



Cross My

HEART

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

LOGAN CHANCE

CROSS MY HEART

GODS OF SAINT PIERCE

LOGAN CHANCE



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You can do hard things.

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Where the mind goes, the body will follow

Arnold Schwarzenegger

*

Roman's journey is his own and not a reflection of anyone else's. We all have to decide what's best for us and there is no judgement on what it takes to make that happen.

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novella RENDEZVOUS.***

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PROLOGUE

Greer

14 Years Old

“Someone call the *Prosecution Podcast*. There’s been a fashion crime.”

“Shut up, Dev,” I shout at my older brother. He’s not wrong, though. The pink frilly dress he’s smirking at makes me feel like a cheap Barbie doll. But I’m wearing it to the dance, and I don’t care what anyone thinks. It’s not like anyone pays attention to me anyway.

He holds his hands up. “No need to shout. Just a little shocked that’s what you’re wearing to the dance. You look about four, not fourteen.”

I push my glasses up my nose and glare at him while he leans against my bedroom doorway. “Well, I’m a little shocked you’re even here. Shouldn’t you be at Roman and Ledger’s house?”

Guilt flashes in his brown eyes before he tucks it away. “Where’s Dad?”

“Drinking in his study.” Like any other day.

“Fuck,” he mutters.

You can curse all you want when there are no adults around to care what comes out of your mouth, but I know she would’ve hated it, so I correct him. “Don’t say that.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re not my mom.”

The perpetual flutter of butterfly wings in my stomach increases like they do every time I hear that word.

“Well, obviously. But just because she’s dead doesn’t mean you can do things she wouldn’t like.”

He blinks, but the guilt doesn’t leave his eyes. I’ve said the unspeakable, brought up the topic we’re supposed to avoid. The tense air in my room feels like a weight on my chest, suffocating me.

“Greer...” he says, but I bolt past him and hustle down the hallway. My pulse drums a rapid beat in my ears as I sprint down the stairs and fly across the foyer. When I fling the door open, I collide with a hard chest.

“Oomph,” flies out into the still night. “What the...”

I look up into the blue eyes of Roman, Dev’s best friend. “Oh. Sorry.”

He glances down at my dress. “Where are you going all dolled up?”

“Nowhere. I was just trying it on for the dance on Friday.”

His brows raise. “You’re going?”

“Yes. I don’t know. Why?”

“Doesn’t seem like your thing.”

“Well, it is now.” I sidestep him as the butterflies swarm within me, their fluttering now fueled for a reason other than anxiety.

Before I can get off the porch, his long legs move him in front of me. “Seriously, where are you going?”

“For a walk.”

“It’s dark.”

“So.” Dad’s too in his booze to care and won’t even notice I’m not in the house.

His mesmerizing gaze dips down to my bare feet. “You can’t walk around without shoes.”

“I’m just going to the garden.” If he doesn’t move, I’m going to cry in front of him. “Please get out of my way.”

Instead of letting me pass, he turns around, giving me the back of his t-shirt and jeans. “Hop on, princess.”

“It’s okay, Roman. Don’t you have to go inside?”

“Nope. Dev wants to talk to your dad before we head back to my house.” He looks over his shoulder at me. “Get on, Greer. Seems like you need me more than he does right now.”

He’s the only one who’s noticed that I’m not okay with my mother’s suicide. “You’re too tall,” I say, trying to hide the tears from him. “And I’m not like the cheerleaders you hang out with at school. I can’t vault into the air like they can.”

He takes two steps down, so he’s on the ground. “There. Let’s go. I have something for you.”

God, the girls at school would die to ride on his back. And so would I. Which is why I say fuck it—forgive me, Mom—and leap off the porch.

He chuckles as I wrap my arms around his neck and cinch my legs around his waist.

“Those cheerleaders have nothing on you, Greer.”

“Yeah, right. They’ve got boobs and I’ve got brains. Yay me.” And then I’m sobbing, because I just said that to the guy I’ve had a crush on for years. But who else can I say it to? I don’t have a mother anymore.

“Ah, shit,” he whispers as he walks us away from the house. “Don’t cry, Greer. You’ll...um...get them soon.”

He stops in the corner of the yard by the oak tree, and I slide down his back onto the soft grass.

“It’s not that,” I say.

He runs a hand through his dark hair, leaving a lock flopped onto his forehead. “What is it then?”

His gaze skims the thin straps holding up the sequin bodice of my dress. “Are you nervous about going to the dance?”

“Yeah, but I’m going anyway. Mom picked this dress out for me and I told her it was awful. This is my last chance to wear it before it doesn’t fit anymore.” I swipe at the tears on my cheeks and finally let out what’s been tearing at my insides. “Maybe if I hadn’t been a brat, she wouldn’t have left us.”

“Greer”—he crouches down a bit and cups my face in his hands—“listen to me. It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t Devereaux’s fault. I may only be seventeen, but I’m old enough to know she loved you and whatever reason she had to kill herself had nothing to do with you.”

His face is so sure, so earnest, I believe him. We sit on the grass, and he listens as I tell him how I worry Dad is drinking and avoiding us because we look like her. That I wonder if I should dye my hair or cut it off. He seems pained by that admission from me, but he doesn’t act like I’m stupid for thinking about it.

When I’ve let all my worries out, we sit in silence until he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a velvet pouch tied with a pink ribbon.

“Dev said you didn’t feel like celebrating your birthday last week, but I got you something anyway.” He hands me the pouch.

Inside I find a heart-shaped golden locket on a dainty gold chain with a note that says *Keep those you love close to your heart.*

“It’s beautiful,” I whisper. “Thank you.”

“You’re going to be okay, Greer,” he says.

“I miss her,” I say on a choked sob. “I don’t have anybody. Dev’s got you and Ledger. Dad’s got his whiskey. Mom left me to take care of myself.”

He pulls me into him and cradles my head against his chest. It’s warm and safe. “You’ve got me.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart, Greer.”

ONE



GREER

Present Day

Welcome to the Wine and Punishment podcast, where we discuss criminal cases in and around Saint Pierce, while having some delicious wine. I'm Sadie, here with my co-host Eden, and today, we're discussing the Delgado case. Is Bane Delgado guilty of extorting local businesses?

“Innocent!” I yell from the shower as I rinse the shampoo from my hair. And I plan on proving it as soon as my firm gives me the case. Which should happen today.

Sadie: *So, we've got a thirty-something year old man who's gorgeous and absolutely oozing with swagger. Yes, I said swagger.*

Eden: *He is sexy.*

“No, he's not.” I slather conditioner through my wet hair as Eden and Sadie theorize on a case they know nothing about. They've never known much of anything either. I went to high school with both of them, and even back then they were insufferable.

Sadie: *Let's break down what we know. Bane Delgado is part of the Delgado Family, and he's been brought up on charges of extortion by way of the Rico Act of 1970. Witnesses will testify that the Delgado Family operated through a network of associates who would approach businesses here in Saint Pierce demanding payments for security. Those who refused to comply faced vandalism and many other harmful activities. Crazy, right?*

Eden: *Remember the pizza shop on 39th that caught fire a few years ago? I'm wondering if arson was at play.*

“Absolutely not,” I say as I aggressively squirt body wash onto my loofah. “That’s all speculation. There’s no proof.” I’ve got one tit soaped when Sadie stops my motions with her next words.

Sadie: *They’ve hired Stanford, Beaumont, and Lind to represent them. That means their lawyer might end up being the sister of the guy who owns Club Greed. Do you think Greer Huxley could handle this case?*

My stomach does a somersault listening to their ensuing laughter. I never did like these girls.

Eden: *I know she’s supposed to be a rising star in the legal field, but no I don’t think she can. She’s probably too busy gawking over her older brother’s besties, the Thorne twins.*

“I never gawk,” I shout as they cackle like drunk hens. “But if I did, it would be quick and wouldn’t interfere with my job.”

These women are royally pissing me off. I am unfavoriting them from my podcast list.

Sadie: *Can you imagine being in the same room with those guys?*

Eden: *Listen, Greer has to be one of the luckiest women on the planet. She’s related to Devereaux Huxley, and she gets to pal around with Roman and Ledger Thorne all day. I’m willing to bet Greer has had some fun times at her brother’s club with Roman or Ledger, or possibly both. And now she’ll be defending Bane Delgado himself.*

My face heats to an inferno. They’re just jealous because Roman and Ledger wanted nothing to do with them in high school. Still don’t. “Not likely,” I shout. I do not frequent my brother’s sex club. That is a bridge too far for me to cross.

Eden: *Who could blame her? If it were me, I’d never leave the club. Even after everything that went down there.*

While they get lost in retelling the Club Greed murders that happened a few months ago, I finish washing and shaving. And stewing over how they've placed me under a microscope with all their listeners. Hundreds of thousands, who all now think I'm an incompetent walking vagina, spending all my time getting spanked and fondled at Club Greed.

It's like high school all over again. Sadie and Eden were the mean girls back then, and it appears they're even meaner girls now.

Sadie: *Devereaux Huxley ended up dating the detective who worked on that case. What was her name?*

Eden: *Chloe Bardot. She went undercover as a Greedy Girl. Some women have all the luck.*

I roll my eyes and shut off the water. "They're in love, unlike you two losers." I jerk the shower door open and stalk across the bathroom tiles to the vanity where my phone plays the podcast.

Sadie: *So, the question remains, is the Delgado Family guilty of extortion, or is it all a big misunderstanding? And will Greer Huxley be in over her head with this one?*

Water droplets fall on my phone screen as I jab a finger to the glass, cutting off the podcast. "Bye, bitches."

"That seems harsh," someone says in a low, domineering voice.

I scream, spinning around to land a wet foot into the crotch of a tall body. And then I'm gone like the wind, sprinting past the claw-foot tub, right out of the bathroom. Adrenaline races through my veins as I haul ass through my ridiculously large house toward the front door.

My mind tries to remember details of the intruder but only black clothes and a black ball cap surface. Great, no description if I survive.

I dash down the hallway and make it half-way through the living room when I hear them shout, "Greer! Wait."

As soon as I hear that deep voice, I freeze in my tracks.

“Greer, it’s me.”

Words fail me as I turn to see Roman standing in the outskirts of the living room. Holding the white towel I left behind. His baby blues sweep over my breasts, down to my bare...

“What the hell?” I screech, snatching a large pillow off the couch to cover my private parts. “What are you doing here, Roman?”

“Well, this didn’t go as planned.” He averts his gaze and walks closer, offering me the towel.

I yank it from his fingers and wrap it around me. Not that it matters, since he’s seen the goods. “You gave me a heart attack.”

“Same,” he says. “Where did you learn that ninja move? Impressive, especially naked.”

I’m sure my skin is as red as the roses on my coffee table. “Chloe’s self-defense classes.”

It would please my brother’s girlfriend to know I followed her instructions precisely as she instructed. Except I can’t tell her because she’s my brother’s girlfriend and he’ll find out that his best friend saw me in the buff.

“Ah.” He adjusts the brim on his cap. “I guess the more important question is, do you always talk back to the people on the podcast?” Amusement twinkles in his blue eyes.

I hold a hand up, palm facing him. “I’ve got a busy morning, so tell me why you were skulking around my bathroom while I was in the shower.”

“First, skulking? Is that a word? Second, I had no idea you’d be in the shower. Third, I heard you yelling at those women, and I just kind of became entranced, not knowing you’d barrel out of there naked.”

I tilt my head. “You thought I’d step out of the shower fully dressed and ready to go?”

His white teeth rake across his plump bottom lip, and I swear he looks like he’s trying not to laugh.

“This is not funny, Roman.”

“Not even a little? You said ‘Bye, bitches.’ That’s pretty funny.”

What comes out of me is between a “humph” and an “argh” as I power past him and stomp down the hardwoods to my bedroom. “I don’t have time for games. I’m due in the office soon.”

He follows me down the hallway. “You need better security.”

I stop at my bedroom door and turn to him. “Clearly.”

He holds his arms out wide. “I’m your man.”

There was a time in my life where I wished I could hear Roman utter those words for real, but not anymore. Long ago, I put the fairytale of Roman and I ending up together out of my head. Mostly. There’s one tiny ray of hope that I’ve tucked away in the darkest corner of my mind, but I’ve locked it up tight so it can’t escape.

“You’re not a security person.” I head into my bedroom and he follows me.

“Trust me. I’m your guy.”

He really needs to stop saying that, because the little piece of hope is banging on the door with all its might, trying to escape. And that just can’t happen. He’s my brother’s best friend. He’s my friend. We’re not meant to be.

“You’re a millionaire, many times over. You don’t need a job.”

“Every man needs to work. I can’t just be a pretty face, ya know?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “How did you get into my house?”

He props a hip against my dresser and crosses his arms, inked forearms flexing as he does. “You need a better security system. Look how easy it was for me to break in. Means you’re not safe, Greer.”

“Get out.” I point to the door, clutching the towel with my other hand.

“Fine. I’ll wait for you to get dressed.” The corner of his mouth tips up. “But don’t feel you have to on my behalf.”

Like always, his innocent flirtation causes my heart to race as I say, “Get out,” again. But it doesn’t sound as harsh this time. I’m so weak when it comes to him.

He smirks as he leaves the room, and I slam the door behind him. After I dry my hair, I slip on a cream-colored shift dress and heels before I apply light makeup. When I enter the living room, Roman is sitting on my couch, powerful thighs spread.

“How did you get in?” I ask, parking a hand on my hip.

“It was easy.” He stands from the couch and prowls closer to me. “Follow me, and I’ll show you.” He leads me down the hallway and back into the bathroom, where he opens the window and says, “Ta-dah. You didn’t lock the window.”

“Oh. Oops.”

He towers over me and places his large hands on my shoulders. “Greer, I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

I gaze into the face I’ve known since I was a kid, fiddling with the necklace around my neck he gave me when we were younger. He’s grown into quite the man since those days—bearded jaw, broad shoulders, bulging biceps—but his piercing blue eyes haven’t changed even a shade over the years.

“I’m fine,” I tell him because I know I am. “I’ve been training with Chloe every week at the YMCA. I’m one of her best students.” At least that’s what I keep telling myself.

“How’s Chloe doing? I haven’t seen her in a while.”

My eyes glaze over as I think about the baby niece or nephew Chloe will be bringing into the world in a few weeks. “She’s great.”

Roman’s gaze skims over my face. “Well, you’re definitely learning a lot from her class.”

He looks proud of me, and I bask in it for a brief second before I need away from his overwhelming presence. It's the unrequited crush I've had for him for ages. I hate being close to him because I'm always afraid I'm going to blurt out something silly like "I want to have your babies."

"Well, now that you've seen me naked, I need to head to work." He swallows roughly and I give him an awkward nod. "I have a meeting with the partners this morning. I'm expecting them to give me the Delgado case."

"You really want that case?" he asks as we leave the bathroom and head toward the front door.

"Yes." For me, it's the case of a lifetime. Honestly, it doesn't look good for Bane, but I'm sure we can win.

Lucky for me, once I'm assigned Bane as a client, I have a bit of time to get my defense case together. Based on the biased gossip from the podcast, I'm hoping we can get a jury that will be fair and impartial.

I grab my handbag and keys from the entryway table as Roman opens the door. "Listen..."

Roman stops with his hand on the door knob.

"Are things going to be weird between us now that you've seen me naked? Are you going to come to brunch on Sundays and feel uncomfortable?"

"Do I look uncomfortable?" he asks.

I use his question as an opportunity to gawk at him, because screw those wine bitches for making me feel like I can't. My gaze roams over the dark hair peeking out from his ball cap, down his lean muscles and long legs, to the black boots on his big feet.

"It's taking you a long time to answer," he says.

My eyes zip back to his amused face. "I guess not."

"You seem uncertain. But I can say with certainty, those cheerleaders from high school have nothing on you."

And then he walks into the sunlight, leaving me with my jaw on the floor that he remembers that conversation from so long ago.

“WE DON’T THINK you’re a good fit for the Delgado case.”

I blink, bewildered by what Mr. Beaumont just said. “Excuse me?” I was sure I was getting this case.

Mr. Beaumont, senior partner, peers across the glossy table at me with sharp hazel eyes, while the other suits in the room act like this isn’t earth-shattering news for me. “Greer, the Delgado case has the potential to go national, and we feel you could be a distraction. Present the wrong image.”

“Although you’re a brilliant lawyer, we’re alarmed by the online chatter about you,” Mr. Stanford, another partner, chimes in. “We think it best to hand this case to someone more settled. Someone who won’t end up in the tabloids with the defendant. Someone who won’t draw speculation about their private life, because they’re, well, settled.”

He means someone married or in a relationship. I clasp my hands together on the shimmery mahogany conference room table while I process what they’re telling me. When I took the position at Stanford, Beaumont, and Lind, I knew they had archaic expectations of the people who become the top lawyers in the firm. They’re an older bunch and it’s an old-fashioned firm. Honestly, I figured they’d all die before it became a problem for me. Looks like I figured wrong.

“Well, I’ve kept it private, but I have a boyfriend. We’re quite serious.” I force a smile to make my lie seem believable. “Don’t want to jinx it, but I’m expecting a ring soon.”

The frowns around the table lift with glee. “What’s his name? We’d love to meet him.”

“Roman Thorne.”

Their eyes go wide as I drop the name. Everyone in this town knows the infamous billionaire, Roman. I can’t help but

feel a pang of guilt. Yet, if pretending to be in a relationship is what it takes to secure the case, so be it.

TWO



ROMAN

I need you.

A text comes through from Greer, and I read it again and again. Do you know how good those words are to read?

They'd be even better if I could hear Greer utter them while I'm sinking deep inside her. Something I've thought about a lot over the years.

Even more now since I saw her naked.

I'd like to say I'm pretty proud of myself for keeping my shit together when she came barreling out of the shower. Water droplets slinking down her tight firm body. I barely got a good enough look before she was kicking me in the crotch. Thankfully my dick was hard and blocked her foot from my balls, or I'd have been doubled over in pain on her bathroom tiles.

The Greer high is ruined with a text from Ledger,

I might die from boredom at Club Greed tonight.
Dev is nesting. Come and keep me company? Need
my twin by my side.

Ledger's my fraternal twin brother. We both have dark hair, but that's where the similarities end. He's got dark eyes, where I've got a "dazzling" blue, or so I've been told. Ledger's a bit more reserved, quieter, where I like to have a good time. Ledger's been helping out with Club Greed while Dev takes some much needed time off to prepare for the baby

his girlfriend is having soon. He's been putting together the baby nursery, and basically waiting on Chloe hand and foot while she grows a tiny human inside her.

I'm still amazed my best friend is about to be a father. I glance at the text from Ledger, and laugh lightly. Ledger's been managing the sex club and I know he's not one to fool around at the club while working. So, I decide to mess with him a little and type back a reply,

Just find someone to fuck all night long.

I laugh as I send it because I know my twin brother would never do that. I also know, he'd never jeopardize his working relationship with Dev.

What?

Greer answers back, and I stare at my phone.

Shit. I sent the wrong text to Greer. The dots bounce as she keeps typing.

I tell you I need you and that's your response. Maybe I'll take you up on that, and head to my brother's club and find some hottie gentleman to... duck.

I glance at the screen.

Duck

Another text from Greer comes through.

A slow smile spreads as I realize what she's trying to type.

Goddangit...fffffuck. Stupid auto carrot.

Correccccct. Ugh.

I laugh as I read her words. I send her a duck holding a carrot gif and then reply with,

Sorry those words were meant for Ledger. To what do I owe the pleasure of you needing me?

I watch the dots move as I wait for her response.

Can you meet me for lunch?

I can meet you at Julia's

I stare at the restaurant in front of me. When I left her house this morning, I decided to stroll the streets of Saint Pierce to distract my mind. Because if I didn't, I'd be jerking off to thoughts of Greer standing in her living room nude.

I know you love their apple pie.

Apple pie? Yes, please,

Her answer is immediate.

I head inside and select a table near the window. There's a great view overlooking the downtown cityscape. Not that Saint Pierce has anything like New York or Chicago, but the small downtown has personality.

I type back a quick reply to my brother, telling him I'll try to stop by if I can. However, he shouldn't count on it.

When Dev first opened Club Greed, I loved the idea of it. Ledger, Dev, and I had a lot of fun over the years, but lately I haven't been interested. In fact, it's been months since I've even stepped foot in the club. Not since we caught the killer of the Greedy Girls. It's not because of the murders I stay away. It's more because that part of my life no longer interests me.

Greer's firm is nearby and she doesn't keep me waiting long. The server has already brought us water when Greer rushes into the restaurant and takes her seat.

She's breathtaking, even if she does appear a bit flustered.

"Are you okay?" I ask her.

She sets her purse on the table and smiles. "I'm fine." She glances at the server. "Glass of Pinot Grigio?"

The server nods and turns to me.

"Same."

"Okay, so..." she starts, but her words fall away. She stares at me, and grabs her glass of water to take a sip.

"You're kind of scaring me. Did you get the case?"

"Sort of."

"How do you sort of get a case?"

Before she can answer, the server appears with our wine and we place our lunch order. After she leaves, Greer takes a gulp of wine and settles her chocolate-colored eyes on me. "Will you have a fauxmance with me?"

"A what?" I ask her, not sure if I heard her correctly.

"Will you be my fake boyfriend?"

I crack a grin until I realize she's serious. "Oh, um, why?" I ask her.

She launches into a long tale about how the men at her firm think someone with a significant other should handle the Delgado case. I swear they're stuck in the Stone Ages, but it's written all over Greer's face how important this is to her.

"So, I lied and said you were my boyfriend. It would only be until the end of the trial." She gives me a pleading look. "Will you do it?"

It's a bad idea for me to be in a situation like that with Greer. But I ignore the warning signals in my brain and reach across the table to take her hand. "Are you sure? What about after the trial? Won't they expect you to keep up this persona?"

She blows out a deep breath. "Honestly, I haven't even thought that far ahead yet."

I study Greer as I run my thumb over her soft skin. "Are you even happy working there, Greer?"

She looks affronted as she takes her hand back and fidgets with her napkin, placing it across her lap. “Yes. I love my job. And this case is an important one. It could accelerate my career. You do sort of owe me, remember?”

I run a finger over my jaw. “Not really.”

“Yes. I bailed you out that time you skipped gym and needed help getting out of the high school. I never told anyone, even though Mrs. Kellerman asked me point blank where you were.” She points her finger at me. “You know she did.”

“Fine. What exactly will being your boyfriend entail?” I can’t believe I’m about to agree to this. Honestly, just getting an excuse to hold Greer’s hand in public has me jumping up and down like an eight-year-old ready to take part.

“Well...” She fills me in on all the details, and when I mention her brother, she frowns.

“We’ll have to tell them the truth. Maybe we can tell everyone at Brunch this Sunday.”

I nod, excited about the prospect of being her fake boyfriend. Just not so sure how Devereaux will handle the news.

THREE



GREER

I flit around my kitchen on Sunday, like Martha Stewart on steroids. Fresh brewed coffee wafts through the air while I lay crisp bacon slices on a plate next to plump sausage links. The granite countertop holds an assortment of delicate pastries, muffins, cinnamon rolls, and bagels.

I've been hosting brunches at my house for as long as I can remember. It was our thing. My mother and I would go to a restaurant for brunch every Sunday. "Just the girls," she'd say. Now I feel like I'm carrying on that tradition in my own way.

Today has an added motive, though. If Roman and I are going to make this work, we need everyone close to us on the same page. That means telling my brother, Chloe, and Ledger the truth. We need them to play along to sell this story. Shouldn't be too hard to do.

As I slide a platter of breakfast burritos on the counter, the doorbell rings. I wipe my hands on my apron and rush to it. When I open the door, Devereaux and Chloe's infectious smiles greet me.

"Hope you made a lot of food," Chloe says, blue eyes sparkling. "I'm starving."

"Have I ever let you down?" I step aside and usher them into the house. "I made a feast."

"Smells amazing," she says, rubbing her round belly. "I should go easy, though. Dev will need a forklift to haul me around soon, and I still have two months to go until this baby comes."

“You look amazing, honey,” Dev says, closing the door behind him. “If we need a forklift, I’ll get us the best one they make. Baby needs to eat.” He kisses the top of her blonde hair, his light brown eyes soft with love.

They’re so sweet it makes my teeth hurt. “That’s oddly the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard.”

He hands me a bouquet with fragrant blooms. “So, what’s the big announcement?”

Dev focuses on me so intently that I shoo away my brother’s question, clutching the array of roses and gerbera daisies tightly in my sweaty hand. “We’ll discuss it over French toast and eggs.”

“Is it about the case?” My brother has no patience. I would imagine having to wait nine months to meet his son or daughter is killing him.

“Kind of.” I pair my vague answer with a sweet-as-pie smile.

“Fine. The twins here yet?” He strides toward the kitchen, leaving Chloe and me alone in the entryway.

“No,” I call after my brother.

“So, what’s really up?” Chloe asks. She’s a detective by trade, so I’m sure she’s eager to unravel the mystery of my big announcement. Now, I’m not so sure I want to tell everyone. It feels like they’ll all know I’ve been fantasizing about Roman since childhood. I should have just kept my mouth shut.

Luckily, I’m saved by the doorbell. I weave around Chloe and fling the door open to find Roman standing there, looking effortlessly casual in a crisp white shirt and dark denim jeans. At first glance, he looks at ease with his smug smile and perfectly tousled dark hair. But something is off. Normally, he just waltzes in, so he must be feeling a little weird to ring the bell.

Chloe must be in my brain, because she says, “Why’d you ring the bell?” She gives him a thoughtful look as he moves into the entryway. Like she’s detecting something going on between the two of us.

I cut through the awkwardness with more awkwardness. “He broke into my house the other day and I was in a compromising situation, so he rings the bell now.”

Chloe rolls her lips inward, gaze darting between us. “There’s a lot to unpack in that statement.” Her hand moves to the side of her belly. “But it will have to wait. I need to sit down. Baby Huxley is playing soccer with my bladder, and I’m already worn out.” She glances at Roman once more. “Something weird is going on here.” She waves her finger between me and Roman.

I laugh. At least I try to, but it comes out all garbled and strangled.

“Is there a party going on in the foyer?” Ledger says as he enters the fray. His dark eyes focus on Roman, and I swear there’s some sort of telepathic twin convo happening between them.

And that’s my cue to morph into the perfect hostess and lead everyone to the kitchen. While they spend a few minutes catching up, gathered around the island, I check on the biscuits in the oven and take a few deep breaths. Now that everyone is here, I don’t know if I can do this.

I catch Roman’s gaze as he steals a slice of bacon and send him a frantic telepathic message, informing him we should wait and reconsider my options. And to stop stealing the bacon. He has the audacity to take another slice and look totally clueless about what I’m trying to tell him. Which is a sign this fake boyfriend thing won’t work if he can’t even read my mind like he can Ledger’s.

“I made you a virgin mimosa,” I say, handing Chloe a flute of orange juice.

“There’s nothing virgin about this.” She gestures to her stomach. “You did this to me,” she says to Devereaux.

He cracks a grin. “I vaguely remember you liking what I did to you.”

“Ew,” I say. “I’ve gone hearing blind. Please don’t reference your sex life in front of me.” I make a gagging face

as they give each other a loving peck on the lips.

Roman laughs—still too busy stealing bacon to read my mind—and Ledger gives me a knowing once over. Shit. Roman probably already told him what’s going on. Or maybe it’s some telepathic twin phenomenon. Must be nice to connect with Roman telepathically. Either way, the subtle shift in Ledger’s demeanor, the way he’s now studying Roman, makes me more nervous.

I send another telepathic message to Roman with a hard gaze, alerting him that my plan won’t work and it’s time to abort the mission. He stares back at me for a beat, but once again fails at reading my mind.

“You ready for your announcement?” is what he says. “You seem like you’re ready.”

“Yeah,” Dev says, “stop making us wait.”

This is too stressful, and we’re not actually dating, so I decide to just spill the tea. “Roman and I are going to pretend to date so I can get the Delgado case.”

Chloe’s brows shoot to her hairline and Dev looks like he’s having a painful contraction.

“The firm doesn’t want any speculation rising between Bane Delgado and Greer,” Roman adds. “Because if there’s one thing I’ve learned about the press is they love making up rumors. Bane’s engaged, but it doesn’t even matter. They’ll stop at nothing to make Bane and Greer out to something they’re not. Just to make Bane look worse than he already is.”

“Makes sense,” Ledger says, his piercing brown eyes focusing on his brother.

I’ve kind of always suspected Ledger knows about my crush on his brother, but he’s never led onto it. I’d probably die if he ever said something.

“It does make sense.” I take control of the conversation. “The firm monitors social media for things relevant to cases and two podcasters won’t stop gossiping about me. The partners think someone less single would draw less attention. So, I need to show them I’m in love.”

“But do you even know what love is?” Dev asks.

I toss a grape from the charcuterie board at him. “Yes, I know what love is.” I want to tell him I’ve been in love with his best friend for forever, but I’m taking that secret to the grave.

“I think it’s smart.” Chloe pops a cracker into her mouth. “They always say putting on a defense case is like a smoke and mirrors show. Get them focused on something. That way, you can sneak in the facts and win the case.”

“Exactly,” I say, my eyes meeting Roman’s for a split second.

“Obviously, we’ll go out on a few dates.” Roman steps next to me, placing his hand on the small of my back. It sends shivers racing down my spine, and I nearly jump at the contact.

“You should go to the club,” Chloe says before popping another cracker into her mouth. “I know for a fact a few of the partners are members there. That way they’d see you there. Know it’s legit.”

“The club?” My eyes go wide. She can’t possibly be talking about my brother’s adult sex club. “Greer?”

Chloe nods. “Obviously, I can’t disclose member names because of privacy issues, but it might surprise you who would see you there. And who they might tell.”

Roman jumps in. “I don’t think it’s Greer’s scene.”

Unease settles within me. Is there an expectation for a woman dating Roman to be kinky? I’m so not kinky. Doubts trickle in whether this will work. We’re complete opposites. He’s quite popular with the ladies, so will anyone believe he’s settled down with me?

“Agreed,” Ledger says. “That’s not the best place for Greer.”

Now I feel like the unicorn in the room. I want Roman to see me as an adventurous, experienced woman, not the innocent—prudish—little sister of his best friend. So I blurt

out, “I’d go.” My face heats at the thought of going to Club Greed under the guise of Roman’s significant other. “If it helps the cause, I’m down for it.”

“No,” Roman says with conviction.

“We can discuss it later,” I say. Because what is this attitude he’s giving at the mention of the club?

“No,” he says. “I’d rather take you to places where we can wine and dine.”

“Aw, you’re having your first fight as a couple,” Chloe teases.

The timer for the biscuits dings and I move away, dropping the topic. Clearly Roman has no interest in being seen with me at a place he’s frequented. I jerk the oven door open, annoyed by my thoughts of him hooking up with other women at the club. That’s probably why he doesn’t want to go there with me.

While Devereaux tells Roman where he’s not allowed to touch me, I butter my biscuits, becoming more annoyed with each stroke of the brush.

