



Her Rugged
GUARDIAN

PIPER STONE

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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Books of the Savage Empire Series](#)

[Books of the Ruthless Empire Series](#)

[Books of the Tainted Regime Series](#)

[Books of the Carnal Sins Series](#)

[Books of the Kings of Corruption Series](#)

[Books of the Sinners and Saints Series](#)

[Books of the Benedetti Empire Series](#)

[Books of the Merciless Kings Series](#)

[Books of the Mafia Masters Series](#)

[Books of the Edge of Darkness Series](#)

[Books of the Dark Overture Series](#)

[Books of the Club Darkness Series](#)

[More Mafia and Billionaire Romances by Piper Stone](#)

[Books of the Missoula Bad Boys Series](#)

[Books of the Montana Bad Boys Series](#)

[Books of the Eagle Force Series](#)

[Books of the Dangerous Business Series](#)

[Books of the Dark Wolves Series](#)

[Books of the Alpha Dynasty Series](#)

[Books of the Alpha Beasts Series](#)

[More Stormy Night Books by Piper Stone](#)

[About Piper Stone](#)

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This book is intended for *adults only*. Spanking and other sexual activities represented in this book are fantasies only, intended for adults.

CHAPTER 1



“It is amazing how your life changes when you embrace the reality that you’re better than the life you’ve settled for.”

—Steve Maraboli

Cassandra

A blonde floozy with big tits. Isn’t that what all men wanted?

Well, fuck that and fuck all men.

My asshole ex could have the tawdry woman. I was certain she’d help his run for senator. Maybe she could jiggle her tits in front of the male reporters for additional votes.

A single bead of sweat trickled down my cheek at such a slow pace, I was instantly annoyed, wiping it furiously. “I hate men, Moose. Except for you, of course. Dogs are different. That’s why there are several songs written about women preferring their pups. You’re a lot less work and I don’t need to pick up your socks and underwear.” At least I could laugh in the face of a total disruption of my life.

I was firmly convinced that there was a black cloud hanging over my head. The day had gone from bad to worse in the blink of an eye. What was I saying? Now that night had set in, I was able to admit that making several significant changes in the sloop of thirty days was akin to having a root canal done without Novocain. But I was Cassandra Dayne, a once powerful marketing expert, considered a brilliant woman in my field. This wasn’t going to dampen my spirits in the least.

Even if somewhere in the back of my mind I knew the concept that change was good had been the thought of a crazy person or villain determined to take over the world. Maybe I was being a little overdramatic, but at this point, I wanted to dig a hole in the sand and hide for months.

Years.

Woof.

The single *harrumph*-ing brought me down from whatever cloud I was on, finally able to make the long-awaited turn to my destination called a brand-new life.

As I pulled down the long driveway, my fingers remained clutched around the steering wheel. Well, it was almost dark, and I was certain by morning light things would look brighter. Right?

The moment I pulled in front of the quaint bed and breakfast, my heart sank. “I don’t know, buddy. I think we might have made a mistake.” The fact my mother had purchased a B & B plus a small winery had shocked the entire family. But she’d run it successfully for years. Then Covid had hit and life for her had taken a serious downturn, enough so the winery had been all but closed for over two years.

Who was I to criticize or challenge her choices? I’d just run away from everything I’d ever known.

Not soon enough to help her run the place she’d grown to love or to save her life. The guilt wore like a thick second skin, something I’d have difficulty shedding. That was one reason I was determined to turn the place around, even if the estate attorney and everyone else who’d heard about the business had recommended otherwise.

Fuck them. I would make this work no matter what I had to do.

Tangerine Sunset had been my mother’s dream, the name perfect for the adventure she’d made her own, a woman I’d considered a gypsy. She’d left her high-powered accounting job in Maryland after learning my father had cheated on her.

I'd seen pictures of the incredible location but had only visited twice in the last eight years, the second time for her funeral.

The revelation hit me hard. I'd missed so much time with her, embroiled in my own life. Now I felt empty inside, uncertain I'd made the right choice to upend my life, moving thousands of miles away from everything and everyone I knew.

With a population of less than three thousand, Depoe Bay, Oregon had small town vibes written all over it. Granted, the city flanked the Pacific Ocean, its claim to fame being the whale-watching capital of the Oregon Coast. Maybe that's why I felt like a fish out of water.

Moose lifted his head from the passenger seat, his tail thumping against the door panel, the slight whine affirming his unhappiness at being taken away from everything and everyone he loved. Sighing, I reached over, scratching behind his ears. My big black lab was my constant companion. I wasn't entirely certain I would have found the courage to do this without his help.

Change was inevitable. That's what I'd heard my entire life. I was taking a leap of faith. At this moment, all I could think about was that the change I'd insisted on had been a decision I would be thankful for later in my life. Whatever the case, I'd reached my destination, a new beginning, and the changes were exciting.

Then why was I terrified?

Maybe because the trip across country had been horrible with flight delays, Moose almost getting transferred to a plane heading to Ireland, and the fact that all I'd eaten in the last fifteen hours had been peanuts. Stale peanuts to be exact.

I peered out the windshield, issuing a growl that could rival Moose's.

The dark sky provided an ominous background. I jumped, even yelping audibly when something hit the windshield. "Jesus. Mommy dog is a scaredy cat. Huh?"

This time, my wonderful companion did nothing but crawl forward, placing his head on my thigh. I stopped the car,

waiting for a few seconds before shoving the gear into park and cutting off the engine. I stared at the house, hating the shadows in the windows.

“What are you doing, girl? You’re out of your mind.”

Woof!

At least I could still laugh given my baby’s exclamation point placed next to my terrified statement.

“I know. I promised you excitement. Maybe everything will look brighter in the morning. Right, buddy?”

His silence meant he doubted my promise. I doubted myself as well. As I opened the driver’s door to my rental car, memories and fleeting images of my mother drifted into the back of my mind. I couldn’t help but wonder if I should have taken almost everyone’s advice and sold the place, even if that’s not what my mother had wanted. Still, I was in way over my head. I’d been in Depoe Bay, Oregon all of two hours and I’d come to that conclusion.

Time to seize the day.

Right. Maybe what I needed to do was to seize my sanity. I was a big city girl used to condo living. The thought of living in a bed and breakfast had seemed like the perfect step in a journey, a way of leaving my past behind. Now I suspected I’d gone cuckoo.

At least the air was fresh, the hint of salt from the ocean and the greenery of the dense forest surrounding the property a pleasant respite from living in the heart of DC. Just driving through town on my way here was a reminder of how small the town really was. Tomorrow I’d go exploring.

“Come on, bud. Time to go inside.”

Moose was reluctant to scamper onto the gravel drive. When he did, he immediately started sniffing. I grabbed a couple of bags before closing the door. The rest could wait until later. I’d sold a significant portion of my belongings including every piece of my beloved furniture. A fresh start. That’s what I’d told myself. The majority of what I’d brought with me had arrived the day before; the few boxes I’d paid a hefty fee to

cart with me on the plane were the items I'd been terrified to lose.

As I headed to the porch, a strange, foreboding sense remained. I could swear I was being watched.

Now you're being ridiculous.

I jerked my jacket around me as I headed for the porch, gazing up at the dark windows for a second time. They weren't brighter. I could almost swear the devil was winking at me. "Come on, baby boy. It's time to make this our home."

At least his single bark held more enthusiasm.

Wind whipped through the trees, the chill in the air unexpected. I took a deep breath as I headed up the six stairs, trying to prepare myself for walking inside. After counting to five, I opened the storm door, trying to snag the keys from my purse. My entire body was chilled to the bone from the light jacket I'd worn.

"Fuck," I cursed under my breath, dropping them three times before managing to slide the correct one into the lock. When I twisted the key, it acted as if it wasn't the right one.

With no light on outside, the sliver of moon hidden behind thick clouds, I could barely see a thing and I hadn't thought to bring a flashlight with me. I was lucky I'd remembered my brain at this point, the entire last four weeks a huge blur of activity and finalizing paperwork.

And sadness.

"Please don't do this to me. Please." I tried it again and groaned. The damn thing appeared to be stuck.

Moose whined as he nuzzled my leg, as eager to crawl into bed as I was. I prayed the cleaning company I'd hired had already been here. As soon as the lock clicked, I almost squealed in delight. I grabbed one of the bags, the door sticking after a few inches. Of course it would. The slight creak gave me the willies. My mother had never said anything about the place being haunted, but at this point I wasn't certain it wasn't. My trepidation had to be all about the darkness.

If only the plane hadn't been late. Then I'd been forced to wait until Moose was unloaded. The poor pup had drooled all over his cage. I couldn't blame him. He was far too large to fit into a medium-size crate. He was a happy-go-lucky pup normally, but he'd used his big dog growl, terrifying the airport personnel, which thankfully had helped in getting him released quickly.

When he woofed a single time, I scratched him behind the ears. "Yes, I remembered the dog biscuits, buddy. That will be first on the agenda."

Thankfully, I'd gotten a text that the few boxes I'd sent ahead had arrived earlier in the day. My mother's attorney had charged me a fortune to handle the delivery, but I was thankful that I'd gone to the expense. I had a feeling I needed all the creature comforts around me I could have.

I tried to be careful with the door, but finally kicked it with my foot, lumbering inside. A light was on in the back of the house, the warm glow creating more foreboding shadows. Maybe the cleaning people had left it on for me. What a nice touch.

Hell, they should have left roses and a bottle of champagne for what they charged me. Still, it would be worth every penny if they'd tackled everything promised from their list. I lowered the bags to the floor, taking a deep breath.

Then I heard a noise.

A clang.

Swallowing hard, I grabbed Moose's collar to keep him from reacting. Maybe it was nothing. Possibly the old pipes. No, my mother had told me all the plumbing had been redone. *Okay, breathe. Just breathe.* I took another step, convinced whatever I'd heard were normal house sounds when I heard an entirely different sound. I yanked out my phone, my fingers shaking. No reception. Shit. Maybe I should just drive away, heading toward the police station. It would be helpful if I knew where it was.

Wait a minute. I was taking the coward's way out. Either what I'd heard was nothing or maybe the wind outside had loosened

a board and it was hitting against the gutters. That made more sense than some intruder being inside the house. There were no vehicles, no other indication anyone was here.

Then Moose growled and I jumped, sucking in my breath as I slipped the phone into my pocket. *Okay, you can do this.*

“Stay, buddy. Right here. Be a good boy,” I whispered. His low growl was more terrifying than I’d heard in a long time. I had no implement of protection, not even mace. God, why had the plane been late? I eased toward the sound, constantly throwing Moose looks. I would unleash the beast if necessary, but not until I knew what I was dealing with. Granted, my big slobbering pup would do nothing more but lick the intruder to death unless the person was intent on hurting me. At least since he topped the scales at one hundred five pounds and was all black, he looked menacing, which terrified the majority of people he came in contact with.

When I heard a third sound, I bit my inner cheek to keep from yelping. That’s when I knew I had to grab something to protect myself with. I couldn’t become a victim in the first hour of being in a new city. Only a hint of light filtered into the kitchen, but I could easily make out all the wonderful small appliances positioned on the counters. I snagged a toaster, holding my breath as I headed through a huge dining room toward the source of light.

I waited just outside the entrance, gathering my courage.

Then all hell seemed to break loose as Moose came charging in my direction, flying by me, growling as if several bears had crossed his path.

Bang.

The loud noise was jarring, unrecognizable.

“Fuck!” The exclamation came from a deep male voice. That was my cue to protect what now belonged to me.

I rushed into the room, lifting the toaster and without paying attention to anything around me, I smashed the stainless-steel appliance down on the perpetrator’s head. The hard cracking sound was empowering.

“What the hell?” The intruder’s exclamation was laced with pain.

Good. I’d hit my mark. I held onto the toaster with white-knuckled fingers as Moose straddled the bastard. What I found odd was that the pup stopped growling almost instantly. My slobbering buddy was even wagging his tail. Of course. Now he was licking the man as if they were best buddies. Perfect.

“Moose! Come here, boy.” My command was unheeded, Moose far too interested in loving on the stranger.

“Okay, buddy,” the intruder said, his husky voice sending a strange set of tingling vibes into my system like a rush of gasoline.

