



CRIMINALS



NEED

LOVE TOO



ADORABLE PSYCHOS # 1

ISABEL JORDAN

CRIMINALS NEED LOVE TOO

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ISABEL JORDAN

CONTENTS

Important Message
Connect With Isabel

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
Chapter 26
Chapter 27
Chapter 28
Chapter 29
Chapter 30
Epilogue

The Has-Been and the Hot Mess

Chapter 1

You Complicate Me

Chapter 1

Caped and Dangerous

[Chapter 1](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Also by Isabel Jordan](#)

[Connect With Isabel](#)

[About the Author](#)

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Happy reading!

To all my readers who have been patiently waiting for me to write a new book in their favorite series, only to have me start a whole new series. Yeah... that's my bad. Sorry.

CHAPTER 1



Who's the easiest mark in any room? That's easy. It's the one who looks desperate.

Desperation makes a man—or woman...but mostly a man—vulnerable to manipulation. And the dude she was looking at right now?

Desperate. As. Fuck.

Tenley Taylor eyed her mark like a starving woman eyed a four-course dinner at a Michelin-starred restaurant. He was better than she ever could've hoped for.

He was about her age, in his mid-30s, and tall. Probably six-two or six-three if she hadn't missed her guess. Muscle-y, too. Not like a bodybuilder, but lean and rangy with the kind of hard strength that came from manual labor, not from being a gym rat.

His clothes were...sad. The black T-shirt he was wearing looked like it had waged war with a bottle of bleach and lost. It was also tight across his chest, as if he'd once had a much smaller frame than he did now, but he'd never bothered to buy new clothes.

His jeans were no better. They were at least a decade out of style and faded with age. So were his tennis shoes.

Nice butt, though.

Which was *so* not relevant.

Tenley shifted her focus to his hair. It was thick, dark, lustrous, shaggy, and curled over his ears a little. Way overdue for a cut.

He wasn't looking in her direction as he leaned against his car (a Honda that looked like he'd have to fold himself in two to fit in the driver's seat), talking on a burner phone. Like most men, he had absolutely zero situational awareness. A woman *totally* would've noticed someone sizing her up the way *she* was sizing this man up.

He was, of course, oblivious.

Whitehall wasn't a huge town, but it was large enough that there were at least twenty or thirty people on Main Street right now window shopping—men, women, and children—while this guy was parallel parked in a highly desirable spot in front of the Chinese restaurant. He didn't seem to notice any of them.

In his defense, he was in the middle of what seemed to be a very contentious conversation. The way he was gesturing and shoving his hand through his hair told her he was arguing with someone and losing. Big time.

And given the way he held himself—tensed, ready for a fight—coupled with the unkempt appearance and outdated clothes, she'd bet *anything* he was fresh out of prison.

She'd probably even bet her pocketful of stolen diamonds on it. That's how sure she was.

All in all, this man was the very picture of a perfect mark.

She needed a quick ride out of town that wouldn't leave a paper trail, and Mr. Desperate Jailbird over there was her ticket to freedom. Hell, if he was freshly released, she could probably get this guy to smuggle her across the border if she wanted. Easy, peasy, lemon squeeze—

That's when he turned around.

Yowza.

Her new mark was *hot*. Brutally hot. Kind of pornographic in his hotness, really.

That could be a problem.

Being attracted to a mark—even just liking them too much—was the fastest way to ruin a good con and get yourself busted. And this guy had *distraction* written all over his knife-edged cheekbones, pouty, kissable lips, flawless olive complexion, and pale blue eyes.

She sighed. Maybe he wasn't so perfect after all.

A screeching alarm two streets over made her change her mind with a quickness. Damn it. She figured she'd have at least an hour before Jerry figured out she'd emptied the safe. She'd been working for the jerk for the past two weeks under a false identity as she cased his business, and he hadn't seemed to notice anything other than her ass the whole time. But today, of course, the stupid fucker decided to be *observant*.

Waiting for a less attractive mark was out of the question. It was time to get the hell out of Dodge.

Tenley took a deep breath, straightened to her full height (which was, sadly, only about 5'2", because it was just her unfortunate luck that attitude didn't manifest physically) and moved toward Mr. Cheekbones like a hungry lion stalking a hapless gazelle on the Serengeti.

She pretended to be looking through her bag and let out a “shocked” gasp when her shoulder connected with his arm, knocking the burner phone right out of his hand. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I wasn’t—”

Whatever she was going to say next was cut off (quite literally) when his muscle-y forearm wrapped around her throat. He yanked her back against his chest and hissed in her ear, “Get in the car. Now. And don’t make a fucking sound.”

Well...Hell’s Bells.

This was going to be even easier than she thought.

CHAPTER 2



The thing no one ever tells you about rock bottom? There's a basement.

Knox Wilder was currently standing in that basement. And with the way his day was going, there was a pit in that basement somewhere that went directly to hell.

But he didn't have time for metaphors. Apparently, he didn't have time for logical or rational thought, either. Because he'd just kidnapped a woman... about two hours after being released from a five-year stint in prison.

Yeah. No one had ever accused him of being the sharpest crayon in the box.

He was out of options, though. If he didn't show up in his hometown with proof that he was settling down and becoming a contributing member of society, the inheritance his father had kept in trust for him until his thirty-fifth birthday, which was—he glanced at his watch—one week from now, his asshole of a stepbrother was going to get every penny.

Then, Knox would be a thirty-five-year-old ex-con with a spotty (and questionable) work history, no skills, and no chance of building a decent future for himself.

His lawyer's advice had been less than helpful. Get married, he'd said. What better way to prove your life is on the straight and narrow than to show up with a new bride, ready to put down roots and start a family?

Yeah, sure. The only woman he'd even seen in the last five years was Agatha

in the infirmary, and he doubted the eighty-two-year-old retired Army nurse wanted anything to do with his sorry ass. Finding a wife on short notice seemed highly unlikely.

So, when the little redhead with the expensive-looking clothes and bag bumped into him, he'd seen it as an opportunity. A sign from fate—or whoever—that *she* was the path to what was rightfully his. Why else would the universe have seen fit to throw a woman his way (literally) moments after his lawyer told him he needed one?

Now he was seriously starting to doubt fate—or whoever. And not only because he'd committed a huge, glaring felony hours after being released.

There was something...*off* about this woman.

First of all, short of one shocked gasp, she hadn't made a sound. Not when he shoved her into the car, and not when he told her that if she cooperated, he wouldn't hurt her.

She just sat there. Breathing normally, casually watching the city disappear behind them. Was she in shock or something?

Shit, he hoped she wasn't going to panic and pass out when the reality of what had happened hit her. Dragging her into his car was criminal enough. He sure as hell didn't want to carry her unconscious body anywhere.

He side-eyed her as she lifted her hands to the passenger side visor, flipped the little mirror down, and checked her teeth for lipstick and smoothed her hair. When she was seemingly satisfied with her appearance, she glanced over at him and said, "So, where are we headed, Cheekbones?"

OK, *now* she was giving him the creeps. What kind of person was concerned about their hair and lipstick when they'd just been kidnapped off the street? "Look, I might've made a mistake," he admitted, still eyeing her like she might stab him with a pair of cuticle scissors from her purse or something, because honestly, it seemed like a good possibility.

She snorted. "You think?"

If he didn't have a white-knuckled death grip on the steering wheel, he would've pinched the bridge of his nose in consternation. He frowned at her.

“I’ve been under some stress lately and I reacted...badly, OK?”

Her lips twitched as if he’d just told the most hilarious joke ever and she was doing her best to hold in a belly laugh. She reached over and patted his forearm. “Hey, I get it. We’ve all been there, right?”

He frowned. *We’ve all been there?* Was she comforting him? And more importantly, why the hell was it working?

“There’s a truck stop a few miles down the road,” he said. “I’ll let you out there.”

“No.”

Wait...*what?* “Maybe I accidentally phrased that as a question.” He let his voice drop to its lowest, most menacing tone when he added, “You’re getting out of this car at the truck stop.”

She raised a brow at him. Just one. Which was annoying, but still kind of impressive. “Or else what?”

“What the hell do you mean, ‘or else what?’”

“It’s not a trick question,” she said reasonably. “What are you going to do to me if I refuse to get out of the car at the truck stop?”

He actually had no idea because he’d never hurt a woman in his life. He’d beaten the shit out of plenty of men and had never lost any sleep over it. But women? No fucking way. Men who hit women were worthless scumbags.

Knox knew he was worthless at the moment, but he wasn’t a scumbag.

Not that he could tell *her* that. Not when she was threatening to stick to him like a damn barnacle instead of running in the opposite direction like she should.

“Don’t fucking test me,” he growled at her. “You can get out willingly, or I’ll *make* you get out. Maybe even before the car stops moving.”

She was silent for all of three seconds before she burst out laughing. “Yeah, right. Sorry, Cheekbones, not buying it. You’re not the violent type.”

“The wardens at Midfield would disagree,” he said with a sneer.

She rolled her eyes. “Am I supposed to be shocked you were in prison? Because I’m not. It’s written all over your face. And your clothes. But I’d bet everything I have that you weren’t in for a violent crime.” Her gaze flicked over him in an assessing manner that made him distinctly uncomfortable. “If I had to guess, I’d say...liquor store robbery? No. Too low brow. You’re obviously prone to moments of rash stupidity, but you’re not an idiot. You sound well educated, too.” Then she snapped her fingers and pointed at him. “Embezzlement. You *definitely* have the face of someone who’d embezzle.”

Knox wasn’t sure what bothered him more. The fact that he had indeed been incarcerated for embezzlement, or that she thought he had the *face* of an embezzler. “You don’t know anything about me.”

She chuckled softly. “I know enough. And I know you’re not going to hurt me. So, look. I need a ride out of town. The truck stop isn’t far enough. Take me with you to wherever you’re going.”

“Or else what?” he asked, tossing her own words back at her, only *way* sharper.

A delicate shrug. “If I get out at the truck stop, I’ll be calling every law enforcement agency in the world to tell them the story of my horrific kidnapping. A scary ex-con like you kidnapping a pretty, innocent-looking young thing like me?” She *tsked*. “One look into my teary eyes and they’ll hunt you down like a dog. Or...you can take me wherever you’re going. And if you’re well behaved, I’ll let you go when I’m done with you.”

And *now* this was officially the weirdest day of his entire fucked up life. The woman he’d kidnapped was trying to blackmail him into *keeping* her. “Lady, did you miss the part where *I* kidnapped *you*? I was there. Trust me, it didn’t happen the other way around. You might *think* you’re in charge here, but you’re not.”

She patted his forearm again. “Whatever helps you sleep at night, Cheekbones. Whatever helps you sleep at night.”

Seriously, though...what the *fuck* was happening here?

CHAPTER 3



“Son of a bitch!”

Tenley jolted out of her catnap. “What? What’s wrong?”

“Cops.”

She followed his narrowed eyes to the flashing lights at the checkpoint ahead. “Relax. They’re probably just looking for drunks. If we play it cool, we’ll be fine.”

“I’m turning around.” He started to cut the wheel to make a sharp turn, but she grabbed his wrist.

“You can’t,” she said. “We’re too close. There’s cars behind us now. If you make a big deal out of going back, you’ll only be drawing unwanted attention to us. We can make it through the checkpoint. We haven’t been drinking.”

He shot her a look like she was the dumbest creature on the planet. “You think they let me renew my driver’s license in Midfield? This isn’t even my car. My lawyer is a friend and he let me borrow it.”

She groaned. “Fuck.”

“Welcome to the conversation,” he snapped.

“Well, how was I supposed to know any of that? But calm down. It’s going to be fine.”

He turned to face her fully, and the effect was no less gut-punching than the

first time she'd seen him head-on. *Damn*. He might whine like a panicky little bitch, but he was undeniably the *hottest* little bitch she'd ever met.

But as usual, he ruined all that spectacular male beauty by *speaking*.

He shoved a hand through his already wild hair. "I'm a felon without a driver's license in a borrowed car with a kidnapped crazy woman in the passenger seat. Lady, what part of that says, 'it's going to be fine' to you?"

She gave him her best pout. "That's hurtful, Cheekbones. But crazy or not, I can handle this. Switch me places."

His brow furrowed. "Why would you—"

"Oh, my God, does everything have to be a discussion? Look, you don't have a choice. Crawl over here so I can slip into the driver's seat. We can share all our hopes and dreams and feelings once we make it through this checkpoint."

He gave her a look sharp enough to filet a girl alive, but he *finally* did as he was told. It was just her unfortunate luck that swapping seats with a giant man in a tiny car was a logistical nightmare.

Somewhere over the center console, her back got really acquainted with his chest, which was broad and hard and just *delightful*. Meanwhile, her butt was introducing itself to his... "Whoa, is that the gear shift, or are you just happy to see me?"

"Jesus Christ," he grumbled as he grabbed her waist, lifted her off him like she was weightless, and deposited her (none too gently) in the driver's seat. "It's been a while, OK? Ignore it."

Not likely. For a hot second there, she'd really thought it was the gear shift she'd been grinding on. If it wasn't, then her kidnapper/captive was broad and hard and delightful *all over*.

Except his personality, of course. That was grumpy with a side of assholery.

Tenley adjusted the seat so she could actually reach the gas and brake (Cheekbones was practically driving from the back seat) and inched the Honda forward as two cars ahead of them in line were waved through the checkpoint. Then she grabbed her go-bag and pulled out her rubber-banded

stack of driver's licenses.

Thumbing through the first few, she finally settled on one of her old favorites. "I'm feeling Southern today," she said.

Cheekbones was eyeing the stack of IDs like she'd just pulled a spitting cobra out of her bag. When his eyes lifted to hers, she asked, "Where's the registration?" He popped the glovebox open and produced what she needed.

Poor guy looked like he might puke. She booped his nose with her index finger. "I got this. Trust me."

He looked her dead in the eye and said, "No fucking way."

She smiled until her cheeks hurt. "I guess you're more than just pretty face, after all."



He was going to die at a drunk driving checkpoint.

If the cops didn't drag him out the car and beat his ass before sending what was left of him back to prison, his heart was going to give out. It could only pound like it was currently pounding for so long before it either burst out of his chest or exploded.

And at this point, he wasn't sure what the damn thing was pumping because all his blood was currently in his dick.

Jesus. How had his dick noticed how pretty his crazy new co-pilot was before his brain or eyes had registered that data?

Honestly, *pretty* didn't even begin to describe her.

She was tiny, but felt lean and strong in his arms. And her skirt was hiked up to mid-thigh, giving him a glimpse of bare, toned and tanned skin that looked like it'd be heaven to touch. Or taste.

But that was just her body. There was also that face to consider. High cheekbones, full, pouty red lips, stormy gray eyes...she was a stunner.

And now, she was all that stood between him and a one-way trip back to hell.

Beautifully dangerous. That's what she was. Like a venomous snake. All bright colors and flawless beauty that you admired right before she sank her fangs into you.

The cop noticed her beauty much faster than Knox had. He strolled up the car with his stone cop-face in place, until he got a good look at the woman in the driver's seat. His eyes lit up like the 4th of July.

She grinned up at him and said, "Well, hey, there, Officer. What are y'all doin' out here tonight?"

Knox blinked over at her. Gone was the raspy-voiced, sharp-tongued woman he'd dragged into his car. In her place was a Southern belle with a lilting, musical voice so sweet it gave him a toothache just contemplating it. And *that* in combination with the angelic face, shampoo-commercial hair, doe eyes and lush mouth was damn near lethal. Officer Whoever was a goner.

"Just a sobriety checkpoint, ma'am. License and registration, please," he said with a warm half-smile.

Knox had met way too many cops in his life, and he'd never seen one offer anyone a smile that friendly. But it wasn't *genuinely* friendly. It was a predatory kind of friendly. The dumb bastard actually thought this woman was easy pickings.

Sucker.

She handed him the registration and let her fingertips linger on his skin a moment longer than was necessary. If she was anyone else, Knox would think it was an accidental brushing of hands. But he doubted this woman did anything without purpose.

"Here's my license, Officer..." she paused, and Knox assumed she was reading the name tag on his uniform, "Knowles. But I need to warn you, this car is registered to my attorney."

His eyes narrowed a fraction as he eyed her license. "Mrs. Wyles?"

"Oh, honey, call me Savannah." She paused a moment before adding, "And

before long, it'll be *Ms.*, not *Mrs.*”

Judging by the way the guy's eyes darkened, her message was received loud and clear. She was soon-to-be single and ready to mingle.

“Savannah,” he said, his voice going low and husky. “Have you had anything to drink tonight?”

“Oh, no, sir. But we were on our way to The Devil's Door. Can't guarantee we won't have a few there.”

Knox had no idea what was happening, but Officer Knowles's eyes widened, and the look in them was way more interested than it had been a moment ago. And since he'd looked *really* interested a moment ago, Knox wondered if she'd somehow managed to flash cleavage at the guy.

He wished her body wasn't turned toward the cop. He wouldn't mind seeing her cleavage.

Shit. Who was he kidding? He'd arm wrestle a pissed off bear for a good look at her cleavage.

Officer Knowles cleared his throat. “You're going to The Devil's Door?” He gestured to Knox. “And this is your...”

She giggled. “He's my...*friend*. For tonight, anyway. That's why my divorce lawyer loaned me his car. Can't afford to have the hubby finding out what I'm up to before the settlement, now can we?”

This cop, who'd presumably been arresting criminals for years on the job, blushed. The fucker actually *blushed*, then stammered out a, “Well...uh...n-no. I guess not.”

She turned and leaned out the open window a little, just enough so that her breasts rested on top of the cop's hand on the car door. “When do you get off work? 'Cause you should definitely join us there.”

His eyes went from her breasts on his hand, over to Knox, and shockingly, he looked even *more* interested. “I just might do that, Savannah,” he said, his voice two octaves lower than it had been.

She snatched her fake ID out of his limp fingers and tucked it into her bra.

“You better now,” she purred in that sweet Southern drawl. “You’ll break my heart if you don’t.”

He stuttered and stammered some more, but ultimately waved them through the checkpoint without even asking for a glance at Knox’s ID.

When the lights from the cop cars were no longer visible in the rearview, Knox turned toward her with the fistful of IDs he’d snagged from her purse when she was busy lying to poor, dim Officer Knowles. “Who—and I can’t stress this enough—the *fuck* are you?”

She checked her eye makeup in the mirror. “Tenley Taylor. Charmed, I’m sure.”

Knox glanced back down at the IDs. “None of these say Tenley Taylor.”

She snorted. “Right. Like I’d give the BMW my *real* name.”

“And what the hell is The Devil’s Door?”

“It’s the new sex club. Swingers, you know?”

He blinked at her. “So, that cop thinks you want him to go to the swingers sex club with you?”

She side-eyed him. “With *us*.”

He shoved a hand through his hair. “Jesus Christ.”

“What is it about this that bothered you—the fact that I used how pretty we both are to distract him from asking for your license, or that what *really* sold that cop on a three way was *you*?”

Knox thought about it for a second. “I don’t even know anymore. Maybe the fact that he assumed I’d ever be willing to fuck a cop?”

She laughed so hard she snorted. “Yeah. What an idiot. You’re *way* out of his league.”

He wasn’t sure what to say to that, so he decided to sit quietly for a moment and ponder all the mistakes he’d made in his life that had led him to this moment. There’d been a lot of them.

Eventually, she said, “This is the part where someone would normally tell me *their* name. Unless you want me to keep calling you Cheekbones.”

Well, this was a conundrum. Because he most assuredly did *not* want to be called Cheekbones. But letting her know his name also seemed ill advised. Ultimately, though, he decided being called that stupid nickname was worse than anything she could do to him, and told her, “Knox. Knox Wilder.”

She shook her head as she snatched the stack of IDs out of his hand and shoved them back in her bag. “I should’ve known you’d have a book boyfriend name. Someone who looks like you with a name like that? Dangerous.”

Now it was his turn to snort. He pointed to her. “Pot.” Then pointed to himself. “Kettle. Nice to meet you,” he said dryly.

Tenley laughed out loud at that. “You know what, Knox? I think we’re going to get along just fine.”

And somehow *that* was the most terrifying thing he’d heard in the past five years.

CHAPTER 4



Escaping town with someone who didn't have anything but the clothes on his back, a few bucks in cash, and a borrowed car was annoying.

Tenley knew they would've made much better time if Knox had a go-bag of essentials like she did. But she also knew it wasn't practical for a recently released convict to have such a thing. So, she cut him some slack when he told her to stop at a Discount Hut just outside of town.

She didn't go in with him, though. She swore at sixteen she'd never set foot in another discount store ever again. From that point on, it was first class all the way for her. Her days as a poor orphan straight out of *Annie* were *long* gone.

Twenty minutes of scrolling on her phone later, Knox emerged with a few bags, looking vaguely disappointed that she was still there, waiting on him. That was a little insulting. But again, he'd had a rough day, so she'd cut him even more slack.

She was magnanimous that way.

"What'd ya get?" she asked, leaning into the backseat to peek into the bags he'd dumped there. Looked like some black T-shirts, jeans, gray sweats, black underwear (boxer briefs that he'd look ah-may-zing in), shampoo, toothpaste and toothbrush...

He smacked her hand like she was a kid trying to steal a cookie before dinner. "Nothing in there is any of your business."

She pouted. “Aw, come on, Hard Knox. I thought we were beyond formality.”

His frown was way sexier than it should have been. “We’re not. And don’t call me that.”

“Don’t be a poop. We’re stuck together, but there’s no reason we can’t have some fun.”

If possible, the frown got even sexier and more frown-y. “We’re not *stuck* together. *You* won’t leave.”

Then he gestured grumpily for her to move out of the driver’s seat, which she did with no complaint. But did he thank her? No, of course not. “Why would I want to leave you, Knoxy? Can I call you Knoxy?”

“Not if you want me to answer.”

Tenley rolled her eyes. “Fine. You want to be a grumpy bastard about this? Be a grumpy bastard. You’ll change your tune after a nice hot shower and a good night’s sleep. I’m betting you didn’t get many of those in prison, did you?”

He side-eyed her as he drove out of the parking lot. “No. I didn’t.”

She felt an unwanted stab of sympathy. There’d been a time when showers and good sleep were hard to come by for her, too. It’d been years and years ago, but she still remembered that feeling. “Well, I don’t know where we’re going because you *rudely* haven’t told me, but what do you say we stop for the night and get some rest? My treat.”

She’d like to think it was her charming smile that won him over, but in all honesty, it was probably the fact that she was paying and he looked like he hadn’t slept in years. But regardless, twenty minutes later, he handed the car keys off to the valet at the Windsor Luxury Resort in the town of Franklin.

Knox looked around nervously. “Are you sure about this? This place looks... expensive.”

Oh, it was.

The Windsor’s lobby was a sprawling, cavernous space. It looked like it

could easily qualify for its own zip code.

The gleaming marble floors were probably imported from Europe and spit-shined daily by Italian nuns or something equally outrageous. The front desk and concierge station were fully staffed with shiny, happy employees that looked like they'd cheerfully murder someone if it mildly amused their wealthy patrons, and the hotel's name was prominently featured on the wall behind an elegant water feature that was, she imagined, fed by the tears of the poor. High ceilings, designer rugs, artistically placed leather couches, gold embellishments and fresh flowers as far as the eye could see...The Windsor was an embarrassment of riches.

Seriously. It was *embarrassing* how much money had been sunk into making this place ostentatious. They probably could've solved world hunger if they'd opted for ceramic floors instead of the fancy marble.

But, regardless of how she felt about their use of resources, this was also the *perfect* place to find a new mark.

"I'm sure," she told him. "Go sit over there in the waiting area. I've got work to do."

He let out an exhausted sigh. "Whatever. But if you get caught, I'm pretending I've never seen you before in my life and I'm walking right out that door."

"Your faith in me is flattering," she said dryly. "Give me ten minutes and just a tiny little *smidge* of your trust, OK?"

Knox waved her off and did as he was told, and she enjoyed the view as he walked away. A hot guy who followed orders. If she wasn't careful, she'd do something really stupid.

Like fall in love with the grumpy bastard.



Tenley took a seat in the hotel's restaurant at the bar and ordered a gin and tonic as she eyed her potential *patrons* for the evening.

The balding guy with the cheap suit sitting at the end of the bar was scrolling through pictures on his phone, smiling, not paying a bit of attention to anyone around him. He had *happy family man* written all over him, and Tenley would bet her last dollar that he was loyal as the day was long. Not a potential mark, but good for him. His wife—or husband—was lucky to have him.

There was a guy who looked maybe five years younger than her who'd clocked her—and her pencil skirt—the second she walked in. Definitely a fuck boy out with daddy's credit card, looking to score. *Hmmm*. There was potential there. But her patience was running low and dudes like that required so much ego stroking. She just wasn't in the mood to assure him how smart, handsome, and well-endowed he was. Especially since he was a mediocre looking, dull-eyed little ponce who probably stuffed rolled up sweat socks in his underwear to compensate for what nature hadn't seen fit to give him.

Not like Knox, who looked like he'd been French kissed by Mother Nature herself when *he* was created. Talk about genetically blessed.

Which was *so* not where her mind should be at the moment.

That's when her eyes fell on a forty-something, salesman-looking guy sitting three stools down. Expensive suit, hand-crafted Italian loafers, tan line on his ring finger. He looked annoyed at whoever he was talking to on the phone. Tenley casually slid to the empty stool on her right so that she was in earshot of his conversation.

“Look, Katie, I already told you, it's just a sales conference. There aren't even any women here. Just a bunch of other med device reps. I promised you it wouldn't happen again, and I meant it, alright?”

I'll just bet, Tenley thought.

Very deliberately, she leaned down and adjusted the strap on her heel, making sure to turn her body so that he'd get a good look down her blouse if he was interested. When she straightened, his eyes were shifting from her cleavage to the expanse of thigh she flashed his way when she crossed her legs.

Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner.

He hung up on poor Katie in a hot second and immediately closed the distance between them, taking a seat on the stool next to her. “Well, hello, gorgeous. My name’s Ted. What’s yours?”

How sad that his name was as unoriginal as he appeared to be. She decided to bring Savannah back out for the night. So, she giggled like she was flattered by the totally generic compliment he’d probably given twenty other women that night alone and offered him her hand. “I’m Savannah. It’s so nice to meet you, Ted. What’re y’all doing here this fine evenin’?”

And just like that, she had him. He was practically drooling on her as soon as he heard her lilting drawl.

So, they flirted for the next few minutes. Well, she flirted. What he was doing was far too ham-fisted to be described as flirting. He was hardcore hitting on her as he ordered her a fresh drink, unconcerned with the fact that her first drink was practically untouched.

It only took five minutes for him to assume he’d *charmed* her enough to get into her panties. Ted put his hand on her knee and slid it slowly up to her thigh. “How about we continue this conversation in my suite?”

In her head, she did a fist pump. A suite! Awesome. She was about to reply when she glanced up and saw that Knox had taken a seat next to the family man and was glaring at Ted’s hand like it had personally offended him somehow. He looked like he was about to leap up and ruin everything. So, when his eyes lifted to hers, she gave him a tiny, almost imperceptible head shake.

I got this, her gaze said.

His jaw clenched, but he stayed put. *OK, but if not, I’m gonna beat the fuck out of him*, his gaze said back.

His grumpy chivalry was kind of...sweet. Completely unnecessary, but sweet.

She turned her full attention back to Ted. Time to go in for the kill.

“See, here’s the thing, Ted,” she said, dropping Savannah’s sugary accent in favor of her *real* accent, which was much harder. “I’m a private investigator.

Your wife, Katie, hired me to check up on you at the conference and make sure you weren't cheating."

He pulled his hand off her thigh like it had burned him. "Fuck," he hissed.

She patted his cheek, none too gently. "Not tonight, hotshot. Katie's not going to be happy with the footage my partner down there at the end of the bar recorded tonight." She gave Knox a little wave. He gave her a head nod of acknowledgment. "But," she added, "I bet her *lawyer* is going to love it."

He leaned forward and grabbed her wrist. "Now, listen here, you bitch..."

Tenley grabbed his thumb and yanked it backward until he yelped in pain and released her. She *tsked*. "Now, Ted, is that really how you want to talk to the woman standing between you and a lifetime of alimony payments? Seems shortsighted of you."

Ted narrowed his eyes on her. "What do you want?"

"Oh, thanks for asking. Here's what you're going to do. You're going to give me your room key, then leave this hotel and find somewhere else to stay for the length of the conference. If you tell anyone about this arrangement or take your credit card off file, Katie gets enough evidence of infidelity to *bury* you in court. But if you cooperate like a good boy, you can go home to your lovely wife and do your best to earn her trust—even though we both know you don't deserve it. She won't hear that from me, though. All she'll hear from *me* is that you went to the conference, ate your dinner, then went back to your hotel room, alone, like the mediocre, boring asshole you are."

If looks could kill, she'd be dead a thousand times over. But Ted here was all bark and no bite. She had him by the balls and he knew it. "What about my stuff?"

"Get new stuff."

He handed over the key card as he stood up. "Fine," he said through clenched teeth. "Are we done here?"

"How much cash do you have on you?"

He mumbled something she couldn't quite hear but assumed wasn't flattering

as he dug a wad of cash out of his wallet and slapped it down on the bar. She tucked a twenty into the bar tender's tip jar and the rest of the cash—several hundred bucks by the feel of it—into her bra. “Pleasure doing business with you. Enjoy the conference.”

When he turned on his heel to stalk away from her, she said, “Oh, and Ted?”

He whirled around. “What else could you possibly want?”

Tenley put away her calm, cool, and collected demeanor and let Ted see the full extent of her disdain for him as she lowered her voice to its most menacing tone and said, “Be thankful I only ruined your business trip. Next time you cheat on Katie, I’ll ruin your *life*.”

The fear that flashed in his eyes before anger took hold again was gratifying. He’d heard her and knew she meant every word.

And with that, Ted stormed off. She sidled up to Knox and slid her arm through his. “Ready to go up to our *suite*, darling?”

His gaze dipped to her mouth for a split second before lifting to her eyes. Tenley tried—and failed—to keep her gaze off *his* mouth. He had disconcertingly kissable lips.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re terrifying?” he asked quietly.

She laid her hand over her heart. “Aw, that’s the sweetest thing anyone has ever said to me.”

The twitch in his lip might’ve been a nervous tic. But it also might’ve *almost* been a smile.

Tenley chose to think it was the latter.

CHAPTER 5



*M*edical device sales must pay pretty well, Knox thought, because the handsy asshole's suite was opulent as *fuck*.

