



DAMAGE

Control

M.S. PARKER
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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THE BILLIONAIRE'S MUSE BOOK 4

M. S. PARKER

BELMONTE PUBLISHING, LLC

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NOTE FROM M. S. PARKER

Thank you so much for purchasing *Damage Control*, the final book in the Billionaire's Muse series about four different Doms from Gilded Cage. All four books can be read stand-alone, but if you'd like to read all the books in the series, I recommend reading them in the following order:

[The Billionaire's Muse](#)
[Bound](#)
[One Night Only](#)
Damage Control

Enjoy!
M. S. Parker

ONE

PAIGE

I loved my mom. Really, I did, but I was never letting her choose a restaurant again. Not for a Sunday brunch, or a Saturday dinner.

Nothing.

Ever.

Again.

In every aspect of her life since my birth, she chose the boring, predictable route...except when it came to selecting restaurants. Instead of picking a nice Italian place or maybe Thai, Cuban, Japanese, she always went for the odd ones out. The restaurants with gimmicks or strange menus.

Like the place in the Bronx last year that tried to do pizza stir-fry with BBQ sauce. Or the one that used stationary bikes instead of tables and chairs so that people could burn off calories while they ate.

This one, however, was the last straw, and I made sure she knew it.

“Never again, Mom.” I glared at her across the table. “I mean it.”

She smiled at me, and not for the first time, I wondered if people thought we were sisters rather than mother and daughter. She’d been twenty-two when I was born, but even now, she barely looked ten years older than me. We had the same raven-black hair, though I wore my long and she kept hers at chin-length. My blue eyes had some green in them, while hers were pure, pale blue. Other than those small details, the two of us looked so much alike that it was occasionally creepy.

“You work too hard,” she said. “You need to have some fun.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Really? *That’s* your excuse for bringing me here? I’m going to have nightmares for months.”

Mom laughed, but the sound was drowned out as the next act took the

stage. Karaoke was bad enough, but a restaurant that awarded prizes for the worst karaoke possible? That was just evil.

I dipped a French fry into some ranch dressing and popped it into my mouth. At least the food was good. One place we'd gone a few weeks back had only served things that tasted like cardboard. At least what I assumed cardboard would taste like. I'd had to pick up a pizza on the way home.

I winced as someone attempted to hit a high note. I didn't know how Mom could listen to this, especially when I knew how she felt about pop and 'adult contemporary' music. Unlike some of my school friends' parents, my mom hadn't forbidden me to listen to rock music. In fact, she'd encouraged it, sharing her favorites before I could speak.

She'd never hidden her past from me. I couldn't even remember the first time she told me about how she'd followed bands around the country from age fifteen until she'd gotten pregnant with me, but it was young enough that, no matter how much I loved her, I'd always known that I didn't want to repeat her life.

Which was why, even though she'd never been overly permissive or overly strict, I'd always been a good kid. No partying, no drugs or drinking, no sex, no late nights. I worked. First at school, then college, and now my job.

Except this horrific rendition of "My Heart Will Go On" was making me feel more than a little rebellious.

"I can't take another song," I said as soon as the song ended. "Please."

Mom sighed good-naturedly and nodded. I didn't give her a chance to change her mind and waved over the waiter, a tanned, blond athlete who looked like he'd be more at home on a California beach than a restaurant in New York City. He came over almost immediately, which wasn't surprising since he'd been staring at me almost from the moment we'd walked in.

"Check, please," I practically shouted to be heard.

When he came back five minutes later, his cheeks were flushed, and from the way his eyes kept darting to the bill, it didn't take a genius to figure out that he'd either left a note asking for my phone number...or left me his. I wasn't about to encourage him, so I slipped a couple bills into the fold without looking inside. I'd done enough of the math in my head to know I'd covered the cost of the meal and given him a nice tip.

"Keep the change," I said with a polite smile. I turned to my mom before I could see any disappointment on the young man's face.

It wasn't anything personal. He was handsome and seemed nice enough. The sort of guy that most women would love to have hitting on them, but I wasn't most women. Finding a man wasn't high on my priority list. It wasn't on it at all, actually. Not for dating, marrying, or fucking.

I didn't hate men. I just didn't need one. Not at this point in my life, and maybe not ever. I had enough on my plate without adding the complication of a relationship. Hell, I'd never met anyone worth the hassle of a one-night stand.

I blew out a breath and twisted my hair up behind my head in preparation for stepping out into the late August heat. As a native New Yorker, I was accustomed to the city summers, but I always preferred the city in the winter. Sure, the sidewalks could be downright dangerous at times, but I'd take cold over hot any day.

"Next time, we're going to Maialino," I said as we made our way to the subway.

Although I wasn't rich, I made enough money that I could have rented us a car, but this was part of our tradition too. Sometimes, we missed a Sunday or two because life got in the way, but when we did go, we had a certain way of doing things. Taking the subway back to the apartment where I'd grown up so we could have dessert was part of it.

"That's not very special," Mom said.

I gave her a sideways look. "Your idea of a special place to eat and mine are definitely *not* the same."

As we turned the corner, she changed the subject, but not to something new. "You've been working a lot of overtime lately."

I nodded. "Ms. Feldt has been giving me more responsibility now that I'm done with school."

She pushed a few strands of hair from her face as she looked at me with concern. "You've only been out of school since May. Shouldn't she be easing you into things?"

"I don't want to be eased into things," I said, fighting to keep the irritation out of my voice. We'd had this discussion a dozen times since I graduated. "I *like* my job. I *like* working."

I didn't have to look at her to know she was giving me the same skeptical look she'd given me every other time we'd had similar discussions over the years. Mom had worked hard to raise me on her own, but she only saw work as something she needed to do, never something she wanted to do. She didn't

understand that I did what I did because I *wanted* to. No matter how similar we were in many ways, I wasn't like her.

"Speaking of work," I continued, "how are things going for you in that department?"

"Same as always." She shrugged, her mouth growing tight at the corners. "It's a job."

"You know, you could go to college, pursue a career of your choosing." We picked a place on the platform and waited. "Now that I'm done, it could be your turn."

Her smile was soft, but she looked past me, not at me. "There's really no point. I've never had anything that I've really wanted to do. Nothing I wanted to be. Other than a mom, of course."

Sometimes, I thought she actually believed it when she said that, but I'd spent too many years hearing the happiness in her voice when she talked about being on the road with all those bands. If I hadn't come along, she probably would've ended up being a manager and never settled down. I knew she didn't resent me for it, but there were times I wondered if she found herself missing the life she'd missed.

"You know that I just want you to be happy," Mom said as we moved onto the subway car.

I forced a bright smile. "I am happy."

She gave me a skeptical look but didn't argue with me. She didn't need to. We'd had this discussion before. She meant well, I knew, but like a lot of parents, she just didn't get how different the two of us really were from each other. She loved me, I never doubted that, but she didn't *get* me.

Even as I thought it, she reached over and gave my hand a squeeze. "Why don't you tell me about your latest project?"

TWO

REB

I groaned as I came back to consciousness after several blissful hours of nothing. I did this because I wanted to forget, but nothing came without a cost, and I was feeling that right now.

My head felt like I had an iron spike going through one temple and out the other, a sharp, pulsing pain that I knew would only get worse when I opened my eyes. My mouth was dry and tasted like some wild animal had taken a shit in it. I could smell the alcohol leaking from my pores, and with it, I registered sweat and sex.

No surprises there.

I'd started drinking pretty much the moment I'd caught my ex cheating on me nearly three months ago, and I'd been hooking up with random women two or three times a week for almost that same period of time. I didn't remember much about last night, but I knew it hadn't been much different than the previous ones.

Finally, I forced my eyes open, wincing reflexively even though the curtains were all closed. The room was dark, but I didn't need to see to know that I was in a hotel, probably the one I'd been practically living in since the cheating girlfriend incident. I'd kicked her out of my apartment, and I still paid my rent every month, but I hadn't been able to stop seeing her fucking other men in my bed every time I walked into the bedroom. I'd replaced the bed, but that hadn't helped.

Nothing helped except drowning myself in women and alcohol. And even that didn't help for long.

I rolled toward the edge of the bed, prepared to stagger my way into the bathroom and take a shower, half to avoid having an awkward morning-after

conversation, and half because I stunk. It was part of the new routine that had become my shitty life.

But I couldn't climb out of bed the way I usually did because someone was in the way.

I frowned and turned the other way, but there was a body on that side too. A flash of memory from last night went through my mind.

A blonde and a redhead knelt on either side of me, both wearing black silk thongs and nothing else. The blonde was nibbling my ear, her breasts pressing against my arm, and her friend was leaning over my lap, her tongue moving over my cock like it was some sort of fucking lollipop.

Another immediately followed.

The red-head smiled up at me, her eyes half-lidded, pupils so dilated that I knew she was on something other than the tequila shots we'd done together. That was her business though. My business was fucking the blonde who was stretched on the bed between the redhead's legs, eating out the pussy I'd be fucking next.

I scratched my head, then resigned myself to crawling to the foot of the bed so I could get up without waking either of the women hidden under the covers. I'd apparently enjoyed their company last night, but I wasn't interested in things carrying over to this morning.

When I reached the bathroom, I braced myself for the light, but it didn't prevent me from grimacing at the reflection in the mirror. My eyes were bloodshot, but I could take care of that with a pair of sunglasses. Being a rock star came with the sort of perks that included being able to wear sunglasses anywhere, anytime, without being called a douche.

I took a piss while I let the shower heat up, then let out a stream of curses when I stepped under the spray. One of those women had scratched the hell out of my back.

By the time I was done, I felt cleaner, but not really any better. I tossed back a couple aspirin and swallowed them with a full glass of water. Hydration would help me feel at least a bit more human, and hair of the dog was always good for a hangover. One of the best parts about having access to an obscene amount of money was that I didn't have to think twice about cleaning out the mini bar. I could afford it.

As soon as I stepped out of the bathroom, I was doubly glad for the fact that I had money. The women were gone, and as far as I could tell, they hadn't stolen anything. Unfortunately, as the now-blazing lights revealed, it

was most likely because they couldn't find anything in the mess.

Shit.

I remembered drinking, and I remembered pieces of fucking both women, but I didn't remember trashing the room. I didn't doubt that I'd done it though. I'd apparently cleared out the mini-bar already because at least a dozen tiny bottles were all over the place. Two ceramic lamps and what looked like every vase and bowl in the place had been shattered into hundreds of pieces. It was a fucking miracle that we hadn't cut our feet walking through here.

This was going to be pricey.

And then I saw that we'd somehow managed to destroy both the television and a chair. I didn't bother keeping the curses inside my head this time.

My manager was going to have my ass if this ended up being as bad as it looked, and something nagging in the back of my mind told me it was actually worse.

I picked my way back into the bedroom to find clothes and my phone. Whatever was nagging at the back of my brain, it'd be on my phone. Once I figured that out, I'd call the front desk and see about getting someone up here to clean things up. I'd make a healthy donation above and beyond what I'd be charged for damage done.

And then I'd find myself something to take the edge off.

As soon as I found my phone, I saw half a dozen voicemails from Chester waiting. And a calendar reminder about an important recording appointment that I'd missed by more than ninety minutes.

"Fuck me," I muttered. I was going to need more than just a small drink.

I put the phone on speaker and let the voicemails play through while I grabbed some clothes.

"Reb, you're late. You better have a damn good excuse, or you'll have a shitload of explaining to do."

"Where the hell are you, kid? He ain't going to wait around forever."

"Fuck it, Reb! You better be dead because anything short of that won't be excuse enough."

They went on like that, each one a little louder and with considerably more expletives. If Chester was already this pissed off, he was going to be livid when he found out about the hotel room.

Then came the last voicemail, the one I hadn't noticed but wished I would

have seen first.

“Reb, this is your mother, in case you’re currently too drunk to recognize my voice. I don’t know what’s gotten into you as of late, but I expect you to be at the Union Square Ballroom this evening or we will be having a serious discussion about your priorities.”

A rush of guilt washed over me.

Everyone had told my mom not to let me go into music, and definitely not rock. I’d get into the whole sex and drugs lifestyle. I’d fuck my way through groupies and be lucky if my dick didn’t fall off from some raging STD or get someone pregnant. I’d be drunk and high most of the time and have at least one overdose by the time I was twenty-five. I’d blow through everything I earned and then start on my inheritance, ending up broke and possibly homeless before forty. And that was being generous.

She’d silently told them all to go to hell by encouraging me. After my dad had died, music had become my escape, and she’d seen that. She’d told me that I had to apply to college and work on a degree, but if I landed a contract, I could quit school. I’d gotten into Columbia and majored in music education for two years, and then Chester Lhaw had found me. Mom had been true to her word and hadn’t said a single word against it when I dropped out.

I’d worked my ass off, not just at proving I could make it in such a cutthroat business, but at making sure everyone saw that my mom had been right to put her faith in me. Despite my numerous tattoos and the bad boy image the studio crafted for me, I was as far from the stereotypical rock star as a person could get. No drugs. No all-night parties. No arrests. Discretion when it came to sexual partners.

Well, at least until recently.

I didn’t need to hear my mother say how disappointed she was in me because I could hear it in her voice, and that was worse than my hangover.

I looked at the time and then pulled up my calendar to double-check when I needed to be at the fundraiser. As much as I hated myself for it, I was going to need some liquid courage before I’d be able to face my mother.

I’D ONLY PLANNED on having one or two drinks before stepping into the ballroom. Just enough to take the edge off my headache and make fielding

questions about my love life bearable. The kind of people who came to these charity events might have liked pretending that they were beyond such things as gossip, but they never had a problem asking me about the latest story as if I had the inside track to all of it.

Unfortunately, my break-up had made tabloid headlines for a couple weeks, and even though it happened in June, I knew there'd be people here who'd want to ask me about it. Plus, based on the looks I'd gotten from strangers already today, I had a bad feeling that word had gotten around about me trashing the hotel room last night.

With all of that in my head, I'd indulged in a bit more Four Roses than I should have, and now I found walking in a straight line to be a little problematic.

My mom's mouth flattened as I approached her, and as soon as I leaned down to kiss her cheek, she grabbed my arm.

"You came here drunk?" Her voice was barely a whisper, but I could hear her displeasure.

I straightened. "I'm fine."

She didn't have a chance to say anything else because the president of some arts foundation was coming toward us, and we didn't air our dirty laundry in public. I'd probably be in for it after the event, but for right now, I was safe. I gave people polite nods of acknowledgment as I made my way to the bar and ordered the most pretentious scotch they had.

I'd made it through my second glass when a pale, weedy-looking guy stepped up to the bar next to me. I was prepared to ignore him, but as soon as he downed his drink, he turned to me and started talking.

"You're the rock star, aren't you?" His voice was louder than it needed to be, which was infinitely more annoying than his question. "Mr. Hot Shot musician who lowers himself to come down and talk to the little people."

I pulled myself up to my full height, which was taller than most, and *much* taller than this guy, and glared down at him. "I think you should walk away and let me drink in peace."

His cheeks flushed, and a quick glance over his shoulder told me that he was trying to impress someone, but all that did was irritate me even more. I was not in the mood to deal with this.

"Why are you even here?" he asked, either the alcohol or the people watching us giving him the courage to say things he shouldn't. "You clearly don't fit in. Sure, you may have money, but it's not the kind that comes with

class. The Whitehall name used to demand respect, but everyone here knows your mother lost it when she went slumming with some jarhead—”

Anything else he would’ve said was lost when my fist connected with his jaw, and he dropped to the floor, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth to pool on the polished wood.

Shit. That wouldn’t go over well.

THREE

PAIGE

“Near, far, wherever... Fuck.”

I wasn't sure if the elderly man in front of me shot me a dirty look because of the song or the curse. I'd caught myself humming that song all day yesterday, and I'd hoped it'd be out of my head by the time I got to work, but no such luck, apparently.

I slipped my earbuds in and turned the volume up almost loud enough to hurt. I didn't have anything against Celine Dion, but classical, and other instrumental pieces were my preference. The sort of music that didn't get much in the way of recognition.

By the time I got my Iced Caramel Macchiato, some Bach and Debussy had chased Dion out of my head. They also did wonders for calming my nerves, which was always important before I went to work. I hadn't been lying when I told my mom that I enjoyed my job, but that didn't mean it couldn't be stressful.

As the elevator doors opened, I took a slow breath, turned off my music, and focused on the job ahead. I was the youngest full-time associate at the public relations firm, and I wasn't naïve enough to think that everyone believed I deserve the position I'd gotten. I didn't actually care what people thought in the sense of needing their approval, but I'd be damned if I proved the doubters right.

I ignored the morning chatter as my co-workers swapped stories of the things they'd done over the weekend. Everyone had their own little group. The young singles who exchanged tales of dancing, drinking, and sex. The young marrieds who liked to talk about how wonderful their spouses were. The middle management men who were either trying to convince everyone

that they were going to be moving up the corporate ladder soon, or that they were happy where they were because it gave them time to do all of the crazy things the twenty-somethings were doing. And then there were the women who either complained that they couldn't get ahead because the men were sexist or insisted that any woman who did manage to get ahead was sleeping with someone higher up.

I had neither the time nor the patience for office gossip. I didn't really care who was doing what with whom. I wasn't there to make friends, and even if I had been, I hadn't met anyone yet who I'd want to make an exception for. I wasn't a people person.

"Paige!"

I kept my face blank as I moved a bit faster. My boss didn't get a smile or a grimace. Depending on what mood she was in, either one could earn me a lecture. Sybil Feldt wasn't the easiest person to work with, but she let me do a lot more than the others like me got to do. Plus, I didn't have to put up with any of the sexual overtures that many of the other women dealt with.

"Good morning, Ms. Feldt," I said as I handed over her Caffé Corretto.

"Did you finish the notes from last week's meeting with Grover's Peanut Brittle?" She barely even looked at me as she sipped her drink, but that wasn't anything new. She wasn't a friend or a mentor. She was my boss, and I appreciated her brusque way of doing things.

"Yes, ma'am," I said as I logged into my computer. "I emailed you a copy and filed a hard copy."

"Did you come up with anything new?" She tucked a strand of barley-colored hair behind her ear.

"I caught something Mr. Grover said in passing," I replied. "A memory of his father coming home after working all day, exhausted, but still taking the time to sit with him and listen to him talk about his day. I think that could be the emotional hook. Nothing big and flashy, but simple and family-focused."

To my surprise, she actually looked at me, hazel eyes shrewd. "That's a great idea."

"Do you want me to write up a proposal?" I kept my voice even. If I could get a proposal to even be considered for a major project like Grover's, it would go a long way to getting me a client of my own. Not something like repackaging the image of an entire company. Something simple, but mine all the same.

"Yes, type that up first thing. Once you get it done, I'll want to see you in

my office.”

Something about her tone made me look up at her, but she'd already gone. I finished up the sentence I was typing, sent off the email, and then hurried after her.

As soon as I was inside, she started talking.

“You know music, don't you?”

I stiffened, unable to stop myself. I didn't talk about my personal life at work. No one here knew who my mother was, or the story behind who I was. My mom had been a groupie for several years, but it wasn't like that was something she put on her résumé.

“Why would you think that?”

Sybil rolled her eyes. “You're young. Don't you keep music available like twenty-four seven?”

The hand squeezing my lungs eased, and I could breathe again. “I don't tend to listen to much in the way of popular music.”

Again, a sideways look, this one with a raised eyebrow. “You might want to fix that.”

I paused so I could make sure my voice was calm. “Is there a particular reason why, ma'am?”

“As a matter of fact, there is.” She tossed her empty coffee cup into the trash. “You're getting your first assignment, and how well you do on it will determine where your career goes from here.”

I should have been thrilled. This was exactly what I'd wanted, what I'd been working my ass off for. Why I never questioned the fact that most of my job seemed to be doing Sybil's work for her.

Except my excitement was tempered by a sinking feeling in my stomach. “What's the assignment?”

“Ever hear of Reb Union?”

Shit.

“Yes, I have.”

And I knew exactly why he was hiring a PR firm. He was everything I detested about most musicians, especially rock artists. Pretending to be some upstanding guy until something finally led to the curtain being pulled away to reveal that he was exactly like all the rest, caring only about partying.

And my job would be to hide all that shit, so he came out like some repentant creative genius who'd never do anything like that again.

FOUR

REB

I considered turning my phone off when I got home. I'd barely missed getting arrested after knocking out the son of a senator, and I knew my mother smoothing things over was the only reason I wasn't cooling off in a jail cell. I also knew I was going to hear it at some point today.

That was the reason why I'd kept it on. If I turned it off or sent her to voicemail, she wouldn't think twice about showing up at my apartment, and for the first time in months, I was actually there. After what I'd done to the hotel room, I knew better than to try to go back there, so I'd gone home.

But I'd slept on the couch. I'd told myself it was because I didn't want to chance throwing up on the bed, but that was only a half-truth. Even the guest room beds brought back memories of that night. For all I knew, she'd fucked guys on every bed in the apartment. Probably on the couch too, but it was easier to push that thought away because I hadn't caught her there. Not entirely logical, but it worked.

None of these things woke me up though. It was the jarring, shrill ringtone I'd assigned to my manager that pulled me out of a restless sleep.

"What?"

Shit, my voice sounded like I'd gargled with broken glass. I needed to be careful, or I wasn't going to have a career left to fuck up.

"What the hell, Reb?"

I put the phone on speaker and set it on the end table. If I was going to be treated to a lecture, at least I wouldn't have him yelling in my ear.

"First you flake out on an important meeting, and then I get a call from a hotel saying you and two women trashed their penthouse suite. They're claiming hundreds of thousands of dollars in damage."

“That’s a bit much,” I interrupted as I forced myself into a sitting position. “I cleaned out the mini-bar, but that wasn’t exactly the finest quality alcohol.”

He actually growled. “You broke the television, two lamps, two crystal vases, two crystal bowls, four wine glasses...”

He continued, reading from a list I assumed, and I put my head in my hands. It was sad, but I was almost used to waking up feeling like shit. I kept my eyes closed as I rubbed my temples, hoping to take enough of the edge off that I could walk without vomiting.

“The cleaning service also found three grams of coke in the bedroom.”

I jerked my head up and immediately regretted it. “Wait, what?”

“Oh, *that* got your attention? Destruction of property, drunken disorderly, all that and you don’t say a word, but some coke, and all of a sudden, you’re the morality police?”

“Those aren’t my drugs.” I ignored his sarcasm. “You know I don’t do that shit, Chester.”

“I know you didn’t *use* to do that shit,” he countered. “You also never punched a senator’s son during a charity event before last night either.”

I scowled at the phone. “That’s different. I don’t do drugs. Hell, I barely drink.”

As soon as the last sentence was out of my mouth, I knew he’d never believe that the drugs weren’t mine. Because he was right. Up until recently, I’d never gotten so drunk that I couldn’t control my impulses. Everything that had been true about my behavior before could be called into question now, and that included the drugs.

“I’ll take a drug test,” I offered. “Whatever you want me to do to prove that I’m clean.”

“Nobody gives a shit if you can pass a drug test,” Chester snapped. “There’s ways around those things, and everyone knows it. It’s what people think that’s the problem now. Especially after the shit you pulled last night.”

“He disrespected my parents.” I was grateful to hear the words come out steady.

“You’re nearly thirty years old, Reb,” he said dryly. “And we both know that, no matter how good you are, music is no guaranteed future. We talked about this when you first signed with me. You get an image, and that gets you endorsement deals. That’s what can set you up for life, even after everything else goes down the crapper.”

I considered telling him that my inheritance was large enough that I could live a decent life off of interest alone, but I kept my mouth shut. I'd been with Chester for nearly a decade, and loyalty kept me with him, but I'd never trusted him enough to share certain things about myself, one of which was exactly how much money I had.

"What do my endorsement deals have to do with this?" I asked, suspecting I'd regret the question momentarily.

"You had a reputation as being clean, the sort of rock star who could be sold to families as someone safe for kids to admire."

I didn't miss the word *had*.

"One fucking screw-up and I'm suddenly on the same level as Ozzy Osbourne or Marilyn Manson?" I had nothing against those guys, but they weren't me.

"Ozzy's gone mainstream," Chester barked, his voice growing louder by the second. "And you've just proven to everyone that you're not as squeaky clean as you'd claimed."

I gritted my teeth to keep from reminding him that I hadn't billed myself as squeaky clean. I hadn't wanted to market myself as anything other than me from moment one, but Chester had sold me to the studio as someone who looked like a bad boy but behaved like the guy next door. I hadn't liked it, but they hadn't asked me to actually change who I was, so I'd just let it slide. It'd meant keeping certain preferences of mine a secret, but I'd always been a private guy when it came to that stuff. The people who mattered to me accepted me for who I was.

Or at least I'd thought they had until Mitzi had proven me wrong.

I pushed the thought of her out of my head as best I could.

"Can't you sell it as one day of bad choices? Come up with some sort of personal problem that got the better of me for twenty-four hours?" I hated myself for even asking it, but I had to ask.

"It hasn't been just twenty-four hours," he reminded me. "This was definitely the biggest mess you've made over the last couple months, but people have noticed a difference in you, and not a good one. Fans are either saying that you think you're too good for them, or that you're spiraling into depression, neither of which is great for your image. Anyone who's around you for more than a day notices that you're drinking all the time. You might not look or sound like you're drunk that much, but we can see the empty bottles and cans. You don't even try to hide it."

“I’ve had a shitty summer,” I snarled, well aware that I sounded like the spoiled rich kid I promised myself I’d never become.

“Your girl cheated on you. Big fucking deal. If you’d listened to me in the first place, it wouldn’t have been a problem. You can’t get cheated on if you’re not in a relationship.”

“Well, I’m listening to you now,” I countered. “Fucking random women without bothering to get their names, making sure they know where they stand.”

“Yeah, well, a threesome with the niece of one of the studio heads and her friend wasn’t exactly what I had in mind.”

“Fuck,” I muttered. I rubbed my hand over my jaw, trying to remember if either woman had told me that they were related to a bigwig where my contract was held. “I didn’t know.”

“You might have figured it out if you’d gotten your head out of your ass long enough to get sober enough to pay attention.”

I stood and stretched. “Look, Chester, I’m expecting a call from my mom so she can lecture me on my bad behavior, so if that’s all you’re going to do, I’d like to get some coffee and a shower before I talk to her.”

“That’s not the main reason I called,” he grouched, then sighed, loud and long. “I talked to the label this morning, and they’ve decided that you need to do damage control. I’ve already hired a PR firm, and they’ll have someone over to see you first thing tomorrow.”

“You hired someone without talking to me?” I was too tired to put much heat behind my words.

“I did. And you can fire her if you want, but if you do, there’s a good chance the label’s going to drop you.”

I cursed under my breath but didn’t argue. There was no point. Technically, I had a choice, but Chester and I both knew that I was stuck. I had to do what was expected of me or lose it all.

FIVE

PAIGE

I didn't want to do this.

I *really* didn't want to do this.

Most women would be thrilled at the chance to work with Reb Union. I'd never heard any of his music, but I doubted that was the draw. I'd seen enough pictures of him to know it wasn't just the money either. He had the sort of features that could only be described as pretty, and was six four, with an amazing body, and bronze hair that always looked like he'd just climbed out of bed. Added to that, the most uniquely colored irises I'd ever seen, and wow. Indigo. As in almost purple.

One of his endorsement deals was with a suit company, and someone on the marketing team had been absolutely brilliant. They'd had the color leached from everything except his eyes.

I might not like musicians – or most people, for that matter – but I wasn't a nun. He was gorgeous.

Not that it mattered. I knew better than to let a pretty face and hard body be anything more than fantasy fodder. The fact that he was a musician just made it easier to remember.

It hadn't been easy yesterday, not giving Sybil a list of reasons why this was a bad idea. If I had, she would've wanted to know why, and that wasn't anything I wanted to share, not with my boss, not with anyone. I loved my mother, and I was proud of everything she'd done to raise me on her own. I'd never let anyone say anything bad about her.

But that didn't mean I wanted to advertise the fact that she didn't know who my father was.

Just after she turned sixteen, she ran off to follow her boyfriend's band,

but they'd broken up only a few weeks into the tour. Instead of going home, she'd moved on to a different member of a different band. For nearly six years, she gone from one musician to another, sometimes between a couple guys. Sometimes they shared her. She'd been into the whole sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll thing, never thinking about the future.

She'd always been honest about that, about why, and when she realized she was pregnant, she didn't have any way to figure out who my father was unless she asked for paternity tests. It hadn't mattered to her back then because she'd known that, whoever it was, he wouldn't want to be a father, and she'd never be able to count on him for any sort of support.

So, my father was either a washed-up wanna-be rock god, or he'd actually managed to accomplish his dream, but either way, he wasn't the sort of man my mom had been able to count on. Which meant I'd learned young to not count on anyone other than myself and my mother.

"Are you going to get in the elevator, or just stand there, staring at it?"

The snide question pulled my attention back to the immediate present, and I managed not to scowl at the woman impatiently tapping her toe at me.

"Sorry about that," I offered as I stepped onto the elevator. That was the best she was going to get from me. I didn't appreciate getting a dirty look from someone who looked like she was doing a late walk of shame.

Her glare didn't get any friendlier when I pushed the button for the top floor. It was on the tip of my tongue to make up some lie about dating Reb, but I couldn't bring myself to even joke about it.

She got off on the seventh floor, and I rode the rest of the way up on my own. I didn't fall back into memories of my past though. No, I kept those firmly pushed down. This wasn't about me or my dislike of a particular group of people. This was work. I needed to be professional.

When I knocked on his door, I was focused and ready for anything.

Anything but realizing that Reb was better-looking in real life than he was in any of the pictures I'd seen.

He looked down at me, his eyes blood-shot and half-focused, then gave me one of those far-too-charming grins that guys like him seemed to master in the cradle.

"Mr. Union?" I bit back a moan at how lame I sounded. Like he was anyone else. "I'm Paige Ryce, your PR rep."

He stepped back from the door and made a sweeping gesture with one tattooed arm. I couldn't make out what the designs were without staring, so I

ignored my curiosity and went inside.

“If I would’ve known I could order someone like you, I might not have been so pissed at Chester for doing it without asking.”

I turned as he closed the door, folding my arms so I could give him a stern look. The alcohol fumes wafting off him were almost enough to make my eyes water. He was drunk. No surprise there.

“I’m here to discuss what my firm will do for you.”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I regretted choosing them. His gaze narrowed in on me, something predatory in his eyes. I had to fight to stop from taking a step back. He wouldn’t hurt me. That wasn’t the underlying danger I saw. No, it was the kind that made my stomach twist.

“I can think of a whole lot of things that fine ass can do for me.”

I raised an eyebrow. “How much have you had to drink today, Mr. Union?”

He gave me that grin again, the one that I knew he thought was so charming. “It’s a compliment, Ms. Ryce.”

“Today is just a preliminary meeting,” I went back to the speech I’d originally planned. “We’ll discuss the image issues we’ll be working to correct, as well as any suggestions we can come up with to give us a place to start.”

“Really?” He sauntered toward me with far more grace than an intoxicated person should have. “That’s what you want to do? *Talk*? I can think of a lot of things that are more fun than talking.”

If this was the way our conversations were going to go, I could think of a lot of things I’d rather be doing, but I wasn’t going to take the bait. This might be a giant joke to him, but it wasn’t to me. This was my job, my future, and I’d be damned if some drunken rock star ruined it for me.

SIX

REB

Full, pouting lips wrapped around my cock, and I buried my hand in her raven-black waves. Hair, soft as silk, slipped between my fingers, each lock in stark contrast to porcelain skin. Blue-green eyes looked up between thick lashes, desire visible in their ocean-like depths...

“Fuck me,” I muttered as I flopped down on the couch.

I wrote notes and lyrics, not prose, but that didn't mean my imagination wasn't vivid enough to make me hard. And my imagination had been working overtime from the moment I opened my door to see my PR rep giving me a look full of enough disdain that I probably would've felt ashamed if the alcohol flowing through my body had allowed me to give a damn.

I didn't need a PR rep. I *shouldn't* need one. Wasn't everyone entitled to fuck up once in a while? I'd been in the music industry for nearly ten years, and all that time, I'd behaved myself. No scandals, no tabloid fodder beyond what the vultures made up. I showed up to things on time and always sober. I didn't have temper tantrums or make outrageous requests. I worked my ass off, and still found time to do charity work. I had casual sex, but it was always safe and consensual.

The only part of my life before this that could have caused issues, I made sure I kept private. Being into BDSM wasn't even really that shocking anymore. If I'd been a teacher or politician, the kind of guy parents wanted their children to emulate, sure, I'd understand. Even now, my sexual preferences wasn't something I wanted advertised, but it wasn't like I had some fucking morality clause in my contract that dictated what sort of sex I was allowed to like.

What had happened with Mitzi changed all of it. Everyone who'd gotten wind of the story had painted a sympathetic picture of me. At first.

Chester had made an agreement with Mitzi that I'd keep my mouth shut about certain aspects of the break-up if she did the same, but most fans figured out that Mitzi had cheated. I started losing sympathy points when my brooding over a beer or two became reclusive behavior with too much alcohol, especially when Mitzi seemed to be appropriately ashamed in public.

I understood that some poor choices over the weekend deserved head-shaking and finger-wagging, to use some of my mother's favorite phrases, but I could have done a lot worse things than trash a hotel room during a consensual threesome and punch a senator's son for making disparaging remarks about my dead father. The way I saw it, that incident was completely justified.

Okay, maybe I would've had a bit more self-control if I hadn't been drunk. But that didn't mean he deserved a punch any less.

I picked up my remote and turned on the TV, flipping through channels too fast to really see what was on. I wasn't much of a TV or movie watcher. Sometimes something would catch my interest, but I preferred music and reading. I hadn't been doing much of either recently though. Too much thought was involved in reading, and listening to music was a reminder of how little I'd written over the last six months.

I couldn't even blame that one on the break-up. I knew that part of the reason the studio had less patience with me than they would have in the past had to do with the fact that they had to keep pushing back the release date of my next album because I hadn't written anything beyond the first song. And that one was a steaming pile of bullshit.

I was still buzzed, walking a fine line between drunk and sober, but as everything piled up, reminding me of all the ways my life was fucked up at the moment, I wanted to get completely shit-faced. And why shouldn't I? I was in my apartment. If I wanted to get black-out drunk, whose business was it but mine? After all the times I'd made the smart, responsible choices, I deserved a break from dealing with my life.

I was still wallowing in self-pity and lethargy when someone knocked on my door.

For a moment, I thought Paige had come back, that my attempt at being flirtatious and charming had actually worked and she would let me lose myself in her body for a few blissful hours.

But then I remembered how disgusted she'd looked by the time she left. Disgusted...and relieved.

"Reb, open up! I have a key, but if you make me walk in on you naked again, I swear I'll take a picture and sell it to the highest bidder."

Erik.

Great.

I forced myself up and to the door. When I opened it, I saw it wasn't just Erik, but Jace and Alix too.

Even better.

"Come in," I said, not even bothering to try to curb my annoyance. "Shouldn't you all be living out your happily-ever-afters or whatever it is you do now?"

"Don't be an ass, Reb," Erik said mildly.

Sanders had been my college roommate at Columbia during the two years I'd gone there. I'd met his cousin one of the times Alix had come up to visit. The three of us had met Jace Randell at Gilded Cage, a club where people like us went to explore our desires without judgment.

These three were my closest friends, and in a lot of ways, they were closer to me than my own sisters. Each one was an artist of some kind. Jace was a painter slash sculptor. Alix, a photographer. Erik was the writer of the group. The four of us understood what it meant to think and create differently than most. If I told them that I was struggling with my music, they'd immediately know that it meant more than simply an issue with work. Because they'd all been there too.

Not now though, I remembered as I caught a glimpse of the ring on Alix's left hand. All three of them hadn't just found the loves of their lives recently, but also their muses. All of them were creating bigger and better things than they had before they'd met their soulmates.

Erik's newest book was flying off the shelves, and everyone wanted to know the real identity of Erika Summers. Being around him and his girlfriend, Tanya, was like having a front-row seat to the sappiest romantic comedy in the world.

Jace and his 'true love,' Savannah Birch, had another of those sickeningly sweet relationships, complete with overcoming odds. She'd woken up something in him, in his art, that I'd never seen before. His most recent show had been fantastic.

Then there was Alix. He'd just married his muse, Sine McNiven, even

though she'd left him for more than a month without a word about where she'd gone or why she'd left. He hadn't been able to work the entire time she'd been gone, and the two of us had commiserated over our artistic block and the women responsible for them. Then she'd come back from Ireland, announced she was pregnant, and now the two of them were planning their nursery.

I was happy for them. Granted, the odds weren't exactly in their favor when it came to long-term happiness. If they didn't crash and burn like most couples, then chances were they'd end up like my parents, with one outliving the other, always aware of that aching, bleeding emptiness where their other half had been. I hoped that my friends would make it work, that they'd build something lasting that wouldn't get their hearts broken in the end.

But I wasn't going to hold my breath.

"You look like shit," Jace said as the guys followed me back into my living room. "And so does your place. Don't you have a cleaning service?"

I shrugged and sat back down. "I canceled it for a while. Didn't want anyone bugging me."

"I figured that staying at a hotel would manage that," Alix said as he disappeared into the kitchen.

"You guys have been listening to the news." I made it a statement rather than a question.

"Is it wrong?" Erik asked, his expression serious. "Are they exaggerating?"

I reached for one of the beers Alix brought out, but he handed it to Erik instead. I glared at him, but answered Erik's question, "Depends on who's telling the story."

"You really punched Senator Mitchell's son in the middle of a fundraiser?" Alix chuckled.

Less than a month ago, Alix had been devastated, barely sleeping, drinking too much, and now he was laughing. He'd been as pathetic as I was, and I hadn't even loved Mitzi.

The revelation made me frown. I'd never actually stopped to think about it, but it was the truth. She'd been my first serious girlfriend, the *only* serious one, and we'd been together for ten months before the shit hit the fan.

But I didn't love her. I hadn't *ever* loved her.

Which meant I couldn't blame a broken heart for what I'd been doing.

Shit.

Before I could become too introspective, Alix spoke, “Look, I’m not going to bust your balls. I’ve been there. But if you miss my show this weekend, or you come in wasted, I’m going to kick your ass.”

I didn’t need to look at him to know he was serious. I nodded slowly. “Fair enough.”

Erik leaned forward. “All right, Reb, let’s cut the shit. This has been going on long enough. You need to get your act together.”

I stared at him for a moment before laughing. “Come on. I watched all three of you do your own downward spirals after you had women problems. I was there for you and didn’t tell you what to do.”

“That’s true,” Jace said.

“But we didn’t carry on for three months, cause random destruction of property, and commit an assault,” Alix pointed out.

“Also true,” Jace added.

Rather than snapping at them like I wanted to, telling them that they didn’t get it because they’d all found what they’d been looking for, I flipped them off. “I think, after a lifetime of being the guy who always does the right thing I’ve earned the right to a couple mistakes.”

I didn’t see them look at each other, but I felt it. I knew they were trying to figure out how far to push because I’d been on their side of things, needing to decide what to say and how to say it.

“You guys don’t have to worry,” I said, swiping Alix’s drink. “Chester got me a PR rep.”

“Seriously?” Erik said, his expression incredulous. “That’s his solution for all of this?”

I glanced at him. “He trusts me to deal with my shit on my own. Paige’s job is to fix my image.”

There was a moment of silence, and then Jace asked, “Your PR rep’s name is Paige?”

The tension in the air eased. “That it is,” I said. “And she’s hot. A pain in the ass, but what a fine ass.”

As my friends laughed and started talking about their significant others, I let my thoughts turn to my hot PR rep and that fine ass of hers.

SEVEN

PAIGE

“He needs to be accessible,” I said, dictating to my phone as I twisted my chair back and forth. My fingers worked a stress ball as I passed it back and forth between my hands. The repetitive movement was soothing, helping me stay focused on the task at hand.

Or as focused as I could be when my attention kept wanting to wander in inappropriate directions.

Like to the way his jeans had shown off strong, lean legs and a firm ass that made me want to sink my teeth—

“If we want people to forgive him for being human, he has to show them that he’s human. No suits or tuxes. He needs to avoid the black-tie charity events where the attendees are all wealthy.”

He definitely looked good in a tux. Something about the contrast between his tattoos and slightly scruffy rock star image, and the polished, debonair look just did it for me.

No. I needed to stop. Not just because he was a client, but because even if he wasn’t, nothing would happen between us. I wasn’t interested in being another notch on his bedpost. I had too much self-respect to act like I needed someone like him if I wanted to get off.

“During initial discussions, Mr. Union was unable to offer any suggestions about what could be done to improve his image. Recommendations to abstain from alcohol were met with silence and barely concealed hostility, so there’s a possibility – probability – that Mr. Union’s antics aren’t yet over. We need to have a plan in place to deal with future instances.”

I really hoped that wasn’t going to be the case. I knew that, technically, it

would be financially advantageous to have a client who repeatedly got into trouble and needed us to fix things. The bigger the project, the more billable hours. But I didn't want this thing with Reb to turn out that way. Which meant I needed to go beyond a surface fix and find out the reasons behind his behavior.

I continued my dictation, "Cursory investigation into Mr. Union's past revealed no known issues with alcohol or disorderly conduct, which begs the question...why now? What prompted a formerly almost-too-clean-for-a-rock-artist to suddenly go off the deep end?"

Just because he hadn't made a public spectacle of himself until recently didn't necessarily mean that something had happened in the past couple weeks. I'd seen several news stories from June that had talked about him breaking up with his girlfriend. His behavior hadn't been called into question back then since it had appeared to be a relatively harmless bit of brooding. Maybe the reports were mistaken. Brooding could have been a cover for drinking, even drugs. I'd heard rumors that some coke had even been found in his hotel room. His manager had been the one to hire us, and he'd said alcohol was Reb's drug of choice, but it wouldn't be the first time a manager hadn't known all of his client's dirty little secrets. And it definitely wouldn't have been the first time a manager had covered for one of his clients either.

I frowned as I squeezed the stress ball. Was Reb really the sort of man who'd be so broken up over a woman that he'd be drinking enough three months later to do what he'd done? Everything I'd observed about people in the entertainment industry, in general, told me that only a small percentage of them managed to have long-term relationships. Most of them went through romantic partners like they did clothes. The articles I'd read had said that Reb had been with his girlfriend for ten months. A lifetime for someone in his profession, but I still thought it seemed overly dramatic to still be so upset.

Unless he'd seen a future with her.

Was that even a possibility? I hadn't seen anything in the news about him ring shopping, gossip about wedding venues. I didn't remember any interviews where he or the girlfriend – Misty? Mitzi? – said anything about marriage, but that didn't necessarily mean anything. They could be one of those couples who didn't believe in institutionalized marriage.

I needed more insight before I could do anything, I reluctantly admitted to myself.

"Mr. Union has been relatively private about his personal life," I said into

my phone. “Most media reports are based on speculations or interviews with people close to Mr. Union rather than direct conversations with him. To get real insight into his life, I’ll have to talk directly to the sources of the articles. Or...” I paused, torn between anticipation and annoyance, “I’ll have to speak to Mr. Union himself.”

I glanced at the time. Nearly noon.

I stopped recording and set my stress ball down on the desk. I could track down people who knew Reb, ask them what they knew. They’d probably be able to fill in the blanks I needed.

But I didn’t want to do that. I wanted to talk to him. Even though I tried to tell myself that it was because it was a simpler solution than going to several different sources, I knew a part of me wanted to see him again.

I stood and smoothed down my skirt. Physical attraction wasn’t going to stop me from doing my job the best way possible. He was good-looking. So were a lot of men. I’d resisted the charms of better men than Reb Union.

I’d go to see him after lunch, ask him about the things I needed to know, and then I’d go straight back to the office and put together a strategy to improve his image quickly. Once he was back on top, I could move on to other clients and forget all about him.

The nagging voice in the back of my head piped up that it might be easier said than done.

IT WASN’T as hard to knock on his door the second time because I knew what to expect. More or less anyway.

“Back again?” Reb asked as he opened the door. “Come on in.”

I followed him into the apartment, noting the empty bottles on the table in front of the couch. Unless he’d had friends over and hadn’t cleaned up yet, he hadn’t taken my ‘advice’ about not drinking.

“Sorry,” he said, turning to face me. “I wasn’t expecting company.”

I gestured toward the table. “So these are all yours?”

He shrugged and shuffled his feet, thrusting a hand through his bronze hair. “Some friends stopped by last night.”

I raised an eyebrow. Friends or not, he’d been drinking already this morning. “I came by to talk to you about a few things, but if I’m

interrupting...”

“S’okay.” The words weren’t slurred, but they definitely weren’t precise either. “You can stay. Want something to drink?”

I took a couple steps toward him, fixing my sternest expression on my face. “You need to take this seriously, Mr. Union.”

“*Mr. Union?*” He snorted a laugh, the sound almost enough to startle a smile out of me.

That was definitely not the sort of laugh I expected from someone like him. With a mother who was a visible member of New York high society, I’d seen numerous pictures of him schmoozing with the cream of the crop. People who weren’t just rich, but old money. Politicians and philanthropists. The kind of people who practiced their smiles and laughs in front of a mirror so they’d be absolutely perfect. Not too big or loud, not too small or soft.

Definitely not the kind of people who snorted.

Still, I couldn’t let his response go unanswered. “Do you find this amusing?”

He closed the distance between us, and under the smell of whiskey, I caught a whiff of soap. At least he’d taken a shower since I’d seen him last.

“Nothing about this is amusing, Miss Ryce.” He frowned, his gaze dropping to my mouth before coming back up to meet my eyes. “Is it Mrs. or Miss? I don’t see a ring, but that doesn’t always mean single.”

I fought the urge to cross my arms, knowing that with him looming over me, it would come across as defensive rather than annoyed. “Let’s stick to the matter at hand, Mr. Union.”

“Reb,” he corrected. “I get enough ‘Mr. Union’ from brown-nosers and ass-kissers.”

“We need to maintain professional boundaries,” I argued. “I’m not here to be your friend.”

“That’s good,” he said, his voice deepened, roughened. “Because I have enough friends.”

I could feel a flush creeping up my neck, and I clenched my hands into fists. “Mr—”

“You’re an employee, right?” he asked, taking a step in my direction. “I mean, technically, I hired you, right?”

Reluctantly, I nodded. I wasn’t sure I liked where this was heading.

“Then I’m your boss.” He grinned, his eyes lighting up. “And I’m telling you to call me Reb.”

In the back of my mind, I could hear my mother telling me to pick my battles. She told me more than once that was how she'd kept a balance when it came to discipline. Treating him like a child seemed like the best way to go.

"All right...Reb." I spoke through gritted teeth, but it was enough to satisfy him.

"Thank you. Now, tell me, *Paige*," his voice slid across my name like a caress, "is there a Mr. Ryce?"

I shook my head. This was a bad idea. I was supposed to be getting background information on him, not the other way around. How had I lost control of the situation so quickly?

"Is there someone gunning for the position?"

"No," I said, hating the breathless way the word came out. "I'm single. Now that we got that out of the way, can we—"

My sentence was cut off as Reb wrapped a hand around the back of my neck and pulled me to him, our mouths crashing together in an explosive kiss.

EIGHT

PAIGE

For the first time in my life, my mind failed me. I couldn't think about anything other than the heat of his mouth on mine, the taste of expensive whiskey when he slid his tongue across mine, the feel of his strong fingers on my neck.

I only had a few kisses to compare this one to, but I had a feeling that it wouldn't have mattered if I'd had a thousand kisses before. Nothing else would feel like this. Like every cell in my body was suddenly awake in a way it'd never been before. Awake, and aware of this new humming electricity that flowed between the two of us.

Almost involuntarily, my arms went up and around his neck, his hair soft against my fingers. He made a sound in the back of his throat, a hungry, desperate sound, and then his free hand gripped my hip. When his teeth grazed my bottom lip, the shock of it jarred me back to my senses, and I took a step back.

My breath was ragged, and as I looked at Reb, I could see that he was just as affected as I was. That didn't make me feel any better though. If anything, I felt worse. My first client and I'd kissed him...no, *he'd* kissed *me*.

"I'm flattered, Mr. Union."

His entire body went stiff, his expression hardening.

"But I'm here as your PR rep, nothing else. I shouldn't have let...I mean, that shouldn't have happened."

He nodded and turned away. "Of course not. Sorry about that. Misread the situation."

"It's all right," I conceded, but something about the slump of his shoulders told me that something was off. This wasn't just some rejected kiss

to him, though I wasn't arrogant enough to think that this was because of me specifically.

"Don't worry about it." He dropped onto the couch and picked up the only bottle that still contained some liquid. "It's not the first time I've been rejected by a woman for what I wanted."

I'd been considering walking away and leaving him to whatever pity-party he'd been throwing for himself, but I didn't hear just bitterness in his voice. There was sadness there too...and self-loathing.

No matter how much I told myself that it wasn't my job to get personally involved, I couldn't bring myself to walk away.

"What do you mean? Rejected for what you wanted?"

He drained the last of the whiskey and tossed the bottle to the other end of the couch. "Shouldn't you be going? Running away from the deviant after your precious virtue."

I flushed and told myself that he was drunk, rambling, probably didn't know what he was saying. Hell, he probably wouldn't even remember any of this tomorrow.

But this wasn't about a kiss, and to do my job, I needed to know what was going on. That was why I'd come here, after all.

I walked over to the couch and sat on the arm. It was far enough away from him that we weren't touching, but close enough that he'd feel more like he was talking to a friend than someone grilling him.

"What's going on?" When he didn't answer, I added, "I can't help you if you don't talk to me."

"Why would you want to help me?" he asked, looking up at me. His eyes were dark and open. Sad. "You didn't want me kissing you, and I thought it was a good kiss. Thought you wanted me to kiss you, but I was wrong. Not the first time I didn't know what a woman wanted. I used to think I did."

"You're not making any sense," I said. What he was saying should have put me off. All of it sounded like the kind of shit an egotistical little prick would say to get a woman in bed.

But something told me that wasn't what he was doing right now.

"You might as well know. Nobody else does, but at least you'll know, and you can get out while you can. Flee the sinking ship." He made a disgusted sound and smacked the couch with the flat of his hand.

He really needed to quit drinking. This would do worse things for his reputation than trashing a hotel room or punching someone. Fans could

handle their rock stars behaving like assholes, but this was the wrong side of vulnerable.

“I’m guessing you did your homework because Chester would have only hired the best, so you know about the break-up.” He glanced at me, and I nodded but didn’t say anything. He continued anyway, “She wasn’t living with me, Mitzi, I mean, but she stayed at my place when we were in New York. She had problems, and I knew it, but she didn’t want to talk about them, so I didn’t.”

He picked at a thread on the couch, and I wondered if he felt more like he was talking to himself rather than me.

“I came in one day and found her in bed with a couple roadies. She was strung out and didn’t even blink when she saw me. She just kept fucking them and told me that it was all my fault. That if I hadn’t made her do…” His voice trailed off, and he raised his head. “I’ve *never* forced a woman to do anything. You have to believe me.”

Even if my gut hadn’t been telling me that he wouldn’t do that, I could hear the desperation in his voice, and it wasn’t because he wanted me to believe him. He wanted to believe it himself.

“I believe you,” I said gently.

He’d been drunk when he kissed me, but he still let me go when I’d taken a step back. If he was the sort of guy who would force what he wanted on someone, that would’ve been a perfect opportunity to do it. But he hadn’t.

Maybe he wasn’t as bad as I’d originally thought.

“You’re pretty,” he mumbled as his head dropped forward, chin on his chest.

I sighed. “Okay, you’re going to get a crick in your neck if you sleep like that.”

I stood up and then reached down to get a firm hold under his arm. He was bigger than me, but I was stronger than I looked. It took some maneuvering, but I managed to get him to his feet. He kept muttering random things under his breath, but I didn’t bother trying to figure out what he was saying. I was pretty sure I’d figured out the incident that had triggered his change in behavior. Now, I just had to get him sobered up and then we could get started on rehabbing his career.

NINE

REB

Something was off.

The pounding in my head was familiar and expected. So was the bed. Except I wasn't supposed to be in this bed. Why was I here instead of at a hotel?

Oh. Right. Because I'd done some stupid shit and coming back here had been my only option. Well, the lesser of all the evils offered. No way in hell would I stay with my mom, or with my friends.

So, I'd come home. As my brain sluggishly woke, I realized that I still didn't know why I was in my bed. I'd slept on the couch before because I hadn't wanted to be in here.

Before I could try to sort things out any further, my body let me know that I'd been out for a long time. It was probably a miracle I hadn't pissed the bed. Passing out drunk often didn't guarantee the ability to wake up for the call of nature.

I groaned as I climbed out of bed, my joints stiff and aching. Everything of mine ached, actually. I limped into my bathroom, my hands keeping me from stumbling into something I couldn't see in the dim light. I could have turned on the lights, but I had a feeling that might make me throw up, and cleaning up puke was not what I needed right now.

I breathed a sigh of relief as I emptied my bladder. Tempted as I was to go straight for my liquor cabinet, I was already in the bathroom, so a shower was probably a good idea. After everything that'd happened, I needed to at least put forth an effort, or all my years of hard work were going to burn right in front of me.

I drank a glass of water as I waited a few seconds for the water to heat up.

Maybe after I'd had some of the expensive scotch I'd gotten from someone, I'd call Chester and find out if he'd gotten any feedback from the PR firm. Paige hadn't liked me much, which made me wonder if she was going to request a change. I hoped she didn't, and it wasn't only because I thought she was hot.

She hadn't been impressed by me. In fact, I'd gotten the impression that she really didn't care what I thought about her beyond her ability to do her job. She'd held her own with me, both yesterday when we first met and then earlier today...

Shit.

She'd come back over.

I leaned out of the shower to check the clock on the bathroom wall. Six o'clock. Was that morning or evening? The last thing I remembered was talking to Paige. It had been afternoon. Maybe. But I didn't feel like I'd slept for only a few hours.

My alcohol-soaked brain struggled to put the pieces together, but it took until I was toweling off before I was able to process that it had to be six in the morning. I'd slept for more than twelve hours. My stomach growled, as if it had needed the acknowledgment of time to be allowed to announce how long it had been since I'd eaten.

I wrapped my towel around my waist and started toward the kitchen. Breakfast first. *Then* I'd call Chester and have him send Paige a nice fruit basket or something in case I said something rude yesterday. I didn't think so, but it never hurt to be cautious.

I was halfway down the hall when something new caught my attention. I smelled food. Specifically, bacon and coffee. Someone was here, but considering they were cooking, I felt safe in assuming they weren't here to hurt me. My stomach rumbled again, and I walked faster. I'd never seen Chester cook, so I doubted I'd find him waiting for me, which meant it was most likely my mother. At the moment, I was prepared to happily trade a lecture for some breakfast.

The person standing at the stove, however, wasn't my mother. I'd only met her twice, but I had no problem recognizing Paige, even from the back.

"Did you stay the whole night?"

She jumped, then turned, the startled expression on her face shifting to something else for a moment before disappearing behind a mask of indifference. If I hadn't known better, I would've said she was checking me

out...because I was wearing only a towel. Shit.

“Sorry,” I apologized. “I forgot I wasn’t wearing—”

“You’ve been asleep for more than a day,” she interrupted, the look on her face telling me that she wasn’t going to acknowledge my lack of clothes.

“It’s Thursday evening.”

I shook my head. “That’s not possible. I would’ve had to get up.”

She turned back to the stove. “You did,” she said. “Sort of.”

“What does that mean?”

She hesitated, and I had a feeling I wasn’t going to like what she had to say.

“What do you remember from yesterday?”

I ran a hand through my hair, sending droplets of water raining down on my shoulders. “Um, not a lot. My friends came over...no, wait, that was Tuesday. Yesterday. Right, Wednesday. I remember you being here. We talked. It’s all really fuzzy.”

“That’s all?”

Shit. “Did I do something? If I offended you, I’m sorry—”

“No,” she said sharply. “We talked. I put you into the closest bed I could find.”

“That’s a guest room,” I interrupted with a frown. “Did I move into my room at some point?”

“Yes. Sometime late last night, you...” Her voice trailed off and even with her back to me, I could see that the tips of her ears were red, but I didn’t think it was because of me and the towel this time. “I put the bed linens in the washer, along with your clothes. Once I cleaned you up and put you in your bed, I called a cleaning company. They’ll come do a deep clean on the mattress whenever you want.”

Heat rushed to my face. “I’m sorry about that. I should’ve known better than to finish vodka on an empty stomach. I can usually hold my liquor better.”

She turned around but refused to look at me as she held out a plate. “Yeah, well, no one can hold that much liquid that long.”

I took the plate, set it on the table, and then froze as I realized what she’d said could have meant something completely different than my original thought. I closed my eyes. “Please tell me that I didn’t piss the bed.” She didn’t say anything, and that just made it worse. “Please tell me that I didn’t piss the bed like some kid and you had to clean up after me.”

“Don’t worry.” Her voice was dry. “I’m billing you for everything.”

I hung my head and wished this was a dream. “And here I thought I’d already hit rock bottom.”

I felt a hand on my arm, and I jerked my head up, my eyes meeting hers. There was a hint of humor in those blue-green irises. “Don’t worry. Your confidentiality agreement with my company completely guarantees my silence.”

“Yeah, that doesn’t really make me feel any better.”

She took a step back, the humor falling away. “Let’s get some coffee and food in you, then we can talk.”

I didn’t like the sound of that. The talking. The other stuff actually sounded pretty good.

After I’d gone back to my room to put on pants – and a shirt – I returned to the kitchen and took a seat at the waiting plate. I took a few bites of bacon, and then asked, “Did I do anything else I need to apologize for?”

She didn’t answer, which made me think there was something she didn’t want to tell me, and considering what she’d already told me, I couldn’t imagine what would possibly be–

Her hair was like silk against the back of my hand, her skin almost as soft. My thumb found the hollow behind her ear as my fingers curled around her neck and pulled her toward me. This was a bad idea, but I had to know what she tasted like, what her lips felt like. My mouth came down on hers, and it was like nothing I’d felt before. Heat and electricity, all of it narrowed down to a single point of contact. And then she had her hands in my hair, her body pressing against mine. Fuck, those curves...

My hand tightened around my coffee mug. I wanted to believe that I was remembering a dream, but my body told me it’d really happened. It remembered better than my head what it had felt like to have her in my arms.

“Paige, I am so sorry. I was out of–”

“The drinking needs to stop,” she said briskly, acting as if she hadn’t heard what I’d been trying to say. “Not just cut back, but actually stop. No more alcohol until I say it’s okay.”

That got my attention. Not because of the drinking, but because she thought she could actually give me an order. Aside from my mother, no one told me what to do. It actually made me smile.

I stood up and picked up my now-empty plate. “What if I don’t want to stop?” I turned toward her, actually curious to hear her answer.

Her eyes narrowed as she closed the distance between us. Even though I was dressed, she kept her eyes on mine. She was as close as she'd been before, when I'd kissed her, but I had a feeling that if I tried that now, she'd probably slap me. Or bite me.

That last thought shouldn't have sent blood rushing straight to my cock.

"I was hired to do a job, Mr. Union." She put her hands on her hips. "*This* is how the job gets done. *This* is how I save your image."

Her eyes were sparking, showing me that I hadn't imagined her fire. I wanted to reach out and touch her, see how she'd respond. She was strong, stubborn, independent...all of the things that should have turned me off as a Dom. Even with vanilla sex, I needed the control, the challenge.

Paige was definitely a challenge.

"If you're not willing to do what I ask, then maybe we need to find someone else to take my place."

Hell no. This was just getting interesting.

"Maybe I just need the right incentive," I suggested. I gave her a slow, thorough look, letting myself see all the things my subconscious had registered before.

Damn.

"What do you say, Paige? I do what you ask, and I get rewarded?"

TEN

PAIGE

“That’s not how this works, Mr. Union. I think it’d be best for everyone if I spoke to my boss and had someone new take over.”

That was what I should have said. I’d gone above and beyond the call of duty with him. I’d spent more than a day taking care of him, and that was so far out of my job description that I could make a case to Sybil to drop him completely as a client. I had a degree in public relations, not babysitting or housekeeping. No offense meant to anyone who worked in either of those fields. I respected the hard work it took to take care of kids and homes. But this wasn’t my home, and Reb was definitely *not* a kid.

I’d seen that for myself. Not that I’d doubted his masculinity before, but now I had visual proof burned into my mind.

He’d been half-conscious when I’d stripped off his clothes and cleaned him up. Not awake enough to have a coherent conversation, but enough that I wasn’t trying to move him around on my own. I told myself over and over that it was no different than helping my mom bathe my grandfather after his stroke, but...no, it wasn’t the same at all.

And I couldn’t get the memory of those amazingly defined muscles and that long, thick—

Dammit.

This wasn’t the time or the place for me to be ogling a guy, and it was never the time or place for me to ogle a client. I wasn’t immune to the fact that Reb was gorgeous, but that wasn’t the point. Nothing was going to happen between us. Nothing *could* happen between us.

And I preferred it that way.

Which meant I needed to take back control of the situation before it got

any further away from me than it already was.

“If you have anything planned for Saturday, cancel it.” The expression on Reb’s face told me the direction of his thoughts, and I mentally cursed myself for not being more put off by it. My irritation at myself came out in my next statement. “You’re doing charity work.”

“I am?” He didn’t seem annoyed, but rather amused.

“You are.” I did my best to keep from returning his smile. The fact that I was torn between wanting to kick him or kiss him didn’t make his grin any less infectious. I took a step back to put some distance between us, but it didn’t stop me from being able to feel the tension between us, the very thing I’d felt before we kissed. That couldn’t happen again.

No matter how much my mouth still burned from just the memory.

“That’s your brilliant PR plan? Have me do a little charity work, and all will be forgotten?” He shook his head. “I thought you were smarter than that.”

My temper flared, and I crowded into his space, glaring up at him. “Just because you’re paying—”

Before I finished the sentence, I saw the corner of his mouth twitch and realized he’d been intentionally goading me.

Asshole.

“Look,” I snapped. “This isn’t going to be some ‘one and done’ thing. The shit may not have hit the fan until recently, but you’ve been spiraling for months, and everyone knows it. It’s going to take more than one Saturday picking up litter if you want to move beyond ‘paid your debt to society’ and on to salvaging your image as a good guy.”

“You think I’m a good guy?”

I sighed. He wasn’t going to make this easy for me. “Fine. You do what I tell you to do, and do it well. In return, I’ll make sure you get something for your troubles.”

He grinned. “Then I put myself in your hands.”

I tried to think of the most bland, platonic way to take that statement. “I’ll send you a text with the time and place tomorrow.”

Then, before he could see me flustered, I excused myself and left. I needed to get home anyway. I needed to have a good meal, and a good night’s sleep, especially since I’d be working over the weekend. I told Reb the truth when I said the company would be billing for the time I’d spent, but a little voice at the back of my head wondered if I’d have stayed even if that

hadn't been possible.

By the time I arrived home, all of my frustration from the past week had coiled into a tight ball in the middle of my stomach. Going into public relations, I'd known that I'd be asked to work with people I disliked. While not all clients were people in trouble looking to smooth things over, there were enough that I knew, sooner or later, there'd be someone I found distasteful.

Except, if I was honest with myself, I didn't actually dislike Reb. He got under my skin in a way that no one else had been able to, and I didn't like that, but if I'd met Reb under different circumstances, we might have gotten along. I still wouldn't have dated him, of course, because I was sticking to my life-long resolution to avoid romantic entanglements with people in his line of work.

I reheated some take-out and wrote myself a note to pick up some groceries on my way home from work tomorrow. My supplies were looking a bit sparse. I didn't have the time to cook myself dinner every night, but I tried to get at least a couple home-cooked meals a week.

I ate standing up, tidying up the kitchen as I went. I moved on automatic pilot, making mental lists of all the things I needed to do tomorrow to get things set up for Saturday. I had a couple ideas of places where Reb could do community service, so that was the first thing to get settled. Once I did that, I could leak information to the media. I didn't want to give a direct invitation to news outlets, even though most of them would guess a PR firm of some kind was involved. That's just how things worked, especially when the client was in the entertainment industry.

One of the interns at the firm had an uncle who owned a huge construction company that often worked with Habitat for Humanity. I'd check there first to see if they had any projects this weekend that Reb could work on. The press would have a field day with pictures of him lifting things, hammering...sweating...

"Dammit," I muttered the curse as I put away the last of the dishes, but I couldn't chase away the images that came up, one after the other.

Reb wiping his face off with the bottom of his shirt, showing off that flat, tight stomach, and the trail of golden brown hair that disappeared under the waistband of his pants. Jeans that hung low enough on his hips that I could see those amazing v-grooves. Pulling his shirt over his head to reveal rippling muscles and tattoos I wanted to trace with my tongue...

Fuck.

I needed a shower. A cold shower. Now.

But when I went into the bathroom, I changed my mind. I needed to get rid of this tension, and it was getting late. I could combine cleaning up with getting some relief, and maybe that would even get Reb out of my head. I had to focus on correcting his image, not that amazing body of his.

As I washed, I tried to pull up one of the fantasies that had worked for me in the past. A hot model I'd seen on a billboard. A favorite character on a television show. A completely imagined man who knew exactly what to do with my body.

But every single one of them morphed into Reb, that smirk on his face and heat in his eyes. So I gave up and closed my eyes, letting my imagination wander even as my hands did the same.

I ran one hand over my breasts, fingers teasing my nipples as I imagined the rough callouses on his fingers scraping over my skin. His lips moving down my throat, teeth nipping at me until I knew he'd left little marks. My free hand went between my legs, moving over the thin curls that covered me until my fingers reached my clit. I circled the already throbbing bundle of nerves, thinking about how he'd touch me there. Rough, hard passes until his mouth soothed me. Just the right amount of suction.

It was the thought of looking down and seeing Reb's head between my legs, tongue and fingers driving me toward orgasm that undid me. The muscles in my body tensed as a small cry escaped me.

Even as the release eased the tension in my body, I couldn't help but think that I'd made a mistake.

ELEVEN

REB

What the hell had I been thinking? She worked for me – sort of – and I’d been teasing her. Flirting with her. It hadn’t really been a conscious decision on my part, but that was no excuse. I’d been completely unprofessional.

I snorted a laugh. I’d been drunk pretty much from moment one with her. She’d put me to bed, cleaned me up when I pissed myself, then put me to bed again.

I’d *kissed* her, for fuck’s sake. My flirting was low on the list of unprofessional things I’d done with her, and it didn’t even register on the list of stupid shit I’d done lately.

Hell, it hadn’t even really been flirting.

No, that was a lie. I might not have *said* anything overtly sexual, but I’d *meant* it. She was beautiful, the sort of woman that men would stare at as she walked by. That women would hate on sight alone. That anyone remotely attracted to women would fantasize about.

It was more than physical with her though.

When it came to women who looked like her, some honestly didn’t know they were beautiful, some pretended not to know, and some used their beauty like a weapon. Paige was one of the rarest kind though. The kind of woman who understood her physical appeal, but made certain it wasn’t the most important thing about her.

She was smart, clever, the kind of quick wit that startled and surprised. Hell, it’d gotten a laugh out of me more than once. And she had a steel backbone, more guts than most people, and I wanted to know what it would take to make her submit...

“Knock it off.” I said the words out loud because I thought it’d make a

difference, but it didn't. I just kept on thinking about Paige, and the way those eyes of hers had flashed when she'd gotten in my face.

What color would they turn when she was aroused, I wondered. Something like the ocean, I imagined. Not like the pure blue coasts in the Caribbean, but rather something deeper, darker.

Then there was that blush. Her skin was so fair that she couldn't hide it, and I wanted to know what it was like to see it spread over her entire body. That wasn't the only color I was interested seeing on her either. Another form of red and pink appealed to me. My handprint on her ass. Stripes from a flogger and crop.

Now that I'd let my mind go there, I didn't want to stop imagining. If I was going to stop drinking, I needed something else to take my mind off of things and thinking about how Paige would reward me this weekend would definitely do the trick.

I sat down on the couch and leaned my head back, closing my eyes. I could picture her immediately. Every line and curve of her face. I shouldn't have been able to see her so clearly, but there she was.

And I could just imagine what it would be like to have her smile at me as she knelt in front of me.

"Hands behind your back," I ordered.

She immediately obeyed, the position pushing her ample breasts out even more. Her nipples, a pale, delicate rose color, were pinched between a set of clamps, but no discomfort showed on her face. All I could see was a desire to please. To please me.

"Open your mouth."

She parted her lips, and I reached out to brush my thumb across her bottom lip. I'd kissed her, bitten the soft, plump flesh, but now I wanted her lips wrapped around my cock.

I gripped my shaft in one hand and buried my other in her hair. "Look at me."

I waited until our eyes met and then slid my cock into her mouth. I groaned as the velvet heat enveloped me. It didn't matter how many times she did this, it was always like heaven.

She let me guide her head, offering no resistance as I made her take me deeper and deeper. Her breathing was harsh, mingling with the slick, wet sound of her mouth on me.

"Do you want me to come in your mouth?" I asked, my voice tight. "Or

on your face?”

I cursed as I fisted my cock faster, the pressure inside me building with each stroke.

“You choose, my Paige,” I said as I pulled back far enough for my dick to slide free. “Where do you want me to come?” I asked again. “Mouth? Face?” Each suggestion made a pulse of lust go through me. “Tits?”

Her breathing hitched. “Wherever you want, Sir.”

I shook my head. “No, Paige, I want you to choose. Where do you want me to come?”

The words were barely a whisper. “Inside me, Sir.”

“Say that again,” I growled.

She squared her shoulders and spoke louder. “I want you to come in my pussy, Sir.”

“Fuck!” The word tore out of me as I climaxed, spurting over my fist and onto my shirt. I was a mess, but the pressure inside me was gone. For the first time in months, my head was clear.

Well, *that* was unexpected.

TWELVE

PAIGE

Considering the guilt that had swept over me after I'd gotten off while fantasizing about Reb, it was probably a good thing that Habitat for Humanity didn't have anything going on at the moment. I wasn't sure I could take an entire morning of watching Reb doing construction work and be able to control myself.

Fortunately, I'd gotten ahold of Candra Hammel, a college classmate of mine who now ran a community program where kids could go both after school and on the weekends. While, most of the time, they had the usual games and such, sometimes they brought in people to offer specialized classes or workshops. Today, they were getting rock star Reb Union to teach music to the kids.

I just hoped I'd made the right call. If he showed up drunk or behaved like an ass, I'd be lucky to not get fired. Reb wasn't the only one putting things on the line today.

"Candra." I smiled at the woman standing by the front door. She looked just as polished and professional as ever. "It's good to see you again."

"You too," she said as she gave me a hug. "It looks like all that hard work you put in is paying off. Representing Reb Union." She let out a low whistle, her turquoise eyes sparkling. "I know a lot of women who'd give their right arm to get that close to him."

I didn't have to ask if she was one of them. Candra had been an out and proud lesbian since well before I knew her. She'd appreciate Reb's beauty the same way I appreciated hers, but it wouldn't be an issue. That wasn't the main reason I'd gone to her, but it was definitely a bonus.

"He's my first client," I admitted. "The first one I have by myself,

anyway. I have to get it right.”

Candra nodded. “At least you’ve got a good guy to work with.”

“You know him?” I was pleased to hear that I didn’t sound as surprised as I actually was. I didn’t want her getting the wrong idea, because I wasn’t jealous. He wasn’t her type. And even if he was, it wouldn’t have mattered because he wasn’t *my* type.

“Only by reputation. He has a good one.” She frowned, and her gaze drifted away from mine. “At least he did until recently. His break-up appeared to have really hit him hard. It’s good that she’s gone though. Mitzi was clearly using him.”

I stared at her. Candra hadn’t been as much of a workaholic as me, but she’d always been focused. The attention to the entertainment industry was new.

She laughed at the expression on my face. “My girlfriend works at *Entertainment Weekly*.”

“So, you know that I—”

“Leaked that Reb would be here today?” She finished. “I figured that’d be the case even before I got Lena’s message.”

“I don’t want you to think I’m using the program. I think it’s amazing what you do for these kids.”

She smiled. “I know. It’s okay. Generally, when celebrities come to something like this, it’s for publicity reasons, and I’d much rather have someone like Reb come in and actually do something other than write a check.”

“I’ll make sure he behaves himself,” I promised. I wasn’t sure how I was going to manage that, but I’d think of something. My ears grew hot as I remembered telling him that I’d make sure he ‘got something’ out of this. I’d come up with something appropriately professional. No way in hell would I give in to the thoughts I knew had accompanied his request for a ‘reward.’ I didn’t want that.

“Speak of the devil,” Candra said, looking past me.

I didn’t need to turn to know he was coming right for us. I could feel him staring and prayed that Candra didn’t read anything into it. The last thing Reb needed was rumors that something was going on between him and his PR rep. I didn’t even want to think what it would do to my reputation.

“I’ve got to get inside,” Candra said. “Two of my usual volunteers called in sick this morning. The kids that get here this early always have far too

much energy, and if I don't give them something constructive to do, I'll end up cleaning paint off my ceiling."

The expression on her face said that she hadn't pulled something that specific out of nowhere. I really hoped Reb was up to this. Maybe scheduling things without talking them through with him wasn't such a good idea. I'd figured making the decisions on my own would keep him from arguing about them. The longer this dragged out, the harder it was going to be to stop the momentum. He needed to do something as soon as possible to show that he was trying to change his image.

Reb stopped next to me as Candra hurried off. "Did I do something to offend her?" he asked.

I shook my head as I turned toward him. "She's a bit understaffed this morning." I glanced down to see that he'd brought a guitar with him like I'd asked. "Thanks for bringing that."

"It's been a long time since I've played an acoustic guitar with nothing else backing me up."

I gave him a sharp look, but he wasn't complaining like I'd thought. He almost looked excited by the idea. "The kids who come here are pretty much all from this neighborhood. Mostly good families, but ones that don't have the money or time to send their kids to lessons. It's not gangs or drugs that are the biggest danger here, but rather the inability to do anything else."

He looked around, a thoughtful expression on his face.

"Some will be talented enough to become electricians or mechanics, and they'll do well. They'll be the success stories. But the kids who might've become doctors, lawyers, teachers, counselors – the sort of occupations that need a college degree – they'll find themselves working in stores or on construction crews. They'll never have the chance to reach their full potential. Maybe some will be able to get into college, get some small scholarships, but they won't be able to afford to go."

I remembered when I first realized what it meant that I was going to college. Mom had always made it clear to me that I either had to learn a trade or pursue a degree. Both were equally valuable, but I was expected to excel in whatever path I chose to pursue.

I had pushed myself academically, even doubling up on credits so I could graduate a year early. I'd earned several scholarships, but if it hadn't been for my mother's determination that I get to do what I wanted, I wouldn't have made it. For as long as I could remember, she'd worked two jobs, gone

without so many things, all so she could make sure I didn't need to work. It was thanks to her I'd been able to accept an unpaid internship my senior year, and I'd felt like all the hard work had paid off when I'd gotten hired as a paid employee.

Any time I'd gotten tired and considered quitting, I'd think about my mom and how, some nights, she'd fallen asleep on the couch, half-way through her dinner.

"Paige?"

I gave myself a mental shake and smiled at Reb. I hadn't asked him if working with kids was okay, and now I wondered if he'd even be able to relate or if I'd set us up to fail.

"Candra wants you to play a couple songs, then work on teaching the kids about music. Once we see how things go, she'll probably have you repeat things every few hours so kids who come in later will get the same chance."

"All right," he agreed. "Let's get started."

I watched him as he walked toward the double doors. He didn't look drunk, despite being a little rough around the edges. I hoped that meant he was going to listen to me when I told him what to do. He didn't give me the impression that he was a man who was accustomed to taking orders, much less obeying them. In fact, something about the way he carried himself made me think that not many people bossed him around, not without repercussions of some kind.

Something low in me throbbed at the thoughts of rewards and punishment, but I didn't let it linger. We had work to do.

Any doubts I had about how he'd do with kids vanished the moment we stepped inside the community center.

"Holy shit!" A boy who looked to be about ten or so shouted as soon as he saw Reb. "That's Reb Union! He's a total badass!"

"Tyler!" Candra scolded him. "What have we said about language?"

He gave her the sort of charming grin that I bet he used on most authority figures to get away with things. "That the study of the English language is fucking important?"

"Tyler!" She was trying to stay firm, but I could tell she was trying not to laugh. "Mind your manners."

He bounced up and down on his toes, but stayed where he was, and didn't shout again.

"Kids," Candra addressed the whole group. "Mr. Union is our special

guest today. He's going to be playing some songs for you, and then he's going to teach you a bit about music." She gave Tyler a stern look. "Which means, I expect all of you to be on your best behavior. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Ms. Hammel," the whole group chorused.

Candra turned to Reb. "Think you can take it from here?"

He swallowed hard, and I wondered if anyone else could tell that he was nervous. "I can. Thank you."

He smiled and led the kids over to a place at the other end of the building where a stage was set up. He sat down, taking out his guitar as the kids pulled chairs into a half-circle. I leaned back against the wall to watch.

Because I needed to make sure this worked.

Not because I wanted to watch him.

"All right," he said as he settled his guitar on his lap. "I'm guessing at least one of you knows some of my music. Do I have a request?"

"Under the Waves," Tyler immediately spoke up. "That's my favorite song."

Reb nodded, plucking at a few strings. "That's one of my favorites too." His gaze flicked to me. "One of the first songs I ever wrote but fits my life now more than ever."

I ignored the warmth that spread through me at his look. It didn't mean anything.

Still, as he began to sing, I couldn't help but think about what it would be like to have someone like him singing to me. The lyrics of the song weren't romantic, but I still felt them. He meant every word, and that had nothing to do with trying to look professional.

"He's amazing."

I glanced over at Candra as she came to stand next to me. I didn't want to agree with her, but there was no way around it. She was right.

"The kids seem to like him," I said, hating myself for how non-committal it sounded.

"They do."

Reb finished up the song, and another kid piped up with a suggestion. They came, one right after the other, and he kept playing. He didn't complain, not even when one quiet looking girl shyly requested a song that was definitely *not* one of Reb's. Instead, he gave the kids a silly grin and began playing the cute, bouncy pop song.

After a couple hours, Candra pushed herself off the wall and interrupted,

“Who’s ready for their mid-morning snack?”

A chorus of cheers answered the question. Three kids hung back as the others rushed to the window where fruit and bottled water waited. One was Tyler, the boy who’d been scolded for his language, and he was hanging on Reb’s every word. Another was the girl who’d asked for the pop song, and she looked like she was torn between wanting to talk to him and wanting to disappear. The third was a small, skinny boy who was trying to hide behind Tyler.

Curious to see how Reb would handle his little admirers, I waited and watched.

“Are you going to teach us how to play the guitar?” Tyler asked. “I’d be awesome.”

“I bet you would,” Reb said. He clapped a hand on Tyler’s shoulder, then looked at the other two. “Hi.”

The girl’s cheeks flushed, and she ducked her head. “Hi.”

“She’s Mags,” Tyler said. He smacked the other boy on the shoulder. “He’s Larry.”

“Nice to meet you.”

Had he seriously just said *nice to meet you* to three kids who hadn’t quite hit puberty? And now he was talking to them like he was their friend. Joking with them. Asking them questions about school and the things they liked to do. He told Larry to be proud of his photographic memory. Told Mags that she should just be herself. He sat with the kids as they ate their snacks and there wasn’t a single trace of insincerity in anything he said.

Was it possible that *this* was who Reb really was? That he was a decent guy who loved kids? That the alcohol and bad decision making was a fluke?

No. I made myself look away, ignore what I was seeing. I couldn’t afford to think that he was different. One morning spent with kids didn’t make him a good guy.

I needed to remember that, and everything would be fine.

THIRTEEN

REB

I hadn't been dreading the community service itself – being sober again wasn't that great – but I hadn't expected to enjoy myself. I'd been looking forward to seeing Paige, even though I knew she was off limits, but when I walked into that community center and Tyler had yelled my name...I hadn't felt anything like that in a long time.

As I followed Tyler, Mags, and Larry over to where the rest of the kids were sitting, I realized that I was having fun. I'd loved performing unplugged, singing songs as the kids called them out. Hell, I'd even liked singing that pop song because it'd made Mags smile.

“So, how many of you think you might like to learn how to read and write music?” I asked.

Hands shot up, and I immediately started thinking of all the ways to best teach them how to read music. I'd never thought of myself as a teacher, but in that moment, I could see it. Showing the kids how to love music the way I did.

“Do you write all your own songs?” Tyler asked.

I nodded. “I do.”

“Not all musicians do though, right?” Larry asked.

“Right,” I said. “Sometimes, people are good at playing instruments or singing, and sometimes they're good at writing music and lyrics, but not always both.”

“But you do both,” Mags said.

I nodded again. “I do.”

I didn't tell them that it'd been a while since I'd written anything. That the songs I'd sung this morning had been written years and months before. In

my opinion, the quality had been going downhill too. The studio had been threatening to send in writers for me, to create an album that would take the charts by storm. Only the fact that I'd had it put into my contract that I had veto power on album content had kept them from doing it. If things were going to suck, I'd own it.

It was one of the reasons Chester had been on my ass. Fucking up my image would've been bad enough if I'd had a new album out or one coming out, but that could've been spun positively. The fact that they had to keep asking me when I was going to get into the studio and finally record something meant they hadn't been feeling very friendly toward me when the shit hit the fan.

But that was why I had Paige. She was going to fix all of that.

I forced my mind off of Paige as Candra announced it was time to move into the teaching music part of the morning. It was funny. I'd spent so much time drinking over the past few months because I wanted to forget, to get out of my head, and I hadn't been able to turn to music like I had in the past. Then I met Paige, and she became another thing I couldn't get out of my head, no matter how hard I tried.

Until I came here, stone cold sober for the first time since the beginning of summer, and found that I could focus on the music again. Playing it, at least. I still couldn't find it in me to focus on writing it, but I'd take what I could get.

"ALL RIGHT, LISTEN UP!"

Paige's friend, Candra, clapped her hands and waited until everyone's attention was on her.

"That's all for our special guest today." She held up her hands when several of the kids protested. "Please make sure to thank him for spending time with us, and then it's time for team sports."

We were done already? I looked at the clock and was surprised to see that it was nearly three in the afternoon. How had the time flown by so fast?

I didn't have a chance to think about it too much, however, because the kids were all coming over to say their goodbyes. Unsurprisingly, Tyler, Mags, and Larry all hung back, waiting until the others cleared out before

they approached.

“Do you really have to go?” Tyler asked. “You’re the first cool person we’ve ever had here.”

The mutinous look on his face reminded me of my niece, Josie, when my sister would tell her she couldn’t do something. Annette always blamed me for that.

“I think Ms. Hammel has some things planned for you guys to do now,” I said.

“Team sports.” Larry made a face. “No one ever wants us on their team, so we always play together.”

“And we always lose,” Mags added.

I glanced up to see Paige coming toward me, but as much as I wanted to try and get some alone time with her, I wanted to see these kids smile more. “How about if I play on your team?”

Their faces lit up.

“For real?” Mags asked, grabbing my hand.

I nodded. “For real.” I smiled as they cheered. “So, what are we playing?”

“Soccer,” Tyler said. “Come on!”

I followed the kids over to the area where an indoor soccer pitch had been set up, and Paige came after me. “You don’t have to babysit me, you know,” I said as we went.

“Who’s babysitting? I love soccer.”

Before I could strike up a conversation, we heard Tyler arguing with some kids who’d come in only a few minutes ago.

“You aren’t our boss!” He glared up at a bigger kid without a trace of intimidation on his face. “Ms. Hammel says everyone who wants to play can.”

“Well, nobody wants you on their team,” the kid said, his face twisted into the kind of scowl bullies seemed to perfect.

“I do,” I said, raising my hands. “So why don’t Tyler and I have our own team, and we play against you and whoever you want on your team. Sounds like that’ll be fair.”

The kid’s hands curled into fists, and I wondered if all my good work today was going to get thrown away by a kid with a bad temper. I wouldn’t hit him back, obviously, but I had no doubt the media could make it my fault.

“We got Mags and Larry,” Tyler said. “That’s four of us.”

“I got eight,” the kid said. “But the old guy should be able to make up the

difference, right?”

Old?

“Five against eight sounds fair to me,” Paige spoke up. She pulled her hair back from her face and called over to Candra, “Hey, let me borrow your shoes.”

“You’re gonna play soccer?” It was hard to say who was more skeptical, Tyler, or the smart-mouthed teenager leering at Paige.

She grinned at the older kid as she swapped out her dress shoes for a pair of sneakers. “No, I’m going to kick your ass at soccer.”

I stared at her while the kids started shouting out positions to the others on the team. She stood up and caught me with my mouth hanging open like an idiot.

“What?”

“I just – I mean...” I stammered, “shit. I’m just surprised is all.”

“That makes two of us,” she said. The moment stretched out, then broke as she bent over to stretch. “You better be good at this, Union. I don’t want to have to explain to the journalists over there why you’re disappointing the kids.”

I glanced toward the front doors, seeing the crowd for the first time. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be annoyed that Paige had called them here, or proud that she’d believed in me enough to bring in the media without really knowing how things were going to go, but either way I was now terrified. Partly because I knew if I made the smallest mistake, that’s all anyone would focus on, but also because I didn’t want to disappoint the kids. More than that, I didn’t want to disappoint Paige.

FOURTEEN

PAIGE

I hadn't played soccer since intermural my sophomore year of college, but even with work, I'd managed to stay in shape. Reb, however, had spent the last few months drinking more than exercising, and while his body still looked fit as hell, he definitely wasn't a soccer player.

I sent the ball over to Mags with a neat little kick, then watched as she sent it sailing right into the make-shift goal.

"Yes!" She threw her hands into the air.

"Nice shot!" I held up my hand, and she slapped hers against it. "You're a natural."

She flushed, her eyes darting toward Reb. I didn't have to know her well to know that she had a crush on my musician.

No. No, *not* my musician. Reb wasn't mine.

And he sure as hell wasn't the reason why my face was suddenly hotter than it had been from physical exertion alone.

"Ringer," Reb said as he stopped behind me. He bent over, putting his hands on his knees. "You've played before."

"A little," I admitted with a grin. "Well, maybe more than a little."

"I'm glad you're on my side." He straightened, lifting his shirt to wipe the sweat from his face.

I tried not to stare at his stomach, and I definitely tried not to think about running my tongue over every one of those ridges.

I jumped a little when a whistle blew, and we looked over to see a large man waving the kids in for whatever was next on their schedule, his dark mocha skin gleaming with sweat.

"We have to go," Tyler said. "But this was the most fun I've ever had

here.”

Reb fist bumped him. “I had fun too.” As the kids ran off, he added, “But I have a feeling it’s going to come back to bite me in the ass in the morning.”

“Why’s that?” I asked as I waved a goodbye to Mags and Larry. “I think this is going to play well in the press.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Reb said. He put his hands on the small of his back and leaned back, groaning as he stretched.

My stomach twisted, and I wondered if he made that sound during sex. “What did you mean then?” I asked, hoping to get my mind off of sex and Reb. That would end nowhere good.

“I’m a bit more out of shape than I realized.” He leaned to the left, grimacing as those muscles engaged. “I’m going to be stiff tomorrow.”

The comment was innocuous enough, but I still couldn’t stop my mind from changing it into something dirty.

Dammit.

“Hey, what are you doing tonight?”

I frowned as I looked over at him. “I didn’t have anything scheduled for you, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“It’s not.” He came over to stand in front of me. “I want to know what you’re doing tonight.”

“That’s a bad idea,” I said, shaking my head. “Whatever it is you’re thinking, it’s a bad idea.”