“If you hurt my dog, I will kill you.”

While Moose kept licking, the asshole stopped talking. Then the criminal managed to peer around the lump of fur, staring at me with the most incredible pair of blue eyes I’d ever seen. I took a deep breath, tingles trickling down both my arms. Only when his expression turned hard and cold did I manage to look away.

“I’m not going to touch your dog, lady. But it seems like he likes me a bit too much.”

“He likes everyone, including unscrupulous assholes who break into a person’s house. I’m calling the police.”

“You do that, sweetheart. I can’t wait to see if you get any reception.” As soon as he struggled to get from under Moose’s hefty weight, I noticed two things.

One—the criminal’s forehead was bleeding.

Even worse—the intruder was without a doubt one of the most gorgeous men I’d ever seen. Models and actors weren’t as handsome and muscular. While he was older by at least ten years, that didn’t diminish his rugged good looks or his extreme sex appeal. My eyes followed a trail from his chiseled cheeks to his full lips and square jaw to... Whoa. The side of the man’s neck was scarred badly, his arm as well.

When he struggled to stand, I refused to take a step back, lifting the appliance, prepared to strike the man again.

What if he has a gun?

Maybe he had one hidden in the... carpenter's bag hung around his waist. What? I took a few seconds to scan the room, realizing he'd fallen from a ladder. Then I looked up at the ceiling, groaning quietly. He'd been in the middle of installing a ceiling fan. Shit. Shit. Shit. Who was this man?

He eyed me scornfully as he rubbed his hands on his jeans. I allowed my gaze to follow his actions, a lump forming in my throat. At least it was no longer from fear or apprehension. Oh, no. I couldn't seem to take my eyes off his muscular thighs and the huge bulge between his legs. His jeans were well-worn, but the fit was perfect, allowing more than a few torrid fantasies.

And the man was huge. At least six foot five. I couldn't help but fantasize about the size of his cock.

What are you thinking?

I forced myself to look away, but not before seeing a smirk on his face. He'd noticed my heated stare. Damn it.

"Who the hell are you and what are you doing here?" I demanded without looking in his direction.

"I could ask the same damn thing about you, lady."

"My name isn't lady."

"Then what is it? Princess? Vixen?"

The dude was grumpy as shit. Okay, I didn't blame him given I'd attacked him with a toaster. Wait a minute. What had he just called me?

"Maybe I'll just call you Mr. Grinch."

He snorted, his glare intensifying. "I guess I'll just call you Cinnamon Girl."

"Excuse me?"

"You smell like a fucking bakery."

“How dare you!” I snapped and without thinking, I took a giant stride toward him. That’s the moment his musky aftershave filtered into my system, jetting straight into my core. Within seconds, my panties were damp, the scent as intoxicating as any I’d ever had the privilege of savoring.

He swaggered even closer, a wry smile on his face. “I have every right to be here.”

“Right. Who says so?”

“Margaret Dayne, a client of mine.”

“She’s dead. That’s a horrible thing to do, using a dead woman to try and explain yourself.”

“Well, nothing will explain your improper use of a toaster,” he snarked then pressed his fingers against his forehead. “I’m the one who should be calling the police.”

I kept my hard glare on him even though my mouth was watering. “Who are you?”

“Jake Spencer. Who are you?”

I wasn’t certain I wanted to give him my real name, but at this point, what did it matter? “Cassandra Dayne. I’m Margaret’s daughter.”

“She never mentioned you or that she even had a daughter, and you certainly never visited her. For all I know, you’re a scam artist.”

“Ha! My mother had next to nothing when she died. And I was busy. I was...” Swallowing hard, I looked away, the guilt over never visiting her returning in full force.

His cold expression softened for about thirty seconds. “I’m sorry about your mom, Ms. Dayne, but that doesn’t give you an excuse or the right to assault me.”

“And my mother never mentioned you or the work you were doing on the place. I didn’t see a truck outside. For all I know, you’re some homeless dude looking for a warm bed to crawl in.”

“That’s why I’m hanging a ceiling fan she ordered a couple weeks before she died. Right?”

Okay, so he had a point. I lowered the toaster, wrinkling my nose as I watched Moose dance around him like the man was his new play toy. There were so many nasty words forming in my mind that it was all I could do to keep them to myself. I’d heard from the attorney the place did need a lot of work. Maybe what he was telling me was true.

“She hired you?” I demanded once again.

“No, my fairy godmother did. Of course she hired me, sweetheart.”

“I’m not your sweetheart, buster. I don’t know you.”

“And I don’t want to know you.”

Even the two-day stubble on his chiseled jaw was sexy, but I refused to think about him as anything other than a man who’d broken into my mother’s beloved bed and breakfast. “There’s no vehicle outside and from what I can tell, you’re a long way from home.”

“I guess you didn’t open your eyes when you drove in. I live just next door. The truck is around the side.”

“It was dark.”

“You have headlights.”

The man was infuriating. I was ready to toss the toaster in his direction. “Fine, you live next door. Great. Maybe I’ll sell the place just because of that.”

He laughed, the gruff, throaty sound sending a wave of shivers through every muscle. “Yeah, you do that. That would suit me just fine.”

A line had been drawn in the sand. God, I hated this man.

“I need some ID.” At least I had conviction in my voice as I threw out my hand.

“Not until I see yours. That will be helpful when I contact the sheriff. He’ll be mighty interested in the reason you attacked me.”

I opened my mouth to issue a sundry list of hateful words but sucked in my breath instead. “What else do you think a woman will do when confronted with a dangerous man?”

It took a few seconds, but he grinned, and I could swear the sun was shining down through the popcorn ceiling. Why were my nipples hard, pressing against the thin material of my blouse? When he slowly lowered his gaze, I knew without a doubt he had a general idea of my body’s reaction to him. Shit. This was *not* the way I wanted the evening to go.

“You’re right. I *am* a dangerous man. I’d keep that in mind if I were you. However, that doesn’t change the fact you accosted me.” He yanked his cell phone from his back pocket, immediately pressing his fingers on the screen.

“What are you doing?”

“Contacting my buddy at the sheriff’s office. We’re close friends and he won’t take kindly to a stranger beating the shit out of me.”

“Let me tell you something. If I’d wanted to beat the shit out of you then you wouldn’t be standing.” He ignored my comment, pulling his hand away and staring at me as he waited for the call to connect.

“Hey, Bart,” he stated, his deep baritone still able to send shivers down my spine. “I need to report a crime.”

“Don’t you do it.” He ignored me. Without thinking, I reacted, moving toward him and ripping the phone from his hand. When it slipped through my fingers, smashing against the hardwood floor, I gasped, the hard thud and cracking sound not what I’d wanted to hear. This had gone from really bad to insufferable in a heartbeat.

There was a moment of quiet calm, but within seconds I realized he was livid. I expected him to lash out, possibly striking me, but his only reaction was to take a full ten seconds to shift his enraged gaze to the shattered phone.

The bile in my throat remained and swallowing several times had no effect. A strange need to say ‘uh-oh’ coasted through my brain.

He took an equal amount of agonizing time to hunker down, retrieving his demolished phone. When he finally tilted his head in my direction, I could see a firestorm building.

I should tell him I was sorry, but what good would that do? We weren't destined to be friends.

For some reason I thought he would fondle his Apple product. Instead, he crushed what was left between his massive fingers, taking a deep breath before depositing the handful of metal and plastic into the suede satchel secured to his side. The entire time Moose whined, turning his head from the stranger back to his Mommy dog. The pup was smart enough to know I'd fucked up. Royally. At least he had the good graces to remain on his haunches, although his thick tail thwapped back and forth, keeping time like a metronome.

Jake finally lifted his head in my direction, narrowing his eyes as he studied me. In the next few seconds, there was no doubt he was undressing me with his eyes. I'd never felt so uncomfortable in my life. In my mind I was naked, my nipples hard as rocks, red from anticipation of his mouth sucking them. Blinking, I tried to look away, but it was impossible to yank myself from his powerful stare.

The man had a dangerous aura, rough and tumble as if he could wrestle with a den of bears and win with no issue.

"Here's the way I see it," he stated, utter domination in his voice. "I can either head over to my place, and make another call to my buddy from my landline, waiting until he arrives and enjoying the moment he slaps handcuffs on you, or..."

The asshole purposely allowed his statement to die off. The son of a bitch was playing me, enjoying every moment. "Or what, Mr. Spencer?" I'd backed away by several feet, loathing the concept of being close to him. He purposely closed the distance, his chest heaving as he took several deep breaths. Oh, this wasn't good in any language or on any level.

"Or we can handle this the old-fashioned way."

CHAPTER 2



Cassandra

The old-fashioned way? What in God's name was Mr. Grinch trying to say? I glared at him, now almost happy I'd nearly bashed his head in. Even his grin was evil. He was the epitome of a grumpy jerk, the name suiting him perfectly. But Cinnamon Girl? Okay, so my shower gel of choice had hints of vanilla and cinnamon, but that didn't give him any right to call me names.

You mean like you called him.

Great, now even my inner voice was taking the rugged man's side.

But I was justified.

Maybe.

"Excuse me? What are you talking about? Fine. I'll pay for your phone if that's what you want."

The bastard grinned. "Not enough. However, I can dole out punishment right here, right now. That will do the trick. For now."

Punishment? The man had a screw loose. "I'm not accepting anything from you but an apology."

He took a deep breath, slowly blowing it across my face. His scent was enriched by the hint of peppermint candy. My panties were soaked, my pussy throbbing. This wasn't good at all.

“Then I’ll visit you in jail while you’re awaiting trial. I hear the judge is on an extended vacation. And so you know, he’s the only one who can reside over your case.”

The fucker was now threatening me. I tossed the toaster onto the dining room table, fisting one hand, ready to throw a hard punch. He disarmed me by lifting a single eyebrow, as if a woman could never best him. “What punishment?”

“Let me think.” Jake dared to take the time to rub his fingers across his stubbled chin. “Ah, yes. I know exactly what’s perfect for you. A hard spanking.”

Whoa. Hold on. What? What did the Neanderthal just say? “I beg your pardon?”

“There’s nothing wrong with your hearing. One solid spanking with my belt across your bottom. Yep. That’s the only thing that will keep you from spending your first few months in my hometown behind bars.”

It took every ounce of control not to punch him several times. “Your hometown? I don’t think so.”

Mr. Grinch swaggered closer, a sly smile crossing his face. “Sweetheart, I’ve been here my entire life. What about you? If I had to guess, I’d say you were from New York.”

“Why would you say that?”

“You have that stuck-up look about you.”

I couldn’t believe the conversation had gone so far downhill it was circling quicksand. “To hell with you.” I slapped my hand on my hip, offering him the same rebellious, nasty look.

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

“Yeah, you’re dead wrong.” I glanced away, cringing inside. “I’m from DC.”

“Ah. The land of corrupt politicians. Perfect. We don’t need your kind here.”

“My kind. Well, *your* kind is even worse. The world doesn’t need a card-carrying, foul-mouthed jerk.”

He puffed up as if he was going to explode. “What’s it going to be, Cinnamon Girl? Prison or a date with my belt?” The way he fingered the thick leather strap around his waist drew my attention.

Unfortunately, I could tell the jerk was serious. I glanced down at Moose, who was watching the action as if enjoying an action and adventure movie, his tail swishing back and forth, my goodest boy drooling in anticipation. “What are you looking at, buddy?”

Woof.

“Even your dog knows you deserve punishment. I’m waiting and the clock is ticking. You should know I’m not a patient man.”

There were at least a dozen nasty things I wanted to say. I’d always had a sharp tongue, something my mother had told me would eventually get me in the kind of trouble my beauty couldn’t get me out of. I raked my hand through my hair, hating the fact it was shaking.

“Tick tock,” he pushed, tapping his watch.

“Fine but I never want to see you again.”

“That’s going to be tough since I live next door.”

“Like I said. I might sell the place.”

“You won’t get any buyers.”

“And why is that?”

Jake grinned as if he held a deep, dark secret. “The place is haunted.”

Stiffening, I couldn’t tell whether he was joking or not, but a wave of butterflies formed in my stomach. My mother had been into all things haunted, her love of the paranormal something my father had hated. “Stop that. Just get on with it.”

