



**DARE TO
LOVE**

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CARLY PHILLIPS

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Kindle Edition

CP Publishing 2013

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She arouses his dominant and protective instincts

And he will do anything to possess her ...

And does.

When billionaire Ian Dare gets one glimpse of the sensual and irresistible Riley Taylor, he knows he must have her. But any future he might have with Riley means he'll have to confront his past he'd rather forget. And that's something this NFL team owner won't dare to do—not even love.

* * *

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* * *

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Chapter One

Once a year, the Dare siblings gathered at the Club Meridian Ballroom in South Florida to celebrate the birthday of the father many of them detested. Ian Dare raised his glass filled with Glenlivet and took a sip, letting the burn of fine scotch work its way down his throat and into his system. He needed another before he fully relaxed.

“Hi, big brother.” His sister Olivia strode up to him and nudged him with her elbow.

“Watch the drink,” he said, wrapping his free arm around her shoulder for an affectionate hug. “Hi, Olivia.”

She returned the gesture with a quick kiss on his cheek. “It’s nice to be here.”

He shrugged. “I’m here for Avery and for you. Although why you forgave him—”

“Uh-uh. Not here.” She wagged a finger in front of his face. “If I put on a dress, we’re going to act civilized.”

Ian stepped back and took in his twenty-four-year-old sister for the first time. Wearing a gold gown, her dark hair up in a chic twist, it was hard to believe she was the same bane of his existence who’d chased after his friends until they relented and let her play ball with them.

“You look gorgeous,” he said to her.

She grinned. “You have to say that.”

“I don’t. And I mean it. I’ll have to beat men off with sticks when I see you.” The thought darkened his mood.

“You do and I’ll have your housekeeper short-sheet your bed! There should be perks to getting dressed like this, and getting laid should be one of them.”

“I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” he muttered and took another sip of drink.

“You not only promised to come tonight, you swore you’d behave.”

Ian scowled. “Good behavior ought to be optional considering the

flaunts his assets,” he said with a nod toward where Robert Dare held

Around him sat his second wife of nine years, Savannah Dare, and daughter, Sienna, along with their nearest and dearest country club. Missing were their other two sons, but they’d show up soon.

Olivia placed a hand on his shoulder. “He loves her, you know. Mom’s made her peace.”

“Mom had no choice once she found out about *her*.”

Robert Dare had met the much younger Savannah Sheppard and, he slowly told him, fallen instantly in love. She was now the mother of his three children, the oldest of whom was twenty-five. Ian had just turned

Anyone could do the math and come up with two families at the same time. The man was beyond fertile, that was for damned sure.

At the reminder, Ian finished his drink and placed the tumbler on the passing server’s tray. “I showed my face. I’m out of here.” He started to exit.

“Ian, hold on,” his sister said, frustration in her tone.

“What? Do you want me to wait until they sing ‘Happy Birthday to you’? Thanks. I’m leaving.”

Before they could continue the discussion, their half brother Alex burst through the double door entrance with a spectacular-looking woman clinging tightly to his arm, and Ian’s plans changed.

Because of *her*.

Some people had presence; others merely wished they possessed a little magic something. In her bold, red dress and fuck-me heels, she owned the room. And he wanted to own her. Petite and curvy with long, chestnut brown hair that fell down her back in wild curls, she was the antithesis of every too-thin female he’d dated and kept at arm’s length. But she was his half brother, which meant he had to steer clear.

“I thought you were leaving,” Olivia said from beside him.

“I am.” He should. If he could tear his gaze away from *her*.

“If you wait for Tyler and Scott, you might just relax enough to have fun,” she said of their brothers. “Come on, please?” Olivia used the pleading tone he never could resist.

“Yeah, please, Ian? Come on,” his sister Avery said, joining in, looking equally mature in a silver gown that showed way too much cleavage. At twenty-two, she was similar in coloring and looks to Olivia, and he

court. Any more ready to think of her as a grown-up—never mind letting other people ignore her—than he was with her sister.

friends. Ian set his jaw, amazed these two hadn't been the death of him yet.

“So what am I begging him to do?” Avery asked Olivia.

w. And Olivia grinned. “I want him to stay and hang out for a while. He is probably out of the question, but I'm trying to persuade him to let lo

“Brat,” he muttered, unable to hold back a smile at Olivia's persistence to hear. He stole another glance at his lady in red. He could no more leave her other could approach her, he thought, frustrated because he was a man of thirty and right now, he could do nothing but watch her.

ie time. “Well?” Olivia asked.

He forced his gaze to his sister and smiled. “Because you two are on amicably, I'll stay.” But his attention remained on the woman now dancing for the laughing with his half brother.

* * *

ly'? No

Riley Taylor felt his eyes on her from the moment she entered the elegantly decorated ballroom on the arm of another man. As it was, her heels were difficult enough to maneuver gracefully. Knowing a devastatingly sexy woman who watched her every move only made not falling on her ass even more of a challenge.

Alex Dare, her best friend, was oblivious. Being the star quarterback for the Tampa Breakers meant he was used to stares and attention. Riley And since this was his father's birthday bash, he knew everyone he didn't.

She definitely didn't know *him*. She'd managed to avoid this annual event in the past with a legitimate work excuse one year, the flu another, last year, Alex knew she was down in the dumps due to job problems, and he insisted she come along and have a good time.

While Alex danced with his mother, then sister, she headed for the bar and asked the bartender for a glass of ice water. She took a sip and then went to go find a seat, someplace where she could get off her feet and slip free of her offending heels.

She'd barely taken half a step when she bumped into a hard, solid body. The accompanying jolt sent her water spilling from the top of her head.

er menand into her cleavage. The chill startled her as much as the liquid that
down her chest.

“Oh!” She teetered on her stilettos, and big, warm hands grasped
shoulders, steadying her.

ing fun She gathered herself and looked up into the face of the man she
ose.” covertly watching. “You,” she said on a breathy whisper.

ence. His eyes, indigo with a hint of light blue in the depths, sparkled
than heamusement and something more. “Glad you noticed me too.”

action, She blinked, mortified, no words rushing into her brain to save her
was too busy taking him in. Dark-brown hair stylishly cut, cheeks
perfectly carved, and a strong jaw completed the package. And the
sked sointense heat emanated from his touch as he held on to her arms. His big
ing andmade her feel small, not an easy feat when she was always conscious
too-full curves.

She breathed in deeply and was treated to a masculine, woodsy scent
turned her insides to pure mush. Full-scale awareness rocked her to her
This man hit all her right buttons.

egantly “Are you all right?” he asked.

made it “I’m fine.” Or she would be if he’d release her so she could think
xy man of telling him so, she continued to stare into his handsome face.

re of a “You certainly are,” he murmured.

A heated flush rushed to her cheeks at the compliment, and a delicious
back of warmth invaded her system.

wasn’t. “I’m sorry about the spill,” he said.

re. She At least she hoped he was oblivious to her ridiculous attraction to him.

al party “You’re wet.” He released her and reached for a napkin from the bar
but this met. Desire pulsed through her veins. Oh my God, what was it about this
nd he’d that caused reactions in her body another man would have to work on
to achieve?

the bar He pressed the thin paper napkin against her chest and neck. He
rned to linger, didn’t stroke her anywhere he shouldn’t, but she could swear
e of her the heat of his fingertips against her skin. Between his heady scent
deliberate touch, her nerves felt raw and exposed. Her breasts swell
uit-clad nipples peaked, and she shivered, her body tightening in places she
er glass thought dormant. If he noticed, he was too much of a gentleman to say

dripped No man had ever awakened her senses this way before. Sometimes wondered if that was a deliberate choice on her part. *Obviously not* Her thought and forced herself to step back, away from his potent aura.

He crinkled the napkin and placed the paper onto the bar.

'd been "Thank you," she said.

"My pleasure." The word, laced with sexual innuendo, rolled off his tongue, and his eyes darkened to a deep indigo, an indication that this attraction she experienced wasn't one-sided.

er. She "Maybe now we can move on to introductions. I'm Ian Dare," he said.

She swallowed hard, disappointment rushing through her as she realized that for all her awareness of him, he was the one man at this party she ought to stay away from. "Alex's brother."

"Half brother," he bit out.

"Yes." She understood his pointed correction. Alex wouldn't want more of a connection to Ian than Ian did to Alex.

er core. "You have your father's eyes," she couldn't help but note.

His expression changed, going from warm to cold in an instant. "That's the only thing you think that bastard and I have in common."

Instead Riley raised her eyebrows at the bitter tone. Okay, she understood his reasons, but she was a stranger.

Ian shrugged, his broad shoulders rolling beneath his tailored, dark suit. "What can I say? Only a bastard would live two separate lives with two separate families at the same time."

"You do lay it out there," she murmured.

His eyes glittered like silver ice. "It's not like everyone here doesn't know it."

Though she ought to change the subject, he'd been open, so she couldn't help but ask what was on her mind. "If you're still so angry with him, why not wish him a happy birthday?"

"Because my sisters asked me to," he said, his tone turning warm. "I didn't indulge."

A hint of an easier expression changed his face from hard and unyielding to devastatingly sexy once more.

"Avery and Olivia are much more forgiving than me," he explained.

She smiled at his obvious affection for his siblings. As an only child, she'd long envied them a caring, older brother. At least she'd had Alex, she thought.

nes she glanced around looking for the man who'd brought her here. She fou
ot, she on the dance floor, still with his mother, and relaxed.

“Back to introductions,” Ian said. “You know my name; now it
turn.”

“Riley Taylor.”

off his “Alex’s girlfriend,” he said with disappointment. “I saw you tw
is crazy in.”

That’s what he thought? “No, we’re friends. More like brother an
aid. than anything else.”

realized, His eyes lit up, and she caught a glimpse of yet another expre
ught to pleasantly surprised. “That’s the best news I’ve heard all night,” he s
deep, compelling tone, his hot gaze never leaving hers.

At a loss for words, Riley remained silent.

ant any “So, Ms. Riley Taylor, where were you off to in such a hurry?” he
“I wanted to rest my feet,” she admitted.

He glanced down at her legs, taking in her red pumps. “Ahh. Well
“I hope just the place.”

Before she could argue—and if she’d realized he’d planned to d
he had off alone, she might have—Ian grasped her arm and guided her to the
the far side of the room.

rk suit. “Ian—”

ith two “Shh. You’ll thank me later. I promise.” He pushed open the do
they stepped out onto a deck that wasn’t in use this evening.

Sticky night air surrounded them, but being a Floridian, she was
doesn’t it, and obviously so was he. His arm still cupping her elbow, he led l
small love seat and gestured for her to sit.

decided She sensed he was a man who often got his way, and though she’
y come found that trait attractive before, on him, it worked. She settled into
cushions. He did the same, leaving no space between them, and she li
rm and feel of his hard body aligned with hers. Her heart beat hard in her
excitement and arousal pounding away inside her.

ielding Around them, it was dark, the only light coming from sconces
nearby building.

d. “Put your feet up.” He pointed to the table in front of them.

ild, she “Bossy,” she murmured.

ght and Ian grinned. He was, and damn proud of it. “You’re the one w

and his your feet hurt,” he reminded her.

“True.” She shot him a sheepish look that was nothing short of adorable. The reverberation in her throat went straight to Ian’s cock, and he sat in his seat, pure sexual desire now pumping through his veins.

He’d been pissed off and bored at his father’s ridiculous birthday party. Even his sisters had barely been able to coax a smile from him. The girls walked into the room.

Because she was with his half brother, Ian hadn’t planned on approaching her, but the minute he’d caught sight of her alone at the bar, he’d gone for her—her, compelled by a force beyond his understanding. Finding out she was just friends had made his night because she’d provide a distraction to the pain that followed him whenever his father’s other half was near.

“Shoes?” he reminded her.

She dipped her head and slipped off her heels, moaning in obvious pain.

“That sound makes me think of other things,” he said, capturing her attention.

“Such as?” She unconsciously swayed closer, and he suppressed a groan.

“Sex. With you.”

“Oh.” Her lips parted with the word, and Ian couldn’t tear his gaze from her lush, red-painted mouth.

A mouth he could envision many uses for, none of them tame.

“Is this how you charm all your women?” she asked. “Because I’m sure it’s working.” A teasing smile lifted her lips, contradicting her words.

He had her, all right, as much as she had him.

He kept his gaze on her face, but he wasn’t a complete gentleman. He couldn’t resist brushing his hand over her tight nipples showing through the fabric of her dress.

Her eyes widened in surprise at the same time a soft moan escaped her lips, sealing her fate. He slid one arm across the love seat until his fingers were in her hair, massaging her scalp. He wrapped his hand in the thick strands. Then, tugging her close, he sealed his mouth over hers. She opened for him immediately. The first taste was a mere preview, not nearly enough, and he deepened the kiss, taking more.

Sweet, hot, and her tongue tangled with his. He gripped her hair, wanting still more. She was like all his favorite vices in one delicious package. Best of all, she kissed him back, every inch a willing,

partner.

able. He was a man who dominated and took, but from the minute he shifted her, he gave as well. If his brain were clear, he'd have pulled her immediately, but she reached out and gripped his shoulders, curling her fingers through the fabric of his shirt, her nails digging into his skin. The thrust of his tongue in her mouth mimicked what he really wanted, and his cock hardened even more.

aching "You've got to be kidding me," his half brother said, interrupting her at the worst possible moment.

he and He would have taken his time, but Riley jumped, pushing at his chest and backing away from him at the same time.

family "Alex!"

"Yeah. The guy who brought you here, remember?"

Ian cursed his half brother's interruption as much as he welcomed the reminder that this woman represented everything Ian resented. Her gaze, brother's friend. Alex, with whom he had a rivalry that would have driven his siblings proud.

The oldest sibling in the *other* family was everything Ian wasn't. Loud, tattoos on his forearms, and he threw a mean football as quarterback for the Tampa Breakers. Ian, meanwhile, was more of a thinker, president of the Breakers' rivals, the Miami Thunder, owned by his father's estranged brother, Ian's uncle.

nds. Riley jumped up, smoothing her dress and rubbing at her swollen cheeks, doing nothing to ease the tension emanating from her best friend.

ian and Ian took his time standing.

ugh the "I see you met my brother," Alex said, his tone tight.

Riley swallowed hard. "We were just—"

scaped, "Getting better acquainted," Ian said in a seductive tone meant to hit her and imply just how much better he now knew Riley.

ging her A muscle ticked in the other man's jaw. "Ready to go back inside? He asked her.

he kiss, Neither one of them would make a scene at this mockery of a formal event.

harder, "Yes." She didn't meet Ian's gaze as she walked around him and collected herself alongside Alex.

giving "Good, because my dad's been asking for you. He said it's been too long."

since he's seen you," Alex said, taunting Ian back with the mention of a tastedone person sure to piss him off.

ed back Despite knowing better, Ian took the bait. "Go on. We were fighting heranyway," he said, dismissing Riley as surely as she'd done to him.

1. Each Never mind that she was obviously torn between her friend and what he had just happened between them; she'd chosen Alex. A choice Ian had made through before and come out on the same wrong end.

g at the In what appeared to be a deliberately possessive move, Alex wrapped his arm around her waist and led her back inside. Ian watched, ignoring the twisting pain in his gut at the sight. Which was ridiculous. He didn't have an emotional investment in Riley Taylor. He didn't do emotion, perceived relationships through the lens of his father's adultery, finding it hard to remain on the outside looking in.

ned the Distance was his friend. Sex worked for him. It was love, not his halfcommitment he distrusted. So no matter how different that brief moment from the realRiley had been, that was all it was.

A moment.

Brash, One that would never happen again.

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t of the
traged

* * *

en lips, Riley followed Alex onto the dance floor in silence. They hadn't spoken a word to each other since she'd let him lead her away from Ian. Riley understood his shocked reaction and wanted to soothe his frazzled nerves but didn't know how. Not when her own nerves were so raw from one kiss.

o taunt Except nothing about Ian was simple, and that kiss left her reeling the minute his lips touched hers, everything else around her had ceased to matter. The tug of arousal hit her in the pit of her stomach, in her scalp, as his fingers tugged her hair, in the weight of her breasts, between her thighs. The most telling, in her mind. He was a strong man, the kind who knew what he wanted and who liked to get his way. The type of man she usually avoided and for good reason.

ame up But she'd never experienced chemistry so strong before. His pull was so compelling that she'd willingly followed him outside regardless of how long that she knew without a doubt her closest friend in the world would be

... of the she got close to Ian.

“Are you going to talk to me?” Alex asked, breaking into her thought.
“I’m not sure what to say.”

On the one hand, he didn’t have a say in her personal life. She didn’t owe him an apology. On the other, he was her everything. The child she’d had been up next door to and the best friend who’d saved her sanity and given her a safe haven from her abusive father.

“She was wrong. She knew exactly what to say. “I’m sorry.”

He touched his forehead to hers. “I don’t know what came over me. I found you two kissing, and I saw red.”

“It was just chemistry.” She let out a shaky laugh, knowing that telling her was easier than admitting what had passed between her and Ian.

“I don’t want you to get hurt. The man doesn’t do relationships, he just uses women and moves on.”

“Umm, pot/kettle?” she asked him. Alex moved from woman to woman just as he’d accused his half brother of doing.

He’d even kissed *her* once. Horndog that he was, he said he’d had a crush on her but they both agreed there was no spark, and their friendship meant too much to throw away for a quick tumble between the sheets.

Alex frowned. “Maybe so, but that doesn’t change the facts about the man. I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I won’t,” she assured him, even as her heart picked up speed when she caught sight of Ian watching them from across the room.

Drink in hand, brooding expression on his face, his stare never wavered. She curled her hands into the suit fabric covering Alex’s shoulders. She assured herself she was telling the truth.

“What if he was using you to get to me?”

“Because the man can’t be interested in me for me?” she asked, hurt wounded despite the fact that Alex was just trying to protect her.

Alex slowed his steps and leaned back to look into her eyes. “That’s what I meant, and you know it. Any man would be lucky to have you, I’ll never get between you and the right guy.” A muscle pulsed in Alex’s temple, a sure sign of tension and stress. “But Ian’s not that guy.”

She swallowed hard, hating that he just might be right. Riley was a one-night stand. Which was why her body’s combustible reaction to him was so confusing and confounded her. How far would she have let him hurt if...

Alex hadn't interrupted? Much further than she'd like to imagine, thoughts. Her body responded with a full-out shiver at the thought.

"Now can we forget about him?"

Not likely, she thought, when his gaze burned hotter than his. Somehow she managed to swallow over the lump in her throat and give him the answer he sought. "Sure."

Pleased, Alex pulled her back into his arms to continue their slow

Around them, other guests, mostly his father's age, moved slowly in rhythm to the music.

"Did I mention how much I appreciate you coming here with me? Obviously trying to ease the tension between them, he shot her the charming grin that had women thinking they were special.

Riley knew better. She *was* special to him, and if he ever turned his back of protectiveness on the right kind of woman and not the group of women preferred, he might find himself settled and happy one day. Sadly, he didn't seem to be on that path.

She decided to let their disagreement over Ian go. "I believe I've mentioned how wonderful I am a couple of times. But you still owe me

Riley said. Parties like this weren't her thing.

"It took your mind off your job stress, right?" he asked.

She nodded. "Yes, and let's not even talk about that right now." When she was soon enough to deal with her new boss.

"You got it. Ready for a break?" he asked.

Unable to help herself, she glanced over where she had seen Ian earlier, but he was gone. The disappointment twisting the pit of her stomach was disproportional to the amount of time she'd known him, and she blamed that kiss.

Her lips still tingled, and if she closed her eyes and ran her tongue over them, she could taste his heady, masculine flavor. Somehow she had to keep that from her thoughts. Alex's reaction to seeing them together near the bar and Ian's reaction to seeing her with Ian's friend, she couldn't allow herself the luxury of indulging in anything more with Ian's friend. Not even in her thoughts or dreams.

She didn't

go to Ian

if

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Not even in her thoughts or dreams.

Chapter Two

Riley walked into the main office of Blunt Sporting Goods, a manufacturer and retailer where she'd been employed since she was seventeen. She worked her way up from sales to store manager until she was ultimately drafted into their corporate headquarters after college. She worked hard, earned good money, and best of all, loved her job. She was in charge of distribution and knew how to get their goods into the right hands. Too bad those years of loyal service were now threatened by a sale to new owners.

When Jerry Blunt had decided to retire and travel with his wife, he sold the once-family-owned business to a pompous jerk who'd with the intentions of cleaning house and bringing in fresh new talent, as he called his hires, until the final papers were signed.

He brought in all his own people for lead jobs, which Riley gradually admitted made sense. But he also sought to hire new people from outside the company, those willing to work for less money. He didn't give the long-standing, once-valued workers a chance to prove their worth. Many employees with families to support were let go, and they'd have a tough time getting a new job for the same pay.

It sucked, Riley thought, and she wanted to at least try to save her department. To do so, she had to prove to her new boss that she could do things well and efficiently and make him money. Sadly, he wasn't the boss she needed to listen, and every day, more people left with their belongings in their cars escorted out by security.

When her intercom rang, calling her in to see the new boss, Riley doubted she would be the next one out the door. She flexed her fingers and took the stairs to the next floor, using the time to give herself a pep talk before approaching Franklin O'Mara.

"Go on in," Gail, his personal secretary, also new to the company, said. "He's expecting you."

"Thanks." She stepped into his office.

In his forties with a receding hairline and paunch in his stomach,

epitomized the lazy executive, and it killed Riley to see the company he'd inherited.

"Ms. Taylor." He held a file in his hand, no doubt filled with evaluations and track record at the company.

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"Mr. O'Mara." She waited until he gestured for her to be seated nodding and settling into the chair across from his massive desk.

"I'm sorry to say, we'll be letting you go."

She swallowed hard. "I understand your new corporate policy in bringing in fresh talent," she began.

"Then you understand it's nothing personal. We'll give you severance package and references. Marge in HR will discuss the details with you."

"What if I told you I could get you access to the Miami Thunder?" he asked, grasping at the first—and clearly most absurd—thing that crossed his mind.

No doubt because Ian Dare, president of the Miami Thunder, who had been in her dreams day and night since their first Saturday night.

O'Mara's eyes lit up with interest. "Keep talking."

She ran her tongue along the inside of her dry mouth, wishing she could take back her words. For one thing, Alex would kill her. For another, she didn't even have access to the man.

But she had a department of employees whose jobs and welfare depended on this one Hail Mary. "I have a personal connection with Ian Dare." The lock they'd shared was very personal, she thought, suppressing a shiver.

"Go on."

She crossed her fingers in her lap and continued. "I've been planning to talk to him about changing suppliers for his team's inventory, or giving us a shot. I figured once he sees we're reliable and our deals are solid, maybe he'll throw more business our way."

She twisted her fingers, hoping he didn't notice how badly she was panicking as she spoke. Even she knew football teams had major marketing contracts with big companies, but the words were out, and there was no taking them back.

"Now that's a way to put yourself on my radar." He nodded approvingly.

my she “Okay, talk to him. You have until Friday noon. No deal? I’m bringing employees people.”

Riley rose to her feet. “Thank you,” she said, extending her hand with hersweaty handshake, then turned and headed for the door.

“Noon Friday,” he reminded her as she let herself out.

before For the return trip to her office, Riley took the elevator, unsure if she would support her on the walk down. She didn’t want to lose her job unless she could reach Ian Dare and talk him into doing business with her. If not, she’d be unemployed, unable to afford her rent, car payment, student loans and other assorted bills. Even Alex would understand how her utter despair over the possibility had led her to Ian.

She hoped.

She leaned against the elevator wall and groaned. Thanks to her father’s big mouth, her job was in Ian Dare’s very sexy hands.

came to

* * *

he kissed

hookup

For the week following his father’s party, Ian was tied up in preparing for the football draft. Agents trying to pitch their best players, to track down unhappy players, to work the system and his team to their advantage. This year, the annual event was being held in Ian’s hometown of Miami at his father’s flagship hotel, which meant he’d have to be on guard while there. Dealing with Robert Dare’s attempts at reconciliation could easily distract him from business.

He depended

The lip-

r.

He was so inundated meeting with his general manager and secretary that he only returned calls relating to deals, ignoring all others, including his parents and siblings.

When he finally sat down to eat and listen to all his messages, he was shocked to hear the sexy voice he dreamed about at night.

at least

he solid,

he was

ultiyear

was no

vingly.

“Hi, Ian. It’s Riley Taylor. We—umm—met at your father’s birthday party this past weekend. I have something important I’d like to discuss with you. My number is . . .” He listened to the rest of the message, a little jotting down her information while focusing on her voice.

Strong and husky, her tone aroused him all over again, but he also felt a tremor as she spoke, which made him wonder if the memory of the woman who had haunted her as much as it did him. Since Saturday night, he’d almost

g in my between cursing his half brother for interrupting and being grateful reminder that this woman had loyalties in direct conflict with him.

for his As an adult, Ian hated the notion of considering Alex competition, past couldn't be changed. When their father had had a choice to make, he picked Alex and his siblings, not Ian and his. They'd had him for career legssporting events, and graduations. Maybe not all his father's so-called job, but travel had been a lie, but there was no doubt who'd gotten short shrift with her, came to having a dad. And though Ian had stepped up for his student loans, nothing could replace the gaping hole Robert Dare had left them with in panic when they were ignorant of the other family and after he'd moved out.

So yes, Alex had always been a rival. First for their father's affections, then as the star quarterback of the Thunder's biggest competition, and finally for a woman Ian barely knew. Even if that kiss had made him think that there was a connection, her withdrawal afterward had made a bigger statement. No woman had gotten to him, something no other could claim. He would not be giving her another opening. He might be curious as to what she wanted, but why she'd reach out to him, but he couldn't afford to care.

He allowed himself a few last lingering thoughts of Riley, the fruit of her glossed lips and the sound of her soft moans reverberating through his head. Then he picked up the paper on which he'd written down her name, crushed it into a ball, and tossed it in the trash.

he was
ld only

* * *

For the first two days of the draft, Ian managed to miss bumping into his motherman but knew his luck wouldn't hold out. Sure enough, Saturday morning

Robert intercepted him on his way to a breakfast meeting at the restaurant he was attending. "Ian!" His father strode up to him, dressed in a suit and tie, happy as he owned the world.

Ian inclined his head. "Good morning. I can't talk. I'm late for my birthday meeting."

His father stared at him with knowing eyes. Eyes the same navy blue as his own. "I won't keep you. But I was disappointed I didn't get to talk to you at the party the other night."

"I was there. Only because Avery and Olivia asked me to come," Ian deliberately added.

for the Avery, his youngest sister, had been a bone marrow donor for his father's other daughter, Sienna—Sienna's illness being the only reason Robert Dare had revealed his cheating, lying ways. He'd needed to see if his legitimate children were matches. The girls had bonded over concerts, experience, accepting them as family. Ian didn't feel the same way. He'd hated his half siblings; he just wanted nothing to do with them. But when his father, he'd sworn to be there for his family, so when the girls had asked him to attend the party for them, he'd agreed.

h, both “And I'm grateful you attended. A man never knows how many years he has left,” Robert said.

fection, Ian rolled his eyes at the dramatic statement. “You're healthy, and you probably outlive us all.” He deliberately glanced at his watch. “I've got a meeting inside.” He tipped his head toward the restaurant.

it. This “Maybe we can have lunch or dinner?” the older man asked, hoping Ian wouldn't be eyes.

ted and Ian shook his head. “Like I said, I've got meetings.”

ty taste Shadows crossed his father's face, and Ian did his best not to feel guilty. “Fine, but I'll keep trying, you know.”

through Ian straightened his shoulders. “It's too late for that too.” He turned and stepped toward the restaurant entrance when he heard his name called and turned.

This time it was Alex rushing to catch up to him.

His father hadn't left, and he greeted his other son, not bothering to excuse himself as Alex strode up to Ian.

his old “You're such a selfish prick,” Alex said, getting into his face. “We've been talking about you for a long time. You should have called her this morning, have killed you to return her phone calls and see what she had to say?”

ant. Ian immediately knew he was talking about Riley. “You're the only one who made it clear she should have nothing to do with me, so what's up with you now?”

for a “She left you a message, right? Said she had something important to discuss? And you couldn't be bothered to call?” Alex asked, jaw held tight.

blue as In that instant, Ian saw shades of his father in Alex's younger face. It had been awhile since the blood connection between them had hit him so strongly. And damn but it hurt.

ne,” he “Would one of you tell me what the hell is going on?” Robert interrupted them.

or their Alex straightened his shoulders. “Riley called him this week. She
reasona favor and asked him to call her back. He didn’t.”

e if any “I was busy,” Ian said, suddenly feeling a combination of gu
ver the overriding concern. “It’s draft week, not that I owe you an expla
e didn’t Besides, *you* made it clear I should back off.” Ian wasn’t above shar
like his blame when warranted.

ed him Alex ran a hand through his hair, frustration evident in the
muscles in his neck. “She’s my best friend. Has been since we were ki

ears he “What did she need from me?” Ian asked, ignoring any reference
close Riley and Alex were. Even if it was friendship, it had come betw
l you’ll and the woman he wanted. He found it difficult to contain his jealousy

it to get Alex paused, looking torn before he said, “It’s not my story to t
besides, it’s too late anyway.”

e in his “What the hell does that mean?” Ian asked.

“Is Riley okay?” Robert demanded. “I care about that girl
daughter.”

guilty. “As if you don’t have enough of those,” Ian muttered.

His father’s face blanched, his skin color leaching out. “She pra
d away lived in our house growing up. If something’s wrong, I want to know.”

e being “You know Riley. She’s always okay or pretends to be,” Ale

“She’s independent and proud, and you know it. You also know why.
enough for her to call *him*.” Alex jerked a finger at Ian.

ring to “But if one of us can help—” Robert said, only to be cut off by the
swinging of Alex’s hand.

ould it “Let her handle her own shit. I’ve learned it’s the only way to kee
’ my life.”

ne who Alex turned back to Ian. “I came here because I was furious, a
our ass deserved to know you fucked up. But it’s too late now. There’s
anyone can do.”

rtant to There were so many questions raised by Alex’s statement that Ian
light. know where to begin. From her always pretending to be okay to he

. It had proud and independent, Alex and their father were privy to why. Ian w

him so But he wanted to know. Needed to understand her even if it
digging deeper than she’d be comfortable with. He was also smart eno

asked, to ask questions his half brother wouldn’t answer.

“Give me her number,” Ian said. “The least I can do is apologize.”

needed Alex scowled at him. "Go to hell. She doesn't need your help and she sure as hell doesn't need to be another one of your conquests."

uilt and "Hey." Ian grabbed his shoulder.

anation. Alex shrugged him away. "Back off."

ing the "Just give me her damned number."

"Not happening, and don't think you can look her up in the phone book. She's unlisted."

ds." With that, he stormed off, leaving Ian where he'd started, about 100 feet away from his father.

een Ian Before he could take leave, his father placed a hand on Ian's shoulder, surprising him and causing an old memory to surface. Robert, getting ready to leave for a business trip, wearing a suit, and placing his hand on the old Ian's shoulder. "Take care of your mother and siblings, son."

At the time, Ian had been puffed up and proud his father trusted him with the job. Looking back, the request was as much of an illusion as his childhood had been. No ten-year-old could possibly take on that responsibility. It was just something a parent said to make his job seem important. But the reality was, that had been Ian's job for way too long.

He stood stiffly, refusing to give his father the satisfaction of showing he was said away, and waited for him to finish.

It took "You all don't have to pay for my sins, son. You could get to know each other. You could be brothers."

His suit jacket suddenly too tight, Ian broke into an uncomfortable grimace. "What part of that conversation indicated either of us wants that?"

"You're both men with huge egos. Neither of you is willing to be vulnerable."

But you're the oldest. Maybe you won't give me a second chance, but you should give your other siblings a first one. You're all family."

Though he hated giving his father a glimpse into his feelings, Ian placed his hand to his throbbing temple. "Isn't it enough I take care of my brothers and sisters, and mother after you couldn't be bothered? I'm there for them."

"If you ever need me . . ." His father trailed off as Ian turned to go.

asn't. Suddenly, he realized his father had something Ian wanted . . . and if he didn't have it, he had access. He turned back to the older man. "You need something for me."

"What is it?" Robert asked, hope in his voice.

"I need to get in touch with Riley. Phone number, address, something."

ymore. Can you get me that?"

"Disappointment flooded Robert's face before he schooled his expression. "I'll give you her number if you do something for me in return."

The calculating son of a bitch, Ian thought. "What is it?" he bit out. "Reach out to Sienna and the boys. Invite them to lunch or coffee. Robert eyed him speculatively, clearly eager to see what he'd do.

Ian gritted his teeth and didn't answer. "I thought apologizing to Riley was important to you." "It is."

His father's deal begged the question, did Ian want access to Riley good enough to extend an olive branch to his father's other family?

Her scent came back to him vividly, a fruity blend that had knocked on his ass and had him daydreaming of her ever since. The thought of any kind of pain in those blue eyes was like slicing his own skin as his apparently he'd done just that. He needed to fix it. But first he needed to know what the hell he'd done by not returning her call.

Hell yes, she was worth it. Ian forced out the words. "I'll invite Sienna for lunch."

Robert's narrowed gaze settled on Ian. "That's a start." If Ian had wondered where he got his business sense, he now knew each include Alex and Jason too," he muttered.

Robert nodded, clearly pleased. "Good. Savannah has Riley's information in her phone," he said of his current wife and Sienna, Alex, and mother. "I'll send it over to you later today."

"Fine." Ian wasn't about to thank the man for something he'd brought out for.

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Looks like he had a family reunion to plan. Because Riley Taylor had gotten to him that much.

Chapter Three

Riley pulled up to the gate surrounding Alex's mansion on Star Island, entered the key code, letting herself in and driving down his long driveway. Alex's house was a far cry from the small apartment in Miami where she lived, but she was used to her best friend's wealth. He had his main residence here and a luxury apartment in Tampa for during the season. He needed privacy, and thanks to the one road in and out along with the guardhouse at the entrance, Alex was away from the prying eyes of rabid fans.

She parked in a guest spot on his driveway, and a few minutes later, Riley and Alex sat on the floor in his man cave, as he called it, eating pizza that the delivery guy had delivered.

"You're really a good friend, letting me cry on your shoulder like this," Riley said.

He shot her one of his patented *are you an idiot* looks. "Like you're any different for me?"

She stretched her legs out in front of her, leaning her head back against the couch behind her. "I just can't believe it. I worked so hard for so long, and everything came down to one long shot."

She grabbed a soda instead of a beer, knowing she had to drive home later.

"You'll find something. You're talented, and you've got a killer resume," Alex said in an attempt to reassure her.

She smiled at his unwavering support. "I'll give myself a short while to wallow in self-pity, and then I'm picking myself up and moving on."

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you. When things get rough, you never give in."

"Nope." Because if she had, she'd have become like her mother, one thing Riley had promised herself was, she would never be any doormat.

"I could make a few calls. Get your foot in the door at—"

"No. Thank you, but no. I can find something on my own."

Alex frowned. "Yet you had no problem calling *him*."

She raised her shoulders, unable to explain why she'd used Ian's r
try to save her job, even to herself.

"Never mind. You were desperate. I get it." Alex repeated what he
the first time she told him what she'd done. She'd been so upset with
and she'd felt worse when he hadn't even gotten angry. He'd merely
her into a hug.

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za he'd
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ig. And
e home
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gh, you
and the
r man's

When Alex was being rational, his jealousy and bitterness over h
treated him didn't come into play. She'd always sensed Alex would b
open to Ian and his brothers if Ian would do the same.

Alex took a long pull of beer. "The least he could have done was
your call."

"Well, maybe it's for the best. You know how much I hate ask
help. This way, I don't owe him anything."

An annoyed sound rumbled from deep in Alex's chest. "Yes, yo
friend who makes millions knows how much you hate asking, taking,
accepting help."

She shrugged, knowing how much she frustrated him, living in h
bedroom apartment without a doorman. He considered her like a sis
wanted her to move to a better neighborhood, but she was happy in he
and wanted to live on her own salary. She'd always felt the need to pr
could stand on her own, was worthy on her own merits, no matter w
father used to say.

"You're a pain in the ass," he said.

"At least you know I love you for yourself."

"Amen to that, sweetheart." He tipped his bottle her way. "I sti
believe the SOB didn't call you back," Alex said, returning to the sul
Ian. "It's not like *I* left the damn message," he muttered.

Remembering that kiss and the electricity that had practically crac
the air around them, she was surprised too. Hadn't Ian been at least
about what she'd wanted? If she weren't so upset about her career
future, her feminine ego might be hurt.

"I nearly kicked his ass today," Alex said.

Riley choked on her soda. "You did what? Where did you see him
sat up straighter.

"I headed over to the draft hotel. I figured he needed to know
selfish asshole he is."

ame to “Alex,” she groaned. She closed her eyes and leaned back against the sofa. “Couldn’t you have left it alone?” Embarrassment already filled her mind. The thought of Ian ignoring her call, let alone Alex confronting him over herself, “No, I could not. He needed to be taken down a peg. But don’t worry, Dad was there, so we didn’t get violent.”

She glared at him from across the table.

ow Ian “And I didn’t tell him you lost your job either.”

he more She exhaled long and hard. “Well, at least you spared me that.”

He grinned. “Did I mention some of my teammates are coming to see me tonight? You up to staying? You know the guys enjoy your company.”

She groaned. “No thanks.” She made a face. She wasn’t in the mood for the guys or their crude humor.

He rose to his feet, collecting the pizza box. She stood and grabbed her bestempties. They cleaned up with an ease born of years of friendship. “Appreciate you being here for me,” she said again.

“Always, Ri.” He reached out to ruffle her hair, but, expecting the other one—she ducked before he could reach her.

By the time she arrived home, she was exhausted. It didn’t help that during the drive home, she’d mentally mapped out her future options. Most of them consisted of sending resumes to the big sports and distribution companies out of state. The thought of having to start over, prove her worth, and work her way back up the corporate ladder once more made her sick.