“Really?” He gave me that grin again, like he knew that alone could make me wet. Then again, with as many women as he’d been with, he probably knew exactly what that smile did.

“Reb, you’re my client. This is my job.”

“And you promised me a reward if I behaved myself today,” he reminded me.

“I did not.” I scowled at him. “You said reward. I said—”

“That you’d make sure I ‘got something for my troubles.’”

Shit.

I released a long breath. “Look, Reb—”

He held up a hand. “A friend of mine is having an art show. He’s a photographer. My friends and I always go to showings and openings and all that, but this year, they have girlfriends. Well, one’s married. Still hard to get used to...shit. Look, do you want to come with me?”

I almost laughed at the rambling, but he looked so earnest. Nothing like

the drunk guy I first met. He'd gone from heated innuendo to a near-childlike eagerness, and I couldn't bring myself to treat him the same way I would have if he'd been drunk or lecherous.

"I suppose that would be okay," I said slowly. Spending time with him outside of work wasn't exactly professional, but going to some photography gallery was a lot better than any of the 'rewards' I'd been thinking he'd want.

"Don't sound so thrilled," Reb said wryly. "If you don't want to go—"

"I do," I cut him off. "I do."

His expression softened, and he reached out his hand. For a moment, I thought he was going to kiss me again, but instead, he plucked a leaf from my hair. "I'll pick you up at six."

I was going to tell him that I'd meet him at the gallery, but he walked away before I could say anything, leaving me with no choice but to stare at his ass as he went.

Really. No choice.

REB HADN'T GIVEN me a dress code, but I'd done a quick internet search for photography shows and found only one happening in the area tonight. It was for a photographer named Alix Wexler. Everything I saw told me this was black tie. Fortunately, the little black dress I'd worn for my college graduation a few months ago would work.

A part of me still felt underdressed as I walked into the gallery, my arm linked with Reb's. The faces I recognized here were some of the tops in their fields.

Dinah Weston was a prominent prosecutor who'd taken down a whole precinct of corrupt cops.

Stanley and Patty Driver owned some of the most prominent racehorses in the country, including three Kentucky Derby champions and two Breeders' Cup champions.

Erik Sanders was one of the wealthiest men under thirty in the city, and if the gossip columns I'd recently read were accurate, the beautiful blonde on his arm was Tanya Lacey, an employee of Branch Publishing and the woman responsible for an upcoming release that was getting rave reviews.

And we were walking right toward them.

Shit.

“Erik, Tanya,” Reb greeted them both with a familiarity that said they knew each other from more than just a passing greeting at fundraisers.

Were *they* two of his friends?

Fuck.

Working for a large PR firm in a city like New York, I’d always expected to rub elbows with some of the upper crust, but it was one thing to meet them under professional circumstances, and something else altogether to be on the arm of someone like Reb, especially since it looked like we were anything other than working together.

“This is Paige Ryce,” Reb said. “Paige, meet Erik Sanders and Tanya Lacey.”

I held out a hand before either of them could initiate another type of greeting. I didn’t know if they were huggers, but I did know that I didn’t want to make things more awkward than they already were. Which, in hindsight, probably meant that I shouldn’t have tried to shake their hands since they both looked like they were trying to hold back amusement that seemed to be directed more at Reb than me.

“Paige is the PR rep I told you about,” Reb said. “She’s amazing.”

I couldn’t stop a blush, and it only got worse when Erik raised an eyebrow, a questioning look in his bright blue eyes. Before I could decide whether or not I wanted him to say something, a handsome blond man approached. On his arm was a delicately beautiful woman who appeared to feel as out of place as I did.

“Reb.” The man clasped Reb’s hand and gave one of those half-hugs that only some men could pull off.

“Paige, this is Jace Randell and Savannah Birch.”

I wasn’t really into the art world, but even I had heard of Jace Randell, especially since rumor had it that he’d found a muse who inspired his newest series, sculptures rather than paintings. Sybil had tried to get tickets to the opening night of his show, but there’d been none to spare.

“Nice to meet you,” Savannah said with a smile.

“You too.” I glanced up at the guys who’d begun one of those conversations that came out of mutual experiences. “How do they all know each other?”

Tanya answered, “Reb and Erik met at Columbia. They were roommates until Reb left. Alix – the one whose show this is – is Erik’s cousin.”

“And Jace?”

The women exchanged looks, their cheeks flushing.

“They met at a club,” Savannah said.

It sounded simple enough, but something in her light gray eyes made me think there was more to that statement than she was letting on. I wasn’t about to press the issue though.

“There’s the man of the hour.” Erik’s voice cut through our conversation as a dark-haired man who shared Erik’s muscular build and chiseled jaw came toward us. He had to be Erik’s cousin, and the photographer, Alix Wexler. I didn’t know, however, who the tiny redhead tucked beneath his arm was.

“You look amazing,” Savannah said as she hugged the newcomer. “Paige, this is Sine, Alix’s wife. Sine, this is Paige Ryce. She’s here with Reb.”

“Lovely to meet you,” Sine said with a smile.

“Likewise.” I couldn’t help but smile back. Between the orange-red curls, freckles, and Irish accent, I didn’t imagine there were many people she couldn’t charm.

“Is the morning sickness getting any better?” Tanya asked, sounding for all the world like a worried mother though I doubted there was much age difference between her and Sine.

Sine nodded. “Mam sent me a few local remedies that she swore by with my brothers and me and they’ve done the trick.”

“And your doctor said it’s safe for you to travel at the end of the month?”

Savannah sounded as protective of Sine as Tanya. I understood it though. Something about the young woman just brought it out.

“Sine and Alix are going to Ireland for a big wedding,” Savannah explained. “They’ve already had a ceremony here, but Sine’s mom wanted a ceremony in a church.”

“Big Catholic family,” Sine said with a smile. Her hand rested on her stomach in one of those absent gestures most pregnant women seemed to make. “Alix is convinced my father’s going to kill him. Well, him or my brothers.”

“You do have six of them,” Tanya said with a soft laugh. “If Erik knocks me up, at least he doesn’t have to worry about someone coming after him.”

“Yes, he does,” Savannah countered. “Because if he behaves like an ass, he’ll have to deal with Sine and me.”

I’d always been fine with family being just Mom and me, but seeing this

group together, I felt a twinge of longing for a bigger family.

“So, Paige, you’re here with Reb?” Tanya turned the conversation to me.

“Not like that,” I quickly said. “I’m his public relations rep.” The trio exchanged knowing looks, and I shook my head. “What?”

Savannah and Sine looked at Tanya, who shrugged. “We’ve all been there.”

“Been where?”

“Thinking that things were just professional between us and our men,” Savannah said. “Tanya and Erik met over a book deal.”

“Savannah’s an art critic who was sent to do a story on Jace,” Sine said.

“And Sine used to be Alix’s assistant,” Tanya finished up.

“Technically, I still am,” Sine said. Her cheeks colored. “Just with a few...perks now.”

We all laughed, but their words kept echoing back in my head as Reb came back to my side. The couples split off to mingle, and Reb led me through the gallery, his hand resting lightly on the small of my back.

“You seemed to be getting along well with the others,” he said as we stopped in front of one of the first photographs.

“I like them,” I said honestly. I didn’t tell him that they thought he and I had more between us than work. They’d figure it out sooner or later, and I didn’t see any reason to make things more awkward.

The picture in front of me was done in black and white, a slender model, nude save a pair of lace panties and a pair of handcuffs hanging from one wrist.

Oh. Okay.

The next photograph had the model from the neck down, a strip of silk across her breasts bringing the only color to the piece, a bright green that stood out starkly against the background.

“Does this bother you?” Reb asked, pitching his voice low enough that only I could hear it.

“Does what bother me?” I didn’t look at him as I moved to the next picture.

The model was on her stomach again, but her panties were gone. The cut of the shot showed only the beginning swell of her ass, but it was clear she was naked. Her hands were tied together at the small of her back with the same bright cloth that had covered her breasts in the previous picture.

“I didn’t know exactly what Alix’s series was about, but he’d hinted that

it was on the erotic side,” Reb said. “I didn’t think to ask if it would bother you.”

I shook my head, willing my face not to betray me. There was no way I could let Reb know that, far from bothering me, the pictures turned me on in a way that was surprising. Not because I was attracted to the model, but because the subject matter touched something primal inside me.

The fourth picture was a close up of the model’s mouth, lips cherry red around a ball gag. The fifth another close-up, but this time of her whole face. She wore a mask, and the gag was gone. The mask was gold, the rest black and white, but the simplicity of it made it stand out all the more. Her eyes were half-closed, her lips parted.

She was coming, I realized with a start. Either he’d hired someone who could fake it with amazing reality...or she’d really been coming. Which made me wonder if she’d done it herself, or if Alix had been the one...shit.

“I don’t think I could do that,” Reb said quietly. “Share my woman with the world.”

My heart gave a funny skipping beat as I realized what he meant. “That’s Sine.”

“You didn’t know?”

I shook my head, unable to tear my eyes from the photo.

“The whole series is her. That’s why they’re in black and white, so no one can see her hair or eye color,” he explained. “Too easy to identify her.”

“She doesn’t seem the type,” I said.

“The type to pose for erotic pictures?” Reb asked. “Or the type to get into BDSM?”

“Both,” I admitted.

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it,” he said dryly as he moved to the next picture.

Tried it? The room was suddenly too hot, the air too thick. Was he simply telling me not to think I knew Sine after only a few minutes of conversation...or was he saying something else? Was he saying that this was what he was into? And that he wanted me to try it with *him*?

Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

What had I gotten myself into?

And why did the idea of exploring these new, primal feelings appeal to me so much?

FIFTEEN

REB

Alix had told us that his series of pictures explored the juxtaposition between innocence and the erotic nature of BDSM, and that Sine had been his model, but, of course, I'd never even thought to tell Paige. Even if I had, I wasn't sure I would've been able to do it. Not after how things had gone with Mitzi.

If I was going to be completely honest with myself, I'd been caught between anticipation and anxiety from the moment I'd invited Paige to come with me. But then we were in the limo, and it was too late to change my mind. A part of me was grateful that the decision was no longer mine to make.

My friends had been polite to Paige, but as soon as she'd started talking to the other women, the guys had turned on me with smug smiles. I'd tried to blow them off, tell them that she was an employee of sorts, nothing more. Then they'd reminded me that Tanya, Sine, and Savannah had all started in similar ways. I'd told them they were crazy.

Now, as we reached the end of the series, I was beginning to think they were right. With every new picture, the tension between the two of us grew. Neither of us had said anything since those first few portraits, but she studied each new one we came to. The one with the flogger resting on the small of Sine's back. The one where the only color was the pink handprints on her ass.

Alix really had found his muse with Sine. I'd been skeptical of her, both before she left, and even more when she'd come back, but I could see it now. How good the two of them were together.

I'd meant what I said to Paige though. I didn't understand how Alix could display the pictures for the world to see. Then again, just because we were both Doms didn't mean the same things got us off. For example,

exhibitionism wasn't my thing, but it apparently got things going for Alix and Sine.

I hoped he knew how lucky he was to have found someone like her. Not that I found her attractive beyond aesthetic appreciation. I didn't envy him the girl, but I did envy what they had. The freedom to be who he wanted to be, to want what he wanted and not be judged for it.

I shook off the self-pitying thoughts and smiled at Alix as Paige and I walked over to where he and Sine were talking to Congressman Powers. I gave the older man a polite nod as he said his goodbyes, then turned back to my friend.

"Amazing," I said, leaning in to give him a hard clap on the back. "I knew you were talented, but damn. This is the best work I've ever seen you do."

"It's all because of her," Alix said, kissing the top of Sine's head.

She gave him an exasperated look. "Take the compliment, love."

Erik and Tanya came up then, and while I knew I should probably hang around a bit, the combination of the photos and having Paige next to me for the past hour was either going to drive me to drink...or do something else that probably wasn't a good idea.

Which meant I needed to get Paige away from me.

"Ready to go?" I asked.

She looked surprised by the question but nodded in agreement. I quickly said our goodbyes, slid my arm around her waist, and walked us out to where the valet was waiting.

It didn't take long for us to get into the limo, but we stopped almost immediately when we pulled onto the highway.

So much for getting away from Paige.

"Is something wrong?" She broke the silence with a question and a hand on my forearm. "You looked like you were enjoying yourself, and then you suddenly wanted to leave."

"Nothing's wrong," I said as I turned toward her. Her hand dropped from my arm to land on my knee, burning through the denim.

Fuck it.

I cupped her face in my hands and kissed her, pouring everything in me into her. Our first kiss had been just as rash, just as impetuous, but unless she told me to stop, I didn't intend to let her go this time. If I was going to fuck up my life even more than it already was, at least I'd get something out of it.

For a moment, she stiffened, and I worried that she was going to pull away, but then her mouth softened, lips parted. When her hands grabbed the front of my jacket, I slapped my hand against the button to close the tinted window between the front seat and the back area. I was planning on taking full advantage of whatever was keeping us stuck in traffic, but unlike Alix, I didn't intend for anyone but me to see Paige this way.

She pushed my jacket off my shoulders, her hands greedy as she grabbed my ass and then yanked my shirt out of the back of my pants. I nipped her bottom lip, then sucked it into my mouth, the taste of her going straight to my cock. I felt like a teenager again, my hands running over her dress, learning every curve of her body.

The limo started to move again, but it was slow enough that I barely acknowledged it. I was more concerned with getting Paige stretched out underneath me and seeing if those legs looked as good as they felt.

"Fuck, Reb," she gasped as I kissed my way down her neck. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

No.

"Yes."

I moved further down her body, settling between her legs even as she grabbed my shoulders.

"What are you—"

I pulled her panties to the side and licked her.

"Fuck!"

I pressed my mouth against her pussy, my hands on her hips to keep her in place. She gasped and cursed, writhing as I ran my tongue over her sensitive skin, then around her clit. Fuck. I'd never imagined how hot it could be to see someone as polished as her completely come apart. I needed to make her come, and then we could decide if I'd go upstairs to her place or she'd come to mine to continue this.

It didn't take much, telling me she'd been wound as tight as me. I moved the tip of my tongue in rapid flicks over her clit, and then she was crying out my name so loud that I doubted even the sound-proofed barrier could keep the driver from hearing her. Not that I minded. He needed to know that she was with me. She was *mine*.

I moved back up her body to take her mouth, my erection rubbing against the space between her legs. Then I shifted, and she stiffened, pulling back.

"Sorry, am I crushing you?" I pushed myself off of her.

She shook her head as she smoothed down her skirt. “No, no, I was just... I mean, we shouldn’t...”

“Hey, it’s okay,” I said, pressing my forehead against hers. “I’m not expecting anything.”

She looked flustered. More so than I’d ever seen her. I reached out and tucked some hair behind her ear. She didn’t flinch, but she didn’t lean into my touch either.

“I’m serious, Paige. I wouldn’t pressure you into anything you didn’t want to do.” She still wouldn’t meet my eyes. “Was your last ex a jerk or something?”

She shook her head and offered me a half-smile. “No, it’s nothing like that.”

“What then?” I asked, mostly because I wanted to know, but also because talking would help keep my mind off of my throbbing case of blue balls. “You’re some kind of ice queen? Don’t want to lose your virginity in the back of a limo?”

I said it as a joke, but then I registered her expression. Her wide eyes. The way the color drained from her face.

Fuck.

Suddenly, the door opened, and the driver was smiling down at us.

“I’m going now.” Her voice was hoarse.

I just nodded, too shocked to say anything, not even when she climbed out of the car and refused to look at me. A virgin? Had I seriously almost just deflowered my PR rep in the back of a limo?

I needed to get my life straightened up, and fast, because if I didn’t, it was going to spin so out of control that no PR would fix it.

I STRUMMED my fingers across the strings of my guitar, not really trying to play a specific chord, but rather just hearing the different notes and trying to figure out where they should go. It always sounded strange when I tried to explain it that way. People tended to get it in their heads that music was composed in a certain way, but everyone had different ways of doing things.

I hadn’t heard the music in my head for too long, and it wasn’t back yet, but I could feel it coming. Like something on the tip of my tongue, or in the

back of my mind. Something not quite remembered.

Still, it gave me something to concentrate on instead of thinking about Paige and what I'd almost done last night.

A virgin. She was a virgin.

That was the last thing I needed. Even if I held back, denied the things I really wanted, it was a lot of pressure, being someone's first. My first time had been with my high school girlfriend, and she'd been a virgin too. It hadn't been bad, but awkward, and when we'd broken up a few months later, she'd yelled at me about getting what I wanted from her and then throwing her aside.

Between that and what happened with Mitzi, I was more determined than ever to stick with finding subs at Gilded Cage, the BDSM club my friends and I frequented. No more relationships, and definitely not sleeping with any virgins. Hell, I didn't even want someone who'd fucked several guys but was new to the BDSM world.

Even if the thought of someone else teaching Paige all the ways pain and pleasure could come together set my teeth on edge. I'd never thought of myself as a proprietary guy, but with her...

It turned out that working on music really wasn't doing much to keep my mind off of Paige.

By evening, I was ready to either drink myself stupid or go over Paige's and fuck her until neither of us could think straight. Fortunately, I was saved from doing either of those stupid things because Erik called.

In less than a half-hour, all three guys were sitting in my living room.

"Here," Erik said as he held out a sheaf of papers. "I just finished the revisions for *The Muse*. Thought you and the guys would like to take a look. You took off last night before I had a chance to give it to you."

"They're really putting a rush on it," Jace said. "Trying to get it out by the end of the year. Savannah said it's unusual to get two books published so close together."

Erik nodded. "Branch wants to use my books to try to see if they can compete with how quickly independent authors get their books out."

"I gave Sine my copy this morning," Alix said. "I'm thanking you in advance for the night I'm going to have when I get home. Seriously, that shit you write, it's like fucking catnip for her. She read *Heat of the Sun* on our honeymoon, and I swear, I thought she was going to break my dick."

I flipped through the book, then set it aside to read later. I'd never go

around telling people that I was a fan of Erika Summers erotica, but Erik was a damn good writer, and there were worse things to have for a guilty pleasure.

“How are things going with Paige?” Jace asked. “The two of you looked good together.”

“It’s not like that.” I shook my head.

“Yeah, we all said that, remember?” Alix laughed. “Come on, man, you watched all three of us fall hard. We know what it looks like.”

“Whatever,” I mumbled, glaring at him.

“Don’t fight it,” Jace advised. “Trust us, it doesn’t work.”

“There’s nothing to fight,” I insisted. “We’re strictly professional.”

Except for last night in the limo.

Alix raised an eyebrow. “Bullshit.”

I scowled. “Like hell it is.”

“I saw the way the two of you looked at each other,” he persisted.

“Look,” I said with a sigh, “I don’t know what you think you saw, but it’s not there. Sure, she’s attractive, but I’m not looking to get involved with anyone. Not after what happened the last time.”

“For all you know, she could be into the same stuff,” Jace offered. “You’ll never know until you at least try.”

“She’s a virgin,” I snapped. “That’s the last thing I need.”

Erik closed his eyes. “Please tell me you didn’t do something stupid. Tanya really likes her.”

Shit. The last thing I needed was them getting on my case. They were supposed to be on my side. “We fooled around, but when I found out she was a virgin, it didn’t go any further.”

“That’s not the stupid I meant,” he said. He opened his eyes, a disapproving expression on his face. “You acted like an ass, didn’t you? You found out she was a virgin, and instead of talking to her about it, you freaked out and either said something asinine, or you said nothing at all.”

Okay, he had me there. The *ice queen* comment hadn’t been meant cruelly, but it wasn’t a nice thing to say.

“So what?” I said sullenly.

Erik looked at Jace, then Alix, who both gave him a half-hearted shrug as if to say *go ahead*. “If any of you tell anyone what I’m about to say, I’ll kill you.” He paused a moment to let his threat sink in. “When Paige and I first had sex, I didn’t know she was a virgin until...well, you get the idea. And I

freaked out, accusing her of intentionally hiding things from me, telling her that I didn't want that responsibility. I almost lost the best thing that's ever happened to me because I didn't just talk to her."

"Communication is key," Jace added his two cents. "Erik's right about that."

"Hell, yes," Alix agreed. "You saw how miserable I was when Sine was gone, and it all could've been avoided if I'd just talked to her, given her the benefit of the doubt."

I sighed and leaned back. "I don't know. Seems like a big risk."

"It is," Erik admitted. "But I know that all three of us would agree that it's worth it."

"Hell, yes," Alix and Jace chorused.

I'd brought them over here to keep myself from drinking, but now, alcohol was looking even better than ever.

What the hell was I supposed to do now?

SIXTEEN

PAIGE

If I thought about it, I probably could have come up with a time where I'd been more mortified than I had been Saturday night, but I couldn't think of anything off the top of my head. I told myself that wasn't because a memory didn't exist, but rather because I'd long since buried it.

I wished I could do the same with what happened in the limo. The tension between us at the show had been bearable, but the moment he'd kissed me, everything had turned upside-down.

I should have remembered that no matter how good-looking Reb was, no matter how much I might be attracted to him, he would never be the sort of man I could trust. Not to that extent anyway.

I would do my job, and I would do it well. I'd give Sybil no cause to regret giving it to me. Once I could claim Reb's new, good image as a product of my hard work, Sybil could feel confident giving me more. I could see it all ahead of me. Lots of nights working late. No social life. No men. No friends.

It was everything I'd ever wanted.

And if I kept telling myself that, I might believe it one day.

I looked down at the message I'd gotten from Reb twenty minutes ago.
Late start. Let yourself in.

I didn't want to think about why Reb'd had a late night. He'd looked so horrified at the realization that I was a virgin that I suspected he'd gone out yesterday to find someone more experienced to fuck. Someone who didn't come across as so desperate and needy.

A flush of shame colored my cheeks, and I pushed those thoughts down as far as I could. I was done thinking about him that way. From here on out,

he was only going to be a client. Mr. Union. Nothing else.

I knocked first, just in case Reb was within earshot of the door, but when he didn't answer, I let myself in as he'd instructed. I supposed he felt safe enough with the security doors downstairs, the doorman, security detail, and the keycard necessary to get to his floor. I couldn't imagine living anywhere in New York City where I could leave the door unlocked like that.

"Re – Mr. Union?" I called as I entered the apartment. No answer. I walked a bit farther in, wondering if I'd find him passed out on the couch. The place was clean, which surprised me. I hoped that meant he was still sober.

I suddenly realized that I could hear the shower running, and a flood of heat hit me along with the memories of what his skin looked like wet. Those tattoos. That skin. Those muscles.

"Dammit," I cursed softly.

I needed to find a distraction.

Fortunately, fate seemed to take some sympathy on me, and I spotted something on the end table next to the couch. *The Muse* by Ericka Summers. I knew that name, but couldn't quite place why. Not that it mattered, I would've read pretty much anything at the moment if it meant I could stop thinking about the fact that Reb was naked and wet only a few yards away.

I sat down and picked up the manuscript, making a mental note to ask how Reb ended up with it in the first place...then I remembered that this was a distraction so I could stay professional. It was none of my business how he'd gotten this from Ms. Summers.

I flipped it open to the acknowledgment page. *To my one and only muse. You are my life.*

It was simple, and even more beautiful for the simplicity.

I turned to the first page and started to read.

The sound of the whip came a split second before it struck, a sharp crack that echoed off the walls. Her whimper was a softer sound, but it still made his cock even harder. It was art, what he did, though most wouldn't see it that way. Art could be sensual, even bordering on sexual, but once erotic was the word used to describe it, people started getting twitchy.

He frowned. The people here appreciated his talents, but if he couldn't concentrate, he couldn't deliver, and they'd start looking elsewhere. Not that he needed the job, per se, but having him here was mutually beneficial. He drew a crowd for the club and was able to create his art in a safe

environment. He could never let anyone see his face. His identity had to remain a secret, and this was the best way for that to happen...

*It didn't take me long to get caught up in the world of Maximillian von Strauss, the Dominant billionaire recluse, and the object of his obsession and affection, reluctant club hostess Chastity Powell. Sure, her name was a bit on-the-nose, and alpha billionaire romances weren't usually my preferred genre, but the writing was amazing, the characters likable even with their flaws. Despite my preconceived notions of the romance genre – particularly the erotic vein – *The Muse* had substance.*

And the sex...one scene was hotter than the next.

Max had told her when they'd first come together that he intended to have all of her, and she was now starting to realize exactly what that meant.

She was naked and face-down, head turned to the side, silk sheets cool beneath her body. Her arms and legs were spread wide, each bound to the four corners of the bed. The restraints were soft, which she had learned meant whatever he had planned for her would make her try to break free. The thought didn't frighten her though, not beyond the small bite of anticipatory fear. She knew she had only to say the word, and he'd release her.

She heard the door open but didn't speak. Over the past few days, she had learned what he expected of her. He liked to talk, but only wanted her to answer questions, not give voice to anything else unless it was to stop the scene. And she didn't want that.

She felt the bed dip as he climbed between her legs. She shuddered as his finger slid inside her. She was wet, of course. She was always wet around him.

Something cool and smooth brushed against her entrance, and she sucked in a breath as a thin dildo slid inside her. It wasn't nearly as large around as he was, barely larger than his finger, but every nerve in her body was on edge, ready for whatever he had planned. She suspected what it would be, but it wasn't until he removed the toy from her pussy and spread her cheeks that she knew she was right.

"I'm going to take your ass tonight, Chastity," he said quietly. "There will be times when it will hurt, but if you can bear it, I promise you an experience more intense than anything you've had before."

She nodded, but it was an acknowledgment rather than permission. By not saying her safe word, she gave consent.

"Ahhh..." It was half a moan, half some other sound entirely, but it

wasn't a conscious choice she made, simply the noise that escaped as Max eased the slick plastic shaft into her ass. She felt a faint burn, but nothing painful. More uncomfortable than anything else.

And then his fingers were in her pussy, relentlessly stroking her to an orgasm even as he fucked her ass with the dildo. She whimpered and gasped, closing her eyes to allow the sensations to wash over her. For an eternity, he stretched her ass even as he took her to the edge again and again, never letting her fall over it. She didn't beg, knowing he'd tell her if he wanted her to, but it was almost impossible not to plead with him to let her come.

Without warning, her ass and pussy were both empty, and she felt the heat of him as he leaned over her back and put his mouth against her ear.

"Once my cock starts filling your ass, you can come as much as you want, say whatever you want. I want you to come apart underneath me, holding nothing back."

She nodded again, body trembling with its need for release. When the head of his cock pressed against her anus, she knew she'd come the moment he penetrated her, pain or not. She needed it. Needed him.

He leaned forward and—

"Find anything interesting to read?"

SEVENTEEN

REB

I wished I had a camera. Not just because seeing Paige jump and look guilty when I spoke was one of the funniest things I'd seen in a long time, but because I wanted to lock in the memory of finding her like this.

Her cheeks were flushed, pupils dilated so wide that only a thin ring of blue-green was visible. She was embarrassed now, but I doubted that was the only reason she couldn't look at me.

She was turned on. For a moment, I thought it was because she'd been thinking about me being in the shower, but then she set something on the table as she stood and I realized what she'd been doing.

Dammit, Erik.

If she hadn't been reading that book, I probably could have let it go. I still *should* have let it go. We had to keep things professional. That was the only way this was going to work. We had to ignore any lingering chemistry between us. If there was even any left after the way I'd put her off the other night.

But my ability to say no to temptation was part of the reason I was in this mess in the first place.

"Like it?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. "I can let the author know if there was anything in particular you thought was...stimulating."

"You know her?" Paige asked, glancing toward the manuscript. She frowned, as if her question bothered her. "Never mind. It's not important. I was just bored waiting for you, and it was there."

"You looked like you were enjoying it." I couldn't resist. "I could come back later if you want to be alone..."

"Don't be an asshole," she snapped.

Damn, she was hot when she was pissed. Made me want to push her even more, see just how much she could take. That was the part of BDSM that attracted me the most. Testing limits. Not necessarily pain, but comfort levels.

Like going down on her in the back of a limo.

“Come on, Paige, no need to be embarrassed. I had it for a reason.” I walked toward her, knowing every step was a worse idea than the last.

But I didn’t stop.

“Because you...*know* Erika Summers?”

I grinned. “Is that jealousy I hear?”

She glared at me, crossing her arms, as if that would offer any sort of deterrent. If anything, it made matters worse because it drew my attention to her full breasts. I hadn’t gotten nearly enough of my fill of them.

“We already went down this road, Mr. Union,” she said, lifting her chin. “And I know you don’t want to go there again, so let’s just stick with business.”

“And if I’d rather focus on pleasure?” The words just popped out, but when I saw her blush again, I didn’t regret them. My friends’ words echoed in my head, louder than they’d been all day. I wanted her, despite what I knew, and despite all the reasons I’d given myself why I shouldn’t.

“Reb...”

My name was a warning, but the fact that she’d called me *Reb* instead of *Mr. Union* made me think that she wasn’t as opposed to the connection as she tried to seem.

“How far did you get? I’m sure Erik has all sorts of new ideas in there for you to think about.”

“Erik?” Her eyes widened.

Shit.

“As in your friend, one of the wealthiest men under thirty, Erik Sanders?”

I could tell by her face that she’d put it all together before she even finished the question.

He was going to kick my ass.

“*He’s* Erika Summers?” She looked down at the manuscript again. “That’s how he and Tanya met, isn’t it? The book deal wasn’t for some memoir or how to succeed in business thing. It was for *Heat of the Sun*.”

“You can’t tell anyone,” I said, making my face as serious as possible. “The only people who know are us guys, Sine, Savannah, Tanya obviously,

and one or two other people at Branch Publishing. Even Erik's sisters don't know."

"I won't," she promised. A flare of understanding lit in her eyes. "Is he into...I mean, him and Tanya..." Her cheeks flamed red. "You said Alix and Sine..."

"It's not as uncommon as a lot of people think," I said, the muscles in my shoulders tensing. "Does it make you think less of them?"

My question sounded like a natural follow up, but tension hummed through my body as I waited for her answer.

"No," she said, giving me a steady look. "I may be a virgin, but I'm not a prude. I believe that, as long as things are between consenting adults, it's not anyone else's business what goes on, and certainly not anyone's place to judge."

I could see that she believed every word she said, but I knew all too well how words were easy enough to say when nothing was on the line. When I'd first talked to Mitzi about it, she'd acted like she was fine with it, but later, things changed.

"So, your opinion is that it's fine for other people, but nothing you'd want to explore?" I mentally cursed myself as soon as the question was out of my mouth. That sounded like I was propositioning her.

She drew herself up to her full height and gave me the sort of look that said I'd gone too far. "I think we should stick with business-related conversation."

I nodded even as my head agreed with my treacherous cock that they were more interested in getting an answer than talking business. I might have been trying all weekend to convince myself that I didn't want to sleep with a virgin, but I'd also been coming up with some pretty good arguments about why it just might be more appealing than I realized.

Like the fact that I'd never have to wonder if another man had been able to make her come the same way, or if she was comparing me to some previous lover. For whatever amount of time we were together, I'd be able to know that I was the only man she'd ever given herself to. I'd be her first in every sense, the one to show her all the different ways she could find pleasure, to teach her the ways to please me.

I could implant myself so firmly in her mind that every other man who came after me would never be able to live up to the standard I'd set. She'd be completely and indelibly mine.

EIGHTEEN

PAIGE

How had I thought I'd be able to talk to him like nothing had happened? Every time I looked at him, all I could think of was what it had felt like to kiss him, to touch him. The memory of his hands on my body, his mouth...it made every cell heat up, every nerve buzz with electricity.

Maybe coming here hadn't been a complete mistake, but reading that book had been. The moment I realized what I'd been reading, I should have stopped. Not because there was something wrong with it, but because being turned on right now was making things even more difficult than usual.

"I talked to some people from work about forty minutes ago, and they've been analyzing the coverage of you and the kids. You're trending in the right direction, but that alone isn't going to turn things completely around. What we need to do is show people that the negative press is the fluke, not this. They need to see that you're a good guy who did something stupid."

"And you have some ideas of how to make me a good guy?"

The question should have been flippant, especially considering he'd essentially been teasing me from the moment he'd come into the living room, but something under his words told me he wasn't being as glib as he tried to sound.

Despite the fact that looking at him made me feel things I didn't want to feel, I turned toward him. He needed to know this. "I don't need to *make* you into a good guy. You already are one. I just need to get others to see it."

He gave me a puzzled look. "You think I'm a good person? Even after—"

I sighed, my resolve to keep things professional already being put to the test. "You made some bad choices after your break-up, and did some stupid things, but that doesn't make you a bad guy."

“Yeah, but the other night—”

I held up a hand to stop him. “We don’t need to talk about that. It was impulsive, and the result of spending time together in a...*charged* environment. Neither of which will be happening again anytime soon.”

“I’m sorry I called you an ice queen and then joked about the whole virginity thing.”

I’d never really thought of myself as a person who was easily embarrassed, but this was getting to be a habit. “Reb, seriously, it’s okay. Let’s just get to work.”

He opened his mouth like he was going to argue, then closed it again when I glared at him. He nodded. “All right.”

“Good.” I turned away so he couldn’t see the relief on my face. Rehashing things would only make working with Reb more awkward. “The key to keeping the press on your side rather than them spinning things into a negative light is to make the experiences personal.”

“And how do we do that?”

“By figuring out what matters to you.” I did my best to fix on my professional face before I turned back to him. I would’ve used the same strategy with any client in a similar situation, but asking these questions of Reb felt a lot more intimate than it should have. “Obviously, music, but that’s the part of you people already know. We need to show them the man behind the music.”

He ran his fingers through his hair, flicking little droplets of water down onto his shirt. “What if music is all I am?” He gave me a sideways glance. “I haven’t been able to write for more than six months. What if I can’t ever write again and that’s the legacy I leave? A stalled career and bad decisions?”

“I’m going to make sure that doesn’t happen.” I crossed over to him and put a hand on his arm. “I can’t help with the music, but we’re going to fix it so that these past couple months are only going to be a blip in an otherwise reputable career.”

“How?”

I took a step back and let my hand fall to my side. “Tell me about yourself. The things you like. What you’re passionate about.”

His eyes locked with mine for a moment, and I swallowed hard at the intensity I saw there. Then he was moving, turning away so he could walk over to the couch and take a seat. I stayed standing.

“I thought you did your research on me.”

“That can tell me facts, not beliefs.”

He studied me for a moment before answering. “My mom was a teacher’s assistant when she was married to my dad, so I’ve always had a weak spot for educational charities.”

“I’ve heard your mother talk about her time as a TA,” I said. “She doesn’t explain though why she was working when her family is certainly well-off enough that she doesn’t need a regular job.”

“My grandparents didn’t approve of her marriage to my dad,” he explained, his tone casual, as if this was something he’d gotten used to saying. “They eloped, actually. He was getting ready to be shipped overseas, and he wanted to make sure she was taken care of if something happened to him.”

“He was military?” I hadn’t been able to find much about Reb’s father, only that he was dead.

Reb nodded. “Special Forces. We weren’t allowed to know much about what he did, and even after he died on an assignment.” His mouth quirked in a sad smile. “I was sixteen.”

My heart squeezed, and it was hard not to go to him then. To comfort him. To make him think of only me. “Oh, Reb, I’m so sorry.”

“Thank you,” he said. “Losing him almost destroyed my mom. She’s always been proud of him, but she can’t talk about him much. Even after all this time, she hasn’t gotten over him.”

My heart broke even more for him, and for his mom. My mom had raised me alone, and my father had never been more than biology and a cautionary tale. She’d never dated anyone, barely showed any interest in romance, and she sure as hell hadn’t pined over any of the ‘rock gods’ she’d slept with.

I couldn’t imagine loving someone so much that the loss of them changed my world forever. Well, I loved my mother, but that was different. Kids expected to outlive their parents. But when someone made a vow to love someone until death parted them, they never wanted to think that they’d have anything other than a lifetime to fulfill it.

“My older sister is terrified that her daughters will join the military someday. My younger sister works with Doctors Without Borders in some of the worst places in the world because she thinks that’s what my dad would have wanted.” He stared down at his hands thoughtfully. “A few months after my dad died, I talked to a recruiter. I started working out so I’d be physically ready as soon as I turned eighteen, but I kept it to myself. I didn’t want to

hurt my mom, but I felt like this was how I could honor my father.”

I moved closer but resisted the urge to touch him.

“Two months before my birthday, I was driving home from a party, and a drunk driver ran a red light. The crash didn’t do much damage, but I was stuck in the car. There was a fire, and I couldn’t get out. A guy driving by stopped and pulled me out before the car caught fire, but because he had to rush, he accidentally dislocated my left shoulder.” Reb’s hand rubbed his shoulder as if he could still feel the pain. “It was bad enough that it ended up keeping me from enlisting.” He looked up at me. “I’ve never told anyone that.”

I tried not to feel warm at the admission. It didn’t mean anything more than he found me easy to talk to. Like how someone might feel comfortable talking to a therapist. Nothing more.

I brought the conversation back to the matter at hand, not wanting to risk things going from personal to intimate. “I think I have enough to work with. I’ll have something set up for the end of the week.”

“Oh, okay. Good.” He stood, a troubled expression on his face for a few moments before disappearing. “I’ll keep the weekend free.”

“Friday too,” I said. “I’ll let you know as soon as I have something scheduled.”

He walked me to the door, opening it partway before stopping. “We should do something this weekend. Something besides work. I’d like to take you somewhere. A club. We can have some drinks. Dance. Loosen up some.”

I started shaking my head as soon as I realized what he was asking. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. Professional, remember?”

“Think of it as a reward for hard work.” He gave me that irresistible smile. Not the plastic one he threw out to reporters, or even the polite one he had for fans. No, this was the smile that had made me melt into a puddle of malleable goo.

I sighed. “Let’s see how things go first.”

He beamed, and I mentally cursed myself for not being able to say no to him. As I left, I wasn’t sure if I wanted him to do well on his next project or not. One option was definitely safer for me, but rooting for him to excel wasn’t only for professional reasons. It wasn’t even all because I wanted him to do well.

Even though I’d given myself repeated warnings, I still wanted him.

NINETEEN

REB

I slid my hand over the curve of her hip, then dug my fingers into her flesh to hold her in place as I slid inside. She was tight and wet and hot, everything I'd imagined and better. She moaned and whimpered, the sounds making me even harder. Everything had been building toward this moment, all the dancing around and flirting, the tension.

I reached out and took her hair, wrapping it around my fist. I pulled her head up so that I could see her expression in the mirror in front of us. So I could watch every nuance...

I jerked awake, my heart racing and my breathing ragged. The central air pumped cold air into the guest room, but my skin was still damp with sweat. I tossed the sheet aside, glowering down at the erection tenting my boxers. Of course, I had to have an erotic dream the night before I was supposed to see Paige again. Because it wasn't difficult enough to not get a fucking hard-on whenever I was around her.

I stretched my arm out and snagged my phone from the bedside table. The alarm I'd set was still ten minutes from going off, but I knew that it wouldn't do any good for me to lounge in bed until it did. It made more sense for me to spend a little extra time in the shower. My hand wasn't exactly the attention my cock would've preferred, but it was the quickest way to solve my problem.

PAIGE'S TEXT had only given me a time and an address, not an explanation

of what the place was or what I'd be doing, so I was surprised when the taxi dropped me off in front of The Kamden McBride Foundation, a private organization that worked with veterans.

How had Paige figured out that I was connected to this place? No one knew about my yearly anonymous donations. I hadn't even told my mom or sisters about it. I supposed Paige could've followed the money, but that would've taken some serious resources. Unnecessary ones at that since all she would've needed to do was ask me. It didn't fit with what I knew about her. And Chester couldn't have told her because he managed me, not my money, and certainly not my inheritance.

As long as Paige didn't reveal my monetary contributions, I wouldn't push the issue, but I was curious.

She was leaning against the front of the building when I arrived, absorbed in something on her phone, and I allowed myself a moment to appreciate how her skirt showed off her legs. Her hair was pulled up behind her head, a few waves left to frame her face, and the memory of my dream hit me hard. I could almost feel the silk of her hair across my palm.

This was going to be a long day.

But, apparently, a good one.

I didn't have much time for things to think about my dream, or about the club I'd invited her to, because as soon as we walked into the building, she put me to work.

I talked to every veteran there, thanked them for their service, listened to the things that concerned them. And I shared about my father, how I remembered what it was like to say goodbye when he left for tours, somehow knowing – even as a kid – that he might not come back. I told them about the first time I remembered going to the airfield to pick him up, about answering the door when a pair of officers came to tell us that he wouldn't be coming home again.

Talking about it wasn't as difficult as I'd imagined.

I played requests, everything from "Happy Birthday" to "God Bless America" to "Sweet Home Alabama," and for the first time in a long time – with the exception of playing for those kids – music was fun. And not just for me either. Everyone was smiling and laughing, including Paige and me.

For hours, I didn't think about all the stupid things I'd done or what else I was going to need to do to get my career back on track. I even managed to keep from thinking too much about how much I wanted to drag Paige

somewhere private and show her how good it would be to submit to me.

As things wound down, she and I finally had a couple minutes to stand back and breathe.

“Thank you,” I said quietly.

“Just doing my job.”

I reached over and grabbed her hand. Her eyes widened, but she didn’t pull away. “No, you could have set me up with some flashy publicity stunts and considered your job complete. You didn’t just gloss over what I’d done, give it a Band-Aid. You found things that I’d actually enjoy and be good at.”

She shrugged. “I didn’t need to change who you are, or re-vamp your image. People just needed a little reminder of why they liked you in the first place.”

“I needed the reminder too,” I said, squeezing her hand. “Thank you, again.”

For a brief moment, I thought we’d address the connection we couldn’t seem to shake, but then her phone rang, and it was over.

She turned to take the call, and I started to make my goodbyes. By the time she was done, I had a taxi waiting, and the two of us walked out together. I tried not to think of how similar this was to what had happened just a week before. I knew I couldn’t kiss her this time, and not only because the taxi didn’t offer us the same privacy. If I was going to see if the two of us could be something more, then I needed to play this right.

Which meant, as we pulled up in front of Paige’s apartment building, I leaned toward her. “About my reward...”

TWENTY

PAIGE

Dress sexy, he'd said. He asked me to a club, told me to dress sexy, and then let the taxi carry him away. I'd spent most of the night wondering if I'd imagined it or if it had been some impulsive gesture that he'd immediately regretted. Then, this morning, he sent me a text, telling me when he'd be by to pick me up.

And I'd spent the rest of the day switching between trying to talk myself into canceling things and finding the perfect outfit.

By the time I finished my light dinner, I'd decided to see things through and then settled on a dress for the night. The most daring dress I'd ever owned. A deep, rich green, it made my eyes pop and my skin glow. It clung to every curve, had a daring neckline, and the length was short enough that I'd never been comfortable wearing it before. I'd never had anywhere to go where it'd seemed appropriate. Certainly not any work function.

This, though, wasn't a work function. It didn't matter that Reb had joked about it being a reward for his good behavior. We both knew we were crossing a line here. Going to an art show had been getting close to unprofessional behavior even before the incident in the limo, but a club... even before he'd said to dress sexy, I'd known it meant something more, though what, exactly, I didn't know.

I buzzed him up and smoothed down some non-existent wrinkles as I waited for him to come to the door. My stomach was in knots, reminding me why I'd previously avoided this sort of thing, and the fact that I thought Reb was worth all this trouble freaked me out almost as much as the date itself. Maybe more, if I was being totally honest with myself.

Then I was opening the door and praying that I didn't embarrass myself.

The stunned expression on his face as he saw me calmed my nerves a bit. It wasn't the type of shock that came with a condescending *I never thought you could look that good* statement, but rather the same sort of breathless *oh* that I had going on when I saw him.

He wore fitted pants that were either leather or denim but did amazing things for him either way. His shirt was short-sleeved and tight, emphasizing the muscles I'd felt the previous week while showing off the tattoos on his arms. He definitely looked more the bad-boy rock star tonight than the wealthy philanthropist, and even though I didn't want it to, my body tightened in response.

"Damn..." he finally said.

His eyes had darkened to a shade of purple I hadn't realized was even possible, and the heat in them turned my insides to liquid.

"Not so bad yourself," I admitted, my voice shakier than I liked.

He grinned at that and held out a hand. "Shall we?"

I placed my hand in his and tried not to shiver. His fingers wrapped around mine, his grip firm, but not too tight. Neither of us spoke as we made our way down to the car he had waiting. It wasn't a limo, but it was definitely nicer than anything I could've afforded.

Once we were settled into the back, the driver pulled away from the curb, and Reb poured me a glass of champagne. I wasn't much of a drinker, but I appreciated the chance to have something to take the edge off.

"After we get there," he broke the silence, "if you're uncomfortable, if you want to go, just tell me."

I frowned. "Uncomfortable? I wasn't raised Amish, Reb." Why did people always assume that just because I was a virgin or because I wasn't a social person, that I was sheltered?

He finished the rest of his drink and set his glass aside. "I can tell." His eyes sparkled. "The dress gives it away."

I laughed, and some of the tension in my chest eased. Not all of it though, because I was still trying to figure out why Reb thought a club would make me uncomfortable.

As soon as we passed through the short foyer and into the club itself, his reasoning became clear.

Because this wasn't just some swanky private club; it was a sex club. Specifically, an S&M club, or a BDSM club, as was more accurate.

"Paige?"

I looked up to see Reb watching me with a concerned expression on his face. I raised an eyebrow. “Are you going to show me around, or should I find someone else to do it?”

His expression darkened, and he stepped closer to me. “You’re here with me, Paige.”

A little thrill went through me at his words. They should have bothered me, but something about them told me it wasn’t meant as an insult. It didn’t take a genius to figure out his role here. He carried himself with the sort of power that demanded attention, and it wasn’t only in his professional life. He drew people to him, and I wasn’t the only one who saw it, who felt it. Thanks to popular entertainment over the last few years, I knew the title for someone like that was Dominant.

He took my hand and tucked it tight against his side, taking me farther into the club. I felt eyes on us, and it wasn’t just my imagination. People moved around him, smiling, dipping their heads. The looks I got were more curious than hostile, but there were a few people – men and women alike – who didn’t seem too pleased with my presence. No one said anything though.

Not that I would have noticed it if they had. A slow, seductive beat pulsed through the club, but it wasn’t the music that had my attention. No, I was trying to act like seeing leather-clad, chain-wearing couples grinding against each other was normal for me. Like the threesome on the stage wasn’t anything new.

Both men were bare-chested and wore black leather pants, but that was where the similarities ended. One was well over six feet tall and solid, like a linebacker. He was dark-haired, with a square, blunt-looking face. The other was shorter and slimmer, with pale hair and a narrow face.

The woman was tiny, probably even smaller than Sine, with piles of golden blonde hair, and pierced nipples. Which were both clearly visible beneath the sheer, shimmery dress she wore.

“Let’s get a seat to watch the show,” Reb said, putting his mouth next to my ear so I could hear him.

I nodded mutely. My brain was scrambling to put together all of the pieces I’d picked up over the last few weeks, and I couldn’t quite manage words at the moment. Aside from processing the Dominatrix orchestrating a scene between the two men and herself, I was also coming to the realization that the ‘club’ Savannah had mentioned as the way Jace had met the guys was *this* club, Gilded Cage.

That should have freaked me out. *All* of this should have freaked me out. But, as Reb sat us down on a short loveseat, I was strangely *not* freaked out. In fact, I was feeling oddly hopeful. Coming here, being a part of this world, it seemed to bring the others together. The women had said they'd worked with the guys before moving into less-than-professional relationships, and I didn't doubt that this was a part of their lives now.

As Reb slid his arm around my waist and pulled me close, I let myself relax against his side and settled in to watch the show.

"ARE YOU OKAY?"

Reb's voice drew me out of my head where I'd been replaying the last few minutes at the club before we'd called it a night. The expression on the woman's face when she'd come that last time, her body held between the two men, both of them inside her, fighting to hold back their own orgasms until she found her release...it had been nothing short of ecstasy, and I couldn't help but wonder what it would be like to feel like that.

I nodded in answer to his question, not trusting myself to speak just yet.

"I didn't freak you out, bringing you tonight, did I?" He tucked some hair behind my ear, his tone concerned, his touch gentle.

I shook my head.

"Then talk to me, Paige."

I looked up at the name. "Just processing, that's all."

"Processing like you're trying to figure out the best way to quit working on my account without looking bad to your boss, or processing like you're trying to decide if you're even safe with me at all?"

I blinked, his question startling an honest answer out of me. "Neither. Unless you want someone else working for you on this."

"I should." He sighed, then cupped the side of my face, his thumb brushing across the corner of my mouth. "Because work makes things...complicated."

After a moment, I asked, "Complicated as in you don't know how to break it to me you don't like the work I'm doing, or complicated as in there are *other* things you'd like us to be doing together?"

He slid his hand around to cup the back of my head. "Complicated as in I

want you to come back to my place tonight.”

My mind ran through all of the things I'd seen over the last few hours. Floggers. Some sort of electric wand thing. A strap-on. Handcuffs. Safe words. I had no doubt that going back to his place meant sex, and probably not the vanilla kind that most women experienced for their first time. I knew him well enough to know that he wouldn't pressure me into anything I wasn't willing to do, but if I did this, I didn't want it to become about him feeling like he had to worry about each step, especially since I knew he had misgivings about being my first.

All of this went through my head in a matter of seconds, probably because I'd already been thinking about it most of the night. This wasn't like before when I'd been shocked by the feel of him touching me, kissing me. Now, I knew what it was like to have his mouth and hands on me, and I knew that I wanted more.

I slid my hands across his chest and up his shoulders, letting myself enjoy the way he felt. I rested my forearms on his shoulders and laced my fingers together behind his neck.

“I want that too.”

THE BUTTERFLIES in my stomach were back again. After I'd admitted to Reb that I wanted to go with him, I'd expected things to get hot and heavy like they had before, but he'd surprised me with a single kiss. Granted, that kiss had been enough to make my panties even wetter than they already were, but there'd been no touching on his part. Me? I'd taken full advantage of the opportunity to explore as many muscles as I could.

Now, I was in his bedroom, watching him take off his shirt, and trying to pretend that my heart wasn't trying to jump out of my chest. He unbuttoned his pants but stopped short of removing them, instead, letting them hang low on his hips as he walked toward me.

His eyes locked with mine as he turned me around and moved my hair over my shoulder. He kissed the place where my shoulder met my neck, a gentle gesture that surprised me. Once the zipper was down, I let the dress fall to the floor before stepping out of it. My bra went next, and he wrapped his arms around me, fingers teasing across my nipples until they hardened.

Then his hands dropped to my hips, and he lowered my panties until they, too, were on the floor.

“You’re even more beautiful than I’d imagined,” he said, breath hot against my ear. “And I’ve done quite a bit of imagining.”

I turned around and took a small step back. I locked gazes and reached for his pants, each movement deliberate as I waited for some sort of command. It didn’t come, though, so I went to my knees on my own. He uttered a low curse as I tugged his pants down his thighs, then dropped my eyes to focus on the long, thick shaft in front of me.

“You don’t have to do this.” His voice was rough, his entire body tense.

“Trust me,” I said, licking my lips. “I want to.”

I wrapped my hand around the base of him, holding him steady as I flicked my tongue across the tip of him, tasting the salt of sweat and pre-cum. He groaned as I began to lick him, long passes with the flat of my tongue from the very bottom to the top, swirling passes and teasing touches, each one getting him slippery enough so that I could begin to move my hand.

I’d never done this before, but I considered myself a fast learner. So, as I stroked him with firm, slow movements, I took the head of his cock into my mouth and let it slide over my tongue.

Now it was time to see how far I could go.

TWENTY-ONE

REB

She was going to kill me.

I was going to die with my cock being deep-throated by the sexiest virgin I'd ever seen, and all before I got the chance to show her just how good sex could be.

That thought was enough to prod me into action. I reached down and buried my hand in that thick, silky hair of hers, and with a reluctant groan, pulled her back. My cock slipped out of her mouth with an obscene, wet sound.

“Did I do something wrong?” Her voice was low, husky.

A part of me wondered what she would sound like if I took control and fucked her mouth, how long her voice would be rough from me using her the way a part of me wanted to.

“Not at all,” I said, caressing her cheek. “But I don't want to come in your mouth.” I traced her bottom lip with my thumb. “Not yet, anyway.”

I took her hand, helped her to her feet, and then led her over to the bed. I opened my mouth, intending to tell her how I wanted her...and then I realized that I didn't know what to say.

Dammit! I was a Dom. Control and knowing what to do were part of who I was, but I didn't know how to be in control without being a Dom.

“Are you okay?” Paige asked, concern replacing the heat and lust I'd seen in her eyes just a few seconds ago.

I nodded, giving her a partial smile. “I'm just not sure how I want you.”

“Don't overthink it.”

She sat down on the edge of the mattress and pushed herself back until she was in the middle of the bed. She laid back on the pillows and parted her

legs. As I watched, she slid her hand down her stomach. The heat in her eyes was back, as was the sexual tension in the room. Her fingers slipped over her pink, glistening skin, and then between her folds.

“Or should I just take care of things myself?”

I growled, and for a moment, I wanted to tell her that I was going to take her over my knee, because *no one* touched what was mine.

And she *was* mine.

But if I wanted her to be mine, and keep her mine, I couldn't risk scaring her away.

“You don't need to do that,” I said as I crawled up on the bed. “Because I intend to take care of you.” I hooked her legs over my shoulders and settled there. “Now, my Paige, move your hand.”

She tasted just as good as she had that night in the limo and came just as fast, but I wasn't satisfied with giving her only one orgasm. I needed to make her come, needed to take her so high that she'd never want anyone else. I tightened my grip on her thighs and took her clit between my lips, sucking hard enough to roll her first climax into a second. She writhed as she moaned and gasped, her hands in my hair, and I worked on getting her to number three.

I would have been content to lay there for hours, but she began to pull at my hair, begging, “Please, Reb.”

I moved up over her, high enough to keep my weight off of her, but low enough that her nipples were hard pebbles against my chest. She wrapped her legs around my waist, arched up against me. My cock was throbbing, aching, and the heat coming from her was almost too much to bear.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” I asked, brushing back her hair from her flushed face. “We can stop right now.”

She reached up and grabbed the back of my neck, nails biting into my skin. “Don't you dare. I want you inside me.”

I knew I should get up and retrieve a condom from my bedside table, but I hesitated. This was her first time, and even though it was selfish, I wanted something that made this more than just another fuck. I didn't know what we were to each other, or where we were going to go from here, but I did know that what I felt for her was nothing like what I'd felt in my past.

“Are you on the pill?”

Her eyes flew to mine, startled. A second later, they widened. “I am.”

“May I...?”

I didn't finish the question before she answered, "Yes, please."

I kept my gaze on hers as I reached between us and positioned myself. "You tell me if I hurt you."

"Just go slow," she said with a nervous smile. "You're bigger than anything else I've had..." The flush on her cheeks deepened.

"I thought you said—"

"Virgin," she interrupted. "Yes. But that doesn't mean I haven't taken care of things myself."

Fuck. "Sometime soon, I'm going to want to see that." I slid the tip of my cock inside her, barely an inch but she still caught her breath.

"You want to watch me...ahh..." Another inch and she was already squeezing me like a vice.

"Hell, yes," I groaned. "I want to watch you fuck yourself with your fingers, with toys, but right now, Paige, I just want to fuck you."

Her legs tightened around me, and she raised her hips, taking me deeper in one smooth motion. "Then stop talking and do it."

I bent my head, kissing her hard and fast. "Yes, ma'am."

I drove the last couple inches into her and we both cursed. She was hot and tight and perfect. I rocked against her, keeping some pressure and friction against her clit as I waited for her body to relax.

When she started to move underneath me, I reached down to cup her ass, then slid my hand to her thigh and pulled her leg higher. Skin against skin, we moved, neither one of us speaking. Usually, silence during sex freaked me out, but now, I found myself too preoccupied with studying all the nuances of her expressions, something new appearing with every stroke.

Pressure coiled low in my stomach, and I could feel my balls starting to tighten. I was almost there, but I needed her to get there first. I rose up on my knees, wrapping my arms around her waist to pull her up with me. Her mouth crashed into mine, and she ground down on me, our rhythm becoming jerky and uneven. It was nothing like the polished and smooth motions I'd had with others in the past, but this was somehow more real.

Her.

Me.

This.

I bit down on her bottom lip, and she cried out, her body seizing around mine. I cursed, clutching her close as I thrust up into her, my own orgasm taking my breath away. Her muscles contracted as I emptied myself inside

her, and as pleasure coursed through me, my mind cleared of everything except her.

As we started to come down, I lowered us to the bed, keeping her in my arms even as my cock slid out of her. Normally, I'd be rushing to get away, or freaking out since I was home and couldn't exactly go anywhere, but I was content where I was at the moment.

"I should go," she said after a couple minutes, breaking the silence blanketing us. "I mean, I can't—"

"Relax. It's okay. I've got you," I said as I kissed the top of her head. She relaxed back against me, and I tightened my arms around her.

I didn't know what the hell I was doing, but for the first time in a long time, my world had stopped spiraling, and I felt grounded.

I'D BEEN awake for the last twenty minutes, staring at the ceiling, but it wasn't because anything was wrong. All of the restless energy I'd had before was gone, and so was the depression. I didn't want a drink. I was quite fine with lying here, hands folded under my head, thinking about my night with Paige. She'd left this morning, but we'd spent the night together, which was a first for me.

This morning hadn't been nearly as awkward as I'd thought, though there'd been plenty of half-sentences and pregnant pauses.

Pregnant.

Shit.

She said she was on the pill, and I believed her, but nothing besides abstinence was one hundred percent. Sine and Alix were proof of that. I hadn't been as shocked by his acceptance of the situation as Jace had been, but at the time, I'd thought how glad I was that I wasn't in his position.

Except now, I was thinking about what would happen if I *was* in that position...and it actually didn't sound that bad. Not that I wanted Paige to get pregnant. Certainly not right now. But the idea of having a baby, of *her* having *my* baby—

My phone rang, the ringtone telling me that it wasn't the person I wanted to talk to, but I still had to answer it.

"Hey, Chester."

“Be at my office in forty minutes.”

“What—”

He'd already hung up. I rolled my eyes and tossed the phone onto the table. At least he gave me time to take a shower.

When I walked into his office forty-five minutes later, Chester was all smiles which, considering the state of his teeth, wasn't really a good thing. It also made me wary, because when he smiled like that, it usually meant he was up to something.

“What was so urgent?” I asked.

He motioned for me to follow him, and I sighed. There was no talking to him when he got some idea in his head. He wasn't the best manager in the world, and I'd always been able to afford better, but Chester was the one who'd found me messing around on a guitar in a college coffee house and offered to negotiate my first contract. He'd never cheated me that I knew of, and he'd always fought to get me the things that were important to me. We weren't friends, and most of the time I didn't really even like him, but he'd done right by me professionally.

Especially when it came to hiring Paige.

I owed him a lot more than my musical career now.

“Is everything okay?” I asked, not liking the vibe I sensed in the air.

“Everything's great,” he said as he moved to his desk, but his eyes were twitchy, a faint sheen of sweat on his forehead making me wonder if he was on the verge of a heart attack.

“Then why—”

A giggle came from behind me, and I turned slowly to find a blonde on the couch. Not just any blonde. Her.

Mitzi was only twenty-three, but she'd aged nearly a decade since I'd last seen her. She'd streaked her hair with hot pink, replacing the purple she'd had before that, but her attempt to look like a teenager made her look more desperate than anything else. She'd lost so much weight over the past couple months, and she'd always been thin to begin with. Her skin was leathery, wrinkled and sagging.

And the moment I saw the table in front of her, I knew why. Bottles of alcohol, some empty, some not. Rolled joints. Cigarettes half-smoked. White powder. Needles and rubber tubing.

She smiled up at me. “Hey, baby.”

I was frozen in shock.

I'd known about some of it. The pot and the alcohol. I knew she'd smoked too, but I hadn't let her do it around me. I hadn't known about the harder stuff though. If I had, I would've tried to get her help.

I shook my head, breaking the grip of surprise that had held me. "What are you doing here, Mitzi?" Seeing her didn't hurt anymore. Hell, it hadn't actually hurt in a while. Even when it happened, it'd been more humiliating than painful, especially after she'd blamed me.

"Chester and I were just talking about old times." She leaned forward and rubbed her finger across the powder residue, then rubbed it on her gums. "All the fun we had."

My feelings for Mitzi were gone, even the negative ones, but I liked to think I was still a good person. A decent guy who couldn't sit by and watch someone destroy herself.

I crouched down to put myself on her level but didn't touch her. I couldn't bring myself to do that. "I'd like to help you, if you'll let me."

She let out a shrill laugh, rocking back so hard that one shoulder of her shirt slipped off, dropping low enough for me to see the top of her nipple. "I don't need your help."

"Come on, Reb, I've got some fine whiskey calling our names. We need to sit down and talk."

I straightened, glaring at Chester. "What the hell? You're the one who forced a public relations rep on me because I was drinking too much, and now you're offering me a drink? And what the fuck's with all that shit?" I waved my hand at the table.

He gave me a sour grin. "That's me taking care of your business."

"My business?" I could feel Mitzi's eyes on me, but I said what I needed to say. "She and I ended things months ago. She's not my business anymore. But she still doesn't need to be using any of that shit... especially with you! What the fuck, Chester?"

He shrugged, seemingly unaffected by my anger and my accusations. "She's a grown-up." He poured two drinks and held out one to me while he started drinking the other.

I glared at him. I knew I should leave, but I also knew I couldn't leave things like this. This was my fucking manager, and I needed to understand why he was doing this.

"I'll just have some water." I moved to the small fridge he kept over on the counter and got myself a bottle of water and twisted off the lid.

“Suit yourself,” he said with another shrug. “I didn’t have a problem with you drinking.”

I stared at him, the bottle frozen just inches from my mouth. “What?”

He rolled his eyes. What had happened the Chester I knew? I looked around the room, searching for hidden cameras. Was I being punked?

He waved a hand at me. “You said I hired that girl because I had a problem with you drinking, but that’s not why. You did some stupid shit, and we needed things to cool down. She seemed like a good way to get that done quick.”

I shook my head. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mitzi pick up one of the joints and light it. The sickly-sweet smell joined the rest of the scents in the office, and I was tempted to take back the whiskey just to get my mind on something else.

“Now that she’s done her job,” Chester continued, “you can knock off the charity shit.”

I could only stare at him. “Excuse me?”

Mitzi let out a cackle, and another puff of smoke came with it. “You look like a pucking fussy.” She frowned. “Nope. That’s not it.”

“The label’s gonna think you went soft.” Chester poured himself another drink. “If you were some pussy pop star, that might fly, but you’ve got an image to protect. Two weekends are enough.”

I remembered what Paige said about why she hadn’t just given me the first community service project she could find. Basically, that it was the difference between paying a penance and actually changing how people saw me. She saw me as a good man, and I wanted others to see me that way too.

“Reb.” Mitzi grabbed my arm. “You really gotta try this shit. It’s amazing.”

Her pupils were so wide that I could barely see any color at all.

I jerked my arm away. “You need to stop that shit.”

She stuck out her bottom lip. “Why’re you always so mean?”

It was the sort of thing a spoiled child would say, but all it made me think of was how she’d said me being ‘mean’ had been the reason she’d cheated. And that hadn’t been the least of the accusations she’d thrown my way.

Surely I was being punked, or could two people I thought I knew have changed so drastically? Or had I just been too stupid or self-absorbed to see it?

I set my bottle of water down on the table. “I need to take a piss. Get your head on straight, Chester, and then we can talk about how things are going to

be from here on out.”

TWENTY-TWO

PAIGE

With my limited knowledge, when a woman lost her virginity in a toe-curling experience with a drop-dead gorgeous rock god, she tended to tell someone. Her best friend usually. Maybe her mom. But I couldn't tell anyone. Even if I'd had someone I considered a close enough friend in whom I could confide something like this, I still wouldn't do it. Not while I was working with Reb.

Which meant I had no one to help me sort through all of the thoughts crowding my mind.

"Paige, can you come here?" Sybil called from her office.

I hurried inside but didn't bother taking a seat. No matter how polite her question, she wasn't asking me to have a conversation. She wanted to tell me to do something.

"I can't get ahold of Chester Lhaw. His check bounced, and Mr. Dwight wants you to go talk to him about it."

I frowned. "Re..." I cleared my throat, blinking rapidly to clear my confusion. "Mr. Union's check bounced?" That didn't sound right. "Shouldn't I talk to him directly? I haven't really had much contact with Mr. Lhaw, but I don't think he handles Mr. Union's money."

Actually, I knew he didn't. Something here wasn't adding up.

Sybil gave me a sharp look. "Just do as you're told and get back here with a new check."

I was tempted to point out that I doubted upper management had specifically requested I personally go get a check. As far as I was aware, Mr. Dwight didn't even know my name. But, then, I'd been suspicious for a while that Sybil had been pawing off some of her work on me. I didn't mind, not when I knew I could count on satisfied clients to be honest about who'd

actually done the work.

“Of course.”

I took a taxi to Chester’s office and thanked the driver when he expressed concern over dropping me off there. I had to admit, I was more than a little surprised to learn that Reb’s manager had an office in that part of town. I would’ve expected something much bigger and definitely in a better neighborhood. Then again, I’d already learned that Reb wasn’t really like anything I’d expected. For all I knew, his manager had an office at that location so that he could find talent others might overlook.

The minute I stepped inside, however, I began to rethink my theory. I wrinkled my nose and hoped I wouldn’t end up with a contact high. The entire place reeked of marijuana, alcohol, and body odor. What I knew of Reb didn’t mesh with where I found myself. The place wasn’t dirty, but it wasn’t exactly clean either. Plastic plants sat at random intervals, even their leaves managing to look wilted. The desk was cluttered, the computer ancient.

“Hello?” I coughed, then tried again when no one answered, “Hello? Mr. Lhaw?”

“Back here.”

A gravelly voice drifted out of the half-open door I could see from where I stood, but I couldn’t see anything else, including the owner of the voice. I didn’t particularly like the idea of going back there on my own, and everything I’d ever been told about how to be smart as a woman in the city alone told me this was a bad idea. Still, I doubted Sybil would accept an excuse for not doing what I’d been told to do.

I took out my phone, tapped out a quick message to Reb, letting him know I was at his agent’s office, and then held my thumb over *send* as I walked through the door and into a smoke-clouded room.

It took me nearly half a minute for my eyes to adjust, and when they did, I wished they hadn’t.

Reb was there. Sprawled on a couch that looked like its better days had been some time in the mid-seventies, his eyes bleary and unfocused, his face slack. His shirt was half-off, one sleeve still around his wrist. He didn’t even seem to see me, but that could have been because he was clearly high on whatever he’d been snorting or shooting...or it could have been due to the half-naked woman squirming on his lap.

Half-naked was being generous. Her shirt hung over the back of the

couch, and if she'd been wearing a bra, it was nowhere currently to be seen. Her breasts were small, her nipples pierced, and I could make out a tattoo, though not what it said. She had on a pair of hot-pink stilettos to match her hair and a leather mini-skirt that was pushed up high enough on her hips that I could see a hot pink thong.

I recognized her too. Mitzi Adler. Reb's so-called ex-girlfriend. The one he'd told me he'd caught in bed with two other men. The one who'd sent him into a downward spiral so bad that he'd needed me to fix it.

She tossed her hair back over her shoulder, only now seeming to realize that she had an audience. She winked at me and went back to grinding on Reb. She started kissing his neck, her hand moving down between them...

I looked away. I couldn't watch anymore, but I refused to leave before I did what I'd come here to do. I wouldn't cry or even acknowledge that I felt anything at all about what was going on. I was a professional, even though my heart was pounding so hard in my chest I almost couldn't breathe.

"Who're you?" With his greasy hair and beady eyes, Chester looked like the stereotypical sleazy manager portrayed in movies and on TV.

I took a deep breath and pretended not to notice that his hand was in his pants and got right to the point. I didn't want to be there any longer than absolutely necessary. Emotions roiled inside of me...anger and disappointment, and something else. A deep, deep sadness that threatened to spill from my eyes and down my cheeks.

"I'm Paige Ryce, and I work for the PR firm you hired on behalf of Mr. Union. Sybil Feldt sent me regarding your payment." I ignored his greedy gaze running all over my body and wondered if I'd be able to run home for a shower before going back to work. "We need you to write another check as it seems this last one bounced. Some sort of misunderstanding, we're sure, but we do need that payment again."

Chester stared at me for a few seconds, his hand moving in a motion that left no doubt about what he was doing. I was just thankful he hadn't whipped his cock out. Yet.

"I don't have my checkbook here," he said finally. "You want to come back to my place, and I'll get it for you?"

"No, that's all right." How I managed not to gag, I didn't know. "We'll have a courier stop by first thing tomorrow to pick it up."

Sybil had told me to get the check, but there was no way in hell I'd be going back to this asshole's place for it. That was where I drew the line. If

Sybil pushed it, I'd threaten to go to Mr. Dwight about all of her work I'd been doing.

"Want some blow?"

My nails bit into my palms. "Pardon me?"

Chester leered at me. "I got some great stuff. Loosen you right up. You can join us."

I turned on my heel and walked away, taking the time only to toss a few words over my shoulder. "First thing tomorrow, Mr. Lhaw, we're going to want that check."

And then I was outside in the crisp September air, trying to remember that I couldn't cry here. This was all my fault. Not what Reb was doing. That was his own stupid mistake. No, what was my fault was the pain in my heart. I'd known better than to get involved with him. He was a client *and* a musician. Two things I'd sworn I'd stay away from.

And that meant I wasn't going to cry over him. I didn't deserve that luxury. Instead, I'd do what I should have been doing all along and work my ass off.

No more repeating my mother's mistakes.

TWENTY-THREE

REB

I woke up about three seconds before I lurched forward and vomited on a rug that had seen better days.

A rug that I didn't recognize.

Where was I, and why did I feel like I had cotton stuffed in my head?

"Hey there, sexy sleepy."

I knew that voice, and it wasn't one I wanted to hear. "Mitzi?"

As the haze cleared, the memories of earlier today started to come back. Coming to see Chester. Mitzi being here. The drugs. The alcohol.

But I hadn't taken anything, so why did I feel like I'd spent the last few hours partying?

"What the hell happened today?" I frowned, searching through the haze of my memory. "It is still today, right?"

She shrugged and took a puff on a half-burnt joint. "No clue."

I pushed up from the couch and immediately grabbed the arm as a wave of dizziness washed over me. "What...fuck..."

"You need to loosen up." She threw a cigarette butt at me.

I ignored her. My stomach was still rolling a bit, and my head was starting to hurt. My mouth tasted like...well, like puke.

I reached for my bottle of water. There was barely a mouthful left, but it'd be enough to rinse out my mouth before I grabbed another one. I tossed the cap onto the table and had the bottle halfway to my mouth when I stopped. Mitzi was watching me, her attention locked in on my hand.

The hand holding my bottle of water.

The water that I'd left on the table when I'd gone to the bathroom earlier.

I hadn't gotten there before, but I was there now. I lowered my hand.

“Did you put something in my water?”

She gave me a guilty little smirk I recognized from when we were together. “Chester did it.”

I looked around. “Where is he?”

“Not here.” She stretched lazily, her shirt riding up to show her flat stomach.

A vague memory of that stomach, of bare breasts, drifted across my mind. Why? I hadn’t seen her naked since that night when I’d caught her being double-teamed by two overweight, sweaty bastards with bad hygiene.

“What the hell did you give me?” I tossed the bottle toward the overflowing trash can, ignoring it when it missed.

“Not me,” she insisted. “Chester.”

“I don’t give a fuck who actually drugged me! What was it?!”

“Just some Valium.” She scowled at me. “Because you needed to chill out.”

I stumbled into the bathroom and splashed some water on my face, then found some mouthwash and used the rest of the bottle to at least fix that problem. When I made my way back out, Mitzi had stripped down to her thong and was dancing on the couch.

“I’m out of blow,” she announced in a sing-song voice that pounded on my last nerve. “Go get me more.”

I stared at her for a moment, but not because she was almost naked. It was like I was seeing her for the first time. “You need to get some help, Mitzi. Living like this is going to kill you.”

“Pfft.” She flapped her hands at me. “Go get me blow and I’ll blow you.” She cackled, clearly pleased with herself. “No one else’ll be doing it now. Not after the story comes out.”

I frowned at her. “What story?”

She bounced off the couch and came to stand in front of me. “The one Chester’s selling to make you look like less of a pussy.”

“What are you talking...”

More memories came forward. Memories of Mitzi on my lap. Touching me. Kissing me. The taste of pot and tobacco on my lips. Then, something else. Something I couldn’t quite remember but had a feeling was important.

“He got lots of good pictures and even some video for TV news. We’re gonna be headlines.”

I tried to process her words, tried to make sense of why the manager I’d

trusted for so long would set me up like this. No understanding dawned.

“Why the hell would he do that? I’m supposed to be getting *good* press now.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll. People just wanna see their stars do some penance, and public flogging isn’t really a thing.” She sneered at me. “Wouldn’t surprise me if you were into that though.”

I suddenly felt sick again, but this time it wasn’t anything physical. “Did we—?”

I couldn’t finish the question, and even though I knew I *needed* to know the answer, I wasn’t sure I *wanted* to know.

She gave me a coy look. “You could watch the video.”

She was right. I could find all of the answers I needed by getting to Chester before he imploded things.

“Or you could ask that prude bitch of yours.”

I stopped mid-step, the last piece of the puzzle falling into place. No, no, that wasn’t...I closed my eyes. Very slowly, I turned back to her, needing confirmation to what I already knew. “Explain.”

SHIT, shit, shit, shit...

The professional part of me had wanted to go straight for Chester, stop him from taking things public, but it had been barely a moment’s consideration. Everything else in me had been screaming to get to Paige and set things straight. What she thought about me meant more than anyone else’s opinion. I needed her to know that whatever she’d seen, it hadn’t been me. I hadn’t chosen to do any of it.

It was late enough that I went straight to her apartment and prayed that she’d agree to talk to me.

“Paige, it’s me. Please let me come up. We need to talk.”

She buzzed me in without a word, but at least she hadn’t ignored me. When I got to her door, I knocked and braced myself. After a moment, I heard the locks turning, and then the door opened.

“Come in.”

Any hope I’d felt disappeared at the ice in her words.

I glanced at her as I walked past. She was in a pair of loose flannel pants

and a camisole, her hair wet and braided. And her face was completely blank. I scrubbed my hand over my chin, and then up into my hair, scowling at the feel of it.

I didn't even want to think about what had been on that couch.

"Everything you think I did, I didn't do," I blurted out, unable to figure out any other way to approach the subject.

Her jaw tightened, as did her spine. I could feel her anger and revulsion radiating off her in waves. "Staying clean and sober was part of our deal. I can't do my job if you don't do what I ask. I'll meet with Sybil tomorrow to move your account over to her, and she can handle things from there."

"I don't want anyone else working with me," I said. Then I shook my head. "You know what, I don't care about any of that. I just care about you knowing that I didn't do what—"

"I heard you," she snapped, her eyes still angry and something else... wounded. "But I know what I saw."

"But you don't know what happened before that."

She raised an eyebrow as she folded her arms. "I saw the booze and the joints and all the rest of that shit. And I saw your girlfriend grinding on you with her tits hanging out. Doesn't take a genius to figure it out."

Okay, not so cold anymore. She was pissed, but I preferred that to the possibility that she didn't feel anything for me at all.

"I swear to you, Paige, it wasn't what it looked like."

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter."

Something in me snapped. I moved toward her, backing her against the door. "Like hell it doesn't."

And then I kissed her.

TWENTY-FOUR

PAIGE

He'd backed me into a corner, almost literally, to steal a kiss, but for a few blissful moments, all I could do was grab the front of his shirt and pull him closer. My head and heart told me I was being stupid, but my body didn't care. It craved his touch like some sort of drug.

And that was the thought that finally broke through, giving me the strength I needed to push him away.

"You can't do that." I glared at him and tried to pretend that my hands weren't shaking. "You can't come in here and act like a kiss is going to make me forget what you did."

The muscle in his jaw popped, and he looked at me intently. "What you saw and what I did are two different things."

I wanted to believe him, wanted to believe that the real him was the man I'd seen with those kids and with the veterans. The man who, contrary to everything I'd ever believed, I'd slept with.

"I might've been a virgin until recently, but I've never been naïve." I started to put my hands in my pockets and then remembered that these pants didn't have any. "I know how guys like you think. It's sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll, right?"

"Paige—"

"And don't try to tell me that you're different," I interrupted before he could say anything sweet or charming. "My mother spent more than six years on the road with one rock band or another, some big names, some not. And she fucked a lot of them. But that's all it was. Never anything more. They didn't treat her badly, but when she got pregnant with me, she didn't even think about trying to figure out who the father was. She knew that, no matter

who he was, he wasn't responsible enough to take care of a kid, even if he wanted to be involved, and she wasn't going to subject me to that."

"That's not fair, Paige, and you know it." His eyes flashed. "You can't hold me responsible for things other people did more than twenty years ago."

"I'm not," I snapped. "I'm just saying that I know how musicians like you are. You drink, and you fuck around, and you trash hotel rooms and do drugs—"

"I don't do drugs," he said through gritted teeth. "And yes, I did those other things, but that's in the past."

"A few hours ago isn't far enough in the past to be using it that way."

He shook his head, the anger on his face changing to desperation. "Will you just listen to me? Hear me out? Please."

I clenched my jaw and nodded once. I'd listen to him, and then I'd tell him to leave.

"Chester called me and asked me to come over so we could talk about some business stuff," Reb said. The words began pouring out of him. "When I got there, Mitzi was there, and all sorts of shit was there too. She was using, and Chester asked me if I wanted a drink, but I said no. I got a bottle of water, and when I went to the bathroom, I left it on the table. I didn't think they'd do anything to it."

I held up a hand. "Are you saying they roofied you?"

He shrugged. "I guess you could say that. Everything after that is fuzzy or completely blank. I only know you were there because when I woke up, Mitzi told me. She said that they'd given me some Valium."

"Why would they do that?"

"She said Chester has some half-assed idea that people are going to think I'm going soft if you clean up my image too much, but I think he's doing it because he knows I'm getting sick of his shit and he thinks he can use the story to make it so another manager wouldn't want to take me on."

What he was saying made a sort of sense, but I latched onto one word more than others. "What story?"

Reb flushed with anger and embarrassment, and ran all ten fingers through his hair. "He took pictures and video that makes it look like I was... well, that I was doing what you thought I was doing. He's out selling it now." He started to reach for me, then stopped himself. "Wait...can I ask why you were even in his office?"

Damn, the check. "My company received a bounced check for our

services, and I was sent to get another one.”

He gaped at me, shaking his head. “My check bounced?” He ran another hand through his hair, this time pulling at the roots. “That can’t be possible... unless...dammit! Chester!”

I watched his face morph through a variety of emotions and he attempted to process all that his manager may or may not have done. “I’m sorry.”

He shook his head again and met my eyes. “All of that can wait. What I want you to know is that I could have gone after Chester to stop him from publishing those lies. I want you, Paige, more than I’ve wanted anything in a long time. You’re what matters to me.”

I shook my head. “I believe you, but wanting me isn’t enough for me to think this is a good idea. I shouldn’t have let anything happen in the first place.”

I believed what I was saying, but I wasn’t telling him the whole truth. I didn’t tell him how much it had hurt me to see him like that, and how I knew I needed to get out now before I got in too deep. I wasn’t sure I’d be able to survive having my heart broken by him when he inevitably moved on. Because him staying with me wasn’t something I could imagine. Not when he was keeping a part of himself from me.

“You need to go.” I couldn’t look at him.

“Please, Paige.” He moved closer, but I still didn’t raise my head. “Give me a chance to prove to you that I’m different. If I can’t, then I’ll leave, and I’ll never bother you again.”

I didn’t want him to go. I wanted to try, to see if we could make things work. But if I was going to take a risk, he needed to do the same.

TWENTY-FIVE

REB

She wasn't looking at me, and she hadn't answered me yet, but she also hadn't kicked me out...or kicked me in the nuts, either. She said she believed me, which meant she was hesitating either because she really thought I was going to treat her the way those men had treated her mother. Or she didn't want me the way I wanted her, and this was her way of trying to get out of having to tell me.

My confidence had been thrown by what happened with Mitzi, but my night with Paige had shown me that the electricity between us was real. I wasn't imagining this connection. I just needed to get her to acknowledge it.

I took a step toward her, the downcast eyes and downturned head speaking to every one of my instincts as a Dom.

"Look at me."

I hadn't heard that command in my voice in a while, and a part of me worried that it'd make her balk. Instead, she raised her head. Her eyes were wide, and when her lips parted, I couldn't stop myself from leaning down to kiss her again.

Only to find myself stopped by a hand on my chest.

"You stink."

The blunt statement startled a laugh out of me. "What?"

"You stink," she repeated, giving me a stern look. "If you want to get near me ever again, you need to clean up."

I grinned, some of the tension easing. She wasn't saying no. "Are you offering me the use of your shower?"

The saucy turn of her lips sent the blood rushing to my cock.

"If you don't mind smelling like me."

I took a step back because it was either that or drag her into the shower with me, which I was still trying to tell myself was a bad idea. Her shower wasn't nearly big enough for the things I wanted to do to her.

"Promise you'll be here when I get out." I didn't make it a request, and it felt so damn good to be giving orders again. So much so that I added another one. "Naked."

A strange expression crossed her face, like she was coming to a decision on something. I only hoped it was a good one.

"I'll give you a chance to prove you're different," she said, "but only if you're honest about what you want."

I frowned. "What are you talking about?"

"I can't be with someone who feels like they have to hide who they are." Her voice was firm, but not harsh. "I don't mean you have to take out a billboard or something, but if you really want to have a relationship with me, you have to be honest about who you are and what you want."

"I—" My mouth snapped closed. A sick feeling settled in my stomach. "I don't *need* it."

She gave me a soft smile. "You want to know why it was so easy for me to believe that you were the same as all the men my mom had warned me about?"

"Because I'm a pervert." I repeated Mitzi's accusation with all the bitterness I felt. "Not really a news flash, Paige."

"No."

I blinked at the force she put into that single word.

"I went to that club with you, and I never once said anything there was perverted about what I saw. Different, yes. Shocking, okay, I'll give you that. But why would you think I'd..." She gave me a hard look. "Is that why things were so...*vanilla* when we had sex?"

The knot in my stomach tightened. "I thought it was good for you. I mean, you came...right?"

She put her hand on my arm. "Yes, Reb. It was better than I'd ever thought my first time would be. I'm not complaining. I'm just saying that after the things I saw at Gilded Cage, I really thought you would've wanted to do...you know..." A blush stained her cheeks.

I shook my head, hands curling into fists. "No. I learned what happens when I force my...preferences on someone. I won't do that to you."

She stared at me for a moment, then her eyes narrowed. "That bitch."

Okay, not what I expected.

“That’s what *Mitzi* said you did to her.”

Paige was furious, but not with me.

“I know you, Reb, and you’d never force yourself on someone. If she would’ve said no, you would’ve listened.”

“Of course I would’ve listened.”

“She’s full of shit,” Paige insisted. Her expression became sly. “Besides, how am I going to learn if you won’t teach me?”

“*Teach* you?”

She nodded, heat smoldering in her eyes. “I’m willing to risk it if you are, but you have to put it all on the line too.”

TWENTY-SIX

PAIGE

My stomach was in knots and I didn't know what to do with my hands. Reb had been in my shower for ten minutes, and I doubted he'd be much longer. At least, I hoped he wouldn't be. I was starting to have doubts about my decision. Not the one to give Reb a second chance, but the one where I was going to have sex with him when he got out of the shower.

Kinky sex.

Romance wasn't my favorite genre, but I'd read a few over the years, including some that had a little S&M in them. Reading about it, however, and actually doing it were two completely different things. Hell, *seeing* it live and doing it myself were worlds apart.

"I thought I gave you clear instructions about how you were supposed to wait for me."

I froze. I'd been so caught up in my thoughts that I hadn't heard the shower stop or the bathroom door open, and now, my brain was scrambling to make sense of what Reb was saying.

"Turn around, Paige."

It was a command, not a request, but the sort of demand I heard wasn't some sort of misogynistic power-trip. I'd heard that same authoritative note in the woman's voice at Gilded Cage when she'd ordered her men around. It was the voice of a Dominant, regardless of gender.

I turned to face him, heat flooding my body as I saw he wore only a towel around his waist. I wasn't so noble that I didn't feel a thrill at the realization that this gorgeous man wanted *me*.

"Did I, or did I not, say that I wanted you *naked* when I got out of the shower?"

The unadulterated desire shining in his eyes made my mouth dry and my pussy wet.

“Paige.” My name was a warning.

“Yes.” The word was little more than a whisper. I cleared my throat and tried again. “Yes, you did.”

“Then why aren’t you naked?”

The question was casual, almost as if he’d been asking why I didn’t have an umbrella when it was raining. Then he tossed his towel toward my hamper and, even though I’d seen him naked before, I completely lost the ability to think clearly.

I suddenly became aware that Reb was talking to me. I jerked my head up, cheeks flaming.

“I suppose I’ll give you a pass for not listening that time,” he said with an amused smile. “But you still haven’t done as you were told.”

I kept my eyes on him as I pulled my shirt over my head. I folded it and put it on the dresser, then took off my pants and did the same.

“Good girl.” He didn’t look away as he walked toward me, his hand dropping to his cock. “Now, face the bed and bend over.”

“What?”

He stopped less than a foot away from me. “You said you wanted me to be honest about the things that I want.”

I nodded. “I do.”

He reached out and took a lock of hair between his fingers. “You know a bit about BDSM. Do you know what happens when a sub disobeys their Dom?”

I shivered, but it wasn’t an unpleasant sensation. “They get punished.”

He nodded. “They get punished. And I’m a Dom, Paige. What does that make you?”

I understood now what he was doing. Part of this was sexual, but part of it was making sure that I truly knew what I was getting into.

“I’m the sub.”

He moved a few inches closer, and I could smell my shampoo and soap. It smelled better on him.

“Whose sub, Paige? Whose sub are you?”

I swallowed hard. “Yours.”

He leaned down and brushed his lips across mine. “And what did you do?”

The words came easier than I'd expected. "I disobeyed."

He nodded. "Yes, you did." After a pause, he added, "What should I do about that?"

My mind immediately flashed back to what I'd seen at the club. If I gave the answer I knew he wanted, I didn't know exactly what he was going to do, and the possibilities weren't equally appealing. Which meant I needed to trust him.

"Punish me," I whispered.

For a moment, he stared at me, as if he couldn't believe I'd actually said it, and then he pulled me to him, skin against skin as our mouths crashed together. I moaned as he ravaged my mouth, his fingers digging into the small of my back, into my neck. I thought I'd known how powerful he was before, but it was nothing compared to the strength I felt in his body now.

By the time he finally broke the kiss, it was all I could do not to jump him right then and there. My entire body ached. His cock was hard and hot against my stomach, leaving a trail of pre-cum on my skin as he moved a few inches back. His eyes dropped, and he used his thumb to rub the salty liquid into my skin.

"I like the idea of you wearing my cum." His hand moved up to my breast, and he squeezed hard enough to make me catch my breath, but not quite hard enough to actually hurt. "But not tonight."

He took a full step back and raised an eyebrow. I almost asked him what he wanted, but then I remembered. I turned around, took a slow breath, and then bent over. I placed my hands flat on the blanket...and waited.

"Each Dom has their own way of doling out punishments," he said. "Even my friends and I don't come at things the same way."

He was staying just out of my line of sight, and I had no doubt he was doing it intentionally. Using anticipation to ramp up the tension.