“Good girl.”

Was he joking? No one called me a good girl. That’s probably because I wasn’t. I’d been a shark in my formal job, tougher

than most men inside the Fortune 500 firm. Maybe that's because I'd been required to be.

The devious grin remained on Mr. Grinch's face as he reached for his belt buckle, nodding toward the kitchen.

"What?"

"We'll do this in there. Lower your jeans and lie across the kitchen table."

His deep, commanding voice sent a series of vibrations into every muscle, which I hated almost as much as the man. What disturbed me almost as much as the wretched situation was that the thoughts thumping in the back of my mind were all about being grateful I'd worn decent panties. I couldn't believe I was even considering something so... blasphemous. However, the last thing I needed was trouble at this point. I'd done everything to keep my move as private as possible. My nerves and the continuing grief wouldn't be able to take it. I'd been through far too much in the last few weeks.

I turned away sharply, pressing my hand across my mouth to keep the ugly, strangled sobs from exposing my sadness. I'd never felt so all alone in my life. All the bravado I'd had before faded, my mind still trying to process and accept that I was allowing some crazed stranger to spank me as if I was a bad little girl. For all I knew, he could be a serial killer or some stalker. Okay, so the attorney handling my mother's estate had mentioned my mother had hired a couple of contractors to help with some renovations, but I'd thought that meant in the past.

And God knows from what little I'd seen of the place, it could use some TLC, but there had to be other contractors in town. Hiring someone different would top the list. Right after I purchased a decent vehicle.

Embarrassment tore through me as I fumbled with the button on my jeans, finally managing to shove the dense material past my hips. He had five minutes to finish and get the hell out of my house before I contacted the sheriff.

Yeah, and tell him what exactly?

Remaining stiff as a board, I bent over the table, fisting my hands as soon as I did. I couldn't believe Moose was obviously thrilled he had someone new to play with, woofing every few seconds.

"That's a good boy," Mr. Grinch told him. Wait a minute. Was the asshole whistling as if he was enjoying this entire thing?

Hissing, I knew neither my mind nor my ears were playing tricks on me. I glanced over my shoulder just in time to see the grumpy bastard swagger into the room. The fact my pussy was throbbing brought a single word into the forefront of my mind.

Betrayal with a capital B.

The mystery man studied me, his expression one of disdain. In his hand was his belt folded in the center. The ridiculousness of the situation hit me hard, but I was determined to get through the moment. I'd find a way never to see him again. Somehow.

As soon as he made his approach, I closed my eyes.

"I think twenty-five will be adequate."

I refused to give him the satisfaction of making a single comment. Mr. Grinch wasted no time on niceties or preparing me, bringing the thick strap down four times right across my sit spot.

"Jesus Christ. That fucking hurts!" I jerked up, panting more than Moose normally did on a hot summer day.

"Didn't you know ladies shouldn't curse?"

He brought the belt down again and I bit back a series of whimpers and other curse words. The pain was horrible, so much so I was blinded by stars floating in front of my eyes. Yet when he issued three or four more, one hitting the tops of my thighs, I felt a dull ache develop in my stomach. That was nothing like the throbbing sensations in my pussy. "Just stop. I take back my agreement."

"Nope. Not gonna happen." Jake's voice was gruffer than before and when he yanked down my panties, I was mortified.

"What do you think you're doing?"

“Disciplining you the way women are supposed to be spanked.” He had the nerve to caress my aching bottom for a few seconds.

His words shocked me. Had I slipped through some time warp into another generation? I pushed up from the table again, throwing him a hateful look over my shoulder, my mouth going slack.

“You’re a terrible person,” I challenged.

“You got that right, Cinnamon Girl. I suggest you remember it next time.”

“There won’t be a next time even if I need to get a restraining order.”

The look on his face changed to one of amusement, his blue eyes twinkling. When I almost bucked off the table, he pressed his hand against the small of my back. “Don’t or I’ll start again.”

“Fu... Fine,” I said through clenched teeth, tingling all over just from studying his impressive muscles, the thick cords in his neck. I turned my head, determined to hate him, frowning as I noticed the happy expression on Moose’s face. He was enjoying this as much as the Grinch.

There was something strange about being so attracted to a man who obviously enjoying taking out his bad day on women. I almost snorted given my thoughts, but admitting it was my fault I’d been plunked into this position wasn’t going to happen. I eased my arms over my head, gripping the edge of the table as the spanking continued.

It wasn’t too much longer before I could hear Mr. Grinch’s labored breathing. When he took a break, daring to caress my aching bottom a second time, I sucked in and held my breath. The last thing I wanted was for him to know he’d broken through a layer of my armor, forcing tears to form in my eyes.

Granted, they’d flowed easily for weeks, my weepiness more than annoying. It was time to suck it up and move forward. Maybe the spanking was a good test of whether or not I had the resolve to make it in a strange city all by myself.

Moose barked once as if able to read my mind. Okay, so I wasn't alone. I had my furball who did keep me warm and cozy at night. And I had my handy-dandy selection of vibrators. One was never enough.

The mystery man hesitated. Out of the corner of my eye I noticed he still had his arm lifted, his fingers curled tightly around the belt as if holding on for dear life. It was as if the man was frozen in time, staring down at, his mouth twisting in either frustration or anger. That lasted only a few seconds, his eyes turning darker.

Another volley of savage strikes brought me down off the rafters or maybe shot me toward the ceiling. I kicked out involuntarily, catching him somewhere painful, his sharp groan almost pushing a laugh up from my throat, but I thought better of it.

While I wasn't certain of how many more lashes were left, I realized very quickly that the spanking had stopped. Mr. Grinch took purposeful steps toward the dining room, his breathing still labored. Moose trotted after him and I heard other noise.

I shifted on the table, almost falling on my face as I jumped off, fighting to jerk my panties and jeans into position. I half hopped toward the dining room, ready to remind the intruder he wasn't welcome in my home any longer.

He stormed out of the room through the second oversized entryway and barely two seconds later, the front door slammed with enough force it seemed the entire house was shaking.

Sighing, I slowly glanced down at Moose, who harrumphed before sneezing.

“That’s exactly what I have to say, little buddy. Why don’t we get settled. Mr. Grinch is out of my life for good.”

Why did I have the distinct feeling that wasn't going to hold true?

CHAPTER 3



Jake

Cinnamon Girl.

The name suited her, although Cassandra was beautiful, far too much so, which was more annoying than the dull ache behind my eyes. Hell, now I'd admitted I found the incorrigible vixen attractive. I'd had other less than nice adjectives and names that had crossed my mind more than once, but my mother hadn't raised a hooligan. I might be grumpy, but I still refused to call the sassy vixen the 'b' word. Even if that's what she'd acted like.

Besides, I had about a half dozen reasons to be in a perpetual bad mood. And who did the girl think she was anyway?

Margaret had been a wonderful client, and although she'd come into hard times, unable to pay me what she owed, I'd kept working for her. She'd been the one bright spot, just about the only person in town who could still make me smile.

Now she was dead.

I was probably the only person who didn't buy that cancer had killed her.

After turning over the engine, I pulled my hand to my face. She really did smell like the sweetest cinnamon buns fresh out of the oven. Snarling, I did what I could to shove her and her dog out of my mind.

Gravel flew as I pumped on the accelerator, the back end of my truck swerving back and forth. I glared into the rearview mirror, snarling even as the exterior of Tangerine Sunset finally faded into the shadows.

On top of having my head bashed in by a toaster, almost licked to death by a frothing beast, the woman had kicked me in the balls. As bad as all three had been, the fact my cock was now throbbing from desire was even worse. I didn't need complications in my life. I also didn't need her as a client. Nope.

I had plenty to go around and I liked my life just the way it was.

Even if it was all alone, that suited me just fine.

I should go straight back to my house and head to bed, ridding my mind of the filthy thoughts running through it. Instead, what was I doing? Heading to the local watering hole owned by a jerk I couldn't stand. Still, maybe tonight was a perfect night to have a drink or three and Scotty's was close enough to my house I could make it home without concern. Snorting, I glanced into the rearview mirror one last time before making the turn, my grip so firm around the steering wheel I was certain I would break it.

Just like I did almost everything else in my life.

My head hurt like a son of a bitch and I winced when I touched it. The girl had a solid swing, even if it was with a toaster. I couldn't help but laugh bitterly. She was a five-foot ten-inch girl, for God's sake, and she'd managed to crawl under my skin, shredding a portion of it.

Staying away from her was going to be vital. Thank God, I had enough work to keep me away from the B & B for a long time.

As I headed closer to town, passing by the local bakery and Millie's Diner, I thought about calling my buddy, Connor, to join me. Nah. He'd just spent a couple of hours lecturing me about my mental health issues. It was nothing a cold brew and a shot of whiskey couldn't cure.

And I didn't have a fucking phone any longer thanks to the little vixen.

I pulled into the parking lot of Scotty's Place, noticing the parking lot of the dive bar was almost full and on a Wednesday night. Maybe I should just turn around. One beer then I was out of here. I had an early day. The trouble was that my next job was repairing the hole in Margaret's roof. No, in the bed and breakfast owned by Ms. Cassandra Dayne. Margaret had signed the proposal slip, squeezing my hand and making me promise to take care of her beloved business. That had been two days before her death.

The fact I'd been told to stay clear of the estate while it was in probate by the surly attorney had left a bad taste in my mouth and even more interior damage to the place. Okay, so I'd known where Margaret had kept a hidden key and had let myself in. That didn't make me the bad guy.

I wondered if Cinnamon Girl had any idea just how much work there was to take care of. The exterior might look pretty, but it was slowly falling apart. What the hell did it matter? Not my place.

I found a parking place behind the joint, cutting the engine and immediately glancing out the windshield as the sliver of moon finally appeared from behind the thick clouds. I don't know why I was bothering to look at it other than the last few days had been dark and gloomy, unusual for this time of year.

As I headed around the side of the building, I could swear I heard coyotes in the distance. Snickering, I wondered how her dog would take to the wildlife.

As soon as I walked into Scotty's I almost turned around. Seeing my brother and some of his hockey buddies sitting at one of the few tables in the back brought a level of irritation my mother had called irrational. My father had told me more than once it was a sin to be jealous of my own younger brother. That wasn't it but I'd never been one to explain my actions or my emotions and I wasn't going to start now.

I glared at one of the team members, surprised he didn't feel a hole burned in the back of his neck. Exhaling, I almost walked

out but refused to allow the son of a bitch to get to me any longer.

Fortunately, I made it to the bar without Riley or any of the others noticing me. There was a single barstool left and I thumped down, immediately drumming my fingers on the aging wooden surface. Scotty Freeman needed to fix the place up, but he preferred drinking and gambling away the money he earned. He was busy talking trash to a couple of the locals, finally noticing I'd joined the crowd.

After grabbing the bar towel slung over his shoulder, he slowly sauntered toward me, his glare as evident as mine likely was.

We didn't like each other. We hadn't since high school when I'd made the varsity hockey team and he hadn't. Our feud had only escalated from there. Maybe I'd come here looking for a fight instead of a drink. Whatever the case, my gut churned from the same anger I'd felt for far too long.

"Well, look what the rats allowed out of their damp caves," Scotty said as he sneered at me.

Instead of dragging him across the bar, I glanced up at one of several television sets that had seen better days. "Beer and a shot of whiskey."

"Oh, yeah. I forgot you don't talk much."

"I talk, Scott, but only to people who have intelligence and common sense."

He threw up one hand, placing the other across his heart as he stumbled backward. "Ouch. That hurt. You know, you've been nothing but a grouchy son of a bitch since the accident. Maybe it's time you got that stick unstuck from your tight asshole."

His buddies laughed but they were easy to ignore. It was rare that a few days went by where I wasn't reminded how much my personality had changed. Yeah, I was well aware. I'd had three psychiatrists provide clinical explanations as to why just seconds before trying to write a prescription for whatever mind-numbing drug was in fashion that month. Nope. Not this guy.

