



BILLIONAIRE
BOSSHOLE

THE BILLIONAIRE CLUB

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BRYNN PAULIN

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Billionaire Bosshole

The Billionaire Club

By Brynn Paulin

Supernova Indie Publishing Services, LLC

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Billionaire Bosshole

by

Brynn Paulin

I heard of the devil, but I was never a believer. Now, I'm ready to call 1-800-exorcist.

I just got promoted! Yay, right?

Not so much.

Being the executive assistant to the company's CEO blew up my life. No one can please this man—especially me. No lie: I'm sure if you look up "Bosshole" in the dictionary, you'll find a smirking picture of Keiran Brothers, the man who's turned my life upside down. Yesterday, I loved my job. Today, I'm contemplating murder and non-extradition countries.

And that's before I'm forced to pretend I'm his dotting fiancée for the long holiday weekend. Keiran is after a big new contract, one that requires the client to believe Keiran is a settled man. He needs me to convince everyone we're madly in love. That or lots of people could lose their jobs.

No big deal. I can do it. I think so, anyway.

Until we have to share a bed.

Until my ex is also at the beach house and watching our every move.

Until I see what Keiran's really like when he's not being Mr. Billionaire Bosshole.

Until I start to fall for him.

And that's when I know I'm *really* in trouble.

This standalone novel is part of the Billionaire Club and related to the Bad Boy Club. All books in both series can be read as standalone books and in any order.

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Billionaire Bosshole

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review or telling a friend about the book.***

***I love hearing from readers! To keep in touch and
follow my news, please visit me on my website at***

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Dedication

***For NaShara, who loves the bad boys best.
(Also, I'm sorry but Mercedes has licked him. You'll
have to take it up with her)***

One

Nora

“You don’t look good in orange. Murder is *not* an option. Not a *viable* option.”

My hands shook as I fast-walked to the women’s restroom. I didn’t scurry. I didn’t run. I marched across the floor to the ladies room as far from my desk as I could get.

To be clear, my hands weren’t shaking from nerves or being upset. The tears burning my eyes weren’t because something or *someone* had made me cry.

Unless you counted tears of fury.

Rage burned through me, and I was about to boil over.

I’d worked in the office of Brothers Construction Management, AKA BCM, for seven months. Until this week, it had been a perfect job. I’d loved it. Carrick Brothers was a dream boss, easygoing, fun and jovial, even if the rumor was, he was a bit of a player outside the office. He never brought it here, though. My coworkers were fun. The atmosphere was laid back, but everyone was still focused on their finest work. And best of all, my commute took mere minutes, and we were close enough to NYC that I got to enjoy suburban living and still take advantage of the perks of the city.

Then I got promoted, even though I’d never met my new boss in person until just days ago, since he’d been working out of the country. He’d returned to the US this week.

Keiran Brothers, Carrick's twin, shared his brother's looks, but he was Carrick's diametrical opposite, as opposite as a demon and from an angel.

Oh, I'd heard of the devil, but I'd never been a believer.

Now, three days into this week, I was ready to call 1-800-exorcist.

Meanwhile, I was taking a three-minute breather in the fourth-floor corner restroom—far from my office. It was the only way to stop my imminent implosion and the resulting fireball that would torch my boss when my rage let loose.

Not that I was some supernatural, fire-breathing creature. I just had to deal with Keiran Brothers.

The man was an absolute...*bosshole!*

And unavoidable. I had direct contact with him. Every. Day. Because yeah... Due to a domino of circumstances, I'd come into work on Monday morning and learned I'd been "promoted" to the position of his executive assistant.

Promoted, my ass.

More like his old assistant, Samantha, had run in terror when she'd found out he was returning this week after working six months in Europe, spending time in both London and Frankfurt. I didn't blame her. From time to time, I'd communicated with *Mr. K. Brothers* via email over the past few months when I'd occasionally covered for Sam. He'd been terse, but...

Damn.

Being face-to-face with his stunning good looks and equally stunning annoyance had pushed me to the limit.

And it was only *Wednesday!*

"I need this job," I reminded myself, clenching my fingers on the edge of the cool marble countertop and staring down at the gray design with tiny swirls of cobalt and gold running through it. "I need this job. I need this job. Take a breath...or eight."

At twenty-six, I *did* need my position at BCM. My parents were “retired” to Florida, and while they’d help me anytime I asked, I wasn’t asking. Not even after my ex practically left me at the altar and stuck me with all the wedding bills *and* an apartment I could barely afford by myself. I was over him—and damn grateful I’d dodged *that* bullet—but financially, I was still recovering.

So I needed to endure Mr. Bosshole Brothers for the foreseeable future. I’d pay off the bills, move to a reasonably priced apartment, and give him a flying one-finger salute on my way out—

But maybe things would get better?

After all, it was just Wednesday.

I felt as if I’d had to remind myself of that half a dozen times this morning.

“It’s all good. Everything’s okay. You’re fine.”

Closing my eyes, I took a slow deep breath then blew it out just as slowly. I was halfway through the second breath, not even starting my six box-breaths when my cellphone buzzed in my pocket.

I ignored it, trying to block out the sound and the feel of the vibration. After a few beats, it stopped, whoever it was going to voicemail. I forced myself to sink into the momentary relaxation, so I could get back on an even kilter.

The entry door to my left swung open, but I ignored it, too. If someone saw me averting a meltdown, no doubt, they’d know *why*. Almost everyone on this floor had witnessed him calling me out over the font I’d used for the presentation he’d given today. That had been the least of things—and damn it! It wasn’t as if I’d used comic sans or something similar.

“Ms. Brooks!”

I nearly jumped out of my high heels at the sound of Keiran Brothers mere feet from me.

In the ladies room!

And there went my Zen. I bit back a growl, my teeth gritted.

With a slow swivel of my head, I silently glared over at him.

Why the hell was he in here?

Why the hell was he so handsome?

I cursed him for it. Didn't they say the devil was beautiful? No man, as much of a dick as this one, should be allowed to have perfect sun-kissed brown hair, sky-blue eyes hidden behind Clark-Kent glasses that made my thighs clench, and chiseled features that would make any runway model green with envy.

Somehow, Keiran Brothers effortlessly managed to pull off sexy geek. That was probably why I'd fielded calls from three breathy celebutantes this week.

"*Why* are you in here?" The gritted out words echoed my thoughts *and* my frustration.

"Don't you answer your calls?" His growl skated along my spine like velvet fingers, and I steeled my frame to hide any reaction.

"I'm in the *women's* bathroom."

"Yes. During your work hours."

"I'm allowed to use the restroom!"

"You weren't using the restroom. You were taking a nap."

My gritted teeth ground, and a long, harsh breath huffed from my nose.

I can find another job, can't I? This was a decent market for people looking to move to another position. Right? *Right?*

"You shouldn't be tired. You were late for work," he went on when I didn't reply.

I'm tired of you.

"I wasn't late for work. My hours are eight to five. I was here at seven-forty-five." I shook my head. I wasn't going to argue with him. What would be the

point? “Did you *need* something?”

“Yes, I need you to make reservations for six tonight at Blue Forest. Then send the information to—” He stopped and peered at my hands that were still clenched on the countertop. “Shouldn’t you be writing this down?”

I lifted my palms and peered at them as if note-taking implements would appear.

“Oh, gosh, I didn’t bring pen and paper into the bathroom with me,” I gasped in faux-dismay.

His face twitched, and for a split-second, I thought I saw a smile. When he scowled at me, I knew I was wrong. This man didn’t smile. Surely, if he did, it would trigger the apocalypse. Or a riot. I almost giggled as a scene from a 90s rom-com movie flashed into my mind, and I envisioned hundreds of brides chasing Keiran down the street.

I wouldn’t be one of them.

“How much longer do you think you’ll be?” He crossed his arms and nodded toward one of the three stalls. “I can wait.”

“I am not—” My lips snapped shut, my incensed breath loud in the expansive, marble-tiled space. “This isn’t acceptable. I’m calling HR when I get back to my desk.”

He lifted a shoulder. “Make the reservations and pass on the information first. I’ll leave the names on your desk since you don’t have paper with you.”

I slowly shook my head as he turned and headed toward the door. “And Ms. Brooks?”

“Yeah?” I bit out.

“Stop wasting company time.” He pulled open the door. “I’ll be out of the office for the rest of the afternoon. I’ll be to your place at five-thirty to pick you up.”

“What?”

But my only answer was the door swinging shut behind him. My head dropped forward, and I took a deep inhale, restarting my breathing exercise while the blood rushed past my ears in a deafening surge.

He'd pick me up at five-thirty? For what?

Two

Nora

So the thing was, my overpriced apartment was five minutes from the BCM office. The short commute was one of the reasons getting the job there was such a coup. Being so close to work, I was home by ten after five, and if I were planning to go someplace at five-thirty, it would be a pinch, but I would have time.

But I wasn't going anywhere. In for the night, planned to eschew a proper dinner, which would have just been a microwave meal anyway, and instead, eat some comfort junk and watch a disaster movie—preferably one where an awful pain in the ass jerk got offed by a tornado or a dinosaur or something.

I'd just changed into a ribbed tank top and lose cotton pajama shorts, then grabbed a pint container of ice cream, when I got buzzed from the doors downstairs.

Probably someone's food delivery. But not mine.

I sighed, remembering the days when I could afford that. Ignoring the sound, I spooned a scoop of strawberry-cheesecake ice cream into my mouth.

Oh...God. My eyes closed, and I practically swooned. If ever I needed dessert therapy, it was today. True to his word, Mr. Bosshole had been out of the office for the rest of the day, but that didn't mean he hadn't been riding my ass the whole time.

“If he intended to be all up in my business like that, he should have at least

pulled my hair and made it good,” I muttered around another spoon of deliciousness. My snark brought to mind Keiran naked. I stuffed away that image fast. He was a dick! I was not interested in that kind of *dick*, no matter how good looking.

Grabbing my laptop from the counter, I padded across my apartment to the living room area with its fluffy, faux-fur area rug. First ice cream, then bills to remind me why I couldn’t tell off my boss, a quick check of my email, then disaster movie therapy.

I’d just sunk down on my couch when a curt rap sounded on my door. Three rapid, staccato beats.

I didn’t move.

The sound came again. Three identical knocks.

Knock, knock, knock, Penny, I thought, rolling my eyes.

When the sound came for a third time, harder, after a slightly longer pause, I huffed a sigh and climbed back to my feet.

Knowing the delivery guy wouldn’t go away, I yanked open the door. I should have checked the peephole. I should have. I *really* should have.

Seeing the man there, my eyes closed, and I slowly shook my head.

This was not happening.

After a scant breath, I pinned him with a glare. “What do you want, Sheldon?”

Keiran Brothers stared at me, and I swore he blinked twice, the only indication that what I’d said fazed him. “My name’s not Sheldon.”

“Prove it.”

“Why are you not dressed?”

“Oh, I don’t know. I finished work for the day—no thanks to you interrupting me constantly—then decided to relax. I don’t drink much, so this is my

relaxant of choice.” I lifted the pint container then ate a large spoonful of the creamy, fruity goodness, just to underline my point.

“I told you I’d pick you up at five-thirty.”

“And I finish work at five—as I’m sure you know.”

“You’re a salaried employee, are you not? I need you to work.”

My mouth dropped open. Then I pressed my lips closed. Just this past weekend, I’d applied for new jobs, hoping one could bring in a second income now that all the interest had come due on my not-wedding bills. When I’d gotten unexpectedly promoted, I’d thought maybe I wouldn’t need to take a second job. Now I wondered, could one of them become my primary employment?

Keiran scowled at my lack of reaction, likely used to everyone jumping into action at the snap of his fingers. I wasn’t budging.

“You need to get dressed.”

“I am dressed.”

And so was he. He was a dick, but dang, he looked good in his undoubtedly bespoke and expensive black suit, complete with a vest and midnight-colored tie beneath. My mouth watered, and I hated that I noticed he was such a snack.

Yeah, I called him that in my head. I had a taste for junk food, but that didn’t mean I couldn’t appreciate something high-end and way out of my price range.

And Keiran was a price I couldn’t pay.

“You need to wear something appropriate for Blue Forest,” he added, eyeing my pajamas. His brow lifted. “And do hurry. We’re going to be late.”

I backed up as he crowded me into my apartment. “I’m not going anywhere with you,” I protested. “I’m off the clock.”

“Hmm,” he said, making it sound as if he were speaking to himself, but I

knew damn well it was for my benefit. “This is a nice place. Expensive.”

I crossed my arms. “I can afford it.”

Barely.

My fingers clenched, sending a steam of melty ice cream over the back of my hand. *Damn. It!* He was ruining this part of my day, too.

His shoulder lifted. “I was just thinking... It’ll be sad when you have to move.”

“What are you—”

Ice-blue eyes caught mine. “Without a job, you won’t be able to stay here.”

“You can’t—”

“I most certainly can.” He leaned in so his face was inches from mine and I could see the tawny flecks in his otherwise blue mesmerizing eyes, the irises mimicking the color of the sky on a bright summer day. This close, his smoky, expensive leather scent filled my lungs. “I *own* the company.”

“You—”

“Go change,” he ordered. Straightening, he glanced at his watch. “You have five minutes.”

I almost threw my melted ice cream at him. Beyond how horrified he’d be, and how fired I would be, I could picture it: the shocked look on his face, the milky globs and strawberry chunks running down his spotless black lapels.

With a cry of outrage, I spun away from him, storming toward my bedroom and dropping my “dinner” in the sink on the way.

The door slammed behind me, and I leaned against it for a second, taking precious seconds to seethe.

What the actual hell? Had he just threatened my job? I could not believe him. I just *could not* with him. And here I’d thought I had a good job. Until three days ago.

Pushing away from the door, I stomped into the bathroom to wash the sticky dessert off my hand then stalked over to my walk-in closet and whipped open the doors. I'd have to work quickly here and didn't have time to indulge a pissed-off fit. Thankfully, I hadn't taken off my makeup yet, and my hair was passable, though I'd still be twisting it into an updo.

I scanned my wardrobe. Lucky for my boss—or maybe, lucky for me—my ex had dragged me to plenty of business dinners and fundraisers when he'd worked for the governor. I hadn't gotten around to offloading the extra clothes, though until a minute ago, I hadn't thought I'd ever need for most of them.

Immediately, I gravitated to a plastic-covered dress in the back corner. I'd gotten it for an event I'd never attended, since my ex and I had broken up a month before it had taken place.

After removing the protective wrap, I snipped off the tags then carried the emerald-green bodycon dress over to my bed. I laid it across the mattress then headed back into my closet, where I stripped off my pajamas then changed into the lingerie I'd need under that garment—basically a thong that wouldn't show a line. The dress, with one long sleeve, the other shoulder bare, had built-in support. At least, I wouldn't have to wrangle the girls back into a bra. Before I headed back out to where I'd left the gown, I slipped on the black stilettos I'd bought to go with the outfit.

A few moments later, I sighed at the decadent pleasure of the heavy, butter-soft material gliding over my body and skimming my curves. After pulling up the hidden side zipper, I glanced into the mirror on the back of my closet door.

I looked sexy as hell. If Keiran didn't like it, screw him. I preened, noticing how the asymmetrical hem flashed a good amount of one thigh when I moved just right.

A rap sounded on my door, dragging me from the perusal.

“Penny. Penny. Penny,” I muttered under my breath.

“Nora, are you ready? We've got to go.”

“Almost. I need another minute.” I turned to my dresser, pushing my fingers into my hair and wrangling it into my updo—once again thankful for all the times I’d had to do this in the past. Quickly, I pushed pins into my tresses.

“You’ve already had seven minutes. We’re going to be late.”

But I was done.

I wrenched open my door. “Then, *maybe*, you should have been clearer about this evening.”

Keiran stared at me, taking in my whole appearance. His eyes scanned over me once. Then again. And he swallowed. Hard.

“Fuck,” he whispered.

He raked his gaze over me again, making awareness crackle across my skin.

Hopefully, that *fuck* was a curse of appreciation and not an opinion about me being a train wreck. I thought I looked great, and I supposed that was all that mattered. I didn’t need his approval. Not at all. Keiran Brothers’ praise wasn’t necessary for my existence or happiness—even if it did send a thrill through me.

Seeming to gather himself, he reached out, offering his hand to me. “Shall we?”

I wanted to say no, but against all my better judgment, I placed my fingers in his. Electricity jolted through me as his grip closed around mine, and I tried to ignore that feeling, but...damn.

“I need to grab my purse,” I murmured, breathless.

“Got it,” he said, lifting the small black clutch I carried. It wasn’t fancy enough to go with this dress, but it would have to do. My ex would have had a fit at it not coordinating with my dress and shoes. But screw him. He wasn’t here. Keiran was. And...he was holding my hand.

And that was just one more thing I had to add to my list of questions about what on earth was going on. Really. What was this?

He handed over the bag. “You left it on the breakfast counter. Your keys are in it?”

I nodded.

“Good. Let’s go. We’re already late.” He held open the door to usher me out. “You’re fucking beautiful, by the way. If this was actually a date... Well, never mind.”

He shook his head, not finishing his thought, but I wanted to know. What if this were a real date? What had crossed his mind?

Three

Nora

Blue Forest wasn't very forest-like at all. That momentarily took my mind off what I'd been stewing over for the past few minutes while we'd commuted to the restaurant in Keiran's Audi. Neither of us spoke during the short ride, not even for him to berate me over making us late. Which surprised me, since it was just the kind of thing he'd been riding me over all week.

His silence and absolute stillness, other than his right forefinger occasionally tapping on his thigh, unnerved me.

Was he nervous? What was this dinner anyway? Though I'd made the reservations, I had no idea if it was business or personal. Neither of the attendees' reactions to the invite had given me much of a hint.

"You contacted everyone?" Keiran asked into the quiet, startling me.

"Yes. I emailed you the confirmation. I had to alter the reservation to eight because Mr. Dennison is bringing his wife and two other people. He told me you wouldn't be surprised."

Keiran's brow lifted the smallest bit, the only indication he might in fact be surprised by Mr. Dennison's move. His lips pursed before he glanced out the side window and changed lanes. When he faced forward again, I saw he wasn't taken aback. He was annoyed.

I'd suspected he might be. That was why I'd sent him a message to let him know of the change, not wanting him to be blindsided if the adjustment

wasn't okay. My boss might drive me crazy, but I was also good at my job—and that included making sure information was relayed.

“Mr. Benson also confirmed he and his wife will attend.”

Keiran's harsh exhale sounded irritated, but he didn't snap at me. “Leave it to Dennison to bring backup. This is supposed to be an informal business dinner for him to meet us, not an opportunity to hash out details.”

“Us?” I echoed. Who was *us*? He hadn't invited anyone else from BCM, not even his brother. As far as I knew, neither Dennison nor Benson were bringing an assistant. Just Keiran—though, Mr. Dennison's “plus two” might be colleagues.

“Yes. Us.”

“Okay...”

We pulled up to the valet stand at the restaurant.

“Wait there,” Keiran ordered. Surprised, I watched him hop from the car, hand over his keys then circle the front to my side.

“Who is *us*?” I finally asked after he'd helped me from the vehicle. Steadfastly, I ignored the warm tingles of awareness the unnecessary action pulsed through me.

“My fiancée and I.”

A heavy rock fell into my stomach. Was that a flutter of disappointment? Why should I care that he was in a committed relationship? Other than to feel sorry for the girl.

“Fiancée?” I echoed. “She wasn't on your list. I didn't make a reservation with her included. I—”

As we stood there on the sidewalk, he raised an eyebrow at me, stopping my words when I was about to offer to give up my seat. Amusement filled his gaze, a small smile on his lips.

“You, Nora.”

Me? What?

“What? But...”

“Look,” he said, cutting into my scattering thoughts. He glanced around us, making sure he wouldn’t be overheard. He leaned in slightly, filling my space with his intoxicating scent. “BCM is courting both of these companies. Dennison and Benson are friends, who are already doing business with each other. What one of them does, the other will follow into. They both want to do business with a settled company—and by that, they mean the company can’t have leadership who’s in the gossip pages every day.”

“But that’s—”

“Their prerogative. Carrick and I want their business. If they sign with us, they’ll be our largest accounts, which is why Carrick needed me home from Europe and I’m coming in clutch to nail this down.”

We stepped to the side to make way of a couple who’d just arrived. I wondered if they were from our party, but Keiran didn’t seem to know them.

“You know how my brother is. Hell, there are practically daily accounts of his escapades on Page Six. No one will believe he’s committed to using the same aftershave every day, let alone that he’s in a committed relationship. That leaves me.”

“But...” My head shook as I saw where he was going, and it looked like a cliff. But I wasn’t Thelma, and he certainly wasn’t my Louise.

“I need you to do this.”

I shook my head again. “No... Why me? You have a plethora of celebutantes panting over you—”

“Exactly.” He punctuated the word with a nod. “They want more than I’m offering, and when they don’t get it, the fallout will be public and messy. But you... You don’t even like me.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” I defended, though it was absolutely true—unwelcome attraction aside.

He smirked, the devilish expression making him sexier than I wanted to admit, but my body still felt it down to my core.

“Okay, maybe, that was too mild. You can’t stand me, perhaps even hate me, but you *need* your job. And I *need* you to do this.”

“Are you threatening to fire me?” I gasped.

That damn imperious brow lifted again, the midnight curve as dark as his devilish soul. He captured my left hand when I started to back up. “Yes.”

Danger! Danger! my self-preservation instincts screamed.

Would making a break for it be too dramatic?

All thought froze when cool metal slid onto my finger. When I looked down, my breathing arrested at the sight of a massive solitaire with a thick gold band manacled my ring finger, the fit perfect. Which shouldn’t have surprised me. He seemed to know everything about me.

The stone twinkled at me as if to say, *Good luck. You’re gonna need it.*

That was true.

“Keiran... Mr. Brothers... I...”

“We met two years ago and immediately after, started to date quietly.”

“Don’t you think these are details you should have told me earlier and not at the entrance of a restaurant?”

He ignored me, slight pressure from his hand leading me farther inside as his warm breath tickled my ear while he leaned in and spoke. “We continued our long-distance relationship while I was in Europe, and three months ago, when I came home for my grandparents’ anniversary, I asked you to marry me. We’ve been keeping it quiet until I got back, so we could make a big announcement.”

“You’ve thought out everything,” I murmured, still barely breathing as the palm on the small of my back burned into me. The touch rested so proprietarily low his hand was almost in my ass.

“Of course, I have.” The words should have sounded smug, but somehow, he managed to make them matter of fact. I wanted to kick him, but I wouldn’t make a scene. He was right. I needed my job. At least, until I lined up a new one. And tonight had cemented that I was one-hundred percent finding something new. Even if the ones I’d recently applied for didn’t pan out. Even if I had to move out of the city—or live in a car.

That didn’t mean I wasn’t driving the pointy toe of my stiletto into his shin—in my head, anyway.

“Let’s not keep our guests waiting any longer,” he said.

I really had no choice, no matter the scenarios spinning through my mind. Keiran needed this; I needed my job. In a sick way, it was symbiotic.

Slight pressure from his palm propelled me toward the entrance to the building, shrouded in blue light, the walkway lined by trees forming an arch over it. Somehow, it managed to invite you into a fantasy of perfect dining, without being cheesy.

A doorman in a navy-blue coat with gold epaulettes pulled open the heavy, wooden door for us.

I took a fortifying breath, preparing myself to lie to six strangers for the evening while I was the center of too much attention. I couldn’t lie to myself and pretend they wouldn’t stare. I would be an unexpected curiosity they’d want to decipher.

“So we’re on the same page?” Keiran asked when we’d stepped into the hushed building, the place apparently having amazing sound-deadening construction.

“Same page? Not really,” I muttered.

“Nora,” he chided, impatience seeping into his tone. “This is important.”

“I’ll be fine,” I said through my teeth. “I’m not happy to be dragged into a lie, but I’ll do it. Under duress.”

“Thank you,” he said. I couldn’t miss the touch of relief in the two words he

bit out. His stance didn't relax, his frame tenser than I'd ever seen it. Since I'd known him, he'd maintained a laid-back, devil-could-care façade of a demon fully in control of every situation, whether he was busy pissing me off, addressing over a hundred people in a meeting, or taking an international business call. "Once we finalize the contract, you'll get a healthy bonus."

A bonus? Say no more. I'm in.

Anything to get me out of my financial bind. Depending on how much it was, it could alleviate some of the pressure of the lingering bills from my aborted wedding, as well as the sudden responsibility of carrying the payments for my expensive apartment and all the related expenses.

I wouldn't closely examine what that said about me? A girl had to do what a girl had to do—possibly including a night of pretend love for her bosshole of an employer.

Before I could ask what the evening would entail, the hostess seemed to recognize Keiran without him even saying a word.

"Your party is waiting," she said with a gleaming-white smile, her large kohl-rimmed eyes devouring my *fiancé* before she turned to lead us farther into to the restaurant.

I ground to a halt just two steps into the low-lit dining room.

Oh...no...

"Keiran," I breathed.

He stopped to look down at me. While most would expect concern, I saw the glint of irritation in his eyes. He was about to get a whole lot more annoyed.

"We have a problem."

Four

Keiran

A problem? I tamped down my irritation. Everything had been clicking along, albeit *slowly* since Nora seemed to drag her heels at every step. Now what?

“What problem?” I gritted out.

“A fly in the plan—namely that guy at our table. The one with wavy brown hair and wearing the gray suit.”

“Why?” I growled. “Are you dating him?”

That thought alone made my blood boil. Nora Brooks might think I hated her, but nothing could be farther from the truth. The moment I’d seen her picture, months ago, I’d known there would be a problem. I wanted the dark-haired beauty in my bed, under me, and not just for a night. The more we sparred, the more that feeling grew. I tried to ignore my attraction, then when I’d called her out—unnecessarily—in a meeting and she hadn’t been cowed by me, I knew. I had to have this woman in any way I could manage. I loved that she went toe-to-toe with me, that she didn’t just take my shit then run into a corner to cry.

Even today, she hadn’t been crying when I’d followed her into the women’s room. Call me a bastard, but that was exactly what I’d expected to find. I’d figured the tears would extinguish my lust for her. I’d pushed her so far she’d scurried off to weep.

She hadn't been sobbing in the ladies room.

And my damn cock had gone rock-hard when I'd discovered anything but that. She'd been seething, and it had spiked my arousal to a degree that startled me. It had been all I could do not to flip the lock on the door and show her all the ways I could occupy her sassy mouth.

Which was why I'd concocted this ridiculous plan. Yes, Dennison and Benson were looking for someone settled, but I could prove that without a fiancée.

And the thought of her with another man...

I'd grind him into ash.

Nora shook her head, her luminous green eyes locked on my gaze. "No. Not anymore. I... I need a moment in the restroom."

I caught the hostess. "Tell our party we'll join them in a moment. My fiancée isn't feeling well."

"Of course," the hostess murmured, her breathy tone and flirty smile unmistakable and totally off-putting. She wanted me—my wallet, my dick, and bragging rights anyway—and didn't give a shit that my woman was right beside me. I hated to admit that sort of thing happened far too often in my circle of friends.

Ignoring her, which I would have done even if I wasn't with Nora, I steered my woman toward the restrooms. Without a second thought, I ushered her inside to the plush sitting room and flipped the lock. I also didn't give a shit that me coming in here wasn't acceptable to most.

Nora spun on me as soon as we were through the doors.

"This is the *ladies* room," she whisper-hissed.

I shrugged. "Not the first one I've been in—"

"I *know*."

"And it's not like I'm gonna whip out my dick or go in there." I waved

toward the inner chamber of the restroom. “Now, tell me what’s going on. Quickly. So we can get out there. Who’s the asshole?”

“You.”

“And you’re a smartass. You know what I’m asking.”

This was what I meant by her not taking my crap and standing up to me. Nora definitely wasn’t afraid of me or taken by any star-struck hero worship. She couldn’t care less about my money or social status.

I’d never run into a woman like her. Every other female, outside my family and close friends, was either trying to fuck me or feared me on some level. Not Nora.

I knew she needed her job—and since I crossed all my t’s and dotted all my i’s, I’d looked into her. I knew she carried a great deal of debt, debt I could erase with the snap of my fingers. She didn’t let that hold her back from giving me shit. Not hold her back *much*, anyway. From the fire flashing her in emerald eyes, I guessed she bit back a whole lot of her responses, only letting me see the tip of her ire-filled iceberg.

“Tell me about the guy.” I didn’t attempt to temper my demand. I wanted to know who he was, so I could erase him from her life.

“He’s my ex-fiancé.”

“Ex-fiancé,” I echoed. Clearly, I should have delved deeper into her personal life. I swallowed back my immediate outrage over the previous engagement. She’d been with him before she met me. There was nothing I could do about that. That didn’t mean his future would be stellar. “And?”

“And…” She shrugged. “We didn’t get married.”

“Why?” I demanded.

To my bones, I knew she wasn’t telling me everything. And, yeah, it was none of my damn business, but I didn’t give a shit about that, either. Which was one reason people thought I was difficult to get along with. Could I help it if I was unwilling to engage in the games society liked to play? Well, yeah,

I could. But I wouldn't.

"That's none of your business."

"If it affects this deal—which it will if he's going to be an issue—then I need to know about it."

"He called off our wedding, okay?" she exclaimed, a flush darkening her cheeks and flooding clear to the tips of her delicate ears.

"Why?"

"Oh my God," she swore in frustration, her hands flailing in the air and the diamond on her finger—*my* diamond—flashing in the low lights. "I don't know. Maybe, he got cold feet the day before the wedding. Maybe, there was someone else I didn't know about. I honestly don't know other than the crappy *it's not you, it's me* letter he left me. He moved out while I was dealing with last minute wedding details and left me holding the bag. For everything."

"What a stupid shit."

Yeah, I was totally crushing this guy. He'd be asking if customers wanted fries with their orders when I was done with him. Was I glad he hadn't married Nora? Hell, yes. But no one treated her badly, not even me, though I was sure I'd never stop sparring with her. I loved that little glint she got in her green eyes when I riled her up.

"How long ago?" I asked darkly. I had to know if it would interfere with my proposed courtship timeline, and Nora and I needed to be on the same page with our story.

"Last year in January. He must have gotten a new job since then. I didn't know he was with Dennison-Co. He used to work for the governor."

I filed away the information while I did the math. Okay, so...that had been about eighteen months. Totally workable. I nodded as I thought. "So...new story. We met last March, and you were still anti-men after what happened to you in January. But I knew you were the one, so I kept working at you until you finally agreed to a date to the fireworks downtown for the Fourth of

July.”

“Determined, aren’t you?” she teased.

