. Your life, your world, is completely separate from this darkness. At least it should be.”

He kisses me again, the warmth coiling around my neck, whispering all over my body. It heats my veins all the way through. Deep within, an instinct tells me to turn around, kiss him, and tell him I’m ready.

“I’m never letting that darkness touch you again,” he snarls. “From now on, I’m keeping you safe.”

“You *did* keep me safe,” I counter.

He holds me *even* tighter. He’s squeezing me so solidly against him that he’s almost crushing me, but it doesn’t feel painful. It feels right, like precisely what we’re supposed to be doing: falling into each other, finding support in each other as boyfriend and girlfriend forever.

“It could’ve gone so much worse,” he says passionately.

Slowly, I turn over, lean forward, and find his lips. I’ve been cautious about kissing him because I don’t want to give him the wrong ideas. His body

seems primed for lust, as if he could turn feral, tear my clothes off, and push his massive manhood between my legs any second.

For some reason, I wonder what Mom would say if she knew where I was. She thinks I'm staying at Lexi's house. If she knew about the gunfight or that I'm lying in bed with a man more than twice my age, it seems safe to assume she'd be angry.

We kiss deliberately. I sense Fletcher purposefully taking it slowly like he knows there's danger of him getting carried away. He smooths his hand down my body, finds my hip, and squeezes it in that possessive way of his.

"I'm safe," I tell him, feeling the heat radiating from his body. He's wearing nothing but a pair of shorts, his bare torso pushing against me, letting me feel the shape of his rock-hard muscles. "You don't have to worry. Nothing bad is going to happen to your girlfriend."

I have to pause before I use the g-word. I keep waiting for him to take it back or hint that it was just something he said in the moment. He didn't *really* mean it. He kisses me again, deeper this time, squeezing my hip with so much possessive force my sex starts to ache.

There are still gunshots in my mind and blood in my memory. Deep down, I know I'm not ready, but that doesn't stop me from kissing him with urgent desire. I smooth my hand down his body, then over his back, feeling each twitching, powerful muscle.

He groans and pushes against me. His manhood grinds against my belly, so hard, so ready. Deep inside, instinct pulses, telling me to give myself to my man, screaming at me to do it, be with him, and be the woman he needs. I swallow nervously as I lean back, creating some space between us.

I feel him trying to relax himself again. He thinks I'm moving away to give him a subtle back-off signal. As usual, doubt tries to stop me, but what's better? Do I *try* with my man or lie here thinking about the blood, screaming, and pain?

Leaning back a little more, I create enough space between us to slide my hand down his crotch.

"S-Samantha," he growls. "You don't have to."

“You don’t want me to?”

“I want you more than anything,” he snarls. “I want your hand, lips, and pussy wrapped around my dick. Of course, I do. Goddamn, but you’ve been through a lot.”

“So have you,” I whisper. “Maybe I want to make you feel better.”

I rub my hand on the outside of his shorts, stunned by how big he is, even if I’ve seen and felt him before. My body gets all tingly as he starts to moan. I stroke him from his base to his tip, his shape outlined through his shorts. His breath is hot on my face.

He strokes his hand down my body and slips it into my underwear. A small voice inside me yells to stop this before it gets too far. I won’t be able to give him what we both want and need. Then he reaches my heat, his finger stroking over my clit.

Pleasure bursts through me. I open my mouth to tell him, *We can’t*, but instead, I let out a shaky moan. He rubs me a little faster, playing with my clit, teasing me as I stroke him up and down. Then I grab his shorts and pull them down. He helps me to get them around his knees.

His cock feels so, so huge. I wrap my hand around him, still shocked at how massive and hard he is despite seeing and feeling him before. His breaths get even hotter, more urgent. His finger rubs my clit quicker, pleasure sparking.

I have to say it now. Otherwise, I won’t be able to.

“F-Fletcher,” I whisper. “I don’t think I can tonight.”

He pauses the movement of his hand but keeps himself pushed up against me.

“No,” I say. “I mean, the rest. All the way.”

He sighs. I think it’s one of relief. “Then you better keep stroking my cock, baby,” he snarls.

I moan when he pushes against my clit with more pressure. My hand returns to the up-and-down movement, driven by desire, instinct, and little thought. My core feels like it’s fluttering almost, a new sensation, as though it’s telling me to take his dick, take his seed, fill with his babies.

I stroke precome up and down his cock, my hand getting slick, my movements fast as I rub him quicker and quicker. He gasps when I start to get *really* fast. I'm timing my movements with his, my clit feeling like it's burning as he gets faster, applying more pressure, owning me just as fiercely as I own him.

"Oh, fuck," he groans.

"Y-yeah," I whimper in response, everything getting tingly and hot, boiling, almost enough to make me scream. I think I would if it wasn't for Charles and Loki.

"I can feel how close you are," he says passionately. "You're going to cream all over my hand."

"I can feel how close you are, too," I whisper, stroking quickly, and I can. I'm sure of it. It's like his rock-hard dick is bulging against my hand, all the pressure trying to erupt from him. "You're so fucking big."

"Your tight pussy's going to take every inch," he says huskily. "I'm going to fuck you deep and hard. I'm going to pound your virgin slit until you're creaming all over my di... di..." He trails off, and I swear I can *feel* the seed rushing up his shaft.

"Y-y-ye..."

I can't speak either. We become nothing but pleasure, his cock so wet with precome that my palm makes noises as I slip up and down. My pussy is so wet with lust that his hand makes noises as he rubs me faster, with more ownership. He handles me powerfully, but not roughly, making it clear I'm his.

Soon, I can't think. My eyes are shut tight. Hot, red color bursts across the darkness of my eyelids, but it's not blood. It's not pain. It's pure pleasure.

I gasp, squeezing my legs tightly around his hand. I'm certain I can feel his seed pumping out of him. As my orgasm slams into me, starlight and heat and everything good and warm pulsing through my body, his seed rushes up his shaft and explodes out of his end. He's moaning through his teeth as if fighting the urge to roar. I rub faster, driven by my orgasm.

Finally, we both stop, breathing heavily. He finds my lips, and we kiss with so much meaning it's like we think it could be the last time. It's like we're kissing to stop the memories and the panic from returning.

"I'm sorry we couldn't go all the way," I whisper between kisses.

"Never..." He kisses me. "Say..." Again. "That..." He makes the third kiss last so long that tingles start to shimmer through me again, even with my sex pleasantly sore from what we just did. My hole is still aching, as if pissed at me for not taking his cock, seed, and future.

"But you must want it," I whisper. "I know I do."

"We're going to do it. Don't doubt that."

"But what if..."

"You were nervous," he says. "We were on a kitchen table. The circumstances weren't exactly ideal. When we try for real, your virgin body will be so needy and horny you'll be surprised by how much your tight hole can take. Soon, it will feel so good you won't stop creaming down my dick."

His words make the shimmers even more intense. I cling to his back, digging my nails in. He's so solid my fingernails feel like they bend as I push against him.

"I guess we didn't have a condom anyway," I murmur, though using one is the last thing I want to do.

I wonder what he'd say if I told him that. *Hey Fletcher, just so you know, when we have sex, I don't want to use protection. I don't want there to be anything between us. I want you... forever.*

After a pause, he says, "Yeah, I guess so."

Then he pulls me over to the other side of the bed, away from the wet patch. He holds me tightly. I hold him even more fiercely. Of course, it was way too much to expect him to say any of the stuff I wish he would. About family. A future. Kids. A life together. He'd never say any of that, not this soon, anyway. I have to be patient. For now, it's enough to lie together. At least we're not thinking about the mayhem, the bullets, the misery.



“You’re the best girlfriend a man could ask for,” he whispers, kissing me on the cheek.

“And you’re the best boyfriend.”

“For an old man...”

I dig my fingernails into his back. “Don’t say that anymore. You’re not an old man. Even if you were, which you’re not, I don’t care. I’ve often been called an old soul, and you’re *clearly* immature.”

“Ah, I get it,” he says, and I know he’s smiling from his tone. “So we meet directly in the middle.”

I smile, kissing him on the lips. “Exactly.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

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### Fletcher

I wake with my woman in my arms and my dog sleeping at my feet. Loki woke me at around three a.m., scratching at the door. It was like the little man knew me and my lady needed some alone time, so he respectfully waited. I sit up, sunlight slanting through the window.

Damn, that was the best night's sleep I've had in years. It must've been because I had my woman beside me. I sit up and look down at her, watching her sleep. Her hair is messy across her face, and she's got a gentle, beautiful smile on her lips. She yawns so cutely, making me want her and *love* her even more.

Is it possible to love somebody so soon? Perhaps I'm crazy, but it feels more than possible. It feels real. It feels like we're building something here that nothing and nobody will ever be able to shatter.

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"We should go our separate ways for a while," Charles Malone says, wincing as he raises his coffee mug to his lips. He's a tough man. Despite his bandaged injuries, he's not letting the pain show much. "If I were you, I'd pay off anybody else you hired. Make sure they keep quiet."

I nod, taking a sip of my coffee. “I will, and you’re right. This is goodbye for us, Charles.”

“Thank you,” my woman says from beside me. “Without you, they would’ve gotten me.”

Charles shakes his head. “It’s like I told you, Samantha. You remind me of my daughter.”

I’m not sure what they’re talking about. Presumably, it’s a conversation they had when I was at the farmhouse. When he says *daughter*, I’m reminded of the age gap, but then I remember what my girlfriend said last night. She’s an old soul, and I’m not an old man. Even if the rest of the world wouldn’t understand, we do, and that’s all that matters.

I shake Charles’ hand at the door. Then he kneels down, wincing with the effort, reaching forward so that Loki can nuzzle his hand. Loki’s usually nervous around strangers, but I think he understands that Samantha and Charles are different.

“It took a lot to find you, little fella,” he says, smiling, “but you were worth it.”

Once he’s gone, I return to the living room to find my woman sitting on the couch with her knees drawn to her chest. She doesn’t turn as I enter. She keeps staring into space as though she’s seeing something that isn’t there. I know what’s happening. It’s the same thing that happens to me sometimes. She’s seeing the gunshots, the terror, the craziness.

I walk over to her slowly, sit down, and wrap my arm around her. “It’s going to be okay,” I whisper.

She leans against me, saying nothing. My thoughts return to last night when she mentioned we didn’t have a condom. I wanted so badly to tell her we’ll never need one. When our bodies melt together with all that heat, it’s going to be for real, for *life*. Hopefully, when my seed erupts in her, I’ll get her pregnant immediately.

“What do we do now?” she asks quietly.

“Behave like we normally would,” I tell her.

“Well, that means I have to get going for college soon. I’ve got a class this afternoon.”

“I can give you a ride to your place,” I tell her.

She snuggles even closer to me. “Thank you, and we’ll see each other again, right?”

