



Bull

COMPLICATED PARTS TRILOGY BOOK TWO

ASHLEY JADE

BLUFF - BOOK TWO OF THE
COMPLICATED PARTS SERIES

ASHLEY JADE

Contents

[Author Note](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Bluff](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Gamblers Anonymous](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Ashley Jade](#)

Dedication

FOR MY DAD.

*Thank you for not only being the best man I've ever known, but for sharing your memories with me. This series—these characters, and myself—wouldn't be the same if you hadn't.
I promise, I'll keep your memories with me forever.*

First published in USA, August 2018
Copyright © Ashley Jade

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be circulated in writing of any publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published without a similar condition including this condition, being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictional manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or deceased, or events is purely coincidence.

Bluff - Book Two of the Complicated Parts Series

Photographer: Michelle Lancaster

Cover Design: Lori Jackson at Lori Jackson Design

Editor: Ellie McLove

Author Note

This book isn't what you were expecting.
I'd ask you to trust me, but I don't have any right to ask that considering this
was supposed to be a duet that's now a three-book series.

So, don't trust me.

Trust Preston and Kit.

Because the greatest love stories...are never easy.

They're messy, strange, and unconventional.

They're complicated.

Don't give up on them.

Dear Reader

Dear Reader,

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

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

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

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

XOXO

Ashley Jade

Bluff

BOOK TWO OF THE COMPLICATED PARTS SERIES

It has been said that something as small as the flutter of a butterfly's wing can ultimately cause a typhoon halfway around the world.

—Chaos Theory

Preston Holden wasn't a butterfly.
He was dangerous chaos.
And the moment my broken wings fluttered for him.
Everything would change.

Preston

Chapter 1

“Warm, it’s so warm.”

“This is nothing, you should visit in the summer.” I kick the door behind me closed and drop her on the outdated floral comforter. “Don’t puke in my bed.”

She murmurs something I can’t decipher before turning on her side. I try not to stare at the curve of her ass as I walk into the bathroom to get a cool washcloth.

I make sure to grab a bottle of water from the mini-fridge on my way back. “Here.”

Soft snoring is my only response.

Cracking open the bottle of water, I ask the good Lord for some patience. Then I roll her back toward me, place the washcloth on her forehead, and prop her up to take a few sips.

I should have asked him for some willpower instead because the top of her dress slips down ever so slightly and those pouty lips of hers moan around the bottle before she swallows.

I’ve been with lots of women, but none of them have ever sent me reeling quite like she does. I still want her in every capacity, on every surface, and at my every disposal.

You’d think three years would have diluted the potency, taken some of the shine off the apple, but it didn’t. Not even close.

Every time I jerked and every time I fucked...she was there. Lingered like a stain that won’t come clean.

Reminding me that we always want what we can’t have.

I bite the inside of my cheek when the tip of her tongue darts out to catch the liquid trickling from the corner of her mouth.

She misses it completely though, and I watch as the drop runs down her suprasternal notch—otherwise known as that sexy little indent between her clavicles, before gliding down her chest and continuing to her...

“This is good water.”

Feeling like I got caught with my hand in the cookie jar, I peel my gaze away. “I’m pretty sure it’s just tap with a fancy label.”

“Can I have more?”

Nodding, I go fetch her another one from the mini-fridge. “Aside from going to bars and popping ecstasy, what else are you doing in Vegas?”

“Work.” Her voice is low, and her words are still a bit garbled. “I really loved my job.”

My ears tune in at her use of the past tense. “Loved? What happened?”

She drops her head in her hands. “I’m not sure.”

The sadness in her tone makes me want to put my fist through a wall and I have to remind myself that whatever the issue is, it’s Kit’s bullshit and not mine.

I hold the bottle out to her. “Here.”

She makes no move for it, instead, she sinks down, dozing off for a second time.

Placing one knee on the bed, I wrap an arm around her for support and haul her back up. “Not yet, sleeping beauty. You need to drink some more water first.”

“No thank you.”

“Kit.”

When she starts to decline again, I push on her chin until her lips part and shove it between her lips. “Take a sip.”

Finally, she concedes. Swear it’s like dealing with an infant. My chest contracts with that thought, but I focus back on Kit who takes the water from me and begins guzzling it down like she can’t get enough of it.

I seize it back and place it on the nightstand. “You’ll get sick if you drink too much too fast.”

I freeze when her palm slides over my chest. “This is really soft. What’s it made from?”

I’m about to tell her it’s just a regular black t-shirt, but the words fall from my lips when she ventures lower, causing my abs to contract under her

touch. Apparently, I've unknowingly entered one of the circles of hell because this is the sweetest form of torture there is.

I catch her wrist while I still have the restraint to stop her. "Don't touch me."

She shrugs, not looking at all put-off. "Sorry." Her eyes become droopy and she slumps down on the pillow. "Thanks for the wa—"

"I want you out of here by morning."

I start to move off the bed, but a tug on my arm halts me. "Why?"

Because I can't stand being in the same vicinity as you.

My jaw works. "I have shit to do."

"That's not what I meant."

Against my better judgment, I look at her...and immediately regret it.

On impulse, I go to wipe away the black crap smearing her cheeks due to her tears, but reach over and turn off the light instead. "Get some sleep."

I go to stand again, but she tugs me back, more forcefully this time, and my composure snaps. I've had about all I can take of this.

"What the fuck do you want from me, Bishop?"

I don't realize how deadly my tone is until her eyes go wide. "You've never been this mean in my dreams before."

A callous, bitter laugh escapes me—of-fucking-course she would think this is all some kind of hallucination in her delusional state.

Shifting, I prop my arms on either side of her body, hovering above her. "Well, I hate to tell you, sweetheart, but this isn't a dream." I incline my head so we're nose to nose. "However, if you don't shut the hell up and stop pissing me the fuck off, it will become your nightmare real quick. Got it?"

"I don't understand—"

I punch the mattress. "That's just it. You don't understand, and you never will, so do us both a favor and stop talking."

She scowls and the organ inside my chest skitters to a stop altogether.

"I don't know why you're being so mean to me when—"

"When what?" I lean in farther, ghosting over her lips. "When I hurt your little feelings by getting sucked off?" I tilt my head, brushing my mouth along her ear. "What's the matter, angry girl? Did it make you jealous?" She whimpers, but I don't stop. I need her to hate me. I need to push her buttons the way her mere presence seems to push every single one of mine.

But mostly, I need her to get the fuck out of my life again. For good.

I nip at her neck, deliberately provoking her. "That's it, isn't it? You

wished it was you taking me deep and sucking all the cum out of my dick. Don't you?"

"No—" A moan cuts her off and it surprises us both. But not nearly as much as what happens next.

She starts grinding against the leg that's wedged between both of hers.

A flush spreads from her cheeks to her chest. "I can't help it." Embarrassment floods her features. "Oh, God. I need to wake up."

I'm torn between wanting to burst that bubble of hers with a reality check, and my own selfish greed. As usual, the latter wins out.

I look down the length of her body and a surge of arousal hits me like a freight train, making my dick strain against my zipper. All of her dry humping has caused her dress to bunch up past her thighs...the only thing preventing me from seeing every inch of that smooth holy grail is the leg she's still rubbing herself on.

My jaw tics and I peel my gaze away. "You're not wearing any panties."

It's like she's intentionally provoking me.

Either she doesn't hear me, or she's too far gone to acknowledge my question. Her eyes roll back and her chest heaves, causing the top of her dress to dip more—revealing an agonizingly, teasing peek of her pink nipples.

Like a cobra who wants to sample his meal before he devours it whole, my mouth finds the exposed skin and I give it a little flick with my tongue. "What happened to your panties, Kit?"

My self-control is hanging by a thread. She has less than a second to stop what she's doing, or I'm going to do us both a solid by spreading her legs, grabbing the headboard, and fucking her into the middle of next week.

"My boss took them off with her teeth." She winces. "Right before I ran out of the room because she wanted me to have sex with some old guy."

Two things happen at that moment.

One—I have the sudden urge to find this boss of hers and toss her off the nearest bridge. No wonder she was walking around by herself.

And two—I grow a conscience. Based on what she just told me and given the dazed state she's in; her boss is either an unprofessional sexual manipulator or a conniving bitch who doesn't give a shit about Kit—because Kit's too drunk and high to stop anyone from taking advantage of her. Hell, depending on what else Kit might have been slipped, she may not even remember any of this tomorrow. There's low and then there's scum.

Promptly, I get off her and stand up, the clarity of the situation slamming

into me.

“Will you be back tomorrow night?”

I have no clue what she’s talking about, and I don’t think she does either because she closes her eyes and drifts off to sleep. With a heavy sigh, I pull the comforter around her. Until something catches my attention, rendering me immobile.

Attached to the thin, silver necklace she’s wearing, nestled between those small, perky tits...

Is my lucky poker chip.

Just like that, I’m cracking, splintering right down the center like the ground during a magnitude eight earthquake.

“Be gone by sunrise, Bishop.”

With that, I make my way to the bathroom so I can take care of my hard-on, figure out how to get Campanelli a million dollars in the next twelve hours...and find a way to forget all about the girl sleeping in my bed.

I look down at the damp spot on my thigh and curse.

I need Kit Bishop gone and out of my life for good before she ruins everything.

For the second time.

Kit

Chapter 2

A *Lady Gaga* song pierces my eardrums and I wake with a jolt, cursing Juan for making it his ringtone.

Stretching my arm out, I reach for my phone on the nightstand and end up knocking over what sounds like a bottle of water instead. I open my eyes to investigate the damage, but the second I do; sharp shooting pain steamrolls down the center of my skull and I burrow under the covers.

Much better. Aside from the fact that my mouth tastes like I've been gargling with sewer water, and my jaw is so sore it feels like I've been grinding my teeth all night.

And Juan is as relentless as a coupon hoarder running for the Sunday paper.

"Hello?" My voice sounds like it belongs to an eighty-year-old chain smoker.

An image of my nanna whizzes through my head and I cringe. Unfortunately, that only makes the steamroller zipping through my cranium kick up a notch.

"Where are you?"

Before I can process Juan's question, he adds, "The first workshop started a half hour ago. I had to sneak into the bathroom to call you."

Workshop? I bolt up quicker than lightning when I realize I'm not at home in my bed, but a hotel in Vegas. Where I'm supposed to be attending a workshop for my job.

"Crap, I can't believe I overslept."

"I know, Jess is pissed."

Throwing the covers off, I stumble out of bed, my brain feeling like scrambled eggs. A feeling that only gets worse when I take in my surroundings.

A television from the early 90s sits on a dresser that has seen better days. A crooked row of empty beer bottles lines the dingy windowsill, along with an ashtray; which explains the faint stench of stale smoke. But all that pales in comparison to the fact that there's only one bed. Juan and I are roommates—yesterday, there were two queen beds in our room.

It looks *nothing* like the hotel I remember checking into yesterday.

I clutch my chest, panic settling in. I know who I am and who Juan is... but I can't recall where I am or how I got here. It's like some men in black suits zapped me with a mind eraser and expunged my memory from last night. Or rather, parts of it, because I do remember some things. Enough to know something's terribly wrong.

"Juan?" I gulp. "How much did I drink last night?"

I can almost feel his own bewilderment on the other line. "I don't know, I chased after Ronald after you accused him of being a murderer, remember?"

"I don't—wait, yes that I *do* remember." I breathe a sigh of relief. I'm still freaked out, but maybe it's not as bad as I thought. As soon as Juan told me what happened, my brain automatically caught up and put some of the pieces together. Unfortunately, thanks to me insulting Ronald, Juan can't fill in the rest of the blanks for me.

"Okay, you're kind of scaring me. Where are you?"

"That's the thing, I'm not sure."

"What do you mean you're not sure? I figured you ended up hooking up with someone after I left the bar last night and that's why you never came back to the hotel."

"I don't know. It's possible, I guess. The last thing I remember is you being upset with me and chasing after Ronald like you said." I rub my temples. "Wait, no. I remember Jess. I saw Jess at the bar and—"

"And what?"

I squeeze my legs together, the urge becoming unbearable. "Holy cow, I really have to pee." My eyes scan what I can only assume must be the door to the bathroom and I jet for it. "Is it weird to use the bathroom in a place I have no recollection of entering?"

"Are you asking me if it's weird to use the toilet belonging to a possible killer who could have drugged you, tied you up, and done Lord only knows

what to you last night? No, Kit. That's not weird at all. Get the hell out of there."

"I will, but nature is calling." I plop down on the toilet so I can take care of business. "It's a biological impulse beyond human control."

He tuts and I take the opportunity to look around the small area. There isn't a tub in here, but I hear water running from the other side of the door. Must be one of those connecting bathrooms.

"I think whoever I came here with is taking a shower." I inspect my arms and legs. "But I don't think they tied me up or hurt me. I'm not sore and I don't have any bruises." I notice a few small cuts on my knees. "I take that back. My knees are scraped." My memory jogs something free and I close my eyes, trying to connect more dots. "I think I might have tripped and fallen on the sidewalk."

"Great, so when I talk to the police, I'll be sure to say, 'Golly gee, officer, I told her to get out of there, but she was too preoccupied trying to play investigator herself, and *that's* when he killed her.'"

I flush the toilet and go to the sink. "What makes you think it's a he? Maybe I really did get too drunk and have a one-night stand and we're both overdramatizing this whole thing."

Although, one-night stands aren't really *my* thing. Not when I'm seriously into someone else. Like my boss.

I release a sigh. My memory spacing is worrisome, but I don't *feel* violated...not physically anyway.

There's a deep ache in my chest that's awfully unsettling, though.

Before I can scrutinize the thought further, a slew of Spanish curse words flies out of Juan's mouth like rapid fire.

"Okay, I'm going." I turn on the water and pick up the bar of soap. "I just have to wash my hands first."

"Because germs are so important right now."

I finish up and get ready to leave, but dizziness barrels into me so hard I have to brace myself against the sink. "Whoa, I need another minute."

Juan's saying something, but I tune him out and lower my head so I can splash some cool water on my face and get my shit together.

It works because a vision of me hanging out with Jess at the bar flashes through my head. "I was definitely with Jess. I remember being super nervous and embarrassing myself while admitting I had feelings for her." I splash my face again as I recall attempting to tell her about the situation with

my nanna, and her telling me to relax before *they* showed up. “But then we were interrupted by some druggie porn stars—”

“That explains how you got the ecstasy,” a deep and oddly familiar voice interjects.

I look up and catch the reflection of some towel-clad guy in the mirror. Or rather, a portion of him due to his tall stature. Not that I need to see anything else, because there’s no mistaking that he is very much *male*...not the gender I’d willingly agree to spend the night with.

Instantly, terror crawls up my spine and I scream so loud it echoes off the walls. Or maybe it’s Juan’s high-pitched scream coming from the floor where I dropped my phone. Doesn’t matter, I grab the only weapon at my disposal—a toothbrush, and spin around.

I had every intention of plunging the damn thing through my assailant’s jugular, but shock roots me to the spot as I come face to face with the last person I ever expected to see.

“Preston?”

A whirlwind of flashbacks burst through my head, most of them painful ones from the past, but one is recent—*very* recent—which only makes everything even more mystifying.

In one casual stride, he’s standing in front of me. “In the flesh.”

I don’t miss the way he smirks when my eyes involuntarily fall to his towel and then back up to his face before I look away.

He takes the toothbrush from me. “Thanks.”

And then, like me being here is an everyday occurrence, he elbows past me to the sink.

“Preston.”

“Kit!”

That comes from Juan who’s still screaming on the other line.

I pick up my phone. “I’ll call you back in a few.”

“What—”

I disconnect the call and focus on the guy in front of me. The guy I haven’t seen in three years. The guy responsible for breaking my heart and ruining my life. The guy behaving like everything is perfectly fine and dandy.

“You’re brushing your teeth.”

He spits, his face expressionless. “Hygiene is very important.”

My mouth drops open in disbelief. So help me God, I hope Juan doesn’t call the police, because *I* might end up committing homicide.

His eyes meet mine in the mirror. “You look like you needed the reminder.”

I rear back, seeing red. I’m perfectly aware of my appearance this morning—and no, it’s not pretty. My hair is a tangled mess, my eyes are puffy, my mascara isn’t coating my lashes like it should be, but smudged under my eyes in a look I refer to as *raccoon chic*, and my breath is a cross between a rotting onion and road kill, but it still doesn’t give him any right to act like such a douche canoe.

Especially when the last time I saw him...he was the one who hurt me.

Worse than that. He broke me...for no other reason than he knew he could.

Because he wanted to.

Preston received the paternity results proving he wasn’t the father before the shooting, and yet, he chose to lie to me about it in the elevator and at the hospital where he held me like a friend...and then stuck his dick in Becca’s mouth like an underhanded enemy. After I disclosed to him that I still had intense feelings for her.

After he tried to kiss me.

Even three years later, I still can’t wrap my head around it. Why he would do something so callous and cruel. Becca was a two-timing witch who didn’t deserve me, but I loved her...I loved her so damn much, and he knew it.

I trusted him.

And I thought that he...that we...

I don’t know what I thought. But I *do* know I’m not going to give him the satisfaction of seeing me cry. Nor am I going to stand here and let him treat me like I’m the one who should be apologizing for waking up to what I’m hoping is a bad dream.

“How did I get here?”

He rinses his mouth and reaches for a hand towel. “Sounds like someone forgot to have the birds and bees talk with you.”

I clench my hands into fists. “This isn’t a joke, Holden. I don’t know how I ended up in this motel room with you of all people. I don’t remember much of anything from last night other than a few bits I can’t piece together.”

He turns to face me. “I found you walking the streets of Las Vegas by yourself at two a.m. You were pretty strung out. I was going to drop you off at a hospital, but you begged me not to because of your grandmother. My options were to either let you sleep on the sidewalk, or bring you home with

me.” He hitches a shoulder up. “I was feeling generous, so here you are.”

For some strange reason, that’s when it dawns on me that I’m not wearing any underwear.

“You didn’t.” I lick my suddenly dry lips, trying to get the words out. “We didn’t…”

Slowly, he drags his gaze up and down my body, leering at me. “You honestly think I would fuck you?”

I feel my face turn beet red. Obviously, I have absolutely no interest in him, but the insulting way he answered was uncalled for. I don’t know why he’s going out of his way to be so vicious.

He hurt me more than enough the last time we saw each other.

He leans against the sink. “I don’t need to screw intoxicated girls to get laid, Bishop. I brought you here, gave you some water, and let you sleep in my bed while I slept in a chair. That was pretty much the extent of our time together.”

A lump fills my throat. I can’t stand him, but if he wasn’t there last night who knows what could have happened to me. “Thank—”

“You can thank me by leaving.” He juts his chin out. “The door’s that way.”

“Right.” I curl my arms around myself, preparing to do a walk of shame I don’t deserve. I’m confused and still a bit out of it for reasons I can’t pinpoint. You’d think he could muster up some compassion.

I’m halfway to the door when it hits me. “Wait, this is your home? You live in Vegas?” My eyes swivel around the tiny, grubby bathroom. “You live *here*?”

No wonder he’s miserable. Who wouldn’t be? A seedy motel room isn’t a home. It’s a holding container when you’re out of options. A roof over your head when you’re one breath and one bad decision away from being homeless.

On the bright side, I know Asher will be happy about this. Not about Preston’s living situation, but that he’s alive. His older brother’s been searching for him for three years with no luck. Figures a gambler would be in Vegas of all places. Talk about hiding in plain sight.

He snorts. “Sorry your stay wasn’t up to par. Feel free to leave your complaints with the front desk, princess.”

“I didn’t—” I swallow and try again. “I didn’t mean that the way it came out. I’m not a snob, I just thought maybe I could—”

“Could what?”

I inhale, knowing my parents would be proud of me for this. Preston Holden might be Satan in a towel, but he didn't leave me there like he could have. It would be gracious of me to do something nice in return. Put some good karma out in the world. It's what they would do.

“I don't know if my purse is here, but—”

“I don't need your charity.” His stare turns hard. “What I need is for you to leave.”

I stand speechless, my mouth nearly hitting the floor. When I make no move to exit because I'm too shell-shocked by his rudeness, he strides past me out the door, nearly knocking me over in the process.

And that's when the part of my brain holding the events of last night captive...unleash them all in rapid succession.

Jess. The old dude. The alcohol and drugs. Getting knocked over by some guy being chased, then watching him get beat up by two men because he wouldn't give them his duffle bag.

I remember freezing when a gun was pointed at me...for the second time in my life.

And I remember Preston giving up the duffle bag before the man could pull the trigger.

I remember nearly everything up until the moment I fainted. Everything after that is too murky to make any real sense of. Kind of like a dream you didn't retain after you wake up, but you know you had one.

Not that it matters, I know all the important parts of the evening. Like the reason for the ache in my chest.

But I can't focus on that right this second...I have a bone—actually, make that an entire skeleton—to pick with someone first.

I exit the bathroom, feeling more in control than I did a minute ago. “What was in the bag?”

He tugs up the zipper of his jeans and I can't help but study him. He looks different. Not in the unrecognizable sense, but in the harder, edgier, more filled out sense. *Grown up*. Nothing like the teenager in suits I remember. He's not as bulky as his brother Asher, but I can tell he works out regularly. You don't get those abs and muscles from sitting on your ass all day. Unfortunately. God knows I'd love to not have to get up at the buttcrack of dawn to go to the gym five days a week before work.

Work...crap. I have to call Juan back.

“You have this annoying habit of mistaking me for the door.”

My archnemesis crosses his arms and my eyes fall to the tattoo on his bicep. It’s large but far too detailed to ascertain what it is from where I’m standing.

As if sensing my curiosity, he pulls a shirt over his head, covering it. Then, he points. “It’s that way, Bishop. Don’t let it hit that sweet ass of yours on the way out.”

“I know where the door is, jerk. Answer the question.”

“Fine.” He gives me a lewd smile that makes me feel all kinds of uncomfortable. Jesus, even his dimples aggravate me. “What I’m about to tell you is important, so you need to pay close attention, got it?”

I nod, and those dimples deepen. “Good.” His smile falls. “Because it’s none of your fucking business. Now get the hell out.”

Oh, that’s it. I am done trying to be civil and cordial to this brute. I don’t know why I even bothered in the first place.

“I had a gun pointed at me because of you. That makes it my business,” I yell, shaking with irritation.

“Well maybe if you had minded your own business instead of walking over and involving yourself, you wouldn’t have,” he yells back. “Seriously, what the fuck were you thinking?”

I look down, feeling both vulnerable and chagrined. “You wouldn’t understand. Besides, I was out of it, remember? So it doesn’t matter.” I look up at him. “I just don’t want whatever trouble you’re in to fall back on me or anyone I care about, okay?”

He crosses his arms. “What makes you think I’m in trouble?”

My eyes zero in on the scratches marring his neck and the deep bruise on his jaw that’s visible under the dusting of dark stubble, before settling on the knuckles of his left hand which are swollen and discolored.

“You mean aside from them chasing you and whipping out a firearm? How about the fact that you fought them back when they attacked you? Anyone else would have given up the stupid bag, but not you. No, you almost lost your life because of it. It’s safe to assume whatever was in it was a big deal.”

A shudder zips down my spine because something tells me if I wasn’t there...Preston might not be here now. Not that I should care, but I can’t take another death on my conscience.

His jaw tics. “They won’t come after you, they got what they wanted.”

“You don’t—” Juan’s ringtone cuts me off mid-sentence.

“Are you trying to give me a heart attack? What the heck is going on?” Juan screeches when I pick up. “Wait, don’t answer that. I don’t want him to snap and kill you. Just tell me if you want pepperoni on your pizza or not.”

My stomach rumbles at the mention of food. “You can put the pizza on hold, everything’s okay. He’s not a murderer, he’s...” I clear my throat because I don’t think telling Juan that Preston’s a giant asshole will ease his concern. “I’m leaving in a few. Tell Jess I’ll be there in time for the second workshop.”

“Are you sure?”

I’m sure I’m not going to let them fire me without a fight. I’m finally good at something and have a career, I don’t think it’s fair I end up heartbroken *and* unemployed.

“Positive. And in case I forget to say it when I see you, thank you for being a good friend.”

With that, I hang up and look around the room for my purse and whatever else I might have come here with.

Preston’s jaw works. “You’re going to continue working for a boss who took advantage of you?” His tongue finds his cheek. “Man, some things never change.”

I find my purse tangled in the bedsheets. “It’s called being a responsible adult. Unlike some people, I confront my problems head on, not run away from them.”

Not anymore.

I locate my shoes under the bed. “And she’s not technically my boss now. There’s been a merger between...” I pause, glaring at him. “You know what? You’re one to talk. Here you are living in a shithole and mixed up with bad people.” I walk over and poke him in the chest. “Do you have any idea how much you upset Asher when you left and never contacted him? Some people would do anything to have a family member who gives a shit, and yet you disregard your brother who does, like he’s yesterday’s paper. Not cool, bro.”

“Wasn’t aware you were such a fan. Last I checked, you hated him.”

“I never hated him. I thought he was a heartless prick who wasn’t good enough for my best friend.”

A quality that seems to run in the Holden family.

“And now?” For a fraction of a second, I see something resembling concern in his eyes before they turn to steel again.

I think for a moment before I answer. “He’s still a bit of a conceited jerk sometimes, but he loves the shit out of Breslin and Landon, and they love him. They’re really great together, hap—” I bop him on the nose with my finger. “No, I’m not doing this. If you want to know about your brother, I suggest you pick up the phone and call him yourself like a big boy. Or do one better and drag your stubborn ass to Louisiana. I don’t know if you’re aware, but he did just lose the biggest game of his career, I’m sure seeing you would cheer him up.”

The stubborn ass scrubs a hand down his face. “It’s not that simple. It’s better for us both if I stay away, trust me.” He walks over to the mini-fridge and takes out a beer. “If you really want to thank me for last night, you can do it by not telling him where I am or that you saw me.”

Lord almighty, I’m certain advanced physics is easier to understand than the inner workings of Preston Holden’s psyche.

I stomp my foot in exasperation and look up to the heavens, asking whatever higher power’s currently listening for the strength to get through to this jackass. “No matter what you two fought about, he doesn’t deserve to be shut out permanently. He is your brother. Your brother who loves you. It would kill him to see you living in a crappy motel and being beat up by men with guns. How can you not understand that?”

I grab him by the shoulders when he starts to object. “Good God, man. Stop being so obtuse and reach out to him. The lad just bought three freaking Ferraris on a whim last week. Heck, I think the dog would have gotten one too if he knew how to drive and stopped peeing on his lucky jersey.”

He peels my fingers off his arms. “Did you really just refer to him as *lad*?”

I rub my temples. “Focus, grasshopper. You’re missing the point. Asher will have no problem helping you get back on your feet and out of this dump. But more importantly, you’ll have your brother back in your life.”

His glare is cutting. “No.”

“But why?”

He gets close to my face. “Because I don’t want to.”

“Why not?”

I jump when he hurls the beer bottle and it shatters against the wall behind me. “Get out.”

I stand my ground. I can be stubborn too. “No. Not until you tell me why you won’t talk to your brother or what was in the bag. The choice is yours.”

His expression is so hard, it's like he's carved from granite. "This is your last warning, Bishop. Get out, or I will make you. You don't want that."

I hold my arms out wide. "Go right ahead."

"Kit," he growls through clenched teeth.

"I know you won't hurt me." I take a step in his direction, determined to chip away some of his shell. "Not physically anyway," I amend. "You might as well tell me, so I go away. I can be very persistent when I want something. I once camped outside the local Walmart for three whole days for a chance to win *Demi Lovato* concert tickets. I thought Breslin was going to kill me for making her poop in a bag."

He stares at me like I'm crazy. "Why didn't you just buy the tickets yourself? It's not like you couldn't afford them."

"Oh, I totally could, but I wanted the experience. And I wanted Demi to know that I was willing to sacrifice for our love." I point to my face. "Now spill it, Holden. Or you'll be staring at this mug for the next three days."

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "You're such a pain in the ass. Like I told you before, I don't want to talk to my brother. For reasons you'll never understand. It's not because we got into a fight, or because I'm mad at him. I just don't want to be around him. I can't, okay?"

There's so much torment in his eyes it punches me in the heart. "I'm not dense, but if you guys didn't fight and you're not mad at him, what possible reason could you have for staying away for three years? Is someone threatening you? Forcing you to keep your distance?" When he stays silent, I sit down on the bed. "I know sports aren't your thing, but are you jealous because he's a famous football star? I won't judge you if—"

"No one is forcing me to stay away, and I'm not jealous."

I clutch my chest when I realize. "You're scared to be around him because of what Kyle did." I sit up straight. "I know it was scary, Preston, I still have nightmares about it, but it wasn't Asher's fault—"

He rolls his eyes. "I know it wasn't. That's not it."

"Is it what Breslin said at the hospital? Because I know she didn't—"

"No. Jesus, stop trying to figure this out! If I wanted you to know, or I thought you could understand, I would tell you. I know in your world everything is either good or bad. Evil or benevolent. But things aren't always so black and white. Sometimes they're gray." His eyes drift to my hair. "And sometimes your reasons for doing things make no sense to anyone else but you." He punches his chest. "And I don't have to stand here and justify my

reasons or my feelings to you or anyone else, because they're mine."

"I get it."

He scoffs. "No, you don't."

"I do. Look, no one believed me about my uncle. And even though all the evidence proved otherwise, in my heart, I know he had something to do with their deaths." I blink back tears because I understand what he said more than he'll ever know. "So, yeah, I get not wanting to talk to someone, even a member of your own family for reasons that don't make sense to others. And you're right, whatever is going on with you and your brother is none of my business. Sorry for not respecting that."

He looks surprised. "Does this mean you won't tell him where I am?"

"You have my word." I reach for my purse and shoes again. If I don't haul ass, they'll have a legitimate reason to fire me. "I'm gonna go, but for what it's worth, I hope everything works out for you."

I don't know what to make of the look he gives me. "Take care of yourself, Bishop."

I stand. "You too. I can't believe I'm about to say this but—" A forceful knock cuts me off mid-sentence and I flinch.

"I'm telling you, Matteo, he's not here. Something about a family emergency. But he assured me he'll be back in a few hours and I know he's good for it. He won the game last night," some guy says and Preston, Mr. Poker Face himself...pales.

When I open my mouth to ask him what's going on, he places a finger over his lips.

"Campanelli's not stupid, it's awfully convenient of him to not show up and make the drop off after last night's game," another male voice says. "Now, I suggest you stop covering for your friend and open the fucking door, or I'll open your fucking skull and force feed you your brain."

I barely have time to process what's happening before Preston is covering my mouth with his hand and dragging me to the closet with him.

I'm about to point out that a closet is the most obvious place for someone to look, especially a spacious one like this, but then he uncovers an oversized trunk, and the next thing I know, we're both crammed inside of it.

If I thought being trapped in an elevator with Preston was claustrophobic, it has nothing on this. That elevator was a huge breezy island compared to the matchbox we're stuffed in currently.

Every single appendage of his, with the exception of the one digging into

my ass, is wrapped tightly around me—like a snake coiling and suffocating its prey.

Holy hell. I've never been so fused to another human being before. I'm literally folded and tucked into his body. I'm grateful he showered.

Grateful and scared. Which isn't fair, because I'm not the one who pissed off whoever this Campanelli guy is.

Darn it, if only I left one minute earlier, I wouldn't be in this predicament. Preston's right, I really need to start minding my own business.

I can hear things being tossed around, and I'm pretty sure I'm going to blow our cover because my heart is pounding like a feral animal stuck in a cage.

The frantic thumping only gets worse when I hear footsteps approaching. The poor thing is thrashing so hard it physically hurts.

If this guy doesn't kill me, I'm confident a heart attack will.

I nearly pass out when I feel a hand move up my stomach. I'm about to scold Preston for trying to cop a feel, but his palm skates past my breast, coming to rest over my heart.

The pads of his fingers draw slow, gentle circles around it, almost like he's telling the organ it's okay and vowing he'll keep it safe.

It's the strangest exchange I've ever been a part of, but to my surprise, the action works because I no longer hear it drumming in my ears.

That is until the closet door opens and it takes off, galloping like a stallion.

Oh, God. This is how my life ends. I'm going to die jammed in a box with the person I loathe. Maybe this is fate's cruel way of punishing me for making it out of the school shooting alive when three innocent people didn't.

I'm about to lose what little composure I have and breakdown, but then Preston's fingertips slide down the top of my dress...and he finds the poker chip.

Otherwise known as the lifeline he handed me three years ago when I needed something to hold on to...because I had nothing left.

The one I started wearing on a necklace when the nightmares became more frequent and more terrifying—because I needed to have it close to me at all times.

I don't have a chance to wonder how he knows it's there though because the guy who wants to crack open skulls and feed people their brains orders the other guy to open the trunk we're in.

I hold my breath and focus on the poker chip Preston's pressing into my skin. I need the illusion of security. I need to know I'm safe again.

And the only time I've ever felt truly safe after my parents' death was in an elevator with this dipshit.

"I wish I could, boss, but no can do. This thing hasn't been opened in over fifteen years. Someone left it here back in the day and there's no key for it. Evidently, it's an antique. You're welcome to try it yourself, though."

Preston's heart batters my back when there's tugging on the latch followed by a hefty kick.

"You weren't kidding," the guy says. "Fucker is heavy."

"Between you and me, I think it's filled with cement. Don't know what's in the cement, but..." His voice trails off and they both laugh.

"Listen, Max," the guy says. "Campanelli likes you. Your wingman though, not so much. But, since he's a pal of yours, and you're an associate of ours, here's what's gonna happen. Tell your buddy he has until tomorrow morning to give Campanelli his money. Otherwise, he shouldn't bother coming back, because we'll be on our way to him—and we'll have no problem making a few pit stops and spending some quality time with his family members along the way. After we visit yours. Then you'll both have a family emergency on your hands."

Underneath me, I feel Preston's entire body tense and my heart jumps to my throat...only to make a U-turn a second later when Juan's ringtone goes off.

I'm about to piss myself until I realize my phone's not in the trunk with me. I must have dropped it outside the closet during all the commotion.

"What the fuck is that?"

"Not sure," the other guy answers. "Some chick he was screwing probably left her phone behind. Wouldn't be the first time. You know how the clingy ones are, always looking for a reason to come back and get more of that vitamin D."

Wow, this Max guy is super charming. A real Casanova that one.

The other guy grunts. "Ain't that the truth."

Soon after, their voices become distant and there's nothing but silence. Before I can speak, Preston clamps a hand over my mouth.

After what feels like an eternity, he whispers, "Max should be back soon to let us out."

My lungs strain against my chest with those words and the already

confining trunk we're in becomes downright suffocating.

"Breathe, Kit. Everything's okay."

I clutch my throat. Everything is not okay. Far from it. I'm trapped in a coffin with the card shark of the underworld, and the people I care about are on the butcher's block.

I'm shaking, downright seething with rage that by the time Max opens the trunk and I climb out, it's all I can do not to wrap my hands around Preston's throat and squeeze.

"I owe you one," Preston says to the short guy who let us out as we exit the closet.

"Yeah, man, you do. I thought Matteo was going to blow my head off." He looks between us, his stare settling on me. "Who's the chick?"

I pick up my phone off the floor. "The chick has a name."

He starts to say something, but I brush him off and focus on Preston.

"You told me you weren't in trouble and they wouldn't come after me."

"They won't." His jaw hardens. "They're not the same people from last night."

I'm no longer seeing red, I'm seeing black. "Not the same people from last night? Like that somehow makes all this better?" I shove him. "They just threatened to go after your family. I know you don't want to talk to Asher, but he doesn't deserve to be killed over your fuckups."

"Hey, relax, doll face," Preston's friend interjects.

I glare at him. "Stay out of this. And the next time you call me doll face, short stack—I'll rip your testicles off and pretend they're a piñata."

He looks at Preston. "Chick's got spunk. She must be wild in bed."

"You have no idea," Preston mutters and I lose my shit.

I push him with every ounce of anger pumping through me. "Why are you such a sociopath!"

Preston motions for his friend to leave, but I charge at him again. "Don't you care about anyone other than yourself?"

He doesn't budge, as usual, he stands tall, completely unaffected, and it only makes me more enraged.

"Why do you like to hurt people?" My vision becomes blurry and my voice starts cracking, but I don't let up. I've snapped and there's no going back. I pound on his chest with my fists. "I hate you."

It's not a lie, I really do hate him.

I hate him for hurting me.

I hate him for making me think we could be friends.

I hate him for breaking me.

But mostly? I hate myself for still trusting him, despite all the reasons he's given me not to.

He grabs both my wrists and backs me into the wall. "Calm the fuck down, angry girl."

"Go to hell."

He deflects the kick I send him. "Asher isn't in danger. I'd turn myself over to Campanelli before I'd let anyone else go down for my shit."

I try to twist out of his grip, but his hold is too tight. "Liar. You'd throw anyone in the fire if it meant saving your own ass."

"That's not true."

When I give him a look, he drops my wrists and sighs. "Okay, it's mostly true. But there are exceptions."

"Like what?"

"Who."

I blink. "What?"

"It's not what my exceptions are. It's more like *who* are my exceptions. I have three. My brother is one of them."

"Who are the other two?" I ask, my throat tight.

He holds my gaze for a long beat, those dark gray-blue orbs cutting through me like a blade, causing a rush of emotion to wrap around my heart and squeeze.

Preston doesn't have to say it. Just like I didn't have to ask.

Because we both already know the answer.

I'm his exception.

He leans his forehead against mine and I clutch his t-shirt, loathing him for making me feel things I don't understand. Despising this unspoken bond between us that makes no sense.

He catches the tear I didn't know I shed with his thumb. "You should go. I don't want you to be here if he decides to come back."

Taking a breath past the ache in my ribs, I peer up at him. "How much money do you owe this guy?"

"Don't worry about it. I got this."

My eyes narrow. "That's not what I asked you."

"I'll have the money by tomorrow morning."

"What happens if you don't?"

His silence hangs in the air between us like a bad omen and it makes my throat lock up.

The corners of his lips turn down in a frown, and then, as if we didn't just share a moment, he backs away; his expression flat, his eyes void of any and all emotion.

That vacant mask of his on display once again.

He points to the door. "Go."

When I start to argue, he takes hold of my elbow and leads me to the door. I barely have time to catch my shoes and purse he tosses behind me before it slams shut. "Have a nice life, Bishop."

Indignation pricks my chest as I bend down to put on my heels. The nerve of him throwing me out like I'm garbage when I was only trying to make sure he didn't end up dead in a ditch somewhere.

Excuse me for daring to give a shit.

I curse when my foot slips and I nearly break an ankle. I hate these stupid death traps.

That's a lie, they're secretly my favorite, but every time I take them out, stick my foot inside, and start the tedious process of lacing them up my calf, I'm reminded that a few hours of pretty aren't worth the effort it takes to put them on or take them off.

Until the next time that is. My love affair with these shoes is a vicious cycle.

It hits me approximately ten minutes later when I'm exiting the grungy motel and getting into a cab.

I didn't take my shoes off last night. Preston did.

He didn't take a scissor or knife to them either. He went through the monotonous process of undoing each knot, and then unraveling each delicate lace strap from my calf and then my ankle so he could take them off.

I'm still thinking about him taking off my shoes twenty minutes into the third workshop I managed to make it to.

He did that for a girl he can't stand. A girl he threw out of his crappy motel room because he wanted to protect her.

No strings attached.

I never in my life thought I'd say this about Preston, but he's exactly what I need.

I hate him, but I trust him. He's not too fond of me either, but he'll protect me.

He needs the money, and I need a husband.

A husband with no strings, and no feelings. A husband who can hold up his end of a business deal. A man who knows how to con, because my nanna wasn't born yesterday.

The air around me stills, almost like the universe is agreeing with me.

A smile touches my face as the meeting ends. The only thing I have to do now is excuse myself from the rest of the day's workshops, take a shower, and trek back to that god-awful motel.

So I can save my soon-to-be husband's ass.

Kit

Chapter 3

“*K* it, a word please.”

My boss’s voice has me skidding to a stop when I’m halfway out the door. Juan shoots me a look of sympathy before he skedaddles out of the room. Can’t say I blame him, I’m not looking forward to this conversation either.

I hold my head high as I turn to face her, something I give myself credit for considering my disaster of an appearance.

Her glare is scrutinizing. “Rough night?”

For once, I don’t crumble. “Yeah, as a matter of fact, it was. You see, this girl I was into set me up to have sex with some old guy who happens to be my new boss.” I place a hand on my hip. “After she gave me drugs.”

Her expression falters. “Well, when you put it like that, I sound like an even bigger bitch.” She blows out a breath. “Clearly, I misconstrued things between us last night.”

“How exactly do you misconstrue not telling someone you were about to have sex with that there was another person involved? After you put a blindfold on them. There’s a name for that, you know.”

Sick. Unethical. *Nonconsensual*.

She has the good grace to look embarrassed. “Listen, for what it’s worth, I was wrong and I’m sorry. I truly never meant to hurt you or put you in such an uncomfortable position.”

I fidget and look down. “I can’t tell if you actually mean that or if it’s something HR told you to say.”

“We don’t have an HR department. But for the record, I like you. I think

you're cute and fun. However, my current situation doesn't permit me pursuing other relationships. It's something I should have been upfront with you about before anything happened between us. Looking back, I didn't think it would be a big deal. Probably because I failed to realize how serious your feelings for me were. I never should have let things get as far as they did."

It's not so much what she's saying, it's what she isn't saying. The lines she's making me read between.

"I don't even know how to respond to that." A blast of perseverance hits me and I find my inner strength. "Actually, I do. First—you knew damn well I had feelings for you. I might not be as put together or posh as you are, but I'm the most upfront and straightforward person I know. You let things get as far as they did because you wanted them to. Don't stand there and act like I was some lovesick puppy following you around and it was one-sided. Put your big girl panties on and own your shit, Jess. Second—if you think you can fire me without starting world war three, you're higher than you were last night." I stab my chest with my thumb. "I am a damn good worker. But unlike some people, no matter how bad of a position I might be in, I know I'm worth more than spreading my legs for some geezer with a Rolex. Therefore, I'm not about to bend over and let you give me the shaft."

She rears back as if I slapped her. And yeah, maybe the tail end of my statement was a bit harsh, but it's the truth. Jess is smart and capable. As a woman, I hate that she felt the only way she could save her business was by merging professionally and sexually with a rich guy who owns a porn company.

But as a person going through my own situation? I know sometimes we do things we don't want to in order to keep what we perceive as important from slipping away.

It's easy to judge others from the outside looking in while we sit perched on our own throne of hypocrisy.

Glass houses and all that.

"That was uncalled for, I'm sorry."

"No, after last night I deserve it." She smiles tightly. "As far as your job goes, I talked to Jared and we both agree we don't want to lose you." She takes out a sheet of paper and a pen. "After you sign this non-disclosure agreement, we can put this mess behind us."

I feel as though *I've* been slapped now. "Did you miss the part where I said I'm not going to bend over?"

She rubs her forehead. “I know you’re upset but other than apologizing, there isn’t much I can do about your feelings. I also have a business to protect. Last night was a mistake, we’ve already gone over that, but it’s not like me or Jared held you down and fucked you. Technically you gave him a broken nose, but you don’t see him pressing charges.”