The executive suite was bigger than Knox's entire cellblock at Midfield. It was simply but elegantly designed with a huge closet, the fanciest walk-in shower he'd ever seen, a spacious seating area with a handcrafted, oval-shaped dinette table, and a bed that looked like it could comfortably sleep twenty.

After sleeping on a lumpy prison cot with a mildew-encrusted pillow for the past five years, it felt like he'd just stepped through the Pearly Gates into Heaven. It smelled great, too. Like soap, laundry detergent, and wildflowers.

Or maybe it was Tenley that smelled so damned irresistible.

"Ooohhh," she cooed, pawing through the suits in the closet. "Armani and Tom Ford. They look like they'll fit you, too."

Knox snorted and helped himself to a bag of fancy trail mix and a sparkling water from the minibar. Those two items probably cost more than everything he owned at the moment. "I don't have any desire to network at the sales conference. You keep them."

Her gaze flicked over him, making his skin itch, then she shrugged. "OK, but you'd look *hot* in a suit."

It took every bit of strength he had left in him—which wasn't much—not to put on one of that fuckwit's suits so she'd think he looked hot.

It doesn't matter if she thinks you're hot, you stupid asshole. Don't go there.

“Whatever,” he muttered, grabbing the shopping bags he’d snagged from the car and heading toward the bathroom. “I’m showering. Try not to commit any new felonies while I’m in there.”

“Oh, *now* he has jokes,” she muttered dryly. “Want anything from room service? Ted’s buying.”

Well, in that case... “Order me whatever is most expensive.”

Her answering grin was, once again, a kick to the balls he didn’t need. “My thoughts exactly.”

Knox kicked the bathroom door shut behind him and stripped out of his gross, outdated clothes. He was never wearing *any* of that crap again. All of it stunk like prison, a place he never wanted to see, smell, or experience ever again.

Thank God for prison overcrowding. Without it, even with good behavior, he probably would’ve done at least a couple more years on his original sentence. Now he had the opportunity to start over, keep his nose clean, and try to rebuild some kind of life for himself.

Which was why he *should* be trying harder to get rid of Tenley. That woman had *felony conviction* written all over her.

So, why was he still with her?

He leaned into the shower and turned the water to its hottest setting. Maybe after a nice, long shower he’d be able to figure out why he hadn’t abandoned Tenley in that hotel bar and made a swift escape.

His gut told him she wouldn’t *really* sic the cops on him. Not with her purse full of fake IDs. There was no way she wanted too much police attention on her. He’d had plenty of opportunities to call her bluff and dump her somewhere. But he hadn’t.

Was it because she was so beautiful? He’d gone a long time without an ounce of beauty in his life. Was he now so deprived and desperate that he’d cling to a woman who could get him sent back to prison with nothing more than a few

careless words from her pretty, pouty, highly fuckable lips?

That had to be it. Terminal horniness had eaten away at his brain for the past five years. And before he made any stupid mistakes (well, stupider mistakes), he needed to clear the pipes, so to speak.

He could probably clean himself up, put on one of the handsy bastard's suits, and pick up a woman at the hotel bar without too much effort. But there was something about that scenario that made his stomach lurch.

Well, he supposed that in the short term, he'd just have to, uh, take matters into his own hands.

With a renewed sense of purpose, he climbed into the shower and made quick work of scrubbing the grime out of his hair and off his body.

When he was relatively certain he didn't smell like prison anymore, he leaned forward into the steamy, near-scalding spray, bracing one hand on the white-tiled shower wall, and bowed his head before wrapping his fist around his cock.

Fuck.

It'd had been way, way too long. No wonder he was strung so tight that he was having completely inappropriate thoughts about the crazy woman he'd kidnapped.

Or had *she* kidnapped *him*?

His brain was playing a dirty, extremely detailed porn flick for him, starring Tenley with his cock as a supporting player. He tried not to, but he couldn't stop imagining how she'd look as she dropped to her knees, tipped those gorgeous eyes up to his, and wrapped her lips around his painfully hard cock.

Something told him the feel of her sucking him into the back of her throat as he slid his fingers into the cool silk of her hair and urged her to go harder, faster, would be better than anything he could imagine.

And he could imagine a whole fucking lot.

Lust pounded through his veins so hard his knees almost gave out. He knew he should be thinking of something—anything—other than *her* while he was

beating himself off, but he was too weak, too far gone, to stop.

That's when he imagined her laid out like a buffet in that giant bed, wearing nothing but those ridiculously sexy, strappy heels of hers, thighs spread wide, just *begging* for him to bury his head between them.

He couldn't stop the groan that tore its way out of his throat any more than he could stop jerking at his needy cock. Muscles shaking, breathing rough and disjointed, he squeezed his eyes shut and just went harder and faster.

How would she feel about him fantasizing about her like this? Would she be angry? Embarrassed? Would she—

“Knox?”

The sound of her voice on the other side of the door locked up every muscle in his body. Only his hand kept moving. He couldn't stop *that* now under penalty of death. “What?” he bit out harshly.

“Geez, no need to growl at me like that. I just want to know how hungry you are.”

Starving. Fucking starving.

He looked down at the swollen, angry head of his cock peeking out of his fist. “Go away, Tenley.”

Her muffled voice sounded slightly annoyed as she said, “Fine. But if I don't get enough of what you want, it's not my fault.”

You have more than enough to satisfy me.

There wasn't a single item on the hotel's menu that would satisfy him as well as a single taste of Tenley's sweet cunt.

And it was *that* thought that ultimately broke him. He had to bite down on his lower lip to keep her from hearing him as he came, splattering the shower wall as he squeezed every last drop of pent-up lust out of his cock.

On the other side of the door, Tenley was mercifully silent. So, as aftershocks wracked his body, he cleaned himself off—again—and wondered if he'd ever be able to look her in the eye again without remembering...*all that*.

If he ever had any doubt, he was now 100% sure of a single truth.

This woman was going to be the death of him.

CHAPTER 6



*T*enley was a good actress. A great one, really.

But it was taking every ounce of skill she had to *not* stare at Knox's bare chest as he shoveled filet and lobster into his mouth like it was his last supper.

He'd strolled out of that bathroom after his shower like he didn't have a single self-conscious bone in his body. Not that he had anything to be self-conscious about.

His abs had abs. His arms looked like he was flexing even when he was totally relaxed. He even had the perfect amount of chest hair, for Christ's sake. Not too little, not too much. If Superman and Thor had an illicit love child, it'd look like Knox Wilder.

She knew he had T-shirts and at least one flannel in his bags, and for some reason (probably just to torment her), he'd opted to eat dinner in nothing but gray sweats. Commando.

Ask her how she knew *that*.

But his body wasn't the worst of it. He'd scraped a majority of the scruff off his face, and with his wet hair slicked back, he was...stunning. Artists would probably fist fight each other for the privilege of painting or sculpting him.

And here he sat with butter dribbling down his chin like he wasn't obnoxiously hot.

It was rude, really.

She thrust a napkin at him and gestured to his chin. “You eat like a five-year-old.”

He snorted. “Table manners haven’t been at the top of my priority list for the past five years.”

Tenley probably would’ve had a snarky, witty reply if he was wearing a shirt. But as it stood, she had nothing. So, they ate without saying another word until she excused herself to get ready for bed.

Which led her thoughts in another uncomfortable direction.

There was only one bed in the suite.

It was a huge bed. They could easily share it. But...he was a shockingly hot ex-con who hadn’t been with a woman in years, and she was a shockingly hot con artist/thief/career criminal who hadn’t been with a man in...Geez, how long had it been? She might’ve even been revirginized by now.

Sex just didn’t fit into her lifestyle neatly. She’d tried a few times, but never figured out how to completely separate the orgasms from intimacy. Opening her body to someone was dangerously close to opening her *heart* to someone, and that just wasn’t a risk she was willing to take. Avoidance was safer.

For years she’d made do with the vibrator she stashed in her go-bag. Risking it all for a man lacked appeal when she had battery-powered magic wrapped in silicone to fulfill her every need.

But Knox...phew. He was the first man she’d seen in a long time who looked like he’d give her vibrator a run for its money.

Tenley scrubbed off her makeup and pulled her hair up into a high ponytail, then slipped into an oversized T-shirt and boy-cut sleep shorts from her go-bag.

She wondered if Knox would try anything with her. He could. He was twice her size. Even though she was well versed in self-defense, he could probably overpower her without too much effort.

The thought should terrify her. But it didn’t, as evidenced by her rock-hard

nipples and slightly damp panties.

It was stupid to be thinking that way, she told herself. Knox wasn't violent. He definitely didn't give off rape-y vibes. So, she seriously doubted he'd try to overpower her or hurt her in any way.

Which didn't rule out the possibility that he'd at least *ask* if she wanted to bang it out before they went their separate ways.

The only real question was what *she* wanted.

Smoothing some coconut and lime scented lotion over her arms and legs, she decided she'd just do what she did best. She'd go with the flow and play whatever cards she was handed.

Feeling more centered and in control than she had since Knox strutted out of that shower like an extra from *Magic Mike*, Tenley shut off the bathroom light and made her way to the ginormous, fluffy bed and the 1500-thread count Egyptian sheets. She ignored Knox, but she could feel the heat of his gaze on her ass as she slipped under the luxurious white comforter.

Only when she was settled did she glance over at him. He was sitting right where she'd left him, leaning forward with his forearms resting on his splayed knees. The pose was casual. The look in his eyes?

Anything but.

If looks could sear clothes off her body, she'd be totally nude right now. And somehow, she didn't think she'd be upset about it.

"What?" she asked, striving for a light tone and failing miserably. "You don't mind sharing, do you?"

She waited for a grumpy comment. And waited.

And waited.

After what felt like an eternity, he stood to his full height and slowly, purposefully, stalked toward her side of the bed. She swallowed hard as he got closer, his eyes never leaving hers. All she could hear was the sound of her own blood roaring through her ears.

OhmyGodOhmyGodOhmyGod.

This was it. He was going to kiss her. Or rip the blankets off her. Or tear her clothes off. He looked...feral.

Maybe she'd underestimated his capacity for violence.

He stopped close enough that if she wanted to, she could touch him...and the now-hard cock that was threatening to shove its way out of those gray sweats. Her lungs locked up as he reached down, gently but firmly snagged her wrist and lifted it up to the wrought iron headboard. Of their own volition, her fingers wrapped around one of the slats as she waited for his next move.

Click.

Her eyes flew to her wrist. The sonofabitch had just handcuffed her to the damn headboard! She gave the cuff a tug as the cool metal around her wrist *very* quickly offset any desire that had been building in her. "What the hell are you doing?"

He rubbed a hand over his jaw. "There's no way I'm falling asleep with you on the loose."

"Oh, come on! What could I possibly do while you're asleep?"

"Steal one of my kidneys and sell it on the black market."

She scoffed. "The black-market organ trade is way too volatile. I'd never get involved in that mess. Besides, selling someone who looks like *you* for parts would be a total waste. I could get way more by sex trafficking you."

His gaze flicked down to her nipples, which were prominently on display in her thin T-shirt and every bit as hard as his cock, which was pointing right at her.

Right. At. Her.

"That answer is why you're handcuffed to the bed," he said.

"You don't trust me at all after everything I've done for you?"

"If anything, I trust you even less."

Fair. Rude, but fair. “Ugh.” She flopped down on the pillows as best she could with her wrist cuffed to the bed. “Where did you even get handcuffs?”

“You’d be surprised what you can find at Discount Hut.”

Touché, she thought as he walked to his side of the bed and crawled under the covers. The bed was so damn big she couldn’t even kick him in his precious kidneys from where she was. He probably knew it, too. Fucker.

“Sweet dreams, Tenley,” he said as he rolled away from her.

“Have the dreams you deserve, *Knox*,” she snarked.

His chuckle held not a single trace of humor. “I have no doubt they’ll be *way* better than I’ll ever deserve.”

She frowned. What in the cryptic *fuck* did that mean?

Not that she could ask. Bastard started snoring two seconds later.

CHAPTER 7



Picking the lock on the cuffs took about five minutes.

It would've taken three, but she was trying to be extra quiet so that she didn't wake Knox. Poor guy was so exhausted she couldn't even bring herself to stay mad at him for cuffing her to the headboard in the first place.

So, she'd just opened the cuffs and rolled over to get some sleep when it occurred to her that she had a call to make. A damned important one, too.

Grumbling under her breath, she grabbed her phone, slipped out of bed, and made her way to the bathroom, locking the door behind her.

He answered on the first ring. "You're late."

She grinned, imagining him sitting in front of his wall of security feeds and desk full of open laptops, waiting for her daily check-in call. "Sorry. I was tied up." Literally.

He muttered indistinctly for a few seconds before asking, "With the ex-con?"

Tenley frowned as she boosted herself up on the ginormous bathroom counter. "Renley, how do you know about Knox?"

"I told you not to call me that," he grouched.

Yes, which was the point, of course. "But Renley and Tenley has a nice ring to it. Makes us sound like a dynamic duo, you know? Like Batman and Robin. Bonnie and Clyde. Starsky and Hutch."

“Bert and Ernie. Simon and Garfunkel, Chip and Dale,” he added dryly.

She sighed. “You’re a buzz kill, Ren.”

“This shouldn’t be news to you, Tenley.”

It wasn’t. She’d known Ren Solace since they were both skinny, underfed trailer park foster kids, and he’d been a dour, the-glass-is-always-half-empty-and-the-contents-are-probably-poisoned-anyway kind of guy since she first met him.

When they were both in the fourth grade, Ren was a scrawny weakling who always screwed up the grading curve because he was ten times smarter than anyone in the room, including the teacher. Those traits, coupled with his awkwardness in social situations and the fact that he was dirt poor, made him an easy target for bullies.

And if there was one thing Tenley could never tolerate, it was a bully. She’d come across a couple of kids trying to stuff Ren in his locker, and she didn’t hesitate to step in, fists flying. No one fought like a trailer park kid with a handsy foster dad. Those fuckers didn’t stand a chance. Two of them went off with bloody noses, and the one who’d first grabbed Ren earned a broken wrist for his efforts.

She’d gotten suspended for a week, but it had been worth it, because after that, Ren became the closest thing to a friend she’d ever had. He even let her stay in the spare room at his compound when she wasn’t on the road, grifting. She could call on him for anything she needed, and he *never* asked too many questions.

After elementary school, he didn’t need her to fight for him anymore. He hit a growth spurt the likes of which Tenley had never seen. Now, he was a beast of a man who would scare the crap out of her if he wasn’t on her side.

Ren was like the brother she never had. They never talked too much about personal stuff. He was every bit as uncomfortable with emotion as she was. But when she needed fake documents, electronic records, false identities, or security footage erased, Ren was there for her.

And to make sure neither of them ever got too mushy about their relationship, she always made sure he was fairly compensated for his work. No one should

ever do work—physical *or* emotional—for free.

Where he'd gained his skills, she had no idea. She truly didn't want to know. She imagined it had been in one those I-could-tell-you-but-then-I'd-have-to-kill-you-situations. All she knew for sure was that if she didn't check in with him every night, he'd come looking for her.

And God help anyone who kept her from reaching him.

“How'd you know about Knox?” she repeated.

“You were late checking in, so I pulled up the security footage from the jewelry store. Based on that, I pulled the street cams in the surrounding areas. I saw him pull you into his car.”

She blinked. “You saw me get *kidnapped* and you didn't come for me?”

He scoffed. “You weren't kidnapped. I saw you go after him first. You obviously had it under control.”

True. But still... “You still researched him, though?”

“I like to be sure.”

That was the understatement of the century. “What'd you find out?”

Ren gave her a brief rundown of Knox's history, including the fact that he hadn't had any criminal record prior to his embezzlement conviction. No violence in his past at all. Which, she already knew. But it was always nice to confirm that the man she was sharing a bed with wasn't a serial killer.

Ren also told her where Knox had gone to college, who he'd dated and for how long, and a slew of other personal facts she had *no* idea how he'd obtained. When he'd finished his recitation, he asked, “Why didn't you ditch him when you got out of town?”

Great question. She'd been asking herself that for a while now. “I don't know yet. There's something there, though.”

“A pretty face and tight abs?”

She snorted. “There's that. But there's more to him than meets the eye. I'm going to hang around for a bit and see what happens next. He's...interesting.”

There was a loaded pause on Ren's end. Eventually, he said, "Just be careful."

She knew he wasn't referring to her physical safety. He wanted her to be careful with her emotions. Being interested in a mark was atypical for her, and Ren knew her well enough to realize she was already in danger of getting too close.

"Don't worry about me," she said. "I've got it under control."

But as Ren helped her make arrangements to meet with a fence who could move the stolen gems for her and her mind kept wandering back to Knox in all his shirtless glory, she could only hope she wasn't lying to Ren—and to herself—about the state of her self-control.

CHAPTER 8



*K*nox hadn't had this many raunchy sex dreams since he'd been a horny fifteen-year-old.

One after another, sexual scenarios bombarded his REM sleep. Over the course of the night in his dreams, he'd fucked Tenley on or against every flat surface in their suite. Twice with her bent over the bed and his hand around her throat, three times in the shower, and once with her spread out on their dinner table.

If all that had happened in real life, he'd need a shot of B12 and a fuckton of electrolytes to refuel. Maybe some Viagra if she wanted to go again.

And Dream Tenley *always* wanted to go again.

Which was probably why Knox was fighting so hard to stay asleep. IRL Tenley scared the crap out of him. And he hadn't had a night's sleep this good since he was a kid.

The pillow he had his face buried in was the softest he'd ever had, and it smelled heavenly. Like...tanning lotion and margaritas, maybe? Knox nuzzled deeper into the pillow and breathed deep. And the way his mom was running her fingers through his hair, just like she'd done when he was a little boy, was so soothing.

It was the thoughts of his mom that ultimately yanked him out of Dreamland permanently. She'd been dead since he was ten, so there was no way she was here, running her fingers through his hair. And the pillow hadn't smelled like

a Hawaiian vacation when he went to bed. So, that could only mean...

Knox's eyes snapped open and he groaned. Yep. He had his head in Tenley's lap with his arms wrapped around her legs like she was his own personal body pillow, and she was sifting her fingers gently through his hair.

The fingers on her *uncuffed* hand.

He came up off the bed faster than he'd ever moved in his life and glared down at her. She looked so calm and refreshed, laying there on his side of the bed with her back against the headboard and her legs crossed at the ankle, holding a Starbucks cup in the hand that hadn't been playing with his hair.

Tenley was dressed, too. Thank God. Although, the yoga pants and tank top she was wearing weren't covering much more than the torturously sexy sleep set she'd been wearing the night before.

"How long have I been out?" he asked, shocked at how hoarse his voice was.

She took a sip of her coffee before answering, "At least twelve hours."

And the even more pressing question... "How the fuck did you get out of that cuff?"

Her smirk was all kinds of annoying. "You really thought that thing would hold me? Please. It was a standard Smith & Wesson Model 300. I could've picked that lock when I was in kindergarten. If you want to make it harder on me next time, use zip ties."

Her use of the word "harder" snagged his dick's full attention. But he willed it down with thoughts of how she could've stolen his organs while he blissfully dreamed of fucking her. He shoved a hand through his hair. "Were you up all night or something?"

"No. It took me about five minutes to pick the lock on the cuffs. I slept for a few hours. Then I got up, showered, got dressed, went out for coffee, met with my fence to broker the sale of some stolen diamonds, then came back here to find you *still* snoring, lazybones."

He decided not to get hung up on the part about the fence and the stolen diamonds. Maybe he could claim plausible deniability if he ever got dragged

into court for something she did. So, that only left one truly pressing question. “And why were you...”

Tenley raised a brow at him. “In bed with you? I sat down to take my shoes off and you grabbed me. Every time I tried to get up, you growled and held me tighter.” She shrugged. “I didn’t want to wake you up. You seemed like you needed the rest.”

There was a hint of sympathy—or pity—in her voice that he didn’t care for at all. Mostly because she was right. He hadn’t slept for more than an hour at a time during his entire prison stint. His body had obviously recognized the constant danger it was in and refused to not be alert for any longer than that. But here, safe in a hotel room, he’d hit the pillow and promptly dropped into a coma.

All while his brain played a porno starring him and Tenley.

Then it occurred to him that he was having sex dreams about her while desperately clinging to her like she was his childhood teddy bear. *That* was embarrassing.

She leaned over to the nightstand and grabbed a second cup of coffee. “Here,” she said, extending it to him. Then she patted the space he’d just vacated. “Sit down. Drink your coffee, and let’s talk.”

Was this a trap? It felt like a trap. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Oh, calm down, Knox. We don’t need to discuss our *feelings*. After last night and the whole handcuff thing, I think we need to do a little trust building.”

He couldn’t help but snort at that. He did take the coffee, though. It was damn good, too. Just good old-fashioned black coffee. His favorite. “You’re not an easy person to trust.”

She gave him a little shrug. “I get that. But on the flip side, you *did* kidnap me. So, neither of us has been at our most trustworthy lately.”

That sounded weirdly reasonable. His first instinct was to distrust everything she said and did. But she wasn’t the villain in this scenario. He was. He’d dragged her off the street and threatened her life. He deserved whatever she

dished out, frankly.

Not that he'd ever tell *her* that.

Instead, he took a seat on the corner of the bed and turned his body toward hers. "So, why did you refuse to leave when I offered to let you go?"

Tenley tapped one of her perfectly manicured fingernails on her coffee cup. "I needed a ride out of town that didn't leave a paper trail of any kind. I spotted you and you looked desperate for some reason." Her eyes flicked downward as she quietly added, "I knew I could use that against you."

Wow. He really *was* the captive in this scenario. He shoved a hand through his hair. "And the reason you needed out of town in a hurry?"

She had the grace to look a little sheepish. "Remember me mentioning the stolen diamonds? Well, I'd just lifted them when I saw you. If I'd had another day to plan, I could've made other arrangements. But the perfect opportunity came up, and I grabbed it—and a bag full of diamonds."

That was a lot to process. "And you're telling me this...because?"

"Mutually assured destruction. I'm giving you ammo to use against me if I try to use the kidnapping against *you*."

"Trust building," he murmured.

"Exactly."

She looked so sincere as she sat there telling him about how she was a manipulator, a liar, and a thief. It was disconcerting. But in his position, did he really have any right to judge her? "So, you're leaving? Is that where this conversation is going?"

Something flashed across her expression so fast he would've missed it if he hadn't really been paying attention. Was it...pain? Regret? He wasn't sure. He'd seen it, though. "I can," she began cagily. "*Or* you can tell me why you were desperate enough to kidnap a woman off the street. Maybe I can help."

He let out a humorless chuckle. "Baby, I *wish* my problems were as small as a bag of stolen diamonds."

She gave him a crooked smile. “You wouldn’t believe what a great problem solver I am.”

In his experience, people who were willing to break every rule put in front of them *did* tend to be good problem solvers. And at this point, what did he have to lose (since he’d already lost his dignity *long* ago) by telling her the gory details of his messy life?

Knox took a fortifying sip of coffee before letting the story fly. “My mom was an entrepreneur. She built this gorgeous, handmade furniture that ended up being featured in a few big architectural magazines, and the business blew up to the point that she expanded production several times. The company became one of the biggest employers in the entire state.”

Tenley gave him a real smile at that point, and it was so warm that he totally lost his place in the story. “What’s the name of the company?” she asked.

“Wilder Days.”

Her eyes widened. “Oh, my God! I saw one of their chairs on some huge influencer’s page and it was the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen.”

His mom would’ve loved hearing that. “Yeah. Mom was a genius. She somehow figured out how to produce her stuff in mass without sacrificing quality.”

“She *was* a genius?” she prompted gently.

Knox swallowed the lump that always settled in his throat when he thought about his mom. “Yeah. She died when I was ten.”

“I’m so sorry,” she murmured.

“Me too.” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, my dad took over the company. The plan was always for me to go to business school and go to work for the company after I graduated. He wanted me to eventually take over.”

“And what did *you* want?”

His brow furrowed. Was it weird that no one had ever asked him that before? “I used to help my mom make furniture, and *that’s* what I liked to do. But the business end of it? No thanks. Besides, I was a total fuck up. Partying and

drinking. That's pretty much all I did. So, my dad gave me an ultimatum. I could go to college and clean my act up, or he'd cut me off completely. I chose college, but like everything else in my life, I half assed it. And when I *barely* graduated and started to work at Wilder Days, let's just say dad was unimpressed with the job I did."

"I mean, you were fresh out of college. I doubt anyone expected you to be a rockstar."

"No, but the least I could've done was show up to work sober."

She cringed. "Yeah, I can see where a dad-slash-boss might not enjoy that. Did your dad fire you?"

Knox rubbed a hand over the back of his neck. "He should've. But he never got the chance. He died about six months after I started working for him." He saw the sympathy in her eyes, but he plowed on with the story before she could express her condolences again. "He'd remarried by that time, and since I was still a fuck up, my stepmother's son took over the company, and my inheritance was placed in a trust, per my dad's will. The only caveat on the trust is that I need to be thirty-five and 'settled down' to the satisfaction of the attorney who created the trust. There are other specifics I'll be let in on when I meet with my dad's lawyer. But *my* lawyer told me the best way to show that I'm serious and ready to settle down was to be married."

Tenley sighed. "And let me guess. He told you this right before you grabbed me off the street."

"Yep."

She crossed her legs into the lotus position and Knox tried—he really, *really*, did—not to think about how *flexible* she looked. "Is that why you embezzled?"

There was a time when that question would've pissed him off. But doing prison time had beaten that outrage out of him. Everyone in prison said they were innocent. "I didn't embezzle. I was set up."

Her brow furrowed. "By who? The stepbrother?"

He shrugged. "Probably. He has the most to gain. My inheritance goes to

Thadeus if I'm still deemed a fuck up by the time I'm thirty-five. Which, by the way, is less than a week from now."

Tenley whistled. "Wow. That's...a lot."

"Yeah. I'm aware."

He imagined this was when she'd take her leave. She'd gotten everything she needed out of him when he drove her out of town. She'd done him a solid by getting him out of that police checkpoint and providing a place to sleep. There was absolutely no reason in the world for her to follow him to his parent's old house in Stars Point. Not when his life was so clearly a disaster. No sane woman would ever—

"I'll do it."

Knox blinked at her. "You'll do what?"

"Pretend to be your fiancé. I can help you get your inheritance."

"But...why?"

She shrugged. "Sounds like fun."

He snorted. "No. Trust me when I say that dealing with my stepbrother will *not* be any fun."

Her grin showcased an adorable dimple in her right cheek. "You'd be surprised how easy I am to entertain."

Nope. Not touching that one.

"Besides," she went on, "I don't have anything else going on at the moment."

Knox narrowed his eyes on her. "You want a piece of the inheritance, don't you?"

Her grin grew even wider. "You really *aren't* just a pretty face are you, Cheekbones? I have a strict policy about not doing anything for free. But that just means I'll be *extra* motivated to help you."

That was both sad *and* scary. The sad part? He wasn't even mad at her for having a self-serving motive. The scary part was *why* he wasn't mad at her.

Truth was, the thought of going home alone to face Thadeus and all the shit from his past was terrifying. But not as terrifying as the idea of Tenley walking away from him.

How the *fuck* had she made him need her after one day?

CHAPTER 9



Senley had scammed a lot of rich folks over the years. Lots of them. Like, a truly staggering number of rich folks.

But she had never seen anything like Knox's childhood home.

She gaped at the mansion. "You lived...here?"

The place looked like it had been designed solely to appear in *Architectural Digest*. It sprawled across the lightly wooded landscape in all its mid-century modern glory—ten-thousand square feet of glass, steel, and river rock. It was gorgeous, but cold. Uninviting.

Not like Knox *at all*.

He parked the car in the ginormous circular driveway and followed her wide-eyed gaze to the house like he couldn't figure out why she was so perplexed. "Yeah. My parents bought this place before my mom died."

"You don't think this is...a lot?"

Knox shrugged. "Of course it is. I never cared for it. I liked the little house we had before the company blew up. But this was my mom's choice, so, I guess it's home."

This was surreal. Here was a guy in Discount Hut jeans, driving a borrowed Honda, fresh out of prison, and he grew up in real estate Nirvana. Meanwhile, she was sitting here in five-hundred-dollar shoes with a million bucks in her offshore account, and she came from a trailer park in Ass-end of Nowhere,

Oklahoma. So much for the whole nature vs. nurture debate.

“You maybe should’ve put on the Tom Ford,” she muttered.

He let out a humorless chuckle. “Trust me. It wouldn’t have made a difference. Thadeus would still look at me like I’m dog shit on the bottom of his shoe. I might as well be comfortable.”

“That doesn’t matter. It’s like battle armor. You don’t wear it to look good in front of the other knights. You wear it to do battle. Slay dragons.”

Knox raised a brow at her. “Slay dragons, huh? Is that why you dress like you’re walking a catwalk in Milan?”

Tenley’s nose scrunched up. “First of all, no designer would be caught dead sending a simple pencil skirt like this down the catwalk. Everyday clothes have no business at Fashion Week.”

“Noted.”

“Besides, won’t it help convince Thad that I’m a good little wife-y if I’m dressed well? Don’t want the guy thinking you snagged me off the street.”

His lip twitched. “I’ll pay you a hundred bucks to call him Thad to his face.”

She waved him off. “I know you’re kidding, but baby, I could make Thad *cry* if I wanted to. Which probably makes this a good time to discuss your expectations.”

The way his eyes darkened made her think his mind had traveled to a decidedly not-PG-rated place when she said *expectations*. And the fact that *her* mind took the same journey just as fast was concerning. This could get messy if she wasn’t careful.

Tenley didn’t do messy.

“Not your expectations of *me*,” she clarified. “Your expectations for this whole visit. You don’t really *just* want the inheritance, right?”

His brow furrowed. “Why would I want more? That inheritance will set me up for life.”

Oh, Lord. He was like a six-foot-three infant when it came to her world.

“You *could* want revenge for the years you spent in prison for something you didn’t do. You *could* want to take this house back, or your mom’s company. There’s *a lot* you could do to Thadeus if you wanted to.”

He thought about it for a moment, then said, “In prison, you go through the five stages of grief pretty fast. You deny that you belong there. Then you’re angry and want to lash out. Bargaining and depression can stretch out for years. But you eventually get to acceptance. That’s when you realize that things like rage and revenge just aren’t worth it. Besides, I have my suspicions about Thadeus, but I don’t know that he *actually* did anything to me.”

She snorted. “Well, that one I can help with. Put me in a room with the guy and I can tell you in five minutes if he’s the one who framed you.”

“Come on. There’s no way you can tell that in just one conversation.”

Oh, ye of little faith. “You’d be surprised what I can do.”