“You’re my girlfriend,” I say, trying to smirk and keep it light and easy despite my never-ending hunger. It won’t stop, ever. Soon, it will be time for her to learn that, but what if she runs? “Of course, I’m seeing you soon. This evening. We can walk Loki together if you want.”

“Uh, *duh*,” she says. “If I want... Did you really just say that?”

I kiss the top of her head, then close my eyes, breathing in her scent as I savor her warmth, her closeness. A jagged jolt of panic spears into me when I think about losing Samantha or anybody hurting her. She was right when she said it’s good I didn’t kill the bastard shooting at her. Honestly, I wish I had, and not with a gun. I wish I’d beaten the motherfucker to death for ever daring to threaten my woman.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

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### Samantha

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Lexi asks, looking at me across the cafeteria table.

There’s noise all around us: people talking, shouting, laughing, the clatter of cutlery and kitchenware. I have to keep reminding myself that the noises aren’t a gun, a bomb, or shattering glass.

She gestures at my face when I don’t reply. “That looks painful.”

She’s talking about the shallow red marks on my face from where the glass erupted against me. The small, stinging points feel so petty compared to everything else. I hardly even feel the pain. Compared to what *could’ve* happened, I’m so lucky.

“It’s my fault for not looking where I’m going.”

My cover story is that I tripped and grazed my face against gravel yesterday. I’ve never lied to Lexi, so she has no reason to disbelieve me. Even if I told her the truth, she’d probably think I was lying anyway. Less than twenty-four hours ago, I was running for my life in the woods. Heck, it hardly seems real to *me*.

“You seem pretty low, too,” she comments. “Are things going okay with you

and you know who?”

Despite the uncertainty, I start smiling like a dork. “The date went well,” I tell her, which is half true. Before Charles Malone’s phone call, it was going better than I could’ve expected. “He started calling me his girlfriend.” When Lexi frowns, I say, “What? What’s up?”

“Have you... you know, yet?”

I shake my head. I didn’t tell Lexi how close we came or about the feeling of the nerves trying to close me up, shut me down, and kill my lust before it had a chance to consume me. “No.”

“Just be careful,” Lexi says. “Trust me. I know guys better than you. A lot of them will say anything to get a woman into bed.”

“He’s not like that,” I tell her. “We’ve got something real.”

“It’s still early days yet.”

She sounds like Mom, and I know they both only want the best for me. I can’t argue too much. Still, there’s this desire in me to scream at her that she has no freaking clue what she’s talking about.

Lexi is about to speak, but then she narrows her eyes, closes her mouth, and looks over my shoulder. I turn to find a barbershop quartet walking through the cafeteria, dressed in the classic hats and matching shirt combo.

“I wonder who it’s for,” Lexi murmurs as they look around the cafeteria. Then, oh my God, no... They walk directly toward our table.

I swallow, praying it’s for Lexi. I don’t understand why Fletcher would do this. I know we’re calling each other boyfriend and girlfriend, but surely he knows me enough to understand how nervous this would make me. Or maybe that’s the point. We *don’t* know each other. Perhaps he thinks it’s going to cheer me up.

They stop next to the table, four men of similar height. One is already tapping his foot.

“Samantha Fitzgerald?” the man at the front of the group says.

I swallow and nod. The whole cafeteria has gone quiet. People are aiming their cell phones over here. I've been the quiet one in college for so long, able to slink through the hallways, focused on the color and the light, and *not* drawing attention to myself. What if Mom sees one of these videos? What if James does?

The men start tapping their feet and humming. Then it hits me. I'm so freaking slow sometimes. It's the flowers situation all over again when I assumed Fletcher had sent them, but no, I get it now. This is him, isn't it? James?

Three men hum and snap their fingers as the lead man sings.

"Samantha, your not-so-secret love just wanted to say... He'd take you on a date, a trip, an adventure any day. James wants to shower you in hugs and kisses..."

One of the background singers steps forward with a big grin on his face, waggling his eyebrows at me. They're very good at keeping their composure. I'm sure they're used to the person they're serenading, smiling at least. "He'll be the mister... you be the misses..."

"And your *love*," the first man picks up. "Will fly like a dove. Will—"

He cuts off when I stand up. I can't take it anymore—the singing, the staring, the phones aimed at me. The fact that my boyfriend's *son* is doing this is so messed up that I can't take it.

"Sammy, wait," Lexi calls, but I run from the cafeteria. If this was high school, I know people would laugh at me. A few laugh, but mostly, people are just quiet. There are fewer bullies here. I'm glad about that, at least.

In the hallway, I shoulder my bag, making for the door. I enter the parking lot when somebody yells my name—a man's voice. I turn, thinking for a split second it might be Fletcher, but no. It's just somebody who sounds like him. It's his son, James, jogging over to me. He's got a confused look on his face.

"I thought you'd like it."

*If it had come from your dad, I might have.*

“Why are you doing this?” I yell, not meaning for so much pain to erupt from me. My voice is so loud. He takes a nervous step back. I wave my hand at him. “Seriously, why? What’s the point? We had *one date*. One. That’s it, and it was a bad date, James. You must know that.”

He nods. “I was rude and selfish, but *that’s* why I’m doing this. I want a second chance.”

“There wasn’t even a first chance,” I snap. “We’re not compatible. I’m not interested. I’m sorry, but I’m just not.”

“Is there someone else?” He walks right up to me, and I hate it. The closer he gets, the more similarities I can see between him and his dad. It’s the eyes, the subtle curve at the corner of his mouth. I don’t want James at all, only Fletcher.

“How is that any of your business?” I counter.

He sneers in a bullying way. “It’s just a simple question.”

“So was mine,” I snap. “Why do you care?”

He steps forward and reaches out as if he’s going to touch my hand. The idea is so gross to me, so unacceptable. Am I really going to be this man’s stepmom one day? How is that ever going to work?

He drops his hands and sighs. “The truth, Samantha? Clearly, you don’t feel the same, but I think you deserve the truth.”

I swallow. “Okay...” I don’t want to listen, but if I don’t, my imagination will fill in something far worse anyway.

“I fell for you the first moment I saw you,” he says, making my head spin and *hurt*. This is exactly what I wanted to hear from his dad, not from him. “The second I laid eyes on you, I knew you were the one for me. I knew, even if it didn’t make sense, even if there were so many obstacles in our way, that I...” He pauses, emotion entering his voice. It’s so wrong. “I loved you. I knew that, no matter what—”

“No,” I interrupt. “No, James. I’m sorry. I don’t feel the same.”

“You haven’t given me a chance...”



“What’s going on?” Lexi jogs over, shooting me a look, silently asking if I need help. She joins us, turning to look at James. “What are you saying to her, James?”

“Nothing that has anything to do with you,” he scowls. “Can’t a man declare his undying love in peace?”

“You don’t even go here,” Lexi snaps, meaning the college. “This is graduating to straight-up stalker territory.”

“I can’t help if it if I feel this way,” James said.

“You’ll have to try,” I say, “because it’s never going to work. It simply isn’t.”

Lexi looks at me, frowning tightly. I know what she’s thinking without even having to ask. She’s wondering if I’ve told him about my relationship with his dad, but obviously, I haven’t done that. I wouldn’t do it without Fletcher’s blessing.

“Anything else?” Lexi says, glaring at James.

“Don’t look at me like that,” James snaps. “This isn’t the gym now.”

“Jesus, James,” Lexi replies. “I beat you in sparring *once*, and now you have to throw a temper tantrum for the rest of all time. You’ve pulled your stunt. Now, is there anything else?”

He grits his teeth, then shakes his head and turns away. “Nah, I’m good... for now.”

“Please don’t send me any more *gifts*,” I call after him as he turns and swaggers away.

Lexi places her hand on my arm, squeezing gently. “Are you good?”

“I just wish he’d leave me alone,” I whisper. “If I’m going to have a relationship with Fletcher, how the heck will it work? I can’t be James’ stepmom if he feels this way.”

“Whoa, stepmom?” Lexi asks. “Seems to me like you’re thinking way too far ahead.”

“Well, I don’t care!” I snap, hearing gunfire in my mind, remembering the barking, the haze of bullets, and the certainty I would die. “That’s how I feel and how Fletcher feels, too.”

“He’s said that, has he?” Lexi says, a challenge in her voice. “That he wants to get married one day?”

“No,” I admit.

The truth is, Lexi’s response is probably the right one. If I told Fletcher about the wedding bells ringing in my thoughts, he’d leave me unless he feels the same. Unless all that talk about what a good mother I’ll make was about *us*, not just some hypothetical.

“Come on.” Lexi squeezes my arm gently. “Let’s finish our food.”

“No way. I’m not going back in there. Not today.”

“Sam...”

“I mean it,” I snap. “It’s too awkward.”

She sighs. “Okay, fair enough. What should we do instead?”

“No way. You’ve got class. I’m not ruining *your* education, too. I’ll be okay, honestly.”

“Are you sure?” she asks, frowning.

No, I’m not. I don’t know if anything is going to be okay. If it isn’t the bullets firing in my memory, it’s the doubt firing in my soul. “Yes,” I tell her.

Once she’s gone, I walk to the bus stop, replaying the confrontation with James. He said everything I wish Fletcher would: He knew when he first saw me. He loves me, even if it didn’t make sense, but it’s coming from the wrong Jacobson.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

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### Fletcher

Loki watches me as I hit the heavy bag in the garden. I was cautious about using it at first. Loki normally loves to watch me work out. Initially, he'd whine and try to get involved, but these days, he enjoys lying on the patio stones, staring, tongue hanging out. I thought the bag might be too loud for him today, but he's resilient, back to his old ways. I hit it repeatedly, wilder than usual, thinking of the bastard who tried to hurt my woman.

"Dad?"

I turn to find James standing at the back door. Loki runs over to him. I smile as James kneels down and strokes Loki. James might talk a big game about not being a dog person, but he can't hide the boyish grin on his face as he greets Loki. James hasn't asked how I got Loki back, so I haven't told him.

"You okay, son?" I ask.

He wanders onto the patio. "Not really. I just made a fool of myself at Samantha's school."

My blood turns to ice. The bag whines behind me. My fists are clenched tight in the gloves. "Why were you at Samantha's school?" I ask, my voice dark.

James swallows. Maybe he thinks I'm going to lose my shit on him. If he

were anybody else, I would.

“I hired a barbershop quartet,” he says. “I wanted to impress her. Show her I’m worth a second chance.”

“But *why?*” I growl. “You only went on one date. I don’t understand this at all.”

I’m being a major hypocrite here. I didn’t even need a single date to know she was the one for me, but I can’t stand the idea of my son feeling this way. If I had to choose... Jesus, I can’t even think like that. Maybe I haven’t been the perfect father. Hell, there’s no *maybe* about it, but this is just too much.

“I can’t help how I feel,” he says quietly, looking down at Loki’s smiling, happy face. “She’s the one for me. That’s it.”