“Just keep your hands in safe zones,” Dev says.

I roll my eyes. “It’s not like we’re going to make out in public twenty-four seven,” I say. “We have a little class.” I glance at Roman, still annoyed. “Is that what you do with women you usually date? Maul them in public?”

“He hasn’t dated anyone in forever,” Ledger says, bringing over a plate so I can place the biscuits on it. “Maybe never.”

“Shut up,” Roman says to his brother with a slap over the head.

“I’m just stating the facts. Greer’s a lawyer, so she appreciates facts.”

While Chloe and Dev take platters of food into the dining room, I study Roman, trying to remember the last woman he dated. He never brings women around, but there has to be someone I’m forgetting. “What about Robin? Rapunzel? What was her name?”

“Regina?” Roman asks. He scoffs. “I went out with her a million years ago for a hot second. We definitely didn’t make out in public.”

I plate the biscuits, dropping each one with a plunk. “Well, I know you’re no saint, Roman.”

His captivating smile almost sweeps away my unreasonable jealousy. “Is that what you want? A saint, Greer?” He steps closer to me.

“I don’t mind if the halo is a bit tarnished,” I say, so I seem less nun-like. “Everyone is a sinner.” For good measure, I wink.

His brows pull together, and if I didn’t know better, I’d think he’s the one annoyed now.

“Brunch is served,” I say, shooing everyone out of the kitchen and into the dining room.

For the next half hour, we busy ourselves filling our plates and talking about Dev and Chloe’s impending baby. And then, Ledger nearly causes me to choke on my biscuit when he asks, “So, why didn’t you pick me to be your fake beau? Why did Roman’s name pop into your head first?”

“Don’t be jealous,” Roman says with amusement twinkling in his eyes. “Clearly, I’m more handsome.”

I laugh it off like a loon. “I figured Roman would have more time, since...you’re busy...being busy, ya know?”

The universe is kind to me and Chloe shifts the conversation away to how much she enjoys having Ledger fill in at the club so Dev can spend more time at home now. We finish up brunch and as the day winds down, I walk Chloe and Dev to the door.

“Thank you for coming,” I tell them, giving Chloe a quick hug. “Call me if anything happens.”

Chloe nods. “Listen, prance Roman around on your arm and the tabloids should quiet down. They’re just trying to intimidate you because they know you have a shot at winning, and the DA doesn’t want to see Bane walk.”

“Because they’ve already labeled him guilty.”

“I didn’t lead the investigation, but I know they’ve got a solid case.”

“Just be safe,” Dev says. “I don’t like this situation. It’s got bad karma written all over it. I like the idea of Roman keeping an eye on you. The Delgados are shady as fuck.”

I sigh. “Yeah.”

Chloe places a hand on my arm. “Before I forget, I want you to come to our house on Friday night. We have something to discuss with everyone. So, we’ll make dinner.”

I nod. “I’ll be there.”

Roman and Ledger join us at the door, and I give Ledger a hug goodbye.

“You’re crazy for going through with this,” Ledger says with a laugh. “But he’ll take care of you.”

“I can take care of myself,” I tell him, loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Nobody says you can’t. But Roman is an extra layer of security,” my brother says. He pulls me away from the others. “Are you still considering visiting Dad?”

Learning that our mother was murdered and didn’t commit suicide has made me think a lot about visiting our father. For years, I blamed myself for so much of my mother’s passing. I thought my father blamed me too. Or blamed us. I don’t even know where my father’s head has been since he’s learned the truth. When I mentioned these thoughts to Dev, he didn’t appear keen on the idea of connecting with our father.

I nod. “I think it would be good.”

He gives a quick nod and leads Chloe out the door. Ledger says goodbye to his brother and follows them out.

Roman shuts the door and stuffs his hands into his pants pockets. “Why do you and Dev look so serious?”

“I need wine for this,” I say, and head toward the kitchen.

“That bad?” He follows me.

“It’s never too early for wine, right?” I select the Sauvignon Blanc and grab two glasses.

“It’s after one. I think it’s definitely a good time for wine.”

“Want some?” I pop the cork and pour us each a glass. After I’m done, I put the bottle back in the fridge. “I’ve been thinking a lot about visiting my father.”

We settle onto stools at the island.

“Dev doesn’t agree?”

I raise the glass to my lips and take a sip. Roman watches the action closely as he mimics my movements. “He doesn’t.” I set the glass down and trace the stem with my fingertip. “It’s been so hard to think one way about a person’s death and then learn something entirely different happened.”

“I get that. It must have been hard on your father.”

“It was hard on all of us. You remember?” Roman’s family was there for ours when the news of my mother’s suicide came out. Roman and Ledger would spend days talking to Dev about losing our mother. I never really had anyone to help me through it all. I wish I could have spoken to my father about it.

Roman turns toward me. “Yeah, I know. But I meant your father went through a different suffering.”

“What do you mean?”

“Imagine loving somebody, being that person’s soulmate, and instead of just walking away, they feel the only way out is by killing themselves.” He shakes his head. “I know your mother didn’t really kill herself, but it’s what you all believed for many, many years.”

I chew on my lip, contemplating his words. What must it have been like for my father to lose my mother? I was too young back then to understand it all. I was too wrapped up in my head to care about anyone’s feelings but my own. For years, I blamed myself for my mother taking her own life, thinking it was because of the fight we’d had a few days before.

“You’re right,” I say. “I think it’s time we spoke.”

“I want to be there for you when you do. If you want me to go, I will. Or I’ll be here, waiting with a bottle of wine, or hard liquor, whatever you need.”

I give a tiny laugh. “You don’t need to do that, Roman.”

“I want to do that.”

I lift my glass and take another sip. “I appreciate it. What about you? How are your parents? Whenever I go to Magnolia Ridge to visit my father, you could stop by your parents’ house.”

He just nods. “Possibly.”

I know Roman isn’t close to his parents, and I’m not sure why. He and Ledger just always change the subject. “Is everything okay with them?” I ask, wanting to know more.

“Everything’s fine.”

I let it go and we drink our wine in silence for a few minutes, until Roman says, “Well, I guess we need to figure this dating thing out.”

“Oh, yeah.” I stare into the bottom of my wine glass, looking for answers. “I guess we should start by going to dinner at places frequented by Eden and Sadie? They are usually around town doing special appearances.”

“Of course they are. Those women are too into themselves not to want to make a big show anytime they leave the house.”

“I can check their social media.”

He pulls out his phone, tapping away at his screen. “No need. I have a friend who might know.”

“A friend?”

He glances up at me for a moment. “Yes.” He looks back down to tap away. Moments later, his phone dings. “This Thursday night at the El Cantina.” He grins. “Looks like our first date will be there?”

“It’s a good thing I love Mexican food.” What I don’t love is the way my pulse skyrockets every time he says our first date. I’ll have to get that under control before Thursday. Maybe take a sedative to ensure it doesn’t happen again. Because this is fake. Nothing more.

FOUR



ROMAN

“Hey,” Ledger says, pushing his muscular frame inside my penthouse.

I shut the door behind him and follow him into my kitchen. “What’s up? Are you working at Club Greed tonight?”

He rounds the island and rests his palms on the marble top. “Yeah. I’ll be leaving here in a few minutes to get down there. I needed to talk to you first.”

It’s crazy to me that Ledger is running Club Greed now that Devereaux is in permanent daddy mode.

“So, what do you need to get off your chest?” I slide onto a barstool. “It’s about Greer, right?”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

I nod. “I do. Greer wants this case. The only way she can get it is to pretend-date me.”

Ledger studies me, and I know what he’s thinking before he says it. “Are you going to be able to keep your hands to yourself?”

“Probably not.” I don’t lie to Ledger, because there’s no point. “But I’m gonna try like hell to be on my best behavior.”

“Why don’t you just tell her how you feel?”

“What? That I think her body is perfect, and I’d love to do bad things to it?” I crack a smile, but Ledger doesn’t.

“You know it’s more than physical. Just tell her the truth.”

I rest my forearms on the island and lean forward. “What’s the truth?”

“That you’re into her.”

I shrug. “Doesn’t matter. You and I both know what she’s looking for in a man. And it’s not me.”

“Remember that guy Patrick she dated?”

I nod, remembering the jerk she dated for nine months. I wanted to punch him on more than one occasion. “She was always too good for him,” I say.

He crosses his arms. “He was a great guy. I still don’t understand why she turned his marriage proposal down. He was perfect for her.”

My blood simmers to a boil. “He was an asshole.”

“And you just proved my point,” he says. “You look like you want to murder someone because I said he was perfect for her.”

“He wasn’t perfect for her.” My pulse won’t calm down and I try to breathe through my nose.

Ledger gives me a smug grin. “Just don’t fuck this up. You know she deserves to be happy. And if you think you can make her happy, I say go for it, but if you don’t think you can...” He doesn’t finish his sentence because I’m already nodding at him.

“We’re just pretending to date. I don’t need the lecture.”

Ledger rounds the island. “All right, man. I’m heading to the club. You coming by tonight?”

I shake my head. “No, I’m in a committed relationship, remember?”

He laughs, slapping me on the back. “It’s so weird to hear those words coming out of your mouth.”

“It feels weird saying them.”

He walks toward the door, and I follow. Before exiting, he turns around. “I know you don’t want to hear this, but Dad

says Mom's asking for you to come visit."

My chest tightens. "I don't want to see her."

"I know you don't, but she's our mother."

"Yeah, I'll think about it."

My brother nods and heads out the door. As soon as he's gone, I try to take a deep breath, but it feels like my throat is closing up. I rush to my couch to sit down, and a feeling of dizziness washes over me. My heart beats frantically, and my attempts to breathe become more desperate. What the fuck is going on with me?

I KNOCK on Greer's front door on Thursday night, and when she opens it, my eyes widen. She's wearing a simple black cocktail dress that hugs her curves in all the right ways. The hem of the dress gracefully falls to just above her knees, revealing toned legs that seem to go on forever. Her silky dark hair tumbles past her exposed shoulders, right to the swell of her breasts.

"Wow," I say. "You look stunning."

Pink fans across her cheeks, and she grabs a black clutch from the table by the door. "You look good too."

"Thanks." I'm wearing nothing special. Black pants. White dress shirt sleeves rolled up to my elbows to show off all the precious artwork I've got tattooed along my forearms. "Are you ready to go?" I ask. Even though I know this isn't an actual date, I can't help but pretend. This is what it would be like to really date her.

I have to say, it feels fantastic.

She steps outside and closes the door behind her, then locks it. "I'm ready. Do you think Sadie and Eden will even recognize us?"

"Of course they will."

I walk Greer to the passenger side of my Lamborghini Urus SUV and open the door for her.

She slides in, and once she's settled in the leather seat, I walk around to the driver's side.

When I get in, her soft floral scent surrounds me.

"I haven't been in your car in forever." She glances over at me. "Not since you drove me home from the hospital."

A few months back, when the Greedy Girl murderer was on the loose, and Greer was representing a member of the Russian Bratva, someone blew her office up. It's one of the main reasons we're all so worried about her safety while she represents Bane Delgado.

"Yeah, I don't like to think about that incident." I clench my jaw as I start the engine, thinking about how that could've played out differently and she wouldn't be sitting beside me right now.

She places her hand on my bicep. "I never fully thanked you for letting me stay with you. For everything."

Having her stay at my place for a few days was torture. There were so many times I wanted to creep into the guest room and watch her sleep. Okay, maybe I did it a few times, but overall, I was a good boy.

"You know I'd do anything for you." Ah, fuck. A tear rolls down her cheek and I swipe it away with my thumb.

"Even pretend to be my boyfriend. I definitely owe you big."

She fastens her seatbelt, and I back out of her driveway.

"Listen, don't think of this as a pretend date. Let's go to dinner and have some fun. You know how to have fun, right?"

She smiles over at me, and the painful thoughts of when she was hurt melt away. "Yes, I know how to have fun."

I squeeze her knee. "This will be the same as when we've gone out in the past and enjoyed each other's company."

"You're right. We've gone out loads of times just by ourselves."

I drift my gaze to her. “Yeah, only this time I’ll be touching you.”

“Touching me?” Her eyes meet mine before I focus back on the road.

“Well, yeah. Holding hands. A light touch on the small of your back. Stuff like that.”

“Oh, right.”

We’re both quiet for the rest of the short drive to downtown Saint Pierre. Images of touching Greer fill my brain, so I don’t trust myself to speak to her. She keeps her gaze trained on the scenery outside her window like it’s the first time she’s ever been to this area. The skyline stretches endlessly against the backdrop of the night sky, and the streets hum with the rhythm of urban life. And Greer’s taking it all in.

I spot El Cantina’s vibrant sign in the distance and look around for a parking spot close to the restaurant.

Within a few minutes, I swing into a spot and throw the SUV in park. “Now, about this favor you owe me.” I raise a brow.

“Anything.”

My smile drops. “You really shouldn’t promise me anything, Greer.”

Because if I weren’t such a good guy, I might ask her to do something really bad.

FIVE



GREER

The way Roman's staring at me makes my insides catch fire. His eyes never waver from mine as the seconds tick by.

"Why?" I breathe out.

He leans closer, and for a second, I think he's going to kiss me. But that's wishful thinking. Instead, he unbuckles my seatbelt and says, "Because you never know what I'll ask for." He leans back, and a slow smile lifts his lips. "I might ask you to clean my penthouse for a month."

"It would probably take longer than a month to clean up after you," I whisper, because I'm afraid my voice might shake if I speak any louder.

Whatever was growing between us quickly dies when he laughs as he opens the door and hops out.

As he rounds the hood, I breathe deep. There are times where Roman looks at me like he's thinking something else. Something deeper. Sexual. Like he wants me. But I know better than to think a man like Roman Thorne would ever want anything with someone like me.

He's into the no-strings-attached women at Club Greed. He'd never want something serious. Roman Thorne can't be tamed.

Despite that, when he opens my door and we head toward the restaurant, I walk with a little pride. I get to pretend I've tamed him, at least.

As we approach the entrance's glass doors, Roman places his large hand on the small of my back. "Are you ready for this?"

I nod as chills skate down my spine. "Yes, I'm ready."

We step into El Cantina, and even for a Thursday, it's busy. The warm lighting bathes the interior in a golden hue, casting an elegant illumination on the dark wood furnishings and ornate tile work. My gaze roams to the red-leather booths lining the perimeter, and the tables covered with brightly-colored linens—all filled with people. We'll definitely get the attention we're seeking here.

The back area is packed like sardines, and I'm guessing that's where Eden and Sadie are seated.

Roman walks up to the hostess with confidence. "We'd like a table in the back," he tells the young girl.

She gazes up at Roman with wide eyes. "Yes, sir," she says, and then taps away at the iPad in her hand. "Follow me."

She's only got eyes for Roman, but I find it funny instead of feeling any jealousy toward it.

I'm accustomed to the attention Roman receives when we go out. Heck, I sometimes catch myself staring at him a bit too long. He's just that good-looking. It's unfair to other men. And me. How can I have a romantic anything with Roman in my life? Compared to him, anyone I date looks like Kermit the Frog.

On our walk to the table, I slip my hand into his and smile just in case anyone knows us. Plus, if we're going to pretend, then I want to get the full experience of what it would be like to really date this man.

Roman glances down to where our hands are joined and gives mine a gentle squeeze. When we make it to the back room, I spot Eden and Sadie's table right away. How can you miss Eden's bright pink bob? She always wears crazy headbands, and tonight she's wearing one with blue and pink hearts all over it. Her makeup is just as bold as she is, and her bright blue blouse and floral skirt demands attention.

Sadie's more subtle, wearing a charcoal dress that cuts just above her knee, with her blonde hair pulled back in a tight bun at the base of her head.

There are a few people at the table with them, but I make eye contact with Sadie as we pass. Her gaze drops to my hand connected with Roman's, and she leans in to whisper to Eden.

I continue along as though I'm unfazed by their presence. The hostess seats us, and Roman holds my chair out for me. I take one last look over at Eden and Sadie's table and find all eyes on us.

"I think we made quite the entrance," Roman says, settling into his chair across from me.

I laugh. "I think we could call it a night right now."

Roman's face falls. "No, we can't leave without eating. I'm starving." He opens the menu. "I need tacos."

I place the green-paper napkin on my lap and open the menu. "I guess we can't deny a man tacos."

"Absolutely not. Tacos are the new pizza."

"How do you figure?"

Roman smiles. "Well, think about it. Pizza used to be all the rave. You could get all these different toppings and hit every food group while eating one slice. Now you can do that with a taco, and want to know the best part?"

"No grease?"

He lowers his menu. "It's like you can read my mind better than Ledger."

"All that may be true, but pizza is so much better."

His eyes blaze into mine. "Are you crazy? Tacos beat pizza every time."

The server interrupts our debate and we order two margaritas. And two taco platters. We put on a bit of a show for the gossips watching us—leaning forward attentively, holding hands across the table—while we wait for our drinks.

When our margaritas arrive, Roman lifts his glass in a silent “Cheers” over at Sadie and Eden, and they smile back.

I take a large swig of my margarita, hoping the tequila will calm my nerves. I’ve been out many times with Roman, but tonight feels different. I feel more alive.

As I sit across from Roman, I try to imagine what it would be like to be his for real. He stares at me like I am.

It’s overwhelming, and I take another gulp of my margarita. “Do you think they’re buying it?” I ask him.

His eyes never leave mine. “I’m not sure. Should I come over there and kiss you?” He starts to get up. “I mean, anything for the show.”

I laugh, but my heart races at the thought of him kissing me. “Sit down. We’re not kissing right here. That would look weirder if we did that.” I place my hand on the table and he covers it with his.

“You’re right. I guess I’ll just hold your hand.” Tingles race up my arm from the contact.

Why do I get this thrill every time he touches me? He’s touched me before in a platonic type of way, but now that we’re pretending it’s different.

“You’re meeting with Bane Delgado?” he asks, changing the subject.

I nod. “Yes.”

“And?” His hand tenses over mine.

“And what?”

“You’ll be alone with him in a room?”

I laugh lightly. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say Roman Thorne is jealous. “At the jail, yes. We’ll be alone.”

“I don’t like that.”

“You know he’s engaged, right?”

Roman shrugs. “So?”

“Are you jealous?”

Roman shifts in his chair, removing his hand from mine so he can take a quick drink of his margarita. “No, I’m concerned.”

I raise a brow. “Concerned? That he might try to hurt the one person defending him?”

“Didn’t say I had a good reason to be concerned, okay, maybe I am a little jealous.”

“It takes a big person to admit when they’re jealous.”

Roman glances around the restaurant, and grabs my hand again. “Well then, I’m jealous all the time.” He smiles wide, and I realize he doesn’t actually mean what he’s saying. It’s all for the show.

“Sure you are.” I remove my hand from under his and take a sip of my drink.

“Ledger used to tell me growing up I’d get jealous a lot.”

“Really? Of him? Or of your past girlfriends?”

“Mainly him, but I think he was lying.” He laughs.

I laugh. “What’s it like?”

“What is what like?”

“Having a twin who can practically read your mind. And who you’re so in tune with. Must be sort of freaky.” The server drops off our food. “Like, will he not feel hungry once you eat tacos?”

Roman laughs. “We’re not that close. But sometimes when we were younger, I hated it. Like when he asked Daisy to the prom. He knew I wanted to ask her.”

“Does he do that a lot?”

“What?”

“Steal women from you?”

Roman’s eyes pierce right through me. “There’s nobody I care about enough for him to steal.”

“Oh.”

“And he knows better than to steal the one woman I do care about.”

I blink. “Who’s that?”

He stares at me for so long that I feel like he’s about to profess some undying love for me. But he blinks and says, “You.”

I can’t breathe. “What?”

He laughs lightly. “I mean as my best friend. We’re besties, right?”

My heart sinks, but I try not to show it. “Oh, right.” I laugh a little as I pick up a taco.

We eat in silence for a moment, and I nearly choke when Eden appears at our table.

“Well, hello, Greer. I’m surprised to see you out tonight.” Her sniveling stare reminds me of the way she always looked down on me in high school.

“Why is that?” I set my taco down and wipe my hands on my napkin.

“Just with the case and all,” Sadie says, stepping beside her partner in crime. The mean girls.

Roman turns on the charm, giving them a dazzling smile. “Greer’s been extremely busy working on the case, but I felt she needed some taco time with her boyfriend.” Roman winks at me. “Nothing beats taco time. Right, baby?”

Sadie and Eden look dumbstruck and don’t have time to say anything else, because Roman effectively ends the conversation with, “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to go back to spoiling my girl.” The seductive way he looks at me has my thighs pressing together.

I’m not sure if I’ll be able to handle faking a relationship with Roman after all.

After dinner, Roman and I decide to stroll around the bustling streets of downtown.

“I can’t believe you said that to them,” I say with a laugh. It’s a chilly night, but the cool air on my hot skin is invigorating. There’s a hint of mischievousness at the way Roman stares at me. Like he says things like that all the time.

I’d call dinner a success. Eden and Sadie will report that I’m dating Roman and life will be great.

“I’ve always disliked people who think they’re owed something because they have a little popularity.” He grabs my hand in his. “Why did they feel they could come up to our table and interrupt us?”

I blink. “I think they were stunned you were on a date with me.”

“Why?”

“Well, because you don’t date. And because you’re you, and I’m me.”

He stops walking. “What does that mean?”

I glance down at the cobblestone sidewalk before gazing back up at him. “You and I are opposites. I like rules and order, and, well, you break all the rules and thrive on chaos.” I drop his hand.

He laughs a little. “Do you think I’m chaotic?”

I nod.

“What’s chaotic about me?”

I think a minute before saying, “Maybe you’re not that chaotic as much as you create chaos within people.” To prove my point, my heart slams around in my chest as his eyes drop to my lips.

He steps closer, fixated on my mouth. “How so?”

The air shifts. A charged energy surrounds us, and I can feel the chaos swimming through my veins. “You just do,” I whisper. I take off walking to break the intensity forming between us.

He blows out a deep breath and walks beside me, not pressing me further. Which is a good thing because I seriously

think he might have kissed me. And that would have been chaotic as heck.

“I’m sure you understand how important it is that I get out of jail immediately.”

Mr. Delgado’s dark eyes bore into mine from across the table. We’ve been sequestered in this small room at the Saint Pierce City Jail for the last thirty minutes, going over the intricate details of the case against him. Although I did my due diligence in researching Bane Delgado before our meeting, I feel woefully unprepared for the real-life version. He’s typically handsome—an aesthetically pleasing face, lustrous dark hair, lean muscles—but a sinister aura surrounds him. Like if you peeled back the layers you’d find the monster lurking beneath the surface.

“Yes, of course, Mr. Delgado.”

“Bane, please.” His lips tip up, but the way he says it leaves no room for argument.

“Okay...Bane. The arraignment is—”

“I need you to get it moved up.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Everything is possible.”

His confidence borders on arrogance, but in his world, I’m sure that statement is true. The Delgados’ enormous wealth most likely ensures whatever they desire is easily accessible. He’s clearly not accepting the gravity of this situation, thinking he can bend reality to his will. I mean, he’s wearing his orange jumpsuit like it’s Armani.

“Judge Phillips is known for being strictly by the book,” I say, maintaining professionalism, despite the mounting pressure. “No exceptions. We need to remain on his good side and—”

“How is your brother? Is he still happily in love?”

I tilt my head at him, his sudden shift in topic catching me off guard. Men like him thrive on weakness and I won't show him any. "Could you stop doing that?"

"What?" He gives me an innocent look, but I detect the amusement in his voice.

"Interrupting me. If we are going to work together, I'd like for you to respect what I have to say."

Surprise flashes in his eyes, and he leans back in his chair, crossing his arms. "Ah, so you *do* have a spine. Good to know."

"Listen, Bane." I lean forward. "I'm here to help you. I'll do everything in my power to make sure you get a fair and speedy trial. In return, I need you to refrain from making everything you say seem like a veiled threat."

His eyes dance across my face, assessing me. "Maybe it is one, Greer," he says in a low voice.

Seconds tick by as we stare at each other. Then, with a lighthearted chuckle, Bane breaks the tension between us. "I'm joking, Greer. Don't look so serious." He runs a hand through his hair. "I just need to get out of here. Sitting in jail is not an option—I have business to attend to, and a fiancée missing me."

I can't help but feel a flicker of sympathy for him as I close my files and slide them in my bag. It's a tiny flicker, but at least it's something other than wariness. "I'm sure Posey will be thrilled when you're released."

"I like that you're speaking in positive terms. When, not if. I expect nothing less." His eyes bore into me with unwavering intensity. "My family expects nothing less."

I stand and slip my bag on my shoulder, pushing away the sense of unease settling over me. "That's because I fully intend to make that happen."

With a final nod of farewell, I turn on my heel and stride purposefully out of the room, leaving behind Bane Delgado and the unsettling questions that linger in his wake.

SIX



ROMAN

I arrive at Dev and Chloe's place on Friday before anyone else. If I'm lucky, I can talk to Chloe about all these feelings I'm having about Greer rising to the top. I want to tamp them back down before they bubble over.

I stride down the cobblestone path leading to the restored Victorian home nestled in the hills of Saint Pierce and ring the doorbell. Chloe answers with a bright smile.

"Come in," she says, moving aside so I can enter. "What's with you ringing the bell lately?"

I shrug. "You and Dev are expecting a baby. I shouldn't be barging in anymore. Besides, last time I walked into your house, I saw a lot more than I wanted to."

Chloe laughs at my reference to the time I walked into their house and Dev was naked, walking out to the pool to join Chloe. "Well, maybe it is better that you knock." She shuts the door and we head into the large galley-style kitchen.

"I knew you'd show up first," Dev says when he sees me. "Drink?" He holds up a bottle of Eagle Rare.

I nod. "Yes." I need a dozen drinks to stop thinking about his sister. Being out on a date with her last night is something I never thought would affect me as hard as it did. I'd always wanted to know what it would be like to go out with her, and it was more than I expected. We had fun.

I mean, we always have fun together, but last night was different. I can't understand it.

And now I'm nervous to see her tonight.

Dev slides me a glass of bourbon, and I take a long pull from the glass.

"You okay?" he asks when I set the empty glass on the granite countertop.

"Yeah, just haven't been feeling too well." I don't want to tell him about the chest pain I've been having. Or the dizzy spells.

"What's wrong?" Chloe asks, looking concerned.

"I'm fine." I don't want either of them to worry. "Just feeling run down."

"Dating my sister will do that to you." Dev laughs at his own joke and Chloe slaps his arm playfully.

"Greer's a gem and any man would be lucky to have her," Chloe says. "Someday she'll meet someone special." She smiles up at her boyfriend, her eyes sparkling with love. "Like I met you." She kisses him on the cheek and my face flames with jealousy at the thought of Greer meeting anyone new.

I know it's inevitable. I know one day she'll marry someone and have a family. I just don't want to think about it.

Ledger shows up, and the last to arrive is Greer.

"Hey," Greer says, her eyes meeting mine first. They linger, and I'd love to know what she's thinking about right at this moment.

She's dressed in a simple beige sweater that drapes off one shoulder and tight jeans tucked into a beige pair of high-heeled boots. Her hair has a simple curl, and she's wearing these dangling silver earrings that draw my eye to her slender neck. She looks totally fuckable, and I realize I'm in so much trouble.

"Hey," I basically squeak out. What is wrong with me?

"I'm glad everyone's here," Chloe says, gaining everyone's attention. "We need to discuss something important with all of you. But first, let's eat. We've got pizzas."

We follow her into the dining room where the irresistible scent of freshly baked pizza entices us to the table. It's a casual setup with opened pizza boxes in the center—each one holding a culinary masterpiece full of delectable toppings, but it's not tacos. We serve ourselves and opt to stand around the table, chatting while we eat.

“See,” Greer says in a low voice beside me. “You can't tell me this golden crust and gooey cheese doesn't win over a taco.”

“It's a close second,” I say, watching her take a bite. She closes her eyes for a moment, savoring it, and my cock twitches. When she licks her plump lips, I have to avert my gaze and focus on the tall plant in the room's corner so I don't get a massive hard-on.

“So, what's going on?” Ledger asks. “Everything's okay with the baby, right?”

“Oh, it's nothing like that,” Chloe says. As she looks over at Dev, a radiant smile spreads across her face and her eyes twinkle. “We invited everyone here to ask each of you to be the baby's godparents.”

Greer makes a little gasping noise and looks like she's about to cry. I have to say, I'm pretty emotional about being asked as well.

“I'll look after this kid like my own,” I say.

Greer nods. “Same. This baby is going to be so spoiled.”

“You know I'd do anything for you both,” Ledger says, clasping Dev's shoulder. “I'm happy to be a godfather.”

I lock eyes with him. “I'm the godfather,” I say, doing my best Marlon Brando impression.

Ledger smiles. “I'm gonna make him an offer he can't refuse,” he says back at me.

“Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, Wednesday, Friday, Sunday, Saturday,” I say, still doing the impression.

Ledger and I laugh, but nobody else is in our joke as much as we are. “I love that you get me,” Ledger says.

“I love that the two of you will be this baby’s godfathers,” Dev says with a tear in his eye.

“Are you crying?” I ask, ready to bust his balls.

“No,” he says, wiping his face. “Shut up. This is important to us.”

“It’s important to us too. Everyone in this room is my family, and I’d do anything for you all. Including cleaning up the mess.” I gather the empty pizza boxes to take to the trash can.

Greer follows suit and collects everyone’s empty plates. She follows me into the kitchen and discards the trash while I make a quick trip to the recycle bin outside.

“Can you believe we’re going to be godparents?” she asks when I walk back into the kitchen.

I run a hand through my hair. “It’s wild when you really think about it. There’s going to be a baby soon.”

“I know.” She leans back against the counter with a dreamy look in her eyes. “I can’t believe I’m going to be an aunt.”

She’ll be related to this baby by blood, but I’ll be equally invested as an uncle to this child. “You’re going to be an awesome aunt,” I tell her.

She captures her bottom lip between her teeth. “I’m nervous that I might screw it up.”

I step closer. “You won’t. You’ll be a natural. Do you want children?” I’m not sure why I’m so invested in her answer.

“I think one day I’d like to have them. If I meet the right man. I don’t want to settle with someone and have a child just for the sake of starting a family.”

“I don’t think you should ever settle, Greer.”

It’s so tempting to brush away the strand of hair on her cheek. She pushes it back before I can. “What about you?”

“Kids?” I rub at the back of my neck. I’ve never really thought about children. Would I end up like my mother?

“Maybe,” I tell her. “With the right person.” My heart pounds, and I want to tell her how I wish more than anything I could be the right person for her.

We stare into each other’s eyes, but Ledger interrupts our connection before I can ask her what she’s thinking about.

“Greer,” he says as Chloe and Dev follow behind him, “I’ve been meaning to ask if you think Bane Delgado is guilty?”

All eyes turn to stare at Greer as we wait for her answer.

She shakes her head. “It doesn’t matter what I think. I’ll still offer the best defense I can.”