At least Scotty had the good sense to detect I wasn't in the mood to be fucked with. Not tonight. Not after meeting Cinnamon Girl. I rolled my eyes, doing my best not to think about how much I'd wanted to tangle my fingers in her long dark hair, fisting it before yanking back her head, driving my cock into the back of her throat.

How long had it been since I'd felt anything other than rage, especially below the belt.

Scotty broke my sinful images when he slammed the Budweiser bottle on the bar, his craggy face breaking into a smile as he shoved the shot glass across the surface. His smirk grew wider when he almost tossed it into my lap. Fuck him. After catching the small glass, I took a long pull of beer, trying to ignore the banter of the drunk assholes at the other end of the bar.

"He used to be a decent player," one of them said, snorting after doing so. "He even got himself a major contract with the Vancouver Jackals."

"Yeah, well, he fucked that up like he did everything else in his life," another asshole said before tossing me a look.

There'd been a time I hadn't been able to ignore the bullshit comments. At least the thousands of dollars spent on clinical help had convinced me that assaulting anyone who aggravated me wasn't in my best interest. For some reason, it struck a nerve tonight. I noticed Riley's approach and shook my head. Why couldn't he just leave it alone?

"Hey. If I hear you talk about my brother that way ever again, I'm going to drag each one of you by a chain from the back of my pickup truck through town naked. Do you hear me?"

An instant frown crossed my face hearing my brother's voice. He was the one who usually took the comments in stride, but lately he'd taken to protecting me when I should be doing that for him instead.

"We weren't sayin' nothing, Riley. It's all in good fun."

"Sure it is, Sam," Riley retorted. "Why don't you and your buddies find another place to roost?"

My brother stood only an inch shorter than my six-foot five-inch frame. He was also extremely muscular like I used to be before my life went to shit. If that wasn't intimidating enough, he had a way of altering his facial expressions, able to make himself look like the devil personified. That scared off most people. He'd been labeled the Intimidator by a reporter, and the nickname had stuck. There were thousands of women on TikTok and Instagram who fawned over him, wearing tee shirts with his picture and the moniker depicted in bold red ink.

If his surly attitude didn't intimidate folks, his celebrity status did. Tonight, I couldn't help but be amused. He was giving the nasty dudes the full court press standing in one of his hockey team jerseys, his eyes shimmering even in the dim lighting. Meanwhile, members of his hockey team stood behind him with their arms folded across their massive chests.

I glanced at Bruno, surprised when he held my gaze. We hadn't talked since my girlfriend had left me, which had suited me just fine. The fact he'd left town after his treachery had been good for his health.

Riley noticed my gaze and lifted his eyebrows, his look of scorn meant to advise me to keep my need for revenge in check. Yeah, fine. Whatever.

Shaking my head, I almost broke out into another smile when six of the guys sitting on the barstools moved away without questioning Riley's order. He was obviously proud of himself, grinning like the happy kid brother I knew him to be.

"I'll catch you guys later. Okay?" he said to his entourage, not bothering to wait for any of them to answer before he spun in a full circle, creating dance moves of his own.

Bruno hesitated, acting as if he was going to say something then thought better of it. Meanwhile, my jaw remained clenched.

When Riley slid onto the now vacant barstool beside me, he gave Scotty the same nasty glare.

Neither one of us said anything for a few seconds, at least until he had a fresh bottle of beer nestled in his hand. From what I'd seen and heard, my brother was drinking almost every night. That didn't bode well for a rigorous and extremely physical career but he'd stop listening to my advice years ago.

"You gotta let the past go, Jake."

"I didn't beat Bruno's face into pulp, now did I?"

"I didn't know you were going to be here, or I wouldn't have asked him to come with us."

"Spur of the moment thing."

"You should know that my heart almost stopped a few seconds ago from seeing you inside a bar. Hell, seeing you anywhere outside of your house." His grin remained, although he was only partially teasing me. He'd cajoled me more frequently over the last few months to come back to the land of the living.

"Yeah, well, I needed a drink tonight and you're always reminding me it's not a good thing to drink alone in my own house."

"Hey, I just want what's best for you. That's all, you big lug."

Snorting, I tossed him a hateful look, but he wasn't paying any attention, keeping his eyes locked onto the television screen and whatever preseason football game was on. While he might be a star player for the Seattle Sabers, the season didn't start for another three weeks. Until then, I had a feeling he was going to be a pain in my ass.

"I'm a big boy, Riley. I can take care of myself. Maybe you should look in the mirror every once in a while."

"It appears you've done a bang-up job so far. That's for certain. And what the hell do you mean look in the mirror?"

"It means you're slurring your words. If you came here to give me a hard time, don't. It's been a shit day."

"Fuck you."

"Yeah, so you've told me many times."

The last two years of trying to carry on a conversation had been excruciating.

“What’s Bruno doing in town?”

Riley took a few seconds to answer. “Just visiting his folks.”

“Right.” I knew there was more to the story. I just didn’t care.

“Why the shitty day? Is that because of the gash you have on your forehead?” He lifted his eyebrows as he turned his head toward me, his grin now what I’d call shit-eating.

I involuntarily touched it, wincing as soon as I did. “Nope. I had a run-in with a toaster.”

“What?”

“Yeah, you heard me. Some chick bought the Tangerine Sunset. She whacked me across the head when she found me inside.”

“That’s what usually occurs when people find a stranger inside their home. Why the hell were you in that old place?”

“Because I was hired to do work there.”

Riley rolled his eyes. “You mean you were hired by a dead woman, the same one who didn’t pay you when she was alive? How much did she owe you, like twenty grand?”

“Don’t you fuckin’ talk about Margaret that way and no, it wasn’t that much.” Although if I’d added up all the service calls, my bill would likely be in that neighborhood. What did it matter now? My voice had risen more than I’d intended. I felt the heat of several patrons staring in our direction, likely talking about the guy who’d killed a little girl. Fuck me. I turned away, tossing back the whiskey shot and lifting the empty glass toward Scotty, who just happened to be staring at me.

“Jesus. You’re surlier than usual.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Goddamn it, buddy. Why can’t you enjoy your life?”

“What are you talking about? I am enjoying life.”

“Uh-huh,” he said before taking a long pull on his beer, returning his attention to the game. As always happened, tension settled between us. It was a far cry from how close we’d been years ago, the kid following me around like my shadow. “You just can’t let the past go. Can you?”

“And you can’t stop partying or wrecking your life.”

“I’m not wrecking my life.”

“Like hell you’re not, Riley. I’ve watched you play. You’re hungover so often it’s affecting your game. It won’t be long until you become a liability.”

Riley huffed. “What the hell right do you have criticizing me? Your leg is all healed up, yet you pretend you can’t play any longer. You’re a chicken shit if you ask me.”

“Well, nobody is asking you!” God damn the man. We’d had more moments of awkward silence over the last few years than I’d thought possible. “At least I have a decent excuse for not playing. What’s yours going to be? And who’s the latest puck bunny hanging all over you at these games?”

“God damn you. I didn’t know you gave a shit about watching me any longer.”

Another two minutes ticked by.

“Yeah, I care whether you believe it or not. I don’t want you washed up early.”

“Why don’t you just worry about yourself,” he said through clenched teeth. Another two minutes ticked by with both of us staring up at the television screen even though I doubted either one of us knew who was playing or what the score was. “So, what’s this chick like?”

His question almost made me laugh.

“She’s a ballbuster, that’s what she’s like. She’s some highfalutin hotshot out of DC. She’s in way over her head if she thinks she can handle the B & B. That much I can tell you. There’s no chance she can get the place back on its feet.”

“Wow,” Riley said, amusement in his tone.

“What?”

“You like this girl.”

“Like hell I do. She’s annoying as fuck. And she hit me with a toaster. Besides, why would you say a shit thing like that?” Scotty slid the shot across the bar just like he’d done before, only this time I snapped it in my hand, giving him a surly look.

My brother leaned in. “Because you haven’t been this animated in years.”

“That’s bullshit.” I powered down more than half the cold one before taking the whiskey shot. All the while my brother continued to stare at me. I wanted to wipe the amused and entitled look off his face.

“I’m not making fun of you, Jake.”

“Yeah, you are.”

“No, I’m not. You deserve to find some happiness.”

“Just let it alone. Okay?”

“Sure.” We sat in silence for a full minute, but I could tell something was on his mind. “So, have you talked to Mom or Dad lately?”

“Why the fuck would I do that?” I took another gulp of beer, suddenly loathing the taste. Or maybe it was the bitter taste that came when he asked the same question at least once a quarter.

“Oh, I don’t know. Because they’re our parents. Because they worry about you.”

“Need I remind you that they made it perfectly clear they wanted nothing to do with me when they moved out of town?”

“Dad got a promotion. That’s why they moved to Seattle.”

“That’s bullshit and you know it. Stop trying to put the pieces back together, Riley. Just face it. Our family is fractured. That’s the way it is. I’m okay with that.” My father had both our lives laid out almost as soon as we were born. He’d pushed us into hockey, an injury similar to mine destroying his career early on. When I’d refused to return to the sport, he’d taken it

as a personal affront. It didn't help that my father and I had never seen eye to eye.

"It's time to heal, buddy."

"I have healed. Dad doesn't rule my life any longer. No one rules mine, Riley. No one."

"Which also means you have no one in your life."

"So be it. I'm fine with it."

"Whatever you say, bro, but if you aren't careful, you're going to end up alone and lonely."

I pulled out my wallet, yanking out a twenty and a five. That should cover the cheap whiskey and beer. When I slid off the barstool, Riley grabbed my arm. I slowly lowered my gaze and he immediately jerked his hand away as if touching the scars on my skin hurt any longer. What no one could understand was that it didn't matter how many scars had been burned into my skin, they'd never been the ones that had bothered me.

Only the ones destroying my heart did. Even then, that only occurred every once in a while.

"Hey. The guys and I are going to go to the zone on Saturday to get in some practice time on the ice. You wanna come? It'll do you some good."

I powered back the rest of the beer, slamming it down with a hard thud before answering. "Let it go, Riley. I like seeing you but I'm not ever going to be a third wheel."

"What the hell are you talking about, a third wheel? They used to be your friends."

"Yeah? Used to be is the key phrase at this point. You seem to forget. I don't have any friends in this town any longer."

With that, I walked out.

CHAPTER 4



Cassandra

“Shit.”

I jerked up, gasping for air, trying to figure out what had awakened me from the dead of sleep. A thunderstorm had come out of nowhere in the middle of the night, which had kept me awake half the night. Storms had terrified me since I was a kid, more so during the last few years. Especially being in a strange place, with a lumpy bed that wasn't comfortable in the least.

The next sound I heard was Moose's tail thumping against the bed followed by his loud yawn.

Groaning, I looked down at my sleepy boy who'd effectively stolen all the covers. I shook my head, reaching down to tickle him under the chin. That lasted a few seconds until I heard yet another sound.

Drips.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

I glanced toward the corner of the room and immediately tossed back the covers. Water was coming in through the ceiling. That meant on top of all the work listed by the inspector, I had a leaky roof to fix. Great. I'd thought I had enough money to fix up the place, even purchasing new furniture. Now I wasn't so sure.

“Time to get up, buddy. I need to grab a bucket before I take you out.” When Moose remained where he was, I waved him off, laughing as I raced down the stairs to the laundry room where I’d seen at least one bucket. When I flipped on the light, I was shocked by the stench of mold, which I hadn’t smelled the night before. Or perhaps I hadn’t paid any attention after the blockhead had left.

Almost as soon as I started to race up the stairs, another noise assaulted my senses. Where was the pounding coming from? I returned to the bedroom and toward the window. A face appeared out of nowhere peering at me through the foggy window. I issued a high-pitched scream, tumbling backwards. My foot hit one of the boxes I’d brought in from my car and down I went, landing on my butt hard.

Woof!

“Don’t you dare make fun of me, Moose.” All it took was another glance at the window to realize what I was seeing: Mr. Grinch’s face leering at me. What in the fuck was he doing standing on a ladder outside my bedroom window? I quickly scrambled to my feet, realizing I was wearing a sexy little nightie and nothing else. I’d grabbed the first thing I’d found to sleep in, not bothering to unpack. Ugh.

