

A WESTERN SPRINGS NOVEL

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing. The man is on the left, and the woman is on the right. They are outdoors, with a soft, golden light in the background, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The woman has long, wavy hair and is wearing a light-colored top. The man is shirtless. The overall mood is intimate and romantic.

BEST
THING

i never had

MERCER
SCOTT

A WESTERN SPRINGS NOVEL

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i never had

A Small Town, Celebrity, Fake Dating Romance

MERCER
SCOTT

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chapter one

selena

There are two things in life women worry about that men will never understand. Showing up somewhere and finding another woman wearing exactly the same outfit as you and not being able to find a bathroom when you need one. The first one usually isn't a problem for me. My personal style incorporates a lot of A-line dresses, bold prints, and no pants except yoga pants. The only muffin tops I'm interested in are the streusel-covered ones I make at my bakery, Ladycakes. But the second fear I live with on a daily basis. It's like knowing the most direct route to the nearest bathroom is my lifeline. When I go on vacation, I pack like I expect to have at least three accidents a day. *At least.*

And now I'm face to face with my fear. Why did I try to squeeze in two extra deliveries today, so I was super late to the last one that had to be delivered today? Why did I go back for the satin scrunchie that I dropped when I was pulling the paper delivery bags off from over my wrist? It was too late to head all the way to this part of town and then get all the way back downtown before heading home. I'm going to be stuck in L.A. rush hour traffic for the rest of my life. I'm never going to get back home in time for *Royally Arranged* with my girlfriends.

And I have to pee.

After dropping off my last delivery of three dozen custom cupcakes for a party tonight, I tried to find a bathroom with no luck.

The cupcakes were pretty cute. White vanilla cupcakes with pink and turquoise swirled vanilla frosting on top, and little guitars that I made of pressed sugar. I couldn't find a one measly bathroom in this gargantuan glass monstrosity of a building. I haven't seen a wall made of anything other than glass except for the elevators. This place reminds me of one of those prisons I learned about in my first-year psychology class at college. The kind where the guards are always watching you. Panopties? Panopticons? I don't remember, but it was definitely something that sounded like a Transformer.

My foot taps against the metal floor as the elevator doors open and close

on nearly every floor, while I fantasize about magically stumbling upon a line-free ladies' room in the lobby. I didn't clock any bathrooms on my way in, but my fingers are crossed.

Half the time, no one even gets in when the elevator doors slide open, making me want to scream. I'm tapping the screen of my phone in the same cadence as my foot is tapping on the floor. This is the elevator ride from hell. It feels like I'm never going to get out of this elevator. I live here now. I should craft myself a bed in the corner out of scarves and takeout napkins. Turn the other side into my living room for, you know, when visitors come over.

When we reach the lobby, everyone gets out except for me—standing at the very back of the elevator in what is soon-to-be my makeshift bedroom because I apparently live here now—and some tall guy at the front with his head down staring at his phone.

The doors shut, and we start descending to the parking levels. The Ladycakes delivery van is parked in an accessible parking spot on P1. I'm risking getting a ticket, but the loading bay out back was full and I couldn't fit the massive van into any of the narrow sets of white lines in the regular spots. After three spectacularly poor attempts and even more judgmental looks from people parking their tiny convertible sports cars and hybrids all the way down on P4, I gave up and drove back up to P1 and parked in an accessible stall. I'm a terrible person. No one needs to convince me.

Even though I do just about everything at Ladycakes, driving the delivery van isn't usually part of my job. I make the desserts. I perfect the recipes. Ladycakes is my business. My baby business. We're only three years old, and just getting on our feet after a few really, really shitty years for the service industry. So, when anything goes wrong, it's my job to take over. And usually that's no problem. Unless it comes to a two-and-a-half-tonne delivery truck. I drive a Prius, and that's the size of car I'm comfortable with. Driving in L.A. traffic is no joke, even in a Prius. But in a massive delivery van, it's a nightmare.

Now, I have to pee *and* face a couple of hours in L.A. Friday night traffic in a beast of a delivery van, *and* I might be about to find a parking ticket that I really can't afford on the dash of the aforementioned van. On top of all of that, I'm going to have to pull over somewhere—and illegally park *again*—just to use a coffeeshop bathroom because I couldn't find one in this dumb building. And I'll probably buy a twelve-dollar iced latte because I'd feel too

guilty using the bathroom if I didn't buy something. Why are the bathrooms so hard to find in this dumb building? Maybe there aren't any? All the walls are glass, and it's probably illegal to have a bathroom with glass walls.

Before we reach P1, the elevator jerks to a stop.

I look around like I'm expecting someone to appear magically in the elevator next to me with some answers. The tall guy looks up from his phone. He moves to the other side of the elevator where the button panel is and starts pressing buttons. Just like a man to hit all the buttons before thinking it through. He's probably going to send us on another tour up and down the building, stopping on every floor before I can get back to my delivery van and find a bathroom. Great. *Just freaking great.*

"Maybe stop hitting random buttons?" My voice sounds shrill. Probably more than just a little bit shrill. I think the intense need to pee is affecting my vocal cords. That can't be a good sign.

"Why didn't I think of that?" The guy mutters, but doesn't turn back to look at me.

"Isn't there a phone or something? In movies, there's always a phone in the elevator."

He doesn't turn to look at me. *Rude.*

"This isn't nineteen-eighty-six. Elevators don't have phones in them."

"And you're an elevator expert?"

"More than you are, apparently."

"Look, I just don't... love small spaces. Is there a button to call for help or something?"

"Yeah."

"Have you pressed it?"

"I never would have thought of that. Thank fucking god you're here, lady."

He jerks his hand at the button panel, and a loud, flat dial tone fills the elevator. Apparently, he *did* need to be told to press the button to call for help. Color me unsurprised that a man had to be told to ask for help, even in what is clearly an emergency.

The dial tone beeps steadily for almost a solid minute before anyone answers. The sound echoes off the close walls around us. I *really* don't like small spaces. Especially when I'm trapped in them.

"Hello?"

"Hi, yeah, we're stuck in an elevator. Is there a button we can push to get

the doors open or something?”

“No, I’m sorry, sir. That would be a safety issue. Please stay calm, and we’ll have a crew *en route* in minutes to get you out.”

The man makes a groaning sound. “How long do you think we’re going to be in here for... just ballpark?”

“I’m sorry, sir. But I’m not able to make any guarantees. Your safety is our highest priority, and technicians will be on site soon to determine the safest way forward.”

“Great. Just fucking great.”

“There is no need for that kind of language, sir!”

“I’m hanging up. Just get us the fuck out of here.”

“Again, there is no need for such language, sir.”

The tall—apparently angry—guy jabs his hand at the button panel again and the phone crackles to silence like an old dial-tone phone.

“Looks like we’re on our own.”

“Can we pry the doors open? We just left the lobby, so we can’t have gone that far,” I say, hopefully.

The man turns around to look at me now.

For the first time, I can see his face.

How did I not recognize his voice?

Jackson Waters is staring back at me.

chapter two

selena

Jackson freaking Waters. The actor. No, Jackson Waters isn't some random actor. He's a freaking *movie star*. He's practically an endangered species. How many genuine movie stars are there anymore? I can count on one hand the number of people I consider movie stars under the age of forty. Jackson Waters is at the top of that list.

And he's just standing there. Right in front of me. In *my* elevator. Breathing the same air as me. His face is ridiculously gorgeous. His intense blue eyes flash across the elevator at me. He's tall and built. Taller than I thought he was. He must be well over six feet, and he's wider than any man should be allowed to be. He fills up the space in the small elevator, in a way that would be extremely hot if we were anywhere other than trapped in a tiny metal box. But right now, it feels oppressive. Like he's taking up valuable space for oxygen. He's even dressed like a classic movie star in his white t-shirt, blue jeans that fit exactly like jeans should fit on a man, a black leather jacket, and black boots. The only part that doesn't fit is the giant canvas tote bag that says *Sivetti Artist Management* on the side in big red block letters.

My brain glitches. I'm not sure whether it's the debilitating need to pee, my latent fear of small spaces, or that I'm trapped in a small space, while I desperately need to pee, and am now staring into the face of one of the original cast members of *Raven's Ravine* that used to stare down at me from the wall of my teenage bedroom.

Of course, Jackson Waters just happened to be there on the poster. The one and only object of my teenage affection was Jonas VerKnauff, his blonde, lonely boy co-star. The one true love of my teenage heart. Jonas made a few movies when the show ended, but none of them did well. He's now a permanent fixture on the D-list. I think he has a winery now and occasionally does reality TV. Meanwhile, Jackson Waters—the man standing three feet in front of me—went on to bigger and bigger movie roles and became an authentic, undeniable *movie star*.

Jackson scans me from my face, down to my blue toes, peeking out of my

strappy platform sandals, and back up my A-line dress with lemons on a sky-blue background to my long, dark hair. Hair that, despite what herculean efforts I put into it refuses to hold a curl. Volume, check. Curl, zero. No matter what I do, my hair goes from prom curls to straight in a few hours. So, both the trend for loose curls and the vintage trend of Hollywood waves are totally out of my reach for anything more than an evening. After a day like today, my hair is puffy and curl-less.

Jackson glances back down at my hands, my fingers painted in matching blue gel polish. “You’re going to pry the doors open? With those hands?”

“I don’t see why not. You know how mothers can lift cars off their children and fight off grizzlies and stuff like that? Women can have extreme strength in times of need.”

He looks concerned. “Do you have a child out there?”

Oh great, Jackson Waters is asking me if I’m a childless spinster. “No. I don’t have any children. Yet. Maybe. I mean, I hope one day. But not yet.”

He nods and then waves at the door. “Have at ’er. Get us the hell out of here.”

“You’re not going to help?”

“I thought you were relying on your superhuman maybe-one-day mama bear strength? Didn’t think you’d need my help.”

Shifting on my feet, I flex my fingers. “Fine. I probably don’t.”

He steps to the back of the elevator and nods at the doors. “Any time now. I actually have somewhere to be.”

“Fine. I will. I’m doing it,” I tell him with a smug smile. Meanwhile, I whisper under my breath, “This is going to work. This is going to work. This is going to work.”

I am going to manifest a way out of this elevator, even if it kills me. Or if I have to kill Jackson Waters.

Dropping my oversized shoulder bag full of every necessity of my life to the ground, I move towards the doors. Since I bake for a living, my nails are short. But I keep them manicured with gel polish, so they always look nice. My hands are short and chubby, like the rest of me, but a coat of nail polish and a bright pink lip do wonders. At least in my head, they do. And that’s all that matters.

Digging my fingers into the small divot where the stainless steel doors meet, I pull them apart with all my strength. And those doors don’t move a single bit. Not even a fraction of an inch.

“Damn it!” I shout at the doors before kicking them with an open-toed sandal and stubbing my big toe. “Ouch!”

Jackson Waters lets out a *tsk-tsk* sound behind me. “Maybe you should leave it to the professionals. If you break an ankle trying to kick your way out of here, just know that I have zero first aid skills.”

“Helpful.”

“I try.”

“How long could this possibly take? What, maybe thirty minutes?”

“In rush hour traffic? In this city? Whoever they’re sending to get us out of here is going to be a while. And then they have to figure out what’s wrong with the doors and then figure out how to open them.”

I glare at him across the elevator. “You’re just a ray of *sunshine*, aren’t you?”

“I’m trying to be realistic. This is going to be a while.”

“I don’t have a while,” I mutter before kicking the elevator doors again out of petty spite. This time, I manage not to stub my toe, so I consider that a win.

“You have somewhere important to be tonight?”

“Yes.” I should be with my three best friends watching *Royally Arranged*, our favorite reality show where women compete to have an arranged marriage with a prince of some ridiculously obscure European monarchy that no one’s ever heard of. But the real reason I don’t have a while is that my bladder is going to burst long before eight o’clock.

I’m going to wet my pants—well, my dress—in front of Jackson freaking Waters.

“We all have places to be. This kind of thing happens, and there’s no point in trying to do anything other than roll with it. Just go with the flow,” Jackson says.

Flow? Go with the flow? This man has the nerve to tell me to go with the flow? That’s the entire problem! I’m going to be flowing all over the place right next to him in five minutes or less.

This is no time for being Zen. Not when I’m trapped in a box barely bigger than a bathroom stall with no toilet in sight. I slide down to the floor, feeling hopeless. And hoping the pressure on the floor will help me with my situation.

“We have a problem,” I mutter under my breath, defeated.

“Yeah, I’m aware. We’re trapped in an elevator.” Jackson lets out an

enormous sigh and then runs his hand through his short brown hair. “Look, they’re going to come and get us out. It’s annoying, but it’s all going to be fine.”

Shaking my head, I refuse to be placated. “No, we have a more pressing problem than that. Urgent, actually.”

Jackson glances around from side to side, looking for danger of some sort. He has no idea that the danger is inside me. And it’s about to explode. “What? What’s wrong?”

“I have to pee.”

chapter three

selena

Jackson Waters looks at me like I'm an idiot. "What's the big deal?"
"What? Where am I supposed to pee? I'm not peeing in front of Jackson freaking Waters!"

"So, you do know who I am." His lips tilt up at the corners. It's not a smile. But it's smug as fuck. He stares down at me. Really stares into my eyes. If ninety-nine percent of my brainpower wasn't currently focused on not releasing a single drop of moisture from my body, I would probably blush at the fact that Jackson Waters even knows where my eyes are. "I was wondering."

My eyes fly open. "Of course, I know who you are! Everyone knows who you are. And I'm not peeing in front of you now. Or *ever*."

"We don't know how long we're going to be in here. Let's just stick to right here and now. What's happening in this elevator is all that matters. How bad do you have to go? Is this like a five-alarm-kind of situation? Or is this more of a can-we-pull-over-in-the-next-hour-or-so-kind of situation?"

Closing my eyes, I tilt my face up towards the elevator ceiling. I think I'd take a lightning strike directly to my head over this conversation. "More five alarm than pulling over in the next hour."

"Okay. At least we know what we're working with, then."

Peeking at him out of one eye, I watch as Jackson looks around from left to right. His eyes slowly pan over the walls and floor of the elevator. If he notices me sitting in the corner, his slow gaze doesn't let on. To a man like Jackson Waters, I probably just blend in with the stainless steel lining the walls of the elevator. I'm a normie, a non-celebrity. I'm a shade of gray compared to his peacock-level handsomeness. And probably a little reflective with the sheen of sweat covering me from the effort of clenching my legs together this hard.

Think of the desert. Think of the desert. Think of the desert.

"You okay over there?"

I don't open my eyes. They're clenched tightly shut. All of me is

clenched at the moment. I can't look at him for another second.

I am going to pee in front of this man.

That is a fact.

This is not some hypothetical would you rather drinking game I used to play in college.

This is not a drill.

I am going to take a giant pee in front of Vampire Vincent DeMarco from *Raven's Ravine*.

And I will never live down the shame.

Never.

"You're starting to make me nervous. How are you doing over there?"

"I feel like I'm supposed to tell you that everything's fine. That it's all good."

My eyes open, and I'm sure that I look like some kind of demonic hellbeast about to char Jackson with my fiery breath before gobbling him up in a single mouthful. Such is the state of my spinning out. I don't know up from down. I don't know real from fake. I don't know wrong from right. I'm trapped in a metal box with the hottest movie star on the planet. And I'm about to pass out from having to pee so badly.

"But all is not well, Jackson!"

"This seems like maybe it's a larger conversation than the whole pee thing..."

"The whole pee thing? The whole pee thing? The fact that I'm about to literally explode is funny to you?"

He holds up his hands to ward off my words. "No one's laughing. But I have an idea."

My heart leaps, and I wonder if the change in weight is going to convince the elevator that we're not even in here anymore, so it will open the doors and let us out. It doesn't.

"You know how to get us out of here?"

Jackson winces. "Sorry, no. But I know what to do about the peeing thing."

"Just spit it out already!"

"I was just at my agent's office. His assistant is a bit of a suck-up, always giving me stuff. Today, he gave me this ugly tote bag full of a bunch of useless shit. There's a big water bottle. I was thinking maybe you could use that to, you know... it's empty."

“You want me to pee into your water bottle?”

“Want is probably a strong word. But I think you should. You look like you’re suffering over there.”

“I *cannot* pee in front of you. This elevator is what, five feet by five feet? You’ll hear every single... sound.”

“Everybody pees.”

“Not in front of men they’ve never met!”

“Right, okay. We can fix that. Hi, I’m Jackson.” He holds his hand out to me to shake.

“I’m... I’m Selena,” I say, holding my hand out and letting him pump it up and down three times.

“Now, I’m not some man you’ve never met.” Jackson looks around the elevator and then taps his knuckles on the wall. The sound fills the small area around us. “The acoustics are pretty damn good in here. So, we just need some background noise.”

He pulls out his phone, taps a few times, and then the elevator is full of old country music. I don’t know who it is, but it sounds vaguely familiar. The singer is apparently very sad that his woman left him and took his truck and his dog. Poor dog.

“Okay, let’s get this over with.”

“Thank you... but, I can’t...” I think I’m going to die from needing to pee. My body is just going to explode, and that will be the end of me.

“What’s the problem now?” Jackson mutters.

“Still the same problem!”

“Would it help if I go first?”

“Now *you* want to pee in front of *me*?” If my bladder wasn’t about to explode, I would laugh at him. This is too much. It’s all too much. I’m seeing black spots. I’m in physical pain. I’m not sure how much longer I can go on. But now we’re both going to pee?

“Do you have some sort of pee fetish?”

He looks shocked. “What? No! Hell no!”

“You’re not... No, you couldn’t be...” I trail off, embarrassed about what I almost blurted out.

He leans in. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“It’s obviously something. Spit it out,” Jackson says... *sternly*. Is he speaking to me sternly?

“It’s just... Movie star. Was on a vampire teen show. Are you lasso golden waterfall guy?”

Jackson looks confused. “I don’t know what any of that means. But I’m going to say no. What the hell is a lasso golden waterfall guy?”

“From CelebritEYES. They wrote this blind item about a movie star who was on a teen vampire show. *Just like you.* He’s very into pee. *Just like you.* The guy likes to lasso women with a rope and then pee on them during sex. So, he’s nicknamed *lasso golden waterfall guy.*” Do I finally have the answer to one of CelebritEYES’ infamous blinds? I can never figure out who the people are, so this would be a total coup for me.

My raging bladder sends a sharp pain, ending my fun.

“What the hell? No. That is not me! And I am not *into* pee!”

“Uh-huh, sure.”

“I’m telling you, it’s not me. I’ve never peed... on anyone. *Ever.*”

“You seem very comfortable with pee. That’s all I’m saying.”

“I grew up on a farm. I grew up mucking out stalls and moving wheelbarrows full of shit. So, I’m not afraid of a little pee. But that doesn’t mean that I’m into... any of what you just said.” The look of disgust on his face almost makes me believe him. But he makes his very impressive living as an actor, so I remain unconvinced.

“You grew up on a farm. So, you probably know how to lasso something, don’t you? Or *someone?*”

“I’m starting to think that you don’t actually need my help. Or I would be, if your face wasn’t so red that you look like you’re about to explode. Let’s get this over with.”

Jackson reaches into the promotional canvas tote still hanging over his big shoulder. He unscrews the lid of a large stainless steel water bottle and hands it to me. The metal is cool in my hand, and when I look down at it, I’m staring into the shockingly blue eyes of Jackson freaking Waters, the blue rings, shifting from the lightest icy blue in the middle to a dark navy at the edges. His face is on the damn water bottle.

“It’s even a wide mouth for you,” Jackson says with a grin.

When I don’t make a move, he reaches a hand out to me. “You look like you’re in physical pain. It’s just a little pee. Just do it. You’ll feel a million times better. I don’t know how long we’re going to be in here for. But it could be a while.”

I’m not sure which I hate more, that he’s right, or that I know he’s right.

Holding my hand out to him, I let Jackson help pull me up off the floor as I push myself up to stand.

“I don’t think I can do this.”

“I don’t think you have much of a choice. Here, take my jacket. It’ll give you a little more privacy. There’s probably a camera in here somewhere.” He shrugs out of his black leather jacket and motions for me to turn around. Then he drapes it over my shoulders.

“Can you go over there? Like as far as humanly possible in the corner. And turn up the music as loud as it’ll go. And don’t listen.”

Jackson moves to the far corner and presses his face into the elevator wall. “Trust me, I’m not trying to listen. But I have ears. And this elevator is only so big.”

“Well...” I bite my lip, grasping frantically for options, and knowing I don’t have a lot of time left. “Cover your ears and sing along to the music. As loud as you can. Then you won’t be able to hear... anything.”

“You want me to sing to you... while you *pee*?”

“Yes.”

“Finally, the woman says *yes* to something. And it’s *that*.”

“I can’t believe I’m going to do this.”

“I can’t believe it took this much convincing when it’s obviously almost a medical emergency.”

“Start singing. Loud!” I shout at him. Grateful that I’m wearing a dress and grateful that this elevator has metal walls for privacy, I unscrew the lid of the water bottle and tug my underwear to the side.

And then it happens. I am peeing into a water bottle four feet from Jackson Waters while he sings to me.

This is the most unhinged serenade in human history.

Los Angeles is filled with hundreds of rooms full of thousands of writers all huddled together trying to come up with funny scenes. And here I stumbled right onto one. Just pee in a water bottle in an elevator in front of a movie star. That’s a guaranteed laugh. Except for the person doing the peeing.

I pee, and I pee, and I pee. When I’m finally done, I screw the lid back on the water bottle and put it in the far corner of the elevator.

Then I slide back down to the floor, the skirt of my dress puffing out around me. My legs feel weak. Like I just ran a marathon, or how I imagine they’d feel if I just ran a marathon. Because the closest I’ve come to running

a marathon is Black Friday shopping at The Grove.

“Oh my fucking god, that felt *good*.”

Jackson turns around to face me. “You sound like you just had an orga... never mind.”

“That was better than any *never mind* I’ve ever had.”

“Lady, if peeing into a water bottle is better than any orgasm you’ve ever had, the guys you’ve been with are doing something wrong.”

chapter four

jackson

We sit in silence for a bit. What is there really to say now that the pissing emergency is over? She pulled some hand sanitizer out of her purse and then made both of us use it, although I'm pretty sure neither of us actually touched anything. I mean, I didn't see what she was doing. I kept my eyes closed and sang my lungs out, as requested. But I understand how female anatomy works, even if it's been a hell of a long time since I explored any for myself. That's probably because it's been a long time since I spent this much time with anyone who didn't work for me or work with me on set.

"Shit. I need to make a call. Sorry," I mutter under my breath as I pull out my phone to call my publicist. I turned it off and put it away to conserve the battery after Selena finished pissing in my water bottle.

"Oh, no problem. I would offer to leave the room, but you know." She shrugs and then glares at the closed elevator doors.

A few taps on my phone screen and Val's voice rings out in the elevator. Even when she's not on speaker, her voice tends to carry. But she's the best publicist in L.A. I've been working with her since I was nineteen and booked my second gig ever on a teenage vampire show. Quickly, I lay out the basics: I'm stuck in an elevator, but I'm fine. Get me the hell out of here.

Val sounds worried. "Are you okay? I'm right here. Do you want me to stay on the line until they get you out?" The sound is muffled, but I hear her shouting directions to her staff to find out who knows that I'm in here and when I'm going to get out.

"Val, I'm not staying on the damn phone with you for hours. Even I couldn't afford the bill."

"Alright, call me if you need me. You'll be out soon, I promise."

"If anyone can bully the Los Angeles first responders to work faster, it's you. I have faith in you, Val. See you soon... hopefully."

After hanging up, I give Selena an apologetic smile, and then we go back to staring into space and not at each other.

Most Friday nights I'm at home with Oats, my Goldendoodle, unless I

have something for work going on. So, to say that tonight is the wildest Friday night I've had in years is an understatement. Getting trapped in an elevator with a pretty woman isn't the worst way to spend a Friday night, I guess.

After a while, Selena starts patting her thighs and humming to herself. And then she just starts talking. I don't think the woman's capable of staying quiet for too long. She makes small talk. We talk about the elevator. About when the hell we're going to get out of here.

When my stomach growls like a pack of ravenous lions, she stares right at me. "Was that your stomach?"

I rub my hand over my abs. "Sorry, yeah. I guess I'm hungry. I normally eat a lot. I have a trainer and a nutritionist. I'm trying to bulk up for a new role."

She frowns. "You're trying to *bulk* up? I can't imagine you getting any bigger."

"Thank you?" I answer, more question than anything.

When she looks away from me to rifle in that giant purse of hers, I figure the conversation is over for now. But then she pulls snacks out and lays them down on the skirt of her dress.

"I have some snacks, if you want some? They're purse snacks. That's kind of weird, so I totally understand if you don't want..."

"Woman, I'm about five minutes from eating that purse. So, I will take whatever you're willing to share, in whatever form it comes out of your purse, and be grateful."

She gives me a big smile, tosses something across the elevator to me, and then launches another just as fast. "Here. Have some coconut peanut butter protein balls and a white chocolate macadamia nut cookie."

"Sounds delicious." My mouth is watering at the description. Ripping open the package, I shove an entire ball into my mouth. It was probably meant to be two or three bites, but I'm starving and eat it in one.

My eyes snap closed. Holy shit. This is one of the best things I've ever tasted. I savor every single second of it. And then shove the second one in my mouth and do the same. And then the cookie.

"Those were truly some of the best things I've ever put in my mouth. Thank you."

"Thirsty?" she asks me.

"You know, I had a water bottle... now what happened to it?" I mutter

under my breath, looking everywhere but at the water bottle with my face on it in the far corner by the door.

“Shut up! That bottle was empty. And we are never mentioning that again. It is the-incident-that-shall-not-be-named, got it?” Then she roots in her giant bag and pulls out one of those massive water mugs that women are carrying around all the time. The kind that weighs fifteen pounds, but keeps your drink ice cold. “Since I am a fair and generous woman, I could share my water with you.”

“You’re a truly benevolent creature, aren’t you?” Holding my hand out, I wait for her to pass me the water.

Instead of passing it to me, she takes a big drink.

“Careful, we don’t know how long we’re going to be in here. You don’t want to have to do the thing you don’t want to talk about again.”

Glaring at me, she hands me over the massive water mug.

“We’ve established I was here seeing my agent. What brought you to this elevator from hell today?”

“Oh, I was just dropping off a delivery. My delivery guy’s daughter broke her arm yesterday. So, he’s off for a few days, and I’m filling in.”

“What exactly were you delivering?”

She smiles, blushing a little. “Oh, right, I forgot that part. Cupcakes.”

“You make... cupcakes?”

“I do. I make cakes, bars, cookies, pastries, and snacks. Like the coconut peanut butter balls. But the cupcakes are the big sellers.”

“I bet. What does a guy have to do to get one of your *cupcakes*?” *Shit.* Am I flirting with her? The woman’s trapped in an elevator with me. It’s not like she chose to hang out with me. Or even meet me in the first place.

Honestly, I don’t meet many women. I’m on set or I’m at home. I don’t shit where I eat, so that rules out people I work with. And I don’t want to be an ungrateful dick, but it’s kind of hard to have a conversation when a woman is shrieking in your face and trying to take a selfie with you.

“You could place an order.” She digs in that oversized purse of hers. This is a seriously enormous bag. I’m not sure how she carried cupcakes or anything else at the same time as she was carrying this bag. She pulls something small out and hands it to me.

A business card.

Ladycakes.

There’s a website, an email, and social media accounts listed, but no

address.

“Ladycakes? And you’re, Ladycakes?”

She nods.

“I’ll have to check you out sometime.” I mean her business. I’ve been checking *her* out since we got stuck in here. She’s pretty. Really pretty.

“We deliver all over the city, and even up to Malibu for an additional fee. And we’re working to scale up production and move into a larger space.”

“Yeah? That’s impressive.” I mean it. She’s obviously passionate about what she does.

“We’re saving up to buy a bigger production facility.”

“Who’s we?”

“Well, me, I guess. It just feels weird when I say me.”

“Why? It’s *your* company. You run it. You’re the one trying to grow it.”

“You’re right,” she says slowly, nodding. “I’m sure no man has ever said *we* because he was uncomfortable with taking all the credit. Only the other way around.”

I grin. “You might be right about that. Where do you... *bake* right now?”

“We rent a space in a communal kitchen downtown. But to grow, we need more space to take on larger orders and more wholesale clients.”

“Sounds like you have a plan.”

She nods. “Oh, I do. It’s color-coded, indexed, and laminated.”

“Wow.” I let out a slow whistle. “That’s one serious plan.”

“You must have a plan too, right?”

“I have a... trajectory? I’ve never been much for color-coding and getting too far ahead of myself.”

“You’ve accomplished a lot so far, though.”

“I guess. It kind of all just happened.”

Her lips twitch. “Oh, I know all about the briefs and cowboy boots.”

“Yeah, you and the rest of the world,” I mutter. My first role made me famous. And infamous. “That was my first acting gig. I got scouted walking down a street in Vancouver. I was eighteen, and my boots still had shit on them from the farm. Those briefs and cowboy boots are going to follow me to my grave.”

“That’s not such a bad thing. Everyone loves that movie. I used to watch it when I was home sick from school in high school. If it’s on TV on a Saturday, I can’t flip past it.”

“You still have cable? How old are you again? I was sure you were

younger than me, but now you've got me questioning that..."

"Twenty-eight. I just like cable, okay? I like flipping channels and watching TV on a certain day at a certain time. I miss when everyone was talking about the same show at the same time because we were all watching it. Why does no one else miss that?"

"Because the rest of the world wants to binge-watch?"

"I guess I like the delayed gratification. Even when I watch streaming shows, I only let myself watch one episode a week. Maybe two, if I'm desperate. It's just not the same experience to binge ten hours of a show on a single Saturday."

I give her a solemn salute. "Well, those of us who spend months making those shows and movies salute you. Your kind is pretty rare these days."

"I know. I'm such a rare and precious flower." She flicks her dark hair over her shoulder, mocking herself. Then she glances around warily. "Do you think we're ever going to get out of this elevator?"



CelebritEYES: BREAKING NEWS! Our favorite internet boyfriend is trapped in an L.A. elevator! This is not a drill people! Jackson Waters is trapped in an elevator! If only we were in there with him...

chapter five

jackson

She looks worried, and I don't like it. Something tightens inside me, needing to distract her from worrying about when we're getting out of this damn elevator. "I think so, yeah. But did you want to figure out who's going to eat who in case your magic purse runs out of snacks?"

She bites her bottom lip to stop from smiling. "Hmmm. First, that's gross. Second, probably also very practical. Good idea. I think you should sacrifice yourself. I have culinary training, so I could probably make you not taste terrible."

Nodding, I eye her up. I'm pretty sure she wouldn't taste terrible, not one bit. At least the way I'd like to eat her.

"Interesting. Interesting. You assume that I'd taste terrible?"

"I'm vegan. I think all meat tastes terrible. So, I think you'd be pretty gross. No offence."

"I'll try not to take any offence at the fact that I'm just a piece of meat to you." I give her a lazy smile.

She shrugs, a smile dancing on her bright pink lips. "You're the one who brought up eating each other for survival. I'm not sure we needed to go full-on Donner Party here."

"I was considering sacrificing myself, but now I know you don't eat meat? I wouldn't want you to compromise your morals. Okay, I've thought about it, and I think I should be the one to eat you. I may not be a chef, but I don't think I'd have any trouble eating you. I might even like it."

Stop it. Stop flirting with the poor woman trapped in a five-by-five metal box with you, you asshole.

She thinks it over. Thankfully, oblivious to the fact that the asshole in the elevator with her is being a completely inappropriate piece of shit.

"I don't think it would compromise my morals, actually. Veganism is all about harm reduction. Day-to-day, I live happily with no animal products. But if my life depended on it, I mean any animal would do what it needs to do to survive. I don't see the two being in conflict."

Looking her up and down, I let out a slow whistle. “That seems like some very convenient logic.”

“Convenient and correct. We should probably also factor in the most humane means of death. I could club you with my giant water mug. You wouldn’t feel a thing, I promise.”

“You’re too kind. But I’m bigger and stronger than you are. I think I could take you.” My lips twitch. When was the last time I actually enjoyed talking to anyone this much? Or at all?

She eyes me from the top of my head all the way down to my outstretched legs and the black leather boots on my feet. “Stand up.”

“Why? I don’t want to waste any of my fading strength. I may need it to fight you off.”

“I want to see how tall you are. Before the-incident-that-shall-not-be-named, I was too stressed to notice. I need to assess whether I can take you or not.”

“While I, on the other hand, was not too distracted by you taking a pee in my water bottle to notice how tall you are. You can’t be more than a couple inches over five feet. You’re not fooling anyone with those platform heels.”

Her face goes downright squirrely. “I’m five-foot-two. And I thought you agreed never to speak of that again?”

Grinning back at her frown, I take another drink from her giant water bottle. “I don’t think I did, come to think of it.”

“It was implicit that the-incident-that-shall-not-be-named would never be spoken of again when I shared my water with you. Stand up.”

“I’d like it to be acknowledged that I’m doing this because I am an eminently fair and extremely reasonable man.” Pushing up on my hands, I stand up.

I’m stiffer than I’d like to admit from sitting on the hard floor of the elevator for so long. I’m not even thirty-three yet, but my twenties feel a million years away.

“So noted. It must be so hard for a rich and famous white man to be acknowledged in this world.” She leans forward and stares right into my eyes. Her hazel eyes look a little more green and sparkle a little more when she’s about to sass me. “I see you, Jackson Waters. I see you.”

I bite back a smile. “Are you making fun of me?”

She shakes her head and gives me a sweet smile, pressing her blue-nailed hand across her impressively large breasts solemnly. “I would never make

fun of the man who gave the world that dance in those cowboy boots!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I wave my hand at myself from my feet to my head.
“This good? See what you need to see?”

She narrows her eyes at me, studying. “How tall are you, exactly?”

“Six-foot-four.”

“I thought actors were supposed to be short. Aren’t you all supposed to be five-eight or something?”

“Yeah, I had to get an exemption to get my SAG card. It was a whole thing.”

“Hmmm. I still think I could take you, though.”

“Really?” I narrow my eyes at her, looking like a cupcake herself, with the skirt of her dress all around her. Her legs are sticking out in front of her, and she has a cute little bumblebee tattoo on her ankle. She doesn’t look like she could win a fight with a kitten. “How?”

“I have car keys, a giant purse, and a giant water mug. It’s honestly not even a fair fight.” She shakes her head at me wistfully. Little liar.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. I’m six-foot-four, go to the gym six days a week, and I’m in professional athlete shape. I’m surprised you’ve let me live this long.”

“It was pretty generous of me.” Her lips span across her face into a huge smile.

She’s even prettier when she smiles like that. Not to mention that she’s sitting on the floor, staring up at me... standing in front of her like... nope. I’m not thinking about what she could be doing down there with those pretty pink lips instead of sassing me.

“You can sit down now.”

“Your generosity is boundless.”

“I’m practically Mother Teresa over here.”

When I sit down again, she tosses me another coconut peanut butter protein ball from her purse. I catch it in one hand.

“Is this a treat for doing what I was told? Are you trying to train me like a dog?”

“If only men were as smart as dogs! We would have an entirely different world. We’d probably all be driving hovering electric cars and taking vacations on Jupiter. You can give the protein ball back if you don’t want it...”

“Oh, I want it.” Ripping the package open, I toss the too-small snack into

my mouth.

I'm low-key ravenous. For the past six months, I've been eating constantly to bulk up. I've missed at least two meals during the time this damn elevator's had us trapped, not to mention during the three-hour meeting with my agent. And Selena's purse snacks are the only thing keeping me going. That and her talking to me.

"Will you do the dance for me? Please?"

"Hell no!" I nearly shout, my mouth still full of the coconut peanut butter ball she gave me.

When I finish chewing, I stare at her. "You couldn't pay me enough to do that dance again."

"That dance is a *classic* scene in a *classic* movie."

"Someone's going to carve my damn ass in underwear and cowboy boots doing the two-step on my gravestone."

"It would probably make your grave easier to find for your millions of adoring fans." She wiggles her eyebrows at me and then bursts out laughing.

"Can you try to be less helpful?"

"Nope. I'm just a very helpful person, can't help it."

"Give me another snack for sassing me."

"Sassing you?" she asks with a laugh.

But she tosses me another protein ball. I catch it in my hand and toss it into my mouth while she watches, probably a little horrified.

"Don't people like you have personal chefs? You must eat a lot."

"People like me?"

"Rich people? Movie star people?"

"I'm just a guy, Selena."

"You're just a guy sitting in an elevator in front of a strange woman with snacks in her purse, begging for treats," she says with a laugh.

"Damn right. You holding out on me? What else do you have in that purse?"

She pulls out another cookie and tosses it to me. This one is fucking s'mores, with hunks of chocolate, graham crackers, and marshmallows in a chocolate cookie. I haven't eaten this much sugar in years. I think I'm getting a little high on it.

"So, do you have a personal chef?"

"No. But I get meals delivered. I'm crap in the kitchen. I had a six-egg, egg white omelet, a pound of spinach, and half a grapefruit for breakfast.

Then I had steamed broccoli and unseasoned chicken every two hours until I left the house to get to my meeting.”

She giggles. “I’m sorry, but that sounds horrible.”

I can’t help but laugh at myself. “It is. It really fucking is. But I need to be in professional athlete-level shape.”

“That sounds like hard work.”

“Trust me, it is. But it’ll be worth it when I land this role I’m up for.”

“I’m sure you’ll get it.” She sounds so sure. I wish I was.

“I hope you’re right. There’s a bunch of guys up for it. But I think we’re getting pretty close to a decision.”

“And if you get it, you have to keep eating like this?”

“Yeah, for the next decade or so. I’m honestly not sure how I’m going to do it.” Shaking my head, I laugh at myself. “I know, poor little rich kid. No one wants to hear the guy who lives in Hollywood bitch about how bad he has it.”

She tilts her head to stare at me. “I don’t know. Everyone has their own stuff. No one’s life is perfect. And it’s not some sort of competition. Everyone has good and bad in their lives, hopefully a little more good than bad. Do you like being an actor?”

“Nothing’s that simple. I don’t not like it. I love making movies. I love acting. Bringing a character to life. Becoming them. I love the process. The craft of filming. The cinematography. The art direction. What they do with makeup, costumes and sets, it’s pure magic. I’m kind of hoping that one day they’ll let me direct something. But that’s a long way off.”

“Why? Lots of actors direct stuff, don’t they?”

“It’s not that simple. It’s a big ask. Making movies is expensive. There’s so many moving parts. And the director is the one who’s responsible for every single one of those parts. It takes a lot of trust to get the job.”

She nods, like she’s thinking it over.

“So prove they can trust you.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do. Bigger roles. Bigger box offices. Showing that I can carry a huge franchise. At least, that’s the hope, anyway.”

She nods at me. “I’m sure you can do it. You’re on at least half of the magazines at the check-out line every time I go to the grocery store. That has to be worth something, right?”

I grin over at her. “Here’s hoping it’s that simple. Half the magazines, huh? How bad is the stuff they’re saying about me?”

She narrows her eyebrows at me. “Like you don’t know.”

Holding up my hands, I shake my head. “I don’t, I swear. I have a publicist who tells me if there’s anything that needs a statement. Other than that, my team doesn’t tell me anything.”

“And you never go to the grocery store?” She sounds shocked. I guess it is kind of shocking how different my life is from hers. From anyone with a normal life.

Scrunching my face, I shake my head. “Honestly, no. That makes me seem like an asshole, doesn’t it? I probably haven’t been to a grocery store in at least three years or more. People notice me, and it can get kinda awkward.”

“Meeting your adoring fans is awkward? How terrible for you!” She rolls her eyes at me, but she’s still giving me that big smile of hers.

“Look, don’t get me wrong. I’m grateful for every single one of my fans. Every single person who buys a ticket to one of my movies or pays to stream it. Basically anyone who doesn’t find some way to steal it on the internet. But when I haven’t showered, I’m wearing sweatpants, and buying toilet paper, I could pass on meeting them at that exact moment. Isn’t that allowed?”

Her eyes narrow on me. “I’ll allow it. What color sweatpants?”

“Gray. Why?”

“The drawstring kind with the elastic ankles?”

“Yeah. Why are you so interested in my sweatpants?”

“No reason.”

Hours pass just like that. Me and her talking, shooting the shit back and forth about everything and nothing.

Selena’s laughing at something I said when we hear a scratchy megaphone call out my name. It takes another hour after that for them to figure out what’s wrong and try to get us out.

Then it’s time to go. Only I’m not sure I’m ready to say goodbye to this elevator just yet.

Or this woman.

chapter six

selena

I was starting to think we were going to be trapped in this elevator for days. And maybe I didn't hate the idea of being trapped in an elevator with Jackson Waters for a while longer?

Everything changes when we hear his name called out over a megaphone. We've been pretty calm in the elevator waiting to be rescued. Jackson kept me calm. But once we know people are outside trying to find a way in, it feels urgent.

We stop talking about whatever random stuff crosses our minds and only talk about getting out.

"Mr. Waters? Stand back. We're going to try to pry the door open."

Jackson stands up and moves to sit next to me at the back of the elevator.

"Jackson?"

"Yeah?"

"Will you hold my hand?"

"Sure."

He reaches out and presses his fingers between mine and then squeezes my hand tightly. His hand is warm and so much bigger than mine that his fingers reach up the back of my hand to my wrist.

"It's going to work."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I'm too pretty to die trapped in an elevator?"

My eyes dart to meet his, and I laugh. I can't help myself. "That's probably true. But I would absolutely watch that *E True Hollywood Story*. I would watch the hell out of it."

"As always, glad to be of service."

There's clanging and banging as the first responders do whatever they're doing to get the elevator doors open. The noise is almost as scary as being trapped in here forever is.

"Jackson?"

"Yeah?"

“Thanks for being human. This could have been really terrible.”

“Being trapped in an elevator fearing for our lives wasn’t really terrible?”
He squeezes my fingers, and I know he’s joking.

“Well, you got to spend it with me. So that was a silver lining for you. I don’t know how I survived this long with you.” I squeeze his fingers back so he knows I’m joking, too.

“A few hours in an elevator with you has done wonders for my ego.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Selena?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks.”

Then there’s a screeching noise and the elevator drops. But only a few inches. And then the doors open. First an inch, then another, and then another. Until the elevator doors are halfway open. We’re trapped between the lobby and P1, but it’s only a couple of feet up to the lobby.

“We were this close to the lobby this whole time? It felt like it was a million miles away.”

“Looks like.” Jackson says next to me. “You ready?”

I nod, and then I realize that I actually need to say the words. We’re both staring straight ahead of us into the big lobby. It’s full of countless first responders staring back at us. The lobby is a little above my waist, so we’re staring right at their knees. From outside the glass lobby walls, I can see TV news trucks and flashing lenses. Lenses aimed at us. Well, aimed at Jackson. But I’m standing right next to him, so they’re aimed at me, too.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

Jackson squeezes my hand again. Then he walks across the elevator, presses his hands down on the lobby floor, and in one smooth motion pulls himself up to the floor above. Instead of standing up and washing his hands of me, leaving the milling first responders to haul me out, Jackson turns around and holds his hands out to me.

“Come on, I’ve got you.”

“Are you sure?” I bite my lip and look over his shoulder at the flashing lights outside. This will not be graceful. And there are so many cameras out there. I could just hide out in here until Jackson leaves and all the cameras follow him.

Jackson glances over his shoulder. “Sorry about that. It comes with the rest of it. But don’t worry about them. I’ve got you. Trust me.”

Nodding, I step forward assess the distance up to the lobby. Jackson's legs have to be at least a foot longer than mine, so this step up was a heck of a lot smaller for him.

"Mr. Waters, maybe you should step back and let us evacuate her."

"We're all good. I've got this. Thanks, though."

"Selena, I'm going to pick you up, if that's okay? Just press down with your hands and then get your knees up on the floor when I pull you high enough, okay?"

"Maybe we should leave this to the professionals..." I mutter, staring at the distance between the floor of the elevator and the lobby.

"You've known me what? Six hours. And have I ever let you down? Even once?"

I lean in as close as I can get to him. "Actually, there was that time you wouldn't do the dance."

He narrows his eyes at me. "You get out of this elevator, and maybe we can talk about it."

I grin up at him. "That's worth bailing and letting the paparazzi take a picture of my vagina."

Jackson's face darkens. "That's not happening. Ready?"

Nodding up at him again, I put my purse on the lobby floor next to his legs. Then I press my hands firmly down on the floor. "Ready."

Jackson reaches out and slides his hands under my arms. I push up, and in a second of seamless movement, I'm on the lobby floor on my knees next to Jackson.

"Good?"

"Yes?"

"That a question or an answer?"

"An answer, I think." I take stock of my body. "Yup, an answer. I'm all good."

Jackson stands up and reaches under my arms again to pick me up. I'm not sure the second time was completely necessary. I probably could have stood up by myself, even with all the eyes on me. He picks up my purse and hands it to me.

"Thanks. For everything."

"At your service, as always." He grins down at me, and he takes my hand again as the first responders rush forward to meet us.

Someone wraps a blanket around my shoulders. Jackson gets the same

treatment. And then we're pulled apart as paramedics pull us out the doors and to separate ambulances to check our vital signs. Jackson's fingers pull away from mine. And that's the end of one of the weirdest and most wonderful experiences of my life. I have a feeling that I'll be telling my grandchildren one day about the time that I got trapped in an elevator with a movie star.

In a city this big, I know that I'll never see Jackson Waters again.

Goodbye, Jackson.

CelebritEYES: Jackson Waters freed from the elevator! Now, who's the lucky girl in the background of these photos who got to spend six hours alone with our boyfriend?

chapter seven

Two months later...

jackson

“Okay, I think you’re ready.”

“Finally. I’m going to be on the show for less than six minutes. Why does that take hours of prep?” I stand up from the uncomfortable little leather and concrete couch in Val’s office. All the furniture in here is weird-looking, modern stuff. None of it’s comfortable, but Val probably doesn’t want her clients staying too long, anyway.

She’s sitting across the big, sunny office behind her enormous glass desk, frowning at me. “So, you don’t say the wrong thing and end your career?”

“Oh, right. Hey, isn’t that why I have you? To shut down anything that’s trying to end my career.” Val Pietro is the scariest publicist in L.A. Her giant black glasses, red lipstick, and short blonde hair strike fear in the hearts of studios and journalists alike. But she’s also the best. And that’s why I’ve stuck with her for the last fifteen years. She took me on when I had one role under my belt and no prospects. She’s come through for me every time I’ve ever needed her, and I don’t turn my back on people who come through for me.

“Even I’m only human. Don’t say anything stupid. No politics. No religion. No climate change. No policy, foreign or domestic. You know the rules. Be positive. Talk about the movie, your workouts, your diet, Oats, and that’s about it. Anything else comes up, steer it back to one of those topics, like we practiced. And tonight’s show is being broadcast live, so there’s no second chances this time.”

“You act like I’ve never done an interview before. I’ve been doing this shit for nearly fifteen years.”

“Yeah, and it takes one. One time saying the wrong thing, and it goes viral. You’re trending, you’re a meme, and then your career is over. I’m just trying to keep you from getting yourself canceled.”

“What the hell have I done to get canceled? I’ve never harassed a woman in my life.”

“I know that, and you know that. So, don’t give anyone a chance to write

something about you that isn't true. Just be careful, please."

"I will. I will."

"Jacks, I know you won't like this. But he's probably going to ask you about the elevator."

"Tell him I don't want to talk about it."

"I can, but you've got to give him something. You won't talk about your break-up with Carolina."

"There's nothing to talk about. We hung out for a few months, and we were never on the same continent. So, we broke up. It was six months ago."

"And you're not dating anyone new. You won't talk about your family. Your set stories are years old at this point. You've got to give them something."

"I don't want to talk about the elevator."

"I'm just warning you he's going to ask, so be ready to pivot back to one of your go-to anecdotes. Just be ready."

"Hey, Val. Did she ever talk to anyone about it? Give an interview or something? After we got out?"

"No." Val shakes her head slowly. "Trust me, I was worried about that. If she had, I'd know about it. I have a hundred different search engine alerts for your name and the word *elevator*. You dodged a bullet on that one. They offered her money, I'm sure. And a lot for the exclusive story of the woman trapped in an elevator for six hours with Jackson Waters. It'd make a great *stars, they're just like us* piece." She looks me over one last time. "You need anything before you go?"

"No, I'm all good. Thanks for everything."

Val walks over and kisses both my cheeks. "Okay, just have fun and don't say anything that I wouldn't pre-approve."

My lips twitch. "Oh, the things I'd like to say that you wouldn't pre-approve..."

"Don't you turn that charm on me, Jacks! I've known you since you were a skinny kid in underwear and cowboy boots."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. You're all talk."

"I'll meet you at the studio later. I might be late."

"You don't have to come. I'll be fine."

"For my favorite client? I'll be there. See you later." Val nods towards the door, and that's my sign to get the hell out of her office, overlooking the Sunset Strip.



I DON'T GET nervous before talk shows anymore, but that doesn't mean I like them. Like with anything else, the producers can cut and edit the footage however they want to make me look like a jackass. They're always looking for some clip to go viral, and me putting my foot in my mouth would be a win for the ratings.

That's less common on The Eddie Parsons Show, but it's always a risk. Eddie's a good guy, normal even. I've known him for over a decade. He used to be an actor, but when his work started drying up, he switched to hosting. Now he hosts the most popular late night talk show in the country.

I'm here to promote a movie I made two years ago. I had to watch a screener to remember what it was even about. But I prepped for this like I do for everything else. Val and I ran questions this morning and picked out some anecdotes from the set to throw in. Some of them made up, some of them not.

"The movie sounds great, man. But what I really need to ask you about is the whole elevator thing?"

I press my hands over my face. "That was months ago! Everyone's forgotten about the elevator."

"I have not forgotten about the elevator. My staff have not forgotten about the elevator. And most importantly, my wife has not forgotten about the elevator. She's going to kill me if I don't ask this."

"Okay, okay, I won't be a party to premeditated murder, so let me have it." I motion towards my face, inviting him to ask the dumb question.

"Jackson, you've played a spy, a Navy SEAL, a firefighter. And you're telling me you couldn't get out of an elevator?"

I don't want to talk about this. I'm supposed to deflect. But all the anecdotes Val and I prepped are gone. I can't think of a single one.

"Who says I wanted to?" I shrug, playing along. "I was stuck in there with a pretty girl."

"Yeah, you were! That's my boy." Eddie reaches out to fist bump me, and I play it up for the cameras, making my hand explode and then blowing air on it to put out the fire. I feel like a complete and utter jackass every second of it.

"Now tell us, just how did things go down in that elevator? I bet you thought of ways to use the time. Am I right?"

"A few," I tell him with a grin. "You know me, I'm an artist. I get paid to

be *creative* for a living.”

“Yeah, you do.”

“I think I saw a picture of the girl with you when the firefighters were rescuing you. Pretty face, huh?”

Keeping a grin on my lips, I nod. “She’s a pretty girl. What can I say?”

“Now, I have got to ask something else. This one is a bit... personal, that okay?”

“Sure, sure. You know me, Eddie. I’m an open book.” I am *abso-fucking-lutely* not an open book.

“Alright, alright. So you and this chick were in there for six hours. Didn’t... nature call? I mean, my wife can’t drive from one end of The Grove parking lot to the other without peeing twice, so I know she’d never survive six hours in an elevator.” Eddie mockingly makes the symbol of the cross.

“Well, this is kind of a funny part of the story that I actually haven’t told anyone before. Do you guys want to hear it?”

“Do we want to hear it?” Eddie motions for the audience to cheer. “Yeah, we want to hear it!”

“Alright, I’ll tell you. But it’s just between us, right?”

Eddie nods at me, then at the studio audience, and then at his camera. “It’s just between us, right America?”

“Well, she *did* actually pee while we were in there. She had to go pretty soon after we got stuck in there. And let me just say that it broke the ice.”

“You’re telling me this chick peed right in front of you?”

I nod. “Nature calls, man. It was life and death in there. The two of us were stuck in a five-foot by five-foot box together for six hours.”

“What, like she just popped a squat in the corner of the damn elevator? I can’t believe this! You’re making this up!”

“I’m not, man, I swear it. She had to go. And I did what a man does. I came up with a solution. I had just been at my agent’s office, and they sent me off with this giant bag of swag. And I wasn’t just going to let her pee in the corner. I didn’t know how long we were going to be stuck in there for. So, I gave her this big water bottle that had my face on it. I gave her my coat to give her some extra privacy, and I hugged the corner, giving her what little space we had. And she did what needed to be done.”

“America, now that is a gentleman.” Eddie leans forward in a mocking bow. “I salute you, sir.”

“Thank you, sir. Thank you, sir,” I accept his praise with a big smile.

Then I turn serious. “But she did her part, too. First, she had good aim. Let’s just say that. But she had this big purse with her. And let me tell you that this woman is a baker. She had protein balls and cookies in this giant purse of hers. I’d been on a strict diet and working out nonstop to get in shape for a role. And I swear to you, I would have wasted away in that elevator if not for this woman and her snacks. You all need to check out Ladycakes, right here in L.A. Those snacks saved my life.”

“What the hell was going on in this elevator? And what do I have to do to get stuck in one? Am I right, America? Am I right?”

“Just need to find the right elevator and the right girl, I guess.”

“It sounds like there was a lot of bonding that happened in this elevator.”

“Six hours trapped in an elevator is like six months in the real world, let me tell you. We might have walked in strangers, but when we left, well...” I smile and look offstage, like I’m too embarrassed to go on.

“Hold up now. Are you telling me that something’s going on with this girl? You’re not... are you dating the girl from the elevator?” He doesn’t even wait for me to confirm it before he pans towards the camera and speaks directly into it. “America, this is Eddie Parsons coming to you live with breaking news. America’s favorite heartthrob and two-time sexiest man alive is dating the girl he met when trapped in an elevator. Jackson Waters is dating #elevatorgirl!”

I shrug, deciding not to give Eddie anything else and just let him run with what he has.

“Apparently, the way to Jackson Waters’ heart is to spill *water* right in front of him. Bad-uh-boom!”

“Ha-ha-ha. Very funny, Eddie.”

“That’s all we have time for tonight, folks. Thank you for coming, sir. You are a scholar and a gentleman. I salute you, sir. And good luck with the little lady!”

I just grin in reply until the camera cuts. I like the guy, but Eddie’s not capable of keeping a secret. So, if I wasn’t willing to say it on air, I sure as hell won’t be saying anything to him after the cameras cut.

My phone buzzes in my pocket with perfect timing. “I should probably check on this. Good to see you, Eddie.”

Lily: You’re dating the girl from the elevator?

Lily: What the hell? Why are you telling this to all of NORTH AMERICA before you even tell your BEST FRIEND?

Shit.



CelebritEYES: Jackson Waters is in love! The sexy movie star is dating his real life co-star from when he was trapped in an elevator #elevatorgirl #elevatorgirlfriend

chapter eight

jackson

“*W*hat the hell was that?” Val’s waiting for me as soon as I step backstage. She rarely comes to these things anymore, so just lucky I guess that she’s here today when I make a jackass of myself on The Eddie Parsons Show. What the hell was I thinking? Why did I go on and on about the girl from the elevator... and why the hell did I say what happened in the elevator? I never told anyone about that.

“I thought it went well,” I hedge, hoping rather than believing this won’t be a PR disaster.

We dodge and weave past the producers, writers, interns, and talent wranglers, numbering in the dozens on our way back to my dressing room where Oats is waiting for me. Val holds it in until the door is safely shut behind us, and then she rounds on me as I bend down to say hi to my eighty pound Goldendoodle who apparently really missed me in the thirty minutes I was gone.

“You’re dating #elevatorgirl? What the hell, Jackson? Do you have any idea what you’ve just done to this poor girl’s life? It’s bad enough she had to be stuck in an elevator with you for six hours. Now this?”

“What do you mean? I didn’t say that... exactly. I just kind of let him assume...” I’m feeling uncomfortable. If Val is this pissed, it usually means something bad is about to happen.

Shit, what did I just do? I don’t know why I told Eddie anything else about the elevator. All I had to do was admit that despite all the badass roles I’ve played, I just sat in the elevator and waited to be rescued like anyone else would have done. Was that so hard?

And maybe it pissed me off when Eddie said she had a pretty face. Like the rest of her wasn’t pretty, only her face. I spent hours staring at her hair, her face, her body, and I can certify that every part of her was pretty. But that was no reason to go off of the script of anecdotes Val and I worked out this morning. What the hell was I thinking?

“We need to get you out of here. No more questions. Say nothing until I

figure this mess out.” Val sits down on the black leather couch and crosses her legs. She taps her foot on the floor for several minutes and then stares up at me.

“Come on, Val, it’s not that big of a deal. Who the hell cares if people think I’m dating the girl from the elevator? No one even knows who she is.”

“Have I taught you so little? Someone already knows who she is. Maybe it didn’t blow up when she was just some random woman you got stuck in an elevator with. Give it a couple of hours. The entire world is going to know who she is by morning, mark my words. You just blew up this woman’s life.”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

If that’s true, then she’s going to hear what I said about her. And she’s going to think I’m a complete pervert who was trying to fuck her the entire time we were trapped in that elevator.

“Come on, Val. You’ll think of something. You always fix it, whatever it is.”

“Let’s get you out of here without any more disasters, and then I’ll figure this out, okay?”

“Whatever you say. Just fix this. Please.”



VAL’S at my front door by nine o’clock the next morning.

“Morning, Val.”

“I have an idea.”

“Great. That’s what I pay you for. Do you want to come in for some coffee?”

“You’re not going to like it.”

“That’s never a good sign when you start out telling me how much I’m going to hate something. Come inside. What kind of idea?”

“The kind where you date the girl from the elevator, take advantage of all the buzz, and then get this franchise that’s going to set you up in this town forever. You’ve done other franchises, Jacks. But superhero cinematic universe franchises are different.”

“And that’s going to set you up forever?”

“A rising tide lifts all ships. You’re my rising tide, kid. And it’s my job to make sure you rise up all the way to the top and stay there.”

“You can’t be serious. I can’t date the girl from the elevator.” She was pretty, but my life is chaotic. My work takes me all around the world. And when I’m home, I’m doing press and hunting for my next project.

“You don’t actually have to date her. You just need to leave room for the interpretation to be that you’re dating. Like you did on The Eddie Parsons Show. You’re the one who started this, kid. The press about the elevator had all died down until you stirred it up again. No one gave a shit about the girl in there with you until you announced on Eddie Parsons that you were fucking her.”

“Hold up, Val. Woah, woah, woah. I never said that. I never said anything like that. Not even close.”

“You implied that you were dating her. Dating equals fucking, kid. This is the twenty-first century.”

“This is wild. I thought things were looking good for the franchise? I don’t need to do this.” Motioning for Val to walk ahead of me, we head for the kitchen because we’re both going to need a lot of coffee for this conversation. My kitchen is all sleek white cabinets, stainless steel, and concrete. And it doesn’t see a lot of cooking. Coffee is one of the few things I know how to make.

“It is looking good. Alan gives me daily updates, whether I want them or not.” Val has a love-hate relationship with my manager, Alan. Mostly hate on her part.

“Does he know about your little plan?”

“He doesn’t get a say. Alan handles the business. I handle the image. But yes, he knows.”

“And what does he think about it?”

“He thinks it’s a good idea. He thinks this could get some nice, positive press for you. And that it would help firm you up as the right pick for the franchise.”

Shit, Alan and Val never agree on anything, so if they both agree on this, it’s hard to say no. Even if that’s what I know I need to do.

“I don’t think this is necessary. It’s all going to blow over.”

“It’s not going to blow over. We all want this role for you, Jacks. This is the big one. After you’re a superhero in the biggest franchise ever, you won’t have to keep hustling anymore. You’ll be able to coast on this one for years—decades even—and get whatever else you want to do made.”

“I want it. You know I do. But pretending to date this girl seems wrong. I

barely know her, but she seemed like a decent person. A good person. I don't want to take advantage of her or anything."

"She'll be in on it! You're not doing anything to her she doesn't agree to. She'll know it's fake. You'll know it's fake. It's just the rest of the world who will get to believe in love for a while."

"It's playing games. I don't play games. I'm not interested."

"Come on, Jacks. You can't just let this go. This kind of free publicity doesn't come around every day. Or every month. Or every year. I've been a publicist for twenty-five long years. So, trust me on that."

"You can't be serious, Val."

"I'm dead serious. The internet is already loving this. It hasn't even been twenty-four hours, and they're already loving the idea of you falling head over heels for a normie. It's romantic. You meet by chance in an elevator and then you fall in love. It makes people think it could happen to them, too."

"Don't call her that. What the hell is a *normie* anyways?"

"A normie is a normal person. A non-celebrity. It's not an insult, kid. Just a statement of fact. She's a normie. And you're one of the biggest movie stars in the world."

"She's going to hate me for doing this to her. She's never going to agree to this."

"Don't sell yourself short. You can be charming when you want to be."

"Awe shucks, and here I thought you were immune to my charms."

"I don't think anyone's entirely immune to your charms. That's why you're the seventh highest grossing box office star of all time. I knew from that first night I met you when you were wandering around L.A. like a lost puppy trying to get a job."

"And you've been in love with me ever since..." I tell her with a grin.

"*You've* been in love with *you* ever since. I just work here." Val smiles her cagiest smile. "I can't make you do anything. It's your decision. But I was right about *Raven's Ravine*. And I'm right about this."

"Val..."

"Just think about it. Why don't you go see her? See if you could put up with her for two months. And more importantly, whether she could put up with you."

"And here I thought I was a delight to be around?"

"When you want to be, kid. Only when you want to be. Got to go. I'm having my vagina steamed at ten-thirty."

“Of course, you are. Aren’t there limits on what I should have to hear about your vagina? Professionally speaking?”

“I’ll text you her address.”

“How do you have her address?”

“I know everything! Go see her!”

Val puts down her coffee cup and stands up, heading for the front door. Then Oats and I are alone. And we’ll be alone until the weekend housekeeper gets here in a couple of hours.

I’m rarely ever alone anymore, except at home. On set, the only time I’m ever alone is when I kick everyone out of my trailer so I can study my lines. I don’t remember the last time I read a book that wasn’t for a role. My job—my life—comes with a team. Manager. Publicist. Drivers and assistants when I’m working. Entourage.

When I’m filming, a driver comes and takes me to set every morning and then drives me back to wherever I’m staying at night. There are people coming and going from my trailer all day. Dozens, if not hundreds, of people on set every day. Hundreds mostly for the last few years as the roles have been getting bigger and bigger, and the fame has been getting bigger and bigger.

Go see her! Val’s voice rings out in my head.

Selena won’t want to see me. I’ve made her life hell. First, the woman gets trapped in an elevator with a strange man for hours. And then when that all finally died down, that same asshole tells the entire country about how she peed in front of him in an elevator. And on top of that, the asshole hints he’s dating her on national TV. If the internet knows who this girl is now, then paparazzi will follow her around because of me. To get something on me. She didn’t sign up for any of this just by having the misfortune to step into an elevator with me.

She’s not an L.A. girl, not really. Everyone who lives in L.A. is trying to get famous. Maybe they’re actors or writers or directors. Singers, whatever. It doesn’t matter. They want it. They want the fame. The money. The attention.

This girl didn’t ask for any of it.

Whatever they’re saying about her, it’s not all going to be good. Some people might love the idea of me dating this girl. But like everything else on the internet, there isn’t just one point of view. Some people are probably going to hate the idea of me dating this girl, and they’ll have some not-so-kind things to say about her. Because it’s so easy to type the first mean thing

you think of and hit enter from the other side of a screen. People on the internet typing from a thousand miles away can be meaner than a pack of coyotes.

Maybe the girl doesn't look like the girls I usually date, but she's pretty. Those wide hazel eyes above those full lips, surrounded by all that dark hair, a bit lighter and sun-kissed at the ends. It's not the first time that I've thought about her since the elevator, and it won't be the last. I certainly wouldn't mind dating her.

Not that I'll actually *be* dating her. Or kissing her. Or anything else I've thought about doing. This is pretend. Fake. Just a game we'll be playing with the media.

If she agrees to it. Hell, if I even agree to it. I don't know why anyone in her position would do this. Not after everything the media is probably saying about her. Not after I told the entire world that she peed in my water bottle in front of me. Why the hell did I have to tell that damn story? I was still thinking about her and that elevator, I guess. There was something about her. Talking to her in that elevator was the first genuine conversation I've had in years that wasn't about the next steps in my career.

Val's right. I need to go see her and make sure she's okay.

chapter nine

selena

*M*y entire apartment is covered with cooling trays. Every time I think I can't make another batch of cupcakes, muffins, or cakes, I see another headline about Jackson Water's pathetic #elevatorgirl, and I'm reaching for my measuring cups and flour. Baking is a distraction. It relieves my stress, or it normally does. My stress level is nuclear since Jackson Waters went on national TV three days ago and told the entire world his oh-so-charming anecdote about getting trapped in an elevator with some *rando* non-famous person and how she peed in his water bottle. He looked like a charming hero, and I looked like the troll under the bridge... the troll who peed in the movie star's water bottle.

Don't even get me started on the nonsense they're writing about how Jackson is in love with me. It's mortifying. Every single article I've rage-scrolled talks about how *different* we are. How perfect and handsome and famous Jackson is, and how *different* I am from him.

No one cared about the normie trapped in the elevator with Jackson Waters when it happened. After all, who gives a crap about another normie? I showed up in a few pictures online. A couple of tabloids figured out who I was and tracked me down, even offering me tens of thousands of dollars to give them tell-all interviews about Jackson. I said no, and they moved on. I really could have used the money, but I didn't feel right talking about what happened in the elevator. It was this weird, out-of-body experience that was just for Jackson and me. Or so I thought.

But then Jackson went on The Eddie Parsons Show and talked all about it. It wasn't until he did that and told the entire world what happened in the elevator that anyone cared about me. The show aired at ten-thirty. By the time the morning shows were on the next day, there were media vans and paparazzi outside my home and at the bakery kitchen. I'm such an idiot. I should have taken the money. At least then, I'd have something to show for the disaster that is currently my life.

Three days later, and the media surrounding #elevatorgirl hasn't died

down. There are still cameras outside my apartment. Cameras. Outside. My apartment. In Echo Park. Paparazzi are not a frequent occurrence here. I might live in L.A., but I live in a very different world than Jackson Waters. Completely different worlds. Different planets, really.

But now all of Jackson's fame and the media's fucked-up obsession with celebrities is raining down on my head. And instead of living my normal, quiet life of baking, growing my business, brunch with my three best girlfriends—because who can keep up with any more than three besties after college when you all have real jobs—and hitting up a farmer's market on the weekend, I'm hiding out in my house like I'm the one who did something wrong.

Everybody pees, damnit! Everybody pees!

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Who would knock on my door with all those photographers outside? No one with any sense would come anywhere near me these days with all the cameras aimed at my front door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Whoever's out there isn't taking the hint that I don't want to see anyone.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

With a groan, I stand up from the fetal position I was lying in on my sofa feeling bad for myself and walk to the front door.

I open it an inch and peek out. I really need to ask my landlord to install a peephole for those times when I'm hiding out from the media. Right, because that's something that happens in a totally normal life.

"You've got to be freaking kidding me."

"Hey, Selena."

Jackson freaking Waters is grinning down at me. He looks exactly the same as he did on The Eddie Parsons Show a couple of days ago. Tall, handsome, black t-shirt, blue jeans. He has more facial hair now than he did in the elevator, like he hasn't shaved since. The sides of his hair are shaved shorter than the top. He's still the hottest man I've ever seen in real life. And that makes me even angrier at him. It's not right that the man who ruins your life is *this* hot.

"What are you doing here?" Stealing a glance past him, I see cameras flashing on the sidewalk on the other side of the little fence dividing my tiny front yard from the street. He did this to me. He turned my life into some kind of freak show.

“Are you going to invite me in?”

“Really, wasn’t going to.” It doesn’t matter that he’s a movie star. It doesn’t matter that he’s more handsome than any single human man has any right to be. The only thing that matters is that Jackson Waters ruined my life. He made me the butt of every single dumb late-night talk show host’s jokes. He made it so there’s a line of photographers on the sidewalk outside my apartment in an old converted house in Echo Park.

“Don’t you want to know why I’m here?”

“I stopped caring what you have to say when you told the entire world that I peed in your water bottle *in front of you* on national TV.”

He has the absolute audacity to flash me a sheepish smile. “So, you heard about that, huh?”

“The entire world heard about that!”

“I... I’m sorry about that. Did you get the flowers I sent?”

I nod towards the compost bin along the fence. A few crushed and browning white roses and pink lilies are haphazardly sticking out.

“Didn’t buy you the right kind of flowers, I guess.”

“Something like that.”

I love flowers. Lilies, in particular. They’re my favorite. It pained me to shove the beautiful bouquet into the trash. But I couldn’t have any reminders of Jackson Waters or #Pee-gate or #elevatorgirl in my house.

“Selena, can I come in? Please? I need to talk to you.”

“Seems like you did more than enough talking on The Eddie Parsons Show.”

“I told you I’m sorry about that. I even sent you flowers. And I’m here right now, so let me make it up to you.”

“Has anyone ever told you that saying you’re sorry doesn’t actually fix anything?”

He looks surprised. No one probably has ever told him that saying he’s sorry doesn’t just magically fix everything. Because he’s probably never heard the word *no* in his entire life.

“I’m sorry for all of this. And I have a way to make this better, I promise... if you’ll let me in so I can tell you about it.” Jackson glances back over his shoulder at the clicking cameras. “Or I could go talk to them? We were in that elevator for a long time. I’m sure I could think of a few more things to tell them about you.”

chapter ten

selena

*M*y jaw drops. “You *wouldn’t*.”
He shrugs.

“So much for what happens in the elevator stays in the elevator.” Turning on my heel, I leave the door open a few inches so he can follow me inside. I might let him come in, but I will be damned if I *invite* this man into my home. I never invited him into my elevator. I never invited him into my life. And I definitely never invited him to talk about me on national TV. I just want all of this—and *Jackson Waters*—to go away.

Whatever he plans on saying to me, I have a feeling that I’m not going to like it. I should sit down. And have several drinks. Maybe he’s planning on writing a book about his harrowing hours trapped in an elevator with a monstrous *normie* with a pee fetish? Or maybe he’s going to direct and star in a new horror movie about a man trapped in an elevator with his worst nightmare?

Making extra effort to stomp my bare feet every single step along the old parquet hallway towards the kitchen at the back of my apartment, I don’t care if he’s following me or not. I hope he’s not. I hope the earth opened up and swallowed him whole. This is L.A. It could happen.

Unfortunately, after some brief scuffing sounds, I hear soft footsteps following behind me. At least he’s polite enough to take his boots off. No, no. He does not get credit for that. He does not get credit for anything. I will not think a single nice thought about the man who made me a walking punchline.

“What smells so good?”

After grabbing my biggest wine glass from the cupboard—the glass I save for only the worst of my worst days—I set it down on the old green tile counter with a crack that has me checking for breaks in my beloved vase of a wine glass. Survived another day. That’s why she’s my favorite. My kitchen is itty-bitty, yellow and green, and wouldn’t look out of place in a nineteen-sixties Tupperware ad. So, I don’t even have to take a step to open the fridge

and pull out the open bottle of Chenin blanc I keep chilled for emergencies. After pouring myself a healthy glass, and then taking an even healthier sip, I turn to face him.

“Are you going to offer me a treat? You know how much I love your baking.”

“No.”

He’s watching me from a few feet away, next to the little bistro table in the corner, covered in cooling cupcakes. There isn’t really any place to hide in a place this small. I chose location and a patio where I could have an herb garden and an outdoor pizza oven over size when I rented this place. And until now, I haven’t had a single regret. But now that Jackson Waters is in my space, crowding me, I wish I’d rented a five-bedroom house with a three-hour commute into the city.

“Are you going to offer me a glass?”

“No.”

“This would be a lot easier if you were nicer to me.”

“And making things easier for the poor movie star who ruined my life is at the top of my to do list.” Flashing him a crazed smile, I bare my teeth before taking another sip of wine. “I’ll get right on it.”

“Right...” Jackson shifts his weight from one socked foot to the other. His socks are black, and I hate him for that, too. Perpetually dirty white socks are one of my pet peeves. Why do white socks even exist? And of course, Jackson is wearing black socks. No filthy, stained toes for this movie star. “So, the thing I wanted to talk to you about. Look, I know this is going to sound crazy. But just hear me out. I think when you look at the big picture. It makes sense for both of us. It’s a win-win.”

“I’m sure it’s a win for you. Not so sure about anything you say being a win for me.” Taking a deep breath, I try to calm myself down. “Just tell me what you want. Because the sooner you tell me what you want, the sooner you can leave.”

“So much for being nicer.”

I raise my eyebrows at him, and then take a giant gulp of wine. Too big of a gulp of wine, in fact. Because some of it goes down my windpipe, and I start coughing. Because of course, I do. Instead of being angry and dignified, I’m pissy and choking on wine. Just freaking perfect.

“Are you okay? Do you need me to do the Heimlich maneuver? I think I can do it. I had to do it in a film, once.” Jackson walks towards me with a set

brow and clenched jaw. It's the same look he had on his face when he went to disarm the bomb in that C.I.A. movie he was in. But that was fake. This is real.

My eyes are swimming. My throat is burning. But I drag in some air and try to stop coughing. I hold up a hand to warn him to stay back. "No." *Cough.* "I'm fine." *Cough. Cough.* "Stay over there." *Cough, cough, cough.*

"You're *not* fine. You're choking. Let me help you." Jackson ignores my hand held up in the universal sign of *stop whatever the hell you're doing* and comes towards me. While I'm coughing up a lung, he sidesteps me until he's behind me. Then Jackson Waters' arms wrap around my chest, pulling me tight against him.

He's so tall that his hard, muscle-y forearms are pressing right into my boobs. He doesn't seem to notice, and his first attempt to give me the Heimlich maneuver results in him crushing my breasts into my body and a strangled yelp escaping my mouth.

"What the...?" Jackson demands.

He leans around me to see my face, sees where his arms are pressing, and then has the nerve to give me a cocky grin. He has the nerve to freaking grin at me!

"Sorry about that. Sensitive area, huh?"

Yes, of course, my nipples are sensitive to being crushed into a pulp by some random movie star's veiny, muscular forearm.

Jackson lowers his arm to just under my breasts and tries to give me the Heimlich maneuver another three times. He squeezes me so hard that he pulls me right off my feet twice. I couldn't cough anymore if I wanted to because there's no air left in my lungs.

After carefully listening to my lack of coughing for a long minute, Jackson removes his arms from my body and steps around me to look at my face. He leans in close and inspects my lips, then my cheeks, then my eyes.

"All clear. No signs of petechial hemorrhaging. You're welcome."

"I'm welcome?!? I didn't thank you for anything!" I'm full-on shouting at him now.

"Well, I was giving you the benefit of the doubt on that one. Since you were choking and all."

"You embarrassed me on national TV and then showed up unannounced at my home. And then just did whatever the hell that was. I have nothing to thank you for!"

“I seem to remember loaning you a water bottle at a very opportune time...”

“If you mention that one more time, I’m going to go out to the compost bin, get those flowers you sent, and then beat you to death with them right in front of all the paparazzi camped out outside my house!”

“A guy can’t catch a break here, can he?”

“Not you. Not today. Not ever.” Finally able to take a deep, steadying breath, I stare him down. “Just get this over with. Say what you need to say and then leave. *Please.*”

“You’re the one who started choking. I was only trying to help.”

“Because you’re always so helpful.”

“Why are you so pissed at me? I thought we were... like friends or *something* after the elevator,” Jackson asks, his eyes searching my face.

“So did I! But then you blew up my life on national TV. You had to get through an army of media vans and paparazzi to get through my front door tonight. You did that!”

Jackson shrugs. “I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

“Of course, this was going to happen! For you, maybe it’s some amusing anecdote. You come off like the hero. But I’m the one who peed in a damn water bottle, okay?”

“I’m sorry, but it’s just not that big of a deal.”

“Maybe to you, it’s not. You’re famous and everything, and I’m just me. And you turned me into a national joke. I thought...”

“What did you think?”

“Never mind.”

“Tell me.”

“I get that you’re you, and I’m me. I know we couldn’t be more different. But I guess I thought that the elevator kind of leveled the playing field. For those six hours in that elevator, we were just two humans. Two humans in really, really unfortunate circumstances. I guess I thought you saw me as a person, and not just a convenient punch line. And I guess I was wrong.”

“I do.”

“I don’t believe you. Thanks for coming here and apologizing, I guess. I think you should go now.”

“You’re kicking me out?”

“Shocking, I know. I bet the famous movie star doesn’t get kicked out of places anymore. Probably not for a long time. But it’s happening now.”

Enjoy!”

“I’m sorry, Selena. I swear.”

“Thank you for saying that. I think you should go now.”

“I haven’t said what I came here to say.”

“You didn’t come here to apologize?”

Ugh. I think he actually might be the worst person on the face of the earth.

“Then why the hell did you come here? Just spit it out and then go.”

“I think we should date.”

chapter eleven

selena

And that's when I spit a mouthful of wine right at Jackson Waters. Unfortunately, I miss him, and it lands on the floor in between us. So, I didn't spray him in spit-wine, and now I have to clean it up later.

Fuck. My. Life.

How much wine did I just breathe in when I was choking? How long did I go without oxygen while it felt like I was coughing up a lung? Am I hallucinating?

"Date? You think we should *date*?" The word feels unfamiliar in my mouth, like a sound from another language. It must be. Because clearly Jackson and I don't have the same definition of *date*.

He looks a little embarrassed. "You wouldn't have to do anything... you didn't want to. It would be fake. My team thinks it would be a good idea. This whole elevator girl thing is getting a lot of attention. They want to capitalize on the good buzz. Remember, I told you I was up for that big role? And for the first time in a long time, I didn't know if I was going to get it?"

I remember. Of course, I do. I remember everything he told me in that elevator.

"So, you don't actually want to date me?"

"You don't have to sound so damn relieved by the idea," Jackson mutters. "It would just be PR. It happens more than you think in this town. We would only have to be seen a few times together. Like me coming to your house tonight. Or we go for dinner. You come to my place. That kind of thing. And we just let the tabloids think what we already know they want to think."

"And what exactly is it they want to think?" I ask him.

Like I don't already know. As if I haven't read countless threads, subreddits, and memes obsessed with the idea of Jackson Waters falling for a *normal* girl. A *normal* girl who looks like me. A 'real' woman. Like my soft flesh and curves make me any more real than someone who is naturally skinny.

"They like the idea of the elevator being our meet cute-"

“You know what a meet cute is?” I ask suspiciously, interrupting him.

Meet cutes are my favorite part of the smutty books I like to read, well other than the smutty scenes themselves. A vibrator and a one-handed read can fix a whole world of stress.

“I’m an actor. I did my share of rom coms back in the day, and I know my way around a meet cute.”

“And you want to pretend that you’re in a relationship with me? Pretend that you love me? Pretend that you want me?” My head is spinning with all the possibilities. If I could have won a billion dollars by guessing why Jackson came here tonight, I wouldn’t have guessed this. “You’re going to put your arm around me. Hold my hand? *Kiss me?*”

“We only have to do whatever you’re comfortable with. And whatever that is, I’ll make it work. I’m an actor, after all.”

Right. He’s an actor. So, pretending he’s in love with me is no big deal for him.

“I don’t get how this helps you get a role.”

Jackson shrugs. “You might not know this, but I don’t exactly have the best dating track record. And one of the studio’s concerns is that I’m not very family friendly.”

Of course, I know this. Anyone who’s been in a grocery store check-out line in the last ten years or has an internet connection knows about Jackson’s sordid history of brief relationships with actresses and models, every single one even thinner and more beautiful than the last. “How does pretending to be in a relationship with a random woman you met in an elevator and then embarrassed on national TV make you more family friendly? Seems to me like it would do the opposite.”

“I think it’s the romance of it all. How we met.” Jackson shifts on his feet again. He does that when he has to say something uncomfortable. I didn’t notice that in the elevator because we were sitting down. And other than the incident-that-shall-not-be-named, somehow inside the four walls of that elevator, there was nothing to be uncomfortable about. There was no bullshit. We were just two strangers. Not a movie star and a normal girl. Just two people. Nothing more, nothing less.

“And my team thinks the fact that you’re not in the business would be good for me. Make me look good.”

“Right. Jackson Waters is dating someone who isn’t rich and famous. Movie stars, they’re just like us!” I mutter under my breath. This has gone on

long enough. I've entertained Jackson and his nonsense for far too long. But one unanswered question pulls at me. "How was this a win-win? Am I just getting the gift of your presence? Or was there something I actually might want in there?"

Jackson's lips quirk at the corners into a faint smile. "You get *me*. My presence, my attention, and my fame. Hell, I'll give you whatever else you want, too. And we were thinking two-fifty to compensate you for your time."

"Two-hundred-and-fifty-dollars?" Wow, that tells me exactly what Jackson thinks of my time.

"Thousand dollars."

"Two thousand dollars?" I mean, it's better than two-hundred-and-fifty dollars. But it's barely a drop in the bucket of what I need to get a commercial baking space, much less a real bakery with a cafe storefront and enough room for a wholesale baking space in the back.

"Two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars," he says matter-of-factly.

"*Two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars?* To get me to pretend to like you?" I let a long whistle out between my lips. "You must be completely shit to be around."

But even I don't believe that, not unless the entire six hours in the elevator was an act. Personally, I don't think he's a good enough actor to keep it going for that long.

"That's why you'd have to sign an NDA."

A non-disclosure agreement. You don't have to live in L.A. for more than fifteen minutes before someone is talking about the NDA they had to sign for something or other. I've had to sign countless ones for special orders and deliveries.

"How long would I have to do this for?" Am I actually considering this? As if the photographers outside my house right now aren't bad enough? This will all get worse if I stop being some *rando* Jackson Waters got stuck with in an elevator that he hinted he might be dating and become his actual girlfriend. Or, at least, let the world think I'm his actual girlfriend. Because even though there won't be anything real about this, I'll be #elevatorgirl forever. And the last thing I want is to be #elevatorgirl forever. This will never go away.

It was never going to go away though, an annoying know-it-all voice in my head tells me. The internet's forever. Once my name got out, for the rest of my life, I was always going to be #elevatorgirl.

"I'm close to booking this big franchise lead. It's between me and two

other guys. I don't know exactly how long we'd need to do this. But not more than two months? Eight weeks? Probably less. Probably a lot less."

"Two months? Eight weeks. Probably less. Probably a lot less," I repeat his words, thinking them over as I sound out every syllable. Two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars for two months' work. And this would be work. Hard work to be around Jackson and pretend that I've forgiven him for what he did. But never in my life did I think I could make that kind of money in that amount of time. And all I have to sacrifice is my dignity and privacy. Both are *long* gone anyway, thanks to Jackson Waters.

"And all I have to do is *pretend* to like you? Nothing physical?" Am I really considering agreeing to this? I'm not. I can't be. It's just that this money would put me at least ten years ahead in my plans for Ladycakes. Maybe I could jump ahead to the dream of actually opening a real bakery? The kind where people drink coffee and eat pastry and steal the Wi-Fi connection.

"Not how you're thinking." Jackson shifts on his feet again. "We have to be convincing. So maybe we can hold hands, or I put my hand on your back, my arm over your shoulders. Stuff like that."

"But you don't *want* to have sex with me?" The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. Of course, Jackson Waters doesn't *want* to have sex with me. He could have any girl he wants, and a plus size baker who lives in Echo Park is the last person he'd be interested in.

"You don't *have* to have sex with me, Selena. We can put that in the contract. Iron clad. And you can have your own lawyer look at it before you sign. I'll pay for you to have your own lawyer, if you don't already have one."

I really want to say no. I really, really want to tell Jackson Waters to get the hell out of my house and never darken my doorstep again.

But his offer is just too good. It's an offer I can't say no to.

"Jackson?"

"Yes, Selena?"

"Give me your phone."

His eyebrows snap together. "Why do you want my phone?"

"So, I can put my number in it. Because you have yourself a fake girlfriend for the next two months. Hopefully less. *Hopefully, a lot less.*"

chapter twelve

Seven weeks. Probably less. Probably a lot less...

jackson

“**S**hit or get off the pot, Jackson!” Val’s voice is going to be ringing in my ear long after we hang up. “It’s been a week, and everyone is still talking about #elevatorgirl. But no one is talking about how you’re officially dating #elevatorgirl. Because no one knows! Get the girl and go to Erewhon or something. Hit up Nobu. I don’t care. Just go somewhere public and get photographed! Today!”

“Alright, alright. I’ll see if she has time to meet up today.”

“You’re paying her two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars, she can make the time. I’m hanging up now. Don’t make me have to call you again tomorrow to have the same conversation we’ve had every day for the last week.”