Ledger’s eyes meet mine and I already know what he’s thinking, so I say it instead of him. “The Delgado family has many enemies.”

Dev nods. “That’s very true. I like that Roman will be with you to keep you safe.”

Greer appears appalled by his statement. “I can take care of myself, thank you very much.”

Ledger, Dev, and I share a look.

“We’re not saying you can’t, but this case has me a little on edge,” Dev says, and he shares my thoughts exactly. We’re all on edge.

“Just be careful,” Chloe says to Greer.

Dev kisses Chloe’s cheek and my arm instinctively wraps around Greer’s shoulders and everyone’s gaze latches onto us.

“What?” I ask the room.

Chloe stares at my arm. “Nothing,” she whispers.

“I can put my arm around Greer. Even if we weren’t doing the pretend thing, I’d still do it.”

Greer blinks up at me. “Thank you. I just want everyone to be careful.”

“We will,” Chloe says.

As the conversation winds down, we bid each other goodnight, exchanging small talk before parting ways.

At the door, Dev says, “No matter what, our safety comes first. Can’t leave this baby without godparents.”

“Or parentless,” I say. “You need to be here, taking care of Chloe and the baby. Let me worry about Greer, and Ledger will worry about the club. We’ve got this, brother.”

“I don’t trust anyone else taking care of Greer but you, buddy,” he says to me, and then looks at Ledger. “And I don’t trust anyone with my club but you.”

Ledger nods. “We won’t let you down.”

We all say our goodbyes, and before climbing into my SUV, I head over to Greer’s white BMW. “What are your plans tomorrow?” I ask her.

“I was going to work on the case a bit. The arraignment is coming up soon.”

“Was wondering if you wanted to spend a few hours with me on a pretend date.” I open her car door for her. “A picnic at Danbury Park?”

She slides onto the soft leather seat, and I picture her sliding onto my lap instead. “I might be up for that. Pick me up at noon.”

“I’ll be there.” I shut her door, shaking that image out of my head, and she gives a wave as she starts her car.

Chloe hurries down the driveway toward me as I watch Greer drive away. “I was hoping you were still out here.”

“What’s up?”

“We just want to be sure Greer is being extra careful. Dev and I don’t trust the Delgados at all, especially Bane.”

“I know, me either.”

Chloe studies me, head tilted. “You like her, don’t you?”

“Doesn’t matter.” I stare down the road, watching Greer’s taillights fade into the distance.

“It does matter.”

I turn to face Chloe, and the world spins off its axis. My breathing becomes labored and my heart beats a million miles a minute. “I’m not feeling so well. Can I get a glass of water?”

She peers up at me with a worried crease between her brow. “Your face is pale.”

My forehead breaks out into a cold sweat, and I try to catch my breath. I need to sit down before I fall over. “Yeah, I’m not feeling too well.”

Chloe wraps her arms around my shoulder, leading me toward her house. “Let’s get you inside.”

SEVEN



GREER

“I brought you more roses.” I kneel beside my mother’s grave, pushing aside the wilted roses I left here last week. “I have so much to talk to you about.”

A tear strolls down my cheek. For years, I never visited my mother’s grave. I was too angry with her. I felt like she left me alone when I needed her most. But since learning the truth about my mother’s death I’ve started visiting in the past few months.

I hate myself for almost hating my mother. Learning that she didn’t die by suicide, but was actually murdered, triggered a surge of overwhelming feelings. I’ve been working through them ever since.

“Mom, I wish I had more time with you when you were alive. I hate you were taken from me.” I sit and pluck a blade of grass from the ground, thinking about all the bottled-up emotions I need to get out.

My thoughts drift to Roman, and I tell my mother about our date. It’s cathartic to talk to her as if she were still here. When I’m done, I add, “Yes, I’m keeping my heart safe. I know if I let him in, he’d smash it to smithereens.” I often wonder what my mother would think about Roman and me fake dating. Would she be as onboard as everyone else?

“I care about him a lot.” This isn’t news to my mother. She always knew I fancied my older brother’s best friend. But she doesn’t know how my feelings for him have grown into this

monster that I try to keep hidden underneath the bed. No one knows.

But I need to tell someone. “I could fall in love with him if I’m not careful.” A gentle breeze rustles my wild mane, and I savor the serenity of it. “I’m not the weak little girl everyone thinks I am. I’m strong, and I can build my image without falling deeper in love with Roman.”

I picture my mother’s brown eyes, the same shade as mine. They were always so intuitive, impossible to hide anything from. Would she believe me? Do I even believe myself?

My phone dings and I pull it out of my jacket pocket. It’s a text from Chloe.

Roman’s at Saint Pierce Hospital. He’s not doing too well.

I’m up and running to my car in the matter of a split second. I start the engine and text Chloe back.

I’m on my way. What happened?

I pull out of the cemetery lot and nearly run the stop sign as I keep glancing at my phone, waiting for an answer.

Who sends a text like that and doesn’t follow up with any additional info? As I’m waiting at a red light, I call Chloe through the Bluetooth system.

She answers on the second ring. “Hey, sorry for not texting back yet. The doctor came in. We don’t know anything right now. Last night, after you left, he wasn’t feeling well, so he stayed with us. Dev ended up bringing him to the ER this morning.”

My mind backtracks to last night and I can’t pinpoint anything that seemed off about him. “Why didn’t you call me last night?” I’m his girlfriend. Someone should have notified me immediately.

But I’m not his girlfriend.

“He wouldn’t let us. We brought him in pretty early this morning and he didn’t want to wake you because he knew you had your hands full with the case.”

“Did you get in touch with Ledger?”

“I didn’t have to. He called Dev right when they arrived at the hospital, saying he had a bad feeling about Roman. He’s been here ever since.”

“I’m here. I’ll be right there,” I say after she tells me where to go as I pull into the parking area at Saint Pierce Hospital.

We hang up, and I quickly find a parking spot and hustle to the formidable structure looming in front of me. When I rush inside of the emergency room, Ledger and Dev are standing near the front, waiting for me.

Dev wraps his arms around me. “He’s fine. Just having some issues with his heart.”

“His heart?” I pull out of the hug. “I want to see him.”

“Follow us,” Ledger says. He turns and heads down a sterile white hallway, which leads to a bay of doors. “He’s in this room. They’re admitting him for the day to run more tests and give him some privacy.”

I nod, take a deep breath, and follow them into the room. My eyes land on Roman in the hospital bed, shirtless and hooked up to a heart monitor. Chloe gives me a wan smile as she moves toward Dev.

I rush over to the side of the bed. “Are you all right?” I give him a hug, making sure not to disconnect any of the leads to his heart.

“I’m fine. I told them not to call you.” Roman sounds weak, and I glance at the machine making a rhythmic beeping noise.

“Of course they’re going to call me. You’re one of my best friends.” I step back so I can look him over once more, like I’ll know what’s wrong with him by one glance.

Ledger moves next to me. “The doctor says they want to check his heart out. They’re ordering an echocardiogram, and they’ve already checked his chest for a blood clot.”

“Blood clots?” This sounds so serious. I think about how I felt after losing my mother, and I worry about what will happen if I lose Roman.

I can’t lose him.

“We’re going to go downstairs and get something to eat,” Dev says, wrapping an arm around Chloe. “Baby’s hungry.”

Chloe pats her belly. “The baby’s always hungry.” They turn to leave and then she glances over her shoulder. “If we’re not back by the time they move you, text us the room number.”

Roman nods. “I will.”

Ledger clears his throat. “I’m gonna head out with them. I need to get to the club soon. You keep me updated. I don’t care how late it is. I’ll call and check in.” Ledger leans in to give Roman a hug.

“Will do.” Roman appears so laid-back about what’s going on, but his eyes dart anxiously around the room after Ledger leaves.

I scoot a chair closer to the bed and take a seat. “Care to tell me what happened?”

“After you left last night, I got dizzy. Chloe and Dev said I should stay at their house until I felt better.” Roman sucks in a deep breath. “I thought I was having a heart attack. I just don’t feel good and I don’t know why.”

I take his hand in mine and give a reassuring squeeze. “The doctors will figure it out and get you back to feeling better.”

His blue eyes shift to the ceiling. “If I’m being honest, I’m kind of scared to find out what it is. Don’t tell anyone that I’m scared, but I am.”

My heart clenches inside my chest. He almost looks ashamed of his confession. “It’s normal to be scared right now,

but we'll get through it. No matter what the doctors say."

He looks over at me and one corner of his mouth lifts. "I'm sure I'll be out in time to make brunch since the picnic is canceled."

I laugh lightly. "Brunch is the furthest thing from my mind. So is the picnic. The only thing that matters now is you getting better."

A nurse, wearing light blue scrubs, pushes a wheelchair into the room. "Ready to get out of here?" she asks Roman.

He nods. "Sure am."

Her silver-streaked red bob swings as she bustles around, disconnecting wires before helping him into the wheelchair.

"We'll let your wife grab your belongings and follow us up to your new room." She smiles at me with warmth in her dark brown eyes.

"I'm not his wife," I clarify as I move to gather Roman's things.

"Oh, sorry," she fires back.

"I'm not that lucky," Roman says to the nurse. He gives me a wink. "But she is my girlfriend."

The sight of Roman in the hospital has me mentally wrecked, and I internally cringe that I forgot we're pretending to be in a relationship. I need to be better at this game, but it's hard when all I can think about is his well-being.

"Ah, okay. So there's hope for you two yet." The nurse pushes him out of the room, and I gather his things and follow behind them.

The nurse wheels Roman toward the elevator amid the distant murmurings of medical staff and the eerie hum of machinery.

"How long have you two been together?" the nurse asks as the elevator doors slide open and we move inside.

"A few months," I answer at the same time Roman says, "Years."

She laughs and pushes the button for the third floor. I squeeze my eyes shut. I think we need to get our story straight.

“We’ve known each other for years, but only recently got together,” I correct as the doors slide closed and the elevator ascends.

“I met her when she was just a bratty kid,” Roman says with a fond smile. His gaze sweeps across my face and his voice turns husky when he says, “But I’m the lucky one who got to watch her grow into this beautifully amazing woman.”

Roman’s amazing at pretending. I can feel my face growing hot as a blush creeps up my neck. “He’s just being nice.”

“I’m not a nice guy,” he says.

The elevator doors open, and the nurse pushes him out with a wistful look on her face. “Sounds like true love to me.”

Thankfully, no response is required because she goes right into how she knew her husband was her true love when he bought her cat a Christmas gift. An ugly Christmas sweater to be exact.

“Aw,” I say as she wheels Roman into a larger, private room with a nicer bed than he had in the emergency room.

“We’re home,” she says as she helps Roman to the bed.

While she hooks the leads on his chest to the machine in his private room, I send a text to our group chat, letting everyone know Roman’s new room number.

“When will the doctor be in?” I ask the nurse before she leaves.

“It could be awhile,” she says. “We want to keep this looker for as long as we can. He’s gorgeous.” She grins as she walks out of the room.

“I have a fan club,” Roman says with a wink.

She wore a wedding ring, so I know she’s only joking about wanting to keep Roman in the hospital longer than needs be, but he is nice to look at. I can’t fault her there.

Sometimes I stare at him a beat too long. Like right now.

“Greer?” he asks and I snap out of my daze.

“Yes, sorry.”

A smile splits his face. “What are you thinking about?”

I’ll never tell him that even in the hospital, after what was probably a very rough night, he still outshines any other man. “Just trying to decide if I should ask her to head the fan club. Think she’s worthy?”

“I don’t know. I kind of like the idea of you heading it. You do like me more than anyone else. Right?”

“Mm-hmm,” I say and then drop my gaze from his to stare at the leads on his chest. Because I can’t pretend as well as he can. And I don’t want him to see just how much I truly mean it.

EIGHT



ROMAN

My heart beat skips in my chest, and the machine beeps as it does. I'm not going to lie and say that the past eighteen hours haven't been a nightmare. But it got better when Greer breezed into my room. Just seeing her made my nerves calm and the dizziness stop.

Since we've been alone in my room, she's been avoiding looking at me. And I can't say the same about myself. All I've done is stare at her.

Her lips part and her pink tongue darts out to wet her bottom lip as she gazes at the heart monitor. "Feeling okay?"

I shift in the bed. "Yeah. I hate that I've made everyone worry. I'm sure everything's fine," I say, even though I don't believe it.

Have you ever just felt like something is wrong with you? Like you've got a hidden sickness that's going to rear its ugly head and ruin your life? Dating Greer is something I've wanted for a long time. And now, to know what it's like to be hers and not ruin our friendship is a dream come true. However, I just know something ugly is waiting around the corner, waiting to ruin it all.

"I'm sure everything's fine too." Greer takes a seat in the chair next to me.

"You should be at home working on your case." I don't want anyone putting their life on hold for me.

She waves her hand, dismissing my words. "I'm all caught up. Don't worry about me. You just sit back and relax and

worry about getting better.” She gives me a soft smile.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I admit to her.

“Same.” She leans forward and lowers her voice. “While we are alone, we should get our story straight.”

“Story?”

“Yes, we answered differently with the nurse earlier. You said years.”

“Sorry. I don’t know what I was thinking.” But that’s a lie. I’ve been crushing on Greer for years, so it slipped out.

“Okay,” she says. “Have you hooked up with anyone recently at Club Greed? I don’t want anyone to think you’ve been unfaithful to me.” The look in her eyes makes my chest ache.

I hate that she could even think this. I shake my head. “No,” I clip out.

“It’s okay if you have.”

Her eyes study me, and I grab her hand. “Greer, I’d never lie to you. I haven’t hooked up with anyone in a long time.” And that’s the god’s honest truth. Over the past few months, I haven’t been able to even think about sex without having images of Greer pop into my head.

“I just want to make sure our story is straight,” she says.

I squeeze her hand. “This is a new relationship, so of course we’ll stumble through it, and I promise I’ll do better at answering questions.”

She shakes her head. “Roman, the only thing you need to do is relax and get better. Don’t worry about me and my case. Your health is number one.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that. If I get better.”

Greer’s eyes widen. “You’re going to get better, Roman. You have to.”

She says it matter-of-fact, like she can’t imagine a world where I’m not in it. And I’ll say one thing: if I were to die

today, I'd miss the fuck out of her.

Before we can discuss anymore, Chloe and Devereaux walk back into my room.

“Have the doctors come by yet?” Chloe asks as she rubs her belly.

I shake my head. “No.”

Speak of the devil, because a tall man wearing a white coat over blue scrubs walks in. “Hi, I'm Doctor Andrews.” He has a good bedside manner and makes a bit of small talk with me before he looks down at the chart in his hand. “We got your lab results back. Good news is there are no clots, and no heart attack. We're going to run an echo to make sure your heart looks good. But other than that, your labs look great. All your levels are where they're supposed to be.”

“So what do you think it is?” Greer asks him.

“Not sure yet. We'll know more once we look at his heart.” He glances over at me. “They'll be down soon to take you for the echo.”

“Thank you.” I lean back against the pillow, wishing for answers.

Once he's gone, Dev and Chloe stay for another hour before heading home. Chloe was getting uncomfortable sitting in the chair, and I completely understood. I didn't want anyone being here when they could go on with their own lives.

“You should get going too,” I say to Greer.

“I'm not leaving until you get that echo.”

Right as she says it a nurse walks in with a wheelchair. “We're ready for your echocardiogram.”

Greer gives me a supportive smile and walks beside me as I'm wheeled to the imaging department. She makes the clinical atmosphere a bit more bearable. I'm taken into a room and lie on the examination table as the technician prepares the equipment. It takes about thirty minutes to complete the test and then I'm wheeled back to my room.

After another hour, Greer falls asleep in the chair next to my bed. I watch her sleep. The way her hair frames her face. The way her soft breathing lifts her chest up and down. She's breathtaking and my eyes fill with unshed tears, thinking I may not live a full life to watch her grow older.

I shake my head, snapping myself out of these morbid thoughts.

"Knock, knock," Doctor Andrews says, striding into the room. At the sound of his voice, Greer's eyes open and she sits up straight in the chair. He stops at the foot of the bed. "The echo came back all clear and your heart is looking strong and steady. Everything's looking good, and this is nothing more than anxiety and panic attacks." He glances at Greer and then back at me. "Have you been feeling anxious lately?"

I shake my head. "I have nothing to be stressed or anxious about." This sounds ridiculous. I have enough money to support myself without the need for work, so I live a pretty carefree life. Sure, the past couple of months with the Greedy Girl serial killer on the loose were stressful, but since we found the murderer, life has been fine.

"Anxiety?" Greer asks. "Can anxiety mimic a heart attack?"

Doctor Andrews nods. "A panic attack can mimic many things. Stroke, heart attack." He turns his attention to me. "You can follow up with a psychiatrist who can get you some medication to help control your anxiety. We'll get your discharge papers and get you out of here."

I nod. "Thank you." Is there really nothing more to it? I feel horrible. Last night at Dev's house, I felt like I was literally going to die. Is that anxiety?

Greer texts everyone to let them know I'm leaving, and I get ready to go, still not convinced everything is okay. They checked my blood sugar and ran all types of tests, but maybe they missed something?

That question repeats in my head as I go through the discharge process. And then I push it away when we leave the

hospital and Greer drives me back to her place.

“I want to sleep for hours,” I tell Greer as she follows me into her house.

“Okay, I’ll leave and let you rest.”

I feel my chest close in on me, and I remind myself that this is all anxiety and nothing more. “No, stay. Lie down with me until I fall asleep?” I hate that I have to ask her this. I hate that I can’t even fall asleep without feeling like I’m going to lose it. “I hate this feeling,” I tell her.

“What feeling is that?”

“Like there’s something seriously wrong with me. Like I’ve got some underlying health condition they didn’t find.”

Greer’s eyes soften, and she steps up to me. She wraps her arms around my waist and rests her head on my chest. “There’s nothing wrong with you. I’m sure of it.” She blinks up at me. “Let’s go lie down.”

I’m so tired that I wonder if I’ll even make it to her room, but I follow Greer down the hallway and head into the bathroom to change. It’s the middle of the day, but I can’t remember the last time I had a good night’s sleep. With how exhausted I feel, I’m hoping I sleep until tomorrow morning.

When I come out of the bathroom in nothing but my gray sweatpants, Greer stares at me.

“I know you’re probably not tired.” I slip under the covers.

She smiles. “I’m fine.” She slides in next to me, and she grabs the remote to lower her blackout blinds.

The room turns dark, and Greer faces me. “Thank you for lying with me.”

“I’ll always be here for you,” she breathes out. She’s so beautiful and having her this close to me has my body heating to inferno levels.

I want so badly to reach over and touch her, but I smile and close my eyes. Then, I’m out like a light.

THE NEXT MORNING I wake up and breathe a sigh of relief when I spot Greer asleep next to me. She's so pretty, and I stare at her until she starts to wrestle awake.

"Are you staring at me?" she asks before opening her eyes.

"Maybe just a little."

She smiles. "Are you feeling all right?"

I nod. "Yes." I continue staring at her, studying the way the sunlight plays in her hair, creating a halo around her head. She really is breathtaking in the morning.

"What are you thinking about?"

"I'm thinking I owe you a date." I feel awful about not being able to take her on the picnic I promised her, but I have somewhere even better in mind. "Get dressed," I tell her as I bound out of bed, the anxiety no longer threatening to split me in two.

After we're both dressed and grab a quick bite to eat, we pile into my SUV and head out.

"I can't believe you're not even going to give me a hint about where we're going."

"Can't do that."

She folds her arms across her chest as I continue driving. Before long, I take the highway exit that leads out of Saint Pierce and into the small town of Magnolia Ridge.

"We're going to Magnolia Ridge?" she asks.

"Don't worry. We're not going to see our parents."

Greer and I both grew up in the small town of Magnolia Ridge, and my parents, and her father still live there.

She visibly relaxes. "Okay, thank you."

I know Greer wants to visit her father on her time. And I don't want to see my parents right now, even though they want me to visit more than anything. Maybe one day I will.

But for now, I want tonight to be special for Greer.

We drive forty-five minutes to Magnolia Ridge, and I make my way past downtown, and turn down Cherry Lane, off the beaten path. I pull into the parking lot of Book, Spine, and Sinker. I find a spot right up front as Greer gasps from the front seat.

“How did you find this place?” She looks over at me, and I can see the complete wonder on her face.

“I have my ways,” I say as I shut off the engine.

I’ll never tell her the real way I found this place. Late night scrolling online. I clicked on a book post I thought Greer would like, and next thing I know, all my ads are for little bookshops.

Worked out for me. Now I get to share in Greer’s love for bookstores. She’s been enamored with them since we were kids. Honestly, I find it sexy that she likes to read. And I find her intelligence even sexier.

“This place is beautiful.” She grabs her phone and snaps a photo of the unique storefront. The building’s upper half boasts deep-red brick while the lower portion is a bulky, clunky forest-green wood with the shop’s name. A paned-glass window gives a glimpse into the store filled with shelves of books and so much more.

A small bell rings as we enter through the green wooden door. Greer walks in like she’s entering a secret fairyland.

“Oh, Roman,” she says before heading toward the back of the store.

“Hi, can I help you find anything?” a blonde woman says. “I’m Millie Mason, the owner. Is this your first time here?”

I nod. “Yes, it is. This is a lovely shop.”

Greer rushes up to me with two books in her hands. “Will you hold these?” She spins toward Millie. “Hi, I’m Greer, and this is my boyfriend Roman.”

A surge of pride rushes through my veins at the sound of being called Greer’s boyfriend. I wave the hand with the two books and smile. “Yes, I’m the boyfriend,” I say, loving the

title. I want to keep using it. Keep shouting it from the rooftops.

“Well, it’s nice meeting you two. If you need anything, just let me know.”

“Thank you,” Greer says, and then she’s off again, grabbing a book from another shelf and rushing back. She hands it to me and I give Millie a playful smirk, rolling my eyes as if to say Oh, here we go again.

“You’re so kind to hold her books for her.”

I smile. “I’d hold the whole bookstore for her if she wanted me to.”

“She’s lucky to have you. One day, I hope to find a man willing to do that for me.” Millie smiles and walks over to Greer to help her find more books.

An hour later, I’ve got an armful of books, and after I pay for them, we head back to my SUV.

“I don’t know when I’ll find time to read all of these books,” she says as she climbs into the front seat.

“You’ll need a vacation after this case.”

“I like that idea. A beach with me reading on it.”

And me there to watch her. No way am I missing the opportunity to see Greer in a bikini with a book in her hand.

“Are you hungry?” I ask as I start the engine.

“I could eat.”

“There’s a little brewery just a bit down the road. The beer’s good. They have it in Club Greed, and the beer rep’s a stand up guy named Paxton Atwood.”

“Sounds perfect. I bet they’ve got a great burger.”

“I’m sure they do.”

I steer my SUV in the direction of Atta Boy Brewery and park in the lot. When we step inside, I guide us straight to the bar. As if you could miss it. It’s definitely the focal point when you first step inside.

“Wow, this place is amazing,” Greer says as we get situated on two barstools.

“It used to be an old power plant. That’s an old diesel engine from like the 1930’s, and they painted it red and built the bar around it.” I point to the huge 750-Kilowatt diesel engine in the midst of the space, drawing everyone’s attention to it when you first walk in.

The bartender, a short brunette woman with tattoos dancing up both arms, smiles at us. “I’m Trudi. What can I get you?” She hands us a list of the beers and appetizers.

“I’ll take the Bad Pear Day cider,” Greer says, glancing at the menu. “And an order of the chicken and waffle sliders.” She smiles up at me.

“I’ll take the Kunt Kicker IPA.”

Greer laughs. “Now there’s a nice name for a beer.”

The bartender walks away with a laugh as well.

“It’s definitely a punchy name.”

Greer nods. “I’ll have to taste it.”

I smile. “Sure thing.”

Trudi places the beers in front of us and lets us know the sliders will be right out. Greer grabs my beer and takes a sip.

“Oh, that’s really good.” Then, she takes a sip of her pear cider. “Oh, but this is so much better.”

I crack a grin. “Good to know, but I’ll stick to the Kunt Kicker.”

“Your loss.” She takes another sip of her cider, and I laugh.

It’s always been easy between us. I’ve never had this with anyone else. I think it’s why I’m adamant to keep my friendship with Greer intact. I can’t lose her.

“Hey, Roman,” Paxton Atwood says, holding out his hand for me to shake across the bar. “So glad you came in.”

“Paxton, how are you?” I shake his hand, and then wrap my arm along the back of Greer’s chair. “This is Greer, my

girlfriend.”

Greer smiles and says, “Hi.”

“Nice to meet you,” Paxton says as he shakes her hand. “What brings you both by today?”

“We were visiting the Books, Spine, and Sinker store.”

“Ah, Millie’s shop? She’s got a great selection of books.” Paxton leans against the bar.

“Not anymore. I think we bought out the entire store.”

Greer swats at my arm playfully. “Not the entire store.” She laughs lightly.

I know we’re not in the city limits of Saint Pierre, and we’re not trying to flaunt that we’re a couple here, but I like pretending with her a little too much. It does something to me to think that a remarkable woman like Greer has chosen me as her boyfriend.

It causes a sense of calm to wash over me, and I can’t get enough of it.

NINE



GREER

I'm having the best time, and as we drive back to my place, I consider asking Roman to stay the night again. But I can't do that. I don't want to use his anxiety as a reason for him to stay and sleep in my bed.

Even though I loved having him there. When he fell asleep I stayed awake, staring at him for entirely more time than I care to admit. I felt grateful that I was able to help ease his anxiety, even if he probably fell asleep out of pure exhaustion.

As we pull into my driveway, I glance over at Roman. "I had the best time," I tell him.

He opens the door. "Me too. Let me walk you to your front door, make sure you get inside okay."

I'm sure I'll be fine, but I want him to walk me so I can spend more time with him. More so, I want him to kiss me. Nerves and excitement flutter low in my belly as he strides around his SUV and opens my door for me. I take his hand as he helps me out of the vehicle.

"Thank you." The words to ask him to stay are on the tip of my tongue, but I can't bring myself to say them.

We walk slowly, like neither of us wants the night to end. His presence comforts me, his hand warm against mine as we approach my front door, bathed in the soft glow of the porch light. I find myself hoping for just a few short stolen moments with him before we say our inevitable goodbyes.

"I knew you'd love the bookstore," he says, setting the books on my porch table.

I smile wide. “You know me so well.” Better than anyone, actually.

“I do,” he murmurs.

The air between us sizzles as he inches closer. I take a tentative step forward, yearning for a sweet goodnight kiss. His eyes sparkle as he gazes at me. I try to memorize every detail of his face so I can forever capture this moment in my memory. And it’s like he’s doing the same thing.

My heart pounds in my chest. *Kiss me, you fool*, I want to scream out, but instead, I remain silent, rooted to the spot on my porch.

He slides both hands into his pockets. “Call me tomorrow,” he says, and the mood shifts, the magical night over.

I nod. “Sure thing.” And then I pick up the books and head inside, wishing more than anything he would have kissed me, or hugged me, or something.

However, I’m not sure I would have been able to stop myself if he had.

“WHEN ARE you heading out to see Dad?” Dev says to me the next afternoon at a local coffee shop where we met to discuss our father.

I shrug. “Maybe next weekend. I have the Delgado arraignment coming up, so I need to be prepared for that.”

Dev’s eyes meet mine. “You remember Dad being the biggest asshole toward us when Mom died, right?”

I drop my gaze to my coffee. “I know, but he thought she killed herself. He must have been heartbroken.”

Dev chuckles, but there’s zero humor behind it. “We’d just lost our mother. Least he could have done was, oh, I don’t know, taken care of us,” he says in a sarcastic tone. He’s getting angry. I can tell.

“You were older. I guess he felt you didn’t need anything.”

“Well, you did. You were only fourteen.”

I twirl the necklace around my neck. “It was right before my fourteenth birthday,” I whisper.

“Same thing.” Dev leans back in his seat, taking a long sip of his coffee, his eyes studying me the entire time. “I just wish I knew what this new obsession with talking to Dad was all about.”

“It’s not a new obsession. I just have so many things to ask him. Say to him. I just need to know.”

Dev hums as he sets his mug down. “I don’t need to know anything.”

“I just want to reach out to him. He is our father.” I pick up my mug of coffee. “I would think, as an almost father, you would want to talk to him too.”

Dev shakes his head. “He has our numbers. I don’t see him reaching out to us.”

“You’re both so stubborn.”

He studies me for a long moment, then shifts in his chair. “How are things going with Roman?”

“Fine.” I glance down at the table. “Everything’s going fine.” I don’t dare tell him about our date the other day, or how I wished for him to kiss me as he walked me to my door.

Dev is quiet for a moment. “Is he taking care of you?”

I nearly spit out the coffee. “What?” My eyes widen, and I hope my brother doesn’t mean what I think he means.

No. He can’t be asking me if Roman is taking care of me sexually.

I need to pull myself together.

“Keeping you safe. I don’t like how much publicity this Delgado case is getting.”

I set my mug down, wiping my hands on the napkin sitting in my lap. “Oh, right.” I clear my throat. “Yes, Roman’s taking good care of me.”

Dev tilts his head sideways a bit as he studies me. “I know you don’t think you need all the extra eyes looking after you, but I’m not taking any chances. You know how awful things were when there was a Greedy Girl serial killer on the loose.”

I nod, feeling bad that I’m making light of his concern. I reach my hand out and touch my brother’s arm. “I know. And I’m taking every precaution to keep safe.”

“I just worry sometimes. Feels like I worry more now that Chloe’s pregnant. It’s like I’ve got more to lose.”

I nod. “I get it.”

“I hope this case is worth all the stress and worry.”

I laugh lightly. “The stress and worry for me? Or for you?”

He laughs. “Touché. I’m turning into somebody I don’t recognize.”

“You’re just in love.”

Dev smiles with pride, and it makes me wonder if I’ll ever have the things that Devereaux has. A devoted partner? A family?

It makes me wonder if the Delgado case is worth it all. Is this really what I want for my life?

TEN



ROMAN

“Fuck, Greer will not be happy about this,” I say to Ledger.

He came over to my place bright and early when he saw the newest gossip rags this morning. They’re all talking about how our relationship is fake. Obviously I know that, but how do they?

It’s been a few days since my date with Greer because she’s been busy with the case, and I’ve been busy trying to keep my anxiety at bay.

“I don’t understand why everyone’s obsessed with your dating life.” Ledger points to the line in the paper that mentions they don’t see me settling down. They expect me to live my life forever as a playboy.

It’s annoying being a rich man, sometimes. The media loves to be all up in your business. Gossip columnists, podcasters, influencers. All of them trying to get a piece of me.

I slam my hand down on the counter. “Fuck this shit.”

He nods. “Yeah. I think the whole town’s jealous of Greer.”

“As they should be.” A smile spreads slowly. She’s unlike anything I ever imagined she’d be. And I’ve had a lot of fantasies about her.

“So, what are you two going to do?” Ledger asks, looking down at the paper once more.