Jake finally tore his gaze away, once again making pounding noises. When he climbed further up the ladder, disappearing seconds later, I backed away, turning sharply and heading to my open suitcase. I tossed clothes aside, most landing on the floor, until I was able to find my robe. I was still struggling to get into it as I stormed down the stairs. Moose was on my heels, finally waking up enough to bark from all the excitement.

I threw open the door, almost falling on my face from the slickness of the aging boards on the steps. As soon as I stepped onto the grassy surface, my bare foot sank in. I hadn’t gauged the amount of rain from the night before. I was locked in now, carefully walking around the side of the building. The grumpy man was nowhere in sight, only his ladder providing any indication I hadn’t been hallucinating.

“Where are you?” I finally called, shielding my eyes from the morning light as I peered up at the roofline. As expected, he didn’t bother answering right away, continuing to make pounding noises. “Jake. Are you up there?”

Of course he’s up there, you idiot.

My earlier prediction about this not being such a good idea no longer seemed so far-fetched.

I had mud on my feet. I was standing in my bathrobe after he’d seen me in my nearly see-through nightgown and I was freezing to death given the chill in the air. And I had a virtual stranger hiding on my roof. Yep. I was in a pissy mood.

He finally appeared, standing like some crazed hero above me, peering down with the same scowl I’d seen the night before.

“Didn’t I make it clear that I never wanted to see you again?” I shouted up at him.

“You don’t have a say in the matter. I have a signed purchase order to fix the roof. Besides, I don’t think you want to continue to allow water inside the place. Do you? If you do, just tell me and by all means, I’ll stop.”

God, the man was infuriating. “Fine. Fix the leak then get down here. I’ll pay you what is owed. Then get off my property. Come on, Moose. I sure hope you did your business because we’re not waiting outside for this big jerk.” Before Mr. Grinch had a chance to retort or I had a chance to be even uglier, I stormed back to the house, forgetting all about the mud until I’d tracked it inside. I slammed the door out of anger and spite, jumping all over again when something fell from one of the walls.

Moose whined and pressed his head against my leg. I knew what he wanted. I’d been a bad Mommy dog the night before, skipping his dinner. “Okay, baby boy. Are you hungry for some frog noogies?” It was the term I’d used since getting him. Actually, it had been the single endearing phrase my ex had used. Otherwise, he’d hated Moose, which had been the first bone of contention between us. After that, everything had

irritated me. “Let me get a towel first and clean up my mess. Okay?”

My furry boy barked once in approval.

After snatching a towel from the laundry room, I cursed the entire time I was wiping the mud, blaming Jake for the atrocity as well.

A few minutes later I headed to the kitchen, stopping short as I took in the view. In the dark, things had seemed much more modern. Now they seemed sad, the cabinets tinted in a pale blue accentuating the ugliest wallpaper I’d ever seen in my life.

At least the appliances weren’t ancient, but they certainly weren’t what I was used to. However, the refrigerator was commercial in size, the two wall ovens as well. And the cooktop on the kitchen island was new with eight burners. If the walls weren’t painted a darker blue, gingham curtains on the windows, it would be a decent enough space.

And it would be again.

At least the oversized kitchen table could easily seat twelve and appeared recently refinished, the banquette-style seats comfortable looking.

Thankfully, the sweeping view out the bay window was incredible. The ocean was right there, so close it was as if I could reach out and touch the waves. And the way the morning light highlighted the carved rocks and sharp precipice was breathtaking. It was mesmerizing to look at even though the day had dawned with gray skies and a chilly breeze.

“I’ll get your food, baby.” I drained his water bowl, refilling it almost to the top, careful not to slop it over the edge when I placed it on a wooden floor that had also seen better days. The photographs my mother had sent over the years had certainly been taken from desirable angles. I couldn’t argue about the house. She’d left it to me in her will and even though there was a hefty mortgage, it still wasn’t anywhere close to what I’d been paying in DC.

A series of thumps overhead reminded me that the man I'd prefer to avoid was positioned on my roof. I resisted becoming incensed, choosing to yank Moose's dogfood away from the wall. I was forced to use my hands to scoop food into his bowl. The entire time I couldn't seem to stop thinking about Jake. What disturbed the hell out of me was that my thoughts had nothing to do with the anger I'd felt the night before after finding him inside my house. No. This girl, the one who'd sworn off men after everything I'd endured with my ex, remained intrigued, desire still barraging my mind with lurid fantasies.

"There you go, baby. Eat up. I need coffee." After placing Moose's food bowl on the floor, I glared at my mother's old coffeemaker, taking the time to search through the drawers until I found a sharp knife. One of the few boxes I'd brought in held my prized coffee machine, the one that I'd paid way too much money for but offered not only single cups of the perfect brew but also cappuccino when I so desired.

When I noticed the box was damaged, my heart did a little flutter. There were few things that I required in my life. I mean, I didn't consider myself a prima donna even if my ex-asshole had tossed the ugly word in my face more than once. Okay, so maybe at least two dozen times. The truth was that by the end of our not-so-passionate love affair, I'd enjoyed yanking his chain every chance I got.

Now all I did was chastise my horrific choice of men. I rolled my eyes as I slit the tape on the box, saying a silent prayer my beloved coffeemaker was in perfect condition.

As I heard Moose eagerly munching on his frog noogies, I managed a smile, giving more than one Hail Mary the second I realized there was no damage. With joy in my heart, I replaced my mother's atrocity with my first real addition of the house, finally breathing a sigh of relief.

Until the hardest thud of all directly overtop me brought debris cascading down across my head and shoulders from the ceiling above. "Goddamn motherfucker!" I glared down at my discolored feet, the white speckles adding to the brown smudges that no amount of wiping my feet could remove.

Moose continued to chow down, not slowing even a tiny bit. Maybe that offered some crazy level of encouragement to ignore the mess, concentrating only on making the perfect cup of coffee.

I managed to follow through with my intentions, yanking my favorite hazelnut coffee pod into my hand. After finding a plastic cup to add water to the reservoir on the side of the machine and finding a coffee mug in my mother's cabinet, I plugged the Keurig in. My actions way too exaggerated for a sleepless night, I turned it on, enjoying the way the slight hissing sound brought the machine to life. When it stopped rumbling, I pressed my finger on the perfect setting, basking in the first whiffs of the delightful coffee smell.

As with every perfect cup of coffee, in my world there had to be cream to go with it. On a morning like this after the night I'd had, there was only one cream that would make the cut. Irish cream. Fortunately for me, I'd snagged a couple of personal-sized bottles from my ABC store before leaving DC, storing them away in my purse. They would suffice this morning until I found a local liquor store.

"Stay right there and enjoy your breakfast, baby. Mommy dog will be right back." I bolted from the kitchen, forced to tie the robe more tightly before flying up the stairs. By the time I hit the landing, I heard my phone ringing. I flew into the bedroom, glaring at the nearly full bucket before realizing I'd been too out of it the night before to bother taking my older iPhone from my purse.

My patience level worn thin, I grabbed then dumped my bag on the bed, shoving the small bottles of Bailey's Irish Cream into the pocket of my robe before yanking the phone into my hand. I did have priorities.

Seeing Jessica's number flash across the screen, I groaned. My best friend had done everything in her power to prevent me from moving, including trying to bribe me with a free vacation to her parents' estate in St. Martin.

"Hey, girl," I answered.

Bang. Bang. Bang.

I shoved one finger in my other ear, trying not to curse up a blue streak.

“You’re there safe and sound?” I’d literally run into Jessica the first day of my job at the advertising firm when I’d tried to sneak a Starbucks coffee to take into the skyscraper building. I’d been late, unused to the DC traffic. After my full coffee cup had landed directly in her lap, I’d thought for certain we’d get into an argument. Instead, she’d laughed it off even though I’d accompanied her to the local Doc in a Box for the mild burns. Thank God for wool material.

We’d been fast friends ever since, commiserating over stupid relationships and idiots at our respective offices since then. She was one of the biggest reasons I’d hated leaving the DC area. On the day before I’d left, I’d promised her that one day I’d convince her to move to the great Pacific Northwest.

That was still my goal.

“Oh, I’m here alright.”

“What does that mean?”

“Let’s talk a flight with three delays, a grouchy pup almost being transferred to the wrong plane, the fact that it’s freezing here and that I had an unwelcome visitor inside my house.”

“Ouch. An unwelcome visitor? As in someone had broken in?”

I walked to the window, glaring at the bucket one more time. As I peered out, I shook my head. Mr. Grinch was currently tossing shingles over the side of the house. “Not exactly. Let’s just say my mother had developed an affinity for sarcastic jerks.”

Jessica laughed. “What are you talking about? Your mother was like what, sixty-five?”

“Somewhere in that neighborhood and no, they weren’t romantically involved.” When one of the asphalt pieces managed to hit the window, I pulled away, hissing under my breath.

“Then what?”

“He was her personal contractor.”

“Ooh la la. Is he a hunk?”

“He’s a jerk.” A handsome, sexy, and very masculine one.

“That didn’t answer the question.”

Sighing, I turned away, pacing the floor. “He’s okay.”

“Uh-huh. I know that tone. You think he’s a hottie.” She laughed, the sound the same as when she pointed out some good-looking guy that I turned my nose up to. Stephen, the horrible ex, had certainly done a number on my level of self-confidence. And it wasn’t all about the fact he’d been seeing a pseudo friend of mine behind my back. It was that I’d managed to ignore all the signs that he was a two-timing pig. And I hated myself for it.

Huffing, I moved out of the room. “Like I said. He’s okay in a Neanderthal kind of way.” Thank God the pounding had stopped. I already had a headache behind my eyes. That wouldn’t bode well for all the things I had to do during the day.

“You need to get a picture of him.”

“Why? So you can chastise me, teasing me relentlessly about the fact my sex life dropped into the toilet?”

“Why should it be any different just because you moved a million miles away?” my bestie cooed.

“Come out here and say that.”

“I just might.”

We both laughed as I jogged down the stairs, stopping in the entrance foyer to listen for any other telltale sounds the hunk with a bad attitude had finally left. It struck me that Moose wasn’t barking, which likely meant I was wrong.

Damn it.

The lure of hot coffee called to me like a siren from the deep ocean waters. Yet the moment I walked into the kitchen, I stopped short. At least I knew why my guard dog wasn’t guarding anything, instead being stroked under his chin, the

look of happiness and contentment even more encompassing than when I did the same thing.

Even worse, the person providing my dog with so much happiness was none other than the man who'd become a thorn in my side. Jake was crouched down next to the pup, who was on his back with his legs spread wide open. I'd swear it was a match made in heaven.

I stopped short, my heavy breathing more like a truck driver who'd had way too many cigarettes in his life.

"Are you okay?" Jessica asked from the other end of the line.

My silence wasn't considered golden. As Jake stood, I realized he had a cup of coffee in his hand. My cup to be exact.

"Motherfucker. I need to go, Jess. I'll call you back later."

"You better and send a picture of this gorgeous hunk."

Yeah, I would, only he'd have a knife stuck in his... man piece. The gash on his forehead had been cleaned up but I was certain he should have gone and had stitches. Although the pang of guilt was short lived.

"How dare you drink my coffee."

The bastard had the nerve to take another sip before bothering to turn and face me, showcasing his crime. I planted one hand on my hip, glaring at him with daggers in my eyes.

"Interesting flavor," Jake said casually. "Tastes a little moldy though." When he dared to pour half the beloved cup down the drain, I stared in horror, unable to say anything as I gawked at him. "I need to get a new bundle of shingles so I'll be back later, but you asked me to provide an invoice of what you mother owed for work I've done in the last few months, so here you go."

The piece of paper had been folded into less than a jean pocket-sized note, the edges crimped and if I wasn't mistaken, stained with some wretched substance. "Fine."

He placed the dirty cup on the counter and headed in my direction with the usual swagger in his step. "Oh, and I added

the cost of the new phone onto the invoice as well.” Grinning, he yanked an iPhone from his pocket.

“I thought you said I didn’t need to pay for it.”

“Nope. Not what I said.”

Oh, I wanted to smack his face.

Instead, I held my head high even though I was standing in stained feet, a baby pink robe that had seen better days, and hair that I had no doubt looked like I’d taken a tumble with a nightclub bouncer.