If she hadn’t been looking right at him, she would’ve missed it. But since she *was* looking, she caught the softening in his eyes as he said, “I don’t doubt it, Tenley. I don’t doubt it.”



Walking through the door of the house where he’d spent so much of his childhood was somehow worse than walking into Midfield for the first time.

So many terrible memories still lived here. They’d seeped into the walls and permeated the imported Italian carpets with their stench. He’d thought prison was the last place he ever wanted to see again.

He’d been wrong.

This was hell.

All the shouting matches with his father. The months his mother spent here, sick and weak, wasting away from a disease that rotted her from the inside out. The years he’d spent burying his pain with drugs and alcohol and partying. It was years ago, and it was all somehow still so fresh.

That's when Tenley grabbed his hand and gave it a good, hard squeeze. He glanced down at her and the sympathy in her eyes almost brought him to his knees. Everything he'd been feeling must've been clear to her. Maybe she'd read it in the tension in his shoulders and jaw. He wasn't sure how she'd known, but she had. And in that moment, her quiet support pushed the past into the background of his mind where it belonged.

"This place looks like a mausoleum," Tenley whispered as they crossed through the grand foyer. "Only, you know...colder."

Knox's chuckle/snort combo echoed through the cavernous, marble-tiled space. "You're not wrong. It wasn't always like this."

It was clear that Thadeus (and whatever trophy wife he had that year) had put their cold, ultra-modern, Jetsons-esque stamp on the place, and both his parents were probably rolling over in their graves at the desecration of what had been an immaculately designed space.

"Well, well, well. The prodigal son returns."

Knox fought off a cringe at the sound of Thadeus's voice. He was the only man Knox had ever met who could say something totally innocuous and make it sound obnoxious and condescending all at the same time.

He glanced up to find his stepbrother walking down the spiral staircase into the foyer in a suit that probably cost more than the ones Tenley had filched from the handsy bastard at the bar, smirking down at Knox like he was a particularly demanding Dicken's child begging for more gruel.

"Thadeus," he said in lieu of an actual, genuine greeting. Because honestly, what was he going to say? Nice to see you? It wasn't. How have you been? He didn't give a fuck. Just saying the asshole's name gave him a migraine, so that's all he could muster. Frankly, Stepbrother Dearest should count himself fortunate that Knox didn't launch himself up those stairs and beat the ever-loving shit out of him.

When his dad decided to remarry, he'd told Knox that he'd soon have a brother. Like an idiot, Knox had been thrilled. In his head, they'd be the best of friends, even though Thadeus was a decade older. Like Bobby and Peter Brady or some shit. One meeting with his new stepbrother shattered those

naïve hopes.

Thadeus was a bully who delighted in tormenting Knox. He stole his stuff, ruined his clothes, cut his hair while he was sleeping, beat the crap out of him and threatened to beat him worse if he told anyone. It was years of agony until Knox got big enough and strong enough to defend himself. After that, Thadeus just focused on making sure he looked like the golden child, and that everyone (especially his dad) recognized what a fuck up Knox was.

It was just his shit luck that Thadeus wore wealth well. He'd aged very little in the last few years. The only sign that any time had passed at all since they'd last seen each other were a few stray gray hairs in his thick, dark hair. His eyes were a little beady and his chin a little weak, but he wasn't nearly as unattractive on the outside as he was on the inside.

Knox was glad he was at least three inches taller and fifty pounds of muscle heavier than Thadeus. He'd take whatever advantages he could.

But whatever anyone was going to say next was drowned out by Tenley's enthusiastic, "Well, hello there, you must be *Thad*. I've heard *all* about you."

Knox felt like an asshole for not introducing her immediately. "Thadeus, this is my fiancée, Tenley T—"

"Snow," she interrupted smoothly. "Tenley Snow."

Go with the flow, he thought. That's what Tenley had told him right before they came in. He could do that. If she wanted to go by Snow instead of Taylor, he imagined she had a good reason.

Thadeus seemed equally confused. Whether it was her use of "Thad" (which, yay, Tenley!) or the sweet-as-molasses voice that vexed him was unclear. But his brows had practically drawn themselves up into question marks as he took the hand she thrust at him.

"Knox's *fiancée*?" he asked, shifting his gaze to Knox. "How on earth did you manage to find a fiancée in prison?"

Tenley's answering laugh could only be described as tinkling bells. Sharp tinkling bells, but tinkling bells, nonetheless. "Oh, Knox told me you had quite the sense of humor. I can just tell he was right. Of course, we didn't

meet in *prison*, silly. Knox and I met in college.”

Thadeus raised a challenging brow. “U of P?”

That was a trap. Knox opened his mouth to answer, but Tenley beat him to it. “Oh, there you go again with your jokes,” she said, narrowing her eyes on him just a little. “You know Knox went to Carnegie Mellon. His father’s alma mater.”

Son of a bitch suspected Tenley wasn’t really his fiancée, and a handful of words into their first conversation, Thadeus was trying to trip her up. And Tenley wasn’t having any of it.

In fact, how the fuck did she know he went to Carnegie Mellon, and that it was only his father’s seat on their board that got him in?

“We didn’t date back then, of course,” she added. “He was with his ex, Rebecca, at the time. But I never lost touch and waited. I always get what I want eventually.”

Shit. Was she psychic or something? First, she knew where he’d gone to college. Then, she’d somehow figured out he’d had a steady girlfriend named Rebecca during that time and couldn’t have been dating Tenley. But Thadeus would have no reason to doubt that they’d had a slow burn, friends-to-lovers kind of relationship.

Once again, he was impressed by her and terrified of her all at the same time.

Thadeus looked oddly deflated by how easily she’d deflected his blatant trap. He turned his attention back to Knox. “I assume you’ll be staying for a bit? I had Melanie make up the guest suite for you and your lovely...*fiancée*.”

“Melanie?” Knox asked. “Where’s Natty?”

Thadeus’s lip turned up like he’d just sniffed a stale fart. “I let Natty go years ago. She had a *terrible* attitude.”

No, Natty had a *great* attitude. She was the closest thing Knox had to real family after his mom’s death. His dad had never wanted too much to do with him because he was such a fuck up, but Natty was always there to help and support him. The fact that Thadeus would let someone as loyal as Natty go

just proved how much of an asshole he really was.

And there was *no way* Knox was staying in this house, sharing a roof with Thadeus.

“I thought we’d stay in the pool house if it’s all the same to you,” he said.

Thadeus’s nose wrinkled up like he’d just suggested they sleep in a jungle cave. “It’s fine with me. But I can’t guarantee you’d be alone out there.” He chuckled. “Any manner of vermin might’ve taken up residence since you were there last.”

You’ve let the pool house—which was mine—fall into disrepair. Because it’s yours now and you don’t give a shit about it. Got it.

But he didn’t have to say any of that because Tenley blinked up at Thadeus with a smile so sharp it could eviscerate a man and said, “Oh, don’t you worry about little ‘ole me. I know *exactly* how to deal with vermin.”

Thadeus’s answering smile was a little confused. Clearly, he wasn’t sure if he’d just been insulted. Knox had to clear his throat to stifle a laugh, because it was clear as *fuck* to him that Thadeus had just been insulted.

With Tenley on his side, maybe this little trip home wouldn’t be as torturous as he’d thought.

CHAPTER 10



“*T*hat man *for sure* framed you.”

Knox set their bags down on the bed in the pool house and side-eyed her. “You talked to him for all of five minutes. What makes you so sure?”

Takes a crook to know a crook.

She thought it, but she didn’t say it. Because even though he was the one with a prison record, Knox was no crook.

Plus, for some reason, she didn’t want him to think of her in the same light as Thadeus. Sure, she’d done some shady shit. But she’d never framed anyone else for her crimes. And she tended to steal from people who deserved it, not innocents like Knox.

“I just know,” she mumbled.

“Speaking of knowing,” he began, “how did you know where I went to school?”

“My friend, Ren, did some research for me. Then he created a new paper trail for Tenley Snow. If Thadeus has an investigator look into me, he’ll find information to back up my story.”

Knox’s lips flatlined. “Ren? Is he your...partner?”

She snorted. “Kinda, I guess. He helps me out when I need it and keeps an

eye on me to make sure I don't get in any trouble."

If anything, he looked even more distressed by this information. "What does 'keeps an eye' on you mean? Is that like, stalking?"

Tenley winced a little at the terminology. "*Stalking* is an ugly word. Look, you have to understand that a criminal's way of showing love and respect to another criminal isn't going to be...traditional. I show my love and respect by always paying Ren for his work. He shows his love and respect by... watching over me."

He raised a brow. "Sounds like he's stalking you."

She shrugged. "Po-tay-toe, po-tah-toe."

"But there's nothing...romantic there?"

Tenley felt her lip curl up involuntarily. "Gross! No. He's like my brother."

Was that *relief* she saw in Knox's face? Did the thought of her having a boyfriend make him *jealous*?

The giddy little flip her stomach did at the thought of Knox being jealous of her relationship with Ren was *completely* unacceptable, so she shut that shit down with ruthless efficiency.

"You really think Thadeus will investigate you?"

"Oh, yeah. I bet he called his investigator the second he walked away from us."

As long as the investigator did the bare minimum, he or she wouldn't find anything suspicious. And she'd be willing to bet anyone working for Thadeus only did the bare minimum on his behalf. No one would ever want to go above and beyond for that dickwad.

"Why did you use the fake last name?" Knox asked.

"Because following Tenley *Taylor's* paper trail doesn't lead anywhere good," she admitted quietly.

He nodded as if that answer was good enough. And maybe it was. For now. But eventually, he'd want to know more. She'd have to decide what she

wanted to share and what she didn't. If she was being honest with herself, though, she'd also have to admit that she'd already shared more with Knox than she had with anyone other than Ren in, well, maybe *ever*.

Who knew kidnapping could be such a great bonding experience?

Tenley took a moment to check out the pool house. On the outside, it was a miniature version of the main house. But inside was another story entirely.

The pool house was full of redwood accents, jewel-toned, overstuffed furnishings, and polished, chic-looking concrete floors strewn with colorful, handwoven rugs. While the main house was clearly designed for shock and awe, *this* was a space you could actually *live* in.

She saw instantly why Knox chose to stay here.

It took them a solid half hour to uncover everything, but when it was all done, the place was surprisingly clean. The dust had mostly been contained by the coverings, and with the windows open, everything smelled fresh and clean. It was like his mom's handmade furniture was so fabulous dust didn't dare sully it.

Tenley decided she liked the pool house far more than the mansion. It was still luxurious and way larger than a mere pool house had any right to be, but it was colorful and cozy in a way the main house just wasn't.

Knox looked more relaxed, too. She had to assume part of that was being out of that house and away from Thadeus. She sat down on the edge of the bed and kicked her feet. "So, now what?"

His eyes did that darkening thing again, where it looked like he was having dirty, dirty thoughts. Her heartbeat (among other things) throbbed in response. "I mean, what's next on the agenda to get your inheritance?"

He shoved a hand through his hair and sat down next to her. "We have an appointment with Luther, my dad's lawyer, tomorrow at nine. But tonight, there's someone I need to see."

Probably an old girlfriend. After all, Knox just got out of prison. She was shocked he'd waited this long to sink into a hot, willing woman. It's not like it'd be hard for him to pick one up. He could probably walk into a bar, snap

his fingers, and have women fist fighting over who got to blow him in the parking lot.

So why didn't he make a move on you?

Tenley was irritated with her brain for even asking such a stupid question. What did it matter?

But even more than that, she was irritated with her heart for being a little hurt that he'd rather fuck some old girlfriend than her.

She toyed with a loose thread on the fluffy comforter. "Sure," she said. "I get it. I can just—"

"Want to come with me?"

Her eyes shot to his. "You...want me to?"

He shrugged. "I mean, sure. Yes. Will you?"

She swallowed the overeager reply that tried to claw its way out of her throat and mirrored his careless shrug. "Sure. If that's what *you* want."

His answering half smile did things to her panties she'd rather not think about. Thank God the man didn't ever seem to *really* smile. She wasn't sure she—or her panties—could handle *that*.



The drive to Natty's modest, two-bedroom bungalow on the outskirts of town took only ten minutes. And Knox felt lighter with every mile they put between him and the mansion.

He was still doubting his decision to bring Tenley along on this mission. At his suggestion, she'd changed out of her fancy pencil skirt and sweater into a pair of faded, holey jeans and one of his T-shirts, knotted at the waist. And somehow, she looked even better dressed casually. How the hell was that even possible?

What really bothered him, though, wasn't her attractiveness. It was the fact that he was starting to trust an admitted thief and con artist. It was that kind

of naivete that had landed him in prison in the first place.

Maybe he really was an idiot like his father had always assumed.

Beside him on Natty's doorstep, Tenley twisted her hair up into a messy bun that she secured with what looked like a lock pick. "Are you sure it's not a problem for me to be here? I don't want to interrupt your time with your... friend?"

Ah. That's why she'd looked nervous since they got in the car. She thought Natty was an old girlfriend or something. He'd been thrown off guard with Tenley since the second they met. It was kind of nice having the roles reversed for once. So, instead of easing her mind, he just shrugged and said, "The more the merrier."

Her nose wrinkled up as she frowned at him, and it was fucking adorable. But before she could say anything, the door was ripped open and Knox was dragged into the warm, rose water-scented embrace of his favorite person in the whole world.

Natty Evans was sixty-five years old, five-foot-nothing when standing on her tiptoes, and probably one-ten soaking wet, but she had the grip of a Grizzly as she rocked him back and forth. "My baby is home," she cried.

Knox chuckled and patted her back awkwardly. He'd gone so long without physical contact with anyone that even a friendly hug felt weird to him now. But with Natty, he'd have to get over it. She was a hugger. Always had been. "It's good to see you, too, Nat."

Then she leaned back and slugged him in the arm, putting her full weight behind it. He rubbed the spot where her tiny knuckles had connected. "What the hell?"

"That," she said, pointing a stern mom finger in his face, "was for refusing to put me on the approved visitor list."

Right. Like he was going to let the person he loved most in the world see him in that shit hole. "I couldn't let you spend all that time and money going there."

I'm not worth it.

He didn't say that part out loud, but it was true. And judging from the way Tenley looped her arm through his and leaned into him, she knew the direction his thoughts had gone in, too.

"It was for me to decide, not you," Nat said sternly, then crossed her arms over her chest. "So, just say you're sorry and we can move on."

Arguing with her was pointless. He'd learned that long, long ago. "I'm sorry, Nat. You were right."

She grinned. "My favorite words of all time." Then her gaze shifted over to Tenley, taking her in from head to toe. "And who is this?"

Tenley pasted on her fake smile and thrust a hand at Nat before Knox could say anything. "Hi there. It's so nice to meet you. I'm Tenley Snow. Knox's fiancée."

Nat ignored her hand and glanced over at Knox, one brow raised. "Knox, why is she lying to me?"

The look on Tenley's face was priceless. Abso-fucking-lutely priceless. She was completely befuddled. It was like no one had ever called her on her bullshit before. He couldn't hold back a chuckle at her discomfort. "Nat, this is Tenley. She's a...friend. She's helping me get my inheritance."

Nat still eyed Tenley like a mongoose getting ready to grab a snake and give it a death shake, but she stepped out of the way and ushered them into her living room. "I'm guessing there's an interesting story here, and you're going to tell me the whole thing over tea. Besides, there's someone in here who's going to be *very* happy to see you."

Since Knox quite literally didn't have any other friends, he had no idea who Nat was referring to...until he crossed Nat's sunshine yellow foyer and saw the most beautiful girl in the world in the living room, curled up on the sofa.

"Layla," he whispered, immediately dropping to his knees.

Obviously, she looked different. It had been five years, after all. But Layla was still the most gorgeous black Labrador he'd ever seen.

Layla's tail started swishing the moment she saw him. She'd only been a

puppy when Knox went to prison, but she was all grown up now. A full seventy-five pounds, if he hadn't missed his guess.

She jumped down off the sofa and came right over to him, greeting him with sloppy kisses and happy little whining noises, just like she always had.

When he sank his fingers into her silky, warm fur and she leaned into him, Knox relaxed completely for the first time since his release. "You kept her," he said, not even caring that his voice cracked when he said it.

"Of course, I did," Natty replied, wiping away her own tears. "She goes to the door every day, and I *swear*, she's looking for you."

And suddenly, the inheritance, Thadeus, his lack of prospects...none of it mattered. He'd been *sure* he'd lost everything when he went away. Turns out, what mattered the most—Natty and Layla—were still here, waiting for him, ready to accept him back home with open arms.

He looked up at Tenley, saw her furiously blinking away tears, and he did something he hadn't done in five years.

He smiled. A real one. Not a smirk or a self-deprecating half smile. A full-on, joyous smile. And when she returned it with a teary one of her own, that's when he knew.

Everything was going to be OK.

CHAPTER 11



Tenley hadn't been caught in a lie since she was five years old.

And in her defense, she'd *almost* gotten away with stealing that pack of Oreos from the Gas n' Guzzle. If she hadn't been starving and could've waited until she got outside the store to start eating them, the store clerk would've believed her. But it was hard to say someone else had stolen the cookies when you had Oreo debris all over your fingers and face.

But she'd laid a convincing lie—delivered with the skill of a master thespian—at Natty's feet, and the woman had immediately stomped all over it. She was like a human lie detector or something.

Tenley knew she shouldn't worry about it. Knox obviously trusted this woman with his life. So, having her in on the truth of their plan was most likely not going to be an issue.

Still...it made her wonder if she was going soft.

Getting caught in a lie was bad enough. But *crying* when Knox was reunited with his dog? Practically *swooning* when he smiled at her?

What the hell was the matter with her?

See, this was why liking a mark was a bad, *bad* idea. And the sordid, sad truth was that she *did* like Knox.

Here was a good, honest guy who'd been framed for embezzlement, but did the time without complaint. He didn't even want revenge, for Christ's sake.

All he wanted was his dog and enough money to start a new life, far from the bad memories of his old one.

It was selfish of her to stay. The ten percent of his inheritance they'd negotiated wouldn't mean anything to her lifestyle. She didn't need it. But she never did anything for free. Not even for a guy she liked.

It was something she'd learned from an early age. Everything was transactional. There was no such thing as unconditional love. Even in families.

Hell, *especially* in families.

So, helping Knox for free was out of the question. And leaving at this point just felt...wrong. She'd committed to helping him, after all. It certainly wasn't because she thought he looked freakin' adorable sitting on the floor, cradling a giant black Lab in his arms like a baby.

Natty handed her a cup of Earl Grey and took a seat across from her at the tiny, fifties-style dinette table between the kitchen and living room. "So, tell me the whole story," she said with a stern, motherly tone that made Tenley feel a little squirmy.

Knox gave Layla a kiss on her furry black head. "Nat, I told you—"

She held up her hand. "Shush, boy. I'm talking to *Tenley*."

By the time the story—the *whole* story—stopped spilling from her lips, Tenley wondered if Natty had put truth serum in the tea. She'd caught Natty up on everything that had happened in her life since she first set eyes on Knox, including getting handcuffed to their hotel bed. It was...embarrassing.

And through it all, Natty watched her every expression, listened to her every word, and studied her like she was a bug stuck to a board in a science class. It was eerie, and honestly, Tenley was jealous. If she could do what Natty had just done to her, she would be completely unstoppable. And there was *very* little chance that she'd use her power for good instead of evil.

When she finally, blessedly, fell silent, Natty nodded thoughtfully, set her tea down, took a deep breath, and...cackled so loud it startled a fart out of Layla.

Tenley glanced over at Knox, wide-eyed and panicked. Holy crap, she'd just broken his best friend. Was he going to be pissed at her for breaking his best friend?

But Knox just shook his head fondly and waited for Natty to compose herself. It took several minutes.

When Natty's laughs died down to occasional guffaws and she'd wiped away all her tears, she said, "Well, now I see why you lied to me at the door. The lie was more believable than the truth!"

Harsh. True, but harsh. Tenley gave her a palms-up, what-the-hell gesture. "You're not wrong. But I'm sorry. For the lie, I mean."

"Oh, honey, no. I get it," Natty said. "Anything you can do to help Knox get what's his is appreciated."

She leaned forward. "So, I know you haven't worked for Thadeus for a while, but how much do you know about him?"

"I know *a lot*," she said. "And I'll tell you *anything* you want to know."

And suddenly, Tenley felt back in control. Back in her element. Because there was *no one* better to have on your side in a con than a smart woman with an axe to grind—and that's exactly what Natty was.

She tented her fingers like Mr. Burns. "Excellent. Tell me *everything*."

CHAPTER 12



Tenley looked ridiculously adorable sitting in bed in his pool house with Layla draped over her legs, a pen tucked behind her ear, and a notebook full of plans and schemes in front of her.

Knox was learning more about her every minute he spent with her, and he wasn't sure that was a good thing. Because the more he learned, the more he liked her. And something told him that for most people, liking Tenley ended with them losing their money, their jobs, or whatever else she wanted to take from them.

In his case, the only thing he had of value—other than the 10% of his inheritance they'd agreed on—was his heart. He'd gladly give her that 10%. After all, the remainder would be plenty for him to get out of Stars Point and start over somewhere new. But his heart?

That just wasn't something he was willing to part with.

So, he'd learn to ignore the fact that she loved dogs. She thought she was slipping Layla table scraps on the sly, but Knox had seen her do it. She'd waited until she thought he wasn't looking to lean down, tell Layla she was the most beautiful girl in the world, then kiss her nose sweetly. He'd seen that, too.

He'd eventually *not* notice how her little button nose crinkled up when she was concentrating on scamming someone. Or how she completely butchered song lyrics when she was singing along with the car radio and didn't seem to care in the slightest.

And he imagined if he tried hard enough, he'd eventually not be charmed by her off-center sense of humor, the absolutely *diabolical* way her mind worked, or the way she fearlessly charged through her life, taking no prisoners. He could learn to at least *pretend* he didn't want her more than his next breath.

Yep. He was pretty sure he could ignore and/or forget all that.

Knox stifled a groan. Fuck. Who was he kidding? He wasn't going to forget anything about her. And if, in the end, she took him for everything he had—including his fucking heart—he'd probably regret nothing.

She tapped her pink pen against her plush lower lip as she narrowed her eyes on her list. "So, I think we're ready for the meeting with Luther tomorrow, don't you?"

He had to force his gaze off her lips before he could formulate an answer. "Yeah. I guess so. I don't think Luther will give us too much trouble. There's not really much we can do until we hear the full terms of the trust."

"And you truly have no idea what they might be? I mean, other than being 'settled down', of course," she said, making air quotes with her fingers.

Knox snorted. "It's hard to narrow it down. My dad pretty much wanted me to do everything differently. He could've put a lot of stipulations in there."

There was that sympathy in her stormy eyes again. The sympathy that brought him to his fucking knees every single time. He *hated* it. Mostly because he knew he could get used to it so quickly. "Do you mind telling me what his chief complaints were?" she asked.

"Well," he said on a sigh. "There were the drugs and alcohol. I could see him asking for drug tests."

She nodded. "That seems doable. You're not on drugs, right?"

"No. That's all behind me."

"Good. What else?"

"He was really concerned with carrying on the family name. He wanted me settled down—married with kids *at least* on the horizon."

She cocked her head to one side. “You’re obviously not there yet, but we can convince him. Especially given how limited your dating options have been for the past few years.”

His brain snagged on the thought of having babies with Tenley. Or more specifically, the thought of *making* babies with Tenley. He gave his head a quick shake to dislodge *those* images. “He wanted me to take control of the company, too. Thadeus is in charge, but Dad never liked him. He was just more responsible than me and was the only other family member he could hand control over to.”

Tenley nodded and set her notebook down on the nightstand. “Now *that* is something I could see working to our advantage.”

Again, his stupid brain got hung up on her use of *our* for a second. “How so?”

“Even though Thadeus looks like a good successor on paper, your dad still preferred you and wanted you to take over. That means his stipulations won’t be impossible to achieve because he *wanted* you to succeed. At the end of the day, he believed in you. He knew you could do it. You just needed a push.”

Knox had honestly never thought about it like that before. He’d always thought his dad hated him on some level. Whether it was because he was such a fuck up or because he couldn’t be counted on when everything else in their family was falling apart, Knox wasn’t sure.

But what Tenley was saying, that his father *had* believed in him and wanted him to succeed, that he knew he’d get to a good place in his life eventually, was actually...life changing.

He’d always identified as a fuck up. Had assumed he’d always *be* a fuck up. Was it possible that he could move beyond his past and become the kind of man his father always knew he could be?

Knox cleared his throat, trying his best to dislodge the lump of emotion that had settled there. “Tenley...um...I need to tell you...well...”

“Good grief, man,” she said with a playful smirk. “We’ve been through a kidnapping together. What are you getting all shy about now? Just spit it out.”

Smart ass. “I just want to say...you know...” He shoved a hand through his hair. “...thank you. That’s all.”

Her eyes softened. “I guess I understand why that was so hard to say, given our circumstances and all.”

He snorted. “You have no idea.”

“Knox?”

“Yeah?”

“You’re welcome,” she said quietly, with more sincerity than he’d ever heard from her.

Well, hell. There went his heart.

CHAPTER 13



Sleep wasn't usually a problem for Tenley.

She never slept for long, but she could fall asleep anywhere, anytime. As soon as her head hit the pillow, she could drop into a coma without any trouble.

Usually. But not tonight.

She flopped over and punched her pillow for good measure. Not that it'd help. The pillow, just like the ginormous King-sized bed in the pool house, was the most comfortable she'd ever slept on. Or *attempted* to sleep on, as the case may be.

So why—in the name of all that was holy—was she still awake?

It wasn't Layla's fault. She was curled up in a tight little ball at the foot of the bed like the sweet baby angel she was, delicately snoring, probably dreaming of frolicking in the sun and eating lots of table scraps.

It wasn't Knox's fault, either. He was just lying there quietly, flat on his back, hands under his head. He wasn't even snoring.

Sure, he was a little distracting, all warm and muscly and shirtless with that one beam of moonlight illuminating him like a Greek god. But she was fairly certain he wasn't keeping her awake.

Maybe she just had a guilty conscience. She almost laughed out loud at *that*. She wasn't even 100% sure she *had* a conscience.

“Can I ask you something?”

Tenley startled at Knox’s quiet question. No wonder he wasn’t snoring. Bastard had been awake this whole time, listening to her toss and turn and mutter grumpily under her breath like Yosemite Sam. “If you want to know why I’m still awake, I have *no* fucking idea.”

He rolled over on his side to face her. “You know all about my past, but haven’t said anything about yours.”

She was way too sleep deprived to have *this* discussion. “It’s not something I usually talk about.”

One corner of his mouth quirked up. “I don’t either. But you know more about me than anyone other than Natty.”

She swallowed hard. His lopsided smile was starting to have an unreasonable amount of power over her. “I’ve never had a Natty,” she admitted. “My only friend is Ren, and he’d rather chew off his own arm than talk to me about my feelings, you know?”

He reached out, tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, and let his fingertips linger on her cheek long enough to make her heart clench. “I’ll be your Natty,” he said, barely above a whisper.

Oh, God. Her heart! It was going to explode. She just wasn’t equipped for this kind of...feeling. She had a *real* problem here.

Knox wasn’t just a con to her anymore.

Somewhere along the line, Knox had become *real* to her. He was a real man she actually cared about.

She cleared her throat. “My mom had me when she was just a teenager. She never told anyone who my father was. But apparently her home situation wasn’t good, and she gave me up for adoption two days after I was born.”

Tenley tried—and failed—to ignore the warmth of Knox’s calloused fingertips as he trailed them lazily up her arm. “Anyway, I was adopted quickly because everyone loves an adorable baby, right? And rumor has it I was more adorable than most.”

His smile was a full one this time, and no less detrimental to her heart. “No way,” he scoffed. “Not *you*.”

“I know, right? I’m sure it’s hard for you to believe I wasn’t *always* the hideous bog witch you see before you.”

“I’ve seen worse.”

She was *definitely* going to ignore the touch of fondness in his rough, sleepy voice. “Sadly, my adorableness wasn’t enough for my adoptive parents, because once they got pregnant with a kid of their own, they abandoned me, too. Relinquished their parental rights and turned me over to social services.”

He frowned. “Assholes. Who the fuck does that to a kid they adopted?”

She shrugged one shoulder. “It’s fine. I’d rather be abandoned than forced to grow up in a family that didn’t really want me, you know? I’m sure they did what they thought was best.”

He looked skeptical. “Was it? For the best, I mean?”

“Not always. I bounced around the foster system for years, and some families were...not so great. Some were OK.”

He didn’t need to hear about the ones who only took foster kids in for the monthly check, then spent all the money they should’ve been using for food on drugs and alcohol. She especially didn’t see the need to tell him about the ones who were overly...*friendly*.

“But I was fine,” she assured him. She’d learned to steal the food and clothes she needed. She’d become a master at blocking her bedroom door at night and evading handsy foster fathers. “I took care of myself. I’ve been taking care of myself since I was, oh, I don’t know, six. It wasn’t until I was a teenager that I learned to *thrive*.”

She didn’t really want to tell him the rest of it. It felt wrong to give anyone this much of herself. It was weakness, and showing weakness would give him power over her.

But there was something about the soft look in his eyes as they moved over her face that seemed to be pulling the words from her even as she tried to

choke them back. “I met a guy when I was fifteen,” she said, her voice sounding pained even to her own ears. “He was... older. More experienced than me in every way. And he was the best grifter I’d ever seen. Taught me everything I know. Well, almost everything.”

Jordan was also a narcissist, a user, a manipulator, and a thirty-year-old who had no trouble twisting the emotions of an innocent girl into knots so that she’d do anything to please him—even steal, cheat, and lie. All of which she did and did well.

He had no way of knowing she’d get so good at it that when she finally realized what a scumbag he was, she’d take him for everything he had and disappear without a trace.

She supposed she *should* thank him for all he taught her. But she wouldn’t. If she ever saw that fucker again, she was more likely to knee him in the balls than thank him.

Now, she hadn’t said a single word about how Jordan treated her, or about all the lessons she’d had to learn the hard way. But somehow, Knox must’ve picked up on the subtext in her story, because the look he was giving her could only be described as pity.

And he could fuck all the way off with *that* shit.

“Don’t give me that look,” she hissed. “I’m doing *very* well for myself, ok? I have plenty of money, and I don’t owe anyone anything. I’m free in a way that you’re not, even though you grew up in a fucking mansion. So, don’t you *dare* pity me, Knox Wilder.”