“Bye, Val.”

I have Selena’s number. The contract and NDA were both signed a week ago, but I haven’t so much as texted her since I left her house the other night. Val and my lawyer handled the contracts. Selena didn’t even care enough to hire her own lawyer. Even when I offered to pay for it again.

But the contract is fair. It’s what we agreed to. She pretends to be my girlfriend for two months in exchange for two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars. No sex. It’s there in black and white in the contract. Not that I would ever take advantage of her. I’ve already done more than enough to this woman. The last thing she wants is me touching her.

I’m allowed to hold her hand, to touch her shoulder, waist, and lower back if I put my arm around her, and get close enough so it looks like we’re kissing when we’re not. That’s it. And only when we have an audience. Full stop.

But if we don’t go out in public soon, I think Val might actually murder me. So, here goes nothing.

Jackson: Can you come over to my place today? I want to show you around. And then if it’s okay with you, maybe we can get some food? In public? It’s Jackson.

Selena: I know who it is

Selena: This is what you bought and paid for. I'm working until four, but I can come over after. Send me your address...

Jackson: You have a car, right? I didn't even think to ask you that before

Jackson: I can have someone come get you...

Selena: I have a car. This is L.A. Everyone has a car

Jackson: Right. Here's a pin. See you this afternoon

Oats and I spend the day at home, working our way through a stack of scripts a few feet high. If the whole franchise thing doesn't work out, I'm going to need a new project to focus on. I don't get more than twenty pages into any of the scripts all morning. None of them are right. Or I'm not right for them. What the hell am I going to do if I don't get this role? It's the next step. A massive franchise—a cinematic universe—is the only thing I haven't done yet.

After another meal of protein and greens, I sit down on the low sofa in my office instead of behind the desk and start in on another pile of scripts.

When four o'clock rolls around, I call it, since I'm not getting anything done, anyway. I play ball with Oats in the yard for a bit and then I jump in the shower before Selena gets here.

I know she's pissed at me, but I swear I'm going to make this whole thing as minimally shitty for her as I can.

When the gate buzzer rings, I'm pacing back and forth across the sunken living room in front of the extra-deep cream sectional. Oats is set up on the matching upholstered ottoman, his eyes tracking me back and forth.

Walking over to the keypad, I press one to open the gate. I forgot to give my *girlfriend* the damn code to my house.

Jackson: Gate code is 5657

Jackson: For next time

“Stay there, Oats. Stay.”

I'm at the front door, holding it open for her by the time she pulls up in a little blue Prius.

She's every bit as pretty as I remember. The sun's hitting her dark hair, making it look lighter than it is. She's wearing bright pink lipstick. She was

wearing bright pink lipstick in the elevator, too. And she's wearing a teal dress that's tight through the chest and then gets wider until it stops mid-thigh. Then there's just a whole lot of creamy leg down to the purple Converse sneakers she's wearing. She traded in her massive bag from the elevator for a little purple one she's wearing shoulder to hip, the strap pressing in between her breasts. And those breasts. They're huge, with several inches of them on display above the neckline of her dress. Not that I've thought about her breasts for the last two months. Because I'm not a completely depraved asshole.

"Hey."

She sounds almost shy, which isn't like her. Or maybe it is? I don't know her well enough to know whether something's like her or not. Only I feel like I do.

"Is it okay to park there?" She waves her hand toward her car, pulled to the side in the curve of my driveway near the front stairs.

"Hey, back. It's perfect. Come on in."

When she walks into the house, I close the heavy glass front door after us. Then she turns to face me and gives me some sort of mocking salute.

"Fake girlfriend, reporting for duty."

"I thought you were pissed at me?" Leaning back, I study her.

"I was."

"But you're not anymore?"

"Not that you need to know about."

"I should probably just take the good news, but I've never been one to let things go. Are you or are you not pissed at me? And why wouldn't I need to know about it?"

"I decided I don't want to be angry anymore. This is two months of my life, and then I never have to see you again. You're paying a lot of money for a fake girlfriend, and I'm going to give you your money's worth."

"Why don't you want to be angry with me anymore?"

"Being pissed at you is more work and harder on me than it is on you." She lets out a long breath. "And while a lot of this was *entirely* your fault, like telling the entire country on live TV about the incident. Not all of it is your fault."

"I guess I'll take the win, then. Did you want a drink or something?"

She smiles politely at me like I'm a stranger. "No, thank you."

"Thanks for coming today. I thought maybe I could show you around

before we head out, if that's okay." Why the hell do I sound like a desperate tour guide? "You should probably know your way around where I live, so there are no surprises."

"Sounds good. Whatever you want." She gives me that same polite smile again, like some sort of Stepford Wife Selena. What the hell?

chapter thirteen

jackson

Walking slowly into the house, I motion for her to follow me. “This is the living room. Those doors lead out to the backyard and the pool.”

“Who is this? Is this Oats?” Robot Selena is gone, replaced by someone capable of human emotion. Apparently only for my dog.

“Yeah, that’s Oats.” His whole body is quivering, wanting to come and say hello. But since I told him to stay, he’s hovering above the ottoman, but not jumping down.

“Okay, Oats. Release.” At my words, eighty pounds of curly blonde Goldendoodle launches himself at Selena. “Shit.”

Stepping in front of her, I take the hit of Oats’ paws on my chest. “Alright, Oats. I know you’re excited. But where are your damn manners? Get down. Down.”

Oats drops to stand on four paws instead of two, and then wiggles over to Selena, his entire body wagging.

She drops onto her knees, defeating the entire purpose of me getting Oats to behave. She lets him lick her neck and cheeks and hands with his gross dog-tongue. I love this dog more than anything, and even I don’t let him lick me on my damn face.

“Hi, Oats. It’s so good to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you. And you just sound like the best dog. Are you the best dog? Are you the best boy?”

“He’s alright,” I mutter from behind her, with a slow smile creeping across my lips. So, she really likes dogs.

After what feels like ten minutes, I interrupt the displays of mutual affection between everyone in the room except me. “We should get moving.”

She rolls her eyes at me. She actually rolls her damn eyes at me. “Okay, Oatsie, your dad says I can’t play with you anymore. But I promise I’ll give you lots of snuggles and kisses later, okay? Can you shake on it? Shake a paw.”

My dog is no slouch in the tricks department, so he gently holds out a paw for Selena to shake.

“I need a treat to give him,” she announces, tearing her hazel eyes away from my dog long enough to look at me like I’ve failed her already.

“Right. Why don’t I get you one?” I mutter, crossing over to the treat canister on top of a nearly empty bookshelf. Grabbing a couple of cookies, I hand them to Selena.

She gives them all to Oats for doing one measly trick and then stands up again.

Room by room, I show her the house. Seeing her here, practically every inch of her covered in a bright color, I notice for the first time how white my house is. I hired a decorator to make it liveable and didn’t pay much attention. But the whole place seems boring compared to her. It’s a new build in the Hollywood Hills, modern, sleek lines, lots of concrete, lots of glass, lots of chrome, gigantic windows, bigger garage.

When we get to the end of the long hall, I open the door to my bedroom. “This is my room.”

Then I turn across the hall to the guest room. “And this is your room. For when you sleep over here.”

Her eyes immediately snap to mine. “Why would I need to sleep over?”

“Because we’re adults. Who are supposed to be dating. We’d be having sex—a lot of it—if we were really dating.”

“Ohhh, right.” Her mouth falls open, letting me see her pink tongue. “But how can I sleep in there if I’m supposed to be sleeping with you?”

“All of my staff have NDAs. We should try to keep up appearances in front of them. But I’m not going to *force* you to sleep in the same bed as me, Selena. *Jesus.*”

She blanches. Apparently, the thought of sleeping in the same bed as me is horrifying. Great. This woman really is fantastic for my ego.

“Look, I’m never going to try to get you to do something you don’t want to do or make you feel uncomfortable, I promise. All touching was agreed to in the contract you signed. So, you don’t have to worry about me trying to pressure you into doing something you don’t want to do.”

She’s frowning up at me now. “That’s the last thing I was worried about.”

“Good?”

Then what the hell was she worried about?

“What do you want me to call you?”

“My name? Selena? I don’t have to change my name, do I? I don’t think I’d be very good at that. You know when you think about being a spy, like could you do it? Would you be able to lead a double life and murder people for a living? I just don’t think I could lead a double life like that. I’m not good at keeping my story straight. I think I’d always be answering to the wrong name and not answering the right one. So, can’t we just use my real name? The press already knows who I am, thanks to you.”

I shake my head. “As always, there’s a helluva lot to unpack there. Murdering people wouldn’t be the issue with you being a spy?”

“I’m assuming they would deserve it, right?”

“And you regularly think about whether you would be good at being a spy? This is something you do?”

“How regularly is regularly? Definitely every time I watch a spy show or movie. Absolutely. Also, I’m not good with accents, so that’s another problem.” She frowns, like it’s a serious failure.

“Okay, well, I’m learning a lot about you, as per usual, whenever you open your mouth and string more than two words together. But I meant a *nickname*. Like baby or honey or something like that.”

She crunches up her face. “Those are kind of boring. What about my moon and my stars? Love of my life? Gift of a woman?”

A smile tugs at my lips. “I think it probably needs to be something short, or I wouldn’t I just say Selena?”

“Fine, I don’t care what you call me if it’s going to be boring.”

“Great feedback,” I tell her, shaking my head.

“What should I call you? Babe seems too boring. What about wild stallion? No, that feels too long. Hmmm, what about *nugget*?”

“Is there a fourth option?”

“I really like nugget. Let me try it out. I think you’re really going to like it.”

“Doubt it. And aren’t you vegan? Why the hell do you want to call me *nugget*?”

“You remember that I’m vegan? Doesn’t matter. Nuggets are adorable, and I would never eat them. It’s perfect.”

She slides her hand into mine and then looks up at me with her big hazel eyes. “Come on, *Nugget*. Let’s go, *Nugget*.”

My lips twitch before pulling into a big-ass smile. I’m going to let this woman call me *nugget*, and I’m going to like it.

“See, it’s perfect!”

“I don’t know about perfect. But at least it’s weird enough that no one would believe I’d let you call me that if this wasn’t real.”

The smile she gives me is pure sunshine. “Like I said, perfect.”

“Let’s go get our pictures taken...”

She looks panicked. “I need to use the bathroom first.”

“Okay, there’s one in your room, my room. And then another eight. Take your pick. I’ll meet you back in the living room.”

Oats and I are waiting in the living room when Selena finds us again.

“I got lost. And I met someone named Margrit. Is she your housekeeper? She seemed kind of surprised to find a random woman milling around your house. I didn’t know what to say, so I told her I was your... new friend.”

“Let’s get going.” My jaw clenches.

Grabbing her hand, I pull her down the hall to the garage. As pissed as I am, I’m careful not to press too hard. Her hand is so small in mine.

I lead her over to the passenger door of my Suburban and open it for her.

“Thanks,” she whispers.

Neither of us says anything while we buckle up and I drive out of the garage and then out of the security gates onto the road outside.

“What’s wrong? You’re never this quiet.”

“You don’t know me well enough to know what I’m like most of the time.”

“I think I got to know you pretty well in the elevator. How often do you spend six straight hours just staring at someone and talking to them? I consider it a crash course in Selena Miller.”

“That was an extreme circumstance and totally doesn’t count.”

“I think it counts.”

“What did I do wrong? I can tell you’re mad about something. So, just tell me. It’s worse not knowing.”

“You’re not my friend, Selena.” I enunciate each syllable through my gritted teeth.

chapter fourteen

selena

*S*let the breath I was holding out on a long sigh. “Rude, but okay. That’s what I was trying to tell you. We barely know each other.”

This whole thing has my head spinning. After a few minutes of driving the curvy road leading down to L.A. from Jackson’s ridiculously expensive Hollywood Hills home, I’m still struggling to wrap my mind around everything. I was primed to be positive and be a great fake girlfriend—the best fake girlfriend—but being with Jackson again, in his house and in his car, meeting his housekeeper, has me all twisted up.

Everything about him is confusing. The country slowness to his voice. The way he held the door open for me. His enormous house. I’ve heard of two-car garages and three-car garages. But Jackson’s garage is enormous. He only has three cars in here, but you could fit five times as many.

“No, I mean, you can’t tell people you’re my friend. You told Margrit that you’re my *friend*. And you’re not. You’re my girlfriend. I trust Margrit not to mention it. She has an NDA. But if it had been anyone else... You need to get used to saying that you’re my *girlfriend*. Try it out.”

“What? No. There’s no one else here.”

“No time like the present. Go on. Introduce me as your boyfriend.”

“Fine.” I reach out and shake hands with an imaginary person above the dash of Jackson’s massive Suburban. “Hi, Bob. It’s so nice to meet you. I’m Selena. Who’s this? Oh, he’s no one. That’s just my *boyfriend*. You can ignore him. He can be super annoying.”

“Charming. Go again. *And who the fuck is Bob?*”

“Hi, Claire. I’m Selena. I’m Jackson Waters’ girlfriend. Oh, you don’t know who he is? That’s so funny! Me, either!”

“That’s just not true. You knew exactly who I was when we met.”

“Claire doesn’t know that.”

“Who the fuck is Claire?”

“The imaginary person who I’m introducing myself to, *Nugget*.”

Jackson glares at me. “Where do your parents live? Do you have any

siblings? We need to know this stuff.”

“Just my mom. No dad in the picture. Mom lives in Riverside. That’s where I grew up. She’s retired now, but she was a teacher. One younger brother. He’s a hockey player. Minor league right now, but he’s going to make it to the pros. I know it. I’m super proud of him. But unfortunately for me, he got every available bit of athletic DNA in the family.”

Jackson eyes me up and down. “A hockey player, huh? Could he kick my ass?”

“*Definitely*, Nugget. *Definitely*,” I promise him with a huge smile. Although, I’m actually not so sure about that. Jackson is taller and has at least twenty pounds on my brother. But my brother’s younger and scrappy. And there’s the whole professional athlete thing, too. And he plays hockey, so he knows how to fight. Even if I have to cover my eyes whenever he gets into a fight during a game.

“My mom was a teacher, too. And I have four brothers.”

“Four brothers, got it.” There are more of him? That just seems wrong. “Older or younger?”

“Younger. Relationships?”

“I’ve had a few boyfriends. Two serious ones. Nothing recent. You?”

“Same. A few girlfriends. None really that serious. Broke up with the last one six months ago. It really wasn’t serious.”

“Got it.”

“Back to what you said at the house about this not all being my fault. Which parts aren’t my fault?”

“The elevator stopping. And the fact that I couldn’t find a bathroom before I got onto the elevator.”

“Ah, so pretty much it’s all my fault?”

“Yes, exactly.” I nod. “But the money from this... situation is going to help me buy a bakery. A real bakery. Not just more space for wholesale production. A real brick-and-mortar bakery where customers can come in and get their morning coffee. A place where people will come in every day and order *the usual*, and I’ll know what that is. Because I’ll get them their usual every morning.” My face is covered in a massive smile just thinking about all my plans for the future. Plans that are now possible, thanks to Jackson. “And since I’m getting what I want, I’m going to give you what you want. The best fake girlfriend in the entire world. Prepare yourself for an Oscar-worthy performance.”

Jackson shifts his weight from side to side and shrugs his shoulders a few times. “Consider me prepared. And I got all of that just for offering a lady my water bottle in her time of need. Best deal of my life. How did I get so fucking lucky?”

“If you keep bringing up the-incident-that-shall-not-be-named, I might have to murder you in your sleep, *Nugget*.”

“Sorry, I forgot how sensitive you are about that. Who gives a shit? Everybody pees.”

“If I’m not allowed to talk about this being fake, even in private, then you can’t talk about the-incident-that-shall-not-be-named. The more comfortable you are talking about it in private, the more likely you are to talk about it in public. Oh, wait. You already told the entire country about it!”

“And they thought it was as charming as I did,” Jackson says with a laugh.

“Peeing in a water bottle in front of the guy from the poster on your bedroom wall when you were sixteen is *not* charming. It’s the dictionary definition of whatever word is the opposite of charming!”

“Hold up? What poster?” Jackson asks, his eyes narrowing. “Shit, are you a closet Raven-head? Do I need to call security? Was this whole thing a set-up from the beginning?”

If looks could actually wither, Jackson would be a shriveled up, rotten old tomato stem. “Shut up.”

“Holy shit. That’s not a no.” He’s staring at me with wide eyes, like he’s seeing me for the first time.

“Okay, so I watched *Raven’s Ravine*, just like everyone else in high school. It’s no big deal.”

“I can’t comment on that. I was in my twenties for the entire run of that show,” Jackson says with a grin. “But to be clear about this, exactly how big of a fan are you? Are we talking about attending a few Raven-Cons or a full on back-tattoo of my abs? Since I’m your boyfriend, I should probably know if you have my chest tattooed on you somewhere, glistening in the moonlight.”

“You would love that, wouldn’t you? Pathetic #elevatorgirl turns out to be a secret stalker fan,” I mutter under my breath, hands in fists on the edge of the seat, ready to claw my way through his black leather seats at any moment.

“So, just a few Raven-Cons then?”

“I never went to a single Raven-Con,” I insist.

He narrows his eyes at me. “But did you want to go?”

Reaching out, I slap my hand against his big arm. “Of course, I did! My mom wouldn’t let me go.”

Jackson lets out a laugh that can only be described as a guffaw.

“I hate you.”

“Sounds like you don’t hate me at all. Sounds like you’re just a little obsessed with me.”

“Trust me, I’m not!”

“Sorry, can’t trust you on this one. The poster speaks for itself. So, how far down the rabbit-hole did this obsession go? Have you planned our wedding? What are our kids’ names? I assume our first-born is going to be Raven, obviously.”

“Shut up! I hate you so much right now.”

“Except that you don’t. Not even a little. You *love* me,” Jackson mocks me. “You want to *marry* me.”

“Oh my god, shut up! I wasn’t into you at all. I wanted to marry Jonas VerKnauff.”

“Well, shit. And here I thought you had good taste.”

“I met him, you know.” My perfectly sensible mind—the mind of an adult woman—is overrun by the crazed ramblings of a rabid teenage vampire show fanatic.

“You met Jonas? When? Here in L.A.? Jonas hates L.A.”

“No. When I was a teenager back home in Riverside. At the mall. He was there as part of a contest with our local radio station. Why does everything happen at the mall when you’re a teenager?”

“I didn’t have a mall growing up. Everything happened in a barn, where I’m from.”

“Huh.” I file that little morsel of information away for future consideration. I know Jackson’s from Canada. But I never thought about what his childhood was like. He’s been famous for so long, I guess I didn’t think he had much of a childhood.

“Now, back to the mall. What happened when you met Jonas?”

“It was the best day of my teenage life. I was completely convinced that Vampire Claude was going to lay eyes on me and immediately fall in love with me. He was going to bring me to L.A., where we’d both be rich and famous or else make me into a vampire and we’d live forever together.

Forever in love.” Teenage me was a complete idiot.

“You know he’s not actually a vampire, right?”

“There is no reasoning with a teenage girl. The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“And you wanted a toxic, pompous, vampire old enough to be your great-great-great-great—and I think we need a few more greats in there—great grandfather?”

“Like I said, the heart wants what the heart wants. And toxic was not a word in our vocabulary back then. Being stolen away from my family and friends seemed totally romantic. Now, it’s giving Stockholm vibes, for sure.”

“I’m not going to lie to you. This completely changes how I see you. Here, I thought you had taste. But you were obsessed with Jonas, when you could have been obsessed with me?” Jackson shakes his head.

“Not everyone is obsessed with you. Sorry to disappoint.”

“Shit, you said you don’t have my abs tattooed on your back, but please tell me you don’t have Jonas’ smug face on there?”

“No. I can confirm I have zero back tattoos. But only because my mom wouldn’t let me do that either.” I pull my leg up from the black floor mat to hold it out in front of the dash. Running my fingers over the tattoo above my right ankle, I turn back to Jackson. “You should probably know about this, though. I have a tattoo of a bumblebee on my ankle.”

“Selena, I clocked the bumblebee in the elevator. I spent six hours staring at you.”

“Oh, right.” How did I miss that he spent six hours staring at me, when I spent the whole six hours staring at him? No matter how many times he tells me that, I still don’t quite believe it.

“Do you have any tattoos that I can’t see with your clothes on?”

“Nope.”

“What about piercings?” Jackson glances over at me. “Other than the ones on your ears?”

Pressing my hand to my ear to fiddle with my textured gold hoop, I shake my head. “Nope, again.”

“I don’t have any piercings, but I’ve got some tattoos. I’ll show you when we’re back at the house.”

My eyes spread wide. “Oh. You can probably just tell me about them. That would probably be good.”

“You worried you won’t be able to resist me with my clothes off?” The

cocky smile he gives me makes me want to slap him. Or kiss him. No, no. There will be no slapping. And definitely no kissing.

“Absolutely not. I just... think that we should keep this as professional as we can. Try to hold on to a bit of normal.”

Jackson’s lips twitch. “Because this whole thing is completely normal. Selena, my life hasn’t been normal since the day I met you. But don’t worry, I don’t have any tattoos you can’t see in a bathing suit. *Yet.*”

“Oh, planning on a dick tattoo?”

“Nah, I was thinking of a treasure trail tattoo that says, *You’re welcome,*” Jackson tells me with a grin.

“That’s literally the most disgusting thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Not a good idea, then?”

“Absolutely not. I wouldn’t be able to even pretend to date someone with a tattoo like that.”

“Selena...”

“Right. I wouldn’t be able to *date* someone with a tattoo like that.”

“We’re here. Ready to put your game face on?”

“My game face is *always* on!”

“You have the worst game face of anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Lies!”

Jackson leans over, and his face hovers next to mine, like he’s going to kiss me. Holy shit. Kissing wasn’t in the contract. But if he did kiss me, would I really push him away?

“Ready to be in love with me?”

Then he clicks my seatbelt and leans back to his own seat like nothing happened. Meanwhile, I’m about to hyperventilate as flashes of bright lights shine into the car and photographers swarm us.

chapter fifteen

jackson

Val must have tipped off the photographers that we'd be here. Even for the Roasted Bean on a Friday afternoon, this is a lot. When I glance over at Selena, she has a big smile on her face. But her eyes are wide. The top half of her face and the bottom half don't match at all.

Taking her hand, I give it a squeeze to reassure her. When her eyes widen even more, I know that I've freaked her out. I'm just some random guy grabbing onto her hand like he has a right to.

I think of all the things I could say to her, and then I think how every single one of them would tell anyone within earshot that this is fake. So, I settle on the obvious.

"Sorry again about all of this. It kind of comes with the territory."

"Oh, it's okay. I'm just not used to it." Selena smiles up at me like I hung the damn moon. "But you're worth it."

Shit. She's good at this. The way she's staring up at me. That's the money shot right there. We can go home now.

But since we're here, and since I'm hungry, I hold the door open for Selena to step inside before me.

"Such a gentleman," she whispers.

"My mom would kill me if I didn't hold the door open for my girlfriend."

"That's sweet. I can't wait to meet her," Selena says, and then frowns.

"She passed a few years ago."

She presses her hand against my forearm. My muscles tense involuntarily. "Jackson, I'm so sorry. I didn't know..."

"Why would you? Don't worry about it. It was a long time ago."

I don't have to look around to know the photographers outside are clicking away at us through the enormous glass windows next to us. Selena looks worried, and that can come across a thousand different ways in a still photo. None of them good.

Leaning down towards her ear to distract her, I get a nose full of berries, vanilla, and sugar. Damn, she smells good. "Don't look so worried. All those

photographers out there are snapping a hundred photos a minute. They can turn one frown into a massive fight. So, we have to keep smiles on our faces, okay? Maybe laugh like I said something funny.”

Selena giggles in my ear. When I pull back, I can see the ear-to-ear smile on her face. She is good at this. Really good.

“Are you ready to order?” The woman behind the counter asks.

“Ugh, yeah. Baby, what do you want?” Testing out the nickname for the first time, I decide calling her baby is way too easy. The word just fell off my tongue. It feels natural.

“Can I get an iced vanilla oat latte and the vegan club? Thanks. Ooh, and the double-chocolate vegan cupcake, please.”

“I’ll get an Americano with room for cream, and I’ll get the protein salad. Thanks.”

I pay, and then lead Selena over to find a table in the back. It would be a bit too obvious if we picked a table next to the window. It’s enough for the cameras to see us coming and going.

When our order’s up on the counter, Selena jumps up. But I press my hand down on hers on top of the table. “I’ve got it.”

My protein salad goes down quickly. With the amount I’m working out, I can’t get enough food. And the fact that this salad actually has a dressing on it makes it feel like a special treat. What the hell is wrong with me? If my brothers had any idea about my nutrition plan or the work that goes into making me look like I do, they’d tell me to try doing a few days of real work back on the farm. After they stopped laughing at me.

Selena eats her sandwich slowly, nodding and making *mmm* sounds. Neither of us talks much, but there’s no one around to hear us. And since we’re focused on the food, I let it go.

“You’ve got to try this cupcake. It’s disgusting. My cupcakes are way better than this!” Selena glares at the offending cupcake, as she slowly chews the big bite she took from it. She looks like she wants to spit it out, but thankfully she’s not going for it.

“Why would I want to try a shitty cupcake, exactly?” I ask, teasing her.

“So that you can tell me how much better mine are when you try them.”

“Ah, got it.” That means that I’m going to get to try her cupcakes at some point. I would eat anything this woman bakes, so if one bite of a shitty cupcake is the price, it’s worth it. “Break me off a piece.”

Selena tears off a quarter of the cupcake and hands it to me, her fingers

brushing against mine. My trainer is going to kill me. Superheroes, or at least the actors who get paid a lot of money to play them, don't get to eat double-chocolate cupcakes. But it's vegan. So maybe it's healthier than a normal cupcake?

I toss the piece of cupcake into my mouth as Selena studies me. It's dry. Faintly chalky. And gritty? Why the hell would a cupcake be gritty?

"That was *not* good." I down the last of my Americano to wash away the suspiciously sandy texture in my mouth.

Selena nods approvingly. "Exactly!"

"Really glad I tossed my nutrition plan out the window for that. Thanks."

"Any second thoughts about it? Ten years is a long time."

"It'll be worth it," I mutter under my breath. Being in superhero shape for the next decade is one downside to a slough of positive sides. But it's going to be worth it as soon as I get the damn job.

"You haven't heard about the role yet?"

I shake my head tightly.

"Can you at least tell me what it is, now that we... now that we..." Selena waves her hand between us.

"Come here," I whisper, motioning for her to lean across the table with the crook of my index finger.

She glances behind her to make sure no one is close enough to eavesdrop on what I'm about to tell her. Then she leans towards me. She's not that tall, so her breasts are dangerously close to the top of her empty plate. I have to lean across the table and meet her more than halfway.

I lean in close, getting another whiff of berries and vanilla from her hair.

"No," I whisper into her hair.

Selena giggles for real this time, and then it morphs into full-on laughter. The fake laughing before was something. But the real thing? I wonder if there's anything I wouldn't do to make this happen again? Can't think of a damn thing.

When she finally stops laughing, I motion towards the door. "You ready to get out of here?"

"Sure," she says with a big smile.

When I stand up and motion for her to head out the door, she ignores me. She picks up our dishes and sorts out the napkins and cupcake wrapper.

"What are you doing?"

"Just clearing up. The staff are busy, and there's a station right over there

for dirty dishes.”

“You’re making me feel like a bad person, Selena.”

“Then why don’t you help me? Then we can both feel like good people.”

Taking the plates from her hands, I watch as she picks up the glasses and then I follow her over to the dishes station. I can’t remember the last time I cleared up my own dishes. At home, the most I do is put them in the vicinity of the sink. And everywhere else, it just gets taken care of.

I hold on tight to Selena’s hand while we walk back out to my car.

Neither of us speaks until we’re two blocks away with no cameras or photographers in sight.

“What do you think? I think it went well,” Selena says, almost to herself. “Our first official fake date is in the books.”

“Selena,” I practically growl at her.

“First official *date*,” she corrects with a smile.

“I think our first official date was the six hours we spent trapped together in an elevator. That probably counts as... a lot more than one. This was probably like our fourth date, at least.”

“Fourth date? Somebody’s getting their money’s worth!”

“What about you?” I ask her. “Are you getting your money’s worth?”

“I will be when this is over.”

Her words are a knife to my gut, making me feel even guiltier for everything I’ve done to her.

Lily: I saw the pictures. You two look so cute together! I like this for you, BFF.

Lily: Glad you’re FINALLY getting a life, bestie!



CelebritEYES SPOTTED: Jackson Waters and his #elevatorgirlfriend out for a romantic lunch in WeHo

chapter sixteen

Six weeks. Probably less. Probably a lot less...

selena

I haven't heard from Jackson in over a week. If not for the emotional stress of being a national joke and waiting for him to contact me, this would definitely be the easiest money I've ever made. But instead of just being grateful that Jackson's leaving me alone, I think about him constantly and wonder *why* he's leaving me alone.

I want him to get his money's worth, so that when this is all over, he doesn't have any regrets or a reason not to pay up. If I didn't do my part, I'd always feel guilty about all the money he's going to pay me.

It's time to take things into my own hands.

Selena: Hey

Selena: Haven't heard from you in a while. Everything good?

He answers almost immediately. Or at least he's typing something.

Jackson: ...

Jackson: Hey. Yeah, I'm doing good. How are you?

Selena: Oh, just feeling kind of ignored

Selena: Do you maybe want to go out for dinner or something?

Selena: Maybe dinner's too much

Selena: Lunch?

Selena: Drinks?

Selena: We could take Oats for a walk

Jackson: There it is

Selena: What?

Jackson: I know when a woman is just using me to get to my dog...

Selena: He's a really cute dog...

Jackson: That's not a denial

Selena: It's okay if you're busy. I just wanted to let you know that I'm available...

Selena: To walk Oats for you...

Jackson: What are you doing tonight?

Selena: This is embarrassing...

Jackson: Why? What are you doing?

Selena: Doing a hair mask? Drinking rosé and watching some Royally Arranged re-runs? Busy night

Jackson: It's Friday night

Selena: Exactly why it's embarrassing. What are you doing?

Jackson: Reading some scripts and taking Oats for a walk

Selena: Big night

Jackson: Fuck this. I'm coming to pick you up. Be there in an hour

Selena: I'll be ready

When I put my phone down, I'm not sure if I'm happy or disappointed by this turn of events. Now I have the stress of another *date* with Jackson. But at least I don't have to feel guilty for not holding up my end of the contract.

Exactly an hour later, I'm standing in my living room window peeking out the curtains to watch for Jackson.

Selena: I'm ready

Selena: You don't need to get out. I'll come out when I see you

Jackson: Here. And I'm coming to the front door to get you

Jackson: You better still be inside when I get there

Selena: Okaaaay, bossy!

Knock. Knock. Knock.

When the man knocks on my door, it feels like the entire house is shaking.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

After making him wait a whole minute, I answer the door.

“Hey Jackson,” I say, trying not to be completely obvious about the way my eyes trace up and down his body. How does a man make jeans and a t-shirt look this impossibly hot?

“Ready to go?” When he holds out his hand for me, I take it without thinking. Then I let him lead me out the door, pulling it to lock after me.

There’s only a few cameras trained on us as we make our way to Jackson’s car. I guess now that we’re *official*, we’re less interesting. Whatever the reason, I’ll take it.

Jackson didn’t really cover how to act around the photographers, so I just follow what I’ve seen celebrities do in magazines and keep my head down, my face almost buried in Jackson’s back.

When he holds the passenger door open for me, I climb in.

“You good?”

He waits until I nod before shutting the door and walking around to the driver’s side.

“I’m sorry about that. I didn’t think they’d still be here. How bad has it been?” Jackson’s jaw is hard, one of the few signs of what he’s thinking.

“I’m definitely not getting used to it. But at least there’s less of them now. Sometimes, I wear a baggy hoodie out in the morning because I just can’t face them. But other than that, it’s okay, I guess.”

“I’m really sorry, Selena. I mean it.”

“It’s part of what I signed up for. It’s not your fault.” Reaching over to pinch his arm, I smile at him. “Well, it’s not *entirely* your fault.”

The smile he gives me is almost sad, so I try to change the subject. “What’s the plan tonight? I can’t help but notice that there does not appear to be a handsome Doodle boy in the backseat.”

“I knew it. The woman’s just using me for my damn dog.”

“He’s a fantastic dog.”

“He’s alright.” The way he says it, I can tell how much Jackson loves his dog. “What do you feel like doing? I don’t care. Only I was wondering if there’s anything else I can do for you? To make up for all the cameras. For all of it. Maybe we could go to your bakery or something? Draw some attention to it? Get you some free publicity?”

I shrug. “Sure, that would be great. Just let me know when you want to go.”

“How about now? Why give somewhere else all the business? If we go to

your place, everyone who posts our picture is going to say where we are. That's what's called free advertising."

I bat my eyelashes up at him. "Oh, wise man. Whatever would I do without you here to explain things to me?"

Jackson lets out a low whistle. "I honestly don't know. It's a good thing you found me that elevator. *Lucky* girl."

"Found you? Please! You were the lucky one. You wouldn't have survived an hour without all my *goodies*."

Jackson frowns at me. "Punch the address into the GPS."

Leaning forward, I type the address into the GPS on Jackson's dashboard, grateful for the opportunity to hide my red face behind a curtain of my hair.

Did I just say *goodies*? What is wrong with me? How hard is it to say snacks? Or protein balls? Or baked goods? Or anything else that doesn't sound vaguely sexual? Apparently, very hard.

It's a forty-five minute drive from where we are to the bakery kitchen in rush hour traffic, according to the GPS. "It's forty-five minutes away. And I'm not sure if anyone will even be there. We're a start early, finish early type of business."

"I don't mind. Nothing in L.A. is close." Jackson glances at me out of the side of his eye. "Your *goodies* were pretty tasty. Would you make them for me again sometime?"

"I could probably do that. Baking for you would definitely earn me some fake girlfriend bonus points."

"You've got to stop saying it's fake, Selena. The more you say that in private, the more likely it is you say it when someone else is around. Or when you think it's private. Trust me, there isn't a whole lot of private in my life. So, we've got to act like it's real. All the time, okay?"

"Okay. You're right. It's just that you're *you*, and I'm *me*." I can't bear to look at his handsome face anymore, so I turn and look out the window.

"Since when do you care who I am? You didn't give a shit about who I was in the elevator. Or when you were a teenager apparently, either."

"The elevator was an extreme circumstance. We weren't ourselves."

"I have to disagree with you on that one. I think we were exactly who we are in that elevator. What was the point of pretending after you took a pee in front of me and we thought we could die?"

"Please do not refer to the-incident-that-shall-not-be-named!"

Jackson grins and then shakes his head like he's confused. "What

incident?”

“The incident-that-shall-not-be-named. The incident-that-shall-never-be-spoken-of. The thing-that-happened-in-the-elevator. You know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“Right. The time when you took a pee in my water bottle?”

“The incident-that-shall-not-be-named!” I’m practically shouting at him now. So much for being the perfect, fake girlfriend. This fake relationship is already off to a *great* start. How many times do I have to tell him not to talk about it? I really might have to murder this man in his sleep.

“Why are women so weird about bodily functions? I’ll tell you this as many times as it takes. It’s just not that big of a deal. Everybody pees, Selena.”

“Women are weird about bodily functions? Oh, please! Men are total babies. Do you want to talk about my period, Jackson? How about poop? Everybody poops! Or heaven forbid, a woman actually passes gas in front of you. Men act like it’s a federal crime instead of a perfectly normal bodily function that they are always happy to do sitting right next to you. But men expect women to go outside and three doors down.”

“Lay it on me. You want to talk about your period, let’s talk about your period. I may not have sisters, but my best friend, Lily, has been keeping me updated about her cycle since we were thirteen. Whether or not I wanted to know. I should probably know the ins and outs of your schedule... since we’re dating... and I’m supposed to know you... *intimately*.”

My lips twitch. “Seriously? Since you were thirteen?”

“Lily’s what most people would call an over-sharer.”

“Can I meet her?”

“Probably not. Lily still lives back home in Western Springs. I don’t get back home too often these days.” Jackson looks almost sad, staring out the windshield for a second. Then he puts a smile on his face and turns back to me. “So, where are we in your cycle? So I know when to have the freezer stocked with vegan gelato and the pantry stocked with chips and chocolate?”

“Why would I give you that kind of head start? You’re going to have to figure it out and be ready for a rollercoaster of emotions at all times.” I grin at him, hoping it comes off menacing.

“How am I going to know, since we’re not... since I agreed not to...”

“There are other ways to know when a woman has her period other than by not having sex because she’s on her period.”

“Why wouldn’t we be having sex when you’re on your period?”

He looks adorably confused.

“Most men don’t want to...”

“Baby, you’re dating the wrong men. A real man gives his woman what she needs when she needs it.”

“Really? Interesting. Because I actually get very, *you know*, when I have my period. And everybody knows orgasms are the best cure for cramps. That’s just science.”

“When exactly is all this *science* going to be taking place?”

“Again, that’s for me to know and you to find out...”

“An emotional minefield? *Fan-fucking-tastic.*”

chapter seventeen

jackson

Selena's bakery is a massive warehouse with a bunch of different businesses all taking up their own sections of the space. Her spot is a corner, which seems like a pretty good place to be. It's not fancy. It's just a lot of stainless steel counters and appliances. But it's spotless.

"We're just this way." She seems nervous. "So, this is it. We do all of our baking and boxing up here. And then everything gets delivered out to our wholesale clients or custom orders."

"This is amazing, baby." Calling her baby is feeling very comfortable. Maybe a little too comfortable.

"Hey, Liam. I didn't think you'd still be here."

"Hey, boss. Just double-checking the delivery orders for tomorrow and making sure that we have everything we need for next week on our dry goods order."

"What would I do without you?" She grins at the man. He's tall, built of lean muscle, and has a great smile. I don't like him already.

His eyes narrow when he sees me. "And are you going to introduce me to your new boyfriend, Jackson Waters?"

Selena scrunches up her face and shakes her head. "Sounds like you don't need me to introduce you."

"Hey, I'm Jackson," I interrupt, pushing my hand out towards the guy. "It's nice to meet you."

To be determined. He seems pretty damn friendly with Selena.

The man breaks out into a huge smile. "Oh my god, Jackson freaking Waters said it was nice to meet me! I'm Liam. I'm Selena's work bestie."

Ahhh, I'm pretty sure Liam is gay, so I like him already. "Nice to meet any friend of Selena's."

"I just knew there was something going on after she got stuck in that elevator with you. She was all cagey and wouldn't talk about it. Selena! How could you keep this from me? And here I was thinking how boring you were for never going on any dates, and you were secretly banging a movie star! I

love this for you!”

“You and me both,” I mutter under my breath.

“I’m not loving any of this.” Selena waves her hands at us. “This is why I never introduce you to anyone, Liam!”

He shrugs, obviously not caring.

“So, Jackson Waters, when did you first know that our little Selena was the one for you?”

My lips twitch.

“You do not have to answer that!” She steps in front of me, holding her hands up to fend off Liam’s question. “He’s not answering that!”

Pressing my hands on her shoulders, I look at Liam over her head. “I don’t mind. I think it was how she was in the elevator.”

“The only woman available?” Selena whispers.

Squeezing her shoulders, I lean closer to her ear. “No.” Then I turn back to Liam. “She was calm under pressure. And fun. She made me laugh. And she’s pretty easy to look at, too. I had a lot of time to just stare at her in there.”

“I don’t think I remember you laughing a single time in the elevator,” she grumbles.

“I was laughing on the inside.”

“I could hear more about this relationship all day. Should we all go get drinks, or?” Liam steps forward, his hands in the air and an enormous smile on his face.

“No. We’re not doing that. Jackson has to get home. He has... a meeting.”

“He has a meeting after seven on a Friday night?”

I can feel Selena rolling her eyes, even if I can’t see it. “Hollywood people, right? Anyway, we have to head out of here. I just wanted to show Jackson this place now that everything is, you know, out in the open.”

“You bet it is. My feed is full of #Jelena and #Sackson. I don’t think the internet has decided yet. I’m team #Jelena.”

“Obviously. Jelena is clearly the way to go. Sounds way better,” I agree.

“Anyway, it was so great seeing you, Liam, my self-proclaimed work bestie. Thanks for double-checking everything. But you can go now. We’ll close up.”

Liam holds his hands up. “Got it, got it. You want to be *alone*.”

Reaching behind his back, he undoes the simple white apron wrapped

around his waist and pulls it off. He walks over to a small curtained area in the very corner and tosses the apron in a bin. Then he picks up a black snakeskin backpack and heads towards the same door we came through a few minutes ago.

“Bye, boss. Bye, Jackson Waters!” he says loudly, giving us one last look before stepping through the open door. Right before the door swings closed on him, he shouts, “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do!”

“Which rules out exactly nothing?” Selena calls after him.

“Exactly!” Liam shouts even louder, through the nearly closed door.

Then Selena and I are alone in the commercial kitchen. None of the other people who rent the rest of it seem to be around tonight.

“Your staff likes you a whole lot.”

“I hope so! I want to be a good boss. It’s important to me. We spend a third of our lives at work. We shouldn’t hate it. No one should have to hate a third of their lives. The time we have is just way too precious for that.”

“Agreed.” I glance around. “Selena?”

“Yes?”

“Can I have a cupcake?”

“I thought you were on a superhero nutrition plan?”

My eyebrows snap together. “Who said it was for a *superhero* movie?”

Selena grins. “I knew it! Which superhero is it?”

“How did you know it was a superhero movie in the first place?” I demand.

“I didn’t! But you just told me.”

“I didn’t tell you anything.”

“You one-hundred percent, completely, undeniably did just tell me you’re going to be a superhero! Oh my god, which one?!?”

She lists off every superhero name she can think of. The right one is in the middle of her list, but there’s no way I’m going to confirm or deny that.

“I’m not telling you. How did you know it was a superhero movie?”

“Because half of the movies in the past decade have been superhero movies, and almost all the big ones. It wasn’t exactly that big of a jump.”

“I can’t tell you what it is.”

“Not even with the iron-clad NDA I signed?”

“Nope, not even then.”

“Fine. I’m going to assume it’s the worst superhero ever. Your superpower is probably being able to sense expiry dates when you’re

cleaning out the fridge. Actually, that would be a really handy superpower. Hmmm, what's a truly shitty superpower?"

"Why would I be a shitty superhero? Why wouldn't I be an awesome superhero?"

"Because you won't tell me which superhero you're going to be, and I'm really not in a position to give you the benefit of the doubt... or a cupcake..."

"I want a cupcake, Selena."

"Nope!"

"I still need to wash away the dirt taste of that last cupcake you made me try. I can still taste it a week later. How was it sour and gritty and it tasted like dirt all at the same time? Making me break my nutrition plan for that was downright mean."

She nods. "It was almost impressively bad. Like it could win an award for being the actively worst cupcake in L.A. But alas, no other cupcakes are available, so you'll just have to survive without one."

"This place is full of cupcakes. And I'm going to find one."

"You wouldn't! They're for orders!" Selena shouts at me.

"Try me," I mutter. "I've been eating greens and protein for the last six months. And I will not let that steaming turd of a cupcake be the only cupcake I remember eating for the next decade."

"Poor famous actor who gets paid ridiculously large amounts of money to play dress-up." Selena flicks away a mock tear.

"I'm going to eat all of your cupcakes for that." The more we talk about it, the more I want to eat every single cupcake in sight. Filling up on that much sugar might just be enough to stop me from doing something even more stupid.

Stalking around the kitchen, I open cupboards and doors until I end up standing at the door of a giant walk-in fridge.

"What do we have here?"

Selena slips under my arm and stands in the doorway with her arms out, trying to block me.

"Nothing to see there. We should probably get going."

Leaning back, I rub my thumb against the beard growing on my chin. I should probably shave. But when I don't need to for work, I usually can't be bothered. "It's almost like you don't want me to go in there."

"Please? As if I care? Nothing but vegan butter and soy milk in there, though. Waste of your time, really."

“I think I’ll take my chances.” Pressing my hands on her soft, fleshy hips, I push firmly enough to make her step aside. After unlatching the door, I pull hard on the handle to get it to open. The dark room fills with light. And it’s the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen. Cupcakes with icing in every color of the rainbow, tiered cakes decorated like unicorns or covered in flowers line shelf after shelf. Then there are the bars. The cookies. The balls.

I think I’m going to eat everything in this entire room.

“What do we have here? What do we have here?” I say slowly, walking into the bright, cold room.

As I step inside, my stomach growls in desperation. Maybe if I’d had some sugar in the past six months, I could consider my options and act reasonably. But nope.

Grabbing the first cupcake in reach, I shove it icing first into my mouth, pulling the wrapper back and scraping my teeth along the edge to get every crumb. That was one delicious unicorn. Vanilla cupcake with vanilla frosting in rainbow colors on the horn and mane of the white unicorn. It was a work of art. Reminded me of my first pony when I was a kid. And I devour it. Devour it.

“Oh my god. Oh my god! Jackson!” She’s just staring at me, a horrified look on her face.

Then I grab some kind of nut bar. It tastes like caramel and coconut and freaking magic. “Oh, shit.”

Next up is a brownie. One with chocolate ganache on top of a dense brownie speckled with walnuts.

“This is the best brownie I’ve ever had,” I whisper lovingly to it as I take another bite.

“Do you and the brownie need a few moments alone? Should I come back?” she asks me, giggling.

“Yes. But if you leave me in here alone, know that you’re going to come back to an empty fridge and a man who’s probably going to need his stomach pumped.”

She nods, her eyes wide and a little horrified. “I guess I’ll stay then.”

“This is the best brownie I’ve ever had in my entire life. I’m serious.”

“Thank you. But I’m not sure I trust your opinion. It doesn’t seem like you eat that many sweets.”

“Not as a rule. But it doesn’t mean I don’t love them.”

“You have a sweet tooth?” She looks surprised.

“A big one. Between the ages of six and eighteen, I pretty much only ate chicken tenders and my mom’s cookies, cakes, and cinnamon buns.”

“That sounds like a healthy, well-balanced way to eat.”

“Completely. Made me grow up big and strong.” Holding another cupcake in one hand and my brownie in the other, I flex my biceps until she laughs. “I’m surprised my nutritionist doesn’t recommend it.”

“Total shocker.”

As I savor the last bite of the brownie, I mull something over. “Are you sure these are vegan?”

“Yup! Everything I make is one-hundred percent free of animal products.”

“This is magic. Whatever you do in that kitchen is witchcraft, baby.” Taking a bite of the cupcake, this one shaped like a bouquet of roses, I nod approvingly. “However, you do it. I’m just glad that you do.”

“Are you really going to eat everything? Because those unicorn cupcakes are actually for a seventh birthday party tomorrow. I don’t love making children cry, but you do you.”

I narrow my eyes at her. “Fine. But I’m taking another brownie for the road.”

Her lips twitch. “You drive a hard bargain.”

“For that, I’m taking two.”

When she rolls her eyes at me, I ignore her. Putting my brownies down, I pull out my phone and snap a few pictures of this slice of heaven on earth. Since no one saw us coming in to her bakery kitchen, I’m going to have to ask Val’s team to post something on my social media about Ladycakes. Selena and I should probably take some selfies or something, but I don’t feel like sharing.

“So, where are we going on our big date?” she asks as I follow her out of the walk-in cooler.

“How does takeout in the backyard with Oats sound?”

Her eyes grow big and the biggest smile lights up her face. The woman practically swoons for my dog.

“It sounds perfect!”

Thankfully, she doesn’t ask me why I didn’t suggest something where people can see us.

Because I don’t think she’d much like my answer.

chapter eighteen

Five weeks. Probably less. Probably a lot less...

jackson

Things are good. Surprisingly good. The press is loving my new relationship with my elevator girl. And Selena is playing the part beautifully. She might sass me in private, but when we're in public, the way she stares at me is enough to make me hard. She looks at me like I could fly to the moon, shit diamonds, and solve climate change all before breakfast. We're three weeks into this fake relationship, and I think we just might make it out alive, with no one being the wiser.

When my phone rings after midnight, I know that something's wrong. None of my team calls me this late unless it's a crisis. My dad and brothers would never call me after midnight just to talk, not that any of us are big talkers to begin with. The person who calls me to talk the most is Lily, and even she has *some* boundaries.

Picking up the phone, I see my brother Jarret's face on the screen. My voice is gruff, as much from how late it is as from the X-rated dream I was having featuring my *fake* girlfriend.

"What's wrong?"

"It's dad. He fell off the tractor. Jensen just found him when he came back to double-check something in the barn and rushed him to the hospital. Jacks... he was out there for hours hurting. And none of us knew."

"How is he? What the hell happened?" I demand, jerking to sit up in my bed. This is the thought that's always in the back of my mind. My family's back home in Western Springs, and I'm all the way down here in L.A. I'll never be there when they need me.

"The doctors are looking at him. He might need surgery. He's got some broken ribs, a fracture in his left arm, and probably a concussion. But they're not sure why he fell. They're thinking maybe a heart attack? But they won't know more until they do some tests."

"Holy fuck. I should have been there."

I should have been there.

I should have been there.

I should have been there.

“There’s nothing you could have done. The rest of us *are* here. Dad’s the one who started driving the tractor by himself after everyone headed home for the night.”

“I still should have been there,” I mutter, rubbing my jaw to ease the tension.

“Get your ass here now. That’s what you can do.”

“Does he need to be moved to a different hospital? Just tell me what he needs.”

“The doctors think they have it under control. This place is state-of-the-art now, after all the money you poured into it when mom was sick.”

There’s silence between us. I wish our cell phones crackled like old telephone lines did, to fill some of it.

It’s a game of chicken, neither of us saying what we’re both thinking.

Jarret breaks first. “It’s not going to be like Mom. It’s not. Just get your ass here now.”

“I’m on my way. I’ll be there as soon as I can,” I whisper, pushing up out of bed to stand.

“Jarret?”

“Yeah, Jacks?”

“Tell him I love him. Tell everyone I love them.”

“Will do. But you get your ass back up here and tell him yourself.”

My brother hangs up on me. It’s a good thing, because I don’t think I would have been able to do it. I always miss my family, but when something happens, I hate how far away I am. When mom was sick...

This isn’t going to be like Mom.

I need to call my pilot. I need to pack. I need to tell Alan and Val.

What else? What am I forgetting?

Selena.

Shit, I need to tell Selena. I don’t know how long I’m going to be gone, and she’s my girlfriend. Or she’s supposed to be. I can’t just leave without even telling her. Val was pushing us to make a couple more public appearances this week, since the whole fake relationship thing is going over so well. Selena’s expecting to see me. I can’t think about anything other than my family right now, but I can’t just disappear on her either.

Reaching for my phone, I’m pressing on her picture and typing before I even make the conscious choice to do it. She probably won’t even get this

until the morning anyway, but letting her know now feels like the right thing to do.

Jackson: I need to go out of town for a few days. Maybe longer. Sorry, I don't know. I'll fill you in tomorrow morning.

Selena: Thanks for letting me know

Selena: Is everything okay?

Jackson: Honestly no. But it's not your problem. I'll see you when I get back

Before I can toss my phone back down on the bed and start packing, it rings. Oats lifts his head up from the foot of the bed, glaring at me for interrupting his beauty sleep.

I'm really not in the mood to talk to anyone right now who isn't family. I need to update Val and Alan, but I don't plan on doing more than sending a couple of texts.

Tilting my phone up, I see Selena's face across the screen. My thumb slides to answer her without thinking.

"Hey."

"Hey... I just wanted to see if there was anything I can do to help?"

"Convince my dad that he's too old to ride the tractor by himself at night anymore? Convince him to let me pay for some more help at the farm?"

"What's his number? I can be very convincing when I want to be."

"This I know." Staring up at the ceiling, I take a deep breath to calm myself.

"So, you're going home? To Canada?"

"Yeah, for a few days. Or a week? I don't know. My dad's hurt. He fell off the tractor. I'm not sure about all the details. But it sounds like he broke his arm and some ribs. And maybe he has a concussion. He's in the hospital. He might need surgery."

"Jackson," she says my name and it just hangs there in the distance between us for a while. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks."

Selena's voice is quiet as a whisper over the phone. "Do you want me to... I mean, should I... come with you?"

chapter nineteen

jackson

There is nothing in the entire world I want more at this moment than for her to come with me and shine some of her sunshine on me and my dad. Since my mom passed, things have been strained between us. My brothers still live in Western Springs, but I'm the oldest. Taking care of dad and the farm is my responsibility. And apparently, I've been doing a shit job of it. What did I expect? I haven't been home in over two years. Three years? I don't even know. And when's the last time I spent more than a couple of days there?

"That's incredibly generous of you... but I can't ask you to do that. Thank you, though. I mean it."

"Right, of course. We're not *actually* dating. If you don't want me to be there, I completely understand. I didn't mean to intrude."

What? Not want her to be there? Selena makes everything easier. She makes me laugh. She distracts me when I need distracting.

"No, I just... it's not your job to take care of me. Or my family. You didn't sign up for this. You agreed to get coffee and dinner with me a few times. And let me put my hand on your back. Hold your hand a few times when the photographers can see. There are no photographers in Western Springs."

"Okay, if you're sure..." she trails off.

Does she sound almost disappointed? No, that's my overactive imagination at work right there. Me leaving town means that Selena can go back to her life and building her business, without me dragging her into any of my shit.

"I'm just worried about what the press will say. They're going to figure out where you are. These things always come out. Someone in Western Springs or at the airport will post a picture of you or something. And then I'll look like a crappy girlfriend for not being there with you."

"People are usually pretty good back home about not taking pictures of me. And I'm flying private, so no one should take any photos at the airport."

I pause, processing what she said. I'm at least a few beats behind in this entire conversation. "Hold on a damn minute. Did you just say that you're worried about looking like a crappy girlfriend?" I ask, sharply.

For the first time since my brother called to tell me about dad, I can see past the panic and guilt about how fast I can get home. And whether or not it's going to be fast enough. Because it wasn't fast enough last time.

"It's not my *biggest* concern. I'm worried about you. And about your dad. And your brothers." She sighs. "But I don't want the world to think I'm a bad girlfriend, either. That would undermine the whole elevator meet cute, Cinderella story thing we've been doing. And at some point, I'm going to be back on the dating market—not that I was ever off it for real—and I don't love the idea of people thinking I'm a shitty, unsupportive girlfriend."

"You mean, *men*? You don't want other *men* to think you're a shitty, unsupportive girlfriend?"

"Yes, fine. *Men*."

I want *men* to think she's the shittiest girlfriend in the entire fucking world. Because the thought of another man calling her his sets me on fucking fire. Not that I have any right to be jealous when she was never mine to begin with.

"Are you sure you don't mind coming? What about Ladycakes?"

"Ladycakes will be fine for a few days. We're actually on top of orders for once since I hired three new bakers. I trust Liam to handle all the in-person stuff, and I can do everything except the actual baking and deliveries from my laptop and phone. I really don't mind." She makes a groaning sound that vibrates against my ear. "But Jackson, please just tell me if you don't want me there. I won't be hurt or offended, I promise. I don't want to intrude on your family time, and I feel like I kind of just invited myself to your family emergency. Sorry about that. I really just want to help. Whatever you need."

She's sorry? For rescuing me from myself? Even if she just kept me company on the three hour long flight and ignored me when we touched down, it would be worth her being there. "You only invited yourself because I was too chicken-shit to ask you to come. It means a lot that you want to. Thanks."

"That's what friends are for, *Nugget*."

"Thank you, Selena." I don't waste time correcting her by telling her that we're not friends, we've never been friends, and the thoughts I've been

having about her aren't friendly... or *fake*.

"Okay, good. When are we leaving? Do I need to buy a ticket?"

"No. But you'll need a passport. Do you have one?"

"Yes. Of course, I have a passport."

"Good. I'll pick you up on the way to the airport. How much time do you need to pack?"

"Half an hour? I just need to throw some stuff in a suitcase."

"Don't rush too much. The pilot's got to get the plane ready. And I have to get to you. I'll be outside your place in an hour, okay?"

"I'll be ready." I can hear the reassuring smile in her voice over the phone. "Everything's going to be okay. We're going to get you home in no time and start taking care of your dad."

"Selena?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks." Tapping my screen, I end the call.

I shove enough jeans, t-shirts, and boxer briefs to last me a week into the stainless steel carry-on Val bought me after I landed my second job doing *Raven's Ravine*. This suitcase cost more than my car did back then. But it's probably got more mileage on it now than that little broken down pickup truck I had back then.

Oats travels with me so much that Margrit keeps a go-bag packed for him with a bag of kibble, a few toys, rubber balls, extra leashes, and poop bags. All the Oats necessities. After grabbing the go-bag from the pantry, I call him.

"Let's go, bud. We're going back home."

He looks up at me and tilts his head. "You want to go see Selena?" Oats barks and jumps up and down. "There it is. Me too, bud. Me, too."

Exactly an hour after I hung up with Selena, I pull up in front of her place. She's waiting for me just outside her front door. She's pulled her hair up into a messy top-knot, and she's wearing hardly any makeup. No bright-painted lips tonight. She looks as beautiful as ever. Her legs are covered in tight black leggings, and she's wearing an oversized t-shirt with the *Ladycakes* name and logo on it, and a chunky knit cardigan. She has a white carry-on suitcase and that oversized bag she had in the elevator. I don't remember the last time I traveled anywhere with a girl who packed this light. That big-ass shoulder bag had better be full of snacks. I really, really hope it's full of snacks.

My nutrition plan is off when I enter the Western Springs town limits. I'm going to eat ice cream, every single deep fried food that I can get my hands on, and whatever I can convince Selena to bake for me for as long as we're there.

"Stay here," I tell Oats as I get out of the car to get Selena's bag. Oats keens. "You can say hi to her in a minute, I promise, bud." He can say hello to her *after* I do.

"Hey, baby," I say when I get close enough for her to hear me. I'm not sure if I'm saying it for any photographers who might overhear it or for myself. I didn't see any photographers camped outside her place, though.

"Hey. I'm all ready."

"I see that. Thanks for getting ready so fast."

"No problem."

"Let me get your suitcase," I tell her, bending over to pick up the small white carry-on.

"Thanks." Selena lets out a squeal.

"What's wrong?" I turn back to her, looking for something hurting her.

"Sorry! I'm good. Oats is coming?" she asks breathlessly.

"Yeah, he always travels with me, unless the country won't let him in or something like that. He's probably spent more nights in hotels than he has at home."

"Are we staying at a hotel?"

"No, I wasn't planning to. But you can, if you'd be more comfortable with that. I was going to stay at my dad's house on the farm. There's no one there since he's at the hospital. There's a lot of bedrooms. So you know, you'd have your own room."

She frowns a little. "That's perfect. I'm happy to be wherever you are. And wherever Oats is, of course."

"Don't be leaving your door open, or he'll ditch me for you in a heartbeat."

Selena grins back at me as she walks to the car to say hello to Oats. "No promises!"

chapter twenty

jackson

Selena asked questions about my family and about growing up in Western Springs for the first hour or so of the flight and just listened to me talk. Then she curled up on the sofa with Oats sleeping adoringly on her feet across from me. It was *nice* talking about my family with her. That's not usually the word I would use when I think about my family. Usually, I just feel guilty for all the ways I've come up short over the years when it comes to them.

Then she fell asleep, curled up with Oats until we started circling to land. She let out little whimpers and cute little snores, giving me all kinds of ideas.

After waking her up, we both use the bathroom and freshen up after the three-hour flight before we touch ground in Western Springs. Selena changes out of her leggings and t-shirt into a cute little sundress and jean jacket. After thanking my pilot for the quick response time and safe flight, I tell him to head to Vancouver until I need him again.

"Woo-hoo, here comes Hollywood!" A voice shouts out from just off the runway. Western Springs doesn't have a real commercial airport. But there's a little recreational airport outside of town where a few local pilots from the surrounding communities keep their planes. And the runway is *just* long enough for the jet. Or at least, my pilot is good enough to make it work. I've never asked, and I figure I'm probably happier not knowing how the sausage is made on this topic.

The entire operation consists of the single runway, two hangars for repairs and maintenance, and a one-room terminal with a single stall bathroom and water that isn't potable.

More whoops and shouts come from the edge of the runway as Selena and I make our way down the plane steps. Oats takes off past us, running at full tilt across the dirt runway to meet my friends.

Taking Selena's hand, I squeeze it a little too tightly. "Sorry about them in advance. Just *sorry*."

Selena grins up at me. "Who are they?"

“I told you about Lily. And that’s my other friend, Gunnar. He’s also my cousin. It’s a small town,” I tell her, like that should mean something. But it probably only means something to people who grew up in towns this small. Western Springs has a grand total of twelve-hundred people calling it home. “You’ll meet the rest of my family later. I didn’t want anyone to leave the hospital to come and get me.”

She squeezes my hand back and smiles at me. “It’s all going to be okay. We’ve got this.”

Lily runs the last few steps and throws herself into my arms. Letting go of Selena’s hand, I wrap my best friend up in a giant bear hug, swinging her around in a big circle, before putting her down. She reaches up and messes with my hair like she did every single day of high school. I frown and shrug her off like I did every time back then.

When I look at her, I just see Lily. I don’t know why, but I never saw her as a girl. She was always just Lily. Probably because we’ve pretty much known each other since we were born. But she’s cute and blonde. A little taller than Selena and just as curvy.

Gunnar looks like he could be another one of my brothers. Dark hair, blue eyes. He’s wearing the same thing as every other man in this town. Cowboy boots or work boots scuffed up from being worn for work, not for show. Worn jeans, a t-shirt, and a plaid shirt over it. A cowboy hat or a baseball cap. Gunnar’s wearing a cowboy hat today, pulling out all the country-boy charm.

When I put Lily down, I shake Gunnar’s hand and bring him in for a half hug.

“It’s been too damn long, Jacks. Wish you were here under better circumstances. But it’s good to have you home.”

I nod, feeling like a total failure. Everyone I love is here in Western Springs, so why the hell do I live all the way in L.A.? I live there for work. I have to. At least, that’s what I tell myself.

“Lily, Gunnar. This is my girlfriend, Selena.” I wrap my arm around Selena and squeeze her to my side. “Selena this is Gunnar and Lily.”

Selena waves at them. “It’s so nice to meet you. Jackson has told me so much about you!”

Lily narrows her eyes. “Has he really? You know I never believe what I read about Jacks. Until he said you were dating on TV. And then I only half believed it. I can’t believe I’m finally meeting you in person.”

“I kind of can’t believe you’re Jackson’s best friend. I like you already.”

“Good. Because I already like you, too.”

“Simmer down. You two just met. You don’t even know each other.”

“Oh, I think we do, *Nugget*,” Selena says, beaming up at me.

Lily nods, her smile looking a little less innocent. “*Nugget*? She calls you *Nugget*?”

“We should get going. We need to get to the hospital.” Nodding at where my pilot put our suitcases, I motion for Gunnar to help me with them. I could move them all myself, but I’d have to let Selena go, and I don’t want to.

“You going to make yourself useful and help with these bags?”

“Allow me. City boy doesn’t know how to do a hard day’s work anymore.” Instead of helping me with the luggage, Gunnar just takes all the bags in a single trip and tosses them in the back of his old pickup truck.

Following behind, I walk Selena to the rear door of the truck and hold out my hand to her to help her in. It’s a big step for her, since she’s so short, and she presses into me for support. I press my other hand against her lower back to steady her.

“Thanks,” she whispers, before I shut the door firmly between us. My hands clench into fists automatically, every part of me wishing I was still holding onto her.

When I open the other rear door for myself, Lily slides past me into the back of the dirt-covered maroon truck before I can get in. “I’ll sit in the back with Selena. So, we can girl talk. You can sit up front with Gunnar.”

I was planning on sitting in the back with Selena, hoping maybe I could hold her hand again. We still have to keep up appearances here, even if there’s no press. There’s my family, and it’s a small town. Everyone in Western Springs knows who I am.

“I know when I’m not wanted,” I say under my breath, loud enough for Lily to hear me as I climb into the front passenger seat. Oats jumps in after me, and I motion for him to sit on the floor at my feet, but he dives over me and into the back seat to curl up next to Selena. He rests his head on Selena’s lap and happily wags his tail onto Lily’s lap. I’ve thought about resting my head on her lap just like that on more than one occasion. She grins down at him and brushes the hair back from his eyes. I wonder what she’d do if I tried it?

Gunnar pulls the old pickup off of the dirt road leading from the landing strip and out onto the two-lane section of the highway leading back into

town. Windows down and country music pumping is the only way to drive down country roads. The smell of hay and sunshine and dirt fills my nose. I've traveled around the world, and no place else smells like this town. This town smells like home.

"Someone likes you," Lily announces, and I turn in a rush to see who exactly she's talking about.

"I'm obsessed with him, too. I've always wanted a dog. But I'm allergic to most dogs. And I've always rented in L.A., so I can't have one of my own."

"You're still renting your own place?" Lily asks.

"We haven't moved in together... yet," I mutter from the front seat.

"No one's talking to you, Jacks," Lily calls out in a singsong voice. "So, how's the sex?"

Selena coughs. "Excuse me?"

Lily isn't deflected one bit. "How's the sex? This is America's sexiest man alive."

"Lily, I can hear you," I caution her, knowing it won't even matter. "And it's two-time America's sexiest man alive, to you."

Gunnar lets out a guffaw, so I punch him in the stomach.

"Careful! Don't hit the driver!" he warns.

"No one's talking to you, Jacks," Lily says happily. "I'm sure Selena can tell me if she doesn't want to answer. She's a grown woman. She can speak for herself."

Glancing over my shoulder to check on her, I see Selena blushing. She looks as uncomfortable as I feel. "She doesn't want to answer."

"No, no. I do. It's fine," Selena says. "The sex is... *epic*. I mean, you look at him, and you think, yeah, he's hot. But hot guys aren't exactly known for *trying* very hard. It's not even their fault, they've just never had to. So, you don't know if a hot guy's just going to lie there and make you do all the work."

"But Jacks doesn't just lie there, huh?" Lily's fascinated. She leans sideways in the bench seat, her head as she can get it to Selena's.

As I watch them in the rearview mirror, Lily stares at Selena like she's studying something under a microscope, leaning closer and closer. But Selena doesn't look uncomfortable anymore. I'm the only person who's uncomfortable in this damn truck.

"Nope. Let me tell you... Jackson puts in *the work*. There really aren't

any words. But I'll try. Epic. Hot. Insane. The orgasms are endless. He's the best I've ever had. The. Best." Selena shakes her head like she can't believe her good luck.

She can't believe it? I can't fucking believe it. This is the woman who told me she couldn't be a spy because she wasn't good at lying and couldn't lead a double life. And here she is telling my friends all about the best sex of her life *that we've never even had* without missing a beat. And she's pretty damn convincing.

I'm apparently the fucking best thing she's never even had.

Gunnar slaps me on the back of the shoulder. "That's my boy! I knew all that movie star shit would never go to your head. Not to the one that matters, anyway."

Does he think I let all the movie star shit go to my head? I'm going to need to ask him about that later. But right now my head is spinning between the conversation in the backseat about my imaginary sex life and the scene at the hospital that I'm about to walk into. And that I'm about to walk Selena into with me.

"Lil, are you good to keep Oats for a few hours? We'll head to the hospital and see what we can do. Then we'll swing by and pick up Oats and our stuff and head back to the farm."

"Sure. You're staying at the farm?" Lily asks curiously.

"That was the plan. Why?"

"No reason," Lily replies too quickly. "Gunnar, has Jacks ever brought anyone else to stay at the farm?"

"That would be a no, Lily." Gunnar earns himself another punch in the gut with that unnecessary comment. Lily's bad enough. I don't need Gunnar helping her.

Feeling Selena's eyes on me, I can't face her. If I did, my face would tell her exactly what I'm thinking. And I know she's not interested in any part of what I'm thinking, despite what she just told my friends about our imaginary sex life.

"I thought you were on my side?" I mutter under my breath to Gunnar.

"I am." He grins back at me.

"So, when are you two going to move in together? Should we go wedding dress shopping while you're here? There is the cutest little shop downtown. Jacks always wanted to get married at the farm."

Selena coughs again in the backseat.

“Leave her alone, please. We haven’t been dating that long.”

“But when you know, you know, right?”

“Do you, Lil? Do you *know* when you *know*?” I demand, staring at her reflected in the side mirror through our open windows. Lily’s been in love with Gunnar since almost as long as I’ve known her. Which is since she was five and saw Gunnar at school on the first day of kindergarten when his family moved back to town. But she’s never done a damn thing about it, so she really has no excuse to come after me for anything.

“Yes!” Lily says stubbornly. “When you know, *you know*.”

“Change the topic, please,” I order.

“So, back to your sex life then,” Lily says with a grin. “You’ve given us an overview, but let’s get... *granular*.”

“Lord help me.”

Selena’s laughter fills the truck.



CelebritEYES SPOTTED: Our favorite Canuck heads up north. Jackson Waters spotted back home on the range. Who’s ready to save a few horses?

chapter twenty-one

selena

Being in Western Springs is like taking a Ph.D. in Jackson Waters. This place gives him the country that's worn off a bit from his years in L.A. This place is the reason for the way he speaks, not with a twang in his voice, but slowly like a country boy. If Gunnar and Jackson's brothers are any indication, it's the reason he always holds doors open for me and offers me his hand every time I have to step up, down, or over any kind of impediment, no matter how big or how small.

This town is as charming as Jackson, too. It's exactly what I picture when I think about the *country*. Country roads head off for miles over flat ground. Fields are full of potatoes, corn, hay, and anything else you can grow with a little dirt, a lot of rain, and some sunshine. Barns are in every color. Red, blue, green.

Blue sky stretches overhead as far as the eye can see, with snow-capped mountains off in the distance. I don't think I've seen a fence that isn't picket or the kind that looks like a horse paddock—whatever that's called—since I've been here. At least nine out of every ten cars I see are pickup trucks. I never really saw myself as a country girl. Of course, I love Kacey Musgraves and Kelsea Ballerini, but that's the extent of my country music knowledge.

There's something about this town that has me wanting to put on a pair of cowboy boots and do a two-step, whatever that is. I make a mental note to look up a tutorial online when I have a chance. I should be ready in case any country dancing is required while I'm here. I want to be the perfect girlfriend. Perfect *fake* girlfriend, that is. Although, as tense as Jackson is, I'm not sure he's going to be in a dancing mood any time soon. Or maybe ever.

He gripped my hand so tightly it hurt when he first saw his dad lying in a hospital bed, covers tucked up under his arms, and wearing a faded blue hospital gown. Jackson's dad looked pretty beat up, but the doctor assured all of us he was going to be fine. One of his broken ribs made a small puncture in his lung. He had surgery to repair it before we landed. The ribs and arm will heal in time, and the concussion just needs to be monitored. It wasn't his

heart. They think it was low blood pressure or low blood sugar and are running more tests to figure it out.

When his dad woke up and saw Jackson there, a tear rolled down his cheek. He slept most of the day, but his breathing was even and steady. And when he was awake, he was bright and alert. He must be in pain, but he was talking and grousing about how everyone was making a big fuss over nothing. He insisted I call him Jerry and not Mr. Waters. And he was well enough to flirt with two of the nurses to get extra chocolate pudding with his dinner. I also noticed that he's still wearing his wedding ring, even though Jackson's mom passed several years ago.

Meeting Jackson's brothers was a blur of tall men with broad shoulders, who all looked enough like Jackson to be his stunt doubles or stand-ins. Jackson introduced me to all of them, but I know that I'm not going to know which one is Jasper and which one is Jarret tomorrow. It doesn't help that their names all start with *J* like they're the Kardashians or something. I should have taken a picture of all of them to study from tonight.

Then there were the aunts, uncles, and cousins. Too many to count or keep track of. And definitely too many to remember their names. Gunnar is the only cousin whose name I officially know at this point.

I'm not sure what was weirder. Being introduced repeatedly to my fake boyfriend's family and friends. Or hearing Jackson Waters introduce his girlfriend... and know that he meant *me*.

The whole day was a whirlwind of voices and hugs and smiles and tears. I never took my eyes off of Jackson all day, and he never took his eyes off of his dad. And as much as I tried to be present for it, I spent every quiet moment I had thinking about Jackson. And wondering what Lily and Gunnar meant about Jackson not bringing another woman home to the farm before. Was that because he never had a fake girlfriend before? A fake girlfriend who would be safe to bring home because she wouldn't expect anything. I'm not *supposed* to expect anything.

The hospital forced all of us to leave when visiting hours ended at eight o'clock, and not even Jackson's star power could get them to bend the rules.

"He's going to be okay," I whisper in the dark truck cab as we drive home to the Waters' farm. Gunnar ended up taking our stuff out to the farm, picking up an old truck for us to use, and dropping it off at the hospital when visiting hours were over, along with Oats. Oats apparently spent the day living his best life with his Auntie Lily, who must have got my number from

Jackson because she sent me the pictures to prove it.

I'm glad he's here now, because I could really use someone to snuggle tonight. Jackson has barely said ten words to me since leaving the hospital.

"That's what everyone keeps saying." He sounds tired, and a little angry.

"That's what the doctor said. Not everyone. The *doctor*."

"I should have been here."

"Your brothers were here."

"Dad doesn't listen to them. I should have been here."

"Does he listen to you?" I ask, honestly curious. Jerry Waters doesn't seem like he's the kind of man who listens to anything or anyone but his own mind.

Jackson grimaces. "No, but I still should have been here."

"You're here now. You're doing everything you can. Your dad will be home from the hospital in a few days. And we'll have everything ready for him. Do you think we should hire a private nurse?"

"Oh, he's going to love that." Jackson lets out a bark of laughter that doesn't sound amused at all. "But that's a great idea. Thank you."

There's a long silence, and then Jackson reaches over and squeezes my hand. "I'm glad you're here. Thanks for inviting yourself."

"Anytime," I tell him with a smile. I'm glad that I can be here for him. It's what *friends* do.

Jackson lets go of my hand as soon as he touches it. There's no reason to hold on to it with no one else around to see, except the two of us and Oats.

After driving in silence for another ten minutes, Jackson turns off of the highway onto a dirt road. "This is it."

"The farm?" I look around, but all I see out the windows is a swipe of darkness in front of us. The headlights roll over a large building.

"Is that a barn? Are there *animals* here?"

"Yeah? But it's a farm, not a ranch. So, they're pretty much all just pets."

"Why have you been holding out on me? Tell me exactly what kinds of animals you have. I can't wait to pet every single one of them."

"I don't think chickens much like being petted. But there's an entire flock of them you can try it with. And then there's a few horses. Jarret and Jensen ride the most. But the horses kind of belong to everyone. Except Violet. She's all Lily's."

A farm with pet horses and chickens? I'm literally in heaven. And I don't even think it's because of the movie star sitting across the old truck bench

from me. Well, maybe just a little.

Jackson pulls to a stop in front of the porch, and the truck's headlights show a wraparound porch with a freaking porch swing.

"Is that a *porch swing*?"

Jackson looks back at me. "Yeah?"

"Oh, my god! I need to sit on it immediately!" I throw the door open and slide out. "Come on, Oats!"

Rushing up the front steps, I plop down onto the swing and wince a little as the chains creak under my weight. The wind chimes at the corner of the house help to hide the sound. Does it really get any better than a porch swing and wind chimes?

Jackson follows me up the steps slowly. "Is this your first time seeing a porch swing?"

"In real life, in the country, absolutely yes!"

Jackson turns to sit down next to me.

"Wait, can it hold both of us? I can get off..." I offer.

"You're all good. It could hold twenty of us."

Jackson sits down and the swing creaks again. His thigh presses into mine, and he doesn't move it. He also doesn't flinch when he pushes the swing back, and it creaks under our weight again. When he clenches his fingers, I wonder if he's about to take my hand in his. But then Oats jumps up onto my lap, and I reach out to stop him from licking my face, trying to make out with me.

"Oats!" Jackson shouts. "Sorry." He points at the porch, about to tell Oats to get off, but I stop him.

"It's okay. Just be calm, okay, sweetie? Now lay down with your dad. He's had a long day and could use some doggie snuggles." When I pat my hand on Jackson's thigh to show Oats what I want him to do, I feel Jackson's muscles clench under my hand. Oats does as he's told and lays down across my lap resting his head in Jackson's.

"He's so smart," I whisper.

Jackson rolls his eyes. "He's smart at getting what he wants."

"That's the most important kind of smart."

My stomach rumbles loudly in the quiet night air.

"That you?" Jackson looks over at me.

"Would you believe me if I said it was Oats?" I ask, staring at him out of the side of my eye.

“You’re embarrassed by your stomach grumbling after I haven’t fed you anything decent all day, when you peed right in front of me the first time we met? Sure, that makes sense.”

“What do I have to do to get you to never mention the-incident-that-shall-not-be-named ever again? Tell me, please. I beg you.”

Jackson grins. “Probably nothing you’d be interested in doing.”

“What does that mean? Try me. I’m pretty desperate here.” I would do just about anything to have Jackson never mention the fact that he’s seen—and heard—me pee right in front of him. He may not be attracted to me, but I don’t want him to be repulsed by me either. Is neutral an option? What is the equivalent of beige in terms of attraction?

“Sorry, I completely forgot about dinner when we left the hospital. And we can’t really get delivery all the way out here.” Jackson rubs his hand over his eyes. “We’re definitely not in L.A. anymore.”

He seems tired. Today was a long day, by any standards. And I don’t think he slept on the plane like I did. When he woke me up, he was brooding in the direction of a plane window. He probably hasn’t slept much since the night before last. No wonder he’s exhausted. Not to mention the emotional strain. I want to do whatever I can to make this easier for him. That’s what I’m here for. Because I’m his friend.

Whatever it takes.

chapter twenty-two

selena

“We don’t need delivery. There’s a kitchen inside here, right?” I nod back towards the front door.

“Yeah, but my dad’s not much of a cook. So, no accounting for what’s in it.”

“I’m sure I can come up with something. Maybe Lily could take me to pick up some groceries tomorrow when you’re at the hospital with your family?”

“Sorry if the hospital was too much for you today. You don’t have to come tomorrow. And you don’t need to stay all day. My whole family... I know it’s a lot.” Jackson shrugs his shoulders like he couldn’t explain it if he tried.

“No, it was great meeting your dad, and your brothers, and everyone. I may need some help to tell your brothers apart, though. You all look so much alike. And I only meant that getting groceries and cooking is something I can do. I’m here to help. That’s the whole point of me being here, *Nugget*.”

Jackson smiles at the nickname, like I wanted him to. Then he runs his hand over his beard. “I didn’t bring you here to cook and clean for me.”

“Hold up. No one said anything about cleaning. You can pick your own gross nose-hairs out of the sink and scrub your own toilet.”

“Tell me where you stand, why don’t you?” Jackson gives me a smile that tells me he’s up to something. “Get in the kitchen and start cooking, woman. I’m hungry.”

Before I can slap him, he jumps up and out of reach, disturbing Oats, who jumps off the porch swing in a flurry of nails and fur, sending me swinging raucously. “I’ll get the bags.”

“Jerk. Where’s the key?”

“It’ll be open. Folks aren’t much for locking doors around here.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

Oats follows Jackson down to the truck, and I head inside by myself.

Jackson was right. The front door isn't locked. It's one of those old doors with the stained glass panels at the top. It must be at least a hundred years old.

I'm going to need to get used to creaking noises because every floorboard and every door here creaks as soon as I touch it. Everything in this house is old and creaky. And as charming as the rest of Western Springs is, Jackson's family kitchen is like if every white Nancy Meyers rom com kitchen had a baby with the Farmer's Almanac. White walls that could stand a fresh coat of paint are covered with miles and miles of butter yellow cabinets. Butcher block countertops, beaten and worn with years of loving use, cover every available surface. And chickens of all kinds run wild everywhere.

On the counters. On the walls. Stenciled onto a few of the cupboard doors. A trio of wildly colored chicken statues sit on the windowsill above the copper sink. Cast iron chickens wrapped in filigree march along the top of the pot rack hanging from the ceiling above the big kitchen table, sitting in the middle of the kitchen. This house is way too old for kitchen islands and bar stools. And I love every single thing about it. There was a photo of Jackson's parents next to his dad's bed at the hospital. I can picture June Waters in an apron covered with chickens and standing in this kitchen, whipping up bread for her boys as if she was standing right in front of me. The kitchen might be less used now that she's gone, but it's still teeming with love. It's an honor to get to cook in this kitchen.

After washing a day spent in a hospital off of my hands, I poke around the fridge and freezer, and then the pantry I discover behind oversized cabinet doors. There's no doubt that Mr. Waters doesn't cook much. The lack of food in the pantry confirms it. But there's enough here that I can pull something together. Baking may be my specialty, but I'm no slouch in the cooking department, either. Whatever I pull together is *definitely* not going to comply with Jackson's rigid nutrition plan, that's for sure.



“THANKS FOR THIS. For cooking. For coming here with me. For everything,” Jackson says as he pushes his plate away from him.

I wanted to eat dinner out on the porch swing, but Jackson insisted there was somewhere better. He shoved a corkscrew in his pocket, picked up a

bottle of red wine from the pantry, took his plate of pasta and marched out into the dark night, calling over his shoulder to bring the glasses.

Following his instructions, I grabbed two wine glasses upside down by the stems, picked my plate up off the counter, and hustled after him. And that is how I ended up having the most romantic, *fake* dinner date of my life, drinking wine and eating pasta on bales of hay under the stars.

We're nearly two hours from Vancouver, and it feels like every single star in the sky is shining down on us. There's no haze or L.A. smog, or even the light pollution of being in a big city. And tonight is a perfect, cloudless night. Miles of navy sky lies overhead with stars twinkling like diamonds.

"Of course. I'm happy to be here. Well, I mean, I wish it was under better circumstances. But being here is what *friends...* and *fake* girlfriends are for."

"Selena," Jackson practically growls at me.

Oops. "Right, right. Not *fake*. Just girlfriends. Just completely normal girlfriends."

"That's better. And thanks." Jackson takes a drink of red wine. "I thought you were supposed to be a terrible liar. Bad at accents. Incapable of being a spy."

My eyebrows pull together. "I *am*. Why?"

"Well, I was a little surprised to hear you tell Lily and Gunnar what a complete stallion I am in the bedroom today."

"You were *surprised*?" My jaw drops, and then I bite my lip, considering him. "Maybe I oversold the experience?"

"You didn't." Jackson lets out a deep laugh. "But since you haven't actually had the pleasure... I was surprised by that, is all."

"Well, I had to say something! And I would imagine that you're, at least, you know... competent in that area. So, I went with it. Lily and Gunnar seemed very impressed. You're welcome!"

Jackson's eyes crease as he fights off a smile. "Competent?"

"Well, how many women have you dated? All those models and actresses?"

His eyebrows pull together. "You've been looking into my dating history?"

"No, it's just... I'm not blind, and I can't help but see stuff in the grocery store line-up."

"How much time have you been spending in that grocery store line-up? Sounds like you're pretty familiar with this topic."

“I spend a... completely *normal* amount of time in the grocery store line-up. And I am a completely normal level of familiar with America’s sexiest man alive’s sex life.”

“Fingers crossed for this year. It’ll be a hat trick.” Jackson flashes me a smug grin.

I shake my head to clear it. I get that he’s hot. I can’t not see it. I see exactly how hot he is every minute that I spend with him. But does he really have to be this cocky? It’s really *not* attractive. Oh, who am I kidding? It makes him even hotter. *Grrr*. But I don’t care how hot it is. This insane cockiness cannot stand!

“Beauty is so subjective. And what makes people attractive is so much more than skin-deep. It’s brains and chemistry. Pheromones. It’s science. Like baking. Not just pretty faces.”

“So, you think I have a pretty face?”

“I think you have a smug face? Is that good enough?”

He shakes his head as he smiles his movie star smile at me. “That’s not quite the same thing.”

“Hmmm, it’s not?” I stare straight at his smug face and take a big sip of my wine. “I guess your face is *okay*.”

“High praise from my *girlfriend*. I would think the face that gives you epic and endless orgasms would be a little more than just *okay*.”

“Your face doesn’t give me...” I reply before his meaning hits me. Oh, my god. His face? Epic, endless orgasms? He means... he’s talking about going down on me? My mind just about spontaneously combusts at the thought. I cover my eyes with my hands and peek out at him between my fingers.

When Jackson licks his lips, I’m sure I’m imagining it.

“*Imaginary* orgasms from my *fake* boyfriend,” I whisper breathlessly. Because that’s exactly what all of this is. *Imaginary. Fake*. We’re three weeks into this fake relationship. And it’s going to be over before I know it. Then I’ll never see Jackson again. I’ll have my two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars and no Jackson. That’s what I agreed to. And if Jackson is having a little fun at my expense, that’s my own fault. Why did I go on like that to his friends about how great he was in bed?

“Should I call you Jacks like your family does? That’s what Lily and Gunnar call you, too.”