She loved Miami and didn’t want to leave her stepmother or Alex and her other friends. There were other smaller local companies she planned to apply to, so all wasn’t lost yet. And until all was lost, she wouldn’t mention the subject of Alex. He’d only get upset and insist on helping. Obviously, people would bend over backward to help the superstar, and his best friend by extension. “I know, but Riley really wanted to try to find a job on her own first.”

She let herself into her building, walked up one flight to her apartment, and was startled to find someone waiting outside her door. Even in the dimly lit hall, she recognized Ian Dare’s tall frame, dark hair, and handsome features. Excitement bubbled up inside her, followed by wariness.

“Finally,” he said, leading her to believe he’d been standing there all day.

She fought against her rapidly beating heart. “What are you doing here?”

He pushed off the wall and strode toward her. “Do you realize I’ve been waiting outside your door for an hour? I just followed behind a

inst thewho were too busy groping each other to pay attention to who was e
l her atbehind them.”

er it. He didn't have to further sum up his point. Riley already kn
worry.argument well from Alex and her stepmom. “It's perfectly safe. I carry
and I'm careful. And you still haven't answered my question.”

Ian ran a hand through his hair, taking the time to tamp down
anger that had been brewing inside him as he waited for her in this ti
that, despite her claim, was far from safe.

by for Not for a woman with her full breasts and curvy hips. Not for a
pany.” with that mass of untamed hair and wild beauty, dressed in a short
ood forskirt with a ruffled edge and black sleeveless top that bared a hint
stomach.

bed the He fought for control over his libido and the desire to take her in
ndship.way imaginable. “I realize I didn't return your call, but I'm here now.”

She met his gaze, brave and unwavering. “Go home. Whatever I
e move,from you, it's too late now.”

His eyes narrowed. “That's what Alex said, but he refused to el
elp thatHe said it was your business, so I came to the source. I was busy this
, whichhad meetings for the draft, and I couldn't call you back.”

chains, She raised an eyebrow. “Bull. I'm guessing there are a whole
th, andreasons why you didn't get back to me. At the top of the list is that y
Alex.”

and her “I don't hate him.” He clenched his hands and released them
o scopesearching for focus. “Riley, you left me a message. Just tell me why.”

on it to “It's too late.” She walked toward him as she spoke.

ould She passed him by, heading for her door, key in hand. “I already
ension,job,” she said as she slipped inside her apartment.

The door slammed closed behind her, leaving him basking in her s

artment, “Son of a bitch.” He knocked hard.

e dimly When she didn't answer, he tried again.

ndsome And again.

Worst-case scenario, he'd settle into the hallway for the night and
rwhile. catch her when she left again in the morning. Unwilling to do that, he
here?” on the door again.

walked In the middle of his knock, she swung the door open wide.

couple “Fine. Come in,” she said, her eyes narrowed and wary.

entering He stepped inside. Once enclosed in her small apartment, her
scent wrapped around him once more. His cock took a definite hit as
ew thefilled him along with that burning need only she inspired. Knowin
y mace,feelings wouldn't be welcome, he took in her space. Bright colors
walls, eclectic pieces of furniture, and a warm feel. She knew how to
on thetiny area and make it feel like a true home.

iny hall "Can I get you something to drink?" she asked.

"No. I just want to know what happened."

woman She expelled a deep breath, causing her breasts to rise and fall bene
: denimflimsy material. He glanced down, trying not to ogle her cleavage l
of herthat made him want to test the weight of her breasts. And once he
touching her, he wouldn't be able to stop. Instead, he noticed her t
n everywhere painted a bright orange, one toe surrounded by a thin silver ring
' her fucking feet were sexy.

needed "I worked for Blunt Sporting Goods," she said, unaware of his
thought. "I was head of their distribution and sales department. The co
aborate.was sold; the new boss is an ass and began laying people off. I pulled
week. I Mary and told him I had an in with you, that I could get some of our p
distributed to the team. He gave me until Friday to get back to hi
host ofsomething substantial. I called. You didn't. End of story." She strode
ou hatethe door and swung it open, obviously eager to get rid of him.

He stared in stunned surprise. "You told him that after meeting me
again,first time on Saturday night?"

She raised her chin. "Yep."

"After our kiss."

lost my Her cheeks turned a healthy pink. "Mmm-hmm."

"After you walked away from me without a second glance."

cent. She blinked up at him. "I looked back," she said softly.

He narrowed his gaze. "You've got nerve."

"So I've been told." She grinned.

He smiled back.

wait to She obviously realized they were sharing a moment and turned
bangedmegawatt grin. "So now you know. You can go now." She tilted h
toward the hallway.

Pride. She had it in spades and didn't like him knowing she'd lost
He respected that. Too bad he wasn't about to leave her now.

conscious He shook his head, silently telling her he was staying. The guilt his desire when his brother told him he'd caused Riley problems was only making those now that he knew how. Based on how angry Alex had been on her behalf, she cared about her deeply. He looked after her. And that was something she could take and respect. Friendship with his half brother, Ian could work around.

But first, there was the issue of her job.

"I realize you don't know me, but you're going to. Because you let me into your world by calling me, I caused a problem for you. No matter how much I'm obligated to fix it."

She leaned against the still-open door. "You can't, because we both started you're committed to whoever you already purchase from, and I should have opened my big mouth."

So she'd realized the way of things in the business. Although that to alleviate his guilt over her losing her job, it didn't. "Maybe not, but if you returned your call, there are other people I could have referred you to. My company could have given your company business."

"We'll never know, now will we?"

"About that? No." Pretending to be tough and unconcerned didn't help him for a second.

She lived in this building, in a not-great part of town, because it was the only one she could afford. With Ian's background in owning investment properties, she could figure out her approximate income and rent and knew, though she might have a small savings, she couldn't afford to be unemployed for an extended period of time. So she'd panicked and called him, which made her owe him.

But that wasn't why he was still here. He wanted to help. She might not let his brother do it, but Ian damned well intended to.

"What are your plans now?" he asked.

She slowly shut the door, obviously realizing he had no intention of leaving. "I'll send out resumes like any job-seeking person would," she said as if he were dense not to have figured her next step out for himself.

"Or you could come work for me."

The color drained from her face. "You're offering me a job. What the hell is your Thunder?"

He nodded.

"Doing . . . ?"

e'd felt If she was questioning, she wasn't saying no, and his heart rate spiked. He magnified the possibility of seeing her day in and day out. "That remains to be seen. In the half, he knew we have some openings. We'll see what fits best."

else Ian She swallowed hard and remained silent, but the color had returned to her cheeks. "So I wouldn't be working directly for you."

Interesting—the thought of working with him flustered her. She brought it up because that meant she wasn't immune, no matter how high a wall she'd erected between them.

"No, you won't be working for me. I can't have that."

He knew She wrinkled her nose, making him want to reach out and stroke her hair. He couldn't skin.

"Why not?" she asked.

It ought He stepped closer, and when she didn't back away, closer still, until he was within inches separated them. "Because I intend to get to know you personally. I'm not who Riley Taylor. So I can't be mixing business with pleasure."

Her breath caught, but she remained in place, those huge blue eyes watching him with a mix of wary curiosity and definite desire. He wanted to kiss her again, to lose himself in that luscious mouth, then press her against the wall and thrust into her warm, wet body.

It was all Shit.

Partly, he He tore his gaze from hers, reminding himself to slow the fuck down. He hadn't gotten her to agree to take a position with the team. A job was a priority, and that meant it was his as well.

He meant he Using all the willpower he had, he straightened his shoulders and stepped away first. "Come to the stadium Monday morning and ask for Olivia. My sister will find the appropriate fit for you with the organization."

"I can't take charity." She folded her arms across her chest. In a defensive stance, he saw the secrets that Alex knew.

He thought of The ones that held the key to understanding this complicated world. He said, "Before he was finished, he intended to know her inside and out."

He remained apart, giving her space. "It's not charity when I owe you. It's not returning your call. It's not nepotism, favoritism, or any other bullshit. It might come up with either."

She pursed her lips, obviously wavering.

His gaze lingered on her mouth, the desire to take it overwhelming, but he refrained. "You were willing to call me and ask me to do business with you."

ed up at Consider this a similar opportunity. If you can't do the job, you're
seen. I your ass, the same as anyone else." He gave her the honest truth. He w
keep her on the payroll if she couldn't perform.

d to her "So? What will it be?"

In the ensuing silence, all the possible things Ian wanted to do to h
Good,her, passed in front of his eyes until he was convinced she'd say no.
l she'd "I'll be there in the morning," she finally said, extending her hand
to shake.

Finally, he thought, grasping her smaller fingers in his. A
her soft awareness ricocheted through him.

Her slight gasp told him she'd felt it too.

He raised a hand and brushed his thumb over her lower lip. H
til mere widened, and her mouth parted in surprise. Warm breath fluttered c
sonally, finger, and the sensation went straight to his groin.

He slid his hand over her cheek, cupping her jaw in his palm.
ie eyes "You do things to me," he murmured, grazing her soft skin v
nted to thumb.

against She swallowed hard, her heavy-lidded gaze never leaving his. "
the same to me."

Victory was sweet, but when he eased his mouth over h
wn. He remembered that she tasted even sweeter. He kissed one corner of her
was her then the other, enjoying the simple act of teasing her, her body's tre
reaction providing so much satisfaction.

stepped He nipped her lower lip, and she curled her fingers tighter aga
a Dare. waist.

Her possessive grip only inflamed his desire. "I want you, Riley. I
In her feel myself hard and hot inside you," he said, nipping her lower lip.

She moaned, swaying toward him. He caught her, wrapping
woman. around her waist, turning the light kiss into a deeper one. Her tong
back and forth over his, her soft sighs rocking him to his core.

you for Somehow he maintained some sliver of rational thought, and with
sm you the knowledge that no matter how willing she seemed to be, any furt
she'd convince herself to run. She'd withdraw before they tested ju
good things between them could be.

, but he So before he could act on impulse and take her against the wall,
ith you. couch, or in her bed, he released her. Steadied her. Gave her a light

out on the cheek, said good-night, and walked out the door.
couldn't He'd convinced her to come to his turf. For now, that had to be enough

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the cheek, said good-night, and walked out the door.

He'd convinced her to come to his turf. For now, that had to be enough.

Chapter Four

Riley drove to the stadium, her stomach churning with trepidation. Her nerves had already prevented her from eating breakfast, and it wasn't a new job that had her feeling off-kilter. Neither was it the kiss she rethought over and over in her mind.

It was Ian, the man. He was so sure of himself and what he wanted that a dominant personality usually turned her off and would have, at the least, had her resisting. And if he'd bulldozed his way into her life, she would have pushed back, but he had somehow turned his insistence on getting his own way into a rational argument that had had her agreeing to the job she'd even thought through her objections.

Then he'd turned what should have been a simple kiss into an assault on her senses. He'd taken his time, teasing her, tasting her, kissing her, and bringing her to the brink of insanity with how much she'd wanted him inside her, hard and hot, just as he'd said. She shivered at the thought.

She had no doubt in her mind that if he'd stripped off her clothes and taken her then and there, she would have gone along for the glory. Her sex clenched with need, reminding her that instead of sleeping with him he'd walked out, leaving her empty and aching. She squeezed her legs together, fighting against that rising need.

With a deep breath, she followed the directions to the stadium and drove up to the guardhouse. She handed a uniformed man her license. He checked his list, then printed and handed her a parking pass and directions, opening the gate with a welcoming smile. A few minutes later, she drove through the large parking lot, the May heat already coming up through the pavement.

By the time she reached the door, she was a sweaty mess, reminding her of the biggest drawback to living down south. She passed a bathroom, stopped into the ladies' room to pull herself together, blot her face and hair, and touch up her makeup. She assured herself of the fact that she mi

Ian had nothing to do with the extra prep.

A little while later, feeling better, she stepped out the door and directly into a hard body. She recognized the potent scent that lingered in the apartment and had kept her tossing and turning most of last night.

“Ian,” she said, sounding too breathless for her liking.

on. Her
only the
displayed
He grasped her waist, steadying her. “You seem to be making a habit,” he said in an amused tone.

“Sorry.” She bit down on her lip.

His heavy gaze followed her inadvertent reflex. “I’m not.”

Neither was she, not that she’d be willing to admit it.

d. Such
he very
would
ting his
before
“I didn’t know if I’d run into you or if I’d have to come seeking you. Apparently luck is smiling on me this morning.”

She smiled, relaxing. “Well, it’s good to see a familiar face.”

“Looking forward to your first day at work?”

“I’m nervous,” she admitted.

all-out
rousing
wanted
re very
He laughed. “Normal, but my sister’s only an occasional slave. You’ll be fine. Come. I’ll show you where to find Olivia.”

“Thank you. Better than me wandering around clueless.”

He placed a hand on the small of her back as they walked down the stairs. His touch radiated heat throughout her body, the neediness she’d felt tamp down returning full force, as if her body recognized his, primed without her permission.

ies and
us ride.
ith her,
tighter,
In the elevator, he stood across from her, watching her with pure interest through his smoky eyes. She attempted to distract herself by studying him her element. His dress shirt, a navy small check with a white collar,

l pulled
checked
before
strode
ugh the
complementing sky-colored tie brought out the blue in his eyes. The cut of his suit accentuated his broad shoulders, making her wonder what his bare chest looked like, how much of a six pack he had, and whether he was good when she ran her tongue down his chest, abdomen, and lower, to his groin.

The elevator announced they’d reached their floor.

“After you,” he said, gesturing for her to precede him with a gentle wave and a knowing grin on his handsome face.

ling her
om and
d neck,
ght see
She stepped out onto the corporate level, certain the flush of arousal she experienced was obvious for all to see.

“Did you tell Alex about your new job opportunity?” he asked.

Oblivious to her thoughts, he led her down a long hall lined with

oversized photographs of the team's best players decked out in full uniform and ran "Not yet." She'd thought about it and decided to hold off. "I thought I'd wait until I had a specific position."

"You don't think he'll be upset you're working for the opposite of you?"

"Don't you mean working for *you*?"

Ian shrugged. "That too."

All of the above had crossed her mind, had her wondering what she shouldn't show up this morning as promised.

In the end, she'd been unable to resist the lure of opportunity any more than she'd been able to resist Ian so far. "Alex wants what's best for you, no matter what form that takes." But it didn't mean he'd be happy.

And if her best friend knew she'd kissed Ian again or that he intended for them to end up in bed, their longstanding relationship would be in jeopardy. So she'd put off telling him. At least for now.

"We're here." Ian stopped at a closed wooden door with Olivia's name on the brass plate beside it.

He knocked once and pushed open the door.

"Come on in," a female voice called.

"We already are," Ian said, his hand settling on Riley's lower back as he escorted her into the room.

His touch was warm, hot, and felt too good. Because his sister had been watching, she eased away from him.

"Olivia, this is Riley Taylor. I told you about her this morning."

The other woman rose from her desk. Tall like her brother and perfect thin, she was the opposite of Riley and her more petite body and full lips. If she hadn't come to peace with herself long ago, she'd be envious of Riley's sister.

"I'm so glad you're here," Olivia said, extending her hand, which Riley gratefully shook.

"I'm happy to be here myself."

"When Ian told me you'd be working here and I just needed to find a perfect fit, I was thrilled. Frankly, we need someone to jump between the states. Our travel secretary has the shingles, and he's out for who knows how long. An extra set of hands will be useful while booking for the season. As things settle down, we can find a more permanent place for you. I hope"

form. okay?” Olivia asked, talking a mile a minute.

ight I’d Pleased to be useful and not a burden imposed by Ian, she grinned
handle anything you throw at me. I ran the distribution departme
ion, dosporting goods manufacturer. I’m used to glitches and problems and
people and dates around.”

“I knew you two would get along well,” Ian said, sounding please
leave you to it.” Ian started for the door, then turned. “Olivia, do me
her sheand invite Tyler, Scott, and Avery to my place on Sunday? Afternoon
pool and dinner.”

y more His sister nodded. “Sure thing.”

me. No “Add Sienna to the guest list.”

Riley recognized Alex’s sister’s name and turned to stare. She kne
clearlystrained the relationship between Ian and the other side of the family w
ould be “Whoa. Did hell freeze over?” Olivia asked.

His mouth tightened. “No, I made a bargain with the devil.” Ian
Dare’s slid from his sister’s to Riley’s, warming as their gazes made contact.
was worth it.”

Riley shivered beneath his heated stare.

Olivia’s eyes narrowed, catching Ian’s not-subtle wink at Riley.

k again Just what kind of deal had he made, and what did she have to do
Riley wondered.

ter was “Why do I have the feeling the deal didn’t include me doing yo
work?” Olivia astutely asked.

Ian grinned, and Riley assumed he’d gotten his way with that smil
l modeltimes in his life.

curves. “I remember going to a certain party for you and Avery the othe
of Ian’sso . . .”

Olivia raised her hands in a gesture of defeat. “Fine. I’ll invite the
h Rileyadd it to my to-do list,” she said, grabbing a piece of paper and
something down.

“Add Alex and Jason too,” Ian said, escaping out the door before
ind thecould stop him.

PR and “Argh! Brothers!” Olivia grumbled, lowering herself back into h
ws how“They are such a pain in the ass.”

1. Once Riley laughed. “I wouldn’t know. Only child here.”

e that’s “Well, my oldest brother is bossy, but maybe you know that ahead

“He’s . . . persuasive,” Riley said.

“I can . . .” Olivia gestured to the chair at her desk. “Have a seat. Relax. And we’ll get you set up here.”

A few hours later, Riley had been to HR, filled out paperwork, and herself officially employed by the Miami Thunder organization. She’d been given a desk in a small side office, a computer and a password in a favor system, and her own instant message name within the company.

All the things a working girl could ask for. Best of all, she didn’t feel she was being given special treatment, which had worried her.

She was just about to sign out for the day when her message box popped on her computer.

How
was.

Ian: Hungry?

’s gaze
“And it

She laughed and typed back: *Always.*

Ian: I’ll come by and take you for dinner.

She wrinkled her nose at his bossiness.

with it,

Riley: That’s not asking me if I want to go.

ur dirty

Ian: That’s because I’m not asking. You’re hungry, I’m hungry. We’ll go get something together.

e many

And there it was, the presumptuous side coming out. She swallowed not liking the idea of being pushed.

r night,

Riley: It’s been a long day. I planned to grab something at home.

m. Just
jotting

Without warning, he stepped into her office. His shirt was unbuttoned, revealing an enticing expanse of tanned chest, his tie hanging loosely from his neck, and he’d slung his jacket over one arm, clearly finished for the night.

Olivia
er seat.

“Ready?” he said, looking more attractive than any man had a right to be.

“I didn’t say yes. I’m going home.”

He frowned. “You have to eat, yes?”

“Well, yes, but—”

“Then let’s go.”

y?”

She meant to argue but somehow found herself being led to the car across the lot, his possessive hand on her back. They stopped at the first spot, his hand on the reserved sign. The lot had emptied out, and not many cars remained. A black Porsche waited for him there.

“Umm, my car is over there.” She pointed in the direction of her vehicle. He frowned, as if he hadn’t thought of that. “Leave it here. We’ll figure it out later.”

“But—”

He hit his remote, the car beeped, and the doors unlocked. Before he could argue further, he nudged her toward the passenger side, and she was inside and buckled in. He was brilliant at getting his way, though she didn’t want him overriding her express wishes.

Enclosed in the small confines of the sports car, his cologne permeated every one of her senses. He took her to one of his favorite restaurants, an Italian place where the owner knew him by name and hovered to make sure he was satisfied with the meal and the service. To her surprise, time passed quickly with interesting chitchat and fun banter. Ian was good company, interested in everything she had to say. He asked a lot of questions about her life. Simple questions. He didn’t dig deep, but she suspected he was biding his time. She was doing the same, satisfied to learn about him in small increments.

The pattern continued throughout the week. He’d show up to take her to dinner, not take no for an answer, and she’d invariably stopped arguing. His persistence endeared him to her even more. He didn’t hide his interest, she couldn’t help but respond. Although he took their get-to-know-you time slowly, he didn’t mask his ultimate intent to wine, dine, and seduce her.

He was a tactile man, something she wasn’t used to but quickly became accustomed to and even desired. He always reserved them a booth around the corner, close by her side, his arm stretched behind her head, his big hand tugging at her curls. She felt the pull from her scalp to between her thighs, and it was all she could do not to attack him at the table. Especially when every single time he kissed her long, hot, and deep but ultimately sent her home, leaving her aroused and aching for so much more. She supposed that was his plan, and he was accomplishing it spectacularly.

How could she not want to be with him?

parking Alex came to mind, as he did when she was alone and not overw
is name and seduced by Ian. She wanted—needed—to talk to him and ma
ined. A understand that the job and the relationship or whatever she was havi
his half brother wasn't a betrayal. She couldn't control her feelings
ehicle. nor did she want to. But Alex was in LA on a promotional trip, a
figure it conversation couldn't happen over the phone. He'd be back on the
Friday night, and she'd tell him on Saturday. As an excuse, it
legitimate one, and though she didn't relish the thought of the convers
ore she part of her was relieved to put it off.

on she By the time the weekend rolled around, she was ready for an
she had almost wishing he'd take that next step. He pulled up to Prime 112
even if his Porsche with the valet.

The hostess greeted him with a warm smile. “Mr. Dare, it's wond
meated see you. Your usual table?”

ants, an He inclined his head. “Thank you, Maria.”

ke sure He'd reserved a table with a view but one that still afforded them p
passed With no booths, he still didn't sit across from her. Instead, he held
mpany, chair, then sat beside her.

out her Prime 112 was one of the more exclusive steak restaurants in Mia
merely not somewhere she'd been to before. “You're a steak man?” she aske
n small they were settled.

“I come here for the burgers,” he said without looking at the menu.
e her to She opened a large leather binder and looked through the optio
ng. His mouth watering at the array of choices. “Thirty dollars for a burge
est, and couldn't help but ask.

u dance “Kobe beef. It's the best.”

r. Oh, really? She folded her arms across her chest and nodded. “T
y grew have the same.” If the man was that crazy, she figured, why not join hi
and sat He eyed her with an indulgent expression she wasn't su
gling in appreciated.

was all “Order what you like. You don't have to eat a burger because I
le night because you think it's one of the inexpensive options.”

ing her She curled her fingers around the menu. “I like hamburger,” sh
and he fighting off the blush caused by him having figured her out.

“Good. My siblings agreed to come over on Sunday for dinner, so
those burgers on the menu.”

helmed “I’m sure they’ll appreciate that.”

ke him “But will you?”

ng with She glanced up at him. “I won’t be there.”

for Ian, He reached out, and when he covered her hand with his, she surprised visible sparks didn’t fly from the heat his touch generated.

red-eye “Yes, you will.”

was a She decided it was time to explain a few things to him. “Just because you got your way this whole week and we’ve had dinner together ever since doesn’t mean you can say jump and I’ll ask how high.” She met his eyes, wanting to him to understand she was serious.

and left Ian heard the insistence in Riley’s voice and knew immediately he wasn’t kidding. In business or in his personal life, he wasn’t used to getting his way. His usual MO would be to steamroll over the opposition. Riley wasn’t his adversary. He wanted to know her inside and out.

She was different from the other women he knew. She was independent. She had spunk. All qualities he appreciated because few women argued out her what *he* wanted. Only his sisters came to mind. Which meant he had to change tactics or she’d bolt. To his shock, he found himself doing a re-evaluation.

mi and “Let me start over. Will you come to dinner on Sunday?” He asked closer. “Please?” He stroked the top of her soft hand with his rougher fingers.

She swallowed hard, her delicate throat moving up and down as she reacted to him.

ns, her “Don’t you think the first time you meet with your siblings, you’ll be alone?” she asked.

Ian groaned at her accurate assessment. “Yes, you’re probably right, but that doesn’t mean I can do it.” He stopped short of saying he needed help when she’d be an ideal buffer between them. “I’d appreciate it if you’d come with me.” He said, managing to hang on to his dignity.

re she She bit the inside of her cheek, clearly still uncertain. “I think I’ll cause more problems between you and Alex. Not to mention between you and me. Or Alex. I still have to tell him about the job.”

Ian grimaced. He didn’t want Alex getting in the way of his affair, but he said, this woman but was forced to acknowledge his half brother had been his life first. Which meant Ian was going to have to give when it came to the other man. Didn’t mean he had to like it.

“Talk to Alex and get back to me,” he said, giving her more leeway.

decision than he wanted to.

“I—”

“Can I take your drink order?” a waiter asked, interrupting as he :
he was up to the table.

“We need some time,” Ian snapped at the man, his gaze never
Riley’s. If he broke eye contact, she’d withdraw and say no.

The waiter walked away.

She leaned closer, her sweet scent kicking his awareness of her in
s stare, higher gear. “I’ll talk to Alex if you tell me one thing.”

He raised an eyebrow, amused that she gave as good as he did. “
ely sheit?”

“The other day, with your sister, when you were talking about i
ion, but your siblings, you said something about making a deal with the dev
looked at me and said it was worth it. What did you mean?”

She was also perceptive. “Alex wouldn’t share your contact info
ed with with me. To get it, I had to ask my father. He had . . . conditions.”

She tilted her head. “Go on.”

“In exchange for your address and phone number, I agreed to reach
inched my half siblings.”

She blinked, her gaze softening. “You did that for me?”

“I wanted to apologize for not returning your call. I needed to know
Alex meant when he said it was too late for me to help you.”

She exhaled slowly, pursing her lips together as she blew out
stream of air.

He’d been deliberately slow and methodical with her, taking his time
her, but he wanted nothing more than to taste those lips and plumb the depths
ne,” he warm, wet mouth. Throughout the week, he’d been hard most of the

thinking about her in the same building, dying for a taste. At home,

’d only he’d taken himself in hand. If he wanted her in bed, he had to keep to t
me and and stop pushing her around, but it wasn’t easy. He was who he was

there was only so much he could temper. From the sudden warmth
air with expression, he’d begun making headway.

“Look, you obviously know things between Alex’s side of the fence
e to themine are strained. I hoped you’d come on Sunday to ease the tension.

friends with Alex and now you’re—” *Tread lightly*, he warned himself
y in her “I’m what?” she asked, a smile lifting her lips.

“You’re involved with me.” Blunt but not so aggressive she’d bolt all, he figured he’d handled that well.
stepped She laughed, the sound brightening his evening. “Is that what you
A couple of dinners and we’re involved?”
leaving “By Sunday when they all show up, we will be.”

* * *

to even After a week of him wining and dining her, keeping a respectful c
What is while luring her in with his domineering personality and erotic kisses
decided Ian Dare was too much. He epitomized danger wrapped in
inviting appealing package.

il. You She eyed him in the quiet that fell during coffee, using the
compare him to past relationships, none of which were all that
rmation Nobody piqued her interest the way he had. Probably because Riley’s
taste in men ran to the predictable and safe. Being raised by a
determined to have his own way with no regard to the emotional dest
h out to left in his wake, Riley made no apologies for choosing carefully. S
immune to hardened, take-charge men.

So she ought to be immune to Ian and his charm.

w what She wasn’t.

She did, however, wonder just how charismatic her father ha
a long toward her stepmother before she married him and, too late, had s
other side. Riley mentally pursued that possibility and imme
ne. But discounted the notion that Douglas Taylor had ever come close to Ian
s of her charm. Though her father had clearly known how to hide his dark
ie time, never in his lifetime had he been endearing. Her stepmother, M
, alone, admitted she’d been drawn to his neediness during his hospitaliza
he plan weakness in herself she’d made certain she got over after the divor
as, and might have been seduced by his good looks, but his charm? Not so mu

To even think about putting Ian and her father in the same categ
insulting, and Ian didn’t deserve it. But that didn’t mean he was *safe*.

No matter how strong her heart beat when he was near, no matt
wily and wet her panties got when he turned his focus solely her way, no mat
You’re *what*, she thought, desperately trying to remind herself why she ne
keep her distance. Alex had already pointed out Ian’s penchant for j

All in from woman to woman. Wasn't that warning enough for her to stay a should have been, but when it came to this man, she feared she was fighting a losing battle.

"What's going on in that active mind of yours?" Ian asked over dessert.

"I'm thinking about you," she admitted, deciding straightforward was the way to go.

He raised a brow, obviously surprised at her honest admission.

"I was just thinking about how bossy you can be."

"Because I insisted you order the fried Oreos with French vanilla cream instead of the warm chocolate chunk cookies?" he asked with a too-amused smile.

She couldn't help but grin. "You know what I mean."

"I'm not going to apologize for who I am." He lifted her hand and threaded her fingers through his larger ones. "For you, though, I'm used to . . . temper those impulses."

Her heart skipped a beat.

"Certain times, certain places, however, I expect you to let go of your inhibitions and enjoy it." His tone deepened, leaving no doubt to his mind. *Just to be sure though . . .* "What sort of places?" she asked.

"I expect you to give yourself over to me completely in bed. To say without hesitation or question." He raised her hand and pressed an open-mouthed kiss to her palm. "I promise you won't be disappointed." Her breath shot out in one long stream of air, and dizziness assaulted her both at his words and the silken slide of his tongue against her skin. Dare in God, she wanted to experience Ian just like this, at his most dominant. Her thought of submitting to him physically and giving him complete control over her pleasure caused a rush of heated anticipation to fire her blood and melt through every one of her defenses against him.

She swallowed hard. "I—"

"Yes?"

Those mesmerizing eyes bored deeply into hers, filled with the erotic promise she'd only dreamed about. "I want . . . I mean, I need . . . I didn't know what she meant to say. Every available thought was centered where a throbbing pulse beat between her thighs.

In an instant, he'd focused all her awareness on sleeping with him and what it would feel like to have him sliding deep inside of her and

way? It multiple orgasms from her sex-deprived body.

ighting a God, the man was potent. And completely irresistible.

ssert. “What do you say? Come home with me,” he said. Asked.

was the She wasn’t sure which, nor did she really care.

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multiple orgasms from her sex-deprived body.

God, the man was potent. And completely irresistible.

“What do you say? Come home with me,” he said. Asked.

She wasn't sure which, nor did she really care.

Chapter Five

Trembling with desire, Riley barely remembered the car ride back to his place. He pulled into the driveway of the Ritz Condominiums. It came as a surprise to her that he lived in a place that offered all hotel amenities being privately owned. He came around to her side of the car and took her by the hand, pulling her from the passenger seat. He maneuvered her close to him and they walked into the lobby, held her beside him as they took the elevator to the top floor. She was enveloped in his heady, seductive scent. His body heat spiked her own temperature, the neediness pulsing through her core as she waited for the anticipation of what was to come.

The ding of the elevator's arrival on his floor startled her. They stepped directly into his apartment, and the door closed shut behind them. Before she could take in her surroundings, he spun her around until her back hit the wall and his mouth came down hard on hers.

His lips were firm and demanding, taking what he wanted and making her need everything he had to give. She could only wrap her arms around his neck and go along for the ride. His mouth tackled her with expert precision, his tongue gliding over her lips, sliding inside.

She parted willingly, taking him in, and the moment his tongue touched hers, he let out a shuddering groan that told her exactly what she did to him. The ability to have a maddening effect on this tightly controlled man was hers, but the minute she slid her fingers into his hair, he broke the kiss.

Startled, she blinked up at him, wondering if disappointment showed on her face.

His eyes dark and needy, he met her gaze. "I need to see you come for me."

She let out a relieved breath and somehow managed a brief nod, saying the same thing. Did he think she'd argue?

He took one of her hands and placed her palm against the wall, touching her the same with the other. "And I can't do that if you're touching me," he growled on a low growl that had her stomach churning with excitement.

move.”

She swallowed hard, her hands pressed against the wall, her chest threatening to beat out of her chest.

His gaze never leaving hers, he undid her blouse, one button, then the next, and the next, his large, tanned hands an erotic picture against the silk of her blouse. He took his time undressing her, the slow anticipation causing her nipples to peak and harden.

“I can’t wait to see you naked,” he said in a deep voice, easing the pressure from her shoulders.

Her shirt fell to the floor in a soft whoosh, leaving her in a lacy black pencil skirt. He stared at her then, his searing gaze taking in her breasts, so much more than the handful she always imagined more preferred.

Her sex clenched, moisture soaking her panties.

“So damned hot,” he muttered, staring.

She felt awkward standing before him half-dressed, her hands pressed against the wall, waiting for him to make the next move. The urge to participate, to undress him and see his magnificent body was strong.

Just as she was about to move, his words from earlier came back to her. *expect you to give yourself over to me completely in bed. To do so without hesitation or question.*

So as his eyes dilated with approval, she let him look his fill. And he did, his erection grew larger, thicker. She did that to him, and the knowledge empowered her, allowing her to remain still and in place.

“I’ve dreamed about the way you might taste. Are you sweet, Riley?” he asked, his voice gruff and sexy.

Her lips parted, but no words came out. She didn’t think he expected an answer, not that she could provide one.

He reached out, pushing the cup of her bra beneath her breasts, tweaking her nipple, beginning a steady massage of one breast that was so good she arched, pushing herself into his hand.

His touch was molten, branding her, and when he twisted her nipple, her sex pulsed with need, and dampness soaked her even more. Her breath hitched in short pants, and she squirmed in place, trying to squeeze her legs together to alleviate the empty, aching neediness he effortlessly created.

“Don’t” “No,” he said in a sharp tone that had her obeying while the throb

her clit intensified. “I told you not to move, and when you come, my heart going to know it’s me who brought you there.”

A moan escaped her lips, and she flushed in embarrassment.

When the “You’re so fucking perfect,” he said, his hands moving to her breasts, giving it the same diligent treatment, rolling her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, watching her face as her hips bucked forward.

“I think it’s time I find out if you taste as good as I imagined.” He pulled her down and sucked one distended nipple into his mouth.

Stars exploded in front of her eyes, and the ragged sound that came from her throat surprised even her. “Ian, please,” she begged, gripping his arm in her hand.

“Back in place,” he snapped, and her hands immediately hit the wall behind her.

She wanted to touch him, hoped he’d allow her later. For now she barely played with her breasts, and already she knew she’d do anything he demanded if only he’d give her the orgasm she desperately needed.

“Good girl,” he said, turning his attention to her next breast. “Is there anything you need?” He bit gently on her nipple, and a full-body tremor shook her. Hard, she was surprised her knees didn’t give way.

“Holy shit,” she muttered, eliciting a dark laugh from him as he licked around the throbbing peak.

“I have a question,” she managed to ask.

He stroked her cheek with one hand, his touch so gentle and caring that it took her breath away. “Ask away.”

“Do I?”

“Do you what?” Ian asked, surprised by the hesitancy in her tone.

She swallowed, the muscles in her neck moving up and down, making her want to growl and mark her there. Something about this woman called to his deepest protective instincts. For all her bravado and independence, she felt so innocent inside her that provided a counterbalance to his more dominant personality. From the minute he’d mentioned her giving him control, her blue eyes had dilated and darkened with a need that matched the pulse racing inside his veins. He’d known she would be the perfect counterbalance to his subtle need for control.

Looking at her now, dark curls wild around her face and shoulders, his hands still damp from his kisses, eyes wide with wonder, instinct told him he was

you're "You can ask me anything," he assured her.

"Do I taste as good as you thought?"

That one question nearly brought him to his knees. He swept her from other arms and headed for the bedroom, depositing her squarely in the middle of his king-sized four-poster bed.

He came down over her, his arms bracketing her surprised face. He leaned and pressed a hard, hot kiss over her lips. "You." He kissed her again thoroughly this time. "Taste." He delved deeper, sweeping his fingers escaped throughout her luscious, hot mouth. "So fucking good."

She moaned and wrapped herself around his neck, holding him

And though normally he'd push back and take charge, her arms around all once felt too good to worry about maintaining control and distance. He kissed

back, all the while maneuvering his fingers beneath her skirt and pushing the garments down her hips and thighs, until she edged away from him, trying to get rid of the damned annoying barrier herself.

Then he was facing heaven. Her almost-bare pussy, damp with arousal, beckoned. He leaned in closer, breathing in her heated, feminine scent.

His cock hardened, and desire raced through him. He'd never before been impacted by a woman before.

"I need—" He bit back whatever he'd been about to say, unwilling to let his feelings out for anyone.

Her lips turned upward, her expression one of pure acceptance.

She arched her lower body, her meaning clear. "Then take."

She humbled him, and he allowed himself the luxury of stroking her delicate folds with his fingertips before lowering his head for his first long, leisurely lap of his tongue around her swollen flesh. And when he came to his stroke, he couldn't stop himself from taking more. With deliberate precision, he licked and soothed her all over. From her bare outer lips to her inner, he made it his mission to tease and arouse.

She moaned and shifted beneath him until he held her down with his hands and continued to take her higher. He thrust one finger into her point and curled it forward.

"Ian!" She groaned his name at the same time he pressed hard against her, lips the right spot to send her into ecstasy.

Her body trembled, and he continued the assault, pressing his

down hard on her clit. She cried out, her orgasm sweeping through her body and arching into it, rolling her hips against his mouth as she came.

His cock throbbed against his suit, the constriction of his clothing making him insane. Especially since she didn't hold back the sounds of her pleasure as he brought her over the edge—and kept her there as long as possible, and continuing to lick and caress her as she settled back down.

He released his grip and raised his head. A look down told him that his tongue and thumbs had left dark imprints on her pale thighs, and damned if a part of him didn't take pride in the knowledge that he'd marked her.

He rose and stood at the side of the bed, making quick work of pulling up his pants and tossing it onto the mattress along with a condom he took from the nightstand drawer. His jacket and shirt hit the floor next, followed by his pants, boxer briefs. He gripped his erection, pumping his cock, wondering how long it would take so she'd ever take her slowly. He breathed in slowly, controlling himself, knowing that this woman that ran so deep, he feared it might never go away.