"I believe in punishments growing in time and intensity, so for this first offense, I'll be using my hand."

I flinched as he touched me, but his palm only rested against the top of my ass.

"You need a safe word."

His tone had changed, and I immediately felt guilty for flinching. "I'm sorry."

"That's usually not a good safe word."

"For flinching," I clarified. "It wasn't fear, just nerves." I risked a look

over my shoulder. "I trust you."

The tension on his face eased. "Thank you."

"Bananas."

He gave me a puzzled look.

"My safe word. Bananas."

He nodded, amusement dancing in his eyes. "All right then. Let's begin."

I nodded and faced front again. The next time his hand came down, it wasn't a touch. His palm hit my ass with a cracking sound, and I gasped. More blows came, one right after the other, alternating from one side to the other until my ass was burning. The pain wasn't unbearable, more like a sunburn sort of sensitivity and sting, but it was definitely intense.

"All done." His voice was almost gentle as he ran his hand up my spine. "Now, my Paige, what will you do when I give you an order?"

"Obey." I closed my eyes and concentrated on his touch. The heat of his hand, so different from the more pleasant feeling a little farther south.

"Good answer." His hands settled on my hips, thumbs stroking my skin. "I didn't bring any condoms with me tonight."

This was about more than him just checking to make sure I was okay with us not using a condom. This was about whether or not I really did trust him. If I thought he was lying and he'd had sex with Mitzi, I wouldn't want him inside me bare.

"I don't want anything between us...fuck!" The curse burst out of me as he buried himself deep with one stroke. I wasn't even close to use to this, but I sure as hell didn't want him to stop.

He wound his hand in my hair, using it to leverage me as he drove into me with one thrust after another. Each one drove another cry from my lips even as the air escaped my lungs. I curled my fingers into fists, the comforter keeping my nails from my palms.

"I'm going to fuck you in front of a mirror sometime," Reb broke the silence. "I want to see every expression on your face when I take you from behind."

His free hand moved underneath me, pinching my nipple between finger and thumb hard enough to send a jolt of pain through me. He held on to my sensitive flesh, even as my breasts moved with the force of his thrusts, causing new little ripples of pain with each stroke.

"I love these tits. Perfect nipples for clamps." His hand moved down between my legs, fingers finding my clit. "We'll try those out before we

move on to putting one on this pretty little thing.”

I whimpered at the thought of something pinching my clit as hard as he was holding my nipple. But I wanted it. Him spanking me had turned me on more than I'd realized, and I knew he could show me things that I'd never find with anyone else. Because I'd never let anyone else this close.

“I'm going to fuck your ass one day.” He spoke so matter-of-factly that it took a moment for his words to sink in. “And then we're going to try some double penetration.” Before I could react, he leaned over and put his mouth against my ear. “Don't worry, my Paige. I don't plan on ever sharing you with anyone. But there are ways to have just as much fun.”

I groaned as he bit down on my shoulder, then shouted his name as he pressed his fingers hard against my clit, forcing me over the edge. My arms shook, elbows giving out as an orgasm ripped through me. I yelped as his grip on my hair tightened, holding me in place as he slammed into me one more time.

As he came, he said only two words.

“Thank you.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

REB

I'd dozed a bit after I'd cleaned us up and put us to bed. I'd always taken good care of the subs I'd fucked, but I hadn't literally gone to bed with them. I hadn't wanted to give them the wrong impression. Occasionally, I'd fallen asleep after sex, but Mitzi had been the only other woman I'd ever consciously chosen to go to sleep with, and only then occasionally. Those nights, I'd hardly been able to rest, constantly aware of her presence, and not in a good way. It had been uncomfortable, something to endure rather than enjoy.

Waking up with Paige in my arms again wasn't like that at all.

She was curled into me, her back against my chest. We were both still naked, and I was hyperaware of all the places where our skin touched. Being with her was so different than being with anyone else. Not because she was inexperienced. She looked past my image to see me, rather than looking past me to see my image, and now, knowing the sort of baggage she had when it came to guys like me, I was even more impressed.

Now, as I brushed some hair back from her face, I allowed myself to acknowledge that what I felt for her was much deeper than *wanting*, more selfless than *needing*. I was falling in love with her.

The thought should have terrified me. I'd never said that to any woman who wasn't family. Not really. I'd said 'love ya' and 'right back at you' to Mitzi a few times near the end when she'd been saying it to me almost every day, but I'd never flat out said 'I love you' or 'I'm falling in love with you' to her. *Want* had been the word I'd used when it came to my feelings for her.

The bedroom was dark, leaving Paige's features in shadows, but I didn't need light to see her. I knew her face and body as well as my own.

I kissed her shoulder and pulled the blankets more snugly around us both. I was tempted to use my fingers and tongue to wake her, then slip into her from behind and take her nice and slow. My stomach clenched at the thought, and my interested cock when from half-hard to uncomfortable.

No. I couldn't do that to her. I'd been rough earlier, and while I didn't doubt that she would've told me to stop if she hadn't enjoyed herself, she was still new to all of this and needed time to recover.

I needed to remember to talk to her about how the Dom / sub relationship worked outside of the obvious bedroom interactions. I didn't want her to think that I expected her to be submissive all the time. Hell, I liked when she pushed me. I had enough people kissing my ass. I needed someone like her to keep me in check out there. Some things, though, would remain the same. I wasn't the sort of Dom who insisted on controlling every aspect of her life, telling her when and what to eat, what to wear, who she could spend time with, but I did take my responsibility to care for her seriously.

Which meant she had to be honest with me if I was too rough or if she needed a break. I'd always push her limits, test her comfort zones, but I'd never hurt her. Despite what most people thought of my world, a sub's well-being was a Dom's top priority.

When I couldn't ignore the call of nature any longer, I eased myself out of bed. My clothes from earlier today were hanging in the bathroom, still damp from my attempts to wash at least some of the smell from them, but since I didn't have any other clothes, I pulled my jeans back on, grimacing at the cold fabric. Still, it was better than wandering around Paige's apartment naked. At least they finally smelled better.

As much as I enjoyed sleeping next to Paige, I was too restless to get back into bed. It wasn't the normal restlessness I got after sex. I didn't have any urge to leave, but something had me on edge. It was a familiar feeling, but I couldn't quite place it yet.

I went into her kitchen and got myself a bottle of water, then paced around the small space, taking in all the details I'd missed before. Sparse furniture, and none of it looked brand-new, but they weren't the ragtag furnishings I'd expected from a recent college graduate. They matched relatively well and looked like they'd been taken care of. She had a small television in the corner, but the stack of books next to a large overstuffed armchair suggested she spent more time reading than watching TV.

Everything was neat and orderly, which didn't surprise me. Paige struck

me as a person who wanted things in her place but wasn't so obsessive about it that that place didn't look lived in.

A small notepad and pen were stuck to her fridge, and I took them over to the chair with me. It wasn't until I sat down that I even realized why I'd wanted them. For the first time in months, I put pen to paper and began to write.

Notes and words flowed out of me, and I edited as I went, scratching out things that didn't work and replaced them with new. I chased the music in my head, racing to capture everything that ran through my mind before it was too late.

My hand started to cramp at some point, but I pushed my way through it. It'd been too long since I'd written things out long-hand. Technology was wonderful for getting things down quickly and saving them in a place where they wouldn't get lost, but there was something to be said for the act of writing things out by hand.

At some point, I began humming the tune, making adjustments as I heard the various instruments in my head. Or rather, as I took out the different instruments. I was considered a solo artist, but I had a band that backed me with drums, bass, and a second guitar, sometimes giving me some assistance on vocals.

This song stripped away all of that. As it solidified in my head, I knew it would be only me and a guitar. Not acoustic, necessarily, but no frills. I didn't know if that sound would carry through an entire album, or a tour, but for this song, it worked.

Finally, I set down the pen and stared at the pages in front of me. It had been more than half a year since I'd written anything, and none of it had been this good. For a long time, writing had been exhausting, a chore. It had always been work, but anyone who did something difficult that they loved will tell you that there was a world of difference between satisfying hard work and the kind of thing you endured because it needed to be done.

I wasn't a fool, and I didn't believe in magical fixes or anything like that, but I did believe in inspiration, in the existence of something beyond what I could touch and see. I'd lost that, even before what had happened with Mitzi, but I'd found it again. And I didn't doubt for a moment why.

Paige hadn't only given me what I needed as a man and as a Dom. She'd given me back my voice.

TWENTY-EIGHT

PAIGE

Something had woken me up, but I didn't know what it was. For a moment, I was disoriented, wondering where I was, and then I felt the familiar comforter, saw the familiar shadows. I was home. But something still felt off. I stretched out my hand without really knowing why, but when I touched empty space, I remembered that I hadn't gone to bed alone.

I rolled onto my back again and sighed. I hadn't given much thought to whether or not Reb would stay the night, but I'd hoped he'd at least wake me up before he left rather than sneaking out. I didn't know what any of this meant. We hadn't made any declarations or commitments, so it was entirely possible that he simply hadn't felt like sleeping over, or maybe he thought it would've given the wrong impression. I'd understand that sort of hesitation, but I still wished he would've talked to me about it. I'd rather have had an awkward conversation than all of these questions.

I started to turn over, then stilled when I heard something. A faint noise. Not talking, exactly, and not loud enough for me to make out anything specific. It could have been the neighbor's television, but a glance at my phone told me that it was barely two o'clock in the morning. Mr. and Mrs. Armitage went to bed at eleven-thirty every night after they watched the news, and they got up at six-thirty every morning, whether they had anywhere to go or not. I knew this because they'd told me when I'd first met them. I was welcome to come over if I ever needed anything, but unless it was an emergency, I was never to disturb them between that eleven-thirty and six-thirty timeframe.

So why was I hearing what sounded like a radio?

No, not a radio.

Someone was singing.
No music, no commercials.
Just singing.

And it was coming from inside my apartment.

I blamed my still-fuzzy brain for taking so long to realize that it must've been Reb, though why he was singing in my living room, I couldn't figure out. I climbed out of bed and grabbed my robe from the back of my bathroom door. I didn't bother with anything else but headed out to the living room to see what was happening.

When I saw him sitting in my chair, I stopped, my curiosity getting the better of me. He held a few scraps of paper in one hand. The other rested on his knee, fingers tapping out a rhythm that went with the melody he was singing.

*I thought I'd lost it all
Would never trust again
I tried to drown the pain
And never let anyone in*

I didn't claim to know everything in Reb's discography, but I'd listened to a few songs. This didn't sound like anything he'd done before. It wasn't so much the style as it was the nature of it. Similar, maybe, to a song or two on his first album, but even they had notes of something I recognized now as loneliness. This one was passionate, full of longing, but hopeful too.

*But I saw my future in your eyes
Heard the song I thought was lost
You brought me back to life
Gave me my music once again*

His voice was raspier, rawer than what I'd heard on the albums, and I wondered if that was some sort of polishing done post-recording. I liked this one better.

I waited until he finished singing, until that last note faded away, and then I spoke, "That was amazing. When did you write it?"

"Just now," he said, turning to look at me. "I didn't mean to wake you."

I shook my head and crossed the space between us. It was a testament to how good his song was that it wasn't until now that I realized he wasn't wearing a shirt. "It wasn't a bad way to wake up."

He reached up and took my hand, tugging me down on his lap. I pulled my legs up and curled against his chest. I'd gotten this chair because I didn't have enough room for a couch, but I'd wanted something bigger than a regular chair. Fortunately, it was big enough to fit both of us. That should be a selling point.

"Everything okay?" I asked as I ran my fingers through his hair. "I know the bed's smaller than what you're used to—"

He caught my hand and brought it to his mouth, kissing my fingertips. "The bed's fine. I got up to use the bathroom, and then couldn't go back to sleep."

"Are you sure nothing's wrong?"

"Very." He slid his hand under my robe, curled his fingers around my calf. "I got inspired, and it's been a while, so I wanted to write it down before I lost it again." He nodded toward the paper he'd been holding when I first saw him. "I owe you a new notebook."

I smiled. "I'm sure I can come up with some way for you to pay me back."

He returned the smile as he leaned in for a kiss. His fingers tightened on my leg as I flicked my tongue against his lips. I moaned as his teeth scraped against my lip, the slight sting making heat coil in my stomach.

"It's because of you," he said as he rested his forehead against mine. "That I was writing again. You helped me find the music."

I opened my mouth to protest, and he put a finger against my lips.

"You're my muse." He placed his palm on the side of my face. "I couldn't have done it without you."

"I didn't do anything."

"Yes, you did," he insisted. "You talked to Tanya, Sine, and Savannah, right? That's what they are to the guys. Their muses. And I never understood it. Until now."

I wasn't entirely sure I agreed with him, but I wasn't going to argue either. I wouldn't do anything to take away the joy I saw on his face, in his eyes. I kissed his forehead.

"You're worth it, you know." I traced his mouth with my fingers. "Worth the risk."

“I’m not going to make any crazy promises,” he said. “Because I’m human. I know I’ll do stupid shit that’ll piss you off. But what I can promise is that I will never lie to you. Even when I do something stupid. I will never give you reason to doubt me.” He took my face between his hands. “I swear it.”

I maneuvered myself around until I was straddling his lap, our eyes locking. “I believe you.”

His eyes slid down and then back up again. “How are you feeling?” His question was full of so much promise that it sent an immediate rush of arousal through me.

“A little sore,” I admitted. I leaned closer and put my mouth against his ear. “But nothing that would keep me from wanting to ride you right now.”

His eyes narrowed, and a shiver went down my spine. He reached for the belt on my robe, and I pulled back enough to let him untie it. My pulse was already racing as he wrapped his arms around me, but he ignored the fact that I was naked under my robe and instead pulled my arms behind my back. Without even looking, he quickly tied my wrists together and then leaned back in the chair.

I raised an eyebrow. “Not really what I was expecting.”

He grinned at me. “Since I don’t have access to all of my favorite toys, I figured I’d improvise.”

His hands moved under my robe, pushing it off my shoulders until it caught on my bound hands. He made a sound of appreciation as his attention turned to my bared breasts.

“Now, my Paige, let’s see how hot and bothered I can get you by playing with these pretty breasts of yours.”

He slid his arm around my waist, his hand settling at the small of my back. He held me in place as he lowered his head, and the moment his tongue began to trace patterns on my skin, I was grateful for the steadying touch.

“Reb,” I moaned.

“I love hearing you say my name like that.” His lips tickled as he spoke. “In fact, I think the only words you’re allowed to say now are my name, *please*, and *fuck*.”

If my ass hadn’t still been sensitive from getting spanked, I might have thought he was joking, but I wasn’t about to risk it. I was fine with those three words.

Especially if he kept playing with my nipples like that. His fingers

weren't only talented when it came to playing instruments. He could play me like no one else, rolling and pinching until every nerve was singing. And his mouth...*fuck*...the things this man could do with his mouth. His tongue teased the tip even as he wrapped his lips around it, and I writhed on his lap. I needed more.

"Please," I begged. "Please, Reb."

I pulled against my restraints, my actions more instinct than anything else. I wanted to bury my hands in his hair, hold his head in place. I hadn't realized just how frustrating it would be not being able to touch him when he could touch me.

"Such pretty nipples." His teeth scraped over one, then moved to the other, worrying at them until they were both throbbing.

"Fuck, Reb," I gasped. "I need—"

He made a tsking sound. "Those aren't any of your words, Paige."

I shivered, then cried out as he bit the side of my breast.

"I think maybe you need to be reminded who's in charge." His eyes glinted with the sort of light that made low things tighten. "What do you think?"

I swallowed hard, my body thrumming with need. "Please."

He moved one hand between us, opening his jeans. He wasn't wearing anything under them, and then his cock was out, thick and hard. His eyes locked with mine as he grabbed my hips.

"I want you on me, sweet Paige. You're going to ride me until I come, and if you behave yourself while I'm emptying myself into that tight cunt of yours, I'll let you come too."

My pussy clenched, in part because of his words, the sort of coarse language I'd never thought of as a turn-on, but even if he hadn't said anything, I would've felt the need to have him inside me.

I nodded and let him guide me as I raised myself up on my knees. The tip of his cock brushed against me as he positioned me right where I needed to be. I didn't have my hands to balance me, but I trusted him to keep me from falling as I lowered myself onto him.

Every motion sent another ripple of pleasure through me. Every inch stretching me in ways that were still new. We weren't like puzzle pieces, perfectly interlocking, but rather like our bodies had been custom-made for each other. Each part of me molded around him until I couldn't tell where I ended and he began.

“Fuck, babe, I love being inside you,” he groaned. His fingers flexed.

I wanted to tell him how amazing he felt. How I couldn't imagine ever finding anyone else who fit me this way. How I couldn't imagine wanting to. He was the only man I'd been with, and I didn't want to think about being with anyone else.

But he'd only given me three words, and I didn't want to disappoint him.

“Reb,” I murmured his name as I kissed him. I loved the taste of him.

I rocked back and forth, putting the perfect amount of friction on my clit, the sensitive nerves there adding to the pressure in my belly.

“Don't come.” He growled the order. “Not yet. Not until I say you can.”

I nodded and shifted my weight so that the only stimulation I received was from me pushing up, then letting myself ease back down. It might have been enough to eventually reach climax, but right now, it was all about his pleasure. Not mine.

“Damn,” he breathed. “Watching you bouncing on my cock like this. Those gorgeous tits of yours, that pussy squeezing me...” His grip on my hips tightened. “I want to mark you, my Paige. Not for punishment, but because I want you to always remember that you're mine.” He yanked me toward him, giving me a brief, hard kiss. “You are mine, aren't you?”

I nodded, moving faster despite the burn in my legs. I needed him to come. My nails dug into my palms, and I fought to keep my balance. I'd never done this before, but I was pretty sure that it would've been easier with my hands untied.

He wrapped his arms around me, pulling me down hard enough to make stars spark behind my eyelids. He groaned my name as his cock pulsed inside of me, his mouth pressed against the side of my throat. I could feel him emptying himself inside me, and as his teeth scraped my skin, I spoke.

“Please, Reb,” I whispered.

“You can come now,” he said, the words muffled.

His thumb pressed against my clit, making hard, rough circles as he sucked on my neck, leaving the mark he'd wanted. The climax building inside me was stronger, more violent than anything I'd experienced before. It tore through me, and the last missing piece clicked into place, making me acknowledge what I'd already known.

I needed this as much as he did.

TWENTY-NINE

REB

I was tempted to stay in bed all day, and see how many ways I could make Paige scream my name. Unfortunately, she had to go to work, and she had far more willpower than I did. We left the apartment together but went in opposite directions when we reached the street.

The first thing I needed to do was get my new song written down before I forgot it. Besides, I figured I had enough time to do that before I went to see Chester. He wouldn't be up before the afternoon meeting we had scheduled anyway. I didn't see the point of waking him up, discussing things, and then having to re-explain them later.

I might as well get some work done while I waited.

As I settled into the small studio I'd set up at my place, I felt a fragment of fear grow. What if last night had been a fluke? I'd told Paige that she was my muse, and I'd meant it, but what if, despite the inspiration I'd experienced, I couldn't do it? What if it'd been too long? What if I'd already exhausted any talent I had?

I gave myself a shake, both mental and physical. I couldn't think like that. I *wouldn't* think like that. I'd written one song already, and even though some parts were rough, I knew it was good. And I had more in me. Nothing had solidified yet, but I could feel pieces of them in my head, and my intuition told me that they were better than anything I'd written before.

I went to work.

If I hadn't set the alarm on my phone, I probably would have worked right through my meeting. I'd completely lost myself in the process. Writing down notes, trying out different instruments, tweaking words until I found the exact right ones.

I would've preferred to keep going, but the things I had planned for today were important, and I'd accomplished a lot in the time I'd spent.

I made sure everything was saved, and then headed out, making a couple necessary calls. I lived close enough to the restaurant where we were scheduled to meet that it only took about twenty minutes to get there, but I was still ready to get things over and done with by the time we arrived.

"Mr. Union." The host was all smiles as he greeted me. "It's good to see you again."

I made small talk as best I could, not wanting to be rude to someone who'd only ever been nice to me, but I was still relieved when I reached the private room we used for our dinner meetings. When I stepped inside, three men were already there.

Chester had put on a wrinkled suit that looked at least five years out of fashion and was the ugliest shade of brown I'd ever seen. Not for the first time, I wondered what he spent his money on, because he sure as hell didn't use it to update his wardrobe. Then again, after seeing all the shit he'd had out for Mitzi, maybe it wasn't such a mystery after all.

On the opposite side of the table sat Roderick Leery and Trevor West, the first the VP of Solis Records, and the second his personal assistant. Both were smartly dressed, though Trevor's suit wasn't quite as expensive as Roderick's. I'd been working with these guys for years and respected them both, but we didn't have what I would've called a personal relationship. Still, I hoped they'd be on my side today.

I didn't bother with any of the usual niceties. "Chester's been supplying drugs for my ex-girlfriend, Mitzi, and probably giving the same stuff to roadies, other musicians, and who the hell knows else, although an investigation is beginning to uncover the depth of his deceit."

All three men stared at me for a moment, and then Chester laughed, a big, booming sound. A sound that I now recognized as fake.

"Come on, Reb, you know me. I don't mess with that shit." He glanced at the other men. "Sorry. That stuff."

I didn't waste my time arguing. I wasn't here for that. I was here to lay everything out on the table and get my life back on track. I pulled my phone out of my pocket and retrieved the video message I'd been sent a few minutes ago.

"Mitzi's on her way to rehab," I said and watched Chester begin to sweat, his face turning a deep, mottled red. "Courtesy of a deal made with the

NYPD.”

I held out my phone and let everyone watch as Mitzi sat down with a detective. I waited until she got a minute or so into her explanation of what she and Chester had done to me, then paused the video.

“I can send it to you if you’d like to see the rest, but I think we’ve run out of time to watch it just now.” I glanced toward the door as I heard arguing coming from the main part of the restaurant. “And, by the way, Chester, if you haven’t figured it out already, you’re fired.”

The door opened, and a pair of cops came through, followed by the detective Mitzi had been making her statement to. He went straight for Chester, already rattling off charges and Miranda rights.

I waited until the asshole had been escorted out before speaking again, mostly because his cursing and threats drowned out everything else. Roderick and Trevor hadn’t said a word during the entire thing, and I got the impression that they were waiting for me to explain.

I didn’t make them wait for long. “I didn’t know what he was doing, but I should have. The past few months, I’ve been...out of it, to say the least. That’s done. I’m ready to get back to work.”

“That’s good to know,” Roderick said. He leaned forward, his expression shrewd. “Do you want to wait until you have a new manager to discuss things?”

I shook my head. “I’ll probably hire someone to handle the manager stuff, but I think we’ve been working together long enough to talk business ourselves.”

I waited until he nodded and gestured at the chair across from him. I sat down, some of my tension easing. Getting Chester to answer for his crimes was only the first part of what I needed to do, and I’d been confident of how things would play out. In fact, I considered it fortunate that I hadn’t gotten punched before the cops had come in. This next bit, however, I was less certain about.

“I’ve been writing again,” I said. “And it’s good...but not the same as anything I’ve done before. Similar to my first album, but different enough that some people aren’t going to like it.”

Roderick nodded slowly. “Your deadlines are coming up fast. Will you be able to meet them?”

I considered the question before answering, “I think so, but only with these new songs. I don’t know if I could get you the sort of stuff I did

before.”

Roderick looked over at his assistant who’d been sitting quietly, taking notes. “What do you think?”

“I think, after the last few months, people will respond better to something new than they would to the same thing,” Trevor answered with a half-smile. “After the community service you’ve been doing, they’ll think of it as part of your new image.”

That was closer to the truth than he realized. Paige was responsible for both my image and my music, though I knew she’d say she was just showing people who I really was, that I’d always had the music in me.

And the sooner I finished here, the sooner I could make sure she knew how I felt about her.

THIRTY

PAIGE

Damn traffic. I was supposed to meet Reb at The Kamden McBride Foundation ten minutes ago. He hadn't told me details about what he planned to do before, but he had said that he was going to do some of his own work on his new image.

I pressed my hands against my stomach, hoping to calm the butterflies fluttering there. Just the thought of seeing him again had my body reacting like I hadn't been with him just last night. I knew some people may have written it off as merely something physical. My first taste of sex had been a pleasurable experience. Of course, I'd want more.

And I did.

But it wasn't only that.

What I felt was too fast, too soon, but I couldn't control it.

As my taxi pulled up to the building, I pushed aside everything I was feeling and focused on the work we were about to do. I had to take things one day at a time with Reb.

He was already there when I arrived, and I took a moment to watch him with a pair of kids who were here for family day. He was so good with them. We hadn't talked about kids or marriage or anything permanent, and a few weeks ago, I would've laughed if anyone had talked about thinking of a future with someone they'd only known for such a short time, but it was so easy to picture him playing with his own kids.

With *our* kids.

Fuck.

I took a steadying breath and started toward him. He turned before I reached him, his entire face lighting up. He wrapped his arms around me,

lifting me up so he could kiss me. He kept it chaste but didn't put me down when he broke the kiss.

"I know this isn't the most romantic time or place, but I can't wait any longer." His expression was serious. "I love you, my Paige."

REB'S TIMING hadn't gotten any better since the night he told me how he felt.

The eight of us had spent the last few days in Aspen, at the home Reb and his friends shared, and it had been amazing. The other women and I had gone shopping while Reb pitched music to Erik for the movie of his new book, and Jace worked with Alix on the cover, then we'd all come together for dinner and movies or skiing. The first night we were all there, we'd decorated the house for Christmas, and last night, we'd done gift exchanges. Today, the other couples had headed to where they'd be spending Christmas, leaving Reb and me alone for the holiday.

Which meant, tonight, we were using the playroom.

Over the past three months, Reb had been introducing me to various aspects of the BDSM lifestyle. At first, he'd made it gradual, still concerned about scaring me off, but then I'd bought him a flogger for his birthday and things had taken off from there.

He'd used that same flogger earlier tonight, and my ass was still smarting, but it wasn't at the top of the sensations I was feeling at the moment.

My arms were stretched above my head, the handcuffs around my wrists attached to the chain hanging from the ceiling. A pair of matching silver clamps were attached to my nipples, the chain connecting them to each other. One day, he'd promised to add a third clip for my clit, but I wasn't quite ready for that yet. The fact that I currently had a thin plastic shaft in my ass, and Reb's cock in my pussy, was more than enough for now.

He'd been making these insanely deep, slow strokes, telling me about all the ways he was going to fuck me, all the places we were going to have sex... and I'd been pleading with him to just let me come.

Then, he'd said the words that proved he had the worst sense of timing of anyone I'd ever met.

"Marry me, my Paige."

Time stopped.

“What?”

He pushed himself deep inside me and slid one hand down between my legs. The other, he moved from my waist up to the chain resting just below my breasts. He gave it a little tug, and I let out a gasp.

“I said, *marry me, my Paige.*”

I turned my head slightly to look at him behind me. “Are you really asking me that now? Like this?”

He chuckled and rotated his hips, sending a ripple of pleasure through me. “I meant to ask you somewhere more romantic, but I couldn’t wait any longer.”

His fingers began to move over my swollen clit, and I shuddered. I was so close to coming, and he knew exactly how to keep me right on the edge.

“Should I make you wait until you accept my proposal to let you come?”

I whimpered, and he put his mouth against my ear.

“Don’t worry, Paige, I wouldn’t do that to you. You may come.”

He pulled back, paused for a moment, and then drove into me, hard. I cried out, the combination of overwhelming sensations tipping me over into the sort of orgasm that made my vision go white and my entire body quiver. And then he came too, growling out a declaration of love.

It wasn’t until he was releasing my restraints, removing the clamps, and doing all the things that a Dom did to take care of his sub, that I gave him his answer.

“Yes.”

He appeared to have stopped breathing. “Can you say that again?”

I smiled and put a hand on his cheek. “Yes, Reb, I’ll marry you.”

With a laugh, he swept me into his arms and spun me around, singing the first song he’d written for me. My head whirled, and I knew this is what life with him would always be. Full of laughter and love...and music.

THE END



CLICK HERE
FOR THE FREE
BONUS BOOK

Wow!!! I hope you've enjoyed reading the Billionaire's Muse series as much as I did writing it. As a special treat, I'm writing a bonus novella, *Change of Plans* (The Billionaire's Muse – The Wedding). I'm not telling who's wedding we'll attend, but everybody will be there, so be sure you are signed up to my newsletter and I'll email the book to you for free, **TWO WEEKS BEFORE** the official release on Amazon on Valentine's day. [CLICK HERE](#) to sign up for the free pre-release copy of the book.

M. S. Parker



M.S. PARKER
CASSIE WILD

MARRIED
a
Stripper

MARRIED A STRIPPER

ONE

PIETY

My head.

Shit...my head.

I had a concussion once, but it hadn't hurt like this. Moaning, I pulled a pillow over my head and prayed for oblivion. Or death. Right now, I was willing to take either one.

The pounding inside my skull only got worse, and as the bed shifted under me, my belly started to slosh around, making me feel nauseated too. That was just *lovely*.

The bed shifted again, and I snapped, "Would you be still?"

"Sorry," a rough voice muttered.

A rough, deep *sexy* voice.

Somehow, that fact managed to penetrate the fog of pain and exhaustion, and I tugged the pillow an inch lower. It didn't help. It actually made things worse because some moron – probably me – had forgotten to close the curtains last night and now the piercing bright light of a Las Vegas morning was trying to singe my retinas. But I needed to know why I'd just heard a *man's* voice in my room.

No, in my *bed*.

There shouldn't *be* a man's voice in my room.

Or anywhere in my vicinity.

I tugged the pillow lower.

Nope.

A little lower.

A disgruntled grumble came from my left, and I turned my head.

Blond hair, sun-streaked and ruffled, hid half his face, but there was no

denying one simple fact.

There was most definitely a naked man just inches beside me.

And I sure as hell didn't know him.

Yelping, I half jumped out of the bed, but fell on my ass as the blankets refused to come with me. They were tangled around his body, hanging on him for long moments before finally coming free.

I scrambled backward and clambered to my feet just as he shoved upward onto his elbows, looking around with a surly snarl.

Oh. Wow.

He was...oh. Wow.

And naked.

Oh. Wow.

"Who the hell are you?" I blurted, my hangover momentarily forgotten as I found myself staring into a pair of beautiful, pale blue eyes.

He blinked, the irritation in his eyes fading, replaced by the same confusion I felt. "I..." Thick lashes, black and dusted with gold on the tips, fell over those amazing eyes, but even that couldn't hide one plain and simple fact – he was checking me out the same way I'd just checked him out.

Immediately, my nipples tightened, stabbing into the sheet I held clutched to my breasts.

"Ah, the name's Kaleb," he said softly and thrust a hand through his unruly hair.

A shiver raced down my spine as he spoke. An accent. I was such a sucker for an accent. "You..." I swallowed and told myself to get a grip. "You're Australian. Sydney?"

A thick blond brow shot up. "Good ear. Most Yanks wouldn't recognize the difference between somebody from Sydney versus somebody from Perth. Spent much time there?"

"Um, no." With a weak smile, I shrugged. "My...family travels a lot. Or they used to." I shrugged, not wanting to get into any of that. Besides, I had other things on my mind. Like why he was in my room. Although *that* was obvious. He was naked. I was naked. I reached up to push my hair back. Sunlight glinted off something, and I froze.

"Oh." Swallowing nervously, I stared at the gaudy thing on my left hand. "Oh, *shit*."

I glared at him, only to see him standing by the side of the bed, staring down at something I didn't think was his toes.

What in the hell was he doing? Admiring himself?

He reached down and understanding dawned, mostly because I saw the empty condom wrapper on the nightstand. Blood rushed to my face, and my head started to spin.

No. Oh, no.

“A dream,” I whispered. “This is all a crazy dream.”

I waited for the sexy Aussie to tell me otherwise or maybe come over and pick me up, kiss me...something that would convince me that maybe this *was* a dream. He was too busy walking toward the bathroom, treating me to an excellent view of his perfect ass – not an image I could easily look away from.

“Not happening,” I said and pinched myself hard enough to hurt. Things were looking more and more insane by the minute.

In desperation, I rushed for the door that opened into the adjoining suite.

The lights were still off, and it was thankfully dim in there. Astra, my best friend, must have remembered to close the blinds, the wench.

I fumbled through the dark living room area and found my way into the bedroom. The blinds were pulled there too. I was tempted to just lay down and curl up next to her, but I needed to know what was going on.

She was snoring softly, and when I shook her, she swatted at my hand. “Not today, baby,” she mumbled.

“Wake up, Astra. It’s me.”

She swatted at me again. “Oomph.”

“Astra!” I shook her harder. When that brought no response, I went to the windows and grabbed a handful of curtains, jerking them open. She screeched behind me.

“Bitch! Close those damn curtains!”

“Wake up and talk to me,” I said, ignoring her. If I could handle the marching band in my skull, she could handle the light.

She cracked an eye open, bloodshot and tired. Okay, she probably had a marching band of her own.

But unlike *me*, Astra didn’t get totally wasted and forget things when she got drunk. “What happened last night?” I asked, holding up my hand, wiggling my fingers to give her something to focus on.

A wide smile curled her lips, and it even went to her eyes, bloodshot and tired as they were. “What do you mean, what happened? Forgotten already, sweetcheeks?”

“Astra,” I said slowly, praying for patience. “I’m going to kill you, chop you into tiny pieces, and toss the remains out all over the desert. You’ll be eaten by scavengers before your family even knows you’re missing.”

“Oh...savage.” She looked unfazed and sat up, lazily stretching her arms over her chest. The skinny strapped silk nightshirt she wore barely managed to cover her considerable...assets.

I wouldn’t have had so much trouble. But then again, her breasts were probably the only thing holding the shirt up, with its deep vee neckline and high cut sides. Astra had one hell of a body.

That nightshirt would've gaped down to my belly button. My body was strong and firm in all the right places, but an abundance of cleavage was one thing God had not blessed me with. I was smart, attractive. Confident too. I also had ridiculously wealthy parents who tried to control my life, but no excessive boobs in sight.

The man upstairs had also seen fit to give me a best friend who was ridiculously insane. She sat on the edge of the bed, grinning at me even though I suspected she was every bit as hungover as I was.

That was bad.

Very bad.

If I got too drunk, things got a bit hazy for me – okay, a *lot* hazy – but Astra could pack it away like a sailor and not forget a thing.

“What are you grinning at?” I waved my hand in her face, making light flash off the cheap plastic ring with its gaudy fake diamond. “And what the hell is this?”

“Isn’t it fantastic? I had to spend like five bucks getting it out of that stupid bubble gum machine after I conned some guy into selling me the quarters. I had to flash him a look down my shirt.”

She leaned backed on the bed, her weight braced on her hands. I stared at her. “What are you–?”

I didn’t get to finish because she blathered on. “I’ll tell you what, those things are rigged. They’re even worse than the slot machines. I got so many stupid tattoos. I don’t know what I’m going to do with them.” She shrugged. “I guess I’ll give them to my cousin. Or maybe one of the kids down at the shelter back home.”

I shoved my hand through my hair. “Forget the tattoos!” I waved my hand at her again, the ring flashing at me mockingly. “This! Explain.”

“Wow. You really don’t remember anything?” She laughed and got up.

Wearing nothing but the nightshirt and a skimpy pair of low cut panties, she came over to me and looped an arm around my neck. “Sweetheart, that handsome hunk of man flesh from Down Under...”

She paused dramatically, arching her brows as she waited.

“What?” I demanded, ready to shake her.

“He’s your husband.” She winked at me and spun away, pausing to stretch before she picked up a robe and tossed it at me. “Here. Put this on. Toga parties are so...college.”

The robe hit my chest and fell to the floor.

Gaping at her, I sank down on the edge of the bed while my brain struggled to process her words.

Husband.

That was the word she used. I’d heard her correctly, I think. But...maybe not. “Astra, what did you just say?” My voice came out in a weak whisper, not quite the calm and steady tone I’d been shooting for.

“You got married, girl!” She laughed, sounded delighted. “It’s crazy, the things that can happen in Vegas. Man, I love this city.”

This was a joke. It had to be a joke. But my heart was racing, and my face felt strangely hot. Pinpricks seemed to dance all up and down my spine, and my head was spinning, but it had nothing to do with a hangover.

“You can’t be serious. You’re joking, right?” I gave her a look of sheer, hopeful desperation. She had to be joking. Had to.

Astra smiled, and this time, it was a little less Mad Hatter and a bit more reassuring. “Piety, babe, it was your idea.”

“No.” Shaking my head emphatically, I said, “No. No, no, no...I get a little reckless, sure, but this has *Astra Traore* written all over it.”

“Okay...well.” She poked out her lower lip and shrugged. “Maybe you made a joke, and I thought it was funny, and we got to talking about it. But you were all in!”

“Why would I go *all in* about marrying a stranger!” I wanted to scream. Or maybe laugh hysterically. My belly revolted, and another thought occurred to me. I just might be sick. Where was the damn bathroom? I knew where it was on my side of the suite, but in here? Thinking was just too damn hard right now, but I didn’t want to walk back to my room.

He was in there.

That beautiful, gorgeous – what had Astra called him? – hunk of man flesh. A beautiful piece of man flesh. Too beautiful.

Frazzled, I stared at the floor. The robe caught my eye, and I picked it up, pulling it on before twisting the sheet into a ball. Then I looked up at my best friend. “Since you seem to have a clear grasp of the situation, why don’t you tell me why I supposedly married this guy?”

“There’s no supposedly about it.” She shrugged and sat down next to me. “You married him. We’ve got it on video, and we’re going to upload it onto YouTube.”

YouTube...

“You’re nuts. You’re *crazy*. My parents will freak out. Hell, this might kill my dad.” Silas Van Allen just might have a heart attack. His precious daughter getting married to some stranger in Las Vegas? I laughed shakily. “Well, we *did* talk about finding a way to get him off my ass about *settling down*.”

“Exactly!” Astra beamed at me.

Rising to my feet, I pointed a finger at her. “Don’t give me this crap about it being my idea. Maybe I made a joke, but how drunk was I? And how drunk were you?”

Astra looked hurt. “What? Don’t you think you’re capable of something this dastardly and brilliant?”

“How about *insane*?” I flung a hand toward the other suite of rooms. “That’s a human being over there. Apparently, we went and decided to do something just to screw with my dad, and we’re dragging him into it. You know what my dad is like!”

“Oh, chill out, PS.”

I made a face at the nickname. “Don’t tell me to chill out. I *can’t*. I’m *freaking* out.” Hearing movement next door, I looked at Astra helplessly. “What do I do?” I whispered.

“Oh, honey.” She came toward me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. “Relax. Kaleb was all in with the idea once we explained how tight-assed your daddy is.” She stood up and held out a hand. “Come on.”

I stared at her waving fingers, wondering what she wanted me to do.

“What?”

“We should go talk to him.” She smiled again and took my hand, trying to pull me after her.

Shaking my head, I remained where I was. “What kind of idiot Justice of the Peace would marry two people who are obviously drunk? Considering how my head feels, I must have been walking into walls.”

“Not quite.” She gave me a smile of sympathy. “You maintained *really* well. And as to the JP? You flashed enough money. You do that, most people will bend the rules a little bit, especially for a Congressman's daughter.”

Groaning, I dropped my face into my hands. “Great. Just great.” I turned into a lush after two days in Las Vegas and had also lost touch with my inner moral compass – *bribing* a Justice of the Peace? “I’m turning into my parents. Oh, shit. What if I’m turning into my *mother*?”

TWO

KALEB

“Would you be still?”

The voice was husky and soft, straight out of a porn flick, and I rolled toward it, seeking out the warmth and scent of a woman. Sexy and sweet, it went straight to my dick, which was already doing its morning salute.

“Sorry,” I muttered.

I was about ready to reach for her when a high-pitched yelp had me jerking up in bed. “What’s—?”

The *wrong* got caught in my throat at the sight of her. I don’t think she even heard me anyway. She was too busy wrapping herself in a sheet and gaping at me. After a second, she snapped her jaw shut. I clenched mine so it wouldn’t fall open.

“Who the hell are you?” She stared at me, her big, dark blue eyes wide and startled.

“Ah, the name’s Kaleb.”

“You...you’re Australian. Sydney?”

“Good ear.” *Talk. Act human. Don’t stare at her damn tits.* “Most Yanks wouldn’t recognize the difference between somebody from Sydney versus somebody from Perth. Spent much time there?”

“Um, no. My...family travels a lot. Or they used to.”

I wasn’t having much luck not staring at those perfect, perky breasts, so I climbed out of bed and looked around. My head was still cloudy, and it hurt like hell. What happened last night? What time was it?

A thousand sticky thoughts pushed through my head, but I couldn’t untangle them.

I could do one thing – use the damn bathroom.

“Fuck,” I muttered.

I didn't think she heard. She was swearing about something too, but I didn't think it had anything to do with the rubber that was in a rather precarious position on my semi-erect penis.

Grabbing it, I looked up and caught sight of her staring at me.

“A dream.” She closed her eyes as she whispered it. “This is all a crazy dream.”

Not likely. If it was a dream, I would have been balls-deep inside her, not standing there with a bloody headache and a crumpled up condom in my fist.

I stalked into the bathroom, desperate to get away from the woman for a minute. I had to think.

I just needed a minute.

Once I was in the bathroom, I shut the door and leaned back. “What the fuck happened?” I muttered.

Spying a waste bin, I tossed the rubber into it and tended to business.

The nagging sense that I'd forgotten something – something important – tugged at my brain as I moved to the sink to wash up, but my mind stayed annoyingly blank, and I finally had to admit that it wouldn't do any good to just stand in this bathroom while that raven-haired beauty stayed out there, probably getting more and more frustrated.

As I washed my hands, I stared at my reflection in the mirror. I looked hung over and pretty damn shitty. That wouldn't go over well with the new boss.

New boss.

“Fuck.”

I grabbed a towel and wrapped it around my waist before leaving the room. Clock! Where was a damn clock? The woman, along with another, came through the adjoining suite's door at the same time.

I still didn't see a clock. “What time is it?” I said.

“We...um...” The girl from the bed looked at her friend, a shorter, cute thing with curls, curves and a wide smile. “We need to talk.”

“I can't,” I barked. “I'm going to miss my bus if I haven't already. What time is it?”

I couldn't lose this job. There was too much depending on it.

Spying my clothes in a tangle on the floor, I grabbed them and almost took them into the bathroom, but for right now, modesty be damned. Without another thought, I dropped the towel and grabbed my jeans, jabbing one foot

then the other into the legs as the women gaped at me. *Yeah, commando, ladies.*

“Look, you need to slow it down,” she said, giving her friend a desperate look.

“I *can't*, sweetheart.” I grabbed my shirt, and something thudded onto the floor. My phone. When I grabbed it, the screen lit up, showing the time.

“Dammit! I’ll barely make it.”

“Wait,” she cried out, cutting in front of me when I would have sat down to put my shoes on.

She looked as desperate as I felt. Maybe she had a job riding on the next few minutes too.

I had doubts about that though. The room we were in was the kind I’d expect to see given to a princess – or a queen. That was what she made me think of – royalty, even wearing that robe and a worried expression. It was in the way she carried herself, so haughty and above it all.

And I didn’t have time to think about how *proper* she might be. “Anyway, I hate to dash, but I have to go.” I cut around her and sat down, shoving my feet into my shoes. I grabbed my shirt and pulled it on as I stood up.

She was right there, not two inches away when my head cleared the material.

“You need to be quiet and listen.” She poked me in the chest with her index finger.

A gaudy, fake ring glinted up at me.

“Nice taste in jewelry, love.”

“I’m so glad you think so,” she said, giving me a sarcastic smile. She held her hand up and waved it back and forth in front of my face. “It’s a damn *wedding* ring.”

“Wedding...” I blinked. “Fuck me, are you *married*?”

If she was, she needed a better man. One who’d put a real ring on her finger and not that horrible piece of junk.

She blinked at me, shaking her head. “You’re beautiful, but maybe you’re not too bright,” she said slowly.

I stiffened instinctively at the insult before reminding myself it didn’t matter what some prima donna American babydoll thought of me. I had enough to deal with anyway.

“Aw, my feelings are hurt,” I said, forcing out a mock sigh. “Anyway,

I've got to run. I've got a new job I'm starting, and if I'm late, I'm screwed. You can...look, I'm sorry. I was drunk, and I didn't know you were married. Doubt it will make much difference, but tell your husband I'm sorry."

"Fine," she said to my back. "The man I slept with last night wants me to tell you he's sorry."

I froze. One hand on the door knob, I stared at the pale, gleaming oak and tried to make sense of those words. *The man I slept with...*

Slowly, I turned around and stared at her. "Is that supposed to be a joke?"

She had crossed her arms over her chest as stood there, glaring at me, her chin in the air. "Do I *look* like I'm laughing?"

No. She looked like she was torn between crying and hitting something. I could sympathize with the feeling.

"You..." I looked back at the ring, then at her. "Are you telling me...?"

Her lip curled into a snarl. "We got hitched last night, *sweetheart*."

"That's not possible," I said, shaking my head. "I don't even know your name."

"That's what I said. But my friend assures me the wedding *did* happen. She recorded it. We've got a license...somewhere. As to our names..." She came toward me, her right hand outstretched.

Good, if I had to look at the awful plastic trinket another moment...

Slowly, I took her hand, staring into those gorgeous eyes.

"I'm Piety," she murmured.

"Kaleb." Then I laughed, feeling like the entire world had flipped upside down. "Look, I'm sorry, but I...I still have to go. If I lose this job, I'm screwed."

THREE

PIETY

I finally convinced him that we're married, and he's worried about losing his job.

I could have rolled my eyes, but then I reminded myself I wasn't someone who'd ever had to worry about money before. When you didn't have to do that, it was easy to dismiss things that seemed relatively simple.

"We have to figure this out," I said. "I mean, your boss will understand, right?"

He gave me a tight look and shot another glance at his phone – checking the time. He swore and shoved it into his pocket. "Too late now. The bus leaves in two minutes. I'll never make it." A scowl twisted his features and he spun away, swearing under his breath.

I took a step forward, only to stop myself. I'd been about to comfort him.

I didn't even *know* this guy, and I wanted to make him feel better.

"How in the hell did this happen?" he demanded, still facing away from us.

"Well..." Astra laughed a little, as she gave him a nervous look.

I had a bad feeling we might have just messed up his life even more than mine. Judging by the look she gave me, Astra was thinking the same thing.

"It's pretty funny, really. We were all drinking. You were at the bar, and you were cute, so I dragged Piety over to sit down and talk with you. We all got to talking, and we told you about how Piety's parents are *serious* control freaks and that they're pushing her toward this guy who is so fucking lame. He gets excited talking about spreadsheets." She paused as the stranger – *Kaleb*, I reminded myself – turned around. "Spreadsheets!"

"I'm still waiting to hear how talking about spreadsheets got two

strangers married.”

“Yeah. Me too.” I rubbed a hand over my belly because I was still feeling seriously nauseated and my head was spinning. Feeling his eyes on me, I glanced his way and stopped rubbing, reaching up to clutch at the neck of my robe instead. He wasn’t gawking at me or anything, but there was something about the way he watched me that was unsettling at best. “Seriously, I don’t get how I could have thought this was a good idea, drunk or not.”

“But you *did*.” Astra grabbed my shoulders and shook me a little. I groaned, batting her hands away.

“Stop it.” I sat down on the edge of the couch and glanced from him to her. “Explain why I thought this was a good idea.”

“I did—”

“Astra.” Giving her a hard look, I waited.

“Fine.” She huffed out a breath and then gave the hottie from Down Under a brilliant smile. “See, her parents are the *most* uptight people you’ve ever met, and they are constantly pushing her toward somebody who could be a clone of her dad. In character, not physically, because that could be gross. But he is a stuffed shirt and so uptight. They keep nagging her—”

Kaleb held up a hand, and Astra went politely quiet. She beamed at him, and he returned the smile, although his was a lot less...excited. “Look, this is all fascinating, and I assume I should know something about my...wife’s family. But none of this is answering anything.”

“It *is*,” Astra said emphatically. “Just give me a moment. “See, that’s why we’re here. They were driving her crazy, and after they tried to set her up on some sort of crazy couples thing with this killjoy, we knew we had to get away for a while.”

“And we came here,” I said, sighing. “Astra, you’re not exactly explaining.” I took a deep breath. “I remember going down to the bar for drinks. Then...nothing until this morning when I opened my eyes and saw this ring. So explain *this* part of things.”

“You thought it would be funny.” Astra sighed and moved over to sit beside me. She took my hand and then looked over to Kaleb. “You were on the stool next to us. There was a woman...she was flirting with you and pushing really hard. Piety could tell you weren’t into it, so she told her to lay off.”

Kaleb shook his head as if trying to shake the memory back into it. “What happened next?”

“Well, the woman got pissy and asked her what the problem was. Piety said you were her fiancé. You laughed about it. When she got up and stormed off, we asked you to join us.” Astra shrugged. “We got to talking and...well, Piety said it was too bad her dad hadn’t been there. If he’d heard her telling some chick that you two were engaged, even though it was just a joke, he’d have a heart attack. And I told you guys you should do it – marry him. I’d videotape it, and we could upload it to YouTube.”

I rubbed my forehead, feeling a pounding headache that had nothing to do with alcohol.

“Why, oh, why would I think this was a good idea?” I muttered.

“Because we were drunk and stupid, and you were pissed off.” Astra looked over at Kaleb. “You were pissed off about something too. I don’t know what because you wouldn’t say. But you loosened up a bit, and we all got to laughing and having a good time.”

Kaleb raised an eyebrow. “A good time still doesn’t equal getting married.”

“I...” I grimaced and then looked at Astra before meeting Kaleb’s eyes again. “My dad is a senator. Silas Van Allan from Philadelphia. He’s planning on running for president, and my mom...well, she’s already mentally redecorating the White House. They’ve got ideas for how their lives will be, and they’re doing everything they can to make sure *I* do everything *I* can to help expedite his career and improve his image.”

“Come on, they can’t be all that bad,” he said, crooking a smile at me.

My belly flipped at the sight of it. A dimple, one that deepened into a wider groove as his smile grew, caused my heart to stutter a few beats. Dimples. That smile. That accent. Well, if I was going to go and marry a stranger, I sure as hell picked a hot one.

Then my brain locked in on what he said.

“Oh, they’re worse.” Heaving out a sigh, I looked over toward the window, not seeing anything around me but the life they were trying to force me into. “They hate my job, hate the things I enjoy. Sometimes I think they only had me because they thought about all the photo ops I’d present them with. That and everybody *knows* that a family man is much more trustworthy.”

Rolling my eyes, I managed to smile at him.

“And that’s it. Somehow my shitty mood translated into *hey, let’s do something stupid*. We’re in Vegas, after all. Right, Kaleb?” I hesitated before

asking, “It is Kaleb?”

He gave me a short nod, still looking distracted. He pulled out his phone again, checked it.

“Look, this job...I’ll call you a cab, pay for it. We can discuss this again later?” I hated how much he was stressing over this job. And I could tell he was. He’d only checked his phone like...oh, ten times in the past five minutes.

“No such luck, Piety.” His accent gave my name a sharper sound, but I liked it. His smile was sharp too, full of edges that might cut. “The bus I needed to catch was leaving the city. They’re gone by now.”

“Oh.” My belly dropped a little more, and I rubbed my temple. “Okay, I’ll find some other way to get you where you need to go. We’ll rent a car or something. Just what is it you do?”

“I’m with Flames Down Under.” He said it calmly, staring me straight in the face, but there was a daring glint in his eye.

I couldn’t understand why. That meant nothing to me. “And just what is Flames Down Under?”

“Oh...oh!” Astra squealed and started to laugh, clapping. “This is *perfect*. Piety, it’s *perfect*. Really!”

She laughed even harder, all but bent over now.

“What’s so funny?” I glared at her while Kaleb moved over to the window and stared outside. Probably searching for his bus.

“Flames Down Under. Honey, he’s a stripper! Flames Down Under is kinda...well, they are almost like the Chippendales, but from Australia...and way hotter, if you ask me.”

Oh, shit.

My face went hot, and I shoved upright, glaring at Astra. “You think this is funny? My dad is going to *freak*. Dammit, Astra, stop laughing! I married a stripper! My parents are going to kill me!”

FOUR

PIETY

The second the words left my mouth, I wanted to take them back.

Appalled at myself, I looked over at him and said, “I’m so sorry. I mean, not that I really...it’s just...”

“It’s fine.” He made an absent, clearly distracted motion with his hand, his gaze once more returning to the window, his jaw locked tight.

“I really am sorry. I imagine you work pretty damn hard and I—”

“It’s *fine*,” he said, his accent doing nothing to soften the word, and this time, he looked at me. His jaw was tight, but there was something about the way his eyes met mine that made me think he had other things on his mind besides my unintended insult.

“Are you...um...well...I know you’re worried about the job, but I swear, I’ll get you wherever you need to be.”

He shook his head, his expression pinched. “I need that fucking job. I need the *money*. It’s...never mind.”

Something flashed in his pale eyes, a mix of fury and helplessness, and my belly twisted into a hundred ugly little knots. Something was going on. I didn’t know what it was, but I had a feeling it was bad. And I wanted to help him. Stranger, husband, it didn’t matter. No one deserved to look like that.

“Hey!” Astra clapped her hands, drawing our attention to her. “I’ve got an idea. Kaleb, this could really help you out.”

The look in her eyes was sly, and her smile had that devious slant to it that I knew all too well. Shit.

I almost told her I didn’t want to hear it, but sometimes her ideas *did* have merit. Still, I was more than a little suspicious as I studied her. She was practically rubbing her hands together in glee, she looked so pleased with

herself, and that was never good.

“Just what is this...idea?” I asked warily.

“Hire him.” Astra moved a little closer, standing between us like a referee as she looked from me to him.

Kaleb and I stared at each other blankly.

“Hire me?”

“Hire him?”

We spoke at the same time, and the inanity of it left us both smiling awkwardly at each other. He gestured to me, and I cocked an eyebrow at my best friend. “Don’t take this wrong, Astra, but I’m not exactly the sort of woman who wants her own personal exotic dancer.”

“That’s not what I meant.” She rolled her eyes. “But for the record – you’re nuts. Why *wouldn’t* you want your own private exotic dancer?”

“Just because you want your own personal pool boy, your own masseuse, a personal shopper, your own driver...”

I rolled my eyes at her, although I was teasing. She had none of those things. She joked about it, but while we’d both been born with the proverbial silver spoon, neither of us liked being waited on or catered to non-stop. Each of us had a personal assistant, but that was simply because we couldn’t keep things straight thanks to everything our parents were constantly expecting us to keep up with.

“Look, this has all been fun, but I need to figure out what I’m going to do,” Kaleb interjected.

“We’ve already figured that out.” Astra folded her arms across her chest, looking determined. “Just at least hear me out. If you don’t want to do it, I’ll rent a car and chase down the bus myself.” She wagged her eyebrows. “I wouldn’t mind seeing *Flames Down Under* all up close and personal.”

“But–”

“Five minutes!” She moved, placing herself in front of the door, spreading her hands against it. She tossed in a bright smile and then looked at me. “Trust me, PS. It’s *way* better than just uploading the video to YouTube. You can prove to your parents that you’re done letting them dictate your life. *And* we can help Kaleb out since we went and screwed up his job.”

“As fascinating as this is, whatever you’re planning, I don’t think you can pay me what I’d be making with *Flames*,” Kaleb said, looking more and more pissed off by the minute. “I’m the new boy and I’m still learning, but I made fifteen hundred dollars last week – American – and that doesn’t include the

tips.”

I didn't blame him for being pissed. Fifteen hundred dollars was a decent amount of money to a lot of people. Except I could do better. I didn't know what pushed me to say anything, but to my surprise, I was the one to speak before Astra could pipe in. “I can pay more than that.”

He swung his head around, a startled expression on his face.

“I can.” I lifted a shoulder. “Granted, I don't know just what Astra has in mind, but I can pay more than fifteen hundred a week. My assistant makes almost that. Granted, I work her into the ground, but...”

He started to say something else, but he stopped abruptly, shaking his head. “It doesn't matter how much your assistant makes, unless you plan on hiring me to take her place. Look, I need to be going.”

“I've got an idea.” Astra placed herself between him and the door. “You listen to me for five minutes, and within the next half hour, Piety will *pay* you fifteen hundred, *and* we'll make sure you get a ride to wherever your bus is heading if you decide you don't want to do things my way.”

That caught him off guard.

Me too.

I mean, it wasn't like I couldn't afford it, but it was irritating when other people got free and loose with my money. From behind him, I gave Astra a dark look, then wiped it off my face before I moved to sit down on the couch.

“It's a fair deal,” I said, keeping my voice neutral. “After all, we messed things up. We can at least rectify the situation.”

“Absolutely.”

Kaleb looked from me to her and then back. Then he shook his head. “The two of you are insane. You know that, right?”

FIVE

KALEB

Insane.

It didn't even come close.

And I wasn't any better.

Hands braced against the shower wall, I stared down at the floor. Water dripped into my face and eyes, ran down my cheekbones and chin, then along my nose before falling to my feet.

Water pounded into me from five different angles, the pressure so high, I almost felt like I was getting a top rate massage.

There was one thing to be said for this set-up so far – the shower was top-notch.

I could stay in here for another week.

Or at least another hour or so. If I could do that, maybe things would start making sense.

Somehow between last night and now, I'd gotten married to one of the most elegant, beautiful women I'd ever met. Not to mention, she was funny and determined. And that was just from the little bit of time I'd spent with her.

And her shower...

Groaning, I angled my back so that one of the jets hit it full on, pounding away stress that felt like it had been building for years. Now, if I could just stay in here long enough to figure out what the hell I'd gotten myself into.

But that wasn't likely. How was I supposed to figure out how I'd ended up *married* to Piety Van Allan?

I still needed to make some phone calls. I had to call my boss for one. Even though the bus had already left, I owed it to him – and the rest of the

guys – to let them know I wouldn't be in. Not today, not any other day in the near future.

I felt like a piece of shit leaving him hanging, but even if I could get to the next tour stop, the bottom line was that Piety was offering more money. Once I'd heard her friend, Astra, out Piety had disappeared, and in less than twenty minutes, she'd returned with cash as promised.

But it hadn't been fifteen hundred.

It was two thousand, and she said if I helped her out, she'd pay me five *times* that.

Ten grand. The exact amount I needed.

I'd spent the time while she was gone researching her. She was exactly who she said she was. It wasn't hard to find information about her. She was a bit of a do-gooder, and her parents look like they had a pair of matching sticks shoved up their asses. If they were as bad as she was letting on...

But even as the idea formed in my mind, I pushed it away. My parents were gone. It was hard to think about doing something just to piss them off although I knew I'd done it a time or two. This, well this was a bit more extreme than anything I could've thought up. Still...

Shoving away from the wall, I reached for the shampoo. I couldn't stay in here forever, as much as I was tempted. Even the toiletries smelled like money and the scent hit me hard. It reminded me of how her hair smelled.

Just that tease was enough to have my prick going hard, and I groaned, squeezing my eyes shut. I didn't need to be thinking about how damn sexy she was.

It can't hurt...you're married.

I ignored the taunting voice and focused on scrubbing my hair.

Piety and I were *not* married – not really. Whatever bogus marriage that had been performed between us was a sham, one that would be annulled once Piety had done whatever she needed to do to convince her parents to leave her alone.

Moving under the spray, I rinsed my hair, still trying to pretend I wasn't acutely aware of how it seemed like the scent of her surrounded me. She smelled so damn good.

Don't think about it.

Hard not to though. She smelled good, felt good. I bet she tasted even better.

I was already doing a cockstand, and with a vicious swear, I turned the

water to cold as I finished scrubbing up. I was shivering by the time I climbed out of the shower, but at least I wasn't about to walk out of there looking like I was ready to jump...Piety.

My wife had come to mind first.

"Focus, Kaleb."

Eyes closed, I pushed aside thoughts of the tempting Piety Van Allan and thought about what I needed to get done. Get my stuff from the hotel, call my boss, check in. It didn't really seem like all that much, but I still felt like the world was spinning around me.

"One thing at a time."

Once I was dressed, I reached for my phone and leaned against the marble countertop, staring at the shower stall in front of me.

I'd call my boss – or should I say *former* boss – first.

He would be pissed off, probably argumentative. And still, it was the easier call.

Another stab of guilt rose up, but I grabbed it and throttled it, shoving it deep inside a dark closet. I excelled at that. Guilt had been my best friend for a while now – a very one-sided friendship. He visited me daily, and I ignored him, pretending the little shit didn't exist and everything was fine.

On the other side of the bathroom door, I heard a bright, happy spate of laughter. That would be Astra. It suited her, that wild laugh, the name. Piety's laugh was calmer, more subtle. No reason for such a smooth, easy sound to hit me right in the gut, but it did.

Looking around the bathroom, I figured I had as much privacy now as I was going to get, so I dialed the number and waited.

"You tell me one good reason I shouldn't fire your ass," Sam Romo snapped, his smoke-roughened voice harsher than normal. He paused, taking yet another drag of his cigarette. Cancer would bypass his mean ass, looking for more fertile ground. "Come on, I'm waiting."

"I can't," I said calmly. There was no point in beating around the bush and leaving him hanging. "Something's come up, and it will be pretty much impossible for me to keep the job."

There was a faint pause, followed by a not so faint explosion. "What in the hell do you mean you're quitting? This is the thanks I get after giving you this job?" He paused to suck in a breath. "You ungrateful piece of shit. You had no *talent*, no *skill*, but I took you on anyway. Now you're leaving me hanging."

“I’m sorry.” Reaching up, I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I can’t say anything more than that. I didn’t plan to leave you hanging, but there’s nothing I can do. Something’s come up.”

I wasn’t about to tell him the truth. I was already coming off like an ass. I didn’t need to make it worse by telling him it’d been a bad combination of alcohol and a woman.

“Fine,” he bit off. “You do whatever the hell you want, pretty boy. But don’t think you can come back. I’m done with you.”

The phone went dead. Lowering it, I closed my eyes. That had gone about as well as I’d expected, and I’d deserved every bit of it. Still, it was nothing compared to what I had to do next.

Eying the phone narrowly, I picked it up and swallowed the bile that had been rising up my throat ever since I woke up – and not all of it because of the hangover.

“Just get it over with,” I muttered to myself.

I dialed the number and waited. One ring. Two. Three.

It went to voicemail, and I gritted my teeth, swearing silently as her voice came on the line.

“This is Camry. You know the drill!”

I didn’t bother leaving a message.

She hadn’t called back the last few times I’d left one, and I didn’t really have anything new to say.

A wild hoot of laughter came from beyond the door, drawing my attention to the women waiting in the main part of the suite. Despite myself, I was drawn to the levity between the two of them. Drawn to *her*. I’d like to hear her laugh, and maybe see her smile again – not that caustic one that had flashed across her face when she spoke about her parents.

I wanted to see a real smile.

And damn what I would’ve given to have met her under different circumstances. Shoving away from the counter, I moved to the door and opened it. *Time to face the music...*

Silence fell, the conversation between them falling to a complete stop.

Two gorgeous women looked over at me, and I had another fleeting thought about how crazy my life had become. Not just in the past twelve hours, but in the past few weeks, the past few months.

A year ago, it had been almost boring. I surfed. I went swimming. I worked. A nice, boring routine.

That was it.

Now, I was staring at a woman I had somehow *married*, and I decided this was about as awkward as it had been the first time I'd gone out on stage. Well, maybe not quite that bad. But it was damn close.

"So..." I shoved my hands into the front pockets of my worn, faded jeans. "What do we do now?"

Piety got to her feet, her wide, sexy mouth curled into a smile that made me wish I could remember anything from last night. "Today, we're going to have fun."

"Fun?" I repeated. Running my tongue across my teeth, I debated whether or not I should say anything, but then I decided what the hell. "You've already paid me two thousand dollars. You're paying me another eight--"

"Actually, another ten. I said I'd give you five times that. That's ten."

She'd changed and showered, her hair a little damp. Her pale blue sundress showed off her long legs, and offered just enough cleavage to be tempting but not enough to be scandalous. She looked tired, but I'd be hard pressed to tell that she was suffering the same hangover I was. If I hadn't seen her earlier, I never would have guessed she'd been black-out drunk less than twelve hours ago.

Distracted by everything about her, it took me a moment to catch up with what she said. "Wait – what? You're paying me *twelve-thousand dollars*?"

"Yes." She lifted an eyebrow. "Is that a problem?"

"Yes!" Without realizing it, I'd half-yelled and lowered my voice. "No. It's just...why in the hell does this matter so much to you?"

"Wait until you meet my parents, and you'll get it." She glanced over at Astra before moving toward me. "Anyway, I figure you have clothes to pick up. You need to check out of your hotel, right?"

"Yes."

"Okay." She was dressed similarly to me, in jeans and a t-shirt, her amazing subtle curves making my cock take notice. "Then we'll take care of that, spend the day getting to know each other before we leave."

"We're leaving?" I rubbed my neck, the headache that had been threatening edging closer and closer. "Where are we going?"

"Philadelphia. My family reunion." She pushed her hair back from her face and shrugged. "I've already bought your plane ticket – hope you don't mind. I...um...well, I checked your wallet while you were showering and took care of the arrangements."

“Oh. Okay.” Wow. She was...efficient. Efficient. Confident. Capable. Sexy. Man, was she sexy. I realized I was staring at her mouth and jerked my attention back to her eyes. “Okay, so let’s go to...well, my hotel first, right?”

She nodded, and we moved to the door.

Behind us, Astra called out. “Have fun, you two! Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, PS!”

“Yeah.” Piety snorted. “That probably covers murder and dismemberment. I don’t think there’s much else.”

I was smiling as we left. Once the door closed behind us, I looked over at her. “PS? Why'd she say that?”

“Because she’s weird.” Piety rolled her eyes. “My middle name is Sabine. The whole name is a mouthful – Piety Sabine Van Allan. PS. Also, I told her more than once that I think my folks had me as an afterthought to help my dad’s career. Afterthought...PS.”

She glanced up at me and shrugged. If I hadn't been staring at her, I probably would've missed the flash of pain that moved across her eyes, then disappeared. I didn't need to know much about her to understand what had prompted that look.

I shook my head. “I don’t see how anybody could think of you as an afterthought, Piety Van Allen.”

SIX

PIETY

Those words tugged at my heart, and as we stood out in the hall, I found myself reaching up to touch his cheek, wanting that contact. His eyes widened a little, and it was that alone that made me realize what I was doing.

I forced a smile. It was fake, but I knew from experience it would come off as real enough. One thing a politician's daughter learned how to do at a young age was how to offer a sincere-looking false smile.

"Sorry...you've just got..." I pretended to brush something off his cheek. "There. All better. Come on, let's get going."

I started down the hall, my face flaming as he caught up with me.

What had I been getting ready to do?

Oh, man.

What was I doing, *period*?

Paying him twelve thousand dollars to be my pretend husband so I could get my parents to leave me alone?

Except it's not pretend, my conscience whispered. *You did marry him.*

He was quiet as I pushed the elevator button, and I glanced up to find him studying me. The elevator door slid open, and we stepped inside, but my wish to have company to keep the conversation at a minimum went ungranted.

"Do you want to do this?" he asked softly. "Or did your mate talk you into it?"

I didn't blink twice at the word *mate*. I'd spent one of the best summers of my life in Sydney the year after I graduated high school. He'd dropped a lot of the terms I would have expected somebody from fresh out of Oz to use, and I found myself smiling a little at the language.

"Astra and I have been friends a long time. She can nag me into a lot of

things,” I admitted, “but she can’t push me into doing anything I don’t really want to do.” I met his eyes and smiled. “This isn’t a bad idea.”

Oh, yes, it was.

“You don’t sound too convinced of that.”

I blinked, wondering if he was guessing or if I’d lost some of my skill at masking what I was thinking.

“What makes you say that?” I asked as the elevator doors slid open.

“Something in your eyes. You look...nervous.” He shrugged as we came to a stop in the middle the lobby. All cream and gold, it was understated elegance in the middle of one of the glitziest cities in the world.

Not too far away lay one of the many entrances to the casino. I reached over and took his hand. “Come on.”

He followed along, but when he saw where we were going, his brows went together. “If you want to gamble, I’ll probably just stand at your shoulder.”

“That’s fine.” I slanted him a glance over my shoulder. “Or you could let me spot you a hundred dollars. If you don’t do much with it, fine. And if you win anything...it’s yours.”

“I...” He scowled even harder and I wondered if he ever let himself have a little fun. I would’ve thought a stripper would’ve been a little more daring.

“Come on.” I winked at him. “It’s Vegas. You gotta live a *little* bit while you’re here.”

“I’m living plenty, thanks.” He flashed me a wry smile, one that managed to set my heart to racing. “I ended up with a beautiful bride, didn’t I?”

That prompted a real smile even as I rolled my eyes at him. “I...well, I don’t think that counts. We were drunk off our asses.”

I continued to tug him along with me as I sought out one of the cashiers. After getting some cash, I pushed a hundred into his hand. “Know how to play Texas Hold’Em?”

“Yes.” He shook his head as he gave me a wry grin. “I guess you don’t know how to take no very well, do you?”

“Sure I do.” I nudged him with my elbow as we made our way over to the gaming tables. “The problem is...you haven’t exactly said *no*. Come on. One hand, and if you don’t have fun, I’ll leave you alone.”

“ONE MORE HAND.”

“No.” I glared at him and his ever-growing pile of chips, although I wasn’t really mad. He’d taken that hundred I’d given him and somehow turned it into over seven. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were a card shark.”

The dealer laughed.

So did Kaleb.

“It’s just luck.” He winked at me and a couple of others chuckled.

“The little lady’s a sore loser,” a heavysset man next to me said, leaning close enough that I could smell the remnants of his breakfast on his breath – onions and sausage.

Pleasant.

“Not really. I’m just a better winner.” I gave him a bland smile and got up to take the seat that had been vacated next to Kaleb. “I’m done though. I’m going to find a slot machine and engage in something a little less strenuous on my poor little female brain.”

He half-choked on the water he’d requested from the server when I fluttered my lashes at the man across from us, who blinked at me, clearly wondering if I’d somehow insulted him.

The dealer was holding back a smile.

I left her a tip and gestured to Kaleb where I’d be. He could see me from the table, and I could see him. We’d exchanged phone numbers earlier, and since he was enjoying himself – and kicking ass – I figured it was as good a time as any to move onto something I didn’t totally suck at.

Plus, I could get away from sausage and onion breath.

At least that was the plan.

I’d only been at my chosen slot machine for ten minutes when the one next to me opened up. When Sausage and Onion sat down, I mentally groaned but ignored him, focusing on the machine in front of me. All the luck I was lacking in Poker today, I was making in spades on my shiny slot machine. I was up to almost twelve hundred dollars, and I’d started out with a hundred.

“Well now, looks like you found your groove, sweetheart.”

I didn’t respond.

Sometimes if a girl ignored the creepers, they went away.

And...sometimes they didn’t. When he patted my shoulder, I glanced over as if just now noticing him. “Oh, hi. Bored with poker, I see.”

“Yeah. That Australian shit is cheating or something, I kid you not.” He smirked over toward the table and then smiled at me. “Maybe you and I could go hit up another game...or something.”

“No, thanks.” I focused back on the machine, then laughed when three 7s lit up on the play line and music began to jingle.

“You’re doing pretty well there,” he said, admiration a little too thick in his voice.

I made a low noise in my throat that could have been a thanks – or anything else.

“How about I buy you a drink?”

Geez. The man wasn’t getting it. Looking over at him, I said, “I’ve got one. I’m not interested, okay?”

“Hey, I’m just being friendly.” He leaned a little closer. “Seeing as how you aren’t here with anybody–”

“Piety.”

Kaleb’s voice was entirely too welcome. I didn’t let myself smile or show any other response as I glanced over my shoulder at him. I just nodded before looking back at Sausage and Onion. “Actually, I *am* here with somebody. My husband is that Australian shit you were insulting.”

Face going a florid shade of red, the man glared at me before looking over my shoulder at Kaleb. “Hey, now why you gotta go...I didn’t...look, buddy, I wasn’t meaning nothing. We were just talking.”

“Of course you were. Now you’re done.” Kaleb’s voice was cold.

I smiled into my coffee as the seat next to me quickly became vacant. Kaleb sat down, placing a fresh coffee down in the empty space between the machines. “Was he bothering you?”

“Yes.” Looking over at him, I offered a smile of gratitude. “I was handling him, but he had a head like a rock. Getting through would probably take a sledgehammer.” I paused, head cocked as I considered. “No. Just the right amount of testosterone. Some men only respond to that.”

He skimmed his fingers along my shoulder. It was a light, friendly touch, almost platonic. “Makes me want to apologize for my gender as a whole.”

“No need.” I traded out my nearly empty coffee cup for the one he’d brought over. “Is this mine?”

“Yes. You seem to inhale it.”

“It’s my addiction.” I sighed lustily and took a sip before focusing back on the machine. “You’re a sweetheart, you know that, Kaleb?”

“A nice quality to have in a temporary husband, I suppose.”

“Well, I think it’s a nice quality to have, period.” Before I could get too wrapped up in my pretend spouse, I pulled the lever on the machine and watched the numbers spin.

“NO.” I looked at the ride in front of me. The damn thing looked like it couldn’t decide if it wanted to be a roller coaster or a giant see-saw. Nerves jangled in my belly, and I stared at it a minute longer before shaking my head and backing away. I ended up backing right into Kaleb and almost, *almost*, stayed there. Laughing nervously, I turned to look at him. “Sorry. And um... no. *Hell*, no.”

“Oh, come on. It’ll be fun.” He moved in a little closer and the scent of him flooded my head.

Flooded my head and threatened my senses too. It was mid-afternoon, and with every passing hour, I had to remind myself more often that we weren’t on any sort of *date*.

This was...well, it was *business*.

Kind of.

Sorta.

Business that had brought us to the infamous roller coaster located on top of one of the tallest hotels in Vegas – the one that went speeding over the edge of the hotel itself. And he looked *excited* about getting on it.

“Look, I’m all fine and dandy with *regular* roller coasters,” I said. “If you want to ride Space Mountain or something like that...” Inspiration struck. “Hey, I know! We can go to Disneyland. Maybe skip my family reunion and go to Disney, and I’ll send them a postcard. *Sorry we missed it. Honeymooning at Disney with my new husband.*”

He cocked an eyebrow at me. “Now you’re just trying to distract me. Okay. If you really don’t want to ride, do you mind if I do anyway?”

“Um...” I glanced at the ride again. “Sure.”

“Awesome.” He squeezed my arms and moved around me, heading toward the ride.

He got maybe ten feet away, and I swore, telling myself that if I went plummeting off the side, I’d at least die a relatively painless death. He shot

me a look when I caught up with him. “Change your mind?”

“You’re up here because of me,” I said sourly. “If that thing breaks down and you plunge to your death, you shouldn’t do it alone.”

To my surprise, he broke out into a deep, sexy laugh.

The sound of it sent shivers down my spine, my nipples tightening in response. Thoughts whirled through my brain as I tried to remember something, *anything* about last night. I was so distracted by that, I didn’t realize how little of a line there was until he came to a stop just a few feet away from the gate and announced, “Looks like we’ll get to be on the next one.”

“Great...wait, the next one?” I looked around, panicked.

“Hey, look at me.” His voice, low and cajoling, had me doing just that, and I sucked in a breath when my eyes met his. He’d dipped his head, and we were practically eye to eye. “It’s just like any other roller coaster. Anchored with steel into concrete. It’s safety checked just like any coaster.”

“It’s hundreds of feet in the air,” I said weakly.

“If you don’t want to ride, don’t ride.” He crooked a grin at me. “I won’t plunge to my death, I promise. Wouldn’t want to make you a widow, after all.”

I almost got out of the line, but for some reason, I couldn’t walk away. Not from him. “I...no, I’m riding.”

“Then look at me. Don’t look around you. Don’t think about it being on a building.” He brushed my hair back from my face and his thumb came in contact with my skin.

Rough, calloused...different from what I was used to. In my social circle, I typically only met a certain type of guy. It sort of limited my dating to *that* certain type of guy. Most of them had manicures about as often as I did.

What would it feel like to have a man with calloused hands touching me in more *intimate* places?

My breathing hitched, and I tightened my hand around his wrist. I didn’t even realize I’d reached up to grab him until I felt his pulse beating against my fingers.

“You’re scared,” he said grimly. “Come on. Let’s forget this.”

“No.” I startled myself with the strength of my response. “I’m...well, yes, I’m scared. But...”

“Tickets, please.”

I backed away from him, swallowing nervously. What would he think if

he knew the reason I'd grabbed him, that the reason I was breathing hard had nothing to do with the coaster and everything to do with him?

"We're getting out of line," Kaleb said.

But before he could take action to echo his words, I grabbed the tickets from his hand and shoved them at the ride attendant. Blindly staring at Kaleb, I said, "No, we're not. Come on, hubby. It's kind of our honeymoon, right? Let's live a little."

"But..."

I pulled his arm. "Let's do it before I lose my courage!"

He chuckled and started to walk with me. "You've got more nerve than a lot of people I know."

Once we were sitting and had to deal with the restraints, I squeezed my eyes closed. He must have noticed because he took over helping me with the safety harness when I fumbled. When he took my hand in his, my heart flipped a little.

"You're going to love it, Piety."

"Yeah...right. Just like dinner with Mom and Dad," I said glibly. I opened one eye a fraction. Oh, no...

In my head, I was screaming, trying to figure out what was wrong with me. I'd hit my head and was suffering massive personality changes. I'd hit my head and was delusional. I'd hit my head and lost my free will. I was having a nightmare. *Something...*

Then he squeezed my hand. "It's almost ready to go."

No...no dream. He was rubbing his thumb up and down the inside of my wrist. It was a slow rhythm, probably meant to be soothing. But I felt each stroke in places that had nothing to do with my wrist – or my arm. My nipples had contracted to hard little points, and my pussy throbbed. If I could have moved, I might have been squirming in my seat.

What is wrong with me...?

"Here we go..."

The rest of his voice was drowned out by the shouts of others and the roar of metal on metal.

I opened my eyes. "I changed my mind! Let me off!" I shouted desperately as the lights of the city began to rush closer. We were going to fly right off this damn thing.

Then we were being pulled right back.

"Oh, shit. I don't..."

He squeezed my hand again.

We plummeted forward. The lights whirled, and Kaleb's knee pressed into mine.

Oh...

I didn't know when I started to laugh, but I was still laughing when he helped me out of the car, and I collapsed against him, feeling almost delirious from adrenaline...and want.

"It looks like you had fun." He brushed my hair back. The wind had blown it all over the place.

I returned the favor, still giggling even as the feel of his soft hair sent a wave of heat through me. "I didn't. I hated it. I think it's..." Another snort of laughter escaped me. "I think it's stress giggling."

"Is that a thing?"

We started to walk, and I elbowed him in the side. "Don't make fun."

"Want to ride again?"

I shot the coaster a look. "No!" But the thought of having him holding my hand, feeling the hard length of his thigh against mine...Shit. "I don't know. There are other rides in Vegas. Or we could go get dinner."

To my surprise, he pulled me against him for a hug, and this time, *he* was the one laughing. "You did have fun, see? You almost thought about getting back on, didn't you?"

"Yeah." I blushed and caught his hand, tugging him along with me so he wouldn't notice. I wasn't quite ready to tell him the only reason I was even tempted was because *he* would be on there with me. I felt like I was in ninth grade all over again, crushing over the cute boy who had helped me with advanced algebra two.

"WHAT TIME SHOULD I meet you in the morning?"

Kaleb had walked me back to my room, and now that he'd retrieved his bag, he looked like he was about ready to take off again.

"I don't know. Where's your..." I stopped, feeling like an idiot. "Son of a bitch. You don't have a hotel now, do you?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "Well, no. I don't see why you're calling me a SOB for it though."

“I wasn’t...”

He grinned at me, and I realized he was joking. “Ha, ha.” Rolling my eyes at him, I gestured at the bag. “What were you going to do? Wander the strip until you found a place? Go down to the desk and see if they had anything here?”

“The idea occurred to me.” He shrugged, looking unconcerned.

“Oh, for crying out loud.” I passed my key in front of the door, and as the electronic lock slid open, I said, “You can stay here. The couch has a fold-out.”

My cheeks went red, but I continued talking as though we hadn’t already shared a bed the night before. What we’d done while we were drunk was different. We were stone cold sober now, and while I was seriously attracted to him, we didn’t know each other.

That small fact couldn’t be overlooked.

“That’s not necessary.” He backed away a step.

I caught the handle of his duffel. “No, it’s not, but it makes more sense than you trying to find a room. If it takes you an hour or so, then you might not get much sleep, and we’ll have to make an extra stop on our way to the airport. Why *not* stay here? We can order up a pizza, a few beers...”

“You know how to tempt a man.” He blew out a breath, staring off down the hallway. Slowly, almost reluctantly, he nodded. “I’ve got to make a call though.”

“Sure.” A giddy sort of excitement unfurled through me as he followed me into the room. “No problem. Use the one in the bedroom suite if you want. Totally private.”

He nodded and left his bag on the floor in the entryway, tucked neatly against the wall.

As he walked off, I leaned my back against the door and watched him walk away.

How crazy was it that part of me almost wished this *was* real?

I’d had more fun with him today than I’d had in a long, long time.

If only I’d...

No. Don’t go thinking about kissing him, Piety. He’s a stranger.

Yes, that was the voice of common sense. I wanted to stuff a sock in its sensible mouth.

SEVEN

KALEB

Of course she's going to make me sleep on the couch.

Various parts of me – from my dick to my bruised ego – were arguing that I hadn't spent *last* night on the couch.

But last night we'd been drunk and stupid.

Today we were sober, but I was clearly still stupid because I still wanted to get naked with a woman I barely knew. My cock was trying to lead me around, and I couldn't let it. I had too many things going on. No, I actually only had *one* thing going on. One thing because I'd pretty much given up everything else for this. For *her*.

Camry.

She still hadn't called back.

I couldn't keep letting myself get distracted over Piety, even as... distractible as she was.

Like now. She bent over the table, putting something down, and my eyes strayed over the curve of her ass. I could see myself moving up behind her and cupping her hips, moving against her. She had a nice ass, round and tight and her legs were long, strong, and muscled. She'd mentioned a few things off and on during the day that made me think she was probably as active as I was – or as active as I *had* been before everything went to shit.

Brooding, I turned away and carried my duffel over to the couch, staring at it for a long moment as I thought about Camry, the money I had to make – the money Piety was going to pay me. If this didn't work...

"What do you think?"

I whipped my head around. "What?"

Piety had moved up next to me, and I hadn't even noticed. Staring down

at her, I found myself wanting a taste of her mouth – one that I remembered.

All I had in my head were disconnected bits and pieces, and it wasn't nearly enough.

She grinned. "You're a little distracted there."

"Yeah. Thinking." I focused back on the bag in front of me and unzipped it, as though something in there would be terribly fascinating.

I had a feeling the woman next to me was on to me though. She knew I was preoccupying myself so I wouldn't look at the *real* thing that fascinated me – her.

"I was just wondering if you had anything specific you wanted on your pizza."

"No. I'm easy." Then I paused. "Unless you're going to get really crazy and put fish or fruit on it."

She laughed softly. "Okay. No anchovies and no pineapple. Maybe a supreme? I'm craving a big, messy pizza."

"Yeah. Fine." From the corner of my eye, I glanced at her, hoping she'd leave. Hoping.

But she still stood there.

Straightening, I met her eyes. "Did you want to go out and get it or are we ordering in?"

"Oh, ordering in. Definitely." She grimaced and dropped down on the couch, kicking off her bright yellow sneakers. "I'm worn out, and my feet are killing me. I just...well, I wanted to say thanks. I know this is an odd kind of job."

I laughed. "*Odd?* You think this is *odd?*"

It felt weird to stand there, practically looming over her, so I sat down, careful to keep a few inches between us.

"Okay, if you want, we can call it outright *insane*." She sniffed primly, crossing her legs, and folding her hands in her lap. She gave me a look of mock affront, but I could see the humor dancing in her eyes.

Already some of the worry and fear were melting away, and I struggled to hold onto them. I couldn't forget why I was doing this. Slowly, I sat down on the huge slab of wood that served as a coffee table in this decadent hotel room. My flat back in Sydney hadn't been this nice. Not even close.

"I should be the one thanking you, really," I said, meeting her eyes.

"Why?" She laughed. "You've always wanted to get hooked up to a crazy chick with parental issues, and then get dragged to a family reunion where

you'll be the object of stares and awkward questions about a baby that doesn't exist? That's what will happen, you know. They'll assume you got me knocked up and we had to get married."

"They do realize it's not exactly 1955. That isn't how things go anymore." I meant it jokingly.

But Piety wasn't smiling when she looked back at me. "They do in my world. You'll see when you meet them. And trust me, by the time this is all over, you'll think you're getting ripped off."

"No, I won't." The sadness in her voice tugged at me, so I did something stupid. I touched her.

She looked up at me, and I felt myself drawn even closer. Instead of moving back, I brushed her hair away from her face, then skimmed my fingers along her jawline. She had silky, soft skin. And she smelled so good – so damn good.

"It won't be all that bad. You'll be around, right?"

She laughed weakly. "That's not much of a bonus, Kaleb. I'm the one who got you into this mess to begin with."

"See, I *should* be the one thanking you."

"You're sweet." Her gaze dropped, and it hit me straight in the chest when I figured out just where she was looking.

Straight at my mouth.

I'd been careful not to spend too much time checking her out today, although I was probably wasting my time, trying to hide the fact that I found her attractive. We'd already ended up in bed – and married. But this...

The tension between us began to simmer, and when she laid her hand on my cheek, I decided that I was overthinking this. Why bother being cautious about this of all things?

I was just about to kiss her when she leaned forward and pressed her mouth to mine, taking the debate out of my hands.

Her taste...

I groaned and reached for her waist, pulling her toward me even as I went to my knees in front of the couch.

She came willingly, and I wrapped one arm around her, pushing the fingers of my other hand into her hair. Her breasts went flat against me, and in the back of my mind, an image flashed, my hands on those pretty little tits, her tongue stroking out to dampen her lower lip.

Then it was gone – and so was she.

“Damn. I’m sorry,” she said, breathing hard as she backed away from me.

“You’re sorry?” Catching my lower lip, I sucked it into my mouth, savoring the faint taste of her as it faded. “I don’t think you need to be apologizing, Piety.”

“I...look.” She blushed, and it was so adorable, I wanted to grab her, pull her against me, and never let go.

But then she turned away, her shoulders hunching protectively, and that was when it clicked – something wasn’t right.

“Look, I’m not paying you to sleep with me,” she blurted out, bolting upright just as the last word escaped her lips.

For a minute, I didn’t quite get what she meant. When I did, I tried to hide my laugh by turning it into a cough. It didn’t quite work.

She glared at me as I stood.

“I’m sorry,” I said, shaking my head, and holding up a hand as she took a step toward me, looking like she wanted to throttle me. “I’m just...look, that never crossed my mind. When a beautiful woman kisses me, do you think I’ve got my mind on anything other than her mouth on mine? Or...”

I didn’t intentionally drop my gaze, but...well, I had other thoughts in my head besides her kissing me, or me kissing her. And all of them involved us naked and touching each other. None of them involved money.

That was foolish, because right now, everything I did should involve thinking about money, whether I was taking a piss, eating or trying to figure out how to stretch five dollars into twenty.

But Piety shut my brain off.

And I loved it.

Her chest hitched.

If I hadn’t been staring at just that portion of her anatomy, I might have missed it, but her breasts rose and fell in an erratic rhythm several times over, and I didn’t let myself think about the steps I was taking to close the distance between us until I’d already done it.