And not in a good way.

“You’re leaving my roof wide open?” Oh, great. That was all I could manage?

“No, Cinnamon Girl. I put a tarp on it. I’m a professional, unlike some of us.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged and almost brushed against my shoulder as he walked by. Damn if his masculine scent didn’t waft into my nostrils, the scent of woody pine and fresh rainwater and... a light musk filtering into my nostrils. The same crackle of electricity I’d experienced before became a full-fledged jolt of current, only this time not from a thunderstorm but a machine used for electric shock therapy. I resisted groaning at the analogy and the subsequent vivid images following the thought.

“What about the hanging ceiling fan?”

“Now you want me. Oh, how nice.”

“If only a robot could take care of it for me.”

“Just so you know, pink isn’t your color. I’m thinking more of a vixen red to match your personality.” He chuckled darkly and walked out. All the while, my beloved baby boy did everything in his power to betray me, his tail thumping against the chipped cheap floor in happiness. “Don’t worry, Cinnamon Girl. I’ll be by later to finish installing it.”

“Don’t call me that!”

Moose's tail thump stopped the moment Jake walked from the room, replaced with a morose sound. I shifted my glare to my big furball, pointing my finger at him.

"I don't want to hear anything from the peanut gallery. Not a single woof."

I eyeballed the invoice he'd left on the kitchen island, hesitating before bothering to walk closer. With a little too much flair, I yanked it from the counter, forcing myself not to rip it into shreds, yet fighting with the frayed edges in trying to get it open. When I did, I was certain I was having a heart attack. Almost seven thousand dollars? Was the fucker kidding? Plus fourteen hundred dollars for a new phone? Oh, hell, no.

There was no trepidation in my angered steps as I rushed out of the kitchen, grabbing the back of Jake's shirt before he had a chance to open the door. I was shocked that enough force in my thin arms had surfaced, I'd managed to jerk him by a full three feet.

"What the hell is the meaning of this, buster? Do you really think I'm going to buy that my mother owned you almost seven thousand dollars? And you're not worth a fourteen-hundred-dollar phone. This place is a dump, with no evidence that you've done a damn thing. I should have you arrested for more than breaking into my house."

Nothing shocked me any longer including my nasty vehemence or the grin that popped across his face.

Or the fact I overreacted as I'd done more than once around the sexy dude and lifted my arm to slap him. Only, unlike the toaster incident, his reflexes kicked mine aside. He not only snagged my forearm while my hand was a solid six inches from his chiseled face—that had more than just a dusting of scruff, making him even sexier—but also managed to shove me against the wall before I could make a single sound.

When he dared to drag my other arm over my head, now holding both my wrists in one very strong set of fingers, I hissed like some venomous snake.

I was in some crazy state of shock as he lowered his head, cocking it slightly, his heated gaze drifting back and forth beseechingly slowly. “I wouldn’t try that again if I were you, Cinnamon Girl.”

“Oh, yeah? And why is that? And don’t call me that any longer.” I barely recognized my voice, the sound deep and throaty.

Dear lord, his scent was suddenly all over me, far too masculine and laced with a heavy dose of testosterone. I was blindsided by another dose of longing so intense that I momentarily lost all the nasty thoughts and likely a part of my mind in the process. When his lips were suddenly dangerously close, I didn’t realize until it was too late that I’d dragged the tip of my tongue across my bottom lip. Filthy images rolled into the back of my mind, ones I wasn’t proud of, so vivid I couldn’t tell anyone about them, including Jessica. I’d never hear the end of it.

“What would you prefer I call you, femme fatale?” His deep, husky voice vibrated into every cell, skittering into my muscles in such a way they were suddenly weak.

I suddenly had no voice as well as no mind. All I could do was breathe and God forbid, moan as if I was attracted to him.

That’s the very moment he took advantage, capturing my mouth, kissing me as if he already owned every inch of my hot and wet body. I’d always been the kind of woman to scoff at the alpha dogs in romance novels who took women in a somewhat nonconsensual kind of way, citing feminism and some sense of decency. But as he swept his tongue inside, dominating mine, I was fairly certain I’d add a bookstore to my list of chores for the day, my search for the hottest and darkest romance books already underway in my mind.

Jake pressed his full weight against me and as I wiggled in his hold, trying to find the strength and resolve to break free from his tight hold, I realized he was rock hard.

And huge.

My mouth watered as another series of savage images floated into the forefront of my mind. Of him licking me, caressing me.

And fucking me.

Get a grip, you foolish girl.

I had no idea how much time drifted away but when he finally pulled away, another moan slipped past my lips.

He let go of me, yet I remained exactly where I was. The smirk from the night before returned to his face as he backed away by two steps. His eyes remained filled with lust, his heated gaze sweeping all the way down to my toes.

After snagging a quick look at the thick bulge between his legs, which confirmed my guess that he was well endowed, I followed through with my earlier instincts.

I slapped him across the face.

He immediately cupped his face with his rugged hand, his ferocious glare entirely different than before. He still wanted to eat me alive, but it had nothing to do with passion.

“The number on the invoice is correct, princess. Your mother was all but broke and you’re right. This house is a dump. I was doing your mom a favor by continuing to work on it because unlike you, she was a lovely person who’d give her shirt off her back to anyone in need and she did several times, including to me.” His glare remained as he spun around so he wouldn’t be forced to look at me any longer, his work boots thudding against the floor given his anger as he headed to the door. “I’ll expect payment by the end of the month.”

He threw me another look that was an odd combination of fury and desire before walking out, slamming the door afterwards. I lifted my middle finger, snarling as only a woman could do. At least I resisted screaming obscenities after he’d stormed out. I sagged against the back of the door, pressing my fingers over my mouth, his scent lingering and realizing that the sash on my robe had come undone, exposing my hard nipples poking through the gauzy material. Shit. In town less than twenty-four hours and my life was going to hell in a handbasket.

“I’ll have you know I’m nice too.” Okay, of all the words in the English language, of all the retorts I could come up with, why in God’s name had I chosen that?

I licked my lips, still able to taste him, including my hazelnut brew.

Time to brew another cup of coffee, tossing in every drop of the Irish Cream.

And to try to get the rugged man out of my mind.

Only one was going to be easy.

CHAPTER 5



Jake

I'd kissed her.

Of all the women in the small town of Depoe Bay, I kissed the single woman who hated me. Obviously, I'd forgotten being dropped on my head at some point. Or maybe the old hockey injuries, including getting my head bashed in by a half dozen players, were finally coming back to bite me.

On top of the woman slapping me, she'd acted as if I'd lied about the work I'd done. That infuriated me more than anything. I'd spent three months doing work on and off, doing my best to put my finger in a dike that would soon blow wide open if the new owner didn't take the repairs seriously.

From what I could tell, Miss High and Mighty couldn't tell a craftsman if she ran over him with her rental car. Hell, I'd refinished the kitchen table only a few weeks before Margaret had died, a surprise to the sweet lady who'd kept me in cupcakes to the tune of more than a few pounds.

To hell with Cassandra. She was trouble with a capital T.

I pressed my elbow against the door panel of my truck, rubbing my index finger across my lips. She'd tasted sweet, more so than I would have thought given her caustic mouth. Plus, the girl not only had excellent aim with a household appliance, she also had a mean right hook. Well, actually she'd slapped me, but I wouldn't want to be on the receiving end of her fist.

And the way she looked in the sheer nightgown had almost driven me to ripping it off and fucking her like some brutal savage. Great. That would add to my less than stellar reputation. Still, the sassy vixen had managed to do something no other woman had in years. She'd made me hungry, desire lingering to the point my balls were aching. While everything about her was attractive, including her long, shapely legs and breasts the perfect size for my big hands, maybe my attraction was based on her instant hatred of me.

I'd always loved a challenge.

I snorted as a red light yanked my attention and I realized I was pretty darn close to running out of gas. I hadn't paid any attention before, purchasing a new phone the first thing earlier that morning. A few seconds later, I pulled into the Chevron station, luckily not needing to wait before heading to a pump. As soon as I climbed out, I noticed my buddy the sheriff pulling in. I grabbed my wallet, studying his face as he eased from his municipal vehicle. It had been a long time since I'd seen him looking so haggard.

"Hey, Jake. How's it going?" Bart asked. He'd been the local sheriff for years, a guy I'd gone to high school with. Back in the day, he'd been considered a bad seed, someone most likely to end up in prison. He'd cleaned up his act by serving a stint in Afghanistan, returning a changed man.

"Not too bad. Long night?"

He pulled out his wallet, eyeing me carefully then lifting his sunglasses. His eyes were bloodshot, and I knew the guy well enough to know it had nothing to do with partying. He only did that when he was playing poker and if that had been the case, I would have been there. A look of amusement crossed his face. "I don't know who had a rougher night, me or you. You get into a little wrestling match with a sexy gal?"

I touched my forehead before answering. "More like a coyote." I slipped my card into the slot, enjoying the brisk chill in the air. However, the light breeze tickled my nose with Cinnamon Girl's delicious scent.

He laughed, but I could see the strain on his face. “Well, then you had a better night than me.”

“What’s going on?” I shoved the pump into my gas tank before heading toward him.

The quick glance over his shoulder meant whatever was troubling him was all about business. “Spent the night working a murder, a gruesome one.”

“Anyone I know?”

“No, an out of townner, a young woman in a cheap motel room. She could have been moving here given the number of belongings she had with her but I’m not sure yet. I’ll tell you this much. The crime scene was a brutal night. Worst I’ve seen. There sure are some sick bastards in this world.”

“Any idea who did it?”

Bart shook his head. While there was crime in Depoe Bay the same as any small town, murders were few and far between, especially gruesome ones. I could tell whatever had occurred troubled him tremendously. “Nah. Don’t go sharing this around but it’s the second one in a couple weeks.”

“What? Why didn’t I hear about the first?”

“Technically the first body was found in Pacific City. You know I’m buddies with the sheriff up there. We’re both trying to keep it under wraps. You know. Hysteria and all.”

“Same MO?” Shit. This was bad.

As the pump filling his truck cut off, he nodded. “I might be jumping to conclusions, but I called the PC sheriff just a little while ago to compare notes. The first victim was another woman and new to the city. She just moved there like three weeks ago. I don’t mind telling you I don’t like it. No sign of forced entry at the motel or the rental cottage either, which could mean the two women knew their attacker.”

“Or that they felt comfortable letting him in for some reason. Maybe a coffee date?”

“Eh. Good point. I’ll keep that in the back of my mind.”

“Are you thinking we have a serial killer on the loose?” Shit. That certainly didn’t bode well for any tourists rolling in to do some whale watching.

“I’m not saying shit and you aren’t going to either. To anyone. The last thing I need is hysteria in town.” He yanked the pump from his tank.

“Don’t worry. I’m not saying a thing to anyone.” Thoughts of Cassandra rushed into my mind. Sadly, the one thing I knew about Margaret’s bed and breakfast was that there were too many easy ways of breaking in. Maybe I’d pick up a few extra locks on the way back to the place. The nagging regarding Margaret’s death shifted into the forefront of my mind. “I hope you catch the guy.”

“Me too. We on for poker next Thursday?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world.” I started to head back to my truck.

“I heard about Riley. Kinda surprised.”

He only mentioned my brother when the kid had gotten himself into a skirmish or had scored the winning goal for the team. “What about Riley?” I shifted back to face him. “Please don’t tell me he got himself arrested.”

Bart shrugged then laughed. “No. The tryout with Vancouver. From what I heard, he’s likely to get the spot.”

I took a deep breath, a quick rush of anger drifting into my system. No wonder Riley had been celebrating the night before. Fuck. It was like having a knife shoved into my heart. “I hadn’t heard.”

“Shit. I’m sorry, man. I was certain you knew. People have been talking about how much good it will do for the tourist trade.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t get out much.” The tourist trade? I wanted to laugh.

“Hey. Maybe Miss Coyote can bring you back to the land of the living.”

“Nope. I don’t need her kind of trouble.”

His face lit up even in the face of what he was dealing with.
“You know what they say, don’t-cha, buddy?”

I didn’t say anything, glaring at him instead. He’d been trying to fix me up for almost two years.