No way in hell could he let her know it though. He might want to push her into her, watch her eyes glaze over with desire, and make long, slow strokes while she screamed his name, her fingertips scratching his back, her legs holding him tight. But he wouldn't do it. Couldn't. Not when he knew the cost of that kind of trust.

He eyed the tie on the bed, knowing what he intended to do and determined that she'd enjoy every minute. And so would he.

* * *

From her position on the bed, Riley took in Ian's oh-so-fine masculinity and let out a breathy sigh, not caring if her approval went to his head. He'd just given her the best orgasm of her life and her first with a guy who took his time to make sure she got what *she* needed before worrying about himself. That alone would make him a keeper, at least in her eyes, but she knew better than to put any stock in those kinds of hopes and dreams.

Great sex with Ian? *That* she wanted more of.

He stood at the side of the bed watching, eyes dilated with need. He gripped his solid erection and slid his hand up and down, pumping himself from base to head, as if getting ready.

She swallowed hard, suddenly nervous but determined to hold her own.

er. She with this man. “Are you going to stand there or are you coming back to me?” she asked.

driving A sexy grin tipped his talented mouth. “Oh, I’m coming back to you, baby.” He pounced, his lean, hard body like a predator as he lay over her. His chest hair brushed her sensitive nipples, his rock-hard abs pressed enticingly against her softer belly, and that massive erection teased her. His husband of desire wound through her all over again despite having just had one of him hard.

She knew better than to expect another orgasm and was beyond disappointed with the one she’d just had. Even so, at the idea of having him inside her, thrusting deep, she raised her hips in silent invitation.

He braced his hands on either side of her head and stared, a heated glow in his navy-blue eyes.

“You asked me if you tasted good, remember?” he said, breaking the sexually charged, silent spell that had woven between them.

She managed a nod.

“I want you to see for yourself.”

Her eyes opened wide at the same time he kissed her, gliding his lips into her mouth and twining with hers. He took his time, turning the kiss into a sensual experience, mimicking the thrust and retreat she was doing with him thick and hard inside her body. He tasted like Ian and delicious, with a hint of herself mixed in. It was the most erotic she’d ever experienced, and she tangled her tongue with his, inhaling a unique flavor.

Desire pulsed everywhere, and she wrapped her legs around his, trying to feel him. Suddenly he sat up, his groin flush with hers, and she noticed. He’d planned, he’d shackled her wrists to the headboard with his tie.

“Ian?”

He stared down at her as if she were a meal he intended to devour.

She tugged, but he’d managed to truss her up tightly. “Ian?” she asked again. Her voice quivered along with every nerve in her body.

Nobody had ever tied her up before. Nobody had suggested it.

“Relax.” He spoke in an easy voice. “Give over,” he said, reminding her of his earlier words.

She tried to swallow, but her mouth had grown dry. She ought to have listened to Ian.

to me?" afraid, but instead, the arousal she'd experienced when he'd instructed her to keep her hands flat against the wall returned full force. Dampness and you all distinct pulsing began between her thighs.

er. She liked being bound? She wrinkled her nose, trying to understand the pressed body's reaction.

sex. A "It's called submission," he said as if reading her mind. "You like to come under my control."

"I do not."

thrilled His eyes narrowed. "Your body doesn't lie, sweetness." He slid his hand inside her, between moist folds, and her inner walls clenched, trying to capture his finger, bring him higher, harder, deeper.

look in He grinned.

She moaned at the emptiness she needed him to fill.

ing the "Now that we understand each other . . ." He began to glide his body against hers, his thick length deliberately teasing her sensitive clit.

She shuddered and instinctively tried to reach out and hold him, to wrap her arms around his massive shoulders and clutch at him while she rose to meet him. In the face of his immediate resistance, the knots he'd tied preventing her from moving, she found herself coming into again, she found oddly arousing.

ying to No, she thought, but bit back the words. He wanted this. She wanted it, dark. Because she wanted to understand his need to control.

c thing But she couldn't concentrate. Couldn't think about anything except the slick movement of his shaft against her clit, up and down, back and forth, harder and harder, until her hips began to rotate in time to the glide of his cock over her sex. His rhythm combined with the intense pressure of his thrusting, a familiar need began to build deep inside.

what he She whimpered, needing more than the circular thrust of his hips against her. The hard press of his erection against her.

She needed him inside her now. "Ian, please." Her hips soared up and down, but she was still empty.

e asked "That's it, sweetness, give over," he said in a deep, compelling voice. "Feel my hard cock against your sweet pussy. Let yourself come for me."

ling her The telltale tremors were just out of reach but so close, and she trembled, her pelvis thrusting upward, seeking relief. He rocked his hips again, and she came, twice, the movement utter perfection, and the crescendo hit, the

and her towracking her body. She screamed—the orgasm was just so intense and almost perfect but not quite, because he wasn't inside her. She needed there—

and her Just like that, he was gone.

“No!” She squirmed helplessly on the bed, fighting the bindings, and he being him for playing with her, when she heard the crinkling of a wrap closed her eyes in blessed relief.

“Easy.” He stroked her cheek, and she turned into his touch, and his finger relief in whatever form he offered it.

ure his She forced her eyes open, and he loomed over her. “Good girl,” and his gaze dark and approving. “Eyes on me. I want you to know who is your pleasure.”

“I'm pretty sure I know,” she assured him, barely recognizing her body over voice.

He grinned and tweaked her nipple. She arched into him once more to touch. “Next time you come, you do it with me inside you,” he told her, and she hit never leaving hers as he positioned himself at her entrance and thrust her which, He filled her completely, and flashes of light danced in front of her followed by the prickle of unexpected tears. Sex had never undone her could try. this before, and it scared her. Her feelings scared her. He'd made her come many times that she'd lost the barriers and walls she normally kept in place. That and he was big, and it had been so long since she'd been with a man and forth, unexpected sting took her by surprise. And that was the only part of the story of his she planned to tell herself—and him.

, and a Ian caught the sheen in her eyes and stilled. “Shit.”

He started to pull out, and she clamped her body around his.

and the “Don't,” she said, her eyes wide.

“I hurt you.” The last thing he'd wanted to do.

upward, She shook her head. “It's been awhile. I just need to breathe. And You're big,” she said, turning away.

ice that Ridiculous pride washed through him at her admission. He touched her cheek, turning her head back to him. “You should have told me.”

“Ruin the mood and send you running before we got to the good part,” she asked lightly.

st hers, “The other stuff wasn't good?” he asked, holding himself stiff, and tremors and watching her intently.

ise and She rolled her eyes and laughed, a novel experience. A woman la
led him while he was hard and thick inside her. Him wanting to smile too.

“No, Ian, it wasn’t good. It was spectacular,” she said on a little
accompanied by a twist of her pelvis that pulled him deeper.

ingry at Still hot and moist, she was beyond ready for him, and he rela
per and arms and lowered his head, wrapping his mouth around one of her l

nipples and teasing her until she began to writhe and moan beneath his
eeding “Oh my God, I think I’m going to—” She cried out and rolled

him, her orgasm crashing over her from the suction of him suckling
he said, breast.

giving She was even more slippery now and completely ready, and he l
steady pumping of his hips, taking her hard and fast. She writhed again

r raspy her climax seeming to never end, or maybe she’d just peaked again.

He only knew he’d never had this depth of want or need. He had
e. her, take her, own all of her, and he did, with a hard thrust of his cock

his gaze warm flesh, pushing deeper each time he pulled out then slid back insi
ome. “Ian!”

er eyes The sound of his name inflamed his desire.

er like Need, want, and something very much like emotion overloaded
ome so him. He took her with deliberate near-punishing thrusts that she accep

1 place. matched by arching her hips in time to his. It didn’t take long; he’
ian, the close since watching her come so many times. His balls drew up tig

ie story the sudden explosion detonated inside him as he came harder tha
before. He continued to jerk against her until he had no energy l

thoughts, nothing.

He collapsed on top of her, his body soaking in sweat, hers damp l
him. Their ragged breathing was the only sound echoing in his ear

reality came back to him. He’d taken her like a man possessed
adjust. stopping to ask if she was okay.

Cursing himself, he reached up and loosened the bindings,
hed her lowering her arms and massaging her gently. “Okay?” he managed to a

“Mmm,” was her only reply.

stuff?” He made sure she could easily lower her arms and was comf
before wrapping himself around her and cocooning her in warm

waitingsomething he usually did, but then again, his typical woman knew he
spending the night in her apartment, and he’d never brought a wom

ughing before.

Time passed, and she breathed easier in his embrace, where, he r
e moan he liked holding her. His heart beat harder inside his chest. It wasn't g
him to want so much from someone not in his immediate family. H
xed his this. The outside world tended to disappoint. Hell, his own blood had
uscious down.

n. But he couldn't help needing her beside him, at least for now, a
against meant making sure that she didn't wake up, remember that he'd tied
on her and taken her hard, and get angry and upset. Better to know how s
feeling about things now.

egan a "Riley?"

st him, "Tired," she murmured and snuggled closer, not farther away.

Her lush body pressed against him, making him hard all over again
to have counted down from one hundred, trying to sleep as she was obviously
k in her breathing easily beside him.

de. Ian groaned, resigned to a long, sleepless night.

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before.

Time passed, and she breathed easier in his embrace, where, he realized, he liked holding her. His heart beat harder inside his chest. It wasn't good for him to want so much from someone not in his immediate family. He knew this. The outside world tended to disappoint. Hell, his own blood had let him down.

But he couldn't help needing her beside him, at least for now, and that meant making sure that she didn't wake up, remember that he'd tied her up and taken her hard, and get angry and upset. Better to know how she was feeling about things now.

"Riley?"

"Tired," she murmured and snuggled closer, not farther away.

Her lush body pressed against him, making him hard all over again, so he counted down from one hundred, trying to sleep as she was obviously doing, breathing easily beside him.

Ian groaned, resigned to a long, sleepless night.

Chapter Six

Sunlight woke Riley, the bright light on her face unusual when she normally pulled her shades shut before going to bed. She blinked, felt a hand wrapped around her, realized she was nude, and last night came flooding back in stark, erotic detail. Her independent nature ought to be horrified at how Ian had dominated her, directed every movement up through which could come, and yet the very thought had her sex pulsing with need.

Needing to see him, she rolled over and stared at his handsome face, much more relaxed in sleep. She wondered what made him need to do every part of his life, including sex, as much as she wondered why he liked it so much. She wriggled backward, and his hot, thick erection pressed her behind.

She held herself still and waited, but he didn't seem to wake up. He grinned and decided that while he slept, she could do a little dominating on her own.

He seemed to be a heavy sleeper, and she took advantage, slowly pulling the covers off and scooting lower. She cupped her hand around his aching hard erection, marveling in the smooth feel of his thick length pulsing against her palm. Though she ought to keep an eye on his face to see if he would wake, she couldn't tear her gaze from the sight of her small hand wrapped around his.

She slid her hand up to the head, down to the bottom, and up again. She was rewarded to see moisture seep from the top. She leaned down and kissed him. His hips flexed, and she opened her mouth, enclosing him inside. She knew he was big from the soreness between her thighs this morning, and trying to take him completely was a challenge.

One she welcomed. She was nothing if not determined, and she moistened his length as best she could, licking him up and down, then using her hand for better friction. She picked up a rhythm she liked, and apparently so did he because he let out a low, shuddering groan.

She peeked up at him without releasing him from her mouth. He was propped on pillows, eyes dark and glittering as he watched her.

trembled at the sexy sight and bent back to her task, taking him as deep as she could, twisting with her wrist, licking with her tongue, and delightfully teasing the round head.

He thrust upward, causing him to hit the back of her throat, gagged but managed to breathe through her nose and keep up with his take-over. She shouldn't be surprised, she thought as he began to pull her mouth with a steady rhythm.

Deep, sexy sounds came from him and sent her body into a full arousal.

Unable to take it, she slid her free hand down to her clit and stroked wet flesh, needing more pressure than she was able to give herself wanted to come. And she did, badly.

So did he, his thrusting getting harder and faster, and she wanted release to happen in her mouth, to know she could cause this controlled man to unravel. Her finger worked her clit harder.

Without warning, he reared up, grasped her beneath her arms and pulled her onto her back, looming over her. His hair was mussed, razor-cut, added a rakish air to his face, and the effect was even more potent than when he came at her in businessman mode. And his damp, hot erection pressed against her stomach.

"What are you doing?" he asked in a gruff voice.

"You don't know? And here I thought you had so much more experience than me," she said, feeling irreverent but also ready.

His eyes darkened. "Funny."

"Let me finish."

"Not if you make yourself come. Your orgasms belong to me."

At his words, her nipples hardened, and moisture trickled between her thighs. She swallowed back a moan. "So what do you suggest?" she asked, unwilling to forgo her own pleasure just because he said so.

A grin passed his lips. Next thing she knew, he'd rolled her to her side while he flipped positions. He lay propped on one elbow, his face level with her needy sex while his erection protruded from his thighs, inches from her mouth.

"Oh God." This position was so . . . intimate.

Without giving her time to think, he leaned in and licked her clit. She shuddered and arched her lower body toward him. As if reading her mind

replay asgrasped her waist and buried his face between her thighs. His breath was so hot and so sweet, his tongue wicked and so talented as he began to tease her, then to suckle and make her feel like she was losing her mind.

and she It would be so easy to shut her eyes and just take, but that wasn't what she wanted. She'd started this needing to dominate him in some way, and she didn't intend to hang on to her sanity long enough to wrest some of his power and control away from him.

state of She held him, opened her mouth, and took his erection again, with her lips tighter around him and pulling him deep, using as much suction as she could to work him into as much of a frenzy as he was doing to her. If she He'd gone from lapping at her like she was the tastiest treat to teasing her clit, pressing hard, suckling the hard nub with tongue and teeth. She pressed her head against his mouth, and he clutched her hips in an almost brutal grip, holding her tightly in place as his tongue slid inside her and mimicked actual sex.

He thrust his shaft into her mouth, over and over, and she moaned and flipped his thickening erection. The sound had unintended results. He jerked, and he pumped himself into her willing mouth while she played him as best she could with her tongue and one free hand. He let out a long groan, and he pulsed suddenly she understood just what she'd done to him as she felt the vibration straight through her core.

The tremors triggered her sudden release, and her entire body came with her as she came, shaking and moaning around his thickening shaft, her head thrown back in imminent. He nipped at her clit, and she shattered completely at that moment he came in her mouth, hot spurts seeping down her throat as she struggled to swallow and keep up with him—and with herself.

* * *

seen her

asked,

Holy shit. Ian had just had his mind—and body—blown by a sexy woman who knew her own mind and refused to roll over and let him have his way. She demanded her due. And he'd loved it. Just as he'd loved sleeping with her in his arms and waking up with her lips wrapped around his cock. He'd been falling for her in a way he'd never let himself before, and it scared the hell out of him. He didn't like giving anyone power over him, especially not a woman. Most especially when it came to his emotions.

lit. She
mind, he

Do not overthink this, he warned himself. It was one night

with a gorgeous woman.

He pulled himself up to the head of the bed and found her face sprawled across the bed. He brushed her hair from her face.

"I think I died and went to heaven," she muttered without opening her eyes.

He burst out laughing, enjoying her immensely. "Happy to have you there."

He took her in—gorgeous curls spilling over her back, her hips wide as generous, her ass perfectly round—and grinned at the sight.

"Come on, sweetness. Time to shower."

"Can't move."

He headed for his bathroom and pulled out two towels, then turned on the shower so it would get hot before returning to the bed.

"Shower," he said, more forcefully this time.

When she didn't move, he debated only briefly, then reached around and hesitated her ass with his palm.

"Hey!" She raised her head and glared at him, but there wasn't a word, and her blue eyes, only heat and sudden awareness and arousal.

He filed the knowledge away for another time.

"Come on." He scooped her into his arms and headed for the steamy bathroom.

Needless to say, the shower took longer than it would have if they had washed up and was one of the more memorable mornings he'd spend as she good, long while.

* * *

Riley normally avoided the *walk of shame*. It was easy when her boyfriends were few and far between, and one-night stands didn't happen in his way. Now she had to put on last night's clothes and ask Ian to take her to the stadium to get her car. All she wanted to do was escape the rest of the morning without undue embarrassment.

In the light of day, everything they'd done came back to her in any detail, and she didn't know how she'd face him. Where was the bravest she'd woken up with? Gone, now that his arms were no longer wrapped around her, and she didn't know where they stood.

She stepped out of the bathroom to an empty bedroom. Ian had c
cedownhimself to take a business call, and apparently he still hadn't returned
check her own cell, but she'd left it, along with her purse, in Ian's car.
ing her Ignoring her rumbling stomach, she picked up her panties from th
and turned them inside out, pulling them on. She folded her arms ac
e takenbare chest and groaned. Her shirt and bra were on the floor somewher
front hall, and no way would she parade through his big apartment
ide andShe'd have to find a dry towel to wrap around herself, she thought.

She glanced at the bed, surprised to find he'd left a folded T-shirt
to wear, and she gratefully pulled the oversized garment on. It fell bel
knees. She folded her skirt, tucking it beneath her arm.
l on the She walked through the hallway, passing two closed doors
bedrooms, she assumed—and entered the main great room area. She
toward the sound of Ian's muffled voice and found him by the f
out andceiling windows overlooking the ocean.

He stood with one hand high on the window. Navy track pants ro
nger inon his waist, and no shirt covered his incredible body, giving her a go
at his muscular back and arms.

She bit back a sigh at the sight.
n-filled Or maybe she didn't suppress it so well, because he turned arou
his steely gaze locked on hers. "Just take care of it," he bit out to w
y'd justwas on the other end and disconnected the call.

When he faced her, his expression softened. "Hungry?" he asked.
She swallowed hard. "You don't have to feed me. But I do need
take me back to my car. It's at the stadium, remember?"

Ian remembered. He also recognized a retreat when he saw one. No
that was his job. He didn't like that she was so eager to escape.

Not when reality would give her reasons soon enough. Befo
er life,happened, he needed to lure her back from wherever she'd g
to the emotionally protect herself.

"That's not an answer," he said. "I asked if you were hungry."
Her stomach answered for her, and a rosy flush stained her cheeks.

He laughed. "I thought so."

He wrapped an arm around her waist and led her to the kitchen,
while aware of her curves beneath his shirt and the fact that she
wearing a bra. He knew because he'd placed her clothes in a bag fo

excusedtake home later.

l. She'd "Come. Breakfast is waiting."

She eyed him warily, as if she suddenly didn't know what to n
ie floorhim.

ross her He felt the same way. Most women he slept with clung to him,
e in thehe'd find something about them that would make him interested lon
naked.often suspected it was his money that had them so enthralled, beca
certainly didn't treat them to his charming personality the morning a
for herfeed them breakfast.

low her With subtle pressure on her back, he led her to the kitchen,
breakfast had been delivered while she finished in the bathroom. "Sit."
—extra She chose a chair and settled into a seat, studying the spread of fc
walkedout before them.

loor-to- "I wasn't sure what you liked," he said. "I figured since one
benefits of living here involves full room service, you might as well ta
ode lowpick."

od look "Thank you." She picked up a bagel and spread cream cheese
ignoring the fruit.

He grinned. "A carb girl."

nd, and "I worked up an appetite." The blush returned. "I can eat it on the
/hoeverthe stadium if you have things to do."

He slid his chair closer to her, gratified when her color heightene
more and her breath caught in her throat. He didn't want to be a
you tofeeling like he couldn't get enough of her.

Still, she was suddenly skittish, and he wanted to know why. "In a
ormallyget away?" he asked her.

"No, it's just . . . I don't know . . . I don't do this." She glanced av
re thattook a large bite of her bagel.

one to "Define *this*."

She chewed and swallowed. "I don't usually have sex with a guy
of a relationship."

Now they were getting somewhere. "And?" He needed her to c
with no suggestions from him. He wanted her unvarnished take on w
all thething between them was. Because he was still working it out himself.
wasn't Without meeting his gaze, she took another bagel bite, c
r her toswallowed, and followed it with a long sip of orange juice.

He waited.

“Alex said you go from woman to woman,” she finally admitted.

He clenched his jaw, wanting to kill his half brother for offering a
of take on his life. The other man didn’t know him. At all.

“That’s been my MO,” he admitted to her.

She placed her unfinished bagel on the plate. “Well, I appreciate honesty. Can we go now?”

He shook his head and couldn’t stop the grin from spreading across his face. “Riley, Riley, Riley. I said that’s *been* my MO. Has there been a change in whereabout my behavior, from last night to this morning, that led you to believe I’m finished with you?”

To punctuate his point, he swiped his finger over the corner of the plate where a drop of cream cheese remained, and licked it off his finger while she watched. Her eyes dilated with undisguised need, and his cock grew hard from his sweats.

“So we’re not finished?” She gripped her napkin in her lap, twisting it over it, unmercifully.

“Not by a long shot.”

She finally met his gaze. Big blue eyes stared at him through thick eyelashes as she clearly worked out what she wanted to say next.

“I have some rules.”

He raised an eyebrow, not wanting to be amused, yet he was, alone in himself. “Go on.”

She drew a deep breath and straightened her shoulders. “If you don’t rush to call this a relationship, that’s fine, but if you’re seeing me, you’re not seeing other women at the same time.”

He hadn’t said he didn’t consider them in a relationship. He wouldn’t know what a relationship entailed, but he had a feeling his admission wouldn’t win him any points.

He rested his hand on her thigh where his shirt had inched up, revealing bare skin. “We both know that since we started going out together, I haven’t had time for anyone else. But you’ll be happy to know I haven’t had this anyone either. So no other women.” He stroked her soft flesh, inching up with a broad sweep of his thumb.

“Good.” Her voice came out on a husky rasp.

“Now for a condition of my own.” He lifted her chin with his hand.

other men for you.”

“Done.” A cheeky grin lifted her lips, and he knew he had her back
ny kind No more distance.

He leaned in and brushed his lips over hers, tasting a mix of Ri
citrus from her juice.

te your She moaned and kissed him briefly before pulling away. “On
thing.”

ross his “What would that be?” he asked, enjoying her way too much.

nything “I have to tell Alex, and I have to do it my way. He won’t be happ
believeeed him to understand. I need him in my corner. That’s nonnegotiable

Ian closed his eyes and groaned, not because he objected to h
her lip, handled his half brother and her friend, but for far more serious reas
hile shethink that may be a problem,” he told her.

arder in She stiffened and pulled back. “Ian, I said nonnegotiable, and I n

Alex isn’t just my friend, he’s my *family*.” Her entire body trembled.
sting itlong time, he was the only person I had in my life who protected m

flinched at her own words. Obviously she hadn’t meant to reveal that r

But she’d said it, and now he wondered. *Protected her? From*
c lashesThere was a story there, Ian knew, and if they had time, he’d ask her al

“The point is, if you can’t give me that, then—”

“I’d give you time to talk to him if I could, but it’s too late. That ca
despitethis morning? It was about this.”

He grabbed his iPhone from the counter and opened the e-mail t
i’t wantcome in earlier, a link to a well-known sports blog that had posted a p
i aren’tthe two of them taken last night as they exited the restaurant.

Her cheeks were flushed. Her hand in his. There was no doubt the
ell, Iantogether. Or intended to be.

ng that She took the phone and stared at the photo filling the screen. “Oh

She jumped up from her seat.

vealing “My phone. I need my phone from your car.” She started for th
haven’tthen turned back to him. “Why didn’t you tell me about the picture bef

wanted “It’s only been ten minutes since I found out. I was trying to find c
; higherfar it spread.”

“And?” she asked.

“It’s gone viral, in the Miami sports blogs anyway.”

id. “No She winced. “What are they saying? What’s the caption?”

“Is it important?” he asked, not wanting to get into *that*.

She eyed him warily. “The fact that you asked that tells me it is,” she said in a cool voice.

He met her gaze. “Miami Thunder President Ian Dare and his late wife. What are the odds this one makes it beyond the weekend?”

“Wonderful,” she muttered.

He refused to lose her over something he couldn’t control. “It doesn’t matter what goes on between us, and we’ve already had this conversation, and I don’t need to worry.”

“It’s not me I’m worried about,” she said, her expression panicked. “I need to call Alex.”

Of course she did. Somehow he managed to stop the words from pouring out of his mouth. “Use my phone,” he said.

When she hesitated, he said, “It’s faster than waiting for my car to be brought around.”

She swallowed hard. “Thanks.” She dialed and waited for the other line to answer.

Ian knew he ought to give her privacy, but he couldn’t bring himself to walk out. He didn’t like being in the dark, and when it came to Riley,

Alex, he wasn’t just the one being blacked out, he was entirely on the edge, all I got looking in. The thought turned his stomach.

“Hi, it’s me,” she said.

“Dammit, Riley—I’ve been calling you all night. Then I wake up this morning to that photo of you and Ian?”

Ian stood close enough to Riley that Alex’s voice carried from the other side of the doorway, and he clenched his hands at his sides.

“I was waiting until you came home from your trip to tell you in person that I’m a God.” She glanced at Ian and turned away. “He offered me a job with the Thunder.”

“And he’s fucking you at the same time?” Alex yelled.

“It’s not like that!” she shot right back.

Except it was exactly like that, Ian thought, and they both knew it.

“You’re home from LA, right?” she asked.

Whatever his answer, he’d lowered his voice, and Ian could not hear.

“Okay then. I’ll see you this afternoon. In the meantime, calm down.”
Silence followed, then, “Love you too. Bye.”

Resisting the urge to punch something, Ian waited for her to turn toward him. When she did, she appeared much more subdued than he liked.

“He hates me that much?” Ian asked her.

She shook her head. “No matter what he said, it’s not all about you about me and Alex. And me keeping this from him for the last week.”

“You said he’s your family.”

She looked up at him, eyes wide and glassy. “He is. Alex and a stepmom. They’re all I have.”

Ian wanted to be included in that short list. It didn’t matter how well he really knew her; what he did know had only convinced him she was the right person for him in an otherwise empty personal life. Other than his family, who he’d do anything for, he hadn’t had anyone he’d felt so sorry for to begin with—ever. Losing her before they ever got started wasn’t an option.

“What about your parents?”

She swallowed hard. “My mom died when I was sixteen. A father . . . I don’t have a relationship with him, and I don’t discuss it with anyone.”

Ian accepted that declaration. For now.

“Can you take me to get my car?” she asked.

“Sure.” The morning had imploded in a way he’d never expected, and he saw no way of salvaging things.

Until she made her peace with Alex, no amount of coaxing by Ian could make things better. Which made Ian’s overture to his half siblings tonight all the more important.

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under.”

longer

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Until she made her peace with Alex, no amount of coaxing by Ian would make things better. Which made Ian's overture to his half siblings tomorrow night that much more important.

Chapter Seven

Riley stripped out of her clothes and stepped into the shower, eager to wash away the stress of the day. But all the hot water in the world couldn't erase the knowledge that Alex wasn't pleased about her relationship with him. To say he hated it would be an understatement. He wouldn't stand in her way, but he couldn't say he was happy. He didn't trust his half brother, and she understood why.

From the time they were kids and Alex had found out he had a half brother, he'd been eager to get to know him. Someone to have his back, to change, not the other way around, like it was with his siblings. Ian had played football in high school, like Alex. Ian had gotten a scholarship to the University of Florida, like Alex. But no matter how many similarities they shared, Ian froze Alex and his family out.

It made sense, of course. Alex's sister Sienna and her childhood friend had exposed their father's affair with their mother, Savannah. Sienna needed a bone marrow donor, and Robert Dare had revealed the truth. He had hoped that one of his other children would be a match. Avery had been the first, which had led to Avery, Olivia, and Sienna bonding during hospital time.

The sad thing was, Savannah had always known about Robert's affair with his wife and kids. She'd accepted it because his marriage to Emma St. Claire had been one of convenience, but their relationship was different—he truly loved Savannah. And though Alex had been an *oops* baby, their relationship had taken hold, and he'd built a family with them. He'd spent more time with them than he had with his real family.

So Sienna's illness had been the catalyst for destroying Ian's family. Of course he wanted nothing to do with the kids his father had with Savannah. Even Alex rationally understood that, but as they grew to be adults, instead of getting beyond their father's mistakes, their competition only grew. With Alex being drafted by the Tampa Breakers, while Ian had already started his climb within the Thunder organization. Just another rivalry to separate the two men.

And now, just when Ian had reached out, Riley stood between the two men. Which meant she had to do whatever she could to make it possible for Alex to accept Ian's overture.

To start with, she wouldn't go to the Sunday dinner, giving the two men time to get together alone. And she would keep her distance from Ian until the two of them got used to each other. Until then, she had no other choice but to pray that they could learn to get along.

Ian. To
her way,

* * *

Although Riley had planned to eat at home on Sunday night, when her stepmother called and invited her for dinner, Riley had agreed to go. Anything to keep her mind off what was going on at Ian's between himself and his half siblings. She worried the two men would come to blows as they played. She worried they'd ignore each other and nothing would get worked out. Going out with Melissa meant she had something else to concentrate on. Melissa chose Nobu, a sushi restaurant at the Shore Club on Bay Street. Riley dressed for the occasion, pulling on a white sundress, silver flat sandals and funky jewelry. Melissa picked her up and drove her to the restaurant.

1 in the Melissa had just returned from her honeymoon with her second husband, a neurosurgeon at University of Miami Medical Center. Her blonde hair was even lighter from the sun, her fair skin pink, her expression relaxed. Dare's happy. She looked younger than her years and always had.

ire had They were escorted to their table in the center of a room with low ceilings and surrounded by white curtains. Melissa ordered a glass of Charcuterie and Riley a club soda.

1. More "So how are you, Mrs. Masterson?" Riley asked, emphasizing Melissa's new title.

ily. Of "Wonderful. I highly recommend it," Melissa said, beaming.

another "What? The honeymoon or marrying a doctor?" Riley teased.

adults, "Both." Melissa grinned. "And how are you?"

y grew, "I'm great." Riley forced a smile, not wanting to worry her stepmother with her problems when she seemed so relaxed and happy.

rate the Melissa pushed the menu aside without looking at it. "You never come to me, so don't start now. I can see the tightness in your expression.

the two wrong?”

ible for “I’d much rather hear about your cruise around the Greek islands than talk about myself.”

m time Melissa narrowed her gaze. “That can wait. What happened to my stepmother pinned her with a determined gaze. “How about I start with the photograph that made the rounds on the Internet yesterday?” she asked.

Riley remained silent.

“Since when do you read sports blogs?” she asked.

“I don’t. David does,” she said of her new husband. “So . . . is there something you want to tell me?”

hen her Riley winced, but Melissa had always been the best of both a mother and a close friend, so she decided to confide in her. “I slept with Alex’s brother, Ian.”

nuch as “Complicated.”

ed out. She nodded. “Alex has always been there for me. He’s hurt I’m involved in for Ian’s sports team, hurt I kept it from him, and—”

Collins “Jealous maybe?” Melissa asked.

ss with The waiter approached to take their order.

re them “Whatever you want. You’re the sushi expert.”

usband, Once the order was placed, Melissa pinned Riley with a look that told her she wouldn’t be dropping their previous conversation.

air was “I don’t think he’s jealous. We’re just friends. We never thought of each other that way.”

lighting Her stepmom propped her chin in her hand. “I don’t know. He’s been protective of you ever since—”

lonnay, “Protective isn’t the same as having those kind of feelings. I know he doesn’t want me to get hurt.”

elissa’s “Would Ian hurt you?” Melissa asked, getting to the crux of the matter.

Riley blew out a long breath. “I don’t know. He’s such a contradiction. One minute he’s bossy, telling me we’re going for dinner and that I have to do things his way, which infuriates me.” She omitted the fact that his dominance extended to the bedroom.

mother “And the next minute?” Melissa perceptively asked.

ould lie “The next I’m feeling completely cared for and . . . secure.” Riley looked away, unable to meet Melissa’s gaze.

What’s Melissa was the strongest woman Riley knew, her role model.

Riley's father had bullied Melissa, she'd pushed back, and when he'd ds thanon Riley, she'd left him for good. It was Melissa who'd taught Riley to own person.

?" Her She was the complete opposite of Riley's mother, who had be vith the loving, too caring, and too sweet. Although she'd loved Riley uncondi d whenand Riley still missed her, she was grateful she'd had Melissa's exai follow. And she found it difficult to remember her mom because, wit memories, she was forced to recall the physical and emotional abuse h is therechauvinist father had heaped on them both and the meek way her mot accepted it, becoming more subservient as the years passed. She shudc her andthe very thought.

's half "Riley, where did you disappear to?" Melissa placed her har Riley's.

She swallowed hard. "Somewhere we both promised never to go a; vorking Melissa's bright smile faded. "Honey, don't think about your da can't change him, so there's no reason to put yourself back there."

Riley shook her head. "I'm not. Well, not that way. I was just t how lucky I was that Dad married you."

"You're the one good thing that came out of that period of n told herYou're my daughter, Riley. There's nothing you can't discuss with what is it about Ian that scares you? Because I can tell something do of eachit's not all about Alex."

Amazed at how well her stepmother read her, Riley laughed. "'s beenpretty perceptive."

Melissa shrugged. And waited.

He just "Ian's need for control scares me. I'm afraid I'm so taken with h by the time I realize he's like my father, it will be too late. And yet tter. that's so wrong. Ian would never—" Riley choked up and waved he diction.indicating she needed time.

need to She hated that after all these years, the memories could still shake hat hisher core.

Melissa squeezed her hand tighter. "Your instinct is everything. H knew. Deep down, when I look back at the days before we got tog lookedknew. He never made me feel safe and secure. Those are powerful wc trust your instincts."

. When Riley nodded. "But there's still Alex's feelings to deal with, and

I turned every right to resent Ian. Not to trust him. And I trust Alex's instincts to be her. "He could be too emotionally invested to see his half brother for really is," Melissa said rationally. "He can't tell you who to date or been too condition for loving you or being there for you. That's not fair either." tionally Riley blinked at that. "You always make sense." nple to "School of hard knocks, honey. But remember, there's always light h those end of the proverbial tunnel. Life brought me David." And Melissa be er male the mention of her new husband. her had Happy to have the topic of Alex and Ian behind her, she chan; lered at subject to Melissa's honeymoon. This time, Melissa was only too ha comply, and over the rest of their delicious dinner, she regaled Riley id over stories of the Greek islands, giving her a much-needed distraction.

* * *

gain." id. You Ian's siblings arrived at his apartment earlier than the others were hinking show up. He appreciated their support. Without discussing it, they a how difficult today would be. Robert Dare's eight children had nev ny life. alone together in one room. me. So Yes, the girls had all gotten close, but not the guys. Ian figured es, and harbored their own resentments, but they'd agreed to come today. "Hey, good call on the burgers," Tyler said, walking into the l "You're "These are my favorite." He eyed the Kobe beef burgers piled on a dish and French fries in a second tray. He reached out to grab a fry. "Hey!" Olivia swatted Ty before he could snag one. "Wait im that company to arrive," she said, sounding a lot like their mother. I know "Spoilsport," Ty grumbled. "I'm going back to watch some baseb. r hand, Scott." "Grab a beer," Ian called out as Ty left the room. e her to Olivia laughed. "Men and their stomachs. You're so easily led arou "Meanwhile, Avery's in with them, and that's where the chips ar loney, I said. ether, I "She always could keep up with the boys." rds. So "You're no slouch yourself," he reminded her. he has She grinned. "I have to tell you, this is quite a spread you've got he "I'm just doing my best to be a decent host."

oo.” “Or trying to impress a certain woman?” Olivia glanced around who he grabbed a burger for herself, taking a bite before Ian could stop her.

te as a He rolled his eyes at her audacity, though he shouldn’t be shocked also wasn’t about to touch the comment about Riley.

He’d had her in his bed, he’d been inside her body, and he wanted it at the there again. Hell yes, he wanted to impress her.

amed at And to do that, he needed her here.

He glanced at his watch. Not only were his half siblings late, but he missed Riley. His stomach churned, and he didn’t think it was hunger.

appy to He joined his siblings in front of the television, but as the next half hour passed with no company and no phone call or explanation, anger bubbled in his gut.

He walked into the living room and looked over the city, seeing the view of Miami that usually brought him peace. Not today.

“Hey.”

due to He turned to see Avery coming up beside him. She pulled him into a hug. He knew she’d never been

“Hey, yourself.” He kissed her forehead.

“I’m sure they’ll be here soon,” she said.

they all She’d always been the most naïve of them all, and he loved her innate goodness.

kitchen. “I don’t know. Maybe they wanted to make a point, and they didn’t want to chafe.” “I want nothing to do with me.” How better to be obvious than to stand in front of his siblings?

for the She shook her head. “It’s not like Sienna to just not show.”

“Did you talk to her?” he asked.

all with She shook her head. “I was so excited she’d said yes when Olivia called her, I called to talk. But she didn’t get back to me. Which isn’t like her.”

“Alex,” he muttered.

ind.” “What about him?” Avery asked.

re,” Ian Ian let out a rough exhale, thinking about his half brother and his feelings about Ian being with Riley. “He’s not too happy with me right now, but he wouldn’t be surprised if he were behind everyone’s no-show.”

“Give it time. Alex isn’t a bad person, Ian. He just—”

are.” “I don’t want to hear it,” he bit out, cutting her off. Whatever justification she was going to make about how Alex hadn’t had it easy either, Ian

nd and want to know.

Avery nodded, looking up at him with sad eyes.

ked. He “I don’t mean to take it out on you,” he said. “Go hang with everyone in soon.”

d to go “Just remember, you always have us.” She hugged him again.

Because she was the youngest, he often forgot to take her seriously. She was his sweet sister, and she had a big heart.

so was “Thanks.” He squeezed her hand, and as she headed back to the room to join their sister and brothers, he turned to the windows once more.

alf hour As more time passed, it became clear they weren’t coming. The more he thought about it, the more he was sure Alex was responsible for his

ned in thought about it, the more he was sure Alex was responsible for his siblings’ rejections. The son of a bitch was pissed about Ian’s relationship

ie view with Riley, and he was making his feelings known in the most conspicuous way possible. Although what Alex had to resent Ian for was beyond him.