And in a fit of righteous indignation, she flipped over so that she wasn’t looking into his stupid, beautiful, gut-wrenching eyes anymore and scooted as far away from him as she could.

If he knew what was good for him, he’d just roll over and go to sleep without saying another fucking word.

But, *no*. Not Knox. The bastard was *far* too diabolical for that.

Without a word, Knox slid his arm around her stomach, yanked her back against his chest, and rested his chin on top of her head. The motherfucker

was spooning her!

She tried to wriggle out of his grasp, but he just held her tighter. She was surrounded by his heat, his muscles, by...him. And it was too much. It was *all* too much. "Let me go."

"No."

"I mean it, Knox. I don't need—"

"Tenley?"

She let out a disgruntled sigh. "What?"

"Shut up and let me hold you."

"Fine," she snapped.

"Fine."

She fell into the deepest sleep she'd had in recent history in Knox's arms, lulled into dreamland by the steady, comforting thrum of his heartbeat behind her.

CHAPTER 14



*K*nox's dreams weren't usually very comforting.

Being in prison didn't really allow for the kind of deep, restful sleep that let his mind wander into a nice, comfy corner of Dreamland. On the rare occasions when he did sleep, he was generally awakened to the sounds of alarms, guards banging on cells with nightsticks, men groaning, yelling, shitting, fighting, and (sometimes) fucking each other. It was loud and disorienting and dehumanizing. Not a situation anyone would ever want to find themselves in.

Waking up this morning was an *entirely* different story, though.

He'd fallen asleep with Tenley in his arms, and he knew it was all kinds of pathetic to admit, but it had been the best night of his life. Getting this guarded, intensely independent, strong, diabolical woman to open up to him, to trust him with her inner pain, made him feel *worthy* for the first time in his life. No one had ever needed him for comfort before, and the fact that someone as strong and smart and fucking *beautiful* as her was the first was humbling.

There'd been nothing sexual about it, either. The whole night had been about nothing but the taking and giving of comfort.

Now, though...

Knox was lying on his back, one arm under Tenley. She sighed in her sleep and rolled into him, tucking her face into the spot where his neck and

shoulder met. He smiled when she slid her arm around his waist. This felt *right*. Her breasts pressed up against his chest, his fingertips trailing over the ridges of her spine, their legs tangled together under the sheets, the warm, clean scent of her skin and hair tickling his nose....it was perfect.

She was perfect.

His cock knew it, too. It went from zero to hard in about three seconds flat.

Knox let his fingers dip under the hem of her tank top. Jesus, was there anything in the world softer than this woman's skin?

Still asleep, she moaned and slid her knee over his thigh. His lips seemed to have a mind of their own as they kissed her forehead, then her temple, trailing down over her cheekbone, and finally—*finally!*—brushed over hers.

Her lips were warm and every bit as soft as they looked. He could kiss them for days. Months. Years.

Forever.

That's when she started sleepily rocking her hips against his leg, slow and steady.

Fuck.

If he died right now, he'd go happy.

But he wasn't ready to go just yet.

Knox shifted and rolled her until she was starfished across his chest, perfectly positioned to ride his cock. He couldn't hold back a groan when she straddled him fully and moaned in his ear.

It was probably his answering groan that pulled her out of her sleepy haze. She lifted her head off his shoulder, and when her eyes met his, he'd never seen so many emotions flit through her expression. Confusion. Vulnerability. Embarrassment. Lust.

He was about to lose her.

She was going to climb off him. He could feel it in the tensing of her muscles and the way she started to push up on her knees, easing the pressure between

his cock and her clit.

He couldn't let her go. Something told him she needed this as much as he did.

So, Knox framed her face with his hands and lifted his lips to hers.

The kiss started off soft. Tentative. Seeking. Almost like they were both terrified the other was going to stop. But then she opened her mouth with a needy, hungry sound, and when her tongue tangled with his, he was *lost*.

Whatever restraint he'd had was a distant memory as he let out a strangled, desperate moan of his own. He'd apparently been starving his entire life, and the only thing that could satisfy him now was the sweet taste of Tenley's mouth.

He slid one hand into her hair and gripped her hip with the other, urging her to start moving again. His breath stalled in his throat when she pulled her lips from his. If she left him now, he might actually die. Was that a thing? Did people ever die from wanting someone?

She didn't pull away, though. She started rocking against him with a sense of urgency that rivaled his own. Desperate to feel more of her skin against his, he reached down, grabbed the hem of her tank top, and yanked it over her head. And when she eased back down on him again, hardened nipples pressing into his chest, he let out a pained groan.

Tenley pressed her forehead into the crook of his neck and gasped when he grabbed her ass and pressed his cock harder against her. "Can you come like this?" he ground out, knowing full well he didn't have any condoms.

When she didn't answer immediately, he rolled his hips up against hers again and decided he'd take her loud moan as the answer to his question. She was still holding back, though. He could feel it. Losing control—*giving up* control—wasn't easy for her.

So, he wouldn't ask her to give up anything.

"Take what you need, baby," he whispered in her ear. "I've got you."

Tenley sat up and looked down at him, and the heat and trust in her eyes was almost enough to make *him* come. But he'd be damned if he was going to

come first. He gripped her hips tightly against his to increase the friction and pressure between them. And just to make *absolutely* sure she got there before he did, he reached between them and brushed his thumb over her clit through her soaked panties.

That was all it took. She broke with a sound somewhere between a groan and a wail, and the way her eyes locked on his through it all was enough to trigger his own orgasm.

Fucking hell. If dry humping felt this good, he could only imagine what it felt like to be inside her.

It'd certainly feel better to come in her than it did to come in his sweatpants like an overeager teenager. Jesus. What a sticky fucking mess.

They sat that way in silence for a moment, breathing hard, chests heaving (which was a *phenomenal* look on her) as their heart rates returned to normal.

The moment her brain started working again, he could see it in her face. Her brow furrowed as her eyes moved over the length of him. It wasn't exactly *regret* he saw in her expression...but it wasn't anything *good*, either. "Tenley," he began.

At the sound of his voice, she was off him like a starting pistol had just been fired. She snagged her tank top from the floor where he'd tossed it and held it up over her breasts as she sprinted for the bathroom. "Um...yeah...s-so..." she stammered. "...shower."

And then she was gone.

Well...shit.

CHAPTER 15



Sitting in a lawyer's office with the fake fiancé you'd dry humped to orgasm was awkward.

Tenley wasn't used to feeling awkward about, well, anything. Confidence was the key to pulling off any con, and she had it in abundance. But intimacy was another story entirely.

Honestly, she couldn't even remember the last time she'd had sex. It might've been that bartender in Phoenix years ago. It'd been meaningless, clinical, and totally forgettable.

That morning with Knox had been different.

She remembered *all* of it. The feel of his strong arms around her. The clean, soapy smell of his warm skin. The texture of his calloused fingertips as they trailed all over her body.

The hard length she'd ground her clit against until she'd drenched the front of his sweatpants with her come.

She'd fallen asleep dreaming of Knox and woken up in his arms, using the man like her own personal sex doll. It was all so *embarrassing*. And so...

Hot.

It'd been fucking hot, OK? The hottest almost-sex of her life. Better than any *actual* sex she'd ever had. He'd ruined her for all other men, and he hadn't even had to take his dick out of his pants to do it.

This was bad. Very, *very* bad. She needed to get away from him as soon as possible.

She'd already committed to helping him get his inheritance, and she was nothing if not true to her word, so she'd get the job done. But then, she was going to run away so far and so fast she'd leave cartoon skid marks in her wake.

It was the only way to get out of this mess with her heart intact.

Knox leaned over in his chair and whispered in her ear, "You realize we'll eventually have to talk about it, right?"

She shivered as his warm, minty breath feathered over her cheek. "Not everything needs to be *discussed*, you know."

He chuckled. "No one has ever accused me of being overly communicative before. But I think it's probably different now that we've gotten off together."

Tenley swallowed a groan. She *really* didn't need to be reminded of that. "Maybe," she admitted, grudgingly. "It was a one-off, though, OK? I was..." *Half asleep? Horny as fuck? So attracted to you that I humped you like a dog?* "...it was just a physical thing. There's really nothing to talk about."

There was a pause on his end, and it was long enough that she made the mistake of looking over at him. These chairs were way too close together, because if she wanted to lick his lower lip, all she'd have to do is stick her tongue out the tiniest bit.

And she had no idea why her mind went *there*. But that wasn't the point.

The *point* was that they were too close together, and his eyes were locked on her mouth in a way that made her think his mind was going to a place equally as dirty as hers. Maybe more.

"What if it wasn't just a one-off?" he asked.

She blinked a few times. Her self-control *really* wasn't in the right place for this conversation. "You want it to *not* be a one-off?"

His eyes lifted to hers. "It was good. But I think we can do better."

OhmyGodOhmyGodOhmyGod.

She was saved from answering (or from falling to her knees and blowing him) when his father's lawyer finally—*finally!*—made it into the office and took his seat at the giant mahogany desk in front of them.

Tenley took a deep breath and put her game face on. Well, she put Tenley Snow's game face on, at least. But the lawyer was *not* what she'd been expecting.

For some reason, when she imagined Patrick Wilder's lawyer, she thought he'd be some kind of Harvey Specter from *Suits*-looking dude. A real king of the world type with swagger and style to spare.

That did *not* describe Luther Wilson, Esq.

Luther looked like someone's grandpa. Put a silly cardigan on him instead of a rumpled old suit and he'd fit right in with the cast of a Hallmark Channel Christmas movie.

If she had to guess by his bright brown eyes, she'd say he was only thirty. But the depth of his laugh lines and rapidly receding hairline told her he was probably closer to sixty. He looked frazzled and busy, but smiled so warmly that Tenley couldn't help but like him on sight.

Luther offered Knox a quick handshake. "It's good to see you, son. I was... surprised to hear about your legal troubles."

Knox gave him a wry grin of his own. "So was I, frankly."

He nodded. "I never believed those accusations, you know. If I was a defense attorney, I would've defended you in a heartbeat."

"I appreciate that, sir."

"Just know that none of that nonsense will impact the release of your trust." Luther shifted his eyes to Tenley. "And who is this lovely young lady?"

Thankful for the opportunity to become someone else (because being Tenley Taylor was so damn confusing at the moment), she extended her hand. "I'm Tenley Snow, sir. Knox's fiancée. It's a pleasure to meet you."

His eyes widened. “Oh, my...well, that’s a surprise.”

“Tell me about it,” Knox mumbled.

Tenley shot him a side eye sharp enough to separate skin from bone before turning back to Luther. “When I see a good thing, I grab it. I wouldn’t let a little thing like a prison record stand between me and the love of my life.”

“Oh, she grabbed me, alright.”

This time she gave him her best full-on glare. The same glare had made more than one grown man quiver in the past. It made Knox grin at her like an idiot. “I could always set you free if you prefer,” she said through clenched teeth.

He ran the tip of his tongue over his bottom lip while his gaze was locked on her mouth like he was about to kiss the hell out of her. “No fucking thanks, baby. I’m good *right* here.”

Annnnddd, just like that, she was *right* back to wanting to dry hump him again.

Luther chuckled. “You two sound like you’ve been married for years.”

They made small talk for a few minutes. Tenley explained how she and Knox had met (the made-up story, not the real one), how they fell in love, their plans for a simple civil marriage ceremony. Knox nodded along and agreed when needed. But she did most of the truth bending on her own. As she’d discovered, Knox was a great many things, but a good liar wasn’t one of them.

When she was done spinning her yarn, Luther looked visibly relieved. “Well, this is all very encouraging to hear. As you know, your father was very hopeful that you would eventually find someone to settle down and start a family with, and it certainly seems like you’ve done that. I’m sure Patrick would be very proud if he were here now.”

Tenley glanced over at Knox in time to see the smile fade from his face *and* his eyes. “I wouldn’t be so sure of that,” he said quietly.

Impulsively, she grabbed his hand and gave his fingers a squeeze. “He wanted you to get your life together, and you have. He’d *definitely* be proud.”

The look of gratitude he gave her as he threaded his fingers through hers brought tears to her eyes. They were having a moment almost as intimate as their time together that morning had been. Almost.

Luther cleared his throat. “As you know, your father wanted more than anything for you to carry on the family name, but also, to carry on the family business. Along with the twenty million in your trust—”

Tenley nearly choked on her own spit. Twenty million! She’d never asked Knox for a number, had assumed it was sizeable based on the mansion, but shit...twenty million. Knox wasn’t just rich, he was *rich* rich. Like, buy his own island rich.

“—your father also made it clear that if you meet the terms he set forth, a board seat—as well as one additional board seat with the qualified appointee of your choice—is yours.”

“I understand,” Knox murmured.

“Wonderful. Are you ready to hear the terms your father put in place regarding the release of your trust?”

Knox took a deep breath. “Yes. Go ahead.”

There weren’t any surprises at first. A clean drug test. No legal proceedings or open charges against him. Since he’d already served his prison time and been released without parole, he’d thankfully squeaked by on that one.

His prior conviction for embezzlement from Wilder Days was a gray area that *could* be contested if anyone really wanted to, but Luther was inclined to overlook it altogether. And since Patrick had given Luther final authority over the trust’s release, it was unlikely that Knox’s past legal troubles would ever be an issue. Especially considering that Knox was heir to the throne, so to speak.

Then came the part about how he had to be married by his birthday. Which was...only days away. Not *engaged* by his birthday, but *married* by his birthday.

Gulp.

“So,” Luther droned on, “I was worried about that stipulation, but now, after meeting Tenley, I can see that we’re not going to have a problem at all. You can stop by city hall and get everything taken care of in a matter of a day. I assume you have a license?”

A license was the least of their worries. Knox turned to her with a raised brow and a what-the-hell-do-we-do-now look, and she stammered, “B-but we weren’t planning to get married *that* fast. Isn’t there any leeway in that clause?”

Luther’s brow furrowed. “I’m afraid not. To be honest, I argued against this clause the moment Patrick suggested it. I felt it was unfair and could lead Knox to make a...rash choice where marriage was involved. When I voiced that, Patrick insisted I not tell you the conditions of the trust until you were within forty-eight hours of your birthday. That’s why I’m thrilled to meet you, Tenley. I realize this is all very sudden, but I can tell you two kids are crazy about each other.”

Bet your ass they were crazy. But crazy about each other? Who the fuck knows?

Luther must’ve seen her consternation, because he added, “Of course, you wouldn’t *have* to get married at all. You could just let the trust fund go. If you fail to claim it, it would just go to Thadeus.”

She snorted. “Over my dead body.”

Knox nodded. “Damn fucking straight.”

The crafty little lawyer steepled his fingers under his chin like Mr. Burns and said, “Excellent. I do love a spring wedding.”

CHAPTER 16



“*I*’m getting married.”

“Congrats,” Ren said dryly. “Should I research venues? Book a caterer?”

“Oh, you have jokes! How wonderful. This is serious, Ren. The terms of Knox’s trust stipulate that he be married—not engaged—by his birthday, which is only a couple days away.”

She could practically hear his shrug. “So, cut and run if you don’t want to marry the guy.”

“We’re talking about twenty million dollars.”

He scoffed. “We both know we could find another way to get that money if we really wanted to. That’s not the problem. The problem is that you actually want to help this guy. Not because you want a cut of that money, but because you *like* him.”

He was right, of course. But calling her out like that was just rude. “How do I do this, Ren?”

“You mean marry a guy you actually like and not mean it?”

She swallowed hard. “Yeah.”

He sighed. “You don’t. Let me get you a fake license. You marry him using your fake last name. It won’t be real, but it will look real enough to get him

his money.”

“You can do that?”

“Are you new here?”

Tenley bit her lower lip. “You’re right. Sorry. I’m just...”

“Out of sorts because you’re falling for a mark?”

Her outraged gasp probably sucked all the air out of the gas station bathroom stall she was currently cowering in while Knox was outside, filling the Honda’s tank. “You take that back! I’m not falling for anyone.”

Ren snorted. “Whatever you say. You’re being careful, right?”

“Always,” she muttered distractedly. “I can do this. I can help him get his money, take my cut, then leave. Right? There’s no reason this has to get overly complicated.”

“Sure. Probably. As long as you don’t fuck him.”

Her stomach clenched as her mind flew back to the feel of Knox’s lips on hers as she dry fucked him that morning.

Well...hell.

CHAPTER 17



*K*nox was shocked at how easy it was to get married using totally false identification.

It had taken Tenley all of six hours to obtain a fake marriage license for the two of them. Apparently, Ren could forge anything. He must be good, too, because the clerk at the county courthouse had barely glanced at it before getting them in a room with a judge.

He knew the vows they spoke didn't mean anything. She hadn't even given her real name, and the license was a fake. They weren't *really* married.

But there had been a point there in the middle of the ceremony where he'd been promising to love and cherish her, and she'd been looking up at him with suspiciously moist eyes, where it hadn't *felt* fake. In fact, it'd felt... right.

She was shutting down on him, though. She'd spoken her own vows in a clear, confident, and completely clinical way. *Definitely* more Tenley Snow than Tenley Taylor.

He didn't want Tenley Snow. He wanted *his* Tenley. All day and all night he wanted her.

Honestly, he didn't even really give a shit about the trust anymore. He just didn't want Thadeus to get it. But if his step-brother was out of the picture, he'd happily give that trust up, get a regular job (if anyone would hire an ex-con), and build furniture on the side. A nice, quiet, modest life would be fine

with him.

As long as Tenley was with him.

He knew how crazy that sounded, too. He wasn't an idiot. She was a con artist and a thief, and clearly had significant trust and intimacy issues. Tenley was far from a good emotional bet. Hell, they were practically strangers.

He just didn't give a shit.

She was smart and beautiful and so damn funny (when she wasn't making jokes at his expense). And she had a good heart. He'd seen it. Given her past, she could've grown up cold-hearted and bitter. But she hadn't. She was still a compassionate woman—a dog lover, too—who was willing to go to great lengths to help him. There was no way her help was only about the money.

After all, no woman who had a forger and a fence in her arsenal—not to mention the money from a stolen bag of diamonds—was hurting for funds.

That was his theory, anyway. Now he just had to put it to the test.

“What is this place? It looks like a murder scene.”

Knox chuckled as they crossed the ratty, weed-encrusted parking lot outside the old abandoned warehouse. “No murders that I'm aware of. Just something I wanted you to see.”

“OK,” she grumbled. “But regardless of what I told Thadeus, vermin are not my thing, and my way of dealing with them is to flail, scream, and run away. In that order.”

“Noted.”

Knox unlocked the giant garage door on the front of the warehouse and shoved it open. A little poof of dust whooshed out when the fresh air hit the stale air inside the old building, but after that, the familiar scent of old machinery and wood shavings washed over him, as comforting as a warm blanket and a cup of hot cocoa on a wintery night.

Tenley wandered in behind him, eyes going wide as she took in what was, to him, the happiest place on earth.

The building was about half the length of a football field, completely open, with forty-foot ceilings, brick floors, and concrete walls thick enough to survive a bomb blast. It was mostly empty, except for the metal shelves where he stored his woodworking materials and hand tools.

And the pieces he'd made, of course. Those were lined up along the north wall, where they'd stay until he decided what to do with them.

Tenley wandered over to a hand-carved walnut rocker and ran her fingertips lightly over the spindles. "I don't remember seeing this in any of your mom's catalogs."

"Mom didn't make that. I did."

Her jaw dropped. "You? Did you make *all* of this?"

He felt something he hadn't felt in a long, long time as her eyes moved wonderingly over the finished and half-finished projects he'd worked on before his arrest. Pride. "All of it," he admitted.

"Oh, Knox," she murmured, gesturing to the chair. "May I?"

"Please."

Tenley sitting in the chair he made with his own two hands while she ran her hands over the armrests in a gentle caress was strangely erotic. But he did his best to put that out of his mind, because that train of thought was *not* going in the direction he wanted at the moment.

"This is amazing, Knox. I think it's even better than the stuff your mom made. You could sell these things and make a fortune. This is why the trust money is so important, right? You want to produce your own furniture line?"

He nodded. "That's the dream. It was a buyer's market years ago when I bought this place, so I got it for a song. But building furniture isn't typically a low overhead business. I might eventually be able to do it without the trust, but everything will be easier with it."

"I can't think of a better use for that money," she said quietly. "But why are you showing me all this?"

Knox took a deep breath. This was either going to go swimmingly, or be a

fiery train wreck. He knelt in front of her so she didn't have to tip her head back to look him in the eyes. "Because *this*—" he gestured to the dusty building and furniture around them, "—is me. I want you to know the real me, because I *really* want to know the real you, Tenley."

For a woman who had the absolute best poker face Knox had ever seen, the look she gave him was so open and shocked, he almost laughed. She blinked a few times in rapid succession before asking, "Why?" on a breathy sigh.

He couldn't hold back a laugh. "Because I like you. Is that so hard to believe?"

She glanced down and tucked her clasped hands between her knees. "Well, after the way we met and everything we've been through so far, I just assumed...I mean...why?"

Seeing the bravest woman he'd ever known in a moment of insecurity because of him was a gut punch he hadn't anticipated. Knox reached out and tipped her chin up with his index finger and held eye contact as he said, "Look, I know I haven't done anything in our time together to make you feel like you can trust me—and vice versa, if we're being honest—but I'd like for that to change. Because everything I *do* know about you, everything I've learned so far, makes me think you're worth knowing much, much better. You're smart and gorgeous and fucking *diabolical*, and I love that about you."

"You mean you want, like...a *relationship*?"

"Absolutely."

She swallowed hard. "I'm not sure I know how to do that."

He shrugged. "I don't have much experience myself. I've only had one real relationship, and to say it ended badly would be a huge understatement. But we can figure it out together. I feel like I can figure out anything when I'm with you."

"And this relationship would happen separately from our deal to get your trust back?"

Knox smiled at her. "I know your policy about not doing anyone any favors

for free. That 10% is yours, even if you shoot me down today. Hell, at this point, if it makes you feel safer with me, you can have the whole trust. I don't even care anymore. I can figure out how to make the business work without the trust. But my gut's telling me I can't make anything work without you."

Her eyes misted over as she muttered, "Well...shit."

And just like that, his heart and stomach started battling for a hiding spot in his throat. "Is that a yes or...?" He trailed off because the *or* in this instance was unthinkable.

Tenley sighed. "I was all prepared to let you down gently and tell you I'm not built for relationships. Then you went and ruined everything by being all sweet and sincere and saying all the right things. And now it looks like I'm about to start a relationship with a guy who kidnapped me."

His entire body unclenched and he nearly passed out from relief. "I think you actually kidnapped me," he reminded her.

She threw her hands up, exasperated. "Not that it matters now. You realize this is going to be messy, right?"

He nodded. "The messiest."

"Most people would call me a psycho, you know. You'll be in a relationship with a psycho."

He grinned. "The most adorable psycho I've ever seen in my life."

"And I'll probably screw up. Hell, you'll probably screw up, too."

"Undoubtedly."

Tenley bit her bottom lip. "We might end up hating each other when it's all over."

His gaze locked on that lip like a tractor beam. "Maybe."

"I might not ever—"

"Tenley?"

"Yeah?"

“Shut up.”

Knox closed the distance between them and kissed her like it was his damn job. Like he’d die if he didn’t kiss her. And she gave as good as she got.

Their first kiss had been gentle. Searching. Almost tentative.

This kiss was not *any* of those things.

This kiss was more like a brawl—an all-out battle for control, and neither of them was willing to submit. It was desperate, carnal, and hungry.

But somewhere in the back of his mind, he realized there was no way he could allow their first time to be on a dirty workshop floor. So, with great, great regret, Knox broke the kiss, leaned back, and cupped her precious face in his hands before resting his forehead against hers. “Want to go back to the pool house?”

Her shaky breath blew across his cheek, sending shivers down his spine. “Yes. But I warn you...I have no intention of letting you out of there with your virtue intact.”

He barked out a laugh. There she was. There was *his* Tenley. “I should hope the fuck not, baby.”

CHAPTER 18



Tenley's plans of ripping Knox's clothes off as soon as they set foot in the pool house were ruined in the grossest, most insidious way possible.

If she hadn't already been intent on keeping Knox's trust out of Thadeus's hands, she sure as shit wasn't going to let him have it now that he was cock blocking two people who hadn't gotten laid in years. She'd known he was a bully the first time she laid eyes on him, but this...this was downright cruel.

The smug asshole was blocking the door to the pool house, standing there in his expensive suit with his expensive haircut and *still* not looking half as good as Knox did in dusty tennis shoes and discount-store jeans while Layla barked her head off behind the sliding glass door.

Good grief. What kind of turd do you have to be to make Layla—sweet, squishy, adorable ball of love *Layla*—dislike you?

Thadeus. You had to be a turd like Thadeus, apparently.

Knox gave Layla a hand signal that had her huffing out one last frustrated *woof* at Thadeus before she sauntered away from the door. Then Knox slipped his arm around Tenley's shoulders and pulled her into him. "What do you want, Thadeus?"

He smiled his smug, fat-faced smile and gave Tenley a once-over that made her want to nut-punch him. Well, made her want to nut-punch him more than usual, she supposed. "I hear congratulations are in order."

Tenley gave him her fakest smile. “Oh, and you just had to run over here and offer them, didn’t you? Bless your heart.”

His beady eyes immediately hardened, telling her he was indeed aware that in the south, *bless your heart* was code for *fuck off and die, asshole*. “Indeed,” he said through clenched teeth. “But I can do better than that. I had my wife—I don’t think you’ve met Tiffany yet—throw together a little dinner party for tonight so that we can celebrate as a family.”

Knox snorted. “We’re not family.”

Thadeus put a hand over his heart. “Well, that’s just hurtful, Knox. Just because we didn’t always get along when we were younger doesn’t mean we’re not family. Mother always treated you like her own son.”

Tenley felt every muscle in Knox’s body go rigid. “I don’t know who you’re trying to fool with that lie, *Thad*, but I was there. And I remember what it felt like to have a real mother. So, whatever bullshit you’re peddling, you can do it elsewhere. We’re not falling for it.”

She had to give Knox credit for not punching the bastard in the face. And on the flip side, Thadeus’s ability to be so angry he was clenching his jaw and still keep his words sounding so calm and rational was impressive.

But this conversation wasn’t getting Knox into bed—or the shower or up against the wall or on the floor, or *anywhere*—any faster. So, she had to cut to the heart of the matter before this whole thing got even more tedious.

She put her hand on Knox’s stomach. “I think what Thadeus is trying to say is that he’d like a new start. To mend the fences he tore down over the years. Isn’t that right, Thadeus?”

Tenley’s jaw hurt just watching how hard Thadeus was clenching his. “Of course, Tenley.”

She smirked. “Then, of course, we’ll be thrilled to accept your gracious dinner invitation. Formal wear, I assume? Eight-ish?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful. Too-da-loo.” Then she dismissed him with a lazy flick of her

fingers.

He looked like he wanted to throttle her, which just made her want to giggle, but he offered them a stiff nod before slithering his way back to the main house like the cold-hearted reptile he was.

She cringed when Knox slammed the door behind them and stomped into the bedroom. “Why the hell did you agree to go to this thing? The last thing I want is to spend a fucking second with that asshole and whoever he’d invite to a formal dinner party.”

“I know. That’s exactly why we’re going. Look, we both know he’s not really extending any kind of olive branch. He’s running scared because he never expected you to show up and take back any of your birthright. He’s clearly having this party because he has some plan to divide and conquer. Something he thinks will get you—or me—out of here. And we’re not going to let him do that.”

He shoved both hands through his hair. “I’m not sure I can keep from beating the shit out of him if he tries anything with you.”

Her heart flipped over in her chest. “That’s sweet. And totally unnecessary. You think I can’t handle anything that smug asshole can throw at me?”

That earned her a tiny lip twitch of a smile. “I think you can handle anything *anyone* throws at you.”

“Damn straight. I need to see what he has planned, though. Whatever he does next will dictate our next move.”

Knox’s brow furrowed. “What next move? Once the trust is released, we’re free to go.”

“That’s fine. But if he keeps things mostly civil, I might not destroy his life before we go.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

She shrugged. “Wouldn’t be the first time I deployed the nuclear option.”

“I’m still not sure it’s worth it.”

Tenley couldn't help but walk her fingers up his chest playfully before saying, "Don't you worry your pretty little head about it. I'll take care of everything."

He frowned. "That's...terrifying."

"Your flattery will get you *everywhere*, sir."

"Everywhere?"

Oh, the things she was going to do to this man.

Tenley hooked her ankle behind his and shoved him back with all her strength. He grunted when he flopped back onto the bed and she crawled on top of him, then moaned when she caught his earlobe between her teeth. "We only have nine hours," she whispered. "Not nearly enough time for everything I want to do to you. But I think we can make it work."

She squealed when he grabbed her waist and neatly reversed their positions. "Hope you didn't have any plans of being able to walk into that dinner party tonight," he growled, then tugged the top two buttons of her blouse open. *With his teeth.*

Was this what it felt like to be out of control? To give yourself over, mind, body, and soul, to someone you might actually trust, even just a little bit?

It felt surprisingly...good.

And something told her that was just the beginning.

"Do your worst," she growled right back at him.

The smile he gave her could only be described as *Big Bad Wolf About to Devour Little Red Riding Hood*. She shivered.

"You might want to hang onto something," he said. "This might get rough."

She grabbed hold of his ass with both hands. "Ready when you are."

She *really* hoped that last part wasn't a lie...

CHAPTER 19



Jenley had never seen anyone shed clothes as fast as Knox.

In no more than 3.8 seconds, not only was he gloriously naked, but he'd rid her of her clothes, too. He didn't bother appreciating her expensive lingerie, and she couldn't bring herself to care. Those overpriced scraps of lace were standing between her and Knox, and for that alone, they deserved to be tossed to the floor and forgotten.

But given the fevered, feral look in his eyes as he stood at the foot of the bed and stared down at her naked body sprawled before him like the most willing sacrifice *ever*, she assumed nothing else would be happening quickly. He was going to take his time, probably until she was a begging, quivering, puddle of lust at his feet.

She appreciated how up (literally) to the task of fucking her into oblivion he was. Really, she did. But all this fanfare was totally unnecessary. She was ready. Hell, she'd been ready since day one.

And judging by the incredibly impressive erection he was sporting (and... wow...it was truly something to behold), she imagined he was equally ready to get this show on the road.

Saying all that, though, was more than she could manage in her current state of breathless anticipation. So, instead, she reached for him and whispered, "Don't make me wait."

The look in his stormy blue eyes was almost predatory. He looked like he

wanted to eat her alive.

And, ah, God. She *really* wanted to let him.