I swallow, shaking my head. I’m not sure how much longer I can take this. I’m not sure if there’s a way out of this. I’ll have to tell him the truth at some point. I’ll have to reveal how much she means to me, and then what?

The worst part is, I can’t even keep asking him to explain how he can feel so certain so soon. It’s the exact way I feel. This is so messed up. If—no, *when*—Samantha and I get married one day, she will be his stepmom. How is that ever going to work, considering all this?

“I take it she didn’t like the quartet,” I say after a pause.

“No,” he sighs. “That’s why I wanted to speak with you, Dad. I wanted some fatherly advice. You know what that is, right?”

I bow my head, meeting eyes with Loki. He looks at me as if to say, *What’s up? We’re doing okay, aren’t we?* Finally turning back to my son, I touch him on the shoulder. “We need to talk.”

He tilts his head, looking at me curiously. “About what?”

“Please, son,” I say. I expect him to get sarcastic when I call him *son*, as he often does, but I must say it in a different tone.

“Okay, Dad,” he replies.

I strip off the boxing gloves and toss them onto the patio. Loki follows us

into the house. I wish I could speak with Samantha before I do this, but I can't put it off anymore. This has gone far enough already. There's too much heat and certainty in my heart, aimed at my woman, for me to let it go. I can't even *try* to let her go.

In the living room, I gesture to the chair. James sits slowly, looking at me with the concern I've seen in my own eyes many times in the mirror. After an operation. Before an operation. The day he was born.

"I have to tell you something," I say, aware I'm delaying, but this is a conversation I never dreamed I'd be having. Ever. Not once. "It's going to be difficult to hear, okay?"

"You don't have to brace me," he snaps. "Just lay it on me, Dad."

We run our hands through our hair at the same time, and then both stop, acknowledging the match with a slight smirk. He lowers his hand and leans forward, staring at me, waiting for me to speak. My throat feels tight. Maybe some fatherly instinct deep inside is roaring at me to do the right thing: swallow my own love so my son can feel his. If Samantha wanted him over me, would I be able to do it then? But that's a false comparison. She doesn't want him. She can't. We belong together.

"Samantha and I are seeing each other," I say, which is one hell of an understatement. "We recently started a relationship. I'm sorry, son. I know this will rock your world, but Samantha's my girlfriend."

James shakes his head slowly. I expected a bigger reaction, but he seems to be hiding his feelings behind a shield of coldness. Maybe he's so devastated he can't accept what he's just heard. "Explain," he says after a long pause.

I sigh, wishing I was with her in bed again. I should've held her tightly this morning and kept her right next to me so we didn't have to deal with any of this, but that's a selfish, cowardly thought.

"You know, James..." I laugh, but there's nothing funny. It's just a noise. It's just a way to let out some of the tension. "It's actually very similar to you. When I saw her, I knew I wanted her. I knew she was mine. I knew... Hell, I even wrote it all down the day we met. I thought if I could get it out of me, maybe I'd be able to let her go, but I can't. Last night, I was with her. We

went on a date.”

He runs a finger over the knuckles of the opposite hand, looking down, not at me. “And how did that go?” he asks.

“It went well,” I reply, deciding to leave out the farmhouse showdown. “The truth is, James, I really care about her. I care about her more than...” *I knew I could*, I was going to say, but I don’t want to diminish my and Margot’s relationship in his eyes. We were good at hiding our mutual coldness from him, I hope. “Than I should be able to,” I go on, “considering the timeframe, but then you understand that feeling.”

“Yeah,” he murmurs, “because she was my date. She was *mine*.”

“No,” I say fiercely. “You went on a date, yes, but she was never yours. She was always mine.”

“She’s less than half your age,” James snaps. “That’s disgusting.”

I grit my teeth, glaring at him. The same fire I felt in the woods returns to me. It’s almost like I can smell gun smoke and feel the hot metal of a gun’s grip in my hand.

“If you think that,” I say, unclenching my jaw, “then fair enough. I can’t change your mind. Maybe the world will agree with you, but my per—but Samantha doesn’t feel that way, and that’s all that matters to me.”

“What about *me*, Dad? Don’t I matter?”

His voice cracks, becoming just like when he was a little kid. It sends a crack right through my heart. Even Loki whines and looks at me like I’m the bad guy. Reaching across the coffee table, I lay my hand on James’. “You matter more than anything. You’re my baby boy. You’re my son. I’d do anything for you.”

He leans back, gently brushing my hand away. When he looks me directly in the eye, I know something bad is coming. It’s in his posture, in the furious shape of his lips. He looks ready to fight.

“Anything?” he says, and I already know where it’s going. Goddamn it. “So if I asked you to leave Samantha, never see her again, talk to her, or *think*

about her... Could you do that, Dad?"

I open my mouth to speak, but there's nothing I can say. No words will come out. I'm caught between my son and the woman of my dreams. No, not *caught*. I trapped myself. I chose this. The second James told me how he felt about her, I should've ended things, but I simply can't.

"James..."

He jumps to his feet and almost runs for the door. Loki yaps in sheer confusion and runs in a small circle, darting at me, then the door, then back at me. James leaves the house, slamming the door behind him, causing the entire structure to tremble.

Loki leaps into my lap, whining and clambering up my chest, trying to lick my face. I turn my cheek to him and let him lick it. It gives me a view of the front driveway. James backs his car out and drives away with a loud *screech* noise, the tires leaving marks on the road.

"What the hell am I going to do, boy?" I murmur.

A moment later, my phone starts to ring. It's my woman. Even now, after the showdown, I faintly smile as I pick it up. James' question rings in my mind. If I had to choose, could I really let Samantha go? But could I be content with never seeing my son again? No, never. He's my boy, *dammit*.

"Hey," she says. "There's something I need to tell you..."

"Is it about James?" I ask.

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"I just spoke to him. He told me about the barbershop quartet, and I told him about us. I had to. I couldn't lie to him anymore."

She pauses and then says in a small voice, "I'm guessing it didn't go well."

"How did you know that?"

"You, Fletcher. You sound cold. Like you're getting ready to pull away from me."

"He asked me who I'd choose. You or him."

“What did you say?”

“I’m a coward, Samantha. I couldn’t give him an answer, but I know one thing. A man who abandons his son is no man at all.”

“I’m so sorry,” she says. “I wish there was some way I could fix this.”

“It’s not your fault,” I reply. “You’re beautiful, sexy, funny, shy in the best way. It’s not *your* fault people can’t help but fall for you.”

“But a son and his dad? That’s not exactly ideal, is it?” After a pause, she laughs, but just like mine, there’s no humor or joy. Just an expulsion of tense air. “I think that was a bit of an understatement.”

“Yeah,” I say, with the same kind of laughter. “Just a bit.”

“Do you still want to walk Loki?” she asks. “I’ll understand if—”

“We *are* walking him,” I snarl. “I need to see you. Nothing makes sense unless I’m with you.”

There’s a long pause. I think she might’ve disconnected. When she finally speaks, her voice is full of emotion. It sends another crack down my heart, joining the one put there by the sense of betrayal in my son’s voice.

“Do you mean that?” she asks. “I mean, when you say things like that, they aren’t lines, are they? It’s real? All of it?”

“It’s real,” I snarl. “The realest thing I’ve ever experienced. I…”

*I love you. I need you forever. You’re going to give me so many children one day.*

I genuinely believe that if it weren’t for the standoff with James, I’d say all of this without a doubt. Nothing would stop me, and I’d mean every word. I can’t keep letting fear hold me back, but I *can* let my son’s agony hold me back. What sort of father would I be if I didn’t?

“I’d never trick you,” I go on. “I swear on Loki, Samantha. I’d die before I did that.”

“Okay,” she whispers. “Good. Thank you.”



“I’ll meet you at your place—”

“No, let’s meet at the park,” she says. “I’m sorry. Mom’s going to be here. I still haven’t told her any of it. As far as she knows, I’m still waiting for... Well, I don’t know what she thinks I’m waiting for. Maybe she thinks I’ll stop caring.”

“It’s not as easy as that, is it?”

“No,” Samantha says, “but nobody else seems to understand.”

She’s right. Nobody does except for me and her. As far as I’m concerned, that’s all that matters.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

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### Samantha

“Where are you going?” Mom asks when I mention I’ll be heading out soon.

Luckily, one of her favorite quiz shows is on. She doesn’t look at me as she asks the question. Instead, she leans over her knitting, staring at the screen as she waits for the host, who she has a crush on, to reveal the answer.

“Uh, out,” I say, knowing that’s the stupidest thing I could have said, but lying to her feels wrong. It makes me feel like a dirtbag.

Mom claps her hands together when the answer pops up. “I knew it!” Oh, dang. Commercial break. She turns to me, eyes narrowed far too perceptively. “Do you think I was born yesterday, Sam?”

I swallow. Uh oh. “What do you mean?” I ask in my most innocent voice.

“You’re acting very shifty. Something tells me this involves a certain man we discussed recently.”

I feel my cheeks turning red, a surefire way to give myself up with Mom. She’s always been able to read me fairly easily. My blushing cheeks might as well be a warning light going off. “Maybe,” I mutter, knowing there’s no use in lying.

“I see.” Mom nods. “I suppose you *did* wait a few days.”

“I know you think I’m being immature, Mom, but it’s much more serious than you think.” *He saved my life.* “I think we could be a real couple and make it work.”

Mom sighs. I think she’s going to snap at me. Then she walks over to my chair and sits on the arm, wrapping her arm around me. “I can tell how much this means to you. I think I went a little overboard last time, but you must be careful. I don’t want you used and discarded like so many young women are.”

“I won’t let that happen,” I tell her.

“It might not be your choice. The second you give him what he wants—”

“It’s what we *both* want,” I snap. “I’m not some defenseless little flower. I’m not some stupid little kid. I don’t think he’s using me. If I had to bet, I’d bet everything I had on him wanting me as badly as I want him, but let’s say you’re right. Let’s say he is—”

“I’m not saying *anything* definite.”

“Then I want it too,” I go on. “I want him, whatever happens. If it’s just a fling, I can handle that. It’ll hurt, but I can take it. What I can’t take is hiding in my shell, never taking risks, never knowing what could’ve been.”

Mom sighs, squeezing my shoulder. She leans down and kisses my cheek softly. “I think that’s my cue to stop babying you.”

“I know you’re only trying to protect me,” I murmur, “but I can handle this. I promise.”

I’m unsure if that’s true or if this *boyfriend and girlfriend* talk is just a line. If he lied on the phone a few minutes ago when he said it *wasn’t* just a line, what would I do? Laugh it off, brush it all aside, tell the desire deep inside that none of it was real to begin with? But I’ve just promised Mom. I don’t break promises to her. That means I *have* to be able to handle it.