“You’re not my friend, Selena.”

“Right. Can’t forget that. The last thing we are is friends.” I look out into the darkness, away from the house. I look anywhere but at him. “I think I should get to bed. You told your dad that we’d be back at the hospital bright and early, and I still have to do the dishes and make a grocery list.”

Jackson’s face is stony. “Sure. But you cooked, so you’re not doing the dishes.”

“I don’t mind, really. I’m sure that you have stuff to do.”

“I have the dishes to do. My mom would come back and haunt me if I let you do the dishes after cooking in her kitchen. That was her rule. She cooked, and my dad and us boys did the dishes.”

“That’s a really sweet memory. Okay, you’re in charge of dish duty, then.”

“Selena?”

“Yes?”

“Thanks again for everything.”

“You’re welcome, Jackson.” He’s welcome for me being here. He’s welcome for me helping out. But he didn’t thank me for lusting after him when we’re supposed to be in an entirely *fake* relationship.

With an awkward smile, I pick up my plate and wineglass, and head back into the house. It’s going to be a long, long night alone in the same house as Jackson Waters.

chapter twenty-three

jackson

If picking up her dishes and fleeing the barn wasn't sign enough to give her some space, I don't know what is. Once we got back inside, she poked around the kitchen cupboards for a few minutes and then fled upstairs and away from me. I put her suitcase in Jameson's old room before dinner. It's the farthest down the hall from mine.

After doing the dishes and heading upstairs, I know I'm in trouble. Because I can't stay away from her like I should. I'm not even trying to at this point.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Yes?"

"Hey, I have something for you." I could just open the door. None of the doors in this house have locks, except for my parents' room. But that wouldn't be right. I'm going to have to spend the entire night knowing that Selena is down the hall without a single lock between us. I don't let myself think about what would happen if I just opened her door and walked inside.

"You do?" Selena sounds suspicious. She probably thinks it's my dick in a box or something. And she wouldn't be entirely wrong. If I thought there was any way in hell that my dick was a present she'd actually be interested in opening, I'd be down in the kitchen looking for some scissors to cut the ribbon to tie around my shaft in an enormous bow for her.

"I do. Come here."

Selena opens the door. She has a towel wrapped around her head, and she's wearing a pale pink polka-dot bathrobe. This is the most natural I've ever seen her. The most intimate. Her face is scrubbed clean of the black mascara and bright pink lips she always has on. Her real lips are a soft pink. Her pretty hazel eyes are framed by brown lashes a few shades darker than her hair. I've had more makeup slapped on my face in the last fifteen years than most people have in a lifetime. Makeup can do a hell of a lot these days, so I like seeing what's underneath. She's so fucking pretty. Like this. All made up. Every single way.

“What is it?” she asks, still suspicious.

“I remembered my mom had some old stuff in a box in the closet, and I thought you might want something.” Pulling the rolled up t-shirt from behind my back, I toss it to her. She reaches out and catches it, slapping it between the palms of her hands like a cute little seal. She might have been right about not inheriting the athletic genes in her family.

She slowly unrolls the fabric, and then she freezes.

“Oh, my god. *Stop*. Is this real?”

Then she’s slapping her hands against my chest excitedly. “Oh my god, Jackson! Is this real? Seriously? It’s not! Is it? Oh, my god?”

“Would your second-favorite hundreds of years old teen vampire lie to you?”

“You have got to be kidding me! This is an original Raven-Con t-shirt with all the cast members’ signatures on it? From the first ever Raven-Con?” She frowns and looks down at it, tugging at the neck for something. “What size is it? I don’t care if this is a collector’s item. If it fits, I am putting this thing on and never taking it off. Unisex XL... it should fit...” she mumbles to herself like I’m not even here.

Actually, I think she has forgotten that I’m here. She throws the door wide open when she rushes back inside. Then she tears the towel off her head and tosses it onto the bed. She rips off her thin cotton bathrobe, and I get a view of what’s underneath.

She has on some sort of silky lavender tank top and matching loose shorts. With bits of cream lace over her breasts and the sides of her hips. It’s not like any pajamas I’ve ever seen before, that’s for sure. Shit, my dick pulls against my jeans at the sight of how her ass fills out the loose shorts. The tank top rides up, exposing a few creamy inches of skin on her lower back as she throws up her arms to pull on the t-shirt. Then she pulls it down. It fits snugly around her hips, and when she turns around to face me, it’s pulled tight over her breasts. Not too tight, just the right amount of tight. Her nipples are poking through. They look big and hard. I have to clench my hands into fists at my sides to stop myself from reaching out and touching them. I think she’s almost as excited about the damn t-shirt as I am at seeing her in those silky pajamas.

“This is the best thing anyone has ever given me. I am never taking it off. *Never!*”

I can’t help but smile. “Glad you like it.”

“I don’t like it, Jackson. I *love* it! My teenage self would have committed unspeakable crimes to get my hands on one of these. And all I had to do was pretend to date a movie star.”

“You mean *date* a movie star.”

She looks up at me, surprised. “Right. Can’t slip up, even when we’re alone. All I had to do was *date* a movie star.”

“I should let you get to bed.” Letting her go to bed alone is the last thing I want to do. But it’s the right thing to do. “Night, Selena.”

“Goodnight, Nugget!”

When I turn to walk away from her, forcing one foot in front of the other with every step, I feel her grab my hand. Turning back to look at her, I wonder if she’s inviting me into her room.

“I mean it, Jackson. This is seriously the best gift anyone has ever given me. Thank you!” She throws her arms around my neck, and I feel her hard nipples press against my chest in the middle of all her softness. I have to tilt my hips back so she doesn’t feel the half chub pressing against my jeans.

“You’re welcome, baby. Goodnight.”

So, that’s a hard no on her inviting me into her bed.

Message received.

chapter twenty-four

jackson

*B*lue balls. Is there a stronger term than blue balls? Indigo balls? Navy balls? Whatever it is, I've got it. I was up half the night thinking about Selena in those light purple pajamas, arguing with myself over wanting to jerk off and telling myself I was a fucking pervert if I did.

The walls are too thin to jerk off. The hot water in the shower is finicky. So, I'd either end up scalded or freezing if I tried to rub one out. I used to take that risk when I was a teenager, but I'm a grown man now.

The way she talked about how good I am at sex, that has to mean she's thought about it, right? I can't be the only one thinking about it nonstop. Maybe she's not thinking about it as much as I am, because that's not humanly possible. But she has to be thinking about it at least a little to come through with that kind of detail on the fly? Right? *Right?*

Fuck, what if it is just me? What if I'm just a dirty old man jerking off and thinking about the woman doing him a favor? What the hell am I doing? The woman had the misfortune of getting stuck in an elevator with me. Then I embarrass her on national TV. Then I trap her again into pretending to date me for two months. And I can't even do the right thing and just leave it strictly business. Not even when I'm contractually prohibited from fucking her. All I can think about is fucking her and pressing my dick balls deep between those thick thighs. And I don't just want to fuck her. I want to push her dark hair back from her face and kiss her. I could kiss her for days on end and not come up for breath. Shit, I am such a fucking perverted old man.

She's so pretty and sweet. If she had *any* idea of the thoughts I have about her, she'd run for the fucking hills. She'd be on the first flight she could to get away from me.

None of what I can't stop thinking about was part of the contract. It wasn't what she agreed to. So, I have to keep it to myself. I only have to get through five more weeks of this. Five more weeks of this, and then I'll be free to fuck someone who actually wants me. Five more weeks of fucking torture.

Between worrying about my dad and wanting what I can't have, I'm so tense I could snap at any minute. Standing up from my childhood double bed, I grab the pair of gray sweats I packed and head to the bathroom. Did I remember she seemed interested in my gray sweats back in the elevator when I packed them? Maybe I did. Maybe I didn't.

The house is quiet. I think I'm the first one up. After brushing my teeth, I grab my AirPods and then toss them back down on the nightstand. There's no noise to drown out here. Just birds chirping and maybe the odd pickup driving off in the distance.

I stop outside Selena's open door, not letting myself look in. I don't know what I would do if she tossed the covers off, and I saw an eyeful of creamy bare skin.

Letting out a low whistle, I call Oats quietly. "Oats. Let's go for a run, you little traitor."

He doesn't need to be told twice. He's out of Selena's room and bounding down the stairs before I can tell him to slow the hell down so he doesn't wake her. Rushing down the stairs after him, I fall into a run the minute my feet touch the ground next to the front porch. I used to run through the fields every morning when I was in high school. Then I left home at eighteen and never looked back. Not really. I visited over the years. I love my family. But I haven't spent more than four nights in a row back home since I left, except when my mom was sick.

I've been too busy for the last fifteen years. Too busy for my family? What a fucking asshole. I wasn't here at the end when mom died, and damn it if I'm not going to be here when my dad needs me.

The rich brown soil is hard beneath my feet. The hay is just about ready to be cut and baled for the first time this season. Even with my brothers around, taking care of this place is too much for dad. He's never going to let them fully take over because he still thinks he can do everything himself. He used to be able to. He ran this place all by himself for years when we were kids. I honestly don't know how he did it, even if the farm was a lot smaller back then. The four of us weren't much help in the beginning. And then just when I was grown and could have really helped him, I left. I should get back here more often. I know that. But with my schedule, it just never seems to fit in. And if I'm the next box office superhero, and I want to try my hand at directing, none of that's going to change anytime soon.

Anger courses through me, and every step I take feels like I'm punching

the dirt ground beneath my feet. This place has always felt like the only home I've ever had. But I was always desperate to leave it. Now, I'm desperate to come back, but I don't want to give up my life in L.A., either. I've put in too much work to give it all up now.

Running usually gives me clarity. Sets my priorities straight for the day. No such luck today. By the time I've put in five miles and looped my way through the fields back to the front porch, my mind is just as muddy as it was when I left. I don't know how to help my dad and be here for him when my life is in L.A. I know I need to keep my hands off of Selena. And I know that if she gives me even the slightest hint that she'd be into it, I'd be on top of her so fast her head would spin.

"Morning."

"Morning." It comes out more of a grunt than a word, as I stand on the front porch glaring down at Selena for looking pretty enough to eat. She's sitting on the porch swing in a short sundress with little puffy sleeves that barely go past her shoulders and a deep V-neck showing off more inches of her big tits than I deserve to see. This one has flowers on it, lilies, I think. She has a steaming mug of what smells like tea in her hands, and she's peering up at me over the top of it.

I think maybe her eyes are scanning my naked chest. But I'm so fucking horny, maybe I'm just imagining it?

"Did you... have a good run?" She asks. Does her voice sound tight? Maybe even a little hoarse? I'm a man looking for a sign, and I can't trust that my mind isn't just seeing and hearing what it wants.

"Yeah, pretty good. Did you sleep okay?"

"Yes, I slept good. Pretty good. It's always hard to sleep in a new place, but Oats kept me company."

"Yeah, don't think I didn't notice that," I mutter in the traitor's general direction.

Selena smiles up at me. "So, what's the plan for today?"

"Still figuring that out. I definitely need a shower. Then maybe we can head into town for breakfast and then go see my dad? Visiting hours start at ten."

"Sounds good."

"If there's anything you want to do while you're here, just let me know. I'm sure sitting at the hospital with a family that's not yours isn't exactly a great time."

“I came here to be here for you. Not to have some big, fun trip. So, whatever you need, I’m here.”

Whatever I need? What I need is to toss her over the kitchen table and shove my face between her thighs. But that’s not on the agenda this morning. *Or ever.*

“I’m all ready to go. But since it looks like you need a shower, I think I’ll poke around the kitchen again and finalize my grocery list. I thought I could stock up for when your dad’s back home, too.”

“That would be great. He’s not much of a cook. More of a can opener and dump it into the microwave kind of guy.”

“Got it. I’ll get him some stuff that’s easy to heat up, but not totally full of salt and fake dyes. I love a challenge in the kitchen!” She sounds entirely too full of sunshine for the mood I’m in this morning. I want to bend her over the porch swing and spank her for being so happy when I’m so miserable from wanting her. Not happening, pervert.

“Thank you. I know I keep saying it, but it’s because I mean it. Thank you for coming here with me.”

“And I keep saying that you’re welcome because I mean it!”

“I’m going to hit the shower. I’ll be ready in fifteen.”

“Sounds good. Oats and I will be right here. Fair warning, you’re probably going to need to pry me off of this porch swing when it’s time to leave.”

“You have a thing for porch swings, huh?”

“A big thing. Huge. I’ve always wanted one.”

“Well, feel free to have your way with it while we’re here. I don’t get back home too often.” Have her way with it? What the hell am I even saying? Although, the rhythm of the swing if we were... No. Nope. I will not think of all the ways I want to fuck Selena in and around my parent’s home. *I will not.*

Her eyes widen, and then her eyebrows draw together. “Go get in the shower!”

chapter twenty-five

jackson

“*T*his place is so cute!” Selena cries out for at least the tenth time as she looks around us. If I was trying to avoid us being seen together here in Western Springs, she would have outed us in ninety seconds. Anyone who’s this excited to be here, definitely isn’t from around here.

“I guess. I’ve been coming here my entire life. It just feels like home to me.” Looking around, I can see what Selena sees in the place. The diner is older than my dad, probably older than my grandparents. The ancient brick walls are lined with farm tools and black and white photos of people, along with tractors and cows, horses and dogs. The booths are covered in an old robin’s egg blue leather with white trim. There’s a long bar counter with robins’ egg blue laminate and chrome edging. The rest of the tables and chairs match. Everything in this place is brick, robin’s egg blue, white, and chrome. Big glass windows look out over Grove Street, the main street in Western Springs. This place is actually called the Grove Street Diner. But since there’s only one diner in town, most people just call it *the diner*.

Trying to see the place like Selena is, I realize it looks like a movie set, except that it’s real. More than half of the photos are of people I recognize, or that I’ve been told who they are. I know that B17 on the jukebox in the corner plays my mom’s favorite country song, an old Patsy Cline classic. I don’t even need to look at the menu to know what I’m ordering. This diner has the best omelets and hash browns in the country. And I don’t give two shits that hash browns are not on my approved nutrition plan. Nutrition plans don’t apply in Western Springs.

“There’s the cutest little bakery over there. Can we go check it out after breakfast?” She’s leaning across the table towards me to get a better look at the old brick building across the street. The white shutters and striped awning have both seen better days. The inches of creamy skin over the neckline of her dress have not. She might be staring out at the town, but I’m staring at every inch of Selena’s breasts on display this morning. Like the undeserving jackass, I am.

“Can we? Go check out the bakery?” Selena asks again when I don’t respond.

Right. Answer the woman, don’t just stare at her tits like a creep. “Ugh... The bakery closed a few years back. And hasn’t re-opened since. But, yeah, we can go over and take a look. Peek in the windows. Like real creepers.” I’m the only creeper here.

“Perfect!” The huge smile she gives me makes me feel even worse.

“Who lives up there on the hill?”

“That’s the Elliot place. They’re the richest family in town.”

“You’re not the richest family in town?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. But I don’t actually live here. And you’ve been to the farm. We’re not fancy. I didn’t grow up rich.”

“I love the farm. It’s perfect. I love the house. And the-”

I laugh. “Yeah, I know. You love the porch swing. And the wind chimes above the porch swing.”

“I really, really do. And don’t think I didn’t notice the garden this morning. It’s adorable.”

I glance down at the table and then back up at her as a fist wraps around my heart, squeezing tight. “That was my mom’s garden. Lily keeps it going since she passed. Dad never really understood agriculture on a smaller scale. He doesn’t really have time for herbs.”

“Jacks? What are you doing here?” I hear Jarret’s voice call out from the front of the diner.

Glancing up, I see all four of my brothers heading towards us. Every single one of them is in boots, jeans, t-shirts, and plaid shirts. Three out of four are wearing backward baseball caps.

“We’re getting breakfast. Same as you.”

“Guess our invite got lost in the mail,” Jameson says with a grin.

“Guess so,” I mutter. I thought we lucked out getting one of the few big booths in the back. But now I’m regretting it. If we were sitting at one of the tiny tables up front, my brothers wouldn’t be able to crash.

“Mind if we join you?”

Selena beams up at Jasper. “Of course, not...”

“Jasper,” he fills in for her.

“Jasper, right. Please join us.” Selena bites her lip. “But maybe we should move to a bigger table?”

“Good idea. Or they could get their own damn table...” I mutter, knowing

that it's not going to happen. And knowing even more that I'm a complete asshole for wanting to be alone and stare at Selena's tits instead of spending time with my brothers when I'm home for the first time in years.

"No need. Plenty of room here. We'll just squeeze right in," Jasper promises, as he tries to do just that right next to Selena.

"Watch where you're squeezing, brother." I throw my arm over Selena's shoulders and shove my brother back a few inches to give her some space. She doesn't seem to mind, and my arm over her shoulders is a pretty solid case for us being together, so I leave it. Jasper and Jensen slide in on her side. Jarret and Jameson slide in on mine.

"You order yet?" Jensen asks, rubbing his stomach.

"Yes. Food's probably almost here. More reason for you to get your own damn table," I grumble.

"That's okay. We can wait." Selena picks up my wrist off the table and tilts it towards her to read the time.

She never touches me like this. I'm always the one who touches her first. In public. When it's appropriate. When I'm allowed to. Not every other second like I want to. "We just need to be done in forty-five minutes. Jackson wants to be at the hospital right when visiting hours open."

"With so many people, that might be hard..." I mutter.

"I'm sure it's not a problem. Just give Dolores one of your big old Hollywood tips, and she'll run that food out to us lickety-split," Jasper says, smiling at me like he knows how much the Hollywood shot pisses me off.

"Watch your words. No one wants to see Dolores do the splits!" Jameson says, shaking his head.

Jarret hits Jameson on the back of the neck before I get the chance. Then he leans forward towards Selena. "Not to be sexist or anything. It's just that Dolores might be older than this whole town. I bet she'd break her damn hip if she tried to do the splits."

"Well, maybe she can just drop it low or something instead?" Selena asks with a grin. "It's really nice to meet all of you. I wish it was under better circumstances, obviously."

There's a chorus of *you twos* and *real nices* tossed out. My brothers are really amping up the country charm for Selena.

"And we didn't really get too much of a chance to talk at the hospital yesterday. So, it's great that you're joining us. Because there is something I wanted to talk to you about..." When Selena leans forward, it takes

everything in me not to haul her ass back against the booth, grab her dress in my fist, and pull it up to her chin.

“And what’s that, pretty lady?” Jasper asks, leaning forward.

“I will punch you,” I mutter under my breath, loud enough for every single one of my brothers to hear me. And Selena, who frowns at me before turning her attention back to my brothers.

She flutters her eyelashes at them. “Oh, I was just hoping to hear about Jackson’s most embarrassing stories, if that wouldn’t be too much trouble.”

“None at all. None at all,” Jarret says with a grin that looks just like mine. My brothers all look at each other and start talking at once.

“The chicken thing?”

“The bedwetting?”

“No, no, the barn thing?”

“The thing with Mr. Alton’s truck?”

“What about Mrs. Roerig’s flower garden?”

“Half of those things weren’t even me. It was you jackasses!” I nearly shout.

Selena turns to glare at me before she has the nerve to actually *shush* me. In my own damn town, the woman has the nerve to *shush* me. Then she flashes me a grin that is downright possessed.

She leans forward again, resting her face on her hands, elbows on the table. “I can’t wait to hear each and every one. Since Jackson told the entire world all about my... incident, let’s start with the bedwetting.”

And that is how I almost die eating breakfast in a diner in Western Springs. But at least I would have had my arm around Selena when it happened.

Selena eats her tofu scramble, hash browns, and fruit salad like it’s the best thing she’s ever tasted, telling us every three bites how good it is. Meanwhile, she doesn’t let up pressing my brothers for every detail of every embarrassing thing I’ve ever done in my life. The only good things about this entire meal are how Selena giggles at every part of every story, and how she’s snuggled into me, my arm wrapped over her shoulders, my thumb stroking her bare arm. I’m not sure what’s acting anymore and what’s not, but I’m pretty sure that I’m not this good of an actor.

“I hate to break this up when I’m having such a great time. But we should get going to the hospital and see Dad.”

Selena picks up my wrist again to check the time. Her warm fingers light

my skin on fire. “Ooh, he’s right. We need to go. Do you think we can pay at the front? I’m worried if we need to wait on Dolores making her way back over here again that we’ll be late for your dad.”

“I’ve got cash. Don’t worry, we won’t be late,” I tell her, squeezing her against me quickly. “The rest of you can feel free to worry. Let’s go.”

One by one, my brothers slide out of the booth. While I’m busy grabbing my wallet out of my back pocket and throwing down enough bills to cover ten times what we ordered, Jasper bows to Selena and offers her his hand to help her stand up.

She reaches out to take his hands and starts to stand up, but I’m faster. I slide along the booth seat and stand up so quickly behind her I have to grab Selena around the waist to steady her. Only with our height difference, I catch her right under her breasts.

“Get your own girl!” It comes out more growl than words.

Selena bursts into a giggle fit, and I know exactly what she’s thinking.

“Ooh, ooh! I have one! Remind me to tell you about the time Jackson tried to give me the Heimlich maneuver!” She says before bending over laughing and taking me with her, since my arms are still wrapped around her waist.

“I will definitely remember to ask about that,” Jameson says with a grin.

“I hate you. And you. And you. And him, too. I hate all of you,” I tell them over Selena’s head, while she’s still in a fit of giggles in my arms.

“Nah, he loves us. He just thinks he has to be the big, tough older brother,” Jameson says conspiratorially to Selena. “You need to get in touch with your emotions, man.”

“My fist is going to get in touch with your face in a minute,” I tell him with a wide-eyed smile. I must look crazy. I definitely feel crazy.

“No one is punching anyone, at least not while I’m around!” Selena orders sternly.

When she stands up straight, I reluctantly let her go. But she slides her hand along my arm and then rubs my fist until I open my hand and take hers. “We’ll see you at the hospital, everyone!”

chapter twenty-six

jackson

*J*n a minute, Selena's safely tucked in the passenger seat of my granddad's old pickup, and I'm behind the wheel, pulling out from the curb on Grove Street.

"I like your brothers. A lot." When I glance over at her, she's turned in her seat to look at me. The way she's twisted in her seat, her short sundress rides up even more than normal, showing me dangerous inches of creamy thigh.

"Oh, I'm pretty clear on that, baby. You've known them less than a day, and I think you like them more than me already."

Selena smiles, but doesn't say anything. "Ooh, can you let me out here? I want to bring your dad some flowers for next to his bed."

"I don't think the man ever noticed a flower a day in his life," I tell her, frowning.

"Well, there's always time to start. It's just something to show that we're thinking about him. Everybody likes pretty things. I don't care how much of a manly man they are."

I know I like pretty things. Pretty eyes. Pretty thighs.

"I'm not letting you out in the middle of the street. I'll pull over and come with you."

"In the middle of the busy street with exactly four cars in it? Three of which belong to your brothers? I think I'll be fine. I don't want you to be late, so I'll just meet you there. It's fine. I'm jumping out at the stoplight. I'll see you at the hospital in a minute, okay?" She picks up her purse off of her lap, getting ready to jump out of the truck.

"Selena, I'm not leaving you here in the middle of a strange town."

"A strange town with a thousand people in it?" She giggles.

"Twelve-hundred."

"Wowza! Bright lights, big city! I think I'll be fine. I'll just see you at the hospital."

"How are you going to find the hospital?"

“Using one of the ten map apps on my phone? Or, you know, my eyes? The town only has three blocks. And the hospital is the only building with more than three stories.” She turns in her seat. “Look, I can see it from here. I’m really going to be fine, I promise. It’s no big deal.”

The truck rolls to a stop, and she puts her hand on the door handle. This truck is seventy years old. The seatbelts are after-market. So, it definitely doesn’t have kiddie locks on the doors to stop her from jumping out.

“Okay, Nugget. I’ll see you in fifteen minutes. Bye!” With a wave, she unhooks her seatbelt, opens her door, and slides out of the truck.

Some asshole honks behind me for sitting like an idiot at the stop sign for too long. *Shit*. I’m not just leaving her here. Not all by herself and looking as good as she does in that little sundress showing off way too much of her tits for anyone who isn’t me to see. She doesn’t know this town. She doesn’t know where she’s going. And she’s not walking around here all by herself. Not fucking happening.

Slamming on the turn signal, I take a hard right and pull up to the curb to park. Two out of four wheels end up on the sidewalk. I’m not too worried about getting a ticket. Everyone in town knows this truck. And by now, they all know I’m in town. My family’s lived here as long as anyone can remember, and in a small town like this that counts for a whole lot. Then there’s the other thing. In my experience, a couple of signed cast photos from my latest project—or worse, from *Raven’s Ravine*—gets me out of just about any trouble.

So, I don’t take the time to fix my park job. In seconds, I’m out of the truck, grabbing Selena by the waist, and pressing her up against the old brick wall of the town movie theater. I put one hand behind her head and the other behind her shoulders to break the force of the hit, but I let her ass take all of it as I slam her into the wall. I grab both of her wrists in my hands and pin them at her sides, tight against the brick wall. Every inch of my hard muscle presses into every inch of her soft curves.

“I told you not to get out of the damn truck, Selena!”

“What the hell? I’m fine. You’re the one acting crazy. I was just going to buy your dad some flowers and then walk the eight-hundred feet to meet you at the hospital. The town has three streets, Jackson. Three streets! I told you I’d be fine.” Her chest is pounding up and down, distracting me with the inches of flesh bouncing against my chest. *Something* is making her breathe that hard. Probably the jackass who has her pinned to a wall.

“You’re not fine unless I say you’re fine, do you hear me? You’re with *me*. So, you don’t just take off without me. You don’t buy flowers for my dad without me. If we’re buying some stupid flowers, then I’m going to be the one buying them, got it?” I demand.

When she just rolls her eyes at me and doesn’t immediately apologize, I’ve had it.

Letting her hands go, I’m still pinning her against the wall to keep her still. Reaching behind me, I pull my wallet out of my back pocket and take out one of my credit cards before putting my wallet back. It doesn’t matter which credit card, none of them have limits.

“I should have done this a long time ago,” I whisper to her, grabbing her wrists and holding them above her head in one hand. “You’re with me. You don’t pay for anything, do you hear me? If you need anything, you use this.”

I drag the card down the skin of her neck, down her chest, and then slide it into the tight line where her breasts press together above the low V-neck of her dress.

Her mouth drops open, showing me that pretty pink tongue she has. My face is inches from hers like this. I could move my head down just a little and swipe my tongue over her full bottom lip like I’ve thought about doing about a million times. Press my lips against hers. Slide my tongue inside those open lips and taste her properly.

Selena lets out a shaky breath and nods. Shit, I must be scaring her. But she doesn’t look scared. She’s staring up at me like she’s seeing me for the first time. That’s probably right. This is the first time I’ve been a completely deranged asshole to her. But right now, I don’t feel the least bit sorry.

Letting go of her hands, I keep my arm against the brick wall over her head. I rub the thumb of my other hand along her jaw, dangerously close to those pink lips. I could lean back and give her some space, but why the hell would I do that when she’s pressed up tight against me like this? Her nipples are sharp little points pressed against my chest.

“Selena?” I demand, my breath moving the hair around her face. “What flowers are we getting?”

She’s staring up at me. She hasn’t taken her eyes off of me this whole time. “I like... lilies.”

Taking her by the hand, I pull her with me towards the little grocery store to find some damn lilies, making sure she’s on the building side of the sidewalk and safely away from traffic.

chapter twenty-seven

selena

I can barely walk as Jackson tugs me along the sidewalk towards Western Springs' only grocery store. My legs are jelly. My vagina is throbbing.

What the hell *was* that?

And why the hell was it so hot?

I can barely breathe I'm so turned on.

That was a whole new side of Jackson. That was *all* of Jackson. All of him pressed up against me, my hands trapped in his. And I *liked* it. I liked it way too much. For a second, I even thought he might kiss me. But obviously not. Whatever just happened, Jackson was only playing the part of the jealous boyfriend.

When he slid his credit card between my breasts, it was so freaking hot. I wanted to grab his hand with both of mine and shove it inside my bra. And grab his other hand and shove it up my dress. In the middle of Grove Street. In a town of twelve hundred people. In broad daylight.

Something is officially wrong with me.

And I'm officially pissed at Jackson.

This might all be fake to him, but he has no right to make me question that. And the way he's acting is making me think things are more than what they are.

I don't understand him. Even when he's throwing me up against a wall, he's protecting me. The only part of me that actually smacked against the brick wall was my butt. He put his hand behind my head and braced my impact. When his whole body pressed up against me, I never wanted him to move.

How could I actually think Jackson might kiss me? I'm the last person Jackson would ever want to kiss. He probably just thought I was going to embarrass him by getting lost in a town with one street? But I'm a grown woman. I can handle buying some flowers and walking a few blocks to the hospital.

The little grocery store is adorable. It's a cross between a general store, a pharmacy and a farmer's market. Tables of local produce are lined up outside, pressed against the brick wall. Inside, the walls are decorated with old signs. It's a bit beat up, but in that way that tells you something is actually old, and the scuffs and scratches aren't just some antique faux-finish. I could spend a couple of hours in here walking down every aisle and looking at everything from the local canned goods to the brands that we don't get in L.A. Jackson, however, is a man on a mission. Tugging on my hand, he leads me to the back corner, where there's a small and not very impressive flower selection. There are a few potted plants and a couple of spindly bouquets of roses, daisies, or wildflowers. And then I see the two bouquets of lilies on the bottom shelf, almost as an afterthought. They're orange tiger lilies, my second favorite. But with only a couple of stems in each bundle, I decide to get both of them and a couple of the wildflower bundles, too. I can put them together at the hospital and make something that hopefully looks better than the sum of its parts.

"Happy?" Jackson asks me, still sounding disgruntled.

"So, so incredibly happy, *Nugget*," I tell him, beaming up at him.

He frowns at my big smile. "Let's go."

"We need something to put them in first." Scanning the shelves, I'm not impressed with the small glass vases. They're not big enough to fit all the flowers we're buying. And they're ugly.

Moving along the aisles, I hunt for what I'm looking for.

"Selena, we can come back here later. We need to get going."

"You're a big boy, Jackson. You're free to leave any time," I tell him, spying exactly what I'm looking for. Reaching down, I grab a half gallon mason jar.

"Planning on canning something at the hospital today?"

Rolling my eyes at him, I head to the front of the store to get in the checkout line. "It's for the flowers, *Nugget*."

Only there is no checkout line because this is Western Springs, and apparently no one buys groceries here just before ten o'clock on a weekday morning. I honestly can't remember the last time I didn't have to wait in a line in L.A. For anything. At the grocery store. At a restaurant. For the bathroom. There are so many people in L.A. that you're always waiting in a line for something.

Grinning at the lack of line, I walk right up to the till. The checkout clerk

is a kid who looks like he's fifteen, but is hopefully at least eighteen because he's not in school on a weekday morning. He stares at us, his eyes wide open. Well, he stares at Jackson.

"Good morning," I tell him cheerfully as I put all the flowers and the giant mason jar down on the little conveyor belt.

"Morning, Mr. Waters," the kid says to Jackson even though I'm the one who wished him a good morning. Jackson is just standing behind me like a grumpy statue.

He moves forward to stand next to me. "Hey, your mom's Lina Torres, isn't she?"

The kid nods, grinning. "Lina Tapper now, but yeah."

"Tell her I said hi."

"Will do, Mr. Waters, sir."

"How much do I owe you?" Jackson says conversationally, apparently happy to not be a grumpy statue when he's talking to anyone other than me.

"That'll be thirty-three dollars and fifty-seven cents."

When Jackson reaches into his back pocket for his wallet, I press my hand on his arm.

"Oh, I can pay."

"You're *not* paying, Selena." His deep voice is a warning. One I happily ignore.

"I know..." Smiling at him when he only looks confused, I lean forward over the counter towards the poor, gawky teenager forced to witness Jackson and me fighting. "You're paying, Jackson."

Slowly, I trail my fingertips down my neck to the deep V-shaped neckline of my dress, just like Jackson did when he shoved a credit card into my bra. Then I slip my fingers between my breasts and slowly, slowly, pull out Jackson's credit card. "There it is."

The poor kid's jaw is hanging open, staring at me. Sorry, kid. You're just collateral damage in my attempt to piss off my fake boyfriend.

After tapping Jackson's card on the sensor to pay, I finally glance at him where he's standing next to me. His mouth is open just like the teenage checkout kid's, and his hands are clenched in fists at his sides. I guess that worked, then.

"Selena." My name is a low growl.

"Yes, Jackson?" I ask innocently.

A hundred different things flash across his face. And I bet there's a

hundred different things he wants to say to me. But he doesn't say even one. Instead. He picks up the paper bag from the checkout counter and storms out of the store.

Thinking, I slowly follow behind him. Coming here to Jackson's hometown, spending every waking minute with him has been... a lot. And we only got here yesterday. I can't think clearly when he's always right there, looking so handsome, practically growling at me. No, actually growling at me. It's putting all kinds of ideas in my head that I have no right to think about.

So, I need to create some distance between us. I need some room to breathe properly and remind myself that this is all fake. All of it. Whatever was really responsible for pissing Jackson off, he obviously didn't mean for things to get so heated between us.

Or so heated between my thighs.

I need air. I need space. I need miles of space. And being stuck out at the old farmhouse by ourselves at night is the opposite of space.

chapter twenty-eight

Four weeks. Probably less. Probably a lot less...

jackson

*A*fter another long day at the hospital, Selena made us dinner, and I did the dishes. She's sitting on the front porch on her phone, and I'm sitting across from her, staring at her while I'm pretending to read a script. Dinner, dishes, and sitting on the front porch are turning into a routine for us after visiting hours at the hospital end. It's nice and quiet. Just how I like things.

Selena's been kind of standoffish since I shoved her up against a wall and almost kissed her a few days ago. And I hate myself more every minute for doing it. It changed something between us, and she's kept her distance ever since. I know I should apologize for how I acted, but it turns out I'm not even a little sorry. Well, I'm only sorry that I scared her away when I did it.

When she stands up off the porch swing, I need to know where she's going, and the words are out of my mouth before I can stop myself.

"Where are you headed?"

She makes a face at me. "Inside. Do you need to come with me? Follow me around inside the house? Do whatever floats your boat, Jackson. I don't care."

Yeah, something's changed. And I don't like it one bit.

Instead of following her inside, I make myself stay out on the porch, still trying to read the script on my iPad. I'm going to keep my feet planted on the front porch, even if it kills me. But instead of thinking about a murder at a luxury resort on Mars, I'm thinking about what the woman inside my house is doing. And how to make things go back to the way they were before.

Eventually, Selena comes back outside. She's changed into leggings and another oversized t-shirt with the Ladycakes logo on the front. This one's lavender, and it makes her look like a pretty, little cupcake. I should ask her to get me one of those shirts. But in black. All the pastel colors aren't exactly my style. But I'd even wear the pastel one for her. She has that massive purse of hers over her shoulder, telling me she's leaving me.

"Going somewhere?" Do I sound as jealous as I think I sound? Yeah,

pretty sure I do.

She gives me a polite smile. “Yeah, Lily’s coming to get me.”

“Why is Lily coming to get you?”

“Because we’re going to hang out. Have some girl time.”

“Hang out where? The only thing that’s open in this town on a Saturday night is the Pump ’n Ride. And trust me, it’s not nearly as fun as it sounds. It’s just a gas station and a shitty convenience store. Trust me on that. I spent one too many nights there when I was a kid.”

“I’m sorry, it’s called the Pump ’n Ride?”

“Yeah. You just didn’t notice the name because the sign’s been broken for fifteen years and no one’s ever bothered to fix it.”

“Someone needs to fix it. Immediately. Where do I sign the petition? Is there a donation jar somewhere? And maybe that is where we’re going? Because hanging out at a gas station called the Pump ’n Ride in your late twenties sounds like life goals to me right now.”

“Is that where you’re going?”

“Nope.”

“Are you going to tell me where you’re going?”

“Nope.”

I want to pin her down on the porch swing and make her tell me where she’s going. But since that approach didn’t work so well last time, I restrain myself.

She’s going to be with Lily. There’s nothing to worry about. Even though I know that I’m going to spend every minute sitting here worrying until she gets home.

There’s the crunch of tires on the dirt road leading up to the house, and I look up to see the headlights of Lily’s little blue pickup coming up the drive. I can’t count the number of times I’ve offered to buy her a slightly less shitty car, but she always says no.

“See you later, Jackson,” Selena says, as she steps off of the porch and into the light from Lily’s headlights.

She hasn’t called me *Nugget* in days. I never thought I’d miss it, but it’s embarrassing how much I do.

After I watch the taillights of the truck drive away, I move to sit on the porch swing with Oats. Two hours later, I’ve only read three pages of the Mars script, and not even because it’s bad. It’s actually pretty good. Like an old-time murder mystery, but on Mars. I’d play the eccentric detective, which

would be a departure from the action-packed stuff I usually do.

Since I need a distraction from thinking about Selena and wondering when she's coming home to me, and the script in front of me isn't doing it, I pick up my phone to call Jasper. He'll know what everyone's up to tonight.

"Hey, it's me."

"Jackson Waters knows how to use the phone? Breaking news, people. Breaking fucking news."

"Asshole."

"What do you want? We're heading out."

"Why the hell is everyone going out tonight? And why wasn't I invited?"

"Because it's Saturday night. And we're not all prematurely old men, like you. What do you want?"

"I was calling to see if I could come over for a beer. Maybe play some Xbox?"

"You think we stay home playing video games on a Saturday night? Dude, I think you're doing L.A. wrong."

"Shut up. Where are you going?"

"The Goldrush over in Western Ridge."

"Why the hell are you going all the way over there?"

"Because it's the only bar in fifty kilometers."

"Still not a good enough reason."

"Jacks, you know where Selena is right now, don't you?"

"At Lily's?"

The laugh on the other end tells me that my girlfriend and best friend are most definitely not safe at home at Lily's place. I'm on my feet and heading inside to grab my keys before I can ask the question, "Where the hell are they?"

"They're at the Goldrush. The same with everyone else under forty in this town. Except you, that is."

"You've got to be fucking kidding me."

Jasper lets out a long whistle. "She really didn't tell you?"

"No. She didn't fucking tell me. She just said that Lily was picking her up for some girl time. Are you sure Selena's there?"

Jameson starts talking in the background. "Tell him what she's wearing!"

"What the fuck is she wearing?" I demand.

"Well, Lily just posted a thirst trap for Gunnar on her Instagram, and I'm pretty sure that was Selena dancing in the background. I can't believe you let

her out of the house like that.” Jasper sounds a little fucking judgmental about what I apparently *let* Selena go out in, considering he doesn’t have a woman of his own to escape to the bar without him in something he wouldn’t want her to be wearing.

“Out of the house like what?” I demand at the same time someone else says, “What the hell do you know about thirst traps?”

It’s Gunnar. Then I hear a heavy thump, and Jasper groans.

“It wasn’t for *me*. And shut up about Lily’s thirst traps before I beat some sense into you. Lord, you must have hit every stupid branch on the way down,” Gunnar’s voice sounds in the background.

“I’ll meet you there,” I tell them before hanging up. I’m not sure if anyone’s even listening. All I know is that I need to get to Selena and bring her home. “Okay, buddy, you’re staying here tonight. I’m going to bring Selena home.”

Oats makes a whiney howl sound at Selena’s name. “I know you miss her. Me too, buddy. I’m going to bring her back home.”

chapter twenty-nine

jackson

J make it to Western Ridge in record time, partially on account of the lack of traffic, and partially because my foot was heavy on the gas the entire way. After parking the truck down the street, I head into the club, giving the bouncer I recognize from years ago a hundred on my way in.

My eyes take a minute to adjust to the dark bar. The room might be dark, but the walls are lined with old neon signs, giving everything a supernatural glow. As soon as my eyes adjust, I'm scanning for Selena. Half the people I graduated high school with are here. I guess there still really isn't anything else to do around here on a Saturday night.

I clock her in a millisecond. She's sitting on the far wall on a low leather sofa with a couple of Lily's friends from high school. *She's fine.* She's smiling and sipping some sort of girly cocktail. The kind that has a pink plastic cowboy hat in it.

Only she's not wearing the leggings and t-shirt she was when she walked past me on the front porch earlier. She's changed into a light-wash denim dress that has puffy little sleeves down to her elbows and that ties up between her damn tits. It's kind of hard to tell when she's sitting, but from the amount of creamy white thigh I can see, it's short. Too damn short. It doesn't look too tight, except where it ties up at the front. And it leaves more than half of her tits hanging out over the knot. I don't think I'd be surprised if I saw a flash of pretty pink nipple. The woman is going to fucking kill me.

"Lily," I say, pressing my hand down on her shoulder when I spot her on the stairs, heading from the bar area down to the dance floor and seating area. The layout is smart. You've got to go past the bar every time you walk in or out of the Goldrush or go to the bathroom, so you know everyone is grabbing another drink. Lily's all dressed up, too, wearing tight jean shorts, cowboy boots, and a sparkly little tank top.

Whether it's over my girlfriend or my best friend, why do I have the feeling that I'm going to be getting into a fight tonight? Nights in L.A. never end up with me in a damn bar fight.

“You don’t need to post thirst traps for Gunnar anymore. He’s right over there.”

“What?” Lily turns, frowning. Then she beams when she sees it’s me. “Bestie!”

She throws her arms around me. “I miss you. Why do you live so far away when everyone you love is right here?”

I wrap my arms around the girl that’s been my best friend—my sister—ever since I can remember. Probably since birth because our moms were best friends, and Lily was born a couple of months after me.

“You know I need to be in L.A. for work. But I should come home more often. That’s on me. I need to do better.”

Lily leans back and rolls her middle finger against her thumb to flick me right on the nipple. *Hard*. “Ouch. Shit, Lily!”

“Yeah you do, asshole!” She glances around, and like always, her eyes land on Gunnar. “What the hell are you all doing here? It’s ladies’ night!”

“Ladies’ night is officially over. The guys are here now. And you know I never would have let you and Selena go to the bar without us, if either of you’d told me this is where you were going.”

“Why do you think we didn’t tell you? Selena wanted some space.” Lily throws her hand over her mouth. “Oops, I wasn’t supposed to say that.”

“You’re my best friend. So, you definitely should have told me that. But you still shouldn’t have come to the bar all by yourselves.”

“We’re grown women. We can go to a bar by ourselves! What do you think I do all the time when you’re not here?”

“I figured you’d have the good sense to bring Gunnar or one of my idiot brothers.”

“I am a strong, independent woman, Jackson Waters. I don’t *require a chaperone*. Now make yourself useful and go get us another round.”

“You’re a monster.”

“But you love me.”

“I know, I do. But I’m not sure how it happened. I think you must have just grown on me like some sort of invasive moss or something.”

“Moss are a super-species. So thank you for that compliment.” Lily drums on my arms, like she’s kicking off a drum solo at Madison Square Garden. “Drinks! Drinks! Drinks!”

“Shit. Fine. What are you drinking?”

“Just get us shots. Tequila, please. The good stuff.”

“Because tequila after eleven o’clock is a good idea. “

“Like tequila’s a good idea *before* eleven o’clock? But that’s what we’re drinking!”

“Fine. Behave yourself while I’m gone.”

“No promises!”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.” I’m not sure I’d recognize a Lily on her best behavior.

Tossing my arm over Jameson’s shoulders, I rope him into coming to the bar with me. I order a dozen tequila shots and a half a dozen waters for the ladies. Lime wedges, shakers of salt. The whole damn thing. Picking up the tray of shots and fixings, I nod for my brother to pick up the waters. Then I turn to deliver the drinks, as requested. One-by-one, I catch Lily, Gunnar, and my other brothers’ eyes and nod towards the sofa area where Selena’s sitting with Lily’s friends.

“Body shots! Body shots!” Lily chants as she walks over to the sofa area and flops down on the ottoman next to the trays of tequila shots and waters. I don’t really want to think about what else has been on that ottoman. Or the sofa Selena’s sitting on.

Selena picks up a shot glass and raises it at Lily, arching her dark brown eyebrow. “I will if you will.”

“I’m not licking Jacks. *Gross*,” Lily says with an exaggerated choking sound.

“Thanks, Lil,” I mutter. “You know how to make a guy feel pretty damn special.”

“Well, there’s lots of guys in this barrr.” Selena glances around her, looking back and forth like she’s trying to find someone. Only I know exactly which guy she’s going to pick. She’s slurring her words, but only a little. It’s pretty cute. “How about Gunnarr? He’s standing right therre next to you. Can’t beat convenience.”

“Should I be more or less offended by the whole convenience thing than you should be by Lily practically puking at the thought of doing a shot off of you?” Gunnar asks thoughtfully.

“More, I think. Lily’s had her whole life to be disgusted by me. Selena barely knows you,” I mutter to him with a grin.

“Ugh, if you’re so precious, I’ll find someone else!” Lily stands up, tosses her arm out, and grabs onto the closest man’s shirt she can reach. It just so happens it belongs to Jameson.

“Tequila’s getting warm, ladies,” Lily announces, tugging Jameson towards her.

Reminding her it’s served room temperature earns me a glare.

“You don’t have to do this,” I whisper, leaning down so only Selena can hear me.

“It’s fine. It’s not a big dealll. It’s not like you’re the first guy I’ve done a body shot off of, Jackson Waterssss.”

“What the hell? I’m gonna need some details on that. Actually, no. Tell me nothing. Never mention it again, please.”

Selena grins at me. For the first time in days, I get a real, all the way big, Selena smile. And I can’t get enough of it.

“How do you want to do this?” I take a step back, my hands at my sides, to show her that there’s no pressure.

“Come herrre.” Selena crooks her finger at me. Then she picks up one of the shot glasses and stands up. She steps onto the corner seat of the sofa where she’s been sitting, her feet sinking into the cushion.

She shifts her weight, and then her arms dart out to balance her. I grab one of them and steady her. But somehow she manages not to spill a single drop of the top-shelf tequila I bought.

“You good?”

“Mmmm-hmmm. Come herrre,” she says in a low, sexy voice, pressing her hands into my shoulders.

“Salt?”

Leaning down, I pick one of the salt shakers and a lime up off of the tray. I hand her the salt shaker first.

“Readyyy?” She asks with narrowed eyes.

“I guess?” I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be ready for. She’s going to do all the hard work in this situation.

Selena leans towards me, and I feel her warm breath on my neck. She tugs at the neckline of my t-shirt and pulls it down a couple of inches. Then her tongue trails a hot, wet path along the base of my neck. Holy fuck. She shakes the salt, pelting my skin with hard granules of the stuff.

She leans back and stares up at me. “Trade you the salt for the lime.”

When I hold it out to her, she presses the salt shaker into my hand and steals the lime wedge. Then she rests her elbow on my shoulder to keep her balance. Her face is right in front of mine. She darts her head forward and retraces the same salty path with her tongue. Then she presses the shot glass

to her lips and tosses her head back. Her face is all scrunched up when she lowers her head to me again, and that's before she shoves the lime wedge between her lips. When she does, she sucks the damn life out of that thing, her cheeks hollowed out from the effort.

Shit. I can never let this woman take a shot anywhere near me ever again.

"You good?" I ask quietly.

Selena nods, and then takes the lime out of her mouth, puts it in the shot glass, and grins at me.

"Thanks for the assist."

"You should get down." Taking her arm, I lead her down from her precarious spot standing on the sofa.

"I'm going to get some air," I tell her, as I turn to walk away.

Reaching down, I adjust the hard-on currently growing in my jeans. And I know there isn't enough air in the whole damn country.

chapter thirty

selena

Jackson's been gone a long time. It was easier before he got here. Before Jackson showed up, I was just me. Having fun with the girls. But when he's here, I'm always looking for him. Wondering what he's doing. Wondering what he's thinking.

I'm thinking about how I grossed him out with the body shot. What the hell got into me? I could have just licked his arm or the back of his hand or something. I didn't have to practically grind on him and lick at his neck like I wanted to give him a tongue bath. He stormed off the second I was done, so I know he was disgusted. And embarrassed. *For both of us.*

"I'm going to go get another water. Anyone want one?" I ask the girls around me as I stand up. Everyone nods and shouts *yes please* and *yes, thank you*. "Okay, be right back!"

Lily's girlfriends from high school are so great. They've been so nice, and I haven't felt left out once tonight. They make me miss my own girls, though. I haven't seen enough of them since this whole thing started. And it's not just because I'm in a different country right now. It's the same when I'm back home in L.A.

I have no excuse, except that I hate lying to them. I can't tell them the truth that the only thing between Jackson and me is a legal contract with terms and conditions. It just seemed easier to avoid them until this thing was over. It's only two months. But I need to go to brunch with them as soon as we get home. I miss brunch. I miss my girls!

I just won't talk about Jackson. That's probably a lot easier than not thinking about him. Because I know that's not happening. Not for the next four weeks, and probably longer. A lot longer.

After making my way up the stairs to the bar, I sidle in until I find a spot leaning against the bar and wait for a bartender to notice me. Getting a round of waters isn't exactly high on every bartender's list, but I'm going to leave a big tip. With Jackson's credit card. It's the least he can do for making me think about him every waking second.

My hips slide back and forth to the music as I wait. This bar is really old. There's the faint smell of cigarette smoke, even though it probably hasn't been legal to smoke in here for twenty years. But it's fun with all the neon signs. I'm getting a lesson in country music, and the seating area is great. I give this bar four point five tequila shots.

Something nudges me from the left, almost making me lose my balance. When I look over, it's a guy. Assuming that he's just trying to get up to the bar, I take a step to the side, giving him more room.

He's a lot taller than me, probably around six feet. He's big. Probably well-built. He has a face. It's probably fine. But on a Jackson Waters scale of hotness, this guy is *beige*. And that's the problem with Jackson making himself my standard. Before the elevator, maybe I would have thought this guy was hot? Now, I barely even see him.

"What are you having? I'll buy you a drink."

"Oh, I'm good. Thanks, though! I'm just getting some waters for me and my friends." I wave back towards the couches and take another little step away from him.

"Come on, I'm buying. What do you want?"

"I'm really okay. Thank you though! Have a good night." I decide I need a little more space, and turn to leave and walk down to the other end of the bar.

He reaches for my arm, but I pull it away before he can touch me. "Hey, what's the problem? Don't be such a fucking bitch. You've got your tits out for every man in this bar to see. It's so fucking obvious that you're just begging for some guy to buy you a drink and take you home and fuck you. I only wanted to buy you a drink, so don't flatter yourself. You should be so fucking lucky."

And in that moment, I see red. I stop trying to sidestep away from him and make myself smaller. Instead, I turn back to face him, straight on. "Excuse me? Fuck you! I don't want your drink. I politely said no. Now move the fuck along!"

The guy looks surprised. Like he can't believe that I would stand up to him. How dare I not be grateful for the free drink he's trying to throw my way? Well, he can fuck right off. I don't have to wait around for a man to choose me or toss me whatever breadcrumbs he feels like sending my way. Ugh, I hate men like this. Sometimes, I just hate men. Period.

"You fucking bitch!" When he walks towards me, I'm afraid. I don't

want to be, but I am. This guy is six feet tall, and he looks strong. He has big, meaty hands. The thought of his hands touching me makes me cringe.

He reaches for my arm again, but I'm too slow. This time, he catches me and he presses his fingers into my skin, so hard that I wince.

Shit, he's hurting me. He's digging his fingertips and nails into my arm.

"Ouch! Let me go, you piece of shit!" I cry out, trying to sound braver than I feel. I'm pissed, but this guy could really hurt me. At bars in L.A., there's security everywhere. But we're in the middle of nowhere, and the only security I've seen is the bouncer at the front door checking IDs when we came in. My eyes dart around the dark bar, looking for someone I know. I haven't seen Jackson since he stormed off after I licked him. Lily? Gunnar? Where are all of Jackson's brothers?

"Owww. Fuck! Let me go!" A voice that isn't mine calls out.

Suddenly, my arm is free, the man's tight fingers releasing me. I pull my sore arm up to my chest, cradling it in my other hand.

I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm okay.

I repeat the words to myself until I believe them.

And then I see why the man let me go.

He's a couple of feet away from me now. And Jackson has his hands wrapped around the guy's wrist—the one that grabbed me—twisting it behind his back. It looks painful, the way Jackson holds his wrist up so high like that.

Where the hell did Jackson come from? I've been looking for him for the past forty-five minutes, and I haven't been able to find him. And then he just swoops in right when I need him. That pisses me right off. He's the one who ditched me. He doesn't just get to come in here and rescue me like a damsel in distress. I *may* have been in distress. But I was handling it! I was going to rescue my own damn self. *Probably.*

"What the fuck do you think you were doing? Don't you ever fucking touch a woman like that!" Jackson spins the man around, still pinning his arm, and shouts right in his face.

Jackson's voice is deep. Angry. Loud. I've never heard anything like this voice before. Jackson is always kind of quiet. Gruff and quiet. He never yells.

"Do you hear me? I should fucking kill you for touching her!" He's right up in the guy's face.

Jackson is several inches taller, and at least half a foot wider. I can't tear my eyes off of him. But I can see more men come forward and form a loose

circle around him and the asshole. At first, I'm afraid for Jackson, but then I realize that it's his brothers and Gunnar.

"Jacks." Gunnar's voice is low and steady.

Jackson looks back at his friend for a long minute, then he scans the crowd of people. People who already have their phones out, camera flashes on.

I haven't seen anyone try to take pictures of Jackson since we've been here. Maybe things are different outside of Western Springs? Or maybe the chance to get a video of Jackson Waters in a bar fight is just too good to pass up, no matter where you are?

After what feels like an eternity, Jackson turns back to the piece of shit misogynist who grabbed me.

"It's time for you to go."

"Holy shit. Are you Jackson Waters?"

Jackson nods his head. "You're not from around here, are you?"

"No. I'm here for a corporate retreat.

"Whereabouts are you staying?"

"At the Macon Ranch. Why? Can I get a selfie with you?"

I can practically hear the grinding of Jackson's teeth from six feet away over the pounding country music.

"Sure. Hand my cousin Gunnar your phone."

The man reaches into his pocket and retrieves his phone, passing it to Gunnar.

"Take a good one, Gunnar." Jackson says quietly as he turns to stand next to the guy instead of facing him.

"You got it, cuz," Gunnar answers, sounding even more country than normal.

What the hell is going on here? Jackson is taking a selfie with the creep who just grabbed me?

The camera flash goes off a few times, and then Gunnar stares at the screen, maybe zooming in on the picture because he's tapping at something.

"There you go." After a minute, Gunnar hands the phone back to the asshole who grabbed me. He could have at least stomped on it and cracked the screen. That's what I would have done.

Jackson bends down and picks something up off the floor. "I think you dropped your wallet, man."

"What? I didn't even... thanks." The man looks about as confused as I

feel. *Asshole.*

Jackson looks through the wallet and then pulls something out.

“Dennis Jenkins, 6743 Highgrove Crescent, Minneapolis, Minnesota. I would say that it’s nice to meet you, Dennis. But since you’re a piece of shit who grabs women, unfortunately I can’t stay that to you. And in case you’re planning on doing anything stupid tonight, we have your photo, phone number, and your address. So, that’s going to make it real easy for the police to find you, got it?” Jackson flips through the rest of the wallet and pulls out a thick stack of bills. He counts them, and then puts his hand up, signaling to someone. What the hell is going on here?

“Hey Tony, this is for you.” Jackson hands the stack of bills to the bouncer. “Can you please make sure that Dennis Jenkins of 6743 Highgrove Crescent, Minneapolis, Minnesota, gets delivered back to the Macon Ranch. Is Carl still running the place?”

“Nah, it’s his son Travis who’s in charge now.”

Jackson narrows his eyes. “Yeah, I remember Travis. Can you let him know that buddy here has to call his trip short? He’s got a family emergency and needs to head home tomorrow. He’s on the first flight out.”

“You got it, Jackson.”

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it.”

“What the fuck? I don’t have a flight tomorrow,” the asshole says, turning from Jackson to the bouncer and back again.

“Well, you better hope you can find one because you don’t have a bed to sleep in tomorrow night. Not in this province, at least.” Jackson hands the man his wallet, and then shoves him towards the door.

When Dennis rears up like he’s going to fight Jackson, Jackson and his ring of brothers and cousin all take a step forward. At exactly the same time. Like it’s synchronized. Like they practiced this.

It’s super hot.

All the Waters boys stand there watching asshole Dennis until he steps right out the front door. Then Jackson turns and when his eyes find me, I want to cry.

He rushes forward and puts his hands on my shoulders. “What the hell, Selena? What’s wrong? Was I too late? Did that piece of shit hurt you?”

I shake my head. “I’m fine. Everything’s fine. It was just... and then you just... and then it was over... I don’t know why I’m crying. I’m fine.”

Swiping under my eyes, I nod. What the hell, eyes? I was being a bad

bitch, and now I'm a sobbing mess.

"I wanted to fucking kill that guy for touching you. If he hurt you..."

"I'm fine, I promise."

"Let me see your arm," Jackson demands, holding out his hands. "Shit. It's too dark to see anything. I need to get you out of here. We need to go to the hospital."

I shake my head. "No, I'm fine, I promise. I had so much fun tonight, and I don't want it to end like that."

Jackson frowns at me, but he nods.

He follows me back to the bar where I order a half dozen waters, and then he helps me deliver them back to the sofa area.

As soon as we get back, Lily throws her arms around me. "Oh my god, are you okay? That was so dramatic. I swear to you, nothing ever happens at this bar. Well, other than hookups and the usual local drama. But it's like the safest place in the country. I wouldn't have brought you here if I'd thought it was dangerous, I promise."

"I know. I know. Don't worry. It's not your fault. But unfortunately, assholes are everywhere."

"And so are good guys, like Jacks." Lily grins up at him, where he's standing next to me like a sentry.

And that's just pissing me right off. I've gone from happy to scared to angry, all in the span of five minutes. I'll take angry over scared any day of the week.

And I'm going to give Jackson Waters a piece of my mind.

"I'm leaving now," I announce, standing up and patting my purse to make sure I still have it.

"Well, you're sure as hell not driving yourself, and you're not leaving with anyone else, so I guess that means *we're* leaving now. Ladies." Jackson nods his head to the rest of the women. "Lil, Gunnar's taking you home. No arguments."

Lily rolls her eyes, but then she gives him a big smile.

Maybe Jackson is a great guy with a great woman as his best friend. Because Lily wouldn't be best friends with an asshole. But, right now, I don't care. Because my fake boyfriend is going to get *several* pieces of my mind.

Turning in my little heeled booties in what I hope looks like a very dramatic fashion, I march out of the bar.



CelebritEYES: SPOTTED: Our favorite action star is a dang hero! Jackson Waters jumps in to save his #elevatorgirl from psycho at bar. Double swoon...

chapter thirty-one

jackson

Following behind Selena, I watch as her ass sways a little to the left, corrects, and then sways a little to the right, then overcorrects, and does the whole thing all over again all the way out of the Goldrush. Taking my eyes off of her ass for a second, I nudge Gunnar on the way out and tell him he's taking Lily home. He smiles and nods, not seeming like he minds much. I wish the two of them would figure out their shit and get together already. At least if Lily was with Gunnar, I know I'd never lose my best friend.

Selena continues her drunk side-to-side shuffle once we're out on the street, heading in the opposite direction from the truck. I don't mind that she's walking in front of me because I can see almost all of her legs in the short little denim dress she's wearing.

"Wrong way. Unless you're planning on walking all the way back to the farm. The truck's over there," I tell her, jerking my head towards the truck down the street.

Selena skitters to a stop, wrenches her head around to glare at me, and then walks in the right direction.

She's trying—and failing—to wrench open the unlocked truck door by the time I catch up with her.

"Let me get that for you." Reaching in front of her, I pull her fingers off the handle and then start to open the door. I only get halfway.

"Exactly how drunk are you?" I demand. She's slurring less now. I think what that piece of shit did sobered her up a bit, but she's still clearly drunk as fuck. I was watching, and the body shot she did off of me was her last drink. That was at least an hour ago.

She narrows her eyes at me, simmering over something or other. "I don't know. Fairly drunk. Reasonably drunk. Like a good amount of drunk?"

"Puke in my granddad's truck drunk?"

"I would never!" Her eyes are enormous and her mouth is wide, apparently shocked and insulted by the accusation. "Well, there was that one

time... but I would *never*. Even if you deserved it.”

“What the hell did I do to deserve you puking in my granddad’s truck?”

“You know what you did.”

“I have no idea what the hell your tequila brain thinks I did, so you may as well tell me.”

She doesn’t answer me, she just pushes the door the rest of the way open and climbs into the truck. After shutting her door, I walk around the front and climb in. When I look at her, she looks out the passenger side window, avoiding me.

Guess we’re done talking.

When I turn the key in the ignition, the old truck revs to a start, shaking us both for a second before settling into its growly rhythm. I double-check that she has her seatbelt on, then flick on the headlights and turn on the radio before pulling away from the curb.

She doesn’t talk until we’re on the highway on the way back to the farm.

“You know exactly what you did!” she accuses.

Great, we’re right back here again.

“I really don’t. Baby, just tell me what the hell I did so that I can say I’m sorry.” Whatever it is. Whatever I did to piss her off, I am sorry. I never want her to feel like she is right now.

“I didn’t need your help, Jackson! I was handling it!”

I’m not sure whether to laugh at her or yell back. She definitely needed my help, and she was *not* handling it. When I looked over and saw that man’s hands on her. When I saw the look on her face, I almost lost it. She looked so damn scared. I never want to see her look like that again. As scared as she was of falling when we were in the elevator, she never once looked scared like she did tonight.

“I know you tried to handle it. I saw you stand up to that piece of shit. You’re feisty when you’re drunk off your ass.”

“I’m feisty *all* the time!” She shouts at me. I nod, since it seems like she wants me to agree with her.

“Don’t give me a pity nod, *Jackson!* I am feisty all the time, and you’re going to know all about it from now on. I’m going to be even feistier. The feisti^{est}!”

Lifting my hands up off the steering wheel for a second, I wave them in a stop motion. “Consider me warned. And just to be clear, what are you pissed at me for? I’m not the one who grabbed you. I’m the one who got rid of him.”

“Like I said, I was handling it.”

“You shouldn’t ever have to handle anything like that. No woman should. I’d apologize for my sex if I thought they deserved it. But sometimes I’m not so sure they do.”

“He called me a bitch.”

“I should have killed him.”

“He told me I should be flattered. He said I should be so lucky. What the hell, Jackson? Why does a guy have to hit on you and insult you at the same time? When you’re just minding your own business trying to get some water. I didn’t even see him. I was trying to get the bartender’s attention. Not some random.”

“I really should have fucking killed him.”

“He said that I had my tits out for every man in the bar to see and that I was just begging for some guy to buy me a drink and take me home and fuck me. Can you believe he said that?” She looks angry, and shocked, and so fucking pretty in the dim light of the moon.

“I’m turning this truck around.” Glancing over my shoulder, I assess the logistics of making a u-turn doing eighty on a single lane highway with Selena in the truck.

She pats my hand on the steering wheel like *she’s* trying to comfort *me*.

“There’s no point. He’s not even worth another minute of our time.

Sometimes I just... hate being a woman. If I want to show my boobs because I damn well feel like it, then that’s what I’m going to do. It’s my body, and I can do whatever I want with it. It’s not an invitation to anyone to do anything I don’t want them to do.”

Glancing over at her, she looks so sad. So defeated.

Wanting to do something—*anything*—to fix this for her, I reach out and squeeze her thigh. It’s so smooth and soft, I can’t help but run my thumb over her skin. “I’m so sorry, baby. I’m sorry that he called you a bitch. I’m sorry that he said any of those things to you. Baby, you didn’t do a damn thing wrong. And I love everything about you being a woman.”

Even if I’m pissed at her for having her tits out when I should be the only man seeing them, that’s between us. It didn’t give any man an invitation to do what that waste of oxygen did to her tonight.

“Thank you, Nugget. But don’t be sorry about the bitch part. I want to be a bitch. I want to be scary. I want for men to think twice before crossing me.”

She called me *Nugget*, and I never thought I’d be so fucking happy to

hear that word again.

“You shouldn’t have to be scary to be safe. A polite no means fuck off. That’s what my mom taught us, anyway.”

“Your mom told you it means *fuck off*?” She whispers the curse words like my mom is in the back of the truck with a wooden spoon at the ready.

“Maybe she didn’t use that exact language. But trust me, her meaning was crystal clear.”

“I wish I could have met her.”

“Me, too. She would have liked you.”

“Really?”

“A woman who cooks like you and doesn’t take any shit? Hell yeah, she would have loved you.”

“Thank you, Jackson.”

When I look over at her in the dark cab, she’s looking at me with a sweet smile dancing on her lips.

“For what?”

“For rescuing me. Even though I obviously didn’t need it, and I had everything under control.”

“Noted. And you’re welcome, not that you need to thank me. I’m always gonna protect you, baby.”

She’s quiet for a beat, but not for long.

“I think I love this town. It’s so cute and quaint. I love how everybody knows each other. Or knows their cousin. I loved Lily’s friends. They’re so great. I love Lily. And I love your brothers and Gunnar. This place is just so great!”

“Guess I don’t need to ask if you’re a happy drunk.”

“I’m sooo happy right now.”

“I bet you are. Drunk Selena is a wild ride. You are officially banned from drinking with Lily.”

“I’m a grown woman, *Jackson*. You don’t get to tell me what to do. I should go find Lily and just keep right on drinking.”

“Yup, I walked right into that one.”

Selena babbles happily about the night and how much fun she had dancing with Lily and her friends. She tells me about all the different drinks she had. So, I’m no longer in any doubt about just how drunk she is. I’m surprised she’s still awake.

When I pull up in front of the house, Selena lets out a deep sigh. “We’re

home.”

chapter thirty-two

jackson

Getting Selena upright and out of the truck is harder than wrestling a crocodile, and I know that for a fact since I had to do it in a movie once.

When I finally wrangle her into the house, I let Oats out to pee. Then I stare up at the old stairs leading to the upper floor. “Can you make it up the stairs by yourself?”

“Yes, *Jackson!*” She hisses at me, before proving that she needs me to half carry her up if I want her to get there without a broken ankle, or worse. Oats runs ahead of us up the stairs, thankfully. Because I don’t need Selena having another reason to trip up them.

“Not loving how you’re saying my name. You’re kind of making it sound like Jackson means asshole.”

Selena shrugs. “Well, if the shoe fits.”

“Ah, so we’re back to angry drunk Selena. What do I have to do to get back happy drunk Selena?”

“I guess you’ll have to figure it out, *Jackson!*”

Tonight has been an eye-opener. There’s a hell of a lot more sides to my sweet Selena than I knew.

When I get her upstairs, I gently press her down to sit on the edge of the bed in Jameson’s old room. It’s simple. A bed. A dresser. White walls. Oak furniture. But any room that Selena’s in seems special.

“How about I go get you a nice, big glass of water? And what if I bring up some of that leftover pasta from the fridge? Some carbs probably sound real good right now, don’t they?”

“Oh my god, Jackson! You’re my hero!”

“That’s better. At least you didn’t hiss my name that time.”

“The night’s still young.”

“It’s really not.” Looking at her sitting on the bed, listing to the side, I’m not sure if I should leave her. “You okay here by yourself?”

“Of course I am, *Jackson!*”

“Back to hissing. *Fan-fucking-tastic*. Oats is in charge while I’m gone.”

I don’t know how long I have before she passes out or rolls off the bed or something, so I haul ass downstairs. I’m back in her room with water and snacks in under two minutes. Oats tags along behind me, torn between getting back to Selena and the tempting food I’m carrying.

And she’s naked.

Okay, she’s not completely naked. She ditched her denim dress, but she’s still wearing a bra and panties. And in my sex-starved mind, that’s downright naked. This is the most of Selena I’ve ever seen, and fuck me, she’s gorgeous.

She’s sitting on the side of the bed with her dress bunched up on her lap as she scans the room angrily. Her creamy tits are practically busting out of the dark purple bra she’s wearing. I don’t know if this is some kind of push-up bra or what, but damn it, it’s doing the job.

I can’t see too much except her bra and a few more inches of creamy thigh because of the way she’s hanging onto the dress on her lap. I know I shouldn’t be seeing any of her when she’s drunk, but I also know that I can’t leave her like this in the state she’s in. Splitting the difference, I settle for staying and keeping my distance. After putting her water and food on the old oak dresser, I lean back against the door frame, hands safely at my sides.

“Everything okay in here?”

Oats is lying down on the floor at the foot of the bed, practically rolling his eyes at me.

“I peed.”

My concerned expression has her shouting at me. “In the bathroom, *Jackson!* And now I can’t find my shirt. I want my *Raven’s Ravine* t-shirt.”

My lips twitch. “Okay. Thanks for the update on the peeing situation. Glad you made it to the bathroom and back in one piece. This t-shirt. Where did you see it last?”

She taps her index finger against her lip. “I don’t know...”

“Let me throw you out some options. Suitcase? Closet? Dresser?”

She shakes her head, her eyes so narrowed that they’re almost closed. “I don’t feel like it’s in any of those places.”

“You don’t feel like... did you want me to check for you?”

“No.”

“When did you last have it?”

“This morning when I got up?”

“Okay, what did you do with your pajamas when you got dressed this morning?”

Her mouth drops wide open, making me think bad, bad thoughts. Then she turns around so fast she nearly falls off the bed and starts digging under the blankets. She throws her arm up in the air, dangling the black shirt from her fist.

“Found it!”

“Very impressive,” I tell her. Only I’m referring to all the creamy white skin she had on display next to her purple bra and teal thong while she was scrambling for the t-shirt, and not the fact that she found the stupid t-shirt exactly where she left it this morning.

Next, she motions for me to turn around, and I do as I’m told, turning to stare out into the dark hallway.

There’s some rustling behind me, and then an enormous sigh. Before I can ask if she’s okay, she’s talking.

“Do you have *any* idea how good it feels to take your bra off? There’s *nothing* like it. *Nothing.*”

“Can’t say I do. But do you think it’s like when I take off my boxers and let my balls fly free, dangling in the wind?”

Selena lets out a loud hmmm sound and then giggles. “Balls.”

“Can I turn around now?”

“Yes. No. Hold on a second.”

More rustling. Boots on the ground. More rustling.

“Okay, you can turn around now.”

Oh boy. Selena is now under the blankets with her head resting on the pillows, only her legs are sticking out the side of the bed at a ninety-degree angle. There’s a denim dress in a pile on the floor under where the boots are dangling. The woman’s a damn mess. A sexy mess, but a damn mess.

Oats is up on the bed with her now, giving me the side-eye and waiting to see if I make him move.

“Trouble getting your boots off?”

“No. I just... was going to do that later, *Jackson.*”

More hissing, great. “How about you let me help you with those boots?”

“Fine, if you insist.” She waves toward her boots, like the whole situation is exhausting.

“Let’s get these boots off.” Picking up one foot and then the other, I unzip her little ankle boots and pull them and her socks off her cute little feet. I

move the boots and her dress away from the bed, so she doesn't trip on them in the morning. I don't need her blaming me for that, too. It's one thing for her to hiss my name at me when she's this drunk, but if she keeps it up in the morning, we're going to have a problem.

"Alright, sit up a bit, so you can drink your water."

The indecipherable *ugh* sound she makes tells me that if I want her sitting up, I'm going to have to take care of it myself. So, I slide my arm under her shoulders, pull her up, and shove the pillows against the headboard. Then I drag her up the bed, so she's leaning against it, sitting upright enough not to choke.

Retrieving the water and snacks from the dresser, I hand her the water first. "Drink."

She makes a little face at me and then guzzles down half the glass.

"Now eat." I hand her the plate, and she digs into the spaghetti and veggie meatballs like a wild animal on the attack.

"Oh my god, this is so freaking good. And not just because I'm drunk. Although maybe a little because I'm drunk. Here, you need to try some." She waves a fork at me until I take it. "Why aren't you sitting? How rude of me. Sit down, Jackson."

I shouldn't sit. I shouldn't stay. I shouldn't be in this room one second longer than absolutely necessary. But when she aggressively pats the bed next to her and looks like she's about to hiss my name again, I take a seat, leaning against the headboard, one leg on the bed, one foot still on the floor.

"Do you ever just chill? Like Netflix and chill?" She giggles. Happy drunk Selena has officially entered the building.

"I... chill."

"You don't sound very chill saying that. You sound kind of intense. Do you ever get drunk? Just let loose and see what happens?"

"Sometimes I sleep in until eight on a Saturday, and I don't even do my workout right away."

"I think you have a chill-deficiency, Jackson. You should probably work on that."

"I'll get right on that."

"I'm tired."

"I bet you are. Ready to go to sleep?"

She nods, and I take the water and plate and set them on the beside table. Then she slides down on the bed, turning onto her side, so her ass presses into

my leg.

I should stand up and walk out of here.

But I don't.

I stay right where I am until she falls asleep, letting out little snores every so often.

After watching her sleep for longer than I should, I stand up and walk down the hall to my room, my fists clenched at my sides.

chapter thirty-three

jackson

I've been up for an hour when I finally hear some movement in the house that isn't me or Oats. It's another solid thirty minutes before I hear very slow steps coming down the stairs.

When she walks into the kitchen on bare feet, she looks exactly how she did when I left her last night. Well, with maybe a bit more makeup smudged under her eyes and her hair in a messy bun on top of her head. Her *Raven's Ravine* t-shirt is still pulled tight across her tits and hips.

And she's not wearing any fucking pants.

My cock grows three sizes at the sight of her, and I'm grateful to be sitting down at the kitchen table, so she can't see my dick trying to impale the thick slab of oak.

Selena barely looks at me as she marches to the sink, grabs one of the mason jars we use as glasses, and fills it with water. Then she drinks. First, she takes slow sips. Then she downs the rest of the glass, fills it up, and starts all over again.

"How you feeling this morning, Champ?"

She winces. "Why are you so loud?"

My lips twitch. "That good, huh? Want some coffee? There's still some in the coffeemaker. Or there's tea." If I didn't have a hard dick, I'd get up and make her something myself. But right now, it's safer to stay at the table.

"Yes. I need all the coffee. Thanks."

"What do you feel like doing for breakfast? Want to put something together here or go into town for something greasy to soak up all that tequila you drank last night?"

Her cheeks turn red, and I catch her eyes staring at my neck, right where she licked a line of salt off me last night. Grinning at her, I know she's embarrassed. I'm not. Because Selena doing a tequila shot off of me was hot as hell. And because she doesn't know that I jerked off last night thinking about the feel of her tongue on my skin. *Twice*. Although, if she wanted to lick me, my neck was a poor stand-in for my dick.

“Town. Definitely. I need all the greasy toast. And hash browns. And maybe just like a side of fries, too?”

“All the potatoes and all the grease. You got it.” Sucking in some air, I look her up and down. “Were you gonna put on some pants or just go like that?”

“Coffee first. Then clothes,” she mutters as she walks over to the coffeemaker to fix herself a cup.

Instead of heading up the stairs with her beverages, forcing me to avert my eyes so I don’t look up her t-shirt, Selena walks over to the table and sets her drinks down at the place next to me.

I push the chair out from the table with my boot so she can sit down. She’s brushed her teeth, but there’s a faint whiff of booze coming from her.

I am not going to think about whether she’s wearing panties under that t-shirt.

And I’m sure as hell not going to think about her wet pussy dripping onto the chair at my parents’ kitchen table.

Watching her, she takes a sip of coffee from a mug that says #1 Cock, next to a big-ass rooster. Why the hell did she pick that mug if she didn’t want me to think about shoving my cock balls deep inside her?

The groan she lets out after her first sip isn’t helping my morning wood. “Mmmm. Why is coffee so good?”

“Don’t you usually drink tea?”

“Yes, but there’s a time and a place for coffee. I’m ambi-beveragous, and I don’t need your judgment. It’s the twenty-first century.” She takes another sip, moaning into the cup. “But *why* is it sooo good?”

“That’s one of the secrets of the universe, not for us to know.”

When she puts her mug down, she reaches her arms up above her head, stretching them while she yawns.

Do not look down at her naked thighs.

Do not look down to see if her pussy is showing.

Don’t look.

Don’t move.

Just don’t do anything, damnit.

Trying to avoid temptation, I force my eyes up her body instead of down, all the way up the curve of her arms to her hands.

“What the hell is that, Selena?” I demand, jerking forward and grabbing her right arm.

“What’s what?” Selena grumbles, but doesn’t pull away.

I trace the constellation of dark blue bruises near her wrist. “This. What the hell is this?”

“Ugh. I was wondering why my arm was sore. I didn’t even notice that.” Selena frowns down at her wrist, and then runs her other hand over the bruises. She presses her fingers down lightly to examine them.

“That asshole did this to you? I should have fucking killed him.” My voice is low as I think about tracking the guy down and how I’d dispose of the body. It’s early. He probably hasn’t left the country yet.

“You’re not killing anyone. And Canada doesn’t even have the death penalty. It’s fine. Well, it’s not fine. But I’m fine. It’s just a few minor bruises.”

“I never should have let that guy leave the bar last night in one piece. I’m gonna fucking kill him.”

“It’s not worth it. I promise you, it’s not.”

“What do you mean? Because I’m pretty fucking sure killing him is going to be worth it for hurting you like that.”

“I’m a woman, Jackson. I’m a woman in the world we live in. This isn’t the worst thing that’s ever happened to me. This isn’t even the worst thing that’s happened to me by some stranger at a bar.”

“What the hell do you mean?”

“Men can be jerks. Selfish, entitled jerks.”

“I’m so sorry, baby. I should have protected you. You’re not leaving this house without me again, do you hear me? I’m serious, Selena.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Have you always been so bossy?”

“You can ask my dad when we get to the hospital. Right now, just do as I say. You’re not going anywhere without me.”

“You can be extremely annoying. Did you know that?”

“So, I’ve been told.”

“Oh, please. Like anyone ever tells you anything you don’t want to hear.”

“What I don’t want is to hear about you getting hurt. I’m never letting anyone hurt you ever again.”

She smiles at me, a little sad, and a little sweet. “Thank you for saying that. Thank you for protecting me last night like you did.” Then she grins even bigger. “Not that I needed your help. Because I was handling it, *Jackson!*” She hisses my name at me and then bursts out laughing.

“So, you remember how your big night out ended, do you?” Shaking my

head, I take the last sip of my coffee. “Please never say my name like that again. It gives me chills.”

“*Jackson!*” she hisses at me, laughing. When she finally stops laughing, she studies me, her pretty face too serious for this early in the morning.

“Thanks for taking care of me and bringing me home.”

“You’re welcome. You’re not an easy woman to put to bed.” *Shit.* Did I just say that? Why the hell am I talking about putting her to bed? The last thing I need to think about is Selena anywhere near a bed. Or half naked like she is right now.

She frowns at me and then looks away.

“Well, thanks anyway.” Standing up, she picks up her rooster coffee mug and water and turns for the stairs. “I’m going to have a quick shower. I’ll be ready in half an hour.”

“Don’t rush. We’ve got lots of time for breakfast before hospital visiting hours start.”

No matter what I say to her, it never seems to be the right thing.

chapter thirty-four

selena

*A*fter another two glasses of water, my coffee, a painkiller for my headache, the hottest shower the Waters farm is capable of producing, and a deliciously greasy breakfast, I feel almost human again.

Jackson and I arrive at the hospital right when visiting hours start and we're the first to get to Mr. Waters' room. I take a seat in the corner and Jackson goes to sit next to his dad.

"What did you two kids get up to last night?"

Jackson rolls his eyes at the ceiling and then flashes me a dirty look. I keep an innocent smile stretched across my face to stop from laughing at him.

"Oh, the usual. Selena and Lily took off to Western Ridge to go to the bar, and got us into a fight."

Mr. Waters grins. "Sounds like fun. I haven't been in a bar fight since your mother agreed to marry me. I was in them weekly, keeping other guys' filthy mitts off her before that, until she finally said yes."

"She didn't say yes right away?" I ask, not able to help myself.

Mr. Waters turns to me. "Nope. Took me six months to get her to take me seriously. And another six months to get her to agree to marry me."

"Really? Why?" I ask, standing up and walking towards the bed to stand next to Jackson. He reaches up and takes my hand, tugging me to sit down on the arm of his chair.

"I was a just a poor farm kid whose big plan was to keep right on farming. Jackson's mom was from a wealthy family over in Western Mountain. She was here in town doing a teaching practicum up at the elementary school. She went out with the other teachers to the carnival, and that's when I saw her."

"Love at first sight?"

Mr. Waters grins, and it's like seeing Jackson smiling at me from the future. "For one of us. Definitely not for her."

"That is such a sweet story. I poked around in some of the old photo albums back at the house. She was so beautiful." Jackson's mom had wavy

red hair just past her shoulders. She always seemed to have a big smile on her face and bright red lipstick. Her body looked more like mine than any of Jackson's actress or model exes.

"She was the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," Mr. Waters says with a grin. He doesn't look sad when he talks about her. I wonder what it's like to love someone so much that even when you lose them, you're still happy because of the time you had together?

Jackson's brothers walk into the room with a round of *hey dads* and *morning dads*. I stand up and step back to give them more room with their dad and brother.

"Jacks tell you about the bar fight he started last night?" Jasper asks with a grin.

"I didn't start it, but I sure as hell finished it," Jackson mutters.

"Course, he did. He handled himself like I taught all of you to. Waters men protect their women."

"Oh, wow!" I say, before I can stop myself. "No offence, Mr. Waters, but *your* women can take care of themselves!"

"Jerry, sweetheart," he reminds me.

"Careful, or she'll start hissing again," Jackson warns.

"Hissing?" Jensen asks with a nervous laugh.

"The rest of you didn't get to see how this woman ended her night. She's a hellcat," Jackson says with a big grin.

"Yeah, you did!"

"Hell yeah, Jack!"

"Someone ended the night with a *bang!*"

My face is burning hot.

"Lies and slander, all of it! Since no truth is going to be spoken here, I'll leave you all to marinate in the overflowing testosterone in this room. Please get it out of your systems by the time I'm back!"

"Where are you going?" Jackson stands up.

"Down to the cafeteria to get a tea. Mr. Waters—Jerry—would you like anything?" I glare at every other man in the room, including Jackson. "Note that I am not offering to get anything for any of the rest of you."

"Thank you, sweetheart. But I'm good. My boys are all in one room, so I've got everything I need."

"I'll come with you." Jackson walks over and takes my hand.

"It's just the cafeteria. I've got my phone. I promise I'll be right back."

And I probably won't get into any fights while I'm gone."

"Selena..." He presses his hands down on my hips, holding me in place.

Reaching up, I press the palm of my hand against his jaw, always so tense. "Jackson, stay with your family. I'll be fine. Promise. See you in a bit, *Nugget!*" With a laugh, I lean up and give him a peck on the cheek and then skip out of the room before he can stop me.

"Awww, *Nugget!*" Jasper's voice carries out of the room after me, before the room fills with the good-hearted laughter of even better men.

Fifteen minutes later, when I'm on my way back to Mr. Waters' room with my tea and a cute child-size cowboy hat from the gift shop for Oats, I can still feel the heat from Jackson's hands on my hips. It's not right what that man can do to me with a single touch. And it's certainly not fair. Not to me, and not to any other man I meet when this is over.

As soon as I step out of the elevator, I see Jackson rushing towards me. He breaks out into a full jog when he sees me.

"What's wrong? What happened?" I ask him, as I rush forward. Nothing athletic has ever been my strong suit, and to even consider anything more than a brisk walk, I definitely need a different bra. But none of that matters because something's wrong. And Jackson needs me.

"It's good news, baby. Good news," he whispers when we're standing a foot apart. "My dad's coming home from the hospital tonight. We can bring him home tonight."

"Jackson, oh my god! That's amazing!" Without a thought about anything other than showing Jackson how happy I am for him and his family, I throw my arms around him. Jackson pulls me into a tight hug, and I have enough wits about me not to spill my hot tea down his back. He pulls me so tight that I'm up on my tiptoes against him. I can feel his warm breath above me, ruffling through my hair.

I hold on to him so tightly that I never want to let go. But I have to. This is great news for Jackson's whole family, not an opportunity for me to grind on him. In a hurry, I let go of his neck and then take a big step back, so I won't be tempted to jump back into his arms.

"Sorry. Sorry about that." I look around us to see if anyone else noticed me throw myself at Jackson and then jump out of his arms. There isn't. If someone was there, it would have justified the first hug. But I'm glad no one witnessed the rest.

"You don't have a damn thing to be sorry for," he mutters.

“This is so great... about your dad coming home.”

“Yeah, it is.” Jackson looks troubled now. He should be over the moon about his dad coming home from the hospital, but now I’ve ruined that by throwing myself at him and making him uncomfortable.

“Do you want me to call the home care company we picked and let them know we’ll need someone to start today?”

Jackson presses his forehead against mine. “No, I’ll do it. But thank you for reminding me. What am I ever going to do without you?”