He remembered clearly the days after he’d found out about his relationship with another family. Ian had taken a friend’s car his father wouldn’t recognize

driven the two hours out of his hometown, wanting to see for himself. Sure enough, there was the father who had no time for Ian and his son playing football on the front lawn with his other son.

for her With the memory vivid in Ian’s mind, his embarrassment and frustration rose. Embarrassment that he’d gone to such extremes, ordering

d. They expensive menu and opening his home, as well as himself, to Sienna and him up and Jason, only to be humiliated in front of the people he loved the most.

And if it wasn’t enough that they all weren’t here, where the hell was Riley? He’d made it clear he wanted her here. Thank God he hadn’t called

told her he needed her to hold his hand through this damned thing or he would have invited even worse.

.” Once again, when a choice had to be made, Ian had lost out to his younger brother.

* * *

feelings

now. I

Once home from dinner, Riley couldn’t stop wondering how things had gone with Ian and Alex. She decided to check in with Alex, hoping he’d give her

fictionation some good news.

1 didn’t She dialed his cell, and Alex answered on the first ring. “Hey, Riley!”

She heard his teammates in the background and frowned. “Who are you?”

“Had some of the guys over.”

“After you came home from Ian’s?” she asked.

He laughed hard. “Are you kidding? Why the hell would I go there, but screwed you—literally.”

She cringed. “You’re wasted.”

“You could be too if you’d come party with us,” he said.

She closed her eyes and groaned. For a man who stepped up when she needed him, he could also be such an overgrown child. The result of his halfcontract and the fact that his parents hadn’t been all that strict.

“You waited years for an opening with your half brother,” she said to reason with Alex. “Why wouldn’t you meet him halfway?”

“Be right back!” he called out to his friends.

She assumed he was going somewhere quiet, because the noise and surrounding him died down.

“Because I don’t trust his motives. I don’t trust him with you. My siblings, he’s using you to piss me off?”

She winced at the implication. “Flattering. very flattering.”

“You know what I mean! He doesn’t deserve you. And the fact is, I can’t fucking trust him, period.”

Riley glanced heavenward. “You can’t begin to know whether you can trust him until you get to know him. If you won’t do it for yourself, do it for me.”

Heavy silence followed, which meant, at the very least, he was listening. “Don’t know if I can do it, Ri.”

Pain twisted her heart.

Although she hadn’t known Ian long, she wasn’t finished getting to know him. She didn’t want to be. But she didn’t want to lose Alex either. She couldn’t imagine her life without him in it.

“How did the night go for your siblings?” she asked, hoping that Ian had made progress with someone on Alex’s side of the family.

His answer sounded muffled.

“Say that again?” she asked, hoping she’d misheard.

“She didn’t go to Ian’s either,” Alex said, sounding more subdued than earlier. Maybe because he’d heard in her voice how much this subject

ere are to her.

Riley shook her head, her throat full. She couldn't bring herself to tell Alex if he'd told his sister not to go to Ian's either. She didn't want to, but she didn't need another reason to be disappointed in him.

ere? He "Call me in the morning when you're sober," she said, unable to pick up the phone any longer.

"Riley, come on. Don't put him between us."

hen she She shook her head. "You're the one doing that. Not me. 'Night, Alex." She hung up, her emotions veering all over the map. From anger to disappointment at her best friend to genuine worry about how Ian had handled their rejection. She'd promised herself she'd keep her distance, trying to know he'd extended himself to his *other* family, in a sense for her, to see him. To know if he was okay.

level

* * *

What if Riley drove to Ian's and left her car with the valet and then approached the man sitting behind the desk to give her name. She wished she could get up, but if she wanted to see Ian, she had no choice but to let him call and get Ian's permission.

I don't "Riley Taylor to see Ian Dare," she said to the older, uniformed man. He typed in her name. "You're on his list, Ms. Taylor. Go right up." She narrowed her gaze, taken off guard, until she realized Ian probably added her because he'd invited her to his family gathering. *At least* he hadn't shown up either. Of course, she'd counted on Alex and his attorney to provide the explanation for her—never thinking he wouldn't show up. He would convince his siblings not to go too.

o know When the elevator let her off inside Ian's apartment, he was waiting. She her, arms folded across his chest.

at least "A little late for the party, aren't you?" he asked in a sarcastic voice.

"I can explain."

"Don't bother," he told her.

"Ian!" a horrified female yelled at him.

Olivia, Riley thought, recognizing the other woman's voice. She had realized Ian wouldn't be alone.

t meant Olivia strode into the room from the direction of the kitchen. "Hi,

she said, subdued.

to ask “Who’s here?” another woman asked from the other room.

to know, “Come here, Avery. I want to introduce you to someone. Drag Scott Tyler with you,” Olivia called back.

stay on “This is a waste of time,” Ian said. “Riley’s not staying.”

Olivia scowled at him.

“What’s up?” A younger version of Olivia joined them, equally attractive.

nger and “Riley, this is our sister, Avery.”

an had Riley smiled at the other woman.

ice, but “Nice to meet you!” she said in return.

she had “Av, I think it’s time we all get going.” Olivia gave both Riley and pointed stare.

“Do I look like I’m leaving?” A tall, gorgeous man with dark hair in, raising his burger in his hand. “I’m just getting started.”

hed the meaning. “Take it to go,” Avery said, obviously having picked up on her

go right Riley appreciated the girls’ attempts to give her and Ian some private

l ahead Ignoring his sisters’ request to leave, the taller brother stepped closer to Riley.

in. “What’s up?” another man asked. He carried a beer.

” Avery and Olivia let out a joint sigh.

an had If Riley weren’t so upset, she’d laugh at the dynamics between siblings. She only wished she had a close family like this.

And she “These two Neanderthals are our brothers, Scott and Tyler,” Olivia

itude to “Riley studied them. Although they resembled Ian, they each had playful qualities that were evident immediately by the twinkle in their

up and and the warmth in their faces. Ian at his most relaxed always looked

ting for wound. His siblings had dark hair, but their blue eyes were almost

e. and each was drop-dead good-looking. *Damn, their parents made good*

kids, she thought. “Nice to meet you,” Riley said to them. “Sorry to say hi and run,” Olivia said, nudging one of her brother

should ribs. “Hi, Riley. I’m Tyler,” he said, ignoring his sister. “And it’s always Riley,” to meet one of my brother’s—”

“Shut up, Ty,” Ian warned in a tone that Riley had never heard from before.

Scott and Scott grinned, unfazed by his brother’s anger. “I told you he was about this one.”

Riley’s gaze shot to Ian, whose expression remained passively as expressionless, at odds with the strain in every word he spoke.

“I’m sorry, but all my brothers can be such asses,” Avery said. “I to meet you, Riley. I just wish it was under more fun circumstances.”

“I feel the same way,” Riley murmured, liking this sister as well.

Ty walked up to Riley with a swagger that reminded her more than Ian. “I wish I’d met you first,” he said with a charming grin.

Id Ian a Ian’s growl told Riley he didn’t like the attention his brother p even if he was still upset with her.

r strode “Even if we’d have met first, I still think Ian’s more my type.”

Tyler let out a loud laugh, as did Scott.

sister’s “I like her,” Scott called over his shoulder to Ian.

Riley managed a smile despite Ian’s continued glare.

icy. “Come on, guys. I’ll make you doggie bags,” Avery said to her bro

loser to Olivia chatted with Riley while Ian bored holes into her with h gaze. Her stomach churned at the thought of being alone with him nothing else, she wanted the chance to explain.

A few minutes later, the sisters shepherded the grumbling men, p n theseup burgers with them, out of Ian’s apartment.

Before getting into the elevator with her siblings, Olivia pau said. Riley’s side. “He’s hurting,” she said softly.

d more “I didn’t know they wouldn’t show up.” Riley spoke equally quietl

ir gazes Olivia studied her face. “I want to believe you—because I think tightlythe only one who can get through to him.”

purple, “What do you mean? You’re all so close.”

orgeous The other woman frowned.

“If you’re going, then go,” Ian said before Olivia could reply.

Olivia leaned in closer. “If you hurt my brother, I’m going to have s in theyou, and that means we’ll lose a damned good assistant.”

“Is that my new title?” Riley joked, but deep down, she apprecia ys niceother woman’s protective nature. In fact, it reminded her of how she ar took care of each other.

om him Olivia laughed. “Actually your new title might be assistant secretary, but we’ll talk tomorrow. Good luck here,” she said, sobering serious she turned and walked into the elevator.

Riley waited until the doors shut behind them before turning to face and Alone.

He didn’t look at her, and his rejection stung.

t’s nice “Why are you here?” he asked.

She swallowed hard. “To explain why I didn’t come earlier. I know if I were here, I would only be a point of contention between you and Alex. I stayed home. I thought if you got a chance to know each other, it would be easier for us to be together.”

aid her “But it didn’t happen, did it?” he asked bitterly.

She’d had it with his attitude. She strode over to him, getting into his personal space. “I didn’t know Alex wouldn’t show,” she said, her voice rising with her frustration.

He gritted his teeth. “I all but begged you to come today.”

“I told you I’d talk to Alex, and I did. He was upset and distrustful. I thought things would go more smoothly if I wasn’t here.”

his hurt “You thought wrong.”

, but if She reached out and placed her hand on his arm. Her palm brushed against his contact. She wanted to get through to him. She needed him to understand.

acked- “Ian, please.”

When he didn’t crack, she glanced away, her gaze falling on the mirror reflected by the nearby wall. She saw herself, hand on his arm, pleading with him to forgive her for something she hadn’t done intentionally. Suddenly the mirror transformed, replaced in her mind by her mother on her knees, begging her father to forgive her for some minor transgression that wasn’t worth the time or emotion invested.

It always ended the same way. He’d backhand her hard, sending her sprawling—into the wall, onto the floor.

Nausea and panic swamped Riley, and she ripped her hand away from him. “You know what? Screw you, Ian.” She took another step back, shaking her body. “You obviously don’t want me here, and I sure as hell don’t need to beg you for anything.”

and Alex She beat a hasty retreat for the elevator, pressing the button over and over, willing the car to come faster. “Come on, come on,” she m

travelunwilling to look over her shoulder at the man behind her.
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Chapter Eight

Riley's outburst popped the bubble of anger that had been surrounding her all day. She stood at the elevator, pounding at the button in a panic, anger, which should never have been directed at her, dissipated, replaced by concern.

"Riley."

She ignored him.

The elevator door opened, and Ian bolted forward, grabbing her the waist and yanking her back before she could step inside.

"Put me down!" She struggled, but he waited until the elevator door shut to do as she asked.

She spun to face him, fury on her expressive face.

"What the hell was that all about?" he asked.

"You tell me! I came here to check on you, and you treated me like a *persona non grata* in front of your family."

Yes, he had. He'd never been so angry or hurt, and it made no sense. The hell did he care if his half siblings showed up or not when he wanted to invite them in the first place? He'd only done it to get an address and phone number, and when she'd bailed too, he'd taken it as a sign of choosing Alex over him. Which clarified his blinding anger, to come from the hurt.

But none of that explained why she'd suddenly freaked—because of what she'd done. Yeah, he'd been an ass, but not enough for her to renege on her way. He knew she wouldn't budge until he gave in first.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Her eyes opened wide.

He was just as shocked by the words that came out of his mouth. He'd never used them, because in his experience, they made him weak. With a woman, it seemed there was nothing he wouldn't do or say.

Needing space, he stalked over to the wet bar in the living room and poured himself a drink. Pausing for a long sip as the liquor burned down his

throat, he studied her, seeing her for the first time tonight.

She wore a white, strappy dress that clung to her generous curves, curls falling over her shoulders and down her back. Now that he'd regained his sanity, he wanted nothing more than to grab hold of all that gorgeous flesh, pull her hard against him, and lose himself in her warm, wet body. He almost forgot that he'd allowed his half brother to get to him and make her cry, that he'd treated her so badly. But that wouldn't solve anything between them.

They'd both overreacted. He understood his own reactions, at least when it came to her. He still didn't understand hers, and the mystery of her feelings remained.

"Are you okay?" he asked from across the room. Riley drew a deep breath and nodded, still attempting to calm down and assure herself that what she'd seen in the mirror hadn't been reality. She'd sworn she'd never be *that* woman, the one who needed a man so desperately that she'd accept anything and everything he dished out.

She replayed the events of the last few minutes in her mind. He'd been cold and unforgiving, but she was the one who'd flipped out. He'd grabbed her, yes, but the minute she'd told him to take his hands off her, he had let go. And he'd apologized.

Two things she'd never seen her father do. Rationally, she knew that people could argue and get past it, and that she and Riley's father hadn't done that. Had an argument.

She swallowed hard and slowly crossed the room to where Ian stood. "I don't understand everything that just happened between us," she said truthfully.

He met her gaze, equal confusion in his navy-blue depths. "I'm sure I get all of it myself." He gestured to the sofa, and she joined him, settling in with just a few inches of space between them.

They sat in silence for long minutes until Ian finally spoke. "I've been telling myself for years I want nothing to do with them."

She knew he was referring to his father's other children, and she wanted him to continue without interruption.

His chiseled features were hard as he spoke. "When my father offered me your address and phone number in exchange for me reaching out to my siblings, I grabbed the opportunity. I let him bribe me, and the *why* he

eating at me ever since.”

Yes, her “Maybe you really wanted an excuse to get to know them again,” she suggested, thinking that deep down, Alex and Ian wanted the same thing as her. He exhaled a harsh breath. “Yeah. And that’s what’s been bothering me. I wouldn’t want to want anything from them,” he said, running a hand through his short hair.

Between “Why do you hate them so much?” she asked hesitantly. “The reason for your father I understand. But Alex and his siblings are as much victims of circumstance as you and your sisters were.”

For Riley “Because he chose them.” Each word came out sharp and punctuated with pain. “And before you say it, I’m fully aware these aren’t the thoughts of a rational adult.”

Down, to She inched closer, clasping his hand in hers. “No, but they’re the feelings of a wounded child.”

He frowned at that. “I was an adult when we found out about them.” “About eighteen, right?”

He’d been He nodded.

She grabbed “If you ask me, eighteen is very much an in-between age. You’re not entitled to the resentment.”

He looked away, and she sensed him sorting through his thoughts.

“Graduations, birthdays, a broken arm, a burst appendix. We didn’t blame your father for any of those events. We thought he was too busy working to not that it made it okay to miss out on so much, but it made sense. I looked up to him because he had this strong work ethic so he could provide for his family. For us.”

She saw the child he’d been, idolizing his father, and her heart softened even more.

He said to her, “It turns out,” he went on, “even if he’d been working, he was living for them while he did. Because he loved Savannah, while my mother was just trying to keep the marriage his parents had forced on him to keep the business running. He leaned his head back against the sofa, his emotions running high.

She nodded, “She sighed, wishing there were words that would help, knowing there were none. She understood so much more about his side of things now.” “It makes sense you’d resent them. But it also makes sense that a man who wants to be included in their family, especially since your sister has been so close with Sienna.”

He glanced at her, looking more the hurt young boy than the confident shaman she was used to seeing.

“Well, it doesn’t matter, does it? Because Alex wants nothing to do with me. I me.”

“He’ll come around.” She hoped. Because the guilt was killing her.

But guilt and her best friend’s disapproval didn’t change her feelings toward Ian, which were developing and growing stronger in a very short period of time. She was still shaken up by seeing shades of her parents’

interactions with Ian, but the facts weren’t the same as her memories. This revealing conversation showed her that even if she had flashbacks, she needed to remember to view Ian differently than she did her own father.

“And if he doesn’t come around?” Ian asked.

Riley knew what he was asking, and she didn’t want to choose. “All I know is, right now, I want everything to do with you.”

She rose and straddled him, her knees on either side of his waist, directly over his now-thickening erection.

His hips surged upward, and he let out a low groan. “I know what you were doing.”

“Really? Enlighten me.”

He met her gaze, heat and desire simmering in the depths. “I spilled my guts, and now you’re distracting me so you don’t have to spill your guts, and what happened with you.”

He was right, not that she’d admit it. “Today wasn’t about me.” *And I wasn’t in the mood to revisit her childhood when she’d just gotten beyond his, at least for now.*

“That’s a nonanswer.” He braced his hands on her waist, seeming to brace himself.

“I don’t want to dig into my past right now. Okay?”

His gaze sharpened. “What happened earlier had to do with your past.” She hadn’t meant to reveal even that much. Seeking a distraction,

he ground down on his hard length, moaning when the sensations came through her, delicious waves of yearning that precipitated the building fast orgasm.

His fingers pressed deeper into her flesh, and her flimsy lace underwear grew wetter. Heat spread from her core to every part of her being.

“I will get to know you,” he said, his words a definite warning.

Maybe so, but not right now. She slid her body away from his side, but there was enough space to give her room to ease her hand into the elastic waistband of his pants and brush the head of his cock.

His erection jerked against her hand.

“Commando?” she asked, the very thought sending heat spiraling through her veins.

He shrugged, as if his lack of underwear were an everyday occurrence. “It’s in my sleepers. Might as well make life as easy as possible.”

“I can’t say I mind.” She eased her fingers deeper so she could wrap her fingers around his velvety, thick penis.

His hips bucked, his gaze darkened, and his erection grew even firmer beneath the firm grip of her hand. Knowing she could wreak havoc on his control caused a rush of pleasure to storm her senses. Her hand throbbed with the need to be touched, but this wasn’t about her.

She wanted to take his mind off his family’s rejection. Make him feel better. Just make him *feel*.

She pulled his shirt up and off then leaned forward, placing her hands on his chest. She breathed in his heady, masculine scent, wet her lips, then bit down on one firm nipple. The salty taste inflamed her senses, and she wanted more.

He shuddered and groaned. Encouraged, she ran her tongue around his chest about the rigid peak, losing herself in everything that was Ian. His calloused, roughened chest beneath her palm, his hot skin, and his incredible taste. And she kept shifting her lower body, but there was no relief to be found in his building desire.

Instinct had her wanting to bite, and she nipped him with her teeth. “Holy shit.”

His fingers bit into her waist, and the edge of pain heightened her desire. Tightening her grip, she pumped her hand up and down his shaft. He thrust upward, and precum moistened her palm. He groaned, and with a gasp, she still against his chest, his big body trembled.

“You feel so good in my hand. So hot and thick. So ready to come.”

“I’m not going to let you play much longer,” he warned her.

“You will,” she said, squeezing his cock in her hand. “Want to take your pants off?” She looked into his handsome face.

“Why?” he asked, his expression a mix of pleasure and pain.

“Because I’m asking you nicely.”

so there He slid his hand into her hair, another warning his willing lack of waist of was coming to an end.

“Please let me make you feel good.” She peppered soft kisses on his delicious skin, moving lower until her mouth hit the top of his pants.

through She slid to the floor. “Please,” she asked again, hooking her hands under his waistband and urging him to help her tug his pants down and off.

ence. “I He met her gaze, and the turmoil she saw almost had her giving in. She wanted this. Wanted to see this big, strong man give over to her tonight.

“You have control issues.” She pinned him with what she hoped was a more serious gaze.

oc with “That goes without saying.”

breasts She nodded. “After what you told me today, I think I understand you.

You had everything you believed in stripped away from you, and you took over as the head of your family. Control makes you feel like you can’t be hurt again,” she said.

ands on He shuddered, her words clearly hitting a nerve. She remained on her hands and knees, waiting.

ore. “I won’t hurt you,” she said in a soft voice. “Just trust me.”

ind and With a low oath, he stood and let his sweats fall to the floor. Pleasure and relief suffused her as he tossed them away and lowered himself back onto the couch.

l. Only She slid her fingers up his thigh, her hand looking small and delicate against his skin. She crawled up between his legs and studied his hot, thick thighs. Sure he’d grown even bigger in the last few minutes.

Undeterred, she licked his shaft up and down, coating him with her tongue before taking him in deep. He was so hot, so big, she hoped she could satisfy his cock as she continued to envelop him.

her lips “Oh, fuck, baby.” His hand gripped her hair hard. “You feel so good.”

Moisture trickled from her sex. Doing this for him was making her needier. She tightened her mouth around his shaft and began to draw him up and down, creating an intense suctioning she both heard and felt. He groaned; her eyes watered. She added her hand, the moisture providing her mouth making for slick ease of movement.

He tugged at her scalp, and she felt the harsh pull in her clit. God, she wished she could touch herself, make herself come. She moaned around

controlsucking him as deep as she could until he nudged the back of her

Needing air, she quickly released him and breathed in deep before s
ver hisher lips around him once more.

With a groan, he cupped the back of her head, holding on to he
ids intojerked his hips, forcing his cock into her open, waiting mouth.

This time, she moaned at the sensual assault, which overwhelmed
in, butshe accepted all of him, including his dominant need. He pumped i
his oneagain and again, as out of control as she suddenly felt.

She slid her hand up and down his shaft faster, twisting her wi
was herdriving him harder.

“Baby, time to move,” he gritted out, tugging harder on he
surprising her by giving her a choice.

id why. She didn’t want one and clamped her lips tighter until, with a harsh
i had tohe spilled himself inside her mouth, and she accepted all of it. All of
u won’the released not just his passion but also, she hoped, the pain and hurt t
been building inside him all day.

on her Although she hadn’t found her own physical release, Riley colla
the floor, spent from the emotions she’d put into this one act.

She was surprised when Ian lifted her in his arms and carried he
ure andbedroom, laying her down on his bed.

κ to the “Breathe,” he told her.

She forced deep gulps of air into her lungs until finally, her br
ate nextslowed. She curled against him, wanting nothing more than his arms
length,her, which he did without her asking.

“That was awesome, baby.”

ioisture She’d pleased him, and she let a smile curve her lips.

do this He brushed her hair from her face and stared into her eyes. “So
you’ll open up to me.”

id.” She hadn’t expected him to forget her outburst, but she’d ho
er evenwouldn’t bring it up again so soon. Not wanting to engage in conve
her lipsshe sighed and laid her head against his chest, closing her eyes. She v
Her jawtired to even think, and thankfully, he didn’t force the issue.

ided by

* * *

od, she
nd him, Ian held Riley while she slept. His emotions had settled down, in cc

throat, thanks to Riley. That was the effect she had on him, and he was she slid talking about the intense blow job she'd given him. And it had been incredible. The best he'd ever had—because she'd been emotionally invested in him as he had in him.

Please let me make you feel good. Her words had shredded his entire body as she stripped him bare. She'd gotten into his head in a way no woman ever had before. Because she cared. Not because he was wealthy and could give her what she wanted, but because she cared for him, and he cared for her. Not because she desired something from him, but because she wanted to be with him and just him.

When he'd instinctively grabbed her hair, her low, throaty moan reverberated around his cock as she sucked him in completely. She liked the bite of pain, the direction he gave. But he had no illusions that he'd be able to control. And in that second when he'd been about to come, every part of him inside him had screamed at him to toss her over the sofa and take her. He had to be the one in charge. To be the one in charge.

He couldn't.

He couldn't.

Because she'd needed to finish what she'd started to give to him. Because she'd needed to finish what she'd started to give to him. Because she'd needed to finish what she'd started to give to him. Because she'd needed to finish what she'd started to give to him. Because she'd needed to finish what she'd started to give to him.

Gentleness didn't come naturally to him, but for her, this felt right. Because she'd needed to finish what she'd started to give to him. Because she'd needed to finish what she'd started to give to him. Because she'd needed to finish what she'd started to give to him. Because she'd needed to finish what she'd started to give to him.

* * *

Some day Riley woke up surrounded in heat, Ian's strong arms wrapped around her. A glance at the clock on the nightstand told her it was eleven p.m. She inhaled and smelled his delicious masculine scent. She wished she could remain in the safe cocoon of his arms and leave all her problems behind. A scary thought, as last night returned in vivid detail.

She'd given guys blow jobs before. It always seemed to be a little bit of a thing with most men, but she'd never *wanted* to give one to a guy like Ian. She'd never wanted to give one to a guy like Ian.

She'd needed to take Ian into her mouth, to taste him, to give him what he needed.

n't just badly needed release of his stress and pain. He'd needed to see that someone had been in his life cared enough about him to put his feelings first. She'd wanted the one to show him he mattered.

What she hadn't anticipated was her own reaction to his need to connect. He'd gripped her hair. Her breasts had throbbed. He'd pulled harder than ever had. He'd cupped her head in his big hand, and she'd nearly come apart in the feeling of being restrained. The other night, he'd tied her headboard, and she'd come apart, harder and faster than ever before.

Hadn't her father held her mother down and beat her? Hadn't he carried her across the room by her hair? So what did it say about Riley that she hadn't *needed* the being dominated in any way?

She exhaled hard, a low groan escaping from her throat.

"You're awake?" he asked in a deep voice.

"Mmm-hmm. Did you sleep too?"

"No."

She blinked into the darkness. "You just stayed with me?"

His arms tightened around her. "Yes."

And She didn't know what to make of that.

The silence reverberated around them until she decided she'd over her welcome. Both for her own peace of mind and probably his.

"I should go," she said, beginning her slide out of bed.

"Don't."

She stilled. Her heart beat a staccato rhythm, panic filling her dichotomy she'd discovered within herself.

"Stay," he said, an underlying tremor in that one word.

Her instinct to soothe him overrode her own sense of fear, and she moved to her side, facing him. Her next words didn't come easily. "You don't realize that we couldn't be more different."

He narrowed his gaze. "We've had enough dinners together for you to know we have plenty in common," he said.

She couldn't help but grin at his attempt to deliberately misunderstand her point. "You know what I mean."

"I do." His body stiffened, but he continued. "Clearly we've been having issues. But you're talking about my sexual needs, and that's your fear."

You liked everything we've done together."

She had. And that was the problem. She couldn't accept it.

Someone His domineering ways went against everything she wanted for he
ed to bereminded her too much of the emotional upheaval and painful ch
she'd left behind.

control. He leaned over and pressed his lips to hers with such extreme gen
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to theresponded, tension leaving her as he slid his tongue over her lips. She
same, their mouths gliding back and forth.

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effective way.

Her sex pulsed, heavy with need, and her breasts grew tight with tl
to be touched, yet he did nothing but explore her mouth with long, le
strokes of his tongue.

Even when she expected him to push further, when she gave hin
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over her lips.

And later, when she said she needed to go home, he respected her
rstayedand walked her to her car, leaving her beyond disappointed he hadn't
for her to stay.

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talking.

His domineering ways went against everything she wanted for herself. It reminded her too much of the emotional upheaval and painful childhood she'd left behind.

He leaned over and pressed his lips to hers with such extreme gentleness, tears formed in the corner of her eyes.

Despite everything inside her warning her to keep her distance, she responded, tension leaving her as he slid his tongue over her lips. She did the same, their mouths gliding back and forth.

For a long while, they lay side by side, just kissing. She lost herself in the taste of him, in his ability to give back to her in this simple but oh-so-effective way.

Her sex pulsed, heavy with need, and her breasts grew tight with the need to be touched, yet he did nothing but explore her mouth with long, leisurely strokes of his tongue.

Even when she expected him to push further, when she gave him every indication she wanted more, he settled for seductive strokes of his tongue over her lips.

And later, when she said she needed to go home, he respected her wishes and walked her to her car, leaving her beyond disappointed he hadn't pushed for her to stay.

Chapter Nine

Monday morning, Riley learned what crisis management meant at Thunder front offices. Over the weekend, the travel secretary had informed Olivia that he'd be retiring and not returning to work when he recovered from his illness. Dylan Rhodes, who Riley had met last week, had been promoted to his position. He'd immediately begun making inquiries into new ways of wanting to do things differently than his predecessor. As a result, Riley had been given a crash course in what it took for a hotel to become a crisis. Thunder would be willing to stay in while on the road.

Under his direction, she'd looked into each hotel's ability to accommodate team meeting space, the ability for their kitchens to meet the dietary needs of the players, and their willingness to block out whole floors knowing full well they could end up with vacancies due to winter storm travel delays.

As the workday eased into early evening, Riley was exhausted and exhilarated. She loved her new job and the challenges that came with it. She came back from a bathroom break to find out that Olivia had left a note on her desk to come see her immediately.

She headed to the other woman's office. As she approached, the sound of raised voices told her this might not be the best time to interrupt.

"This isn't the change I want you to make!"

Riley recognized Ian's sharp tone.

"Well, travel isn't your domain—it's mine, and I'm making it," Olivia shot back.

Riley raised her hand, debating whether or not to knock.

"He's a womanizing ass," Ian said.

"No, he's just single, and you're jealous. This is ridiculous. Go back to your office and let me do my job," Olivia said.

Figuring it was as good a time as any and not wanting to hear anything about Ian's possible jealousy, Riley knocked.

"Come in!" Olivia called out.

Riley pushed open the door, and the other woman smiled. “That’s it’s you.”

“I got your message.” She looked from Olivia’s relieved expression to Ian’s furious one. “But I can come back if this is a bad time.”

“No, your timing is perfect. First, thank you for jumping into the void helping Dylan. He’s been extremely pleased with your work.”

“Thank you.”

Olivia smiled.

Ian watched their exchange in silence.

“Dylan asked that you be made his assistant, and I agreed. You would be a good fit.”

Ian let out low growl that startled Riley, and she turned, meeting his gaze. “Problem?” she asked.

He opened his mouth, but Olivia beat him to speaking. “Before you accept this job, you should know it involves travel.”

“Really?” Riley had never been anywhere in or out of the United States. Even college had been local.

“Yes. You’d accompany the team on road trips, and since Dylan wants to make changes to the hotels when we’re on the road, you’ll need to conduct your research in person.”

Riley’s eyes opened wide. “I’d get to go to places like San Diego?” she asked, naming just one of the cities in which she’d spoken to hotel managers today.

“Yes. And you’d have to leave today for Phoenix. If that’s an issue, I can understand, but—”

“No! It’s not a problem,” she said, doing her best to remain professional and not jump up and down with glee over the opportunity.

Olivia’s amused grin told her the other woman had caught on. “Does it appeal to you?” she asked, shooting Ian a look Riley couldn’t quite ignore.

“Oh my goodness, yes!”

“Great. So go home and pack. A car will pick you up around nine. Please take a late flight so you can get to work first thing in the morning.”

“Thank you for the opportunity.” Riley grinned, turned, and headed back to the door.

* * *

nk God Ian started after Riley, but his sister's voice stopped him. "Don't do it."

He turned.

ision to "Don't stop her, and don't take away her excitement by telling I don't want her to take the job."

oid and Ian curled his hands into a fist. "I've seen Rhodes hit on you a event we run."

Olivia dipped her head. "That's between me and Dylan. It doesn't him a womanizing pig."

"I don't want her traveling alone with him."

ou two "That's not your choice to make! Did you see her face?"

He had. She was fucking glowing. But he wanted to be the one to j is gaze. look on her face, not a job.

"She wants this job, Ian. If you want any kind of relationship w re you you have to give her the freedom to make her own choices."

He didn't know what exactly he wanted with Riley except States. couldn't let her go. But the more he felt himself falling for her, the m fear gnawing at him grew. He didn't trust her to stay with him, and t wants to the crux of his problem. That's why he wanted to manipulate the para continue of her job and keep her in his orbit and his alone.

Olivia's hand on his arm surprised him. "You give Avery a o?" she freedom."

anagers "Not easily," he muttered.

"Okay, maybe you try to meddle in our lives, but we kick your as issue, I you do. I have a feeling Riley will stand up to you the same way paused. "But here's the thing. We have to love you and stick by you t ssional you're our brother. She doesn't."

"No shit." Did his sister really think she was helping him?

"So it "I meant, she doesn't have to stay with you unless she wants to, s terpret. give her a reason to run. All I'm saying is, think carefully before you caveman on her, okay?"

. You'll He raised his eyebrows, thinking that if his sister knew just how c he'd considered going, she wouldn't use the term so lightly. He alrea ded out to share her with his half brother, something that threatened th foundation of whatever they were building.

In his mind, he'd had the company jet fueled and ready to go so h beat her to Arizona and be there for every moment she'd otherwise ha

” alone with Dylan Rhodes.

“I have to go.” He started for the door, finished discussing his p
her youlife with Olivia.

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

it every “Nothing.” Until he figured out his next move.

’t make

* * *

Riley wondered if she’d hear from Ian before she left for Phoenix. Hi
in Olivia’s office had been off, and she assumed it had something to
put that whatever they’d been arguing about.

She pushed Ian to the back of her mind and focused on her upcomi
ith her, She packed a mix of professional business clothes along with some
wear. Olivia hadn’t said how long she’d be gone, so she improvise
that he mix-and-match clothing.

She called Alex and her stepmom and let them know she’d be out
ore the for a couple of days. Alex, she knew, had returned to his Tampa place
hat was week, and she figured they could use the break. She hoped that, u
ameters return to Miami, they could pick up a more rational conversation at
ind me relationship with Ian. And hers.

She’d already decided a complete break from Ian wasn’t wl
wanted, but maybe this short time-out would be healthy for her too. H
is when and her heart were torn over the best thing to do when it came to
y.” She further involved with him. Her emotions pulled her inexorably towa
because but she worried about the intensity between them and the way he se
provoked memories she preferred to leave buried.

Yet she related to him on so many levels, from his painful childl
o don’t the way he kept himself isolated from everyone except those he really
1 go all If she needed a tie breaker, however, her body was all in. Especially a
way he’d treated her the other night, so gentle and giving, so at odds v
aveman man she knew him to be.

For the next few days, she wanted to focus solely on business and j
idy had herself to Dylan. Putting Ian out of her mind, she headed downstairs
ie very for the car service to take her to the airport. She met Dylan at the g
e could was a good-looking man, tall, dark, and handsome with a goatee—sor
ve been she’d never thought she’d appreciate, but on him, it worked.

On the long flight, they alternated between companionable siler
ersonaltalk, some business, some more personal. She appreciated his sense of
as well as his dedication to the team. He asked about her relationsh
Olivia, and she got the distinct sense he had more than a passing int
her.

Riley turned on her cell phone as they exited the plane, and Dylan
same. At the baggage carousel, they waited for their luggage and, lik
passengers, studied their phones and missed messages. Riley texted M
s mood, letting her know she'd landed. She did the same for Alex.
do with

There was no message from Ian, and she told herself not
disappointed. But she was.

They were greeted at the hotel by the night manager, who assure
the owner would be there to meet with them the next morning. He led
separate suites on the same floor, and Riley said good-night before
herself into the room.

She stepped into a room filled with flowers. Bright, colorful bouc
various blooms. She released the breath she hadn't been aware of h
but clearly she had—ever since she'd run out of Olivia's office and
heard from Ian at all.

She picked up the envelope on the table and read the small card er
at she *MISS ME.*

“Oh, I will,” she murmured.

Though it was earlier in Arizona, it was still too late to call. She
want to wake him. But a text for him to receive when he woke in the n
easily would be okay.

Will miss you, but thanks for the flowers, I'll think of you often.

Then she pulled out her toiletry bag and headed to the bathroc
washed up. She put away a few items she didn't want to wrinkle and c
into bed, exhausted.

As she plugged her phone in to charge overnight, the beep of
sounded.

That's the point. Sleep well, sweetness.

nothing

She let out a sigh that sounded too much like contentment for he

ice and and fell asleep thinking about Ian.

humor She met Dylan early the next morning at the breakfast restaurant with hotel. “Good morning,” she said.

erest in “Not so sure,” the other man said.

Riley narrowed her gaze. He wasn’t the cheerful, upbeat man she’d did there with. “Not a morning person?” she asked.

ce most “That’s not it.”

Melissa, “Then what’s wrong?”

He studied her, as if unsure whether to speak.

to be She wondered what had happened overnight. “Whatever it is, just s

“I hired you for this position because you jumped right in with enthusiasm, and I thought you’d be an asset.”

them to “And suddenly I’m not?” She stiffened at the implication that this letting changed.

“Not if it means having the president of the organization breathing jets of my neck.”

olding, *Oh, no. No, no, no.* Riley curled her hands around the handle she hadn’t oversized bag. “What did he say?”

Dylan’s gaze assessed her. “I didn’t realize you two had a previously closed relationship.”

Heat rose to her cheeks. “That has nothing to do with my job.”

“You’re right. It shouldn’t. And there’s no company policy against it either. But Ian called me this morning. He made it perfectly clear I’m morning things strictly business between us. In fact, I believe his words were, off.”

She clenched her jaw until she saw stars. “I’m going to kill him.”

“I worked hard for the opportunity to step into this position, and I don’t want it jeopardized because the boss’s girlfriend is my assistant.”

She fought back the tears that threatened. “I can assure you that Ian will be an issue.” If she had to break up with him to ensure her job had not do with her personal life, she would.

In fact, right now, she had no intention of speaking to the controller of a bitch ever again.

Dylan studied her for a long moment. “I like how you think and what you bring to the table. I just don’t want trouble.”

r liking “You won’t have any.”

He nodded, seemingly assured. He dropped the subject, and that in the breakfast prior to their first meeting with the hotel owner.

Riley didn't taste her food, but she knew she had a long day ahead and she forced herself to eat.

When she received a text from Ian, she ignored it. Phone calls? decline. She deleted messages without listening to them, her anger growing as the day went on.

The next two days passed in a blur of tours, meetings, and eating at a restaurant in the large hotel. They checked out the conference rooms to see if they could accommodate pregame summits; they needed an even area for a makeshift chapel, because many of the players and their families liked to attend services. They sat down with floor plans, examining layouts, the suites, the regular rooms, and by the time the trip was over Riley's head spun with information.

Good thing she'd taken copious notes to compare with the previous years' accommodations, since she hadn't been around to see them. Dylan seemed pleased and said they'd have a meeting with the rest of the team back in Miami before making a final decision.