She slams the paper down on the table. “You weren’t in danger, Kit. No one stopped you from leaving. Just like no one forced you to do anything you didn’t want to do last night. Don’t turn this into some hashtag me too movement and insult the women who have been raped.” Her lips pinch. “You want to keep your job? Well, so do we. Neither myself nor Jared deserve the bad press that can result from a misunderstanding. Sign it so we can move on from this and go on with our lives. Don’t make it complicated.”

I pick up the pen with trembling fingers. I thought what happened was indisputably on the wrong side of the coin, but Jess has a point. I wasn’t raped, and I was angry instead of fearful when I ran out of the room. Other women aren’t so lucky. They don’t get to leave situations like that without someone taking a part of them they’ll never get back.

When I think about what happened in that context, I can’t help but feel like I’m blowing this whole thing out of proportion.

And yet, as I press the pen to the paper, I can’t help but feel like I’m signing a deal with the devil.

I slide the document across the table after I’m finished, debating my next words carefully. It’s an odd time to bring this up considering the circumstances, but then again, she sprung a non-disclosure agreement on me out of nowhere.

“I know we’re supposed to be in Vegas until Wednesday afternoon, but something’s come up and I need to leave early.” When she makes a face, I add, “It’s family stuff. My nanna’s health is declining, and I need to take care of some things.”

She visibly relaxes. “Sorry to hear. Tell you what, take the rest of the week off. Use the time to clear your head and handle your personal stuff. This way, when you go to New York, you can bring your A-game.”

I had forgotten all about going to New York, but maybe not seeing Jess every day will make things easier for me. “Thanks.”

She goes to reach for my hand, but I pull it back and stand up. “I’ll be there bright and early Monday morning.”

There’s a million-dollar fine on the non-disclosure agreement if I break

my silence.

But the dull ache sitting smack dab in the middle of my chest as I make my way out of the conference room?

Turns out it's about as worthless as she made me feel today.

Jess's one-eighty was a hit I never saw coming. Other than last night, there weren't any warning signs. It was completely unexpected.

And that right there is the worst part about having your heart broken.

Reality versus expectation.

In my mind, I had already jumped ahead to Jess and me dating and getting our happily ever after. I had envisioned long nights spooning, hot sex, deep conversations, and a chubby cat named Whiskers—because Jess seems more like a cat person, and a bulldog named Lola would probably be too slobbery and high-maintenance for her. Therefore, I was willing to compromise.

Not that it matters now. None of it does.

She's not the beautiful, smart, driven woman I thought she was. Her true colors are as shady as her *Chanel* handbag with bad stitching.

And to think, for once, I did everything right. Like getting to know her before diving in head first.

A lot of good it did me, though. Because here I am. Standing in an elevator, holding back tears as I try to figure out yet again why I'm so unlovable.

Why my heart isn't good enough.

Why my mind insists on building these forevers with those who don't even want a tomorrow with me.

God, I'm so tired of waiting for Mrs. Right to show up so we can ride off into the sunset together.

Maybe it's time I let go of the idea of finding her and focus on making my own dreams come true. I don't need a soulmate in order to have a career, travel the world, rescue Lola the bulldog, or accomplish my goals.

I've been on my own since I was eight years old. What am I so afraid of?

I step off the elevator and take a deep breath. I won't break, and I won't shatter. I'm stronger now.

Fuck finding Mrs. Right. Fuck love. Fuck anything that doesn't make me happy. I'm going to reclaim my life. Emerge from this gloomy cocoon a butterfly.

After I drag Preston Holden to the nearest chapel.

My nanna will be infuriated no doubt, but I refuse to let her throw some elaborate wedding and stick me in a fluffy cupcake dress all so she can gawk and have the last laugh.

The crotchety old bat is already getting what she wants by me marrying a guy. She doesn't get to control how I go about it too.

I breeze past Juan after I swipe my key and he stands up. "What happened?"

I pause on my way to the bathroom. "I'm a goddamn butterfly."

He opens and closes his mouth before he speaks. "Is that why Jess wanted to talk to you?"

I look down at the tiles before I spit out my lie. "No, she wanted to make sure I was still on board to go to New York next week."

The pressure in my chest tightens and I swallow the sob threatening to break free.

I'm a butterfly with broken wings.

Preston

Chapter 4

“*J*ust lay low and I’ll call you tomorrow morning.”
Max shakes his head when I hang up the phone. “I checked with everyone I know. Nothing’s happening tonight. It’s sort of strange how dry it is.”

Not the update I was hoping for. Just my luck. “If I didn’t know any better I’d think the universe was against me.”

He pops open the tab of his beer. “You and me both. You might be the bullseye, but my nuts are on Campanelli’s dartboard now too. How the hell are you going to come up with a million by tomorrow? Last week you could barely pay your room and board, and that’s with the discount I give you.”

I scrub a hand down my face. “I don’t know, but I’ll figure something out.” *I always do.*

He searches his pockets for his cigarettes. “You can call that rich brother of yours. The tattooed hottie with the weird hair sounds like she’s close with him.” He waggles his eyebrows. “Maybe if you fuck her again, she’ll put in a good word for you and he’ll cut you a check.”

“I didn’t—” I pause, bumming a cigarette from his pack before I hand it to him. “I can’t. Her plane left an hour ago and I didn’t ask for her number.”

It’s easier to let him think Kit’s nothing more than another lay at this point. He’ll have fewer questions about her, and I won’t have to think about her. Things are more manageable for me that way.

Just like it’s easier to let him think my older brother’s a jerkoff who won’t give me a cent of our father’s money because I like to gamble.

Technically, it’s not too far off from the truth. When I went to say

goodbye to Asher after the funeral, he tried to approach me with his own version of a good boy reward system.

Just like I knew he would.

Needless to say, I declined and got out of there as fast as I could. I already survived one Spencer Holden. No way in hell was I going to stick around to watch my brother transform into the next one.

I take a sip of my warm beer to wash the animosity down.

“He has to have an agent or something you can get in touch with,” Max continues. “A Facebook page, some bullshit like that.”

My already short fuse grows shorter. “Contacting my brother isn’t an option.” I take a long drag off my cigarette. “Besides, he won’t do it.”

That’s a lie. My brother would do it in an instant. But I haven’t reached the end of my rope...yet. And even if I did, I’d prefer to let Campanelli hang me.

“You won’t know unless—”

I slam my fist on the table. “Would you shut the fuck up about my brother? I’m trying to think.”

He raises his hands. “And I’m trying to help. I don’t know if you noticed, but Campanelli isn’t playing with a full deck. He hasn’t been for a while. It’s why Matteo runs most of his shit, otherwise, he’d be out of business because everyone who ever pissed him off would be dead.”

His hand grips the back of his neck. “I know how he operates, man. And Campanelli will get his money one way or another. It’s not a matter of if, it’s only a matter of how bloody the trail he leaves behind will be. And if you think he’ll listen to your sob story or spare anyone you love, think again. It doesn’t matter to him, it’s game over for everyone. The man is three fries short of a happy meal.”

A wave of panic washes over me. I can’t let that happen. *I won’t.*

Max—like anyone feeling apprehensive about being unjustly executed, has managed to poke at my weak spot. Fortunately for him, it works because I rise from my chair. “I’ll be back later.”

He gives me a puzzled look. “Where are you going?”

“Casino.”

That only confuses him more. “You ain’t got a pot to piss in, guy. This isn’t the time to be gambling away your last fifty bucks.”

I run a hand through my hair and grab my wallet. “I’m not.”

“Then what—” Whatever he was going to say falls by the wayside as he

puts two and two together. “Bad idea. You can’t afford to sit in a jail cell tonight.”

“I know what I’m doing. I was barely even arrested last time.”

“Barely even arrested,” he repeats to himself. “Her husband was a goddamn DA.”

I smirk. “Yeah, but it’s not like she pressed charges.”

He gestures toward me with the beer in his hand before he takes a swig. “And that right there is half your problem, man. You’re too cocky. Just like the rest of them pretty boys in the world, you think good looks and a big dick makes you invincible, but it really makes you stupid. Take my word for it, man. I’ve seen this scenario play out before with bad results. Your charms won’t save you from Campanelli, and neither will a night in the slammer, because he’ll be waiting when you get out. Or worse, someone will be waiting when you go in. Don’t do anything stupid, Preston.”

Kit

Chapter 5

“*I* thought you were gone?” Max questions as I make my way to the front desk.

“I did leave, but I came back.” I straighten my spine, ignoring the way his eyes drop to my boobs. “And I’d really appreciate it if you could give me Preston’s room number.”

Between my anger over Preston throwing me out, my shoe situation, and not remembering the journey to his humble abode in the first place, I forgot to look at it before I left.

In my defense, I didn’t think I needed to, considering I had no intention of returning.

He leans back in his seat. “He said your plane left this afternoon.”

Now I’m the one who’s confused. Why would Preston tell him that? He doesn’t even know how long I’m here for.

I wave a hand because none of that matters. Due to Juan filling me in on what happened between him and Ronald while I was getting ready, I lost track of time.

“Can you just give me his room number please?”

He eyes me skeptically as he plucks a toothpick from its holder. “Can’t. None of the rooms have numbers.”

Disregarding the fact that *that* is a terrible system, I press on. “I’m cool with a map.”

He kicks his feet up on the desk. “Don’t have one.”

I smile tightly. “Perhaps a compass?”

He works the toothpick between his teeth. “We’re all out.”

My frustration comes to a peak and I slam the desk with my palm. “Good grief, dude, draw me a freaking picture then. I need to see him.”

His face scrunches. “Why?”

I raise my chin. “It’s personal.”

“Personal?”

Evidently, that’s the wrong answer for Preston’s gatekeeper, so I try again. “We’re friends.”

“You two didn’t seem very friendly earlier.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but we did spend the night together.”

“That was last night.” He chews his toothpick with more vigor. “He doesn’t like visitors. Especially the female kind who come by unannounced.” He winks. “He’s not into clingers. But they don’t bother me none.”

“I am *not* clingy,” I shout and his eyebrows shoot up into his hairline.

“If you say so.”

Trying my hardest not to let my irritation get the best of me, I place my forearms on the desk. “Okay, here’s the deal. You’re either going to tell me where his room is...or I’m going to take one of those toothpicks and shove it in your eyeball.”

He seems unfazed. “No, you won’t.”

He’s right, anything involving eyeballs makes me squeamish. “Level with me here, Max. What will it take for you to let me through the pearly gates so I can talk to Preston?”

He thinks about this for a moment. “You can show me your tits.”

“Hard pass.” I yank on his shirt. “And the longer you prolong this song and dance, the quicker that Matteo guy will kill you. Now do us both a favor and stop acting like the messiah of douchebags so I can save my goddamn husband.”

His mouth drops open and he stares at me like I’ve sprouted another head. “Preston’s not here. I had no idea you—”

“Where is he?”

He looks uneasy. “I don’t think you—”

My grip tightens. “Do you want Matteo to kill you?”

“He went to a casino downtown, you just missed him. But I really don’t think—”

I don’t hear the rest of his statement because I jet out the door.

Two cab rides and thirty-five minutes later...I spot him across the room in a swanky casino.

And my stomach drops to the floor.

Preston's not gambling like I thought he would be.

Instead, I watch as he leans in close to the attractive woman he's sitting next to at the bar. Judging by the way his hand is slowly moving up her thigh and she's giggling like a school girl, despite being a good twenty or so years older than I am...things are hot and heavy between them.

My heart jumps to my throat because Preston dating someone undoubtedly sends my plan straight to hell in a handbasket.

There's a peculiar twinge in my chest when he whispers something in her ear and she tosses her head back and giggles again, soaking up every drop of his attention like a sponge.

Like he's the only one in the room.

The one responsible for her racing heart, sweaty palms, and muddling thoughts.

The tiny hairs on my body stand on end as I continue observing them, seeing him the way she does.

The woman angles her body closer, completely hypnotized by his smoldering gaze, chiseled cheekbones, structured jawline, and those straight white teeth.

And I get it. I might not be attracted to him, but there's no denying his appearance is...aesthetically pleasing to the eye. Beautiful even, if his features weren't so jagged.

Heat invades my cheeks as I resume my examination of him through her lens. Great looks are one thing...but there's a certain quality radiating from Preston right now. Something that isn't so obnoxious. Something I can't quite put my finger on.

And that's when I realize. It's his confidence. His swagger.

There's a magnetism about him that's borderline seductive. Like a serpent carefully weaving a spell.

The ground trembles beneath my feet and an inexplicable weight compresses against my ribcage. Even though it's completely irrational, I feel like I've been betrayed somehow.

Frustration claws its way up my throat because I don't understand these disturbing feelings or what they mean. All I know is that it makes me hate him for being the cause of them.

My hostility grows when he gives her a devilish grin and whispers more sweet nothings to her, those deep dimples on display.

Whatever he says nearly causes her to melt right there on the spot. Part of me hopes she does so I don't have to watch this anymore.

I'm about to walk away, but then it dawns on me. Why is Preston spending the night flirting with his girlfriend at a casino when he has people after him? Surely, he has more important things to worry about.

That's when I notice something sparkly on her left ring finger. It's one heck of a big rock. Not something a person living in a motel could afford.

My spidey senses tingle as I continue my appraisal. I was so focused on Preston, I never took the time to look at her.

Everything from the red soles of her heels to the expensive silk dress she's donning tells me she's loaded. As if detecting my nosiness, her eyes drift across the room.

I swiftly dip behind a slot machine and follow her line of sight to where an older gentleman is playing blackjack. He's so into the game, he either doesn't notice or doesn't want to return the wave she gives him.

Disappointment flashes across Preston's face briefly during the exchange, but not one to be deterred, he gives her a coy smirk and says something that has the woman blushing.

I have to bite my knuckle to stop from laughing as I put all the pieces together. Preston's here trying to snag himself a sugar mama.

My amusement dies when she jots something down on a napkin and slips him a key card.

Sorry, lady. The position's been filled already.

Thinking quick, I rush over to the bar.

"There you are, baby," I coo as I wedge myself between their stools and slip an arm around his neck.

The only person more surprised than the adulteress by my impeccable timing is Preston.

"What the hell are you doing?" he growls low and deadly as I rise on my tiptoes and smack a chaste kiss on the tip of his nose.

Ignoring him, I turn to the woman and stick out my hand. "Hi, there. I'm Kit."

She shifts in her seat, visibly uncomfortable. "Shannon."

I give her hand a firm squeeze. "Now that we got that out of the way, Shannon, I'm going to need you to run back to your husband." I level her

with a stare. “Unless you want me to inform him that you slipped *my* man a hotel key while he was playing blackjack.”

She drops my hand like a hot potato. “I didn’t—I’m sorry.”

Preston’s arm swoops around my waist, tugging me back. “What the fuck is your problem?”

“Who me?” I question innocently as the flustered woman scurries off and I face him. “I don’t have a problem. Then again I’m not the one soliciting married women.”

His eyes narrow. “It’s none of your business.”

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong.” I take a sip of his beer, washing down my nerves. “I have a proposition for you.”

He snatches the mug from me. “Not interested.”

“You haven’t even heard it.”

He downs the rest of his beer and looks at the bartender. “You can put this on her tab.”

And then, like we weren’t in the middle of a conversation, he stands up, nearly knocking me over in the process, and storms off.

Swear on everything he is the rudest person I’ve ever known. I toss a few bills at the bartender and chase after him. “Preston, wait.”

His strides accelerate, giving me no choice but to jog behind him. “You know, it’s really not nice to walk away from someone who’s trying to help you.”

A middle finger in the air is my only response.

My simmering pot of aggravation boils over. “Why are you such an asshole? You were the one who ruined our friendship when you lied to me about the baby and then stuck your dirty dick in the love of my life.”

My outburst causes a few people to stop and stare, but I don’t care. I’ve tried to be mature. I’ve tried to be civil. I’ve tried to be gracious. And yet, he treats the dirt on the bottom of his shoe better than me.

“I never lied to you,” he calls out behind him.

“Yes, you did,” I argue. “In the elevator when I—”

He stops abruptly and I almost ram into his back. “Exactly, Bishop. *You*. I never told you anything.” He spins around. “You took what she said at face value and believed it. Hell, it was pointless for me to even go there in the first place. Biggest mistake of my life.”

I shake my head, not understanding. “What do you mean—”

“Why do you think I was in the cafeteria that day, huh? Here’s a hint. It

wasn't for the chicken salad."

It's like he just hit me over the head with a steel bat. So many horrific things happened that day, but it never once occurred to me that I was the reason Preston was standing there in the first place. The reason he almost died. Maybe even the reason he doesn't get along with his brother anymore.

I clutch my chest, the realization sinking in. "That's why you hate me so much, isn't it?"

"No, I never blamed you for me being there." He glowers. "But don't accuse me of lying to you back then when I had every intention of telling you the truth."

"Then why didn't you?"

He snorts. "Like it would have mattered. Your mind was already made up about me. I never stood a chance."

Before I can say a word, he takes off once more, leaving me in the dust.

"That's not true," I exclaim. "If you told me, I would have believed you. I would have—"

"Would have what? Accused me of being a user and manipulator again?"

His words are like a punch to the gut. Not because of the bitterness behind them, although that's a little daunting. But because he's not wrong.

I was so angry and hurt over Becca, I had him pegged as the villain no matter what he did. Not that it excuses what I walked in on, but maybe things aren't so black and white.

Maybe we're stuck in the gray area.

As much as I hate to acknowledge it, Becca and Preston had a relationship that had nothing to do with me. I can't imagine the pain of finding out the baby I was led to believe was mine for months...wasn't. God only knows what he must have been going through. It must have stung like hell.

I wasn't the only one she hurt and lied to.

Turns out a mental breakdown and three long years will give you some stellar hindsight.

"You're right. I'm sorry."

"I don't need your apology. What I need is for you to go back to wherever it is you came from and leave me alone."

And just like that, I'm back to wanting to deck him in the face.

I follow him out the front doors. "Why do you hate me so much?"

"I don't hate you. If I hated you I would have left you on the street last

night.”

Okay, we're making progress. “You have a point.” I gesture between us. “See? Look at us not hating each other. Now, about my prop—”

He walks over to the taxi stand, effectively cutting me off.

I stomp after him. “Dammit, Preston. Can you stay still for two seconds so I can talk to you?”

A vein in his forehead pulses as I approach. “Christ, you can’t take a hint. Go away.”

“Not until you hear me out.”

“You have one minute.” He motions to the taxi pulling up to the curb. “Make that two seconds.”

Adrenaline races through me and I blurt out the first thing that pops into my mind. “Marry me.”

Not many things crack Preston’s arctic exterior, but his expression changes in the span of a single second, going from confused, to dubious, and finally, shock. He’s so thrown off by my request, the person behind us cuts in front of him and takes his taxi.

Unfortunately, there’s another behind it and he gets inside that one. “You should lay off the drugs, Kit. They’re seriously fucking you up.”

I roll my eyes. “I’m not high, you ass. I’m being—”

He slams the car door, but I wrench it open at the last minute and get in.

Preston tries to get out, but the driver takes off. “Where to?”

“Stratosphere,” Preston grumbles at the same time I say, “Same place he’s going.”

Preston glares in my direction. “Stop following me.”

“I’m not.” I fish my key out of my purse and hold it up. “It’s my hotel.”

“Of course it is.” He looks at the driver. “You can drop me off here.”

I pull out a hundred-dollar bill and hand it to the driver. “Don’t listen to him, he doesn’t have any money. I’ll pay double for us both if you don’t let him out.”

“No stops,” the man tells Preston.

I grin. “There’s an extra fifty in it for you too if you circle the block a few times before you drop us off.”

“Done.”

Preston throws his hands up. “Unbelievable. In case you forgot, I’m on a deadline.”

“I know, and now that I’m paying almost two hundred dollars for fifteen

minutes of your undivided attention, perhaps you'll finally listen to my proposition. Unless you look forward to knowing what it feels like to drown in your own blood tomorrow morning."

His jaw works. "Start talking."

I fold my hands in my lap. "I'll give you the money so this Campanelli guy doesn't off you. I just need you to do me a favor and marry me."

His eyes dart around the cab briefly, like he's waiting for me to tell him we're on a hidden camera show. "Why in the world would you want to marry me? I thought you were a lesbian. I mean, I know I'm irresistible and all but —"

"Trust me, you're not." I exhale slowly, attempting to explain this the best I can. "I'm still very much a lesbian. Which is why my nanna refuses to make me her beneficiary. She's losing her battle with cancer, and when she drew up her will, she cut me out. But her will contains all the money from my parents' estate. The money I'm rightfully entitled to regardless of my sexuality."

He frowns. "But everything is yours when you turn twenty-five, remember? So even if she croaks tomorrow, you only have another year to go."

I smooth my hands down my pants to stop them from shaking. "No, I don't. She lied to me. Sort of. According to the family lawyer, my parents wanted it to go to me when I turned twenty-five, but my dad didn't want his money tied up in case we needed it, so he put my nanna in charge and left everything to her. He figured she would respect his wishes. He also didn't plan on both him and my mom dying when I was eight."

His frown deepens as I continue. "Anyway, she can legally do whatever she wants with the money. Including not give it to me because she doesn't like the fact that her only granddaughter likes pussy."

In the rearview mirror, I see the driver's eyes become saucers.

I snap my fingers. "Eyes on the road, pal."

Preston folds his arms across his chest. "What a cunt."

"I know. However, she said she'd make me her beneficiary if I married a man." I bat my eyelashes. "Do I need to buy you a pretty ring and get down on one knee, or will you do me a solid and accept my curbside proposal?"

I can see the wheels in his head turning as he drags a hand down his face. "The two of us getting married is a horrible idea."

Dread crawls up my spine. I wasn't prepared for him to turn me down. I

have no choice but to lay it all on the line. “Three years ago, Kyle held a gun up to my head and you traded places with me. Then you pulled me into an elevator and kept me safe. You didn’t have to do either of those things, but you did. I’d like to return the favor.” He starts to speak, but I raise a hand. “I know we’re not exactly bosom buddies and most of the time we can’t stand one another, but I also know I can trust you with my life. And I hope you know you can trust me with yours.”

When he starts to object again, I add, “I’ll give you two million dollars on top of whatever it is you owe Campanelli.”

The tires screech and we stop so short I’m pretty sure I’d be leaving a permanent indent in the back of the passenger seat if it wasn’t for Preston extending his arm out in front of me.

“What the hell?” Preston yells, but the driver ignores him and turns to me. “I will do it.” He takes my hand. “Beautiful pink-haired goddess, nothing in the world would make me happier than to be your husband.”

I blink, a little taken back. “Um, well, I suppose it couldn’t hurt to have a plan B.”

A low growl erupts from Preston. “Don’t you dare, Bishop.”

“Hey, I am a good man and good provider. I take care of my family,” the driver says emphatically. “Just ask my wife.” He kisses my hand. “She’s delightful, you will love her.” He wiggles his eyebrows. “We can all have sexy fun together, yes?”

Preston grabs him by the collar. “If you don’t turn the fuck around and start driving, the only sex you’ll be getting is my foot up your ass.”

He drops my hand like it’s a grenade and a moment later we’re weaving through traffic.

“Does this mean you’ll accept my offer?”

A crease forms between his brows. “No.”

I look out the window so he can’t see how disappointed I am. “So you want to die?”

“I’m not saying I couldn’t use the money, but I don’t—”

I whip my head around, beyond exasperated. “Seriously? You were willing to get it on with a married woman you don’t even know in hopes of scoring some cash, but you won’t help a girl who is begging and offering you the money you need to continue breathing? Jesus, I know you aren’t too fond of me, but it’s not like it would be real. It’s nothing more than a business arrangement. We’d barely see one another, let alone have sex. The only time

I'd contact you is if there was an emergency."

"Sounds like real marriage to me," the driver mutters.

"You know," I continue, "There are much worse things that could happen to you than having me as your wife." My chest stings, not only because every day that goes by is another day my uncle could possibly gain access to my parents' estate. But if I can't even get Preston—a gambler who hustles women for money—to agree to marry me, it goes without saying my chances of finding real love are bleaker than I thought.

I blink back tears. "I didn't realize death was a better fate than marrying me."

His expression softens. "It's not—"

"No, it's cool, I'll just marry..." I look at the driver. "I'm sorry, what's your name?"

His face lights up. "Kevin."

"I'll marry Kevin here. I think there's a chapel nearby, right?"

"Yes," he exclaims cheerfully. "But you need to go to the courthouse for the license first. You can fill it out online to save time. I'll have us there in five minutes. Three if I blow this light." He cringes. "An hour if I call my wife and tell her I'm marrying a rich American girl."

I paste a smile on my face. "Sounds like a plan."

Preston glares daggers at me when I pull out my phone. "You know it's illegal to marry someone who's already married, right?"

I don't look up from my device. "Why do you care? You declined my marriage proposal, remember?"

He punches the seat. "Because I don't think you should give her what she wants. Fuck, hire a better lawyer, go through the courts, but don't let her do this to you. Don't let her win, because no amount of money is worth giving up your soul. Trust me, I know."

Tears sting my eyes for a different reason now. "It's not my soul I'd be giving up." Clutching my arms around myself, I tell him my real reason for doing this. "She's going to leave everything to my uncle if I don't." Anger courses through my veins and I start shaking. "Why should he be rewarded for setting up the two people I loved the most in this world? Why should he get a prize for destroying a little girl?"

I tap my chest. "I couldn't do anything to protect my parents. I couldn't stop them from getting on the plane and I couldn't convince anyone to put away the man I believe to be responsible for what happened to them. I will

never get justice and it eats at my heart every time I look in the mirror and see them staring back at me. But this? Making sure he never gets a cent of what they left behind? That's something I can do. And I don't give a fuck if you disagree, Preston. With or without you, I'm still doing it."

As if on cue, we drive up to the courthouse.

Kevin clears his throat. "We're here." He goes to get out of the car, but Preston yanks him back. "Over my dead body, buddy."

My mouth drops open in shock. "Does this mean you'll do it?"

He gives me a small nod, his expression somber.

I'd give all the pennies in the world to find out what he's thinking. However, I know better than to waste my time wondering...because Preston doesn't show his cards to anyone.



"Drive-thru or indoor ceremony?" Kevin, who's still a little bitter about not getting hitched questions as we pull up to a little white wedding chapel that's aptly named after its description.

Preston checks his watch. "Drive-thru will be quicker."

"Thank you," I whisper, suppressing the urge to throw my arms around him. I didn't get the chance to thank him at the courthouse because everything happened so quickly. We were in and out in under ten minutes with barely even a word passed between us.

Our gazes clash and he inches toward me, making it hard to breathe. I feel like the bottom of the car is about to give way underneath my feet at any second.

His hand slides to my cheek, his calloused thumb brushing over my mascara streaks from earlier. "You might want to hold off on thanking me because I owe Campanelli one million. So, it's three million in total you'll be forking over." He smirks, pulling me closer. "If you want to consummate our marriage, I'll give you the best fuck of your life for free. But if you want more than that, it's gonna cost you."

I scowl at his crude offer. "You've got to be kidding me."

His nostrils flare and he clasps my jaw. The move is so unexpected, my breath stutters in my chest. "I'm dead fucking serious."

My heart pounds when he leans in, his lips a centimeter from mine. "This

isn't a joke, Bishop. It's your warning. Whether you ever cream my dick or not, consider yourself thoroughly fucked because you're about to marry Preston Holden. It's an honor that comes with a closet full of skeletons you'll never uncover but will incinerate you anyway if you're foolish enough to get too close to the fire." His fingers tighten. "I've destroyed everything that's ever been mine—do you really want to roll the dice and take that risk?" When I nod, the tip of his tongue flicks out to touch my bottom lip, intentionally provoking me. "Last chance, angry girl. Because once we do this, there's no going back. Are you one hundred and fifty percent certain you want to be my wife?"

There's no doubt in my mind Preston's being intimidating because he likes eliciting a reaction out of me, but it won't work. I'm not backing down. *I can't.* "Yes."

He tugs on my necklace, luring the poker chip out of my shirt as we pull up to the window. "You put a hole in my chip."

"I had to, it was the only way I could put it on my chain."

His fingertip traces the long line of my collarbone and I fight back a shiver from the contact. "Objects are no longer lucky if you alter them, Bishop." The pads of his fingers drum over my heart, matching the chaotic beat. "Broken things never work as good as they used to."

I open my mouth to speak, but he lowers his head, pressing a soft kiss to the crook of my neck. "Ready to do some business, *wife*?"

I pivot away. "Yes, *husband*. First order of business—time management. My nanna says we need to stay married for one year."

Horror crosses over his face. "A year?"

I bite the inside of my cheek to stop from laughing. "Also known as three hundred and sixty-five days, but hey, who's counting?"

"Hi," a man at the window interjects, his tone making it very apparent he hates his job. Before I can return his greeting, he rattles off a list of different packages.

I'm about to opt for the pink Cadillac one, because well, it's pink, but Preston cuts him off. "Standard drive-thru is fine. Less frills the better."

The man nods in understanding and we hand over our IDs and marriage license.

"Wait," I say when it occurs to me. "We don't have rings. Don't we need rings?"

"We have rings available for purchase here, miss. You can come in and

choose them yourself.”

“Standard rings are fine,” Preston grits through his teeth.

The man nods. “Okay, then.”

Preston shifts in his seat. “Anything else you neglected to tell me? Speak now or forever hold your peace.”

“We’re not up to that part yet,” Kevin, the driver informs him, much to Preston’s dismay.

I lick my lips nervously, trying to think of the best way to explain this so it won’t sound so bad. “Now that you mention it, there is.” I fidget, struggling with my next words.

“Spit it out,” he grunts as the man at the window starts speaking and the ceremony officially starts.

“Okay, don’t get mad, but you have to meet my nanna, or she won’t make me her beneficiary. You see, she wanted to choose the guy and plan this huge wedding, but I told her I was already dating someone who works overseas. She obviously doesn’t believe me, and as a result, she wants to meet and approve of my mystery man before she holds up her end of the deal.”

He makes a choking sound. “What?”

“I couldn’t let her choose my husband, Preston. What was I supposed to do? At least now, I have some control over my life. All you have to do is meet and charm her.” I bite my lip. “Well, that and act like we’re madly in love—this way when I tell her we got hitched on our own, I’ll be able to convince her to make me her beneficiary and give me a million-dollar advance.” I clap my hands. “It can be her wedding present to us.”

I hold out my fist for a pound, but he leaves me hanging.

“Everything will be fine as long as we stick to the script.”

The bulging vein in Preston’s forehead makes an appearance again, and I know he’s liable to snap any second. Then, as if things couldn’t possibly get any worse, a man dressed as Elvis languidly waltzes over to our car, belting out a rendition of the King’s, “Can’t Help Falling in Love.”

“Let me get this straight,” Preston barks above Elvis’s singing. “You want me to go to Connecticut and attempt to win over that evil prune you call your grandmother?”

“Oh, come on,” I argue. “You clearly have a thing for older women and have no problem using or sleeping with them. Just pretend she’s one of your clients. Cast your little voodoo magic and dazzle her, Holden.”

“For fuck’s sake, I’m not a goddamn sorcerer. And there’s no way in hell

I'm sticking my dick in your decrepit nanna, not even if you offered me five million dollars," he roars, causing Elvis to botch his verse and the clergyman—or whatever he is, to pause the ceremony.

"Is everything okay? Should I stop?"

"No," we shout. "Keep going."

Both the man and Elvis pick up where they left off and I focus back on my groom. "I'm not asking you to fuck her. I'm just asking you not to piss her off. As long as she thinks we're in love, and she likes you, we're golden."

Elvis holds out two small jewelry boxes and Preston snatches one. "You realize this is a terrible plan, right?"

"Do you have a better one?" I pluck the remaining velvet box. "Oh, that's right, you don't, because some mob guys are getting ready to chop up your body with a chainsaw and feed you your brain for breakfast."

"Which wouldn't be happening if you had minded your own business," he bellows.

"Well excuse me for giving a shit, asshole. And for the record, I didn't make you give him the duffle bag."

"So, I was supposed to let that Russian bastard shoot you? Jesus, you're a real—"

"Do you Preston Spencer Holden, take Kit Jameson Bishop as your lawfully wedded wife, to love and cherish from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, 'til death do you part?" the officiant says, cutting him off.

"Your middle name is Jameson?" Preston snaps, his lip curling more than Elvis's.

Irritation swells in my chest. "Really? My middle name pisses you off? Good gravy, it's not like I had any say—"

"I do," Preston snarls, no doubt to make me shut up.

"Ring," Kevin whisper-shouts. "You have to put the ring on her finger."

Preston tosses the jewelry box. "Catch."

The officiant sighs. "Do you Kit Jameson Bishop, take Preston Spen—"

"She does." Preston bangs on the side of the car. "Now will you speed this shit up? We chose drive-thru for a reason."

The poor guy's eyes dart between us skittishly. "As your lawfully wedded husband, to love and cherish from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness and in health, 'til death do you part?" he rattles without stopping for air.

“I do.”

Preston gestures to our simple white gold bands. “Are we done here?”

The man gives us an unsure smile. “Okay, by the authority vested in me by the State of Nevada, I now pronounce you husband and wife. You may kiss the bride.”

I hold up a hand. “Nope. That won’t be necessary.”

“The least you can do is lay one on me, Bish—” He grins menacingly. “Mrs. Holden.”

Every ounce of blood drains from my face and my stomach lurches.

I’m no longer a Bishop. I lost another part of my parents.

“Hey,” Preston says, his tone surprisingly soft. “I was joking.”

Elvis begins to sing again, but Preston sticks his head out the window and roars, “Put a sock in it,” before concentrating on me. “What’s going on?”

“My last name.” My head whirls with anguish and on instinct, I fumble around for the poker chip, but Preston’s large hand engulfs mine, keeping me steady.

“Please don’t make fun of me,” I whisper, embarrassed at my inability to keep it together in front of him.

His expression becomes intent, his focus never wavering from me. “You don’t have to change your name. Plenty of people hyphenate or choose not to take their husband’s name at all.” The corner of his mouth quirks up in a small smile. “I’ve never been a big fan of Holden myself. Makes it too easy for my opponents to make fun of me during a poker game.”

When I give him a questioning look, he starts singing the chorus to “The Gambler” by Kenny Rogers. Only he changes hold em’ to hold en’.

A laugh bubbles in my throat, not only because he’s serenading me off key to make me feel better, but because we got hitched in a freaking taxicab a mere few seconds ago. “I can’t believe I married you.”

He places his other hand over his heart, feigning offense. “Regretting that decision already? My singing must be worse than I thought if it’s grounds for divorce.”

“God, yes.” He looks genuinely offended now and it only makes me laugh harder. “I meant your singing. I don’t want a divorce.”

Instantly my laughter dies, and the air around us pulls tight, the full magnitude of our actions seeming to hit us both at the same time.

Nerves bunch in my belly as the realization of how much this will change everything crashes down on me like the world’s largest hammer.

Preston shifts in his seat and my hand slides to the back of his neck, clinging. Seeking comfort and reassurance from the only person who can give it to me. “What if this doesn’t work and I lose everything?”

He drops his forehead to mine and I see the resolve on his face, despite the wild thumping of his heart. “We’ve got this, angry girl.”

Memories slash through me and I nod, forcing myself to meet his gaze. “You make it sound like we’re some kind of dynamic duo.”

His thumb strokes the edge of my jaw. “That’s because we are.”

I bury my face in his neck and his arms wrap around me, enclosing me. Like his limbs alone can shield me from all the bad things in the world.

“You make it so hard to hate you sometimes,” I whisper into his skin.

“I know.” His voice comes out gruff, defeated.

We’re so attuned in this moment, heartbeat to heartbeat, breathing the same air. I’ve never been so fundamentally attached to another person like I am with him. There’s a pull between us, one that’s much deeper than attraction. Something more profound. A phenomenon that can’t be explained. A tangible illusion.

And even though our feelings for one another can flip on a dime, our connection never will. It’s secure, solid, stable. An inherent bond that’s unbreakable.

I’m his exception, and he’s my anomaly.

“This is nice and all,” he murmurs in my hair. “But unless becoming a widow in the next thirteen hours is part of your big plan, we should probably get a move on.”

His words are like a jumpstart and I spring into action. “We need to get to the airport.”

“No worries,” Kevin says, dabbing his eyes. “I will take the happy couple to the airport for their honeymoon.”

“Thanks.” I pull out my phone so I can book our flight. “There’s a red-eye that leaves in a few hours. As long as we have no major delays, we should land in Connecticut around five a.m.” When Preston balks I say, “I know it’s cutting it close, but there’s also a three-hour time difference that works in our favor. If everything goes according to plan, we’ll be back in Vegas by late morning.” I type in my credit card information and confirm our first-class reservation. “Booked. Now all I have to do is call my nanna’s assistant and inform him we’ll be there for a *very* early breakfast.”

“I have to see Max before we leave.”

I lean against the seat. “Checking in with your keeper, are you?”

His expression sours. “He’s not my keeper.”

Something crosses over his face then, but he tries to hide it.

My stomach dips and I’m about to interrogate him, but then he says, “I need to make sure he knows I’m not leaving town and setting him up to be killed.”

“Oh,” I whisper, feeling like an idiot. Here he is doing the right thing and I was preparing to rake him over the coals for it. “I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Expecting the worst from you.” I give him an earnest smile. “I know you’re not the same person you were three years ago.”

I know he won't hurt me...because there's no danger of falling in love with him.

Preston

Chapter 6

I cross my arms and stare her down, curious what's going on in my wife's head.

My. Wife.

Kit Bishop...is my wife.

I'm her husband.

Spin it however you want, it won't make it any less true.

Just like trying to ignore the possessive feeling that blazes like a hellfire whenever I look at her now, doesn't make it any less real.

Because it's there, and it's potent. And every time those sad hazel eyes peer up at me...it grows.

We've only been married twenty minutes and already I have a deep-seated urge to pummel anyone who dares to look at her the wrong way. A cardinal need to tuck her to my side and protect her from all the assholes in the world. Myself included.

A scoff pushes through my lips. *Who am I kidding?* I've felt the same way about her since the night on the bridge. A fake marriage doesn't change that.

It just gives those pesky fuckers called feelings a valid claim.

My blood quickens as I contemplate taping a neon sign to her ass that reads: *Property of Preston Holden. Don't Touch. Violators will get bitch slapped with my dick.*

Fuck, this girl drives me insane.

Not that I regret marrying her...I don't. Or rather, I don't regret not letting anyone else marry her. Especially some over-excited cabdriver she's

never met before today. For all she knows, the bastard would have married her, taken all her money, and then killed her.

But Kit doesn't think about those things; she chooses to see the best in everyone. Even the people she shouldn't...like her new husband.

Three years later and the girl still wears her ethereal heart on her sleeve.

Chalk it up to another one of her annoying traits that equally entices and pisses me the fuck off.

Kit squirms in her seat and it's all I can do not to grin. Long periods of silence make her uneasy. Particularly when I'm staring her down, quietly scrutinizing. She thinks I do it to get a rise out of her. I do it because I find her utterly fascinating.

I'm also quite fond of getting under that delicate skin of hers.

She fidgets, a tell-tale sign she's going to start babbling. As if on cue, she opens her mouth. "That came out wrong. What I meant was...I think we both misjudged one another. We were both hurt by Becca and I think we inadvertently put some of the blame on each other instead of where it belonged. But now that she's not around and can't come between us, maybe we can start over and be friends." She gives me a smile that's so damn hopeful and sweet it makes my teeth ache. "For real this time."

I sharpen my gaze. "No."

Her smile crumbles like an avalanche and I hate myself for causing such an abomination.

"Right." She turns her body away from me, looking out the window. "Should have seen that coming."

It's on the tip of my tongue to say something to ease the sting, but her phone rings.

It's just as well.

I don't want her to make excuses or delude herself into thinking that I turned into some kind of saint all because I stepped up to the plate and agreed to help her out of a tight spot.

My reasons for marrying her aren't as noble or as selfish as she thinks they are.

Life's full of tough choices...but you don't always get to make the choice. Sometimes life makes it for you.

"You gonna answer that thing?" I grunt when it rings for the second time.

My impatience quickly turns to concern when I see the uncertainty on her face.

“It’s Breslin.” She looks down at her phone. “I don’t know how she’s going to react to hearing the news that her best friend got married in Vegas —”

Thinking quick, I snatch the phone from her and throw it out the window of the taxi.

“What the actual fuck, dude?” Kit yells, diving for it a second too late.

I place one hand on her back and the other around her arm, holding her in place over my lap. “You shouldn’t be worrying about her reaction, you should be worrying about *mine*. You gave me your word, remember?”

Turmoil lines her face. “I said I wouldn’t tell Asher where you were, but Breslin’s my best friend. I can’t not tell her what’s going on.” Her eyes turn hard. “I don’t want to lie to her or screw up our friendship again. I don’t want to lose her.”

I can feel myself cave, because even though I’m not fond of my brother’s girlfriend, I know how important Kit and Breslin are to each other.

That said—there’s no way Breslin won’t tell Asher...and there’s no way my brother won’t bulldoze his way into my life. The fucker is as relentless as I am when it comes to getting what he wants.

Unfortunately for Asher, what I want is to not see or talk to him. I don’t need his judgments. I don’t need him to clean up my messes and then tell me how disappointed he is.

I don’t need him to stir up those old feelings of how my ultimate achievement in life will be living in the shadow of him and our father’s greatness. And I most certainly don’t need the reminder of everything I’m fighting like hell to forget.

I’d rather remember my brother the way he used to be—someone I cared about and had respect for—than watch him resurrect our father’s ghost and let his legacy live on.

Seeing him now will undoubtedly stir things, and if he makes the mistake of pushing me too far...he’ll end up getting caught in the crossfire of my wrath.

A wrath that stews in my subconscious like a volcano that could go off at any minute. A tempestuous need for revenge that makes my skin crawl just as much as my memories do.

Spencer Holden got the last laugh when he ended up dying before I could destroy him. And every day since then, I’ve woken up with the taste for vengeance.

But if I give into it, Asher's career will be ruined...and unlike his last scandal, he won't be able to recover from this.

Instead of sports reporters and fans referring to him as the talented son of a football legend. Or the guy with the killer arm who likes dudes. He'll be the son of a sick pedophile. No one in the industry will want to go near him ever again.

It's why Asher never went public with what I overheard him tell the police at the hospital regarding Kyle and our father.

Why he made a very sizable donation to the police department after the shooting happened and he inherited his will.

Asher paid them off with our father's money because he wants those secrets to stay buried.

He paid them for their silence in order to save his reputation.

Just like our father did to me.

On instinct, my body locks up and my muscles clench. It's best for everyone that I keep my distance...keep those skeletons confined.

"Preston," Kit whispers, bringing me out of my thoughts.

Her eyes are wide with panic when I look at her. Like she knows the small thread keeping me together is a second away from snapping.

Like she can see my demons.

I release my grip so swiftly she nearly faceplants. "I don't care about your little ya-ya sisterhood. A deal is a deal."

She edges away, righting herself. "I know, but I can't—"

"You have to."

She juts her chin out. "And if I don't?"

In one fell swoop, I grab her arms and haul her back on my lap, giving her no choice but to pay attention. And straddle me.

My dick twitches his approval of the current seating arrangement.

Kit, however, doesn't. She tries to wiggle away, but I don't let her. "If you don't quit acting like a Neanderthal, I'm going to introduce your nuts to a cactus while you're sleeping."

"We can discuss what you want to do to my nuts later, my blushing bride." She cringes, and I leer at her. "Right now, I'd prefer to talk about how I'll divorce your ass so quick your pretty head will spin if you break your promise."