He stares at me for a long minute, and neither of us speaks.

“Come on back. Everyone’s celebrating.”

“Has the testosterone in the room mellowed out?”

Jackson grins at me and takes my hand in his. “Not even a little bit.”

A smile tugs at my lips the minute I step into Mr. Waters’ room. Jameson and Jasper are sitting on the end of the bed. Jarret’s in the chair next to it. And Jensen is leaning against the plastic rail at the bottom. Gunnar and Lily are here now, along with Gunnar’s parents, his three sisters, and a bunch more people whose names and relationships to Jackson I should really know at this point.

It didn’t take me long to figure out Jackson’s brothers. A few long days at the hospital, and I knew that Jarret’s the grumpy, serious one. He thinks he’s the oldest brother, and he acts like it. But I guess someone had to be the oldest brother, and Jackson wasn’t here. Jasper’s the next oldest, and the most outgoing. He’s always joking and laughing. And other than Jackson, he’s the only one who left Western Springs. Jasper was in the military, but now he’s back home, safe and sound. Then Jensen. He’s the one I know the least. He’s huge like Jackson and doesn’t say much. And then Jameson is the youngest, and he acts like it, too. He reminds me of my little brother.

With everyone here, the room sounds like a party.

Wait, a party isn’t a bad idea.

When there’s a lull in the volume, I step closer to the end of Mr. Water’s bed, Jackson still holding onto my hand.

“Jerry?”

“Yes, sweetheart?” Jackson’s dad looks up at me with a grin.

He’s just as big and handsome as Jackson. And if he’s any indication, Jackson and his brothers are going to have definite Zaddy vibes in about twenty-five years, give or take. Whoever these boys end up with are going to be some very, very lucky women. I push down the twinge I feel at the

thought of Jackson getting married and riding off into the sunset with the luckiest woman on the face of the earth. A woman who is definitely not me.

Returning his smile, I take a deep breath. “Jerry, would it be okay if make dinner for the whole family at the farm tonight to celebrate you coming home? I know how much Jackson needs to spend time with his family, with all of you. And I’d really like to do this for everyone. But I don’t want it to be too much for you.”

“Is anyone going to ask me about this?” Jackson grumbles, squeezing my hand.

The entire room erupts into a chorus of *nos* and *no ways*, bringing a smile to my face. I really, really like it here.

Jackson tugs me a step back towards him and whispers in my ear. “Are you sure about this?”

I nod and turn back to his dad.

“You go right ahead, sweetheart. The boys’ mom would have loved that. Thanks for bringing all my boys, and the whole family, together like this and taking care of everyone. If I get tired, I can go on up to bed. Doesn’t mean you kids shouldn’t have some fun. ”

“Thank you so much. I’ll try to do Mrs. Waters proud.”

“I’m sure you will, sweetheart.”

“Everyone good to come for dinner at seven tonight? Spread the word. Everybody’s welcome. We’ll have enough food and drinks for the whole town. Jackson’s buying!” I announce, and everyone in the room laughs.

Meanwhile, I’m hoping and praying that every single person in this room, the rest of the extended Waters family, and every other one of the twelve-hundred residents of Western Springs will come and rescue me tonight from doing or saying anything else to embarrass myself in front of Jackson. Distract me so that I’m too busy to have ideas I’m definitely not supposed to be having. Wanting things I’m definitely not allowed to be wanting.

And I need to figure out what in the world I’m going to cook for all these people I just invited over to a house that isn’t even mine. Normally, throwing a meal together doesn’t phase me. But this is Jackson’s family. His brothers. His dad. His aunts, uncles, and cousins. In his mother’s kitchen. I need everything to be just right.

I decide to go simple with a meal that I know everyone will love. Caesar salad. Garlic bread. Lasagna. And chocolate pie for dessert. Everything’s going to be vegan, of course. Not that Jackson or his family will know it. I’ve

fed my lasagna to *meat-a-tarians* countless times before, and no one has ever batted an eye. These recipes are my *A* game. I could make something fancier and more complicated, but something tells me that's not how Jackson's mother cooked. And this is her kitchen. I want to honor her by cooking up a big, hearty meal for her boys. Especially for Jackson.

chapter thirty-five

selena

*I*t only took thirty minutes to convince Jackson that he couldn't be in two places at once. He can't be at the hospital with his dad and also running around town shopping for dinner and then at home cooking all day.

He very reluctantly entrusted me to Lily today to get ready for the party tonight. But I honestly wouldn't be surprised if he's figured out a way to track my location.

After leaving the hospital around noon, Lily and I pop into the diner for an iced coffee and a brainstorm.

My bakery organization takes over, and I sort out the grocery list so Lily and I can divide and conquer. The menu is simple, but the volume is not. Just to be safe, I'm going to make eight lasagnas, six huge Caesar salads, six loaves of garlic bread, and six chocolate pies. We sketch out a quick plan for picking up wine and beer. Lily says the specialty wine store has a better selection than the liquor store, so I add it to the list. After last night, I'm definitely not interested in drinking hard alcohol. Probably not for a very long time. And we need ice to keep the drinks cold. That's it. *Simple*.

"Are you sure you want to cook for all these people? This sounds like my worst nightmare!" Lily says dramatically before diving headfirst into her iced coffee. Iced coffee at the diner tastes like drip coffee poured over ice. It's not great. Really not great. This town could really use a cute little cafe or a bakery like the one I want to have someday. The one that I'll have a lot sooner, thanks to Jackson.

"Yes, of course. I love to cook. And I want Jackson to get to spend more time with all of his family while we're here. He and his brothers have been holed up in his dad's hospital room every day for more than a week. And now his dad finally gets to come home, so we need to celebrate!"

"He really hit the jackpot with you. She's pretty, smart, funny, likes to cook, and looks at him like he's her hero. I'm really not sure he deserves you, to be honest."

Pressing my lips together in a firm line, I give her a hard look. "Aren't

you supposed to be his best friend?”

“I *am* his best friend. I know him better than anyone. And Jackson’s been a *fuckboy* for as long as I’ve known him. He never knew what he wanted. Was never ready to commit.” Lily beams at me. “Until you.”

“Yup, until me.” I don’t know how much more of this I can take. I hate lying to everyone. And worst of all, I’m pretty clear that the only lie here is that Jackson wants to be with me. Because me wanting to be with him isn’t the big lie that I agreed to.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking... about portions! I bet people here eat more than they do in L.A. because everyone isn’t constantly on a diet. Sounds amazing, actually. Are you sure we have enough food?”

“Yeah, I don’t know how you and Jackson do it. I’ve visited him in L.A. a bunch of times over the years and on set wherever he’s filming. Because he never makes the time to come back here. It’s just like a man to let a woman do all the hard work. Trust me, I am the only reason that man has any friends at all who aren’t blood relatives or weren’t trapped working with him on *Raven’s Ravine* every day for six years.”

Smiling back at her, I shake my head. She makes it sound like it’s hard to like Jackson. I can confirm that it isn’t.

“Look what he had to do to get a girlfriend? Trap her in an elevator. Honestly, I wish he’d thought of it sooner. So, I’ve been meaning to ask you. Why do you call him *Nugget*? I can only assume it has something to do with you having a thing for his balls?”

“Oh my god, no! I don’t have a balls fetish! It’s... private. I guess. I don’t know. That’s just what I call him.”

“Yeah, that answer tells me nothing. I’m sticking with you having a balls fetish.”

“Great. I can’t wait to tell Jackson about this conversation.”

“Don’t you mean *Nugget*?”

“He didn’t tell me that you go visit him on set? What’s that like?”

“What do you mean? You’re not seriously jealous of me and Jacks. *Gross.*” Lily makes gagging noises.

Lily’s gagging is music to my ears. “Oh, I’m very clear on how not attracted to him you are. And it makes me very, very happy.”

“We were literally bathed together when we were babies. Our moms were best friends.”

“I know. It’s so sweet. But what was it like when you visited him? Was it weird? How did people treat you?”

“L.A. people are crazy. And they treated me like they didn’t even see me. I don’t think Jacks noticed. Or he would have done something about it. But it wasn’t worth telling him. He would have just been pissed at everyone. Over something that doesn’t matter. I’m always there to see Jacks and no one else.”

Right. Because Lily doesn’t fit into the perfect mold that everyone in L.A. strives to fit into. Just like I don’t. People might think the whole #elevatorgirl thing is funny for a while, but no one thinks that I’m the kind of girl who gets a man like Jackson Waters as more than a fling.

After finishing our coffees, we head out onto Grove Street, Western Springs’ busiest street. A third of the angled parking spots are empty, and there’s only two cars waiting at the red light on the corner. All the buildings are old red brick with colorful awnings over the wide sidewalks. I freaking love this town.

“Let’s go in there,” Lily says, pointing to an adorable little boutique on the other side of the street with mannequins in the windows.

“Do we have time? We should probably get to the grocery store.”

“Who says we can’t have a little fun, too? Before we spend the entire day exhausting ourselves over a hot stove.”

“Jackson?” I mumble and then giggle.

“Is Jackson Waters the boss of you now? Because if he is, then we need to have a long talk, my friend.”

“Of course not!” The feminist in me nearly shouts. Just because he’s my boyfriend—fake boyfriend—does not make Jackson Waters the boss of me. I’m the boss of me, and no one else. I want to poke my head into every single shop in this adorable little town, and Jackson isn’t here to stop me. “Let’s do it!”

Flashing Lily a devious smile, I step out to jaywalk across the street. My bravado crumbles when I spot a police officer a couple of blocks away. I press into a full jog to make it across the street and out of sight into the shop before he notices me.

Lily walks into the shop laughing a few seconds after me. “Did you just think you were going to get a ticket for jaywalking?”

“Maybe?”

“You’ve spent way too much time in the big city. As if any cop here

wants to do the paperwork to give you a ticket for something like jaywalking. Please.”

Lily and I mill around the boutique, touching the different fabrics of the clothes hanging from racks in the window and along the walls. I always worry that nothing is going to fit me in cute little shops like this, but their size range is actually pretty inclusive. There’s not a full range in every style, but I spot sizes all the way from zero to twenty-eight.

We browse in easy silence until I can’t stop myself from asking, “So, has Jackson really never brought anyone back here?”

Lily looks up from the white silk dress she’s admiring. It would be a departure from the things I’ve seen her wear since I’ve known her, and I wonder if she has it in mind for something—or someone—special. Like Gunnar. “Nope. Not a one. Not until you.”

“Well, he only brought me because his dad was in the hospital. It wasn’t like he planned a trip to bring me home to meet everyone or anything. He didn’t even actually invite me. I kind of invited myself.”

“He’s a grown man, fully capable of running from a woman. But he didn’t run from you. I’ve seen him do it countless times. He pretty much leaves a Jackson-sized hole in the wall as he escapes. It’s pathetic.”

A Jackson-sized hole in the wall? Is that what I have to look forward to when the contract is over? I don’t want to think about it, so I distract myself with a less upsetting topic.

“So, are you and Gunnar...?”

Lily narrows her eyes at me. “What did Jackson tell you?”

I shake my head. “Oh, nothing. He never told me anything about you two. Well, he told me about you. One of the first times we met, actually. We were talking about my period, and he said that he would still want to, you know, even at that time of the month. And he told me you schooled him in all-things menstruation-related since you were in elementary school.”

“Of course, the man would say that. Idiot. I did a public service! It’s a natural bodily function. Why men are so damn squeamish about it, I have no earthly idea.”

“Gunnar doesn’t seem like the squeamish type...” I say, testing the waters.

“Mmmm-hmmm,” Lily mutters. “That man wouldn’t know how to...” But she doesn’t finish.

“He’s handsome, though,” I say with a smile. “Not as handsome as

Jackson. But no one's as handsome as Jackson."

"That pretty boy has you wrapped around his... I'm going to be a lady for once and not say it. But he has you wrapped right around *it* good, doesn't he?"

"Wrapped around his what?" I ask, trying to figure it out.

When Lily motions with her hands to her thighs, I put two and two together. And I turn bright red *again*.

"Well, with the glowing description you gave when we picked you up at the airport, I can't blame you, I guess." Lily narrows her eyes. "But the least we can do is spend a chunk of his money today. And I don't mean on groceries. Do you have any cowboy boots?"

"Cowboy boots? No... But they're not really my style..."

"Cowboy boots are everyone's style. If you don't think they're your style, you just haven't had the right reason to wear them yet. But you're in Western Springs now. So, you'll definitely have a reason."

"I don't wear leather..."

"No problem. This place has some sort of vegetable leather, too. It's made of compost or something. My friend, Drea, is vegan, and she says it's great." Lily looks over at the woman behind the counter, who has been cleaning the glass display case this entire time and couldn't have missed a single word of our conversation. "We need to buy Jackson Waters' girlfriend a pair of cowboy boots. Not leather, preferably."

I wince. "Did you really need to announce that I'm Jackson's girlfriend?"

"Yes, and it's not like everyone doesn't already know. Trust that Jackson is this town's very favorite son. Everyone here knows everything about him. Including about you."

Lily is a whirlwind of a shopper, just like she's a whirlwind at everything else. Before I've even put my second foot into a pair of boots, she's already vetoed it and is moving onto the next one. This shop has a surprising amount of vegan options. Or maybe it's not surprising at all? There is life outside of L.A., I guess. There's an entire world out there. One where everyone isn't always on a diet, trying to get famous, or bragging about their proximity to someone famous. It sounds pretty nice, actually.

And the life Jackson could have here in Western Springs would be full of family, friends, and laughter. But instead, he's all by himself up in that big, white, sterile house in L.A. It's not the choice I would make. I hope that it's right for him, but it's just that I'm not sure it is. Other than being worried

about his dad, Jackson seems more relaxed than I've ever seen him here, surrounded by his family and friends.

"Why doesn't Jackson ever come home? He said that it's been years since he'd been home, and that he never stays more than a couple of nights at a time."

"Because he's an idiot?"

Pursing my lips, I frown at her. "Not helpful. You're supposed to be his best friend."

"If your best friend can't call you an idiot, then who can?"

"So, best friend, tell me why?"

"He says it's because he's too busy. I may not be an expert on Hollywood, but I'd say he's successful enough to make a few of his own rules. Has been for a long time. He could spend more time here, and I bet it wouldn't hurt his career one bit."

"So, why doesn't he? He seems happier since we've been here than the whole time I've known him." Biting my lip, I think about how that's not all that long. Not long at all.

"My two cents is that he feels like he made his choice when he left. I don't think he feels like he belongs here anymore. And then when his mom got sick, he tried to be here as much as he could. He funded an upgrade of the entire hospital. But he wasn't here when she passed, and I don't think he's ever forgiven himself. And I'm sure none of those idiots have ever actually talked about any of it. Let's just say that none of the Waters men are great at talking about their feelings."

I bite my lip to stop from smiling. "You don't say?"

Lily smiles, but she's shaking her head. "Shocker, right? Complete freaking shocker!"

chapter thirty-six

jackson

Today is the longest I've spent away from Selena since I picked her up on the way to the airport to come home. I miss her. I miss her voice. Her laugh. I miss seeing her smile or being able to reach out and take her hand in mine. When people are around. When I'm allowed to.

The way she threw her arms around me when I told her my dad was coming home, that didn't feel fake. There was no one around. But the way she let me go, and shoved me away like I burned her. That didn't feel great.

I think I would have taken her spilling that hot tea all the way down my back over how shitty it felt when she pushed me away. As long as she cleaned up the mess... with her tongue.

After a couple of vitals checks and a parade of doctors and nurses coming through, the hospital finally released my dad around six. He's been able to stand up and walk around for days now, even showering. One of his new, full-time nurses showed up a couple of hours before that to get up to speed on his situation. This one's Brenda, but there's a team of them that will be taking care of him at home for as long as it takes to get him better.

Like clockwork, my brothers, Gunnar, and I all arrive back at the farm exactly fifteen minutes after we all left the hospital when they released my dad. Brenda insisted on driving him home. As much as I hated it, it made the most sense for Dad to come home in her accessible mini-van with a medical professional than with any of us in our pickup trucks.

When I walk through the front door, I see Selena coming down the stairs with Oats on her heels. She's changed into another short dress that swings around her hips with a little extra fabric. This one is sleeveless with thicker shoulder straps. The low, round neckline shows off her tits to perfection, without making me worry that some other guy is going to see her nipples. Its royal blue color makes her hazel eyes sparkle, and the neckline shows me enough inches of her breasts that I don't have a single thing to complain about. The dress is perfect, and she looks perfect in it. Selena must have just put on perfume because the scent of vanilla, berries, and brown sugar is

wafting off of her. She's wearing that bright pink lipstick of hers. She looks so much prettier than I deserve.

All of that, combined with how good the house smells after she spent the afternoon cooking, is nearly enough to give me a hard on.

Oats runs up to rub against my legs and demand attention. Leaning down, I give him a pat on his head. But Selena has *all* of my attention.

"What the hell smells so damn good?"

When Selena blushes, I wonder if maybe we're both thinking about how much I like how she smells. Then she glances towards the back of the house to the kitchen. "Dinner. Is your dad here? His room is all ready. I put on a fresh set of sheets and put some fresh flowers by the bed. I tried to make it nice for him. And despite what I said about never cleaning for you, I did the bathrooms, vacuumed, and dusted a little."

Leaning back, I stare down at her. "Baby, you didn't have to do any of that."

"I wanted to. Your dad's finally coming home, and I've been staying in his house like a squatter for weeks. I just wanted to say thank you."

"Baby, you're the one we should be thanking. You didn't need to do any of this. Just you being here is enough. But dinner smells so damn good. What'd you make?"

"Guess."

"Something with a hell of a lot of garlic."

"You like garlic, right?" She looks worried. "Everyone likes garlic, right?"

"Yeah, I can't imagine you cooking anything we wouldn't like, though."

"I made lasagna and garlic bread. With Caesar salad. And chocolate pie for dessert."

I rub my grumbling stomach. "Sounds fucking perfect."

"Good, because there's so much food. I hope lots of people show up or you and your brothers are going to be eating lasagna every meal for the next month."

"Either way, I'm a happy man," I promise her.

When she smiles up at me, I know I don't deserve her. I don't deserve to have her here. And I definitely don't deserve to have her cooking all these amazing meals and taking care of me and my family. But I'll be damned if anyone tries to stop her. Even me.

"Selena?"

“Yeah?”

“Thanks for doing this. Really, I mean it. For all of it. You didn’t have to do any of it. But I’m grateful that you did.”

“Of course, what are *frrr-girlfriends* for?” She says awkwardly. I know she wasn’t just about to call me her damn friend. The last thing I want is to be her friend. Being her friend would be worse torture than not knowing her at all.

My brothers and Gunnar sewer the moment as they follow me in the front door one-by-one, each letting out a low whistle over how good it smells in here. They had better be talking about the lasagna and garlic bread.

“Okay, before you all wash up, can I get a couple of strong Waters boys to move your dad’s chair from the living room outside? I want to make sure he’s comfortable tonight.”

Before I can volunteer, Selena’s heading for the living room. “Jarret, Jensen, make yourselves useful. Come on.”

Selena grabs the throw blanket off of my dad’s chair and the one from the sofa. Then she directs my brothers on how to get the old armchair out of the house. “Watch the picture! Rooster on the left!” She holds the door open for them and then leads them down the back porch steps.

In a minute, they all file back inside, and I’m standing there like an idiot with my mouth open at the way she takes charge of everyone like that to take care of my family. My dad. Me.

“Thanks for your help, guys. Okay, everybody wash up, and then head out back. We set up to have dinner outside,” she calls out.

“Who’s we?” I ask with an edge to my voice, like Selena might have random dudes shoved in my parent’s coat closet or under the living room sofa. Why am I such a jealous asshole?

She frowns at me. “Lily helped. She’s just upstairs getting changed.”

After sending a dark glare in my direction, she turns to my brothers. “Go wash up, everyone. I’m getting myself a glass of wine... or three,” she mutters to herself as she walks into the kitchen.

I’m home less than three minutes, and I’ve already pissed her off. *Fan-fucking-tastic.*

chapter thirty-seven

jackson

After washing my face and changing my shirt, I head back downstairs and out onto the back porch. Selena and Lily put an old white tablecloth of my mom's over the long table out behind the house. Then they covered it with a downright chaotic amount of plates, side plates, silverware, and glasses, not to mention flowers and candles, so that everything looks just a little bit precarious. They left big gaps for the food when it's ready. It all looks amazing. I can't believe Selena did any of this. *For me*. Without me even asking.

She must've brought every single chair they could find in the house out to the backyard and rounded up all the outdoor furniture here, too. She's even set up bales of hay with blankets on them in loose rings around the old brick fire pit halfway between the house and the barn. And I see where she had my brothers put my dad's chair. On the far side of the fire pit, so he can look out over the entire yard and see everybody who loves him all together at once.

But shit, those bales must weigh at least fifty pounds. I hate that she did all this work without me.

"What do you think?"

"I think it looks amazing. And if you ever try to move bales of hay without me again, I will not be happy."

She smiles up at me. "They were surprisingly heavy. I don't get how a bunch of grass can get that heavy? Lily and I had to move them together."

"Please, just be careful. The last thing I need is something happening to you." I don't know what I would do if something happened to her.

"Don't worry, I left the fire-building to the cavemen." Selena flips her dark hair over her shoulder and marches away from me back into the house. In a few minutes, she comes back out with a tray of something in one hand and a glass of white wine in the other. She's barefoot, and milling about my parent's lawn like some sort of sex nymph who seduces men with baked goods. And all I can say is, it's working. At least, on me, it is. It had better not be working on any other man.

She walks around to everyone as they arrive out into the backyard. After long, it's not just my brothers and Gunnar. Every extended relative within a hundred kilometer radius eventually makes their way around the house to the backyard. Selena offers whatever she has on that tray to everyone but me. When it's empty, she goes inside, refills it again and then sets it down on the long table for people to help themselves. Then she takes a seat on a bale of hay by the fire pit as far away from me as she can get and drinks her wine.

Dad should be here by now, even with how slow Brenda must be driving, so I head back around the front to wait for him. When they pull up in Brenda's white mini-van, I head over to meet them. I try to take my dad's arm to support him, but he waves me off.

"I'm good, Jacks. I'm good," he tells me. But I still stick close just in case.

"Do you want to change or head right out back?"

"I just need a change of clothes."

"Okay, I'll take you upstairs," I tell him.

"I don't need a babysitter, Jacks," he mutters.

Turning back to Brenda, I arch an eyebrow.

"Yes, you do, Mr. Waters. When was the last time you climbed a flight of stairs? Until I sign off, someone needs to be with you when you're going up and down the stairs."

"She schooled you," I laugh under my breath.

"I can take you. Or one of your boys can."

"Talk about a rock and a hard place," I mutter, laughing.

"I'm not sure which is worse. A professional babysitter or having my kids babysit me."

"Well, you're gonna have lots of time to figure that out. I'll take you upstairs now, and you can try it out later with Brenda."

Dad grumbles through the entire process of going upstairs, changing while supervised, and me hovering in front of him to break his fall on the way back down. I set him up in the chair Selena had brought outside for him and then see about starting the fire. It's still early, but I may as well get it started now.

When the fire's just taking hold, I hear something happening behind me.

"What the hell?" Jasper says.

"What happened to Lily?" Jameson says loud enough for everyone all the way back in town to hear.

Turning around to see what's wrong, I see Lily walking down the back porch steps, barefoot like Selena. And wearing a dress. A white silk dress that floats over her curves and has a deep v neck. I don't think I've ever seen Lily wear a dress that didn't look like it came from my grandmother's closet in my entire life. This dress is... slinky. It looks good on her.

"You look good, Lil!" I shout before doing a wolf whistle at my best friend. Then I remember I have a girlfriend, and I would lose my shit if she did anything half as bad as what I just did. But Selena's grinning at Lily and holding up her wineglass in a toast.

Selena did this too, I guess.

Walking over to her, I stand there waiting for her to make room for me on her bale of hay. When she doesn't, I slide my hands along the sides of her breasts under her arms and pull her to stand up. Then I sit down in the middle of the bale and pull her back down next to me. I grab her legs and toss them over mine, and throw my arm around her shoulders. No one who sees this is going to be in any doubt about my feelings for this woman.

She takes a sip of her wine, not bothering to comment on the way I just manhandled her. Maybe she's used to it by now?

"You bought Lily's new dress. So, I'm glad you like it." Her tone is pissy.

"Are you jealous? Because Lily looks great, but you look..." I trail off, not sure how far is too far, since I just manhandled her, rearranging her to sit how I wanted her to, and violating the contract seven ways from Sunday. And now I've got her trapped next to me, her legs across mine.

Fuckable? Hot as fuck? Good enough to take a bite out of? So good she's giving me half a hard-on, and if she moves her legs even an inch she's going to feel it? I can't say any of those things to her. So, I settle for a different truth.

"You look *perfect*."

When she frowns at me again, I know that wasn't the right answer, either. I never seem to say the right thing to her.

"I should go check on dinner," she says quietly, trying to push away from me.

She's not strong enough to get away from me if I don't let her go. And I don't want to let her go. But I drag my arm off her shoulders because I know it's the right thing to do. "Do you need any help?"

"No, thanks." She gives me a polite smile. The kind you give to a server

in a restaurant. The kind meant for a stranger. “You should spend time with your family. That’s why you’re here.”

After she leaves, I walk over to get a taste of whatever appetizer she was serving to everyone but me. It’s some kind of bruschetta with sundried tomato pesto. I could eat the entire tray and my only regret would be that there weren’t any more of them to eat. When I see Lily heading past me, I nod at her to get her attention. “Did something happen today?”

“Lots of things happened today,” Lily says with a grin, and then does a little spin in her new dress that I apparently paid for. “Thanks for the dress, Jacks.”

“You’d be more welcome if I’d known I was buying it for you in the first place,” I grumble, then look around to see who’s standing near us. “What’d Gunnar think of it?” I wiggle my eyebrows at her.

Lily immediately punches me in the stomach. And not lightly. “Shut it.”

“Mmmm-hmmm. So, what happened today with Selena? She seems... moody.”

“Maybe it’s because you haven’t told her you love her yet?”

What the hell? “How do you know I haven’t told her I love her yet? She told you that?”

“No. You just told me.” Lily frowns. “Why haven’t you? You two are so ridiculously in love with each other, it’s almost disgusting. Just tell her.”

If only it were that simple. And if only it were true. How could I have feelings for Selena—much less be in love with her—when I’ve never even kissed her properly? It doesn’t make sense. None of it makes any damn sense. Maybe I feel... some kind of way about her. But it’s just from being so goddamn horny, isn’t it?

“We haven’t been... together that long...” I’m grasping at straws, trying to make excuses.

“When you know, you know, Jacks.” Lily shrugs. “I knew I was in love with Gunnar the first time I saw him in kindergarten. I knew he was it for me. Can’t help it if he’s too damn stupid to know it, too.”

“You could tell him and see what happens. Take your own advice for once.”

“It’s completely different. Selena’s in love with you, too. Gunnar... doesn’t see me like that.”

“Is that what the dress is about?”

“Nope! The dress was for me. She was so pretty, I couldn’t resist.”

“Care to let me know what else I bought today?”

“Nope. But you’re going to be happy when you find out.”

My jaw drops to my knees. “How happy, Lil?”

“Let’s just say you’re going to be a *very, very* happy man. And you’re welcome, best friend! She’s a good one. I can’t believe she’s from L.A. She’s the real deal, Jacks.”

And the words from my best friend’s mouth have me wondering if there might be something real happening here, after all.

chapter thirty-eight

jackson

Dinner was amazing, just like the woman who made it. My entire family spent the night milling around the backyard, talking and laughing. Somehow Selena got my brothers to open up and talk more than I think I've ever heard them talk in a single sitting, telling old family stories. And my dad sat right in the middle, loving every minute. Selena even thought to buy him non-alcoholic beer because he's not cleared to drink yet. The men did the dishes in the kitchen while the women sat on hay bales by the fire, drinking their wine. It felt like old times. And somehow everything felt new at the same time.

The crowd kept thinning as the night got darker and darker. My dad went up to bed hours ago. And now it's just Selena, my brothers, Lily, Gunnar, and me sitting around the fire, late into the night. Oats is passed out by the fire after running wild all night like a toddler hopped up on too much sugar. He loves being around all these people. I feel bad that it's usually just him and me most of the time. Until Selena.

Selena and Lily are drinking wine. My brothers and I are having beer after beer. It's a great night. One of my best, actually. And I'm thinking it's not a coincidence that Selena is right here for it.

After grabbing another beer from the old galvanized water trough that Selena filled with ice to keep the drinks cold, I head back over to join Selena on our bale of hay. This time, she sidles over and makes room for me. When I wrap my arm around her, she presses into my side. There's nothing like an enormous bonfire. The smell of the smoke brings back so many memories.

Eventually Gunnar pulls his truck around the side of the house—very slowly and very carefully considering the number of beers he's had—and turns on the stereo, leaving the windows down. We all sit there listening to old country songs while the fire crackles in front of us, sending sparks up to meet the stars in the sky above.

Selena gets up to use the bathroom, and before she can make her way back to me, Jasper stands up and holds his hand out, asking her to dance. She

giggles and takes it.

I let them two-step around the lawn for a completely reasonable thirty seconds before I stand up and cut in. But I'm not interested in two-stepping. Instead, I pull Selena tight against me, her softness collapsing against every inch of my body. I wrap my arms around her and rest my hands on the top of her ass.

I'm playing with fire, and I know it. The contract explicitly prohibits this kind of touching. And I give zero shits. I give less than zero.

Because when Selena presses her cheek against my heart, I know that this isn't about a contract anymore, at least not for me. I'm not sure it ever was. Now I just need to convince Selena to give me a real chance. Or ten.

Holding her in my arms, we sway back and forth until a fast song comes on. Then I lead Selena back to our shared bale of hay to sit down again. She snuggles into my chest and sips her wine, watching the fire. There's no place I'd rather be right now than on my family's farm, surrounded by family, with Selena in my arms.

When Selena yawns for the fifth time, I've had enough.

"You're tired. Why aren't you going to bed? You don't have to stay up just because everyone is here. It's still their home. You spent all day cooking the best meal they've had in years. You don't have to take care of everyone all night."

She has the nerve to yawn again, right in my face. "Oh, it's not that."

"Then what is it?"

Selena looks around from side to side. Even though there's no one near enough to hear us over the music, she still leans closer until her hair is raining down on my chest and she whispers in my ear. "Lily found my stuff... not in your room."

My whole body clenches. "What did you tell her?"

Selena glances around her suspiciously again. A great spy she would not be. There is nothing subtle about this woman. If she's thinking about it, I know about it, too.

"It was actually extremely quick thinking on the spot, so you should be very proud."

My lips quirk. "I'm sure I will be. I can't wait to hear it."

"I said that it was just because we didn't think your dad would be comfortable with us sleeping in the same bedroom when he comes home."

"But he just got home tonight."

“Exactly. So, I said that I was sleeping in your room... with you... in your bed. And I was just keeping my stuff in the other room as a cover.”

“She bought that?”

Selena nods. “Yeah, I really sold it.”

Now I’m officially fighting off a smile.

“She said that your dad wouldn’t care. That he would be happy to have you home, however he could get you.” She presses her hand down on my arm. “I wanted you to know that.”

“Thanks,” I mumble, something caught in my throat. “What does any of this have to do with you not going to bed when you’re clearly ready for bed?”

“Who said I’m clearly ready for bed?”

“The eighth yawn you’re on and the three bottles of wine you drank with Lily?”

“Rude. I wasn’t keeping track.”

“I was.” When I tense my arm, I watch as her fingers grip tightly to the muscle. “So, why haven’t you gone to bed yet?”

She leans in close again. “What bed? I don’t know where I’m supposed to go! Your dad’s home now. And everyone’s drunk, so you’d better not be letting anyone drive home. That means everyone’s staying over. And there are only so many bedrooms. And I’m supposed to be sleeping in your bed... bedroom.”

“We need to move your stuff into my room.”

Her eyes flare wide. “We need to *what* now?”

“Move you and your stuff into my bedroom.”

“I can’t... stay in your bedroom, Jackson. I was just making it up when I said that to Lily.”

“We’re supposed to be a couple. Why would you sleep in a different bedroom than me?”

“Maybe because we’re old-fashioned, and we think it’s weird sleeping in the same room in your parents’ house?”

“Do I look like a guy who’d be uncomfortable sleeping with his girlfriend in his parents’ house?”

She stares up at my face and pales. “No.”

“Exactly.”

“Maybe I could share a room with Lily tonight and you could share with one of your brothers? Just for tonight, when everyone is sleeping over. And we can figure the rest of it out tomorrow?”

“Baby, did you have more than three bottles? You’re not sharing a room with Lily, and I’m sure as hell not bunking with one of my brothers. No one would believe that shit.”

“Oh.” She frowns. “Well, where am I supposed to sleep? I can’t sleep in your bed!”

“Look, I’m sorry about this, Selena. I didn’t think about any of this when we rushed to get out here. Maybe I should have left you back home in L.A....”

“No. No, you shouldn’t have. I’m glad to be here with you and your family.” She pats her hands against her thighs. “This is fine. It’s no big deal. Just two friends... acquaintances... sort of... sleeping in the same room. It’s like summer camp. It’s practically bunk beds, but just in the same bed. It’ll be fine.”

“Selena, I’m really sorry about this. I promise it’s no big deal.”

That’s a complete fucking lie. I know exactly how big of a deal this is. And that big deal is going to be rock hard in my boxers all night. Not that she’s going to know about it. She’s had too much to drink tonight for anything to happen, even if I’m finally getting her in my bed like I want.

“You don’t think it’s a big deal? But what about the... con-”

I press a finger to her lips and cut her off. I don’t need her saying words like contract or NDA right now. And not just because my family could hear them, because I don’t want to think about it. I don’t want to think about the fact that the only reason she’s here with me is because of a couple of signatures and a few pages of legal speak.

“You don’t have to worry about *anything*. I won’t...” I lean in close so that I can whisper in her ear. “Do anything you don’t want me to do.”

Now, if she wanted me to do it... but I can’t. Not tonight. Not when she’s had this much to drink. Damn it, why the hell did I let her drink this much? I sure as hell wouldn’t have if I’d known we’d be spending the night in the same bed.

“You don’t have to be sorry about... anything. It’s fine,” she reassures me.

I wish I could believe it.

“Jackson?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“Can you take me to bed now?” *Shit*. The last thing I need is Selena begging me to take her to bed. Thinking about putting her to bed in that silky

get-up she wears, or worse, just her *Raven's Ravine* t-shirt with nothing on the bottom. On the other hand, Selena barely dressed and pressed up against me is *everything* I need.

“Yeah, I can take you up to bed, baby. I’ll grab your stuff and move it into my room. It’s no big deal. Sound good?”

Selena nods, looking like we’ve just dodged a bullet. She has no idea of the explosive situation she’s putting herself in.

chapter thirty-nine

selena

Tonight has been perfect. Or it would have been perfect if I actually belonged here.

Jackson has this whole big, wonderful family, and it feels like I'm a part of it.

I have to keep reminding myself that I'm not.

"We're going to bed. You're all sleeping here at the house or walking to Jarret's place. No one's driving home, got it?"

Jackson stares everyone down until they all agree.

As we head towards the back porch, Jackson's brothers hoot and holler at us.

"Shut it!" Jackson barks at them. "You're going to wake dad up!"

"Sorry about them. They're idiots."

"It's fine, I promise. At least, we're being convincing."

Jackson doesn't answer me.

He leads me upstairs to his room. I stand there for a minute like an idiot, not knowing where to look or what to do. Then I decide to sit down on his bed. I may as well get used to it, since I'm apparently going to be sleeping here.

"Any instructions?"

"I just need my suitcase... and my purse... and the clothes on the chair in the corner. And my pajamas. They're under the covers of my bed. My... old bed."

"Yeah, I remember that little hiding spot from the other night. Be right back."

I haven't spent any time in this room since we got here. The walls are painted white, like most of the house. The bed frame is old and made of brass. Every other piece of mismatched furniture is made of different shades of oak. His sheets are white with what looks like a handmade patchwork quilt on top. I wonder if his mom made it? I would take this room over any of the big fancy ones in his house back in L.A.

Jackson walks back into the room while I'm still taking stock of it.

"I brought you your pajamas and your makeup bag. Thought you might want to get ready for bed while I get the rest of your stuff."

This is finally happening. I'm finally going to sleep with Jackson. Well, in his bed anyway. I'm finally going to sleep with Jackson, and I don't know how I feel about it.

I'm still awake when Jackson walks back into the room.

"Selena? You awake?"

I panic and try to steady my breathing, so he thinks I'm asleep in the double bed.

He walks back out of the room and heads for the bathroom. When he comes back, he doesn't try to talk to me again. I must have convinced him I'm asleep.

I watch out of barely open eyes as he kicks off his boots and tugs his t-shirt up and over his head. Then he unbuttons his jeans and pushes them down and throws them over the back of a chair. When he bends over to take off his socks, I get a full view of his ass. And it is glorious. The perfect blend of rounded muscle. It's not fair that a man with so many blessings also has an ass like that. Not fair at all.

Pressing my eyes shut tight, I listen as Jackson walks around to my side of the bed. Is he planning to climb in over top of me or something? Not that I'd mind...

Jackson presses his hand against my face and draws his thumb over my eyebrow. "Goodnight, baby."

Then he walks around to the other side of the bed, pulls back the quilt and sheet, and gently lays down next to me. He sticks to his side of the bed, but with his hands behind his head and elbows out, he takes up more than half of it.

I never thought I would be this close to Jackson, but he still feels so far away.



WHEN MY EYES open the next morning, I have no idea where I am. I try to move, but I can't. I'm trapped.

Panic rips through me until I feel something move under me.

I'm pressing my face against something hard. Something warm. Something that is definitely not a pillow. My face is on Jackson's chest. I'm using Jackson's perfect manchest as a freaking pillow. Oh my god! I've attached myself to him like a freaking barnacle.

"Morning."

When I press hard against his chest, Jackson loosens the arm that was holding me tight against him. My leg is draped over his.

"Oh, my god!"

Jackson sits up in a hurry, and crushing pain streaks through my head when his forehead bangs against my temple.

"Ouch. *Shit*. Are you okay?"

That's enough to wake up Oats, who's squeezed himself along the foot of the bed. He stands up, gives us both a dirty look for interrupting his sleep, and then circles, and lays back down again.

"No, I'm not okay. Jackson I'm so sorry!"

"What the hell are you sorry for?"

Motioning down to where my hip is pressed against his, I jerk it backwards. "This. All of this."

I sidle over to my side of the bed and wrap the covers tightly around me.

This is definitely not what Jackson had in mind when he promised not to touch me. Little did he know that I would be the one all over him.

Jackson rubs his beard and leans back against the pillows, lifting one knee up under the quilt. He has the nerve to look ruffled and perfect. And like a walking poster for the benefits of morning sex.

"This wasn't the most relaxing wake up I've ever had."

"Well, it wasn't exactly fun for me either!"

"Shhh, baby. We have to be quiet. There's a lot of people still in this house." Jackson lets out a sigh. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize I was holding onto you like that. If I did anything..."

"It's fine. It's my fault. I should have stayed on my side. I'm sorry. I didn't mean..."

"What do you say we agree that neither of us meant to do anything to make the other one uncomfortable and move on?"

Move on? Like I'm just supposed to forget how good it felt to have Jackson's warm body pressed against mine? And how strong and solid he felt under my leg.

But do I say any of that? No, no, I do not.

“Yes, of course. Bygones.”

“Bygones,” Jackson mutters.

Then he turns away from me and walks to the door. “I’m gonna grab a shower.”

“You’re not going to go for a run?” Jackson usually starts the day with a run. Not that I keep track of when he’s panting and sweaty. That would make me a total creep, so obviously I don’t do anything like that.

“Not this morning,” he mutters, without turning around.

He sounds kind of pissed at me. And he has every right to be.

chapter forty

slena

Things have been pretty quiet for the last few days since Jackson's dad got home. We've fallen into a rhythm of quiet days at home on the farm. Every morning, I do physiotherapy exercises with Mr. Waters and his morning nurse. A little extra stretching never hurt anyone. Jackson's dad shows me around a bit more of the farm every day and tells me how it all works. I do most of the cooking and Jackson does the dishes. After dinner, we play board games or read until Mr. Waters goes to bed. And then Jackson and I sit out on the front porch like we did when we were here by ourselves. Oats is in dog heaven having the run of the farm and being surrounded by family who sneak him treats every time they see him.

Things are great. Except in the bed department. There hasn't been a change there, unfortunately. I spend every single night falling asleep inches from Jackson. And every morning I wake up with a leg or arm thrown over him. The worst was when I tried to drag my hand away from his stomach and accidentally stroked his morning hard-on. Neither of us mentioned it again, but I know Jackson was awake. He froze when my hand was on his dick because it was practically an assault. Although I swear I didn't mean to. I was half asleep and just trying to escape back to my edge of the bed. It's always me that moves. Jackson stays on his two-thirds of the bed, manspreading, but never moving an inch past some imaginary boundary in the sheets.

The Jackson I know here in Western Springs isn't what I would have ever expected before I met him. And it's different from when we were in L.A. and going out on fake dates to get photographed. There are no distractions here. No publicists, agents, house keepers, personal trainers, or any of the million other people Jackson has orbiting around him. He's just Jacks here. Not Jackson Waters. His brothers would never let him pull any celebrity stuff, not that he ever would. It's been really *nice* being here with his family.

And I just happen to be in town when the annual Western Springs carnival is on. Lily insisted that we all go, so we're all heading out tonight to have some fun. Not that Jackson's very good at fun. But I plan on having

some fun, with or without him.

When I hear Jackson talking to his dad as I head down the stairs, I stop and eavesdrop, rather than interrupt them. It's so obvious how much they love each other. But the communication skills between the men in this family are shockingly bad. My mom always talked everything out with my brother and me, whether we wanted to or not. So, this lack of communication in a family seems so strange to me.

"Are you sure you're okay with us going to the carnival? We don't need to go. We can stay home and take care of you," Jackson offers.

"I'm your dad, Jacks. I take care of you, not the other way around. And I don't need a nurse anymore. But I'll be fine here with Nurse Ratched until you get home."

"I heard that!" The nurse—Caroline—calls from the kitchen. She's really nice, actually. All the nurses have been.

"Take your girl to the carnival. Show her off. She's good for you, son. You're a lucky man."

"I know I am. Oats won't be too much trouble?"

"He'll keep me company while I catch up on some hockey games."

"Okay, but only if you're sure."

"I am. Go have fun with your girl. And don't let your brothers do anything stupid."

The decision settled, I walk down the stairs to head out to the carnival.

"You clean up pretty good, Jackson Waters," I tell him with a smile. He's wearing the same thing he always wears. Jeans, t-shirt, boots. But I think maybe he put a little gel in his hair or something? And he's definitely wearing cologne.

"Are those cowboy boots?" Jackson is staring at my feet like he's looking at roadkill.

"They're too much, aren't they? I thought they were, but Lily insisted on me getting them. I'm going to go change." When I head back up the stairs to change into a pair of sandals, Jackson grabs my hand.

"Don't change. *They're* perfect."

"I'm not usually interested in feedback on my clothes, because most of the time I feel like me in them. But cowboy boots are outside my wheelhouse. You're sure I don't look ridiculous? Or offensive, or something? You would tell me, right?"

Jackson smiles down at me. "The last thing you look is *offensive*. I would

tell you, I promise. You look... *fine*.”

I look *fine*? Well, I guess that’s better than roadkill. But I thought I looked cute in my new white cowboy boots, a short, swingy black dress, and a jean jacket.

“Oh, and I owe you for the boots. Lily swiped your credit card from my bag and paid for them when I wasn’t looking. That woman can be sneaky when she wants to be.”

“You don’t owe me anything. Consider them a gift, from Lily apparently,” Jackson says with a laugh.

“I guess we should get going?”

“Yeah,” Jackson says, pushing off from the wall. “We’ll be home late, Dad.”

“Have fun, kids!” Mr. Waters calls after us, as we head out the front door to Jackson’s truck.

“Are you sure we should go to the carnival? Your dad just got out of the hospital a few days ago...”

“He practically kicked us out. The nurse is there. She’ll call us if he needs anything. He’d probably just spend the night cursing us out if we stayed home.”

“Oh, okay. If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure. You have those new boots to show off. How comfortable are they?”

“So far, so good. But Lily said there can be a break-in period. And that it can be terrible.” I wince at the thought. I threw a couple of band-aids in my purse, just in case of an emergency.

“She’s not wrong. I can’t even count the number of blisters I’ve had over the years from a new pair of boots.”

“I’ve never seen you wear cowboy boots when you’re in L.A.”

“Maybe. But you can take the boy out of the country, you can’t take the country out of the boy.”

I wish that were true. Jackson seems happier here in Western Springs than he ever did back in L.A. But I kind of wish he would let loose and have some fun. Sometimes I feel like I’m some albatross around his neck, stopping him from doing what he really wants to do.

Staring out at the empty highway in front of us, I try to make conversation so I don’t have to sit here in silence.

“So, talk me through this carnival. Are we talking about rides? Funnel

cake? Games?”

“All of the above. Except instead of funnel cake, we do mini doughnuts here. And beaver tails.”

Giggling, I ask, “What exactly are beaver tails?”

“It’s like a doughnut with cinnamon and sugar on it. They’re a Canadian delicacy.”

My lips turn up into a big smile. “You Canadians *really* love your beavers.”

I thought Jackson would laugh at my joke, but he frowns at me. “You have no idea.”

“So, tell me more about the carnival.”

“The Western Springs carnival is the biggest town event of the year. My dad told you it’s where he met my mom. She loved the carnival so much. She would get all of us in our best jeans and button downs, make us polish our boots, and then let us run absolutely wild, going on rides and eating cotton candy and mini doughnuts or beaver tails until we were sick.”

That sounds like heaven. “Sounds like we have a plan. Rides and cotton candy and mini doughnuts and beaver tails until we puke,” I promise him with a laugh.

Jackson’s lips twitch.

My phone buzzes in my small cross-body purse.

Lily: Told u you’d get a chance to wear those new boots!

Lily: What’s taking you guys so long???

Lily: Get your sexy ass over here in those cowboy boots and make Jackson Waters admit he loves you already!!!

Selena: We’re on our way! He’s in a bit of a mood...

Lily: How is that different from every other day?

Selena: LOL

Selena: See you soon!

I never told Lily that Jackson hasn’t said he loves me yet, because I dodge any and all questions about our relationship, feelings, the future, and just about everything else. But maybe he did?

“Who was that?” Jackson asks, with one eye on me and one eye on the road.

“Lily. She was just wondering where we were. It sounds like she’s already having herself some fun. I can’t wait to do the same,” I mutter under my breath. At least someone in this fake relationship should have a little fun. “If you want to do your own thing tonight, that’s cool with me. I can hang out with Lily. And I’m sure I could get a ride home from Gunnar and Lily. Or one of your brothers.”

“You’re not going anywhere with any of my brothers. Or Gunnar. And not for the first time, I’m questioning whether I can trust you alone with Lily.” Jackson practically explodes. “Why would I want to do my own thing?”

“Well, there aren’t any cameras here. No one’s photographing us. And you just don’t seem that happy around me. So, if you wanted some space, I totally understand. We’ve been cooped up at the farm for days. It’s close quarters. I get it. I can just have a girls’ night with Lily. And you can do whatever...” *Whoever.* “You want to do...”

“You think I’d be happier away from you?”

I look away. His words cut right through me. “It’s totally fine. I understand, I promise. You can’t even get away from me at night.”

“What the hell do you think you understand?” Jackson growls as he pulls the truck to a stop in a makeshift parking lot in a grass field.

“It doesn’t matter. I was just trying to help.”

“Just because it doesn’t look like anyone’s taking pictures, it doesn’t mean they’re not watching us, okay? We have to keep up appearances the same as we do in L.A. Can you do that tonight? Can you act like you’re in love with me?” He’s staring right into my eyes when he asks me that.

He looks so handsome tonight. Yup, acting like I’m in love with him will not be a problem.

“Of course I can. That’s what I agreed to, and I don’t go back on my word. But you might be easier to love if you smiled once in a while. Let’s go carnival!” With that, I open the door and slide out.

I know how much it pisses Jackson off when I don’t let him open my door, and right now, I don’t care one bit. I will hold his hand and gaze up at him lovingly like the perfect fake girlfriend, all the while wishing he would shove that hand between my thighs so I can finally release some of this tension ping-ponging around my body. But I absolutely will not do so without a beer in my hand, without going on every single ride at this carnival, and without eating every single piece of vegan carnival food I can get my

hands on.

“Wait up,” Jackson growls as he catches up with me and shoves his hand into mine.

“So grumpy,” I whisper back. “Just like we had a *real* fight.”

The Western Springs Carnival is as adorable and picturesque as everything else in this town. All sorts of rides cover a big grass field. There are booths with games and food. Everything is lit up with bright, colorful lights under the dark sky. The normally quiet night air is full of laughter and the whirring sounds of rides and games.

Tugging Jackson’s hand to walk faster, I announce. “I need a beer. Or several.”

“*Selena...*”

“We’re here to have fun. It’s a carnival. Lighten up, Jackson! Ooh, there they are. Everyone’s already here.”

Tugging Jackson behind me, I’m determined to have fun tonight if it kills me. Or if I kill Jackson. Whichever comes first. At least if I ended up murdering Jackson, I’d get my hands on more of him, wrapping them around his thick throat as his muscles bulge against my fingers while I strangle him.

chapter forty-one

selena

Jackson and Gunnar went to get drinks, leaving Lily and me alone for a few minutes. I feel like I can finally breathe now that Jackson isn't standing right next to me, looming over me and making me feel things I'm not supposed to be feeling.

Lily and I are dancing at the edge of the temporary dance floor set up at the edge of the carnival while a bluegrass band plays, when a couple of cowboys come up to us. At least, I think this is bluegrass. If there's a banjo, that means it's bluegrass, right? And if they're wearing cowboy hats, that means they're cowboys? The first one takes Lily by the hand and twirls her on the spot before wrapping his arms around her. They're doing what my online research has confirmed for me is in fact the two-step. I've watched a ton of tutorials, but have zero confidence I can mimic them.

"Wanna dance?" the taller cowboy asks me.

"Sure." I nod. Zero fucks available to be given. Jackson Waters doesn't own me. And he certainly hasn't asked me to dance with him tonight. All he's done is hold my hand and talk to everyone but me. Dancing with a tall, handsome cowboy at a carnival does not violate any of the terms of our contract, not a single one.

The cowboy puts one hand on my shoulder and the other hand on my hip. Well, the back of my hip. Ass-adjacent, really. But maybe that's how you two-step? Who am I to say? The video tutorials I watched didn't cover hand placement in any significant amount of detail. They were more focused on the footwork.

He leads me one step back, and then I'm staring at a blank space where my tall cowboy used to be.

When I spin around, I'm staring at the back of familiar broad shoulders in a familiar black t-shirt.

"Hey, buddy, you can fuck right off," my tall cowboy says.

"Yeah, just try it," Jackson says quietly as his brothers and Gunnar appear out of freaking thin air and step in line next to him.

Oh shit, this is a scene out of *Footloose*. If that music and dance-less town was full of broad shoulders cockblocking me from getting to finally two-step at a country carnival in front of a real-live bluegrass band.

How do they do this so perfectly in sync? Were they in some sort of choreographed dance-fighting gang when they were younger? I would pay all of my money to see that.

And why the hell does it make me wet?

“Whatever, man. I’m out of here,” my tall cowboy mutters. Peeking through the gap between Jackson and Jarett’s shoulders, I watch as my tall, handsome cowboy abandons me. Leaving me in the clutches of my taller, handsomer movie star.

Jackson turns to face me, while the rest of the Waters men continue to stare down my tall, handsome cowboy until he fades into the crowds of the carnival.

“Selena?”

“Yes, Jackson?” I say, anger surging up in me.

“I really don’t need you getting me into a fight tonight, baby.” His voice is so low and gruff I can barely hear him.

“You’re a grown-up, Jackson. The only one getting *you* into a fight is *you*,” I whisper back, sweetly. “You weren’t rescuing me. I wanted to dance with him!”

“You’re *my* girlfriend, Selena.”

“I’m your f-” I almost blurt out the truth of it, but I stop myself before saying it. *I’m your fake girlfriend*. “I’m your girlfriend, not your property. I do what I want.”

“Not when I’m here, you don’t.” Jackson scans around us, his gaze settling on a low picnic table that just opened up a few feet from the edge of the dance floor. He jerks his head toward it. “You’re going to sit down at that table and behave yourself while I go get you a beer, got it?”

“I didn’t have waiting for you and behaving myself on my to do list for tonight, actually.”

“Selena…” Jackson lets out a sigh. “Be a good girl and go sit at the damn table.”

“Excuse me? Be a good girl? Be a *good* girl?” I’m practically sputtering. I am a grown woman, not a girl. And I’ll do whatever the hell I want to do, whether Jackson Waters likes it or not. Actually, I think I’d be happier if he didn’t like it.

“Just do it.”

Crossing my arms under my breasts, I glare up at him. My arms are acting like a push-up bra, making my boobs look even bigger. Not that Jackson notices. “What if I don’t?”

Jackson leans in so close that his lips brush against my ear. If I didn’t know better, I’d have sworn he took a deep breath of my hair. But I *do* know better.

“I’ll have to drag you behind that group of trees over there and bend you over my knee.”

My jaw drops open. “You wouldn’t.”

“Try me.”

“Someone would see.”

“And they’d know just how serious I am about you, wouldn’t they?”

“They’d see what a possessive psycho you can be, is what they’d see.”

“Perfect. I just got a script where I’d play a possessive psycho. Call tonight method acting.”

Jackson is going to pay for this. The minute we’re alone, I’m going to give him every single piece of my mind. I’m going to scream and shout at him.

But until then, I’m going to make him pay. “Fine. I’ll go sit at the damn table and be a *good girl*, but know that this is not over. You are going to do every single thing I want to do tonight. You are going to play every game, go on every ride, and get me whatever I want. Got it?”

Jackson narrows his eyes at me and then nods slowly. “Got it.”

If I may have stomped my feet a few times on the way to the designated picnic table, that was only because I tripped in my new boots. *Obviously*.

“Everything okay?” Lily asks as she slides onto the picnic table bench across from me. “Don’t worry. You didn’t miss much with those guys. Jameson came and scared mine away, too. I get more than enough of that bullshit from Jacks and Gunnar. I don’t need Jameson Waters chasing men away from me, too! What a total cockblocker! This is exactly why I don’t bring any of these boys with me when I go out. They act like I’m their little sister or something, and not a grown woman capable of making her own decisions.”

“Tell me about it! Jackson doesn’t think I can do anything myself. Who even cares about that guy? I just wanted to have some fun and dance. It’s not like Jackson’s interested in dancing with me. He’d rather be a possessive ass,

so just the usual.”

Jarret is keeping watch at the end of the table, not sitting down, just scanning the vicinity for errant cowboys who might ask us to dance. How is this my life? How did getting stuck in an elevator lead to all of this mess?

“Maybe it’s normal to you. But seeing Jacks jealous and possessive is like seeing a chipmunk in a ballet leotard. I meant it when I said he was a total *fuckboy*. He’s never cared enough to be jealous before.”

“He’s *not* jealous. Jackson just... cares about how things look. He assumes people are watching everything he does in public. And that means they’re watching everything I do in public. It’s stupid.”

“Are you sure about that? Jacks is usually pretty chill here. Most people know better than to take pictures. They just give him his space.”

“He’d do anything to get this big role he’s up for. So, he’s being extra paranoid. But it’s fine. This will all be over soon enough.”

“What will be over?” Lily’s eyebrows snap together.

Oh shit. Oh shit. Oh shit.

“Just the stress of this big role. He’ll get it, I know he will. Then everything can go back to normal.”

I can go back to my life. And Jackson can go back to his. He’s going to leave me to go be a superhero without even a glance in the rearview mirror. That thought hits me like a knee straight to the vagina.

“My heroes!” I call out when I see Jackson, Gunnar, Jasper, Jenson, and Jameson walking over with their hands full of as many beers as they can carry. At this moment, I could drink every single one of them. But I need to pace myself, because this is going to be a long, long night torturing Jackson Waters.

I’m so mad at him that I lay it on thick. The second he sits down next to me and hands me my beer, I sidle up to him, pressing my thigh into his. I pick up his arm and drape it over my shoulders, and do my best to burrow into him. I reach up and twine my fingers through the hand hanging over my shoulder because an arm over the shoulder isn’t enough, not when we could also be holding hands.

Two can play at this game, Jackson. If he wants us to look convincing, oh, he’ll get convincing. I will match every ounce of his stupid fake possessiveness with a pound of clingy-ness. Every single person at this carnival is going to leave knowing exactly how into Jackson Waters I am. *Exactly.*

I smile and laugh along as Jackson talks with his brothers and friends. And eventually, I feel less pissy. But I'm still going to make Jackson pay for being such a dick to me.

All of Jackson's brothers are apparently single, and I have no idea how that's possible. They're all handsome and have great smiles. Every single one of them makes me laugh. I've seen more than one girl in this town stare longingly at them, but they don't even seem to notice. So, being oblivious runs in the Waters family. *Got it.*

When I take the last sip of my second beer, Jackson throws back the remaining half of his first.

"What did you want to do first? Games or rides?" He sounds completely normal, like we didn't have a fight forty-five minutes ago in the middle of the carnival. And another one in the truck on the way here.

No one would know that he threatened to drag me off behind some trees and *spank* me. Maybe I should have let him? He would have had quite a shock when it turned out that I liked it. I'm not totally certain that I would have liked it. I've never been spanked before. Not as a kid and definitely not during sex. But I have a feeling that anything Jackson wanted to do to me during sex would be just fine with me. And I can't imagine his hands on my bare ass being anything but sexy as hell.

"How about games?" I ask sweetly, batting my lashes and pretending to be shy.

"Games, it is." He nods at the table. "We'll see you all in a bit."

Jackson stands up and then takes my hands, helping me to my feet, steadying me, as I climb out of the picnic table. These tables always make me anxious. Extricating yourself from one requires the grace and leg strength of a ballerina and the contortionist abilities of a human circus performer. Neither of which are skills I possess.

Once I'm up and safely clear of the picnic table, Jackson releases one of my hands but keeps the other one. He slides his fingers between mine and rubs the back of my hand with his thumb. The way Jackson holds my hand is *intimate*, and I'm getting way too comfortable with it.

Then he leads me toward the games.

chapter forty-two

jackson

I should let go of her hand. I don't need to have myself wrapped around her at all times to prove that we're in a relationship.

Only I can't help myself.

The way Selena snuggled into me at the table, I thought I was going to cum in my jeans. I had to adjust myself more than once, so she wouldn't lose an eye if she happened to glance down towards the table where my cock was trying to single-handedly destroy the zipper of my jeans and dive into her mouth.

I don't know that the hell she's playing at tonight, but she's for damn sure winning. And I'm for damn sure losing.

The only way I'd be winning was if I had dragged her off behind those trees, pulled up her dress, ripped her panties, and left my handprint in the soft flesh of her ass.

It's probably a good thing she didn't defy me again. Because I doubt I would have stopped with spanking her. A naked-from-the-waist-down Selena across my lap would not be standing up again before I came in her pussy.

chapter forty-three

selena

“*B*e careful with that thing.”

“Why? It’s not like it’s a real gun!” Aiming at the clay disk ten feet away, I squeeze the trigger on the heavy toy rifle. I don’t hit the clay disk or anywhere near it. But there’s a convincing bullet lodged in the plywood back wall of the booth. “Wait, that sounded like a real gun. And is that a bullet?”

“It’s a twenty-two. This is the country. If it looks like a gun, it’s probably a gun, baby.”

“I’m holding a real gun?” I’m suddenly so nervous I almost drop it. I’d probably shoot myself in the boob or something if I dropped it.

Jackson’s hands fall to cover mine. He gently pulls the gun from me and places it on the table.

“She still has another four tries,” the guy behind the booth says.

“I think she’s done,” Jackson mutters.

“Can you shoot? That pink poodle is really cute. It looks just like Oats. But pink.”

Jackson sighs. “Yeah, I can shoot. But I can buy you a stuffed animal.”

“It would just mean so much more if you won it for me, Nugget. It would *really* show me how much you *love* me.”

Maybe I should make Jackson publicly declare his love for me tonight? But I can’t decide if torturing him like that would be worth it, knowing how much hearing him say the words and not mean it would hurt me.

Jackson steps in front of me towards the game booth. He holds the rifle with his left hand under the barrel and his right arm pulled back, hand wrapped around the back end of it. His long index finger stretches past the trigger. He freezes for a second. And then he pulls the trigger.

Bang.

It’s like something out of a cop show. Or a cop movie. Didn’t Jackson play a sharpshooter in some movie? What was the name of it?

Bang. Bang. Bang. Jackson discharges the gun again and again, using up

the rest of my turn. When I peek around his arm to see what's happening, I see all four of the clay disks shattered.

"I guess not everything you learn for the movies is just for show?"

"I learned how to shoot on the farm."

"Your dad taught you?"

"Mom actually. Dad's a crap shot."

"Interesting."

"Here's your dog, ma'am," the kid says with a slow cadence that doesn't make the *ma'am* sound quite so bad, as he pulls down the pink dog and holds it out to me. Every time someone calls me ma'am in L.A., I cringe.

Jackson's arms are longer, so he gets to the pink dog before I do.

"Thanks."

When he hands me the stuffed animal, I can't help but grin. This moment is the culmination of every fantasy expectation that every small town rom com has ever given to me about your man winning you a toy at some town event. The dog is enormous, fluffy, pink, and ridiculous, and completely perfect. I love it. The only thing wrong here is that the man who won it for me isn't mine. He's only pretending.

"My hero!" I shout and reach up on tiptoes to wrap my arms around his neck. This is when the girl would kiss her guy in the movies. But kissing wasn't part of the contract. Leaning close and looking like we're kissing, that's what we agreed to. So, that's what I do.

Jackson wraps his arms around my waist and sways me back and forth a few times. Then he pulls away.

Because this isn't real. Every part of this is fake, except for what I'm feeling inside me. And that's not his fault. Jackson couldn't have been clearer about what this was. I'm the one who can't keep things professional like we agreed, and when I get hurt, that's going to be my own fault and no one else's.

"More games?" Jackson asks, scanning up and down the row of booths.

"Not sure we can top that one, but let's take a look."

Jackson takes one of my hands, the other carrying my enormous pink dog, and we walk down the row of booths. All the usual suspects are here. Ring toss. The thing burly men are supposed to hit with a hammer to prove how strong they are. Skee-ball. Whack-a-mole. Nothing really catches my eye.

"Are you hungry?"

“Sure,” he agrees.

How did we go from Jackson threatening to spank me to him not stringing more than three words together in a row?

“You pick. What would you and your brothers eat first?”

“Fries and cotton candy.”

“Together?”

“We don’t-”

“No, I want to. Let’s do it.”

Ten minutes later, I am a convert to the concept of fries and cotton candy. There’s something about the salty, sweet combination that is so, so good. I wonder if I could do something like this at the bakery. Fries don’t exactly scream dessert. But maybe chips? Or popcorn? I’m definitely going to put some thought into that. It might just be weird enough for people to love it.

Jasper and Jameson walk over and start stealing fries and cotton candy over my shoulder. I’m happy to share. Why is cotton candy always so enormous? I may bake desserts for a living, but unlike Jackson’s, my sweet-tooth has its limits.

“More food? Rides?” Jackson asks. Three words. Again.

There’s only one solution here, and it’s definitely not food or rides. “Beer!” I announce cheerfully. “You stay with your brothers. I’ll go get it. Everyone in? Be right back.”

chapter forty-four

selena

I'm not sure how I'm going to carry four beers, but I'm just going to make it work. Three, I know I can do, although it's been a few years since my hey-dey in college. Spotting a short lineup for the bathroom, I pop in to use the park facilities before getting in the beer lineup.

The lineup is pretty long, but that just means that I can have a few extra Jackson-free minutes to balance myself out. I take my place at the back of the line and don't pull out my phone. I don't know what I would tell my friends, if I even could tell them anything. They know I'm on a whirlwind trip to Canada with Jackson, but that's it. The NDA applies to everyone in my life, so there's not a single person I can talk to. Except Jackson, I guess. But communication isn't going too well for us at the moment.

My foot taps along to the country music pounding from the stage across the field from me. I swear it's these cowboy boots. They can't be stopped. They need to be stomping or tapping at all times. The bluegrass band is gone now, and it's a woman country singer on stage. A pretty woman with long blonde hair. She sounds kind of familiar, but I can't place her.

As the line slowly moves forward, the person in line behind me bumps into me. I take a step forward to give them more space. Then it happens again. Once. Twice. Okay, I'm beginning to think this isn't an accident.

The fourth time it happens, I whip around, ready to slap someone. "Excuse me? It's called personal space, asshole."

And there is Jackson.

I panic. I just called my fake boyfriend an asshole in a line full of people. And if he was my real boyfriend, shouldn't I have known it was him and not some pervy stranger rubbing up against me? I'm frozen. I don't know how to fix this.

Jackson wraps his arms around me and pulls me towards him, so we're hugging like we did when he won me my pink poodle. "Got you!"

Laugh. He's pretending it's a joke. You need to laugh, or else the whole fake part of this fake relationship is going to be out in the open.

Smiling up at him, I press my hand against his cheek. I can't remember if face touching was part of the contract or not right now, but I figure this situation calls for extreme measures.

Shaking my head, I let out a few laughs and then slap at Jackson's arm with my other hand. My laughter sounds pathetically fake to me.

"You are such an asshole! Why do you always try to get me?"

"Maybe I like seeing you pissed?"

"And why in the world would you like that?" I ask, sweetly.

"Because it makes *things* spicy when you're pissed at me, baby," Jackson whispers against my face, loud enough for at least the five people in front of us and behind us to hear every word.

Oh my god, *things*. Things? He's talking about sex.

"You're so naughty!"

"Just the way you like it," Jackson whispers.

If only he had any idea.

I don't care what anyone says, Jackson deserves a damn Oscar for this performance. And maybe I *am* a good actress? I deserve an Oscar just for not spontaneously combusting. Or spontaneously humping his leg until I come all over his jeans. Honestly, not sure which would be worse.

"Line's moving, baby." Jackson nods his head at the line and releases me from his arms.

He holds my hand as we move towards the booth selling the beer. I lean against him, trying to keep up the façade we just put so much effort into protecting.

Eventually, we get to the front of the line and order as many beers as we can carry. Jackson pays, because of course he does. He never lets anyone pay for anything. It's ridiculous. I can buy my own beer, damnit. And I can buy a few extra beers for my fake boyfriend and his brothers. And I'm going to be able to buy more beers than I could ever drink with Jackson's two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars very soon.

Carrying all our beers, we head back over to Jasper and Jameson. Lily and Gunnar and a few other girls have joined up. Jackson's brothers might be single, but I don't think they spend much time lonely, that's for sure. We're short one beer.

"I'll go back and get another one. It's no problem." I could use more space from Jackson to put out the fire currently raging from my bellybutton down to between my thighs.

Jackson shakes his head, taking my hand again. “I’m driving. I don’t need one.”

Why am I angry that he doesn’t want a beer? For some reason, it really, really pisses me off. Why is he always putting himself last? Why does he always insist on paying? Those are questions for a not *slightly* buzzed Selena to figure out tomorrow.

When I yawn, I can’t even cover my mouth because I have a beer in one hand and Jackson has my other hand trapped in his. He stares at my gaping mouth, probably mortified that his girlfriend—even his fake girlfriend—has so little class.

“I’m getting tired, I think. But we can’t leave without doing any of the rides. We need to do at least one. Which one should we do?”

“Whatever you want,” Jackson offers.

“You pick!” I insist.

He’s not going to win this time. I’m going to out-gracious him, if it’s the last thing I do.

“I’m good with whatever you want to do. *Really.*”

“Me, too.”

“For goodness’ sake, will you two just get a room already! Go on the Ferris wheel and make out, so the rest of us can have some peace!” Lily shouts from above her beer.

“Ferris wheel, it is,” Jackson mutters. “Get home safe if we don’t see you again. No drinking and driving, got it?”

“Got it, Dad,” Jackson’s brothers say in unison.

“Just do it,” he orders them again.

He’s so sweetly protective of his brothers. But when he’s protective of me, it makes my rage-flag fly. I like to think I’m a pretty reasonable person, but I can go from zero to a thousand in a split-second with this man.

Jackson takes my pink dog and weaves his fingers through mine as we walk through the crowds towards the Ferris wheel.

I’m still sipping my beer as we join the line-up. It moves faster than the drinks line, and I’m left with half a beer when we’re at the front of the line.

“No drinks on the Ferris wheel,” the teenager running the ride calls out.

“Shit,” I mutter.

Jackson holds out his hand. “There’s a garbage can right over there. Give it to me. I’ll toss it.”

“I’m not wasting it! This beer was like *twelve* dollars. Carnival pricing is

as bad as L.A. pricing!” I squeal before diving head-first into my plastic cup. I down it like a pro, and my college self would be very proud.

Jackson stares at me with raised eyebrows as I toss my empty cup into the garbage can and march up the stairs to the Ferris wheel platform.

I sit down on the farthest part of the seat, hating the way the seat rocks under me.

Jackson sits down in the middle, his leg pressed against mine. Then I unconsciously suck in my belly and hold my breath as the teenager we’re about to trust with our lives lowers the guard rail down.

“You okay? Shit, you don’t like heights, do you?” Jackson asks, his voice concerned.

“I’m okay. I just don’t like falling from heights. So, as long as we stay up when where we’re supposed to be, I’ll be fine.”

Jackson puts his arm over my shoulder and tugs me against his side as the Ferris wheel moves.

“I’ve got you. And you’re going to stay exactly where you’re supposed to be.”

After we make it through the first full rotation, I figure the ride has proven itself and I can relax. Just as we’re about to touch off on our second rotation, I see cameras aimed right at us.

I don’t think. I just act, leaning my face close to his.

“Kiss me!”

chapter forty-five

jackson

“*K*iss me!” she whispers, and then brings her face close to mine. Her eyes closed, her lips pressed together in a hint of a smile, ready and waiting to be savaged. *By me.*

“What?”

“Kiss me! Just do it. Right now.” Her eyes are still closed, and her face looks serene.

Her face definitely doesn't match the urgency in her voice. Her tone has me on edge. I gave her a chance to get out of this, and she told me again to kiss her. So, I take my chance and do as I'm told. I'm not trying to piss her off on purpose. I've seen Selena's temper—sober temper, that is—more tonight than I have in the weeks I've known her. And I'm not interested in missing out on what could be my only chance to taste her for real. If this is real? Shit, I have no earthly idea what's going on.

Sliding my hand back over her shoulder, I press it against the base of her neck, pushing her the last few inches towards me. Her lips are parted, ready and waiting for me. I've been thinking about how that shiny lip gloss she painted on her lips would taste all night. Now I'm finally going to find out.

Before she can change her mind, I rush down and press my lips against hers.

Berry. Vanilla. Sugar. And hops. And something else. Something her. Something exactly her. She tastes like fucking heaven.

I slide my lips against hers, softly at first. And then harder. I can't stop myself. Her lips are still slightly parted. Pressed against mine. If she didn't want me to slide my tongue inside her mouth, surely she'd have pressed her lips closed, right? This whole kiss was her idea, so I'm letting her be my guide here.

I need more of her. I need to taste all of her. And since her lips are open, I'm going for it. Slowly, I push my tongue past her open lips, hoping she doesn't push me away.

She doesn't push me away.

Her tongue rushes forward to meet mine. She presses her lips around my tongue, opening and then clenching tight. Her tongue slides against mine.

I can feel myself getting hard, pressing against the zipper of my jeans. Everything in me wants to grab her hand and press it down hard onto my cock, showing her what she does to me. Showing her how badly I want her. Then her hand would move against my jeans, pressing the rough fabric against my sensitive tip. It wouldn't take much. Two or three strokes, and I'd be finished. I'd come in my pants for her so fast.

Just like I did in my hand every night in bed before she fucking started sleeping in the same bed as me. And every morning in the shower, despite the shocks of cold water. A bit of cold water isn't enough to make me lose my hard-on for her. Thinking about those pretty pink lips wrapped around my cock. My fist in her hair. Those same lips that I'm finally getting to taste for real. Not a kiss on the cheek. Those same lips that I'm finally getting to kiss and suck on for real.

My tongue is licking at hers in a hot, wet mess of saliva that feels so damn good. My lips are moving against hers. My hands are in her hair tugging on it to keep her face against mine. I'm hard as a fucking rock. When I notice my hand under the skirt of her dress and making its way up her thigh, I remember where we are. On a Ferris wheel in front of the entire town.

Shit.

As long as I've waited for this—as much as I want this—we can't do this here. I can't let this go any further or I'm going to push up the safety bar, unzip my jeans, pull her onto my lap and plunge deep, deep inside of her in front of everyone.

Shit.

I try to say her name, but all that comes out is a rumble that sounds more like a growl than anything.

“Selena.” Half-growl, half word. *Better.*

When she opens her eyes, the look on her face is exactly what I've been dreaming of. Only better. She blinks, confused, like she's stepping out of a dark room into the light. Her cheeks are flushed, and I can feel her smile against my lips.

Maybe she wants this for real? I know she doesn't want this as bad as I do. *Not fucking possible.* But maybe she wants this, too? Maybe she's ready to finally put me out of my misery? Maybe I can finally have her the way I want to?

“Selena.” My lips are still pressed against hers. “Baby, we can’t do this here. We have to stop.”

Her eyes flash open wider, not confused now. Panicked.

“Sorry. Oh my... oh shit. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to-”

She doesn’t have time to finish because I press my lips against hers again to shut her up.

“Baby, you’ve got nothing to apologize for. You did nothing wrong. But I can’t finish what you started here with all these people around, you understand me?”

She nods, but doesn’t look convinced. “I just saw the photographer, and I thought it would make a good picture. I didn’t mean to...”

“To kiss me like you were trying to suck the life out of me?”

Her face falls. “Yes, that. I didn’t mean to do *that*.”

“Huh. Well, that’s going to be a problem then.”

“I know, I’m so sorry. It’s all my fault.”

“Baby, the only problem here is if you *don*’t want to do that again.”

“*Oh*.” Her lips part again in surprise, and all I can think about is shoving something in between them. My thumb. My tongue. My dick.

“*Oh*, is right, baby. What do you say we get off this Ferris wheel? And we should probably fix your lip gloss. Mind if I take care of that for you?”

Her throat clenches as she gulps. But she nods for me to go ahead.

With one hand still pressed against her neck, I run the thumb of my other hand along the top of her lip. Catching the gloss that made its way above her lips. Then I drag the pad of my thumb along the underside of her mouth, catching it there, too. I press my thumb into my mouth and lick the gloss off with my tongue.

She gulps again.

“Perfect. You almost wouldn’t know that I just had my tongue all up in your mouth.”

“Almost?”

“I kind of made a mess of your hair.”

She smiles and runs her hands down the back of her hair, trying to flatten it. Her fingers brush against mine.

The Ferris wheel slides in to a stop on the platform.

“Ready to go?”

She nods.

I push the safety bar up and then grab her hand with mine. I walk behind

her as we make our way down the stairs to the ground.

“Baby, we’ve got another problem.”

She turns around, concerned. “What? What’s wrong?”

Quickly, I hug her, pulling her against me, so the elephant in the room isn’t visible to every single camera phone in a fifty-yard radius.

“Getting a sense of what the problem is now?”

Her eyebrows pull together, puzzled.

I roll my hips quickly against her. My erection presses into her stomach.

Her eyes drop between us and then flash back up to mine.

“Oh.”

“Yeah, *oh*. Can we get out of here before someone sees?”

“I have an idea.”

“I’ve already tried all the ideas. You know, baseball. Taxes. The desert.”

“The desert?”

“It’s flat and dry and the opposite of... curvy and *wet*.”

She smiles. “Ah, I get it now. Here, try this.” She pushes the fluffy pink dog I won her earlier tonight into my hands. “You can hold this in front of... *it*.”

Am I imagining that she sounded a little breathless when she said *it*? No, I don’t think I am.

“We’re going to need a bigger stuffy.”

chapter forty-six

jackson

She laughs before biting her lip. Her eyes dart down between us to where I know she can feel my cock hard as a rock between us. I'm on the wrong side of thirty. This should not be happening right now. But I guess this is what I get for denying myself for so long with only my hand as company. I get one taste of the real thing and I have a *perma-hard-on* worthy of an eighteen-year-old.

"Well, it can't hurt. Ooh, and what if you hold my jacket, too? We're dating, so it makes sense that you would hold on to my stuff for me. That's what... boyfriends do." She slides her arms out of the sleeves and presses her jean jacket into my hands. "And I'll still stick close, just in front of you. Okay, ready?"

When I nod, she steps back, taking my hand and leading me away from the Ferris wheel and towards the parking lot.

When we get back to my truck, mercifully, without being stopped by the cops for having an indecent erection in a public place, she stops in front of my door instead of hers. "Here, get in. I'll cover you. Unless the situation has been...downgraded."

I laugh grimly. "The situation is still on *high* alert."

"Really?" she giggles, and her eyes dart down to my jeans again, even though my hard dick is thankfully hidden behind her jacket and her damn stuffed poodle. "That's... impressive."

"Thanks. Maybe I'll feel proud when we get out of here without anyone seeing it."

"Anyone other than me."

"You felt it. You didn't see it." Fuck, I want her to see it. And hold it in her hands. Wrap her lips around it. Squeeze it with her pussy. More blood rushes directly to my cock. *Shit. Think of the damn desert.*

"We've got to get out of here," I grumble.

"Get in!" She motions for me to get in to the driver's seat.

"I'm putting you in first. Let's go."

“You’re being silly. I can open and close my own door, thank you very much. Especially under these circumstances.”

“I’m not taking *my girl* on a date—our first fucking real date—and then letting her open her own damn door. You’re not winning this argument. Let’s go.”

My girl.

Did she notice when I called her that? There’s nobody within earshot to hear it but her. And I have no right to call her my girl. She’s not my girl. She’s only pretending.

“Okay, okay. Someone’s even more bossy than usual when he’s on *high alert*.”

“Baby, you have no idea,” I agree.

I’m not sure how she takes that because her face visibly pales, so her blush stands out against her cheeks at the same time as she licks her lips.

Interesting.

Still holding my hand, she walks around the front of my truck and stands in front of the passenger door. She holds out her hand and clenches and unclenches it in front of me. “If only I knew what to do next. However, does this mechanical device open?”

Part of me wants to laugh. But the part of me with ninety percent of my blood flow and all of my control is fixating on the way she’s clenching and unclenching her hand. The way she could wrap those purple nails around my cock and squeeze me tight.

“Yeah, yeah. Wasn’t so easy when you were shit-faced the other night leaving the Goldrush, was it?” I jerk the door open a little harder than intended. “Get in.”

“Aren’t you going to hand me my coat?” She asks with a laugh. “And my pink poodle?”

“No. You’re *hot*. You don’t need it,” I mutter as I make my way around the truck and climb inside. When the door’s safely closed, I toss her jacket and the damn poodle into the backseat. I turn the key in the ignition, and the old truck rumbles to life beneath us. Fuck, even the rumbling of my granddad’s old truck makes me want to get my rocks off. I seriously have a problem.

She’s quiet as I pull out of the parking lot, gravel crunching beneath the weight of the truck. She stays quiet until we’re outside of town on the road home. But she’s not looking out the window at the specks of light from the

farmhouses we pass or the yellow-hued road in front of us, lit up by the headlights. She's staring at me. At one particular part of me, where my dick is attempting to drive, pushing up towards the steering wheel. Part of me wants to just unzip my pants and let it, so my hands are free to be where they want to be. On her. *All over her. Inside her.*

She bites her lower lip as her head rolls from side to side. "Is this... something that happens to you often?"

"No. This has never happened before."

"*Interesting.*"

"Not really."

"No?"

"*No.*"

"Why not?"

"Because embarrassing myself in a public place—not to mention in front of you—is not exactly my idea of interesting, baby."

"You didn't embarrass yourself. No one saw. I'm sure of it." She's quiet for a second. "And you don't have to be embarrassed in front of me."

"I don't?"

"Never."

I press down on the old brakes as I spin the wheel to turn onto the dirt road leading up to the house.

"Tonight didn't exactly go as planned."

"What did you plan?" She sounds thoughtful.

"Not this."

"It doesn't have to be a big deal. I'm the one who made you kiss me to impress whoever was going to take our picture with us faking a romantic kiss on a Ferris wheel."

"I don't care why you told me to kiss you. There was nothing fake about that kiss."

"There wasn't?"

"Not for me." I wave down at my dick. "I finally got a taste of you and this happened. My *perma-rection* should speak for itself."

She laughs. "What do you think it would say?"

I glance over at her. This is the moment where I either convince her to take a chance on me tonight or I completely screw this up.

"It would say that it wants you. All of you. Whatever you're willing to give."

“Huh.”

“You have any thoughts about that?” I ask as I pull the truck to a stop next to the front porch.

When she doesn’t answer me, I know I’ve completely screwed this up. The contract said no sexual contact required. It actually prohibited it. There’s a whole breach clause that I’m about to happily violate if she’ll let me. Kissing and hard-ons weren’t part of the arrangement she agreed to. And now me and my *permanent* hard-on might have ruined everything.

She doesn’t wait for me to open her door. Instead, she slides out of the truck and starts walking away from me. Both actions pissing me off equally.

“You’re not heading into the house to go to bed?”

“I thought I might sit outside for a bit. I’m feeling a bit... *restless*, and I don’t want to wake up your dad.”

“*Restless*, huh? Mind if I join you?”

“I guess you can crash my solo stargazing party.”

“Oh, it’s a party now?”

“Haven’t you figured that out yet? Wherever I am *is* the party, Nugget.”

My lips twitch. She’s not wrong about that. This woman has made me laugh more in the last five weeks than I have in the last two years. The more I’m around her, the more I want to be around her.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. You keep telling me that.”

She shrugs. “If you’re not your own hype woman, who else is going to do the job?”

“Val.”

“Okay, so maybe you’re an exception to the rule, since you have an actual publicist. But the rest of us have to hype ourselves up.” When she runs her hands up and down her arms, I can tell that she’s cold in the night air. If she’s cold, she’ll want to go inside. And I don’t want the night to end yet.

Reaching into the back of the truck, I toss her jean jacket to her.

“You keep on hyping yourself up. I’m going to grab you a blanket from inside and make sure my dad is out for the night,” I mutter as I slide out of the truck and head for the house.

One of the rotation of nurses is sleeping on the old plaid couch in the living room. I move as fast as humanly possible to open my dad’s bedroom door long enough to hear his steady breathing. Oats is lying at the foot of the bed, keeping him company. Oats lifts his head, gives me the side-eye for disturbing him, and then goes back to sleep. Heading back to my room, I grab

the extra blanket off my bed and some condoms from my suitcase. The whole time I'm in the house, I'm afraid that she's going to disappear on me. Or change her mind.

When I find her, she's sitting on a bale of hay next to the barn and staring up at the stars. I'm standing about six feet away from her, and I stop and stare, taking in every last bit of how good she looks in the moonlight. The skirt of her dress is spread wide around her thick thighs. She's tapping those white cowboy boots against the dirt. I can't wait until those fancy white boots are dangling over my shoulders.

"Have you heard those rumors about me liking to be the boss in the bedroom?"

She finally tears her eyes off the stars to look at me. Eventually, she nods at me, but her eyes don't meet mine.

Of course, she's heard the rumors. Everyone's heard that particular gossip thanks to CelebritEYES. "They're true."

She tilts her head, staring up at me and meeting my eyes now. "We're not in a bedroom."

"I like being the boss wherever I'm touching you. I'm going to tell you what to do. You're going to do it. And I'm going to make you come and come and come, got it? There isn't a safe word. You tell me to stop, and I'll fucking stop. But you won't want me to stop. Do you want this, Selena?"

She nods. Her throat constricts again as she swallows. I don't see this night ending before she swallows at least one stream of my cum. I need to see her throat clench just like that, over and over again as my cum fills up her mouth.

"I'm going to make this so good for you, I promise." I've never made a promise that I intended to keep more than this one. "Tell me you want me to do what I want with you tonight. Say it, Selena."

"I want you to do what you want with me tonight."

"Say my name."

"Jackson, I want you to do what you want with me tonight."

"Tell me you know that I'm going to make you come so fucking hard."

She swallows. "Jackson, I know that you're going to make me come so fucking hard."

"Beg me to make you come harder than you've ever fucking come in your life."

"This is a lot of hype..." she says with a laugh.

“Say it, baby.”

“Jackson, I’m begging you to make me come harder than I’ve ever fucking come in my life. I... *need this.*”

“Yeah, you do. I’m going to take care of you, baby. I’m going to give you everything you need.”

chapter forty-seven

selena

Well, this is new. We've gone from first real kiss to *perma-rection*, to making me beg to come in less than half an hour.