And then I was only thinking about it because there was still too much space between us even though, unless I had her naked and under me, we couldn’t get much closer.

Right. Clothes. I wanted those off right now.

Her hands twisted in my hair while I reached for the zipper at the back of her sundress. It was surprisingly difficult to concentrate on something so complex as a zipper when her tongue was stroking across mine. My fingertips

brushed her shoulders as I pushed her dress off, and a zing of electricity went through me.

I needed to feel her skin. All of it. I needed it more than I'd ever felt like I needed anything else in my life.

Her bra went next and I couldn't stop myself from shifting enough to get my hands between us. She moaned the moment I cupped her breasts, and I made a similar sound when I felt her nipples harden against my palms. I'd never given much thought to whether I had particular type when it came to women, but I couldn't imagine a set of breasts more perfect than the ones I was touching right now.

Her hands were at my waist now, tugging at my shirt, so I tore my mouth away to deal with it. I wouldn't have done anything more than that, but as I lost the heat of her body, it suddenly occurred to me that I needed to find protection before things got even more heated. Now I just needed to figure out where in the hell I'd put my condoms. I knew I had a pack. Somewhere.

“Kaleb?”

The uncertainty in her voice had me looking up, and the sight of her perfect, porcelain skin, those high, firm breasts...she took my breath away.

“Just being safe, sweetheart.” I tore my eyes away from her as I dug through my pack until I found what I was looking for.

In the two minutes it took me to find them, Piety had plastered her front to my back, and I could feel the soft, silken smoothness of her curves, the hard, pebbled flesh of her nipples. I had to close my eyes. Her hands slid across my stomach, and my muscles twitched beneath her palms. Her touch was light as she toyed with the button on my jeans. In short, she was going out of her way to drive me out of my mind.

And she was damn good at it.

Turning back to face her, I caught her in my arms and guided us onto the wide couch. She laughed breathlessly, the sound fading as I put her under me. I allowed myself another moment to appreciate the sight of her body, bare except for a pair of tiny white lace panties.

If I would have known she was wearing those under that bloody dress of hers, I would've been hard pressed to resist as long as I had.

“You drive me insane, you know that?” I caught her lower lip between my teeth and tugged.

“Stop talking and kiss me.” She put action to words and pulled my head closer, licking at my mouth until I kissed her.

Sliding her hands between us, she reached for the button, freed it. Then she dragged the zipper down, and I groaned the second she shoved her hand inside and wrapped her fingers around my cock. Her teeth scraped against my lip, and I tightened my hold on her hip.

Thrusting into her touch, I ground down against her hand, pleasure coursing through me at her touch.

She laughed, the sound wild and hungry. “You better not enjoy that too much. Wouldn't want you to miss out on the main event.”

“We couldn't have that,” I agreed.

Shoving up onto my knees, I hooked my fingers in the elastic of her panties and pulled them off, her eyes locking with mine as she raised her hips and let me pull them off. Her legs settled on either side of of me, revealed dark curls and pink flesh.

Fuck.

I fumbled the condom out of my pocket and tore it open. As much as I wanted to taste her, I needed to be inside her more. Without another word, I settled in the cradle of her hips. The heat was unreal, and when I brushed against her, we both shuddered.

Hooking one of her knees up over my arm, I drove into her, listening to her cry bouncing off the walls as I slid home. My head fell forward as her wet sheath gripped me tight. She moaned, low in her throat, and I pressed my lips to the satiny skin just above her pulse.

She reached for my shoulders, sinking her nails into my skin. The sweet little bites of pain went tripping down my spine as I rocked back, then thrust deeper still. Her pussy contracted around me, squeezing me like a fist. She opened her eyes, and we stared at each other.

This was too good.

Too perfect.

The pleasure so acute I couldn't even process it, I gave up trying and just let it go. Let my body sink into hers, move with hers. Each stroke sent another ripple of pleasure through me, each breath rubbing her nipples against my chest. Unlike women I'd slept with in the past, she was tall enough that I managed to bend my head down to capture one pale pink nipple between my lips without missing a single thrust.

She arched her back, nails scratching at my scalp even as she pressed my head closer to her breast. Not that I had any intention of releasing my prize. Her sounds of pleasure were almost enough to send me over the edge, and I

knew I'd want to hear them again. And again. And again.

Piety was hot and sweet, her cunt rippling around me with sensations that became tighter and tighter as she moved closer to climax. She writhed and moaned and twisted under me, her nails scratching against my back and chest until my skin stung.

Neither of us spoke, and for that I was grateful. I didn't want to lie to her, to say things in the heat of the moment that I couldn't keep to later. Better to show her how attracted I was to her, how much I enjoyed being with her. I couldn't make her promises, but I could make her feel good.

I buried my hand in that thick, soft hair and used it to tilt her head back, baring her throat to me. I could feel her trembling around me, beneath me, and knew she was close. I pulled her leg up high, her ankle on my shoulder, and leaned down, opening her wider. As I pushed in deep, I bit down on her soft flesh, worrying at her skin with teeth and tongue until she exploded. The sound she made was something so primal, so real, that I came, unable to hold back any longer.

Fuck.

Dropping my head down so that my forehead rested between her breasts, I closed my eyes. Her arms and legs were still wrapped around me, holding me to her, as if she was worried I would run away.

She...this...all of it.

Dammit!

Why couldn't I have met her some other time?

Some other place?

EIGHT

PIETY

“This family reunion, is it something your family does every year?” Kaleb asked.

His fingers drew small circles on my side as we lay on the bed. We might've moved from the couch to my bedroom, but we still hadn't gotten around to ordering pizza. We would have to get something eventually, because my belly was growling, but I wasn't in any hurry. I didn't think he was either.

I was entirely too comfortable with him. I hadn't been with too many other guys, but I couldn't think of a single one who had been so easy to just *be* with.

It was nice.

“Every two years. And that's about five years too often.” Grinning, I reached up to run my hand through his hair.

He caught my hand. “That math doesn't add up.”

“I know. It's not that I don't love my family, but they're not the easiest people to be around en masse.”

“Why not?” he asked, rubbing his thumb over my inner wrist.

I bit my lip, considering how to answer. He watched me, not pushing, not judging, and I answered as honestly as I could. “Have you ever had anybody who expected certain things of you? I mean like all the time?”

He started to shake his head, then stopped and shrugged. “In a way. I don't think it's quite the same thing you're putting up with.” He kissed my hand. “But I think I get it. It can be exhausting.”

“You nailed it.” I curled in closer to him, enjoying his warmth. “Thank you. I know you don't want to hear it, but thanks for helping me.”

“I’ve already told you, I should be thanking you. The money...well, I need it, so you’re helping me.” As he spoke, a dull flush rose to stain his cheeks, and the tips of his ears turned red. It was oddly charming.

“Family stuff?”

He gave me a lopsided grin, but offered no real answer. His eyes shifted away, distancing himself even if his body stayed close.

Understanding the need for privacy, I rested my head on his shoulder so he didn’t have to feel like he was avoiding looking at me.

“You know, twenty-four hours ago, I was brooding and pissed off. I had no idea I was going to be doing this today. I had no idea I would be meeting you.” I laughed a little. “All in all, I’m pretty pleased with how the day is going. Granted, last night...” I exhaled a long breath. “My mind is still kind of blown. I wish I could remember everything that happened.”

“According to Astra, we got hitched.” He said it in a tone dry enough to make me laugh again.

“That’s not what I meant.” I nudged him. “Well, not entirely. I’m talking about...” Now was my turn to blush and avoid his gaze. “I mean, last night. We slept together, but I don’t remember anything. Considering how amazing what we just did was, I sort of wish I could.”

He cleared his throat. “I kinda have an answer about that I think.”

I pushed up and turned around, facing him. “What do you mean? You know what happened?” He wouldn’t meet my eyes directly, and he didn’t answer right away, so I prodded him, poking him in the side. He flinched a bit, and I tucked that into the back of my head. *Ticklish...* “Come on, tell me.”

Kaleb sat up, scooting until his back was against the headboard. “I don’t think anything happened.”

“But this morning...” I stared at him. “There was a condom wrapper on the nightstand, and you were...” I cleared my throat. “You had a condom on.”

“Yeah, about that.” He flushed bright red. “It...ah...well, it wasn’t used.”

“But...” I couldn’t think of a single response to that.

“Maybe we were just both too drunk. I don’t know.”

Baffled – and oddly disappointed – I stared at him for the longest time, uncertain of what I wanted to say. I couldn’t think of a single thing, although there were a hundred stops and starts inside my head.

“Mystery solved, right?”

“Yeah.” I managed a weak smile. “Mystery solved.” I leaned against him and snuggled in closer, tucking my head into the hollow between his neck and shoulder.

His arm came around me, and it fit – we fit. We felt...perfect together.

Why did I feel so disappointed that we hadn't had sex last night? I didn't understand it, but there was this strange hollow feeling inside me.

“Are you okay?” Kaleb stroked his hand up and down my back.

“Oh, I'm fine. Just thinking.” I was careful not to let my voice reveal anything. I'd become all too good at that. That was a skill you picked up early, being a politician's daughter. Certain things, a girl just didn't let show.

From where my head rested against his chest, I could feel the steady beat of his heart, and it was oddly soothing, comforting. My hand was on his stomach, moving up and down with each breath, and in that moment, it made a deep, gurgling noise. With a little laugh, I straightened. Before I could tease him about it, my belly rumbled in agreement. “I guess we should get around to ordering that pizza. What do you think?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

I kicked my legs over the edge of the bed and grabbed the first thing that came to hand. It happened to be his t-shirt, but I pulled it on without a second thought. It came to mid-thigh, and the scent of him wrapping around my body made me shiver a little.

“Hey.” His voice had a low sexy rumble to it that made my pussy throb.

I glanced back at him.

“Did I say you could borrow that?” The glint in his eye said he was teasing me.

Two could play at that game.

“Well...” I reached for the hem.

“Don't.” He groaned and looked away. “Keep it on or we'll never eat, and I'm starving.”

I laughed and blew him a kiss. As I moved over to the phone, though, I could feel his eyes on me, and when I glanced back at him, he was watching me with heavy-lidded eyes.

Heat swept through me, and I averted my gaze as a voice came on the line. By the time I finished ordering the food, I could hear water coming on in the bathroom, and I thought about joining him. We had half an hour.

Might as well enjoy the time...and it would conserve water too.

BETWEEN THE TWO OF US, we pretty much demolished an entire extra-large pie and several beers.

Now, belly full and pleasantly buzzed, I stretched back out on the bed, studying him.

“I’ve been thinking,” I announced. He’d pulled a pair of jeans on after we’d gotten out of the shower, and while I was kind of sorry to see him wearing any kind of clothing, at the same time, it’d been a good idea. When he was all naked and beautiful in front of me, I lost track of important things...like breathing.

He glanced at me over his shoulder, a golden brow arched. “Just what have you been thinking about, Miss Piety?”

“I’ve been thinking...” I said slowly. I rolled to my hands and knees and crawled to the edge of the bed as I grinned at him. “That you and I need to be able to convince my parents and the rest of my family that we’re comfortable together, that we fell head over heels in love...or at least in lust with each other.”

“Well, that is what you’re paying me for,” he said, turning to face me. Eyes locked on mine, he reached out and traced a bold finger down my cheek, my collarbone, then dropped his hand down to cup my breast through his shirt. “Are you saying I haven’t I done a good job of proving there’s a fair amount of lust on my side?”

I was having a difficult time concentrating as his thumb moved across my nipple. “I think...it’s safe to say there’s a fair amount of lust on both sides.”

He lightly pinched my nipple and I moaned, fighting the urge to wrap myself around him and tell him to just do me.

It took a supreme effort of will to continue.

“We have to convince them. We should...” I cleared my throat, heat rushing up to stain my cheeks red as he dipped his head and raked his teeth down my neck. He’d already left one mark, but I wanted him to leave another. But first I had to finish my thought. “We should be comfortable together.”

He pushed his knee between mine as he wrapped his hand around the back of my neck. “I don’t feel comfortable right now. Maybe after I’ve had you wrapped around my cock for a little while longer, after I’ve made you scream my name and I’ve emptied myself inside you...then I’ll be comfortable.”

Fuck me. Every cell in my entire body was practically vibrating.

“That’s not what I...meant.”

He grinned down at me, ice-blue eyes blazing hot. “What did you mean?”

“We should start sleeping together.”

“Haven’t we done that?” He caught the hem of my shirt – his t-shirt – and started to drag it up, letting his fingertips trail across my skin as he went. “Let me refresh your memory.”

“Again, not what I meant.” But I wasn’t going to complain. Not when I could still feel what it was like to have him inside me

“Oh.” He let the shirt go. “You meant...share your bed.”

“Yes.”

He looked thoughtful.

My body burned as I waited.

Then he nodded. “I’m fine with that.”

He turned away from me and my stomach dropped.

“Wait! What are you...?”

He looked back at me. “We’re sleeping together, right? I’m tired, so I’m going to get ready for bed.”

“But...” Glaring at him, I folded my arms over my chest, knowing my nipples would be clearly visible.

He slowly shifted back around to face me, his gaze flicking down and then back up. “Is there a problem?”

“You started something. Aren’t you going to finish it?”

He came toward me, a loose-limbed prowling gait that was unbearably sexy. “So...sex *and* sleeping together. This is getting complicated, Piety.”

There was a teasing glint in his eye, though, one that made me want to smile, want to tease.

Smoothing my hand down the front of my borrowed shirt, I hitched up a shoulder. “Not so complicated. Don’t you need to get your shirt back so you can pack it? Be ready for tomorrow.”

He caught my hips, and the feel of his rough hands against my smooth skin sent a shiver through me.

“You sound like you’re a big believer in being prepared.”

He said the words against my lips.

Before I could respond, he was kissing me.

No...no, I really wasn’t a big believer in being prepared. I just would’ve said anything to get him to touch me again. What did it matter anyway? No

amount of preparation could have ever gotten me ready for him.

NINE

KALEB

Waking up felt strange.

For a minute, I didn't entirely understand why.

I lay there a few more minutes, trying to process. That didn't take too long, but even after I'd figured out why things felt different, I didn't move.

If I did that, it might break the spell.

It had been years since I'd woken up with a woman.

I couldn't really count yesterday. We'd been hung over and irritated, and I'd been in a stupor for several minutes even after Piety had rolled out of the bed.

This though...

This.

It had been years since I'd had this.

I hadn't realized I'd missed it. There'd been no time for a relationship, not really. Even the few I'd had when I was younger...hell. Nothing had felt as easy and right as this.

That in and of itself was just insane, because *this* wasn't real.

Piety was paying me.

Not to sleep with her, but she was paying me money to stay with her, and if it hadn't been for the money, I wouldn't have been around for any of this. And that bothered me more than I wanted to admit.

I couldn't lose sight of the reason I was doing this. I couldn't afford to. And I couldn't afford to have feelings for this woman, even though it would be damn easy *to* have feelings for her. She was...funny. Sweet, but in a subtle way. There was a sharp, sarcastic side to her that hid that softness. I liked all of it, and suspected the more I was around her, the more I'd like it. Like *her*.

Which meant if I was smart, I'd get away and stay away.

Rising from the bed, I moved over to the window and stared outside. Under my feet, the carpet was plush and thick, feeling as foreign to me as the rest of the room, as strange and different as the woman lying on the bed behind me.

I didn't fit in here.

Brooding, I looked back at Piety, but that only made me want to climb back into bed with her.

The temptation was so strong, I jerked my gaze away and headed for the small pile of clothes at the end of the bed. Grabbing my jeans, I headed for the bathroom.

I didn't bother putting them on until the door was closed behind me. Once I was lost in the relative privacy, I checked my phone to see if there had been any calls.

No.

Not that too many people *would* call.

But Camry should have.

But, of course she hadn't. I squeezed my phone around the casing, hard enough that the plastic cracked a little. Then, slowly, I lowered it and punched in her number. She didn't answer. Big surprise.

I waited till the voicemail started and once it beeped, I left a message.

"Hey, Camry. It's me. Listen...something's come up, and I've got to leave the city for a little bit. When I get back, I'll have money. I'll have everything I need to make all of this right again. It's going to be okay."

Make it right again...

I wanted to laugh at my own stupidity.

Instead, I disconnected the call and shoved my phone in the pocket of my jeans.

How could I make things *right*? How could I possibly hope to do that?

Frustrated, I wrenched the door open, half thinking I'd go for a walk or something.

And I came to a dead stop at the sight of Piety lying stretched across the bed, taking up two-thirds of it. She had the sheets wrapped and twisted around her, her face turned toward me, a faint smile on her lips.

The sight of her was like a blow straight to my chest, and without thinking – without *letting* myself think – I went to her and laid down, curling around her. I tucked my face against her hair and breathed in the scent of her.

In a few days, a few weeks, this would be over.

I'd go back to my life.

She'd go back to hers.

She'd probably forget this whole interlude. All she wanted was for her parents to get the idea that she was her own person. She was a grown woman. A fact that the body pressed to mine made abundantly clear.

Me, though...I'd go back to my life and do what? Do what I'd been doing for years?

This was my escape. *My* escape, brief as it was. I was doing what I needed to do, yeah. I couldn't deny that. But I *wanted* to do it. I hadn't wanted to walk away from Piety yet. From the moment I'd first seen her, I'd wanted her. And then I'd wanted to know her.

When it was all over, I'd go back to a life I was just now recognizing as completely empty.

Yes, I was going to try to fix things with Camry.

How could I not?

But nothing was going to be *okay*.

Things hadn't been *okay* in a long time.

So I might as well enjoy this for as long as it lasts.

Piety made a low, humming sound and stretched.

I slid my hand down her hip, and she covered it with her own. The cool metal of the new ring she'd bought brushed against the matching ring I now wore. She'd insisted on it – her parents would never buy that she'd gotten married without an appropriate ring – for both of us.

It hadn't felt right letting a woman buy something so...personal for me.

But when she'd grinned at me so playfully, then slid it on my finger, I realized how *personal* things between us already felt. She'd told me that once this was done, I could keep the ring – sell it or do whatever.

I would keep it. I already knew that. Even after we annulled this farce of a marriage, I'd keep it. A little piece of her.

She stretched again, wiggling her ass against my cock. I closed my eyes as blood rushed south. When she did it again, I realized she was holding her breath a little. Little minx.

“Something tells me you're doing that on purpose.”

She broke out in a laugh. “It took you long enough.” She did it again.

I rolled onto my knees, dragging her along so that her back was flush against me. She gasped as I slid a hand around and down, pushing my fingers

between her thighs. She was already wet, the slick heat making my cock even harder. She moaned as I rubbed my fingers against her clit until she swore. Her head fell back against my shoulder as she rode my hand, rocking back against my cock, until I thought I just might embarrass myself.

“Come for me, sweetheart,” I spoke through gritted teeth just before I pressed against that little bundle of nerves. She cried out, her body jerking as she came.

Damn, she was beautiful like that.

I eased her down onto the bed before I eased away and tore open one of the last remaining condoms on the nightstand. We’d need more. Had to remember that. No matter how much I loved the idea of sliding into her bare. I would do at least one thing smart here.

I rolled the condom down, as I trailed my eyes up along the curve of her spine. As I watched, she lifted up on her hands and knees, threw her hair back, and turned her head to smile at me over her shoulder.

It was a sweet, wicked little grin that made my heart flip over and my stomach clench.

Groaning, I grabbed her hip with one hand and held her steady, wrapping my other hand around my cock. “I think you want to drive me mad.”

“No, I just want *you*.”

Such simple words, but the things they made me feel...

Swearing, I buried myself balls-deep inside her cunt with one thrust. We both cried out, our voices mixing together even as our bodies joined. I gave us both a moment to gain control before I started to draw back. She clamped down tighter around me, like she was trying to keep me trapped inside her. I wouldn’t mind staying like this, wrapped inside her, where I belonged.

My balls went tight as I eased back, then slid forward. Slowly at first, then building in speed, I drove into her. Each time, she tightened around me, friction and pressure forcing me higher. I could feel my orgasm coiling in my stomach, fighting to break free. But I wasn't going to give in, not until she came first.

Bracing my hands against her hips, I bent over her, sweat blooming on my skin, need knotting in my gut. I slid one hand under her and rolled her nipple between my fingers. She moaned and arched her back.

“Touch yourself,” I ordered. “Rub your clit and come for me. Let me feel that hot little cunt of yours squeeze me.”

I pinched her nipple, then tugged it as I felt her shift. She shivered as her

fingers began to move over her clit. I pulled her nipple again, twisted it, and she called out my name, the sound one of pure pleasure.

Fuck. I wanted to hear that again.

“Say my name, sweetheart.” I could feel her body trembling around me. “Say it and come.”

I grabbed her hair and yanked her back against me. She came apart as she yelled my name and I didn’t fight my release any longer.

I started to climax, curses pouring from my mouth alongside her name. But the only thing that really mattered was her name.

“YOU WERE CUSSING ME OUT.”

Her words broke the silence that had fallen as we’d recovered, and I felt my face going red as I looked over at her.

Piety was propped on her elbow, staring down at me, a curious look on her face. “Well?”

“Well, what?” I asked irritably.

“I’m just...well, it’s not like I’ve slept with a lot of people or anything, but there’ve been a couple of guys.” She flushed. “And I’ve never had a guy swear at me when he came before.”

Shit. Throwing my forearm over my eyes, I tried to explain. “It wasn’t you. It was...”

Unable to find the words, I lowered my arm and stared at her. After a moment, I caught her and rolled until I had her under me. She wasn’t upset. I could see it in her eyes now. She was actually smiling. She always seemed to be smiling, even when it wasn't quite genuine.

“You know the cartoons you see in the paper? Or online where one of the characters stubs his toe or something, and all he says are exclamation marks and such? It’s because cartoons don’t cuss...but sometimes it’s more effective, even though silence can say more than words at times. But then, there are times when swearing says more than words.”

Her face softened as she reached up, cupping my cheek.

I covered her hand with mine. “I’ve been caught in a shit storm for a while, and now there’s you. You’re like an oasis.” Balancing on one elbow, I slid a hand down her belly and cupped her between her thighs. “Just being

with you would be sweet. But having you moan out my name, fucking you and knowing you want everything I can do to you – that you want to do the same things to me...”

“So, fucking me is like stubbing your toe. You can’t express yourself in any way other than cursing?” She cocked an eyebrow even as she closed her thighs, rocking up against my hand.

“Yes.” I offered her a weak grin. “It’s just...well, in a good way. Almost like hitting your funny bone or...well, you get the point.”

She pushed against my shoulders until I went to my back. She grabbed the last condom from the bedside table, then threw a leg over my waist.

“Let’s see if we can hit that funny bone again.”

TEN

PIETY

Walking around the airport in Las Vegas wasn't too different than walking around outside in the city itself or in one of the casinos. Okay, it was definitely cooler in the airport than in the city, but you got the same sense of excitement and desperation from many of the tourists.

There was such a wide variety of people, and I loved people watching. It always baffled my parents when we'd traveled, although I got better about getting caught watching as I'd gotten older. Mom had never approved.

Piety, sit still...stop gawking. It's so unseemly.

A stern look from Dad had been enough to communicate the same message, but it hadn't stopped my...*gawking* either. I'd just learned to be more subtle about it.

Now I didn't need to be subtle, but I'd learned it was more...well, polite not to so openly stare.

I wasn't trying to be *nosy* exactly.

People just fascinated me. All of them.

Of course, some of them pissed me off, like the mom who was yelling at a baby who couldn't be more than six months old, telling the poor thing to quit crying.

Just as the thought went through my mind, Astra noticed as well.

"Like yelling at her is really going to make the baby stop crying," Astra said, sarcasm thick in her voice – and she wasn't quiet about it either.

The slim blonde heard and whipped her head around, glaring at us.

But Astra was already talking to Kaleb. "I mean, don't *you* find it soothing when somebody yells at you? Especially when you're in a loud, noisy unfamiliar place and you're probably tired? That's exactly what makes

you feel better, isn't it, Kaleb?"

The look on his face made it plain as day that he didn't know if he wanted to laugh or hide behind the menu. Taking pity on him, I laid a hand on his arm. "Half the time, being in an airport is enough to make most people want to cry – or yell."

I gave the mom a smile and hoped she'd take the out, and give her baby one too. We all got stressed after all, but the baby shouldn't suffer for it.

After a moment, her eyes fell away, and she started to bounce the little girl, patting her on the butt as she rocked her back and forth. A moment later, the pitiful wails subsided and the baby shoved her fist into her mouth.

"I'm *starving*," Astra announced, studying the menu. "Why did we get on such a late flight? I could have sworn we were flying out earlier."

"We were." I glanced at her over the top of mine. "We changed it to a later one so we could all three fly first class."

"You didn't have to..." Kaleb went quiet at my look, miming that he was sealing his lips shut and tossing away a key. He'd already lost that argument.

Laughing, I patted his arm. "Figure out what you want to eat, okay?" A small market across the way caught my eye, reminding me. "Hey, I forgot my ear plugs back at the hotel, so I'm going to go grab some."

It wasn't the only thing I needed, but I definitely needed those, and gum. Hopping off the stool, I looked at Astra. "Order me an omelet and some bacon. I want something messy and fattening before I head to the reunion. I'll be eating canapes and the rest of that crap that looks pretty and tastes like cardboard."

"You got it. Don't worry, PS. I'll stay here and keep Kaleb company." She gave me a serene smile.

Inside the small shop, I found a box of condoms and the ear plugs I needed for the trip. My ears always killed me when I flew. I also saw a book from one of my favorite authors and grabbed it. On impulse, I picked up an action thriller for Kaleb. I had no idea if he liked to read. If he didn't...well, I wouldn't hold it against him *too* much. After all, Astra and I were best friends, and I only nagged her about her lack of love for reading every now and then. Like once or twice a week.

As I made my way to the cashier, a voice caught my attention. Plaintive, young...almost desperate. "Please, can you try again? It's the last credit card I have, and I'm out of diapers."

"Ma'am, I've already tried twice, and I've got other customers."

The young mom.

My gaze locked on her as she stood there, rocking her baby, and holding her credit card out to the cashier while a couple of other customers shifted restlessly behind her.

One of them, an older businessman behind her, said, "Can you move? I have a plane to catch."

My temper snapped. Striding forward, I pulled out my wallet. "Here you go, sis."

Heads whipped my way as I nudged the businessman aside, just as he had been trying to do to the young mom. I swiped my card, smiling serenely at the cashier and ignoring the surprise on the girl's face. She really was just a girl. Nineteen, maybe twenty. "I need cash too. What's the max?"

"Excuse me," the dude in the suit snapped. "You weren't next."

I glanced at him. "Oh, I know. My *sister* was. The girl you were being so rude to? We'll be done in a second."

I withdrew the maximum amount I could, then stepped out of line, holding out the diapers to the girl who was standing there, staring at me, still rocking the baby.

She didn't take them. "What's this?"

"Diapers, sweetie." Nudging her out of the line, I continued to hold the package out to her.

"I..." She firmed her jaw. "I don't need charity from some rich bitch."

"It's not charity." I didn't let the barb get to me. I was rich. I could be a bitch. And so could pride. I understood pride really well. "It's called kindness...and help. Sometimes everybody needs a little."

Her cheeks flushed hot and red. "I don't—"

"Doesn't your baby?" I kept my voice soft.

She deflated and reached out, slowly taking the diapers. "We're going to meet her dad. He's in the army, stationed out in Virginia, and I..." Her eyes filled with tears. "We're getting married. I'm moving out there. All my stuff is already on the way, but it took all my money, and I'm about broke. My parents won't help me."

She looked like she wanted to just break down and cry.

"Then your parents kind of suck," I said with a sympathetic smile. Gently, I turned her around and pushed the diapers into the bag hanging from one narrow shoulder.

Then I turned her back around to face me. "Here." I started to give her the

money I'd withdrawn, but then I stopped and pulled out my wallet, taking the rest of my cash. It added up to nearly three hundred dollars. Nothing I'd miss, and it'd make a difference to her. "Make sure you both have food and formula before you get on the plane. And put the rest of the money somewhere safe. The diaper bag is too easy for people to steal from."

She gaped at me, dark eyes wide. "Why...why are you doing this?"

"Because I can. Because you need it." I brushed a wispy lock of hair back from the baby's forehead and then smiled at her. "Go on...I think she needs her diaper changed."

I headed back into the store and almost walked into the businessman as he headed out. He glared from the girl to me. "Square things up with your sister?"

"Yep." Breezily, I edged around him and took my place in line.

"That was nice of you."

I jolted at the sound of Kaleb's voice coming from just over my shoulder.

Whipping around, I met his eyes. "What...where did you come from?"

"Same place you did. I put my order in then came over here. I needed... something." His gaze slid down and lingered on the box in my hands, his lips twitching in amusement. "Looks like great minds think alike."

I flushed. "Well, I'm taking care of it. You can go back to the restaurant."

"I don't think one box will be enough," he said easily, gaze heated. "Again, that was nice of you."

We shuffled forward as the customers in front of us each paid and went on their way. It was down to the last one before he spoke again.

"Nothing to say?"

Huffing out a sigh, I said, "What's to say? She needed a break. I gave her one."

"Just like I needed one." He didn't sound angry, but he wasn't happy either.

"No, you're doing *me* a favor," I said quickly, shaking my head.

"I'm the one getting paid to—"

Spinning around, I clapped my hand over his mouth. "Shh..." I didn't give a quick look around, although I was tempted. "Be quiet, you..." Huffing, I dropped my hand and turned back to the counter just as the last person in front of me moved off. "Just hush," I said grouchy.

I dumped my stuff down in front of the cashier, hoping she hadn't noticed the interaction between Kaleb and me.

I suspected she had though.

If for no other reason than the fact that she was gaping at him.

He seemed to inspire that reaction quite a bit, not that I blamed any of them. He was *gorgeous*.

And for a while, he was mine.

Instead of making me smile, though, the thought made me a little sad.

He was mine...but only for a while.

“YOU CAN’T DO THAT,” I said, focusing on my irritation instead of the thought that had been circling through my head since we’d left the store.

Astra had wandered off to check out some purses in the store we’d just passed, giving me the chance to finally talk to Kaleb about what’d happened.

We still had an hour to wait until boarding, and Astra couldn’t sit still for that long, especially not with a plane ride ahead of us. I didn’t want to talk to him in front of her, not when I knew she’d see more than I wanted her to.

“I can’t do what?”

Kaleb was wearing a pair of sunglasses now, and I wanted to tug them off, look into his eyes.

“Say things about me paying you.” Self-consciously, I glanced around and then met his eyes. At least I assumed I was meeting his eyes. The lenses of his glasses were opaque. “I get recognized sometimes. Not as often out here, but if a person is a journalist, especially on the political beat, it’s not a stretch. I can’t have anybody hearing that I’m *paying* you. It will get back to my dad, and this is all for nothing.”

“And they might assume you’re paying me for something else.” He wagged his eyebrows.

I laughed even as blood rushed up to heat my cheeks. “My father would have a heart attack.” I was only half-joking about that. Offering him a smile, I said, “Just...don’t do it, okay?”

“No problem.” He slung his arm around my neck. “Shall we find our gate, my darling wife?”

“We shall.” I pasted a smile on my face, hoping it would hide the hollow ache settling inside.

IT WAS the shortest flight ever.

Or it felt that way.

As we collected our luggage, Astra watched me with gleaming eyes, and I had to poke her in the side and give her a death glare to keep her from saying something.

I didn't know what she wanted to say, but I had no doubt it would be something embarrassing. When Kaleb made a quick stop by the restroom, I found out.

"You two almost look like this is...*real*," she said, her voice low.

"That's the idea." I managed a non-committal shrug.

"Except there's no reason to play it so well right now. And I don't think you're *playing*." She tapped a bright pink fingertip against equally pink lips. "You like him. I mean, *really* like him."

"Well, yeah." I kept my eyes on the restroom. "What's not to like? We get along. He's funny and sweet. He's *not* into me because of my parents or my money."

"All good things," she agreed. "But this is just a temporary thing, remember? You don't really know him. So why does it seem so *not* temporary?"

"You're imagining things." I waved it off and started to add something, but a tall, blond figure caught my eyes, and I gave her a quelling look to keep her from pursuing it.

She arched an eyebrow, but lapsed into silence.

A moment later, Kaleb joined us and took his luggage, a single duffel bag which he hefted over his shoulder with ease. He also took my suitcase and Astra's, leaving us with our carry-ons and purses.

"It's so nice having a big, strong man around the house," Astra said, sighing lavishly.

"Stop it." I smacked her on the arm and moved to his side, gesturing toward the exit. "Our car is on the way. Won't take long."

"Your car?" he asked.

"We always have a town car pick us up," Astra said, checking her phone. "It's so much easier than trying to deal with parking and lugging our own luggage around. Of course, if you asked Piety's daddy, he'd insist that we take a limo."

I rolled my eyes. “Astra, stop. Your dad isn’t much better.”

“Oh, I know. Sometimes, he’s worse.” She flashed a sunny grin our way. “That’s why we never tell anybody when we’re going out of town. Then we don’t have to worry about unexpected chauffeurs showing up at our loft.”

We moved past the crush at luggage pick up and got outside just as the driver texted that he was there. “Perfect timing,” I said, gesturing to the car. “It’s Roy.”

We had a favorite, a guy we usually requested and most of the time, we got him. His worn, friendly face creased in a smile as we waved him down, and he studied Kaleb with curiosity as he held the door for us. Kaleb hesitated, eying the bags.

“I’ll get them, sir,” Roy assured him.

“Come on,” I said, tugging on Kaleb's hand.

After another moment, Kaleb climbed in after me, sinking back onto soft leather, but looking uncomfortable. “He’s...”

“If you let Roy hear you calling him old, he’ll have your heart on a platter,” I said, keeping my voice low. “He thinks he’s still thirty-two. Besides, he likes his job. He does this so he can help with his granddaughter’s college. Doesn’t have to. He retired from the military, but he wants to help.”

“Sounds like you know him.”

I nodded, but I didn’t go into any detail as Roy slammed the trunk shut and came around to the driver’s seat.

Kaleb still looked like he wanted to say something, but when I took his hand, he twined our fingers and slowly relaxed.

“So...are you ready for this?”

He stared out of the window as we pulled away from the airport, the Philadelphia city skyline slowly revealing itself. “Ready as I’ll ever be, I guess.”

“WELCOME HOME!” Astra threw back the door and stepped into the loft we shared.

I still stood next to Kaleb, holding his hand.

The doorman was taking care of the luggage, yet another thing Kaleb was

clearly not used to.

My life must have seemed so strange to him.

I didn't mind carrying my own luggage. I was usually the one carrying it down when I left – Astra too. But when we got back, the staff in our building, like Roy, made us feel like we were doing them injury if we didn't let them handle it. Granted, I think they appreciated the tips, and I had a feeling we tipped better than most of the people here, so maybe that was part of it.

But Kaleb was clearly not used to having his luggage handled for him or doors opened, and the expression on his face made me re-evaluate every little thing, even though I always told myself not to take anything I had for granted.

I didn't think I did. Many of the people Astra and I knew growing up didn't know what to make of us. While they'd been partying and shopping and heading off to Cancun for vacations in high school and college, we'd wanted to get involved with Habitat for Humanity. We hadn't been able to in high school, no matter how much we begged, so we'd done it in college, never even telling our parents.

Over the summers, we backpacked through Europe, staying at hostels instead of the lavish hotels our parents had pushed on us.

I knew I was a little spoiled, but I didn't want to live my entire life never seeing beyond the silver spoon.

Astra and I got along so well because we both felt the same way.

Now, though, I felt like I was seeing my life through somebody else's eyes and it was...weird.

I wasn't sure I liked it.

Shaking off the feeling, I pulled at Kaleb's hand. "Come on. Astra can wait for the luggage. I want to show you around."

"Ah...yeah. Yeah, sure." He looked a little dazed, eyes lingering on the huge windows that dominated one wall, facing out over the city, the river sparkling off to the east.

"We moved in the year before we graduated from college, handled all the designing, picking out the furniture." We walked into the large, wide-open living room space. "Our mothers kept insisting we let somebody from their circle recommend a decorator. But we didn't want a designer space. We wanted something comfortable."

"It's gorgeous," he said. Then he smiled a little. "And comfortable. I could sleep on that couch for a month, I bet."

“I’ve tried.” Then I laughed. “But Astra doesn’t do quiet well. That’s why her bedroom is on one side of the loft and mine is on the other.”

I took him through the entire place, room by room, although I only gestured toward Astra’s rooms. “She’s a bit of a messy roommate, and the lady who cleans for us has been on vacation in Puerto Vallarta this week. You don’t want to look in there.”

“It can’t be any worse than...” He stopped, trailing off and shaking his head. “Never mind. I’ll take your word for it.”

I paused by another door and opened it. “One of the guest rooms. We have three. Sometimes we have a party here, and we’ll let a guest stay over in case...” I rolled my eyes and mimed drinking from a bottle.

“You’re a good mate.”

“And this is my room.” I bit my lip as I led him inside, still holding onto his hand.

It wasn’t as large as my childhood room, but it was *mine* – decorated by me and only me. A rainbow of colors that shouldn’t have worked erupted around us, cheerful and chaotic and wonderful. Orange and red and pink, blended with the colorful carpet I’d bought from a street vendor on one of my trips out of the country with my parents. It had appalled my mother, which made me love it even more.

The silk comforter on my bed was pink and orange, and it might have been too much for some, but I loved it. The walls were the only thing lacking in color. They were a pure, soft white, but there were bits and pieces of art, pictures, silk wall hangings that echoed the color design.

“I feel like I’ve fallen into a flower,” he said, smiling as he turned to look at me.

“Is that a bad thing?”

“No.” He smiled. “I like it. It’s kind of like...you. Crazy and wild and...soft.”

“Oh.” Something I didn’t want to think about made my throat close up. “Well, I think I like that.”

“Good.” He cleared his throat and ran a hand through his hair. “Well, should I...um. Any particular guest room I should take or can I just pick?”

I moved closer.

His pupils spiked, getting a little larger as I reached past him and nudged the door closed.

“I was kind of thinking that you could just stay with me.”

ELEVEN

KALEB

Stay with me.

Her words lingered with me all through that night, clear into the next morning.

Standing under the hot, pulsating spray of the shower, I braced my hands against the wall and told myself to quit thinking about it – about *her*.

I needed to be thinking about my problems, of which there were many.

I still hadn't heard back from Camry.

I'd left more than a couple of messages. She should have called by now. I didn't know if I wanted to be pissed or scared. I was a little of both, but I couldn't do anything about it here. And I couldn't leave until the bloody money was in my hand.

It was quiet, not even a whisper, but the brush of chilled air against my skin let me know that the shower door had been opened. I turned just as Piety pressed flat against me, her breasts warm and soft – *everything* about her was warm...and soft enough. She definitely had an athletic build. She had the look that made me think she could take a run down the beach and maybe even join me when I went out surfing.

It made me wonder if she'd ever gone surfing herself.

If not, I could teach her.

She pressed her mouth to my neck, and I reached out, gripping her hips. "If you need the shower, I can let you have it in a few minutes," I said, head falling to the side as she bit down.

Fuck.

"Hmmm. But I climbed in here because you're in here." She eased back, blinking the water out of her eyes. She pressed her hands against my chest

and let them slide down, the path made slicker by water. “I was thinking we could engage in some...water conservation.”

She slid her hand down to my cock.

“That’s...an important issue,” I said, the words rough.

She tightened her grip as she neared the tip, rotated her wrist as she moved closer to the base. It was enough to drive me to madness.

“Isn’t it?” She licked water from where it ran down the midline of my chest, then she sank lower, giving me a view that I knew men would kill for.

Then she closed her mouth around my cock.

“Oh, shit.”

She chuckled, and the reverberation had me slamming a hand against the wall. When she leaned forward, I eased my weight completely against the tile and threaded my fingers through her hair, shaking the water out of my eyes as I watched her swallowing my cock. I’d had her more than once since we’d met, but we’d both been too eager to take the time for this.

When the water clouded my vision again, I fumbled for the faucet and turned the spray off, shuddering out a groan as she paused a moment to lick the water away from my belly and left thigh.

“Didn’t want to waste that water, since we’re trying to conserve and all?” she asked, giving me a sly smile.

“Can’t have that.”

I grabbed her hair and tugged her mouth back. I clenched my teeth as she took me back inside, the wet heat almost enough to undo me. This time, she sucked on me with a fervor, not letting go until I was panting and half-mad. When she finally did, my cock slid from between her lips with a little *pop* before she stood up in front of me, raising onto her toes until our lips were pressed together.

The brush of her belly was damp against my cock, and I swore. I needed her again.

Spinning her around, I bent her over the built-in bench seat and drove inside.

She was even more wet and soft than usual, slick like satin.

And *naked*...

No.

“Shit. Condom,” I said, groaning.

I started to pull away.

“Don’t stop.” It was a weak whisper, and I told myself to ignore it. To do

the smart thing.

Then she reached down and closed her fingers around my balls. My eyes crossed and hot licks of pleasure-pain went shooting straight up my spine. Talk about having someone by the balls.

“Shit, Piety, I...fuck, we need a rubber.”

“I brought one. But...” She wiggled her ass back against me. “Do we really need it? You feel so good. I’m...safe. Protected.”

I rolled my hips against her, told myself again to pull out.

“Please, Kaleb. You feel so good like this.”

She looked over her shoulder, her eyes deepened to indigo.

How the hell was I supposed to say no to her?

“Yes,” I muttered, knowing I was doing something incredibly stupid. But if I was going to be stupid about something, I might as well be stupid for her.

And maybe for myself...a little. This once.

She squeezed my sack again, and I thrust against her again. I could only withdraw so far with her holding onto me, but the friction was perfect, sweet and tight. And then I heard her cry out and knew that I'd found her sweet spot.

“Fuck me, Kaleb.” She released me, using both hands to balance herself.

She didn't have to tell me twice, not when I finally knew what it felt like to be skin to skin with her. I doubted I could ever have it another way after this. I reached underneath us and found her clit, stroking it as I thrust into her, long, deep strokes that would get us to our climax quickly.

I planned on having her again in her bed, and then I'd take my time.

As I felt her clench around me, heard her gasp out my name, I wondered if I'd be able to let her go when the time came. I pushed the thought from my mind as I let my own orgasm roll over me. I pressed my mouth against her shoulder, murmuring her name as I emptied myself inside her.

I wouldn't think about the future. Not now. I'd enjoy what time I had with her. All of it.

“THINK OF A HAPPY PLACE.”

Glancing at Piety, I asked, “Are you telling me or yourself?”

“Myself.” She sighed glumly as she parked her car, a sexy little McLaren

that had almost given me a hard-on just climbing inside. Riding next to her had done the rest.

I'd almost asked if I could drive, but I thought that might be pushing it.

"I think this car is a damn happy place." I thought a moment, then smiled. "And the shower. That's a very happy place. Between your legs, that's a favorite. Should I continue?"

"Thinking about me crawling between my own legs isn't exactly making me nice and calm." But she smiled over at me.

"Oh, it's not making me *calm*." I took her hand, threading our fingers together. "It's giving me nice thoughts. Or dirty thoughts. Some might not consider those so nice, but whatever. Why do you look so nervous? This was your idea."

"Actually, it was Astra's." She rested her head on the padded headrest.

I did the same, enjoying the luxurious leather. These were moments I'd remember the rest of my life, and not just because I was sitting in a supercar that would make most men weep from the sheer beauty of it. It was the beauty *in* it. Piety was turning me inside out and we barely knew each other.

"She manages to talk me into the craziest shit. Always has. This wasn't any different. Hell, I think this was the easiest of all." She rolled her head on the seat and looked at me. "Because of you. You're incredibly easy to say yes to, you know that, Kaleb?"

"Am I?" I lifted her hand to my lips and kissed it. "I'd say the same of you. I'd say yes to just about anything you asked at this moment."

"Hold on to that thought," she muttered. She turned her gaze back toward the house. "You might not think so in a bit."

"Come on. They can't be that bad, can they?" I'd said something along those lines before. They'd raised Piety, after all.

But she gave me that grimace again. "Just remember...go to your happy place."

"I CAN'T BELIEVE you did this."

I stood off to the side, remaining silent for the most part while Piety stood in front of her parents, looking like a queen. Her parents viewed themselves as royalty at least, no denying that.

Her father, one Senator Silas Van Allen had taken one look at me and dismissed me with barely a flicker of his lashes, right up until Piety had pressed a kiss to my cheek, and said, “Daddy, meet Kaleb Hastings. My husband.”

Her mother had gasped in outrage, and looking from me to Piety and back like she expected us to tell her it was all some big prank.

“What are you going to tell Windsor?” her mother asked, her voice low, as if I wouldn’t hear them.

Of course, I was standing right there, and she damn well knew it.

“What do you mean, what am I going to tell Windsor?” Piety asked calmly. “I’m not going to tell him anything. Well, unless I run into him at a fundraiser or something. We hardly know each other.”

“You’ve been dating,” Silas said, his voice just as neutral as his daughter’s. But his eyes were...cold.

How could these two have created somebody like Piety?

She was so warm. So alive.

And they were like a couple of wooden dolls, complete with sticks up their respective arses.

“No, Daddy. You *wanted* us to date. I went out with him once or twice to get you off my back.” She lifted a shoulder and turned away, moving over to a long table stretched against the wall.

“Is that what this...this farce is about?” Silas demanded.

I tensed. I really didn't like the way they were talking to their daughter.

His eyes came to mine. “Is that it...what did you say your name was?”

I didn’t respond. If he was smart enough to handle the political claptrap, he was smart enough to remember my name. He just wanted me to feel like I wasn’t important enough.

Fuck that.

“Kaleb,” he said slowly. “It *is* Kaleb, correct?”

“Yep, sure is, mate.” I exaggerated my accent and gave him a glib smile. If Piety wanted to piss him off, I might as well give her – and him – her money’s worth. “I’m a bit of a bastard, really, going and stealing Piety away like I did, marrying her without so much as inviting you. But we just couldn’t wait, could we, sweetheart?”

Piety was back at my side now, and some of the stress had melted from her eyes as she leaned against me. “No. We couldn’t.” Head resting against my arm, she gave her mom a dazzling smile. “Maybe we can plan a real

ceremony here in a few months...something we can invite *everybody* to. The drive-in Vegas chapel thing was so...lame.”

“You got married...” her mother paused, a hand pressed to her chest, “you went through one of those *drive-through* chapels?”

Piety waved a hand, forgoing the answer, which was probably a good idea since neither of us actually had any idea how the ceremony had gone. “It was just making things official. Kaleb and I knew what we wanted.”

Damn, she was good at this.

Sliding a hand down her back, I glanced at her father.

He was still skewering me with his eyes.

“Just what do you do, Kaleb?”

“Right now? Not much of anything.” I shrugged and turned my head into Piety’s hair, nuzzling her neck. “I had to quit my job so I could be with Piety.”

She gave me a smile so warm and sweet that my heart ached a little. Then it ached more as I reminded myself that this wasn’t real. None of it was. We enjoyed being with each other, but that was as far as it went.

“How...thoughtful of you,” Silas said. I could hear the fury pulsing in his voice. “And what was it you did before you quit?”

“Well, I didn’t hold the job long. I’d only taken it mainly to get some money and get over here to the States.” I had a feeling that would piss him off – and it did. His mouth tightened, and I could see the redness slowly creeping up his neck. He looked like he wanted to punch me already. And I hadn’t even gotten to the good part. “Back in Australia, I did a bit of this, bit of that. Planned on opening up my own surf shop, but that didn’t pan out. Anyway, I came over here after Flames Down Under took me on.”

“Flames...” It was her mother who said it. Amara’s face went white, and she looked from me to Piety before covering her eyes with her hand.

I bit back a smile. Her mother knew what Flames Down Under was. I’d have to point that out to Piety later if she hadn’t caught it already.

“You’ll have to help me out there, Kaleb.” His jaw was tight, yet he managed to sound calm, casual even as he continued. “I’m not familiar with Flames Down Under. Is it a restaurant?”

“No. It’s a dance troupe...of sorts.” I paused and then added, “We’re – well, it’s not *we* anymore since I quit – but Flames are kind of like the Aussie version of the Chippendales. Strippers.”

I added the last part in even though it wasn’t necessary. He’d figured it

out.

“You married a *stripper*,” he said, finally giving up the pretense and whirling on Piety with rage stamped all over his features.

“I married *Kaleb*.” She lifted her chin and stared him down. “I’m hardly a child, Dad.”

“That’s hardly evident!” He flung a hand in my direction. “He just outright admitted that he came over here for money, shakes his ass...*for money*, and you went and married him. You don’t even know him!”

“I know what I need to know.” Piety looked over at me and the smile on her face did little to calm the anger that had started to burn in me.

The anger had nothing to do with what her father was saying about me – I didn’t give a damn about that – but he had no right to talk to her like that.

Bastard.

“And just what is that?” Silas held up a hand. “Never mind. I don’t want that answer. This is insane, Piety. I won’t stand for it.”

After a moment, he turned on his heel and moved to pick up a phone. He spoke quietly into it and then replaced it before looking at me, eyes hard and cold as steel. “I’m having a car brought around. The driver can take you... wherever. But I need to speak with my—”

“I’m not going anywhere without my wife.” I took Piety’s hand. “Not unless she wants me to.”

“This is my house, you son of a bitch,” Silas said, voice choked.

“And he’s my husband.” Piety tightened her hand around mine. “If he’s not welcome...well.” She glanced up at me. “Come on, Kaleb. Let’s go.”

“Piety, wait.” Amara rose as she spoke for the first time in several minutes.

“I won’t stand here and have Dad talk to me like I’m an infant.” Piety lifted her chin.

“Then stop acting like a child!”

I turned on the senator then. “Exactly what is your problem?”

He blinked, clearly caught off-guard by the *stripper* daring to talk to him.

Next to me, Piety tensed.

I continued, “I couldn’t understand it, the whole way here. Piety has been so...well, she’s amazing. I’ve seen her give her heart to people. She laughs, and she makes me laugh. She’s kind and sweet and funny and confident. And then on the way here, all that changes. Now I get it – she was worried about dealing with *you*.”

He opened his mouth, but at that moment, a towering man appeared in the doorway, his bald head gleaming as if it had been polished with wax. The thought made me chuckle, and I shook my head, amused at the absurdity of it all.

“You think this is *funny*?” Silas asked, the words grinding between his clenched teeth.

“Sir, how may I be of assistance?” The giant eyed me narrowly.

“You aren’t needed, Timothy,” Piety said. “Dad was trying to make my husband leave, but if he can’t stay, neither can I. We’re both going.”

“Your husband...” Timothy – the giant – studied us for a moment, then nodded at Piety. “Congratulations.” Then he nodded at the elder Van Allans and left.

“She makes me happy,” I said without thinking. For a minute, this wasn’t a scam, wasn’t anything I was doing for money. I was just seeing the rage, the disappointment, all the negative emotions in the older man’s eyes – emotions directed at Piety – and it pissed me off. “And I think I make her happy. If you love her, I don’t understand what your problem is. Unless, of course, you’re more worried about your life than hers, and that makes you the son of a bitch here.”

A soft gasp escaped Piety at my words, and I decided I needed to stop before I said something stupid – or more stupid. Taking her hand, I lifted it to my lips. “Come on, love. Let’s go.”

“THANK YOU.”

We’d been driving in relative silence for the past ten minutes, and the soft words were loud.

I looked over at Piety. “You’re not mad?”

She laughed. “No. I...hell, Kaleb. There have been so many times I’ve almost said those exact same words to him.”

“Not being related to the uptight bastard makes it easier.” Grimacing, I added, “Sorry. He just...I didn’t like how he talked to you.”

“It’s okay.” She smiled, her gaze locked on the road. “My parents love me, Kaleb. I know that. They just don’t understand me. Anyway...it went about as well as we could hope. Now we just...well, we’ve got the family

reunion. Then you and I will have some massive blow-up, and we'll call this quits so you can go on your way. I've got the money I promised you – half of it now, the rest after the family reunion. Okay?"

I swallowed hard. "Sounds good."

"Oh, by the way..." She glanced at me. "Astra's cousin is a lawyer. I don't know if you're wanting to stay over here or go back to Oz, but we can talk to him. He can help you figure things out."

"Brilliant."

But I wasn't paying that much attention.

In a few more days, this would all be over.

I should have been relieved. I could focus on what really mattered. I could deal with Camry. Do what I'd come here to do.

Yet I wasn't relieved.

And even though she was sitting right there next to me, I was already missing my wife.

TWELVE

PIETY

I checked the time.

Again.

It was only ten minutes later than when I'd checked the last time.

Sighing, I dropped down onto the couch, determined to find some way to fill my mind.

Something underneath my butt managed to preoccupy my thoughts...for maybe two seconds.

I frowned as I pulled out a cell phone. Not mine.

"Kaleb's."

Had to be.

I rubbed my finger along the surface of it for a moment, nibbling my lower lip. Then I put the phone down and dropped my head back to the couch. He wasn't here, and I was slowly going out of my mind.

Astra had indeed worked her magic and gotten him a meeting with her cousin Samuel. Whether or not anything solid would happen today, I wasn't betting on it, but at least they could start the ball rolling.

I'd feel better if I was with him, but Kaleb had told me there was no need for me to go. Something told me that he wanted to go alone.

So I stayed home.

I wasn't *hurt* or anything. It wasn't like he needed me to hold his hand, and our marriage wasn't about a green card for him. Besides, I could use a little more downtime and relaxation before heading back to work next week. I certainly wasn't going to be getting any over the weekend.

I snorted at the thought and tried to picture how things would go when my dad already looked like he wanted to explode just thinking about Kaleb.

Dad had tried calling, but I'd ignored him.

He'd even broken down and texted even though he'd always insisted that texts were so impersonal. He didn't even like emails, but understood they were how people communicated these days.

But texts?

Senator Silas Van Allen didn't *text*.

But he had sent me one earlier.

You need to stop acting like a child and talk to me. Please join your mother and I for dinner.

I'd responded with a simple question. *And Kaleb?*

We haven't been able to spend time with you in several weeks. We need time to catch up. He can join us some other time.

I'd given him a simple answer.

No thank you.

That had set him off, and Mom had taken over from there, but I was ignoring her too.

It was weird how freeing this was. Granted, it was all a farce, and I needed to think through how things would be after this, but for the first time, both my mother *and* my father had stopped trying to talk *through* me, stopped *looking* through me.

Yes, they were angry, but I could handle that.

I couldn't keep handling how they spent more time worrying about how *my* life was going to affect *theirs*.

If they were that hung up on it, they should have had a poodle instead of a daughter.

I checked the time again without any conscious thought, then groaned. It was going to be another hour, maybe two, before he was done with Samuel.

I was about to go out of my mind...

The phone next to me buzzed again and I looked down at it automatically.

A pretty girl's picture flashed up across the screen, along with the notification that he'd gotten a message.

"Don't do it, Piety," I muttered to myself.

He was a good-looking guy. He probably got messages from a *lot* of girls. Of course, he hadn't told me that he was involved. I hadn't asked.

But...

I'd married him, and we were having sex. It wasn't just about me, since I knew where we stood with each other. I didn't want to be the other woman.

At least that was the excuse I gave myself as I swiped my thumb across the phone to unlock it.

Her name was Camry.

That was the first thing I noticed.

She was also flashing a wide, open grin into the camera.

She looked...happy. Sweet and young and happy.

Who was she?

The phone jolted in my hand as another message came through.

Are you there, K? Come on...I need to know. Things are getting desperate here. You got the money or not?

A strange, heavy sensation settled in my gut, and I closed the messages, putting the phone down.

I knew Kaleb needed money. He'd been honest about that from the beginning. Or had he?

Had he known who I was from moment one? Astra said she remembered how things had gone the night Kaleb and I had gotten married, but how reliable was her memory.

Had Kaleb been playing me this whole time?

And just who the hell was Camry?

THIRTEEN

PIETY

It seemed like an eternity passed before my husband for hire finally returned from the meeting with Astra's cousin, the lawyer. When he did, I was still dealing with the uneasiness I'd felt ever since I read the message from Camry.

Camry.

Who was she?

How did he know her?

Did she mean anything to him?

Of course she did.

How could she not?

She was asking him for money?

But even as that thought occurred to me, I brushed it aside. I'd had people I barely knew hit *me* up for money, guys I'd dated just a couple of times ask to hook up, telling me about this *fascinating* idea they had and just how much they could change the world if they had a *little* bit of help.

Money didn't mean somebody mattered – it meant the *money* mattered.

I pushed the thought aside as I heard the familiar sound of the elevator, and I slid off the couch just as the door opened. He caught sight of me coming toward him and paused, as if I'd surprised him.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and kissed him. For a moment, for that *brief* moment as my lips touched his, the chaos in my head faded away to nothingness, and it was just the two of us. It seemed that some tension drained out of him as well, and I wanted to curl myself tighter around him, pretend the world was gone.

But the world would just come back and find us.

So I retreated, rubbing my lips together to hold onto his taste a moment longer.

“How did it go?”

He shrugged, his voice deprecating and wry as he answered, “It went.”

He kissed my forehead before he cut around me and the feel of his lips lingered in the sweetest way. I leaned against the door, watching him as he moved deeper into the loft.

“You left your phone,” I said. There. Nice and easy. I didn’t have to mention I’d gone snooping and seen his message, right?

“I noticed,” he said dryly as he pulled out a bottle of water from the refrigerator. He grinned at me. “I discovered that...oh, two minutes before I was supposed to meet the lawyer. Great timing, huh?”

“Could be worse. You could have left it back in Vegas.”

“True.”

Looking down, I fought the ugly monster brewing in my belly. It wasn’t like I’d gotten his girlfriend’s number or something. This wasn’t that big of a deal.

“Who’s Camry?”

The words popped out without any conscious thought from me, and I would have sucked them back in if there was any possible way of doing it. But that wasn’t possible, and I stood there, feeling blood rush to my face as he slowly lifted his head and met my eyes.

“What?”

“Ah...” Face flaming, I shifted from one foot to the other, feeling awkward and out of place. It wasn’t a feeling I was used to, and I didn’t like it – at *all*. “She...um...well, she texted you. I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I just picked up the phone and saw the message. She wants money.”

I half-expected him to just brush it off. *Oh...it’s a woman I know on the tour...she’s always bumming money for a smoke. It’s a lady from home, sometimes she runs short right before payday.*

It would be something small and easy.

But a muscle jumped in his cheek as he stared at me.

“She’s...” He turned away, the muscles in his spine going tight.

I could see the tension in him. He stood so rigid, I thought he’d break.

I wished I hadn’t said anything.

“Camry’s my sister.”

A harsh breath escaped me, the nervousness draining away to be replaced

by giddiness.

But all of that evaporated in an instant when Kaleb looked back at me.

“She needs money to pay off her dealer. That’s why I came to Las Vegas and joined the Flames. She’s in trouble.” He stood there rigid, shoulders braced like he was preparing for a blow. “She’s been in and out of trouble since our parents died, and I can’t do shit to help her. But I couldn’t just ignore it...she’s my baby sister. I had to try.”

FOURTEEN

KALEB

I expected a lot of reactions from her, everything from apathy to outrage.

What I didn't expect was for Piety to come over and take my hand, then lead me to the couch and tell me to sit. She sat down next to me and curled up against me. "I think it's time you tell me what's going on."

"I just did."

"No. You told me you had a sister who owes money to a dealer...that's like saying Captain America is a movie about a soldier."

It tugged a smile out of me. "You mean there's more?" I tilted my head and smiled at her tiredly.

"Kaleb."

Sighing, I dropped my head forward, pressing our brows together. "Okay." Closing my eyes, I tried to figure out where to start. How did I wrap up the last decade of my life in a way that wouldn't take hours or months to explain?

"Our parents died ten years ago. It was...rough." Shaking my head, I stared off into nothing. Rough didn't even describe it. "Before that, we were normal. So fucking normal, you'd almost get sick. Dad and Mom would dance around the house at night, and they'd laugh and tease each other...I used to act like I hated it but..." I shrugged, smiling a little. I didn't let myself remember the good times enough. "It was good. They were good. We were good. They were killed in a car crash, and nothing's been good since."

I looked over at Piety. "We were sent to live with my dad's uncle – he's the only family we had left. He tried, but he never had kids, hadn't wanted any, and he didn't know what to do with us. Especially Camry. She cried a lot. Caused trouble. Started skipping school and by high school, she got into

drugs and was already drinking...fuck.”

This was why I didn't like to think about it. I felt like a failure. I hadn't been able to help her. At all.

“Sometimes she hated even being around me, hated me, I think.”

“No.” Piety touched my cheek. “Why would she hate you?”

I looked at her. “Because I had them longer. She was only eleven when they died. I know it doesn't make sense, but she was a kid. Nothing makes sense when you're a kid who's lost her parents.”

“But you're her brother.”

“Fat lot of good I've done her.” I covered her hand and pressed a kiss to it. “Camry...well, hell. If Mom and Dad had still been alive, there's no telling what she might have gone on to do. She was always smart. Even as much trouble as she got into, school was still easy for her. She even managed to get an international scholarship to go to college – over here. It was in Las Vegas. The University of Nevada.”

“It's a pretty decent school.” Piety smiled, brushed at my hair. “You must have been proud.”

“I was.” It hadn't lasted long. “I got worried fast. She had trouble after the first few months. Wasn't fitting in well. I guess life away from home wasn't everything she thought it would be. She ended up losing her scholarship, left school. Now...hell. I don't know what kind of trouble she's in, but I know she owes a shitload of money to a piece of shit drug dealer, and when I try to call, I can hardly ever get hold of her. The one time she does call...” I laughed, bitterness tearing at me.

Getting up, I paced over to the wide window that faced out over the panorama and stared outside.

“I talked to Samuel about helping us getting new visas to stay in the States,” I said quietly. “When I signed with Flames Down Under, I got a one year visa, but since I'm no longer in the show, I need to find another way to stay. I must...for Camry's sake. She's an addict. She needs help, more help than I can give her. I want to get her into some sort of program. I'll find a job.”

She opened her mouth to ask a question, but I held up a hand.

“Not stripping either,” I assured her. “I was...am a good surfer, worked at a shop in Sydney, wanted to have my own place. I had this crazy idea I could get her debts settled, then we could find some place. In California, maybe, I don't know. I could work at a surf store, maybe give lessons.” He shot me a

quick smile. “Nobody surfs like an Aussie. Except maybe down in Hawaii. But it was an idea. I don’t know though. Nothing is going the way I planned.”

I heard her getting up and turned to look at her, uncertain what she was going to do. Turning around, I caught her arms just as she would have slid them around me.

“What are you doing?” I asked softly.

“Hugging you.” She gave me an easy smile. “You look like you need it.”

“I...” The words died in my throat as she slid her arms around me and tucked her head against my chest, snuggling in close.

“It will work out, Kaleb.”

I cupped the back of her head in my hand and breathed in the scent of her. I really, really wanted to believe that.

She smoothed her hands up and down my spine, and the worries continued to eat inside me. When she took my face in her hands and kissed me, offering the sweetest of distractions, I wasn’t about to refuse.

She tasted so good, felt so soft.

I caught the hem of the skirt she wore and pulled back, looking into her eyes as I dragged it up. She didn’t look away, not even when I slid my hand inside her panties and found her already wet, already ready for me.

“I want you now,” I said, the need slamming into me like it had been lying in wait.

“Then have me now,” she said, leaning in and kissing me. She bit my lower lip, and I groaned as it sent waves of heat blasting through every neuron in my body.

“Right now? Right here?” I asked, staring into her eyes.

“Right now. Right here. No roommate to bother us.” Her tongue flicked out to wet her lips. “She’s gone...out doing things. Going to be gone...all day...oh...”

She clamped around the fingers I’d just slid through her damp folds, then up into her wet channel.

“That’s...convenient.” I twisted my wrist.

She rocked against me, her lashes fluttering. She slid a hand down and gripped my wrist, her mouth parting on a moan. She started to ride my hand, and I almost laughed, even as my dick began to pulse in heavy denial. I wanted to have her riding *me* like that.

But there was time.

Later.

She moved against me, demanding and hungry. I braced my free hand on the wall over her head, staring down, watching the two of us. When I circled my thumb around her clitoris, she shivered, a delicate reaction that started at her shoulders and went all the way down.

Her nipples went tight, and I wanted to catch each one and bite them.

But that would require moving, and I didn't want to do that until—

“Kaleb!” She clenched around me and climaxed, hard and quick, her hips bucking against my hand.

I waited until she was done before I moved.

Then, as she sagged against the wall, looking insanely pleased with herself, I tore open my trousers, grabbed her hips and boosted her up. “Again.”

I thrust inside her, felt the mini tremors still going through her as she came, and I had to grit my teeth against the sensation because it just felt too damn good.

“You're...fuck me, Piety, I think we'll kill each other.”

She laughed weakly and clung to my shoulders. “But what a way to go.”

“Yeah.” Lashing everything down until I almost had myself under control, I eased away and looked into her eyes as I withdrew, then surged slowly back inside. “I love watching you. Love touching you.”

“I love having you touch me...” The words broke on a sigh, and she arched, clamping tight around me with a moan.

“Don't...” I hissed out. “Don't do that.”

“I can't help it.” She shoved away from the wall, closing the distance I'd put between us and wrapped her arms around my neck. Then she started to move – she was riding me, again. All sleek muscle and hungry female, she used the strength of her thighs and hips to move herself up and down.

“*Fuck.*” I grabbed her ass, dragged her up, let her sink back down, driven by her weight. Then I did it again, grinding her against me.

She whimpered, and I heard another moan rip out of her.

Again.

Again.

“Please!” The word was weak, almost a scream, would have been if she'd had air.

Lurching forward a half step, I put her back against the wall and thrust. Deep, hard, over and over.

We came together and it was almost painful.

“I think we...really might kill each other,” Piety said, a few moments later, her breathing still ragged.

“Yeah. But as you said, what a way to go.”

FIFTEEN

PIETY

“Are you nervous?”

Sliding on my earrings, I glanced into the mirror and met Astra’s gaze. I shrugged and said honestly, “Some, I guess. I mean, this whole thing rides on him not...”

I trailed off, because I couldn’t understand why he *wouldn’t* say anything. My parents had been awful. The people around us later today would be just as bad, although they might not say anything outright. I just didn’t know. All I knew was that if I had people digging at me like that, I’d strike back.

“He won’t say anything,” Astra said, reading my mind in that annoying way of hers.

I stuck my tongue out.

“You’re so mature.” She clucked her tongue, then flopped back down on my bed to stare up at the ceiling. “He’s not going to. He’s just got that kind of...oomph to him. You can trust him. He’s the guy you call at two a.m. when you’ve got a flat. Even if you’re an hour away, he’d come help you out.”

“Yeah.” I had that kind of feeling from him too. Maybe that was part of why I was so nervous. Granted, this had been my idea – okay, mine and Astra’s – but he’d be the one to deal with some of the harsher things said by people. Sure, they might say things about me and my *judgment*, but I’d dealt with that plenty.

They wouldn’t be insulting his *judgment*.

They’d be insulting him, and what was worse, now I knew why he’d made the decisions he’d made.

Groaning, I rubbed my forehead.

“Next time I offer somebody a ludicrous amount of money to do something for me, tell me to ask them why they need it so badly first,” I told Astra, moving to sit next to her. After a moment’s debate, I flopped down flat right alongside her, and we lay there, studying the ceiling.

“You like him, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” Closing my eyes, I blew out a breath. “I really, *really* like him.”

“Tell him.”

A knot settled in my throat, but I forced myself to ignore it. “No point. He has things to do back in Las Vegas, a life to get back to.”

“And you know this because...?”

Sitting up, I looked over at Astra and shrugged. “We’ve talked. Some. I... I think he kind of likes me too. But the things he’s got going on must come first. I don’t blame him. But it’s too complicated for a relationship.”

“If it’s the *right* relationship, nothing is too complicated.” She sat as well and hooked an arm around my shoulders, hugging me. “You seem awful happy with him, PS. You really wanna give that up?”

Covering her forearm with my hand, I leaned into her. “I’m not even ready to think about that yet. Besides, I can’t control the things in his life.”

Even though they weighed on me.

Even though Astra wasn’t entirely wrong.

There was a knock on the door, and I squeezed Astra’s arm. “Gotta go. That’s him.”

“Say hi to Mummy and Daddy for me.” She blew me a kiss and wagged her eyebrows.

“You sure you don’t want to come?” I picked up my purse from the foot of the bed and went to open the door. I smiled at Kaleb, then looked back, waiting.

“You’d have to get me even drunker than you two were before I’d consider going through one of your family reunions again. And I’d have to *stay* that drunk. All day. I’m pretty sure that’s not good for the liver.”

I laughed. “Probably not.”

She winked at me. “Toodles!”

“Toodles.” I made a face at her as I followed Kaleb through the door. Turning my attention to him, I asked, “Are you ready for this?”

“Are you?” He skimmed his fingers through my hair.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I gave him a brilliant smile and linked our hands. “Let’s do it.”

THE Madder my dad got and the more my mother clutched her pearls – she *literally* clutched her pearls – the easier it got. Sinking down on a padded chaise lounge next to my great aunt Agatha, I gestured to Kaleb. “Aunt Agatha, have you met my husband?”

She gave him a narrow look and a short nod. It was one of the politer receptions he’d gotten, but her attention on him didn’t last long. She was too interested in me.

Holding a cocktail in one hand and a book in the other, she studied me.

“Just what are you up to, Piety?” she asked.

“I’m introducing you to my husband,” I said innocently.

“Humph.” She took a lusty sip of the cocktail and put her book down. It was a romance, one featuring a bare-chested man with a woman bent over his arm, her boobs all but falling out of the dress. The sight of it made me grin. “Your husband. What’s his middle name?”

It caught me offguard, and I felt like an idiot – I didn’t *know*.

“What’s yours?” Kaleb asked, interrupting smoothly. He sat down on the chaise next to me and gave Agatha a mega-watt smile. “If I’d known Piety was holding out on me, I might have told her no.”

To my surprise, a laugh boomed out of Agatha. “*She* proposed to *you*?”

Some of the suspicion leaked from her eyes, and she sighed, reaching out to pat my knee. “Keep your secrets, Piety. I won’t blab. But it’s going to take more than this for them to leave you be.” She leaned back and settled more comfortably against the chaise. “It’s going to take *you*.”

I wasn’t even going to try to follow that line of thought, and she didn’t give me the chance. “Here,” she said, pushing her nearly empty cocktail into my hand. “Go refill me. I’m thirsty, and I want to admire the arm candy you brought.”

Wariness flooded me. “Aunt Agatha...”

“Oh, relax. None of them will bother him if he’s with *me*.” Aunt Agatha gave me a serene smile, then one final pat on my knee. “Go on now.”

Sighing, I went on.

As I made my way through the crowd of aunts, uncles, cousins, and various other relations, I told myself I didn’t need to hurry, that Aunt Agatha wouldn’t expose our secrets.

Then I wished I *would* have hurried, because I came face to face with one

of the few cousins I would have done *anything* to avoid.

“Well, well, well.” Tabitha smiled at me. She was my father’s niece, and she looked far too like me, save for the hair. Hers was a bronzed sort of blonde, and the stylist she used teased out shades of gold and caramel. She was shorter and softer, a gentler reflection.

At least physically.

Inside, Tabitha was a piranha.

“How’s life for the newlywed?” She gave me a look of innocent curiosity. “I hear you married an exotic dancer. Does he still...perform?”

“Hi, Tabitha.” I chose to ignore her latter comment.

“You see, a friend of mine is getting married, and I’m in charge of the entertainment.” She took a step closer and gave me a devious smile before glancing toward where I’d left Kaleb with Aunt Agatha. “And he is *certainly* entertaining. Easy on the eyes.”

“Nice try,” I said. With a casual smile, I smoothed out a non-existent wrinkle in my dress. “But you and I know none of your friends are warm-blooded enough to enjoy a man of Kaleb’s talents. Snakes have no desire for such...fleshly desires. Unless you’re in a man-eating sort of mood.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She smiled, although her idea of a smile was just the slightest curl of her lips. Heaven forbid she do something that might lead to wrinkles. “A girl has to experiment every now and then. You clearly have... and look at you. So, what do you say? Does he...hire out his services?”

She lingered long enough that we both knew she wasn’t talking about stripping.

But instead of sinking to her level, I stepped aside and gestured. “I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you go ask? He’s right over there...talking to Aunt Agatha.”

The first few words were all she processed for a moment, and the cat’s smile came, brightening her eyes.

Then she heard...*Aunt Agatha*.

She sucked in a breath, stopped when she realized I was waiting for her reaction. “You left him with *that* old hag? Talk about a man-eater.”

“What’s the matter, honey? Jealous?” I asked. “Go on...go talk to him.”

She turned on a toothpick heel that sank into the ground and stalked off. We both knew she’d never do anything that might even resemble confronting somebody near Aunt Agatha. The woman was a lioness, and you had to have a spine to deal with her.

I managed to get Aunt Agatha's drink – and one for me – without too much additional drama, and I got back to find her and Kaleb laughing as if they'd known each other for ages. It was enough to make me smile, and I turned Aunt Agatha's drink over to her as I sat down next to him, leaning against him without thinking about it.

"Hmmm..." Aunt Agatha made a low noise as she sipped from her drink, one that had me sliding her a narrow look.

"What's that for?"

"Oh, nothing. Nothing." She waved a hand at me and took another sip, looking rather...*pleased* with herself. "I just thought I had this whole mess figured out, and you just went and dashed it all to bits, that's all."

"What mess?" I took Kaleb's hand, hoping nobody was around to hear. "We're not a couple of specimens sitting on a slide in your lab, Aunt Agatha." She'd worked for a biological research facility for years after her husband passed away, choosing science over pursuing a family. A rather strange idea for a woman of her time, she'd once told me.

"Everything is a specimen, in a way." She reached out, one hand extended.

I took hers, and she squeezed my fingers. "Go on, now, Piety." She smiled at me and let go. "Mingle and make sure you kiss that sexy Aussie of yours a time or two. Shock the hell out of that stodgy old nephew of mine."

I blushed at the thought of kissing Kaleb – or anybody else – in front of my father.

"Enjoy the rest of your day, Aunt Agatha," I said.

"You too, darling."

As we lost ourselves in the crowd, I hooked my arm through his. "What did you think of her?"

"She doesn't seem to fit." He glanced down at me. "A lot like you."

I laughed, delighted. "That's the best compliment I've ever received. Thank you."

"That's the best compliment you've *ever* received?" We'd reached the stone balustrade that separated the wide terrace from the landscape. There, we stopped, leaned against it, and looked back over the crowd. Some of them weren't paying us any attention. Others were good at pretending not to.

But some didn't even try. I ran out of fingers counting the ones who weren't being subtle about their interest in us.

"Look at everybody here. I didn't have too many role models growing

up.” I shrugged, swirling my straw through my drink. “It’s not that any of them are...well, *bad* people. But they have a certain view of the world that doesn’t fit with mine. Is it any wonder that I clicked with Aunt Agatha?”

“No.” He dipped his head.

He was going to kiss my cheek.

Whether it was because so many were still making little effort to hide their interest, or because so many were making little effort to hide their disdain, I don’t know. But I turned my head just slightly so that his lips brushed my mouth instead of my cheek.

He paused, hesitated.

Against his lips, I whispered, “Kiss me.”

And he did.

It wasn’t a deep, *I’m gonna make you naked*, kiss. But it was far from chaste.

And when he looked back at me, my heart was pounding, my throat was dry...and I was ready to make *him* naked.

NIGHT WRAPPED around us in a cool, dark embrace by the time we finally reached my room. It wasn’t that it had taken forever to get home. It had just taken forever to get from the elevator to the door, then across the living room and finally to here.

There was a breadcrumb trail of clothing marking our progress and later, much later, I’d be a little embarrassed because no doubt Astra would see it and tease me.

But for now, all I could think was that he wasn’t completely naked yet, and he wasn’t inside me.

Fumbling with his belt, I leaned against the wall as he reached under my skirt and yanked at my panties.

“Open your mouth, Piety,” he said against my lips. “Open...damn it, can’t get enough.”

I laughed shakily, thinking the same thing.

He caught my lower lip and bit down. At the same time, he caught my hips and lifted up. I wrapped my legs around him and arched, pulling him against me.

I was already wet, slick and ready for him.

He was hard, and the head of his cock passed over me, once, twice...

I gasped, shivering in sensation as he teased me. "Stop it," I demanded. This time, I was the one doing the biting.

"What...stop this?" He slowed his movements and eased back until we barely touched.

"No!" I buried my hands in his hair and pulled, arching closer. If I could have urged him inside me by sheer force of will, I would have. Whimpering and wiggling, I moved closer.

"So...you want this?" He moved back to me and began to pass back and forth over my clitoris, taunting, teasing.

"I want you in me. I want...you."

His eyes met mine.

There was something utterly raw about it as he sank into me. Something too intimate, more than sex. I wanted to look away, but I didn't dare.

"Have me then. And I'll have you."

We kissed each other as he began to rock against me, slow, subtle moves that barely counted as thrusts, but I felt every nuance of him, every stroke.

And when I came, it was so, so sweet...

SIXTEEN

KALEB

The world looked terribly small from thousands of feet up in the air.

I guess it only made sense.

The weird thing was how small I felt, how isolated.

For the first time in a week, I was alone with nothing more than my own thoughts in my head, and I didn't like it.

I'd spent most of my life alone, so this shouldn't be anything new. It shouldn't be anything different. And yet...

And yet...

The checks Piety had given me burned a hole in my pocket. There was no way this plane could land soon enough. I'd done what I had to help Camry, but part of me wished Camry had never been in the picture – and I hated that part of myself.

Hated it, and hated that it was growing bigger and bigger.

For a few days, I hadn't had to worry about taking care of my sister or anybody else.

Oh, the worry had been inside me, rubbing around like an annoying bug, but I wasn't constantly forced to watch my back, or wonder when she'd show up or if I'd hear from her – or the cops.

Now it was all rushing back and what I wanted to do was board the first flight back to Philadelphia so I could see Piety again.

But I had responsibilities – a sister to take care of.

I didn't have time to dream about something that never would have worked out anyway.

But I couldn't stop thinking about what it would be like when she came back to annul the marriage. I had to handle Camry first, but then I'd see her

again. See her and...

Let her go.

The words made something ugly and hot fester inside me, and I admitted to myself that at some time during the past week, a part of me had begun to wish this whole thing was real. At least a part of me wanted the chance to make it real.

So, yeah, we didn't know each other all that well – we hadn't had that chance. But everything I knew about her, I liked. I wanted the chance to know more, and I wanted...everything. A little more of everything when it came to Piety.

And that wasn't going to happen.

Closing my eyes, I dropped my head back onto the padded headrest just as one of the airline attendants came by and offered a cocktail. Piety had done everything first class – including booking my trip back to Las Vegas. I had a wide, comfortable seat, and I'd already been given a snack and offered wine or a premium beverage. I'd declined both.

When she asked again, I requested scotch, and when she started to name the offerings, I just shook my head and asked for the best.

A few minutes later, something smooth and powerful was gliding down my throat, and I silently toasted the woman who was my wife for a few more days.

Once the scotch was gone, I closed my eyes and put her out of my mind.

I had to move on.

All that mattered was Camry.

“HAVE YOU GOT THE MONEY?”

The man on the other end of the line made me want to do something brutal, ugly, and violent.

I managed to keep that desire out of my voice as I responded. “That's why I'm calling. When can we meet?”

“Well...” Stefano drew the word out.

I already knew he would try to make it seem like he was doing me a favor. Bastard. If I could put my fist all the way through his face when I saw him, I would.

But I already knew that would just cause more problems for Camry.

She'd gotten herself hooked up with a crook like Stefano, and she'd outdone herself. He wasn't the first asshole she'd hooked up with, but he was, by far, the worst. He sold drugs and flesh, and while he might not be the one to get his hands dirty, he didn't like being double-crossed either. I'd been doing my research on him, the best I could. Law enforcement had tried to arrest him more than once, but the piece of shit kept slipping free.

No, the best chance was to just get Camry away.

"I think we can make something happen tonight. You bring that money, pretty boy, you hear me?" Stefano said.

"I hear you."

He named a place and hung up. I shoved my phone into my pocket and stood there, staring at nothing. The hair on the back of my neck stood on end, and my gut was raw. I didn't like this, didn't like any of it.

But what the hell could I do otherwise?

THERE WAS an air of desperation to the place. Even the dancers strutting up and down the stage looked just this shade of panicked, like a mouse caught in a trap or cornered by a cat, a particularly cruel one that wanted nothing more than to play with its food.

When Stefano glanced at one of the girls on the stage, she put a little more heart into her act. I could have sworn I saw her hands start to shake.

I wanted to grab her off the stage and give her my shirt – and a damn sandwich. She was so skinny, her ribs showed, and her hipbones jutted out against her skin. She looked like she hadn't had a good meal in weeks, or longer.

"Like that one, do you?" Stefano gave me a leering smile.

The asshole was almost as tall as me and muscular, the kind of guy who liked to stare at his muscles as he worked out and flexed, if I had to make a guess.

He looked about the way I thought he would, dark eyes, dark hair, and a sleazy smile that made me think he'd been born straight out of a grease trap.

Everything about him was slimy.

"Tell you what," he continued. "You can have her for the night. A

freebie. Once we wrap up business.”

Just the suggestion made me feel dirty.

“I don’t think so.” I met his dark brown eyes. “I don’t need to pay a woman to have sex with me.”

A muscle pulsed in his cheek.

Should have kept my mouth shut.

But he just smiled. “Sometimes we all like it a little wild, you know. Just thought I’d give you the offer. My girls will do *anything*.”

I looked past his shoulder, staring at the woman on the stage. “Yeah. I see that.” Then I met his gaze and put the envelope down on the table. “Here. The money you say Camry owes. Now, take me to her so I can get her out of this stinky place.”

He laughed. “So you want to save your sister. What makes you so sure she wants to be saved?” He took the envelope and started to count. I shifted restlessly in the chair, thinking about the other two grand I kept on the side. It would be enough, I hoped, to put the two of us up in a hotel for a little while so I could find a decent job, see about getting her help—

“You’re short.”

I shot him a narrow look. “No. I’m not. I counted it twice. You said she owed you ten grand. That’s ten grand.”

“Ten grand is just for the drug debt.” Stefano lifted a shoulder. “But if she goes with you, I’ll lose another ten grand easy – just within the first few weeks. She’s a favorite. Won’t be easy to replace her.”

“You arrogant—” Coming out of the chair, I slammed my hands down on the table, glaring down at him.

He smirked, his eyes flicking left then right.

I knew without looking that some of his goons had come up and surrounded us. Arse. The fucking arse. I was tempted to beat him shitless just for existing.

But Camry needed me.

“You got this easy enough,” Stefano said, smacking the envelope against his hand.

“I don’t have another ten grand.” Now I understood the desperation some of these women must feel. Or at least a shade of it. I needed to get Camry away from this scum.

“Then you better get it.” Stefano leaned in, still smirking at me. “Until you do...she’s mine. But I’ll give you some time. A few weeks...interest-

free. Hurry it up though. You wanted to do business with me, so we're doing business."

SEVENTEEN

PIETY

I'd put entirely too much time into my appearance, and I knew it.

I'd even gone shopping.

Not that I minded shopping, but how many women went shopping just to buy an *annulment* dress?

A wedding dress, sure.

A dress for a date? Or even when you knew you'd see your ex and you wanted to knock him dead, just so he'd know what he was missing out on.

But this wasn't any of those.

I was going to see my yet-to-be-ex and sign annulment papers, and I wanted to look good. Not because I wanted him to know what he was missing out on – but because I wanted to look my best.

I'd chosen a sheath that was almost the same color as my eyes and paired it with shoes the same shade. Keeping the makeup light, I'd done my best to look *good* without making it obvious I'd spent nearly an hour getting ready.

I hardly slept the night before. I was too anxious about seeing Kaleb again, and I didn't want the effects of a sleepless night showing on my face.

"Is this the place, Ms. Van Allan?"

The driver of the car I'd hired met my gaze in the rearview mirror, and I looked out the window, already going to check my phone. But I didn't have to.

I saw Kaleb.

He was sitting on a bench outside the towering spiral of glass and just the sight of him made my heart race.

"Yes. This is the place."

He parked, and I climbed out.

He passed me a business card. “I won’t be any more than ten minutes away, so call me when you’re done,” he said, smiling.

“Of course.” I slid out of the car and started toward Kaleb, hoping none of my nervousness showed on my face.

My heart was racing. Just seeing him again had my belly twisting inside. It hadn’t been long – just a couple of days – but it felt like it had been forever. I wanted to go to him and kiss him and stroke my hands over him...

He looked up, and my racing heart tripped a beat or ten.

Forgetting my mental decision not to let him see my nervousness, I rushed closer and caught his hand just as he stood up. I placed my other one on his cheek. “What is it?” I asked, studying his eyes.

“Nothing.” He gave me a tired smile and nodded toward the skyscraper at his back. “You ready to get inside and get this done? Get you out of the heat. You aren’t used to it.”

The heat of the Las Vegas sun beat down on us but instead of saying *yes*, I cupped his face. “What’s wrong?”

“I...” He sighed, and it was like the energy drained out of him with that expulsion of air.

Sweat beaded on my neck and began to trickle down my spine. “Come on. There’s a coffee shop.” I nodded toward it and took his hand. “Let’s go in there. The meeting isn’t for another half hour.”

“I thought you said...” Kaleb frowned, checking his watch.

“I asked you to meet me here at two. I didn’t tell you when the meeting was.” I flashed him a smile. “I wanted to see you.”

A ghost of his old grin came and went. “Come on.”

Inside the coffee shop, I got both of us iced tea.

Sitting at a table in the back, the booth over a guise of privacy, I took his hand. “Talk to me,” I said. “Please.”

“I met with Camry’s dealer.” He looked away, jaw clenched tight. *Everything* about him seemed tight, like he might shatter. Or explode.

I wanted to go around the table and sit next to him, but it wasn’t the time. I knew that, somehow.

“I guess things didn’t go as planned.”

“No.” He laughed, and it was a terrible, broken noise, like broken glass and rusty nails. “Son of a bitch. Scum-sucking, bottom-feeding son of a bitch.”

“Tell me how you really feel.”

He stared at me, then a faint smile curled his lips. “I’m being polite, actually. Piety, this man...shit, I’m not even sure if he qualifies for the title. I’m not even sure he qualifies as human. He’s cold-blooded...a snake.”

“He’s stringing you along, isn’t he?”

Kaleb closed his eyes.

Reaching out, I covered his hand with mine. He turned his hand up and linked our fingers.

The connection hit me hard, straight down to my soul, and I tightened my grip.

“How did you know?”

Lifting a shoulder, I said, “As angry as you are, as frustrated as you sound. Wasn’t hard to guess. I...ah...” I licked my lips, debating on how to answer. “I know girls who’ve gotten caught up with men like him – or at least men who seem to have things in common with him. He sounds like a predator.”

“He is.” Kaleb clenched his jaw. “We met at a strip joint he owns. There was this girl.” He shook his head. “Piety, I swear, she didn’t look like she’d had a decent meal in weeks. I wanted to put some clothes on her and feed her.” He laughed sourly and dragged a hand down his face. “That sounds awful, I guess. I was taking my clothes off for a living just a week ago, and here I am, wanting to help some girl who, for all I know, could have willingly chosen to do what she’s doing.”

“I think you know she’s not.” Rubbing my thumb across the back of his hand, I willed him to look at me. “And there’s a difference between somebody who wants to strip for a living and someone who is either coerced or forced into it.”

