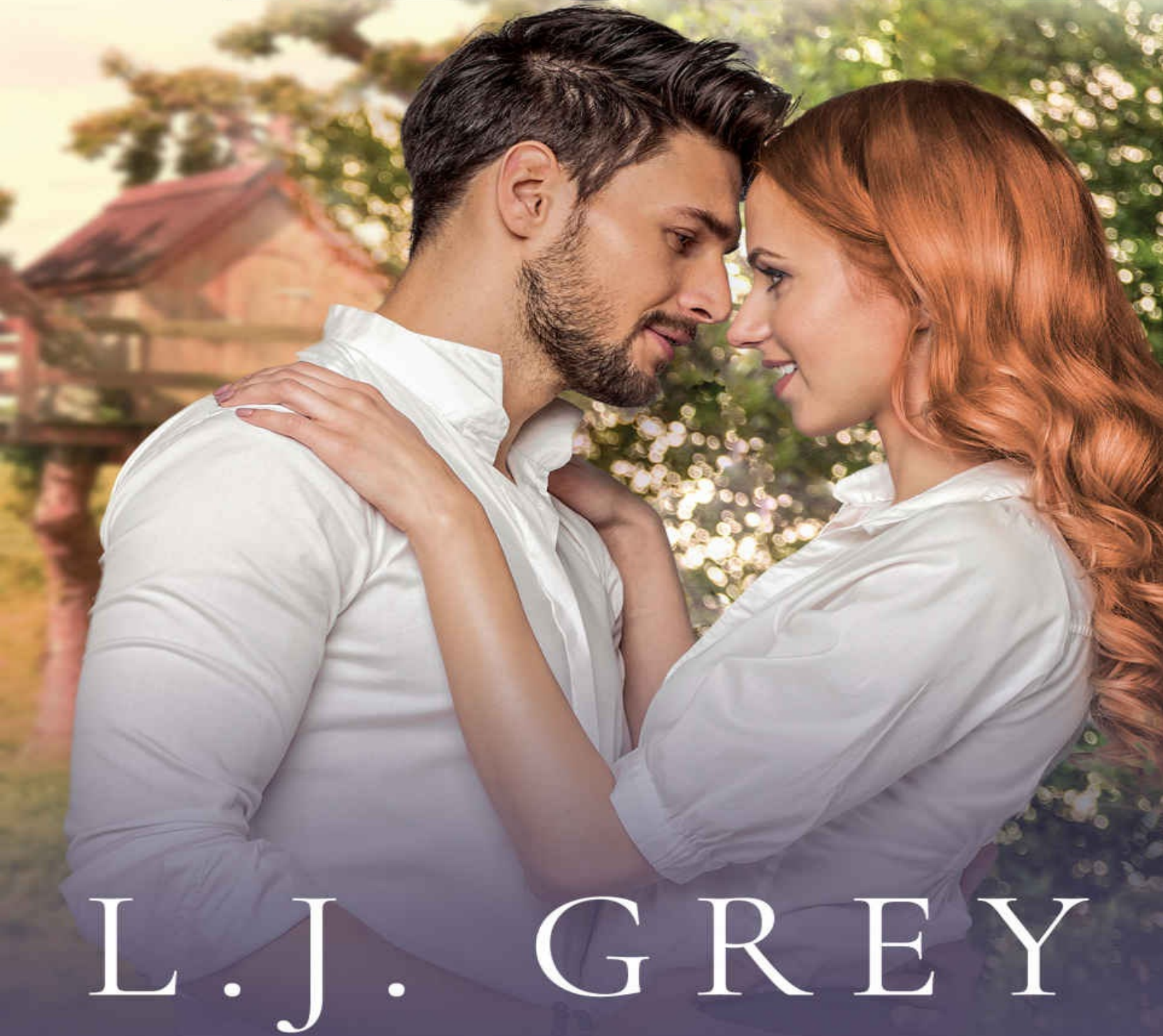


THE TREEHOUSE SERIES

Finding
HOME



L. J. GREY

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About The Book

No amount of success can chase away the past.

Kylie

When I was young, I had the biggest crush on my best friend's older brother.

But then he left, and I grew up, leaving town myself to pursue my artistic dreams.

Thirteen years later, tragedy brings me back to Willowcreek, and back to Dante.

He isn't the boy I remember. This billionaire before me may be sexy as sin, but he is also cold hearted, closed off, and only focused on one thing... himself.

I want nothing to do with the new Dante Lewis, but when he makes me an offer I can't refuse, I find myself in a situation that brings us closer in proximity than ever before.

And the closer I get, the more I want him. A part of me is craving the dark side of passion that he is willing to offer.

But my heart still wants more, and I'm not sure if passion alone will ever be enough.

Dante

Life for me is simple. I focus on what I want, and I get it, never stopping

before reaching for more.

My next target is back in my hometown, and nothing will get in the way of my plans.

That is, until I see Kylie Simmons again. My younger brother's best friend has turned into a stunning woman that's everything I crave and nothing I should want.

Kylie is soft, sweet, and completely off limits.

Yet when a potential client requests Kylie's paintings be included to close a deal, I realize staying away is not an option.

But bringing her back to New York with me is only the beginning, because once I've had a taste, there will be no going back.

Finding Home is the second book in the Treehouse Series. It is a Contemporary, Steamy, Small-Town, Best Friend's Brother, Forced Proximity Romance and can be read as a standalone.

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The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred. 1st edition 2024.

This book is dedicated to my readers; you're simply the best. Thank you!

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Chapter One

KYLIE



“B ye, Mom and Dad!” I shout a quick goodbye to my parents as the door slams behind me, and I take off at a sprint across the street to Knox’s place. Knox’s dad had just finished building a pergola with a swing underneath it. I like it better this way. I run up the pathway to the front door, my heart fluttering. I’ve only really started crushing on Knox’s older brother Dante this year, but my traitorous heart won’t seem to get the memo that he is my best friend’s brother and off-limits.

I ring the doorbell and my best friend in the whole world, Knox Lewis, answers. I beam at him. “Hey, Knox! It’s the last day of Freshman year, let’s go! I’m so excited to start our summer!”

“I’m almost ready. Come in,” Knox says. He seems subdued.

As I step in, a shout from upstairs makes me flinch. Dante and his dad are at it again, and I can hear the shouting match loud and clear. Those two never seem to get along, but it’s been getting progressively worse this year. Luckily, the screaming never gets directed my way, even though I can’t say the same about my best friend. Dante and Knox have never been close, but Knox has always looked up to his older brother, and I know he tries hard to get along with him.

“What’s going on?” I whisper to Knox, threading my fingers through the strap of my bag.

“Dante’s leaving. Dad wants him to stay until graduation but Dante already got a bus ticket. He’s leaving today, even skipping the last day of school.” Knox flinches as another shout wafts down to us. He grabs his bag and hurries me out of the house.

I’m slower, a bitter taste in my mouth. “He’s just leaving?”

Knox nods. “He’s off to New York. Says he’s going to have bigger and better things. Dad’s trying to reason with him, but... you know Dante.”

My head bows, my unruly red curls falling into my face. All the excitement I’d felt is gone.

Knox sighs and whispers, “He’ll forget about us, you know. He can’t wait to get out of here.”

I grab my friend’s hand and squeeze. “No, Knox. He won’t forget. You’re his brother.”

He stares at me, his eyes blank. Then he sighs again. “Someday that will be you, you know. Making it in the big city. Having all the hot shots fighting over your art at auctions.”

I laugh as I shake my head. “Nah. That’s not me, Knox.”

“Kylie.” Knox stops and grabs my shoulders. He stares intently at me. “It is you. You’re going to make it big. Just promise me we’ll stay best friends forever, Kylie, even then.”

I wrap my arms around him, though my thoughts are with his dark-haired brother I see storming out of his house. “Of course, Knox. I can never forget about you. I can never forget about any of you....”

Light streams through the window of my New Orleans home, waking me up before my alarm can. I linger in the dream, the sharp ache for Willowcreek fading as I start to tally up the things I need to do today.

I throw off my blankets and head for the shower. My long, curly red hair is a disaster and will remain that way if I don’t wash it first thing in the morning. Because of how thick my hair is, it needs enough time to dry properly or it turns into a frizzy mess.

An hour later, my hair is washed, moisturized, styled, and ready to start the day. After a childhood of having to keep my curls cropped short since neither of my parents knew how to deal with the curly hair that I inherited from my great grandma, I make it a priority to take care of it.

I toss on a shirt and my painting overalls and head downstairs. I’m lucky in that my commute is only a staircase. My bestie from Tulane University, Stella Berman, is already waiting for me in the gallery.

“Latte grande with a shot of vanilla,” Stella announces, handing me a cup of coffee.

“OMG, you’re an angel.” I sigh, accepting it. The delicious scent makes my mouth water. “This is perfect!”

Stella laughs, tossing back her short hair. She keeps it in a bob and the jet

black frames her face beautifully. She's taller than my five feet four inches, and today wears a sweater dress that hides her willowy frame. Stella is gorgeous, of course, but her real magic is in her hands.

I inhale the scent of my coffee, grinning. "How did you know I needed this?"

"I heard you tossing and turning in your room all night," Stella replies. "Bad dreams?"

"Hmm. Not so much a dream but a memory. I was dream-reliving the summer after freshman year with Knox."

"Missing the old days?"

"Yeah. As much as I love New Orleans and the opportunities here, Willowcreek is always going to have a special place in my heart. I've been missing Knox and my parents lately, I guess." I shrug. "Maybe you, me, and Max should fly out sometime soon. Plan for an artist's retreat."

Stella grimaces. "Not anytime soon. I'm saving money, remember?"

"I can pay for you."

"Oh, right, that'll work." She snorts. "Then I'll have to pay you back. I still owe you three months' rent."

I frown at her. "Excuse me, I believe I said I wasn't taking rent from you since I don't have a mortgage."

Stella sips her own coffee, the familiar stubborn look settling into her jaw. "You're still paying back the loans you needed to renovate the ground floor into the gallery and our studios, not to mention how much it cost to put a kitchen and two bathrooms upstairs."

"That's my own fault, we could have worked with one bathroom," I argue back. "My loans are my problems, especially when you're looking for a gallery and studio of your own."

"Hmmm." Stella sips her coffee again.

I already know what her next argument will be. "And as for not accepting handouts, I don't think you realize how selfish I'm actually being here. I love your work more than anything in the world and I'm always greedy for more. Besides, I wouldn't be where I am right now if it weren't for Grandma leaving me this house, so where the hell do I get off demanding one of my best friends pay me just so I have the privilege of having such an awesome roommate?"

Even though the popularity of my art has taken off in the last few years, I would still be paying off the mortgage if I'd had to buy a studio space. Not

many people could say they owned a home and business at the age of twenty-eight, but I can.

Stella wrinkles her nose and sticks out her tongue. Aha! I've won the argument. For now, at least.

We head into the studio and start setting things up. The storefront is closed today but we're planning on a lot of coffee and painting to occupy our time. Well, painting for me. Stella's talent is in sculpting. She's the best sculptor in the entire world, as far as I'm concerned. This is why I'm on pins and needles, waiting to hear about the studio space Stella is hoping to purchase in New Jersey, where her family comes from.

Her phone rings and we both squeal. She wiggles on the spot, unable to make herself answer.

I have to hit the button for her and then I chug my latte to stop myself from interrupting her conversation.

"You're kidding me! Approved for funding." Her eyes shine as she turns to me, bouncing on her toes. "Just need the realtor to finalize the bid? Thank you! Thank you so much!"

I set my coffee aside, pressing my palms together as I bite my lips to prevent me from squealing. My heart races with excitement as Stella hangs up. She throws her arms around me, bursting out in peals of laughter.

"Accepted!" I shout in excitement. "There you go! I'll take the first sculpture that you make in your new studio as payment for everything you owe me."

"But I owe you so much." Stella releases me and dances across the room, her hands over her head as she sways her hips. "My dream of opening my very own studio is finally coming true!"

"Hell yeah!" I exclaim.

I'm going to miss her to pieces, but I'm excited for her. She deserves it. New Jersey is perfect for her; not only because it's where she comes from, but because she wants to make a real difference in her childhood community by turning a portion of her studio into an art education center for young artists.

"Oh!" She comes to a stop and lunges for her phone again. "I need to call the realtor and we need to tell Max! He's going to go to bits!"

"Let's call Max first," I suggest. "Then you'll be able to talk to the realtor without screaming into the phone."

Stella laughs as she calls Max. I giggle and she waves her hand at me. I

slap both hands over my mouth and wait. Max answers with a groggy, “Hello?”

Max is my studio manager. He went to Tulane with both Stella and me and, other than Stella, is my best friend here in New Orleans.

“Hey, Max,” Stella says coyly. “You’ll never guess what happened.”

A groan answers. “It’s eight in the morning on my day off.”

“You’re going to have a lot fewer days off here soon... at least, until Kylie finds another renter for my studio,” Stella says, bursting into a smile again.

There’s a flurry of noise over the phone. “You got it? You got the studio?”

“Yes! I just need to finalize some things with the realtor.”

Max cheers through the phone. I clap my hands, laughing.

“This calls for a celebration. The three of us over at the Clawfoot Bathtub bar, seven tonight,” I say. “My treat!”

“I’ll be there,” Max promises.

“See you then,” Stella says.

She calls the realtor while I set up for the day. I miss most of the conversation but when Stella hangs up, she’s beaming all the brighter. After all these months of saving and searching, it’s finally happening!

It’s hard for the two of us to keep focused on our work, so most of the day ends up with us dancing around the studio with music blasting. When the evening comes around, we meet up with Max at the bar. He takes one look at our giggling and frowns.

“Are you two already drunk?” he demands.

“No. We didn’t have any wine or even more caffeine, other than that first cup this morning,” Stella tells him.

He leans in closer. “Are you high?”

“Only on the sweet, sweet smell of success!” I exclaim.

Max shakes his head, laughing despite himself.

Maximilian Schroder looks exactly how you’d expect an art studio manager to look. He’s always perfectly put together. Everything about him is neat, from his precisely styled blond hair to his fastidiously trimmed beard. His thin, lanky build looks perfect in the pale suits he wears to work. Not too intimidating while also clearly professional and knowledgeable. Tonight he wears blue jeans and a dark blue V-neck sweater.

Just as we get seated, my phone goes off. I check it and grin to see it’s

Knox. He knows all about our struggles to get Stella's funding approved and will be just as excited to hear our good news.

I excuse myself and step outside to answer. "Knox! You'll never believe it! The funding has come through and Stella is going to get her own studio! You said we could do it and we're doing it! I can't tell you how excited I am. You'll have to come out for the grand opening."

I'd brought Stella home to Willowcreek a few times and Knox had come to New Orleans often enough over the years. They are good friends, too.

"Kylie."

His voice is low and bleak. My heart stutters and I clutched the phone tighter. "What's wrong?"

"Mrs. Kendall passed away," Knox says.

The air leaves my lungs and my eyes instantly well up with tears. Mrs. Kendall was the neighborhood grandma on my street. Hell, she was the town grandma for all of Willowcreek! She always had time for us kids and had even built a treehouse behind her house for us to hang out whenever we needed to. I can't count the hours that Knox, me, and our friends spent there. That treehouse was my sanctuary through all the best and worst times in my life. She was the one who encouraged me to go to art school in the first place.

"How?" I ask, leaning against the side of the building.

"It was just her time. She passed in her sleep," Knox replies.

I close my eyes against the welling of emotions. "Are you doing all right?"

"Yeah. I'm just working to arrange everything. Mrs. Kendall's lawyer wants us both at the will reading. She would have called you, but I wanted to let you know myself."

"Thank you," I whisper. Then I straighten. "I'll be on the first flight home."

"You can stay with Callum and me," he says. "I know your parents are on a transatlantic cruise, so if you don't want to stay at your family home alone..."

"Thanks, but I'll be okay."

"Are you sure?"

I laugh at his worry. "If I change my mind, I'll let you know."

"All right. Let me know when your flight gets in. I'll pick you up, then you can use your parents' car while you're here," he tells me.

"Thanks." That's one less thing that I'll have to deal with. I hope I can

contact my parents to make sure that they're okay with the plan. They often forget to check their messages while they're traveling, though.

Knox sighs. "I'll see you when you're here. Love you, Kylie."

"Love you, too."

I hang up, staring up at the sky lit by the lights of the city.

"There you are," Stella says next to me.

I jump, not realizing she'd come outside. Max stands just behind her. Worry is etched on both of their faces. I wince as I realize what it must look like to them. First I step outside to take a call, and now I've been out here longer than I ought to be. Neither of them are prone to over-worrying but even in this part of the city, there are things to be worried about in the evening.

"What did Knox need?" Max asks.

"Mrs. Kendall passed away," I whisper. "Looks like I'm headed back to Willowcreek."

Chapter Two

DANTE



My hands tighten on the steering wheel of my rental car as I drive down Main Street. Nothing has changed in Willowcreek. Maybe a paint job here and there but that's it. I shake my head in disappointment to ignore the curdling of my gut. This place brings up too many memories.

It'll be worth it if I finally close the deal, I tell myself. Then I'll never have to come back here again.

"John McKinnon called for you this morning," my secretary, Lizzie, says over the Bluetooth. "He was getting pushy about where you're at so I told him California. I think he's trying to find the deal you're working on to try to steal it."

"Can't blame him after I stole that deal in Tulsa," I reply with a laugh. "But this is too local of a deal for him. You can go ahead and tell him I went to my hometown if he gets pushy again. It's not like he'll be able to do anything with the people around here. None of them can wrap their minds around the possible profitability of this place."

Lizzie hums. "I suppose because it is a small town."

"Yeah, but it's also beautifully situated, close enough to larger city centers that it's easy to get to them but not so close that traffic is constantly backed up," I say, as I turn the corner and head down to the Kendall property. "The natural beauty of the area is enough to make a retiree weep."

The two-story home I'm after comes into view. At least the part that can be seen from the road. The cream-colored siding has seen better days, while the burgundy shutters should have been replaced ages ago. I slow down as I gaze past the house to the forest beyond. Desire and frustration well up inside

me as I imagine what this would look like if people had any ambition.

The old Kendall place is prime real estate, and buying land cheap to develop into high profits is exactly how I've made my fortune.

"Sounds like a good investment for sure," Lizzie agrees.

"The old bird—" *May she rest in peace*, I add silently, "—always refused to sell, no matter how generous my offers were. It's over fifty acres of treed real estate; with Willowcreek's great location, it's a prime spot to develop into a luxury residential area."

I've been drooling over this place since I realized just how profitable it could be.

"Maybe the locals can see its potential these days," Lizzie suggests.

I snort in reply. "The town's exactly the same as when I escaped as a teen. The only difference is the welcome sign."

Oh, I'd come back a handful of times. To see my brother and to try to bring some profitability to this tiny town. You'd think they'd be grateful; instead, they're all too jealous of my success.

I clawed my way to where I am today. Now at thirty-one, I'm richer than this whole town put together. I actually made something of myself. Something that certain people—my dad—will never do.

"Good luck with the will reading," Lizzie tells me. "I'll email you the information on the office buildings you might be able to use with Sean Moore."

"Thanks." I hang up.

I park my car on the street, surprised that there are so many other vehicles around. I'd thought Mrs. Kendall would have only a handful of family members here for the reading of the will. I frown as I catch sight of an old beat-up thing that had once belonged to my grandfather.

Knox is here. Dammit! Why is he here? I haven't talked to my brother since he called me on my birthday. He'd tried to convince me to let Dad say hi. Fuck that! I don't need that kind of grief in my life.

But Mrs. Kendall was always good friends with Knox. Maybe she had left him a handful of knick-knacks, or some tools or something.

I shrug and clear my head. My secretary has gone to great lengths to get me the time and date for this reading. I'll have to rethink my sales approach if Knox is here, that's all. And if Mrs. Kendall left him the property? I'll have to rethink it even more.

I head into the old house. It smells wrong. It takes me a moment to realize

there's no scent of fresh-baked goods. Mrs. Kendall was always making cookies or bread. Every time I came here to try to convince her to sell, she'd sit me on the sofa and counter my every argument with some sweet treat.

My chest starts to tighten and I stride across the entrance, ignoring the spot where she'd always be standing when she greeted me. Trying to buy this property brought me back to Willowcreek more often than I ever thought it would. When I left at the end of high school, I planned to never come back. And now look at me, here once again.

My polished shoes thud against the thin carpet as I approach the living room.

I stop at the entrance. Knox is there, next to a redhead who must be a Kendall family member.

As she shifts to meet my gaze, I do a double take. The air leaves my lungs as my eyes meet emerald green ones in an all-too-familiar face. Holy shit! That's not some random stranger, that's Kylie Simmons. I stare at her. Her red hair was always cropped short as a kid. Now it's bounteous and thick as it curls down the length of her back. Her frame is slim but with generous curves.

"Dante," she murmurs, nodding toward me. I clear my throat, completely caught off guard.

She's got to be almost thirty now so I know she had to have changed, but I never expected her to be such a woman. "Kylie," I mutter with indifference, masking my surprise as I turn away from her to check out who else is here. I try to calm the frantic beating of my heart.

Knox's other friends are here, too. Samantha the cheerleader, who now owns the elite event-planning company Transcend. She keeps it a secret that she owns the place but I considered having Transcend do some work for me once. I investigated it thoroughly and after learning that it was Sam's business, took my business elsewhere. I wasn't going to cross paths with anyone from Willowcreek if I could help it.

Red curls try to draw my eyes but I force them to stay on the others. After Sam, I spy Jaxson the shaggy-haired chef. I didn't pay attention when Knox told me about his fame, just made sure to note the names of the restaurants he owns so I'd never go to them.

Don't look, I tell myself as Kylie shifts. I'm not here for her. I'm here to buy the property, make a buck, and never return to Willowcreek again. *Don't look.*

Then, of course, there is loud-mouthed Madison. The girl who stayed in this old town to work with her single mom at a bakery. How sweet... *not*. At least the others had tried to make a name for themselves. Other than Knox, of course.

Only the football star is missing. Ms. Dorman, the lawyer, is also here. She spares me a brief frown as she sets up Mrs. Kendall's video will.

As Knox's friends turn toward me, I give them a slight nod. An odd feeling creeps up my spine, as though I don't belong here. Which is ridiculous because this isn't a closed reading and we're not in high school anymore. This isn't the lot of them wasting time in that stupid treehouse until Dad sends me to bring Knox home. I can't remember the amount of times I was forced to stand at the base of the tree, listening to them giggling about things that I didn't care about. Knox would always delay, forcing me sometimes to even climb into the treehouse myself.

I never needed to belong with them. I don't need to belong now, either. I've always made my own way in the world. Nobody was going to look after me but me, and having a group of distractions like this would have only made me waste my life.

I take a seat and studiously ignore the others. Even Knox doesn't say hi. Which is just as well. I don't want to deal with sentimentality here.

Kylie shifts and I can't control myself anymore.

My brother's best friend. She's not looking at me, so I take my time studying her. It sobers me, remembering her connection with Mrs. Kendall. Maybe I should have waited until after the will was read before I sought out whoever was going to inherit the property. Everything about Kylie draws me in, making me forget why I'm here.

She looks up, catching me staring, and my imagination goes into overdrive. What will that thick red hair of hers feel like bunched in my fist? I'd love to get my hands on her curves, taste her, and see exactly what makes her tick. What does she look like flushed as red as her hair, as her eyes roll to the back of her head and her toes curl?

Kylie hasn't looked away. Her hand goes to her chest as she takes a deep breath. Knox leans close to her and whispers in her ear. Kylie breaks eye contact and shakes her head in response to whatever he says. Then she smiles and I force myself to turn fully to the lawyer. Right. This is why I'm here. To buy the property from whoever inherited it.

I can't focus, my mind still on Kylie.

Kylie wipes at her eyes. Her face is pale. The dark clothes she wears don't give her any color, although I suppose her pallor is to be expected, seeing as we're here because someone died.

Fuck! I should have sent one of my own lawyers to broker the deal. I'm wasting time sitting here when I could be back home, working on more important deals.

There was a moment, right before I left this goddamn town, where I imagined what my life would have been like if I stayed for Kylie, or a girl like Kylie. But that was the last thing I wanted. To fall for the girl and get stuck living this small-town life. Willowcreek was never going to be good enough for Kylie, just like it was never good enough for me.

But if I'd stayed for her, she would have stayed for me. Until we both realized it wasn't good enough... but by then it would be too late. I'd never have made something of myself and she would have left me.

I couldn't let history repeat itself.

She puts an arm around Knox and rubs his back as his shoulders hunch. That's not the touch of old acquaintances, but rather good friends.

Thing is, she should have forgotten all about Knox by now. Didn't everyone who went to the big city for something better forget where they came from? I certainly have tried my best to forget Willowcreek, though I never wanted to forget my little brother along with it. It's one of the reasons I've tried so hard in the past to get Knox to move out of this dead-end town and put his talent to good use.

"You young hellions were some of the only few to really use and love my treehouse."

I jump at the sound of Mrs. Kendall's booming voice. Even as she aged, her voice was always strong and clear. I look around, half expecting to see her standing there, a teasing glint in her eyes. Instead, I find it's a recording. I lean back in my chair, trying to tell myself I'm not disappointed.

People die. Mrs. Kendall was just a barrier to buying this place. It wasn't like she ever took me in the way she fussed over Knox.

I'm still well aware of Knox and Kylie. She leans her head against Knox's shoulder, but not like she's seeking support from him. It looks like she's giving him comfort.

Mrs. Kendall's taped will concludes with her bestowing the treehouse and property on all six of them; Samantha, Madison, Jaxson, Kylie, Knox, and football boy, who'd arrived at some point. Asher. Right, that was his name.

Sam, with her cheerleader-blond hair and bubblegum mouth, starts off by declaring that the property would be great to turn into an event space.

I groan. Of course. They're going to try to force their own ideas onto the property without knowing any of its potential.

Asher snorts. "No. In this small town? Not a chance. The best bet would be to sell it. Dante, you can put it on the market, right?"

I'm pleasantly surprised that Asher would turn it over to me like this, rather than me having to interject. From the way the others were shifting in the seats—especially Knox—I knew it wasn't going to be popular, though.

Madi proves me right when she leans forward, her eyes narrowed at Asher. "Woah there, big dog. What about other options, Mr. Celebrity? Just because you want to run back to whatever tail you're chasing now doesn't mean the rest of us don't have any other ideas."

Asher scowls and flips her the bird.

Kylie leans forward, her brow puckered. She opens her mouth, then shuts it and slumps back. Her gaze lowers to the table as she shakes her head to herself. I'd forgotten just how shy she actually is. Even among her old friends, it seems.

Madi rolls her eyes at Asher. "We can turn it into a bed and breakfast, and my mom could supply the pastries and stuff from her bakery."

I internally groan with frustration realizing they all have their own ideas for this place. Which means I have to approach this with care. I can't just start pushing for them to sell right now, there's too many other possibilities for them to work through.

Taking a moment, I glance around at each of them. I'll start with Asher since he's willing to sell already. The only reason any of them have any desire to keep the place is the sentimentality attached to that rickety old treehouse in the back. The treehouse might be the key, actually.

Maybe I can start by telling them about how many children will be able to enjoy Mrs. Kendall's property if they sell the land for development.

A dozen different ideas roll through my mind as I ponder over what to do. I'd been iced out of their group often enough as a kid to know it's going to be difficult to break in, so if I stand any chance at getting what I want, I need to be patient.

Knox interrupts me before I can even start, resting his elbows on his knees. "That's not such a bad idea. Dad and I can do the new furniture at the carpentry shop and —"

“You don’t have the time or resources for that kind of project, Knox,” I snap, just as Asher shoots down the idea as well.

Kylie stiffens, her bright green eyes flashing at me. She opens her mouth —

“But I do,” Jaxson cuts in.

I scoff, unsettled by the lingering attention from Kylie. While she was all softness before, her glare seems to burn a hole through me. “Yeah, yeah, we all know you’re a big-time chef in Italy or whatnot, and that you own how many restaurants? But don’t let sentiment blind you. This is not a viable business spot.”

Not that sort of business, at least.

Kylie continues to glare at me. Why isn’t she saying anything? Is this still her shyness, or is it because she can’t be bothered to talk to me?

“He’s a chef in New York now, you penguin,” Madison says.

I have to resist the urge to flip her the bird just like Asher did. God, she’s insufferable! Normally I don’t have any problem controlling my emotions, but for some reason being back in Willowcreek, around the same people I knew when I was a kid, is making me feel like him again: the teenage me with a temper problem.

But I’m not a teenager anymore and I can control myself.

Leaning back in my chair, I watch as they start arguing again. The only person who doesn’t join in the discussion is Kylie. Instead, she looks as if she is trying to take the information in, but is unsure if she should speak up. It’s clear to see her shy demeanor hasn’t changed much.

Shaking my head, my eyes drift towards the window, my thoughts going over the land I came here to acquire. To think that the people in this place have no idea what potential wealth they are sitting on. What change it could bring to their lives.

We don’t even have to take down all the trees. They’re part of the appeal and I’ll be able to sell the idea of privacy in the woods to anyone who wants to move here.

When Madi suggests something else ridiculous I scoff, rolling my eyes before I glance at my brother. He has remained quiet the entire time for the most part. Except for the stern glances he keeps shifting my way, which I choose to ignore.

The last thing I need is Knox and our father, with their small-town vision and rinky-dink carpentry shop, mucking up the place. But once I convince the

other five to sell, he won't have a choice, anyway.

A gentle shift in Kylie catches my eye. Her expression has smoothed out, as if she is done with all the back-and-forth conversation. And for a split second, I find myself wondering what it is she is thinking. What can I do to convince her to sell?

After all, it isn't like she has anything tying her here.

Images of her flood my mind. A seven-year-old standing next to Mrs. Kendall as she asks Knox to play. A nine-year-old, shyly offering me a homemade chocolate for Easter. A twelve-year-old, crying in the bathroom at school because she'd stammered through her speech in front of her class. A fifteen-year-old, twirling in a brand-new skirt as she asked me what I thought.

Now, as she watches her friends, I get the feeling that *she's* planning, too. What does she want from the property? I suddenly have the feeling that she, not Knox, might be the biggest obstacle in the way of getting what I want.

Three days later, my secretary calls me to say that the transfer of Mrs. Kendall's property is complete. Knox and his group of friends all have equal rights. And they've decided to keep it. I thank my secretary but inwardly I'm seething. Why couldn't she have bribed Mrs. Kendall's attorney into telling me when the signing took place? I would have stepped up my plans to get them to sell. I had only barely started on my plans to convince Asher to sell.

There's only one person in this group that will tell me what's going on. I call Knox, not bothering to hide my displeasure.

"None of you could decide what to do with that property and somehow you managed to convince them all to keep it?" I demand, glaring at the window of my New York apartment. "How did you do it?"

"I didn't do anything," Knox replies, far more even-tempered than I want him to be. It makes my own anger feel irrational.

I take a deep breath and release it slowly. "Then what happened?" I ask, my tone flat now.

"We found a letter from Mrs. Kendall to her late husband. We decided to ensure the home and treehouse stay with the community, to be a safe place for kids like it was for us."

I scowl, but the wheels are already turning in my mind. I could start trying to get the wooded acres over the house and yard. I'll just tell them that they don't need it for their community center, and by selling off the forested area, they'll be able to fund the center. That should be enough to sway at least some of them.

Then, after the luxury homes are built, the people who live in them won't want a bunch of unruly kids running around. It'd be easy to get this community treehouse shut down, opening up the last piece of property for sale.

"Dante, let it go." Knox sighs. "This is too important to Willowcreek. It means too much for my friends and me. You won't convince anyone to sell."

I don't have anything else to say, so I hang up. *We'll just see about that.*

Chapter Three

KYLIE



I'm coloring on my new driveway with chalk when an older lady approaches. She has kind, warm brown eyes and gray short hair. The pie she carries in her hands makes my mouth water.

"Well, hello there, my dear. I'm Mrs. Kendall, your neighbor. What are you doing outside all by yourself?"

I look up and smile at her. She seems very nice and the first person to have spoken to me since we moved in. Not that it's been that long. I've only lived here a few days and the chaos that my mother is creating inside with her unpacking has me playing outside every chance I get. I've seen kids playing around the neighborhood but I've never been really good at making friends, and approaching them to say hi is scary.

I smile up at her and simply shrug, before looking back down at my work. I love the pretty blue flower I'm drawing now, and look through my new chalk collection before picking up a darker blue.

Mrs. Kendall shakes her head. "You're a shy one. I can see that right off the bat."

She puts the pie on the front step and holds a hand out to me. "All right, come on." I frown at her. I'm not supposed to go with strangers. I look at the big windows of my new home and see Mom standing there. She smiles and nods at me, so I smile and take Mrs. Kendall's hand.

"We'll see about you playing by yourself," Mrs. Kendall says, guiding me across the street. She rings the doorbell and a lanky boy with blond shaggy hair answers with his dad. "Knox dear, this is Kylie, she just moved in across the street. Kylie, this is Knox. Do you want to play together?"

Knox is already nodding, his eyes bright. "I saw you coloring outside. I

have chalk too, want to color the sidewalks?”

I clap my hands, skipping on the spot. “Yes!”

Knox’s dad turns. “Dante, do you want to play with your brother and his new friend?”

I peer past them to the dark-haired boy in the house. “No!” He glares at his dad. But as he’s turning, his dark eyes land on me and he stops glaring. He doesn’t look as mean as he’s acting toward his dad. He seems to hesitate, looking on with what I think is longing in his eyes. He does want to come play with us, I just know it.

I smile a big smile at him and he almost smiles back. Right in that moment, I know he’s not mean. He needs a friend, and I can be that friend.

“Do you want to change your mind?” his dad asks.

The soft look disappears and Dante stomps up the stairs.

“That boy, I swear,” Knox’s dad mumbles and shakes his head, then looks back at us.

“Don’t worry, Keith. I’m sure he’ll come around one day.” Mrs. Kendall smiles.

“I hope so, Betty. Knox, go play outside and please stay where I can see you.”

“Ok, Dad.”

As Knox pulls me away, Mrs. Kendall watching over us, I hope one day Dante will join us, too.

I wake up after another dream from my childhood, this one from when I was only seven years old. It’s no surprise that my dreams are centered around Mrs. Kendall, when the majority of my focus has been on helping with the remodel of her home. It’s only been a few weeks and Knox has already finished gutting the three bedrooms and two bathrooms on the upper floor of the newly named clubhouse. I have to admit, I cried a little when I saw how much was torn out, but Knox is right. The home is old and everything from the insulation to the drywall needs to be redone. Luckily, the structural framework is intact.

Sitting on my parent’s porch, I lift my coffee cup to my lips and stare down the road at Mrs. Kendall’s old house. The thought of calling her house a clubhouse is going to take some getting used to.

As much as I miss Mrs. Kendall, it gives me comfort to see how things are coming along. To see how hard everyone is working on the project regardless of the lives they have outside of Willowcreek. She’d approve of

using this place as a community center. Every time I get cranky during the harder parts of the job—or teary seeing hideous 70s wallpaper destroyed beneath a sledgehammer—I just think about all the great memories the new generations will make here.

Who knows? Maybe one day there will be a group of friends, just like me and the gang, working to update the clubhouse for their new generation.

Letting out a heavy sigh, I glance down at my phone sitting on my lap just as it lights up with a new notification. Knox's name flashes across the screen and the moment I open the message I can't help but sigh again. He's going to be late today.

"I guess I can relax a little longer then," I mumble to myself as I shoot a message back to him telling him to take his time. It isn't often that I get a moment to breathe, and with the cool air brushing against me this morning, I decide to take advantage of the peace.

One of the great things about my job is that I can work from pretty much anywhere. Which means that long after the clubhouse is done and everyone else is going back to their busy lives, I can stick around and relive the moments I once had here.

Perhaps take advantage of a few other things as well.

My mind once again flitters back to Knox and the excitement in his eyes as he discussed having the murals painted on the walls of the clubhouse. It honestly took me by surprise, and though I came unprepared to paint, I didn't hesitate to run into town and pick up the supplies I needed to do so.

I mean, it is cheaper than flying back to New Orleans, and when I'm done I can leave the materials here for the kids to use while at the clubhouse.

New Orleans... The thought makes me internally groan. I love the work I'm doing here, but I can't stop thinking about all the work that I still need to do for my gallery back home.

Thankfully, Mrs. Kendal's old garage is the perfect place for an art studio. My parent's home is simply too cluttered from all their travels to give me enough room to paint.

Getting to my feet, I stretch my arms out over my head before picking up my coffee cup and taking it back inside. As much as I want to continue being lazy, there is too much to do. And honestly, Mrs. Kendall's home is calling my name.