Genuine hurt crosses her features. "You'd do that to me?"

"No." Relief flashes across her face and I run my nose along her throat,

inhaling that fruity scent of hers I can't get enough of. "I'd do something much worse." She tenses and my teeth graze the spot where her pulse is beating rapidly. "Like take every cent of your parents' money and leave you with nothing." I suck her skin into my mouth, intentionally marring her flesh. "That's how important it is to me that you keep your word."

I can feel the anger coursing through her limbs and I soothe the tender spot with my tongue. "I don't want to hurt you or break your trust, Kit. But you'll leave me no choice if you break mine first." I cup her face in my hands, forcing her to look at me. "Please don't do that to me, angry girl. I can take betrayal from everyone else in my life...but not you."

Whatever she sees in my expression causes hers to soften. "I won't tell them we're married or that you live in Vegas. I won't ever betray you."

"Thank—" White hot lust surges when she shifts, and her knee brushes my cock. "Kit."

She leans in close, her dainty fingers skimming my throat. "But if you ever use my parents or their money to threaten me again..."

I snatch her wrist when she starts to squeeze.

Unfortunately, it distracts me enough that I fail to deflect the knee she pulls back and slingshots into my sac. "I will shove a stake right through that cold heart of yours and watch you bleed out."

She hops off my lap and I clutch my throbbing balls. "Duly noted."

Moments later we pull up to the motel and I instruct the driver to go around back. Then I reach into my pocket and pull out a burner phone.

Kit makes a face. "I didn't know you had a phone."

"I don't."

She raises an eyebrow. "Then what do you call that?"

I bring it to my ear. "A secret that's none of your business."

She scowls and it's all I can do not to tug that plump lower lip into my mouth. Instead, I give her necklace a little tug. "I'm calling Max. I don't want you going inside in case Campanelli shows up." I jerk my head toward the driver. "But I also don't want him to run off with my wealthy bride. I'll be able to keep a better eye on you if Max meets me out here to talk."

"If that's the case, why don't you just tell Max what's going on over the phone?"

Angling my body toward her, I intentionally crowd her space. Perchance she'll understand how annoying it is to have someone poking their head in where it doesn't belong. "Because I don't want you to hear what we're

talking about. It's a private matter. Business stuff."

She starts to rebuttal, but Max picks up after the third ring. "Who's this?"

"It's me. I need you to meet me out back."

"Is this a setup?"

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "You think I'd be in a position to tell you if it was?"

"Shit, I knew that little pink-haired hottie was trouble. Should have known she was lying about being your wife."

I look at Kit, but she averts her gaze. "How do you know—"

"Give me a minute," he yells, cutting me off. "Gotta go get my gun."

"No," I say, not only because I don't want him falsely pointing it at Kit, but there's no doubt in my mind he's going to want to use it on me once I tell him I'm leaving. "This isn't a set—"

The line goes dead. *Perfect*. Just the state of mind I want him in before I ask him to do me the biggest favor of my life.

Kit

Chapter 7

“*I* don’t need a suit,” Preston snaps as I grab his hand and tug both him and my suitcase through the airport’s shops.

“You need something more appropriate than a t-shirt and jeans.” I lead him into a men’s apparel store. “How is my nanna supposed to buy that you’re an overseas spy if you’re not even smart enough to wear a jacket while visiting Connecticut in the middle of winter?”

Preston stops walking. “You told her I was an overseas *spy*?”

I amble over to where the suits and ties are. “I told her your job was top secret.” I thumb through a few rows of shirts. “Your chest is what? Forty? Forty-two inches?”

“Forty-four,” he bites out, nudging me out of the way. “Forget the spy shtick. We should tell her I’m an international stockbroker who works for a private firm that requires me to travel overseas from time to time.” He peruses the ties next, dismissing an employee’s offer to help. “I interned at a stockbroker firm when I attended Yale. It will be easier for me to bullshit her if there’s some truth in my lies and I’m familiar with the subject matter.”

“Works for me. Besides, she might not even care.” I leave out that my nanna’s under the impression that I still work at the coffee shop instead of selling sex toys.

Preston would have a field day with that information and we still have a flight to board.

He picks up a slim black tie and I crinkle my nose. “Don’t you think that’s kind of...plain? You’re supposed to be impressing her, remember?”

He gives me a cocky smirk as he heads for the dressing room. “It’s not

the suit that makes the man, Bishop.”

“Well, in that case, we’re really screwed,” I call out after him.

I’m trying on some sunglasses when the door to Preston’s dressing room opens ten minutes later and I nearly do a double take.

As much as it kills me to admit it, I have to hand it to him—he knows how to choose a suit. Everything from the solid black jacket to the matching slacks fits him perfectly. The dark tie which I thought would be understated, adds an element of sophistication and authority. It’s a great cut, one that showcases his build and highlights his razor-sharp jawline and prominent cheekbones. No one would ever guess it wasn’t professionally tailored, or that it came from a department store.

I’m feeling a little underdressed in my oversized sweater and leggings now.

“We closed five minutes ago,” a man reminds me curtly as Preston makes his way over to us, those eyes boring into me.

“Sold.” I swallow. “I mean I’ll take him.” I dig around my purse for my credit card. “It,” I correct. “We’ll take the damn suit.”

Preston’s lips twitch and he rips the tags off. “I’ll pay you back.”

“No, this was my idea, remember?” The man hands me my receipt and we walk out of the store. “You can put your clothes in my suitcase if you want.”

When he nods, I bend down and tug on the zipper. Unfortunately, due to my haste, I open the wrong end and my folder from the workshop I attended earlier falls out.

Before I have a chance to shove it back in, Preston picks it up and opens it. I can feel my cheeks heat as he reads it.

My embarrassment turns to confusion when a muscle in his jaw tics. “You work for Porn Rub?” I open my mouth to explain but then he booms, “You’re a porn star?”

I snatch the folder from him. “Wow, judgmental much?”

That only makes him madder. “About you fucking men on camera for money? You’re goddamn right I’m judging.”

I try to explain myself again, but his hands frame my face. The action is so unexpected it throws me off kilter. “You’re better than this shit. And this shit ends now, you hear me?”

“No, it doesn’t.” His eyes blaze, but I continue. “I’m not a porn star, I’m a social media manager for a company called Pretty Kitties. However, they

merged with Porn Rub this week, so technically I'll be working for them, too. It's complicated." I wag a finger in his face. "But for the record, even if I did do porn, you have no right to tell me what I can and can't do with my body." My nose turns up. "And don't you dare stand there and act like you're the new chief of the moral police. We both know you're not concerned about the porn stars you watch on your screen when you rub one out."

I can practically see smoke coming out of his ears, but he stays silent.

Stuffing the folder inside, I zip up my luggage. "Is there anything else you need before we check in?"

I follow his gaze to a video poker machine. "I'll meet you at the gate in a few."

I latch onto his arm, halting his movements. It's safe to say he still hasn't gotten a handle on his gambling issues if all he can think about is playing poker when there are people who want to kill him and we're about to board a flight.

"Not really the best time to try your luck, P."

Tension lines his face and I know he wants to argue, but I reach for his hand. "There will be plenty of time to gamble if we can get through the next twenty-four hours, okay?"

He squeezes my hand harder as he gives the slot machine one last glance. "Yeah, okay."

I let the hostile bite in his tone roll off my back as we make our way to the ticket counter.

"You brought a friend with you this time."

I'm so busy rummaging inside my purse for my identification I don't realize the pretty girl at the counter isn't talking to me. "We're not exactly friends, but yeah, we're together. He's my husband."

Her face twists in confusion when I glance up. Beside me, Preston goes rigid.

I hand over my ID and look between them. "You two know each other?"

I don't even know why I'm bothering to ask when I'm ninety-nine percent sure I already know.

Preston, as per his usual modus operandi, doesn't answer, but the girl gives me an icy smile. "You can say that." She presses down on her keyboard with so much vigor I'm surprised the keys don't fly off.

Yup, I was right on the money. The poor girl is yet another casualty of Preston's pecker. Maybe I should do something good for womankind and

insist my new husband wear a *ride at your own risk* sign around his neck.

We finish up at the kiosk and I glare at him. “Is there any woman in the tri-state area you haven’t screwed?”

I want to wipe the smug look off his face when he says, “Yeah, my wife.”

Disgust ripples through me as I breeze past him and find a seat in the waiting terminal. “You’re gross.”

“Wow, judgmental much?”

His mocking tone only infuriates me more. “About you being a skank and screwing countless women?” I smile sardonically and dish his own words back to him. “You’re goddamn right I’m judging.”

He plops down on the seat next to me. “I don’t screw countless women.” His voice drops low enough so only I can hear. “But for the record, even if I did, you have no right to tell me what I can and can’t do with my body.”

My teeth grind together. I abhor when he turns the mirror around and highlights my own faults. “Point taken.”

A quiver whizzes up my spine when his lips brush the spot under my ear. I hate how sensitive my body is and how it reacts to his touch despite my brain’s reminder that he’s not only a guy but a jackass too. Almost as much as I detest the fact that Preston uses it to get the upper hand.

“Say the word and it ends.” I’m about to ask him to clarify, but he presses an open mouth kiss to my neck and whispers, “Tell me you don’t want me having sex with anyone else and I won’t.”

The conviction in his tone is so absolute I believe him, and the urge to tell him not to is so severe I have to gulp down the words.

My head whirls because my reaction makes absolutely no sense. Who Preston has sex with shouldn’t bother me. And when I take the time to stop and objectively scrutinize the thought, it doesn’t.

My body doesn’t agree though because my stomach churns and something that feels a whole lot like jealousy stirs in my blood.

I almost want to laugh when I realize. Of course, I’m jealous. It goes without saying that I’m supposed to be the most important person in his life now that we’re married. At least for the next year.

I have nothing to worry about, though. Preston’s incapable of feeling anything serious for anyone other than himself so there’s no chance of him catching feelings from a booty call and leaving me in the dust.

Pivoting in my seat, I look at him. “I don’t care who you sleep with. We’re only legally married on paper.” I point to my heart. “Not here.”

He holds my gaze for a beat, and I keep my face as impassive as I can. This way he can't use the opportunity to mistake my possessive feelings for anything more than what they are and use them to manipulate me...or alter our newfound business dynamic.

"First class is boarding."

Before I can say a word, he stands up and starts walking.

I follow behind him and even though his back is to me, there's no mistaking the frosty draft coming from his direction. To say I'm ticked off would be an understatement. We've only been married for a couple of hours and already I'm growing tired of his stupid games and how he keeps treating me like I'm no different than any other girl he encounters and that my sexuality doesn't matter to him.

My mind tries to remind me that not focusing on my sexuality and giving me the same treatment as someone who isn't gay is something I actually appreciate, but I brush it off. Preston *knows* what he's doing.

But so do I...and I will never be another notch on his bedpost.

I manage to catch up with him on the passenger boarding bridge. "You have no right to give me an attitude when you're the one testing me." I wait for him to react and when he doesn't, I add, "The jig is up, Holden. I know you wanted me to say yes so you could make fun of me and then gloat about making a lesbian fall for you. Sorry to burst your bubble, but I'm a lot smarter than I look."

He stops so abruptly the people walking behind us nearly topple over before he backs me into a wall. "No, you're not. Because if you were, you'd know I'd never do that to you."

I scan his face for signs that he's either playing me or joking, but there are none.

He places one hand on the wall beside my head and leans in. "My question wasn't a trial by fire, angry girl. Not only are you shelling out three million dollars, but you're saving my ass from being murdered. I figured the least I could do in return was ask if your husband sleeping with other women bothered you and respect your wishes."

The humble pie he's feeding me tastes like crap. "I'm sorry. I guess I thought that because you're always touching me, maybe you were trying to... I don't know—get your kicks by sleeping with a lesbian."

He looks so offended my heart pangs. "I touch you because there are times where I can't help but think you need basic human contact more than

you need your next breath.” My throat constricts as he continues. “And not for nothing, but *you* told me we need to make your grandmother believe we’re in love. It’s going to look bad, not to mention suspicious as hell if you recoil whenever I go near you, or God forbid kiss you, don’t you think? But don’t worry, now that I know how much my touch bothers you, I won’t do it again.”

Tears well in my eyes as he edges away. “And just so we’re clear—my desire to have sex with you has nothing to do with wanting to attain some kind of street cred or trophy because you’re a lesbian. You’re not a goddamn conquest to me. You’re *Kit*.”

He says my name like it’s the most important word in the whole wide world.

And when he walks away...he takes a part of me with him. A piece of me that only he understands. A piece that belongs to him and only him.

He wasn’t wrong when he said there are times where he can sense I need human contact more than I need air.

There are days I crave it so bad it brings me to my knees.

My parents were huggers, they were constantly giving me affection and drowning me in every ounce of their love, but when they died...they took all their love with them.

When they died...all that was left behind was a heart full of memories. An empty shell of who I used to be.

The person I never got a chance to be because I was robbed.

I was no longer Kit, the happy little girl with the best parents anyone could ask for.

My identity became Kit Bishop...orphan. *Hollow. Alone. Abandoned.* The rich girl with the dead parents. Along with any other labels people tossed at me. *Lesbian. Dyke. Freak.*

I miss being Kit. Just Kit. The Kit that existed before my world was unjustly turned upside down.

I miss being their daughter. I miss my family. I miss being loved by my *family*. The people with the intrinsic biological need to love me and never leave me.

Only they did. And even though it’s not their fault...it makes me so angry.

But I can’t tell anyone those things. Because even though people say they understand...they never really do. And even though people say they’re there if you ever need them or want to talk about it...they never really are.

They're moving on with their lives. They're falling in love, graduating college, starting careers, getting married, having kids.

And you're still stuck in the past...wanting nothing more than to go back in time to when your world was right again.

When you're a member of the dead parents' club...you don't get the luxury of moving on. There's no such thing for us.

Because you can't have any of those great accomplishments without the constant reminder of how the two people who should be there during the best and most important times of your life...aren't.

God, sometimes the grief is so strong, so profound I think maybe it would be best to join them.

And other times, the need to be loved is so paralyzing I can't breathe without the crushing weight of it suffocating me.

The only time it's bearable is when I'm with *him*.

Preston's cold front hurts like hell...but his warmth? The way he touches my face or wraps me in his arms and consoles me without me even having to ask him to? It comforts me in a way I can't explain. Almost like he knows what I need before I do.

I don't want to lose that. I don't want to lose him or our friendship that's not a friendship. I don't want our bond to break.

I don't think I'll survive it a second time.

"Preston." My voice cracks and for a second, I think he doesn't hear me and I'll lose this moment. Lose him.

But when he turns around, takes one look at my face, and opens his arms...I don't hesitate.

Like a boomerang returning to its owner, I launch myself at him. And he's ready for me. Preston wraps me up so tight it almost hurts. Almost like he needs this as much as I do.

"I don't want anything to change," I whisper, because I don't know how else to explain it. "There are so many things about you that bother me, but this isn't one of them."

I need this.

He snorts and holds me tighter. "You drive me crazy, angry girl."

I wrap my legs around his waist. "You drive me crazier." *Please don't leave me.*

He sighs, but not in annoyance, in defeat. "Think we'll ever figure this shit out?"

I lift my head off his shoulder and look at him. “Nope.”

I’m not trying to be cute or coy either. I truly don’t think our weird relationship can ever be figured out. It’s just one of those things that exist in the universe and can change with the wind.

Only, unlike the weather, the foundation of our relationship is permanent and secure. Whenever I’m with him, it’s like coming home after a long vacation.

On the one hand—it’s annoying because you have no food in the house. And if you forgot to take the clothes out of the washing machine or take out the garbage before you left...boy does it really suck.

But on the other hand—nothing beats the comfort of sleeping in your own bed. Or the familiar and safe feeling that immediately puts you at ease when you walk through those doors.

Not even when your belly growls and you realize it’s too late to order takeout. The faint stink of garbage is still lingering after you brought it out to the curb. Or you realize the god-awful mildew smell in your clothes isn’t going away after one wash.

You’ll take the good with the bad, because the good is so fucking good. The good is everything you need. It’s *home*.

“You’re my stinky garbage, Preston. And I don’t want to waste my time analyzing us or wishing you didn’t exist.”

His brows furrow. “I’m not even going to pretend I know what that means.”

“Don’t. It’s not important. Just know that despite how much you annoy me, you’re better than a vacation. I accept our weird.”

He fastens his hold on me and starts walking. “Yeah, that doesn’t make it any clearer, but considering the plane is going to take off any minute, I’ll let it slide.”

My heart thuds against my ribs as his statement from earlier reverberates throughout my head. “Wait, stop.”

He halts his steps. “What’s wrong?”

“If I ask you to do something, can you swear you won’t make a big deal, pretend like it never happened, and promise to never talk about it again?”

“Is this a trick question?”

I lick my lips nervously. “No. I...uh. I think you should kiss me. Not with tongue or anything, just a little peck. What you said before made sense. Couples kiss and if I vomit on your shoes...my nanna’s going to know

something is wrong. If we do it now, maybe it won't be so bad when we're there. Doing it now might desensitize me and help me get through it."

His jaw sets. "Are you asking me to kiss you or pop your arm out of your socket?"

I let out a huff. If we don't get this over with soon, I'll chicken out. "Considering my arms are fine, a simple kiss will do."

"Hold on to me, Bishop."

When I do, one of his hands cups my cheek while the other drops to the small of my back, stroking the length of my spine. The space between us surges with tension as we lock gazes, causing goose bumps to erupt over my skin.

I'm grateful he asked me to hold on now because I feel like I'm walking across a high-voltage wire that's suspended ten thousand feet above the ground.

If I'm not careful—I'll either plummet to my death...or be electrocuted.

A wave of dizziness washes over me when the hand on my cheek slides to the back of my neck and the fingers skimming my vertebra twitch, like he wants to go lower, but he's trying to be a gentleman.

When he leans in, my stomach buzzes right before it bottoms out entirely.

I don't know why I'm so nervous. It's just Preston. Home doesn't make you jittery. Home doesn't make your belly clench or your mouth go dry. Home doesn't make you so lightheaded you feel like you could pass out any second.

And home most certainly doesn't give you a look that makes your heart skip not one, not two, but three beats...and then tumble over itself.

Fuck a duck. Maybe I have an arrhythmia and instead of kissing Preston I should be running to a doctor. Oh God, I feel sick. This is too much. This was such a horrible idea. The worst idea I've ever had in my life.

"Prest—"

Gently, his lips brush mine, a whisper of a caress. Silk over satin. And that's how we stay for a bit—lip to lip, inhaling and exhaling the same breath.

Until I can't take it.

"Kiss me." I barely recognize my own voice it's so shredded. So raw.

There's a deep rumble in the back of his throat, a cross between a grunt and a hiss. It's a sound that resonates through my bones.

The air around us sizzles as he ever so slowly parts his lips. When I

follow suit, he bunches my sweater in his hand like it's taking every ounce of his self-control not to take it to the next level.

Take what he really wants.

He goes to pull away, but my tongue darts out and I lick the seam of his lips, seeking more.

I'm playing with fire, I know this, but I'm so curious about the flames.

I place a hand to his chest where his heart is pounding like a jackhammer. I find it fascinating that I elicit such a reaction out of him, so I up the ante by slipping my tongue past his lips and flicking the roof of his mouth. Craving a small sample.

I should have known better.

The tightrope I was balancing on snaps and my spine hits the wall so hard I gasp. That only provokes Preston further and tension coils low in my belly when he grips a fist full of my hair and groans my name before he starts feeding me his tongue in teasing thrusts, coaxing me...making me work for it.

I take the bait, nibbling on his bottom lip, gunning for those dark and gruff sounds of pleasure he makes. I don't think I've ever turned someone on the way I turn him on, and that...

A weird snapping sound jolts us mid-kiss. Like something is decompressing.

Preston appears just as confused as I am. "What is that?"

"I'm not sure..." I slap his arm when I realize. "It's the jet bridge. I'm pretty sure it's about to disconnect."

In an instant, I'm tossed over his shoulder and he starts sprinting. "Christ, don't they check these things before departure?"

"You would think so," I answer, my voice bouncing like a skipped record due to his fast running.

We manage to make it just in the nick of time.

We're both panting as we stumble onto the plane. Well, Preston is, I'm too busy trying not to faint due to all the blood rushing to my head.

A flight attendant starts lecturing us about safety and the importance of being on time for a scheduled flight, but Preston cuts her off with a quick, "We're newlyweds." And her demeanor changes entirely.

A few people clap as we shuffle to our assigned seats.

"Aisle or window?"

I'm uneasy for a whole different reason now. "Window."

He dumps me in my seat and takes the one next to me.

Terror has my chest growing tight and I clutch the armrest for dear life. Ignoring the blanket and pillow Preston offers me.

As strange as it sounds, I don't mind flying. I've never been particularly religious, but I find the thought of being close to the heavens comforting and I use the opportunity to talk to them. Catch them up on my life. Let them know how much I miss them.

However, I hate takeoffs. Given the fact that my parents died shortly after theirs...it both petrifies and torments me.

It's like finding out they died all over again. Only it's more morbid... because I can't help but think about things I shouldn't.

My biggest fear was that they survived the crash only to drown in the river later, but after bugging my nanna, she finally let me see the autopsy reports when I turned sixteen.

Good news? They didn't drown. Bad news? There wasn't a whole lot left of their remains.

Acid works up my throat and I close my eyes, trying to get a handle on my emotions as we circle the runway. But I can't.

Because thoughts that nightmares are made of keep barreling into me.

Were they in pain? Did they hold hands? Did they have enough time to tell the other they loved them? Did they think about me?

Instinctively, I run my fingers through the ends of my hair.

Did they get one last chance to look at the pink sunset? The one that lit up the sky the last time I saw them alive. The very last time I hugged them before they got in their car and headed for the airport.

Dread rushes through me as the engines get louder and louder and we start moving faster and faster. I'm regretting not taking my medication like I usually do before flights, but I was distracted and preoccupied. And now it's too late.

I try to breathe, try to tell myself that it will be okay, but neither my fear nor my grief is listening.

Just when I think I'm about to lose it and disturb the plane full of people trying to sleep and get myself kicked off the flight, a warm hand finds mine.

Preston's lips hover over my ear. "There's a better chance of getting into a car crash on the way to your grandmother's than there is of this plane crashing." He squeezes my hand harder. "But if it did...there's no way we would feel it because the sensation of pain wouldn't reach our brains in time.

The impact would be too quick and too severe. It would be instantaneous. Best way to go if you ask me.”

Something in my chest shifts and I take a breath. I can't think of a single person who would tell a girl who lost both of her parents in a plane crash something like that during takeoff.

Except for Preston.

Does it ease my anxiety? Not exactly...but there's something to be said for being the one to drag your monsters out from under your bed instead of the other way around. It gives me a sense of control.

It gives me a safe illusion.

He lets go of my hand and undoes his seatbelt, disregarding the flashing sign. “Get some sleep.” He pulls me into his arms and I burrow into his chest. “I've got you.”

For once, I don't argue. I close my eyes and drift off.

Because I know he does.

Kit

Chapter 8

When I was fourteen, Sara Little shoved me in a closet and told me I couldn't come out until I let Matt Molloy get to second base.

Of course, I didn't want to, but it was my first year of high school and rumors were starting to circulate that because I wasn't boy crazy like other girls...something was wrong with me. And combined with the fact that my nanna finally agreed I was *normal* enough to attend regular school again ... there was no way I could back down.

So, I did it. I played my hesitation off as nerves and let him slip his tongue in my mouth and his clammy hands up my shirt.

If I ever had a glimmer of doubt that I was gay before then? I didn't after that experience.

It wasn't so much his unskilled sloppy kissing technique, or how he treated my breasts like they were a radio in need of tuning that I didn't like—it was how *wrong* it all felt. How *unnatural*.

Like I was a mermaid washed up on shore and forced to walk on land.

Only I couldn't...because I had a big fin instead of legs like everyone else.

I didn't belong in their world, but I had no choice but to disguise my fin and act like I did.

I wasn't very good at pretending, though, and my nanna knew something was fishy. Later that year I found out she paid Sara five hundred dollars to force me into that closet with Matt.

The irony. I wanted nothing more than to come out of the closet and swim

in the ocean, and she was not only shoving me in one but insisting they chop my fin off.

She'd rather me not be free at all than be a lesbian.

There was a short period of time where I thought she might be right. After all, society didn't like mermaids...not unless we suited their agenda and they needed a token mermaid to prove to others they were tolerant and accepted all ocean life. But I didn't want to be people's token mermaid.

I didn't want the responsibility of explaining my world to others when I wasn't even sure myself. It was easier to pretend to be whatever it was I was supposed to be than what I was still struggling to understand.

So even though Matt didn't feel right...I made believe he did.

It wasn't until ten months later when I made it past second base with Jackie Lawrence in my grandmother's pool house...that everything changed.

Unlike with Matt, I was excited about hooking up with her. Not only because Jackie was pretty, popular, and had a fantastic rack—but because of how *right* it all felt.

Until my nanna walked in on us.

She screamed, kicked Jackie out, and had forbidden her from ever coming over again...and cried for the second time in her life.

She told me I needed to get over this disgusting phase and that people would never accept me or my perversions.

But, to my surprise, I stood up to her. I told her I didn't need her or anyone else to accept me, because *I* had finally accepted me. For the first time since my parents' death—something in my life made sense again.

I made a promise to myself right then and there that no matter how many guys she forced me to go on dates with, how many Saras she paid to shove me in a closet, or how many Jackies she sent away—I was done pretending to be anyone other than me.

I was a goddamn mermaid. And even if you cut off my fin...I'd still find a way to swim.

I never *once* wavered or questioned my sexuality after that day. Never had a reason to.

Until now.

Until Preston Holden.

On instinct, I touch my mouth. My lips burn, almost like he tattooed his kiss there.

Or maybe it's because he's an evil warlock...and it's my warning to

make sure it never happens again.

“Green means go,” Preston grumps from the passenger seat of my car, bringing me out of my thoughts.

“Huh?” I start to look up, but an obnoxious horn blaring has me stepping on the gas so hard I burn rubber.

“Pull over.”

“I’m fine.” I turn up the music.

Now, I don’t have to listen to him. Or think about how he kissed me like he was running out of oxygen and I was his only source of air.

And I...liked it.

My stomach sours. I’m such a dirty, rotten liar. I more than liked it—I *craved* it.

“Learn how to drive!” some man shouts when I veer into his lane.

I promptly give him the finger.

I’m a lesbian, dammit. One stupid kiss with my husband doesn’t change that.

Preston turns the radio down. “Bishop.”

Paying him no mind, I go to turn it up again but end up swerving due to the distraction. “You don’t control me.”

He grabs the handle on the door. “I’m not trying to control you, I’m trying not to die today, *Driving Miss Crazy*. Now pull the fuck over.”

When I do, he swiftly jumps out and walks over to my side. I’m tempted to peel off and leave him stranded.

Maybe then everything will go back to normal.

He motions for me to get out but I don’t budge. “I was driving fine.”

He gives me a dubious look. “Sure, if you were a blind woman living in England where driving on the opposite side of the road is standard.”

I push my door open and slam it shut. “It’s not the opposite side of the road for them, jackass. But of course, *you* wouldn’t know anything about that, now would you?”

Because he’s not different. He drives on the same side of the road as the rest of the country. But me? I’m England. Something he’ll never understand.

Kissing me doesn’t give him an identity crisis. It doesn’t let *her* and every bigot like her win.

His eyebrow quirks up. “What’s happening?”

The confusion on his face almost makes my heart cramp, until I remember he’s the reason for *mine*. “Nothing.”

I start walking to the other side of the car, but he catches my wrist and hauls me back to him. “Kit.”

I hate the concern in his tone. I hate that he’ll keep pushing me until I snap and admit these fucked up feelings that I can’t wrap my head around. “I’m fine.”

Hopefully that will pacify him so he’ll leave me alone. This way, I can breathe and sort out my mind. Realize that a kiss is just that—a kiss. It doesn’t mean anything.

“No, you’re not.” He studies my face. “I know you’re worried, but I told you, we’ve got this.”

I salute him. “Sure thing, chief.”

My voice wobbles and I weigh the pros and cons of throwing myself in front of the next car that drives by. Anything to get out of this conversation.

“Look, I can’t decipher whatever chick language this is, or why you’re acting stranger than—” He pauses mid-sentence and I see the light bulb go off. “The kiss.”

It’s like he’s pouring salt on my cut. “Wow, someone is awfully full of themselves.” I give him a snide smile. “Sorry to stomp on your ego, but it wasn’t all that great. We’re lacking a little thing called chemistry.”

Liar, liar, pants on fire. We have so much of it I’m surprised the snow-covered ground between us hasn’t gone up in flames.

His mouth curves into a sinister smirk. Like my answer amuses him. “That’s bullshit.”

Diverting my stare, I lift my chin in defiance. I need to nip this in the bud now. “Is not. To be perfectly honest, it was the worst kiss I’ve ever had.”

A pang of regret goes through me, but it vanishes when he pins me against the car.

“Look me in the eyes and say that.” He leans down, and even though it’s freezing outside, my hands become balmy. “I fucking dare you.”

It’s my move, I know this. Whatever I say or do next will change the course of history.

Change me.

But I don’t want to change. I don’t want to conform, and I don’t want to question everything that felt right in my life before he kissed me. I just want to forget it ever happened.

I won’t trade my fin for legs so I can walk on land with him.

Not even for one night. Or less—because knowing Preston he’ll be long

gone before the wet spot on the bed dries.

His gaze drops to my lips, lingering there. “You can’t hide or deny your attraction to me. Might as well put on your big girl panties and admit it.” Lids lowering, he gives me a slow perusal from head to toe that makes my heart pump harder. “Or better yet, take them off.”

Finding my resolve, I square my shoulders. “Never gonna happen. The kiss didn’t mean anything. I’m not attracted to you, dude.”

It’s not very convincing. Even I wouldn’t believe me.

The pad of his thumb brushes my bottom lip. “If that’s the case, do it again.”

Anxiety speeds through me like a rocket. “What? Why? No. We’re not in front of my nanna. In fact, I’ve been thinking about it, and there’s really no reason for us to kiss in front of her anyway. It’s kind of tacky, don’t you think? I mean who—”

“Stop babbling and kiss me.” There’s a dark note in his tone that sends a shiver up my spine. “If you really felt nothing, it shouldn’t be a problem.”

Rock...meet hard spot. In more ways than one, because there is definitely something very hard, and large, nudging my stomach. Something I know for sure I don’t want. I might like his lips, but that’s where this yellow brick road to hell ends for me.

“That’s dumb. I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t enjoy eating a donkey’s testicles, but I would never ask you to just to convince me you don’t.”

His hands fasten around my hips, pulling me up to meet him and I have no choice but to fold my legs around his waist.

“You asked me to kiss you at the airport and I obliged. I’m asking you to return the favor.”

Without warning, his lips coast along my neck and I suck in a breath. The sun is going to start rising any minute, and here he is mauling me on the side of the road where anyone can shine their headlights on us and see.

“That was different,” I pant, my breath coming out in rapid, visible puffs due to the cold and his teeth nipping at me. “It was business, and now that we’ve established I can kiss you without tossing my cookies...there’s no need to do it again.”

The tip of his tongue glides over my sensitive skin and I arch into him. “Stop being a coward and take what we both know you want.”

“No.”

If I kiss him right now...I’m afraid I’ll never be able to stop.

A snarl leaves him. “Then I will.”

Crushing his mouth against mine, he makes good on his word and takes the reins, leaving me helpless. His tongue plunges deep, and unlike our last kiss, he’s not teasing and he’s not giving. He’s downright taking. Bludgeoning anything in his path that prevents him from getting what he wants.

Including my defenses...because Preston’s breaking me apart with a single kiss. And by God, I’m not stopping him.

He’s so greedy—one hand threads my hair and the other drops to grab a handful of my ass as he coaxes me to open my mouth wider so he can explore every nook and cranny. The low, almost growling sound that emits when I slick my tongue over his, tasting him back, has me shaking with need.

My body’s response to him is downright scary. I’m so turned on. So pliable with a single kiss.

How far will I let him go? Where do I draw the line?

Preston’s not the kind to give any mercy. Which means I need to put an end to this while I still can. Before this gets even more dangerous for me. A kiss or two can be chalked up to an experiment, simple curiosity. But anything more is an undertaking.

It’s giving credence to these feelings.

“Preston,” I wheeze, struggling for both air and clarity.

“Tell me you don’t want this.” He sucks my bottom lip, pulls it between his teeth. “Tell me you don’t feel anything.” His voice is rough, thready, making my insides coil.

Hand clasping my nape, he gives me one last flick before his lips descend, peppering kisses down my jaw as he tugs on the zipper of my jacket. Good Lord, he’s insatiable.

“Tell me to stop.”

Evidently my vocal chords are on strike because the only thing that comes out is a whimpered moan when he licks the hollow of my throat.

My head lolls back as he pulls my sweater down and ventures lower, his stubble scraping the tops of my breasts. “I want these in my mouth.”

Sweet baby Jesus in a manger this escalated quickly.

My heart stops when he finds my nipple through the fabric of my bra, toying with me. “I want to hear you moan my name as you come down my throat.” Heat invades my cheeks with his dirty words and a sharp nibble steals my breath. “I bet you taste so fucking good.”

His fingertips trail down the side of my stomach and he snaps the waistband of my leggings. “Take these off so I can find out.”

A ripple of lust goes through me, hot and viscous, but it’s immediately followed by the tide of self-loathing.

He’s trying to take me out of my ocean.

Dread claws at my chest when another wave of desire erupts, sending me reeling. “No. Stop.”

He releases his hold so fast I nearly fall on my ass. “What—”

“I can’t do this.” I push him, needing the distance. “I don’t want to walk on your stupid fucking land, okay?”

He looks at me like I’ve sprouted another head. “I don’t understand—”

“That’s just it. You don’t understand, and you never will. I am a lesbian. And no matter what you say or do, I will never let you...” My throat swells with tears and I try again. “I’ll never let you, my grandmother, or anyone else force me to be something I’m not.”

He looks so dejected my heart falls. “I don’t want you to be anyone but you.”

He reaches for me, but I jump back. I can’t take having his hands on me again, or I’ll burst into flames.

“Don’t touch me,” I yell, much harsher than I intended.

His face turns ashen. “I might be an asshole, but if you think I’d hold you down and rape you, then you really don’t know me at all.”

A splinter of remorse goes through me. “I know you wouldn’t do that.”

And I shouldn’t be putting the blame solely on him for what happened. Not this time.

I was the one who asked him to kiss me at the airport. I was the one who *kept* the kiss going. I was the one who kissed him back before...because I wanted to.

Nausea barrels into me and I squeeze my eyes shut. *Jesus, get a grip, Kit.*

It’s like I don’t even know who I am anymore. The last twenty-four hours have been such a whirlwind I can barely see straight let alone think straight. Or gay as the case may be.

No wonder my system is so screwed up, it can’t tell left from right or right from wrong. It’s making me think I enjoy things I never would. It’s taking my bond with Preston and spinning it into something it’s not. Something it can never be.

As usual, I’m ready to jump into the fire all because I feel one tiny spark.

I'm pathetic. My desperation for love has reached such a sickening low, I'm seeking the opposite sex now.

My stomach spins for a whole other reason when I look up at the rising sun. "We need to go, we're wasting time we don't have."

Without a word, he heads for the car.

"Preston," I say, halting him.

I'm grateful when he doesn't turn around. "I think it would be best for us to forget this ever happened. We're both complicated enough as it is, we don't need to add any more logs to the fire, you know?"

I don't want to chase the burn this time.

"You're right. It was a mistake."

I flinch and my heart twists when he slides into the driver's seat and slams the car door shut.

Because he'll incinerate me.

Just like he said he would.

Kit

Chapter 9

“She can’t speak.”

I ring the doorbell, which is stupid because I already told them via the intercom at the gate that I was here.

Preston gives me a sharp nod. “I’m aware.”

“She also does this weird thing where she lights cigarettes since she can no longer smoke them. It’s probably—”

“Got it.”

That subzero front of his is firmly back in place again.

Sometimes I feel like I’m dealing with two different people.

There’s the Preston who gave me his lucky poker chip. The guy the organ in my chest is unconditionally attached to whether I like it or not.

And Preston—the asshole with the poker face of the devil and an ice sculpture for a heart. The one who drives me out of my mind and makes me seriously contemplate murder.

In other words, *not* the man who will charm my nanna like he was supposed to. I’m regretting that kiss even more now.

“I think our best bet is to let me do all the talking. All you have to do is sit there and look like you’re hopelessly in love with me, okay?”

Preston stares straight ahead. “I’m the window dressing.”

And that’s when the door opens.

“Reggie will be with you shortly,” a butler informs us curtly before he starts walking, gesturing for us to follow him.

If Preston’s impressed by his surroundings, he doesn’t show it.

Perhaps he’s disgusted like I am, given this place is a gaudy monstrosity.

Nothing like my parents' house which, despite its large size actually felt like a *home*.

But it wasn't good enough for my nanna, so she had to buy her own.

And what a shit-show it is. Porcelain floors, ridiculous marble statues, and expensive antique knickknacks that serve no real purpose—other than to remind people she's loaded, are just some of the things that surround me as the stuffy butler ushers us into the atrium leading to the enclosed, heated verandah outside.

Figures this is where we'd be eating, she knows I hate it out there. It feels more like dining at an upscale restaurant rather than a meal with family. Which is probably why she likes it, it's as detached as she is.

Another five minutes pass and when there's still no sign of Reggie, I start walking around. I'm hoping moving will reduce some of the anxiety I've got going on, but I can feel Preston's eyes on my back the entire time, silently studying me.

I'm about to go find my nanna myself when I hear Reggie's infamous throat clear. "Your grandmother said to go ahead and start without her, she'll be joining us shortly."

I open the glass door to the verandah. "Let me guess, she's busy thinking up more ways to make my life a living hell."

"She's with the doctor. She wasn't feeling well and took a tumble on the bathroom floor in the middle of the night." Remorse crosses over his features. "I had checked on her minutes before it happened. I thought she was sleeping."

The blood drains from my face. "Is she okay?"

"She's doing as well as a woman approaching her final stages of cancer can be doing, yes." His eyes land on Preston. "This the beard?"

My boy Reggie has jokes.

Palm to head, I gasp dramatically. "I'll be damned, Reg. Was that... sarcasm?" I pick up a cloth napkin and dab my eyes mockingly. "My baby is all grown up. Soon you'll be swearing and diddling the maids like the virile hot-blooded male you are."

In my peripheral vision, I see Preston's lips twitch.

Reggie's cheeks redden as we sit down at the table. "The lawyer should be arriving any minute." He pours himself a cup of coffee and takes a sip. "Probably running late due to having to be here for breakfast at this ungodly hour."

“Well, you know what they say. Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. I think my wife did us all a favor.”

Three things happen at that moment.

One—Reggie chokes on his coffee.

Two—Barry, the lawyer arrives.

And three—a maid wheels my nanna in.

Fuck several ducks. This wasn't how I planned to spill the beans.

I nudge Preston with my knee under the table, reminding him that *window dressings* don't talk.

My nanna shoos the maid away and waves Reggie over.

Barry's already pallid complexion turns peaked. “You got married?”

“Surprise.” Although it shouldn't be. I told him I was getting myself a husband.

Barry grabs a seat on the other side of me. “Please tell me you didn't run off and marry someone without a prenup.”

Both his statement and the severe prick in his words has me breaking out in a sweat. Making Preston sign a prenup never even occurred to me. Not once.

But it occurred to him. Because he threatened to take my parents' money. It's all I can do not to dry heave. I feel so sick.

My nanna looks at me then, disappointment hardening her gaze.

Without missing a beat, she gestures for Reggie to wheel her out of the verandah, discarding me like I'm nothing more than leftovers.

My heart drops to the floor. *I blew it.*

Barry lets out a heavy sigh. “How could you be so stupid, Kit?”

Before I can respond, Preston reaches across me and lunges for Barry, grabbing him by the collar. “Call her stupid again and I'll knock your teeth out, motherfucker.”

“I was only trying to look out for her,” Barry sputters.

“That's not your job.” Preston tightens his grip. “Now apologize to my wife for being a dipshit.”

“I'm sorry, Kit. I didn't mean to insinuate you were stupid, I'm concerned is all.”

I give Barry a small nod, I'm so stunned it's all I can manage to do. To say this breakfast meeting is off to a horrible start would be an understatement.

And although Preston is screwing up the plan, I can't bring myself to be

mad at him for defending my honor.

He's the only one here who would. Even if it's only for show.

From the corner of the room, I notice my grandmother. Cigarette in hand, she's watching the exchange with a sickening pleased expression on her face.

Either she really hates Barry and it amuses her that he's having his ass handed to him, or she's starting to believe this fake relationship might not be so fake. If I had to take a gander, I'd say the former, but I don't want to mess it up in case it's the latter.

When Preston releases Barry, I lean over and whisper, "Thank you. I've got everything from here, though, okay?"

I can practically feel my nanna's eyes burrowing through me and I realize *this* exchange probably interests her way more than Preston and Barry's did.

Which means giving Preston a high-five is out of the question. I rub his shoulder instead, trying to play it off like I'm calming my agitated husband down and whispering soothing words in his ear.

Evidently, it works because Reggie wheels my nanna over to the table and the butler takes our breakfast orders.

And then there's nothing but awkward silence.

My specialty.

"Sorry for springing this on you, but I'm just as surprised as you are, Nanna. I was away on business in Vegas of all places, and Preston flew down to meet me." I reach for the orange juice, ignoring the look Preston's giving me. "Anyway, he showed up with a gorgeous engagement ring and proposed, it was super romantic. So romantic we couldn't wait another second and we had to do it right there and then."

Preston squeezes my knee and I realize that my nanna's looking at my left ring finger. The one that doesn't have an engagement ring, but a simple white-gold band.

Nerves flutter in my tummy, but I continue. I can do this. I'm gonna knock her support socks off with a story that's so unbelievably romantic she'll keel over and have no choice but to believe every word I say.

"It's such a shame a mugger held me at gunpoint right after the wedding and stole it."

Preston, the professional con-artist himself, told me it's easier to bullshit people when there's some truth woven into the lie.

This is as close to our truth as it gets.

My nanna lifts an eyebrow and Reggie rolls his eyes. "How tragic."

“It was, I was scared out of my mind. One moment I was at the hotel bar celebrating, and the next, I was walking outside trying to get some fresh air and some scary Russian man was pointing a gun in my face.” I bat my eyelashes and look at Preston. “But like the white knight he is, Preston came to my rescue.”

My nanna hands Reggie her notepad. “Why were you walking around by yourself?”

She glowers at Preston. *Shit.*

“We got into an argument,” Preston pipes in. “I told her to go back up to the room, but she ended up following me outside.” He brings his coffee cup to his mouth. “My little dumpling just couldn’t mind her business.”

“You were being attacked by some scary mobster,” I grind out. “I wasn’t going to stand by and watch him kill you. Most people would have said thank you for intervening, ass—ace in the hole.” I grab a slice of toast and butter it, trying with all my might not to stab Preston with the knife in my hand. “It’s my nickname for him. He’s a bit of a poker player.”

Preston snorts. “Most people wouldn’t have involved themselves in the first place.”

I slam my hand down on the table. “Jesus Christ, you’re never gonna let that go, are you?”