“You have no idea. So we dated from then on, and we were devastated when I had to go overseas for six months. I asked you to come with me, but you said no because you weren’t ready to make that kind of commitment. We fought, then we didn’t talk for a couple weeks, but I couldn’t stand it. I flew home on a redeye and begged you to do the long-distance thing with me. And we’ve been together ever since, with you even saying yes to marrying me while we were at my grandparents’ anniversary party three months ago.”

Her eyes narrowed at me, her amused but suspicious expression grabbing me by the balls. “Do you lie for a living? You’re pretty good at this.”

My shoulders twitched, not giving in to a full shrug. “Business is all about subterfuge. So is life.”

“That’s a jaded view.”

I herded her toward the door, so we could join the party waiting for us. “I suppose your life view is all puppies and unicorns.”

“Not really.” She grinned. “It’s more of the princess choosing the dragon over the prince.”

“Remind me to show you my fire-breathing skills later.” If she wanted a dragon over a prince, she’d chosen well with me. Not that I’d given her a real option. Not that I planned to, either.

“Trust me, I’ve seen them,” she muttered. I didn’t think she meant me to hear, so I just smirked. This dragon would win in the end.

“So what’s this errant prince’s name?” I asked as we entered the short hallway that led into the dining area. A slightly older woman waited outside the door and gave us a snotty, censoring look. She probably thought Nora and I had fucked in the bathroom.

I wished.

“Peter Mills.”

Peter. Perfect name for an immature dick. Before this charade was over, I’d show Nora a real man.

And it wouldn’t be a charade anymore.

Five

Nora

Keiran's hand at my waist felt all-too-real while we walked toward the table where the other six people waited for us. The waitress immediately appeared and before we even sat, took our drink orders.

"We're sorry to keep you waiting," Keiran said smoothly to the table at large, while holding out my chair for me. "My fiancée isn't feeling very well this evening; are you, love? I fear it's from too much cake tasting this afternoon. We just couldn't make up our minds."

"Oh, I remember that," the woman beside Tom Dennison said, placing her hand on his sleeve. Though she appeared to be a good twenty years younger than the fifty-five I knew him to be, I suspected this was his wife, Remy Dennison. "We ended up going to *three* bakeries before we found what we wanted."

"Fiancée?" the man to her other side gasped. I didn't need to glance over to see the speaker's wavy brown hair and light gray suit to identify him. I'd heard every nuance of my ex's voice over the years we were together. The evident shock in his tone annoyed and delighted me at the same time.

Keiran looked over at me with pure adoration in his eyes, his curled fingers brushing my cheek in a tender caress.

"Yeah." The way he breathed the affirmation made me feel special, as if he couldn't believe I was his.

But I wasn't. I so was not. I had to remember that.

Looking back to the table, Keiran made a show of getting down to business. "Everyone, this is my fiancée, Nora. Nora this is Garen Benson and his wife, Genevieve, from Green Possible. And this is Tom Dennison and his wife, Remy, from Dennison-Co. I'm afraid I don't know the other two gentlemen."

It sounded as if his teeth gritted when he said *gentlemen*. He was really taking it personally that one of them was my ex. With smiles and nods, I said hello to each of them, along with the requisite *nice to meet you*, except for to Tom, who I only greeted with a hello. I'd met him earlier this year when he'd come in for a conference with Keiran's brother, Carrick. Thankfully, we hadn't interacted enough for him to question the story of my relationship with Keiran.

"These are our junior partners, Peter Mills and Byron Kelly," he told us.

I nodded but didn't look at Peter. I gave Byron a small smile. "Nice to meet you, as well."

If anyone noticed I hadn't said anything to Peter, they didn't show any reaction. Except Keiran. He squeezed my fingers where our hands rested on my thigh. I held on tight to him, needing this unfailing strength. Even if I hated him, I could lean on him to get through this dinner.

Plus, I didn't hate him. He just annoyed me. He'd garnered a lot of points in my book when he'd been so pissed off about my ex, though. The man had looked as if he might obliterate Peter if given the chance. And that warmed all the dark places in my frozen heart. Dare I say, there was something I *liked* about Keiran, after all? The very thought.

I suppressed a giggle while I studied my menu.

Keiran leaned into me. His lips brushed my ear. "What's so funny?"

I shook my head. "Nothing."

His lips grazed my temple. Then he straightened to look at his own menu. "What are you going to have, Firecracker?"

First, he'd called me love and now Firecracker. I was ready for him to break out the big guns like Sweetie Pie and Pumpkin, soon.

"I was thinking about the chicken marsala. Have you had it?" Slightly breaded and stuffed with a cranberry dressing, it came with mashed potatoes and steamed green beans. Peter would have been apoplectic at me choosing the dish, telling me outright to get one of the salads. Once, he'd even gone so far as to order over the top of me, patting my hand afterward and telling me he had my back and would help me to stay on track. As if I didn't work out hard and burn more calories more than he did.

With lightning clarity, I realized Peter had been more of a dick than I'd remembered. Even so, I waited for Keiran to criticize my selection.

"It's my favorite. Good choice. I think I'll have that, too."

My breath slowly released, and I realized I'd been holding it while I'd waited for him to respond. These men were vastly different. Both were controlling but in completely different ways. And Peter got nasty when challenged, while Keiran seemed energized by it. Another revelation that hit me out of the blue.

Too bad, I wasn't actually *with* Keiran.

No! Not *too bad*! What was I thinking? He was a asshole. I didn't want to date him. But when I *did* start dating, I knew what I'd look for in a man and what behavior I'd be on alert for, as well. I wanted a man who could spar and keep me on my toes, without getting butthurt and retaliatory. A man I could stand up to, who didn't control every aspect of my life from clothes to food to who my friends were and how often I saw them.

"So when is your wedding?" Remy asked, startling me from my thoughts. Well, shoot. We hadn't discussed—

"December," Keiran said. "I want it to be sooner, but Nora's making me wait."

"Well, you are coming off six months out of the country. Maybe, you'll decide you don't want me around so much every day."

"Aw, love," he said, bussing his lips across my temple and sending a quiver

through me. “There will never be a moment when I won’t want to be...” His look was filled with meaning when he let his words trail for a moment. “*With you.*”

The other women sighed, while one of the older men cleared his throat.

“Sorry,” Keiran said. “I can’t help it. I’ve just gotten back from Europe, and we’ve missed being together. We’re still making up for lost time. Besides, Nora had her heart ripped out before me, and it’s taken me a long time to convince her she’s my everything. Sometimes, I have to remind her.”

“Clearly, you’re not at all like your brother,” Garen observed.

“Oh, Carrick and I are very alike.” Keiran looked over at me. “I just know what I want. And it’s not running around, playing the field, when a priceless prize is right beside me.” He sniffed a laugh and looked over at Garen. “And the sooner I have her nailed down, tied to me forever, the better it will be.”

Garen and Tom exchanged a glance, and Tom nodded.

After the waitress came around with our drinks then took our food orders, Tom leaned back in his chair. He glanced over at Garen then at Keiran. “Well, then... Let’s get down to business.”

My fake fiancé inclined his chin, exuding the kind of alpha confidence few men could pull off. “Let’s.”

Six

Nora

Just act normal. Just act normal. Just act normal.

The mantra played over and over in my thoughts while I walked into the BCM building the next day.

My morning had been more difficult than I'd expected, nerves making me second-guess every part of my before-work routine. I just wasn't sure how to act, and by extension, I'd waffled hard over what to wear.

In the end, I'd decided I was being foolish, then I'd opted for my favorite fuchsia-pink skirt and blazer, coupled with a white blouse that had a subtle floral print on it. Of course, my heels matched my suit to a T.

Wearing my favorite outfit grounded me as I headed toward my desk at my normal time that morning. The charade from the day before was over. Time to get to work on present tasks. Business as usual.

Last night, dinner had primarily consisted of business discussions, while Peter had stared a hole through me. As for Keiran, it had been constant small touches and occasional kisses to my temple. Though I really had no part in his negotiations, he'd asked my opinions and tried to include me, which was more than the other men did with their wives.

Afterward, it had been just as silent in the Audi on the way back to my place. I hadn't tried to break the quiet because what would I say? Thanks for the date? He'd walked me up to my apartment, waited until I opened the door,

then left. If anything, his demeanor after dinner had disconcerted me.

It wasn't until I was getting ready for bed that I realized his monster of a ring still adorned my finger.

Now, it was in my pocket. When I saw him in a few minutes, I'd return it. The negotiations were well on their way with Dennison-Co and Green Possible, and Keiran and I could go back to being boss and assistant and avid adversaries at work. After one night, returning to reality shouldn't make me sad. After all, tonight, I could relax in my pajamas and have a second attempt at my pint of ice cream—with a new container due to the meltage that had occurred yesterday.

“Love, good, you're here. Come join us in my office,” Keiran called through his open office door when I slipped behind to my desk to put away my purse. My habit the past three days had been to take my tablet into his office at eight then review his appointments and what he needed me to work on.

“I'll be right there.”

Pulling the ring from my pocket, I slipped it onto my left-hand ring finger. His greeting told me two things. Keiran wasn't alone, and whoever was with him required me to play the part of doting fiancée.

“Good morning,” I called, going right to Keiran when I entered his office. His eyes hungrily swept over me. A tinge of relief lightened his expression when his gaze landed on my ring.

“Good morning,” he rumbled, pulling me against him then pressing his lips over mine. My thoughts blanked. All I registered were impressions... His hard, powerful body against my softer, smaller one. His firm lips pressed to my mouth, though he didn't try to gain entrance. The heady sent of his expensive smoke and leather cologne. The loud, harsh breath he sucked in when his arms wrapped around me, both his hands splaying on my back. And tingles. A million electric tingles tumbling along my limbs and making me quiver from his touch.

We were contained in a bubble, where nothing else existed. His lips moved against mine, his voice a heady rasping whisper. “Did you have a good

night?”

“Uh-huh,” I murmured. “You?”

“Lonely.”

I couldn't help but frown, and I pulled back, my eyes meeting his. His light blue irises were dark, the pupils overtaking the sky with stormy arousal. What was going on? His need couldn't be faked. Neither could the sensations still vibrating over me.

“You two don't live together?”

Keiran turned, pulling me flush to his side, and my eyes widened. Geez! I'd forgotten someone else was here. Tom Dennison sat in one of the leather chairs across from Keiran's desk. My fingers touched my lips while a burn erupted across my face. He'd just gotten an eyeful.

“No, we don't live together. Nora insists she wants her own place until we get married and she moves into my house. Thankfully, her lease expires before the wedding, so I'm hoping I won't have to wait until December.”

What as Keiran even going on about? My brow furrowed as I looked up at him, and he kissed my temple, smiling affectionately at me before he returned his attention to Tom.

“To tell the truth, it's kind of hellish, Tom. I'm sure you understand how it is.”

“That I do!” The man shook with laughter. “I had my ring on Remy's finger and my last name attached to hers within two weeks of us meeting.”

Keiran gazed down at me. “See?”

See what? “No...”

He chuckled. “Stubborn. Tom stopped by to invite us to their beach house for the holiday weekend, tomorrow through Sunday night—”

“Only because I can't convince you two to stay the whole week of the Fourth,” Tom interrupted.

“I told him we’d love to come out to their place. At least for the long weekend.”

I nodded, realizing this probably had something to do with the contracts Keiran was pursuing. I also suspected Tom had stopped in to check up on us.

“It sounds like fun,” I agreed, with a smile, hoping it hid the utter horror creeping through me. A whole weekend with Keiran and a bunch of strangers while I pretended to be Keiran’s devoted fiancée. God, help me now.

“Good! Good!” Tom pushed up from his chair, reached out his hand to shake with Keiran, then patted my upper arm. “I’ll have my assistant send over directions and the itinerary for the week.”

Itinerary?

As soon as Tom left, Keiran closed the office door behind him then returned to his desk and sagged back into his chair.

“Holy fuck. I didn’t think...”

“That he’d test us?” I leaned against the edge of his desk, crossing my arms. “It doesn’t look like you know your adversaries very well, Mr. Brothers.”

“I can get us out of this weekend if it’s going to be a problem.”

“How much is this bonus you mentioned?” I asked.

“I already deposited it last night—enough to pay the remaining bills that douchebag left you with, plus more to cover half your rent until your lease is up in October. I knew you wouldn’t let me take care of all of it, or I would have covered every cent.”

I stared at him in shock.

“You have no idea how important these contracts are,” he added.

“How do you know my... Never mind.” I held up my hand, closing my eyes for a moment as I shook my head. “I should have realized you’d nose into my business.”

He half-shrugged, shaking off my protest without a smidgen of repentance in him. Picking up a pen from his desk, he twirled it in his fingers. “I have to know who I’m working with. Of course, I looked into you.”

“You’re working with someone who likes to keep her private business as *her private business*.”

“But, Pumpkin Pie,” he said, grabbing my hand and pulling me into his lap. His fingers landed high on my leg. And if I thought he were serious, I’d be on the phone with HR again this morning. He wasn’t, though. “Your business *is* my business. I’m all about it, and I can’t wait for a formal introduction.”

He squeezed my thigh, making me question my belief that he was only playing. Not to sound like a puritan, but what *were* his intentions? Judging by his dilated pupils after our kiss, he had to be attracted to me on some level.

“Get off me, you lug,” I complained, pretending this was all for show. Taking him seriously would open a whole Pandora’s box of questions I didn’t want answered.

Shoving at his chest, I wrestled off his lap. My heels hampered me, not wanting to get back under me, but Keiran grasped my hips to steady me. I peeled away his fingers then moved out of his reach, putting his desk between us. He dropped the pen he somehow still held. It rattled across the glass lain over the wood desktop while he leaned forward on his forearms. His hungry gaze held me rapt.

I was in trouble. Such big trouble.

But we were just pretending. Right.

I took a few steps backward. “If we’re going away tomorrow, I need to cancel meetings and get the Friday reporting done early.”

“Okay, love. Let me know if you need help dealing with anything.”

I needed *help* with dealing with *him*.

I hadn’t said it aloud, but I had no doubt Keiran knew my thoughts because his dark chuckle followed me to the door.

“Keiran,” I said, stopping with my hand on the knob. “Mr. Brothers, what’s going on?”

I suddenly felt like some too stupid to live heroine in a movie. The one everyone knew was about to die, but she was still going to run into the abandoned house.

His soft smile twisted my insides, tugging nerves low in my belly. My grasp on the door lever tightened. I couldn’t slow my breathing. Drowning...this was what it was like to drown. His smiled widened, pushing me deeper while his brow lifted in challenge.

“We’re convincing everyone who needs convincing...*Ms. Brooks.*”

Seven

Nora

“Should we work on our backstory or something?” I glanced over at Keiran, totally not getting worked up by the sight of his fingers curled on the steering wheel. Backstory wasn’t really on my mind, but I had to break the silence in the SUV as we drove north to Lake George. It had already been a long day, commuting from Tarrytown into NYC then taking a helicopter to Albany before starting this drive. “Like...if we’ve known each other for fifteen months and been dating for over a year, I should know stuff about you, right? More than you being a total nightmare in the office.”

“I’m not a total nightmare.” His amusement was clear in his defense. He knew how he was and had no remorse over it.

I rolled my eyes. “If you say so.”

“I like that about you,” he said out of the blue.

“What?”

“You’re not afraid of me. You tell me exactly what you’re thinking.”

I snorted. “Oh, trust me. I don’t tell you *exactly* what I’m thinking. I kind of need my job.”

And I did, even though he’d paid off all the bill that had been hanging over me, I still needed to get on steady ground. After the unexpected, over-the-top bonus, I wasn’t quite sure what to do or what to think. I’d struggled for so

long, then he'd obliterated that problem with a few keystrokes.

It kind of made me obligated to him. Like an indentured servant, which was imagery I didn't like.

A roll of deep laughter filled the car, jarring me back to the present.

"That. That right there. That's exactly what I'm talking about."

"You don't mind when I'm..."

"When you're a smartass?" he filled in. "No. You keep that shit up, and I'll keep giving you generous raises. Now..." He glanced at the clock. "We have about an hour and a half before we get there. Tell me your life story."

I fiddled with the frayed edge on the hem of my shorts. "You must think my past is pretty boring to fit twenty-six years into an hour and a half."

"Well...actually, you have forty-five minutes. I need the other half."

"I bet I already know more about you than you do about me—aside from what you got off my personnel file and credit report—or whatever you pulled for my financial info."

One side of his lips twisted upward, an absolute tell for him. He was so sure of himself, and I amused him. I tried not to take it personally and again reminded myself that he was definitely not like Peter, who'd acted superior to me all the time. The passage of time sure managed to clear our vision and show us the truth we were so blind to in the past.

"Really? What do you know?" His tone challenged me, and I was sure he thought I knew jack-all about him.

"I know Carrick is your twin. You're thirty-two and started investing when you were in high school, with the blessing of your grandfather, who bankrolled you until you started making your own money. You taught Carrick what you know, but even though you're as close as two people can be, he's the charisma and you're the brains of the operation—a quote you can find all over the place. That kind of makes this Dennison-Benson contract negotiation out of the ordinary for you. That's not to say he isn't brilliant, but

you each have your own strengths and talents.”

He made a face, his approval and surprise appearing while he nodded slightly, still listening.

“After your parents’ death when you were eight, you two were raised by your grandparents who adore you, and you two adore them right back. You’re accustomed to wealth because they’re wealthy, through your grandpa’s family line. They were in building and contracting when they emigrated here in the 1800s. It slowly shifted into purely financial dealings. That’s the business your grandfather still runs. You have a hand in it, though you prefer the construction sector and picked up that part of your heritage during college. You inherited half of your parents’ estate, Carrick getting the other, which includes stakes in the family holdings.”

“That’s all public knowledge.”

“True but most people don’t bother to find out stuff like that. Personally, you’ve had some relationships that have been reported on, but very few, especially when compared to your brother’s activity. You played football in high school but not in college, though you do maintain a workout regimen to this day.”

He glanced over at me with a raised brow.

“What?” I defended myself. “Look at you. That’s obvious. Let’s see... You attended Yale and graduated with honors at twenty-one. When you don’t have Espresso Romano, you prefer dark roast coffee with no cream or sugar—which, by the way, is frankly inhumane and you should be prosecuted to the full extent of the law, because clearly you are a danger to society. You’re not much of a people person, and this weekend will suck for you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Do you have any idea how often you grumble when you have to meet people in person? You’re like a troll who has to come out from under a bridge.”

“Fair point.”

“Your favorite color is black—”

“That’s not true,” he interrupted.

“No?”

“No. My favorite color is that green dress you wore Wednesday night. You looked amazing, and it was the exact color of your eyes. Enough about me. Clearly you know a bunch, and I’ll fill you in as we go. But what about you?”

He reached over and clasped my hand, stopping me from pulling at the loose string on the hem I’d been fiddling with.

“I know you’re twenty-six, since you just said so, but I also knew that from looking at your personnel file. Your emergency contact is your parents, but their address is in Florida, leading me to believe you’re alone here. No siblings?”

“No. So you *did* look at my personnel file?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Oh...like a million reasons.”

My huff didn’t faze him. Instead, he nodded, but I knew it wasn’t that he agreed with me. He did that when he took in information—another of his tells. I wondered if he realized it.

His lips pursed the tiniest bit for a moment. “You were engaged to Peter Prick, and he basically left you at the altar the day before your wedding. As if that wasn’t bad enough, he stuck you with a shit-ton of debt. How long were you with him?”

“Six years. We met at the beginning of college.”

“And he decided the day before the wedding that he couldn’t do it? What a dumbass.”

“Maybe, he suddenly couldn’t see himself married to me for the foreseeable future?” I shrugged, stating what I’d pondered a million times. “Maybe, there was something about me that had gnawed at him so badly he couldn’t go

forward without becoming an axe murderer.”

“Or maybe, he was a selfish imbecile. Don’t think badly about yourself, Firecracker. It’s him, not you.”

A sharp laugh burst from me. “That’s what he said in his note. Classic breakup line, huh? It’s not you, it’s me.”

Keiran reached over and took my hand. “I’m sorry he did that to you. That was a shitty thing to do, not even manning up and telling you face-to-face. The cowardly fucker snuck out and left you holding the bag.”

With a small smile, I stared out the side window at the thick green trees we passed. Maybe, I should tamp down my evil mirth at Keiran’s assessment, but it was an old friend. It was all that had gotten me through the initial days after having a crater blown into my life.

“I got a little revenge.”

“How?”

“He didn’t tell anyone. Not the people from his side who were invited, our mutual friends, his coworkers. No one. He expected me to do it. But I didn’t. Not beforehand, anyway. To tell the truth, I didn’t know who he’d told...or hadn’t. Plus *everything* for the reception was paid for. I showed up at the church, and when our guests were all seated, I went out and told everyone what happened. I didn’t spare Peter’s pride by lying about how he’d handled things. I told the absolute truth. Then I invited everyone to the big reception with the open bar that I’d already paid for. It was too late for any refunds, and I didn’t want it all wasted. Come to think of it, maybe that’s why he has a new job.”

“Priceless,” Keiran murmured. “That took some balls to do—to stand up there and be so brave. You have a wicked thread running through you, too, Firecracker. I like it.”

“Good. You’re stuck with me for the weekend.”

“For a start.”

“What?” I said.

“What?” he echoed, teasing me, but he didn’t answer.

Eight

Keiran

My Nora was a pistol, and I'd aptly nicknamed her Firecracker. I'd seen her fire and heard her pop, so when it came time to "name" her on Wednesday night, I couldn't imagine another thing more appropriate.

Maybe, that wasn't very inventive of me, but all I could think of was how I wanted to make her explode, not just by getting beneath her skin and exposing her fire, but by giving her an explosive orgasm that dumbass couldn't have possibly given her. Just from what she'd told me, I could tell he was too selfish to make sure she came in a mind-blowing release—if at all.

She wouldn't have that experience with me. I might have been with less than a handful of women, long before I met Nora, but I hadn't gotten to thirty-two with no experience. To me, making a woman lose her mind with pleasure was nearly as good as getting my dick wet. Fuck, if I didn't want to please my partner, I could just take myself in hand—which I did all-too-often, as of late. No one had sparked my desire in years.

No one until Nora.

And my insta-lust for her had taken me by surprise. She was quickly becoming a flat-out obsession. Now, I'd spend all weekend, pretending-not-pretending she was my fiancée.

The woman...intrigued me. I wanted to know everything about her. But rather than sharing life stories on the way here, we'd mostly chatted. She'd

learned more about me, and I'd learned more about her—like she was semi-addicted to high-fat, high-sugar pints of ice cream and to counteract the calories, she worked out hard almost every morning before coming into work.

She'd love my home gym, and I'd bet my chef, Phillip, could make her a healthier frozen treat, so she could indulge without feeling it necessary to kill herself with cardio. I'd get him to work on that when I got home. Not that I wanted to change a single bit of Nora's curves. I just wanted her to save all her energy for me and the workout I'd give her in our bed.

Nora also liked to swim and had been on the swim team in high school. No lie, I couldn't wait to see her in her suit this weekend—and I hoped it was skimpy. Wait. No, I didn't. Well, yes, *I* did, but I didn't want anyone else seeing her perfect little body in tiny scraps of Lycra. Even now, her cute denim shorts showed a little too much of her supple tanned legs for my comfort. Her thighs were firm yet soft beneath my palm, and I'd bet they'd be just perfect wrapped around my head while I made her scream from my mouth on her.

And... I needed to get my thoughts away from that, or I'd have a full-on boner greeting everyone when we arrived at the beach house in a few minutes.

“Have you been here before?” Nora asked.

“No.” I shook my head, keeping my attention on navigating the winding road. Glimpses of the lake showed through gaps between the large houses and trees, and I was getting the feeling Tom's “little” cottage beach house wasn't very cottage-like at all.

“Do you think it'll be the size of these?” she asked, almost guessing my thoughts.

“I'm afraid so. They all seem to be large or...even larger. Nothing small or normal house size.” Not that I was one to judge. I lived in a sprawling place some would call a mansion. And I'd grown up in a bona fide, twenty-bedroom estate that no one had ever tried to downplay by calling it a cottage or bungalow or some shit like that. Aside from my apartment in college, I'd never lived someplace “small”, either.

I rolled my eyes as I turned into the long drive that led to Tom Dennison's place. Massive wouldn't be an overstatement. As we rounded the place, following the private road, I saw it was perched above the lake like a medieval fortress overlooking a kingdom.

Per Tom's directions, I followed the curved drive that ran in front of the house then parked in the forecourt near the decorative fountain.

"Wow," Nora breathed.

"Yeah." Only we were looking at different things. I was taking in the massive stone-faced "cottage" that looked as if it could have been built in the gilded age as a manor house, but when I glanced at Nora, she didn't seem to care about the Dennison home. She was taking in the massive glistening lake with a multitude of tiny motorboats dotting its surface. Even from up here, there was water for nearly as far as the eye could see.

"It makes you feel small," she commented, almost to herself. "Like a tiny speck in a huge world. Look how teeny those boats look out there!"

"Do you want to go out on a boat this weekend? Tom mentioned we could use one of theirs if we wanted to. I have a boating safety certificate."

Her curls bounced as her head bobbed. "That would be awesome. I'd love that."

Unable to help myself, I twirled one of her silky curls around my finger before I could stop. Swallowing hard, I pulled back my hand and let the strands fall to her shoulder. "Then we'll do it. Shall we go find our hosts?"

We both breathed hard for a moment, staring at each other, before she nodded.

"I think we shall." The corner of her mouth twitched up at the highbrow voice she affected clearly to mock me. It didn't bother me in the slightest.

Getting out of the car, I circled to her side and opened her door. I offered my hand and enjoyed the sizzle that went through me when she placed her fingers in mine.

Yeah, that was another thing I'd never experienced with anyone else. The depth of my reaction to her couldn't be denied.

"You're here!" Remy exclaimed, bursting from the house then hurrying down the steps toward us, her gauzy white sundress flying around her. How she managed to run in those stacked, strappy sandals was beyond me.

When I glanced over at Nora, she looked from Remy then down at herself in a cute red tee, cuffed blue-jean shorts, and red flip-flops with tiny white stars all over the wide straps.

"You're perfect." While I murmured my reassurance, I squeezed her fingers, which I'd never let go of. My thumb grazed up and down the warm, soft skin on the back of her hand. "I wouldn't change a thing. Not a single thing about you."

She peered up at me, studying my face as if to determine the truth in my words. When she saw my sincerity, the clouds in her expression cleared. She turned back to Remy, just as the woman reached us and pulled Nora into a tight hug.

"Hi! Thank you for inviting us for the weekend," Nora said, returning the embrace. Remy stepped back, grasping Nora's biceps for a moment, pure joy on her features. For some reason, I got the feeling that maybe she didn't get to visit with people much. At least in a casual setting.

"It's so great to get out of the city, isn't it?" She pushed a strand of golden blonde hair back behind her ear, taming it after it had gotten caught in the wind. "And after the other night, when Keir told us how the Fourth of July is the anniversary of your first date last year, I thought what a great way to celebrate that special day. With a little weekend getaway. I wish you would stay through to the actual fourth, though, rather than leaving on the second."

Wow, when Remy got on a tear, the words just kept coming.

"I'll have to check in with Carrick, but we may be able to stay until then," I offered. "If there's anything I need to handle, I should be able to do that through my tablet. What do you think, love? Shall we stay? We can run into town and grab you more clothes if you need them."

“Okay. Sure?” Nora didn’t sound too sure at all, but Remy still seemed to take it as a firm yes. Clapping, she gave a little hopping cheer. Maybe, she’d been a cheerleader in the past? Who knew? Maybe, I should have done a little more research on her and Tom personally, not just their business dealings.

She captured Nora’s hand, dragging her toward the house while I grabbed our luggage. “Tom and the boys are in the study, and Garen and Genevieve will be here tomorrow—maybe, tonight if we’re lucky. He had meetings and couldn’t get away this morning.”

“That’s too bad,” Nora replied. “So your kids are here? How old?”

“Oh, no. Tom and I don’t have any kids. Why would you think—oh... Oh. Because I called Tom’s execs *boys*.” She shook her head, her smile as bright as the glistening water below the bluff where we stood. She reminded me a little of a Barbie doll, but I knew she must have something in her head. Tom adored her, and he didn’t suffer idiots. While I didn’t know deep details, it was common knowledge he’d waited a long time for his perfect woman, and to him, that was Remy. Good thing he’s waited, I supposed. It was nice to see two people in a happy marriage.

“Tom’s execs? You mean Peter and Byron?”

Remy might not have noticed, but even from a few feet away, I heard the dread edging into Nora’s tone when she asked the question.

So much for the perfect “anniversary” getaway. We were spending it with two couples, who needed to be convinced Nora and I were the real deal, and two single guys, one of whom might be the very thing to trip up this whole scheme.

Nine

Nora

Keiran and I followed Remy upstairs to the guest rooms. “We have four bedroom suites in this wing, so you two will have one, the Bensons will have one and each of the boys will take one. That way none of you will get lost.” Remy winked, chuckling at her own joke. “Actually, it’s easier for the staff that way.”

Like an old-school computer with too many windows open, my brain froze and stuttered, and somewhere in it all, heavy-metal music wailed—though in truth, that could have been my blood rushing past my ears like a freight train. One phrase kept flashing and overriding my ability to take so much as another step.

You two will have one.

One room. She meant...one room.

One.

Room.

Keiran and I would share a room. One. Room. Presumably with *one* bed.

Why hadn’t I considered that possibility before now? Like when the invitation had first been floated to Keiran and his “fiancée”? Of course, the Dennisons would expect Keiran and I slept together like many modern engaged couples.

As if sensing my panic, and maybe fearing I'd run, Keiran flattened his hand on the small of my back, and the pressure there was the only thing to propel me into action.

Remy seemed oblivious to my turmoil, but he wasn't. "Don't freeze up now. In for a *penny*..."

"Fuck off, Sheldon," I muttered under my breath.

"There's my firecracker."

"I'm going to kill you in your sleep." The possibility was getting stronger every day. What was it with this man? Half the time, he pissed me off to the deepest parts of my soul. The other half... Well. I forgot to breathe around him because all I could think of was his lips on mine again, his hands on my body.

"Sure, you are. I'm so terrified."

I rolled my eyes at his deadpan, his jibe clearing the static in my brain and getting me back on track. At least, until we joined Remy inside the doorway where she stood waiting for us to enter.

The room was white and bright and airy and...so much smaller than I'd thought it would be, growing even smaller when Keiran wheeled in our suitcases and placed them next to the door. I'd heard the phrase about someone filling a room with their presence, but I'd never experienced it before him. I didn't have to look to know exactly where he was.

I felt him.

I couldn't have looked if I wanted to, anyway. My eyes were riveted to the bed that was best described as...fluffy. Covered with a mound of pillows and a thick comforter, it invited you to snuggle in and let the bedding hug your weary body. To luxuriate in hours of relaxation.

It terrified me.