I've never done this kind of thing before. I've never really talked dirty. Or had anyone talk dirty to me. And I've never begged for sex. Conversation during sex in my experience starts and stops with *yes, right there, faster, and I'm going to come*. I've definitely never given a man permission to take what he wants from me before.

But am I going to be eighty years old and telling my granddaughters or grand-nieces the story of how I fake-dated a movie star and chickened out from sleeping with him? Absolutely not. I'm not passing this up. I'm not missing out on this. If that kiss on the Ferris wheel is any indication—not to mention the size of the bulge he pressed into me when we got off—I would definitely miss out if I walked away from him now.

And I don't want to miss out on anything else in this life. I want to have the experience, risk the pain. I just want to live, not second-guess whether every decision is the right one. Life is too freaking short for that.

What's that quote? You regret one-hundred percent of the chances you don't take? I'm not going to regret missing out on Jackson's mouth, his body pressed against mine, and whatever he intends to do with his hard dick. Nope, I will not miss out on one bit of that.

Jackson whips the blanket up in the air, and it flutters like it's riding on the wind. Then he lays it down over the bales of hay. He glances up towards the sky and then looks down at me. There's nothing between us and the stars. I want this so badly, my thighs are shaking.

"Come here," Jackson demands. It's not a question, it's an order. And one it doesn't even occur to me not to follow.

He grabs my hair in his hand, tilting my head back, and presses his mouth against mine. *Hard*. His mouth is rough and passionate on mine. He kisses me like it's not enough for him. Like it will never be enough for him. He drives me wild with his lips, his tongue, his teeth. He bites, licks and sucks at

me, starting a wildfire in me I have no hope of controlling.

Pressing my hands against his chest, I rub them over every hard plane and every line of muscle that I've ached to touch since I met him. His body is so completely different from mine. I'm not sure we have anything in common. He's hard where I'm soft. He's bigger where I'm smaller.

Because the curiosity is killing me, I slide one hand down his chest and over his jeans to feel his *perma-rection*. He's huge. And very, *very* hard. I swipe my hands over the hard rod in his pants, pressing my hips tight against the back of my hand, grinding against him.

"Baby, hold on." Jackson's voice is low, wild. Desperate.

"Baby, *stop*," Jackson takes a gulp of air, and then his body rocks against mine in the universal movement for...

"Did you...? Did you just?" A giggle escapes me, uncontainable.

"That was not how I wanted tonight to go, baby," Jackson holds me tight and whispers into my hair, breathing hard. "But that is exactly how much I want you."

"Baby, look what you do to me." Jackson takes my hand and pushes it inside his jeans until I'm touching the hot, sticky mess. When he pulls my hand back out, he presses the tips of my fingers into my mouth. I taste him, warm and sticky and salty.

"Like that, don't you, baby?" Jackson whispers, not taking his eyes off of my face as I lick my fingers clean.

I nod.

When I'm done licking my fingers clean, he turns away. "Give me a sec."

Not wanting to make things worse, I turn around and try not to giggle at the stream of curses I hear coming from behind me.

"It's okay. These things happen..." That seems like what you're supposed to say. But *do* these things happen? Nothing remotely like this has ever happened to me before. No one has ever wanted me this much. I barely touched him.

"Not to me, they don't."

"It's okay, I promise." I bite my lip, feeling out what the least wrong thing to say is. "We can just go inside if you want... and cuddle."

Jackson puts his hands on my shoulders, turning me around to face him.

"Baby, I'm just getting started."

Jackson leans back, staring down at me. He pushes my jean jacket off of my shoulders. Then he slides his hand down the back of my dress, finding the

zipper. He unzips it and then pushes the fabric off of my shoulders. I glance towards the house, but we're hidden from it on this side of the barn. The nearest houses must be miles away. It's just Jackson, me, and the stars, and the moon tonight.

"Fuck me. You're so fucking beautiful."

It doesn't seem like he's expecting a response, so I don't say anything.

"Lose the panties. Keep the boots on," he orders.

I'm standing in the moonlight in front of Jackson Waters in my bra and underwear. At least, it's the pretty new matching set Lily made me buy. The panties are pretty full coverage, which was perfect for being at the whims of carnival rides and night air in my short dress tonight. But at least they have a layer of lace over the opaque teal satin. The matching bra is teal lace without the satin layer, and you can see my hard nipples through it. That has to count for something, right?

Jackson frowns at me as his eyes rake over my lingerie. "Who the hell are you wearing those for?"

A nervous smile tugs at my lips. "You? I guess? I mean, you paid for them, after all."

"Lily?"

"Lily," I confirm at the same time as he asks the question.

"She said I was going to be a very happy man when I found out what else I bought the other day."

"Are you?"

He nods slowly, not tearing his eyes above my neck. "You could say that."

Jackson slides his hands down from my shoulders, pressing against the sides of my breasts and then hooks the top of my brief underwear with his thumbs. He pushes them down, and we both watch as they fall to the ground, leaving me and my dark, curly landing strip exposed to his eyes and the night air. He holds his hand out for me to take as I step out of the panties in my bright white cowboy boots.

He wraps his hand around my leg and slowly slides it up, his thumb sliding along the sensitive skin of my inner thigh. Getting closer. Closer. Closer. Until he presses inside me.

"So warm and so fucking wet. Just like I knew you would be."

"Good to know I'm not like the desert."

"No, you're wet as fuck. And it's all for me isn't it, baby? You want my

dick, don't you?"

"Yes, it's all for you. Jackson, I want your dick."

"I'm going to give it to you. But not yet." Jackson slides his thumb up inside me and then drags it through my folds until he finds the nub of my clit and then he presses firmly and circles it.

I moan audibly. I can't help it.

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

"So good," I mumble.

"You like me fucking you with my thumb?"

"Yes." I nod. "I like it."

Jackson drags his thumb out of me and brings it to his lips. He slides it inside his mouth and sucks it clean, like he did at the carnival with my lip gloss.

He lets out a long groan. "You taste fucking perfect. And look at those hard nipples. They're greedy for their turn, aren't they?"

"Yes, they're so hard. And so greedy." I like this game of repeating everything back to him. It's making me so freaking turned on.

Jackson roughly tugs first one breast and then the other out of my bra, so my nipples are exposed. The lacy fabric underneath them presses my breasts up towards the sky.

"Fuck, I've imagined what these nipples look like a million times. And they're even better. Big and dark pink. *Fucking perfect.*"

"Wait, what? You have? You thought about what my nipples look like a million times?"

"At least."

Jackson circles both nipples with his thumbs, and I feel physical pain from how badly I want this. How badly I want him. My clit is throbbing. My whole body is humming at some kind of frequency I've never experienced before.

He grins down at me. "Should I suck on your tits... or?"

chapter forty-eight

selena

“*P*lease suck on my tits, Jackson. *Please.*”

Why do I feel zero shame standing here naked in front of one of the biggest movie stars in the world, begging him to suck on my nipples? I feel embarrassed when I accidentally try to grab the same cereal box as another shopper at the grocery store. Jackson might be fully dressed and telling me what to do, but somehow I feel like I’m the one with all the power.

Jackson lowers his head to my left breast and bites onto my nipple. He sucks hard on it. I’m sure I’m going to have a hickie on my breast tomorrow, and I couldn’t care less. I’m the only person who’s seen these nipples in a very long time. And even if I wasn’t, I wouldn’t care. Because right now, this feels so fucking incredible.

Jackson’s other hand bites at my nipple. Pinching me. Then he bites the nipple in his mouth with teeth. Then he switches. Someone is moaning dramatically, and I’m pretty sure that it’s me. My hand falls down between my legs to find my clit, and as I press my hips into the pressure, Jackson pulls my hand away.

“Did I tell you to touch your clit?”

“No. But I need...”

“You need to do what I tell you to do and nothing else.”

“Then tell me to do something else because I can’t fucking take this anymore. I need to come, Jackson.”

“Ask nicely, like a good girl, baby.”

When I roll my eyes at him, he pinches my nipples. *Hard.*

“Please make me come, *Nugget,*” I tell him in my sweetest, most sugary voice.

Jackson pulls his hands back, so no part of him is touching me. At first, I think he’s mad at me for talking back. But he’s just staring at me.

“Climb up those bales of hay and get onto the blanket. Spread your legs for me. As wide as you fucking can.”

He doesn’t have to tell me twice. Spread legs means more access to

what's between them. And I want to give him as much access as possible for whatever he's planning. His hands, his mouth, his cock. I don't care. I just need to come or I'm going to explode.

Doing as I'm told, I climb up three bales of hay to the thick blanket. I must look ridiculous out here, naked and climbing a mountain of hay bales, but I don't care. All I care about is Jackson's body on mine and him letting me come. *Finally.*

I sit down on the blanket on top of one row of hay bales and lean back against another row, spreading my legs wide for him. My boots gleam a shiny opal in the moonlight.

Jackson is just standing there a few feet away, watching me. He licks his lips. "You're so fucking beautiful. Every inch of you."

A girl could get used to this. Not that this girl is going to get the chance. But even if this one night with Jackson is all that I'm never going to get, I want it. I want every single second of it.

"I think you can spread those legs a little wider, can't you?"

I frown, but wriggle my ass into the hay bale and rock my boot heels until my ankles are a few inches wider.

"Good girl."

My lips twitch. I've read about the whole good girl thing in my smutty romance books, and I didn't really understand it. That is, until Jackson fucking Waters looked at every inch of my naked body, spread out in front of him, waiting for him, inviting him, and called me his *good girl*.

"Something funny?"

"Say it again."

"You like being my *good girl*, don't you, baby?"

I nod. Apparently, I really, *really* like being Jackson Waters' good girl.

"Then be a good girl and don't come until I tell you to, Selena."

"Shouldn't be a problem."

If only he knew. Other than with my vibrator or my own hands, my orgasms have very been few and far between. It's like lining up everything for a solar eclipse when I'm with a partner. It's a lot to expect him to be doing just what I need, just where I need, and for me to be in just the right headspace to come all at the same time. The stars and planets just don't align like that very often. At least, not for me, they don't. So, I usually end up having to take care of myself at some point.

Jackson frowns at me. We're practically eye to pussy with me leaning

back, legs spread wide, on these bales of hay and him standing in front of me. “Why not?”

“I just... haven’t had great luck having orgasms... with a partner. It just doesn’t happen very often for me. But I can still have a good time, even if you don’t make me *finish*. I’ll just do it myself.”

“No, you can’t.” Jackson says the words like there’s no room for discussion.

“Yes, *I can*. I’m having a great time right now. Or I was...” I motion with my hand for him to continue.

“Why did you tell me you knew I was going to make you come before?”

I shrug. “I thought that was just part of this whole bossy thing. Like role-playing or whatever.”

“No one’s playing any roles tonight.” He sounds angry. “I’m going to make you come, Selena. Got it?”

“I’m really, really going to try. I really, really want you to make me come. Is that good enough?”

“No. But I can see that I need to show you that you can trust me to make you come. *Hard*. You’re going to come for me like a good girl, aren’t you, Selena?”

“I’m really, really going to try. Because that’s all I can promise.”

Jackson shakes his head, his expression determined. “It’ll do. For now. Spread your legs wider.”

I wriggle my legs to get every last inch of spread I can. Thank goodness for all the pilates!

“Are you going to take your shirt off?”

Jackson looks up from staring hungrily at my vagina. “Do you want me to?”

“Yes. One-hundred percent, yes.”

His lips twitch. Then he grabs the hem of his shirt with his left hand and slowly drags it up over his abs. He flexes his pecs as the t-shirt pulls over them, and then he tugs it over his head.

“Happy?”

“Very.” I grin back at him.

Jackson’s eyes flash up to meet mine, and then immediately look back down between my legs. He looks determined, like there’s a problem he’s trying to solve. And then he kneels on the first bale of hay and hovers his face in front of my hips as his hands slide up my inner thighs. Both of his thumbs

slip inside me and glide through my slick wetness until I feel them brush against my clit. Almost by accident.

My eyes flare wide as Jackson's thumbs pull my lips apart and the cool night air hits my clit.

Jackson lets out a low laugh. And then he presses his face between my thighs. His beard scratches at my sensitive skin in a way that feels oh so freaking good.

He laps at my exposed clit in broad swipes, like he's getting the lay of the land. Then he circles it. And then he swipes back and forth in unexpected and random strokes. Finally, he switches to rhythmic swipes of back and forth. Back and forth.

My hands go to the back of his head, pressing him into me. My hips rise against his face, grinding into his tongue.

He pulls back just long enough to whisper. "Like that, do you? Good girl. That's my *good fucking girl*."

He grabs one of my legs and tosses it over his shoulder. Jackson massages the sensitive skin of my inner thighs with his fingers while his thumbs hold me open to his lips. He presses against me, splaying my hips even wider. The pain of the deep stretch bookends the pleasure of his tongue on my clit perfectly.

"Taste so good. So fucking good."

Jackson swipes and swipes his tongue against my clit. His strokes are steady, but they're getting faster and faster.

Then I don't know what I'm feeling, but suddenly there's a different pressure on my clit. It feels like... is he? Sucking on it? Like he sucked on the tips of my nipples? Whatever he's doing, I don't care. Because it feels amazing. It feels so fucking good. I wonder if I actually might do this? If any man can make me have an orgasm on command, it's probably Jackson Waters.

"I need you to come for me now. Be my good girl and come for me."

"I'm trying. I really, really want to."

Then he's starts swiping the tip of his tongue against the tip of my clit, while he's sucking it pressed between his lips. His strokes get faster and faster until. Wait, am I going to come? Is this actually happening?

And then the clenching and euphoria hit me like only an epically amazing orgasm can. The kind of orgasm that until now I've only had in the company of my vibrator or my hands. Jackson drags his tongue over my clit again and

again. My hips buck against him. He keeps sucking on me until my body stills from jerking against his face.

“Good girl. *Very* good girl.”

I can't move. I can barely speak. My body feels exhausted and energized, broken and perfect. That is what a massive orgasm from a beautiful man, fully intent on wrenching that orgasm from your body come hell or high water does to a woman.

“That was... that was... amazing.”

“Baby, I told you I was just getting started...”

chapter forty-nine

jackson

J. Am. Just. Getting. Fucking. Started.

She's so damn beautiful. Every inch of her. Every soft curve. Every tiger stripe. She's perfect. Perfectly imperfect.

And how she tastes between those thick thighs.

Fuuuuck.

If I'd known she'd taste like a vanilla cupcake on a tropical beach, I never could have waited this long. Shit, I wouldn't have left that damn elevator without tasting her. Now, I have a fuckload of time to make up for. But first, I need to give my dick a taste.

Kicking off my boots, one by one, I leave them in a pile on the ground next to the hay bales. I don't look away from her eyes. She's watching me. Watching and waiting.

My hands fall to the big silver buckle holding my old brown leather belt together. It was a gift from my mom and dad when I turned eighteen. I only wear it when I'm at home. It seems too precious to waste on L.A. I undo it and then unbutton and unzip my jeans in a rush. Grabbing the condoms from my pocket, I shove my jeans down to my ankles. I reach down to pull my pants and socks off, and then I'm standing in front of her, completely naked.

Selena's eyes leave mine. She stares me down as her eyes trace over every inch of me.

"Turn around. I want to see your ass," she says with a smile.

Since I'm not exactly shy, I shrug and turn around for her. And maybe I clench my ass, so she can see exactly what she's working with tonight.

When I turn back to face her, I wrap one hand around the hilt of my dick and run the other hand slowly up and down my length.

I wonder if she even knows that she's dragging her tongue across her bottom lip just as slowly.

"Baby, you keep licking your lips like that, and I'm going to have to shove this dick in between them," I warn, as I stroke up and down my shaft. "And I have something else planned... Stand up."

She looks around her, confused. Then she does as I say, and puts one booted foot after another onto the lower bale of hay, then she presses behind her and stands up.

I bound up the two bales until I'm standing beside her. Dragging her up against me, I press my hard dick into her soft stomach. I'm pretty sure a couple of swipes over her soft tummy and I'd be shooting my load off all over again. Or better yet, between those big tits. I knew they were going to be big before tonight. But those bras she wears don't do them justice. Not one bit. I don't want her breasts contained. The only time I want her wearing a bra is like she is right now, pulled down with her tits bursting over the top.

Reaching behind her, I undo the clasp of her bra. I slowly drag the straps over her arms and toss the teal lace to join my boots and jeans in a heap next to the bales of hay.

"Better," I whisper.

She's frowning.

"What?"

"You're very good at that."

I run my hand over my beard, thinking she means I'm good at going down on her. "You bet I am, baby."

She rolls her eyes at me. "Not that. The bra. You didn't have any trouble getting that off."

What is she talking about? With her tits fully free now and her naked pussy only inches away from my hands and dick, I can barely concentrate. "Are you jealous?"

Her eyes flare open. "No! Of course, not!"

"Don't worry, I like it." I like it a lot. My dick tugs against her stomach, and we both feel it.

I need to be inside her sooner rather than later.

Looking down at the blanket, I see a wet spot where Selena came. Where I made her come. This old blanket is about to get a whole lot wetter.

Taking Selena's spot on the hay bales, my dick jutting out hard as a rock and pointing straight at the stars. I toss the condoms down onto the blanket next to me.

"Think you brought enough condoms?" Selena asks with a smile.

"Guess we're going to find out." I hold out my hand for her to climb up onto my lap. "Come here, baby. You're going to ride my dick."

"Oh... ummm... are you sure?" She's biting her lip again. She's worried

about something, but all that biting her lip makes me want to do is shove something into her mouth to distract her. She's crossing her legs like she's trying to hide her pussy from me, or to look smaller or something. I'm not interested in either since she's the perfect size, and I just had my whole face up in her pussy. And I can't wait to get back there again.

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure about everything at the moment. Come here." I pat the top of my thighs with one hand and hold out the other one to her again.

"It's just that..."

"What?"

"Objects might shift in flight..."

"Huh?"

She holds her hands out and waves them back and forth in front of her. The movement makes her boobs jiggle, and her arms and tummy dance a little. "All this. All this is going to... *move*. Why don't I just lie down or something?"

"Baby, if all that isn't moving, then I'm doing something wrong." I grin at her. "And if you're not over here in ten seconds, I'm going to have to give you give you that spanking."

"You wouldn't." She eyes me warily, but I think there's some excitement in there, too. She doesn't actually want me to spank her? Does she? Shit, I think she does. *Fuck me*.

"Try me." I shrug, still holding my hand out to her. My arm's going numb at this point.

She bites her lip one last time and then flashes her pretty hazel eyes at me. "Fine. You're getting exactly what you asked for, so you don't get to complain about it. Save a horse, right?"

"Save a what?"

"Shut up, Nugget."

Selena takes my hand and steps between my spread legs until she's standing right in front of me. Her big tits are too tempting at this height, so I lean forward and grab one in my teeth. I drag my teeth down her breast until I have the tip of her nipple caught. I press down, biting it, until I hear her sharp intake of breath. Then I wrap my lips over her whole nipple and suck hard. One hand finds its way to her other nipple, and one hand slides over the curve of her hip to slip inside her pussy. Good. She's still hot and wet for me. Just how I need her.

My thumb finds her clit and I slip two fingers inside her tight pussy,

testing her size. She's tight. But she's warmed up and ready for me. So fucking hot. And so fucking wet.

Moaning into her tit, I can feel her whole body react to the vibration. I let go of her breasts and grin up at her. I keep working her clit with my fingers to keep her ready for me as my other hand scrambles to find the condoms I tossed onto the blanket.

Leaning back, my hand still inside her, fucking her with my fingers and my thumb, I toss the condoms up to her.

"Put it on me, baby."

Selena rips a condom off and tosses the rest of them back onto the blanket. She carefully rips the edge of the package and takes out the slippery little coin. She pinches the tip and then leans forward over my dick to put it on me. Her hair and tits hang down right in front of my face. Shit. I could come just looking at her like this.

My cock jerks at the feel of her as she slowly rolls the condom down my length. When she stands up again, I can tell by the look on her face that she's about to sass me. So, I slide my index finger out of her, along the length from her entrance to her clit, and pinch her clit between my fingers.

"Hap-" Her words catch in her mouth. Her eyes flare wide open as her hips buck towards the pressure from my fingers. "Happy?"

She's riding my hand, and I can feel every nerve in her body pulled taut.

"You have no idea." Slowly, I give her pussy a few final thrusts with my index finger and a few final swipes of her clit before I pull my hand away. One by one, I suck my fingers and thumb into my mouth and lick them clean.

She watches me with her lips parted. She better watch those sassy lips, or I'm going to have to keep her quiet with my dick in her mouth.

"Climb on my dick, baby," I tell her, my own lips spreading into a grin.

She places her hands on my shoulders and pulls up first one knee and then the other onto the big hay bales, straddling me. My dick is pressing against her soft belly again. Her shiny white cowboy boots are dangling over the bale of hay past my knees, satisfying every fantasy my country-boy heart ever dreamed up.

Raising an eyebrow at her, I challenge her to finish this. She rises onto her knees, her thick thighs wrapped around mine. Taking one hand from my shoulder, she drags it down my chest to take hold of my cock. She's looking down, focused on what she's doing, like when she's icing a cake. Icing. I'd like to lick icing off of every inch of her. Next time, I think greedily.

Selena surprises me by grabbing my dick and pressing it into the top of her pussy. What the hell is she up to?

When she moans, I know exactly what she's up to. Selena groans and gyrates her hips as she masturbates with the head of my fucking dick, using it as a dildo or vibrator, rubbing it over her clit. *Fuck me.*

She's close, I can tell. A few more strokes, and... Selena collapses over me, jerking against my dick as she comes again. She's so pretty when she comes. Her cheeks are flushed and her lips are wet from her licking them. Then she slowly drags my dick down through her folds and positions me at her entrance.

"Fucking finally," I mutter, not that I would trade five million dollars for experiencing Selena using my dick as her own personal sex toy.

Selena rocks her hips and lowers herself to take me in. She lets out a sharp exhale of breath.

"Slow, baby. Slow," I whisper. "Your pussy's ready for me. Let it do its job. Stretch and take me. Take every fucking inch."

"Mmmm-hmmm," she mutters, ignoring me. Selena appears to be communing with her pussy and my dick at the moment. I'm not sure she needs me to be here.

I move my hands to her hips to support her, but I don't press her down or try to speed things up. I have a big dick. This isn't the first time it's been a problem. And Selena's barely over five feet tall. I'm more than a foot taller than her. But if I can't fuck Selena tonight... *shit*. Blue balls doesn't even begin to describe it.

Selena moans again and then presses down another couple of inches. She takes a few deep breaths and then rocks her hips, taking another inch. And another. And another. And another. She's breathing hard. Finally, I'm all the way in. And if I've died and gone to heaven, I'm good with it. She's so hot and so tight. Condom or no condom, I can feel her pussy grabbing at every inch of my dick.

"Baby, I think I'm going to go crazy if I don't start moving. But I don't want to hurt you. Are you okay? You did such a good job taking every fucking inch of my dick, baby. Such a good fucking girl."

And that's when I know it's fucking over for me. Selena grins down at me and nods, the moonlight making her dark hair shine and her skin fucking glow. She looks like Venus. She looks like a fucking sex goddess. Grinning at me while taking my cock.

She looks like she's mine.

“You ready, baby?” I have to know that she's ready for me. I can't hurt her. *I won't.* “Say it, baby. Tell me you're ready to fucking ride this hard cock.”

She nods again, still smiling down at me. “I'm ready, Jackson.”

Together we move. She presses up on her knees, and I guide her with my hands tightly holding onto her hips, steadying her and supporting her. And when she comes back down, my hips rise to meet her, shoving every inch of my hard cock inside her again. Holy fuck, she feels good. We move like this, again and again. Slow and steady torture.

“Faster, Jackson. *Faster.*”

“Yeah, baby. I've got you. I'll give you whatever you need. You just keep taking that dick like you are, and I'll give you everything,” I mutter. I'm out of my mind. The only one doing any thinking here is my dick. And he has a one-track, one-pussy mind.

Instead of guiding Selena gently up and down, I press harder to push her up and pull her harder back down, increasing our rhythm. Every time she rises up and then slams back down on my cock, her tits bounce in my face. Her soft tummy and arms dance, tempting me. Giving me filthy ideas. I want to come on every single inch of her. But what I can't look away from is seeing my cock disappear into her pussy. In and out. Wet and messy, my cock sinks into her dripping wet pussy. Her thick thighs, wrapped around mine, are tensed from effort but still manage to jiggle for me with every stroke. Strong and soft. I can't fucking get enough. Leaning forward, I lick the bead of sweat dripping between her breasts. It tastes salty, and it tastes like Selena.

“It's time to come for me, baby,” I whisper when know I can't take any more of this.

Selena nods and starts moving her hand from my shoulder towards her pussy. I grab it and put it back on my shoulder. Then I slide my hand across the curve of her tummy, spanning from her hip to her pussy. I slip my thumb between her lips, knowing exactly where to find her clit, an expert now at her body, an expert at making my woman come for me.

I rub the wide pad of my thumb over her clit. I circle it, and then swipe it again and again, until I feel her pussy clench around me. Her whole body tenses and then crumples over my shoulder as she pulses with pleasure again and again. I couldn't hold back if my life depended on it. So, I'm glad it

doesn't. Because there's no way that I'm not getting inside Selena's hot little pussy again. She jerks around me right as I thrust in one last time, and I explode inside her. I shoot my seed into the tip of the condom, wondering how it can possibly take the load.

The orgasm takes total control of me. I jerk and buck into her, and Selena rides me wildly as I rock and plunge into her. What was that she said about saving horses? I have to remember to ask her about that again.

I wrap my arms around her so she doesn't lose her balance, as our bodies jerk together again and again before finally stilling.

We're a fucking mess. Selena sweaty and limp over my shoulder, her soft breasts pressed against my chest. Her soft everything draped over me. My cock twitches one last time, and I know I'm done.

I lift Selena off of me and put her down on the blanket next to me, her legs draped over mine. She watches as I carefully pull off the condom, knot it, and toss it onto the ground below the bales of hay.

When I turn to look at her, she's staring at me.

"So..." she whispers.

"So..." I reply easily.

chapter fifty

selena

If I thought I'd experienced awkward before in my life, I was wrong. Not until the moment that I was completely naked, outside, at night, on a bale of hay, sweaty and panting, with my legs tossed over a naked Jackson Waters did I know what the word awkward truly meant.

The sex was... the orgasms... his tongue... his hands... his dick...

I have no words. I could type on a keyboard for a thousand years and still never come up with anything to accurately describe what I just experienced. What I told Lily when we were leaving the airport on our first day here, I meant it. In my experience, the hotter the guy, the less effort they seem to think they have to put into sex. So, I'm more than a little happily surprised that a man as hot as Jackson—a literal movie star—really put the work in. He put in *all* the work. My body is still humming from all the work he put into it. Jackson followed through on every one of my lies to Lily. *And more.*

I knew what Jackson Waters looked like. The face. The abs. I've seen him working out at his house back in L.A. I've seen him coming and going from the pool after swimming laps. I even saw him without a shirt while he went down on me and licked and sucked the biggest orgasm of my life right out of me.

But nothing could have prepared me for a completely naked and hard Jackson Waters underneath me. He's incredible. He's the sexiest man I've ever seen in real life *or* on a movie screen. The little stretch marks on his arms only make him seem human and less like a perfect statue. Before tonight, I knew his pecs were perfect. I knew about his eight-pack. I even knew about the hard V of muscle leading below his pants. But what I didn't know about was the sprinkling of dark hair at the bottom of that V. And I definitely didn't know about the massive dick waiting for me at the end of that treasure trail like a pot of gold. Or maybe a gold bar? Because holy shit. He's enormous. Big and thick. I think it's the thickness that has my heart pounding. He's big in length, but not like concerningly big. Just proportional. He's a tall guy. But his girth. Oh, my god. The man filled me up and then

some.

Now I'm naked and just sort of lying across him. Jackson's soft dick is lightly touching my left leg. Am I supposed to get up off of him? I can guarantee that from this half-laying down position on a bale of hay that wouldn't look like anything remotely graceful. Do we stay here like this? I'm sure I would have numb legs and a backache if I spent the night like this. And what if someone saw us? Are we going to go inside? To our *shared* bed? Are we supposed to talk? What could I possibly say after what we just did?

"Selena?"

"Yes?"

"I forgot something."

I glance around us at the bales of hay beneath us down to the dirt ground where our clothes are lying, haphazardly discarded.

"You're not going to find it down there."

"What did you forget, then?"

"You were a naughty girl tonight at the carnival."

I let out a nervous giggle. "At the moment, I feel very naughty. What *exactly* are you talking about?"

"You tried to dance with another man tonight."

My eyes snap to his. "And?"

"And that kind of behavior needs to be punished."

"What if I say I'm sorry?"

"Are you sorry?"

Shrugging, I know that I'm not sorry. I've never lied to Jackson, and I'm not about to start now.

"Exactly what I thought."

Jackson grabs me by the hips and flips me onto my stomach, so that my pussy is right next to his dick, and my ass is over his knee. I cross my arms to keep my head up off of the blanket and hay inches away.

"What are you doing?" I ask, a little nervous and a little excited.

Jackson runs his hand over the soft curve of my ass. So far, this doesn't feel like punishment. Then he lifts his hand up, and I turn to look at him. Before I can speak again, he lays his hand back down against my ass, hard.

Spanking me.

Jackson freaking Waters just spanked me!

The force shoves my pussy down against his no longer entirely soft cock. My breasts press hard against the blanket. My nipples are hard little peaks.

“Jackson!” His name is an outraged cry on my lips. Only I don’t know what to say next. The man just spanked me. I’m pretty sure that I’m supposed to be pissed about that... but I’m not sure if I am?

“Yeah, baby?”

“I can’t believe you just did that!”

“Believe it.” He rubs his hand over my ass, but doesn’t spank me again. And he is definitely getting harder by the second. I wriggle my hips against his cock as it presses into me.

“Are you... getting hard again?”

“Yeah, baby. That was hot as fuck.” Jackson rolls his hips into me.

“You *liked* that?” I ask, pushing up on my arms and half turning to stare into his face.

Jackson grins back at me. He runs the back of his hand over first one nipple and then the other. “Looks like you did, too.”

I glance down and see the evidence in my own nipples. They’re hard enough to cut glass.

“Want me to do it again so you can be sure?”

“No, thanks. I’ll take a rain check on that.” A rain check until I figure out what the hell is going on here. I shouldn’t like this. I can’t like being tossed over a man’s lap and spanked. That’s just so... wrong. *Right?*

“You just let me know when you’re ready for another spanking. I live to serve.” Jackson slides his hand between us and presses inside me. “You’re so fucking wet, baby. Guess you liked that a *lot*.”

Why is my body betraying me like this? “Maybe I’ll go find that tall, handsome cowboy from the carnival and let him spank me?” I say with a grin, taunting him.

“Test me, Selena. Just test me.” He tugs me against him. “You’re *mine*.”
Mine.

His.

He doesn’t know what he’s saying.

I’m *fake*-his for the next three weeks.

Jackson runs his hand over his dark beard, thoughtfully.

“Actually, maybe you should test me. Because the next time I spank you, it’s going to be in front of a mirror, so I can see those big tits shaking back and forth when I do it.”

“*Oh*.” My lips form a silent *O*. I think Jackson really does have a future as a director because the way he sets a scene is very... vivid.

“Just something to keep in mind, baby.” Jackson grins at me. “Now let’s go to bed.”

Holding me around the waist, he pushes me to stand up between his spread legs.

“You’re hard.” I state it simply, like the fact it is, all the while staring at his perfect, thick, enormous cock.

He glances down at his dick and winces. “Yeah, with you standing there naked right in front of me, I don’t think there’s much I can do about that. It’ll go down after a while. Probably.”

When I shiver at the thought of Jackson being hard because little old me is here naked in front of him, his brows draw together. “Shit, I shouldn’t have kept you out here like this in the cold. Let’s get you inside.”

Taking my hand, he leads me down the bales of hay and then holds out my dress for me to step into. I don’t bother zipping it up because I’m going to be changing into my pajamas as soon as we’re inside. Then he drapes my jean jacket over my shoulders again.

Jackson bends over and picks up his jeans. He shoves his legs in and then pulls them up to his waist, not bothering to do them up. He shoves his feet into his boots and then reaches for the random other clothes we discarded earlier. My bra and panties. His socks. His shirt. The blanket. The condom and wrapper. I don’t miss it when Jackson shoves my panties into the back pocket of his jeans like a mechanic’s rag.

“Planning on holding on to those?” I ask, eyes wide.

“I bought them. So they’re mine,” he says, grinning down at me as he wraps his arm over my shoulders and pushes me toward the house. “Let’s go, baby.”

“Everyone’s asleep, right? Your dad? Caroline?” I ask, biting my lip.

“Yeah. Everyone’s out for the night. She’s in the living room, so we should probably be quiet, though.”

“Good. Because having sex next to his barn probably won’t do wonders for my first impression on your dad.”

Jackson grins. “Oh, I don’t know about that. Anything that makes one of his boys this happy is probably fine by him. And this made me pretty damn happy. We can always ask him tomorrow morning.”

Stopping in my tracks, I press my palm flat against his bare chest. “Jackson Waters, I forbid you from telling your dad about this! I would literally die of embarrassment. Promise me you won’t tell anyone we had sex

next to a barn!”

“Fine,” he grumbles. “I don’t want you to die of embarrassment, but I do like it when your cheeks go red like this.” Jackson runs his knuckles across my flaming cheeks and then leads me back inside.

We creep over the creaking floorboards onto the back porch and through the kitchen, where Jackson gets us each a glass of water. Then we carefully step up the creaking stairs to Jackson’s room.

This isn’t my first night sharing a room with Jackson. It’s not even my first night sharing a bed with him. But the last few days feel like a million years ago. They were before Jackson kissed me. They were before he made me come with his head between my thighs. They were before... *everything*.

“I’m going to go... to the bathroom... and put my pajamas on,” I mumble as soon as the door to Jackson’s room closes behind us.

“Fine, but I don’t see much point in you putting on pajamas just so I can take them off you again. Actually, go ahead, so long as it’s those silky purple things. Been dying to get those off of you since we got here.”

“You have?” I hate the hesitation in my voice. But despite what just happened between us, a big part of me can’t wrap my mind around the fact that Jackson thought about being with me before tonight. That he wanted me like this.

“Nonstop since the first night we got here.”

Grabbing my makeup bag and pajamas, I rush out the door to the main bathroom down the hall that Jackson and his brothers all shared growing up. The same one we’ve been sharing for weeks now, even before we were sharing a bedroom. And a bed. I quickly wash my face, brush my teeth, pee, and then change into my pajamas.

When I get back to the bedroom, Jackson is waiting for me. I can tell from the bulge in his jeans that he’s still hard.

“I’ll be right back,” he tells me before heading out to use the bathroom himself.

I don’t know why I feel so awkward, but I do. It’s like the world shifted on its axis the minute Jackson and I got naked, and now I can’t find my balance.

After quickly shoving my dress and cosmetic bag into my suitcase, I turn out the light and jump into bed. I lay down on my side at the very edge of the double bed, pulling the covers up to my neck. I don’t know where we stand now or how the hay bale *incident* changed things, but I feel like I’m in limbo.

Are we back to the terms of the contract now? Are we somewhere else? I don't know how I'm supposed to act. I know what I'm supposed to do as Jackson's fake girlfriend. But not as this, sort of fake, but also just had sex with him, and now have to sleep together in the same bed situation.

chapter fifty-one

selena

When I hear the door open slowly and then Jackson's heavy footsteps, I don't look up. I'm not exactly pretending I'm sleeping, but I'm also not *not* pretending I'm sleeping. I'm leaving it up to Jackson to decide what happens next.

After some shuffling sounds, I feel his heavy weight sink into the mattress, and then I feel his arms reach out for me. "What the hell are you doing all the way over there?"

He wraps one arm around my waist on top of me and one underneath me and drags me across the mattress to meet him in the middle of the bed. My body wriggles away from his hands on my soft stomach, and my bum presses up against something hard. My hips wriggle again, and I press my ass into his hard cock. I swear, it's an involuntary reaction that I'm not at all responsible for.

"Baby, you keep that up, and I'm going to find somewhere to put this thing," Jackson warns.

Jackson's arm slides down over the soft curve of my tummy, and I flinch away from him again. I never let anyone touch my soft stomach. But my movement only pushes my butt harder into his dick.

"Baby," he warns me again, his tone gruff.

His hand slides over the waistband of my shorts and then up over my stomach to my silky tank top. He grunts in what sounds like disapproval, and then he pulls the silky fabric up over my breasts. Then he starts absentmindedly massaging one breast, his forearm pressing hard against the other.

"Better," he whispers against my neck before kissing it.

"I thought we were going to sleep," I whisper back in the darkness.

"I said we were going to *bed*..." Jackson whispers as he kisses my neck. "Are you sore from before?"

I wriggle my hips again to assess the situation between my legs. "Nope. I'm good."

“Baby, you’re killing me,” Jackson grunts against my neck. “Can we?” he asks, pressing his hard cock into the flesh of my butt cheek.

“Yes, we can...” I whisper back, a smile on my face.

“Thank fucking god,” Jackson whispers against my neck. “But baby, you’re gonna need to be quiet.”

“Baby, *you’re* gonna need to be quiet,” I warn him right back.

He bites my neck softly. “I think you’re the one we need to worry about here.”

“I guess we’ll see about that, won’t we Nugget? ”

“I guess we will,” Jackson mumbles, kissing my neck.

He moves the arm under me enough that he can tease my breast, and then he slides his left hand down, down, under the waistband of my silk shorts. He slips his middle finger and index finger inside me, swiping them up my seam until he reaches my clit. And then he starts a slow, methodical rubbing. Nothing about what he’s doing feels rushed. Jackson is taking his sweet damn time driving me crazy.

It feels so good that I wriggle my ass against him on purpose this time, just to mess with him. I want him to feel how good I feel right now, even a fraction of how good I feel.

“You’re so fucking wet for me, baby,” Jackson whispers.

Then he slides his fingers back and presses them deep inside me. He presses them in a circle, testing how tight I am. Then he curls them towards my front wall and presses. The palm of his hand rubs the lips over my clit, grinding into me.

“Jack-son!” I almost cry out, before toning it down to a very loud whisper.

“Quiet, baby,” he makes a *tsk-tsk* sound against the side of my neck before licking from there to my ear. His hot breath is on my ear as he sucks my lobe, gold hoop and all, into his mouth.

“Not helping...” I whisper, my voice ragged.

“You ready for my hard dick to stretch you out?” He whispers, letting go of my ear.

I nod, trying to be quiet.

Jackson leans back, and suddenly where I was surrounded by a wall of warmth, there’s only emptiness. I hear the ripping of foil, and Jackson’s hard steady breathing. Then he’s pressed up against me again. His hand presses inside the silky fabric of my shorts, pulling them down.

“Lift up for me,” he whispers in my ear.

I do as I’m told, and lift my hips just enough so that he can pull my shorts down. He doesn’t bother pushing them past my knees, leaving me tied up in the silky fabric.

Jackson lifts my leg up, bending my knee and pushing it forward to make room. He slides his thigh up under mine, and then he’s pressing into me.

“Don’t worry, baby, I’ll go slow.” His whisper is husky as he presses into me inch by delicious inch.

His hands keep working my body, making it hum. One hand on my nipple, and the other on my clit.

Deeper and deeper, he inches into me. Going exactly as slow as I need him to so my body can stretch and make room to take all of him.

“You’re taking my cock so fucking good, baby,” Jackson whispers in my ear. “Take every inch of me, baby. Wrap your sweet pussy around every fucking inch. Such a good fucking girl.”

I can feel myself get even wetter at his words.

When he’s all the way in, he stays there, not moving.

But I need more. I need him to move, so I grind my ass into him. Then he rocks in and out of me. Slow, grinding strokes. It’s torture. Beautiful, sweet, torture. I’m always on the edge of something, but never actually find it.

“Ready to come for me, baby?” Jackson whispers into my ear.

“Yes, please. Make me come,” I beg.

Jackson speeds up the rhythm of his strokes, pulling farther out of me as he revs up the strokes on my clit, pressing harder, pinching my nipples even more. I try to block out the squeaking I know I’m hearing from the old box spring. It doesn’t take long before I’m on the edge and falling into the abyss. My body jerks against his as waves of pleasure pound through me. My body clenches around him, pulling him into me even farther, taking up room where there wasn’t any to begin with.

“Jack-” I cry out as I come unhinged.

But before I can finish the word, wet fingers press into my mouth, keeping me quiet. Jackson’s fingers. Covered in... *me*. I’ve never tasted myself like this before. It’s different and weird. I taste like vanilla and musk. Jackson’s thick fingers slide in and out of my mouth like he’s fucking it, and they’re so big and thick. I decide I like this after all. Tasting my pleasure on the fingers of the man who gave it to me is hot as fuck.

Jackson grunts as he jerks against my body until he finally stills.

He takes his fingers out of my mouth and sucks them into his. Then he kisses my shoulder before pulling back, pulling out of me. I feel empty and cold without his warm strength behind me. I hear Jackson's feet on the floor, the door opens and closes again, and then his weight sinks back into the bed. Once again, he wraps his arms around me, pulling me tight against him. His hand finds my breast, and he gently plays with my nipple as he falls asleep.

chapter fifty-two

selena

*W*hen I wake up the next morning, I'm in Jackson's bed, in Jackson's bedroom. *Alone.*

I guess that's my answer. Last night was some sort of freak weather event that only happens once every hundred years. Not to be repeated in a single lifetime, and definitely not in mine. A pang shoots through me at the thought of never being with Jackson again like we were last night. I've never been that free with anyone else, and I've never felt that way with anyone else, either. Four orgasms are not just unheard of for me, they're downright inexplicable.

How am I never going to have that again?

No idea, but it's not like it's up to me. I'll have a good story to tell my granddaughters one day or to include in my scandalous autobiography. Although, one steamy night with a movie star does not a bestselling autobiography make. The rest of it would just be baking and brunch.

Now, I need to figure out how I'm going to survive the next three weeks with Jackson until the contract is up. Spending every day with Jackson and not obsessing about what we did last night is going to take more strength and focus than I can muster. And I need to not be completely awkward around him. I'm sure Jackson has nights like that all the time. What was an epic, once in a lifetime night for me was probably just an ordinary Tuesday afternoon for him.

I have to play this cool. Not that I've ever actually played anything cool in my entire life. *Ever.* But if there was a time to start, that time is now. I have to be cool, calm, and collected. Easygoing. Chill. For another three weeks. And then I never have to see Jackson again.

The thought of never seeing Jackson again sends another sharp pang of pain through me, even worse than thinking about never having another night like last night. The man must leave a string of broken women in his wake, and I'm only the latest. And not even one he was trying to make feel something. I'm just the one he got stuck with.

The smell of waffles—wait, no, pancakes—hits me as soon as I open the door to Jackson’s bedroom. At least there will be delicious food to distract me during the most awkward breakfast of my entire life. Finishing up in the bathroom and throwing on a white tank top and floral skirt, I head downstairs to get the awkward over with.

“Morning,” I whisper as I pad into the kitchen on bare feet.

Jackson turns around from where he’s standing at the stove with a spatula in hand, minding a griddle covered with silver dollar sized pancakes.

“Morning.”

He has a tea towel draped over the shoulder of his white t-shirt and his faded jeans hit the tops of his bare feet.

The silence in the kitchen is drowned out by a beating heart of awkwardness pounding between us.

“Sleep well?” The words are out of my mind before I can stop them.

Jackson turns around and quirks an eyebrow at me over his shoulder. Then he turns back to his pancakes. He flips them with more flair than technique, almost but not quite, losing a few.

“Where’s your dad?” I try again to make normal conversation on a morning that is anything but normal.

“He was up and had an early breakfast before I got up. Jarret came over to take him on a drive around the farm. He’s been making us all crazy about letting him get back to work. Jarret finally caved and is at least going to let him see what’s going on. He’ll be back in a bit for physiotherapy, so you can get your stretching in. You probably need it after last night.” Jackson chuckles to himself.

“That sounds really positive. He’s doing so much better!” Ignoring his comment about stretching, I try to put all my nervous energy into relief and happiness that Jackson’s dad is home and doing so well.

“Positive isn’t exactly how I would describe the mood he’s in at the moment. But yeah, it’s pretty good.” Jackson turns to look at me. “So, I was thinking-”

He’s cut off when his phone, iPad, and the old-fashioned ring of the old-school house line in the corner all start going off at once.

He was thinking, what? What specifically was he thinking? I need to know exactly what he was thinking before he answers a single one of those calls.

“Hold that thought,” Jackson mutters as he walks over to the far counter

and picks up his phone.

“Jackson.”

His eyebrows narrow. Then pull apart. Then draw back together. Watching the expressive brows of a professional actor is pure torture. Jackson mumbles *okay* and *huh* and *yeah* over the course of a few minutes, telling me exactly nothing about what is happening on the other end of the call.

“Okay, call me later.” Jackson puts his phone back down on the counter. “Sorry about that.”

“Why are you sorry? What happened?” I snap, biting my tongue, wishing I could take back the tone and the words.

“I guess, I got it.”

“Got what?” I have no clue what he’s talking about. Yes, he got in my pants, but we’ve already established that.

“The part? The superhero franchise.” His face turns up into a big smile. “I got the part.”

“Right.” I nod, staring at him. “The reason we’re doing all of this.”

Breathe, Selena. Breathe, damnit!

One phone call, and I turn right back into a pumpkin.

This is it. It’s all over now.

“Con-congratulations. I know how badly you wanted this.” As much as I know I should smile, I can’t bring myself to do anything other than press my lips together.

“Yeah, I guess I was feeling like it was never gonna happen.” He runs a hand through his hair and stares over my shoulder. “The next decade of my life is pretty much locked down now.”

“I can’t tell from your voice if that’s a good thing or not?”

“Both, I guess. This job comes with a lot of money, but with a lot of money comes a lot of strings. I won’t have time for much else. There’s going to be training and green screen work and tons of stunts. And it’s looking like we’re going to shoot all the movies in Australia.”

“Right. Australia.” That’s only on the other side of the world. But it probably doesn’t matter whether Jackson is next door or halfway around the world. Either way, he’s going to be gone from my life.

“So, we’ve got to pack up and get back to L.A. *Today*. Apparently, they want to make a big deal about closing the contract and they’re setting something up for tomorrow night. I need to shake some hands and do some

press. That kind of thing.”

“Go back to L.A.? But what about your dad?”

“I don’t like it either, but he’s home now. He’s got my brothers, and he’s got his nurses. We’ll come back as soon as we can.”

He didn’t mean that. He means *he’ll* come back as soon as he can. Which probably means in about a decade, if his dad’s lucky.

“Got it. I’m so happy for you, Jackson. I hope that this part is everything you want it to be.” My voice is about to break. If I don’t get out of here, I’m going to lose it. “I’m going to go pack.”

“What about my pancakes? They’re my specialty.”

“Oh, ummm, thanks. But I’m not really hungry. And our... your room is a tornado of clothes. So, I should probably go pack.”

“How are you *not* hungry after last night?” Jackson asks with a laugh.

How can he mention what happened last night so casually? I don’t know what to say in reply. So, I just flash him an awkward smile and retreat to the bedroom. *His* bedroom.

After about fifteen minutes of intentional breathing and willing myself not to cry while I fold clothes into piles on the bed, I hear a knock at the door.

chapter fifty-three

selena

“Come in.”

“I come bearing pancakes. Will you try them? They’re the only thing I can cook even remotely well.” Jackson is holding two plates of pancakes, and he nods for me to take one. He even plated them cutely in an overlapping row with a little pat of vegan butter and a stream of maple syrup, and a fruit salad of strawberries, grapes, and baby orange segments. The man made me breakfast and brought it to me in his bedroom. I can’t not take the plate from him.

“Thanks.” I push a stack of dresses aside and sit down on the edge of the bed.

Using my fork, I break off a piece of pancake, dip it in syrup, and take a bite. The man knows how to make a pancake. “These are delicious. I’d say you cook pancakes very well.”

“Thanks.” Jackson seems to relax a bit. He moves a pair of my platform sandals off the chair by the bed and takes a seat. “And if you need help packing, I’m available. I’ve been living out of my suitcase anyway, so I’m pretty much ready to go.”

“Thanks, but I think I’ll be okay. I only have a carry-on, too.”

Jackson raises an eyebrow and looks at the tornado of shoes, dresses, skirts and t-shirts haphazardly arranged around the room. “You sure about that? How did it even get like this?”

I look around the room and see the mess with his eyes. “It’s still in the *it’s going to get worse before it gets better* stage. And it was a combination of making it look like I was staying in here the whole time and getting ready for the carnival.”

“About how far are we from the *it gets better* stage?”

“Close-ish? What time is the flight?”

“The plane’ll be ready in an hour. My pilot’s taking a helicopter back from Vancouver. We can leave whenever you’re ready. There’s no rush though.” Jackson stares at me for a minute. “Look, I’m sorry about this. I

know we were supposed to stick around here for a while longer.”

“It’s fine. This is what we were doing this all for in the first place, right? You got the job. It’s amazing. You’re going to be a superhero. I’m thrilled for you. You’re getting everything you worked so hard for.”

“I guess.” Jackson lets out a sigh. “It’s not how I wanted this morning to go.”

It’s not how I wanted any of this to go. “It’s fine. The pancakes are delicious.”

Maybe if I just say everything is fine often enough, then somehow it will be?

We both eat our pancakes in silence. It’s not an awkward or uncomfortable silence exactly, but there’s a distance between us that wasn’t there this time yesterday.

I only wish I knew if the distance was caused by what happened last night or the fact that Jackson can finally get rid of me now? There are still three weeks left on the contract, but we don’t need to go through with that anymore.

He got the role. That was the whole reason we did this. None of this was real. Last night wasn’t real. I knew that going in. And it’s not fair to place the blame for how I feel now on anyone other than myself. I’m a grown woman. And spending the night with Jackson was the decision I made last night, and it’s the same decision I would make a hundred times over. If it hurts now, then that’s on me.

Jackson stands up when he’s done his breakfast. “Okay, if you don’t need my help, then I guess I’ll go back down and spend some time with my dad before we head out. There’s no rush. We can leave whenever you’re ready.”

“Okay. Bye, Jackson.” This is only the first time I’m saying goodbye to him. It won’t be the last. The next time will be forever.

When I’m finally all packed up, I carry my suitcase and bags downstairs to the porch. I’ve definitely accumulated more stuff since we’ve been here, so I have some loose bags of stuff. But that won’t be a problem on Jackson’s private plane.

I don’t know where everyone is. The trucks that are normally lined up in front of the porch aren’t there. I don’t know if I’m supposed to go find Jackson, but I don’t know how to and I don’t want to interrupt his time with his family.

Gently, I sit down on the old porch swing one last time. It creaks as it

sways just this way and just that. There's something about this place that makes me want to can beets and make preserves. Feed the flock of chickens every morning like a cartoon princess. Maybe it's catty, but I don't think any of the models that Jackson usually dates—dates for real—want to be in the middle of nowhere making jam. But hopefully one day someone will, and they can give this place the woman's touch it's missing.

My relationship with Jackson is fake. It was always fake. It was always going to end. So, there's no point dragging it out or being dramatic. It was an agreement with a contract and a cheque at the finish line. Nothing more, and nothing less.

I'm sadder than I have any right to be thinking about leaving this place. I barely spent enough time here to know Western Springs enough to miss it, but I have a feeling that I'm going to be missing it for a very long time.

chapter fifty-four

jackson

The guilt eats at me like it always does when I leave this place. When I leave my family.

“So, I know this is kind of sudden. But Selena and I need to get back to L.A. today. I just found out that I got this big role that I’ve been working towards. And I need to get back to the city to do some work stuff.”

“Congratulations, son. I’m glad you got what you wanted.” My dad claps me on the shoulder. I know he really is proud of me. But I also know living in another country isn’t what he or my mom would have chosen for me.

“Sorry about this. But we need to fly out *now*. Can you tell everyone else I said goodbye? I promise we’ll be back soon.”

“I’m going to hold you to that, son,” my dad says, his voice gruff.

Then he reaches for me and wraps his arms tightly around my chest. I’ve got a few inches and at least twenty-five pounds on him now. My dad’s always been larger than life and invincible. Seeing him in a hospital bed was a wake-up call. I can’t hide out in L.A. for my career when my family needs me at home.

Jarret walks over, his eyes narrowed. “You’re leaving again?”

“Sorry, man. I’ve got some work shit to do back in L.A. We’ll be back soon. Just remember, you’re not actually the big brother while I’m gone.”

“I’ve been the big brother since I was seventeen.” Jarret says before pulling me into a tight hug and slapping my back a few times. “Have a safe flight.”

“I’m coming back. I promise.”

“We’ll see you soon then,” Jarret mutters. He doesn’t look like he believes it.

When I get back from talking to Jarret and my dad, I find Selena asleep on the porch swing with Oats lying across her legs. And I feel like a selfish piece of shit for barely letting her get any sleep last night.

“Hey there, sleeping beauty.”

She looks so pretty lying there asleep in her favorite place. I hate to wake

her up, but I don't have a choice. We need to get back to L.A.

"Baby, can you wake up for me?" When she doesn't move, I press my hand on her shoulder to wake her up.

When the porch swing creaks, she presses up against the pillows to sit up and then looks around like she's confused. "I think I fell asleep."

"Looks like. Sorry I took so long. Did you get everything packed up?"

"Yup, I'm all ready to go."

"Okay. The plane's all fueled up and ready to go, too. I'll put your bags in the truck, and then we can head out. Jarret and Jensen are going to drive out to the airport later and pick up the truck."

"Sure."

She's quiet the whole way to the airport.

"I never said goodbye to anyone... that's so rude."

"Nobody's gonna think you're rude. They know it's my fault rushing you out of there." They know everything's my fault.

"Are you sure? Do we have time to go back? And into town to say goodbye to Lily?"

"Sorry. We've got to get back to L.A."

She looks crushed at my words.

"Selena, I just want to say thank you. For everything. I really appreciate everything you've done for me over the last few weeks. I know it was asking a lot."

"Do you know what's going to happen when we get back to L.A.? How does the whole breakup thing work, exactly?"

I let out a bark of laughter to cover the way her words punch me in the gut. "That desperate to be rid of me?"

"No, of course not." Her voice sounds sharp and unnatural. "I'm just making conversation."

"I don't think we need to change anything... for a while. It wouldn't look great if the casting news gets overshadowed by my personal life." I take my eyes off of the road ahead of us to look at her. "So, if it's okay with you, I think we should keep doing what we've been doing for now. Is that... okay with you?"

She nods, but there's a frown on her face, and her hazel eyes look a stormy brown. "Whatever you need. I mean, whatever's best for your career or whatever Val says to do is fine. That's what I signed up for, right?"

A whoosh of air escapes my lungs that I didn't even know I was holding

onto. “Good. So, everything will just stay like it is. And we’ll figure out the rest later.”

“Sure.” I don’t like the sound of her tone at all.

Things don’t get any better in the three hours we take to get back to L.A. I bet we don’t say ten words to each other the whole damn flight. I’ve never wished Oats could talk so much in my life.

Flying private, you’re not supposed to have awkward flights when you can’t talk to the person sitting next to you. The woman sitting next to me isn’t some stranger. I know her. And I got to know every inch of her body last night. But damn if it isn’t awkward sitting here next to her, neither of us saying anything.

“You don’t need to come in. When you drop me off at my place.”

“I thought you’d come back to my house.”

“Do you *want* me to come back to your house? What were you thinking? Is it going to look weird if I go home right now?”

No, that wasn’t what I was thinking. I wasn’t thinking about anything other than the fact that I want her at my house. I want her with me, and I want to touch her again like I did last night. I want to kiss every inch of her until she’s screaming my name. I want it to feel normal and natural to reach out and take her hand. I want this distance between us to be gone.

“Yeah, maybe you could come back to the house with me and stay overnight tonight? Just until we get the contract signed tomorrow. I just want to make sure the optics look good. I don’t need any bad press right now. And I can have someone go pick stuff up from your place if you need anything else...”

“Nope. I’m all good. I can stay over, if that’s what you need. Your house is big enough. You won’t even know that I’m there.”

I want to know that she’s there. I want to roll over in the night and reach out for her and have her be there. I’m not ready to go back to not having Selena in my bed.

I thought last night changed things between us. But maybe I scared her away? I thought she liked it as much as I did. Damn it, I made sure she was into it every step of the way. But maybe it was too much for her? Why the hell did I have to spank her like that? Maybe she just wasn’t into it?

Or maybe she fucked the movie star and now that she can cross that off of her bucket list, she’s over this whole thing? It wouldn’t be the first time having sex with me was like a Monopoly property for the woman to collect.

Except I did not pass go and did not collect two-hundred-dollars. At least when I date actresses and models, I don't feel like they're mentally ticking an item off their to do lists before they get back to their real lives. And I didn't think that's what was going on with Selena until this morning.

Even before Val called, something was off between us. It's like we've lost something, and I don't know how to get it back.

"Okay. Whatever you need. I shouldn't need anything from my place. I have my suitcase. But if you need me to go anywhere special, then I might need to pick some stuff up."

"Sure, or I can order you whatever you need."

"I don't need you to buy me anything. I'm sure I have everything I need, or I do at home."

"What do you feel like for dinner tonight? There probably isn't much here, since no one knew we'd be coming back today. So, I was thinking takeout? What do you feel like ordering?"

"I don't really care. Whatever is fine with me."

"You don't seem to care about much, all of a sudden."

And that's when I piss her off so badly that she won't even talk to me. Selena goes to the guest room and hides from me as soon as we get home. Until I order Thai delivery, and the smell of pad kee mao with tofu and spring rolls finally makes her come out and look at me.

After a dinner that starts awkwardly and doesn't get any better, I need to burn off some energy from all this tension. "I'm going to go for a swim. Want to join me?" *Naked?* The naked part goes without saying.

"No, thanks. I'm going to go... read for a bit," she announces as she takes her dishes into the kitchen.

"Okay. Sounds good. If you change your mind, I'll be in the pool." *With a hard on... thinking about you wet and naked in my arms.* That part goes without saying, too.

"Okay." She barely looks at me as she flees the kitchen. I don't know how much more of her ignoring me I can take.

After forty-five minutes of hard laps, with Oats watching me swim from one end of the pool to the other from his perch on a lounge, I'm still full of tension. When I try to peek in the guest room blinds, I can't see anything other than my reflection.

After taking a shower and jerking off, I throw a towel over my hips and head for the kitchen to scrounge up something sweet to eat instead of fucking

Selena like I want. When I walk past Selena's bedroom door on the way to mine, I hear something strange.

What the hell is that damn buzzing?

I'm sure as hell going to find out.

chapter fifty-five

jackson

The guest room door is closed, but I don't bother knocking. Knowing she'll just tell me to go away, I don't give her the chance.

"What are you doing?" I ask, leaning back against the doorframe.

"Nothing? Going to sleep. I'm tired."

"It's seven o'clock and you're in bed?"

"I'm tired."

"What's that noise?"

"Nothing. There's no noise. What noise?" She looks around her like she's hunting for a phantom noise. The noise that's coming from her bed.

"There's a definite... buzzing... coming from in here." I tilt my head, listening carefully to identify the sound. It's still quiet, so I step forward into the room.

"I don't think so." Her face is noticeably red. She's blushing. And something is going on under those covers. Her face and shoulders are completely still, but the covers lower on her body keep jumping around like she's got a frog under there with her. Both of her hands are under the blankets, and in my experience, that can only mean one thing. Whatever she's doing, she reminds me of a pretty little duck. Completely serene above the surface, and her legs frantically paddling underneath.

If I were a better man, I'd probably leave her be. Not embarrass her. But the more she tries to hide whatever she's doing under there, the more determined I am to see it.

Taking a few more steps towards her, I tilt my head again. The buzzing is getting louder. She has to know that I can hear whatever she's got going on under there, right? And that I'm not letting this go until I find out *exactly* what she's up to.

"I'm pretty sure I hear something buzzing. Is there maybe a wasp nest in the wall, do you think?"

"Yes. Yes! I'm sure that's it. You should probably go... call... an exterminator." She nods towards the door, both hands still under the blanket.

“Huh. Now that I think about it. We had a few wasps’ nests in the barn at the farm over the years. They didn’t sound quite like this.”

“No?”

“No.”

I smile. “Did you want some help with that?”

“Oh, ummm. I don’t know. Like I said, I’m pretty tired.” She musters a pathetically fake yawn.

“Funny. You don’t look tired. You look bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. Bright shiny eyes. Red cheeks. If I didn’t know better, I’d almost say that you look like you do when...”

“When I’m tired. *Exactly.*”

“I wasn’t going to say *tired.*”

“No?”

“No. I was going to say *fucked.* You look like you do when I’m *fucking* you. But that can’t be right because I was out there in the pool. And I know you wouldn’t be in here trying to get off all by yourself when I was only just outside.”

I advance the last few steps until I’m at the side of her bed. Why the hell is she in her bed in the guest room, anyway? She should be in *my* bed. And she damn sure should have told me if she wanted to get off. I’m more than happy to get her off any time. And selfishly, I need another taste after last night. The way she’s been acting today had me wondering if I imagined the whole thing between us. But I’m not that creative. The way she fucked me last night. I never could have imagined that.

“Jackson, no. Don’t!”

I don’t listen. I need to know what she’s hiding from me. In one quick motion, I whip the cloud-white duvet back and toss it messily at the foot of the bed. And then I rake my eyes over her, from her pointed toes, up along the tight line of her calves, to where her hands press against her thighs. I can’t miss out on an opportunity to look at her bare breasts, and watch her lick her lips, but before long, my eyes are back on her hands.

She’s naked. That has to mean something, right? Even if she didn’t find her way into my bed tonight, she got into her own bed naked and with something buzzing to keep her company. I should be fucking keeping her company. I should be fucking her.

“And what have you got there?”

“Nothing.”

I kneel on the edge of the bed. My weight presses into the mattress, tilting her towards me. Then I slide my hand under her hands and tug out what she's hiding.

It's black and gold, made of soft matte silicone.

"What does this little thing do?" When I press the pad of my index finger against the little oval ring at the top, it sucks onto my fingertip like a fucking vacuum. "I can see why you like this."

She can't meet my eyes.

"Do you want to get off, Selena?"

She nods.

"Do you want me to get you off?"

A thousand thoughts fly across her face. If she has to think this hard about fucking me, I must be doing something wrong. Because it's a no-brainer for me. I'm dying to get back between her thighs.

After a long minute, she nods. "Yes."

"Good girl."

Throwing my knee over her, I move to straddle her. My towel spreads apart, so I rip it off and toss it on the floor. My dick's already getting hard, even though I just finished jerking off. I want Selena to see this hard dick. See how fucking rock hard she makes me.

Then I lean forward and press the suction bud against her left nipple.

"Oh, my god."

"Feels good, doesn't it?"

"Yes, oh my fucking... yes."

I grin, and then I press it harder into her. The suction bites greedily at her flesh. Her skin clenches and puckers, and I can't take my eyes off of it. This thing must be doing something right, because her hips are trying to grind against me. But my thighs are pinning her down and there's nothing for her to grind against. My dick is pressing into her stomach, safely out of reach of her greedy, wet pussy. And as much as my body is screaming at me to shove my dick deep inside her, I want to play with her first.

I absentmindedly start massaging her other nipple as I press the suction hard into her.

"Does this thing leave a bruise?"

"I don't know. I've never... I don't know."

"Let's find out."

"Oh my god, Jackson." Her voice is ragged. Her hips snap together and

shove up towards me, trying to find some release.

“No.” With one word, I shove my knee between hers and hold her thighs apart.

She looks gloriously pissed. “I need more. I need it on my clit. Please, Jackson.”

“Not yet.” Lifting the suction toy up, I press it down on her other nipple. Then I take her left nipple between my teeth. I rake the tortured flesh roughly before sweeping up her nipple and as much of her areola as I can fit into his mouth. I lick and suck, giving her little toy a run for its money. She’s about to fucking riot, if the wild bucking of her hips is telling me anything. That little toy may have suction going for it, but I’ve got a warm, wet tongue motivated to make her wild. Her whole body is pulsing below me, rocking to find release. And I haven’t even touched her clit yet.

I repeat the same torture on her right nipple, pressing the suction toy into her flesh until I don’t think she can take any more of it. I’m not sure if I’m going to be pleased or pissed if she ends up with bruises tomorrow.

“Jackson, please. Make me come. I don’t care how you do it. Just let me come.”

“Baby, all you ever have to do is ask.”

I tear the suction toy off of her nipple and then swipe my tongue in a wet trail across it, tasting the silicone and her skin.

“You’re going to come in a heartbeat if I put this thing on your clit, aren’t you?” I murmur, my breath whispering over her slick skin.

“Yes, please. Make me come. Put it on my clit. Suck on my clit.”

“Not so fast. Good things come to those who wait,” I promise her with a huge smile. Playing with her like this is so fucking hot.

I press the toy into her mouth, and I feel her tongue dart out to feel the bite of its suction. Then I drag it down her body, between her beautiful breasts, circling her belly button, over the soft curve of her belly. But instead of pressing the sweet suction right onto her clit, I take my time, lazily tracing it up one thigh and then down the other. When I finally press it into her, it’s too low. On purpose. I know exactly where her clit is after last night. Selena grinds against my hand, trying to move the toy up. Her whole body is writhing. It’s impossible for her to stay still. My knee is still between her thighs, pushing them apart. But I don’t want to take any chances. I press my other leg in and then spread my thighs, forcing hers even farther apart.

She opens her eyes to glare up at me. Then I slide the tip of the suction

toy up, up. When she shudders, and I know it's found her clit, I tug it away.

"Please, I want it. I want all of it. Let me come. Jackson, please let me come."

I press the suction toy back into her, finding her clit again. I drag it away one more time before pressing it into her for good. Ten full seconds of pressure, and she goes off. Her body dances under mine as she desperately tries to fuck the little black toy in my hand. Her whole body clenches and contracts. I keep the pressure on so the pleasure can keep coming. I want this to last for as long as it can for her. Not for the first time in twenty-four hours, I'm fucking blinded by how pretty she is when she comes. And she keeps coming for me. Again and again and again. When her body finally stills, I pull the suction toy away.

When she opens her eyes, I'm still fumbling with it, trying to turn it off.

"See, it's not as easy as it looks!"

"Who the hell designs these things?"

"I don't know. But I'm grateful to whoever they are."

"Me, too. You look so pretty when you come. Anything that makes you come like that is a good thing in my books." I run the back of my knuckles along her skin, from between her breasts to between her legs. "Are you ready for me, baby?"

When she nods, I pull her right leg up, bending it at the knee. Then I pull it past me and flip her onto her stomach. I slide my arm under her breasts and pull her up. She presses against the bed until she's on her hands and knees in front of me. But then she giggles.

Laughing is not what I was going for right now.

"What the hell is so funny?"

"It just reminded me of when you tried to give me the Heimlich maneuver, that first night that you came to my place."

"The time I tried to save your life? Heroically, might I add."

"That's not exactly how I remember it."

"Well, not everything they teach you how to do on movie sets is useful in real life. A lot of it's just to look good. Speaking of looking good..." reaching my arm under her, I tug her to the left so we're not facing the headboard anymore.

Now, we're facing the massive floor-length mirror my decorator put on the opposite wall next to the walk-in closet. Leaning down, I kiss her ass and then let my palm fly in a hard smack in the same spot, rocking her forward on

her knees, and making her tits bounce. And I see every inch of her jiggle in front of me in the mirror. “I promised you the next time I spanked you, I’d do it in front of a mirror so I could see your tits bounce. They’re fucking majestic. They should be carved into the side of a fucking mountain.”

She giggles and then frowns back at me in the mirror. “What was that even for?”

“For sneaking off and using your vibrator without me.”

Her eyes meet mine in the mirror, and she looks pissed. “Excuse me? You don’t want me to use my freaking vibrator?”

“You can use your little toy whenever you want. I just expect you to tell me so I can watch.”

She lets out a little noise that’s half whimper and half growl. Those are my terms, and she’s just going to have to get used to them. If she’s coming, I’m fucking watching it happen. And licking up the mess.

Enough talking.

Then I remember I was wearing a towel when I came in here and didn’t bring a condom with me. Reaching into the bedside table drawer, I silently thank Margrit for keeping this house running. And apparently keeping my guests stocked with condoms. As soon as I put the condom on, my hands are on the sides of her ass, pulling her back into me. I slide into her slowly, inch by torturous inch until I’m filling her up. I can feel her stretching around my dick, and I take my time, letting her body work to let me all the way in.

“You good, baby?”

“Uh-huh.”

I pull back and then slide into her again in long, even strokes.

“Play with your nipples,” I order her.

She does as she’s told. Just how I like.

“Good girl.”

The only sound in the room is the rhythmic, wet smacking of my hips and balls against her ass and both of our moans.

“I could fuck you forever. I’m never going to get tired of fucking you.”

She stills against me, and I know that I’ve said the wrong thing.

Then she moves against me again. “Make me come again, Jackson.”

“I’ll make you come, baby,” I grunt, as I thrust into her. “Tell me you’re mine, baby. All mine.”

“I’m yours, Jackson. I’m yours.”

My thrusts become shorter and more intense. I slide my hand over her hip

and press inside of her until I find the nub of her clit. Her whole body jumps at my touch. She's primed and ready to come again. Reaching down, I pick up the little toy, turn it on and press it down hard over her clit. I fill her pussy with my cock until I feel her jerk against me and clench my dick inside her. I come inside her with a final hard thrust against her ass and then frantically jerk against her, my dick trying to get deeper. Always deeper inside her.

"I fucking *love* fucking you."

chapter fifty-six

selena

*W*hy didn't I put on pajamas after I got out of the shower last night? I hate that I know the answer. And I hate even more that it's because I was horny, and if I couldn't have Jackson's hands on me, I at least wanted the feel of his thousand thread count sheets all over my body. And maybe I had some crazy hope he would come to my room and want to sleep with me again.

When he said we should keep doing what we were doing, how was I supposed to know what that meant? Did he mean sex on bales of hay under the moonlight or virtual strangers pretending to be in love?

I guess he answered that question last night. The farm wasn't a onetime thing. Jackson wants me. He told me he loves fucking me. He said it during sex, so I don't know exactly how much to believe it. But he said it. And what's the point of lying in this situation? He has a guaranteed end date, so he doesn't even have to deal with a real breakup or a clingy girlfriend. Because this isn't real, and I'm not his girlfriend.

But whatever this is and whatever this can't be, Jackson wants me. And I want him, too. I want him more than anything. I want all of him. And I'm going to take whatever Jackson will give me for as long as he wants to give it to me, however pathetic that makes me.

He told me he could fuck me forever. But forever is a long time. A lot longer than two months, probably less. Probably a lot less.

The way Jackson touches me doesn't feel like goodbye. It doesn't feel like the last time. But I know it doesn't get to be forever. It's only a little more time. Days, minutes, hours before this all ends. But it *is* going to end. It doesn't matter what I want.

"Selena? Are you listening?" Jackson's frowning at me. Because I'm supposed to be listening instead of worrying about things I can't have.

"Wow. That sounds like a pretty big deal."

"Yeah. That's the point. The studio wants to make a big deal about the announcement. The first movie doesn't come out for three years, so the plan

is for a snowball approach to the press. Just keep getting bigger and bigger until the premiere.”

Three years. The movie doesn’t come out for three whole years. I’ll be long gone from Jackson’s life by then. I only get a couple more weeks with him before this is all over. That’s what I agreed to. And I hate myself for being jealous, thinking about the lucky woman who’s going to be Jackson’s date to the premiere. Another model? An actress? Maybe his new co-star? I don’t have any right to be jealous.

Elisha Bell is stunning. Tall with long blonde hair and green eyes. She’s the kind of woman who someone like Jackson should be with. The two of them would look so tall and beautiful together on a red carpet. No one within a mile radius would be able to take their eyes off of them.

“Selena?”

“Hmmm... what?”

“I asked you if you were okay?”

I’m wrapped up in Jackson’s arms as we lie in his bed.

“I’m fine. I was just thinking.”

“Thinking about what?”

“Does it really make sense for me to go with you to the announcement? Maybe you should just go by yourself?”

“Of course, you should come with me. I need you there, baby.”

“Right. Because if I’m not there, the press might notice and write that we’re over. And that might draw attention from the announcement.” *Over.* It kills me to even say the word out loud.

“So, you’ll come?”

“Of course, I will.”

I’ll give him everything. Even if it’s going to kill me in the end.

chapter fifty-seven

selena

“Selena, how are you?” Val asks on her way back from the bathroom.

Alan, Val, and Jackson have been holed up in Jackson’s office for the past two hours. I came home from the bakery early to get ready for the big casting announcement, and I haven’t seen anyone other than Oats. My stomach is a pit of nerves, and I feel like I’m about to throw up. I don’t know how any of this works, and I don’t have Jackson to hold my hand and tell me everything is going to be okay.

“I’m good, thanks. It’s so great about Jackson getting the role. He’s going to make a great superhero.”

“Selena, thanks so much for doing this. You really made all the difference. The press are eating this relationship up!”

“Oh, that’s great. I’m glad.” I can’t muster up any energy to sound excited about how the press is reacting to Jackson *pretending* to love me.

“This has been so great for Jackson. The new face of a franchise. He’s trending. The calls for paid sponsorships are out of control. You must be his lucky charm.”

Shaking my head, I can’t meet her eyes. I’m not Jackson’s anything. Except his fake girlfriend. Fake being the most important word.

“He did it all himself.”

“Everyone absolutely loved how you went back home to meet his family. All those shots of you walking around the carnival in *Nowheresville*, Canada were fantastic! Come on. All that country charm? I couldn’t have planned the photo op better myself. The two of you on that Ferris wheel just looked adorable! Even those leaked videos from the bar of Jacks defending you that went viral worked. He looked like the superhero he’s about to be. I know this all helped him get the franchise.”

“Thanks?” I mumble. What else is there to say? That it wasn’t a photo op? That Jackson really did defend me against an asshole in a bar? That none of it was fake for me. That I loved being in Jackson’s hometown, meeting his family and seeing where he grew up. That after that Ferris wheel ride,

Jackson brought me home and licked my pussy and called me his good girl? Nope, I really can't say any of that to Val.

"I better get back. But Jackson asked for me to arrange hair and makeup for tonight. And your dress should be here in about an hour. Have fun tonight! And don't worry, this will all be over soon!"

That's exactly what I'm worried about. How soon this is all going to be over.



"YOU LOOK BEAUTIFUL," Jackson's voice has me turning around from where I'm staring at myself in the mirror.

I don't know who picked out the dress, but they did an excellent job. It's such a deep purple that it almost looks black, but when the light hits it, it shines purple. The slippery satin fabric falls in a deep V-neckline over my breasts, and then gathers underneath them. Then it hangs all the way to the floor. But instead of looking dowdy, it has a slit halfway up my thigh to make it a bit scandalous. And easier to walk in. Little loose sleeves hang halfway down my upper arm, but barely touch my shoulders. This dress is only strapless-bra friendly.

I feel beautiful and sexy. But I don't feel like *me*. The dress gives femme fatale vibes, and that's just not me.

"Thanks, but I feel like I'm in a Halloween costume or something." Pushing my hair behind my ear, I return to staring at myself in the mirror.

The stylist curled, teased, and hair-sprayed my hair within an inch of its life to get it to fall in what look like a ridiculous amount of volume and loose effortless waves down my back. Only the stylist and I know exactly how much work went into this hair.

"Only if you're dressed up as the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head. "Stop."

"No way. You look beautiful. Almost too beautiful to leave this house, actually."

Jackson walks up behind me and kisses my bare shoulder.

"As much as I'd rather stay here at home with you, you can't miss an event announcing that you got the job you've wanted since forever," I insist.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Jackson mutters, his breath warm in my ear. "Why

does she have to be pretty *and* smart?”

“Just lucky, I guess,” I tell him with a smile, hoping it doesn’t show the nerves eating me up inside. It’s one thing pretending to be Jackson’s girlfriend in Western Springs with his family or when we’re here at the house or even the photo ops we did in the beginning. That was still just *us*. It felt natural. But it’s completely different when I have to pretend Jackson loves me in front of a million celebrities and reporters. And I actually have to talk to other people. Smile when I’m supposed to. Laugh when I’m supposed to.

“You ready to go? You couldn’t look any more beautiful if you tried.” Jackson holds out his hand to me and leads me to the garage.

“We’re not taking a limo or something?”

Jackson frowns. “Did you want to? I figured it was easier to just drive us myself. I never drink at these things. It’s not a party for me. It’s work. You should try to have some fun. But not too much fun.”

When he opens the door to the Suburban, I step into the seat and let out the breath I’ve been holding onto.

Have fun, but not too much. Pretend to love Jackson. But not so much that people are going to dislike him for breaking my heart. Make everyone think I’m in love with Jackson, but don’t actually fall in love with him. There are so many rules, and I never seem to get any of them right.

We don’t really talk on the drive into the city. I’m spinning out. And it doesn’t get any better when I see where we’re going. When we get out of the car, there’s a literal red carpet on the sidewalk. It’s like something out of a movie. Press are lined up on either side of a red velvet rope, and they photograph us as we walk the twenty feet inside. Then we pose for more photos against a backdrop of the studio’s logo. The photographers are all shouting at Jackson, trying to get his attention. I don’t know where to look or what to do with my hands.

The venue is massive. Concrete and glass. And it’s full of fancy people in fancier clothes as far as I can see. Servers are walking around with champagne and canapés. It’s just all a lot.

Jackson never lets go of my hand, and that’s the only reason I’m still on my feet. Everyone here knows who he is. All eyes are on him. And on me, the random woman tagging along after him who looks like she doesn’t belong.

After an hour of being ignored or being awkwardly introduced to the people who come up to talk to Jackson and then ignored, I’m about ready to

scream.

“Hi, you must be Jackson’s sister,” Elisha Bell says, holding out her hand to me.

Automatically, I extend my hand to shake hers. She’s so beautiful. She’s even more perfect in person. It’s like she’s a robot or something. I don’t think I’ve ever been this close to someone this stunning. Her face, two feet from my face, looks like an airbrushed magazine cover. I don’t see a single pore on her skin. Or a single hair, other than in her perfectly laminated eyebrows.

“Hi, I’m Selena, but I’m not-”

“Have you been living under a rock?” another voice says. “She’s his *girlfriend*. You know, the one from the elevator?”

Elisha’s perfect, not-a-single-hair-out-of-place eyebrows pull together, perplexed.

“Selena’s my girlfriend,” Jackson adds. “I don’t even have a sister. I have four brothers.”

Maybe it was an innocent mistake? Or maybe Elisha Bell just can’t fathom that someone beautiful enough to date her could date someone normal like me?

She presses her free hand flat against Jackson’s chest, right in front of me. “Four brothers? I didn’t know there were more of you! Where can I find them?”

Jackson steps back. “Western Springs, Canada. I’m sure they’d love to meet you.”

“Canada?” she asks with a grimace.

“It’s actually really beautiful. Like something out of a movie.”

Every part of Western Springs is charming, adorable, and full of life. I might not be from there. I might have only spent a few weeks there. But no one is going to shit on Western Springs in front of me.

“How quaint!” I’m not sure if it’s her expression or the pitch to her voice that’s more condescending. But I want to slap both of them.

Jackson leans towards me and says in a mock whisper. “Let ’em think Western Springs is a shit hole. Keep it safe for the rest of us.”

He squeezes my hand. “Looks like my girl needs another drink. Thanks for having us. Looking forward to working with all of you folks.”

Is he amping up the country in his voice? I’ve never heard Jackson say *you folks* before.

“Elisha’s really beautiful,” I whisper, needing to hear Jackson lie to me

and tell me she's not.

As we walk away from the group, they close ranks behind us, leaving no room for us to go back. Or maybe just no room for me. Because everywhere we walk, people step aside and make room for Jackson freaking Waters.



CelebritEYES: The internet's boyfriend is officially a superhero! We can't wait to see him in skintight rubber... You can come to my rescue anytime, Jackson!

chapter fifty-eight

selena

“**S**he better be. That face is going to be on movie posters next to mine for the next decade.”

That wasn't a no, she isn't. What did I expect him to say? Elisha Bell is drop dead gorgeous. There's no point in denying it. And Jackson's going to spend the next ten years of his life with her, apparently. In Australia, an entire world away.

“Does she have a big role?” I ask, hoping rather than believing he might say no.

He grins. “Not as big as mine, but pretty big.”

I roll my eyes up at him, desperate to change the subject. “I'm sure no one's is as big as *yours*.”

Jackson gives me his cockiest smile. We both know I'm not talking about movie roles.

“When do you actually start filming?”

“Next fall.”

“Wow. That's soon. How long's the flight to Australia from L.A.?”

“About fifteen hours, I think.”

“I guess that's nothing on a private jet.”

“Do you want another glass of champagne or something else?”

“Something else... do they have rosé?” I ask, trying to peer over a few shoulders to see the drinks menu.

“If they don't, I'll have someone go out and get it for you.”

“Oh, no. No one needs to do that. I'll just have something else. I don't even really care. Just not champagne.”

“Okay, one not-champagne coming up. I'll surprise you.”

“Do you need to shake hands or network or whatever it's called in Hollywood? I can go powder my nose.”

“I think that means something else here. Maybe don't tell anyone else that you're going to powder your nose, baby?” Jackson says with his big, movie star smile.

“Oh, right. I didn’t even actually mean powdering my nose. I just meant, you know, going to the bathroom.”

“I may just be a humble country boy, but I did follow that.”

I nod, my neck tight, all of me feeling rigid and restricted in this stupid hair and dress. “Right, a humble country boy in his tuxedo that probably cost more than my car.”

Jackson frowns at me. “You need a better car.”

“My car works just fine. We’re not all rich movie stars.” I’m pissed on behalf of my car and on behalf of myself. I worked hard to buy my car, just like I work hard for everything else. So, I don’t need Jackson’s rich butt criticizing it. “Don’t worry about my drink. I’m going to go to the bathroom... and *not* powder my nose. You do your networking or schmoozing or whatever you need to do, and I’ll come find you, okay?”

It’s never been uncomfortable when it’s just Jackson and me. But it’s not just Jackson and me now. We’re in a room full of rich and famous people. My world is sugar, flour, and frosting. Jackson’s world is couture fashion, three-hundred dollar bottles of champagne, and cameras.

I need a few minutes to myself. And I need to not be holding him back from whatever he needs to be doing instead of babysitting me.

He’s frowning down at me like I’m turning out to be the disappointment I always knew I would be. “You okay down there, baby?”

“Me? Yup. All good. Everything is *A-O-K*.”

Jackson narrows his eyes at me, but he doesn’t stop me when I flash him a big smile and walk away towards the bathroom.

The bathroom is *faaaancy*. Marble floors are ringed by sinks with some sort of round fainting sofa in the middle. The bathroom stalls are off to the far end through a swinging door. It’s like something out of a movie. And the tall women swanning around in it don’t help with that. Most of them are probably actresses or models. Not bakers. I probably ingest more sugar through my skin baking in a single day than they do in a year.

Keeping my head down, I rush to the stall area and dive into the first stall I see. I don’t even really need to pee. But since I’m here, I figure I may as well.

“Did you see Jackson Waters out there? Honey, that man can get it!” a woman’s voice says, like Jackson isn’t here with the woman everyone—except apparently Elisha Bell—knows is his girlfriend from the elevator.

“From you and me, both!” a second woman’s voice volunteers before

entering into a fit of giggles. “He’s even hotter in person. And that’s definitely not the norm around here. How tall is that man?”

“I don’t know. But, Australia’s a long, long way away. And if Jackson needs someone to keep him company at night, I volunteer as tribute! I’m going to climb him like a tree!”

“Hey, I want to volunteer as tribute!”

“You’re going to have to get yourself to Australia then. Or I’ll just have to have Jackson all to myself,” the first woman says. “Let’s get back out there.”

There’s a clatter of hard heels on the marble floor and then the sound of the door swinging open and closed again.

I never want to leave this bathroom stall. Or maybe I want to run straight out of here into Jackson’s arms and make him promise me that he won’t have sex with any of these women in Australia. Or maybe I want to run out of here and go home. To *my* home. Where I only have to worry about cupcake deliveries and orders of flour and sugar and cocoa, and I definitely don’t have to worry about fake movie star boyfriends and who they might have sex with on location in Australia.

My life would be so much simpler if I’d never met Jackson. Never got stuck in that elevator with him. Never agreed to this whole stupid fake dating thing. And it would be a hell of a lot simpler if I’d never had sex with him. Because sex always complicates things, and this situation was already complicated enough.