The moment I close the front door of the house, my nostrils are assaulted by the scent of debris. Drywall dust, mildew, everything that comes with

construction. But mixed with it is something else—fresh paint. I'd recognize it anywhere and I find myself smiling.

The rooms are empty save for Knox's tools. All the furniture has been moved out, of course, and we'll be going through it all to see what we keep and what we will donate, but right now it's all sitting in a storage locker.

Ringling from my pocket draws my attention. Pulling out my phone, I smile, expecting it to be Knox. Instead, my brow furrows slightly as a smirk crosses my lips when I see that it's Stella.

"Hey!" I answer.

"Kylie! Have you heard?" Stella asks, her voice stressed.

"I haven't heard anything," I tell her, my stress levels spiking.

What happened? I'm not worried about my New Orleans gallery even though I'm miles away. Max is the best gallerist there is to run the business side of things. He can broker any deal. Stella has so much knowledge about art in every medium that she can talk to any customer for days about it. She knows how to handle all questions and transactions, meaning the two of them can run the gallery just fine, even though they bicker like an old married couple.

Her silence is worrying. I know I can count on them to hold down the fort, which means that it has to be about Stella's potential studio. "Stella... is there something I should have heard?"

Stella groans into the phone. "The realtor... I was hoping you would have heard something by now, it's been weeks."

I flinch as I run my fingers through my hair, a bad habit that I still fall into when I'm nervous. It'll probably be a frizzy mess by the end of this phone call. Stella's anxiety is palpable through the line, despite the miles and miles of space between us.

"I know you gave him my number as a backup contact, but I haven't heard anything from the realtor, either," I tell her, trying to be soothing.

I love working with Stella in my studio. I love her being so close, and for her sculptures to be displayed with my artwork. She's ready for her own place, though. She's ready to start building a name for herself, rather than being attached to Kylie Simmons.

Not only that, but she wants so much more than a studio. She wants the gallery, the studio, and a study space for youth artists. She's worked so hard on putting together a business plan. I've been with her every step of the way. Since Stella got approval for funding, it's just been waiting on the realtor.

I won't say it, but this is far too long to wait. Stella was promised an answer weeks ago. So what went wrong? Why is there a delay?

I make my way to the kitchen, talking Stella down from her panic spiral as I make a big pot of coffee for Knox and his dad when they arrive. I end up talking with Stella for a bit too long, but she seems like she's much more optimistic by the end of the call.

By the time I finally make it up the stairs to the bedrooms to start visualizing what murals I want to do, I'm already exhausted. My anxiety over Stella's situation is causing me more stress than I honestly need.

And instead of visualizing murals, my mind conjures up the image of a dark-haired, dark-eyed, brooding businessman.

My core tightens as I picture him in his suit, his eyes boring right into me. The stubborn set of his square jaw. He'd been clean-shaven when he walked into the house for the will reading,

My whole body quivers as I picture him. I open my eyes, telling myself the only reason I'm thinking about him at all is because he's a real estate mogul. With Stella's real estate problems, it's only natural I'd think of Dante Lewis.

Despite my internal reassurance, goosebumps form over my arms. I have to bite my lip as butterflies launch an attack on my stomach.

He looked hot as hell striding into the home as he had. He'd seemed ten feet tall and had all the suave sophistication of someone raised in London, Paris, or New York. I knew from Knox that Dante had grown to be extremely successful. I just never realized how much until I saw him.

Ugh. He'd been brooding the whole time. I never saw him crack a smile once, just had an asshole smirk on his handsome face. I knew the moment I caught the scent of his expensive cologne he hadn't been there with good intentions. My pussy didn't care though. I can't remember getting so wet from someone without him touching me.

The front door closes, making me jump.

"Kylie?" Knox calls.

Shit. "Up here!" I call back, smoothing out my shirt. With my best friend's arrival, I take all these thoughts about his brooding big brother and throw them out the window.

Knox is more than generous, offering his time, skills, and resources to fix up the clubhouse and asking for nothing back. Yet Dante had shot down his idea without hesitation, and Dante doesn't even have a share in the property.

He'd had no right to butt in like he had. And I'd seen how hurt Knox had been when Dante rebuffed his offer.

Maybe Dante has to be cold and ruthless. Maybe he has to be a shark, scenting for blood and ready to tear into the nearest dying thing in his business. But when dealing with family? Forget it.

There's no excuse for it.

"There you are," Knox says the moment he enters the room. "Know what you're going to paint yet?"

"Almost," I hedge. "I just need to clear my head a bit."

Knox puts an arm around my shoulders. "I know it's hard to see the change. But this is a good thing."

"I know," I say, smiling at him.

Dante's an idiot to not see just how smart and kind Knox is.

He's dismissed Knox's skills as long as I've known him. Even as teens, Dante sneered at the way Knox and their dad worked together. They ran a successful carpentry business, yet to Dante, they might as well be beggars on the street. *A man like that isn't worth my time, fantasy or not.* Even if he's sexy as sin in that business suit of his.

I push aside thoughts of Dante once more and grin at Knox. "So, where do you need my help today?"

Chapter Four

DANTE



My phone lights up with a text.

If you want to talk, come see me in person. I'm at the treehouse.

I scowl at the message from my little brother. I'm not at all interested in stopping by the treehouse. Hell, I didn't even want to come back to Willowcreek. I'd done my damndest to keep things rolling from New York. But three weeks of Knox refusing to talk business over the phone has brought me back.

Now, he won't even go to a restaurant like I suggested.

No, I have to go to him on his time. He's deliberately making this more difficult than it needs to be.

I thought Mrs. Kendall was a hard sell. She was positively easy compared to my brother. At least she pretended not to hear or understand on the phone. Knox told me outright that every time I brought up the property he was going to hang up.

My brother apparently needs a personal touch in this affair. Statistics and promises aren't going to cut it with him. It's *personal*.

I run a hand through my dark hair as I throw my suitcase onto the bed of the best hotel Willowcreek has to offer. Knox offered to set up my old bedroom for me but no way was I setting foot in that house again. I'm not about to sit at family dinners while Dad and Knox drone on about the tiny projects they've taken around town.

If it was actual business talk, maybe, but instead they always get

distracted by so-and-so going through a hard time. Plus Dad always gives me a disappointed look if I ever talk about my real estate business.

If he had his way, I'd be stuck here, just like Knox.

Dressing in my most modest suit, I pick out a plain tie. If I don't rub my wealth in his face, maybe I can have a decent conversation with Knox. I don't like how things are so tense between us. Yeah, I know he's got to feel torn because of this rift between me and Dad, but I don't see why that has to destroy our relationship.

Even if I wish he'd put his skills to better use—he was truly an artist with an eye for fine detail—he's still my brother. He and Callum came to New York every January to have a sort of make-up Christmas. So long as we don't talk about Willowcreek, we have fun together. Callum's a great guy. If anyone can make long-term work, it's the two of them. I only hope that Callum doesn't get sick of small-town life and leave.

I drive to Mrs. Kendall's property in the car I rented at the airport. It's not as flashy as what I'd usually drive for the same reason I wore a plain suit. Knox needs more of the down-home approach, and rolling up stinking of money will only make him dig his heels in more. Jealousy often makes people act against their best interests.

I haven't been idle these past three weeks. I had the land assessed and put together a file with the projected property value if the wooded land was developed.

I need to convince these people to sell. Knox is going to be my biggest barrier. Even Madison, who never left the town, can be persuaded if Knox wants to sell. The others don't even live here, so they won't be as attached to the place.

Knox is in the treehouse when I arrive.

"Come on down," I call.

"Nah, you come up," he replies.

I'm suddenly transported back to the years and years of standing in this exact spot, having this exact conversation. I roll my eyes and lean against the tree. "That thing won't hold the both of us. It needs to be torn down and rebuilt."

Knox laughs as he climbs out the window frame and lowers himself down until he's dangling from both hands. He drops, brushes his hands off his jeans, and grins at me. "What do you think I'm doing? Part of fixing up this place for a community center means restoring the treehouse."

“Right,” I grumble.

“So you said you wanted to talk?” Knox dusts off his jeans. “Something new happen?”

“You know that I want to talk about this place,” I tell him.

“If you’re here to convince me to sell, forget it. This project is too important,” he says as he jerks his head toward the house. “I thought the last three weeks proved I’m serious. I’m not selling, not even to you.”

I follow him in, choosing my words carefully. “You can profit off the property and have your community center both, you know.”

He grunts as he leads me to the kitchen, which smells strongly of fresh coffee. Knox pours himself a mug, then hands it to me. Surprised, I take it.

Oh. He’d been pouring *me* the mug. I take a sip as he fixes himself a mug, using cream and sugar.

“All right. How can I have both?” Knox asks, a suspicious glint in his eyes as he leans against the counter.

“Keep the house, the yard, the treehouse,” I say. “Sell me a share of the land. Then everyone can invest and receive a share back.”

“For...?” He arches his eyebrows at me. “A nature preserve?”

I grimace into my coffee. “Of course not. Luxury homes. At least one condo development. There might even be space for a country club, to bring some class to Willowcreek. The property values throughout the entire town will go up.”

“A country club that nobody in Willowcreek will be allowed to join,” Knox says flatly. “Besides, you said the area isn’t ritzy enough for a restaurant or bed and breakfast. So how do you propose to build a country club?”

I laugh. “Because luxury homes and a country club are a far cry from a bed and breakfast. The clientele will be built into the business plan.”

Knox doesn’t look convinced.

“People always want what they don’t have,” I tell him, shaking my head. He knows it, even if he doesn’t want to admit it. “Always. People who live and work in New York City long for an escape from their high-powered jobs. They want to have a simple life, or at least a vacation in a cabin by a lake.”

“And they’ll have a simple life if they own a house in Willowcreek that they only use a couple weeks out of the year?” he asks, unimpressed.

I shrug. “They’ll be able to live the simple life for those few weeks a year, which is worth the money to them. Other people, who have worked

tirelessly and clawed their way up from nothing to finally be wealthy, want a fancy high-rise condo, where their every need is taken care of. They want opulent luxury. They want —”

“Dante.” Knox puts his cup aside and sighs, looking very old and tired. Clearly the effect of all the work he does for Dad. “You do realize that everyone isn’t you, right? Some of us are perfectly content with what we have. We don’t want luxury high-rises replacing our forest and driving us out of our own town.”

I grin through my teeth. How can he be so closed-minded about this? And the jab at me is completely unnecessary. “I’m not talking about what I want, Knox. This is what I built my business on, selling people the life they want but don’t have. You do, too, at a smaller scale.”

Knox frowns at me as though I just insulted him.

“You build houses, don’t you? You put on additions or refresh a run-down building. It’s all about replacing what someone has with what they want,” I explain. My tone is too sharp and I attempt to soften it. “Think about the business it could provide you. You could finally take some time to renovate your own house.”

Knox rubs both of his hands over his face, sighing. Am I getting through to him? I can’t tell.

“Do you really think Callum is going to be happy living in that run-down place forever?” I demand. “How long until he realizes you can’t provide him with more and he leaves you?”

“Callum isn’t going to leave me. We both know exactly what we want,” he answers, glaring at me. “And we’re both happy where we are.”

“Fuck, Knox. Why do you always settle for mediocre?” I demand, my hand growing tighter around the coffee cup.

Knox raises one eyebrow at me. “If you’re calling Callum mediocre —”

“Of course, I’m not.” Although settling for one person when you could have endless opportunities might be—depends on the quality of the person. I have to admit, Callum is high quality. “Don’t you ever wish you could be happier?”

“I am happy,” Knox replies. “Why are you never happy with what you have? Are you happy with this life, or are you always looking for more to bring you the happiness that you’re missing?”

A muscle twitches in my jaw.

“Well?” he pushes. “Why are you never happy? Why do you always want

more?”

“Because people leave when you don’t have enough,” I snap at him.

Knox’s jaw drops as he scrutinizes me. “What are you talking about?”

What I won’t tell him, what I’ve known since I was seven years old, is that wanting is a dangerous thing. You always want more and it’s that wanting that keeps you in place. Grinding at a job you hate, working on a dead marriage, whatever else. You want more so you put all your heart and soul into it...

Until you realize that you’ll never get what you want. And then you walk away. You leave without a backward glance at the people you left behind.

Just like I did when I left this place. I walked away from my dad and the place I’d foolishly thought of as home because I knew I’d never get what I wanted here.

My dad would say I pushed everyone in my life away. He’d say that I did it on purpose, so I have nobody left to worry about leaving me. But how can that be true, when I’m here worrying about Knox? I still call him a couple of times every year, I have him and his partner at my apartment in NYC for visits. How is that pushing him away?

I shake my head sharply. Why should I give a rat’s ass what my father thinks?

"Fuck it. Thanks for the coffee. I'll get out of your way."

Knox holds out an arm, stopping me.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you, Dante, but selling isn’t what I want. It’s not what Mrs. Kendall would have wanted either. I know that you were trying to convince her to let you buy the property,” Knox says. His tone is low and almost like he’s speaking to a caged bear instead of me.

“Knox—”

“This is what I want,” he interrupts. “I want this place to become for the kids of today what it was for me and my friends. I want a place where they can belong. I want that forest to remain the way it is. You can’t sell me on ‘more’ because the ‘more’ that I want can’t be bought.”

I can feel the familiar argument welling up in me. I’m not about to let myself become emotionally invested in this, so I take a sip of my coffee. The only reason I’m reacting to this is because it’s Knox. It’s the same argument I always had with Dad as a kid. The same argument that drove me away all those years ago.

“I wish you would think bigger and recognize that your potential is being

wasted here,” I tell him coolly.

“Wasted according to you. Worthwhile to me,” he responds.

“I see. Then I suppose pointing out that you could turn it into a clubhouse for kids who move out here from the city is pointless?” I ask.

Knox shakes his head. “I want it to be open to everyone, not just rich kids.”

“Then there isn’t anything else to say, is there?”

Knox scrutinizes me. “You’re not going to give up, are you? This isn’t just about the land for you, it’s about Willowcreek. You want to develop this land to prove to everyone that you can do it. I just have never understood why you need to prove anything at all.”

There’s no point in sticking around if he’s going to resort to personal attacks. I turn to leave, unable to take it anymore, only to find myself face-to-face with Kylie Simmons. And she looks pissed as fuck.

Chapter Five

KYLIE



I've never been so angry in my life. I glare at Dante, my fists trembling at my sides. His dark brown eyes narrow and he instantly crosses his arms, going on the defensive.

"Kylie," he grunts.

"I heard the whole thing." I seethe. I want to make some blistering speech about how he's wrong about everything, but now that I'm standing here...

I'd been upstairs when they came in. Knox got the walls in the first bedroom ready for me to paint, so I'm starting on the mural. A river of sunshine that leads to a rainbow that will cover one entire wall.

Sound travels in this old house, and their entire conversation wafted up to me. The more I heard, the more I started to shake. First with anxiety over their fight, then increasingly with anger. I thought about throwing on my headphones but I'm my own worst enemy. I couldn't stop eavesdropping, even though I knew it was only going to make me angrier.

Then when Dante shouted at Knox, I had enough. Normally, I can't deal with confrontation. My social anxiety is so bad that even with people I've known for years, like my friends at the reading of Mrs. Kendall's will, I have a hard time speaking up. Jumping right into a fight between Knox and Dante would usually be enough to turn me into a puddle of tears on the floor.

I point my paintbrush, covered in cheerful yellow paint, at him. "You can't have this place, Dante. You're not going to turn it into some generic weekend playground!"

Dante's eyes widen a bit more, then harden. He draws himself up straighter and sneers at me.

"Kylie, stay out of this," Dante says, his voice cold as ice.

“You’re talking about this property, which I own one-sixth of,” I counter. “Maybe you should stay out of it since you don’t own anything. This isn’t any of your business.”

Dante shakes his head. “My business is real estate. My business is knowing that this is doomed to fail.”

I roll my eyes at him. “You’re not the only one here that runs their own enterprise.”

“What, just because you have some little shop in New Orleans?” He shakes his head again, condescension dripping from him. “That hardly counts.”

I flinch. This is exactly why I can’t hold my own in a fight. I’m an open book and anyone can see exactly how much their words hurt. I’m easily distracted by these barbs. Even now the heat is rising up my cheeks.

“My gallery is hardly ‘some little shop,’” I mumble, trying to think up a stronger comeback.

“No? Then what is it?” he demands, looking at me as though I’m still the kid his brother hangs out with.

Fuck him! I’m famous in my own right! People have paid hundreds of thousands of dollars for my paintings. But when I try to tell Dante that, I can’t get my mouth unglued. I want so badly to say he’s wrong but all my indignation is fleeing before his arrogant expression

This isn’t the Dante I knew as a child.

“What happened to you?” I whisper.

Dante steps back from me.

“Both of you are making decisions based on petty nostalgia,” he says in a condescending tone, as though he expects us to fall at his feet and kiss them for pointing out our folly. “It doesn’t work in the real world. This community center of yours is going to cost money. Not just the initial investment, but to keep it up. Not to mention all the insurance and other legal protections you’ll need.”

“Dante,” Knox says. He’s usually so level-headed, but right now his fists are shaking.

“You need to grow up.” Dante is still looking at me.

“You need to grow a heart,” I whisper. That’s all I can get out.

Dante shakes his head. “It’s your heart that is going to destroy the very thing you want.”

Knox growls. “And just what is that supposed to mean?”

Dante pokes at his chest. “I guess I shouldn’t expect you to understand. You, who stayed in this crappy town working on Dad’s dream instead of finding one of your own.”

If I was a braver person, I’d tell him to stuff it. But I’m not. By this time Dante isn’t even looking at me. His back is fully turned toward me, his shoulders poker-stiff. Judging by the look on Knox’s face, he’s probably glaring just as hard as Knox is.

He’s doing what he always did when he was a kid—picking fights until someone walks away.

Why is this smug bastard determined to shove everyone away?

I take a deep breath, planning out my words. *It’s okay to care. It’s okay to want better for other people, not just yourself.*

“It’s—” is all I can manage before I lose my voice.

He doesn’t even look at me. It’s like I’m so unimportant to him that he can’t be bothered to turn around.

There’s so much I want to say to him. I want to yell at him until he sees reason and realizes that his brother and father love him. That all of his problems could be resolved if he bothered to shut his damn mouth and listen for once in his life.

But he’s standing there with his thousand-dollar haircut and million-dollar suit and that sneer he gave me is burned into my mind, even if I can’t see it now.

I can’t get any further words out.

Especially as I become more aware of what I look like. I’m wearing old overalls Knox leant me and now they’re covered in splashes of paint. My hair elastic broke so now it’s come all unbraided—as usual—and had captured plenty of paint as well.

Shaking my head, I try to calm my racing heart. “Knox, when you’re done with him... come find me.”

I’m not a confident person, and maybe standing up for myself to Dante is an impossible task for me, but speaking to Knox isn’t. If Dante wants to act like a complete asshole to me, then so be it.

However, before Knox can address my comment, Dante breaks out into laughter, shaking his head. “So you’re going to run away from the conversation. I don’t see why you bothered to come down.”

“What...” I stammer. My heart breaks at his words as I stare at him in disbelief. I never thought that Dante could act as cruel as he is right now, but

once again I have been proved wrong.

Anger courses through me as I try to find the courage to tell him off.

“You know what? You’re... you’re—” I freeze as I realize the hand I just jolted out to point at him still holds my yellow paintbrush. Which then proceeds to splatter paint all over his suit and face.

Oh my god...

Mortification fills me as I watch his eyes shift down to the speckles of paint on his jacket. His jaw set firm as he clenches it before looking back up at me from beneath narrowed brows, paint dripping down his cheek.

“I’m sorry,” I gasp, my hand flying to my mouth as I turn on my heel and leave. My breath comes in shallow pants as I try to control myself. I meant to try and be assertive, and that failed epically as it always does. Instead, I just ruined his probably very expensive suit and made myself look like a complete idiot.

It’s not just Dante anymore. It’s the whole conflict with him trying to sell this place, and everything else. I’m not a confrontational person. I’ve never been able to deal with fights; my nature is to run away.

To think I actually just ruined his suit out of anger.

God! What is he doing to me?! He’s such an asshole!

My hands shake as I set the paintbrush down and run my hands through my tangled hair, trying to calm my breathing. It’s clear Dante is pissed about what I did. The sound of his and Knox’s arguing is only getting louder by the second.

“You can’t treat people like that,” Knox says. “You have no right to talk to Kylie like that.”

“I’m only being honest. Look what she did to my jacket!”

I grab my headphones, turning my music up as loud as I can stand, only briefly worrying about damaging my hearing. All I want to do is focus on my painting but I keep making mistakes because my hands won’t stop trembling.

The thing is, I’m not even angry at Dante anymore. I’m too upset with myself. I’ve been so blind! I can’t believe I wasted so much of my life having a crush on that asshole. Okay, it’s not like I’ve refused all other men in favor of pining over him, but come on! I shouldn’t even think about him at all, except for being angry at him for hurting Knox.

I’m humiliated when I think of all the times that, as a kid, I’d find excuses to go to Knox’s house. Not just because Knox was my best friend, but because I wanted to be closer to Dante. I wanted to see him, wanted to try to

make him smile and laugh.

Knox was and still is my best friend. He's more of a brother to me. We've always had a great time together, laughing, joking, sharing silly little inside jokes.

As a kid, the times that Dante would sometimes join us were the best memories of my life. I always felt triumphant when I convinced him to play with us—when he forgot to act like he was too cool for his younger brother. I don't love him, but I do care about him. And I guess that's why I've been willfully blind to all his faults for so long.

There was something in him I'd always ached to see. It was as though, even when he was spending time with us, he was still on the outside. That he was always looking in, rather than belonging. For so long, I desperately wanted to fix that. To bridge the gap. I was certain it was because he fought with their dad while Knox didn't. Somehow that rift spilled over and put distance between Dante and Knox, too.

Now, I know it's a lie. I fooled myself because I was too busy swooning over his brown eyes. He was a hard bastard.

I had always imagined a softer side to him. But it was never real.

I'm brought out of my self-pity by Knox. He smiles at me as I take off my headphones.

"Sorry," I mutter as he opens his arms and I quickly step into them, still shaking.

"For what? Sticking up for me?" Knox pats my head and laughs. "Hell, Kylie. I'm proud of you. I know how hard that must have been for you."

His words help me feel a little better. "A lot of good it did me when I just ran and hid," I scoff, shaking my head.

Knox steps back, holding my shoulders as he peers intently at me. "It's a start. You should try to be assertive more often. I honestly think you rendered my brother speechless for a moment."

"I doubt that. I try to be assertive, but I hate feeling like I hurt other people's feelings." I sigh. "And I usually end up feeling terrible afterward, anyway."

"Think about it like exercise. The more you do it, the easier it will be." He kisses my cheek. "I need to go home to talk with Callum. I'll lock up so nobody can bug you."

So Dante can't bug me, he means. I nod, not wanting to admit that I'd rather not be alone. But luckily, that brief talk with Knox helps to soothe me.

I can focus again on painting, and this time I'm able to relax into it. I paint a tear-shaped drop of liquid sunshine and hesitate.

The memory of the first time I ever really talked to Dante floods my mind.

I ring Knox's doorbell, skipping on the spot in my excitement. Mrs. Kendall told me that the treehouse is ready! I can't wait to check it out. It's going to be so much fun!

The door opens to a scowling face. Dante's expression melts into confusion when I see him. His eyes are red and puffy like he's been crying. If I ask, though, he'll just say it's allergies.

I give him a great big smile, hoping to make him feel better. "Hi, Dante! The treehouse is done, I want to see if Knox can come play."

Dante wrinkles his nose at me, drawing himself up so that his chest is puffed out like a bird. "Knox isn't here. He went to go play with Jaxson and Asher. Clearly, you're not his 'best friend' anymore. Soon he's going to forget all about you."

I shake my head, sighing. "You don't get it. I can have more than one best friend, and so can Knox. But since he's not here, do you want to come play at the treehouse?"

His eyes widen. For a moment, I'm sure he's going to say yes, then he folds his arms and sneers at me. "I'm too old for treehouses. And you are, too."

My lip starts to tremble so I turn away quickly before he can see that his words hurt. I'm only in first grade and Dante is in fourth—we aren't too old for a treehouse. My shoulders slump as I head back home.

But as I walk away, I can't help but think about how sad Dante always looks. I wish I could help him. I hope that he'll find a way to be happy soon.

I pull myself out of the memory. He wore the same arrogant sneer that day that he did downstairs. Have I been wrong about him my entire life? Or is there something in Dante Lewis worth fighting for?

Chapter Six

KYLIE



The night after my blowout fight with Dante, I can't sleep. I keep reliving the confrontation and changing it every time. Sometimes I slap Dante across the face and feel bad for resorting to imaginary physical violence. Other times I break down in melodramatic sobs and he feels so bad that he changes his entire life.

Mostly, though, I just make him feel as bad as he made me feel, and then he walks away.

It's all imaginary, though, and by the time morning dawns, I'm exhausted and still hurt by his words. How shark-like his eyes had turned as he utterly dismissed everything that I've worked for.

I can't tell if I'm more humiliated by his words or the attraction I've harbored toward him all these years.

One thing is certain—Knox is right. If I knew how to hold my ground, I wouldn't have turned tail and run so easily. I might have been able to actually stop Dante from being a bully.

Not that I'm sure it would make a difference. The man seems stuck in his ways.

As I make my first cup of coffee, I call Madison.

Since the reading of the will, I've really been trying to put myself out there and reconnect with both Madison and Samantha. Even though my shy and quiet personality has often made me feel like an outsider looking in, they never treated me that way. Throughout our years in high school, with them both being on the cheer squad and me stuck with my nose in a sketchbook, the treehouse still brought us together and kept us close friends. I know I'm as much to blame as Madi and Sam are for how all three of us have lost

touch.

“What’s up, doll?” she greets in her usual over-the-top way.

“I need your help,” I blurt. “I need to learn how to stand up for myself. You’re so good at being firm and not letting people push you around. Can you help me?”

Madi laughs. “Sure thing. I’ll call Sam and you can meet us at my mom’s bakery this afternoon. Come around two, that’s after the lunch rush. The bakery will be nice and empty.”

“Thanks, I’ll be there.” I hang up with a renewed sense of hope. *Next time, Dante, I’ll be ready for you.*

Who knew working on being mean and having a backbone could be so exhausting? Madi smirks at me, her fingertips pressed together as she thinks up her next devious ploy. She and Sam have been throwing scenarios at me to see how I’d respond for half an hour now.

And my mind feels like it’s going to explode.

“Someone comes into your gallery angry that a painting they bought is ruined,” Sam suggests, brushing her golden hair over her shoulder. “It turns out that they put it in their shower, right under the shower head, and then left the water running.”

“What?” I gasp, staring at her in disbelief.

“It’s clearly their fault,” Sam says with a grin. “But they’re demanding a refund and a new painting for free. What do you do?”

I hesitate, caught between two replies. One is what I’d actually do, and the other is the ‘correct’ answer that they’re looking for. “Um, tell them no and send them away?”

Sam gives me a hard look. “Would you?”

“No,” I admit, wrinkling my nose with a heavy sigh. “I’d probably end up giving them a free painting unless Stella or Max interfered. I’d try not to give the money back, though.”

Madi laughs in her usual, free way. Some people think she goes overboard, but I don’t. I love her personality, even the rough edges. She has a way about her that makes me feel like she always has my best interests at heart. I can get a bit irritated with her sometimes, but she’s a peach. Most of

the time, at least.

“Let’s practice,” she says and puts on a fake angry face. “I bought a painting from you and wanted to hang it in my shower. It’s your fault the water ruined it! Give me a million dollars.”

“No,” I say firmly. That does feel good. “No, I’m not doing anything like that. It’s your own fault.”

Madi narrows her eyes. “Listen here, Missy. Give me a million dollars for this ruined painting because you never told me I couldn’t shower with it.”

“No.”

Sam giggles, shaking her head at the ridiculousness of the situation.

Then Madi does something that’s utterly unfair. She scrunches up her face, makes her lip tremble, and even squeezes out a tear. “Please?”

I bite my lip. “No?”

“Aw, sugar.” Madi leans across the table and kisses my cheek. “You were doing so well!”

“I’m feeling stressed out,” I admit. “I didn’t realize being assertive could be so stressful.”

Madi nods. “How ‘bout we take a break, then? We can have a relaxing girls’ day and go to the spa, and then have a wine sleepover at my place.”

Ugh. Having my teeth yanked from my skull sounds like a better idea. I hate spas. I hate having people fuss over me. It always ends up with me feeling like I’m causing extra work for the people whose job it is to pamper me. I glance at my paint-stained cuticles and grimace. They’d be scrubbing the skin off my hands to clean them up, and Madi would insist I get false nails that I can’t work in.

A thud hits my leg, making me jump.

“Ow,” I mutter in surprise.

Sam raises her eyebrows meaningfully at me. She must have seen how much I dislike the idea. Madi is waiting with an expectant smile. Ugh. So she picked it on purpose, knowing that I hate spa days.

“I’d rather do something else,” I say, tracing a pattern on the tabletop with one finger.

Madi snorts. “Kylie, if you’re going to get out of the spa you’re going to need more attitude than that. Come on, give me a smack-down! Tell me what you really think.”

Oh, boy. I straighten my back, lifting my chin so I glower right over Madi’s head. I can’t look her in the eye. I try to think of what she’d say if our

places were reversed, then land on exactly what I want to do. I glance around the bakery to make sure we're alone, even though there have been no customers for twenty minutes.

"I want some goddamned fucking fun!" I declare, thumping my fist on the table. I meet Madi's gaze as her grin widens. "I'm gonna put on a sexy dress that shows off these great tits and we're going dancing, bitches!"

Instantly, I wonder if I've gone too far with the "bitches," but both Sam and Madi holler with laughter. They both clap their hands and cheer me on.

Bolstered, I throw back my hair and grin. "And I'm going to dance with the first hot guy I see! Hell, I might even sleep with him!"

My girls cheer even louder. I'm flushed with daring as I dance in my seat. I did it! I declared my intention and I was forthright about it! Triumph surges through me...until the hairs on the back of my neck prickle. A sense of foreboding takes root as my head slowly turns, only to be met with a pair of angry dark eyes.

Dante stands in the doorway of the bakery. His hand is still stretched out, holding the door open. First I feel dizzy, then heat rushes into my face. *Why can't I seem to break eye contact?*

The judgment in those dark eyes is more than I can take. I shrink back into myself. How much did he hear?

His nostrils flare and his jaw clenches. He stalks past us, tearing his eyes away from me. I can almost see the thoughts in his head.

She's a loudmouth like the rest of them.

"You gonna just stand there brooding?" Madi challenges him.

I groan as I glance back up to see Dante at the counter. His expression has utterly smoothed out, but the contempt he throws her is obvious.

"Don't let him slow your roll," Sam whispers to me.

"Do you want something?" Madi demands, getting up from her chair.

"Coffee."

Madi's mom starts to come to the front, but Madi waves her back and gets the coffee for Dante herself, all but shoving it in his hand while raising an imperious brow. "Here. Now waddle your penguin ass out."

Rather than leaving, though, Dante chooses a table at the wall and sits directly facing us, his cold gaze on me as he drinks his coffee.

Madi rolls her eyes with a groan as she plunks back into her seat. "Ignore him. He is just jealous that he doesn't know how to have fun."

"So where should we go dancing?" Sam says, deliberately turning her

back to Dante. “We could run up to the city. We’ll have our pick of clubs there, with VIP service to boot. All Asher has to do is make a call”

I nod along, even though I’m not all that into the idea of dancing anymore. It’s... whatever. But once we’re away from Dante, I’ll be better again. For now, I try to pay attention to the conversation. I’m distracted, though, and my gaze continually flickers to him.

His presence seems to reach out around us. After the situation that happened with Knox the other day I can’t help but feel like the Dante Lewis I knew was long gone. Or maybe it was just that I didn’t really know him at all. My idea was simply a delusion. A messed-up fantasy that he is the dream guy I have always wanted.

To think that I had always imagined him touching me, running his hands down the length of my body as he forces me into submission. The tantalizing image of him bending me over, my arms tied behind my back as he spreads my legs and takes every inch of me by force.

Even now, thinking about it as I catch him staring at me, forces me to press my thighs together in an attempt to control myself.

Who does he think he is, coming in here? Perhaps he is here because he is trying to prove a point. Maybe me ruining his suit is just what he needs to have a reason to get back at me.

Because for the life of me, I don’t understand why he didn’t just leave.

Or why it is that every time I look at him those sinful eyes of his are planted directly on me. Eyes that seem to say so much even though all I ever really received from him is silence.

The longer he is in the cafe, the more uncomfortable I become. And no matter how much I try to ignore him by interacting with Madi and Sam, I can’t. The task itself is impossible.

He is impossible. Like an addiction that I can’t get rid of.

As time ticks on, the bakery begins to grow busy again. Madi unfortunately has to excuse herself to take on the task of helping her mother while Sam and I continue to catch up. That is until a tap on my shoulder causes me to turn and come face to face with Henry Myer.

His family had moved to Willowcreek the year after Dante had left, and we were paired up together in our art class. Having him for a partner honestly helped the year go by a lot better than I expected.

“Oh my god! Henry, I didn’t know you were in town,” I say as I wrap my arms around him and pull him into a hug.

Henry laughs at my reaction as he pulls away slightly. “I still live in town. I’m the art teacher at the high school now.”

“Oh, wow,” I reply with a smile that feels like it stretches from ear to ear across my face. “That’s amazing. You were always so talented.”

“Me?” He chuckles again as his eyes roam over my body before meeting mine once more. “I think it’s safe to say that you’re the amazing one. I mean, you’re the big-shot artist in New Orleans these days... didn’t one of your latest pieces recently sell for over six figures? Why the heck are you back in Willowcreek?”

I grin, blushing, as I step out of his hug. “Actually, I’m here because my friends and I inherited Mrs. Kendall’s property. We’re turning it into a community center clubhouse.”

“That’s awesome! The kids need more entertainment around here.”

“Our thoughts exactly.”

My gaze flickers to Dante, wanting to say, *See? We have community support, what we’re doing is actually useful.* But instead, I say nothing.

Instead, I’m briefly captivated by the way his eyes bore into mine. Shifting from Henry to me with an angry narrowed expression before sliding down my body and back up to my face once more. I’m not sure what’s going through his mind, but the actions he takes are so intense that my body feels like it’s on fire.

I don’t miss the way he briefly looks at Henry once more as he lifts his coffee to his lips downing it in one go before pulling his phone out of his pocket and placing it to his ear. The entire time he is speaking, his eyes don’t leave mine. A sense of warning that what happened today wasn’t over.

And then just like that, he stands, throwing a few bills from his wallet onto the table before disappearing out of the coffee shop as if what had just happened between us was non-existent.

It happens so suddenly that I didn’t even notice Henry and Sam starting up a conversation. My hands tremble as I take a seat again and gulp down the glass of water I had sitting on the table. What was that about? Was I imagining that look? It’s ridiculous. He already made it perfectly clear that he thinks I’m an idiot.

He wouldn’t be wrong.

I am an idiot if I let myself think that there’s anything more to it.

Chapter Seven

DANTE



Madi shoves the coffee into my hand, malice written in her eyes. *The last thing Kylie needs is you fucking up her life. Buzz off.* I can almost hear her words projected at full volume into my head.

“Here. Now waddle your penguin ass out.”

I had planned on taking my coffee to go. Half-planned at least. But now it’s a matter of pride. If I leave, Madi will think she drove me away, which is nowhere near the truth. Besides, I want the chance to talk to Kylie alone... even though I have no fucking clue as to what I’ll say to her.

Other than, “I’m sorry for being a complete asshole.”

I deserved the paint splotches on my suit jacket after how I spoke to her, even though part of me is annoyed she ruined my suit. Even if it is old.

Irritation at myself spikes through me as I find a spot facing the three women and take a seat. Kylie’s face is as red as her hair and she stares downward, regret and embarrassment clearly written on her face. The urge I have to go over and reassure her that she has nothing to be embarrassed about irritates me even further.

“Ignore him.” I hear Madi tell Kylie as she rejoins the table. “He is just jealous that he doesn’t know how to have fun.”

Jealous? Hardly. I scowl as I watch them.

“So, where should we go dancing?” Sam says, deliberately turning her back to me. “We could run up to the city. We’ll have our pick of clubs there, with VIP service to boot. All Asher has to do is make a call”

I didn’t miss the end of Kylie’s comment when I entered the cafe. I try my best to ignore it. To internally laugh at the thought of her partying, the idea is too humorous to ignore. She had never been a party girl. And though

she might not think that I paid attention to her, I did.

She is still the same shy little girl who used to follow my brother around everywhere.