There's a knock at the door and I ignore Ledger's question to answer it. Greer stands outside my door, wearing a flowy floral-print maxi dress with a cinched waist and flutter sleeves, paired with strappy sandals and her heart locket resting just between her tits. She's got her phone in her hand and she hits me in the chest with it as she barrels past me.

"Did you see this?" she asks in a high-pitched tone. "Oh, hi, Ledger," she says once she spots him in the kitchen. "I didn't know you were here."

"Yeah, he's seen it." Ledger offers Greer a friendly smile as he holds up his copy of the paper.

"No, this." Greer holds out her phone and presses a button. As soon as she does I hear Sadie's voice instantly.

Sadie: Can you believe the fauxmance happening right before our eyes?

Eden: Right? Like we're supposed to believe Roman Thorne is dating Greer Huxley. Ha. As if.

Sadie: They couldn't have looked more uncomfortable with each other if they tried. They haven't even been spotted at Club Greed, Roman's favorite place.

Greer's eyes crash into mine. "Are they serious?"

I shake my head. Looks like we weren't as believable as we thought.

Eden: It's definitely a front, which makes Greer even more pathetic.

They both laugh.

I shut it off, pissed that these women are talking about Greer like that.

"I think Eden and Sadie are sour because they never got the chance to play around with you." Ledger crosses his tattooed arms over his chest. "I'm sure they'd love a night at the club with you."

"I thought they were supposed to talk about murders, not our love life," Greer says.

“I don’t know what we can do to convince everyone,” I say, stepping next to Ledger. “We could fuck in front of the whole town, and I don’t think they’d buy us as a real couple.” My thoughts turn dirty as I think about sliding my dick into Greer.

“You could stay at Greer’s house. Her place has more eyes on it because it’s not in this building that the press can’t get into,” Ledger says. “Kill two birds with one stone.”

“What birds?” I ask, although I do like the idea of staying with Greer.

“I agree,” Greer surprises me by saying. “I may not be safe defending Bane.”

A strong sense of protectiveness kicks in. “I like that idea,” I say. The more I think about it the more I want Greer beside me twenty-four seven.

“You need more outings.” Ledger drops the newspaper on the counter and lifts his hand to my shoulder, giving it a squeeze before making his way to the door. “I have to get to the club. Good luck.” He nods at Greer and walks out the door.

She places her hands on her hips and blows out a breath. “I can’t let the firm find out about this. They’ll pull me from the case if they think I’m lying about being in a relationship with you. And then I’ll never make partner.”

“I’m sorry, Greer.” I want to fix this for her. I want to be the hero here with all the solutions. “We’re just going to have to up our game, I guess. Living together will do that.”

Her eyes meet mine, and she almost appears like she’s nervous to be around me.

I have to admit, when I walked her to her door after our date I wanted nothing more in the world than to kiss her, but I didn’t want to cross that line with her. But maybe I should.

Maybe that’s what the world needs to see.

“I have an idea,” I tell her.

“What’s that?”

“I think we should go to Club Greed.”

“Oh,” is her slow reply. “Okay, we’ll go to the club.”

I hate that I have to take her there. Greer’s too classy for Club Greed. She’s too perfect, and I’d rather wine and dine her for the whole town to see, but we really need to up our game. The club is the best way to do that.

ELEVEN



GREER

I've been stressing all week about going to Club Greed this weekend, but on Friday night my nerves are ten times worse. I know I want to prove to Roman that I'm the type of woman who'd enjoy a club like Greed, but honestly I don't think I am.

I selected a simple black dress that hugs my curves just right and curled my hair in loose waves.

When I heard what Sadie and Eden were saying about my fauxmance with Roman, I wanted to march down to their studio and set them straight. Tell them Roman and I are indeed dating.

Why don't they believe us?

I know it's new, and the timing is suspect, but still. After the club tonight, no one will question us again. I just hope I can go through with all of this.

There's a knock at my front door, and I open it with a smile. "I'm still not used to you knocking now."

Roman laughs lightly, handing me a bundle of red roses. "This is an official date. So, I thought I should knock."

My heart skips a beat as I stare at the flowers. "Thank you, they're beautiful. Come in while I put these in water."

He steps inside and follows me to the kitchen. "You're welcome. You look...wow. You're gorgeous."

I turn to hide my blush and retrieve a vase from under the sink. "Thank you. You look pretty amazing too." I've seen Roman in suits many times before, but tonight's different. He's

in an all-black suit and his hair has that messy appeal that makes me want to run my fingers through it all night long while calling out his name.

I try to tamp down that thought as I fill the vase with water.

Roman moves next to me. “I have to look good to show you off on my arm. Because let’s face it, you’re the show stopper.”

I blush once more. “Oh, stop,” I say with a laugh. I wave off his compliment as I arrange the roses in the vase.

“I’m serious, Greer. You look so…” He doesn’t finish his statement as his eyes drift down my body.

Before things get awkward, I spin and set the vase on the island and grab my clutch off the counter. “Let’s go,” I say, heading toward the front door.

He follows and after I lock up, Roman opens the car door for me. I climb into his SUV while he holds my hand to help. It’s all very nice, and I can see why Roman has had many women in the past. He’s sexy and a gentleman.

Once we’re driving toward the club, Roman says, “I can see the wheels in your head turning.”

Nerves trace up my spine. “I’m fine,” I tell him. But I’m not. I have no idea what to expect when we step into the club.

I’ve been there a few times before the club opened to the public, but only to see my brother’s investment and to make sure he kept the décor classy. What happens in those rooms is a mystery to me. My imagination goes wild as we get closer to the club, and I would never go into court unprepared, so this is no different.

“I need details,” I say in the same calm voice I use with my clients. “What happens when we get inside the club? Am I going to be whisked away and flogged by some stranger in studded panties and a leather mask? Or will we have drinks, chat a bit, and then I get whisked away? Give me all the details.”

Roman lets out a hearty laugh. “No one is whisking you away from me. I’ll go with you and make sure they don’t flog you too hard.”

My head whips to him. “Oh my god, what?” I squeak out. “Roman.”

“I’m kidding, Greer,” he says with a chuckle. “I’d never let anyone flog you.”

“Will people be naked when we walk in? Am I expected to not stare? Because most likely I’ll stare.”

“No one will be naked in the main area. It has a night club vibe. Bar, people drinking, music.”

“Okay.” I take a deep breath. “When I was there, no people were hanging out, so I just wanted to make sure I’m prepared.”

“Don’t worry about anything,” he says as the club comes into sight. “We’ll just walk around, show our faces, and leave. We won’t do anything you’re not comfortable with. You’re in charge.”

“Yes, I’m in charge,” I say, staring at the two-story brick building sprawled across acres of land. That phrasing makes me feel less out of control as Roman drives past the bubbling fountain and sophisticated greenery in front of the club.

He stops at the valet, and a tall man hustles over to open my door for me. I slide out of the vehicle and stare at the oversized doors of Club Greed. Behind them are all the people who have paid astronomical sums of money for access to my brother’s exclusive sex haven.

Roman reaches me and places his hand at the small of my back. “Ready to pretend, babe?”

Although I’m sure it’s part of the charade, his husky endearment sets off a series of tingles through my body. “Yes.”

The bald man guarding the front doors greets Roman and then...we’re inside the club. It’s much like I remember. Elegant and extravagant. An enormous golden chandelier hangs above the gobs of people mingling in the main area. To my right is the long bar, with fluorescent red bulbs running its

length. On the left-hand side, a grand staircase with white limestone banisters leads up to a private floor where Dev has his office.

Roman guides us through the throng of people to the bar, and the bartender working gives him a smile. I don't miss the curious gaze she shoots my way when he orders our drinks—a glass of white for me, and a bourbon on the rocks for him. In less than a minute, I'm sipping my drink, letting myself peruse the club.

The atmosphere crackles with activity as the weekend crowd fills the club, but a shift in energy occurs as the notorious Chekov brothers make their entrance. Their presence commands attention, and heads turn as they navigate through the throng of people, heading straight for the bar. It's impossible to miss the power that surrounds them, a legacy inherited from their father, the daunting leader of the Russian *bratva*.

I lean in close to Roman, my voice barely a whisper against his ear, the words tinged with apprehension. "We won't be in a room with them, will we?"

He follows my line of sight. "I'd never let those motherfuckers anywhere near you."

My insides throb with need when he says the words. I so dig the protective vibe.

"Good," I say back.

We finish our drinks and head toward the hallway partitioned off with a gold rope.

My heart is beating like a jackhammer.

I'm nervous.

I'm never nervous.

My palms are slick with sweat as the bouncer unlatches the rope and tells us the common room is the second door on the left.

As we head that way, I'm sure I look like a moth being led to a flame.

“I won’t let anything bad happen to you,” Roman says reassuringly. “There’s going to be a bunch of people in this room doing all sorts of things. Kind of like a strip club.”

“I’ve never been to one of those either,” I whisper to him.

He nods. “I know.”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Yes, but you have nothing to worry about with me around. You can trust me.”

He leads me into a sophisticated room that has a soft purple light casting a warm glow on everything. Plush, oversized couches and chairs are arranged around low coffee tables, and there’s a black stage at the back of the room where a few scantily clad ladies dance with each other.

I avert my eyes, my cheeks flaming hot, when I see their bodies through the thin material they’re wearing. My gaze lingers on a few couples making out on one of the couches. This is definitely a place you leave your inhibitions at the door because they have no qualms about touching each other while others watch.

I’m not sure if anyone even noticed us entering the room. Is this really worth going through with?

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I ask Roman, not letting go of his hand.

He dips his head so only I can hear him. “Yes. More people will come and it will turn into a party atmosphere. We could always talk to the Greedy Girls who work in this room.”

“For what?”

Roman’s intense stare burns into mine. “Bane’s a member here. We can do some investigating while we’re pretending.”

I nod. “I like that idea. So, girls work in this room?”

“Yes, they’re like the hostess. They’ll get us drinks, or food. Sometimes, they join in the fun.”

My throat grows dry. “How often do you party here?” I hear the words come out of my mouth, even though I don’t

want to hear the answer.

Before he can respond, a dark-haired girl in a shimmering sky-blue mini-dress saunters into the room and up to Roman. “I’m Starlit. Do you need anything?”

To his credit, he keeps his eyes on her glamorous face and not her enormous tits. “Nice to meet you. We’re good for now.”

“You sure?” She turns her attention to me and drifts closer. “You don’t need anything at all? Something wet on your lips to make you feel good?” Her gaze travels down my body and not in a sizing-me-up way. “I’d love to get you anything you want.” She moves closer and I feel the eyes of people in the room moving over to us.

I’m not sure what to do here, or if she means what I think she means. This is the last thing I expected when my mind cooked up scenarios, but she could be my in to get some answers about Bane.

My gaze shifts to Roman, and he’s frozen in place, his eyes not leaving my face. “What do you think, honey? Should I or should I not?”

Starlit leans closer and whispers, “You should.” Her lips dust against my ear. “I’d love to find out if you’re wet. Mm.” She licks the shell of my ear.

Someone moans nearby and says, “Fuck, I want to see you two kiss.”

I glance over and half the people in the room have moved closer to watch. Electricity zaps through my body as Roman shifts beside me, sliding his hands around my waist.

“Just a little taste,” she says.

My breath comes out in brief spurts as my ass connects with Roman’s groin.

“Sorry,” he says. “No one touches this pussy but me.”

“Okay, fair enough,” Starlit says. “But what about the top part?”

Roman tenses behind me when someone says, “Come on, man. Let them do something.”

I keep my face neutral so I don’t appear prudish to the people surrounding us. “Maybe a little something,” I say.

She’s so close, the stiff peaks of her nipples graze against my skin.

“You sure?” Roman asks, his mouth dangerously close to my ear.

“I’m dedicated to the cause,” I hint about our investigation. “She looks like she could reveal things to me.” If I can use my appeal with her to glean information, I’ll do it.

“Oh, I definitely can,” Starlit says.

She licks her lips before placing them on my neck, right over my racing pulse. My eyes flutter shut as she sucks the sensitive flesh, working her way up to my jaw. “We don’t want to leave your man out,” she murmurs.

“No, we don’t,” I say in a breathy voice that doesn’t sound like mine.

She reaches down and takes Roman’s hand, sliding it up my body to my breast. I let out a soft moan. His hips rock into me and I feel his erection coming to life, growing thicker. She glides his hand inside my dress while she palms my other breast, squeezing my nipple.

“Ah, god,” I whisper.

Roman leans down and his husky voice rumbles in my ear, causing vibrations in my core. “Is this okay?”

“Yes,” is my simple answer.

He rocks into my ass, and I push back against him, feeling the wetness soaking my panties.

Starlit trails kisses across my collarbone, over my pounding heart, her silky hair tickling my skin. She sucks a nipple into her mouth through my dress and moans, nipping at the hard bud with her teeth.

About five feet behind her, a man adjusts himself, his hard-on bulging the front of his slacks. My head drops back against Roman's chest as his fingers work my other nipple—grazing, tweaking, pinching—until I'm aching, needing relief.

I drop my hands on Starlit's shoulders so I don't collapse in a heap on the floor. Heat slams into me and pressure builds low in my belly as pleasure courses through my veins. I'm losing focus on why I'm here, and I need to stop this madness.

Starlit releases my nipple and works her way up my chest again, licking and kissing. "God, you turn me on," she says. "What I wouldn't give to slip my hand between your thighs and rub your clit." Her lips are a breath away from mine. "Want to sit on the couch so I can watch your man touch what I can't?"

I'm so turned on right now from the feel of Roman behind me, from everything happening, but I'm not ready for this, so I pant out, "I...think I need...to hit pause."

In a flash, Roman angles himself between me and Starlit. "My girl has had enough. If we need anything, we'll let you know."

"Um, thank you," I say to Starlit, smoothing my dress into place.

She winks. "My pleasure."

And just like that, like it's a blip in their world, the people watching disperse back into their groups as she saunters away from us to mingle with them.

I nudge Roman with my elbow. "I thought I could ask her for some info, befriend her, but things went haywire really fast."

Roman smiles. "Patience, Greer."

I slump. He's right. I'm not cut out for this life. I'm usually one to jump and ask questions later. Which is usually Roman's MO too.

He still hasn't answered my question about how many times he's partied here, and now I won't ask again.

Even though I'm getting agitated and want to know more than ever.

He leads me over to a couch, and we take a seat.

"Come closer," he whispers in a voice I've never heard from him before.

I'm in trouble here.

TWELVE



ROMAN

I don't mean for my voice to come out in a husky growl, but I can't help it. Since I picked Greer up tonight, I haven't been able to think straight. She's gorgeous. Hell, she's always been gorgeous, but now that I'm pretending she's mine...it's so much more.

I've been staying with her for a bit for the rouse, but had to run home to grab a few things. Plus, I wanted the excitement of picking her up. Like a real date.

Greer scoots her sexy body closer to me, and I let another growl escape my lips. What is wrong with me?

I told her she could trust me. And here I am, acting like a pervert.

I need to school my expression and not let myself get too worked up like I'm some horny teenager.

It's hard when they're playing this sexy-as-fuck music, and others are already making out.

Greer asked me how many times I've partied here, and I don't want to tell her the truth. Because yes, I've been to a few of these rooms. I'm not innocent.

I wish I was.

I've never wanted anyone as much as I want Greer, but once I realized nothing between us could ever happen, well, there was a period in my life where I let myself get lost.

Not anymore. I don't want to be anywhere in the world but here with Greer. Helping her win this case. Watching out for

her to make sure she's safe. Pretending to be her man so the press will back the fuck off her. Spending time with her. I'll take her anyway I can get her.

I think about Greer as a wife, taking care of a few kids.

Fuck.

I need to stop thinking about these impossible scenarios with her.

It has to end.

But not tonight.

I tug Greer closer to me and sweep her hair off her neck. I breathe her in, and I can't get enough of her intoxicating scent.

She smells like coconuts and sin.

I lower my lips to the side of her neck, and a shiver runs through her.

"Not there," she says, sitting up straighter, brushing me off.

I lift my head and stare at her. "What was that?"

"I have this spot on my neck that drives me wild."

Noted.

And now my dick is a rock.

All I can think about is getting my hands, mouth, and tongue all over that spot.

I get close to her skin, and whisper across the spot I touched earlier, "Got it," I whisper, and she shivers.

"I can't believe I'm here with you like this."

"Like what?" I ask her, my head in a fog.

"Like this. I always thought you viewed me as the annoying little sister you never had."

I recline in my seat, allowing myself to sink back as I fix my gaze on hers. She's alluring. "Greer, trust me, I don't think of you like that."

A delicate blush gently colors her cheeks, like the soft, rosy hues of a sunrise, and I want to kiss her there. Kiss her everywhere. I need to rein it in.

“Good. Because I’m not a child anymore. As you know, I finally got my boobs.” She laughs lightly.

My chest pinches at her throwback to the conversation we had so long ago. The night I told her she had me. God, how she has me. But I can never have her.

Because that’s not in the cards for us.

I don’t think it ever will be.

My heart rate kicks up, its rapid beats echoing in my ears like the pounding of distant drums, while I struggle to draw in a deep, steady breath. The dizziness returns. Fuck.

“So, what should we do?” she asks, changing the subject, but I can barely hear her.

I need a distraction from the anxiety suffocating my system right now. Fuck, I’m being selfish, but a large part of me wants to explore this with her. I want to see what she’d look like if she were fully mine.

I’m an asshole for thinking this way, but I can’t help it. I can’t breathe, and these thoughts are the only thing making me feel better.

I suck in a deep breath, pushing the anxiety away. “Do you trust me?”

She nods, biting her lower lip, bringing my cock to life. “Yeah,” she whispers.

“I’m going to get you off, Greer.” Yes, I’m definitely going to hell for this.

“What do you mean?” she asks, but I don’t give her an answer.

Instead, I show her by bringing my hand to her leg and trailing my fingers closer to the edge of her dress.

“Roman,” she breathes out, but she doesn’t stop me.

I position myself to where I'm leaning over her, my arm between her legs.

There's no mistaking this woman is mine.

Mine.

Mine.

That thought turns me on more than I've ever been and my anxiety slips away. I press my fingers along the inside of her thigh, pushing a little until she spreads her legs more for me.

Her breathing has picked up as I pepper a kiss over the spot on the back of her neck, and I can't believe I'm about to risk our friendship, but there's just no stopping me.

I slide my finger across the panel of her soaked panties. Oh fuck. Discovering how wet she is for me has me as hard as iron.

I'll need to jerk off a few times tonight, that's for sure. And I'm okay with it.

"You can open your eyes, Greer," I whisper against the shell of her ear.

"I'm afraid if I do, I'll wake up from this dream."

"You can watch the dancers on stage," I tell her.

Her eyes pop open, worry etched along her pretty face. "Are you watching them?" She looks almost mortified.

"I'm not watching anyone but you, sweetheart."

Her eyes connect with mine. "I like you calling me that."

"Then it's yours." I push a finger slowly under her panties and through her wetness. Holy fuck. I need to remind myself to breathe as I touch her.

She's so wet for me. All for me. A surge of pride races through my veins like a wild stallion, igniting a whirlwind of passion and yearning that consumes my thoughts.

She moans out long and hard as I press against her clit. This pussy is mine. But it's not and the thought that she will most likely end up with somebody else makes me angry.

A wave of fury washes over me at the thought of anyone touching her like I am right now. The panic is back, but I suck in a deep breath, knowing that right now she's mine. And that's all that matters.

Mine.

"Say you're mine," I fucking beg of her, even though I know it's all a fantasy.

"I'm yours," she whispers, and I wish with everything I have it could be true.

"Say it again, Greer."

"I'm yours."

I want her to say it again over and over, but I know I'm playing a dangerous game, one where I'll surely get burned.

THIRTEEN



GREER

Say you're mine.

Those words play on repeat in my head as Roman continues touching me in ways I never thought possible.

He works my body like he's had the playbook all along.

No one has ever touched me like this.

And it's a sad thought to know no one will ever again.

I close my eyes as his fingers scissor inside me. He pushes deeper, and my eyes spring open, locking with his.

"You're the most beautiful sight I've ever seen." His voice is deep and husky.

I hate that we're just pretending to be a couple, and after tonight, no one will ever question us again. I know he doesn't mean the words he's saying. I know they're just as fake as our fauxmance.

I know how men are.

They have no feelings.

Sex to them is a conquest.

And once they've conquered, they move on to the next shiny new toy. I need to remember this as Roman pumps his fingers deeper inside me.

My body's brimming with desire, right on the precipice of orgasm, betraying me as he touches me.

“I know you’re close, Greer. Give it to me, please.” The timbre of his voice has me believing he really wants this. Really wants me.

My insides coil, igniting a passion deep inside, and then his fingers stop. And my heart sinks.

“What are you doing?” I ask him, the mood disappearing the longer he stares at me.

“I can’t do this.” He removes his hand from between my legs, and I feel embarrassed. Humiliated.

“I’ll be right back.” I stand and rush out of the room.

Roman is hot on my heels as I search for the closest restroom. When I spot the sign, I rush inside and stare at myself in the mirror. “Calm down, girl,” I say to myself.

“Greer,” Roman says, entering the women’s restroom.

I spin around. “What are you doing here?” I glance around to make sure we’re alone.

“I pushed you too far.” He thrusts his hands into the pockets of his suit pants. “I’m sorry, Greer.” He steps closer. “I’m so sorry. It won’t happen again.”

I gaze up into his eyes, wanting him to be mine. Wishing he could be mine. But that’s just a fantasy, and I need to remember what we’re doing here. “I think people will believe we’re a couple now. I think you should take me home.”

He nods.

No words are spoken between us as we head out of the bathroom. His SUV is waiting for us when we exit the club. He holds the door for me, and I slip into the front seat.

On the drive home, I can’t bring myself to look at him, so I stare out the window, watching the cityscape pass by in a blur.

I fight against the overwhelming urge to let tears escape, my heart clenching with the effort. The truth is undeniable—I’ve harbored feelings for Roman since I was thirteen.

When he pulls up my driveway and puts the SUV in park, I finally turn to him. “I’m going to bed.” I rush out of the SUV

as he shuts off the engine.

I leave the front door open and he slips through keeping quiet as he does. Roman's been staying here now, and I've got the guest room all made up for him, but I wish more than anything he'd keep doing what he was doing at the club.

He stopped because he doesn't want me, and I need to remember that.

I head into the kitchen and grab a bottle of water from the fridge. Roman follows me. I remove the top and take a swig, setting it down once I'm done. I can't even look at him.

"Greer," he murmurs, closing the distance between us with each measured step.

I pivot slowly, averting my gaze, unwilling to meet his eyes. My silence hangs heavy in the air, a tangible barrier between us.

"Greer, I'm begging you, just look at me," he implores, his voice tinged with urgency and desperation.

I wrap my arms tightly around myself, a defensive gesture to shield the vulnerability that threatens to spill over. I chide myself internally for the irrationality of my emotions—I understand that he doesn't want me, yet I can't shake the sting of rejection that pierces through me. "I'm okay. Sorry, I don't know what came over me."

"Greer, I didn't like the way other people in the club were staring at us. At you. I don't like to share."

I rotate gradually on my heels, each movement deliberate as I shift to meet his gaze. My heart pounds in my chest, the anticipation of our encounter tingling in the air like electricity. "What?"

"I don't share. And I think you're way too classy for a place like Greed."

A soft, gentle laugh escapes me. "Greed is the classiest place I know of."

He moves closer. "Greer, you're better than Greed. You're better than me. I don't deserve to touch you, but I want to

more than anything else in the world.”

I’m rendered speechless as Roman’s hands encase me.

“I’m going to finish what I started at Club Greed.”

I nod, still unable to find any words to say.

FOURTEEN



ROMAN

My mind's misfiring on all cylinders as I kiss the hell out of my best friend. My heart's nearly beating out of my chest, yet no anxiety ensues. I can't believe this is happening. Her lips are so much softer than I ever could have imagined. And she's making these little noises that make my dick incredibly thicker by the second.

I press her against my body, needing to be closer to her in every way. We break the kiss, and I gaze into her brown eyes.

"Your room, now," I say in a rush, my mind unable to process anything.

She moves like fire, and I chase the danger. We rush into her master bedroom, and I think about all the ways I'd like to give her an orgasm. I've felt this need to finish what I started at the club.

Greer moves to take off her clothes, and I stop her. "Do you not want me to get undressed?"

"It's like you're unwrapping my gift. I want to do it."

She drops her hands by her side, and I step behind her slowly. I move my hand up to the curve of her neck and find the zipper on her black dress.

I place a kiss against the soft skin at the base of her neck, and she shivers at the contact. "I want to remove every piece of your clothing. I want to explore every inch of you, Greer." I don't tell her I want to memorize every inch as well.

Her skin is sweet as honey, and I swipe my hungry mouth over her once more for another taste as I lower her zipper. I slide the dress off her shoulders and smile as it falls to the floor.

She's all mine.

I memorize every detail exposed to me, the natural curve of her hips, the dip in her lower back, the swell of her ass. I lift her bra strap so I can kiss her shoulder. Her head falls back against my chest and a soft moan escapes her lips.

I spin her around. My eyes land on her black-lace bra and matching panties, and my heart nearly races out of my chest. "You're so fucking stunning," I tell her.

She blushes, and it turns me on even more.

"Get on the bed, Greer."

She moves away from me and climbs onto her king-sized bed. I swear I hold my breath the entire time. Like a hawk fixated on its prey, I can't take my eyes off her gorgeous body. I want to feast on all her beautiful skin.

She's breathtaking.

I stalk closer, removing my shirt in the process.

"Please be gentle," she breathes out. She must see the raw desire swimming in my eyes. She must sense my hunger.

"Cross my heart." I place my hand over my pounding heart. It will take all my resolve to keep my promise. Because the minute I touch her skin, I may turn into a madman, unable to control this burning desire flowing through my veins.

There's just something about her.

It's never been like this for me.

I step out of my shoes. "Touch yourself for me. Show me where you want my tongue on that precious body of yours."

I continue removing my clothing as she slides a hand down to the juncture between her thighs.

My mouth salivates at the sight.

Fuck me.

This is really happening. I climb onto the bed and work my way up her body, touching her silky skin. Memorizing every curve. Committing to memory the way she feels beneath my skin. She moans as I press a kiss on the inside of her thigh and I lick a path to her sweet spot. Fuck, I can't believe my lucky stars.

“I'm going to get you off with my tongue, sweetheart.”

She smiles at me, and I can't wait to get my mouth all over her. I place a kiss against her soaked panties before I sit up and drag the delicate material down her long, sexy legs. I gaze at her perfect pussy, bared just for me.

A white-hot heat sears through my brain, firing off my synapses at what's about to happen.

I lower my head, spreading her legs so I can get to exactly where I want to be. She groans louder and tilts her hips up as I flick my tongue over her clit. I do it again and she keeps rewarding me with a twist of her hip. I drag my tongue through her wetness and kiss her pussy, then back up to focus all my attention on her clit again.

God, she tastes like heaven.

“Yes, just like that,” she breathes out. “You're so good at this.”

I lift one of her legs over my shoulder and scoop her ass into my hands. Forgetting momentarily what my mission is, I feast on her, just trying to get as close to her as possible. I can tell she loves it because her fingers twist in my hair, pulling on each strand. I keep going, egged on by the fact that she's enjoying this so much. My tongue enters her tight walls, and I fuck her with my tongue for a moment before focusing back on her clit.

“Oh god,” she cries out, her nails digging into my scalp, when I replace my tongue with a finger. And I fucking love that I'm making her lose control.

I could eat this meal every night. My dick's so hard it's almost painful. My mind's in a lust-filled daze as I think about

getting Greer off, and myself. I want to come so deep inside her.

This is where I'm meant to be. Here with her, making this gorgeous woman mine.

I keep nibbling, sucking, fucking this woman with my tongue and fingers. I lift her other leg over my shoulder and squeeze her ass as I eat the fuck out of her. She thrashes beneath me, moaning and groaning, and I keep scooting closer to get my fill of her. God, I could come just from eating her.

I need release. It's too much. So I lower a hand to jerk off as I eat her out. I can't help myself. I need to come with her. I groan against her pussy as my hand stokes my thick length. She whimpers, and I pump my dick harder and finger fuck her cunt faster.

I sit up so I can watch her go off as I jack my dick between her legs. "You're so fucking hot," I tell her, but I don't think she can hear me over her loud cries from the pleasure I'm giving her.

I keep fingering her, getting her exactly where she needs to be.

"I'm coming, Roman. Oh god. I'm coming," she screams out.

She's gorgeous. Her eyes squeeze shut as her mouth forms into a perfect O, and her pussy tightens around my finger. One fucking finger inside her. She's just that tight.

"Come for me, Greer. Show me how good I can fuck you." I keep stroking my cock, my own body climbing toward that ultimate release. My body's on fire, my heart hammering around my ribcage. I'm nearly out of breath when Greer's eyes open. She watches me stroke my dick, still panting from her orgasm.

"You like watching this, don't you?" I ask, my body nearly combusting at the sight of her.

"Hell yes," she whispers, moving her hands behind her back. She unhooks her bra and removes it. "Please come on my breasts. Please." She squeezes them in her hands.

That's all I need to hear. I lean over her body, my hand up near her head, and explode, shooting ribbon after ribbon of cum all over her soft skin.

She watches me with a satisfied smile on her face, cheeks tinged pink and her hair in a sexy disarray.

I jerk my dick a few more times, getting the last of the demons out. I'm spent, but I have so much more I want to do with her.

"You're so pretty, Greer," I tell her, staring at my release all over her luscious tits. I swipe my fingers through my seed, and rub it over her, mesmerized by her beautiful round breasts.

She sits up, eyes sparkling. "You made me come. I can't believe I came so easily."

I smile as I hop off the bed and rush into the bathroom to get a cloth to clean her chest. "Did you doubt my skills?" I ask as I walk back into the room.

She smiles wider. "No, I never doubt you, Roman. I've just never had an orgasm from somebody doing that before."

"Good." I gently clean her chest. "You know I'd do anything for you."

"Even if that's doing the job other men were too incompetent to handle?"

"That wasn't a job." I make my way to the closet and put the cloth into the hamper. "But they were definitely incompetent," I say with pride as I return to the bed and pull the covers back.

She snuggles next to me, and I wrap her in my arms. My body comes back to life at the feel of her soft curves pressed against me.

She lays her head against my chest. "I think it has a lot to do with trust. I never trusted anyone enough to let go."

I mull over her words. Think about how Greer's had trust issues for as long as I've known her. Ever since she thought her mother killed herself because they got into a fight. Now, even though she knows the truth about her mother, I bet it's

still hard to let the trust issues go. “I’m glad you can trust me. And I never want you to think you can’t.” I just want her to be happy.

We lay in silence for a few moments, and my mind drifts to all the ways I can make Greer come tonight. However, that’s when I realize she’s fallen asleep.

“Greer,” I say. “You asleep?”

My answer is her slow and steady breathing. I hold on to her, not wanting to let her go.

This is where she belongs. In my arms. I breathe in a deep sense of satisfaction as everything feels right.