He dragged the tip of his tongue over his bottom lip and the entire lower half of her body clenched in response. “Baby, it’s been five years for me, and I’ve never seen anything as beautiful as you are right now. If I last three seconds once I get inside you, it’ll be a miracle. Which means I need to make you come at least three times before that happens.”

“Three?” she choked out.

“At least.”

Fuuuccckkk.

As phenomenal as all that sounded, she had every intention of arguing with him. But she didn’t get the chance.

Tenley couldn’t hold in a surprised squeal as he flopped down on the mattress, grabbed her, and yanked her over him so that she was straddling his face. “Ah!” This was dangerous. As wet as she was, he could drown down there. “I don’t think I should—”

He gripped her hips tighter when she tried to move off him. “You *definitely* should.” Reaching up, he teased her nipples—which were so hard they could cut glass—with a gentle but firm touch she felt all over her body.

All. Over. Her. Body.

“Christ,” he groaned, looking up at her. “This view’s gonna kill me.”

Agreed, she thought as she stared down at his perfect, fuckable lips closing around her clit. This view was nothing short of life altering.

She was going to be different after this. There was no way to come out of this kind of pleasure unchanged. She knew that to be true as he flicked his tongue over her clit again and again with the perfect amount of pressure.

After everything she’d done in her life, every dangerous situation she’d survived, this was going to be a defining moment. Leg-trembling, soul-shattering, throbbing, melting, muscle-clenching orgasms were going to ruin

her life as she knew it, and she was going to let it happen. Hell, she was going to *beg* for it.

But it was too good, too intense, too...intimate. Changing positions would help. He held her firm when she shifted to move off him, though. "No," he said in a dark, guttural growl. "You're not going anywhere. Hands on the headboard."

She resisted because, well, following orders had never been her jam. But she changed her mind *real* quick when he snapped, "Now!"

Tenley grabbed that headboard like her life depended on it. And it might. Especially when he made a growly, self-satisfied sound in the back of his throat and said, "That's my good girl."

Holy. Shit.

Who knew she had a praise kink? Certainly not her. Not until this very second. But the list of things she was now willing to do to earn his praise was long and *super* sketchy.

So she kept her hands clenched around that headboard while he tormented her clit with his tongue. Held onto it when he slid not one, but two thick fingers inside her to expertly stroke her G-spot. Held onto it while animalistic sounds and prayers and curses fell from her lips of their own volition. And kept holding on to it until her toes curled, her muscles locked up, and her back arched as she came harder than she'd ever come in her life with his name on her lips.

He didn't stop, though. "Again," he snarled, his fingers and tongue working harder, faster, until her eyes rolled back in her head.

"I can't!"

"You will."

That's when he caught her already overstimulated clit between his teeth and gave it a sharp nip. The mix of pleasure and pain had her coming again, even harder than the first time.

Only when she slid bonelessly off him to flop down on the mattress did he let

her catch her breath. Knox levered himself up next to her and brushed the back of his hand over his glistening lips. Then he sucked the moisture—*her* moisture—off his fingers as if he couldn't get enough of the taste of her.

“Two down,” he said, trailing a wet fingertip down her stomach. “At least one more to go.”

Yep. There was no way she was surviving this.

CHAPTER 20



If he died right now, he'd die happy. Of *that*, Knox was certain.

Making Tenley come apart in his arms, pleasing her, learning how to touch and tease her until she begged for more was...*everything*. It made him feel powerful. Like he could do anything. But now was not the time for a stupid *Titanic* I'm-king-of-the-world moment.

He needed more.

Tenley wasn't one to relinquish power without a fight, though. She shocked the hell out of him by crawling on him, then slithering down between his legs.

The fact that he didn't go off like a rocket the second she tipped her eyes up to his and wrapped her lush lips around his cock was a gift from the gods. He'd bet his life on the fact that there wasn't a sight in the world more erotic than what he was watching right now.

Knox slid his hands into her hair and watched her work the length of him with her sweet, hot mouth and deft fingers.

"I can't last like this," he choked out, watching her cheeks hollow as she sucked harder.

"You *will*."

Son of a bitch. She'd thrown his own words back at him!

What had he done—in this life or any other—to deserve this woman?

But that wasn't relevant right now. If he had any hope of following her order, he needed to get himself under control. He would *not* tighten his hold on her hair and fuck her throat. He would *not* come until he was balls-deep in her tight, wet...

Yeah, this wasn't working.

Knox tugged her hair until she let go. Her wet lips pulled into a pout. "Look," he said, "I swear I'll do everything in my power to make you come before I do, but I need to fuck you. Now."

"Oh, thank God."

With that, she rolled over, reached under the bed into her go-bag, and pulled out a condom. "There's more where this came from."

If that wasn't the hottest thing he'd ever heard in his life, he didn't know what was. "Then grab that headboard again. This is going to get rough."



Tenley scooted up on the bed, grabbed the headboard like the good girl she *really* wanted to be called again, and watched him roll the condom down his length.

Good Lord, he was stunning. All that taut, golden skin stretched over miles and miles of muscles, the fallen angel face, and yes, the huge, hard cock that was pointing right at her...it was nearly orgasm inducing all on its own. She'd be able to masturbate to this visual for *years* to come and never tire of it.

Then he glanced down the length of her body, and the look in his eyes nearly undid her. It was possessive, reverent, and carnal all at the same time. "You're so fucking beautiful," he growled, giving his cock a good, hard squeeze. "What did I do to deserve you?"

"Something really, *really* bad, I'm sure," she said. Then she spread her legs. Wide.

He smirked at her, still stroking his cock. “You ready to be bad with me, good girl?” he teased.

She tightened her hold on the headboard. “More than you know.”

This is what a gazelle feels like when a lion is stalking them, she thought as he slowly crawled on top of her, only stopping long enough to give her nipples the attention they were practically begging for.

When they were finally—finally!—nose to nose, he held his weight off her and asked, “Are you sure?”

Oh, God. Just when she thought he couldn’t get sexier, here he was, double checking for consent. “I’ll kill you if you stop. I’ve taken years of martial arts, and I can do it, too. I need you to fuck me *now*. Am I making myself clear?”

The rough groan that escaped him made her shiver. Then she let out a shocked gasp/moan combo as he slid into her with one hard, smooth thrust. “Crystal,” he said.

He caught her bottom lip between his teeth and bit down. The quick sting of pain, coupled with the pressure his pelvis was putting on her clit and the fact that she was full of the biggest, hardest cock she’d ever ridden in her life, startled a surprise orgasm out of her. Just a tiny one, but it still left her heart pounding and her entire body trembling around him.

He grinned down at her. “Already?”

The wordless little happy noise she made would have to serve as her answer, because actual words escaped her.

Knox kissed her—hard, needy, and just shy of brutal. “Good.”

That’s when he grabbed her hips in a bruising grip and started moving. He angled her so the base of his cock hit her clit with every thrust. She arched her breasts into his chest, still clinging to the headboard. “Yes,” she hissed. “More.”

The muscles in his shoulders flexed as he tried to keep his movements controlled—in and out, in and out—but he was quickly losing it. She flexed

her inner muscles until he let out a pained groan, and that was all it took to break him.

Knox started pounding into her so hard and fast that all she could do was hold on to that headboard for dear life while her breasts nearly smacked her in the face with the force of their bouncing.

“Don’t stop!” she cried. “Fuck, that’s so good. Don’t ever stop!”

He let out a string of curses and went harder. But he was apparently still unwilling to come before she did, because that’s when he did two completely diabolical things at once. First, he bent his head down and caught one of her bouncing nipples between his teeth and bit down. Hard. Then, he licked his thumb, reached between their straining bodies, and pressed firmly on her clit.

That was the end for her. She came until her vision blurred. She might’ve even passed out for a second. All she knew was that she screamed so long and so loud she probably wouldn’t be able to talk the next day.

But Knox wasn’t done yet. Even though his control was shot, he pulled out, flipped her over, moved her hands back to the headboard, and slammed back into her from behind. Again and again and again he pounded into her. She had no idea why he wasn’t coming yet. There was nothing he could do at this point to make *her* come again. He might as well go ahead and...

Knox grabbed a handful of her hair and gave it a firm tug. “Come again,” he hissed in her ear.

She tried to shake her head and find the words to tell him that she wasn’t sure she could *ever* come again, not after all that. The words weren’t there, though.

He released her hair and slid a hand around her throat. All it took was one hand flex, just a little tightening, for her to prove herself wrong. Again.

He rode her through every wave of her orgasm until he buried his head in her hair and came with a possessive growl that would live in her fantasies forever. On another day, it might’ve even triggered another orgasm for her. But not today. Today, she was too dehydrated. And probably paralyzed from the vagina down.

Tenley dropped face first into the comforter. Rather than collapse on top of her, Knox rolled off her, disposed of the condom, then flopped down beside her.

“Holy shit,” she muttered into the mattress. “That was fucking *hot*.”

He rolled toward her and lazily trailed his fingertips over the ridges of her spine. “*You’re* fucking hot.”

She lifted her head and blew a sweaty hank of hair off her forehead. “I’ve always been fucking hot, but I’ve never come like that in my life. I think that was all you. Or maybe we’re just unspeakably hot *together*.”

His eyes darkened a split second before he grabbed her and rolled her up so that she straddled him. Surely he wasn’t ready to...

His thumb found her clit unerringly. “Let’s try it again. Maybe we just got lucky that first time.”

She choked out a laugh. “You mean those first *five* times?”

His grin was pure evil. “Did I ever tell you that six is my lucky number?”

Well...who was she to mess with someone’s lucky number?

CHAPTER 21



When they were both too physically drained to move, Knox laid flat on his back in the bed with Tenley sprawled across his chest.

This, he thought, was probably the closest he'd ever get to heaven.

They'd been talking nonstop for the past two hours, and he'd been enjoying the hell out of it.

He now knew little things about Tenley he imagined few others did. For example, she refused to watch any network television shows until they'd been renewed for at least four seasons because she'd been let down by too many one-season wonders in the past. She was particularly bitter about the cancellation of *Pitch*.

He also knew she had an irrational hatred of Brad Pitt because he reminded her of her junior prom date, a guy who'd apparently not taken her refusal to give him a second date well and had told the entire football team she'd blown him in his car after the dance. Somehow, after that, every girl in school had received a copy of a very real looking (but very fake) report from a free clinic with the positive results of the douchebag's herpes test. He'd apparently spent his senior year dateless and friendless.

He told her about his one long-term relationship and how she'd dumped him during his trial. Tenley had been appropriately outraged on his behalf, but in all honesty, he didn't blame Rebecca for leaving him. What young woman would want to tie herself to a prison-bound embezzler? Loyalty only went so far. Especially since he now realized his feelings for her had been fairly

superficial, and hers probably hadn't been any deeper.

He had Tenley to thank for that knowledge. He'd only known her for a few days and he already had deeper feelings for her than he'd ever had for Rebecca.

But that was definitely a conversation for another day. He'd only just convinced Tenley to extend their relationship beyond a con. If he pushed her any harder, he might scare her off forever.

So, for now, he'd settle for great conversation, mind blowing sex, and the best company he'd ever had.

Tenley shifted in his arms so that she could look up at him. "Should we talk about tonight?"

He shrugged and kissed her forehead. "It'll be a stuffy dinner with stuffy assholes who don't give a shit about anyone but themselves. What's there to talk about?"

She patted his cheek gently and smirked at him. "Oh, you sweet summer child. Thadeus is clearly upset that you met the conditions of your father's will. This dinner is meant to trip you up somehow. I guarantee it. We need a plan."

"I'm getting the trust, and I'm leaving. What could he possibly trip me up on? And honestly, he has plenty of money. Why would he care about one little trust?"

"There's nothing little about twenty million dollars. You heard what Natty said about his gambling, his boats, and his car collection, too. He doesn't live on the cheap. He might need that money. But honestly, it might not even have anything to do with the trust. He might be more concerned about you taking that board seat."

Knox ran his fingertips lazily down her spine, reveling in the shiver his touch caused. She was so damn responsive. "I don't give a shit about the board."

An adorable little furrow formed between her brows. "He'd never believe that, though. Because that company is the star he hitched his wagon to. He'd never believe that someone would walk away from it. So, he'll probably be

willing to do anything to make *you* walk away. Or have you dragged away in handcuffs again.”

Now *that* thought caused a pit in his stomach. “You think he’d try to set me up again?”

“In a heartbeat. Without hesitation.”

“Well...shit.”

“Welcome to the game, Knox.”

Ugh. “So...I guess we have to talk about tonight, huh?”

Her smirk blossomed into a grin that neatly derailed his train of thought again. “This is what I’m saying.”

“Ok. Fine.”

And with that, he flipped her off him, yanked her up on her hands and knees, and slid into her from behind. Her breathy moan did *great* things for his ego. He leaned down and caught her earlobe between his teeth before growling, “We’ll talk about it. Later.”

“Later,” she agreed eagerly. “Much later.”

CHAPTER 22



*K*nox tugged at his tie like it was actively trying to choke him. “I say we bail and go back to bed.”

Tenley rang the doorbell at the main house and smirked at him. “You’ve been saying that since we got *out* of bed.”

He gave her the male equivalent of a pout and gestured to her body. “Of course, I have. Look at you. You look way too good for these assholes.”

It was during that last second sentence that Thadeus’s maid, Melanie, opened the door. Stone-faced, she ushered them in. Tenley offered the woman a little smile. “Sorry. He didn’t mean to badmouth your boss.”

“The hell I didn’t,” Knox grumbled.

Tenley sighed, but Melanie didn’t seem phased in the least. “Oh, no, he’s right,” she said. “You definitely look too good for these assholes.” Then she eyed Knox up and down. “So do you, frankly.”

Knox gave her a palms-up gesture. “Right? *Thank* you.”

She nodded. “Don’t eat the lobster bisque. The chef...did something to it.”

Tenley’s eyes widened. “Did he spit in it?”

The look on the maid’s face made Tenley’s stomach flip over. Melanie shrugged. “*Spit*. Sure. We’ll go with that.”

And with that, she ushered them through the foyer and disappeared without a

trace.

“I know it’s not customary to tip maids who open doors for you in fancy mansions, but shit...I feel like we owe her some cash,” Tenley said.

“I can make that happen. But seriously, have I told you how amazing you look tonight?”

She slipped her arm through his. “You have. But I wouldn’t mind hearing it again.”

Her black, sequin-covered cocktail dress sparkled with every step she took, making her feel like a night sky full of twinkling stars. It had a neckline that dipped low enough to be interesting, but not low enough to be considered indecent by any stretch of the imagination. The skirt hit her mid-thigh and flared out from the waist. Sleeveless and backless, the only thing holding the bodice in place were two thin straps and the fact that she didn’t plan on taking any deep breaths all night.

And the best part? That was easy. It was the pockets she’d had sewn in under the skirt. She could easily lift ten wallets and a few handfuls of jewelry, stash them in her skirt, and no one would be the wiser. It was her favorite article of clothing in the world, and she never left home without it.

He leaned down and kissed her forehead. “You’re stunning.”

“So are you. Tom Ford should hire you to model for them.”

Whatever he was going to say was interrupted—rudely—by Thadeus. Again.

“You made it,” the smug jerk said, giving them a slow clap. “I’m so glad. You’re not going to believe who’s here.” He waved them on into the formal living room where several exquisitely dressed people chatted, looking bored.

“Everyone,” he went on, “Knox is here. And this is his...*lovely* new bride, Tenley.”

A chorus of polite (and completely insincere) greetings echoed around the room before they all awkwardly went back to their little conversation cliques.

“Well, that was lackluster,” Tenley muttered when Thadeus wandered off to get himself a bourbon.

Knox chuckled. “It was warmer than I expected, honestly. See that guy in the gray pinstripe suit?”

Tenley followed his eyes and saw a fifty-ish man with a full head of impeccably styled salt-and-pepper hair and gold-framed glasses. “Yeah?”

“He’s on the board at Wilder Days. Name’s Waylin Foster. I went to school with his daughter. She was very...friendly. Let’s just say when he found us under the bleachers at the homecoming game, he wasn’t exactly happy to see her hand down my pants.”

Tenley had to turn her snort into a delicate cough. “Yeah, I imagine that didn’t endear you to him at all. What about the kid he’s talking to?”

Knox’s eyes narrowed slightly on the twenty-ish blonde who looked like she’d been shrink wrapped into her pink Versace minidress. “Pretty sure that’s Thadeus’s wife, Tiffany.”

Her lip curled into an involuntary snarl. “Gross! He’s old enough to be her grandfather.”

“If she’s lucky, he’ll die in a boating accident or something and she’ll get all his money. Otherwise, he’ll divorce her when someone new and shiny comes along and leave her with nothing. That’s what he did to his other five wives.”

Tenley hoped Tiffany was getting everything she wanted out of Thadeus now. The thought of the woman being blindsided by what was coming made her...sad. Which kind of pissed her off. One good dicking-down (OK, seven) and suddenly she had *empathy* for some trophy wife she’d never met.

Old Tenley would’ve befriended the woman and used her to skim money off Thadeus until his bank account was bled dry. Meanwhile, New Tenley was standing here with a rosy, just-fucked glow about her, wondering how she could *help* this stranger. Out of the kindness of her heart! A heart she’d only *just* realized she had.

These were strange, dark days she was living in.

But thankfully, she didn’t have too long to think about it. Because that’s when Thadeus’s intentions for this little get together strolled in wearing a Gucci sheath and glittery Alexander McQueen heels.

There weren't too many women who could make Tenley feel short and frumpy. And this woman didn't either...but it was a close call.

She looked like a Barbie come to life. Six feet tall in her heels, platinum blonde, so slim she probably snubbed every carb that came her way, with a pair of breasts so perfect they could only be silicone...yep. This woman was *definitely* here to make Tenley uncomfortable.

Or to get her to leave Knox, ruining his "settled down" appearance.

That's when it clicked in her brain. This was Knox's ex. The one he'd thought he was in love with.

The one who'd abandoned him when he went to prison for a crime he didn't commit.

That's when Tenley's confidence returned in *full* force. It didn't matter how tall and beautiful she was, or how fabulous her shoes were.

This bitch was no match for her.

So, she leaned into Knox's side and watched the woman glide up to *her* husband like she had the right to even breathe his air.

The *audacity* was astounding.

She didn't even bother reminding herself that Knox wasn't *really* her husband. That totally wasn't the point.

Knox's arm tightened around her as the Charlize Theron-clone stopped in front of them. "Knox," she let out on a breathy whisper.

"Rebecca," he said, sounding a little tense. "Good to see you."

Tenley swallowed a snort. His tone made it abundantly clear that it was *not* good to see *Rebecca*. But Rebecca was clueless as she stared up at Knox like a starving woman eyeing a lobster dinner.

Yeah, between Little Miss Awestruck here and Mr. Grumpy Pants, this slice of awkward pie would last *forever*. So Tenley stuck out her hand and offered Rebecca her brightest smile. "Nice to meet you, Reva. I'm Tenley. Knox's *wife*."

Rebecca shifted her gaze down as if she'd only just realized Tenley was even standing there, glued to Knox's side. After blinking her big blue doe eyes a few times, she took Tenley's hand and said, "It's *Rebecca*."

Tenley tightened her hand around Rebecca's until she felt the delicate bones shift. "Oh, I'm so sorry, honey. I'm just awful with names. Are you an *old* friend of Knox's?"

She wasn't sure what horrified the woman more—her surprisingly strong Kung Fu grip, or her emphasis on the word *old*. Either way, Tenley had to resist purring like a satisfied kitten at the way Rebecca's features twisted. "We dated through college *and* after graduation," she said defensively.

Tenley glanced up at Knox and saw a muscle tic in his jaw. "Oh, is *this* who broke up with you after you were sentenced?" she asked sweetly, knowing the answer all too well.

"Before actually," he confirmed. "I don't believe you were at the sentencing, were you, Rebecca?"

Tears rose to her eyes and if Tenley had one, she would've handed the girl an Oscar. That's how convincing her performance was. "Oh, Knox," she said on a pained whisper. "I know you must hate me. I made a mistake by not being there for you. I never believed you were guilty, though. Not for a minute. And I've missed you so much. Do you think there's any chance we could be...friends again?"

It all sounded sincere. To an untrained ear, that is. But Tenley had worked with some of the best con artists in the world, and what this woman was selling was an illusion. She didn't really care about Knox. If he was still in prison, he wouldn't have crossed her mind at all. But because he was here, looking fine as hell in Tom Ford, about to receive a giant check from his trust, now Miss Rebecca was sweet and regretful.

Yeah, not gonna happen, sister.

Tenley stepped out of Knox's arms and laid a hand on Rebecca's forearm. "Look, I'm going to be straight with you, Roxanne."

"It's Rebecca," she snarled.

“Whatever. The thing is, Knox is a nice person. So, I’m 100% certain he forgives you for abandoning him when he had no one else on his side.” She turned to Knox. “Am I right?”

He gave a half-hearted shrug. “Sure. It was a long time ago.”

“Great,” Tenley said, then turned back to Rebecca with a crazy-eyed smile. “There you go. All forgiven. But as far as you and *my husband* being friends goes? That’s not going to happen. He’s a nice person, but, honey...I gotta tell you. I’m a stone-cold *bitch*. And if, after we’ve had this talk, I see you eye-fuck him again, I’m going to snatch that pretty blonde weave off your head by the roots and cram it down your throat. We clear?”

Rebecca’s skin went ashen and her eyes widened comically. “I...I...w-well...”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Tenley made a shooping motion with her hand. “Off you go now, pumpkin. You have a good night, and it was *lovely* to meet you.”

Rebecca took off like Usain Bolt off the line. It was actually impressive that she could move that fast in designer heels. Tenley knew from experience that Alexander McQueen shoes had zero tread. The fact that the woman didn’t face-plant on the imported marble was a testament to her balance. Maybe she’d done ballet as a kid or something.

But again, that wasn’t the point.

Tenley glanced up at Knox, who was looking down at her with an expression she couldn’t read. She sighed. “You’re mad at me, aren’t you? I was rude.”

He cocked his head to one side. “*Mad* isn’t the word I’d use. And yes, you were.”

She swallowed a pout. “I didn’t like the way she was looking at you.”

“How was she looking at me?”

“Like you were a tasty *crème brûlée* she wanted to slurp up.”

His lip twitched. “You think?”

“If there’s anything I know it’s how to spot a phony bitch, and I guarantee you, that bitch is phony. And while she definitely wouldn’t mind a ride for old time’s sake, she is *not* to be trusted long-term. So, sorry, I guess, for threatening her.” But not really.

That annoying dimple—the one that only popped up when he was teasing her—made an appearance. “You were *jealous*.”

Of fucking course, she was!

Tenley scoffed. “No. I mean...no. Never. I don’t get jealous.”

He nodded, then leaned down and whispered in her ear, “You’re fucking *gorgeous* when you’re jealous.”

And that was...not the reaction she’d expected. If he wasn’t mad at her for being rude, maybe he wouldn’t be mad that she’d stolen the bitch’s diamond bracelet during their handshake, either.

But that was an admission for another time.

She cleared her throat. “Well, OK then. Let’s get this shit over with so you can take me back to the pool house and show me just how fucking gorgeous you think I am.”

There was a distinct twinkle in his eye as he dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Sounds perfect, wife.”

It really did, too. In fact, it was getting scary how perfect the word *wife* was starting to sound to her.

CHAPTER 23



*K*nox would rather have a colonoscopy, sans anesthesia, in the middle of a tax audit, while being waterboarded, than be sitting at *this* dinner with *these* people.

If Thadeus's goal was to convince him to get the hell out of town as soon as dessert was served, he couldn't have done a better job of it. The dining room was full of assholes, and their combined income was probably enough to fund a giant war or feed a couple of small countries for a month.

What a fucking waste of time, food, and emotional energy this was.

Except for Tenley, of course. She looked like she was genuinely having fun talking to these fools. They probably assumed she was enjoying their company. Only Knox knew she thought they were as insufferable as he did. The truth was that Tenley was looking at a room full of easy marks, and she had dollar signs in her eyes. This room was her Christmas, birthday day, and 4th of July all rolled up into one glorious money-making opportunity.

And he wasn't sure, but he thought he'd seen her lift at least three wallets and stow them away in her skirt.

Knox didn't blame her. He couldn't imagine a more deserving group of assholes. Who was he to deny her a little fun?

The dining table was comically large. He'd seen apartments with less square footage, which meant that if you were sitting on one of the long ends of the rectangle and wanted to talk to either person sitting at each short end, you had

to yell.

Not that he wanted to talk to either of the fuckwads at the ends of the table.

Thadeus sat at one end, and John Richter, head of the board at Wilder Days, sat at the other.

Richter was probably only sixty years old, but looked much older thanks to his yellowish blond combover and nicotine addiction. He was at least a foot shorter than Knox and outweighed him by probably eighty pounds. Most of that weight was in his belly, which was currently spilling over the table a little as he ate. The guy was crooked as the day was long, and Knox had never understood why his father had let this man anywhere near his business.

Next to Richter was his wife, Vanessa. She was a good decade younger than her husband. She was either bored, stoned, or so Botoxed she could no longer move the muscles in her face, because as far as Knox knew, she hadn't said a word or made a single expression all night. She was pretty, though, and knowing Richter, that was all she had to be in his presence. Smart, capable women probably set him on edge.

Kay Marks sat next to Vanessa. She was the kind of woman Richter probably had nightmares about. Easily the smartest and most well-educated businesswoman in the room, Kay had been his mother's best friend. He imagined it killed her to be around assholes like Richter and Thadeus all the time.

The best news for Kay was that she was a vegetarian, so she was spared the lobster's, um, *special* seasoning.

Tenley and Knox got stuck sitting between Kay and Thadeus while Rebecca, Waylin, and Tiffany grabbed their seats on the opposite side of the table.

He'd been doing his best to avoid the lingering looks Rebecca was shooting his way. She was obviously working up to saying something to him when Tenley wasn't around, and he was *not* looking forward to it. Talk about awkward. He was almost embarrassed for her.

Almost.

John pulled the napkin he'd tucked into his dress shirt out and tossed it down

beside his plate. The buttons over his gut looked like they were fighting for their life as he leaned back in his chair and let out an obscene groan. “Thadeus, my boy, you sure do know how to treat your guests. That lobster bisque was *phenomenal*.”

Next to him, Tenley disguised an amused snort with a delicate cough, and he hid his own smile behind a sip of wine. No one seemed to have noticed that neither of them had touched their food. Or, more likely, no one cared, which was fine with Knox. At least they hadn’t eaten that tainted bisque.

Thadeus was oblivious to their amusement as he preened and took credit for things he’d had absolutely nothing to do with. Pretty typical Thadeus behavior as far as Knox was concerned.

As if his thoughts had summoned the bastard’s attention, Thadeus turned to Knox as he raised his glass and tapped his knife against it. “I want to propose a toast to my stepbrother, Knox.”

The ick that crept over him at being called Thadeus’s stepbrother was instant and insidious. Knox fought off a cold shiver.

“Now, as I’m sure you all know, Knox isn’t one to stay in one place for long,” Thadeus droned on in a condescending tone he’d probably trademarked as his very own.

Other than that stint in prison, right, stepbrother dearest?

“And before he leaves for his next adventure with his *lovely* new friend, I wanted to make sure I had the opportunity to send him off in style. So, let’s all raise a glass to Knox, and wish him the best in...*whatever* is to come for him.”

Waylin was super quick to raise his glass, as was Rebecca. Only Kay had the decency to look a little confused, since he hadn’t said a single word about leaving town after dinner.

Funny how he’d wanted to escape this room and this town with a passion all night, and now that Thadeus was practically shoving him out the door, he was ready to dig in his heels and be a total mule about it.

Thadeus had never understood that about him. Here he was, putting on this

whole show to prove to him that he didn't belong here with these people, and it was having the exact opposite of the intended impact. What a narcissistic idiot.

Next to him, Tenley must've had the same feeling, because she raised her glass, but laid her other hand on Knox's shoulder and said, "I'm always ready to toast my *husband*, but surely you'll let us finish our dinner before you run us out of town on a rail, now won't you, *Thad*?"

Her tone was so light and teasing that to a casual observer, it sounded like she was joking. But Knox knew her well enough to pick up the edge in her voice. She'd just called Thadeus out at his own dinner table, and it was *glorious*.

Waylin cleared his throat nervously and lowered his glass. Kay chuckled and muttered, "Hear, hear."

Thadeus's pasty complexion took on a decidedly ruddy glow as he clenched his jaw and said, "Of course you should feel free to stay as long as you like, Knox. This is your hometown, after all."

"Technically, it's his *home*, too," Tenley added helpfully. "According to Luther, of course, and the fine print in his father's will. If Knox sticks around and takes that board seat, the house is his." Then she let out a tinkling laugh and said, "But of course, *you* should feel free to stay as long as *you* like, Thad."

Thadeus looked like he might have a stroke. Tiffany looked like she was considering packing up and leaving that night. Kay was looking at Tenley like she was the most fascinating creature in the world. And Waylin looked... confused.

If Knox wasn't already in love with Tenley, this moment had tipped him over to the dark side.

"I adore you," he whispered to Tenley so quietly only she could hear him.

She patted his shoulder. "Of course you do," she whispered back.

CHAPTER 24



*A*fter dinner, everyone retired to the parlor, drinks in hand, and promptly split up into little conversation cliques.

John and Thadeus were sitting by the fireplace, smoking foul cigars that probably cost more than Tenley's first car and drinking whiskey like the stereotypical mediocre white men they were. Waylin and Rebecca were listening to Tiffany blather on about how the nail technician at her salon had screwed up her French manicure. Vanessa had gone home to relieve the babysitter, and Knox was brooding in the corner, staring at his phone like it held the secrets of the universe.

Tenley had made the rounds and had a good read on almost everyone there. First of all, John and Thadeus were definitely plotting something business-related, and they were super motivated to get Knox out of town. Waylin and Tiffany were 100% fucking. In fact, they'd both disappeared for about 10 minutes before dinner and when they came back, he reeked of her perfume. The fact that Thadeus hadn't noticed was either really funny or really sad. Tenley wasn't sure which.

She knew for a fact that Knox was ignoring everyone around him by playing *Plants vs. Zombies* on his new phone. She couldn't really blame him for that.

Meanwhile, Rebecca was just a lovestruck idiot. She'd spent dinner staring at Knox with sad puppy-dog eyes. If he'd offered her a single scrap of attention or encouragement, she would've offered to blow him under the table. Of *that*, Tenley was sure. The woman would probably cry herself to sleep that night

because she'd lost her last opportunity with him.