“Okay,” Mom says, kissing me again. “I trust you. I’ll stop coddling you but know one thing, Sammy. If you ever need me, I’m here.”

“Thanks, Mom. I love you.”

We hug for a long time. Then I head out to my car, released from the garage. When I went to pick it up, they told me the bill had already been settled. I remember the date and talking with Fletcher about how I'd like to start a family earlier. When I picked up the car, I wondered if we *did* have a family, would he support us? Or would he want me to work? Either way, I'd throw myself into the relationship and the future. We'd make it work, even if I had to work twelve-hour shifts daily. It's him I want, not the money. That fact slamming into me on the way home felt good, affirming how true this connection is, at least on my end.

When I get to the park, I see my man leaning against the railing with Loki sitting at his feet. Fletcher looks so cool and calm in his army-green jacket and faded jeans. As I walk over, Loki runs until he's at the full extension of his leash, straining to get closer to me. Fletcher chuckles and walks toward us. Kneeling, I stroke Loki on his head, then tickle him under the beard. He's probably the most resilient person I've ever met. Well, the most resilient *dog*.

"Hey," Fletcher says. Then he does something I never would've expected in public. He leans forward and presses his lips against mine. The shock stuns me for a moment, but then I taste his lips, taste his certainty. I kiss him back. "You seem surprised," he goes on when the kiss is over.

I smile, trailing my hands up his back, holding tightly onto his solid muscle. "I didn't think we were going to be public until..."

He sighs and nods. He doesn't need me to mention James. "I feel like a terrible father, but when I see you, hell, I can't resist."

I take his hand, holding it tightly. "I know the feeling. Especially after..."

He nods again, his eyes getting dark. Leaning forward, he gently kisses the side of my head, where the glass bit into me. "I'll never let anything happen to you. I'll die or kill before I let that happen."

When other boyfriends say stuff like that to their partners, there's a chance it's just talk. They want to seem tough and capable in front of their women. When it comes from Fletcher, I don't have to wonder if it's true. He proved it in the woods.

"Shall we?" he says, gesturing to the park.

“Is this our second date?” I tease as we walk through the gate and down the path. Loki stops every few moments to sniff.

“I guess it is,” Fletcher says, smirking. “Our second date, and I already feel closer to you than I would to any other woman after two hundred.”

I feel my cheeks heating up. I know there’s still so much up in the air. His son *loves* me, apparently. Deep down, when I look at this situation objectively or try to, I can see Fletcher’s point. We really shouldn’t be here, doing this so soon after what James told me. He was also right when he said it’s hard to resist.

“What are you thinking about?” he asks.

“Us,” I tell him.

“What about us?”

We stop near a large tree, Fletcher letting Loki’s leash extend so he can sniff around the base of the trunk. Loki’s tail is perked. Every time there’s a noise outside the park, a car or somebody yelling, he snaps his head around, on alert.

“Just the future, I guess,” I murmur, refusing to meet his gaze. Being with him has helped me break through these walls deep inside and helped me to say things I’d usually keep locked up, but this is next level.

“The future,” he repeats, his voice husky.

I swallow. We’re standing side by side as Loki takes his time with the tree. I’m guessing he can smell countless other dogs. He’s probably got a lot of catching up to do since he’s been away. It’s like a doggy message board.

“Yeah,” I say, then wait for him to reply. It takes a while. I wonder if he’s mad. I wonder if I’m pushing too hard.

No, I’m *not* pushing. I’ve got to stop doubting myself so freaking much. I’ve got to stop acting like I’m somehow less worthwhile than others, less able to share my thoughts.

“What about it?” he asks after a pause.

I risk a glance at him. He's staring at Loki with a faraway look, as if he's looking past Loki, past the tree, past the world, into the future.

"It's what we were talking about on the date," I say, my heart pounding hard. It's like the frantic beating is trying to shut me up and warn me that if I keep going, I could risk everything, but I push on. "About a family. Children. Stuff like that."

"Look at me, Samantha," he says fiercely.

I turn with an effort. He's staring down at me, his blue eyes blazing. He steps forward, holding the leash in one hand, gently smoothing his other around my body. He stares right into my eyes. "Tell me what you're thinking. Don't worry. Whatever it is, you're not scaring me away."

I cling onto his shirt, digging my nails in, almost as if I'm getting ready for him to push me away. "Well, I was thinking, honestly, that..."

"Say it." He leans closer, staring directly into my soul. I'm sure I can see some guilt in his eyes, some indication that he shouldn't be going this far without his son's blessing, but like me, he can't stop. "Don't leave me hanging, my perfect painter."

The nickname sends those familiar yet captivating tingles through my body. Okay, this is it. I didn't plan on this when I drove out here, but I'm on the edge now. I have to step forward. I've spent way too long hiding inside myself.

Staring right up at him, *into* him—it's how he stares at me—I lick my lips. "I want it all with you," I whisper. "The future. The family. The kids. Everything we talked about."

For long, long seconds, he says nothing. Then his lips curve into a smirk. He thinks I'm joking. He's going to make a wisecrack. He's going to use humor as a method to give me an escape from this situation, but I can't laugh at this.

I turn, meaning to walk away, but Loki is standing on my other side. I'm not sure when the little man sneaked over here. The leash wraps around one side. Loki stares up with a determined, doggy expression as though intent on keeping me here.

“Samantha,” Fletcher growls, taking my hand and turning me toward him. “I want it, too.”

“You...”

He leans down, warm breath shivering over me. “I want it, too—more than anything. I want—need—you. I need you so badly it hurts. I needed you the first moment I saw you. When I first saw you and James, I didn’t even recognize him. I just saw my woman. That’s how I was thinking of you already. *My woman* and I knew I had to defend you.”

I press both hands against his chest, feeling his heartbeat slamming and his muscles tense. “Do you mean it? Really?”

“I’ve never meant anything more,” he growls. “You and I are forever. *Forever*. I’ve never been more certain about anything.”

He leans down and kisses me. I return the kiss. Our mouths open, our tongues hungrily seeking each other out. I smooth my hands under his jacket, feeling his firmness, strength, and power. He grabs my hips and gently pushes me away.

“We should talk more at my place,” he says, the passion in his breathy voice telling me everything I need to know. He *definitely* means more than talking.

I grab his shoulders, searching his face for any sign of deceit. “Tell me you mean it. Promise. *Swear*.”

“I swear on Loki,” he growls. “I swear on my life. I swear on my son’s life.” We pause, both of us thinking the same thing. It’s a little ironic to use James as proof of our honor. “The. First. Time. The second I saw you, you were mine. Nothing will ever change that.”

I nod, stand on my tiptoes, and kiss him on the cheek. “Then let’s go.”

We head toward the park’s exit, even if we shouldn’t. We should wait until James... until James what? Stops feeling exactly how his father feels?

At my car, he kisses me on the cheek. “Follow me, my perfect painter.”

“Are we going to your place?” I ask.

“The apartment,” he says, not having to explain why.

If we went home, his son might catch us.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

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### Fletcher

I take Loki to his dog bed in the hallway, kneeling and stroking him softly under the chin. He yawns and whines, curling into a ball. Standing, I join my woman in the living room. She's sitting on the couch, looking sexy in her pink T-shirt and jeans. She could wear anything and still make me hungrier than lingerie would with anybody else. I only want her forever. Now I know she feels the same.

She bites her lip as I join her on the couch, a flash of guilt in her glance. I know where it's coming from. It's the fact that we haven't dealt with the James situation yet. Even thinking of it as the *James situation* makes me a bad parent.

I can't think about anything else when I wrap my arms around my woman—the gunshots (both recent and in the more distant past), the pain, the doubt. All of it melts away when I lean down and find her lips. She gasps in the cutest way, as though she's surprised. I kiss her deeper, with more hunger.

She moans through the kiss when I slide my hand up her thigh. Goddamn, I love that noise. She presses her hands against my chest, digging her fingernails through my shirt. I can feel her passion, her neediness.

Her moans get more urgent when I press my hand down between her legs. She opens her mouth, causing our teeth to click together passionately. She

leans back, panting as she stares up at me. “Should we go to the bedroom?”

I smirk. “I thought you’d never ask.”

She squeals in the cutest, most captivating way when I loop one arm under her legs and brace her back with the other. I carry her through the apartment. Loki blinks one eye open as we walk past him, then closes it. It’s almost like he’s winking.

Gently lowering her onto the bed, I close the door, then turn to find her sitting forward, cheeks flushed, biting her lip in that sexy-as-hell way.

“Tell me again,” she whispers as I walk toward her slowly.

I know there will be a point where I won’t be able to stop. The hunger will overcome me, and I’ll have to surrender to the fierce desire. I won’t be able to go slowly. I won’t be able to give my perfect virgin the softness she might need. I’ll drive deep and hard into her young, tight body.

“You’re mine,” I growl. “You’ll *always* be mine. Nobody else’s. You belong to *me*.”

I gently push her onto the bed, climb on top of her, and kiss her deeply, feasting on her lips, hearing the pleasure bursting out of her. She wraps her arms around me as we grind our bodies together. I push my crotch against hers, the tip of my manhood pushing through my jeans, my seed pulsing in my balls.

“I need your virgin hole so badly,” I growl, kissing her neck, kissing down her body.

“I need you,” she whimpers.

I grab her shirt and pull it up. She raises her arms, helping me to take it off, and then I unclip her bra. It takes me a few moments. I laugh gruffly as I fiddle with the strap. “You’re not the only one who’s inexperienced.”

She giggles captivatingly, then reaches around to help me. Savage impulses pulse in me when her big, juicy breasts spill free. I can see her lust in her voluptuous tits, the veins moving through her creamy skin. I push her tits together, sucking her nipples greedily, tasting her desire. She runs her hands

through my hair, moaning, driving me on.

I slide my hand down her body and undo her zipper and button. With a growl, I kiss down her body, over her belly. I'm so on the goddamn edge. I grab her jeans and underwear, pulling them down her body and revealing her thick thighs. Finally, I pull them completely off and toss them to the floor. Then I stand so I can get a better look at her.

She looks up at me, her tits wet from my mouth, her slit wet from her desire. When she leans up on her elbows, her breasts jiggle gorgeously for me. A voice whispers in my head, telling me I'm a bad man. Telling me I should think of my son. Telling me I'm making a mistake.

"Is something wrong?" she asks.

"No," I growl. "I just need to look at my perfect virgin when you're naked."

"What about you?" she whispers.

I smirk. "Don't get shy with me now."

"Okay." She sits up even more. When her breasts bounce like that, I almost erupt in my pants. "Let me see *you* naked."

"I'll make you a deal," I tell her. "Play with that wet pussy. Rub your needy clit. Then I'll do it."

Fuck. My tip is leaking so much. It's a hot, intense feeling, precome burning from my body as I watch her hand smooth over her heat. Her folds are so perfectly thick, swollen with her lust. Her hand smears juices all over her sex.