“PROZAC?” I shoot Dr. Marley Dale a skeptical look. “I don’t really want to take medication. I’d rather find the root cause of my issues.” Now I’m wondering if she’s a quick-fix type of doctor, and I’m not sure I want to be here anymore.

When I was doing my due diligence to find a doctor here in Saint Pierre, Marley Dale was highly recommended by many. Her husband, Dr. Houston Dale is some hot-shot surgeon, and together they moved to Saint Pierre a few years ago so she could open up her own practice.

She scowls in my direction, her green eyes boring into me. “I’m not the type of doctor to push drugs onto my patients unless I really think it can help.” Ah. It’s like she can read my mind. “We can discuss things during our sessions. I just think the medication will help you while we uncover the root cause of your anxiety.”

Good answer, but I still don’t want to take the meds. However, I mask my reluctance and agree with her course of treatment. “Right, Dr. Dale,” I mutter.

“Please call me Marley.”

I nod. “Okay, Marley.”

When you think of a psychiatrist’s office, you picture a leather couch where you lay while discussing feelings.

However, Marley's office defies this stereotype entirely. She sits behind a white desk, with pictures of her and a man, assuming it's her husband. Many other frames have a few kids in the frames, and I'm guessing they're her kids.

"When did you first start noticing your anxiety?" she asks me.

I try to recall what was going on when I had my first panic attack, but nothing stands out. "I don't know," I tell her, unable to think of anything pertinent going on in my life. "Greer has a high-profile case, and we're all worried about her safety with all the press and such."

"Greer? Is she your girlfriend?"

Shit. I know doctors are bound by confidentiality, but I promised Greer I wouldn't tell anyone about our fake relationship. "Yes. It's new." I give her an overview of how I first met Greer when we were just children. How we grew up together. How we've remained close over the years, and how it blossomed into more.

"So your anxiety started right after you began dating Greer?"

I know what she's thinking, and I stop her thought process in its tracks. "Yes, but I don't think she has anything to do with it. If anything, being around her calms me down."

Marley nods. "Tell me about your upbringing. Any siblings?"

I keep silent about my upbringing, the words catching in my throat as I grapple with the weight of my past. I can't bring myself to tell her my mother was a monster. "I have a twin."

"Are you close?"

"My brother and I have been best friends since we came out of the womb together."

Marley smiles. "Having a twin is something special. That one person you can rely on throughout life. I'm glad you've remained close."

I nod. “We’ve had our fights, but yeah, I can’t imagine my life without him.” I think about the people who I couldn’t live without, and Greer sits at the top of the list.

Marley taps at the iPad on her desk before moving into more uncomfortable territory. “What about your parents? Let’s start with your mother. Are you close to her?”

My shoulders tense. “No one could ever be close to my mom. Not even my father.”

“Why can’t you be close to your mother?”

The unease expands from my shoulders to my neck. “Where do I begin? I guess it started when I was young. When we were young. Ledger and me.” I settle uneasily into the plush leather chair, the supple material creaking softly beneath me as I adjust my position. “My mother,” I begin, my voice tinged with a hint of apprehension, “had this rigid vision for our lives. Any deviation from the path she meticulously charted would send her spiraling into a fury.” The memory of her wrath looms ominously in my mind, a specter of rage that still haunts me to this day.

“How so? Give me some examples.”

“Okay, like prom. I had to take a certain date, even though I’d have much rather asked Greer to prom.”

Marley tilts her head. “Why wouldn’t your mother let you take Greer?”

I shrug. “She said I wasn’t good enough for Greer. That Greer was a sweet girl, and I was tarnished like my father.”

She taps more on the iPad. “Where’s your mother now?”

I scrub a hand down my jaw. “She’s in an assisted living facility. Battling dementia.” That’s the first time I’ve spoken about my mother’s disease aloud. Actually admitted to her disease.

“That must be hard for you.”

My smile is strained. “I haven’t visited her.”

“Why?”

My throat goes dry and my heart rate accelerates until it's racing. I need to get myself under control. The dizziness begins with a rush, and I try to catch a breath. "May I have a glass of water?"

Marley studies me. "Are you feeling anxious right now?"

I nod, pulling at the collar of my button-up shirt. "Yeah." It's hot in here, and I stand from the chair, trying to breathe and calm my heart rate.

Marley retrieves a pill from a drawer, still in its wrapper. "Take this, it's hydroxyzine pam. It'll help calm you down." She gets up from her chair and moves to a small fridge. She takes out a bottle of water and hands it to me.

I open the pill, pop it into my mouth, and sit back down. I take three big gulps of water. "Thank you." It sounds crazy, but I already feel better even though I know medicine doesn't work that quickly.

"You'll start feeling better soon." Marley returns to her desk. "Just focus on your breaths. Breathe in for four counts." She does the action with me. "And hold your breath for four seconds. One. Two. Three. Four. Good, now breathe out through your mouth."

We continue breathing for a few minutes until my heartbeat returns to normal, and I don't feel like I'm about to die.

"Anxiety sucks, and I can't understand what is going on with me."

Marley rests her forearms on the desk, leaning forward. "It's your body's reaction. It thinks you're not safe, so it goes into fight-or-flight mode. For example, imagine you're being attacked. Your body activates the sympathetic nervous system and triggers an acute response that prepares the body to fight or flee. It releases adrenaline into your system, and that can be a scary thing. Especially if you're not in any danger. Your body doesn't understand, and you feel each effect of your body tenfold."

I nod. “I’ve been doing some reading on anxiety, and I wish I could stop my body from triggering this response. Or at least understand what is causing the anxiety.”

“I want you to keep a journal, and—” Marley’s words hang in the air, but I interject before she can continue.

“Pass,” I retort curtly, my tone edged with resistance.

Undeterred, Marley’s smile remains gentle as she persists, “No, seriously. I believe it could help you untangle the knots of your anxiety. And perhaps it’s time you consider reaching out to your mother.”

I shake my head vehemently, the mere thought of facing my mother stirring a swell of unresolved emotions within me. “I have nothing to say to her,” I declare firmly.

Marley shifts her focus, her fingers dancing across her iPad screen as she redirects the conversation. “Perhaps we can delve deeper into your feelings about your mother next time. For now, how are you feeling?”

I inhale deeply, allowing the breath to fill my lungs before exhaling slowly. “Exhausted, but feeling a bit better,” I admit, the weight of my fatigue evident in my voice.

Marley nods knowingly. “That’s your body’s way of gradually returning to baseline after the rush of adrenaline. Some people chase that high—they’re adrenaline junkies.”

I shake my head, a shiver running down my spine. “They must be insane because I can’t stand this feeling.”

“Remember,” Marley reassures me, her voice gentle yet firm, “no one has ever died from an anxiety attack. You have the power to control it. When it hits, lean into it, breathe, and you’ll overcome it.” Her warm smile offers solace as she continues, “Don’t let it derail you. Acknowledge the attack, but know it will pass. Your body can only produce so much adrenaline before it tires out.”

“Good to know,” I reply, a flicker of hope igniting within me.

“There’s a wealth of resources available online,” Marley suggests, tapping her iPad. “You can explore my website for articles on overcoming anxiety.”

Her unwavering gaze meets mine as she concludes, “You’re stronger than you realize. This challenge doesn’t define you. It’s just a hurdle you’ll overcome.”

Grateful for her encouragement, I offer a nod of appreciation. “Thank you.”

“Same time next week?”

I nod again. “Sure.”

Leaving her office, a sense of relief washes over me, buoyed by the reassurance of progress. However, the effects of the medication start to take hold, leaving me too drowsy to trust my ability to drive safely. With a sigh, I fumble for my phone and shoot off a quick text to Greer, updating her on the successful appointment. I know she’s busy with Bane Delgados’ arraignment.

In search of clarity, I find myself wandering aimlessly through the streets, the rhythm of my footsteps echoing in the quiet surroundings. Eventually, I stumble upon a quaint stationery store, its window adorned with an array of notebooks, pens, and greeting cards.

Am I really the type of man to benefit from keeping a journal?

The bell chimes as I enter, greeted by the warm smile of a red-haired girl stationed behind the counter. Returning her smile with a nod of acknowledgment, I make my way toward the aisle designated for Journals and Diaries. My eyes skim over the array of options—pink journals adorned with delicate flowers, others featuring inspirational quotes—until they settle on a sleek black one embellished with a majestic gold emblem of a lion.

I proceed to the checkout, snagging a pen from a display next to the register before settling my bill for both items. Once I leave the store, I walk toward Danbury Park, which is situated nearby.

I follow the winding path until I find a bench nestled by the tranquil river. Settling onto the weathered wood, I reach into the white bag and retrieve the journal and pen.

The rhythmic sound of the flowing water lulls me into a sense of calm, and I sit for a few minutes, watching the gentle current of the river.

I open the journal and write...

I don't know what to write in this stupid thing, but Marley thinks it will help. I am not so sure, but here we are. Right?

Life is strange, and I don't know which direction I'm headed in now. I've often taken things for granted. Like my friendship with Greer. I'm not so sure I can call her a friend anymore. After last night, I never want to be friends with her again. I want to be the one to take care of her. Physically and emotionally. However, she deserves someone so much better...

I stop writing when I realize I've just written the words my mother said to me, repeatedly, growing up. *You're not good enough for her.*

I think about the type of man Greer deserves, and I know she doesn't deserve somebody struggling to keep their shit together. I scrub a hand down my face. Fuck.

My thoughts circle back to the harrowing panic attack that gripped me in Marley's office, triggered by our discussion about my mother. The memory floods my mind with vivid recollections of the suffocating fear and overwhelming dread that consumed me in that moment.

I'm certain Marley would admonish me for harboring such vindictive thoughts, urging me to let go of the desire for my mother to recollect the pain she inflicted upon me. She'd likely advise against viewing her memory loss as a sick twist of karma, reminding me that holding onto resentment only poisons my own well-being. Yet, the anger gushing through me refuses to be calmed. I'm furious as I set pen to paper...

My mother liked to call me stupid. And I guess I was back then. I was young. I had a crush on my best friend's younger sister. My mother knew too.

Ever have somebody hate you so much that they start rumors? Rumors that aren't even true? My mother hated me that much. She'd tell people I was a playboy. Tell others that I couldn't be tamed. Made sure that I never felt good enough for Greer.

"She's too classy for a man like you. A man that will take after his father." Back then I never knew what she meant.

It took many years to understand that my parents' relationship was never perfect. That my father stepped out on the marriage. That my mother hated my father, and therefore hated me because I looked like him.

Or maybe she hated me because I reminded her of him in some way. I guess

she felt I'd never amount to much. That I'd never be good enough for love.

Maybe she's right.

I don't deserve to have somebody love me when I can't even control my own anxiety.

I stop writing and take a deep, cleansing breath, but the anxiety I'm feeling threatens to unleash. I close the journal and spot a text from Greer.

Where are you?

I'm at Danbury Park, please come to me. I need you.

FIFTEEN



GREER

I find Roman sitting on a park bench close to the river. My mind is filled to the brim with questions about his appointment, but something tells me I need to let him take the lead on what he wants to share with me.

“Hey,” I say as I sit next to him on the bench, running my fingers over the heart locket around my neck.

His gaze meets mine, and the sunlight catches in his blue eyes, making them almost transparent. “Hey,” he whispers back. He lifts a notebook from beside him. “The shrink thought it would be a good idea to write down my feelings.”

I stare at the gold lion on the front for a moment and place my hand over his. “How do you feel about that?”

“I don’t know. I had a panic attack while talking about my mother. I think I should head out to Magnolia Ridge to visit her.”

“We can go together,” I tell him.

“I’d like that.” He leans back, placing his arm along the back of the bench. “How was work?”

“Busy. This case is taking all my energy. I wish I knew what the DA has planned.”

“How do you know they’re planning something?”

I shrug. “Intuition.”

“You’re the smartest woman I know. I have no doubt you’ll win this case.”

“I just wish I knew how.”

“I have every confidence you will.” He beams at me like a proud boyfriend, but I don’t feel confident. I feel like my walls are closing in on me. When did I become this type of person who defends evil? I think back to the question Roman asked me, if I really even wanted this case. We were sitting at Julia’s, and I asked him to be my fake boyfriend for the case, and he asked if I even wanted it. At the time I was upset. Of course I love my job. I love court. I love defending the innocent.

But now I’m not so sure.

“What’s wrong?” he asks me.

I shake my head. “Nothing. You make me sound so badass.”

Roman wraps an arm around my shoulder. “You’re more badass than you think you are. Remember when we were younger, and you kicked Jimmy Smitz in the balls when he tried to push you down the slide?”

“I think I was in sixth grade then. That was hardly badass.” I laugh lightly.

“Jimmy told all the other kids not to mess with you because you’d push them down the slide.” Roman chuckles at the memory.

“I thought they left me alone because of Dev. I figured he threatened anyone not to touch me.”

Roman squeezes me closer. “No, that was in high school. We all made a pact to kick anyone’s ass who asked you out.”

“Are you kidding? Is that why no one ever asked me to any dances?”

Roman nods. “Yeah. We put the fear of death into anyone who wanted to ask you.”

I slap his arm lightly. “That’s not very fair.”

Chills skate across my skin as he traces a finger down my cheek. “I didn’t want anyone touching you but me.”

Is this true? Or is he caught up in the moment of this being fake?

With those words, I stand from the bench and reach my hand down. "Let's head home," I say, wishing he meant every word he's said.

SIXTEEN



ROMAN

Home.

That word sounds so good coming from her. It makes me wish I could live with her year-round.

We retrieve my SUV from Marley's parking lot and head back to Greer's house.

Home.

I want to touch her like I did last night. Have her come all over me again. I haven't been able to stop thinking about touching her since I woke up with her in my arms.

We arrive at Greer's house, and when we get inside, she busies herself with preparing dinner. I should take a nap, but my body is buzzing with a new type of energy. An energy I want to explore. Getting Greer off last night was amazing, and I want to do it again.

This may be the only chance I get to be with her. Like a real couple.

I head into the kitchen.

"Hope you're hungry," she says, and I nearly growl.

"Oh, I'm hungry all right." I don't mean for the words to come out as cheesy as they have, but I don't care. I am hungry. For her.

She spins around to face me, and her eyes eat me up as I erase the space between us.

“I can’t stop thinking about you,” I tell her. “About last night.”

I don’t give her a chance to respond before my lips are on hers. I kiss her with everything I’ve got, wrapping my arms around her trim waist.

I know I don’t deserve this woman. How can I deserve to love somebody when I’m riddled with anxiety.

She deserves the world.

But tonight, I’m pushing all of those soul-crushing thoughts away, and I’m going to enjoy this woman like I’ve wanted to for years.

“I love how hard you make me come, Greer. I want to make you come just as hard.” I continue kissing her, letting my tongue glide over hers.

She moans into my mouth, and I push off all the measuring cups and ingredients she had on the kitchen counter for dinner. It all goes crashing to the floor, and I don’t give a fuck.

Apparently neither does Greer, because she smiles as I hoist her onto the counter, spreading her legs so I can stand between them. I kiss her like it’s the end of the world, while my hands move over her body.

“Roman,” she moans, and I know exactly what she wants.

So, I give it to her. I ease my hand under her skirt, gliding it all the way up until I’ve reached the lace of her panties. Fuck. This woman is so hot.

I slip my finger beneath the panel of her panties and slide it through her wetness. I love how wet she gets. I push my finger inside her pussy as she digs her nails into my shirt.

I wish we could get rid of all this pesky clothing.

But I can’t stop now. I won’t stop until I get at least one orgasm from her. My hand works overtime to get her off. I toy with her clit while pushing two fingers deep inside her. I keep kissing her as I pump my fingers inside her.

“Greer, call me your boyfriend,” I demand. “Call me your boyfriend, and I’ll let you come.” I stop moving my fingers, and she grinds against my hand.

“Roman, keep moving.”

“Call me your boyfriend. Tell me how badly you want your boyfriend to get you off.”

Her eyes bore into mine. “This will ruin me, Roman.”

I cup her cheek with my other hand. “I won’t let it. Tell me you want your boyfriend to get you off.”

“Please,” she begs, and it makes my cock rock hard. “I’m so close,” she moans out.

“Then do it. Beg for it, Greer.”

She stares into my eyes, contemplating. I know I’m not her boyfriend, but tonight, I want to be. I want to be so much more for her. “I want my boyfriend to get me off.” She closes her eyes, leaning her head back. “Please, Roman, my boyfriend.”

And then, like a bolt of lightning, she goes off, coming all over my hand. I keep playing with her clit, making sure to apply the right amount of pressure. She rides out her orgasm on my hand, and our lips are so close. I could kiss her if I wanted, but I’d rather stare at her. Study her. Watch her come alive with her orgasm.

It’s probably the most stunning thing I’ve ever seen.

I want to see it more and more.

As soon as her body calms, she moves off the counter. I lean against the opposite counter and raise my hand to my mouth.

Her eyes widen. “What are you doing?” she asks as I lick a finger that was inside her.

“Tasting you.”

She blinks as she watches me suck the fingers that were so deep inside her.

“Do you want to taste?” I offer her my hand.

She shakes her head. “No.”

I frown. “You sure?”

“Is that what you want?”

The thought of Greer tasting herself turns me on. It turns me on something fierce, and I nod.

She steps forward until she’s standing right in front of me. She opens her mouth, and I slide my finger into her mouth. She sucks it into her mouth, and thoughts flood my mind.

Dirty thoughts.

Filthy.

Of me shoving my cock deep down her throat.

I close my eyes and moan as she sucks my finger deeper into her mouth, hollowing out her cheeks.

It’s as if she can read my mind, because after she finishes sucking my finger, she lowers to her knees and reaches for my zipper.

Fuck.

“You sure?” I ask her.

She nods. “You’ve tasted me twice. It’s my turn to taste you.”

I help her unzip my pants, my dick already hard. Her eyes widen as I pull him out and give him a stroke. “I liked coming all over your tits, but I’d rather come in your mouth. Deep down your throat.” I wrap a hand around her throat, feeling her pulse spike. I rub my thumb over her pulse point and then move my hand up, until I’m cupping her cheek. “Suck me, Greer. Open wide, and suck it, sweetheart.”

“It’s so big,” she says as she wraps her hand around the base, moving the other to cup my balls.

“Take it, Greer. Take it all. Show me how messy you can be.” I lean my head back, closing my eyes as she sticks her tongue out to lick at the tip of my cock.

SEVENTEEN



GREER

I can't believe I'm doing this. I've wanted this for so long, and now it's turning into my reality. I won't overanalyze and think about what this means for us. What it means for our future. Right now, I'm going to enjoy the moment with him.

And the many inches before me.

So many inches.

His eyes connect with mine. "Take a deep breath because I'm gonna shove it deep down your throat."

I immediately do as he says and suck in enough air to fill my lungs.

Roman pushes his dick into my mouth and I hold my breath, letting him slip down my throat, relaxing as he does. "No gag reflex?" he questions, holding the base of his cock.

I shake my head slightly, tasting his precum.

He closes his eyes briefly. "Ah, fuck. That's it. Get my cock nice and wet. Sloppy wet," he says, pushing his dick deeper. "I'm gonna fuck this pretty mouth of yours."

I love that I'm doing this for him. Turning him on so much. A warmth of pride stretches through my chest, and it makes me eager to please him. I want to touch all of him. Every inch. More so than I am right now.

I wasn't kidding when I said he'd ruin me. I think he already has. Ruined me for any other man who comes after him. Ruined me for loving him the way I do. For worshiping this god I'm kneeling before.

My mouth is stretched thin as he fucks my mouth like he said he was going to, and I'm here for every moment of it. Memorizing it. Wanting to keep doing this, over and over again.

I suck him, letting my head move with each thrust of his hips.

He leans over me, one hand fisting into my hair, the other holding onto the island countertop. His eyes never waver from mine, and it builds this connection between us. His words, mixed with the way he pumps his dick into my mouth, turn me on, and I squeeze my legs together to ward off the tension growing there.

He keeps thrusting, in and out of my mouth. I hold my mouth open for him, letting it rub along my tongue. "That's it," he groans out. "I'm about to come."

His words urge me to keep going. To keep sucking like I've always wanted to. I'm giving him this pleasure, and my heart beat thrums through my ears. I'm so turned on.

I want him.

"I want you to swallow me, Greer. Don't spit this cum out. I want you to taste it. Drink it up. Fuck..." He jerks and I feel the warmth glide down my throat. "Take your dress off."

I stand, my eyes never wavering from his as I swallow the last of his cum. I slowly remove my dress, taking my time with it, even though we're standing here in my kitchen.

He tucks himself back into his pants and watches me as I finish undressing. "Bra and panties too. I want to see every inch of your precious skin."

Whenever I was naked in front of past boyfriends, I felt shy. Nervous. Afraid.

But not with Roman.

He looks at me like I'm the most valuable commodity on the planet. And who knows, maybe it's my feelings reflecting in his eyes, because I know Roman is my person.

My human.

The person I can't live without. I push away the thoughts, because I know he doesn't feel the same. This is all pretend for him.

He's the playboy.

I'm the prude.

So, tonight, I'm going to have this man any way I can. I want the mind-numbing orgasms with him. He's already given me one tonight. But I'm greedy because I want so many more.

And even more than that, I want to be the one pleasuring him.

I shimmy my ass as I move toward my master suite down the hallway. "Come and get me," I tell him and then I take off running.

Roman's hot on my heels as he chases after me down the hall. He wraps an arm around my waist and lifts me off the ground. "You're not getting away from me."

I want to tell him that I'd never want to get away from him, but I know this is all pretend. It's for fun. So, I laugh. "Put me down," I say, playfully.

He tosses me onto the bed and steps out of his shoes, removing his socks too.

I'm sitting on my ass, leaning back, watching with wide eyes. "Yes, take it off."

Roman pauses as he holds the top of his pants in his hands. "I told you to get your bra and panties off, and you haven't done it yet. Should I punish you?"

I smile, wondering how he'd punish me. However, I shake my head as I smile wider. "No," I giggle.

"Get naked, Greer. I want to see you. I need to see you." His voice is so desperate. Pained. Like he won't survive if I don't do as he demands.

I reach around my back and unsnap my bra, removing it from my body.

He appears feral as my breasts come into view. “Perfection.”

I lift my hips and bring my fingers to the waistband of my panties. “Are you going to get undressed?”

We remove all of our clothing, neither of us making a sound. The bed dips as he moves onto it and crawls over my body. Our lips meet, and he kisses me, taking all of my breath with it.

He flips me to where I’m straddled on top of him, and he sits us both up. He fondles my breasts, sucking one into his mouth and I squeeze my eyes shut. This is quite possibly the best thing that has ever happened to me.

I’ve always imagined what it would be like with Roman, and this is so much better. Every touch is gentle, yet rough. Possessive almost. Like he’s marking me as his.

Oh how badly I want to be his.

He kisses up my neck while his hands move down my body. “I need you to ride my cock, Greer. I’ve never been this hard in my life, and it’s because of you. Now take care of him. Bounce that hot ass up and down on me.”

I move to where his dick is centered at my entrance.

“That’s it. Take control. Ride this dick like you own it, sweetheart.”

I slide down over his ginormous cock, letting him fill me up completely. He hisses as I grind closer. I sink down on his length, and then I move back up again, over and over until I’m riding him.

His fingers dig into the flesh of my ass as his eyes connect with mine. “You’re so fucking beautiful. The way you ride my fat cock. The way your tits look. Play with them for me.”

I do as he asks, running my hands up my sides until they cup each breast. I move my thumb over the nipples, and then I pinch each of them.

“Touch yourself, Greer.”

I move one hand from my breast and travel lower down my body as I press my fingers against my clit. It feels so good. Before I can do anything more, Roman flips us in one swift motion to where I'm on my back, and he's on top of me, pounding into me.

"Come for me, sweetheart. Don't stop playing with yourself." He rests his hand over mine, moving my hand over my clit with his. "Do you do this when I'm not around?"

I blush slightly as he keeps pounding deep inside me. "Yes," I whisper.

"What do you think about when you're all alone? Do you picture me touching you? Do you imagine me getting you off with my tongue? Do you like riding my face?"

I'm so turned on I'm about ready to explode. Listening to the words Roman is saying has my body heating up to inferno levels. It's so hot. "Yes. To all of it."

His eyes shine with something that looks like pride. "I stroke my cock all the time thinking about this sweet pussy. Dreaming about it."

There's no stopping the tidal wave of emotions rushing through me. Like a tsunami threatening to pull me under. I've succumbed to it. It's surrounding me, taking over as my body heats up. The orgasm starts low in my belly, expanding out, creating a frenzied rush of tingles shooting up my spine and ending in every limb. My toes curl. They fucking curl, something that has never happened to me before. My eyes squeeze shut as bursts of colors dance across my vision. This is real.

EIGHTEEN



ROMAN

My most favorite thing in the world is quickly becoming watching Greer have an orgasm. It's simply the hottest thing I've ever seen. I thought eating her out was amazing, but watching her come on my cock is way better.

My body's a mess of wanting to prolong my orgasm, and getting off as quickly as possible. I don't want this feeling to end. I don't want this fucking night to end.

I pick up speed as I pound into her tight pussy. I never in my life have been this turned on. The sex turns frantic. It's pure fucking at this point, and I run a hand up and down her body, trying to feel all of her in this moment.

I'm so fucking close. So close to coming deep inside her.

"Are you on the pill?" I ask.

She nods. "Yeah. Do it, come inside me, Roman. I want to feel you."

This woman is perfect for me. The sound of her asking me to come inside her makes my heart beat amp up. Is this really happening?

I've had dreams just like this, but have always woken up before I could finish off inside her. This is so much better than any dream.

This is the real thing. And I'm nowhere near done with her yet.

I want to go to sleep fully satisfied by her. I want to be the man to take care of her.

“Greer, you do this to me. You make me so fucking hard,” I tell her, wanting her to know this is all for her.

Every inch of my cock pumping inside her tight cunt is all for her. She does this to me. She turns me into this ravenous man who can't get enough.

My body heightens, my orgasm slamming into me like a sledgehammer. It nearly knocks the wind out of me, and I keep thrusting, screwing her into the mattress as my orgasm rolls through me.

As our bodies calm, I gaze down at Greer. “You make me come so good, sweetheart.”

She nods. “Same.”

She heads into the ensuite bathroom to clean up, and when she returns she's dressed in a dainty robe.

“Come lay with me,” I tell her.

She nestles beside me, her warmth enveloping me like a cocoon. The gnawing anxiety is gone, and for the first time in a long time I'm truly happy.

“HOW'S EVERYTHING GOING?” Marley Dale asks me as I sit in her office. “Is the Prozac helping?”

“Honestly, I never even filled the prescription.”

“Why not?”

“I want to overcome my anxiety on my own. I know I can. Anxiety will not be something that defines me, but it's hard. I feel it creeping up when I least expect it.”

“I can respect that. I have many patients who want to take a more cognitive behavioral approach, and that's okay. Each journey is different. There's no right or wrong way to treat anxiety.” She leans forward, placing both elbows on her desk and steepling her hands together like a chapel spire. “Have you had any more attacks?”

I shake my head. “I've felt the anxiety bubble up, but am always able to calm myself down before it gets out of hand.”

She nods. “That’s very good. What helps you calm down? Breathing? Meditating? Something else?”

I don’t want to tell her sex with Greer is the answer to unlocking all of my anxiety, but it’s like she can tell by the look I give her.

She nods again. “Ah, I see. It’s the something else.”

“Is it crazy that a person can make me feel calm? Whenever I’m around Greer I feel alive.”

“That’s absolutely normal with love. My husband was going through something traumatic when I first met him.” She leans back in her chair and adopts a smile on her face. “I was one of his students in college, and he was a complete grump. We used to call him the meanest professor around.” She chuckles lightly. “Well, we had more colorful names for him, but you see what I mean. We never know what someone is going through, and we never know who can help them out of that dark place.” She leans forward again. “Greer might be the light to the dark tunnel you’re in right now.”

An uneasiness settles over me. “Well,” I start, and then I tell Marley the whole truth about what Greer and I are really doing. About the fauxmance.

She listens intently to my story, and when I’ve finished she only smiles wider. “Maybe that’s what started as your story, but I don’t think it’s where your story will end.”

“She’s my best friend. I can’t do anything to compromise that.”

“But, you love her, right?” Marley asks me point blank.

Now it’s my turn to lean back in the leather armchair I’m sitting in. “I don’t know. I think I’ve always loved her.”

“I know you love her as a friend, but what about romantically?”

I nod. “Yes, I love her. I want to be with her always.”

Marley beams. “That’s amazing, but I don’t want you to become dependent on her as an anxiety crutch.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t want you to only be able to calm your anxiety down by using her. Do you see what I’m saying? I want you to overcome your anxiety by looking for the root cause. By doing work on yourself, not because you have a crutch to lean on.”

I nod, completely understanding her. “I see what you mean.” But what about Greer? I feel safe when I’m with her. She calms me. She makes me believe I can overcome the anxiety.

Is it true that I’m using Greer instead of doing the work myself?

“I’d like for you to overcome this anxiety by yourself. So, that way if you lose her you won’t head off into a tailspin.”

My heart beats heavy in my chest. I can’t lose her. “I...I.” My eyes widen when I realize I’m having another panic attack.

Marley moves from around her desk. “Roman, breathe. You’ve got this.” She holds onto my hands. “Breathe,” she repeats over and over, and I focus on her words.

I suck in a deep breath, trying my best to fill my lungs and slow my heart rate. I try to focus on Marley’s words of telling me to breathe. Of telling me everything will be all right.

But will it?

Will I even be able to survive without Greer in my life?

NINETEEN



GREER

“Not guilty, your honor,” I say to the judge as Bane Delgado stands in the courtroom next to me.

Doubt fills me as I stare at the judge, wanting so badly to believe the words I say. After looking through the case files, I don’t believe my client is not guilty, but that shouldn’t matter. It shouldn’t matter to me.

It never has before. I’ve defended guilty clients before. I knew what I was getting into when I started this job. When I went into this career.

Bane smiles at me, and it’s not a friendly smile. No, it’s calculated and sinister. Like he’s secretly telling me not to fuck this up for him. He’s got a fiancée to get home to, which he won’t let me forget.

It’s as if the judge is in his pocket. He delves into the finer details and ultimately orders Delgado to be placed under house arrest until the trial—a decision I had been hoping for. Bane Delgado appears pleased with this as well.

After the arraignment, I hurry out of the courthouse. I head outside, eager to get home to Roman.

“Hey, you,” someone says.

I glance up and Chloe’s walking toward me. The pale blue maternity dress she’s wearing hugs her growing baby bump, and she’s as radiant as the sun beaming down from the clear blue sky.

“Hey.” I give her a little wave. “What are you doing here?”

“I have to appear in court, regarding a case.” She glances at the courthouse. “Do you have time to grab a coffee with me in the cafe? I’m early and would love a decaf cappuccino.”

“Of course.”

We head back into the courthouse and weave through the hustle and bustle to the small cafe tucked in the lobby’s corner. Chloe settles in at a table while I head up to the counter to order.