Too bad, honey. You had your chance. He's mine now.

That thought gave her pause. She'd agreed to give this relationship thing a chance, but when had she started to think so possessively about Knox? And this was *after* she'd practically gone feral on Rebecca when she was apologizing to Knox. That had been completely out of character for her, especially when she was in the middle of a con.

Knox (and all the sex, if she was being honest) had her...discombobulated.

The one thing they hadn't discussed in detail was what they were going to do when this whole thing was over. Once Knox had his money...what then? Specifically, what was going to happen with their new *relationship* when he didn't need her anymore?

That's when he looked up from his game and caught her gaze. The smile he gave her simultaneously melted her heart, her panties, and every doubt lingering in her mind.

Everything was going to be fine.

As long as *she* didn't fuck it up.

"It does my heart good to see him so happy."

Tenley turned and found Kay Marks at her side, smiling fondly at Knox, who'd gone back to playing his game, ignoring the other guests. "Mine too," she admitted, not even a little bit surprised that she meant it so wholeheartedly.

Kay was a 50-something, stunning Black woman who looked like the only thing holding her back from a thriving career as a runway model was that she was only five foot five inches tall. Tenley got good vibes from her immediately, which made her a rarity at this gathering.

She glanced back at Tenley over the tops of her stylish, red-framed glasses. "He was always a good kid. A little lost, but it was clear to anyone paying attention that he had a heart of gold. I never believed the charges against him for a minute. In fact, I wrote a character reference letter to the judge before

his sentencing, asking for lighter punishment.”

Note to self: make sure Kay isn't collateral damage when you destroy Thadeus.

“That’s really good to hear,” Tenley said. “I’m glad he wasn’t as alone as he *thought* he was at that time.”

Kay’s face screwed up into a disgusted scowl. “How else could he feel with Thadeus and Rebecca around? With *friends* like those, who needs enemies?”

The woman said their names in the same tone most people reserved for talk of festering sores and herpes. It made Tenley like her even more. “I take it your opinion of Thadeus and Rebecca is aligned with mine?”

“If you think that Thadeus is a less than mediocre white man whose only talent is lucking into fortuitous situations and Rebecca is a simple-minded, faithless, gold digger who would starve if she was less attractive, then...yes. I’d say our opinions are aligned.”

Tenley blinked at her. “That was...blunt.”

She smiled ruefully. “I’m not here to win Miss Congeniality.”

“So, why are you here?”

“Knox’s mother, Sara Rose, was my best friend. I could’ve left when she died, and honestly, I considered it because her husband was a bit of a tool. But this company was Sara Rose’s dream, and I never had the heart to let these idiots ruin it.”

Interesting. Tenley cocked her head to one side. “I feel like there’s a reason you’re telling *me* this.”

Her gaze was so direct it almost made Tenley uncomfortable. Nothing good ever came from anyone studying her that thoughtfully.

“Look,” Kay began, “it takes a strong, smart woman to know one. And let’s face it, no offense to Knox, but no one here is smarter than the two of us. This is a greedy, self-serving group of people, and they’ve done wrong by this company. You and Knox are in a position to change that. I want to help you.”

Tenley returned her gaze with a fierce one of her own. “You’ve been on the board the whole time. If you want things to change, why haven’t *you* done something about it?”

She shrugged delicately. “I don’t have the votes. Since Patrick died and left his seat open for Knox, the board is only the three of us, and John and Thadeus are always on the same page, and Waylin does whatever John wants because he lacks the capacity to think for himself. I’m always a voice of dissent, and they’d love to get rid of me, but they don’t have cause. They’re also afraid I’ll sue if they try to get rid of me.” Kay smirked. “And I will.”

Tenley nodded. “So, what do you think *I* should do about it?”

“I can’t tell you *exactly* what to do.” Kay glanced to where John and Thadeus were still chatting, then back at Tenley. “When an NDA has been signed, there’s not much anyone can tell you outright. But if an...*interested* party were to do a little digging, they could find out if something big was in the works. Something that would change the entire direction of a company forever.”

Well. That was ominous as fuck, wasn’t it?

Tenley took a sip of her wine and wondered if Ren knew anything about corporate power struggles and bullshit like that. She sure hoped so, because this was *way* outside her realm of expertise. “Hmmm,” she said. “I suppose I could probably find an *interested party* if I tried hard enough.”

Kaylen patted her arm and offered her a motherly wink. “I knew I was right about you.”

“Right about *me*?”

“I knew Knox would need the support of someone with genuine love for him if he had any hope of protecting his mom’s dream. I took one look at you—and the way you look at him—and immediately knew how much you love him.”

It took every bit of acting skill she had not to flinch at the word *love*. In her experience, love led to pain and not much else. She’d sworn she’d never go down that road again.

Did she...*love* Knox?

She decided to table those thoughts for the moment. After all, they were *terrifying*, and she had a trio of assholes to thwart and a company to save.

Just a typical day in the life of Tenley Taylor, she supposed.



Knox came out of the bathroom to find Rebecca leaning against the wall in the hallway, waiting on him.

Just. Fucking. Great.

He gave her a nod of acknowledgment and tried to walk past, but she wasn't having it. She stepped into his path and blocked his only escape route. Damn it.

Her lower lip trembled as she stared up at him. That look used to bring him to his knees. There was a time when he would've done anything to keep that look off her face. Now, he had trouble bringing himself to feel anything but annoyed that she was standing between him and Tenley.

"I needed to talk to you, Knox. Alone."

He couldn't hold back a sigh. "I think my *wife* said everything that needed saying, Rebecca."

The trembling lower lip poked out into a pout. "I can tell you're still angry with me, and I don't blame you. But in a way, I'm glad. It means you must still have some feelings for me." She laid her hands on his chest. "I know there's still a chance for us."

Wow. Had she always been this bad at reading a room, or was this something new? He caught her wrists and gently but firmly removed her hands from his body. He had a feeling if Tenley saw any of this, she wouldn't give Rebecca the same courtesy. "Rebecca, I meant it when I said I forgive you. Honestly, if the situation had been reversed, I can't say for sure I wouldn't have done exactly what you did."

She shook her head, tears glistening in her eyes. “That’s not true. You would’ve stayed with me forever.”

“Maybe.” Probably not. “But we’ll never know.”

Rebecca reached for him again. “I can fix things between us. I know I can.”

OK, he was done being nice. He swatted her hands away. “There’s nothing to fix. I’m married. I love my wife. You’re nothing but my ex.”

She reared back as if he’d slapped her. “You...you mean that, don’t you? You really *do* love her.”

Finally! It was about damn time she accepted the truth. “Of course, I do.”

He was as shocked as she was by the vehemence in his tone. He’d known he was in love with Tenley for a little while now, but he’d never said it aloud. It felt...*good* to put words to his feelings.

He could only hope Tenley didn’t look as horrified as Rebecca did now when he finally said the words to her.

Rebecca took a big step back and held her hands up in supplication. “I’m sorry, Knox. I didn’t know. When Thadeus called, he told me your marriage was just a scam to get your trust released. I had no idea it was real.”

Yet another reason to hate Thadeus. As if he needed more. “He shouldn’t have led you to believe there was *any* chance of a reconciliation between us.”

She swallowed hard. “He told me he’d always liked me and wanted to see me happy. I was an idiot for believing him. If your marriage is real, then all he wanted me here for was to try and sabotage you so that he could ruin your chances of getting that trust. Since it’s almost your birthday, I must’ve been his last-ditch effort to make you look like you were no closer to settling down than you were five years ago.”

Well, suddenly this whole dinner party made sense. Tenley had been right, of course. On one hand, he was pleased that Thadeus wasn’t planning to frame him for murder or something this time. But on the other hand, trying to fuck up his relationship with Tenley was a really low blow.

“I’m sorry you got caught up in the middle of Thadeus’s...shit, Rebecca.”

She gave him a wobbly smile. “Tenley is *really* lucky to have you. I hope she takes better care of your heart than I did.”

That sure as hell made two of them.

CHAPTER 25



*K*nox was done letting Tenley circle the room like a shark, gathering intel.

Not that watching her work wasn't entertaining. It was entertaining as *hell*. But after his conversation with Rebecca, he was *really* over this whole fiasco.

This room, these people...it was all more than he could stomach. He might've grown up in this superficial madness, but that didn't make it his world. He just wanted out.

So, he followed Tenley out into the garden where Kay said she'd gone to make a phone call.

She glanced up when she saw him approaching and motioned him over. Her willingness to let him listen in on her call did his heart good.

"Ren's been doing some research for me," she said when he reached her. "I don't want to put him on speaker, so just lean in so you can hear him."

He'd literally take *any* excuse to lean in close to Tenley. He had to stoop down nearly in half, but that was fine with him.

"Are you *sure* you want him to hear this?" Ren asked over the line.

Tenley smiled up at him. "Yep. I'm not keeping any secrets from him, Ren."

Knox barely resisted the urge to kiss the hell out of her. This woman agreeing to not keep secrets from him was the equivalent of a love declaration on a

billboard in Times Square from any other woman.

“Sounds like a toxic relationship to me,” Ren muttered.

She snorted. “It would to *you*.”

“Rude,” he said dispassionately. “But...touché.”

“So, what’d you find?”

“There was no paper trail connecting Thadeus to your boy.”

Knox couldn’t say he was surprised by this news. Thadeus was an arrogant, self-important doucheturd, but he wasn’t dumb. If he had framed Knox for embezzlement, he wouldn’t have left a trail.

“Damn.” Tenley sighed. “I was *sure* he was the one to frame him.”

“I said there was no *paper* trail connecting them.”

The look on Tenley’s face was terrifying. “Burying the lead, Ren? Really? That’s the direction you want to go with me?”

Ren let out a rusty-sounding laugh. “Oh, chill out. I’m just having fun. *Trying* to, anyway. But, long-story-short, there was an electronic trail that couldn’t be scrubbed as easily as the paper trail. Took a little digging to uncover because of all the shell companies and overseas banks the money went through, but right before Knox went down for embezzlement, Thadeus paid Waylin Foster a huge amount of money outside of his usual salary and bonus structure. And the way that money bounced around looks a *lot* like the way the so-called embezzlement funds ended up in Knox’s name.”

Knox blinked. “So...you’re saying Thadeus paid Waylin to frame me for embezzlement.”

“Sounds like you picked a winner, Tenley,” Ren said. “Pretty *and* smart.”

He was really getting sick of being told how pretty he was. “Why would Waylin do something like that? I never had any problem with him.”

“Thadeus doesn’t have the skills,” Ren answered. “His systems took me all of three minutes to hack. Waylin’s way more sophisticated.”

“But why would he go along with it?”

“I can answer that one,” Tenley said. “According to Natty, Thadeus knew Waylin was fucking Vanessa. If I had to guess, I’d say Thadeus blackmailed him into helping. And he’s a spineless little toad, so he probably went along with it without putting up any fight at all.”

Knox frowned. “I would’ve sworn Waylin was fucking Tiffany.”

“You’re not wrong. Vanessa ended things a while ago. That’s when he started up the affair with Tiffany.”

He wanted to ask why not one but two attractive women would want anything to do with a greasy little turd like Waylin, but he imagined that was a question for their therapists, not Tenley, so he let it go. “None of that changes anything since I already did the time. I’m guessing we can’t prove what they did legally?”

Ren snorted. “Legally? No fucking way.”

Knox shoved a hand through his hair. “Then it doesn’t matter. There’s nothing we can do about it.”

“We can’t just let him get away with it,” Tenley argued. “He has to pay.”

“I can’t get those five years back, and we can’t put him in prison.” Knox shrugged. “The whole ‘eye for an eye’ thing isn’t going to work out this time.”

“Just because we can’t put him in prison doesn’t mean we can’t make him pay,” Tenley said. “Look, you’ve known Thadeus longer than I have, but if I had to guess, I’d say the most important things to him in life are power and money. Am I right?”

“Totally.”

“Then we hit him where it hurts. We take every red cent he’s got and rip his power out from underneath him like a rug.”

Knox let out a weary sigh. “I don’t give a shit about the money. What would I do with it? Unless you’re saying *you* want his money.”

Tenley's sharp intake of breath was like a knife to his heart. Damn it. He shouldn't have said that. Hell, he knew Tenley wasn't just looking for a new con. She wanted to help him get justice.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean that. I know you don't care about the money. But neither do I. He can keep it. And as long as he's doing what's right for my mother's company, he can keep that, too."

Ren sucked in a hiss of air through his teeth. "What if he *wasn't* doing what was right for the company, though?"

Maybe he wasn't as smart as everyone kept telling him he was, because Knox had no clue what Ren was talking about. "What the hell do you mean? The company has seen record profits since Thadeus took control."

"Yeah, but the way he achieved those profits was by making specific changes that made the company ripe for a sale."

Tenley did a little fist pump. "I knew it! That motherfucker wants you out of town and far away from that board so he can sell off the company and make a fortune."

"Yep," Ren said, making a popping sound on the *p*. "HomeTech Enterprises. It's a—"

"Chinese furniture company," Knox murmured, rubbing his now-aching forehead. "They do pre-fab, mass produced stuff. Their company and their furniture is everything my mother hated about the industry. They'll buy Wilder Days, use their resources to create what they'll call a higher-end product line, then make the same cheap shit they've always made, just at a higher price point. It'll *destroy* my mother's legacy. Thadeus has to know that."

Tenley nodded. "And he doesn't give a shit. Are you going to let him get away with it?"

You could still leave, a distant corner of his brain reminded him. Grab Tenley and your trust fund, and retire to some South American tropical paradise, never to hear from assholes like Waylin and Thadeus ever again. It'd be easy. Fun. Sexy. Low drama.

And damned if he didn't *really* love the idea of that kind of retirement.

But there was no way in hell he could sit idly by and let the asshole who sent him to prison ruin his *mother's* legacy.

"No, I'm not," he said through clenched teeth. "No *fucking* way."

Tenley's smile could only be described as violent. "Excellent."

Ren sighed. "Guess I won't be getting any sleep tonight."

"Nope," Tenley said, still smiling her serial killer's smile. "None of us are. We've got lives to ruin." Her eyes sparkled. "This is going to be *fun*."

CHAPTER 26



There were dead people who didn't rest as hard as Knox.

It was a fact that delighted and annoyed Tenley in equal measure. On the one hand, she loved to see him sleeping, mouth open, breathing so deep it couldn't even be called snoring, because he obviously needed the REM. But on the other hand, she was the lightest sleeper in the world these days. A gentle breeze ruffling one lock of her hair woke her up. And sleeping longer than three or so hours a night? Unheard of lately.

So, she couldn't bring herself to sit there, wide awake, watching him sleep and getting resentful about it. He didn't deserve that. Especially not after the three—no, four—orgasms he'd given her after dinner.

She'd never be able to look at that doorframe in the pool house without blushing ever again.

But that was beside the point.

It was her insomnia that allowed her to answer the door before Thadeus managed to drag Knox out of his hard-earned slumber. Tenley tightened the robe over her tank top and sleep shorts because Thadeus in no way deserved a peek at her legs or cleavage and stepped out of the house to greet him, easing the door shut behind her.

She knew a split second of surprise at his appearance. For the first time since they'd met, he wasn't wearing a suit. Instead, Thadeus was wearing jeans (albeit obviously expensive, designer jeans), a wheat-colored cashmere

sweater (which was a waste because despite its quality, it was still boring and ugly as fuck) and boat shoes (like the pompous, pretentious yacht owner he was).

But it wasn't his attire that gave her pause. It was his drawn expression and disheveled hair. He looked like he was under an unbearable amount of stress and wasn't handling it well.

Good.

"It's late, Thadeus," Tenley said. "Knox is asleep and I'm not waking him. "

"That's fine. I'm here to talk to you."

Oh, goodie for her. "What could you and I possibly have to talk about?"

He leaned against the porch post and gave her a quick once-over that made her want to throat punch him. "Did Knox tell you I've been married six times?"

She mimicked his posture by leaning against the opposite porch post and offered him the same condescending once-over he'd given her. "No. Knox and I don't talk ever talk about you."

The gentle glow of the lights around the pool let her see the reddish tint his complexion took on. The jerk wasn't used to anyone making him feel unimportant. She was *delighted* to offer him that experience.

He composed himself quickly, though, and said, "Knox and I both have a type when it comes to women. He's always gone for beautiful, well-bred women. Wealthy. Well-educated. Like him. My type was always a little...*different* than that."

She raised a brow at him. "Ugly, ill-bred, and dim?"

Now he looked like he wanted to throat-chop her. Excellent. "I've always appreciated beauty as much as Knox," he said, nostrils flaring. "Maybe more so. But the rich, educated ones he likes are too high maintenance for me. I prefer women who are hungrier."

"You like your women to be desperate and needy. Got it. Can I go back inside now?"

He shook his head. “That attitude of yours is something I’d never tolerate in a wife. But other than that, you’re much more my type than Knox’s.”

Now *that* was truly hilarious. “Oh, buddy, if this is you hitting on me, I need to tell you just how far out of your league you are. There’s not enough money in the world to make me—or any sane woman, really—choose *you* over Knox.”

He straightened and crossed his arms over his chest. “You misunderstand me. I can spot women who are hungry to overcome their station in life, the one they were *born* into, a mile away. I’ve married *six* of them. They’ll do *anything* to become more than they are. And don’t assume going to a good school—probably on scholarship—makes you immune. The *stench* of being low-born and desperate is all over you.”

He really didn’t know who he was dealing with if he thought that little speech was going to elicit a visible reaction out of her. She might be low born with more than a passing acquaintance with desperation, but she was the best damn actress this putz had ever seen. Even better than his six wives who, no doubt, faked every orgasm for the duration of their marriages.

Tenley shrugged and covered a big, dramatic yawn with the back of her hand. “Is there a moral to this story? Because if not, your delivery could use a little work. I’m bored.”

He practically hissed at her like an angry possum. “We’ll see how *bored* you are when Knox leaves you for Rebecca. Because he will, you know. If not her, then someone else, because Knox always screws up when it counts most. Then you’ll be right back to square one where you started—and Knox’s trust will be back where it belongs. With me.”

Aw, it was *adorable* that he thought she’d ever let him anywhere near that trust, even if Knox did end up with Rebecca or another woman. Just adorable.

Although, the thought of Knox ending up with Rebecca (or anyone other than her, for that matter) made her feel like her heart had been set on fire, so she would not be giving *that* any additional consideration.

She sighed. “Look, I think we both know you can’t bully me. I’m immune. So, if you don’t have another move in your asshole playbook, I’m going to

just go inside and forget this ever happened.”

He was practically vibrating with tension, which was a fairly common reaction from a bully who'd been rendered impotent. “Fine,” he said. “I won't let Knox get his hands on that trust, so he'll soon be worthless to you. With that in mind, what's it going to take to get rid of you, huh? Twenty thousand?”

Tenley laughed out loud at that one. “Really? You think you can buy me off with twenty thousand dollars? My shoe collection is worth more than that.”

He straightened and shoved the sleeves of his sweater up past his forearms. “Fifty. And not a fucking penny more.”

She snorted and turned on her heel to leave this jerkoff. “Good night, Thad.”

She had her hand on the doorknob when he said, “You're not good enough for him, you know. You never will be.”

Now *that* was the first thing he'd said in the entire conversation that *really* gave her pause. “Don't I know it,” she whispered, closing the door behind her.

Tenley stopped for a brief second to pat Layla on the head before climbing back into bed with Knox. As soon as she settled into her spot and turned away from him, he rolled over, wrapped an arm around her, and yanked her back against him. “What was that all about?” he grumbled sleepily.

“Nothing worth talking about,” she said. “Go back to sleep.”

He was silent for so long she thought he'd drifted off again, but then he said. “You can tell me anything, baby. You know that, right?”

She swallowed hard. “I do.”

He sighed into her hair and mumbled, “OK. I love you.”

It had been a half-slurred, sleep-induced confession. He might not even realize he'd said it. But she heard it, and those words vibrated through her entire body. They probably seared a brand—his brand—on her soul. And as the silence between them stretched longer and longer, she wished more than anything she could say the words back to him. Saying them, though...that

was a step she just wasn't ready for.

Maybe when the whole mess with Thadeus was done, she'd be able to tell him how she felt. If she could figure it out, that is.

If he still wanted her around after that.

"Stop overthinking it," he admonished sleepily.

Well, so much for him not realizing what he'd confessed. She supposed she'd have to get comfortable with her feelings *quick*.

She could handle that...right?

CHAPTER 27



*K*nox woke up the next morning feeling refreshed, ready to ruin Thadeus's life, and alone.

The alone part wasn't much of a surprise. Tenley only seemed capable of sleeping a few hours a night, and could get more done in the hours before he woke up than he could get done all day.

So, when he rolled out of bed, he fully expected to find Tenley in the kitchenette, sipping coffee, ready to tell him about all the cool things she'd done while he was drooling into his pillow. But when he got there, she was nowhere to be found.

She wasn't in the bathroom, either. The living room and pool area were also empty, except for Layla, who smiled her doggy smile up at him. "Where's Tenley, girl?"

Layla was happy to hear Tenley's name, as evidenced by her tail thumping against the hardwood. But she didn't seem to know the answer to the question, either.

That's when his inner critic, the one who'd only shut up over the past five years for a few minutes at a time when he was with Tenley, started talking inside his head, telling him she probably left because she was done with his sorry ass. That she was moving on to bigger, better things. Better people. And maybe worst of all...

He'd told her he loved her and she was either a) disgusted enough to run, or

b) totally freaked out by the extent of his feelings.

Feelings she didn't reciprocate.

At this point, he wasn't even sure which thought was the most troubling. They all sucked giant, hairy, donkey balls.

OK, don't freak out for no reason. You know none of that is true about Tenley. You know her. She knows you. She hasn't given you any reason to doubt her.

Knox had just about talked himself off the mental ledge when there was a knock at the door. In his head, Tenley had gone out, was now back, and had forgotten the door code. Which he would later realize was ridiculous because Tenley never forgot anything.

He was surprised enough that he couldn't hold in a disgusted groan when he opened the door and Thadeus was there instead of Tenley. "What the hell do *you* want?"

Thadeus's gaze moved scornfully over Knox's bare chest and boxer briefs. "Dressed for success as usual, I see."

He let his eyes move over Thadeus in a similarly disdainful manner. "Dressed like a douchebag as usual, I see. Now, I ask again, what the hell do *you* want?"

He rolled his eyes. "I don't want anything from you. I'm only here to see if your *lovely* bride changed her mind after our talk last night."

Why were you talking to her last night and why didn't she say anything to me about it? his annoying inner critic asked. Outwardly, he just tightened his jaw and said, "She doesn't want anything to do with you, either."

"We'll see. I told her *I* know she's a filthy little gold digger, even if *you* don't see it. Once you screw up and lose your trust, she'll take the fifty thousand I offered and leave you in her rearview where you belong."

Knox instantly relaxed and rolled his eyes. "Shit, man. The clothes in her overnight bag probably cost more than that. If you wanted her to take a fucking bribe, you shouldn't have been cheap about it."

If Knox knew anything it was that Tenley wasn't going to betray him—not for any amount of money.

Seeing that he clearly wouldn't be getting the reaction he wanted, Thadeus sneered at him. "You two deserve each other."

"Aw, thanks. That's the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

And with that, he slammed the door, mind racing. Tenley talked to Thadeus the night before, then disappeared sometime before Knox woke up. Did that mean the bastard had said something upsetting to her?

No. There was no way Thadeus could say anything that would upset Tenley. She was unflappable.

So, they were back to her being run off by something *Knox* said. And the only thing he'd said that she might even have a tiny problem with was...

That's when he heard a phone that wasn't his. He'd know that ring tone anywhere.

Tenley was gone, but her phone was here.

No way would she have left her phone. And as he made his way back to the bedroom to grab it, he saw the strap of her go-bag poking out from underneath the bed.

Even if she would've left her phone, she *definitely* wouldn't have left her go-bag. She guarded that thing like it was an infant.

OK, now he was worried. Something was *really* wrong here.

Grabbing the phone off the nightstand, heart in his throat, Knox snarled a greeting at the caller.

"I quit watching her for one day—fucking *one*—and you fell down on the job," the caller snarled right back. "What the fuck?"

This was getting weirder by the minute. "Ren? Where the hell is Tenley?"

"You were supposed to watch out for her!"

Knox threw his hands up in frustration. "Most people don't *stalk* their loved

ones twenty-four-seven, Ren. That's unique to you."

"And it's been effective for *years*. Until *you*."

Normally, he wouldn't snap at Tenley's go-to guy for all things illegal, dark, and morally questionable. Tenley trusted him, and that's what mattered. And also, he was scary and if Knox learned anything in prison, it was to not piss off the scary people. So, it was against his better judgement, but totally out of his control when he snapped, "Can we talk about how fucking great you are *after* you tell me where the fuck Tenley is and what the hell is going on?"

"She missed her check in call with me last night," Ren explained through what sounded like clenched teeth. "I didn't follow-up immediately because I knew she was with *you* and figured *you* were keeping her safe."

Knox fought the urge to scream at the guy. "Use your words, Ren. Are you trying to tell me you don't know where she is, either?"

"When she hadn't responded by this morning, I checked the security cameras around your property. I saw her let your dog out at six. She was on the porch. That's the last time I saw her, because the cameras cut out for approximately ten minutes."

He glanced down at Layla and rubbed his aching forehead. "The dog's here. So, somewhere between letting the dog out and back in again, she disappeared?"

There was a loaded pause on Ren's end before he sighed and mumbled, "Why couldn't she have picked another criminal and not some pretty civilian? No, jackass, I'm saying that right after she let your dog back in, she was grabbed by someone who knew enough to shut the security cameras off."

"Thadeus," Knox said. "It has to be, right?"

"I don't think so. At least, not him personally. Thadeus showed up at your door last night, and again this morning, but he was in the main house during the time she disappeared."

Knox frowned. "How the fuck do you know that?"

"I hacked the computer in his home office. Saw him on his camera jacking

off to Russian octogenarian porn. It was disgusting. Why?”

Well, that brought up a lot of questions he'd never want the answers to. “Um...no reason. So, if it wasn't Thadeus, who the hell was it?”

“I assumed someone on the board might make a move to keep you away from today's board meeting, but her going missing was a surprise. I don't like surprises.”

Ren's voice dropped an octave on the word surprises, and if Tenley wasn't in danger, Knox would've felt bad for the guy—or woman—who'd surprised *Ren*.

“I saw that John Richter made a sketchy wire transfer yesterday,” Ren continued, “and I figured it was to take out a hit on you. I have no idea why they'd grab Tenley. It makes no sense.”

Knox idly wondered if Ren would've ever told him he thought Richter had put a hit on him, or if he would've just let John fucking Wick show up at his door. But he imagined that didn't matter at the moment. “We can figure out the *why* later. How can I find her?”

He heard clicking on a computer keyboard over the line before Ren said, “Based on the time she went missing, if someone got her in a vehicle and drove the speed limit, which I assume they would've to avoid drawing attention to themselves, by this time, they could've only made it one, maybe two towns over. They don't want her dead, or they would've dropped her on your porch.”

The thought alone turned Knox's blood to ice.

“So, they'll want to hold her someplace where there aren't any neighbors,” Ren went on. “Abandoned warehouses, farms, closed businesses...those types of places make great hideouts for kidnappers. Do you know anyplace like that about two towns over?”

His mind whirled. “They're pretty overpopulated towns around here. Not too many places I can think of with no neighbors.” He tried *really* hard not to think about why kidnappers didn't want any neighbors around. “Except... wait...someone at dinner last night mentioned an old dairy farm south of Shadeland they were considering buying. It's in the middle of a ten-acre tract

of land in the middle of the woods.”

“Go there,” Ren said immediately. “Go there now. I’m on my way, but you’ll beat me there.”

Knox didn’t bother with a goodbye. He disconnected the call and took all of two seconds to get dressed. He didn’t have a gun, but he did grab his old baseball bat, deciding it was better than nothing.

Layla whined nervously as he made his way to the door. “Don’t worry. I’m bringing our girl back.”

Hang on, baby. I’m on the way.

CHAPTER 28



Tenley wished she could say this was the first time she'd ever woken up, handcuffed to a chair. But alas, it wasn't. There'd been an unfortunate episode with an art forger in Italy a few years ago—and that thing with the card counting in Atlantic City—that had taken every bit of her skill to talk her way out of.

This was different, though.

She'd been grabbed right off the pool house's porch, and she hadn't seen it coming. The gross rag covered in homemade chloroform had been a surprise, as well.

When she got out of this—*when*, not *if*—she was going to have to learn to balance all these *feelings* she was having for Knox with her killer instincts, because right now, the two seemed diametrically opposed, which was super clear now that she was *handcuffed to a damn chair*.

That's when she had a thought that chilled her to the bone even more than getting kidnapped.

Knox would have no idea what happened to her. In his mind, she might've run off because he'd said, "I love you."

Tenley groaned out loud. He was probably sitting in that pool house, thinking she'd abandoned him just like that cuntbag Rebecca. And because she wasn't around, he'd probably skip the board meeting and his mom's company would end up in Thadeus's hands forever.

Fuuuuccckkk. This was bad!

She appeared to be in the kitchen of an old farmhouse. *Old* being the operative word. Dilapidated cabinets that were held in place by nothing but plaster and memories, an old apron sink that probably hadn't held water in this century, the smell of wood rot and mildew perfuming the air...this place looked like an abandoned set piece from *Little House on the Prairie*.

"About damn time you woke up."

Now *that* was a voice Tenley hadn't heard in a long time. And she certainly hadn't missed it.

"Jordan," she said, shifting her gaze to the left, where she spotted the man himself leaning against the ratty old kitchen counter.

The years hadn't been kind to him. His once luxurious blond hair had thinned considerably, and his forehead was now more of a fivehead. There were lines on his once flawless skin that did *not* look like they were caused by laughter. Was he shorter? He looked shorter. And while he always used to wear designer clothes, his current ensemble looked like it came from...whatever the cheapest store in the area was.

He crossed his arms over his chest and smirked down at her. "You're a hard woman to find, Ten."

Inwardly, she cringed. She hated being called *Ten*. She'd told him that repeatedly during their years together, but being a consummate narcissist, Jordan never listened, assuming he knew better. "That's by design. How *did* you find me, by the way?"

"I'll admit, for years, I had no clue where to find you. I didn't know what names you were using, or if you were even in the country anymore. Then I heard about your last job." He shook his head, looking weirdly proud. "No one but my Ten could've stolen those diamonds and disappeared without a trace. And without so much as a glimpse of your image on security feeds? That had *you* written all over it. I assume your little hacker friend helped with that? The one who framed me for the art theft you did in Madrid?"