I undress, pulling my shirt over my head and roughly yanking my jeans down. She gasps when my cock springs up from my waistband.

"What about you?" she moans, nodding to my manhood.

I reach down and start stroking, rewarded with a widening of her eyes that drives me even more feral. I stroke faster, staring at her slit, but then I have to let go. There's no way I'm wasting my seed by erupting pointlessly. It belongs in her body.

Climbing onto the bed again, we kiss passionately while I reach down and

grab my cock, guiding it to her entrance. I slip up and rub against her clit, rewarded with more sweet moaning and trembling.

I can feel the tension moving through her, threatening to draw her into herself again and ruin the magic of the moment. Not for me. Nothing could be ruined when I'm with my woman, naked and willing, as hungry for this as I am. I know she wants this. I can sense it. It radiates from her like a maternal scent, as if she's dreaming of the future right now.

"Fletcher," she whispers. She doesn't have to say anything else. I know exactly what she's hinting at.

I kiss her cheek gently, lowering my voice. "This is for the future. This is for *life*. You don't have to be shy. You don't have to worry. We're going to be together forever. Relax into it, my perfect painter."

Rubbing my hand faster against her clit, I lean back, holding myself one-handed to get a look at her. Her eyes flit open and closed as I rub with fierceness and a greater sense of possession. Dimly, distantly, I hear my son, but I won't let my mind go there. The guilt can consume me later.

Her sexy body trembles when I rub faster, harder, with more heat and desire. She bites down, squeezing her fingernails against my shoulders. She's digging so hard it's a miracle I don't bleed. Even if I did, I wouldn't stop. Her pleasure is the only thing I care about right now.

Finally, she lets out a gasp that tells me she's creaming. My tip leaks hot precome as I grind myself against her, moving fast. She bucks her hips, the entire mattress trembling as she shifts up and down, moaning intensely. When I feel her orgasm ending, I slide my cock lower to her entrance.

Her eyes snap open. She bites her lip. She stares at me as if part of her is afraid. I read the message in my woman's expression. She's not worried about the physical pain. She doesn't want to let me down again, or herself, or our future.

"It's okay," I tell her as softly as possible, taming the beast inside me. "We need this—both of us. Don't think, Samantha. Just..."

I slip my dick into her just an inch. She gasps as I push a little deeper, feeling her walls spreading around my tip. She's soaked from her orgasm. I arch my

back, pushing my hips forward, spreading her horny young no-longer-a-virgin slit.

“Oh, oh fuck,” she moans. My world is pure heat, pure pleasure. Her hole squeezes my end so tightly. Intense fire sensations flicker up and down my shaft. “Y-y-yes...”

“You can take more,” I growl. It’s not a question. “You can take every fucking inch.”

I look down between our bodies, letting me watch as my dick slides deeper and deeper inside her. It’s a beautiful sight—my dick disappearing into her tight slit. Leaning forward, I bring my lips to hers. She tries to kiss me back, but she’s too lost in the moment, our teeth clashing again.

Instead, I lean up slightly again, letting me see her jiggling, perfect tits as I grind deeper into her. Deeper, deeper, owning her, claiming her, claiming the future with every single inch.

I groan when I feel her walls tightening around my base. I’m completely inside my woman, her hole quivering around my dick. Leaning down, I kiss her neck and bite softly. “We’re so fucking close,” I growl. “As close as two people can get, and I’m the *only* one you do this with. Ever. Nobody else gets to fuck your perfect pussy. Only me.”

“Only...” She shivers, whimpering so damn hotly. “You...”

I slide out slowly, savoring every inch of her body, every burning moment. When I’m almost out, she smiles at me, her eyes glistening. She nods, her smile widening even more.

“Again,” she whispers.

I smirk, teasing her entrance with the tip of my cock. “Excuse me?”

She grins and laughs. The noise is as much relief as pleasure. “Keep going, Fletcher. Please.”

With a moan, I push into her, quicker this time. The impact causes a reverberation to move through her body, her thickness shivering for me, every curvy inch dancing with my thrust. She moans as I slide out and slide

in. Her pussy is *mine*. I can feel the animal inside trying to make me go harder, *too* hard, but I hold back. I listen to my woman's body, her pleasure.

"Oh, fuck," I groan when she brings her hands to her breasts, pushing them together.

"Like that?" she moans.

"Y-yeah." I can barely talk. "Oh *fuck*."

I slip into her soaked slit faster, the mattress whining beneath us, her walls pulsing around my dick. It's like she's on the verge of another orgasm already. My cock is full of tension as if my seed is getting ready to erupt at any moment. My head is a haze, capable of thinking of my woman, just my woman, nothing and nobody else.

She starts to grind up and down in time with my thrusts. Oh, hell yeah. My woman's getting into it. There's no discomfort now, I can tell. Just the heat. Just *us*. She bounces up and down in time, with me thrusting inside her, pushing all the way in, her slit tightening around my dick.

"F-f-*fuck*," she yells, letting her tits go, clawing onto the bed sheets instead as she lets go. "Oh my... Oh..."

I look down between our bodies as I hammer her pussy. I'm almost letting go, almost losing control completely. It's the sight of her thick, sexy cream squirting down my dick, a globule of white lust that shows how eagerly she's letting go. There was never a reason to be nervous to begin with.

Her moans get breathy as if she can't summon enough air to produce the noise anymore. She keeps creaming down my dick. As I thrust up, her release spreads over her clit and lips, making her even slicker.

She blinks up at me, a dazed look on her face as the orgasm passes. "Oh, Fletcher," she moans as I slow down, slipping in and out, in and out.

Then I can't take it anymore. The beast in me howls. I slide out of her.

"On all fours," I growl. "I need to see your perfect ass. Make sure to look over your shoulder at me. I need your beautiful eyes, too."

She bites her lip. For a second, I think she's going to say no. In that case, I'll

fuck her even harder like this, making those voluptuous breasts bounce for me. Then she rolls over and climbs to her hands and knees.

My dick aches. Seed tries to explode out of the tip. Her round ass is so damn captivating, big and curvy, made for my dick. I hook my hands beneath her hips, guide her toward me, then grab my cock and bring my tip to her soaked hole.

“Oh, oh, oh,” she murmurs as I slowly push inside her.

Seeing my rock-hard dick slipping between her ass cheeks into her fertile hole almost finishes me. I slip my hands from her hips to her ass, massaging her as I grind all the way in. She gasps, looking over her shoulder like I told her, wide-eyed as I begin to fuck her like this.

“Oh my God,” I growl when she pushes back against me.

“Like that?” she moans.

I can’t talk—only nod.

“I’m a qu-quick learner, huh?” she says, with a cute, captivating smile.

I nod again, sliding into her faster. Our body makes smacking noises, wet and adding to the pleasure. Her ass ripples and bounces against my abs. Finally, I let out the beast. I can’t talk or even think. I can only focus on her wide, pleasure-filled eyes and jiggling, beautiful ass.

I hammer her *hard*. I pound into her young pussy. I fuck her deep and relentlessly, the seed pushing more urgency against my cock. Then my tip is burning, scorching like there’s a dam just about holding back the release.

With a roar, I collapse against her. She falls onto the bed, lying on her front as I hammer her hard. She reaches back, clawing against me as the seed bursts from my dick—wave after wave. Nothing else exists. Just my woman. Oh my... Oh *fuck*.

It feels like it lasts for a long time, and then I fall onto the bed beside her, turning onto my side to look into her eyes. She turns onto her side, too, smiling at me, looking so relieved and cute I have to lean over and kiss her on the lips.

“You’re a wild man,” she whispers between kisses.

I smirk, feeling more carefree than I have in years, or ever, really. Deep down, I imagine James staring at me, judgment and resentment in his eyes. Then, I focus on my woman. The guilt can come later.

“You *make* me a wild man,” I tell her, trailing my hand up her body. Lying on her side like this highlights her shapeliness so much. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Forever?” she asks, reaching over and touching my cheek.

“Forever,” I say fiercely. “I meant what I said. The first time I saw you...”

I trail off when I see the panic in her eyes. I’m about to ask what’s wrong, but I don’t need to. She’s thinking the same thing I am. How can this ever work when James feels the same as me?

“What are we going to do?” she asks a moment later.

“Tell him the truth,” I say. “Be upfront. Be honest. Hope he understands.”

“And if he doesn’t?” she asks.

Part of being a good operator is having multiple avenues for accomplishing the mission and, most importantly, improvising when the job calls for it. As I lie here with the only woman I’ll ever want or need, I can’t think of any other options. I can’t imagine any different outcome.

“I don’t know,” I admit.

“He might make you choose.”

I sigh darkly. “That wouldn’t be good.”

“You can’t choose a woman you barely know over your own son.”

I lean forward and kiss her tenderly on the cheek. “You’re not just any woman, Samantha. I don’t feel like I barely know you. Maybe we can’t list a bunch of surface-level facts about each other, but I know you’re going to give me children one day. I know you’re going to be my wife. I know...” *I love you*, I almost say, but the phantom of my son holds me back. “You’re mine.”



“So you’re saying you’d be with me even if it meant never seeing your son again? I don’t know if I could ask you to do that.”

I sigh, roll onto my back, and pull her into my arms. Stroking my hand gently through her hair, I say, “Let’s not think about any of this right now. I know it’s selfish, but I want to be here just with you, only you.”

“Me too,” she murmurs, hugging closer to me.

A minute later, I hear scratching at the door. With a chuckle, I say, “Well, maybe we can make room for one more.”

My woman laughs as I stand, pulling on my briefs. Walking across the room, I open the door. Loki runs in, tail wagging so much his whole body is shifting from side to side.

“Somebody’s starved for attention,” Samantha says with a smile, putting on her underwear.

Loki runs right past me and leaps on the bed, snatching Samantha’s bra out of her hand before she can put it on. We laugh when he leaps down from the bed, running around with it, shaking it from side to side.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

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**S**amantha

“Thanks for waiting with me,” I tell Lexi, wrapping my hands around the cup of hot cocoa. We’re at a café a short drive from Fletcher’s house. It’s the day after we had sex—the day after I experienced the most intense pleasure of my life, both physical and emotional. Now Fletcher’s going to tell James just how much I mean to him and wait for the fallout.

“It’s okay,” Lexi says quietly, seeming more withdrawn than usual as she stares into her coffee mug. “He said he’d call if he wanted you at the house, too?”

I nod. “Yeah. If James wants to speak to me about it, but I’m not sure what he’d say. Last night feels like a dream. It was so perfect. It was like we could pretend nothing else existed, but now...”

“It’s going to work out,” Lexi says, her voice confident, even if her demeanor seems beaten down.

“Are *you* okay?” I ask. “I know it’s been a bit *me, me, me* lately.”