I watch as Kylie tries to avoid my gaze, nodding slowly but not saying anything as the other two continue their moronic conversation. Though Kylie sits with them, I can't help but notice how her mind seems to be a mile away as she bites gently on her bottom lip.

A lip I wish more than anything I could taste.

I imagine her with her hands bound over her head, moaning as I tease her with my fingers. My cock responds to the image and I shut down that line of thinking at once.

I try to tune out the conversation, but they're talking so loudly I can't.

I should go back to the hotel. I've been working all morning and I still have two dozen unanswered emails I need to deal with. My phone dings as I sip my coffee. *Two dozen and one emails.*

There's something about this town that gets under my skin. I really ought to just cut the Kendall property loose. I have plenty of other business opportunities. But, unfortunately, Knox is right about one thing: this feels personal. Like I'm proving something to this town—to my dad—and if I give up on the Kendall land, it's something I won't be able to come back from.

The smart thing with this whole business is to step back and give Knox and his friends the space to see just how impractical their plans are. I can do that from NYC. Give it a month or two, lay off on my attempts to convince them to sell, and let reality do the work for me. I don't need to be here.

Yet I couldn't make myself book a flight back home this morning. All because of a pair of soulful green eyes staring at me with hurt and disappointment. I really shouldn't care so much about what she thinks of me, but for as bad as I feel, I might as well have kicked a puppy.

I drag my coffee out longer than necessary and do some work on my phone while Kylie continues to chat with Madi and Sam. When Knox told me she'd be here this afternoon, I expected to find her crying to her friends over biscotti.

I'd been an asshole. Kylie's art is a big deal. She's not just well-known in New Orleans, I've seen Kylie Simmons originals throughout the country, on the walls of many rich clients I've worked with. It was below the belt to negate the work she'd put into her craft. She is talented, smart, and successful. And I'd acted like she was a finger painter.

After some time, the bakery picks up more business. People ignore me, which I'm grateful for, and the additional people seem to have a positive effect on Kylie.

Some guy I don't know strides into the cafe. He stops short, clearly noticing Kylie, and makes his way directly towards her with a smile on his face as he taps her shoulder. I stiffen, watching the interaction.

Kylie jumps to her feet with a cry of recognition and hugs him. "Oh my god, Henry! I didn't know you were in town."

Is this an old boyfriend? Who is he? My phone dings and I should look... but Kylie is beaming at this new guy and I can't take my eyes off them.

I might not completely understand the female brain but I do know that Kylie is out of this guy's league. He's goofy-looking, with oversized ears and a nose too small for his mouth. He's got the same sort of shaggy hair that Knox has, but while Knox always looks kind of like a California surfer, I suspect this guy has never seen a comb in his life.

"I still live in town. I'm the art teacher at the high school now." The guy says, flirting. His hands rub up and down Kylie's back. Is it my imagination, or is he about to grab her ass?

As they talk, I can't seem to focus on anything except the way he is touching her. My fists clench in anger as the irrational thought to pull him away from her comes flooding into my mind.

Suddenly, she looks over at me smugly, snapping me out of my thoughts. It's clear that they have been talking about Mrs. Kendall and that she's very pleased to have someone else from Willowcreek endorse the clubhouse while I'm in earshot.

As our eyes meet, a strange sensation sweeps over me. Her gaze is like a physical touch and I can't help it. My own gaze moves over her. Her self-proclaimed great tits are, in fact, just as great as she thinks. Better, probably. The shirt she wears clings to her form and I can only imagine what she'd look like in a tight little clubbing number.

I grind my teeth as I finish my now-cold coffee. My phone rings at the right time and I quickly answer the call. "Hello..."

I don't have to take the call, but it is the welcome distraction I need. An excuse for an escape as I grab a few bills from my wallet and toss them down onto the table, not caring how much it is. I simply need to get away.

The moment I step foot outside the bakery, I welcome the stiff afternoon breeze as it brushes against my skin. "Yeah, I'm still here," I reply to my

assistant, who I wasn't paying attention to.

"I was able to rearrange a few of your meetings, sir. I just want to see if the Sean Moore appointment was something you wanted to keep. I know you said rearrange them all, but that one—if I remember correctly—was very important to you."

Sean Moore is indeed important, and I've been after that meeting for months. Rescheduling it would be idiotic.

"No," I reply tightly. "No need to apologize. I can still meet with him."

I should be focusing entirely on that meeting. Instead, all I want is an excuse to talk to Kylie and stop her from going to a club tonight. So much so that my hand grips my phone tighter as I think about another man placing his hands on her body as if she is a prize they can actually obtain.

"I've got to go. Send me the details, and I'll call you back later."

I end the call and close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose as I take a deep breath and let it out slowly. Coming to this town was a mistake. I can't bring myself to regret it, though, not now that I've seen Kylie once more.

Even if she is a distraction I can't afford.

The woman has me palm-twitchingly mad with a desire to bend her over my knee and punish her for what she did in there. To let that man flirt with her before me... he isn't worthy of her. And she should know that! Hell, no man in this town would be worthy of her attention. Not to mention, I didn't miss the way she watched me eye her from across the cafe. As if she could feel my eyes on her the entire time she was in there.

Who knew that Kylie Simmons could tease me with such innocent eyes?

I release the breath I'm holding, letting go of the memory at the same time. She's still got that shy naivety around her. It kills me to think of some guy taking advantage of her. She deserves better than to be treated like a one-night stand that will be forgotten in the morning.

Another call has me snatching my phone out of my pocket like I'm grabbing a life raft thrown to me in choppy waters. I glance at the name to see that it's John McKinnon. He's as close to a friend as I've got in the real estate business. A braggart and loudmouth. But fuck, he's a shrewd businessman and we work well together.

"McKinnon," I greet, my voice as smooth as though I've been working all morning instead of having these ridiculous flights of fancy.

"Lewis! I just acquired the deal of a lifetime over in New Jersey. I was wondering if you'd want a piece of the action... unless it's too big for you, of

course,” he mocks.

I laugh. “You wish. I’m sure it’s a small fish compared to the one I’m reeling in.”

“You mean Sean Moore or that mystery project you’re doing out in Maine?” John asks. “That is, if you’re in Maine at all.”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” I say smoothly.

Truth is, the Kendall land was nothing in the grand scheme of things. But the reminder is sobering. I’ve put a fuckton of effort into getting Sean Moore, the CEO and founder of Moore Pharmaceuticals, to hire me on. And here I am, risking that for... what? The Kendall property—which will turn a tidy profit, but never enough to jeopardize other opportunities.

Moore represents the biggest potential client I’ve had so far. The man is said to have impeccable taste and a generous hand to whoever can give him what he wants. I’ve been wanting to work with him for years, and when rumors started to circulate that Moore plans to build a new headquarters in New York, I knew I had to act.

This place is a distraction, and the sooner I shift my focus back to what’s more important, the better.

Chapter Eight

KYLIE



The feeling of strong, firm hands tracing a line down my hips and parting my thighs has me gasping for breath. The sensations are so light that I can hardly tell they're there, but it sets my skin on fire all the same. Heat rushes through me as tingles linger in the wake of his lips.

His head dips to my thigh, pressing a firmer kiss there as he looks up at me through his dark lashes.

"Are you going to be a good girl for me?" he asks, the husky undertone of his voice sending tingles up my spine.

I whimper as I nod. My hands are bound over my head, the silken cords holding me in place. I'm his to do with as he pleases. My surrender unconditional.

He kisses up my inner thigh. "What do you want?"

"You," I say.

"What do you want me to do?"

He's going to make me beg. I'm already wet, need pulsing through me. "Lick my clit. Please!"

He smirks, then delves into me. His tongue laves over my clit, setting the bundle of nerves pulsing with pleasure. Heat pools in my core. My pussy starts to flutter. I want more. Need more. I want him inside of me.

"More," I beg.

He hums in satisfaction. "Don't move," His command has me freezing in place. "You understand?"

I nod my head in response, completely breathless.

"Words, Kylie."

"Yes, sir," I breathe out, meeting his dark gaze with my green one. His

pupils are so dilated, the dark brown has faded completely to black.

“Good Girl.”

He leaves my thighs wide open as he instantly removes his hands. As one hand travels up my body to cup my breast, I feel the other slam two fingers into my core, sending me close to the breaking point as I arch my back and cry out.

“Dante.”

His name on my lips is all it takes. In the next instant, he’s pinching my nipple and my clit in tandem, sending me directly over....

My eyes snap open and I jolt up in bed. It’s clear that my efforts to forget Dante have been fruitless. Throwing off the covers, I drag myself from the warmth and comfort of my bed and head towards the shower to wash the essence of the dream off of me.

It doesn’t help though. No matter how many times I try to push Dante out of my mind, I can’t.

Perhaps spending time at the studio will help me to regain my composure. I never thought that seeing Dante again after all these years would stir up feelings inside me that I thought were buried with the rest of my teenage fantasies.

I rarely paint people. My specialty is abstraction, using bold colors and patterns to express underlying emotions. However, the image in my mind is too powerful to ignore. I need to paint it. To clear myself of the confusion I feel. The fact that Knox is busy helping his dad means I have the perfect opportunity to do so.

The moment I step into my makeshift studio in the clubhouse garage, I relax. There is something about being here, or simply in any art environment, that takes all the tension out of me. Helping me to find a balance that the normal world squanders.

Sitting on the edge of my seat, I try to relax further. Though the idea of what I’m about to paint makes me momentarily anxious, I grab my first brush and start mixing my colors. The scene comes alive before me, every detail growing sharper in my mind as I put it on canvas. There are a few times when I have to remind myself to slow down because otherwise, I’ll end up ruining it.

Painting is a delicate process. It involves being aware of what your final product will be before you even start. It’s as much about precision and knowing when to hold back as it is about passion.

I should put on my music. I have a few painting playlists, so I know when to take proper breaks; when the music stops, the sudden silence draws me out of my focus.

My core tightens as I work, the colors and shades bringing the image in my head to life before my eyes. My paintbrush sweeps across the canvas, my hands moving with a steadiness of every stroke. The V sculpted in his body forms, as well as a peek of his cock before it disappears behind my thigh. I'm straddling him, and his legs are slightly splayed as he thrusts upward into me.

Am I doing him justice, or is the real thing even more stunning than what I'm able to put onto the canvas?

Something smacks into the garage doors, jolting me. I turn, searching the windows. To my shock, the shadows from the trees outside are starting to cast patterns on the glass.

"No," I breathe, checking the time. It's almost one in the afternoon.

My stomach grumbles, angry that I neglected it for so long. I sigh, moving through a few easy stretches to release some of the kinks in my stiff back.

As I grab a few snacks from my stash here in the garage, my thoughts turn to the body on my canvas, and the one beneath the suit. How similar are they? My fingers itch to call him, to get him over here to model for me. All for the sake of accuracy, of course. I'd painted plenty of nudes in art college. One naked body was exactly the same as the next. It was all about discovering the planes, curves, and lines of the body.

At least, if any telepaths happened to be kicking around reading my thoughts, that's what I want them to believe.

Popping a chip into my mouth, I stand back and stare at the painting. I tilt my head to the side as I let out a slow exhausted sigh. Another song from my playlist begins.

Dante's face is hidden in the crook of my shoulder. It's clear from the tender embrace he has around her waist and the way her hips are lifted toward him that he's kissing his way down her neck. Her skin is smooth and clear...

I swallow hard.

I'd gotten the shade of my hair just right. When I started this painting, I had hoped to be able to keep the people in the painting anonymous. But even though my face is hidden by Dante, it's obvious that it's me. Not only is it the same shade as my hair, but it falls in the same way, with a few whorls that curl out the wrong way no matter how much I try to tame them.

Painting-Kylie is a sexy beast. She's straddling Dante, in the motion of thrusting herself up and down on him. Anyone from the outside will think that she's the one who's dominant here, but I know the truth. The reason you can't see her hands from this angle is that Dante tied them together. She's not setting her own rhythm, but rather Dante's fingers pressed into the sensitive skin on her hips tell her what pace to use.

Maybe I read too much BDSM stuff, but I like that sort of thing. Anyone who knows me would be utterly shocked at what kinks hide behind this face of mine. I shared some of my tamer fantasies with Sam and Madi back when we were still in high school; I'd always had my kinks.

Something that they didn't believe. They couldn't believe that I'd be so shy and quiet while having a full BDSM dungeon in my head. They assured me that I didn't have to "pretend" to be into bondage to be interesting.

"I talk big but honestly, vanilla stuff is perfectly healthy," Madi told me. "There's nothing wrong with liking a plain cheese pizza. Fuck, I could go for pizza."

That was the last time I talked to them about my sexual preferences. So what if I'm shy? Does that mean I can't have fantasies about bondage and dominance?

Knox knows in general terms because he knows I'm always on the lookout for BDSM erotica, but the only person who knows more of the intimate details of my fantasies is Stella. She's sworn to secrecy, though I'll never forget the stunned look on her face when I told her.

She, at least, didn't act as though I was making things up. She believed me and helped me do research so that, if I ever gather the courage to actually try out a scene, I know what safety precautions I need to take.

I take a seat again and pick up my paintbrush. Pirate metal sea-shanties blare in my ears as I go about adding a touch more chest hair on Dante. It doesn't matter. Nobody is ever going to see this painting, other than me.

Nobody. This painting, this version of Dante, is *mine*.

Chapter Nine

DANTE



I'm almost done packing up my shit to return to NYC when I get a call from my secretary.

"Mr. Lewis, good afternoon," Lizzie greets, her voice cheerful.

I put the phone on speaker and set it down to zip my suitcase shut. "What is it?"

"Mr. Moore stopped by the office to drop off papers. He's signed on to be your client." Lizzie's voice brims with excitement. "He's hoping the meeting he has scheduled can turn into a showing of some properties"

This is fantastic news. I've been chasing Sean Moore for months!

"When was this?" I demand, straightening.

"He just left."

I curse under my breath. I should have been there.

I've been wining and dining Moore for weeks now. I'd dedicated hours to convincing him that nobody knows real estate on the East Coast like me. Now, when he signs on, I'm not even in the city. Because I'm in Maine, worrying about a stupid piece of property that will produce about half as much as what Moore is offering

To be fair, I didn't have Moore on the hook until now, and the Kendall property is worth a hell of a lot... but I should have bailed on the Kendall land when I realized Knox was going to be juvenile about it.

Willowcreek apparently has infected my ability to see clearly. Why, I'm not sure. Maybe I caught a brain fungus.

Knox can have the property and run himself and his friends into the ground trying to be altruistic. Hell, maybe they'll be successful at their venture.

“All of your hard work has paid off, Mr. Lewis,” Lizzie says, oblivious to my internal annoyance with myself. “Shall I tell the pilot to ready the plane?”

“Yes. Thank you,” I say, checking the drawers of the dresser to ensure I didn’t forget anything. I had planned to call her on my way to the airport.

Lizzie makes a weird noise and then clears her throat. “Oh, Mr. Moore. You’re back. Can I help you with something?”

My head snaps to the phone. I stride back to where I left it and pick it up, switching off speaker mode again. “I want to talk to him.”

“Actually, sir, Mr. Lewis is on the phone right now,” Lizzie says. She’s using her ‘sweet’ voice, the one she always uses with older male clients. They respond better to that than her ‘business’ voice. “Why, yes, he is asking to speak with you, too.”

The phone switches hands and Moore’s booming voice echoes across the line. “Lewis! Bet this lovely secretary of yours has already delivered the good news, eh?”

“I’m glad to have you on board,” I tell him.

“No doubt, no doubt,” Moore replies. “I was just coming back in to see when she expects you back. She told me already but sometimes an old man forgets these things.”

“I’m just finishing up some business in Maine but will be back in New York soon,” I tell him. “I know we had a meeting planned but I can have a list of potential properties drawn up for you as soon as tomorrow if you’ll just give me a bit more understanding of what you’re looking for with your new headquarters.”

I know he wants something huge. His budget is higher than my entire net worth, for fuck’s sake. He’s always been weirdly cagey about the specifics, though. From what I understand, he likes to “keep people on their toes” and wants quick thinkers on his team.

Moore makes a thoughtful humming noise. “I want to have my corporate offices throughout the building, but I also want to be able to be on-site. Something with a livable penthouse. At least three floors, mind, and I don’t want to share my living space with any offices. I want the space to be malleable. Instead of a gym here and a kitchen there, I want to be able to put it together the way I want.”

I grin. There are at least five places that could work for that right off the top of my head.

“I have two excellent prospects we can look at tomorrow if you’re

available,” I tell him. I’ll have to arrange with other realtors to look at the other properties. “I’ll email the specs to you.”

“Excellent. I knew I could count on you, Lewis.”

He hangs up. I shoot Lizzie a to-do list—no doubt she’ll have it done before I even board the plane—and scan the subject of an email that just came in.

Initial Sketches – Kendall.

I hesitate before I open it. Yes, I’d been a bit too sure of myself when I asked for these sketches drawn up. At this point, I should just cut the Kendall property loose. I have bigger fish to fry and I can always circle back around once Knox and his friends realize their clubhouse is doomed to failure.

All the same, this could be the last chance I get. I open it and skim the sketches showing the various ways to divide the property.

Shit. That’s a bigger profit margin than I anticipated.

Maybe I can still get Knox to see reason before I leave. If I can convince him to sell, then the others will fall in line. I don’t have time to pursue them each individually, not with Moore waiting for me.

One last attempt and then I’ll wash my hands of the whole business.

I load my suitcase into the rental car, and by the time I make my way to Knox’s new clubhouse, Lizzie has already sent confirmation that the plane will be ready for take-off within the hour. I’m happy that I decided to invest in my own plane last year. Flying commercial, even first class, is simply not worth the hassle.

Knox’s truck isn’t at the Clubhouse, but since he and Dad still live so close nearby, he might be inside anyway. If not, I can at least leave the offer papers for Mrs. Kendall’s property in the mailbox. Seeing that number alone might sway Knox and his friends.

I know exactly who I’m thinking of, though. It’s not Samantha or Asher or any of the others. It’s Kylie. I hate that I can’t get her off my mind, even when I’m trying not to think of her. I can’t stop this burning in my gut as I think about that scene in the bakery yesterday.

Did she, Sam, and Madi go into the city last night?

Did she bring some fucking dickhead home?

I shake my head swiftly, removing the thoughts as I test the door of the clubhouse. It opens easily and I stalk inside. The place is eerily silent.

“Hello?” I call out.

No answer.

Fuck, did he forget to lock the door? Just standing in the entrance like this I see a bunch of his tools. Not expensive by any means, but it'll hurt him if they're stolen. Why the fuck does he have this place open to any idiot who wants to walk in?

I start to fish the phone from my pocket as I step back outside. As I do so, I catch sight of the door to the detached garage—it's open. Is Knox in there, or are there Willowcreek hoodlums causing trouble for the clubhouse before it's even open?

As I approach, the sound of humming greets me. I push open the door, frowning, to find myself in Kylie's studio. Her back is to me, her hair pulled into a ponytail. She's wearing a pair of noise-canceling headphones. If I wasn't so shocked by the sight of what she's painting, I might have interrupted her to say something about her needing to pay better attention to her surroundings.

Her toes are tapping against the floor, the paintbrush in her hand as she studies her work. From this angle, I can see it perfectly.

If this is her normal fare, no wonder her New Orleans gallery is so successful! It's not even finished and I can see the beauty of her vision. The skill in her work, and the emotion she puts into every brushstroke.

The garage blooms with a golden glow as clouds move away from the sun. It shines through the windows, lighting Kylie up. She's got a halo around her hair, and even without seeing her face, I can feel her concentration and passion.

Without thinking, I lift my phone and snap a picture. The image of Kylie working in this old place is just like a baroque painting.

Fitting, that the artist is a work of art herself.

I tuck the phone back into my pocket and step forward. I don't want to interrupt her, but I need to finish up the business here and get to the airport. As I do so, though, my eyes are drawn back to the image on the canvas.

Two people, entwined in the act of sex. The man's fingers are buried in the woman's hips, and I know just from the shadows around them that they're going to bruise. But neither of them cares, too involved in their passion. The woman... the woman's red hair falls down her back.

Kylie.

It's Kylie in that painting. She's capturing herself in the throes of passion.

The more I look, the more I see tiny details that indicate more about what exactly she's experiencing. Her arms are at an angle that indicates that she's

been tied. To anyone else, it will be inconsequential. But I recognize instantly what it is.

Sweet little Kylie is into bondage?

All reason seems to leave me. I can't quite connect the two images. One of the Kylie I've known my whole life. Shy, kind-hearted, the sort of girl who will go out of her way to be nice to others or camp out for days below the porch to save a feral kitten. And this sex magnet, the erotic woman who is taking what she wants without caring about what anyone else might think of her.

Jealousy punches me in the stomach as I draw nearer.

Who's the man she's fucking? Why didn't she give him a face? What kind of man would she give so much control to, that she'd let him dominate her?

And why the hell isn't it *me*?

Chapter Ten

KYLIE



My playlist ends, indicating it's time for me to take a break. I put down the paintbrush before I convince myself to do "just a little more." Which will then turn into another few hours of working and the kink in my shoulder will only grow worse. I'll soon be at the point where I need to put the painting away for a day or two and work on other things. Otherwise, I'll over-paint and end up ruining my vision.

Sweat clings to the small of my back, between my breasts, and behind my ears. I groan as I take off my headphones, putting them aside. When did it get so hot in here? It can't be just because I'm that turned on.

With a sigh, I stand to my feet and grab my bottle of water sitting on the small table next to me only to stop dead in my tracks.

I'm not alone anymore. And to top it off it isn't just anyone... it's Dante, watching me.

His eyes wander down the length of my body as if his hands are physically on my skin. The dark lustfulness that seems to lay within them sends shivers across my skin, my nipples hardening in response. God, why didn't I wear a bra today?

Dante's eyes linger on my breasts for just a moment before sweeping back to my face. I nearly fall back a step. The fury radiating off him is obvious. It's told in the tension of his jaw, the rigid way he's holding his shoulders.

I swallow hard. Oh no. He recognizes himself. He knows I'm painting him, that I'm lusting after him. It's all laid out right here on my canvas, so of course he has to know, and now he knows just what I am. He's offended by these liberties I've taken with his image.

But wait? How would he even know the faceless man in the painting is him? It's not like he has a tattoo I've added or any other distinguishing marks to make him recognize himself. It's only my own guilty conscience playing havoc with me.

A million and one emotions run through me as my heart begins to race. Opening my mouth, I attempt to say something, but no words come out. Instead, I find myself stuttering on air as my eyes rack down his body, taking in how snugly his shirt fits over the curves of his muscles before disappearing beneath the hem of his pants that covers his...

I stop. I can't help but notice the incredible bulge in his pants, and the realization that he is hard makes me gasp.

Wait, what?

It's an impressive size which makes my mouth go dry. Apparently, my painting didn't just make him furious. It turned him on.

Maybe that's why he's angry? Because he's responding to what I've painted and he doesn't like it?

Or maybe it's because he does like it. I meet his dark gaze again. The lust in his eyes shifts and I shy back. The intensity of my own thoughts makes my legs shake.

What am I thinking? This is meant to be my private fantasy. I know he's not good for me. But I never expected he would see this...nor did I want to get turned on by him.

I don't want that. I want someone who will respect me. Something Dante isn't capable of.

My shoulders hunch forward and I wrap my arms around myself. The action seems to trigger something in him as his lip curls back.

"The fuck are you doing?" Dante snarls.

His comment strikes something deep inside me as I narrow my eyes in his direction, recalling what Madi and Sam had taught me the day before. There is no way in hell I'm going to let Dante Lewis make me feel ashamed of myself!

Before I can start, though, Dante gestures back behind him at the open door. "You left the house unlocked and the door wide open! And you were just sitting there, completely unaware. Anyone could have walked in here. You could have been hurt."

Hold on a sec... is he serious?

"This is Willowcreek," I say slowly, raising a brow in question. "Nobody

will —”

“There are still bad guys in Willowcreek.”

“You’d know all about bad guys, wouldn’t you?” I reply, my heart skittering like a rabbit’s, as the electric bolts continue to leap between us. “You, who are determined to take this beautiful property and destroy it. You care more about profits than you do your own family.”

Of all the people to stand up against, it has to be Dante. *But it does have to be him, doesn’t it?* How am I going to get over my crush if I don’t...well, crush it?

He’d never hurt me. He’s not a dangerous man. At least, not physically... emotionally is another thing. Which is why I have to do this. Why I have to speak my mind. Because otherwise, he’ll break my heart and never even know he did it.

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

“Stop swearing at me,” I snap, my eyes narrowing as I throw the rag over my shoulder down onto the table. Though my hands tremble, I force myself to continue. “You’re so worried that a ‘bad guy’ will sneak in? Well, you’d be right because you snuck in!”

“Don’t you have a girlfriend or someone you can bother?” I reply softly, turning my eyes from him to look anywhere else in the room.

He scoffs, “I don’t do commitment.” His words coming off more menacing than I expected.

Dante’s jaw clenches. He stalks forward, moving with slow, deliberate steps. “If being a good businessman makes me a bad person, then you don’t know how bad I can be.”

Goosebumps rise over my arms and my skin tingles with the desire to be touched. The electricity seems to increase as he draws nearer. I fight to keep my eyes on his. My face flames with heat—embarrassment and arousal mixed—but I’m not going to back down.

“You don’t scare me,” I say through gritted teeth, trying to seem confident but slightly unsure of the current situation.

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yes.” I hesitate. “This is my studio, Dante.”

“Clearly,” he replies as he takes one step forward.

I don’t know how to feel about him being here. About how he is acting with me. But as I watch him take a deep breath in, his jaw rigid as he glances around once more, I realize that whatever he is upset about, he isn’t going to

go away silently.

“Then if you know that, why are you still here?”

“That’s irrelevant. Why did you leave the door open?” He couldn’t seriously be going back to this. It wasn’t like I intentionally did it.

“There’s no bad guys around here, Dante,” I reply firmly, my hand on my hip as I stare at him, unwilling to back down no matter how nervous he makes me being as close as he is.

He stalks towards me, his eyes staring daggers into me as he speaks. “Forget about the bad guys in Willowcreek. There are bored kids who could have snuck in and stolen Knox’s tools.”

Shit. As much as I don’t want to admit it, he has a point. While a bad guy may not come in here and do anything to me, it doesn’t mean someone couldn’t have stolen other things. My mood had been so fogged over with thoughts of Dante that I was completely careless about his brother’s belongings.

Though thinking back, Knox leaves the house unlocked all the time.

Clearing my throat, I lift my chin a little higher, balling my fist at my side. “Knox leaves the house unlocked when we go for lunch all the time. So you don’t get to yell at me for doing the same.”

He stalks towards me, not stopping until he’s right up in my space, staring down at me. I may not be able to speak up, but I refuse to move. I stare back, refusing to be the one that breaks first. Knox is right. I need to stand up for myself. And Dante wants to take this property and ruin it. If I can’t stand up against him, who am I supposed to stand up against?

But my body won’t listen to me. I’m supposed to be staring him down but my eyes keep drawing to his lips. They’re just so sexy and distracting. Slightly parted, perfectly shaped to fit with his square jaw.

The smell coming off him is divine. Musky, manly, with notes of the forest. I want to bury my face into his skin and inhale that scent deep into my lungs. And with those blazing eyes of his, he looks even more sexy here in person than he was in my dreams.

Ugh. I can’t have done him justice in my painting.

I’m unsteady, torn between turning my back on him and closing the distance between us. I don’t know what will be more brazen. Dammit! He should be minding his own business instead of getting so close to me. And I shouldn’t be enjoying his proximity.

I open my mouth to tell him to leave—or at least, to back up out of my

face—but before I can, he reaches out. Somehow it feels like everything happens in a second, yet it also feels so deliberate, like I have plenty of time to pull away if I want.

His hand grips my throat, pulling me towards him, and my breath catches. I don't have a moment to process what's happening as his lips crash on mine in frenzied hunger. Every nerve in my body is set alight, my core aching at the possessive way he touches me.

It's as if I'm living and breathing Dante Lewis.

As his hand slides around to the back of my head he fists my hair, pulling me forcefully flush against his body. I grasp at his biceps, greedily feeling the strength of his arms through the dress shirt he wears. His buttons rub against my tank top, and through my skin, causing my hardened nipples to ache as they press into his chest. My eyes close as heat and desire sweep through me.

I can't count how many times I dreamt of this moment. Dreamt of how he would hold me... touch me. Though never in my life did I believe it would happen. Softly he teases my lips with his tongue, the willingness in my desire evident as I let them fall open, moaning into his mouth.

Every single one of his fingers sends an electric pulse straight to my aching core. Especially when I feel his thick hard cock pressing through our clothing. I'm defenseless in his arms, willing to let him take everything that he wants without a moment's hesitation.

He pulls away as quickly as he started. My breaths come out in ragged pants as I try to draw air into my lungs. "Dante —"

His name on my lips seems to make him freeze as he stares down at me with the same shock in his eyes that I feel coursing through my blood. And as I let my fingers gently brush across his chest, he quickly pulls away.

I stumble, but Dante catches my elbow, steadying me. As soon as I've regained my balance, though, he releases me. Straightening his shirt as he steps back. The tension lingering in his body disappears as his eyes grow cold.

In just a second, he's changed from that hot, passionate Dante to the cold businessman I've come to learn to despise. A chill washes down my spine as I watch him, searching for any sign of the man I'd just had a glimpse of.

But he's nowhere to be seen.

Clearing his throat, he gestures to a folder of papers sitting on a nearby bench. My brow furrows in confusion as I glance back at him trying to figure out where they came from. "See to it that Knox gets those."

Before I can get a word out he turns and quickly disappears leaving me standing there staring after him with more confusion and desire running through my body than I know what to do with.

“What the hell just happened?”

Chapter Eleven

DANTE



Lizzie didn't disappoint, as usual. From the moment I stepped off the plane back in the city to the time I arrived at the private rooftop elite club for lunch with John McKinnon, everything was taken care of. I didn't even have to tell the driver where to go. It was one of the things I liked about her, she got shit done without having to be told what to do.

Unlike some people I know.

Stepping out of the elevator at Starlite Elite Gentlemen's Club, I prepare myself for meeting McKinnon. I don't have time to think about my brother or Willowcreek. I have to get back on track, even if a pair of emerald green eyes continue to haunt me since the moment I left that damn town.

The tall vaulted ceilings, crystal chandeliers, and large floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the city greet me with elegance. Even the cute blonde at the hostess stand knew how to act the moment I walked through the doors. Her hair is pinned back without a strand out of place as she sashays towards me in her royal blue pencil dress with a smile on her face.

"Mr. Lewis, it's a pleasure to see you again."

"Is he here?" I say quickly, completely ignoring her greeting. I did most of my business with high-end clients in this facility and with the amount of money I spent in the place, they knew I didn't have time to mess around.

"Yes, sir. Right this way."

Following behind her, I make my way past the array of circular tables with black leather armchairs. Men from the city sit either alone or in quiet conversation, with crystal glasses filled with an array of colors depending on what type of liquor suited their pallets.

And there, at my usual table, next to the large waterfall feature on the

backside of the club, sat McKinnon. His dark hair, as perfectly pristine as his botoxed smile, stood out against crystal clear blue eyes.

“Lewis, good to see you. That business in Maine turn out?” he asks, pounding my back the moment he pulls me in for a hug. I have never been one for people touching me, but when it comes to McKinnon, I was fine with whatever gesture would make him happy.

“Unfortunately, a family friend died. I went back to see if my help was needed, though they already had things taken care of.”

McKinnon’s smile falters for a moment as we take a seat. “I’m sorry to hear that. We could have postponed this...”

I smile, shaking my head as I lift my water glass to my lips and take a swig. “No, no. It’s fine, honestly. I was eager to get back to the city. Plus, I wouldn’t miss a chance to have lunch with you. I enjoy our conversations.”

John laughs as he slugs the rest of the amber liquid from his glass before gesturing to the waiter for another.

“Did I tell you about that deal I completed?”

I grin at him. In this business there are no real “friends,” but he’s someone I work well with when our paths cross. And when we end up fighting over the same deal, it’s always an entertaining challenge.

“Nope. Must be recent, ‘cause normally you brag about every shit you take,” I say, ribbing him.

“I just closed the deal on a bunch of sweet, sweet properties in an up-and-coming district in New Jersey. It’s the perfect investment to rent out for businesses. And I snapped them all up,” he boasts, puffing out his chest.

Right. He did tell me about that.

By the time our food order is put in and it's placed in front of me, I’m starving. I didn’t bother with breakfast and the entire flight home I was working. But I manage to contain my excitement over the lemon glazed chicken that quickly became an addiction from the first time I came to this place.

Our conversation takes a turn to other avenues while waiting, but something in the back of my mind about his deal in Jersey kept nagging at me.

“So,” I drawl. “How did you manage the efforts in Jersey?”

I’m not one to fish, but perhaps John has some information that I could use to help with my efforts in Willowcreek.

“There was a small-time developer that held the deeds but I helped them

see that they didn't have the funding to remodel. Apparently, they had a couple properties promised to other buyers, but I made it clear. All of it, or none." He laughs as he lifts his beer. "You can guess what option they took."

After being stuck in a loop with Knox, Kylie, and their friends with their sanctimonious sentimentality, I can't help it. I burst into laughter, before raising my water glass once more to my lips.

"And that's how it's fucking done," I tell him. "God, I'm glad to be back among people who get it."

This is exactly what I want, peers that understand the drive, the want. Profit over sentimentality. It's good to be home.

John chuckled. "That bad, huh?"

"You have no idea."

"Sounds like you need some stress release." John's eyes glint as he nods over my shoulder. "There's a fine-looking one right there."

I turn, already knowing he's referring to a woman. I find the one he means soon enough. The whole bar is looking at her. She's tall and slender, with gorgeous hair the color of chocolate. And in the tight red off-the-shoulder dress she is wearing, it shows off what paid for assets she does have. Typical gold digger, not the marrying type. But great for a one-night stand.

Or so John tells me.

"Just your type, eh?" John says, giving me a wide smile.

Every part of me wants to brag to John and tell him that I'm not interested because I have to leave here to meet Mr. Moore. However, I'm not stupid. Though John and I get along, he is just as much a shark as I am. To give him the opportunity to steal my biggest client would be naive on my part.

I pause for a moment, contemplating the situation before letting a chuckle escape my lips. "No, she isn't. She's all yours."

Normally, I'd continue the jab. Perhaps hint to him how he could take her home, not that he needs help. He's usually successful. The moment he brought up the woman, a pair of green eyes flashed through my mind, causing my heart rate to pick up and a sick sense of unease to fill my stomach.

I shouldn't have left, but I did. I left after kissing her, and every part of me screamed to go back. Thinking of when I saw her sitting before the painting, sweat glistening over her skin, I mentally freeze the moment. To anyone else, Kylie's painting may have looked obscene. But to me, it wasn't. There was tenderness in the image, a sense of desire and drive that is too hard

to explain. But I understand more than she knows.

The need for control and the desire for release.

It's the entire reason why I fell in love with the dark side of sex: my own need for control.

"You gonna call up some fun tonight then?" John raises his eyebrows at me, pulling me from my thoughts of Kylie. "Get rid of that small-town funk?"

I take a deep drink of my water to avoid answering right away. Even as I think of saying yes just to get him to leave me alone, a mass of red curls wrapped around my fist appears in my mind. The heat of Kylie's body against mine, the feel of her pressed against me, the taste of her lips. Fuck, I still don't know what came over me.

Kylie Simmons is off-limits. Has been from the first moment I saw her, not that I'd had these sorts of urges when we were kids. I mean, hell, the last time I saw her she was a freshman in high school, though I had always been curious as to how she would turn.

Not the kind of woman I desired to play with.

"No," I finally reply. "I've had my fair share of entertainment the last few days. I think tonight I'll just call it early. Perhaps dive into my emails and try to get caught up."

John watches me for a moment, his brow lifting as he nods. "Suit yourself. It's been fun, Lewis. But I'm going to snag that one at the bar before some other guy gets the nerve to do it."

I watch as he stands, sauntering his way towards the bar as I turn back to my food and take the last bite of my chicken before gesturing towards the waiter. The staff here are remarkable and within minutes our tab is closed and I'm stepping into the elevator headed to the top property I have picked out for my biggest client.

Thirty minutes later, I'm unlocking the doors to a large office building on the north side of the city. There aren't many properties on the island that are open for people to build what Moore is looking for, but I've always got connections.

Two of the properties are empty, this one being my first pick. However,

with a few others I have to show him, the current owners are easily persuaded when it comes to money. Unfortunately, closing those kinds of deals always tends to take longer. Which is why my fingers are crossed that he selects one of the first two.