That was news to Tenley. She'd had no idea Ren had done that. But she couldn't say she didn't appreciate it. It was sweet...in a Ren kind of way.

She sure as shit wasn't going to talk about Ren with this asshole, though. "Glad you're impressed. I can die happy now."

He reached out and brushed his knuckles over her cheekbone—tender, but in a mocking way. "Die? No, my love. You're going to live a long, healthy life. Now, your new little boy toy, however...he might not be so lucky."

Tenley's heart rate kicked up. "You stay away from him," she growled.

Jordan chuckled. "Aw, it's nice to see that you *are* capable of loyalty. I wondered."

"I mean it, Jordan. You better not—"

He backhanded her. Hard. It was enough to make her run her tongue over her teeth to make sure they were all still intact. But she'd be damned if she'd let him see her pain, so she spit a mouthful of blood on the floor at his feet. She missed his shoe by an inch. Pity that.

Jordan pointed his index finger in her face. "*You* don't get to make threats. Not after what you did to me."

Tenley rolled her eyes. "Oh, come on. I didn't do anything to you that you didn't deserve. And that you wouldn't have done to me if given half the chance. You know as well as I do that I was nothing but a tool for your scams."

The fucker had the nerve to tap her nose with his index finger. "And a pretty little tool you were...and will be again."

Now she was getting *really* nervous, because he was even more delusional than she thought, and no one was more dangerous than delusional people. "I'm not working with or for you ever again."

"I figured you'd say that. But what you don't know is that I was hired to kill your little jailbird, and if you want to keep him alive, you'll play ball."

OK, kidnapping her, handcuffing her to a chair, slapping her, and insulting her was one thing. Taking a contract on Knox was another. "What's your game?"

He boosted himself up on the counter and grinned at her. "I'm so glad you

asked! See, when I managed to track you down, I watched. I watched *everything*, Ten. I know exactly what you have planned. So, when the board chairman you're trying to fuck over put out a request on the dark web for a hitman, I took the job."

She shook her head. "You're a lot of things, Jordan, but we both know you're not a killer. You have no intention of carrying out that hit."

"No, but Richter doesn't need to know that. Knox can play dead, and you and I can take the money and run."

"And if he doesn't play dead?"

He shrugged. "Richter will just send someone else—someone who won't be as squeamish about killing as I am. Him stepping aside and you working with me is a win win. Come on, Ten. It'll be just like old times."

The idea of leaving Knox and hitting the road with Jordan to help him grift made her so nauseous she almost gagged. "That's exactly what I'm afraid of."

His eyes narrowed. "You owe me. You ruined my life. And you're going to help me get back everything you cost me."

"You never had that much, asshole. I'll write you a check. Just take the money and disappear."

The laugh he let out was so sharp she winced before she could stop herself. "It's not going to be that easy, I'm afraid."

She raised a brow at him. "If you're insinuating that I owe you a few fucks, I'm gonna have to decline. Disrespectfully."

Tenley was ready for the backhand this time. It barely stung. Jordan always had hit like a little girl. "You. Owe. Me," he hissed in her face. "I taught you everything you know, and you betrayed me."

She'd humored this asshole more than she should've already. It was time to end this conversation and get the hell out of here. Nothing—especially not the worst fucking blast from the past *ever*—was going to keep her from that board meeting.

But more importantly, nothing was going to keep her from Knox. Because imagining how he must feel right now, wondering where she was, made her realize something.

She loved him.

She loved Knox more than any con she'd ever pulled off. More than...peanut butter cups and the scent of fresh rain in the springtime. He was the first person she wanted to talk to in the morning, and the last before she went to bed. She wanted to watch him build furniture and sketch new ideas on scrap paper.

She wanted him in her bed—and her life—forever. Like, the *until-death-do-they-part* kind of forever.

And it was *way* past time she told him so. Especially since she wasn't anywhere *near* ready for death to part them.

“Well, Jordan,” she said on a sharp exhale, “you’re partially right. You taught me everything *you* knew. But my education didn’t end with you.”

“Is that so?” he sneered. “What could *you* possibly know that *I* don’t?”

She cocked her head to one side. “How to get out of handcuffs, for one.”

He reared back, but not fast enough.

Tenley whipped her now uncuffed hands—thanks to the bobby pin she kept up her sleeve at all times—out from behind her and shoved Jordan until his back hit the counter.

“You bitch!”

“Now, I’m getting sick of being called that.”

She didn’t give him a chance to reply. Instead, she caught him in the chin with a front snap kick. Because one of the other things he’d never taught her was how to kick the ever-loving *crap* out of an attacker. She had Ren to thank for that.

Jordan’s head snapped back and a second later, he crumpled to the ground like a used paper towel, unconscious.

Tenley blinked down at him, nonplussed for a moment. Damn. That'd been easier than she'd thought.

But this was no time for musing. So, she bent down, grabbed his wallet, keys, and phone from his pockets, gave him a swift kick to the kidney for good measure, and beelined for the door. When she ripped it open, she stopped dead in her tracks.

“Knox,” she whispered.

CHAPTER 29



It took every bit of strength Knox had not to fall to his knees at her feet in sheer relief. He settled for dropping his baseball bat, grabbing her, and tugging her into his arms.

“I was so fucking worried,” he whispered into her hair. “Are you OK?”

“How are you here?” she asked, tightening her arms around his waist to the point that he could barely breathe. “How did you find me?”

“Ren helped.”

He pulled back just far enough to run his gaze over her, searching for injuries. Her lip was split, and there was an ugly bruise blooming on one of her perfect cheekbones. That alone was enough to make him want to kill whoever had the fucking *nerve* to touch her. But other than that, she looked blessedly unharmed.

Her lower lip trembled as she looked up into his eyes. “You came to...*rescue* me?”

He snorted. “Looks like you beat me to it. I should’ve known you had it under control.”

“I could handcuff myself to the chair again if you want,” she suggested. “Give you another shot at it.”

This was just one of the many, many reasons he loved her. “I think we can skip that.” He glanced behind her at the fallen body of the idiot who’d been

stupid enough to think he could best her. He didn't really even care who the bastard was. "Why do you seem surprised to see me?"

She swallowed hard. "The way I disappeared. I thought...well, I assumed... you would've..."

He kissed the corner of her mouth as gently as he could so that he wouldn't hurt her poor abused lip. "You thought I'd assume you abandoned me because I told you I love you and you didn't say it back?"

"Well...yeah."

"Oh, baby." He kissed her forehead this time. "I wasn't expecting reciprocation. I was just telling you how I felt. You'll tell me how *you* feel when you're ready. I can wait."

"See, that's the thing. I didn't know exactly how I felt yesterday when you said that, because I've never felt anything like it before."

That was a gut punch for two reasons. First of all, it hurt his heart that Tenley couldn't recognize love because she'd never felt it before. No one had shown her love in her life, and that was tragic. But also...was she saying she loved him without *actually* saying it? Because he'd take it. "It really is OK. You don't need to—"

She slapped a hand over his mouth. "I'm not saying it. Not right now. But not because I don't feel it. It's just that...it'll seem disingenuous if I say it right now, after this whole kidnapping ordeal. I'll say it when there's no reason for me to. That's when you'll know I'm being truthful and not being, well, you know...*me*."

Knox kissed her palm before pulling her hand away from his mouth. "I can live with that. In fact, I can live with *anything*, as long as I have you."

He was just about the kiss the hell out of her when he was nudged out of the way from behind.

"Yeah, very touching. Whatever," the guy grumbled as he moved past Tenley and dumped a black duffel bag the size of a small country next to the body on the floor. He huffed out an exasperated breath and glanced from the body to Tenley. "Jordan, huh?"

Tenley nodded. “Unfortunately, yes. Traced me from the Whitehall job, then took a job on the dark web to kill Knox.”

“What an idiot,” he said, looking disgusted.

Tenley leaned into Knox and gestured to the newcomer. “Knox, this is Ren. I think you guys are already good friends, right?”

Knox held out a hand. Ren didn’t even bother glancing at it before saying, “Introductions can be done later. You know, when there’s not a body on the floor.”

Rude. But not wrong. Which was pretty much how Knox would describe everything he knew so far about Ren...whatever his last name was.

Physically, everything about Ren was aggressive. The angry slash of his black brows, his messy mop of black hair, the black eyes, the towering height and bulky muscles (there weren’t too many guys who made Knox feel dainty, but Ren was definitely one of them), the black-on-black, military-looking wardrobe, the holster and weapon he wasn’t even attempting to conceal...it was all very intimidating.

Knox was glad Ren was on Tenley’s side.

“You don’t look like a hacker,” Knox observed.

Ren frowned at him. Aggressively, of course. “You don’t look like a dude who would let his girlfriend get kidnapped off his own damn porch. But here we are.”

Rude. Again. And also... “You’re not wrong. I’ll do better going forward.”

And he would. Because after this, he wasn’t sure he’d ever let Tenley out of his sight again. She’d just have to get used to him being glued to her side 24/7.

Ren snorted, and Tenley shot him an admonishing look. “Be nice, Ren.”

“That *was* me being nice.”

The guy looked like he could kill him twelve different ways with his pinky, he was rude and sarcastic, and Knox still liked him because he was the

closest thing to family Tenley had. “It’s fine,” he whispered to Tenley. “You had to deal with my stepbrother. I can deal with your friend.”

Ren snapped on a pair of surgical gloves and gave Jordan a dispassionate once over. “Speaking of dealing with shit...what do you want me to do with him, Tenley?”

She frowned thoughtfully. “What do you recommend?”

“I have lye, and I saw a firepit out back.”

Knox blinked a couple times before saying, “His chest is moving. I think he’s still alive.”

He shrugged. “The lye won’t care.”

Wow. Just...wow.

Tenley shook her head. “Nah. I don’t think that’s necessary. What do you have that gets him out of the way but doesn’t involve dissolving his body?”

Ren looked a little bummed out at the prospect of a less violently permanent option. “If Jordan were to cross the border with, say, drugs or illegal firearms on him, the federales in Mexico would be *very* unhappy. I’m betting he’d be tossed into a cell to rot for a good long time.”

“Does *Jordan* have access to drugs and or illegal firearms?” Tenley asked carefully.

Ren looked her dead in the eye and smiled the coldest, scariest smile Knox had ever seen. “*Jordan* has access to things you could never imagine.”

She nodded and looped her arm through Knox’s. “OK, then. Would you mind terribly if we excused ourselves and let you do...your thing? We have a board meeting to crash.”

He waved her off. “Yeah, yeah. Go. I got this.”

They were almost out the door when Ren said, “Tenley?”

“Yeah?”

“Are you happy?”

Knox glanced down in time to see Tenley's smile, which was brighter than the fucking sun and made him weak in the knees. "I am, Ren. *Really* happy."

While Knox's heart was practically vibrating in his chest with joy, Ren nodded stoically and said, "I'll add him to my list."

Tenley put a hand over her heart, tears in her eyes, as she told him, "Thank you."

He waved her off again so he could get to work. It wasn't until they stepped into the car that Knox asked, "What did he mean when he said he'd put me on his list?"

"Oh, it means that you're now on his list of people that he'll watch out for from now on."

More blinking. "You mean he's added me to his 'people to stalk' list?"

"Yes. Trust me...it's a good list to be on."

He'd take her word for it, because honestly, the thought of being on any of Ren's *other* lists was terrifying.

He was about to say something else when she blurted, "I love you."

Then she lunged across the center console and kissed the crap out of him. When she pulled back, he was breathless, a little confused, and more turned on than he'd ever been. (Which, frankly, was how he always felt when Tenley was around). "I thought you were going to wait to say it."

"No, I said I was going to wait until it didn't sound disingenuous." She bit her lower lip. "It didn't sound disingenuous, did it?"

He laughed out loud. "It did not. I love you too, baby."

She let out a big sigh of relief. "Thank God. Ready to go ruin some lives?"

Would there ever be a time when he wasn't thoroughly delighted by this woman? He thought not. "Ab-so-fucking-lutely."

"Oh, and happy birthday, Knox."

"It is now, baby. It is now."

CHAPTER 30



Senley had been in more than a few corporate boardrooms in her life, always for some kind of con. Always for her own benefit. She'd never been nervous.

Until now.

Being here with Knox, helping him protect his family legacy, was utterly nerve-racking. She could *not* afford to screw this up.

And why did all corporate boardrooms smell like printer paper and oppression? It was a weird combo that did absolutely nothing to quell her queasy stomach.

She gave herself a mental slap across the face. *Get your shit together!*

Knox squeezed her hand, and when she glanced up at him and saw the grin on his face, her nerves evaporated. It was obvious that he loved her no matter what happened today, so what did she have to worry about? She'd already won.

Not that her sunny, happy, lovable self was going to go easy on these fuckheads. Nope. They were done. But she was going to destroy them with a chipper disposition she didn't normally have.

All eyes were on them as they strolled casually toward their seats at the conference table.

Waylin offered a murmured greeting, while Thadeus glared at her like he was

trying to burn a hole through her skull with nothing but the power of his hatred. John said nothing. He just stared at Knox like he was seeing a ghost. Only Kay offered a sincere, pleased greeting and a warm smile.

“Hey, y’all,” Tenley said, taking a seat next to Knox. “It’s so nice to see everyone again.”

“Not the word I’d use,” Knox muttered.

Thadeus, still glaring daggers while his mouth gave them the fakest smile she’d ever seen and said, “We were just about to have an important discussion. Is there something I can do for you two before we begin?”

“See, that’s the thing, Thad,” Knox said. “I’ve decided that I’m ready to be involved in the business. *My* family’s business.”

John scoffed. “Now, son, you know your brother—”

“I’m not your son and Thadeus is *not* my brother,” he interrupted. “The terms of my father’s will are clear. As of today, my birthday, a seat on this board is mine if I want it, and I do.”

Thadeus turned a shade of red that could only be described as apoplectic. “You haven’t been involved in this business. We have an important vote today, and you’re not up to speed. You can’t expect—”

Knox cocked his head to one side. “Who says I’m not up to speed?”

John leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “You can’t possibly know anything about HomeTech Enterprises.”

“You mean the fact that you and Thadeus bullied Waylin into voting for selling to HomeTech?” Tenley asked. “Or that they plan to completely obliterate this company’s reputation by flooding the market with cheap, mass-produced versions of the furniture that made you all millionaires to begin with?” She smirked at him. “Trust me. We’re up to speed on all that.”

John turned his furious scowl on Kay. “You. You told them, didn’t you? You were always against this sale.”

She nodded and calmly took a sip of her tea before saying, “I am against this sale, and my voting record reflects that. But I didn’t tell them *anything*.”

“Unlike you, she actually cares about this company,” Knox said. “Which is why when this meeting is over, she’ll still have a job and the rest of you won’t.”

Thadeus barked out a harsh laugh. “You might be able to stop the sale, but there’s nothing you can do to any of us. See, Knox, you were born with every advantage in the world, but I have the thing you always lacked. Drive. You’re not fit to lead this or any company.”

Knox smiled. “You’re right about that. I’m not fit to lead this company.” He gestured to Kay. “But *she* is.”

Thadeus opened his mouth to spew more vitriol, but Tenley didn’t give him a chance. She leaned forward and rested her forearms on the table. “Look, this is proving to be a lot less entertaining than I thought it’d be, so let me break it down for you. Knox and Kay are voting against the sale of the company. Per the terms of Knox’s inheritance, he’s also allowed to appoint someone of his choosing to the board.”

He rolled his eyes. “Let me guess. You?”

She grinned. “Nope. The terms state someone ‘qualified’, and I can assure you I’m not that person.”

Knox pulled a stack of papers out of the file folder he had in front of him out and slid them down to Thadeus. “I’m appointing Luther Wilson, esquire. And in that stack of papers, you’ll see that he has given me his voting proxy. Guess what? He votes no sale.”

Thadeus ignored the papers. “That only ties the vote.”

“See, that’s just one more thing you’re wrong about, hon,” Tenley said. “Waylin is also voting no to the sale.”

Waylin’s eyes went wide. “N-no I’m not.”

Thadeus snorted. “Waylin votes how we tell him to vote.”

She smiled sweetly at him before turning back to Waylin. “He’ll vote how I tell him to from now on. Honestly, Waylin, did you think you were smart enough to not leave a paper trail when you framed Knox for embezzlement?”

The color drained from his face. “I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Aw, bless your heart,” she said. “I have the proof—and trust me when I say I have enough of it to put you away for years.”

He didn’t need to know she was bluffing or that none of her evidence would be admissible in criminal court. She’d just keep that info to herself.

His eyes flitted to Thadeus, looking for help, and finding none.

Knox cracked his knuckles, causing Waylin to flinch like he’d been struck. “He can’t get you out of this. The only play you have to avoid prison is to vote our way and become my little board bitch.”

Tenley nodded. “I mean, even if we did send you to prison, there’s no way someone like you would survive without becoming someone’s bitch. Might as well be Knox’s, huh?”

Waylin swallowed hard. “I vote no on the sale,” he said quietly.

“You might win on this one issue, but I’ll make your lives so miserable from here on out that you’ll wish you’d stayed in prison,” John snarled at them.

Tenley felt her lip curl involuntarily in disgust as she eyed the asshole who put a hit out on Knox so that he could make a few more million. “Wrong again. Because you’re resigning. Right the fuck *now*.”

“Or else what?”

“I’m so glad you asked. Or else I go to the cops with the proof I have that you put a hit out on Knox. See, just like Waylin here has learned, even transactions done on the dark web can be traced by someone who really knows what they’re doing. Especially when someone is dumb enough to hire my ex, who grabbed me instead of Knox.” She *tsked*. “Next time, maybe do some due diligence before you hire a hitman, yeah?”

Thadeus’s sneer dropped off his face as he turned to John. “You put a *hit* out on him?”

“Oh, don’t act all morally superior,” John snapped. “I only did what you didn’t have the balls to do.”

Tenley rolled her eyes. “Long-story-short, you’re going to disappear today, or I’m taking everything I have—which is a considerable amount of shit—to the authorities.”

“I’ll take my chances,” he said. “Go ahead. The courts will take years. By then, I can have eight judges in my pocket.”

She blinked innocently at him. “Oh, did you think the attempted—and miserably failed—hit was all I had on you? I also checked your financials, asshole. Think the IRS will take years to come after you and lock you up for fraud and tax evasion to the tune of at least twelve million?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed as the fury seemed to drain out of his bones. It took several loaded seconds, but he eventually muttered, “I resign.”

“And appoint Luther in your place, right?” she prompted.

“Yes,” he agreed through clenched teeth.

“Excellent.”

Then she turned to Thadeus. “Two down, one to go.”

“You have nothing on me,” he scoffed. “I’m not stepping down as CEO.”

Kay, who’d been watching everything unfolding around her like she was in the middle of a tennis match, said, “You don’t have to step down. The rest of the board can vote you out.”

Knox ticked off four votes on his fingers. “And what do you know? Looks like we have the votes to do just that.”

Thadeus was shaking with the force of his fury. “I’ll sue. You can’t do this to me. I won’t let you.”

Tenley shrugged. “You could try to sue. But then I’d have to turn over the proof I uncovered that you were the one who ordered Waylin to frame Knox. I’m guessing the authorities would frown upon that. And even though you wouldn’t get as much prison time as Waylin, I would assume that any prison time would be bad for someone like you.”

Again, he didn’t need to know the evidence she had would never stand up in

court. She was an *excellent* bluffer.

Knox nodded. “It’s true. Pompous fuckwits get beat down on the daily.”

Tenley added, “Oh, and because I’m a spiteful bitch, you and your trophy wife—who, by the way, has been fucking Waylin behind your back for *ages*—are going to get the fuck out of Knox’s house and never darken his doorstep again. Today.”

His eyes shot to Waylin. “You’re fucking Tiffany?”

She snapped to get his attention as Waylin sank even further down in his seat. “Stay with me here, Thad. You can leave with the clothes on your backs and nothing more. Understood?”

If looks could sear flesh from bone, she’d be a puddle of goo on the floor. “Understood,” he gritted out.

“Great,” Knox said, slamming a palm down on the table. “It’s settled. Luther will be chairman of the board, I’ll keep my seat, Waylin will remain my board bitch for as long as I need him around, and Kay will be CEO.” Then he turned to Tenley and added, “Can we go now?”

She glanced over at Kay. “You good?”

She nodded enthusiastically. “This is the most fun I’ve ever had at one of these meetings.”

“Awesome,” Knox said. “Meeting adjourned.”

As John, Thadeus, and Waylin scampered out of the room like the cockroaches they were, and Kay excused herself to go check out her new corner office, Tenley practically leapt from her chair and straddled Knox in his.

She gave him a toe-curling, rock-his-world kind of kiss that said more about her feelings for him than words ever could. But she knew she’d eventually have to get more comfortable with using her words like a grown-up, so she broke the kiss and pulled back just far enough to rest her forehead against his.

“What happens now?” she asked.

“Ever been bent over a conference room table?”

She barked out a laugh. “That’s not what I mean. I mean, now that you have your trust and your mother’s company is safe, what happens with us?”

He grinned and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “We go home.”

“Where’s home?”

“Wherever you are.”

Swoon! “I’d rather not live in that mausoleum.”

He chuckled. “Agreed. But why’d you fight for it if you didn’t want to live there?”

“I didn’t want Thadeus to have it. Plus, I figured we could bulldoze it and build something different if we wanted to. A house we can fill with your furniture?”

“I’d love that,” he said, his voice warm and even lower than usual. “I’m a little surprised you let Richter and Thadeus off the hook so easily, though.”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I didn’t, really. Ren emptied their bank accounts. Natty got a few million, Tiffany got a few million, and the rest went to charities of Ren’s choosing. Probably animal charities, knowing him. All untraceable, of course.”

“Of course.”

She bit her lower lip. “I was thinking it might be time to make a new career move for myself, too.”

He eased back to look her in the eye and frowned. “You don’t have to do that if you don’t want to. I love you no matter what you do for a living.”

“I know,” she said, toying with a button on his shirt. “But getting kidnapped—for real this time—made me realize it’s too risky now. I’ve never had so much to lose before.”

Knox kissed her forehead so gently it nearly broke her heart. “Me, neither.”

“I thought I might try my hand at running a charity. For kids who grew up

like me, you know?”

“I think that’s a *great* idea.”

“Maybe I’d *sometimes* con rich people out of money to keep it running,” she admitted.

He laughed. “I’d expect nothing less from the woman who kidnapped me and stole my heart.”

She grinned at him. “So, we’re in this together, then? Forever?”

“Baby, I’ve been yours from day one. Getting kidnapped was the best damn thing that ever happened to me.”

“Yet,” she corrected. “We can *definitely* do better.”

And she was right. It only got better from there.

EPILOGUE



Setting up a *real* charity was way harder than setting up a *fake* one. Ren knew that better than anyone.

Because after a full year of mission statements, helping Tenley hire lawyers and a board of directors, applying for a million little things with the state, county, and IRS, Tenley's dream of helping young girls like her was a reality. And it was all on the up-and-up.

Except for the little matter of how she convinced shady million and billionaires to "donate," that is.

Searching for corrupt assholes Tenley could blackmail or con out of huge donations was starting to be a full-time job. Thankfully, there was no shortage of such assholes in the world.

He could only hope Tenley and Knox didn't plan to have kids. With Tenley's ventures taking up so much of his time, he couldn't afford to let his list grow.

Currently, the list of people he watched out for (or, stalked, as Knox worded it) sat at four, including Tenley and Knox. His fourth-grade teacher, the one who'd always let him into the school early to shower and eat breakfast when his foster family couldn't be bothered to make sure they had running water, power, or food in the trailer (and made sure he had plenty of books to read) was low maintenance. He could keep her deadbeat son from getting his hands on her money in his sleep. He didn't even require daily check-in calls from her. One call a month worked just fine.

Knox was pretty easy to watch out for, too. He refused daily check-in calls, but he hardly ever went anywhere without Tenley, and she was easily traceable.

Lark Shaw had given Tenley a run for her money in the *hard to follow* department for *years*. And as the only person on his list who know he *or* the list existed, keeping her safe was especially problematic. Getting close to her, of course, would be more problematic for many, *many* reasons.

But that was a story for another time .

With two clicks on his keyboard, Ren wiped out all records of Tenley and Knox's fake marriage so they could quietly get married for real in a month. He'd let her know it was done when she checked in later that night. Or maybe he'd keep his mouth shut so he wouldn't get roped into showing up to the ceremony and being a witness.

He shuddered at the thought of...people-ing.

Glancing at his bank of monitors, he caught a glimpse of Tenley and Knox. The security camera that faced their porch let him watch as Knox threw a tennis ball for Layla, then tugged a laughing Tenley into his arms. She grinned up at him, eyes sparkling with love and humor.

That look right there—that *joy*—was all the proof he needed that adding Knox to his list was a good call. Tenley deserved this. She now had an amazing, happy, *normal* life.

Ren would do *anything* to guard that life for her.

Which reminded him that he needed to check in with the guards at the prison in Juarez and make sure Jordan was still locked away safely in his cell. Ren was sure he was. It wasn't like due process or releases for good behavior ever happened in the shithole he'd dumped that fucker in. But it never hurt to double check.

He didn't even have to check in on Thadeus. Dude didn't have the resources or will to ever go up against Tenley again. Tiffany had cleaned out what was left of Thadeus's assets (a boat and at least twelve luxury and vintage cars) in their divorce, leaving him with no other means to support himself than the low-level managerial job at a small pharmaceutical company he'd been

forced to take in Minnesota. Ren hoped the bastard was freezing his balls off and/or would choke on a tater tot hot dish. It was the least he deserved.

Richter, not so sadly, had died shortly after Ren redistributed his money. He'd suffered a stroke while in the, um, company of a prostitute in a cheap motel in the red-light district. It was rumored that his wife and the prostitute were working together and had planned his murder to look like a stroke, but there was no proof of such a thing.

None that anyone would ever find, of course. Pharmacy records were disturbingly easy to alter and delete.

But regardless, at least for tonight, it looked like Tenley and Knox, Mrs. Fulkerson, and even Lark were living the kind of normal, safe life someone like him had never and would never have for himself.

Not that he'd even know how to handle happiness if it walked up and slapped him across the—

The computer he had monitoring the dark web dinged, letting him know an alert had surfaced. That was unusual. No one on his list usually popped up on the dark web. Was someone trying to kill Knox again? Had Tenley conned someone who thought they could find someone on the dark web to hurt her? Surely no one hated a simple schoolteacher like Mrs. Fulkerson enough to mention her on the dark web.

Son. Of. A. Bitch.

Some asshole was after Lark.

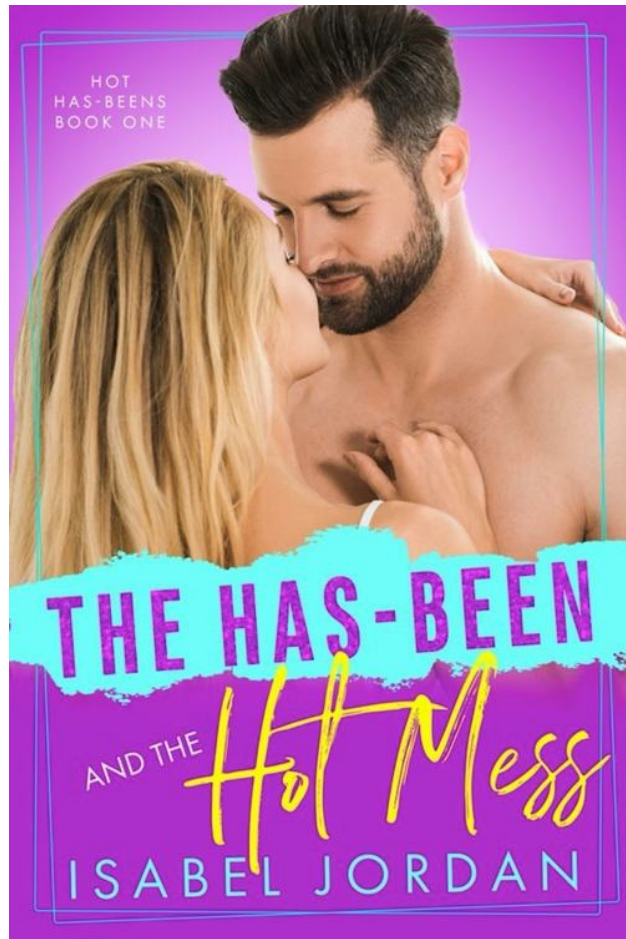
Not on my watch, motherfucker, he thought, grabbing his jacket to head out.

Not on my fucking watch.

THE END

But keep reading for samples of *The Has-Been and the Hot Mess, You Complicate Me*, and *Caped and Dangerous*, three of my other snarky

contemporary rom coms. And stay tuned for more books in the Adorable Psychos series.



Her job is to resurrect his image. Falling for him is not part of the plan...

CHAPTER 1

Whoever said sleeping with the boss was a bad idea was wrong. It was when you *stopped* sleeping with the boss that the trouble really started.

Kendall Quinn flopped down on the couch next to the battered cardboard box that now represented the remains of her career. Four years as a PR manager with the most prestigious talent representation agency in LA and all she had to show for it was an over-watered Philodendron, a half-eaten container of Tums, and a severance check that wouldn't even cover her half of next month's rent.

She kicked off her heels and tossed her iPhone on the coffee table, not bothering to check for messages. Kyle had almost certainly made sure no one would try to contact her—none of her clients, none of her coworkers. She was well and truly screwed.

Metaphorically, of course. Because to add insult to injury, Kyle had been a lousy lay. Bastard.

It wasn't even like she could turn around and sue him for wrongful termination. Even though he'd all but *admitted* he'd fired her because it would be uncomfortable for his new girlfriend to have to work with her every day, Kendall had failed to bill the required number of hours for the past two months, which was the official party line for why she'd been terminated.

And as far as party lines went, it was super credible. Especially since she recently lost her biggest client to the hateful little bitch—her protégé, no less—who'd also stolen Kyle from her, making it nearly impossible to bill the

required monthly hours.

Getting new clients took time, too. Wining, dining, schmoozing, and convincing Hollywood types to trust her with their precious PR, social media, and crises management wasn't an easy task. It *especially* wasn't easy for someone like Kendall, who had very little control over the filter between her brain and her mouth, which was why she'd lost Lynsay Storm, country music's flavor of the month, as a client in the first place.

But that wasn't worth thinking about right now. It was done and there was no going back. What she needed now was a plan for how to recover from this fiasco.