But if I’d never met Jackson, I’d never have gone to Western Springs. I’d have never met his dad or his brothers, or Gunnar and Lily. I’d have never met Oats. And I’d never know what it feels like to be kissed by Jackson Waters. Or what it feels like as he pushes inside me. How it feels when he makes me come with his head between my thighs.

Selena: Hey

Lily: Hey, what’s up? How’s Hell-A?

Selena: How do you know when something’s worth the risk?

Lily: Not sure what this is about. But I’d say trust your gut?

Lily: And if this is Jackson Waters-related, he’s worth the risk. I promise

Lily: PS you two look amazing tonight! Jacks sent me a pic

When did Jackson send Lily a photo? Of us?

Knowing I can't stay in this bathroom forever, as much as I'd like to, I finish up in the stall and tug my dress back into place. This dress is so beautiful, but it's just not me. I wish I was at home wearing leggings and a t-shirt, and watching *Royally Arranged*.

Listening for a window when no one else is at the sinks, I rush through washing my hands. As soon as I'm done, I sneak towards the door. Glancing at myself in the mirror as I pass, I have to admit again that I look good. Really, really good. But I definitely don't look like me.

When I push open the swinging door from the bathroom, I have options. I can try to find Jackson, I can go to the bar for a drink, or I can find somewhere to hide until we can get the hell out of here.

It's not even a close call.

Option three, it is. I'm hunting for a hidey-hole.

chapter fifty-nine

jackson

Glancing at my watch, I realize that Selena's been in the bathroom for more than thirty minutes. Is something wrong? That's an awful long time to be in a bathroom, even for a beautiful woman.

Looking over the heads of the producers I'm talking to, I scan the crowd for her. I don't see her anywhere. Panic grips me right in the gut. I don't like not knowing where she is. I brought her into the snake-pit that is a Hollywood press event, and I should have stayed with her. Right by her side. My arm around her, her hip pressed into my thigh.

"I'm going to hit the head," I announce in the middle of someone else talking. Shit, now they're all going to think I have some kind of bathroom situation. Instead of a woman situation. I'm honestly not sure which looks worse.

Walking through the crowd, I nod and smile at people I recognize or see trying to get my attention, but I don't let myself get caught up in anything.

When I get to the bathrooms, I see a tall blonde woman coming out. She's probably pretty. Most women here are, but I barely even see her. I just need to find Selena. She's the only woman I care about.

"Did you see a woman in there?"

"You're going to need to be a little more specific. I saw lots of women in there," she answers with a laugh.

"Right. The one I'm looking for is a little over five feet. Long dark hair, a little lighter at the bottom. Purple dress. Beautiful. *Curvy. Thick.*" As if those few words could describe Selena. A thousand more couldn't come anywhere close to describing her.

"Nope, didn't see anyone in there that meets that description. I guess she could have been in a stall, though. Good luck finding her, Mr. Waters." The woman smiles and walks away from me.

When I walk past the bar, I scan every single face in the line. But no Selena.

Then I hear her laughing.

But I still can't see her.

There it is again. Tinkling like the wind chimes on the front porch at the farm.

Where the hell is she?

Walking towards the sound, I head away from the drinks line, away from everyone milling around at this stupid event trying to pretend they're somebody, and towards a back corner behind a couple of promotional posters with my face on them.

I'd feel bad enough if Selena was hiding in a corner on her phone, laughing at something.

This is worse.

Because she's not alone.

And molten rage runs through me when I see who's making her laugh like that.

Derek fucking Jones is younger than me, in his late twenties, closer to Selena's age than she is to mine. But he's as tall as me, and a little thinner. I don't get it, but women fucking love him. It's probably the British accent. Or maybe it's the bad boy reputation? Derek's playing my half-brother in the franchise, who turns into the villain before I kill him in the third film. At this rate, I'm not sure he's going to make it to the first one.

"Selena, there you are. Is this guy bothering you?"

Selena drags her eyes away from Derek's face to spare me a glance. She gives me half a smile. "Oh, hey Jackson."

"Hey, *baby*," I grit out, glaring at Derek.

He gives me a shit-eating grin. "Alright, Jackson? I was just chatting with your lovely date. Did you know that she's never been to London? I told her I'd be happy to give her a tour of my hometown any time."

No, I didn't know that Selena's never been to London. Why the hell didn't I know that? My mind reels at all the things I probably don't know about Selena because I never took the time to ask her.

Since the minute I showed up at her door with a proposal for a fake relationship, all of this has been about me. *My* career, *my* plans, *my* house. Then my family has a crisis, and I dragged her home with me to Western Springs. I haven't even been inside Selena's place since that first night. Picking her up on the way to the airport doesn't count. She's from Riverside. It's not even that far from L.A., but I haven't met her mom or her brother. I haven't met a single one of her friends. I've been a selfish, controlling

asshole since the beginning.

That changes tonight.

Well, as soon as I get her away from the piece of shit currently taking advantage of her short height to stare down her dress at her perfect tits.

“Selena’s not my date. She’s my *girlfriend*. And if she’s going to London, I’m going to be the one there showing her around. We’re going to get out of here. I haven’t made her come in a couple of hours, so I’m overdue. Later, Derek.”

Sending him a shit-eating grin of my own, I grab on to Selena’s hand and tug her away from him. “Let’s go, baby.”

She’s clinging tightly onto me, digging her nails into the back of my hand. When I glance back at her, her face is red. She looks pissed.

Well, she’s not the only one. I’m fucking pissed, too.

I make polite smiles and nod at producers, studio execs, and press while I drag Selena out front to the valet stand.

Selena only had one drink in the hour I was with her, and she couldn’t have had more than one in the half hour we were apart. She didn’t have a drink in her hand when I found her. So, she doesn’t even have the excuse of being buzzed. She was totally sober and letting Derek fucking Jones stare at her tits and invite her to London.

She doesn’t look at me when I open her door for her to climb into my big, black Suburban. When I pull away from the curb, she’s staring out her window. She still doesn’t look at me when I pull out of the busy city traffic and head for my house.

Once we’re driving along tree-lined streets, I’m pretty sure we’re clear of all the press and paparazzi from the event. Now, I can finally let out the anger that’s been simmering inside me since the minute I saw her talking to Derek. I’m impressed I held it in this long, but I don’t need paparazzi photos of us screaming at each other in the car as we drive away from an event getting out.

“What the fuck was that, Selena? If you’re with me, you’re not talking to another guy in a corner where no one can see you. And you’re sure as hell not standing there all fucking smiles while he looks down your dress and ogles your tits. Do you hear me?”

“Excuse me? You’re mad at me? You just talked to a total stranger about giving me an orgasm!” She’s practically sputtering, but at least she’s looking at me now. She glances into the back seat like someone there might hear what she’s about to say next. But we’re all alone. “I will talk to whoever I want.

Whenever I want. Being Jackson Waters' *fake girlfriend* doesn't make me stop being a human being with free will."

"And you want to talk to that piece of shit?" Jealousy is a warm green blanket, and I'm getting real cozy covered up in it.

"He seemed *nice*. We were just making small talk. I was trying to give you time to network or whatever you were there to do. I was trying to give you space," she mutters, staring out at the window, going back to not looking at me.

"I never asked for space, and I sure as fuck don't want it. What I want is for you to not be talking to assholes in dark corners where I can't see you." I pinch the bridge of my nose, trying to relieve the tension in my head. "You don't get it. The wrong picture gets taken of you talking to Derek, and now my elevator girl is cheating on me."

"Right. Because the wrong picture is all you care about."

"Were you flirting with him?"

"What? I wouldn't do that. I'm not a cheater."

"That's what I'm saying. You don't actually have to cheat to have it all blow up in my face. You laugh at the wrong guy, and someone takes a picture. That's all it takes."

"Of course, this is about how everything looks. I'm so over caring about how anything looks! Is the problem that a picture could have been taken of me talking to a human man and people make nonsense assumptions that I'm cheating, that it was Derek Jones I was talking to, or that I'm supposedly into him?"

I grit my teeth. "All of the above."

"This is insane! You're being ridiculous!"

"I am not being ridiculous, Selena. This is my world. I've lived with the press and the tabloids and gossip sites for the last fifteen years."

"Well, it's all stupid. You didn't have to drag me out of there like that. Did you even try to read the room before coming in there with all that alpha male bullshit?"

"You're lucky my alpha male bullshit didn't have me bending you over my knee and giving you a spanking in the middle of everyone." The press would have fucking loved that.

"You wouldn't." Selena frowns. "You're too worried about your stupid image and all the cameras."

"Maybe," I mutter under my breath. Now that I think about it, maybe I

should have just bent her over my knee in front of everyone. Claimed her in front of everyone. Claimed her in front of the entire fucking world. But then the entire world would have seen Selena's creamy white ass, and that's just for me.

Not for Derek fucking Jones.

"This is so stupid. You really have nothing to be jealous about. Trust me," Selena mutters under her breath.

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means that I'm the last person Derek Jones is going to be interested in. He was just being nice."

"You sure about that? He seemed pretty happy to stare at your tits and invite you to London."

"That was just because he's charming. And British. I don't think he knows how to turn it off."

"You thought he was charming?" I growl. "Why don't you just take me through everything you two said to each other? Start at the beginning."

"You're being ridiculous!"

"I'm not. You hid out with Derek Jones in a dark corner instead of standing by my side. What the hell am I supposed to think?"

"You're insane! I'm not interested in Derek Jones or anyone else, for that matter!"

"What the hell does that mean?"

"What the hell does that mean? It means exactly what I just said! It means that I'm not interested in anyone else! It means that no man has ever made me come like you do! It means that you have *nothing* to worry about."

Selena looks like she's about to explode. Her face is red. Her eyes are glistening. She's breathing hard.

She looks fucking beautiful.

She looks like she does when I fuck her.

She looks like she's all fucking *mine*.

chapter sixty

selena

Jackson is quiet the rest of the ride home after my verbal diarrhea. Since he doesn't seem interested in talking about what happened anymore, I get lost in my own thoughts. And they're dark. Crawl under a rock and drown myself in rosé, dark. Dark and twisty branches of a spooky old tree, dark.

Jackson pulls up right in front of the big glass door to his house in the center of the massive curved driveway instead of parking in the garage like he usually does. Desperate to get inside, get out of this dress, and start shoving ice cream and rosé down my throat, I don't wait for him to come around and open my door for me. I give zero shits if it pisses him off. Actually, I hope it does.

I beat him to the front door and open it, letting Oats run past me outside to Jackson. I guess you can take the boy out of the Western Springs, but you can't take the Western Springs out of the boy. Just like back home in Western Springs, Jackson doesn't feel the need to lock his front door. Although instead of miles of empty road and green fields, there's just a half a mile of curving driveway, locked gates, and a ton of security cameras between Jackson's front door and anyone who wants to get in.

I'm almost past the living room by the time I hear Jackson's footsteps and Oats' nails on the tiles behind me.

"Selena?"

"What?" I demand, only half turning around. I feel ridiculous all dressed up in this fancy dress and not like myself. Why did I let someone else pick out my clothes? I'm an adult, and I can dress myself. At least when I choose my own clothes, I feel comfortable in them. I feel like *me*. Right now, I feel like I'm playing dress-up in someone else's life, and all I want to do is get back to my own.

"Where are you going?"

"Not that I need to report my every move to you, but I was going to get changed into my pajamas and then drown myself in ice cream and rosé."

Jackson walks across the hall to me. “What if I had a better idea?”

“I don’t think I’m interested in any more of your brilliant ideas tonight. I think I’ve heard more than enough of them for one night, to be honest.”

“I’m sorry I got so jealous before.”

Forcing myself to take a deep breath, I stare into his face. He seems sincere, but he’s also a professional actor. “Thank you for saying that. But why did you?”

“How could I not, with you looking as good as you look in that dress? You look beautiful tonight, baby.”

“I can’t wait to get out of this dress. I hate it! Change of plans, I’m going to go take a bath and then drown myself in ice cream and rosé. Goodnight, Jackson.” There’s a massive soaker tub with jets in every single one of the seven bathrooms at Jackson’s house. I can take my pick.

“Do you want to hear my idea?”

“No, I’m not sure that I do. It was mortifying being dragged out of there like that tonight. You talked about giving me orgasms in front of a complete stranger! It was embarrassing. I’m cringing just thinking about it. I didn’t want to be there in the first place, but you made it a million times worse by being so ridiculously jealous.”

“Yeah, I did. I’m sorry. And I’m sorry that you weren’t having fun, but it was a work thing for me. I guess I should have explained it better. These things aren’t fun.” Jackson runs the back of his knuckles down my bare arm. “But you know what could be *fun*...? How about our big night starts *now*, baby?”

“But we’re home now. It’s time for bed.” A panicked thought occurs to me. Is there more? Are we expected to go somewhere else? Talk to more horrible people? I have no more polite smiles left to give tonight. Jutting my chin out at him, I stand my ground. “I’m not going anywhere else tonight.”

“Exactly.” Jackson grins down at me. Somehow, he closed the distance between us, and I didn’t even notice. He pulls on my arm roughly, and I tumble the two steps towards him. He catches me in his arms and presses his lips hard against mine. His lips are wild and demanding, like always. But maybe a little extra wild tonight.

I can barely remember a time when I didn’t know what it was like to be kissed by Jackson Waters. And it’s only been less than forty-eight hours since he first kissed me on a Ferris wheel. Jackson bites my bottom lip, and I spread my lips open for him. As mad as I still am at him, he *did* apologize.

And there really is nothing like an orgasm to release stress.

Jackson slides his tongue into my mouth, and swipes at mine. Then he pulls my tongue between his lips and sucks on it.

My thighs clench together involuntarily. I want him so badly. I always want him. Even when I'm pissed at him. Even when he's a jealous caveman.

"I don't think we're going to make it to the bedroom." Jackson whispers when he comes up for air.

As he unbuttons the black bowtie around his neck, he tugs me towards the oversized sectional sofa in the sunken living room. The glass wall of windows shows the entire city stretched out in front of us in a tapestry of dotted light.

I expect Jackson to shove me down onto the sofa and tell me what he wants me to do. This is perfect. I can just lay back, relax, and let the orgasms clear my head. My head needs a good clearing right now. Orgasms over baths every single day of the week, in my books.

But Jackson sits down, legs spread wide. This man is the very definition of manspreading. If you looked up manspreading in a dictionary, you'd see a picture of Jackson Waters in this exact position. One arm tossed over the back of the sofa as he undoes the buttons of his shirt with his other hand. His legs spread impossibly wide.

"Be my good girl and make me come," Jackson says in a harsh whisper.

"Tell me what you want."

"I want to come. Use your imagination."

He nestles back into the sofa, watching me.

"This is *new*. I don't know what to do," I whisper. Somehow, I feel more vulnerable than when I'm lying naked in front of Jackson with my legs spread wide to him. How do I feel so completely exposed when I'm still fully dressed in this stupid gown?

"What do you think I want?"

"You want me to make you come."

"Yes. How do you think I want it? You could use your pretty hands, your pretty lips, your pretty pussy. Hell, I'd come like a fucking rocket pressed between those pretty tits."

Huh. Interesting. Very interesting. I think about my options. The boob thing sounds kind of awkward, so I file that away to try another time. I could make him come with my hands, but in these loose sleeves, I'd be all in my head about whether my arms were jiggling too much. So, that leaves my

mouth and my pussy. I already know that I want both.

Mouth first. Pussy later.

Once I make the decision, I feel more confident.

“Tell me you want my lips on your cock, Jackson.”

He looks up at me, surprised at my words. Then he grins.

“I want your lips around my cock, Selena. I always want your lips around my cock. Every time I look at you. Every time you open your mouth to take a drink or eat something. Every time you speak, I think about your lips on my cock.”

Interesting. The man must have exceptional hearing skills if half of his brain cells are wasted thinking about me sucking on his dick all the time. He always makes me feel heard, no matter what. Even when he’s being an irrationally jealous asshole.

Then I have an idea. Liam told me about something once, and I’ve always wanted to try it.

“Be right back,” I whisper, as I head towards the kitchen.

Jackson lunges forward. “Wait, where are you going?”

“Nowhere. I’ll be right back. Promise,” I call out over my shoulder as I walk back to the kitchen. In the kitchen, the stress cupcakes I baked earlier are still sitting under the beautiful jadeite glass cake stand that Jackson bought for me in Western Springs. Carefully picking up the glass cloche, I remove a cupcake, replace the cover, and head back to the living room.

“Are you hungry? Shit? I should have thought to pick up food for you on the way home. Sorry, I was thinking with my dick. I wanted you back here naked.”

“That’s okay. I’m not hungry, exactly. I’ve just always wanted to try this.”

“If you’re not hungry, what are you going to do with the cupcake?”

“I’m going to shove your cock into it and then eat my way to sucking you off. Does that sound okay? It might make a mess. Actually, now that I think about it. All this frosting and cake... is probably a bad idea. I don’t have to.”

It’s a good thing my dress is dark purple. At least it won’t stain. Not that I’m ever wearing this nightmare-dress again.

“That is a fucking brilliant idea. Baby, you can make all the mess you want when you’re sucking my dick.” Jackson looks at me appraisingly.

“Maybe I should put you in charge more often?”

“Maybe. But only sometimes. I like the... usual way when you tell me

what to do. I like being your good girl.”

“You’re my fucking best girl, Selena.” Jackson leans back against the sofa and undoes his zipper. He pulls his hard dick over the waistband of his black boxer briefs and runs his hand up and down the shaft. “Now get on your knees and suck my dick.”

“I didn’t bring you a cupcake. Did you want one?”

“I’m okay. I’d only be licking it, thinking how it tastes almost as sweet as your pretty pink pussy.” Jackson holds up his fingers in a V in front of his face and wiggles his tongue at me.

“Promises, promises,” I whisper with a breathless laugh.

“Ones I’m happy to fulfill after I come in your mouth.”

I guess it’s my turn now. It’s go time. Resting my free hand on his knee, I bend down over him, my breath a whisper on his cock. Then I kneel in front of him.

“Those earrings look good on you. You should keep them.”

“I couldn’t afford them. And even if I could, giant emerald earrings aren’t how I would spend my money.”

“You don’t like them?”

“Of course I like them. They’re gorgeous.”

“Good. Because I already bought them for you.”

“Thank you. But I don’t need them.”

“I do. I need to see how pretty you look in them.”

He watches me intently as I drag the sides of the cupcake wrapper down. When it’s free, I carefully place it on the glass coffee table behind me.

I’m not sure if this was a good idea. Jackson’s throbbing tip is about the same size as the cupcake, if not bigger. The cupcake might just smash. But it’ll still taste good, and I’ll still get to lick the frosting off of Jackson’s cock. So, that’s definitely still a win in my books.

Running my free hand up and down his length a few times, I circle his tip with my thumb. Then I swipe the cupcake, frosting side down, against his tip. Leaning down, I lick the frosting off with a few quick swipes of my tongue, darting my tongue against his slit to get every bit of sweet frosting.

“Selena.” My name on his lips is a bite. A bark.

“Did you like that?” I whisper back.

Every muscle in his body clenches. “Yes,” he grits out.

Holding his hard cock steady in one hand, I press the cupcake, cake side first against his tip. There’s some initial resistance, and then the cupcake

splits around him. I make a damn moist cake. That's the only way it's still holding its shape with Jackson's cock shoved deep inside it. It's probably not going to hold on for long, but it won't have to.

Leaning back, I giggle.

"Something funny?" Jackson grits out.

"I wasn't sure it would work," I whisper. "I need a mental picture of this." Making a fake camera clicking motion with my hands, I grin up at him. "I could probably sell a lot of cupcakes like this. How much does it cost to have Jackson Waters's dick in your ad campaign?"

Jackson shakes his head at me. "More than you can afford. Now get back to work, baby. You have a very important job to do."

"Customer satisfaction is extremely important to us at Ladycakes."

"Well, your number one customer isn't feeling very satisfied right now."

I grin up at him and then move my lips next to his cock. "We can't disappoint our most important customer, can we?"

I lick at the frosting a couple of times. Jackson is watching me, but he's probably not feeling much at this point. My hand is wrapped around his length, slowly pumping up and down. But there's a lot of cupcake and frosting between my tongue and his cock.

"Maybe I should take a bite?"

"Careful..."

I bite the side of the cupcake gently until my teeth hit skin, and then I drag them down, biting off a hunk of the sweet cake. Damn it, I make delicious cupcakes. Even eaten off of a dick, this is the one of the best cupcakes I've ever had in my life. Actually, eating it off Jackson's dick is a plus, not a minus.

Taking a swipe of frosting, I lick at his balls. Balls never tasted so good. Then I get back to my cupcake and take another bite. And then another. Then I'm left with one last frosting-covered cupcake bite right on the tip. I open my mouth wide and take the frosting, the cupcake, and as much of Jackson as I can fit in my mouth. I suck and swallow until the cupcake is gone. Then I'm left with Jackson's cock, and the sweet taste of vanilla frosting and chocolate cupcake.

Pumping my hands along his length, I pull and suck on his head until I know he's close. I feather my tongue at his slit. Then I ease off and drag my tongue and then my teeth down the sides of his cock. I want to prolong this. The man deserves to be tortured after his behavior tonight. I'm so damn wet,

my thong feels heavy between my thighs. Shifting, I clench my legs together.
I need more.
I want more, and for once in my life I'm going to take it.

chapter sixty-one

selena

“*I*f you don’t stop messing around, I’m going to give you a pearl necklace. And not on purpose.”

“Why would you want to give me a pearl necklace *on purpose*?” I look up at him, thinking the idea over. I’m not sure why he would want to come on my neck, but I guess I’d be willing to try it, if he thought he’d like it.

“Why would I want you to suck on my cock and then shoot my load around your neck until you’re fucking drenched in me? Baby, there isn’t anything about that scenario that doesn’t sound good to me. I’d come on every fucking inch of your pretty skin if you’d let me.”

“*Interesting.*”

“I’d be happy to show you later. Right now, I’m going to come in your mouth, and you’re going to swallow every single hot, salty drop, aren’t you? You’re going to be my good fucking girl.”

I nod up at him.

“Say it. Be a good girl and tell me how you’re going to lick and suck my cock until I explode in your mouth and then suck down every drop like you’ve never tasted anything sweeter.”

“I’m your good girl. I’m going to lick your cock, and I’m going to suck it until you explode in my mouth. And then I’m... I’m going to drink every single drop.”

“Good girl.”

And I am his good girl. But he’s going to do something for me, too.

Pushing up on his knees, I stand up between his legs.

“Lay back down on the sofa.”

“Selena, I told you I want to come in your mouth.”

I nod. “You will. And I’m going to come in yours.”

Jackson’s eyes widen, and a huge grin spreads across his face. Now that is a million-dollar smile. That’s a smile that belongs on billboards and fifty foot-wide movie screens. It should be a crime to watch this man on anything smaller than the big screen. I feel practically criminal for being the only one

here to see the smile on his face.

Stepping back and forth from one foot to the other, I shimmy my raspberry pink satin thong down my hips to my feet. I step out of it. Then I tug off my platform heels. They don't feel like me, and I don't want to wear them anymore. The dress doesn't feel like me either, and I'm desperate to get it off of me. Nothing else might be real between Jackson and me. But when we make each other come, that's real. And I don't want to be wearing this stupid dress when I touch him.

Looking down, I pull down the zipper on the side of my dress. Then I pull the skirt up inch by achingly slow inch, until it's draping from my waist, and I'm totally exposed to him. Jackson swallows audibly, and his hard cock jerks at the sight of me. Then I pull it up over my head and toss it on the sofa next to him. I hate this stupid dress, but it's too fancy to just throw on the floor.

"Lay back down on the sofa, Jackson," I tell him again.

Jackson lays back down on the sofa. There's a smug grin on his face as he shoves a pillow under his head. His raised eyebrow tells me he's ready and waiting for me.

After considering for a minute how to do this gracefully, I decide graceful is a little aspirational. Shifting my weight onto my left foot, I pick up my right and step over Jackson. Bending my leg, I press my knee down onto the sofa next to his chest. Jackson's hands go to my hips, as I press my other knee into the sofa on this other side.

He guides my pussy to hover just over his mouth. I lean forwards and lap at his cock with my tongue to make sure everything is going to line up for what I have planned.

"Suck my cock, Selena. And sit on my fucking face. I'm going to ruin this pussy for any other man. Do you hear me?" He runs a thumb up the side of my thigh before pressing inside me. "You're already so fucking wet for me, aren't you? Only for me."

The feminist in me says that I shouldn't be as turned on as I am when Jackson says stuff like that to me. But the pounding between my thighs says different. It's so fucking hot when Jackson is all possessive and demanding during sex. It's just the rest of the time that I don't understand it. As if I would ever be interested in anyone else when I have this man at home?

I think I need to donate to Planned Parenthood tomorrow. Actually, we're *both* going to donate to Planned Parenthood tomorrow.

Satisfied that contributing to Planned Parenthood makes up for my failing at being a take-charge feminist in the bedroom, I settle in to do exactly what Jackson tells me to do. I lick and suck his cock like my life depends on it. My moans from what he's doing to my clit make my mouth vibrate around his dick.

Jackson pulls his tongue out of me, ending the vortex of sensations I'm currently trapped in. "I meant what I said. Sit on my fucking face, Selena."

He rolls his hips to press his cock farther into my mouth. "I want you to choke on my cock while you smother me in pretty wet pussy, got it?"

"Hmmm-hmmm," my mouth vibrates against his cock. Rolling my hips, I press my pussy farther down into Jackson's face. I can feel the hardness of his nose, the beard on his cheeks, the hard line of his jaw between my thighs. And that tongue. Oh my fucking god, that tongue. He should have to declare it as a dangerous weapon.

Jackson growls, and the vibrations rock through my pussy. Then he roughly elbows my knee out, so I fall onto him. All of my weight is pressing down against him. I try to push back up onto my knees again, but Jackson holds me down. He can't... like this? I don't want to hurt him. But the wild energy that he's devouring my pussy with tells me he's exactly where he wants to be right now.

And I'm exactly where I want to be. With Jackson in my mouth, pressing dangerously against the back of my throat as I suck on him, trying to make him feel even half of what he's making me feel between my thighs. And with Jackson face-deep in my pussy.

He's too late.

I'm already ruined for other men.

I don't know how many times I'm going to be with him like this. So I savor every second of the soft skin of his cock in my mouth. I memorize the taste of him. The heavy weight of him on my tongue. Every single vein pulsing along his length. I savor every second of this until Jackson bursts in my mouth. His warm, salty cum hits me in the back of the throat as his hips jerk against my face, and I swallow every drop just like he told me to. With a couple more hard passes of his tongue over my clit, I explode on top of him in answer. Jackson licks up every drop of pleasure I have to give him and more.

When our bodies finally stop shaking, I lift my head and wipe the sweat off of my forehead. Jackson presses his lips against my thighs. First one side,

and then the other.

“Oh, my fucking god. I think you just killed me. I think I’m dead. And it was all worth it,” Jackson says behind me. He slaps my pussy lightly, and the pressure on my delicate nerves almost has me coming again.

“It was good?” I know how hard he just came in my mouth, but I also know that I could have cut off his air supply in a heartbeat.

“It was more than fucking good. You felt how hard I came, just like I felt how hard you came. You just fucked my damn face off, baby. It was amazing. You’re fucking amazing.” Jackson grabs my hips and pushes me up until I’m kneeling over him again. Then he pushes and pulls me, guiding me until I’m straddling him, but facing him this time.

He runs the back of his index finger along my cheek. “What did I do to be so lucky that I was the guy stuck in an elevator with you?”

“I’m not sure that lucky people get stuck in elevators?”

“I was. Because that’s how I met you.” Jackson grins up at me. “Now, give me a couple of minutes, and I’m going to show you just how lucky you make me feel.”

He pulls me down on top of him and runs his hands up and down my sides. He smacks me on the ass and then grabs a fistful into a tight pinch. My hips involuntarily press into him, already turned on again. Then Jackson pops one of my breasts out of my bra and pulls my nipple into his mouth to suck on it lazily.

“I need a couple of minutes, but that doesn’t mean you should have to wait,” Jackson whispers through the teeth he has clenched around my nipple.

chapter sixty-two

jackson

She tastes so fucking good. So fucking good.

Just because my dick needs a few minutes to get hard again doesn't mean the rest of me wants her any less. My fingers are itching to touch her. My tongue needs to taste her. Always.

And that little trick she did with the cupcake? That was sexy as fuck. The sexiest thing I'd ever seen until she climbed on top of me and fucked my face with her pretty pussy while she devoured my dick. Every time, I think it can't get any better. And every time with this woman is better than the last.

Taking my lips off of her nipple, I drag my tongue up her chest, over the subtle rise of her collarbone, and then along her jaw to her ear. I trace the curl of her ear with my tongue before whispering, "I'm going to break this pussy tonight, baby."

Tracing my tongue back down her jaw and then up to her lips, I press inside her. I can still taste her on my tongue, and know she can, too. She lets out the prettiest little moan.

"How many times have I made you come tonight?"

Her lips twitch. "Only once. Slow night, I guess."

"Night's just getting started, baby. Night's just getting started."

I play with her nipples until she's arching her back to shove them farther into my mouth and grinding her pussy into my thigh. My cock is hardening as we speak, but I'm only at half-mast, so I decide to use my fingers to get the job done this time.

Shoving my leg between hers, I roll Selena onto her side, facing me. I run my hand down the side of her. From the heavy curve of her breasts, loose now on top of her strapless bra. When she took off the dress, she tossed it onto the sofa with me. That was fine until I lay down on top of it. This dress is going to be ruined by the time I'm done with her. Covered in sweat and cum. It's not like she could wear it again anyway, since she was photographed in it tonight. Not that I care. I'd buy her a thousand designer dresses and then ruin all of them just like this.

I run my hand down the inner curve of her waist to the big curve of her hips. Pulling my hand back, I smack her ass again. The sharp sound fills the room, all the way up to the fourteen-foot ceilings. Then I slide my fingers across her thigh. I slip my index finger just inside her slit and drag it along her from her entrance to her clit. Her whole body vibrates against me.

“Still sensitive, huh?” I whisper in her ear as I run my tongue along its curve and then suck her lobe into my mouth over the enormous emerald studs she’s wearing.

I pull back my middle finger and then plunge two fingers into her pussy. My thumb finds her clit, and Selena’s moaning against my neck.

“Talk to me, baby.”

“I don’t know what to say...”

“How does it feel?”

“It feels so good. So good.”

Her breathing is rough and ragged now. Like she’s climbing a mountain instead of just riding my hand.

“You like it when my hand’s inside you? When my hand’s fucking you?”

“Yes,” she whispers, nodding frantically.

“Good. Now, tell me what you want, Selena.”

“I want you,” she whispers.

“What do you want me to do?”

“I want you to make me come. I want to come so hard I forget everything except where your body is touching mine. I don’t want to think about anything except how good you’re making me feel.”

“I’m going to make you come so hard. You’re going to cream all over my hand. You’re going to cream so hard you ruin your dress, the sofa. All of it.”

I build up the speed of my thumb over her clit, steadily increasing the pressure as I feel her legs tighten around my hand. Making a claw with my fingers, I rub inside her until her body jerks like a bow and arrow. Then I know I’ve found her G-spot.

“Jackson, yes. I’m going to come.”

“Yeah, baby. Come for me. You’re so fucking pretty when you come.”

Selena jerks against my hand, her thighs clenched so hard around my fingers I know I’m going to lose circulation if this goes on too much longer.

“Yeah, baby, fuck my hand. Come all over me.”

I keep working her pussy with my hand and she keeps coming for me in slow jerks as the waves of her orgasm slow down. Multiple fucking orgasms.

If I was capable of this, I'd have worn all the skin off my hands and not seen sunlight in two decades. Women are a fucking miracle. This one in particular.

"Baby, you look so pretty when you come, you've got me hard again. I'm going to fuck you Selena. Fuck you until you can't think of fucking anyone but me."

"Fuck me, Jackson."

Pushing up off of the sofa, I stand up. She's still wearing a bra. And that's too many clothes, as far as I'm concerned. I need to see her.

All of her. Every fucking inch.

"Stand up," I order her, holding out my hand.

When she reaches for me, I pull her up off the sofa to her feet. Then I undo each of the five clasps on her strapless bra.

And then she's standing in front of me, completely naked. For how many times I've made her come, I actually haven't seen her fully naked that often. Her pale skin shines in the moonlight coming through the big windows. Her lips are full and red from sucking my cock. Her dark makeup is smudged around her eyes. Loose waves of dark hair fall around her face. And she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

Kicking off my shoes and socks, I push my pants and briefs down to the ground. I don't want there to be anything between us, keeping us apart. Not clothes, not the contract, nothing.

I just want her.

"Do you trust me?"

She frowns, but then she nods.

"I want to see every inch of you when I fuck you."

I hold out my hand to her and wait for her to take it. Then I lead her from the sunken living room to the open plan dining room. I pull the chair away from the end of the table, and I bring her to stand in front of me. I press her back against the table, and then press her down to sit.

"Lay back down."

She does as I tell her.

"You're so fucking beautiful."

No matter how many times I come inside her, it's never going to be enough. No matter how many times I taste her, it's never going to be enough.

I'm never going to get enough of her.

She's staring up at me with her legs hanging off the end of the table. Her thighs are spread wide in front of me. Her body spread over the table for me

like a fucking feast.

Pressing my hands down on her thighs, I step towards her. I run my hands up her thighs to her pussy. I swipe my index finger inside her to make sure she's wet and ready for me. She is. Still covered in her own cream.

Then I roll a condom onto my dick and push inside her. Slowly. One inch at a time until I'm balls deep inside her. I don't ask. I take what I want. And I know she wants it, too. She lays back and stares up at me.

Holding onto her hips, I thrust my length into her, pull back, and do it all over again. The empty house fills with the wet sounds of my thighs hitting her ass.

She's spread wide for me, but I want more. Reaching down, I pick up her right leg and toss it over my shoulder. Fuck, I'm so deep inside her. So fucking deep. And she's so tight. So hot. So wet. She feels like heaven wrapped around my cock.

"Play with your nipples," I order her. "Give me a fucking show."

Selena swallows loud enough that I can hear it, through the wind raging in my ears.

She picks her hands up, and tentatively slides them over her breasts, circling her nipples with the palms of her hands.

"Harder." I tell her. "Pinch your nipples."

She does as I tell her, and pinches each nipple with her thumbs and index fingers. When her lips fall open, and she lets out a cry, I know she's doing it hard.

"Good girl." I whisper. "Show me how you play with your tits when you're alone."

Selena looks from side to side.

"Selena, I want to come while I'm watching you play with your tits. Are you going to give me what I want?"

She nods.

She runs her hands over her nipples again, circling the pad of her index finger over the nipples. Then she tugs on her right breast. She tilts her head up and shoves her nipple into her mouth. And then she starts sucking, moaning as she makes wet sucking sounds.

My brain cannot compute. "They're big enough... you can..."

Holy fuck. She's sucking on her own nipple. It's the hottest thing I've ever fucking seen. I would never leave my fucking house.

"Suck harder. Give yourself a bruise."

Selena narrows her eyes at me, then bares her teeth. She bites down on her nipple, and then wraps her lips around it and sucks hard. When her pussy clenches around my cock, I know she likes how good it's making her feel.

"Yeah, baby. You're my good girl. Suck on your tits while I shove my hard cock inside you."

The whole table is shaking as I pound into her. The whole world is shaking.

"You're fucking perfect, baby. You're mine, Selena. Say you're mine."

She lets go of the nipple in her mouth and nods. "Yes, Jackson. I'm yours. I'm yours."

"Are you ready, baby? I'm going to come. And I need you to come, too."

She nods and switches to sucking on her other nipple. I can tell she's close, but she needs a little something to push her over the edge. I slide my hand over her stomach and press my thumb inside her to find her clit. I roughly drag my thumb across it a couple of times, and her pussy clenches around my dick like a fucking vise. She tightens and jerks against me again and again. I couldn't hold on if I wanted to. I come hard inside her, driving my cock into her again and again. I buck against her, wild and out of control. She's so fucking wet, her cum is dripping out of her pussy onto the table. I keep rubbing her clit and moving in and out of her until our bodies slowly stop jerking.

I fucking love this woman.

I might not have put it together before now, but I already know it's true. I'm in love with Selena. This isn't just the contract. It's not just sex. I fucking love her.

"How have you never shown me that you can suck your own tits before?"

"You never asked?"

"Not good enough. If I could suck my own dick, I'd never leave the house."

"I can't suck my own..."

"Pussy?"

"Yes." She grins. "If I could do that, I don't think I'd leave the house either."

"My dirty, dirty good girl." I grin.

"I think I might go have a shower."

"No. You smell like sweat and sex and cum. You're perfect. Let's go to bed."

When I hold out my hands to her, she takes them without question and lets me pull her up and off the table and then lead her to my bedroom.

I press her down onto my bed and then lay myself down on top of her. Her hand slides in between us and slowly teases my cock back to life. Wrapping her hand around my length and running her thumb over the tip.

When I'm hard again, I put on another condom and then I slip into her. And I fuck her long and slow. Every inch of my body is pressed against every inch of hers. As I pump my hips into her over and over again, I feel her body shake against mine. I'm riding on an ocean of her, and I never want to feel anything else. Eventually, my long, slow thrusts in and out of her have her clenching around my dick one last time. When she comes, I come. I collapse on top of her in a mess of skin, sweat, and sex.

And I've never been happier.

I'm fucking in love.

chapter sixty-three

selena

Things have been good with Jackson for the past week since the announcement event. So long as we don't leave the house, and so long as I don't think about when he's going to decide it's finally safe for his career for us to break up. Amicably, of course.

The sex is definitely a bonus to the whole fake relationship thing. But nothing's changed. Jackson's never even so much as hinted that he wants to see where this could go after the contract is up. He's never said anything about feelings or that he even actually likes me.

He likes having sex with me, but what man doesn't enjoy having sex with a woman who's right in front of him every day? *I'm convenient.*

Maybe he's sweet to me. And maybe he's possessive. He wouldn't bother to be possessive if he didn't care about me at all, would he? But Jackson's a proud man. I'm not sure how much of the possessiveness is just about his ego. As far as the rest of the world knows, I'm Jackson Waters' *real* girlfriend.

Even if it's just sex, even if that's all it is, I'm contractually required to stick around. So, I might as well enjoy it, right?

When I get back home from the bakery, I'm tired and covered in a thin layer of flour. Training some new part time bakers on how to use our eight-hundred pound Hobart industrial mixer came with a few hiccups. The Hobart is like a countertop stand mixer on steroids. But if something is wrong with it, you can't just run out to Walmart and buy a new one for a couple of hundred dollars. They cost thousands upon thousands, and repairs aren't cheap either.

Then we got shorted on our chocolate chip order. The astronomical prices of vanilla and cocoa. And all the larger commercial spaces that I've looked at online are still way, way over budget, even with Jackson's two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars.

I'm just grateful to be home now.

At Jackson's home, I remind myself.

This is Jackson's home, not *mine*.

At best, I have temporary squatter's rights or something.

But every time I mention staying at my house, Jackson convinces me not to. Usually with sex. And who am I kidding? I'm not difficult to convince. I only have a little over two weeks left before the contract is up and Jackson and I fake our breakup, just like we've been faking everything else. Except for all the orgasms. Those have been as real as it gets.

After parking my little Prius in the garage in the closest spot to the house that he always leaves open for me, I head through the house to take a shower and wash this terrible day away. Oats comes over to say hello, his bum wriggling and tail wagging like it's been weeks and not only eight hours since he last saw me. He's more than happy to lick the sugar cookie dough remnants off my clothes.

"Jackson? I'm home," I call out, but don't get an answer. "I'm going to take a shower..."

He doesn't respond, but I hear his voice from his office as I head into his bedroom to reset my mood with his enormous marble steam shower. I didn't even make it a full night in the guest room that first night back in L.A. before Jackson brought me back to his bed. He put my stuff in one of the enormous matching walk-in closets the next morning, and I haven't looked back. Jackson and I share a bed and a bathroom, almost like this is real.

California water conservation guidelines be damned. I must stay in that shower for a whole twenty minutes trying to wash my bad day off of me. When I get out, I moisturize every inch of my face and body, and then pull on my *Raven's Ravine* t-shirt. It's a bit too tight, but this is the comfort I need after the day I've had.

Maybe I'll curl up with my iPad and binge-watch a few old episodes? *Raven's Ravine* is my emotional support TV show. I can't help it, even if Jackson hates being subjected to his twenty-year-old self doing some sort of weird, country, not-quite-European accent. I'm a *Raven's Ravine* fangirl, and I don't care. I love every single minute of the show. But I'd be lying if I said that Vampire Vincent wasn't starting to leapfrog ahead of Vampire Claude as my favorite *Raven's Ravine* vampire.

There isn't any competition that Jackson doesn't win for me. Best fake boyfriend, best sex, best melodramatic teen vampire.

When I step out of the bedroom, I hear more talking coming from Jackson's office. I decide to peek my head in to see what he's up to, and

maybe try to mime to him that I'm getting hungry and going to start dinner.

Popping my head through the slightly open door, I see Jackson at his desk, facing away from the wall-to-wall windows overlooking the pool and the entire city. He has a multi-million dollar view of L.A., and he's looking in the other direction at a white wall.

But him facing the door means I don't have to work very hard to get his attention. He's wearing AirPods and nodding. His face pulls into a slow grin when he sees me. And not for the first time, I think what a crime it is that I'm the only one seeing it.

He mouths *hey* to me, as he mumbles words of agreement to whoever he's talking to. Then he crooks his finger at me to walk across the room to him.

I shake my head vigorously.

He nods and crooks his finger again.

What's the harm? I can see Jackson's phone on the desk in front of him on a call. So, he's just on a call to whoever he's talking to, not a video chat or anything.

When he crooks his finger at me a third time, I roll my eyes and then nod. My bare feet sink into the thick rug as I make my way across the office floor to him. Jackson's house is so new that nothing creaks. It's also made of concrete, which I think helps in the not-creaking department.

Jackson spreads his legs and motions for me to come stand between them.

When I do, he presses his hand along my jaw, his thumb rubbing my cheek. And when he speaks, he's not talking to me. "All I can tell you is that this is the job of a lifetime, and I'm going to give it everything I've got not to let anyone down. Let's make this the biggest franchise in history."

My lips twitch. He's such a smug country boy. This big, famous movie star is just a cocky country boy at heart.

When he's done talking, his hand slides behind my neck and pulls me down to him until my lips meet his. He presses his lips hard against mine, and then slowly slips his tongue between them. But he's careful not to make any wet sucking noises like he normally does when he kisses me. When he loudly mmm-hmmms with his lips wrapped around my tongue, my knees go weak. I can feel the smile of his lips against mine. He kisses me like that for a while longer, mumbling unintelligible sounds of agreement to whoever he's talking to. Then he lets me go and goes right back to talking.

"Shooting in Australia is going to be an adventure. And it's one that I'm

super excited about. I can't wait to get to know that great country better. Oz is going to be such a fantastic backdrop for the story we're trying to tell. It's got ocean, desert, and insanely gigantic spiders. What more could we ask for?"

I can hear laughter echo from Jackson's AirPods.

When I nod towards the door and then turn to walk away to leave him in peace, Jackson pulls me back. He pulls me again, making me lose my balance, until I fall backwards and land on his lap.

Leaning forward enough to turn and look back at him, I raise an eyebrow. Jackson just stares back at me with an up-to-something gleam in his beautiful blue eyes.

He says random words that make little sense without the other side of the conversation.

"Totally... Yeah... Of course, that was a big decision."

But at the same time, he pulls me tighter against him on his lap. Then he pulls my legs over his, so each of my thighs is on the outside of his. And I'm spread wide open.

"Of course. We're all really excited that Dirty Bunny is going to be collaborating on the soundtrack. They're one of my favorite bands of all time."

When I turn back to look up at him again, Jackson pushes me against his chest and slides his hand down from my waist. *Down. Down. Down.* His hand slips under my t-shirt and presses up against the lace of my panties. My lingerie got a surprise upgrade after Jackson started seeing it regularly. No more laundry day, white cotton undies for me. Now it's stretchy lace every single day of the week.

He roughly tugs my thong aside and slips his middle and index fingers inside me. His hand is in the same position that mine would be if I were touching myself, but this is nothing like when I touch myself. Nothing like it at all.

Jackson's thick fingers take up all the available space, spreading my lips wide as he circles my clit. He knows just what to do to have me panting in seconds.

The heavy pads of his thick fingers press just enough to have me on the edge of his lap, begging for more. More contact. More friction. More teasing.

As I ride his lap and my hips try to fuck his hand, I do my best to stay quiet. I hear Jackson talking behind me, but I don't know what he's saying. I

don't even care anymore.

He pushes me right up to the edge and then backs off.

"Jacks-" I whisper. But I don't get to finish because Jackson clamps a hand over my mouth. I bare my teeth and try to bite at his fingers, unable to do more than pinch them.

Jackson slips what feels like two fingers inside me, driving them in and out of my pussy. It feels good, but it's so far from giving me what I need that I want to scream. I try to scream, but it just comes out like a low humming. Jackson covers it up by talking.

Since Jackson won't listen to reason, I take matters into my own hands. Literally.

I grab at Jackson's hand and extend his thumb. Then I press his thumb inside me until it finds my clit. When he doesn't start doing what I expect him to do, I move his thumb in circles and then torturous rubs over my clit.

Eventually, Jackson takes over. He stops plunging his fingers in and out of me, and curves them to meet his thumb. He rubs up and down against my inner wall, as his thumb does the same over my clit. His hands on me always feel so good. It's like he has a decoder ring for how to make me come. The way he touches me. It's like nothing I've ever felt. It doesn't take long before my body jerks to a standstill in its efforts to fuck Jackson's hand. Then the spasm hits as I clench against Jackson's fingers inside me. Every wave feels like heaven. Jackson keeps working his thumb against my clit until I stop jerking against him. When I finally relax against his shoulder, Jackson lifts his hand from my mouth. Then he shoves the wet fingers he used to make me come into my mouth, and I taste myself on him. I lick and suck on his fingers until every trace of me is gone. Then I bite him to let him know I'm done.

When I turn back to look at Jackson, he's grinning down at me. He slides his thumb into his mouth and licks it clean.

Then he wraps his arms around me and rolls his hips. Of course, he's hard as a rock. But I don't think even Jackson would try to have sex with me while he's on a call.

He holds me there, slowly grinding his dick into my ass for at least another fifteen minutes while he finishes his conversation. I can't say that I mind. An orgasm is definitely the best medicine for a bad day at work. And anytime Jackson has his arms wrapped around me and his big dick pressing into me, showing how much he wants me, I'm exactly where I want to be.

chapter sixty-four

jackson

“Thank you so much for your time. You’re going to have to come out to Australia and visit the set. Definitely. Let’s make it happen,” I say with a fake smile on my face as I wrap up the call and take out my AirPods.

I have much more important things to take care of tonight. And the list begins and ends with being balls deep in my girlfriend’s pretty wet pussy.

“Who the hell were you talking to?” Selena tries to push up off of my lap, but I don’t let her. “If it was Val, I’m never going to be able to look her in the eye again.”

“Don’t worry. It wasn’t Val. It was an interview. With *Deluxe Life* magazine,” I tell her, resting my hands on her tits and starting to massage them just how she likes. Just how I like, too.

“You did not just do... that... to me while you were doing an interview!” Selena sputters.

“That was why it was so important that you stay quiet. Now you can be as loud as you want to be, baby.”

Selena leans back into me, rubbing her big ass into my hard cock as it presses against the zipper of my jeans. Her hands come to rest on top of mine, where I’m massaging her nipples. Just like how she put her hands on mine and took what she wanted from me. Fuck me, but it’s hot when she uses me to take what she needs.

“Yeah?” She grinds her ass into my cock again.

“Yeah, baby, I’m going to make you come screaming my name this time,” I whisper against her ear.

Selena leans forward just a little and starts sliding her hands behind her down my chest towards my dick. I like where this is going.

Then she presses hard against my stomach and ejects herself from my lap. There’s no other word for it. One minute, the woman is grinding up on my dick, and the next she’s halfway across the room.

“What the hell...? Selena?” I call after her. “Are you coming back here?”

“Nope!” she calls from somewhere far away. In the opposite direction

from the bedroom.

Reaching down, I adjust my dick and start thinking about the desert. I guess only one of us is getting off right now.

After I poke my head into half a dozen rooms, I find her in the kitchen. She's still wearing the dumb *Raven's Ravine* t-shirt I gave her back home. She wears it all the time. But I can't complain about how it pulls tightly across her tits and her ass, and just barely reaches her thighs. Only now she's got an apron on top of it. She's still not wearing any pants, though. Just that dripping wet thong.

"I want to fuck you, Selena."

"I guess you're just going to have to wait. I'm feeling very satisfied at the moment."

"Uh-huh."

"When do you think you might go back to Western Springs? I'm sure your family would love to have you back. And Lily misses you already."

"I know. When we left, I was planning on heading back in a couple of weeks. But things are getting busier here, so I don't know." I know I need to get back home. But there's so much I need to take care of here before I can.

"You should go back soon. You seemed happy there."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, like you're less tense. You're just a country boy when you're home. I liked seeing you with your brothers, always joking around and making fun of each other. And it's obvious how much your dad enjoyed having you home. I always wanted a big family like that."

"Do you still want a big family like that now?"

"Hopefully one day, yeah. When this is all over." She smiles hopefully, and it feels like a punch in the fucking gut.

When this is all over. When she's finally free from me.

I don't want to talk about that. I don't want to think about it. So, I change the subject.

"What's happening in here?"

"Dinner," she says with a smile. If she didn't still have a glint of sweat lighting up her face, you almost wouldn't know that she just came on my fingers twenty minutes ago.

"Why don't we go out for dinner tonight? You don't always have to cook for me. It's not your job, baby."

As much as I like the look of her half-dressed in my kitchen, I want her to

know that I don't expect this. The only thing she needs to do is be here. And keep on fucking me like my life depends on it... because I'm beginning to think it does.

It's so easy when she's here. Floating around the kitchen cooking or baking up something delicious. Making me watch some old episode of *Raven's Ravine*, reminding me of all the fun times Jonas and I had making that dumb show. Teaching me what it's like to have someone home when I get here. In my bed every night. She just fits here. She makes everything better. Oats is happier with her here. I'm happier with her here.

Now I just need to convince her she's happier here with us, too.

She bites her lip in the way that makes me want to shove my dick between her lips. If she actually believed me that every time she bites her damn lip, I think about shoving my cock down her throat, she'd slap me. I know that for a fact.

"I'd rather stay in, if you don't mind? And I know it's not my job to cook. But I enjoy cooking. It relaxes me. And you never seem to complain about what I make, so..."

"That's because you're a fucking great cook, baby. I just don't want you to feel like you have to. You can do whatever you want here. Or not."

Just so long as you're here.

I want to say the words, but I don't want to scare her away.

"I don't. Promise," she says quietly. "It was a really long day at the bakery kitchen, and the thought of going out on top of that. I just... can't. I don't have it in me tonight, okay?"

She sounds defeated. Like going out is a battle that she just doesn't have it in her to suit up for. Now that I think about it, every time I suggest going out for dinner or going out anywhere, really, she always wants to stay home. I should have been paying more attention.

When was the last time we even went out anywhere?

It can't be. No, it is. The last time she and I left this house together was to go to the announcement event. That was over a week ago.

What the hell is going on here? What's that condition when you're afraid of leaving the house? Agoraphobia? Does Selena have agoraphobia, and I'm too wrapped up in fucking her to notice? What the hell?

She's been going to work at the bakery kitchen and coming home to me every night after work. But that's the only time she leaves the house. She hasn't been home. She hasn't seen any of her friends. Hell, I still haven't

even met any of her friends. I still haven't spent a night at her place. I've only even been there twice. Once was just to pick her up, and I didn't even go inside. Shit, I swore I was going to make more of an effort to get to know her life. And instead, all I've been doing is fucking her and eating everything she cooks up for me.

"Are you sure you don't want to go out? We could go somewhere quiet. Off the beaten path."

"I don't think anywhere with Jackson Waters is ever really off the beaten path. Maybe in Western Springs, but definitely not in L.A."

"Yeah, you might be right about that. Sorry." I hate this. My life comes with so much privilege. But I hate that I can't take my girl out for dinner without it being a big deal.

"It's not your fault. But can we stay home? I have an idea for dessert. Spoiler alert... it's a blowjob. How does that sound?"

"A blowjob after a home-cooked meal? Sounds fucking perfect to me."

It really does. I'm getting too comfortable with Selena being here all the time. Used to her cooking for me. Used to fucking her every single night, and then some. Getting way too used to it when we've never really talked about what's happening here. When I don't know if she's planning on staying after the contract period ends. And knowing how much I need her to.

"It does to me, too." The smile she gives me is big and bright, and tells me exactly what I want to hear.

I am a selfish asshole. Because at the offer of a blowjob, I decide to let this go. For now, at least.

chapter sixty-five

selena

“Hi, Val,” I say with a wave as I head to my car in the garage.
“You’re here early.”

“Good morning, Selena. Jackson and I had an early meeting. New York time.”

Ah, that’s why I woke up in an empty bed. Not that I’m grumpy about it or anything. But I had a really vivid sex dream about Jackson fighting his character Vampire Vincent from *Raven’s Ravine* over me, and then me telling them all they needed to do was learn to *share*. So, when I woke up after the two of them learning how to share, I really could have used the real Jackson to finish what my two dream Jacksons started. I didn’t feel like *handling* it myself, so that gave me a horny, grumpy start to my day. And now here is Val. In my inner sanctum, that’s just for Jackson, Oats, and me.

“The photographs from the announcement were perfect. You two almost make me believe in love. If I didn’t know better, I’d believe you two *were* actually in love.”

“Right, thanks.” *I think*. “You don’t believe in love?”

“I’ve been divorced four times. I believe in falling in love. Love just doesn’t stick around, in my experience. But you two are so damn adorable together, you’ve almost got me ready to marry husband number five. And it’s not even real!”

“Thanks, I guess...”

“You ever think about acting, kid? You let me know.”

“Oh, that’s not for me. It’s really not for me. I don’t think I’d be a very good actress at all. Everything I think kind of ends up on my face.”

“I never would have known. But that’s not exactly great for an acting career!”

“I guess I’m glad we’re that convincing. That’s the whole point of all this, isn’t it?”

Jackson and I are so good at pretending we’re in love that we’ve convinced everyone around us. Unfortunately, we’ve also managed to

convince *me*.

“Exactly.”

“Have you given any thought to how you two are going to end it?” Val asks, like she’s asking about something as simple and inoffensive as the weather. When she’s actually asking about something as unhinged as gummy bears coming alive and eating everyone I love.

“Uh, no. I know we’re almost at the end of the two months, but I... I haven’t thought too much about it. We haven’t really talked about it.”

“Okay, great. Well, we can figure that out. No time like the present, right? That’s what I’m here for,” Val nods, and chews on the arm of her big, black designer sunglasses. “We don’t want anything too dramatic. We don’t want Jackson to look like the bad guy...”

“Why would Jackson look like the bad guy?” The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them. Of course, Jackson would be the one to dump me and break my pretend heart. Only he won’t just be breaking a pretend heart. He’s going to tear the real one up into a thousand pieces, making a million tiny cuts, until my heart is full of holes like a paper snowflake at Christmas.

“The celeb breaking up with the normie? Not a good look.” Val narrows her eyes at me. “No need to reinvent the wheel. We can just say that distance was too hard. Jackson is going to be on set in Australia for most of the next ten years. I can just push it out quietly that you still care about each other, but that you ended it because of the distance. Sound good?”

She’s nodding at me, and I know that I’m supposed to assure her it all sounds fantastic. She’s providing me with a seamless, no-embarrassment plan to end my fake relationship with Jackson. But my mouth won’t form the words. I can’t bring myself to thank her for any of this. Not when it hurts so much that I can’t breathe.

I nod my agreement. Because there’s nothing else for me to do. Jackson isn’t mine. He never was. And he never will be.

“Wonderful! I have to get to the office. Thanks for everything, Selena!”

Thanks for everything? Did she know what she was thanking me for? Did she know she was thanking me for sleeping with Jackson? For falling in love with him? For breaking my heart by letting him go?

Part of me wants to go find Jackson and make him hold me in his arms until I feel better. But the rest of me knows nothing is going to make this better. Because pretty soon, Jackson won’t be around to hold me. And I better

get used to that.

Yeah, this day is off to a great freaking start.



SPOILER ALERT. My day did not get better. More training mishaps at the bakery. More over-priced commercial kitchens that I could never in a million years afford.

For the last couple of years, Ladycakes has been holding steady. Steady staff. Steady orders. But trying to grow is messy. I can't expect everything to go smoothly. But when I know that my fake-but-not-fake-at-all-to-me relationship is about to implode, I don't think I can handle every aspect of my life being in shambles. How much mess is one woman supposed to take?

When I get back to Jackson's, my mood is just this side of murder-now-ask-questions-later. I'm on my way to the bedroom to change, when Jackson finds me in the hall.

"Hey, there you are. I was wondering when you were going to get home. I almost came down to the bakery to find you."

My lips twitch. Now this is something that could improve my mood. Some Jackson-provided-orgasms would definitely put a smile on my face.

I walk over to him and nuzzle my face into his black t-shirt, not caring if my makeup rubs off on him. He's going to be covered in my makeup in minutes if I have anything to say about it.

Reaching up, I pull Jackson's head down to mine. When his lips press against mine, he takes over, like always. He kisses me hard, convincing me how much he missed me.

My hand slides down to feel him through his jeans, and his dick leaps to attention, like always. If this is what the man is like at almost thirty-three, I can't even imagine what he must have been like at twenty-one during his *Raven's Ravine* hey-day. Or all the women he took out all that stamina on. No. Nope. Actually, I don't want to imagine any of that.

Instead, I'm going to distract myself from that thought, from my bad mood, from bakery disasters, and from the ticking clock that I really don't want to think about, with Jackson's dick. In my experience, Jackson's dick has some sort of magical powers of distraction. And I am powerless against it.

Perfect.

Feeling my way, I find Jackson's fly and start undoing the zipper.

Then his hand pulls mine away. I want to pout and stomp my foot, like he's taking my stuffy away. But since I'm a twenty-eight-year-old woman, I restrain myself.

"What's wrong?"

"Baby, as much as I want to. As much as I *always* want to..." Jackson glances at his watch over my shoulder. "We don't have time."

"Why not?" I ask, confused.

"We have to be at the studio in two hours. And with traffic, it's going to be tight. You should start getting ready. There's a dress for you hanging up in our room. Hair and makeup'll be here in ten. And I'll eat out that sweet pussy of yours as soon as we get home. That's a promise."

Pressing my knuckles into my eyes, I don't care if I mess up my mascara, more than it already is.

"Sorry, what? Where are we supposed to be going?"

"There's a roundtable press event with the director, writers, Elisha, fucking Derek, and me."

"And it's tonight?"

"Yeah, baby, I told you about this."

Slowly, I shake my head. "No, you didn't."

"Baby, yes, I did."

"No, you didn't. I would have remembered that I was supposed to be going to some fancy press thing. I've been working at the bakery all day. My hair is frizzy. My makeup is a mess. I don't want anyone taking my picture. No one told me about this!"

Jackson holds his hands up to calm me down, which only pisses me off even more. "Hold up, hold up. Everything's going to be okay. You look great. Baby, I need you to come with me. I'm sorry, but this kind of thing is part of the deal..."

And that's it right there.

The deal.

This contract I made before I had any idea what I was getting myself into. Before I had any idea that I was going to fall in love with Jackson Waters.

The resistance inside me feels like tectonic plates shifting and grinding against each other, about to cause the big one they've been warning us about since elementary school.

And I know that I'm done. I'm not waiting for the other shoe to drop. I'm not waiting for Jackson and Val to cook up a perfect plan to break my heart and make sure Jackson comes out of it smelling like roses.

I'm done.

I'm just done.

I'm taking my tattered heart and running as far and as fast as I can from Jackson fucking Waters.

"I don't want to go."

"I'm not going to make you do anything you don't want to do, Selena. But I need you there with me tonight."

"No one's going to notice if I'm not there. You can just go without me."

"Are you sure? I'd really like you to be there." Jackson grins. "And I think you underestimate how much everyone loves my #elevatorgirl."

"If I never hear that dumb hashtag ever again..." I would almost wish none of this had ever happened. But then I would never have met Jackson. And I don't want to think about a world where I don't know this man. Maybe I only get to almost have him for six weeks, not a lifetime, and never the real thing, but I know with every desperate beat of my breaking heart that almost having Jackson is better than never having him at all. And that's all I have to hold on to right now.

"Why? It's cute. Just like you. My elevator girl," Jackson says with a grin, rubbing my shoulders.

His elevator girl. If only. Maybe in another life. Another universe. Maybe if everything was different, and he could actually be mine.

"Don't call me that."

"Sorry, baby. I think it's cute. You are my #elevatorgirl."

"I don't know. I'm not sure how good it would look for me to be there."

"What do you mean?"

"The two months are almost up. We only have two weeks left."

"Right." Jackson frowns at me. "And you've been thinking about that?"

"Of course. Maybe it makes more sense for you to go alone? Get people used to the idea of me not being in the picture?"

He sounds angry now. Good, that makes two of us. "If you don't want to come with me, Selena. Just fucking say it."

"I did say it! You weren't hearing me. I don't want to come with you."

"Fine."

"Fine."

Winner of the maturity contest officially goes to me! And my prize is being sad and alone. Exactly how I always knew this was going to end.

chapter sixty-six

jackson

*A*fter spending the night smiling, answering questions about shit I don't care about, shaking hands with people I don't care about, all while dressed in an uncomfortable suit and all by myself when Selena should be here with me, the anger rises and rises inside me as I drive home, and I don't try to stop it.

I used to have to do this kind of thing alone all the time. It wasn't a big deal to attend one of these things by myself. Sometimes Val or a studio I was working for would line up an actress or a singer who needed a bit of publicity to be my date, but lots of times I went alone.

But that was before I had a woman that I wanted to bring. That I was proud to bring with me. Everything's better when Selena's there. That's just a fact.

I knew something was off with her, but I didn't push. I hate myself for selfishly being so happy when something was obviously eating at her. But I'm pissed as hell at her for not just telling me what was wrong, so I could fix it for her. If she doesn't like the hair and makeup or the dresses, that's all she had to say. If she needed more notice, fine. If she didn't want to do events after working all day at the bakery, fine. I could have worked something out. But she doesn't just get to not tell me what's wrong and then be pissed at me for not being a mind reader.

I don't know what the hell happened tonight, but we're going to hash it out as soon as I get home. Whatever it takes. If I have to lick her pretty pussy for hours and not let her come until she talks to me, then that's what I'm going to do.

I don't take the time to park in the garage like I usually do. I don't want to waste any more time. Not a single second. We're getting all of our shit out in the open tonight, and she's going to tell me she's staying here with me forever. Fuck the stupid contract.

Throwing open the unlocked front door, I'm calling out for her before I even set foot inside.

“Selena, where are you? We need to talk.”

Oats gets up off the couch to come say hi to me, his tail wagging. He headbutts my hand, so I give him a scratch.

“Hey, bud. Where’s Selena? Why aren’t you with her?” The dog sticks to her like glue most of the time. He’s never more than three feet away from her, much less in another room.

Where the hell is she?

“Come on, buddy. Let’s go find her,” I mutter to him, as we start searching.

After opening and closing more doors than I can count, and still no Selena, I’m pissed as hell.

Where the hell is she?

That’s when I realize. That’s when I know. Only I don’t want to believe it.

Rushing back to my room, I open the door to her closet. She hasn’t slept in the guest room since she tried to the first night we got back from Western Springs. I moved all her stuff in to my room the next day, and neither of us looked back.

All her stuff’s gone. The little white carry-on that sat in the corner of the closet. The dresses that hung on hangers above.

Shit.

Shit.

I run into the bathroom. Her toothbrush isn’t in the cup on the counter next to her sink anymore. Grabbing the first drawer on her side where she keeps her makeup so hard that it nearly pulls all the way out, I find it empty. The second drawer where she keeps her period stuff is empty. The third drawer where she keeps the blow dryer that she seems to prize more than any of the expensive shit I’ve bought her is also empty.

She’s gone.

But there’s still one last place to check before I admit the truth to myself.

When I open the door to the garage, Oats runs out and circles the area where Selena’s blue Prius should be parked.

She’s gone.

She’s fucking gone.

And it’s all my fault.

What the hell just happened? I started out today with a girlfriend, the promise of a home-cooked meal, and the perfect woman in my bed. Now

she's just gone.

I can give her everything she could ever need or want in this world. But the ugly truth is right in front of me. Clear to me as this empty house. No matter what I can give her, it's not enough.

Because I'm not enough.

I made my choice more than fifteen years ago when I walked off of my parents' farm and walked right into Hollywood. That's not a choice I get to take back.

And that's why I don't get Selena. What woman wants to sign up for all the bullshit that comes with being with me? The money's nice, but all the rest of it can feel like hell. All the attention. The press. The pressure. Having to worry about being photographed or what bullshit they're going to write about me. I'm not sure I'd do it all again, if I'd known this was where I'd end up. In a big white house on the hill, all alone.

Fuck that.

I'm not letting her go this easily.

"Come on, Oats. We're going to get our girl," I punch the button for the garage door to open and then Oats and I run to the front of the house and jump into my truck.

The forty-five minute drive should give me time to cool down. It doesn't.

I pull past her place and scan up and down the street. At least there aren't any photographers camped out here anymore. Selena's spent so much time at my house lately that they must have given up.

Finding a spot near her place, I parallel park the car.

"Sorry, bud. You're staying here," I tell Oats, as I open the driver's side door. I'm across the street and at Selena's gate in a couple of strides.

Her main lights aren't on, but her car's out front, so I know she's here. And there must be a lamp on somewhere on the main floor because it's not totally dark in there. Glancing in the front window like the creeper I am, I think I see something move. Squinting harder, I see that it's her. She's wrapped up in a big blanket, rocking back and forth. Sobbing.

She's fucking sobbing.

Over me?

I've never hated myself more than I do right at this moment.

And I'm an even bigger asshole, because I know that at least if she's crying like this, then she cares. Maybe she doesn't love me like I love her. But it's a chance.

That elevator stripped down all the walls I built up between me and the rest of the world. And she walked right into my heart. I think I've loved her ever since that night. How could I not? She's perfect. All big smiles and soft curves. And I'm sure as hell not letting her go without a fight.

I was going to come over here and yell at her for leaving me. For scaring me when I couldn't find her. But that'll only push her farther away from me. I can't trust myself here. Because storming into her house and making her come home with me isn't the right play. Even if it's exactly what I want to do.

Forcing myself to take every step away from her and back to the car, I climb in. My hand reaches for my phone, and I'm tapping on a familiar face. The only person I trust to fix this for me.

"Hey, Jacks. What's up?"

"Lil... I fucked everything up," I whisper softly into the phone. "I need you to tell me how to fix it."

chapter sixty-seven

jackson

Lily says nothing for what feels like forever. But it's probably only ten seconds.

"Are you calling because you really want me to tell you how to fix it, or because you want me to make you feel better about it?"

"I *need* you to tell me how to fix it."

"What did you do?"

"I guess... no, I know that I didn't make sure she knew how special she is to me. She ran away from me, Lil. She ran away from me."

"And you didn't give her good reason to? Are you sure letting her go isn't the right thing? And you and I both know that you know what the right thing is."

"No, I swear. I was an asshole. And an idiot. But she's in her living room sobbing right now, and it's breaking my fucking heart."

"Why do you know what Selena's doing in her living room right now?"

"Because I'm across the street in my car with Oats looking in the window?"

"You're outside like a peeping Tom? Fan-fucking-tastic!" Lily lets out a long breath. "Jacks, step away from the window. You won't fix anything by getting arrested for being a late-night creeper."

"Okay, okay. I told you I was in my car. Across the street. I'm not... officially creeping. But... I can't just leave her like this."

"Jacks, you need to give her space. She ran away from you for a reason, whatever it was. But don't give her too much space, either."

"I love her, Lil." The words sound desperate in my ears. "How do I make her love me back?"

"Trust me, you don't need to try that hard. I'm pretty sure she's in love with you, too."

"What? Did she say something?"

"No. But call it a hunch. If she isn't completely in love with you, she's at least halfway there. You just need to push her over the finish line."

“And how do I do that?”

“By proving that you love her. Put her first. Show her she’s the most important thing in your life. Care about the things that she cares about... and maybe don’t have sex with her?”

“What? Why wouldn’t I have sex with her?”

“She and I’ve been messaging since you got back to L.A.”

“And she talked to you about having sex with me?”

“Yeah, and it seems like that’s all you two do. Try to see it from her perspective. If all a guy wants to do is have sex with you, then what are you going to think?”

“That he’s super fucking hot for you and enjoys making you come? A lot,” I reply angrily.

“Or that he just wants you for sex? I don’t make the rules, Jacks. Thousands of years of the patriarchy and society do. Have you ever told her how you feel about her? Ever even hinted at it? Ever talked about the future?”

“I thought about it. A lot.”

“She’s not a mind-reader. Women want you to use your words. And show us with your actions.”

“But you said...”

“Actions that don’t involve your dick.”

“Okay, okay. Message received.” Why is this so fucking hard? I want Selena. I love her. We’re perfect together. I want to spend the rest of my life telling her I love her and making her come over and over. I want to take care of her. “What if I tell her I love her now?”

“Have you ever even hinted at how you feel?” Lily makes a ticking sound. “The silence speaks volumes. So, I’ll take that as a no. I mean, you could. But she might not believe you. Some guys will say anything to get a woman to have sex with them. And if she thinks this is just sex, and then you tell her you love her, it’s kind of coming out of nowhere.”

“I can’t fuck her. I can’t tell her I love her. What the hell am I supposed to do here?”

“Woo her, Jacks. Woo her.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Figure it out! Date her. Court her. Make her fall in love with you. Make her fall in love with the life you two could have together. Be there for her and let her come to you.”

“When should I tell her I love her?”

“Just give her some time. I’m sure she’ll give you a sign that she loves you, even if she doesn’t say the words first. Just pay attention and do everything you can to make her love you. Trust me, you’re not that hard to love.”

“You’re pretty good at this, you know,” I say thoughtfully. “Ever think of trying some of this stuff out on Gunnar?”

“I don’t want to talk about Gunnar. And if this is what I get for helping you un-fuck your situation, I’m going to think again next time.”

“No, you’re not.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Thanks for being my best friend, Lil.”

“It is truly a hardship sometimes, but I do my best.”

“Lil?”

“Yeah?”

“Men are the opposite. We don’t want words. We want actions. Preferably ones that involve eating... food and your-”

“Don’t say it.”

“Just go jump on Gunnar already. Then you can both thank me.”

“I’m hanging up on you.”

“Goodnight, Lil.”

Testing my luck, I sit in my car in the dark for a while thinking over every word Lily said. How could Selena think I only want her for sex? I mean, when the sex is that good, sure, maybe. But I’m always holding her hand. I fucking love spending time with her. I fucking love her. How does she not know that?

Because you never fucking told her, asshole.

How the hell do I give Selena space and woo her at the same time? I can’t make her believe I love her if she’s across the city and won’t even talk to me. And the clock is ticking on the contract period. I have two weeks before she thinks she never has to see me again.

Well, that’s one problem figured out. I can’t let her shut me out.

My fingers are swiping to call Selena in seconds.

I can still see her in the window from here. She’s just a dark shadow until the ringing phone screen lights up her face. And I see her decline the call.
Ouch.

Swiping one more time, I call again. And she declines the call again.
Double ouch.

Third time's the charm. It rings, and it rings.

"What do you want, Jackson?"

"Hello, Jackson. I'm sorry I packed up my shit and moved out without telling you. I'm sorry that you lost your mind worrying that something happened to me. And I'm sorry that poor Oats is pouting, waiting for me to come home."

"I didn't move out because I didn't live there. I was just... staying over."

"Semantics, baby," I whisper. "Are you at home? Are you safe?"

She makes a strangled, blowing sound like she's trying to hide the fact that she's crying from me.

"I'm home. I'm fine."

She sure as hell doesn't sound fine.

"Why are you calling so late? Did I forget something? You could have just sent it over tomorrow or whenever?"

"I'm calling because I needed to make sure that you're alright."

"I told you I'm fine." The last thing she sounds is fine.

This isn't getting us anywhere.

"We're going on a date tomorrow afternoon." Afternoon should be safe. And in public. Somewhere I can't throw her knees over my shoulders and devour her perfect pussy.

"What? No. I told you I didn't want to do any more stupid events."

"You don't have to. But the contract doesn't end for another two weeks. As far as the world knows, my elevator girl and I are in love. So, we're going to keep dating... publicly."

"Jackson, please..." If I was a better man, I would let her go. Because the pain in her voice is almost enough to break me. But I'm selfish. I want her for myself, and I'm going to spend the rest of my damn life proving to her I was worth the pain she's feeling right now. I'm never going to let her hurt like this again.

"Sorry, baby. It's non-negotiable. I'll pick you up at the bakery kitchen at two."

"Whatever. Fine."

"Goodnight, baby."

She hangs up without saying another word.

"Oats, stage one of getting your new mom back accomplished."

The little howl he gives me tells me we're on the same page about Operation Get Selena Back.

chapter sixty-eight

Two weeks. Probably less. Probably a lot less...

selena

The bakery kitchen is in its usual chaos the next morning. I spend so much time putting out fires that it's two o'clock before I know it. And I'm hoping and praying that Jackson is over whatever nonsense he got into his head last night about us going on a date and is just going to let this go. He can let the media and the public think whatever he wants them to. That he dumped me for being too clingy, or too normal, or too boring. I honestly don't care anymore.

Jackson was always going to be the only one who came out of this fake break-up unscathed. That was never going to happen for me. I've got one night of crying into my satin pillowcase down, and I'm ready to get the rest of them over with until I feel nothing at the name...

"Selena! Jackson Waters is here to see you!" Liam calls out like an unnecessarily loud foghorn from ten feet away.

Okay, so we're definitely not at the point where the name Jackson Waters means nothing to me. But since I didn't burst into tears at hearing his name screamed at me, I'm taking that as progress.

"Thanks. Can you tell him to wait up front and that I'll be out in a minute?" I ask from behind a row of cooling racks, where thankfully Jackson can't see me.

I'm going to be more than a minute if I have anything to say about it. More like a solid half hour, at least. Maybe even forty-five minutes.

"Sure." Liam looks almost as confused as I feel. And I can only imagine how Jackson looks right now. How dare I keep the great Jackson Waters waiting? Well, he'd better get used to it. Because he's going to be waiting a lot for the next two weeks until the contract is over.

I take my sweet time finishing the inventory of all our dry goods because that order needs to be put in by the end of the day. Then I make my way over to the makeshift office I created in the corner of our designated space out of a few shower curtains hanging from the ducting above. It's not much, but I have a four-foot high bookshelf with a laptop on it as a makeshift standing

desk and a stool for when I can't take another minute of standing. The rest of the staff and I all put our personal stuff on the bookshelf and use this little area to change in and out of our work clothes. It can't be bigger than three feet by three feet.

Actually, that's exactly how big it is, because I had to measure the bookshelf to make sure it would fit before buying it from IKEA. I put it together all by myself the first week I rented this space. This kitchen has so many memories wrapped up in it. All the excitement of starting something new. The growing pains as we struggled in those first few months. Then the joy of finding our footing and wonderful repeat customers who ordered from us again and again. Tears threaten to fall when I think about leaving this place, but I've already cried more than enough in the last twenty-four hours to last me a lifetime.

As much as I hate it, I need to make myself presentable. If I'm with Jackson this afternoon, then there's a chance someone could take my picture. And I'm vain enough not to want to be photographed next to two-time America's sexiest man in my flour-stained yoga pants and a Ladycakes t-shirt.

After undoing my apron, I toss it in the laundry bin and then pull the shower curtains tightly closed around me. I pull my t-shirt up and over my head. I'll take that home to wash myself. When my head is around my knees as I push down my yoga pants, I feel a rush of air on my back. And then I see black boots through my legs. Very expensive black boots are right in front of my face. The metal shower curtain rings jangle on the ducts above my head.

"Don't let me interrupt you," Jackson's voice says above me.

Well, I've had a shit day, so I guess one more orgasm for the road isn't the worst idea. I tug my pants and socks off, and then stand up slowly, my eyes raking over his jeans and black t-shirt until I'm facing him, wearing only a matching forest green bra and panties set he bought me. Straightening my shoulders and arching my back, making myself as tall as possible, I stand there eyeing him, waiting for him to make the first move.

His jaw clenches. But he doesn't move.

Neither do I.

"Get dressed, Selena. We have an appointment in twenty minutes," Jackson says before grimacing. Actually grimacing. What the hell is going on here?

"What appointment?" I ask, narrowing my eyes up at him.

“You’ll find out when you get dressed.”

“What if I don’t want to?” Do I know that I’m acting like a small child? Yes. And do I care? Absolutely not. “What if I want to go like this?”

Jackson leans forward. He reaches out his hand to drag his knuckles down my chest, but doesn’t quite make contact with my skin. “Not happening. Get dressed, Selena.”

“Whatever,” I tell him, rolling my eyes.

Turning away from him, I dig in my shoulder bag for the A-line floral dress I brought with me this morning. My bag is on the bottom shelf, so my ass is up in the air while I rifle under my makeup bag and hair brush and sandals, and all the other crap that accumulates at the bottom of my enormous work purse. When I do my Sunday night clean-out, I am always astonished by how much stuff ends up in there in only seven days.

“Selena,” Jackson barks at me.

I don’t like that tone at all. I don’t know why this is all pissing Jackson off so much, but I’m enjoying myself way, way too much to stop. I don’t want him here, and I have no intention of just going along with whatever he wants. Not anymore.

Assholes deserve ass jiggles. I shake my ass for a good thirty seconds, as close to his face as my short legs will get me.

Then I place my sandals on the ground and finally pull my dress out. I turn around so I’m facing Jackson again as I unzip it and then step into it, pulling the wide straps up over my shoulders. The zipper’s at the back, and while I can, and do, manage to zip it up all by myself, why would I do that when I have my *fake*-boyfriend here to assist? So, I turn around again to point the zipper in his direction.

“A little help, please?”

“Shit, Selena.” Jackson mutters behind me. I don’t know why the man is even here, but the least he can do for me is pull up my zipper.

I feel Jackson’s hands on me finally, pulling the two sides of the fabric closed and then tugging the little gold zipper up the back of my dress.

“Thanks,” I mutter, before leaning down to pull the straps of my platform sandals around my heels and shoving my ass up in the air again.

“Ready now?” he demands.

When I turn back around to face him, he’s clenching his hands into fists at his sides. What is his deal? It’s like he ate rage cookies for breakfast instead of his usual egg whites, greens, and protein. He’s the one who

insisted that we keep pretending to date. I tried to walk away and make a clean break.

“Nope,” I tell him with a smug smile. “I need to brush my hair and touch up my makeup. Probably going to be a while.”

“You have three minutes,” Jackson grits out.

Did he clench his teeth this much before? If he did, I never noticed. It’s probably not good for his teeth. I wonder if his dentist gives him crap about it? Probably not. No one seems to give Jackson Waters crap. Except Lily and his family. And now me. That makes me smile. If there’s one short list I’m happy to be on, it’s that one.

Like I’m moving in slow motion, I pull the satin scrunchie from my hair and then shake my head so that waves of dark hair fall from my messy bun down over my shoulders. Then I brush, counting from one to two hundred. Where did I get the idea that I’m supposed to brush my hair two hundred times before it’s done? Some old movie? I’ve never had the patience before to make it past fifty. But today, with Jackson waiting for me, I have all the patience in the world.

Next up is makeup. Pulling out my little gold mirror, I take stock. There’s a small patch of flour on my forehead. Easily wiped away, thankfully. I wipe under my eyes and then add a bit more concealer and setting powder. I add a bit more pink to my cheeks. Then a bit more mascara, with my mouth open in the universal *O* women use when applying mascara. And finally, I get out my lip gloss and apply a heavy coat of bright pink stain.

“You don’t need any of that, you know.”

I shrug. “Maybe I enjoy wearing it?”

I do actually enjoy wearing makeup. I just don’t love when I feel like I have to. It’s like society could only possibly take me seriously with my hair and face tamed into something it deems acceptable.

Fuck that and fuck Jackson Waters.

“You’re beautiful without it.”

Weird. He doesn’t want to have sex with me. But he apparently wants to tell me I’m beautiful. I don’t know what kind of game this is, but I’m not interested in playing with him anymore.

“I’m ready,” I tell him, ignoring his compliment, and tossing my makeup bag back into my purse.

He clenches his jaw again.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

“Nope.” Jackson surprises me by taking my left hand in his and then pressing his right hand against my lower back. Not on my ass. Not ass-adjacent. But on the flat of my lower back. Then he guides me out of the kitchen.

“See you tomorrow. Liam’s in charge,” I shout over my shoulder.

“That’s right, kids. Dad’s in charge, so you better be on your best behavior,” Liam warns my employees.

Everyone laughs. The idea of Liam being a hardass boss is a complete joke.

“Dad?” Jackson’s grip on my hand tightens just a little.

A smile pulls across my face. “Yeah. Liam always jokes to all the staff at the bakery that I’m mom and he’s dad.”

“If anyone’s the dad, I’m pretty sure it’s me,” Jackson mutters.

“It’s a bakery thing. You don’t even know the people I work with. It’s just a joke.”

“Why don’t you have them over to the house sometime?”

“To your house? Because that would be weird? Why would I do that?” Today is just getting more and more confusing. “Does this appointment involve wine? Because I would kill for a rosé...”

“No.”

When we’re sitting in his car, I glare at him until he looks at me.

“Can you please explain to me why you’re so grumpy today? You’re getting everything you want. I’m continuing with the contract for the next two weeks. We can go on as many fake dates as you want. I don’t even care anymore. And then I’ll be on my merry way, per the contract. No strings attached. Hell, I even would have had sex with you behind that shower curtain right now. Which would have been a completely terrible idea, because it’s, you know, a shower curtain. In my place of work. I probably would have had to sign up for sexual harassment training after that. But I still would have done it. So, honestly, I’m just really not sure what you have to whine about, and I’m not interested in a moody movie star *fake* boyfriend, if I’m being completely honest.”

Is he grinding his teeth now? Because I’m hearing full-on grinding.

“Moody movie star *boyfriend*,” Jackson says. His voice is menacing, like something out of that movie where he played the assassin. I give zero shits.

“Whatever.”

chapter sixty-nine

jackson

*M*oody is an understatement. It's a colossally inadequate word to describe my present state of misery.

The woman is trying to kill me.

Is this what I missed out on by jumping on her any chance I got since the first time? Selena being a temptress? Trying to seduce me? Shaking that perfect round ass in my face? She wanted to fuck me behind that flimsy shower curtain in her bakery kitchen?

Fucking hell, the woman is going to kill me if she keeps this up for the next two weeks. Unless I don't follow Lily's rules. But since it's been less than twenty-four hours, and I'm fucking desperate to break the rules, I have a feeling they're there for a reason. But damn it, this all had better be worth it at the end of this. And the only thing worth anything is Selena telling me she loves me.

"So, where are we going?"

"I told you it's a surprise."

"Maybe I don't like surprises?"

"That might work if I didn't know you. But I do. And you love surprises. So, try again."

Selena narrows her eyes into a glare, aimed right at my face.

This is going fucking great.

Pulling off the highway about twenty minutes from her bakery kitchen, I cut through a residential neighborhood until I reach Silver Lake. I pull into an alley and park my Suburban along a brick wall.

"I can't get out. You parked too close."

"Come this way, I'll help you."

"No. Just move the car a few inches."

"We're already late because of your little show back there. Get your beautiful ass over here."

Selena rolls her eyes at me and then shoves her purse into my chest. I toss it up onto the roof, out of the way. Then she hikes herself up onto her knees

and starts crawling across the seats. When I can see that both of her knees are clear, I wrap my arms around her and pull her out. I let every inch of her slide down every inch of me before setting her on her feet.

She rolls her eyes at me again. “Like moving the car a couple of inches wouldn’t have been easier? Sure.”

“Worked just fine from where I’m standing,” I tell her with a grin. I turn back to face the car and adjust myself—*think of the fucking desert*—before grabbing her purse from the roof and handing it back to her.

“Did you bring me here to murder me or what?”

“Or what.” Taking her hand, I lead her towards a giant steel door. Tugging it open, I push her in front of me into the dark room. Then I scramble to find the light switch.

When the lights finally flicker on, we’re standing in an old commercial kitchen. Black-and-white tiles line the floor in a diamond pattern. Every flat surface is stainless steel. The appliances look like they could use some modernization, but it’s a hell of a lot bigger than where she is now. On the far wall, there’s an actual office with a door that closes. In case she ever wants to fuck me at her work again. I hope to hell that we’re going to need it one day soon.