Like a Newton's Cradle, one ball had set these events into motion, and now, I was careening back and forth in an ever-lessening arc, my anger and

attraction growing closer and closer with each swing. I needed something to happen, to set the balls back into motion and reignite my raging animosity toward Keiran—freaking Keiran who had suckered me into this ruse as his fiancée. No... Not *suckered*. Forced.

And our act was sure to be derailed with my ex here to scrutinize everything Keiran and I did.

“Everything okay?” Remy asked, noticing my stare and likely picking up on my bald-faced anxiety.

“Yes, it’s perfect,” Keiran said, coming up beside me and looping his arm around my waist. He kissed the side of my head. “My baby girl just hasn’t gotten enough rest, have you, love? She gets travel anxiety.”

“It’s perfect,” I murmured with a weak smile. “Sorry, I just—”

Remy waved away my words. “No explanations necessary. Believe it or not, I’ve been in your position.”

I highly doubted that.

“When Tom and I got serious, he dragged me to a retreat with several of his business associates, none of whom I’d met before that week. I was so nervous. I was sure I would say and do everything wrong.”

Okay, maybe, she wasn’t completely off-base about knowing my feelings.

“Don’t you even worry about that,” she went on. “You’re with family here.” She gestured around. “This is a safe space. Why don’t you get some rest and settle in? We’re not having lunch until one. Keir, I’ll let Tom know you’ll be down later. He’s busy watching some soccer game, anyway.” She rolled her eyes. “Or...football, I guess. Whatever. He’s very into the European teams right now. It’s not even regular season, so he’s watching some exhibition game or something. I don’t know.”

She was still rambling as she closed the door behind her and left us alone.

“She’s quite the talker,” Keiran said.

“I like her.”

“Good, you’ll probably see her a lot if this contract goes through.”

I stared at him, the weight of the statement sinking in as this lie just kept growing bigger and more drawn out.

“Are you okay?” he asked without explaining his statement, not the first of its ilk. For as fearless as he thought I was, I wasn’t really up for examining the scope of this façade, so I didn’t push for explanations.

“Yeah, it’s just…” I waved at the bed.

“Believe it or not, I *can* control myself. Are you worried that you can’t and you’ll attack me in my sleep? I guess that’s just something I’ll have to live with, Ms. Brooks. If I must.”

I grimaced at him, giving him stink-eye. “So we’re really sleeping together this weekend.”

“If I get lucky.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re still my boss, and I still think—”

“That I’m a bosshole? Yes, noted. I meant *to sleep in the bed*—I’d be lucky to sleep in the bed. I don’t want to make a pallet on the floor for the next four nights.”

My eyes narrowed, my lips compressing to keep from contradicting him. He was lying, but I didn’t call him on it.

“What now?” I asked instead.

“Remy told us to rest—”

“Remy’s not the boss of me.”

Keiran leaned in close, so close I could see those tawny flecks contrasting the blue in his irises. “I know. Because *I’m* the boss of you.”

I groaned, trying to ignore the arousal that immediately pulsed through me,

and he looked around the small room, which seemed to grow smaller by the moment.

“We can lie down, cuddle,” he offered.

Cuddle was said in a derisive tone that was totally him. That attitude? I recognized it.

“There’s the bosshole I know.”

“And love?”

I scoffed, a huffed laugh escaping me. “Don’t push it.”

His eyes dancing with merriment. He really did enjoy pushing me. What would it take to push *him* to the edge.

Keiran moved toward the bed and turned back the covers before looking back to me. “Really, though. We should try it. You need to get used to my hands on you. No one will believe we’re engaged if you tense up every time I touch you. We’ve supposedly been a couple for a year.”

“What are you proposing?”

“That we climb into bed and get comfortable.”

My gaze flitted from him to the bed then back to him. Still unsure, I stared at the floor because looking at him just made me think of possibilities. Possibilities I shouldn’t entertain. And was he serious? He wanted us to lie down together on the bed and...*cuddle*?

I wasn’t sure I could do that.

Yeah, I had to admit my body thrilled at all his little touches, longed for more. And that kiss in his office... My face burned at just the memory. And now, we were going to share a bed and act like a loving couple for the weekend. We would have to behave intimately, if not *be* intimate. How had I known but *not* known what would happen?

I should have realized sooner that this could be the situation, but the full magnitude really hadn’t hit me until right now. As reality dawned, my pulse

raced with a fiery scourge of panic. I wasn't sure I could do it—pretend to love him all weekend then act as if there was nothing between us later.

Keiran stepped in front of me. His hands caught my biceps, sliding his grip downward and forcing me to drop the arms I'd unconsciously crossed over my middle. His fingers caught mine, lacing through them. Connecting us.

“You're thinking too much. Come on, Firecracker. You've got this.”

“I'm not a firecracker. Not really. I'm...boring. Ask Peter.”

“I'd eat glass before I'd ask that fucker *anything* about you. And you...” He cupped my cheek with one warm, slightly callused palm. “There is absolutely nothing boring about you. You can build everything on that—and trust me... I know. Building is my specialty. And you, Firecracker, once your fuse is lit, you light up the world.” He pulled me closer to him. “And me? I'm the match.”

Ten

Nora

Still swimming through his compliment, I startled and a small shriek escaped me when Keiran lifted me into his arms, bridal-style.

“Oh my God! What are you doing?” I exclaimed, clutching his shoulders. He couldn’t just...*lift me up!* Like...like I was some file folder to review.

“Cuddling.”

“This is *not* cuddling!” I hissed, struggling to get away from him. I shoved at his shoulders, but he held me tighter.

“It will be. Now, be still, so you don’t fall.” Despite his admonishment for my safety, his grip didn’t falter while he kept me safe against his chest.

Still...

“Put. Me. *Down!*”

And he did, but I almost wished he hadn’t. My back hit the mattress, and I bounced slightly before he planted his knee beside my hip then came down over me. Our bodies aligned and tangled in a delicious yet maddening way. There was no mistaking the hard ridge that ground against my apex, evident though the barrier of our clothes.

I suppressed a moan and desperately wiggled to get out from under him. Either that or I’d give in and lose myself in him, just as I had during that

mind-destroying kiss in his office on Thursday morning. And that had happened while standing upright in his arms. Now, with us jumbled together in a bed, our bodies straining for more than could be allowed, I couldn't let that happen. But as ribbons of pleasure threaded through me, my squirming lost its direction. Was I trying to escape the embrace or get closer?

"Godsakes, Nora," he swore, sounding pained. "Stop."

"Then get off me!" I hissed, desperate to maintain the flimsy barrier of decorum between us and afraid someone passing the room might hear me if I yelled at him the way I wanted to. He needed to move, or I'd have to admit how good his weight felt over me, his warm, powerful frame pressing into me just...right. Just perfect. Just...

Damn it!

"You're not very good at cuddling." He hadn't moved a centimeter away from me. If anything, he seemed *closer*.

"This *isn't* cuddling!" I growled, his banter dragging back from the edge of the sensual cliff where I danced closer and closer to falling into his carnal black magic.

"Fine," he grumbled, rolling to the side. He pulled me with him. "You're adorable when you get worked up, you know that?"

I blew out a scoffing breath. "No one has ever—and I mean *ever*—thought I'm adorable. Seriously."

"Then they're idiots. Or blind. Your eyes glitter like diamonds and a cute little blush creeps into your cheeks—"

"You write romantic poetry as a side hustle?"

"No, but if I did, you'd inspire me."

Oh, God. Why did he so easily set off flutters inside me?

Also, he was so full of it. Now, I knew he was teasing me. He had to be. My eyes narrowed on him, letting him know I wasn't having any of it. "Don't

make fun of me. I'm here doing you a favor."

"I'm not," he murmured. "Besides...you're getting paid for it. Already were paid, actually."

"I didn't get paid for *this*. For you and I to... I'm not that kind of girl."

His hand skimmed along my side down to my hip, and he pulled me closer against him, his knee bending between mine. His calf followed, and he hooked his foot behind my ankle. His fingers slid lower, barely feathering over the outer curve of my ass as he moved to grasp my thigh and pull it up over his hip.

"No, you're the perfect kind of woman."

"Don't tease me."

His hips ground forward into me. "Does it feel like I'm teasing?"

A tortured sigh escaped my lips when he moved against my center, and what sounded like a groan of pleasure rumbled up from his chest. This might actually be worse. No. Not *might*. It was definitely better—I...mean...worse. Terrible. Very horribly terrible.

My eyes drifted closed, and his forehead tilted to mine.

"Put your arms around me."

Without any thought, I did. One went around his back as the other circled his neck, and my fingers buried in the thick strands of his hair that were way too silky to be possible.

Leaning in, he grasped my hair and gently pulled back my head. His lips pressed to my throat. I could barely swallow around the desire lodged there. Then his mouth...

"We fit together perfectly," he said against my skin while he nipped and sucked, the touch so light it wouldn't leave marks, yet just enough to have merciless lust burning through me while I tried to press my thighs together—an impossibility with his leg between mine.

“No.” Even as I said it, the denial was futile. He knew what he did to me, and his low chuckle proved it.

“Yeah.” Somehow, that counterargument cleared my head a little. The tiniest, most minuscule bit. I knew he’d have an answer for every protest I made, but it didn’t stop me from dredging up my fleeting irritation.

“You’re annoying.”

He sniffed a laugh through his nose, an agreement if ever I’d heard one. He kissed me, angling his forehead against mine again as if telling me to look at him. “But that’s why we work so well, Firecracker. I’m the fire that lights beneath you and gets you all worked up, and when the explosion happens, the sparks are beautiful and undeniable to anyone who witnesses it. We do that together.”

My eyes opened, and I pulled back slightly to stare into his stormy blue gaze, darkened by his blown-wide pupils, the tawny flecks entirely erased by his desire. “What are you saying?”

The question came as a whisper, but practically nose-to-nose, he heard me.

“We’re good together.”

My brow furrowed at the all-too-simple response, and I shook my head, refusing it. Incredibly, the friction of his forehead against mine anchored me into our intimacy.

“Are you going to deny it?” he asked. “Are you going to try to tell me you don’t feel this?”

I did feel it. He knew that. What I *felt* wasn’t the issue here.

“You’re my boss.”

“Like I give a fuck about that. It’s my damn company! No one is going to tell me—or you—who I can and cannot see.”

“Mr. Bro—”

“Keiran. And you damn well know it.”

My mouth clamped shut, my teeth biting into the inside of my bottom lip. He brushed his kiss over my throat again, sending a shiver cascading through me, the touch so heartbreakingly tender, despite the intensity I felt vibrating through him.

“Say it. Say my name,” he growled against my skin.

“Keiran.” God, anyone passing our room would hear me moaning his name and probably think we were having sex. Somehow, this felt better, more intimate, than any sex I’d ever had, though. Which answered a lot of questions I’d never fully asked or explored.

He kissed up to my ear, nipping the sensitive skin, just behind the lobe. “That’s good, baby girl. Very good.”

His hand moved to flatten over my ass and guide my rocking hips. I hadn’t even realized I’d started moving.

“You feel so fucking hot riding my thigh,” he rasped into my ear, his sultry-hot breath making the erogenous zone prickle. “How wet are you for me? How ready for me are you? Not gonna lie, I want nothing more than to bury my cock nine deep in your sweet, wet heat.”

Nine...?

His hips bucked into me while his hands grasped my hips and ground me down on his rock-hard thigh wedged between mine. “Yeah. Nine. Thick and hard. Just for you.”

Okay, so I’d asked that out loud.

“Keiran,” I breathed. “I...”

His fingers tightened on my ass. “Just feel, baby. Just feel then go off like my perfect little firecracker.”

“Oh, God...”

He toyed with the cuffed hem of my shorts then trailed his fingers down along my bare thigh, lifting chill bumps in his wake.

“I want to touch you.”

My belly muscles sucked in, everything contracting, as I released harsh breaths. I wanted his touch more than I should to admit. My eyes closed.

“We shouldn’t. This is already—”

He cut off my denial. “We should. Often. Look at me, Nora.”

The use of my name drove my eyes open. I stared at him, and he gave a slight nod.

“I might adore riling you, but I will *never* lie to you. I’ll do my best never to hurt you. I’m not...*that* guy. I’m not like that.”

“Okay,” I whispered.

His lids dropped as he tilted his forehead to rest against mine. I didn’t close my eyes. I stared at his face, taking in the faint bluish lines of the veins on his lids, the tiny crinkles next to his eyes, the darkening of the skin in the divot below them. It all made his irises all the bluer when he stared at me and somehow worked together to make him even more attractive.

We were so close I felt every deep breath he took, his chest moving against mine with each excited inspiration. And God help me, his body convinced me he truly wanted me.

I believed him. I believed he’d piss me off—possibly daily. But he wouldn’t hurt me. He wouldn’t leave my heart for roadkill and merrily go on his way. Problem was, when we *did* go our separate ways, which was inevitable, I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t hurt myself in the process of the extraction. Because I was finding bits of him threading their way into my soul already, and this ruse had only been in place for mere days.

Yet... I couldn’t say no. I’d already decided I would leave him—well, not *him* but BCM. I’d applied for jobs last week, and I hadn’t canceled them, especially since Keiran had made me nuts when he’d come into the office. Now, this mutual attraction had me questioning everything. Would we burn out quickly? Would everything blow up so badly we’d incinerate the company? Would he hate me in the morning?

But what if he doesn't, Nora?

I could see all the ways he was different from Peter. Better. More exciting. Under different circumstances, he could be my one, or I could just be imagining things.

My heart urged me to see how things played this out. See what happened. My head told me not to fool myself into thinking his interest would lead to anything more than a fling. Okay. Well, we could enjoy each other. No harm; no foul.

Decision made, I covered his hand where it rested on my hip and brought it closer to my denim-covered center, silently giving him permission. Keiran's eyes popped open, hot and hungry, so dark with roiling emotions I couldn't read. I squeezed his fingers then let go, leaving his hand there as I arched into him, giving him a clear invitation.

Licking my lips, I waited, and Keiran didn't disappoint.

Eleven

Keiran

Sliding my fingers into Nora's shorts and encountering her slick heat was the best damn moment of my life to that point. Crazy? Maybe. But I was coming to realize my life had two parts: BN and AN—Before Nora and After Nora. And I would never allow there to be a time that was WN—Without Nora. Everything before meeting her had ceased to matter. I hadn't come alive until she'd come into my life.

Anything outside our bubble didn't exist.

“Oh, God,” she breathed, the words a harsh gasp while I pushed two fingers along her slit, applying extra pressure to her clit when I sawed forward.

“You feel so fucking good, Firecracker. I knew you would.”

Both her hands came up, burying in my hair, and she pressed her lips to mine. I instantly took over, kissing her hungrily. I rolled her back under me, licking her mouth open and exploring her with teeth and tongue while my fingers discovered her intimate secrets. I'd like to believe I had some flair to my touches, but really, I plundered her pussy, much as I did her mouth—taking her prisoner and seizing command.

She cried out into me while I tormented her little bundle of nerves with my thumb and curled two fingers inside her. I couldn't help but moan at the feel of her walls sucking at those digits and begging for more. Between her spread thighs, my hips ground into the bed, seeking to quell the raging need to take

her. That part of me wouldn't get inside Nora this afternoon, but one could hold out hope for tonight. Please...

I didn't let up while I fed on her cries, like an incubus supping on his victim. Right now, she was my sweet captive, and those sounds of pleasure were all mine. God willing, they'd always be mine alone. My greedy soul grew with each swell of bliss rolling from her. And when she fell over the edge, her orgasm pulled us both over, and I couldn't help but groan while I felt myself leaking, barely able to keep from coming in my pants while her sex clamped around me, her nails digging into my scalp and her legs clamped to my sides.

"Fuck, you're beautiful, so damn beautiful. Nora... My fiery goddess," I told her as she sagged into the blankets. Pulling my hand free, I refastened her shorts then cuddled her against my chest. I wrestled the blankets over us, wishing I'd pulled the blinds—not that I was worried about anyone seeing us. We were on the second floor and far enough from the window, not to be seen. But I wished the sunlight were blocked out.

Still, Nora relaxed into my chest, her breathing evening out. I realized the blinds didn't matter. Closing my eyes, I stroked my fingers over her hair and let sleep pull me under, too. Just for a few minutes.

But the best laid plans as they say. Both Nora and I stirred at about the same time. Plagued by the feeling of *what century is this*, I glanced at my Breitling watch and groaned. Christ. I was fucking this up. It was almost two-thirty, which meant we'd missed lunch with Dennison and his junior associates. I was here to make a deal, and I'd missed my first opportunity to woo my prospective client.

But fuck me, I couldn't even bring myself to care that much. Which was totally unlike me. I was all about growing BCM and making our next millions. This weekend was about *the deal*. Yet I'd slept through my initial chance.

If nothing else, I supposed Nora and I were doing a fine job of convincing the group we were together and madly in love. Despite what had happened before our nap, I didn't fool myself into thinking Nora wouldn't be the most difficult person to convince of my feelings, though.

“Firecracker,” I murmured, kissing the top of her head.

“Mmm...” she muttered, cuddling closer to me. Christ, I wanted to turn her lithe little body under me, tear off our clothes and sink into her with more than my fingers. My hand tightened on her hip, and maybe, that was what caused her to stir further awake. She stiffened, but I didn’t relinquish my hold.

“Uh-uh, no,” I murmured. “Don’t go getting prickly now. I like you all warm and snuggly. My own personal soft, warm kitty.”

She snorted quietly. “By your own admission, you like me prickly, too, *Sheldon*.”

“Fair.”

“I’m amused you’ve picked up on my Big Bang references.”

“I’m all about business, but I’m not oblivious to pop culture, *Penny*.”

She licked her lips before lifting a brow at me. “You know Penny and Sheldon didn’t end up together, right? That they were never together?”

“But this isn’t their story, is it? As long as you realize you belong right here in the end, we’re just fine.”

“Keiran, I...”

She trailed off as I levered out of bed, pulling the blankets off her on the way and interrupting her thought process—thoughts I was pretty sure I wouldn’t like, anyway.

“We missed lunch. So we need to get moving, Firecracker. Ready to convince the world you’re mine?”

“The world?” she echoed.

“Okay...maybe, not the *whole* world, but the other six people who are here with us.” And my family and our coworkers and anyone else we came in contact with after this weekend. Nora had no idea, but I had zero intention of letting her go anytime soon.

I circled the bed, coming face-to-face with her. I slid my hand behind her neck and pulled her in, pressing my lips to hers. It was chaste compared to our earlier caresses, but no less intense. Her fingers curled on my chest while she leaned into the kiss. Thank God. I'd been half afraid she'd run the other way when she came fully back to her senses.

Her touch radiated through my chest...down to my balls in a tight grasp that stole my breath. When we joined the others, my attraction to Nora wouldn't be acting. The way she canted into me, grasping my shirt, I had to believe she felt it, too.

"Let's do this." I traced my thumb over her slick bottom lip. "Just don't forget which guy you're here with—the bosshole, not the dick."

She jerked away and glared at me. "You're such an ass. It would serve you right if I walked up and laid a big one on Peter."

Over my dead body.

"Only if you want him to have a fist in the face and for you to end up over my knee."

Fire flashed in her eyes, telling me she wasn't averse to that—but which part?

"You wouldn't."

I leaned in to her ear to speak into it. My lips brushed her soft skin while I breathed her in. "Try me and just see what happens, Firecracker. He'd deserves it, and you... Turning you over my lap and making you moan would be the fulfillment of six months of fantasy."

Nora's lips parted as she stared at me, speechless.

Yes, love, I've wanted you for far longer than a week.

I held out my hand, ignoring that I'd just divulged a secret. "Ready?"

Twelve

Nora

I couldn't get Keiran's threat out of my head. Or... He'd wanted me for *six months*? His statement played on repeat through my thoughts while his iron-like grasp kept my hand in his as we walked downstairs to find everyone.

"Hello, Lovebugs," Remy singsonged the moment we stepped into the kitchen, which hadn't been difficult to find since we'd followed the scent of coffee. "I set aside some lunch for you."

"Oh, you didn't have to—"

Remy narrowed her eyes on me when I tried to protest. "Don't even tell me you're not hungry. Besides, it's not much—just sandwiches and cold pasta salad with some fruit. Oh gosh!" She turned with two plastic-wrap covered plates. "Neither of you are vegetarian are you? I don't remember from the other night. You probably think I'm the worst—"

"We're not," I cut in. "And it's so nice of you to keep aside food for us."

"Yes, thank you." Keiran's low voice caressed over me while he curled an arm around my waist.

"She's like that," Tom said as he and the younger men came into the enormous kitchen behind us. My gaze flitted over the three of them, dismissing Peter quickly. Keiran's fingers tightened on my waist, nevertheless.

“I’m glad you could get some rest,” the older man said, his lips twisting into a knowing smirk. Heat burned into my cheeks, but I was glad he wasn’t upset with us. The last thing I wanted was to mess up Keiran’s deal. Though he seemed laid back, I knew it was important to him.

Keiran pressed his lips to the top of my head.

“Sorry about that,” he told Tom. “We didn’t get much sleep last night since Nora’s travel anxiety kept her up.”

A derisive snort drew my attention and roused anger I knew I had to keep tamped down.

“You’ve never had travel anxiety.” Apparently, Peter was still an idiot and couldn’t keep from scoffing and thereby, shredding the illusion of us not knowing each other.

I sent him a death glare, and beside me, Keiran went rigid. I felt more than heard his growl.

Tom’s attention shot to Peter. “Excuse me?”

“We were trying to afford you some dignity, Petie,” Keiran said.

I bit back a grin. Peter *hated* being called Pete, and I’d bet he hated Petie even more.

“What do you mean?” Remy asked, handing us our plates then indicating to the large table, off to the side, that didn’t diminish the size of the enormous kitchen at all. “Would you gentlemen like something to drink?”

“I could use a beer, but you don’t have to wait on them, Rem. They’ve been here enough times to know where things are. But I’m really quite interested on what’s going on here with these three.” He indicated between me and Keiran and Peter then looked over at Byron. “You know what this is about?”

“Nope.” The man looked amused as he crossed his arms and eyed his coworker. “But I’ll bet it’s interesting.”

“Pete, you want to field this?” Keiran offered as he led me to the table with a

hand at the small of my back.

I had no doubt it was purely a gesture to exert his possession. Under the circumstances, I was okay with it. After I'd slipped into a chair that faced the room, he pressed a kiss to my head then took his own seat.

The kitchen had grown silent, everyone waiting for Peter—or me or Keiran, I supposed. Eyeing his employee, Tom sank into the seat at the head of the table.

“Since you brought it up, it’s in your court, Pete.” Not even looking toward the man, Keiran reached to a tray in the center of the table and grabbed us both forks and napkins.

“It’s *Peter*,” my ex gritted through clenched teeth. He poured himself a coffee then came to the table to join us. Byron followed on his heels, at first striking me as the mousier of the pair. However, when his boss and coworker weren’t looking, a calculating look in his eyes said otherwise.

The silence stretched again.

“Fine. Nora and I used to date,” Peter exclaimed.

“Is that your story?” Keiran’s fork paused midway to his mouth. It seemed he was unwilling to let Peter off the hook that easily. I squeezed his fingers where they’d come to rest on my thigh, a habit of his that I didn’t mind.

Peter shrugged, and Tom looked to me, not Keiran, for a more expansive answer.

“Peter and I were engaged a few years ago.”

Keiran set down his fork. “And he left her at the altar.”

A flush reddening his neck and creeping toward his face, my ex shot to his feet. “I didn’t leave her at the altar!”

“No, you didn’t.” Despite a bland tone, Keiran’s malice-filled stare conveyed his true feelings. “Two days before the wedding, while she was at her final dress fitting, you moved out of the place you shared with her. You left her

high and dry with the bills and the responsibility of canceling everything.”

“She didn’t cancel anything.”

“Nope. Serves you right, too.” Keiran speared a few noodles of his salad, steering the attention from Peter. “This is good, Remy. Thank you.”

Around us, Tom looked shocked, Remy seemed unsure what to do, and Peter appeared ready to explode. Byron, bless his mousy soul, bit back a smug grin.

And Keiran might act nonchalant, but tension practically vibrated from him. This could be a disaster and kill the deal he wanted, when nailing down a contract was the whole point of our charade.

Trying to diffuse things, I shrugged and acted unfazed by Peter.

“It’s water under the bridge. Old news. And I have Keiran now.” I grinned up at him. “Don’t I, baby?”

His blue eyes danced with mischief, the total opposite of the asshole I was used to. “You do. And I’m never gonna give you up.”

“Or let me down?” I couldn’t resist adding.

He brushed his mouth over my ear. “Or run around and desert you.”

My giggle slipped out, despite me trying to suppress it.

“You two are just...so adorable,” Remy gushed, pressing a hand over her heart. “I’m so glad you could make it here for your anniversary.”

“And the holiday,” Keiran added. “It’s not all about us.” He looked at Tom. “So how was the game?”

“For my team? A trainwreck!” Tom launched into a recap of the match while Keiran and I ate. Peter sent me death glares the whole time, but I ignored him. He might be pissed, but I’d been nicer than he deserved in order to keep everyone else from being uncomfortable.

“So you had your cake tasting the other day?” Remy said to me while the guys talked. Somehow, they’d segued from sports to business, and I was torn

with if I should pay attention to them or have the side conversation with Remy.

Keiran squeezed my thigh where his hand rested, seeming to give me permission to peel away from the business chat.

“Yeah...so many flavors. We’re going to do different ones on different layers.” And I was making things up as I went, but heck, I’d planned an entire wedding before. I knew the steps. “My favorite was the chocolate with orange liquor cream. Kind of like those chocolate oranges they have at the holidays.”

Keiran leaned over. “I liked the Prosecco-infused cake. It was filled with a fresh peach buttercream.”

“Oh my God! Prosecco and peach! That sounds amazing. Do you think I can get them to make me a non-wedding cake like that? Or will Tom and I have to get married again?”

“Not getting married again, honey.” Tom tugged her chair closer to him and softened his statement with a kiss to the cheek.

“Spoilsport,” she teased, but a faint blush flushed over her cheeks.

“They do all-occasion cakes,” I assured her, hoping the place I’d originally gone to could make the cake Keiran had mentioned. We might not be getting the wedding cake he mentioned, but Remy could get her desired confection.

“They did my grandparents’ anniversary cake,” Keiran supplied. “When we’re back in the office next week, Nora will send you their info.”

“I hardly remembered that,” I said, playing along.

He kissed my temple. “It was a whirlwind. I was only home from Germany for those few days. There was all the family stuff. My proposal. Catching up on months apart...”

I almost pictured the situation he painted. He’d said business is all subterfuge. In that case, he was good at it.

So good that Tom ate it up. “That must have been difficult. How long were you gone?”

“Six months. Trust me, I racked up the frequent flier miles—and jetlag. I was back here as much as I could be.”

He squeezed my thigh again, and I covered his hand with mine, looking up into his eyes. Even with four other people here, Keiran managed to wrap us in that same bubble we’d been in when we were alone upstairs, the same one we’d been in when he’d kissed me in his office. If only it could be real and all the time, rather than a lie we were telling.

“Not often enough,” I added.

“No, not often enough. I’m never doing that again,” he assured me. “Nothing could make me leave you.”

And somehow, amongst all the lies, despite knowing none of this was real, I believed his promise when he vowed that.

Thirteen

Keiran

Fucking Pete. Now that he'd been a whiny pussy and told the room that he and Nora had been together once, it seemed as if everyone intently watched me and my girl. Which was okay, I supposed. It just give me more excuses to touch her.

"I forgot!" Remy's palm smacked onto the tabletop. "While you were sleeping, Garen and Gen called. They're going to make it up tonight, after all. They should be here anytime, which is perfect. We can do the game I have planned for after dinner."

"Game?" Nora tensed beside me. Which was weird since she seemed to roll with whatever I threw her way.

"Yes!" Remy clapped, clearly excited even as Tom sighed. "Kind of like the old *Newlywed Game*. Byron and Peter are basically work spouses, so they can be a team. The twist is that the couples get to take turns questioning the other two pairs. Doesn't that sound great?"

"Fun," Byron deadpanned. Peter, on the other hand, remained silent and eyed Nora and me with speculation.

Remy shot to her feet, having barely sat still for a moment. The woman seemed wound too tight—or she was hopped up on energy drinks. Or both. "Okay, you're all on your own until dinner at seven. Then afterward, we'll gather around the bonfire and have the game."

“And drink.” Tom jerked a firm nod to accompany his dry assertion.

“And listen to me. And, I mean it.” Remy pointed at each of the men. “No business. All of you go your separate ways and have some fun. This is a *vacation*.”

“Honey—”

She interrupted her husband. “Not today.”

And I wasn't going to piss off Tom's wife. If others before me didn't realize Remy swayed her husband, they were damn fools. Since she intended to job-block us, I couldn't schmooze Tom—or Garen when he arrived. In that case, I might as well keep pursuing my long game with Nora.

“You mentioned the boat. Can Nora and I take it out on the lake?”

“Of course. I got it ready this morning.” Tom stood and patted me hard on the shoulder, but not hard enough to faze me. “Have fun and we'll see you back here later.”

“In that case, I think I'll head into town for a Starbucks.” Byron climbed to his feet and grabbed his cup from the table. “Pete, coming with me?”

“It's Peter,” the man gritted out.

“Whatever, Petie. Let's go get you an extra-strong iced coffee with whipped cream while I call my girl. I get better signal in town.”

Remy eyed at Tom, playing with a strand of her hair. “Honey, since everyone's occupied, I need you to help me out with something upstairs.”

Tom's gaze darkened with something I didn't want to think about between the two of them, so I looked away, meeting Nora's sparkling green eyes. “Ready to go out on the lake?”

“Sure. You know how to drive a boat?”

“Of course,” I scoffed. “Told you so earlier.”

Boating had been practically a compulsory element of my upbringing—

boating, equestrian activities and haunting my grandparents' country club where I got tennis and golf lessons.

“Good, I don't want to drown in my new bikini.”

“New bikini? I can't wait.” My eyes raked over her, ready to see her in her new suit. Or without it, if I could talk her into that.

I didn't ask if she could swim, since she'd already told me she'd been on her high school swim team. All I cared about was getting her alone and perhaps helping her apply sunblock.

Standing, I took her plate and carried it over to the sink with mine. One of the Dennison's staff had come in while we talked, and the woman smiled at me as she took the dinnerware. After thanking her, I went back to Nora and held out my hand.

“Come on. I'm ready to see that bikini.”

She smirked as she stood, then she gave me a wide smile. “I'm sure you are. See you all later.”

“Later,” I echoed.

I didn't miss Peter's scowl or that Nora ignored him, even as Byron jabbed him with an elbow as a warning to stop his glaring at us.

Nora's mirth evaporated when we entered the bedroom. She blew out a breath and wilted as soon as the door shut.

“What is it?” I closed the distance she'd put between us.