Lexi laughs, but it sounds so fake. Finally, she looks up at me, only to turn back to her coffee immediately. It’s as if she finds staring into the coffee mug easier.

“Lexi?” I ask when she doesn’t say anything.

She swallows and looks up at me again. She doesn’t immediately turn away this time, but I can tell it’s a big effort for her. “I did something bad,” she says. “I should’ve told you back when this started.”

“Okay…” I wait for her to go on. When she doesn’t, I reach across the table and touch her hand. “Whatever it is, I’m sure it’s not that bad. We can get through it together.”

“I don’t know.” She pulls her hand away. “You might hate me.”

“Oh, come on. I could never hate you.”

“Seriously.” Lexi’s tone gets cold, sending a chill through me. “You don’t know that.”

I fold my hands. “Okay, then lay it on me.”

“I don’t know if I can.”

“Well, you can’t bring it into the conversation and then clam up. *That’s* definitely not fair.”

“You’re right,” she sighs, leaning back as though afraid of my reaction, as if she thinks I’ll turn feral and leap at her. Feral like my man, panting, moaning, rushing toward a shared end. I need to stop. I need to focus. “Okay, fine. You know how I set you and James up?”

“How could I forget?”

“That wasn’t fair of me,” she said. “It was, well, sort of petty on my part. See, James and I dated a while back.”

“You *did*?”

She nods. “Just for a couple of months. It was before college and before we met, but lately, we’ve been flirting in the gym. Both of us are so stubborn. Neither of us wanted to make the first move. I could tell he liked me, and he could tell I liked him.”

“Wait.” I feel like I’m blinking about a million times in a second. Okay, I’m exaggerating, but this is slamming into me like a freight train. “You *like*

James?”

She nods, flashing a guilty look at me. “He doesn’t normally act as douchey as he was on the date. Honestly, I think he did that *because* I set you up. I think he was trying to prove a point by being cruel to you. It’s my fault. I never should’ve done it.”

“Then why *did* you?” I ask, confused.

“We were talking at the gym one day,” she replies. “We do this thing where we sort of flirt, but we’re also kind of mean to each other. Do you and Fletcher do that?”

“Not really,” I say quietly, “but I know different people have different dynamics in their relationships.”

I never thought I’d use the word *relationship* in reference to myself, yet it feels so right. A relationship is exactly what Fletcher and I have, as unlikely and impossible as it would’ve seemed when all this started.

“We were doing our usual routine. I got angry and told him that if he didn’t care about me, I’d happily set him up with one of my friends. He called my bluff, and that’s where the setup came in. I used you like a checkerboard piece. I’m a terrible friend.”

I sit back, trying to process what she’s just told me. “So it wasn’t about you wanting me to get out into the dating world? You just didn’t want to lose face in front of James?”

She sighs and nods. She won’t look at me. She stares down at her coffee as if wishing to disappear into it. After a pause, she looks up with a visible effort. “Yeah. That’s it. I’ve wanted to tell you so many times, but things started getting complicated with... No, that’s crap. I *could* have told you. I *should* have.”

“So all that stuff he’s saying... about loving and wanting me...”

“I don’t understand any of that,” Lexi says.

“Really?” I snap. “Surely, you can see. He’s doing it to get back at you. He wanted you to find out he’d sent me flowers. You were there when he sent

that barbershop quartet. He wanted *you* to see. God, how petty. How pathetic!”

I’m grinning like a madwoman.

“Uh, aren’t you mad?” Lexi asks.

“Yes,” I say, with that same grin on my face. “But don’t you get it, Lexi? This means he doesn’t want me. He’s never wanted me. It’s all been about you.”

She bites down. “I don’t know, though. He’s taken it so far. Me and James, we have our back-and-forths. We play our games, but this is way further than he’s ever taken it.”

“So you think he really did fall for me, a love-at-first-sight deal?” I ask doubtfully.

“I don’t know,” she replies. “I mean, probably not?” She turns it into a question. “But I can’t imagine him taking it this far just to get at me.”

I reach into my pocket, willing my cell phone to start vibrating. I need to know what James has said to his dad, my man, the future father of my children. Anger and relief clash inside of me, a curious and uncomfortable mixture.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” I tell Lexi.

“I know,” she says quietly. “I’ll understand if you don’t want to be my friend anymore.”

“Our friendship means that little, does it?”

“No,” she says fiercely, “but what I did was shitty. It was beyond shitty. So I’d *get* it, but I’d hate it. If you give me a second chance, I swear, Sam, I’ll never do anything like that again. I’ll be the best friend you deserve. I promise. It’s just James messes with my head sometimes. Honestly, I think we’re a bit of a toxic pair. I don’t think we’d work. I’m so sorry you got caught in the crossfire.”

I think back to that date, how rude he was, how completely uninterested in me. It makes much more sense knowing he was thinking of Lexi the entire

time, wishing she were there instead of me.

“You shouldn’t have done it,” I sigh, “but I understand why you didn’t want to lose face. I get that part initially, but lying to me and keeping it to yourself, especially after the barbershop quartet. You saw how embarrassed I was.”

“I know,” Lexi groans, putting her face in her hands. “I wanted to tell you. I knew I should have. I knew it was the right thing to do, but it was like there was this block inside of me. This... this wall, sort of, stopping me from doing the right thing. Do you know what I mean?”

I laugh humorlessly, thinking back to the date or all the moments with Fletcher when I’ve wanted to say something but felt unable to. My man is helping me break down those walls, but it’s not easy. “Yeah, better than you probably think, but—”

*It was still wrong*, I’m about to say, but then my cell phone starts vibrating. I take it out of my pocket and answer. “Yeah?”

“It’s me,” Fletcher says. “Could you swing by? I want you to hear this in person. It’s going to be a shock, my perfect painter.”

I wonder if James is in the room with him and heard him call me his perfect painter. “Is it about James and Lexi?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Fletcher replies, sounding confused. “How did you know?”

“Lexi just told me,” I say.

“Ah, I see,” Fletcher sighs. “You should come by anyway. There’s something else James needs to tell you.”

This doesn’t sound good. “Okay, I’ll be there soon.”

When I stand up, Lexi does the same. She moves much more nervously, her chair screeching against the floor.

“I have to go,” I tell her.

She frowns. “Are we...”

“I don’t know,” I say honestly. “We’ll talk about it later.”

---

Fletcher opens the door, Loki at his feet, panting and grinning at me. I still haven't asked if there will be any fallout from what happened in the woods. I've heard no sirens nor seen any police officers, so that must be a good sign.

Fletcher is wearing a shirt with rolled-up sleeves and an undone top button. His hair is messy, as though he's been running his hand through it repeatedly. When he steps forward and lightly kisses me on the cheek, I feel a flair of hope deep within. He wouldn't do that if it were all going to come crashing down, would he?

Inside, I lean down and stroke Loki on his head. Fletcher lowers his voice, presumably so James doesn't hear in the next room. "Just so you know, I've gotten word from Charles. He has some contacts with the police. They're rehoming the dogs, and the men involved are going to jail. They were all wanted for something. The gang is pissed, but not at us. They're pissed at the guards for letting it happen."

"So it's over?" I whisper.

He takes my hand, squeezes it, and nods.

*That* problem is over, at least, but the other problem is waiting for us in the next room. I follow Fletcher into the living room, finding James sitting on the armchair, his head in his hands. He looks up as we enter.

"Hello, Samantha," he says in a small voice.

"Uh, hey," I reply, almost like I'm speaking to somebody else, not the James I met on that first date. He seems far more withdrawn.

Fletcher sits on the couch. Loki immediately jumps up into his lap. I sit beside him, keeping some distance between us, just in case. Heck, just in case James still *loves* me? What a joke.

James' gaze lingers on me for a while. Finally, he says, "I wanted to... I have to... No, you *deserve*... I'm sorry. I shouldn't have been so rude to you on that date. After, I shouldn't have sent you those flowers or that stupid singing stunt. It's just—"

“I know,” I say. “Lexi literally just told me. I was a checkers piece in a game between you two.”

He shakes his head. “That’s only part of it. There’s more.”

Fletcher gives me a *you-better-listen* look. I bite my lip, then let it go—that freaking annoying habit. Fletcher smirks. I grin right back. It takes less than a second. I wonder if that’s what marriage is like: secret looks, wordless communication.

“James?” I say when he stares at the floor.

“I heard my dad on the phone with you,” James says. “He *knew* I’d gone on a date with you, but he pursued you anyway. That’s when I came up with the whole love-at-first-sight thing. I wanted to see who he’d choose. I wanted to see if he’d put *his* feelings aside for *me*.”

Fletcher audibly swallows. I glance across the couch to see tightness at the corners of his mouth and eyes. The guilt emanates from him, almost like I can see it.

“It was a test,” I murmur.

“Yeah, sort of.” James shakes his head, picking at the arm of the chair with his fingernails. “It was immature as hell, honestly. I just... I wanted to see who he’d pick. You have to understand that when I did this, I didn’t think Dad *really* cared about you, Samantha. I just thought it was a fling or a pickup or... You know, I wasn’t sure. Dad doesn’t date, not since Mom.”

Emotion enters James’ voice. I’ll never mention what Fletcher told me about only being with Margot because she got pregnant after a one-night stand. It’s not my place, and the last thing I want to do is cause him unnecessary pain.

“Then Dad told me the truth.” James looks at me with tears in his eyes. “He told me how much you mean to him. He said you’re going to be together forever. You want *kids* together. Is it true?”

He asks the question with a sense of desperation. It’s like he’s praying for it *not* to be true. Maybe because, if it is, the trick he played will be that much worse. Or perhaps it’s simple disbelief.



“It’s true,” I tell him. “Actually, it’s kind of funny. Well, it’s not funny, but remember that speech you gave me? That’s how I feel about Fletcher and how he feels about me.”

“Yeah,” James said. “That’s not a coincidence. It’s because I found the note Dad wrote for you. I basically copied it.”

“But if you found the note...”

“I thought it was a *line*,” James said, and it’s not like I can blame him for that. I thought the same thing. “I thought it was some cheesy older-man pickup line. Dad’s been out of the game for so long, and I thought it was the best he could come up with. I didn’t think it was real.”

“But you stole it anyway.”

“Because I’m fucked in the head,” James says. “I wanted payback. So I took his line. I tried it myself.”

“So you really never wanted me?” I say, trying to keep the hope out of my voice.

“No offense,” James says, “but you’re not really my type.”

I can’t help but smile. I feel my lips spreading wide across my face, probably too wide. There’s probably too much shameless glee radiating from me. “No offense taken,” I say. “Seriously.”

“I’m sorry,” James says, “for being such a dick on the date, embarrassing you at your school, and for all of it. I swear, I didn’t know how much you meant to Dad or how much Dad meant to you. I wouldn’t have gotten in the way if I had.”

“I forgive you, son,” Fletcher says. “I just hope you can forgive me.”