Exhausted by the time the car service took her home, she wanted more than to climb into bed and sleep. The time difference would be a problem with her system, and Dylan told her not to come in tomorrow.

She was only too happy to oblige.

to keep
'hands

* * *

Ian showed up at his mother's house in Weston, which had also been his childhood home. Personally, he didn't know why she still lived there, but she could afford to move wherever she wanted. Anywhere wouldn't hurt. Memories this place did.

He parked in the circular drive and let himself into the house.

His mother greeted him in the hallway, her eyes sparkling with pleasure. Emma Dare, with her dark hair, not a strand of gray, looked younger than fifty years, and she was as beautiful inside as out.

"Ian! I'm so glad you came by."

He hugged her and kissed her cheek. "It's been awhile, I know."

She waved away his concern. "Draft time. I remember how crazy

hey ate uncle used to get before, during, and after. No worries.”

Before and after Robert Dare had abandoned his real family, his life of her, Paul, had been a permanent fixture.

Ian grinned at the mention of his uncle. “Have you heard from him?” She hit His mother smiled. “He’s on an African safari with Lou. I don’t know when he’ll be in touch for a while.”

Ian chuckled.

at each His uncle and his longtime partner had waited until Ian was ready to make over the reins before Paul retired and they took off to travel the world. Ian’s larger gay wasn’t the reason he treated Ian and his siblings like his own children, but the fact that Lou didn’t want babies was. Paul loved Lou, and he spoiled the nieces and nephews to spoil when they’d been younger, so he never felt left out, he’d missed out. Ian was happy his uncle was enjoying his life.

Grasping his hand, his mother led him into her state-of-the-art kitchen. Recently remodeled to indulge her love of all things culinary, his mother herself gave cooking classes. It was her way of establishing her independence of having something for herself, and Ian admired her for it.

He settled onto a barstool while his mother poured iced tea for them. “So what brings you by?” she asked.

“Nothing in particular.”

She placed his glass in front of him. “This is your mother you’re talking to. You don’t show up in the middle of the week for *no reason*.”

He stared at the multicolored granite counter, the wash of colors forming an indistinct blur. He hated it, preferring things in bold colors with high contrast. Kind of like his life, with distinct rules, everything having its own order. Knowing what to expect let him breathe easier. Which explained his need for control, in all things.

“So your sisters tell me you met someone special,” she said softly.

Ian let out a laugh. “They have big mouths.”

“They’re girls! The first thing they each did Sunday night was call me,” she said, laughing. “Olivia thinks it’s a good thing there’s someone who won’t take your crap. Her words,” his mother said, amusement in her eyes that he didn’t appreciate.

But he could never be angry with her. The little brats he called his siblings were another story.

“Who is she?” his mother asked.

“Her name is Riley Taylor.” He went on to bring his mother up to brother, how he’d met Riley and her entanglement with Alex.

“Well, that hits right where you hurt,” she said bluntly, as only a ?” could.

’t think “Yeah.” And he still didn’t understand Alex and Riley’s connection.

Yes, they’d grown up as neighbors, but Riley and Alex had an unbreakable bond. Maybe if Ian understood what lay behind it, it would be easier for him to accept.

“Yet she’s worth dealing with them? I mean, you’ve avoided doing children, all these years.” Her eyes lit with questions.

Ian nodded. If there was one person he could confide in, it was his mother. “Yes. She is. And right now she’s ignoring my calls.” And text

Emma laughed at his obvious distress.

“Umm . . . What did you do?”

He raised his eyebrows. Normally with that look, his employees would be running.

His mother merely laughed again.

“What makes you think I did something?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. Why would she suddenly ignore unless you upset her?”

He rolled his shoulders, the tension there painful. “I sent flowers to my hotel room.” And told her to miss him because he sure as fuck missed her.

“And?”

He didn’t want to admit to the next part and let out a frustrated gasp. “I might have called and warned her boss to keep his hands to himself because I need for business trip.”

She’d left him a message while he was in a meeting telling him in uncertain terms that she was pissed and he’d gone too far. And she was answering his return calls.

“Ian Carlton Dare, how could you!” his mother asked, wagging her finger at him as if he were a child.

“You should hear the things he’s said to Olivia! I was just making sure she understood that Riley was mine.”

She shook her head, her blue eyes dancing with undisguised laughter. “Oh my God. You are impossible. First, Olivia and Dylan have history. And second, that it’s any of your business.”

date on Ian nearly fell off his stool. “How the hell would I know that?”

“You wouldn’t! Your sisters don’t want you to know anything about motherlove lives because you scare men away.”

He narrowed his gaze but didn’t touch that remark, mostly because it was true.

had an “You can’t go around staking your claim like some cavewoman would be mother’s shoulders shook from trying to suppress laughter.

“Now you sound like Olivia,” he muttered.

g so for “Because she’s right. I’m sure your Riley would be flattered to get attention if you didn’t insert yourself into her work and diminish her authority as his eyes of her boss!”

ts. “I didn’t—”

“You did.” A few seconds of silence passed before his mother coughed.

“Ian, honey, you can’t ensure the people you love won’t leave you. You would have to learn to trust.”

And wasn’t that the crux of all his problems in life, Ian thought wryly.

“Thanks for talking, Mom.”

“Honey, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

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“We’ll see.” He had to get her to talk to him again first.

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“You wouldn’t! Your sisters don’t want you to know anything about their love lives because you scare men away.”

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“You can’t go around staking your claim like some caveman!” His mother’s shoulders shook from trying to suppress laughter.

“Now you sound like Olivia,” he muttered.

“Because she’s right. I’m sure your Riley would be flattered by your attention if you didn’t insert yourself into her work and diminish her in the eyes of her boss!”

“I didn’t—”

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“Thanks for talking, Mom.”

“Honey, there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for you.”

He rose and pulled her into a hug. The scent of her perfume brought him back to childhood, evoking warm, pleasant memories. “I hope you and Riley can fix things. I’d like to meet her one day.” Her eyes opened wide. “Are you bringing her to the fundraiser Saturday evening?”

“We’ll see.” He had to get her to talk to him again first.

Chapter Ten

Riley's first day back at work, she was on edge and not only because she had to deal with Ian. When she'd played her answering machine at home, she'd had numerous heavy breathing messages. The caller didn't say anything, but there was no doubt the messages were deliberate, not mistakes. The calls and hang-ups. They'd continued after her return, waking her in the middle of the night and early in the morning. As she had an unlisted number, yeah, she was rattled, to say the least.

She passed Angie, Dylan's secretary, and smiled. "Morning."

"Good morning. Riley, wait. I have a message for you," she said.

Riley paused at the other woman's desk. "I thought my calls went to voice mail," she said.

"Not since your promotion. I'm now your official go-to person," Angie grinned and handed her a pink message slip.

"Cool."

"You're telling me! I'm fairly new, and Dylan's my first important person. Now I have you both." The young woman smiled.

"Well, thanks. I'll try not to work you too hard," she said wryly.

Riley continued on to her office and settled in. She placed her Starbucks cup on the desk and glanced at the message.

You owe me. Dad.

Full-blown shivers took over. Riley hadn't heard from her father in many years that she'd almost convinced herself he no longer existed. When a bad dream or memory that surfaced occasionally, she'd banished him to the dark corners of her mind as often as she could. Suddenly, the hangover made sense.

Her first instinct was to call Alex, but that would only cause an explosion that might not be warranted. She had to think rationally and decide how to handle the man. Not that she wanted to handle him at all. The very thought had her hands shaking uncontrollably.

As for Ian, he'd probably be furious if he knew her own parents were harassing her. He worked himself up enough when he thought about the man even looking at her the wrong way. She still hadn't told him about her childhood, the fact that her father had abused her mother, or that he had touched her. She rationalized her silence easily. She hated the man's memories, and given the fact that he hadn't been in her life for so many years, she'd had no reason to bring him up before. As for these phone calls, she assumed they were probably meant to scare her. A power play or something, not say anything more.

But her hands still shook, and she hated herself for the weakness. "Breathe," she reminded herself, pulling air in, forcing air out.

She hadn't spoken to her father since the day she and Melissa had broken out. The day Alex had nearly choked him to death and threatened him with an inch of his life. He'd been petrified of Alex and his bulk, bulging muscles, and raging fury, and he'd taken Alex's threat to harm him if he came directly to Riley again very seriously.

So why was he surfacing now?

Her desk phone rang, and she jumped in her seat. "Oh my God." She tried to calm down. "Hello? Riley Taylor speaking."

"Riley, it's Jeannie from HR. I need you to come sign some forms to confirm a few things about your new position."

"Of course. I'll see you in a few minutes." She left the paper on her desk face down, so she didn't have to look at the reminder and went on about her day.

A little while later, Riley had a raise she was assured was commensurate with her position, but she'd never made this much money in her life. She couldn't help but wonder if Ian was pulling strings again. Another thought occurred to her in soadd to their conversation about his meddling, controlling ways, because she refused to be under any man's thumb again, a thought that only served to remind her that Douglas Taylor had resurfaced.

Determined to keep her mind on work while she was here, she pushed her father to the back of her thoughts, and she dug into the proposal the company owners had faxed over this morning, as promised. She met with the other employees, sharing lunch in the conference room as they went through the pros and cons of each hotel in preparation for his meeting with Ian, Olivia, and the hotel manager. He offered to let her sit in and learn from the exchange of

ent was Once again, Riley realized how much she loved this job and how fo
another she'd been when Ian had taken an interest and handed her the opportur
out her Ian.

'd ever As the day drew to a close, she finally let her mind drift to and
and the him. He'd kept his distance, not stopping in to say hello, not
o many messaging her. Clearly he'd gotten the point that she was extremel
ie calls, with him.

of some She bit the inside of her cheek, not amused by the irony—she miss
pestering her throughout the day. At this point, she was more than r
akness. see him.

She approached his office. His secretary had left for the day,
moved knocked.

l within “Come in.”

muscles, She pushed the door open and stepped inside, her breath catching
ne nearsight of him after what felt like so long. Shirt unbuttoned, his ta
peeking through and sleeves rolled up, his muscular forearms all a trea
deprived senses.

She had And she couldn't mistake the relief that flickered in his gaze w
realized she'd come.

ms and “Hi,” she said into the silence.

He rose from his chair. “I didn't expect to see you.”

er desk, She swallowed hard. “Yeah, well, I was upset with you.”

out her He strode over and pushed the door shut behind her, turning th
“Talk to me,” he said.

nsurate “Okay. You can't go around dictating orders to my boss about m
And she never see me as someone he can look up to and trust with his accounts
hing to worried about losing his job if he so much as looks at me the wrong w
ie Riley heaven forbid, touches me!”

rved to “Did he? Touch you?”

“Ian!”

hed her He braced his hands on her forearms and looked into her eyes. “Ho
ie hotel I'm kidding. I was out of line making that phone call.”

Dylan, She blinked, taking in his serious expression in search of s
nd condementia. “Say that again?”

general “I was out of line. I shouldn't have called Rhodes.”

f ideas. “Oh. I . . . thank you. I didn't expect that to go so easily.”

fortunate He grinned. "Sometimes, I can admit I was wrong."
uity. "Okay, so while I'm on a roll, about the salary with my new position."
stay on "I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't know who gets to
on what unless I've done the actual hiring."
instant She eyed him warily.
y upset "Don't look at me like that. It's true. Is the salary not enough? Because
can talk to Olivia—"
sed him "No! It's already a raise from the job I started one week ago. If an
easily to it's too much. I just wanted to make sure you weren't manipulating a
to my benefit."
so she An adorable grin lifted his lips. "Finally, you accuse me of something
didn't do wrong."
She laughed.
g at the "Because God forbid I give you a raise."
n chest She rolled her eyes. "I get the point. I do."
it to her "The salary's that much more than you were earning?" He raised
eyebrow in curiosity.
when he She nodded.
"Enough for you to move out of your unsafe apartment building?"
"Ian—"
"Consider it a quid pro quo. I'm doing my best to back off and believe
you. You can move into a safe apartment for my peace of mind."
ie lock. "And you don't consider this you manipulating me?"
"I consider this me doing my very best by you." He spread his hands
e. He'll front of him, silently asking her to trust him.
s if he's "Fine. I'll consider it. After I do the math. I want to pay off some
way. Or, student loans, and with a salary increase, I can start to do that."
He opened his mouth, then immediately snapped it shut.
Whatever he'd been about to say, he'd obviously thought better.
Which meant he was thinking. About her wants, needs, and feelings.
onnestly, She grinned.
Without warning, he grasped her around the waist, pulled her toward
igns of and kissed her. Considering he'd gone against type and given in to what
needed, she forgave him for messing up while she was in Phoenix.
She was happy to be back in his arms and had no problem showing it.
She kissed him back, settling her lips against his warm mouth. He

with his tongue, and her stomach fluttered in anticipation. Her sex s
on . . .” need building without any care to their location. The desire to conne
ets paidhim was that strong.

He lifted her, and she hooked her legs behind his waist, holding o
carried her to his desk, easing her down, disregarding the papers
:cause Ibeneath her.

He lifted his head. His heavy-lidded gaze met hers, those dee
ything, taking her in.

nything “I missed you,” she said, threading her fingers through his h
attempting to pull him back for more deep, lingering kisses.

ething I He didn’t listen. Instead, he looked down, watching as he slid hi
along her bare thighs and up her skirt until his thumbs came into conta
her moist flesh.

She moaned at the intimate touch.

ised an “So fucking sexy,” he said, obviously referring to her barely there
He pushed the skirt around her waist, easing the flimsy material as
barring her to his hungry gaze. He immediately began to play with her,
her feminine folds.

In another lifetime, she’d be embarrassed that her skirt was hike
her private parts exposed, but she couldn’t make herself care, not w
ave forwas so diligently trying to please her.

He circled her outer lips with his finger, spreading her moisture o
sex, arousing her but never quite reaching the tiny nub that would br
ands inthe most pleasure.

“I need to come.” She bucked against his hand, urging him to m
e of myfingertip closer to her aching center.

He grinned. “You do?”

He slid one finger inside her, still ignoring her clit. But as he pur
r of it, and out, adding a second finger, she felt every erotic stretch and gli
nerve endings tingled, her need grew, and she threw her head back,
into his hand.

rd him, “Harder, faster . . . something!” She yanked at his hair, realiz
that she could give as good as he did when he drove her this close without c
completion.

ng him. He chuckled, his eyes darkening, as he pulled his finger out of he
stroked Gaze on hers, he licked her juices from his fingers.

welled, She followed the movement, surprised and oddly aroused.

act with “You know why I call you sweetness, right?” he asked as he unl
his pants.

n as he Throat dry, she shook her head to answer.

strewn “Because you taste so damned sweet,” he said, dropping his slack
floor.

p eyes His thick erection strained against his stomach, and her sex puls
gnawing hunger at the sight.

air and He grabbed a condom from his desk drawer, jolting her from arou
to horrified awareness.

s hands “What the hell?” Just how many women did he take in his offi
act withwondered, the notion turning her cold.

“I bought them after you took the job,” he said, stroking her che
his thumb in a calming gesture that had her turning her face into his ha
thong. She exhaled a relieved breath.

ide and “Better?” he asked her.

teasing She managed a nod.

“Good. Because I haven’t brought women to my home, and I de
d high,don’t have them in my office. You seem to be the exception to every c
/hen herule I have.”

Her entire body went lax with the admission.

ver her He stepped forward and slid his cock along her center. The de
ing herfriction had her releasing a sigh of pleasure, and a full shudder wrac
body.

ove his He stepped back, donned the condom, and returned to her, giving
time to think before he was poised at her entrance and thrust deep.

“Oh God.” She felt him everywhere, and her inner walls clenched
nped inaround him to keep him in place.

de. Her “Baby, you’re so damned tight.”

arching She moaned, and he slid out then back in, picking up a pace guar
take her up and over quickly.

ing she She leaned back on her arms and braced as he pumped in
fferingpunctuating every thrust into her body with a hot grind of his hips that
clit in just the right place. The sensations built, white noise roared in h
r body.and her body gripped his, trying unsuccessfully to hold him in plac
took her soaring.

Without warning, he reached between them and pinched her clit between his fingers. “Come, Riley. Now.”

Her body responded to his command. She screamed and blew pulsating waves of light and sensation taking her over. Her orgasms to the through her, clearly triggering his.

“Oh yeah.” His hips slammed into hers, once, twice, and on the third time, his loud shout echoed in her ears as he came.

Ian’s brain buzzed, overloaded with sensation as awareness returned fog buried deep inside Riley’s warm body, her pussy clamping tightly around him, he was in heaven and would do anything to keep her in his life.

Especially since his possessive feelings only grew each time she welcomed him inside her slick body. “You okay, sweetness?” He licked her forehead and brushed her damp hair off her face.

She forced her beautiful blue eyes open. “That was incredible.”

He laughed. “I was right there with you.” With regret, he eased out and went to his private bathroom, returning to see her smooth her skin over her sexy legs.

She looked up, a pink flush on her cheeks. “I can’t believe we did this in your office.”

A swell of stupid masculine pride filled him at the reminder. “You damned well plan to do it here again,” he informed her, in case she was thinking this was a one-shot deal.

“We’ll see.” She raised an eyebrow at his dominant tone, then turned to grab her purse.

“Wise guy.” He reached out and smacked her ass.

She spun toward him, lips parted in surprise. But her eyes also told him all he needed to know.

“Come home with me tonight,” he said, wanting more time. A quickie in his office wasn’t enough. He wanted hours to talk to her, listen to what she had to say, and then devour every inch of her delicious body.

But she shook her head, dispelling his plans. “I don’t want ever to see us coming to the office together tomorrow and know I’m sleeping with you.”

“I don’t give a damn who knows about us.” This was the first time he wanted a relationship, and she was shooting him down.

He was in over his head and wasn’t afraid to admit it. Remember

between needed him to hear her and listen, he forced a mental step back. “V
you so against us?”

7 apart, She frowned at him. “It’s not us I’m against, it’s how it looks
1 swept started here. If I arrive with you in your Porsche tomorrow, everyo
think you gave me the job because we’re having sex. Dylan already
ie third because you all but threatened him if he touched me.”

He scowled at the mention of the other man’s name, but he didn’t
ed. Still the sharp edge of panic in Riley’s voice and knew he had to back off.

around He’d spent the last few days struggling with uncertainty, a feel
wasn’t familiar with. But until he’d known how badly he’d blown thin
ne she her, he’d been on edge. Seeing her in his office, having her come to
fted his knew he was damned lucky to be getting another chance. He might not
what the hell he was doing when it came to relationships, but he knew
didn’t want to lose her for good.

t of her Listening to her cues seemed like the best place to start. “Okay, fin
rt down She met his gaze, a stunned expression on her face followed

appreciative smile.

lid it in His heartbeat sped up at the sight.

“Want to get dinner?” she asked, giving an invitation he hadn’t expected.

’ou can “Sounds like a plan. And since you’re willing to be seen with me
he was about coming to the Juvenile Diabetes Fundraiser with me on S
night?” Why not push when he had an opening? “The team donates
rned to cause, and my whole family attends.”

She narrowed her gaze. “It means a formal dress and heels, does
she asked on a groan.

dilated, He took that as a yes and grinned.

He knew damned well he’d been given a second chance and planned
ck fuck make the most of it.

’hat she For him, this woman was the whole package. Intelligent, funny, and
warmed him in places that had long been cold. Not to mention she did
yone to his crap, which he admired; his money didn’t impress her, which told
ng with she was sticking around, there must be something more about him she

A damned good thing, since he liked her too.

ne he’d

* * *

ing she

Why are The last thing Riley expected was for Olivia to invite her to go shopping to wear on Saturday night. She suspected that Ian had put his sister in. I just to it, but since Riley didn't have anything except the red dress she'd worn the night she'd met Ian, and Olivia promised she had a place that would know dresses quickly, Riley readily agreed. She also needed the distraction from her father's message and the hang-ups that continued to haunt her at home. I't miss They left work midday on Friday and headed to a boutique off Madison Avenue. Although Riley had window-shopped in the area once or twice, she couldn't afford to buy anything here, but before she could mention this with concern, Olivia whipped out a black credit card.

him, he "Gotta love when my brother's feeling generous," she said with a grateful smile. "That's great for you, but—" "You think he's doing this just for me?" Olivia paused in the middle of the sidewalk, causing people to stop short and swerve around them. "I don't know." "You're right, he's doing it for me."

by an She raised her Chanel sunglasses and met Riley's gaze. "This is fine. I'm just getting a side benefit. And before you argue with me, we're both going to be going through with it."

ected. A warm, fuzzy feeling floated through her, but the objection came quickly. "I can't accept—"

aturday "Yes, you can. You aren't denying me this. Come on." Olivia grabbed Riley's hand and pulled her out of the oppressive heat and into the cool, air-conditioned store.

n't it?" Over the next hour, Riley said *I can't accept this* so many times that it had become her mantra for the day, but Olivia assured her she had to stop insulting Ian, who'd never gone out of his way for a woman who was so important to his family before. Olivia insisted that Riley meant something to her and Riley wanted to believe her.

and she So in the end, although the money was never far from her mind, Riley didn't take as much as Olivia instructed—she let go and enjoyed. How could she not, when it was fun and happy and her attitude was contagious?

liked. By the time they finished for the day, Riley owned a dress so high-end she didn't recognize the name of the designer; shoes so expensive, she could pay her rent for two months; and a Judith Leiber purse in the shape of a peacock, glittering with brightly colored jewels.

Before they parted for the evening, Olivia informed her she'd be

ing for after up first thing in the morning for part two of their excursion.

ister up “Part two?”

orn the The other woman grinned, her eyes glittering with excitement. “I’d alter surprise,” she insisted in that tone that told Riley no amount of pain from would get her to reveal what she planned.

ome. After shopping, Riley arrived home, arms loaded with packages. Collins dress would be delivered by four p.m. tomorrow. Her phone was ringing, she fumbled for her keys. She found them, unlocked her door, and ran in dropping the bags onto the couch.

She grabbed for the receiver. “Hello?” she asked, out of breath.

grin. *Click.*

Whoever it was hung up on her. “Dammit!”

ddle of Her mouth ran dry. Before she could think about it, the phone rang as they Riley answered it, yelling into the receiver. “I swear to God, if you stop calling me, I’ll—”

or you. “Riley? What’s wrong?”

ere, so “Alex?” Relieved, she lowered herself next to her purchases.

“Yeah. Talk to me.”

just as She sighed. “Nothing. I just came home from shopping, and the phone was ringing, my hands were full . . . everything’s fine.”

grabbed “That’s why you were threatening me before you even knew who I was, right—the other end of the line?”

She swallowed hard. “I heard from my father,” she said, knowing it was better than to lie to him.

or risk Alex swore loudly. “What did he say?”

asn’t in “He left a message with my secretary when I was out of town. The secretary just said, ‘You owe me.’”

“I’ll kill him.”

iley did “It’s not worth it. You were a kid last time you dealt with him. You can’t let Olivia’s career to worry about now. Just stay away from him. Promise me. I know he’s all talk,” Riley said, praying she was right.

gh-end, It didn’t make any sense. He’d been out of her life for years. Why the hell would she care now?

hape of “Not making any promises. I’m still in Tampa, but I’ll be back tomorrow. I’ll see what I can dig up on your old man. See what he’s been up to.”

picking “Thanks, Alex.” She opted not to argue with him.

Still shaken up, she knew better than to call Ian. He'd know immediately that something was wrong, so instead, she texted him her thanks for the "It's a and the rest of her new things."
nodding He wrote back immediately.

es. Her *Seeing you in them will be thanks enough.*

ging as She smiled and managed to go to bed happy, but her dreams kept
inside, tossing and turning and on edge. Her childhood wasn't a happy one, so
couldn't think of one good reason for her father to surface, or what he
imagine she owed him.

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orrow.

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He wrote back immediately.

Seeing you in them will be thanks enough.

She smiled and managed to go to bed happy, but her dreams kept her tossing and turning and on edge. Her childhood wasn't a happy one, and she couldn't think of one good reason for her father to surface, or what he could imagine she owed him.

Chapter Eleven

The next morning, no sooner had Olivia picked up Riley than she in her they were spending the day being pampered. She should have been pampered, massaged and hot-stoned, plucked, waxed, blow-dried, and styled. Riley's nails and toes were soaked and perfectly painted, a far better job than she did herself. Olivia, it seemed, treated herself to this. For Riley, it was a brand-new experience, and she surprised herself by enjoying every minute.

Before she knew it, she was dressed and ready and allowing Ian to help her into the limousine. Ian waited in the back seat, looking exceptionally handsome in his black tuxedo. Clothes didn't make this man; he was imposing not to be noticed, no matter what he wore. But with his hair perfectly styled, his navy-blue eyes focused on her, he was every inch the man she couldn't get out of her mind . . . or, she feared, her heart.

"You take my breath away," he said, his eyes darkening with his words. Never before had she been the focus of such intense scrutiny.

"Thank you," she murmured. "You look pretty hot yourself."

"I'm not the one they won't be able to take their eyes off of."

She ducked her head and felt herself blush.

He lifted her chin with one hand. "I'll be the luckiest man there to want you to know that."

He trailed a finger down her neck and across her collarbone, his touch intimate and seductive. Her nipples beaded, and she trembled.

"I think that dress needs a little something more." With his free hand he reached behind him and held out a long box.

"Ian, no." She'd already compromised her usual beliefs by letting him buy her this dress and the shoes, not to mention the complete spa day.

His eyes lost some of their earlier sparkle. "Let me give you this, Riley. It makes me happy. I want you to have something that . . . when you think of me."

She swallowed hard. "I always think of you."

“Then let me in.” He leaned in and pressed his lips against that swi behind her ear, and she let out a soft moan. “Let me do things for yo took her hand and placed it on the box. “Please.”

She could see and feel how much this meant to him. It was a g she’d hurt him if she didn’t accept it. “Okay.”

formed His expression transformed, his pleased smile making her happ given in.

ve said He snapped open the box, revealing a delicate, teardrop-shaped d l made-necklace set in white gold.

ir more She sucked in a breath, overwhelmed by the piece. It wasn’t oster s often. or over-the-top. It didn’t make a statement or scream money, though self by no doubt the item had cost him a lot. Instead, it was simple, elega every inch something she’d not only pick out herself but also wear. / s driver. just tonight at the fundraising gala, but every day.

tremely He’d chosen the perfect gift, picked with her taste and feelings in n

vas too “It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

his hair “You’ll wear it?” he asked.

nch the The vulnerability in the question touched her. “I’d be honored.” Sh her hair away from her neck and turned.

ords. He placed the necklace on and hooked it in place.

She swiveled back to face him.

He smoothed her hair over her shoulders, surrounding the delicat of jewelry. “It’s perfect. Just like you.”

night. I She opened her mouth to argue. She wasn’t perfect, and she had t to prove it. Her father’s reemergence had never been far from her mi s touch she’d wanted to hide it from Ian for as long as possible. But he ob and, he cared about her, and he was showing her in so many ways, which n was time to trust him with her secrets.

“Ian, I need to talk to you.”

ng him “Later.” He pressed his mouth to hers, gliding his tongue over h encouraging her to open for him.

please. His masculine taste flooded her senses. Her eyelashes fluttered and she parted her lips, taking him in. He devoured her, kissing her a were the only thing that mattered. He gripped the back of her neck w hand while he swirled his tongue in her mouth, round and round, o wear it, over.

et spot She returned the kiss, the fervor behind it, and the need they both
ou.” Heuntil the car came to a halt and a knock sounded at the side window.

Ian groaned and pulled back, his hand never leaving her na
ift, andforehead touching hers. His breathing ragged, he dragged in gulps
while she did the same.

y she’d She reached for her small purse and took out the tiny mirror she’
somehow managing to wipe away the lipstick smudges and reapply. I
iamondstill looked puffy, her mouth well kissed, but there was nothing she c
about that.

rtatious She eyed Ian, dabbing at her lipstick marks on his lips and fac
she hadshe’d cleaned him up too.

nt, and “We’ll pick this up where we left off,” he said, the promise in his v
And notseductive as his kisses.

“I’ll hold you to that.” She managed a grin, ignoring the pulsing
mind. body and the niggling guilt that she was holding back about her father.

Why that had suddenly begun to matter, she didn’t know. Her fir
went to the delicate teardrop at her throat. Something about this g
ie liftedbroken down the last wall she’d erected to keep Ian out. Sudden
wanted to let him in.

“Ready?” he asked, his hand on the door lever.

She nodded.

e piece He grasped her hand, and they stepped out of the car.

She supposed she should have expected the photographers, given
he pastThunder players were attending as well, but the flashes of light caught
nd, andguard.

viously Sensing her distress, Ian tightened his hold and pulled her again
neant itwrapping a protective arm around her waist as he led her inside.

* * *

er lips,
closed,
s if she
with one
ver and
Hours into the event, Ian couldn’t wait to get Riley home, peel the di
her body, and explore her inch by inch, first with his hands, then v
mouth. She was easily the sexiest woman here, not to mention the cl
Her one-shoulder dress—black with silver trim, slit up one side—reve
elegant expanse of tanned leg and an incredibly hot, ridiculously high
shoe. His mouth watered, and his cock hardened and approved.

shared, Knowing he had to remain at least through the speech portion of the evening, he'd settle for having a few minutes with her alone. His father had been monopolizing her time ever since they'd arrived. Since they were in the presence of airpublic, he'd suffered through each of his brothers dancing with and pestering her, but she'd laughed and smiled and obviously enjoyed it.

It didn't fit in, He bit back his jealousy over other men touching her; they were his brothers, after all. He'd settle for killing them over a Sunday basketball game with well-placed elbow jabs and points scored. He wasn't any more interested in Olivia, her plunging neckline, and clear attempts to make Dylan jealous until jealous by dancing with other men while eying him to make sure he was watching. At least Avery seemed to be behaving herself . . . so far.

His voice as Even his mother seemed to be enjoying herself, dancing with one particular all evening. That was something he intended to question her thoroughly. In fact, he made it a point to interrupt both of his sisters at least find out what they were up to.

His fingertips With Riley occupied by Tyler, Ian headed onto the dance floor, where his mother and a silver-haired gentleman were dancing and had been for some time.

"Mind if I cut in?" Ian asked.

"Michael, this is my son, Ian. Ian, this is Michael Brooks. His in-laws' company is a big donor for tonight's auction."

Ian nodded.

That the other man extended his hand, and Ian took it. "I've been talking about you all evening. Your mother is your biggest fan. And I'm impressed with all you've done for the team during your tenure."

It wasn't him, "Thank you." Ian hoped the other man wasn't trying to impress his mother's sake. He hated suck-ups.

"Unfortunately, I'm a Breakers fan," Michael said with humble honesty.

He pressed off the man's truthfulness even if his taste in football teams sucked. "A little with his mother's dancing with you anyway? I'm surprised."

His classiest. "I've won her over with my charm," Michael said. "She's a love-ale and Well worth the effort."

-heeled "I agree."

"I'll let you have some time together. I'll wait for you at the bar, E"

of the Ian's mother smiled. "I'll see you soon."
ily had "Nice to meet you, Ian." Michael tipped his head and walked away
were in Emma followed the other man with her gaze.
robably "Have you met him before tonight?" Ian asked her.
"We're both on the Juvenile Diabetes Board that planned to
ere hisevent," she said.

ll game Ian pulled her into his arms, and they swayed in time to the slow
pleased "I'll look into him," he told her.

Rhodes "You will not. I'm a big girl and—"

he was "What the hell are they doing here?" Ian asked, interrupting her
caught sight of his father and Alex walking into the ballroom. Savannah
man in beside them.

n more "Who?" His mother glanced toward the entrance.

and at "My father, his wife, and Alex," Ian said, any peace he'd been feeling
evening evaporating at the sight of them.

ere his Ian had stopped dancing, but his mother pulled him back into their
or quite positions. "Don't let them rattle you or interrupt your evening," she
firmly.

He acquiesced to her demands and forced himself to both relax and
survive continue their dance. "I don't understand how you do it."

"How I do what, exactly?" his mother asked.

"Get past what Dad did? Go forward as if nothing happened?"

hearing He met his mother's gaze but saw no stress there, only understanding.

pressed "Your father and I weren't a love match, Ian. You know that already."

"Is that an excuse?" he asked, hearing his bitter tone but unable to argue.

him for "No, but it is a fact. The truth is, I was in love before I ever met
father. His name was Jonathan Daniels. He mowed our lawn," she said
or and blushing.

Ian immediately realized where this conversation was going. "Mom,

admiring "No. You're going to listen. You're old enough to deal with it, so cut
and my He blinked and nodded, knowing when his mother used *that* tone,
no choice but to listen. Besides, she held him captive on the dance floor.

ly lady. She had his ear, and nobody else could hear. "I'm listening."

"We fell in love, but you know the world I lived in. Your grandmother
would never have let me be with him, so we sneaked around. Then my
mma." was diagnosed with leukemia. He was terminal and needed someone

over his hotels. My father and your father's father had been fierce competitors for years. They agreed to merge their businesses and have Robert to ultimately run both. Our marriage was a part of that deal."

Ian winced at the cold bargain two men had struck at the expense of my mother's children. Of course, Robert had benefited greatly from the merger and had become a hotel magnate.

"Did you ever think to say no?" Ian asked.

She shook her head, her eyes filled with unshed tears. "I loved my father very much, and he was dying. He didn't have a son, and I wasn't the first woman to take over and run a business."

Her heartfelt sigh broke Ian's heart.

"I had to let Jonathan go."

Ian swallowed hard. To him, it was unimaginable. Could he let himself do this? Damn, he was in so deep with her he didn't know how he'd ever get out.

"Do you know what happened to him?" Ian asked his mother.

"We agreed it was better if we said good-bye for good."

"So you gave up the man you loved to marry Robert Dare, who betrayed you." Ian shook his head, his father's behavior suddenly seeming so much more reprehensible in light of what his mother had given up.

She sighed. "Your father and I had what I thought was a traditional marriage, much like many in our social circles. He was away often, and he cheated on me, I didn't want to know. But when he came to us about Savannah's illness and revealed a whole other family?" She shook her head. "I was numb. I stayed that way for years. The only light, the only feeling that kept me going were for you and your brothers and sisters."

"God, Mom."

"Life isn't always fair. We both know that. But I got five beautiful children out of the deal. I can live with myself because I was faithful. Your father's behavior is on him. I just wish I could have protected you from the pain of that deal." I hate that you're still so angry and you expect the world to let you down.

He tightened his grip on her hand as he led her around the dance floor. "I idolized him. I had him on a pedestal so high . . ." He shook his head, trying to banish the memories.

"Your father was—is—just a man. And a flawed one at that. But he was my father Savannah, and he hasn't, to my knowledge, cheated on her. Which tells me that we were both at fault for agreeing to a loveless marriage to begin with."

friendly He blinked. "You made the same commitment. You were already groomed with someone else, and you didn't cheat on him. There's no way to justify that."

"I agree. I'm just saying people have faults. You have to find a way to accept them and move on. You haven't. And it's eating away at you. He's single day."

He couldn't argue that point.

"And Sienna's illness wasn't something I'd wish on anyone, especially my father's innocent child," his mother went on.

kind of Ian nodded. "I haven't exactly been fair to her. Or the rest of the family. I've admitted, embarrassed in light of his mother's forgiving nature."

"At least you realize it."

"It's too late." Alex had made that clear when none of them had shown up at his invitation.

at out. His mother shook her head. "It's never too late while you're all still here. So let the past go," she said, her words hitting him with deadly accuracy and devastating impact.

and he Ian inclined his head. He didn't know if he could, but with everything his mother revealed, and for all she'd given up, he promised himself that, for her sake, he'd try.

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Riley listened to Olivia and Avery's banter, once again enjoying the dynamic between the sisters. She'd already met Ian's mother and instantly was drawn to the charming woman who'd gone out of her way to make Riley feel welcomed. She knew Ian appreciated his family in a way many people wouldn't, and as a man who carried hurts from the past, she was grateful for these three women in his life.

His brothers, who she'd also spent time with, were very much like him when he was in a good mood. They liked toying with their older brother by dancing too close with Riley, they knew they were poking at Ian's weakness. She'd tried to pull away, but they'd laughed and kept her dancing.

"So tell me how you put up with my brother's bossy ways," Avery said, bringing Riley into their conversation.

Since Ian had cut into each sister's dances with other men, and he'd done the same with their mother, they had good reason to ask Riley about it.

in love control issues.

ify it.” Still, Riley couldn’t help but blush, knowing there were plenty of ways she liked Ian’s brand of control. Yet there were many instances where she didn’t.

“I suppose I just put him in his place,” she said to Avery. She took a sip of her champagne and shrugged, not knowing what else to say.

ally an “And he accepts that?” Olivia asked.

Riley shook her head and laughed. “Not always.”

em,” he “What happens then?” This, from Olivia.

“I’m not telling.” Riley grinned, and the other women merely groaned.

“Good evening, ladies.”

showed Riley stilled at the unexpected sound of Alex’s voice. She turned around, surprised. “What are you doing here?”

ill here. He looked handsome in his tuxedo, his shaggy brown hair giving him an even more appeal. She was happy to see him, just not here. Ian was upset, and that was the last thing she wanted on a night that had otherwise been wonderful so far.

for her “My parents are big supporters of the cause. Why wouldn’t I be here?” He turned toward the other women. “Olivia, Avery. Good to see you.”

They each eyed him warily.

ynamic Olivia, who Riley had learned was the more outspoken of the two women, straightened her shoulders. “You owe us all an apology,” she said to him. “Unless you think not showing up when you’re invited and not accepting a dinner invitation is the polite thing to do.” She raised an eyebrow as she stood up for her brother.

he had Alex straightened his shoulders. “I think that’s between me and Ian.”

ce Alex “Not when I extended the actual invitation on his behalf,” he reminded him.

ier, and Riley winced. She deliberately stayed out of the conversation. Alex’s main subject upset her, she recognized it was none of her business.

ncing. Alex met her gaze and slowly nodded. “You’re right. It was rude, and I’m sorry.”