She took a step back and held up her hands. “Our story is just growing. Maybe, we should come clean. Especially before that game tonight. Peter will know if you get an answer wrong, even if I lie and claim you didn't.”

Grabbing her hips, I yanked her to me before I could even think it through. When we were chest to chest, her hands landed over my heavy heartbeat.

I decided to play dumb. “Come clean about what? That I can't keep my hands off you? It's true. That I fully intend to experience your sweetness tonight?”

Also true. Taste you? Feel you?” I leaned in and rasped the words into her ear. “Fill you? True, true, true.”

“Keiran. We’re not real.” Her protest sounded weak and reluctant, even to me.

“We’re as real as we want to be. Can you really deny what happened in that bed earlier? What you feel whenever I touch you? I sure as hell can’t.”

Her tongue darted across her lips, and she swallowed before she shook her head.

“That was—”

“Perfect.” I gave her hips a quick squeeze. “Let’s just see where things go, okay?”

“While we pretend to be engaged?”

Lifting a hand to cover hers on my chest, I fingered her ring. “Tell you what... You just keep on pretending you don’t hate me, okay? The rest will work out.”

Hopefully.

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t hate you. I couldn’t have...” She looked over at the bed that had been remade by staff sometime after we’d left it. “I couldn’t have *you know*...let you *cuddle* with me, if I hated you.”

A smirk curled my lips. “I *do* know. You kiss me too good to hate me.”

She scoffed at me. “You’ve never heard of a hate fuck?”

“But we haven’t fucked. Yet.”

“You’re annoying.” Tugging away from me, she marched toward her suitcase. “And bad. You are so bad.”

She had no idea...

“Go change. When we’re on the boat, I’ll tell you all about this de facto club

I belong to.”

“Club? Do tell.”

“Not until you’re in your bikini and basking in the sun. Go change. Then I’ll tell you all about it.”

* * *

Nora was sin in spandex or whatever the hell that tiny red swimsuit was made of. Fighting a hard-on my swimsuit couldn’t hide, I’d maneuvered us from the boathouse then driven far enough out onto the water that the beach was out of sight. It was only then Nora shed her cover up. I about swallowed my tongue. Thank God, I’d already dropped our weighted anchors, so we could drift in place on these waves, *before* she’d done that.

“Jesus, baby. You’re...”

She preened. “You like it.”

“Ms. Brooks, take a memo. We have a new dress code at work.”

Her back arched, and her head dropped back as she propped her arms on the cushioned bench beneath her and basked in the warm sunlight. “That’ll get cold in the winter.”

“Heavy coat, boots, that suit underneath... You should be okay. And I’ll keep you warm.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Her smile sapped any annoyance from her statement. I’d take it. She’s waffled back and forth between just wanting me and wanting me but being afraid to cave to her feelings. I understood. She had no reason to trust me and no map to show her where we were going. I’d just have to convince her.

“You’re right. Strike the new dress code. I wouldn’t want anyone else in the office to see this much of you. Even my brother—especially him, come to think of it. His reputation speaks for itself.”

I couldn't take my eyes off her. I also couldn't peel off my T-shirt since it was the only thing marginally disguising the wood I'd sprung for her. As she reclined back on the bench seat, my thoughts went wild, careening directly into the gutter. With a smug smile, she lowered her sunglasses enough to peer at me over the top, and I knew she realized what she was doing to me.

"You give me confidence I've never had before, Keiran." She turned her head to face the sky again and bent one knee up, resting one dainty foot with pink-painted toenails flat on the cushion. "It feels good."

"You should never feel less than the goddess you are."

Fuck, she was ethereal, too. An angel dropped from heaven. Peter was a fucking fool, but all the better for me. I was not an idiot, which meant I was smart enough to never let her go.

Facing her, I sprawled on the bench opposite her and ran my hand over my cock while she wasn't looking at me. I might die if she said no tonight. If she did, I'd be taking a long, cold shower with my fist around my dick. She could listen to what she did to me.

"So tell me about this super secret club of yours," she said out of the blue, dragging me away from the torrid thoughts that beckoned for me.

"It's not secret."

"The media refers to you being part of some club of young billionaires—"

"It's not that." Christ, the media. God forbid any of us happened to be in the same restaurant at the same time. It turned into a *billionaire club* meeting in whatever article was written. It was why I kept my other friendships on the down low.

"Well, I've never seen anything written about anything else, so it must be a *little* bit secret." Her head rolled toward me and she raised a brow behind her glasses. "Do I need to sign an NDA?"

"If you needed to sign an NDA, it would have happened long before now. This club I mentioned is a joke between friends, not a real club at all. It's just me and my friends. My brother and I are new to the group—Ross McKenzie

invited us a few years ago. Ross McKenzie from McKenzie and Sons.”

“The *billionaire*,” she deadpanned, harkening back to the moniker used in the papers—the one I’d just denied. “I know who he and his brothers are. Technically, Ross is the ‘*and Sons*’ part of the company. His father is gone and his brothers have taken on other careers. One is a rock star and the other is a NASCAR driver.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “So Ross, his brothers and some close friends used to get into a lot of trouble in high school. Hell, they still do get in trouble, just not in ways that land them on the wrong side of the law. Anyway, back then, they were dubbed the Bad Boys Club. All these years later, it’s stuck, and now, Carrick and I are part of the group.”

“So...you’re a bad boy?” She considered me thoughtfully, then her lips curled into a grin. “Yeah... I have to admit, it fits you.”

Fourteen

Nora

Somehow, it didn't surprise me that Keiran would be part of a group casually called *The Bad Boy Club*. It surprised me even less that Carrick would be, but I wouldn't tell Keiran that. I also knew he was very much part of the billionaire enclave, even if he denied it. He was friends with all those men and they'd formed their own modern version of the 80s Brat Pack. Young, beautiful, and glamorous, with plenty of celebutante groupies.

Pretending to bask in the sun and not look at him, I side-eyed him from beneath my sunglasses. I hadn't missed his adjustment earlier. Feminine power unlike any I'd ever experienced flowed through me.

I pushed away any confusion about what we were and what the future might hold. Right now, I wanted Keiran and he wanted me. If I had to find a new job next week, he'd already ensured I wouldn't be homeless.

"So this secret club...? You guys have regular meetings? Do you pay dues and are there badges?"

"Smartass."

"I think you like my ass."

"You're definitely not wrong. I can think of lots of things I'd like to do to it."

My thighs pressed together, and heat flooded my core. Hell, I could think of lots of things I wanted him to do, too.

“We get together every few months.”

“What?” I’d lost the thread.

Reaching over, he trailed his fingers along my thigh. “The club. We get together every few months. Used to be more often. Whoever’s around meets, anyway. I’ve missed out for the last six months, and I will again tomorrow night.”

“It’s good to have close friend like that.”

“Do you?”

“Not particularly. School for me was...” I lifted a shoulder to shrug away the memories. “It’s a long story. I thought I had to be perfect all the time. That I had to be a particular kind of person. I did what I had to do in order to fit in—not in a mean girl way. I was nice to everyone. But I gave everything of myself away. And I came away with nothing. I diluted the real me so much, people remember me as ‘oh she was always so nice’ but nothing else.”

“There are worse things to be remembered for.”

“I’d rather be me. And I am most of the time now. Funny thing is, I still default to over-nice. Mostly.” I sighed, frustrated with myself. “So...this deal. It seems like a pretty big thing for BCM.”

He studied me, seeming unwilling to jump topics

“Do you know what Brothers does?” he asked after a long moment.

Strange question. How could I not?

“Yeah, of course. New construction, property management, remodels, real estate development. I mean...I don’t know exactly what each project entails, but generally, I know.”

“We’re pivoting. The wave of the future is green. That’s what I was doing in Europe. While overseeing a build there, I was learning some of the latest developments for smart buildings and leaving smaller footprints. A whole sector of our company has been attaining certifications and training on best

practices and implementation. I'm explaining it poorly, but there's so much to nutshell."

Of course, I knew a lot of that, but the way Keiran explained it, the excitement in his voice... In just a few words, I saw he was on fire for this.

"Green Possible and Dennison-Co already operate in this market. We're positioned to be their best choice for their new builds—new offices and stores. At the same time, they're perfect to be our source for the materials we need for other projects."

"So a symbiotic relationship that would be good for all parties? It sounds like they'd be foolish to turn you down."

Keiran picked up the sunblock and squirted some on his palm as he crossed the space separating us, on his knees. "We're not the only ones courting them."

My breath caught as the cream smeared on my thigh. His hand had warmed it, but the touch still shocked across my skin.

"Don't want to burn," he rumbled, watching his hand move over me.

"I can do it."

"Let me."

Not awaiting my permission, he stroked his palm down to my ankle, manacling it for a moment before trailing back upward. My breath panted from me. I was burning, and I was sure he knew it, too. The coals had been glowing in my middle for days, and he kept stoking them higher. Right now, I sizzled with enough heat to melt the coldest icecaps.

Squirting out more lotion, he kneaded it into my thighs and calves, the tops of my feet. He spent extra time on my inner thighs, his fingertips teasing under the edge of my bottoms.

"Keiran."

He ignored my whine and used his splayed fingers to push me flat on my

back so he could minister to my upper body. His hands were a tease on my torso until he reached the undersides of my breasts. His thumbs dragged along the lower curves while he applied the lotion. Just as I was about to squirm off the seat, he applied the sunblock to my arms...my hands, lacing his fingers through mine.

With a featherlight touch he, returned to my shoulders.

“You know you’ve got the most breathtaking body I’ve ever seen.”

“I’ve seen the celebutantes who’ve been calling your office. We all have. They love the paparazzi.”

“They’re not you.” His hands worked over my breasts, lotioning the tops and sides, slipping into the cleavage where the sun wouldn’t touch, kneading ever so lightly.

“They’re gorgeous.”

He huffed a laugh. “And still don’t hold a candle to you. Baby, I’ve been jacking off to your photo for six months—ever since the first time I spoke with you on the phone then requested your pic from HR.”

“You did not,” I gasped, both shocked and aroused by his confession.

“I did. Are you going to run from me now?” His hands tightened where he’d been lotioning my upper arms.

“Not much place to run when we’re on a small boat in the middle of a lake.”

He made a noncommittal sound as both hands skimmed up to my shoulders. One circled my neck, his thumb lifting my chin. My tongue flicked out to dampen my lips as I stared up at him wide-eyed, aware of the pressure on my throat but unafraid.

“You’re such a good girl.”

“So you don’t want to spank me?”

He chuckled a dark sound that shouldn’t have surprised me from my boss’s hole. “Oh, I do.”

His lips covered mine, kissing me hard and deep. I clutched his shoulders while his upper body held me in place.

“You make me crazy,” he confessed against my lips. “No one distracts me from business, yet here I am.”

“I like where you are.”

His lips covered mine again, his mouth and tongue tormenting me until I saw stars. When I gasped for a breath, it took me a moment to realize he’d retreated to the bench that ran along the other side of the boat, parallel to where I lay.

His hand cupped his cock through the thin nylon of his dark-blue swimsuit. “The things I want to do to you. But not on this boat.”

It took all of my willpower not to whine *why not*. My brain scrambled for our previous topic even though he’d purposely changed the subject.

“You were telling me about Dennison-Co and Green Possible, that you’re not the only one courting them. I noticed you’re the only one here for the weekend.”

“True.”

“And if you didn’t think you had a chance...”

“We wouldn’t be here. Even fairly new to the green game, we’re still the best there is. I just need them to realize it.”

Sitting up, I turned toward him and grasped edge of the bench seat as I leaned his way. “I think they already know. You’re just here to reassure them that they’re making the right decision in working with BCM.”

Keiran studied me, his eyes speculative, but I knew he was thinking about business, not me. At least, not right now.

I gazed out over the blue water gently rippling around us, letting it lull away some of the arousal still muddling my thoughts. “I have to admit, when I came to work for Brothers, I didn’t realize how environmentally conscious

you were.”

“It didn’t start out that way. I have to give Carrick the credit. He’s the one who saw the path.” He blew out a breath and looked out over the vastness of the lake, following my stare. “Tom and Garen both run family companies. They’re very big on stability—not just in a company’s standing in the marketplace, but also in the people running it. Like me and Carrick. They’re willing to overlook Carrick’s apparent philandering as long as I’m on the straight and narrow. Even so, I told my brother he needs to stay out of the society pages for a while.”

I turned back to him. “And that’s why you suddenly needed to produce a fiancée you’ve been quiet about until now?”

He made a face, but it didn’t say yes or no. “It seemed prudent.”

“And after they sign?”

His intense blue stare slid back to me. “What do *you* want afterward?”

“You’re going to make me say it first? Leave me to hang it all out there?”

His smirk had no repentance in it. In fact, he looked completely sure of himself. “I know what I want. I’m quite interested in finding out what you want.”

That hardly seemed fair, but he continued before I said so.

“I’ll tell you what I want. I want to see where this goes. I want it to be far more than a charade.”

I blinked at him, hope filling me. “You want to date me?”

“I want a lot more than that, Firecracker. And I *need* you in my bed, starting tonight—and before you make a smart ass remark about only having one bed, I don’t mean only for sleeping. I want the gossip rags to speculate about the gorgeous, mysterious woman on my arm. I want to kiss you in my office. And your office. And that damned women’s room. Frankly, I want more than kissing. I’m going to bend you over my desk, too.”

I bit my lip while listening to him. His words stoked the raging flames of need inside me that had barely settled moments ago. Need twinged low in my belly, twisting and tugging and growing.

It was everything I hadn't been looking for before he showed up at my apartment the other night. Less than a week ago, I'd hated him, and now... I was considering his proposal for us to date. More than date.

"That's...a lot. Fast."

"Yes," he agreed. "I don't waste time. Never have. Never will."

"If you've wanted me for so long, why have you been a pain in my ass—"

His sharp laugh cut me off. "Because I love to rile you up. I told you that."

"I don't know if I should be with someone who riles me up. That doesn't seem healthy."

He drop forward off the bench and onto his knees again. Closing the space between us, he pressed close to me and forced my knees apart to accommodate his larger body. His palms skimmed up my thighs to my hips, and he dragged me closer.

"It's the sparks that light in your eyes, Firecracker. I can rile you in other ways."

"I..." God, when he was this close, I could barely think. "I've been burned before, Keiran. When you came along, I wasn't looking for a relationship. I wasn't interested in opening up to anyone."

He cupped my cheek. "I'd bury that asshole if I could. Physically, financially, professionally, any other way possible—"

"Don't. He's not worth it. He seems to be doing a good job screwing up all by himself."

"Yeah," Keiran said on a huffed laugh. "I can't believe the dumbass outed himself for being such an asshole to you."

"Technically, he just said we dated."

“An asshole and a liar.”

“We’re lying, too.”

“Are we?” He brushed his lips over mine, and I groaned, opening for him to deepen the kiss. He sat back on his heels, pulling me to straddle his lap, my soft core to the rock-hard ridge in his suit. His hips rolled up into me, hitting me just right to pull a moan from deep in my chest.

“Does this feel like a lie?” he demanded, in a deep, rumbling growl. “It feels fucking perfect to me.”

“No,” I panted, my head dropping back while he ground my center against him. “It’s...real.”

His lips skimmed along my jaw. “If there wasn’t a chance of being seen, I would push aside your bottoms, pull myself out and sink right into you.”

“There’s no one—”

“There’s always a chance, baby. Especially when the gossip sites want dirt on you. I won’t do that to you. Ever. Besides that, for our first time, I want you in a bed, not on a floor with rough boat carpet that’ll give you wicked rug burns on your knees.”

That just made me want him more.

He rocked up into me, and I moaned again. “You’re still going to make me come.”

Any thought that I should be embarrassed about that with my boss was long gone.

“Good. You just keep rocking...right...there.”

“Keiran,” I gasped as spikes of pleasure raked over me, ever expanding until the sensations stole my breath, and I came on a silent shudder while I trembled above him, my fingers clenched tight to his shoulders.

His hands glided up and down my spine, gentling me as I came down.

“That’s my girl,” he murmured. “That’s my good girl. That’s it.”

I buried my face in his neck, breathing him in, absorbing the strength that rolled off him while we rocked together.

His girl. God, help me. I wanted that. Even if he did manage to piss me off nine out of ten times. But...well, when I thought about it, he hadn’t annoyed me so much since that kiss the other morning. Maybe, there was something to what he said about lighting the fire in me. While I still tingled from my release, I had to admit, he was good at that, too.

Fifteen

Keiran

“Was it love at first sight?” I glanced at Peter and Byron while we played this *Newlywed*-esque game Remy had concocted. “Or *like* at first sight for you two, I guess.”

After Nora and I had gotten back, we’d had a casual sit-down dinner in the Dennison’s fancy dining room then come down to the bonfire. The Dennisons and the Bensons had both asked questions already, the former asking the guys what the women’s favorite holiday was and the latter asking the girls what their partner’s favorite sport was.

After a badly played round of *rock, paper, scissors*, poor Byron got designated as a girl for the game, but he was a good sport about it, laughing and making a show of fluffing his hair. I liked him. His work associate? Not at all.

Remy had given each couple small notebooks to write down our answers before the other person guessed, which meant neither Nora nor I could agree that the other person had answered correctly when they hadn’t. So far we’d both been right, me answering Christmas and her answering soccer. I had to breathe a sigh of relief that I didn’t have to answer this time.

Both Tom and Garen were scribbling down their answers to my question. Whatever Pete had answered, he’d scratched it down quickly.

The tiny egg-timer hourglass we were using ran out.

“Okay. Time,” I called. “Remy, you want to go first?”

“I’m not sure how to answer that.” She looked thoughtful, and Tom smirked, making me suspect he’d anticipated she’d say that. “Long answer. For me, no. For him, yes. But then after he gave me space, I realized I was in love with him.”

She looked over at him to see what he wrote. He held up the notebook with his writing for us to see, though there was no chance in reading it across the fire. It *did* look like a lot of words, though.

“That’s basically what I said. She didn’t think so, but I knew so.” He pulled her close enough that he could kiss the top of her head. “And look at that. I was right.”

She sighed, snuggling into his side.

“Gen?” I asked.

She smiled warmly. “Oh no. It was hate at first sight. Our families have always been acquainted, and we always fought—until we were in our junior year of high school and he swooped in to rescue me when some guys had cornered me one day. After that... Never anyone else.”

Beside me, Nora sighed at the romanticism of it. And I pulled her closer. She rested her head on my shoulder. The moment would only have been better if she were on my lap.

“Garen?” I prompted.

“Yeah, that’s what I said. She hated me from age five to age sixteen. Me, not as long as her—but it definitely wasn’t love at first sight.”

“Byron?”

He blew out a light-hearted, scoffing laugh. “Of course, he liked me. What’s not to like?”

I glanced over at Pete.

“No,” he said.

“No?” Byron demanded, leaning away and swinging a glare at his partner.

Pete shrugged.

“Asshole,” Byron muttered and shoved Pete’s shoulder, managing to tumble him and his chair sideways.

“Now, boys,” Remy said, poorly hiding her laughter. “It’s just a game.” Then she looked to Nora. “What about you two?”

“No, not.” Nora shook of her head. “I’d been burned, and while I thought Keiran was sexier than hell, I wasn’t ready. He was determined, though. And as you know, the Fourth is the anniversary of our first date. We’ve gotten there now, and that’s what matters.”

“Okay, Peter and Byron, your turn,” Remy chirped. Seriously, that woman had more energy than that famous long-lasting battery bunny. “A question for the ladies to answer about their men.”

“What’s their coffee order?” Byron blurted out, before Peter could ask anything, which meant he’d get his chance next round. I almost laughed, because this was the easiest question yet. I sent Nora for my coffee every morning since I’d returned to the office. Nora got to answer first once all of us guys finished jotting down our responses.

“Keiran likes an Espresso Romano.” Nora grimaced. “I’ll admit I tried one to see the allure of an espresso with lemon treatment. It sort of won me over.”

I laughed. “But you still like your froufrou lattes. I got hooked on the Espresso Romano in Italy last year.”

Holding up the notebook, I showed the group Nora was correct. We all laughed when Remy and Gen had no idea what their guys preferred, and it reassured me that if we got something wrong, it wouldn’t completely blow our cover. But I guessed well that Nora’s favorite color was green. I kind of panicked at the question and froze, not writing anything for a long moment. As the timer was running out, I just scratched down my own favorite.

When asked my favorite TV show, Nora guessed I didn’t have one. Again, right. I didn’t watch television. We were five for five and in the lead when

the question asking got back around to Peter and Byron.

“Have you been in love before your current partner?” Peter asked. His eyes seared into Nora, and I wonder what the hell game he was playing and why he’d even ask something like that.

When I glanced at Nora’s face, her features were pinched. I stared back at the fire, assured I knew her answer. Beside me, I heard, rather than saw her writing. I had a smug feeling Peter was in for a big surprise.

Both Gen and Remy answered yes, and their husbands guessed correctly, despite adorable hemming and hawing. All eyes turned to Nora and me. Per the rules, she had the notebook face-down on her lap. The pencil eraser bounced against the back paper while she nervously twirled the utensil in her fingers.

She probably suspected expected I’d answer wrong since I knew her past with Peter and that they’d dated for years and been engaged. And she was right. I knew her past and that she’d been about to walk down the aisle when she’d been basically left at the altar by that asshole.

I stared at Peter, not answering for a long uncomfortable moment—uncomfortable for everyone else, anyway. I enjoyed the way Peter squirmed. The world seemed to go silent around us while I weighed the man and found him far worse than lacking.

“No.” The single word dropped like a bomb on a hushed night. “No, Nora has never been in love before me.”

Nora’s mouth dropped open ,and she gaped at me before a huge smile overtook her face. Peter crowed in triumph, but I was comfortable with my response.

“Nora?” Remy prompted.

Nora blinked, ripped from the tableau that had set up around us. She held up her paper, displaying the giant NO she’d written. There was no mistaking it, even across the fire.

“Damn straight,” I muttered.

My hand cupped the back of her head, fingers knotting in her hair, and I pulled her toward me, crushing my lips to hers in a quick, fiery kiss.

“For the record...” I pulled back slightly to speak. “Me, either.”

“Whew,” Remy teased, fanning herself. “I think we need some cold drinks. The temperature just went way up.”

Tom snorted. “Wait until later.”

Though I was pretty sure he meant between him and his wife, I couldn’t help but wonder if he knew exactly what would blaze between Nora and me when we retired to our room.

Sixteen

Keiran

Thank God for my long T-shirt with an unbuttoned shirt over it, because I was fairly sure my light-blue twill shorts were doing a piss poor job of hiding the wood I sported in anticipation of my night with Nora. Also I was pretty confident she knew all about that problem, since I'd pulled her to sit on my lap while we'd had drinks around the fire after the game. Most of us anyway. Peter had stomped off someplace as soon as Nora and I had been declared the winners.

We weren't drunk, though. Perhaps anticipating tonight, she'd had a Coke while I'd nursed the same longneck for over an hour. Neither of us wanted any inebriation between us this evening. I wanted to be sure she was all in, and I needed full control of my faculties, as well.

At the moment, Nora stood in the middle of the room, looking adorable in the jean shorts and tiny tee, a form-fitting white shirt she'd pulled on over her bikini, which showed through her top. Watching me shut the door, she sank her teeth into her lip and twisted her fingers together. Then, seeming to realize what she was doing, she dropped her arms to her sides.

I closed the space between us then cupped her hips in my hands. "We don't have to do anything you don't want."

She released a slow, unsteady breath and lifted her hands to rest on my chest. "I do want. I want to be with you. I just don't know what—well, um, I'm worried about what will happen when we get back to the office on

Wednesday.”

“Probably, we’ll drive in together—because I’m not letting you out of my bed anytime soon.” *If ever*. “Then you’ll settle at your desk, and I’ll go to mine. After I turn on my computer, I’ll call you into my office. If I last that long.”

“But...”

I sealed my lips over hers, and she groaned, leaning into me and opening for me. I slipped inside and tasted the sugary drink she’d had, the chocolate the girls had shared, and Nora. My sweet as fuck Nora.

“Don’t worry.” My mouths brushed hers when I spoke before I rested my forehead to her furrowed brow. I craved another taste, to gorge myself in her, but we needed this in the open even more. “Your job is safe. Even if you kicked me in the balls right now and ran from the room, screaming.”

“I’m not really that dramatic.”

“You’re a good actress, though.”

The tip of her tongue swept out to dampen her lips, and I wanted to follow that path with my own. My fingers tightened on her, but I forced myself to relax. This was happening. Not soon enough. But it would happen.

“There hasn’t been as much acting as I’d like you to believe.” She grimaced as she stared over my shoulder.

Gently, I grasped her chin and drew her gaze back to me. “Because you like me.”

“God, no.”

“Really?” I laughed at her obvious lie, and she joined me before she struggled back to a straight face, a mostly unsuccessful feat as her lips kept trying to break into a wide grin again.

“I mean you’re sexy and all.” She waved her hand, indicating down my body. “And who wouldn’t like a piece of that, given the chance?”

“Wow, Firecracker, I’m not sure how to take that. Was that an ego boost or a giant smack down?”

Her effervescent laugh tinkled around us, even as she leaned in to me as if pulled by a magnet. Her hands ran up my chest before skimming up over my jaw and back into my hair.

“If it helps... I wouldn’t want you to be any other way,” she confided.

“Masochist.”

One slim shoulder lifted. “Maybe a little. I mean, nothing will change the fact you’re a bosshole jerk.”

I gathered her closer, needing to feel my little smartass flush against me, to experience every perfect curve. Seeing her in that tiny bikini had just about done me in earlier. Even when she’d slipped on the minuscule cut-off shorts and a tee over it, it hadn’t helped my situation. At all. Visions of her and everything I wanted to do to her had tormented me all afternoon and evening.

“You’re right. I’m a bit of a jerk. I want what I want, and I want it when I want it—”

“Which is usually *right now*.”

Her reward was a put upon sigh, but she wasn’t wrong. “*But* I won’t ever hurt you.”

Though it wasn’t my intention, my words erased the light-hearted mood, leaving a more somber tone.

“You can’t promise that.” Nora almost whispered her rebuttal, her focus on our toes, and her arms circling her waist. She didn’t back away, the top of her head resting against my chest. She seemed resigned to being hurt yet unable to move away from me.

“I *can* promise you that. As I pointed out: I want what I want. That’s because I *know* what I want. I’m not some little boy who’s going to drop you like a toy that’s lost my attention.”

She lifted head, but the look in her eyes said she didn't believe me. Fucking Pete. That asshole had messed her up, and now, I had to fight past it. I pushed away my inner voice that scoffed at me, accusing me of making things worse by being a so-called bosshole and intentionally triggering her annoyance.

Maybe, I was the masochist.

I hated this distance between us.

Crowding close again, I cupped her face and ran my thumb along her jaw. "Baby, I'm demanding and overbearing. I know that. But I don't think it's anything you can't handle."

Her body sagged, and she settled into me. I clasped her against my chest, her ear over my heart while I ran a hand up and down her back. We stood there. Rocked. Nora finally released a long breath, and the tension continued to seep away.

"You are a lot to handle." Her concession brought a wide smile to my lips.

Grasping one of her hands, I drew it down my chest, stopping at my navel. Angling to see her face, I caught her eyes with mine. Waiting. Handing the next move to her.

"You have no idea."

"Perv."

She was the one who finished the path to my groin, though. I moaned, pushing into her palm when she cupped me. Relief flooded through me and erased the momentary uncertainty hanging over us. We got lost in a better place, staring at each other, our breathing growing harsh and uneven.

Her fingers flexed on me. My hands had settled on her lower back, and I angle them down to her ass, pulling her closer.

"I just want you." My hips canted into her touch. "Now that we're finally in our damn room and alone, I want you. Under me. Wrapped around me. Screaming my name for everyone—especially Peter—to hear. Not because I'm jealous, but because...damn, he's an asshole."

“No argument from me on that point.” She squeezed me again, and I groaned, pushing even harder into her grasp, wishing we were naked already.

“Nora...”

“I want that, too; just so you know. Consequences or not.”

“The only consequence will be your addiction to my dick. Promise.”

“Cocky.”

“Or your addiction to my *cock*. Whatever you want to call it.”

She jacked her fist along my length once more, growing bolder. And I was about to die. Or lose control. Or spend in my pants. On shaky legs, I jerked back and out of her grasp then swept her up into my arms.

“Bed,” I growled.

“Finally. Are we going to cuddle?” Her tease was a breathy whisper as I placed her on the bed. I didn’t answer while I climbed over her much the same way I did earlier that day. This time, I immediately speared my fingers into her silky hair and cupped the back of her head. My lips pressed over hers, devouring everything I could. Nora arched under me, her hard nipples, evident even through our clothes, pressing into me. Unable to help myself, I palmed a soft mound and found the rigid peak with my thumb.

“Keiran,” she gasped. “Oh...”

I flicked over the tip again, making her jerk and cry out under me. My lips brushed over hers. I wanted to capture all the sounds. “You feel so fucking good.”

“I want more.” Her hands slipped beneath the hem of my shirt, pushing upward. Her warm palms were heaven on my skin. Still, I knelt up and stripped away the tee before reaching for my waistband. She could touch me everywhere with no fabric between us. I didn’t care if I was naked first. While Nora watched me with avid fascination and hunger, all that mattered was the desire in her stare.

“You can have anything you want,” I promised. “You tell me, and I’ll find a way to give it to you.”

Even that asshole’s head on a platter. Metaphorically, anyway, because prison wasn’t a separation I could tolerate. Hell, I was loath to move even a foot from her. My being protested when I climbed off the bed to peel off my shorts and underwear.

Naked, I pulled Nora to sitting, so she faced me and watched her skim her appreciative gaze over me. Swallow. Lick her lips. Her fingers flexed. Opened. Finally, fucking finally, she reached for my cock where it bobbed before her, and I let out the breath I’d held while I waited for her to make the move.

Nora ran her hand up and down my length, sending aching pleasure up my spine and down into my ball. I reached for her shirt, telling myself not to rip it. Still, I yanked it off her, but she didn’t seem to mind the force. Her back arched forward, displaying how hard her nipples were against her tiny bathing suit top.

My breath caught, my belly muscles sucking in as a fresh wave of lust manacled my dick. Her soft mounds taunted me, begging me to mold them in my hands again and to discover every inch of her golden skin.

“Did I tell you how much I fucking love and hate this God damn sinful scrap of a suit?”

I tore it away while she jacked her fists over my stiff length. Her breasts bounced free, and I groaned, taking advantage and finally palming her firm mounds. They felt perfect, the hardened nipples poking against my hands. I plucked at the taut tips, and her hoarse cries shot spirals of pleasure through me—too much pleasure. While I watched her agonized ecstasy, her head thrown back, my balls pulled tight. Lightning slammed down my spine into my lower back and threatened to explode into a reaction that would end things far too soon.