He smirks. “Until death do us part, baby.”

“Don’t call me—”

Reggie clears his throat and my own tightens when I realize everyone is staring at us. Including the butler who’s back with our food.

After we’re all served, I take the folder out of my purse containing a copy of the marriage certificate and hand it to Barry.

Then I look at my nanna, silently praying she’ll still uphold her end of the bargain. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you, but I hope you’ll keep your promise to me.”

Barry opens the folder. “You can call and confirm yourself, but according to this, she is married.”

You can cut the tension in the room with a knife.

My breath stutters in my chest when my nanna turns to Preston, eyes narrowed. Preston doesn’t falter though, he gives her the same venomous stare right back.

I kick him under the table, reminding him that he’s not supposed to be pissing her off, but charming her. In typical Preston fashion, he pays me no

mind.

The atmosphere is so strained no one has even touched their food.

Gaze still locked on him, my nanna lights another cigarette...and then she blows on the end, driving the smoke directly into Preston's face. My guts clench, because not only is it one of the rudest gestures I've ever witnessed—it's clear Preston's not passing her little test.

I'm so screwed. Juan prancing around in a sequin ball gown would have worked out better for me.

Or Landon. Landon would have been the perfect choice. He's nice and respectful. He would never...

Oh, dear God. Fuck all the ducks.

I watch in horror as Preston plucks the cigarette from her, takes a slow drag...and then blows it right back in her face.

Reggie looks appalled, and Barry, who's coughing up a storm, looks like he wants to buy him a beer.

Unfazed, Preston gives her a smug smile, deep dimples and all. "Cigarettes are bad for your health, Grams." He takes another drag and stubs it out on her plate of uneaten food. "So is fucking over my girl."

My mouth hits the floor and Reggie shoots up from the table. "How dare you—"

My nanna shoves her notepad at him, cutting him off.

His face screws up in confusion as he reads it. "Are you sure about this, madam?"

That earns him a pinch. "She wants me to tell you the original agreement isn't off the table yet."

Relieved, my breath leaves me in one big whoosh until he unfolds another sheet of paper and says, "Provided you answer the following questions honestly and to Ms. Bishop's satisfaction."

"Fine. I'll answer—"

"Not you." Reggie's eyes swivel to Preston. "Him."

My nanna folds her hands in her lap, looking far too superior for my liking as Reggie continues, "Since your grandmother never had the chance to approve of your boyfriend before he became your husband, she wants to conduct an interview to make sure you were telling the truth about being involved prior to getting married. Based on those answers, she'll make her decision regarding whether or not she'll proceed with making you her beneficiary."

Oh, crap.

Barry looks at me. “I don’t advise going through with this.” He heaves a forkful of eggs into his mouth. “Then again, I also advised you not to get married in the first place.”

My spidey senses tingle. Barry’s right. It’s a trap. Her dislike for Preston aside, it’s clear she never had any intention of making me her beneficiary. She just wants to dangle the carrot in front of me for however long she can before she rams it down my throat and watches me choke to death.

Me and Preston...because every second that ticks by brings him that much closer to his own death.

Our differences aside, I can’t help but feel awful for pulling him into this situation now. He would have been better off with that rich woman at the casino bar.

Preston must be thinking the same thing, because when he pulls out his phone and looks at the time, his jaw tightens. “Let’s get this over with.”

The butler appears. “Is there anything else I can get you?”

“Scotch,” I mutter, even though it’s clear his question was directed at my nanna.

The butler scurries off and Reggie sits back down in his seat. “How long have you known Kit Bishop?”

Preston picks up his fork. “Three years, three months, and four days if you want to get technical.”

My nanna stiffens, it’s clear she wasn’t prepared for that answer.

Preston takes a hearty bite of his pancake. “Next.”

“Why did you want to marry her?” There’s no mistaking the judgment in Reggie’s voice.

Preston gives him a shit-eating grin. “So no one else could.”

Arrogant ass hat.

“Where did you attend college?”

Shame shadows his face and I want to warn him that my grandmother has a habit of sniffing out a person’s weakness and using it to finish you off like an opponent during a game of *Mortal Kombat*.

He recovers and looks her dead in the eye. “Yale. But I dropped out before I could graduate.”

“You and your wife have that in common,” Reggie says snidely, and I give him the one-finger salute.

Preston turns to look at me, but then my nanna scribbles something on her

pad. "Why did you drop out?"

The butler arrives with my scotch and Preston takes it from him. "It's personal."

My nanna's not happy with that answer and I blurt out the first thing I can think of. "His father passed away the same day the second semester of his sophomore year started."

I inwardly shudder. *The same day of the Woodside school shooting.*

Maybe that will soften her heart enough and I'll be able to borrow a million from her so Preston can give it to that Campanelli guy.

If not...

I close my eyes, hoping it won't come down to that.

"My condolences," Reggie says before he goes back to his paper. "In your opinion, what is Kit's best trait?"

Preston's response is automatic. "Her heart."

"Worst trait?"

"Her family." Preston pins my nanna with a dark stare. "Specifically, the vindictive hag who locked her in a basement."

Her eyes become tiny slits and dread claws at my chest. *So much for asking for a loan to save him now.*

Reggie shifts, looking uncomfortable. "Where was your first kiss?"

The hand around the glass of scotch tightens. "In an elevator."

I try to keep my expression neutral, but heat rushes over my face. I don't know why he would say that when there are two, no, technically three, real places he could have chosen to say instead. Why pick that one?

"An elevator where?" Barry asks appearing enthralled.

Preston takes a sip of his drink. "Woodside University. I was with Kit during the school shooting. Kyle was holding us hostage and threatening to kill us all. But, thanks to Landon sacrificing himself we were able to hide out in the elevator until the police showed up."

"Thanks to Landon and Preston." My hand goes to my necklace. "I wasn't being very cooperative and Preston had to drag me to safety. If he didn't, I probably wouldn't be here."

His lips turn up in a snarl and he looks at my grandmother. "I made sure she was okay when you couldn't even be bothered to show up at the hospital."

Whatever doubt my nanna had about me not knowing Preston is gone with that statement.

The woman almost looks sorry.

Either that or she ordered the butler to drug my food and I'm seeing things. I wouldn't put anything past her anymore.

Reggie looks puzzled. "I thought you said you went to Yale? What were you doing at Woodside?"

"Does it really fucking matter?" He leans back in his seat and folds his arms. "Who the hell are you, anyway? The only way a man would take this much crap from an old bag is if she's fucking, feeding, or financing him."

It's like he wants the mobsters to kill him.

Reggie turns his nose up. "I'm her assistant."

"No shit," Preston scoffs. "Given you're about as gay as the day is long I assumed as much."

I can't help but take offense to his mocking tone. "Something wrong with being gay, Preston?"

"Dammit, Kit you know I—"

Reggie drives his finger into the air. "You're out of line, sir. I'll have you know I am not a homosexual."

Clearly, I should have directed my question at Reggie.

Preston's nostrils flare. "I wasn't—"

A plate shatters against the floor and we all look at my grandmother.

"Madam, are you—"

My nanna holds a hand up, silencing him. And then to my sheer confusion, she crooks a finger at Preston, calling him over.

Automatically my hand goes to his arm. I don't know what she's planning on doing, but I don't trust her.

"I'm fine, Kit."

With that, he walks over and takes a seat next to her.

She shoos Reggie to the other side of the table before she writes something on her notepad and hands it to Preston.

The knot of tension in Preston's shoulders mounts as he reads it and I lean over the table, attempting to see.

Sensing my nosiness, she hits the side of her cup with a fork in warning.

My annoyance grows when she rams a pen into his hand and taps the notepad. I was hoping I'd be able to figure out what was going on by his response.

He scrawls something on it and gives it back to her.

And then there's nothing but silence as her gaze ping-pongs between us.

That is until Preston's phone rings and he pulls it out of his pocket.

Before I can inquire what's going on, my nanna jots something else on the notepad and thrusts it at him.

Shoving his phone back in his pocket, he scribbles his answer.

Then he stands up.

"Everything okay?"

I have no idea what to make of the look on his face, but it's enough to send my heart into the pit of my stomach. "Yeah. Where's the bathroom?"

"Down the hall and to the left," Reggie informs him and he takes off like a bat out of hell.

"What did you do?"

She rips up the paper from her notepad and shrugs.

I'm about to let her have it, but an unsettling feeling hits me full force and I dash out of the room.

The look he gave me was unlike any I've ever seen from him—almost like he was saying goodbye. Combined with that secret cell phone of his ringing, it's enough to send me into a tailspin.

My heart thunders in my ribs when I check the first-floor bathroom and find it empty.

The sick feeling in my stomach rises when I glance at one of the security monitors in the foyer and see a black SUV parked at the end of the long driveway.

An SUV Preston's walking toward.

I sprint out the front door, cursing when I reach the first gate that's closed.

I slam the buzzer. "Let me out!"

Not waiting for it to open entirely, I squeeze through it and run down the long, winding driveway that's just under a quarter mile, praying they haven't left yet.

My lungs cramp and burn and it feels like an eternity has passed by the time I turn the curve and approach them.

My heart folds in on itself when I see that both of Preston's arms are being held by two freakishly large men while another man stands in front of him, ready to attack...but not with his fists.

With some kind of metal baton.

Judging by the blood dripping from the corner of his mouth and the way his body wants to hunch over despite being physically detained by the men,

they've used it once already.

"Preston!" My voice comes out tattered and my stomach jolts with a brutal lurch.

If they kill him...they'll have to kill me too. It doesn't matter if we're hiding in an elevator or facing scary mobsters...we're a team.

"She has nothing to do with this shit. She's just some rich bitch I'm screwing." Even though he's trying hard not to break, there's no mistaking the pain he's in when he looks at me. "Go inside."

Not a chance.

The man before him takes a step back, getting ready to take another swing.

"Stop hurting him." I'm a shaking mess as I dig inside my purse for the jewelry box. "I have your money."

I charge toward them, but the SUV door opens and some scary man in a suit comes out and violently seizes my arm.

"I told you, she has nothing to do with this, Campanelli. Leave her alone —"

The baton flies into Preston's stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

"Stop! I told you, I have it."

Squinting his eyes at me, the man in the suit barks, "Who are you?"

He has the faintest hint of an Italian accent.

"I'm his wife." I hold up the jewelry box with my free hand. "And inside this box is a twelve-carat ring worth three million dollars. I have certified papers to prove it if you don't believe me. I'll even go with you to pawn it if that's what it takes."

"Goddammit, Kit, no—" A punch to Preston's face cuts him off mid-sentence.

"Change of plans." The grip on my arm becomes so tight I wince. "We're taking the *moglie* with us."

He starts tugging me inside the car, but the sound of a gun firing makes him pause. "Che cazzo è?"

"Some old woman with a gun," one of the men answers.

Craning my neck, I stare in shock as Reggie wheels my gun-toting nanna down the driveway. An out of shape, wheezing Barry struggles to keep up behind them.

Promptly, the men draw their guns and point them at her, causing Preston to fall to the ground with a curse.

Our gazes cross as he stands back up and I give him a shrug. I honestly have no idea what she's doing.

We all find out when she nudges Reggie and he pristinely states, "Madam wants me to inform you she will take care of whatever money is owed to you, provided you leave her grandchild alone and get off her property at once."

One of the men snicker and Preston mutters, "This is like bringing a spoon to a gunfight." He looks at Campanelli. "I'll get you the million by sundown if you let her go."

One of the men hits him with a gun.

"Stop hurting him." I struggle against his hold, but the goon starts bending my arm and I gasp in pain.

That only makes Preston charge for Campanelli...which earns him a hard punch to the kidney before he's restrained again.

He spits blood at him, twisting and foaming at the mouth like a rabid dog. "You better kill me because the next time you hurt her, I'll rip your throat out and feed it to the Russians."

The gun pointed at my grandmother shifts to Preston, but I yell, "Everybody calm down and shut up so I can give the man his money." I don't know who this girl taking charge is, but I like her. She's stronger than the girl who cried and shook during a school shooting.

Then again, there's only so many guns you can have pointed at you before you become desensitized to it.

There's only so many times you can have your life threatened before you decide to stop letting others control you and fight for it.

Cocking my head, I look up at the mobster holding me captive. "I have what you want, but the longer we stand here partaking in this pissing contest, the more time and energy we're wasting. You seem like an important man—surely standing in a driveway having it out with a gambling addict, his wife, and her senile grandmother doesn't top your list of priorities for the day. Therefore, why don't we get his debt squared away so you can go back to what you do best and handle your business?"

The corners of his eyes crinkle. "I like you." He taps his temple. "You use this to think instead of emotions like most women."

Dude couldn't be farther from the truth. Logic has always taken a backseat to my emotions. But considering he could kill me in the next five seconds, I'm not about to argue.

He looks at the guy with the baton. "Take note, Matteo. *She* gets me. *She*

also doesn't waste my time with bullshit. You should have tracked him down after the poker match and killed him that night."

It's safe to say we're a little lost in translation and *not* on the same page.

Nanna pokes Reggie and he clears his throat. "Madam will offer you two million."

Campanelli laughs. "Why would I do that when I can get three million from this girl?"

"Well, I mean pawn shops never offer retail value—"

"I just told you I liked you, Bella." He skims my cheek. "Don't ruin the start of a good thing between us."

"She's *married*," Preston says through clenched teeth.

But more importantly—gay.

"Not for long. I told you what would happen if you ever crossed me and stole my money."

"He didn't steal your money. Your money was stolen from *him* by some Russian guys. Trust me, I was there. Besides, do you really think he could spend that kind of money in a single night. And even if he did, don't you think he'd be hiding out somewhere more clever than an old woman's house?"

He starts to speak, but Reggie holds up a check. "Madame will offer you twelve million dollars if you leave both her granddaughter and her husband alone. For good."

"How do I know this is legit?"

"She'll contact the bank and verify the funds for you if you wish."

I look at my nanna, waiting for her to take it back and cackle as he kills us. But she sits stoic, watching Campanelli like a hawk.

Campanelli drums his fingers along his jaw. "Preston brings me decent money. Then again, I'll probably end up killing him sooner or later. He's not exactly a pleasant employee, you know? One of these days that little attitude problem of his is going to land him at the bottom of a lake."

Preston starts to speak, but I hold up a hand. "Believe me, I get it. I married the guy. But for twelve million he'll be out of your hair for good. Think about it, that's one million a month for a year. Although there's taxes so that—"

"Men like Campanelli don't pay taxes, Kit," Preston bites out. "Now will you shut the fuck up already so he'll take the offer and let you go."

It's taking everything in me not to tell one of Campanelli's men to whack

him. “Are you seriously telling me to shut up when I just saved your ass? Unbelievable. I swear to God you are the rudest, most—”

“Thirteen,” Reggie says. “Now please, sir, do us all a favor and take the offer. If you don’t, these two will keep arguing until *they* kill each other.”

He scratches his chin, pondering the thought. You’d think the man was being offered a sale on a used car after a major flood instead of thirteen million dollars.

“Fine. On one condition.”

“Are we supposed to guess?” Preston mutters after another moment passes.

The look Campanelli gives him makes me inwardly shudder. “If you ever step foot in Vegas again, I’ll kill you.”

Preston’s face falls faster than a child finding out the truth about Santa. Before he can do something stupid and argue, I say, “He won’t. Swear on my life.”

The look Campanelli gave him has nothing on the look Preston casts my way.

I can’t focus on that though because Campanelli releases his hold on me and walks over to Preston who’s still being restrained.

He twists the gaudy gold ring on his finger. “He better not.”

Before anyone can blink, he launches his fist into Preston’s groin. *Hard.*

I don’t even have balls and I’m recoiling.

The men laugh as they release him and he drops to the ground. The tendons in his neck straining as his face turns red with both fury and agony.

And because Campanelli is a special brand of ruthless, he issues him a sharp kick before he motions for his men to head out.

I’m so upset I’m shaking. I want nothing more than to give the douchebag a taste of his own medicine. But if I do, this will no longer be over.

Instead, I do the only thing I can. I situate myself on the ground beside a hunched-up Preston and rub his back, hoping it will alleviate some of the pain.

Campanelli spares me one last glance before he gets into the SUV. “I like you.”

That’s not creepy at all.

Preston grunts as they drive off. “I’m gonna kill that motherfucker.” Slowly, he staggers to his feet. “I would have kicked his ass if it weren’t for two of his bitches holding me back while another took cheap shots at me.”

“I know. You’re big and strong. A modern-day Tarzan.”

I reach for his arm to help but he shucks me off. “What the fuck were you thinking involving yourself? *Again?*”

Looking up to the sky, I stifle my annoyance. Only Preston could be internally hemorrhaging, or worse, and still find the time to yell about me butting into his life when he fucks it up.

“You know, I don’t remember Cinderella or any of the other princesses giving their heroes this much crap.”

The dirty stare he levels me with would be comical if it wasn’t so chilling. “What if he killed you? What if he decided to shoot you on the spot when you approached? Ever think of that?”

No. Not once. The only thing I could think about was saving him in time. “I—”

“I don’t want your coffin on my conscience. Do us both a favor and stop doing stupid shit.”

“I was only trying—”

“Well, don’t. Stop trying to play hero, Bishop. It won’t bring them back.”

It would hurt less if he rammed my head into the asphalt.

He starts hobbling back up the driveway, discarding me like litter on the side of the road.

Reggie and Barry have the good grace to look down, but not her. She’s eyeballing me, waiting to see what I’ll do next.

Her assistance always comes at a price. No matter how much my heart wants to believe that maybe she’s turned over a new leaf due to her illness, I can’t delude myself about what kind of woman she really is.

The only thing I can do is play into her hand so I can get what’s rightfully mine.

She’ll be dead soon.

“Thank you for what you did.” The words are like sawdust in my throat.

Preparing to follow my unappreciative asshole husband, I start to turn, but then Reggie says, “She wants the doctor to see him. After he calms down of course.”

I nod. Considering I’m almost positive Preston would never agree to go to the hospital, it’s not a bad idea.

“While he’s being checked out, your grandmother would like to discuss the estate with you and Barry.”

I eye her skeptically. “You mean it?”

She holds up her notebook and I nearly throw up in my mouth when I see what's she's written.

Grandbabies.

"You're unbelievable." I shake my head in disgust, preparing to walk away.

"She'll leave you your parents' house if you agree to try. You can move in as early as this week. She'll have everything prepared for you."

My heart thumps a painful rhythm and I close my eyes. I've wanted my home back since the day I was ripped out of it.

She'll be dead soon. Christ, it's like my new mantra.

Driving air into my lungs, I force myself to seriously consider her new term. It takes nine months to have a baby. Everyone knows it doesn't usually happen on the first try. Not that me and Preston will be *trying* any of that.

The woman only has a few weeks left. Months at most. This is an easy get around.

Besides, it's not like she'll park herself at the foot of my bed and demand to watch. *Although I wouldn't put it past the evil witch.*

"Fine."

I jog up the driveway, so I don't have to see the self-satisfied look on her face.

I'm getting part of my parents back, and it's all that matters.

Even if I have to give up part of me in the process.



Preston's almost reached the house by the time I catch up. Which is bad for him, because it's given me time to stew. "You had one job, Holden. All you had to do was sit there and look pretty."

I can practically see the tiny hairs on the back of his neck raise as he spins around. "You're fucking with me, right?" He inches closer and my breathing turns staticky. "Are you really going to stand there and blame me for putting your cunt grandmother in her place and for *you* being reckless enough to almost get yourself killed?"

Guilt, the traitorous bitch, snags me. He has a point.

"I'm not saying—"

"It's like you don't have a single drop of self-preservation in you."

Disgust coats his words and I inwardly flinch. “You’re low hanging fruit for all the assholes in the world.”

“Like you?”

“Yeah, like me.” There’s a genuine uneasiness in his eyes. A blemish in his stone-cold armor. “He could have killed you and there wouldn’t have been a damn thing I could do to stop it.” He punches his chest. “Do you have any fucking idea what that feels like?”

Not that it excuses his behavior, but when I look at things through his perspective, I can see how me showing up threw him off kilter. Preston hates being put in a position where he can’t manipulate or control the outcome. Almost as much as he hates being vulnerable.

I pretty much handed his enemy his Achilles’ heel on a silver platter.

But I’d do it all over again in a heartbeat.

Instinctively, I bridge the distance between us. “I do. Because he could have killed *you*.” My hand goes to his face, but he catches my wrist at the last moment, almost like the contact will scald him.

“I’m gonna get cleaned up and head out. Since your grandmother came to your rescue and paid Campanelli off, it’s safe to say you have this in the bag.”

Before I can protest, he stalks off, leaving me to choke on his dust.

As usual, he has this uncanny ability to make me want to push him off a cliff...and then turn myself into a body of water at the last possible second just to make sure he lands safely.

He’s a jerk. He’s mean. And he’s cruel.

But he’s Preston.

I see the parts of him no one else bothers to. The parts he doesn’t want anyone to see.

He’s approaching the bathroom when I catch up with him again and I sashay past him, locking the door behind us.

“What are you doing, Bishop?”

I grab the first aid kit and a bottle of peroxide from the cabinet under the sink. “Sit.”

When he gives me a look, I tell him, “We can either do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Reluctantly he closes the lid to the toilet and sits. “You’re annoying.”

Inhaling a breath, I place the supplies on the counter and stand in front of him. “And you’re merciless.” I pour peroxide on a cotton ball. “I don’t care if

you think being a good person and choosing to look for the good in others makes me stupid. I won't apologize for being who I am." My voice trembles and he curses under his breath. "I won't apologize for my emotions either because I'd rather feel everything there is to feel in this world...than *nothing* like you do. I'd rather—"

He cups my face, rendering me speechless. "I don't think you're stupid." I can almost hear his teeth grinding. "And I don't want you to apologize for being who you are, I just want you to stop..." His voice trails off and he looks away.

"Stop what?"

The fingers on my skin spasm. "Your mother's engagement ring, you never should have—"

"It was my only option."

"It shouldn't have been an option at all. Not for someone like me."

"This might sting." I place the cotton ball on his lip so he stops talking. "You gave the Russian dude a million dollars to save me without batting an eye, I'd say we're about even."

He snorts. "Not even close."

Ignoring him, I set to work on the cut on his cheek next. It's deeper than the others. "You might need stitches for this one."

He gestures to the first aid kit. "If there are butterfly stitches in there I can take care of it myself."

I reach over and get them. "You seem to have a lot of experience with this. Do you get your ass kicked often?"

His eyes turn to steel. "Not anymore."

Instantly my heart aches and I feel like a monster for my offhanded comment. "I'm glad he's dead."

"Pretty powerful words for a girl who hates death."

"I know."

His hand curls around my hip, stilling me. "You never mentioned you didn't graduate."

"Didn't think I needed to."

His face screws up. "The thought of returning to classes after a school shooting must have—"

"That wasn't it." I hold his stare. "It was more like what happened after the shooting." A flicker of resentment pops through the surface. "In a hospital room."

His dark eyes go wide, like he can't believe what I'm insinuating, but then his expression turns somber. "Shit." His grip on my hip tightens, almost like he's afraid I'll run away. "I didn't want that. Believe it or not, I do give a fuck about what happens to you."

"Right." I dab the cotton ball on his wound, being way less gentle than before. "Because nothing says you care like smashing someone's heart to smithereens."

His thumb strokes the flesh above my waistband. "I did it for you. I did it so you—"

"Be still my heart, you stuck your dick in her mouth for *me*?" Placing a hand on my chest, I mock-gasp. "How noble of you."

A muscle in his jaw jumps. "I wanted you away from her."

"Yeah, no kidding. She hurt you and it was obvious you wanted to fix things. Either that or you just had this insatiable need to screw her again."

He grabs my face forcefully. "You're so fucking wrong, Bishop. I didn't do it because I wanted to get off and I didn't do it because I wanted to fix shit with her. I did it to hurt you because it was the only way I knew you'd come to your senses. You couldn't see the forest through the trees back then. Someone needed to show you the right path."

"Did the right path involve me getting arrested?"

Shock crosses over his face. "What?"

I shake my head. "Doesn't matter, what's done is done. And technically it wasn't your fault, it was mine."

I try to turn away, but his hands slide to the small of my back, caging me. "What happened?"

Since there's no point in lying, I spill. "I was in a dark place after everything went down. I hung out with the wrong people and pushed the right people, like Breslin, away. Even my nanna's threats didn't work. Long story short—I met a girl at a club one night and after a few drinks..."

I peer down at my shoes, embarrassment hitting me square in the chest.

He tilts my chin up. "After a few drinks, what?"

I look up to the ceiling to keep the tears at bay. "You know me—I had tunnel vision and ended up falling head over heels." I sniff. "She wanted to go to some party for her agent—she was a model, which shouldn't come as a surprise because as you already know—pretty girls are my kryptonite. Anyway, I inadvertently gave her my keys and we took off. Next thing I knew, my car was sitting in the middle of someone's house and I was being

arrested for a DUI and a purse full of cocaine that wasn't mine. She was nowhere to be found...shocker."

"Christ."

"I know. I royally fucked up. Thank God no one was home or hurt. If it wasn't for Breslin, Landon, and Asher coming to my rescue, I would have been up shit creek without a paddle. Your brother bailed me out of jail and pretty much let me live in his home for a year while I was on house arrest. All three of them chipped in to help pay for my lawyer and they got me through one of the hardest times of my life. I don't know where I'd be if it wasn't for them."

He holds my gaze. "I'm so fucking sorry, Kit."

The sincere look in his eyes tells me he means it.

"Me too. But it's over and done now. It took a while, but eventually, I found a decent job I liked with a boss who was willing to hire me despite my record, and I got my life back in order." I laugh sardonically. "Or rather, I did. It's a bit messed up at the moment."

And that's when the Band-Aid on the dam comes off.

Big, ugly sobs wrench out of me. The impact of everything that's happened over the last few days hitting me like a nor'easter on steroids.

I'm losing everything I worked so hard to put back together. My stability, my sanity. *My sexuality.*

For the first time since my parents died, I was able to build a life that didn't involve my nanna's iron fist. But that's long gone now. And even though I chose this path in order to keep what little of my parents I have left...there's a small part of me that hates myself for giving in.

However, I know I'd never forgive myself if I didn't.

Without warning, he pulls me closer, his arms coiling around me snugly despite the momentous amount of pain I know he's in.

He doesn't pacify me and tell me it's going to be okay like Breslin would. He doesn't tell me to toughen up like my nanna always has. And he doesn't lie and say he'll always be there for me like every other person before him... because we both know he won't.

Instead—he holds me as I continue to shatter. Holds me until I've cried every bit of my heart out and there are no more tears left for me to shed.

He holds me until the hurt subsides and I can breathe again.

And he does it without any judgments or scrutiny. He lets me be me—even when what I am is one big mess.

“I’m sorry,” he repeats when the worst of my meltdown has diminished. His voice is so faint, I almost don’t hear him. “I knew it would hurt you, but I didn’t think it would...”

“Not everyone is a stone like you, Preston. Some people are more like Origami...we fold, bend, and change shape. We find a way to adapt when life throws us curveballs.”

But at the end of the day...we’re still paper. Still fragile.

Still a lightweight.

Which is why when Preston makes the mistake of leaning in...I do something I shouldn’t.

I bend and break...

Because I need this more than my next breath. I need to feel connected to someone. Even though it’s not real...I need the illusion.

And I can’t think of anyone better than Preston to provide it.

It’s not possible for me to ever fall for him...and he’s not capable of falling in love with anyone other than himself.

He’s safe. I can use him for comfort and he can use me for...

A moan leaves me when he pulls me onto his lap, sucking and biting every inch of my skin his lips touch. “So fucking perfect.”

I cling to his shoulders, desperately needing more. “Keep kissing me.”

He complies, and my hand goes to the nape of his neck, deepening the kiss. “More.”

I flick my tongue along his and he groans into my mouth. “Bishop.”

It sounds like a warning, but I can’t stop. If I do, I’ll go back to feeling dejected and miserable.

Or worse—empty.

His palms slide up my thighs, stopping to cup my ass firmly. “Do you have any idea how bad I want to fuck this perfect ass of yours?” He rolls his hips, creating a friction I’m not sure how to navigate.

My insides begin to shake in protest and the haze I was in lifts. “Preston.”

The lines of his face draw tight. “Take it out and ride it, angry girl.” A small smirk unfurls. “Maybe have mercy on me and suck it a little first. I am an injured man after all.”

I’d almost laugh if I didn’t feel so sick to my stomach. My hand flies to my mouth and for a moment, I honestly think I’m going to add insult to his injuries and puke all over him. “I’m so sorry.”

I’m not the type to use and lead someone on. I know what it’s like to be

on the opposite end and it's never a pleasant experience. "I can't do this."

He reaches for me when I get off his lap. "It's my fault. I forgot you wouldn't know how—"

"Seriously?" I back away, putting as much distance between us as I can. "You say that like there's something wrong with me because I won't drop to my knees and suck you off or fuck you. Newsflash, Holden. I'm not defective because I don't want your junk. It just doesn't interest me."

The muscles in his neck tighten. "You know, for someone who claims not to like cock, you sure like to tease it."

The statement physically hurts, his words an intentional sucker punch. "I thought you were different."

His gaze burns right through me. "Yeah, me too."

We can't keep doing this.

I've only been glued to his side for forty-eight hours and already he's turned my life upside down.

Because that's what Preston Holden does.

You let him get one foot inside your door...or worse, inside your heart... and it's utter mayhem.

Chaos and destruction.

"We can't kiss anymore. All it does is complicate things between us and make us cross lines we shouldn't. Lines we can't." My throat locks up as I continue. "We have an unexplainable bond, I'll never deny that. But it will never be enough...we'll never be able to give the other one what they need. It's not fair to either of us."

"You're right." He starts to stand, and it takes everything in me not to rush over when he curses under his breath and grips the ledge of the sink. "But I can't help but wonder. Is it really the kissing that upsets you...or the fact that you liked it?"

"I'm gay."

"And I hate country music. But I still listen to Johnny Cash."

"Are you really trying to compare my sexual orientation to something as trivial as your choices in music? That right there proves you don't understand a damn thing about this. Me being gay isn't a joke, it's who I am. I'm sorry if that's an issue for you—"

"The only person in this room who has an issue with your sexuality is you, Kit."

I open my mouth to tell him off, but there's a knock.

“The doctor is waiting,” Reggie informs us curtly.

I pick up the first aid kit off the floor. “My nanna wants her doctor to see you.”

He limps toward the door. “I don’t need a doctor.”

“My nanna said she’d go over the will while he checks you out.” I look him up and down. “You could be seriously hurt, let him examine you. Please.”

Brushing past me, he turns the knob. “Fine, but after that, you’re giving me a ride to the airport.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to protest, but there’s no point. It’s probably best we don’t spend any more time together. “Fine.”

With that, we go our separate ways.

Kit

Chapter 10

“Two bruised ribs. A concussion. A fractured finger. A laceration on his cheek that required four stitches.” The doctor clears his throat and pushes his glasses up his nose. “And some bruising in his genital area.”

I glance at my husband who has a dopey grin plastered on his face. “There she is. Told you my wife was hot, doc.”

Reggie and I exchange a glance. “Is he okay?”

“The bruised ribs will take a few weeks to heal as well as his finger, but other than that he should be fine in a few days. I’ve given him some pain medication to make him more comfortable, but you’ll need to keep a close eye on him for the next forty-eight hours. Make sure his symptoms don’t become worse and there’s no nausea, vomiting, memory impairments, or bleeding when he urinates. If so, bring him straight to the ER and call my cell phone.”

He hands me a bottle of pills. “What I gave him should last for a little while, but you can give him one of these every six hours. A little sooner if he’s complaining of pain. I’ve given him a splint for his finger, but I would like to see him in two weeks to see how he’s healing.”

My nanna ushers the doctor over. Whatever she’s written on her notepad makes him turn red. “Barring his symptoms don’t become worse and after the bruising in the area subsides, he should be able to resume his usual activities.”

I glare at her. “Please tell me you did not just ask the doctor when he can have sex. What is *wrong* with you?”

At that, Preston laughs. “My dick works just fine, Nanna.” He winks, his dopey grin growing wider. “I tested it out in the bathroom with your granddaughter earlier. Although she—”

“Preston,” I grit through my teeth before he says something he shouldn’t. “Spare everyone the details.”

I lead the doctor to the far side of the room so no one will overhear. “So that’s it? You sure he doesn’t need to stay at a hospital?”

The doctor shakes his head. “Not unless his symptoms become worse, no. Like I said, he just needs someone to keep an eye on him.”

“Right.” I can feel the color drain from my face. “Is there a place I can bring him...like a service that will do all that? You know...almost like a pet sitter...but for humans.”

The doctor raises an eyebrow and my nanna takes the opportunity to wheel her nosy ass over.

Thinking quick, I add, “It’s just...I have to go to New York for work in a few days. I don’t want to leave him without care.” I give him a saccharine smile. “I worry about my shnookums.”

From across the room, I hear Preston snort.

The doctor looks between us. “I suppose you can hire a private nurse if you’re that worried, but I don’t think it’s necessary. The worst should be over by then.”

“I’m fine,” Preston slurs. “Just drive me to the airport.”

“Airport?” Reggie questions.

I glare daggers at my husband. “Sorry, lovebug. We’ll have to reschedule the honeymoon until after I get back from New York. That’s what happens when you mess around with mobsters.”

My nanna pinches Reggie and thrusts her notepad at him. “Your grandmother said she’ll make the arrangements for a new honeymoon after you get back.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

With my luck, she’ll end up sticking us on a remote island together where our only option of getting back home is to procreate.

I hold out my hand. “But I will take the keys to my parents’ house.”

Reggie tuts. “It won’t be ready for at least another twenty-four hours. The workers are there now.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “Workers?”

“She hired a cleaning crew and she’s having it inspected. No one has

lived there in over fifteen years.”

I know.

She pinches him again. “She’s also having some renovations done, but the contractors won’t be there until next week.”

Irritation crawls along my neck as I turn to her. “I don’t want any renovations. Leave everything as is.”

The way they left it.

She flips her notepad around. *Too late, I already paid them. You’re welcome.*

If it weren’t for the fact she’s still alive and can change her will at any moment, I’d strangle her.

I wave Preston over. “Come on, let’s go.”

He jostles to his feet, swaying slightly. “If she’s gonna start changing shit, you should ask her for one of those saunas. Fuck knows I could use one right now.”

“Perfect, I’ll be sure to drop your ass off at the Four Seasons,” I snap, linking my arm with his to keep him steady. “See you around, Nanna.”

My husband, ever the polite one, salutes her with his middle finger as we walk out of the room.

And even though I shouldn’t, I can’t help but smile.



“*W*hat kind of drugs did he give you?” I gripe as I help him up the stairs to my apartment. “Horse tranquilizers?”

“I wish,” Preston quips, his voice sounding more slurred than before.

“That makes one of us. If you were any heavier, I’d leave you at the bottom of the stairs.”

“Come on, Bishop. I carried you into my place.”

“Big difference. Unlike you, I don’t weigh the same as a baby elephant.”

“Yeah, well, I told you I didn’t need your help in the first place.” He pauses. “And for the record, baby elephants only weigh two hundred pounds. I’m about fifteen pounds heavier. Maybe less, considering breakfast sucked and it’s almost midnight now.”

I fish my keys out of my purse when we reach the top of the stairs. “Well,

aren't you just full of useless information."

He waggles his eyebrows and gives me a boyish grin. "Depends on who you ask."

Maybe it's because I'm exhausted after a stressful day, but I can't help but laugh. "God, if that's how you flirt with women, I have a feeling I'll be the one and only Mrs. Preston Holden."

His expression is dour as I stick my key in the lock. "You will. I don't believe in marriage."

I open the door and take off my shoes. "Really?"

"Nope. It's nothing but a government-sanctioned union. Something people do to shut their friends and family up as some bullshit rite of passage. If you really loved someone...you shouldn't have to pay thousands of dollars to declare it in some fancy building full of people you barely talk to." He leans against the doorframe. "I'm also not too fond of being permanently tied to one person until the day I die. You shouldn't have to surrender your life or your freedom to anyone other than your spawn. It's why the divorce rate is so high. Marriage is a bet you're all but guaranteed to lose."

"Shoes," I scold when he starts to walk inside.

His tongue finds his cheek as he shucks them off. "And so it begins."

I roll my eyes. "The last part of your statement aside, I kind of agree with you. I've never been big on the idea of marriage. In the traditional sense." I raise a finger. "And before you say it's because I'm gay, that's not why—equal rights are an entirely different argument." I place my purse on the table and walk over to the fridge. "But marriage itself? I don't really get the purpose. You know, in the general sense. You shouldn't need a piece of paper to prove you love someone or that you'll remain faithful to them...you should just do it. Put them first and show them you love them every single day...including the bad days when it's not so easy. Fuck the paper."

He props himself up against the counter and even when I turn to fetch us something to eat, I can still feel his eyes on me. "You're a paradox, Kit Bishop."

I grab a carton of eggs from the fridge along with the rest of the fixings to make omelets since I never went food shopping before I left for Vegas. "How so?"

He hands me a bowl from the cabinet I can never reach. "You're an old soul with a young heart. I don't think they make them like you anymore."

I have to refrain from rubbing the painful spot forming in my chest as I

pour the eggs into the pan and face him. “My dad used to tell me they broke the mold.”

Those intense eyes slide over me again. “He was right.” And just as quickly the heat from his stare is gone and it’s all I can do not to shiver from the loss. “I’ve never met anyone like you...don’t think I ever will.”

“You sure that’s not the painkillers talking?”

“No, but now that you mention it, I’ll take another one.”

“You don’t look like you’re in that much pain.”

His eyes narrow, sizing me up. “Are you a doctor?”

“No, I’m just worried about you is all.”

“Clearly.”

An awkward silence descends. It’s not that I want him suffering, but it hasn’t been that long since he had his last one.

Fidgeting, I try to word my next statement carefully. “I *am* worried. You obviously have an addictive personality—”

“How very Freudian of you.”

“This isn’t a joke, Preston.”

His face is an impassive mask. “Do you see me laughing?”

Smoothing my hands on my thighs, I inhale a deep breath before I unveil the big, ugly elephant in the room we keep tiptoeing around. “Look, it’s no secret you have a gambling problem. And given your preference for drinking beer for breakfast along with all the empty bottles around your motel room... it wouldn’t be that much of a stretch to say you enjoy alcohol more than what’s considered healthy as well.” I chew on my bottom lip. “It’s only been a few hours since your last dose...you shouldn’t play with fi—”

The pungent smell of eggs burning has me turning back to the stove. My annoyance grows when I see the shit-eating smirk on Preston’s face out of the corner of my eye. Given his height and where he’s standing, he watched it happen.

I reach for the spatula and point it at him. “You could have told me.”

“And disrupt your riveting after school special where you make assumptions about a person you haven’t seen in three years based on a few beer bottles.”

“Fine—you might not have an issue with alcohol, but what about the fact that we were reunited due to you playing poker with mobsters? Call me crazy, but if you’re willing to play with dangerous thugs and die over a stupid game...I’m pretty sure it’s no longer a harmless pastime. It’s a serious issue.”

He runs a hand down his face. “You know what? You’re right.” I open my mouth to tell him I’m proud of him for admitting it but then he says, “I should have told Campanelli I didn’t want to work for him anymore. I’m sure he would have been very accommodating.”

I start to open my mouth again, but he slams his fist on the kitchen counter. “Newsflash...when you work for the mob, there are only two ways out—money or blood. And it’s usually the latter, because unlike some people, not everyone has a rich family to fall back on when shit goes south.”

Acid burns my throat. “You’re an asshole.”

He smiles, deep dimples and all. “Tell me something I don’t know, angry girl.”

My heart squeezes in protest, but I say it anyway because maybe it will get through to him.

Maybe no one ever told him.

“You’re one of the smartest, strongest, and most capable people I know. You could do anything you want in this world and succeed. It’s a pity you let all your potential go to waste and choose to intentionally fuck up your life instead.”

Maybe no one’s ever called him on his bullshit before.

He’s silent for several agonizing beats of my heart.

When it becomes more than I can bear, I turn and scrape the charbroiled eggs into the trash.

I’m preparing to bring the bag to the dumpster, but Preston snatches it from me. “I got it.”

Before I can say a word, he’s gone.

For a moment I’m worried he’ll leave, but when I peer out the small kitchen window above the sink, I see him toss the bag in the dumpster. The full moon and the dim streetlight above him illuminates his suit-clad form, and from this angle, he looks so much like the Preston on the bridge—my breath catches and I’m immediately brought back to that night.

He was nothing more than a silhouette when I first saw him, but I was completely transfixed. Heavy footsteps and the way his shoulders slumped as he walked to the other side of the bridge made it seem like he was carrying the weight of the world on them. Like he lost everything and was having the worst night of his life. Or rather, a lifetime full of the worst nights of his life—which was something I could relate to.

And even though his back was to me as he looked down at the river, his

misery was palpable—as if he was in a perpetual state of grief.

For one fleeting moment, time stood still and it felt like there was an invisible cord connecting us. A profound reason he was on my bridge that night...less than sixty seconds after I made the decision to join my parents, because the pain caused by another person I loved ripping my heart out had become too much.

But then he turned around and started walking to his car...and I realized he wasn't my kindred spirit after all...

He was my archenemy.

And if he hadn't been there and said what he said—if he hadn't given me the tiniest bit of hope...I wouldn't be here now.

“You, Kit Bishop, deserve the real fucking deal. The best kind of love. The constant, unwavering, selfless, for better or worse, never goes away and they'd do anything to see you smile kind of love. And one day, someone is going to come along and give it to you in spades. They're gonna crash right into you and never let go.”

Exhaling a breath, I shake the memory from my thoughts and focus my attention out the window again.

Curiosity holds me hostage as I watch him pull his phone out of his pocket and then check his watch. His gaze darts between the two for a beat, as if he's having an internal debate of some sort before he brings it to his ear.

I don't know who's on the other line, but it's obvious they annoy him based on the way he grinds his teeth and drags a frustrated hand through his short dark hair.

And then the strangest thing of all happens.

Out of nowhere, his face lights up and every ounce of his former irritation dissipates. I've never seen anything like it.

The conversation is short, a few minutes at most, and when it ends, he's back to his usual brooding self. Which only has me even more baffled because who in the world would make him instantly happy like that?

A curse leaves my mouth when it hits me. Turns out it's not who...it's *what*.

Asher once disclosed to me that Preston's gambling problem was so bad he had actual bookies on speed dial. He was so desperate to find his brother he attempted to track them down and offered them money to spill. According to the private investigator he hired to help, there were over five he'd been in

contact with since the age of fifteen. One was honest enough to admit he didn't know anything and no longer talked to him, but the others took the money and made up stories and locations that ended with Asher being even more depressed.

Right before I moved out of his home, he decided to give up and stop looking for someone who didn't want to be found.

I told him it was probably for the best, and Breslin and Landon agreed, no doubt relieved he finally came to his senses.

The promise Preston forced me to make curdles in my stomach as I watch him walk through the front door of my apartment. I hate not being able to tell Asher he's been found—almost as much as I hate not knowing what's caused such bad blood between them that Preston refuses to see or talk to his brother, but my husband's given me no choice.

Doesn't mean I'm going to sit idly by and let him pull this crap.

"I'm going to ask you this once and if I find out you lied to me, I don't ever want to see you again and the deal we made is off for good."