“He offered her to me.”

My jaw dropped.

Now he did look at me. “She looked so sad and scared standing up there. There was nothing sexy about it at all, but there were men cat-calling at her, and I was thinking about how pathetic the whole thing was. He saw me looking at her and said I could have her for the night. Free.”

Somehow I managed to close my mouth.

“I wanted to beat the shit out of him.”

“Now I do too,” I said. I wasn’t...*surprised*. Not exactly. I hadn’t been lying when I said I’d worked with girls who’d been forced into lives they weren’t happy with. The shelter I worked at took in a lot of girls who were

trying to get out of prostitution, and we had to deal with pissed-off johns quite a bit. Some treated women like they were nothing more than just commodities, a product to be sold or traded.

But knowing it and having something like that happen so close to me...

Unconsciously I tightened my hand on his.

“You look like you want to make him eat his own face,” Kaleb said.

“Ew.” I blinked at the disgusting mental image, then laughed. “I think it would be a nice punishment. Have any suggestions on how to make it happen?”

“No. But I’ll think about it.” He slumped a little deeper into the seat, his eyes staring off at nothing. “He wants another ten grand. Says the money I paid him covered Camry’s drug debt, but that he’s entitled to get the money he’ll lose when she leaves him. She’s one of the *favorites* – like she’s some kind of piece of meat.”

“Kaleb...”

“Look, I’m sorry.” He went to slide out of the booth, shaking his head. “We should head on up to the lawyer’s office, see if they’re ready for us. If not...look, I don’t need to dump this on you. You’ve already helped me enough.”

I caught his hand. “What are you going to do?”

He stared down at me. “I’ll figure it out.”

“You’ve been trying to do that ever since he dumped this on you, haven’t you?”

He didn’t answer, but judging by the dull red flush creeping up his cheeks, I could take a good guess.

“Come on.”

As I led Kaleb out of the coffee shop, I called the driver. “Come on back, would you? It didn’t take long.”

I hung up before the man had a chance to answer and turned to meet Kaleb’s eyes. “That was my driver. He’s on his way back. We’ll get this figured out.”

He just frowned.

I called the lawyer’s office next and looked away as I waited for the receptionist to come on the phone.

His attention grew more intense as I canceled the appointment, explaining that something urgent had come up and I’d get back with them when I needed them – so terribly sorry.

“What are you doing?” he demanded. He gestured toward the entrance doors for the office building, just a few hundred feet away. “It’s right there.”

“You’ve got bigger problems, Kaleb...and I’m going to help.”

“It’s not *your* problem, Piety,” he argued. “I’ve got to fix this on my own.”

“I’m your friend.” The word felt...funny. We were friends, I thought. But that was such a mild term for what we had. “Friends help each other, right?”

“And what do you propose we do?” He crossed his arms over his chest, staring me down. “Are you going to pay me to stay married to you for another week or two? Give me more money so he can jerk me around again? Is that the solution you have in mind?”

“No.” Then I shrugged. “Actually, I don’t have a solution. But this guy is a user – you’ll never be free of him as long as you play his game, so I don’t think paying him is the answer. But I’m not walking away and leaving you – or your sister – alone to deal with him.”

“My sister isn’t your concern,” he said gently, reaching up to cup my chin.

As he angled my head back, forcing me to meet his gaze, I tried not to let him see how much I loved having him touch me again.

I’d missed it – missed him – every second.

I’d felt the loss of him every second.

It was hard enough to convince myself that I needed to come out here and handle the annulment. The only thing that made it even semi-tolerable was knowing I’d see him again. But the thought of walking away now when he was dealing with this was just intolerable.

“She is.” I leaned in and kissed him gently. “Because she’s yours and I’m concerned about *you*.”

EIGHTEEN

PIETY

I'd booked a room at the Bellagio before I left Philadelphia.

Now, as my driver came to a stop at the elegant, grand entrance, I tightened my hand around Kaleb's. He was staring at nothing, and I knew part of him wasn't here.

He was thinking about his sister.

I wished I could take the worry away, but I was too acutely aware of the sort of trouble she might be in. The first month I'd been at the shelter, I'd worked with a girl who'd tried to get away from her john. She'd tried so hard.

One day, she left the part-time job at a coffee shop, and he caught up with her, threatening that she still owed him.

When she stood up to him, he'd beaten her senseless.

People like this Stefano were bottom-feeders. We had to find out how to help Camry.

"Thanks, Delano," I said as he helped me out of the back of the car. I passed him a twenty. "Would you be available tomorrow if I need you?"

"You just give me a call, Ms. Van Allan." He tipped his hat to me and nodded at Kaleb as he climbed out.

Offering my hand to Kaleb, I waited for him to take it before we started inside.

The concierge had seen me coming, and he already had my room key ready as well as a bellboy on hand to take the luggage Delano had unpacked from the trunk.

"I still can't get over that," Kaleb said abruptly.

I glanced at him, puzzled.

He gestured to the bellhop walking in front of us as we started down the

hall. “You didn’t even have to check in. They were just...waiting for you.”

“Ah...” Blood rushed to stain my cheeks red. “Well. Yeah.”

He laughed. “You’re embarrassed by it. I imagine your dad would be furious if a place like this wasn’t ready to get down on bended knee the moment he walked through the doors.”

“Probably.” I nodded at the bellboy as he held the elevator doors for us, nudging Kaleb in the ribs so he’d stop.

But he either didn’t get the hint or refused to take it. He met the bellboy’s eyes. “What’s it like? Working at a place like this?”

“It’s a good job, sir.” He smiled politely at Kaleb.

“I’m not a sir.” Kaleb snorted. “I’m only here because I’m lucky enough to be hooked up with her. Otherwise I’d be...hell, a week ago, I was taking my clothes off for a living.”

“What was that like?” The bellboy smiled again, still polite, but I saw a hint of amusement in his eyes. “Working at a job like that?”

“Good one,” I murmured. Then I winked at the bellboy. “Ignore him. He’s had a rough few days.”

“I understand.”

Once he had my suitcase in the room, he nodded at us and accepted the bill I extended, then left, closing the door softly behind him. Meeting Kaleb’s eyes, I said, “When I’ve had a bad day, I get a little bratty, just to make me feel better. It looks like we share that in common.”

“Sorry if I embarrassed you.”

“Oh, it takes more than that to embarrass me.” I sat down and reached for the ankle strap of my shoe. “But questions like that to an employee, in a place like this? The wrong kind of answer, overheard by an asshole sort of manager could get somebody fired. I think that would make you feel like shit.”

Kaleb hissed out a breath and turned away, shoving both hands through his hair. “That doesn’t make sense. I was the one being an arse.”

“But this hotel is meant to cater to the guests. If a manager decided that the kid had somehow insulted you...” I shrugged. “Things are different here when it comes to that sort of thing. People are more uptight a lot of the time.”

“You’re not.” He looked back at me, eyes wild and hot. He came to me, and a few feet away, he went to his knees.

I’d been in the process of reaching for my other shoe, but at the look in his eyes, the muscles in my body started to feel curiously lax and limp, overheated too, like a puddle of hot wax. He crawled to me and bent over,

pressing his lips to one knee, then the other.

“I missed you,” he murmured. “I didn’t expect that to happen, but it did. It’s like you’re a fever in me, Piety. I’m not certain I like it.”

He reached for my remaining shoe and sat back on his heels, staring into my eyes as he freed the strap and slowly slid the shoe off.

“I wasn’t expecting any of this to happen,” I said truthfully. “But I’m not exactly unhappy with it.”

It kind of stung that he might be.

“I didn’t say I was *unhappy* with it.” He ran his thumb along my instep.

It sent a shiver through me, and I had to swallow a sigh when he began to dig his fingers into the tight muscles of my left calf. “You’re the best damn thing to happen for me in ages. But I don’t have time for this...for you...for all the things I feel for you.” His fingers moved higher. “And damn me if I give a flying fuck.”

My breath caught in my lungs, stuttered, and hitched there.

Then he straightened, coming up in front of me and tugging me to the edge of the bed until we were eye to eye, chest to chest, belly to belly. “I get around you, and it’s like nothing else matters. I don’t like that, Piety. I have to think about my sister and you make me not want to care about anything.”

“You’ve spent most of your life taking care of her.” I traced my finger across his upper lip. “It’s okay to want something for yourself every now and then.”

“She needs me.” His gaze fell away, his hands resting on my thighs.

For a moment, I thought he’d get up, walk away.

Then he looked back at me. “But I need you.” He leaned in and kissed me, his mouth hot and demanding.

I didn’t even have time to brace myself, not that it would have mattered. The kiss was deep, and his hands were hard, hungry, as he pushed my skirt up and stripped away my panties.

“Tell me you want me,” he said against my lips.

“More than I’ve ever wanted anything.” And it was nothing but the truth. I needed him so deeply, so desperately.

He tugged me closer, and I thought he just might pull me down onto his lap and take me right there, but he went for the hem of my dress instead, peeling the skirt of it up and stripping it away until I sat naked in front of him. The surplus cut front had let me go without a bra, and I shivered a little, the cool air drawing my nipples into tight, hard buds.

Then his mouth closed over one, and it was heat and wet that made me shiver, that puckered and tightened my flesh.

I cried out and shoved my hands into his hair.

He gripped my hips, fingers restlessly kneading.

He went back and forth between my breasts, and I wiggled closer, an ache spreading through me.

When he slid one hand between my thighs, I whimpered and spread them wide, eager for more.

But he didn't touch me.

In fact, he straightened and stared down at me.

Panting, I waited, watching him.

"What are you doing?"

He shook his head and caught my shoulders, easing me down to the bed.

When I lay flat, he kissed the underside of my left breast, rubbing his chin back and forth across my flesh so that the stubble growing on his chin rasped over my skin. He kissed my belly. My hip.

I arched up, whimpering.

When he nuzzled the folds between my thighs, I whimpered and curled one leg around his upper torso.

Then he licked me, opening me with one long stroke of his tongue.

I arched up, screaming, but the sound was breathless and broken.

He did it again, then stabbed at my clit with his tongue.

"Piety..."

Even the brush of air over my skin felt like too much, and I fisted my hands in his hair, trying to draw him closer. "Please," I moaned.

"Tell me."

I couldn't, another moan choking out the words.

He caught my wrists and dragged them from his hair, pinning them next to my hips. "Tell me what you want, baby. Do you want my mouth on you?"

"Yes...please...fuck...yes. Your mouth, your tongue...you."

He flicked his tongue over me again, raked my clitoris with his teeth.

Then he pushed two fingers inside me and pressed up.

I came in a rush, startled by the suddenness of it.

He was inside me before it was over, the thickness of his cock stretching me.

"Look at me," he said, tangling his hands in my hair and arching my head back.

Blindly, I stared at him, whimpering as he twisted his hips and sent the head of his cock sliding and rubbing over my G-spot. Grabbing for him, I clutched at his sides, my nails sinking in deep.

“I don’t want to think about being without you,” he said against my lips, only a second before he kissed me.

I caught the words, clung to them. I wanted to ask him what it meant – did it mean *anything at all*?

But he was stealing the breath and soul from me, riding me fast and I couldn’t think, couldn’t breathe.

“Come for me, Piety...come.”

Like I had any other choice.

WE LAY CURLED against each other, the room dim and quiet, sweat drying on our bodies as we stared at each other in silence.

It should have been awkward.

There were no words spoken, nothing that I could think needed to be said in that very moment.

I’d come to need him and it could either be the best thing that had ever happened...or the very stupidest thing I’d ever done.

I didn’t know.

But right then, I didn’t care.

Snuggling in closer, I rested my head on his shoulder and sighed in satisfaction as he curled his arm around my shoulders.

The silence, warm and comfortable as it was, stretched out, but it couldn’t last forever.

Finally, Kaleb said, “We need to talk.”

“I know.” Rubbing my cheek against his chest, I slid my hand up, then down his abdomen. Muscles jumped and clenched under my touch. Lifting up, I stared down in his eyes. “But do we have to do it now?”

“No.” He cupped my cheek. I felt him kiss the top of my head. “We don’t have to do it now.”

“Good. Because I’m not ready to.”

“Me neither.”

NINETEEN

KALEB

The earth had moved. Okay, maybe not literally.

It wasn't like there was an earthquake shaking Las Vegas.

But as I laid there with Piety wrapped around me, I understood why some people talked about how being with a certain person made their entire world shake under their feet.

She'd changed something in me.

She'd changed *me*.

I don't know if this was what it was like to fall in love – maybe it was the start of it. Maybe it was something else entirely.

I don't know, but things felt...different.

And I couldn't tell her any of it.

Whatever it was between us, it was only temporary, and I would be an idiot to think otherwise.

Maybe I was an idiot anyway because instead of keeping whatever distance between us I could, all I wanted to do was grab up every second possible.

My hand was in her hair, and I could feel her breasts moving against me with every breath.

Nothing had ever felt so good in my life. Her hair was silky smooth, her body was soft and warm.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, her voice drowsy and soft.

"The same thing I think about a lot these days," I replied.

"Your sister." There was a world of understanding in her voice.

I should have felt more than a little guilty.

Camry *should* be on my mind.

She wasn't though, until now.

But the guilt I knew I should feel wouldn't rise and rear its ugly head. It would later, but for now, the only head rising was the one that had been driving me crazy around Piety almost from the get-go. Turning toward her, I met Piety's eyes. "I'm thinking about you."

She pushed up onto her elbow and looked at me. "Really?" There was no surprise in her voice. She had a smile on her face that I've seen on my own more than once lately.

"Yeah. I like thinking about you."

She laughed, and the sound was bubbly and soft. "I like thinking about you too."

There were a hundred other things I wanted to say, but before I had the chance to put even the first one into words, my cell buzzed, letting me know I had a call.

Sighing, I reached for it.

It showed only a number, but I recognized it. Setting my jaw, I answered, careful to keep my voice neutral.

Stefano's voice was lazy, arrogant in a way. *Nobody will tell me no*, he seemed to think. "Dude. Kaleb, you don't sound too happy to hear from me. Why is that?"

Because now I'm thinking about you instead of the woman in bed with me, I thought. I didn't say it though. "Don't know what you mean, Stefano. It's a delight to hear your voice."

"Yeah, it shows." He laughed, amused. "Look, I was just...you know, checking in. Wanted to make sure you hadn't thought about taking off and leaving your sister to hold the bag. You wouldn't want to do that, would you? Leave your sister holding the bag?"

Fury flooded me. I fought the need to hit something – like Stefano's face.

"I don't plan on leaving her, Stefano. I'm working on the problem."

"So you've found a way to come up with the rest of the money you owe me?"

The money I owe you? He was unbelievable. It was some made up figure he'd foisted off on me and now...

Slowly, I sat up, easing away from Piety and staring at the wall as I willed myself to stay calm.

Completely unaware, Stefano continued to talk. "See, you better work fast. Otherwise, the price will just keep going up and up."

“I want to see my sister.” My eyes burned, and the fury bubbled in me like acid. “I want to see my sister and make sure she’s okay before this goes any further.”

“Nah, that ain’t going to happen,” Stefano said confidently.

“Then...” I sucked in a breath, blew it out through my teeth. “You know what? Fuck you. You’ve got my sister dancing like a puppet on your strings, but I’m not your puppet, Stefano. I’ll help her, but I want to make sure she’s okay first. If you can’t make that happen, then shove that money I gave you up your arse and don’t expect to see a penny more.”

I disconnected the call, feeling sick as I rubbed my shaking hands over my face, wondering how bad I’d just fucked things up.

“What did I do?” I whispered.

Turning to look at Piety, I said it again. I tried to stay level, but it came out as a shout. “What the fuck did I just do?”

She rose from the bed and came to me, reaching up to cup my face in her hands.

“I think...” she said slowly. “You did exactly what you had to.”

“No, I...I...” A torrent of disjointed words came bubbling out, and she leaned in, kissing me softly.

“You did what you had to. You want to make sure he’s not screwing you over, and you want her safe. If that’s her pimp, then that’s what they do. He’ll push you as far as he knows he can push you. You just made it damn clear you’re nothing like your sister.”

She sounded calm, strangely grounded, and I felt like I’d explode into a thousand sharp, jagged bits.

I went to say...something.

The words died as the phone rang. I went to grab it, but my fumbling fingers knocked it to the floor. I didn’t answer until the third ring. “Yes.”

Stefano was laughing. “Well, I’ll say this, *mate*...you’ve got balls. Tell you what. I’ll let you see your sister. Then you pay me my money.”

“I’ve still got to collect it,” I said, my mouth going dry. I’d see Camry, know she was okay.

“That’s fine, that’s fine. But you keep this shit up, boy? And the price will continue to rise. You got me?”

“I got it.” Swiping the back of my hand over my forehead, I looked at Piety.

She met my eyes, a steadying influence.

“Where do you want to meet?” I asked. “Somewhere public. No offense, but I’d rather swim bloody and mangled with a great white than be someplace private with you.”

“Aw, I’m hurt, Kaleb. And here I thought we could be friends. But that’s fine. I’ll text you the place. But Kaleb...?”

I started to lower the phone, but now I pressed it hard against my ear. “Yeah?”

“You bring a cop, and you’ll be sorry. Camry will be even *more* sorry.”

“WHAT IF HE freaks about you being here?”

The cooler night air whipped my hair back from my face while blowing Piety’s long locks into hers. She held my eyes steadily. “He told you not to bring a cop. I’m not. You brought your wife. And trust me...he won’t mistake me for a cop.”

Taking my hand, we started in a circle around the top of the hotel. We were back at the ride where we’d come the day after our crazy wedding.

Abruptly, somebody stepped in front of us, half crashing into Piety. “Hey, watch...”

The words died in my throat as I realized who it was.

“Camry,” I whispered.

My sister gave me a brittle smile and then looked over at Piety. “Ditch the rich bitch, and we can go talk, Kaleb.”

“Hi!” Piety ignored the insult and held out a hand. “I’m Piety. Your sister-in-law.”

Camry looked at her for a long moment, then at me. Finally, she shook her head and muttered, “Whatever. Come on. I don’t have much time.”

We ended up in the nearest restaurant, sitting in a booth.

“What do you want, Kaleb?” she asked, her voice cool.

“What do I...?” I cleared my throat. “What the hell does that mean, what do I want? I’m here to help you.”

She lifted a shoulder and started to pick at the metallic blue polish on her nails. It was a shade or two lighter than the skinny-strapped top she wore, and it kept falling over one bony shoulder.

She looked like she hadn’t seen a decent meal since she’d left home.

“Are – *have* you been sick?” I asked carefully.

“What?” She lowered her hands and stared at me.

“You just...you look like you haven’t been eating.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, puh-leeze. I eat when I’m hungry, not because the clock says I should. I refuse to be one of those cows who no longer can’t fit into a pair of old skinny jeans.”

“You’re right,” I said, keeping my voice neutral. “You’re not a cow. A skeleton might work, but a cow? Not in a hundred years. I’ve seen refugees in better shape than you, and I’m serious about that.”

She flinched but covered it quickly with a brittle smile. “Fuck off, Kaleb.” She directed her next comment toward Piety. “So... just how did you come to be?”

Piety narrowed her eyes and took a deep breath, then seemed to relax as she exhaled. “Well, once upon a time, my mommy and daddy decided they wanted a little girl...” Piety stared at her with big, wide eyes.

The sharp retort caught Camry off guard, and in the end, Piety ended up laughing.

“Wow. Aren’t you a bitch?” Camry said.

“Takes one to know one. Or so they say.” Piety thanked the server who appeared just then, passing out drinks. Beers for both of us, but a double bourbon, no ice, for Camry. “I mean, maybe I’m off base here, but I thought you’d have some appreciation for the brother who came here to help you out, but all you’re doing is being a bitch yourself. I guess they show love differently in Australia.”

For a moment, just a brief one, Camry looked shame-faced. Then she tossed her drink back. “You know, I’m pretty sure I don’t *need* his help.”

“So, you weren’t ten thousand in debt to a drug dealer?” I snapped.

She opened her mouth, then shut it, her teeth clicking together with the gesture.

“I gave up my *job*, Camry. Back home. I was *this* close to talking Mac into letting me buy him out. It was all I’d *ever* wanted, and now I’ve lost my chance.” I smashed my fist into the table, the fury I’d been suppressing all this time rising and grabbing me by the throat. “*This* close. And now it’s gone.”

“So go back!” she shouted. “Tell him to give you your job back. I didn’t ask for your help.”

“The hell you didn’t!” I shouted back, feeling sick. “A dozen times at

least. Remember those night time phone calls when you blubbered, half out of your mind, about how much trouble you were in?"

"I was *high*," she said. "Just...just go."

"I can't." I felt...used. Stupid. "Or, hell...I could, but the job's gone. He's already sold the store. If I go back, I start all over again. I gave it up for *you*."

She stared at me.

I waited for a sign. For something.

"Yeah, well." She shrugged. "You didn't have to. I'm *fine*."

Piety covered my hand, squeezed. "Then I guess he doesn't need to pay the other ten grand." From the corner of my eye, I saw her staring at my sister. But there wasn't disgust on her face. It was...pity. "I mean, I guess you heard that your john wants additional money. But if you're *fine*, then I guess you don't need anything more?"

Camry opened her mouth, then closed it, looking at me, then at her. "Bitch, why don't you mind your own?"

"I am. He's my husband, and you're jerking him around."

I opened my mouth, but before I could say a word, Stefano arrived and sat next to my sister. He eyed Piety.

"Who's the broad, Kaleb? Are you bringing her as a trade for your sister? I might just take you up on that."

I tensed, about ready to lunge to my feet and beat the man in front of me bloody.

He could tell too.

Leaning in, he kissed Camry. She didn't so much as blink.

"Having a good dinner, baby?" he asked.

"Fine, thank you," she said woodenly.

"Satisfied now?" he asked me.

I just stared at him.

"I guess you can see that she's alive...healthy." He nuzzled her cheek, let his hand slide lower. "Now it's time for you to quit jerking me around, or the price will just keep going up...and up...up. Fuck me over and see what happens."

He stood and snapped his fingers at Camry.

"Hey," I said as they walked out, keeping my voice level.

She looked back at me.

He didn't.

“It was good seeing you too, Camry. Always great to catch up,” I said, not raising my voice an iota.

She flinched but followed the asshole out the door.

TWENTY

PIETY

“It’s not personal,” I said softly, covering his hand with mine.

He stared out the small rectangle at the world below us, although I knew he wasn’t seeing it.

I didn’t think he was going to respond. Several minutes passed before he finally looked over at me. “How can it not be personal? He talks about her like she’s nothing more than a slab of meat, right in front of her, and she just takes it.” I growled. “Then she talks to me like I’m nothing to her, and I’m the one who’s supposed to get her out of the mess she’s in?”

“No.” I leaned in as much as I could. We’d booked a flight back to Philadelphia, although I’d had to convince Kaleb there wasn’t much he could do here that he couldn’t do back east. Finally, I told him he might be able to do *more* for her if Stefano didn’t know what he was up to.

I’d been reaching, but it had gotten him away from the people who were manipulating him so badly. I brushed his hair back. “Maybe you’re not supposed to dig her out of this mess. It’s not easy to save someone, who doesn’t want to be saved.”

“So I *shouldn’t* pay?” His jaw went tight.

“I can’t answer that.” I didn’t think he should, but I wasn’t going to tell him that. “That’s got to be your decision, but I can tell you that he’s jerking you around. As long as he thinks he has you on a leash, he’s going to use it. And Camry is...well, she’s your leash.”

He stared at me hard and tension pulsed, beating in cadence with my heart. Finally, he looked away and swore. “Fuck. You’re right. What else am I going to do though? Leave her to deal with that prick on her own? She hasn’t been able to do it so far.”

“Maybe she hasn’t been trying.”

Pale, icy eyes cut to me. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s just...” I sighed and looked away. I hated this. “Kaleb, did she seem like she was scared of him? Frightened? Desperate to get away?”

“She...that’s bullshit, Piety. She’s the one who called me.”

“I know.” The airline attendant approached, and I lapsed into silence until she’d gone by. Biting my lower lip, I struggled for the right way to explain this and hated that I felt so uncertain. “Kaleb, he’s got her so suckered in right now, if he asked her to dance the hula naked on the front lawn of the White House, she’d get herself shot trying. That’s how johns and dealers work. She’d do anything to keep him happy, because by keeping *him* happy, he keeps *her* happy.”

“So...” He blew out a harsh breath and tugged his hands free. Reaching up to scrub his hands up and down his face, he groaned. “Are you telling me you don’t think he’s been threatening her at all?”

“Hard to say. But...” I lifted a shoulder. “She looked like she was maintaining pretty well. She wasn’t high. If she was in such bad shape that she ended up in debt to the tune of ten grand, I think she would have been looking worse than she was. Which would leave her in not great shape for his...um...other business. That makes her valuable to him. Johns love a girl they can string along and still profit from.”

His eyes flew to mine and blood stained my cheeks.

“How do you know all of this stuff?” he asked, voice rough.

“I do some, ah, counseling of sorts.”

“Of sorts how?”

“I’ve been working with a shelter off and on since I graduated. I was finally taken on full time last year. Most of my work is with at-risk young adults and high school aged girls.” Nervous for reasons I couldn’t explain, I rubbed my hands together and resisted the urge to bite my nails. I’d quit that habit years ago, but now found myself practically smacking my hands to keep from nibbling.

“What sort of counseling?” Kaleb’s suspicion had only grown.

Huffing out a breath, I crossed my arms over my chest and glared at him. “The kind of counseling you give girls who are trying to get away from a life of drugs and prostitution, you idiot. For some reason, I seem to have a knack for it. And I can tell you this – your sister is playing you.”

Something hot and furious lit his eyes, and I watched as his chin went up,

and he prepared to battle. Then, slowly, he lowered it, and the tension drained out of his body.

“Shit,” he muttered.

“Tell me about it.”

“SO WHAT DO WE DO NOW?”

The rest of the flight passed in silence, and I ended up drifting off. Now that the plane had landed and taxied in, I was brooding over what lay ahead.

As we moved through the Philadelphia airport, I glanced over at him, debating on what to tell him. I didn’t like it, but I think I was going to have to...hedge.

If I was upfront, he’d want to come with me, and some of these things would just be easier to investigate if he wasn’t there.

I wasn’t trying to hide anything, but I could move quicker if I wasn’t answering questions, and I already knew he’d have a hundred. Or more. I didn’t blame him.

I would too. But I also knew we didn’t have time for a hundred questions, or even one. I could answer questions after I told him what I’d accomplished. And if I failed...?

Shit.

Then I’d give him the money, and we’d go back out there, and I’d offer Stefano *more* money if he’d just kick Camry to the curb right then and there. I could offer him enough that he’d do it too. Camry would be pissed, but he was her one anchor and maybe if she was cut off from him, she’d realize how much trouble she was in.

But that was my *last* option, not my first.

“I’ve got some things I need to do for work,” I said finally, looking over at him.

His mouth compressed into a tight frown.

“We’ll take care of her. I’ll make sure you get the money, and we’ll work on it tonight and tomorrow.” I didn’t like lying. In a way, I was telling him the truth, or a shade of it. I’d given my heart and soul to helping girls like Camry out. It didn’t matter to me that she hadn’t come into the shelter asking for it. She’d come across my path, and she needed it, so that was good

enough for me.

TWENTY-ONE

KALEB

“Wow. Something smells *amazing*,” a voice announced behind me.

I glanced back at Astra, then immediately whipped my head back around to focus on the omelet sizzling in the skillet.

She wore a whole lot of nothing. Okay, not *nothing* – there was a tank top that didn’t quite reach her panties and those panties covered very little, so she might as well be wearing nothing. It was true some could argue that I wasn’t really all that married and yes, I was neither blind nor dead, but still...she was Piety’s best friend and I was more than a little crazy about Piety. Seemed wrong to notice that her best friend had curves like that.

She chuckled behind me.

“I’ll go put on a robe, Kaleb. Sorry, not used to having people in here other than me or PS. It’s cute, though, seeing a guy blush.”

“You’re a pain in the arse, Astra, you know that?”

This time, it wasn’t a chuckle, but an all-out laugh. “Don’t suppose there’s enough to share, is there?”

“There is.” I figure she’d wake up. One thing about Piety and Astra, they both enjoyed eating and made no bones about it. I checked the bacon in the skillet on the back and turned the burner off before reaching for my coffee.

I started breakfast more to have something to do than anything else. Piety had left early that morning, telling me that she had to work. She’d smiled when she said it, kissed me, then just...left.

I couldn’t quite put my finger on what it was, but there was something she wasn’t telling me. She’d been gone most of the day yesterday too. Once we’d gotten in from the airport, she’d had the driver bring me to the loft, and she’d left, not coming home until late.

And today, she'd left, just as distracted as she'd been late last night when she'd gotten in. Yes, something was going on. I had no idea what was up, and I didn't feel right pressing the issue either.

Since I knew I'd go crazy if I did nothing but sit and think about it, I'd decided to make breakfast. After that, I was going to clean the place. Not that it needed much, but I wasn't used to sitting around and doing nothing.

I'd been working my ass off since our parents died. Not having something to do went against everything I knew, and it was driving me crazy.

"Okay, Crocodile Dundee. I'm decent."

I smirked. "That's a bit of a dated reference, Astra."

"Hey, I'll have you know I enjoyed the very best education. I immersed myself in the eighties culture and know all the best movies."

I grinned as she came to join me at the counter, taking a cup and pouring herself some coffee, staring down into the dark brew.

She looked at me sideways. "I'm a little nervous here. I'm picky about my coffee."

"So am I."

"Let's see if you make the cut. Otherwise, I'll have to boot you out, just to save Piety the heartache." She winked at me, then took a sip. A moment later, she sighed and leaned against the counter. "Okay. I give you my stamp of approval."

"So glad to know." Nodding at the plates in front of her, I said, "Hand me one and I'll dish you up."

A few minutes later, we were sitting down to eat.

It wasn't until Astra had cleared half her plate that she asked, with complete casualness, "So...where's PS?"

"She said she had to work." I kept my attention focused on the plate in front of me, eating with mechanical focus and not really tasting any of the food. I didn't want to look at Astra, because she'd see the lack of conviction in my eyes, and I didn't need that.

"Huh."

Slanting a look at her, I echoed her response. "Huh." I popped a bite of omelet into my mouth, chewed, swallowed, then asked, "What does that mean?"

"It's just a noise. Do you plan on doing anything to amuse yourself?"

"Not really." I wasn't about to tell her I'd located some cleaning supplies and was already making a game plan on what I'd do once I cleaned up the

dishes. I had a feeling she'd tell me it wasn't necessary. Better to already be doing it before she realized what I was up to.

"Well, I'm not due back at work until Monday, so I'm going to enjoy being *lazy*." She made a show of an exaggerated stretch before picking up her coffee cup.

Grateful for something inane to talk about, I asked, "Where do you work?"

"Get ready to be surprised." Over the rim, she gave me a rueful smile. "Piety and I both work for homeless shelters. We love it but sometimes I need a break. I dragged Piety off to Las Vegas after I finished handling a rough case. She needed to get away from her folks, but she needed a vacation too, even if she won't admit it. Her job is rougher than mine."

Homeless shelters. Frowning into my coffee, I turned that puzzle over in my head. Eyeing her, I asked, "Do you enjoy it? Does she?"

"Yes." The smile she shot at me was dazzling. "It's hard work, for both of us, but we love it. It's not what our parents would have planned for us, although I will tell you, Piety's parents definitely play up the photo ops when they get a chance. But sometimes..."

Her voice trailed off, and she shrugged. "It's hard. The place I'm at works with at-risk youth and runaways. We try to get them placed with...well, affluent families who are good at reaching troubled kids. The sort of people who want to make an impact on a kid's life. It makes a difference. It's still hard, but it helps. I see it."

She looked away, and I held quiet, wondering where she was going with this. She wasn't done, I could tell that.

"Piety, though...she's at a shelter that specializes in helping domestic abuse victims, women trying to get away from abusers, girls who've run away from boyfriends...that sort of thing."

"Sounds like hard work," I said softly, staring into my coffee.

"It is. She's good at it. Sometimes, it...hurts."

Tightening my hands on the cup, I thought of how she was helping me with Camry and wondered what it was doing to her, wondered how much Astra knew.

Across from me, she sighed. "She should take more time off. But sometimes I think she doesn't feel like she has the right."

"What's that mean?"

Astra caught sight of my scowl, and she shrugged. "It's not logical. We

were both born lucky, we've got so much, and others don't have hardly anything. I don't know if she feels like she has to balance the scales or what."

Was that why she was doing this? Trying to balance some sort of unseen scale?

I didn't know.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

The flabbergasted confusion in Astra's voice told me I'd been right on base when I'd elected not to tell her about my exciting plans for the day – cleaning.

Looking up from the table I was dusting, I cocked my head and then looked at the rag before examining the can in my hand.

"It would appear that I'm cleaning." I gave the table a final swipe and then moved to the bookshelves.

"You don't need to do that." She sounded mystified. "We have somebody who comes in twice a month. She'll be here next week, and we pick up our own clothes. We even *wash* them. We're not totally helpless."

"I never thought you were," I said, laughing under my breath.

"Then why are you doing this?"

She came around to stand in front of me, and I looked from the bookshelf to her. With a sigh, I met her gaze. "Because I've got nothing else to do. Piety isn't here. I don't know this city, and I really don't feel like playing tourist – I've got too much on my mind. But if I just sit around and watch the fucking television, I'll go flat out crazy."

Her eyes widened a little.

"Sorry," I said shortly, going back to the task at hand.

"Hey, I've said bad words before. A lot."

Looking back, I saw understanding in her eyes. She smiled at me. "It's cool," she said softly. "I get it."

"Thanks."

I went back to work on the bookcase, acutely aware that she was still watching me.

After another moment, she turned away. "I'm going to take care of some stuff and then order in something for lunch. How do you feel about

Chinese?”

“I feel just fine about it.” I wouldn’t have minded cooking lunch, but that would require a trip to the store, and I had no idea where one was, and Philadelphia was a monster of a city, completely different from what I was used to.

I half-expected her to disappear back into her room, but Astra set herself up on the couch, laptop perched across her thighs, a pair of glasses on the tip of her nose. She focused on the screen with single-minded determination, and after a while, I forgot she was there.

Nearly two hours passed before she interrupted me.

“Chicken or pork? Sweet and sour? Kung pao? What’s your poison, Kaleb?”

“Huh?” I threw the rag into the bathroom and swiped my arm across my forehead. I’d thrown myself into the cleaning with more intensity than it really needed, thanks to a text from Camry a half an hour ago.

What’s going on, Kaleb? Where are you? Are you going to help me? I’m sorry I behaved that way. I do want to leave Stefano and come with you home.

I hadn’t answered her back.

I didn’t know what to believe anymore.

I was...tired.

I’d come here to help, and then when I finally talked to her, she acted like I was just there to be a pain in her skinny, underfed backside.

“Kaleb?” Astra’s voice was soft.

“Sweet and sour chicken,” I said, bending back over the bathtub. “That will do.”

“Are you okay?”

“No worries, Astra.” No fucking worries.

She left me alone, and I scrubbed at the already gleaming bathtub as if I could scrub all the misery out of me.

IT WAS NEARLY ten when the door opened.

Astra flashed me a bright smile and bounded up from her chair.

The remnants of pizza still sat on the coffee table, and I stared at the box

for a long moment before standing and cleaning it all up.

Piety's soft voice behind me didn't even have me turning around. "I'm sorry I left you alone so long."

"No worries. It's not like I need a babysitter." I glanced at her as I carried the box into the kitchen. "There are two slices left if you're hungry."

"No. I...ah...grabbed something while I was out." She slid her hands into her back pockets and looked around. "What did you do all day? Astra show you the city?"

"No. I'm afraid I'm not much up for playing tourist with everything going on." I placed the two remaining slices on a plate and wrapped them, then put them in the fridge next to the leftover Chinese from lunch. Once that was done, I tore the box down and placed it near the trash to dispose of in the morning. While she watched, I cleaned up from the late dinner.

"Seems like you figured out where everything is," she said, giving me a smile. I think she tried to keep it light, but it just looked strained.

"Yeah."

I waited, wondering if she'd say anything else, offer me...anything. She said I should come back here while we figured out what to do, but so far, she'd spent the past two days out of the loft, hardly talking to me. I was running out of ways to tell myself that I'd figure something out on my own.

Piety toyed with the braided belt on her dress, but I abruptly said, "I'm tired."

Heading past her, I paused just long enough to kiss her cheek, then went straight into the guest bedroom where I'd originally planned to sleep, closing the door behind me.

I heard voices just a few minutes later, low and soft, but I didn't try to listen to what Astra and Piety might be discussing.

I was...tired.

Tired and feeling empty and just about out of hope.

A SLEEPLESS NIGHT led to me sleeping past ten, and when I woke up, the loft was empty.

A note was under a cup next to the coffee pot – apparently, they at least knew I needed coffee to function.

Kaleb,

Astra and I need to see to some business details.

We will be gone for a while.

I plan to be back in time for dinner, though.

Don't make plans.

She signed it with a *P* inside a heart.

I reached for the piece of paper and crumpled it in my fist.

“What kind of fucking plans am I supposed to make?”

Unless there was somebody on Craigslist looking for a kidney or something, I was shit out of options, and I needed to figure something out fast.

Head pounding, I started the coffee pot.

It hadn't even managed to get me my first miserable cup when somebody knocked on the door.

Frowning, I walked over and looked through the security hole. Nobody had called up, and security here was tight – I'd already seen that. So whoever it was must be somebody the building security knew. Unless that somebody knew how to get in undetected.

I didn't know him, but what did that mean? I could count how many people I really *knew* in this city on one hand and have fingers left over.

Eying the distinguished looking man, I felt an immediate rush of dread and distaste fill me.

“Can I help you?” I asked through the door.

“Mr. Hastings? Hello, my name is Stuart Rushmore. I'm a friend of Piety's. I was wondering if you had a few moments.”

As I studied him through the small Judas hole, he smoothed his tie down and beamed a brilliant smile directly at me, clearly aware I was watching him – or maybe he just liked to smile.

“A few moments for what?” I asked.

“Well, to be blunt, Mr. Hastings, I'm here to help you. If you could allow me in...?”

“How about you give me some insight as to who you are first?” For all I knew he could be working for Stefano. Not likely, but still...

“As I said, I'm a friend of Piety's. To be more direct, I'm a friend of your in-laws.”

Oh, shit. Dread dropped down on me like a leaden weight, and I wanted to tell him to get the fuck out. But instead, I unlocked the door and studied

the man in front of me for a long moment.

He did the same.

He probably found me wanting. He looked expensive, in a lightweight summer suit and a tie the same shade of green as his eyes.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” he said after a few moments.

Before he could hold out his hand, I turned away. “Something tells me I’ll need coffee for this. Bourbon, too, but it’s kind of early for that.”

He followed me inside. “I wouldn’t mind a cup of coffee myself. But relax...I don’t have anything hard to tell you. It will make your life so much easier, in fact.”

I STARED AT THE CHECK.

“What’s the catch?” I asked flatly.

“Not much of a catch, really.”

The moment I’d seen Stuart Rushmore standing at the door, I decided he would be an arrogant piece of work. I was right.

He was also a prick.

He smiled at me like we were friends, leaned forward, and gave me that *we’re cool* look as we talked and did all sorts of things that would have irritated me even if I’d liked him. But I’d disliked him from the get-go, so it made it even worse.

“You just need to end this farce of a marriage. My clients know it’s not real. You know it’s not real. Why keep it up?” Elbows resting on his knees, he gestured with one hand and shook his head. “This was just some stunt Piety pulled to upset her parents. She got her way. She wanted attention, and she got it. They’ll talk. You’ll get the money you clearly need—”

“Clearly?” I asked, keeping my voice calm through a sheer act of will.

“Both Mr. Van Allan and I know what a desperate man looks like,” he said, his voice almost kind. “Perhaps if you hadn’t involved his daughter, he would have been more open to helping. As it is, you’re lucky he’s willing to make this offer.”

He put the check down, then a folder.

“Take the check. Sign the annulment agreement. Leave the city. Everybody gets what they want.”

The numbers on the check staggered me.

It would take care of what Stefano wanted. Get him to let Camry go.

It would be more than enough, even some to start a new life back home.

Open the surf shop I've always dreamed about.

All I had to do was leave.

“How do I know he won't cancel the check the moment I leave?”

“I'm going to the bank with you.” He smiled benignly. “Then to the airport. I've already secured you a seat back to Las Vegas. But this is a very limited time offer.”

TWENTY-TWO

PIETY

“Kaleb!”

I felt awful about how I’d left him alone in a strange city for the past two days, but I had news that was well...promising. Not one-hundred percent *good*, but definitely heading in that direction.

And I could *tell* him now. I hadn’t wanted to get his hopes up, and I hadn’t wanted him coming along until I knew more about what I needed to do.

Now that I had answers, though, it was different.

Very different.

The dinner I’d planned to be a distraction could now be something even more...almost a celebration.

Things were going to work out.

I knew it.

“Kaleb!”

There was no answer, though, and my voice almost seemed to echo back in that odd way a place had when it was empty.

Not just because somebody wasn’t there, but when they were...*gone*.

“Hey, PS.” Astra came rushing in after me, all smiles. She wagged her eyebrows. “Are you two heading out?”

Turning back to the empty apartment, I lifted a hand. “It looks like he’s already gone.”

Astra looked at me, confused. “What? I thought you told him you wanted to go out to dinner?”

“I did. I wrote it in the note I left him.” Then I frowned. Maybe he hadn’t seen it.

But when I checked, it was gone.

I turned around and saw Astra dumping her purse in the chair. “Maybe he just got hungry and went to the store. It’s not like we keep a bunch of stuff on hand.” She kicked her shoes off and groaned. “Those shoes are adorable but murderous.”

“Maybe. But wouldn’t he have left a note?”

Turning back to the empty loft, I looked around, searching for some clue as to where he might have gone, but I didn’t see anything.

“He probably wasn’t planning on being gone long. You’ve been out late the past two nights, so he probably figures he has time.” She shrugged and leaned back, rotating her feet at the ankle and glaring at the discarded shoes. “You know, you did a good thing, helping him. Maybe he can stop being so...serious. He doesn’t seem to enjoy life much.”

I’d filled Astra in on some of the details – some, not all – earlier because I needed her help.

“Yeah, I hope so,” I said absently as I wandered around the main room of the loft. Something was missing. I couldn’t figure out what it was.

I walked into the room he used last night and then walk back out. The bed was made, but I’d already figured out he was a neat freak. Astra told me how he’d spent half the day yesterday cleaning. It wasn’t that either of us were particularly messy. Both of us wanted a clean space, so we’d learned how to pick up after ourselves between professional visits.

But the place was now spotless. There wasn’t even a speck of dust to indicate people even lived here. I went into my room and looked around, lingering in the door, searching for whatever it was that was tugging at the back of my mind.

Something’s missing...something’s missing...

Not even a speck of dust, I thought.

Nothing to indicate anybody even lived here...

“Shit,” I whispered. Spinning on my heel, I rushed back into the guest bedroom, coming to a stop in the doorway as I looked around.

For some reason, it felt like somebody had punched a hole in my chest and ripped out my heart. “It’s not here,” I said. I could hear the panic in my voice, and it didn’t make sense.

Astra stared at me, confused. “What’s not here?”

“His suitcase,” I said. “His suitcase isn’t here. Neither is his jacket. He left in hanging on the hook by the door. It’s not here.”

“Why would he need a jacket?” she asked. “It’s the middle of summer.”

“It’s not in Australia. It’s winter. He probably wasn’t thinking when he started packing for the trip!”

I rushed back into the bedroom and flung open the door, hoping I would see the jacket or his suitcase hiding in a corner, but it wasn’t there. “He’s gone, Astra.”

“That doesn’t make sense.” She offered me a smile, but it was hesitant and uncertain. She came to stand in the doorway where I had been just a few moments ago, watching as I went through the bedroom searching for some sign of him. It wasn’t like I’d find his suitcase, or him, hiding in one of the drawers. But I was desperate and not feeling particularly logical.

As I came striding toward the doorway, she stepped out of the way and trailed after me as I continued my mad search of the loft.

It didn’t take long. There was no sign of him, and worse, not even a note. “Why did he leave?” I asked. I wasn’t asking her, I was asking myself, trying to figure out some sort of answer. Did he think I wasn’t going to help him?

And *how* could he leave? He had to do something for Camry, and he was nearly out of options. But...hell. I didn’t know what to think. Covering my face with my hands, I emptied my mind and tried to calm my thoughts, desperate to think everything through.

“Maybe he thought it was something he should handle on his own,” she said gently. “It sounds like he’s been doing everything on his own for a long time.”

“But where will he come up with that kind of money on his own?” I demanded. That piece of shit Stefano wasn’t exactly giving him a lot of time. I shoved my hands through my hair and tugged, feeling more and more helpless, more and more frustrated.

“How about instead of driving yourself crazy,” she suggested, “you call him.” She pushed my cell phone into my hands and guided me over to the couch. “Call him and get an answer. That’s all there is to it.”

Touching my phone, I looked up and gave her a wan smile. “You know, every now and then, you really make sense.”

She gave me a wounded look. “Only every now and then? I thought I made sense all the time. You’re just not superior enough to understand my unique way of thinking.”

“Yeah. You’ve got a unique way of thinking, alright.” Sighing, I pulled up Kaleb’s number and hit the call button.

One ring.

Two.

Three.

Four.

As it rolled to voicemail, I closed my eyes, unable to stop the sinking sensation of dread inside me. I left a message, hoping I didn't sound as desperate as I felt. When I disconnected, I shot Astra a look. The look on her face had me wincing.

"That sounded pretty pathetic, didn't it?"

She held up a hand and wiggled it. "You could have sounded a *little* more needy, but that's okay. You like the guy. Right?"

She sat down next to me and hooked an arm around my neck, hugging me closer.

"Don't worry. He'll call back soon, and you'll figure out what's going on, and we'll all feel better."

BUT KALEB DIDN'T CALL. Not that hour.

Not the next.

It was almost eight when somebody knocked on the door, and I lunged for it, ready to yell at him and hug him and kiss him and throttle him.

But it wasn't Kaleb. Feeling deflated, I stood there, staring at Stuart Rushmore, unable to say anything.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" he asked, offering me a smile.

"Um, yeah." I looked around the loft, feeling like I'd never seen it before. It already felt empty without Kaleb there. How insane was that? "Come on in."

I stepped aside and waited for Stuart to come in, although I had no idea why one of my parents' personal legal lapdogs might be here to see me.

He moved deeper into the main area of the loft before he turned and met me. Astra had retreated into her room earlier, and it was just the two of us. Probably a good thing. She didn't like Stuart any more than I did – and she didn't bother to hide it.

"Why are you here?" I asked, feeling too drained to bother with courtesies.

He sighed, smoothing his tie down. “We need to talk, Piety. I...look, I don’t want to be rude, but can I have a drink? It’s been a rough day and I could use it.”

The grave expression in his eyes hit me a moment later, and my heart seized inside my chest.

“Are my parents okay?” I asked, forcing the words out through an already tight throat.

“Yes, yes...” His eyes softened. “Of course. They’re fine. They...well, I told them you might take it better coming from me.”

“Take what?”

“That’s what I’m here to discuss.” He put his briefcase down and came toward me. Within moments, he had me sitting on the edge of the couch, holding my hands in his.

I don’t know how he managed it. It was one of the reasons he was so good at what he did – managing people. He hadn’t stayed with my parents for so long by *not* being good at it, that was for certain.

“Piety, you look so tired.”

“I’ve had a crazy couple of days,” I said shortly, tugging my hands free.

He nodded his understanding, as if he knew exactly what I’d been dealing with the past forty-eight hours. “That’s part of what I’m here to talk to you about.” He patted my knee, then got up and went into the kitchen.

Make yourself at home, I thought sourly. But I remained quiet as he cracked open a bottle of scotch – my brand *new* bottle – and poured both of us a drink. He came back to me, concern stamped across his features as he gave me the glass.

“You’ll probably need it in a moment, sweetheart.”

I took it but didn’t lift it to my lips. I just held the glass in my lap as he sat back down.

“How about you cut the bullshit and just tell me what’s going on?” I said.

“You are so much like your father.” He shook his head and took a sip of the scotch.

“Insulting me won’t help me feel any better,” I fired at him.

Shock danced across his features. “That wasn’t an insult.”

“Maybe not to you.” I took a sip too, then put it down. It hit my raw belly too hard and too strong. “But I’m not feeling too friendly toward the man right now. Sue me. He wants to control my life, dictate who I’ll marry, and when I *do* marry, he insults the man, ignores me—”

Stuart interrupted me, his voice calm and placid. “And he protected you today.”

“What?”

He didn’t repeat himself, just reached inside his briefcase and withdrew a manila folder. “Kaleb went to see your parents today. Did you know that?”

“He...no. What?” Confused, I shook my head, eying the folder like it might bite me.

“Piety...” He sighed. “Look, I know you have your differences with your parents, but surely you know they love you.”

“Yeah.” I jerked a shoulder in a shrug, still eying that folder. What was in it? And why was he here? “Why are you here? I’ve already asked once.”

“Kaleb attempted to blackmail your parents.”

“I...he what?” Shaking my head, I shoved upright and paced a few feet away. Once I had some room, I took a deep breath. This was bullshit. It had to be. Something Stuart and my dad had cooked up.

But where’s Kaleb?

“He paid them a visit and told them things weren’t going quite the way you two had planned. You’re not happy – he’s not. Anybody can see that. But he didn’t want to give up on a good thing so easily – or that was the implication. But if they wanted him to make it easy...well, he said he’d agree to an annulment if they agreed to help him out...financially.” Stuart’s eyes fell away at the end, like he couldn’t stand to look at me as he said it.

“No.” Denial swelled inside me at the very first word. Shaking my head, I repeated, “No. That’s bullshit.”

It had to be. It wasn’t like we had planned on anything between us being real to begin with. This had to be a joke. He was getting money from me to help his sister, and I was getting...

What was I getting? I *thought* I was getting back at my parents.

But that seemed an empty reason now, especially considering what Kaleb was dealing with. But what Stuart was saying was just bullshit because we *knew* the marriage was a farce.

Nobody else did.

“No,” I said again, louder, with more force in my voice. I practically shouted it.

It was loud enough that Astra appeared in the doorway, looking from me to Stuart then back.

Distaste flashed in her eyes for a moment when she saw him, but it was

quickly hidden when she met my gaze. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I said, my voice shaking. “Stuart here is just feeding me a load of crap that he and my parents cooked up.”

But I didn’t sound entirely convinced.

I didn’t *feel* entirely convinced.

Why hadn’t he called me back?

Why hadn’t he texted?

“Have you talked to him?” Stuart asked softly. “Maybe there was a... misunderstanding on your father’s part.”

“I bet,” I muttered, shaking my head. But I pulled my phone from my pocket, checked the messages, and tried to call *again*.

Nothing.

“When did he...?” But I couldn’t bring myself to finish the question. Shaking my head, I turned away.

“Piety, I spoke with him myself at the reunion. Kaleb seemed – in my opinion, at least – to have a great deal on his mind. If he was desperate, perhaps...”

“Desperate.” I jerked my head up, staring at him. “Why do you say that?”

“I know desperate men, sweetheart.” He held my eyes levelly. “The man who went to the bank with me was a desperate man.”

“You went to the...” I stopped and sucked in a breath. “You went to the bank with him?”

“Your parents agreed to pay, as long as he sign the papers as promised.” Stewart stared at me with a solemn, sad expression. “Then I accompanied him to the airport. They wanted to make sure he’d actually leave as promised.”

Leave.

Agreed to pay...

“Is this really happening?” I whispered.

“Piety...”

“Stewart,” Astra said softly. “Shut up.”

She came to me and rested a hand on my arm. “Are you okay?”

I looked at her, unable to answer.

Maybe he’d just been desperate, I thought. No, there was no question of that. He *had* been desperate. Whatever he’d done, it wasn’t done out of malice.

“Why didn’t he wait?” I whispered. “I was trying to help.”

“Help with what?” Stewart asked. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter. Look, this boy has led you around by the nose—”

“Shut up!” I shouted. Spinning away from him, I shoved my hair back and tried to think. Why hadn’t I told him? I mean, I knew *why*. I’d been trying to make sure I had everything in place. I hadn’t wanted to get his hopes up and then have things fall apart.

But if I’d been upfront with him about everything I’d been trying to accomplish over the past couple of days, he would have known I hadn’t just *forgotten*.

He wouldn’t have been so desperate.

“It’s my fault,” I whispered, tears trying to burn their way up through my throat.

Stewart misunderstood. “Honey, you made a bad choice.”

“Oh, shut *up!*”

Both Astra and I shouted it at the same time. He looked caught off guard and backed up a step before realizing what he’d done. Mouth flattening out, he lifted a hand. “I think you need to take a deep breath and calm down.”

Shaking my head, I looked over at the folder Stewart had brought with him. The annulment papers. I didn’t *want* to calm down.

“You can go now, Stewart.”

“Piety...”

“I just *said* you can go!” I turned away, and when I didn’t hear movement behind me, I shouted. “*Go!*”

TWENTY-THREE

PIETY

I hadn't touched the scotch from earlier. Now I wished I'd just poured it out. The smell of it was leaving me nauseated.

Astra sat across from me on the opposite couch, watching me with worried eyes as I stared at the annulment papers as if they were a snake ready to bite me.

I almost wish that was the case. A snake bite might feel a little bit less painful than this.

It didn't make sense. It wasn't like we had anything real, right? So why did it hurt so much?

"Just because it wasn't real doesn't mean it won't hurt that he just up and left," Astra said.

Dazed, I looked up at her. "What?" Then I realized I must have spoken out loud. Shaking my head, I said, "It just doesn't make sense. I know he didn't plan to stay, but—"

"That doesn't mean you expected him to go and ask your parents for money." She offered a weak smile and shrugged. "But it sucks. Not that your parents aren't jerks, but you still don't want to see them being used."

I snorted. "Hell, my parents excel at using people. Maybe I should celebrate that they got used for once." I rubbed my burning eyes and swallowed around the knot in my throat. I would feel better if I could just cry, but the tears refused to come. I was so angry. Angry and hurt. I wanted to cry, and I wanted to scream, and I wanted to throw things. But that wouldn't solve anything either.

"Why couldn't he just wait?" I asked, my voice cracking.

"Oh, honey..." Astra got up and came around the table, wrapping her

arms around me. “There’s no answer to that.”

A tear finally managed to break free of my burning eyes, and it rolled down my cheek, followed by another, then another. As the dam started to break, I wrapped my arms around Astra and rested my head on her shoulder. “Why couldn’t he just wait?” I asked again.

“Maybe it’s better that he didn’t,” she said gently. “If you’re hurting this bad already, think about how much worse it would have been the longer you two were together. This was never meant to last anyway.”

“But I think I wanted it to,” I said as I started to cry harder. Astra nodded, and we sat there, her rocking me while I cried.

It wasn’t supposed to be real. But it sure did hurt like it was.

TWENTY-FOUR

KALEB

“Piece of shit bastard,” I muttered, fuming. I disconnected the call and slammed the phone down although it didn’t do anything to cool the temper burning inside me.

I’d called Stefano so many times, I’d already lost track.

The same could be said for Camry.

Neither of them bothered to call back or even send a text. That was only one of the things that had me in a foul mood.

Piety had called numerous times that first night and left several messages. But since then, she had only called twice, and each call had been late. At least late for the eastern part of the United States. She hadn’t left a message, and she hadn’t texted anything either. I almost answered each call. I almost called her back.

But what the hell would I tell her? That I’d accepted the money from her parents so I could help my sister? And it was driving me crazy to sit in Philly while doing nothing while she worked?

Would I tell her that the prick lawyer had been right in that there was really nothing else I could have done? He was right, even as much as he was a prick. Maybe he didn’t know why I needed the money, but I had needed the money. And I needed it bad enough to do something desperate, something that would hurt her. That had mattered more than anything.

Maybe it wasn’t fair to compare my sister’s life to the feelings of a woman I barely knew – even a woman I wanted more than I’d ever wanted anybody. But that’s how it was. My baby sister needed me and I’d already failed her too many times.

That thought had me reaching for the phone again, but when I went to

check my messages, Piety's name fill my vision. I read the last message she'd sent me over and over even though I'd already committed it to memory.

Where are you? Is everything okay? I've got some cool news, and I can't wait to tell you. But I want to tell you in person. Call me back, please?

Cool news. I had no idea what she planned to tell me, but that message had come through while I'd been speeding across the country on a first-class ticket paid for by her parents.

Even now the thought turned my stomach.

I went to delete the message, just as I had told myself to do a thousand times over the past couple of days. But before I could, the phone rang.

"Finally," I muttered under my breath. There was no name attached to the phone number, but I knew who it was none the less.

I answered with a short, "About time you called, damn it."

"Easy, easy," Stefano said. "Why are you so hot under the collar? I would have thought you'd be happy that I was giving you time to get all that cash together."

"I want to talk to my sister."

"She's sleeping. You know how these junkies are." He sounded amused with himself.

I wanted to punch my fist through the phone, grab him by his thick neck, and strangle him.

"When can we meet? I want to get this taken care of. I want it over with." I sounded calm. Maybe I should consider an acting career.

"Yeah, well, me too. But I've been busy. I'm a businessman, you know. Your sister isn't the only fish in the sea, and I've got other...fish to take care of. Although she is my favorite. I'm going to miss her when she's gone." Then his voice went sly. "Assuming she doesn't come crawling back for more. You know, I can be hard to resist."

"Huh. Fuck you. Look, can we just set up a time to meet or what?"

"You're in such a hurry. But fine...no small talk." Stefano laughed and named a place.

I had no doubt it would be just as sleazy as the last place, but it didn't matter. Camry was all that mattered. "What time?"

"I'll be there around three. You be there."

He hung up, and I stood there staring at the phone. I had a bad feeling about this entire thing. But what else was I supposed to do?

THREE O'CLOCK CAME AND WENT. It was coming up on four-thirty when he finally came in...alone.

Camry wasn't with him.

That alone made me furious.

I came out of my seat, hands closing into fists.

He had an easy smile on his face when he saw me, and I wanted to knock that smile off his face and his teeth down his throat.

"Hey there, Kaleb. How's it going? You got my money?"

He looked so damn pleased with himself. The arrogant bastard always looked happy.

"Where is my sister?" Anger was a huge ugly knot in my gut, but I managed to keep my voice level.

"That ain't how this works." He clicked his tongue and shook his head, looking almost pained as he said it. "See, you gotta *pay* me what you owe me and then she's free to do what she wants. But until you pay me..."

"I want to see my sister."

Stefano's eyes went cold and hard. With a shake of his head, he shouldered past me. "You don't get to make demands here. I own her."

"Did they forget to tell you that slavery ended a long time ago?"

He laughed. "You're so naïve. Where. Is. My. Money?" He enunciated each word, the cold, ugly threat coming through with every syllable.

I'd heard it from the very first word, but this time, I knew I couldn't ignore him. I wasn't worried about me, but my sister? Yes.

I turned on my heel and went back to the table where I'd been waiting. I sat down and reached for the envelope I'd left on the seat. As he sat down across from me, I slammed it on the table. "There. Now, where is she?"

"See, that wasn't so hard." Stefano shoved the envelope into his coat pocket and leaned back in the seat. He dropped his fingers on the top of the table and looked around, looking pleased with himself. "So...here's what happens now. I'll let her know that her debt is paid in full. She's free to do whatever she wants."

"If she was free to do what she wants," I said, struggling to keep my temper under control, "then she could have left whenever she wanted."

"Hey, man..." He held up his hands, looking wounded. "She owed me money. What was I supposed to do? Just let her walk out and leave me

hanging?”

“Yeah. You’re the injured party here.” I curled my lip at him, so disgusted I could barely stand to be in the same room.

“Hey, she came to me. Remember that. I didn’t snatch her or something like that. I’m legit.” He hitched up a shoulder and tipped an imaginary hat in a salute before sliding out of the booth. “Nice doing business with you, Kaleb.”

I almost told him to shove his *business* up his ass.

Instead, I shrugged easily. “Tell Camry I’ll be waiting for her call. I want to know where to pick her up.”

“Hey, I’m sure she’ll be in touch...soon.”

As he turned and slouched out of the club, I fought the uneasy feeling settling over me. More than anything else, that last comment set me off.

I’ve been leery of this whole mess from the get go, but now I was left to wonder if I hadn’t just been played.

TWENTY-FIVE

PIETY

“So you see, this client last week...”

Across from me, one Windsor Kiperman droned on and on. He was a good-looking enough guy, dark brown hair, streaked through with gold, and *amazing* hazel eyes. But he was so hung up on work, it was amazing he hadn't choked on it.

I nodded politely, trying my best to look like I was interested.

Really, I *should* be.

He was good looking and well off, and our fathers were very good friends. His father was also one of my dad's biggest campaign contributors.

In the eyes of my family, it was probably a match made in heaven.

In *my* eyes, it was a match made in the doldrums. I had never been so bored in my entire life. It wasn't that Windsor was a bad guy or anything. He wasn't. He opened doors, he'd called up and asked if I had an opinion on where we should go to eat, he was polite, attentive during the drive over.

And he was so perfectly...*boring*.

Finally – *finally* – he wrapped up his conversation about the client, and I leaned forward, smiling. “What was the last movie you saw?”

If he kept talking about work, I just might cry.

He stared at me with a blank expression.

“I absolutely loved the Avengers movie that came out last spring. Did you see it?” I continued to smile as I reached for my wine, wondering if my face would hurt from that fake, plastic smile.

“Hmmm. No. Those movies don't appeal to me.” His comment wasn't *rude*. It was just a statement – a polite, boring statement. “I seldom have time for movies. I'm rather surprised, I heard you do...charity work?”

He left the statement hanging, as though it was a question.

“My charity work?”

“Yes, I understand you’re involved in some philanthropic sort of business.” He sliced a precise cut off his steak and popped it in his mouth.

I hadn’t been able to stop from noticing that he cut his food in an obsessively neat way. It was like he practically *measured* how wide of a bite to cut, how long.

You’re obsessing, Piety!

“Ah, yes. I suppose you could call it a philanthropy sort of thing.” I shrugged. “I’m a social worker. I work at a homeless shelter.”

“You *work* there?” Windsor arched his brows. Now, instead of slicing off another perfect bite of steak, he laid his fork down and leaned forward. Puzzlement stamped all over his features, he studied me.

“Yes. It’s a home for battered women and their children.” I expected his eyes to glaze over, but he nodded, looking almost interested.

“I didn’t realize you actually worked there. I assume you get a paycheck?”

I rolled my eyes. “Barely. Their budget isn’t much, but I love my job, and it’s an important one.”

Windsor nodded slowly. “I imagine it is. I’ve been attempting to convince my father into getting the company more involved in philanthropy, and perhaps getting the employees to jump on board, but he’s...slow to see the benefits.”

“The benefits are helping people out.”

“Yes, of course. That’s always a positive thing.” He shrugged, his eyes sliding away. “But that’s not an argument that would work with him. You know, this is interesting. I didn’t know you actually worked at this facility. Fascinating.”

I’d heard too many similar comments, most of them with more than a tinge of superiority, to be insulted. At least Windsor seemed to mean it when he said it sounded *fascinating*.

“Yes, well, my parents would much rather it be true philanthropy.” I played with the napkin in my lap. “Dad loves how it looks in front of the camera, but that’s the only way it appeals to him.”

It sounded terrible and made me feel even worse than before. I felt awful about how Kaleb had taken them for all that money – that was how I ended up here.

I still didn't want to believe he had done it. But he hadn't called, hadn't texted. Without any sort of explanation, what was I supposed to think?

You're not supposed to be thinking about him at all.

Desperate to change the subject, I asked, "So if you're not into movies, what do you do for fun?" *No more thinking about Kaleb.*

"Well..." He shrugged sheepishly. "To be honest, I really don't do much for fun. I just don't have time."

"Oh, come on...everyone has time for a little bit of fun." I pushed my hair back from my ear and stopped myself from playing with a strand. "I managed to read for about fifteen minutes a day no matter how busy I am. I go crazy if I don't get in something to entertain me. Do you work out, go to the gym?"

"I...work...all the time." He held up a hand. "Sometimes I play golf with a client."

"But that's work too."

He laughed. "True. I'll be able to slow down later on in life. Right now, I'm still trying to get established and show my dad I can take care of the job. I'll be the one taking over when he retires, you know." He cocked his head, that inquisitive, puzzled look on his face. "What about you? Have you ever thought about going into politics? Following in your father's footsteps?"

"Crap." I shuddered at the thought. "No."

He laughed. "You look like you just ate something that tasted really, really bad."

"I *feel* like I tasted something really, really bad. There's no way I would go into politics." I gave an emphatic shake of my head.

"So what do you plan on doing?" The genuine interest in his voice was...sweet.

But he didn't get it.

"I'm already doing it." I shrugged. "I love what I do. Sometimes it breaks my heart. Some of it drains me and leaves me exhausted. But at the end of the day, I'm making a difference. That...matters. It's enough for me."

At least it always had been.

I didn't feel quite so ready to dive into work, although it wasn't *work* that was getting to me. I was just finding life in general lacking.

And I knew why.

Kaleb.

There it was again...I was thinking about him.

“What about your father? Don’t you think he’s making a difference? Don’t you think he might want something...more?”

“Do you really think that politics can offer more? More what... headaches?” I laughed a little. “No. I don’t think so.”

Windsor seemed to realize he was about to step in it. “I’m sorry.”

I waved him off. “It’s okay. Not everybody gets it, but they don’t need to. I’m happy with what I do. I’m more than happy. I feel...complete. At the end of the day, I’m satisfied. I make time for myself, and I do things for fun – *now* – and I don’t feel the need to do anything to prove myself to anybody. I’m good.”

“I think I envy you,” Windsor said softly.

It surprised me.

“Nothing is stopping you from finding what would make *you* happy – except you.” I held his eyes for a moment.

“True. But my priorities are more important than just being happy.”

TWENTY-SIX

PIETY

The better part of a bottle of wine sat open in front of me. I had just about emptied my glass, and I was ready to top it off.

Drinking in the dark wasn't exactly the best way to end the night, but I wasn't ready to go to bed, and I had no interest in reading or watching TV.

The one thing I *did* want to do wouldn't happen.

I wanted to talk to Kaleb.

But I sure as hell wasn't going to call him. Or text him.

I put my phone away just to make sure I didn't give into the urge or get too drunk and forget the promise I made to myself.

Astra called to check on me, asking if I was okay.

I lied.

Part of me wished I hadn't, that I'd confessed to how miserable I truly was. If I had, she would have come back home, and we could have eaten ice cream and watched cheesy movies, and maybe I wouldn't feel so pathetic.

Maybe I should just give in to the inevitable.

My parents were just going to keep pushing men like Windsor at me. At least Windsor wasn't a total ass. I could be Piety Kiperman within a year if I played things right.

Piety Kiperman.

"Please," I whispered, the very idea making my head hurt.

Life with him would be awful.

I'd be bored within three days, if not less.

But my parents were constantly pushing him at me, and if it wasn't him, it would be somebody else. Mom had already sent me a text, asking how the date had gone and when we were going out again.

Tears burned my eyes, and I groaned, putting the glass down so I could press the tips of my fingers against my eyes, trying to stem the flow.

“Crying alone in the dark, drinking alone in the dark,” I muttered. “Pathetic.”

I couldn’t help it though. Everything seemed to be imploding around me and all within the span of a few days. I wanted to go back to my nice, normal existence when I’d been content.

Except content wasn’t enough now.

I’d felt what it was like to be *happy*. I’d only had a taste of it, but it had been enough. I wanted that back. I wanted something my parents had never had – passion. A partner who *loved* me, not just somebody who shared common interests.

I wanted things my parents wouldn’t even understand...and all they kept doing was pushing Windsor at me.

I wanted a man who loved me so much he was stupid with it. My dad was never stupid about anything.

The thought of him doing something stupid and crazy for my mother was just insane. The thought of my mother doing something stupid and crazy for my father was equally insane.

The sound of my own laughter caught me off-guard, but I’d started to think of that crazy, freefall sort of feeling I’d had when I climbed on the skyscraper roller coaster with Kaleb. I’d done it because of the way he’d smiled at me. I hadn’t been able to stop myself. It wasn’t even all that crazy, but my mother wouldn’t have done it.

My father...on a roller coaster?

Never.

“Stop it!” I grabbed the bottle of wine, and without even bothering to pour it into the glass, I took a drink. Rising, I headed straight into my bedroom and went to the window, staring outside. I’d never felt so lonely and empty before in my life.

If I could just convince myself that I was worried about his sister, I’d feel better.

If I could just convince myself that it had little to do with him as a person and more to do with the situation itself, maybe I’d be alright.

But I couldn’t do it.

Yes, I had concerns about Camry, but she wasn’t what had me lying awake at night.

I'd thought there was...something between us. I really had. But I must have been wrong. Maybe it was only growing on my side. If we'd had anything there, wouldn't he have trusted me? Wouldn't he have at least called or sent me a note? Something to let me know?

I took another drink of wine, then put the bottle on the nightstand. Falling back onto the bed, I stared up at the ceiling.

I wanted to tell myself that things would get better...things would turn around.

But I'd been doing that ever since he left, and so far, nothing had changed.

"YOU SEE...I told you a change would do you good..."

Astra's wild, bawdy laugh had me giggling. "Look at that one...the blond." My heart skipped a beat when he flicked ice-blue eyes my way.

He was so...so pretty. And biteable. And pretty. I wanted to just...bite him. Yeah. Bite him.

Astra giggled. "You're licking your lips, PS. Don't blame you though. Have you ever seen such a pretty man in all of your life?"

"Nope. Not ever." Chin resting on my fist, I stared at him and sighed. I was entirely too drunk to be sitting here, gaping at some stranger – or maybe I was just drunk enough to be gaping at some stranger. I didn't know.

I just knew I was drunk and I loved it.

The beautiful blond edged closer, and the woman a seat down from us reached out and stroked her hand down the back of his calf. I wanted to smack her. He ignored her, catching the chair that had been placed in the middle of the walkway and swinging a leg over it.

"I bet you anything he's just pretty though. No brain inside that head." I gestured to him, convinced that somehow made sense. "If you're that pretty, you've got to have something wrong. Right?"

"Hey, you're pretty and smart. I'm fucking beautiful and pretty damn sharp." Astra laughed until she snorted and waved at the blond. He continued to twist his spine, a movement that made it clear that at least one thing was not lacking.

My mouth went dry.

“Besides, with that face, what does it matter if he has a brain? As long as he’s not a dick – I mean, I want him to have one...” She shot me a grin. “And it’s obvious he does.”

We were both so drunk, that was why it was so funny. It had to be.

The blond slid off the chair and went to his knees, crawling along the stage. I had a bill already clutched in my hand, and my fingers were shaking as he moved closer.

His skin was hot against my fingers, almost shockingly so. Our eyes caught, then held. I wished there was something I could say or do. Something like... Hey, you want to get a drink?

I bet that would make me stand out. Biggest loser he’d probably had to deal with in a long time, and I was fawning over him. My fingers lingered on his skin for so long that he caught my wrist and tugged my hand away.

But he didn’t let go.

At least not right away.

We stared at each other, and I bit my lip, tugging a little harder as a bunch of women around us started to whoop. He let go, loosening his grip slowly until I felt each slow brush of his fingers as they left my skin.

His eyes, so big and soft, surrounded by spiky lashes, held mine for another moment. I didn’t want him looking away, but in the next moment he did.

And I slumped in my seat.

That had been the most intense minute of my life – at least that I could recall, considering how freaking drunk I was.

“Wow...look at his ass.” Astra smacked her lips. “I just want to...bite him. Like all over. Don’t you?”

“Yes.”

I caught the server’s eye and waved my hand. I needed another drink. Desperately. Maybe if I got just a little more sloppy drunk, I could get him out of my head.

“IT’S HIM!”

Astra grabbed my arm and squealed. “See! It’s him.”

I was already staring at the guy at the bar, face shielded by his blond

hair, so I didn't need Astra shaking me. It wasn't helping my spinning head, either.

"Stop," I said, tugging my arm away. My heart raced harder at the sight of him, but when Astra tried to tug me closer to the bar, I dug in my heels and resisted. "No. You're supposed to be distracting me and helping me have fun. I'm drunk enough."

"I'm not taking you over there to get drunk. He's the distraction." She was nowhere near as quiet as she tried to be. Several people swung their heads to look at us as she continued to pull me along. "Come on, PS."

He flicked a glance our way, and the sight of his pale blue eyes had my heart hitching a beat or two. He immediately returned his interest to his glass though.

He had a booted foot hooked on the rung of the bar stool, broad shoulders slumped.

There was something...lonely about him.

Maybe it was because I was lonely too, but when Astra urged me along, I didn't resist. He continued to stare into his drink as I continued to stare at him, swirling the whiskey around and around.

What are you looking for? I found myself wondering. You won't find the answers there.

Astra nudged to me. "Talk to him. I dare you."

"I stopped responding to dares a long time ago." But I found myself taking one wobbly step and then another, and before I knew what I was doing, I had settled down next to him.

He didn't even look up.

"Hi."

Nothing.

I tried again. "I saw you dancing."

He shrugged and lifted his glass. "So did a lot of other women. I don't do private performances. Sorry."

"Oh, I don't want..."

He looked up at me.

Our eyes met.

Oh...wow...

OH...WOW...

He kissed me, and he tasted like heaven.

I giggled a little bit, because the bourbon he'd been drinking had been called something...heaven something. And I knew it was closer to hell, especially on the stomach.

But it tasted pretty damn good on him, and now he was with me, his skin hot and naked on mine.

"Stop," he muttered when I slid my hand down his chest. "You've got to stop."

"Why?" I giggled again as I slid my hands farther down, his skin hot against my palms. Hot and amazing. Everything about him was amazing.

"Stop, because...fuck. I need..."

"Yes, you need to fuck." I laughed, delighted with everything. Curling my arms around his neck, I tugged him back to me. "You need to fuck me. Right?"

"Right..." He laughed this time, and then he kissed me again.

And again.

And again...

I JERKED upright in the bed, staring at the wall.

That dream...

"Wow."

The echo of something from the dream came back to haunt me.

Oh...wow.

Had I *said* that?

Or just dreamed it?

I couldn't remember, couldn't think.

Shaking, I rubbed my hands up and down my face.

I had a headache, and the outline of the bottle of wine mocked me. I'd drunk almost half of it. Not that much in the scheme of things, and not enough to give me a hangover, but maybe enough to fuel a wild dream.

Yet...it didn't *feel* like a dream,

Not really.

It had felt like...well, a memory.

“Wow.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

KALEB

The pathetic little hotel where I was staying might not have been exactly a fleabag, but it wasn't much better.

The watery light made it impossible to read, but I didn't have anything else to do so I stayed bent over the book Piety gave me, ignoring the slowly building headache and focusing on the words on the page.

I had nothing else *to* focus on, unless I wanted to think about the phone that hadn't rang or the sister that was still strangely absent.

But it was getting harder and harder to keep my thoughts on anything that didn't either piss me off or make me wish I'd done everything – and I mean *everything* – about this differently.

I hadn't seen or heard from Stefano since I'd given him the money yesterday. Camry hadn't so much as called. I lost track of how many times I sent her a text or tried to call. I left the address of where I was staying.

She knew where I was. She knew how to get in touch with me. She could, assuming Stefano had actually let her go. I don't see why he wouldn't. If he was trying to string me along for more money, he would have made that clear.

Shit, I hope that wasn't what he was up to.

Still, if he planned to jerk me around more, I would have expected to hear from him.

I hadn't heard from anybody. My phone had been wonderfully, miserably silent. Camry hadn't called, begging for money.

Piety hadn't called. Not even once.

Unable to tolerate the stingy light any longer, I closed the book and placed it face down on my chest. Throwing my arm over my eyes, I tried to

forget about where I was and pretend I was back in Philadelphia. With her. Of course, it didn't help me feel any less miserable. Maybe I should imagine I was back in Sydney, surfing.

At least that was a little more likely.

One thing I do know – I wanted to get the hell out of Las Vegas.

I hated it here.

The wind, the dirt, the sun...and there was never any darkness, never any silence.

I must have half-drifted off to sleep because the knock on the door was so unexpected, it jerked me into awareness – and confusion. I sat up, not entirely sure where I was. I was hungry, sore, and irritated, and when the knock came again, louder, I shouted, “What is it?”

“Open up, grouchy pants!” a thin, familiar voice said through the door.

Camry.

I almost fell on my face rushing to get there.

Something light, almost happy settled inside my chest, ready to explode. Finally!

And then it died, all in the span of a second.

Camry stood staring up at me, a wobbly smile on her mouth and her pupils so huge, I could barely see her eyes. She threw herself at me and practically missed. If I hadn't caught her, she would have toppled to the floor. “Oops!” she said cheerfully. “Hi, big brother!”

“Camry.”

She gave me a smacking kiss on the cheek and then brushed me off, moving deeper into the room.

Her pupils were too big, and her smile was too big and too bright.

“You took *forever* to answer the door, Kaleb.” She giggled and said my name again. “Kaleb. *Ka-leb*. That's a cool sound...*Kaleb*.”

“You're high.”

“Maybe.” She held up her index finger and thumb about an inch apart. “Just a little.”

More than a little. I wanted to hit something. As I fought with that urge, Camry turned in a circle, looking around the room. “Wow. This place is a *dump*. Why are you staying here?”

“I've been too busy saving every penny to pay off your drug debt, Camry,” I snapped. “I'm afraid I don't have money for a room at the Bellagio.”

“Ooohhh...” She smiled and spun around in a circle. “That’s a nice place. Stefano’s taken me there.”

I clenched my jaw. “I bet he has. Did he give you the drugs?”

“Not like I’d take them from anybody else.” She sniffed. “I’m *careful*.”

“And that’s how you ended up owing him ten grand.”

“Shit, Kaleb. You’re *grouchy*. You’re so grouchy. You want to know why I get high? It’s because I don’t want to be grouchy and boring like you. Lighten up, brother. Life’s too short. You’re supposed to have fun.”

The bed springs squeaked under her, and she laughed again at the sound, bouncing up and down. Turning away from her, I moved to the window and threw open the curtains. Immediately, the heat made me wish I hadn’t. The air conditioner had a hard time keeping up with the heat and I could feel the scalding temperature outside beating against the glass.

I hated it here.

I wanted to go back home.

Back to Philadelphia.

Somewhere...anywhere but here.

“Maybe I should get high,” I said absently. “Rack up a debt of ten thousand dollars, whore myself out too. But who will bail me out when I get in trouble, Camry?”

“Don’t be mean.” Camry sniffed. “You know, I could have taken care of it myself.”

“Then why in the blue fuck did you call me?” Spinning around, I glared at her. “I gave up *everything* for you – my job, my apartment, my chance to buy the shop. *Everything!* Because I thought you needed me.”

She flinched, tears filling her big eyes.

I felt terrible but steeled myself against it. I knew better than to do this, to let her get to me. I should have known better than to even *come* here. Piety was right. She sure as hell hadn’t acted afraid of Stefano, and I was starting to get a bad feeling about this whole miserable mess.

Looking away from her, I focused on the wall. “Don’t try and use tears on me, Camry. Not now.”

“I’m not trying to *use* anything!” She stood up, wobbling on a pair of heels that had to be five inches. She gave me a defiant glare and still managed to look pathetic and woebegone.

“Why are you doing this?” I asked. “Where did you get the money for the drugs this time?”

“It was *free!*” She flung it at me like a weapon. “He *likes* me, so he does that sometimes.”

“Bastards like him likes nobody but themselves.” I wanted to shake her. “Dammit, you can’t fall down that hole again. I can’t get that kind of money again.”

“Why not?” She shrugged, not looking worried. “You did it easy enough this time.”

“Easy?” I started to see red. I’d given up Piety for her.

The first time I finally found anybody who meant something to me, and I gave her up...and for *what?*

“Easy?” I shook my head and turned away. Gathering up some clothes, I started for the bathroom. I needed to cool down before I lost it. “I don’t think you have any idea what it cost me, Camry. What *you* have cost me. You probably never will. And I’m about ready to stop trying to make you understand.”

“What does that mean?”

I paused to look at her. “Just that. You can get help. You don’t need Stefano. You can get help, get off the drugs, stop sleeping with men for money or for a quick fix...whatever. But if you’re going to keep this up...I won’t be the one to help you back up the next time you’re in trouble. You’ll have to figure it out on your own.”

“I’ve always had to do that.” She poked her lip out. “You had Mom and Dad. But I only had...me.”

“You had me.” I wasn’t going to do this. “And you know it. But if you want to tell yourself otherwise, then do it. Maybe it makes it easier for you to make bad choices.”

I left her alone, locking myself in the bathroom.

I STAYED in there more than long enough for her to give up waiting and leave, but when I came out, she was still there, standing in front of the window with her hands in her pockets.

“You never needed me,” she said, her voice soft.

Was that what all of this was about? I didn’t let myself ask the question though. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer. And to be honest, I

wasn't sure it mattered. Camry didn't want to get clean. Until she was ready, there was nothing I could do to help her.

"You know, if I'm such a pain in the ass, you could just..." She laughed, the sound shrill and harsh. Turning to face me, she jutted her chin up, an indignant look on her face. "I've *tried*, Kaleb. Things aren't as easy for me, okay? I wanted my mom and my dad to be there. I wanted...things. You did too, I get that, but you coped better than I did."

"No. I just coped. You had it rough. I get that." Shaking my head, I looked away. "But instead of trying to cope, you partied, you did drugs and acted out. I'm done feeling sorry for you."

"I'm not asking you to feel sorry for me!" she shouted. "Just go! Go do... whatever it is you do."

"Your entire life is a plea for attention, Camry." Already tired, I sat on the edge of the bed, staring at her. "I came here to help you. Apparently, *that* is what I do – look out for you. I don't know how else to define myself. And every time, it gets thrown back at me. I'm...tired of it. I'm just tired."

"Then stop." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't need you to take care of me, Kaleb. I don't need it, and I don't want it."

There was something final in her voice, and I looked up to find her staring at me.

She gave me a tight smile and then turned. I didn't even have time to process what was happening until she was already out the door. I lurched up, heading for her, but she just kept going.

There was a car waiting for her in the parking lot.

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

"Whatever I want." She glanced at me as she neared the car. "You don't want to talk to me, you want to bitch at me. So fine. I'll leave."

"You didn't come here to *talk*. You came here strung out and feeling sorry for yourself. Sorry if I'm not really in the mood for a pity party when I'm dealing with my own shit, Camry."

"Well, now you can do whatever you want. And so can I. You made that clear." She lifted her chin. For a moment, just a brief one, I thought I saw something in her eyes.

Sorrow.

Guilt.

Hurt.

I couldn't tell.

It was gone so fast, then she was too. She climbed into the car, and the driver pulled off with a spray of dust and gravel.

I stared after the car until it was lost from sight, and then, feeling oddly numb, I went inside.

I was done with this.

Friends had told me I couldn't help her if she wasn't ready, and maybe I was a slow learner, but I finally got it.

I wasn't going to sit around wasting my time trying. I wasn't going to hang around for her to jerk me around again.

I grabbed my wallet and started to shove it into my pocket, only to pause.

Dread filled me when I squeezed it.

Earlier, it was fat with the Benjamin's I'd put in there, half the cash I had left over. Now, it was almost pathetically thin.

"Camry..." I closed my eyes, hoping against hope.

I had to make myself look inside, even though I already knew what I'd find. Or what I wouldn't find.

I'd stashed half the money in my wallet, and every last dollar was gone.

Flinging the wallet across the room, I swore. It hit the wall and bounced before falling to the floor. Without waiting a moment, I went to the mattress and hauled it up, searching for the small slit I'd made, and the rest of the money.

It was there.

Thank God.

I wasn't completely broke.

But what was I going to do...?

It hit me then.

There was only one thing I could do.

One thing.

TWENTY-EIGHT

PIETY

The resume in front of me wasn't coming together.

One of my clients at the shelter was trying to get a job. She had a place to stay as well as childcare, and if she could just get a job, we could make a case with the kid's social worker.

But the job...I needed to get a resume together so we could practice her interview techniques.

We were so close. Things would get better for her once the last block fell into place.

Normally, this was the part of my job that I loved. Carol had done the hard part, leaving her husband and asking for help. But I couldn't focus on this task to save my life.

I was distracted. By the dream, by Kaleb, by everything that had been going on in my life.

And I was miserable.

My heart hurt.

Throwing down my pen, I leaned back in my chair and shoved my hair from my face. "Focus," I told myself. "I've got to focus."

Getting up, I went to the coffee maker.

It had long since gone burnt. Disgusted, I dumped the dregs out and started a fresh pot. At the rate I was going, I wouldn't be done before midnight anyway, and I definitely didn't want to sleep.

If I slept, I'd dream about Kaleb again.

Once the coffee was done, I leaned against the counter, sipping the hot brew and coaxing my muddled brain into thinking. All the key info was *there* – I just had to get it down.

Outside, rain pounded against the window, and thunder crashed. It was a miserable night. Or a great one, depending on who you were with and what you were doing. Astra was out with a guy, probably snuggled up and doing something debauched.

And here I was alone and miserable. The storm was adding to my overall melancholy state, but I tried to block it out. Returning to my desk, I settled down and stared at the laptop.

Carol could do this. She had a solid work background.

She was trying to get on at a daycare, and she had experience with kids.

She'd left the workplace when she had her daughter, but she'd done some volunteering...I could do this.

After a brief mental pep talk, I buckled down.

A half hour later, I was done. The resume wasn't perfect but it would do.

Now I had nothing left to occupy my time, and it didn't take long for my thoughts to drift back to Kaleb.

What was he doing?

Had things worked out with Camry?

The phone rang, and I grabbed it, hoping it was something else that might distract me. Man, even my parents.

It was just Carlos, the nighttime doorman for the building.

"Hello, Miss Piety. Lovely weather we're having, yes?"

I eyed the storm and smiled. "Absolutely, if you like floods. Do you like floods?"

"I like the rain. Are you having a good night?"

"Good enough," I lied. "And you?"

"Of course. Ma'am...there's a young man here to see you. I believe he stayed with you and Miss Astra a few nights last week. His name is Kaleb..."

I didn't even hear the rest of the sentence.

IN MY RUSH down to the lobby, I neglected to think about what I was wearing, an oversized men's shirt that I liked to sleep in. The cool air blowing in through the vents had me shivering, but I wasn't about to go back upstairs.

When the elevator doors slid open, and I caught sight of him, my heart

lurched.

For one moment, everything stopped.

It just stopped.

I stumbled to a halt, my fingers curling into fists so I didn't reach for him. He was soaking wet, broad shoulders slumped, head hanging low.

"Kaleb."

At the sound of my voice, he looked up, and I found myself lost in those pale blue eyes.

"Piety," he said, his voice raw.

"Hi." I sounded breathless, like I'd run every flight from the loft down here to the lobby. I felt like it too.

"Can we...?" He looked around. "Can we talk?"

"Of course." I didn't know what else to say, and I lifted a hand. "Come upstairs."

He stared at my hand for a moment, and I didn't realize what he was looking at so intently until the light bounced off the ring. My wedding ring. The one I still hadn't been able to take off. Slowly, he accepted my hand, and I turned, knees shaking and heart racing.

Giving Carlos a weak smile, I tugged Kaleb into the elevator and pushed the button for the loft. Barely daring to breathe, I closed my eyes.

He still held my hand.

His skin was hot.

Hot and damp from the rain, and I could smell him.

I wanted to peel the clothes away and touch him, kiss him...do all the things I thought I'd never do again.

On the top floor, the elevator stopped, and the doors slid open.