I captured her wrists, earning a protest when I pulled her away from her new toy, then tugged her to her feet before me. Grasping her waistband, I yanked down her shorts, not even pausing to unbutton and unzip them. I dragged the

swimsuit bottoms down her firm, shapely thighs right along with the denim as I knelt before her.

As soon as she had one foot free, I jerked her closer and dove forward. With a startled cry, she grabbed my shoulders for balance. The cry turned to a gasp when I parted her with one hand and sealed my mouth over her sweetness.

Fuck...yeah, sweet. So perfect.

“Keiran...fuck...” she choked out, fisting my hair. But I was lost, moaning at her flavor. Heaven. The best treat I’d ever experienced. Flicking and sucking at her delicious nectar, I devoured her then spent long moments on her sensitive clit.

Her grip on me tightened as her legs buckled. Not letting up for even a moment, I turned and pushed her to sit on the bed. I shoved her legs wider, lifting them around my shoulders, while I redoubled my efforts to pleasure of her. I breathed deep and inhaled her sweet, musky arousal. Delectable. Arousing. Addicting. My fingers tightened on her thigh where I held her open with one hand. The other explored the place where I longed to bury myself deep.

Getting marginal control over my primal instincts, I pressed two long digits into her spasming core. Smooth and slow, I finger-fucked her slick passage.

“You going to go off for me, Firecracker? Are you gonna come all over me like a good girl?”

“Keiran! You...can’t— Oh, God!”

My teeth pinched her clit with just enough pressure to jerk her hips into me. Her whole body clenched, her head falling back as she caught herself on her hands, her pretty pink nipples pointing toward the ceiling while she arched and came apart for me. And indeed, screamed my name.

Seventeen

Nora

What the hell?

I had never, ever, come like that. Not on my own. Not with a partner. But with Keiran...

I stared up at him while he rose over me. His long, thick shaft bobbed, tapping his hard belly as he moved. A thick droplet of precum beaded on the tip, and I licked my lips. He'd probably taste as good as he looked. Everything about him was perfect—damn him. Well, except for his bossy ways.

Some of them.

Because admittedly, I didn't mind *all* of the times when he was bossy.

"That was beautiful," he growled. "So fucking beautiful. You're going to come for me again. This time, while I'm filling you up."

I nodded. He'd rendered me momentarily speechless, the tremors still racing through me. Boneless, my legs dangled off the side of the bed, and I wasn't much help while Keiran smugly adjusted us.

"How'd you get so good...at that?" I managed.

"Books. Ask me later."

His mouth covered mine, my flavor filling my senses while he kissed me

ravenously. His body pushed me backward on to the bed. My knees immediately lifted around his hips when his cock notched to me. I sucked in a breath at the wide, hot glans pressing against me, begging for entrance, already pushing me open around its girth.

“You want me?” he asked. “If you don’t—God help me—you need to tell me to stop now because it’s your last chance before I take you and own you, Nora.”

Oh... God.

Pillow talk or real talk? I didn’t care.

I reached for him.

“I want you, Keiran.”

Drawing back, he looked down at me, a speculative light in his eyes as his teeth raked over his lower lip. “I think...maybe, right now, I want to hear you call me Mr. Brothers.”

A quiver trembled over my core, so hard I knew he had to feel it. His naughty idea twisted tension low in my belly, and my thighs squeezed him. I licked my lips, catching my taste again while I watched him, way too turned on by the twist we’d taken.

“I...I want you. Mr. Brothers,” I rasped brokenly, every part of me on fire at his deviant game. “Sir.”

I added the last on impulse, but Keiran went stone-solid, his eyes pure lust, incandescent with blue fire.

“Fuck, yes,” he growled. He surged into me. Hard. Deep. With no pause. He didn’t allow me time to adjust to the thick intrusion of his length stretching me wide as he bottomed out in me almost painfully, almost punishing. It was perfect. Perfection. Perfect perfection. The epitome of all things *perfect*. And a kink I hadn’t realized I needed.

My strangled cries colored the room while he did exactly what he’d claimed—he owned me. Inside and out.

I tried to give as good as I got, but my feet couldn't get good purchase on the edge of the bed. I settled for wrapping my legs around him and squeezing him with my thighs while I canted my hips up into him, in time with his drives.

My fingers clawed down his back, the pads digging into his powerful shoulders. Keiran reached between us, aiming for my breast, finding my nipple. Pinching. Flames lit through me, and I yelled out as a taut line of tension yanked from my chest to where he tunneled in and out of me with furious determination.

"You want to come, Little firecracker?" he asked into my ear before nipping the lobe.

"Yes," I gasped.

"Tell me."

"I want to come."

"Do you?"

"Yes," I panted, squeezing my legs harder.

"Ask nicely." His thumb rubbed circles around my clit, promising fulfillment, while he pinched my aching nipple again with the other hand.

"Ah! Please...I want to come. Please."

He leaned to my ear again, his breath hot against my skin. "I think you're forgetting something, baby girl. Who do you think you're asking?"

"Oh, God—"

"No..."

"Mr. Brothers. Please. Sir. Please—"

He squeezed that peak again, but this time, when he simultaneously grasped my clit between his fingers, sensation burned through me, catapulting me to a place I'd never been, where I flew, twisting on spirals of pleasure that stole

my breath, my vision and every thought disintegrating, leaving only sensation.

Above me, I heard him groan, felt him fill me with blasts of heat. And I careened further into the breathtaking climax.

I was boneless when I wilted onto the mattress, the muscles in my thighs aching from how I'd clasped him. We panted together, the sound harsh in the suddenly quiet room. I vaguely realized he was moving me...us. I didn't even consider telling him I was too heavy. He'd effortlessly lifted or carried me too many times for me to count lately—and after being body shamed in the past, I kind of liked the way Keiran manhandled me into whatever position he wanted, making it seem as easy as if I were featherlight. More than kind of. It turned me on.

He rolled, pulling me over him, so my ear rested over his heart. I listened to the fast rhythm start to slow then even out while he stroked my hair and kissed the top of my head...my temple...my neck...my shoulder. As laughable as it might sound after our cuddling debate earlier, I'd never been one to snuggle in with a man after sex, but nestling into Keiran now was good. It felt right and comfortable.

I wiggled closer and felt his hard length against my thigh—harder than I thought it should be right then. He chuckled when I moved again and he guessed what I was doing. How was he so hard? Still? Or again?

“I want you,” he rumbled.

“You... Again?”

“Again. Still. Always. I wanted you before, but now, I'm finding I might just be obsessed. You're addicting.”

“Keiran...” It was all I could say. No coherent reply formed in my mind.

I gazed up at him, concerned when my heart squeezed at how beautiful he was after sex. How much I...*felt* for him.

I wasn't even sure how to process what he'd just said. Part of me believed this...*whatever it was* between us...was just for this weekend. Not just

playacting, but a fling brought about by opportunity. But he made it sound as if he wanted a lot more. This seemed to be about much more than convincing two company owners he was a family man and the perfect stable guy to build all our futures—for BCM and their businesses.

And if he asked me for more, what would I say?

Yes.

Of course, I'd say yes.

I'd never had better sex than with him. And I wanted Keiran again, too. Right now. Who knew, though? Maybe, we'd burn out by the time we went home.

“You're thinking awfully hard, Ms. Brooks.”

My lips twitched. “What my brain does on my own time is my business, Sir.”

Those blue eyes, which had started to go back to normal, immediately darkened again. “You're on my time, right now. And you're about to be on my dick again, too.”

“Oh, really?” Why was bantering with him so fun? The more I was with him, the more he seemed...less of an asshole and more of a challenge to take on—a *good* challenge.

“Really. Are you testing me, Ms. Brooks?”

Maybe.

I barely held back a grin.

“No. Of course not, Sir. I get the feeling you'd turn me over your knee and spank me if given the chance. Am I wrong?”

He *had* threatened that a time or two.

And I was...interested.

Which, again, was weird. That had never been something I'd consider.

He didn't answer, but that damn naughty smirk and the flex of his hand on my hip gave me all the answer I needed. In one swift motion he had me straddling him, positioned over his erection, that long, thick length poised to thrust into me again.

His stormy blue eyes held mine.

"Ride me," he demanded. "Take me and show me what a good assistant you can be."

"You're insufferable," I huffed in hard-won, faux-exasperation because really, I was growing breathless at his naughty words and the feel of his tip kissing my opening. His grip loosened, and I sank down him, groaning.

"You're such a asshole."

"I'm the boss of your hole."

I snorted. Right there in the middle of sex. Astride him, I started laughing so hard I tipped forward and crashed my forehead into his chest.

"You did not just say that! Keiran, you're terrible!" I managed between gasps of laughter.

"It's true, Ms. Brooks," he asserted, his grip urging me upright to bounce on him. "Now, get to riding or we'll be talking about that spanking again."

And damn, if I didn't want both.

Eighteen

Keiran

“You staring at me.”

I didn't open my eyes as I spoke, though the sun burned through the thin curtains and indicated it was time to rise and shine. I could lie here forever with Nora beside me.

“I'm considering if I could smother you with a pillow and get out of the country before anyone finds out.”

“Canada's closer.” I tugged her closer to me, still not opening my eyes. I pressed a kiss to the top of her head while she kissed my pec and played with my sparse chest hair. “But both Canada and Mexico are extradition countries, so you'd be screwed with either of them.”

“Only if they found me.” She yawned, telling me she hadn't been awake for long. Oh course, I had kept her awake far into the wee hours.

I opened one eye to find her emerald gaze peering at me. “Are you a criminal mastermind, Ms. Brooks?”

“Clearly not or I would have figured this out already.”

“The fact your considering how to off me really negates everything I thought I'd leaned about sex over the years.”

She giggled, her body vibrating against mine as she sprawled over me.

“Don’t even try to convince me it was all book learning. I know you weren’t a virgin—and no, I’m not going to ask about your past partners. But you told me to ask about the books later.”

I groaned. I thought maybe she would have forgotten that. If we hadn’t been in the throes of the moment, my mind more focused on her pleasure than anything else, I never would have revealed that. “Romance novels—from my grandma’s collection. Those old books from the seventies were no joke.”

She chortled, sitting up and leaving me bereft of her heat and weight on me. “What were you doing reading your grandma’s romance novels? How old were you?”

“Twelve...thirteen. Something like that. I was grounded and alone in the house, and the one I looked at sounded intriguing. I don’t even remember what it was called anymore, but there was this girl—”

“Back then, there was always a girl.”

I was more distracted by Nora’s fingers exploring my abs than I was by her interruption. I swallowed already feeling my body responding to her—which really wouldn’t take much instigation, to be honest.

“Right... So she was kidnapped by a pirate. It was not *The Princess Bride*, I can tell you that.”

“Kidnapped by pirates also happened a lot.” She traced my navel, not looking at me. The impish curve to one side of her lips told me she knew exactly what she was doing, however. And I guessed her next intention.

“I know.”

“So you read a lot of those books?”

I caught her hand as she was about to grasp my erection. “Baby, it was a long, boring summer. My grandparents were in Europe, my brother was off at some country club of a camp, and I was alone in the house with a staff that didn’t care what I did as long as I wasn’t a nuisance.”

“You wouldn’t know anything about being a nuisance.”

“Hmph. Right. But you tell me... What boy that age, in the midst of puberty and growing sexual curiosity, wouldn’t be diving deep into the explicit depictions in those novels?”

She snorted. “A bad boy like you.”

With a chuckle, I turned her under me. “Speaking of bad... You are such a bad girl. I think maybe you need some punishment.”

She fluttered her eyelashes at me just before I kissed her. “Oh no, it’s the Dread Pirate Keiran.”

“Yo ho ho, I’m going to plunder your booty.”

Her eyes widened, her lips parting, as the unintended double meaning sank in.

“Or your sweet pussy,” I offered though it got me hard—*harder*—to imagine the day when we’d explore that option.

She nodded. “I’m not really ready for more than that, yet.”

“I’m happy with any of you, Firecracker.” My hand circled her neck, my thumb tilting her mouth up to mine. Holding her still, I proceeded to plunder all the treasure that was mine to take.

* * *

I couldn’t keep my smile off my face. Last night and this morning had exceeded any fantasy I’d ever had about Nora—and I’d had been plenty since I’d started interacting with her, long before she’d become my official assistant. I’d been harboring this fascination/obsession for her since the first message I’d gotten from her. Since I’d demanded her picture from HR.

Then jacked off frequently to her damn company ID picture and the few I’m managed to get off her social media account.

I never claimed to be a good man. But fuck if I didn’t plan to be exactly the man Nora needed for the next fifty or so years. Last night had cemented that.

My eyes tracked her now while she filled her breakfast plate from the buffet Remy had set up for all of us. While Nora moved along the side table, Peter interrupted my sightline from where he sat at the dining room table across from me. If not for Nora walking behind him, I wouldn't have even noticed he and Byron were in the dining room. That was how obsessed I was with her.

And Peter... He glared at me with murder in his stare. Murder I worried about more than I did Nora's teasing earlier.

I couldn't help the triumph in my smile when I glanced at him, though. He'd probably heard us last night. Nora and I had been a little loud—especially her. It seemed that, maybe, her ex had gotten an earful. Under most circumstances, that would have made me furious. I didn't want anyone but me enjoying Nora's passionate responses. With him? The fucker could eat his heart out. I had the priceless treasure he'd thrown away, and I was never giving her up.

"You're not going to get breakfast?" she asked me when she came over. I stood and held out her chair for her.

"Just waiting for you, Firecracker." I winked, playing it up because, again, fuck Peter, but also, I'd discovered I liked to make her laugh as much as I liked to annoy her. "I need some protein."

She pressed her lips together, her eyes sparkling. "Mmm, maybe, get some carbs for fast energy. And definitely some of that pineapple."

"Oh my God," Byron snorted to himself, barely smothering his delighted laugh, before quickly lifting his cup of coffee. Peter threw down his napkin and shot to his feet, almost knocking over his chair as he stormed from the room.

I couldn't help my own chuckled.

"What?" Nora asked in feigned innocence.

I pinched my fingers together. "You're just a smidge evil, darling."

I kissed the top of her head as I got up to grab my food.

She shrugged. “A woman scorned...” she murmured. “Plus, I wasn’t joking about the fruit.”

Shaking my head, I headed over to the buffet, making sure to take extra of the pineapple without making it embarrassingly obvious what I wanted to do this afternoon.

“Have you seen Tom or Garen?” I asked Byron when I returned to sit beside Nora. Reaching over, I curled my fingers around her thigh while I ate.

“No, they were both up fairly late last night. Tom’s probably doing some work from the office attached to his bedroom—which I only know about because Remy complains about it a lot. And I wouldn’t doubt Garen is sitting in bed working, too. They both think that’s fine as long as they don’t have to get dressed and be social yet. My girlfriend would kill me.”

“Were they doing business last night?” I asked, concerned they might have been discussing the deal, and wondering if I should have stayed downstairs with them last night.

“Only if the business was nearly an entire bottle of eighteen-year-old whiskey,” Remy said, breezing into the dining room. She glanced at Byron. “Where’s your cohort?”

“Pouting. Apparently, he thinks Nora should have become a nun after he got cold feet. He’s acting like a teenage girl who can’t get the latest fad everyone else is wearing.” He looked at my girl. “No offense, Nora. Sorry. I’m not implying that everyone’s getting...” His face flushed. “I’ll shut up now.”

I glanced over to see Nora blushing, too, but she took what could have been an embarrassing situation in stride. “Only Keiran, actually. No hordes of men chasing me.”

“I doubt that,” Remy said. “You’re beautiful. But good for you being choosy. I’ll have Tom talk to Peter—”

“No, please, don’t,” Nora exclaimed. “It’s uncomfortable enough to be here with my fiancé while my ex is here, too. We’ll just make the best of it. We’re all grown ups, right? Mostly. I’m with Keiran, and what happened with Peter

is in the past.”

Remy slowly stirred the coffee she'd just prepared. She paid more attention to studying Nora than to her beverage, however. “Okay, if you're sure.”

“I am.”

I squeezed Nora's thigh. “I'll be with Nora most of the time, too. Walk after breakfast, baby? If Tom and Garen aren't down yet.” I looked over at Remy. “Or you don't have something planned for all of us?”

“No, you two go have fun. I doubt they'll be around until midafternoon. They love their whiskey when they get this time away from the city a couple times a year, but neither of them do very well the next morning.” She made a face and wagged a finger at Byron. “Don't you dare tell that I said that.”

He made a motion to zip his lips. “Never.”

Nineteen

Keiran

“How are you this morning? Really?” We’d been walking along the long, private beach in silence for long minutes. The quiet made me itchy, especially after last night. Though it was uncharacteristic of me to worry, I was concerned about how she was taking the shift in our relationship.

She smiled up at me, lightly swinging our clasped hands while the waves licked at our ankles. “I’m good. Still thinking about, um, consequences, but...I’m good.”

“Hey...” I stopped and pulled her to face me, keeping my arms loosely around her waist. “No consequences. Nothing bad is going to come of us being together.”

Her lips rolled together, and she looked as if she didn’t believe me. After a moment, she sighed and forced a faint smile. “Okay.”

“Baby—”

“I believe you,” she interrupted.

“No. Actually, you don’t if you’re worrying about it.”

Her eyes narrowed, fire erupting in their depths, and for the first time, I didn’t like it.

“Are you *really* going to tell me what I’m thinking and how I feel, now?” she

demanded.

Ready to backpedal, I shook my head. I wasn't easily cowed, but the last thing I wanted was to drive her away when I finally had her. By reflex, my grasp on her tightened.

Her finger poked my chest. "We didn't use a condom. We never talked about that...or our status—I'm clean by the way. But I'm not on birth control."

"I've also got a clean bill of health." Trying to relax the unfamiliar panic that had my pulse racing, I reached up and brushed my thumb along her cheek, my fingers feathering along her throat. "I'm sorry that worried you. I know evidence doesn't show it, but I've never had sex without a condom, and I haven't been with anyone since..." My brow furrowed. I couldn't remember. "In long enough that I can't even remember exactly when."

"A clean bill of health doesn't help with the other *consequence*." She pulled away, rubbing her forehead. "I mean...you had me so far gone I didn't even think of it. All those times. I... We..."

I pulled her back against me, looping my arms loosely around her waist once more. "Baby..."

"This is supposed to be a charade. I'm supposed to be your pretend fiancée and... This is so much more. A lot more than make believe."

I thought we were past this, that we'd moved to the same page. It was time to get Nora in step with me.

Circling her neck with my hand, I brought her face up to look at me. "This is *exactly* what it's supposed to be."

She shook her head. "You're my boss—"

"And you're my everything, Nora. Stop freaking out." Releasing her, I took both her hands in mine. Thoughtful, I played with the ring on her engagement finger. A picture of her round with our baby filled my mind. I didn't hate it. Not even close. I wanted that. "If you're pregnant, all the better."

"Better?" Her outraged exclamation echoed over the water as she pulled

away from me and took off, storming away from me, down the shoreline—thankfully away from the beach house, too.

I took off after her, scrambling for how to fix this. What had started out as a good day was quickly turning to shit. As much as I liked setting off sparks in my little firecracker, I didn't like this.

"I can't believe you!" she bit out when I caught up with her. "Forty-eight hours ago, I didn't even like you! And I'm not liking you very much right now, either."

I scoffed. "You like me. You more than like me."

"I don't."

"You do."

"Don't."

"Nora, baby, I know this scares you. But you're safe with me. No matter what happens." Grabbing her, I dragged her to me and buried a hand in her hair. My lips slammed over hers. Nora smacked my chest, pushed, then fisted the hand in my shirt as she rose to her toes and wrapped her other arm around me. Her moan, accompanied by her melting into me, brought the sweetest relief I'd ever felt.

"I'm sorry," I whispered against her lips when we came up for air, still clinging to each other, our faces close enough to sink into another kiss. "I want more than you do, and I'm rushing you. It's what I do. When I know what I want, I run at it full bore."

"I'm not a deal, Keiran." Her weary tone held none of the anger from before but affected me just as much. Her eyes were still closed, her face filled with pain.

"Baby, I know you're not a deal. You're not a prize to be won, as much as I might think you're a priceless gift. I know you're not for sale, and you're not something I can steal. But if you give yourself to me, all of you, I...will... treasure you for as long as I breathe. Completely. And if we have kids, I'll be grateful. If we don't, I'll still be grateful, because I'll have you."

“No one’s ever wanted me.” Her murmured words were so quiet while she looked away, I wondered if she were speaking to herself and not to me. I felt compelled to answer anyway.

“I want you. And as much as I hate to admit it, that asshole ex of yours clearly wants you, but for the life of me, I can’t figure out why he fucked things up.”

She spat a sound of disbelief. “He doesn’t.”

“Am I a man? Is he a man?”

Her eyes rolled. “Yeah.”

“Then trust me. He’s not over you. I can tell.”

“He—”

Her phone rang, interrupting us. I wanted to tell her to ignore it, but she pulled it from her back pocket. “I didn’t realize the ringer was on.”

I shrugged. Even if I wanted to throw the damn mobile device in the lake, I wouldn’t control her that way.

Taking my response as a go ahead, she lifted the cell to her ear to answer. “Hello? Yes, this is Nora Brooks.”

My arms crossed while I stared over the water, cursing whoever was on the phone. This conversation was a turning point for us, one of those ultra-important moments that could propel us forward or end us. Truly, I didn’t even care about the fucking deal anymore. I cared more about Nora and making sure she stayed in my life. If Dennison-Co and Green Possible didn’t sign with BCM, we’d manage. I’d figure out a way to grow without them. I wouldn’t live without Nora.

After moving a few feet from me, she tipped her head forward, staring blindly down at the beach while she listened. Apparently, it wasn’t a telemarketer or scam call. At least, I didn’t *think* Nora was gullible enough to fall for either of those.

“Yes, I’m available on Wednesday.” She nodded, even though whoever was on the line couldn’t see her. “I look forward to it. Thank you. I’ll see you then.”

My brow lifted when she slid her phone into her back pocket but didn’t look over at me.

“Nora,” I prompted. Her demeanor agitated me. Whatever that phone call was, I sensed it concerned me—us—and she didn’t want to tell me.

Faint pink seeped into her cheeks as she scrunched her face. “Um…”

“Um?” I shouldn’t push. Maybe, it wasn’t my business. Unless it was a date. Was it a date? She was *my fiancée*.

Granted…she was technically my *fake fiancée* until she realized there was nothing fake about my intentions. And she needed to understand that ASAP. Hell, hadn’t I just been making that clear to her?

“Were you making a date with some other guy?” I growled. Fuck, I hadn’t meant to ask that.

“Um…no?”

That damn little word. The question in it. I loomed closer, forcing her to take a few steps back before I caught her and pulled her flush to me again, never letting go of her upper arms. Her breaths fluttered rapidly while she stared up at me. While I breathed just as hard, my incensed look probably mirrored a fire-breathing dragon whose gold had just been stolen.

“*You’re not sure?*” The demand in my voice wouldn’t be smothered. God damn it. I finally had her, and she was—

“No,” she huffed. “I’m sure I wasn’t setting up a date. That call was for a job interview.”

“A job interview?” And now, I was yelling, and I wasn’t a yeller. Usually. God damn it! I took a calming breath that *didn’t* calm me at all. “Not fucking happening. That’s not fucking happening! You’re not leaving me.”

Did she just roll her eyes at me when she huffed again? She did. She rolled those alluring green eyes—and I couldn't help thinking how I could give her another, *better* reason to look heavenward. With her head thrown back in ecstasy.

Jesus, she made me crazy.

“I applied for the position to be a possible second job before you went and paid off all my debt like some freaking financial Santa. But with what's going on, maybe...”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“I mean no. *I mean* I want you to stay with BCM. Look...I'd hate it, but you insisted we can't work together, you could go work for Carrick—if you won't at least try to work with me. I want it on record, however, that I don't want that.”

“I can't be with you and have you pay me—”

“Whoa.” I held up a hand. “No. I don't pay you. BCM pays you. Yeah, I'm your boss, but I have absolutely nothing to do with your check. That's all payroll and HR. That said, HR will probably make us fill out some sort of bullshit paperwork about us being in a relationship, but whatever.”

“You're so nonchalant about the whole thing.”

“Trust me, I'm not. I'm not even in the same country as nonchalant. I'm more invested in this than I have been in just about anything in my entire life.”

She crossed her arms. “Speaking of bullshit...”

“It's not. You have no idea what I feel, how deep this goes, though you should have some fucking clue. *I. Want. You!* Nothing else matters.”

“No one wants me!” she yelled, looping us back to where we were before the phone call.

I grabbed her hand. “I do. And asshole Peter still has feelings for you. Your

parents, of course—”

“No.”

“What?”

“No. They don’t. I’m a part of their life that’s over. A mistake. Once I graduated college, they washed their hands of everything, including me, and retired. Moved to Florida. Their job with me was done, you know?”

“No. I...don’t know.” The words came out slowly while I tried to figure out what she meant. Done with her? How could anyone ever be done with her? Anyone who loved her, anyway? Even Peter clearly had residual feeling that he’d better fucking keep in check.

“They raised me, made sure I got educated and on my feet—”

“So did my grandparents for me and Carrick, but they’re far from done.” I shook my head, reeling from this jarring change of direction, a direction I’d never envisioned. “They’re always in the middle of whatever we do. Hell, I’m surprised they didn’t show up in the office this past week.”

Pulling her hand from mine and giving me her back as she turned, she crossed her arms over her belly and stared out over the lake. My heart broke at the pain evident in her rigid shoulders.

“Nora,” I pleaded. I wanted nothing more than to gather her to me, but she seemed as if she’d shatter at the merest touch.

“Your grandma and grandpa are great,” she whispered. “I’ve met them several times since I’ve been with BCM. My mom and dad... They...” A strangled gust of air rasped from her. “They loved me. They never neglected me or anything like that, but I was the proverbial oops baby. They didn’t *want* children. They didn’t want me. But then there I was, and they did what they could to be good parents and take care of me. But they had to put their lives on hold to do it. To do what they never wanted to do.”

“That’s bullshit!”

A gorge rolled up into my throat, choking me as I realized her mood today

didn't really have to do with our changing relationship dynamics. She was scared of accidentally getting pregnant. She was afraid I'd be forced into taking responsibility for something I might not want—for her. For our baby. God, she was so wrong.

“It's what happened.”

“No!” My hand slashed through the air as I denied anyone having an excuse to make her feel less than wanted. Grasping her shoulders, I pulled her to face me again. “No. You are so special, Nora.”

She closed her eyes, her chin dipping as she shook her head. “I heard them say it. I *heard them* talking about it. After that, I did everything I could to be perfect and to never be any trouble.”

“Fuck, baby.”

Her arms were still crossed as I pulled her into me, but her face buried into the center of my chest while she shook with me rocking her. I couldn't imagine living with such a burden as she had. “How old were you?”

“Six...seven. Somewhere in there.”

“Fuck.”

“I just learned not to bother them. And I'm not going to bother them with anything now, either.”

No, she wouldn't. Because she was mine now, and whether she liked it or not, all her problems were mine to shoulder and solve.

“I'm not them. I'm not Peter. I'm not anyone from your past. You're mine, Nora. Any children we have—and we will have kids—will be mine and loved with everything in me. I want you. I *want* you. I want *you*. So forget that interview. Forget walking away from me. It's not happening.”

“You can't—”

“Try it. Try walking away. See what happens. I'll burn the world to keep you. I might be a good man—mostly. I might be a asshole—sometimes. But if

you try to leave me, I'll be the billionaire nightmare no one saw coming.”

Twenty

Nora

“Are you okay?”

That seemed to be the question of the day.

I looked up as Remy sank onto the lounge beside me. Though he'd been loath to leave me, Keiran was off talking property and solar power with Tom, Garen and Tom's associates, and Remy and Gen had been in town, so I'd decided to curl up with my tablet to read.

“Yeah, I'm just...” I held up my device.

Sitting sideways on the chair, Remy studied me. “You looked upset down on the beach earlier. With Keiran. You looked like you were fighting.”

Well, shoot. I hadn't thought anyone was around. A shot of adrenaline flooded through me when I realized Remy and possibly Tom could be questioning the relationship Keiran and I had presented them. That could ruin everything.

My shoulder lifted, and I grimaced a smile as I scabbled for an explanation. If Remy wasn't convinced about Keiran and me, then the deal with Dennison-Co and Green Possible wouldn't go through. I knew that as clearly as I knew the sky was blue over our heads right then.

“Wedding stress,” I hedged, reaching for the common ground we'd commiserated over a couple days ago. “Keiran wants to hire someone to do

everything, but I want to have a say in everything. He and I have been having a lot of misunderstandings over it. About an organizer. About other things. Maybe, it's because we're together too much, what with working together and dating. And yet, he's upset that we spend so much time apart."

She nodded, her eyes narrowing just slightly while she considered what I told her. I prayed she wouldn't see through the lie—all the many lies.

"You're his assistant, right?"

"Yes."

"How's that?" She turned and fully reclined against the thick cushions of the lounge with her feet up. The kitten-heeled pumps she'd worn with her floaty, summer dress tumbled to the floor. She reminded me of a heroine from the silver screen's golden age. And once again, I wondered if I shouldn't be dressing up more. My only saving grace on that front was that Gen dressed just like me.

"It's good. I like my job at BCM." At least, I had until last week. Which was info I definitely wouldn't share with this woman.

Remy arranged her skirt around her and smoothed an invisible crease. While she looked at the fabric, I knew her full attention was still on me. "I couldn't work with Tom. I might kill him."

"Well..." My chuckle sounded forced, and possibly stressed, even to my ears. "It's a lot like that. Keiran's difficult. He expects the best from everyone who works with him—and I'm no exception. But I can handle it. Like I said, I love working for BCM. The thing is, Keiran just found out I've been looking for another position—you know, so we won't be in each other's pockets all the time—and he's not happy about it."

That was mostly true, anyway.

"I'd imagine he's not. I bet he trusts you, and he also likes having his fiancée around for a little...impromptu afternoon pick me up."

I snorted then pressed my fingers over my mouth and nose, rolling my lips together to hold in my uncomfortable laugh. Heat flooded my face.

“Oh, come on.” She swatted at my shoulder. “I’m not that old. I know how it is. It would be the only perk of working with Tom.”

“You’re not old at all.”

She fiddled with the neckline of her bodice. “Thank you. It’s difficult with Tom being so much older than me, you know? I try to...minimize the appearance. Make it less evident. Yeah, we’re twenty years apart, but I love him so much. Still, people judge us. I guess no relationship is without problems, though. Right?”

I frowned, setting my tablet on the table between us. Sitting up and turning sideways on the lounge, much as she’d been a few minutes ago, I faced her. “No. I think people look for problems because it makes them feel better about themselves and their choices. It’s on them, not you. Love is love. Isn’t it?”