“What?” James snaps. “Forgive *you*? Why would I need to forgive you, Dad?”

“Come on...” Fletcher reaches over and places his hand on James’ arm. All the while, I’m trying not to punch the air, trying not to cheer or let out a lot of inappropriate happiness. “I didn’t know any of this was a trick. I thought you actually cared about Samantha, and I pursued her anyway. Let’s face it. You

would never have done this if I wasn't such a cold bastard, but I promise, James. I'm going to be better. Samantha has helped me with that. I'm going to be less of a robot."

James places his hand on top of Fletcher's. "Thanks, Dad, and you don't have to wonder if I'll forgive you. I already have." He looks up at me with a smile. "It's okay, Samantha. You don't have to hold it back."

"Hold what back?"

James chuckles. "You look like you want to cheer. Seriously, I don't mind."

"It's just..." My smile keeps widening. I feel like I'm floating. "I seriously thought we wouldn't have a chance at all. I thought it could be the end. Knowing it's just the beginning is a special thing."

"I've never seen Dad this happy," James says, grinning. "Honestly, I didn't know the grim old man *could* smile."

"Careful," Fletcher says. "My girl doesn't like it when people call me old. Isn't that right?"

I laugh. James is right. I could cheer any second. Punch the air. Scream at the top of my lungs, *We made it. We're going to make it work. We're going to do this.* "You have to call him *mature* or *experienced*," I say.

"Oh, is that the new rule, Dad?" James replies.

"Don't ask me," Fletcher says. "She's the boss."

We all laugh together. Even Loki gets in on the action, jumping to the floor and running in crazy circles, standing on his hind legs and letting out yaps of joy. After a moment, Fletcher reaches over and takes my hand.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

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**F**letcher

“Thank you, Annabelle,” I say, offering my hand to Samantha’s mother.

She takes my hand and shakes it gently. She feels so frail and vulnerable, but it doesn’t matter. Now, she’s got me to look out for her. She will be my mother-in-law soon, as crazy as people might find that. At least she’s almost twenty years older than me, making it less awkward.

“If you mean everything you’ve said,” she tells me, holding my hand with sudden tightness, not so frail when she’s in mother-bear mode, “you’ll make my daughter happier than anybody else ever could.”

“I meant every word,” I say fiercely. “I love your daughter. I’m going to protect her, provide for her. I’m going to be the husband she deserves.”

Annabelle smiles. After I leave the house, there’s a spring in my step.

It’s been four days since James revealed the truth. Things were slightly awkward between us at first. I kept expecting him to resent me for pursuing my girl even when I thought he loved her, and he kept expecting me to resent the lie. We both realize it’s just better to put it behind us.

My woman said it best last night. *“It’s like with me and Lexi. I could be mad if I wanted. I could hold a grudge, but what’s the point? We’ve won,*

*Fletcher. We've got what so many dream of but will never have. We have a relationship worth fighting for. We have each other. We have a future so bright I almost cry just thinking about it."*

This was after we'd made love. Sometimes, my woman and I will fuck, screw, turn feral. Other times, we'll take it slower. Last night, Samantha was on top, gently rocking back and forth as I slid my hands over her back, sitting up so we could gaze into each other's eyes as we lost ourselves in the pleasure.

Getting into the driver's seat of my car, I've got a big grin on my face. I've been nervous ever since I decided to speak to Annabelle and ask her for her blessing. It was the final hurdle, and I knew Annabelle might say no.

I'm older. We're rushing into things. Samantha is too young and naïve to make this decision. These are all the reasons she could've given for us not working. It would've been easy and maybe justified for her to put up those walls to defend her daughter. Yet when she looked at me, she must've seen how sincere I was.

*"Bad date,"* Samantha said last night, trailing her fingers down my chest and stomach toward my manhood. *"Good dad. It's funny how life works out, isn't it?"*

I'm about to start the car when my cell rings. It's Charles Malone.

"Howdy," he says.

"Hi, Charles," I reply. "It's good to hear from you."

"I thought you'd want to know. The man you tickled..." He means shot, but he doesn't want to say it over the phone. "He's turned on his buddies. Apparently, he got so terrified in those woods that he wants nothing to do with the gang ever again. The cops have found three more dog storage sites."

"Good," I say fiercely, even if part of me still wishes I'd hit him between the eyes with a fatal shot. It's the itch that will never go away, the call to battle, to war, anything to protect my woman. "I'm glad some good came out of this. How's the new ride treating you?"

"It's smooth as a dream, but I think you went a bit overboard. This car's

worth at least three, hell, four times more than my last one.”

“You earned it,” I tell him.

Without Charles, the gunman would’ve aimed for my woman first. Maybe she wouldn’t have run from the car when the panic set in. They told me what happened. He was the one who yelled at her to get moving.

“Good day ahead of you?” Charles asks.

“Yeah, I hope so,” I reply. “I’m going to propose to Samantha.”

“That’s excellent news,” Charles says.

“You don’t think...” I trail off. Charles and I are on friendly terms and going through something so intense bonds people, but it’s not like we’re friends.

“What is it, Fletcher?” he asks.

“It’s just... you said before she reminds you of your daughter. You and I are about the same age.”

“So what?” Charles snaps. “I see the way Samantha looks at you. I see the love there. Hell, if my daughter were still here and had a man like you, I’d give you my blessing. I mean that.”

I swallow, feeling touched. “Thank you, Charles. Really.”



“Why are we *here*?” my woman says from the passenger seat, looking across from my car to the restaurant where she and James had their first date.

I take her hand, looking down at her. She’s wearing her school clothes since I didn’t want to give her any warning about the proposal. Goddamn, my heart is almost beating out of my chest, with more fierceness than it did even in the woods when the bullets were flying.

Holding her hand tighter, I smile. Across the street, a car backfires, and it’s a miracle. I laugh. I didn’t flinch. I didn’t freak. With Samantha sleeping in my bed since James told us the truth, my sleep has been much more peaceful.

“It’s where it all started,” I tell her. “Our crazy, crazy relationship.”

She smiles, a few strands of loose brown hair framing her angelic face. She’s got that playful light in her eyes that pushes me close to the edge every time, making me want to turn savage. “I still love it when you call it a *relationship*.”

*How about a marriage?* I almost ask, but that would mean giving the game away.

“Come on.” I squeeze her hand. “Before I lose my nerve.”

“*You?* Lose your nerve? I don’t believe it.”

She would if she could feel these sensations buzzing around my body. Leaving the car, I hold her hand, leading her to the restaurant. When I take out a key and unlock the door, she says, “It’s closed? You have a key?”

“Nothing slips past you,” I say jokingly.

She nudges me playfully. “You can’t blame me for being surpr...”

Her voice trails off with an awed quality when she walks into the restaurant. Her mouth is wide open as she stares around at the rose-petal-covered floor, at her paintings on the walls, some reprinted on canvases, others in gold and silver frames.

Walking up behind her, I wrap my arms around her body, feeling her warmth, her curviness. When my manhood begins to stiffen, I remind myself that this is about love, not lust, at least for now.

“Look how talented you are,” I whisper, leaning down to kiss her on the cheek. “My perfect painter. My perfect girlfriend, and hopefully, my perfect wife.”

I take a step back, reaching into my pocket. She turns with glistening eyes, tears threatening to slide down her cheeks.

“I love you,” I tell her, and she gasps with surprise. I smile. “I’ve been waiting until today to say it. I wanted the first time to be special.”

“I love you too,” she says, “and it *is* special.”

Taking the ring box from my pocket, I feel my eyes stinging. It's like all the coldness is finally catching up to me. The realization slams into me. I don't have to be cold anymore. I don't have to fight my emotions ever again, not with my woman.

"Samantha Fitzgerald," I say, kneeling down and opening the ring box. The diamond is as full and bright as she is. "I love you so, so much. We've been through hell together. Now it's time for our heaven. Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she yells, as the tears start to fall. "Oh my... yes, Fletcher. Yes!"

I slide the ring onto her finger, smiling brightly and filled with love.

# EPILOGUE



ONE MONTH LATER

## Samantha

“I’m so proud of you, Samantha,” Professor Haywood says, smiling as she gestures around the college’s function room. My project was the highest rated in the class. Professor Haywood didn’t tell any of us beforehand, but she’d planned to host a gallery-style viewing for the top-performing student.

“Thank you,” I say, with those nerves still trying to cling to me. “I almost didn’t come tonight.”

Professor Haywood gasps. “What? Really?”

I look around the room full of people, my paintings on display. There are students, professors, friends, family. Mom and Lexi walk around arm-in-arm, with James at their side. Lexi says she and James are just friends, but I see how they look at each other.

“Yeah,” I say, nodding. “I know it seems silly since I’m an artist or want to be one—”

“You *are* an artist,” Professor Haywood says. “Never doubt that.”

“I hate being put on display,” I go on, leaving out the fact that, for my man, I absolutely *love* being put on display. “Fletcher talked me into coming.”

Whenever I mention my engagement to Fletcher, I expect a response similar

to how Mom initially talked about it. Even if they don't say anything, I look for signs—a tightening of the mouth or a flash of judgment. However, Professor Haywood, like most people, seems happy for me.

“You two are adorable together,” she says, “and if he got you here, he’s a winner in my book.”

Charles walks by, leaning on his walking cane. The doctor says he won't need it for much longer, but there's currently undue stress on his right side. He grins at me, tipping an imaginary hat.

I turn when I sense Fletcher behind me. I know how crazy that sounds, but I really *do* sense him. He's dressed stylishly in his shirt and jacket and sharp trousers. He's even wearing a tie, making me want to tug on it and bring his lips to mine.

“Excuse me, Professor,” I say.

She grins. “I couldn't keep you here if I tried.”

I walk across the function room and touch my fiancé's hand. He turns, smiles, leans down, and gently kisses me on the forehead. “This is amazing—all of it. I've never seen anything like this before. The angles. The interpretations...”

“You sound like an art critic,” I tell him with a smile. “Follow me, okay? I've got a special piece just for you.”

“Here?” he asks. “I mean, I'm not complaining, but you should enjoy your big moment.”

“I'm not talking about *that*, you savage. It'll only take a couple of minutes.”

I lead him into the small room at the back, where I've set up the painting with lantern light shining on it. It shows me lying in a hospital bed, the sun beaming through the window, a handsome silver-haired man sitting at my side. There's a baby in my arms.

“What's this?” he whispers, stepping forward, staring almost awed at the piece.

“The future,” I whisper. “I did a test—”

He turns to me suddenly. "Say it." He gasps. "Hell, my perfect painter. I need to hear it."

I step forward, wrap my arms around his shoulders, and stare lovingly into his eyes. "I'm pregnant."

He cheers, sweeping me into his arms. When we kiss, I can feel tears sliding down his face.