The top two floors are already set up as a penthouse, and it won't take much for the rest of the building to be renovated to suit Moore's needs. Though, I know deep down that the view is what will captivate him.

Finding a property like this that stands high enough to look out over the city with floor-to-ceiling windows, that is completely empty, is rare. Like finding a needle in a haystack-rare.

Though I pulled it off. Just as I always do.

Taking a seat on a chair in the abandoned receptionist area, I wait for Moore. There is still plenty of time until he gets to the property, and my mind can't seem to leave the thought of Kylie. Her captivating green eyes have been haunting my mind since the moment I left her in her studio.

Letting my fingers slip into my pocket, I pull out my phone and flip through my photos to the image of Kylie's painting. I have no qualms about taking a closer look at it. When I look past Kylie, staring at the painting, I'm instantly filled with regret.

I should never have taken this damn picture. Not that it isn't erotic—my cock is currently proving it is. I want to look at Kylie's painted body and envision what it really looks like. Is Kylie the sort to boost her vanity by hiding her flaws, or does she embrace them?

Instead, my gaze keeps going to the bastard she's fucking. Whoever it is, I hope he makes her happy. It makes me seethe to think there is a chance he isn't treating her right.

"Mr. Lewis."

Shit. I turn off the phone and stow it into my pocket as I turn to face Sean Moore. He stands behind me, an amused look on his face.

"Mr. Moore. Good to see you," I say, standing and offering my hand.

He shakes it firmly. That amused look is still in his eyes. I ignore the implications of it. So what if he saw Kylie's painting over my shoulder? He's half an hour early.

"Let's start with the penthouse, shall we?" I ask, gesturing to the elevator.

Sean nods once and heads over, his cane tapping against the floor. I give him the papers showing the stats of the building before I take him on a slow tour of the property. There is much that can be done with the space, and I'm

hoping that he selects it.

“The entire building has sixty-eight floors. The top two are the penthouse, and there is also a rooftop terrace. If you would like to expand your penthouse further, renovations on the sixty-fifth floor will cost anywhere between one and five million dollars, depending on how extravagant you want to get,” I reply, just as the doors open to the penthouse. “However, the benefit of this building isn’t just its location, Mr. Moore, but the view.” I hold my arms out in a gesturing manner to the large floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the city.

“It is impressive...but I’m not sure if it’s big enough.”

“I see,” I reply slowly. “Well, another positive note is that the smaller two buildings on either side are actually for sale as well. So if you wanted, you could buy those out, too, and potentially expand. Perhaps another addition to this as well as a parking garage?”

Moore is quiet for a moment, his eyes searching the skyline as he steps forward and opens the door that leads out onto the rooftop balcony. I follow him, not saying a word as I let him ponder over the pricing and other factors of the building.

“Is this all you have for me?” Moore asks, striding toward the huge windows right ahead of us.

“No sir, I have a few more. It’s just that with the location of this building, and the space it has to offer you, I wanted to show you this first.”

Moore nods, breathing in deeply. A contemplative look comes to his face. “Show me that painting you were looking at.”

I’m completely caught off guard as my lips part and my brow furrows. “Sorry?”

Moore turns to me. “The painting. The features you sent me on this place are exactly what I want. I don’t give two shits about budget and I like this view. So show me the painting. Then I’ll give you my final answer on this place...and my continued work with you.”

He’s got to be kidding. The man’s literally blackmailing me to look at Kylie’s painting! “May I ask why you have an interest in it? It’s irrelevant to our business.”

“Young man, I know your type well enough. You show me the best property first. Then you show me the others so it sinks in how inferior they are, and finally, you bring me back here. Now I’ve had plenty of time to think it over and you’ve convinced me it’s the best place.” Moore smirks at me. “I

don't have the time to play these games. I want this building and that painting. I'm not usually into redheads, but that could sure change my mind."

"Sorry, the painting was already sold," I say before I'm even aware of the words. I'm instantly possessive of Kylie, and the thought of some old fuck jerking off to her, even if it's only a painting of her, pisses me off.

"However, I know the artist personally," I continue, before Moore can start pushing me to give him information about who bought the painting. "I can get you commissioned pieces for a special discount."

Moore laughs, slapping an open palm against his hip. "Son, I don't even care about discounts. Get me a few different pieces for my penthouse and a special one for my main office. I'll be the envy of every fucking man in this city."

"I can do that," I reply, shaking his hand. "Is there anything else?"

"No. Send the contract over once you have the agreement with the artist." Moore strokes his chin as we head for the elevator again. "I want abstract pieces for the penthouse, but the one for my main office... ask the artist to make it as erotic as the one on your phone. No preferences... surprise me."

My jaw clenches as I nod, forcing a smile to my lips. "I'll pass it along."

It's not until I'm back at the office and I've shared with Lizzie the good news that it hits me. And only because Lizzie asks the question —

"Would you like me to contact Miss Simmons, or will you bring the proposal to her yourself?"

Fuck. Kylie isn't going to react well to this.

"I'll contact her myself," I tell Lizzie. "You may leave for the night. I'll finish up my work."

"It's no problem, Mr. Lewis. I'm happy to stay for whatever you need me for," Lizzie assures me.

Coming from practically anyone else, that would sound like a come-on. But I never mix the business of pleasure with the business of work. I hired Lizzie specifically because she's not my type and I'm not hers. That is, she's fully committed to the relationship she has and will never put us in the awkward position of forcing me to fire her.

"There's nothing I need help with. Goodnight, Lizzie."

Lizzie nods as she starts to collect her things. “Goodnight, Mr. Lewis.”

I lock up after she’s gone and head back into my office. I’ll be pulling an all-nighter, that’s for sure. There’s a lot of work to be done. Yet another time the office shower, not to mention the comfortable couch, will come in handy. But as I sit down at my desk to work, my mind keeps drifting to Kylie.

Specifically, the way her ass felt in my hand, the way she slid her tongue into my mouth, the noises as she pulled me closer.

Fuck it.

Heading to the ensuite shower, I slowly undo the buttons of my shirt, having already shrugged off my jacket and tossed it onto the sofa in my office. Thoughts of Kylie swirl around me. Setting my phone up on the counter, I turn the nozzles of the shower, watching as the water pelts the shower floor and steam slowly rises.

More than anything I wish that I had stayed to finish what I started with Kylie. Even if she is forbidden. The moment I step beneath the water I let out a sigh of relief. My hands run over my hair as I close my eyes and tilt my head up toward the faucet, allowing the hot water to rush down over my face and chest.

“Kylie...” Just her name makes a wicked smile cross my lips as I take my already thick, rigid cock into my hand, wishing it was me she was riding in the painting.

As I open my eyes once more, I take in the image of the painting on my phone. I imagine what her tight wet pussy would feel like with me sliding in and out of her. What it would feel like to trace the curve of Kylie’s hip, to taste her pussy on my tongue. To hear the sound of her moans echoing off the walls as I fuck her relentlessly and without restraint.

I pant as all my muscles tighten. A growl rips from my throat as I picture her throwing her head back, screaming my name. With a jerk of my hips, I cry out, a strangled noise escaping me as I shoot against the glass.

I’m left feeling oddly unsatisfied. Something that rarely happens. A strange part of me wishes that she could be here with me, but I quickly push the thoughts away. Kylie Simmons is off limits, though if she isn’t careful...I’m not sure I can stop myself from breaking her into submission.

Chapter Twelve

KYLIE



Shit! Didn't I lock that? I rush over, blood pulsing in my ears. When I step into my makeshift studio, my heart stops beating entirely. Madi stands in front of the painting of Dante and me. Her hands are on her hips as she studies it. A small scoff-like laughter escapes her as she then shakes her head.

"Wow, I knew you were good, but damn girl..."

Oh, can the ground open up and swallow me now? How many more people are going to see me making love to Dante on canvas?

Fucking hell! This is why I should stick with abstracts. Everyone always has something to say.

Especially Mr. High and Mighty Businessman, who didn't even say goodbye before skipping town.

It's been two days since he left, and though I managed to finish a majority of the painting, my heart and mind are still conflicted over what happened between me and Dante.

Madi turns, her eyes catching sight of me as her brow rises and her smile grows. "What the hell is this masterpiece?"

I grab a sheet and throw it over the canvas. "Just a painting I've been working on. It's not done."

"Is that right? No point in covering it now."

I stand in front of her and hold out my hands, beseeching. "No one's supposed to see it."

Madi snorts as she steps around me, pulling the sheet off the painting again. "It's meant to be fucking looked at, Kylie, that's why you painted it. My god, girl. I didn't know you had it in you."

I groan, hiding my face in my hands as embarrassment fills me.

“No, I’m serious,” Madi says. She grabs my shoulders and grips them. “It’s so fucking sexy. And I don’t mean because of how they’re in the buff, smashing.”

I peek through my fingers as she turns me around so I’m facing the painting. “What do you mean, then?”

“I mean, look at it!” Madi shakes her head as she steps forward. “Like this right here. Your back is just starting to arch, so it’s clear you’re on the verge of orgasm —”

Shit, shit, shit! She knows it’s me!

“—but look at your arms. It’s unclear as to where they are... are they restrained or are you restraining yourself by not touching him? And your head is resting on his shoulder making the moment more intimate. And look!” She points to his neck, “this flush in his neck, he’s clearly fighting off his orgasm so you come first.” Madi steps back, shaking her head again. “I didn’t know you could get that much out of a painting. It’s... It’s beautiful. They’re not just fucking, they’re making love. They’re *in love*.”

I lower my hands, studying my painting. She’s describing exactly the image in my head when I started painting it. I’ve been so distracted by... well, Dante, that I haven’t had the chance to really look at it. Though I’m glad that someone else clarified that I had captured the exact image I had in my head.

“Who’s the guy?” Madi asks.

“Just someone I dreamt about.”

Madi whistles. “I wish I had your dreams.”

Looking at it more objectively, it is good. Damn good. I’d managed to capture not only the bodies I’d wanted but the emotion and movement within those bodies. It might be the best work I’ve ever done.

“Why don’t you do more of this sort of thing?” Madi asks. “Don’t get me wrong, I love your abstracts, but this is... wow.”

I sigh. “The truth is that I did a lot of portraits in college. Until a professor who I didn’t even like eviscerated my work at the student show in front of everyone. He said that my work was redundant, forgettable, and lacked any intellectual humanism.”

Madi wrinkles her nose. “He sounds like a fucking ass.”

“Yeah. He was.” I rub the back of my neck. *And I let him prevent me from doing forms and portraits ever since.* Why am I still giving him so much

power over me?

I like painting people. To capture them in another light that shows who they truly are. Their every flaw and internal desire. Even the emotions that so many people often try to hide, I'm able to portray in my paintings of them and bring it to life. I should start again, even if just for myself.

"Hey, can you give me a dream guy?" Madi asks, quirking a brow at me.

I laugh, but before I can answer my phone rings. I fish it from my pocket. "Sorry, this is my gallerist. I should see what he needs."

Madi nods. "Don't mind me. I'll just be here, drooling."

I roll my eyes at her as I head outside. "Hey, Max."

"Kylie! Thank God! It's awful. You have to—" His voice is muffled as he babbles.

I stick a finger in my free ear, trying to hear him better.

"Say that again," I tell him.

He takes a noisy breath. "I need you to get back here. It's awful! Stella's not coming out of her room, and everything is a cluster fuck. She's inconsolable. She needs you."

Cold rushes through my veins. "What happened? Is someone hurt?"

"What? No. Well. Not yet. Once I get my hands on him, he's dead!"

"Max!" I have to shout into the phone. "Slow down and tell me what is happening."

Madi turns toward me with confusion on her face the moment she steps outside to join me. I'm too focused on what Max is trying to tell me, so instead of easing her confusion I hold up a finger.

"The realtor called. The space that the two of you have been working to get was sold to another developer."

"But, they can't do that! We had the paperwork started. The bank agreed to the loans," I protest, gripping the edge of the door. My heart races. Another developer? Who?

"They said that it was a big business deal, the whole area or nothing at all. They couldn't pass it up. Stella's a mess." Max lets out a heavy breath that rushes like static into the phone. "We need you back, Kylie. She won't talk to me."

Tears spring to my eyes. Stella has been so excited about this property, and for someone to do this to her—hell to me—it was unbelievable. For the life of me, I can't understand why, after everything we had already gotten done for this deal, they would do that and not tell us anything beforehand.

Though now it makes sense that they weren't calling with updates.

"So, she's locked in her room?" I ask, trying to figure out what my next steps are going to be.

"Yeah, she locked herself in. I don't know if she's drinking or binge-eating ice cream. She won't talk to me and I'm officially worried," Max says.

Madi pulls her phone out of her pocket and mouths, "I'm going to call Knox" to me as she steps back into the house.

I nod at her. "Stay with Stella, Max. I'll be there as soon as I can."

I throw my arms around Stella. Her eyes are bloodshot from crying and she smells like she just ate a gallon of chocolate ice cream.

"You shouldn't have left Willowcreek. Your clubhouse is going to fall behind schedule," Stella murmurs as she buries her face into my shoulder.

"Nah, it's fine. Knox and I don't work on a schedule. The renovations will get done when they get done. Besides, Madi promised to help out." I pull back and rest my hands on Stella's shoulders, studying her. "Are you okay?"

Stella's lip trembles then she grinds her teeth. "I can't decide if I'm more heartbroken or furious. I got contacted by the developer."

Max hands her a glass of water, his jaw rigid. "What did the asshole want?"

"To offer me the space—for twenty percent more than the original price." Stella takes the water and gulps it like she is trying to drown herself.

My jaw drops as I gape, speechless. Twenty percent? Even including the budget we'd allocated out of the bank loans to redo the place, there's no way Stella will be able to afford it. Hell, I'd have to refinance my studio to get that sort of money!

"Bastards!" I seethe. "What sort of people do that? Decide to swoop in like fucking vultures? I hope their brakes fail while they're driving downhill!"

Max and Stella stare at me. Then, despite the fresh tears that well in her eyes, Stella starts to laugh. She hugs me tightly. Max rubs her back, shooting me a grateful look. For as crushed as Stella is, it's good to see that she can still find some humor.

"Don't let this bother you. We will figure something out—hell you know

me. I always figure something out.”

Stella nods, wiping the remaining stray tears from her cheeks. “Thanks, Kylie.”

“Anytime... and look on the bright side of things. Had we gotten it, and he was buying shit around the place, we would have to see that asshole on a regular basis. I’m sure there are better places out there.”

An hour later, we’re sitting around Stella’s living room having eaten our fill of pizza. None of us have more to say. I’d love to say I could lend her the money to get the place, but even if I did have it, it wouldn’t help her in the long run. She would feel obligated to pay me back, because that’s just the type of kind-hearted person she is, and it would stress her out to no end.

“I don’t want to think about this anymore,” Stella declares suddenly. She turns to me. “So. Tell me something about Willowcreek that will distract me.”

“Dante Lewis kissed me.”

Stella’s eyes go huge. Max drops the piece of pizza he just picked up. I have about half a second to regret bringing it up before Stella jumps over to the couch next to me.

If I told Madi, she’d be squealing and demanding all the deets despite her personal disdain for Dante. Stella, though, looks worried. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. I was painting and when I took a break, he was there. He started berating me for not paying enough attention like someone was going to break into the house and murder me. I got snippy... and he kissed me.” I slump back onto the couch, reliving that moment. “But it doesn’t matter if it felt good. He was also a complete jerk the entire time I was there. Berating me and treating me like I’m nothing because he is some big hotshot in New York.”

“Wow,” Max grumbles.

Stella shoots him an annoyed look, then focuses back on me. “Have you talked to him again?”

I shake my head. “And I’m not going to, either. He’s got ice for blood and his only passion is for business. I’m not getting mixed up in that. It’s only a physical attraction. That’s all.”

Stella puts an arm around me. “You have a big heart, Kylie. Keep it safe.”

I nod glumly, though I don’t feel confident about my chances. No one else ever made me feel the things Dante does, even with him being a complete asshole. I internally sigh, forcing a smile to my lips as I attempt to

show them I'm not bothered.

Though deep down I know she is right. I have to keep myself safe.

I can't let Dante Lewis anywhere near my heart.

It'll only end up broken.

Chapter Thirteen

DANTE



It's taken me four days to wrap things up so that I can return to Willowcreek. Not that I especially want to go back to my old town, but I figure it will be better if I talk to Kylie about the paintings in person. That just doesn't seem like the type of conversation to have over the phone.

Especially with how I left things.

I can still feel the heat of her mouth, the taste of her on my tongue. I know it was a dick move to just walk out after kissing her, but I was so shocked by the strange feelings she invoked in me that all I could think about was getting away. I don't do relationships, especially not with girls as sweet as Kylie Simmons. Why bother, when people are only good for one thing—leaving?

And that's something I need to keep in mind. Especially when dealing with Kylie. Seeing that erotic painting of her, naked and being thoroughly fucked, and then kissing her... it was such a fucking turn-on. But it was more than that.

Whenever I'm around her, I feel the need to protect her. I've never been known for my protective instincts—unless we're talking about my own interests—so it's odd to suddenly have the need to make sure Kylie is safe and cared for.

I shake my head as I get into my rental car and leave the airport, back again in Willowcreek. I probably shouldn't meet with Kylie in person if I want to avoid giving her the wrong impression, but closing this deal is important to me and, unfortunately, she is the key.

I know her personality well enough to know she'll find it hard, if not impossible, to say no to me face-to-face. Hell, most people have a hard time

telling me no. Maybe that's why I can't seem to get Kylie or Knox on the phone. They probably know I'm calling to convince them to do something they don't want to do and decide that ignoring me is the best way to deal with me.

Unless Kylie is ignoring me after what happened between us...

I push the thought away once more. I can't let my emotions over Kylie deter me from why I'm coming back. I just need to get her to agree, sign the contract, and then leave again. Without issue.

They underestimate my determination, though, if they think avoiding me will get the job done. I'm sure Knox thinks I'm still trying to get the treehouse property, and I don't blame him. Pretty much every time we've talked, I've thrown in how stupid their idea is of converting the property to a clubhouse for kids.

I drive straight to Mrs. Kendall's house and find Knox outside working on the treehouse. God, what is it about that stupid thing that would make six people lose their minds and decide to keep this rickety old place? Asher and Jaxson are here, too, and all three of them look like they're having a blast.

Scowling, I stroll over to the base of the tree where the fort is being restored. Knox looks down, his gaze a bit surprised, then he climbs down from the tree with the other two men following behind him.

"Kylie gave us the proposal," Knox says by way of greeting. "We're still not interested."

I look at Asher, the football player who had been the first—and only—to suggest selling the place. "You sure?" I ask.

He nods while rubbing the back of his neck. "Nah, man, Samantha would have my head, and I ain't rockin' that boat."

I shake my head and shrug. "Your loss. Fortunately for you, I have a much bigger deal to focus on right now.

"Do you know where Kylie is?" I ask Knox, who scowls suspiciously at me. "Don't worry. It's a business offer, non-related."

He stares at me for a little longer, trying to read my expression, I guess, before he finally sighs and answers. "She flew back to New Orleans to help her friend Stella."

I blink at him in surprise. Why would Kylie go all the way back home just to help a friend when she has so much work to do here? Obviously, the poor woman is still too naive about how the world works. Friends aren't worth that much effort because eventually, they will always leave, just like

everyone else does. In this world, the only person you can count on is yourself.

“Do you know when she will be back?” I ask, then add, “It’s important.”

Knox pulls his phone out of his back pocket and scrolls through the contact list before dialing. We stand there quietly while Jaxson and Asher go back to work on the treehouse. After a minute, he shakes his head and hangs up.

“Let me try Max,” Knox says, dialing another number.

Max? Who the hell is Max?

“Hey Max, it’s Knox. Is Kylie around?” Knox says into the phone. “Sure, great.”

Who the fuck is Max? I wonder again. And why is she with him? She’s not answering her phone but she’s close enough for Max to answer? And why the fuck do I even care? She can be banging every man she comes across if she wants to. It’s none of my business.

Then why do I get this weird feeling in the pit of my gut just thinking about Kylie with another man? I can’t believe I’m this jealous over a woman I’ve never even slept with. I’ve never felt this way before. I’ve always been about the pleasure, not the emotion.

Hell, the women I have sex with sign a contract with me. It’s not like I go out looking for a quick piece at a club somewhere. That’s too dangerous for someone like me. Women find out how much I’m worth and they’ll pull any trick to get a piece of it. Of me.

I have a very short list of women I have sex with and each one of them has signed non-disclosure agreements with my attorney. Some might think that’s cold and calculated, but I don’t give a fuck. It’s insurance and protection.

Straining, I try to hear what Kylie is saying, but I can’t make out any of her words. Just the sweet sound of her voice. I mentally shake my head in annoyance. What the fuck am I thinking? However, I can’t deny the little zing of awareness that shoots to my balls at the sound of her voice.

Maybe I just need to fuck her and get it over with. The problem is, I’m not sure one time will be enough. Not with Kylie.

“Hey, Kylie,” Knox says, a smile on his face as he speaks to her. “No, nothing’s wrong. Everything’s going well here...”

My eyes watch him, he’s listening intently to her as a laugh escapes my brother’s throat. “No, I just called because Dante actually wanted to know

when you were coming back. Yeah, he came back already.”

His eyes turn towards me as a smirk crosses his lips. “No, he isn’t pestering us about selling... I know, that’s what I was thinking... no, I don’t know what he wants to talk about...mhm...okay, I’ll let him know. Don’t worry about anything until you get back. Be safe, we can catch up tomorrow.” He hangs up, stuffs the cell phone into the back pocket of his jeans. and looks at me. “She’ll be in late tonight.”

“Good.”

“Good?” Knox replies, raising an eyebrow.

I hesitate. “Yes, good. This is important.”

He raises both brows, giving me a mocking look before shaking his head. “Right.”

Growling under my breath, I turn on my heel, but Knox’s words stop me before I take more than a couple of steps.

“He misses you, you know.” I don’t turn around, but my shoulders stiffen. “Dad, I mean.”

As if I didn’t know! Slowly, I turn with a scowl. “Leave it alone, Knox.”

Of course, my little brother doesn’t know when to leave well enough alone. “Seriously, Dante. Dad misses you and he keeps begging me to get you to visit, even though you don’t pick up his calls anymore.”

Turning, I get another few steps when Knox calls out to me again.

“At least call him,” Knox urges.

I stand for a minute with my back to Knox, then without a word, walk away. How many times do I have to tell him that I do not want a relationship with our dad? I haven’t wanted one in years, and nothing has happened to change that. I doubt anything ever will.

Apparently, Kylie will be in too late to talk tonight, so I go to my hotel room and order room service. I’m not in the mood to be around anyone, or chance running into Knox and his friends. My thoughts are still on who the hell Max is and why Kylie is spending time with him.

After a thick steak and loaded potato, I take a shower and go to bed. Flipping through the channels on the television remote doesn’t inspire me, so I turn the TV off and then the bedside lamp. It doesn’t take long to fall asleep.

“How’s my big boy doing?”

I glance up at my mom, a huge smile on my face. It’s rare that she tucks me into bed at night, but here she is.

“I’m not that big.” I laugh, and she pinches my cheek lightly.

“You’re my big boy,” she says with a soft smile. Her gaze drops to my lap where the book I was reading is lying.

She raises her eyebrows when she reads the title. “Do you want to be an artist when you grow up?”

I can’t really read the book that well, too many big words I don’t understand. I shake my head. “No. I just like the pictures.”

She laughs. “Well, you can do whatever you want in life. Never reach for the stars, my son, when you can have the entire moon!”

“But there are a lot of stars and only one moon,” I say with a little frown.

“True. But if you have the moon, you command the sky and the Earth.”

The sound of my dad’s voice yelling for my mom comes from downstairs. She looks towards my open bedroom door and sighs before giving me a kiss on the head. “Get some sleep.”

Soon they’re both yelling. They are always fighting nowadays. I don’t know why they are fighting. “Where are you going?” I hear my mom yell right before the sound of the front door slamming shut echoes up to where I’m lying.

I guess this time it’s worse than before.

With silence in our house, I roll over and let myself fall asleep.

I don’t know what time it is when my parent’s bedroom door closing wakes me from my sleep. I sit up, rubbing my eyes as I see the shine of a light in the hallway gleaming through the crack of my bedroom door.

Slowly climbing out of bed, I tiptoe quietly out, padding towards the stairs just in time to see my mom at the bottom with a suitcase in hand. “Mom?”

She looks up at me quickly, her eyes widening as tears brim her eyes. “Sweetie, go back to bed.”

“Where are you going? What’s going on?”

I make my way down the stairs towards her. She sighs, setting the suitcase down before she turns to me, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, sweetie. But this life isn’t enough for me. I want more.”

She doesn’t give me a chance to say anything as she kisses me on the cheek, then picks up her suitcase and heads towards the door. It closes behind her, leaving me staring at the vacant space where she once stood.

What does she mean?

I run to the front window, and I watch just in time as she gets into the

driver's seat and closes the door. Her red tail lights quickly fade as she goes down the road.

I didn't even get to say goodbye.

I wake up with a curse, scrubbing a hand across my jaw. Why do I have to keep having this dream...no, this memory? That was the last time I ever saw Mom. She gave no warnings, said no goodbyes, just up and left without a backward glance.

Scowling, I go into the bathroom and splash water on my face. I look haunted in the mirror's reflection, pissing me off more.

I'm a grown man and I learned a valuable lesson from Mom when I was just seven years old. Always keep reaching for more, because if you don't, no one will ever stay. And more importantly, I'll never get attached. There is no risk of getting hurt if you keep emotions out of the equation. How many times do I have to keep reminding myself of that lesson?

Now, more than ever, I'm determined to close the deal with Sean Moore. I need to get far away from Willowcreek and all the memories that come with it.

Chapter Fourteen

KYLIE



Nothing like taking the red eye, *ugh*. At least I saved money doing it. By the time I make it back to Willowcreek, it's nearly 3 a.m. and I'm so exhausted my eyes hurt and my vision is a bit blurry. My muscles don't seem to want to work, either. My whole body just feels depleted of energy.

Oh well. Nothing a little sleep won't fix.

But, as I lie in bed an hour later, that sleep I need so badly eludes me. Why does Dante want to talk to me? Does it have something to do with what happened between us?

Not knowing is driving me nuts and I so badly want to call him to find out. I don't, though. Maybe if it was just a couple hours later I might try, but no need to poke the bear. Dante's personality is already grumpy, I don't want to make his mood even worse by waking him up before the sun even shows itself.

I fall into a restless sleep and two hours later, I wake up and take a shower. I'm still tired, but those couple of hours of sleep did help to rejuvenate my energy. I leave my hair down so it can air dry, swipe on a bit of mascara, then get ready to head over to my makeshift studio. My mind drifts to the delicious taste of coffee from Madi's mom's bakery.

A stop that I will have to make.

The moment that I pull up outside the bakery, I notice that Madi's car isn't in the parking lot. Which is probably for the best, otherwise I'll be here for hours instead of a five-minute stop. Climbing out of the car, I head for the front door. As soon as I enter, I'm greeted by the smell of freshly baked goods and the deep aroma of freshly made coffee.

I love coming to this place. Even if it is currently packed.

It only takes a moment and I'm able to order. Madi's mom looks up at me from behind the register and smiles. "Kylie, it's so nice to see you again. Madi's not here, I'm afraid."

"That's okay," I reply with a smile of my own. "I'm only stopping for a moment. I desperately need coffee this morning."

"Oh, are you working in the clubhouse today? Madi said you were painting the murals. It's so nice to have you back in town. To see you girls together again warms my heart."

There's a soft look in her eyes as she turns and makes me a coffee. Then she grabs a blueberry muffin from the front glass case. "Here sweetie, it's on the house."

"Oh, but I don't mind —"

"No, no," she says, cutting me off with a wave of her hand. "I insist. I'm so glad that you guys are all working together again to bring back life to this town. That youth center is going to be an amazing asset... and to think, it all started because of the treehouse."

I never really thought about it that way. After a quick hug, I take the coffee and muffin and hurry out of the bakery. As much as the thought of sticking around to talk to her is nice, I have too much to do in the clubhouse.

But it does make me feel good to hear how much what we're doing means to someone.

Mrs. Kendall's house is quiet when I finally pull up. Not a single car in sight, and no lights on through the vacant windows. Gathering my purse and coffee in hand, I set about planning out my day. Being away left my mind pondering over the work that still needs to be done, and the painting I left sitting silent in the studio.

It isn't until I'm inside my make-shift studio, setting down my things, that a noise stops me in my tracks. My eyes shift slowly in the direction it came from. "Hello?"

Expecting it to be Knox, since he is usually the first person to arrive, I almost drop my coffee seeing Dante standing in the doorway.

"Jesus Christ, Dante," I gasp a bit breathlessly with my free hand over my heart as I try to collect myself. "What are you doing here so early?"

He frowns slightly. "Didn't Knox say I wanted to talk to you about a business proposition?"

With my heart still galloping in my chest—and not just from being

surprised by his sudden appearance—I set my coffee on a board stretched across two sawhorses that acts as my work station.

Of course, this would be about business. How silly of me to think it was otherwise.

I turn around slowly, trying my best not to notice how hot he looks this morning. Instead of his usual suit and tie, Dante is wearing a pair of dark blue jeans that fit him like a glove and a black pullover sweater that emphasizes his broad shoulders and well-developed pecs.

“Sort of,” I finally answer when I can drag my eyes off him. “Knox did tell me you wanted to speak with me, just not in great detail.” I try to hide my disappointment as I give him a warning glare. “This better not be about the house, again.”

His expression doesn’t change. “It’s not. Actually, I want to commission some of your art. It’s for a client of mine.”

My mouth drops open and I snap it shut quickly. This is not what I expected to hear. Narrowing my eyes, I study his face. He looks serious enough, but then the man always looks serious. I can probably count on one hand the number of times I’ve seen a smile on his face.

“Why?” I finally ask.

He raises an eyebrow, then strolls further into the room. “Have any more of that coffee?” he asks, pointing to my cup.

“Obviously not since I bought it on the way here,” I chide, but then instantly feel guilty for being so rude. “I can put on a pot, though. I’ll drink more when this is gone anyway.”

I didn’t expect him to follow me through the house and into the kitchen, but he does. While I set up the coffee pot, Dante leans against the kitchen counter, watching me. Having his eyes on me like this is nerve-wracking. When I shoot a sideways glance his way, I catch him staring at my ass. Tingles course through my body and along every nerve with the realization.

“You didn’t have to come in here, you know. I would have brought it to you when it was ready.”

“I know.”

That’s it? That’s his only response? I frown at him and the corner of his mouth lifts in a wry smile. The only sound in the house is the coffee pot percolating. Although the kitchen is a fair size, it feels much smaller with Dante in the room.

“So, what is it you wanted to talk to me about?” I ask into the

uncomfortable quiet. “Well, I mean, how many paintings are you looking for?”

He crosses his arms over his chest as he looks at me. “Quite a few. It’s a huge job, Kylie.”

Dante’s eyes drop to my mouth where I’m chewing my bottom lip. Instantly, I stop, then run my tongue over it to soothe the tender skin. His eyes grow darker, and I swear I see hunger shining in their depths.

I shake my head and try to keep my mind focused on the conversation. “I just don’t think I have the time. There’s still the murals here to finish, plus I need to get back to my studio in New Orleans.”

“Did I tell you my client will pay top dollar?” Dante says, his voice as smooth as velvet. This must be the tone he uses on prospective clients. It’s almost hypnotic. I nearly agree before I catch myself. But before I can say anything, he spouts off a price that has me raising my eyebrows in surprise.

“That’s for each painting,” Dante says with a half grin. “Not the entire project.”

Holy shit, that’s a fortune. That’s at least twice my going rate. I would be an idiot to turn down such a lucrative offer.

An idea pops into my mind and I cock my head to the side. Stella needs money, but she won’t take handouts. Especially from me since she thinks I’ve done too much for her already. This amount will not only get her the space she wants, but will allow a large donation to go towards the youth center portion she is trying to fund. I was already going to donate to that, and this is the perfect opportunity to do so.

“Okay,” I say slowly. “I’ll take the job. *But,*” I emphasize, “I want the payment to go to my friend Stella... anonymously.”

His eyebrows raise in surprise and then he frowns. “Why the hell would you give so much money away?”

“My friend needs it more than I do,” I say defensively, jutting my chin out in defiance.

He looks at me as if I’ve lost my mind. Straightening, he drops his arms to his sides and walks toward me. “Do you have one ounce of self-interest in your body?”

I’m dumbfounded by his question, anger filling me as I stare at him. “My body is just fine, thank you very much!”

Dante stops a couple of inches in front of me. I have to crane my neck back to see his eyes, but he isn’t looking at me. Or, rather, he isn’t looking at

my face. His eyes trail a hot path down my body. It's all I can do not to shiver, imagining his hands following his eyes.

"Yes, it is," he agrees, his voice husky.

When his gaze meets mine again, I swallow thickly at the lust shining in his eyes.

"But that's not the point," he continues. "You really want to work that hard and just throw all that money away?"

"I'm not throwing anything away." I bristle. "Stella is a good friend going through a difficult time." Taking a deep breath, I turn and grab a coffee cup from the cupboard. The coffee is just about done and I'm glad to find a distraction, something to keep me from looking into those passion-filled eyes.

After pouring Dante a cup, I turn and hand it to him. Our hands brush slightly when he reaches for it, and I just know he did that on purpose.

"Listen. That's my stipulation. Your client will send the money to Stella, anonymously as a donation, or there's no deal."

Dante takes a step back and raises his free hand away from his side as if surrendering. "Okay, have it your way. No skin off my back, but it's your mistake."

His words grate on my nerves. How dare he look down on me for being generous? I bet he doesn't have a single friend he would help out like this, or one that would help him if he needed it. Dante, for as long as I can remember, has always held himself away from everyone else. I wonder if he has any true healthy relationships.

And that gives me the perfect idea.

"Good, then, it's settled," he says, drawing my attention back to the conversation. When he tries to continue talking, I cut him off.

"Not so fast, Dante." He raises his eyebrows again, surprised I would interrupt him, I guess. "There's more."

Obviously, if the way he's scowling at me is any indication, he's not too happy that this isn't such a done deal yet. And, as much as he'd like to act nonchalant, I can tell by the stiffness in his shoulders that this deal means more to him than he's willing to admit.

"You need to stop bugging Knox—and the rest of us—about selling this house," I say, throwing an arm to encompass the area. "And, you need to work on fixing your relationship with your brother and your dad."

Had I thought he was scowling before? Wow, the way his eyebrows draw down and his eyes narrow into warning slits is almost scary.

“I’ll work with Knox,” he says through gritted teeth. “I’ll be on my best behavior with him when I can. But there is no way in hell you can push me into anything with my dad. Don’t even go there.”

He pauses to glare at me. “Take it or leave it.”

I nod, surprised I even got that much accomplished.

“Then it’s a deal,” he says almost formally. He stops long enough to take a sip of coffee, the first since I’d handed him the cup a little while ago.

“In order to stay ahead of deadlines, we’ll need to begin immediately,” he says, all businesslike again. “There’s not enough space to work here, in that garage. Plus, my client is very picky and I don’t trust the safety of the paintings if they’re shipped from New Orleans.”

“What are you trying to say, Dante?”

He sets the coffee cup down on the counter and pins me with his eyes. I see determination there, but also something else. Wariness? A little desperation?

“Simply that this project is very important. Also, if you’re working for me, I don’t want you having to worry about things. My client’s in New York City. You can stay there while painting, and it will give you a chance to check out the aesthetics and the lighting in person. I know that’s an important part of your work, and you can’t just do that in one day. I’m sure you will need multiple trips.”

“How do you know that?”

His expression doesn’t change, but he says quickly, “I paid attention to your doodling back in the day.”

Heat climbs from my throat to stain my cheeks. Although he said the compliment casually, it makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside to know that he noticed me when we were younger, even in such a small way.

I find myself considering it. Maybe it’s because of that compliment. Maybe it’s because of the money. Or maybe it’s just because deep down I wouldn’t mind finding an excuse to be around Dante a little longer.

“Okay, but before I agree to that I need more information,” I reply, trying to show him that I’m not just going to do something because he asked for it.

His eyes bore into mine before a heavy breath escapes him. “Okay... what do you want to know?”

“Well, for starters I need to know the exact amount of paintings.”

“The finalized amount I got from the client was seven. Six will be for the apartment and one for his main office. However, they aren’t small... he

wants them to be feature pieces. Each different, but each their own piece on a particular wall.”

Suddenly I realize how large this project is going to be. Seven feature pieces, which for all I know could each be upwards of thirty-six square feet or more, depending on the size of the wall, is massive.