The tone of my voice tells him there's no room for argument, but he doesn't look worried. As usual, he's cool as a cucumber.

"I don't lie...I bluff. But for the record, I've never lied to you, Kit."

I want to tell him that right there is a lie because he never told me why he won't talk to Asher, or what the deal with the secret phone is—but then I realize he's right. Preston doesn't lie to me, he just chooses *not* to tell me certain things...which isn't any better. It's just a technicality.

"You omit. There's a difference."

He crosses his arms. "Are you gonna get to the point of this little interrogation?"

I look him right in the eyes. "Did you call a bookie and make plans to gamble before?"

"I live in Vegas and work for the mob. I have no use for bookies and haven't called one in years. Also, I'd never call a bookie to make *plans* to gamble...it's not brunch."

I poke his chest. "You *used* to live in Vegas and you *used* to work for the mob. And I don't care how the process works, I need a straight answer."

"No."

I match his stance. "Who did you call then?"

"None of your business."

"It kind of is."

He walks to the fridge and pulls out the carton of eggs. “How so?”

“We’re married.” I raise an eyebrow as I watch him take out a new pan. “You cook?”

“I cook.” He starts chopping up an onion like a pro despite a fractured finger. “I figure if you’re going to continue giving me the third-degree, I’m gonna need some sustenance. Preferably uncharred.”

“Does that mean you’re going to answer my question?”

He cracks some eggs into a bowl. “I already did.”

I’m pretty sure peace in the Middle East would be easier for me to achieve at this point. And way less frustrating.

“Fine, you don’t have to tell me who it was, but can you at least tell me if they’re dangerous?”

“No.” He whisks the eggs and adds the chopped onion. “Do you have any garlic?”

“No—you won’t tell me. Or no—they’re not dangerous?”

He swoops past me and opens the fridge. “No, they’re not dangerous. Your milk has gone bad.” He makes a face. “It expired last month. When’s the last time you went food shopping?”

I shrug. “I don’t really go food shopping. I usually order takeout or get frozen stuff I can microwave. Cooking isn’t really my thing unless it’s simple stuff like eggs and grilled cheese.” My heart rises in my throat. “It’s not like I have a family to feed, so I never saw the point in learning how to make full meals.”

He walks back over to the stove. “Most kids like grilled cheese and microwavable stuff anyway.” Something crosses over his face, but then he adds, “Asher and I used to bug the crap out of the housekeeper for grilled cheese and chicken nuggets when we were younger.”

“My parents didn’t have a housekeeper, but peanut butter and jelly sandwiches were my favorite.” I can feel the smile spread across my face with the memory. “Grape jelly and smooth peanut butter only, though. Cut into fours and no crust. It was my dad’s specialty. He’d always make it for us when my mom wasn’t home. He wasn’t much of a cook either...at all really. I once asked him to make macaroni and cheese from the box and he called my mom in a panic and almost passed out.”

Preston flips the omelet over in the pan and winks. “Guess that explains who you inherited your overdramatic side from.”

“Bite me.” I take two plates down from the cabinet with a heavy heart.

“My dad wasn’t overdramatic...but he was pretty particular about things. Not in a mean way...he just liked things to be a certain way and didn’t like to deviate from his routine.”

He flips the omelet again. “That’s not unusual. Most people don’t like change.”

“Yeah, he hated change.” I laugh. “My mom and him were so different. She loved to decorate and rearrange everything from the rugs to the furniture. Sometimes every week. It drove my dad crazy and he’d retreat to his office when it overwhelmed him, but he was too captivated by her to tell her to stop. I think she was the only person in the world who didn’t annoy him. He said in a world full of clouds and storms she was his sunshine.”

He divides the omelet and plates it. “Sounds like a man in love.”

I take my plate and walk over to the kitchen island. “He had a yellow rose delivered to her every day without fail.” I look down at my food. “Sorry, I’ll shut up. I always end up getting carried away and rambling on and on about them for too long and annoying people.”

“You can talk about your parents for as long as you want.” He joins me a moment later. “Yellow roses? Sounds like a hopeless romantic like his daughter.”

“I can’t decide if you meant that as a compliment or an insult.”

“Trust me, angry girl. If I wanted to insult you, I’d start with the cremation ceremony you gave those eggs before.” He picks up his fork. “I think it’s safe to say that unlike most husbands...I’ll be ordering my wife to get *out* of the kitchen.”

I fling the forkful of eggs which was about to enter my mouth at him. “Jackass.”

He brushes the food off his shirt. “I am, but at least now you look amused instead of sad.”

He’s right. Usually, I’m down in the dumps after talking about my parents because it’s so bittersweet, but with Preston, it feels more sweet than bitter. “Thanks, I needed that.”

He exhales heavily. “It’s been a long day.”

I get up from the table when it dawns on me how inconsiderate I’m being. “I keep forgetting you’re injured. I should probably let you finish eating so you can get some rest instead of cooking and cleaning up after me while I talk your ear off about people you don’t even know.”

I fish his medication out of my purse. “You were right before. I assumed

you were addicted to these because of your gambling issues. But I know how upsetting it can be when someone makes assumptions about me based on what they think instead of facts.”

He stares at the bottle of pills. “Narcs aren’t really my thing. I much prefer a green felt table with a side of whiskey or beer.” His lips pull tight. “Doesn’t mean I wouldn’t take them if I didn’t have access to my usual and needed a pick-me-up. You’re probably better off holding on to them for the time being.”

Shock roots me to the spot. “Did you just ad—”

“Don’t make it a bigger deal than it is, Bishop.” He points to the seat across from him. “Sit down and tell me more about your parents. I could use the distraction.”

I make a mental note to throw the pills into the toilet as I put them back in my purse. “Okay, but we don’t have to talk about them. It might be boring—”

“Not to me. I’m all ears.”

Taking a deep breath, I settle into my seat...and then I proceed to tell him everything I still remember about my parents.

And he never complains, not even when I’ve talked so long, I fall asleep at the table and he has to carry me into my bedroom.

Preston

Chapter 11

A blood-curdling scream coming from Kit's bedroom has me lurching up from the couch ready to slaughter someone.

She screams again as I enter her room and the sound along with the way she's clutching the poker chip on her necklace for dear life shreds me.

I'm almost positive she's having a nightmare, but just to be sure, I scan the room and make sure the window is locked.

"No." A choked sob rips from her throat and she kicks her legs. "Please don't kill me."

I'm about to reassure her I'd never lay a hand on her, let alone kill her, but she starts flapping her arms and cries out again. Only this time—it's my name on her lips.

Shudders are wracking her small frame, whipping her around the mattress like a plastic bag in the middle of a hurricane. I want to grab her, shake her out of it, and tell her it's only a dream.

Instead, I approach her bed carefully, like she's a bomb about to detonate. "You're okay, Kit."

It's like she doesn't even hear me. If anything, me speaking only makes it worse. Her tremors grow more violent and so do the screams.

Seeing her like this is the equivalent of someone cutting my chest open with a shard of dull glass.

When she yells for me again, I don't hesitate. I wrap my arms around her as though she were a wild animal needing to be tamed.

She struggles for the first minute, kicking and thrashing, but then she

goes limp and blinks up at me.

“Preston?” Her voice is laced with panic and her body feels cold despite her sweat soaked skin. “Is it really you this time?”

She looks so confused and helpless, something inside me unhinges. “It’s me, angry girl.”

I loosen my grip so she can move freely again and she bolts upright. “It wasn’t before...it was a trick and I couldn’t—”

“You’re safe. It was just a bad dream.” I palm her cheek. “You know I’d never let anything happen to you.”

I’m not a good person and most of the time I deserve the bad shit that comes my way, but Kit’s my proverbial line you don’t cross.

Not unless you have a death wish.

She nods slowly...and then to both my horror and concern she throws her arms around me—clinging to me like I’m her lifeline as her soft sobs fill the room.

I’m at a loss for words, but given her heart rate and breathing are still erratic, I do the only thing I can think of—I situate us so she’s resting against my bare chest and we’re skin to skin.

Then I trace my fingers up and down her spine until her crying slows down and she stabilizes.

“Thank you.” Her voice is burnt toast. “God, you must think I’m crazy.”

“If it’s any consolation, I thought that way before tonight.”

“Asshole,” she says, but there’s humor in her tone.

She shifts slightly, and I get a whiff of her hair, that intoxicating berry concoction going straight to all the places they shouldn’t. “You want to talk about it?”

“Not really.” She draws in a ragged breath. “But this is kind of nice.”

“It—” I clear my throat so I don’t finish that sentence. “I once read in a camping magazine that sleeping like this keeps you warm.”

“You mean snuggling?”

She might as well stick a big floppy bow on my balls and suggest we paint each other’s nails. “I don’t snuggle.”

“Would you prefer the term cuddling?”

“Bishop.”

“Relax, Holden. You can be the big spoon.”

She nuzzles closer and I trail my hands up and down her arms. Something I regret almost instantly. Not only is her skin softer than butter in the midday

sun, she must have changed after I put her to bed because all she's wearing is a thin little tank top and shorts.

My dick stirs, very much aware that the only two things separating him from his own pearly gates are a pair of boxers and her tiny bottoms.

I stifle a groan when I feel her nipples harden and I have to remind myself what transpired earlier.

Kit was right about us needing to stop whatever was starting between us. For a multitude of reasons.

The first one being—she's gay. It's not an issue for me, but if she's going to have a mental breakdown every time I whisper dirty things in her ear and we dry hump, it's probably best we don't anymore.

Goose bumps erupt over her exposed flesh and my own heart rate ticks up. It's taking everything in me not to slip my hand between her legs and find out what kinds of sounds she makes when she comes.

Instead, the hand on her back slides under her shirt and I circle her pierced navel with my thumb, recalling reason number two.

Mixing business with pleasure never ends well for either party. Once things like emotions and sex are involved...it makes shit complicated. The bottom line becomes murky.

And deal's get broken.

She licks her lips and it's all I can do not to move her shorts to the side and bury myself inside her when her tongue touches my skin and she arches her hips, pressing her pussy against me.

My heart pounds in my ears and hot lust pulsates my groin when she repeats the movement. Instinctively, I dig my fingers into her ass and thrust, eliciting a sharp gasp from her.

Then there's nothing but choppy, desperate breathing in the darkness. The chemistry a thick, palpable current running between us.

"Preston."

Her voice is shattered glass and it's like a knife twisting in my gut.

"I know."

Her teeth scrape my shoulder and she shudders when I reach down and adjust my erection, squeezing the tip to take the edge off before I tuck it into the waistband of my boxers.

A few minutes later, the sound of her sleeping softly fills the air and I recall the most important reason of them all.

Kit's a jump first and ask questions later type of girl.

But if I allow my selfishness to get in the way and let her do that with me...

I'll hurt her worse than I did before.

And this time, she'll have every reason to never forgive me.

Kit

Chapter 12

I almost had sex...with a guy.

Well, not just any guy...Preston.

The glint from my wedding band mocks me. My husband.

Bending over the bathroom sink, I lather on soap and scrub my face vigorously, as if it will wash away all these weird feelings.

I cringe as I look at my reflection in the mirror. Feelings...that's far too extreme of a word for mid-morning.

Urge? Thumbs down—that word isn't any better. Not when there's a penis involved.

Not that I have anything against penises per se. I've experimented with strap-ons a time or two and my favorite vibrator is phallic shaped.

Penises aren't the problem for me. It's the male attached to them. Specifically, the six-foot-three asshole sleeping in my bed.

I peer at the asshole in question from the doorway of my bedroom and my heart spasms.

He looks so sweet and innocent with one hand stuffed under a pillow and the other...

Oh, dear God.

Watching Preston scratch his nuts is something I could have gladly gone my whole life without seeing.

Grimacing, I pad out to the living room and nearly trip over his crumbled-up suit on the floor.

Muttering a curse, I gather the pile and make a mental note to have it dry cleaned. Preston is doing me a favor after all. Not to mention what he did for

me last night...before the heavy petting.

I'm getting ready to toss his clothes in the laundry room when something hits my foot. I yelp because it freaking hurts, but my mouth clamps shut when I realize what it is.

His cell phone.

Chewing my lip, I toy with the idea of going through it for a solid minute before deciding against it. It's the ultimate invasion of privacy. I certainly wouldn't be jumping for joy if he went through my phone.

Although unlike him, I have nothing to hide. The only dirt he'd find would be a few questionable pictures of the time Breslin and I got drunk in college and attempted to bedazzle our vaginas. And the porn gifs Juan insists on sending me because it's Taco Tuesday—which he assumes must be every lesbian's favorite day of the week.

But none of those things are secrets I'm keeping from him. I'm an open book.

But Preston? His book is on lockdown and he threw away the key.

What if he's in serious trouble?

It's not a stretch to think that if he gets annoyed whenever I bring up his not so secret phone and refuses to tell me who he's talking to...things aren't exactly copacetic.

Although he did say the person he's talking to isn't dangerous.

I pace the small rug in front of the laundry room, staring at my very own version of Pandora's box.

I'd like to consider myself a good person. One with ethics and morals. But I'm also human, and this right here is too tempting to turn down. It might be my one and only chance to uncover all that is Preston Holden.

I'm pretty sure experts would agree one should know everything there is to know about the person you're married to.

"What's yours is mine, baby," I whisper under my breath as I tiptoe to my bedroom to make sure he's still sleeping before I mosey into the bathroom.

Nerves bunch in my stomach as I lock the door behind me. If Preston wanted me to know about whatever it is he's hiding, he would have told me. It's not like he'd ever intentionally put me in harm's way.

That alone should pacify me enough to put it down...and maybe a few years ago it would have.

However, I'm not the same girl I once was and there's a twinge in my heart I can't shake...a painful reminder.

I have a horrible habit of falling for the wrong people. People who use, hurt, and break me.

Not that I'm in danger of falling for Preston. That would be utterly ludicrous.

I just want to make sure my husband isn't a serial killer.

A frustrated sigh leaves me when the screen lights up and it asks for the pin number. This was a complete waste of time. *Unless...*

A frown mars my face when I try his birthday and it doesn't work. Undeterred, I enter the number thirteen, certain I've cracked the code.

Jitters do the tango in my belly when that proves to be futile, too. Depending on what model it is, I might only have one try left after this before it locks me out permanently...and then he'll know I attempted to go through his phone.

Then again, I might have unlimited tries left. There's no way to know for sure. Not without grabbing my laptop to research or contacting customer service. And with my luck, he'll be awake by then.

Whatever...he's sleeping in my bed, in my apartment, and he's my husband. If I get caught...that's exactly what I'll tell him.

Since he's a gambler, I try good ol' lucky seven and twenty-one, but it's no dice.

I drum my fingers on my chin. I honestly have no idea what set of numbers are significant to him. For most people, it's the date of important events. Birthdays, anniversaries...

It comes to me so fast, I nearly drop it as I type in the date of the school shooting.

Jackpot.

I don't know if I should be more surprised that it worked or confused. Even though it still haunts me, Preston never talks about that day.

Then again, it was also the day his father died, so there's that.

The first thing I do is check his contacts...empty. Same goes for pictures and text messages—which is odd because I've seen him use this phone before.

Frustrated, I check his call log next and I'm practically salivating when I see a number he forgot to erase. Based on the timestamp, it must be who he was talking to last night at the dumpster.

I want to believe him when he says it wasn't a bookie, but what if he lied? Guilt tangles in my chest. Perhaps he called up a friend after we fought to see

if he could crash there for the night, and I need to have some faith in him.

Only, Preston doesn't have friends—apart from that little weasel in Vegas.

He does have someone, though. Someone he refuses to talk about. Someone important to him. And there's only one way to find out who that someone is.

Steeling myself, I press the call button with shaky fingers, preparing to give whoever picks up a bullshit story about coming across the phone during a walk. "H—"

"Nope, not yet, Preston. But, hey—since you're in town, you're welcome to spend the night at my place again."

I freeze. Completely caught off guard by the very feminine, flirty voice with a hint of a French accent.

I disconnect the call so I don't make an even bigger ass of myself.

Maybe it's naïve of me, but the last person I expected to hear on the other line was a girl.

Although I probably should have. It *is* Preston after all. It makes perfect sense.

The only thing that doesn't make sense...is the boulder compressing my lungs.

I almost let him...we almost...

I look up at the ceiling and take a cleansing breath. I'm more wound up than a two-dollar watch and there's no reason to be—it's not like I have feelings for him. I'm gay for crying out loud. Our marriage is nothing more than a business arrangement. It's not real.

Nothing between us is real. Which I suppose is no different from my other relationships.

Becca.

The organ in my chest squeezes in protest before it starts waving the white flag.

I rub the tender spot. *Don't worry, heart. I know the deal—we don't think about her when we're extra fragile.*

I'm halfway to my bedroom when I hear a knock on my door. Since I'm not expecting any visitors and I'm almost positive it's Reggie coming here to bug me about babies and God only knows what else my nanna wants, I ignore it and keep walking.

Until the sound of my best friend's voice has me screeching to a halt.

Why is she here? Usually, I'd be excited to see her, but she literally couldn't have picked a worse time for a surprise visit.

As if sensing my thoughts via some weird best friend telepathy I hear her say, "She hasn't answered any of my phone calls since she met with her poor excuse of a grandmother. I'm worried."

Fucking Preston. I told him I had to talk to her. But *no*—he had to throw my phone out of a moving vehicle like a crazy person.

My heart jumps to my throat as I creep toward the front door and look through the peephole. It's not only my bestie, it's her entire entourage—plus one golden lab. Anxiety hits me like a hot pan to the face as I watch them. Breslin's making a phone call. Landon's tending to Picasso. And Asher's... snacking on what looks like peanuts with a bored expression on his face.

"I still think we should have gone to Vegas first." *Crunch.* "She's obviously not home."

Breslin casts him a dirty look. "Seriously? I told you on the plane that I called her hotel and spoke to her coworker Juan who confirmed she left Vegas yesterday."

Freaking Juan.

Asher looks sheepish. "My bad, babe. Our flight was mad early. I thought you said you were *booking* a hotel in Vegas."

Landon's lips twitch. "Guess that explains why you kept insisting she call Juan back to ask about upgrades."

Asher winks and smiles at them both suggestively. "I wanted to make sure we got a king size bed."

Woof.

"Not for you, mutt. Dogs who sabotage my shot at winning the playoffs don't get to sleep in king-sized beds. You can sleep on the floor."

Picasso bows his head and Landon pets him. "We've already gone over this, Asher. It's not his fault."

Breslin places a hand on her hip. "Can you two focus please? I'm worried. You know she's...I just want to make sure she doesn't disappear again, and knows we're here for her."

My throat grows thick and they both nod.

"I got this," Asher says before he pounds on my front door. "Yo, small fry. I know you're going through some shit, but I didn't come all the way to Connecticut to freeze my balls off and be ignored. So if you're home, do us both a favor and let us in before Breslin kicks your door down."

“Why in the world would I kick her door down when she gave me a key?”

Well, shit. I forgot about that.

Landon clears his throat. “Look, Kit. Whatever you’re going through you don’t have to go through it alone. We’ve got you.”

Pressing my head to the door, I close my eyes. I know Preston wants nothing to do with them, but they’re my friends. They hopped on a friggin’ plane to make sure I was okay for crying out loud.

Also, Breslin has a key and I know she’ll use it if she doesn’t hear from me in the next minute.

Finding my resolve, I speak. “Sorry, guys. I just got out of the shower. Give me five minutes.”

“Are you okay?”

“Why are you whispering?”

“Do you have any food?”

Woof.

Oh, hell. “I’ll answer everyone’s questions after I put some clothes on.”

With that, I make a mad dash for my bedroom where Preston’s still out like a light. I’m about to close the door and hope for the best, but then it occurs to me he could wake up and go looking for me.

Maybe it’s best I tell him what’s going on.

Then again, if I tell Preston his brother’s here, I’m almost positive he’ll run out of my apartment like a bat out of hell and never look back.

Or worse—make good on his threat.

My stomach dips as I slink toward my dresser drawer. Handcuffing my new husband isn’t something I ever planned on doing, but it’s the best option at my disposal.

Stealth-like, I wander over to him. After securing the first cuff to the metal headboard, I gently raise his arm...but stall when I notice his tattoo. Even though it’s no longer covered by clothing and I’m much closer this time, it’s still inconspicuous due to the dark colors and intricate detail spanning from his arm to his wrist.

My eyes track what looks like an obscure jungle setting and I follow the design around to the underside of his arm where the leaves turn to flames... flames that appear to be coming out of one very awesome looking dragon.

A husky groan snaps my attention back to what I’m supposed to be doing and I slam the cuff on his wrist.

Straddling his waist, I charge for the other one, but he swiftly clamps it around my arm. “What the fuck are you doing, Bishop?”

I have every intention of telling him the truth—but not until I secure both hands. Since I don’t have a deck of cards lying around to distract him, I’m left with the alternative.

I bat my eyelashes and fluff my hair. “What does it look like, big boy?”

His eyebrows shoot up to the ceiling. With the peculiar way he’s staring at me you’d think I was trying to seduce the man while wearing a chicken suit.

Guess I don’t do it for him either.

I ignore the weird feeling in my chest that thought produces as I watch the pulse in his neck thrum.

“If you wanted my cock so bad you could have asked for it like a good girl.” His thumb traces the skin above the band of my shorts. “Or better yet, beg.”

“I—” A rock forms in my esophagus and it’s all I can do not to puke. I’d rather bathe in monkey piss than ever *beg* for the crude thing between his legs that’s currently nudging me.

A prickle runs up my neck when he slides his hand under my shirt. “What’s the matter? Cat got your tongue?” The pads of his fingers tease my ribcage, inching higher with every inhale. “Come on, angry girl. Let me hear you beg for my dick.”

I scowl, trying with everything in me not to sock him across the face. “You’re disgusting. Do girls actually fall for that?”

His face splits into a menacing grin. “The girls who actually want it do.” In a flash, he grabs a fistful of my shirt and tugs me close to his face. “Not lesbians who are being sneaky and trying to get one over on their fake husbands.”

With no choice left, I give up the ghost and tell him the truth. “You’re right. Don’t get mad, but Breslin, Landon, and your brother are here.”

He jerks up so fast I almost go sailing. “What?”

“I…” My sentence trails off and I seize the opportunity. Trying to seduce him was stupid. Turns out making him angry distracts him just the same if not better.

A string of expletives leaves Preston’s mouth as I finish locking him to the bedpost. “I should have known better than to trust you.”

Pushing my shoulders back, I straighten out my shirt. “It’s not my fault.

Breslin's worried because I haven't returned any of her phone calls. However, she wouldn't be here if you didn't throw my phone out the taxi window."

Those intense orbs grow darker. "Why did you answer the door in the first place?" They narrow. "And why the fuck would you *handcuff* me?"

"I wasn't going to, but then I remembered I gave Breslin a key. My only option was to tell them I was in the shower and to wait outside until I put some clothes on." I ignore his sinister expression and power on. "You're handcuffed because I didn't want you to wake up, go searching for me, and run into them." I tap the tip of his nose. "See, silly? I wasn't trying to get one over on you, I was keeping my promise."

His nostrils flare. "Right. And now that I'm no longer sleeping, you can take these things off and tell them to leave."

Slowly, I proceed to unstraddle him, being careful not to make any sudden movements. "I totally would...but unlike you, I'm not rude to the people who care about me. Sending them away is only going to make them worry more. It's best I just let them in for a little while so they can see everything is okay."

"Fine, do whatever you want. But undo these first."

I ease off the bed. "Sorry, chief. No can do. If you didn't make that threat about my parents' money, I'd consider it. But you did—therefore I have to cover my ass."

He rolls his eyes. "I won't take your parents' money from you, Kit. You have my word. Now get back here and let me go."

I shake my head. "Nope."

I'm not taking that chance. In my heart of hearts, I believe he wouldn't, but I've been screwed over by people before and I'm finally learning not to trust my stupid heart anymore.

But mostly, I don't want him to leave and get himself into trouble again.

"Bishop," he growls low and deadly. "Uncuff me right now."

I hold up my hands. "Relax, hubs. I've got this under control." I start tiptoeing backward. "Everything is fine."

The vein in his forehead bulges. "Everything is *not* fine."

"You're going to need to learn to trust me," I say when I reach the door.

"Trust you? You tied me to a goddamn bed while I was sound asleep," he shouts as I pull it shut behind me.

Probably best I don't tell him the latch on the door is a little faulty.

After I do a quick sweep and make sure nothing is out of place, I open the front door. “Hey, guys. Come in.”

A sharp pang of guilt goes through me. I don’t care if Preston hates me, but I want him to be able to trust me. “On second thought, let me find my coat and I’ll meet you downstairs. I’m starving and there’s a new tapas place that opened up down the street.”

I go to close it, but Breslin wedges her foot inside the door.

“I told you something strange was going on with her.” She starts pushing. “I swear to God if you don’t let me inside right now I will lose my shit.”

I push back. “Nothing is going on, B. I’m just hungry.”

“She had me at tapas,” Asher interjects.

Breslin tunes him out. “Why didn’t you answer my phone calls? And why did Juan say you left Vegas because you had a family emergency? The meeting with your grandmother happened *before* you left. He also mentioned you got drunk your first night there and ended up spending the night with someone, but refuse to talk about it. What’s going on, Kit?”

I curse under my breath. “Freaking Juan.”

“He’s concerned about you like we all are!”

Breslin shoves harder and whatever leverage I had weakens. “Damn, woman. Have you been working out?”

“Don’t try and change the subject.” She rams into the door and I topple over, landing on my ass.

“I’m fine, I swear,” I assure them as they barge in. “My parents’ will is kind of messed up, but I’m in the process of fixing it.”

“Why didn’t you call me back?”

Landon’s gaze bounces between me and Breslin cautiously while Asher steps over me, heading into the kitchen.

“I lost my phone in Vegas. The replacement should be here today.”

Breslin holds her hand out. The second I take it she pulls me into her arms. “You have no idea what a nervous wreck I’ve been. I can’t lose you again.”

I hug her tighter. “You’re not losing me, B. I’m a little overwhelmed dealing with my nanna, but I’m dealing. I’m okay.”

She frames my face with her hands. “What happened?”

Asher sticks his head out of my fridge. “Your milk is expired.”

“Yeah I know, your br—” I fist pump the air. “I know, bro. Thanks.”

Asher and Landon exchange a glance, but I pat my tummy. “I’m

famished. How about I order those tapas and fill you guys in on everything?”

Everything...with the exception that I married Preston Holden and have him handcuffed to my bed.

Kit

Chapter 13

“*I* don’t want a fucking tapa,” Preston grits through his teeth. “I want you to unlock these.”

I place a hand over his mouth. “Stop talking, or they’ll hear you.” I tap the container of food I managed to smuggle away for him. “I’ll leave these here until you’re ready to eat. Maybe then you won’t be so crabby.”

I jet out of the room before he can yell...only to run straight into Landon.

“Are you okay?”

I throw my hands up. “Do I have a tattoo on my forehead that says, ‘*Keep asking me if I’m okay?*’” I toss the sweatshirt I snatched as a ruse over my head. “I went to get a sweatshirt because I’m cold, but now I’m fine. No, better than fine. Freaking *perfect*.”

He pushes his glasses up his nose. “Sorry. It’s just...I thought I heard you talking to yourself.” He holds up his hands. “Not that I’m judging.”

Well, shit.

“I—”

Picasso barks and Landon shakes his head. “I better take him outside before he pees all over your carpets.”

I breathe a sigh of relief when he puts the leash on Picasso and they walk away. Landon’s too perceptive for his own good sometimes.

“So did she give you a list of these *things* she wants you to do before she makes you her beneficiary?” Breslin questions as I enter the kitchen where she and Asher are still going to town on tapas.

Well, Asher mostly.

I plop down beside her. I've already filled her in on everything that didn't involve marriage or Preston. "Kind of. It's complicated."

She pauses mid-bite. "How so?"

"She uh..." I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. Side-stepping around the truth is so much harder than I thought it would be. I don't know how Preston manages to do it all the time. No wonder he's always in a bad mood. "She wants me to get married."

Breslin looks like she smelled the sour milk in my fridge. "What? That doesn't make any sense. All your life she's been a royal bitch about your sexuality—"

"To a guy." I reach for some chips. "I don't really want to talk about it."

Breslin's face falls. "She can't do that."

"Can't do what?" Landon inquires when he joins us a moment later.

"Kit's nanna won't give her the money unless she marries a guy."

Landon sticks his hands in his pockets. "Wow, that's...you're obviously not going through with it, right? Because take it from me, you're better off without her. I'll always love my mom and it hurts that she still refuses to accept me, but it's her problem...not mine. I have a right to love who I want and so do you."

Breslin gives his hand a squeeze. "He's right, Kit. I know the money is important to you, but I think your parents would rather you be happy."

I look down at the table, feeling both heartbroken and angry about being in this position. "I know."

"I think you should do it," Asher mutters, surprising everyone.

When we all look at him, he says, "We can sit here all day and preach about how money isn't more important than love or happiness. But the way I see it, Kit has neither." He looks around my apartment before his gaze lands on me. "Regardless of the blunder with their will, your parents wanted you to be secure. They didn't want you to be stuck in some crappy apartment your whole life and struggle financially, right?"

I nod. "Yeah, I mean, isn't that why most parents leave money to their kids?"

He points to the scar on his eyebrow. "Not all parents. Some parents are assholes who think giving you an inheritance makes up for all the fucked-up shit they did. But your parents weren't assholes. Your grandmother is." He slaps the table with his fist. "And right now, you're single with no commitments, so you're in the perfect position to beat the old bag at her own

game. Get your ass on Tinder, set up a few interviews, conduct some background checks, and offer the dude you can stomach the most a cool million. Easy peasy.” He leans back in his seat. “People marry for money and status all the time. Hell, it’s why my parents got hitched.”

“It’s not about the money, it’s about not giving into her grandmother’s ridiculous threats and demands and taking a stand,” Breslin argues. “Kit should be allowed to marry who she wants as long as they make her happy.”

Landon nods. “I’m with Bre. You shouldn’t cave. Let her suffer knowing she lost the world’s best granddaughter.”

Asher jabs his finger in the air. “Nanna’s gonna be dead soon, guys. You really think she’s gonna have this epiphany on her deathbed and apologize to Kit for being such a fuckface?” When we all shake our heads, he says, “Exactly. And then Kit loses twice. At least now she has a chance of getting back something that never should have been taken away from her in the first place. Why should Kit be single, sad, *and* poor.”

“Shit.” Landon leans against the counter. “You have a point.”

Breslin chews on her fingernail. “Money isn’t everything, though.” She plays with the straw in her drink. “But what do I know? I grew up in a trailer park and was miserable until...” The color of her cheeks matches her fiery red hair as she looks at Asher and then Landon. “Well, these two.”

Woof.

“Three.” She pats Picasso’s head and he licks her nose. “If you want to do it, I’ll support you.” She turns to me. “I just don’t want you to end up marrying some jerk. You don’t need anyone else taking advantage of you or tagging along for a free ride. I know it won’t be—” She makes air quotes. “Real, but it doesn’t mean they can’t hurt you or use you. It should be someone you can depend on. Someone responsible and kind-hearted who will respect you and the situation.”

I release a sigh. Lord knows if I had married a guy with *those* qualities instead of Preston, my life would be much easier.

Her green eyes harden. “The last thing you want is some loser addict mooching off you. Trust me.”

I know she’s referring to her dad who treated her like cow manure for most of her life, but my stomach sours anyway. Preston isn’t any of those things either, but I know it’s what most people see when they look at him.

Asher leans back in his seat. “I’d offer to help you out, but I’m crazy in love with two very jealous, awesome people.” He laughs. “Plus, you don’t

really have what it takes to be a Holden. No offense.”

It’s a good thing I start choking on my food and Breslin knocks over her drink when she goes to swat him.

“Crap.” She stands up. “My shirt.”

Asher waggles his eyebrows. “You can always take it off.”

Breslin rolls her eyes, but I see the blush creeping into her cheeks again. “Considering it’s freezing and we’re at Kit’s house, I’ll pass.”

“Do you want mine?” Landon offers.

She waves a hand. “I can’t take your shirt, honey. Then you’ll have nothing to wear.”

Asher grins and looks between them. “Again, my vote is for no clothes. It’s a very simple solution, you two get naked and I’ll warm you up. Everyone wins.”

Landon shuffles his feet. He’s not quite as reserved about his sex life like my bestie Breslin, but he’s far from the outgoing exhibitionist Asher is. Well, on the surface. It goes without saying that living with them for a year made me privy to certain aspects of their private life. Enough to know that yes—*It’s always the quiet ones.*

“I’m positive Kit wouldn’t win in that scenario, jock.”

I inwardly flinch. “Nope. Two naked dudes is not my idea of a good time.”

Breslin sighs. “No one is getting naked.” She looks at me. “Can I grab a shirt from your closet? I’ll have it washed and returned before we leave in a few days.”

“Sure—No.” I rewind the last part of her statement. “You’re staying here for a few days?”

I’m pretty sure having someone handcuffed to a bed against their will for more than a few hours is a federal crime of some kind.

“Yeah, I figured we—”

“You guys can’t stay here.”

Breslin blinks. “Figured we could hang out for a few days. However, I was going to book a hotel, so we didn’t put you out.” She grabs her phone and I see the hurt simmering under the surface. “Most hotels don’t accept dogs, though so I was gonna ask if you could keep Picasso here with you. But don’t worry, we’ll all be out of your hair soon.”

I feel lower than dog poop. They let me stay at their freaking house for a *year* rent free. And yet here I am making them feel like outcasts because of

someone else's drama.

Sometimes I really despise Preston.

"Breslin." When she looks at me, I take off my sweatshirt and hand it to her. "You know I'd give you the shirt off my back. It's not that I don't want you guys here." I look at each of them so they know I mean it. "You're all welcome here whenever you want. However, I—"

"Is that a bite mark?" She comes closer and I cock my head to the side to hide it. "Make that multiple bite marks."

Fuck a duck. Preston's a dead man.

"You mean hickeys, babe," Asher unhelpfully chimes in.

"I know what hickeys are. Those are not hickeys. It looks like some savage beast tried to make Kit a snack."

She's not too far off.

"Did someone attack you? Is that what Juan was referring to?"

"I'm seeing someone," I blurt out because all this lying is becoming too much for me to handle. "That's what I was trying to say. I'm seeing someone and they're asleep in my bedroom. It's why I freaked before. I'm so sorry, I just didn't want to overwhelm them."

"Understandable," Landon says. "Some of us—" He points to Breslin. "Can be a little scary and intimidating."

Asher raises his glass. "Don't forget stubborn."

Breslin pops a hand on her hip. "Whatever, I make no apologies for protecting the people I love." She straightens her spine. "Does she have a name?"

"Who?"

She gives me a look. "The new girl you're seeing."

"Oh, right." *And this is why you should never tell a lie.* "Pres—" I gulp. "Cott." I force a smile. "Her name is Prescott."

Asher holds his fist out for a pound. "Sounds like a badass."

You have no idea.

Landon studies me. "Where did you meet her?"

Breslin's face twists. "More importantly, is she another gold digging whore like thou who shall never be named unless we're referring to her as her biblical name—Becca, the giant thundercunt?"

Everybody goes silent. Which sucks because I'm almost positive you can hear the broken pieces of my heart clanking together.

"No."

Breslin visibly relaxes. “Okay, well in that case, I want to know all about her.”

My shoulders rise in a shrug. “There’s really nothing to tell, it’s still super new.” I wring my hands so they can’t see them shake. “We met in Vegas.”

Asher’s eyebrows dance. “Is she hot?”

Bile rises in my throat. “God, no.”

The three of them exchange a glance.

“Guess that explains why you’re keeping her hidden,” Asher says through laughter and Breslin swats the back of his head.

I reach for my glass of water. “What I meant was, this person isn’t my usual preference, but I suppose some people might find them attractive.” I sweep a hand up and down. “You know, if you’re into *that* sort of thing.”

“Looks aren’t important anyway,” Landon says. “It’s what’s on the inside that counts, and you sound like you’re crazy about her.”

I spit up the water I swallowed. “I do?”

“It’s true,” Breslin agrees as she pats my back. “I already like her so much more than your exes who walked around like their shit didn’t stink.” She ruffles my hair. “I’m glad you’re looking beyond the physical appearance. Not that you’re vain or anything. It’s just good you’re branching out of your usual is all. Maybe this one is the one.”

“Definitely not.” I fidget. “We’re not serious at all. In fact, you probably won’t even meet her. Neither of us wants to be tied down—”

Woof. Woof. Woof.

Breslin looks around. “Where’s Picasso?”

Landon peers through the serving hatch into the living room. “He was here just a minute ago.”

Picasso barks again and Asher’s face goes slack. “It sounds like he might be in Kit’s bedroom.”

Oh no.

I stand in front of the entryway to my kitchen. “No, he isn’t.”

A growling sound erupts followed by a deep bark.

And then...

“Bishop, you better get this perverted dog out of here before I *Old Yeller* his ass.”

Asher stands up so fast he knocks his stool over. “Who was that?”

“No one—a neighbor.” I twirl a finger around my head. “He’s a little crazy.”

“I’ll say,” Breslin yells. “He just threatened to shoot my dog.”

Before I can stop them, they bum rush me out of the kitchen and run into my bedroom.

Where we find Picasso standing on his hind legs playfully tugging on Preston’s boxers.

Not that anyone cares what Picasso’s doing, everyone’s too busy staring open-mouthed at Preston who’s still very much handcuffed to my bed.

Landon’s the first to speak. “Is this where he’s been all this time?”

As if on cue, they all turn to me.

I laugh nervously. “This isn’t what you think...we’re not...he’s not Prescott.” That only confuses everyone more. “What I mean is...I know how this looks, but it’s not like that. I’m a lesbian.”

“He’s covered in bruises.” Asher grinds out. “It *looks* like someone beat the shit out of him.”

“Someone did—” I start to say until Preston issues me a silent warning. “I—um...”

Breslin’s expression falls. “Kit, honey please tell me you didn’t—”

Asher charges in my direction. “What did you do to my brother, you little bitch?”

I’m about to shit a brick, but Landon and Breslin jam themselves between us.

Breslin’s positively fuming. “What is *wrong* with you, Ash—”

A loud bang followed by a deep voice cuts her off mid-sentence.

“Call my wife a bitch again and I’ll make you eat this bedframe.” The broken bedframe Preston’s cuffed to rattles. “And if you ever charge her like that again I *will* fucking kill you.”

His voice is so lethal and the look in his eyes is so sinister I fight back a shiver.

I open my mouth to clear everything up, but everyone loses their goddamn minds and it’s downright pandemonium.

“Your *wife*?” Asher spits.

“As usual, he’s lying to you, Asher,” Breslin states with a dismissive flick of her wrist. “You heard what Kit said before. There’s no way she would marry *Preston* of all people. Not unless he was manipulating and threatening her.” She turns to me wide-eyed. “Oh, God. I *knew* something bad was going on.”

I shake my head. “No, Preston’s not—”

“Manipulating and threatening *her*?” Asher grits through his teeth. “Kit’s not the one chained to a bed.”

“Oh, please,” Breslin screams. “Kit’s harmless. Your brother on the other hand—is a dangerous thug with no regard for anyone but himself. Are you forgetting what happened with those bookies at Woodside? If you didn’t win the championship, they would have killed you. He used your life as *collateral*, Asher.” Agitation flares her nostrils. “I know it’s been a while since you’ve seen him, but *that’s* the kind of manipulating asshole he is.”

I feel myself wilt. Preston might not have fully realized the extent of his actions given Asher’s talent and skill. But technically, he did use his own brother to collect a debt he couldn’t pay. If things didn’t work out and Asher hadn’t won the championship game during our senior year of college...who knows what might have happened.

Panic claws at me with my next thought. *Preston also said his brother was one of his exceptions.*

“I know he does stupid stuff sometimes,” Asher says. “But you don’t know him like I do.”

Preston laughs sinisterly. “You don’t know me at all, shithead. Not anymore.”

It’s evident his comment crushes Asher and it sets Breslin off again. “Don’t talk to your brother like that. Not after everything you’ve put him through.”

“How I talk to my brother is none of your goddamn business.” Preston leans forward, his lip curling in a callous smirk. “I suggest you do us both a favor and stick to nagging your two boyfriends instead of me, fire cr—”

“Preston,” I hiss before it becomes a bloodbath in here. “Stop.”

“Let me out of these cuffs.” Preston glares daggers at me. “Now.”

If I let him go now, he’ll either commit homicide or leave and never come back. “I don’t—”

Asher wags a finger in my face. “Let him go, you little psycho.”

“Don’t tell her what to do,” Preston roars. “And the next time you stick your finger in her face, I’ll break it.”

Asher gestures to his splint. “Like she broke yours.”

I’m honestly offended Asher thinks so little of me. “I didn’t break his finger, Cam—”

“Shut up, Kit,” Preston seethes. “I’ve got this.”

Breslin lunges for him. “Don’t tell my best friend to shut up.”

Asher stands between Breslin and Preston. “He’s only trying to defend himself against his attacker. It’s clear your little *friend* undid a few screws in my brother’s head. It’s why he’s being so mean to everyone. She probably brought him here and performed some kind of Jedi mind trick as payback for the Becca bullshit.”

Breslin throws her hands up. “Take off those rose-colored glasses and pull your head out of your ass, baby. Your brother’s been a royal prick for as long as I’ve known him.”

Asher points to himself. “Not to me.” He tilts his head toward Preston. “What did Kit do to you?”

I’ve had about enough of this. “I didn’t do anything.”

“Bullshit,” Asher snarls, his mouth twisting into a grimace. “I haven’t seen my brother in three years and the first time I do—he’s married to *you* and shackled to *your* bed.” He punches his chest. “Yet he’s treating me like *I’m* the fucking enemy here.”

Preston’s jaw works. “Leave Kit alone. It’s not her fault I hate you. It’s *yours*.”

Asher rears back, his expression going from annoyed to devastated.

Preston might not care about anyone in this room, but I do. I can’t keep them all in the dark like this. It’s not right. “You have to let me tell them, Preston.”

“Tell us *what*?” Asher bellows.

“See?” Breslin shouts. “I *knew* he was manipulating her.”

An ear-piercing whistle makes us all wince.

“Enough,” Landon roars. “You guys aren’t even talking, you’re attacking.” His eyes flick to Breslin. “I know you’re trying to defend and protect your friend, Bre. But accusing Preston of manipulating Kit and yelling at Asher isn’t solving any problems. It’s only creating more tension and drama.”

His eyes drift to Asher next. “I know you’re overwhelmed, and you have every right to be—but it’s pretty clear Preston’s not here against his will and Kit didn’t hurt him. I don’t think she’s capable of hurting anyone. Deep down I know you know that.”

Everyone’s silent for what feels like an eternity before Asher speaks. “You’re right.” He scrubs both hands down his face. “Shit. I’m sorry, Kit. I lost my head.”

He didn’t even need to apologize to have my forgiveness, but I’m glad he

did. “I get it. Apology accepted.”

Breslin fidgets uncomfortably. “Did you really marry Preston?”

There’s no hiding the disapproval in her tone.

My teeth dig into my lower lip. “Yes.” I draw in a shaky breath. “You guys already know about my nanna and the will, but what you don’t know is that she wanted to choose the guy I married. Long story short—I panicked and told her I had a boyfriend. I figured if I was being forced to marry someone, it should be my choice and not hers. As luck would have it, I ran into Preston. I asked him to help me out and he agreed. And since I didn’t want any part of the shit show wedding my nanna would end up throwing, we got married on our own.”