We still hadn't spoken.

We still held hands.

Moving into the loft, I slowly tugged my hand free and tried to breathe a little deeper. Rain crashed into the windows, and the electricity from the lightning seemed to be gathering inside my loft as well. Tension hummed between us, so hot and erratic, I thought I'd come out of my skin.

I finally went to grab him a towel, handing it to him without meeting his eyes. "Here, why don't you dry off? You're soaked to the bone."

"Yeah." He gave a cursory rub of his hair and shoulders, then stood there, twisting the towel around his big hands. "I'm sorry, Piety."

"For which part?"

He looked up then, met my eyes. “I’ve made a mess of things, and I needed to tell you that.”

There was hell in his eyes. Still, as he stood there, watching me, all I could think was...*a mess? You call this a mess?*

He’d blackmailed my parents, left me without a word...and he wanted to just call it a mess?

I didn’t know what to say, so I just nodded.

He rubbed the towel over his face, then folded it neatly and held it back out to me. I took it, feeling out of place in my own home. Everything felt out of place.

It wasn’t okay.

His sorry wasn’t enough.

But what was I supposed to do?

He gave me a tight smile. “This was a mistake. I shouldn’t have come. I’ll go.”

Just like that?

Without thinking, I threw the towel down and got between him and the door. Reaching up, I touched his cheek. Kaleb froze.

Every muscle in his body locked up, the heat from him searing me through.

“Don’t,” he said roughly. He closed his hand around my wrist, and I could feel my pulse banging against his fingers. “Just...don’t.”

“Don’t what?” I asked. “Don’t want you? Don’t think about you? Don’t ask you to stay?”

A muscle pulsed in his cheek.

“I don’t want you to go.” Pushing up on my toes, I pressed my mouth to the corner of his lips. “Don’t go, Kaleb.”

I would have plastered myself against him, but he caught my upper arms in his hands, held me back.

“I’m soaking wet. We...this isn’t smart.”

“I don’t care. I’m tired of being smart and thinking...I’m tired of wanting you and you not being there.” I twisted my arms out of his grip and reached for him. “No matter what happened, I missed you, Kaleb.”

This time, when I kissed him, he kissed me back, his mouth opening against mine, his tongue sliding out to tease me.

I groaned at his taste, shuddered when he slid his hands down my body. Everything inside me came back to life. Color returned to the world.

Everything was alive again.

Hot and frantic kisses led to hot and frantic caresses with the two of us leaning against the door, his hands sliding up under the nightshirt I wore.

When he found me naked, he groaned and swore. “Damn, are you telling me you’ve been naked under this the whole time?”

He kissed me again, his fingers playing over bare skin. “You came downstairs naked. We’ve been standing here talking, and you’re naked. I just can’t...”

He went to his knees, and I bit my lip, bracing myself as he pressed a kiss to my knee, the middle of my thigh, my hip.

When he slid his tongue between my folds, I twisted my fingers in his hair and swore, pleasure ripping through me.

“Come for me, Piety.” He teased and licked, nipped and nuzzled, slipping two fingers inside me and twisting them, working me closer and closer.

“Come...”

I did, and he didn’t wait for me to float back down before he rose, tearing at his jeans.

I stared at him, half blind as he freed his cock. I reached out and wrapped my hand around him.

Kaleb groaned and moved into my touch. When I did it again, he reached up and braced one hand on the door by my head, the biceps bulging.

He closed his other hand around mine, tightening my grip and pumping into my hand, hard and fast. “That is one of the hottest things I’ve ever seen,” he said, his voice rough. “I could fucking come all over you.”

“Do it, I wouldn’t care.”

“I’d rather come in you.” He kissed me and then let go of my hand, catching my hips and boosting me up. “Hold on.”

I gasped as he filled me, deep and hard. Then he caught my wrists and stretched them over my head, leaving my weight balanced on his cock and hips.

“I’ve never wanted anybody the way I want you. You’re like a drug.” Kaleb shuddered as he skimmed his lips across my cheekbone. “My drug.”

“You’re mine.” I tugged against his hold, but all he did was stroke his thumb across my skin. I felt completely surrounded, completely filled by him. He stretched me and filled me, and *finally*, that horrible emptiness began to fade away. “Don’t leave me again, okay?”

“I won’t.”

He kissed me, a deep, seeking kiss.

Each thrust had him dragging back and forth against my clitoris, the sensation so painfully sweet. I hung on the edge of climax almost from the first touch, but Kaleb wouldn't let me fall over, instead dragging it out.

The silk of my night shirt drag back and forth over my nipples, taunting me. Everything became pleasure.

Kaleb caught my lower lip between his teeth, drawing it out before letting it go to kiss me again.

I pulled against his hold, and he finally released my hands so I could cling to him. He boosted me higher, changing the angle of my hips and it was too much. I came hard and fast, but just when I thought it was over, he started to come, and the pulsations of his cock set me off all over again.

It was unending.

It was amazing.

It was stupid.

TWENTY-NINE

KALEB

We lay on the couch. Piety was warm against me, and I rubbed my chin against her hair. It was soft as the silk nightshirt she still wore. I knew more about silk after a few days with her than I'd learned in my entire life.

"Is Astra going to walk in here and find me laying naked on her couch?" I asked.

We had a throw covering us, or mostly. But I really didn't want her best friend finding us like this.

"Not a chance. She's with a guy." Piety stretched against me, and the feel of her sleek body rubbing against me like that had my cock stirring. I was tempted to roll her over and take her again, but things had to be said first.

Before I could lose my nerve, I shifted around on the couch and pushed up onto my elbow. Her eyes were big and sleepy, her face still flushed from sex.

My heart clenched, just looking at her.

"We should talk."

Her smile was soft, sadness clinging to it. "That's what we've been doing. You came up here to talk."

"No." Stroking my thumb over her lower lip, I sighed. "I'm serious. There's...more. I should have told you this before."

Her eyes cooled slightly, and I braced myself for the rejection I suspected was coming.

"If this is about my parents," she said, voice level, almost...gentle. "I already know what you did. I mean, was I not going to find out?"

"What I did?" I asked.

Well, that answered a lot of questions. I'd spent the past week wondering

what they told her. Her calls had gone from worried to agitated and then to... careful. There had been no emotion in the last message she had left for me and that careful lack of emotion had managed to convey quite a bit.

I'd known her parents wouldn't have been honest and confessed to what they'd done. Considering how things already were between them and their daughter, they'd be particularly careful about how they handled this.

And now here I was, throwing a wrench in it.

"Come off it, Kaleb." She eased away from me and sat up. "I understand. I really do. I was trying to get things together to help you out anyway, and if I had been upfront and honest, you wouldn't have been so desperate. But don't try to make this into anything other than what it was."

She'd been what...?

I pushed that aside, climbing off the couch and grabbing my jeans. They were still wet, but I pulled them on anyway.

Piety had smoothed her shirt down and now sat studying me with studied casualness. "We can get past it. We really can. But, just...don't."

Some of the frustration I was feeling dissolved.

She'd let it go, I realized. She would let it all go. Her heart was amazing. I went to her and cupped her face. "I'm losing a little bit more of myself to you all the time," I said against her lips.

I thought about staying quiet, just keeping it all inside.

A small selfish part of me thought I should do just that, enjoy what time I had, while I could.

But she'd never been anything but honest with me.

I could do no less with her.

"I don't know what they told you I did, but your parents paid me to leave town, Piety. They said if I signed the annulment papers and left, agreeing not to talk to you, they'd give me money – cash. It was everything I needed to take care of Camry."

Shock danced across her features.

Here it comes...now she'll push me away...

"What?"

"Their lawyer came to see me," I said, that familiar feeling of exhaustion bearing down on me again. Sighing, I tugged her in and kissed her forehead, then let her go, turning away to pace over to the window. The storm had blown over, but it was still raining, a cold, steady drizzle that blotted everything out. Staring into the rain, I said, "You and Astra were gone. This

lawyer shows up...Stuart Rushmore.”

Even his name disgusted me, but I kept my voice flat.

“He came here and told me that he wanted to talk to me, said he could help me.” Turning back to her, I shrugged. “He said he was a friend of yours. It wasn’t until I’d already let him in that he clarified and said he was actually your parents’ lawyer. Then he laid out the deal. And I...took it.”

“That’s why you haven’t returned my calls.” She swallowed, her gaze falling to the floor.

“I felt ashamed and I’d given my word. It means something to me. I don’t have much, but that’s one of the few things I do have.” I looked around her loft, evidence of how little it had meant in the end. “Or had. I’m here now.”

“And why are you here?”

“Because. There’s nothing left. I spend the last money to buy a ticket back here.” That sounded...awful.

I then told her what happened with Camry, and she came to me, wrapping her arms around me. I hugged her back, desperately. “I’ve messed it all up, and everything’s just fucked. But all I can think about is you and how much I miss you and how much I wish I hadn’t left. So, I came back, praying you would see me and understand. Forgive me. I know all this sound terrible selfish, and I supposed it is, but you’re all I have left. My last hope.”

She eased back, staring up at me for the longest time.

I felt frozen, unable to do anything.

Then, slowly, she kissed my forehead. Each of my cheeks. My chin.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’ve been so angry at you these past few weeks, and it wasn’t totally your fault. It was my parents manipulating you like they’ve done so many others. And I should have known.”

“Don’t apologize to me.” I stroked my hand up her back, my fingers passing over each bump of her spine. “I made the fucked up decision to take the deal and leave.”

She sighed and tucked herself in closer. “What are you going to do about Camry?”

“I don’t know. I...don’t think I can do anything.” Misery settled inside, and I wanted to pound something, but the anger and hurt were useless. Giving in to them solved nothing. “I’ve given up everything for her, sacrificed most of my life to take care of her. And now this...” I shook my head, unable to put into words the sheer helplessness I felt.

“We’re going to find a way.”

THIRTY

PIETY

“I got the job.”

Carol stood in front of my desk, twisting her fingers, looking stunned.

“Congratulations.” I came out from behind the desk and hugged her, keeping it light and easy so she could break away. She was doing so much better than when she first came here, but I knew physical touch was hard for her. She nodded nervously, her eyes bouncing all over the place. “I got the job, Ms. Van Allan. They hired me.”

“I know. Congratulations.”

Carol pushed her hair back from her face with shaking hands, then tucked them in her lap, staring at them. “I just don’t understand. Why would they hire me? I haven’t worked in years.”

“Apparently, they saw something in you that they liked. Now it’s time for you to look in the mirror and see the same thing they saw.” I settled in the chair next to hers and took her nervous hands, squeezed gently. “It’s the same thing I see when you play with your daughter or the other kids here. It’s the same thing that gave you the courage to leave. You’re tougher than you think. You’re going to do fine.”

A few minutes later, I walked into the small break room at the shelter and a wave of clapping broke out.

I gave a small bow and then laughed as they continued.

“Stop it. Or go applaud for Carol. She did the hard part.” One of the girls who handled the new intakes opened the microwave, pulling out her typical lunch – a microwave burrito.

The smell of it hit me hard, even as I wondered how she could eat them.

She was talking, saying something to Carol – she wouldn’t even talk to

people at first.

I think.

Maybe.

But nothing more than the first few words really connected because as that smell grew stronger, my stomach rebelled.

Oh, shit.

Lurching toward the bathroom, I almost bowled over the woman coming out, and I rushed in, skidding to my knees in front of the nearest toilet.

I barely made it, emptying out my stomach with near violence while my heart hammered in my ears.

“Oh, honey...are you okay?”

That was when I realized I had an audience.

Another wave hit me.

A few more seconds passed before I thought it might be over.

“Oh for the love of my great aunt Bessie,” a familiar voice boomed. “Somebody might think you’d never seen a woman get sick before. You people, give her some *room*.”

I cringed at the sound of that voice. It was Felicia Winke, my boss.

Her words sent people scurrying, and before long, I was alone in the bathroom with just her. I thought maybe I was done.

Maybe.

She stared at me hard. “How long have you been sick?”

I passed my hand over the back of my mouth. “Just this once.”

“Unlike some people, I know that throwing up can come from a variety of reasons. Do you think you’re contagious?”

I was feeling better, so I didn’t think so. I shook my head. “Maybe something I ate just didn’t settle well.”

She narrowed her eyes and slowly turned away. “Okay. If it gets worse, go home. We don’t need an epidemic. And try toast and ginger ale. We always keep some around.”

I started to refuse, but a ginger ale actually sounded nice. As I sat at the table a few minutes later sipping one, I took out my phone and read through my emails.

“Are you feeling better?” Felisha sat down across from me, eyeing me critically.

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “I feel fine.”

She looked at her nails, then glanced back up at me. “Are you seeing

anybody?” There was a deliberate casualness behind the question that worried me.

I hadn't wanted to tell anyone about the marriage and the subsequent annulment, so I had taken to wearing my wedding ring on my right hand when I was at work. Nobody here knew about Kaleb, and since it wasn't likely they would ever meet anybody in my family, explanations weren't necessary, or so I thought.

“Why?” I asked

“I'm just wondering.” She began to examine her nails again. “What I'm thinking is that it's kind of funny that those nasty microwave burritos have never bothered you before. But today, you turn green and are puking your guts out, then five minutes later, you're right as rain.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but she pointed to my glass and continued. “Ginger ale seems to be settling just fine. You look great. Nobody would believe that you were on your knees just a couple minutes ago, puking for all your worth. And Piety, you're worth a lot.”

“What are you trying to say?”

Felisha looked at me with sympathy dripping from her expression. “Piety, I've had this sort of...stomach issue a few times myself. The last time was ten years ago.”

I stared at her, her meaning beginning to sink in. “Oh, shit!” A cold sweat broke out on the back of my neck.

“So...it's possible?” she asked.

I exhaled a long breath and covered my face with my hands.

She came and sat next to me, patting my shoulder. “Honey, it's okay. You just need to find out for sure.”

I thought about the wine I'd drunk last night. The sip of scotch I'd had the other day. Hell yes, I needed to find out. If I was pregnant... I groaned. Could I be?

I thought about the dream. “Oh, man.”

“Well, you've gone from oh shit to oh man. I'd say this might not be such a bad thing.”

I dropped my head down onto the table. I needed to go to the store. I needed to... I didn't even know what I needed to do.

“Take a few more minutes.” She got up and headed out of the room. “But on your way home tonight, you might want to think about buying a pregnancy test.”

I took the extra minutes she'd advised and sent Astra a text. Astra's response came back a couple minutes later, but those minutes felt like hours.

What's going on?

I just threw up. I responded.

Her response was an emoji, one with the guy and a giant open mouth. Yeah, that's about as surprised as I felt.

THIRTY-ONE

PIETY

I didn't have time to go to the store last night. Or rather, I'd been too afraid to. I was still trying to convince myself that I'd just eaten something that hadn't settled well on my stomach.

I had to go through with it. I knew that, but maybe it was just a flu. I'd already thrown up two other times, again aggravated by some awful smell coming from the break room.

Felisha brought in crackers and more ginger ale, so the second and third time, a sleeve of saltines were waiting for me.

She'd also given me a questioning look, and I'd just given her a weak smile in her return. When she only shook her head, I knew exactly what she was thinking.

Now, hours later, stressed out and drained, I sat on the couch, curled up against Kaleb as I rubbed the inside of my wedding ring with my thumb.

"Are you feeling alright?" he asked.

I was about ready to blurt it all out when a fist pounded on the door. I scowled, wondering who it was. But I already had a bad, bad feeling. There were only so many people it could be.

"Piety," my father said through the door. He knocked again, harder. "Open up. I know you're there. Carlos told me you were here. We need to talk. With you and...Kaleb."

The distaste in his voice had me shaking. Furious, I stormed over to the door and threw it open.

He opened his mouth to yell, and I reached up, poking him in the chest. "Yes, Dad. We do need to talk. Who in the hell do you think you are?" I demanded. "You paid him money to leave and never say a word to me? What

kind of man does that to his own daughter?”

He glared at me, but said nothing.”

I threw up my hands. “And you lied.”

That got him going. “I didn’t lie,” he insisted through gritted teeth. “I haven’t said a word to you since the reunion.”

“Fine, you had Stuart lie.” I rolled my eyes. “It amounts to the same thing. He’s your mouthpiece and does all the dirty work for you anyway.”

“Piety, can we take this inside?” my mother asked, stepping up and placing herself halfway between my father and me.

I barely resisted the urge to roll my eyes again. That was my mother. Always worried about what people might think.

“Fine,” I said. Turning on my heel, I stormed back into the loft, leaving the door open behind me so they could trail inside. I went back to the couch but didn’t sit down. I knew better. I was too familiar with my father’s intimidation tactics, and I knew how this would go.

I looked at Kaleb and held out my hand. He took it and placed himself at my side. He had risen the moment he heard my father’s voice, and he lifted his chin, meeting my father’s gaze squarely.

“How can you stand there and look me in the eyes?” Dad demanded.

“It’s not hard. I don’t have any respect for you, so why should I have a hard time looking at you?” Kaleb said.

“When you take a man’s money, you give him your word, and you want to talk about respect?”

Kaleb scowled. “I didn’t do you wrong. I did Piety wrong. I gave her my word long before you and I made any sort of agreement. Besides, I didn’t make the agreement with you. I made the agreement with your... mouthpiece.” Kaleb tilted his head. “If it makes you feel better, I can apologize to *him*.”

“Stop it,” I said, cutting between Kaleb and my father. “Dad, I can’t believe you did that.”

“You’re angry with *me*?” he asked. “This no good con artist took our money, the money we paid to protect you, but you’re mad at me?”

“I don’t need your protection, and Kaleb isn’t a con artist.”

Dad scoffed. “He took the money easily enough.”

“I took it for my sister,” Kaleb said flatly.

My dad turned his head, staring at Kaleb as if looking at bacteria under a microscope. “Your sister?” he asked, the doubt thick in his voice.

“Yes.”

“Let me guess, she’s suffering from some sort of terrible disease, and you need the money because she sitting in the hospital?” Scorned ripped from his words and he shook his head. “Do you even know anything about this man, Piety?”

I was about ready to scream from frustration, but Kaleb threw a bucket of cold water on the entire thing.

“As a matter of fact, my sister is a prostitute and a drug addict. I took the money to pay off her dealer. I was hoping to get her into rehab, but that didn’t go over very well. She took what little money I had left and ran off with it.”

Mom spoke up, her face white as her fingers danced at the base of her throat. “Let me get this right. You’re a stripper, and your sister is a prostitute? And you wonder why we didn’t want you around our daughter?”

“Mom,” I said. Horrified, I reached out and touched Kaleb’s arm.

“You’re wrong,” he said. “I know exactly why you didn’t want me around Piety. I’m not good enough for her. But then again, neither are you.”

Dad’s mouth fell open in shock. Mother’s face went red. Kaleb didn’t back down.

“You see, she’s got a heart that’s bigger than anyone I’ve ever met. You two are too concerned about appearances and how things might look. She worries about people and how things will affect them. I don’t know how the two of you managed to combine your DNA and create this magical creature.”

He turned from them and looked directly at me. “Frankly, she’s amazing. You’re right, I’m not good enough for her. But that doesn’t mean I’m not going to work my ass off trying to be.”

“You are unbelievable,” my mother whispered.

“Don’t, Mom.”

She ignored me. “You have no idea who we are. How dare you judge us.”

“That’s rich.” Kaleb snorted. “You don’t know anything about me either except for the fact that I stripped for money to try to help out my baby sister.”

“A baby sister who is a drug addicted prostitute,” my father said with a harsh laugh.

“A baby sister who lost her mother and father when she was eleven. Do you have any idea what that’s like?” I asked, unable to stay out of the conversation any longer. “Kaleb’s been raising her since she was a kid. He wasn’t able to go to college because he’s too busy working his butt off to take

care of her.”

Uncertainty flickered across their faces, but my parents didn't know how to back down. “Just go,” I said when my dad started to open his mouth. “We're not doing this. We're not.”

“Piety...” Mom began, “we just—”

“No,” I shouted. “I care about him. You have no right to interfere. This is my life, and I'm going to live it. I'm not living it just to be some sort of paragon that you can put up on a pedestal and show off when it's election time. It's my life.”

I turned away until I heard the door shut. Kaleb came up behind me, his hands squeezing my shoulders. “I'm sorry.”

“Don't be. This has been a long time coming.”

“Still, I haven't helped.”

I smiled up at him. “Actually, you have. This all needed to come out before it completely ate away my soul.” I sighed, the stress I'd been feeling earlier was now magnified tenfold. “You know what? We should just pack and go to Vegas. We need to figure out how to help your sister. I can get the next few days off from work.”

THIRTY-TWO

KALEB

She was quiet.

She had been quiet ever since last night, ever since her parents had left. The fight between them...

Closing my eyes, I wondered if there was now a rift between them so big it might never be repaired.

I hoped not.

They were overbearing – assholes, really.

But I could tell they loved her, and I know she loved them.

I felt guilty for my part in all of this, and that part was huge, but at the same time, I was...amazed. Nobody had ever stood up for me like that, had ever fought for me. I was the one who went to bat for people.

I know my parents would have had my back, if they'd lived. But they'd been gone a long time. It was like a different life.

For too long, it had just been me and my sister, and I was always the one carrying the weight.

Now, I had someone who had stood next to me and stood up *for* me.

I didn't know how to handle it.

Finally, unable to handle all the chaos inside me, I looked over at Piety. She was sipping from a glass of club soda, staring down at the book on her lap.

She hadn't turned the page in ten minutes.

I reached over and took her hand. She started, and the club soda sloshed over the rim.

"Lost in thought?" I asked, reaching for a napkin to clean up the spill.

"I guess." She smiled up at me.

“I...” Blowing out a breath, I tried to think of the right way to say what I needed to say. “I’m sorry for the problems I’ve caused between you and your parents.”

“You didn’t. The problems were already there. You just helped bring them to the surface.” She sighed and put her book down, shifting around in the seat to face me. “My parents love me. I know that. But I have no doubt that their love comes with...” She bit her bottom lip and considered her words.

“Strings?” I offered.

Her smile was sad. “Yeah. Always conditional. And they don’t understand me. They never have. And they’ve never stood up for me the way you have. You think I’ve got a big heart, but they think I’m an alien for just...*caring* about people.”

She lifted my hand to her lips, kissed the back of it.

“You do have a big heart.” I crooked a grin at her. “So big, I sometimes think you might *be* an alien.”

“Stop it.” She tipped her head back, laughing.

Some of the tension in the air dissolved, and I stroked my thumb over the inside of her wrist. “I can’t tell you how many times I wished my parents were still here, still around to deal with this mess with Camry. But then I look back and realize how lucky I was to have had them for as long as I did. They always had my back. They supported me. That’s worth...a lot.”

“More than gold, I think,” Piety said, her voice sad.

“Yeah. I bet it is.”

She turned her head back to me, and we stared at each other.

“I haven’t had anybody stand by my side the way you did since they passed away. It means a lot. Thank you.”

She squeezed my hand. “Nobody has ever stood by me like you have, other than Astra. So...same goes.”

We lapsed into silence for a long time, then she laid her head against my shoulder and opened her book. As she read, I thought about how much things had changed since the morning I woke up in her bed.

“THE BED,” I said against her mouth.

Piety laughed. “Who needs a bed?” She pushed my shirt up and scraped her nails down my sides.

I gasped and caught her hands. “No.”

She giggled. “You’re ticklish. I love it.”

“Bed,” I said again.

Instead, she twisted out of my grip and curled her arms around my neck, pressing her mouth to my chin. “No. Too far. Way too far.”

She shot a look at the bed, and I had to agree. She was right. That bed was too far away. The whole other side of the suite. In a different room entirely.

“Okay, you’re right. Right here.”

I boosted her up into my arms and carried her the few steps into the dining room, laid her out on the formal table. In my wildest dreams, I never would have imagined a hotel with a formal dining room. In my wildest dreams, I never would have imagined Piety.

I caught the hem of her flirty little skirt and pushed it up to her hip, leaving her bare from the waist down. Hooking my fingers in the silken scrap of her panties, I slid them down her legs. “I want to...”

“Then do it.” She caught my hair and tugged me closer, arching her hips up.

I smiled at her, then licked her, opening her folds.

She gasped, lashes fluttering down.

Pressing my mouth to her cunt, I caught the nub of her clitoris and sucked on it. She moaned, and when I twisted two fingers inside her slick heat, she began to move up against me.

I did everything I knew would make her moan and sigh, those little sounds I loved to hear.

Rising, I freed myself from my jeans. As I came down over her, I said, “I don’t even remember what it’s like not to want you. I don’t want to.”

“Come here,” she said, the words both a plea and a demand.

I did, spreading her thighs and settling between them. Wrapping a hand around my cock, I passed back and forth over the heat of her.

“Stop teasing me.”

“But it’s so much fun.”

“Keep it up, and I’ll go without panties for the next two days, and you won’t get to so much as *touch* me.” She gave me a wicked smile.

“Oh, now that’s playing mean.” I guided the head of my cock to her

entrance, and when I thrust inside, both of us shuddered. I groaned, and she cried out.

“I need this,” she said. “All the time.”

I needed *her* – all the time. I was starting to wonder how I’d even existed without her.

THIRTY-THREE

PIETY

Light filtered in through the curtains. We hadn't gotten around to pulling the blackouts before we fell asleep the night before, tangled around each other.

The light wasn't what woke me though.

It was the incessant, annoying chimes from my phone.

Only one person would be *that* persistent.

I groaned, throwing my forearm over my eyes. If I grabbed a pillow, buried my face in it, and tried really hard, I might be able to block her out.

A grunt next to me made me realize that wasn't going to happen. Astra wasn't just being a nuisance to me. She was annoying Kaleb too.

Sighing, I grabbed the phone and squinted at it, my eyes struggling to adjust to the light. It was too early for conversations.

It didn't matter that it was ten o'clock back home and my body was still on that time. My body *wanted* it to be midnight, making it totally acceptable to still be asleep.

But logic and want never seemed to align.

Swiping a finger across the phone, I muted the notifications, then went into my messages. I did it just as the next one came in. Without bothering to read any of them, I sent her a quick greeting.

You are such a pest sometimes. I was sleeping!

Her answer was a smiley face and *LOL*.

Yeah, she could laugh.

Scrolling back up, I read her messages.

With a grimace, I propped myself up. Somebody had told her that my parents had been to the loft.

Yeah, it wasn't fun. Kaleb told them about his sister. You'd think he'd

confessed to being a serial killer.

Astra texted back with another emoticon, but this was a sad face, followed by an angry one.

That pretty much sums up how I feel. I didn't want to deal with their drama so we just came back out to Vegas. We have to figure out how to help her anyway.

I eyed Kaleb next to me and then slid out of bed.

Astra texted me twice, but I ignored them as I slid into the bathroom and took care of some necessary business. Once that was done, I moved into the main area of the suite and curled up on the couch, reading her texts.

She wanted to know why and how things had changed with Kaleb. It was too long to go into detail about that on the phone, so I summarized.

My parents lied. They had Stuart pay Kaleb off so he would leave – he didn't go to them. They went to him. It still sucks that he just disappeared, but he was feeling desperate. His sister is in serious trouble.

As I waited for her to receive and read, I stared at the door.

Her answer took a few moments, and when I read it, I saw why.

It was...long.

So let me get this straight...your parents had their dipshit lawyer claim he'd blackmailed them. Am I right there? And you've spent the past few weeks feeling like a piece of shit because you put them in that position. Or that's how you felt. But it turns out that THEY set the whole thing up and were the ones who went to him? What sort of shit were they smoking?

I started to laugh, muffling the sound behind my hand. But just as I went to respond, another text popped up.

And why the hell didn't he get in touch with you and talk to you sooner? I don't want to hear this shit that he felt like he shouldn't. You were busting your ass to help him. Doesn't he know that?

He didn't though. I texted her back.

He doesn't have what we have, A. I've always had you. You've always had me. Ever since his parents died, it's just been him and his sister. She was a kid, always relying on him. I don't think he knows how to rely on somebody.

This time, the little emoticon she chose to represent her mood was one sticking out his tongue. I could almost hear the raspberry.

I stuck my tongue out at the phone.

“Astra?” a deep voice bellowed.

Startled, I almost dropped the device.

Jerking my head up, I eyed Kaleb, who was standing in the doorway, wearing a pair of low-slung jeans, and looking sleepy-eyed and completely beautiful. “Yeah. She...um...she spent the night with a friend last night. Got my note, wanted to see what was going on.”

My gaze strayed to his chest, then back to his eyes only to find him grinning at me.

“We’ve got things to do today.” My mouth was dry, but I knew if I wasn’t careful, the two of us would end up naked and all over each other, so my gaze went back to the phone – and the message that had just come through.

He seems to know how to rely – or at least TRUST you. So whatever you’re doing, keep it up. And keep me posted. Later, PS!

I texted *bye* to her and then tucked my phone into my lap, watching as Kaleb made his way over to the coffee pot, a giant yawn cracking his jaw.

“What do you need to do today?” I asked softly.

He shrugged restlessly. “I’ve texted Camry again. I texted her last night when we got in, but I didn’t hear back from her. Who knows if I even will.”

He turned and met my eyes, staring at me solemnly. “I don’t know how this will go, Piety. My work visa is only for a few more months and once that time comes, then what?”

Yeah. I’d worried about that myself.

Maybe Camry wasn’t worried about immigration and violating a bunch of laws, but something told me her brother was a different creature altogether.

“Fuck,” he muttered, tipping his head back and staring at the ceiling. “If it expires, and I have to go back while she’s still tangled up with Stefano, then what do I do?”

I wanted to tell him we’d figure it out. We had to. Right?

But I had other, selfish reasons for wanting to comfort him. Reasons that had to do with needing him here with *me*. I had to buy a test kit soon. But I bit my lip, holding everything I was thinking back. Getting up from the couch, I went over and hugged him. “We’ll work it out.”

Leaning against him, I focused on the sound of his heart beating and closed my eyes.

He loosely looped his arms around me and rested his chin on top of my head. “I’m glad you’re here, Piety.”

“I’m glad *you* are here.”

THE SOUND of his phone ringing was like a death knell.

It was almost noon, and all the things I thought we needed to get done had just never quite come together.

Camry hadn't called him.

The calls I'd put into the lawyer had yet to be returned.

But now, as his phone rang, the two of us stared at it, and I knew we both felt a strange kind of dread.

He finally answered it right before it would have kicked over to voice mail – four rings. That's exactly how many rings it would take.

I knew from the expression on his face that the call was going to be...problematic.

I listened to his side of the conversation, mostly monosyllabic, and his voice never changed inflection even once.

When he finally disconnected, he moved over to the window and stared outside. "That was Camry," he said softly.

"You don't sound overly happy."

He laughed, but it was bitter and...broken. "It was just typical Camry. I'm meeting her in a little while."

I wanted to tell him no, tell him it wasn't a good idea. But I didn't think there was any point in arguing with him. He had to do what he had to do. We'd come out here for this anyway.

"Any chance she's decided to leave Stefano and come back with you?"

"Fat fucking chance." Kaleb gave me a grim look, then went back to staring outside. "I...ah...she asked me to come alone. I should probably get going. It's on the other side of town, and I'll have to take a cab."

"I..." My throat was dry. I didn't like the sound of this. Not at all.

Panic began to chatter and screech inside me.

I didn't want him to see his sister. I didn't want him leaving me *period*.

What if...?

My mouth went dry.

I should tell him.

It was possible – not necessarily *probable* – but possible that I was pregnant. He wouldn't take off alone to deal with his sister when we had something going on here. What if something happened?

"Are you sure it's a good idea to go alone?" I asked, uneasy at the idea.

“Yeah.” Kaleb looked away. “It will be fine.”

I *really* didn’t like that. Heart hammering against my ribs, I turned away and shoved my hands through my hair. “Okay.” I nodded and made myself say it again. “Okay.”

If I said it enough times, everything *would* be okay.

That was how it worked, right?

“Are you okay?” Kaleb sounded closer, and I spun to meet his gaze. “I’m fine. Just...on edge. I need to um...I want to meet a lawyer that Samuel suggested anyway. Do you remember Samuel?”

“Of course.” His eyes studied my face.

Searching for the lie. For the fear.

But I hid it, locked down deep. If he could do this, so could I.

“What’s this about the lawyer?” he asked. His eyes continued to study mine, probing, and I knew he’d seen my uneasiness.

Okay, so what? He knew I didn’t like the idea of him meeting up with Camry again – and the fact that she’d told him to come alone? Yeah, that was even more worrisome.

“Piety?”

“Oh. Yeah. Well, Samuel knows somebody here in Vegas who specializes in immigration, and I want to see if she can help you and Camry out.” I did need to talk to the lawyer. Samuel had recommended we all speak with Liushi Testudo while we were here and I *did* plan on doing that.

I offered him a smile and reached out, tugging him closer to kiss him. His mouth was warm, and I wanted to stay there forever.

Really...forever.

I couldn’t imagine him not being here anymore.

And what if I *was* pregnant? He couldn’t possibly leave the US now.

THIRTY-FOUR

KALEB

The house was empty.

I'd been waiting there for too long already, and Camry was either ignoring me on purpose, or she was so strung out she didn't know I'd been texting her.

Of course, it was possible she was passed out.

Drunk.

Or maybe she'd overdosed...

"Stupid bastard, just stop it already." I groaned and rubbed my hands up and down my face, as if it would scrub the images from my brain. I couldn't do that though.

I'd been dealing with these nightmarish thoughts ever since I realized just how bad Camry's drug problem was. Sooner or later, she would either be forced to get clean, or she would end up dead. These things never ended well, a fact I'd been adjusting to for longer than I liked to admit.

Shit, what if she was inside there and she was strung out...or worse?

"Camry!" I practically threw myself at the door, banging on it so hard, it was a wonder it didn't rattle on its hinges.

There was no answer though.

Spinning away, I paced down to the window and stared inside, hands cupped around my face to block out the light. It didn't do any good. I couldn't see a damn thing thanks to the layer of dirt coating the window.

I slammed a fist into the wall. A faint pain splintered through my hand, but I ignored it as I turned around and braced my back against the building.

A car came rolling by, thick black smoke blowing out the back, and I could feel the eyes of the occupants roaming over me, sizing me up. Like any

big city, Las Vegas had its fair share of bad neighborhoods. This was definitely one of them.

I stared back, waiting until the driver took a right and disappeared. Then I shoved away from the house and jumped over the mostly broken porch, walking around the house, looking for some sign that Camry was here, or recently had been. The house was a boarded-up wreck, and if anybody *had* lived here in recent memory, they probably needed to be tested for shit like tetanus and anthrax...and who knows what. There was no way anybody could live in a dump like this and not get sick.

Of course, Camry hadn't told me she *lived* here.

She'd said to meet her here.

And that had been...I checked the time. Over an hour ago.

What the hell was I doing still waiting around here?

"I'm fucking done."

I'd had it.

I gave another look around the house. I'd give her one more call and maybe another to that ass Stefano, then I was going back to the hotel.

"Where are you?" I demanded when her voicemail came on. It wasn't her, of course, and that just made me even angrier. "I'm done with your bullshit and tricks. This is enough, Camry. I'm done."

Then I tried calling Stefano. I gave him a similar version of the message I left Camry, although I was a lot less polite.

Then, without bothering to give the hellhole behind me another look, I headed for the sidewalk. I was going to find a bus stop and get back to the hotel.

BY THE TIME I reached my destination, I was hotter than hell, frustrated and tired.

But I was ready to see Piety.

Except...when I let myself into the room, she was gone.

The room was quiet, and judging from the looks of things, housekeeping had come and gone. I moved through the suite in silence, hoping she was resting or something. She had seemed tired the past few days, but no.

I was alone.

Pulling out my phone, I sent her a text, then flung myself down on the couch and threw my arm over my eyes. I was trying to work up the energy to take a shower, then maybe scrounge and see what sort of food was in the pantry. There had to be something, although I doubted the cheese, fruit, and crackers would fill the hole in my gut.

I could order room service, but I never felt right doing that without Piety being here.

Just as I went to sit up and drag my tired arse off to the shower, the phone rang.

I grabbed it, thinking it was Piety. Or maybe Camry. A few hours too late. But Sam Westmoreland's name flashed across the screen. I blew out a breath and pinched the bridge of my nose. I wasn't in the right frame of mind to talk to Astra's lawyer, but I'd have to get over that.

There was a second ring, then a third.

"Hello."

"Kaleb, Sam Westmoreland here. How are you doing?"

"I'm doing alright," I said, lying through my teeth.

And he heard it. "You sure about that?"

"Well, if you want the truth..." I paused, then decided against it. "I could tell you how I really am, but you don't have all night, and I was just starting to mellow out. What can I do for you, Sam?"

But he wasn't ready to let it drop. "You sure you don't want to talk about it? Might help. Not to mention, it's all confidential."

"Shit. What the hell." I sighed and gave him a quick rundown of what happened with my sister, leaving out the more personal details between Piety and me.

"You know she's sick." Sam's voice was gentle and understanding.

I didn't want any of it.

"Yeah, I got that memo. She's sick. And I know she did this to herself. I know she's an addict, but she chose this life, and I'm tired of being understanding. Tired of trying to help her turn her life around when all she wants to do is fuck over me and anybody else who cares about her." The anger in my voice caught me off-guard but I couldn't undo it, couldn't stop it. Didn't want to. "I'm just tired of it."

"I bet you are. I can't imagine how hard this is." He was quiet a moment, then added softly, "Maybe you need to talk to somebody about it."

I scoffed, but he cut me off.

“I’m serious. The families of addicts have a harder time than a lot of people realize. You had an even harder time because you’ve been trying to be a parent to her as well as dealing with your own shit. You never had a chance to finish growing up yourself, Kaleb.”

The words made me uncomfortable, and I chose to focus on something else. “Tell me something, counselor. Is it typical for an attorney to tell his clients to get counseling to get his shit together?”

“More common than you know. Sometimes I feel like a teacher, a bouncer, and a playground monitor all rolled into one – *and* a counselor.” He laughed. “We do what we have to, Kaleb. But listen, none of this is why I called. I assume you know about the annulment papers.”

Those few simple words soured my mood even further.

Sam did not wait for my response.

“Piety signed them also. At the time, I believe she thought it was what you wanted. The annulment got finalized today.”

“I understand.” She was under the impression I’d gone and blackmailed her parents, so of course, she thought it was what I wanted. But it wasn’t. I was tempted to shout that into the receiver, to yell at him, convince him, somebody, anybody...*Piety*...that I didn’t want the fucking annulment.

But, how could I?

Too late anyway now.

Besides, the whole thing had been a joke and a jab at her parents and a job for me. There was no way anybody, especially us, could take it seriously.

So what if it felt serious?

So what if it felt more real than anything I’ve ever felt?

It didn’t matter...did it?

Yes...

A small, sly voice in the back of my mind whispered to me.

It felt very real, and it mattered very much.

But I kept all of that trapped inside me, locked away.

Sam must have picked up on some of my tension, and an awkward silence stretched out over the next few seconds.

He cleared his throat. “I do have other news. I think we might have a solution for the situation with your sister and her abuse problem. It would entail you both moving to Philadelphia so we can do what we need to in order to help her. Would that present much of a problem for you?”

“Move to Philadelphia,” I murmured. Walking to the window, I looked

out at the city. Even now, with evening approaching, the unrelenting heat was pounding down, and I could see little heat mirages off in the distance. Beyond the buildings, the earth was scorched, dried and brown. Leave Vegas? “No. No, sir. Nothing here would present a problem.”

Then I pondered about my sister.

She might present one, but if I had to, I’d just knock her out and drag her ass into the back of my car if I had one.

THIRTY-FIVE

PIETY

“Well, here’s an interesting fact...”

Liushi Testado leaned forward, her long hair pulled into a knot that left her elegant face unframed. She had high cheekbones and dark eyes, and she was, in a word, beautiful. She smiled at me, clearly enjoying something about whatever *interesting fact* she was holding back.

“This Stefano character has been under investigation for a while.”

It was a sign of how tired I was that my brain took a few seconds to process just who Stefano was, but once I had, I leaned back in my chair. “Really.”

“Yes. They’ve tried to bring him in more than once, but nothing ever sticks.” She shrugged. “Now, this isn’t my area of law, but I know people. I could make some calls. If your friend Camry was willing to testify against Stefano, it would make it an easy case to get her approved for a Green Card.”

I laughed, shaking my head. “First, she’s not my friend. Second...right now, I think Kaleb is having a hard time even getting his sister *away* from Stefano.”

“But that’s the plan, right? Get her away from him?” Liushi cocked her head. “If not...well, maybe it would be best for her if she were deported back to Australia. It would take having somebody tip off Immigration, and it’s not like she’s abiding by the agreement set forth when she came here to study. If she was removed from this man’s influence...”

My stomach knotted at the very thought of it. If Camry left, then so would Kaleb.

“There are other ways to get her away from his influence. Once we do that, maybe she’ll straighten up and see how damaging all of this is.”

“True.” Liushi lifted a shoulder, the elegant cut of her red suit highlighting her every subtle curve. “Of course, you have to get her away from him, convince her how damaging all of this is, and then we’ll still try to find the right way to keep her in the country. Like I said, testifying against him would be an almost sure win.”

I made a face, because while it made sense to me in theory, I knew too much about how girls like Camry behaved. Stefano was probably as much a drug to her as the chemicals he was feeding her. He gave her...something. Made her feel something. Wanted, maybe? I couldn’t know.

I checked my phone, wondering if Kaleb had texted. If he’d gotten through to her, that would be...something.

But there was no message from him, and I was left with nothing to do but nod at Liushi and thank her.

She gave me a card and told me to stay in touch.

Once the card was tucked away, I left her office and headed back out in the late afternoon sun.

MY STOMACH WAS UPSET, so I found a place that served mostly soup. Over a bowl of chicken noodle, I tried to tell myself that it could be any number of things making me feel sick.

I don’t know why I was so determined to convince myself that it was anything other than what I suspected it was.

Part of me was even excited. Almost giddy about it.

But everything in my life was in complete upheaval.

Did I really need a change like...*this*?

And what about Kaleb?

I’d signed the annulment papers. It would be finalized any day now.

This wasn’t the time for any of this.

When is it ever the time? a small voice in the back of my head spoke up. *You act like life is supposed to be something you’ve figured out, and nobody ever has it all figured out. Not even your parents. Not even you.*

Slowing to a halt on the sidewalk, I let that roll through my head as I considered it.

Because it was true.

When did anybody ever have it all figured out?

I needed to talk to him.

About *everything*.

Changing directions, I headed back to the hotel. Another quick look at my watch had me thinking he might already be there. The meeting had been over an hour ago. He could be done. He could already be back, waiting for me.

We needed to talk. And we should talk.

The sight of a drugstore sign caught my eye, and I slowed my steps, studying it.

We should talk, I thought again. And I should know for sure before we do. Kaleb should know. He deserved to know.

I went inside, but nerves overtook me, and instead of going straight to the section I needed, I swung by the pantry area and picked up a box of crackers. It wasn't like I wouldn't need them. Then I forced my feet to walk in the direction of the right aisle, and I stopped.

Heart pounding, I studied the boxes.

So many different ones.

They all blurred in front of me, and I finally grabbed one at random, reading it.

Digital readout.

Two weeks sooner.

Ninety-eight percent accurate.

Good enough.

My hands shook as I paid for the purchases, and I wondered if the cashier noticed, but she seemed completely oblivious. Nervous twenty-somethings coming in to buy pregnancy tests were probably run of the mill around here.

I headed for the door, feeling more settled somehow.

I was going to stop wondering.

I was going to get an answer.

But then I swung left and saw her.

She was leaning against the light post, arms wrapped around her middle, looking scared and nervous and cold, even in the burning heat.

As I slowed to a stop, she lifted one hand to her mouth and started to bite at her nails. She swung a look down the block away from me, then pushed off the light post and started to pace. When she turned in my direction, she faltered.

The tears in her eyes had my heart aching.

“Camry,” I whispered.

“Um.” She looked behind me, then behind her, so jumpy, it was like she expected the shadows to come to life and steal her away. “Hi. It’s Piety, right?”

“Yes. Is...where’s Kaleb?” Compassion welled inside me, and I took a step forward. “Honey, are you okay?”

“I...shit. Fuck. I can’t talk about this...” She went left, ducking into the narrow alley between two buildings. “I shouldn’t have come here.”

“Camry, wait. What’s wrong?”

But she shook her head and continued to walk.

Feeling helpless, I went after her, my little plastic bag slapping against my leg.

“Talk to me, Camry. Where is Kaleb?”

She stopped when I put my hand on her shoulder and turned slowly, facing me.

Her eyes were still open too wide, and now that I was closer, I could see the oversized ring of her pupil. She was high, but she seemed steady enough. Probably so used to being strung out, it was her normal. Shaking her head, she said, “You shouldn’t be here, lady.”

“Don’t be silly.”

Camry just shook her head. Then, slowly, her gaze flicked past me, her tongue snaking out to wet cracked, dry lips.

I heard it then.

It was quiet, so quiet, I couldn’t have heard it over the sound of my voice a moment ago.

But I heard it now and spun around, ready to face whoever it was.

I had a good idea who it was too.

But I never made the full circle.

I saw something swinging down at me, and I lifted my arm.

Then everything went dark.

THIRTY-SIX

KALEB

Night had fallen over the strip.

The only time Vegas was even remotely appealing was when the sun had set, and the lights were all ablaze.

Or maybe if I was out past the city, in the desert.

I didn't mind the desert.

Standing in the elegant suite of the Bellagio, I stared outside and brooded.

I hadn't heard from Piety all day.

Not so much as a phone call.

It was past nine now, and I'd been here for a few hours by myself. I'd given in and called down to room service for a pizza, although it sat like a stone in my belly and every passing minute made it worse.

"Where are you?" I whispered.

I pulled out my phone to call her again, only to stop and put it away.

She hadn't responded when I called five minutes ago. I'd sent any number of texts and messages, so she knew I was waiting to hear from her. Calling every few minutes wasn't going to help.

I figured I could hold off for five more minutes.

I paced and ended up by the bar, pulling out a bottle of whiskey, studying it before putting it away.

A few more circuits around the room had me back by the window and staring outside.

"This is getting ridiculous."

I didn't know what I should do.

Call Sam?

The police?

Would they even do anything? It hadn't even been ten hours, and they wouldn't do shit the first 24 hours.

Although maybe if they knew who she was...

I eyed the phone again and wondered if I should have Sam get in touch with her father.

That would suck for me, but if it would get people moving...

"Fine," I muttered. I'd do it. I could deal with the devil for Piety.

But just as I went to punch the number, the phone lit up, signaling a message. Relief punched through me.

It faded fast though, followed on the heels by confusion, fear, then anger.

Hello, Kaleb! Sorry I wasn't at the house to meet you, brother. I ran into a friend of yours...Piety! Wow. You really did get married, huh? I'm truly happy for you. Now...if you'll just do me a favor, you can have your wife and be on your way. You know the money I needed previously? I now need ten times that. In cash. Be a good brother and get them for me – today.

I read it through once, twice, three more times, trying to make it make sense.

There was a date and time at the bottom.

Hours away – just hours.

I swore, and my hands started to shake.

Then, another text came through, and I dropped the damn thing, and the screen went blank.

But not before I realized what I was staring at.

A picture of Piety. But not just a picture of Piety.

There was a pregnancy test in it too.

And the test was...*positive*.

Another message came through.

Looks like you're gonna be a daddy! Let's get all this tediousness out of the way so you can get started with your new little family, hmm?

I grabbed the phone, spun, ready to hurl it into the wall.

But I stopped myself.

Think, I said silently. Going to my knees, I braced my hands on the floor and flexed them.

Think...

THIRTY-SEVEN

PIETY

Even without an introduction, I knew who the big bastard watching me was – Stefano. It couldn't be anybody else.

I'd feigned sleep for as long as I could, trying to get a grasp on what was going on, and now that I'd opened my eyes, I'd managed to get a decent handle on the situation – I hoped.

Camry was too strung out and nervous to be quiet or subtle.

Stefano was too arrogant.

They'd sat around talking about their plans with no regard to me, so I'd taken it all in. Now that I was awake, my biggest challenge was trying not to let on that I'd heard them talking.

“Come on, Piety,” Stefano said, waving the pregnancy test in front of my face. “It's been almost an hour since you woke up. It's time to go and take a tinkle.”

The hair stood up on my arms, and I wracked my brain for an excuse to delay doing what he wanted.

“You're going to be suffering from blood loss – extreme blood loss – if you keep this shit up and don't take this test.” Stefano tossed the box from one hand to the other.

“Camry, why don't you get her a soda or something?” Stefano suggested. “It might make things a little easier.”

“I'm not thirsty.” Shit, if they made me drink something, I'd pee my pants. And if the test was positive they would have something else to threaten Kaleb with.

“Sure you are. You took a nice long nap. Gotta be feeling a little dry.” Stefano sat straddling a chair, facing me. I was in a twin of the same chair,

but I wasn't quite so casual – hard to be when I was tied to the damn thing.

“No, I'm not feeling *dry*. I'm feeling *nauseated*. If I drink anything, I'll throw it up.” There.

“Oh...maybe she *is* pregnant.” Stefano giggled and edged closer. “Come on, honey. Let's just get the test done so we can get in touch with your hubby and get this whole mess behind us.”

“I've got a better idea...let me *go*, and I'll get a hold of Kaleb.” I smiled sweetly at him. “He can come pick me up, and we'll just forget this whole thing ever happened.”

“Not going to happen that way, sweetheart. See, that Kaleb asshole gave me a lot of trouble. I figure he owes me something extra for it.” Stefano winked at me. “This way, I don't have to worry about him trying to jerk me around again.”

“He doesn't owe you shit.” Maybe I shouldn't have said that.

Stefano just laughed at me and shoved off the chair. “You wouldn't understand, angel. Come on. You're getting out of that chair and going with Camry here into the bathroom. You're going to be a good little girl and piss on that damn test.”

He knelt in front of me and started untying the ropes. I glared at him.

“And if I don't?”

Something ugly lit his eyes. “You don't want to know the answer to that, Piety. See, I've been nice so far. Don't make me change that. Or maybe you'd rather have me follow you in there. I always get a kick out of watching a pretty girl like you take a piss.”

His entire persona changed, and it sent a shiver down my spine.

He reached up and stroked a hand down my hair. “Now...are you ready to go with Camry and use the fucking toilet?”

“Sure.” I bared my teeth at him, refusing to show how afraid I was. “But only if you say please.”

“Oh...I like you. You've got balls.” He leaned in, pressed his lips to my ear. I didn't let myself cringe away as he murmured, “Pretty please, Piety. Go piss on that damn stick. I want to get the show on the road.”

A FEW HOURS AGO, I'd been giddy, almost eagerly awaiting this

moment, but now, I was hoping and praying the test would be negative.

If it was negative, that was one less thing they could use against him.

One less thing *I* had to worry about.

They hadn't tied me back up, but I wasn't fooled into believing it meant anything. After Camry watched me pee on the damn stick, she'd grabbed it from my hand. Now, Stefano was pacing back and forth, holding onto the test as he watched it reveal my future.

I wanted to vomit. That he was there, watching something so personal taking place, made me sick – and furious. I wanted to hurl the chair at him, but he had something else in his other hand.

A gun.

I didn't doubt his ability to use it either.

“Well, well, well...”

I had no doubt what the smile on his face meant.

I'd been counting down the seconds in my head, and when he looked up at me, I already knew.

“Yes?” I said, feigning boredom.

“Congratulations. You're going to have a bouncing bundle of joy in a few more months, precious.” Stefano came closer and showed me the test before gesturing to the chair with his gun hand. “Sit back down. Camry, tie her up.”

Numb inside, I sat down.

I didn't even move as she strapped my wrists down, jerking the rope tight. Her mouth was pressed, eyes jumping all around. I recognized the signs. She was coming off whatever drugs she'd been on.

It wasn't until Stefano came forward and tucked the pregnancy test in the vee of my shirt that the numbness cracked, then disappeared entirely. “Get off me,” I shouted.

But he continued to fuss with it, twisting it around until he was satisfied.

Then he took the box and placed it in my lap, facing out. “That way, he knows what we're telling him. He's pretty enough to look at, but he's kind of...well...dumb.” Stefano tsked under his breath.

“That's funny, coming from an asshole like yourself.”

His smile faded. “Be nice, Piety. You be nice, and I'll be nice.”

“This doesn't feel very...nice,” I said, jerking against the ropes.

But he turned away, moving a few feet before he turned back to me.

I sat stiffly as he took a few pictures with my phone, then started texting. “Let's get the show started.”

“You asshole,” I said, shaking my head.

I couldn’t believe this was happening. All because I – we – tried to help Camry.

Stefano was texting away on my phone, and I shifted my attention to Camry. “He gave up *everything* to help you, and this is how you repay him?”

She flicked a look at me. “You don’t know anything about it, princess. So shut up.”

“I know this baby is *his* – that means you’ll be an aunt.”

Her mouth dropped open, then she shook her head. “Shut up.”

This was really happening.

Distantly, I heard the little *whoosh* indicating the text had been sent.

And...silence.

Seconds passed, then a minute.

I counted a full two minutes off in my head before there was any response, and I closed my eyes.

“Fuck yeah!” Stefano said. “The ball’s rolling now.”

“He won’t be able to get you any more money. *I* gave it to him last time. And I’m stuck right *here*. I can’t exactly go to the bank when I’m tied to a chair.”

My belly heaved, and I hoped I wouldn’t throw up.

Stefano shrugged. “He’ll figure something out. I’ve done some digging on you. You’re a rich little bitch, aren’t you? He can call Mommy and Daddy, talk to them.”

“Oh, man. And you have the balls to call *him* stupid?” I laughed, but it was the sound of the desperate and broken. “If you think my parents will give him a dime, you really are an idiot. They despise him.”

“He’ll figure out something.” Stefano shrugged and slid the gun away. He yawned and glanced at Camry. “I’m going to lay down. Watch her.”

Once he was gone, Camry came over and took the pregnancy test out from between my breasts, then put it in the box. “It will all be over soon.”

Her voice was soft, hesitant now. Maybe it was because Stefano wasn’t there. She didn’t look as certain as before.

“You don’t really think my parents will give him money, do you? They think he used me all this time. They won’t believe anything he says.”

“Kaleb doesn’t use people. He’ll get them to understand.” She shrugged.

“My parents don’t *get* people like Kaleb. They won’t believe him, I tell you.” I jerked at the ropes on my wrists, panic getting louder and louder in

my brain. “You are risking the baby’s life, Camry. How can you do this?”

“Stop.” She turned away, moving to the couch. After she dropped down onto it, she shot me a dark glare. “You wouldn’t understand, okay? You’re beautiful, you’re rich, you’ve got your parents – *and* you’ve got Kaleb now too. Your life has been so fucking easy.”

“You’ve *always* had Kaleb,” I fired back. “And you never appreciated him. And for the record? You’re not the pregnant woman tied to a fucking chair all because you were trying to help some drug addicted drama queen.”

She jerked as if I’d slapped her, and I could have kicked myself. I needed to get a grip on my temper if I wanted to get her on my side. But nooooo....

“Just...” Camry looked away, pushing her hair back with shaking hands. “Be quiet, okay? And stop trying to piss Stefano off. You won’t like how it goes. You won’t.”

THE PHONE WENT OFF, signaling another text from Kaleb.

Camry smirked at me. “He’s working on it, honey. Thought you said he couldn’t get the money.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “Thought your boyfriend said Kaleb wasn’t all that smart.”

She twitched, but it wasn’t from anything I said. She needed another hit, and it showed.

I tried a different tactic. “What are you going to do if something happens to your niece or nephew?”

“Nothing’s going to happen!” she shouted, getting off the couch to pace. “Shit, will you shut up? All he has to do is pay and everything will be fine!”

“And when this is over...?” I laughed, feeling more and more desperate. “I just go about my merry way? You think Stefano is just going to let me and this baby *go*?”

“He gets the money, that’s all that matters.”

“Bullshit. He’s in so much trouble with the cops, he won’t take the chance of something coming along that might *actually* stick. And this could fuck him over. Kidnapping. That’s ten years of hard time.” I shot a look at the door, hoping I wasn’t saying too much.

“He’s...stop it, okay? You ain’t going to say anything because you’re

smart. So it's all good."

"It's not!" I struggled against the ropes, moaning a little as the fear threatened to swell out of control. "How can you do this? What in the hell would your parents think if they could see you? If they knew you were threatening your brother's baby?"

She went pale, the blood draining out of her face. "That's not...I'm not..."

"They hell you're not!" I glared at her. "Fool yourself all you want but don't expect me to buy it. If Kaleb doesn't pay, I'm the one who's fucked – me *and* the baby, and you know it. And you're *helping* him!"

"Shut up."

The cold, flat order came from the door, and I whipped my head around just in time to see Stefano come out of the bedroom. His eyes were heavy, hair mussed. He'd been sleeping, I could tell. But he was wide awake now and was focused on Camry.

She rubbed at her arms.

"You need something, baby?" he asked in a tone far more gentle than what he'd use with me.

"Yeah." She nodded jerkily. "I'm hurting...hurting bad. And she won't shut up."

"She's going to shut up, or I'll gag her."

"I'm already about to throw up," I said nastily. "Gag me and watch me choke on it. Then how am I supposed to help you get money?"

His eyes narrowed. "Be quiet, bitch."

"Don't, Stefano," Camry said. She touched his cheek. "We can't gag her. If she does get sick..."

"Okay, okay. But she needs to shut her trap." He gave me a threatening look, then reached into his coat, pulling out a small metal box. "Here. Find something you like."

I swallowed as I watched her cradle the cigar case sized box to her chest and carry it over to the table.

He came to me then, dragging the chair he'd used earlier closer. As he sat down, I sighed and tipped my head back, staring upward.

"You really are a ballsy bitch, you know that?"

"Your point...?"

"My point is this...I don't give a rat's ass about the baby." He lowered his voice and leaned in, voice low. "If you keep this shit up, I'm going to

punch you in the gut, good and hard, not once, not twice, but as many times as I feel like it. What do you think will happen to that fucker's baby then?"

My blood went to ice.

He held my gaze, a cruel smile twisting his lips. "You understand me now?"

"Yeah."

"Good." He got up, shoving the chair carelessly off to the side before going over to Camry. She was bent over the table, her hair fisted in one hand as she snorted something through a small tube. "Oh, baby...you found the good stuff."

She hummed happily, and I swallowed back the bile as he went to his knees next to her, then tugged her around to face him. "Give me a kiss, baby."

I was screwed.

I was so seriously screwed.

THIRTY-EIGHT

PIETY

The world kept dancing in and out of focus.

My head fell forward, eyes closing.

I slept.

I don't know how long but something clattered, and I jerked my head up, startled awake. My neck was killing me.

It was dark, and for a moment, I had no idea what was going on.

I tried to move, and everything came to me, the world snapping back into sharp focus. I wanted it to go back to the way it had been just a few minutes before.

Man, how could this be happening?

I was tied to a chair.

My head was pounding, my mouth was dry, and I hurt in ways I didn't think it was possible to hurt. Stefano hadn't even laid a hand on me. Neither had Camry. I'd just been forced into this unnaturally still position, unable to move for hours on end.

And they were waiting for Kaleb to show up with money he didn't have.

And I was pregnant.

Maybe not, I tried to tell myself. That test had boasted it was *ninety-eight* percent accurate. What about the two percent? Were they false positives or false negatives? I tried to remember my classes in biology, but nothing was coming to me. The tests were based on the human growth hormone that kicked on in pregnancy, right? So...could there be a false positive? Or was a false negative more likely?

I didn't know.

Fear was a sticky, metallic taste in the back of my mouth.

I was most likely pregnant and trapped in a building with a man who cared more about money than anything else. Sadly, it was a mindset I understood. There were too many people in *my* life who cared more about the almighty dollar than anything else.

How could this be happening?

Tears burned my eyes, but I forced them back. Crying wouldn't help anything and would probably make that bastard *happy*. No way was I going to give Stefano that satisfaction.

I managed to fight them down and get myself under control, and I was happy with it. It was a small victory, but in these circumstances, every damn victory counted.

I felt somebody watching me, and I searched the dim room with my eyes, trying not to move any more than I had to.

"Your boyfriend isn't helping things out much here, sugar," a low voice drawled.

I managed to control the flinch, and I swallowed, trying to unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth. "Can I get some water?"

"I look like a fucking maid to you?"

"It's probably escaped your notice, but I'm not exactly able to do it myself. If you were to untie me—"

"Fat chance. Just be quiet, okay?" He sounded far less cocky now, and I wondered if I'd missed something during the brief patches when I'd dozed off.

I set my jaw, looking away, but to my surprise, Camry came over.

"Hey," Stefano snapped.

"She's pregnant, okay?" She held a can in her hand and lifted it to my lips. "It's ginger ale. Might be better for your stomach. I don't know if you're feeling sick or not, but just in case."

I didn't want her being nice.

But the ginger ale settled on my stomach far easier than water would. A little bit of it ran down my chin, and she used her sleeve to wipe it off. "Better?" she asked.

Her eyes were heavy, and when I looked at her, she averted her gaze.

"Oh, I'm just peachy," I said sourly.

She gave me a jerky nod, and I could see the guilt in how she held herself, how she was moving.

"He ain't responding to my texts anymore, sweetie. Why do you think

that is?” Stefano demanded.

“I don’t know. Maybe his phone died.” I was so tired, I couldn’t think of anything better.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Camry sit down and Stefano hold out the metal box from earlier. She licked her lips, eying it nervously. Her gaze came to me, but she wouldn’t look directly at me.

“Come on, sugar. Been a while. You gotta be needing something,” he said in a tone far more gentle than even before. “Try this. It’ll make you feel unlike anything you’ve ever felt.”

“Yeah, yeah, alright.” She accepted the tube he offered and snorted the white powder.

My belly heaved, and I willed down the nausea through sheer determination. I was being held hostage, and she was shooting up.

But in a way, he’s holding her hostage too, a soft voice murmured.

I ignored it. I didn’t want to feel pity for her. Not now. Maybe not ever.

I don’t know if I ever want to feel sympathy or compassion for anyone again and that utterly infuriated me. It was like they’d broken something vital inside me.

Stefano continued to glare at me, the insolence returning to his eyes and I thought he knew exactly what I was thinking. Camry’s lashes fluttered down, and a smile drifted over her face.

“Oh, that’s better,” she murmured. “That’s so nice.”

“Why don’t you come here, baby? Gotta be tired.” He guided her close, and she laid down. He rubbed her shoulder and before long, she was asleep. Must be nice, being able to get lost in herself.

Exhaustion pressed in on me, and I could feel my own eyes growing heavy again, but just as my head started to droop, Stefano said, “You know, if I don’t hear something soon, it ain’t gonna go well for you. I don’t give a fuck whose kid you are.”

“You don’t think you can do something to me and just get away with it, do you?” I glared at him, so tired of this whole mess that I could feel the grip I’d held on my temper and my fear sliding away from my grasp.

“Ah, I’m just gonna...disappear. See, if he don’t show up, you’re dead.” He mimed making a gun with his hand and pointed it at me. “And you can’t tell them shit. And my girl here...?”

He laughed and nodded his chin toward the box. “I got all sorts of goodies for her. She won’t ever wake up. I made it look like she’s the one

who's been sending the texts, see? And I've got a hundred people who'll vouch that I was anywhere but here."

"You're a bastard."

"Be nice." His eyes glittered with malice, face mostly lost to shadow. "Be nice, honey, and maybe you won't suffer too much."

I opened my mouth – and nothing *nice* was going to come out – but was saved from my own stupidity by a heavy knock on the door.

I whipped my head around, fear skittering through me. The tense muscles in my neck screamed out at me, but I ignored it as I watched with trepidation Stefano get up and make his way to the door.

"Who is it?" he shouted, still several feet away.

"Kaleb."

My heart lurched into my throat.

"I've got your fucking money, so open the damn door."

"Alright, alright..." A bright, sharp smile split his face and Stefano turned to look at me. "You just sit tight, sweetie. I've got to check a few things."

He went closer to the door. "Just hold your horses, pretty boy. Gotta make sure you're being legit and alone, okay?"

I panted, blood draining out of my head and leaving everything looking fuzzy.

Stefano had the gun in his hand, didn't he?

I thought he did. I was almost positive.

"Kaleb! He has a gun!" I called out.

"Be quiet, bitch." A moment later, I felt the gun press against the back of my head. "You be quiet, or I'll just put a bullet through the door *and* him. You got me?"

The words were delivered in a lethal, deadly voice. I swallowed, slowly nodding and hoping he didn't pull the trigger when I moved.

Be careful, I thought. *Please be careful, please, please, please...*

A moment later, Stefano knelt beside me, jerking at the ropes. "You get your wish, princess. I'm untying you. I'm going to let you open the door so you can tell your boytoy to come in. Then we'll get down to business. If you as much as flinch, I'll put a fucking bullet through your little pretty head, you understand?"

"Yes."

He jerked me up, and I stumbled.

"Stop playing around," he yelled.

“I’ve been tied up for hours,” I snapped before I could stop it. “My legs are asleep, and nothing wants to move, dumbass!”

I froze instantly, wishing I could yank the words back.

To my surprise, though, Stefano grinned at me. Man, he was crazy. Still grinning, he reached up with both hands and framed my face. I could feel the cold metal of the gun digging into my skin. “You’re one tough piece of ass, you know that? I almost had fun with this.”

Before I could respond, he let me go and spun me around. “Move.”

I stumbled again but steadied myself. I did *not* want him touching me.

Each step had more sensation returning to my legs, and it was like a thousand pins and needles were stabbing into me, but I gritted my teeth and ignored it.

The door was ten feet away, then five, then two...

“Open the door. Just a little. Stay behind it.”

The gun’s muzzle was pressed tight against the back of my ear, making it clear that arguing would be a little bit stupid. So I did exactly what he said.

Kaleb slipped in through the narrow opening, carrying a duffel bag.

The sight of him hit me hard in the chest, and this time, no matter how hard I fought, I couldn’t hold back the tears.

“Kaleb,” I whispered.

His eyes came straight to me, and he started to take a step in my direction, only to stop as he realized a gun was pressed to my head.

“Let her go,” Kaleb said roughly.

“In a bit, in a bit.” Stefano kicked the door shut and locked it then jugged his chin toward the table. “Let’s sit down and get to business. Don’t try any bullshit or your pretty little wife here will get a third eye.”

“There’s no business left. I’m taking Piety and my sister and getting out of here.”

His eyes flicked to me, and he stared at me for a lingering moment before looking back at Stefano.

“Well, see...your little sister is taking a nap.” Stefano laughed and gestured toward the couch. “Tell you what...you can take *one* of them, after we’re done doing business. Whichever one you want.”

“Asshole,” I muttered.

He ignored me and gestured to the table again. “Come on. Let’s sit. I want to check the money.”

“It’s all there,” Kaleb said. “Let Piety go now. She’s about to fall asleep

on her feet.”

“Sit,” Stefano said again, an edge to his voice.

Kaleb sat.

But when I went to take a step closer, Stefano pointed the gun in my direction. “Keep a few feet away, sweetie. I want to check my money.”

“It’s all there,” Kaleb said again.

“Yeah, yeah. Put the bag on the table. Unzip it.”

Kaleb sighed and did so, his eyes searching the room. I knew the moment he noticed his sister. His mouth went tight.

Then he looked at me, and again, our gazes caught and lingered. His gaze tracked to the front door, then back to me. *What?* I wondered. *What are you trying to tell me?*

“Man, I knew you’d come through,” Stefano said, that sly smirk firmly back in place as he looked at us. “I should have upped the dollar amount. You made this look easy.”

“Yeah, it was a real walk in the park. Are we good now?” Kaleb asked, sounding bored.

“Hmmm.” Stefano slowly zipped the bag, shaking his head. “What are you looking so smug about?” Stefano asked? He studied Kaleb with narrowed eyes, a look on his face that I didn’t like at all.

But the question made me wonder. Kaleb did look really, really calm.

Swallowing the knot of nerves in my throat, I tried to move to where I could watch both, but the room was only so big, and every time I moved, Stefano shifted his attention – and the gun – toward me.

“I’m not smug.” Kaleb lifted one shoulder, his face composed, entire body relaxed.

“Well, you look pretty damn chill about all of this.” Stefano looked even more suspicious

“I don’t have any reason not to be chill.” Kaleb snorted, then slid me another one of those piercing looks, before glancing at his sister. “I’m getting what I want. I’m getting Piety, I’m getting my sister and we’re getting out of here, all three of us.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t think your sister is going anywhere.” Stefano looked please with himself as he gestured toward Camry’s unconscious body. She lay sprawled on the couch, one arm and leg half on the floor, her face turned in our direction.

I don’t know if it was my own fear, or something more, but she seemed

unnaturally pale, and I stared at her chest, searching for signs that it was still moving.

It did, but that didn't make me feel any better.

"Don't worry, I think I can carry her just fine," Kaleb said, his voice dry.

"And if I tell you that I'm not letting her leave unless that's what she wants?" Stefano's brows beetled together over his eyes, an ugly snarl twisting his face as he took a few steps closer to Kaleb.

"You don't want to do that." Kaleb just looked at him, looking unconcerned.

"Yeah?" Stefano brandished the gun, holding it sideways, gangster style. I would have rolled my eyes if I hadn't been so afraid.

Kaleb shot me another look, that intense gaze piercing straight through me. That silent unspoken message was still there.

What? I wanted to ask. *What are you trying to tell me?*

"You ain't taking her anywhere she don't want to go. That wasn't the deal." Stefano sounded bored, then his eyes brightened, and he snapped his fingers, like he'd just come up with a great idea. "I know. Why don't you try to wake her up? If you can, she's all yours."

The confidence in his voice, the cocksure tone of it made me worry. He had already planned on killing me and pawning this off on her if things went bad. Was there something wrong with her? Was *that* why she was so pale? So still?

Had he given her some bad drugs? Or too much?

I knew way too many women and kids who'd gotten a bad mix. I had horror stories I could tell, and I wouldn't put it past him either.

But I couldn't voice any of those fears right now, could I? Not with him staring me down, almost daring me.

"Here's the thing." Kaleb's face took on a menacing expression, and he took a step toward the other man.

Stefano's gun came up, and he leveled it at Kaleb's chest.

Fear exploded inside me, and I said, "Stop it, okay? Stefano, you got your money."

"Be quiet, bitch," he said, not even looking at me.

Kaleb held up a hand in my direction. I don't know if he was trying to calm me or quiet me, and I wanted to rip out my hair.

"I'm taking both Piety and Camry, and we're leaving. You got your damn money, so we're going. If you don't like it, you go ahead and shoot me." A

bit of a smirk twisted his lips, even as I felt that fear expand and explode like it was going to eat me alive. “But I can guarantee you that won’t go well.”

Stefano laughed. “What, you think you’re Superman? You think bullets will bounce off you?”

They were close now. So close.

Not even two feet separated them, and the gun was only inches from Kaleb’s chest.

I tried to say Kaleb’s name, but I couldn’t even make my damn jaw move. I’d never felt fear like this, had never understood what it was like to be petrified by it.

What happened next was so mind-boggling, I still can’t completely understand it.

Stefano nudged Kaleb’s chest with the muzzle of the gun. “Come on, pretty boy. Do something.”

And Kaleb did. He shot out a hand, twisted and moved. There was a sickening loud noise, and I clapped a hand over my mouth to silence a shriek. *Gun*, I thought. It was the gun.

But it wasn’t loud enough to be a gun shot.

My brain knew the sound of a weapon. Dad owned a whole room full of firearms, and I’d learned how to handle them young.

It wasn’t a gun.

But in the quiet of the room, it sounded terribly loud.

A split second after that thick, wet, cracking sound, a scream erupted and Stefano just...collapsed. He went inward, going to his knees while Kaleb twisted and moved, all but jerking the man around by his arm, an awkward marionette and his puppet master.

His wrist, I realized. Kaleb had broken the man’s wrist. That horrendous crack I’d heard was the sound of a bone breaking, not a bullet.

Stefano was shouting, voice ragged and hoarse, now on his knees in front of Kaleb.

I had no idea how Kaleb had *done* that. I’d taken several courses in self-defense, and the fluidity of his movements bespoke of the ease some of the martial arts instructors had used.

“Wow. I think you really are Superman,” I said.

There was no chance for him to respond.

Stefano roared and surged back to his feet, fumbling at his back with his one good hand. A moment later, there was another gun, but instead of trying

to disarm Stefano again, Kaleb lunged for me.

“TIME!” Kaleb shouted.

It was a huge bellow and within a split second I was pinned under him.

Feet pounded.

Wood crashed.

Voices raged.

Through it all, Kaleb held me pinned to the floor, protecting me with his body. He murmured reassuringly, “Be still, baby. Just...be still.”

At least that’s what I thought he said through the cacophony that followed.

There was more crashing, shouting, and above it all, authoritative voices bellowing out, “Drop the gun!”

That command came from multiple directions, and I could hear more than one speaker.

As I shivered and shook, Kaleb murmured to me, “Be still. Don’t move... you’ll be alright.”

I didn’t have any choice. I was so stunned, I don’t think I could’ve moved if my life depended on it.

“Be still...you’re safe, baby. You’re safe.”

“YOUR BLOOD PRESSURE IS FINE. Your pulse is strong and steady. Unfortunately, there’s nothing I can do to check on the baby, but if you’re just barely pregnant, everything should be fine. But it would be a good idea to go to the hospital and get checked out.” The paramedic gave me a solemn smile and held out a lollipop. “Want some candy? Always helped my wife when she was upset while she was carrying our first.” He looked thoughtful for a moment and then added, “And our second. And our third.”

“How many kids do you have?” I asked, shooting out a hand to take the sucker. It didn’t matter that it was just a cherry flavored lollipop.

“Three.” He grinned at me and added, “I’m trying to talk her into a fourth, but she says this third one will be the ruler of the universe, so I’m not sure if I can do it.”

Kaleb sat next to me, rubbing my back. He was listening, sort of. But his eyes were on his sister, and so was most of his attention.

I understood.

Once the paramedic had assured him I was okay, he had focused on her, and to be honest, so had I.

She was still just as pale, just as still as she had been in the house. She hadn't moved once, hadn't made a sound.

I'd heard talk that was a little too familiar. The antidote to the overdose they suspected she'd been given wasn't working.

Her heartbeat was too slow, her blood pressure as well.

The paramedics were worried about her, and they were loading her into the back of an ambulance. They were already prepping a second treatment, and I closed my eyes, resting my head against Kaleb's shoulder.

Don't let it end like this, I thought. Not now that Stefano was out of the picture.

I hadn't told anybody what Stefano had threatened. Not yet. I would, but the cops hadn't even gotten around to taking my statement yet. They were too busy focusing on Stefano and Camry and gathering precious evidence, but I knew they'd get to me.

He was wailing for a lawyer from the back of a squad car, but the detectives were ignoring him. One told him he could get his phone call once they got to the station.

I had a feeling he wasn't going to get out of this quite so easy.

Kaleb and the cops had actually been outside for over an hour, he told me, waiting for the right movement. They'd had microwaves up, the kind you'd think would exist in spy movies, and they'd caught the better part of the conversation from the past hour.

The cops probably already knew about his threat to kill me and frame Camry for it. Since he'd decided to go and kidnap somebody this time, it seemed to me he'd have a harder time sidestepping things. And I knew my dad would throw his weight into prosecuting the man too.

For once, I didn't mind at all knowing that being his daughter was going to make a big difference here. Stefano needed to be taken off the streets for decades, no matter what it took.

"Are you okay?" Kaleb murmured against my temple after the paramedic left.

I laughed weakly. "Okay?"

"Shit. What a stupid question. How can you be okay?" He hugged me tighter and whispered, "I'm so sorry, so fucking sorry you got caught up in

this.”

“Don’t.” I turned my face into his neck. “You’re not responsible for this, so don’t apologize.” Then I tipped my head back and smiled at him. “And it could have been so much worse.”

I shook my head, still baffled by everything he told me. I had no idea how he’d done all of this. Saving me. Shifting around, I wrapped my arms around his neck and cuddled close. The tears wanted to come out, but I didn’t want to cry right now. Not here.

Later, maybe. When we were alone.

He nuzzled me, murmuring nonsensical words under his breath. None of them made sense, but they did their job, soothing me when nothing should have been able to. I took a deep breath, and for the first time in hours, let some of the fear inside me drain away.

“Hey, Kaleb?” A watery laugh escaped me. “I think I’m pregnant.”

He laughed too. The sound was strangled and raw. “Really? Huh. Maybe we should have a talk.”

“Yeah, but not yet. I want to stay like this.”

THIRTY-NINE

KALEB

“She’s awake.”

The doctor’s words hit me like a leaden fist, heavy and bruising, and I stumbled back against the wall.

“What?” I asked.

“She’s awake,” he said again gently, smiling at me as if he understood. He looked around and then came into the waiting room where the nurse had asked me to wait. Camry was being examined when I came to check on her, so they hadn’t let me in. I’d been about to leave and go back to Piety’s side when the doctor appeared around the corner.

The worst sort of dread had flooded me, and I’d been prepared for the worst. And now he was telling me...

“She’s awake.”

I swallowed, the words foreign and strange in my mouth. “Are there...?”

She’d had to have another treatment in the ambulance, and they’d told me her heart was dangerously slow. I hadn’t understood any of the medical mumbo jumbo, save for that – dangerously slow.

“Are there complications?”

“I think, after a few days of observation, she’ll be fine. She’s very malnourished, which isn’t uncommon for addicts, so I’d like to keep her here and monitor her for a few days while we push fluids and try to stabilize her on that front.” He glanced around and then nodded to one of the chairs. “Why don’t we sit?”

I all but collapsed into the chair, the fear and adrenaline draining out of me, leaving me weak.

“Your sister...” He offered me a kind smile. “Camry has struggled with

her addiction for some time, hasn't she?"

"I don't know if struggle is the right word. She's had quite a bit of fun with it lately, seems like." I felt bad saying it, but I was so tired of making excuses for her. I loved her, but she could have cost me something precious tonight – today. Fuck, I didn't even know what time it was. Anger tried to take root in me once more, but I lashed it down.

Not now.

Just...not now.

"Well, I doubt we could call it fun. Your sister is...quite depressed." The doctor settled back in the chair, studying me. "I understand you lost your parents young, and you had to raise her."

I could already feel the defensiveness rising, but I struggled to keep it at bay.

"Yes. I know I wasn't able to give her everything—"

"This isn't your fault." He shook his head. "Your sister was old enough to understand what she was doing when she first started using. I've talked with her to some degree. She said you talked to her growing up, about drugs, sex...you had to be brother and parent. That couldn't have been easy."

I could feel the blood staining my cheeks, but I didn't look away. "Who else was going to?"

"And that's just the thing. You did everything you could, and she made the choice. She chose. And you've tried to be there for her as much as you could. She even understands that. She's...angry with herself more than anything, and that's the root of much of her depression, more than likely."

I narrowed my eyes. "Are you an ER doc or a shrink?"

He chuckled. "I started out in psych before I realized it was a lot easier to fix the body than the mind." His eyes became intense. "I think she wants help. Every addict hits rock bottom, Kaleb. And every brother, sister, mother, father of an addict eventually hits a point when they don't want to reach out anymore. This isn't the time to walk away from her."

Something tangled and twisted welled up in me. It was guilt, a feeling I knew too well. Throat tight and burning, I said, "Is it that obvious?"

"Well, I overheard the police talking. I can't imagine how angry you must be – and rightfully so." He inclined his head. "If you were to walk away from her now, you'd be completely entitled. Nobody could blame you at all."

"I would." I got up and moved to the door, staring out the block of glass toward her room. "I can do it...one more time."

But that was it. If she messed up again...
“I think one more time is all she needs.”

A TRIM ASIAN woman was walking out of Camry’s room just as I approached the door.

She paused and met my eyes. “You must be Kaleb.”

“Ah, yeah.” I racked my brain, trying to figure out who she was, but I came up empty.

“I’m Liushi Testudo, a friend of Sam’s.” She smiled. “I’ve been trying to help him work on a way to keep you both stateside.”

“Oh.” A hard breath exploded out of me, and I shot a look at the room, where I could see Camry lying in her bed. She was curled up on her side, facing away from me. “What were you...ah...she needs an attorney, doesn’t she?”

Medical bills. Lawyer bills.

How was I going to handle all of this?

“Yes,” Liushi said gently. “She does. But that’s not the kind of lawyer I am. I was testing the waters, so to speak, on behalf of a friend at the district attorney’s office. Sam gave me a head’s up, and I called the DA and asked if he’d mind if I spoke with Camry. I had a feeling she might be willing.”

“And just what were you testing the waters for?” I had to fight not to throw in the word *sharks*.

She looked kind enough, but this was my baby sister. My fucked-up baby sister who could have gotten herself and Piety – and the baby – killed.

“To see if she’d be willing to make a deal with the DA and testify against Stefano Fuentes. I don’t think you realize just how hard the police here in Vegas have been trying to put him away.” She smiled again. “If she testifies, the DA will have enough of a case to put Stefano away for a very long time. Since there’s no physical bruises indicating that he hurt you and Piety, without Camry’s testimony that he tried to kill her by giving her an overdose, he could be out in less than a year, depending on the judge and jury. Camry might need some time to adjust, but she told me she’ll testify.” She rested a hand on my arm for a moment. “Be gentle with her...she’s fragile.”

I stared at the narrow back of my sister and wanted to laugh, wanted to

punch something.

Fragile.

She looked damn fragile, alright.

I'd been trying to help her, take care of her for years, and look where that got me.

But I told myself – told the doctor – I'd give it one more try.

Thinking of my parents, I promised them too.

One more try.

Slowly, I entered the room. Camry flinched at the sound of my footsteps, quiet as they were.

“Hey.”

I stopped at the foot of the bed, feeling out of place and awkward. I hated it. When had the two of us gone from being family to near strangers?

It started before she'd left home.

I couldn't put my finger on what changed, but something had, something indefinable and real and it made me sick.

“Camry.”

“What do you want?” she asked in a small, tired voice.

“What do I...?” I lashed down the anger that tried to come spiraling out. *Not yet*, I told myself. Not yet. Soon. Someday soon, I'd give into it, but not yet. “Camry, I was scared sick you wouldn't wake up. What do you think I want? I wanted to make sure you were okay. I needed to see you.”

Finally, her eyes flicked my way through the heavy tangle of her hair.

It was dull and lank, and I remembered how it had once been her pride and joy. Was it the drugs? The malnutrition? I just didn't know.

Somehow, the sight of her lying in the bed looking so broken managed to crack the hard shell of apathy and I went to my knees next to the bed.

Camry squeezed her eyes closed. “Why do you even want to be around me?”

“Because you're my baby sister,” I said, brushing her hair back. “I love you.”

“Why? After everything I've done? After what could have happened?”

“Cam–”

Abruptly, she sat up, flinging my hand away. Color flooded into her cheeks, washing away some of the pallor. “You don't *get* it! Stefano made it all seem like it would be a big joke, and I *let* him talk me into it, but in the end, it didn't matter because he promised to give me money, and money

meant *drugs*. Nothing else mattered. Not your cute girlfriend, not you. Not even...”

Her voice cracked.

“Not even the baby,” I finished for her.

“Yeah.” She lifted a fist to her mouth, gnawing on her reddened knuckles, worrying skin that was already sore and cracked. “Now I keep thinking about what might have happened, and I feel *sick*. But what’s worse...I’m coming down off a high, and it’s...”

She held out her hands and showed me how they were shaking. I took one of them in mine.

“And you’re scared.”

She nodded and tears pooled in her eyes. “I know in a while I’ll be in a state to where I’ll do *anything* to get a fix. So...yeah...why are you here, Kaleb? I’m a pathetic, weak mess.”

I sat down next to her and put an arm around her. “I guess that’s why I’m here. You’ve never outright admitted being weak and pathetic quite like that. I think that means you’re ready to reach out and ask for help. Let me be strong for you, Camry.”

I LEFT HER SLEEPING, moving as quickly as I could through the hospital to the floor where Piety was being held for overnight observation.

They had Camry on a suicide watch. I don’t know if it was something she’d said or done, or if it was typical because of the drug abuse, but she was on the far side of the hospital from Piety and I felt pulled in two, trying to take care and be there for them both.

Piety was lying on her side, a mirror of the way I’d found Camry, but instead of facing away and locking the world out, she was facing the door.

Waiting for me.

A smile curved her lips as I approached and the ragged, aching mess in my chest faded away.

Just like that.

I snagged a chair as I went to her side, dragged it with me as I walked, then dropped it by the head of the bed, so I could sit and stare at her face.

“I thought I might lose you,” I said bluntly. “I’ve never been so scared in

my life.”

She reached up, cupping my face.

“I thought the same about you.” Then she tugged me closer.

I never needed encouragement to kiss her, so I went gladly.

But she didn’t kiss me.

She bit my lower lip – hard.

“If you *ever* stand in front of a man with a loaded weapon like that, I’ll hurt you,” she said, her fingers tangling in my hair as she held me close. “You understand?”

“I...yeah.” My lip throbbed. I didn’t care. “I understand completely.”

I bit her lower lip, not as hard, just a slow, light pressure of my teeth on the plump curve, tugging it out before releasing it all together. “And don’t you ever...hell. Don’t ever leave my sight again. Okay?”

She laughed weakly. “That might be hard. And awkward. Like now. I have to pee. You don’t need to come in.”

“I should inspect the loo, just to make sure.” I nuzzled her neck then sat back, watching as she eased upright.

A fist grabbed me by the throat, and I wanted to pull her into my arms, hold her while promising that nothing bad would ever happen to her again.

Instead, I helped her stand up and stood guard while she went to the toilet. When she came out, I caught her in my arms and tucked her head against my shoulder.

“Like this,” she mumbled.

“Hmmm?”

“I want to stay like this for a thousand years.”

I chuckled, rubbing my chin on top of her head. “We need to pause from time to time to eat.”

“Eat. Go to the bathroom...” She backed up and looked at me from under her lashes. “Ah...have a baby.”

I blinked, suddenly feeling nervous. “Um, yeah. You weren’t too certain the test was accurate, right? Might be too—”

“They’re running a blood test. We’ll know soon. The blood tests always hit the mark, Kaleb.” She reached up and cupped my cheek. “If you...I mean, neither of us were planning this, so I understand. But—”

“I want to be with you.” I cut her off and pressed my mouth to hers.

She sighed against my lips. “Kaleb?”

“It’s insane, and I know it doesn’t make sense, but I want to be with you.

And if there's a baby, then I want the baby."

"Really?" She laughed, the sound bright and happy. "Oh, man. Yes. Me too. Yes."

I went to kiss her – really kiss her.

But there was a knock at the door.

We turned as one.

A man in a white lab coat stood there, and he nodded at us. "I know it's early yet, but you have some visitors, Ms. Van Allen. Their plane just landed."

My stomach dropped out, and Piety stiffened.

"Your parents," I murmured under my breath. "I'll go—"

But it was too late.

Piety's mother just barely beat her father through the door. She was, incongruously – at least I thought so – dressed in blue jeans and a blouse, her hair pulled back from her face. "Piety," she said, her voice trembling.

I edged back, even as Piety tried to catch my eyes. Looking at the doctor, I nodded at him. "I'll be in the waiting room."

"Kaleb." Silas Van Allan was standing in front of me, his hand outstretched.

I shook it. "Mr. Van Allen."

He had dark circles under his eyes, and his gaze flicked past me to linger on his wife and daughter before re-focusing on me. "Kaleb, please. I owe you the deepest of apologies," he said, his voice shaking for a moment before it firmed. "I misjudged you terribly, and I can never make up for that. You risked your own life to save my daughter. Please...will you...?"

He looked away.