“It is.” Reaching over, she squeezed my knee. “I like you, and I hope we get to spend time together once the boys are done with whatever they’re working on.”

I didn’t believe for a moment that Remy wasn’t fully aware of the deal in progress. My eyebrow lifted before I could stop it, and Remy laughed.

“Okay, I won’t pull the air-head blonde card on you. I know BCM wants to do the builds, and I know they want to have Tom and Garen as suppliers for all their green projects. And...” She shared a wide-eyed nod, sharing a confidence. “I know Tom and Garen see the benefit of it for all parties.”

That was a relief.

“It would be good for everyone. I heard there are other people courting them, though.” It was a push, but if she was sharing, I would take the chance.

“Mm.” The sound rang with an unhappy tone. “Yes. BCM isn’t the only entity after the business. I really...” She shook her head. “Well, you know, some of the people Tom deals with, they’re not great. But I don’t have a say in that.”

I didn’t call bullshit, despite being sure Remy played a big part in her husband’s decisions. I’d gotten the impression that if she thought buying the

moon would be a good idea, he'd find a way to make it happen, while also making it profitable.

Her fingers gave a decisive, double-tap on her thighs, and she took a breath as if closing the subject. "But everyone's out for something, aren't they?"

"Yeah." That wasn't guilt eating a hole in my gut, was it? As if I didn't feeling crappy enough for lying, Remy made me feel worse without knowing it. But it was either this or lose BCM the accounts, and from what Keiran had told me, we couldn't afford for that to happen. Livelihoods were on the line.

Reaching over I grasped her hand and squeezed. "For what it's worth, and excuse my language, just say *fuck 'em* about anyone who questions your relationship with Tom or makes you feel bad. It's not their business; it's yours. You make your decisions and you live with each choice you make, not them. No one else gets to decide what you do or how you should feel."

And maybe, I should take my own advice. Now, before I screwed up everything with Keiran. I could make my decision and choose to believe him about us. No one else mattered in the equation.

Remy's already perfect shoulders straightened as if my words bolstered her. She lifted her chin. "No, they don't. You're right. That sounds like the voice of experience."

"Maybe, a little. Keiran likes me just as I am—so don't think that's it. It hails back to since I was a kid. I spent years and years trying to meet everyone's expectations for who I should be, always trying to be perfect and popular. I hated it. It sucks, you know? And it still tries to creep in now, if I'm not careful. For a long time, being like that squashed out some of the most important parts of me—like the part of me who has the courage to even say this to you." I chuckled, shaking my head. "Strangely, it was what happened with Peter that gave me the wake-up call. There is nothing I can do to make people like me—not the real me—if I'm putting on some façade and worrying about what they think of me. That's part of why I love Keiran. He met me post-fake-Nora, and he loves me for me."

I took a breath, realizing I'd gone on a mini-rant. "Sorry. I..."

She curled her fingers around my upper arm and squeezed. “No, don’t apologize. I see why he calls you Firecracker. I like it. I like real Nora, too. Thank you. I swear I’ve been married to Tom for thirteen years and sometimes... Well, let’s just say, I wish I had your attitude.”

“Just be you. That’s who Tom loves. And anyone else—”

“Fuck ‘em?”

We laughed together, and I fell back onto the lounge properly while we both settled. From our vantage point, you couldn’t see the beach below us, just miles and miles of lake and coastline, the waves gently rolling while they glistened under the bright sun.

“It’s gorgeous here. Do you have people up often?” I asked.

“No, not really. This is usually just our retreat, our refuge away from the rat race. In fact, we’ve never had someone here for business even if a few of Tom’s senior employees are invited to visit for mini-vacations with us. But Tom really wanted to have Keiran up so they can nail down this collaboration—or not.”

I saw the gold at the end of the rainbow, even if Remy was careful not to commit to anything. Tamping down hope, I didn’t react or comment on her slip.

“Having you two, the Bensons, Peter, Byron here for the holiday is fun, though. Hopefully, you can stay for the fireworks.” She reached over again and squeezed my forearm. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’m glad, too.”

Remy could be a friend, but more so, I hoped this meant the negotiations were really a done deal and Keiran didn’t have to worry so much.

“So...” Remy dragged out the word, and the trepidation I’d just extinguished raged back to life. “Are you ready for the game tonight?”

Oh no. Something told me I *so* was *not* ready.

Twenty-One

Keiran

It's part of why I love Keiran.

Had Nora meant that when she'd been talking to Remy? While we stood around the kitchen now, I glanced over at her, speculating on her feelings. I was more interested in delving into that than I was in listening to Remy explain tonight's "game." Our hostess appeared gleeful, and I had a steely knot of tension in my gut.

When I'd come looking for Nora after finishing up with Tom and Garen for that moment, hearing that she loved me was the last thing I expected. I wanted it to be true, and I wanted to hear it spoken to me, not to someone else as part of the roles we were playing. Suddenly, it was *all* I wanted.

"So...I had my bestie back in the city put these together for us, so I haven't seen the contents." Remy held up a pair of envelopes. "We're doing a scavenger hunt!"

At my side, Nora forced a smile, but to be fair, the rest of us just stared at Remy.

"Oh come on!" Remy stomped a foot. "It'll be fun! I even have prizes."

"Honey." Tom put his arm around his wife and rubbed a hand down her arm. "Garen, Keiran and I—"

"Uh-oh," Nora whispered just before Remy erupted.

“You are *not* working! This is a *vacation!* No more work!”

“Honey...”

She crossed her arms, and Nora stepped closer to me. We were the nearest to the exit, and I thought maybe she was preparing to escape in case fireworks erupted. Smart woman.

“Do *not* ‘honey’ me. You...*promised!*”

Tom’s jaw worked, and I saw a thousand things he wanted to say cross his face. The wise man kept his mouth shut.

He sighed. “Alright. Okay. Tell us about this...game.”

She patted his arm. “It’ll be fun. We’re going to break up into two teams, and whoever gets back here by ten p.m. with the most points will win.”

“Do we pick the teams?” Gen looked less than confident in this game.

“Each couple is on one of these popsicle sticks.” Remy shook a small basket and rattled around the contents. “I’ll just give them a good shake.”

She jiggled the basket again then set it on the counter. After reaching in and stirring the contents, she pulled out the sticks, two in each hand. She set her fists on the counter to either side of the container, not telling us who was on what team.

Way to drag out the suspense, Remy.

“Each team gets one envelope, and you will all work together. One of you will need to be the photographer to document the completion of tasks, if you can’t present other proof. Everything on the list can be completed in town, or you can take the time to drive up the shore to Clear Point,” she offered, naming the nearest city.

“Honey,” Tom prompted. “If we have to be back by ten, we need to get moving.”

She made a face at him that warned him not to rush her. He held up his hands, taking a step back, but he couldn’t quite hide his grin.

“Okay...Team One. Oh. Interesting. Keiran and Nora, you’re with Byron and Peter.”

Well, fuck.

“Oh...this seems like a bad idea,” Gen whispered while Byron chuckled in disbelief.

“Garen and Gen, you’re with me and Tom.” Remy handed our sealed envelope to Nora. “I’ll leave it to you guys to decided who does what.” She flicked her gaze to Peter then to me then back to Nora. Her eyes widened comically. “Happy scavenger hunt! Good luck.”

“*May the odds ever be in our favor,*” Nora muttered under her breath.

“I’m not doing this,” Peter griped.

Tom stopped and pointed at him. “Oh, you are. If my wife says we’re doing a scavenger hunt, you’re participating.”

He didn’t wait for a reply from his employee, but I got the feeling Peter had just shoveled another foot down into his own grave. A moment later, our team stood alone in the kitchen.

“So...” Nora tapped the edge of our envelope on the countertop.

“So,” Peter echoed. It was a single word and still managed to annoy me. I hoped something in the list included dumpster diving. I’d throw him right in.

“I’m driving.” Wrenching my rental’s keys from my pocket, I grabbed Nora’s hand and stalked toward the driveway.

“Shotgun!” Byron yelled behind us.

I glared at him over my shoulder. “Nora gets shotgun. She’s not sitting in back.”

The *with him* was silent, but everyone got it.

“Fine, fine.” Byron lifted his hands, the laughter in his voice all-too-clear. He was loving every moment of this. “Can I look at the list?”

“Sure.” Nora handed it to him as we got to the SUV. I helped her inside then headed to the driver’s side while the other men climbed into the back.

“Oh...Oh my God...Oh!” Byron laughed as he read the list to himself. “You guys, we should totally do this one. We’ll win. Everything is mostly between one to five points. But the biggie is for a hundred points. We’d *totally* win.”

“What is it?” Nora twisted in her seat to look back at him while I pulled away from the house to head into town.

“Get matching team tattoos!”

“No fucking way,” I muttered at the same time Peter scoffed.

“Hell, no. I’m not getting matching tattoos with you assholes.”

“Thanks a lot, Peter.” Nora glared at him.

“I don’t mean you. I’m talking about them.”

She rolled her eyes and faced forward. “What else is on there, Byron—things you think we’ll do?”

“Form a human pyramid. Jump in a fountain. Find an acorn. There’s like sixty-five different things to pick from. Hmm... Maybe we should head to the bar first. We could knock out...it looks like...nine tasks and probably lower our inhibitions all at one place.”

I glanced at the time display on my dash. It was a few minutes to five.

“Sounds like a plan. Every one agree?”

“Sure.” Nora shrugged.

“Whatever,” came from the other guy in the backseat. How the hell had Nora ever been with him? He was such a whiny wet blanket. When I glanced over, she had her eyes closed and shook her head. Clearly, she wondered the same damn thing.

Twenty-Two

Nora

I eyed the fountain in the center of downtown Clear Point. “I’ll do it. Get your phone ready to record, Byron.”

“Nora, you’re *not* jumping in the fountain,” my *fiancé* grumbled.

I glared at Keiran. “Don’t be a downer. Yes, I am. And I’ll steal a penny while I’m in there. I’m the only one who’s not in long pants, and it’ll get us six points!” I pointed at him. “Don’t you try to stop me.”

“Fuck the points.”

“Fucking’s not on the list.”

Keiran’s jaw clenched, a small tic throbbing near his eye while his nostrils flared. “And maybe, you shouldn’t have had wine, a shot and then joined in on the team beer chug at the bar.”

I swatted at his arm. “You *needed* me. There’s no team without I.” I jabbed at my chest, almost missing as my pointer finger jabbed above my breast and careened up over my shoulder. “Besides...I’m *fine*.”

“Or drunk.” He smirked, raising an eyebrow.

“Mostly fine.” I had to admit maybe that whole thing about drinking *beer after wine and you’ll be fine* was a big ol’ lie. More tipsy than I’d ever been, I felt every ounce of my body weight while I stood there.

Whatever. We had a game to win.

“Let’s do this!” Despite Keiran’s pained look, I did not slur. He could think whatever bossy thing he wanted, but I was invested in winning this game. Throwing a fist, urging them to follow me as if I were leading a charge, I marched over to the fountain.

Close up, the sides were higher than I’d originally thought. While I figured out the best way to get in without tripping, I felt Keiran come up beside me. When I looked over, the other two guys were a distance back, Byron with his phone lifted to document my feat.

“Don’t stop me.”

Keiran rolled his eyes at my repeated warning. “I’m just here to rescue you when you inevitably fall on your ass.”

“Ooh, like a sexy lifeguard from *Baywatch*. David Hasselhoff was so hot on the old show, but I think The Rock brought it home in the movie. You could give him a run.”

“Firecracker, you are so drunk.”

“Not.”

He pursed his lips at my petulant tone. “Do you need help getting in?”

“Oh, now, you’re Team Kickass?” Team Kickass still made me giggle. Byron and I had come up with it at the bar. Neither Peter nor Keiran liked it—and I thought it was likely the only way they were alike.

“No. I’m Team Nora.”

“Well, Team Nora’s got this.” I sat on the edge, kicked off my sandals then swung my legs in. The tepid water surprised me since I’d thought it would be colder. I did a little shimmy when I stood, throwing my hands into the air. “Like a pro!”

“Did you do a lot of fountain dancing in college?” Keiran moved as close as he could from outside the fountain, holding out his hands to catch me.

“No.” Peter moved closer, arms crossed while he watched me in disbelief. “She never drank—in college or after.”

I pointed at him. “Because I was dating *you*. All you cared about was poli-sci crap and schmoozing anyone remotely in the political scene.” I made a choking sound. “So boring! And it was all wear this. Don’t wear that. Don’t eat that! You’re going to get fat, Nora. What will people think if you go to that party or hang out with those people, Nora?”

“You never complained.”

“That was old Nora. This is *new* Nora!” My voice echoed around us as I yelled my freedom to the sky. One of my hands splashed into the stream spouting from the top of the sculpture, and I remembered what I was supposed to be doing. Jumping in the fountain. With a determined nod, I hopped.

Big mistake.

My foot skidded on the slippery, change-covered bottom. My arms windmilled as I careened into the shallow water.

I’d barely landed, when strong arms wrapped around me and I came up sputtering.

“Ow,” I whined.

“Are you okay!” Keiran stood and had us on dry pavement in two big steps.

“Uh-huh...”

His hands ran over me as he checked me for injuries. His concerned gaze followed the path before his eyes widened, and he stared at my chest.

“Christ.” He yanked me to him. “What the fuck were you doing?”

“The paper said *jump* in the fountain.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

I snuggled into his warmth, not even caring I was drenching his shirt. “You

say fuck a lot.”

“What am I going to do with you?”

“Kiss me. Fuck me later.”

He shook his head, but his head lowered toward me. I forgot all about my aching body and my bruised pride as I sank into his passionate kiss, his lips and his embrace sending fire through me, making it so I wasn't cold at all. I moaned when his tongue sought out mine and his fingers fisted in my hair, the other arm an unbreakable band around me.

“I love you,” I breathed emphatically against his lips.

“Um-hmm, tell me when you're sober.”

“I—”

“Cop,” Byron muttered, dragging us from the moment.

“Fuck,” Keiran swore under his breath, hugging me closer. “Do not open your mouth and say anything. And stay where you are. I don't want any fucker, cop or not, seeing the headlights you're sporting right now.”

“Only you?”

“Damn straight.”

“I'm sure he's seen boobs before—”

“Not the point, baby.” He looked over my shoulder. “Sorry, sorry, officer. She was celebrating a little too hard tonight. Got a bit dizzy after having a beer after her wine. Fell in. I had to save her from drowning.” He looked behind us into the fountain. “In half a foot of water. It's all good now.”

The cop's lips quirked while he bit back a smile. “Shouldn't do that. The CO2 makes the alcohol absorb quicker.”

“Didn't know that,” I exclaimed.

The man looked at Keiran. “Better get her some meds and water to drink—

lots of water—or she’ll have a hell of a hangover tomorrow. And...stay out of the fountain.”

Shaking his head, he walked away, but not before calling out over his shoulder to stay out of more trouble.

“He was nice,” I sighed. Keiran growled. As soon as the officer was out of earshot, Keiran loosened his grip and let me turn toward the rest of our team, but he remained behind me, offering support and keeping his arms curled over my chest. I held my hand toward Byron.

“Mark it down: jumped in a fountain. Here’s the change I stole from the bottom of it. Oh! And I kissed a team member—and French kissed him, so that’s another twofer!”

Byron cleared his throat. “I think you had that one covered earlier. If you wanted to kiss me—”

“Then the only thing earned would be your black eye,” Keiran interrupted.

Byron held up a hand and laughed at Keiran.

“Whatever. Men...” I rolled my eyes, noticing it hurt a little and I felt a little less buzzy. “Don’t forget Keiran had to put his feet underwater to get me. How many points?”

“You are way too invested in this,” Keiran muttered, but he sounded amused, so I didn’t care that he was low-key chiding me. After all, he was the one who had to walk around in squishy sneakers.

“And I got pics of it all.” Byron pulled his pen from behind his ear, checking off items. “Three, three, one, three...um, and one more. So what’s that?”

“Eleven. And sixteen from the bar,” Peter supplied from his sulking position behind Byron. Obviously, the alcohol earlier hadn’t cheered him up at all—even with my *new* fiancé paying for everything.

Byron scanned the wrinkled paper that was getting more and more beat up as the evening progressed. “Two of those points might not count—if the other team found a bar that was more of a dive than the one we went to. We should

go to the park next. There's a bunch of opportunities for points there."

"No, we're heading to a store." Keiran's tone left no room for argument.

"Nora needs dry clothes."

"Good idea! Maybe, we can buy something blue to eat!" I exclaimed.

"Like...oh! Those shark gummies."

"Right, because you need sugar, right now."

"Oh, don't be a wet blanket bosshole!"

"And... I think there's a store over there." Byron spun away from us and caught Pete's arm. "Come on, Petie. Let's give the lovebirds a second."

Twenty-Three

Keiran

Beside me, Nora moaned as bright sunlight poured through our thin curtains. It had been a late night, and there had been even more booze when we'd all returned and rehashed the hunt around the bonfire. I was feeling the aftermath, so Nora had to be feeling destroyed as she woke.

"Need some water, Firecracker?"

"I need to die," she groaned into the pillow. "You're a bad influence."

I curled into her, spooning our bodies and breathing in the flowery scent of her soft hair. My hand glided down her side. "Mmm...survey says, this was all you."

"I hate you."

"That's not what you said yesterday."

Silence.

Crap.

Well, it was too much to hope, right? But I had hoped.

"I shouldn't have said that."

"Because you don't." I turned on my back and crossed my arms under my head, staring at the swirled plaster on ceiling. I kept my tone even, pushing

any disappointment from my voice, but I felt every ounce of it weighing me down.

“It’s so soon. Isn’t it? Too soon?” she said.

“No.”

She rolled over, and I turned my head to look into her hangover-blurry green eyes. Pained but very clear. Awake. Lucid.

She bit the corner of her bottom lip, considering me. Her brow furrowed.

“No?”

“No. I’ve known how I feel for months—”

“You just met me.”

“Technically. Yet, not.” The tension seeped from me. It wasn’t that she didn’t share my feelings. Her reluctance came from adherence to societal norms dictating how long to wait before declaring feelings. But was there actually a norm? Really?

“What do you mean?”

“Firecracker—Nora. My feelings for you run deep. I love you. But I’ll wait ‘til you catch up and get here.”

Her fingers trailed over my shoulder and down to my bicep. “I don’t think that will take long.”

Her engagement ring glinted in the sunlight while she traced the heart on my bicep. One that matched the one above her left breast. No ordinary hearts. No, they were bound by barbed wire with flames surrounding them. Even though Byron had talked us into them, I couldn’t help but consider how symbolic of our relationship the temporary tats were. What a hot mess. Our love was all bound up in problems. Lies. My not-so-secret obsession. Possibly an impermanent partnership—at least for her. Her distrust of her feelings, because of both Peter and her parents, could burn us to the ground.

Nora wanted to love, though. Not only romantically. The goodness inside her

ran deep.

I caught her fingers and brought them to my mouth, kissing the tips, then her palm while I held her gaze. “Take whatever time you need. I’ll be here.”

She chuckled, shaking her head against the pillow, then winced when the movement exacerbated her headache. “I feel like that promise mirrors our fake relationship backstory—you being into me then waiting over three months for our first date, all the while talking me into going out with you.”

“There’s a lot of truth in the story.”

“What truth?”

I paused a beat. “You can’t handle the truth.”

At least, I didn’t yell my delivery of Jack Nicholson’s famous line. With her hangover, I guessed she wouldn’t appreciate any of it.

“Did you order the Code Red?” she asked, continuing the interchange from the movie. A code red... Yeah, that was exactly what it was when I’d returned to the States with the intention to claim her—not in the off-records military punishment sort of way, but I’d been in a high-alert, determined situation. Everything about Nora crossed my radar.

Had I orchestrated everything that led us here, when Carrick really could have handled our negotiations? “You’re goddamn right I did.”

And I thought she knew it.

“Keiran...”

Gathering her to me, I cupped the back of her head, cognizant of being gentle. My lips brushed over hers.

“You can trust me.” The promise was a whisper from my heart to hers. “When you give me the gift of your heart, I’ll protect it with everything in me.”

She’d know she was wanted every day of our lives. Competitors might consider me a bad boy, but Nora, like my family, would know the truth. Once

you got past my hard outer layer—something only those I loved were allowed—I had a soft center. It would wrap around Nora and cushion her from *any* falls.

“I believe you,” she whispered.

She leaned in, and I kissed her again, taking advantage of her offer. I’d already been semi-hard, but my cock thickened between us and pushed against her thighs, searching for treasure. Nora arched into me, doing her own searching. As my hand skimmed her hip, however, my phone bleated with a text message...then two more in quick succession, each notification sounding like missiles launched into the quiet of our room.

Nora pulled back, pressing a hand to her eyes. “Oh God, make that stop.”

My lips brushed the back of her hand, then I rolled away and grabbed my cell before another text could sound.

“Christ,” I muttered, sinking into my pillows as I read the three messages from Tom. With a huffed sigh, I levered myself out of bed. “Duty calls.”

“Duty?”

“Tom.” I headed into the bathroom to grab a glass of water and some pain relievers. When I returned, I set them on the bedside table then sat on the edge of the bed. Tenderly, I brushed the hair back from Nora’s face, noting the dark circles beneath her slightly squinted eyes, her face drawn.

“Take those and drink all the water. Then get some more rest. Tom is taking Garen and me out on the boat to ‘fish’ before Remy wakes up and waylays us.”

“Fishing? This morning? Ugh.” She groaned at the thought.

Nora was never slow on the draw, so her question testified to the depth of her hangover.

“Business, baby. We’ll be gone all morning. You just relax, okay?”

She snuggled deeper into her pillow. “Okay.”

My thumb traced over her cheek, my fingers brushing over her jaw as I stood. “I’m gonna shower quick then head out.” Bending, I kissed her forehead. “Love you.”

“I know.”

I chuckled, the sound merely air stuttering from my nose. “Okay, Han Solo,” I teased. “Get some rest.”

“If you could arrange a carbonite freezing that would be great.” Still, so quick-witted, even with the hangover—fishing confusion aside.

“No deal, Firecracker. I prefer you warm and cuddly and able to tell me off when you feel like it.”

“Masochist.”

“Probably. Now, be a good girl and take your meds then get some rest.”

Grimacing, she sat up to reach for the water and pills, not even seeming to care or notice that the blankets fell and revealed her naked torso and her oh-so-tempting breasts. I groaned, sorely tempted to climb back in bed.

She smiled coyly at me. “If I’m good, will I get a treat when you get back.”

I grinned, considering everything we could get up to. “You can bet on it.”

Twenty-Four

Nora

I jerked to a stop in the dining room doorway, the strong urge to turn around gripping me. Peter sat at the table, staring out the window with his fingers curled around a cup of steaming coffee.

“We dated for six years, lived together and were engaged. I hardly think you need to be afraid to be in a room with me.” He didn’t look my way until after he’d spoken, but maybe he saw my reflection in the window and realized I lingered in the doorway.

“I’m not afraid of you, though you have kind of turned into an asshole. No offense.”

He rolled his eyes then looked down at his drink. “Yeah, well, my fiancée showed up here with another guy.”

I leaned against the wall, just inside the doorway and crossed my arms. “*Ex* fiancée. You made your feelings pretty clear on that and left me to clean up the mess—”

“Clean up the mess! You blew up my entire life.”

“No... *You* set that bomb. I just didn’t defuse it.”

“I was going to be governor someday.”

“God, help us all. Guess we dodged that bullet.” So apparently, this morning

was all about war metaphors. Fair. With the way my head throbbed, I felt as if I'd been in the center of a building when it had come down. And I was giving no fucks about my ex.

Not giving him any more of my attention, I headed for the table where a breakfast spread had been laid out again this morning. Eggs, meat, biscuits and gravy, fruit... I bypassed all of it and headed for the coffee carafe, hoping the brew was strong yet smooth. With a small smile, I snagged a lemon from a small dish near the cream and sugar then squeezed it while swiping it around the inside of my cup, letting more juice pool in the bottom of the porcelain before I poured the coffee.

Yeah, apparently, Keiran was rubbing off on me.

Taking a sip, I let my eyes drift shut while I enjoyed the dark flavor with bright citrus notes. Perfect. Keiran would never convert me from my froufrou drinks, as he called them, but I could be converted to this as a second choice.

“Are you going to ignore me?” Peter growled from behind me, still at the table.

“Is that an option? Because, if so, yes.”

“Don't be such a bitch. I can't believe you came here with Brothers and you're whoring around with your boss.”

Mouth opened, I slowly spun toward him. That...*asshole*.

“Excuse me?” I said slowly, my shocked tone edged with danger. How *dare* he?

“You heard me.”

“I am not *whoring around*. Keiran is my fiancé—”

“You certainly moved on quickly enough.”

“It's been over a year and a half.” I shook my head. “Why am I even arguing with you? You threw me away like trash. But, yes, I picked up with my life, and I moved on.”

“With your *boss*. I thought you had more scruples than that.”

I had more of a lot of things. One of those was a hell of a lot more backbone. “There’s nothing wrong with us working together. But you know what? Get over yourself. You’re the one who left—”

“Yeah!” He shot to his feet. “Because I knew you would never make a proper politician’s wife.” His hand slashed through the air as he spoke. “I *constantly* had to police what you wore, what you ate, where you went and who you associated with, just so you wouldn’t be an embarrassment.”

I had no words. I literally...had nothing to say to him.

Tears burned in my eyes, pissing me off, and I refused to let him see them. I was worth so much more than he believed. I’d realized that over the past year or so, and Keiran had put a giant exclamation point at the end, constantly making me feel like gold, not detritus under his feet.

Shaking my head, I turned back to the sideboard, grabbed a biscuit and slowly cut it then smeared marmalade jelly inside it.

“You know what?” I never looked up from my preparation. I cupped the biscuit in a napkin then picked up my mug again. “Fuck off, Peter. Maybe, you should put that same effort into your own life and leave mine alone.”

Breakfast in hand, I left the dining room and ignored him spluttering behind me. The chair scraped across the floor, the back hitting the wall as he sprang up.

“You loved me!” He stomped after me. “And now, suddenly you love him?”

Was this seriously happening?

“I didn’t love you. I never did. That’s a hard truth I’ve had to come to terms with. I loved the idea of you, the idea of us in a relationship—of having a relationship where the other person actually wanted me. And I’m sorry. But if you had actually loved me, you wouldn’t have felt compelled to fix me all the time. You certainly wouldn’t have snuck out of our life like a cowardly thief in the night and left me holding the bag. I love Keiran, and he loves me—just like a couple getting married should love each other. I didn’t lie the other

night. I've never loved anyone before him."

"That's bullshit," Peter exploded, on my heels. He yanked my arm, pulling me to a stop and sloshing scalding coffee over my hand and down my pantleg, narrowly missing my bare thigh. An involuntary cry tore from me, and I jerked out of his grip, sloshing more coffee. Transferring everything to my other hand, I shook the burning liquid off my skin then wiped my scalded skin on my shorts.

"Don't touch me! Jesus, Peter! What is wrong with you?"

"You! You're what's wrong with me. Because of what you did, I had to leave my job. And now, here you are, when I'm finally starting to make progress at Dennison-Co—"

"If things get messed up, it's gonna be on you," I gritted out and stepped farther from him. "I'm going to change. Get your shit together. Stay away from me and don't start shit with Keiran, and your precious job will be fine—and for fuck's sake, stop sulking like a toddler who threw away a toy but now wants it back because someone else has it."

"I don't want you back," he growled, but his reply was so petulant no one, least of all me, would believe him.

"Good. Maybe, start acting like it."

"I don't like it thrown in my face. You two are so—" His splayed hands shook in the air as he searched for words.

"In love?" I supplied. "Again. Get over it. I'll see you later for whatever Remy has..." I trailed off suddenly, my eyes narrowing as something he said earlier finally registered. "How did you know I work at Brothers?"

Color flooded up his neck. "You told me."

"No. I didn't."

"Because I know. I know a lot of things about you. Which is how I know you saying you were never in love before is bullshit."

And we were back to that. I almost rolled my eyes, but I knew that would set Peter farther off kilter, and God knew what he'd do then.

“And it's how I know you supposedly being in love with him is bullshit,” he continued. “What game are you playing? I know you're not with him. I know that so-called sex you wanted us to hear through the wall wasn't real—you were *never* that loud.”

“And maybe that should tell you something about my lukewarm feelings for you, don't you think? Keiran and I are together. He's my fiancé. We love each other. Deal. With. It.” I pointed at him, feeling the tightness on the back of my scalded hand. “And if you've been stalking me—”

“I haven't stalked you. I just...”

My angry breath stopped his lame excuse. “If you've been *watching me* and keeping tabs on my life, cut it out. I mean it, Peter. A restraining order won't look any better for you than you sneaking out on our wedding did. In fact, I'm sure it will look worse.”

I nodded to where my coffee had splashed onto the floor. “Maybe you should wipe that up, so Remy or one of her staff doesn't need to. I'm going upstairs to clean up.”

Twenty-Five

Nora

“I don’t know who he thinks he’s fooling,” Remy said to the deck in general where she, Gen and I were having mimosas and watching the sailboats on the lake. Peter had been nowhere to be found when I’d emerged from my room, in new clothes, to return my cup to the kitchen. Remy had snagged me there and brought me out for *drinks on the deck*.

She waved a hand. “Fishing, my ass. If that man comes back with any fish, it’ll be because they stopped at the Fresh Catch Market to pick up ‘evidence’.”

My lips pressed together while I bit back a laugh. Mimosas and Remy equaled enlightening entertainment. We’d heard all about her feelings on Tom working during their holiday vacation, even though he’d *promised* not to.

“There are three-hundred and twenty-seven other days of the year for him to *do deals!*”

Gen lifted her drink to her lips, not even bothering to hide her grin. “It’s terrifying that you have an exact number on days when he’s allowed to work.”

“It’s an agreement we came up with our first year of being married when he was working three-hundred and seventy-five days a year—and yes, I know how many days are really in a year. That’s exactly my point.” She turned her

assessing gaze on me, pivoting sideways on her lounge, her summery skirt swooshing along the cushion as she spun. “And if I were you, I’d get some sort of agreement nailed down *before* you and Keiran say I do. These businessmen are all the same.” She looked at Gen. “Am I right or am I right?”

Gen set down her mimosa and picked up the champagne bottle to add more to the drink. “You’ll recall we were late getting here on Friday because of business—and Friday night only happened because I threw a fit. So I would say you’re definitely correct.” She picked up a cheese-filled pastry, glancing my way. “Remy’s right. Lay down some ground rules—but also, be fully aware that your man will probably find ways to skirt around them. These CEO-types are all the same.”

“The big fish hunters return!” Tom’s bellow preceded him, the call seeming almost on cue.