Any trace of annoyance is replaced by hurt. “I always thought if either of us got married the other would be there. Or at the very least you’d *tell* me.”

I know she’s upset, but it’s not the same as me marrying someone for the right reasons. “We’re not actually together, Breslin. It’s just business. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“Yeah, I get that.” She gives her head a shake. “What I don’t get is why you would try to hide it from me. Lord knows I can’t stand Preston, but *you’re* like a sister to me. I thought we told each other everything.” She looks at Asher and Landon with glassy eyes and my heart twists. “I’m gonna take Picasso for a walk.”

Without sparing me another glance, she starts walking out of the room.

A lump fills my throat. I don’t want to lose her for a second time. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“She didn’t have a choice, Breslin,” Preston says. “We got married without a prenup and I threatened to take every dime of her parents’ money if she told you. I also destroyed her phone to make sure she couldn’t call you.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to defend him, but I can’t. Everything he said is the truth.

Which only makes it so much worse.

The expression on Breslin’s face when she turns around is what I imagine most killers look like right before they murder their victims in cold blood. “You did *what?*”

Before anyone can blink, she’s speeding toward him. Preston doesn’t even flinch when her fist goes sailing into his jaw. “You’re such an asshole!”

“You’re just realizing that now? Someone’s not the sharpest tool in the shed after all, now is she?”

She goes to punch him for a second time, but Asher and Landon step in. “You’re a real class act, man,” Landon bites out as they pull Breslin off him.

The fact that Preston can manage to ruffle the feathers of someone as calm and level-headed as Landon speaks volumes.

Preston gives him a shit-eating grin. “Thanks, I’ll be here all night. Don’t forget to tip your waitress.”

Christ, it’s like he *wants* everyone in the room to hate him.

It suddenly occurs to me that’s *exactly* what he’s doing. He’s intentionally pushing them away so they don’t get too close.

Just like he does with me.

Even Asher who went to the ends of the earth to defend him earlier looks disgusted. “What the fuck is your problem? It’s like aliens abducted my brother and brought back a psychopath.”

I shuffle my feet, my gaze darting between Asher and Preston. There’s so much I want to say and so much Preston won’t. And yet, I can’t help but feel like I’d be betraying Preston—the Preston I know, not this snarky douchebag version—if I told his brother all the things *he* should be telling him.

Asher looks so distraught and out of sorts it makes my heart hurt. “No phone calls. No visits. Not even a fucking postcard the whole entire time you’ve been gone.”

Preston stays silent, freezing him out like he’s nothing more than a piece of furniture in the room.

Asher sits at the end of the bed. “Can you guys give us a few minutes alone?”

Preston snaps his head up. “No.”

It’s clear Asher doesn’t like that response. “Why not?”

“Are you really that stupid, or have you just been sacked one too many times?” I wince at the hostility in his tone. “I don’t want to talk to you. Hell, I don’t even want to *see* you ever again.”

Asher’s jaw tics. “Well, it’s a good thing you can’t leave then, huh?”

A frown pulls at Preston’s mouth. “Take these off, Kit.” His gaze draws inward. “Please.”

“No,” Asher argues. “Leave them on. He might not want to talk, but he can damn sure listen to what I have to say.”

Dread claws at my chest. I hate being pulled in two different directions and having to choose a side.

Asher points to the door. “Everyone get out so I can talk to my brother.” I can see the struggle on Preston’s face. “You told me you understood.” My insides coil. “I do—”

“Yeah? How would you like it if I handcuffed you to a bed and forced you to be in the same room as your uncle?”

I wouldn’t. I’d hate it so much I’d never be able to forgive him.

A decision that seemed so hard a few seconds ago is now one of the easiest. “I’m not leaving.”

Asher looks positively baffled. “Fine. But one of you better tell me what the hell is going on.”

“I can’t.” My throat goes tight. “It’s not my place to tell you what he’s been up to or why he didn’t contact you. All I know is Preston doesn’t want to talk to you right now. Maybe he’ll change his mind or maybe he won’t. But if you love him, and I know you do, the best thing you can do is respect that and give him some time to sort things out.”

“Time? It’s been *three* fucking years.” Asher stands up. “After everything I’ve done for you, this is the thanks I get.” He gets close to Preston’s face. “You’re gonna regret this. Mark my fucking words.”

Preston’s expression goes blank, void of any speck of emotion. Like he’s mentally checked out of the room. It’s the scariest, most heartbreaking thing I’ve ever seen.

“I think you should leave.”

The cords in Asher’s neck strain. “I’m not leaving.”

“Come on, Asher.” Landon drapes his arm around his shoulders. “I think everyone needs a breather right now. We can check in with them tomorrow.”

Breslin looks between the door they just walked out of and me. “Will you be okay if I leave you alone with him? I can stay.”

“No. I’ll be fine.”

She exhales sharply. “Everything is so messed up.”

“I know.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow. I think it’s safe to say we really need to talk.”

After she leaves, I make my way over to him on the bed.

Preston doesn’t move a muscle. I’m not sure he even knows I’m here.

“I’m sorry.” I take the key out of my pocket. “I was trying to do what I thought was best.”

I unlock one of his wrists and his arm falls limp at his side. Same happens when I unlock the other one.

I cup his jaw. “Can you look at me, please?”

But he doesn't. He only retreats further into whatever trance he's in and my heart bottoms out. *Something's seriously wrong.* He's completely withdrawn...catatonic.

“I'm sorry, Preston. I was scared you were going to leave and get into trouble again.” I cradle his face in my hands, my desperation and concern growing with every second that passes. “Please, talk to me. Yell at me if you want. Tell me how wrong I was. Call me a neurotic nutcase who has no respect for personal boundaries. Just say something...anything.”

Nothing.

Panic shoots through me like a slingshot and I grab him by the shoulders. “Tell me what I can do. Tell me how to fix this.”

Fix you.

My chest caves in when I don't get a response and I do the only thing I can think of.

I throw my arms around him. “Okay, fine—you win. We don't have to talk.” I rest my head on his shoulder. “But I'm not letting go until you tell me to.” I trace little circles up and down his back, being as gentle as I can. “It's me and you. Until the end. Even when you hate me and push me away.”

My heart threatens to beat out of my chest when strong arms wrap around me. The tremors zipping through his body are so intense they make my teeth chatter and he's clutching me so tight it physically hurts, but I don't care. I match his strength, holding on to him with everything I've got.

“It's okay.” He lowers his head, nestling in the crook between my neck and shoulder as if he's seeking somewhere to keep cover, and it sends a gust of anguish through me.

Trailing my fingers along his scalp, I plant a gentle kiss on his scar. “You're okay.”

The stove is hot—my mind warns me. But I'm not listening.

Because Preston's in the middle of an inferno...and I won't let him go through it alone.

Preston

Chapter 14

The moment we're born we're already dying.
The proverbial clock is ticking away...counting down the seconds until our last.

Yet, our human instinct is to try and stop the inevitable.

We're so scared of death we spend a good portion of our lives trying to prevent it. As though the grim reaper himself was lurking around the corner...ready to pounce at a moment's notice.

From an early age, parents inform their children of all the bad things that could happen. All the ways they could die.

Don't cross the street without looking both ways—you could get hit by a car. Don't go swimming by yourself—you could drown. Don't talk to strangers—they could murder you.

Parents warn their children of all those things, but assure them the monsters under their beds aren't real and there's nothing to be afraid of.

No one ever tells children the truth.

The monster is real.

The monster could kill you.

And sometimes...*they're* the monster you should be afraid of.

Because some things are far worse than death.

Things like—the sheer terror that snatches you by the throat when you're immobilized by a force much stronger than you and you realize there's no escape.

The surge of helplessness that seeps into your psyche as someone painstakingly strips you of every ounce of your control piece by piece.

Or the overwhelming agony that follows when you finally succumb to the monster and beg and plead for him to stop...but he doesn't.

Because you're at his mercy, and he wants you to feel weak and powerless.

And you do.

Until finally...you don't feel anything anymore.

You're just a vacant cadaver. Lying face down on a bloody carpet until every drop of humanity is siphoned out of you.

I was seven years old when I found out the same man who laughed and told me the monster under my bed wasn't real...was the monster I should have been afraid of all along.

And every day since then has been spent wishing the bastard finished the job and killed me. Put me out of my fucking misery.

The only time I don't feel like that is when I'm gambling. When I'm riding the high, calling the shots, and manipulating fate—I get some of my control back.

It enables me to have a few moments that aren't weighed down by my past and all the things I want to forget.

Or the things I'll never have.

Like the girl in my arms.

"Hey." Her pretty face is filled with so much concern when she looks at me it chips away at the block of ice in my rib cage. "You're back."

She makes it sound like I just returned from the store instead of the few hours I spent trapped inside my mind—reliving the most vile, unspeakable acts.

I can see the questions burning behind those hazel eyes, but she doesn't start pummeling me with them like I thought she would. Instead, she throws her arms around me again, as if she didn't just spend the last three hours doing exactly that. "I missed you."

Fuck—this girl. She has a way of coiling herself around the dead thing inside my chest and jump-starting it back to life.

Kit not only gives me glimpses of the person I was supposed to be...the man the boy could have been. She accepts the fucked-up remnants of what's left behind.

She makes me feel less alone...a little more human.

Even still, Kit's not a cure and she can't fix me...she's merely life-support for my cadaver.

She's my favorite illusion.

Despite my resistance, I'm hugging her back. "Does that mean I'm in danger of being handcuffed to your bed again?"

"No." She squeezes me tighter. "I'm sorry. I never should have done that in the first place."

A sharp pain infiltrates my skull and I close my eyes.

Being physically restrained and forced to do something I don't want to—like interact with my shitbag brother—was pretty much my version of hell.

If I had any doubt about him turning out like our father and any hope I could move past this...I don't anymore. And if I never see him again, it will be too soon. He can take his money, fame, and his threats and choke on them.

The faster I get my ass back to Vegas, the better it is for everyone.

Despite being a loose cannon, Campanelli's fairly easy to manipulate and I know with the right words I'll get my job back.

I let go of her and get off the bed. "Do you have a computer?"

I only have fifty bucks to my name, but I can use my frequent flier miles to book a flight back home.

After I make two pit stops first.

"Yeah." She scoots to the edge of the bed and I try not to focus on the way her shorts ride up her thighs. "Is a laptop okay?"

"Perfect." I search around for my clothes but come up empty. "Have you seen my suit?"

She raises a brow. "In the laundry room. I haven't gotten around to having it dry cleaned yet though."

"That won't be necessary."

I amble toward the door, but she tugs my arm.

"Hold on. Why are you acting like you just woke up after a one-night stand with a taxidermist and can't get out of her house quick enough?"

To say she's piqued my attention is an understatement. "That's quite the picture you're painting."

She chews on her bottom lip. "I was nineteen. She was older, cute...a bit odd. Long story short, I got drunk and we went back to her place for the night. I woke up in a room full of stuffed cats and birds and hightailed it the heck out of there. Unfortunately, I couldn't find my clothes, so I had no choice but to grab the bearskin rug we had sex on and hide behind a large oak tree until Breslin picked me up."

I open my mouth, but words strike me silent. I'm not sure there's

anything one can say after hearing that.

She waves a hand. “Yeah, I know. But enough about me, why does it sound like you’re leaving?”

“Because I *am* leaving.”

I start to walk away again, but she runs in front of me. “Wait, hold your horses, cowboy.”

I brush past her. “Unlike your taxidermist, I have no horses. I do, however, have some things to take care of and hopefully; a plane to catch in the next forty-eight hours.”

“Plane to catch where? Campanelli said he’d kill you if he sees you in Vegas again.”

I look around for the laundry room. “Let me worry about Campanelli.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

When I don’t answer, she huffs out a breath. “Not only are we married, which automatically puts me on his radar...but my nanna shelled out thirteen million dollars to save your ass.”

“To save *your* ass,” I correct her. “Which she wouldn’t have had to do if you stayed inside.”

“You were in trouble.”

Christ almighty, she’s like the little lamb who follows Mary to school. Or in this case, follows *me* around. But, I’m no Mary, and if she keeps shadowing me, it’s only a matter of time before she ends up on the chopping block.

Just the thought of someone hurting her has my blood boiling.

I rub the throbbing spot on my head where a migraine is starting to form. “Look, I signed up for a quickie wedding and an even quicker trip to meet your nanna. Not a lifetime of being forced to talk to your friends or nagged about my whereabouts.”

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tack *no sex* to the end of that sentence, but I’d like to leave with my scrotum in one piece.

I breathe easy when I manage to locate my suit in the laundry room. I was hoping to make a getaway without any arguments or hard feelings. Then again, I suppose I kind of fucked that up with all the bullshit that happened earlier with my brother.

All the more reason to get a move on. If I leave now she won’t hate me like she did the last time I left.

Though it might be better if she does.

“You hugged me back.”

She’s lost me. “What?” I yank on my pants. “Hate to burst your bubble, but we’re not five. A hug doesn’t mean we’re lifelong friends or soulmates.”

I’m being a dick, but it’s the only way to cut the cord.

“I meant before...when you were going through...you know. You hugged me back. I know it’s scary to admit, but maybe you need someone—”

I spin around so fast she has no choice but to back up a few steps. “You have no idea what you’re talking about. I don’t need anyone.”

Anger races over my skin and it takes everything in me not to lose it. I don’t want to talk, let alone think about what happened before. Not now. Not *ever*. “You’re the one acting like a stage-five clinger who can’t take a hint. Not me.” And because I want to make sure she stops poking the beast I add, “No wonder your relationships never work out. You’re too goddamn needy.”

I regret the words the second I see the crushed look on her face. It’s as if I took the wind right out of her sails and threw her overboard.

“Does it feel good?” When I give her a look she says, “To cut people down to size and push them away whenever they get too close?”

Usually. Not with her, though.

She rubs her arms like she physically needs to warm herself up from the cold shoulder I’m giving her. “I wasn’t trying to make you talk about what happened earlier. I just wanted you to know you have a friend who cares and doesn’t want to see anything bad happen to you. A friend who’s here whenever you want to talk...or don’t want to talk.”

For the very first time, I tell her an outright lie. “I’m not going to Vegas.”

Maybe that will pacify her enough to let me leave without telling me crap that makes me want to stay.

Maybe if I treat her like every other girl who’s tried to implant themselves into my life...I can trick myself into believing she’s no different than they are.

Her brows knit together. “You’re not? Where else would you—” Her eyes widen and recognition crosses over her face. “Right.”

I’m not sure what’s going on in her head, but I know Kit’s not the type to try and manipulate me into telling her whatever she wants to know by pretending she already knows.

Kit places all her cards on the table for everyone to see. It’s a quality I admire and loathe.

Although with the way she’s glaring at me like she wants to toss me right

out of her apartment, maybe it's best I seize the opportunity. "Right. Take care."

Evidently that was the wrong move because she turns on her heel and flips me the bird. "Have fun with your whore."

I have no idea what's she's talking about. Or rather, *who* she's specifically referring to. "Which one?"

I narrowly dodge the bottle of cream she launches at my head. "Thank goodness I didn't have sex with you last night. God only knows what you could have given me from the little friend you visit whenever you're" —she makes air quotes— "in town."

Record skip. Two important things occur to me at that moment.

One—does this mean she was seriously considering having sex with me?

And two—my little friend in town? That doesn't make any sense. I don't have any...

"My little friend in town?" I repeat slowly, trying to process what's going on.

Irritation flickers in her eyes. "Yeah. I spoke to her this morning while you were sleeping in *my* bed."

I blink, still not understanding. "Spoke to her this morning?"

Guilt colors her face. "I went through your phone."

I no longer have any doubt as to whether my heart works because it stops cold. "Kit, please, give me—"

"It's in your suit pocket." She crosses her arms. "And I know, I shouldn't have. I just wanted to make sure you were telling the truth about not talking to any bookies."

"I'm not mad."

That's another lie. I'm so mad I want to destroy everything in her apartment, light it on fire, and then piss all over it. I have one thing in this world besides gambling that prevents me from putting a bullet in my head... and she just took it from me.

I step closer, preparing to fence her in so she can't escape. "I need to know *exactly* what you said to her."

The look on my face must convey the rage I'm feeling because she turns pale. "I didn't say anything."

A black haze clogs my vision and I get so close to her face I can smell those fucking tapas she ate on her breath. "Don't lie to me. You just said you spoke to her." The thread I'm barely hanging on to is unraveling. I need to

get out of here before I do something I can't take back. Something I'll never forgive myself for. "What the fuck did you say?"

"I didn't talk to her," Kit screeches. "She picked up the phone before I could get a word in and said since you were in town, you were welcome to spend the night at her place again. Even with her accent, her flirty undertone was undeniable, she obviously thought it was you. I felt stupid so I disconnected the call."

Accent? Flirty undertone? None of that sounds right. Neither does inviting me to spend the night at her place.

Unless...

Relief slams into me so hard I nearly rock back on my feet. If what she's saying is true, I just dodged the mother of all bullets.

"That's it?"

"That's it." Her face screws up. "Actually, there was one more thing."

"What?"

White hot pain steals my breath when her bony knuckles sail into my already bruised ribs.

But it's nothing compared to the pain I feel when she locks herself in the bathroom and I hear her cry.

I did this. I hurt the only person who's never demanded anything more of me than I was capable of. The only person who's taken my side over my brother's. The only person who's never treated me like a fuck-up.

I hurt the only true friend I've ever had. The one I never deserved.

If I was a good person, I'd leave like I desperately wanted to ten minutes ago.

If I was a good person, I wouldn't be making my way toward the bathroom.

But I'm not.

I'm a liar. A thief. And I'm selfish.

Because for once, instead of leaving after I've destroyed something...I want to try and repair the damage first.

Because the thought of Kit hating me before I let her go again hurts *me* more than I care to admit.

Because I made a vow to cherish her until the day I die. And even though the wedding was utter bullshit...that part was real.

I don't bother knocking before I enter.

When I find her on the floor of the shower; hugging her knees to her

chest, shaking like a leaf in a hurricane—I want to take a sledgehammer to my cranium.

Unable to resist, I turn the shower off, drape an oversized towel around her, and pick up the mess I made. “I’m sorry.”

“I’ve heard that from you before.”

The dull ache in my chest is back with a vengeance. “Yeah, but this time I mean it.”

I feel it.

“You should leave,” she chokes out as I start walking us to her bedroom. “Go hang out with your girlfriend. The one who makes you so happy.”

I have no idea how she’s getting all this from a phone call in which she didn’t even speak to anyone. “I—”

“You must really love her,” she whispers. “I’ve never seen you so furious before...not with me.” Her voice cracks on the last word. “You could have told me about her, Preston. You could have told me you were in love and didn’t want me interfering.” Her tears come faster now. “You could have told me you chose *her* instead of me. You didn’t have to hurt me like you did. You didn’t have to save me and then leave me like they did.”

Oh, fuck. It’s not so much her words that punch me in the heart. It’s the broken look in her eyes.

She’s not looking at me like Kit—my quirky, lovable, angry girl I’d do anything for. Right now, she’s looking at me like Kit—the little girl who lost everything.

She’s looking at me like I’m another thing she’s going to have to grieve and mourn.

The realization that I have another tough decision to make punches me in the heart.

Lying to her would be the easy choice. The most humane.

But Kit deserves honesty. She deserves someone who will think about what’s best for her.

I sit down on the bed, but I don’t let her go. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

“But you want her to be, right?” She sits up on my lap, adjusting the towel around her petite form. “That’s why you were so irate. You didn’t want her to find out about me—”

“No.” I swallow, and it feels like nails going down. “I’d have one hell of an Oedipus complex if that was the case.”

“I don’t—”

“She’s my mother.” I take a breath, inhaling that addicting scent of hers instead of the shame that’s swirling around me like a fog. “But you’re right, I’d rather her not know about you. I don’t need her hounding my rich wife with a heart of gold for money.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I don’t know, probably for the same reason you didn’t tell me you went through my phone.”

“I meant to, but Breslin and your brother showed up and everything...I was going to tell you.” Her nose wrinkles. “It was wrong of me to do it.”

I tip her chin. “Why did you?”

“I told myself it was because I wanted to make sure you were safe...but I think my curiosity got the best of me and I just wanted to know more about you.”

I brush the damp tears from her face. “You know more about me than anyone else, Kit.”

“I thought so, too, but...” Her voice trails off and she gives her head a shake.

“But what?” I urge.

On some level, I register it’s probably not fair to demand she tell me given everything I’ve kept from her, but I don’t care. Our relationship has never been symmetrical. Kit gives...and I take.

Because naturally, we both know I have nothing good to contribute.

Her hand goes to her necklace. “I don’t care about your stupid booty calls...but this...I don’t know how to explain it. All I know is she felt like a threat to us...our connection. I didn’t like it.”

Ignoring the sick feeling snaking up my spine, I kiss the top of her head. “And here I thought you were crying because I was an asshole, not jealousy.”

She scowls, and it takes every ounce of my willpower not to throw her on the bed and kiss it off her lips...and then do something to put it right back again.

“I wasn’t jealous. Jealousy implies I want something someone else has.” She fiddles with the poker chip. “But I already have it.” Her gaze sharpens. “You can stick your pecker in whoever you want. It doesn’t bother me. Just don’t give someone else the part of you that’s already mine.”

If this wasn’t such a serious moment, I’d tease her about the little green-eyed monster poking out and marking her territory. However, I need her to know that no one will ever take her place or the part of me that belongs to

her.

My arms find her waist, tugging her closer. “That will never happen. It’s me and you, angry girl. Until the end.”

She wraps her arms around my neck. “Does this mean you’ll stay?”

I start to answer, but she places her finger over my lips. “Before you say no, hear me out. If your mom is bad news, you shouldn’t be around her.” She grabs my cheeks. “We don’t have to talk about you zoning out before, your brother, or the fight we had, okay? We don’t have to talk at all...just stay.”

I don’t have it in me to deny her right now. “Just for the night.”

“We’ll take it day by day,” she counters as if she’s already prepared tomorrow’s negotiations as well. “Now turn around so I can put some clothes on. After, we can order pizza and snuggle.”

“I don’t—” I clamp my mouth shut. It doesn’t matter what she calls it—Kit will be in my arms, which is exactly how I want to spend my last night with her.

There’s a crushing weight in my chest as I slide into her bed. A hefty awareness creeping into all the crevices I thought were sealed tight.

Kit deserves every good thing life has to offer. She deserves someone who makes her laugh instead of cry.

Someone who will put their selfish needs aside and think about what’s best for her and only her.

She deserves someone who would never lie to her.

And I hope like hell she finds them one day.

Kit

Chapter 15

The tip of Preston's finger trails down the side of my face. "How old were you when you got your first piercing?"
"You mean professionally?"

When he raises an eyebrow, I lift the hem of my shirt, exposing my belly button piercing. I'm beginning to regret the four slices of pizza I slammed. But then I realize, it's just Preston. He couldn't care less about the pizza pouch situation I've got going on.

"Technically I did this myself when I was fifteen, but it was a huge mistake."

"Because it hurt?"

"Because I didn't know what I was doing and it got infected." I cringe as I recall the memory. "It worked in my favor though because after it cleared up, she gave me permission to get it pierced legitimately." I roll my eyes. "She said my scar was abhorrent and she didn't want people starting rumors about me having a botched plastic surgery."

Preston doesn't even try to hide his annoyance. "Christ, she's really something else."

"Yeah, but I got her back on my eighteenth birthday." I grin mischievously. "The look on her face when she saw my first tattoo was priceless."

"Is that why you got it?" There's no judgment in his tone, just curiosity.

I shake my head. "No. Don't get me wrong, it added to the enjoyment. But self-expression was the culprit. Well, that and the adrenaline rush."

Amusement lines his face. "A fellow adrenaline junkie."

I have to laugh. “No, I’m absolutely petrified of heights.” Just like that my stomach free falls as the memory slashes through me. “It’s why I proposed to Becca in front of the Eiffel Tower instead of at the top like I originally planned. I wanted it to be special for her, but I freaked everyone out when I had a panic attack, and they made me go back down.” I inwardly shudder. “Have you seen those elevators? They’re no joke.”

Something passes in his gaze, but he shrugs and says, “No, but if you’re planning to ask someone to marry you, it should probably be someplace you both enjoy.”

“Like standing on a curb in Vegas?”

A laugh rumbles out of him and I can’t help but smile.

The fight we had earlier tore me to pieces, and there’s still so much we need to talk about—but I think us agreeing to put it on the backburner for tonight was something we both needed.

Things are so much simpler when it’s just the two of us.

It’s the outside world that screws everything up.

“And they say romance is dead.” I gesture to the pizza box. “I don’t know about you, but I’m enjoying our awesome honeymoon.”

He tucks his arm under his head. “Throw in a few rounds of strip poker and beer and it’s paradise.” He gives me a wry grin. “What do you say, Bishop?”

My laughter dies. “Hard pass. I’m not stripping for you.” I can feel the flush creeping in as thoughts of last night flit through my head. “However, I *do* have an employee subscription to Porn Rub. If you want me to throw you a bottle of *Jergens* and buzz off so you can have at it, just say the word.” Incapable of taking the foot out of my mouth, I add, “Or I can hire an escort and you can go to town. If you do her in front of me, it will almost be like we consummated our marriage.”

His mouth tightens. “Do you think I have a problem getting laid?”

The fact that I almost went there with him last night *proves* he doesn’t.

“Hardly,” I prattle on, brushing off the tiny voice in my head that’s begging me to shut up. “Come on, even your mom sounds like she wants to climb you like a tree. You obv—”

“You’re babbling.”

“Yeah, I know. Bad habit.”

Turning, he props himself up on his elbow. “Relax, angry girl. I suggested strip poker so I wouldn’t wipe out your bank account when I won.”

His eyes burn a stormy trail down my body and back up again. “Not because I want to have sex with you.”

“Oh.”

I should be relieved instead of offended...and yet...

I’m about to ask him why I’m not up to par when he has no problem screwing anything in a skirt, but then he says, “I’m not trying to be a dick. You were right yesterday, it’s best we don’t muddle things.”

“Right.” I clear what sounds a whole lot like disappointment instead of relief out of my throat. “Exactly.”

I can feel him studying me. “It’s going to be awkward as hell now when I get up to take a shower, isn’t it?”

“Not at all.” Lord knows I can use a moment or several after that exchange.

When he rises from the bed, I go over to my dresser.

He looks at me like I’ve sprouted three heads when I throw a pair of men’s pajama pants at him.

“I bought these for a girl I used to hook up with.” I pick up the empty pizza box. “You two were around the same size.” I place a finger to my lips. “On second thought, I think her muscles were way bigger.”

“Hilarious,” he mutters as I leave the room.

After I throw the pizza box away, I head for the couch, figuring it’s probably a good idea to read over my notes from the one and only workshop I went to. This way, I’ll have some idea of what to expect on Monday.

The second my butt hits the cushion; however, I realize I left my suitcase with my paperwork in my car.

It’s extra chilly when I step outside, the cold air numbing my extremities as I make a mad dash for it.

“Planning to escape?”

Instinctually, my hand goes to the can of pepper spray on my keychain and I spin around.

Unfortunately, or rather fortunately for Asher, I lose my footing on a small patch of ice.

Asher holds his arm out, righting me. “Probably should have knocked on the door, huh?”

I nod, my breathing erratic due to being spooked and almost falling. “Considering you took a decade off my life? Yeah, that would have been preferable. What are you doing here, anyway?” I look around. “Where are

Landon and Breslin? How did you get here?”

“That’s a lot of questions.”

“Answer the first one then,” I say through chattered teeth.

He peels off his jacket and hands it to me. “I’m here trying to figure out how to get my brother to talk to me.”

Mayday. Abort mission. Preston’s upstairs and I don’t want to do or expose him to anything that will cause him to go into the horrible state he was in earlier.

I give Asher his jacket back. “Sorry, can’t help you there. Have a good night.”

“What, we’re not friends anymore?” he calls out when I start walking away.

“Of course, we’re still friends.” I pause, scrutinizing the thought. “It’s just kind of...”

“Complicated?” he finishes for me. “Yeah, I know. So is not knowing why your brother—who you’ve always looked out for—disappears for three years and doesn’t want to talk to you when he finally comes back.”

“You really don’t know why?” I can’t help the discrimination in my tone, but if anyone other than Preston should know the reason for their fallout, it *should* be Asher.

“No, I’ve been wracking my brain, but nothing adds up.”

“What happened the last time you saw him?”

He digs his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “The last time I saw him was at our father’s funeral, about a week after the school shooting.” He shrugs. “But he was fine...up until the last few minutes.”

“Care to elaborate?”

He draws in a deep breath. “Our father left everything in his will to me. I told Preston I’d write him a check, but not until he followed certain conditions.”

Revulsion coils my insides and I hold up a hand. “On second thought, I don’t think I’m the best person to talk to about this. As someone who’s been dealing with my own family member’s *conditions* for most of her life, I’m far too subjective not to be biased.”

“That’s different. Your grandmother wanted to make your life miserable. I wanted to help my brother.”

I motion for his jacket. “Go on.”

“The terms were simple. I’d pay for his tuition at Yale, and after he

graduated, I'd cut him a check for half the money—provided he quit gambling for those two years. This way, when I forked over millions, he'd do the right thing and not blow it all.”

To say I'm dumbfounded would be an understatement. I'm sure Preston didn't like hearing that he had to give up gambling, but his brother was only trying to do right by him.

“And he said *no*?”

“Turned me down on the spot.”

He pulls what looks like a joint out of his pocket. When I raise an eyebrow, he says, “It's not weed. The NFL would can my ass so fast my head would spin if I failed a drug test.” He lights it and makes a face. “This here is some organic, herbal crap Breslin and Landon found for me. It's not as good as the real stuff, but it helps with my anxiety.”

A bittersweet feeling snags me as I recall the time Asher and Landon showed up at my dorm and we ended up higher than attendees at a *Bob Marley* concert. Mere hours after Becca broke my heart. “Hey, whatever works.” I shift my weight from foot to foot. “Did you say anything after that? Anything that might have upset him?”

He shakes his head. “No. Although, I was pretty pissed when he told me he dropped out of school and even more pissed when he told me he came there to say goodbye because he was in trouble and had to skip town.”

“What kind of trouble was he in?”

“Fuck if I know, he didn't say. He got in his car and took off.”

I motion for Asher to give me the joint. “So, he told you he was in trouble, and then left?”

“Pretty much. I mean, he didn't tell me he was in trouble, but it was obvious.”

“How so?”

He takes the joint back from me. “Because I know my brother. Besides, why else would he leave town?”

Pressing the heel of my palm to my eyes, I let out a groan. Asher isn't much better than his brother is when it comes to thinking of others.

“I don't know, maybe because the guy found out he wasn't the father of his girlfriend's baby, survived a school shooting, and lost a parent just days before. It's safe to say he had a lot going on.” I peer up at him. “The last time I saw him was at the hospital after...you know.” An image of Becca on her knees permeates my brain and I close my eyes. “He didn't seem upset then,

but how was he after?”

Asher’s shoulders sag. “I don’t know.”

“Huh?”

He plops down on a nearby curb. “I was so worried about Landon, I never checked in with him at all that week.” He stubs out his joint. “No wonder he doesn’t want to talk to me. He needed someone to talk to back then and I wasn’t there.”

I’m not going to kick my friend when he’s already down. It’s not like I thought about Preston’s perspective back then either, I was too busy hating his guts.

I take a seat next to him. “You had your own shit going on. Landon was fighting for his life because Kyle...” Bile surges up my throat as another slew of images...awful ones, rip through me. “We all had things we were going through back then. Things we were trying to cope with.”

Some of us have things we’re still trying to cope with. Things we’ll never be able to forget.

Asher’s brows knit together. “You okay?”

No.

“I’m fine,” I lie. “The good news is, now that you know what the issue is, you can start taking the steps to fix it.”

He stands. “You’re right.”

Before I can say a word, he starts walking in the direction of my apartment.

“Wait,” I yell, chasing after him. Asher might be ready to boogie, but Preston’s not quite there yet. “Not so fast.”

“Why?”

“Preston doesn’t want to talk to you right now. I think you should give him a little more—”

Evidently not listening to me runs in their DNA because Asher continues up the stairs to my apartment and barges through my front door.

To say Preston’s not thrilled to see his brother would be putting it mildly.

“I dropped the ball, Preston. You needed your big bro to be there and help you fix everything, and I wasn’t.” Before Preston has a chance to process what’s happening, Asher throws his arms around him. “I’m sorry.”

The sound of Preston’s fist connecting with Asher’s cheek can be heard across the Atlantic. “Touch me again and I’ll rip both your arms off and end your career, motherfucker.”

My heart aches when Asher's face falls.

"Preston—"

"Did *you* put him up to this?" The glare he aims at me sends a chill up my spine. "Did you tell him to come up here, apologize, and then *hug* me?"

"No, I—"

"She didn't put me up to anything, shithead," Asher unhelpfully supplies. Preston bares his teeth. "Shut the fuck up!"

"Stop." I stand between them. "First of all, this is my apartment. And the first rule of Kit's place is there's no fighting in Kit's place."

Asher rubs his cheek. "You've got that all wrong, small fry. It's—the first rule of fight cl—"

Asher doesn't get to finish that sentence because Preston takes a swing at him over my head. "One boyfriend and one girlfriend aren't enough for you? You have to try and take my girl, too?"

"What?" Me and Asher yell at the same time.

Preston's officially gone off the deep end if he thinks *Asher* and I are interested in one another.

Asher appears to be as baffled as I am. "What the hell are you talking about? Kit's been my fr—"

"Not anymore she isn't." The look in Preston's eyes is downright menacing. "Kit isn't your anything, bonehead. She's *my* wife."

Mamma Mia, I've never had one guy fight over me, let alone two. It's *awful*. Why in the world do women dig it so much?

Asher puffs out his chest and I can tell he's nearing the end of his fuse. "A little obsessive for a fake marriage, don't you think?" He flicks a hand in my direction. "But hey, it seems like you treat your *wife* much better than your past girlfriends, so bravo. Controlling douchebag is a step up from lying, cheating, scumbag."

My stomach knots because that ugly side of Asher is officially out and without Landon and Breslin here to help defuse the situation, it could get bad. *Real bad*.

Preston's laugh is callous. "That's real funny coming from the guy who lied to his high school sweetheart while he was off getting blow jobs from that psychopath Kyle."

Talk about a low blow.

Placing one hand on Preston's chest, and the other on Asher's, I part them like the red sea. "All right, boys. I think we all need to chill."

“Him or me?”

Now Preston’s just being difficult. “You can’t be serious.”

My heart spasms when he starts trudging toward the front door. “Guess I have my answer.”

Oh, this bastard.

I reach for his arm. “You. My choice is always you, jackass.”

Even when I hate your guts.

“But for the record, if you cared about me you would never make me choose. You’d either tell your brother what he did and how he could gain your forgiveness, or you’d man the hell up and find a way to coexist in the same room with him for my sake.”

“I wouldn’t hold your breath,” Asher mutters. “Preston doesn’t do anything for anyone that doesn’t directly benefit him.”

“I think it’s best you go for now.”

I hate making Asher leave, but Preston and Asher aren’t going to fix their issues tonight and the longer he stays, the worse it will get.

Preston opens the door. “You heard my wife. Get the fuck out.”

Asher laughs. but there’s not a drop of humor. “You know, you keep using that word like it means something. But everyone in this room knows exactly why you married Kit.”

He has a point, and yet, my ticker has officially put Asher on her shit list for the night. “Ash—”

He holds up a hand. “Hold on, I’m about to do you a big favor.” His eyes swivel to Preston. “Since you like gambling so much, brother—I say we place a bet on how long it will take you to plow through her parents’ money before you toss her to the side like used toilet paper.” He smirks when Preston stays silent. “What’s the matter? You haven’t given her a sob story and convinced her to cut you a check yet?”

He digs his wallet out of his pocket and throws a wad of cash in Preston’s face. “Don’t worry, this one’s on me. Because I’ll bet every cent I make this year that you’ll fuck her life up before the first six months of your marriage is over. Just like you do everything else.”

He looks at me. “I’ve been cleaning up his messes for most of my life—so when he screws you over, you know where to find me.”

With that, Asher walks out.

I close the door and lean against it. “I don’t know if you’re aware, but I don’t have many family members left. I’m down to a grandmother who

delights in controlling and torturing me, and an uncle who most likely murdered my parents. I know you can't stand him—but your brother, Breslin, and Landon...they're my family. They took me in when I had no one. And now you're making me lose them too."

Preston's face softens. "I'm sorry."

I raise my chin. "That's two for two tonight."

He takes a step closer, but I grab my jacket so I can return Asher's to him.

"Where are you going?"

"To tell off your brother." I open the front door. "You were a jerk to him, but he's dead wrong about you."

"Hey," I call out when I reach the parking lot.

Asher continues walking, like he doesn't even hear me.

Must be another Holden trait.

I start sprinting when he turns the corner and heads down the street.

I call his name again and when he doesn't stop, I throw a snowball at his back. "Don't ignore me."

He turns to face me, hands on his hips. "I'm sorry, *Mrs. Holden*. Was there something you wanted from me?"

I know he's mad, but he's taking it out on the wrong person. "I get that you're upset, and I know Preston can be infuriatingly frustrating and difficult, but he doesn't deserve to be treated or talked to like that."

His jaw works. "Weird. All this time I thought you hated my brother and we were friends."

"We are. And friends are honest with one another. Friends tell each other when they're wrong. And you're wrong about your brother—who yes, I did hate at one point. But there's more to him than what you think. Give him a chance to prove it."

"Give him a chance?" He points a thumb in the direction of my apartment building. "Twice today I've given him a chance."

"No, the only thing you've done was try to make him talk to you. And when he wouldn't, you cut him down and threw his past in his face. That's not giving someone you love a chance, Asher. That's intentionally hurting them because they're not doing what you want." Pressure tightens against my ribs. "No wonder he is the way he is. How is he supposed to get his act together and believe he's capable of stopping the self-destructive spiral he's been in when no one else does? Not even his own family."

He looks down at the ground and curses.

“What?”

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

The implication is like a brick to the face. “No—”

“Look, he’s my brother so I have no choice but to love him.” He sighs deeply. “And you’re my friend, which means I have to warn you that it won’t end well.” A deep frown lines his mouth. “There *is* good in him like you said. But relationships have never been something he was good at. They’re something he *avoids*. You’re a sweet girl and I know you want to help him. But please, don’t delude yourself into thinking you can change him. You’re not the first girl to have stars in her eyes when it comes to my brother, and you certainly won’t be the last.”

“I don’t—”

“If you think Becca broke your heart, my brother will throw it in a blender and have it for a midnight snack.”

The organ he’s referring to squeezes and threatens to go on strike.

Chill out, heart. We’re not interested in Preston.

He takes his beanie off and runs a hand through his hair. “Not to mention, Breslin will go postal if she loses you again.” He folds his arms and stares me down. “And if she’s upset...*I’m* upset.”

Good Lord, he’s being far too dramatic about this. “No one is losing anyone. It’s not like that between us. We’re not in a romantic relationship.”

He tilts his head to the side, studying me. “Then what exactly is going on between you two?”

“We’re sort of, kind of...friends. It’s...he doesn’t have anyone.” When he starts to argue, I hold up a hand. “He’s choosing not to have anyone. But sometimes, he lets me in.” I clutch my chest, images of Preston from earlier slamming through me. “He’s going through some stuff, Asher. I don’t know what, because we haven’t broken that barrier, but I know it’s bad. Real bad. He won’t admit it, but he needs someone.”

He stays silent as I continue. “So even though it might piss you off and upset Breslin, you two can’t stop me from being his friend. Unlike everyone else, *I’m* not giving up on him.”

After what feels like an eternity, he speaks. “Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me...” I gape at him. “I don’t get you. One second you love and miss your brother and the next you—”

“I’m frustrated, Kit!” He kicks a piece of black ice, sending it sailing. “Preston and me...we used to be close. I hate that he gambles his life away

and does stupid shit, but I dealt with it.” His eyes become glassy. “What I can’t deal with—is him looking at me like I’m the biggest piece of shit on the planet.” He shrugs helplessly. “How do I get my little brother back when he despises me?”

The defeat in his voice has my heart folding in on itself and I can’t help but pull him into a hug. Asher’s strong on the outside, but once you crack that shell, the dude is a big mush.

“I know it’s hard, but I think the best thing you can do is find a way to respect Preston’s wishes and give him some time. If you keep pushing him, you’ll only make it worse.” I hand him his jacket. “I’ll try to help, but not until he’s ready.”

“I hate it, but I guess you’re right.” He blows out a breath. “I’m gonna jog back to the hotel.”

“It’s freezing outside. Let me drive you.”

“Nah, I don’t want to piss him off.”

I steer him back to the parking lot. “As long as you don’t go up there and hug him again, it will be fine.” I point to my car. “Hang out over there while I run upstairs and tell him.”

“Fine,” he grumbles. “But if he punches me again, I’m kicking him in the nuts.”

“Don’t. Those puppies have already taken a beating over the last few days.”

I ignore the look he gives me and race up the stairs to my apartment.

“Don’t get mad, but I’m giving your brother a ride back to his hotel,” I say as I open the front door. “I’ll bring you back food so you’re not so grumpy, okay?”

No response.

“Preston?”

Given he’s not in the living room or kitchen, I walk down the hall and check the bedroom.

Nerves bunch in my stomach when I check the bathroom next. *Empty.*

My heart’s in my throat when I check the laundry room and notice his suit and phone are gone.

And it bottoms out completely when I see the note he left.

He's not wrong about me.
Take care of yourself, angry girl.

-P

Kit

Chapter 16

“*H*ow do you not have your husband’s phone number?” Asher drones as he paces back and forth.

“Don’t give her shit right now,” Breslin scolds. “Can’t you see she’s upset?”

“Well, I’m upset, too,” he booms. “And maybe if Kit would start talking and tell me what my brother’s been up to, we could find him.”

Landon puts what looks like a cup of tea down in front of me. “Quit riding her. I’m sure if she knew something important, she’d tell us.”

Breslin rubs my back. “You keep staring at your phone, honey. Does Preston have your number?”

I shake my head.

Even if he did, I doubt he’d use it.

An uneasy feeling settles over me when I look out the window and notice the sun is rising. Between the four of us, we’ve spent the better part of the night checking every casino, every airport, and every hotel.

Somewhere between desperate and hopeless, I realized Juan was still in Vegas. With no other options left, I begged him to go to Preston’s motel and call me when he got there.

That was a little over an hour ago, though and I haven’t heard from him since.

“It’s not my fault he left. It’s yours.”

It’s the first words I’ve spoken since we came back.

A shard of guilt pricks me for blaming him, but I’m getting tired of Asher interrogating me.

I refuse to betray Preston and tell his brother things he doesn't want him to know.

I made a promise...a vow.

Asher rakes a hand over his scalp. "Look, I'm sorry for being a douche." His face goes slack. "I just don't want to see my brother in a body bag because you don't want to tell me what he's been up to."

An ugly feeling churns my insides and the room spins. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

"Okay, that's enough," Breslin says. "I think we're all forgetting it's Preston. Him skipping town is nothing new."

When my eyes narrow, she adds, "I'm not trying to be insensitive, but there's no denying things are much better when he's not around."