Stunned, not sure how to handle this reversal of events, I reached out and took his hand.

He tightened his, eyes coming back to mine.

I waited for the cameraman to jump out and yell something like, *Joke's on you, mate!*

But the only thing that happened was Silas jerking me up against him in one of those back-slapping hugs that left me feeling like he might have jarred a few teeth loose.

Then he let me go and went to his daughter, and I was caught up in an embrace from Amara, one that smelled of a soft perfume. Oddly, it reminded me of my own mother's.

My throat went tight.

“Please forgive us,” she said, pulling back and staring at me solemnly. “We were unkind, but we’ve only ever wanted what’s best for her.”

“It’s...I understand.”

“I don’t see how.” She offered me a wobbly smile, then looked over at her daughter. “We would like to...make a gesture, if you would. We heard that your sister is willing to help putting that ugly man away for many years. We understand she need some rehab. Silas and I want to help. And we’ll do everything we can to make sure the two of you can stay in the US.”

FORTY

PIETY

Kaleb slid his mouth down my neck.

I wanted to grab him and rip his clothes away, but he wasn't having any of it.

I'd spent the night at the hospital, plus half the day, waiting for the doctor to look me over so he could discharge me.

I might have been okay, but Kaleb had started running his hand up and down my thigh on the drive over and the need to *touch*, to *connect*, had been overwhelming.

Now, as his hands slid up my back, dragging the shirt with it, I unbuttoned his, with far more speed and far less grace than he showed.

"Naked," I said. "I want you naked."

"Same goes. I want to see and touch every inch of you. That's the only way I'll be sure you're okay."

His tongue flicked the corner of my mouth, and my knees went weak. "This has been the longest day of my life," he said.

"Absolutely," I agreed.

He arched his fingers in through my hair and tugged my head back, but the desperate, dark kiss I'd been anticipating – *craving* – didn't happen.

Instead, he kissed me soft and slow. He kissed me so sweetly, tears burned in my eyes as he trailed a path down my chin, then my neck.

"Hold on," he murmured, wrapping his arms around my hips, then boosting me up.

I did.

I'd hold onto him forever.

He held me close as he carried me through the suite and into the bedroom,

where he laid me down and stripped away my skirt and panties, then pressed his lips to my belly.

But when he would have spread my thighs and moved between them, I tugged him up to me. “I want you now...I want this.”

I *needed* it, needed to feel him inside me, moving against me, and I needed to see his face.

He nodded, as if he understood exactly what I meant.

Maybe he did.

We were almost...careful with each other. It wasn't something I could explain, the gentle way he touched me or the slow, almost teasing way he entered me.

By the time he filled me, we were both holding our breath, and it was almost painful to have him withdraw – we were *part* of each other.

But I needed *more*.

So did he.

He moved, finding a rhythm that kept him from being gone from me for too long, while I clung to him, my heels hooked over his ass, tightening every time he was too far away.

“Don't let go,” he said, just as I started to come.

I wanted to tell him I wouldn't, not ever.

But I didn't have the breath.

So I just clung to him instead.

Right where I belonged.

EPILOGUE. PIETY

“Wow.”

That voice, hesitant and soft, was about as familiar to me now as Astra’s and Kaleb’s.

I looked up, met Camry’s gaze in the mirror, and smiled at her.

Things between us were...odd.

We were developing a friendship, but it was slow, and I was fine with that. I’d rather it be slow and real and *last* than either of us fake it just because we were sisters-in-law.

And real ones too.

I was wearing my wedding dress, and not some sexy little party dress like the one I’d worn when I asked Kaleb to marry me just to piss my parents off.

In less than fifteen minutes, we were getting married...again, in an official ceremony this time.

Something fluttered in my belly, and I gasped, pressing a hand to the hard mound there.

“Wow.” This time, I was the one to say it.

“Nervous?” Camry offered a quick smile as she tucked her hair behind her ear.

“Um...well, yeah, but I think the baby just moved.”

Her eyes widened. “Whoa. Cool.”

I grinned at her, echoing her statement.

Astra came sailing in, wearing a dress of dusky gold, reminiscent of the glamorous twenties. She even had a band around her head, one that did nothing to restrain her curls.

She caught sight of me and caught my face in her hands, then kissed me.

“Checking – gotta make sure the lipstick is kiss-proof, PS.”

I batted her hands away. “The baby kicked,” I said, grinning.

“Really?” Her eyes popped wide, and she went to put her hand on my belly, but I smacked her away.

“No. Daddy gets to feel it first.”

“Oh, fine. Spoilsport.” Then she did a quick circle around me before turning to look at Camry.

They hadn’t hit it off right away. Astra was nothing if not fiercely loyal, but things had smoothed out after the initial rough patch. After Camry’s first few months in detox, she understood more of how badly she’d screwed things up. During her initial visit home, the first thing she’d said to Astra had been, “If you want to smack me, I’m fine with that.”

Camry was still so thin. She’d put on a few pounds and no longer looked like a starving waif, but Astra had huffed, saying, “I’d probably break you in half with a small swat.”

A week later, Astra decided that we should offer her a job for the non-profit we were working to get off the ground. It took forever to get such a thing approved, and we had more paperwork to deal with than an army could handle, so the extra hands were appreciated.

And since the non-profit dealt with young women who’d been in Camry’s situation, she could connect on a level many others couldn’t.

It was going well.

My mother knocked before slipping inside, checking to make sure I was ready before opening the door for my father.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

I barely recognized the warm, loving man he’d become over the past few months. Nodding, I fought back tears. I guess the possible loss of his only child had hit both of them, hard.

I know it had me.

He held out a hand, and I went to him.

“Come on,” I said, smiling up at him. “I’m ready to get started with the rest of my life.”

Kaleb was out there in the church...waiting for me.

THE END

Turn the page to start reading Astra's story: L. A. Misbehaved now.



M.S. PARKER
CASSIE WILD

L.A.
Misbehaved
PART 1

PART ONE

ONE

ASTRA

“Have fun.” I clung to the woman in my arms, blinking back tears.

My best friend laughed and pulled back until I could see her dark blue eyes shine. “I’m not kidding, Astra Traore. If you start to cry, it will make *me* cry.”

“I’ll cry, you’ll cry...” I gave a dramatic sigh and pulled her in for another hug. “We’ll *all* start to cry!”

The thing was...it wasn’t a joke.

I knew it was silly to be this upset. She was just going away for a week. But it was her honeymoon, and when Piety came back, she wouldn’t be the exact same woman. Then again, she already wasn’t.

She was no longer Piety van Allen.

She was Piety Hastings. As of four hours ago – not to mention the numerous drinks, dances, and some rather delicious cake – she was married. For real this time.

The tall, beautiful blond man standing next to her bent to kiss my cheek when I turned to him.

“Take care of her.” I thought it would’ve been easier to fight back the tears now, but it wasn’t. Taking care of Piety – and her taking care of me – had been the job since first grade.

And now I was practically the third wheel.

No wonder I felt like crying.

But I was happy for her.

Of course, I was.

It was the truth too. I didn’t even have to convince myself of that. All I’d ever wanted was for her to be happy, and Kaleb did that.

But as I waved them off, I couldn't lie to myself anymore. I was happy for them, but I wasn't so sure how I felt about my own life anymore. Piety wasn't just newly married. She was also four months pregnant. I would be demoted from third wheel to fourth wheel come spring. I didn't begrudge her any of it, but I couldn't deny that it made me a bit sad to think that we were barely into our twenties and everything was changing in such a significant way.

"You went and turned kind of grim, sweetness."

I glanced over at my date for the night – and most nights that needed dates. Baylor Aravis was a friend, casual for the most part. We both hated the idea of our parents setting us up with somebody of their choosing, and since it just wasn't *done* to go alone to a wedding, or any other significant social event, we latched onto each other whenever we could. That was just the way the rules played out in the circles our families traveled in.

I could practically hear my mother's appalled tone if I'd even suggested attending the wedding of a congressman's daughter by myself. It didn't matter that everyone would be paying attention to the happy couple since their love story had been splashed all over every magazine, newspaper, and website in the country since the moment it'd broken. Mom would want me to make an appropriate impression.

Since Baylor and I both hated that endless push from our parents, we tended to do the socializing bit together.

And later, we'd do something else together, if we were in the mood.

Earlier, I'd planned on finishing up the night solo girl style, a bunch of corny romantic comedies and ice cream. And maybe some time with my B.O.B. – battery-operated boyfriend.

Now, I didn't want to be alone.

So, I leaned against Baylor and smiled. "Just thinking about how much it would suck to go home alone after such a beautiful wedding."

"Is that what you were thinking?"

He rested a hand on my hip, and I felt the warmth of his touch through my silk bridesmaid's dress. Since I'd been the only bridesmaid, Piety had let me choose what I wanted to wear. I'd gone with a dusky gold dress in a style inspired by the roaring twenties. I looked smashing, if I did say so myself.

Baylor's hand traveled a bit lower. "I'm not much on weddings, but as far as they go...this one was nice."

He drew closer, and I pushed myself up on my toes to press a kiss to his

lips.

“Come on.” I reached for his hand. “Let’s have one more dance, then we can get out of here.”

MY DRESS and undergarments lay on the back of Baylor’s couch.

I lay in front of them, devoid of everything but the band in my hair trying to contain my mass of nutmeg brown curls.

And Baylor knelt between my thighs, as naked as I was.

Eyes closed, I focused on what he was doing...which was when I knew I had a problem.

He was good at what he was doing.

I couldn’t fault his technique, and if I could just get my brain to turn off...

He raked his teeth over my clitoris and heat finally sparked through me. A startled noise escaped my throat as he slid two fingers inside my pussy, twisting them. As the heat turned into a pulse, it made it easier for me to *feel* instead of think. And I welcomed it.

One hand closed around my ankle while he continued to play the skilled fingers of his other hand over me, in me, like a particularly masterful musician.

The bright lights overhead shone too brightly in my eyes, and I closed them to block it out, to block out everything but the feel of his mouth and fingers working me toward release.

Except, just when I felt the climax pressing closer, he pulled away.

“Damn it, Bay!”

He gave an evil chuckle as he tugged me off the couch and helped me to my feet. I sulked, and he just smiled, guiding me until I was bent over, my hands on the couch cushions.

Yeah, he could smile.

He wasn’t the one who was so close to getting worked up just now.

He brushed kisses over my spine, working lower and lower. The gentleness of the touch, the eroticism, brought back the flame that had dimmed when he moved me from one position to another. His fingers stroked between my legs again, and I let my eyes close.

I heard the rustle of a condom wrapper, and then he was sliding inside. I pushed back on him hungrily.

I needed this...an escape from my own mind. A break from all of it. And his cock offered me that. It was one of the things I liked about Baylor. He knew where we stood, knew that it was friendship and sex and nothing more. We used each other for pleasure and escape with no other expectations.

As I ground back against him, he followed my lead, moving faster, rougher, deeper. He was a bit above average in the size department, and better than that, he knew how to use every inch.

It still wasn't enough.

Even as I climaxed.

But I pretended it was.

An hour later, lying in his bed, I stared at the ceiling until I knew he was asleep.

Sometimes I stayed the night.

Sometimes I didn't.

I'd never made it a point of sneaking out though.

But tonight...

Yeah.

Earlier, he asked if something was wrong and I laughed it off because I didn't *know* if something was wrong.

The only thing I could figure out was that something didn't feel *right*.

“NOPE.” I stared at my reflection, the bright makeup lights highlighting a crucial fact: *smear-proof makeup* was a marketing scam. “Something definitely doesn't feel right.”

And it was more than my smudged mascara or the lipstick that had long since disappeared.

I'd put it on for the wedding, counting on it to last through the entire event as well as my after-reception activities. It hadn't. Hopefully, it hadn't ended up on Piety when I'd been blubbing on her shoulder on more than one occasion.

My dress was on the floor. It needed to be cleaned and pressed before I donated it. I'd never wear it again, not when I knew if my mother spotted me

in it a second time, she'd give me a thirty-minute lecture on what it meant to be a part of our world.

Our world did not recycle.

At the moment, I was wearing nothing but a robe, and the bathtub behind me was steaming hot, the water fragrant from the bath salts I dumped in a few minutes ago.

A hot bath, a glass of wine, and hopefully, I'd sleep.

I had all of tomorrow to lay around and mope about how my best friend's happiness sucked for me. With any luck, I'd mope myself out of this depression.

If I didn't, I'd just have to grin and bear it. It wasn't like I hadn't done that before. People thought that because people like me had money growing up that we had some sort of idyllic childhood. Not that mine was awful. I hadn't been abused or even neglected. The poor little rich trope was annoying even to me by now.

I had no reason to be depressed, not really.

And I knew these raging feelings couldn't just be because Piety had gotten married.

Married.

I laughed. She was married because of me.

And just like that, I was smiling. Stepping out of the robe, I thought about my friend and the big, blond Australian who'd stood at her side earlier as they exchanged rings and vows, all that sappy crap I'd pretended wasn't going to make me cry.

It wasn't their first time at the altar. They'd gotten married, while drunk, in Vegas. And I'd been there. I was the one who'd convinced them to do it in the first place. I'd seen something in Kaleb that had made me think that he would be perfect for my best friend. Now they were so happy, they were all goofy with it.

Sure, things would change some, but she was still my best friend. And when she had her baby, I'd be an aunt. Well, sort of. Maybe Piety would refer to me as a godmother instead. I could work with that. Astra, the fairy godmother.

The lingering ache of sadness remained, but as I slid into the bath, I felt a little less like crying.

Reaching for the wine, I lifted it up and toasted absolutely nothing.

“Change will do you good, or so the song goes, Astra.”

TWO

DASH

It was getting dark.

My head was pounding.

I only noticed the former because it was aggravating the latter, and when I finally turned on the desk lamp, I glanced at the time.

Gritty-eyed, I looked from the papers strewn across my desk to stare out the window.

The day was almost done.

I'd worked through it.

I'd made it *through* it.

Thank God.

As memories tried to encroach like angry, hungry little monsters gnawing on my already overworked brain, I got up from the chair. The picture on the edge of the desk caught my attention, and I paused. Picking it up, I stared at the beautiful woman in the frame for a long moment, then carefully placed it face down on the desk. Every so often, I wondered if I should finally put it away.

I never did.

Moving over to the French doors, I opened them and moved out onto the deck.

A few hundred feet off the wide expanse of cedar, the Pacific Ocean roared and crashed into the sand, echoing the chaos of my thoughts. I placed my hands on the railing and closed my eyes. In a couple more hours, the day would be over and then I could pretend everything was normal, everything was fine...for another year.

Or three hundred and sixty-four more days. Sixty-three. Maybe sixty-two.

Fuck it.

I could never really *pretend* anything was normal. Some days, it was just easier to lie to myself than others.

Today wasn't one of them. Tomorrow probably wouldn't be either.

But in a week, maybe I could get back to level.

A wind blew up, whipping my hair back.

Opening my eyes, I looked back out over the water, watching as the sun sank closer to the deep blue, partially obscured by a bank of clouds that send gold and orange spilling over the sea, turning it to flame.

We loved to watch the sunsets...

"Stop it, Dash," I muttered, turning my back on the horizon.

We had loved a lot of things.

I didn't like much of anything these days.

I just...existed.

Moving back inside, I closed the doors and looked at my desk. The same pile of papers sat waiting. There was so much to get done, and I still hadn't managed to get through all the red tape.

It shouldn't be so hard to set up a center to help people. I had the money. I had the space. I had people lined up to help, and all the media attention one could hope for to make people aware of the center.

What I didn't have was the okay to move forward.

And people wondered why shit didn't get done.

"Fuck."

It was days like this that made me crave a drink. A drink, maybe something else to help me sleep, but that was a dangerous trap to fall into. Not that I'd ever had a problem with it, but it would be so easy for it to happen.

I knew that from experience.

My stomach grumbled, reminding me that it had been a while since I'd eaten. I wasn't hungry, but my body needed fuel.

Pausing by the desk, I studied the paperwork waiting for me. There was so much to be done. So many hoops to jump through, red tape to work around.

Did I have the time or luxury to eat?

I looked at the picture once more.

Then my belly grumbled again, and the pounding at the base of my neck seemed to renew its urgency. I had to eat.

After I did, I might be able to put in another couple of hours. If I didn't, my headache would keep growing, and I wouldn't be able to concentrate, which would make not eating so I could work a moot point.

With that in mind, I left the office, hitting the light behind me. I hadn't even managed to get a pot of coffee brewing when the alarm system chimed, alerting me to a car pulling through the gates. Moving to the small monitor set up inside the utility closet, I spied a familiar car. Turning, I went back into the kitchen to make a sandwich. Didi knew the code, and with any luck, she'd go straight to her place.

When I heard the front door open, I groaned, knowing that today wasn't my lucky day. Not that it was a surprise, today of all days. I should've just guessed that Didi would use her key. I heard the click of her heels on the polished hardwood floors but didn't turn around.

"Hey, Dash!"

Staring at the coffee, watching as it slowly filled the pot, I finished chewing the food in my mouth before I answered. I recognized that tone in her voice.

It was Didi Krauss's *let's take care of Dash* voice. I'd been hearing it often over the last couple years.

"Hi, Didi."

She came around the island and stood in front of me. With me standing half-slumped against the counter and her in a pair of razor-picked high heels, we were almost the same height. She took advantage of it, leaning in to glare at me.

"You did it again," she accused me, green eyes snapping.

"Did what?" I shoved another bite into my mouth so I could have time to figure out an answer.

But Didi knew me too well. She waited until I'd finished with the messy process of mastication before snatching the sandwich from my hands and spun out of my reach. Her long blonde hair had just settled back into place when she finally answered.

"Didn't we talk about you doing something today? Something that involved getting out of the house and not *thinking* about stuff? You said you were going hiking."

"I..." *lied*. But I couldn't say that to her face.

I didn't have to.

She could tell, just by looking at me. Sighing, she dumped the sandwich

on the plate and moved away.

I'd eaten maybe half.

Now I was full. Ignoring it, I crossed my arms over my chest and stared at my friend as she started to pace. I reminded myself that her heart was in the right place. We'd been friends for more than twenty years.

"It's not as easy as just getting out of the house and turning my brain off, Didi," I said softly.

"Hell." She huffed out a breath and shot me a look. "I know that. I *know* that. It's not like I've never had to turn *my* brain off and sucked at doing that very thing."

She moved to stand next to me, and I slung my arm around her neck. She leaned in closer to me, and I kissed her brow, feeling a little less miserable having her here.

We'd been friends for most of my life. It was easier to tell her things than it was to tell others. It had always been that way. Something about the two of us had always clicked, made it easy to bare everything and not worry about judgment.

"Did you do *anything* good for yourself today?"

"I made a sandwich." I hugged her a little tighter, then let her go. I picked up the plate to remind her of my accomplishment. "No pickles. You want the rest?"

"No. I want you to eat it." With a stern look on her face, she crossed her arms over her chest.

I'd been getting that look from her at least once a day since a week after we first met, which was the same day I tried to tell her that she was too small to follow me up the tree holding my tree house.

She'd not only joined me, but she'd threatened to put bugs in my lunch if I ever told her she couldn't do something. I knew that threat still stood today, so those words had never crossed my lips.

But I was still stubborn.

"Not hungry." I shook my head and put the plate down. I needed coffee. My head felt numb, like I'd been awake too long – and I had. But I couldn't sleep yet. If I slept now, I'd see it all over again...and that wasn't going to happen.

"Will you at least sleep?" Didi's soft voice had me closing my eyes.

Without opening them, I reached up and grabbed a mug. "I can't sleep yet. Later."

“Don’t tell me it’s because you’re not tired. I can see it in your eyes. When did you sleep last?”

Because I knew better than to try and pour coffee with my eyes closed, I stopped trying to block the world out and reached for the pot, pouring the steaming brew into my mug before answering.

“I’m not sleeping until the day is over with, Didi. I did that last year and...” I stopped, shaking my head. “I’ll sleep better once this is behind me again.”

Without a word, she moved to stand next to me. As she slid an arm around my waist, I dropped a kiss on her head, grateful that I never had to wonder if things might get awkward between us. Grateful that we would always be like this, no matter what else happened.

“So...what are you doing? Going blind on paperwork again?”

“You guessed it.” Heaving out a sigh, I sipped my coffee. “I’m a regular party animal.”

“What else is left? Anything I can help with?”

Shrugging, I thought about it. “There’s so much red tape. I’ve got to get government approval, but I keep getting held up there.”

“Still?” She grinned at me like I’d given her an early Christmas present. “I might be able to help with that. I made a couple contacts recently that could cut through some of that red tape. Specifically, there’s this one senator who might be good to talk to.”

Easing her away from me, I studied her face. “Really?”

“Yeah.” She rolled her eyes and reached for my sandwich, peeling the bread away to take the tomato. Popping it into her mouth, she chewed it before continuing, “Of course, she’s back east right now, doing her thing on Capitol Hill.”

“Yeah.” Absently, I took a piece of turkey from the deconstructed sandwich and ate it. “You know a senator?”

“I know a *lot* of people, Dash.” She smiled and leaned against the counter. “I keep telling you I have connections.”

As she kept talking, I reached for another bite.

Five minutes later, my hand hit a bare plate, and I looked over to see that the sandwich was gone.

“Only time I can get you to eat is when I’m distracting you,” Didi said quietly.

“Please tell me you really do know a senator.”

Didi smiled and came closer. Cupping my face in her hands, she pressed a quick kiss on the corner of my mouth. “Of course I know a senator, you sexy beast.”

I narrowed my eyes at her, feeling my face heat up. “Stop it, you brat.”

“Oh, hush. You need to hear it from time to time. You’re turning into a hermit. I swear, if you were my type, I’d totally jump you just to remind you that you still have a cock.”

The heat in my face only got worse, and I focused on my coffee. She nudged me with her elbow.

“Lighten up, Dash. I’ll call her tomorrow. She’s in DC right now.”

“You...” Pinching the bridge of my nose, I thought through what she said. “You know her home number.”

She winked. “Home number. Cell phone. I’m full of secrets, baby.”

It was another reminder of why I was glad she was on my side.

THREE

ASTRA

The sun shone down on us, a bright, warm day and I was currently enjoying it with my best friend. Piety was back from her honeymoon with Kaleb, and we'd met at one of our favorite restaurants.

The remains of a Philly cheesesteak lay on my plate.

Piety hadn't even left that much behind. She'd gone through a full cheesesteak, two plates of fries, and a salad, and I was pretty sure she planned to order dessert. Her baby bump didn't seem any more pronounced than it had a week ago, but I doubted she'd be able to get away without maternity clothes for much longer.

"So. What was it like?"

Piety looked at me with innocent eyes.

I wasn't buying it. She had a glow to her skin, and it wasn't just because they'd gone to Australia with a stopover in New Zealand and she'd tanned a bit too much.

She was *glowing*. Spinning on the side of a mountain, stupid with happy kind of glowing.

It was almost indecent to be that kind of happy.

"What was *what* like?"

"Oh, don't give me that bit." Leaning forward, I braced my chin on my fist and grinned. "The honeymoon. I guess the sex is still awesome. They talk about the honeymoon phase. That can't be over with. Did he screw you six different ways to Sunday? Did *you* screw him six different ways? What did you see? What did you do?"

"How many more questions are you going to cram into one breath of air, Astra?" She cocked her eyebrow at me.

“I’m controlling myself,” I said, deadpan.

“I bet.”

“Now talk.”

“About my sex life? Please.” Her delicate snort had me grinning.

“It’s not like I’m asking positions or in depth detail about how he looks naked.” I waved a hand at her. “I saw him *mostly* naked, remember?”

Kaleb had worked as a stripper when we met him in Vegas. He’d been trying to raise money to get his sister out of a bad place. Camry was a recovering addict, and she seemed to be doing a lot better, but less than a year ago, she’d been attached to a drug-dealing pimp.

I was still wary around her, but Kaleb loved her, and because of that, I knew Piety was giving her new sister-in-law more of a chance. I was reserving my judgment.

“Let’s not think about that,” Piety advised, shaking her head. As she reached for a glass of water, I pulled up a somewhat hazy image from the show we’d seen, featuring that sexy piece of man flesh Piety was now married to.

He was the sort of beautiful man who drew attention no matter where he went. And like many things of beauty, I was happy to admire from afar.

He wasn’t my type.

Still, it was fun to tease my best friend about it. That’s what friends did.

She threw a packet of sugar at me. “Are you thinking about my husband naked?”

“*Mostly* naked,” I reminded her. “I’ve never seen him fully naked. But I’ll bet I can figure out how big his c—”

“Shit.” She waved a hand in the air. “Fine. I’ll talk. If I don’t distract you, you’ll just stay on this tangent.”

She knew me so well.

“Yes. We screwed each other’s brains out. And…” She sighed and looked up, eyes closing in bliss. “We laid on the beach – or I did. He went surfing. It’s amazing, watching Kaleb on a board. We drove around. I got to see kangaroos. Koalas. We went to New Zealand…”

Her voice trailed off, and after a minute, I poked her in the arm. “*And what?*”

“It’s a dream,” she said simply. “Seriously. The mountains, the green. It’s all so unreal. I want that beam thing on *Star Trek*, but instead of *beam me up, Scottie*, I want some Kiwi to beam me over.”

“Kiwi?”

She laughed. “New Zealanders are Kiwis. And there are these little birds, too...also called kiwis. Adorable.”

“You sound...” Huffing out a breath, I finished, “Adorable. Ridiculously adorable and happy.”

“I am.” She shrugged and then leaned forward, pulling a binder toward her. “But...we aren’t here to talk about how cute and happy I am. Or for you to make faces at me.”

Had I been making faces?

I didn’t know.

Sticking my tongue out at her, I gestured to the fat, leather folio on the table. “Let’s get to it then.”

I reached for my wine as she unzipped the folio, flipping it open to the calendar. Our server paused by the table to clear the plates, and I flicked a few crumbs away from me as Piety flipped open one of the brochures I picked up while she was out of town.

“We don’t have a lot of time,” I told her.

“I know.” She sighed and rubbed her temple, gazing at the glossy photos and text printed on the thick paper. “This would be so much easier if we’d hired somebody when we started working on this a couple months ago. Event planners know all about this, don’t they? I mean my wedding planner...”

Her voice trailed off as she put the brochure down and reached for another.

“But I thought we thrived on chaos,” I said lightly.

I personally did.

Piety did too – or she used to, at least. I supposed being a mom would change that. She was going to be a great mom. Unlike our moms. Things were better between her and her parents, but they still wouldn’t win any parenting awards.

Clearing my throat, I turned back to my original thought.

“If we hire a planner, we can’t thrive.”

She laughed. “I thrive on sleep lately.”

I went to make a jab at her but stopped, because I realized that beneath all that glow, she *looked* tired. Reaching out, I put a hand on her arm. “Are you okay?”

“Just tired.” She lifted a shoulder and smiled. But it didn’t do anything to change the fact that she had shadows under her eyes.

“PS, do I need to strong arm you into going to see a doctor?” The nickname wasn’t one I used much anymore.

She rolled her eyes. “Stop it. I’m just tired, Astra. I’m *pregnant*, remember? And that flight was a bitch. Coming back to hear that the caterer for our event canceled and is leaving us hanging...ugh.”

“You’re the one who decided to fly to the other side of the globe while you were pregnant.” I made a face at her but relaxed. If she said she was okay, I believed her.

And it made sense.

Growing a person had to be *exhausting*.

Thinking of that, I wiggled uncomfortably in the chair and went back to something much more comfortable than thinking about growing a baby. Namely, business shit. “Well, good news is, I didn’t let her keep the deposit. She kept insisting she was entitled, and I pulled out the contract.”

“Did you now? You hadn’t lost it?” Piety smirked.

I scowled at her. “I only did that once.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, twice,” I admitted. “Now, can we figure out what we’re going to do?”

She looked back at the planner she’d brought with her and shook her head. “Normally, I’d be all over this, especially since I’ve finally got my parents convinced I’m not some flighty piece of work they need to guide in the right direction. Maybe they’ll actually see what I’m doing instead of what they think I should be doing.”

I grimaced. “Lucky you.”

“Hey.” She poked me in the arm. “It took getting kidnapped and held hostage to make them see me for who I was instead of some political piece.”

“I don’t think I’ll go that far.” Making another face at her, I pulled the folio over to me and flipped to the calendar. Trying to coax a smile, I nudged her. “I’ve already finished my costume.”

“And will you change your mind again like you did last year?”

Rolling my eyes, I said, “Weren’t you just complaining about your parents’ issues with flightiness?”

“So...I’m guessing you changed your mind at least three times.”

“Brat.” Huffing out a sigh, I said, “No. Two. But it didn’t matter. The same basic idea worked for both.”

And it was possible I’d change my mind again, but that was part of the

fun.

“Your dad is really okay with all of this?” I asked, trying not to sound as wistful as I felt.

“Yeah.” Without looking up at me, she reached over and covered my hand with hers. “You know your parents love you.”

“Sure. Like they’d love a puppy. It just wasn’t as easy to get rid of me once I grew out of the puppy stage...like they did with Max.” One Christmas, my parents had given me a Schnauzer. It had been the best present, and we’d all had fun playing with him. But Mom and Dad didn’t think about things like neutering a dog, and when he’d gotten older and started acting like unneutered boy dogs do, they’d gotten rid of him, giving the sweet boy to a friend who lived outside of the city.

And that friend wasn’t careful. Max ended up getting hit by a car and dying before he was even a year old.

I cried for two days and never asked for a pet again.

Heaving out a breath, I looked at the list of things to be done in the next few weeks. We knew from experience that if we didn’t start on it now, it would only get more difficult as time passed.

“What about a theme?” I asked Piety abruptly, determined to get my mind off my parents.

“You’ve already picked out your costume,” she reminded me.

I grinned. “So, we make the theme work with my costume.” Waving a hand, I grabbed my laptop and flipped it open. As the computer booted up, I dug around in my purse for my glasses.

“I’m surprised you still haven’t done the eye thing yet,” Piety said.

“And let some maniac with a laser near my *eyeballs*?” I shuddered. “No. Capitol N. Capitol O. No.”

She laughed as I slid the black cat-eye framed glasses into place.

“Besides, I look good in glasses.” I winked at her. “Sexy librarian good.”

“You look good in anything.” She rolled her eyes and leaned forward, bracing her elbow a little closer so she could see the monitor. “Guys would still fall all over you if you walked around wearing burlap.”

“No...they’d be falling all over me because I’d be naked. Burlap would be itchy.” Wagging my eyebrows, I typed in a search for fun Halloween themes. One of the first had me bursting out laughing. “What do you think? Would my parents go for it? You could dress up as Ana. I’d have to start from scratch, but...”

She gave me a light shove. “Please don’t. And if anything, *my* mom would be Ana.”

“What?” Whipping my head around, I gaped at her. “Amara Van Allen actually read... Fif... Fif...” I faked gagged. “I can’t even say it.”

“I should have kept my mouth shut.” Pushing her dark hair back from her face, Piety eyed me narrowly. “Camry gave a copy to my mom. They’ve... well, it’s weird, but Mom and Camry have really hit it off. I think Mom’s trying to make up for everything between us, and she’s being super sweet to Camry. And it was like...I dunno. She’s practically adopted the girl. Then Camry goes and gives the book to my mom. I’ve walked in on her reading it, *Astra*. Freaked the shit out of me.”

I grinned. “Maybe I should get her one with those BDSM for beginners kits.”

Piety pointed a threatening finger at me. “Be quiet, or I’m going to hurt you. Friendship will only get you so far.”

“Okay, okay.” I skimmed down a little further. “Did we ever decide if we were going with a masquerade ball or just costumes?”

“I don’t know.” With a shrug, she moved closer once more. “I think it sounds fun, but keep in mind, we’re trying to snare some of our dads’ friends, and a lot of them are a little...stand-offish. If we toss in something like *masks are welcome and encouraged*, it will probably discourage some of them from coming.”

“Because they are sticks in the mud.” I sighed. Leave it to them to take all the fun out of things. “Fine...we can do *masks are welcome, but not required*.” A picture caught my eye, and I tapped it. “You know, you’d look awesome in a dress like that. And picture Kaleb dressed up as the beast. Not in the torn-up cape thing, but at the end. *Beauty and the Beast*.”

“I love that fairy tale.” She smiled a little.

“We could do a fairy tale theme. It would be fun.” I didn’t care if it didn’t match the costume I’d originally planned to wear. I could do that anytime. I liked the idea of fairy tales.

“If we did, what would you be?”

“A mermaid,” I said, not even having to think about it. I’d always loved *The Little Mermaid*, although I hated the Disney-fied version. The one from Hans Christian Anderson was much more poignant. Even if she did turn to seafoam or whatever at the end.

“You...the little mermaid. You going to be quiet the whole night?”

“Whatever.” I waved a dismissive hand at her.

“If we did a fairy tale, a million women will show up like Belle or Cinderella. That’s so boring.” Piety shook her head.

“Okay...maybe something like *Famous Lovers Throughout History*.” I waved a hand. “We’ll pick something catchier for a title. And we can work in a line that if you don’t have a date, come as you are and we’ll help you meet your match.”

We tossed around a few more ideas but kept coming back to famous couples.

Piety insisted it should be *famous people*.

I’d probably end up agreeing. I wouldn’t be coming with anybody, that was for certain, even though it was still some ways off. I wasn’t feeling much like hooking up with my usual friend with benefits.

“Let me send myself an email on these things,” I said, clicking over to the window. I hadn’t checked my email in...days. Maybe a week.

Shit. The sheer number of messages in my inbox made me groan, and I thought about doing a nuclear method – delete them all.

But one name popped out. Piety. Pictures.

“You didn’t tell me you’d sent pictures,” I said, giving her an accusing look.

“You told me you wanted them.” She lifted a shoulder. “Why wouldn’t I send some?”

“Brat.” Clicking on the email, I started to download and whistled as I caught sight of the status bar. “How many did you send?”

“A lot. I took...” She laughed a little. “A lot. Here. I’ve got quite a few on my phone too.”

While the images downloaded and drained my battery, we huddled over her phone, and I scrolled through the pictures.

There was one of Kaleb running up from the beach, holding a surfboard, water running down his face and chest as a brilliant grin lit him up.

“He looks so happy,” I said softly.

“Yeah.”

And Piety...didn’t.

“What’s wrong?”

Turning to her, I reached over and took the phone, putting it down so she couldn’t change the subject.

“He misses Australia.”

Something about the way she said it turned me cold. “You’re not...I mean, are you thinking about moving there?”

“No, silly.” Piety laughed a little. “Camry is staying in the States. She’s happy here, and Kaleb won’t leave her, but...hell, with her in college now back in California, he doesn’t see her that much. He gave up everything for her, and now he’s giving up everything for me.”

She looked away, but I caught a lock of her hair, tugging on it until she looked back at me. “What gives, PS?”

“I...” She blew out a breath, then looked up at the cloud-strewn sky. “Astra, I’ve been thinking about asking Kaleb if he’d like to move to California.”

A hundred words leaped to my lips.

Why?

California?

How?

That’s stupid.

You can’t go!

Please!

I didn’t let myself say anything for the longest time, then slowly, I asked, “Why California? So he can be near Camry?”

“Yes.” She plucked at a loose thread on her shirt. “That...and he...don’t tell him we talked about this, okay? But he had dreams of opening his own surf shop back in Australia. And he’s so good at it. He says he’s not good enough to go pro, but so what? It makes him happy, and he could be surfing more and be near his sister and...”

“You want him to be happy,” I said into the lull.

“Yes.” Her eyes, bright and sharp, met mine.

I asked the question that was more important to me. “Will *you* be happy?”

Piety took my hands. “I’m married to a guy I love so much, it hurts. And he loves me. We’re getting ready to have a baby. And I love California. Why couldn’t I be just as happy there as I am here?”

“Then you should talk to him.” I was pleased. Those words had been delivered calmly and easily, and even though it hurt just to say them, I’d done it.

“You think so?”

No!

Ignoring that hurt little girl inside me, I nodded. “Absolutely.”

And I almost sounded like I meant it.

FOUR

ASTRA

“Penelope, would you like another Bloody Mary?”

Mom glanced at my dad, an absent smile on her face, as though he’d pulled her from some comfortable daydream. I knew she didn’t mind the intrusion much. She’d use the strong drink to ease her return trip. She wasn’t a drunk, but she did like her mixed drinks.

“Absolutely, Elliot, darling.” They both shared a smile and Dad went off to get the Bloody Mary – and probably kiss the new chef – while Mom sipped her coffee and pretended to eat.

She’d had a few bites of her grapefruit and two forkfuls of egg while ignoring the fact that I preferred to eat and loved my curves rather than live in a constant state of hunger to stay slender like her.

My plate was full of French toast, cheesy eggs, a wonderful potato casserole, and bacon. Even if Dad was sleeping with the new chef, I couldn’t fault her cooking.

I couldn’t even fault her for fucking my dad, really.

Mom and Dad had never really enjoyed what one might call a match made in heaven. It had been a match made in financial planning and pedigree. I was the baby who had put a shining finish on what looked to be a picture-perfect marriage on the outside. Inside, it was just...empty. Not cruel or cold, but empty all the same.

Nearly ten minutes passed before Dad returned, and when he put the glass down next to Mother, she eyed it as if she’d forgotten she’d even asked for it.

I wasn’t surprised by that either. She lived in her own little world

“Have you seen Piety?” Mom asked. “Is she back from her honeymoon... where did she go again? Antigua, was it?”

Before I could answer, Dad did. “It was Australia, Penelope. With a stop in New Zealand, if I’m right.” He glanced at me, and I nodded.

If they were going to talk to each other, I’d just as soon be left out of it. I hated when they tried to act like we were a normal family. Not because I didn’t love them. I did. And I knew they loved me in their own way. But the only time they made this kind of attempt was when we were gathered around a table, eating one of our mandatory meals.

We had brunch every other Sunday, and dinner every other Thursday. I’d been forced to rearrange a class for that. The dinner *had* been on Mondays, but Mom found it too taxing to do anything at night after a Monday full of charity board meetings. So naturally, I rescheduled. I wouldn’t want to interfere with her “relaxation,” even if we all knew what exactly that was.

She had a massage therapist who relaxed the hell out of her.

My parents still shared a bed...just not with each other. Sometimes I wondered if they’d even used conventional methods to conceive me. They didn’t disgust each other or anything like that, but I’d honestly never seen any physical affection between them that went beyond a kiss on the cheek or an essentially platonic touch of a hand. They were always polite with each other, courteous, if not mostly cordial. They just lived in their own worlds.

When my mother informed me that we’d be changing our dinner night, I told her that it was almost impossible to change classes at that point in the semester. Her response had been to tell me to drop the class, her dismissive tone telling me how much she understood its importance to me.

I could still hear her words echoing in my head.

It’s not like you need the education, darling. You’re already smart. You’re beautiful, and you’re rich. You can have any man you want.

It did little good to argue with her. It was just how she saw the world.

In the end, I dropped the class simply so I wouldn’t have to fight with her. Sometimes, it just wasn’t worth it.

As they talked over me, I reached for the mimosa I’d made prior to sitting down and tossed half of it back. I should have used a large glass. Like a gallon-sized mason jar. That could get me through a brunch with them without wanting to scream just to shake things up.

“So...what does Piety’s new husband do?” Mom asked out of the blue, catching my attention.

“Do?” I stared at her.

She studied me with curiosity as I fumbled around for an answer, as if she

couldn't quite fathom that I hadn't been hanging on her every word already.

"Yes, darling." She waved a hand. "He clearly has impeccable taste, marrying Piety. Why didn't you snag him for yourself?"

"Because he was interested in my best friend, and she was interested in him. I'm not in the habit of poaching," I said with a sigh. This was the sort of thing I shouldn't have to explain.

"Hush, Astra. I know that." She laughed like it was a joke as she reached over and patted my hand. "I'm just making small talk. You're so quiet. You didn't answer though. Is he in finance? I imagine Silas would be ecstatic over that. Might help Piety settle her focus a bit."

Because that's what marriage should be about. Settling a focus.

Under the table, I twisted my napkin around my hands to keep from drumming my fingers on the tablecloth in a fit of pique. "Kaleb's a surfer," I said abruptly.

I'd almost blurted out that he'd been a stripper, but that was unfair. Being a smart ass just to shock my parents was something I might have done when I was oh...*twelve*. But I was better than that now. Besides, Piety didn't need the sort of shit she'd get. They weren't trying to hide Kaleb's past, but there was a difference between not hiding and announcing it to my parents.

"A surfer." Dad frowned, his eyebrows coming together over his eyes. Over the past couple of years, he'd finally stopped trying to resist the inevitable march of time and quit the botox injections. Now, his forehead actually moved when he made expressions, but he still looked strangely shocked as he spoke. "That's an acceptable hobby, I suppose."

I was sure Piety would be pleased to hear my parents' endorsements.

"Maybe. He used to run a surf shop." Picking up my bacon, I crunched into it with deliberate loudness, knowing it would irk Mom.

Okay, maybe I wasn't *completely* grown up.

She frowned at me. "Please eat like you have some manners."

"Sure." Dabbing at my mouth, I looked over at Dad. "I don't know much more about him though."

I sure as hell wasn't going to tell them about Camry. I didn't fully trust her, but I wasn't going to let her – and by association, Kaleb and Piety – become the newest fodder for Philadelphia gossip. My cousin, Blayne, had suffered through something similar when he'd gotten into an unconventional relationship a while back, and I wouldn't subject anyone but my worst enemy to that.

“Well.” Mom’s voice was distant. “Perhaps I should have made an effort to speak to Amara before the relationship progressed so far. We might have been able to present Piety with better options.”

“You’re unbelievable,” I snapped, shoving back from the table. “It wouldn’t have made a difference.”

Mom’s head jerked up, lips already pursed in disapproval.

“She loves him, Mom. And he’s a good man. That’s all that matters. He worships the ground she walks on, and he’ll be an amazing father.” I shook my head, knowing even as I said the words, Penelope Van Pelt Traore would never understand. “They love each other.”

“There’s so much more to life than just love, darling.”

The condescending tone in my mother’s voice made me want to scream.

“Like what? Forcing your daughter to drop a college course so you can move family dinner on Thursdays because fucking your masseuse on Monday evenings was more convenient for you?” The words flew out of me.

I didn’t realize how angry I sounded until she sucked in a breath.

“That was uncalled for.” Her voice was cold, the way it always was when she felt like I’d crossed a line.

Tired now, I looked back at her. “Maybe. But it’s also true. I had to reschedule my life because you put what you wanted above me. I worked my ass off in that class for more than half a semester, and I lost all of it.”

With one hand, she reached up and patted her hair. “That’s hardly the point, Imogene.”

“Don’t call me that,” I said, annoyed. “I’m not a child. And that is *exactly* the point. Everything you do is to make a life that suits you. This wasn’t me being some spoiled brat who wanted to go out with her friends. Or you needing to do something important. It was you putting a fuck over a college class I’d put a lot of work into.”

“That is *enough*, young lady!” Her normally bright blue eyes were dark and stormy.

“Young lady?” I stared at her. “What are you going to do next? Send me to my room.”

“Enough.” Dad stepped between us and caught my shoulders. “Astra... you seem upset.”

“Do I?” I barked a bitter laugh, almost throwing his touch off before catching myself.

I was overreacting, I knew. Not because anything my mom said was right,

but because it was nothing new. It shouldn't have prompted such an intense reaction from me.

"What's wrong, dear? Talk to me." He gave me an encouraging smile, his dark gray eyes so similar to mine as he looked at me.

I desperately wanted to, but I knew I couldn't tell him about everything that was going on with Piety. I stopped believing his smile after he'd assured me Max would be happy, and we'd go see him all the time. His love was just like my mom's, based on what he needed. And right now, he needed peace. He didn't really want to hear what was bothering me, but if that was the only way to calm things down, he'd do it.

"Stress," I said shortly. Easing away from him, I moved to the sideboard and grabbed my purse. "Sorry to ruin brunch, but I need to be somewhere."

Anywhere but here.

Ignoring their protests, I left, slipping out the front and heading for my car. I needed to think and clear my head.

As I pulled away from my childhood home, I found myself thinking that I didn't want to come back.

At least not for a very long time.

That made me sad too.

I was losing Piety.

I'd never suffered the sort of abuse or neglect that I knew thousands of children did at the hands of their parents. I'd never known hunger or cold, never questioned where I'd be the next day. My safety had never been in question.

But for all the outward necessities and indulgences I'd been given, I still lacked the one thing I truly wanted.

Love.

Not in an obligatory sense, or just the sort of familial fondness that people had for someone who shared their DNA or name. But the sort of love that I would have given up every comfort and extravagance to have.

That was what I'd found with Piety. *She* was my family. If she moved to California...

I didn't want to even think about it.

"No," I said, deciding then and there. Avoidance hadn't ever helped me, so I was going to stop.

If Piety left, then maybe I should leave too.

FIVE

DASH

“Have you had a chance to look through the proposals I sent?” Sitting across from Senator Sondra Thatcher, I kept my hands folded in my lap and tried to meet her eyes, but it was difficult since she had a mask in place that was... well...distracting.

Sequins. Feathers.

A lot of sequins and feathers.

She was also wearing a wig. Either that or she'd found the be-all-end-all of hair growth treatments, because the last time we'd met, her hair was much shorter.

The huge, powdered masterpiece currently perched on her head gave me a headache just thinking about what she'd had to do to keep it in place.

“Yes, yes...” She pulled a compact from a purse that was barely bigger than my hand and checked her reflection. “Do you know who I am? I mean, who I'm supposed to be, of course.

I studied her. The mole. The dress. The insane wig and mask.

She waved her purse at me, and I had to admit, it was a good touch. If somebody had no clue about history, the cake-shaped purse wouldn't help but, fortunately, I'd always been good with history.

“Of course, Marie.”

She beamed at me. “You should have let me help you find a costume, Dash. It's a Halloween party. You can have a little bit of fun, even if you're here on business.”

“I'm sure I'll have fun. I'm just not a costume person.” Clearing my throat, I tried once more to get her to focus on the rehab center. That's why I was here, after all. I had no time for parties otherwise. “About my

proposal...”

“Oh, hush.” This time, she pulled her mask off, gingerly though, taking care not to muss her hair. “Dash. I’ve already said that I’ve read your proposal. It’s solid. I want to talk to a few friends and see what they think, but I’m on board. However, I can’t do anything tonight.” She pointed a finger at me. “Now, you just relax and have fun. I haven’t had a night off in months, and I intend to enjoy this. You should do the same.”

The car came to a stop, and a few moments later, we began to make our way up to the house.

I didn’t want to tell her that the last thing I had on my mind was *fun*. Not just tonight, but every night. I had more important things to do. No doubt it would come out as insulting as hell, and I didn’t want to do that, not only because I needed her help, but because I did genuinely like her.

But I hadn’t come out here to have fun. I hadn’t come out here to wear a stupid mask or costume, either.

Once we were inside, I thought Sondra would go her own way, and I could find a peaceful corner, maybe deal with email, and reach out to the sponsor network I was trying to build. Get some work done.

But that wasn’t meant to be.

Sondra hooked her arm through mine. “Come on. I’d like you to meet one of our hosts.”

I was along for the ride as we went from one politician to another, then the daughter of a politician and her new husband. She looked familiar, but I couldn’t place why. I didn’t have time to figure it out either, because Sondra was moving me along.

The next clutch of people had nothing to do with politics and everything to do with money. As soon as she introduced me, Sondra launched into a talk about the rehab facility I had planned, and it gave me a moment to take a look around at the group, not that I really needed it.

They were all old money. I didn’t need her to tell me that. I knew old money.

I definitely didn’t fit in that class, but Hollywood was a lot more accommodating about such things than most places. Philadelphia, however, wasn’t anything like back home.

After Sondra finally introduced me, one of the women made a sighing sound. “Your father broke so many hearts when he married your mother, mine included.”

I gave her a polite nod and managed a small smile. “I’ve heard that quite often, Mrs. Branch.”

It was a familiar sentiment, and it led to more of the same. Familiar ground, I was able to respond to the curious questions, and evade the ones I didn’t care to answer with ease.

After the typical small talk had been exchanged, Odelle Branch, the one who’d apparently had her heart broken by my father, turned curious eyes on me. “Why is the son of one of the greatest actors in modern cinema setting up a rehab facility?”

“Lost friends, no doubt.” It was a churlish response from a woman whose name hadn’t been offered. She gave me a look out of rheumy eyes and sniffed. “You know how it is with young ones who choose the high life. No discipline. No morals.”

“I know how it is to lose somebody I love,” I responded calmly. I’d dealt with enough petty or lonely people in my life to know how to handle them. They liked striking out. I didn’t bother giving them something to push back about, but that didn’t mean I wanted to continue this conversation.

Shifting my attention back to Sondra, I said, “I’m going to go find something to eat.”

“I’ll join you.”

I repressed a sigh. I’d been hoping to find some peace and quiet, but it looked like that wouldn’t be the case.

On our way to the room where food was spread out, Sondra kept waving and pointing out everybody she thought I just *had* to know. There was a damn lot of people I’d managed to go without knowing for almost three decades.

The sarcastic thought managed to tug a smile out of me, but it faded when Sondra tugged me down and whispered, “See... I knew you could have fun. You’re loosening up. Let’s get you a cocktail and see if we can get another smile.”

SEPARATING myself from her two cocktails later – both of them hers. She ended up disappearing into the bathroom after snagging somebody female to help her, and I took advantage of it, moving to the nearest door and heading

outside.

I went for the fresh air, but the grounds were amazing. One thing a city like Philadelphia had that California would never possess was the stately old elegance of homes like these.

Settling on a bench in a far corner of the garden, I sat down and settled back to admire the house. Ivy twined up the sides, and the windows beckoned with a warm golden glow. It was the sort of place that wasn't just a house, but a home.

Somewhere close by, I heard somebody laughing, then a moment later, the sound faded.

Good.

I wasn't in the mood to make nice anymore. Or at least not for a while.

I looked down and realized I was still holding the black silk mask I'd been given when I came inside. Rubbing it between my fingers, I wondered what Layla would have thought about a masquerade party at a place like this.

She'd always enjoyed...fun.

"Too much," I reminded myself.

Cramming the mask into my pocket, I got up and wandered into the garden.

Sooner or later, I'd have to go back in there, and I wasn't much looking forward to it. Sooner or later, I'd have to talk to people. People who would want to know my reasons for opening this particular type of clinic.

What will you do when you have to talk about me...?

I silenced that ghostly little voice and lifted my face to the sky.

It was a beautiful night. Too bad I had to spend it surrounded by people I didn't know, pushing for help to get through shitty bureaucracy so I could focus on the one thing I really enjoyed doing.

"Might as well get it over with."

I turned back to the house.

And again, I heard the ghost of a voice.

You don't enjoy this. You need this. There is a difference, baby.

I ignored it. Denied it. Told myself that the noise and chaos, the desire to keep busy, was all a necessary evil. I didn't want it or need it.

But the truth of it was...I did.

I had nothing to do and nobody to talk to. And when my mind had nothing to occupy it, I was outright miserable.

SIX

ASTRA

“Aren’t you looking lovely this evening, Miss Traore. Ariel?”

I grinned at Miles as he stepped aside to hold the door open for me.

I didn’t get out to the estate where Piety had grown up with her parents, but I remembered the butler quite well. He used to sneak us butterscotch cookies and vanilla steamers when we hid out in Piety’s treehouse.

“Good guess.”

“Well.” His eyes moved to the utensil in my left hand. “You are carrying a fork. And it was always your favorite movie when you were younger. I believe I heard it in my sleep for nearly a year.”

I hugged him and smacked a loud kiss on his cheek. “I’ve missed you.”

“Then come visit more often,” he replied simply.

Hearing somebody behind me, I caught my mermaid tail of a skirt and stepped forward. Or rather, I tried.

I ended up pitching against Miles, and he steadied me, but not before both of us heard the loud *ripppppp*.

“Oh, shit.” I closed my eyes.

As Miles eased me back onto my feet, whoever was behind me just kept on going.

Without thinking, I shouted, “Thanks, you asshat! You made me rip my skirt!”

The man paused and looked back, already smirking. When he saw me, his eyes lit up, but I just gave him a withering look as I turned to focus on my skirt.

“It’s easy enough to mend, Miss Traore,” Miles said. “I’ll get a sewing kit and have you fixed up in a jiffy.”

He reached up and tapped his earpiece as the asshole who'd trampled on my skirt started back toward us. I didn't even need to wait for him to open his mouth to know that he was about to hit on me.

I gave the jerk a withering look. "Don't waste your time trying to apologize. Do you have any idea how much work I put into this costume?"

"You still look stunning," the stranger said with a grin.

I pointed the fork at him and didn't smile back. "Go away." Turning to Miles, I cocked my head. "I'll wait in the office."

I used the loop on my hand to tug my skirt up. A sequined scallop remained on the ground, and I looked up to see my would-be admirer still hovering.

Miles coughed to cover up his chuckle as he bent to pick up the mangled part of my costume's tail. He tucked it into my hand and stepped in front of me, giving me a chance to move away with some dignity. Or at least as much dignity as a twenty-three-year-old dressed as a mermaid could have.

"Sir, if I may... I don't believe now is a good time to socialize with the lady. She's somewhat hot-tempered and might well stab you with that fork."

I disappeared around the corner as the guy started to laugh.

I paused to hear Miles' response. "You think I'm joking. I assure you, I'm not. Trust me, you would not want to be forced to explain to a doctor why a lady felt the need to impale you with a kitchen utensil."

I made a mental note to send Miles a bottle of his favorite pinot noir for Christmas. Two, since he'd managed to say it all without laughing.

I started walking again, still fuming despite my momentary amusement. I couldn't believe the jerk had torn my tail. I'd spent forever working on this mermaid costume, and he'd gone and messed part of it up before I even had a chance to show Piety.

Sighing, I took another hall, nodding at the security personnel monitoring it. They'd been working at Van Allen events for years. We weren't friends, but we smiled and joked whenever we happened to see each other.

"I have to go mend my skirt," I announced with a regal tone. "Some toad stepped on it."

"You need an escort, little mermaid," the one on the left said, winking at me. "I'd offer, but I'm already tied up for the night."

"Your boyfriend would kill us both." Laughing, I waved and continued on down to the office Congressman Silas Van Allen used when he wasn't working in Washington.

Shutting the door behind me, I made my way over to the desk and went to grab the tail.

Immediately, several problems presented themselves.

Part of my costume was a nude-tone underbust corset. While an underbust was nowhere near as constrictive on movement as a full-length corset, it definitely didn't give to bending and twisting. Also, there was another scalloped edge of the tail that had been ripped off.

"Hell." Catching sight of my reflection in the darkened window, I said, "This is going to be fun."

I went over and caught the cord, drawing the drapes then moved back to the desk. I wasn't giving a show to anyone who happened by. I didn't think Miles would be too pleased if I flashed my tits at him either, but I still had on a bra – with sea-shells attached. Appliqued, of course. Real seashells couldn't be comfortable.

I was only halfway finished unlacing myself from the corset when Miles knocked.

"Come on in," I shouted.

He caught sight of me as soon as he opened the door, eyebrows shooting up.

Seeing the humor spark in his eyes, I said, "You try wearing a corset."

"I think I'll pass, Miss Traore." He approached and put the sewing kit on the edge of the desk. "Do you need help?"

"No." I shoed him off in the direction of the door. "I'm sure you've got a million things to do with the party going. The event planner has been praising your name. I wouldn't be surprised if she tried to steal you away."

At that, his cheeks went pink, and he coughed into his hand. "Yes, well...I'll be going now."

My eyes narrowed. "You...she offered you a job, didn't she?"

"Of course not. That would be most unprofessional." But he didn't look in my direction as he closed the door on the sound of my laughter.

"Scheming event planner," I muttered as I wrestled the underbust the rest of the way off. I dumped it on the desk and eyed the kit. Then I turned and went to the drink service on the other side of the room.

I was supposed to be chowing down on canapes and sipping champagne, talking up donors and dancing, not fixing a tail I'd already spent probably eighty hours on. Some rich kids would simply buy a costume or have one made for them by a professional. Not me. I'd always loved making my own.

But I'd definitely learned one thing.

"I will *never* hand-sew crystals on like this again. Never." Splashing some bourbon into a glass, I took a sip and tipped my head back, trying to ease the tense muscles in my neck as the liquor burned a hot, smooth path down my throat.

After a few more sips, I topped myself off and returned to the desk with a sigh.

The zipper and the waistband were one of the main reasons I'd decided to wear the corset. Things like waistbands and zippers needed more patience than I had. Well, they were boring, mostly. I'd be fine with the crystals because I'd played with the patterns doing them, but there's nothing fun or interesting about the other construction. So I'd rushed both of them, and they looked a bit messier than I wanted.

The underbust covered the area on the top where the zipper got messy, and it completely hid the awful waistband.

Biting the tip of my tongue, I eased the zipper down. "Thank you," I whispered as it held.

Stepping out of my mermaid skirt, I stood in the middle of the room, wearing my shell-bra and nude panties, studying the damage to my skirt-tail.

"Not too bad." Still irritated, I went behind the desk and laid the skirt down, then put the scallop into place, smoothing the other torn one down as well.

Once I was happy with how they looked, I flipped open Miles' sewing kit.

"Dude," I muttered. It was like a MacGyver kit for seamstresses.

I could have practically *made* a costume with everything in there. The creative little brat in me was tempted to sit down in the corner and see what all I could do with the ribbons and doo-dads, but I had work to do, so I selected thread that was nearly identical to my skirt and got a needle.

I was in the process of threading it when my phone rang.

Forced to dig it out of the small pocket I'd worked into the design of the skirt, I barely got it before the call went to voice mail. "Hey!"

Piety's voice was all but lost in the roar.

"Where *are* you?" she demanded. "If you're flaking out on me..."

"I'm in your dad's office. Chill out." Putting the phone back down, I put the call on speaker and went back to threading the needle.

"Why are you in my dad's office?"

With one scalloped tail fin in hand, I got to work. “I’m having a quickie with Miles. You know how crazy I am about him.”

“You’re so damn crazy.” She laughed. “But even if I were to believe the two of you were going for a May/December thing, Miles is in here, dealing with a minor catastrophe.”

“What catastrophe is that?” Knowing the kind of people who showed up at parties, it could be anything from the ludicrous to the borderline career-ruining.

“One of the staffers who used to work for my dad has apparently been sleeping with the rep she now works for. The rep’s wife got suspicious. Wife ordered a mai-tai at the bar and threw it the staffer’s face – and the staffer is allergic to just about every tropical fruit known to man. She’s having a crazy reaction. My mom and dad had to escort the rep and his wife to another room.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.” Rolling my eyes, I paused a moment as I thought that through. “Did the wife *know* the woman was allergic?”

“Yep. They worked together on campaigns before, it sounds like. So it was intentional. Miles just gave her a shot from an epi-pen in our first aid kit. Those are—”

“My mom has one,” I interrupted. Mom had an allergy to shellfish. And here I was dressed up as a mermaid with a shell-bra.

A psychologist would have a field day with that, I knew.

“She going to be okay?” I asked.

“I think so. I called the ambulance before I called you and one of the catering staff is outside to bring them in. But you’re missing all the fun drama. So I ask again, why are you in my dad’s office? And don’t tell me you’re having a quickie with my dad. I’m not in the mood for *that* kind of joke.”

“Very funny. I’ll have you know that Miles is the only silver fox who’ll ever steal my heart.” Huffing out a breath, I feigned mock indignation as I finished fixing my fin.

“I don’t know if you’d ever let anybody steal your heart, darling. You don’t trust anyone enough.”

“Only you, PS.” I sighed. “Anyway, I was just coming inside and stopped to talk to Miles. Some jackass stepped on part of my costume, and it ripped. I’m in here fixing it.”

“It ripped,” she said slowly.

“Yep.”

Seconds ticked by, quiet save for the cacophony raging around Piety and echoing through on my end of the phone. After a few more moments, she cleared her throat and asked, “Were you naked? I’m almost positive Miles loves you enough that he would have covered that up.”

“No.” I laughed, delighted at the thought. Nothing scandalized Miles, but I knew he loved me and could totally see him covering my ass – literally and figuratively – if my costume *had* totally ripped off. “Enough of a tear that I needed to fix it, but not so much that it couldn’t be mended.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” She sounded relieved.

“Afraid that me parading around in panties and my bra might be bad press?” I teased. “You’re turning into a stick in the mud, PS.”

“Bite me,” she said dryly. “And hurry up, okay?”

She didn’t wait for a response, and as the call disconnected, I settled back in the seat and continued to sew. I wasn’t about to hurry this any more than I’d normally do.

The silence of the room was lessened only slightly by the muted noise of the party. I could smell the food though, and I was starving. That might have hurried me up, but I didn’t let it. The tail fin that had been ripped off had actual *rips* in it, too, as well as a dirty scuff mark from a shoe.

“Asshat,” I muttered.

After pinning the tail in place, I held the skirt up as best as I could to see how it would lay once I was wearing it. And the stupid scuff mark was completely visible.

“Dammit!”

The bathroom attached to Silas’ office was small, but thanks to a hanger I found on the back door, I was able to hang the skirt up. I set about dabbing at the dirt mark with a damp rag, breathing out a sigh of relief as it slowly started to come up.

Ten more minutes of that, and it was finally almost invisible.

Another ten minutes and I managed to secure the tail fin back into place. It wasn’t perfect, and it wasn’t pretty, but the small, irregular seams wouldn’t stand out unless somebody got down on their knees and started inspecting each fin one by one. I didn’t exactly plan on making people start kneeling at my feet, so I figured I was good.

“Finally.”

Putting the skirt down on the desk, I reached for my drink and tossed the

rest of it back. Just as I lowered the glass, I heard a noise.

The door.

“Piety, for crying out loud, I’m almost done.”

A few seconds passed.

Then there was the sound of a throat being cleared.

“I’m sorry. I’m not Piety.”

Spinning around, I found myself gaping at a tall, utterly bitable man.

And he was staring at me too.

Staring at me as I stood there...in my shell-bra and a pair of skimpy nude panties that barely covered the essentials.

Heat suffused my skin, although it wasn’t because I was embarrassed. He dragged his eyes up to meet mine and lust exploded through me, turning what had simply been heat before into burning, scorching lava.

“Hello there,” I said, my voice far huskier than it needed to be.

He didn’t speak.

Not a single word.

SEVEN

DASH

Too many people.

That was the only clear, lucid thought in my mind next to, *Shit, I need to breathe.*

I'd gone to talk to Sondra again, or rather, she'd hunted me down, and we'd chatted for a while, then she'd gotten swept up into the crush of the party, and it was like somebody had hung a neon sign over my head.

Fresh single man meat. Come get him.

It was just as bad as it had been when I was in school.

Too many people gathering around, staring at me, and although none of them were gaping because of my freakishly high IQ or because I was going to school with people three or four years older, I was still the target of intense scrutiny. It seemed like the quieter I was, the more curious they got. Or maybe they simply smelled more blood.

In desperation, I blurted out, "Do you want to dance?" to the one who looked the least predatory. Seriously, some of them practically had *on the prowl* stamped on their foreheads.

She looked caught off-guard, but when I held out a hand, she accepted, and I led her onto the floor just as a slow song started.

Maybe I sucked at being social, but I was good at strategy.

As my partner began to fill the silence with chatter about who was who at the party, I circled us around the dance floor to the French doors that had been thrown open to let the air in. Her name was Elle, and she was cute and smart and absolutely way too...happy. That kind of happiness was probably infectious, spreading to everybody around her, but it only served to make me aware of how *not* happy most of my life was. I tried to focus on the feel of

the cool air on my face and keeping us near the doors.

As she laughed at the ending of her story – I had no idea what it was – I timed my exit.

“Wow. That was fun. You dance so well.” Her smile was flirtatious without being too cloying.

If I’d been anyone else, I would’ve been flirting and laughing right back, but I wasn’t anyone else. I didn’t want to stand here and make small talk with a woman I was sure was just as delightful as she was sweet.

“Thanks. Excuse me...” I broke away from her and moved quickly through the crowd to get to the doors.

Yeah. It was pathetic, but I had to get outside.

Once I stepped outside, I sucked in a breath.

“Are you well, sir?”

I caught sight of a suited man, one who eyed me with a mix of suspicion and amusement. I pegged him in a blink as security. Not a bodyguard, at least not right now. He might act the part when needed, and he definitely had the look, but right now, he was just keeping an eye on the lay of the land. Growing up the way I had, I knew professionals when I saw them.

“Too many people,” I said, keeping my answer vague. “I usually tend to avoid them.”

“So you came to a party at a congressman’s house?” He cracked a grin at me, one that lit up his dark face and even reached his eyes. “What did you expect?”

“Exactly this,” I admitted. Shooting another look back at the house, I shook my head. “I’ll head to the garden for a while.”

“A number of people have decided to escape the crush that way.” He laid a finger alongside his nose. “Most of them decided the garden was a great place for a few minutes alone.”

I sighed. “Shit.”

“That way.” He jerked a thumb in the other direction. “You’ll run into security, but as long as you’re just walking around, nobody will mind.”

I gave him a nod and headed in the direction he’d indicated. The farther I moved away, the quieter it became. The cool night air managed to cool the sweat that had broken out along my neck over the past hour, and I welcomed it. Without any direction in mind, I roamed around, paying little attention to anything beyond making sure I didn’t walk into anybody or anything.

I might have stayed out there for the rest of the night, but I was used to

October in California. Not Pennsylvania. Vast difference.

After about a half an hour, I had to either go inside or freeze my ass off. Some guys acted like they were too macho to get cold. Not me. I got cold, and I did something about it.

The front door loomed ahead, and I could see the people gathered on the wide, elegant stone stairway, smoking, and exchanging small talk. I ignored all of it and kept going, hoping to be able to hang out at the fringes of the crowd until it was late enough that a polite exit was possible.

Then I almost walked right into what looked like a screeching cat fight.

“You *bitch!*”

That came from a tall, slender woman with hair that was going delicately gray at the temples. Her eyes were narrowed, and judging by the smell of alcohol wafting off her, blood-shot. She struggled against the arms of two men fighting to hold her back.

“I hope you *die!*”

There were two other men with the woman on the end of the attack. Her face was blotchy red and swollen, but her eyes spat fire.

“I’m going to sue your miserable ass!” she shouted. “You tried to kill me! I’m going to have you arrested for *assault!*”

More bodies rushed into the vestibule, and I had to dodge to get out of the way. That put me in a hall leading *not* where I wanted to go.

Though after a few steps, I thought that maybe this was *exactly* where I wanted to go after all.

It was blissfully quiet.

One of the black-suited security guards rushed past me. He paused for a second. “Sir, you can’t be here.”

“The hall...” I gestured. “It’s sort of blocked. Got shoved in here. How do I get to the ballroom?”

He grunted then pointed down the hall, giving curt directions. “Go straight there. This leads to the personal wing and more security personnel are on those floors. Try to go up there, and you’ll be removed from the premises.”

I had no doubt he was being honest. “Got it.”

Still, once I rounded the corner, I didn’t go straight to the hall that would lead me back to the ballroom.

Why in the hell would I?

It was quiet back here.

A glance into one open doorway revealed a sitting room. I almost went in, but the reason the doorway was open was because there was no door.

I wanted a fucking door. Something I could use to close out the world and give myself some fucking space. I ignored the next one up, because the door was open. I had no doubt security would check inside if they came through and it was shut.

The next door was closed.

As long as nobody was inside...

I eased the door open and stepped through the doorway.

Nobody—

Shit.

I all but fell over my feet as my eyes landed on the curvy, perfect body of a woman clad in a red wig, barely-there panties, and...was that what it looked like?

She turned to face me, and I realized it was.

She was wearing seashells that barely covered enough of a set of full, gorgeous breasts to be considered decent.

Then she took a breath, and those amazing tits moved, and I reconsidered my previous position.

Nope. Not decent at all.

I slammed my jaw as my brain processed the words I'd dimly heard a few seconds ago.

"I'm sorry. I'm not Piety," I said, tearing my eyes away from her chest and hoping she couldn't see the flush I knew was staining my cheeks.

My cock sprang to attention in a way it hadn't in a long, long time as she thrust one hip out and planted her hand on it. In her other hand, she had a drink, and she watched me with a glint in her eyes as she lifted the glass to her lips and sipped. Her hair spilled down over pale skin as she stared at me boldly. It was a wig. Had to be. That sort of red didn't exist in nature. Still, she looked good in it.

I had a feeling she was the sort of woman who'd look good in pretty much anything.

And even better out of it.

"You're missing your tail," I said, not even thinking about how fucking *stupid* that sounded.

"Am I?" She arched her eyebrows, and a ghost of a smile danced around her lips as she looked down at her body, staring at her legs and wiggling her

toes as if that would make said tail appear. "I guess I am."

"What happened? Or is this the new costume rage?" The questions popped out before I realized I was going to say them, and I wondered if she thought I was flirting.

Was I?

She rolled her eyes and took another sip from her drink before turning on her heel. "A jerk happened, thank you very much."

As she walked away, I was treated to a view every bit as perfect as the front. Her round, plump ass was the kind that made a man just want to grab it and not let go. Determined to find something else to stare at, I jerked my gaze away.

And that was when I noticed the glittering, shimmering mess of green and blue on the desk.

"I guess you're not missing your tail after all." Frowning, I glanced from the fabric back to her...just in time to see her looking back over her shoulder, craning in a deliberate attempt to look at her butt.

"Well...look at that!" She winked at me. "I *do* have a tail."

My cock twitched as she rounded the desk and tossed back the rest of her drink, then planted the empty glass down on the desk, all the while displaying that to-die-for body.

"Some moron stepped on one of my fins. I worked on this *forever*. Spent close to eighty hours on it. Can you believe that?"

As she spoke, she picked it up, displaying a skirt that flared out at the bottom...in fins. It was startlingly elegant.

"*Eighty hours*," she said again. "*Eighty hours!* And he just tromped all over it."

Light flickered over the skirt as I examined it. "You made that?" It looked like a thousand crystals were hand-worked into it. I'd spent enough time around costumes thanks to my dad, and I knew if she'd made that, she was pretty talented.

"Yes." She huffed out another breath and tossed me a look. "I almost forked him."

I blinked, jerking my attention back to her. "You what?"

"Idiot jerk," she grumbled, ignoring me. "But I fixed it."

"And you almost...?"

I saw something on the desk then, and my brain clicked things into place. Fork. Forked. Right. The year *The Little Mermaid* had been rereleased, my

dad had been on wife number four, and she had a little girl who was obsessed with the film. I hadn't been living at my dad's then, but every time I'd come by to visit during that two-and-a-half-year marriage, Appalachia had made me watch it. I lost touch with her after our parents divorced, like I did with most of the children of my dad's numerous lovers.

Then the stranger-mermaid captivated my attention as she lowered the skirt and stepped into it.

Most guys would argue that it was more fun to watch a woman undress.

But there's something terribly sexy about watching one dress as well. She shimmied her hips as she eased the mermaid skirt up and smoothed it down before tugging the zipper up, every motion making those amazing breasts jiggle enticingly. She shot a look at me and rolled her eyes. "Are you enjoying the view, honey?"

Yes.

But I couldn't quite manage to get out a reply that wouldn't sound like stupid middle school boy fumbling through seeing a girl without her shirt on.

So, I just stared her down, resorting to the look I'd perfected as a skinny fifteen-year-old who'd decided that going straight to Stanford after graduation was better than living with his father on one movie set after another.

It was condescending and rude as hell.

Normally, it pissed people off.

She winked at me. Fucking *winked*.

Then she picked something off the desk. "You know, you spent all the time admiring my tail..."

"What?"

She grinned at me. I had the feeling she knew I'd been checking out her ass.

"Don't tell me you weren't checking out my handiwork." Now her expression went innocent, even as she smoothed a hand down a hip covered in sparkling green and blue. "I did pretty good, if I do say so myself. It's a nice tail, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Clearing my throat, I gave her a terse nod. "It's a nice tail."

Who the hell was this woman?

"Come on. Help me out." She snapped out the rolled-up fabric she'd been holding and turned, presenting me with a view of her back yet again. "I need to get out to the party. My friend is waiting on me."

“Help...?” Mystified, I watched as she contorted and twisted, her movements both awkward and elegant, not making sense at all.

At least not at first.

By the time it did, I was all but dumb with the need to touch her. She was lacing herself into a corset. In under a minute, she had laces in one fist, and she shot me a demanding look. “Come on. Lace me up.”

A *corset*. On top of that impossibly sexy get-up, she was wearing a shimmery, nude-colored corset and she wanted me to...

“Come on. Lace me up,” she said impatiently. “I’m already late as it is.”

I needed to go take a walk outside again. Or take a cold shower. For like eternity.

But instead of disappearing out the door, I moved closer to the mystery girl. “I have no experience with this.”

“Think of it like tying a shoestring. But you have to tug the slack out from the top and bottom, then meet in the middle.” She twitched her hips, a message of clear impatience even as it sent even more blood rushing to my cock.

Following her advice, I began tugging the slack out, bit by bit.

“Has to be tighter.”

“You need to breathe,” I responded.

“I’ve been wearing corsets for years, honey. I know when it’s too tight – and this isn’t tight enough. Pull the damn strings already.”

She was pulling *my* strings. And her scent...I pulled harder than necessary, and she ended up falling back against me. “Oh...”

“Sorry,” I said, the words thick in my throat, my nose buried in her faux hair. Wig or not, it smelled like her. “What color is your hair?”

The question escaped me before I could swallow it.

“Ah...it’s brown. Just brown. Nothing spectacular.”

I had a feeling she was wrong about that. Nothing about this woman could be less than spectacular.

She pulled away from me, putting distance between us. “Can you tie me up now? A double-knotted bow.”

Without saying anything, I tied the strings as she instructed, expecting her to rush away now that the task was done.

Instead, she turned to face me, a faint smile on her lips.

I wondered if she’d taste like a mermaid.

What in the hell is a mermaid supposed to taste like? That rational part of

my brain that normally controlled everything seemed very, very far away.

She licked her lips and fluffed her hair. Then she asked the question that every man loathed.

“How do I look?”

EIGHT

ASTRA

He was so hot, with his burnished copper hair and tall, lean body. Like fucking surface of the sun hot.

And nervous. Or maybe just awkward.

I had the feeling he was also a bit of a stick in the mud. He didn't apologize for looking at my mostly-naked body – hell, I'd have been insulted if he had since I was putting on a show just for him – but he also didn't act on the desire I clearly saw in his eyes.

Those eyes. I'd thought they were hazel at first, but when he'd come closer, I realized they were a dark, rich green.

I wondered what his name was.

I wondered who he was here with.

I also wondered why he was standing there looking like he wanted to run the hell away from me, even though he seemed to want to touch me at the same time.

“Are you here with anybody?” I closed the distance between us with slow, measured steps, stopping when I was less than a foot away. I reached up and caught the lapel of his jacket, rubbed the satin of it under my thumb. It was a nice suit. He wore it well. Not every man could wear a suit like this guy did, no matter how expensive the cut or how much he'd paid a tailor.

Despite how reserved I suspected he was, he exuded a strength and confidence that told me his serious nature didn't mean he was a pushover. That was good. I didn't find that sort of men attractive.

I'd been told on more than one occasion that I was a bit intimidating.

As I moved a breath of an inch closer, waiting for his answer, he didn't look particularly intimidated. Cautious, yes. But it was the sort of caution that

made me want to grab it and strip it away – destroy it.

Caution had never been my strong suit, and I didn't see why anybody else really bothered with it. Piety had always been my anchor, keeping me from going too far, but she had new people in her life to worry about, which meant I got to fly a little freer.

His eyes dipped to my mouth, and I was overcome by the urge to kiss him. Bite him, right on the lower curve of his full, very bitable mouth.

But he still hadn't answered the question of whether he was there with somebody, and even my impulsive nature would wait for that. I didn't have a lot of rules, but there was one very clear, very firm one.

I didn't cheat, and I didn't touch guys who were cheaters.

Okay, so that was technically two, but they went together, so I only counted it as one.

“Are you?” I asked again, easing in closer.

He blinked, looking confused. “Am I what?”

Nice to know he wasn't as unaffected as he seemed.

“Here with somebody.” I tugged on the lapel of his jacket, impatient now.

His pupils spiked, and that just added to the intoxicating, surreal beauty of his eyes. He reached up and covered my hand with his, the roughened skin catching me off-balance. I wouldn't have expected callouses from someone so refined-looking.

“I'm here with you.”

The words were a rough rasp against my skin, but I shook my head, needing my answer before I could let myself completely swoon. “Either you're being difficult, or you're a serious flirt. I meant, did you bring a date?”

He blinked then, and his eyes cleared.

He shook his head. “No. I'm not...here with anyone, I mean.” He started to take a step back.

“Okay.” I tightened my grip on his lapel to keep him from going anywhere and leaned closer. “Where are you going?” I purred.

“Didn't you say you had to be going somewhere?” His voice was gruff, eyes still so dark, I could have gotten lost in them. “Didn't you say you had a friend waiting for you?”

“I do.” Lifting a shoulder, I placed a free hand on his chest, just inside the material of his suit jacket. I could feel the heat of him, the firm muscle, and I wanted to feel more. “She's a good friend. She can wait for a few minutes.”

“Wait for what?”

His heart thudded against my palm, and his eyes locked on mine. I had a feeling if I moved in any closer, I'd feel his cock, hard and erect against my stomach.

But...if I *did* do that, he'd probably jerk back, ending our game.

And I was having so much fun.

"I'm supposed to be playing hostess with her." Lifting a shoulder in a casual shrug, I edged in as much as I dared. "This is the kind of thing that I hate about parties. I'm more comfortable talking to people one on one... getting to know them."

I dropped my gaze to his mouth then, wondering how long I'd have to wait before he'd make his move. A moment later, one hand came up and gripped my hip.

One corner of his mouth tipped upward. "Has anybody ever told you that you're a menace to civilized society?"

The words startled a laugh out of me, and I threw back my head, delighted at the very idea. Seconds passed before I was able to control myself enough to respond. And the first time...

"I'm a menace—"

Laughter overtook me again.

The hand on my hip tightened.

That movement was enough to jerk me back to the present. If I wasn't one hundred percent certain it would have sent him running, I would have been all over him, climbed him like a tree.

"What's so funny?" he demanded.

"It's not funny." Grinning up at him, I corrected, "It's *flattering*."

A frowned furrowed his brow, and he shook his head. "Flattering?"

"I'm supposed to smooth things over and keep the conversation going. Be supportive and smile in all the right places. You know, be everything a *good little wife* should be." I stopped, realizing he might think the wrong thing. "Not that I'm married. Mom might be giving up on that, but according to her, that's just what a woman like me does. I go to college, get a completely *useless* degree that sounds socially acceptable, but I never do anything with it before I get married."

He looked a little dazed by my impromptu speech.

It wasn't the first time I cause that kind of reaction.

My occasional word avalanche had knocked more than a few people for a loop.

“I take it that you’re not planning on getting married then.” He rubbed at his temple as he spoke and looked around.

I wondered if he was looking for an escape.

“I might.” Wiggling my eyebrows at him, I asked, “Are you proposing?” With another playful tug on his collar, I quickly assured him, “I’m teasing. I shouldn’t, I know. You gave me a compliment. A ‘hazard’...no, I’m sorry...’a menace to civilized society.’ I think that’s completely delightful.”

Something in his eyes softened at that.

And part of me wished I’d never started down this tangling trail of babble. Because I knew that look.

Understanding.

It wasn’t quite the same thing I felt the first time I’d met Piety, but it was...it *almost* felt like it was a connection.

“I guess it’s better to be a menace than to be a bore.” Rough fingers closed around my wrist, and I shivered when he pressed his thumb against my pulse. “Somehow, I don’t think that’s anything you’ve ever been accused of, being a bore, I mean.”

“No.” He was stroking my wrist now. Did he even know he was doing that?

I had no idea why, but it was amazing how such a small, simple touch managed to affect the state of my knees.

“I need to get going.” His gaze dropped to my mouth again.

But he let go of my wrist.

“Yes. I’m sure. But...”

He wasn’t walking out of here as quick as that, I decided.

He hesitated at my words, clearly waiting, for what I didn’t know, but something. What the hell. Rising to my toes, I curved my hand over the back of his neck and tugged.

If he was at all reluctant, it sure as hell didn’t show.

His mouth met mine, hard, firm, certain.

Licking at the seam of his lips, I hummed in surprise at the taste of him as he opened his mouth. For somebody who seemed so proper and rigid, he tasted wild...dangerous. And so fucking good. Coffee, chocolate, and something that could only be defined as him.

He slid his tongue along mine, one big hand coming up to cup my cheek, adjusting the angle of my head as his long fingers caressed my skin. The feel sent a shiver racing through me.

More...

I curled my hand in his shirt as the kiss deepened. His teeth scraped across my top lip first, then my bottom, each one making me moan. The sounds seemed to spur him on, and he tangled his hand in my wig, threatened to dislodge it. I did some exploring of my own, yanking at his shirt until I could finally touch him. Skin stretched hot and tight across lean muscles, and I felt a shudder wrack him as I skimmed both palms up his sides. I was pretty sure he had at least a six pack. Maybe eight.

“...you in there?”

The voice didn't penetrate.

“Oh. Well. I guess you are in here.”

My mystery man froze, his mouth a breath above mine, his breaths coming as fast and harsh as my own.

“She'll go away if we ignore her,” I said, staring into his eyes.

But he shook his head and pulled away. While I stared at him, he smoothed a hand over his hair, settling it into place. I watched as he adjusted his jacket, fixed his shirt.

It took him less time to fix the damage than it had taken me to cause it.

Feeling a curious gaze on me, I finally looked past him and found myself staring at a woman who was vaguely familiar. A smile quirked at her lips, and she inclined her head. “Hello.”

“Hi.”

If she wanted anything more than that, she should have waited until...I don't know, when he and I were done.

The thought startled me. What did I mean by *done*? Had I seriously been considering having a quickie with a stranger in my best friend's father's office while dressed as a mermaid?

That was a bit much, even for me.

I pulled away from him, reaching up to adjust my wig.

“Let me help,” he offered.

I sidestepped when he reached for me. “I've got it.”

I didn't know why I felt so put out. It wasn't like I'd *planned* on coming in here and having some hot guy walk in so I could put the moves on him.

Turning on my heel, I headed into the bathroom tucked off the side of the library. I didn't precisely storm away, but I wasn't exactly all grace and sex appeal, either.

Behind me, I could hear him talking to the woman in a low voice, and I

hurriedly fixed the damage he'd done to my wig. Still, even though I'd done a haphazard job, I came out just as they passed through the door.

"Jerk," I muttered.

He walked in on me, kissed me—

"All right, *I* kissed him," I admitted to myself. Still, it wasn't like he'd been an unwilling participant.

He'd been more than into it. I could still feel the press of his fingers, the heat of his skin.

And he'd just walked out like that?

Like hell.

Hurrying out the door, I moved as quick as a mermaid skirt would let me. It wasn't very fast, but it was the least I could do.

I caught sight of him just before the crowd in the ballroom would have swallowed him whole and locked on that position. By the time I cut through the crowds, I had a blistering comment on my lips.

Then I saw who he was talking to and that comment died.

He was talking to Silas. Or maybe Piety. Or both?

Yes, definitely both.

And the woman who'd interrupted us was also there.

Piety caught sight of me and waved, beckoning me over in a way that made it clear if I ducked her, she'd hunt me down. Resigned, I started in her direction and even managed to smile as she gushed over my costume the moment I reached her side.

She'd done as I'd suggested and dressed up as Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*, and she looked amazing.

"Where's the Beast?" I asked lightly, ignoring the burning gaze of my annoying mystery man just a few inches away.

"Oh, he's off somewhere." Piety rolled those expressive eyes of hers. "He loves parties, but he doesn't love this part. Can't say I blame him."

This part. I knew exactly what she meant. She and I had been raised for *this part*, and both of us were good at getting people to open their wallets.

"Let me introduce you," she said, easing right back into the conversation she'd been having before. "You know Sondra Thatcher, right?"

The name clicked, and I met the level eyes of the woman who'd walked in on me and the hot guy. "Of course, Senator Thatcher. How are you?"

"I'm afraid you've got me on the name." She gave me a polite smile without any indication of where she'd seen me before. "You look familiar,

but I can't quite place you."

"I imagine you meet a lot of people, Senator," I said vaguely, refusing to feel insulted that she hadn't realized she was at *my* fundraiser. Okay, not *mine* entirely. But Piety and I had set it up together. Granted, Piety's name was more well-known than mine, but the Traore and Van Pelt families were both staples in Philadelphia society.

Piety rushed to fill the silence as I looked over at the quiet man at my side, but he wasn't looking at me. He actually *was* speaking to Silas. Quite intently too.

Senator Thatcher said something to me, and I made a half-hearted response, but I was more focused on Silas and the man who'd yet to be introduced. I wanted to know why he was here, how he knew Senator Thatcher. I'd always been a curious person, but he'd gone beyond piquing my interest. He intrigued me.

"...how many do you think you'll have when you're at full capacity?" Silas asked.

"I'm hoping for thirty. It's not much, but rehab works better when there's time for one on one, when the people we're trying to help can get to know each other and the support staff. That's a crucial step in getting better, I've always thought."

Piety's father nodded. "It sounds like you've put a great deal of thought into this, Dash. Shame you're starting on the West Coast. I'd love to have a place like that near here. But make sure I get your contact information. I'd be happy to give a donation."

Two things hit me at once. *Donation*. Dash.

His name was Dash, and he was here for a donation. At *my* fundraiser.

What the hell?

This was my fundraiser, mine and Piety's, and some senator from California showed up with this guy and started soliciting for funds? Who the hell did that?

"Now that you've gotten your hand out," I interrupted, smiling brightly. "Are you interested in hearing about the shelter this fundraiser is actually for?"

Two pairs of eyes turned toward me, only one set of them amused.

Silas patted my shoulder. "I've already given Piety a check, sweetheart. Are you going to twist my arm for another one?"

"You've thrown open your home and donated more than once,

Congressman. You know me better than that.” I kissed his cheek before focusing back on the other man.

He was finally looking at me again, his expression unreadable.

“How about you?” With a falsely bright smile, I met his eyes. “Are you interested in what we’re doing here, or did you just come to sell your own idea?”

There was a flash in his eyes, gone too quickly for me to identify. Then, slowly, a red flush crept up his cheeks. “I’m happy to hear about your cause.”

That look in his eyes, followed by the blush was...disappointing. No denial, but no apology either. He’d totally just asked my best friend’s wealthy father for a donation at someone else’s fundraiser. In front of the people throwing said fundraiser.

Without blinking, I turned and grabbed one of the flyers from the table next to us. Slapping it against Dash’s chest, I said, “Here. Have fun.”

Then I turned and ducked into the crowd. I heard Piety saying something behind me, but I didn’t stop.

I didn’t know why I was so upset.

But I was.

I most definitely was.

NINE

DASH

“Astra!”

So now I knew the name of the hot mermaid I’d been kissing less than ten minutes ago. If Sondra hadn’t walked in, I might *still* be kissing her. Kissing Astra.

Or worse.

No. Better.

Definitely better.

Well, it would have been better if she hadn’t just overheard me making my pitch to Congressman Van Allen at a fundraiser she’d clearly been a part of planning. That had been an asinine move on my part.

“Should I go talk to her?”

The low, mellow voice came from the man next to me. Congressman Silas Van Allen. But he wasn’t looking at me. He was staring off into the crowd, looking for that vibrant red wig. He knew her.

“No.” The congressman’s daughter huffed out an irritated breath and reached into the little beaded bag dangling from her wrist. “I’ll call Kaleb, have him check on her. She hasn’t been having the best night, apparently.”