“Ooh, a kitchen! I’m so impressed!” Selena turns in a circle, eyeing it appraisingly. “Can we go now?”

“No.”

“Why are we here?”

“Knock, knock, knock,” a woman’s voice says from the front end of the kitchen. Sandra, my realtor. “I think I can help with that. You must be Selena. I’m Sandra. Jackson asked me to help you find your dream bakery. And I don’t know why he insisted on bringing you in the back. Because the back... needs a little work. But it’s nothing that a little—or a lot—of money can’t fix, though. But the front is where the real magic is. Come on out here with me!”

Selena walks away from me, and I let her go, letting our hands pull apart. She doesn’t need me hanging onto her every second of every day. This is about her business. I’m just here to be a second set of eyes and to bankroll whatever she wants. That’s it.

But I want to see her see it for the first time. Sandra sent me pictures, and this place is perfect. It’s old-fashioned. It reminds me of the diner in Western Springs. That’s probably why I like it.

Selena’s smiling as she turns in a slow circle. Her eyes are wide. I don’t

need to look away from her to see what she's seeing. The pictures I saw, a couple of inches tall, were more than enough. I already know the white and black floor carries on out there. That a big glass bakery case lines half the wall and a big service counter on the other side with a massive, old chrome espresso machine. That there are a couple of booths and a few bistro tables. Everything needs a good clean or a coat of paint, Selena's touch, but it's all there.

All I care about is the look on her face. And that she's smiling.

"It's beautiful. It's so charming. What did it used to be?" she asks breathlessly.

"It's been vacant for about eighteen months. It used to be a little Italian bakery. A real mom and pop shop."

"That's a long time for a place like this to stay vacant. What's wrong with it?"

"Well, you're not wrong about that. I think it may have a little something to do with the price."

Selena nods. "Ah, that's why this place didn't show up in any of my searches."

Stepping out of the doorway, I wave my arm at her. "The price doesn't matter. All that matters is that you love it."

Selena rolls her eyes. "Says the rich movie star."

"Mr. Waters has made it very clear that price is no object..."

"Has he?" Selena's eyes shoot to mine. "Sandra, could *Mr. Waters* and I have a few minutes alone?"

"Of course! You just give me a shout when you're ready."

"Thanks, Sandra." Selena waits for the other woman to walk out the front door of the bakery and for the door to close behind her.

"Jackson?"

"Yes, baby?"

"What is this? Like what exactly is going on here?"

"We're standing in an old bakery."

"I'm aware of that. But *why* are we standing in an old bakery?"

"Because you need a new bakery?"

"Stop playing games. Why are we here?"

"To find your dream bakery."

"I don't know why you even want to do that. And I don't want to know. This place is perfect, but there's no way it's in my budget."

“So, we agree then? It’s perfect. Let’s take it.”

“Take what?”

“This place?”

“For what now?”

“For your bakery.”

“There’s no way I can afford this kind of place in this neighborhood. If I could, it would have come up in my listing searches. It must be way over budget.”

“Why don’t you let me worry about that?”

“Let the man who appears to be having some sort of early midlife crisis worry about the future of my business? Nope, don’t think so.” Selena shakes her head. “And you never take the first place you look at. If house hunting reality shows have taught me anything, it’s that you always need to find at least three options. Since we’ve already found our budget-buster, dream place, we still need to find our derelict, money-pit, fixer-upper, and our I-guess-I’ll-have-to-settle-for-it realistic option.”

“How is that a good show if you go in already knowing the three options and which one they’re going to choose?”

“I don’t make the rules. It’s a brilliant concept for a reality show. It just is.”

“So, we have two more underwhelming options to look at before we take this one?”

“No. *I* probably have a couple of hundred more underwhelming options to look at before I finally find one in my price range that I can live with.”

Frowning, I put my hand on her shoulder. “I’m not interested in that.”

“Good thing it’s not up to you. This is life. You win some, you lose some. Not everyone can afford whatever they want whenever they want it.”

“I can afford whatever you want whenever you want it. If you like this place, then I want to buy it for you.”

“Remember how we just established that you’re in some sort of midlife crisis? Not going to happen.”

“It was an *early* midlife crisis. And that’s not what this is.”

“Then tell me what this is, and I’ll decide.”

That has me shutting up. One day of putting Selena first won’t make her fall in love with me. And it won’t make up for the way I’ve taken her for granted since I met her.

“Let’s go see a couple more losers.”

“Perfect!” Selena says with a fake smile, turning away from me.

chapter seventy

selena

*Y*ou know when you know. And when I walked into that dated, overpriced, black-and-white-tiled slice of heaven, I just knew. This was the place. This was the place where Ladycakes is supposed to put down roots and grow into the place I know that she's meant to be one day.

I just don't know how I could ever afford it.

If I put all of Jackson's two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars into the down payment, that would make the mortgage payments slightly more doable. But it wouldn't leave anything left for updates and new equipment. I'd need a tech to look at them, but the ovens look like they're shot. The industrial mixer looked like a rust bucket. And the whole place needs a makeover. There's not much a coat of white paint can't fix in my experience, but I still need to be able to buy the paint. And the rollers, and brushes, and trays, and the list goes on.

Jackson's offer to buy the place for me is ridiculous. It's not happening. I don't know why he's offering, but I wouldn't feel right about taking it. The two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars is what we agreed to before everything got *complicated*. I'm not comfortable taking any more than that. It would feel like dirty money. Like he was paying me for sleeping with him or something. The thought of that just gives me the *ick*.

And underwhelming was an understatement for the rest of the places we looked at today. Jackson's fancy realtor didn't look like she even wanted to set foot in them. I guess she spends more time selling sunset and selling Calabasas than any part of L.A. I actually go to.

I'm lost in thought about ovens and paint and square footage when I realize that we're almost at Jackson's house.

"What are we doing here? I'm not staying over," I blurt out.

Jackson glances around the car, as if looking for whoever suggested that I was staying over. "No one invited you to. We're just going home to pick up Oats."

"And then where are we going?"

“Your place.”

“Why are we going to my place?”

“So, I can cook you dinner.”

“I thought you only knew how to make pancakes.”

“While pancakes are my most impressive dish, I know how to make one or two other things. You’re just going to have to trust me.”

“Are you planning on staying overnight?”

“Nope.”

I frown. And there’s the problem right there. How can I trust him when I don’t know what he’s up to? I didn’t see a single photographer today. I didn’t see one camera flash or anything else suspicious, and trust me, I was watching.

“Whatever. You’ve got two more weeks. You can use them up however you choose. It’s your time. If you want to spend it cooking for me, that’s your business.”

Jackson pulls up in front of his house and jumps out of the car. He opens the big front door, and Oats comes running out. Before I can open my door, he jumps in on Jackson’s side and is across the console and on my lap.

“I missed you too, baby. Yes, I did. You’re the best boy in the whole, entire world, aren’t you? Yes, you are! You’re just the most beautiful boy? Who’s the most beautiful?” I pull his ears in front of his eyes in a game of peek-a-boo. “You are, yes you are!”

“Do you two need a minute alone?” Jackson’s at the back of the truck, putting something crinkly inside, but I don’t look away from the golden bundle of curls smothering me. Oats never makes me guess what he’s thinking or how he feels about me.

“Yes, actually. I’d love to spend the evening with just Oats. Feel free to drop us off and then head back to your palace.”

“Too bad.” Is Jackson’s teeth grinding thing back? What is going on with that? He’ll be lucky to have any teeth left if he keeps this up.

The drive back to my place is uneventful. Oats is excited to be somewhere new, and while I walk him across the street and take him for a pee, Jackson pulls four large fabric grocery bags out of the back of his car.

“What’s all that?”

“Dinner. Or, it will be.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how likely is it that I’m going to be ordering myself takeout for dinner?”

“A solid seven. Maybe an eight. But let’s live dangerously,” Jackson says with a grin. That smile. Those blue eyes. It’s not fair that he looks at me like that and expects me to not get attached.

When I unlock the door, Oats rushes in to sniff everything his perfect little nose can reach, and I lead Jackson back to the kitchen. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him do anything in his own kitchen except for getting a glass of water or using the fancy espresso machine. I’m fearful for my beloved little vintage kitchen. She’s not the biggest or the best, but she’s all mine. And my landlord’s.

Jackson places the bags precariously on the small, rolling island and then unloads them.

“Do you need any help with that?”

“No, no.” Jackson looks around the small kitchen. He’s holding a small bag of flour in one hand and an eggplant in the other. He definitely seems like he needs help. “Actually, yeah. A corkscrew? Where would I find a corkscrew?”

“Little drawer next to the oven.”

He scans the kitchen again. “Right, got it.”

He retrieves the corkscrew and opens a chilled bottle of rosé, pouring me a glass and then handing it to me, before placing the bottle in the fridge to stay cold.

“When was the last time you cooked anything?”

“The morning after our first time.” Jackson grins at me. “When I made you my special pancakes.”

“Right? And before that?”

He runs his hand through his hair. “I honestly don’t even remember.”

My heart tightens just a little knowing that pancakes aren’t his go-to morning after routine. That maybe it was something at least a little special, just for me. Just for us.

“Why don’t you tell me what the plan is so I can at least help a bit?”

“I want to do this for you. I don’t want you to have to help.”

“It’s not a big deal. You’ve never really even been in my kitchen before. I’ll only help a little. Tell you where to find things. That kind of thing.”

“You’ll only help if I really need it?”

I pick up my glass and give him a mock salute with it. “Of course, only when dinner is in grave danger. Why else would I get up off my butt when I have a sexy man cooking me dinner?”

Oops. Shit. I didn't mean to say that. From the giant grin on Jackson's face, I know that I really, really shouldn't have said that.

"Let me get you some more wine," he says, walking back to the fridge to top up my glass.

In the next hour, my kitchen turns into a scene out of a horror movie. Total chaos. Total carnage. Thank goodness I have a dishwasher because Jackson dirties just about every dish in my entire kitchen. And if his mother's rules apply at my house, since Jackson's cooking, I have to do all the dishes. Not that I asked him to cook. I honestly don't even know why he's here.

It's really weird having Jackson here in my home. In my space. He hasn't been here since that first night when he offered me a deal so insane I should have got a restraining order instead of signing two months of my life away. But what did I do? I signed up to play girlfriend-boyfriend with the sexy movie star who used to stare down at me from my bedroom wall.

What the hell was I thinking? If I could go back and redo that night... I honestly don't know if I would change it. I want to. I want none of this to have ever happened because of where I am now. But that would mean that I'd never have got to know Jackson. He'd just be this question mark after the elevator. Maybe a story I told people at parties, eventually.

But having him here in my kitchen is giving me an out-of-body-experience. Until now, I could put all things Jackson-related in this little box that didn't touch the rest of my life. His big white house up in the Hollywood Hills is a world away from my little converted apartment in a quarter of an old house in Echo Park. His life at Hollywood premieres, press events, and private airports is a different galaxy from the one I live in.

People outside L.A. think when you live here you must run into actors and famous people all the time. Maybe you see someone rushing out of a Starbucks or whatever health food store is trendy that month as you drive by, but I can count on one hand the number of times I've spent more than ten seconds near a celebrity who wasn't buying cupcakes from me. And one of those times was in the elevator with Jackson.

Him being here with me is breaking down some wall that I didn't know I had up to keep my real life separate from whatever I was doing with him. And I don't like it one bit. It scares me. Seeing him in my kitchen with a tea towel hanging out of the back pocket of his jeans, flour on his black t-shirt, and country music playing in the background, I don't know if I want to tell him to get the hell out of my house so I can hide my head under my pillow

from missing him or beg him to stay here with me forever.

I am completely and utterly pathetic.

Jackson is here... doing... I honestly don't know what he's doing here. Playing with his new toy for the last two weeks he gets to have it? *Have me.* And I'm wondering how to convince him to love me forever. I'm still a pathetic teenager wishing a beautiful vampire would steal me away from my real life, instead of an adult woman going out and making the life she wants. And being a bit more realistic about who is going to share that life with me. No one tells you when you're growing up that you're going to have to stop waiting around for Prince Charming at some point and get realistic. But you do.

"Oh, crap. I left my car at work. Now, I'm going to have to take a car share to work in the morning." I let out a long breath as I instruct myself to calm down. It's only fifty dollars. I'll more than be able to pay for the odd extra car share ride to work once I have Jackson's two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars in my savings account. "It's fine. It doesn't matter."

"What time do you go to work in the morning?"

"Five-thirty."

"Shit. Really?"

So, he really didn't wake up all the mornings I snuck out of bed at four to get to the bakery kitchen.

"Yes, people typically like their morning baked goods to be, you know, baked when they come to buy them in the morning and not just under proofed, wet dough. I'm not even on the first shift anymore. Some of my staff gets there at four."

"That's disgusting, all of it. I'll be back here at quarter to five to take you to work."

"You can't be serious."

"Try me, baby."

chapter seventy-one

selena

“*T*hose sighs seem pretty deep. Anything I can help with?”

Anything he can help with? When he’s the source of ninety-five percent of my problems?

“Nope,” I whisper against my glass as I take another sip of cab franc. I killed the bottle of rosé and moved onto red. So, that’s how this night is going. “How’s the sauce coming? You could have used a jar of sauce. It’s easier.”

“No way. This is my soon-to-be-famous red sauce. Good for all things pizza and pasta.”

“You should start selling it. I’m sure your face on a jar of pasta sauce would go great next to your face on all the tabloids.”

“How much time *do* you spend in these grocery lines staring at me? I’m starting to think you make up reasons to go to the grocery store. Baby, if you want to stare into my eyes, I’m right here.”

Maybe. For the next two weeks, anyway.

“Do you want me to check on the dough? I could start rolling it out.”

“Yeah, probably best to take advantage of a professional opinion, since I have an expert here. But then we’re going to roll it out together.”

“Not sure it’s a two-person job.”

“It is the way I plan on doing it.”

Shaking my head at whatever that means, I get up from my seat at the kitchen table to check on the dough rising in a vintage Pyrex bowl with a damp tea towel over the top.

Gently poking a finger into the top of the dough ball, I get a nice bounce back. “It’s ready. What was the big plan for rolling these out?”

“This is my first rodeo, making pizza at least. So, I thought you could show me how it all works.”

“Sure. Are you ready? Sauce under control?”

Jackson gives his precious sauce a gentle stir and then walks over to me.

“It’s easy. You just get a bit of flour on your hands. Then you flour the

board.” Careful not to squish out any air bubbles that developed while the dough rose, I push the puffy ball out of the greased bowl and onto my floured marble pastry board. “How many pizzas are we making? And are they thin crust or thick crust?”

“What do you like better?”

“Thin crust. Easier not to get soggy.”

“Thin crust it is.”

“This is probably enough dough to make eight thin-crust pizzas. So, I’m just going to cut it in half. And then in half again and again until we have eight even-sized balls to work with.”

“You’re good at that.”

“I’m a professional baker. It’s literally my job. I’ve thought about serving pizza at my bakery one day. I think it would be good to have some lunch options to have people coming back in later in the day. Maybe flatbread style or sheet pan style? You really can’t go wrong with bread, sauce, and cheese.”

“Here’s hoping,” Jackson mutters under his breath.

“Ready?” I ask, as I toss a round ball of dough at him.

His hand darts out to catch it, and only a little extra flour ends up on his shirt.

Getting my own ball out, I set it down on the marble board. Then I grab my rolling pin. “You just need to make sure that the rolling pin has enough flour on it so that it doesn’t stick. And then you go like this over and over again until it’s the thinness and shape you want. Easy.” I demonstrate for him, pressing the rolling pin into the soft dough to push it into an oval shape and then turning it and doing the same again, pressing it into a thinner circle.

“Like this?” Jackson’s hands move over mine on the rolling pin, and suddenly he’s right behind me, his body pressing into mine, his warm breath in my ear.

“What are you doing?”

“Learning from your baking expertise.”

“Uh-huh.” I turn up to look back at him. “If I’m the teacher, shouldn’t I be behind you?”

He grins. “Be my guest.”

Rolling my eyes, I step back and around him. He lifts his arms up, and I slide my arms underneath, trying not to press against his body. Jackson’s body only confuses me.

But I can’t reach the rolling pin. And I can’t see anything. Pressing harder

against him to reach, my entire body is tight up against his hard muscle. Wriggling my fingers, I reach for the rolling pin. Still no luck. You have got to be kidding me. I press harder, and Jackson grunts as I shove him into the counter.

“Something wrong?”

“Where is the damn rolling pin?” I seethe into his back.

“This rolling pin?” Jackson says with a laugh, and I feel the rolling pin press into my hand.

“What the hell?” Leaning to the side, I peek around his arm. The half-rolled out pizza crust is right there in front of him. I totally could have reached if he wasn’t such a jackass, hiding the rolling pin from me.

“Want to try the other way?”

“No,” I mutter against his back. “This is perfect. This is how I teach all my new bakers.”

“Hell, if it is.” Jackson’s words are a growl as he turns in my arms to face me. “You better not have your arms around any other man like this, your tits rubbing all up against his back.”

“What about my women bakers?”

He narrows his eyes at me. “I guess we can talk about that.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“I’m *your* idiot.”

I really, really wish he was *my* idiot. And not just for the next two weeks.

After Jackson decides the pizzas are done—at least five minutes after I tell him they’re done—he serves us each up a couple of slices on my mismatched vintage dinner plates. He cuts the pizza too soon without letting it cool down, so it’s a saucy, cheesy mess, but every bite is delicious.

“This is good. I make a mean pizza. I think I need to get a pizza oven. Maybe put it out in the backyard.”

“I thought you weren’t eating carbs for the next decade.”

“Some things are worth a little extra time at the gym. And there’s other ways of getting my cardio in.”

When I roll my eyes at him, he flashes me his best big-screen smile.

“What was it like growing up in Riverside?”

chapter seventy-two

slena

“Are you seriously going to come back here before five o’clock in the morning to take me to work?”

“Of course, baby. I said I would.”

“Jackson, it’s almost eleven. Your place is forty-five minutes away. That’s an hour and a half of driving. That’s not even giving yourself four hours of sleep. Just stay here. And then you can drop me off at the bakery in the morning, and you and Oats can head home.”

“Are you sure? I don’t want to invade your space.”

“It’s fine. And you invaded my space when you invited yourself over for dinner hours ago.”

“Why don’t you take Oats out for one last pee? I’m sorry, Oatsie. I don’t have a big backyard for you like your dad does.” Then I turn from the cutest, fluffiest face I’ve ever seen to the handsomest one. “I’m going up to get ready for bed. You can sleep... wherever.”

I refuse to invite Jackson into my bed after sort of breaking up with him only the night before. And after he hasn’t made a move to do anything more than hold my hand or touch my lower back all freaking day. Rolling pizza dough with my arms around him and my breasts pressed hard against his back didn’t even lead to us having sex. Something weird is definitely going on here. I just don’t know what it is.

My face is washed, my teeth brushed, and I’m safely in my pajamas under the covers of my queen-size bed when I hear Jackson’s heavy footsteps and Oats’ nails on the old parquet wood floors downstairs. I hear Jackson lock the door, turn the deadbolt, and use the chain, and then check all of them again.

I hold my breath while I wait to see which way his heavy footsteps are going to go. To the living room and a night on the sofa? Or up the stairs to spend the night with me. I don’t have a guest room, like he does. So, those are his only options.

The second Jackson puts his foot on the first step, a flurry of nails start

tapping on the stairs, and then eighty pounds of fur land on the bed on top of me.

I giggle and attempt to avoid being smothered to death, while Jackson's heavy steps run up the stairs.

"Shit. Sorry. Get off, Oats. Off!" Jackson orders him.

Oats calms down, but doesn't jump off the bed.

I sit up, and the duvet falls away from me. My first thought is to pull it back up, but what's the point of trying to hide anything from Jackson? He's seen every part of me before. He's had every part of me.

"It's fine. I'm okay. Oats, go to the bottom of the bed." Leaning forward, I tap with my hand where I want him to go, and he obediently sidles over into the designated spot at the foot of my bed, all while avoiding looking at Jackson. "Good boy."

"Do you mind if I..." Jackson's words hang in the air between us.

"Sleep wherever you want. There's a toothbrush set out for you in the bathroom."

"Why do you have an extra toothbrush, Selena?"

"In case anyone sleeps over. And none of your business. I wouldn't question a free toothbrush and a place to sleep if I were you. Night, Jackson," I tell him before laying back down and pulling the covers tight around me.

After a few minutes of movement, the faucet running, and the toilet flushing in the bathroom, Jackson steps out. He stands there for a long minute, not moving. Then he heads for the far side of the bed. As big as Jackson is, if he really wanted to, he could spend all night in this bed and never touch me once. I don't know if I hate that idea or if I love it. I know what would be easier on my heart in the long run. And what would be easier on my heart tonight. And I know they're two very different things.

Holding my breath again, I'm still as a statue while Jackson pulls back the duvet and then lays down under the covers. He's about as far as he can get from me, and he stays there for a long minute.

Then I hear him mumble something that sounds a lot like *fuck it*, and then he's in the middle of the bed, his arms reaching for me. He pulls me tight against him, and I realize that he's not wearing anything except his boxer briefs. He's like a furnace, a wall of flames pressing into my back and legs. Every part of me that isn't covered in my tank top and shorts is touching him, skin to skin.

Waiting, I lie still, expecting something else to happen. But it doesn't.

I hear Jackson grinding his teeth in my ear.

I roll my hips back, pressing my ass into his dick. We can both feel it when his dick reacts to me.

I want him so much I can barely breathe.

“Selena...” His voice sounds rough. A warning.

I do it again, grinding my ass again and again until there’s no way he can think it’s an accident.

“What?” I ask, trying and failing to sound innocent.

I rub my ass against him and then let out a moan. I’ve been in an emotional tornado for the past twenty-four hours. Make that the last two months. I need him to make me come so I can forget about everything else, except how good he makes me feel.

“Selena...”

“Why are you being so weird? You haven’t touched me once today. Not really.”

“I’m not having sex with you again until you ask for it, baby.”

“What?” When I pull away from him, he doesn’t let me go. His arms are wrapped around me like an iron cage. “Are you trying to play some kind of weird sex games with me?”

“No. I just want to make sure that I’m not doing anything you don’t want. You know how much I want you. How much I always want you. All you have to do is tell me you want sex. And you’ll get it.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“I just want to make sure that we’re on the same page.”

“And what page is that?”

“You tell me.”

“I have no idea what page we’re on because I have no idea what you’re doing. I don’t even know what book you’re reading, Jackson.”

“I’m just telling you that I’m not pressuring you into anything. I’m here, and I want you. Whenever you tell me you want me, I’ll be right here, baby.”

“I’m not begging you for sex.”

“You don’t have to beg me. Just tell me you want it. And I won’t stop making you come until you tell me to. Do you want to tell me you want it?”

“No.”

“Okay. Goodnight, baby,” he whispers in my ear before pressing his lips to my temple.

I don’t know what to say or what to think. I only know how good it feels

to be in his arms again.



THE NEXT MORNING, my alarm wakes us up bright and early. After all these years, I still haven't quite adjusted to waking up around four o'clock in the morning.

While Jackson pulls on his jeans and takes Oats out to pee, I grab some clothes, sneak into the bathroom to shower, and lock the door behind me. By the time I emerge from the bathroom with wet hair and enough makeup for the bakery, Jackson's already retrieved his clothes from my room, so at least wherever he is, he should be dressed.

Neither of us says much for most of the drive to the bakery kitchen.

"I bought it for you."

"Bought what for me?"

"The bakery we saw yesterday. The first one."

"What? I didn't want you to buy it for me."

"You needed a bakery space. I saw how terrible the places you were looking at are. And I don't want you in a place like that. You getting to the bakery at five in the morning in a neighborhood like that? Not happening."

"Jackson, what are you not getting about this? You don't get a say. Actually, you can have a say. I'm not going to tell you that you can't have an opinion. You just can't have it around me. Because I don't care. This is *my* decision about *my* business. You need to cancel the sale. Or return it, or something."

"I already bought it. It closes next month, but the lease to rent it until we close starts today. It's paid for. Insured. It's all yours."

"How is it even possible to do anything that quickly? Doesn't it have to go through escrow? Whatever that is..."

"I may have greased the wheels a bit. I didn't want you to worry about your next step. Ladycakes has a new home."

"I don't want it, and I don't accept it."

"That's your decision. I can't make you do anything you don't want to do. But it's a hell of a waste, if you ask me. Just having the place sitting there empty. When it could be a place for the community to come together. Get some baked goods. Get some coffee."

“If it’s so bad for the community, then you should probably sell it to someone who can use it.”

“Can’t sell it.”

“Why not? You’re just being a stubborn... jackass!”

“Can’t sell it because I don’t own it.”

“You just told me that you bought it.”

“I did. But it’s your name on the title.”

“I... I don’t want it.”

“Too bad.”

I can’t wrap my head around a gift this big. Why would he do this? Whatever he paid for the bakery, it was way, way more than the two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars he’s supposed to pay me when the contract is up.

It’s too big. It’s too much. I hate that he feels guilty for how this is going to end in a couple of weeks or like I’m some charity case. Maybe the cost of the bakery was nothing to him, but it’s huge to me. It’s years of hard work and saving up.

Ladycakes is my baby. She’s all mine. I’ve put everything I have into her and she’s grown, little by little. Somehow Jackson buying me a multi-million dollar bakery like it’s nothing, a bakery that I could never in a hundred years afford, makes all the hard work I’ve put in seem pathetic. Why didn’t I think of just dropping millions of dollars for a prime bakery space in the perfect area? I can’t feel grateful when what he did undermines everything I’ve worked so hard on for the past few years.

“I’ll see you tonight, baby.”

“For what?”

“Just be home by five.”

Rolling my eyes at him, I wish I could be anywhere other than at home when he gets to my place tonight. But I already know that I’ll be ready and waiting for him.

Because I’m completely and utterly pathetic.

chapter seventy-three

Twenty-four hours. Probably less. Probably a
lot less...

selena

*I*t's been two weeks of... whatever this is. Jackson is officially driving me crazy. I don't know what kind of early midlife crisis this is, but the man needs help. He's there every time I turn around. He's offering to drive me places, taking me to dinner, making me dinner, asking me if I need anything, asking me what I'm thinking, asking me about my childhood, and how I felt about being raised by a single mom, and do I wish I had a sister, and what do I think is the meaning of freaking life!

Pizza night was only the first night Jackson tortured me. He's been torturing me every single night since. He's slept in my bed almost every night. He's held me in his arms every time. I've felt his hard dick pressing into my back, but he's refused to do anything with it. He hasn't tried to touch me once.

I don't think I've ever heard him speak this much since the elevator. But for all the talking he's done, I still don't know how he feels about... anything. Is he sad that this is all going to be over? Is he going to miss me? If I wasn't such a coward, I would ask him. But I can't bring myself to make this any more embarrassing than it already is. Jackson signed up for a fake girlfriend. There is a paper and ink contract. And yes, maybe there were some additional benefits added on top of the contract, but Jackson didn't sign up for his clingy fake girlfriend catching feelings. He's never even hinted that he feels... anything towards me.

He hasn't touched me once. Not like I want him to, anyway. He's held my hand, put his arm around me, kissed me on my forehead and temple, and held me in his arms all night long. But that's it. He hasn't kissed me for real, and he definitely hasn't had sex with me. Not that I haven't tried. I've done everything but beg him to put his *p* in my *v*. I've walked around with no pants on. I've *accidentally* flashed him while I was dressing or undressing at night. I even slept naked right next to him. And nothing. Nada. I'm officially sexually frustrated.

And I won't ask him for sex. I can't. Not when it already hurts this much.

I can't have sex with Jackson again, knowing I have to say goodbye to him tomorrow.

All he's done is confuse me even more and make the gears of the ticking clock in my heart grind even louder as the countdown gets closer and closer.

It's officially the last day of the contract. I've been dreading this day and just as anxiously waiting for it. And now that it's here, I don't know what to do with myself.

It's here. Finally. Inevitably. In less than twenty-four hours, I'll be a free woman with an extra two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars in my bank account. And I would trade every cent for another two months with Jackson.

All I know is that we're flying somewhere on Jackson's plane as our last official date.

"What's the plan today? Flying to Turkey for a hot-air balloon ride? Swimming in the Maldives? A quick hop across the pond for a picnic on top of Big Ben?"

"I forgot you haven't been to London. We need to go sometime. It's a great city."

I have nothing to say to that. I was joking about all his over-the-top dates. The clock is ticking. We don't have time to go to London before the contract is over at midnight. "Well?"

"No to all of the above. It's better. Well, you're going to think it's better. A sane person might disagree."

"Whatever it is, I'm sure it's fine. But I don't need all of this... whatever it is you're doing."

"You may not need it, but I want to do it."

"Right. It's Jackson Waters' world, and the rest of us just live in it," I spit at him. I'm mad at him. I'm mad at myself for wanting him. But I'm the most mad at myself for loving him.

"Yeah, she's in a bad mood this morning. What can we do to turn that frown upside down, baby?"

Narrowing my eyes at him, I smile, but then bare my teeth at him.

"You're going to fit right in where we're going."

"We're going somewhere hormonal women snarl at you? Sounds like my kind of place."

"Hormonal?"

"It's been two months, Jackson. You haven't figured out when I get my period yet? Lily is going to be so disappointed in you."

Jackson stares at the ceiling of the plane like he's doing some kind of brain math. "Yup, yup, that all adds up. My bad. Won't happen again."

I don't bother reminding him that he's not going to have the chance for it to happen again because we're down to the last twenty-four hours we're ever going to spend together. Just thinking about that turns my breath to ice in my lungs.

"Do you need anything? Chocolate? Painkillers? A hot water bottle?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

"Remember that thing you told me about the best way to cure menstrual cramps?"

I nod, refusing to give him the satisfaction of an audible response. Of course, I remember loudly announcing to him that orgasms were the best way to cure menstrual cramps one of the first times I ever met him. Because of course, I did.

"Well, you just holler if you need any help with that. I aim to please." Jackson stretches out the fingers on both hands like he's readying them for an arm wrestle.

Refusing to deign his nonsense with a response, I slouch into my seat on his plane, choosing to wallow in my misery.

"You seem... uncomfortable. Come here, let me help you, baby."

I shake my head. As good as an orgasm would feel right now, and as much as I know it would make these cramps magically disappear, I don't want him to touch me. Not like this. Not out of pity, or charity, or medical necessity. "I don't want you to. It's been so long. We haven't. I don't want it... like that."

"Baby, you can have whatever you want from me. Whenever you want it. All you've got to do is ask." Jackson grins. "But what I actually meant was for you to just come here. We'll get you that hot water bottle. Some painkillers. Cocoon you in some blankets. See if that doesn't do the trick."

All the blood in my entire body surges to my cheeks. "Great. Now, I have horrible cramps, and I have to be embarrassed for turning down a fingerbang that wasn't even on offer."

Jackson leans across the plane to me and brushes my hair away from my face. "Baby, it's *always* on offer. All you've got to do is tell me you want it. And you never have to be embarrassed with me."

He presses a button on the side console. "Can we get some painkillers and a hot water bottle for Ms. Miller? Thank you."

Then he opens an upper cabinet and pulls out some blankets. He sits down on the sofa lining one wall of the cabin, one leg on the sofa, one leg on the floor. Manspreading, like always. “Come here, baby.”

I can’t say no to being in his arms one more time. So, I take the few steps over to him. He wraps me up in a blanket and then pulls me down to sit between his legs. One arm holds me tight across my chest, above my breasts. The other slowly rubs my stomach in lazy circles.

I’ve never let anyone else touch me like this. My stomach is a no-go zone. But Jackson has seen me naked from every angle, and if he wants to rub my soft tummy to ease my cramps, then who am I to stop him?

Shockingly fast, the flight attendant knocks and then comes into the main cabin.

“Here you are, sir,” she tells Jackson, handing him a hot water bottle before setting down a tray on the end table with a bottle of pills and a glass of water on it.

“Thanks, that’s great.”

“Will you be needing anything else, sir?”

“No thanks, we’re all good for now.”

Letting Jackson take care of me, I finally fall asleep in his arms.

When I wake up, I’m in a strange and wonderful new world.

Santa Barbara Raven-Con.

Jackson holds my hand as I gawk at all the people in amazing costumes. All the booths. The t-shirts. The signed pieces from the set of *Raven’s Ravine*. I could spend a month here, and it wouldn’t be long enough. Just breathing the air, alive with everything *Raven’s Ravine*, is fulfilling every one of my teenage dreams.

After only about fifteen minutes of living my best freaking life, Jackson squeezes my hand to get my attention. “Sorry, baby. But I need to go see someone. We can check out the rest of this stuff later.”

I wonder if Jackson’s just worried about being mobbed. I’ve seen the way people keep doing double-takes as their eyes pass over him. But he’s too famous. Everyone knows he would never go to Raven-Con, so no one seems to think it’s actually him.

Jackson leads me behind a row of booths lining one side of the huge hotel ballroom. It looks like several connected ballrooms with their panel dividers opened up. He leads me down a long hallway and then through another door. He doesn’t bother knocking.

“Shouldn’t you...” I start, about to tell him exactly how rude he’s being.
“Jacks! Holy shit! What the hell are you doing here?”

chapter seventy-four

selena

Jonas freaking VerKnauff is standing right in front of me. Time has been kind to him. Very, very kind. He still has a boyish look to his face, with lines just forming around his eyes. Holy shit, he's handsome in person.

"Hey, brother. It's been too long. I thought I'd finally come and check one of these things out after all these years." Jackson walks forward and wraps his arms around Jonas.

They hug for a long minute, and then Jonas pulls back, frowning. "Something wrong? Why are you really here?"

Jackson shrugs and then turns towards me. "Jonas, I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Selena Miller. Selena, this is Jonas."

Am I having an allergic reaction? Did my tongue suddenly grow three sizes? Because I can't seem to move it to create sounds. *Words. Words.* That's what they're called. *Words.*

"Selena?" Jackson asks, eyeing me.

"Hi... Jonas. It's ummm, it's really nice to meet you. I'm a... ummm... a really big fan."

Jonas smiles at me, and it's like a thousand double rainbows. My teenage self is completely losing her shit. "Hey, Selena. It's nice to meet you, too."

Jonas elbows Jackson in the ribs. "I think your girl like me better than you."

Nodding, I step forward. "I do! I am *such* a big fan."

"So, this is what she's like when she's star-struck. I wouldn't know." Jackson's deep laugh sounds next to me. "You're not even going to pretend it's a close call are you, baby?"

"Nope! Because it's not. Not even close," I mutter to him, my eyes on Jonas.

Just because I'm in love with the real Jackson doesn't mean I'm not obsessed with Jonas as an actor. Watching old episodes of *Raven's Ravine* with Jackson had me swooning over Vampire Vincent. But seeing Jonas in

the flesh has me back on Team Vampire Claude forever.

“Do you want to take a picture? I’m sure Jacks won’t mind,” Jonas offers.

“Yes! Yes, I do!” Reaching into my purse, I shove my phone at Jackson.
“Take *lots*.”

Jackson shakes his head, but he’s smiling. Or at least, I think he is. Because I can only see him in my peripheral vision. My eyes are glued to Jonas’ perfect face, perfect light blue eyes, and perfect swoop of dirty blonde hair. He’s barely aged. *Like a vampire*.

Jonas throws an arm over my shoulder and my inner department store catalogue model emerges. Again and again, I pose with him in an increasingly deranged series of unhinged positions. Arms are not supposed to bend that way. Hips are not supposed to work like that. Jackson dutifully takes picture after picture.

“How about one of all three of us?” Jonas asks, after a few minutes. “I’m going to need proof that Jackson Waters actually attended a Raven-Con.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Jackson mutters, as he steps forward to my other side and wraps his arm around my waist. With his long arm extended, he takes a few selfies of the three of us.

“Thank you so, so much, Jonas! You honestly have no idea what a huge thrill this was for me,” I tell him, holding his hand between both of mine.

Stop being crazy, Selena. Let the man go.

I order myself to let go of him, but I think I’m glitching. Because I do not, in fact, let go of Jonas VerKnauff’s hand.

“Don’t be so sure. I’m getting that it’s a pretty big deal for you. Almost as big of a deal as you getting Jacks here is for me. Thanks for bringing him to see me. He’s always too busy working to make it up north to the vineyard.”

I can’t lie to Jonas, even implicitly. “It was actually his idea. I didn’t even know where we were going. It was a surprise.”

“Huh, well, that’s interesting.” Jonas stares at me with his piercing blue eyes before turning to look at Jackson.

“Jonas, we’re ready for you,” says a tall redheaded man who sticks his head behind the black curtain to the stage.

“Shit, I guess I need to get out there.” Jonas runs his hand through his dark blonde hair, perfectly messing it up. “Are you going to stick around for a while? I’m stuck here until five. But we could get some dinner later?”

“We were going to walk around for a bit, and then head home.”

“Okay. Well, come up to the vineyard soon, will you? The kids miss their

Uncle Jacks.” Jonas grins. “And I guess there’s no chance of convincing you to do the panel with me? For old times’ sake. Be a hell of a lot more fun with you out there sitting next to me. Just like the old days.”

Jackson shakes his head. “I don’t think so, man.”

“Why not?” I demand, sounding squirrely as I frown up at Jackson.

“Jacks is too big to do a dumb panel at Raven-Con,” Jonas says, answering for him.

“That’s ridiculous! I don’t need to get back to L.A. tonight. So, I’d *love* to stick around and watch the panel and then have dinner with you, Jonas. Jackson is free to leave anytime, but I *can’t wait* to see the panel.”

“Selena...” Jackson’s voice is a low warning. One I ignore.

“If you’re so big and important and have big and important things to do back in L.A., then go. But you’re here now, and this isn’t stupid. Raven-Con isn’t stupid. Jonas isn’t stupid. I’m not stupid. And all the fans out there who love this show and love you aren’t stupid. Why wouldn’t you do something that would make so many people happy? Not doing it is what sounds stupid to me.”

Jonas lets out a long whistle. “The lady has a point...”

Jackson takes a couple of steps forward until he’s standing right in front of me. Catching my chin with his hand, he tilts my face up to his. “You want me to do the panel?”

“Yes. You owe a lot to these people and to this show. It would be nice of you to give something back to all the people who are out there still supporting you.”

He nods at me and then turns to Jonas. “I guess I’m doing the panel, then.”

The redhead appears from behind the curtain again. “Jonas, we really need to get started. The crowd is getting restless.”

“I’m so excited! Okay, I’m going to go around and find a seat at the back somewhere. I’ll meet up with you two after.”

“No way,” Jackson growls at me. He pulls out his wallet and peels off a few hundred-dollar bills and then walks over and hands them to the tall redhead. “Can you go find a seat in the front row and put her in it? Offer cash or a selfie with me and Jonas, whatever you need to do. Just empty a seat in the front row and put her in it.”

“You got it, Mr. Waters.” The redhead looks at me. “Please come with me, ma’am.”

Nodding, I walk towards the black curtain. When I pass Jackson, I press my hands against his chest and lean up and press my lips softly against his. “You’re a good man, Jackson Waters.”

With a smile, I slip through the curtain. I could swear that I hear Jonas laughing and Jackson grumbling until all I hear is the excited crowd around me.



CelebritEYES: A Raven’s Ravine reunion? Our favorite vampire brothers reunited at last... #elevatorgirl was there too!

chapter seventy-five

selena

Jackson's minion empties out a seat in the front row in exchange for a fifteen minute one-on-one and photo with Jackson and Jonas. Everyone in the front seat wanted to take the redhead up on the offer, but since I just needed the one seat, only one lucky fan got it. I would say that I don't get trading a seat the guy probably bought months ago for fifteen minutes with Jackson, but I completely get it. I would give just about anything for more time with Jackson. Even fifteen minutes and a few more pictures to remember him by.

I stand up and clap along with everyone else when Jonas is announced. I stay standing because I know what's coming next.

The crowd behind me goes wild when they announce a surprise guest. And they almost blow the roof off of this place when they announce that it's Jackson freaking Waters.

I have no right to be, but I'm so damn proud of him. Jackson walks out with a dark frown on his face, but when his blue eyes meet mine, he smiles and relaxes as I go crazy clapping and jumping. I must look insane. And I don't care.

Jackson waves to the crowd and then takes a seat next to Jonas. The show runner who made Jackson and Jonas both household names sits next to them. And next to her is the author of the books the show was based on. I've read all of her YA paranormal series. And loved every word. I wonder if I can meet her after?

I'm not surprised when all eyes and almost all the questions are aimed at Jackson. No one gets that better than me. My eyes are *always* on him.

But the number of times he finds me in the crowd and smiles at me has my heart racing. And I see this man all day, except when I'm at the bakery kitchen. I fall asleep in his arms every night. And it's still not enough.

My cheeks burn every time he catches my eyes. I don't know this Jackson. The cocky, thoughtful movie star. The celebrity. I know the guy I got stuck in an elevator with, the one I tossed protein balls at like he was a

dog. I know the country boy from Western Springs who fits right in back at home on his family's farm. The one always joking around with his brothers. The one whose best friend is a woman I truly want to be friends with. That's the man I know. That's the man I love.

And that's the man I have to say goodbye to in about ten hours.

The clock is ticking down to my broken heart. That's a joke. It's already broken. But having Jackson still around is sort of keeping it taped together before it breaks into a million little pieces. And that tape is going to be ripped off tonight.

The panel is amazing. Probably more as a *Raven's Ravine* superfan than as Jackson Waters' pretend girlfriend. Because as a pretend girlfriend, all I can see is how handsome he looks and how far away from me he feels.

After the panel, Jackson crooks his finger at me for me to come up on stage. When a well-meaning security guard tries to stop me, Jackson bites his head off like a total asshole until I press my hand on his chest and shake my head at him. Then he apologizes and gives the guy a few hundred bucks. Jackson always thinks he can fix everything with money.

Part of me wishes it was possible. Because at midnight I'm going to have two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars in my bank account. And I would give every cent back for more time with Jackson. I'd give anything for him to see how good we could be together. And not just the sex. I love being with him. We have fun together. We can talk to each other about almost everything. I love his family. I love Oats and Lily. I love Western Springs. We could build a life there. Or here in L.A. I want to scream at Jackson to wake up and see that we could be the real thing.

But he's never going to see me as anything more than pretend. I'm temporary. I'm convenient. Soon, Jackson will be in Australia, and I'll still be here in L.A., missing him.

Jackson will never think of me again, but I'm not sure how I'm ever going to think of anyone else. I'm not sure how I move on from Jackson Waters. I honestly don't even want to.

But I have to. Because I can't waste the rest of my life pining for a man that the entire world thinks is out of my league. Maybe I can just be an old spinster baker?

But I want kids. I want a family. I want Jackson.

But people don't get to have everything they want, do they?

I should just be grateful that Jackson Waters ever gave me a second look.

I should be grateful for the two months I got to spend with him. For the *benefits*. For how good he makes me feel every time he touches me.

Maybe one day, I will just be grateful. But right now, it hurts too damn much.

“Selena? Baby?” I look around when I hear my name. I zoned out while Jackson was talking to the show runner about old times. But the intimidating woman in her late fifties with long silver hair has turned away now and is talking to the author, instead of Jackson.

“Sorry. What’s up?”

“We’re going to meet Jonas for dinner at seven. But I thought you and me could walk around the convention floor for a bit before then.”

Biting my lip, I glance behind us at the dozens and dozens of fans who haven’t left the room yet because they’re hoping to get close to Jackson. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“You’ve been telling me for months how obsessed you are with Raven-Con, and now you don’t even want to check it out?” Jackson looks hurt, and I hate it.

“Of course, I do! Coming to Raven-Con is the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” When Jackson frowns, I know he’s not happy. But I don’t know what I said. He’s the one who brought me here. Why isn’t he happy that I’m enjoying it? “You know how much I’d love to spend all day here exploring. I could *live* at Raven-Con. But are you sure you can go out there? People were staring at you before, but I could tell they didn’t believe it was actually you. Now they *know* it’s you.”

His jaw loosens, and he lets out a big whoosh of air. “Thanks for looking out for me, baby. I talked to security, and they’re going to send a few people out on the floor with us to make sure things don’t get out of control. I’d never put you in danger.”

I smile up at Jackson because I can’t not smile up at him when he’s this adorable. “I’m not worried about *me*. You know I’d blend right in with the obsessive fans. I wish I’d known we were coming here. I would have brought my *Raven’s Ravine* t-shirt. Everyone here would be so freaking jealous.”

“No fucking way. That shirt’s way too tight on you,” Jackson growls at me.

Pink stains my cheeks. Right. The shirt Jackson gave me is too tight for me to wear in public.

Jackson wraps his arm around me and pulls me tight against his side. He

leans down and whispers in my ear. “Baby, that shirt looks way too good on you. No one’s seeing you in it but me. I’ll buy you a new t-shirt, baby. I promise. Ready to go?”

Jackson takes my hand and leads me to the back of the auditorium and out onto the convention floor.

It’s complete chaos. People are everywhere. And now they know for sure that it’s actually Jackson.

People come up to us asking Jackson for signatures and pictures. And he’s kind and patient with everyone. He only lets go of my hand if he needs it to hold on to whatever he’s signing. And then he picks it right back up again. We’re not going anywhere fast at this rate of stopping for ten minutes every few feet. But meeting Jackson is making fans like me so freaking happy that I couldn’t mind if I tried. Even if I desperately want to see all the booths and displays myself.

Jackson must be getting a sore hand from signing his name over and over again. And I can tell he’s getting tired of smiling, because the smiles are getting a little less big. A little less genuine.

My eyes nearly bug out when a tall, beautiful redhead tugs her shirt down to show her impressive boobs in a black lace bra.

“Hi, Jackson. Will you sign my tits?” She leans forward, pushing her chest out towards him.

I want to slap her right on her perfect boobs.

Jackson jerks his head towards me. “Sorry, but my girl wouldn’t like it. I’m happy to sign any merch or posters, though.”

I would very much *not* like it. But I’m also not his girl. Or at least I won’t be in a few hours.

The redhead doesn’t seem impressed, but she gets a t-shirt signed and then moves on. Probably to get someone else to sign her boobs.

Honestly, good for her. I wish I was brave enough to just walk up to a guy and ask him to sign my breasts. Maybe then I wouldn’t be too afraid to ask Jackson why he keeps torturing me like this, acting like we’re together when it’s all going to end at midnight. But I’m way too chicken to do that.

chapter seventy-six

selena

Jackson takes a right in the black Range Rover that miraculously showed up at the hotel for him, as he drives us to meet Jonas for dinner.

“Will you sign my breast?” I ask out of nowhere.

I’m tired of the silence and awkwardness between us. I want to be bold and brave like that redhead at Raven-Con. Even if the thought of Jackson signing her boob makes me taste acid.

Jackson’s eyes fly from the road ahead of us to my face. “What?”

“You heard me. I stole one of Jonas’ sharpies. I want you to put your signature on my boob.”

“How much of that bottle of rosé did you drink when we were getting ready for dinner?”

After the convention ended for the day at five, we walked up to the front desk of the hotel hosting the convention and there was a room key waiting for us. Changes of clothes and toiletries were already in the room. And a bottle of rosé was in a fancy silver ice bucket. In Jackson’s life, those kinds of things just happen.

“I’m not drunk.”

“Are you sure? Because you just asked me to put my signature on your tits, baby.”

“Just one. Not both.”

“Hoping Jonas’ll sign the other one at dinner?”

“A girl can dream.”

“Baby, are you trying to start a fight?”

“Why would this start a fight? I’m just telling you what I want. I don’t get what the big deal is.”

“I’m not signing your tit. Singular. Either one of them.”

“Why not? You’ve come all over them. What’s the difference?”

“The difference is we both enjoyed when I did that. *A lot.*”

“I’d enjoy this, too.”

Jackson gives me a wary glance. "It's not happening, baby."

"You'll come all over my boobs, but you won't do this for me when I ask you to. I'll say please?"

"No. But I'll come on your tits again anytime. All you have to do is ask."

"Maybe Jonas will?" I whisper, wondering if I'm brave enough or afraid enough to trigger the nuclear option so I don't have to wait and watch the clock turn to midnight. Or watch Jackson walk away from me when it does.

"Baby, you better mean signing your tits and not coming on them. And if you ask Jonas to sign your tits at dinner, I'm going to bend you over my knee and spank you."

"No, you're not."

"Try me, baby."

"I don't need to. If you bent me over your knee and spanked me, you'd have sex with me. And you said you wouldn't have sex with me unless I asked. I'm haven't asked."

"I thought bringing you to Raven-Con was going to be fun."

"It was. I loved it."

"You're really not acting like it, baby. Maybe we should just go home?"

"I already told you. You're free to go at any time. But I'm having dinner with Jonas. It'll probably be less awkward to have him sign my boobs if you're not there, actually."

"One, over my dead body are you asking another man to sign your tits. And two, don't think I didn't notice that you apparently want Jonas to sign both of your tits and you only want me to sign one. Why are you doing this, baby? Why don't you just talk to me? I'm right here if there's anything you want to talk about."

"Is there anything *you* want to talk about?"

He looks over at me like maybe he's going to say something. But then his jaw tightens, and he shuts down. "No."

"Then I guess we're all good. What time does the convention open tomorrow? Maybe the hot British librarian won't be too famous and important to sign my boobs?"

"I'm really not sure why you're trying to piss me off right now. But it's working, baby."

"I know. Because I know you. I know what makes you tick. And I know what pisses you off."

"And you're using all that knowledge to pick a fight with me right now?"

I shrug. I know exactly what I'm doing, but I don't know why I'm doing it. I've been all churned up over him for the last two weeks, and honestly it's been even longer than that. I've been churned up about Jackson since the night he showed up at my place and said we should date. Jackson has seemed totally fine through all of it. Maybe he's been a little growlier the last two weeks. Maybe he's done a little more jaw clenching. But he's fine. I'm tired of being the only mess. I'm tired of being the only one it matters to that, after tonight, we're never going to see each other again. Maybe if we get into a big fight, I'll be so angry I won't even notice when midnight comes?

Doubt it. But it seems worth trying.

Neither of us says anything until Jackson hands the valet his keys outside of some fancy restaurant that someone back in L.A. probably picked out for us. It's the kind with valets, white tablecloths, and sommeliers. I would have picked tacos from a food truck because good tacos are the one thing you can't get in Western Springs.

Knowing it will piss him off, I open my door and slide out before he can get to me. I try to stomp up the stairs to the restaurant, but Jackson catches my hand and hauls me back against him. He wraps his arms around me, pulling my back tight to his chest.

"Jonas and I have been friends for more than ten years, Selena."

"And?"

"Please don't make this dinner end with me punching him. You know I don't have that many friends, baby."

"Fine. I won't ask him to sign my boobs. But only if you promise to do it when we get back to the hotel room. I didn't bring my stolen sharpie with me, so you can't do it now, anyway."

"No." Jackson squeezes me before I can argue. His arms wrapped around me like this always make me think of when he tried to save me from choking. But this time I don't smile when I think of it. Because after tonight there aren't going to be any new stories. No new jokes between him and me for us to look back at and laugh about.

"But if you behave yourself at dinner like a good girl, and you don't come to your fucking senses before then, I'll sign your ass when we get back to the hotel."

Interesting. "How do I know you won't back out after dinner?"

"I'm promising you I'll do it. And I'm never breaking a promise to you. Not ever."

He promised me this was going to be fake and that I'd be free of him after two months. I know he's keeping those promises.

He also promised I didn't have to have sex with him, but I guess he kept that promise, too. I never *had* to have sex with him. I *wanted* to. I *still* want to.

"I can't see my own ass, Jackson."

"You can see it in a mirror. And I'll take a picture for you. I'm not putting my name on your body anywhere anyone but you and me can see it."

"I want your face in the picture next to my ass."

"What the hell, baby? Absolutely not."

I figured that one was a long shot. He's probably worried I'll blackmail him with it or something. If only I had something big enough on him to blackmail Jackson into giving me a chance at making this real. But I have nothing. He's always been a gentleman to me, even when he threw me over his knee and spanked me. Even when he fucked me. I liked all of it. I wanted all of it. I wanted all of him.

"You have a deal, Jackson Waters." I hold my hand over my shoulder to shake on it. But Jackson turns me around in his arms and presses his lips against mine. He kisses me slowly and softly. Like I haven't been desperate for him to do more than give me a peck on the forehead for weeks. I hate myself for the way I melt in his arms.

When Jackson lifts his head from mine, he stares into my eyes.

"Deal, baby. Now be on your best behavior like a good girl or I'm not signing that perfect ass of yours." He leans in and whispers in my ear.

"Unless you want me to write my name in cum all over your body. I'm happy to do that, even if you're naughty. All you have to do is ask."

"Like your aim's that good," I mutter.

Jackson gives me his huge movie star smile. "I promise to practice as long as it takes."

He only has until midnight to learn cursive with his dick, and there's no way that's happening.

Jackson lets me go, then he takes my hand, and we walk inside to meet Jonas together.

chapter seventy-seven

jackson

Selena's mood flips like a switch the minute we sit down across from Jonas. She's nothing but sassy to me lately, but she's so sweet to Jonas that my fists are itching to punch him and mess up his perfect fucking hair. At first, it surprised me that she didn't try to sit next to him. But she couldn't gaze at him adoringly across the table if she was sitting next to him, without getting a neck cramp.

Jonas is so fucking charming. And it's never pissed me off more than it does sitting at this table while the woman I love acts like I'm not here and tries to flirt with my friend. Fine, maybe she's not actually flirting. But that's what it fucking feels like to me. He has her hanging on every fucking word.

I have my arm hanging over her shoulders, trying to look casual. But it's actually to stop Selena from leaning farther across the table towards him. No one but me should be staring down at the inches of pretty white breasts on display tonight. The little black dress I had delivered for her is a little too small and a little too tight in all the right places. It's sleeveless and has a deep V-neckline over her tits and then the stretchy fabric sits tight against her ass and tits. The way she fills it out, it only goes down to her mid-thigh. And shorter when she sits. If I don't get a hold of myself, this dress is going to have me begging for sex by the end of the night. I told Selena she didn't have to beg, but I know I'm going to have to. I'm going to be on my fucking knees, begging and pleading. And I'll happily stay down there and lick her pretty wet pussy to convince her to let me put my dick between her thighs.

No. I can't do any of that.

As much as I want it, sex is off the table. Unless she asks for it. I have to keep it together.

I really need her to fucking ask for it.

The restaurant isn't what I would have picked. It's too fancy, too old-fashioned with white tablecloths and dark-stained wood. I'd rather be eating tacos with Selena at a food truck across town. But it's expensive, and it's private. No one's getting out their camera phones to take pictures of the

Raven's Ravine cast reunion happening at our table.

"Why don't you tell Selena about the time we almost got arrested in Rome?"

"I'm sure she'd rather hear it from you," I mutter.

"That's not true, *Nugget*. I'd love it if you actually *talked* to me. I'm going to go to the ladies' room. Maybe you can use the time to think of something to say to me."

Selena nudges me until I stand up to let her out of the booth. Then she slides out. She squeezes my arm before rushing off to the bathroom. It takes everything in me not to follow her and stand outside the door until she comes back out.

Jonas lets out a low whistle as we watch her slip behind a door at the back of the restaurant.

"What's going on there?"

Turning back to glare at him, I take a big pull of my beer. "How the fuck am I supposed to know?"

When Jonas raises an eyebrow at me, I press the palms of both hands against my eyes and rub hard. "Sorry, man."

"It's all good. You do something to piss her off?"

"Apparently so."

"Any idea what it was?"

"No fucking clue."

"Sounds like she wants you to talk to her about something."

"Easier said than done. We're just having an off day. And you don't have to be such a charming piece of shit making her eat out of your hand like that."

"Come on, you know I'd never steal your girl. Even if I could. And not just this one. I could have stolen all of them."

"It's like you want me to punch you? I'm already on edge, and you're *trying* to piss me off?"

"Just tell her you love her and go down on her until she can't remember why she was pissed in the first place. Always works for me."

"And that's why you have a million kids."

"You always wanted a million kids, too. You want them with her?"

Nodding, I don't even need to think it over. I want Selena to be the mother of my children. Maybe in my head I've never thought much past getting her to admit she loves me and getting her to stay with me. But I do. I want it all. I want the big wedding back home on the farm. I want the

marriage. The partnership. I want the babies. I want the life. I want everything. And I want it with her.

“Have you told her that? I bet she’d be less pissed at you if she knew you were counting down the days until you can knock her up.”

“It’s *complicated*.”

“The best women always are.”

“She’s the only woman I want.”

“You need to get better at getting her over being pissed at you. Because trust me, a smart woman can always find something to be pissed at you about. But then you get to have make-up sex.” Jonas shrugs like it’s a fair trade.

Having any kind of sex with Selena would be a fair trade for just about anything in my books.

“And make even more babies?” I shake my head.

We’re the same age, and it seems like Jonas has everything figured out. He’s got a wife and a million adorable kids back home waiting for him. And I’ve got a woman I love who can barely look at me, a big house in L.A. that doesn’t feel like home, my family thousands of miles away, and a decade in Australia to look forward to. I feel like everything in my life went wrong somehow.

When Selena gets back, she has a smile on her face again. I’m not sure how long it’s going to last, but I’ll be damned if I don’t try to keep it there. I’ll do anything to make her happy, but I’m starting to think maybe I’m the thing making her unhappy.

When I stand up, Selena slides back into the booth and then I sit back down, blocking her in again. Am I forcing her to sit on the inside of the booth because I know she won’t be able to run away from me? Maybe. Do I have any regrets? Not a single one.

Wrapping my arm around her shoulders again, I pull her tight to my side.

“So, which one of you is going to tell me the Rome story?” Selena asks, still smiling.

“Jacks. Definitely Jacks. He tells it way better than I do.”

Selena raises her perfect brown eyebrow at me and nods. “Let’s hear it, Nugget.”

I look both ways, like I’m afraid someone might hear us. Then I lean closer to her and tighten my arm over her shoulders. She rolls her shoulders as she snuggles into me this time. Then she stares up at me like her life

depends on hearing what I'm about to say. I've never suffered from performance anxiety in my life. But the look she's giving me is a lot of fucking pressure.

Selena laughs and cringes at all the right parts while I tell her about the time Jonas got us invited to a poker game in Rome that turned out to be run by the mob and that police just happened to be doing a sting on that night. Jonas punctuates the story with his own commentary as I go. He's trying to make me look better than I do. But I was a young, dumb kid back then. I still feel like a dumb kid when it comes to Selena. And I really need to do something about that.

Dinner lasts for over three hours, with Selena staring adoringly across the table at Jonas. But she's snuggled into me with her head on my shoulder. Every so often she tilts her head to look back at me and if I leaned down a couple of inches, I could press my lips against hers. She's fucking killing me.

We both hug Jonas tightly when we say goodbye at the end of the night.

"Come visit us on the vineyard. Soon, Jacks."

"I know. I know. We will. I promise."

"You need to actually go though. And you need to go back to the farm soon," Selena says with a bite in her voice.

"I know, baby. We will."

She frowns at me when I say that, like she has no intention of going anywhere with me. So that's how the rest of tonight's going to go, I guess.

She's quiet while we put Jonas in a cab and wait for the valet to pull around with our rented Range Rover.

When I see her shiver, I pull her against me. She presses her head against my chest while I rub her arms up and down.

Once we're in the car driving back to the hotel, she stares out the window not talking to me. Or even looking at me.

"I'm just going to say this now. Because I don't know when I'll have another chance. *You're an idiot.*"

Yeah, I was right about how tonight was going to go. And I hate it. "Nice, baby. Am I an idiot about anything in particular, or just generally?"

"You're an idiot about *you*. You're not happy in L.A. I'm not saying you're miserable and crying yourself to sleep every night. But you're *not* happy. You need to spend more time at the farm. With your family. Go visit Jonas on his vineyard. Be a good friend. Be an uncle to his kids. Show up. People are out there loving you and missing you, and you're sitting alone in

your big house in L.A. And don't make Lily come and see you on sets and be ignored by everyone. It hurts her feelings. Go see her in Western Springs. Did you see how happy your dad was to have you home? Your dad's a silver fox, by the way. How is no one talking about that? Oh my god! And your brothers miss you. They love you so freaking much! Can you believe that Jameson was *twelve* when you moved away. Twelve! You need to get your priorities straight, Jackson. For them. But for you, too. No one who cares about you gives a shit how much money you've made or how many movies you've been in. When is it going to be enough? You get one life, Jackson. And you're wasting the hell out of yours. Okay, I'm done. I don't want to talk about this anymore. I said what I needed to say. Your family loves you too much to say it. But someone had to."

"What the hell, baby? You just dropped like a dozen truth bombs on me. You think I'm not happy? You think my dad's *hot*? And who the fuck was ignoring Lily on set?"

And most importantly, what the hell does that mean that my family loves me too much to tell me this. Does that mean she *doesn't* love me?

The worst part is that I know she's right. For the last fifteen years, I've barely come home. I've missed Christmases and birthdays. I've missed everything.

"I told you I don't want to talk about this anymore."

"I don't fucking care, baby. Start talking."

"I already said what I needed to say. You should try it sometime."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"It means you should just talk about things. It's better to just be open about everything."

"Selena, if you've got something else to say, then just say it."

"I told you I said what I needed to say."

And then she shuts me out for the rest of the drive. The valet at our hotel opens her door before I can get to her, but she lets me take her hand as we walk up to our hotel room.

Being with her and having her mad at me like this is fucking killing me. Today did not go as planned. I knew she was going to fangirl all over Jonas, but I didn't think it would bother me like it did. It's one thing to be jealous of another man touching her, but to be this jealous over her being a fan of my friend is fucking ridiculous.

And what she said in the car. What the hell? Where did that come from?

Selena is sweet most of the time, unless she's drunk. And she's not drunk tonight. I kept track of how many times her wine glass was refilled. She and Jonas split a bottle, and that was it.

She's apparently over being pissed at me once we're back inside our hotel room, but she still feels a million miles away from me. She pours us both a glass of the rosé that I had delivered for her. And then she paces back and forth in front of the floor to ceiling windows. I just wanted something convenient, so we're staying at the same hotel where Raven-Con is being held. It's the same generic hotel room as I've had in a dozen different countries. Dark durable carpet, off-white walls, white sheets, granite bathroom. But it's the honeymoon suite because that's the best room the hotel had left. The towel swans are enough to give me nightmares.

"Jonas is really so sweet. I honestly can't believe it. He is such a talented actor. To be so sweet and yet be so convincing as a possessive vampire," Selena says breathlessly as she paces.

She's gone from snuggled into me at dinner to telling me off in the car and back to swooning over one of my oldest friends. I can't fucking keep up. She's all over the place tonight, and it has me on edge.

"Should I be concerned about what I witnessed today? Are you going to try to trade me in for Jonas?"

chapter seventy-eight

selena

“*N*o, of course not,” I tell him, not explaining more.

I don't remind him I won't have the chance to trade him in, not that I ever would. Because the second the contract is over, Jackson's going to be out of my life. He'll be on his way to Australia with Elisha Bell or one of those women from the fancy bathroom. And if Echo Park is a different world from Jackson's place in the Hollywood hills, Australia is another universe.

Dinner lasted at least three hours. Jonas let me ask every *Raven's Ravine* question I've been too embarrassed to ask Jackson. And then they just talked. They talked about old times. They made fun of each other. It was so good to see Jackson around another person who loves him. It never feels like that in L.A. In L.A., he sees his agent and publicist. Everything's for business.

I didn't mean to blurt out what I said to him in the car driving back. But someone sure as hell had to. His family might love him too much to say it. But I love him too much *not* to say it.

When I stop pacing to sip my wine, he's staring at me from across the room. Jackson's sitting at the desk, and I'm pacing back and forth between the windows like both of us are too afraid to go anywhere near the king size bed.

“How come you never treated me like you did Jonas today? You had me all to yourself for six hours in that elevator.”

I smile at him. It feels like a sad smile, and I wonder if he even notices that. “I told you, I was Team Vampire Claude, all the way. And I kind of had other things on my mind when we were in the elevator, like peeing and possibly dying. And then once you pee in front of a guy? That kind of progresses the relationship a few thousand percent past big fan.”

“Well, a guy might like to get that kind of attention now and again...” he mutters, not looking at me.

“The last thing you need is another adoring fan. You need real people in your life. Real ones you aren't paying.” I frown as I realize the truth. “So, I guess that doesn't include me, actually.”

“*I’m not paying you.*”

“You’re kind of paying me. Two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand dollars. And whatever ridiculous amount you spent on the overpriced bakery that I’m not keeping. And the massive emerald earrings I’m wearing right now.”

His jaw clenches tight. “*I’m not paying you.*”

“Yes, you are. And it’s weird. But things have been weird between us the whole time I’ve known you. We went from trapped in an elevator to pretending to be in a relationship. That’s not normal, Jackson.”

“I can’t go back and undo any of it. I’m not sure I’d want to, if I could.”

“No one’s asking you to.” I stop pacing. “Thanks for today. It was... amazing. The perfect... *Nevermind*. I’m going to go have a shower.”

“You want me to come in there with you?”

“No, thanks.”

I take my time in the shower, thinking. I’m tired of this tension with Jackson. This is our last night together, and I don’t want to spend it like this. I don’t want this to end, but I definitely don’t want it to end like this.

When I come out of the bathroom with my hair wrapped up in a thick white towel and a fluffy robe wrapped around my body, Jackson’s taken up pacing back and forth across the windows where I left off.

“You should have a hot shower. You look stressed. The water pressure is chef’s kiss.” I make the chef’s kiss kissing motion with my hands, pressing my fingers to my lips and then pulling them away, making a smacking sound.

Jackson actually looks *pissed*, but I figure saying that will only start a fight.

“Do you need anything else from in there before I go in?”

“No, I’m all good. And thanks.”

Jackson grunts and stalks off towards the shower.

After taking off my robe, I take my time rubbing lotion on every inch of my body. I don’t care that Jackson might walk in on me naked any second. I kind of hope he does.

But I’m fully moisturized and back in my hotel robe by the time the bathroom door opens again.

When Jackson walks out of the bathroom, with a white hotel towel slung low over his hips and drops of water dripping down his chest, I can’t take my eyes off him. But I have things to do that aren’t just staring at him. I stand up off the king-size bed and pick up the sharpie I stole from Jonas.

“I’m ready for you to sign my ass.”

“Baby, I’ll give you whatever you want. But I don’t get why you’re doing this. What exactly do you think me signing your ass is going to accomplish?”

“Do you feel guilty or something?”

“No.”

He looks like he feels guilty. Probably for having sex with me. Maybe for making me fall in love with him and throwing me away at midnight.

“Actually, I don’t even want to know. Here’s the sharpie.”

“Are you sure you’re sure about this?”

“Are you not going to do it? You promised.”

“Baby, I’m going to give you whatever you want. I just don’t get why you want this.”

“It doesn’t matter.” I pull up my robe until my right ass cheek is hanging out. I stand up on my tiptoes with my right foot to raise my ass. “Sign it, Jackson.”

“This... feels wrong.”

“It’s not wrong if I want it.”

“I’m not sure about that, baby. Because I have no idea why you want this.”

“Please, Jackson.”

I expect him to just lean down and give my ass a cursory swipe with the pen, like I watched him do a hundred times this afternoon. But Jackson never does what I expect. He kneels down behind me and presses his hands to my hips. He holds onto me tightly. Then I hear his teeth bite into hard plastic while his left hand still digs into my hip.

When he rubs his palm over my ass cheek, I don’t need to see it to know that it doesn’t stay still. You can’t bounce a quarter off my ass. I’d probably just end up with a bruise and be twenty-five cents richer if anyone ever tried.

Jackson rubs his hand over my ass cheek a few times. I can feel his warm breath on my butt and curling down the backs of my thighs.

The room is so tense, it’s like I can feel the crackle of electricity between us.

“Last chance to tell me not to do this, baby.”

“I *want* you to do it.”

Jackson presses one hand against my ass, and then I feel the tip of the sharpie dragging over my skin.

“I put it where no one else can see it, but me. Before you argue with me, I’m not fucking marking you where anyone but me is going to see it, Selena.”

“Are you done? I want to see it.”

Jackson squeezes my ass in a way that is not completely necessary since the signing is done. But then he stands up behind me and steps back. I walk over to the big mirror across from the bathroom. When I look over my shoulder, I see Jackson’s messy signature scrawled on my ass. And I wish I hadn’t had to beg and nag him to do it. I wish he wanted to claim me like this. To make me his. I wouldn’t care how he wanted to mark me, so long as he wanted to keep me.

“Happy?”

I nod.

“You don’t look happy, baby. You look like you’re about to cry. Talk to me. I promise, whatever it is, I’ll fix it.”

“What do you want, Jackson?”

His face closes off. He clenches his jaw. His eyebrows pull down over eyes that will barely look at me. “What do you mean, what do I want?”

“I want you to tell me what you want.”

“I want you to not look like you’re about to cry. I want things not to be like this between us. I want them to be how they were at the farm. Easy. I want you teasing me. Laughing at me.”

“You want us to be friends?”

“I want you not to be hurting. And I’ll do whatever it takes to make that happen.”

“Do you want to fuck me tonight?”

“Baby, I always want to fuck you.”

“I don’t want to talk anymore, Jackson.”

“So, you’re just not going to talk to me?”

I don’t answer. I don’t know what to say. I only know what I need right now. What I need is to be in his arms and feel him touch me one last time.

Turning away from him, I walk over to the bed. I pull the towel off of my wet hair and toss it over a chair. And then I slowly slip my robe off and do the same with it. I pull the covers back and climb into bed, pulling the duvet back up to my waist and leaving my breasts where he can see them.

“I don’t want to talk. I want you to make me come.”

Jackson’s eyes snap from my breasts to my face. “You’re telling me you want sex, baby?”

I nod.

“Make me come, Jackson. I want you to make me come.”

“Baby, I’m always going to give you whatever you want. Whatever you need.”

He’s lying, even if he doesn’t know it. The thing I want most from him is his heart. And he’s never going to give that to me.

He wants things to go back to before things got complicated. Before I fell in love with him. Only he doesn’t know how long I’ve been in love with him. It feels like I’ve loved him forever. But I’ve only known him for two months. And the six hours in the elevator.

I shouldn’t feel how I do about him in so little time. He thinks of me as a friend. He likes having sex with me. And if sex is what he’s willing to give me, then I’m going to take it. I want to spend my last night with Jackson in his arms. Because I know after tonight that I’m never going to feel his arms around me again.

chapter seventy-nine

jackson

*A*fter I shut the bathroom door, I don't lock it. I'm hoping she barges in here and jumps in the shower with me, demanding I make her come three times before the water gets cold. But she never comes in to join me.

After showering and brushing my teeth, I towel dry and then wrap a towel across my hips. I should throw on some underwear, but I'm too tired to care. And it's not like it's going to matter, anyway. I haven't touched Selena in weeks. She hasn't wanted me to. All she had to do was ask, and I would have broken my vow not to fuck her again until we clear things up between us.

The minute I'm out of the bathroom, she hands me a sharpie and orders me to sign her damn ass.

I know I'm not supposed to like it. But I love my name on her soft flesh. I want to fuck her from behind and see her ass bounce with my name written all over it every time I thrust hard into her.

When she asks me to make her come, I'm lost.

It's all fucking over.

I'm across the room so fast my head spins. I slip my towel off my hips and toss it on top of hers. Then I pull the duvet back and lay down next to her, half on top of her. Then I pull her against me, wrapping my arms around her. She's so small and so soft. So fucking perfect. And fucking naked. This woman is trying to kill me.

She rolls her hips, pressing her thigh into me. My dick instantly reacts to her touch. It would be so easy to just slide over a few inches and push inside her. I'm so fucking desperate for it.

"Are you sure about this, baby?"

When she nods, my whole body feels it. "I want it, Jackson. I want you to make me come. I want this."

"All you ever had to do was ask, baby." Leaning back, I pull all the extra pillows out from behind her head and push her down flat onto her back. Then I lean over her, splitting my weight between pinning her down onto the bed and pushing onto my elbows.

I press my lips against hers in the first proper kiss I've had in more than two weeks. The kind of kiss where I don't have to stop or slow down or worry about who's watching us. Like always, she lights a fire in me that there's no hope of putting out. My dick is rock hard, and I roll it against her thigh.

"Tell me what you want. You want me to eat out that pretty pussy? You want this hard dick inside you, baby?"

She darts up, her forehead bonking into mine.

"Ouch."

"Sorry! Sorry!" Selena rubs her hand over my forehead, soothing the pain. "Can we do... other stuff? Remember, I have my period."

"Who the fuck cares?" I mutter, letting my hand drift down to play with her nipple.

She arches her back, pressing her nipple against my fingers. She's breathing heavy now.

"It'll be... messy."

"Baby, I want you clean, dirty, messy. I want you every single way."

"But we're in a hotel. The sheets. The bedding... This was a bad idea."

"This was a great idea. I need you, baby."

"I don't know. Maybe we shouldn't..."

"Baby, do you want this dick inside you, stretching you out, or not?"

She bites her lip and nods.

"Then I don't give a fuck about the mess or about anything else. I'll buy the hotel some new towels. I'll pay an extra cleaning fee. Baby, I really don't fucking care. If you want me inside you, then I'm gonna be inside you."

"Okay, okay. I... want that, too. Be right back." When she tries to pull away from me, I hold her still.

"Where the hell are you going?"

"Bathroom."

"You just got out of the bathroom."

"And now I need to go back."

"Why?"

"It's... personal."

"Baby, there's nothing you could tell me that's going to make me want to fuck you any less."

"I need to take out my menstrual cup."

"Your what now?"

“It’s like a tampon, sort of. But made of silicone. And it sort of catches my period blood.”

“Huh.” I mull over this new information. “And it’s up there now?”

She nods.

“And I can’t fuck you with it in there?”

She shakes her head.

I nod down at her, clear on what needs to happen. “I’ll take it out.”

Her eyes flare. “It’ll make a mess…”

“Baby, how many times do I need to tell you I don’t give a shit about the mess? I want you. I want every part of you. There’s nothing that’s going to scare me away from wanting to fuck you, got it?”

Pushing back off the mattress, I push myself up onto my knees and toss the white duvet back until I see all of her. Beautiful face, shiny dark hair, big naked tits, miles of soft skin and sexy curves, and a little trim landing strip of dark hair along her pussy.

Reaching over to the chair by the bed, I grab our towels and her robe.

“Lift your hips,” I tell her, folding them all in half.

When she does, I place them underneath her hips.

She’s naked in front of me, and so fucking perfect it hurts my eyes to look at her.

“You’re so beautiful,” I whisper.

She reaches out, trailing her knuckles down my stomach and taking my cock in her hand. She wraps her hand around my length and strokes me.

“Careful, baby, or I’m going to come all over that pretty stomach. Add some splatter paint to those pretty tiger stripes on your belly.”

chapter eighty

jackson

“*M*aybe that’s what I want you to do?” She’s so fucking desperate for my dick she’s already breathing hard.

I shake my head. “I know you too, baby. You want this hard cock inside you, filling up that tight little pussy of yours.”

She gulps, and then nods. “I do. Jackson, it’s been so long. I need you inside me.”

“Yeah, you do. I’m right here, baby. I’ll give you everything you need. You’re going to come so hard for me aren’t you, baby?”

She nods.

Straddling her with my knees, I lean down and kiss her again. Hard and needy. My tongue demanding what my dick’s about to claim from her.

Then I rock back onto my knees and rub my hands together, staring down at her perfect pussy. “Okay, what are we doing here? How do I get it out?”

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Baby, nothing on this earth could make me not want you. I’m hard just thinking about how wet you’re going to feel tonight. Like a damn slip and slide.”

Her face goes bright red, but she’s smiling up at me. I want it to always be like this. Her laughing at me and fucking me. That’s everything I need in this world. How can she think I’m not happy when she gives me everything I need?

“Okay, you just slide your fingers in and squeeze slightly to break the seal. And then you just pull it out. It’s kind of shaped like a little funnel. And it might have... blood in it. But it shouldn’t be too much. It hasn’t been in very long.”

“Okay, I’ve got this. You just lean back, relax, and tell me if I’m doing it wrong.”

I press my hand down on top of her pussy and slide my fingers gently up and down her lips. “Are you... bigger than normal?”

“Probably. It can get kind of swollen while you’re on your period. And

everything is even more sensitive.”

“Even more sensitive, huh?”

Pressing my thumb inside her, I find her clit and circle it.

“Wrong spot,” she whispers, pushing her pussy against my hand.

“I’m getting there.” After playing with her clit for a bit longer, I slip my index finger inside her to see what I’m working with. I find the funnel thing pretty quickly. Pressing my fingers against it like she said, I squeeze and try to pull it out. The thing comes right out. There’s not much of anything in it, like she said. But I try not to make a mess because I don’t want to stress her out. I don’t give a fuck. The wetter and messier, the better.

“What do I do with it?”

She glances around and then picks up her empty glass of water from the nightstand. “Just put it in here. I’ll deal with it... after.”

Doing as she says, I put the little funnel thing into the glass. “Now where was I?” I whisper into her neck, as my hand finds her pussy again.

Finding her clit, I circle it again. “Right here.”

Leaning up, I lick her nipple and then suck it into my mouth. I bite it roughly, and then lick and suck at it. The little cries and moans she makes above me tell me how much she likes it.

She’s desperate to come after not fucking me for weeks. Her pussy is riding my hand, so I give her a little more. I press my index finger and middle finger into her, up to the hilt, and then drive them in and out of her as I play with her clit. I could touch her like this a thousand times and never get tired of it. It’s always a little different. The way she arches her back. The way she cries out. The way she moves under me. There’s no amount of times that’s ever going to be enough.

When I put my mouth on her other nipple, Selena runs her hands through my hair, pressing my face into her body. Shit, she’s needy tonight. She needs me to fuck her so bad. She needs me to make her come.

She’s so fucking slick, and I know it’s more than just her period. She’s hot and wet for me.

“Ready to take this thick cock, baby? Take every fucking inch until I stretch you out how I like?”

She nods. “I’m ready. I want it. Jackson, give it to me. I’ll do anything. I’m a good girl. I’m your good girl.”

“Are you going to be a good girl and come when I tell you to? And not before?”

She nods, but the way she's trying to ride my hand feels like she's trying to wring a free orgasm from me.

Give the woman what she wants. "I want you to come for me before I give you this dick. I want you to come all messy and dirty on my hand. Fuck my hand, Selena. Go on. Take it. Take everything you need. Ride my fucking hand until you come."

Selena nods, but her focus is entirely on making herself come. Her hands pull my head back down to her nipple. And then she pulls the other one into her own mouth, and I see her bite down and then suck on it. Hard.

I fucking love it when she does that. It's so fucking hot.

Fucking hell, this woman is trying to kill me. Her hips are bucking wildly as she tries to fuck my hand. Slipping my fingers out of her, I pull them up and rub some of her mess on her clit. And then I roughly swipe over it with my thumb before pinching that hard little nub between my thumb and index finger. She's so wet my fingers nearly slip right off, but I hold on tight, pinching her.

"Jackson!"

And she goes off like a fucking rocket. Her body jerks into hard spasms under me. Her nails dig into the back of my neck.

I stop sucking on her nipple so I can lean back and watch her come. She's so fucking beautiful when she comes. She's glowing, with a sheen of sweat on every inch of her. Apparently, she worked pretty hard on that orgasm. Her lips are open, just turning up into a smile at the corners. Her hair's a mess, still wet and spread out around her on the white pillow.

Watching her every single second, I memorize every movement she makes, every little sound she utters. I love this woman and making her come is just about my favorite thing in the entire world to do. Scratch that, it's definitely my favorite thing in the entire world to do.

When she finally stills, laying herself back against the pillows and letting out a colossal sigh, I grin down at her.

"Ready to take this cock?" I demand. "Shit, I forgot to grab a condom. Be right back."

Before I can get up, she lets out an enormous yawn. "Are you sure? I mean, I'm all good here. I feel very relaxed. No cramps. I could just fall right asleep after that. That was fantastic."

"Selena." Her name is a raw bark on my lips.

She giggles up at me. My girl thinks she's funny. She's *not*.

Fuck, I love it when she teases me like this. I'm always so damn serious. Smiling at my black stare, she presses her hand against my chest. "Give me your cock, Jackson. Press every single inch inside me and fuck me."

"That's better."

Jumping out of bed, I grab a condom from my jeans pocket, and I'm back on top of her in seconds. All that time I spend in the gym has its benefits, if it means I'm inside of her one second faster. Ripping the foil, I slide the condom over my length, and then guide my tip inside her. No more foreplay. No more teasing. My woman begged me to fuck her, and that's what I'm going to do.

I press a couple of inches into her and then back off, holding in place. Feeling her stretch to take me. She breathes deep and then nods. I press in a couple more inches.

"You take me so good, baby. Take every fucking inch," I whisper, my eyes locked to hers.

"You feel so good inside me. Fuck me, Jackson. Fuck me like it was the last time."

Last time? What the fuck is she talking about?

"Give me all of it, Jackson. Every inch. I want you so much. I want all of you."

I can't think when she's talking like this, and my dick is pushing inside her. I push in the last few inches, and when her hips rock against mine, I know she's ready for more. I pull out of her and then press into her again. It's slow at first, and then urgent. I need her so badly. I've needed her for weeks. I always need her.

She's so tight and so wet for me. Slippery. It's so fucking hot. Whatever piece of shit made Selena think having sex when she had her period was a bad thing deserves a special place in hell. But even the thought of her with anyone else has my hands clenching into fists.

I press those fists next to her, holding some of my weight on my elbows, as I stare into her face. Her hazel eyes stare right back at me. I haven't felt this connected to her since before she ran away from me. I need her. I need this. I'm just a satellite that orbits around her sun. I couldn't escape her pull if I wanted to. And I don't want to.

"You're mine, Selena. Only mine. Say it."

She nods. "I'm yours, Jackson. Only yours."

Does she mean it? Could she mean it? Or does she just want to come?

The only time she says she's mine is when I tell her to say it, so that I'll let her come. So, how could she possibly mean it?

Pulling out of her, I roll over onto my back.

"What the hell, Jackson?"

"I want you on top. You know I like you on top. I like to see your tits bounce when I plow into you with this hard dick."

"I can't. It'll make a mess..."

"How many times do I have to tell you I don't care about the mess? I want your cum and your pussy blood dripping down your legs all over me, got it?"

She studies me for a long second and then nods. She pushes up onto her knees, and then I take her hands as she slides one thick thigh over mine and presses down onto my dick. It goes faster this time because she's so fucking ready for me.

In no time, I'm all the way inside her where I belong. She's so tight and hot and wet. Everything about her is perfect for me. Everything about her fits me just right.

Gripping her hips tightly, I help her push up and back down onto my cock again and again. Not too fast, not too slow. Just the right speed to drive us both mad.

"Jackson, I need to come. I need it. Please."

Sliding my thumb across from her hip and down onto her clit, I rub her right where she needs. Because I love her. Because I'm going to spend the rest of my life giving her everything. Because I'd give up my last breath to give her what she needs.

"Come for me, elevator girl."

She gives me what I want and clenches around my dick, her pussy grabbing me so fucking tight. I pump my hips up into her once, twice, three more times. And then I'm fucking done. My balls clench, and I'm shooting my cum inside her for the first time in weeks. I press my hands on her hips to hold on to her as I buck wildly underneath her as she rocks with the tremors of her own orgasm.

When we both finally stop moving, she crumples on top of my chest and I can feel her jerking against me. But it's not from the orgasm I just gave her. She's fucking crying.

"Baby, what's wrong? Did I hurt you?"

She shakes her head. But I don't trust it. Reaching out, I tilt her chin up to

me and stare into her face. These aren't happy tears. She looks like her heart is broken. But I've given her every chance to tell me she loves me. Or at least that she wanted something more than the contract. More than two months. I've practically stalked her at work. I've slept in her bed every night, just waiting for her to tell me she wants me. And nothing.

"Baby, tell me what's wrong?"

"Nothing."

She doesn't want to tell me whatever it is that has her torn up like this. But I can't take hearing her cry like she is. And I'm a selfish prick, so I ask one of the questions that's tearing me up instead.

"Do you like Jonas more than me?"

Her whole body tenses. I'm still inside her, so I feel it there, too. And my dick is already reacting to her.

"Do you want the truth?"

"I only ever want the truth from you, baby."

She lets out a few raspy sobs and then runs the pad of her thumb over my chest. "I don't like anyone more than you, Jackson. I didn't fangirl all over you when I met you because I wasn't a fangirl for Vampire Vincent. From the moment we met in the elevator, you were just Jackson to me. I got to know the real Jackson. I like Jackson. I..." She bites her lip, and I would give anything to know what she was going to say. "Jonas is great. And oh my god, is he handsome. I don't think more perfect hair exists. But he's a stranger. I don't know him at all. I know you."

I grunt, because I don't know what else to say. She's on top of me, her whole body pressed against mine. I'm inside her. But she feels a million miles away from me.