Not for me.

Her eyes drift to Asher. "Preston's...he's a lot to handle. Not to mention dangerous, selfish, reckless—"

"He's my friend."

I look at Landon because he's the only other person in the world who will understand. "I wouldn't be standing here if it weren't for Landon and him."

There were two heroes in the cafeteria that day...and Preston was one of them.

He was *mine*.

He didn't have to trade places with me when Kyle held me at gunpoint. And he didn't have to continue dragging me into an elevator while I fought him and almost ruined his only chance at survival.

But he did.

Landon's expression turns serious, like he's replaying that exact moment in his head like I am. "Kit's right." He rubs Asher's shoulder. "It's obvious the guy is going through some shit. I think we should find him and let him know he has people in his corner." Asher gives his hand a gentle squeeze.

Breslin's face turns to stone. "I don't—"

"He saved Kit, Bre," Landon whispers as his gaze bounces between Asher and me. "He's family."

I give him a grateful smile. If there's one person who can tame Breslin's stubbornness and get through to her...it's Landon.

Breslin nods slowly and ruffles my hair. "Okay, we'll keep looking." Her other hand cups Asher's cheek. "We won't stop until we find him."

Landon pulls out a small notebook and takes a seat beside Asher. "He

doesn't have a car and I'm assuming he doesn't have much money. Therefore, how far could he have really gone?"

Asher turns peaked. "He has a little over nine hundred. Give or take."

Landon stops writing. "How do you know?"

Crossing my arms, I look at Asher. "Because your boyfriend not only told his brother he was a screw-up, he *bet* him he'd fuck up my life in the next six months. And then—he threw money in his face."

I don't bother holding back the venom in my voice. It was a shit thing to do.

"That was cold," Breslin says at the same time Landon bites out, "What the hell is the matter with you?"

Asher points to the bruise on his cheek. "That was after I apologized to him and he punched me." He holds up a finger. "Not to mention, threatened to break my arms and ruin my career."

"He did what?" Landon and Breslin yell.

Asher juts his chin at me. "And accused me of trying to sleep with Kit."

Goddammit, Preston. You sure don't make it easy for a girl to defend you.

I wave a hand. "He didn't mean it. He was upset because Asher barged in unannounced and riled him up." When they all make a face, I stab the counter with my finger. "Can we focus on what's important? Like finding Preston."

Breslin clacks her teeth so hard I'm surprised a few don't break. She takes a sip of her coffee and turns to me. "I'm assuming he's been in Vegas gambling all this time, right?"

Dread coils my insides and I clamp my mouth shut, just like I always do whenever they ask me a direct question about Preston.

I can tell their patience with me is starting to wear thin. Even Landon looks mildly annoyed with me now and the man has the patience and temperament of a saint.

"How can we find him if we don't know where he's been?" Asher gripes.

"I...he..." A rock lodges in my voice box.

I'm not trying to be obtuse. I *want* to do the right thing. But I can't help but feel like Preston will never trust me again if I spill. And I need him to trust me so I can help him.

I glance at the clock and nausea barrels into me.

Seven.

A lot can happen in seven hours. Preston could be anywhere right now.

He could be in trouble.

I pin Asher with a look. “If I tell you what I know, you have to promise me you won’t throw it in his face, no matter how mad you are.”

His jaw works. “I don’t want to throw anything in his face, Kit. Despite what happened between us yesterday, I do care about him.”

Breslin rubs between his shoulder blades. “Asher’s been looking for him since he first left. You and Preston might be *friends* now, but Asher was your friend first. Stop treating him like an enemy.”

Breslin has a point. Maybe I subconsciously put Asher in the box marked *bad* because a small part of me can’t help but think Asher must have done something horrible to make Preston not want to talk to him.

Despite my friendship with Asher, I inadvertently chose a side without realizing it.

And even though it’s probably wrong of me, I can’t bring myself to regret it.

Preston needs someone on his side.

But I need to find him.

“He’s been living in Vegas.”

Asher throws his hands up. “That’s the first place I sent the private investigator. How the hell did he not find him?”

I sit on my hands to stop them from shaking. “I don’t know. Maybe because he worked for the m—”

Juan’s ringtone cuts me off mid-sentence and I jump out of my seat.

“You got some ‘splainin’ to do,” Juan hisses when I answer. “Not only did you send me to the shadiest motel, but this skeevy guy at the front desk—”

“Skeevy guy has a name, twinkle toes,” Max grunts in the background.

Juan sighs. “I’m sorry. This skeevy guy named *Max* told me you’re married.”

Well, shit.

My mouth goes dry. “Um—”

“To a man!”

“A little bit,” I settle on. I’m seriously regretting not telling him now.

There’s a long pause on the other line. And then, “Oh, my God. It all makes sense.” He exhales sharply. “Sweetie, are you a prostitute? Are these men pumping you with drugs and forcing you to fu—”

“No,” I shout, both offended and impressed with Juan’s ability to conjure up the worst possible scenario. “I’m not a prostitute and they’re not giving

me drugs.”

I can feel everyone’s eyes on me and I point to the phone. “It’s Juan.”

I get up and walk into the living room for some privacy, but everyone—Picasso included—follows behind me. “I would love to explain everything to you, and I will, but I can’t right now because time is of the essence. I need you to ask Max if he’s seen or talked to Preston—my husband.”

“Hold on.”

There’s murmuring in the background before Juan sighs. “He said if you wanted to talk to him, you should have called the motel instead of sending me to do your dirty work.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I grumble. “Put him on the phone.”

“Long time no talk, toots,” Max drawls a moment later.

“Don’t you *toots* me, jerk. This is important.”

“What’s up?”

“Preston’s missing.”

I hear him chomp down on his toothpick. “Shit. Doll, I’m sorry to break it to you, but he’s not missing. I *told* him not to cross Campanelli.”

Despite knowing what he’s saying is incorrect, I have to remind my heart to beat again. “His debt with Campanelli is taken care of.”

“He got the money back from the Russians?”

I start pacing my living room. “No. Long story short, Campanelli and his goons showed up at my nanna’s house and tried to kill him, but she took out her gun and offered him thirteen million to leave me and Preston alone.”

“What?” Breslin screeches.

“The fuck?” Asher barks.

“Jesus,” Landon mumbles.

Woof.

I hold up a finger, silencing them.

Max whistles. “Is your nanna single?”

“She...ew.” Shaking that god-awful image out of my head, I continue. “Like I was saying, it’s not Campanelli. Preston left in the middle of the night on his own and I can’t find him.”

“Did you try calling him?”

“I don’t have his number.”

“You don’t have your husband’s number?”

So help me God I am going to deck the next person who says that.

Cradling the phone, I rub my temples. “I don’t. I was hoping you could

give it to me. And before you say you don't have it, I know he called you the other day from the taxi. I was there."

"I don't know, doll face. I don't like getting involved in other people's relationships."

Somehow, I find that *very* hard to believe.

"You're the only person who can help me, Max." My heart pangs and I close my eyes. "I'll do anything. I'll even hop on a plane and flash you my boobs if that's what it takes. I just need to get in contact with him. I need to know he's okay."

"You're my friend's wife. I can't let you come down to my establishment and show me your tits." I open my mouth to tell him he's missing the point, but he adds, "Text me nudes instead."

"Max—"

"Got a pen?"

I grab one off the coffee table. "Yes. Ready when you are."

He rattles off the number and I quickly jot it down before I hang up and dial it.

My chest caves in when it goes directly to voicemail.

Given it's the only lead I have and I don't want to take the chance that Preston won't call me back...or worse, get rid of his phone, I decide not to leave one.

"I think it's turned off. It went directly to voicemail," I whisper and my heart thrashes in protest.

Asher's features screw up. "He's working for the mob?"

"He was playing poker for a mob boss in Vegas, but it's over now." I plop down on the couch across from them. "Preston didn't tell me much about it."

He never told me much about anything.

Except one thing. I was tempted to ask Asher earlier, but I didn't want to disclose Preston's secret.

However, my concern must be winning out over my honor because it no longer seems like such a hindrance.

"I do know something that could help us, though." Leaning forward, I rub my now damp hands on my sweatpants and look at Asher. "He's been talking to your mom."

Kit

Chapter 17

*S*entacles wrap around my lungs and I claw at the hand around my throat. “No.”

He tightens his grip and my fingers burrow between the flesh of his hand and my larynx, desperate to get some air, but it’s not enough. It only taunts me and makes it worse.

A sharp pain jabs my lower back as he presses me against the metal railing and fear zips through me so fast he no longer needs to strangle me. I stop breathing on my own.

One wrong move and I’ll fall.

“Can I ask you for a favor?” The mocking tone of his voice is grating, and it distracts me enough that I don’t realize his gun is against my temple until it’s too late.

Vomit works up my esophagus and a stream of hot urine runs down my legs...because I know what happens next.

I know how this ends.

“Say it.”

He loosens his hold just enough for me to get the words out. “Let me trade places with her.”

A sadistic smile spreads across his face. “No.”

My insides churn, and on impulse; I reach for my poker chip. “Please don’t kill me, Kyle.”

Hollow eyes stare back at me. Eyes that no longer have any ounce of humanity left in them.

The last thing I see before he pushes me over the ledge of the bridge...is

my poker chip in his fist.

Pressure tightens against my ribs and I hit the water so hard my ears pop.

I kick my legs, trying to get to the surface but I can't...

I've lost my ability to swim. Because I no longer have legs or a fin. I'm a mangled and disfigured corpse.

Whatever you do. Don't open your eyes.

I attempt to swim again, but I'm almost out of air and my energy is waning. In another fifteen seconds, I'll be dead.

"Kitty."

No.

"Kitty-cat."

Hearing him say his old nickname for me makes my skin crawl.

"Here, kitty, kitty," my uncle teases.

Wrath flows through my veins and I snap like a rubber band.

I open my mouth to tell him to leave me alone, but the metallic tang of blood filling my lungs causes me to dry heave and convulse as a viscous haze of red surrounds me.

I twitch when something brushes against me but refuse to look. I don't need to see it to know what it is.

It's the stuff nightmares and autopsies are made of.

Defeat courses through my bloodstream and instead of trying to fight a battle I know I'll never win, I let the fight drain out of me.

Because I deserve this. I deserve to die like they did.

I'm sorry I couldn't save you.

"Wake up, angry girl."

"Preston?" I touch his face, grateful to have my limbs again. "Is it really you?"

The water's so murky, I can barely make out his features.

He shoves his poker chip in my palm. "Illusions aren't always a bad thing, Kit. Sometimes it's your mind's way of saving you when reality keeps trying to break you. A way of giving you something to believe in when you don't have anything left."

I fold my arms around his neck. "I'm so scared."

My uncle's callous cackle chills me to the bone. "You should be."



reston!"

P

My heart batters my ribcage so hard it reverberates throughout the quiet room and I bolt up in bed.

A drop of liquid falls from my hairline to my jaw and I breathe a sigh of relief when I see it's not blood, only sweat.

Clutching my poker chip for dear life, I remind myself it was just a bad dream.

Swinging my legs over the bed, I scurry over to the window and open it. The cool air whips my face like a punishment, but it helps bring me back to reality.

Embarrassed, I do a quick once-over and check the sheets to make sure they're dry before I sprint off to the bathroom.

After I splash some cold water on my face, I open my medicine cabinet.

An assortment of various benzodiazepines stare back at me. All prescribed from countless psychiatrists to help me deal with these frequent night terrors that have been plaguing me since the Woodside shooting.

Why my nightmares always end up with Kyle pushing me into a river full of corpses and drowning in blood is anyone's guess...but the professionals sure had a ball trying to analyze it.

I cringe as I finger the medication bottles. Usually, Preston does a better job of saving me *before* I vomit and piss my pants...but there are nights like tonight when the bad guys triumph.

There are nights like tonight where I need one of these to numb me because neither dreams nor reality is something I can handle.

My heart nose-dives to the pit of my stomach when I check my watch.

It's been forty-nine hours. Nineteen minutes. And five—make that six—seconds since he left.

And every second that goes by...the farther I sink.

God, I miss him.

My heart spasms in disagreement. What I feel is much more profound than simply missing him.

This ache penetrates right down to my bones.

It burns me from the inside out.

It's *grief*. In its purest, ugliest, rawest form.

Being without him feels like trying to swim without limbs.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I pull out my phone and dial the only number I have for him.

The one that always goes straight to voicemail.

Only this time...I'm leaving one.

I had every intention of informing him how messed-up it was that he pretty much divorced my ass in a Post-it note—but when I open my mouth, only one thing comes out.

“I need you.”

In the most basic, complex sense.

After I hang up, I slam the medicine cabinet shut, throw on some clothes, and jog to my bridge.

Being without Preston is like trying to breathe when you're already drowning.

Preston

Chapter 18

“So uh, this one time me and my buddy went to Vegas, you know?” The irritating man next to me recalls.

Paying him no mind, I reach for my glass of whiskey.

For the first time in a long time, I’m able to enjoy a few games of poker without Campanelli’s dark cloud hanging over my head and I refuse to let this bozo kill my vibe.

I walked in here tonight with a little over two-hundred, courtesy of my brother; and now I’m almost up two grand. It’s small potatoes, but the night is still young.

Unless this moron at the table continues babbling. Even the dealer looks like he’s getting sick of his stories.

Not taking the hint, he continues, “Picture it, table is full. We’re down to our last few thousand, right?”

The man on the other side of me sighs in annoyance. “Right.” The dealer clears his throat and the man shakes his head. “Check.”

I take a long drag off my cigarette and stub it out. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say this was the player with the motormouth’s strategy.

The dealer looks at me next.

“Raise.”

My cards aren’t the greatest, but I’m one right card away from a straight. And like my pal Max says—on a bad night, a straight can look pretty damn good.

If only the drunk motherfucker next to me would shut the hell up. “Anyway, my buddy looks at me and I look at him.”

Pushing my chips forward, I do the only thing I can think of.

I give the man some rope. "Then what happened?"

The guy on the other side of me mutters a curse, no doubt loathing the prospect of having two Chatty Cathys at the table.

He laughs. "We said *fuck it* and went all in."

I give him a little more rope. "You did what?"

He slams the table emphatically. "All in, baby!"

"All in," the dealer announces.

The idiot's smile falls faster than a Sumo wrestler jumping off the balcony of a penthouse when he realizes his critical mistake.

"No, wait. I didn't mean that." The man who looked plastered a moment ago suddenly looks stone-cold sober. "I didn't know it was my turn."

His frenzied gaze flies to me. "Tell him."

Shrugging, I bring my glass to my lips. "Sorry, man."

"It's Chuck." He stands and stomps his foot. "The name is Chuck. And you know damn well I was only telling you a story and not placing my bet."

Chucky-boy's a hair away from having a full-on temper tantrum right here at the poker table.

Then again, losing five-thousand because you're a dumbass will do that to you.

I down the rest of my glass and gesture to the table. "I'm trying to play some poker here, *man*."

His face turns beet red and he curses up a storm when the dealer calls the floor. Even if they do end up ruling in his favor, security is already eyeballing him.

Bad luck Chuck.

My lips twitch when the verdict comes back that the call is binding.

Dude looks like he's about to pass out when the dealer turns the final card over.

But I grin from ear to ear because I needed that eight to win the hand.

Chucky-boy flips me the bird and swipes his cards on the floor. "This is bullshit." The two security guards walking over aren't enough to deter him and he kicks his chair away. "Fuck Connecticut casinos. This shit would never go down in Vegas."

That gets a laugh out of me. Vegas casinos are no different than any other casinos. No matter where you go, the house always wins.

A bilious feeling slams into the pit of my gut and I wash it down with the

fresh glass of whiskey the waitress brings me.

The dealer shuffles the cards and I reach for my smokes, settling in for a new round.

I fish around for my lighter but come up empty. “Anyone have a—”

Before I can finish that statement, someone holds a flame to the end of my cigarette.

I turn my head and immediately regret it. “You’ve got to be shitting me.”

This old bag is the last person I expected to see in a casino.

Then again, they say it was the devil who invented gambling.

Christ. I knew I should have booked a flight for tonight instead of tomorrow morning.

“What are you doing here?” I don’t bother hiding my animosity.

Her wrinkly eyes narrow as she parks herself in my former opponent’s spot. I’m about to ask where that shit-stain butler of hers is so he can roll her ass out of here, but it occurs to me that I really don’t care.

“Are you playing, ma’am?” the dealer inquires.

Over my dead body. “No, she’s not.”

She waves me off and points behind her.

“For fuck’s sake,” I mutter when I look over my shoulder.

Sure enough, here comes the pompous butler. He quickly helps her set up shop and explains to the dealer that she can’t speak, but not to worry because he made cue cards for her.

This is where I should get up and walk away, but the game has already begun. It’s bad luck to start a hand and not see how it will play out.

Something that feels a whole lot like remorse infiltrates my chest as the white-gold band on my left ring finger catches the light. *Mocking me.* Just like the voicemail icon on my phone.

The one I won’t let myself listen to—because the second I hear her voice...I’ll crawl back to her like a moth to a flame.

My jaw tics and I take a swig of my drink. After I land, I’m making a beeline for Max and kicking his ass for giving her my number.

And then my own...for allowing her to get under my skin like this.

It was never my intention to hurt Kit or let things get as far as they did between us. I knew the lines—hell, I was the one who drew them in the first place, and I crossed them.

I signed up for a five-minute wedding, a cool two mil, and divorce papers sent to my mailbox...not all these goddamn feelings and complications.

My fingers tighten around the glass I'm holding. "Check."

All I wanted was to give her a reason to stop hating me...

Instead, she gave me a million more reasons to fall for her.

Kit Bishop's no longer in my veins...she's taken up residence in the vacant cavity between my lungs.

Shaking the thought out of my head so I don't lose what little is left of my focus, I look down. I grit my teeth when I realize I don't have any decent cards. *Should have folded.*

The hairs on the back of my neck stand on end when the hand plays out and I lose a grand to the guy next to me.

The old prune gives me the side-eye and I suppress the urge to reach over and wipe the smug look off her face.

My hands itch and my stomach contracts. It would be in my best interest to leave...because once Lady Luck moves on to the next chump, it's time to get up and walk away.

But unlike every other area of my life...walking away from the table has never been my strong suit.

Because every gambler will tell you...

It's never winning that's the problem. It's *losing*.

Losing stirs the beast...the addiction. The sweet aphrodisiac laced with optimism.

The ultimate illusion of control.

It's easier to walk away when you're winning. It's *impossible* to walk away when you're losing.

Not until you've lost everything.

Which is exactly why I stay and place my next bet.

Because when you're standing outside Lady Luck's church and she lures you in with the promise of sucking your dick like a champ and letting you fuck her like a dirty little whore...it makes an atheist like me a believer again.

My new cards are just as bad as my last hand, and logically, I should fold. But hope rears its ugly head and I decide to ride it out.

Bad move—I lose two grand. This time, to the seventy-year-old witch.

There's a certain shift that happens at a poker table when you lose two rounds in a row.

You plummet to the bottom of the food chain...and if you lose the next round as well, you might as well rip off your balls and add them to the pot—because they're about to start feeding off you like an injured animal in the

wild.

Unless you're smart and calm enough to use it to your advantage.

I raise on the river...Nanna Wicked doesn't know I've got plans but judging by the way my other opponent goes rigid, he's stumbled upon my trail of breadcrumbs.

If you can make your opponents follow you to the river—you've already won half the battle. Chances are if they've stuck around this long, they're going to stay in the game for the final showdown. They're *invested* by this point—both financially and emotionally.

Gambler or not. Hope springs eternal in all of us.

No one likes to lose.

If they both fold right now...I'll win. Not only their money, but the exchange of power will once again shift back to me, because they were too much of a pussy to call my bluff.

I can see the player on my right mulling it over, which immediately clues me into the fact that he doesn't have a good hand.

As predicted, he folds a moment later.

Nanna, however, doesn't. The bitch re-raises and goes all in.

She turns her head to look at me. Her expression echoes the very same thing I'm thinking. *You're fucked.*

If I fold now, I can still leave with a few thousand in my pocket. Or better yet, go to a new table and start from scratch.

Or, I can leave it all up to fate and roll the dice.

Perspiration trickles down my back and seeps through my shirt. I've already screwed up, given it's taken me more than a moment to think about my next move.

Right when I'm about to make it—she slips me a note. Much to my dismay, the dealer allows it given she can't communicate any other way and it's fairly standard—if not expected—to persuade your opponent to fold.

How much money did my granddaughter offer you?

I snatch her pen and write my response. *Our prenup is none of your business.*

It's clear she doesn't like that answer by the furious way she grabs the paper and scrawls something on it. *I'll offer you double if you stay.*

I blink. To say this is an unexpected turn of events would be an understatement.

However, unlike the game—this decision is an easy one. *No.*

Her nostrils flare. *Why?*

Shaking my head, I scribble. *Every dime you have belongs to Kit. I won't take more than what me and my wife already agreed upon.*

I finish my whiskey and stand. "Fold."

With that, I turn and walk away.

"Young man," the butler calls out behind me. "Madam wants me to inform you the conversation isn't over."

And here I thought Kit didn't inherit any qualities from her grandmother.

"A conversation requires the participation of more than one party. Unless you're batshit crazy," I toss out over my shoulder.

They continue following me out of the casino, only unlike Vegas, there are no cabs lined up outside and I can't make a quick departure.

I had intended to wait at the airport until my early morning flight—but considering I'm broke, stranded, and being followed, the odds are not in my favor. I'm forced to stand outside.

The butler waves his arms like a ground controller on a runway. "Sir, a moment of your time."

I point at my grandmother-in-law. "For your Lord and Savior, Nanna Satan?" I snicker. "Nah, I'm good."

She elbows him when I start to walk inside and what happens next can only be described as the biggest mistake this butler has ever made.

The second he stands in front of me and puts his hand on my shoulder, I lose it. There's no notice or warning, there's only my fist to his face and a high-pitched squeal from him.

I look at her. "Stay the hell away from me."

I'd never hit a woman, not even one as vile as she is, but I won't hesitate to position her wheelchair-bound ass at the top of the steepest hill and blame what happens after on a strong breeze.

In a flash, she holds up her notepad and my chest tightens.

I'm not dead yet. I still have time to change the will and sell everything my son and his whore wife ever touched.

Doing that won't just break Kit's heart—it will break *her*.

I take back what I said about never hitting a woman. Before my head can process my actions, I'm charging for her.

"I'll fucking kill you."

The butler, noble as ever; wedges himself between us. "That's not much of a threat to a woman who's already dying." I'm about to chuck him across

the parking lot, but he lowers his voice. “Trust me, it’s in your best interest to do what she says. For you and Kit.”

Despite it sounding like a warning, I don’t detect a hint of it in his voice. Quite the opposite. The uptight servant façade is gone...he almost looks afraid.

It tells me one of two things. Either Granny’s got his balls in a vise because she’s got something on him, or he knows something about her... something that makes him uneasy.

Grinding my teeth, I look at her. “What do you want?”

Her lips purse in a tight line and she flips to the next page of her notebook. *I want you to hold up your end of the arrangement with my granddaughter and remain married.* She holds up a finger and jots something else down. *Not living in separate states or houses.*

My hands clench into fists. I don’t know why this woman is so keen on making Kit miserable when I’ve never met anyone who deserves happiness more. “You know Kit’s gay, right?” I lean down and get close to her face. “She likes pussy. Forcing her to marry me or any other guy won’t change that.”

The pen flies across the pad and her eyes become tiny slits when she holds it up. *Perhaps your bedroom skills aren’t up to par then and you should be working on those instead of hanging out at casinos.*

A snarl leaves me. “You’re an asshole.”

She shrugs and scribbles on the pad. *So are you. However, only one of us is in the unfortunate position to be manipulated by the other. Here’s a hint: it’s not me.*

The bitch has me there. I try a different tactic. “You realize you only have a few more months before you croak, right? Wouldn’t you rather spend your limited time on earth making sure your granddaughter doesn’t hate you and you do something nice for her for once?”

Her response is swift. *No.*

Jesus. This woman is so despicable she makes me look like a saint. Hurting Kit is firmly on my top three list of things I abhor doing. And yet—*she* does it for sport.

I’m positive there’s a special place in hell for her. If not, I’ll be sure to save her a seat.

I grab the armrests of her wheelchair. “That’s too bad because believe me when I say—it’s your loss. Your granddaughter is kind, generous, and unlike

anyone else I have ever met in my life. Her pinky finger has more strength and grace than you on your best day.” I level her with a stare that tells her every bit what I think about her. “Clearly she didn’t get that from your side of the family, you haggard, blackmailing, good-for-nothing cunt.”

She reaches for her notebook, but I wrangle it from her and toss it in the trash.

Then I look at the butler. “I’m calling a cab. I suggest you get her out of my face or I’ll finish rearranging yours.”

When I take out my cell, the witch shoves an envelope in my other hand.

I’m about to go off, but the butler wheels her away and my eyes fall to the note on it. *I only had a pair of sevens. You never should have folded, imbecile.*

Inside the envelope—is the three grand I lost.

My palms are itching when I turn and face the casino. It’s safe to say calling a cab is now the farthest thing from my mind.

The old bat doesn’t play fair.

I go to shove my phone in my back pocket, but the message icon snags my attention. Given I have no choice but to stay, it might be best to find out how pissed my wife is before I knock on her door.

Tapping the icon, I bring it to my ear.

“I need you.”

Instantly, I feel the color drain from my face and my hand clamps in a fist around the phone.

Emotions—all different ones—slam into me. Far too many to register or single out.

Except one.

I *need* to be wherever she is.

Preston

Chapter 19

One frustrating *Uber* ride later, I'm zipping up the stairs to her apartment.

I've called Kit so many times on the way over my cell phone is dead—and every minute that ticks by makes me lose my damn mind.

Considering I don't have a key, my only option is to pound on her front door.

According to the timestamp, she called me three hours, twelve minutes, and nine seconds ago. But it's after two a.m. now, so she's probably sleeping. And if she's having one of her night terrors...she probably can't hear me.

I bang harder. "Kit!"

Some woman wearing a headscarf and a frown wrenches her door open. "People are trying to sleep!"

"Do you have a key?"

The woman stares at me like I'm crazy. "You on drugs?"

"Not presently."

She jerks her chin at Kit's apartment. "Why would I have a key for someone else's place?"

"I don't fucking know, lady. Maybe because you're neighbors?"

She swivels her head with such gusto I'm surprised it doesn't pop off. "Do I look like the type to be loaning out my sugar and exchanging keys?"

"Fair enough. Do you have something I can use to open this door?"

She scrunches her face and places a hand on her hip. "Like what?"

Frustrated, I drag a hand down my scalp and leer at her. "Bobby pins? A screwdriver? A knife? How about a goddamn gun?"

Her finger zig zags the air. “Hell no. I’m not helping you steal.”

“I’m not stealing anything,” I bite out as I scour the hallway.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot one of those In Case of Emergency axes next to a fire extinguisher.

Swiftly, I take my jacket off, put it over my hand, and punch the glass.

Then I take a swing at Kit’s front door.

“There’s something wrong with you, boy,” the woman shouts as she slams her door shut. “Crazy motherfucker.”

She’s not wrong.

I chop until there’s a gash big enough to stick my forearm through and unlock the door.

The lights are off when I walk in and I stumble over something on my way to her bedroom. A box. Make that *boxes*.

Her bedroom is empty when I enter. The only sign she was here recently are the crumpled-up sheets in one corner of her bed.

I blow out a heavy breath and my ears tune in to the sound of something behind me.

I turn around as lightning flashes through the window, followed by a loud boom of thunder.

And Kit’s blood-curdling scream.

I’m about to ask her what’s wrong but given it’s dark and I hacked her front door—it dawns on me that she probably thinks I’m an axe murderer. In the very *literal* sense.

I don’t have time to find out, though because she’s gone quicker than the next flash of lightning.

Kit

Chapter 20

This isn't a dream. It's real. It's happening.
My time is up...the angel of death has come to collect his debt.

Christ on a cracker. I knew I shouldn't have walked inside. But after seeing the shattered glass in the hallway and my slashed door—I panicked and figured there was an *actual* emergency. And since I left my phone inside my apartment and couldn't call the police, I decided to go inside and assess the damage myself.

Huge mistake. The last thing I expected to find was some man hovering over my bed with an axe.

If I make it out of this alive, I'm going to insist my crappy landlord hire security for my crappy apartment building. Although I doubt he'll take me seriously given I'm moving out tomorrow.

Provided I live to see tomorrow that is.

I fly down the stairs and do a quick feel around for my keys, cursing under my breath when I come up empty. They must have dropped out of my sweatshirt pocket when I started running.

My stomach feels queasy when I realize I have nothing but my two legs to make it to safety.

Heart lodged in my throat, my sneaker-clad feet hit the pavement of the parking lot. I almost slip and bust my ass when thunder booms again and it starts to downpour.

My ticker is pounding so hard I barely hear the footsteps behind me. Fear skitters up my spine and I rev up my pace.

A deep voice roars something that sounds like my name, but thunder rumbles above me and the rain falls harder, drowning them out completely.

Anxiety shoots through me like a cannon, causing my terror to fester. The only thing I can focus on is not passing out so I can make it to safety.

My muscles start to cramp due to the high-speed chase and freezing rain as I reach the end of the large parking lot and I silently curse myself for not pushing myself harder at the gym.

“Dammit, Kit,” a deep, distinctive voice bellows. “Stop.”

I shake my head. I’ve officially lost my marbles. Either that or I’m in my own version of *Inception* and I’ve reached another level of my nightmares.

It’s not Preston. It can’t be Preston. Preston’s gone.

He left me.

My chest contracts with a violent lurch. I miss Preston with an intensity that’s nearly paralyzing.

“Kit.” His gruff voice reverberates through my body.

I stop running and my heart kicks into overdrive when I turn around and take in a water-logged Preston standing a few feet in front of me.

With an axe in his hand.

“Why do you have an axe?” I question, trying to distinguish if this is another dream or reality.

It feels real, but my dreams are so lucid most of them do.

The axe hits the concrete with a hefty thud. “You said you needed me.”

He shrugs nonchalantly like it made perfect sense to chop down my front door and he has no regrets. “I had to get to you.”

It's not so much his words that cause the overwhelming shift I feel in my bones. Or how he’s looking at me like I’m the most important person in the world.

It's because he proved it.

Preston came back like a typhoon...because he knew I needed him.

“What’s wrong?” There's a strange note in his tone—like he's torn between wanting to console me or picking up that axe and finding whoever hurt me. “Why are you crying?”

I wipe my cheeks with the back of my hand. “Because I never have to worry about falling for you.”

Confusion lines his face and he opens his mouth, but I don't give him the chance to speak.

Instead, I hurl myself at him...and he catches me.

Just like he always has.

I lock my legs around his waist and I rest my head on his shoulder. “You came back.”

He secures his hold on me and starts walking. “Sorry it took so long. I would have been here sooner, but I didn't want to listen to your voicemail.”

“Why?”

The fingers on the small of my back twitch. “Because I knew I'd never be able to get on that plane tomorrow morning.”

The beat of my heart comes to a rapid halt. “You're leaving? Again?”

He stops walking. “Do you want me to stay?”

My answer is automatic. “No. I need you to stay.”

His throat bobs on a swallow. “The night?”

“And every other night after that.” I place both my palms on his cheeks. “I don't know what this connection between us is...all I know is I need it and I'm not ready to let go of it.” I loop both arms around his neck as if my hold alone will stop him from leaving. “Please don't tell me I'm about to lose you.”

His fingers thread through my wet hair. “You can't lose something that will always belong to you, angry girl.”

I can feel his heart racing underneath his soaked shirt and when I place my hand over it, it beats faster.

A smile touches my lips. I don't think I've ever made someone's heart pound so hard. But I know without a doubt no one has ever made *mine* pound so hard before.

The air is so thick with tension I can feel it tunneling between our bodies, like two sticks rubbing together to produce smoke...

Smoke that will lead to a wildfire.

I incline my head and his expression turns serious. “Kit—”

I don't want to listen to Preston's warning. I just want to breathe again.

The moment our lips connect, the sky above us lights up and my heart takes off like a rocket.

The desperate groan that leaves him reverberates inside my chest when he crushes me against the building and I taste his tongue. The contact ripples through me in a slow wave and I suck the tip, seeking more.

Most kisses leave you breathless, this one breathes life back into me.

It's needy, wild, and reckless. Languid and hasty. It equally confuses and enlightens me.

He breaks away mid-kiss. “What are you doing?”

“I’m breathing,” I whisper against his lips.

I’m burning.

I’m drowning.

I’m falling.

All at the same time.

He slams the building he has me pinned against with his hand. “The last time you kissed me, you said it was a mistake.”

“I know.” My eyes become blurry and I bury my head in my hands.

Accepting I was gay was never a struggle for me. The exact opposite. It was something that made sense...something that fit. But me and Preston? We don’t make sense. Our parts don’t fit. And the thought of doing anything more than this...is a struggle I’m not sure I can overcome.

There’s a huge hurdle in the way, and I’m afraid if I force myself to jump over it...I’ll lose the most important parts of me in the process.

Being a lesbian is my sexual identity...but it’s also *my* identity. It’s ingrained in me.

It’s who I am.

“I’m not ready for what happens after kissing.” The admission sits heavy on my chest, but I have to be honest with him. “I’m not trying to lead you on or toy with you, but I’m not sure I’ll ever be ready for anything more than—”

“Just kissing,” he finishes for me.

I nod. “I’m so sorry.”

His eyes darken, and he runs his thumb over my lower lip. “Don’t apologize for being you.” I tremble when he thrusts his tongue inside my mouth with a punishing stroke, teasing me. “And don’t apologize for doing something you enjoy.”

He starts to pull away, but I sample his mouth some more. “Does that mean you’re okay with being...kissing buddies?” It sounds ridiculous to my own ears, but I have no idea what else to call it.

His teeth tug my bottom lip. “It’s hard to answer questions when your tongue is in someone else’s mouth.” He gives mine a little flick and I shiver. “And we can’t be kissing buddies if we freeze to death.”

He’s right. The weather is brutal.

I run my lips along his Adam’s apple. “I’m pretty sure my apartment door is open.”

He hoists me up. “Hold on to me, Bishop.”

“So you can carry me upstairs like a princess?”

He grunts and charges up the stairs. “No. I just figured you’d appreciate the extra stability when you become the first person in history to ever orgasm from a kiss.”

I’m glad he told me to hold on because I laugh so hard I nearly choke. “Someone is awfully confident.”

He opens my apartment door. “More like a determined man on a mission.”

Tiny shivers prickle my skin. “Well, before this mission starts, I’m gonna need a hot shower.”

His jaw tics as he puts me down. “Fine, but keep your clothes on.”

“Why?”

He moves a large bookshelf in front of the damaged door. “I’m not a goddamn martyr, Bishop. I’m freezing my balls off and if I let you shower alone, you’ll use all the hot water and leave none for me.” His teeth catch his lower lip. “And if I see you naked...we’ll no longer be kissing buddies.”

He stalks toward the bathroom. “I’ll have you creaming my cock before the water turns cold.”

Arousal crashes into me with a force so crippling it nearly brings me to my knees.

“No,” I whisper aloud. “Never gonna happen.”

Not only would it complicate things even more between us. There’s no man on earth who can ever do to me what another woman can.

Just because I like Preston’s lips and I’m pro-orgasm...doesn’t mean I like dick.

I’m still firmly in the lesbian camp.

I take off my socks and shoes, grateful to have my wits about me again.

And then I meet him in the shower...where we proceed to kiss some more...with our clothes on.

A kiss is just a kiss...until it isn’t.

Kit

Chapter 21

K

nock. Knock. Knock.

“Go away,” I whine from the comfort of my bed.

“They’ll leave if you don’t answer,” Preston grumbles, his voice thick with sleep.

Yawning, I shove the covers off me. “What if it’s an emergency?”

He grunts and rolls over. “Then they’ll chop your door down with an axe.”

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I grab a sweatshirt out of my drawer and put it on. “Considering it’s probably my landlord, I doubt it.”

Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock. Knock.

Grimacing, I exit my bedroom and pad toward the incessant knocking. “Hold on, Mr. Jenkins.” I move the bookshelf out of my way and open what’s left of my front door. “Hey...” My face falls when I see who it is. “Guys.”

My friends have impeccable timing.

Three very alarmed faces stare back at me.

“What happened to your door?”

“Did someone break into your apartment?”

“Why didn’t you call me? Are you okay?”

I look at Picasso for help, but he’s too focused on whatever’s in the brown bag Landon’s holding.

“I’m okay,” I assure them. “No one broke into my apartment.”

Although technically—that’s pretty much exactly what Preston did.

Breslin studies me. “Then what happened to your door?”

I start to explain, but the universe must need some entertainment this morning, because out of nowhere Reggie appears.

My eyes widen when I look at him. “That’s one hell of a shiner. What happened?”

He clears his throat and his gaze drifts to something behind me. “*That* happened.”

“Told you not to answer the door,” a shirtless Preston says dryly. The pajama pants I found for him are slung dangerously low on his hips and I try not to notice the razor-sharp V cuts above his groin when he runs a hand down his lower abs. “Got any food? I’m starving.”

Landon shrugs. “I brought bagels.”

Asher opens his mouth to object, but Preston takes the bag. “Sweet.”

I fold my arms over my chest. “Why did you punch Reggie?”

“Reginald,” Reggie corrects with a sigh.

“Why didn’t you tell me he was back?” This from Asher.

“Did Preston break into your apartment?” Breslin asks, ice in her tone.

I shake my head. “No—”

“Yes.” Preston takes a bite of his bagel and winks. “I also played a few rounds of poker with Kit’s grandmother.” He jerks his chin at Reggie. “Punched that guy.” He slaps my ass and squeezes. “And took a shower with my wife.” His face goes slack. “Anything else you’d like to know? Like the last time I beat off? Perhaps how my last bowel movement went?”

When no one says a word, he stalks off toward the kitchen.

Everyone looks at me, mouths agape.

“We showered with our clothes on,” I whisper.

I make a mental note to follow up on him playing poker with my nanna...*and* tell him that what we do in private is no one’s business.

Reggie clears his throat for the tenth time in five minutes. “As much as I’d love to stand here and partake in this delightful conversation, I’m here on official business.” He holds up a key. “You can start moving your stuff in today. However, the contractors haven’t finished the renovations yet. They’ll be there this week.”

Anger courses through my limbs. “I told her I didn’t *want* any renovations.”

“They’ve already started.”

I rub my temples. “I’m leaving for New York on Monday. I won’t be there to supervise them.”

And by supervise—I mean make sure they don't fuck up my parents' home.

He smooths his tie. "That's precisely why she asked them to come back then."

My tongue finds my cheek. "Why am I not surprised?"

His eyes fix on Preston who's munching on his bagel at the kitchen counter. "You can always ask your husband to stay and watch them."

I take the key out of his hand. "Anything else?"

"Not that I can think of." He lifts a finger. "Although she did mention something about making an appointment with the gyn—"

"I have my own doctor," I grit through my teeth.

Not that I'll be seeing her anytime soon.

"Very well."

He leaves a moment later and everyone's eyes swivel to me.

"Anyone else starting to feel like Kit's apartment is some kind of black hole that causes events to happen and people to appear so fast you can't keep up?" Asher questions.

"Yup." It's not the hint of resentment in Breslin's voice that makes my chest hurt, it's the sadness in her eyes.

"Technically that would be the opposite of a black hole," Landon chimes in. "Black holes make things disappear."

Asher grins. "That was such a nerd response." The smile falls from his face when he looks at his brother. "I'm glad he's back. And since I want him to stay, we—I should probably go."

I glance between Preston and my friends. I feel like I've reached a fork in the road and my heart is being split down the middle.

"Wait," I say when they start to leave. "I could use some help moving...if you guys don't mind."

"Are you sure your *husband* is okay with that?" Breslin snaps.

"As long as your *boyfriend* doesn't try to talk to me, I'll be fine," Preston bites back.

The flash of hopefulness on Asher's face echoes exactly what I'm thinking.

It's not much, but it's a start.

Landon and Asher walk into the kitchen, but I reach for Breslin's hand. "Please don't be mad at me."

"I'm not mad at you, Kit." She drills holes into the back of Preston's head

with her eyes. "I'm scared."

That makes two of us.

“*I*s that the last box?”
I give Landon a thumbs up. “All systems go. I’ll meet you guys at the house.”
“After we stop for food,” Asher gripes. “Someone ate my bagels.”
Beside me, Preston smiles. “I forgot to thank you for breakfast, Landon. The bagels were spectacular.”
Landon shakes his head and peels out of the parking lot.
I close the trunk of my car. “Exactly how many meals is it going to take before you start talking to him again?”
His expression goes flat. “Zero.”
“Why?”
He plucks my car keys out of my hand. “We’re not talking about this.”
“Then let’s talk about how you played poker with my nanna and punched her assistant in the face.” I lunge for my keys. “Why are you taking my car keys?”
He holds them up in the air out of my reach. “Because you drive like a woman.”
“I *am* a woman.”
He slides into the driver’s seat. “Precisely my point.”
I climb into the passenger seat and scowl. “Misogynistic bastard.”
He shifts the car into drive. “Hardly. Trust me, I love women.”
“You love to fuck them.”
His lips twitch. “That too.”
I roll my eyes so hard I’m surprised I don’t see my brain. “There’s a huge difference between fucking women and respecting them.”
The groove in his forehead deepens. “If it makes you feel better, I’m an equal opportunist. I don’t respect anyone. Men or women.”
I balk at him. “You don’t respect me?”
His warm hand fastens onto my thigh. “You’re an exception.”
“Does that mean you respect your brother? He’s one of your exceptions.”
His jaw hardens. “I *used* to respect Asher.” He gives me the side-eye.

“We’re not talking about this.”

Huffing, I plug the address into the GPS, so he knows where he’s going. When he gives me a look, I say, “You have no idea where the house is.” I raise my chin. “Considering men never ask for directions, I figured I’d do us both a favor.”

He gives my thigh a little squeeze. “Misandrous brat.”

“Am not.” I sink against the seat. “I hate when you do that.”

The ass grins. “I know.”

Since he’s going to call me on my shit, it’s only fair I call him on his. “Can you tell me why you were playing poker with my nanna last night?”

We come to a stop at a traffic light. “It wasn’t because I wanted to.”

When I gesture for him to keep going he says, “She found me at the casino.” The lines of his face pinch. “Her and her butler.”

A slew of questions pummels through my brain like rapid fire. I start with the most important one. “Is that where you were for the past two days? The casino?”

Asher told me he got a hold of his mom, but she said Preston wasn’t with her. I wanted to ask Preston where he ended up going, but I was too afraid I’d upset him, and he’d leave again.

Being around him is like walking on eggshells...or nails, depending on the day. One wrong move and he shuts down completely. Or worse—he’s gone like the wind.

He grips the steering wheel, causing the prominent veins in his forearms to bulge. “Is that a problem for you?”

No, but it’s obviously yours.

I pick an imaginary piece of lint off my clothes. I don’t want to argue or make him feel like I’m judging him, so I proceed with caution. “We searched every casino in the tri-state area after you left.”

Maybe once it seeps in that he legitimately has people who care about him, he’ll be willing to seek help.

He falls silent, causing a sharp ache to my heart.

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, changing the subject so he’ll talk again. “Did she say anything to you?”

“No. The woman can’t speak, remember?”