I shot another look off into the crowd. I wanted to go check on her, and the impulse surprised me. I didn’t want to just kiss her again either, although that was definitely on my mind. If I kissed her again, maybe I could convince myself she didn’t taste that good, feel that good.

But maybe she would—

“Why don’t you tell me a little more about the facility you’re planning?”

Jerking my head around, I met Silas’s gaze. “Is that a good idea?” I asked bluntly. “It wasn’t exactly considerate of me to talk about my facility when

this event is geared toward raising funds for another cause.”

“Don’t be silly.” Sondra leaned in and patted my arm. “You only spoke to Silas, and it’s not like he plans to announce that you’re looking for donors and backing.”

And that told me what I needed to know. I shouldn’t have said a damn thing. I should have paid attention to where I was instead of being so focused on myself that I acted like a total ass. Irritated with myself, with Sondra, and with Mermaid Astra, I disengaged from the conversation as quickly as possible, without being outright rude.

“Shit.”

That inelegant comment coming from the woman in the yellow dress had both me and Silas looking at her. She made a face at her father, not really paying any attention to me. “Kaleb is helping somebody out to their car, and...well, the guy really had too much to drink. Kaleb will have to ask Miles to find him something else to wear. I better go find Astra myself. Can you handle things for me for a while, Dad?”

“Of course.”

She gave him a kiss on the cheek and only then seemed to notice me, giving me a polite nod while hardly glancing at Sondra.

“Well.”

Silas clapped his hands together, then looked at me.

“I pissed her off, didn’t I?”

His eyebrows went up. “Piety?”

“Piety. Astra.” I shrugged. “Take your pick.”

“You and Astra were barely in the same space for sixty seconds.” He waved a hand. “I wouldn’t worry about it. Piety will explain that Sondra just mentioned I might be able to help with some of the issues you’re having. Setting up a non-profit can be a pain in the ass, anybody in government knows that, including those two.”

I wasn’t convinced but inclined my head. “Of course.”

He gestured to the crowd. “Since Piety went to go check on Astra, why don’t we mingle? You can tell me about your problems, and I’ll meet and greet. Senator, come with us.” He pointed a finger at her. “But no fundraising. This is my daughter’s event. Her cause gets the funds.” He smoothed a hand down his tie and gave me a pained look. “I should probably double my initial donation.”

“Give it to Astra,” I said without thinking.

He paused and gave me a measuring look. “Had the two of you met before?”

Sondra covered a laugh with a cough while I nudged her forward. “Come on. We should mingle, as you said.”

We shook hands.

I introduced myself.

The senator made it clear I was a friend of hers, nothing fascinating, and Congressman Van Allen was happy to play her off as a fellow politician who’d come to support the endeavors of his daughter and her best friend.

Over and over and over until my head was pounding.

“I assume I’ll be writing a check for this shelter before I leave the city, won’t I?” Sondra said lightly as we found a quiet bit of floor.

“You will.” Silas looked satisfied. “It’s a worthy cause.”

They chatted more while I searched the room for Astra.

It didn’t take long to find her. She was on the other side of the room, working the crowd with her friend Piety. Neither the sunshine yellow dress nor the brilliant red wig could easily be overlooked, though I had a feeling those two could attract attention no matter what they wore.

The two of them chatted brightly, and the people with them smiled back and nodded. I wasn’t surprised to see the two women collecting cards. I figured it was for the charity, but a part of me wondered if Astra was getting phone numbers too.

It would make sense.

She was bright and cheerful and flirtatious, the picture-perfect socialite. How many women had I known like her?

I couldn’t even recall, but I doubted there was anyone else like her anywhere.

When she glanced in my direction, and our eyes met, I felt the connection to my bones.

I told myself I just needed to get laid, and I wanted to believe it too.

But I didn’t.

“I THINK THAT WENT WELL!”

Sondra was no longer wearing her wig.

It sat on the seat next to her. Staring at the towering white disembodied coif, I found myself wondering about the hair under Astra's wig. She'd said it was boring brown, but I doubted anything about her was boring.

I hadn't seen her for nearly an hour, and I wouldn't have a chance to see her again because Sondra's car was turning onto the road that led away from the Van Allen home.

She'd avoided me all night. If she would have given me three minutes, I would have gotten the information I needed to let her know I'd be sending funds on to the shelter she was supporting. I had money to spare.

I'd do it anyway, but I didn't want her thinking I was some jackass who'd come in and tried to divert funds away from her pet charity.

Immediately, I felt like an ass.

Pet charity or not, women like Astra managed to get a lot of money flowing toward issues that would otherwise go unnoticed. That was one fact I'd learned over the past couple of years as I focused on the best way to find help for those who might otherwise end up like...

Closing my eyes, I tried to push the thoughts out of my mind. I didn't want to think about that right now.

"You look tired."

Sondra's voice had me opening my eyes.

"I am," I admitted.

"You should be wide awake. You're several hours ahead out on the west coast."

Lifting a shoulder, I said, "It doesn't matter what time zone I'm in, I don't sleep much in general, and it's been less than usual lately."

"Oh, I hear you there." She sighed and smoothed her short hair back, staring out at the rapidly passing scenery. "Go ahead and rest, if you need to. If you fall asleep, I'll wake you when we reach the hotel."

I wasn't about to argue with that. I doubted I'd sleep, but I definitely wasn't up to being social.

I DIDN'T SLEEP.

Not in the car, and not for several hours in my room.

I couldn't blame the bed or even the time change though. I couldn't even

blame my over-wired brain this time.

I *was* actually tired, but every time I closed my eyes, I saw Astra's face.

I wanted to go back and undo the evening. Make it to where I'd never walked into that office in the first place.

Or to where I'd never walked out.

I wished I hadn't kissed her.

I wished I hadn't *stopped* kissing her.

I wished I hadn't walked away from the office without her.

I wished I hadn't left the party without hunting her down and talking to her.

It was possible to hunt her down. Both women's phone numbers had been left on the information about the shelters they were supporting, so if I wanted to be a total stalker, I could call her.

But the last thing I needed to do was get my head twisted up over a woman.

Still, as I lay in bed, I knew that's exactly what I was doing.

Getting twisted up over her.

I wondered what she looked like without that wig.

I wondered what she would have done if I'd asked her out.

I wondered what *I* would have done if I'd asked her out. I didn't date. Not really. I did the one- or two-night stand thing whenever I got the urge, but I didn't do the whole dinner and movie thing. Not since...

Despite all the questions, I wished I would have at least asked.

But I hadn't, and I hadn't seen her again.

So, it didn't matter.

I just needed to convince my brain of that.

TEN

ASTRA

“I hate winter. I hate winter. I hate winter.” I had a nice rhythm going. “I hate winter.”

“It’s barely November.”

A deep, amused voice interrupted my mantra, and I looked up to see one of my co-workers watching me with amusement. Levon Hartsfield stood sipping his coffee – and blocking the coffee machine. He was six feet five and probably half as wide as he was tall, so he was used to his height doing all the intimidating for him. Unfortunately for him, it didn’t work on me.

“If you don’t get out of my way, I’m taking you down,” I said in warning.

“Yeah, yeah.” He heaved out a sigh and moved away, settling his solid frame into a chair at one of the few tables our break room boasted. The table, like the chairs and the coffee maker, were second-hand. Any time we got extra funds, we funneled them into the areas that needed them the most, and there were so many areas that little things like our break room didn’t even make the list. Not even after a successful fundraiser like the one we’d just had.

Split down the middle, Piety and I had each managed to bring in enough to cover at least most of our current necessities.

Piety had already announced the funds at her shelter would be going to fix the plumbing and do some updates on the bathrooms. Here, we were getting beds and fixing up the kitchen.

One of the women who worked in the kitchen was married to a contractor, and the company he ran had volunteered to do the work at cost, so we were going to save a *lot* on that front. Enough to make sure we could replace all the beds and not just the ones in the worst condition.

Once I had coffee in hand, I breathed out a sigh of relief. One thing I planned on contributing to that new kitchen out of my own budget was a decent coffee machine. If I thought I could get away with it, I'd make it a high-end model, the kind that made espresso, cappuccinos, the works.

I loved my caffeine fix.

But while the head of the shelter let me do a lot, I'd probably get razzed over that much commitment to it.

The focus here was the kids.

Not fancy coffee.

I could already hear the lecture I'd get if I even tried to go that route.

I frowned, then took another sip. "I'd take a damn bath in this stuff if I could," I grumbled.

"You've lived here all your life. You'd think you'd be used to the weather by now." Levon sipped his coffee and watched me with amusement.

"Being used to something doesn't mean I like it," I came back at him. "You know, like you."

Topping off my coffee, I moved out of the break room and went straight to my office before he could respond.

My office was the size of a postage stamp.

A small, square postage stamp.

No windows, no carpet, and the heating hardly worked. The good news was that it was small enough that I could put a floor unit under the desk and have it nice and toasty in minutes.

The bad news was that anytime somebody dropped by to do one of those infamous inspections, they loved to ding us over things like floor heaters. I understood why they had to do it, but even the most well-intentioned regulations couldn't keep my toes warm.

I made sure I kept the heater tucked out of sight. So far, I hadn't been busted. I always made sure it was off and unplugged every night when I left too.

I hadn't even had a chance to hang my coat up on the back of my chair when Roz Flowers came rushing in. Roz was one of the live-in aides who stayed in the girls' wing of the shelter and acted as a mom, nurse, and all-around saint.

Which sometimes meant telling other members of the staff about the things she learned.

"Jamie Horvath is back, Astra. She's pregnant."

Those words, delivered in such a blunt manner, had me closing my eyes.
Shit.

Jamie.

She was one of my favorite kids. I wasn't supposed to have favorites, but I did. I looked at Jamie, and I saw somebody who reminded me too much of myself, from the uninvolved parents to the almost reckless demeanor she displayed to the world. She was who I might have been if I hadn't had a friend like Piety.

"How far along?" I asked quietly.

"Five months." Roz's voice was grim. "She didn't realize it until a few days ago. Her parents kicked her out, of course. You know how those two are."

I did, unfortunately. "That's completely bullshit. I know for a fact that they never even bothered to go see the family counselor we recommended to them when Jamie went home the last time."

Slapping my hands on my hips, I glared at Roz, although I wasn't angry with her. It wasn't her fault. She'd worked almost as hard as I had to get Jamie home and her family into the therapy they needed.

"No surprise there." Roz pressed her lips together and looked away. After a few seconds, she looked back at me. "She's pissed off, and I can't blame her. Pissed and hurt. She came in last night, and she won't talk to anybody. It was like pulling teeth to get her to give me that much. I was hoping maybe you'd go talk to her."

I was already draining the last of my coffee before Roz finished talking.

"IT'S NOT LIKE I CARE." Jamie said the words with complete sincerity, and if it wasn't for her swollen red eyes, I'd almost have been tempted to believe her.

Sitting at the foot of her bed, I pulled my knee up to my chest and rested my chin on it, turning my answer over in my head. Piety had kept me grounded enough that I'd curbed my more destructive impulses. If I hadn't had her, I might have resorted to some of the same behaviors that Jamie had used, including when she'd run away and landed here the first time. I liked to think that my parents wouldn't have reacted the same way, but I didn't know

for certain.

After all, we'd had our share of fights. They'd said things or done things that had hurt, and I'd shoved it all down and pretended like the pain wasn't real. It had never been malicious, or at least I hoped it hadn't. I always felt like they were just more concerned with themselves and the image they presented to the world than they had been with me.

I had no doubt Jamie was trying to put up a front, trying to make me believe that she didn't care, but I wasn't going to call her on it. She was fourteen going on forty. Sure, some of that was due to poor decisions, but she was a teenager. It was her parents' job to guide her, and in that, hers had failed miserably.

"Screw them," I said agreeably. I wasn't a teacher or a counselor or anyone in any sort of position of authority that made me feel obligated to take her parents' side.

Jamie snorted, but the sound was more sob than laugh. "You bet your ass. More Mom than Dad though. She was the one who told me to leave." She swiped her hand under her nose. "Mom was pregnant before she had me. Twice. She aborted one, lost the other. Sometimes, I think the reason she's so mean to me is because she's mad she didn't lose me too."

"Oh, honey..." I could ignore a lot of things, but I couldn't ignore that. Moving across the bed, I caught her in a hug. "You can't believe that."

"Yes, I do." She stared at me with tired, empty eyes. "When I told her I was pregnant, she just shrugged and told me to get out. Said if I was old enough to fuck, I was old enough to take care of myself."

Even when the kids at the shelter tried my patience or pissed me off, they never made me second guess putting time and energy into this place. Even when I got restless and moved on to the next thing, I'd make sure this place kept going, that I was always available for the kids. It was the parents I wouldn't miss. They drove me crazy.

As I hugged her, she pressed her face into my neck and started to cry. "What am I going to do, Astra? How can I go to school and take care of a baby and do all of this on my own?"

Rubbing my cheek against her hair, I murmured to her, empty, meaningless words, because she was already crying too hard to hear me. I had no idea what she was going to do. Not yet, at least. But we'd figure that out later. Right now, she just needed a safe place to cry.

“YES...YES.” Rolling my eyes as the bubbly receptionist on the other end of the line repeated back everything I told her – twice – I cut in to say, “Please tell Mr. Horvath it’s very important he call me back.”

“I will, Ms. Traore. Absolutely. Can you give me any more information–”

I hung up before she could finish that request. No, I wasn’t giving any more information.

After talking to Jamie a bit more, I’d learned that she hadn’t actually told *both* of her parents about the baby. Her mom had found out by accident and told Jamie to leave before the girl had a chance to see if her father would take it any better. I was hoping he’d finally wise up and leave the petty bitch who kept pushing her daughter to the wayside. He wasn’t really a bad guy. More weak than anything else. But, if the idea of never seeing his daughter or grandchild again could give him enough backbone to stand up, maybe Jamie wouldn’t have to be abandoned by her entire family.

I wasn’t holding my breath though. I was going to make sure I had a backup plan, or three.

Marking that call off my daily list, I shoved my hair back, then checked the time. I frowned when I saw it was later than I realized. I hadn’t even made it through a third of the things I needed to do. Granted, Jamie’s unexpected arrival and pregnancy announcement had changed things and shifted priorities. But I still had other work. Former residents I needed to follow up on, current residents who needed my help getting jobs.

It was almost four, but I still might get a few of them done. Skimming the list, I selected one that might be taken care of the easiest and reached for the phone on the edge of my cluttered desk. Just as I picked it up, my cell phone rang.

I eyed the name on the screen, debated for about two seconds, then answered, “Please tell me you’ve had a better day than I have.”

“That bad?” Piety sounded sympathetic, but there was something under her words that made me leaned forward.

“Well, it hasn’t sucked to high heaven. Middle of the sky, maybe.”

“Interesting turn of phrase, there.” There was a faint pause in her voice, then she asked, “So, you want to get dinner tonight?”

I was actually exhausted, and the thought of going out in the cold drizzle that had started to fall was depressing as hell, but Piety calling out of the blue

had my friend vibe buzzing. Something was up. “Sure. Where at?”

She named a place, and we agreed on a time. She wasn’t in a rush, either. Dammit. I’d have time to make those phone calls after all.

KALEB, Piety, and I sat around a small three-top, the remains of a pizza littering a metal pan in the center. There was also an empty pitcher of beer – split by Kaleb and me while Piety watched with envy. Lifting my glass to my lips, I took another sip and studied Piety over the rim.

She was too quiet. When she wasn’t absolutely silent, she was babbling. I knew my friend’s tells. She was nervous about something.

Since she wasn’t taking the bull by the horns, I guessed it was up to me.

“Are you going to tell me what’s got you so worked up, Piety?”

“Nothing’s got me worked up,” she said, rolling her eyes. “Can’t I have dinner with my best friend?”

“Sure. But when you sit there and brood, then babble, then brood, that means you’re worried about something. I’ve known you for a long time, PS.” I put the glass down and braced my elbows on the table, leaning forward. “Spill.”

Her expression was tight. “Astra, there’s...you know...it’s...fuck...”

She went quiet as Kaleb put his hand over hers. “Baby.”

“It’s...look, nothing’s wrong. But...” She bit her lip and looked away. When she looked back, there were tears in her eyes. “I was really excited about this. I still am, but...hell. This part sucks.”

“What’s wrong?” Suddenly, I wished I hadn’t pushed. I hated seeing her so upset, and a part of me knew it had something to do with me.

“Nothing’s *wrong*.” She laughed, but the sound was almost as much sob as anything else. “It’s just...Kaleb and I are moving.”

“Oh.” The knot in my chest eased, and I laughed, too, almost giddy with relief. “Well, that’s no big deal. Unless you’re moving to the moon. Then that might be a problem.”

“We’re moving to Malibu.”

MALIBU.

It might as well have been the fucking moon.

The next morning, I trudged into work feeling about as gray and moody as the slate-colored clouds overhead. When the steady drizzle turned into a pounding rain halfway between the bus stop and work, it didn't surprise me at all.

By the time I made it through the doors, my hair was dripping, rain had seeped inside my coat, and I was certain I had about an inch of water inside my shoes.

"Shit. Shit. Shit," I muttered, trailing water down the threadbare carpet in a straight line toward the bathroom. I used a few paper towels to pat my face dry, wiping away the smears of makeup that had begun to run under the deluge. There wasn't much to be done for my hair but pat away the excess water. Normally, I loved my curls, but when it rained like this, they tended to go a little crazy.

"I looked like a drowned poodle."

Sighing, I left the bathroom and made a deadline for the break room, not even stopping to dump my bag and coat in my office. I needed coffee more than I needed oxygen in that moment.

"Astra."

"Coffee." Ignoring the sober tone in my boss's voice, I continued into the break room and pulled my mug out of the dish rack.

Margo Grady had followed me, and she stood in the doorway, watching me with grim eyes. Somebody else appeared behind her – one of my co-workers, Jonah. His normally cheerful face was downcast, and after he met my eyes for a moment, he looked away.

"What's the matter? I mean, I know I looked like a drowned rat, but... come on." I went to push my wet hair back from my face but paused as both Margo and Jonah flinched.

Margo's lip quivered, and Jonah passed a hand over his eyes. An icy hand grabbed my heart. Something was very wrong. Margo never got emotional, and Jonah never looked that distressed.

Oh, shit.

"What's wrong?"

Margo came toward me. "It's about Jamie."

I shook my head before she could say anything else. "No." I put my coffee on the table, not even bothering to see if I'd set it down right. I kept

shaking my head as I backed away. “No. We’re not doing this, Margo. I need to get to work.”

Cutting around a table, I avoided her. But I couldn’t avoid Jonah. He was big, a bear-like man who stood nearly seven feet, with a bushy beard and curly hair. He was one of the guys we sent in to deal with anyone who had a hard time following the rules.

“Get out of my way,” I said, glaring at him.

This wasn’t happening.

“Astra. You need to listen,” he said.

I shoved him, not wanting to hear what I knew was coming.

He let me, then caught my hands before I could pull away. I jerked back, but he didn’t let go. Instead, he pulled me against his chest, somehow still managing to be gentle. I collapsed against him, and he picked me up like a doll, carrying me over to the table where Margo still waited.

As he sat me down in a chair, she started talking, “She left a little after midnight. The night supervisor tried to stop her. Everybody did. Jonah was on call, and he was on his way, but she wouldn’t wait. They did a search on her rooms to see if they could figure out where she was going.” Margo’s voice cracked.

“She left a letter for you,” Jonah said. “There was also a note to everybody explaining...why.”

“What did she do?” I asked, a numb cold setting inside me.

“The Benjamin Franklin Bridge.” His voice cracked on the last word, but he took a breath and kept going. “Somebody saw her and tried to stop her, but...she jumped. They called 911, but it was...it was too late.”

I stared numbly at the wall, waiting for the tears to start. But they wouldn’t. I was vaguely aware of Margo and Jonah talking about how sorry they were, how no one could have seen this coming.

Unable to take any more, I nodded and got up, making my way to my office. Once I was there, I shut the door and leaned back against it, slowly sliding down until I was sitting huddled on the floor. Only then did I wrap my arms around my knees and let the tears come.

ELEVEN

DASH

The last thing I wanted was to go out to dinner. Even if it was with Didi. I knew everyone who'd be there, and it wasn't like any of it would be a chore, but things were finally moving faster with the clinic, fast enough that all the hiring was mostly done and word was starting to get out.

The only big problem was that we still hadn't gotten the okay to open.

That was severely problematic.

Sometimes, I wished I'd just opened as a private, for-profit center. A lot less hassle on that front, but then there was a lot more chance for the people running the clinic once I stepped out of the way to abuse and exploit it. Even if I planned on running it until I couldn't anymore, there would come a point in time where it would have to go on without me, and I had to protect it. I wasn't so stupid as to not see the potential even with a non-profit center, but non-profit entities had more oversight. And the doors would be open to more than just the wealthy.

I wanted that too.

I finished showering and getting dressed, a hundred things on my mind besides getting out of the house in the next thirty minutes. My office and the pile of paperwork was calling me. I'd hired an administrator recently, but I still reviewed every hire, every major decision. I didn't want anything to fall through the cracks. There was so much to do.

My phone buzzed across the room. When I didn't pick it up after a few rings, it went silent.

Then it started to ring again.

Didi. I knew without even looking.

Sighing, I rubbed the back of my neck and debated whether to answer. I

debated too long, and it went quiet again.

Then it started to ring a third time.

I answered that one.

“You better not be sitting in your office,” she said without preamble. “You’ve been ditching me for dinner dates for weeks. You’re not doing it again. You’re my best friend, and it’s my duty to drag you out of that house before you forget how to communicate with your fellow man.”

“You are a pain in the ass.”

“I love you too,” she replied sweetly. “Are you sitting in your office?”

I’d been thinking about it, but since I wasn’t, I could answer honestly. “No.”

“Good. Then you won’t be late, right? A friend of mine is joining us. You’ll be happy.”

“Didi.” Groaning, I dropped down onto my bed. “If you’re trying to set me up with another one of your friends, I’m just going to say it here and now...I’ll leave. I’m not doing that again.”

“I’m not, you big baby. I learned my lesson.” She huffed out an annoyed breath. “It’s just a friend. Now get your sexy ass over here.”

She hung up without another word.

Dropping the phone down on the bed, I stared at the ceiling. I could still go into my office, shut the door, lock out the world.

And I’d disappoint my best friend. My *real* family.

So I got up and finished getting ready.

DIDI WAS RUSHING around the kitchen like a mad scientist when I got there, pots steaming, tantalizing smells lingering in the air. She always liked to do a *faux Thanksgiving* halfway through November, claiming it was the chance to perfect her holiday fare.

Her girlfriend Christal had been banished from the room. Any time Christal tried to cook, bad things happened. I’d watched a grease fire erupt within seconds of her turning on the stove. She was the only person I knew who’d actually managed to make a smoke alarm give up the ghost by trying to make an entire meal on her own. It was almost magical how badly things went wrong with her and kitchens.

She didn't really mind the teasing...or the banishing. She much preferred to do things like set the table, arrange centerpieces, and howl at the commentators over bad calls. I wasn't much of a football fan, but it was entertaining to listen to her.

Her running commentary was a welcome interlude from Didi's grumbling.

"I could have gotten some work done," I said, sipping my wine to keep from smiling when Didi turned an irate glare on me. "You never time things right."

"Bite me." She bent over the stove, and I lapsed into silence as she checked the turkey. Her aggrieved moan said everything. "It'll be another thirty minutes or so, at least."

"And how long until your guest arrives?"

"Well, I'm going to have Christal throw your ass out the window, so you'll need to go to the emergency room, and it's a weekend, we're probably looking at a few hours before you'll even be seen..." She trailed off, but there was a faint smile on her lips. "Yes, I'm a bad planner. Shoot me."

"Nah." Shoving off the seat, I went to hug her. "It's not like most of this stuff won't hold until the turkey's done. And..." I scooped up another deviled egg. "I'll take care of the things that won't."

I hadn't eaten breakfast. Or dinner the previous night, I didn't think. Too often, I forgot meals, and when I finally remembered to eat, I was ravenous. Case in point: I'd already demolished four or five deviled eggs and several of the bacon-wrapped dates.

"You better leave some of those for me," Christal called from the other room. "Better yet, bring them in here."

I nodded at Didi and took the plate, carrying them into the living room where Christal was watching TV and sipping wine.

"Should I feel bad that I can't go in there and help without risk of setting the place ablaze or cutting off a thumb?" She took an egg and popped it into her mouth.

"No. I think she likes your thumbs in place and the building not ablaze." I gave her a fond smile.

I put the plate down and roamed over to the window, staring outside. I always felt restless when I wasn't working. I didn't relax well.

"Besides, if she didn't like the chaos of it, she wouldn't have insisted on cooking, and we would have gone out to eat like normal people do."

“Only rich people think that’s how normal people do it.” She laughed. Glancing at her, I shrugged. “Guilty.”

Since Didi had threatened to stab me with a knife if I so much as pulled out my phone, I sat down next to Christal and studied the TV. I knew better than to suggest that we find something other than football. She liked ogling the cheerleaders too much.

I sighed. “Who’s playing?”

When the doorbell rang thirty minutes later, I was the one to answer. Christal was opening another bottle of wine – the one *kitchen chore* she said she excelled at – and Didi was still glaring at the turkey.

“Hello, Senator.”

Sondra Thatcher stood on the doorstep. A few feet away, her bodyguard stood with her. He only nodded while Sondra reached out with both hands. “Dash! How good to see you!”

The enthusiastic greeting caught me off guard. We’d met just a few times, but I took her hands and let her tug me in closer so she could kiss my cheek.

“Sondra!”

Didi’s voice rang out behind me, and I stepped aside.

As my friend rushed up to greet Sondra, I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jeans. Was this the surprise Didi mentioned? I needed to talk to her about expectations. Then again, it was better than her trying to set me up on another disastrous date.

A few low murmurs passed between them before I caught the conspiratorial look, then Didi shook her head.

“Ahhh...I see. Well then.” Sondra came inside, her bodyguard trailing behind. Sondra did a round of introductions, and I shook Marcus’s hand.

Once the pleasantries were over, I focused back on Didi and Sondra. “So what was with that *ahhh, I see...*moment?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” Sondra said airily. “Didi, you must let me help in the kitchen. I hardly ever have time to cook these days, and I miss it.”

Didi hooked her arm through Sondra’s and led the other woman off, leaving me to glare at their backs.

“You might as well just go with it,” Marcus said.

I glanced at him.

“She’ll tell you when she’s ready, and if you nag her, she’ll drag it out.” He smiled faintly. “She can be obstinate that way.”

Great.

“IT SOUNDS like your entire life has been focused on this clinic.” Christal eyed me over her wine glass, an amused smile on her lips.

Didi took the butter knife she’d been using and pretended to stab herself in the throat. “Don’t get him started, baby.” She made a face at her girlfriend. “You know better. I warned you. You’re not around him as much as I am, but I warned you.”

Christal lifted a hand. “Hey, I’m working crazy hours. Besides, I think it’s admirable.”

“I’m not doing it for praise,” I said after a few seconds. I knew she didn’t mean it that way, but I always felt the need to explain myself. “I’m doing it because it needs to be done. Too many addicts fall through the cracks, and I wanted to help whoever I can.”

“Dash.” Didi reached over from where she was sitting. “You couldn’t have helped.”

Shaking my head, I kept my attention on the food overflowing my plate. “It’s not about her – that. Not anymore. Look, let’s change the subject, okay?”

“Oh...oh, my.” She clutched the table, pretending like she’d fallen from the chair, and she got the smile she’d been aiming for. “I feel faint...”

“You’re such a dramatic soul, Didi.” Sondra laughed into her wineglass. “You should have pursued acting.”

“Heaven forbid.” Didi made a face. Reaching for her own glass, she lifted it. “A toast. To friends, to the future, to good things.”

“I think it’s time we tell him, Didi,” Sondra said as soon as we’d finished the toast.

“Sondra!”

Lowering my glass, I looked from the senator to Didi, my gaze narrowing. “Tell me what?”

Didi made a face. “Oh, fine.” She waved a hand. “Sondra called me two days ago to get your number. She had it programmed into her phone, but she had to get a new one, and your number didn’t get transferred over for some reason. Anyway, I made her tell me why.”

She smiled over at Sondra, who was smiling as well.

The senator continued the story, “Once I told her, she asked if I’d like to join you for dinner and give you the news then. She wanted to be there.”

I shot Didi a look. She shrugged at me. “I know how much this means to you.”

“What, exactly, are we talking about?”

“Your clinic is all cleared and squared away.” Sondra gave me a brilliant smile. “You’re good to go.”

“It’s...” I gripped the table hard, not wanting to dare to believe what I was hearing. Years of work. Done. “Are you serious?”

“Quite.” Sondra had that ‘cat ate the canary’ look about her.

“Shit. Son of a bitch. Hell.” Then I scowled. “Sorry, Senator.”

She broke out into a laugh. “Please. I say worse all the time. Those idiots in Washington would drive a saint to swear. And I’m far from a saint.” She took a sip of her wine and reached for her fork. “Let’s eat, and we’ll talk. I’m sure you’re curious.”

“There’s not much to talk about. All we needed to do was clear away the red tape. Once we did that, it’s pretty much done.”

“Well...” She cleared her throat delicately.

“What?”

Sondra and Didi exchanged glances, and I started to wonder if I’d gotten my hopes up too soon.

“There are still a few things that need to be dealt with.”

“Like what?” Confused, I leaned back in the chair to meet her eyes, appetite gone.

“Eat your food, Dash. Goodness.” She rolled her eyes, good-natured merriment on her face. “We just need to discuss a few things about your hiring process to make sure you’ve got the right people on the inside.”

“What do you mean by that?” I demanded.

Didi huffed out a sigh. “Can’t we eat and discuss this later?”

“We can do both now,” I offered.

She eyed my plate.

Frowning at her, I grabbed the fork and shoved in a bite of food just so the senator would keep talking.

“Fine,” she said with a weary sigh. She began to speak, the political and legal jargon enough to make my head spin.

“As you can see, you’re so close to this. You need some outside people to help finish filling some of these positions. You need an advisor to help you when it comes to developing the board. You can see that, right?” She beamed at me.

“Somebody from outside,” I said slowly. “No. Actually, I don’t see.” I tossed the wine back like it was whiskey, wished it was, then reminded myself I’d stopped letting myself have any sort of crutch when it came to dealing with the shit life threw at me. Not that I’d ever really needed them, but...

Focus. “Senator, I appreciate all the help you’ve given me—”

“Then please,” she said, interrupting with polite firmness. “Continue to allow me to give it. You need some eyes on the project that aren’t so...invested. You’ll need those as you continue, once the clinic is open.”

I had a hundred things I could say to that. A thousand.

But Didi laid a hand on mine. “Dash. She’s right. You need somebody there who doesn’t bleed for the place. Emotion is fine. But you need objectivity too.”

They were right.

“Dammit.”

TWELVE

ASTRA

“Drink, ma’am?”

The flight attendant stopped by the seat where Camry and I were sitting, giving us both a polished, perfect smile as she waited for us to answer.

Camry said, “Water, please.”

“And would you like a snack?”

The younger woman nodded. I declined the snack, but asked for a glass of wine, glancing at Camry as the attendant moved away.

“Is it okay I did that? I should have asked first, but I don’t do too well on planes.”

“It’s fine.” Camry gave me a tired smile. “I’ll be around all sorts of people who drink. Maybe drugs too. I’ll do my best to avoid those people, but college isn’t exactly a convent. I can’t control what other people do. I can control myself.”

She said the last two sentences like a mantra, but she also looked confident, like she believed them instead of simply reciting them. That was an improvement over how she’d been even just a couple of months ago.

“You’ll be fine. Plenty of time to get settled in before the second semester begins.” Covering her hand with mine, I squeezed it lightly. I was still more skeptical than Piety when it came to Camry’s sobriety, but even I’d been able to see how hard she was trying to make amends and stay clean.

“Thanks. Your support means a lot, Astra.” She started to say something else, stopped, then continued, her accent thickening as she twisted her fingers together. “I have a favor to ask.”

“What’s that?” I asked warily.

“If I screw up, I need you to make sure my brother and Piety don’t bail

me out.”

I blinked. Not what I was expecting.

“I need someone who’ll tell them to let me go to jail or back into rehab, no matter how much I beg. I’ll try to be strong, but I can’t promise that, if I mess up, I won’t try to talk them out of sending me away. I need you to make sure that they don’t give in.”

I studied her for a moment. She was tiny, and with her light brown hair pulled back into a ponytail, she looked more like a teenager than an adult...until you saw her eyes. They made her look twice my age instead of two years younger. She didn’t necessarily scream ex-junkie, but she seemed to understand that no matter how different she looked, the temptation wouldn’t go away.

“I’ll do it,” I said finally. “I would’ve done it anyway, but the fact that you asked makes me trust you more.”

Before Camry could respond, the flight attendant returned with our drinks. After she’d moved on to check with the others in first class, the younger girl gave me a wide-eyed look.

“They give you one in first class before they even take off?”

“They better.” Rolling my eyes, I lifted the glass to my lips and took a long drink before continuing, “They charge a ridiculous amount for these tickets.”

Camry laughed and wiggled her butt in the seat. “Well, you also get these big, comfy seats where you can actually move. Being rich has got to be so awesome.”

I didn’t offer any sort of answer. What was there to say?

I loved being able to go shopping whenever I wanted, and it didn’t hurt that I had all this wiggle room sitting in first class. Being able to buy that cute Coach bag I’d seen while we were killing time thanks to a flight delay wasn’t anything to sneeze at either.

But there were things money couldn’t buy.

I’d heard Kaleb and Camry talking about vacations they’d taken with their parents before the car accident left the pair orphans. Simple enough affairs that would probably have made me break out in hives, like camping. For real camping. Tents and everything. I was a city girl through and through. But having my mom and dad spend that kind of time with me?

And Camry’s dad had taught her how to swim. Himself. She hadn’t had a private instructor come to her home and do it in their personal Olympic-sized

pool while her parents were off doing God knew what. I thought about Jamie and her miserable parents. They hadn't been rich, but they hadn't exactly been poor, either. And they hadn't given that girl any love at all. There were more important things in life than money, and Camry had made bank in at least one of those areas. A part of me couldn't help but wonder if that had played a role in the fact that Camry was here and Jamie wasn't.

I gave myself a mental shake.

"So, have you decided what you want to major in?" I asked, keenly aware of the insightful look she was giving me. She had a way of seeing straight through people, and I had no doubt she'd been putting that skill to work on me just then.

"I want to do what you and Piety are doing." She gave me a sheepish shrug. "Piety...well, Kaleb knew I was in trouble, but Piety...she had a way of making me realize that I either needed to fix myself or..." Her words trailed off as she glanced past me to study her brother and Piety, talking quietly on the other side of the aisle. After another moment of hesitation, she finished, "It was time I either fixed myself or killed myself. She didn't say that. She didn't make me *feel* like that. But she made me see that I'd been doing that anyway, killing myself. If I was going to do it, why be slow? Why drag it out? I just needed to decide I wanted to die...or if I was ready to live."

Misery burned inside, reminding again of Jamie. For the cries of help the young girl had thrown out, only to have them go unheard. She'd decided she wanted to die, had seen no other way out. I'd cared, and I hadn't seen how close to the edge she'd been. I should have. Otherwise, what the hell was I doing?

Camry sighed, shaking her head. "I sound kind of pitiful, don't I?"

"No," I quickly cut in before she could start feeling any guiltier. "You sound like somebody who understands where she's come from and accepted that she needs help."

Any further conversation was halted by a man's voice coming on the intercom, and Camry and I both settled back for the tedious in-flight announcements. Taking my wine, I lifted it to my lips and settled more comfortably in my seat. I had a long flight ahead and some thoughts to think.

“YOU’RE QUIET.”

Piety’s voice caught me off-guard. Jumping, I looked over at her. “When did you sit down?”

She grinned at me. “Camry wanted to talk to Kaleb. She gets nervous flying, I think.”

“That’s because she’s smart. We’re hurtling thousands of feet over the earth at hundreds of miles an hour. Who wouldn’t be nervous?” I reached for my wine, only to remember I’d already emptied it. Dammit.

“I’m not.” Piety shrugged. “Fewer people die from plane crashes than car crashes.”

“I bet there are fewer people flying than driving, so that makes sense.” Rolling my eyes, I pushed the button for the flight attendant. Now, Piety had me thinking about planes and crashes. My pulse ratcheted up a notch.

“You’re such a mess.” She sighed and settled back as the flight attendant came to a stop next to us.

Once the attendant left to get my wine, Piety looked over at me. “Are you sure about this move? I mean, I know you’re hurting over Jamie, but this is a big change, even for you.”

“That’s the point.” I lifted a shoulder. “I need a change. Desperately.”

Her eyes softened. “I understand, but *this*? Malibu is so far from Philadelphia. What about your kids?”

“They need somebody better.” Shaking my head, I looked out the window. Jamie had needed somebody better. Maybe if she’d had someone else to talk to, she wouldn’t have done what she did. Maybe she’d be alive right now, trying to decide what to do about her baby.

Piety put her hand on my arm. “You’re punishing yourself because she committed suicide, but that wasn’t your fault. Blame her parents. Blame the jackass who got her pregnant but didn’t offer her any support.”

Sighing, I closed my eyes, wishing I could believe her words.

“What if you’re miserable out here? Then what?”

“Right. I’ll be miserable in Malibu.” I sniffed and looked over at her. “I hate the cold. I hate winter. I hate snow. Please tell me why I wouldn’t love Malibu for the weather alone.”

“You love your kids,” she said quietly. “We both know that even if you’d gotten bored at the shelter, you would’ve kept in touch with them. And you love your parents, even if they can be idiots sometimes. You had friends at work.”

“I’ll have you,” I countered. “You and Kaleb and Camry. And I’ll still keep in touch with the kids and people from work. Social media’s a great thing.” I swallowed hard. “I’ll find other things to love. I *need* to find something else. Even thinking about walking into the shelter right now hurts. Staying, it would’ve destroyed me.” I made myself look at her. I didn’t like revealing any sort of weakness, not even to my best friend.

But we didn’t hide things from each other. She knew that, despite my habit of moving from one thing to another, the thought of moving across the country was a daunting one.

She watched me for a few more moments, then nodded slowly. “Okay. Just make sure you’re doing it for the right reason, Astra. You’re hurting over Jamie, and like I said, I understand that. But you have to accept that it’s not your fault. Learn to deal with that guilt, and with the hurt. You can’t outrun it.”

She smiled at me and then took the edge of the over-large sweater I’d been using as a blanket and tugged on it. It’d been my grandmother’s, and she was closer to Piety’s height than mine, which meant it was huge on me. It had been my comfort object since she’d died six years ago.

Piety tugged again. “Come on. I’m tired.”

I glared at her. “You’re using my sweater as a blanket.”

“That’s what friends do.”

“Brat,” I muttered even as I snuggled in a little closer so it could cover both of us. Sighing, I closed my eyes but couldn’t sleep. Her words kept echoing in my head.

I needed to do this for the right reasons. I knew I was trying to outrun the pain, distract myself from the guilt, but who knew if those were the right reasons? I didn’t. I had no idea what the right reasons were.

Camry was moving for college. Kaleb was moving to be closer to his sister, and so he could finally follow the dream he’d put on hold to rescue his sister. Piety was going because it was what her husband needed. Who was to say that my reasons were any less right than theirs? We were all trying to make fresh starts.

But even as I tried to argue my way around it, I couldn’t help thinking that maybe I wasn’t looking for a fresh start, but rather a place to hide.

THIRTEEN

DASH

“Things really took off this past week, haven’t they, Mr. Lahti?”

Glancing over at the administrator I hired three weeks ago, I nodded. Frederick Leiu had a face that made him seem far younger than he was and a warm, humorous attitude that had made him stand out from every other person I interviewed for the position. He also had an outstanding resumé.

I had no doubt the facility I hired him away from was pissed that I’d gotten my hands on him. I intended to do everything in my power to keep him, which was why his contract said that we were entitled to counter any offer he received. He wouldn’t be obligated to accept our offer, of course, but I liked having the option.

I’d given him a lot of incentive to change jobs, and he was definitely earning every penny. The Monday following our dinner at Didi’s, Sondra had met with him to discuss some things he needed to do, and in just a week, he’d managed to fill almost every position, and gotten many of them to agree to starting the week of Thanksgiving.

“It will be moving at top speed from here on out,” I said, pulling my phone out to check the schedule. “How many people will be here for orientation today?”

“Roughly half.” He blew out a breath, then absently stroked the neat goatee that framed his mouth. “With the rest, it’s their current jobs, as I’m sure you understand. Nobody wants to just walk out and leave their employers in a lurch, or the people they care for. It’s the nature of the business. Some didn’t feel comfortable counting the week of Thanksgiving as part of their two-week notice.”

I nodded. I understood, but it was another hold-up. “What’s the outlook?”

“With orientation this week, about forty percent can start next week. The rest won’t be in until two weeks from today. Some of that group are willing to come in for a few hours in the evenings next week if they’re compensated for their time. They might even be willing to do this week if the price is right.”

Fred gave me a direct look. I liked that about him. He didn’t dance around things. Not even the issue of money.

I knew the people I’d hired for the clinic weren’t just doing this to fill some void inside them. They wanted to help people, but they also needed to pay bills, feed families. Fred had been very blunt when he explained that he’d not only advocate for the clients we took on, but for the caretakers as well. The quickest way to undermine the work, he explained, was to undervalue the people hired to care for the clients.

That all-encompassing way of thinking hadn’t just made me hire him. It’d made me trust his intentions.

I nodded. “If they’re willing to come in next week, they’ll be compensated. Perhaps three hours, three nights a week. I’ll offer a bonus, and meals will be provided. Make sure the new hires who come in this week are giving a signing bonus if they’re on time and don’t miss any of the orientation.”

“Excellent.” The broad smile communicated his satisfaction, and we both went back to watching the state of organized chaos taking place below us in the atrium. As they came in, people were being sorted into their various departments – direct client care, support staff, counseling, human resources...

“Ah, there she is.”

“Who?” I asked absently as I tried to picture how this would look when everything was running.

The atrium would be ideal for family visits or for when those with high enough privileges just wanted to sit down and enjoy the sun or read a book somewhere with a bigger air of freedom than the more locked-down sitting room. I hadn’t quite understood the privilege system that had been outlined when I first set out to make this into a reality, but the team of therapists, psychologists, behaviorists, and a whole lot of other *-ists* had enough experience that I trusted their judgment.

Incoming clients, especially those in immediate danger, needed a lot of structure – limited time with family, limited phone calls, that sort of thing. Once they were no longer in danger of hurting themselves or others or had

been clean for a certain amount of time, they could start earning privileges.

“The HR woman who’s responsible for sending reports to Senator Thatcher.” He gestured down into the people flowing through the atrium. “Imogene Traore.”

Before I could ask him to point her out specifically, someone caught my eye. She looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn’t place her. Then she shifted, and the woman at her side came into view.

No. Fucking. Way.

I muttered something to that same effect.

“What’s wrong?” Fred asked.

“What...no, nothing. Excuse me.” I nodded at him, my mind racing. What was she doing here? I’d gone over the name of every employee hired, and while I didn’t have faces to go with names yet, I sure as hell would’ve remembered the name *Astra* since the little mermaid had been on my mind more than I cared to admit.

I jogged down the steps, cutting through the flow of people, my eyes on the taller, dark-haired woman I first saw because she was easier to spot in the crowd. I reached them just as they found the human resources section.

The man at the desk repeated the same questions he’d asked everyone else in line. “And what’s your name, ma’am?”

“Piety Hastings.”

That was why she looked familiar. And as I put a name with a face, I remembered her resumé. A resumé that had contained her maiden name. Congressman Van Allen’s daughter had gotten married not too long ago. Married name: Hastings.

But her name and why she was here wasn’t as important as that same information about the brunette next to her.

And I’d been right. Those curls were anything but a boring shade of brown.

“Astra Traore,” she said with a sigh. She shook her head, curls bouncing. “Do I need to spell it?”

Traore? I’d just heard that name, hadn’t I? But where – shit.

“Right,” she said suddenly, “It’d probably be under my legal name. Imogene Traore.” She wrinkled her nose. “I’ve never liked my first name.”

Imogene Traore.

Shit.

Not good. She was the new HR manager responsible for sending the

senator progress reports, which meant this flighty mermaid held the future of my facility in her hands. How in the hell had this happened? I stepped to her side and caught Astra's arm, just above the elbow.

She turned, mouth already open like she was going to say something witty. Her jaw snapped shut the moment she recognized me. Before she could say a word, I spoke.

"Excuse us, please, I need to speak with Ms. Traore."

I took a step, but she didn't walk with me until I gave a none-too-gentle tug.

"Wow, rude much?" she demanded from behind, jerking against my grip. "Who in the hell is in charge here? I need to have a word with him."

I pulled her into the nearest room, which happened to be a small conference area. Shutting the door, I let go of her arm and turned to face her. "I'm in charge, and you can have a few words with me after you answer a few of my questions. Like what in the *hell* you're doing here."

Her mouth opened. Then closed. Finally, she planted her hands on her hips, giving me a lofty look. "I'm here to work. Shouldn't you know that since you hired me?"

"No." Shaking my head, I crossed my arms over my chest. "No, I did not."

She mirrored my stance, highlighting her ample chest, and I tried to ignore it. "Well, *somebody* received my resumé and offered me a job in human resources."

"A job that includes reporting to Senator Thatcher." I glowered down at her.

Astra's mouth tightened. "My best friend's father is a congressman. My parents and their families have moved in all the same social circles as some of Washington's biggest politicians. I know my way around them."

That information didn't exactly endear her to me.

"I'm here to work." She planted her hands on her hips.

"*You?*" I stared her down. "Just how are you ready to work? Are you going to dress up like a mermaid when you do your interviews and write your reports?"

The second I said it, I wish I hadn't.

But she just laughed, those gorgeous gray eyes going from iron to sparkling. "Unless it's a costume party, why would I dress up like a mermaid?"

A hot flush crept up my neck. She was right, and I was an idiot.

“I’m sorry,” I said flatly. “That was uncalled for. But this is a *serious* job. Are you aware of that? A serious job. With real life implications and real life consequences.”

What she said about her family finally clicked. She hadn’t just been heading that fundraiser. She was from one of the old money families who were part of that crowd. It was no wonder she’d seemed so comfortable around all of them.

“Are you even qualified to do this?” I asked.

“Are *you*?” She arched an eyebrow at me, tilting her head. “Because I would think that whoever hired me had read my resumé and done the research *before* I was offered a job.”

I narrowed my eyes. “That doesn’t answer my question. What kind of experience do you have? You know, you need to know more than how to plan a party and raise money to do this sort of thing.”

She frowned at me. “Somebody should teach you some manners.” She sniffed and turned on her heel. “If you want to know what kind of experience I have, go find my resumé and job application. You’re the boss. You should have access to it. Until then, I have a job to do.”

With that, she turned around and left the conference room.

She didn’t storm out though. Of course not. She moved with that insane grace, like she was a poem in motion—

“Shit,” I muttered, shaking my head.

I didn’t like how I sounded, how I was thinking. I never had thoughts like this.

Well, no. That wasn’t entirely true.

I had once.

Back when I was falling for a woman.

But that wasn’t happening now.

The door shut with a decisive click, and it jolted me out of my half-disgusted, half-terrified state.

I couldn’t be falling for Astra.

I’d met her *once*. Okay, today made twice.

But I couldn’t be falling for her.

It would be a complete, total nightmare.

It would be inconvenient.

Even if I hadn’t been able to forget the kiss we shared. On second

thought, it would be inconvenient for *exactly* that reason.

“Stop it,” I muttered. Scrubbing my hands across my eyes, I started for the door.

I needed to stop thinking about her, find ways to avoid her. Or maybe not. She’d caught my attention. Once I figured out why, I’d lose interest. Or I’d learn that she wasn’t as interesting as I first thought.

That was what I needed to remember.

But as I left the conference room, my attention wasn’t on how I’d make myself lose interest in Astra. It was more on how her ass looked in that skirt. How she’d smiled at total strangers.

And how she hadn’t smiled at me.

FOURTEEN

ASTRA

I stalked back to where I'd last seen Piety. She was still there, talking to a short, pleasantly plump woman who looked to be in her mid to late forties. Before I'd been blindsided, the head of the HR department had introduced herself to Piety and me as Pattie Arlotti. I put a smile on my face and hoped that Pattie wouldn't ask me what that had been about. I just wanted to get into my job.

This sort of thing wasn't exactly new to me. I had a minor in social and public policy from NYU. Or I would have if I'd ever graduated.

Of course, I had enough credits for minors in about three other fields too. Over the past five and a half years, in addition to social and public policy, I'd also pursued social and cultural analysis, global liberal studies, and social work. It'd been the last one that had brought me to the shelter back home...back in Philadelphia. Not finishing that degree wasn't really a surprise. I never made it that far.

Nothing interested me enough to keep going.

Still, I knew what I was doing here, and even had the experience for it, thanks to the numerous jobs I'd held over the years. I'd done more than my share of interviews, and when it came to conflicts among co-workers, I'd stepped in to help before things could escalate. The shelter hadn't had the budget for a full-fledged HR department, so Margo had done it all, delegating a lot of it to me. I also had to deal with people in all sorts of ways when it came to the fundraisers Piety and I did.

I could do this job, even if I was a little thrown off by seeing Dash here.

Piety could do it too, which was another reason I wanted to stay. She would be more involved with the clients, helping them as they started to re-

integrate into the real world, lining up possible jobs and connecting them with living quarters when and if needed, as well as making sure they kept up with the advised counseling. She was the one who suggested it to me when I told her about what happened to Jamie and that I wanted to get out of the city for a while.

Getting the job had been a surprise, even if I'd known I could do it. It'd seemed like a sign. The universe appeared to know that I needed something different and that I'd needed Piety too.

But I sure as hell hadn't expected to find *him* here.

Dash.

Dashiell Lahti. I'd looked him up after the party, telling myself I was just curious. The moment I'd seen the pictures that came up in the search, I realized who he was. His parents were famous, dad a Hollywood establishment, an actor with more acting cred to his name than three-quarters of SAG, and a supermodel mother. No wonder he looked like the living, breathing embodiment of perfection.

But why was he here? And why was he saying he was the boss?

He'd solicited a donation from Piety's dad. What did that matter? How many celebrities had a pet charity they fawned over? Too many. That didn't mean they were actually *involved* in it. And it seemed like Dash was more than involved. He was way more than involved. He said he was my boss. I still couldn't quite believe that.

How could that rich Hollywood man be the head of a giant rehab facility like this?

Immediately upon thinking it, I realized it made me sound like a hypocrite, but I wasn't some Hollywood elite who went gallivanting around the country, eliciting funds from people I didn't know to save pet rocks or whatever the hell was the latest fashion. I'd worked my ass off in school, gotten whatever scholarships I could. The only reason I'd taken any money from my parents at all had been so I could join Piety in volunteering at homeless shelters and other charities while the rest of our classmates were out partying and spending obscene amounts of their parents' money.

I'd never asked to be treated differently because of who my family was, and I'd earned every single credit I received. And it was a smack in the face to have him insinuating that I wasn't fit for the job.

"Jerk."

I meant to keep it under my breath or inside my head, but I must not have

done a good job because Piety heard me and looked up. “Hey, you’re back.”

“Yes.” Pinning a professional smile in place, I asked, “Did I miss anything?”

“No.” She shook her head and brushed a thick lock of dark hair back from her face. “We were just talking shop. I need to go find who I report to. Pattie, you have a good day. You’re going to love working with Astra.”

“Hello,” I said, thankful to have something else to think about besides Dash. I focused on Pattie as Piety disappeared. “I know my resumé says my name is Imogene, but I go by Astra. It’s part of my middle name, actually—”

“Everything you need is in here.” She gave me a polite smile as she passed a sealed manila envelope to me. “You’ve got a name tag, a schedule, the basic employee handbook, and the timeline of what we’ll be adhering to in order to open the clinic on the designated date. Anything you need to put in your reports should be in this envelope.”

She glanced over my shoulder, and I echoed her gesture, seeing a couple of others moving up behind me.

“I better let you get to work,” I said, smiling. I moved off, looking down at the envelope I held. There was a map printed on it. Thorough. I followed the little dotted line until I found myself at the door with a sign that read *HR Personnel*.

Slipping into the room, I found three others. For a moment, I thought that I should introduce myself to my co-workers but remembered that I was actually their manager. I was in charge.

What the *hell* had I been thinking, taking this job after learning they wanted me to manage three other people.

If I started thinking about that too much, I’d panic, and I preferred to panic elsewhere. In private.

Putting my best smile in place, I walked forward and put my purse down. “Hello! I’m Astra Traore.”

Each of them responded, introducing themselves and offering a greeting as I tried to keep track of who was who. After a few minutes of small talk, I sat down and took the bull by the horns.

“It seems I’ll be heading up this section of the HR department.”

One of the older people, at least by appearance, nodded. “We know.”

His name was Sean Beasley. His graying hair and calm, smiling demeanor made me think of how I’d always wished my dad would be. He was sharp though, and the dark eyes behind his glasses told me he wouldn’t

be a push-over. That was good.

“The information packets provided were very thorough.” He looked down at his folder. “Seems this is your first jaunt into a manager type position, Ms. Traore. What made you take that leap?”

A cold sweat broke out over my skin at those words.

Jamie.

Ignoring the knot in my stomach, I kept my smile firmly in place as I responded. “I needed a change. Back in Philadelphia, I’d been working with at-risk youth for a while, and I loved it, but there were times when it tore out my heart and left my soul to dribble out through the hole left in my sternum.”

“You have a way with words.” That came from the woman sitting opposite Sean. The grimace on her face made me think she was picturing what I’d just said.

“Sorry. I’ve been told I can be a little dramatic.” Determined not to let thoughts of Jamie overwhelm me, I asked, “What was your name again?”

“Gianna,” she reminded me. Dark auburn hair swept back from a face that could only be described as patrician. She wasn’t beautiful, but she was elegant and stately, the kind of woman who would still command attention when she was in her eighties. Her eyes were wide-set and shrewd, studying me with thoughtful consideration. “I left the Radner Center to come here. I was the assistant human resources director there for five years.”

Yeah, she was going to be my problem employee. I could tell that before she said anything else.

“You came from a shelter for homeless teens in Philadelphia.” She picked up a folder similar to the one Sean held.

“I did.” Taking the seat at the head of the table, I folded my hands and met her gaze. “And the people here must have thought I’d learned a thing or two about conflict resolution and dealing with ungrateful, sarcastic asswipes since they hired me for this position.”

“I think you’re quite ready to handle *this* job then,” Sean said with a suppressed smile.

“I like to think I can hold my own.”

A FEW HOURS LATER, I was wishing I hadn’t done this at all.

We'd just finished up for the morning, and I already felt like I'd just spent the entire morning sandbagging an opposing team.

I guessed in a way I had.

We should have been discussing the policies and procedures. I *should* have started developing a basis for them, except I'd only been offered the job less than a week ago, and I had no idea where to start building a department from the ground up.

But I was a pro at faking it, so we'd played a merry little game of *let's introduce ourselves*, followed by *so...what's your background*. I'd discreetly turned my phone's recorder on so I could keep track of what everybody saying – or at least listen later – while I made furious notes on things I needed to do.

Call old boss, get her input.

Call other contacts, get their input.

Research online. Call whoever you can think of, get input.

“Are you taking notes about us?”

That came from Gianna, and I looked up, thankful I'd been listening with half an ear. “No. I'm making notes for everything we need to focus on next week.”

“Next week?” She tapped her pen against the pad of paper she'd placed in front of her. “Do you plan on waiting until then to get to work?”

I'd already come to the realization that the job she'd wanted was the one I had. She'd made a hundred little pot shots, and I was under no illusions that she'd take being placed under me – a woman probably fifteen years younger than her – easily.

But I wasn't playing power games, either.

“I plan on being realistic,” I said honestly. “With Thanksgiving, it's a short week. Two days where we can basically get to know each other and get familiar with the facility. Two days where we can toss around ideas before we really get to work. I need to know strengths and weaknesses to come up with a game plan the boss won't just toss out on principle.”

The door opened then, the knock coming two seconds after the faint *click*.

I didn't even have to look up to know who it was, not when all the hairs on the back of my neck were standing up, my skin humming.

Dash.

He came inside and glanced around, nodding before he took a seat.

Shit.

I was tempted to get up, walk out into the hallway and find my very nice office, lock myself in my very nice bathroom and scream just that. *SHIT*. Why was he in here?

I almost blurted that out but kept it behind my teeth and gave him a stiff nod. "Hello, Dash."

If my use of his given name bothered him, he didn't show it. He just offered another nod and said in a calm voice, "Please, don't let me interrupt."

I managed not to scowl at him.

"Don't worry about that, Mr. Lahti." Gianna managed to make his last name sound like seduction. "We're not doing too much in here just yet. Ms. Traore is of a mind that we won't get much accomplished this week, so we're mostly covering my history and experience. This younger generation of management takes a very low-key approach."

So sweetly said.

Such a back-handed insult.

I didn't know if anybody else heard the venom, but I did.

Dash glanced at me, expression unreadable.

"I wouldn't say we're not doing much," I said, keeping my voice calm. "It's hard to put together an effective game plan without knowing my team. Sean, for example, is an old hat at this." I smiled at him. "I'm surprised he wasn't offered the job."

"I was." The older man leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together over his belly. "But I told Fred I didn't want management. Management makes most people mean or old before their time." He winked at me. "I think you might do just fine, but I'm not taking a risk. I'm already old. Why risk it?"

I had to assume Fred was Frederick Lieu, a very formal, polished-looking man I met earlier that morning when he'd come to the conference room and introduced himself.

"You mean you don't want my job?" I asked the older man.

"Not if you paid me your weight in gold every week," Sean said happily.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Gianna practically perched on the edge of her seat, waiting for me to turn my attention to her. I looked at Dash instead. "Was there something specific you needed, Dash?"

"No." He resumed studying the room, almost like he'd never seen it before. He wasn't paying much attention to any of us, including me.

That was how it seemed, anyway. But as I directed my attention back to

Sean and Gianna, I could feel his gaze on me. I didn't acknowledge it though.

"So, Gianna, at your previous job, what practices worked best for you? What didn't work?"

TWENTY MINUTES LATER, I couldn't handle anymore and a glance at the clock almost had me sighing in relief.

"It looks like it's time for lunch. If I recall correctly, Dash has made arrangements for everyone to eat here." I smiled brightly at the others and stood up, gathering my things. "After lunch, we're to report to the conference room down the hall for a few general orientation items."

I focused on shuffling my papers, not looking up until the sound of the door closing had me breathing out a huge sigh of relief. I straightened from the desk with a groan.

"Oh, man. Thank God. Thank *God*."

"If you needed a break that bad, you could have called it off sooner."

The sound of a too-familiar male voice had me yelping, and I spun around to see him standing in front of the closed door, hands in the front pockets of his steel-gray suit. A suit I hadn't allowed myself to fully appreciate until now.

"Shit!" Glaring at him, I crossed my arms over my chest. "I thought you'd left."

"If you'd been listening, you would have heard me say I needed to speak with you."

With me?

Shit.

He had a cool, collected way about him that irritated me. It left me feeling like he had the upper hand, and that *really* irritated me. *I* was used to having the upper hand.

But damned if I'd let him see that.

I leaned back against the desk. Feeling embarrassed about my reaction just a few seconds earlier, I smoothed my hair back from my face. "You startled me. I thought I was in here alone."

"Obviously." He slid his hands into the pockets of his trousers, head cocked. "If you're already worn out after..." He glanced at the clock on the

wall. “Four hours of work, you’ll have a hard time of this. We’ve got a lot of work to do if we want to get this place open on time, and it won’t get any easier after that.”

The unspoken words came through loud and clear.

You can’t do this job.

I smiled sweetly.

“Dash,” I paused, drawing his name out. “That’s short for Dashiell, right?”

“Yes.” He spoke through gritted teeth.

I clicked my tongue and shook my head. “I’m not sure *Dash* fits you. You’re so...polished. So proper. A bit withdrawn too.”

“Is there a point to this?”

“So touchy.” Huffing a bit, I lifted a shoulder, feeling better now that I’d managed to unsettle *him* a little. “I just don’t see it. Then again, your father is an actor, and I guess among children named Arrow and Audio Science, Dash isn’t exactly the odd one out.”

A faint touch of red settled on his cheeks, and I could see that he was debating on whether to argue with me. It was there in his eyes. But in the end, all he did was shake his head slightly as if he didn’t see the point.

“Can we get back to discussing the job?”

The one you think I’m not cut out for, right?

I didn’t say any of that though. Instead, I gave him that same sweet smile. “Absolutely. As I was saying, you’ll have to be patient. I spent the weekend flying across the country, and before that, I was uprooting everything I’d ever known to accept a job that was just offered to me a few short days ago. I’m a bit tired at the moment.”

Clearly caught off-guard, Dash didn’t say anything for a few moments. Then he blew out a hard breath. “I guess I might have pushed everybody a little hard, dragging all of you in without even a week’s notice.”

Instead of responding out loud, I held out my hand and placed two fingers about an inch apart, indicating that *maybe* he’d been pushing a little hard.

I wasn’t about to go into detail about how a week ago, I’d been standing by the casket of a girl I’d failed to help, or that I’d only quit my job a few hours after learning of her death. Nor did I mention it wasn’t until after that abrupt decision that I’d sent in a resumé to the clinic Senator Sondra Thatcher had mentioned to Piety and me when she’d dropped by to speak with Silas.

In under a week, I’d made the decision to flip my life upside down.

Man, I *was* tired.

“I guess I need to ease off some,” Dash said, unaware of my mental gymnastics as he stared at the wall behind me.

“Well, maybe just be...aware, Dashiell.”

His eyes came to mine then, and I wished I hadn't said anything. How that had turned into some sort of sexually charged comment, I don't know, but as he stared at me, I realized that he and I were *both* all too aware.

And that wasn't good.

At all.

FIFTEEN

DASH

“Happy Thanksgiving!” Didi threw her arms around my neck before I even made it inside the door.

“Happy Thanksgiving to you too.” I returned the hug and then nudged her back inside, breathing in the scents of turkey, stuffing, and a hundred other good things. Didi’s pre-Thanksgiving experimental dinner had paid off again, it seemed.

My belly rumbled.

Ever since we’d gotten the go-ahead on the clinic, my appetite had returned, and I’d been sleeping easier.

Of course, I’d also been dreaming, and all those dreams centered around the hot, sexy former mermaid running the report section of my HR department.

How in the hell was I supposed to handle working with a woman I wanted to bend over her desk and ride like there was no tomorrow?

I had no idea.

During the mandatory sexual harassment seminar on Tuesday, she’d been selected to read a section from the policy, and every time she said *sexual*, my dick pulsed. I’d almost had to excuse myself so I could go jack off just to keep from losing it right there. Which, of course, was a perfect reaction to have during a meeting about proper workplace behavior.

And she’d just kept on reading like I hadn’t needed to move my chair closer to the table to hide the fact that I was fucking hard.

“I’m so glad you made it.” Didi took a step back, her eyes bright.

Some thread of worry in her voice pricked through my thoughts. “Did you think I wouldn’t?”

“Well...” She glanced over at her girlfriend, standing a few feet away. When she looked back at me, old insecurities showed in her eyes.

I understood then.

A few weeks ago, Didi told me that Christal wanted the two of them to move in together after Thanksgiving. Then she’d rushed to assure me that she didn’t want things between us to change because of it.

I never thought they would, but I knew Didi’s insecurities went deep. It was understandable. Her parents had all but cut her out of their lives when she’d come out to them, and even though she knew I loved her, some part of her was almost always braced for another cut like that.

When she announced she wanted to have dinner at Christal’s this year, I hadn’t thought much of it.

Now I understood why.

She wanted to make sure I understood I was still part of the family, and she wanted to make sure *she* was still part of mine. Christal was being added in, and no one was being taken out.

“We’re family, Didi.” I hugged her again, knowing she needed the extra reassurance. “Nothing will ever change that.”

She sniffed and squeezed me tighter for a moment before stepping back again.

With nothing else to say, she gave me a bright smile. “Come on, let’s get you a glass of wine.”

Didi hooked her arm through mine and started to half drag me through the living room. Christal’s place was smaller than Didi’s, but I knew it wasn’t about the size of the home they cared about, but rather who was in it. My chest tightened as a memory pushed forward, and I shoved it back into its box.

Not today.

“Have a glass of wine, and don’t tell me you don’t want any. It’s a damn holiday, and you can cut loose a little bit.”

I didn’t bother arguing. I rarely drank, but I figured I had a good reason to do just what Didi had said. Cut loose. Relax. Even celebrate.

Christal was already in the kitchen when I followed Didi in, and I smiled at her, already feeling some of the tension in me ease. “Should I have the paramedics and cops on standby? Is the oven going to blow up?”

“Oh, hush.” Christal stuck her tongue out at me. “I’m arranging a cheese plate, you twat. There’s no cooking or cutting required.”

“I see your new clients have been expanding your vocabulary.” I chuckled.

“She can do anything decorative. That’s what makes her so great at her job.” Didi paused to kiss Christal on the cheek and then moved to the bottle of wine on the counter. “We just have to keep her away from sharp objects.”

“I’m going to use one on you both.” Christal rolled her eyes, but she had a smile on her face as she kept arranging crackers and pre-cut slices of cheese. “This is a seriously excellent gouda.”

Didi passed me a glass of wine, her head canted to the side as she eyed me. “You look...relaxed. Wow. And you didn’t even put up a fight about taking a glass of wine.”

“What’s the point?” I took a sip of the chardonnay. “You’d just nag me until I gave in just to shut you up.”

“Yes, I would,” she agreed good-naturedly. “That makes this much less painful.”

“Makes what less painful?” Suddenly I felt less relaxed, but I concealed it, taking another sip of wine and moving to swipe a piece of cheese from Christal.

She smacked my hand, but it was worth it. The gouda was excellent. Worth risking another slap.

“Sondra came by the bookstore yesterday and asked a favor.” Didi sipped her wine. “I...um...well, she told me that a friend’s daughter and son-in-law had just moved out here, and they were still trying to settle into their place... buying furniture and all that, plus she’s pregnant and starting a new job...”

Aw, hell.

“You mean Piety Hastings.” I stared down into my glass because I had a bad feeling if Piety was involved, so was Astra.

Astra.

That pretty mouth under mine. Sequins glinting under the light as she marched away from me in that sexy little mermaid costume. Those fucking seashells...

Shit.

“Yes,” Didi said quickly. “I guess Senator Van Allen reached out to Sondra earlier this week to ask if she’d check in with Piety and her husband to see how they were settling in.”

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. “I take it you invited them over for dinner?”

“I did.” Didi gave me a bright smile. “Sondra took them out to dinner Tuesday, and they came by the store afterward. Such an amazing couple. We all got to talking and Kaleb – that’s Piety’s husband – mentioned that they’d just find a restaurant or something, but...well...” She shrugged. “It’s Thanksgiving.”

“Yes.” I took a drink of wine, emptying the glass. “It’s Thanksgiving.”

The doorbell rang, and my heart jumped.

I didn’t ask if Piety and Kaleb were the only two coming because I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted to know until it was absolutely necessary. While Didi went out to answer the door, I moved over to the bottle of wine and filled the glass. It was a good thing I’d already decided to let myself drink today.

I had a feeling I’d need it.

I heard Didi greeting people, and although everything in me wanted to go see if Astra was part of the group, I remained where I was, putting off the inevitable.

A few seconds later, a familiar, bright laugh echoed out of the living room. Taking a sip of the wine, I told my dick to return to its resting position and smiled at Christal. “If you want to go on out there, you can leave the cheese plate. It’s safe with me.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why don’t you come with me and bring the cheese plate.” She pointed a finger at me, narrowing her eyes. “No snitching. That’s for guests first.”

“I’m a guest,” I muttered.

“You’re family,” Christal shot back as she walked past me.

Dammit.

I took the plate and followed, knowing that if I stayed, I’d look like I was hiding.

As I stepped into the room, my eyes found Astra almost immediately. She sat on the arm of the couch, dressed in a clingy sort of metallic gray dress that managed to be both fancy and casual at the same time. The shoulder cut-outs and sweetheart neckline exposed just enough skin to make my mouth water but not so much that she was indecent.

She swung her head around, a smile on her lips. Then she saw me, and maybe it was because I’d spent two days watching her, but I saw that smile freeze just the slightest.

It didn’t fade or die. But seeing me caused some sort of reaction. Not the reaction I wanted though.

A split second later, she tilted her head, eyes sparkling, “Well, hello there, Dashiell.”

“Dashiell?” Didi glanced from Astra to me, curiosity in her voice. No one called me by my full name.

As Astra started to explain how she didn’t think my nickname suited me, I settled in a corner chair so I wouldn’t see Astra unless I turned my head. I needed to *not* spend the day staring at her.

Not staring.

I could do this.

SHIT.

Didi put me next to her at dinner.

Now, not only was I treated to a closer view of the tops of her breasts and left to wonder more about stripping off that dress, I could smell whatever it was she smoothed on that pale, soft skin. It wasn’t cloying or overpowering, but rather complementary to the meal. Like cinnamon or nutmeg or one of those spices.

It made me want to shove everything off the table and feast on her.

My dick would be permanently deformed at this rate, twisted in an uncomfortable position as I sat there, wondering if her pussy tasted as good as her mouth, while Christal and Didi argued over the best way to carve the turkey.

“You’re quiet.”

Astra’s voice was low and close to my ear, sending another ripple of arousal through me. Two words shouldn’t turn me on so much.

It’d been too long since I’d gotten laid.

Turning my head, I found her leaning over so that her arm brushed against mine.

Don’t look at her mouth. Don’t look at her mouth.

It took a solid effort, but I managed it. “I’m not much for small talk, as a rule.”

A slow smile curved her lips.

“I’m all about small talk. Small talk. Big talk. Any kind of talk.” She settled back in her seat as a platter was passed her way.

Without thinking, I took it from her, my fingers grazing hers. “Allow me,” I said, ignoring the jolt caused by just that light touch. At this rate, I was going to have a fucking heart attack by dessert.

She sent me a look from under her lashes as she took the serving fork and helped herself to some of the turkey.

“Do you want white or dark meat?” she asked.

“Ah...I don’t care. I like both.”

She took her time selecting some of each, drawing out the time I was facing her before I could pass the plate on.

We ended up repeating the process with every plate, every bowl, and by the time we were done, our plates were loaded down with Thanksgiving deliciousness, and I was trying to understand just how serving food and passing plates could feel so intimate.

I didn’t want to feel that for her, for anyone. I needed to find someone to fuck, and then it wouldn’t be like this around her. She was just new and attractive, catching me at a time when I needed a sexual outlet. That was all it was.

Just don’t look at her, I reminded myself.

Just don’t look.

“I’M SORRY,” Piety said, smothering a yawn behind her hand. “This baby-making business is more exhausting than anything I’ve ever done.”

She stood by the door while Kaleb held up the light jacket she’d worn, helping her slip it on. The way they looked at each other was almost painful to watch. I’d heard a bit of their story via office gossip over the past week, and seeing them together made me believe all of it. These were two people who would do anything for each other.

“Go on,” Astra said, flapping a hand at her. “I was planning on taking a cab anyway. You’re in the opposite direction of my hotel. Go, sleep. Tell Camry I hope she’s feeling better.”

Apparently, Kaleb’s younger sister had also moved to California with them, but she would be starting college in the spring semester. She’d been invited today too but had come down with a stomach flu yesterday. She was feeling a bit better today, but not enough to be out in public.

As Piety and Kaleb closed the door behind them, I looked over at Astra. “Why are you at a hotel?”

She gave me a sideways smile. “I’m still trying to find a place to stay. Piety and Kaleb have a place, but I can’t stay with them. I mean, they offered, but...newlyweds? No.” She ran her fingers through her curls as she laughed. “They can’t be around each other more than a minute without getting moon-eyed and going all kissy-face.”

“Kissy-face?”

“Yes. Kind of like...” She gestured toward Didi and Christal as they leaned toward each other, lost in a conversation that mattered only to them.

Ah. Kissy-face. I could understand not wanting to be around that all the time.

Astra sighed. “I guess I should call that cab.”

“I’ll drive you.”

I didn’t know what madness prompted me, but the words were out there now, and I couldn’t take them back without looking like an ass. I wasn’t even sure I wanted to take them back anyway. I checked my watch before looking at her. “It’d take a cab a bit to get out here anyway. Especially on a holiday.”

She hesitated, but one look at Didi and Christal had her nodding. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Are you two leaving?” Didi asked, just now realizing what was going on.

“Yes,” Astra answered for both of us, moving to hug Didi as though they’d been friends for life. “Dashiell here is saving me the trouble of calling a cab by driving me himself. You don’t mind, do you?”

Didi looked at me, then back at Astra. “Of course not.” There was speculation in her eyes, but before she could push for anything, I took Astra’s arm.

I was being stupid, I knew. I was way too attracted to her. She worked for me.

For fuck’s sake, we’d just had an entire forty-five-minute seminar on the company’s sexual harassment policy.

But I was going to be stupid anyway.

I didn’t need to see the confirmation in my best friend’s eyes.

WE PULLED up in front of the hotel, an awkward silence falling after the bright, easy chatter that had filled the drive since we'd left Didi's. Granted, the chatter had all been on Astra's part. She was like a magpie, bouncing from one thing to the next in some verbal gymnastics that left my mind reeling as I tried to keep up. It'd been a long time since anyone had challenged me like that, and I found myself attracted to her in a way that had little to do with looks alone. She wasn't some snobby intellectual who thought that conversations had to be deep and philosophical to matter. With Astra, it was all about whatever came into her head at any given moment.

But now she was quiet.

"This is a nice hotel," I said.

"Yes. It's very nice," she agreed.

She hadn't gotten out. What was she waiting—
Shit.

I got out and moved around the car to open the door for her at the same time she started to climb out.

We both ended up standing outside the passenger door, only inches apart, staring at each other. She tugged at her dress, smoothing it out, and revealing a bit more cleavage at the same time. Unable to stop myself, my eyes dropped to the soft swells of her breasts.

Fuck.

"I...um..." Her hand fell to the side, and she shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

I reached up and ran my finger from her shoulder down to her neckline, not quite going low enough to touch her breasts but definitely beyond a platonic gesture. Slowly, I lifted my gaze to hers.

She was staring at me with wide, hungry eyes, the intensity of my own desire matched with hers.

Fuck it.

I reached for her, and she moved toward me at the same time.

Our mouths came together in a hot, bruising kiss.

She moaned softly, and I took advantage of her parted lips, sliding my tongue into her mouth. Shoving my fingers into the tumble of her hair, I tipped her head back and deepened the kiss, exploring, taking.

Claiming.

SIXTEEN

ASTRA

Shit.

He was kissing me.

His mouth was on mine, his tongue twisting and sliding and tangling with mine while one hand fisted in my hair, putting a not-unpleasant pressure on my scalp that was just this side of painful.

This was really happening.

I'd been aching to feel his mouth on mine again for almost a month, and now it was real. And it was so much better than I remembered.

I needed to make him stop.

We weren't two strangers sharing an impulsive kiss in a quiet room at a Halloween party anymore.

We worked together.

But since when did I do *smart*?

I wanted him, and he clearly wanted me. And I'd have been lying if I said I hadn't been thinking about what would've happened if I'd taken things further on Halloween.

"Come up to my room." I tore my mouth away from his long enough to whisper the invitation, then brushed my lips against his.

He went still, lifting his head so he could meet my eyes. Brushing my hair back from my face, he asked softly, "Are you sure?"

"Not sure it's smart, but I know it's what I want," I said, rising up on my toes to bite his lower lip. "Come to my room."

He shuddered, eyes closing for a moment. Then, nodding, he eased away and shot a look around the area. I didn't know what he was looking for until he spoke, "Can you park it for me?"

One of the valets came forward from where he'd been standing in the shadows. Once Dash had a ticket in hand, we started toward the doors.

I felt awkward and strange in my skin, like something about Dash unsettled me. I didn't know why. I wasn't the sort of girl who took a new guy home every night, but I wasn't a nun either. This shouldn't have felt any different than when I'd been with Baylor, but it did.

When Dash reached out to place a hand at the small of my back, I couldn't stop a shiver that raced all the way up my spine. My nipples were already tight, sensitive to the minor friction offered by my bra. I wanted to throw myself at him, and rub all over him the moment the elevator doors closed behind us. Beg him to put his hands on me.

I didn't though.

It was a glass-walled elevator on all sides, save for the door. I was adventurous, but definitely not voyeuristic. A kiss was one thing, but I knew the next time I kissed him, I didn't want to stop.

As soon as I was through the door, I tossed my purse onto the nearest flat surface and reached for him. He was already moving toward me, and I opened my mouth as his came down on mine for another deep, starving kiss. His grip was tight on my hips, the lines of his body deliciously hard against mine.

The hotel door met my back as he crowded up against me, and I almost laughed when the phrase *between a rock and a hard place* popped into my head. He would be nearly a full foot taller than me when I took my heels off, but even now, he loomed over me, around me, his very presence giving me a feeling of security I'd never had with anyone else.

"Tell me you've got a condom," he said, his voice rough.

"In my purse." I never trusted a guy to be prepared.

"Good." He reached over and grabbed my bag, shoving it into my hand.

As he leaned back, I unzipped the main compartment. Then I had to catch my breath because he hadn't just been leaning back to give me room to get the condom out.

"I've been wanting to do this all day," he said, voice raw as he hooked his fingers in the straps of my dress.

His gaze darkened as he slowly tugged the stretchy material down. I shifted my arms, giving him the space he needed to get the dress down to my waist, leaving me in my silver silk-and-lace strapless bra. As he took a few seconds to admire the garment, I managed to get the condom free and toss my

purse back onto the nearby table. All my attention focused back on him as his fingers found the front clasp on the bra and flicked it open.

He muttered a curse as he cupped my breasts in his hands, thumbs brushing across my nipples. I made a sound in the back of my throat as his touch sent a shiver of pleasure through me. He smiled the sort of dark smile that made my knees weak, then he plucked at my nipple. Hot little darts of pleasure jolted straight down to explode inside my pussy.

“More,” I begged.

He didn’t need additional prompting. He wrapped one arm around my waist, the other moving under my ass to brace me as he lifted me against his chest. My legs wrapped around his hips as I clung to him, his arms going around me to support my weight as he leaned me back.

I cried out when he took my nipple into his mouth, his teeth scraping the sensitive flesh before soothing it with his tongue. I dug my fingers into his hair, holding him close as he began to suck on my nipple. He alternated pressure, playing my body like a fine instrument as he coaxed the heat inside me into a flame.

I felt the ridge of his cock, heavy and thick as it pulsed against me, and I shuddered, twisting against him until I had him tucked right against me, nothing separating us but my panties and his trousers. He moaned, the vibration against my skin making my eyelids flutter.

“I spent all day wanting to do this,” he murmured, his voice low enough that I wondered if he’d intended for me to hear it.

The idea that he’d been thinking about me like this all day drove me a little crazy, especially since I’d been hungrier for him than I had been for any of the mouth-watering food Didi had made.

Then his mouth moved to the other breast, the suction harder, the teeth sharper. I moaned, arching my back.

“Want more,” I said, wiggling against him.

He went rigid, mouth releasing my breast to allow him to take a shuddering breath. I rolled my hips, loving that I could affect him that much.

Slowly, he lifted his head and stared down at me.

“More,” I said again, using my legs to rub me up and down along his length.

A hard shudder wracked his body, and he braced both hands on the door by my head. He dropped his head so that his forehead rested against mine. Closing my eyes, I reveled in the increased pressure even as I cursed the

clothing that kept my skin from his.

He started to rock his hips, slow motions that managed to put just the right amount of pressure and friction against my throbbing clit. It was like the most erotic dance I could imagine, every inch of me hyperaware of his body. Clinging to him, I began to mirror his movements. My orgasm was already building. So close. So close—

He shoved away from the door, taking me with him, but ending our dance before I was able to find release.

“No,” I whimpered. I tried to move on my own, but he held me too tightly, a silent laugh rumbling low in his chest.

Holding me in his arms, he carried me into the sitting area and lowered me onto the couch. I pushed at my dress, helping Dash get it off. He didn't wait for me to assist with my panties, simply tearing them off. The sting made me gasp, and then he thrust two fingers inside me, deep and rough, and I cried out.

It was exactly what I needed, and I came, the assault to my body more intense than I could have imagined. Then his fingers curled, finding that sweet spot inside me, pushing me even higher.

When my body fell back against the bed, every muscle limp as jelly, his hand withdrew, and I made a sound of protest, reaching for him, but failing to find him. I was half-blind in the dark room, but I managed to make out his shadow. I heard foil ripping, then he was back, covering my body with his.

His mouth found mine, and I eagerly explored his body with my hands. I wished I could see more of him. I wasn't foolish enough to think that we would become something more than just this night, and I wanted to remember everything. When we were sitting in a meeting at work, I wanted to be able to picture every muscle, hear every sound.

He grasped my hips, and his eyes met mine. I had only a moment to know what was coming before he lifted me and thrust deep. I would have cried out, but he kissed me, swallowing the sound even as my nails dug into his shoulders. He'd taken off his shirt and pants, as if he needed to feel his skin on mine as much as I did.

He kissed me like I'd never been kissed before. Like he was starving, and I was the only thing that could satisfy him. His hunger fed my own, and I rocked up against him. He took me hard and fast, riding my body at a pace that left me gasping.

His cock swelled, sliding over sensitized skin, shoving me right back into

that realm of pleasure where nothing existed but the two of us. He muttered my name against my lips, tangled a hand in my hair, crushed me against him.

Biting his lower lip, I pleaded, "More. Harder."

He laughed, the vibration rippling through every place our bodies touched. "I'm about ready to fuck us through the bed and into the floor."

"I'm good..." A spasm of pleasure twisted in me, and I moaned. "I'm good with that."

He responded by catching me behind the knees as he pushed up onto his own knees, slowing his thrusts as he pushed my legs even farther apart. I cried out as he stretched me wider, hit deeper. It felt amazing, but it still wasn't *quite* enough.

Then he stroked his thumb over my clit, and my breath froze in my lungs. He did it a second, then a third time, each caress matched with a hard thrust, combining sensations into a ball of pleasure that threatened to overwhelm me.

And then I exploded, my world going white.

Dimly, I heard a ragged groan, and his hips jerked against me. His body stiffened, and then he collapsed against me, his head between my breasts.

My heart hammered, so loud in my ears, I could hear nothing else for the first few seconds. I could barely raise my hand, but I managed to get it to the top of his head, to stroke my fingers through his hair.

As I started to get my breath back, he spoke, "Please tell me you have more than one condom because I sure as hell don't want to be trying to find a place open tonight."

THE TABLE WAS cool and smooth under my chest, and behind me, Dash was all heat and muscle – and cock.

That beautiful, thick, amazing cock.

I groaned as he slowly filled me. We were up to my third and last condom, and I couldn't fault his choice in position. He'd come up behind me as I was trying to get everything back into the purse I'd dropped when we came inside.

I hadn't even gotten close to finishing that task, but sex was more fun than organization. Especially when I was approaching orgasm number...I

realized I'd lost count somewhere around six.

Gripping the edge of the table, I bit my lip to keep from crying out as he hit the end of me. There'd been a couple times in the past where I'd had a weekend sex marathon, but Dash was nothing like my prior lovers. Everything was more intense with him, and I knew my body would be feeling it for days.

But it felt damn good right now.

He pulled out, just as slow as he'd gone in, and it was torture.

The best kind of torture.

Moaning, I thrust back against him – or tried at least. One firm hand on my hip kept me from moving too far.

“Be still,” he demanded.

“Stop teasing me,” I countered, voice breathless.

“Every time you bent over a desk this week, especially in that skirt you wore the other day, I've wanted to do this.”

He drove in harder, and I gasped as a jolt went through me. I was so sensitive that I was riding that fine line between pain and pleasure, unable to think of anything beyond him and me and the fire between us. I slapped my palms on the table, needing to touch something, needing some sort of outlet.

“Just like this...” He slammed into me again.

Again.

I closed my eyes, letting each thrust drive out little primal grunts of sound. I was beyond being able to form coherent words.

“Fuck, Astra,” he ground out the words, each syllable telling me that he was as far gone as I was. He shoved a hand into my hair and bent me back, twisting my head around until he could kiss me, bite my bottom lip. “You drive me crazy.”

I might have told him he did the same to me.

If I could have talked. If I could have breathed.

But I couldn't.

He yanked me up, bracing me against him with one arm around my waist as his mouth made its way down my neck. All my weight bore me down on his cock, our height difference forcing me to the very tips of my toes. No more deep, driving thrusts. Just slow rocking moves and my own internal clenches. Just the irrepressible sense of fullness, of being stretched to near the breaking point. That and the gentle sucking and biting on my throat that told me he was marking me.

“I...I can’t...Dash...”

He let go of my hair and palmed one of my breasts, squeezing my nipple until I hit the point of no return.

The climax tore into me, and I fell apart.

LYING ON THE COUCH, curled up against him, I fought the wave of sleep that was coming. Between the awesome meal Didi prepared and the vigorous exercise Dash and I had just done to work off all those calories, I was about ready for bed. Well, for sleep anyway.

He’d put on his pants before we’d collapsed here. I hadn’t bothered with anything, just grabbing a long sweater I’d tossed on the back of a chair.

I yawned, smothering it behind my hand.

“You’re tired.”

The words sounded oddly stilted.

I straightened, twisting to look at him. I didn’t have much of a chance though, because he got up now, looking around the suite of rooms with an unfocused expression. “I...” He stopped and rubbed at his neck.

Shit.

“We’re both probably tired,” I said with more cheer than I felt. “Long day, lots of food. Great sex.”

His eyes came back to mine, but they were guarded.

“Don’t feel like you have to hang and cuddle.” I rolled my eyes and forced a smile as I looked away.

He looked really uncomfortable. Dash was a nice guy, but as good as he was at impulsive sex, I had a feeling he’d always avoided someone he actually knew. I’d always tried to keep from hooking up with guys from work, but I hadn’t managed to hold to my good intentions a time or two. I was eager to avoid the awkwardness I’d experienced then. Trying to spare us both, I got off the couch and went over to kiss his cheek with a light, platonic touch.

“This was fun. A release of all that tension between us. A good time, but no reason for either of us to get moon-eyed.”

“Of course.” He gave me a short nod and turned away.

As he gathered up his clothes, I rubbed the heel of my hand over my chest

as an ache began to throb there.

No. This wasn't awkward.

It was just...miserable. In under three minutes, he was heading for the door, and I had to bite my lip to keep from asking him to stay. From telling him that I'd changed my mind, and I wanted him to spend the night here, with me.

But I didn't.

He was moving so fast, it was like he couldn't *wait* to get out of there, and I wondered if I'd misread the situation, if there wouldn't have been any awkwardness because this had been just another night for him. Maybe he hadn't been nervous. Maybe he'd been trying to figure out how to let me down easy.

And I'd apparently just done it for him.

**Astra's story continues in the full novel book, *LA Misbehaved: Complete*.
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M. S. Parker is a USA Today Bestselling author and the author of the Erotic Romance series, Club Privè and Chasing Perfection.

Living in Las Vegas, she enjoys sitting by the pool with her laptop writing on her next spicy romance.

Growing up all she wanted to be was a dancer, actor or author. So far only the latter has come true but M. S. Parker hasn't retired her dancing shoes just yet. She is still waiting for the call for her to appear on Dancing With The Stars.

When M. S. isn't writing, she can usually be found reading– oops, scratch that! She is always writing.

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