I nod, biting on my bottom lip as I take in what he is saying. Each piece could take me a month to do. Maybe even longer depending on the exact feel the client is going for.

“This isn’t going to be a short trip—” My sentence is cut short with Dante snorting in amusement at my response. “Something funny?”

“No,” he says, the corner of his lip turning into a smirk. “You’re just putting a lot of thought into everything. You can always figure that out later.”

“No, I can’t.” I snap, not meaning to come off angry or anything but finding myself a little annoyed by his attitude. “All of this is extremely important. I have to figure out the length of time for each, the style, where I’m going to be painting them... it isn’t just as easy as saying yes.”

He doesn’t reply, just continues to stare while I dive back into planning. Dante doesn’t understand art, or anything about creating it, from what I can see. All this is to him is a contract. A deal that he is getting to add to the other notches on his belt.

“When does the client want these done by?”

“He wants them done as soon as possible, but the max I would say is eight months.”

I sigh. “Well, that’s manageable. I guess. Though I don’t really want to be up there for eight months.”

“Well, it could be four to six months, maybe even less. It depends on how long it takes you to do them. All I know is that the client plans to have renovations done in a year, so they have to be done by then.”

Eight months had been manageable, but four months? That would be pushing it. Then again, I have managed to do pieces in a much shorter time period. If I have silence and no other distractions, that is.

Plus, the faster I get them done, the less I have to be around Dante.

“Can I speak to the client?”

This time he laughs. “In time, yes. Right now, no. It takes time to make things happen, but it can happen. So, are you going to take the job?”

I frown at him, my eyes narrowing for the briefest of moments. As much as I would like to say no just to piss him off, I can’t. This money could really

change things and Stella desperately needs it.

“Okay. I’ll do it.”

His smile widens in an “I knew you were going to say yes” kind of way. “Wonderful. My private plane leaves tonight. Be ready.”

He doesn’t give me time to question him or protest before he turns and walks down the hall to the door. My heart is all but in my throat as I subconsciously lift my coffee to my lips and take a long sip trying to wrap my head around what the hell just happened.

I’m going to New York with Dante Lewis.

The thought alone sets my nerves on edge. If I’m not careful, I have a feeling this deal could be my downfall when it comes to that man.

Chapter Fifteen

KYLIE



After a moment of shock, reality sets in and Dante's demand to leave tonight comes rushing back to me like a tsunami raiding the coastal beaches. There is no way in hell I can leave tonight!

"Wait," I call out, hurrying after him.

Dante pauses and slowly turns to look at me, a dark eyebrow raised in question.

"What do you mean tonight? That doesn't give me much time."

"I saw the rooms. The murals look pretty much done to me."

"Not hardly," I argue. "I haven't even started on some and there's still a lot of finishing touches to make."

"That can wait. This can't. Besides, from what I can tell, my brother and the others will be working on this place for quite a while still."

God, he is so infuriating. He just expects to snap his fingers and have everyone rushing to do his bidding. Slamming a hand on my hip, I narrow my eyes.

"I still have my commitment here," I practically growl.

"This," he says, gesturing around the house, "isn't making you—or your friend—any money."

"Money isn't everything."

Two dark eyebrows raise in surprise. "Maybe not, but it sure makes life easier."

We stand facing each other, neither saying a word for a couple of minutes. It feels like a standoff, like he's waiting for me to cave. But this time, I refuse to. Everything Sam and Madi have been teaching me about standing up for myself seems to have finally stuck. Yet, the longer we stare at

each other, the more uncomfortable I become.

And not just because of the confrontation. It's the way he's staring at me, as if he's undressing me with his eyes. I can practically feel everywhere those dark orbs touch me. A shiver works its way down my spine and I clear my throat.

"I suppose I can fly back and work on the mural here and there," I mumble irritably, causing Dante to grin as he slowly opens his mouth. "I'm not finished."

Snapping his mouth shut, his smile falls. "Go on."

"This project is going to take months, which means I'm practically moving to New York. Leaving tonight isn't practical when I still have to find a place to live, studio time —"

Holding up his hand, he cuts me off. "I already have that handled. You don't need to worry about anything. You simply need to be ready at seven when I come to pick you up."

Part of me is extremely turned on by the way he is taking control and bossing me around. The dominant side of him shining through makes me press my thighs together trying to soothe the ache between my legs. The other part of me though, is tired of being pushed around.

"Look, stop trying to tell me what I'm going to do. I get that is what you're used to, but this is my work, Dante. I will make the rules to fit into your client's guidelines. You don't get to just tell me where I'm going and staying. I want to know, otherwise I'm not getting on the plane."

"Then you wouldn't get the money—" he starts, but this time I cut him off.

"You know you keep bringing that up, but it makes me wonder. Why, if it's just a simple job for hire, did you need to fly all the way down here to ask me in person, instead of just doing it on the phone? Could it be because you wanted to make sure I said yes? Or is it because you can't afford for me to say no?"

He stills, staring at me with absolutely no emotion as he exhales. "I'll email you over some information within the hour."

Feeling proud of myself, I let the glowing feeling of accomplishment fill me. "Great, I'll see you tonight then."

"I'll pick you up at seven." This time, when he walks away, I let him. I've got a few hours before I need to go home and pack, which will give me some time to do a little more work on the murals.

There's really not that much more to do right now. Just a few touch-up areas until Knox and his dad finish the other rooms. I lied about that, but I didn't like the way he was acting so sure of himself... and of me. In fact, I'm sure I can finish the final touches today if I get busy and stay focused. That way, I will be able to concentrate on the paintings while I'm in New York, instead of worrying about getting back here to finish up.

I spend the rest of the day painting. At around five p.m., I brush an arm over my forehead and stand back to study my work.

A smile spreads across my face. The mural is lively and inspiring, and I think the kids who come here will enjoy it.

After cleaning my brushes and the area, I pack up my things and go home. A quick shower later, I grab my suitcase and put it on the bed. I have a little over an hour to finish packing up my few belongings before Dante is supposed to pick me up.

I still can't believe I'll be going to New York with him. As a young girl, I would have given just about anything to spend some time with my best friend's older brother. Although I'm still excited, I'm also nervous. Dante has a way of pushing my buttons and setting me on edge. Both emotionally and physically.

And now, I'll be spending who knows how much time with him.

The sound of the doorbell echoes through the house. I look up with alarm, then glance at my phone lying next to my suitcase. It's barely six o'clock, surely Dante isn't this early!

My heart gallops in my chest with the thought of seeing him again and I rush to the door, practically yanking it open. Knox smiles at me from the other side and I deflate just a little bit. I didn't really want it to be Dante, I tell myself.

"Hey Kylie," Knox says, stepping around me to come into the house. "I wanted to see you before you left."

I'd sent him a text message earlier letting him know I was going to New York with Dante for a job.

"You're just in time," I say with a smile as I close the front door. "Your brother will be here soon to pick me up. Come on back to my room and we can chat while I pack."

He follows me down the hall and to my room, not saying anything until we're inside.

"I don't get it," Knox finally says as I fold a t-shirt and put it into the

suitcase. “Dante never does anything unless it benefits him.”

I shoot a quick glance at him over my shoulder. “True, but in this case, it’s helping me, too. Well, it’s going to really help Stella.” My mouth curves into a smile at that thought.

He’s not satisfied and frowns in concern. “Still, there has to be some other angle for him. I just don’t see him offering you this job of a lifetime out of the goodness of his heart. Don’t get me wrong, I love my brother. But I also know him.”

Setting down the pair of pants I am in the process of folding, I step over to Knox and give him a hug. “You’ve always had my back,” I tell him softly with a smile. “I know you’re just looking out for me, like you always have. You want to keep my heart safe, and I appreciate it. But I want to do this for Stella. I *need* to do this for her.”

He stares at me, his brown eyes barely visible under his shaggy hair. I can read the concern there, but also the genuine happiness that I have such an opportunity.

Walking back to the bed to finish packing, I chew my bottom lip. “What exactly happened between Dante and your dad?” I finally ask, something that has been bothering me for a long time. “Dante just says I wouldn’t understand, but I’m sure there’s more to it than that.”

Knox nods as he walks over and sits on the opposite side of the bed. He sighs, then looks up at me.

“It started when Dante was seven years old and our mother walked out on us. This was before you ever moved to town,” he explained.

“I always wondered about her.” I put the last bit of clothes into the suitcase and look around the room to see if I missed anything. “Neither of you guys ever talked about her.”

Knox shrugs, his hand laying atop the bedspread while one long finger traces the stitching in the cloth. “I was only four years old. I barely remember her.”

“Dante, though,” he continues, “he remembers her well. He woke up that night and watched her drive away. He stayed up the whole night waiting for her to return. Somehow, even though he was so young, I think he knew that she was never coming back.”

My hand pauses over the suitcase as I look at Knox. “That’s so sad.”

Knox nods, still looking down at the bedspread where his finger is making figure eights on the material. “Since he was older, he remembers

things much more vividly than I do. For whatever reason, Dante blames our dad for Mom leaving.”

Knox shrugs again, abandoning his finger doodling. He looks up at me. “He’s never told me why he blames Dad, but no matter how much Dad tried to break through to him, Dante would never relent. I don’t think Dad even knows the real reason Dante is mad at him.”

I zip the suitcase closed and sit down on the opposite side of the bed. “Hm,” I hum. “I wonder if Dante even knows or if he just continues to blame him out of habit. I mean, did your parents fight a lot? Did your dad have an affair or anything that you know of?”

He shakes his head. “No, I’ve never heard of anything like that.” Knox frowns for a second, then raises his eyebrows. “I think Dante mentioned once, or maybe I overheard him telling Dad, that Mom left because Dad was lazy and didn’t want to better their lives.

“Whatever happened to cause Mom to leave, Dante blames Dad and it’s changed him forever,” Knox finishes.

“Surely they can work things out.”

Knox shakes his head sadly. “I don’t see how. After all these years, nothing has changed. Dad tries to reach out to him and Dante adamantly refuses. Every time I bring it up, Dante gets pissed and warns me to leave it alone.”

“You know, I actually tried to make it a condition of me taking the job.”

Knox looks at me with a puzzled frown. “What are you talking about?”

I chuckle and shake my head. “When I accepted the job from Dante, I said the money had to go to Stella anonymously and that he had to be nicer to you and try to work things out with your dad.”

Knox laughs. “I bet that went over well.”

“Yeah, not so much.” I grin. “But hey, it was worth a shot.”

“I know my brother has the capacity to love and care,” Knox says after a couple of minutes. His voice is solemn, kind of sad. “He’s not a sociopath or anything. The problem is, I believe that the past cemented his fear of relying on someone and being hurt again.”

Chapter Sixteen

KYLIE



The moment we stepped onto the flight, I couldn't shake the awkwardness that seemed to flow between us. Dante was quiet when he picked me up, barely saying two words to me. Then when we boarded the plane it was like he wanted to keep as far from me as possible. Something that really set my nerves on edge.

Glancing over to where he was sitting a few rows away from me, I sigh. If I'm going to have to be working with him on this project for so many months, I can't let everything be awkward between us. His eyes are staring at the paperwork in his hand as he continues to go from one stack of forms to another.

Finding the courage in myself, I stand to my feet and walk towards the seat directly across from him. "Can we talk?"

His eyes slowly lift to meet mine, a single brow rising in question as he lays the papers back onto the table. "About what?"

"I don't know," I shrug. "Perhaps about this client and the project?"

"I have a meeting planned with the client for tomorrow. After the meeting, I'll take you to the building to view the space."

I hesitate. It's good news, but the way he is talking to me, it's as if I'm just some task to complete.

"That sounds good," I reply softly, my eyes drifting towards the window as I sit quietly.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, just thinking," I say, turning my attention to him once more. "Out of all the artists out there, why did your client want me?"

My work was widely known, but I couldn't help but wonder how the

client selected me. And then Dante just happened to know me? It just doesn't make sense.

Dante is quiet for a moment, his eyes on me like steel as he seems to ponder over his reply. The silence is almost deafening before he finally opens his mouth. "He asked about having some art done, and out of the artists I do know, I knew that you would give him what he wants. Not to mention, you have a reputation for creating works of art that people didn't even know they needed in their lives until that moment. That's what I've heard, at least."

"Oh." I didn't expect any praise from *the* Dante Lewis. To hear that he thinks I'm better than other artists out there made my stomach flutter in a way I didn't expect.

"Yeah," he nods. "Now, I have to get this paperwork done. We will be landing soon."

An hour later, Dante ushers off the plane and into a sleek black sedan that is racing into the city towards our next destination. The address to the place I'm staying was sent over via email just like he'd said. The moment we pull up to the massive, towering apartment building, I can't help but be blown away.

"This is where I'm staying?" I ask the moment we step out of the car. The doorman helps the driver with my luggage.

Dante glances up from his phone to look at me. "Yeah, this will be your new home away from home for the next couple of months until the projects are complete."

"You mean, since you don't trust my choice in how the paintings are transported?" The corner of my lips turn up into a smirk as I watch him roll his eyes.

"I never said I didn't trust you. I just want to protect the investment." He places his phone back into his pocket. "Let's get you upstairs so I can show you around."

It didn't take long to get upstairs, the elevator speeding us towards one of the many floors that held penthouse apartments suited for luxury. Hesitation fills me. I knew he was going to get me a place, but never in a million years did I think it would be this. It has to have cost a fortune.

Even the hallway from the elevator reeks of money. Sleek white marble

flooring with cream and black runners going down the hallway. White walls accented with neutral-colored decor and abstract paintings. I halt my steps as I admire them.

“Dante...” I mutter, turning to where he had been standing only to realize he was further up the hallway from me. “Are you sure this place is okay?”

He stops at a dark wooden door and turns towards me. “Is it not up to your standards?”

“No, that’s not it,” I say in a rush. “This place looks really expensive. I didn’t expect something like this.”

He chuckles, shaking his head as he unlocks the door. “This isn’t even the start of the extravagance.”

I don’t know what he means, but the moment the door swings open, I stare open-mouthed at the lush environment around me.

The apartment is huge. Stepping into the entryway awed by the dark wood flooring, sleek granite countertops, and endless amounts of space. The complete minimalist lifestyle I have always wanted but never could seem to accomplish.

Everything around me was designer, some brands I recognized and others I didn’t. Though, just by looking at them I can tell they cost a fortune.

The living room is an open concept that flows seamlessly to the kitchen. Everything is so pristine, and the moment my eyes take in the floor-to-ceiling windows on the far side of the room, I gasp.

The view of the city is absolutely breathtaking. We’re so high up, while looking down on millions of twinkling lights, that it almost makes me dizzy.

I feel Dante’s presence before I see his reflection in the window. Our eyes meet but I don’t turn around.

“This is way too much,” I tell him, slowly turning around.

“It doesn’t matter. You’re staying here.” It’s not a question. He just spouts off things as if no one else has a say. His word is law.

I open my mouth, ready to argue that I will most certainly not be staying here, but he walks away before I get a chance. *Typical high-handed Dante*, I grumble inwardly.

“Fine,” I call after him. “If I need something though, how far away are you from this place? I’m guessing you will have a car sent for me in the morning?”

He stops mid-step and turns to face me with amusement written within the crooked smile on his lips. “What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean, what am I talking about?” I ask slightly puzzled.

It takes a moment, but laughter quickly escapes him. “Kylie, this is my apartment. You’re staying here with me. Well—in your own room, but with me, nonetheless.”

Frozen in place, I stare at him. Lips parted, eyes wide, heart racing... “What?”

“This,” he gestures to the apartment around us with his arms open wide. “This is my apartment. I don’t want to risk you staying somewhere else. And this way I can ensure that nothing happens to the paintings. You have your own private wing to the apartment.”

“No.”

His brow furrows. “No?”

“Yeah,” I reply, crossing my arms, feeling overwhelmed by everything. “Look, I’m grateful for a place, Dante. But... I don’t know how comfortable I feel about staying in your house.”

“I sent you the address, Kylie. Just as you requested.”

Rolling my eyes, I glare at him. “Yes, I know that. But I didn’t know it was your place. I mean, don’t you find it weird letting me stay here? We haven’t exactly seen eye to eye on a few things lately.”

Shaking his head, he scoffs before striding towards me. “No, I don’t think it’s weird. I’m rarely ever here anyways, and at least this way I know you’re in a safe place and able to work peacefully on the paintings. I honestly didn’t think it would be a big deal.”

His words instantly make me feel guilty. A heavy sigh escapes me as I turn towards the window, glancing outside at the New York City skyline once more. “It’s not,” I reply quickly. “I’m sorry— I’m just tired.”

When I look back at him, he’s watching me. But not like he’s indifferent to me. Like he sees something about me that’s enchanting to him in an entirely different way. “What?”

“Nothing,” he replies, shaking his head. “Come on, I’ll show you to your room.”

I follow him down the hallway. My feet move slowly as I try to process the new information. The fact that I’m staying with Dante sends a flush of excitement across my skin, but also forms a ball of nerves within my stomach.

Is this really the best idea?

The moment we pass a partially open door near the end of the hallway, I

stop. A shimmer of white—what looks like a canvas—catches my eyes. I can't help but slowly push the door open, taking in the gorgeous open layout of the room.

And not just any room. An art studio... just for me.

Throughout the room, there are several easels in varying sizes, and I spy more rolls of canvas and stretcher bars than I could use in a year against one wall. Brushes of every size and type are set up and organized by the material of the bristles. There's an entire cabinet filled with paints.

Unless Dante suddenly developed a taste for the arts, it's obvious he set this up to be my studio. But there's just so much! I don't even have this many supplies in my own studio in New Orleans.

"I was going to wait till morning to show you this, but I guess you found it early. Do you like it?" A deep voice says from behind me, causing me to turn with a smile as I try to calm the excitement burning inside me.

"Yes, this is amazing. Did you do all of this?"

Clearing his throat, he glances around. "No, I had my assistant get it together."

"Oh. Well, she did a good job." I try to keep the sound of disappointment out of my voice. It would have been naive of me to think Dante himself would have done something like this for me.

However, when I look a little closer, I notice that the brushes are of my preferred brand, as are the paints. That's saying something since I don't always use the most popular artist-grade brands. These are just my tried and true products that I like working with and that work the best for me.

Since Dante is so into designing everything and paying top dollar for whatever he buys, he had to have known my personal choices and told his assistant what to get. A pleased smile pulls at my mouth. The man *has* been paying attention to me. The knowledge sends a warmth through my body.

"Come on, I'll show you your room."

Letting my eyes linger on the studio space for a moment more, I turn to follow him. Down the hall he stops at a white door, carefully opening it. "This room is yours."

Dante stands off to the side to let me enter, my eyes widening at the beauty that is his spare room. There was no way in hell this room had looked like this before. Four poster bed, white canopy drapes, thick white blankets covering the mattress... Even a white wicker basket filled with blankets sits near a deep blue chaise by the large bay windows.

This room was absolutely designed to fit a woman's taste. After all the years in the art industry, I knew design when I saw it. I didn't comment. Instead, my smile widens as I continue looking around. "This is beautiful."

"I'm glad you approve."

Glancing over my shoulder at him, I feel the heat of his intense gaze. Everything about this man has captivated me since going back to Willowcreek. Even though I try to fight it. My curiosity piques—*I wonder where his room is.*

"So, you said this is my own wing?" I ask, fishing for information.

"Yes, my room is upstairs."

I didn't realize there was another level, but perhaps I missed the stairs while admiring the apartment. Not that I need to know where his room is. I'm here on a job. Nothing more.

"Okay."

Awkward silence slowly fills the space between us as I watch him shift from foot to foot.

"Alright, well... make yourself at home. It's late, and we have an important meeting in the morning," Dante finally says as he wraps his knuckles on the door, giving me a subtle nod before disappearing back down the hallway. Leaving me alone to settle in.

The past few days replay in my mind. From the moment I got word from Stella, to going home and seeing Dante again. Even him asking me about coming here, arriving at his apartment. My mind is blown. New York is as beautiful as I remember, but something about being here with Dante makes me feel different.

As if I'm stepping into a future I'm not prepared for.

Chapter Seventeen

DANTE



I jolt from my sleep, the sound of banging causing me to throw the covers back as I swing my legs over the bed and reach for my gun. I didn't use to carry a weapon, but one thing I have learned living in New York is to always be prepared. Step by step, I make my way down the stairs towards my kitchen where the sound of shuffling and cabinets closing grows louder.

It isn't until I get halfway down the stairs and I peer over towards the kitchen that I quickly realize where the noises are coming from. Kylie.

Shit. How in the hell did I forget she is staying here?

It's been a long time since I had someone stay the night in my house, and even then it was one night and nothing more. A fling that wore me out and unfortunately overstayed their welcome. Keeping the gun at my side, I sneak down the rest of the steps and place it in the drawer of a nearby table to retrieve later.

It was hell getting Kylie here, and the last thing I want to do is scare the shit out of her.

I watch her for a moment, admiring the way her perky round ass peeks from beneath the navy blue cotton shorts she is wearing. An obvious matching set to the white and navy blue tank top she has on that fits her like a glove.

If this woman is going to continue to wear these kinds of things around the house, I'm in trouble.

Clearing my throat, I watch as she jumps. Her eyes widen with shock as she turns to face me, her hand over her heart as her breathing comes in pants. "Jesus Christ, Dante. You scared me."

I chuckle in response. "Looking for something?"

She hesitates for a moment, her eyes drifting towards the fridge before looking back towards me. “Uh, yeah... I was going to make something to eat but you don’t exactly have food here.”

“Oh.” Guilt fills me instantly over her statement. I’d told my assistant to make sure the studio was well stocked, including Kylie’s favorite paints and brushes. I’d even had my cleaning service come in early to do an extra thorough sweep of the penthouse so that everything would be perfect for when she arrived.

But I hadn’t even thought about food. *What an idiot.*

“Well,” I say, looking at the clock on the wall. “It’s still early, but I’ll have something light sent up. We’re meeting the client for brunch at ten and that’s in four hours... Do you usually get up this early?”

Soft laughter escapes her as she nods. “Typically, yes. The whole ‘early bird gets the worm’ kind of thing. Aren’t you usually up this early for work?”

I hesitate. “If I have to be. Usually, I’m out the door by eight-thirty though.”

The awkwardness of our situation sinks in and that conversation comes to a halt once more. We stare at each other, her eyes quickly shifting as she slowly moves from the kitchen back towards the hallway.

“Well, I’m going to get ready. Let me know when the coffee gets here?”

I nod, watching without words as she scampers down the hallway towards her room. The sound of the door closing echoes in my ears.

Three hours later, I sit at the bar in my kitchen, staring at my watch and wondering where she is. It’s already quarter past nine and we’re supposed to be meeting Mr. Moore at ten. I hate being late.

I had told her this morning, and even again when I brought her coffee and a muffin, that we needed to be walking out the door at nine. But is she ready? No. Irritation fills me as I grit my teeth together, trying to keep myself calm so as to not explode at her the moment she shows her face.

“Sorry!” she exclaims as she comes running down the hallway, slipping on a white pair of flats with her purse in her hand. The meeting is business casual, and though most might find her flowing white and yellow dress just that, I can’t help but admire how gorgeous she is.

Her long red hair is pinned up at the sides as it flows down over her shoulders in waves, highlighting how stunning she is even with barely any makeup on. Not that she needs it. The natural beauty she holds is what captivated me to begin with.

When her eyes meet mine, though, I quickly regain control of myself. “Shall we?”

Thirty minutes later, we finally arrive at Balthazar’s Restaurant. The tall gray brick is lined with black trimmed windows. Red canopies above the door stand in contrast to the rest of the city. The restaurant is one of the best in New York, people typically lining up around the block to get in.

But of course, Mr. Moore knows the owner. And this just so happens to be his favorite place.

The moment we step inside, I hear Kylie gasp. The vaulted ceilings make the place look much bigger than it is. Wooden pillars that are a goldish-yellow tower rise the ceiling, with one wall entirely made of mirrors. And down every center divider that stands between the booths are huge floral arrangements that give the place a feminine charm.

“This place is so beautiful!” she murmurs with excitement, her eyes casting towards the ceiling. “The visual texture of the upper walls and ceiling are all done by hand. There is no other way to get the paints to fade like that...”

Is she sharing that information with me? Or perhaps it’s just her talking to herself. Regardless, it sparks something inside me watching her get excited the way she is.

“Name?” The hostess says, barely glancing at me.

“Lewis, Dante Lewis. I’m meeting Mr. Moore —”

“Oh yes!” She quickly states, cutting me off with a large smile. “Right this way. Mr. Moore isn’t here yet, but we made sure to prepare his table for your arrival.”

She turns with menus in her arms as we trail behind her, past the large bar area with huge shelves of different liquors that soar towards the ceiling, down a hallway, and into a more private area of booths and round tables.

“Here we are,” the blonde-haired woman says as she places down our menus. “I will be sure to let Mr. Moore know you’ve arrived.”

She quickly disappears, leaving Kylie and I alone. Kylie doesn’t hesitate in taking a seat at the far side of the round table. She lifts the menu as she eyes the items with what looks like a desperate hunger.

“See something you like?” I ask, her eyes meeting mine as she gives me a sheepish grin.

“Um, well the eggs florentine sounds delicious...”

Before we can continue the conversation, a hearty voice calls my name. “Mr. Lewis!”

I turn to see Moore and quickly stand, shaking his hand. “Mr. Moore, thank you for fitting us in this morning.”

“Well, when your secretary called and told me that my artist was going to be in town I couldn’t pass up the chance to meet her myself.” His eyes drift to Kylie. She stands, pushing a strand of her hair behind her ear with a smile.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she says softly. “Thank you so much for taking an interest in my work.”

Moore’s eyes meet mine briefly as he gives a smirk before replying. “Well, after seeing the work that you do, I would be a fool to pass on this kind of opportunity. It’s *very* impressive. And I only want the best for this project.” He gestures to the table and we all take our seats.

Kylie’s cheeks flush as her eyes drift back to her menu. As soon as drinks and food are ordered, we settle into more important things.

“So, Mr. Moore,” Kylie starts, a pen and notebook in her hand. “Can you tell me about the pieces for your office? What subjects are you thinking of? Do you have a color scheme in mind?”

He seems unconcerned as he sips his coffee. “Honestly, I don’t have a preference. I’m an old man, darling. I’m not good with that kind of thing. I do know, though, that I want these pieces to be like nothing anyone has ever seen before. I want them to make people stop in their tracks and to brighten a room at the same time. I’m a man who has to have the best.”

Kylie is quietly listening, a slight crease between her brows. Is she dreaming of the possibilities such free-rein gives her, or confused by a client having no opinion about such expensive paintings? “Okay... and the one for your main office?”

The moment the question leaves her lips, I stop. I know exactly what he wants for his main office, and this is the part that makes me a little more nervous than I thought I would be. I hadn’t told Kylie he had seen the secret photo of her painting back in Willowcreek. And to be honest, I’m not quite sure she will be willing to do this one.

“Well... this one I want more for... personal use.” he says, a twinkle of mischief in his eyes as he glances at me for a moment. “Something that’s not

your everyday style. A more erotic piece, perhaps a beautiful woman to put on display.”

To my surprise, Kylie doesn't react. She remains calm and composed. Clearing her throat for a moment as she lays her pen down, she crosses her hands over the notebook with a professional smile on her face.

I'd give anything to know what was going through her head at that moment.

But alas... I'm not privy to that kind of information.

“I think that's all very manageable Mr. Moore. Dante plans to run me to the property after our meeting to view the spaces. I'm sure I can come up with some amazing feature pieces for you.”

Damn.

Everything about the way she is acting right now, down to the way she looks, makes me want to pin her against the table and ravish her. Mr. Moore is clearly sold on her, and that's exactly what I'd been hoping for.

“I knew you would be able to give me what I want,” he says, lifting his hand to lay it atop hers for just a moment. Though most would see the act as endearing, something in me shifts.

He has no right to touch her, contract or not. Especially when I know what he's thinking.

What does he expect to get from Kylie? Moore was so captivated by the painting when he saw it. He has to be fantasizing about her in that painting. Her hands tied, the erotic position of her body against the faceless man... does he imagine that's him?

Forcing myself to calm, I push the thoughts from my mind as I lift my water glass to my lips.

Moore is nothing but a client... an old man looking for artwork.

And I'm overreacting, letting my mind wander when I should be celebrating.

Fuck. I need a real drink...

Chapter Eighteen

DANTE



As soon as we're back in the car, I let go of the tension that had been building from Moore's affection towards Kylie. It's clear that I'm being ridiculous with the feelings I have. To get jealous over an old man? Fucking hell. How pathetic can I be?

Kylie's quiet, though. Her eyes scan over the notebook as the driver sets off across town. She barely has said anything to me since we left the restaurant, and I don't understand why the hell that bothers me.

"The meeting went well," I finally say, clearing the silence between us.

"Yeah," she replies with a sigh, closing her notebook. "It did. I was so nervous this morning, but after going over things with him... all that's gone. I'm really looking forward to getting these pieces done. How far away is the building?"

I pause, mouth opening as I give a short sigh. "About fifteen minutes away."

"Oh, well that's not bad."

"Yeah." I nod. "Moore likes to keep everything he loves very close to him."

She laughs at my comment, her eyes meeting mine. "Well, he is a very sweet old man. I'm happy to help bring his vision to life. Thank you for thinking of me for this opportunity, Dante."

I'm slightly taken aback by her gratitude. I don't understand why it seems to catch me off guard, but it does. It's as if I feel proud that I did something to please her, even if it was just getting her a job.

Dismissing what she said, I pull out my phone and begin scanning through my messages.

“Once we get done here, I’ll drop you off at the apartment. Then I have to run to my office to handle a few things. I was thinking that we should go out tonight, celebrate how well the meeting went. What do you think?”

“Uh, yeah...” she hesitates. I glance towards her to see her mouth open and close as she looks slightly flustered at my offer.

“It’s just dinner and a drink. Nothing serious. You did well today and should be rewarded. Plus, I can’t have you come to New York and not enjoy at least one night out. Think of it as a mini party before being locked away in the painting dungeon.”

At my explanation, she laughs. The warmth and vibrance of her laughter floats around me, constricting my heart as I watch the dimples in her cheeks grow red from her amusement.

“Okay...okay.” She pants as she catches her breath. “I’ve never had anyone describe my studio like that before, but I’ll go. Just as long as you promise it’s just dinner, and one drink only. I don’t want to get drunk... I plan on waking up bright and early tomorrow to begin.”

“Deal. Dinner and one drink only.”

Taking Kylie to the building was definitely memorable. The moment she saw the space she had to work with, her eyes lit up and—due to her amazement—she almost tripped and fell. Thankfully though, I was standing right next to her.

She took notes and pictures with her phone, telling me it was all reference for when she began conceptualizing the art. Whatever that meant.

I can’t deny that spending time with her is something I’ll never get enough of.

With one final look in the mirror, I leave my bathroom and go downstairs to wait for Kylie. We agreed to dinner, and on my way to my office, I made sure to make the best of reservations. Though, if she doesn’t hurry up, we’re going to miss them.

Glancing down at my watch, I frown. What is with this woman and being on time?

When I finally hear the sound of heels on my flooring, I look up and have to hold back the excitement I feel when I see her. She looks so fucking hot in

that simple black dress, her red hair piled artfully atop her head with a few wayward curls framing her face.

Did I think the dress was simple? Far from it. At least on her. It hugs all the right places, emphasizing her perfect breasts and trim waist. The hem stops a couple inches above her knees, giving me a tantalizing view of her slender legs.

Ho-ly fuck, she is a knockout. If I didn't realize it before—and of course I did—Kylie is no longer my brother's awkward little best friend. She's all woman now. She looks so fantastic that I want to tell her to forget going out, we're eating in. And clothes are optional.

"Ready to go?" I finally manage to choke out. She blushes and I admire how natural it looks on her. I don't know how they do it, but I've met some women who are able to make themselves blush on command.

But not Kylie. Everything about her is open and honest. It's so refreshing compared to what I'm used to being around. A sudden desire to make sure I'm the only man to make her blush takes me by surprise. Why the hell am I suddenly feeling so possessive?

"Thank you," she says, clutching her purse a little tighter. "You don't look so bad yourself."

We leave and take the private elevator down to the garage where my Bugatti is parked. She raises an eyebrow at my car but doesn't say anything. I'm not trying to impress her. I'm not trying to impress anyone. I enjoy the finer things in life, and I work hard to have them.

I drive us to one of the popular restaurants that usually requires reservations at least a month in advance, but I have a standing reservation because I tend to bring a lot of clients here. Wining and dining really can make a difference when a client is on the fence.

As the valet takes my keys, I escort Kylie up the red-carpeted walkway and into the restaurant.

"Mr. Lewis! How nice to see you this evening," a young host says when we get inside. His eyes brighten as he looks at Kylie before returning his attention to me. "Table for two tonight?"

"Yes, thank you, Sean," I answer.

Kylie shoots a surprised glance at me. As we follow Sean to my table, I don't miss the way that wandering eyes are trailing Kylie as she moves in front of me. A dark urge brews inside me as I shoot a few of the patrons a stern glare, watching as they quickly shift their attention elsewhere.

As soon as we're seated, I turn to Sean. "Bring us a bottle of my usual."

He doesn't need to be told twice as he hands us menus and scurries away to get what I asked for.

"I take it you come here often," she says wryly.

I shrug. "My clients seem to like it."

She smiles and takes a sip of her water, her eyes darting around the restaurant above the rim of her glass.

"Wow, this place is amazing," she says softly after setting her glass down.

I glance around, trying to see it through her eyes. I'm so used to it, the miniature chandeliers above each table don't even impress me anymore. The lighting is dim and intimate, but not dark like a bar. There are candles on each table. Real candles, not battery-operated cheap imitations. Pristine white linen tablecloths are accented with royal blue cloth napkins.

But, as I look around the room, what I really notice is all of the men within view of my more private table are looking at Kylie with appreciation. Even in a place like this, I can't get complete privacy and part of me hates it. All it does is set me on edge. She doesn't even realize she's gorgeous and is getting so much male attention.

"I'm looking forward to getting to work on the paintings," Kylie says with genuine enthusiasm lacing her soft voice.

"I'm sure that Moore will be excited to see what you come up with."

She nods as the waitress appears to take our order. "Some will be a bit challenging, especially the last one... but I will focus on the others for now," she says once the waitress leaves.

"Do you have everything you need?" I'm not sure what to talk about. Usually my dinners are business-related and I'm trying to close a deal. Normally the conversation revolves around that, not so much light conversation between old friends. If that's what you would even call us.

Kylie chuckles. "More than enough. You really didn't have to go to so much trouble. I'm sure I'll be able to use a lot of it and you'll probably have supplies left over."

When our food arrives, Kylie starts up a comfortable chatter about her work and her friend Stella. She mentions Stella's dream of having her own studio and her plans to give art lessons to the kids in the area. I find myself listening to what she is saying, surprised that I'm interested in a conversation that has nothing to do with work for once.

It's just so easy being around Kylie. She's not pretentious. She's not trying to get something from me. It's a nice change.

Halfway through the conversation, I glance up to see John walking toward us. He grins and waves when our eyes meet. I jerk my head up in recognition, then look back at Kylie.

Unfortunately, John doesn't take the hint and walks over to our table.

"Thought I'd stop by and meet this beautiful lady," John says, his eyes roaming over Kylie.

"Kylie, this is John Moore. John, this is Kylie Simmons," I say, trying to make the conversation end as quickly as possible.

Kylie, however, is oblivious to my intentions and smiles at him. "Hello, it's nice to meet you. Do you work with Dante?"

John chuckles and shrugs. "Not exactly. We're old friends I guess you could say."

Hardly.

"Well, it was nice seeing you —"

My words are cut short as he ignores my hints and turns his attention to Kylie. "So, how do you know Dante? Are you a client?"

Her eyes meet mine for a second, mouth slowly opening. "Uh, no. We're... old friends. I'm just in town on business for a while."

"Is that right?" He grins. "Well if you ever need someone to show you around..."

"She's fine." I finally snap. "You've met her, now you can go."

Kylie's gasp is soft. John raises his eyebrows in surprise at my tone, but shrugs and walks away.

"You didn't have to be so rude," she admonishes me.

What the fuck? I sound like a jealous boyfriend. This isn't the first time John has come over to a table where I'm sitting with a woman to meet her. Why am I so bent out of shape now?

"You're naïve," I grind out between clenched teeth. "John would fuck you and forget you in a second." I shrug as if it doesn't bother me. "But, hey, if that's what you want, I would happily accommodate you."

I know as soon as the words are out of my mouth that it's the wrong thing to say, but I can't take it back. Her face flushes a bright red and her mouth tightens into a grim line. She narrows her eyes and stands.