Remy looked over at us with her brow raised as the three men piled into the room. Her arms crossed as her dubious gaze scanned Tom then Garen and landed on Keiran. “And what store did you go to in order to pick up this impressive catch?”

“Uh...” A deer in the headlights, he glanced over at Tom.

“Baby...” Tom started.

She slowly shook her head from side to side. “You promised. Now, you owe me.”

Tom’s eyes darkened, but Remy wasn’t softened by it. “And...” she went on with emphasis. “You are cleaning that ill-gotten gain. I don’t want to see so much as a gill.”

“It wasn’t ill-gotten,” he muttered.

“Uh-huh. Tell it to your other wife.”

Her chin angled up, and she looked away. Beside us, Gen was already snickering, and an amused smile curled her husband’s lips. I understood why they were laughing when Tom dove in and swept Remy up over his shoulder.

My mouth dropped open as he marched away with her.

“He works out,” Garen offered. “A lot.”

“I guess so.” I glanced over at Keiran, who seemed equally stunned. Shaking his head, he came over and pulled me off the lounge before he took my place and settled me on his lap.

“There are mimosas and pastries.” I indicated to the table a few feet away.

“We ate. Tom took us to a great bakery in town when we were there.”

“You went to Ava’s?” Gen exclaimed, swiveling a glare at Garen. She swatted at him. “Without me?”

“I didn’t have a choice, Muffin. But if you keep that up, I’ll have to pull a Tom on you.”

“I wish you would.” The end of her sentence was squealed when Garen indeed followed suit with his friend.

“They’re a crazy bunch,” Keiran murmured. He settled back in the chair, swinging up his feet and tugging me against his chest.

I snuggled in, listening to his strong heartbeat beneath my ear and absorbing his heat, despite the already warm day.

“They are. How did business go?”

He sank farther into the cushion, getting more comfortable, a rumble of pleasure beneath my cheek. “Good. I think they’re both on board. We should be able to sign initial paperwork this week, and I’ll get our designers to work on some prelim sketches.”

“Really!” I leaned up to look at him. “That’s great. I’m so glad. That’s everything you’ve been working toward.”

His arm banded around me and pulled me back to rest against him. “It’s going to mean a lot of meetings. You’ll probably end up seeing Remy and Gen a lot.”

Which meant this charade, which wasn't as much of a charade anymore, would continue after this long weekend—or week. We'd yet to discuss if we were staying the duration or going home tomorrow morning. “Okay. I like them.”

“The three of you seem to get along well. You all looked like you were conspiring over something when us guys came in.”

A chuckle burst from me. “They were warning me about men like you and their husbands.”

“What about us?” He sounded genuinely surprised and worried. “Nora—”

“That you CEO types are all work work work. And you forget you have wives. I feel bad about—”

“I would *never* forget about you.”

My words and breath were stolen by Keiran's fingers driving into my hair, a mere moment before he pulled my head toward his and slammed his lips over mine.

His mouth commanded a response to his kiss. He didn't need to demand anything. The moment he touched me, heat flooded through my system, and every part of me sent out the order to get closer. I was so connected to him that when this was over—God, I didn't want to think about it. But when this ended, I wasn't sure what I'd do.

Sure, pragmatic Nora would pick up and march forward, just like always. But softer, hidden Nora, who just wanted to be loved, she might just shrivel up and not try again. If you didn't try... Well, you didn't get hurt that way, did you?

My eyes burned, a gorge rising in my throat while I tried to push away the old fears and insecurities and just be in the moment with Keiran.

“Hey... Are you okay?” he asked against my lips, pulling back slightly.

“What?” I'd been kissing him and lost in my thoughts. Did I miss something? My breath stuttered, sounding far too close to a sob. I clamped down on it

and blinked hard to clear my eyes. Fine. I was *fine*.

“You were with me, and then you tensed up.”

I sighed, burying my face in his neck. “Sorry. I’m sorry. I got all up in my head. Thinking about the past. Thinking about the future. I’m just off today.”

“Hangover?”

“Yeah, that. And I had a... I guess, you could call it a run in. I had a run in with Peter this morning.”

Keiran straightened, carrying me upright with him. “What did that ass say to you?”

“Just bullshit. He was nasty about the past and stuff. Mostly, the main takeaway is, he doesn’t believe we’re real. He thinks we’re faking everything—even the sex he’s heard.” I shivered, thinking about the incident with my ex in the dining room this morning. My hand still hurt a little from where I’d been scalded by the coffee. I curled it under me, between our bodies, so Keiran wouldn’t see it. If he was upset about Peter’s words, he’d go ballistic over me being physically hurt—I knew that for sure, even without experiencing his protective, territorial anger.

His palm stroked over my back. Up. Down. Up. Down... “He’s in the past. He’s nothing to you—to us. Whatever he says, it doesn’t matter, you hear me? You’re mine, and if he can’t deal with it, well, he can go fuck himself.”

“I kind of told him that. Why is he even here at the vacation house if Tom isn’t including him in negotiations. Him or Byron, I guess?”

“Oh, Byron was with us on the boat—which probably pissed the fuck out of Petie. From what I understand, they’re both up for a promotion, and Byron is kicking Pete’s ass in the eyes of the boss. Pete was probably butt hurt about it this morning. Frankly, I’d love to bring on Byron as a project manager over at BCM. He’d be a hell of an asset. I think Tom sees that.”

“I’m really worried,” I whispered. “If he finds out about us... If he tells...”

Keiran cupped my face with both his hands. His lips brushed over mine to

reassure me. “There’s nothing to tell. There’s nothing for him to find out. We’re together.”

But there was, and I couldn’t help but worry Keiran was just caught up in the lie, and he didn’t remember this was supposed to be for the weekend. That we’d get home and all the promises would be just words.

Twenty-Six

Nora

Worries about Peter, about our cover being blown, about Keiran not realizing the dangerous line we walked—a danger to *him* and his company—cast a shadow over me for a good part of the day. Doing my best to act fine, I played my part as loving fiancée while we spent time with the other couples that afternoon.

Then all worries had evaporated, for the moment, while we played a lively match of Peanuts. Remy’s version of the card game basically turned out to be full-contact double solitaire as everyone dove to discard their cards onto available aces called castles.

“I never would have imagined any of us diving across the table to play a game,” I laughed as Keiran and I headed up to our room to change for dinner. We were all going out to some fancy restaurant in town. The translation being, shorts and tees weren’t acceptable. I was glad I brought a nice dress *just in case*.

“I don’t know why. All of us like to win. It is what we live for—”

“That and shoving your sworn not-so-secret enemy out of the way.” At one point, Pete had gone flying sideways as Keiran went in for a score.

He shrugged, not quite able to suppress his smirk. “Just an accidental casualty. That’s all.”

“And that’s your story, and you’re sticking to it.”

“Yes. Though after what you told me earlier, he deserved far more than a friendly tackle.”

Keiran had been livid after he cajoled me into detailing the confrontation—livid and ready to hunt down Peter and make him apologize. I suspected his means would have fallen under “make him sorry by whatever means was necessary.” I’d only stopped him when I’d stepped in front of him, while he was on the way to our bedroom door, and stripped off my shirt. I was reaching for the button on my shorts when he swept me onto his wide shoulder and carried me to the bed.

Apparently, the over-the-shoulder move was a trait shared by all three CEOs in the house. No complaints from me.

Now, Keiran pulled me into his arms as soon as we entered our room to get ready. “I want you again. Still.”

I palmed his cheek, the fine late-afternoon stubble tickling my hand. “Why can I never get enough of you?”

“I can never get enough of you, either. It’s a mystery I’m happy to explore for as long as I can.”

“Keiran, this is just—”

His hand curled around my neck, and he angled my face up to him and interrupted me. “Don’t. I know what you’re going to say, so don’t. You’re wrong. It started that way, but... I’m finding I want you forever, and I’m willing to go the distance for it.”

“But...”

Before I could ask what he meant by that, his lips covered mine, and I was lost in a haze of Keiran and tingles racing down my spine. My fingers knotted in the soft cotton of his shirt before I pressed closer, going to my toes and wrapping my arms around his neck. My back hit the wall, and he tore at my clothes, shucking off my shorts then ripping open his pants.

We both groaned low, in pure satisfaction, as he sank into me. His thick cock drove straight to my core, pinning me to the wall. A mix of pleasure and pain

exploded along my limbs when he bottomed out. Bliss won out.

“Please...” I begged. My walls squeezed him, begging for more.

“You’re mine, Firecracker. Tell me you’re mine.”

“I’m yours.”

“Fuck, yes, you are.” His hips punctuated each word with a hard surge into me.

“That means you’re mine, too.”

“Yes,” he breathed. “Yes... Tell me you love me.”

I pulled him down for a kiss, breathing him in, giving myself to him, crying out into his mouth when he pushed me over the edge then followed right after me.

Eyes closed, I breathed heavily with him, still wrapped around him while we came back to earth. “Think they’ll notice if we don’t come down for dinner?”

Keiran’s chuckle vibrated deep in his chest, the sensation abrading my rock-hard nipples, even through my shirt. I moaned arching in closer.

“Baby,” he chided. “Don’t do that, or we’ll be deep in the throes when someone comes looking for us.”

“Give me a better downside.”

“I want to show you off, all flushed and well-loved.”

The things he said...

“Okay. I’ll go clean up and put on my dress. What are you wearing?”

“Chinos and a sports jacket. The place is fancy in that you don’t want to wear shorts or jeans but not five-star or anything. Low-key country club vibe.”

“Whatever that means. I figure my dress will be fine then.”

“You’ll be perfect in anything. I dare anyone to say otherwise.”

I cupped his cheek again while I untangled my legs from around him and got my feet on the floor. “You say the sweetest things. Keiran?”

“Yeah?”

“I do, by the way.” I met his eyes, mustering all my bravery. He deserved it. “It wasn’t just drunk me spouting off last night. I do love you.”

“Baby...” he breathed and pulled me back to him, his mouth covering mine, fierce and possessive.

It was long minutes later when necessity finally forced us apart. Leaving him to get his things together, I headed into the bathroom to freshen up. When I was finished, we traded places. I pulled my summery dress from the closet. It was fitted on top with an A-line skirt. The hem was embroidered with flowers some of which trailed higher along the white fabric. It had thin tank straps but had a matching bolero jacket with three-quarter sleeves that made it perfect for all occasions.

“I’m going to head down,” I called after I’d slipped into my outfit and checked my hair. I looked flushed and...yeah, well-loved. The ring on my finger glinted as I reached up to touch my cheek then trace my kiss-swollen mouth. A cat-with-the-cream grin curled my lips, and I allowed the warm, tingly feelings to wrap around me. Keiran wanted me. He really wanted me. I’d never experienced such wholeness.

Keiran said something I thought was agreement while I walked out to the hallway. I stopped short as I closed the door. Peter leered at me, glittering animosity in his eyes while his lips twisted in disgust.

“Can’t you stay off him for fifteen minutes. The two of you are disgusting.”

I forced myself to hold my ground while I glared at him. “The two of us love each other. And what are you doing? Hanging around outside our room, listening? That’s sick, Peter. You brought this onto yourself. And I’m happy with him. Move on!”

“Move on?” he exclaimed, grabbing me when I started to walk past him, his grip hard enough I knew I’d bruise. My back slammed into the wall, so

entirely different from the last time it had been against a flat surface. He loomed over me, sending fear prickling through my veins and scattering all the muzzy feelings I'd experienced just moments ago. The euphoria I felt with Keiran evaporated like a vampire on the run, sucking away all my lifeblood along with it.

Peter's fists slammed into the plaster to either side of my head. "Move on? *Move on?* You're still fucking up my life."

I shrank back, my eyes darting around and searching for escape. "Let me by. Get away from me and let me past or you're going to find out what it really means to have your life fucked with."

"And what are you going to do?" He grabbed my chin in his bruising grip. "Scream? You're real good at screaming, aren't you? Maybe, if you'd yelled my name like that, I wouldn't have—"

Whatever he would have said was lost in a bellow of rage. In a streak of fury, Keiran plowed into Peter's side driving him sideways. Startled, Peter scrabbled for purchase on anything. He clutched at my arms and almost pulled me with him. It was only due to another set of hands that I didn't tumble onto the hallway carpet.

"What happened?" Byron gasped after making sure I was upright. "I heard a yell and..."

My gaze stayed glued to the other two men. "Peter cornered me and—well, worse than that. He attacked me, and Keiran must have come out of our room and seen him threatening me. Saw his hand on me."

"Fuck," Byron muttered.

"You fucking touched her. Threatened her? You piece of shit!" Keiran bellowed while he hauled Peter to his feet. His hand fisted in Peter's shirt as his fist drew back. Tom and Garen rushed up the stairs, drawn by the chaos.

"Keiran, no! Don't!" I cried, seeing everything he'd worked for crumbling at our feet.

The rage on his face terrified me when he whipped his attention to me, still

poised to destroy my ex. His sharp nod was the only indication he maintained any control. With a shove from where he still held Peter by the collar of his button down, he sent the man reeling.

“You’re not even together!” Peter shouted from where he sprawled on the floor where he’d landed. “You’re not even dating! I know it. You’re just lying. I’ve kept tabs on you.” He pointed at me, and my head swam as the blood drained from me.

Keiran pulled me against his side. “You’re wrong. You’re completely wrong. And we’re leaving. Deal’s off. If that’s the kind of man we’ll have to deal with...” He shook his head. “No deal.”

“Now, Brothers,” Tom started, but Keiran was already pushing me back into our room and shutting the door on everyone.

“Pack,” he ordered, in full boss mode. “We’re getting the fuck out of here.”

Twenty-Seven

Nora

“Are you alright?” We’d been driving for a half hour, and these were the first words Keiran had spoken to me since we got into the car. After his order, we’d packed our bags then he’d thanked Tom for his hospitality, but he told the man he was sorry the deal wouldn’t work. There’d been no room for argument. Peter’s assault on me changed everything.

We’d left behind a furious Tom and Garen, a distraught Remy, and confused Gen, who apparently hadn’t been apprised of the situation. Byron seemed the least affected, watching us leave with a thoughtful expression and his arms crossed over his chest. For my part, I’d felt as if I were running away with my tail between my legs. Only I’d done nothing wrong.

Except lie to everyone.

And Peter knew it. He’d announced it to everyone. Right now, he was probably telling everyone all about what a liar I was. And the deal... All Keiran’s work... It had all blow up around us and put BCM in jeopardy. My heart ached while I considered the consequences, the number of people who might lose their jobs. Because of me, because I’d been so desperate to be loved, that once upon a time, I’d put all my chips on the wrong man. Now, my old mistake would ruin another man, his brother, a company... It had cost me Keiran. I was sure I’d lost him.

I’d wanted him too much. I loved him, but I should have walked away the moment I’d seen Peter was part of the equation. I hadn’t. I couldn’t. And

now, we'd all going to pay. So many people would be caught up in the ripples radiating from the meteor that had hit my life years ago. That meteor hadn't been my fault, but my actions before and after had been.

So... No. I wasn't okay.

"Yeah. Fine." Another lie. I stared out the window as the shadowy landscape passed. I hadn't realized it had gotten this late.

Closing my eyes, I leaned my head against the side window, all too aware of Keiran's silence and distance while he stayed well on his side of the car, not touching me after he'd touched me constantly all weekend. My arms ached from where Peter had grabbed me then jerked me around. Hell, my whole body hurt from how hard he'd slammed me against the wall. It was nothing compared to the emotional pain clamping down on my chest. I could barely breathe through the anguish of knowing this was over.

You knew it would never last. You knew it.

But I'd still thought *maybe*. With everything Keiran had said about forever, I had started to believe him. Now, he'd shut down and shut me out.

As we sped along the dark highway, I heard him fumble with his phone.

"Yeah, it's me," he said when someone answered. "I'm on my way back into town... Yeah, I know. But it all went to hell. I'll be back in the city in about an hour. I'll come over, then we can— Okay. Yeah. Yeah, you're right. I'll see you in a little bit."

His real girlfriend?

No. I shut that down quick. Tried to anyway. He wouldn't do that. He wouldn't cheat with me.

A damn, miserable little voice inside me kept whispering *maybe*, because hadn't I always been treated that way? Only because I allowed it. That realization didn't make me feel any better, and I drew my shell of self-preservation tighter around me. Nothing made sense anymore.

Keiran's phone rattled into the cup holder then silence descended into the

cabin of the SUV again, but I didn't ask him the question eating at me like acid. We should talk, but all my words were strangled beneath the rock in my throat. I couldn't force them out.

I wanted to know who he was going to see. If I should show up to the office tomorrow. If I even had a job. If I had a boyfriend, let alone a fiancé.

"I'm sorry the deal blew up," I finally managed.

"It's fine."

He sounded distracted, and he didn't sound *fine*. His fingers tapped on the wheel as he stared straight ahead.

"But—"

"Nora, honey, it's okay. We took our shot, and it didn't work out. And you go..." He cut off on a growl, not voicing the words. "Now, I just have to figure out clean up."

"Oh." The sound was less than a full breath, and he probably hadn't heard me. We'd taken our shot, and it didn't work out? I rolled my lips together ordering myself not to cry. My eyes burned, and my nose started to tingle. My already tight throat clenched as the weight of everything slammed a wrecking ball through my heart.

With iron will, I held myself together through the long trip, made longer because we drove the whole way rather than taking the helicopter for one leg. I refused to be yet another mess to clean up. I'd tie up my feelings tight inside, just as I had with my parents, with Peter, with every friend who'd ever hurt me. Keiran would join that collection. Only he was too big. He'd edge out everyone else, eclipsing everything.

"I'll get your bag," he said when he finally parked at the curb in front of my place. I'd been staring at my knees so hard, I hadn't even realized we were here.

I nodded and watched him jump out. This was it. With a resigned grimace, I shook my head then pulled off the ring that had graced my finger for half a week. It dropped into the cup holder, tinkling against the screen of his phone.

It was the saddest, most final sound I'd ever heard.

With another shake of my head, I climbed out of the SUV and met him on the sidewalk.

"I...I guess I'll see you," I said, grasping the handle of my suitcase and trying hard to make my voice sound normal.

"Are you sure you're okay? I can—"

"Yeah. Just...exhausted."

With everything. With life.

"Besides, you have to go. I'll just head up." I didn't look over at him. I certainly didn't wait for a kiss goodbye. God! I'd break in half if he even touched me.

I heard him sigh. Swear under his breath. Then the door slammed as I entered the building. Lost in the misery rising up at me like an unavoidable tidal wave, I didn't even glance over at the doorman when he greeted me.

I was almost to the elevator, my feet as heavy as if I wore cement shoes, when the building's outer doors whooshed open.

"Sir!" the doorman yelled at whoever ran in.

"Nora!" Keiran yelled, ignoring him. He grabbed my arm, swinging me around, but the pain barely registered. "Nora, what the fuck?"

What the fuck?

What the fuck did he mean *what the fuck?*

I stared at him, confused. In the lobby's bright lights, there was no way he couldn't see how this destroyed me, see the tears, see all the feelings I'd tried to hid from him while I told him I was *fine, just fine*.

"What the fuck is this?" Invading my space, he held the solitaire in my face, the large diamond glinting sadistically under the lobby's fluorescents.

“I had to give it back.” I took a step away—as far as I could with him holding my arm anyway. “It was done—”

“Haven’t you listened to anything I’ve said the past few days?” He snatched up my hand and shoved the ring back into place, in the least tender yet desperately romantic manner ever. “There’s *nothing* temporary or *over* about us. Do you hear me? I don’t know what’s going through your head, but you can get rid of it. You and me? We’re happening, and I don’t give a shit about Peter or the deal or even any God damn bullshit objections you might throw up between us.”

“Keiran, I—”

“No! I love you, and you fucking love me.” He dragged me against his chest and kissed me hard, all that same desperation in the demand of his lips. “You’re not leaving me.”

Twenty-Eight

Keiran

“I need to call Carrick. Tell him I’m not coming over.” I pulled out my phone. “Shit. I need to move the SUV, too. Wait. No. Don’t wait. Come with me.”

“Where?”

“We’re going to my place. Soon to be our place.”

“You’re moving so fast,” Nora half-heartedly protested while I practically abducted her, ushered her into the passenger seat and then tossed her bag in the back.

“It’s not too fast. I told you that I know what I want and I go for it.”

“And you want me?”

“With everything in me. Please, God, tell me you want me, too. I’m not so sure I’m above actual kidnapping—I’m not. I would.”

Christ, I shouldn’t be telling her that. Tonight had fucked me up. Peter attacking her. The deal crashing and burning. Nora trying to leave me. I was a mess.

She breathed a single laugh full of shocked disbelief. “I love you. And I want you, too. Even back when you were being a great big bosshole, I couldn’t help wanting you.”

I grabbed her hand and brought it up to my lips, kissing the back. “I still need to call Carrick. We can deal with business shit in the morning.”

“Oh, so you weren’t going to see your girl?”

“My *girl* is right beside me. Besides...listen to what I’m saying. Since the first time I saw your picture, that was it. No other women—not for a date or hook up or just hanging out. It’s only been you. It’s only been me planning how to get you.”

When she didn’t respond, I glanced over and found her thoughtful.

“So, it was convenient that you needed a fiancée?”

“Well...” I prayed she would be furious at me, even though I deserved it. “Convenient for me, but probably unnecessary to win over Dennison and Benson.”

“Keiran! I can’t believe you. I should be so mad at you. We all should be.”

“You should be. But you’re not?”

“Grudgingly...no. You’re just lucky you got me to love you before I found out the truth.”

“God, I love you. I do. And that’s the absolute truth. I promise you. I’m still in deep shit if they find out I was lying to them...at first.”

“At first?”

“Yeah. *At first*. At first, you didn’t realize you were already mine. I just needed to get you to see it, too.”

“I get it. I see it.”

“Then I win. We win. Screw the deal. Fuck, it was over as soon as Dennison’s *associate* crossed the line. If there’s ever a choice between you and anything else, it’s *you* I choose. You’re what’s most important. Not making another billion.”

“A billion?” she squeaked.

“At least.” And Carrick would probably be pissed that I’d fucked it up. He didn’t comprehend how love ranked higher than raking in more cash.

“Keiran...”

“You’re all that matters, Nora. Only you.”

We pulled into the long driveway leading up to my home, and Nora stared in awe at the three-story brick and glass home with tiered landscaping before us. When I’d worked with the designers then had our company build my place, I’d been specific: huge windows, textured brick, lots of space. I wanted the house to make a statement, that statement being *home*, and I wanted it to have plenty of room for my eventual family. Everyone had delivered.

And I hoped that soon, Nora and I could make it a haven for ourselves and our children.

“Like it?” I could tell she did.

“You live here?”

I nodded. “Designed and built it.” Essentially, anyway. “It certainly made my apartments in Europe fade by comparison.”

“I’d think so. Wow, Keiran, this place is...amazing. It’s like something you’d see in a magazine or in a movie.”

I hopped out of the SUV and circled around to her side. I held out my hand to help her out. “It has been featured in a couple trade journals and at least two magazines, actually. Come on. I’ll show you around.”

“Should we get the bags?”

“I’ll have Gray bring them up.”

“Gray?”

I guided her up the six stone steps to the wide porch leading to the front door. “He’s sort of... Well, he’d be pretty pissy if I called him a butler. He’s my house manager. He keeps things running and oversees the rest of the staff—a couple of whom live-in. Fair warning.”

She took a deep breath as if drawing in all the information then gave a slow single nod. Her breath expelled. “Okay.”

My house manager swung open the door for us as we approached, alerted to my arrival by a sensor at the gate.

“Good evening, Mr. Keiran,” he said, with a nod. Gray looked as pressed and distinguished, as usual. I knew he was in his mid-forties, and though I wasn’t expected home, he wore his typical dress pants, vest and white button-down, finished with shiny Oxford’s.

“Gray. This is my fiancée, Nora.”

His expression didn’t so much as flicker at the sudden news. He nodded.

“Ms. Nora. Welcome.”

“I’m going to show her around.” I held out my keys. “Will you have our bags brought up to my room and take the SUV to the garage?”

“Will do. Anything else? Should I have a meal set out?”

“No. We’ll find something on our own. Are you the only one here?”

“Yes. Everyone’s gone home. Margaret and Phillip are in their quarters.”

“Margaret’s the head housekeeper, and Phillip is my chef,” I told Nora. I looked back to Gray. “After the bags are in, feel free to lock up and retire for the night. We’ll be fine.”

He nodded. “Very good, sir.”

Gray disappeared outside, and I led Nora deeper into the house.

“He looks like James Bond,” she murmured. “Sounds like it, too.”

“Hey, now. No looking at other guys.”

She turned her face up to mine, inviting a kiss. “You know who I’m with, and it’s not the British butler.”

“House manager. And thank God for that. How much of the house do you

want to see before I take you to bed?”

“Enough that Gray has time to retire for the night.”

“Okay, well, when we were driving up, you saw all three levels of the house, but we actually entered on the main floor which is in the middle. It’s a sort of strange architecture, by usual standards. The house is built into the side of the hill on one side, with about a quarter of the lower part abutted to the slope. So the floor below us is technically the first floor with a basement below it. But like I said, I consider this to be the main floor.”

Holding Nora’s hand, I showed her the kitchen and dining room then my office and the library. As we exited the library, I saw Gray coming down the wide stairs from the next level.

“Good night, sir, ma’am,” he said then disappeared through the door that led to the live-in staff quarters on the far side of the garages, another three story structure with six apartments. Only three of the units were occupied, at the moment, though.

“Let me show you the bedroom, Firecracker.”

“There’s just one?”

“For you?” I swung her over my shoulder as she shrieked with laughter.

“Yes, just one. Ours.”

I took the steps two at a time while she curled her fingers into my belt loops. She let go when I kicked shut the door. Moments later, I dumped her onto the thick blankets on my bed. I crawled over her, caging her with my arms and legs.

Breathing hard, she reached up and cupped my cheek, her expression serious.

“I feel like I’m too happy. After what happened...all the stuff that’s still wrong, I shouldn’t be so happy.”

I grasped her hand, pulling it around to my lips. I kissed the soft palm. “As long as we’re good, we can work out everything else.”

“But...” She pushed up on her elbows, her green eyes troubled. “The people

at BCM and your staff here, are you going to be able to keep them?”

“Baby, this deal would have been a coup and really helped us expand—and we need new contracts to grow. Working with Dennison-Co and Green Possible would have perfectly fit our needs to stay relevant in the changing market. *But* our company is solid. We’re not looking at layoffs. No one’s losing their job. Carrick and I will just go back to the drawing board.”

I was downplaying, but Nora didn’t need to know that a plethora of other deals hinged on this one, that long hours and months of work might be trashed, that I might need to take on more overseas work.

No, we weren’t discussing that right now.

It was all things to deal with in the morning.

I played with a lock of her silky hair, rolling the soft strands between my thumb and fingers. “Are we done talking about work? Can we get naked now?”

“So polite.”

“Ms. Brooks, I want to fuck you,” I growled.

“That’s better, Mr. Brothers.” Her fingers moved to the buttons of my shirt.

“I’m not really the asshole you think I am.” I reached for the hem of the dress she still wore from when we were going to attend the fancy dinner.

She laughed while she tugged my shirt off my shoulders. “I know. I love you whether your being a bosshole or the soft marshmallow who loves me.”

I pulled her hand to my abs. “Marshmallow?”

“You know what I mean.”

I paused to looked into her eyes. “You love me. And you’re mine.”

After earlier and the way my heart had basically plummeted out of my body when I’d reached for my phone and found her ring, I couldn’t hear the words near enough.

“I love you.” She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me down. “I love you, and yes, even though you never officially asked, I’ll marry you.”

Triumph leapt through me, but I only did a mental fist bump, rather than the real thing. I kissed her nose. “I already knew that, pumpkin. Wasn’t going to give you a choice. How do you feel about this weekend?”

“Um...” She bit her lip and seemed to visibly scramble for a response. “Weren’t we getting naked?”

“We were.” I leaned in to kiss her. “Don’t worry, Firecracker. I’ll convince you. I know I said December, but I really can’t wait that long to make you mine in every way possible.”

And then I used my body to start my campaign to take Nora Brooks as my wife. ASAP.

Twenty-Nine

Nora

Hoping not to get lost in Keiran’s massive house, I followed the scent of coffee and bacon. He’d said he was going to work out in his gym—yes, the man had an in-home gym and why was I not surprised? I probably should have joined him, especially after all the rich food and drinking this past weekend, but staying snuggled in his blankets, surrounded by his scent, had won out.

A man who looked very similar to Gray was chopping vegetables in the kitchen when I found it. Similar but he was dressed far more casually in jeans and a button-down, and he had long hair that was pulled into a hipster man-bun.

“Ah, you must be Ms. Nora. Coffee?” Even his accent and voice matched Gray’s.

“Yes. To both.”

Grabbing a cup, he headed over to a fancy machine that probably could have been in a high-end coffeeshop. Way above my drip maker or Keurig pod skills.

“Espresso Romano like Keiran or are you more of the latte type? I could make you my specialty, a vanilla ripple latte. I’m Phillip, by the way. The chef.”

“Nora. The fiancée.” After last night, I’d finally settled into that title being

real. And for the first time, it felt right. Truthful. Comfortable. Mine. God... somehow, Keiran had become mine. For real. How crazy was that?

“Nice to meet you.” After his greeting, any other conversation was impossible as he concocted my latte. He poured the brew into a tall ceramic mug and topped it with whipped cream, a caramel drizzle and mini chips.

I moaned when I took a sip. “Oh my God. I don’t know if I’ll ever go home.”

Phillip grinned and gave a little shake of the head as he returned to the cutting board and picked up his knife. “I’m sure Mr. Keiran will be happy to hear that. You...don’t cook, do you.”

“Um... I can?” The words came out as a question because I wasn’t sure where he was going with this.

“Because if so, we’ll have to come up with ground rules.”

“Holy fuck, Phillip. It’s my kitchen,” Keiran said, coming into the room from somewhere and wiping his sweaty face with the shirt he’d been wearing for his workout.

“Morning, baby.” He brushed a kiss to my temple as he passed me on his way to the refrigerator where he grabbed a glass flask of some green drink that he could keep all to himself, thanks very much.

“Morning.” I’d never been attracted to sweaty, post-workout men, or sweat in general, but Jesus take the wheel. My mouth went dry at his clean, hot-man scent and the sight of all that glistening, fabulously fit masculinity. My eyes devoured him over the top of my cup. How was this my reality? How was he mine?

“Are we really having this discussion again?” Phillip dropped his knife onto the cutting board with a clatter then crossed his arms, his snide British accent dragging me from the lustful path I’d just taken. “The last time you used the kitchen, you didn’t take the cardboard away from the bottom of that frozen travesty of a pizza you bought and we had to call the fire department.”