’d done Riley blinked in surprise, proud of her best friend for owning up to her behavior.

at Ian’s “Any chance you’ll tell Ian that?” Olivia asked, pushing her luck.

“Tell Ian what?” the subject of conversation asked, joining them.
Riley sighed.

Ian slipped in beside her, wrapping an arm around her and pulling her tightly against him. She automatically leaned into his warmth, savoring a delicious and arousing smell of his cologne. His fingers gripped her possessively.

The half siblings and siblings studied each other warily.

“I think Avery and I are going to dance.” Olivia spoke first. “It’s the first time this DJ is picking up the beat. I don’t want to miss out,” she said, grasping her sister’s hand and pulling her away.

Left alone with the two men, Riley looked to each, wondering how to break the tension first.

“Alex,” Ian said, extending his hand for a shake.

Riley knew what the gesture had cost Ian’s pride. She immediately would have done it for her, and her heart filled with love for this enigmatically contained man.

Love.

“Oh God.”
She didn’t have time to analyze the emotion because Alex

answered. Beside her, Ian stiffened at the insult, and they both waited.

“Ian.” Alex pumped Ian’s hand.

Riley’s knees went weak, and she was grateful for Ian’s bodily support. She expected them to find a reason to part ways, but to her surprise, they had made small talk about the draft and the potential of both teams during their upcoming season.

A start, she thought, relieved and pleased beyond words. These two were so important to her that she couldn’t bear it if they couldn’t even have a small inroad in their relationship.

“Feeling better?” Alex asked Riley, interrupting her internal musings. “I’m fine,” she answered quickly, shooting him a warning look. She hoped he understood that she wanted him to end this conversation now and not bring up last night’s phone call.

“I set a PI on your dad. I should know what that bastard has been doing soon enough.” Clearly he’d missed her pointed glance.

“What’s going on?” Ian asked.

Riley groaned. “I . . .” She trailed off, unsure of where to begin.

Alex's gaze shot to hers, his expression apologetic. "I'm sorry, Riley assumed you'd told him."

ing her "Told me what?" Ian asked, his grip on her waist tightening.

ing the "Ouch," she muttered.

r waist He immediately loosened his hold. "What am I missing?" he asked

She swallowed hard and glanced up at him. "Do you remember earlier the limo, I said I wanted to talk to you, and we—umm—got distracted"

he first Ian nodded, his jaw tight. He hated being in the dark. Hated more the first time Riley and his half brother shared some sort of secret.

"Well, it was about this."

who'd "I don't know what *this* is," Ian reminded her, hurt and betrayal flashing through him.

Alex shook his head. "Jesus, Riley. Your old man surfaces, I don't expect you to keep the news locked up tight. He's the guy you're worried about," he self-gestured toward Ian. "Hell, you practically threatened me that I'd lose Riley if he didn't come around and find a way to get along with him. I figured Riley was the first one you'd confided in."

"You thought wrong," Ian informed him. "I don't know what the hell was going on, but I plan to find out," he said, his voice vibrating with anger.

"Let's go. We're leaving," he told Riley, his hand still holding her arm.

"The hell you are." Alex stepped into his personal space. "You're not leaving with her while you're so pissed off."

se, they "Alex, it's fine," Riley said.

ing the The other man scowled at Ian. "You don't hurt her, you don't put your fucking hand on her in anger."

vo men "He wouldn't! Alex, back off. This is my problem, not yours," Riley said, defending him.

Ian clenched his free hand, the one he was itching to shove into Riley's brother's face.

ok. She "Do not tell me how to deal with *my* woman," Ian bit out, wanting to know when it came to Riley, Ian had first dibs. "And if you think you can touch me if I laid a hand on her, then you don't know her as well as you think you do."

"You're the one who doesn't know her."

Point scored, Ian thought.

Alex stepped back. "Call me in the morning," he said to Riley.

i. I just She nodded.

Ian immediately led her across the ballroom toward the exit. She struggled to keep up with him in her high heels, but getting her alone quickly, was his first priority.

l. “We need to say good-bye to your family,” she said.

rlie, in “They’ll deal.”

?” “What about the speeches? I thought you wanted to stick around those?” she asked.

 “It’s fine. I’m well represented.”

 “Okay,” she said quietly, giving in, which told him she knew he was just upset but that he had good reason to be.

He didn’t speak again until they were settled in the back seat of the limousine, the privacy partition raised. “You had a problem, and you didn’t say anything.” HeAlex,” he said through a clenched jaw.

you if I She blinked at him. “What? No. It wasn’t like that. He called me a bitch. I need to start at the beginning.” She pushed away from him, into herself close to the car door.

hell is He gave her the space she needed. For now.

anger. “You already know it’s about my father,” she said, not wasting time.

l. “The father you never speak of.”

’re not She inclined her head, looking down as if ashamed.

 He couldn’t have that. Didn’t want her unable to meet his gaze when she confided in him.

t lay a “Riley, look at me.”

 She raised her head, tears in her beautiful blue eyes.

ey said, *Shit.* He slid closer and cupped her chin in his hand. “Tell me.”

 She swallowed hard.

his half He waited until she nodded to release her but didn’t give her anything between them.

ig Alex “What Alex said? About you not touching me in anger? It was . . . I know he’d be sensitive subject for me. For us.” She hesitated, and Ian gave her the time she needed to gather her thoughts. “You see, my father was and still is an asshole son of a bitch.”

 Ian froze, his entire body stilling. He hadn’t seen this coming.

 Not at all. “He *hit* you?”

 Her shoulders sagged slightly. “When I was younger, my mother told me that.”

brunt of it. She made sure he directed his fury at her. Then, when Mo
it. SheI stayed out of his way, and he seemed to calm down a little.”

ne, and He recalled her telling him she'd been sixteen then. He swallowed
the bile rising in his throat.

“Not long after that, he had his gall bladder removed. My stepmo
his hospital nurse. He was on his best behavior while he was wini
and fording her and never showed his real self until after they were marrie
fiddled with her hands, then drew a deep, shuddering breath. “Melis
stepmom, she's one tough lady, and he quickly realized he'd cho
wasn'twrong kind of woman this time.”

Ian inclined his head. “You've mentioned her. You said she an
of thewere your only family.”

went to She nodded. “I adore her. She was the role model my mother shou
been. Don't get me wrong, I loved my mom, and I miss her every day
fter . . .know she protected me, but she didn't stand up for herself. If not for M
curlingwould I have learned to value myself? To not put stock in the belittling
I grew up around? I'm not so sure.”

His stomach churning, Ian reached for her shaking hands, coverin
e. with his own. “You're strong, Riley. I saw that in you from the first
met.”

She smiled at that. “I like to think so.”

hen she “Did he ever hit Melissa?” Ian asked.

She shook her head. “They fought often and loudly but . . . he just
to keep himself in check somehow. I think he knew Melissa would g
cops.”

“Your mom never did?” he asked, but he already knew the answer.

“I begged her, but . . . no. She wouldn't.”

y space “So what happened?” Because something had tipped the pre
balance. That much was obvious.

. it is a “Alcohol happened,” Riley said in a disgusted voice. “He was al
ime sheheavy drinker, but living with Melissa, suppressing his rage, it got
abusiveAnd one night, Melissa was working the late shift. He expected me
his dinner on the table. Not only didn't I do it, but I talked back and
slapped me. Hard across the face.”

A building fury like he'd never felt before filled Ian, making him
ook the
lash out. But his more rational self understood that anger was the la

m died, Riley needed to see, and he clamped down on his simmering emotions

“Whenever you’re ready,” he said in a gentle voice he barely recognized back

She nodded. “I tried, but I couldn’t hide the red mark on my face the next day, Alex saw, and he went berserk. Part of me was surprised he was so badly. I mean, in my mind, a slap was nothing compared to what was done to my mother, though I hid that from Alex as much as I could. I did.” She back, I thought I was getting off lightly, but Alex was furious.”

ssa, my “Good for him,” Ian muttered.

sen the “He cornered my father. He had his hand around his throat, I cutting off his air supply. He told my father that if he ever touched me I’d Alex he was a dead man.”

Ian closed his eyes, grateful to the half sibling he’d never bothered to know. The man he was irrationally jealous of.

And I Riley’s harsh laugh recaptured Ian’s attention. “My father threatened Melissa, go to the cops. Can you imagine the irony? Alex told him to go right to the cops. Then he followed up his words with a knee to my father’s groin and told him that was just a preview. He said I was off-limits, and he dragged me out of there.”

day we She shook her head, obviously lost in the memory. “I know my father believed his threats, because at seventeen, Alex was massively huge and working out for football.”

“What happened next?” Ian asked.

seemed “I called Melissa at work; she came home immediately. She refused to stay with him after that. Alex stood watch while we packed. Melissa told my father I’d be living with her until I was eighteen and, if he had a problem with it, to take her to court. With Alex looming over him, he backed off. That was the last night I saw him or heard from him until I got back from Arizona.

curious Ian narrowed his gaze. “Which brings us to now.”

She nodded. “There have been hang-ups on my home answering machine, but I never thought it was my father. Then I returned to work to find out how much worse. A message while I was away. He said I owed him. And then Friday afternoon after I got home from shopping, the phone rang, and the person was bristling. . . . he into my ear. I hung up, and the phone rang again. I answered it yelling at him. It was Alex. He wanted to know what was going on. I said it was nothing. He didn’t believe me . . . so I told him.”

st thing “Why didn’t you call me? Why didn’t you trust me enough to let

before now?”
He forced himself to remain calm, not to yell or show her just how frustrated and angry he really was. Not now, when he finally realized that if he flipped out in any way, he could very likely lose her for good.

“It wasn’t a question of whether or not I trusted you—it was humiliating admitting I grew up that way. Besides, I’d put him so firmly in my mind I never thought about him, talked about him, or wanted to revisit those memories.” She glanced away.

Once again, he gently redirected her with a touch of his hand. He wanted them communicating, not shutting each other out.

“Do you think I want to deal with my family history? But it’s between you and I thanks to Alex. I’m trying with him. Because of you.”

If he was going to make that kind of effort, he needed to know she would reciprocate in kind.

“What do you want me to say? I should have told you, and I didn’t warn you.” “Because you have trust issues.” And here, he’d thought those were all his.

She blinked in surprise. “I suppose I do.”

Part of him understood, as he was still working through his own. A part of her wanted her to know she belonged to him. That she could come to him with anything, *would* come to him first, and know he’d give her everything she needed.

Him.
No one else.
That was
all.”

machine.
he’d left
that night,
leaving
behind, and it
wasn’t long. He

took me in

before now?”

He forced himself to remain calm, not to yell or show her just how frustrated and angry he really was. Not now, when he finally realized that if he flipped out in any way, he could very likely lose her for good.

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Him.

No one else.

Chapter Twelve

Ian stood with Riley in his living room, the night sky sparkling with stars visible through the large windows. Her revelations about her childhood had humbled him. She was stronger than he'd given her credit for, and their relationship with his half brother something he understood much better now.

But that understanding didn't calm his racing heart. And he couldn't ignore the irrational fear that Alex would always come first for her. It was because she hadn't decided to tell Alex about her father before Ian's timing of the other man's phone call had dictated that choice. And it was because his jealousy over what she'd told Alex, and when, was based on the insecurities of the child Ian had been, not the man he was now. And that's how he should be viewing things.

His mother had begged him to let the past go. If there was ever a chance to do that, it was now. The question was whether he could.

"Ian?" Riley asked in a soft voice.

He turned toward her.

She stood in her bare feet, her hair tumbling over her shoulders, her face wide and more vulnerable than he'd ever seen them.

She reached for his arm. "I'm sorry I kept you in the dark."

"I know."

"So you're not angry?"

He shook his head. "No, angry wouldn't be the word I'd use."

"Hurt?" she asked.

"I was." He pulled his tie off and held it in one hand. The desire to pull her into the bedroom and tether her to his headboard was strong.

She bit her lower lip. "And now you're not?"

"Now I understand you better. Which was all I ever wanted to understand what bound you and Alex beyond basic friendship."

She swallowed hard, the soft lines of her throat moving up and down. "And now that you know?"

He walked over to her. "Now you and I are going to come

understanding.”

“I don’t want to lose you,” she said before he could elaborate.

“That’s not what I want either.” In fact, he wanted her bound to him where he’d know she belonged to him, he thought, winding the tie around one hand.

But then he wouldn’t know she was there willingly. Olivia’s words came back to him. His sisters and his mother all put up with his over-the-top behavior because they were related. They had to, as Olivia had so pointed out. But she was right. If Ian wanted Riley to trust in him enough to come to him first, he needed to extend that same faith.

That didn’t come easily to him at all.

“So what now?” she asked.

Now he proved to her he was worthy of any leap of faith he wanted to make. “I can handle your friendship with Alex. It’s an important part of you are, and I wouldn’t ask you to give that up.”

She blinked, her eyes filling with tears. “Thank you.”

“But . . . you either trust me or you don’t. You either instinctively come to me first, or there is no us. On that, I can’t compromise.” And he knew if she could give in on this point that meant everything to him.

“Done.”

He blinked.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tightly, sealing her lips against his. Stunned, he couldn’t move. Hell, he wasn’t sure he’d heard her correctly.

She tipped her head and looked into his eyes. “First, last, always, I’ll be yours.”

He let the tie drop to the floor and released a long, relieved breath.

“Mine,” he said, lifting her beneath her arms so she could jump over his shoulders and wrap her legs around him and hold on as he walked them into the bedroom.

He slid her to the floor by the side of the bed. “Turn around,” he said in a gruff voice he barely recognized.

She did as he asked, lifting her hair out of the way. He unzipped his jeans, sliding the garment off one shoulder and letting the material fall to the floor. He pulled down her feet. The sexy, strapless bra came next, and he kissed the marks on her skin, sliding the confining material, sliding his tongue over her soft skin, working his way down one vertebra at a time.

She trembled but remained in place as his lips hit the sweet spot.

base of her spine, just above the silken thong that settled between her

He squeezed each round globe, kissing her there, too, before gliding
his bed, panties down her long legs.

around He rose and splayed his hand across her stomach, his fingertips
downward, toward her sex. "Mine," he said once more before spinning
his came back to face him.

the-top Her eyes were dilated, her cheeks flushed, and she'd pulled her
kindly bottom lip between her teeth.

ough to "You make me want," she whispered. "You make me believe."

She didn't need to explain. She did the same thing for him.

Before Riley, he didn't believe in romance, relationships, women, or

He shuddered at the word that danced around his head, tempting him
and her to something he'd long since thought impossible. Yet she was here, by
of who Not running when she knew exactly how demanding he could be.

He cupped her face with both hands and kissed her, taking his
stroking her lips with his tongue and reveling in her sweet taste
y come demanding anything she didn't willingly give. Instead, he was kissing
e didn't if they had all the time in the world.

He thought of the tie on the floor of the living room. With one
word, he could have her splayed before him on the bed, acceding to his
command. Lifting his head, he looked down at her. Blue eyes wide, li
ing her kissed, her breathing ragged, she waited for him to take the lead.

'd even He traced the line of the chain and diamond drop hanging from
delicate neck, and her nipples puckered at his touch. He could have
an." her back, hands gripping the headboard as he fucked her wearing nothing
his necklace.

up and He could. But that wasn't what he wanted from her.

oom. He shed his jacket, then unbuttoned his shirt and dropped it to the
aid in a She reached out a hesitant hand, placing her palm over his heart.

instant, he accepted that she owned him. He didn't want to fuck her
oped the submission; he wanted to make love to her. It seemed there were still
pool at for him, after all.

left by With none-too-steady hands, he unbuttoned his pants and slid
his way trousers and briefs, ridding himself of those as well. Then he lifted her

dropped her in the center of the bed, coming down on top of her, his
t at the aligning with hers.

cheeks. He braced his hands on either side of her head. "I don't want anything between us. I want to feel all of you when I slide inside your slick heat."

Her eyes dilated at his graphic words.

dipping "I'm on the pill, but I never have sex without protection," she said.

ing her He was disappointed, but he understood and reached for the nightgown drawer.

plump "I meant, I've never had sex without it before."

Her words stopped his forward movement, and he came back, resuming his earlier position, his thick cock gliding over her feminine curves.

"I'm safe," she continued. "And I know you wouldn't be asking for love. I had any doubts about yourself."

m with "I would never put you at risk."

choice. She nodded. "Then I don't want anything between us either."

He released a long-held breath. She'd given him a gift he didn't expect. "I've never not used one before either," he assured her.

te. Not "I know, Mr. Always in Control." She grinned, her pretty blue eyes sparkling with laughter.

"Minx."

choice She wound her arms around him. "*Your minx.*"

s every He groaned at her words, raised himself up, settling his erection into her. He watched her expression as he eased inside her by inches.

not wanting to miss out on one second of this first time. As her body came from her accepting his thick length, taking him in, wet heat slowly enveloped him.

her on "Oh, Ian, I *feel* you," she murmured in awe.

ing but "I feel you too, baby." And he hadn't been prepared for the erection flooding through him.

Oh hell, now he knew why they called it making love, he thought, as he lay on the floor all the way home. *So damned good*, he thought, his entire body in a state of overload.

er into Her body clasped him tight, gripping him and connecting them. His heart slammed harder inside his chest, beating out a new rhythm.

ll firsts heart, and soul. His heart screamed ownership and possession of this woman who was so different from the very first. He stilled, giving himself a second to catch up and breathe and calm the fuck down.

If there'd been any lingering doubts or questions about the depth of feelings she inspired, they were gone with this act.

act.

nything .” gliding in and out of her slick sheath. She bent her knees and raised h encouraging him, giving him more depth for each thrust. He pic rhythm, and she moaned, arching into him each time he drove harder htstandher.

Their bodies already had their own rhythm, but skin to skin, eve was elevated, bigger, more, including her cries of pleasure. Faster, har to her,broke into a sweat, braced his arms, and powered into her.

heat. “Yes. Oh God, right there.” She arched again, and he made sure tl ; if youof his cock hit the same spot inside her.

“Come, baby. I’ve got you.”

Her body stilled and clenched, and she convulsed around him, cry with each pump of his cock.

r’t take “Ian!” She screamed his name, triggering his own hard, fast release

He came, spilling himself into her, opening his heart and gutting ie eyes the same time.

* * *

1 at her Riley woke up because her stomach was grumbling. She rolled to f ements, watching her in amusement, his lips twitching with a grin.

opened, “Something funny?” she asked.

m. “I like watching you sleep. Listening to you? Not so much.”

notions She punched him in the arm. “You made me leave the party dinner,” she reminded him. “I’m starving. And craving ice cream.”

gliding He rolled his eyes and laughed. “Luckily for you, I keep a stocked sensory question. for the girls. My sisters,” he added quickly when she raised her eyeb

“Feed me?” she asked.

1 body, He leaned over and kissed her hard on the lips. “Only because yo a rapid so nicely.”

d been He slid out of bed, perfectly comfortable in his nudity, and headed atch his kitchen, returning with a large tub of ice cream and one spoon. “He ubts or like chocolate swirl.”

his one “Mmm. Works for me.” She scooted back in the bed, sitting up turned on the bedside lamp and settled in beside her.

to move, “You’re not having any?” she asked, holding out her hand for the spoon.
her hips, He shook his head and laughed. “We’re sharing.”
picked up “You’re a mean man, making me share my ice cream.”
from inside Ignoring her complaint, he popped off the top and placed it on the
nightstand before settling in beside her. He dug into the tub and held out a
spoon for her to eat.
under. He He fed her, alternating one for him and one for her until they’d both
filled. This was the most relaxed she’d ever seen him, and she understood
something had changed tonight.

Not something, she thought. Everything.

It was as if once she’d verbally committed to him, the walls between
them had crumbled. Her heart swelled with emotion and a
knowledge that somehow she’d captured this man for her own.

The rest of the night continued the same way, with them holed up in
his apartment, sharing food, making love, and shutting out the outside world.

Until Sunday morning, when Ian went downstairs and returned with the
morning paper. He drank orange juice; she sipped her coffee. She
looked into the back of the sports section that completely covered her
view from hers.

“So this is how it’s going to be now? You ignoring me for the newspaper?
That didn’t take long,” she joked, reaching for another section of the
paper to keep her busy while he read.

“This from the woman who can spend half an hour looking through
apps on her phone?” he asked lightly.

She grinned, still enjoying this lighter, happier Ian.

She flipped through the lifestyle section, pausing at a black-and-white
photograph. “It’s us!”

The picture had been taken as they exited the limo, Ian obviously
protecting her. She smiled at the stern expression on his face.

“You’re not upset this time?” he asked.

She shook her head. “It’s not like everyone doesn’t know about us.”
She’d called Alex earlier this morning, as promised, and assured him
Ian wasn’t upset, things were good, and he no longer had to worry about
her. Ian had been by her side, and she’d chosen her words deliberately, vowing
to him to know she meant what she’d promised him.

He would come first.

poon. Her cell rang, and she glanced down. "Alex," she murmured.
Ian met her gaze, his expression bland. Whether it was a controll
or not, she appreciated how hard he was trying.
on the "I'm sure my sisters will be next once they've seen the paper. Th
out thegossip," he muttered.
She answered the call. "Hi, Alex," she said into the phone.
ad their "I take it you've seen the paper?" he asked.
od that "We've seen it."
"I hope your father hasn't. The last thing you need is to be a
spectacle, and that's what being with Ian will do for you."
'd kept She frowned. "Don't start."
nd the Ian met her gaze with a hard one of his own.
"I have to go. I'll talk to you soon." When she hung up, she fi
p in his smile. "He saw the picture. He's worried it'll provoke my father some
ld. "There's a simple solution for that."
with the Wary now, she raised her eyebrows. "What would that be?"
he was "Move in here."
his face And things had been going so well. Had she expected Ian to
overnight? As long as he was being reasonable and compromis
orningreminded herself.
1 of the "That's ridiculous. And premature." She'd planned to go home
To take a long bath in her own tub, to play her music, and to gat
ugh the thoughts about this intense, emotional weekend.
She rose and walked to the sink to rinse out her coffee cup.
He came up behind her and bracketed his big body around hers, p
d-white against her, his erection thick against her backside. "I agreed to be rea
and to back off outside the bedroom, but not when it comes to your saf
holding "A couple of heavy-breathing calls and one phone message don'
I'm not safe."
"You're safer here. With me. And for once, I think Alex woul
now." with me."
um that She turned, only to find her front pressed against his. "That may
out her, but it doesn't make you two right. He hasn't threatened me."
wanting "Yet."
"I need to go home tonight. We have work Monday, I need to
clothes, and I already told you I can't be seen coming to work with yo

mornings.” She eyed him warily, really hoping he wasn’t going to try to look into a fight.

He let out a frustrated groan. “Okay, answer this one question for me, and then we’ll decide together. Would you put it past your father to lay a hand on you?”

He had her, and she knew it. She hung her head, her shoulders drooping in defeat. “No.”

He braced his hands on her shoulders. “Listen to me. I’m not trying to control your life. I’m not even trying to get you to move in here just because that’s what I want.”

Her stomach did a flip at the admission.

“I’m doing it for your safety.”

“Never mind that you get what you want in the end.”

He grinned. “That’s just a side benefit. Can you deny that a building of yours is too easy to get into?”

“No.” She hated that he was right. Not because being here with Ian appealed to her but because it did. She wanted them together for the right reasons, when they were both ready.

Riley had spent too many years on her own, rebuilding her confidence and belief in herself after the time her father had spent tearing her down. Tonight, leaning into Ian was something she’d prefer happened slowly, at her own pace and on her level. Instead, her bastard father was forcing her hand.

“Let me drive you back to your place. You can pack your things, and I’ll follow me back here in your own car. Tomorrow morning, nobody will be there where you’re arriving from.”

She blinked, startled at his concession. “I really thought—”

“I was pushing my own agenda,” he finished for her.

She averted her gaze, embarrassed. She figured he’d pulled the card and then she’d have no choice but to drive to the stadium with him, allowing him to put his stamp all over her at work.

“I may not have given you any reason to trust me, but I swear, it will be true, compromise. And I’m doing it.”

She heard the hurt in his tone. “You are. I’m sorry I’m such a bitch,” he said.

“As long as you’re *my* bitch.” He grinned, swatted her on the ass, and then he walked away, leaving her with her mouth open in surprise.

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Chapter Thirteen

Riley arrived at work on Monday morning to find that Dylan wanted to take a quick trip to Manhattan to check out a city hotel owned by the company as the place in Phoenix. Forty-eight hours, in and out. She agreed to go and head home and pack.

She called Ian first, knowing he'd appreciate the gesture. Although she was in a meeting across town, he took her call immediately. He was pleased they'd be apart so soon after she'd moved in, but he didn't want her not to go or interfere. He couldn't leave the meeting he was in and insisted she take a car service to her apartment, charge it to the company, and make sure the driver walked her up to her door and waited for her to get into the car. He didn't want her alone.

She didn't argue, not wanting to add pressure to his day. She knew how difficult he found it to let her go on these trips, and she understood so much more now, especially since many of his father's business trips had been a cover for time with Savannah and his *other* family.

While away, Riley made sure to call him often, and though her room was full of flowers, Dylan had no complaints about phone calls from Ian.

In other words, Ian was living up to his word. In return, she picked up little souvenirs, silly things like a miniature Empire State Building and an NY hat just to show Ian she thought of him too.

She arrived home Wednesday morning, heading straight from the office to work.

Angie greeted her with a smile and her messages.

"You're amazing," Riley told the other woman.

"Thanks! Let me know if you need anything."

"I will."

"Oh! There's a package for you on your desk," Angie added.

"Got it!" Riley said as she entered her office.

She parked her small travel suitcase in the corner and flopped into a chair. "Home sweet home away from home," she muttered, kicking

shoes beneath her desk.

She might have work to do, but she wanted to see Ian first. A package in brown wrapping called to her. She wondered if he'd bought something while she was away. She immediately touched the pendant given her. She only removed it to shower, then put it back on to sleep.

She wasn't stupid; she knew it was ridiculously expensive, but it wasn't in its dollar value. For Riley, the necklace was Ian's statement of how well he knew her taste and what she meant to him. She didn't need anything else from him, she thought as she ripped into the package.

Inside was a box and inside that, a picture frame. Had the silhouette framed the picture of them from the newspaper? That was something she couldn't cherish, their first photograph together.

She turned over the rectangular frame, took one look at the picture, and screamed, dropping it onto her desk. "Oh my God!"

"Riley, are you okay?" Angie popped around the doorframe.

"I'm fine," she lied.

The other woman narrowed her gaze. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," she whispered.

Angie left, and Riley turned over the offending picture. Riley's brother, her face bruised and battered, stared back at her. Obviously a photo, it was faded and had been crumpled and straightened again to fit the frame.

Ian. She had to show Ian. Not because she'd promised him, but because he was the only person she wanted now.

She held the frame against her chest, not wanting anyone else to see it. She ran for his office.

His secretary smiled when she saw Riley.

"Is he in?" she asked.

The older woman nodded. "But he's on a call."

Riley didn't care. She passed by the woman's desk and let herself into his office.

He looked up when she burst in, his serious expression transforming into a smile. "I have to go," he said to whomever was on the phone, disconnecting the call.

Ian rose and started toward her, stopping when he caught sight of her face and wide, panicked eyes. "What's wrong?"

She shook her head, and he realized she was clutching something close to her heart. He wrapped his hands around hers. "Can I see?"

She released her grip. "It's my mother," she said in a pain-wracked voice. He looked down at the gruesome reminder of her past pain, a

combination of nausea and rage filled him. "Where did you get this?"

"The package was delivered here," she said, her voice dull.

Ian narrowed his gaze, trying to decide what concerned him more: the delivered photograph or Riley's reaction. "Come sit."

He led her to his leather couch and eased her down, setting the table in front of them. "Riley?"

"I'm going to kill him," she said, color returning to her cheeks.

Not if Ian got to the son of a bitch first.

"We need to call the police. They need to document what's happening, okay?"

She nodded. "My mother never did. I want it on record," she said, sounding stronger.

He let out the breath he'd been holding, relieved that she seemed to be coming back to herself.

"Have you been home yet?"

She shook her head. "Dylan was coming straight here, so I didn't want to see you."

He smiled at that, touching his forehead to hers. "I'm right here."

"I came straight to you," she said, her gaze on the picture frame. "I opened it up and came right to you."

He gathered her hair and pulled it back, off her face. "You did good. I'm going to take care of it," he promised her.

She blinked at that, her posture stiffening.

Wrong direction, he thought. She didn't want him fighting her battles, acting like she couldn't take care of herself. He got that about her.

"I missed you," he said, changing the subject.

"Me too. I brought you presents."

His heart warmed at the gesture. "How about we take the day off? I suggested, needing to be alone with her. He needed to slide deep into her willing body and know she was safe. And his.

She frowned. "I have summaries to write."

"Did Dylan say he needed or wanted them today or first?"

close tomorrow?”

She shook her head.

“Then relax. You earned the rest of the day. And I’m the boss. I can do whatever I want.”

She rolled her eyes and laughed. “You sure can. But we need to go to the police station on the way home,” she said, her tone growing more serious. “I’ll be right there with you,” he promised her.

She grasped his hand and squeezed tightly. “I don’t know what he’ll do with the picture from me after all this time.”

Ian couldn’t imagine. But he intended to find out. Until now, he was okay letting Alex handle looking into the son of a bitch, but now that his father had stepped up his game, Ian was getting involved. In deference to Riley’s feelings, he’d talk to Alex, but that didn’t mean he’d leave the matter solely in his half brother’s hands.

He said,

* * *

It had to be

Ian had not only lived alone, but he’d planned to remain that way. He had Riley with him, but he’d expected some internal tension over having her clothes in his closet and drawers, her feminine bottles and things in his bathroom and personal space. To his surprise, they blended seamlessly.

Once she’d returned from New York and made herself at home, she’d found out and not keeping to one small space, he found comfort in the things she brought. “I’m assured him she was there and real. The problem, in his mind, was that she wasn’t there by choice. Her father’s implied threats may have forced her to move in with him, but if he had his way, she wouldn’t be leaving with the bastard was taken care of.

If left up to the cops, that might be awhile. Their stop at the precinct was, as he’d feared, a waste of time. Short of documenting the calls and gift, there was no proof either of those things had been the man’s doing. Though the cop who’d taken Riley’s statement had been sympathetic, especially after seeing the picture of her badly beaten mother, he didn’t think she had enough evidence to rise to the level needed for a warrant of protection.

Riley would need to prove she had reasonable cause to believe she was in immediate danger of becoming a victim of domestic violence, and give

she hadn't seen her father in ten years, one phone call that wasn't a direct threat didn't suffice. The officer couldn't suggest anything more he could do to remind her to be in touch if she heard from her father or received a call more harassing than the calls she'd received so far.

Riley left defeated, and Ian hated seeing his normally spunky, bright, and serious. feeling so beaten down. He swore to do more than the cops in order to get things right.

He started by arranging for a surprise for later that would put a smile on Riley's face. It would also give him a chance to poke further into the side of her life he'd been and see if there was anything more he could find out about her old man. What he had her

ence to

* * *

things

Riley awoke from a long nap feeling refreshed and calmer than she had earlier today. She stared at the ceiling of Ian's bedroom, the events of the morning coming back to her full force. She closed her eyes, refusing to think about her father at all. If she allowed him any space in her mind, he would be a danger, she gave him power. And that was the one thing she refused to do here ever again.

Instead, she shifted focus to her location, looking around the beautifully furnished, massively large bedroom, amazed at how much her life had changed in a short time. From the new job, to the new man in her life, to moving into a new house, Ian, albeit temporarily, nothing was the same as it had been just a few weeks ago. And it wasn't just logistics, career, and Ian that had changed.

She was changing.

Learning to accept things from others, from small items and gestures to larger, more significant offers, like a new job and a place to live, she had been slowly bending. Giving up her hard-won and fought-for independence was the scariest of all, coming to count on having Ian in her life.

But she was also realizing that relying on others didn't make her weaker. It had been it made her human. Nor did it escape her notice that Ian was changing, and that made her own transformation somewhat easier to accept. Ian couldn't demand he alter who he was to accommodate her and not the other way around. It was the same for him.

She was growing up, she thought with a laugh. Ironic, since when she had first met Ian, she'd believed her independence defined her and was the

even important thing in her life.

more than "Something funny?" Ian slid beside her on the bed and pulled her into his arms.

"Not really. Just thinking about how different things are for me lately," she said.
"Good different or bad different?" he asked, nuzzling her neck with his lips.

"Are you searching for compliments?" she asked.
He nipped her collarbone in reply, and she groaned. Every nerve tingled, her nipples puckered, her body on high alert, ready for him. A part of her was still missing something that had changed. She was always sexually charged now.

"Get showered and ready; we're going out for dinner tonight with a friend," he told her.

She bolted up in bed. "What? Who?"
He yanked her down and back into his arms, where she immediately felt safe and secure. "Your stepmother and her husband."

She rolled so she could look at his handsome face. "I don't get it."
"What's not to get? You love her, I haven't met her . . . It's time."

"Does my father resurfacing have anything to do with this invitation?" she asked him.

Ian shrugged. "I won't deny it put the idea in my head. Maybe you've heard from him too."

"She would have told me," Riley said.
"Why? Have you told her?" he pointedly asked.

She winced. "Score," she muttered under her breath.
He chuckled and kissed the tip of her nose. "Maybe she doesn't want to worry you, same reason you haven't told her. Or maybe he's only focused on you. We need to know. And she needs to be prepared, just in case."

"You're right."

An arrogant grin edged his mouth. "Say that again."
"No."

He cupped her sex with his big hand, and she arched up, immediately seeking more pressure. She'd shed her skirt when she climbed into bed with him. He brushed one finger over her mound, drawing small circles over it, causing an exquisite pressure to build inside her.

"Mmm."
"Like that, do you?" he asked, nibbling on her neck at the same time.

continued his sensual assault.

into his “Yes. Harder,” she said, eyes half-cast as she focused on the p slowly mounting.

ely.” He stopped all movement. “First, say it again. ‘Ian, you were right.

with his She opened her eyes wide to find him above her, grinning like

Hmm. Give him the words he sought or suffer orgasm deprivation—l

she had no doubt he’d stop completely. *Controlling bastard*, she thoug

ending really meaning it. Not anymore.

Another “Ian, you’re right,” she said, and he came down on top of her an

the next thirty minutes catering to her body, giving her two orgasms t

another her screaming out her release.

Then he plunged deep inside her, whispering *mine* in her ear and

her to heights she’d only dreamed of before he’d come barging into he

ely felt

* * *

Riley drove to work the next morning on a high from how well Ian

sudden stepmom had gotten along. Ian had charmed Melissa and had a lon

dinner drink with her husband, David, while Melissa gushed over t

e she’s man in Riley’s life. In her mind, Ian was the perfect catch, and she

approved. With her husband being a Thunder fan, the two men h

plenty to talk about.

The only downside to the night, in Ian’s mind, was that not on

Melissa not heard from Douglas Taylor, she’d offered Ian no new insi

want to why Douglas had suddenly started harassing Riley.

used on For Riley, however, this was good news. The best, really. It meant

all likelihood, she didn’t have to worry about her father going after M

and now that both she and David were aware of the possibility, the

take steps to protect her, just in case.

That Ian had invited Melissa over spoke volumes about his un

mediately feelings for her, Riley thought. Although she knew she loved him

ed, and remained silent on the subject. She might be changing, but she w

er clit, fashioned at heart, and she wanted, needed him to say it first.

Mine, while possessive and arousing, wasn’t the same thing. She

the words. In her mind, saying them was the ultimate vulnerability.

time he much as he’d given her, as much as he was learning to compromis

laugh—as much as she believed in his feelings for her, him saying those little words would be the ultimate gift. The final breakdown in the walls they'd each erected to protect their hearts.

” Once in her office, she settled in to work, and the morning passed like a fool, quickly.

Because Her phone rang, and she assumed it was either Dylan or Ian, ready to go out for lunch, and she answered on the first ring. “Riley Taylor.”

“You’re not a big shot to me,” a familiar voice from her past said.

And spent Her blood ran cold, and she sat up straighter in her seat. “What do you want?” she asked the man she’d hoped to never hear from again.

“To tell you that you don’t impress me. You’re just playing dumb with a little girl. I know you’re not worth a damn. You never have been. All your life. But that you’re with that hotshot, I have leverage.”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said, gripping the phone so her fingers ached.

and her “I mean, I don’t have to worry about your football player and his reputation anymore. Even if he manages to find me, I can do plenty of damage to your new boyfriend’s reputation before he does.”

g after- So Alex was right when he’d worried about those photographs with her new boyfriend. Nausea filled her, and she fought the swirling sensation in her stomach.

he new heartily “Leave him alone. In fact, go back into whatever hole you crawled out of.”

ly had “Then do something for me.”

ght into She began to shake. “What do you want?”

that, in “Money. Thanks to you, I lost my wife, my house, I have nothing, and I’ve just been waiting for the right time to collect.”

Melissa, “I don’t have any money,” she said, her throat dry.

y could Her father let out a mean laugh she remembered from her childhood—the times she’d curl in a ball while he used it on her mother. He slapped her around.

spoken, she’d “The whole city knows how much money your boyfriend’s got, so make sure I get my share, and I won’t show up everywhere he goes and make a scene.”

needed “Ian won’t care,” she whispered, hoping she was right.

For as “But you do. You never liked to be the center of attention. Never mind—when people looked at you. Because you’re trash, and everyone knew

se three “Because I had an alcoholic father who beat the crap out of my m
at wallshe shouted at him.

“Don’t blame me for your failings. I’ll be in touch by the end of t
passedGet me money, or I’ll call the news and create enough scandal for Ian
drop you like the trash you always were.”

y to go Tears leaked from her eyes. “What did I ever do to make you hate
much?” she asked, but he’d already hung up.