I shouldn't be acting the way I am, and guilt fills me. Kylie is a grown woman, and we've been having a nice day up until this point. For me to act

like this is out of line. Not that I wouldn't beat John's ass if he so much as touched Kylie.

That man won't get a single second alone with her as long as I'm breathing.

It's not until I see her put her napkin on the table and grab her purse that I realize she's actually planning on walking out. Leaning across the table, I grab her hand, momentarily stalling her.

"Kylie, I apologize. I was just angry and being protective. Like a big brother, since I've known you practically your whole life."

When she just stands there staring at me, I release her hand and sit back. Finally, she nods, rolling her eyes with a slight huff as she reclaims her seat, but the happy, jovial mood of earlier is gone.

Thankfully, she bought my bullshit story about protecting her like a big brother. That's the furthest thing from the truth. Even now, with her still upset, I can't help staring at her in that tight little black dress and imagining her tied up and blindfolded in my bed.

Mentally, I shake my head. I have to stop letting my dick rule my thoughts. I'm not interested in relationships, and Kylie would never agree to a one-night stand or a mutually beneficial sexual partnership. Especially if I presented her with a non-disclosure agreement like I have with the other women.

I brought her here to help seal my real estate deal and that's what I need to focus on. I need to keep things between us completely professional. No matter how much my dick wants otherwise.

"I will be out of town for the next few weeks," I find myself saying, even though I hadn't decided until this moment. But I have to put distance between us, and this seems the likeliest way. "You should have everything you need. Except food," I add wryly. "But I'll make sure that's taken care of. Just give a list of what you need to my assistant. I'll email you her information."

"I can buy my own food," Kylie argues, but I wave a dismissive hand.

"It's part of the deal. You have a free place to stay, food, and all the supplies you need."

She doesn't argue. Instead, she falls silent and every part of me wishes she hadn't.

Chapter Nineteen

KYLIE



It's been a week since Dante left town, and my progress is coming along better than I even imagined. I guess it helps to have this huge studio space and no other distractions, although it does get a bit lonely now and then. I'm used to having Stella and Max around, coming and going throughout the day. But here, in this unfamiliar and opulent penthouse, it's way too quiet and a bit depressing at times.

Even if I was excited to have no distractions.

Dante kept true to his word about food, but not in the way I expected. I made a grocery list and gave it to his assistant. I was expecting groceries to be delivered, but instead, Dante set it up so that I get fresh meals delivered daily. Apparently, the items I noted on my list helped his assistant to determine what kinds of food I'd be cooking because those are the kinds of meals I receive.

It actually saves me quite a bit of time. I don't have to do the shopping or cooking for myself, which means I have more time to work. On the downside, it also means I don't have a reason to take a break and step away from my work.

My cell phone dings, indicating I have a text message. Putting down my brush, I grab the phone and swipe to open it. A smile pulls at my mouth as I see Dante's name. He's been texting me regularly all week, and without that broody, intimidating nature of his, our brief conversations have been friendly. It seems so much easier and natural talking to him via text messaging.

Dante: How is everything going?

I rapidly type back a response.

Great. I've got one painting nearly complete and one about halfway there.

True, our conversations aren't that thought-provoking or in-depth, but I have always found it hard to speak to him face-to-face. He intimidates me, and he always seems to do it in a way that leaves me utterly speechless—but also makes my heart race, my core ache, and my body beg to be close to him in a way I've never felt before. And though the texts between us the last few days have been nice, they haven't done anything to ease the boredom and loneliness I feel.

As I clean up my workstation and get ready to take a shower, I realize it's already Friday. The weekend is here and I have no plans. What I really need is a break. Not just from work, but from this huge penthouse as well. There's no telling when Dante will return. I wonder if he really had to go out of town for business or if he is just giving me my space so I can work faster.

Maybe he's not as impervious to me as he wants me to believe. When he told me I was staying here, I thought I wouldn't be able to. I mean, he said he was rarely home since he's always working, but I still thought I'd be in close proximity with him in the evenings. Instead, it feels more like he left town to avoid me. Though, I'm not sure why I'm bothered by that... I shouldn't care.

But for some reason I do.

With a sigh, I take a quick shower, then grab a premade meal of lemon chicken and broccoli out of the refrigerator and warm it up in the microwave. Once the bell chimes letting me know my meal is ready, I take it and a glass of wine into the living room and sit on Dante's gigantic black leather sectional couch. He'd probably have a meltdown if he saw me eating on his furniture, but he's not here to yell at me, so I don't care.

Since I've got this huge place all to myself... I glance at my phone on the couch beside me and smile. Setting my dinner plate on the coffee table, I grab my phone and call Stella.

She answers after the second ring. "Kylie! How's it going, girl?"

I smile, feeling a little less lonely just hearing her happy voice. "Not bad, but I had a thought. If you and Max aren't doing anything, why don't you close up my studio for the weekend and come for a visit? Jersey isn't too far from where I am so we can take a look at a few of the studio property options

that you have been considering as backups.”

“What about Dante? Aren’t you staying at his place?” she asks. “He’s such a grouch, or so you’ve told me, I don’t want to get on his bad side by intruding in his space.”

Laughing, I shake my head even though she can’t see me. “He’s not even here. He’s been out of town pretty much the whole time I’ve been here.”

“Well, that’s pretty rude,” Stella chides. “What kind of person invites another to stay at their place and then takes off on them?”

“Dante does,” I answer glibly. “But honestly, I’m not complaining. This isn’t a personal visit. I’m here for work. However, since I’ve been working so hard I figured I earned a little fun.”

As much as I try to act like I’m not bothered, I am. Though, I don’t tell her that.

“I don’t know... I’d love to see my family in Jersey. And I’m sure that they’ll let us crash there.” Stella pauses for a second. “Max just walked in. Let me ask him what he thinks.”

I hear muffled sounds as if Stella has covered the phone, and then a minute later, she gets back on the line.

“Max says, hell yes.” Stella laughs. “We’ll catch an early flight in the morning and be there as soon as possible. Oh, this is exciting! I can’t wait to see you and what you’ve done on those paintings so far.”

I can’t help the smile that crosses my face at the thought of seeing my friends. Honestly, with how things have been with Dante, I really need it. “I’m looking forward to seeing you guys, too!”

The next morning, true to their word, Stella and Max make their appearance bright and early. Stella’s eyes are round as saucers as she takes in Dante’s penthouse suite. and I wonder if that’s how I looked when he first brought me here.

“Holy shit...” she murmurs, tiptoeing across the floor like she’s afraid she will break something.

Max whistles and rubs his blonde beard. “I’ll say one thing for him, the man’s got taste.”

“More than likely he had some fancy expensive designer do everything.”

I laugh with a shake of my head. “Not that I’m complaining. This place is beautiful.”

My phone rings and I grab it out of my back pocket, then grin when I see Dante’s name. “Speak of the devil...” I say, briefly showing Max the phone before answering it.

“Hi, Dante.” My voice seems overly cheerful. Probably because I’m excited my friends are here and I get to leave for a few hours.

There’s a slight pause before he talks. “Good morning, Kylie. I just thought I’d call and check in to make sure you don’t need anything. Is there anything you do need?”

“Would you get a look at this?” Max asks, pointing at a sculpture on the table. Stella walks over to it and I shake my head with a smile.

“Who’s that?” Dante asks, and it takes me a minute to realize he must have heard Max talking.

“Oh, that’s just Max,” I answer offhandedly. “Everything’s great here, Dante. Thanks for checking in, but I really need to get going. I’ll be out all day but I’ll be back tonight.”

I glance at the time and say, “Gotta go. Bye.”

I don’t wait for Dante to answer, I’m too excited to spend time with Stella and Max. After ending the call, I stuff my phone into my back pocket and practically skip over to my friends.

“I’m so glad to see you guys!” I draw them in for a brief group hug. “Now, let’s go get something to eat!”

“I’m starving,” Stella agrees. “Those cookies on the plane are good, but they don’t do anything to satisfy an appetite.”

The moment breakfast is done, we pile into Max and Stella’s rental car and go to a few of the locations I had picked out for Stella to see. I watch her closely, but she doesn’t seem overly enthused by any of the choices, for which I’m secretly glad.

The whole point of showing her other options is so that she doesn’t get suspicious when she suddenly received an anonymous donation towards her art studio and youth center, that is technically coming from Dante’s client for the paintings I create. I want Stella to get that studio she wants so badly, but I

have to be careful how I go about it.

“What do you think about this one?” I ask as we stand outside a single-story red brick building with large glass windows and a rickety white door. The place definitely needs some work done to it, but I can see its potential.

Her eyes turn to me with a questioning gaze as she raises a brow. “Kylie, I love you... but this place isn’t worth the price. Not to mention, you and I both know the lighting isn’t right—it doesn’t catch any morning sun, and the building next to it blocks evening light.”

I nod, understanding exactly what she means, before looking down the street. “Why don’t we get a coffee... looks like there is a place right up the road, and I don’t know about you, but I need a break. And to get out of this heat. July in Jersey is no joke.”

Max and Stella both agree, and before I know it we step into a shop that smells of coffee and fresh baked goods. It reminds me of Madi’s mom’s place back in Willowcreek. It doesn’t take long for us to get our drinks and a snack and find an empty table.

“So, you didn’t like any of them?” I ask and then take a sip of my iced coffee.

Stella cocks her head to the side and smiles. “They’re nice,” she says after a minute, but it’s obvious none of them really called to her. Not like the one she wants.

“Well, they’re just backups, which I’m sure you won’t need,” I say with an encouraging smile.

Stella sighs, her eyes showing nothing but defeat as she runs her hand through her short hair. “The problem is, I do need one. I can’t afford the place I want. I mean, that is my dream studio. I know I need to be realistic, but I just feel...”

Her words die short as I place my hand on hers. “Defeated. I get it. Don’t give up yet, though, we will figure something out.”

She replies with a meek smile, Max wrapping his arm around her shoulder in a comforting gesture before he lays his hands on the table.

“So, what are the plans for tonight?” he asks as we finish our coffee, standing from the table.

Every part of me hesitates for a moment as I think about Dante and the work I’m supposed to be doing. Though, as much as I probably should go back and lock myself into the work that needs to be done, I also need to have fun.

I grin. “Dancing, of course!”

Stella claps her hands together. “Yes! It’s been a while!”

It has indeed been a while. The three of us spent so many nights together back in New Orleans, hitting the bars and dance floors, enjoying ourselves. And over the past few months there has been so much crazy stuff going on we haven’t really been able to.

“That’s the truth. Speaking of which, I’m going to go back to the penthouse and get ready for tonight,” I tell them.

Max nods. “We can drop you off on our way back to the hotel. Then meet you back at the apartment, say around eight?”

I nod as we pile into the rental car. The city streets of Jersey pass us by as we head back into the Big Apple. It’s crazy how my life has changed so much over the past couple of weeks. And though I never expected my future to include New York... I can’t help but sense how it feels like home.

Chapter Twenty

DANTE



What the fuck!
I open my home to Kylie and she has random guys in it while I'm away? And who is this Max guy, anyway? This is the second time I've heard his name and known that he's around her.

I try to concentrate on work, but I just keep hearing Max's voice in the background and Kylie in a hurry to get off the phone with me. I had planned that coming to Miami would be not only beneficial to her, but for me as well. I already have a beach-side condo here, and with the way Miami is growing, there is definitely room for me to expand my portfolio.

It's a win-win situation. Or at least, I thought it would be.

Kylie would be able to get work done, and I wouldn't be distracted by her. Or vice versa.

But instead, I find out that some other stupid fuck is distracting her?!

Fuck this. I shove my papers into a briefcase, grab my suit jacket off the hook on the wall behind my desk, and lock up my office. There's no way I'll be able to concentrate knowing *Max* is at my house with Kylie.

By the time I land in New York and get to the penthouse, it's early evening. I step inside and put my briefcase on the floor and my keys on the glass table in the entryway. That's as far as I get when someone knocks on the door.

I open it and scowl at the thin blonde-haired man who is grinning widely at me.

"Hi, you must be Dante —"

"Who the fuck are you?" I growl at the stranger.

“Oh, Dante! You’re back!” I turn toward the sound of Kylie’s voice and my jaw practically unhinges. She’s wearing a sexy red dress that is skin-tight and a bit too low-cut for my tastes. Although, compared to what most women wear, it’s modest, showing just enough cleavage to make a man’s mouth water. I don’t like the idea of her being out where men will be staring at her, though, imagining fucking her.

“Hi, Max!” Kylie says, her high heels clicking on the laminated floor as she comes closer. Wait, Max? I turn back to the stranger at the door and scrutinize him. He’s lanky, with perfectly-styled hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He’s not Kylie’s type at all.

Who am I kidding? I have no idea what her type is. A tall brunette with a short bob haircut peeks her head around the door, startling me a bit. I didn’t realize anyone else was there.

“Hi, I’m Stella,” the woman says as Kylie comes to stand next to me. “And I take it you’re Dante?”

I grunt in response, feeling a bit dazed and uncertain. So, Max wasn’t alone with Kylie all this time. The relief that brings me also irritates me. For fuck’s sake, I have to stop getting so jealous.

“They’re here for me, Dante,” Kylie says cheerfully. “We’re going out for a bit.”

“Where are you going?” I ask, still standing in front of the door.

“This club down by The Square,” Kylie answers. “PJ’s or something.”

“TJ’s?” I ask with a raised brow, and she nods.

“Yeah, that’s it! TJ’s.”

“I’ll come with you.” The words are out of my mouth before I even know I’m going to say anything. “One of my clients owns that club.”

Kylie looks a bit startled, but she nods and grins. “The more the merrier.”

I grab my keys off the glass table and nudge my way through Max and Stella, who are still standing in the doorway. I’ve been in the same suite all day, but I don’t give a fuck, I refuse to leave Kylie alone with Max for another second.

“We were going to call a cab,” Kylie calls out behind me.

“No need.”

I know I’m being short and snappy, but I can’t help it. For some reason, whenever I’m around Kylie I always feel off-kilter. I lead the way to the elevator and the others join me. Kylie and Stella keep up a steady, excited chatter and I find myself relaxing a little.

“I just still can’t believe it,” Stella says as the elevator doors close. “What fucking assholes. As if Harrington Properties doesn’t have enough real estate, they had to go and buy *my* studio out from under me!”

I stiffen. I know exactly who bought the property. John McKinnon. If Kylie finds out, she’d think I had something to do with it. And why should I care? Even though I didn’t, it’s just business. Nothing personal.

Or, so I try to tell myself. But somehow when it comes to Kylie, things seem to be very personal. As Kylie and Stella talk about what an evil bastard whoever runs Harrington Properties is, I zone out. I don’t need to listen to it, and it’s not my business anyway.

The elevator doors open into the garage, we pile into my BMW, and then drive over to TJ’s. I don’t talk throughout the drive. I wouldn’t know what to say, anyway. The valet takes my keys, and we walk inside the upscale club.

I don’t even have to say anything to the bouncer for him to nod his head in acknowledgment, lifting the red velvet rope as he lets us pass through with ease. The gesture causes Kylie to give me a sideward glance of curiosity. I furrow my brow in confusion.

“Does everyone in New York know you?” Kylie asks.

I look down at her upturned face. Her expression doesn’t say she’s overly impressed with my popularity. If anything, she looks like it irritates her.

“The important ones do,” I quip.

She shakes her head with a sigh. “Of course they do.”

Walking through the club, I take them up to the VIP area. The table I have here is secluded, yet offers a perfect view of the dance floor below. I’m not a big fan of clubs, but at least TJ’s is tasteful. The strobe light over the dancefloor isn’t in my eyes. There’s just enough swirling light to give it the club ambiance, but not so much as to make someone dizzy.

“Wow, the VIP treatment,” Stella says with a grin.

I ignore Stella’s comment, watching as Kylie slides into the booth first, followed by Stella and Max, leaving me at the end. As much as part of me would love to be squeezed up next to Kylie to ensure no other man can get his hands on her, it’s clear she has no interest in getting close to me right now.

At least this way I have a better chance of intercepting any asshole who tries to talk to her.

A waitress comes over to the table and we order drinks. While Kylie, Max, and Stella continue to talk excitedly, I sit back and watch. Some might

call it brooding, but I can't help it. Kylie has got me all twisted around and I don't know which way is up.

Suddenly, Kylie stands up, grabs Stella's hand, and drags her out of the VIP lounge and down to the dance floor. I can't help a smile that pulls the corner of my mouth up as I watch Kylie dance. She's not exactly graceful, but it's the freedom and happiness that shines on her face that draws my attention. She looks so carefree, as if she doesn't have a care in the world. Fuck, wouldn't that be nice?

The women come back up to the lounge and chug the drinks the waitress had just brought over, then they hurry back to the dance floor again.

"She's something else, isn't she?"

I turn to Max, my eyebrows drawn up in confusion. "Excuse me?"

"Kylie," he repeats. "She's something else." He sighs and leans back in his chair. A small smile plays along his mouth and his eyes are focused on the dance floor.

"I have to admit, I've loved her pretty much since I met her. Even when I was dating Stella in college, a part of me was in love with Kylie."

My grip tightens on my drink to the point that I have to consciously loosen it for fear of shattering the glass. I don't want to hear how much Max loves Kylie. I don't want to find out they've been fucking.

Max shakes his head and looks at me. "She's never seen me as anything but a good friend." His tone is a bit sad. His eyes narrow slightly and he stares hard at me. "She's never looked at me the way she does you."

He pauses long enough to take a sip of his drink then pins me with his gaze again. "Don't string her along," he warns, and I bristle a bit at the warning. "It will break her heart."

I don't think I have the power to do that, but I nod and turn my attention back to the women on the dance floor. Throughout the rest of the night, I watch Kylie dancing and having a great time. She and Stella come up to the lounge for a few minutes and a couple drinks, then return to dancing.

I have to get over this obsession with her, but how? And will I be able to? She has a hold on me unlike any woman I've ever known, and I don't know what to do about it.

Just before the club closes for the night, we leave. I order a car to take Stella and Max back to New Jersey, then drive Kylie back to the penthouse. She's a bit intoxicated, I can't help but notice, and I grin a little when she leans her head on my shoulder and sighs.

“You know, tonight was nice,” she tells me, before leaning towards the window, her eyes looking up at the sky as I drive through the city. “I like it when you’re nice.”

I find myself speechless at her words. I have been hard on her, that’s nothing new.

By the time we get to the apartment, she’s staring at her phone. Scrolling through reading god-knows-what. “We’re here.”

She looks up at me, the drowsiness clear in her face as she pushes her phone back into her purse.

Getting out of the car, I go to the passenger’s side and open the door. Kylie slowly climbs to her feet, a bit unsteady as a soft giggle escapes her lips. “Sorry, sorry.”

“It’s fine,” I reply, taking her arm so as to steady her. “Let’s get you inside, though.”

It takes longer than it should to get her from the parking garage up to the apartment. The entire way I can tell she is trying to keep her composure, but is failing miserably at it. Her steps are uneven, her movements a bit wobbly. I never pictured myself having to take care of a drunken Kylie but, here we are.

She stumbles the moment we enter the apartment, and I have to catch her quickly before she falls. At least she isn’t entirely wasted, her words aren’t slurred or anything. I’m mainly cursing the extra tall high heels she’s wearing that should never be worn when someone is drinking.

“Are you used to walking in these damn things?” I ask her, watching as she uses me to brace herself while she kicks them off just inside the doorway.

“No,” she giggles. “Well, I mean I do every now and again, but I don’t like them. I prefer being barefoot and covered in paint.”

Now that is an image I’ll never be able to get out of my head. Though, in my mind—she’s naked.

When we reach her room, she pushes away from me. Her hands go to the hem of her dress as she begins to pull it up and over her head. My eyes go slightly wide as I realize what she’s doing. She has seemingly forgotten I’m still in the room.

Every part of me knows that I should go, but I can’t take my eyes off her. From the beautiful curves of her hips to the slender dip of her waist... not to mention the swell of her breasts beneath the lace of her bra, I’m captivated.

She turns to face me, her green eyes putting me in a trance I’m not prepared for.

“I think I should go.”

A small smile plays to the corner of her lips as she slowly walks towards me. “Are you sure?”

God, this woman. My cock throbs within the confines of my pants as she lays a hand on my chest, slowly glancing up at me from under thick dark lashes.

“As much as I would love to stay, you’re not thinking straight.”

“You don’t know what I’m thinking,” she murmurs, playing with the buttons on my shirt. “Stay with me.”

Taking a moment, I clench my fists at my side, contemplating the situation. She wants me, or at least the little more intoxicated version of her does. I have dreamed of having her beneath me. Bound and gagged like a good girl accepting the torture I can bring her.

But this moment isn't what I pictured. I want her to actually remember when I finally take her.

“You don’t know what you’re asking for, Kylie.”

She gives a half laugh, her hand trailing down my chest towards my belt. “I think I do.”

Without a second thought, I grab her, pushing her towards the bed as I watch her gorgeous figure bouncing slightly on the mattress with a giggle. I stalk towards her before slowly leaning over her, brushing my lips gently against the side of her cheek.

“You want me to make you feel good?”

She gasps softly, a nod of her head before she speaks. “Yes. Please.”

Fuck. Just hearing her say please makes me want to fuck her until she can’t walk. But I have to restrain myself. Instead, I look into her deep mesmerizing eyes and let myself lose a fraction of control as I kiss her with a ferocity I’d been holding back for weeks.

My tongue fights for dominance as she moans into the kiss. Her legs wrap around my waist as I place one hand on her throat and use the other to brace myself above her on the bed. Just the taste of her kiss alone has me dying to fuck her.

But not yet. She hasn’t earned that yet.

Instead, I let my lips leave hers, trailing over the side of her neck as my hand brushes down the thin bra strap on her shoulder. Her perky breast pops out from beneath it, ready for me to play with.

One minute she’s smiling and the next—a moan escapes her as I capture

the erect bud of her nipple within my teeth.

“Oh, fuck,” she gasps, wriggling beneath me.

I can't help but find amusement in her reaction, having wondered for so long how she would look. She is more beautiful, more... everything.

With her breast within my lips, my fingers find their way between her thighs, slowly sliding over the silk of her black thong, teasing her pussy lips before diving beneath the fabric, slipping inside her. She moans, her back arching as two of my fingers stretch her out as if she hasn't been stretched in ages.

To feel how tight she is has my cock straining. Every inch of it aching to stretch her to limits she's never gone before.

“Please,” she moans again. Her hips rock against my hand as I fuck her just like she needs. Slow steady strokes against her g-spot until she is begging a bit louder and cries out as she tips over the edge, her fingers gripping at the blankets on her bed as her head tips back in pleasure.

That was the first orgasm I plan to make her have tonight, but it sure isn't the last.

As she comes down, I slowly slip my fingers from her, watching as her eyes meet mine once more.

“You're such a good girl...” I murmur, lifting my soaked fingers to her lips. “Taste yourself.”

She doesn't hesitate to wrap her tongue around my fingers, moaning as she does. Her enjoyment of the arousal I created in her makes me hungry for more.

“My turn to taste.”

It almost seems like she half-expects me to lick my fingers, but instead, I go to my knees. Pulling the panties from her body in one swift motion as she sits up on her elbows staring at me. “What are you —”

Her words never finish as my mouth descends on her core with a hunger I've never felt before. No other woman I have ever fucked made me want to please her as much as Kylie does.

With a swirl of my tongue, her head falls back again. Her moans get louder and louder as I grip her hips tighter, pulling her harder against my face before placing one hand on her abdomen, not allowing her to move from where I have her.

I can feel her pulling back slightly. Eager to move with me, as if the friction of moving her pussy against my tongue motions will bring her

pleasure. But it isn't about allowing her to bring herself pleasure. It's about me bringing her pleasure. It's about my control over her in this situation.

“Oh—god!” She cries out, my lips nipping at her sensitive clit as her legs begin to shake and my tongue dives back within her core once more. “Fuck! I'm going to come... Dante... I'm —”

But it's too late, and I'm glad it is.

She comes hard, her eyes rolling back, one hand gripping my hair as she screams out in pleasure. Her voice echoes around the room as if the moment is life-shattering. The sweet taste of her flows over my tongue as I lap up every single last drop.

I don't let her go right away. Not until the shaking stops and she falls flat on her back, panting as she tries to catch her breath. Standing to my feet, I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand and gently get her tucked into bed.

After what I did, her eyes fluttered close. Exhaustion takes hold of her, the sight bringing a smile to my face as I step back towards her bedroom door.

If I planned to stay away from her before... it sure as hell isn't happening now.

One taste of Kylie, and I'll be damned if anyone else is going to have her.

Chapter Twenty-One

KYLIE



Oh shit, what was I thinking? Apparently, I wasn't thinking at all. At least not with my tipsy brain.

I can't believe I came on to Dante like that! He gave me two explosive orgasms but didn't get off himself. I'm not quite sure what to think about that. I know he was turned on. I felt his hard dick straining in his pants.

Was he trying to be a gentleman and not take advantage of me since I was a bit drunk?

Snorting, I toss the covers aside and sit up. The snort turns into a groan as my head threatens to pound out of my skull. Cupping my head with both hands, I sit on the side of the bed for a couple of minutes, taking deep breaths until I feel safe enough to stand without toppling over.

First stop, shower, then it's straight to the kitchen for a nice, big, hot cup of coffee. I don't drink very often, and this hangover is one of the reasons why.

After showering and getting dressed for the day in a pair of jeans and a t-shirt, I head toward the kitchen. Then stop dead in my tracks. I've spent most of my time here alone in the penthouse and I wasn't expecting to see Dante. Especially after last night.

But here he is, standing at the counter pouring two cups of hot coffee. The aroma tickles my nose and calls me toward the brew. He looks up when I'm close and although he doesn't smile, he doesn't frown either, so that's something, I guess.

Heat climbs my throat and spreads across my cheeks. God, this is so embarrassing! I drop my eyes from his face, not wanting to see censorship or disappointment in his gaze after how I behaved last night. Unfortunately, my

gaze goes to his hands where he's holding out a coffee cup to me and I can't help but think about the pleasure those hands brought me last night.

"How did you sleep?" Dante's deep voice sends shivers down my spine. After swallowing thickly and forcing myself to gain some kind of control over my wayward thoughts, I look up and smile.

"Like a baby," I say, and take the proffered cup of coffee, holding it between both hands.

He nods and takes a sip of his own. "I'll be at the office most of the day, but I'll bring something back for dinner. Do you have any preferences?"

I guess now that he's back, those one-person meals he was having delivered aren't going to cut it anymore.

I shake my head with a soft laugh. "Not really. It's too early to be thinking about dinner anyway."

A slight smile pulls at the corner of his mouth, which amazes me. I can probably count on one hand the number of times I've seen a genuine smile from him, and although this isn't a full ear-to-ear grin, it's something.

I half-expect him to say something about last night. Maybe even make a sarcastic comment. But he doesn't. Part of me is glad he doesn't, but at the same time... I'm conflicted.

Is he mad he didn't get off? Or bothered that I acted the way I did?

My mind simply refuses to shut off as I watch him stand silently at the kitchen island, sipping his coffee as he scrolls through his phone. It's as if the Dante in front of me is completely different from the one who brought me here.

After finishing his coffee, Dante rinses out the cup and puts it in the dishwasher. "See you tonight," he says, then walks out of the kitchen.

My brow furrows at his nonchalant action, and I find myself even more baffled

He hasn't even mentioned what happened between us the night before. He's just walking around, acting as if nothing happened. Though, perhaps that's for the best after I practically attacked him last night. The memory mortifies me to no end.

I carry my cup to the table and sit down. That wasn't nearly as awkward as I thought it was going to be. *Think positively... Everything's fine. It was just a poor decision after one drink too many.*

But is that really what it was? Biting the corner of my lip, I ponder everything. Did what happened between us mean that he cares for me more

than he is saying? Does it mean that I care for him more than what I had believed?

No... that's ridiculous. Now I'm overthinking things.

Taking my time, I try to rid myself of my hangover. I down one coffee after another before grabbing a donut from a pink box on the counter that had been delivered.

Taking a moment to collect myself, I grab the coffee and head towards my studio to start the day. There is still so much to do, and the most time-consuming are the initial studies I desperately need to get done if I want to nail each piece. Though, I'm not sure how far I'll get feeling like shit.

Not to mention the massive amount of confusion swirling in my mind like a storm on an open sea.

By early evening, I'm still so caught up in perfecting the compositions that I don't even realize I've missed lunch until I hear the front door close. Between my music and endless amounts of coffee, I lost myself in my work like I used to do in my studio back in New Orleans.

I clean up my work area, wash my hands and face, and go into the kitchen where Dante is busy unpacking to-go food.

"Mmm, smells delicious," I say, walking over to grab plates out of the cupboard. My stomach rumbles in anticipation and Dante shoots me a wry smile.

Roast beef smothered in gravy, broccoli with cheese sauce, garlic bread, and a small green salad. All this time, I have yet to ask him who his caterer is. I really need to do that, because they are divine. We carry our plates to the table and sit across from each other.

I'm so hungry, I dig in and moan in satisfaction. Dante glances at me with a raised eyebrow, his eyes turning hot, but he doesn't say anything.

And that's how the rest of the week goes with us. Every morning, we meet in the kitchen for coffee and a little conversation before starting the work day. It's crazy to think that when this all started we barely spoke to each other. Little by little, our conversations started to grow. It reminds me of how things were with Stella and Max back home. How we would talk about the most random of things, and laugh at funny stories.

Day to day, he continues to surprise me with how different he has become. And how much he seems to care about how I feel and what I have to say.

Sometimes, Dante surprises me by dropping off lunch, which is a good

thing since I'm so caught up in my work that half of the time I forget to eat. Three times this week he's taken me to fancy restaurants for dinner.

While the extravagant lifestyle was initially nice, I'm getting a bit tired of it. I'm not used to eating out all the time or having all of my meals prepared. Sure, I actually felt spoiled at first. But now, well, it's just too much. I miss home cooking and relaxing in a pair of sweatpants in front of the television.

Suddenly inspired, I order some groceries for dinner and start cooking. It will be nice to stay in for a change and eat something not prepared at a restaurant. Since we've been having such rich meals, I decide to go for something simple, yet tasty. Pasta is almost always a good choice, and I do make a mean lasagna if I say so myself.

"What's this?"

I practically jump to the ceiling at the sound of Dante's voice. I didn't hear him come in. He walks over and stands next to me where I'm putting a garlic butter spread on French bread.

"I thought it would be nice to have home cooking for a change." I smile and wave the spatula at him.

"It smells good," he nods with a small smile.

"It will be ready in about twenty minutes."

"That gives me enough time to shower and get out of this suit," Dante says, then turns and walks out of the kitchen.

I watch him walk away for a second, then finish putting the butter on the bread and set it aside to pop in the oven when dinner is a little closer. Rummaging in the refrigerator, I gather the salad fixings and take them over to the kitchen island.

Grabbing the cutting board, I move the ingredients to the side to make room, then notice Dante left his phone on the counter and it beeps with a message. My hand is already on the phone to move it out of the way. I don't mean to look, but I still see the message.

"Hi, handsome. I hear you need some company tonight."

My blood turns cold and I feel a little dizzy. Apparently, our night together didn't mean nearly as much to Dante as it did to me. Although, until now, I didn't realize just how much it meant. True, we didn't have sex, but we were intimate and he gave me two of the best orgasms of my life. But this is a good thing, I tell myself. I don't need to get caught up with Dante. I know nothing will ever come of it except heartache. My heartache.

Dante comes into the kitchen just as I finish setting the table. He looks at

the meal laid out and offers me a genuine smile. He even walks around and pulls my chair out for me, like he actually cares. Not that it matters, I remind myself.

“So,” I say as casually as possible after we start eating. “You have plans tonight?”

He looks at me with a frown. “No.”

I shrug. “I happened to read a text message from a lady friend that suggests you were going to meet tonight.” I feel like an idiot bringing it up, but I want to see his expression.

He narrows his eyes at me, laying down his fork as he swallows the bite of food in his mouth. “You went through my phone?”

“No,” I say quickly, feeling guilty that I even looked at it. “It was just lying on the counter... I was moving it out of the way when it lit up.”

“That doesn’t mean you need to read it.” I can’t tell if he is pissed at me or what. His voice is a little more stern, and his sweet and caring attitude from earlier is long gone.

“It’s not a big deal. We each have our own personal lives. I was just curious and making conversation.”

When he raises his eyes, his expression is guarded. “I’ve told you, I don’t do commitments. I only answer those texts if the timing suits me.”

When the timing suits him? What the hell?!

Clearing my throat, I force myself to swallow a bit of food. “I guess that’s what the other night was, then,” I mutter under my breath.

If he hears me, he doesn’t say anything.

Now if that isn’t awkward, I don’t know what is. “I... Uh ... I’m making really good progress on the paintings. In fact, I’m almost done, only a few left,” I say, trying to get off the uncomfortable topic I stupidly started.

He glances at me and scowls. “You must be thrilled to be getting away from me so soon.”

My mouth practically drops open in shock. Is that what he thinks? That I want to get away from him? Anger starts to claw at my throat. He’s the one that’s always trying to get away from me.

Standing, I grab my plate and take it into the kitchen. “I would think it’d be the other way around. You’ll be glad to get rid of me! Then you’ll have time for all your other women without me being here underfoot.”

I’m rinsing my plate off as I’m talking, so I don’t realize he’s come up behind me until he places his hands on my shoulders and turns me to face

him.

“I don’t have other women,” he growls. “They’re just... business arrangements.”

“Business arrangements?” I exclaim. “That’s how you view sex?”

His eyes grow dark, with anger or lust I’m not sure. He doesn’t answer though, at least not with words. Grabbing the back of my neck, he pulls me close and presses his mouth against mine. I practically melt against him, like putty in his hands.

Dante breaks the kiss and pulls back, but I wrap my arms around his neck and try to pull him closer.

“Tell me to stop, Kylie.” His voice is husky and full of need. “Tell me to stop now because I don’t think I can control myself for much longer.”

I smile up at him, pressing my breasts against his broad chest. “I’m not afraid of your dark side,” I whisper. “I want to see it all.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

KYLIE



Snatching my arm, he pulls me forward, all but dragging me through the kitchen and towards the stairs that lead up to his wing of the apartment. I'm not sure what to expect, but I don't hesitate. I want to know it all.

The moment we reach the top, he takes me down to the second door on the right and opens it. My eyes adjust to the scene as my mouth hangs open. A four-poster bed sits in the center, but that's not what surprises me. Instead, it's the racks and racks of paddles, whips, floggers, and other toys that are in full view for use.

"What is this place?" I ask softly, watching as Dante stands at my side, letting me adjust to everything I'm surrounded by.

"It's my playroom."

Playroom?

I stand, dumbfounded and exhilarated all at the same time. This is the kind of thing I'd always dreamed of, to be the submissive to a dominant, but I'd never found someone I'd be willing to submit to.

My body is super aware of every step that Dante makes as he steps closer towards me. My heart racing as I feel his fingers brushing over my shoulder. "Do you want to play?"

I don't hesitate before looking him directly in the eye. "Yes."

He doesn't need to be told twice as he turns me to face him. His lips crash on mine once more as he pulls me close to him, his hand fisting my hair as he walks me backward towards the large bed sitting against the wall on the far side of the room. The moment the backs of my thighs touch the edge he pulls back.

"Strip." His words are a command, and I don't hesitate to follow them.

My eyes never leave his as I unbutton my jeans and pull my shirt from over my head, tossing my clothes into a pile on the floor. “All of them.”

This time hesitation fills me. But I comply. I very slowly let my eyes falter as I lower them, letting my white cotton panties slip to the floor, followed by my white bra. I kick them to the side towards the other clothes.

This is the first time I’ve ever stood bare before Dante, and it scares me. Hesitation and concern flow through me like a raging river as he steps forward and lifts my chin so that my eyes meet his. “Don’t be embarrassed or shy with me. You’re a goddess, and in this room—you can be whoever you want to me. As long as it’s mine.”

Taking a step back, he moves towards a dresser drawer on the far side of the room. His hands dig around for something, before I watch him turn to face me. He holds a satin strand of fabric within his fingers, and a mischievous glint in his eyes.

“Hold out your wrists.”

I do as he says, watching as he binds my wrists with the fabric, ensuring the knots are tight so that I can’t move. Everything about what he is doing sets my nerves on edge. Especially when he lifts my hands above my head and secures me to a hook I hadn’t seen before.

I’m restrained, a victim to whatever pleasure he decides to place on me. Only able to submit to him, and unable to escape.

“Now at any point in time you want me to stop, I will. All you have to do is say your safe word.”

I glanced at him. “My safe word?”

“Yes. It can be any word you want, and when you say it during our sessions... I’ll immediately stop what I’m doing.”

Pondering for a moment, I think of what word to use. “Willow.”