“Enemies make the best lovers.”

“Says the man who married his high school sweetheart.”

“Jealous, buckaroo?”

“Very funny.” The truth was I’d always been jealous of what he had, a perfect life with a beautiful wife and three amazing kids. That wasn’t in the cards for me. I’d sworn off women a long time ago.

As he continued to laugh, I waved him off, taking long strides toward my truck, finishing the transactions then jumping into the cab. I’d known Riley was a damn good player, rivaling the accolades I’d gotten over the years, scouted by the best teams in the NHL. But why wouldn’t he tell me? Images of my first illustrious career flashed into my mind. He hadn’t told me because he didn’t want to hurt my feelings. Or maybe he knew what I’d say.

Huffing, I started the engine. Yeah, I’d gone from being the number one player in the NHL, sought after by just about every team to a has-been in the blink of an eye. As I pulled out of the station, I did what I could to put the past behind me.

I’d made a fresh start, my contracting firm doing well. As I headed for one of the big box contracting stores, I held the lie in the forefront of my mind. Who was I kidding? I’d lost two careers I’d loved, one to an accident and one to tragedy. Now life was about as good as it was going to be and nothing more.

* * *

Cassandra

The ocean view was spectacular. I’d taken dozens of photographs of the waves thumping against the rocky shore, the cove Tangerine Sunset was nestled in adding to the charm. Even if the day and building clouds became another reminder that Jake was due to return to the house later in the afternoon. I

wanted to avoid seeing him, which was ridiculous, but my feelings about the man were mixed.

Plus, we were like oil and water.

While the grounds surrounding the main house needed some work, the grassy knoll leading to the cliff was in perfect condition, so green and lush that I envisioned the place being in Ireland instead. Moose had enjoyed every moment of being outside. We'd even played a little ball before I'd shooed him inside, determined to get some of the essentials out of the way.

Including purchasing a few half gallons of paint. The kitchen walls would be first on the agenda. The cabinets second. The curtains had already been yanked down. With a little lightening and brightening, the place would seem a lot more like home.

Before I'd left the B & B, I'd taken a walk around the estate, realizing that while I'd wanted to ignore everything Jake had said, I didn't need to be a contractor to note all the problems that existed. And I'd seen evidence of repairs he'd made. Fortunately, the pumping and electrical system appeared to be in decent working order. However, the roof had been better days, several areas of siding rotten. It appeared Jake had tackled some of the windows, replacing them with updated vinyl ones, but there were a lot more to go.

Maybe the inspector the probate attorney had used was on the take, given a significant number of repairs hadn't shown up on the list emailed to me. That had prompted another self-deprecating moment because if I'd visited my mother even every once in a while, I would have known the condition of the property.

The bad thing was that until my condominium sold in DC, there was no way I could afford a new roof and everything else to get the place up and running. Plus, while it was only September, colder weather was setting in. Although I doubted that would deter a man like Jake from doing any work.

I'd left Moose at the house while running errands, including picking up a few groceries. I'd been pleasantly surprised when seeing the winery. It was small but the vines looked healthy

and the grapes still on the vines were plump and juicy, their taste spectacular. What bothered me was that the area was overgrown, another indication my mother had let go of her employees, no longer bottling any wines. While the wine-tasting room was actually gorgeous, it had the appearance of it being a long time since my mother had offered a wine tasting. Thankfully, I'd had the forethought of contacting a wine consultant, already setting up an appointment in a couple of days.

However, the nicest surprise of all had been the large wine cellar that hadn't appeared on the list of amenities. There were several hundred bottles of various vintages, some dating back to before she'd bought the place. They had to be worth something. Maybe I could sell them so I could replace the roof.

Ugh. I didn't really want to do that. I'd planned on restoring the entire location back to its original glory. I'd seen the pictures two decades before, the beautiful and lush grounds, the large gazebo overlooking the Pacific Ocean likely holding many a wedding.

My mother had gotten in over her head. Me too.

Groovy.

The one thing I had going for me was I'd been in marketing and advertising, including for a winery in Virginia. My work alone had helped them move to the number one winery in the state, their profits increasing by five times. I was certain I could do that for Tangerine Sunset and Winery, even if the name left a lot to be desired. Still, I could work with it, especially since I had a feeling the pictures were going to come out spectacularly.

However, the ugly truth was that I needed Jake's help whether I liked it or not. After making a few calls to other handymen, I'd learned quickly everyone was booked solid, including the larger firms out of Portland.

After picking up a few items at a local hardware store, I headed to the grocery, filling the basket with way too many items. When I went down the aisle with the pet food and

treats, I couldn't help myself, tossing a few of their toys into the basket before yanking a couple different treats off the shelves as well. After being uprooted, and forced to deal with a crazy Mommy dog, he deserved a few treats.

It was time to check out and go home. I pushed the basket, another squeaky toy grabbing my attention. A hard thud as I ran into something sent groceries flying to the floor, the jolt enough to cause pain flying up both arms. I immediately teetered on my heels, the attire I'd chosen overkill.

"Oh, shit. I'm sorry, honey."

"What the..." Thank God, I stopped a series of curse words. The woman's voice was soft and sincere in an apology. I dropped to the floor, struggling to pick up the fallen items before they rolled too far, clenching my teeth to continue holding my tongue.

"Oh, goodness. Let me help. I was in my own little world."

"No, I wasn't paying attention to where I was going." After tossing the items back into my basket, I turned toward the woman, holding back a giggle as she carefully placed two of Moose's upcoming toys back into the basket. While the woman was obviously in her sixties, she was wearing pink spandex pants and a crop top with a jacket over it along with tennis shoes the color of plums.

However garish the look, the older woman was in the kind of shape I wished I were in. Even her blonde hair was perfect, suiting her well-tanned face. Who managed to get a tan in a town where the average rainfall per year was eighty-five inches? Information on the area had been something I'd looked up on my laptop when the hint of sun had given way to another round of dark, foreboding clouds.

"Oh, my gosh. You're Cassandra Dayne, aren't you?"

"How did you know?" My defense system was immediately on high alert.

"Well, sugar, first of all, this grocery store isn't a tourist attraction even if it's obvious you're not from around these parts. More important, your mama was very proud of you with

that six-figure job you had back in DC. She bragged about you all the time. When I learned she left Tangerine Sunset to you in her will, I breathed a sigh of relief. I think the whole town did.”

“She did?” That wasn’t like my mother at all. Somehow, I could tell she was comparing me to my mom, who wasn’t like me at all.

“Oh, golly gosh, yes. She was so proud of you.” Her face clouded over. “I’m so sorry about your mama. She was such a breath of fresh air in this town. You have no idea. Cancer is a bitch.”

“Yeah, it is.” I still couldn’t get over that my mother had talked about me. We didn’t have that kind of relationship at all.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Where are my manners? I’m Millie Tinslow. I own Millie’s Diner. Your mama used to supply us with her delicious wine and baked goods.”

“Baked goods? She didn’t bake.” My mother could burn water. When I was a kid, we ate out almost every night, or something was brought in. My father certainly didn’t care, almost never home for dinner anyway.

“Goodness. She was a delicious baker. Pies. Cakes. Cupcakes.”

“Wow. I had no idea.”

“I admit it, I was kinda hoping you were as good a baker as your mama.”

“Me? I don’t think so. Besides, it’s going to be a little while before I get the place up and running again to even consider using the oven.”

She eyed my cart and sighed. “What a shame. I know your mama was struggling. All the businesses around here are. We just don’t have nearly as many tourists coming through as we used to. We need a big promotional marketing thingy but the mayor doesn’t want to spend the money.”

Hmmm... Maybe that was something I could also help with. "It's not just about the marketing. I need a lot of work done on the place."

"That's what your mama said. Those old buildings are notorious for having crap show up out of the blue. Hey, but your mama hired the best contractor in town. Jake Spencer is a damn good carpenter, a real craftsman too."

"A craftsman?" Jake seemed far too rough around the edges in my opinion, but what did I know?

"Golly jeeppers, yes. He built me this gorgeous coffee table for my house and a stunning butcher block service cart for the diner. Oh, and the kitchen table inside your mama's kitchen? He refinished that. She found it at an estate sale and it was in rough shape. In a flash, Jake had that all spiffed up."

"Wow. I had no idea." That made me feel even worse about bashing his head in with a toaster.

"He's a talented man. Don't let anyone steer you wrong."

"Why would they?"

She glanced over one shoulder then the other before leaning in. "Did you know he used to be a famous hockey player?"

"Uh, no. Hockey's not that big in DC."

"Well, he was. He was the cream of the crop, his name alone putting our little town on the map. The mayor even gave him the key to the city when his team won the Stanley Cup and all because of him. So sad what happened."

While it was obvious she enjoyed gossiping, she'd piqued my interest a little too much. Now I needed to know more. "So what happened?"

"He got injured, tanked his career. He's lucky he can still walk. All those months of physical therapy. All those doctors. He was lost without hockey for a long time."

"So he became a contractor."

"Oh, heavens no, at least not at first." She laughed as if I should know all this.

Okay, I'd continue biting. "Then what did he do?"

"Became a firefighter. Did all the training and everything and let me tell you the odds were against him since his leg was like a dead stick for a long time. But he persevered, determined to make the cut. Best thing for him, at least at the time. It's funny how karma always comes back to bite the poor guy." She sighed, looking all pitiful.

"He's a firefighter too?"

The shadow crossing her face was in direct contrast to her expressions from before. "No, sugar, and don't you dare talk about what happened the night of the big fire to the man. Such a tragedy. So sad. He'll blow up if you do and you don't want to see him angry. Lordy, no, you don't. The last time someone asked, Jake almost landed in jail. It's a good thing one of his buddies is the sheriff. Anyway, the poor thing lost almost everything these past few years. Started when he was a kid too. Who knew someone so talented could have a black cloud hanging over his head. Such a shame. Now his baby brother has taken Jake's glory. I'm sure he's not happy about that."

O-kay. Wow. Now I didn't want to hear anything else. And I certainly had no plans on telling her the real reason I'd left DC. I'd be on a most wanted bulletin if I did. "Well, I need to get back to my fur baby. He's not used to staying alone in a strange place for too long."

"You have a dog?"

"Yep, Moose. He's my baby."

"Well, you're welcome to bring him to the diner anytime. We love our animals around here. Just tell Becca, that's my daughter, I sent you. And the first meal is on the house as a welcome to the neighborhood."

"That's very sweet of you. I'll stop by when I get a chance."

"You do that, sugar. Just so you know. If you want to get on Jake's good side, he loved your mama's chocolate cupcakes. He's a sucker for anything chocolate." She winked as if knowing I needed to extend some kind of olive branch.

As she walked away, I bit my lower lip. I wasn't the kind of girl to issue apologies. That's something I'd never been good at, which my mother had reminded me of often. Maybe I could do so with bakery goods.

Of course, that would be if I didn't poison him by doing so. Maybe I'd grab a few more items just in case I gathered the courage to turn on the oven.

After paying for the groceries, I headed outside to my car. And in those fleeting moments as I unpacked the cart, the skin on the back of my neck began to crawl. Very slowly, I turned my head from one side to the other, half expecting Jake to be standing twenty feet away, ready to accuse me of following him or something. There was nothing other than shoppers coming and going, a few chatting with friends and family members.

I licked my lips, closing the back door and gripping the handles of the cart, telling myself I was being silly. Yet as I pushed it into the cart corral, I couldn't get over the feeling I was being watched.

And it scared me to death.

CHAPTER 6



Jake

A beautiful blizzard.

That's what it felt like as the fiery vixen took long strides in tall heels toward me, hissing the moment she was forced to step onto the soft grass. With the wind blowing through her hair, she reminded me of a siren, and tall tales of sailors in the Pacific being lured to their deaths.

Of course, the analogy was ridiculous, but I couldn't seem to take my eyes off her, forced to admit that she'd grabbed my attention more than any woman had in a very long time. The girl was way overdressed, but that also was a breath of fresh air.

I'd tried to get her out of my mind, but it had been next to impossible. She'd peeled away a layer that had been securely driven into place years before. I didn't like it one bit, which yanked further at my resolve. God knew I didn't need any complications from hungering for a woman. I'd fucked a stranger or two in my life, but being she lived next door, I'd be forced to see her far too often. That would lead to issues that I didn't need in my life.