She slammed the phone down, missing the cradle. So she banged
do youand again, sobs wracking her body. By the time she pulled herself to
her head pounded, and she was sure she looked like roadkill. She grab
ress-up,compact mirror and fixed herself as best she could, not wanting
nd nowanyone at work to her personal problems.

Her father wanted money, she thought. The one thing she didn’
iard herThe two men in her life both did, but she discounted going to each, f
different reasons.

threats Alex was out for two reasons. The first being she’d promised Ia
to youralways go to him first, and she meant to keep that promise. The secon
that Alex would find her father and beat him within an inch of his
ith Ian.appealing as that thought was—and Riley refused to dwell on what
i. person that made her—she couldn’t allow him to ruin his career and
led outover her. He’d done enough for her over the years, and she wouldn’
his friendship and love by knowingly destroying him.

Which left Ian. Without a doubt, she knew he’d react the same
Alex, and she wouldn’t put him in that position either. Both men l
ng left,much at stake professionally, both were public figures, and neither d
to lose everything because her father had tripped their anger.

In her heart, she didn’t believe Ian would care if her father did his
d, fromhumiliate him in public, but Riley would. She also couldn’t subject his
fore he—his mother and sisters especially—to her father’s hostility and

They didn’t deserve the fallout sure to come from Ian being associat
t. YouRiley.

d make God, she hated the man. He was forcing her to lie to Ian, the one th
didn’t want to do. She mentally replayed her conversation with Ian
*either trust me or you don’t. You either instinctively come to me first, c
liked itis no us. On that, I can’t compromise.”*

it.” She honed in on the word “first.” She promised she would come

mother," *first*, which implied she'd go to him over Alex. She was parsing, she
Playing word games to justify not telling him about her father's c
he day. threats. Word games were all she had.

Dare to She couldn't go to him about this, not because she didn't trust h
because she did. She trusted him to take care of things, to either kill he
e me soon agree to pay him off. She couldn't allow the former, and the latter
shook her head. She might be learning to accept things from him, but t
it again out of the question. Her father would only keep coming back for mor
together, and over again. He'd never be out of their lives. She shuddered at that.
bed her Somehow, Riley needed to handle her father herself. No matt
to alert scared she was, and her stomach cramped with pain at the thoug
needed to handle him alone.

't have. She played with the necklace dangling against her chest, findin
for very comfort as she touched the pendant and thought about how to proceed.

What to do.

n she'd The idea, when it came to her, was simple. It also devastated h
d being most important, it would buy her time and protect Ian and his family fr
life. As father until she could figure out a more permanent solution.

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first, which implied she'd go to him over Alex. She was parsing, she knew. Playing word games to justify not telling him about her father's call and threats. Word games were all she had.

She couldn't go to him about this, not because she didn't trust him, but because she did. She trusted him to take care of things, to either kill her father or agree to pay him off. She couldn't allow the former, and the latter? She shook her head. She might be learning to accept things from him, but this was out of the question. Her father would only keep coming back for more, over and over again. He'd never be out of their lives. She shuddered at that.

Somehow, Riley needed to handle her father herself. No matter how scared she was, and her stomach cramped with pain at the thought, she needed to handle him alone.

She played with the necklace dangling against her chest, finding small comfort as she touched the pendant and thought about how to proceed.

What to do.

The idea, when it came to her, was simple. It also devastated her. But most important, it would buy her time and protect Ian and his family from her father until she could figure out a more permanent solution.

Chapter Fourteen

Ian's stomach grumbled.

He glanced at his computer screen, his gaze on Riley's instant n window that he kept up and available to him at a moment's not thought of the day he'd taken her in his office, and his cock ha immediately. *Sex or food*, he thought wryly.

Ian: Hungry?

She didn't answer immediately, so he gave her some time to return desk.

He called the private investigator he'd put on Riley's father and man another voice mail. Ian understood it took time to compile infor but dammit, he wanted answers now.

A few minutes later, with no word from Riley, he decided to go fi He'd had lunch with her all week, and though they hadn't explicitly di today, she'd have let him know if she had a meeting.

He walked through the offices, which were mostly empty, as lunchtime, and stepped into her private domain. She wasn't arou figured he'd leave her a note and go grab something in the cafeteria. she'd come find him, and they could share a quickie for dessert. At he he looked around for a piece of paper, his gaze immediately coming to a notepad.

"Cash-In Pawn Shop" was scrawled in her handwriting.

Ian narrowed his gaze. What the hell would she need to hock and v Her father.

Ian didn't know what was going on, but he'd bet his life it had sor to do with that bastard.

He pulled out his phone and saw missed calls from earlier that m His half brother had called twice. No message.

Shit.

He hit redial, and Alex answered on the first ring.

“You’re a hard man to get a hold of,” Alex said.

Ian scowled. He’d have to get his phone checked. “What do you want?”

“I have the report on Riley’s father. I thought I’d share.”

Ian narrowed his gaze at his half sibling’s unexpected overture ahead.”

“Douglas Taylor has been living on the streets for the last two years. He lost his job and then his house to the bank when the market crashed years back. He’s flat broke and an alcoholic, to boot. Occasionally he picks up and gets a job washing dishes, but then he has money for booze, and the cycle starts up all over again.”

The words *flat broke* reverberated in Ian’s brain. “Riley left the necklace at the pawnshop downtown scrawled on her desk.”

“Son of a bitch,” Alex said.

“That bastard’s been in touch again. He probably wants money,” Ian said.

“But she doesn’t have anything of value to sell,” Alex said.

Ian thought of the necklace he’d bought her, and the pain of that realization, nearly gutted him. “Yeah. She does.”

And she’d chosen that route instead of trusting him. He shook his head, unable to believe it.

“What’s the address of the pawnshop? I’ll meet you there,” Alex said, breaking into Ian’s thoughts.

He shared the address on the paper and disconnected the call.

He

Maybe

er desk,

rest on

why?

nothing

orning.

* * *

Riley pulled up to the pawnshop in a really horrible part of town. I she got a parking spot out front. She shouldn’t be here long, which was a relief, considering the neighborhood gave her the creeps. A man with a sign sat on the ground beside the shop with a sign asking for money. And a group of kids wearing matching colors hung out across the street.

She shivered and quickly walked inside. The shop was dimly lit with linoleum on the floor filthy and cracked. There were other people in the shop lingering at the counter and haggling with an older woman near the back.

A middle-aged man greeted her. “What can I do for you?” he asked.

She still wore the necklace, unwilling to take it off until the last possible second. She reached for it, as she’d been doing since she’d made the decision.

to sell it to pay off her father.

ant?” The weight of it gave her comfort, making her feel like she had Ian
her. From it, she drew strength. “I umm . . .”

re. “Go “I ain’t got all day, lady. You selling that piece or not?”

ars. He “I need a minute,” she snapped and turned away from the counter.
l a few customer. He mumbled about indecisive women and turned to help

obers She ran her hand over the cool diamond, memories of Ian bom
, so the her. The vulnerability in his face when he’d asked her to accept the
relief when she had. His placing the pendant around her neck and his
me of a spoken words, *It’s perfect. Just like you.*

She clasped the beloved piece tighter, knowing she couldn’t do
couldn’t part with something Ian had given her, and she wouldn’t ca
an said. her father. He’d bullied her throughout her childhood, and she was fini
Done.

betrayal It had taken her coming here to see what a foolish mistake she mig
made. Ian would know the necklace was missing, and she couldn’t lie
is head, She’d promised him she would come to him first and always, and that
she would do.

ex said, “Thanks anyway,” she called out to the man, walking at a fast p
the front door. She reached the sidewalk and breathed in the stuffy,
air, wanting nothing more than to get into her air-conditioned car.

“Riley.”

She turned to see her father climb out of the passenger seat of a
car that sat behind hers.

uckily, “Long time no see.”

l was a Her skin crawled at the sound of the voice that had haunt
h a cup nightmares for years. He didn’t look well. His skin was sallow, his t
a gang thin and gaunt that his clothes hung on his narrow frame. Dark circle
heavy beneath his eyes, and red splotches stained his cheeks.

lit, the “What are you doing here?” she asked.

e store, “I’ve been keeping an eye on you. Imagine my surprise when y
ck. your cushy job and drove here. I guess I can still get you to do what

l. He gestured toward the pawnshop behind her.

ossible “You’re following me?” Revulsion filled her. “But you can’t get
decision stadium without permission.”

“Don’t be an idiot. I waited until you pulled out of the lot.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “Well, I don’t have anything right now,” she said and started for her car.

He lunged, grabbing her and dragging her into an alley beside the shop.

He backed her into the wall, giving her nowhere to go. The overwhelming stench of alcohol and body odor hit her hard.

“Let’s start over.” He grabbed her arm so hard, she knew she’d be bruised. “We agreed you’d get me money.”

“We didn’t agree on when,” she gritted out.

He shook her hard. His fingers bit into her skin, his frail appearance belying his strength. “Where’s the cash?”

“There isn’t any. Go ask the guy in the shop if you don’t believe me.”

He snatched her purse from her shoulder, nearly wrenching her arm from its socket. Opening it, he began tossing her things onto the ground in

search for cash. When he came to her wallet, he shoved her bag at her. She held it tightly while he looked through her wallet. *Good luck to him.* thought. If she had twenty dollars in there, it was a lot.

He pocketed the small amount of money he found and threw her wallet on the ground. “Where is it? In your pockets?”

“I said I didn’t sell anything,” she said coldly.

“Bitch.” He slapped her hard across the face, her head smacking against the wall with the force of the hit.

She saw stars, the pain overwhelming and intense.

“Why are you here? What were you planning to sell?” he asked the same time his gaze focused on her chest. “This is it, right?” He put his hand on her beloved necklace. “Your boyfriend buy this for you?”

She closed her eyes, unable to stand being this close to him and unwilling to believe she’d ever considered selling something so precious to her.

That’s when her fight instinct kicked in, and she kned him in the chest hard. She didn’t have enough leverage to take him down, but the element of surprise along with the initial pain had him rearing back in shock.

“You stupid bitch.”

She expected him to slap her again and braced, ready to duck, but he grabbed for the necklace instead and yanked hard, breaking the chain.

He held up his prize. “This oughta net me a nice sum. Don’t think I’m done with you either.” He turned and headed out of the alley and back

the street.

ing for “Oh hell no,” she muttered, having had enough. Not just for today a lifetime.

store. She started after him and slammed into him with the full force of her body, taking him down. He rolled, flipping over, and she ended up on top of him, her hands around his throat, and she began to squeeze . . .

’d have Her mother’s face flashed in front of her eyes, and she tightened her grip. “I hate you,” she screamed at him as his body bucked and he clawed at her in an attempt to dislodge her.

earance “Riley!”

She heard her name at the same time sirens sounded. Hands gripped her by the shoulders, pulling her off him, but she was too hysterical to focus on who’d come to her rescue or what had happened to the man who’d been a madman, a real father.

ier, and
ck, she

* * *

allet to Ian pulled up to the pawnshop just after Alex. It took mere seconds for him to process the scene. Riley’s hands around a man’s throat, Alex pulling the man’s shoulders. Her father began to rise, coughing and sputtering but intending to run. Ian slammed the man back to the ground just as a police car screeched to a halt, and the cop approached the scene.

he wall “She attacked me,” her father sputtered at the uniformed cop.

l at the *The coward*, Ian thought.

s hands “Shut the hell up.” Ian shoved his foot on her father’s chest so he couldn’t move until a cop showed up and took over.

able to The officer pulled the older man to his feet. Before he could ask any questions, a middle-aged man walked out of the pawnshop and headed toward the cop.

ie groin “He attacked her in the street,” the shop owner said, gesturing toward the man’s father.

ment of “You’re the one who called it in?” the cop asked.

but he The other man nodded.

ink I’m and cuffed him while reading him his rights. Then he turned to the guard at the store. “Wait here. We’ll need to take your statement.”
ck onto

With her father subdued, Ian turned to focus on Riley. He saw her but foreground, Alex holding her in his arms.

He gritted his teeth and walked over to them. "She okay?" he asked of her Alex met his gaze, a warning look in the other man's eyes.

Right. Like Ian was going to start a fight with her now. *Thanks faith*, he thought with disgust.

One of the cops came up beside Ian.

"Ri?" Alex eased her away from him. "The police are here."

"Does this belong to you?" The cop held out the necklace Ian had her. "He had it clutched in his hand."

She nodded then groaned and grabbed her head. "Yes," she said, focus on meeting Ian's gaze.

"It's evidence for now, but you'll get it back when the case is over you hit your head?" the officer asked.

"He slapped me, and I slammed into the wall in the alley," Riley said, voice hoarse from screaming.

Ian winced and wished he'd done more than restrained the son of a bitch for the police.

"An ambulance is on its way. You're going to need to be checked for concussion."

"But—"

"No arguing," Alex said, helping her rise to her feet.

She raised her tearstained face to Ian's for the first time. "Stay with me," she asked him.

He couldn't say no.

Didn't want to.

But the pain over her putting herself through this when she couldn't turned to him devastated him. He'd asked her for one thing if they were

to go forward, and at the most crucial moment, she hadn't kept her promise. Riley's An hour later, he and Alex sat in the hospital waiting room while she was taken in for tests.

"You'll take her home from here?" Alex asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Ian shifted in his seat. "Actually I was going to ask you to do it."

The other man narrowed his gaze. "I don't get it."

Ian studied his hands, trying to figure out how to explain his

on the personal feelings to a guy he barely knew. “After the fundraiser, I
Riley and I had come to an understanding.”

1. *You either trust me or you don’t. You either instinctively come to me
or there is no us. On that, I can’t compromise,* he’d told her.

for the “Yet at the first sign of trouble, she went off on her own,” Ian said.

Alex shrugged. “Told you from the get-go she was independent.”

“Yeah. But I thought we were working on how to compromise.
compromised on you,” Ian said, because he knew the other man could

d given Alex burst out laughing. “I hear you. The thing is, you just saw first
why she doesn’t trust. She didn’t call me either.”

aid, not Ian nodded. He’d give her that. That might have sent him complete
the edge.

er. Did “I’m still not sure we can go forward from here.” And that was all
he wanted to say on the subject to his half brother. “I just need to know

aid, her be there for her.” Because he knew she shouldn’t be alone.

It would kill him to leave her, but he had no choice. He’d made his
a bitch clear—and he didn’t think he was being unreasonable. He’d done even

he could to give her the space she needed to be independent, backing off
ed for his possessiveness at work, not pushing on the unsafe apartment issue

well, not much.

Yet when the ultimate shit came down, she’d gone it alone.

“I’ll be here,” Alex said. “I always am.”

h me?” Ian nodded. He knew better than to thank the other man.

So he’d wait for news she was okay. Then he’d leave, ripping his
heart . . . along with hers. Because after her choices, what kind of part

did they have? He might not be an expert on relationships, but he knew
ld have sure that without trust, they had nothing.

e going

mise.

* * *

e Riley

Riley had a concussion and mild bruising. The doctor told her she could
ng the home as long as someone was there to make sure to check her every hour

also advised her to watch for more severe symptoms—headache
worse, vomiting, and extreme dizziness. Since she knew Ian wouldn’t

out of his sight, she promised the doctor she’d follow his instructions.

is most her to inform Ian and Alex of her condition and to send them in to see

thought She lay with her eyes closed, her head pounding, moving only when she heard the rustling of the curtain in her small cubicle. She opened her eyes for the first time to see Alex enter, and she immediately looked beyond him for Ian.

He wasn't there.

"Where's Ian?"

Alex settled into a chair beside the makeshift bed. "I'm sorry . . . Hell, I take it. "Work emergency? Or is he that mad at me?" she asked. Alex groaned. "I've seen him angry, and I wouldn't say that. He's . . . hurt. Really hurt. What the hell were you thinking?"

"My father wanted cash. I was thinking that I'd pawn the necklace to buy overbuy myself some time to figure out what to do. Otherwise, he threatened to show up at places like the fundraiser and embarrass Ian. I didn't want to show all him or his family through that."

He shook his head. "That's bullshit."

She raised her gaze. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You ran scared. The man told you to come to him for anything, and the first chance you had to do that, you took off on your own. To pawn the necklace he gave you to pay that lowlife son of a bitch."

"I didn't go through with it!" she said, raising her voice.

"That's not the point!" he shouted back. "That moron I call a half brother is the best thing that ever happened to you, and you lost him, and because you're afraid to trust, that's why. Everything has to be on your own terms. You won't accept help from the people who love you, including me. You know how that makes me feel, so I can only imagine how Ian's suffering."

Tears filled her eyes. "You're taking his side?"

He grasped her hand. "I'm taking your side, Ri. Always. And I know you love him."

She blinked. "I never said that."

"You didn't have to." He shook his head, his expression thoughtful. "Honest to God, if you had to fall for a guy, why did it have to be him?"

She managed a smile. "I don't see how it matters. He's gone."

"Only because you won't give him what he needs. Look, I'm the last person to talk about relationships, but even I can see he's changed for you. Can't you do the same thing for him?"

He left her. She glanced down. "I'm scared," she whispered. "What if I rely on him and he's not there?"

hen she “Listen to me. Kids are born, and they’re supposed to know their eyes in will be there for them, to keep them safe, to love them. You never h
1. so you learned early to count on you. Then later, you found it in you trust me.”

She swallowed, and it physically hurt. “Because you were always [e left.” side.”

“I don’t see Ian going anywhere if you open yourself up to him.”
it now. “I told him I would . . . and I didn’t.”

“Can you? In the future?”
ace and Riley searched her heart. She wanted to. She did . . . but she jus
ened to know, if pushed again, if she’d turn inward like she always did.

t to put “Ms. Taylor?” A woman dressed in a skirt and blouse, her blon
pulled back in a ponytail, walked into the room. “I’m Madison Eva
you can call me Madison. I’m a social worker.”

Riley’s head whipped up. “I don’t need—”
m with “Good to meet you,” Alex said, rising from his chair, nearly stu
ur own. over his feet in an effort to say hello. “I’m Alex Dare, a friend of Riley

The pretty woman appeared to be about Riley’s age. She smil
shook his hand, no sense of recognition in her expression.

brother “Nice to meet you too,” she said, dismissing him by turning l
d why? Riley.

on your Alex’s mouth opened in disbelief.

g me. I Riley did her best not to laugh. Poor Alex wasn’t used to no
ng.” fawned over by women.

“I appreciate you coming by, but honestly, I don’t need a social w
ow that Riley told the woman.

“Don’t listen to her. She protests too much. Finish what you wer
to say.” Alex shot Riley a pointed look.

ightful. Madison glanced back and forth between them before again focu
?” Riley. “I was just going to tell you that I speak to all domestic abuse
who come through the hospital.”

ast guy Riley wrinkled her nose. “But I’m not—”

So why “You are.” Alex came to stand by her side, placing a calming hand
shoulder.

on him Madison stepped closer to the bed. “The reports say you were
when you were attacked by your father?” she asked gently.

parents Riley met her gaze. "Yes."
ad that, "If you'd like to set up an appointment for counseling, it might
myself totalk to someone."

"It definitely might," Alex said.

by my "I get the point." Riley accepted the woman's business card, and
she'd be using it. "Thank you."

"That's my job, and I'm good at it, if you don't mind me saying
like the chance to help you work through whatever issues might have
from this experience."

t didn't Riley nodded. "Okay."

Madison smiled. "Okay."

ide hair She strode out of the room, Alex's stare never leaving her retreating
ins, but Riley narrowed her gaze, but she had no chance to ask about his
interest in a woman who looked nothing like his usual bimbo type.

"She's right," Alex immediately said.

imbling "You think I need help." Riley glanced down at the blanket covering
r's." "I don't think talking can hurt."

led and "Look at you, being all diplomatic." She pursed her lips and stuck
woman's card in her hand.

back to "I just want you to be happy, and you were happy with Ian. He was
for you."

Riley grinned. "Don't sound like you're choking on those words."

t being Alex laughed. "Give me a break. I called him with information about
father, and I thought that was being generous. Now I'm singing his praises
worker," He shook his head. "I'm not sure how much more I can handle in one
of these."

"Alex?"

e going "Yeah?"

"What if Ian's gone for good?" She voiced her biggest fear. "He
sing onlet people in easily either. What if I pushed him so far, he'll never
victimsback?"

"Then he's the idiot I always thought he was."

"You're so bad," she said, laughing through her tears.

l on her "And you're so good. Get the help you need. It's important for
whether or not Ian is in your life."

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Chapter Fifteen

A few days after the incident with her father, Riley left the corner of Alex's house and headed home to her apartment. On doctor's orders she had taken the rest of the week off from work and used the time to rest and think.

Her mother had been gone well over a decade. Riley had been out of her father's house for ten years. All this time, she thought she had survived the past unscathed. She looked at the box of her things Ian had sent over, her eyes filled with tears. Apparently she hadn't emerged as unscathed as she had thought.

She glanced at the clock. Melissa would be here soon, and Al would be coming to take her for dinner. Not only were they the extent of her family, they were the extent of her friends too. She'd been kidding herself that the coworkers she used to have an after-work drink with were her friends. She didn't let anyone close enough to have any *friends*.

She ducked her head, only now accepting that she had trust issues that just might rival Ian's. Except he'd been making an effort to change, up to the point when he'd abandoned her at the hospital. Of course, she knew the obvious reasons for his disappearance from her life. She'd disappointed him by handling things with her father herself and not turning to him like he had promised. She also knew his bailing on her had to do with his insecurities, just like her actions had been dictated by her own issues.

None of which mattered when she hurt so badly, she wondered if she would ever recover. Her heart was well and truly broken for the first time, and she couldn't do anything about that, but she could work on her problems and live her life as best she could.

Heading for her purse, she pulled out the social worker's card, hoping to make an appointment for early next week.

She needed help for herself.

And if she happened to convince Ian she not only loved him but was trying to get beyond her fears, well, her future was definitely bright. If

finished with her regardless? She brushed at her wet cheeks. Well, she has more to discuss in therapy.

* * *

Sending Riley's things back to her had nearly destroyed him. Still, he had to do what he had to do, ridding himself of all reminders, going back to the way he'd lived before. Her scented items no longer sat in his bathroom—surrounding his razor and toothbrush. Her clothes no longer hung in her closet. He now had an empty drawer where her sexy underwear used to be. No, she hadn't been with him long, but she'd made her mark.

He'd made room. Let her into his life.

And he missed her.

It'd been two weeks since the episode with her father, and staying at work was giving him an ulcer. He was a nasty bastard with his sisters, his brothers steered clear, and his mother liked to berate him about letting Riley slip through his fingers. Olivia had a big mouth.

"Shit." He never used to brood about women.

He had a breakfast date with his mother this morning, and if he kept their conversation off Riley, he just might survive this day.

He strode into the restaurant his mother had chosen, but instead of finding her waiting at a table, he found his father.

"Oh hell no." Ian spun around, turning to go.

"Ian. Don't walk out on me."

He clenched his fists as he pivoted back and strode to the table where his father now stood. "But you had no trouble doing the same to me. To us."

"That's right. I did it. Now sit down and listen to my side for once."

Ian reared back, both at the admission of guilt and the fact that his father demanded to be heard. He hesitated a brief moment.

"I suggest you sit and talk to me. Unless you want to spend the rest of your life not only resenting me but giving up on the woman you love."

"My mother sent you here."

"Yes."

"To set me straight."

"Right again."

In other words, if he didn't have this talk, his mother would make

e'd just she sat him down and did it herself. But for some reason, she'd decided *him* to do it instead.

"Let's get this over with." Ian pulled out a chair and sat down.

His father did the same.

"I have no excuse for what I did. Your mother and I had an arrangement I'd done. I not only violated the sanctity of marriage by cheating, but I also was a solitary father."

"To some of us," Ian muttered.

Robert braced his arms on the table. "To all of you. Savannah knew your mother. I'm not sure which of the kids knew too, but trust me say they didn't like me not being married to their mother, and when I told them about all of you—they resented being the illegitimate ones."

His words gave Ian pause. Not once had he thought about Alex and his siblings getting short shrift. Not. Once.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "What's your point?"

"You are not making this easy." Robert shook his head, but Ian give the man credit; he didn't get up and leave. No, he stuck it out.

"Did you really expect me to?"

"My point is, none of you have good reason to trust or believe in me. The thing is, you underestimate people. You underestimate yourself. I'm finding what you've done for your sisters. For your mother. You've been their

Compliments? From Robert Dare?

"Look at what you're capable of, and now let me ask you, are you going to give up on Riley when she needs you the most?"

"Now we get to the point. You really think I'm going to sit and let you give me advice on love?"

His father grinned. "At least I know you love her. There's a place to start."

Ian sat back in his chair and groaned. "Yes. I love her. But she—"

"No buts, boy. If your mother hadn't said yes to marrying me, it would have been different. If she hadn't said, 'I might love someone else if my father's sick, so I have to marry a man of my parents' choosing'. I wouldn't have you wonderful children I don't deserve. But she'd have the man she really loved."

Ian's eyes opened wide at his father's full knowledge of his private emotions and feelings.

d to ask “Don’t look so shocked. I knew I wasn’t it for her. To say we didn’t
a shot? Well, that’s an understatement. But you and Riley? What
possibly be holding you back except for the fact that my behavior is
unable to trust or hold on to a good woman?”

gement. Ian grew dizzy.

a shitty A waitress started toward them from across the room, and Robert
his head. She stepped back.

“What do you know about Riley?” Ian asked, suddenly hungry
for information about her. Starved, in fact.

when I “I only know what your brother told me.”

1 I told Ian held back the word *half*.

“Which is?”

and his “The concussion’s getting better, and she’s moved back home.”

“Into her piece-of-shit apartment?” His voice rose, and the older man
sitting next to him frowned at him, but Ian didn’t care.

had to Robert shook his head. “Your brother and I agree about her
arrangements.”

“She got a raise. She can afford a much safer place to live.”

people. “Therapy costs a lot of money,” his father said. “I didn’t say that or
Look at did I?”

rock.” Suddenly needing a caffeine boost, Ian gestured to the waitress
bounced over with a smile. “What can I get for you?”

u really “Coffee, black, please.”

She glanced at Robert. “Refill on the decaf. Thanks.”

isten to “Decaf, huh?” Ian asked when the waitress had walked away.
remember Mom always having your coffee ready in a travel mug
place you were leaving for work or for the airport. Strong, black, no sugar
memory took him by surprise.

He’d suppressed so many of his early childhood memories, the good
things the bad, not wanting any part of his past, because any time he remembered
else, but the hurt. Suddenly the hurt wasn’t as sharp.

. . . well, It wasn’t the years that had dulled the pain; it was the changes
have the The softening. He knew he had Riley to thank for that.

“Therapy, huh?” he asked his father.

mother’s “You didn’t hear it from me. I just thought if you realized how much
an effort she was making to deal with her past, maybe you would

it has same. I'd ask you to do it for yourself, but I have a hunch I'd have
it could succeed if it was for her."

left you Ian frowned. "Because you know me so well?" he asked with no
his words. Not anymore. Though he didn't think he'd ever forgive and
holding on to so much hatred had taken so much out of him.

it shook His walls had walls.

And those walls had kept Riley out. Even when he thought he'd let
gry for he'd been pushing her away. How the fuck else had he walked out of
the hospital? Self-loathing filled him at the thought, and Ian rose from
seat.

"Going to get your girl?" his father asked.

"Don't think this was a bonding moment," Ian said.

"Wouldn't dream of it," his father said, raising his coffee cup in
couple toast.

Ian's lips turned upward despite himself.

living

* * *

out loud, Riley worked late, not minding since she didn't have anything to rush
for. She typed up the last report of the day and organized her desk
is, who morning. But now she was ready to shut her computer and head back
lonely, empty apartment, when her instant message chime went off.

She glanced at the monitor, hoping Dylan hadn't found a reason for
to stay even later. She was exhausted. She hadn't been getting much
vay. "I since the incident with her father. Since she'd left Ian's and had gone
whether sleeping alone in her own bed.

r." The She looked at the screen, and her heart nearly stopped beating
chest.

god and
numbered, *Ian: I need to speak to you.*

She blinked, certain she was misreading. He'd avoided her since
in him. return to work. She hadn't bumped into him in the hall, nor had he shown
out. He hadn't called to check on her either. He'd just cut ties, and damn
that didn't hurt. After the longest two weeks of her life, he was asking
much of now?

do the

She knew he couldn't want anything job related. She didn't work for him.

Her pulse began to race as she typed back.
I don't want to forget,

Riley: Just leaving for the day. Will stop by on my way out.

Ian: I'll be waiting.

Her nerves kicked in as she powered down her computer and grabbed her purse, shutting the light off as she walked out of her office.

After five, support staff was gone for the day, and she knocked on the door, letting herself in.

He rose as soon as she stepped inside. "Lock the door," he said by way of a greeting.

She automatically did as he asked, closing the door behind her. Beneath her collar, she began to perspire from sheer nerves because she knew, no matter why he'd called her in here, they'd be having it out.

Possibly for good.

As usual for this time of day, his jacket was off, hung on a hook by the door; his tie was undone and the top buttons on his dress shirt open. He looked scruffy and hot, but as sexy as he appeared, he also looked tired. Dark circles shadowing his eyes, and she wondered if he'd lost as much sleep as she had since they'd been apart.

"How are you?" he asked, his searing gaze raking her over.

"Fine. Apparently I have a hard head." She knocked on her skull with the back of her hand.

He didn't laugh. "Don't joke about what that bastard did to you."

"Well, I'm not going to cry about it." She'd done enough of that crying for her mother and her father both. After a lifetime of abuse, she still shed a tear for the kind of parent she had and the way he treated her.

"You look good," Ian said, sounding relieved. "I was worried."

"Bullshit." The words were out before she could think, taking her by surprise.

He reared back, staring at her.

"What? You want me to think you actually care? Is that why you came out on me at the hospital and I haven't heard from you since?"

From the minute she'd entered this office, she'd felt her nerves

...k underbrewing below the surface. She wasn't surprised they were coming on. She'd spent so much time first berating herself for violating Ian's trust, then missing the good times they'd shared, she hadn't allowed her anger to let him to truly surface. But as she stood here now, it was alive and vibrant within her.

"Go on," he said in a deceptively calm voice.

She flexed her fingers and decided to take her therapist's advice. Of course, she'd only had two sessions, but they'd been plenty productive. First lesson? Let yourself feel. The second? Express those feelings before you sit on his seat you alive.

What was the worst thing that could happen? Ian had already abandoned her. She strode up to his desk, bracing her arms on the wooden top.

"My father slapped me. My head slammed against a brick wall. Alone. He didn't come in to see if I was okay."

use she His eyes darkened, and his cheeks burned with what she'd like to see was embarrassment.

"The doctor came out with an update on your condition," he said.

on his "Oh. That makes it all better," she said, her temper rising.

en. He "I never said it did."

ed, dark His placid demeanor drove her insane. "I know I screwed up. I was coming to you about my father's threats, but I had my reasons. I wanted a chance to explain them to you, but you wouldn't give me the chance."

She straightened and walked to his side of the desk, stepping into his personal space. "You dumped me on Alex and took off, never to be seen from again. Did you feel better after?" She shoved at his chest, hurt and very betrayed. "Hmm? Did punishing me for defying you make you feel better, Ian?" She shoved at him again.

over the He grabbed her wrist. "Nothing about how I handled this makes me happy. I was an arrogant ass. Is that what you want to hear? I thought I'd break down the law that you'd have to come to me first. Always. Then I'd have her by

"Control," she said at the same time as him.

"Exactly," he muttered.

walked "Well, I hope your precious control keeps you warm at night." She snapped at him.

"It doesn't."

notions "Good." Because she was lonely too.

ut now. He lifted a strand of her hair and twisted it between his fingers. Just and the pull straight through to her skin. It was the start of him getting to inger at she allowed him to.

ibrating She hadn't decided yet. "I'm human, which means I'm going to make my own decisions. And I'm going to make mistakes," she told him.

A smirk edged the corners of his mouth.

ice. Of "Unbelievable. You're laughing?"

ve. The He shook his head. "No, I'm just realizing you're smarter than I've ever been."

She tipped her head to one side. "Say that again?"

ndoned "Hell no. It's taken me too long to catch up," he muttered, realizing himself than to her.

nd you "Meaning?" she asked, her tone weary even to her.

He cupped her chin in his hand, just begging her to turn in to him and to think comfort. And she was tired. So tired of riddles and talking in circles. Tired of being alone.

His thumb caressed her jaw, and she couldn't help but stare into his eyes.

"Meaning, I love you," he said in a strong voice.

Riley gasped. "You—"

by not "I love you." His eyes were warm.

ited the No longer that steely gray. She couldn't name the color, just the temperature in their depths. And there was heat. Lots and lots of heat. Everything inside her melted, at both his expression and the words she heard longed to hear.

and so "You're strong enough to overcome your past, and you're strong enough to deal with me. From the minute you walked into that ballroom, you were for me," he said in a gruff, emotional tone she'd never heard from him before.

if I laid She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "How do I know you love—" find some reason to push me away again?"

His hand remained on her cheek. "You trust me. How do I know you won't leave me for a better bet?"

it," she "You trust *me*," she said, a slow grin spreading across her face.

Then she did the one thing that guaranteed him she understood. She grasped his wrist and turned her head, easing her cheek into his hand, accepting him and opening herself to *them*.

She felt “I love you too, Ian.”

her—if The words reverberated in his brain until finally settling in his head. More important, *he believed it.*

ake my He lifted her up and seated her on the desk, stepping between her legs. “I’m not sure how I got so lucky, but I won’t be screwing this up.”

She wound her arms around his neck. “How about you just screw me instead? How’s that for a play on words?”

ve ever “Not funny.” He leaned in, touching his nose to hers. “I’ll be making love to you, not screwing you. And that’s something you’d better remember.”

He eased her skirt up around her legs, pulling off her barely there panties. “I think you should give up on underwear too,” he informed her. “It’ll make my life so much easier.”

“Works for me,” she said as her trembling fingers fumbled with the zipper and found the buckle, finally opening his pants.

He stepped back long enough to drop his trousers and kick them as far as they came back to her, taking his time, allowing his cock to slide up and down her slick folds. He couldn’t refrain from glancing down, viewing his cock glide over her slick folds.

She answered with a soft moan. “I didn’t think we’d be like this,” she whispered.

Knowing he’d broken her heart, he swore to himself he’d do everything possible to mend it and keep her whole for the rest of her life.

His gaze never leaving hers, he eased himself inside her slowly, riding the feel of her internal muscles as she clasped and clutched around his shaft.

She braced herself on her elbows, locking her legs around his waist, holding him in place.

“I love you,” he said, thrusting deep.

Her eyes opened wide, and she moaned at the intimate contact.

“I love you too,” she said. “So much.”

With her words came soul-shattering emotion, as he made her his, going so far inside her that she became part of him. And every time he breathed, the base of his cock rubbed her clit, bringing them both closer to completion.

One good drive into her again and he’d come, but he didn’t want to stop. She gripped his palm, her hand hard and fast and lose the beauty of the moment. Instead, he kept going, grinding against her, over and over, rolling his hips against hers, letting her feel

breaths, clutching fingers, and wet heat work their own brand of magic art. She He leaned in and pressed his lips against hers just as she started to She tugged at his hair with her fingers and rolled her hips, bucking her legs.him. His cock grew rigid, his entire body tripping in ecstasy, feeling second of her release.

new me “Oh, Ian! Love you, love you, love you!”

Her continuing chant triggered his release, and he began to throng lovebody consumed by the biggest tidal wave of heat and sensation he r.” experienced. He was overwhelmed by the feelings and emotion panties.through him as he spilled himself inside her. To his shock, she continued makepulse around him, aftershocks or a continuation of her equally exciting climax.

his belt Unwilling to separate, he remained inside her and stroked her hair both came down.

side. He “Ian?”

own her “Hmm?”

against “Next time, you can tie me up,” she murmured.

And damned if his cock didn't twitch in agreement. He appreciated again,” she might want to give him what she thought he needed, but the truth he needed was Riley. The rest didn't matter.

rything He reluctantly pulled out of her. He headed for the bathroom, re with a wet cloth. After taking care of her, he lifted her into his arms. evelingmoved them to the couch, where she cuddled on top of him, her head und hison his shoulder.

They lay in silence for a while, her rhythmic breathing reassuring l s waist, wasn't going anywhere ever again.

“I'm seeing a therapist,” she said softly.

Her sudden revelation surprised him, but he was glad she had decided to confide in him. “Is it helping?”

“It is.” She paused. “I need to tell you what happened with my father settling He nodded, needing to hear it too. “I assume he called and asked, themoney.”

on. “Mmm-hmm. He saw the photos of us and decided you were his ticket to take a windfall. He threatened to create a scandal that would embarrass you and rocked the team. He swore you would drop me like the trash I always was. I never softshuddered as she spoke, and he realized the awful lies she'd grown

... hearing about herself.

... come. He tightened his arms around her and tried like hell to suppress the pain against reverberating through him. She didn't need that from him now.

... every "I knew you wouldn't care, but I did. I didn't want to bring that humiliation into your life, or your family's. None of you needed or deserved that."

... ust, his "How about next time, you let me decide what I need?"

... 'd ever She nodded into his chest. "The thing is, even though he didn't know it, pulsing when I was younger, he made sure I knew my place. That I wasn't allowed to do a damned thing, and those feelings came flooding back. I just wanted to explode myself and make him go away. But when I got to the pawnshop, I couldn't do it."

... as they Ian stilled. "But your father had the necklace in his hand. I just assumed you were giving it to him to sell."

... She lifted herself up and straddled his waist. "No. I was going to give you the necklace and give him the money at some point in the future. But I changed my mind. I couldn't do it. I couldn't give in to him one more time in my life, and I really couldn't part with the necklace you'd given me."

... was, all She reached up, her expression crestfallen when she realized the necklace was no longer there.