With both drinks in tow, I cross the hardwoods of the cafe to the table where Chloe sits waiting.

“Here you go,” I say, handing off Chloe’s decaf cappuccino to her. “How are you feeling?” I ask as I sit down.

“I’m ready for this baby to be out. Only like one more week, but it feels like forever.”

I can’t wait until my little niece or nephew is born, so it truly seems like forever. It must be a million times worse for Chloe. “He’ll be here soon enough,” I say with a smile. “Or she.”

Chloe rubs her belly and leans in to whisper, “I’m scared.”

“Aw.” I set my cup down and stare into her worried green eyes. “I can’t pretend to know what you’re going through, but everything will be okay. Dev’s going to be a great father. You’re destined to be a rockstar of a mother, and naturally, I’ll be the coolest aunt around. We got this, Chloe.”

Chloe shakes her head. “No, I’m scared about labor. It’s going to be horrible. I can already tell. I was talking to this woman at Lamaze class, who’s pregnant with her second baby, and she told me a war story.”

I don’t know how to reassure her, because no baby has come out of me, but I try anyway. “But she’s doing it again, so that’s a good sign, right? And once it’s over, you’ll have this adorable little baby to love.”

Chloe blows on her decaf cappuccino. “It’ll be like something out of a horror movie.”

I laugh as I take a sip of my coffee. “It won’t be like a horror movie.”

“It will be.” Chloe eyes me over the rim of her cup. “I swear, this baby better be cute.”

“It will be the cutest baby ever born.” I laugh. “Come on, stop. You’re the strongest woman I know, and the baby will be perfect.”

“You’re right. Positive thinking.” She takes a sip of her coffee. “Enough about me. What’s up with you? How’s the case?”

“Yeah. I don’t know about this one. It all seems so backwards. It’s crazy to defend somebody who might possibly be a monster”—I lean back in my seat—“but I still don’t know what to do.”

Chloe ponders for a moment, her brow furrowing. “Bane has lots of enemies, so he could be set up. What is the evidence saying?”

I shrug. “I just got done with the arraignment, so now I’m waiting for the evidence from the DA’s office.”

“I’m sure they’ll take forever to get it to you too,” she says with disdain in her voice.

Chloe works closely with the DA on numerous cases, so she knows how they operate. She knows how they intentionally delay everything they can to help their case.

“So...” Chloe shifts in her seat. “How are things going with Roman? He’s staying at your place, right?”

A blush creeps up my neck at the mention of his name.

Chloe’s eyes widen. “Oh my god. You’re blushing. What happened? Did you two have sex?”

“No,” I whisper-shout. “Well sort of.”

“How do you sort of have sex?” Chloe leans closer, ready for me to spill the tea.

I cast a quick glance over my shoulder, ensuring no prying ears linger nearby, before I confide in Chloe. And when I say I

tell her everything, I mean every last detail.

Her face is a mix of awe and curiosity once I'm done telling my story. "Wow," she says. "I kind of always knew this would happen eventually."

"Shh." I glance around once more. "It's not a big deal."

"It's a huge deal." She places a hand over her heart. "It's like a fairytale."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, right. Beauty and the Orgasms."

Chloe giggles. "Sleeping with Beauty."

"Cinder-give-me-all-the-orgasms," I say with a laugh. "Okay, that one doesn't have quite the ring to it."

Chloe's laughter lights up her face, and then it turns serious. "Are you going to keep having sex with him?"

"I want to, but I don't want to ruin the friendship."

"What does he want?"

My head shakes with uncertainty. "I don't even know. And with everything going on, with his anxiety, I don't want to put added pressure on him."

Chloe nods in understanding. "I see what you're saying. Has he had any more attacks?"

"Just a few."

"Just take it one day at a time. I guess that's all you really can do." She jolts in her seat with surprise. "Oh, the baby just kicked," she exclaims, excitement lacing her words as she seizes my hand and guides it to her belly. "Can you feel it?"

I smile, my heart swelling with warmth as I sense the gentle kick beneath my palm. It's a moment so tender it nearly brings tears to my eyes. "I already love this baby," I confess softly, overwhelmed by the rush of emotion. "Him or her, it doesn't matter."

Chloe's eyes shimmer with unshed tears as she beams at me. "Me too. It's crazy how you can love somebody you've

never met so much.” She rubs a hand over her belly. “I never thought I could ever be this happy.”

I sigh. “I know what you mean.”

“You deserve to be this happy too. With Roman. I can see the way he cares about you.”

“I know he cares for me. But it’s so much more complicated than that.”

Chloe shrugs. “It doesn’t have to be.”

I yearn for a simple life. One where I can tell Roman exactly what I’m longing for. How can I do that when he’s going through so much? With the state of his mental health, I don’t want to put any added stress on him.

After I say goodbye to Chloe, I head home and Roman’s standing in my living room, waiting for me.

“How was your appointment?” I ask him, wondering how things went with the psychiatrist.

“I don’t want to talk about any of that right now.” He inches closer. “Come here,” he murmurs in a husky tone.

I do as he says, and cross the living room floor until I’m standing face-to-face with him. “Roman, I…” I want to tell him that I know he’s going through something terrible, and I want to be there for him. Instead, he gently places a finger over my lips.

“No talking. Tonight, I just want to feel you.”

My core tightens at his words. His hand skates around the nape of my neck, sending chills skating down my spine, and he tugs me closer.

“Kiss me, Greer. Kiss me like you mean it.” And then his lips crash against mine, and the kiss is urgent, needy. Desperate. And I *do* kiss him like I mean it. I kiss him like a woman who loves a man. Deeply.

He keeps kissing me, deepening the kiss, fueling my passion, letting his tongue entangle with mine as he moves us

over to the couch. He lays over me, stirring my soul, and I wrap my legs around his waist.

“I don’t want to let you go,” I say to him, squeezing my legs tighter around him, trying to keep him close.

“Then don’t,” he whispers back, his voice dripping with pure grit. He captures my mouth with his and before I know it we’re removing our clothes as quickly as possible.

There’s a glint akin to lust in his eyes, and I’m certain I’m reflecting his gaze. Every touch is like magic, sparking a whirlwind of sensations that envelops me in pure bliss.

He moves us together, positioning us on the couch to where I’m straddling his lap. “No one’s ever made me feel like this before.”

I gleam with pride at his words. “Same,” I say, letting our foreheads meet.

“My anxiety melts away whenever you’re around.” He says the words like they’re sacred, and I treat them as such.

“I’ll always be around,” I tell him, meaning every word of it.

TWENTY



ROMAN

My head's exploding with things I want to express to Greer, but don't know if I should. I'm overwhelmed, and as she rocks her naked body against mine I realize I need to get deep inside this beautiful woman in my arms.

"Greer," I plead, my voice thick with desire.

She climbs off my lap, and moves to where she's kneeling on the couch. "Do me from behind," she says, and I'm in love.

My body heats up with desire, igniting a fervent longing that courses through my veins.

I fist my cock in my hand, and grip her ass with the other as I move to position myself behind her. With a quick thrust, I'm inside her. Her breath catches and I suck the secret spot along the back of her neck. She goes wild. Completely animalistic, and it makes me ravenous for her, my heart pumping madly.

"You take my cock so well. So fucking good." My legs go weak as I growl out her name. My heated gaze is locked on her perfectly round ass, and I slap it roughly.

"Ah Roman," she calls out, her pussy gripping my cock so tightly.

I keep slamming into her at a brutal pace, one hand wrapped around her neck, the other slapping her ass until her porcelain skin is red. And then, I rub her tender flesh, my eyes glazing over as I keep fucking her. Keep screwing my best friend in the most primal of ways.

Fuck, I'm so turned on, and nearly ready to blow. But I don't want this to end too quickly. I want to enjoy this woman. Every single minute I've got with her.

My heart throbs with intensity, pounding loudly in my ears. The raw passion building between us is quickly becoming something I can't live without.

I keep slamming into Greer's perfect pussy, my body edging closer to release. "Fuck sweetheart, you're going to make me come so good. So hard. I'm so close, Greer."

"Me too," she cries out, and I tighten my grip on her neck, so she knows she's mine, and I'll protect her with every fiber of my being.

I slide my hand that's wrapped around her neck into her thick strands of hair. I grip it in my fist, pulling her back so I can claim her pouty lips again. "Kiss me," I beg of her as I don't even give her a chance to answer. My tongue's down her throat as she moans, and I swallow it down.

I flip her around with sheer force, and slam my cock back into her. Her nails grip my back, her legs wrapping around my waist, anchoring me as I keep screwing her. The sounds of our fucking echoes throughout the house. My thrusts become desperate. The need overtakes me until I'm brutally pumping into her, trying my best to tame the beast deep inside me.

I'm taking what I want with no mercy. Like a savage animal.

"I'm coming," she sings out into the night.

I run my hand over her body as I settle on her hip, holding tight as I pound away inside her. And I'm nearly ripped in two, my body quaking as I grip her flesh between my fingers. Like a firecracker, my body sparks, flying high into the sky, unable to come down until it explodes.

"You're making me come so good," I groan out, moaning, grunting as my orgasm shreds me.

We lay together, our breaths uneven and choppy as we try to calm ourselves.

“That was...wow,” she whispers, and I reposition our bodies so we’re snuggled together on the couch.

I love having her in my arms. She belongs here.

Greer’s breathing evens out, and I gaze down at her and realize she’s fallen asleep. My phone pings from the coffee table, and with a swift motion I grab it.

The group chat I’ve got with Greer, Dev, Chloe, and Ledger goes off with a flood of notifications.

Holy shit.

I nudge Greer awake. “Greer,” I whisper. “We need to get to the hospital.”

She’s groggy as she opens her eyes. “What’s wrong?”

“Chloe’s having her baby.”

AS WE ARRIVE at the hospital, Ledger stands outside in his suit, his arms folded over his expansive chest. He must have just come from Club Greed.

“Nothing yet,” he informs us briskly as we approach.

We enter the building, following Ledger’s lead as he guides us toward the elevator.

“We’re only allowed in the waiting area until the baby’s born,” Ledger explains, pressing the button for the third floor.

Greer breaks into a radiant smile, her lips curving upward, showcasing her perfect set of white teeth. “I can’t believe I’m going to be an aunt soon.”

When we step off the elevator, there’s a man, clad with jeans and a worn-out tee, standing with a camera slung over his shoulder, his fingers deftly adjusting the settings on the device while his beady eyes seek us out.

My blood boils at the sight of him. The media revels in the affairs of Saint Pierce’s most prominent figures. Dev sits at the top of the list with his billions and alluring nightclub, making frequent appearances in the gossip columns.

“Stay out here for a minute,” I tell Greer. “Let us get rid of this asshole before you go in.”

Greer acknowledges us with a simple nod, her expression stoic as the man looks on. Ledger and I move away from her, our strides purposely leading us toward the unwelcome guest.

“What do you want?” Ledger barks out at the man.

He holds up the camera, as if that’s a perfect excuse of why he should be here. “Let me just get one picture of the baby.”

Ledger smirks, inching closer as he puffs out his chest. “I think you should leave.”

I corner the man, making sure I’ve got Ledger’s back. I’m fully aware of the scene before me, and am ready to attack if the situation calls for it.

“Or what?” the man gawks.

“Or we’ll make you leave,” I say in a deep, foreboding voice. I move closer until I’m right in the guy’s face. “Time to go.”

His gaze shifts to where Greer lingers just outside the waiting area.

I shake my head at the man. “Don’t even think about talking to my girl on your way out.”

I like calling Greer my girl. Feels good. Feels right.

The man listens and leaves, and I breathe a sigh of relief that he’s gone. Greer walks into the room, and I wrap an arm around her waist.

Devereaux walks into the waiting area from a sliding door, appearing exhausted. “Still no baby, but Chloe’s doing amazing,” he says.

We gather around him, clustering together as we listen to his words. He relays the story about how Chloe wasn’t feeling too well when she got home from the courthouse, and how he insisted he bring her in. While they were getting ready, Chloe’s water broke.

“And how are you doing?” Greer asks, resting her hand along her brother’s arm.

“Nervous. I’m so excited and scared all at once.” His hands fidget restlessly as his eyes dart back at the sliding door leading back to Chloe. His anxiety is present, and I can tell he’s worried about her well-being.

I slap a hand on his shoulder. “You’re going to be great. Now get back in there and take care of your girl.”

His smile is warm and genuine as his eyes light up. “Thank you.”

Greer gives him a hug before he heads back through the door.

“How’s the club?” I ask Ledger.

Ledger takes a seat and gives me a look that means something bad happened. I can always sense Ledger’s mood anytime I talk to him, and today is no different. “Not good. A woman was attacked at the club.”

“What happened?” Greer asks, taking a seat next to my brother.

“It was Posey, Bane Delgado’s fiancée”—he uses his fingers to make air quotes—“she was waiting in a room all by herself. She said the lights went out and someone ambushed her in the room.”

I take the seat across from Ledger and Greer.

“She didn’t see anyone come into the room?” Greer asks, her eyes widening as she pulls out her phone. “Has this made it onto social media yet?”

Ledger shakes his head. “Nobody knows. We made sure the story didn’t get out. Bane’s released from jail this morning, all fitted with an ankle bracelet this afternoon, and his fiancée is hanging out at Club Greed. By herself? Something doesn’t add up.”

Greer and I exchange looks as my mind tries to wrap around somebody getting attacked at the club.

“What did she say? Did you catch the person who assaulted her?” Greer fires off questions in rapid succession, leaving no doubt in my mind that she has many more ready to follow.

Ledger’s shaking his head. “She’s pretty shaken up, and no we didn’t catch anyone. Nobody on any cameras, and the VIP members were all accounted for. I don’t know what happened.” Ledger checks his phone and slides it back into his pocket. “I gave her my number if she thinks of anything else.”

“Has she reached out?” Greer asks.

He shakes his head. “No, not yet.”

“Maybe she will. I hate that this happened at my brother’s club. Have you told him yet?”

Ledger looks mortified at the idea of telling Devereaux. “Not while Chloe’s in labor. This is something I can handle on my own.”

I nod. “If you need any help, let me know.”

“I’m just wondering what will happen once Bane finds out.”

“Maybe Bane had something to do with it,” Greer shocks us both by saying.

“Why do you think that?” I ask her.

She shrugs, her mahogany-colored hair falling over her shoulders as she does. “I don’t know. Just a feeling I get about him. You should have seen him in the arraignment. I don’t trust him.”

“Me either,” I add on. “I don’t trust anyone.” It’s true. I trust the people closest to me, and that’s it. I trust Greer. Having her around calms my anxiety.

And at the thought of my anxiety, it’s here, rearing its ugly face.

“Are you okay, Roman?” Greer’s voice cuts through the tension, prompting me to take another deep breath, drawing in air until my lungs are fully expanded.

I nod, knowing if I've got Greer around I don't need to worry about my anxiety. "I'm fine," I smile, my body unwinding.

I push away the thoughts of losing control over my body and lock eyes with Ledger. He nods at me, silently asking me if I'm okay.

"I'm seriously fine," I say aloud, knowing that I can control this anxiety. At least, hoping I can. Greer makes it easier to face it.

Ledger and Greer discuss Bane and Posey more, and I think about my life. My best friend is having a baby right now, and it makes me reflect on myself. Will I ever have a baby? Will Greer be the mother?

I watch my brother as he speaks about this Posey woman with Greer, and I can tell he's got a little something for this woman, even if he doesn't admit it out loud.

Dangerous territory he's wading into.

"You like this woman?" I blurt out, interrupting their conversation.

Greer and Ledger both pivot to look at me, with Ledger's expression betraying a hint of shock at my question. He understands trying to lie to me—there's simply no point.

"There's just something about her," he whispers, and Greer's eyes grow wider.

"Oh Ledger," she gasps, obviously knowing how bad this is.

"Don't worry. I know she's engaged, and I don't plan on doing anything about it." Ledger glances at his phone once more, and I can't shake this feeling of unease.

I want to believe him. Really, I do, but why is he watching his phone like a hawk?

After what feels like an eternity, Devereaux walks out to deliver the good news.

“A healthy baby boy,” he says with one of the biggest smiles I’ve ever seen on his face.

We all congratulate him and time moves like a snail until we’re allowed into the room with Chloe and the baby.

Chloe’s face beams as she gazes down at her son in her arms. She’s a trooper, and she looks great. “I want you all to meet Devereaux Junior.”

Devereaux looks like a proud papa standing next to Chloe and my heart fills with happiness as I stare at my two friends.

Greer coos over the baby, talking with Chloe. Ledger and Dev discuss a few things about the club, and I stand back and watch it all. Like I’m looking into someone else’s life. The life I realize I want.

I want it all.

And I want it with *her*.

My fake girlfriend.

TWENTY-ONE



GREER

“Can you believe how perfect my little nephew is?” I ask from the front seat of Roman’s SUV on the way back to my place.

“He was incredibly perfect,” he answers in a monotone voice.

“What’s wrong?” I ask because he’s been sort of off since we left the hospital.

He pulls into my driveway and switches off the engine. As he does so, he places a hand on my knee. The mere touch sends shivers cascading down my spine.

“One of my best friends just had a baby. It’s a pretty big thing. Dev is the guy who jumped off a roof when he was fifteen just to see if he could, and now *that* guy has a baby.”

I laugh lightly, remembering how Dev twisted his ankle when he decided one sunny afternoon that he’d jump off the roof of our childhood home. “Yeah, it’s hard to believe.”

Roman’s silent again, staring at his hand on my knee. He moves his thumb in lazy circles. “It’s just a lot to process.”

I run my fingers over his hand. “Let me help you process it better.” I don’t know what’s come over me, but it’s as if my body has transformed into a live wire, crackling with anticipation, poised to be ignited at any moment. Watching Roman hold my nephew changed something deep inside me.

He leans in, capturing my lips, and I moan against him. “Let’s take this inside,” he whispers across my skin causing an electric shiver to race up my spine.

We barely make it out of his SUV before we've got our hands all over each other.

We slip inside the front door, and slam it shut. And then his hands are gripping my ass, and he's kissing me desperately.

We make it as far as the couch.

"I can't stop wanting you," he says to me as he sits down and I straddle him. "I just can't get enough of you, Greer."

I gaze into his eyes, wishing more than anything I could have this for the rest of my life. "Me too." I grind against him, my body coming more and more alive with every touch.

Roman guides my hips with his strong hands and brings his mouth to meet mine. It's a sensual kiss at first but grows hungrier by the second.

I'm so turned on I could orgasm from the friction we're creating by rubbing against each other.

"I need to be inside you," he murmurs against my lips.

"Yes, yes," I say in a low voice, needing him more than anything too.

He makes quick work of sliding down his pants and boxers. "I need you to ride me, Greer. Show me how you own this cock."

I slip my panties off and position myself over his hard length. And with one twist of his hips, he's inside me, and it feels so incredible.

I rock my body, slowly at first, and then I pick up speed. I gaze into his soft blue eyes, feeling a sense of calm wash over me as I lose myself in their tranquil depths.

His lips slowly spread into a smile, and he leans in to pepper kisses down my neck. "I need these clothes off," he says between kisses, reaching for the hem of my maxi dress.

I help him get the thing off, and he stares at my breasts covered by my black lacy bra.

"You're so fucking perfect," he whispers as he brings his hands to cup each breast. He squeezes a bit and then leans his

head closer, sucking on my breast through the bra.

In a flash, he removes my bra and tosses it on the floor behind him. He gives my breasts equal attention, sucking one while playing with the other and vice versa, as our bodies move in unison.

I realize Roman fucking owns me, and I grip his hair with my fingers, and moan as my body picks up speed.

“That’s it, Greer. Be a goddamn good girl and ride my cock.”

I love it when he speaks dirty to me.

“How did I ever get so lucky to be here right now?” He kisses me, and then our lips stay close, hovering, breathing each other’s air. “Greer,” he whispers, and I’m so close to coming it’s crazy.

If there were ever a moment for Roman to confess his undying love for me, it would be now.

Instead, he grips my hair and pulls my head back so he can trail kisses along my neck.

“I’ve wanted you for so long,” he says, barely audible.

Is this true?

And how long is long?

A week?

Month?

Years?

I keep grinding against him, rocking my hips, moving with him as my body tingles everywhere. I can feel my orgasm cresting, but I try to push her off for just a second longer. I need more of this.

More of him.

“Greer, come all over me. Make me yours,” he says before kissing my lips.

And I lose it.

I can't stop coming as I ride him.

"That's it, baby. Fuck, I feel you. I feel that sweet pussy tightening around my dick." He rocks up into me, gripping my hair tighter in his fists. "Keep riding me. I'm about to come," he says.

I'm still coming when Roman lets loose. It's a beautiful sight, and I memorize every detail.

He tugs me closer, and I know at this moment that I'm completely in love with this man. There's no need to think about anyone else ever getting my heart, because Roman has the whole damn thing in his hands.

And I think he always has.

"I'M STILL NOT sure about visiting my mother. I know this needs to be done, but..." Roman says, while maneuvering his SUV onto the highway.

I rest my hand on his thick thigh as he drives. "It'll be great."

"If you say so," Roman says with a half-ass smirk on his face.

Since last night, I've found myself feeling jittery around him, and I can't quite pinpoint the reason why. Perhaps it's because I've come to terms with the realization that I'm in love with him. I've always harbored feelings for him, but now I recognize that it's love.

The genuine kind.

The kind that has the power to move mountains and beyond.

"Are you listening to me?" Roman's voice breaks through my inner monologue.

I snap out of my thoughts, turning to meet his gaze. "No, sorry. What did you say?"

He lifts my hand and grazes his lips across my knuckles. "Are you sure you're okay with seeing your father?"

I sigh. “No, not at all. I don’t even know what I’m going to say to him.”

Roman lets out a gentle laugh. “That’s what I asked when you weren’t listening to me. I asked if you knew what you were going to say. Now we know the answer.”

I squeeze his hand as he kisses it one last time and places it back on his lap. “It’s been so many years, but I think it’s time our father is a part of our lives again.”

“What does Dev think?”

I glance out the window, watching the tapestry of greenery pass us by. “He wants no part of it.”

“It’s a tough spot. I remember your father never being around after your mother died. It must have killed him to think she committed suicide. I think that breaks a person.”

I shift my gaze toward him, his eyes focused intently on the highway before us. “It killed all of us. It breaks everyone.”

Roman steals a swift glance in my direction, his gaze lingering on me for a fleeting moment before returning to the road ahead. “I know it did,” he murmurs softly, his voice carrying a hint of understanding.

“He was being selfish. He had two kids who were dealing with the loss of their mother.” I will myself not to cry.

Roman lifts my hand again and brings it to his lips. “I wish I knew the perfect words to say right now, because I’d say them over and over to you.”

I summon a strained smile, feeling completely hollow. “I know.” I drop his hand and resume looking out the window until the small town of Magnolia Ridge comes into view.

“Do you ever miss it?” Roman asks as we get closer to the town.

“Miss what?”

“Living in a small town. Everyone knowing all your business.”

I laugh lightly. “Everyone already does. That’s why we have to pretend to be dating.”

Roman nods as he pulls onto Main Street and heads downtown. “Right. Pretend to date,” he whispers, like he’s lost in thought.

“Do you miss it?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “I love my life in Saint Pierce. I’d never come back here.”

He loves his life. The life where he visits my brother’s club for a good time. The life where he and I are just friends and nothing more.

Right. My already somber mood plunges even deeper into despondency.

He pulls up to my old home, and my father’s car is in the driveway. “Call me when you want me to pick you back up. I’ll be at the nursing home where my mother’s staying.”

“Good luck.” I lean over and give him a hug.

He holds onto me tightly. “Good luck to you too.”

“If you want to wait, I can go with you to visit your mother.”

Roman debates my offer for all of five seconds and then shakes his head. “No, go enjoy your time with your father. I wouldn’t want you to waste time with my mother.”

I kiss his cheek. “I’ll be thinking of you,” I say to him.

He gazes at me, face serious. “I’m always thinking of you.”

I HAVEN’T BEEN HOME since I graduated college.

With hesitant knuckles, I rap against the front door, each echo resonating through the silence of the hallway. The heavy weight of anticipation hangs in the air as my father swings the door open, revealing his weathered face, etched with lines of worry and surprise. His eyes, once bright with familiarity, now

regard me with a mixture of disbelief and uncertainty. Perhaps in his eyes, I'm a ghost, a fading memory resurrected by the knock on the door, stirring emotions long buried beneath the surface.

He invites me in, and I take one small tentative step forward.

Nothing's changed. The family picture still hangs over the sofa in the living room. I inch closer, drawn to scrutinize my mother's image more closely. It's sad to admit, but sometimes her face eludes me when I try to conjure it in my mind. The scent of fresh raspberries mingled with cream triggers a flood of memories, transporting me back to my childhood. I recall her tenderly brushing my hair after bath times, her touch dripping with love and care. And the way her eyes would light up with joy whenever I wished her a happy birthday—she adored those occasions, believing that they warranted celebration like a national holiday.

And now I'll always celebrate March 22nd as one.

It's one of the reasons I couldn't understand why she'd kill herself if she loved to celebrate the day she was born so much.

My father hasn't said anything since he's let me into the house. He stands with a quiet dignity, his eyes watching me closely, most likely wondering why I'm here standing in his living room.

"Hi, Dad."

"Greer," he whispers out, like he hasn't spoken the name in years. And maybe he hasn't. "What are you doing here?"

I fidget on my feet before I move further into the house. "I wanted to talk to you." I move around the space with a sense of familiarity.

"Talk?" My father follows me, and he reminds me of a little kid. I glance around the dining room that pours into the kitchen, letting my eyes wander over everything.

"Yes, Dad. Talk about some things." I walk over to the kitchen island where newspaper clippings litter the space. I glance down, taking one in my hand. "Dad, what is all of

this?” In the clipping is an article that was written about me last year when I won an influential case.

There’s another article about Devereaux opening his club. And another about the Greedy Girl murders and them catching the killer.

“I just like to read about what you all are up to.”

I spin around to face him. “In the newspaper? There are better ways to get info. Aren’t you on Facebook?” I giggle a little and it feels so out of place in this tired home. “Chloe posts daily pics about how she’s getting ready for the baby.” I pause. “Oh Dad, the baby. They had a boy.” I feel almost weird about sharing this information with my father. Maybe Dev should be the one to tell him, and I worry that maybe I’ve said too much.

The sight of unshed tears glimmering in my father’s eyes is almost unbearable. However, I can’t forgive him just yet. There’s still so much left to say.

We sit at the dining room table, and after a few minutes of me filling him in on the latest news in my life, I study my father.

He’s lived here alone for all these years. He’s never remarried or even dated anyone, for that matter. That I know of.

And more importantly, he’s never reached out to us.

“Dad, have you ever considered selling this place? Maybe moving to the city with Dev and me?”

My father’s gaze locks onto me, his eyes, the color of rich caramel, betraying a depth of sorrow that seems to weigh heavily within his soul, reflecting a myriad of unspoken emotions. “No, I can’t leave here. This was your mother’s dream home. She loved it here.”

I place my hands over his on the table. “Dad, what happened to you after she died?” I don’t mean for it to come out so harsh, but I have to know. I need to understand.

My father blinks. “I think I died along with your mother that day.” A tear escapes his eye and trails down his cheek. “I loved her so much, and I thought she didn’t love me anymore. It consumed me until it drove me mad.”

I squeeze his hand. “You had two children who needed you.”

For the first time since I’ve returned home, it feels like my father truly sees me. Not just as his child, but as an individual with dreams, fears, and aspirations of my own. In his gaze, I glimpse a flicker of understanding, a recognition of the person I’ve become and the journey that has shaped me. “Oh, Greer. I’m truly sorry,” he says, raising his hand to cup my cheek. “I couldn’t face you and Devereaux. I felt like you would see whatever it was your mother saw in me that made her want to escape.” He shakes his head. “That made her think the only way to flee was to kill herself.”

“She didn’t, though.” I stand to look at the pictures hanging on the wall. “She didn’t leave you, Dad.”

“I know that *now*, but it does something to a man when he believes the woman he loves doesn’t love him. It breaks a man harder than anything else.”

“How do you think it feels to believe a mother doesn’t love you? We were broken too, Dad,” I say, sitting back down and grabbing his hands again. “We had a mother who we thought didn’t love us enough to stick around, and a father who wanted nothing to do with us. We didn’t just lose a mother that day. We lost our father too.”

My father breaks down crying—sobbing—before my very eyes. “I’m so sorry, Greer. Will you ever be able to forgive me? I was hurting too badly. I was selfish.”

I stand from the table to grab a box of Kleenex on top of the hutch in the corner of the room. I hand him a tissue as I wrap an arm around him. “I know you were. We were too, but we were kids. We were allowed to be selfish. You were the adult.”

He stands from his chair, and we hug. “You’re right. I handled everything poorly. I should have been there for you two.” He swipes away his tears, and I shed a few of my own.

“Dad, she would want us to be close. She wouldn’t want you clipping articles out of a paper to find out how your kids are doing.”

“I figured you both hated me. I didn’t want to intrude on your lives.”

This makes me cry harder, knowing my father has been sitting here for years all alone.

“Why didn’t you reach out to us?”

He pulls out of the hug and his haunted eyes stare down at me. “Fear. Fear will make you believe the craziest of things. It makes you believe the world is out to get you.”

I hug him again. “Dad, nobody is out to get you. Especially not your children.”

“I wish the bastard who murdered your mother would have taken me instead. Your mom would have known how to handle it better. She would have been better than me.”

I rub my hands along my father’s arms. “I wish he would have never taken anyone, but you can’t change the past. No matter how hard you try. You just have to keep moving forward.”

He nods. “How did I get so lucky to have you for a daughter?”

A soft smile curves my lips, the warmth spreading through my chest like a comforting embrace. “I love you, Dad,” I say, the words carrying the weight of years of unspoken sentiments and gratitude.

“I love you too,” he says, letting the words fall easily from his lips. “Do you want some coffee?” he asks as he hurries into the kitchen. “I want to hear all about you and Roman.”

“I’d love some,” I tell him, but then realize my father doesn’t know the truth about me and Roman. Only what he’s read in the papers.

The fauxmance.

I don't know how to tell him the truth, but this meeting is a breakthrough with my father. This is the first time in years we've spoken so openly and freely. I can't lie to him now.

"Roman and I aren't really dating," I tell him, my voice sounding flat to my own ears.

He sits back down at the dining room table and hands me a mug of coffee. "What do you mean?"

I breathe deeply as I resume my seat across from him, and let it out slowly before I explain everything to my father. He listens intently, asks a few questions, and smiles when I tell him about how we've been tricking the media with our charade.

"So, you don't have feelings for him at all?"

"I love him." The words free me. I feel lighter finally telling someone. Finally facing the truth.

"How does he feel?"

I slump my shoulders. The lightness is replaced with a heaviness that sits deep in my chest. "He's Roman, Dad. I don't think he's capable of loving someone for the long term. Sure, he cares about me. We're best friends, but that's where it ends."

"Your mother and I started out as friends. Some of the best relationships start out with friendship. It's a great backbone."