# EPILOGUE

TEN MONTHS LATER

## Fletcher

I stand at the bedroom door, watching my wife holding our baby, Max, named after Samantha's father. Both of them are falling asleep. My height lets me look over her shoulder at my son, his eyes falling closed. Since it's so dark out and light in here, I can see my woman in the window's reflection, her eyes doing the same.

Walking slowly into the room, I pull up a chair next to them, moving as quietly as a big man like me can. Luckily, because of my old job, this isn't as hard as it could be. Samantha looks over at me with a sleepy smile on her face.

She's become more beautiful every day since the pregnancy, glowing and curvier. Now, in the first weeks of motherhood, she's like an angel with messy hair, bags under her eyes, and comfortable clothes. She doesn't believe I find her so gorgeous and sexy, but I do. She radiates motherhood.

When she yawns, I lean over and gently kiss her on the cheek. Then I whisper in her ear, "Get some rest. I'll wait for the little man to fall asleep."

"Are you sure?" she asks.

I kiss her again. "Of course I am."

She carefully hands him to me. My heart melts again when I pull him into my arms, rocking him gently. He opens his eyes, sees it's me, and then closes them peacefully. I already feel a burning connection with him, just like I did with James. However, I will be here every step of the way this time.

# EPILOGUE

NINE YEARS LATER

**J**ames

“James, James,” Max says from the back seat, a big grin on his face as I glance at him in the rearview. “Is it true Lexi beat you up?”

Lexi sneaks a smile at me from the passenger seat. She’s let her hair return to its natural blond in recent years. My wife is beautiful no matter what color her hair is.

“It’s true,” I admit, “but how did *you* find out about that, huh? Hmm, Rachael?”

Our daughter giggles, covering her mouth with her hand. She’s seven years old and full of mischief. They’ve both just been to kickboxing practice, and now we’re taking Jack back to Dad’s place. It’s pretty convenient since we live in the same neighborhood.

“It was sparring,” Lexi says. “Anyway, your father let me win.”

“No, no, no,” I reply, laughing. “I won’t hear that. Your mother’s ferocious, Rachael.”

“Fe-ro-shus,” Rachael says. “That’s a hard word.”

As Lexi spells it out for her—Rachael is endlessly fascinated with words—I drive, smiling. When I tell people how this all started—me and Lexi, Dad and



Samantha—they sometimes look at me like I’m crazy. They can’t believe it could ever work, but it does. It has. Every day, it gets better.

Lexi and I own our gym together. Lexi has painted the outside in a graffiti style, giving it a unique look that draws in endless numbers of new customers. Dad has expanded *his* gym business to multiple locations, and Samantha works from home, selling her art online and taking care of my four nieces and nephews.

As I drive up Dad’s street, my smile gets even wider.

“Wrestling!” Max cheers, leaning forward to press his face against the window.

The sun blazes down, lighting up the scene. Dad’s got his shirt off, still ripped at fifty-two. He’s got a big silver beard now, his hair longer than it used to be. Jimmy and Sara run right at him. He laughs and scoops them up, spinning them in circles. Samantha watches from the porch, gently rocking their baby, a smile on her face.

It’s taken time and healing. It’s taken humility and owning up to past mistakes. What started as a bad date and a lot of guilt has ended with a life worth fighting for. Lexi must sense my mood. She reaches over and touches my hand. I turn. We share the kind of silent, intimate moment I didn’t know existed before we married. This is the life.

THE END

Want more? Check out my latest release *Revenge With My Ex's Dad* [here](#), or subscribe to my newsletter [here](#) to get a free, new, original story and stay up to date.

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- [5\) Revenge With My Ex's Dad](#)
- [6\) Crushing on The Billionaire](#)
- [7\) Kidnapped by My Dad's Best Friend](#)
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RIDING MY BROTHER'S BEST FRIEND

## CHAPTER ONE

### Kayla

“You *knew* he was sick?”

My voice is torn with agony and disbelief.

Ryan stands at the window of our kitchen. It’s the same one Mom used to bake apple pies in, the room smelling so homely. It’s the same place we’ve had countless family scenes and so much happiness. We never worried that Mom would die in a bus crash and Dad, a few years later, would get an incurable illness—the big C. I hate even thinking of its name.

Since I was sixteen, it’s just been me and Ryan, and now he won’t look at me, gazing out over the dusty hill that leads to our small corner of California. He’s wearing his Titan’s MC jacket, the motorcycle club my dad started.

Ryan glances at me, his mop of black hair falling over his eyes. I’m nineteen. He’s thirty-two. He’s always been just as much of a father figure to me as Dad, and that was doubly true when Dad passed.

“Talk to me,” I snap, hurrying across the room.

Ryan sighs and stuffs his hands in his pockets. He’s tall and lean, with sharp cheekbones. He has Mom’s eyes. It always makes me sad when I think about that.

He’s watching the hill as if expecting an army of motorbikes to surge over it

any second. He's been tense lately, maybe because he recently split with his girlfriend, or perhaps it's something else. He won't talk to me.

I grab his arm, spin him roughly, and force him to look at me. "Did you know Dad was sick?"

Dad hid his illness for a year, spending most of his time at the motorcycle club, not telling me and, I thought, Ryan.

"I thought we were *both* in the dark, but you knew?"

He swallows and nods shortly. "I'm sorry. He told me soon after they diagnosed him."

"Did he make you promise not to tell?" I demand.

This could be the saving grace. If Dad, dying, had *begged* Ryan not to tell me, then I can understand. I can forgive him.

"No," Ryan says. "I made that decision myself."

I take a step back, shaking my head.

"It's the anniversary tomorrow." What an upbeat word for what it is the day my dad died. "I'm ready, and you drop this on me *now*?"

Ryan's eyes flit to my duffle bag. We have a tradition of camping on the peak that overlooks our small town. It's where Dad used to take us when we were kids. Just me and Ryan, remembering the good times. This will be our third year. Or it *would've* been if Ryan hadn't thrown this news at me.

"I don't understand why you didn't tell me. We've always told each other *everything*."

"There's no excuse," he says darkly.

"Aren't you going to defend yourself, at least?"

"I don't think I can."

"Jesus, Ryan."

He bows his head and nods, his teeth gritted. "I never wanted to lie to you,

but you must know.”

“You have to give me a reason.”

He folds his arms, turning fully to me now. A thousand versions of him flutter across my memory. My wannabe poet’s mind starts composing some probably terrible lines.

*A titan, staring,*

*But I’m not lost.*

*The ocean glaring*

*And now we sail together.*

*Just us, only us,*

*We can do it.*

*We can do anything.*

God, how dramatic, and now I’m almost crying. I feel so immature as I walk across the room and grab the kitchen towel, roughly pawing at my cheeks. Memories of Dad attack me: bobbing up and down on his knee, his voice as he read bedtime stories to me.

But *that* leads me to the other man who used to read me stories: his husky voice and dark eyes. The calm concealed a world of fire, heat, and potential violence—

Kai. I won’t think about him. He’s been gone for two years. When I was seventeen, he left to work with the European branch of the Titans. I sometimes hear him and Ryan talking on the phone, my entire body tingling at Kai’s voice, but I lock that away. I lock it down deep.

Ryan and Kai have been best friends for as long as I can remember. Hell, when Kai *started* reading stories to me, we were both kids. I was four, and he was seventeen. Mom and Dad loved Kai so much and treated him like family, which helped because he never had one of his own.

“I’m going to stay at the apartment,” I say, not looking at Ryan. I’m not sure if that comes from guilt or rage.

The apartment is the two-bedroom Ryan bought in town a couple of years ago. Sometimes, he'll stay there when handling business, or I'll stay there if I'm spending time with friends or working late at the diner.

I've taken some holiday time, just like last year when working at the diner as a summer job. Now, there's no more high school, just the diner and the wild, weird dreams of being a poet—the most unsustainable and unlikely profession.

"I understand," Ryan says, walking over and wrapping his arms around me. I almost yell at him to take his hands off, but the feeling is too familiar. Falling into his arms, holding him, and letting him hold me. "I love you."

There are more tears in my eyes. "I have to go."

"Kay—"

He's about to say *Kayla*, but I only hear the first part. It's almost like he says *Kai*, and that reminds me of when I was a kid, writing *Kai & Kay* in notebooks, knowing I could never act on these feelings. It would've been a betrayal, just like Ryan betrayed me.

I leave the room and almost run down the hallway. I've got my sneakers on, so I push the door open and walk down the windy, dusty road leading to town. I could've taken the pickup, but the keys are on a hook in the kitchen. Anyway, I want to walk. Maybe the motion will clear my head, though I've never been the biggest fan of exercise.

I walk with my head raised. If I stare at the ground, my thoughts will collapse inward like a sinkhole. I won't be able to do anything except think about all the moments I missed. Ryan supported Dad, caring for him, but I didn't even know anything was wrong.

Only toward the end, when he collapsed, I finally saw past what I expected him to be to what he had become—shrunken, half of the man he was. I hated myself for not noticing sooner. Maybe I still do. How could I miss that?

After five minutes of walking, the town is in sight, lying in a natural dip in the terrain. Everything is tinted yellow. As the midday sun blazes, I hear a bike engine roaring behind me. I turn to find a cloud of dust swirling in the air, so I can only see Ryan's silhouette. He must want to talk about what just

happened, though I don't know if I can, don't know if I've got any more words in me. Maybe some bad poetry. Maybe some lines of pain.

I turn and walk quicker, though obviously, that's a fool's game. It's not like I've got bionic legs. I'm not outrunning him. The bike gets closer, and I clench my fists. The sound of bikes usually brings a smile to my face. It means my brother or his friends, who are all friendly and respectful to me, are here. It means comradery and warmth.

Once, it even meant Kai. *That* didn't make me smile. That rumbling made my insides quiver and my soul hurt. It made me think of a life where this huge, handsome, hot-as-hell man and I could be together.

The bike pulls around in front of me. The driver comes to a clean stop. He handles the bike even better than Ryan, which says a lot. It's not my brother. I bite down, stepping back, wondering if I've got a heatstroke. A light layer of sweat covers my body, so maybe that's what's happening here. Perhaps I'm losing my mind.

Kai steps off the bike. I know it's him even before he takes his helmet off and lays it on the ground. He's the same age as Kai, thirty-two, with dark black hair grown a little wild, swept to the side to keep it out of his eyes. A few specks of silver glisten in the sun, giving him a more mature look than the last time I saw him.

He wears his leather, which outlines his broad shoulders and muscular arms. His face is perfect from every angle. I should know. I studied it a *lot* growing up. His eyes are bright green. Maybe that's it, but the green becomes a raging fire in other lights—ready for violence and prepared to do what has to be done for the club. He's not just Kai's best friend. He's his right-hand man.

If I acted on these feelings, I'd ruin a friendship *and* put the club at risk. It's a good thing he'd never want me.

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