... turning He could fix that, but he wanted her to finish unburdening herself from the pain.

... ms and "I stood in the pawnshop and decided right then to go to you, so we could rest together and figure out what to do together. But when I walked out, my father was demanding the cash, and you know the rest."

... rim she Yeah. He knew. "Riley, you have to know you're worth everything. You make me a better man. And I'm so damned sorry I wasn't there when you needed me afterward."

... ided to Her eyes filled, and his heart squeezed tightly. He hated causing her that kind of pain.

... er." "You're here now."

... ked for "And I'm not going anywhere ever." He'd been without her, and he wasn't going back to that empty place again. "Which reminds me. The ticket to I called you in here in the first place. Scoot over."

... ou and She slid off him, and he headed to his desk, coming back with two tickets. "Here." She handed her the long one first.

... own up She opened it and squealed with delight. "My necklace!"

“I called the police and managed to convince them to return it to me. Your father pleaded guilty.”

“The district attorney called me to approve the deal.”

“You’re okay with the five years?”

She nodded. “As long as he’s behind bars and I get a restraining order when he gets out, I’m okay.”

Ian wouldn’t let the man anywhere near her, but it was a discussion worth a hit me far in the future.

He was more interested in focusing on the present. He lifted the necklace and she raised her hair so he could replace it on her neck, where it belonged.

“I had the clasp fixed, and they cleaned it too.”

She turned and kissed him. “Thank you.” She touched the pendant. “I assumed like you’re always with me when I wear it.”

“Then I hope you’ll feel the same way about its mate.”

She narrowed her gaze, wrinkling her nose in curiosity as he handed her the small box. “Ian?” she asked, her voice trembling.

He understood because his insides were a quaking mess.

Her hands shook as she lifted the top off the box, revealing the necklace. The pendant in ring form. A pear-shaped diamond that was too big, but he didn’t care.

Corny as it was, he dropped to one knee. “Marry me,” he said. She stared openmouthed at the ring.

“Was that a question or a demand?” she asked, half laughing, half crying.

He grinned. “Still working on that part of me.”

She met his gaze, her expression solemn. “I don’t want to change when completely. I just need—”

He grasped her wrist. “I know what you need, and I want to be there for you. Give it to you.”

“Tell me that includes you keeping control in the bedroom, because those are places I really don’t mind you taking over.”

“Is that a yes to my proposal?” he asked, his heart still hammering in his chest.

She wriggled her fingers in front of him. “Yes. Yes!”

He slid the ring onto her finger, grateful his sister had guessed her size correctly.

He rose and settled back on the couch, pulling her into his arms.

ne after She sighed and snuggled close.

He didn't know how long they lay, her heart beating against his chest. It was long enough for everything inside him to settle and for him to find the peace that had always eluded him.

g order Peace he sensed he'd now have, every day for the rest of his life, but he'd finally done what he'd always thought was impossible. He'd decided to stay for love. And he had Riley to thank for teaching him how.

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Peace he sensed he'd now have, every day for the rest of his life, because he'd finally done what he'd always thought was impossible. He'd dared to love. And he had Riley to thank for teaching him how.

Epilogue

Four Months Later

Surrounded by his siblings, real and half, Alex nursed a beer as he sat around his half brother's apartment. Everyone seemed to be having a good time. The food was phenomenal, Ian having spared no expense. He was his damnedest not to follow up every thought of Ian with an explicit complaint, but old habits were hard to break.

The lovebirds couldn't take their hands off each other. Considering it was an engagement party, as well as a redo of the family event he'd had a few months ago, Alex figured that was to be expected.

He wondered how long he had to stay before he could bow out and have it look suspicious.

"What's with the scowl?" his sister, Sienna, asked.

"I'm not scowling." Was he?

"You're okay, right?" She wrapped her arms around him for a tight

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?"

She frowned at him. "You can fool the others, but I know you. You're jealous of Ian and Riley, and I'm worried about you."

Her words hit him where it hurt. "I am not jealous."

She settled her hands on her hips. "You've had Riley to yourself for years. Then Ian comes along and . . . well, you wouldn't be human if you weren't a little envious of what they have."

Even if he was, Alex wouldn't admit it out loud. Not even to the siblings he loved. "It's fine. I want her to be happy, even if it is with him." He turned toward Ian, doing his best to keep his expression neutral.

"Are you sure you aren't . . . a little bit in love with her?" Sienna asked.

Alex blanched. "Hell no. That'd be the same as thinking of you that way."

Sienna raised one eyebrow. "That was a quick denial."

"Look, maybe once, a long time ago . . ." He shook his head, not wanting to remember or even admit that, yeah, he'd once had feelings for

Feelings that had been in no way brotherly.

Then he'd kissed her, she'd freaked out, saying they were just friends, why ruin it, and he'd agreed. Quickly. Better that than to let which seemed a certainty given that she clearly hadn't felt the same about him.

Since then, he hadn't had to worry about her finding anyone serious. Ian. His half brother. Well, whatever. The families were making their glances and he had to live with it.

a good "Yeah, I thought so." Sienna clasped her small hand in his. "I just doing facing your feelings is better than avoiding them. You don't have anyone else, but I'm here for you, okay?"

He shook his head hard to clear his thoughts. "Hey, I said maybe, not doing this time ago. Not anymore. I'm fine." And he was, except . . . Ian and his notched engagement made the stark contrast of his life clear.

He had his bimbos, and Riley? She had a soon-to-be husband and not that didn't include him. Certainly not the way it used to.

"Okay. I'll accept that for now. I'm going to talk to Mom, okay?"

Another weird thing. Ian had invited their father and Savannah about making a huge concession and reaching out. Even Alex had to hug the man for that.

"Hi!" Riley walked over, a glass of champagne in hand. "I know you're not having the best time, but I'm really glad you're here."

He shook his head. "I'm having a good time," he lied. "And I love wouldn't be anywhere else. You're happy, so I'm happy." And that not self for meant. Absolutely.

if you Female laughter captured his attention, and he turned toward the

Not far from where he and Riley stood, Ian spoke to a beautiful blonde sister he wore a fitted black skirt that hugged delicious-looking curves and a nodded satin top that covered more of her than it exposed. He was used to

who flaunted their assets and would definitely consider himself a break. He couldn't see a damned thing about this woman's cleavage, and out that couldn't tear his gaze away. Something about the way she held her

tightly composed and not overtly sexual, appealed to him on a visceral

Really unlike his usual type too. Huh.

wanting "Who is she?" he asked Riley, thinking that something about her Riley familiar.

“You don’t recognize her, do you?” Riley laughed. “That’s Madison Evans, the social worker you met at the hospital after . . .” Her voice rose and fell, and he understood her not wanting to mention or think about her name. The woman who Alex hoped was miserable during his stint behind bars.

“No shit?” He blinked. This woman with the flowing blonde hair was the same female who’d all but ignored him the one and only time they’d met in peace. He shouldn’t be shocked though. She’d worn a prim little skirt paired with a blouse that hid her assets, and even then, he’d been distracted. It’d pissed him off too. Not because she hadn’t recognized him, but because she hadn’t given him a second glance. Madison Evans had bruised his ego as much as she’d surprised him by attracting his attention in the first place.

Riley’s “I know that you saw her for a couple of sessions afterward, but as your therapist, what’s she doing here?”

“I finished therapy.” Riley smiled. “I really didn’t want to spend a life rehashing things. Anyway, Madison and I became friendly, and I don’t have many close women friends.” Riley shrugged, as if that explained it all.

h. Talk He supposed it did.

admire “Why are you so interested in her?” Riley asked. “Because I noticed the same reaction the first time you laid eyes on her.”

you’re Alex cocked an eyebrow. He’d been wondering that himself. Sorry about the woman called to him in ways he didn’t understand. He should have decided he didn’t need to understand; he needed to get her attention.

much he “Uh-oh. What’s that sudden focus in your eyes?” Riley waved her hand in front of his face. “You look . . . determined.”

sound. He’d been bored at this party, looking for something—or someone—to capture his interest. He’d found her.

purple He started toward her when Riley’s voice stopped him. “She’s not a woman’s usual fare.” Her tone held a wealth of warning.

st man. Alex turned and grinned. “That’s what I’m counting on.”

yet he
self, so

level. Thanks for reading! Continue this series with **Dare to Desire!** Click [HERE](#) to read.

looked

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Madison
traveled
father,

DARE TO DESIRE EXCERPT

was the Quarterback Alex Dare took possession of the ball the same way I
let. possession of a woman's body. With skill, finesse, and the absolute c
rt then, he'd score.

awn to Madison Evans watched the man who'd been in her bed the night
him, as on the huge screen in front of her. She'd joined her friends for Thank
second dinner—Riley and her husband, Ian Dare, and Ian's siblings. W
ed him biological family of her own, Madison appreciated having somewhere
if she's Eating alone in a restaurant on a holiday, something she'd done often,
appeal.

d years The football game held everyone's attention. Watching the r
it have screen, Madison felt as if she were on the field along with Al
teammates, and the opposing players. Everyone around her joked, la
and ate the delicious hors d'oeuvres their hosts had supplied.

ced the Someone yelled in complaint. Madison glanced at the televisio
more. A time-out had been called, giving her an opportunity to reflect
whirlwind couple of weeks she'd shared with the irresistible man.

nothing She'd met Alex when Riley had been brought to the hospital
rugged, months ago, but she'd ignored the quarterback with the playboy reput
favor of the patient she'd been assigned to treat as the social worker or

hand in She'd seen him again at Riley and Ian's engagement party, whe
turned on the charm and begun an all-out sensual assault. Desp
one—to attempts to keep her distance, she'd broken down, given in, and ende
his bed that same night. He didn't do relationships, and she'd steeled
ot your for the inevitable quick end, which hadn't happened.

Though Alex played for the Tampa Breakers and lived almost fou
from Miami, he kept his main home in Miami since most of his fam
here in town. His apartment in Tampa existed for convenience dur
season, when he was either here in Miami, in Tampa, or on the road.

[ERE](#) to But ever since he'd sweet-talked Madison into his bed, he'd made
any physical distance in other ways. They'd talked on the phone and
often, including sexting when he was out of town. And wasn't that r

[E!](#)

her? She squirmed in her seat at the arousing memories. Luckily, the weekend, his team had had a bye week, football jargon for a week off. It meant extra time in Miami. And with her.

They'd spent enough hours together both in and out of bed that, knowing his reputation, Madison's emotions were already involved. She was smart for a host of reasons. If her childhood had taught her anything, it was to keep her feelings locked down tight. She knew better than to get attached to anyone in any capacity. Especially a man like Alex, who did not last in relationships.

She even knew he was uncomfortable that she was spending this time with his family, never mind that they'd been her close friends before she'd gotten involved with him. He obviously hadn't thought through the ramifications of an affair before turning on the charm. But chemistry wasn't theirs didn't come along every day. They had amazingly hot sex. Awfully no-holds-barred, panty-drenching sex. Something Madison had never experienced before.

Not to mention, he had a sweet side. He adored his siblings and he was protective of his friends, and he could seduce her with a winning smile. Then there were the off-the-chart orgasms. She wriggled and squirmed in various positions because just the thought was enough to get her motor running. It was *that* good.

So if she was stupid enough to have developed some feelings for the man, she at least trusted that because of her friendship with Riley and the respect he'd shown her family, he'd treat her with care. If not, Riley would kick his ass. Madison would be all too happy to help.

She didn't believe in love at first sight. If pressed, she'd have said she didn't believe in happily ever after, but as she watched him move across the field, her heart gave an unmistakable flutter, and she knew she was in trouble.

She forced her gaze to the play on the screen. Ball in hand, Alex stepped into the field for his receiver. He obviously found the man he was looking for. He raised his arm, poised to throw.

The next few seconds were a blur. He faked, ducked, and ran in the opposite direction only to be charged by a massive hulk of a man on the left. He took a hit and was leveled by opposing players on the right. Madison winced at the force of the blow that took him down. As the men heaped on top of the other, time-out was called.

his past The dog pile took time to sort as each man slowly rose to his feet. Which except the player on the bottom. Number twenty-two, Alex Davidson, sprawled and unmoving on the field.

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ed. Not

* * *

it was to
ched to
ln't do
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gh the
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esome,
never
Alex knew immediately this hit was different than the others. Things went black for a few seconds too long. Enough to have panic setting in before the blue sky above him came back into view. *Thank God.* But the pain and nausea were overwhelming and nonstop. And at some point, he must have blacked out. He woke up in an MRI machine, something he was familiar with. The enclosed space and loud banging noises didn't hurt. Pain. Finally, they pulled him out of the tiny capsule, and he answered requisite questions about day and time, doing his best not to puke or move his head even a fraction of an inch.

Damn, he hurt.

mother,
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re man,
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his left.
Madison
ed one

He remembered the start of the game but not the score or the hit. I didn't even remember the ambulance ride to the hospital. Not unusual for a concussion, and he'd had enough of them to know.

They sent him for more tests, and his head pounded with the force of a hundred bass drums. Waves of nausea washed over him, threatening to make him lose his lunch. If he'd eaten lunch. He couldn't recall.

The team doctor and a neurological specialist were waiting when they finally settled him into a private room. Their expressions were grim, but they didn't want to tell him? He was deathly afraid that he couldn't handle *that*.

The doctors spoke, sharing the news, their words echoing in his brain. He could not afford another hit to the head. One more concussion could result in permanent brain damage.

Memory loss.

Depression.

Loss of motor control.

Blindness.

The damned doctors used every worst-case scenario they could think of to make their point: *No more professional football.*

A career-ending injury—every player's worst nightmare.

et. All He refused to talk to the doctors and was grateful when they finally lay him alone. For the next hour, he stared at the ceiling of the hospital room, the blinding headache and nausea a constant reminder of loss.

He was twenty-six years old, and all he could think was . . . what next?

* * *

gs went

fore the *Six Months Later*

and the Alex woke up in a sweat from the same nightmare he'd had for months. He'd taken the life-altering hit to his head. Not only did he relive the impact, the details of which had eventually returned to him, but he also experienced the searing pain. Six months had passed since that Thanksgiving weekend, and he'd thought that damned dream was behind him. He should've expected it again now since training had begun for the new season and, along with it, the renewed feeling that his life was over.

He rolled his tight shoulders, the stress of not knowing what to do eating at his gut. He sat up in bed and stretched. Maybe he just needed a laid. After all, he hadn't indulged in his favorite pastime in far too long. Problem was, every time he picked up his phone, none of the names there appealed to him.

Okay, one did, but he'd burned that bridge. To the ground, if his friend and sister-in-law, Riley, was to be believed. Considering the way they'd thrown Madison Evans out of his hospital room, he figured his best bet was right. He winced at the memory, self-loathing filling him for how they'd treated Madison.

He remembered the moment as if it had just happened. After the concussion and the battery of tests, the doctors had insisted on keeping him overnight. Riley, Ian, his brother, Jason, and sister, Sienna, had stopped to see him. He hadn't been pleasant, but they were family. They had to go home. His parents had come next, and they'd understood his depressed state. The revolving door of visitors had made his head spin even more than the injury. He'd assured them all he was just fine and tossed them out. Pity and concern were the last things he needed. He'd been through a big enough party all by himself.

Then *she'd* shown up.

He'd looked up to see Madison standing there, blonde hair spilling

ally lefther shoulders, covering luscious breasts he'd had in his mouth and ha
om, thenight before. He might've been down for the count, but he cou
appreciate a beautiful woman, and this one did it for him. She had fre
ow? sight, which was why he'd kept her around longer than his usual femal

But he'd been getting antsy, especially with how close she was
family, spending the Thanksgiving holiday with them. How stupid
fucking where he lived? He had an old man who'd married one woma
keeping another on the side. Was it any wonder Alex had done somet
hs afterdumb?

moment The one and only time he'd let a woman close, she'd cut his he
actuallywithout thought. He'd sworn never again and thought he'd meant i
sgivingMadison had broken through those walls he'd erected, fitting in with
But hetoo well, and it scared the shit out of him.

football And now? He had no career, no future, and he sure as hell didn't
be worrying about a relationship of any kind.

do next *"What are you doing here?" he'd asked her.*

d to get *"I'm worried about you. I came to see if you're okay." Concern fi
o long, big blue eyes, and she started toward him.*

s listed *He held up a hand to stop her. "I'm fine."
"Riley said—"*

his best *"I don't care what Riley told you. I'm not your problem, got it?"*

ay he'd *She visibly swallowed hard, the delicate muscles in her neck wor
t friendand down. "I thought you might need me."*

ow he'd *He managed a harsh laugh. "I've got my family. I don't need you."
"So we're—"*

ter the *"There is no we, sweetheart. It was fun. Now it's over."*

ng him *Moisture filled her eyes, and in that moment, he hated himself.*

ed in to *"I forgot," she said. "Alex Dare doesn't do relationships."*

forgive *"Damned right," he muttered.*

mental *She straightened her shoulders, the backbone he'd sensed in her fi
re thanbeginning taking over. "I was foolish for thinking I found someone
the helland real beneath the façade. You're every bit the manwhore the Inter
wing ayour reputation say you are."*

*She started for the door, then turned back to face him. "You're
hearted, selfish bastard too." She stormed out, slamming the door
ng overher.*

nds the *His head pounded at the noise, and he cursed out loud.*

uld still He could admit now that he deserved every word. There was no
om first around the fact that until six months ago, he'd been exactly the ma
e. Madison had accused him of being. He hadn't seen anything wrong
s to his either. All the women in his life up to that point had known what the
was he, getting into.

n while Hell, he thought Madison had too, but that's what he got for ass
hing so But he should have known better. She was different, and he'd always
it. Which must explain why he couldn't get her out of his head, a
part out months later.

t. Only No other woman who'd graced his bed ever lingered in his mind.
his life for the blonde-haired vixen he never should have fucked. At this point
sure that concussion had scrambled his brains even worse than he'd t
need to But he couldn't deny that the memory of what he'd said to her sham
and it'd been a long time since he could remember feeling that pa
emotion.

lled her He slid out of bed and took a long, hot shower. He'd just step
when his phone rang.

He grabbed his cell from the counter. "What's up?" he asked, ans
at the same time he wrapped a towel around his waist.

"Good morning, Alex," a familiar voice said.

king up "Ian, good to hear your voice." Alex clenched his jaw, s
comfortable with any kind of relationship with his half brother.

"For Riley, he reminded himself. Alex and Ian's wife were best
childhood friends. He'd do anything for her, including deal with Ia
what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Got a job proposition for you," the other man said.

Alex blinked. "Are you seriously asking me to work for the oppos
Until his injury, Alex had been the quarterback for the Tampa Break
rom the was the president of the Miami Thunder.

human Half brothers. Rivals. In more ways than one.

net and "Not to rub it in, but you're a free agent," Ian said.

At least he hadn't used the word *unemployed*. Because with his
a cold-head injury, that's exactly what he was, with no job prospects in
behind "Yeah," Alex muttered.

"Are you available this morning? Your name came up, and Riley

you'd be perfect for what we need."

getting Now Alex was intrigued. "You've got my attention. What time?"

nwhore "Eleven at the stadium," Ian said.

with it "See you then." It wasn't like Alex had anything better to do.

ey were

* * *

suming.

sensed Madison paced the confines of her boss's office in the Miami T stadium. Ian Dare was intimidating on a good day. A day that was defined as one where everyone agreed with Ian. Today wasn't one of

ll these days.

Except She'd been working with the Thunder for the past month, having g he was social work for a hospital in exchange for starting up an e hought. groundbreaking program with the hometown football team.

ed him, She glanced at Ian, not happy with his most recent proclamation. " particular took this position, we agreed this program would change lives, ped out Madison asked.

ped out Ian straightened his tie and met her gaze with those steely gray e swering will. We'll be the first football team to institute mandatory pos education. The Thunder will make sure its players are capable of a suc physical, psychological, and social transition into the real world whe till not careers end. I don't care if it's one year into their contract or ten."

She nodded. She would be in charge of getting the program friends, running, her schooling and work history in social work and psyc an. "To providing the perfect background. She'd also thought she'd have a whoever came on board to work with her.

Apparently not.

sition?" She folded her arms across her chest. "So tell me how bring ers. Ian playboy athlete on board gels with those goals?" Then, realizing she s his half brother, she cleared her throat. "No insult intended."

"None taken." The corner of Ian's mouth lifted in a wry grin.

Dark-haired, buttoned-up men weren't her type, but she'd have to l ; recent not to notice that Ian was one very sexy man and Riley was one ver 1 sight. woman.

"I'm aware you and Alex have . . . history," Ian said.

7 thinks "That's a delicate way of expressing it." Ian already knew she ar

had history.

Madison wouldn't be surprised if Riley had filled him in on the ending. They shared everything.

Madison had met Riley in her former position as a social worker for domestic abuse victims at the hospital. She'd briefly been Riley's therapist and had ended up being her closest friend. She knew why Riley never told Ian in the dark and respected it.

Thunder
could be
of those
iven up
xciting,
When I
right?"

"You're a professional. If you set your mind to something, I have no doubt you can handle working with Alex," Ian said.

Madison raised her eyebrows. "Do not try to win me over with pleases and compliments."

iven up
xciting,
When I
right?"

"Are you saying you can't work with him?" Ian asked.

Madison laughed. "You must really be used to people you can't work with. Now you're trying to challenge me into accepting him."

When I
right?"

He grinned, stunning her. "Is it working?"

"What do you think?" Madison let out a heavy sigh.

yes. "It
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career
uccessful
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up and
hology
say in
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be dead
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id Alex

She was a pro at protecting herself from hurt and abandonment, a result, she chose the men she let into her life carefully. They couldn't touch her on any level except sexually. No chance of being hurt when things went wrong. From the second she'd laid eyes on Alex standing by Riley's hospital bed, she'd pegged his type. Cocky and full of himself. She'd bruised his ego when she hadn't let on that she'd recognized the infamous womanizer as a former quarterback. Why should she? The battered female in the bed had been his only concern despite his sexy good looks.

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id Alex

But months later, when they'd begun their fling—she refused to call it a relationship now—Madison had warned herself that all she was to him was a *game*. And yet she'd allowed her hormones, his charm, and their chemistry to override common sense.

ing the
poke of
be dead
y lucky
id Alex

She'd let her heart betray her. And she'd paid for that in spades. She thought, remembering the days of hurt and pain after he'd callously thrown her out of his hospital room, never to be heard from again.

be dead
y lucky
id Alex

"Who better to co-chair this program than someone whose career has been sidelined by unexpected injury?" Ian's deep voice broke into her thoughts.

id Alex

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe someone who takes life seriously?" she asked. But his injury *had* been serious, she knew. She could still hear the

of his helmet against the ground in the instant replay.

Ian cleared his throat. "He's lost without football. He needs direction. And he's in a unique position to bring perspective to the players you're trying to reach. He'd be the perfect person to talk to the league when they're ready to try to convince them to make this type of program mandatory for all teams."

Madison studied Ian closely. His jaw was set tight, his eyes narrow. Being close to Riley gave her insight into the man. And she knew that when he was meeting Riley, Ian had wanted nothing to do with his half sibling. Ian resented his father's *other* family, especially Alex.

"Who are you trying to convince this is the right move? Not yourself?" Madison asked. Ian stiffened, and she knew she was right. "That's bullshit. Riley's idea, isn't it? She's worried about Alex, and she asked you to give him this opportunity." Disappointment settled heavily in her heart.

"Every time you speak, you convince me you're the right woman to spearhead this effort. You're intuitive. And you're correct."

"Nice. So Riley threw me under the bus for him."

"You know Riley better than that," Ian said, his tone sharp as he defended his wife. "She gives her loyalty and love to few people, and you're not going to take that away from her."

Madison blinked. "So why isn't she here telling me herself? I'm assuming she couldn't help being hurt and blindsided."

"She's home sick, or she would be."

Madison swallowed hard. "Do I get a say in this, or is it a done deal?" She asked Ian.

He met her gaze. "You're in charge. You decide who to hire. Ultimately it's between you and Alex to decide."

But it was clear to her that both Ian and Riley wanted her to give up her job. "I need to think about this."

Ian glanced at his watch. Then he cleared his throat. "You've got ten minutes. Alex will be in the conference room at eleven."

"Keep him busy till eleven fifteen," she muttered.

Madison headed back to her office, frustration, anxiety, and more than a hint of jitters in her stomach over the prospect of seeing Alex again. The meeting was the least of her problems, and she paced the carpeted floor, contemplating the real issue at hand. Could she work side by side with Al

after day, remembering what it felt like to have him deep inside her bo
rection. She shivered at the reminder, her nerve endings alive and tingling;
ou'll beprospect of seeing him again.

1 we're Despite how badly he'd hurt her, she still wanted him. And was
7 for allthe worst part? She, who'd trained herself at an early age not to want
anyone or anything, still responded to the mere thought of Alex Dare.

rrowed.

t before

* * *

3. He'd

Alex liked the Thunder Dome. The new stadium was a hell of a lot nic
the Breakers' home in Tampa, not that he'd be caught dead admitting
e? Or thing out loud. Still, he couldn't help the disappointment clouding him
"This is in a stadium and knowing he was unable to play. It was one thing to m
to offer decision with his rational mind, protecting himself from bodily inju
man to would affect his entire life. Quite another to emotionally accept that h
the thing he loved most in the world. The game had defined him fr
time he'd picked up a football as a kid and had carried him through
defended what he'd thought was his first love. And he had stupidly thought he'
one of the game on his own terms.

Apparently not.

?" She Alex followed the directions left for him at the guardhouse and er
at Ian's office. It was the first time he'd come to his half brother's p
business, and his skin itched with the feeling that something big was a
al?" she take place, even if he didn't know what *it* was.

He walked in to find the office as imposing as the man himself. A
mately, Ian couldn't be more different in personality—Ian stiff and uptigh
easygoing and relaxed.

Alex a "Thanks for coming," Ian said, extending his hand.

Alex shook it hard. *Man to man*, he thought wryly and settled into
fifteen making himself comfortable. Sitting across from Ian, Alex acknow
how far their relationship had progressed. They were in the same roo
having a conversation. It was huge.

e than a "Before we go into the conference room, I wanted to fill you in
3ut this proposition I have for you."

d floor, "I'm listening."

ex, day Ian inclined his head. "You must realize that your injury brought

dy? the deficit in the league as far as preparing our players for life at g at the game.”

Alex stiffened, as he always did when talk of his career n’t that concussion arose.

or need Ian ignored his reaction and went on. “The fact is, you could continued to play, taken the risk, and down the road, you’d have been with severe head trauma and mental deficits. You were smart enough back. Not a lot of guys are.”

Alex raised an eyebrow. “You’re complimenting me?”
er than Ian rolled his eyes. “But now that you’re retired at the age of two
; such a what do you plan to do with your life?” He held up a hand before Ale
1, being answer. “Hang on. That question is part of why I asked you here. It’s
ake the question the league should want all players to consider *before* they’re
iry that and forced out of the game.”

e’d lost “Where are you going with this?” Alex asked, warning himself not
om the defensive.

losing Ian cleared his throat. “I plan to institute a training program that
d leave the players to think about the future, do smart things with their mon
take informational classes that will prepare them for later on.”

Interested, Alex merely studied the other man and waited.
ided up “Did you know seventy-eight percent of retired athletes are broke
place of two to five years?” Ian asked. Without waiting for an answer, he cor
about to “Statistics show fifty percent of ex-pro football player marriages
divorce because couples aren’t ready for the pressures of life after the
lex and So I want spouses involved in preparation and education.”

t, Alex “You’ve really thought about this,” Alex said, impressed despite
and his lingering resentment of Ian.

Ian inclined his head. “It’s in motion. I have a social worker on
a chair, and I want you running things along with her.”

pledged Alex reared back in surprise. “Why me?”
om and He and Ian weren’t close. Ian came from their father’s legitimate
on the Alex and his siblings were the man’s illegitimate secrets. But secrets
stay buried, and the explosion, when it had come, had rocked both f
deeply. Alex and Ian had remained on opposing sides for ten years.

Until Riley.
to light Ian cleared his throat. “Why not you? Or should I say, who oth

fter theyou? You will have the unique ability to convince the players
important. You definitely have media presence when this goes publ
-endinglet's face it, you have nothing else lined up at the moment."

"And there's the asshole I know."

d have Ian grinned. He fucking grinned, as if he already had Alex exactly
dealinghe wanted him.

to step "Come meet the woman in charge before you make any decisions."

Alex nodded. Why not? He was impressed with the progra
interested.

nty-six, As he followed Ian to the conference room, passing the
x couldchampions, life-sized photos of past and present Thunder all-stars, A
s also awondered why Ian had chosen him. But he couldn't deny the import
injuredbrilliance of the program. There were so many ways guys' lives did
eighty after retirement, forced or otherwise, that training and prep
it to getwould only help.

"Riley's really behind the idea," Ian said as they approached the
teacheswooden door.

ey, and "Way to try and sway me, man."

Ian shrugged. "I do what I have to in order to get my way." He
and looked Alex in the eye. "So about the woman who will be v
: withinalongside you—"

tinued. "I haven't agreed."

end in "About her," Ian went on as if Alex hadn't spoken. "I'm trusting
e game.be professional."

Alex narrowed his gaze, his internal radar on high alert.

himself "And to not be a jerk."

"Hey!"

board, Without replying, Ian opened the door. They stepped into the roc
Alex laid eyes on the one woman he hadn't been expecting to see. Th
woman who'd haunted his dreams and sidetracked him from many
family.nightmares.

s didn't Madison faced him head on. Her shoulders drawn back, golden
amilieshair pulled away from her face, she didn't back down from his sta
wore a pair of black slacks that hugged her curves and a white silky-
top that clung to her generous breasts. And those unusually blue eyes
er thanover at the sight of him.

this is “Alex, I believe you know Madison Evans.”

ic. And Blindsided—and his half brother knew it—Alex strode up to I
inhaled her familiar fruity scent, which only served as a reminder of
times he’d spent breathing her in as his cock moved inside her bo
7 whereeffect on him was potent, and even the most common expressions faile

’ “Alex,” she said, her cool tone bringing his head out of the desir
fog he’d found himself in.

m and “Hey, Angel,” he said, using the endearment he’d started call
during their brief time together. Another sign he’d had it bad, wheth
hall ofwanted to admit it or not.

lex still Her head whipped up, her eyes narrowing and settling on Ian
ance orwon’t work.” She turned to go.

a one- Alex still had excellent reflexes, and he grabbed her arm before sh
arationstride past him.

She glared.

closed He didn’t look away, determined to win this battle of wills. This p
job, which had interested him on an intellectual and emotional level i
suddenly felt even more important, and *she* was the reason.

paused “We need to talk,” he insisted.

working “I have nothing to say.”

“Ian’s proposition said otherwise.”

Madison looked over his shoulder in search of Ian and frowned.
you tothe traitor is gone. No big surprise there.”

Smart man, Alex thought. “If I let you go, will you stay long en
discuss this position Ian and Riley want me to take?”

She let out a frustrated puff of air.

He took that as a yes and released her.

m, and “Us working together is not a good idea, and somewhere in th
ie samehead of yours, you know that.”

r of his “Because we slept together? More than a couple of times?”

She set her jaw. “That was a mistake.”

-blonde *Ouch. That hurt*, he thought and filed away the why to deal with I
re. Shewant to know more about this training program and what my role in it
lookingbe.”

frosted “Why? You can’t possibly be interested.”

“It sounds more like you don’t want me to be interested.”

She rolled her shoulders back even farther, stiffening her posture. He “You’re right. I don’t. This is a serious project that could help a lot of the hot and have far-reaching positive repercussions for years to come. I’m really. Her partner willing to go all in. And let’s face it, I’ve seen your staying power. It’s nonexistent.”

He winced, knowing she was really referring to him and relationships.

And she was right. At least, that’s how he had been. Six months with nothing herto do but live in his own head had brought changes she knew nothing about.

Eyebrows raised, stern expression on her face, she glared at him. Her hands were something she’d scraped off her shoe.

“This In the span of five minutes, she’d insulted him more than anyone probably his entire life. So why was he turned on? He shifted his stance, a futile effort to adjust his cock and gain some sort of ease or comfort from the happening around her, and he knew it.

“I’ll give you that one insult because I deserved it.”

She wrinkled her nose in confusion.

Good. He liked her off balance. Much better than spitting mad at him. “More and I’ll have to take action.”

She opened her mouth then closed it again, because as they were so intimately aware, he’d have no trouble following through on his threat.

“Care to tell me what you have planned for this program?” he asked.

“Well, deliberately all business. He strode over to the chair at the head of the table and settled in.

She obviously realized he was serious because she headed for the stacks, pulled out folders on the table and sifted through them.

Coming up with the one she wanted, she opened it and glanced at it only briefly before speaking. “Football players—anyone in training at thick prolonged periods of time—live a very regimented life. From what and how they eat, to their exercise routine, to when to practice and attend meetings, everything is laid out for them. One injury and everything changes.” She eyed him warily from beneath her lashes.

He was surprised she’d still worry about his feelings after how she’d been treated. “Go on. I can take it.”

She nodded. “Suddenly they can eat what they want, when they want. They gain unhealthy amounts of weight that isn’t balanced out by the exercise they used to do. Lack of education and preparation result in poor fitness.”

posture. choices. Most athletes run through any good money they might have in a short amount of time. Marriages crumble from the strain. Not to mention they get bored, and depression sets in. I have statistics, but for now, just take my word for it.”

He didn't have to. He'd begun experiencing some of it himself. “What's your solution?” he asked, impressed with the knowledge she had regarding the problem they faced.

“Education.” She tapped the folder on the table. “All football colleges as if universities need to have programs geared to postcareer options. I want to offer a finance or business major. They need to have a plan for their postprofessional life. From our perspective, that means we start from the ground up. We contact schools and propose just such an approach. We need former players willing to speak to the kids about the importance of education beyond football. And at a team level, we begin to provide all sorts of counseling and training. Nutrition, business classes, psychological counseling. Another goal is to eliminate the stigma of retirement, and I think that's important. “Anythat, we need to prepare our players for the future.” She finished her sentence and her cheeks flushed pink and her eyes wide, her passion for the subject evident.

Fuck, she was gorgeous. He'd seen a similar look on her face before, right before he'd had his fingers inside her and teased her to climax. He closed his eyes, dragging in a controlled breath.

Wrong time, wrong place. Wrong everything. He might want to return to where they'd been before he'd opened his mouth and thrown her out of his hospital room, but she wanted nothing to do with him. She didn't trust him, and he didn't blame her. He needed to get out whenever before he could let himself even think about sinking back into his old team. She needed to see he'd changed, grown up.

And maybe he needed to prove the same thing to himself. “I'm in,” he told her.

“Excuse me?” “I'll take the job.”

She pinched the bridge of her nose. “Didn't Ian tell you it's up to you to hire?”

Alex shook his head, silently cursing his manipulative brother.

nade inthink the plan was to throw us in here like gladiators and see who surv
ention, To his surprise, she let out an amused laugh.

you can The desire to kiss the dimples on either side of her mouth was
Beneath the table, he curled his fingers into fists, curbing his desi
frustration wasn't as easily controlled.

lge she "I really don't think we can work together," she said, sobering.
"Then I'll just have to convince you otherwise."

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It's not

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"No, I

think the plan was to throw us in here like gladiators and see who survived.”

To his surprise, she let out an amused laugh.

The desire to kiss the dimples on either side of her mouth was strong. Beneath the table, he curled his fingers into fists, curbing his desire. His frustration wasn't as easily controlled.

“I really don't think we can work together,” she said, sobering.

“Then I'll just have to convince you otherwise.”

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Dare to Love Series

[Book 1: Dare to Love \(Ian & Riley\)](#)

[Book 2: Dare to Desire \(Alex & Madison\)](#)

[Book 3: Dare to Touch \(Dylan & Olivia\)](#)

[Book 4: Dare to Hold \(Scott & Meg\)](#)

[Book 5: Dare to Rock \(Avery & Grey\)](#)

[Book 6: Dare to Take \(Tyler & Ella\)](#)

[A Very Dare Christmas – Short Story \(Ian & Riley\)](#)

* Sienna Dare gets together with Ethan Knight in **The Knight Brothers** (*Dare Me Tonight*).

* Jason Dare gets together with Faith in the **Sexy Series** (*More Than Sexy*).

Dare NY Series (NY Dare Cousins)

[Book 1: Dare to Surrender \(Gabe & Isabelle\)](#)

[Book 2: Dare to Submit \(Decklan & Amanda\)](#)

[Book 3: Dare to Seduce \(Max & Lucy\)](#)

The Knight Brothers

[Book 1: Take Me Again \(Sebastian & Ashley\)](#)

[Book 2: Take Me Down \(Parker & Emily\)](#)

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[Novella: Take The Bride \(Sierra & Ryder\)](#)

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About the Author



NY Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today Bestseller, Carly Phillips is the queen of Alpha Heroes, at least according to The Harlequin Reviewer. Carly married her college sweetheart and lives in Purchase, NY, along with her crazy dogs who are featured on her Facebook and Instagram pages. The author of over 75 romance novels, she has raised two incredible daughters and is now an empty nester. Carly's book, *The Bachelor*, was chosen by Kelly Ripa as her first romance club pick. Carly loves social media and interacting with her readers. Want to keep up with Carly? Sign up for her newsletter and receive TWO FREE books at www.carlyphillips.com.

About the Author



NY Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today Bestseller, Carly Phillips is the queen of Alpha Heroes, at least according to The Harlequin Junkie Reviewer. Carly married her college sweetheart and lives in Purchase, NY along with her crazy dogs who are featured on her Facebook and Instagram pages. The author of over 75 romance novels, she has raised two incredible daughters and is now an empty nester. Carly's book, *The Bachelor*, was chosen by Kelly Ripa as her first romance club pick. Carly loves social media and interacting with her readers. Want to keep up with Carly? Sign up for her newsletter and receive TWO FREE books at www.carlyphillips.com.