First and foremost? She needed a new place to live. Kyle had given her a month to vacate the townhouse they shared. The miserable asshole didn't even have the decency to offer her the place as a parting gift, which was just spiteful, seeing as he was staying with his new fuck toy.

She also needed to figure out what she was going to do for work. Because apartments in LA didn't just magically pay for themselves.

She wished she could pull a *Jerry McGuire* and try to convince some of her old co-workers and clients to follow her. But the non-compete she'd signed when she was hired by Walker and Patrick PR was iron clad. If she tried to steal any of their clients and employees now that she was a free agent—even though that status had been forced on her—she'd pretty much owe a kidney and her firstborn to the firm's lawyers.

Even if she could find a way to weasel out of her non-compete, it wasn't like any of her clients would leave Walker and Patrick for her. Sure, her clients liked her, but Kendall was sure they loved the firm's endless resources and connections even more.

Honestly, until she ran the clock out on her non-compete (five years, if she remembered correctly), the best she could probably hope for here in LA was occasional consulting work, or finding brand new, awesome, unrepresented talent.

And finding brand new, awesome, unrepresented talent in this place? Her odds of finding a unicorn with the Holy Grail shoved up its ass were better.

Practically every waiter and waitress with a dream and a modicum of talent had representation here in La La Land.

Sweet crap on a cracker, what had she gotten herself into? Had she really lost her career over a douchenozzle like Kyle Walker?

It didn't escape her attention that nearly every mistake she'd ever made in her twenty-nine years of life could be traced back to a good-looking, smooth-talking, dark-haired, bad-boy asshole.

Losing her virginity at sixteen to a guy who'd told the entire school she'd given him crabs when she broke up with him? Yep. That'd happened. Vance McNeil—quarterback of the football team and hotter than he had any right to be, with hair and eyes the color of melted dark chocolate.

Then there was the bartender with the deep, grumbly baritone and midnight eyes she'd dated for two weeks. That relationship had come to a screeching halt when she found out he'd stolen her jewelry and pawned it to pay off his gambling debts.

Kyle was no better. He hadn't stolen from her or told the entire office she was an STD-ridden whore or anything, but he'd done something much worse. He'd actually tricked her into thinking he was a good, decent guy. The kind of guy who, despite his gorgeous face, olive-toned skin, and wavy chestnut hair, would never fuck her protégé on his desk where anyone could walk in and find them only weeks—WEEKS!—after asking her to move in with him.

Gah! Her taste in men was shit. Her next boyfriend would be a blond with absolutely zero alpha tendencies, by God.

Kendall jumped when her phone rang, then she lunged for it. With any luck, Kyle had realized he'd been a short-sighted jackass to fire her and that there was no way he could keep the agency going without her.

She sighed with disappointment when she realized it wasn't Kyle calling. But hey, at least this caller was a blond. Maybe her luck was starting to turn already.

“Hi, Ray,” she said, trying not to sound like a defeated, pathetic, desperate loser. “It's not a good time. Can I call you back later?”

After I've eaten the giant bag of cheese puffs I bought on the way home and washed it down with a cheap bottle of wine?

She could practically hear Ray rolling his blue eyes heavenward. “Oh, please, Ken Doll,” he said. “I know you’re about two seconds away from carb-loading and binge-watching *The Great British Baking Show*. You have nothing better to do than talk to me.”

“Rude,” she grumbled. True, but rude, nonetheless. “And don’t call me Ken Doll. You know I hate that.”

“Whatever you say, pumpkin.”

Pumpkin was only marginally better, but she’d allow it. “I was fired less than an hour ago, Ray. How do you already know about it?”

“Your ex-protégé,” he said. “I called your office because you weren’t answering your cell and she spilled the beans. Gleefully, I might add. She has absolutely *zero* discretion.”

“Yeah, I kind of figured that out when I caught her banging Kyle on his desk yesterday at lunch,” she said dryly.

And she’d only caught them because she’d felt bad when he told her he had to work through lunch, so she’d picked up his favorite sandwich—chicken salad on rye—from Joe’s deli where they usually ate lunch together.

But apparently all he’d *really* needed for lunch was Tiffany bent over his mahogany desk with her skirt shoved up to her waist and her thong around her ankles while he fucked her from behind as hard as he could manage with his pencil dick. Asshole.

Ray let out a disgusted sound. “Ugh. I knew I hated that guy as soon as he said *The Rise of Skywalker* was the best *Star Wars* movie ever. There is no one on earth less trustworthy than a straight white guy who loved that movie more than *The Empire Strikes Back* and *The Last Jedi*. Dumb motherfucker.”

Kendall knew better than to engage in a *Star Wars* discussion with Ray. It was a never-ending rat hole that often led to him asking if she knew anyone who could get him a meeting with JJ Abrams so that Ray could kick him in the shins.

So instead, she just sighed and said, “I should’ve known Kyle was too good to be true. Tiffany, too. It was at least partially my fault for trusting the wrong people. Again.”

“I knew neither of them would last.”

“And now you’re psychic? Great,” she said, her voice completely devoid of emotion. She held up her middle finger. “Tell me what I’m thinking right now.”

He chuckled. “Oooh, feisty. I like ‘em feisty.”

“That would be great for my ego if I didn’t also know you like ‘em male.”

This time he let out a sharp laugh that actually made her smile. But only a little. “Baby,” he said, “if you were a dude, I would’ve married you by now.”

Now that one hurt a little. The closest thing to a marriage proposal she’d ever had, and it was from her gay best friend. “Good to know that if I only had a penis, I’d be married and employed.”

“‘If I only had a penis’...the forgotten song lyrics that never made it into the final cut of *The Wizard of Oz*,” he quipped.

Kendall shook her head. “Funny. You’re a funny guy, Ray.”

“Oh, buck up, buttercup. It can’t be as bad as all that. Why did the asshole fire you, anyway?”

“The real reason? He thought it would be awkward for his new fuck toy to have to keep reporting to his *old* fuck toy every day. The made-up reason? I lost the Storm account.”

“Well,” he said, “you *did* call her a brainless twatwffle. On national television.”

Kendall threw a hand up in frustration. “Just how many times do you have to flash the paparazzi before you start wearing underwear, huh? It’s not rocket science, for fuck’s sake. And she completely ignored the script I gave her and said, on camera, that she didn’t usually participate in children’s charities because kids are gross. She said the sick kids in the cancer ward were gross, Ray. How am I supposed to spin *that*? She *is* a brainless twatwaffle.” She

sniffed indignantly. “It’s just my unfortunate luck that I said it within earshot of so many hot mics. It was an honest mistake that could’ve happened to anyone.”

“Agreed. But that doesn’t make you any less fired. Anyhoo, I’m bored with feeling sorry for you. Let’s talk about me.”

She blinked. That was abrupt, even for Ray, who was *not* known for his tact. “Wow, thanks for the sympathy, pal. You’d think that losing a boyfriend, my career, and my townhouse in one day would earn me the right to *wallow* at least a little.”

Ray made a disgusted sound. “Kyle was a shitty boyfriend with a tiny dick who cleared his throat every eighteen seconds and said ‘irregardless.’ No loss there. And you’ll have another job before this phone call is over.”

She frowned. “Once and for all, Ray, I’m not going to dress up like Betty Draper and pretend I’m your secretary.”

He scoffed. “No, silly. I mean a *real* job. Although I don’t know what you have against *Mad Men*. You’d look just like January Jones all dolled up in a flouncy little skirt.”

She was so not going to have this conversation with him today. “What job?”

Ray took a big dramatic breath. “I’m about to tell you something I’ve never told anyone in LA.”

Anyone who didn’t know Ray would probably be intrigued by the gravity of his tone. But Kendall knew him better than that. “Is this about the time you saw Ashton Kutcher at Starbucks?”

A pregnant pause on his end was followed by, “Dumbass, I told *everyone* that. I *said* I was going to tell you something I’ve never told anyone in LA.”

True enough. She’d heard the Ashton Kutcher story at least twelve times. “OK, so spill.”

“I have a brother.”

“Great. Is he blond and single?”

She heard him slap a palm to his forehead. “Damn it, Kenny, I’m serious.”

So was she. At least a little bit.

Ray then said the magic words. “He was a *bit* famous a few years ago.”

Kendall leaned forward, suddenly *very* serious. “Why am I just now hearing about this?”

“Because I’ve seen you go after celebrities and it’s like watching the shark swallow that little boy in *Jaws*. And he wasn’t ready to be in the limelight again. If you’d convinced him to hire you when we first met, today he’d be the biggest name in the business, because you’re incapable of half-assing anything. And he just wasn’t ready.”

“But he’s ready now? So, what, is he some kind of washed-up child star looking to make a comeback?”

Kendall practically salivated at the thought. Washed up child stars were her specialty. If she’d been around to convince David Cassidy to sign with her, he would’ve had his own number-one-rated reality series or been the host of a top-tier talent competition instead of that Vegas residency he did.

“No. And I’m not telling you anything else. Not yet, anyway. I want you to meet him before you make any snap judgments.”

She pursed her lips in frustration. “I don’t make snap judgments.”

“Puh-lease. You’re Snappy McSnaperson, mayor of Snappytown.”

“Well, that’s just childish.” A little true, too. Not that she’d admit that to *him*. “You have to give me something here, Ray. How do you even know I’ll want to work with him after I’ve met him?”

“One, you love a challenge like no one I’ve ever seen in my life. And two, you don’t have a choice, Kenny. You have posh taste, high-maintenance hair, and a shoe fetish. You *need* the job. Plus, you have little-to-no savings.”

“How do you know I have little-to-no savings?”

He snorted. “Hel-lo? Not only am I a CPA, I’m *your* CPA. Did you forget that? So, unless you have an account in the Caymans I’m not aware of,

you're damn near broke."

"It's not like I blew all my money on hair product and shoes, you know," she grumbled.

"I know, I know. You paid off your student loans and your parent's house like a good little girl. Oh, come on, sweetie. What do you have to lose?"

Thanks to Kyle, a whole helluva lot of nothing. Her name would be shit in this town by tomorrow. If it wasn't already. "Tell me this mystery brother doesn't already have an agent, and isn't in LA," she said.

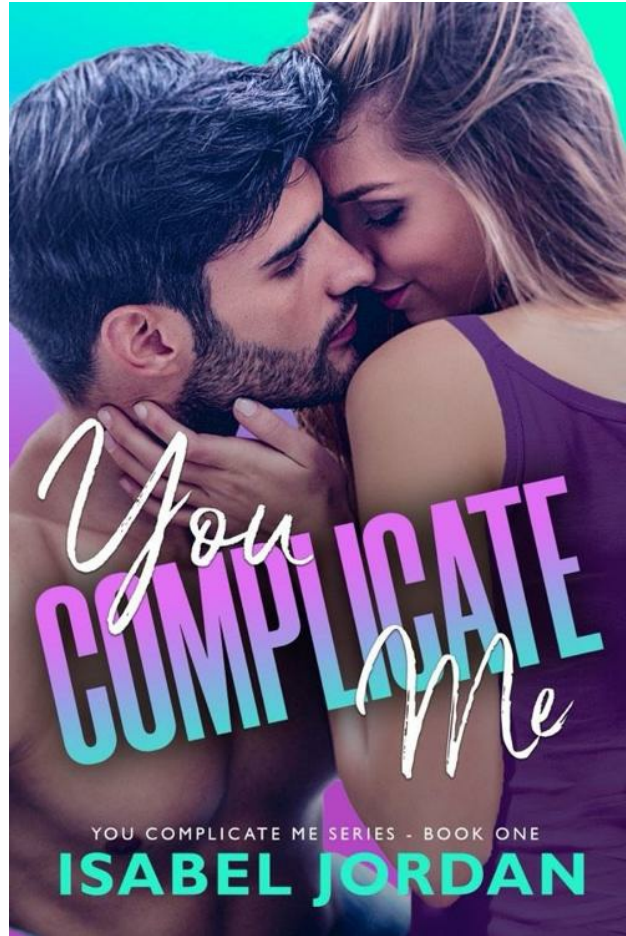
"No agent. And he is hell-and-gone from LA."

And he was Ray's brother, so chances were good that he was a blond, not some hot, dark-haired, alpha jerkwad that'd be her Kryptonite. Again. A blond paying client who wasn't in LA sounded pretty good right about now.

Besides, she hadn't met a client yet she couldn't handle. Drug addicts, sex scandals, has-beens and never-were's—she was a publicity *goddess* who could deal with them all.

How bad could it be?

Like it so far? You can get more info right [HERE](#).



The road to happily ever after has never been more hilarious...or complicated...

CHAPTER 1

In retrospect, the Valium probably would've been enough to soothe Grace Montgomery's nerves on the flight from Los Angeles to Indianapolis. The wine was most likely overkill.

As was the tequila.

It had all started innocently enough. "Take one pill an hour before the flight," her doctor had told her, "and one an hour into the flight. You'll be completely relaxed. Valium is magic, I swear."

"The kind of magic that keeps planes from falling from the sky in a ball of fiery death?" Grace had asked.

Her doctor's answering smirk should've been a warning. "The kind of magic that makes you not care on the way down."

And she hadn't. Cared, that is. The magic Valium had done its job.

Until take-off, at least.

As soon as the plane started rolling down the runway, as soon as she felt the rumbling of the engine in her belly, she started panicking. The man sitting next to her in seat C2, no doubt having noticed the white-knuckled grip she had on their adjoining armrest, had suggested a glass of wine, which she'd requested from the flight attendant as soon as she'd been allowed. But even though she gulped it down in two swallows, the wine was absolutely no match for her anxiety, because she soon started hyperventilating.

C2 had pressed an air-sickness bag into one of her hands, and a mini bottle of tequila into the other. After breathing deeply into the bag for a few moments, she'd unscrewed the tequila and downed it, too. One swallow that time.

Grace was nothing if not a quick learner.

It was then she'd made what she thought was a tragic error. She'd asked for a second bottle of tequila, which she used to wash down her second Valium. The calm that had quickly washed over her was amazing. She couldn't remember a time when she'd felt so relaxed.

And warm. She was suddenly really, really, warm. So it only made sense that she'd strip off her sweater, right?

Sadly, while she was shedding layers, she elbowed the guy next to her in the eye.

"Jesus Christ," he'd muttered, holding a hand over one eye.

That was when she got her first good look at C2.

Maybe it was the Valium, or maybe it was the alcohol, but holy hell, he was *beautiful*.

His inky hair was long overdue for a trim and fell in messy disarray—the kind of messy disarray that hot men achieved naturally and women paid big bucks to a salon to fake—to just above the collar of his white button-down shirt. With his knife-edged cheekbones, strong jaw, and olive complexion, he looked like he could be Hugh Jackman's younger brother.

Grace had watched *Wolverine* four times, and not because the storyline was stellar (or even remotely plausible, really). Her mouth immediately went dry. Other parts of her...not so much.

"I'm r-really sorry," she whispered.

He lowered his hand and she winced at the elbow-sized welt forming under his eye. "Are you always like this on a plane?" he asked.

"Like what?"

"Fucking crazy?"

She frowned at him. “I’m a nervous flyer, okay? Lots of people are nervous flyers.”

He shook his head and ran his hand through that amazing hair of his. “This isn’t nervous. I’ve seen nervous. You’re a train wreck, lady.”

He wasn’t lying. Didn’t make his comment any less insulting. “I’m sorry if my fear of falling from the sky and plummeting to a fiery death is inconveniencing you in any way.”

One black brow winged upward. “Fear all you want. I couldn’t care less. But when you try to blind me with your fucking elbow while you strip down to your underwear...well, that’s when I start to care.”

Grace glanced down at her white layering tank top. It wasn’t see-through. Minimal cleavage was on display. Perfectly respectable. “I said I was sorry about elbowing you, okay? And I’m not in my underwear.”

His gaze dipped down. “I can tell that you’re cold.” He smirked as his eyes met hers again. “Or turned on.”

She so wasn’t cold.

“I’m cold,” she said dryly. “Don’t flatter yourself.”

His smirk morphed into a full-fledged grin, and Grace fought the urge to fan herself. Jesus, the grin was nothing short of panty-dropping. A smile like that should be illegal. All those straight white teeth and the dimple that carved into his cheek...it was gratuitous, really.

And his eyes? An amazing oceanic mix of blue and pale green. Men shouldn’t be allowed to have eyes that pretty.

“Let’s start over,” he said. He held out his hand. “I’m Nick. Nick O’Connor.”

She was so busy staring at his eyes—and being envious of his thick, dark eyelashes, if she was being honest with herself—that it took her a moment to realize he was speaking to her. She took his hand. “Grace. Grace Montgomery.”

Something akin to recognition lit his eyes for a moment, making her wonder if he knew her. Had they met before? But she immediately dismissed the

thought. If she'd met *this* guy before, she'd remember it.

His hand was warm and callused, and dwarfed hers. Her gaze traveled from his hand up his thick forearm, exposed by the rolled-up sleeve of his shirt. His biceps strained the fabric of that shirt, as well. If the arms were any indication, a muscly chest and flat stomach were a foregone conclusion.

She considered then that her judgment might be impaired. No one was *this* good-looking. Or else Nick O'Connor was genetically blessed in a way that was totally unfair to all other men.

Tequila goggles. She was wearing a set of tequila goggles. There was no other explanation.

He cleared his throat, drawing her attention back to his face. He let go of her hand and she fought the urge to grab his again. She knew she was an embarrassment to feminists everywhere, but there was something insanely comforting about having a big, strong guy holding her hand. If she'd grabbed him early on, maybe she wouldn't have needed the Valium. Or wine. Or tequila.

"So, Grace," he said, "have you always been a nervous flyer?"

She laid her head back against the seat, suddenly feeling a little off balance. "Yeah. I don't like being closed in. Or depending on people I don't know to fly the plane. And land the plane."

"Uh huh. So you're one of *those*."

She frowned at him again. "One of those *what*?"

"Control freaks."

"I am not a control freak."

Was it her imagination, or had she slurred that sentence?

He gave her the panty-dropping grin again. Yep, she'd slurred.

"Whatever you say, angel."

Being called a control freak was kind of a hot button for Grace. It was something her ex-husband never failed to bring up when they'd argued,

which had been often. And the fact that this total stranger would agree with her ex pissed her off. She also took exception to him assigning her a nickname. Grace unbuckled her seatbelt and stood up to tell him so.

And that's when her memory got a little...fuzzy.

She had a distinct memory of poking him in the chest, telling him he didn't know anything about her. He'd told her to sit down. To *calm* down. She'd refused, colorfully and loudly. She'd tried to badger a man in another row into trading seats with her. The guy had refused, colorfully and loudly.

Nick had gotten in the middle of that argument and tried to tell her something about who he was, what his job was, but she was too busy yelling about... something to catch all of it.

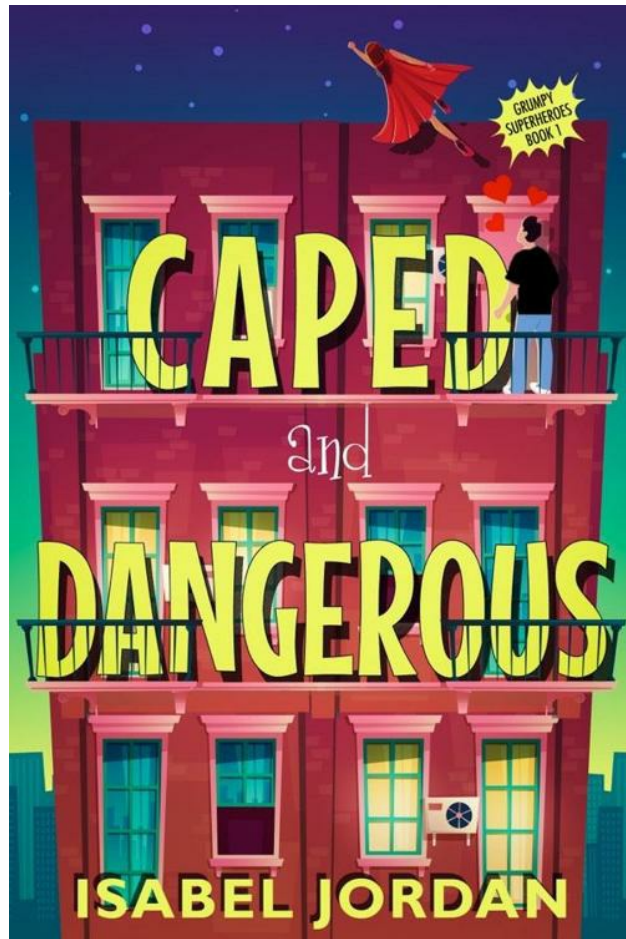
The next thing she knew, Nick had forced her back into her seat. He might've also threatened to cuff her if she got into any other arguments with passengers, which seemed a little excessive. And...kinky.

"I'm sorry," she thought he'd said at that point.

"I'm sorry, too," she vaguely remembered responding.

Then, she couldn't be sure, but she thought she might have leaned over and puked all over his shoes. After that...there was nothing but blissful, blissful unconsciousness.

Like it so far? You can read the rest right [HERE](#).



Being a superhero is not all it's cracked up to be...

CHAPTER 1

Being a superhero is *not* all it's cracked up to be.

Evil doesn't take a break because you have a date, or the flu, or just *really* want to stay home and binge-watch *Supernatural* on Netflix while wearing slouchy socks and sweatpants.

Nope. Superheroes don't get vacation days. You're pretty much on call 24-7, with crappy state-employee health benefits and damn near useless dental coverage.

And for what? The feel-good knowledge that you're doing something good for your fellow man? The adoration of the public? *Pffftttt*. Sometimes the "adoring public" sues you because when you flew in to save them from a carjacking, you accidentally shattered their windshield with the bad guy's head.

A thank-you would be customary in such situations, but it doesn't happen as often as one would think.

And you know what else? Capes chafe the back of your neck like a *bitch*. They always feel like an irritating tag in the back of a \$2 T-shirt.

These were all things Greer Glenanne, aka G-Force (a stupid nickname she did *not* choose for herself, mind you), wished someone had told her *before* she'd taken the gig as the official superhero for Gem City.

But that was twenty-ish years ago. Back when she was shiny and new and so idealistic it *hurt*. There'd been so many things she'd wanted to do, so many

people she'd wanted to help. She'd been so *sure* she would save the world one day.

Now she got sued by the people she saved. (Yeah...that was a true story, sadly.) Her bum knee ached so badly every time it rained she was forced to limp on the job. Sometimes she woke up and her back hurt for no reason at all. Or she threw it out entirely because she sneezed wrong.

As it turned out, being able to fly and bench press a Buick didn't protect you from all the typical middle-aged maladies that impacted normal folks.

Then there was the fact that she was in early onset menopause. That was a fun one. Hot flashes and heightened emotions. Just what every woman with superpowers should have.

So, if being a superhero sucked, being a *middle-aged* superhero sucked the biggest bag of dicks the world had ever known.

“Hey! Yo, G!”

Greer startled at the voice that popped into her ear, nearly causing her to spill the mug of hot chocolate she'd just pulled out of her microwave.

Yeah. That was *another* thing that sucked about being a superhero. The Bluetooth-enabled cochlear implant that allowed her team to reach her, anytime, anywhere.

Day. Or. Night.

The sheer number of times she'd taken calls while on the toilet was appalling.

“What?” she snapped, wishing more than anything that she could just drink her damn hot chocolate and go to bed. But Rio only said “Yo” in that tone when she wasn't going to like what he had to say.

Rio Flores was her tech support, her project manager, her personal assistant, and her best friend all rolled into one six-foot-tall, ridiculously attractive gay man who had better style than all the *Queer Eye* guys combined. He was her Overwatch—the Felicity Smoak to her Green Arrow.

And he was about to ruin her night. She could just feel it, from the tips of her messy bun to the soles of her fuzzy pink bunny slippers.

“I got a call from Hottie McStudly, my friend.”

Greer groaned and squeezed her eyes shut. “Ugh. Not again. Please, don’t tell me.”

“OK. But he says he has something of yours. Again.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “See, I *told* you not to tell me.”

“Sorry,” Rio said, not sounding sorry at all. “But we don’t know for *sure* it’s her this time.”

Oh, of *course* it was her. It was *always* her. “Don’t patronize me.”

Bryn Terrell—no official superhero nickname yet—was and had always been a pain in the ass, ever since the state made her Greer’s trainee.

It wasn’t that Bryn was bad at the job. Quite the opposite, really. She was just *overzealous*. She tended to treat jaywalkers with the same “I am Justice” attitude she threw at bank robbers and muggers. She saw every petty thief and minor league crook in the state as *evil*. Greer had been at the superhero gig long enough to recognize all the shades of gray between good and evil.

There were *so many* shades of gray.

And Bryn’s righteous quest for justice was topped off with a mountain of blonde curls, perky, 20-year-old boobs, and a sweet, lilting voice. All of that made Bryn almost more than Greer could take on a good day.

And today was *not* a good day.

Bryn had, for some reason, made it her life’s mission to take down Killian Morgan, who Rio lovingly (or lustingly) referred to as Hottie McStudly.

About once a month for the past two years or so, Bryn got caught breaking into Killian’s billion-dollar, corporate high rise, looking for “evidence of wrongdoings”, as she put it.

Greer wasn’t entirely sure what Killian had done to make his millions, and she wasn’t certain what his employees did in that lavishly appointed high rise of his. What she *did* know was that he was way too smart to have any “evidence of wrongdoings” laying out where Bryn could stumble upon it.

And it wasn't like Killian didn't *know* that Bryn had X-ray vision. If there was anything in the building that could incriminate him, she would've seen it. Then she would've gleefully reported it all to Greer in that annoyingly pretty voice of hers, and Greer would've gotten a migraine.

Greer was willing to admit that, on some level, it irked her that Bryn might be at least a little *right* about Killian. The odds that he was completely innocent were most likely not favorable. After all, were any hot billionaires under fifty *not* crooked as hell? Greer didn't see how they couldn't be.

But as far as Greer knew, whatever Killian was doing wasn't actively hurting anyone. If anything, he was probably guilty of a bunch of white-collar crimes and money-making schemes that Greer didn't give a crap about. And Bryn wasn't going to find evidence of any of *that* in his building, or she would've already.

So, here she was, again, in the position of going to the Morgan Enterprises building, and being forced to sweet talk Killian Morgan into *not* pressing charges against her trainee.

Which left Greer in yet *another* uncomfortable position. Because as much as she tried to ignore it, Killian Morgan was wildly attractive. And she did mean *wildly*. Like, throw-him-down-and-mount-him-like-a-rutting-beast *wildly*. She couldn't afford to develop a crush on him or indulge in any flirting. She did *not* need a sexual harassment suit on her record.

Greer fanned her face. Great. Now she was having a hot flash. Just the *thought* of sexually harassing Killian gave her hot flashes. Fan-fucking-tastic.

"Kiss him 'hi' for me, G," Rio said.

Greer let out an unladylike snort. "Yeah, sure. I'll get right on that," she said, still fanning her face.

"Honey, if I was you, I would've got on *that* years ago. Now, go collect the B-Team."

"You know she hates it when you call her that."

"I could call her Plan B, if you'd prefer? Betamax?"

Even in her foul mood, Greer got a chuckle out of that. “You know I love you, right?”

“*Pfffttt*. Of course you do. Who else would pick up your hormones from the drugstore and iron your capes?”

Like it so far? You can pick it up right [HERE](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My husband, my son, my parents, all the folks in the Bitch, Write Faster fan group, LE Wilson, Jaycee DeLorenzo...y'all know why you're here. Y'all know why I love you and why I owe you BIG. A mere "thank you" will never be enough.

AFTERWORD

If you enjoyed this book, first of all, thanks for reading! It would mean a lot to me if you would take a moment and show your support of indie authors (like me) by leaving a review. Your reviews are a very important part of helping readers discover new books.

Want to know more about me, or the date of the next book release? You can email me directly at:

isabel.jordan@izzyjo.com

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Monster Mate

A personal note from Isabel:

If you enjoyed this book, first of all, thanks for reading! It would mean a lot to me if you would take a moment and show your support of indie authors (like me) by leaving a review. Your reviews are a very important part of helping readers discover new books.

Want to know more about me, or the date of the next book release? You can email me directly at: isabel.jordan@izzyjo.com. Also feel free to stalk me on:

Bookbub: <https://www.bookbub.com/authors/isabel-jordan>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/AuthorIsabelJordan>

Private readers' group (Bitch, write faster): <https://www.facebook.com/groups/846416382191567/>

Twitter: @izzyjord

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/isabel.jordan_author/

Pinterest: <https://www.pinterest.com/ijordan0345/>

Website: <http://www.izzyjo.com/>

Sign up for updates on all things Isabel Jordan at: <http://www.izzyjo.com/sign-up.html>

Thanks so much, and happy reading!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The normal

Isabel Jordan writes because it's the only profession that allows her to express her natural sarcasm and not be fired. She is a paranormal and contemporary romance author. Isabel lives in Indiana with her husband, her son, a neurotic Shepherd mix, and a ginormous Great Dane mix named Jerkface. (Don't feel bad for him. He really is a jerk.)

The weird

Now that the normal stuff is out of the way, here's some weird-but-true facts that would never come up in polite conversation. Isabel Jordan:

1. Is terrified of butterflies (don't judge...it's a real phobia called lepidopterophobia)
2. Is a lover of all things ironic (hence the butterfly on the original cover of Semi-Charmed)
3. Is obsessed with Supernatural (hated the finale), Game of Thrones (hated the finale), and Dog Whisperer.
4. Hates coffee. Drinks a Diet Mountain Dew every morning.
5. Will argue to the death that Pretty in Pink ended all wrong. (Seriously, she ends up with the guy who was embarrassed to be seen with her and not the nice guy who loved her all along? That would never fly in the world of romance novels.)
6. Would eat Mexican food every day, if given the choice.
7. Reads two books a week in varied genres.
8. Refers to her Kindle as "the precious".
9. Thinks puppy breath is one of the best smells in the world.
10. Is a social media idgit. (Her husband had to explain to her last week what the point of Twitter was. She's still a little fuzzy on what Instagram and Pinterest do.)
11. Kicks ass at Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon.
12. Stole her tagline idea from her son. Her tagline idea was, "Never wrong, not quite right." She liked her son's idea better.
13. Breaks one vacuum cleaner a year because she ignores standard maintenance procedures (Really, you're supposed to empty the canister every time you vacuum? Does that seem excessive to anyone else?)
14. Is still mad at the WB network for cancelling Angel in 2004.
15. Can't find her way from her bed to her bathroom without her glasses, but refused eye surgery, even when someone else offered to pay. (They lost her at "eye flap". Seriously, look it up. Scary stuff.)