I nod. "I know. I know. But there's something different about us. I'd hate to tell him how I feel and have him not agree, and then our friendship would be ruined. I'd never be able to handle that. Or what if we started something, and it didn't work out? I just feel like there's no going back to where we are now." I shrug. "He's dealing with a lot right now. I can't make it all about me when he's going through a rough time."

"What's wrong?" My father's eyes are etched with worry.

I explain Roman's anxiety, and discuss his panic attacks. "I think he just needs time."

My father gives me a half-smile. “Time is something none of us have a lot of.”

“I know, but I’m scared.”

“I could give you a ton of cliché quotes about trying and regrets, but you already know all of those.” He sighs and smiles at me. “Here’s the only advice I have for you. Don’t let the what-ifs keep you from going after what you want. If I had listened to the what-ifs, I would never have asked out your mother. I often wonder what my life would have been like without marrying your mother.”

“And?”

“And I can’t fathom it. There’s never a clear picture. I didn’t get to spend a lifetime with your mother like we planned, but I’m still the luckiest man on the planet because I got to love her, and she loved me. It took me a long time to come to that conclusion. For many years, I thought your mother didn’t love me.” Tears well in his eyes. “But now I know she loved me. She loved us. God, Greer, she loved you so much.”

I try to fight back the tears, but there’s no use. “I know she did, Dad.”

He smiles even though he’s crying too. “I just remembered something.”

“What?”

“Your mother knew you liked Roman, and one night, she told me she had caught Roman staring at you. You were out back doing cartwheels, and he was in the kitchen watching you. Your mother said Roman told her you were just so pretty it was hard not to stare at you.” He chuckles. “Your mother told me that night she thought you two would end up together.”

“Really?”

“Really.” He grabs a tissue from the box. “Your mother had a sixth sense about those kinds of things. Remember when she predicted that the mailman’s wife would have a boy?” He

smiles wide, his eyes doing that far off look like he's remembering the day. "Well, she had that boy."

I grab a tissue and sit back in my chair, blotting the tears from my eyes. "I wonder what Mom would think now."

"She'd want you to risk everything and take the leap. She'd want you to be happy."

I shake my head. "Fear makes you believe things that make it impossible to think clearly."

My father leans forward, resting his forearms on the table. "Greer, I think life might surprise you if you give it a chance."

"Who is this man? And what have you done with my father?" I say with a tiny laugh.

"I've been seeing a shrink, and she's helping me deal with the death of your mother. For so many years, I had so much anger. I hated life. I hated it so much, and now I see it's all been a lie. When your mother died I felt like a part of me died that day too."

I nod. "You're right. I have felt so much guilt about Mom's 'suicide', thinking it was my fault."

"No," my father says with regret in his eyes. "I never knew you felt guilty for it. I'm so sorry I wasn't there for you."

I smile. "Well, you can be here for me now. If I put everything on the line and Roman rejects me, I'll need you to help me pick up the pieces."

"I'll be here." His eyes never waver from mine. "I'll always be here."

TWENTY-TWO



ROMAN

I ease my SUV into a parking spot outside the Magnolia Ridge Nursing Home, a place I'd rather not visit. Stepping out, I prepare myself mentally for the impending encounter.

I suck in a deep breath, letting it out slowly, my gaze fixed on the weathered facade of the building, its bricks weathered and its windows oversized. It's a sight that causes a mix of emotions.

In the early stages of my mother's dementia, my father attempted to shield her condition, masking her symptoms beneath a veneer of normalcy. But as her condition progressed, the façade shattered. Reluctantly, he made the difficult decision to relocate her to this nursing home, where she has resided ever since.

As I move toward the entrance of the home, a weight settles in my chest. Anxiety grips me like a vice, and I wish Greer were here to help me through this impending panic attack. I can do this.

Breathe.

Fucking breathe.

Maybe I should head back to Greer's father's house. I suck in a deep breath and before I turn around to head back to my SUV in the lot, I spot my father's tall frame in the neatly landscaped courtyard near the entrance. I *can* do this.

"Hi, Dad," I say once I'm close enough.

He smiles and extends his hand for me to shake. “Hey, Roman. I’m glad you dropped by today. Your mother’s been buzzing since she saw the news about you and Greer.”

Shit.

“Oh, right,” I mumble, rubbing at the back of my neck. How will I tell my mother that all the nonsense in the paper has been a giant hoax?

She’d never understand.

“Come on, she’s about to take her daily walk. If you want, you can go with her.”

“Uh, sure.” I can go for a walk with my mother.

We step inside, and I shadow my father as he strides past the front desk with an air of familiarity. It’s evident that he’s here daily. Nurses greet him with friendly waves as we walk the corridors, engaging in brief exchanges of pleasantries.

We proceed down a spacious corridor and eventually arrive at a room located towards the end. My mother occupies the bed, her figure facing away from me as she gazes out of the window. “Walter, is that you?”

“Yes, Catherine,” my father says. “I’ve got someone who wants to see you.”

My mother turns around, her gaze locks onto mine, and in this fleeting moment, I’m met with a void—a chilling absence of recognition that sends a shiver down my spine. My heart lurches in my chest as I reel in disbelief. How could this be? Oh my god. The realization hits me like a thunderbolt—she doesn’t recognize me.

Her own son.

I know this is common for patients with dementia, but it’s unsettling to see it firsthand. To see your mother look at you without a spark of recognition. Then, in a moment of clarity, something in her demeanor changes and she smiles, the memory of me floating back to her consciousness.

“Roman,” she says in a sweet voice. “How are you?”

I take a tentative step closer. “Hi, Mom.”

“Catherine, do you want to go for your daily walk with Roman?” my father asks. “You can show him the petunias you like.”

“Oh, yes, I like the petunias.” She glances up to look at me. “Would you like to see them?”

I nod. “Yeah, Mom. I’d like to see them.”

Watching my mother walk closer to me with a sweet smile is really messing with my head.

She’s so fragile. So different. Not the woman who raised me.

My father gives me quick directions to go out the back of the building toward the garden, and I wrap my mother’s tiny arm in mine and lead her out of the room.

Once we’re in the hallway, my mother smiles up at me. “How’s Greer?”

“She’s fine. She went to visit her father today.” I open the back door and we step out onto a brick path.

“I always adored Greer. Are you good to her?” It’s strange to have my mother asking about Greer. It’s like I’m wading through her memories. What all *does* she remember?

I think about how I’m always good to Greer. No matter what. Even when we’re not fake dating, I’m good to her. “Yes, Mother. Always.”

“You always had a thing for her,” my mother says.

As my mother guides me along another winding path through the lush sanctuary, the garden unfolds before us in a kaleidoscope of colors and fragrances. Each step covered in vibrant blooms, their petals swaying gently in the whispering breeze.

We pause in front of a cluster of fiery red flowers. Their crimson hues blaze against the backdrop of greenery, a striking contrast that draws the eye.

My mother halts before the scarlet blooms, her fingers delicately tracing the velvety petals as if communing with nature's beauty. There's a softness in her gaze, a momentary respite from the fog of forgetfulness that clouds her mind. "Aren't they beautiful?"

I ignore my mother's comment about having a crush on Greer when I was younger and focus on the flowers. "Yeah, they're beautiful."

"You should take some home to Greer."

"Maybe later, Mom."

She turns to face me, and the woman I've known my whole life shines through like the monster I remember. "She was always too good for you," she says, and then it's like the sweet mask of dementia slips back down, covering her face.

I agree with my mother, nonetheless. "She is too good for me, but it will not stop me from being my best for her every day."

Instead of pissing me off like in the past, it saddens me that my mother doesn't think my love is good enough for Greer.

Wait.

Am I in love?

Yes. I am. I *love* Greer.

The weight on my chest intensifies as I think about my love for Greer. As I think about what Greer deserves in her life. About my anxiety, and how it's nearly crushing my existence.

She deserves a man who can give her what she needs.

Am I that man?

"That's good, dear," my mother says, touching the petals of the flowers. "So pretty," she says.

We walk further down the path, and I can see this is taking a lot out of my mother. She appears weak.

So I stroll with her back to her room and chat with my father for a while. As I'm leaving, I lean over to give my mother a kiss on the top of her head.

"Thank you for coming, Roman," she says with a big smile. "I'd like for you to keep coming. I miss seeing you."

Tears well in my eyes as I think about my mother living out her days here in the nursing home. Not remembering her life. Some days, not even remembering who she is.

It's a hard way to live, and something I don't wish on my own worst enemies. Coming here today was an eye-opener.

I say my goodbyes and head out of the building. When I reach my SUV, I pull my phone from my pocket and check to see if Greer has texted yet. As I'm looking at my phone, it rings.

It's her.

"Hey, was just thinking about you," I say into the phone.

"What were you thinking? How wonderful I am?" she teases.

"Always." My mind travels back to my mother's words in the garden.

She is too good for me.

My heart races as Greer tells me she's ready for me to pick her up. The world closes in on me as I try to catch my breath.

"Greer," I croak into the phone, raspy and nearly incoherent.

"Roman? What's wrong? Are you okay?" Her voice is panicked and I hate that my anxiety is impacting her. It makes my attack that much worse.

"I'm fine," I reassure her, though every fiber of my being feels like it's on the brink of collapse. I try to summon the breathing techniques Marley taught me, hoping they'll provide some relief.

It isn't working.

“Roman, are you at the nursing home? I’ll be right there.”

She hangs up, and I spot a bench closeby and take a seat, willing my body to calm down. Breathe.

My mind is overwhelmed with a million thoughts, yet none of them provide any relief. I’m stuck in my head when Greer pulls up in her father’s Cadillac.

She rushes out of the car and wraps her arm around me as she sits down next to me on the bench. “Breathe,” she whispers, rubbing her hand down my back. “Just breathe. I’m here.”

While I breathe in through my nose and out through my mouth, I focus on the soothing motion of her hand gliding over my body.

Greer soothes my anxiety, and I think about what Marley said about using Greer as my anxiety crutch.

I push away the thoughts as I suck in a deep breath. “Thank you,” I tell her once my breathing returns to normal. “I don’t know what happened there.”

Her lips curl upward into a smile. “It’s okay. I’m always here for you.”

“HOW DID THINGS GO WITH MOM?” Ledger asks as we gather at Dev’s house for Sunday brunch a week later. Greer insisted on hosting the brunch here to spare everyone the hassle of traveling with the baby, and Chloe didn’t want to miss out on the chance to hang out with us.

While everyone else fusses over the baby, Ledger corners me in the kitchen.

“Things went okay. I can’t shake off the surreal feeling when Mom didn’t recognize me at first. It hit me hard,” I confess, a pang of sadness lingering in my chest.

Ledger offers a comforting pat on my shoulder. “Yeah, it’s tough. I’ve been seeing her every week, and it’s like she’s slipping away more and more.”

“There was a brief moment of clarity when she said Greer was too good for me,” I share, a hint of amusement coloring my voice.

Ledger chuckles. “Well, she’s not wrong there.”

“Yeah, I know. Greer deserves better. And, uh, there’s nothing between us,” I add, feeling a twinge of guilt for the half-truth I just uttered to Ledger.

He laughs harder, shaking his head. “You can’t lie to me. You’re in love with her, and I’ll let you in on a little secret.”

“What’s that?”

“You’ve been in love with her for a *long* time.”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Roman, you’ve loved her for years. Since around the time her mother died.”

I raise my hand to my face, tracing a path down from my forehead, past my eyes, and finally coming to rest on my stubbled chin. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re friends. And I won’t do anything to ruin that friendship. She’s working through a lot with her father and she has this important case. I don’t want to be just another distraction for her. Besides, I’m working through a lot too. How can I expect her to be with me when I’m not working properly?”

Ledger crosses his arms, leaning back against the counter. “You work just fine. Anxiety isn’t a reflection of you. You’re healthy as a horse, and you’ve got a great life ahead of you. I understand your hesitation to go all in with Greer, because she’s not the type you half-ass it with. You either go all in or nothing at all. So, you need to decide if you’re ready for an all-in situation.”

I nod. “I know Greer deserves a man who’s all in. And I know I love her. But sometimes that isn’t enough. How can I subject her to a life where I’m a fucking wreck? What if my anxiety gets worse?”

“What if it gets better? What if you have the life you want and you’re happy?”

“The shrink told me not to focus on the what-ifs.”

Ledger cracks a smile. “Exactly, stop focusing on the what-ifs. You and Greer belong together. We all know it. Hell, even Dev knows it. I just think he won’t admit it to anyone, but we all see how much you care for her. And how much she cares for you. She loves you too.”

A peaceful sensation falls over me for the first time in a long time. “I love her, Ledger, but she deserves so much better.”

“Then be that better man. Go fucking find yourself or whatever shit you need to do, but be that man she deserves.”

“What’s going on in here?” Dev asks as Ledger’s phone chimes.

Ledger pulls his phone from his pocket and his face lights up as he looks at the screen.

“Who’s that?” I ask, ignoring Dev’s question.

Dev steps closer. “Whoever it is, Ledger’s thrilled to hear from them.”

Ledger pockets his phone and scowls at us. “It’s just Posey. She remembered something else and wants to meet with me to discuss it.”

Dev and I share a look and revert to our teenage selves. We laugh and tease Ledger for a few minutes until Greer, Chloe, and Devvie Jr. join us in the kitchen.

“What’s going on?” Greer asks.

“Ledger’s in love,” I say back to her.

She smiles wide, and it’s breathtaking. As the rest of the kitchen explodes in questions about Posey, I watch my friends interact, thinking about what Ledger said to me.

I need to be the man who deserves her.

But how?

TWENTY-THREE



GREER

Roman's become a fixture in my home. It's different having him in my space. Yet, with each passing day, his presence has gradually grown on me, like a vine creeping up the walls of my heart. It's something I'm getting used to. Something I'm actually liking. A little bit too much.

After we got home from brunch yesterday, Roman held me in his arms for the rest of the afternoon. Then, we made love all night long, and a weight settled deep in my chest. A weight of unease with my life. I feel like something's not right. Something isn't perfect.

That's why I slipped out of the house before Roman woke up, and am heading to the one place I haven't visited since I was a child—church.

I step into the church feeling a shift in energy, a sense of peace and reverence washing over me. I breathe in the subtle aroma of incense and let it out slowly. I admire the architecture, stained glass windows, and religious symbols as I pass each pew. The altar, the focal point of the chapel, is adorned with candles and fresh flowers. I feel myself drawn to the serene atmosphere and move closer toward it.

A man in black pants and a black button down shirt moves closer toward me. I realize quickly it's the priest heading down the aisle.

"Welcome," he says in a deep, comforting voice.

I nod my head. "I'm not really sure why I'm here."

The priest steps closer with an aura of confidence and charm, drawing my attention to his striking features and magnetic presence. He has a chiseled jaw, piercing blue eyes, and a smile that lights up his whole face. He's quite good-looking, but he's got nothing on Roman.

"I'm Benedict Carmichael. Whether you're here to explore your faith, seeking solace, or just curious about our community, we're delighted to have you. Please feel free to ask me any questions you may have, or if you simply want an ear to listen to your problems, I can offer that as well."

I let out a deep breath I didn't realize I was holding. "Thank you. I could really use somebody to talk to." The words pour out of me. When I headed toward the church this morning I wasn't even sure what I was looking for.

It wasn't until Father Carmichael offered his ear that I knew exactly what I needed.

He smiles another genuine smile that puts me at ease. "Please sit down," he says, leading me to a pew near the front of the chapel. The place is empty, quiet, and it makes me breathe easier. He doesn't say anything else, obviously waiting for me to start.

And so I do, "I think I'm defending a guilty man, and I'm not sure I can do it anymore. I thought I loved my job, but how can I love something that makes me feel inadequate because I don't have a man on my arm. I should be good at my job because, well, I'm really good at my job, not because I'm in a relationship."

Benedict listens to me intently, and it feels so good to have somebody to talk to. Sure, I can talk to Roman but with his anxiety, I don't want to put this on him. I know what he'd say. He'd tell me to do what makes me happy. However, I don't know what that is. I like talking to somebody impartial.

"It's important to feel a sense of pride in your work. To be awarded for that good work. It offers a sense of accomplishment. I understand. Let me ask you, are you happy with where you're at?"

I think about his question. Working my way through law school was tough. Once I graduated and was offered the job at a big law firm, I was ecstatic. Now the expectations I had don't live up to the actual life I have. "I'm not sure. I don't even think I know what true happiness even looks like." I think about my life. Have I ever been truly happy?

"Happiness isn't found in material possessions or fleeting pleasures, but in cultivating a deep sense of purpose, connection, and inner peace. Take time to build relationships based on love, compassion, and understanding. Do you have anybody in your life that you feel you have a deep connection to?"

I nod, instantly thinking about Roman. "I do."

"Remember, true happiness comes from aligning your life with your values and embracing the love and grace of a higher power. Trust in yourself to make the right decision. You know deep down the answers you're looking for."

He's right. I know deep down what I should do. "Thank you, Father." I smile at him, standing from the pew. "I appreciate you listening to me."

He nods, staying seated in the pew. "You're welcome back anytime."

I leave the church feeling a sense of tranquility. I don't want to work for a firm that doesn't value me as a person. Only values me as a worker. Somebody they can dictate to. Someone they can manipulate to do their bidding. Bane Delgado is most likely guilty. Even if he isn't, I don't want this case.

I head downtown, walk into Stanford, Beaumont, and Lind, and walk right into Mr. Stanford's office.

His eyes express his worry. "Greer, what's going on?" He stands from his desk, buttoning up his suit jacket.

I bypass all the formalities, and get right to the point. "I'm so grateful to you for giving me a job. For teaching me, and helping me grow into the lawyer I am."

He slides a hand over the lapel of his suit. “You’re welcome,” he says, confusion lacing his tone. “What is this about?”

“Please sit down,” I say, taking a seat at the chair facing his desk.

He carefully unfastens the button of his tailored suit jacket, the fabric yielding with a soft rustle, before settling into the plush leather chair positioned behind his imposing oak desk. “Greer?” he questions.

“I appreciate everything, Mr. Stanford, but I’m putting my notice in. I need to explore new options, and I can no longer work on the Delgado case.”

His eyes widen in astonishment at my words. “I don’t know what to say,” he stutters out.

“Just say thank you,” I tell him.

The crow’s feet deepen around his eyes as he attempts to summon a smile. “Thank you, Greer,” he says, his expression initially strained before transforming into one of warmth in an instant. “I’m genuinely happy for you, and if you ever need anything...” His words trail off, but the unspoken assurance hangs palpably in the air. I know he’ll always be there for me.

I rise from my chair, extending my hand to shake his. “Rest assured, I’ll fulfill the terms of my employment contract, and the transition of my cases will be seamless.”

He nods appreciatively. “I’m grateful for that.”

As I step out of his office, a weight lifts from my shoulders, leaving me feeling like I can conquer the world. With a surge of determination, I realize that I’m capable of facing whatever challenges lie ahead.

Yet, with this newfound confidence, there’s a twinge of sadness as I contemplate the next step. I need to tell Roman that our charade as fake lovers is no longer necessary. The mere thought weighs heavily on my heart, stirring conflicting emotions within me. Perhaps it’s time to confront the truth of my feelings for him. Despite the fear of rejection or

uncertainty, I know deep down that it's a conversation that needs to happen.

TWENTY-FOUR



ROMAN

Greer's not home when I wake up, and I pace her living room floor, debating my next step. Last night was miserable for me. I lay awake all night long, thinking about my life. About using Greer as my anxiety crutch. How I need to face my anxiety head on. Not lean on Greer to fix my problems for me.

I need to learn to do it on my own, and there's only one way to do that.

Greer enters the house, and I swear it's like there's this aura that shines around her. She's breathtaking, and she smiles at me with what looks like true happiness.

"I quit my job."

I nearly choke. "What? Why?" I've got so many questions for her.

She shakes her head incredulously, mirroring my own disbelief, her expression a captivating blend of astonishment and delight. A radiant smile graces her lips, stretching from ear to ear, as strands of her mocha-colored hair dance playfully around her shoulders with each movement. "I don't like this person I've become. Defending the guilty. Not delivering justice."

"What will you do?"

She shrugs. "I'm not sure yet. Maybe work for the DA's office? Maybe open my own practice."

I shove my hands into my pockets. "Will that make you happy?"

Her eyes roam over me before she chews on her bottom lip. “I’m not sure.” She inches closer. “I guess I don’t need you to be my fake boyfriend anymore.”

My heart plummets inside my chest, and a wave of anxiety threatens to bury me whole.

Despite the fear clawing at me, I muster a nod. “Okay,” I manage, swallowing hard against the lump in my throat.

The awkwardness stretches between us, making Greer’s face fall with sadness. A sense of protectiveness sweeps through me, and I want to wrap her into my arms. Tell her I love her, but instead I stay rooted to the spot.

“Roman,” she begins, her voice trembling with uncertainty as she takes a tentative step forward. “I don’t want you to leave. I’m tired of pretending,” she confesses, her words weighted with raw honesty. “I love you,” she whispers, her voice barely audible but brimming with sincerity.

My heart nearly explodes inside my chest. I love her more than anything. More than myself, but for some reason I can’t express the words to her. I know I have too much to work on before I can open my heart up to her completely. Before I can be the man she needs.

I blink. “Greer, I...uh,” before I can finish my sentence tears fill her eyes.

“Oh god,” she says, covering her mouth.

“Greer,” I say, reaching out my hand to touch her arm, but she backs away.

“No, you don’t have to say anything. It’s fine.”

It’s not fine, but I can’t be the man she needs when I’m suffering like this. “I’m sorry,” I tell her, feeling the need to escape. Escape from my feelings. Flee from this world I’m in right now.

I have to face my anxiety head on.

My chest constricts as Greer rushes out of the room. I want to chase after her. I need to tell her how I feel. That I’m madly, truly, deeply in love with her.

But then what?

We live happily ever after?

I can't live this lie. This life where I know my anxiety is always lurking around the corner ready to attack.

I pack my bags and head out the door, ready to face things head on.

"HI DAD," I say as he opens the front door of my childhood home. "Can I stay here awhile?"

His eyebrows nearly shoot into his receding hairline. "What's going on? Everything okay?" His tone is one of worry, but I quickly put him at ease by telling him I just need a break for a while.

I'm not even sure for how long.

After settling into my childhood bedroom, I slide into my old desk, thumbing through the internet on my phone, searching for articles on anxiety crutches. I get lost down the rabbit hole of anxiety, and ways to overcome the stress, and decide to go for a walk outside.

I slip on my tennis shoes, and head downstairs.

"I'm heading out to see your mother in a bit. I'm sure she'd love to see you," my father says before I walk out the door.

I glance at him from over my shoulder. "Sure, I'll be back in an hour and we can go."

My father nods, telling me to enjoy my walk.

And then I'm off, wandering the streets of Magnolia Ridge. I pass by Greer's father's home, and my thoughts instantly replay all the memories of growing up here. How I used to swing by their house to check on her under the guise of going to hang out with her brother.

I think about my anxiety. I think about my mother and all the cruel things she said to me growing up.

I think about Greer as my anxiety crutch.

I remember one phrase I read today, '*Where the mind goes, the body will follow.*'

I repeat the words over and over in my head. Right now my mind's in a dark place. A place haunted by old memories. A place shrouded in fear. Fear that blossoms into anxiety the more and more I let it.

I need to retrain my brain. If that's even possible.

I glance up at the cloudy sky, and suck in a deep breath. "How do I overcome something if I can't even predict it?" I don't know when my anxiety is ready to leap out, attacking me out of nowhere.

As if on cue, thinking about the anxiety brings on the heart palpitations. I try to breathe as I stop walking, my heartbeat raging out of control.

I think about Greer, and I'm temporarily calm, but then I push the thoughts of her away. I need to do this on my own. My mind needs to know my body's not in danger.

My body's fight-or-flight reaction has been activated, and my body's on high alert, but there isn't any danger present.

I sit on the curb, gasping for breath, while repeating aloud, "I'm not in any danger," in an attempt to reassure myself.

The feeling passes, the adrenaline running its course through my system. I can finally catch my breath, and after the dizziness settles, I stand.

I think about how my mind thought about anxiety, and my body followed right along after it, making the saying, '*Where the mind goes, the body follows.*'

I instantly reverse my thinking. I tell myself I'm healthy and strong.

I am healthy. The doctors checked me out. They made sure there's nothing physically wrong with me.

I'm as healthy as an ox.

I'm as strong as one too.

I sprint toward my house, feeling the rush of my healthy heart pumping blood through my veins. My legs carry me faster as I pick up speed.

Before long I'm hauling ass down the street as fast as I can go, no longer worrying about my racing heart.

I can do this.

My anxiety will not control me anymore.

I rush up the steps to my front porch, and my father's waiting just inside the door.

"Are you okay?" he asks me as I lean over, resting my palms on my knees, trying to catch my breath.

"I'm fine," I say, standing to my full height. "Just let me shower and then we can go visit Mom."

He nods, and I head upstairs.

As I shower I think of Greer. My thoughts always go to Greer, but I'm not about to jerk off in my childhood home. I did that plenty growing up.

Oh if these walls could talk. I chuckle as I exit the shower and get dressed in record time, tossing on a pair of jeans and black turtleneck sweater.

I need to make peace with my mother. I'll never move forward until I do. I'll never overcome my anxiety with the thoughts that I'm not good enough for Greer looming in the back of my mind.

TWENTY-FIVE



GREER

I slept like shit last night. To be honest, I've slept like shit the entire few weeks Roman's been gone. After I poured my heart out, confessing my love for him, he left without a word. And since then, reaching him has proven impossible.

Not that I've made any attempts.

In truth, I haven't even glanced at my phone much. Everywhere I turn, I'm reminded of memories of our fauxmance.

I finally broke down and made Ledger tell me if Roman was at least okay.

He confirmed he's working through some things while staying at his parent's house. And I respect that.

At least I try to respect it. Above all else, I will remain Roman's best friend. That fact will never change.

Even if I laid out my heart for him to crush. I won't ever let him know that it affected me like it did. That his words, or lack thereof, crushed my soul.

I answer a few emails from headhunters trying to land me work, but even though I'm now one of the most sought after lawyers in the city, I don't really want to work for another big law firm.

Maybe I'll write a book.

Or teach.

Or become the next Martha Stewart. I giggle at the thought of that, and slam my laptop shut. My phone rings, and my heart nearly leaps into my throat at the thought that Roman's calling me. I glance at the caller ID, and let out a sigh.

"Hey Dev," I say into the phone after answering.

"Hey, what's wrong?" he asks, already picking up on the lack of cheer in my voice.

I shake my head, trying to push away the sadness I'm feeling from Roman's rejection. I haven't mentioned to Devereaux the extent of what went down between Roman and me, but I'm sure he knows something happened. "Nothing's wrong."

My brother accepts my answer, and changes the subject. "I called Dad."

My eyes widen in utter disbelief, nearly bulging with shock. "And?"

"And we're meeting tomorrow to talk."

Tears well in my eyes at the thought of them working things out. "I'm happy you called him."

"You don't sound too happy. Are you sure everything's okay?"

I nod, even though he can't see me. "I miss him."

"Dad?" my brother asks, but then I hear the realization dawn on him as he comprehends who I'm referring to. "Oh, Roman?"

"I hate that I do, but I'm worried about him more than anything else."

"I won't pretend to understand what the two of you have going on, but I'm no dummy. I know it's more than friendship. And I think Roman's feeling like he's broken somehow."

"Broken?"

"Greer, anxiety is a big hurdle to overcome. Most people never overcome it. They live with anxiety for the rest of their

lives. I can't even pretend I know what he's going through, but I have to believe he'll find his way back home."

Home.

I think about that word and what it might mean to Roman. What it means to *me*. Having Roman stay with me while masquerading as a couple was life-changing. It made me realize it's all I've ever wanted.

"Are you mad that I've fallen in love with your best friend?"

My brother laughs. "Greer, I've always known you had a thing for him. And I've always known he's had a thing for you too."

If that's true, then why did he leave? I want to ask my brother, but instead I remain silent. We chat for a few more minutes about our father, and I ask about my little nephew and how he's doing.

After we hang up, Dev sends some snapshots of Devvie Jr., and I smile as I glance at the photos. And then, the acid in my stomach churns, and I rush to the bathroom and get sick.

For the remainder of the afternoon, I lie on my couch, a sense of unease gnawing at my insides until a realization strikes me like a bolt of lightning—I haven't had my monthly visitor in what feels like an eternity. A wave of apprehension washes over me as I rack my brain, trying to recall the last time I experienced it, only to realize it was before Roman started staying here.

Once my stomach settles, I muster the resolve to venture to the drugstore in search of answers. As I wander the aisles, my mind swirls with uncertainty, pondering which pregnancy test to select, each box holding the weight of potential life-altering news.

Is it possible that I'm pregnant? I'm aware of the pill's low failure rate, but could this truly happen to me?

I buy the test, rush home, and now I'm waiting anxiously for the full three minutes to determine my fate. My heart races within my chest, my palms slick with sweat.

Two pink lines appear and my heart plummets into my stomach and I get sick once more. Uncertainty floods my system as I stare at the test again once my stomach calms down. I can't tell Roman I'm pregnant. Not when he's dealing with his own demons.

What am I going to do?

Oh my god. What am I going to do?

IT'S BEEN NEARLY a week since I found out I'm carrying Roman's child. I need to tell him, but I don't want to add more pressure to him.

Before I freak completely out there's a knock at my front door. I swing the door open, and Roman's standing on my front porch. I almost want to cry, but I keep the tears at bay out of fear I might cry out that I'm pregnant, and I don't want to lay that burden on him.

I study him, my gaze lingering on his features, and I'm struck by how good he looks. There's a brightness in his eyes that I haven't seen there in a long time, and as he smiles it nearly knocks the breath out of me.

"Hi, Greer," he says, barely audible, and I can feel the apprehension in the timbre of his voice.

"Hi," I peep out.

"Are you okay? You look like you've been crying?" Roman leans forward, and I open the door wider, moving aside so he can enter the house.

I sigh. "I've had better days."

Together, Roman and I move through the house with ease, neither of us strangers in the space. Sunlight streams in through the windows, casting warm, golden hues across the walls and illuminating the path before us.

We head to the heart of the home—the kitchen. As we step into the spacious area, Roman leans against the island, crossing his arms over his chest. "Want to tell me about it?" he

asks me, and emotion wells up behind my eyes, threatening to spill over in tears.

I shake my head. "Tell me why you're here," I say, wondering what's brought him by today.

Is he going to tell me he's leaving my life for good?

Have we forever ruined our friendship?

My heart nearly stops in my chest as I hold my breath, waiting for him to speak.

He steps closer, but I keep my guard up. "I'm sorry, Greer," he starts. "I never meant to hurt you the day I left. I needed time. I needed to not use you as a crutch."

"A what?" I ask him.

"A crutch. I was using you as a crutch for my anxiety. When I'd have an attack, I counted on you to help me through it." He shakes his head. "I needed to be able to overcome the anxiety on my own. And I couldn't do that with you around."