"Will you hold me?"

"I am holding you, baby."

"Hold me tighter."

I pull her tighter against me and contract the ring of my arms around her. "Is that too tight?"

"No. It's perfect. Thank you, Nugget."

Lily told me Selena wouldn't believe me if I just blurt out that I love her after being a selfish prick. But that's getting harder and harder not to do. When she asked me to tell her what I want? I almost said it. But she already seemed upset. And telling her I love her after signing her ass seemed a bit crazy. It wasn't the way I wanted it to happen. And I didn't want to upset her

even more. I can't take seeing her upset like she was tonight. Like she is now.

The contract is up at midnight, as she keeps reminding me. But it's going to take Selena longer than that to fall in love with me. It didn't take me any time at all to fall in love with her. But she's perfect. And I'm a grumpy asshole who comes with a hell of a lot of baggage. I come with the press writing whatever they want about me. Decade-long career commitments, bullshit nutrition plans, and spending months of the year away on a set somewhere. I can change some of that. But I can't change everything.

chapter eighty-one

selena

“Jackson!”

“Wake up!”

“Wha-? What’s wrong?”

He has the absolute audacity to look all sleepy and ruffled and gorgeous. And I’ve never loved him more than I do right now. And I’ve never hurt more than I do right now.

“This bed looks like a crime scene,” I mutter when he looks at me.

“That’s what you woke me up in a panic to tell me?”

“Yes.”

“Baby, how many times do I have to tell you I don’t fucking care about a mess? It looks like a painting. It’s fucking beautiful. Just like you.”

“It didn’t get onto the bed. But we’re going to have to steal these towels and this robe. Like criminals.” I smack him in the chest, my hand hitting hard muscle. “How could you let me just fall asleep like that?”

“It’s just stuff, baby. Trust me, the hotel doesn’t care about a few towels and a robe, as long as I pay for them. And I’m happy to pay for them. Last night was perfect. You were perfect.”

“I’m sure you are happy to pay.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You can’t solve all your problems with money, Jackson.”

He leans forward and presses his lips against my shoulder. “This I know. But this particular problem I *can* solve with money. And I have zero regrets about you riding my cock last night and then falling asleep naked in my arms with my dick still inside you. Now, what do you say we have a shower and clean up?”

“You go first. I’m going to try to hide the evidence. Like a *criminal*.”

“Baby, I said *we* should have a shower. Don’t you want me to pin you against the shower wall and fuck you with the hot water streaming down on us? Because that sounds like a pretty damn good way to start the day to me.” He reaches down under the sheets and catches my whole pussy in his big

hand. “Do you still have cramps? I guarantee I’ll make you feel better or die trying.”

“I don’t think that it’s a good idea.”

His hand tenses on my pussy. “Why the hell not?”

“Because it’s *today*.”

“What’s today?”

“The contract. The two months is up today.”

“I’m aware.” His face tightens. His eyes narrow. His jaw clenches. “And so that means you don’t want to join me in the shower?”

“I don’t think we should... I don’t want to confuse things.”

“Right. And what would we be confusing? *Exactly?*”

“*Ourselves*. I don’t want people—anyone—to get confused about what’s going on here.”

“And what’s going on here?”

He’s really going to make me say it. The words feel like hot tar on my tongue. “We had a contract. With some *bonus benefits*. But it’s over now, and I don’t expect anything from you. I promise.”

“So, you’re just ready to walk away from me?”

“Of course. That’s what I agreed to do. I promise, I don’t want anything from you.”

“You don’t want *anything* from me. Right. Well, I’m going to go in the shower. And it’ll sure as hell be a lot more fun if you join me. I don’t give a fuck about the damn contract.”

Taking a deep breath, I try to make him see reason. “Jackson, I want to, but I don’t think that’s a very good idea.”

“Right. Well, come on and join me if you decide to start making some bad decisions with me.”

I’ve had break-ups before. But now I know that I’ve never had a broken heart. Because none of those break-ups felt anything close to what it feels like knowing I have to say goodbye to Jackson today.

I know sleeping with him again last night was stupid. But I couldn’t say goodbye to him without feeling him touch me like he does one last time.

I can’t believe it was the last time.

He’s never going to touch me like that again.

He’s never going to touch me in any way ever again.

When Jackson gets out of the shower, I’ve wrangled the ruined towels into the white plastic laundry bag I found in the closet. But I can see the red

stains through the white plastic. And since we don't have luggage, I'm going to be walking out of the hotel carrying it. I should have brought my massive work purse. That would have at least hidden the crime while we walk out of the hotel. I checked and there were a couple of small bloodstains on the sheets. So, I used the sparkling water from the minibar to get them out. The little bottle is probably going to cost Jackson twenty-five dollars, not that he even cares.

After showering and putting my dress from yesterday back on and doing my makeup as best as I can with the concealer, mascara, and lip gloss in my little purse, I find Jackson on his phone at the desk in our hotel room.

"Jonas wants to know if we have time for breakfast before we head out. I knew you'd insist we go, so I told him yes."

I freeze. I can't pretend anymore. I can't delay the inevitable. This is over. So, I need for it to just be over. "Oh, can you tell him that we can't make it?"

Jackson's eyes catch mine, suspicious. "You don't want to go for breakfast with Jonas? I could barely tear you away from him last night."

"I don't think it's a good idea. But I can wait at the hotel if you want to go see your friend. I don't mind."

"You said having breakfast with him isn't a good idea. Why not?"

"Because this is over now. And I want to just get back to my life."

"I've kind of taken over your life for the past two months, haven't I?"
Now he can't meet my eyes. He's staring somewhere over my shoulder.

"Yes, but it's what I agreed to. The two months are up now. And it's time for me to just go back to normal. I'm ready for some normal."

He shuts down. Whatever he's thinking, his face is totally blank. "Right. I guess having me around makes it hard to be normal."

Shrugging, I hold my hand out. I don't mean to hurt him. I never want to hurt him. "Kind of. I mean, you're Jackson Waters. You always seem to forget that."

"Sometimes I wish I could."

Jackson texts Jonas back, and it freaking kills me to miss out on breakfast with Jonas and more time with Jackson. But more time having what I want is only going to hurt me more when I don't have it anymore.

I don't get to have Jackson. And spending more time with him now that the contract is done is just begging to hurt myself even more. That's just stupid. I already let myself feel things I never should have. And it's my own

fault now that my heart is broken.

Jackson leaves a whole stack of hundred-dollar bills on the desk before he stands up. "I'm sure they'll reach out if they want more. Selena?"

"Yes?"

"Last night was worth every fucking penny."

"Glad you got your money's worth." When I smile at him, my teeth feel sharp against my lips.

Jackson bought and paid for my time. And I threw in my body and my love for free.

There's a new distance between us as we drive back to the private airport. And I know I'm the one who made that distance. Jackson would probably be happy having sex right up until he drops me off at my house and drives away for good. We could join the mile high club and have sex in the back of his Suburban for old times' sake. But I'm not built like that.

Last night was the last time. Last night was *goodbye*.

I smile and nod whenever Jackson says anything on the short flight home. I don't snuggle up with him on the sofa like I did on the way here. My cramps aren't bad today. And even if my insides felt like they were in the industrial mixer at the bakery kitchen, I wouldn't let him hold me like that again. It would only confuse things. And I'm already confused enough.

"Are you going to talk to me about what's going on in that head over there?" Jackson finally asks, breaking the silence between us.

I smile at him, but I have tears in my eyes that I'm sure he can see. "Trust me, you don't want to know."

"I think I do."

"Fine. I'm sad."

"I don't get why you're choosing to sit over there and be sad all by yourself when you could be over here with me doing something a hell of a lot more fun."

"I don't want to have sex with you."

"Why not? You did last night."

"Because the contract is over. It's time for us to go our separate ways."

"The fucking contract again. You want to go our separate ways?"

"That's what we agreed to. The sex doesn't change anything."

Does it? Does it?

All he has to do is tell me I'm crazy. Tell me the sex changed everything. Tell me he never wants to let me go. Tell me he loves me.

He frowns at me. “Right... I guess I’ll just read some scripts over here, then.”

“For your superhero movie?”

“No, some other stuff I’m looking at doing.”

“Are you going to have time for other stuff?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

He looks like maybe he wants to say something else. But he doesn’t.

He doesn’t say anything else for the rest of the flight or the drive back to my place. Then it’s time for goodbye.

“Well, I guess I’ll see you around. Or not. *Whatever.*”

“Why are you being like this, baby?”

“I’m not being like anything.”

“I never thought you were capable of it. But you’re being *cold*. You’re icing me out, and I don’t know why.”

“I’m trying to be *professional*.”

“Were you being professional all the times you came in my mouth?”

“*Goodbye, Jackson.*”

When I wave my hand at him, he catches it.

“*Fuck this.*”

He tugs me to him and kisses me. *Hard*. His tongue slides into my mouth, and I don’t think about how much I love him or how much all of this hurts. All I think about is how good his mouth feels on mine.

Jackson takes what he wants from my lips and my tongue. And I give him everything. I give him all of me. I give him my love, my body, and my broken heart, all in one kiss.

And when he lifts his head and stares down at me, I know this is the last time Jackson Waters is ever going to look at me like this. *Hungry. Possessive. Mine.*

Because this kiss was goodbye. He’s not mine. He never was.

I can’t get over Jackson if I keep seeing him. And I can’t be around him for another second knowing how much I love him and that he’s never going to love me back. Not like I need him to. Not at all.

“*Goodbye, Jackson.*”

“*Later, Selena.* This isn’t goodbye. I’ll see you soon.”

“No, you won’t.”

Jackson gets out and walks around to my door. Without another word, I slip out and rush across the street to my house. Squeezing the door so tightly

I'm worried about denting it, I slowly close my front door on Jackson Waters.
It's time to get back to my real life.
And my real life doesn't include sexy movie stars.

chapter eighty-two

jackson

Jackson: Can I come over? We need to talk

Jackson: Can you please answer me? I've been calling

Jackson: I need to know that you're okay

Jackson: I miss you

Jackson: Oats misses you

Jackson: Please baby

Jackson: Can you at least check in with Lily? I need to know that you're okay. Please baby

Jackson: I came by the bakery kitchen today. Liam said you weren't there. But I saw your car outside. Why are you hiding from me baby?

Jackson: Will you please pick up? Give me five minutes. Please

Jackson: We need to talk

Jackson: I'm outside. If you're home, please let me in

Jackson: Baby I see your car parked out here. I know you're home. Please open the door and talk to me

Jackson: Please just talk to me

Jackson: I don't know why you're doing this

Jackson: I'm starting to feel like I don't know you. But I do know you Selena

Jackson: We need to talk

Jackson: Baby please answer the door

Jackson: Baby I'm outside. Just come to the door and talk to me

Jackson: I didn't want to do it, but I went by the bakery again today. Liam said you were sick

Jackson: Baby talk to me. I need to know you're okay

Jackson: I swear I'll leave you alone if you just talk to me. Answer the phone baby. Please

Jackson: I'm going on Eddie Parsons' show tonight. Will you watch it for me?

Jackson: Please do this for me baby

Jackson: PLEASE

chapter eighty-three

One week later...

jackson

*W*hy do I always do exactly the wrong thing when it comes to her?
Why do I always say exactly the wrong thing? Or I don't say anything at all when I should have said something?

I tried to give her space to calm down and realize she misses me.

But instead of realizing how much she misses me and how good we are together, Selena decided to shut me out. She won't answer my texts or my calls. When I showed up at the bakery, she hid from me. She doesn't answer the door when I go to her house.

And I never even got to know any of her friends, so I have no one to ask for help.

She's completely icing me out.

I went from fucking Selena exactly how I wanted in a hotel room to meeting an ice cold wall.

Operation Get Selena Back is not going as planned.

How the hell am I supposed to convince her she loves me if she won't even talk to me?

I've been spinning my wheels for a week, obsessing over her. And last night, I decided to go for the nuclear option. Big risk, big reward. Or I crash and burn. Publicly. *Fan-fucking-tastic*.

A lot of favors were pulled to get me on The Eddie Parsons Show tonight when the only thing I really have to promote is getting hired to be a superhero. And that's old news. It's only been a few weeks since the big announcement, but in this industry, weeks are like months.

I've never done as much soul-searching in my life as I have since Selena walked out on me. The only thing I came up with after all of that deep thinking is that I need her, and I'm not letting her go.

I hate that she thinks this is all about a fucking contract. Even if she's not in love with me yet, I know she's hurting. And I hate it. I never want her to hurt, and I just don't know what else I can do to show her how much I love her. I didn't touch her for weeks to prove that this isn't just about sex to me.

I'm practically stalking her. I'm showing up at her house at all hours. Turning up at the bakery kitchen. Before she stopped talking to me, I invited myself to stay over every night. I invited myself into her bed. I held her in my arms all night.

I thought by now, things would be clearer. That she'd have told me how she feels, so I could tell her I'm in love with her. Tell her that she's it for me. Tell her that I'm never going to want anybody else. I did everything Lily said. I showed her with my words and my actions—and not my dick—how much I love her.

I knew exactly what I needed to do. And I did it.

And it didn't fucking work.

So, now it's time to tell her and the entire fucking world that I love her. That she's my girl. That I want her to be my wife.

I'm done giving her time. I'm done trying to get her to say it first. I'm saying it first, and then I'm going to spend the rest of my life convincing her she loves me, too.

So, whether or not, I like it, I'm about to propose to Selena on The Eddie Parsons Show.

I keep a big old smile on my face, even though my mind is racing. I need this to go perfectly. I need her to say yes.

Studio lights have never felt this hot. I swear my palms are sweating, as Eddie introduces me and I walk out onto the set to join him up on the stage.

“Hey, everybody! Good to be back so soon.”

“Soon is right. You were here what? A little over two months ago?”

“Sounds about right.”

“And the last time you were here, you broke some pretty major news with us.”

Grinning, I hide my face in my hands. “I know. Me and my big old mouth. Here I thought I was just talking to an old friend about my amazing new girlfriend. And then everything kind of went crazy on me.”

Eddie laughs, and so does the studio audience.

“How are things going with our favorite couple? How are things going with #elevatorgirl?”

“You know, Eddie. There's something I need to get off of my chest. My girl and I actually had a fight.”

“A fight? What happened?” He leans forward across the desk, pressing his chin onto his fist. “Tell your old friend everything. I've been married a

long time. Here's some advice. Apologize. Even if you don't know what you did."

"Well, I probably acted a little stupid. It's just I'm all in on this girl, and I want everyone to know it."

"That's sweet, isn't it?" He motions with his hands for the audience to give him something, and the room fills with *ooohs* and *awwws*.

"And I knew I was coming onto your show tonight, and she's a big fan. She watches your show every night, Eddie. So, I know that she's watching right now." It's a small, but necessary lie. Selena doesn't watch the show.

"Is there anything you want to say to her? To tell your #elevator girl?"

I rub my chin with my thumb and index finger. "You know what, Eddie? I think there is. I've actually got something that's been weighing me down. It's right here, actually. I've got it in my back pocket."

Leaning forward, I take the little velvet ring box out of my pocket.

"Holy moly, is that what I think it is?" Eddie motions to the audience, and another chorus of *ooohs* and *awwws* rockets through the studio.

"I think it just might be... as long as you think it's an engagement ring, that is."

"Oh, my god! America's favorite bachelor is about to be off the market, ladies!"

"Let's just hope my girl says yes."

She better fucking say yes.

And not because her saying *no* would embarrass me on national television. I'd deserve that ten times over. Because it would mean that I'd have to live every day of the rest of my life without her, and I don't want to do that. I can't. I won't. Selena's it for me. She's my everything. She's my air and my water. She's my home.

"How do you want to do this?"

"That's a good question, Eddie. I guess I should probably figure that out sooner rather than later," I tell him with a laugh, as if I didn't already practice this with his producers in rehearsal before the live audience came in. "Here's what I'm thinking. Maybe if the camera could come down here with me?" I ask as I stand up and walk down to the center of the stage. A dozen interns rush out with massive bouquets of pink and white lilies. And another intern walks out with Oats on a leash and hands it to me. The interns place the bouquets of lilies in a big circle around me and Oats.

"Lilies are her favorite," I explain to Eddie with a shrug.

“Lilies are her favorite. How sweet is this guy?” Eddie asks with a laugh. “And who is this?”

“Right, this is my dog, Oats. And he’s pretty obsessed with my girl. We talked it over, and he wants her to be his new mom. So, I figured Oats here could do some of the heavy lifting and use those big puppy dog eyes to get her to say yes.”

“Do you hear that, everyone? The man is desperate for a yes! He’s willing to do whatever it takes, including using the dog.”

The audience erupts in laughter again.

“Alright, alright, settle down now. If everyone could hang tight, I’m just going to pour my heart out on national television to the woman I love.”

“Okay, you hear that, everyone? Jackson Waters needs us all to be quiet so he can propose to his girlfriend. So, let’s zip it.”

“That means you too, Eddie.”

He mimes zipping his mouth up and throwing away the key.

Looking around between the big studio cameras, I pretend like I don’t know which one I’m supposed to talk into. But I know exactly which camera is fixed on me. “This one? Okay. Quiet, everyone. Thanks. Okay, here goes nothing.”

Here goes nothing, is right. Because if I don’t have Selena, I don’t have anything.

After turning from the audience, I stare straight into the camera aimed at me and Oats. Then I get down on one knee next to my dog with a velvet box in my hand as nerves slice through my body.

“Hey baby, it’s me. I know that you’re at home watching Eddie and me talk right now. I’m sure you’re thinking you see more than enough of me already and want to get to the musical guest. But I had to take this opportunity to ask you something pretty big. ’Cause I’m pretty much head over heels for you, baby. I can’t imagine living a single day of my life without you in it. You make me a better man. You make me the happiest man on this entire planet. Baby, I love you more than life itself. Will you marry me?”

There’s a long pause. Then Eddie leads the audience in a massive round of applause.

“The suspense is killing me!” The look on his face tells me he means it. Eddie’s a good guy.

After standing back up, I walk over to the couch next to Eddie’s desk,

bringing Oats with me.

“You and me both. She’s not actually going to see that until the show airs tonight. That’s six hours of me on pins and needles, I can tell you that.”

“If she says yes, what do you say about coming back to the show for your engagement party? Bachelor and bachelorette parties? We’d love to host the wedding, too. The Eddie Parsons Show is invested in this relationship. We feel like we’ve been part of this love story from the beginning, don’t we?” Eddie motions again at the crowd, and they erupt into hoots, hollers, and applause.

“We’ll see about all that. She has to say yes first.”

“Who could say no to that face, America? This is America’s next big superhero! America’s sexiest man alive. And the best jawline in the business.”

“Eddie, are you hitting on me? I’m almost an engaged man!”

“Hahaha!” Eddie reaches across the desk to shake my hand. “Thanks so much for being here, Jackson. And for letting us be a part of your proposal. We’re all rooting for you two crazy kids. Now get out of here and go find out what she says! And then come back tomorrow, and tell us everything! Jackson Waters, everybody! Big round of applause for Jackson Waters and his #elevatorgirl!”

The show cuts for what’s going to be a commercial break. But right now, there’s still a large studio audience staring me down.

Raising my hand, I wave at them. “Thank you all. Now everyone has to keep this a secret for the next six hours. Can you do that for me?”

“Keep this a secret until then, and Jackson Waters and his #elevatorgirl are going to name their first baby after me. Little Eddie Waters. I love it!”

“First kid’s name is already spoken for. But I could probably swing a middle name on the second kid,” I promise him with a grin, thinking of the time I accused Selena of planning our kids’ names and naming the first one Raven. If Selena agrees to be the mother of my children, I’ll let her name them whatever she wants.

“I can’t say no to that!” Eddie says, shaking my hand again. “Thanks so much for doing this here. The ratings are going to be insane. And I’m serious. You and your #elevatorgirl are welcome here anytime.”

“Her name’s Selena.”

“Selena,” he repeats back to me. “Well, you and Selena are welcome here anytime.”

“Thanks again. I’m going to get out of here now. Get back to my girl.”
“You got it, buddy.”



CelebritEYES: I promise we’ll say yes! The internet’s boyfriend makes surprise proposal to his #elevatorgirlfriend on the Eddie Parsons show!

chapter eighty-four

selena

I haven't answered a single one of Jackson's calls or texts, even though it's killing me. All of this is killing me. And Jackson isn't making it any easier to get over him. Because he's not leaving me alone. Who does that?

It's like he gets off on torturing me. Only I know better than that exactly how Jackson likes to get off. It's with me on top. But I can't keep having sex with him when it's just sex for him. And it's love for me.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

Who the hell just shows up at someone's house at ten-thirty at night with no notice?

Grabbing my box of tissues and my wine, I head for the door.

Whoever it is, is about to get a piece-and-a-half of my mind. I'm in my sad robe with my sad tissues and my sad wine. And that is no time to interrupt a woman. Sad everything is how I live now. I've spent every night for the past week crying alone on my sofa. In my bed. In my shower. I hold it together when I'm at the bakery and there's people around. But other than that, I'm crying. Going cold turkey off of Jackson Waters is not for the faint of heart.

"What?" I bite out as I swing the door open.

Jackson and Oats are standing in front of me. Jackson has a giant bouquet of lilies in his arm.

Cameras flash behind them. My street is full of photographers and media trucks.

Oh my god. Oh my god. It's all starting again.

I slam the door right in his face. I'm in a robe. My face is puffy from crying. My hair is all over the place. And I'm double-fisting wine and tissues.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Baby, can you let me in? Please? There's a lot of cameras out here watching us. They'd love to get some pictures of us fighting." My front door muffles his voice, but I can hear him just fine.

“I’m not sure that’s my problem anymore. It’s over, Jackson. The contract expired a week ago. You’re a free man, and I’m sure as hell a free woman. I never have to live my life around what the press thinks ever again.”

“Selena, I just need to talk to you. I did something...”

“What did you do?”

“That’s what I came here to talk to you about. Please let me in, baby. I just need to talk to you. Then if you still want me to go, I’ll go. I promise. Please, baby.”

My mind spins, trying to figure out what’s worse. Me letting Jackson in and actually having to be in the same room with him, knowing I can’t have him. Or weeks of headlines about how I’m a crazy bitch who locked out my movie star boyfriend. I’ve waited all week to see headlines about our relationship being on the rocks. But nothing. As far as the rest of the world knows, Jackson and I are blissfully happy together.

Hiding behind the door, I twist the handle and open it enough for Oats and Jackson to come in. As soon as they’re inside, I slam the door shut and lock it.

Then I turn and walk down the hall to the kitchen to get more wine. I’m having total *déjà vu* to the first time Jackson came to my place to talk to me. The night when my life spiraled out of control. Everything has changed, but so much is still the same.

Jackson and Oats follow me into the kitchen and watch me while I fill my enormous glass right to the top.

When I turn around after putting the bottle of rosé back in the fridge, he’s staring at me. Jackson has no right to be this handsome after breaking my heart.

“Hey, baby. I missed you.”

“What are you doing here, Jackson? Since I know you won’t leave until you’ve said what you’re here to say. Just spit it out.”

How the hell am I supposed to get over him if he keeps showing up on my doorstep like this? I don’t stand a chance of ever moving on if I have to keep seeing him.

When Oats headbutts my thigh, I put down my box of tissues and pat his head. I’m not giving up my emotional support wine for anything, not even Oats.

“Hi, Oatsie. I’m always happy to see you. But I’m not interested in seeing your dad.”

“I needed to see you.”

Forcing a smile on my face, I stretch out my arms and snap them in the air. One arm holds my box of tissues and the other has my enormous glass of wine. “Here I am. You saw me. Wine, tissues, and all. Happy?”

“Did you see the show?”

“No. I think I have more than enough trauma from watching you talk to Eddie Parsons the last time. I never want to see that man’s face ever again. If I have to hear him call me #elevatorgirl one more time, I’m going to lose it.”

“You need to watch it.”

“I don’t want to watch it.”

“Selena, you need to watch it.”

“No, thank you, Jackson. I don’t want to.”

“Where’s your laptop?” Jackson asks, walking into the living room.

Taking a seat on the sofa, I wave with my wine glass towards the table under the window.

Jackson puts the lilies down on the table and picks up my laptop. Then he sits down next to me on the sofa. Oats lays down next to the coffee table in front of us. In a second, I’m staring at Jackson walk out on stage at The Eddie Parsons Show. He looks so handsome. Because of course he does. He looks like a movie star. The studio lights emphasize every hard line of his face, his dark lashes, the curve of his lips.

And from the first question, they’re talking about our fake relationship. And it kills me. It’s bad enough to feel the way I do, but to see Jackson smiling and joking about us on national television is the slap in the face that takes me from unkept mess to homicidal mess.

When he gets down on one knee in a circle of lilies with Oats by his side and pulls out a velvet box, I lose it. Slamming my laptop shut, I can’t take another second of it.

“What the hell did you do, Jackson? Did you just propose to me? On The Eddie Parsons Show?!?”

“Well?”

“You proposed? To me? On national television?”

Jackson nods.

“What the hell were you thinking?” I can’t sit still on the sofa next to him. Needing to let out some of this tension before I actually do murder him, I jump up off the sofa, my full wine glass precariously close to spilling. Needing space, I walk as far away from him as I can in my small living room.

“We can’t get married for social media likes and your career. *I won’t*. Because I want a real life. I want to be with someone who loves me. I... I want kids, Jackson.”

“I want all of that, too, baby. I want it with you.”

“No, you don’t. I don’t know why you’re saying that. But you don’t love me.”

Jackson puts my laptop on the coffee table and stands up to face me.

“Who the hell says I don’t love you?”

“*You?* Val? The contract?” I can feel my throat closing up and tears sting at the backs of my eyes.

I will not cry.

The last time Jackson sees my face in person, I will not be even redder and puffier than I already am.

“Baby, the damn contract was just how it started. The contract ended the minute I slipped my tongue into your sweet, wet pussy back at the farm. The entire thing is null and void. Except for the breach clause. I breached the contract by fucking you. You get five million dollars for that. Have you checked your bank account lately? It should already be in there.”

“The contract’s been over for weeks? You lied to me? *Five million dollars?* What the hell are you talking about?”

“Technically. And the penalty for me breaching the contract was five million dollars. It’s yours. You always need to read the fine print, baby.”

My brain can’t keep up. Nothing makes sense anymore.

“*What are you talking about?* You *knew* that you’d have to pay me *five million dollars* if you slept with me? And you *still* slept with me?”

Jackson grins at me and runs his tongue over his lips. “Worth *every* fucking penny.”

What the hell is wrong with this man? He’s clearly deranged. I don’t know whether to feel flattered or offended. Thinking it over as much as my overloaded brain is capable of right now, I choose offended. Because offended hurts less. Offended means angry. And angry feels a hell of a lot better than hurting.

“I don’t want five million dollars. I don’t want a million dollars. I don’t want anything from you,” I spit at him.

I wish that were true. I would give anything to not want anything from him. Because I’m here wanting the one thing he isn’t willing to give me. *His heart*. And everything else he has to give. His smile. The way he looks at me

like he can't get enough. I want all of him. Every single part. But I can't pretend anymore.

"Want it or don't, it's yours, all the same. You can take it and run as far as you can get away from me." He gives me a half-smile. "But I hope you don't."

"I'm not running anywhere. You can run away from me if you don't want to see me. You're the one showing up on my damn doorstep after telling the entire world that you love me and proposing to me on national TV."

"Baby, I'm always going to show up on your doorstep. The contract is how it started. How it ends is you and me sitting on the porch swing at the farm surrounded by our dozen grandkids. It's gray hair and decades of me loving you every single day more than I did the last."

He doesn't mean it. He looks sincere, like he means every single word. But he's an actor. I can't trust his face, and I know I can't trust his words.

"Why are you here? What's the point? Even if there was something real here, and I'm not saying I believe there is. You're going to be in Australia for the next decade. You're going to be fucking Elisha Bell and skinny women from fancy bathrooms. And I'm going to be here."

"What the hell am I doing with women in fancy bathrooms?" Jackson shakes his head. "Doesn't matter. I'm not going to Australia. And I'm not fucking anybody but you, baby."

"What do you mean?"

"I only want to fuck you, Selena."

"No, not that. What do you mean about Australia?"

"I turned down the role, baby. I'm going to be wherever you are for the next decade, and all the decades after that."

"You shouldn't have done that. Maybe you can still fix it? Go back and tell them you made a mistake."

"I didn't make a mistake. I have everything I want right here in this room."

"You don't love me."

chapter eighty-five

jackson

The hurt in her eyes is breaking my heart. “Who the hell are you to tell me I don’t love you? Maybe I didn’t get any of this right. You’ve met my dad. My brothers. We’re not exactly great at expressing our emotions. But baby, I’ve never loved anything or anyone more than I love you.”

Why didn’t I figure out that Australia and the superhero franchise were the wrong move sooner? I don’t want to spend the next decade in Australia. I can’t ask Selena to come with me. It wouldn’t be fair. It wouldn’t be right. So, that leaves me in Australia for most of the next decade by myself, and that’s not happening. My family needs me home in Western Springs. And I need Selena.

“You don’t love me.”

“Why not?”

“Because you can’t.”

“Look, Selena. I know I don’t have the best track record here. But I’m not some broken thing incapable of love. I love *you*.”

“I never said you were incapable of love. I just said that you don’t love *me*.”

“This is crazy.”

“Don’t call me crazy!” I shout at him, waving my wineglass wildly in his direction like a crazy woman.

“I didn’t say you were crazy. But you’re sure as hell acting crazy right now.”

“I am not! You proposed to me on national TV. You’re the one who’s crazy! How is it easier to talk to all of America than it is to just talk to me?”

“Selena, I’m talking to you now. But you shut me out. I didn’t know any other way to get you to talk to me. To get you back. I need you in my life. I’m in love with you. Maybe I waited too long to say it. Hell, I know I did. But when was the right time? In the elevator? After I fucked you? When you walked away from me? I know I messed this all up. But you’re the one.

You're it for me. Every single thing about this has been different. You're the first woman I've ever lived with. The first woman I've ever taken back home to Western Springs. I've never introduced anyone to my family. Before you, I never wanted to."

"You can't propose to a person before you've even told them you love them."

"I just told you I love you. Baby, we didn't do any of this according to anyone's plan except the universe's. I wasn't supposed to leave a meeting that ran long and be lucky enough to get trapped in an elevator with the sexiest, most beautiful woman I've ever met. The woman who drives me wild in every way, and is still the only thing I want. The one thing—one person—I want all the time. When I'm happy, I want you with me. When I'm scared, I reach for you. When I'm horny, all I want is to push my cock inside you. When I'm tired, I want to go to sleep with you in my arms. Baby, you're it for me. You. This. Us. We're it for me. I want all my firsts and all my lasts to be with you, Selena. Baby, say yes. Say you'll marry me."

"I moved out. I left you."

"I know, I remember. It scared the hell out of me that night when I got home and you weren't there. Oats was moping around without you. He missed you. I missed you. Why the hell do you think I barely let you out of my sight after that?"

"Not that I believe any of this, but if it was true... what was the last two weeks about? Why wouldn't you touch me?"

"Lily told me that I needed to show you this was more than just sex for me."

"What? You talked to Lily about this before you talked to me?"

"Yeah, sorry, baby. When you left, I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to get you back. I wanted you to know that this was more than just sex to me. I love fucking you, baby. I always want to fuck you. I'm never going to get enough of you. But I love you. You're more than the best fuck of my life. *You are my life*. Baby, we did everything backwards. We didn't meet the normal way. And we probably never would have if not for the damn elevator. I told you I loved fucking you when I should have told you that I fucking loved you. But don't hold that against us. Please don't let me being an idiot get in our way. We're taking our own path. But where we end up is together forever. I know it."

"This just doesn't make any sense. I can't wrap my brain around what

you're telling me. I can't believe you. It was all supposed to be fake. It was all fake. ”

“Selena, I don't care how long it takes. I'm going to keep right on saying it until you believe me. Because you're just about the only thing that makes sense to me. And I don't know if I'm alone here, but it stopped being fake for me real fast.”

She looks at me like she's afraid. “Tell me. When did it stop being fake for you?”

Staring up at the popcorn ceiling, I search for the answer. “Honestly? The elevator. There's a reason I kept thinking about you for months after we got out. There's a reason I told Eddie Parsons about you. And there's a reason I went along with the whole fake relationship thing. I've never done anything like that before. I don't play the same media games that everyone else does. Val could have figured a dozen different ways out of it without us pretending to date for two months. All I had to do was say no. But I wanted to see you again.”

“Jackson, I just... I was there, too. And all the time you were thinking one thing was happening, I was thinking something else was happening. I *want* to believe you. You don't know how much I want to believe you. But I just... I don't know if I can.”

“I've got you. From the minute we got stuck in that elevator, I've had you. And I'm going to be right here proving how much I love you every single day for the rest of my life.”

“I... I don't fit into your life. I'm too big and too small at the same time. I just don't... fit.”

What the hell is she talking about? “Baby, you fit perfectly. I don't want a life that you don't fit in.”

“Every time we go to some industry thing, people are going to think I'm your sister or your assistant or whatever. People don't see someone who looks like me and think I should be with someone who looks like you.”

Grinding my teeth, I think back to the night of the announcement. What Elisha said. What it must have meant to Selena, if it's still bothering her this much now. And how I didn't pick up on any of it at the time. I should have stood up for her. I should have protected her.

Taking a deep breath, I try to explain myself. “Elisha Bell is just fucking jealous. I'm sorry about what she said to you. But fuck her. And fuck anybody else who thinks like that. You're perfect for me. I love how you

look, and I love how you feel even better. If you don't want to come to industry shit with me, you don't have to. I'm a grown man, I can go to some stupid work events by myself. That's what I've been doing for the past fifteen years. I don't give a shit about that, as long as I get to come home to you."

"You promise?"

Grinning down at her, I nod. "I promise. And maybe one day you'll tell me you love me too and agree to marry me."

"I already love you, Jackson. I've loved you since..." she says and then stops, looking past me as she thinks it over. "Since we touched down in Western Springs, and I met all the people who love you, too."

"Really?" She's loved me that whole time? And I had no damn idea.

She nods. "I just... can't believe any of this is happening. Of course, I want you. Of course, I want this. And part of me says go for it. Just jump. Part of me wonders why I'm trying to deny myself you, when I want you so badly. Why can't you be mine? And then the other part of me is like, reality check. How could this ever work?"

"It's happening, baby. All of this and more." When I run my knuckles down her cheeks, she seems surprised to see me standing next to her. "I love you, Selena. Fuck, it feels good to say that. I've wanted to say it for so long. I love you enough to make it work. It has been working. We've been together night and day for weeks. And I know that might not sound that long to some, but it's longer than I've ever spent with anyone else. You saw me through my dad's accident. My whole family loves you. I love you, baby. We've got this."

"I'm going to need you to keep saying it. *Often.*"

"All you have to do is ask, baby. And I'll give you anything you want. I'll give you everything. I fucking love you. I love your eyes and your smile. And your tits and your ass. Your laugh is my favorite sound in the entire world. I love the color of your lips, and how soft they are when I kiss you. I love when they're swollen from me kissing on you. I love your body. You get me so fucking hard for you. I'm never going to get enough of you. I love how you taste. I love how you moan when I lick your pussy. I love being inside you. I just fucking love you. All of you. Marry me, Selena."

"I... I can't."

"Why the hell not? You love me. I love you. The way I feel about you is as real as it gets, baby."

"Because you asked me to marry you on a late-night talk show before you

ever told me you loved me to my face, Jackson. I need time. I thought I had to survive the end of us. You don't know how much I was dreading the contract ending. I didn't think I'd ever see you again. I'm going to need to hear you tell me you love me about a thousand more times before I can say yes. And I need you to prove to me I can believe it."

"Done. If I tell you how fucking ridiculously in love with you I am at least ten times a day—which is probably pretty low, to be honest—we'll be engaged in three months. Sound good?"

"It sounds perfect."

Finally, I wrap my arms around her, lightly at first, testing to see if she's going to pull away from me. When she doesn't, I press her tightly against me. I'm never going to let her go.

"Jackson?"

"Yes, baby?"

"I'm really pretty, Jackson."

"You're the prettiest thing I've ever seen."

"I mean it."

"So do I."

"I'm pretty, and I'm smart. I'm funny. I'm a great friend. And I make the best vegan cupcakes in the damn country!"

"I second all of it. Selena Miller for president," I whisper against her hair.

"And I think I'm hot. My body is pretty and soft and curvy. I like it."

"You know how much I like your body."

"I do... and I don't. I like myself. I think I'm great. But it's hard not to internalize at least some of what the world tells you about yourself. And the world has been telling me my whole fucking life that I'm not good enough. The world tells me every single day, in big ways, and in small ones, that I'm not enough and too much at the same time. And it tells me every second of every day that I'm sure as hell not good enough for Jackson Waters."

"Don't fucking listen. Fuck the world, and fuck everyone in it, except you and me. I love you. And, I don't think you're perfect," Jackson's lips twitch. "You can be downright mean when you're drunk and hissing my name at me. But you're perfect for me."

"I know I am!" Selena slaps my shoulder with her palm. "I know that I'm perfect for you! The way we are together. The way we can talk and laugh. The way our bodies fit together when we have sex. You and me together is the best thing I've ever had. I just never let myself believe that you'd actually

see it, too.”

“Baby, I see it. I see you. All of you. And if you ever need me to show you just how much I want you, I’ve got a surefire way. I’ve never been so hard for anyone in my life. Selena, you gave me a fucking *perma-rection* from all the blue balls I had from wanting you. You made me come in my damn jeans in seconds when you touched my dick for the first time.”

“I think I’m going to need you to show me. *Often.*”

“That’s a promise.”

“Be careful with me, Jackson. I love you so much that I just…”

“Selena, I’m in this. I’m not going anywhere. It’s you and me still stuck in that elevator together. *Forever.* That’s all I want.” Grinning, I lean back and take her hand, pressing it against the fly of my jeans. “Baby, I’m so hard for you right now. Let me show you how fucking hot you get me.”

She nods. “Yes, I need you. I need you inside me. I need you making me come. But no more talk shows, okay? Can you promise me you’ll just pretend that I don’t exist when you have to go promote something?”

“Baby, I could never pretend you don’t exist.”

“Can you at least promise me you’ll never tell Eddie fucking Parsons anything before you tell me ever again?”

“I can probably do that. And I should probably tell you that I already told him our second kid’s middle name was going to be Eddie.”

“Don’t you think you’re getting a little ahead of yourself? I haven’t said I’d marry you, yet.”

I flash her my cockiest grin because now that I know she loves me, I have all the time in the world to get her to say yes. “You will.”

She nods up at me. “I know I will. I need you, Jackson…”

Pulling her roughly against me, I press my hard cock into her stomach, only the denim of my jeans and the fuzzy fabric of her robe separating our skin. “Baby, all you ever have to do is ask.”

chapter eighty-six

One month later...

jackson

*I*t feels so damn good being back home on the farm. Selena's holed up in the kitchen making Sunday dinner. My brothers are all slowly trickling out to the farm. My dad's sitting in his armchair, that he now insists on putting outside any night the weather cooperates. The bales of hay Selena and Lily set up around the fire pit live there now. And they get used. A lot.

The farm feels alive again, like it did when my mom was still here. There are Sunday dinners, barbeques, family parties. It seems like we're always celebrating something or other, probably because Selena bought every one of us all dumb holiday calendars that tell us it's national doughnut day and national beer day. And she makes us celebrate almost all of them. She throws a family dinner together like it's nothing.

It feels like I never left. But I appreciate being here in a way I never could have if I hadn't walked off the farm when I was eighteen and spent all those years missing it.

I'm standing on the porch looking out over the farm when my dad elbows me in the arm and then holds out a bottle of beer to me.

"Selena just kicked me out of the kitchen. What'd you do?"

Taking a long drag on the bottle in my hand, I scowl out at the fields. "Nothing that would justify her being this pissed at me."

My dad tilts his head at me. "You know I love you, son. But I'm going to have to take her side on this one."

"I'm your damn son, and you're on Selena's side?" Fuck me. That woman. I'd be on her side, too. If I wasn't the one she was pissed at. I always want to be on her side. I never want to be anywhere else.

"Selena brought you back home to us." My dad shrugs, like that makes any kind of sense.

"You being an idiot on a tractor brought me home, so you should be thanking yourself for that."

"My accident brought you home. But it didn't keep you here. She did." My dad smiles. "She reminds me of your mom. It's nice having a woman

around the house again, keeping you boys in line. And damn, can she cook. You picked a good one, son.”

I think this is maybe the most my dad and I have ever talked about something that wasn't the weather, or how the grow season was shaping up, or when I was coming home next since before we lost my mom.

“I don't think I picked her. From the minute that elevator stopped, it was just inevitable. I needed her, and I was never going to let her go.” Shrugging, I shake my head and look back out over the farm that stretches all the way to the mountains in the distance. “I don't know how to explain it any better than that.”

“You don't need to. That was exactly how it was with your mom and me. Once I laid eyes on that smile and that ass, I never thought of another woman.”

“Please *never* talk about Mom's ass ever again. But other than you scarring me for life, I'm glad I'm not alone in this. I feel crazy half the time. Like I'm obsessed with her.”

“I think that's just love, son.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah.”

“Now go apologize for whatever you did. Because dinner smells too good, and how pissed she seems at you, I don't think she's planning on letting you have any.”

Taking a big drink of my beer, I shake my head. “At least she's not hissing at me.”

“Yet, son. Yet. Go talk to her. Tell her half of what you just told me, and you'll be forgiven for whatever idiot thing you did.”

“Why does no one believe me that I didn't fucking do anything?”

“I'm not getting on the wrong side of this fight. I already told you I'm on her side. Now, I'll be in my chair. Call me when you've apologized and Selena's ready to feed us.”

“No one's on my fucking side around here,” I mutter, as I finish my beer. Fucking hell. I'm not apologizing for this. I didn't do anything wrong.

“Don't be ridiculous. Let me carry that,” Jameson argues with Lily as she walks around the house carrying a massive plant in a big pot.

“Are you going to come to work with me every day and carry stuff around for me then, too?”

Jameson scowls down at her. “I guess so. Sounds like someone needs to.”

“You're being an idiot. I can carry a damn plant.”

“That’s not a plant, it’s a fucking tree. Why are you bringing a tree here? It’s too big. And it’s definitely too big for you to carry,” I shout over to them. “Hand it over to him, Lil.”

“Enough, Lily. You’re the one who’s being ridiculous.” Jameson steps directly in front of Lily and pries the plant pot out of her hands.

“Asshole,” she mutters.

“The plant. What’s it for?” I shout again.

“It’s a housewarming gift. Sort of. Selena wanted it. And since you’re living here part time now, I figured you deserved a housewarming gift.”

“How much do you sell one of these things for? It’s big.”

“Two-fifty for city people. One-fifty for locals. Free for besties,” Lily says with a huge smile.

She walks over to me and pinches my arm. “Don’t let this go to your head, but I kind of like being able to show up at the farm and see you here all the time.”

“I know you’re going to let this go to your head. But me, too.”

“What’s for dinner?”

“No idea. Selena kicked everyone out of the kitchen.”

Lily rolls her eyes at me. “What did you do?”

“Why does everyone keep asking me that? I didn’t *do* anything. Why does everyone just assume it’s my fault?”

“Because you definitely did something,” Jameson grins at me. “And if you really don’t know what you did, she just hasn’t told you what it is. Yet. Where do you want me to put this? Or should I just ask Selena?”

When I roll my eyes at him, he nods. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. I’m braving the kitchen to see where she wants this. You going to come and protect me, Lily?”

“I’m coming. But I’m definitely not protecting you from Selena or anyone else.”

“Fuck it, I’m coming, too,” I mutter, as I follow them towards the kitchen.

“I thought I told everyone to stay out of the kitchen,” Selena shouts, spinning around from where she’s closing a hot oven door, hands covered in crazy oven mitts she made me buy her that look like lobster claws. She’s fucking pinching and snapping them at me like lobster claws, too.

She’s wearing an old apron of my mom’s over her dress. Her face is all flushed, and she looks so fucking pretty. If I didn’t think she’d be even more

pissed at me for ruining dinner, I'd be dragging her upstairs to shove my face between her legs right now.

"Lily! Finally! Oh my god, the testosterone was drowning me. I'm so glad you're here! Do you want to know what your best friend did?"

"You still going to insist you didn't do anything?" Lily punches me in the arm.

Selena rolls her eyes, then turns to me. "You told Lily you didn't do anything, *Nugget?*"

My eyes drop to her big, perfect tits. It's a hell of a lot better than staring at the ceiling when I can't meet her eyes.

"He bought me the bakery in town. Without even asking me. *Again.*"

"Wait, isn't that a good thing? I thought you wanted to open up a second Ladycakes location here in town?" Lily asks, looking from Selena to me and back.

"I did!" Selena nearly shouts.

"So, what's the problem then?" My little brother is a brave man. A dumb, brave man.

Lily nods. "Yeah, I don't get it."

"Lily! You're supposed to be on my side."

"Sorry, I'm totally on your side. *Probably.* Once you tell me exactly what Jacks did wrong?"

"I just told you! Jackson bought the bakery. On Grove Street."

"I'm still not getting it."

"He didn't even ask me! He just bought it for me without even talking to me."

"I mean, I'm obviously completely on your side. *Probably.* But isn't that kind of nice of him?"

"Exactly," I mutter, grabbing another beer from the fridge. After opening it, I take a long drink.

I catch Selena watching me while I do, her eyes staring at my neck as I swallow. At least even when she's pissed at me, she still wants me. Jonas was right about the make-up sex. I hate it when Selena and I fight, but the make-up sex almost makes it worth it.

"It's not nice. It's overbearing. And rude."

"Jacks, can you just apologize for being overbearing and rude, so the rest of us don't have to suffer anymore?" Jameson says from behind me.

Selena crosses her oven mitts under her breasts, pushing them up even

higher, staring at me like she's waiting for an apology.

So, I guess I better give her one.

"Baby, I'm sorry you're upset. But I'm not sorry for buying the bakery. I love you, and if there's something you want, I'm going to figure out a way to get it for you."

She narrows her beautiful hazel eyes at me, and her crossed arms push her tits up a little more. "What if I want a horse?"

"We'll go look first thing tomorrow morning. But you're not putting a foot in those stirrups by yourself until you take some lessons."

"This is exactly what I'm talking about! I don't need a horse! Just because I casually mention something does not mean I'm asking you to go out and buy it for me."

"You wanted the bakery. I got it for you. I don't see what the big fucking deal is."

"I have a business plan. I was going to save up for it and then buy it with profits from the L.A. location."

"This was faster. And what if someone had bought it in the meantime?"

"It's been for sale for the last four years, and no one bought it," Jameson mutters.

"Not fucking helpful, bro."

The back door opens and Gunnar peeks his head in. "There you are, Lil. I need you to come settle a bet with Jasper."

Lily smiles sweetly at him. "Be right there."

Then she turns back to Selena and me. "Selly, I love you. But you're being crazy as fuck. Jacks, tell her you love her and make out with her so the rest of us don't have to witness this nonsense. And you're welcome to buy *me* any bakeries, tropical islands, or small countries whenever you want!" Lily heads out the back door, with a wave at us.

"I'm just going to leave this here," Jameson mutters, finally putting down the tree he's been carrying. Then he follows Lily out onto the back porch.

"Thanks for the fiddle leaf fig, Lily!" Selena calls after them. "See? If you need to buy ridiculously large gifts, you can buy them for Lily."

"I'm never going to stop taking care of you, baby. If something's going to make you happy, I'm always going to find a way to make it happen for you. And it's *our* money, so technically *we* bought the bakery for you."

"Ugh! Why do you have to be so sweet all the time? It makes it really hard to stay pissed at you. I was going to be all spicy tonight. Torture you

until you beg for my forgiveness,” Selena whispers, breathless.

“Yeah, we’re definitely still doing that. I’ll probably give you another reason to be pissed at me before then. I love you, baby.”

“I love you too, Nugget. I love you more than I ever thought I could love someone as hard to look at as you are.”

“I’m grateful you can look past how ugly I am, baby. Because you’re so fucking beautiful. Lose the oven mitts unless you’re going to jerk me off with them. I want your hands on me when I kiss you.”

“What about dinner?”

“Lily ordered me to make out with you. How long do we have before dinner burns?”

“We have a few minutes.”

“Let’s not waste them.”

The sweet smile she gives me makes all my blood surge to my dick. “No minute I spend with you is ever wasted. Not when I was pretending to love you. Not when I was pretending *not* to love you. And definitely not now that you’re mine.”

I press my hands against her face. “You’re the best thing I ever had, baby. You’re the best thing that ever happened to me. And you’re all fucking *mine*.”

chapter eighty-seven

Two months later...

selena

After dinner, Jackson did the dishes and put them away while I sat on the kitchen counter next to him with a glass of rosé. It was another perfect, quiet night on the farm. The farm that feels like home now. I'm so freaking happy that I'm about to burst from it at all times.

And I have every intention of rewarding my boyfriend for making me this happy by watching the sunset and then seducing him.

When I go to join him out on the front porch swing, I'm wearing the denim dress from the Goldrush, the infamous night of body shots and bar fights.

Jackson turns away from the sunset to me as soon as he hears me. His eyes always find me in a room. His hands always reach for me. He's always touching me. Always showing me—and telling me—that he needs me.

The smile on his face turns into a frown. “What the hell are you wearing?”

Smiling back at him, I ignore his grumpy frown. “You never told me if you liked this dress.”

“Half of your tits are hanging out the top and your ass is nearly hanging out the bottom, so you know I like it. But you're not going anywhere in that dress, baby. I don't care what you and Lily have cooked up tonight that neither of you decided to tell me about.”

He might not look happy now, but I'm pretty sure he's about to.

“I'm not going anywhere tonight.”

He frowns up at me. “Then why the hell are you wearing that sexy little dress?”

“I thought she deserved some happier memories.”

A slow smile spreads over Jackson's face. “And just what kind of *happier* memories were you thinking?”

“I have some ideas...”

“I bet you do, baby. I bet you do. Are you planning on telling me what they are?”

“We’re going to watch the sunset, and then I’m going to seduce you.”

His eyebrows dart up. “I can’t wait to see what you have planned. But I can promise you, it’s not going to take much work to seduce me. I’m hard just seeing your tits falling out of that dress.”

“Sunset first, Nugget.”

“Get your sexy ass over here on this porch swing, then.”

With a laugh, I strut across the front porch over to him. When he reaches for me, I step into him as he guides me to sit down next to him and then pulls my legs over his lap. When he runs his knuckles over the curve of my breast, my breath catches in my throat.

He lets out a long, slow breath. “You’re killing me in that dress, baby.”

“Good,” I whisper, leaning in to press my lips against the spot where I licked salt off of him at the Goldrush months ago.

We both stare out over the farm while the sky is all lit up in pastel pinks, purples, and golds, dancing over the snow-capped mountains. This place has the most beautiful sunsets I think I’ve ever seen.

“What if I build you a big house over there on that hill, so we could watch the sunset whenever we’re in Western Springs?”

“Thank you for offering. But I don’t need a big house on a hill to watch the sunset. I can watch it fine from right here on the porch swing. In my favorite spot.”

“I’m not sure you like anything more than you like this damn swing.”

“Maybe there’s one or two things I like more.”

“Maybe?”

“Maybe.” Nuzzling my head into his neck, I drink him in. This man that I thought I would never see again, except on a movie screen. This man I thought would break my heart, but somehow ended up being all mine. “Our new house in L.A. is more than big enough. You and I could live in that house and never see each other if we wanted.”

We traded in Jackson’s cold, sterile white house for an old Spanish style one from the nineteen-twenties. It’s warm and beautiful, and everything I could ever want. It feels like home. I keep hoping to find a friendly ghost living with us. The kind that turns off the lights when I forget or closes the kitchen cupboard when Jackson leaves it open. But so far, no luck.

“Don’t even think about it. I like you where I can see you. At all times. Where I can reach out and do this.” Jackson presses his hand against the back of my neck and brings my lips up to meet his. Warm, firm, familiar lips press

down on mine. Rough and demanding, like always. He licks, sucks, and bites at me like he wants to devour me. Like his very life depends on it.

“I only want to be where you are,” I whisper against his lips when he finally pulls up for air. “And that’s why we don’t need a big house here. When we’re here, I want us to be together. On top of each other. I want to see your family every day. I want big family dinners and grilling outside and parties and drinking too much wine with Lily on a bale of hay. Why would we want to be over there on a hill away from everyone when we could be right here?”

“Okay, okay. If you want to stay here when we’re in Western Springs, that’s fine by me. But six months a year is a long time. You might get sick of living with my dad and having my brothers come and go all the time like they still live here.”

“You promised me six months. Or more. Probably a lot more. And I couldn’t ever get sick of *our* family.” How could I ever get tired of having the big, crazy family that I always wanted?

“Now that that’s settled, what were you saying about liking us on top of each other?” Jackson asks, kissing my neck.

His hand slides down my side and starts playing my nipple through my dress.

“Jackson, your dad’s inside!”

“He went up to bed. On the other side of the house. And the risk of getting caught is half the fun, isn’t it?”

“No! It’s *none* of the fun! I could never look your dad in the eyes again if he saw,” I wave my hand over my body frantically. “Any of this. Then we’d actually have to build a new house, far, far, away.”

Jackson growls. “No one’s seeing an inch of you except me. Lose the panties and the bra. Keep the dress on. And you’re on top.”

“Nugget, I’m supposed to be seducing *you*!”

He leans in and nuzzles my neck. “Baby, you did such a good job seducing me. My pretty, sexy good girl. Now I want you to ride my cock, Selena. I’m going to suck on your tits and watch you bounce on my cock while the sun sets, painting this pretty skin gold.”

“You’re sounding very romantic tonight.”

“What can I say? This is what you do to me.”

Jackson maneuvers me off of the porch swing until I’m standing between his legs, which are spread wide. Of course. The man only knows how to

manspread.

When Jackson pulls me between his legs, poor Oats stands up from where he was lying next to the porch swing, gives us a dirty look and heads down the porch steps to find a more peaceful napping space in the yard. By now, he's pretty used to mommy and daddy wrestling. *Often. And enthusiastically.*

"You're taking too long, baby. Let me help you out of those panties." His voice is low and hoarse as he slides his hands up inside my dress to pull down my underwear.

Only, I'm not wearing any.

"Shit, baby. You're bare under there?"

Smiling down at him, I nod. "I'm seducing you."

Jackson growls up at me. Then he tosses my dress over his head and presses his face between my thighs. He finds my clit and sucks on it hard. Leaning back to give him better access, I press my pussy into his mouth. No matter how many times he licks my pussy, I can never get enough. My knees go weak, and I would fall right onto the porch floor if his hands weren't holding onto my hips so tightly.

"Make me come, Jackson. Make me come."

His tongue slides out of me, and his head reappears from my dress.

"Naughty girls who walk around without panties on have to wait until I say they can come," Jackson tells me, licking his lips before curving them into a wide smile. "Now lose the bra. I want to suck on your tits."

"Asshole," I whisper as I do what I'm told. Doing what I'm told during sex always turns out very, very well for me in the end.

Reaching behind my back, I undo my bra clasps through my dress. Then I pull the strap over one arm and slide it out through the other arm hole.

Jackson pulls me towards him until my breasts are in his face. "Let me see that jiggle."

He smacks me hard on my ass, making all of me shake from the force. "Idiot," I mutter under my breath. "If people had any idea what a pervert you are--"

"Who are you going to tell? No one would believe it." Jackson grins up at me. "And only for you, Selena. All for you. Now be a good girl and get on my lap."

chapter eighty-eight

selena

Like always, when he touches me like this, I do what I'm told. I climb up onto his lap and start grinding my naked pussy on the seam of his jeans and the thick, heavy cock trying to break free.

"Does that feel good, baby?"

"Mmmm-hmmm," I whisper, as I grind on him.

Jackson leans forward and bites my breast through the thin denim of my dress. His mouth is hot and wet. Then he releases me, only to jerk the neckline of my dress down and pull out both of my breasts. The dress is so low cut that it doesn't take much to have my boobs falling out.

"Jackson! What if someone sees?" I demand, only half of me concerned. Because my lower half is very intent on wringing an orgasm out of Jackson's trapped dick.

"No one's going to see anything if I'm covering your tits... with my mouth." Jackson grins up at me and then sucks one heavy breast into his mouth, while his other hand pinches and then massages my other nipple.

My hands are on Jackson's shoulders to steady myself as I grind on him. When I decide that's not enough, I drop my hands to his pants and free his beautiful cock.

"Do I even need to be here?" Jackson murmurs with my nipple still in his mouth, the vibration from his words making me pant.

"Part of you does. A very, very important part." I whisper. "I need you inside me, Jackson. Fill me up with your cock."

"It's yours, baby. Only yours." Jackson releases my breasts and presses them back inside my dress. Then he wraps his hands around my hips and positions me over his cock. One hand slides up under my dress and presses his head inside me.

"Hold on." Jackson lifts his hips up, pushing his dick inches farther inside me, as he reaches behind him for something.

Smiling, I press down lower onto him. "What are you up to? It's not like we need a condom at this point. You've painted just about every inch of me

in your cum by now. Your signature can still use some work, though.”

“Baby, you keep talking about my cum all over that sexy body of yours like that, and I’m going to pull out and come right into that dirty little mouth. I’m not getting a condom. I’m getting this.”

I slide down another few inches, taking more of him inside me. Every time he’s inside me, I still have to warm up to take all of him. He still stretches me out in the best way.

Jackson groans. “Fuck, baby. You take this hard cock so fucking good.”

“What is it?” I ask, distracted by how good he feels, and honestly not really caring anymore.

“This,” Jackson whispers, as he presses the final length of his cock inside me.

“Mmmm,” I groan, half pleasure, half discomfort.

Then I see what he’s holding in his hand.

A velvet box.

“*What is that?*”

“An engagement ring.”

“Oh.” I can feel tears burning my eyes.

But he hasn’t asked me anything yet. I had wondered if maybe he wasn’t ever going to ask me to marry him when three months came and went with no proposal. I thought maybe turning him down once was enough to make him not want to marry me. But even if Jackson never proposed, I know I’d stay with him as long as he wants me. I’d stay with him forever.

Jackson presses two fingers into my open mouth. “Baby, you can’t just look at me with those lips wide open and not expect me to put something in that naughty mouth of yours.”

I suck on his fingers, like I suck on his cock, and roll my hips, pressing him even deeper inside me.

Then I bite his fingers and pull my head back.

“Are you planning on doing anything with that ring, or...?”

“I guess it depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“On whether you’re going to be a good girl and not come until I tell you to.”

“I’m a very good girl.”

“Yeah, you’re my good girl. My fucking best girl. Now, ride my fucking cock like you’re my *wife*. Ride this cock like you own every fucking inch of

it, just like I own that pretty, wet pussy.”

Doing as I’m told, I press my hands back on Jackson’s shoulders and rise up, only to crash back down onto his cock. I grind back down into him again and again as his hips rise to meet mine. Our movements are urgent and greedy. Because as many times as I’ve felt Jackson inside me, it’s never enough for either of us.

The pleasure and pressure build inside of me until I can’t take it anymore.

“I need to come, Jackson. I need it so bad.”

“Yeah, you do. *My wife* needs to come, and I’m going to give her everything she needs.” Jackson pulls my hand off of his shoulder and slips both of our hands under my dress. He twines his fingers with mine and then presses them into me, opening me up wide. Together, we feel his cock slide in and out of me, everything between us wet and sticky. Then he slides our fingers up to my clit. “Come for me, *Wife*, make that pretty pussy come all over my dick.”

I don’t know where his body ends and mine begins. I don’t know which fingers are his and which are mine. But we rub my clit until I can’t take it anymore and the pressure breaks inside me as I clench around his dick, my body jerking.

Jackson hammers his cock into me once, twice, and then it’s too much. He shoots his seed inside me, as he jerks under me.

“Marry me, Selena.”

I nod, as my body rocks into him, as my orgasm rolls through me.

“Say it, baby. My moon and my stars, love of my life, gift of a woman, say you’ll be my wife.”

My whole face is smiling. He remembered those words? The words I told him to call me the first time I went to his house. When I decided I was going to call this beautiful man *Nugget*.

“Yes, I’ll be your wife. I love you, Jackson,” I whisper, my voice rough as my body jerks around his.

When our bodies finally stop moving, I’m pressed against Jackson’s chest, my head under his chin. Reaching up, I kiss his neck and then bite it. “You better still fuck me like this when we’re married.”

“I’m never going to stop fucking you like this, wife. Give me a couple of minutes, and I’ll show you.”

Jackson rolls his hips into me, his spent cock still inside me as our hot, wet cum slowly drips from my pussy down onto his jeans.

“We’re making a mess...”

“Baby, I can promise you we’re never going to stop making messes. But I’m always going to be right here to clean you up so we can make another one. Give me your hand.”

Holding out my left hand to him, Jackson pushes a massive sapphire engagement ring onto my finger. Fluttering my fingers, I smile down at my hand. At *my engagement ring*. It’s the first good look I’ve had at it. I’m not even sure if it’s the same ring he used when he proposed to me on The Eddie Parsons Show, and I don’t even care. I never finished watching Jackson propose to me on national TV, and I swear I never will. This is the only proposal I want to remember.

“Do you like it?” For once in his life, Jackson Waters sounds unsure of himself. “I looked at a ton of diamond ones, but they all seemed cold. Not warm like my baby.”

“You did good, Nugget. I love my ring. And I love you,” I tell him with a smile, dragging my eyes away from my pretty ring. The sapphire is more teal than anything. It’s perfect. A massive oval sapphire with five marquise diamonds on either side, that almost look like white lilies in bloom.

“We may need to revisit you calling me *Nugget* after we’re married.”

Biting my lip, I shake my head at him. “Never. At least not if you want your wife to keep on fucking you and loving you like I do. You’ll always be my *Nugget*, Jackson.”

“And you’ll always be my baby.”

Jackson holds me tight and we watch the last few minutes of the sunset together before the night sky goes dark.

epilogue

selena

*I*t's finally here. The grand opening of Ladycakes' first Canadian location. Right here in Western Springs.

"I'm still mad at you for buying this bakery without telling me, Nugget." Jackson grins down at me. "No, you're not. You're just nervous. But it's going to be great, I promise. You and Ladycakes are going to have people coming from all the surrounding towns. Hell, you'll have people driving all the way from Vancouver."

"You're just saying that because you're obsessed with sugar."

"I'm obsessed with *you*. I'm actually very picky about where I get my sugar. And your baking is fucking amazing, baby. You have nothing to be nervous about. Everything's perfect. Because the place is yours. And you're perfect."

My lips twitch before I just give in to it and give him a massive smile. "And you're only a little bit biased?"

"I am all the way biased. But that doesn't make it any less true. Look around you. You did this, baby. This is all you."

With his hands on my shoulders, Jackson slowly turns me around to take in a full three-hundred-and-sixty degree view of the cute storefront on Grove Street that is now the home of Ladycakes' first Canadian location.

The brick walls have been sanded down so only bits of the previous white paint show through, along with the rust color of the natural brick. Everything is white, chrome, and glass to make the small space feel open and bright. Little white bistro tables and chairs are dotted everywhere I could fit them. The Ladycakes logo runs over the windows across the entire front of the shop, with a new black-and-white-striped awning outside. More tables line the wall underneath the windows inside. When the weather's nice, we can put more tables outside for people to drink their coffees and eat their breakfast sandwiches or pastries. The service counter is white with a big glass case to show off our baked goods. And Jackson insisted on buying me a brand new, insanely expensive espresso machine from Italy.

Everyone helped out. Lily made me a custom plant art installation on one wall. Jackson's brothers helped with painting and sanding and refinishing the floors. Getting this place open was a group effort. But Jackson was the general contractor, the cheerleader, and my shoulder to cry on whenever things got stressful.

This place isn't as big as the location in L.A., but in a town of twelve-hundred people, I don't need to have a kitchen big enough to make a thousand wholesale cupcakes every day. This place is exactly what I wanted. A cute cafe in Western Springs where people can get a delicious iced coffee in the morning.

And I hope people come in here the rest of the day, too. We're going to do sandwiches, pizza, and salads at lunch.

But the thing I'm most proud of is that Ladycakes is going to supply the hospital with free baked goods every day, so families don't have to eat the crappy food we did when Jackson's dad was in the hospital.

"Thank you, Nugget."

"What are you thanking me for? You did this, not me."

"Thank you for letting me invite myself to your family emergency when your dad was hurt. I can't imagine what my life would look like if I hadn't come with you."

Jackson pushes my hair back behind my ear. "Don't you worry about that, baby. It'd look just about the same. I wasn't going to let you out of my sight until I made you fall in love with me."

Smiling, I slap my hand at his chest. "Oh, please! You act like you knew I was going to fall in love with you."

Jackson shrugs. "I knew what I was working with. My rabid little *Raven's Ravine* fan. You were into me in the elevator. It was only a matter of time before you were all mine."

He's right.

I know he's right.

And I will admit that to him over my cold, dead body.

"Oh, please. You did not know that."

"I did know that. I knew you'd fall in love with me. And I was already in love with you, even if I didn't know it yet. I told you I loved you first."

Jackson grins. "I also asked you to marry me, and you rudely declined."

Rolling my eyes, I shake my head. "I wasn't rude. And you deserved it. You proposed to Eddie freaking Parsons, not to me, Nugget."

“Are you finally going to marry me now that the bakery’s open?”

“You put a ring on my finger and you already call me your wife.”

Jackson growls at me. I *love* it when he growls at me. “I want it official, baby. That you’re mine. Let’s move up the wedding. How about this afternoon?”

“Absolutely not. I want the wedding we planned at the farm with all our family and friends around us. I always wanted to get married in June. You’re just going to have to wait until next year for the wedding. But, Jackson?”

“Yeah, baby?”

“It’s already official in every way that matters. I’m yours. And you’re mine.”

“I know, baby. I know you’re mine. But I want to claim you in front of the entire world.”

“I don’t care about the entire world. I care about you and me and our family. Nothing else matters to me.”

Jackson presses his hands against my cheeks and tilts my face up to meet his. He’s kissed me like this at least a thousand times, and I still get butterflies every single one of those times. After we’ve had sex, sometimes he’ll kiss me slow and soft, taking his time. But most of the time, it’s like this. Hard and demanding. He never makes me wonder how much he wants me. He wants me all the time, just like I want him all the time.

“Hey, break it up! This is a place of business!” Lily’s voice calls out as the old paned glass door at the front of the bakery creaks open, and she pokes her head in. “Are you ready to open up? There’s a line out here. The people of Western Springs demand iced coffees and pastries!”

The plant installation Lily created for me is a wall of living plants covering most of the wall opposite the bathrooms. On a black powder coated metal frame that we salvaged at an estate sale, countless little galvanized buckets hold tropical plants in every shade of green with just a few flowering in white and pink. It’s so beautiful. I don’t know what the frame was built for, but it’s like it was meant for the bakery. It fits perfectly onto the wall.

That’s what my life is like with Jackson. Perfect for me. He’s perfect for me. We’re perfect together. We argue like anyone does, but then we make up. And Jackson kept his promise to me, like he keeps all of his promises. He loves me more every day than he did the last.

I love this man so damn much. I used to think lucky people didn’t get trapped in elevators, but now I know that’s not true. Because I’m the luckiest

woman in the entire world.



jackson

“Baby? Are you ready to open up now?”

Selena looks out the front windows. And then she slides her hand down my arm and takes my hand.

“I’m nervous.”

“Baby, this place is amazing. Everyone’s going to love it. You’ve got this. And I’m right here if you need anything. I love you, baby.”

“Okay. Let’s open.” Selena scrunches up her shoulders and does a little shimmy that she’s definitely going to be repeating later. Naked. While she’s riding my dick.

She looks over her shoulder towards the back of the bakery and calls out to her new employees. “Okay, I’m opening the doors! Let’s do this!”

Selena walks towards the door where Lily and the rest of my family are all waiting not-so-patiently in line along the sidewalk, tugging me along with her. I didn’t even have to tell my brothers to have their asses here for Selena’s grand opening today. They showed up because they love me and because they love Selena. Lily and Selena are best friends now. And the two of them terrorize me daily. But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t love that, too.

“Ready?”

“You’ve got this, baby. And if you ever don’t, I’m right here to help.”

“I love you, Nugget.”

“I love you too, baby.”

Lily groans and rolls her eyes at us from the other side of the glass door while I lean down and kiss Selena’s forehead. The way my wife leans into my side and smiles up at me makes everything worth it. Giving up the superhero franchise. Putting Selena and my family first. It’s all worth it every day. I don’t have a single regret for not spending the next decade of my life in front of a green screen in Australia. Not a single fucking one.

Selena swings the front door open and slides a doorstep against it with her toe. She’s wearing platform sandals, trying to pretend she’s taller than she is, and one of her little sundresses. She looks fucking perfect. When we step back, my entire family and what seems like the entire town flood into the bakery. Lily gives Selena a big hug. Then my dad holds her tight for a long

minute.

“This place looks amazing. I’m so proud of you, Selena,” he tells her with a big smile on his face. Selena never had a dad, and she’s starting to know what it’s like having a really fucking great one.

Then all of my brothers hug her, too. When Jasper holds onto her a little too long just to piss me off, I haul him away from her. Jameson dances her side to side. Even Jarret and Jensen like Selena, and they’re both grumpy assholes like me. My brothers and Gunnar clap me on the back like I did something. But this place was all her.

Selena eventually lets go of my hand and walks around behind the counter.

“Do we get a friends-and-family discount?” Lily asks, batting her lashes at Selena. She’s first in line at the counter because all the men in my family let her go first. “And is the first official coffee free?”

“Yes, you get a family discount. But please try not to abuse it. I know how much you Waters boys eat. You’ll eat right into my profit margins.”

“They can pay full price for a coffee and a croissant, baby,” I mutter, shaking my head at her.

“I’ll buy you a coffee, Lily,” Jameson offers. “And maybe a cupcake too, if you’re lucky.”

A big smile covers Lily’s face. “Thanks for offering now that you know there’s a family discount. But you need to be careful and save your money. If you spend all your money buying me breakfast, who’s going to buy hard lemonade for your little girlies at the Goldrush this weekend?”

Jameson bumps into her side and grins down at her, jerking his chin up. “Jealous?”

Lily bursts out laughing. Then she reaches up and messes up his hair like she’s been doing to me since high school. “So, so jealous. I spend all my nights at home crying about being too old for you to hit on at the Goldrush. Thanks for the laugh, kid. Jacks can buy me a coffee, though. And a breakfast sandwich. Thanks, bestie!”

Pulling my wallet out of my back pocket, I grab one of my cards and put it down on the counter in front of one of Selena’s new employees. “Just use my card today. For everyone. Whatever people want.”

“Jackson!” Selena shouts at me from across the service counter.

“I’m just supporting your business, baby. I want to. So, let me.”

She shrugs, but she’s giving me one of her big sunshine smiles. “Fine.

But you're an idiot. It's like you're paying yourself."

"Yeah, I'm not too worried about the math. Can I have the first coffee, though? Sorry, Lil. Yours is free, but you're getting the second official coffee from Ladycakes."

"Of course, Nugget." Selena tilts her head and smiles at me. "Want to come back here and help me make it? You're better at this stupid expensive espresso machine than I am."

"You got it, baby." I walk around the counter to join my wife. She's right. We're already married in every way that matters.

"Oh my god, Jacks is making the coffees now?" Lily asks, rolling her eyes. "I mean, I know a lot of actors work as baristas, but come on."

"Using the espresso machine is just one of my many talents. Selena can tell you how good I am with my hands, if she hasn't already," I tell Lily, shrugging as I walk around the counter to Selena.

Selena swats my chest for that, but I just wrap an arm around her and haul her against my side. "What do you want, Lil?"

"An iced rosemary brown sugar oat latte, please and thank you."

"Coming right up."

Lily's right. Most actors don't want to spend their days making coffees. But I'll give Selena whatever she needs. I'd do anything to put the kind of smile on her face that she gives me when I put the portafilter under the expensive grinder I bought her. The coffee setup was my thing. I picked out everything from the espresso machine to the grinder to the beans. Selena knows how to use everything now, but I think she's still a little intimidated by it. I'll be right here helping her until she's confident she has the hang of it. There's nowhere else I'd rather be than by her side.

I'm so freaking proud of my baby for opening this place. Not to mention the new L.A. location.

I love the house she picked out for us in L.A.

I love the life she gave me.

We spend as much time here in Western Springs with my family as we can. We go back to L.A. when I need to be there for work. And for the first time in my life, the first thing I think about when I look at a new script is where it's filming and how it's going to affect my family.

Because Selena gave me my family back.

She's the best thing I ever had.

Spend more time in Western Springs with Lily and Jameson in Nothing Like I Expected, a steamy best friend's brother, reverse age gap, small town romance. READ NOW

Lily

WHEN I LEAN FORWARD, Jameson releases me from being pinned against his warm body. Turning around to face him, I have a huge smile on my face. "I don't know whether I should be offended or impressed. You're scary good at that."

My best friend's little brother, Jameson, was ready and willing to help get rid of my shitty online first date. Or at least incapable of saying no to his brother's best friend in my time of need. With a made-up story about how we're pregnant and getting married, he had my date running for the door of the Goldrush to get away from me.

"Happy to chase men away from you anytime, babe."

"Enough with the *babe* stuff. He's gone now." Batting my lashes at him, I rub the curve of my stomach like he did. "Unless you think we should really get married. *For the babies.*"

Jameson grins at me with his big smug smile. "There's more than one in there? I figured my guys could swim, but shit."

"Twins. They run in my family."

"No one in your family is a twin."

"Twins always skip a generation."

"Let me buy you a drink. We can talk baby names."

"Are you even old enough to buy me a drink? How did you even get in here tonight? Still have Jacks' old fake ID?"

Jameson's lips twitch before he gives me a lazy grin. "I'm plenty old enough to get you a drink. And whatever else you *need* tonight."

Is Jameson... flirting with me?

That's weird. How much has he been drinking?

"Sounds like you don't need another drink. You can go back to your little redhead friend now. Preferably, before she claws my eyes out. But maybe have a glass of water?"

"I'm good. I've had one beer. Less than you've had."

"Why do you know that?"

"Maybe because I've been keeping tabs on you, Lemon."

“I’m a grown-up, Jameson. I don’t need a *kid* looking after me.”

“Remember that time when you needed my help, and I scared your date off for you? That time about two minutes ago?”

“I’m sure I could have found someone else to help me.”

“But you didn’t, did you? You came to me for help, Lemon. Come on, I’m buying you a drink.”

“What about your little girlie over there?”

“Only girl I see is the one standing in front of me I’m about to buy a drink for.”

His words are so sweet and sexy. My brain can’t process that Jameson Waters is the one saying them to me. “You’re really picking the wrong audience for these lines. They’re actually pretty good.”

“I know they’re good. And we’ll see about that.”

“What’s with you tonight? You’re acting weird.”

“Maybe something got into me?”

“Yeah, like what?”

“Like how pretty you look tonight.”

I’m smiling before I can stop myself. So, I try to counter it with an over-the-top eye roll. “Just get me a drink already.”

“Your wish is my command, Lemon.”

Jameson presses his hand lightly against my lower back and walks me around the edge of the dance floor to the bar. Since it’s a Tuesday night, it’s not very busy in here. We don’t have to wait long before one of the bartenders looks at us with raised eyebrows. Thankfully, it’s not one I recognize. So, he won’t remember I was here with Jameson. Not that I’m here *with* Jameson. We just both happen to be here. Separately. Independently. At the same time. Two old friends who happened to run into each other. By accident.

“What are you drinking? You want another white wine?” Jameson asks, rubbing his hand against my lower back to get my attention.

Is his hand still on my back? How did I not notice that?

“Seems like you’re calling all the shots, kid. Why don’t you surprise me?”

He nods. “She’ll have a tequila soda with pineapple juice and lime. I’ll have another beer. Thanks.”

Jameson pays, and the bartender is pushing our drinks across the bar in less than a minute. Jameson picks them both up and hands me my drink.

When I take it, his fingers drag along mine before he lets go.

“Were you going to thank me?”

“Wasn’t planning on it.”

Nodding, he grins down at me. “That sounds about right.”

Jameson presses his hand to the small of my back again and guides me down the stairs and over to a tall table next to the seating area with low couches and ottomans.

I push up onto my tiptoes to slide onto a barstool tucked against the wall. But instead of sitting on the barstool on the other side of the table next to the wall, Jameson stands at the table next to me, his thighs brushing up against mine. Heat radiates off of him onto my bare legs.

“So…” I say, because I don’t know what else to say.

I’ve known Jameson Waters my entire life. He’s all grown up now. Tall and handsome. With dark brown hair and the prettiest blue eyes I’ve ever seen, just like the rest of his brothers. All the Waters boys are hot. And the cocky grin that’s always on his face? It’s adorably sexy. But he’s just… *Jameson*. He’s the kid brother who was always tagging around behind everyone, easygoing and cracking jokes. He was the little shit-disturber always getting away with everything.

“So…” Jameson answers back.

“How did you know what my drink is?”

“How could I not know what your drink is? You always get the same thing.”

“Why do you know that?” I ask and then shrug.

I don’t really care how he knows it, because it doesn’t matter. Jameson is my best friend’s little brother. We’re around each other all the time. Of course, he’s seen me order this same drink before. Probably dozens of times.

“It’s my favorite. I’m a tequila girlie.”

And as much as I love my tequila, I will forever be just a little bit sad that I grew up to drink fruity little drinks and not shoot whiskey like I always planned.

“I remember, Lemon.” The way he says it, slowly, his voice extra deep tells me exactly what he remembers.

The time I drunkenly did a body shot of tequila right off of his stomach because he was standing the closest to me when I reached out to grab someone—anyone—after my friend, Gunnar, didn’t sound too excited about the thought of me licking him. My feelings were hurt, and so I made a big

show of licking the salt off of Jameson's abs and biting the lime out of his mouth. Not my most mature behavior, and an incident best left in the distant past. How long ago does something have to be to qualify as the distant past? The body shots incident was only a couple of months ago.

Jameson reminding me of that night deserves another over-the-top eye roll. "Funny, I don't."

"No?"

"No. So, what was the plan here? You bought me a drink. Now what?" I ask, expectantly. "Can I get back to my night, or...?"

"And what exactly was your night going to include?"

"Oh, I don't know. Trolling around the bar trying to meet someone better than my Tumbleweed date?"

"Not happening."

"I know it's unlikely, but I can at least try. I got all dressed up for this. I practically won the lottery booking the one taxi in Western Springs just so I could have a few drinks tonight."

"You don't need to troll the Goldrush. You've got me right here. And I'm a hell of a lot better option than that piece of shit grazing your tits and pretending it was an accident. If I'm touching your tits, it won't be an accident."

It's a good thing Jameson's not sitting across the table from me. Because I do a spit-take and send a mouthful of tequila soda across the table and onto the barstool and wall on the other side.

"You're *never* touching my boobs!"

Jameson takes a big swig of his beer, and I can't look away from the way his Adam's apple bobs and his throat muscles work as he swallows. "Night's still young, so I guess we'll see about that."

"You wouldn't even know what to do with me, kid."

"*Try me.*"

"Oh, please! Who are you tonight? Stop fake hitting on me and tell me how everyone is at the farm?"

"Everyone's fine. Violet misses you."

"I saw her this morning."

I found Violet half-starved and abandoned when I was fourteen, and I've never looked back. She's my best girl, and I've loved her more every single day than the one before. We couldn't keep a horse in town, so she's lived out at the Waters' farm ever since. I go out there almost every day to take care of

her, and the Waters boys, including Jameson, fill in for me the rest of the time.

“She still misses you. I brushed her out for you this afternoon after work. She was looking real pretty when I left. Just like her mama.”

“Seriously, what is going on with you tonight? Is this how much you hit on other women? No wonder you have so many little girlies after you.”

“I don’t need to hit on any of them this much, Lemon. Shit, this is the hardest I’ve had to work since I grew facial hair.”

“Remember those scraggly little whiskers you had on your upper lip for like a year before you actually needed to shave? You were so proud of them. It was so adorable.”

Jameson rubs his hand over his jaw, against the thick line of dark stubble there. “Been a long time since I’ve been shaving.”

Faking a confused expression, I narrow my eyes at him. “Has it?”

“You’re looking real pretty tonight, Lemon. Your tits look great in that dress,” Jameson says, his deep voice low as he leans close to whisper to me.

Am I going to try to figure out why dating app Mike complimenting my boobs made me cringe, but when Jameson does it, I press my thighs together to stop the pounding between them? No, because there’s no answer to that question that I’m interested in hearing.

Jameson’s just being a shit-disturber hitting on me like this. We’ve known each other our whole lives, and we just don’t think of each other like that. We wouldn’t even if he was age-appropriate. Which he’s definitely not. He’s a twenty-six-year-old *boy*. I’m a thirty-two-year-old *woman*. Yes, he’s handsome, and he’s all grown up now. But he’s *Jameson*. He’s way too young for me to even be thinking he’s hot.

But if he wants to act like a fool tonight, I’m not going to stop him. Two can play at this game. I’m going to have this boy running all the way back home to Western Springs to get away from me.

Reaching up, I push the hair back from his forehead and then run my fingers along his jaw. “You’re looking real handsome tonight, Jameson.”

He knocks back a pull on his bottle, his Adam’s apple working hard again as he swallows, and then stares down at me. “You think so?”

“Yeah, baby.” I press my fingers against his chest and then drag them down to rest on his big silver belt buckle. “You’re looking *real* good tonight, kid.”

Jameson narrows his eyes, staring down at my face. “If you’re trying to

take me home tonight, you don't have to work that hard. Just say the word, Lemon."

"You're such a child!" I tell him with a laugh, carefully removing my hand. So, much for sending him running back to Western Springs with his tail between his legs.

I flex my hand to release the tension trapped in my fingers from pressing against the hard line of his stomach before pushing my hand down safely on my lap.

"You won't be calling me a child when your boots are over my shoulders and my head's between your thighs."

"Oh my god! *Shut up!*" My eyes are wide. My mouth is open. What the hell is happening? Why does it feel like Jameson has the upper hand here? And how the hell did he get it?

"Why don't you put something in my mouth and make me?"

"Don't say things you can't take back, *kid.*"

"I don't want to take it back. What I want is to make you come, screaming my name."

When my breath catches, Jameson leans in closer. He stares right at me, studying my face. He should be staring at my thighs, all clenched together like I can trap his words between them.

He nods slowly. "You want to fuck me too, don't you?"

"I'm *not* having sex with you, *kid.*"

"Come on, what do you say I take you home tonight, babe?"

"Be careful what you wish for. I'm just tipsy enough to start making some bad decisions."

"What's the capital of Australia?"

"Canberra."

"It's not Sydney?"

"No, it's Canberra."

"Alright, I'm gonna let that one slide. What's eight times four?"

"Thirty-two."

That's an easy one. Because thirty-two is how old I am. And why I definitely shouldn't be flirting—or whatever this is we're doing—with my best friend's little brother. Who is six years younger than me.

"Why are you asking me twenty questions?"

"Because I'm not fucking you when you're drunk, Lemon. But lucky for me, I don't think you are. You only had three drinks tonight. Over nearly two

hours. So, we're all good."

"You're not fucking me at all, *kid*."

"We'll see about that," he whispers. "I'm taking you home tonight. Your place is what, twenty minutes from here?"

"Give or take."

"Well, I'm taking you home. And that's how long you've got to figure out whether I'm coming inside with you tonight."

"You're such an idiot." He doesn't know what he's saying. Or what he's playing at. But that's all this is. A game. He's bored, and he feels like pressing someone's buttons. I'm just the unlucky woman who crossed his path tonight.

"Maybe. You can keep calling me names and go to bed alone. Or you can spend the night riding my face. Not sure I'm the idiot here."

I roll my eyes at him.

"You can roll your eyes at me all you like, Lemon. But you should know, it's only getting me hard."

"Maybe I'm going to find my own ride home. I'm sure there's at least one guy in here who wouldn't mind taking me home tonight. Maybe I'll invite *him* in for a beer?"

Jameson makes a sound that's either a grunt or a growl, or both. He presses his hand against the back of my neck and pulls my face an inch from his.

"You're crazy if you think I'm letting you walk out of here with another man. What happens when we get to your place is up to you. But you're leaving this bar with me tonight, Lemon."

"I'm going to tell Jacks about this," I threaten him.

He shakes his head and smiles. "No, you're not."

Shit. Of course, I'm not telling my best friend and Jameson's older brother about this. But he's not supposed to know that, damnit.

"Finish your drink. Because we're leaving."

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The Art of Being Grumpy

about the author

Mercer Scott writes fun, sexy, modern romance, guaranteed to give you all the feels.

She lives on the West Coast of Canada and spends her days and nights writing, hoping her readers connect with the funny and sexy romance stories that pop into her head.

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