I held up a hand. “Um...for the record, I hate to cook. We’re all good. You do you, and if I get a hankering to boil an egg or something, you just slide me

one of these lattes to distract me. Okay?”

“Oh, I like you. You?” He looked at his boss. “Debatable.”

Keiran just sipped his swamp water, unmoved by Phillip’s tirade. “I’ll remember that when I sign your check.”

Phillip went back to the chopping he’d been doing when I came in. “I was preparing Mr. Keiran’s western omelet. Can I make you one?”

“That sounds wonderful. Can I help with anything? Make toast?”

He leveled a stink eye at me. “Are we going to have a problem, here, ma’am?”

“Just asking.” I grimaced, figuratively backing away, then sipped my latte. Guess I’d been told. And damn, his coffee creation was better than any coffeeshop I’d ever been to. If Phillip wanted to be a kitchen diva, I wouldn’t get in his way.

Keiran caught my fingers when I set down my cup. “We’ll be back in a few minutes. I need to clean up.”

“Oh, it’s a group task now? Nice.” The chef didn’t even look up from his chopping as he teased his boss. Apparently, he knew all about Keiran’s soft inside, too, because he clearly had no fear of his billionaire employer.

“I’m going to be spoiled,” I murmured as we headed upstairs.

“Good, you should be. I’m going to make some calls this afternoon to arrange movers for your place.”

“Keiran, you can’t just—”

Turning halfway up the steps, he pulled me into him and kissed me, hard. When I was good and breathless, his eyes met mine again. “This afternoon, I’m making calls to arrange movers for your place.”

“Don’t you think it’s too soon?” I ventured, still in a fog from his kiss. Dang, the man was like a drug. He went to my head faster than beer after wine had the other night.

“No.” He continued up the stairs then down the long hallway, pulling me with him. “I want you here, in our home.”

“I don’t think there’s much from there that I’ll need here.”

“You can bring anything you want. The house still had plenty of empty rooms I never bothered to do anything with—and you can even setup stuff in the kitchen downstairs next to the family room and home theater. Whatever you want.” The door to his bedroom suite closed behind us, like a punctuation to his statement.

“Phillip won’t be upset?” The last thing I wanted was to piss off his chef. I had yet to taste his food, but if his coffee was any indication of his skill, the guy was a master in the kitchen.

“He doesn’t like the ‘wannabe kitchen’ downstairs and refuses to acknowledge it. When I’ve had people over to swim, he works upstairs, prepares everything in *his domain*, then ferries everything down through the dumbwaiter in the pantry. Trust me, when Gray told me about his brother, I had no idea I was hiring such a diva.”

“You like him.” My curled fingers traced the curve of his pec and down to his taut six pack.

“Yeah, he and Gray are like family. So is Margaret. She’ll probably try to mom you to death. Be forewarned.” He captured my hand. When I thought he’d stop my downward progress, he instead brought it down to the prominent, rock-hard ridge pressing against his black sweat shorts. My fingers flexed, curling around him as he pushed me back against the wall.

“I thought if I worked out hard enough,” he said into my neck, “I could maybe make it through the afternoon without being inside you again, but I need you. Fuck, Nora, I need you.”

My teeth sank into my bottom lip. A quiet inkling in my head whispered I was stress relief, that despite his calm over the contract situation, he had agitation to work out. It didn’t make me feel less than; it gave me even more purpose. I could be this for him. Even a day ago, I wouldn’t have been comfortable with the knowledge, but now, I believed he loved me. His panic

last night had driven away all my doubts.

I curled my fingers into the waistband of his shorts, tugging.

“Firecracker, you’re playing with fire.”

“Perfect. That will just set me off then, just the way you like it. Right?”

Keiran growled, not stopping me as I freed his cock. Dropping down, I pushed him back a step so I had room, then I leaned in and circled the wide crown of his shaft with my tongue.

“Fuck, baby,” he swore, burying his hand in my hair, making me really glad I’d left it down this morning. “Don’t play with me, Ms. Brooks. You want that promotion you better make your boss feel really good.”

My eyes widened at his words until I realized quickly this was all roleplay. Moisture flooded my core as his naughty act made me throb.

“But Mr. Brothers, it’s so big. I don’t know—”

His fingers tightened in locks he fisted. “You’re going to take all of it, right to your throat. Then deep in your pussy, just like the good girl you are.”

My core clenched, and lava flooded through me.

“Now. Suck. Now.”

Opening wide, I circled my lips around his glans. My tongue flicked over the tip, lapping at the drops of precum sliding from the slit. Losing myself in him, I licked and sucked as all the while, Keiran sank deeper.

“Look at me. Look up at me while I fuck your pretty mouth.”

At his rasp, my eyes rolled up to peer at him. He pushed the last bit inside, lodging against the back of my mouth, pushing a little farther than comfortable. My body convulsed involuntarily, choking, my tears brimming my eyes. My fingernails dug into his thighs while I fought to stay where I was, to show him I trusted him.

“Fuck, you’re amazing.” His fingers stroked through my hair, gentling me, as

he pulled back then started fucking my mouth in shallow strokes, only occasionally, unexpectedly, pushing deeper. “This damn mouth will be the end of me. Oh God, fuck, yes. Suck hard like that.”

Watching him, I cupped his balls, rolling them, tugging gently as he rocked forward.

“So fucking perfect,” he mumbled. “So perfect. So mine.”

My thumbnail dragged up his balls and along the base of his cock.

“Fuck! Firecracker! I’m gonna come. You need to—”

I sucked harder, getting off on his reaction almost as much as I would if he were railing me against the wall.

A moment later, he was filling my mouth, and I swallowed as fast as I could.

Both Keiran’s hands flattened against the smooth wall behind me as he sagged forward. He didn’t get a moment to recover, and I didn’t even have a chance to release him from my mouth when a melodic chime went off through the room.

“Damn it,” he muttered. I felt him stretching sideways as I settled back on to my heels. He pressed a button near the door. “Yeah?”

“Sir, I’m sorry to interrupt, but your brother has just come through the front gate.”

“Shit. Okay. I’ll be right down.”

He reached a hand toward me and helped me to my feet then pulled me into his tight embrace, kissing the side of my head before burying his face in my neck. “Thank you, baby. I promise I’ll make it up to you later.”

“You don’t have—”

“Oh, trust me. I do. And I will. After we deal with Carrick.”

This was it. The consequences had arrived, and it was time to pay the piper.

Thirty

Keiran

I quickly cleaned up and pulled on jeans and an old concert tee.

“I have to say, I never saw you as an old jeans and graphic T-shirt type. Also... David Bowie? Leave it to you to wear what’s probably a collector’s item,” Nora teased as I led her downstairs.

“Trust me, he’d want it this way.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, when I met him and Iman—”

“Okay. You can just shut up now. I hate you.”

Laughing, I leaned in and brushed my lips against her crown. “You love me.”

“No, I don’t. I think I’m just going to have to find someone less annoying to sleep my way up the ladder with.”

Growling, I yanked her to me, knowing full well she was joking but also descending into full territorial-male mode. “Over my dead body.”

She just giggled while I kissed her. We were still laughing as we got to the kitchen, just as Phillip slid Carrick a coffee.

“I made you a fresh latte,” he told Nora, “since you got pulled away without drinking the first one.”

Carrick raised an eyebrow at me. “You’re awfully chipper, considering the shit hill we have to dig out of.” He glanced over at Nora. “Ms. Brooks. Good to see you.”

His tone said otherwise, and I would fucking kick his ass if he didn’t treat her with respect. Clearly uncomfortable with his tone and dismissive look, she tried to step away from me, but I kept her close to my side, my fingers clamped tight on her waist.

“I think you can be less formal and call her Nora, since she’ll be your sister-in-law as soon as I can drag her to the altar.”

Carrick’s fingers tapped on the files beside his coffee on the breakfast counter. “Would this be my *fake* sister-in-law after she’s your *fake* fiancée?”

Nora tensed, and I tightened my hold, looking down at her. “Do you want to take your coffee back upstairs or down to the movie room while Carrick and I discuss this? I can have Gray show you the way.”

She shook her head. “I’m part of the problem. I can help with the solution.”

“You’re not part of the problem—”

“Ah,” Carrick interrupted, disagreement twisting his features. “The way I hear it, you punched out her ex who still has a hard-on for her.”

“He didn’t punch out Peter,” Nora clarified. “Look, I’m sorry my ex was such an ass, and I really do love your brother. I want to help fix this however I can.”

For the first time since we came downstairs, Carrick’s features softened, slightly, and he appeared exhausted rather than angry.

“Fine, let’s go spread this out on the dining room table and come up with a game plan.” He levered off the stool and pinned me with eyes that were similar to my own—the only way we were alike, really. We were twins, but no one would guess it.

“Who did you hear that from?” I asked.

“Long story short. One of the guys up there is dating the sister of the woman I’ve been seeing lately. I didn’t appreciate hearing hours and hours of embellished details from her when I could have just gotten the five-minute rundown from my brother.”

“Sorry.” I grimaced.

He waved it away, showing more of his normal levity. “Bygones. More important is that our upcoming business plan was built on this deal going through. We’ll have to revamp it and scale back for now.”

“Isn’t that like...counting your chickens before they hatch?” Nora asked.

I’d made similar arguments in the past and couldn’t hold back my smile when Nora asked.

Carrick scoffed. “Your lover boy there is an excellent incubator. When he’s on task, locking down deals, all the chickens hatch. Plus some we didn’t expect.”

She crossed her arms. “Then maybe, you should cut him a little slack. If this is the first crucial deal to go south in...” She looked at me. “How many years?”

“Fourteen.”

She gave a decisive nod. “The first in fourteen years, then it seems like he’s due for a mulligan.”

“Baby...” I couldn’t help my smile as she told off my brother. Damn, she was magnificent.

Her sparkling green eyes turned on me. “Nobody’s perfect, and this isn’t on you. Carrick is right. It’s on me. I should—”

“I didn’t say it’s on you,” he cut in, probably sensing I wouldn’t let that shit wouldn’t fly and we’d have an even bigger problem. “Let’s just calm down and go work.” He nodded toward the counter. “And don’t forget your coffee. I’m sure Phillip won’t want to make you a third one.”

“You would think right. I’ll bring in food for all of you, shortly.” Phillip was out of sight around the corner, but apparently, he was still listening in on everything. Something, Nora would have to get used to. Privacy during daytime hours could sometimes come at a premium.

I retrieved her latte and my espresso that Phillip had slid in beside it, and we headed into the dining room. There were double doors on the north and east walls, and Carrick closed them all before we took our seats at one end of the large, rectangular table. Opening one folder and unfolding the large, overall timeline then pulling out a red pen, he spread our problem across the polished wood surface.

“Byman Foods is the obvious place to start.” He tapped the end of his pen on a point six months from now. “Most of the prelim work is done, and they wanted their projects moved up anyway. If we can get enough of the remaining details nailed down, I can contact them Wednesday when we’re all back in the office...”

I nodded, and we settled in to shifting projects and proposed staff. Nora immediately grabbed a pad of yellow paper and started making notes for us, occasionally running for coffee while we stood over the papers redesigning the timelines.

Though a solid plan materialized, we all knew it was a short-term solution. We needed to bring on more clients in order to grow at the rate needed to meet our ten-year revenue goals, but the future was doable not dire. By late morning, I didn’t feel quite as much as if I’d torpedoed BCM’s future.

Shortly before noon, Carrick left to grab more files. Nora and I kept working until I sank into a chair and pulled her sideways into my lap. Curling my hand around the side of her neck, I angled her toward me then covered her lips with mine. It took about one-point-two seconds before her arms were around my neck and my hands were buried in her hair. I claimed her mouth with all the pent-up energy that had only grown since my brother’s arrival had interrupted us earlier.

I almost didn’t hear the soft knock on one of the glass-paneled doors.

“Fucking hell. Too many people around here,” I muttered against her lips.

“I’m sure it’s important. I’ll get it while you...um...take care of thing.”

“There’s no taking care of this, baby.”

“Think about ice-cold showers or something.” Nora popped up to open the door for Gray, who’d stared pointedly into space while he waited patiently for one of us to acknowledge him. I blew out a long breath. It had to be important for him to interrupt us, since the crystal-clear windows on the doors made it obvious what we’d been up to.

He cleared his throat. “Sir, there’s a Mr. Tom Dennison here to see you. I’ve left him in the south parlor.”

“Thank you, Gray.”

“Will you need anything else? Refreshments?”

“No. That will be all.”

Standing, I caught Nora’s hand. Tom was here? I couldn’t help but hope that was a good sign. “Let’s go see what’s up.”

“Are you sure you want me to come with you?”

I squeezed her fingers. “Positive. We’re a team.”

“You’re still my boss.”

“Bosshole.” I winked.

“Not so much anymore.” She sighed heavily. “Very disappointing.”

I chuckled but grew serious when we entered the room. Tom stood at one of the windows, staring out over the pool and the landscaped backyard.

“Tom.”

He turned and smiled softly when he saw both of us. “Nice place you have here. You designed and built it?”

“I did.”

He nodded, looking thoughtful. “It’s impressive. Maybe, we can roll a new place for Remy and me into—” He shook his head. “I’m getting ahead of myself.”

He nodded toward us. “It’s good to see you two actually together. After what Peter said...”

“We’re together. Peter is just an asshole.” My voice was hard, leaving zero room for argument.

The other man dipped a single nod, his expression tight and his eyes worried, before he swept it away and put on his game face. “Right. Well, I’m glad to see you two are alright after...everything. Anyway.” He swallowed the word, stretching his neck slightly and not appearing at all the tough businessman who usually came into negotiations. “I apologize for what happened. I should have said that yesterday. I was just shocked. Until after you were both gone and it was too late.”

“It was shocking,” Nora offered softly when I would have left him flying in the wind. Her free hand curled on my bicep as she leaned into my arm, displaying our solidarity and reminding me what was important. Her. Our future.

“Yes.” He nodded again. “But we’d like you to come back and finish out the holiday with us. Stay until next Sunday—I know that’s a little longer than planned but...” He shrugged. “Remy’s pissed at me. Garen and I still want to do business with you. You know it will be lucrative for all of us. And Peter is gone. Not just from the beach house. I fired him.”

Thirty-One

Nora

Keiran's grip on my hand tightened, and when I looked over, he had started to shake of his head.

No? Was he insane?

"Can you give us a moment?" I asked, my smile strained while I tried to maintain that everything was fine. There was no way we could discuss this situation in front of Tom. "We'll be right back. Would you like something to drink? We can have Gray bring in something. Coffee? Tea?"

"No, I'm good." He turned back toward the window while I pulled Keiran from the room. As soon as we were back in the dining room, I closed the door and turned to my fiancé. My arms crossed, mirroring his.

"Let it go and do the deal, Keiran. We just spent all morning going over how you and Carrick can make things work for BCM, but none of that is solid. You know the best path is the original one. Let's go back to the lake. Meet with Tom and Garen. And come to an agreement."

He shook his head again, worry and determination in his eyes. "You're more important than that. I can't overlook what happened—"

I grasped his forearms and stepped closer. "You don't have to prove anything. Tom and Garen didn't attack me. Peter did. Look..." I raised an eyebrow at him, going out on a limb. "Call it a wedding present. I'm yours; Peter is nothing. Don't let him ruin anything else. This affects more than you

and me. It affects you and me, your brother, your staff here and at BCM—even other companies you contract with. Look at the big picture.”

Keiran studied me, his brow furrowed while I reminded him of the big picture and who he was—not just my fiancé but a powerful billionaire with plenty of people depending on him to be a shark. His gaze grew distant then zeroed in on me, and a spark of triumph blazed through his eyes. At the deal? Something else?

“You make a good point, Ms. Brooks, and I’m sure Carrick will agree with you. I’ll go in there and tell Tom the negotiation is back on the table. On one condition.”

“What condition?” I took a step back warily, but the glass-paned door wouldn’t let me go far.

Keiran closed the space between us, his arms caging me in, his palms to either side of my shoulders. “We’re not waiting until December to get married.” One side of his mouth turned up in a smug grin I wanted to kiss off his too-handsome face as he taunted me. “Take it or leave it.”

I shook my head. “You’re such a bosshole!”

“That’s not a no.”

“You’re insufferable.”

“Still not no.”

“Maddening.”

His forehead touched mine as he stared into my eyes with his determined blue gaze, the tawny flecks almost seeming to glow. “But you’re marrying me.”

“I already said so—I did say so, right?” Just watching the lust-filled agitation blaze to life in his eyes urged me to tease him.

“I’ll produce a signed agreement if I have to.”

“So romantic.”

Tilting his head, he brushed his lips over mine. “I’ll give you all the romance you could ever want. All you have to do is say yes, then say ‘I do’ before the minister. Sign your name on the contract—um, certificate.”

“Yes. Yeah.” I sighed, pretending to be put upon. “I am marrying you. For the sake of the company. And because...” Leaning up, I kissed him. “I can’t think of anything I want more.”

“I love you, Firecracker. More than I ever thought possible. But I fell fast and hard for you, and I love you with everything in me. I love you enough to make up for anyone who was stupid enough not to see how special and wonderful you are. I’ll never stop loving you or showing you that you’re first in my life.”

“Does that mean you’ll stop irritating me and making me want to scream?”

“No.” He didn’t seem repentant about that at all, especially when he chuckled. And honestly, I wouldn’t want him any other way. Call me a masochist, but I’d started falling for him long before I got conscripted into being his fake fiancée.

“Well, in that case, you’re lucky I love you, too.” Falling into his kiss, I lost myself in the way his mouth explored mine, worshipping it as if he’d found the nectar of the gods. As if I were his goddess to adore. “I do,” I whispered. “I do love you, and I’ll marry you soon.”

“You will?”

“Yeah. I fell fast and hard, too. Plus, Phillip makes awesome lattes, and someone needs to keep you in line, so you don’t go throwing away deal-making opportunities.”

“Brat.”

“I might need more cuddles. I didn’t get enough hugs as a child.” My lips quivered while I tried to keep a solemn face.

Keiran tickled my ribs, forcing out my giggle. “As soon as Tom leaves—cuddle time.”

“As soon as Tom leaves, we have to pack so we have clean clothes for the beach house. And you have to call Carrick. Actually, you should call him now, so he doesn’t head back over here.”

“Ever the assistant.”

“Just assisting my fiancé.”

“Your soon-to-be husband.”

“How soon?” December was only five months away. Did he want sooner?

“Very. Don’t worry. This part I have totally under control. All you have to do is show up. Let’s go tell Tom the good news, and I’ll send Carrick a quick text.”

“How soon is very soon?” I asked as I reached for the doorknob.

“You already agreed.”

“How soon?”

He pulled me against him before I could open the door. After turning me, his hands clasped together low on the small of my back while we gazed at each other. “Tomorrow.”

“*Tomorrow?*”

A wide smile spread his lips. “There’s my Firecracker. I love you.”

“I love you, too.” My hands shook, and tears burned my eyes. All because of my infuriating and lovable asshole boss. My forever and ever, the man who held me in his heart. And who I held in mine. “But...tomorrow?”

Keiran just laughed.

Epilogue

Keiran

Five Days Later

Standing on the beach, I took a deep steadying breath while the waves lapped at my ankles beneath my cuffed-up pants. The July sun blazed down, but I was comfortable in the sand-colored Italian linen vest and pants I wore with a thin ivory linen shirt. Prickles still bloomed across my shoulders while I waited, with Carrick at my left and the officiant at my right.

“Fuck, bro, take another breath.” Carrick grasped my shoulder when I swayed toward him. “Your girl is going to be pissed if you pass out into the water before you say I do and she can collect your fortune. And I’m not jumping in to save you.”

“Asshole,” I muttered, quiet enough that the minister from my grandparents’ church wouldn’t hear me. “She’s not marrying me for my money.”

“Yeah, I know. She asked me to have a prenup drawn up since you wouldn’t.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry. I said no. Obviously. Since you weren’t given anything to sign.”

That didn’t mean I wasn’t ready to have a naked discussion with my wife over it. Hell, I was always ready to be naked with her. Who was I kidding?

No one.

I shook out my hands at my side, flexing and opening them while I tried to calm.

I wouldn't settle until my eyes latched onto the beauty who would meet me here in just moments, though. It seemed as if I'd waited an eternity already.

Nora had thought I was joking about marrying her on the Fourth of July, but nothing had been further from a joke. And if I could have—without going to Vegas—she'd already be my wife, but even I couldn't wrangle a marriage license for the next day, a holiday. And after my fiancée had talked a little sense into me, I knew she was right that we should at least have some family and friends present. My brother would have been annoyed, and my grandparents would have been hurt. As much as I wanted to abscond away with my bride, I wanted neither reaction from my family.

She'd invited her parents, as well. I hadn't wanted to, but she assured me they were actually nice people.

Well, those *nice people* had said they wouldn't be able to make it here, even when I offered to pay for their plane tickets. Nora tried not to be hurt, but she was.

Which was how I'd found myself on my plane yesterday, tracking down their asses in Florida. And that was how they'd ended up on a plane back here with me. And why they were now sitting with our guests. I had to admit, they were nice, so I couldn't figure out the dysfunctional disconnect between them and their daughter. Whatever it was, I wasn't allowing it anymore.

I scanned the crowd—some of my relatives, my friends from the so-called Bad Boy and Billionaire's Clubs and their wives, and a couple close colleagues. Tom smirked at me from the second row where he sat with Garen and Gen. His look told me he knew exactly how I felt right now. He probably did.

The music started, and my heartbeat ratcheted up to double time when all gazes went to the small white cabana tent set up a short distance away. Remy rounded the side in a flowing aqua dress that matched Carrick's shirt and

Tom's vest—Tom shocking no one who knew him since he was remarkably possessive of his wife.

The breeze flirted with the gauzy skirt while she carried a tiny clear-glass pot tied with a trailing ribbon that matched her dress. Inside was a tiny arrangement comprised of a variety of greens, either rising up or trailing over the sides. In her hands, it looked no different from a green bouquet, yet it was an eco-friendly addition that would be repotted to live in the home I'd make with Nora. Though I hadn't seen it, I knew my bride would carry a similar arrangement.

My gaze already flitted past Remy for a glimpse of Nora. I knew she was coming. Remy's reassuring smile told me as much, yet I knew I'd rushed Nora. And I couldn't shake the fear she's run the other way. I'd sure as hell chase her, though.

My knees almost buckled when she rounded the tent, her white dress cut similar Remy's with the same flowing skirt and bodice style. But her top sparkled beneath the early evening sun. Her glorious waves of hair fell loose around her shoulders, and her eyes were locked on mine. I didn't let go, even when she stood beside me and we turned to face each other.

"You're breathtaking," I breathed.

"You're here."

I knew where that came from. She'd shared my fears. Only her past gave her more reason to worry. She didn't need to be concerned about me, though. I would never desert her.

"Always. I'll *always* be here."

Her head shook in near disbelief while she smiled, and the officiant launched into the beginning of the ceremony. It was all a blur, and I was glad we'd chosen to go with standard vows. Truly, I hadn't been sure I could deliver heartfelt intimate promises in front of others.

That would come later.

All I was really sure of was, I said I do. Nora said the same. Then finally,

finally an eternity later:

“You may kiss the bride.”

“Mrs. Brothers,” I growled then covered her mouth with mine in a kiss that promised everything I hadn’t said and everything I could imagine for our future.

Distantly, I heard applause, and I registered a clap on my back from my brother.

“I love you,” she said against my lips as we pulled apart. I eased back and set her back on her feet since I’d gotten a little carried away. Oops.

“I love you.” I pecked her lips again then trailed over to her ear. “And tonight, I’m going to be your favorite bosshole and do very bad things to you.”

“Keiran...”

“Is that no?” I smirked, already knowing the answer.

She grinned back, the fire lit in her green eyes. “No, definitely *not* no.”

Epilogue Two

Nora

Five Years Later

“And who is this?” My fingers pressed into the inner corners of my eyes as a breathy voice asked for my husband. Celebutante calls came less often nowadays, and I trusted my husband implicitly, but this still annoyed the hell out of me.

“Cristal Vance. Can you put me through, please.”

Oh, not so fast, honey.

“And the purpose of your call?”

“It’s personal.” She giggled, and I rolled my eyes.

“I’m sorry?” Not really, but I still feigned confusion.

“I’m calling for a personal reason.” Now, she sounded a touch annoyed as she realized her breathy sorority girl act wouldn’t work.

“And that would be?”

“None of your business.”

Oh...wrong, sweetie. So wrong.

My husband came to the doorway of his office, leaning on the jamb as he

regarded me with mild amusement. Clearly, he'd picked up on my tone of voice and knew what was happening. His gaze heated while he watched me, and it told me everything I needed to know.

I love you, Keiran mouth. My lips curled into a smile that widened when he came over and pressed the speaker button on my phone.

“Ms. Vance, you realize Keiran is married, don't you?” I chided *Cristal*, knowing she really wouldn't care about his status. Just like I didn't believe her made up name—oh, I knew she went by that name publicly. I was just pretty sure her incredibly straight-laced, teetotaler parents hadn't named her after champagne.

“Oh, her?” I practically heard the eye roll that accompanied the scoff.

“Yes, her,” Keiran growled. “The love of my life who won't be replaced by some airheaded no-morals fake debutante. Do not call back. I'm not interested in anyone but my *wife*.” He pressed the disconnect on the receiver cradle before he reached for the handset I still held in my hand.

“Fucking ridiculous,” he muttered. “You'd think these social climbers would get a clue by now. I'm never without you. We have two kids.” He glanced at my gently rounded belly where I was just beginning to show. “Two and a half...”

“Not all men are faithful. So they just think they have a chance, I guess. You're so popular with the celebutante crowd.”

“You doubt me?”

“God, no. No one who knows you could doubt you're absolutely devoted as a husband and father—me, least of all. You've kept every promise you've ever made to me.” My hand settled on my belly. “Except giving me a girl.”

“Next one,” he promised.

Sighing, I picked up the already straightened pile of papers on my desk and unnecessarily tapped them into order. “You *know* this one is the last one.”

“I know this one is the third of four. You promised right there before God,

our guests and the officiant that you would give me four adorable babies.”

“Still making up stories about our past, I see.”

“Am not. Do you want me to go get Carrick? He’ll verify it.”

“Carrick will say whatever you want him to, just like you’ll tell Haisley whatever he needs you to. For the record, neither of us believe either of you when you do that.”

I also knew he would get his way. We weren’t so great about using condoms, which was how I’d been pregnant with KJ when Keiran and I got married. Not that either of us had known I was pregnant. And it was also how I’d ended up pregnant with Toren after a gala celebrating BCM’s green innovations around the world. And this one had been conceived on his father’s desk on Valentine’s Day. So I had no doubt sometime in the next couple years, we’d complete Keiran’s vision for our family—he was a builder, after all.

Meanwhile, I had no problem giving him a hard time. Catching his eye, I made a snipping motion with my fingers. He shook his head, nonplussed.

“I think you should come into my office for us to discuss the matter.”

“I have work.”

“Not anything that won’t wait,” he countered.

“It’s almost lunchtime.”

“Then I’ll have food brought up—and afterward, we can go to the nursery and see the kids. After our *meeting*.” Grasping my hand, he pulled me to my feet then against him. His arms loosely circled me. He massaged my lower back. “How are you feeling?”

“Better. Thankfully, the morning sickness is actually sticking to mornings this pregnancy. Though it could end any time now, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Maybe, you should have stayed home. You know Margaret would have been thrilled to bring you tea and toast.”

“And you know that I’m going to work. Millions of women work with or have worked through this same thing. I’m fine.”

I might have the title of executive assistant, but I had a stake in running this company, just like Keiran and Carrick. When I’d had KJ, Keiran had wanted me to stay home. I’d refused. So he’d compromised and had a nursery put on campus. Now all the employees had the option of bringing their children to the company daycare—an improvement I liked to think of as my achievement since it wouldn’t have happened if I weren’t stubborn.

“Okay, Mrs. Brothers. At least, come into my office and let me take care of you.”

“Are you going to rub my feet?” I teased.

“Not what I had in mind, but if you want that. I’ll rub your feet first then you can rub my—”

I slapped my hand over his mouth. “Keiran!”

He laughed, nipping at my palm. “It’s not as if everyone doesn’t know.”

“You don’t have to confirm it.”

“Oh, but I do.” He swept me up into his arms and carried me into his office, kicking the door closed behind him. “I want everyone to know just how whipped I am for you.”

And *only* me. I might know my husband was a marshmallow for me and the kids, but for everyone else, Keiran was *still* very much a bosshole. But he was all mine, and I didn’t mind all the ways he also showed me how he could be the boss of me, which was his very favorite thing to be.

Thank you for reading! I hope you loved Keiran and Nora as much as I loved writing them.

Stay tuned for Carrick...coming soon!

Do you want more? Get even more Nora and Keiran here:

<https://BookHip.com/ZCQLKAG>

Want a heads up on my upcoming projects?

I'd love if you'd join me over on [*Brynn's Place*](#) on Facebook!

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Girl on a Beach Blanket

Guy with a Starfish Tattoo

Steamy in Sweetville

(writing as Whitney Quist)

Postcards in the Sand

Cuddle Up, Buttercup

Pants on Fire

No More Running

In Plain Sight

His Sugarplum Kisses

Paws for Love
Amaze Me
Something So Sweet
For the Love of Pete

The Monster Misters

Vampire Bait
Wife Bait

Monster Bait

**Not the Good Guy (with Kyra Nyx)
and Kuznetsov Mafia (only Brynn)**

Enforcer
Soldier

Room Fifteen: Making Her Obey

Empire

Wedded

Lawfully Wedded By Mistake
Unlawfully Wedded

Wedded or Worse

New Midgard

Viking's Claim

Wall Street Princesses

Billionaire's Halloween Princess

Tales Undone

The Prince's Syn

Oh My Scot

Falling for Forever

#Bridesmaid Again

Hunter

Chords

Rising Storm

Rush

Dare to Love

Half Past Normal

Billionaire's Bunny

Quarterback Leap

Weathering the Storm

Penalty Call

Switched Up

Merry Loves Bright

Daly Way

Belonging to Them

Plays Well With Others

Fill Her Up

One for the Team

Briar's Cowboys

Roped by the Team
His Old Kentucky Home
Eye of Her Storm
Santa Secret
Mad About Her Cowboys
Passing Through
Under Their Protection

Tradition Bound

On Your Knees
In His Chains
Chain Me Up
Hers to Obey

Circle of Three

Boy Toys
Tempting Tamera
Halloween Pleasure
Forgotten Forever

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Blood Bought
Blood Mates

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Malloy Brothers (with Dakota Rebel)

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Billionaire's Beautiful Runaway

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North Springs

Stocking Full of Cole

Love Notes

Standalone Books

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Farmer Takes a Wife

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Ménage

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Behind Sin's Door
Pride
Snows
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In the Dark

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Mine Every Night
Forbidden Obsession
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