Now I mirror his stance, crossing my arms over my chest. "You could have told me why you were leaving. I would have understood."

He shakes his head, black strands of hair falling into his eyes. "I froze. My anxiety was threatening to suffocate me when you told me you loved me."

Now the tears fall freely. "That's always something a woman wants to hear." I have to walk away from him. Now it's my turn to flee. I rush out of the room, making my way as far away from him as I can.

I make it to my master suite bathroom and lock the door as Roman barrels after me. I breathe heavily as I lean my head against the door.

Breathe.

"Greer," Roman says as he raps his knuckles lightly against the bathroom door. "I didn't freeze because you loved me."

"Why did you freeze?"

“Because I love you.” I hear his forehead tap against the door, at least I think it is, and then when I hear his voice, I know he’s leaning against the door.

I turn around, leaning my forehead on the door as well.

“Fuck,” he breathes out. “It’s always been you, Greer. I’ve been in love with you since before I even knew what love was. I froze because I felt you deserved better.”

I open the door so I can gaze into his eyes. “Better?” Is he for real? There’s nobody better than him.

His eyes soften as he stares at me. “I felt I couldn’t be the man you needed when my anxiety was controlling me.”

“Roman, we’re a team. I could have helped you.”

“It was something I needed to do alone. I had to learn that anxiety doesn’t control me. That I can overcome it, without my favorite crutch by my side.”

I give him a warm smile. “I’ll always be here for you. I want you to know that.” I suck in a deep breath, wondering if I should tell him I’m pregnant. Will he be upset?

Will it cause his anxiety to spiral out of control?

“I’m in a much better place, Greer. And I love you”—he wraps his arms around my waist—“I want it all with you. Everything. A relationship. Family. Marriage. I want everything.” He leans in and captures my lips with his. The kiss is easy, simple, and I grab hold of him, because I love him just as much.

He breaks the kiss, and gazes into my eyes. “Do you want that too?”

I inwardly cringe, hoping I’m doing the right thing by telling him this quickly. “Yes, I want it all with you, and just so happens we might be getting a family sooner than expected.”

His eyebrows shoot up. “What do you mean? Do you already know I made peace with my mother?”

I stop my train of thought about the pregnancy, and focus on what he just said. “You did?”

“She wasn’t a nice person growing up. It was hard. But I’ve learned to forgive her. There’s no roadmap on how to do everything right. My mother tried, sure it didn’t feel like it most of the time, but in her own way, she tried. Or at least I’d like to hope she did. I have to believe that.”

I wrap my arms around his neck. “I’m so sorry you grew up with a mother who didn’t support you.”

“She never thought I was good enough for you.”

I laugh at that. “I think nobody is good for anyone until they learn to love themselves first. I think once you find the person you want to be with, you need to work on being the best version of yourself for them.”

“I love you,” he tells me again.

It warms me up from the inside out. “I love you too.” Now’s the time. “Also, I’m pregnant.”

For the first time since I’ve known Roman, and I’ve known him a really long time, tears well in his eyes. “Are you serious?”

I nod, hoping he’s just as happy as I am. “Yes. I know the timing isn’t the best, and everything is so new, but...”

Before I can finish my sentence, Roman’s lips are pressed firmly against mine. He kisses me and I can’t stop smiling as he does.

When he breaks the kiss he cups my face in his hands. “I love you so fucking much.” His eyes go wide as he lowers himself to speak to my belly. “I didn’t mean to curse around you.” He places his hands on my tummy. “I love you too. I haven’t even met you yet, but I absolutely love you.”



EPILOGUE

Greer

“I love you so much,” I say, kissing the squishy cheek of my nephew.

You want to know who else I love so much? Roman Thorne.

He lounges beside his twin brother on my living room couch. They’re deep into a discussion about a new woman Ledger can’t seem to get enough of, and as Roman laughs, it’s like a burst of sunshine warming from the inside out.

His laughter is contagious, and I find myself craving more of it. To say Roman’s conquered his anxiety is an understatement. Though he still faces occasional rough patches, they’re steadily diminishing. He’s doing much better, and he knows I’ll always be here to support him. We all will.

The doorbell rings, and I hand my nephew back off to my brother with a grin. “Dad’s here. You nervous?”

“No, I’m ready for him to meet Chloe and the baby.”

After a deep breath, I swing the door open. Dad stands at the threshold, a bottle of white wine in hand, giving me a soft smile.

“Thanks for having me over,” he says as I envelop him in a warm hug.

“Dad, you’re always welcome here. Come in.”

Hesitation flickers in his eyes as he steps into my house.

I take the bottle of wine from his hand as Roman and Ledger get up from the couch.

Roman positions himself by my side, his hand resting on my lower back. “Mr. Huxley.” He shakes my father’s hand.

“I heard you two were together and I couldn’t be happier,” Dad says, the smile on his face genuine. His gaze roams over everyone until they land on Devereaux, cradling his baby.

Tears glisten in my father’s eyes, and Dev edges closer to him.

“Dad, I’d like you to meet your grandson, Devereaux James Huxley Junior.”

My father sheds a few tears as he steps closer to my nephew. Dev hands his son off to our father, and my father holds the baby, unable to take his eyes off him.

“This is Chloe,” Dev says, introducing the love of his life to our father. “We’re getting married.”

My eyes light up at the news. I move closer to Chloe as everyone gushes over the wedding announcement.

Chloe smiles like the happiest woman on the planet, and I can actually relate.

I give her a hug, and she smiles at me. “I’m so happy to have you for a sister,” I tell her.

She squeezes me hard. “Thank you, and when are you going to tell everybody that you’re pregnant,” she whispers into my ear.

I’m shocked. “How did you know?” I pull out of the hug so I can look into her eyes.

She winks. “I was right. I had a feeling, but you just confirmed it.” She’s excited, like she just won the lottery.

“We wanted to wait until the doctor confirmed everything, and after the first trimester to make sure everything was okay.”

Chloe nods, and the room quiets down.

“Let’s move into the dining room and I’ll get brunch served.” I smile at Roman. “And then Roman and I have an announcement.”

“Please don’t say you’re pregnant,” Ledger says, staring at his brother.

It’s like I can’t keep the news of the baby off my face. I’m literally glowing.

“I am,” I say, and Ledger stares at his brother incredulously.

“I knew you were hiding something big from me,” he says, wrapping Roman into a big brotherly hug.

“Just like you’re hiding something from me?” Roman raises a brow at Ledger.

“I’m not hiding anything,” Ledger answers back. “You mean Posey?”

Roman nods.

“There’s nothing going on with her. She’s engaged, remember? We’re just...friends.”

Something seems off about the way he says friends, and for his sake, I hope they are just friends. Bane Delgado isn’t a good man.

Before we can delve further into what’s going on with Ledger, my father, Devereaux, and Chloe are all congratulating Roman and I.

As we step into the dining room for brunch, the atmosphere comes alive with animated discussions of weddings and babies. Conversations swirl around us like a whirlwind, punctuated by laughter and excited chatter, filling the space with an energy of anticipation and joy.

In this moment, Roman stands before me, a vision of pure beauty that steals my breath away. His smile stretches wide across his face, illuminating his features with an infectious warmth that radiates pure bliss.

We sit around the table, and I couldn’t be happier.

“I can’t believe everything that’s happened this past year.” I think about all the things, starting with the Greedy Girl murders, to having to pretend to be in a fake relationship with my best friend.

“All good things,” Roman says. He focuses on Ledger. “Now we need to get you a woman.”

Ledger rolls his eyes. “No, thanks.”

A slow smile spreads across Devereaux’s face. “Really? Not even Posey? The woman you’re *babysitting*?”

“Babysitting?” Chloe and I say together, sharing a look of confusion.

Ledger runs his hands into his hair and tugs at the ends. “That’s a story for another time.”

Roman smiles at me, glancing at the locket around my neck. I beam up at him, and open it, revealing a picture of him alongside the picture of my mother. “You told me to keep who I love the most closest to my heart. So, now you are.”

Roman leans closer to me in his chair, wrapping an arm around my shoulders. “I love you so fucking much,” he whispers in my ear, running his fingers over my locket.

“I love you too.” And for the first time in my life, I’m excited about what’s to come. It’s thrilling—*terrifying*—and completely everything I’ve ever wanted in the world.

WANT MORE GREER AND ROMAN? [CLICK HERE](#) to get a Bonus Epilogue for these two.

THANK you for reading Cross My Heart. Stay Tuned for Ledger’s Story with Close Your Eyes, coming soon.

Cross My Heart holds a special place in my heart because in 2023 I experienced something like what Roman’s facing. Anxiety crept up out of nowhere and started ruling my life.

In early 2023 I had a medical emergency, and after that I started having severe health anxiety. Anytime my heart rate would race, it would spiral me into a panic attack.

Anxiety is something I never thought I could have. What have I got to be stressed about is what I would always say?

Once I realized I had anxiety, and had been experiencing anxiety attacks, I began scouring the internet for answers. I knew I could overcome my anxiety.

There's so much info out there, and at first it was overwhelming. I kept thinking, how can I control my anxiety when I don't even know when an attack is coming? And everything kept saying, breathing. Meditation.

And I never understood. I'd always say, well why meditate when I'm not feeling anxious? I needed to know how to control my attacks. The thing I learned was, meditating is teaching you how to breathe, so when you HAVE an attack you know how to breathe through it. Because let's face it...the only way to get through an attack is breathing, calming down, while changing your mindset.

It was mindset I needed to change. I also needed to know exactly what was happening to my body during an attack. My heart is racing, why? My breathing is shallow, why?

Once I learned the basic anatomy of what was going on, I was able to work on controlling myself. I knew the attack was just a huge surge of adrenaline surging through my body. I wasn't dying. I knew my body couldn't keep producing adrenaline, and my adrenals would fatigue, and I just had to wait for the adrenaline to leave my system. Breathe. Relax. Let the adrenaline run its course. It's almost over.

There's so many helpful things on the internet, and some of the main takeaways I learned were...

Where the mind goes, the body follows. This is so true. I thought writing this book would be therapeutic for me. I thought writing about my anxiety would help me more. I couldn't have been more wrong. Writing this book has, in a way, brought me right back to the height of my anxiety. What I mean by that is...when your mind is constantly focused on the anxiety, your body will follow. Writing this book has brought my anxiety to the forefront of my mind, and in the past week alone I've nearly had a few attacks.

Now...let's examine that phrase one more time... *Where the mind goes, the body follows*. We all know that when we think about getting sick, we get sick. When we think about anxiety, the anxiety is present.

Now, what if you changed your thinking to more positivity. I'm healthy. I'm strong. I can do hard things. Your body will follow.

So, if you suffer from anxiety (and I'm sorry if you do because I'd never wish anxiety on anybody) try not to focus on the fact you suffer from anxiety. Instead try to think about how healthy and strong you are. Once I'm done writing this...I don't ever plan to think about my anxiety ever again. I *am* healthy. I *am* strong. And so are you...

ANXIETY IS NOT A ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL EXPERIENCE. Each individual's journey with anxiety is unique and deserves understanding, empathy, and support.

Just as every person is different, so too are the ways anxiety manifests. Some may feel it as a constant weight on their shoulders, while others experience it in intense bursts. No matter the form it takes, anxiety is valid and real.

Let's remember that support looks different for everyone. While some may find solace in talking openly about their struggles, others might prefer a quieter, more private approach. Respect each person's coping mechanisms and offer your support in the way that they need it most.

There's no one "right" way to overcome anxiety. What works for one person may not work for another. It's a journey of trial and error, filled with ups and downs. Encourage patience, self-compassion, and seeking professional help when needed.

Above all, let's foster an environment of kindness and understanding. By acknowledging that everyone's experience with anxiety is different, we can create a community where individuals feel heard, supported, and empowered to navigate their unique paths to healing.

Together, let's break the stigma surrounding anxiety and embrace the diversity of each person's journey. We're in this together.

SNEAK PEEK SAY MY NAME

Chloe

“Another Greedy Girl found dead. This is the third murder victim from Club Greed this month. Last night, a neighbor heard shouting, then a gunshot, and called the authorities. When police arrived, they found Julie Landers in her apartment, face down, with a bullet to the back of her head. There was no forced entry.”

I glance at the TV playing in the Saint Pierce police station. The morning show anchor rattles off details about the grim news while an image of a smiling redhead standing on a beach pops up on the screen.

“It’s a damn shame,” Guy Adams, a Saint Pierce officer, says, taking his chewing gum out of his mouth and sticking it under his desk. “A body like that gone to waste.” He shakes his dark-haired head. “Damn shame.”

What’s a “damn shame” is that I have to call this man my partner. Him and his disgusting gum chewing habits. After today, I’m hoping I won’t have to deal with him again.

I’m still waiting to see if I made detective, so I can move up in the world. Captain’s been promising me the promotion ever since I finished all the required courses it takes to become a detective, but so far, nothing.

“Chloe, Captain’s been looking for you,” Marge, Captain Adler’s secretary, says. “He’s in his office.” She scuttles off

down the hallway, and I follow her matronly figure, taking a deep breath as I approach his open door. Here it goes.

“Congratulations, Bardot,” Captain greets me as I enter his office. “You’re now a detective.” He’s always been very clipped and to the point, so his no-frills announcement doesn’t phase me.

This isn’t the type of place to show emotion and do a happy dance, but I can’t help the proud smile that lifts my lips. “Thank you, sir. You—”

“No time for accolades,” Captain Adler interrupts, his naked head shining under the office’s fluorescent lights. “I’ve got your first assignment.”

All the excitement racing through me screeches to a halt. My smile collapses because I already know what he’s going to say, and I’m simultaneously filled with anticipation and dread. You can’t escape the news. “Club Greed?”

He nods, not meeting my eyes. “Here’s how I see it, Bardot.” His bushy mustache moves along with his mouth. “Homicide needs your help with this case. You in particular.”

“Why me in particular?” I ask, furrowing my brow. This is a high-profile case, and I should be enthusiastic about the opportunity—yay for me—but his phrasing of me “in particular” has alarm bells ringing in my head.

In a city with only eleven-thousand people, the police force is small, so it’s no wonder they want me on the case. I think right now they’ll take all the help they can get, but why me in particular?

I’ve been a kickass police officer, and I’m confident I’ll be a kickass detective. I’m one of the youngest officers to become a detective in the Saint Pierce Police Department. At twenty-seven, I’m already on my way to becoming captain someday.

But Captain Adler still won’t look me in the eye, making my scalp prickle with unease. He rustles through some papers while I wait for him to answer my question.

His brown eyes finally connect with mine, and I see the apprehension skulking in their depths. “We’ve got a true mess

down there at Club Greed.”

I nod, hoping he’ll explain further. His obvious hesitance to elaborate is making my palms sweat.

Captain Adler leans back in his cherished leather chair, and that’s when the alarm bells blare. I never thought it possible for a grown man to worship a piece of furniture so much, but he has a thing for his state-of-the-art Herman Miller gaming seat. He’s told us all many times about its ergonomically designed craftsmanship with eight zones of support, meant to keep asses comfortable for the long haul. I mean, the man won’t shut up about it most days. It’s turned into an extension of him. And every time we discuss something troubling, he caresses the arm rests. Just like he’s doing now.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“It’s no mystery that we’re all working overtime to figure out who’s behind the latest murders of Club Greed employees. Katherine in Homicide wants to put you undercover.”

My heart freezes, then pounds at an alarming rate. “Me?”

Confession: Katherine terrifies me. She’s a no-nonsense woman without a filter, who has spent her adult life on the force. She worked her way through the ranks, just like me, until she became lieutenant of Homicide.

“I don’t understand. Undercover where?”

“She wants you to go undercover as a Greedy Girl.”

I can’t help but gulp, and internally laugh at the absurdity of me becoming a Greedy Girl. Has he seen me walk in heels? It’s just not good. I knew someone might have to infiltrate the club to get closer to the situation, but I never in a million years imagined it would be me.

As if sensing my expanding anxiety, Katherine strolls into the office. Captain Adler’s stiff shoulders relax. “Just in time. I was telling Chloe about the assignment.”

Katherine’s icy blue eyes rake over my uniform, evaluating if I’m up for the job. “Do you think you’re ready for this?”

“Yes,” I reply, without missing a beat. Even if Captain Adler would make a better Greedy Girl than me, I’d never let on to my superiors about my insecurities.

I joined the police academy at twenty-one because my cousin, Vin Mills, always made working in law enforcement look so thrilling. He’s a federal agent rockstar, and I idolize him. While I thought about joining the agency too, I wanted to travel my own path in this world, and not follow in his footsteps. So, I signed up for the Saint Pierce Police Academy, and haven’t regretted it since. I always dreamed of helping others in some capacity, so being a cop was the best way to accomplish that goal.

A few years later, I realized I wanted more, to be the one solving the cases and giving the victims closure. Yet, in all those altruistic goals, I never really imagined I’d go undercover. I can’t wait to tell my cousin, Vin about this. He’s always undercover.

Saint Pierce is a town built on tourism. People travel from all over the country to experience its entertaining nightlife—casinos, nightclubs, and Club Greed, our infamous sex club. While we have the occasional reveler who gets boisterous and disorderly, what we’ve never had in Saint Pierce is a serial killer.

Until last week when some psycho started murdering Greedy Girls. It has dominated the news, shocking our thriving city to the core.

Beyond the fear that has settled over the community, there’s Saint Pierce’s livelihood to think about too. We need to solve these crimes before any more girls end up dead and our local economy is on life support because Club Greed closes its doors for good.

You’d think Saint Pierce’s residents would oppose such a salacious business, but there’s no arguing that Club Greed draws members with enormous bank accounts who spend their money around town, enriching the community. The club boasts they make sexual fantasies come true and guarantees anonymity through confidential membership. But an

atmosphere that grants such a claim comes at a price, and the current cost is the welfare of the seductive women it employs.

I can only imagine what the job of a Greedy Girl entails, but considering the way Katherine is critically eyeing my body, I think I'll be discovering firsthand what the patrons expect of a Greedy Girl.

Am I ready for this assignment?

I don't know.

I should be thrilled. This is an excellent opportunity for my career and for me to make the difference I've always wanted to see in the world. Instead, I feel entirely unprepared.

Finn Grant, another homicide detective, enters the room, interrupting my internal turmoil.

He gives me a once over before moving to stand in front of the captain's desk. "Her?" he asks, sounding appalled as he jabs a thick thumb over his shoulder. "You're kidding, right?"

"Yes, her," Captain Adler breathes out in an irritated flurry. "Do I look like I'm kidding?"

I don't dare speak. I don't dare breathe. Instead, my eyes ping-pong around the room, taking in the conversation as if I'm some tween on a take-your-kid-to-work day.

Finn prattles on about how I look too innocent, how I have no experience, how his thinning hair has a better chance of regrowing than I do of pulling this off.

"Enough, Finn." Finally, Katherine commands the room. "She'll have to do. She's the only one who can do it."

I'll have to do? That's inspiring.

Finn turns around, staring at me with fire in his eyes. "If she screws up, I won't be there to have her back."

Anger emanates from Katherine's slim frame. "You will have her back, Finn. Because she is now a member of our team. And we always watch after our own."

My eyes shoot over to the Captain. "Are you sure about this?"

“You’re our only option, Bardot.” He opens a file and pulls out a picture, tapping it with his index finger. “This is Devereaux Huxley, owner of the notorious Club Greed, and a person of interest. Everything points to him. But if he’s not behind this, I’ll bet he knows who is. We just need the evidence to bring him down before anyone else ends up dead.”

I step closer and lean over Captain Adler’s wide metal desk, glancing at the image of the potential suspect.

Wow! For a split second, my breathing is suspended.

I pick up the photo, needing a better look.

A brown-haired man stares back at me. Not exactly what I imagine a murderer to look like. But they say Ted Bundy was a looker too. My gaze travels from his caramel irises to the sharp cheekbones carved on his face before settling on his chiseled jaw. My eyes linger there, noting there’s enough tantalizing scruff present to consider it a full beard before I’m drawn to his perfect lips.

He’s gorgeous.

Trying to keep my thoughts purely professional, my focus returns to his eyes. They’re mesmerizing, like he’s actually looking back at me. The whiskey color shines from the photo, and his half-smile makes me wonder what he’s like in person.

He looks like a celebrity. Important. He exudes power in his fitted black suit. On my shifts, I’ve never responded to a call that’s taken me anywhere near Club Greed. And I certainly haven’t been inside of the establishment.

Club Greed is like a fortress. Its own little city. You have to be a member to even step foot in the parking lot, and well, it’s not a place I’ve ever considered joining.

Although, I’m low-key kind of curious.

It’s rumored that many members of the Russian mob are members. Someone once claimed they saw Yuri Cheknov, alleged boss of the Russian syndicate here, driving away in a Maserati. This club is very elite, and I’m a clearance-aisle-at-Target kind of girl.

I place the photo down and Katherine catches me up to speed on how the girls were murdered only days apart from one another. I thumb through the case files of each woman as she speaks.

“And the killer leaves a calling card,” Katherine says.

I tilt my head. “What do you mean?”

“Each girl had the words ‘Say My Name’ scrawled in red lipstick across their chests.” She points to a picture of a deceased woman in another file with those words on her porcelain skin.

I fight back the gasp that travels up my throat. I mean, I’ve studied to be a detective, so this shouldn’t shock me, but it’s Saint Pierce, for heaven’s sake.

“These are the three women,” she continues. “Suzie Parks, Lindsey Jane, and Julie Landers. They each used stage names. Scarlett was the first discovered dead, followed by Strawberry, and this morning’s fatality is Ginger.”

My eyes roam over Ginger’s striking red hair and radiant smile.

“He’s the key,” Katherine says to the room, her finger pointing to the picture of Devereaux. “Club Greed is the one link we have to the three women right now.”

The room goes silent for a moment as all eyes home in on me.

“What do you think, Chloe? Can you handle this assignment?” Captain Adler asks.

My eyes return to the photo of the breathtakingly gorgeous man at the center of this investigation. I nod, steadfast in my determination to find out whether he’s a murderer. “Yes. I can, sir.”

“We have little intel about the club. All we know for sure is the victims worked there,” Katherine says.

“What exactly happens at the club?” I ask.

“Whatever they want,” Katherine says. When my brows shoot up, she quickly tries to reassure me this aspect of the job is safer than it seems. “You’ll be fine.”

I rein in my doubting expression and nod. “Yes, ma’am.” I don’t sound convincing, and she’s probably pegged me for a complete sexual noob. I am. I’ve been so busy working on my career that I’ve had little time for a social life.

Both of my failed relationships were mundane in the bedroom. I can’t imagine either of them being members in a club like this.

“You’re our only female option. They’d see right through me. I’m old, and you’re younger. You fit the stereotype of the girls who work there. And your long blonde hair and pretty green eyes certainly help.” She hands me a few files. “This is for you to study before your interview at Club Greed tomorrow.”

I swallow the ball of nerves threatening to choke me. “Tomorrow?”

She gives me a curt nod. “Yes. We’ve given you a fake last name and full backstory for you in your file. Memorize it. Breathe it. Live it.” Her expression changes to one of reassurance. “You’ll do fine.”

I gaze back at the picture of Devereaux Huxley, hoping she’s right.

I spent every free second and my entire morning studying every word of the files Katherine handed me yesterday. If they gave me an exam on Devereaux Huxley, I’d ace it. However, I fail at pulling off sexy.

I cock my head to the side, staring in the bathroom mirror at the absurd dark eyeliner sprawled out from the corner of my upper lid. Since I wanted my makeup to give off seductive vibes, I went where all professionals of their trade turn—YouTube. However, the smokey-eye tutorial I watched has me looking more like a twelve-year-old girl trying to be a punk

rocker for Halloween than a sensuous woman who entertains wealthy men for a living.

“How am I ever going to pull off being a Greedy Girl?” I mutter.

I can't leave the house like this, so with a wet wipe, I tone down the goofy eyeliner.

Pulling off sexy is hard AF. I followed the instructions on the eye tutorial to the T but my eyes look like someone punched me, or worse, that I'm impersonating a raccoon.

Hopefully, my white blouse and black pencil skirt—courtesy of the precinct's Amex card shopping spree—projects something close to a sex-club vibe. I leave the bathroom and wobble on the tallest heels I've ever worn in search of my keys.

It's seven in the evening when I lock up my townhouse and leave for the club. One new thing about working at an establishment like Club Greed is the late hours. The place doesn't even open until eight p.m. so I will no longer be a morning bird with a nine-to-five schedule. Well, if they hire me.

They *have* to hire me.

As I take the left onto Hallow Drive, my nerves ratchet up with each mile that passes.

The winding road takes me up the coast, and I glance at the ocean. It's a dark storm of waves at this time of night. Even the moon hides behind a cloud for fear of witnessing something it doesn't like.

Before long, I see the club's spotlights shooting up into the heavens above to tease God about all the lewd acts happening inside its walls. I white-knuckle the steering wheel as I make a right and drive down the tree-lined road leading to Club Greed.

The club is nestled in an immense hollow to hide all the dark secrets of the people paying big money to remain anonymous. Signs to visitor parking direct me around the grounds, and I find a well-lit space in the front row. A

cobblestone path leads me from the parking area to the imposing two-story brick building, sprawled out on acres of land. The bubbling fountain in front changes from yellow to red as I approach, like liquid flames taunting me.

I can do this.

I can play with fire and not get burned.

Up close, Club Greed's exterior reminds me of a posh hotel, surrounded by elegant greenery. Because of their strict privacy policy, no pictures are circulating of the interior, so I have no idea what to expect when I step inside the building. My feet want to head back to my car, but Captain Adler, those dead girls, and the town of Saint Pierce are counting on me to catch a killer.

At the entrance, a bald man in a suit guards the oversized wooden doors. He checks a list that has my fake name on it for an interview and allows me entrance into the lion's den. Chilly air cools my hot face as I move toward the marble desk situated at the back of what looks like a ritzy hotel lobby. Completely professional, as if there isn't a lewd party taking place somewhere within these walls.

"Hi, I'm here to interview for the open position."

The petite brunette behind the desk tips her lips up at me, but there's sadness in her dark eyes. I'm sure the murders have hit her hard. They must have hit everyone here hard.

"I'll let Adele know you've arrived." She picks up the phone and pushes a button. "There's a girl here for an interview." As she hangs up the phone, her eyes sweep over my attire. "Adele will be right down."

"Thank you."

The club's music booms behind a door to my right, and while I wait, I take in the surrounding red walls adorned with framed pictures of painted statues, all in black and white. An enormous rose, also in black and white, hangs over a white leather couch accented with black throw pillows. Maybe it's a good omen that my outfit matches the décor?

The steel door to the right of the brunette bursts open, and a tall woman with sleek red hair bustles through as if she's on an important mission. She's like a supermodel walking toward me, and her fitted navy suit makes her appear even more intimidating.

“Are you here for the interview?”

I nod. “Yes, I'm Chl—”

She cuts me off with a wave of her elegant hand. “No names. You're blonde, that's good. We don't have any blondes.” Her eyes scan my body from head to toe as if I'm another piece of art she's considering adding to her collection. “Beautiful face, nice breasts. Are they real?”

“Excuse me?”

“Are your breasts real?” she asks, like it's the same as asking for my five-year goals.

“Uh, yes.” Based on her quick appraisal of me and the meticulous, tightly wound bun atop her head, I peg Adele for someone who appreciates anyone who can make her life easier. So, I try to win some hiring points. “And the carpet matches the drapes. No piercings or tattoos. Just lots of pale skin.”

It works.

“Excellent. Follow me,” she says, snapping her fingers. “There's a no-name policy. I'll be the only one with access to your file and your real name.”

“Oh, the owner doesn't know?”

She studies me. “No, he's got more important things to do.”

I nod as she leads me down a lengthy hallway with marble floors and walls painted a darker shade of red than the area we just vacated. When we emerge, we're in a vast space with a high-end nightclub feel to it. A golden chandelier sparkles in the center of the room, and to my right is a long bar, with fluorescent red bulbs running its length. On the left-hand side,

a grand staircase with white limestone banisters leads up to another floor.

It's still early, so there aren't many patrons present, just a few men sitting at the tables, sipping drinks. I glance over at the bartender, who is whispering with several cocktail servers. Once they spot Adele, they separate and busy themselves.

Anticipation zaps my chest at the thought of being able to do some actual detective work once I get hired and can chat with the girls to find out what they know.

"This way," Adele says, turning toward the staircase.

I hurry to keep up with her long confident strides across the glossy black floor, memorizing everything I can in case I don't get the job and this is the only look I'll get of the interior.

Once we reach the top of the staircase, she guides me into a large reception area which has a loft feel to it and allows me to still see the bottom floor.

"You'll interview with Mr. Huxley, if he's available," she clips as we move past a desk with another beautiful brunette behind it.

I'm about to meet the potentially dangerous man I've studied, and my insides coil tight with something I can't quite grasp. Anticipation? Nerves? Excitement?

"He's busy," the girl tells Adele as we approach a closed door.

Adele stops in her tracks. "Doing what?"

"The Thorne twins are in there with him."

At first I assume she's referring to women, but my mind slingshots back to the packet of information I studied on Huxley. Roman and Ledger Thorne are Devereaux's best friends. Roman and Ledger don't have jobs, because they don't need one. According to their file, they're living their best life off of the billions they earned from stellar investments. Must be nice to be so rich. They grew up with Devereaux, and

even though these men are not mafia related, I'm sure they have tons of associates in organized crime.

It's also rumored the Chekov brothers frequent this club.

Dimitri and Vlad Chekov are the sons of mob boss Yuri Chekov, one of the most notorious men in this century. Yuri bows to no one and has given his spoiled sons the keys to his kingdom. I make a mental note to look further into their recent activities as Adele knocks on the door, opens it, and leans her head in.

"We have a girl here for an interview."

I barely get a peek, but what I glimpse unsettles me. Three men, one more powerful than the others, occupy the office. Devereaux sits with his hands steepled and his elbows resting on an imposing oak desk. The other two men stand nearby, as if hanging on his every word.

"Adele, come in," Roman says with a wicked glint in his eye.

I recognize Roman Thorne from his file picture. Nicknamed Romeo, according to the background information, because he has a way with the ladies. And looking at him right now, I can see why. Tall, dark hair, with dazzling blue eyes and a body of steel. He's incredibly handsome.

His fraternal twin brother, Ledger, is just as pleasing to the eye in an unfair-to-other-men kind of way. He's covered in tattoos, and his jaw looks like it's been set in stone. His brown eyes rake over my body as I enter the office with Adele.

Heat flows through my veins. I'm well aware the warmth I'm now experiencing relates to the way *his* eyes land on me.

The killer.

Devereaux Huxley's whiskey-colored orbs devour me, leaving nothing but my shaky bones in their wake.

"She's here to interview for a position," Adele says. "I think she'll do."

Devereaux nods at his friends and they walk toward the door, licking up the space with each large stride.

Adele follows them out, shutting the door behind her, leaving me alone with Devereaux. Not what I expected to happen.

But it's showtime.

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