He stares at me. “Willow?”

“Yeah, because that’s short for Willowcreek and that’s the place that brought us together.”

As silly as it may sound to hear me say that, it seems to make something flicker in him as he runs a hand down the side of my face. A small grin plays on his lips as he leans in, kissing the tip of my nose. “Very well. Willow it is. One last question, are you on birth control? I could use a condom, but I’m clean and there is nothing I want more than to feel all of you”

“Birth control,” I whisper back, “I want to feel you too.”

“Good Girl”

Hearing him say that makes my choice seem so final. Exhilaration travels through my body the moment he lifts another satin piece and wraps it around my head, covering my eyes. I'd never been blindfolded before, but I'd always wanted to try it.

No longer can I see or touch him, but I can feel him. And every time his fingers brush over my skin I flinch, shivers rushing over my spine with excitement. I'm a prisoner to his desires, and there's nothing I can do—unless I say the safe word.

My hearing is heightened with my other senses taken away. The sound of another drawer opening causes my head to turn in its direction, my ears following every footstep that Dante takes as he moves back to me. “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” I say softly. “More than ready.”

Before I realize what's happening, lips descend on my skin. His tongue swirls over my tender nipples as the sound of vibration reaches my ears, and then—pleasure. My head falls back the moment the vibrating wand touches my clit. The mixture of his mouth and the toy quickly push me to the edge as I writhe against my restraints, panting and moaning.

Never in my life have I felt such pleasure. A knot in the pit of my stomach growing and growing as his teeth bite down on my sensitive nipple causing me to come hard on the wand. A loud moan escapes me as my toes curl against the floor.

But he doesn't stop... my sensitive clit begging for him to stop... but he doesn't. He takes me from one orgasmic high directly into another as a scream rips from me. His hand quickly falls to the dip above my ass as he holds me firmly in place, and tight against the wand.

“Oh my god—” I cry out. “Sir... I can't—it's too much!”

But he doesn't stop... not that I want him to. I didn't use my word.

From one rippling orgasm to another, he continues until I'm all but limp in my restraints. Tears of pleasure trickling down over my cheeks as his lips brush against mine.

“Tell me you want me,” he whispers. “Tell me how bad you want me to fill you.”

My mind a fuzz of endorphins, I nod. “Please... I want you—only you. Please.”

I don't remember him stripping his clothes, or taking a break at any point. But I'll never forget the feeling of the head of his cock gently sliding against

my swollen sensitive pussy lips. The friction of it against my clit causes me to whimper. “Please...”

With his hands on my hips, he lifts my waist. Pressing the head of his thick swollen cock against my entrance before he slowly slides it deep within me. Inch by inch he pushes inside me, my mouth open wide as I feel how full he makes me. Dante is much bigger than any man I’ve ever been with. I know he feels the stretch as he groans out, his fingers digging into the skin on my hips.

“I don’t do gentle,” he warns, a playful smile pulling at my lips.

“Good—don’t.”

After a split second, he pulls out and it’s game over. His thrusts come hard and fast. No halfway attempts at pleasure. No... he spreads me wide and slams every inch of his cock into me over and over again.

At some point, my blindfold slips down, and when it does the first thing I see are his eyes, staring back at me. That’s all it takes for his lips to capture mine, and the depth of his cock and the feverish hunger of our movements grow as he continues to fuck me without holding back.

But I love every second of it.

The way he possesses me... the way he controls me. It’s everything I want, and so much more.

Chapter Twenty-Three

DANTE



By the time I finished with Kylie, I came harder than I can ever remember coming. Her body...everything I wanted and more. And just like the others, I took care of her afterward. Aftercare isn't everyone's thing, and some of the women that I play with prefer not to have it.

They prefer to simply leave when we're done.

But I knew Kylie would be different. I ran her a bath, helped to clean her up even though she was so tired she could barely keep her eyes open, and afterwards, I carried her to her room and tucked her into bed. But I didn't stay...

Conflicted in the moment, I stood in her room, watching her breathing even out as she lay sleeping. Part of me wanted to stay. Part of me didn't want to let go of the moment. I was still shocked that she didn't break and use her safe word, and instead held out to the very end.

But the other part of me simply had to get out of there. Which is what I did.

I shouldn't have left without saying anything to Kylie. She's not like the other women I sleep with. With her, it's different. Our connection is different. Seeing her sleeping so peacefully, a tender smile on her face was almost my undoing. I actually considered calling my assistant and having my day cleared.

After last night... Well, holy fuck! I never expected her to be so passionate. So adventurous. So kinky. With some of my other lovers, I could tell they sometimes just acted out the pleasure instead of actually enjoying it. Not everyone is into bondage, and ever since seeing that painting Kylie did of herself being pleased with her hands tied, I wondered if she was really into

that sort of thing.

Now I know she is. And she enjoys the hell out of it, just like I do.

Perhaps I enjoyed it too much. That's why I have to leave this morning before she wakes up. I know that if she crooks her little finger at me, I'll be lost under the sheets with her again. And I can't lose myself that way.

Besides, after I get out of the shower, I have a text from a picky client. I have an excuse to go into the office anyway to put out some fires. That's what I tell myself as I drive through town. That's what I tell myself when I go into my office and start working.

Kylie will get over me not saying anything this morning. She even said last night during dinner that it was no big deal if I saw other women. Hell, she'll probably even thank me for sparing her the embarrassment of an awkward good morning the night after. Even if it was mind-blowing sex.

By mid-afternoon, the situation with the client isn't getting any better. In fact, I have to fly to Boston to take care of it in person because the client is threatening to pull out of the deal. After arranging the flight, I scroll through my phone, my finger hovering over Kylie's name. My first thought is to call and let her know I have to go out of town. But I don't know what to say. Do I just say, "Hi, gotta go out of town for a bit, thanks for last night?"

With a disgusted shake of my head, I put my phone away and grab my briefcase. My flight leaves in a little over an hour, so I don't have time to waste.

The flight is not long enough to get much work done, especially with thoughts of Kylie filling my head. My heart starts racing in my chest and it's a little difficult to breathe. Am I having a panic attack? Why do thoughts of her cause me such anxiety?

It feels like, for the first time since I was a kid, something is opening up inside me. A part of me I'd walled off and kept locked away. Being with Kylie now, it feels like that wall is crumbling and it terrifies the fuck out of me.

The memory of watching my mom drive away that final time slams into my brain. Would Kylie leave me, too?

I shake my head at my stupid thoughts. I'm being an idiot and only

thinking with my dick. It's not really Kylie I want, it's the idea of her. She's something I want because I don't have it.

Wanting what you don't have—a generic human flaw.

That's all there is to it, I try to convince myself as the plane lands. None of these mushy feelings are real. I don't do relationships. I don't do commitment. I go after whatever I want and get it. Once I'm done, it's always easy for me to move on to bigger and better things.

But with Kylie, it's different. I can't seem to get enough of her. I may want her in my bed, but she's my brother's best friend and there are way too many complications there. It's better if I just get the hell away from her for a while until I can remember why she doesn't belong in my life. No matter how right it seems.

While waiting to disembark from the plane, I send Kylie a message that I had to go away for business and probably won't be back tonight. I frown as an email notification pops up. It's from my secretary saying that the updated sketches for the development of Mrs. Kendall's property are finally finished and that she will have them delivered first thing in the morning.

Fuck, I'd forgotten all about that.

Putting my phone away, I grab my overnight bag and briefcase and exit the plane. I wait until I'm in the limo before taking my phone out again. I need to cancel the Kendall property plans, as I promised Kylie I would, but before I can call my secretary, my phone rings. My eyebrows raise in surprise when I see Knox's name pop up.

"What the fuck did you do?"

Knox doesn't even wait for me to properly answer the phone before starting in on me. "Have you talked to her today?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Kylie," he huffs out in exasperation. "She hasn't picked up her phone all day! Kylie *always* picks up her phone. What did you do? I know you had to have done something to hurt her."

"Why the hell would you think that?" I bark, then suddenly remember my promise to Kylie that I would try to be nicer to my brother.

I sigh long and loudly. "Shit. Sorry, Knox. It's been a rough day and I shouldn't be taking it out on you. I'm out of town for an emergency meeting with a client, but I'll check in with her."

There's a long pause on the other end. "Wow, okay," Knox says. "I thought this conversation would go a bit differently."

I smile wryly and we hang up. I immediately call Kylie but she doesn't answer my call, either. By the time I get to the meeting, I'm still frowning. I go into the conference room and sit with the client, but I only hear about half of what he's saying.

I'd been a total ass, leaving this morning without a word. It was the same damn thing I did to her last time, after we kissed. No wonder she won't answer my calls.

But why is she also not answering Knox's calls? What if she's left? If she has, I have no one to blame but myself. Someone leaving has never really bothered me before—I never get close enough to anyone for it to matter. But right now, I feel like a hand is squeezing my heart.

Suddenly, my mind travels back in time to when we were just kids and Kylie invited me to go to the treehouse with them.

"I don't want to talk about Mom!" I yell at Dad. I can't believe he's still trying to make excuses, as if she didn't leave because he couldn't make her happy. He has no right to talk about her. She left because of him.

I can't stand here and deal with this. I need to get out before we really start arguing.

I slam the door as I leave the house and walk out into the front yard. I'm so angry my hands are shaking. Mom left and that's a fact. I don't need Dad trying to explain it. I'll never forgive him.

I hear a noise and look up. Knox's friend Kylie approaches.

"Knox isn't here," I tell her. I know my voice is sharp and rude, but can't help it.

The expression on her small face falls for a second, then she looks up at me with her big eyes. "Want to go to the treehouse with me?"

"No," I snap.

This isn't the first time she's invited me, and I really want to go. Badly. I want to have fun and hang around other kids. But I can't. I don't want to get close to anyone and then have them leave me like Mom did.

To this day, I can still see that heartbroken expression on her face as she walked away. I can't seem to get the image out of my head, and wonder if that's how she looks right now. Max had warned me not to hurt her and the first opportunity I got, I bail on her.

What a fucking jerk!

By the time the meeting wraps up, it's late. I should just go to a hotel and get some sleep, but I don't want to wait until the morning to check on Kylie.

She still hasn't answered any of my texts or calls and I'm growing more concerned by the moment.

At times like these, it's really nice to have a lot of money. It doesn't take long for my private plane to take me back to New York and I make it to the penthouse just before midnight. The apartment is quiet, no television, radio, or any other noise to tell me if Kylie is still here or awake. It is late, I remind myself. She's probably asleep.

Loosening my tie, I head down the hallway, anxious to see if she's still here or if she left me. That's when I notice a small glow coming from the studio.

My heart thuds in my chest. She's still here, and apparently awake. Has she been working all day and night with her phone switched off? No, I think with a small shake of my head. Like Knox said, Kylie always answers her phone.

Obviously, she's pissed at me. I'm surprised she wouldn't talk to Knox, and that makes me worried that she's even more upset than I imagined.

Still yanking my tie from side to side to loosen it, I stop at the studio. The door is partially open. I lift my hand, intending to knock, but since it isn't closed all the way I change my mind and push it open.

My jaw drops and suddenly I can't breathe. Kylie is here all right. She's reclining on the daybed, wearing one of my white dress shirts. It's unbuttoned, showing off her cleavage but covering her nipples. New York City's skyline shines through the floor-to-ceiling glass.

All of those are great images, but what really floors me is that Kylie has her hands between her legs, her head thrown back as she pleasures herself.

I'll never, for as long as I live, forget this sight. I'm hypnotized and find my feet carrying me fully into the room and over to Kylie before I know what's going on. She finally notices me, her eyes round with surprise. Her mouth opens and I swoop in, taking her lips and capturing her gasp of surprise.

Chapter Twenty-Four

KYLIE



When I woke up this morning, an empty feeling filled my stomach when I realized Dante was gone. My heart is aching, willing me to shed tears, but I refused that opportunity. Dante had made it clear quite a few times that he doesn't do commitment. And even though we had an amazing night together it didn't mean that I should expect something more to come of it.

So instead, I carried out my morning like I usually would. Shower, dress, breakfast. Though, after breakfast, I did find myself sneaking up to the playroom. My eyes wander over all of the items in there, until they finally fall to his white shirt lying on the floor. My hands are unable to restrain themselves as I pick it up, pulling off my dress to pull it on. I inhaled the earthy aroma of his cologne as I made my way back downstairs.

Usually, I'd have cringed at someone for doing something like that. But at that moment it felt right. Almost like a sense of security that I didn't understand, though I tried to shrug off the feeling, to pretend it was simple infatuation. That I could wear his shirt with pride knowing I finally had my moment with him.

But even trying to push myself to feel that way didn't sit right. It should have, since he didn't bother to call, just texted me telling me he wasn't going to be home and had to go out of town. It was standard practice for him to not be around since I've been here, but it still bothered me.

More than I wanted it to.

I took it upon myself after that text to silence my phone and dive into my painting. Which is what I did... until my thoughts traveled to the pleasure he

created in me last night and I couldn't hold back anymore.

Chasing my own pleasure, the last person I expected to see standing over me was the same one I was thinking about at that moment.

I gasp the moment Dante's lips capture mine. The hunger and passion he drives into his kiss as his tongue sweeps across mine has my body begging for the pleasure that only he can give me.

"Dante—" I moan against his lips as his hand travels to between my thighs. His fingers slipping inside me as his thumb rubs gently against my clit.

"You've been a naughty girl, I see."

I giggle. It quickly turns into a soft gasp before I moan in pleasure at the sparks he is driving inside me. "You were gone, though... I didn't have you here to do it."

His hand cups my core tightly, causing me to jolt up closer to him as I smile with excitement. My eyes bore into his with anticipation of what he is going to do to me. I don't have to wait long, his fingers begin to move more feverishly, his lips descending on my neck as he takes possession of me.

My fingers frantically try to undo his tie and the buttons on his shirt. Sliding my hands across his bare firm chest, the feel of his muscles makes me ache with yearning to have his body against mine.

I need him, more than I have ever needed someone, and he seems to realize this.

Grasping my hips, he pulls his lips away. Spinning me over onto my front, I instantly get on my hands and knees. The feeling of his palm across my bare ass has me rocking back into him, wanting everything he can give me.

A firm crack from his hand against my bare ass causes a jolt of excitement to run through me.

"Fuck—" I pant out.

"You like that?" He chuckles, swatting me again.

"Yes! God, yes."

"Mmm—" he muses, the feeling of his fingers sliding down over my tight aching pussy before smacking it gently. "All mine."

A sound of a zipper hits my ears before I feel the swell of his cock pressing against my folds. With one hand sliding up to my neck and the other on my hip, he thrusts into me until he fills me to the brink of exploding.

A cry escapes me as he holds me tight, my back arching my ass high as

he pounds at me like I'm the last fuck he will ever have. One of the things about him that excites me the most.

He isn't gentle... and I love that he isn't.

The harder he pounds into me, the louder my moans of pleasure become. His hand every so often smacks against my ass as he drives himself faster and faster. His other hand eventually leaves my neck and tangles within my ponytail as he pulls my head back harder and continues to fuck me relentlessly.

With a cry of passion, I finally tip over the edge. My tight core squeezes around the length of his thick, hard cock as I come hard against him. His own pleasure builds as his pace slows and becomes more forceful until he finally groans out in pleasure.

Releasing himself into me without hesitation.

By the time we're done, we are both a hot panting mess. His hands rub against the small of my back as he pulls out of me, and I'm finally able to sit up properly to look at him.

"I think a welcome home is in order..." I reply as I watch him fixing his pants before he turns back to me.

Getting to my feet, I fix the button-up shirt I'm wearing and walk towards the painting I'd been working on before I decided to find pleasure in... *other things*.

"You've been busy painting all day?"

I don't bother to look up at him. "Yeah. I just can't seem to quite get the contrast on this one the way I want it."

"I tried calling you..."

My eyes meet his for a second before I glance back at the painting. "I put my phone on silent earlier. I guess I got caught up in my work and forgot to check."

"I see," he replies, taking one step towards me. "Knox tried calling you, as well."

This time I freeze. He talked to Knox? "And did that end in an argument?"

He scoffs this time. "No... I promised I would attempt to be kinder."

"Right."

He walks towards me, standing only inches from me as his fingers brush against my neck. He takes in the painting in front of me. "It looks beautiful to me."

“What does?”

I glance at him for a moment furrowing my brow as he points. “The painting.”

“You would say that,” I laugh. “It’s not finished yet. A few more days and I think I’ll have it down. I just need a break from it.”

“Is that right?” he whispers against my ear as he places one hand on my hip. “I think I know a few more things we can do tonight that will take your mind off this painting.”

“Maybe I need to be convinced...sir.”

He chuckles, the sound of his deep hearty voice vibrating against my back as his hand once again comes down around my throat. “I don’t think you need much convincing.”

He lifts me quickly, tossing me over his shoulder as laughter escapes me. He carries me out of the room, down the hallway, and towards the stairs. I know where he is taking me, and the thought of playing in his playroom once more excites me just as much as it did seeing him hovering over me, watching me play with myself.

“I need a shower!” I squeal at him, letting him manhandle me however he pleases.

He doesn’t reply, just continues to carry me up the stairs and into his playroom. Instead of throwing me on the bed, he carries me to a door, opening it to reveal an ensuite bathroom with the largest marble shower I have ever seen.

He sets me on my feet and walks towards the shower. He doesn’t say a single word, moving as if the actions he is taking are second nature.

Something deep inside me stirs with unease, unsure if it’s a good thing or not.

But honestly, if this is how staying here is going to be, who am I to complain?

In the back of my mind, though, is what he said more than once.

I don’t do commitment.

Chapter Twenty-Five

KYLIE



I wake up wrapped in strong, warm arms. At first, I think I'm still dreaming because surely I'm not actually sleeping in Dante's arms. Heat from his body envelopes me and I open my eyes, blinking at the sight of a thick, broad naked chest.

Holy hell, I'm not dreaming. Last night really did happen. It wasn't just another fantasy. I'm not sure how to feel about that. My body is happy while my head and heart remind me of just who I'm with and why I should guard my heart with everything I have.

But I'm afraid it's too late. My heart is already invested, even more so than my body. I think it always was.

He looks so peaceful in sleep. With his eyes closed and his mouth slightly open, he reminds me of the boy I used to know. None of that brooding and intense skepticism shows on his face now.

But I'm hesitant to give in to my feelings.

He always left the previous times. His statement about him not doing commitment had been loud and clear in the past... but now this? What made him stay?

I expected to wake this morning to find him gone, and yet... here he is.

Before I came to New York, Knox did tell me that Dante has the capacity to love, he just won't allow it. Their mother, leaving as she did, had really done a number on Dante. I can't believe a mother, someone who is supposed to love her children with everything in her, would choose to hurt her children so much. Thankfully, Knox isn't as traumatized since he was so young at the time.

But Dante had been old enough to know what was happening.

With a quiet sigh, I carefully remove myself from his arms and slide from bed. Last night was incredible. I'd done things with Dante I'd never expected. Fantasized about, sure, but I never thought I'd find someone I felt comfortable enough to try those things with.

Every part of me wants to give in to how I feel, but I don't know if I can. Instead, I head downstairs to my room to shower and change my clothes. The urge to do something normal is important to me because, honestly, normal is all I have right now.

A knock at the door catches my attention the moment I step out into the kitchen to grab a coffee. My eyes shift towards the stairs, my teeth biting at my bottom lip as I let out a sigh and decide to open it. Right now, I don't want Dante to wake up. I need more time to think before I can face him.

The moment I open the door a messenger in a blue suit smiles at me and hands me a large tube of presumably papers or blueprints. I frown, looking at them as he shoves a clipboard and pen at me to sign for them.

The moment I close the door I stare at the tube, my brow furrowing as I slowly carry it back upstairs to Dante's office. It's as I'm setting it on his drafting table that I see the writing on the tube. "Kendall Luxury Condominiums," and it has Mrs. Kendall's address beneath that. Normally, I wouldn't intentionally invade anyone's privacy, but I'm too incredulous to think about manners at the moment. This can't possibly be what I think it is.

But when I open the tube and pull out the rolled blueprints, my heart plunges to my stomach. I spread the paper out on the drafting table and stare unbelieving at the plans before me. This has to be a mistake. Dante promised me he wouldn't pursue this as a project, that he would leave it alone. It was part of our deal.

But there, staring me boldly in the face, is the proof. The plans call for cutting back the forested acres on the property. And, shit! They even put in a visitor's parking lot where our treehouse now stands. *What the fuck?*

I drop into the chair in front of the desk and stare at the evidence before me. My heart argues that this isn't true. *Perhaps it's mislabeled or something.* There has to be another explanation. Maybe this was in motion before he made the promise.

I shake my head. Even if that was true, he should have canceled it by now. I've been here at his penthouse for a while, there's been plenty of time to cancel it if he'd really intended to keep his promise.

Now I know the truth. Dante went back on his word. In fact, he probably

never even meant to keep it in the first place.

How could I have been so stupid? So naïve?

Well, not anymore. I'm *not* the same Kylie from our childhood. I learned my mistakes by letting people walk all over me, and I'm *not* intimidated by Dante Lewis anymore.

My fists clench on the desk, anger brewing inside me at how stupid I have been. I allowed myself to slowly build feelings for him... to feel things I didn't want to feel. My heart aches over the entire situation as I try to process the fact that he has been using me.

The intensity of it all overwhelms me. I have to get out of here. I can't stay after such betrayal. With tears caused by anger and hurt pooling in my eyes, I glance once more at the damning blueprints and leave his office.

In my room, I pull my suitcase out of the closet and start packing. Tears blur my vision and I'm not concerned about keeping things neat and orderly. I practically rip clothes off the hangers, yank everything out of the dresser drawers, and shove it all inside.

On my way out, I stop and go inside the studio. Four of the paintings are done and they're pretty damn good, if I do say so myself. I can finish the rest from Willowcreek, transport worries be damned. It's time to go home and put all this behind me. And hopefully, never see Dante Lewis's face again.

Closing the studio door as I leave, I march down the hall toward the front door. *Fuck him*. I have no intention of even saying goodbye. He doesn't deserve it. Besides, how many times did he leave me without a word? He has it coming.

"Good morning."

I whirl around at the sound of Dante's voice. As usual, I didn't hear him and he startles me, which makes me even angrier.

"Would you like to go out for breakfast?" The last word barely makes it out of his mouth as he notices the suitcase I'm carrying.

A brief look of hurt flashes in his eyes and for a second I feel guilty, remembering how his mom left him. But fuck that. He caused this. I won't let him or his sad eyes deter me.

"You went behind my back." My voice is low. I'm not yelling, but the tone makes it obvious I'm pissed off.

He frowns in confusion.

"You promised you would drop your bid to buy Mrs. Kendall's land," I explain angrily. "You *promised* me."

I haven't had a chance to do anything with my hair yet today and the curly mass is getting in my way. I push the strands behind my ear in frustration, staring Dante down as he continues to stand there and look at me without saying a word.

"I saw the plans, Dante." I'm seething. "They showed up this morning."

He flushes. Actual color dots his cheeks and his expression turns guilty. *I'm right*. That doesn't give me any comfort. In fact, it makes me feel even worse to have it confirmed.

"It's not what you think," he starts, but I'm not hearing it. His guilty expression says it all for me. "I commissioned those earlier —"

"I've been here for a while, Dante. You've had plenty of time to cancel them ... if that had really been your intention."

My breath is sawing rapidly in and out of my lungs. "Are you proud of yourself? Were you trying to seduce me to get me to sell, and then convince the others to as well?"

A muscle starts to twitch in his jaw. "I'm Dante Fucking Lewis. I don't have to pimp myself out to make deals."

"Well, it's obvious money is more important to you than anything else," I shoot back, turning sharply toward the door. I need to get the hell out of here.

"Don't throw the blame on me," he retorts. "I never hid who I am or what I want."

"And now I know you'll never change." I yank open the door, then jump back, startled. A man is standing on the other side about ready to ring the doorbell.

"Oh, hi!" he says. "I'm Robert, Sean Moore's assistant." When I just stand there staring blankly at him, he clears his throat and continues. "Of Moore Pharmaceuticals. I've been sent to collect a couple of paintings in person."

He grins, shaking his head. "Could you run along and get them for me? Moore was so impressed by the original painting Mr. Lewis showed him the picture of that he couldn't wait any longer to get his hands on a few of the finished pieces."

He thinks I'm Dante's secretary? And what picture?

Robert winks and leans in a little closer, as if telling a secret. "Don't tell your boss, but Moore knows he did the right thing by refusing to buy the property your boss was selling unless he got those paintings. He hasn't stopped bragging about the stunning redhead from the original painting, and

then she turned out to be his artist.” He pauses for a second, tilting his head, then his eyes widen. “Oh...is that you? Are you the artist?”

“Fuck.”

Dante’s curse is quiet, but I still hear him. I don’t think it was loud enough for Robert to hear. At least, if he did, he doesn’t show it.

“Give me a minute,” I say through gritted teeth and close the door in Robert’s face.

“So,” I say, dragging out the word as I turn to Dante. “You clearly have no problems pimping *me* out for deals.”

His eyes darken. “And clearly *you* want more of what you don’t have or you wouldn’t have taken this deal,” he growls.

“Bullshit,” I practically shout. “I was fair and honest with you. I took this deal because you needed me to help and I because I wanted to give Stella the earnings so she could get the studio she wants. I was never dishonest about it! Not like you!”

He takes a couple of steps toward me and glances meaningfully down at my suitcase. “And now that you’re almost done, you’re leaving. Just like I knew you would.”

I let out a long sigh and shake my head, reaching for the doorknob. But I don’t take my eyes off him. I want him to look into my eyes as I tell him how I really feel.

“You’re right, Dante. I am leaving. But it’s not money or property that I wanted more of. It was you.” I pause, watching his tight expression. “Until you changed my mind.”

When I open the door, Robert is still standing there. I mumble an “Excuse me” and leave before the tears building behind my eyes can fall.

Chapter Twenty-Six

DANTE



“You can do whatever you want in life. Never reach for the stars, my son, when you can have the entire moon!”
“But there are a lot of stars and only one moon,” I say with a little frown.

“True. But if you have the moon, you command the sky and the Earth.”

Later, I’m woken up by a sound and follow it to the living room. I know what I’m going to see. I’ve had this dream, this memory, a thousand times. I’m surprised I even realize I’m dreaming and that I still go to the window and look out.

Only this time, it’s not my mom driving away. Suddenly, the dream shifts and I’m in my penthouse with Kylie standing, suitcase in hand, by the door. I watch, feeling just as helpless as I did when I was nine, as Kylie walks out the door and out of my life.

I wake up with a curse. Damn it! It’s bad enough when I dream about the time my mom walked out on us, but now I’m dreaming about Kylie leaving me, too?

Turning on my side, I punch my pillow into shape and lay back down. It’s been three days since she left and still sleep doesn’t come easy, if at all. I spend the rest of the night tossing and turning. After a few hours, I give up the fight and sit up.

Dropping my head into my hands, I close my eyes and try to clear my mind. But all I can see is Kylie walking out that door and never coming back.

“Fuck!” I roar and swipe my hand across my nightstand. A designer vase worth a few thousand dollars crashes to the floor, but I don’t care. Getting out of bed, I walk over to the dresser along the wall and stare at my image in the

mirror.

My eyes look haunted, with dark bags beneath them and frown lines marring the center of my brow. I'm tired, unable to sleep since the day she left. With another curse, I grab the blue pearl vase sitting on the dresser and throw it across the room. The sound of it shattering doesn't do much to alleviate my anger.

Anger and frustration are written all over my actions, but the problem is I don't understand why I'm angry. I should be happy that I have my life back the way it was before. I don't have to worry about anyone being in my home... changing things around my house.

Hell, I don't have to worry about all the damn questions and unnecessary conversation.

Though, the moment those thoughts cross my mind, I realize I don't like the silence as much as I once did. Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath, trying to understand why my head is a mix of confusion and... I pause. I open my eyes slowly, realizing that over the past few weeks, I did enjoy the things I once hated. My house is filled with nothing but anger, despair, and a mixture of cold hatred for a life I once had.

A life that I spent searching for what I assumed was missing...power and money. But I couldn't have been more wrong. She's what's been missing all along.

The thought of Kylie's soulful eyes, full of such hurt when she'd said it was *me* she wanted and I had ruined that, finally breaks through my walls. I realize my anger lies solely with me.

I ruined it... not her.

With sleep nowhere in sight, I take a shower. Afterward, I head downstairs to the kitchen and start a pot of coffee. My hand falls short as I take in the pink and white ceramic cup my secretary got her as a gift with the first batch of meals that were delivered to the house. The old me would have tossed it out... I'm no longer the old me.

Standing against the counter, I wonder how I could have been so blind. So stupid. Why had I been such a dick to her? Walking out without a word after we'd had sex.

Fuck!

The coffee pot finishes its job and I pour a large cup of steaming coffee, then carry it with me as I walk down the hallway. The smell of paints and cleaners reaches me as I near the studio, reminding me even more of Kylie.

Every part of the old me wills myself to keep walking. But I can't.

Instead, I go inside and stop to admire her work. She really is very talented. I move around the room until one of the paintings calls out to me. With a wry smile, I set my coffee down and pick up the painting. The other day, Kylie had jokingly told me that I had inspired her to create this abstract. As I study it, I can see why. It's expressive, raw, and passionate, and it feels like it's speaking to my soul. The part of me I keep hidden from everyone.

But Kylie saw it. She saw deep inside me and captured it in this painting. Somehow, that sweet, loving, and generous woman had found a way in and saw me for who I am. Or who I could be behind this cold mask of indifference I show to the world. But in the end, she left because of me, regardless of the money and success I can offer her.

Because Kylie isn't like that. She's honest and likes people for who they are, not what they can offer her. She likes me for me.

I'm in love with Kylie.

The realization feels like a large hand reaches inside my chest and squeezes my heart.

I don't know when it happened, but it did. Somehow, she'd worked her way inside my walls. Hell, maybe, in a way, I've been in love with her since we were kids, jealous of the easy closeness she shared with Knox back then.

I stagger back a couple of steps and fall into the office chair. Does Kylie love me? Is that what she'd meant with her parting words, that it's always been about me?

She'd said I'd never change, but she's wrong. I've already changed because of her. Without even realizing it. Admitting I'm in love with Kylie opens a floodgate of emotions, things I thought buried and out of reach all this time.

Some of it is good. Other things, however, are painful, and I'm tempted to try to rebuild that wall. To avoid feeling what I felt the day my mom left. That day changed my life forever and made me into the bitter, sarcastic, self-serving man I am today.

Leaning forward, I put my elbows on my knees and close my eyes. Maybe I don't have all the facts. Maybe there's more to my mom leaving and it's not all my dad's fault. Kylie had asked me once to try and make amends with him, but I'd adamantly refused. Maybe it's just easier for me to blame him than to face the truth, that Mom may just not have cared about us enough to stay.

Standing, I walk back to the painting Kylie said she was inspired to do because of me. It's time I fix my life. It's time I be the man she sees in me. Reconnecting with my dad won't be enough. If I'm going to win Kylie back, I need to really show her I've grown up.

I grab my phone out of my pocket and call my brother. Knox answers after a couple of rings.

"Not selling, dude," Knox says, and I almost laugh.

"I'm not asking," I reply.

"Oh, well, what's on your mind?"

"I fucked up, Knox," I say after a minute. Running a hand through my hair, I start pacing the studio.

"What? You're admitting you made a mistake?" Knox sounds sarcastically surprised. "It must be a big one if you're calling me."

"It is," I say with a scowl. "It's Kylie. I've messed things up with her."

There's a long silence from the other end. Finally, Knox lets his breath out in a long sigh. "She was pretty upset when she got back into town, but for once, refused to tell me why. I figured it had to do with you. And here I'd always thought you were a smart guy. How dumb do you have to be to hurt someone as sweet as Kylie?"

"I know, Knox," I growl into the phone. "I'm an idiot. We've established that, can we move on?"

"You know she's been in love with you since we were kids."

I stop pacing and scrub a hand down my jaw in surprise. "What are you talking about?"

Knox chuckles. "I guess you've always been an idiot if you never noticed that, for more than half your life, Kylie has had a crush on you."

I start pacing again. Could it be true? She always invited me to go to the treehouse with them or join in other fun, but I never thought she was inviting me out of anything other than friendship. Because I was her best friend's older brother.

"I'm glad you finally came to your senses, but if you aren't ready to give Kylie everything, then you need to leave her alone," Knox says, his voice hard with warning. "She isn't one of your acquisitions."

"I know that, damn it," I growl through gritted teeth. "If she was, this would be easy. But this love thing... well, I don't know how to deal with that and the thought of not having Kylie in my life scares the shit out of me."

"Wow, Dante." Knox whistles. "I always knew you had it in you. I even

told Kylie that you always had the capacity to love but your problem is that you buried it so deeply. I feared you'd never let it come out."

"Well, I've opened that well and now I'm practically drowning in emotion. And I don't like it one bit."

Knox laughs. "I'm happy for you, brother. This is a good thing. And you couldn't have chosen a better woman if you tried."

"I think I messed things up too much with her," I grumble.

"Kylie is a forgiving person. She just needs to know that she means more to you than any business venture."

"I don't care about any deals, Knox. I would give up everything for her."

"Then prove it," Knox challenges.

We talk for a few more minutes and then disconnect the call. Knox is right. I do need to prove to Kylie that I love her and that she means more to me than my money, this penthouse, or any business deals.

But how? I'm new to this emotional rollercoaster and have never tried to win a woman's forgiveness. At least not the woman I just realized I love.

Then it dawns on me. The studio for Kylie's friend Stella. John was the one who had screwed Stella out of the studio deal. I'll persuade him—well, force if necessary—to sell the property back to Stella at the original price she'd agreed on.

Then I'm going after Kylie to set things right.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

KYLIE



It's been almost a week since I walked out of Dante's penthouse and I haven't heard a word from him. Not that I really expected to. It's just that... I had hoped. I'd hoped he would call me and say it was all a mistake. At least send me a text to see how I'm doing.

I've been foolishly hoping he'd come after me and try and get me back. But alas... he hasn't.

As I stand here in front of a blank canvas, paintbrush in hand, I know all of it had been wishful, stupid thinking. I thought I had really started to break through his barriers, that I was finally reaching him. We had started getting close and I thought he could feel that strong connection between us like I did.

I'm an idiot for ever believing such a thing was possible.

I set down my paintbrush with a heavy sigh. There's no way I'm getting any painting done today. Again. I haven't felt motivated enough to be creative since our fight.

Walking over to the stack of paintings leaning against the wall, I dig through them until I find the one I'm looking for. The one of me with my hands tied, finding pleasure with a faceless man. I hadn't needed to put Dante's face on this painting, I knew he had been the inspiration. It was because of the dream about him that I'd woken up so inspired, eager to paint the fantasy. To make it seem more real.

And then Dante made my deepest fantasies come true. Now, as I look at this painting that started it all, I feel heart sick. Disillusioned. Regretful.

Closing my eyes, I tilt my head back and will the tears building not to fall. When was the first time I realized I had a crush on Dante? I bite my bottom lip in thought. I guess it had to be this one particular time I'd gone to

the Lewis house in search of Knox, but he wasn't there.

It's sixth grade. It had been a bad day in school. A few of the mean boys called me a dork and other names, hurting my feelings. I need my best friend to talk to. To make me laugh. Knox always has a way of making me see that things aren't as bad as they seem. He'd tell me something like, "they're the dorks but are too stupid to see it."

But when I knock on the door of the Lewis home, Dante answers and tells me Knox isn't home. I feel like a baby because I've been crying and tears are still streaming down my face. I'm about ready to leave when Dante call out to me.

"Want to play video games?"

I stare at him in shock. Dante never asks me to play anything with him. He's fifteen years old and I'm only twelve. He always acts like I'm too young to be any fun.

"I don't know how," I answer. "I've never played at home."

Dante shrugs. "It's easy. Come on, I'll teach you."

I follow him into the house and soon we are having a blast. We end up playing video games the rest of the afternoon.

That is, until Knox and their dad get home. Dante's fun mood instantly changes and he turns solemn. The next thing I know, he's gone.

"There you are! We've been looking all over for you."

I blink, a bit startled by Sam's voice. She and Madi had come into the garage studio without me even realizing it. Madi looks at me, then her gaze drops to the painting I'm holding.

"You know what?" I say, sniffing. "This is a terrible painting." I pick up a container of gesso to whitewash over it. Madi snatches it away from me before I can.

"Oh no you don't! You're not destroying my fantasy painting."

"What's going on, Kylie?" Sam asks softly.

They know I was in New York and they know something happened to upset me, but they don't know what. I shake my head, not sure I'm ready to dig at those wounds quite yet.