I make a strangled sound in my throat. My patience with him is wearing thin. “Can you be a little less evasive please?”

“She asked me how much money you were paying me to marry you.”

Panic spirals through me so fast I feel lightheaded. “What!” I press a hand to my stomach. *She knows the jig is up.* “What did you tell her?”

“I told her our prenuptial agreement was none of her business.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. As much as I hate to admit it, Preston handled that way better than I would have. “Thank you.” I look at him. “Did anything else happen?”

For the tiniest of moments, his expression falters before it evens out. “No.”

I can’t let it go without calling him on his bluff. “You told me you never lied to me, remember?”

He slams on the brakes when he almost hits the car in front of us. “Yeah, Bishop. I remember.” Like the flip of a switch his expression changes to one I can’t decipher. “She offered me double what you did to marry you if I stayed in town.”

Oh, wow. His admission makes my heart physically hurt and I clutch my chest. I don’t know whether I want to break down and cry, or open his door and shove him into oncoming traffic.

I thought he came back because he cared.

“Look at me.” His tone is too serious to ignore and when I do he says, “I didn’t take it. I told her to go fuck herself.”

My head feels heavy as I process what he’s telling me. “You didn’t take it?”

“No. The only money in my pocket is the three grand I won fair and square last night.”

My eyes burn. “I can’t believe you turned her down.”

It’s no secret gambling and money go hand in hand.

He hitches a shoulder in a shrug. “Wasn’t her money to offer.” His jaw flexes. “And that’s exactly what I told her.”

I should probably scold him for not sticking to the plan and pissing her off, but I just don’t have the heart to. I’m grateful he came to my defense. “How did punching Reggie factor into all this?”

“They chased me out of the casino and he made the unfortunate mistake of attempting to stop me from going back inside.”

“Is it bad that I wish I was there to witness it?”

His teeth catch his lower lip. “Fucker went down like a sack of potatoes. He even squealed.”

I laugh so hard tears leak out the corner of my eyes. I feel awful that

Reggie got hurt, but it's kind of hysterical that he thought he could take Preston.

"Thank you."

"You don't need to thank me, I enjoyed it."

"I meant thank you for not taking the money." I brush a strand of hair off my face. "And thank you for not lying to me. I might not always like what you have to say, but your honesty means a lot to me, Preston."

I thread my fingers through his and I feel the pulse in his wrist jump.

His mouth parts in surprise as we drive up to the bridge. "I didn't plan this."

"I know. In fact, you should have never been able to drive to the bridge that night. It's private property." He stops driving and I swallow hard. "This bridge leads to my parents' home." A breath shudders out of me and I fold my arms around my waist. "I should have told you, it was stupid of me not to, I just didn't...I didn't want you to think I was even more of a freak."

He shifts in his seat and cups my face with both hands. "You're not a freak."

"How many other people hang out on the bridge where their parents' died?"

He studies my face for so long I fidget. "I only know one. But she's not a freak." His thumb strokes my cheek. "She's beautiful." He tips my chin. "And unique." He kisses my forehead. "She's so imperfectly perfect she still takes my breath away."

It's downright mystifying how Preston always seems to know exactly what I need when the pain starts creeping in.

I inch closer, bridging the distance between us. Unlike last night, this kiss is tender and sweet. His lips are soft and soothing. Comfort and solace.

And the arms that wrap around me feel like home.

Kit

Chapter 22

“Wow,” Landon says. “This is...”
“Beautiful,” Breslin whispers.

Asher’s eyes become saucers as he looks around the spacious French country kitchen. “Awesome.”

“It’s one of my favorite rooms in the house.” I point to the large granite island. “When I was little I used to sit on top of there and help my mom make dinner.” My throat tightens as the bittersweet memory streams in. “Although help is a bit of a stretch. I usually made a mess and gave her more work to do.”

Preston’s hand finds mine, offering me unspoken security.

Breslin’s smile fades when she looks at our adjoined hands. I brace myself for a cynical remark, but she flicks her gaze past us and says, “I’ve never seen anything like it. It’s somehow big and cozy at the same time. It’s —” Picasso’s barking cuts her off and she digs around her purse for his leash. “I think he needs to go out for a walk.”

I gesture to the French double doors. “There’s a deck and a backyard out there. It’s all fenced-in so you don’t have to put the leash on him if you don’t want to.”

“Perfect.” Breslin stuffs the leash inside her purse and whips out a tiny plastic bag. “I’ll make sure to clean up the present he leaves you before we go.”

Asher turns the handle and Picasso dashes out the door like his ass is on fire. “You know...” He rubs his chin thoughtfully. “Maybe if we get a deck and a bigger backyard, he’ll stop peeing on my lucky jersey.”

“The dog isn’t so bad after all,” Preston mutters and I nudge him with my elbow.

Landon gives his head a shake. “We live on a farm, Asher. Our backyard is huge.”

Breslin nods in agreement. “Any bigger and we’ll need our own zip code.”

Beside me, Preston goes rigid. “Must be nice throwing around a dead guy’s money so you can live the perfect life.”

Asher pales. “I—”

“You make me sick.” Preston’s eyes swivel to me. “I’m gonna take the boxes out of the car.” When I protest he says, “Relax, I’m not leaving. I just need a breather from this shit.”

An awkward silence fills the room in his absence.

“I guess we finally know what his issue with Asher is,” Landon whispers, sadness shading his features.

I pick at my cuticles. “You guys did come off a little like you were bragging.” When they look insulted I quickly add, “I know you guys aren’t like that, but it probably stings to hear how big his brother’s home is while he’s spent the past three years living in a crappy motel.”

“Oh, please,” Breslin exclaims. “If he thinks living in a crappy motel for three years is hard, he should try living in a rundown trailer for eighteen years.” I can practically see the steam coming off her. “Look, I tried to be civil, but I’ve had about enough of his crap. It’s *not* Asher’s fault that Preston gambles all his money away.” She points a finger in the direction Preston left. “And if he’s going to put his brother through hell because he’s mad Asher won’t hand over the money *he* worked his ass off for, so his narcissistic brother with an attitude problem can shit all over it, your precious husband can go fuck himself.”

It’s safe to say what’s been simmering between me and my best friend for the last three days has officially come to a head.

But I’m ready to rumble.

“Worked his ass off for?” I place a hand to my head dramatically. “It must be so hard to have the money your asshole father left you sitting in your bank account for a rainy day.”

She takes a step closer. “So Asher’s supposed to feel guilty his father left him the money instead of his gambling addict brother?” She tips her head back. “Ha, that’s awfully hypocritical coming from you of all people.”

Maybe I'm not as prepared for this as I thought because her words knock the wind out of me.

I can see the regret on her face, but I don't give her a chance to speak. "It's not the same." I swallow the lump in my throat. "I'd give the money back in a heartbeat if it meant I could have five more minutes with them. Asher and Preston can't say the same about their father."

She blows out a breath. "You're right. I'm sorry."

Asher rubs the back of his neck. "Almost everything I buy is with my own money, not his."

"You don't have to defend yourself," Landon cuts in. "What you do with your money is no one else's business."

Landon's right. I was way out of line. I'm just so tired of everyone ganging up on Preston and acting like his feelings don't have merit. Even though he's wrong for lashing out, and even though he won't talk about it—his resentment is coming from somewhere.

"I'm sorry for being a bitch, Asher." I shrug helplessly. "I was trying to be a good friend to your brother, but I ended up being a lousy friend to you in the process."

He digs his hands in his pockets. "It's cool. I know your heart's in the right place."

My eyes swing to Breslin when a scoff pushes through her lips. "I know you don't like him, but can you please cut Preston some slack?"

"I can cut Preston all the slack in the world, but it won't change things." A frown pulls at her mouth. "I know I'm supposed to be a good friend and tell you I'll support you, but that would be like cheering you on as you walk into the lion's den." She looks up at the ceiling and sighs. "When someone you love is starting to go down the rabbit hole, you do the right thing and pull them out of it."

Hell must have frozen over while I was sleeping, because out of the two of us—I'm the dramatic one and she's the responsible, level-headed one. "Preston isn't a rabbit hole, B."

"You're right. Rabbit holes would at least offer you shelter." She purses her lips. "He's quicksand."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"That's my point. You're not acting like *you*, Kit. Last time I checked, you hated Preston Holden." She starts ticking things off with her fingers. "But now, you're married to him, holding hands, and taking showers with

him.” She throws up her hands. “Help me understand what’s going on because right now I feel like I don’t even know you anymore.”

I wipe my palms on my jeans. “Nothing is going on, Breslin. Preston and I...” My voice stalls and I straighten my spine. “It doesn’t fucking matter, okay? I’m still very much a lesbian.”

Something passes in Asher’s gaze, but Landon takes a step forward and says, “This sounds like a personal conversation.” He grabs Asher’s hand. “I’m gonna help bring in boxes.” He winces. “I’ll supervise the brothers and make sure they don’t kill each other.”

They leave and Breslin starts pacing. “I’m not trying to be a bitch. I’m just trying to wrap my head around why you married *Preston Holden* of all people.”

She has every right to be concerned and confused about all this, but I don’t know how to explain something I don’t understand myself. Especially when her hate for Preston is so palpable.

I plop down on a stool at the island. “I know it doesn’t make any sense.” I trace the patterns in the granite countertop. “I’ve been avoiding having this conversation because I don’t want your hate for Preston to spill over to me.”

She takes a seat next to me. “I could never hate you, Kit. Who else would I confide all my dark secrets to?”

I snort. Breslin’s record is as squeaky clean as they come. The dirtiest thing she’s ever done was...well, Asher and Landon.

“So if I told you I kissed him you won’t judge me?”

She makes a face. “Was it because the priest forced you to at the wedding?”

My forehead hits the counter with a thud. “See? That’s my point—I can’t talk to you about him.” I tilt my head so my cheek is resting on the counter. “But for the record, there was no priest. We were married in a drive-thru. The dude who performed the ceremony wore jeans and a t-shirt and I’m pretty sure he shit his pants at some point because Preston kept growling at him to hurry up.”

“What a prick.”

“He was really sweet actually, he was just jumpy because Pre—”

“I was referring to Preston.”

“Oh.”

When the silence has stretched too long, I whisper, “I don’t think it’s in Preston’s best interest to tell you anything else.”

“Probably not.” She rests her cheek on the counter, facing me. “But I care about what’s in your best interest. I don’t want you to feel like you can’t tell me anything because I’m judging you. Therefore, I’m going to do what I do when Asher talks about him and try my hardest to listen to your feelings and not let my own judgment interfere with my best friend duties, okay?”

“Really?”

She nods. “It’s not always easy for me. Just hearing his name makes me want to stab teddy bears. But when we have girl talk—I promise I’ll do my best to keep it under wraps.”

“What if we come up with a pseudonym for him during girl talk?”

Her face scrunches. “You mean like a secret code-name?”

“Yeah. This way you can separate the Preston who makes you stabby from the guy who confuses me and sometimes does nice things for me.”

A wicked grin spreads across her face. “Can I choose his name?”

“Sure.”

Her grin grows wider. “Princess Monet.”

“Do I want to know your reasoning?”

She shrugs. “It’s simple really. When you call someone a Monet, it’s because you think they’re attractive from afar, but repulsive up close. Just like Monet’s paintings.” She chews on her thumbnail. “Preston’s gorgeous on the outside, but he’s a big ol’ disaster on the inside, so it fits the concept.” Her nose crinkles. “I added Princess purely for my own enjoyment.”

I can’t help but laugh. “You’re terrible.” I give her hand a squeeze, glad to have my best friend back. “Thank you for agreeing to this. Fighting with you kills me.”

“Same here.” She draws in a breath. “Okay, I’m ready. Tell me what’s up with you and Princess Monet.”

“I’m not sure where to start.”

I can see her mulling it over in her mind. “Well, I already know you got married in Vegas because of your grandmother’s stupid stipulations, right?”

I nod.

“And I’m guessing he agreed to go along with it in exchange for the money he owed that mob guy?”

I nod again but don’t bring up the two million. This is our first girl talk regarding Preston that didn’t start with me in tears and end with either myself or Breslin plotting his death. I’d like to keep it that way.

She traces her own pattern on the countertop. “Okay, so I get *why* you

needed to get married, but I still don't understand why you chose Princess Monet to be your husband."

I look her in the eyes. "Because I trust him. And I didn't want that mobster to kill him. I know it's a bad subject for both of us, but he did pull me into the elevator and save me. I saw the opportunity to return the favor and I took it."

She stares at me for a long moment. "Is that why you trust him so much? Because he kept you safe?"

"If I say yes does that make me an idiot?"

"Not at all. It just makes *him* a really good manip—" Her lips form a tight line. "Sorry, I'll rein my judgey cunt back in." Her expression evens out. "I think I'm beginning to understand now. It makes sense that you'd feel a certain attachment to him given the traumatic experience you went through."

"Yeah." When her expression doesn't change I add, "Princess Monet is an asshole, but I know I'm safe with him."

I can see the apprehension in her eyes. "It's not so much Princess Monet I'm worried about as it is the people he gets involved with, you know?"

"I get that." As much as I hate to admit it, it's a valid concern. "But he'd never let anyone hurt me."

"Including himself?"

I don't follow. "Preston would never lay a hand on me."

She shakes her head. "No, I mean emotionally. I know you two have a bond, but Preston's not the type to settle down." She blows her bangs out of her face. "That heart of yours already tends to give way more than it gets in return, and I don't want to see it get broken again." She narrows her eyes. "Because then I'll have to kill him, and I'm not sure there's enough blow jobs or make-up sex to make Asher forgive me for murdering his baby brother."

I feel my cheeks heat with shame. Breslin—or anyone for that matter—sticking me and Preston in the couple box and throwing away the key doesn't sit well with me. *At all.*

Caring about Preston and being close to him doesn't negate me being gay. A few kisses with a male doesn't mean my lesbian card has been revoked.

Straight people kiss members of the same sex all the time and chalk it up to simple curiosity or inebriation and no one bats an eye. Why do *they* get a free pass to do whatever they want, but I don't?

"It's not like that between us. Other than a few kisses here and there—it's completely platonic. We're friends."

“Kit?”

“Yeah?”

“How many years have we been friends?”

I think about this for a moment. “Since our freshman year of college, so about seven years, give or take.”

“Have you ever stuck your tongue in my mouth?”

“No.” My cheeks go a shade darker. “I know how it sounds, but there’s really nothing going on between us.” To my absolute horror, my voice cracks and my eyes become glassy. “I have no desire to have sex with him, okay?”

She wipes what I assume must now be mascara streaks from my face. “Okay.”

I give her a skeptical look. “Okay?”

“Yeah. You’re a big girl and if you say it’s not like that between you two, I believe you. I’m sorry for pushing the issue.” She drums her nails on the counter, appearing lost in deep thought. “Maybe you like being close to him because you miss having that intimacy with someone, you know? You haven’t had that since—”

“Becca,” I finish for her, my heart making its objection to her name known.

Breslin has a point. I’ve had sex with girls since she ripped my heart out, but I haven’t allowed myself to fully go *there* with someone. Not even with Jess and I was crazy about her...up until she revealed her true colors.

It’s like Becca permanently cut out the part of my heart that made it possible for me to get to that final level again.

Breslin’s nose turns up. “You mean Becca—the giant thundercunt.”

My face twists. “Or, Becca—the two-timing skank.”

We burst into laughter but make no move to stop hurling insults at my ex.

Breslin slaps the counter. “Becca—the dirty sewer whore.”

She holds her fist out and I bump it. “Becca—the cum guzzling dumpster snatch—”

“That counter must be really comfortable.”

Asher’s voice jolts us from our conversation and we turn to face him.

Breslin’s hands fly to her face and I gasp when I see his split lip and what looks like the start of a black eye.

Landon steers Asher over to the sink. “Stop talking so I can clean that cut.”

Breslin races over to them. “What happened?”

Their eyes float to the entryway at the same time Preston wanders in, shaking out his hand. His knuckles are split and bleeding, and the finger that was already fractured looks worse. “Got any ice?”

Oh, no.

I trek over to the freezer. “I thought you said you were supervising them, Landon?”

“I was. Everything was fine until...” His sentence trails off and he grips the back of his neck.

“Until what?” Breslin questions.

Landon shifts his weight from foot to foot. “Until I went into the bathroom to take my insulin. That’s when Asher cornered Preston and confronted him about something.”

“Traitor,” Asher hisses.

Landon throws up his hands. “I’m sorry, but they weren’t going to believe your story about flying monkeys attacking you.”

I open the freezer door and frown. “I don’t have any ice. How about a few bags of peas that are probably as old as I am?”

Preston nods. “That’ll work.”

Breslin tips Asher’s chin, checking him out. “What did you confront Preston about, baby?”

From opposite sides of the island, Preston and Asher exchange a menacing glance.

“Nothing,” they mumble in unison.

It’s most definitely something.

Arms crossed, Breslin and I turn to Landon again.

He shrugs innocently. “Don’t look at me. I’m just as clueless as you two are. By the time I came back, Preston already had Asher in a headlock.”

I pick up the bags of peas and chuck one at Asher. “He told you he needed space.”

I chuck the other one at Preston. “Stop attacking your brother.”

Preston places the bag on his hand. “What makes you so sure it was me who attacked him? Maybe it was self-defense.”

I blink. “Was it?”

He smirks. “No.”

Breslin’s eyes become tiny slits. “Why did you have to punch him in the first place?”

Preston’s gaze draws inward. “None of your business.”

Breslin rolls her eyes and looks at Asher. “Why did he punch you?”

“I—” Preston glares daggers at him. “I called him a douche for eating my bagels.”

Preston smiles wide. “There. Everyone happy now?”

I’m not stupid enough to believe it’s the real reason, but I’m not going to question it since Asher and Preston are finally in agreement about something.

Breslin grabs her purse. “We should probably head back to the hotel.” She looks at me. “Are you free tomorrow?”

I shake my head. “Nope. I leave for New York.”

She pouts. “That sucks. Our flight home doesn’t leave until Tuesday.”

“Don’t worry. After this stupid merger with Porn Rub is settled, I should have some free time to visit.”

She cringes. “Ugh, I forgot about that. Call me and let me know how it goes.”

After they find Picasso, we exchange our goodbyes.

Well, everyone but Preston who just stands there.

I close the door and lean against it after they leave, a strange sense of relief washing over me. I feel like I just crossed the finish line of a marathon. Not that their absence makes me happy, but it does ease my anxiety to know I won’t have to juggle Asher and Preston being in the same room anymore.

I catch Preston silently studying me. That’s when I remember I have another big favor to ask him.

“So, I’m leaving for New York tomorrow.”

“I heard.”

I look down at my shoes. “Those people will be coming here to do those stupid renovations while I’m gone.”

“Make me a list of everything you don’t want them to touch and I’ll make sure they don’t.”

I stare at him wide-eyed. “Really?”

It’s not that I didn’t think he would do it, I just figured I’d have to beg and offer...

I cover my face with my hands when it dawns on me. “Crap, I promised Max nudes.”

“What?” Preston roars so loud I jump.

Hand clutching my chest, I tell him, “Relax. I was gonna paste my head onto some hot porn star’s body.”

“Yeah, that’s never happening. He’s not choking the chicken to what he thinks are naked pictures of you.”

“It wouldn’t actually be me, silly.” He motions for my phone, but I don’t give it to him. “He did me a favor, Preston. If I don’t deliver, it goes without saying he won’t help me out the next time.”

“There will be no next time.” His nostrils flare. “I don’t want you calling him again, you hear me?”

I’m a little taken back by his hostility. “Or what, Daddy? You’ll ground me?”

“Bishop.” There’s a dark note in his tone. “I don’t want you talking to Max anymore. Not without me present. And I definitely don’t want you sending him naked pictures. It’s a deal breaker.”

I don’t like this controlling side of Preston one bit, but not talking to Max or sending him nudes is without a doubt something I can live with. However, I’m going to take a cue from Preston and use what he wants to get something I want.

Like security that he’ll stay. If he’s comfortable and feels at home, maybe he’ll reside here for longer than a few nights.

Maybe he won’t leave while I’m in New York.

“I won’t talk to Max or send him nudes,” I say, and he visibly relaxes. “If you let me take you shopping.”



Getting Preston out the door was like pulling teeth, but he finally agreed when I said I would deduct whatever we bought today off his two-million-dollar marriage of convenience fee.

“Are we done yet?” he gripes as we walk through the store.

“We only got here three minutes ago.”

His face sets. “That’s three minutes longer than I wanted to be here.”

We turn down the first aisle and I get down to business. “Are you pro loofah?”

“What the fuck is a loofah?”

I reach past him. “Washcloths it is then.”

With no help from Preston, I spend the next fifteen minutes filling the cart with various bathroom essentials.

We turn down the bedding aisle next. “Do you have a preference?”

“For blankets?”

I fidget, nervous to broach this topic with him. “No. I was thinking more along the lines of...do you have a preference for your bedroom?”

When he stays silent, I play with the hem of my shirt. I don’t know why telling him we should have separate bedrooms is so difficult...it shouldn’t be. We’re not having sex and we’re not in a relationship. In fact, sharing the same bed will put the kibosh on having either of those with someone else.

My mind drifts back to what Breslin said earlier about intimacy. Maybe I’m utilizing Preston as my crutch because I miss the real thing.

When the minutes stretch I say, “There are two guest bedrooms—”

“I know. I picked the one with the adjoining bathroom.”

Oh.

And just like that my chest sinks. “Good choice.” I thumb through some throw blankets. “At least now you won’t have to kick your wife out of bed before you fuck some other woman.”

I ignore the dirty look the lady scoping out a flannel comforter gives me.

I don’t know what to make of the expression on Preston’s face. “Is that what you want?”

I’m honestly not sure how to answer that. Or rather, I can’t decide if the twisting in my gut is due to the thought of Preston having sex with someone...or remorse, because I’ll never be the girl he has sex with.

I just want to be the girl who gets all his other parts. The parts that actually matter.

I try to get ahold of my emotions because having a mental breakdown in aisle twelve at my local *Target* wasn’t on my agenda for the day.

Drawing myself tight, I tell him, “Doesn’t bother me either way. Do whatever makes you happy.”

It’s the truth. I want Preston to be happy. I want him to conquer his issues and have the best things life has to offer.

Including the things I’m unable to give him.

My heart knocks against my chest with every step he takes toward me. It threatens to break free entirely when he leans in and his lips brush my ear. “I was talking about the blanket in your hand.”

I look down. I’m clutching a plush throw blanket so hard my knuckles have turned white.

My stomach swoops and my face goes hot. I’m so mortified I can barely

speaking. "Right. Sorry."

He eases back, and those intense orbs examine my face. I don't know what he sees, but it causes the corners of his lips to turn down in a frown and his forehead to crease.

But it's his words that send a kick of pain straight through my heart. "Me too."

Kit

Chapter 23

*Y*ou can learn a lot about a person by being around them long enough.

For instance, I know that Preston likes to wear dark colors as opposed to light. He thinks social media is a stupid diversion that's designed to turn everyone into sheep. And he doesn't like to show off his impressive math skills.

When the lady at the checkout counter handed him the receipt at the store earlier, I saw his eyes narrow momentarily before he stuffed it in his pocket. When I pressed him about it in the car, he handed it to me and said the total was off by three cents. I thought he was mistaken, but after he went upstairs for the night, I took out my calculator and fetched the receipt out of my purse.

In the battle of man vs. machine, it turns out that man is smarter.

If that man is Preston.

Thing is, I can think of at least a dozen people off the top of my head who would have complained and caused a scene.

Not Preston, though. He prefers not to be noticed and left alone.

I'm still thinking about the damn receipt as I toss and turn in bed. So much so that I'm wide awake when I hear a loud grunt followed by the sound of the headboard banging on the other side of my wall.

I'm seriously regretting taking the other guest room instead of my childhood bedroom now. Listening to Preston jerk off isn't the soundtrack I want to listen to before I go to sleep every night.

I thump the wall with my hand. "Can't you do that in the shower like every other married guy?"

Turning in bed, I place a pillow over my head, trying my best to drown it out. When that doesn't work, I decide I've had enough.

Stomping to his room, I prepare to let him have it. But what I see when I open the door makes my heart bottom out.

Preston's not riding the solo train...he's violently tossing and turning on the bed.

I guess we have something in common after all.

Nightmares.

His face is contorted in pain and the muscles in his neck are straining like his body's in the middle of a storm.

My heart's in my throat as I approach. "Preston."

I go to place my hand on his shoulder, but he bolts up so fast I stumble back.

His eyes are wide and frantic as he looks around the room, like a feral animal who's about to be trapped.

"It was just a bad dream," I whisper, and he jerks his head in my direction.

I take a tentative step toward him and he shifts to the edge of the bed, his harsh stare tracking my every movement.

He looks so out of sorts right now my heart breaks.

"You're okay," I say when I reach him. "It was—"

His arms fasten around me, his hold is so strong it nearly knocks me off my feet.

Whoa. Dread coils my insides. I don't know what's going on, but something is seriously wrong.

"Kit." He says my name like a prayer he's begging me to answer.

I clutch him tighter and he nuzzles the crook of my neck. "I'm here."

A tremor zips through him and my hands bracket his cheeks, forcing him to look at me. There's so much turmoil etched on his face, a knot forms in my chest. I wish I could siphon all his pain into me.

But mostly? I wish he would tell me what's wrong so I could find a way to save him from whatever demons he's keeping locked up inside.

"Tell me how to fix this."

He catches the tear streaming down my face with his thumb. "You can't."

"Let me try."

A breath shudders out of him and he maps my lips with his, inhaling my every exhale like he has to breathe me in to survive. "Make me forget for a

little while.”

It’s like the tiniest ray of light shining through the darkest of clouds. “Deal.”

Faster than I can blink, he crushes his mouth against mine. His kiss is angry and vicious. A predatory sting that’s meant to punish me for caring. “You really want to place that bet?”

The ominous note in his voice sends a shiver up my spine, but I’m not backing down. I’ll play his game if that’s what he needs. “Yes.” I kiss his jaw. Then his cheeks. “Raise.”

I’ve never played poker, but I know that’s one of the terms.

Those long fingers of his spasm as he slips them under my shirt, causing every nerve ending of mine to vibrate in response. “Rule number one, Bishop. You should never place a bet without knowing the stakes first.”

I gasp when he tugs my bottom lip between his teeth and his tongue slides inside, hungry and greedy. “And if you raise, you have to set the new stakes so your opponent can decide whether to fold or call, got it?”

I nod.

“Good, because it’s a new round.” His teeth nip at my collarbone. “Are you in or out?”

I’m trying to follow along, but he’s not playing fair. “In.”

A husky groan rumbles in his throat and his eyes darken with arousal. “Me too. I have a damn good hand.”

My cheeks flush when I look down at my puckered nipples through the thin fabric of the white Henley I’m wearing. Given I don’t have a bra on, there’s very little left to the imagination.

Eyes locked on me, he undoes the first button of my shirt. “Stay in or fold?”

My insides swoop when the second button pops open and he presses a soft kiss to my skin. “In.”

I suck in a breath when he undoes the third button and runs his calloused knuckle down my cleavage, watching me intently. My heart is beating so loud in the quiet room it nearly echoes.

A low, strangled grunt leaves him. “Raise.” He tugs on my shirt, and the fourth button goes flying.

I’m torn between wishing there were more buttons...and being thankful there were only four.

The tip of his finger grazes the underside of my breast. “Call or fold,

Bishop?”

Blood whooshes in my ears and I swallow hard. “C-call.” I clear the nerves from my throat and try again. “Call.”

Tension in my core tightens when his mouth hovers over my nipple. So close it hurts. “You can still fold.”

My thighs tremble. “I don’t want to.”

He looks up at me with a dirty smirk. “Then what do you want?”

“I want...” I don't recognize my voice. It's so thready and urgent. “Please.”

God, I'm a mess. A desperate, shivering mess.

His breath tickles my nipple through the fabric of my shirt, teasing. “You want my mouth here?”

I whimper, unable to form cohesive sentences.

“Want me to taste them?”

My pulse explodes when he gives it a little flick with his tongue.

“Suck them?” He closes his mouth around the bud and lures it into his mouth.

The wave of pleasure has me digging my nails into his shoulders. “Preston.” My moan is guttural when he sucks harder and my hand goes to the back of his head, urging him on. “Please don't stop.”

A growl leaves him and his fingers dig into my hips. “Bishop.”

I know that tone. It’s my warning. But as usual, I don’t listen.

Instead, I raise. “All in.”

In one fell swoop, he slides his hands under my ass and hauls me onto the bed. The look on his face as he crawls up my body and settles between my legs is devious, like a thief who's spotted his next target.

He cups one hand around the base of my neck and walks his fingers across my collarbone and down my chest, drawing out my anticipation so much that when he finally moves my shirt over and exposes my breast, I nearly come undone from that alone.

“Fucking perfect.” He keeps his gaze on me as he plumps my tit in his hand and draws my nipple into his mouth, taking greedy pulls; this time with no barrier. It’s just his tongue, and my skin, and a million nerve endings firing off by the nanosecond.

The air between us crackles and I cry out, needing more. More of whatever this is. More of us. More of *him*.

As if reading my mind, he shifts, lining himself up with the achy spot

between my thighs. Pressed against me, his cock is heavy and thick. Not something I can ignore. Heat sparks and my eyes flutter closed when he starts grinding, my body waging war with itself.

Ripples of pleasure slash through me when he grips the headboard and thrusts. “You’re soaking my boxers, angry girl.” A deep groan rips from his throat and he repeats the movement, the friction sending me into a tailspin.

His hips meet mine with a hard slap and he runs the tip of his nose along my neck, inhaling me. “I need to be inside you.” His voice is so rough it scrapes across my skin.

The organ currently tethered to him stops cold, but I give him a nod.

I can do this for him. I can close my eyes and push through it.

Pretend I’m your puppet. Use me and pull my strings.

Take whatever you need from me to make it better.

I try to keep my shaking in check as I raise my hips and he slides my shorts off.

His breathing turns staticky when he zeros in on the damp spot on my panties. “Fuck.” His eyes are molten, and his voice is laced with so much want my insides coil.

Which makes what he does next downright bewildering. “I can’t do this.”

For a moment, I think he’s joking, but he gets up from the bed. “I can’t fuck you.”

I should be relieved...but I’m not. My lungs feel like he wrung them out. I’m short of breath, struggling for air.

My throat jams up when he goes to the closet and throws on a pair of jeans and a hoodie. The same clothes he bought just hours ago.

I sit up, covering myself. “Did I do something wrong?”

I don’t know what guys like. Or what they *don’t* like. Maybe I did or said something that was a turn-off.

He shoves his wallet in his pocket and looks at me. “No. I did.” For a moment, I see a flicker of something cross his expression...but then he’s gone.

Leaving me to drown.

Because he’s the one who made me fall.

But he didn’t catch me this time.

Kit

Chapter 24

The sun is rising by the time I manage to pack a bag and get ready for work. I'm already running behind schedule since I was supposed to catch the ferry that left ten minutes ago and have no choice but to wait for the next one.

I'm sure Jess will be thrilled with my lateness considering she gave me three days off last week.

Then again, Jess is a shady bitch. So fuck her. The mood I'm in this morning has me tempted to quit, but according to Reggie's text twenty minutes ago, my nanna still has a pulse.

Which is odd if you ask me, because I'm certain the woman doesn't have a heart.

Reaching for the tube of concealer, I dab some under my eyes. This way, it won't look like I've spent the last six hours crying over a husband who is God only knows where for the second time in seven days.

Although if I had to take a gander, I'd say there are slot machines and poker tables nearby.

I pick up the mascara next and my mind floats back to all the times I watched my mom put on her makeup in this mirror. It never hit me just how much I favor her until now.

The thought causes a bubble of anguish to rise to the surface. Not because my mother was unattractive, she was beautiful. Her features were delicate and proportionate, and she had a smile that could light up an entire room.

But that smile was a distraction from her most prominent feature.

Despite her sunny personality, her hazel orbs held a sadness in them that

couldn't be masked.

Like mine do this morning.

Funny how we only remember the positive things about our loved ones when they're gone.

After I apply a coat of Chapstick and give myself a once-over, I find my black blazer and slip it on. I'm not sure what one wears for their first day of work at a porn company. Well, when they're *not* the talent that is. However, I'm a professional and I'm there to do a job, so I might as well keep it classy.

After I grab my suitcase and car keys, I head for the front door.

Then I pause. *What if he doesn't come back?*

A lump fills my throat. I'm *this* close to calling Jess and asking for another few days off, but I remind myself that Preston is a grown-up. And like a lost dog, he'll come back eventually.

Or he won't. And yeah, that will sting, and it very well might break me again...but I've built up scar tissue. It's not as dense as I'd like it to be, but it's there. *Somehow, I'll find a way to deal.*

Hopefully without mind-numbing substances, Brazilian models, or arrests this time around.

Either way, keeping my mind off Preston's whereabouts and focusing on something I enjoy, like social media management seems better than wilting away in my parents' house waiting for him to return.

I stick my sunglasses on my face, shielding my sad eyes. *I've got this.*

Straightening my spine, I march forward.

Until I hear the faint click of the front door.

A second later, six feet and three inches of pure asshole comes barging in. Or rather, stumbling.

My heart wants nothing more than to throw my arms around him, but the scar tissue surrounding the organ tells me to sit this one out a little while longer.

Preston's eyes are bloodshot, and I can smell the potent stench of alcohol coming off him from where I'm standing.

I can't decide if I find it more humiliating or heartbreaking that the thought of fucking me drove him to drink.

He's the first to speak. "Hi."

All I can do is stare at him. Six, make that seven, hours ago I was sprawled out on a bed, ready to do the unthinkable with him before he walked away.

But the only thing he has to say to me when he comes back is a single word containing two letters.

It makes me feel about as insignificant as I did last night.

I clutch the suitcase handle so hard when I walk past him, I'm surprised it doesn't break.

On second thought, I have two letters for him, too. "F." I square my shoulders. "U."

Breslin once told me that bruising a woman's ego during sex was like ramming your fist right through her chest and bruising her heart.

I never really got that until now. Sure, I've been turned down my fair share of times. But never while I was naked and vulnerable. *Ignorance really is bliss.*

But even that I can get over. What I can't get over? Is the impassive expression on his face.

It's tragic how someone who once looked at you like you were everything...can turn right around and look at you like you're nothing.

"Listen, if you don't want me to stay here I won't."

My nose crinkles. "That's really the best you can do?"

Silence.

I push past him, but he grabs my elbow. "What do you want from me, Kit?"

The list of things I want from Preston Holden is about a mile long.

But right now? I want him to leave me alone, so I can forget everything that happened between us last night.

"You want me to tell you that I fucked up?" His large hands cup my face and my pulse skitters. "That I'm sorry?" A muscle in his jaw flexes and he lets go of me so abruptly I sway back. "Or that I warned you not to marry me?"

I stand there, chest heaving, the hold I had on my emotions cracking. "I want you to grow a goddamn heart."

With that, I snatch my suitcase and throw open the front door.

Preston

Chapter 25

Preston: You got me a phone.

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

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

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

Preston: Why?

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

I pinch the bridge of my nose.

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

I grit my teeth. Kit shouldn't be buying me phones. She should be refusing to talk to me. *She should hate me.*

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

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

Before I can respond, another text comes through.

Kit: Most people would say thank you.

And another.

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

Preston: FFS. You even babble when you text.

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

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

The dots disappear, then start up again.

Kit: I miss you.

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

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

I can't let her fall for me.

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

Because I'm a liar.

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

A thief.

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

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

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



To

be continued...Fall 2018.

Want to be notified about upcoming releases?

<https://goo.gl/n5Azwy>

Afterword

If you liked the book, it would mean the absolute *world* to me if you left a review. It's so hard for indie authors to receive acknowledgment and reviews *really* make a difference for us.

Want to be notified about my upcoming releases?

<https://goo.gl/n5Azwv>

Or join my exclusive reader's group:

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/685774991573128/>

For more news about what I'm working on next: Follow me on my Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ashley-Jade/788137781302982>

Acknowledgments

I wish I could tell you something poetic about writing this book. Instead, I'm going to let you into my private life for a moment. This book and the book after this one (the one that will conclude Preston and Kit's story) will always be incredibly important to me, for very personal reasons.

You, see my father has dementia. Unfortunately, he's losing his battle (he also has some other health issues.) However, the very last conversation I had with him in which he was coherent was about the things he remembered about his life. He told me all sorts of things and we laughed, held hands, and reminisced.

We also talked about Kit and Preston that day. My dad ended up helping me tremendously with their story (for this book and the second book.) He did that by sharing his personal memories with me.

For instance. The Drive-thru wedding? The seedy motel Preston stayed at? Let's just say those were based off very REAL places that held significance for my dad. (He and my biological mother were married the same place Kit and Preston were.) And well, if that motel wasn't nearby offering substantial discounts to couples recently married a little over thirty years ago...there's a very distinct possibility that I wouldn't be here bringing you Kit and Preston's story. (*I know, TMI.*)

Anyway, as you might have guessed, I was born in Vegas. (However, I don't remember much because I only lived there for a little over a year.) I plan to go back one day soon.

There's also even more of a personal element to this, but I would rather disclose that during the final book. Trust me, it will mean even more then.

And yes, I know, this is the most personal I've ever been in a book. I just wanted my readers to understand why this couple is so personal to me and why this book and the next will be dedicated to him.

Don't worry. I'll get down to business now.

There's no way I can possibly thank each and every one of you, but I'm going to try. You're all so important to me and there will never be a good enough way to thank you for all the support you've shown me. A simple acknowledgment in a book will do it justice, but I hope it matters all the same.

I hope I'm not leaving anyone out. And if by some horrible chance I did...I'm truly sorry.

Avery and Kristy: "Fuck all the ducks"

Avery: I don't know what else I can say to you that hasn't already been said. You carried me through this process in every way and I'm so thankful for you. Whether it was awaiting my message at two in the morning telling you I finished another chapter and needed you to tell me what you thought. Or pointing out a typo from my too tired eyes. There was also the much-needed character venting sessions when a certain character (*ahem, Preston*) wasn't doing what he was supposed to. Or when the Breslin haters would come out and I needed to yell and scream. Thank you for holding my hand. Being objective when I couldn't. And for being kinder than most when I needed that, too. I couldn't do this without you.

Kristy: How do you tell a person that you love them, but they drive you crazy? I'm not sure, but I'm going to try. I grumble when you make notes I don't agree with. But I also love it because those notes force me to think. They force me to either defend the action or think of a way to improve it. They get my creative energies flowing and help me keep my eye on the prize. *They make me a better writer.* Sometimes a better person too if I'm being honest. And I know you only do it because you give a shit. So, thank you for giving a shit. Thank you for being you. Thank you for driving me crazy, but also for being someone I know I can trust and depend on.

Brandi, Vickie, Jackie, Crystal, Rebecca, Shonda, Mary, Beth, Dee, and Jodi. I always swore I would never have more than two betas. I thought the idea of having more was insanity. Well, like they say—don't knock it until you try it. Funny thing is, it started out as something simple. I just needed a small group of ladies to read my MS and find a few teasers. It ended up becoming so much more. A tribe of sorts. And I'm so incredibly thankful.

You ladies are amazing. Thank you for all that you do. Thank you for your continued support and for being my cheerleaders. Thank you for being drama free and keeping it real. I hope you know you're stuck with me now... so strap in and hold on tight. <3

Ellie: Dude. I love your face. You make my words pretty. You adjust your schedule. You make me shine. And you do it all without complaining. I count my lucky stars I found you and I'm keeping you.

Preston's Harem: You babes are my backbone. The wind beneath my wings. I can't thank you enough for your unconditional support. But, I'll try and thank you with some pretties instead. Or you know...by sending you inappropriate half-naked postmarks of Preston. :P You babes are the real fucking deal. Preston told me so himself. Thank you so much.

Street team: Sometimes it feels more like my therapy group than a street team, but that's what I love. We're weirdos and we sit together on the grass and eat our lunch instead of mingling with the cool kids.

But you babes *ARE* the cool kids. You're the *coolest* kids and I'm so lucky to have you.

Little Survivors: I know I'm not one of those authors who have their shit together. And I'm sorry for that. Thank you for accepting all my flaws and for accepting my human side. Thank you all for *not* being assholes. Thank you for being the best readers an author could ever ask for.

Thank you for being excited, laughing, telling jokes, being my cheerleaders, sharing your stories, supporting me, and being the salt of the earth people you are.

Thank you for giving me my safe bubble.

What I lack...you babes make up for in spades. You all are perfect. I'm

so incredibly lucky.

Cassie: You were my very first 'fan'. Starting all the way back from the days of the 'Twisted Fate' series. I will never, ever forget that. Thank you so very much. You're my 'MVP' for life!!!

And last but not least...my favorite asshole. The person who makes my world go round'. My '*Hammie*'—My heart and soul. I couldn't do this without you, baby. My love for you knows no bounds...because we'd find a way to demolish anything standing in our way. You're my 'alpha', my strength, my weakness, but most importantly...my everything.

Gamblers Anonymous

Help is only a phone call or an e-mail away.

Gamblers Anonymous

International Service Office

P.O. Box 17173

Los Angeles, CA 90017

T (626) 960-3500

F (626) 960-3501

ISOMAIN@GAMBLERSANONYMOUS.ORG

Website: <http://www.gamblersanonymous.org/ga/>

If you or anyone you know is a victim of **sexual assault**, again; I urge and I *beg* you to reach out.

National Sexual Assault Hotline 800-656-HOPE (4673)

National Child Sexual Abuse Helpline (*Darkness to Light*)

1-866-FOR-LIGHT (866-367-5444)

For rape & sexual assault victims call: 212-227-3000

or **email** : help@safehorizon.org

All calls are kept completely confidential.

About the Author

Want to be notified about my upcoming releases? <https://goo.gl/n5Azwy>

Ashley Jade craves tackling different genres and tropes within romance. Her first loves are New Adult Romance and Romantic Suspense, but she also writes everything in between including: contemporary romance, erotica, and dark romance.

Her characters are flawed and complex, and chances are you will hate them before you fall head over heels in love with them.

She's a die-hard lover of oxford commas, em dashes, music, coffee, and anything thought provoking...except for math.

Books make her heart beat faster and writing makes her soul come alive. She's always read books growing up and scribbled stories in her journal, and after having a strange dream one night; she decided to just go for it and publish her first series.

It was the best decision she ever made.

If she's not paying off student loan debt, working, or writing a novel—you can usually find her listening to music, hanging out with her readers online, and pondering the meaning of life.

Check out her social media pages for future novels.

She recently became hip and joined Twitter, so you can find her there, too.

She loves connecting with her readers—they make her world go round'.

~Happy Reading~



Feel free to email her with any questions / comments: ashleyjadeauthor@gmail.com

For more news about what I'm working on next: Follow me on my Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Ashley-Jade/788137781302982>



Thanks for Reading!
Please follow me online for more.
<3 Ashley Jade



Also by Ashley Jade

Royal Hearts Academy Series (Books 1-4)

Cruel Prince (Jace's Book)

Ruthless Knight (Cole's Book)

Wicked Princess (Bianca's Book)

Broken Kingdom

Hate Me - Standalone

The Devil's Playground Duet (Books 1 & 2)

Complicated Parts - Series (Books 1 & 2 Out Now)

Complicated Hearts - Duet (Books 1 & 2)

Blame It on the Shame - Trilogy (Parts 1-3)

Blame It on the Pain - Standalone