"I know what will make you feel better," Samantha says with a smile. She takes the painting from my hand and sets it aside, then pulls me out of the garage. Madi follows right behind us.

I laugh when I see that Sam is leading us right to the treehouse. We climb up and get settled in, just like back in the old days when we were young,

carefree, and had no idea what it was like to have our hearts broken.

This was our safe space. These walls have heard a lot of secrets throughout the years. Just being here with Sam and Madi helps me relax.

“What happened with Dante?” Sam asks, and suddenly it just all seems too much and I burst into tears.

“Kylie loves him,” Madi says solemnly. “She loves the cold-hearted bastard. Only heartache can make someone cry like this.”

Hiccupping, I start to tell them just what an asshole Dante is when I hear someone else coming up the treehouse ladder. The treehouse creaks slightly and I wonder if it’s going to hold the extra weight. Sam looks downright nervous and chews her fingernail as we wait to see who is intruding on our girl time.

A couple of moments later, Knox’s head becomes visible through the trap door. He looks around at the three of us, grins, then climbs in the rest of the way.

“I’m so proud of you!” Knox says to me. He looks at Sam and then Madi. “Did Kylie tell you how she stood up for herself, and us, against Dante?”

Both women look at me with surprise.

Madi raises her eyebrows. “Oh? No, she didn’t.”

“I haven’t had a chance,” I say defensively. “Besides, I didn’t really do that much.”

Knox crawls on his hands and knees over to where I’m sitting, then sits down next to me. “Is that what you think?” He chuckles and shakes his head.

“My brother tore up the plans for the condo development,” he continues. Knox nods when he sees my surprised expression. “It’s true.”

“Really?” I can’t help the hopeful tone of my voice.

He nods again, this time with a wide smile. “And that’s not all. He’s going to put his real estate law knowledge and finesse to good use and put Mrs. Kendall’s house and property into its own holding company. This way,” he explains, “should anything ever happen, no one can sue us personally.”

“That’s great news,” Madi exclaims. “I never even thought of that. We’ve been so focused on renovating the house and land for the kids, I don’t know that any of us thought about any legal issues that might happen.”

“Or how we would protect ourselves if they did,” Sam adds.

“I still can’t believe it,” I say, shaking my head. “I saw the plans myself. He had blueprints delivered the day I left and they showed how the forest area was going to be taken out to make room for the condos. There was to be

a parking lot, right here where our treehouse is.”

“All that’s changed,” Knox says. “Those survey plans you saw, Kylie, are going to be used to make sure every acre is accounted for and that we get the appropriate insurance for the property. Not for development.”

There’s a moment of stunned silence as we look at each other. Who would have thought Dante Lewis would come through for us like this? Especially after he’s been bugging us since the reading of Mrs. Kendall’s will to sell.

Could it be that he really did keep his promise, and simply forgot to cancel the plans?

Thinking back to that day, I remember him telling me it wasn’t what it seemed. I’d been so livid, so hurt, that I didn’t really believe him. I just assumed he’d try to explain it away. I thought he was trying to convince me that he’d had the plans drawn up in case we changed our minds, meaning he planned to keep bugging us.

He’d looked guilty when I’d questioned him about it, so how could I think anything else? Dante has always been about business, making a profit, securing that deal. Who would have guessed he had this in mind?

I should have. I know who he is deep down. Way deep down. So far hidden that I finally decided that part of him would never break the surface again. But maybe I was wrong.

“I still can’t believe it,” Sam says with a shake of her head. “I never thought I’d see the day when your brother would go out of his way to do something for someone without expecting anything in return.”

“That still doesn’t excuse him for breaking Kylie’s heart,” Madi says with a frown. “And I’ve got to wonder if there still isn’t something in it for him.”

“Madi,” I admonish lightly, but I’m touched that she’s looking out for me. I guess I feel a little guilty for thinking the same thing, and hearing her voice my thoughts amplifies that guilt.

“You’ll just have to ask Dante about that,” Knox tells Madi, then he turns and grins at me. “As for you, you need to get cleaned up. You’re all blotchy and snotty from crying.”

He waggles his eyebrows and leans in close. “I heard a rumor that Dante is back in town.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

DANTE



Finally, I'm back in Willowcreek. It's taken me a few days to get everything I wanted to do accomplished, but I've made it. My first instinct is to go straight to Kylie and straighten out my mess, but there's something else I need to do first. Something that needed to get done for a very long time.

After loading my rental car with my luggage, I drive through town to my dad's house. I haven't been here in a long time and it feels strange, but not necessarily in a bad way. There are a lot of memories here, including many involving Kylie. Like Knox said, she has been a part of my life since I was a kid and it's taken me all this time to realize just how special she is.

I park along the curb and just sit in the car for a few minutes. The house looks pretty much the same, although it could do with a coat of paint. The lawn is green and freshly mowed. Dad has never been one to have a bunch of flowers around. Instead, there are neatly trimmed hedges lining the outside of the house.

Getting out of the car, I walk up the sidewalk leading to the house. Halfway there, though, the sound of a saw reaches my ears, and I pivot and head around the side of the house to the backyard where the shop is located.

The smell of sawdust instantly hits me and for once I don't feel bitter about it. I used to hate the idea of Knox wasting his time working with Dad in the shop, thinking he could do much more with his life. But now, as I step inside and breathe deeply, I realize that I was just being a prick. Why should I care what Knox does as long as it makes him happy?

Besides, it's not all bad memories. I take my first look around the shop in years. In fact, Knox and I had a lot of good times here. Like when Knox

wanted to surprise Dad for Christmas one year and tried to build a birdhouse for him, roping me in to help so he didn't cut his fingers off. It didn't turn out great at all, but Dad had seemed happy and had praised us for our hard work.

There were also times, mostly before mom left, when I'd come out here and work with Knox and Dad on projects. In my effort to put distance between me and family—well, really, between myself and anyone else—I'd forgotten just how much fun we'd had together.

My gaze travels around the shop and then pauses when my eyes land on Dad. He has his back to me, safety glasses over his eyes, ear protection on, and he hasn't noticed me yet. It's been years since I've seen him, and even with his face covered by a dust mask, I can still see the effects of age starting to settle in. He isn't standing as straight as he used to and it looks like he's lost a bit of weight since the last time I saw him. He's not too skinny, but he's definitely smaller than he used to be.

He turns off the circular saw, then lifts turns toward me. His eyes widen in surprise.

“Dante?” He strips off the mask, glasses, and ear protection in a flash.

I nod and walk farther into the shop. “Hi, Dad.”

After a brief hesitation, he grins and walks toward me. “It's so good to see you!” He stops in front of me and gives me a once over. “You look good.”

Now that I'm here, I don't know what to say or where to even begin. I've spent most of my life ignoring him, and now that I'm ready to try and mend our fences, I don't know how.

“Knox has kept me up to date with what you're doing. Well, besides what I find in the financials and real estate sections of the newspaper.” Dad smiles a bit shyly. “I'm proud of you for going after your dream and achieving it.”

It's funny how hearing that he's proud of me has such a profound effect. I almost feel like a little kid again, showing my dad a picture I drew and him telling me how wonderful it was. I guess no matter your age, hearing a parent is proud of you really means something.

“Thanks,” I say, not sure how else to answer.

“How do you like New York?” he asks into the silence that follows. “I don't think I'd like all that hustle and bustle and noise, but you've always wanted more, so I figure that kind of fast lifestyle suits you.”

I nod. “I like New York. It's perfect for my business and I can get whatever I need quickly.”

Dad frowns, cocking his head to his side. “But you’re not completely satisfied, are you?”

My emotions must be written all over my face. Something else I’m not used to. Somehow, after realizing I love Kylie and opening my heart, I’ve lost my ability to appear cool and nonchalant. I hope it’s not a permanent thing, at least not when it comes to dealing with my clients.

“I’m working on it.” I shrug as if it’s no big deal, but I can tell by the wry smile on Dad’s face that he isn’t buying it.

“Not that I’m not happy to see you, Dante, but it’s been a long time. I don’t think you just stopped by out of the blue for a friendly chat.”

I can’t help it. I chuckle and shake my head. “You’re right,” I agree. “I’ve been doing some thinking and I realized that I may not know the whole picture of what happened that night. I have spent years looking at it from the perspective of a child, but now I’m a grown man and I really need to know.”

Dad flinches, but I continue. “Why did Mom really leave?”

He meets my gaze for a minute, then looks down with a long sigh. “We never loved each other, your mother and I,” he begins, then meets my eyes again. “Times were different back then. We were pressured by our parents to get married.”

My eyebrows rise in surprise. “Are you saying what I think you’re saying?”

Dad nods. “Your mom got pregnant after just a one-night stand together. Our parents didn’t want the shame of your mom being a single-mother, plus they said the baby needs both parents to raise it. That *you* needed both parents.”

This is something I never knew. I doubt Knox knows it either. I can’t imagine my parents were forced into marriage because of me.

“Just so you know, we both wanted you very much,” Dad says as if reading my mind. “We both loved you so much and never regretted having you. I never told you about it because I didn’t want you to feel like you were an accident.”

“But I was,” I argue softly. “I wasn’t planned. But that’s not a big deal. I’m shocked, though, that your parents pressured you into marriage.”

Dad shrugs. “This is a small town. It’s how things were done, then. In fact, it’s still done sometimes here, too.”

I find that hard to believe in today’s progressive society, but then, small-town living is a whole different world.

“So, what happened?” I ask, bringing the subject back to where I want it. “Why did Mom leave like that?”

“Well, as I said, we didn’t love each other,” Dad says sadly. “Your mom, well, she started resenting her life.

“You see, she never wanted to be tied down to marriage and a family. She was a free spirit and wanted to be out exploring the world and meeting new people.”

I stare at him incredulously. “Are you saying she walked out on us—her children—because she wanted to travel?”

“I tried, Dante,” Dad says, a plea for understanding in his tone. “I tried to show her love and attention. I tried everything I could think of to make her happy, but I couldn’t stop that resentment from growing.”

He pauses to stare at me with sad eyes. “I’m so sorry she left like that. And that you had to see it. No child should have to witness a parent’s desertion.”

Emotions start to clog my throat and I have to swallow the lump that suddenly forms there. “For the longest time, I thought Mom left because we didn’t have enough money or success,” I say after a minute. “Mom always told me not to settle, to always work for more. To reach for the moon.” I scowl after saying that last bit. “It’s the last thing she told me before she left.”

Dad shakes his head. “We weren’t filthy rich, but we had everything we needed.”

“Everything you needed,” I repeat slowly. “But you could have had more, like Mom wanted. Why settle?”

“What would I do with more?” Dad gestures to a picture of me and Knox standing with Mom. It had to be taken right before she walked out. I’m surprised he still has that picture and displays it in the shop.

He looks around the shop that he’s owned all of his adult life. “How could I need more than this?”

I follow his gaze and see several unfinished projects, all in varying degrees of construction. There’s a rocking chair half-finished and an entertainment center built and just waiting to be stained. A few other things are newly started and I can’t tell what they will be yet.

“But,” I say, returning my attention to him. “Everyone wants more.”

Dad raises a knowing eyebrow. “Has that ‘more’ you’ve been chasing made you happy? As happy as I am in this place, enjoying this small-town life?”

I open my mouth, but no words come out. He's right. No matter how hard I've worked to always have more, I've never been satisfied, never been happy with my life.

Dad leans forward. "I'll tell you a secret, son," he says with a smile. "Not everyone wants what they don't have. Sometimes what you have is all you'll ever need."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

DANTE



Dad's words follow me as I drive over to Mrs. Kendall's house. He's right. Even with all the money and success I've accumulated over the years, I've never truly been happy.

Except for when I was with Kylie.

With her, everything seems right in the world. She fills the empty void that I've been carrying around since I was nine years old.

Now, after all this time, I finally let myself listen to Dad's side of the story. And I realize that everything I'd thought had been wrong, or at least a misconception. Mom never wanted the family-style life. It was nothing we'd done or that my dad didn't do. She would have never been completely happy with us. She was never given a choice to begin with, and would have left one day or another.

The knowledge eases the vice grip around my heart. I'll never understand why she chose not to get in contact with us, but now I realize that it is all on her. That has always been her choice. Dad never prevented her from calling or seeing us. And, no matter how much it hurts, I just have to accept the fact that my mother didn't value us as much as she did her own freedom.

But Kylie isn't like my mom. Kylie values friendships and relationships. She doesn't just get up and leave when the going gets tough. She left me because I gave her no reason to hope. All of my actions showed her that I refused to change, and she had every reason to believe it. Every reason to doubt I would ever open my heart up enough to let others in.

Well, now I've come to show her that I *have* changed. That I'm worthy of another chance. That we belong together and I've finally figured that out.

When I get to Mrs. Kendall's house, I pull into the driveway and get out

of my rental. As I'm walking up the sidewalk to the house, Knox, Sam, and Madi are walking out. Sam gives me a hesitant look—Madi looks pissed. She glares at me, eying me up and down as if in contempt.

Shit.

I try to smile, but the motion is a bit foreign to me. I'm not used to smiling, laughing, or showing any true emotions, really.

As they walk by me, Knox reaches out and squeezes my shoulder. "Be the man she deserves," he says quietly. "You got this."

I nod absently and continue into the house, making my way through the door in the kitchen, out to the garage where Kylie has her studio set up. She doesn't hear me come in and I take a moment just to watch her. At first, I only notice her. Her stunning, curvy figure and the way her long, curly red hair hangs down her shoulders and back. But then I notice she's holding a painting and staring at it. When I look closer, I realize it's the one of her posed so erotically, naked and bound.

"It's us," she says.

I blink and look at Kylie. She's still sitting with her back to me and it doesn't look like she's moved even an inch. "What?"

She turns around and looks at me with sad eyes. "The painting," she says, glancing down briefly at it. "It's us. It's always been us." She sets the painting aside and stares at me unblinkingly. "Why did you do it? Why did you hurt me?"

Her words, filled with sadness and hurt, tear at my heart.

"Kylie," I whisper urgently. I stride over to where she's sitting, grab her by her shoulders, and pull her into my body. As I feel the press of her plush, soft breasts against my chest, I lower my head and devour her mouth. She tastes like Heaven. Like home.

"I'm so sorry," I say once I'm able to break the kiss. "I know I messed up. It was an awful thing for me to do to use you and your talent just to make a sale."

One large red curl slips down across her cheek. I reach out and tuck it behind her ear. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you the truth. I was so caught up in making the deal that I didn't stop to think how you might feel about it. Mr. Moore wasn't even supposed to see this painting. I took a picture and he caught me looking at it. He demanded his own and I agreed, but that was never my choice to make—it was yours."

She stares at me for a minute, then offers a small smile. "You know,

Dante, if you would have just asked me, I would have done it. There was no need for subterfuge.”

I sigh and let my hand drop from her hair down to my side. “Ever since I was young I’ve been convinced that Mom left because we didn’t have enough money or success to keep her happy. It changed how I looked at people. I didn’t trust anyone, fearing that they might abandon me at any time, and knew that I could only count on myself.”

“But that isn’t true,” she argues softly. “You’ve always had your dad and Knox —”

“I know,” I cut her off gently. “At least, I know that now. But not then. Not until recently.” I stop to look at her. “Until you.

“Why me?”

“I’ve been a ruthless businessman for so long, it never occurred to me that someone would do something for me out of kindness. Everyone I work with and deal with are always looking for what’s in it for them. But not you. You value people for who they are, not what they can give you, and I’ve never realized just how much I needed that.”

“That’s a sad way to live,” she says softly.

I nod and reach up to rub the back of my knuckles over her smooth cheek. “I’ve lived closed-up for so long, I didn’t know how to live any other way. At least, not until you.”

Leaning forward, I kiss the tip of her nose, then press a quick but soft kiss to her lips. “You brought me out of that darkness and I couldn’t be happier. I’m trying to change, Kylie. For you and for me.”

Her eyes glimmer with unshed tears. Reaching up, she cups my cheek and smiles at me. “I don’t expect or want you to change... much,” she adds with a chuckle. “You are all I’ve ever wanted.”

We stare into each other’s eyes for a moment longer, then I step back and retrace my steps to the door where I’d set my briefcase on the floor before coming into the studio. I bring it back over to her and set it on the workbench and open it.

“I didn’t tell you before because I didn’t want you to think I had anything to do with it,” I say as I pull out paperwork from inside my briefcase. “And I didn’t. But as soon as Stella mentioned who bought the studio out from under her, I knew who it was.”

I hand her the papers. Kylie glances down at them briefly, but then looks quizzically back at me. “The guy who bought it is actually John McKinnon,

the man you met one night at dinner. We've been in the same business for years, often towing the line between competitors and friends. I convinced him to sell the studio to your friend... at twenty percent less than the original agreement."

Kylie's mouth drops open and she stares at the paperwork, her eyes scanning the pages as she reads through them. "What? How?"

"All it needs is Stella's signature," I say. I don't want to explain how I threatened John that I'd go to the regulatory office about some of his shady practices if he didn't do the right thing and sell the property back to Stella.

"Oh my God!" Kylie exclaims in a shaky whisper. "I ... I don't know what to say! Thank you so much, Dante."

I shrug. What I did wasn't that big of a deal, but I'm amazed at how good it feels to do something for someone without expecting anything back. It's nothing like the high I get from closing a big deal. This is much more satisfying.

"I can't take back pimping your paintings out," I say and she chuckles. "But, if you'll let me, I'll spend the rest of my life trying to make it up to you."

Kylie's eyes widen as I drop down to one knee. Her hands fly up to her face and cover her mouth. Reaching into my front pocket, I pull out a blue velvet box and open it, then lift it toward her. Her eyes never leave my face.

"Will you marry me?"

When it dawned on me how royally I had fucked up, I knew that a simple relationship would never be enough. I wanted Kylie for life, and to show her that the man who doesn't do commitment was truly willing to commit to forever, this is what I wanted to do. I've known this girl, no woman, since we were kids. I may not have known then how much I would fall for her, but Willowcreek and Mrs. Kendall's Treehouse helped me find her again, find home again, and I'm never letting go.

Kylie stands there staring at me for a long, uncomfortable moment. My hopeful smile starts to slip and doubt creeps its ugly way into my heart. But then she gasps and kneels down in front of me. I'm not prepared when she throws herself into my arms and I fall back a little.

She starts raining kisses on my face and her tears leave wet streaks across my skin.

"Is that a yes?" I ask with a chuckle.

She pulls back and looks at me, grabbing my jaw in both her hands.

“Yes!”

Our next kiss is a mixture of quick kisses and happy chuckles. My heart, for the first time in my life, is full and content.

“When did you get so sentimental?” she asks, grinning at me.

I shrug, then stand and help her to her feet, holding her in the circle of my arms.

“I learned it from the best,” I say, waggling my eyebrows at her. “You know, I thought I’d come back to Willowcreek and turn a good profit selling Mrs. Kendall’s house. It was a great investment, one I couldn’t pass up. But now... well, now I see this place as much more. I see how important it is and how it brought all of us back together.

“How it brought you into my life.” Using the tip of my finger, I wipe a tear sliding down her cheek. “I’ve never been so thankful for a treehouse in my life!”

She laughs and I smile. “Hell, I’ll turn it into a damn shrine if you want me to.”

“Aww.”

Kylie and I turn at the sound and find Knox, Sam, and Madi watching from the doorway with huge, goofy smiles on their faces. Apparently, they didn’t leave like I’d thought but had been waiting around to see how everything worked out.

“Go on, you guys,” Kylie laughs, shooing them with her hand. “Get out of here and give us some privacy.”

I watch them leave until Kylie’s soft hand cups the side of my face and turns me toward her so she can give me a proper kiss.

Epilogue

KYLIE



It's amazing how fast things can go once you set your mind to something. After Dante proposed, we leased an apartment in Willowcreek so we have a place to stay, other than my parents' or a hotel, while we finish up the clubhouse. We've been living here almost two months now and things are really going well. Excellent even.

Although Dante still has to fly to New York here and there to meet with investors or clients, he spends all of his free time in Willowcreek. Once everything is finished, I plan to move to New York with Dante full-time. I know he proposed so quickly to prove he was ready to commit, so I decided to have a long engagement and simply enjoy our time together. I'm in no rush, and neither is he.

For now, Willowcreek is our temporary home. It's given him the opportunity to get closer to his dad, too, which really makes me happy. It seems as though now that Dante let down his walls, his whole life is turning around. He's much more relaxed and he laughs more often.

It makes my heart melt whenever I hear that rich, gruff laughter. When he smiles, his whole face seems to light up. He's come such a long way in such a short time. It's hard to believe the Dante of today is the same man as a few months ago.

Stella has already moved to New Jersey to work on her new studio. When she found her studio was once again available, and for twenty percent less even, I thought she was going to faint. She did cry, though. A lot. I know that

in her heart she considered that studio a lost cause.

Max, however, stayed in New Orleans to manage my gallery for me. He will oversee renting it out to artists and I couldn't be more grateful. I can't even think about selling my grandmother's place, and Max is so wonderful at managing it, I didn't dream of asking anyone else. I know I don't have to worry about anything with him in charge.

Dante has already purchased me a studio space in the heart of New York's art district. He called it an early engagement gift. I call it typical Dante. He also wants me to keep my studio in his penthouse in New York, and I'm only too happy to do so. I love the idea of being able to work while waiting for him to come home so we can share an evening together. Sometimes, he likes to come in and just stand silently in the doorway, watching me create my art.

Today, we are all gathered at Mrs. Kendall's. We've been working on the final touches. It's so exciting to see how well our clubhouse plan has come together, and everyone is happy and proud with the way it's turned out. Dante has been contributing, too. He brought some furniture the other day that his dad had made. It was heartwarming to see the pride shining in his dark eyes as he talked about his father's craftsmanship.

But as we all gather in the garage that I've been using as a studio, I feel a bit nervous. I've been working on a secret project and I'm going to unveil it to everyone today. I look around at all of my friends and see Dante's encouraging smile. Earlier, we brought in a table and put snacks and drinks on it. Now everyone is sitting around talking and laughing.

Dante nods his head, gesturing toward the easel where my secret project is covered by a white cloth. I nod back at him but take a deep breath. I'm not sure why I'm so nervous. It's not like everyone here hasn't seen my work before. I guess it's because this is a special painting meant for the clubhouse and I want everyone to love it.

As I walk toward the easel, everyone quiets down. I stop in front of it, then stand off to the side. My hand hesitates on the cloth for a minute as I look at my friends.

"Kylie, you're a great artist," Sam says, grinning. "Whatever it is, I'm sure we'll love it."

"Is it another dick pic?" Madi asks hopefully, her eyebrows wagging up and down suggestively. She grins at Sam. "You know which one I'm talking about, right?" Sam nods and laughs. "The guy is ripped and lying naked in

bed except for the sheet partially covering his giant —”

“Madison, please!” I beg her. I’m absolutely mortified. A quick glance at Dante shows him smiling smugly.

“Whatever,” Madi shrugs. “I tried to get her to sell it, but she won’t budge. And she won’t tell me who the model is either! His face is hidden so I can’t tell, but who cares? I mean, the man has the body of a god, that’s all I need to know.” I almost groan out loud when she clutches her neck in mock ecstasy.

Jaxson stiffens, then excuses himself from the group. He stalks past everyone and goes into the kitchen. I frown at his stoic expression, wondering why he left without a word.

“What’s up with him?” I ask, nudging my head toward Jaxson’s retreating back.

“Chefs don’t like to hear someone praise another chef,” Madi says.

I don’t get the reference, but apparently Sam does. She laughs and claps her hands, bending over at the waist, causing Asher to release the arms that he had wrapped around her.

“Okay, no more stalling,” Knox says, looking at the covered painting. “Show us what you got.”

I nod, then remove the covering. The painting highlights the treehouse, the place that means so much to all of us and is the reason why we’re here today, creating a clubhouse for neighborhood children. Inside and around the base of the tree children are laughing and playing.

“That is absolutely perfect!” Sam cries out.

Knox stands and walks over to the painting, looking at it from every angle. “You’ve really outdone yourself with this one, Kylie,” he says, then turns and gives me a hug.

Madi, usually the loudmouth of the group, doesn’t say anything. At least not with words. Her eyes, though, are very telling. I’m amazed to see a little sheen of tears building up.

Dante puts his arm around me. “I told you there was nothing to worry about,” he says, then bends to kiss me on the cheek. “And if anyone complained,” he whispers in my ear, “I’d beat them up for you.”

I throw my head back and laugh. I love this open and funny man Dante is finally allowing out in public.

Dante and I walk over to the table to join the others. Now that the big reveal is done, we all grab paper plates and start filling them with finger

sandwiches, potato chips, meat, cheese, fruit, and a host of other goodies we'd put together.

Dante brought a couple of bottles of expensive champagne, which he opens and pours into everyone's glasses. It's kind of funny drinking fancy champagne out of plastic disposable cups, but no one seems bothered by it. Not even Dante.

"Here's to the clubhouse," Dante says, raising his red plastic cup.

Everyone raises their cup and we all take a sip.

"Here's to Mrs. Kendall, who brought us back together after all these years," Knox says. He looks between me and Dante and winks, a smile spreading across his face.

This time, everyone cheers louder. We really do owe Mrs. Kendall a lot. She made our lives so much better when we were kids. Without her and the treehouse, I wonder what would have happened to us. I mean, sure, we'd probably be fine, but afternoons spent here telling our secrets and sharing our fears really brought us together back then.

Just like it's doing again now, years later.

After we finish eating, Madi, Sam, and I clear the table while Dante and Knox bag up the trash and set it out by the garbage cans.

"I still want to buy that sexy painting," Madi says when we walk back into the garage. "Come on, Kylie. You have to sell it to me!"

Dante comes up and puts his arm around me. He grins and says, "Then I'll just have to sit and model for another portrait."

It takes Madi a full second to realize what he means, and when she does, her eyes widen and her mouth drops open.

"Oh my God!" she screams, then starts making loud retching noises.

"Still want to buy that painting?" I laugh.

"Mystery solved," Sam says with a chuckle, patting Madi on the back in mock sympathy. "Although, we should have guessed."

That surprises me. "How in the world would you have guessed the man is Dante?"

Sam shrugs. "Because he's the only man you've had the hots for all of your life."

Dante smiles as a blush steals over my cheeks. He cups my chin and turns my head to kiss me. Madi makes the retching noises again and we all laugh.

Some people, like Madi, never change. Which is a good thing. But some people do change. I look into Dante's eyes and smile, then turn to look at my

friends.

No matter where our lives take us in the future, we'll always have the treehouse and our friendship to come back to. I lean my head on Dante's shoulder. Life could not be more perfect.

THE END

Want more Dante and Kylie? Download their Bonus Epilogue [here!](#)

I hope you enjoyed Finding Home! If you loved this book, you'll love Snowed In With My Frosty Boss. [Click here](#) to grab your copy from Amazon or turn the page to find out more.

About Snowed In With My Frosty Boss

When a freak snowstorm leaves me grounded at the airport on Christmas Eve with my arrogant ex-boss Derek, it feels like a cruel joke.

Years after he callously fired me, he's still infuriatingly handsome.

Trapped together, our simmering tension quickly erupts into fiery clashes.

And then... an extremely hot hook-up.

As travel chaos continues, a hotel room isn't the only thing we share.

I catch glimpses of Derek's caring side beneath the bosshole façade.

And it melts my heart.

Being stranded together was bad enough,

But throw the best sex of my life into the mix

And things get complicated. Fast.

Now that we're both invested, things are messy.

And deep.

Will the bitter weather outside chill our new connection?

It's shaping up to be a holiday I'll never forget.

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Chapter One

FRANKIE



Tomorrow would be Christmas Eve, and I couldn't believe I was stuck at another business conference.

Don't get me wrong. I was thrilled to be there, surrounded by brilliant minds in the marketing world, but all I could think about was getting back home in time for Christmas with my family.

The conference venue had a swanky hotel, and in a break between presentations, I'd made my way to my room for a short rest. As I prepared to head back down for more professional networking, I found myself standing in front of a full-length mirror in my room, taking a moment to assess the post-nap situation.

My reflection stared back at me, and I rolled my eyes at the ridiculous reality of getting all dolled up for a bunch of marketing seminars hosted by a bunch of old blow-hards that weren't worth a second glance from me anyway. Still, in my field, I knew that a woman had to work twice as hard to get half as far, and the quickest way to move ahead was to be liked by the boys.

I adjusted the deep blue dress I had chosen for the day. It was classy but not too flashy. I wanted to make a good impression but didn't want to stand out like a sore thumb.

The dress hugged my curves, which was intentional but subtle. My chestnut hair, which usually spent its days in a messy bun or a quick ponytail, was styled into an elegant braided up-do for the occasion. It felt a bit foreign, to be honest.

In my personal life, I'd always been the type to don jeans and an oversized sweatshirt. In the professional world, I always felt like I was

putting in extra effort to be someone I wasn't- but such was the nature of the beast.

As I looked at my reflection, I practiced a toothy smile, albeit a somewhat awkward one.

My long lashes had always been a source of pride, but in my post-nap haze, they'd smeared my mascara, and I'd done my best to clean up the evidence but wasn't feeling overly confident in my results.

In the process, I'd lost most of my foundation- but, hey, freckles had their charm, right?

Being the last day of the conference and so close to the holidays, I had lost steam in trying to impress anyone. I could have gone back downstairs in sweats and a baggy t-shirt and probably would have if I'd not known my hot ex-boss, Derek, was mingling in the crowd.

He was a jerk, but he was a pretty one, so that made all the difference in how I wanted him to see me. Even if we could barely stand being in the same room together, I had a silly little secret desire for him to find me attractive.

The epic saga of my rivalry with Derek had become the stuff of legends within the confines of our competing businesses. If you were to ask around, you'd hear tales of intensity that rivaled heavyweight boxing matches.

However, a deeper layer to our conflict eluded most casual observers.

Once upon a time, Derek held the prestigious position of being my boss. He was the head honcho in the marketing kingdom, and he made sure I remembered it. From the first day I stepped into that office, he made it abundantly clear that he perceived me as a threat.

It wasn't that he harbored any personal animosity towards me- he simply despised the idea of someone else stealing his thunder.

There's no denying that Derek possessed an exceptional talent for marketing. He seemed to develop innovative campaigns effortlessly, and his magnetic charm could win over clients with nothing more than a smile. However, alongside his brilliance came a reputation for ruthlessness and arrogance, which had earned him more than a few enemies in our industry.

On the other hand, my journey had been one of climbing up from humble beginnings. I couldn't match Derek's natural charisma, but I compensated with unwavering determination where I lacked charm. Competition fueled my very existence, and I had made it my life's mission to establish myself as the reigning champion in my field- even if it meant I'd have to topple Derek along the way.

Derek and I collided like two raging bulls in a China shop from day one. Our clash became an ego-driven battle for dominance. He resented my refusal to back down from challenges, while I resented being treated like a subordinate. Our rivalry became a toxic cocktail of professional animosity tinged with personal undertones.

Our feud played out relentlessly in every boardroom meeting, brainstorming session, and client pitch. We engaged in an endless game of one-upmanship as we both vied for the same contracts each time a new potential client entered the work arena.

It wasn't long before Derek decided he would not permit some upstart like me to overshadow him. He would go to great lengths to prove that he remained the undisputed alpha dog in the competitive marketing world, even if it meant tearing me down.

So, in due time, I was fired. During a particularly heated board meeting, Derek and I went for one another's jugulars, each pointing out the massive issues with one another's work merits and practices. As things became more heated, the meeting was called to an end by other associates. When I returned, I found the notice of my termination on my desk.

He hadn't even been ballsy enough to tell me to my face.

At first, I'd taken it hard. Then, I found a home in a competing Marketing firm, and the battle was back on. I made it my mission to bury him in the marketing world. After some time, though, I realized I was much better off in my new firm, and it all turned out for the best.

As I stood in front of the mirror, the irony of it all was not lost on me. Here I was, primping myself for a conference where I would come face-to-face with Derek - a man who had dedicated himself to dismantling my dreams. It seemed especially unfortunate that I should have to deal with such a blow-hard, considering it was killing my Christmas cheer.

Yet, I refused to back down. This conference was the ultimate opportunity to establish myself as a force to be reckoned with. A few major contract leads were in attendance, and I was committed to impressing every one of them.

Returning to the conference floor, I scanned the crowd to see who I'd network with first.

The conference buzzed with activity as professionals donning crisp suits and business attire filled the hall. The air crackled with anticipation and smelled faintly of freshly brewed coffee. Conversations blended into an

ambitious symphony punctuated by the sharp clicks of heels on the marble floors.

For me, it felt no different than any other day at work - only now our “office” consisted of a high-end conference venue, and the stakes were higher than ever before. Competition always fueled my fire, but it felt deeply personal this time.

“Derek is really making an impression,” my colleague, Sarah, observed as we watched him deliver a captivating presentation on the future of digital marketing. “He’s got everyone’s attention.”

Sighing slightly, I couldn’t tear my eyes away from the charismatic figure commanding the room. “Indeed, he is a tough act to follow.”

Sarah patted my back supportively. “You’ve got this, Frankie. Your presentation is going to blow them away.”

Grateful for her encouragement, I patted her on the back as I prepared my final notes. Countless hours had been spent preparing my presentation - pouring over data and revising talking points. All of this was in an effort to prove that I was just as capable, if not more so, than Derek.

When it was finally my turn to take the stage, adrenaline surged within me. All eyes were fixed on me, and there was no room for faltering.

I launched into my carefully crafted presentation - every word uttered with conviction, and each slide timed perfectly.

As I spoke confidently and passionately, I couldn’t help but notice Derek sitting in the front row. His expression betrayed a curious mixture of interest and competitiveness. He scrutinized me intently as if searching for any hint of weakness that he could exploit. It became a silent contest of wills - a duel of intellect.

The ensuing Q&A session proved equally intense.

Derek had presented just before me. The hitch was that he and I were both expected to field questions simultaneously after our presentations, ultimately pitting us against each other in a public arena.

As he and I fielded questions from the audience enthusiastically, we strived to outshine each other with our answers. It became a game where neither of us was willing to surrender even an inch.

At the end of the Q&A, I felt like I’d done the better job, but when I glanced over, I noticed Derek with his usual smug smile and felt my insecurity boil up once again. I desperately wanted to win over him, and it infuriated me that he always played everything so smoothly, like all of this

was just a cakewalk to him.

Derek and I crossed paths repeatedly throughout the day - each encounter laced with subtle jabs and masked competition. We exchanged polite pleasantries on the surface, but underneath lay an undeniable tension that refused to dissipate.

Unexpectedly, things took an intriguing turn during the evening networking event. By some twist of fate or perhaps a mere coincidence, Derek and I found ourselves side by side at the crowded bar, reaching for the same glass of champagne. Our fingers brushed fleetingly, and in that brief moment, a flicker of something more than rivalry ignited.

However, Derek quickly flashed his trademark grin - that disarming smile that had won over countless clients - extinguishing the growing spark between us. We engaged in light banter, discussing industry trends and sharing career anecdotes.

“You certainly know how to charm a room,” I admitted begrudgingly. Although he was a terrible work rival, even I had to admit there was something charming about him. His charisma and good looks were hard to ignore, especially in the moments when we weren’t letting our competitive work histories stand at the forefront.

Derek chuckled as mischief danced in his eyes. “It comes with the territory. But I must confess, Frankie, you’re no pushover yourself.”

As the night wore on, we were separated, each stuck talking to others within the crowd of marketing and business professionals who were all eager to get an opportunity to chat with us individually.

As I glanced over at him, I felt a weird mix of both hostility and respect. His undeniable talent commanded recognition, and I couldn’t deny that I had learned a great deal about marketing and securing clientele from watching him in action.

Yet, simultaneously, I resented his ability to always remain one step ahead of me and his seeming desire to knock me out of the ring whenever we were competing against one another.

But something else was at play, too.

Maybe it was the alcohol. Maybe it was the magic of the holiday season.

Something within me had started to develop, an almost playful fondness for Derek as the conference began pushing toward its close.

I watched him flash that easy smile and tilt his head back, laughing with a colleague. Then my eyes started drifting further down his body, scanning his

broad shoulders and tall, well-built frame. It had been a while since I felt a man's touch, and the conference had seemed to pose the perfect opportunity for some one-off, no-strings-attached fun. I'd packed my favorite sexy nightgown and condoms, anticipating that I might treat myself to a fun night with a worthy man if I found one, but so far, I'd been too busy working.

As I looked Derek over, I let my eyes linger on all of his most physically attractive qualities. I thought to myself about the tension between the two of us- and how that might manifest itself between the bed sheets.

I shook my head, looking away again in a hurry.

Derek? I thought to myself, unable to resist shifting my eyes back for one more subtle glance. *I must be feeling desperate.*

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