It was best to make her hate me.

She stormed in my direction and I wiped my hands on my jeans, waiting for the firestorm to hit. It took about two seconds.

“You changed my fucking locks?” Cassandra demanded.

“Yep.” The sound of her angry voice brought another wave of amusement. She was the kind of woman I didn’t mind fucking with. However, changing the locks was all about the fact the protector side in me had been dragged to the surface. I’d tried to discover additional details about the murder Bart had mentioned, but there was nothing in the news. I knelt on the edge of the roof, peering down at her. Jesus. I should have guessed she’d be wearing a skirt and heels, which didn’t fit Depoe Bay in the least.

She was definitely a city slicker.

“Why?”

“Because they needed to be. Someone could easily break in.”

She stomped her feet, staring up at me as if ready to climb the ladder, slapping the other side of my face. I kind of wanted to watch her make an attempt to do that in her tall heels, shoes that accentuated every curve of her long legs. Images of the pencil thin skirt riding up her legs made my mouth water. I could envision sliding her lacy thong to the side, thrusting all four fingers deep into her wet pussy. What the hell was I doing? I couldn’t be attracted to the woman. She was bad news all the way around. We’d never be able to get along and that was just fine by me.

“You had no right, no authorization to do that. I can make my own decisions about my house. My bed and breakfast. The place belongs to me.”

“You trying to make me believe you purchased the place?”
Yeah, I couldn’t help teasing her. She was cute when her brow was furrowed, her lips twisting in frustration. I could be such a bad man.

“I did purchase this place. Now, answer my question. Why. Did. You. Do. It?”

“It needed to be done. Call it a housewarming gift. Along with finishing the ceiling fan.”

“I don’t need your gifts.”

“Nope. You need another hard spanking,” I told her, grinning after I made the statement.

“What did you say?”

The way she stuck out one leg, swiveling her hips, pulled at my aching balls all over again.

She huffed and puffed, and I thought for certain she was going to hyperventilate. “We need to talk.”

“Sure we do,” I chortled, sighing when she cocked her head. “Fine. I’ll come knock on your door when I’m done for the day.”

“Groovy. But this is the last day you’re going to work on my house.” Her adamant tone was pronounced by the girl pressing her index finger against her chest vehemently.

But who the hell said groovy any longer? Margaret. That was who. Okay, so maybe she was the daughter after all.

Her piss-poor attitude just made me want to push her buttons even more.

“Whether you like it or not, you need help with the place.”

Cassandra laughed in a haughty way. “I do not. I’m pretty damn good with fixing things.”

I cocked my head, allowing my gaze to fall to her feet. “Then you might want to change.”

“I’ll have you know—”

Moose bounded outside, immediately drowning out whatever she was spouting off. The grin widened on my face and I immediately started popping more nails into the shingles I was working on. Just to push her buttons a little bit more.

She finally gave up less than a minute later, but I heard her flow of curse words as she moved into the house, slamming the door.

And I couldn’t help my body’s reactions, my cock pushing hard against my jeans.

A few seconds later, I headed down the ladder, climbing down to the ground. I needed another pack of shingles, which would take care of the one square. Somehow, I'd need to convince her that a solid half of the roof was ready to spring leak after leak.

I grabbed the bottom of my tee shirt, using it to wipe sweat from my face. As I headed toward the windows, I sensed she was staring at me. Even though she was behind a pane of glass, I noticed her expression had nothing to do with anger. She was giving me the same heated onceover I'd done to her.

As I stretched just to irritate her even more, I could almost sense her increased anger. And I could swear the scent of her arousal slipped underneath the window frame.

Grinning, I powered down some water before tossing the bottle back into the cooler, grabbing another bundle of shingles. I hoisted them over my shoulder and headed for the ladder. For some crazy reason, I couldn't help but glance toward the window before climbing back to the roof.

The sultry woman was still watching.

* * *

A solid hour had passed, the sky darkening even more. I'd been deep in thought, including feeling guilty for not checking on my parents. They weren't spring chickens any longer, my father's bout with testicular cancer lingering in the back of my mind. While he'd been deemed cancer free four years before, there was always a chance of recurrence.

It was too bad they'd all but disowned me. Not that I could blame them.

Sighing, I wiped sweat from my brow, eager to finish. Tonight, I'd grab a microwave dinner and go to bed early.

Just like I did most nights. Fuck. Maybe Riley was right. My life had turned to shit. It was as if I was doing nothing more than just existing.

After glancing at the ominous sky, I popped a few more nails from the nail gun, attaching the new shingles. I'd ripped off

more than I'd originally planned. Thank God I hadn't found any rotten boards underneath, especially given it looked like the sky was going to open up at any moment. I hated the current weather pattern, the amount of rain we'd gotten more than usual.

It didn't suit my mood at all, the darkness reminding me of too many memories.

I slapped another row of singles on, crawling closer to the roofline, forced to straddle the peak in order to get to the last course on the one side.

Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop! Pop!

The feisty vixen's face continuously slipped into my mind, making me uncomfortable as hell. She wasn't my type. I was into buxom blondes. Yeah, the bigger the tits the better. Not some chick with thick dark hair and dancing green eyes. And I sure had never been into the next-door girl types, the ones with just a hint of freckles across the bridge of their nose and their rosy cheeks.

Shit. There I went again. I had to drive the woman out of my mind.

Little Miss Cinnamon Girl had risked running into me again by returning to her car, still glaring up at me as she unloaded groceries and cans of paint. I looked forward to seeing her handiwork. I'd looked her up for the sheer hell of it. I'd been right in she'd been a bigwig in the world of advertising, vice president of a large firm in DC. She'd risen in the ranks quickly after graduating with her master's degree, her work rivaling the big New York firms. While I knew her mother had left her the B & B, I still found it surprising that Cassandra had decided to toss aside her high dollar salary to take on such a significant challenge.

What the hell did I know? I wasn't some relationship guru by any means. Huffing, I had to stretch to grab another shingle, hearing the first rumble of thunder a little closer than I wanted.

A sudden vision popped into my mind hearing the noise and I was instantly frozen where I was as the flashback rolled, the

images vibrant as if they'd just happened yesterday.

"Everyone needs to get the fuck out of here! The place is going to blow," Shane called out from behind me.

Smoke was billowing, swirling in black all around the team. However, I was certain I'd heard a voice crying out for help. "Not yet, Cap'n. We still have someone inside."

"Everyone is accounted for, bud," Mike said from behind me. "We gotta get out of here. The propane tanks are going to blow."

"Not until I do another sweep." I'd never been one to follow orders and this time was no exception. I was certain one of the students remained inside. There was too much commotion, kids running everywhere. There was no way every child in the school had been accounted for.

"Get back here!" Captain Biddle yelled, but as usual, I ignored him, pushing deeper into the blackness, dragging the hose behind me.

Creaking sounds were all around me, the timbers of the roof ready to cave in. The fire was burning hot, flames licking up the sides of the walls, spiraling across the roofline in an eerie shade of blue. I moved through the debris, pushing it aside, my heavy breathing the only sound I was able to hear.

Whoosh!

"Jake!" one of the men called, his voice muffled by the roaring flames.

I'd never seen a building go up this quickly, the fire out of control even though other departments had been called in to help. There was no chance of saving the building. I doused a firewall standing between me and another section of the school, forced to stop and concentrate on my breathing.

"Is anybody there?" I called out, uncertain even if anyone remained inside they could hear me. As a portion of the roof caved in, I was forced to duck, barely avoiding being crushed by the heavy weight. An ache formed in my chest. It was becoming useless. I'd be forced to turn back. I waited for thirty seconds longer before turning away.

“Help...”

“Fuck,” I snarled, popping the last of the nails into the shingle. The vision was too much to bear, the ache in my heart gripping, stealing my breath as it had done before. Why had the ugliness come back to haunt me today?

“You need to live your life. You need to stop thinking about the tragedy.”

The words had been said by everyone who’d pretended to care about me as well as those who didn’t give a shit. Well, fuck that. I sat down on the roof, trying to catch my breath. The truth was that I hadn’t wanted to live. I didn’t deserve to live. I closed my eyes, doing everything I could to ignore the memories.

That’s the moment the sky opened up, rain pouring down over me in torrents. I lifted my head, glaring up at the sky, throwing my middle finger toward the heavens. If only the night of the fire there would have been rain pouring down from the sky. Then maybe, just maybe I could have saved her life.

Yeah, and maybe I’d want to live.

CHAPTER 7



Cassandra

No man had six-pack abs like Jake. It wasn't human.

Ugh. Why had I been staring at him? And he'd seen me. Even worse.

What did it say about a recently single woman who was thinking like a hussy? That's the word my mother would use. The number of lewd images that had crossed my mind was pathetic, even if they were tasty.

Jessica would be jumping up and down about now, pumping her fist as she dared me to take a tumble on the wild side. Not this girl. Not ever again. I'd done that once, grabbed a brilliant white tee shirt that had turned yellow in time and been run over by a bus. And not just any bus. One of those three-ton monsters holding metal bands and all their equipment.

Great. I'd been reduced to making ridiculous and very corny analogies. Maybe it was the salt air making me crazy.

"I don't know, baby. What do you think?" After icing the last cupcake, I glared down at the plate trying to remember the last time I'd dared attempt making anything in the kitchen other than boxed meals. I was damn good at setting the oven temperature right. Sadly, that was about it.

While Moose's tail thumped against the floor, the way he was peering up at me with his huge chocolate brown eyes was telling, his whine forcing me to roll my eyes.

“I know. You’re right. They suck.”

He looked down, covering his face with one paw. Great.

“Where’s your support when I need it?”

The cupcakes would never win a baking contest. However, I’d followed the recipe to the letter. Then why did they look a little sunken in the middle? It was nothing additional icing couldn’t cure. I grabbed the spatula, noticing I had more icing on my hands than on the kitchen implement. I slapped another scoop of icing on the last and worst-looking one then pushed the plate aside.

After rinsing my hands, I yanked the kitchen towel I’d found in one of the drawers, making faces from the stickiness remaining on my hands.

A huge and very loud rumble of thunder made Moose whimper and I jumped. The rain was coming down in torrents, pelting against the windows. When I noticed a huge flash of lightning, I thought about Jake. There was no way he was still on the roof. If so, he was a crazy man.

“Let’s go see, buddy.” I barely made it out of the kitchen when I heard a loud pounding on the front door. While I wanted to make peace with the man, he had to understand that I simply couldn’t afford his services. Plus, we would never get along. He was surly and didn’t like me very much.

Okay, so the feeling was mutual. Well, kind of. No one had ever made me so infuriated in my life.

Exhaling, I smoothed my hands down the red apron I’d found, padding toward the front door. I threw open the door, ready to launch into the man again.

But seeing him standing on my front porch completely drenched pulled at something other than anger. I couldn’t help allowing my eyes to fall down his muscular chest, the wet material clinging to his six-pack abs and carved lines. Holy shit, the man was built.

“Can I help you?” Okay, being tongue tied around him was getting ridiculous.

“You wanted to talk, so talk,” Jake stated in his usual commanding way. He stood with his arms to the sides, his hands fisted as if furious I’d interrupted his schedule. But it wasn’t his stance that bothered me at all. No, it was the way his eyes had locked onto mine, as if searching for and finding my soul. Now he was ready to rip it apart. His anger was overblown, as if I’d pissed in his Wheaties instead of challenging his handiwork. For several reasons, I was uncertain I wanted him inside my house.

He might render me unconscious or worse. Not that I blamed him given the constant battles between us.

“You’re wet.”

“Good observation skills.”

Woof. Woof!

Moose bounded from the kitchen, running so fast he skidded as he reached the front door. My pup never acted this way. Not with any UPS man or even the delivery person from my old local Chinese restaurant where I knew they’d placed my picture on their wall denoting I was their number one customer.

What I witnessed was touching, yet irritating, but something miraculous happened. The man melted, and not from rainwater. He crouched down, a huge smile crossing his face. “I got something for you, buddy. You ready?”

I was blown away when he reached into his back pocket, pulling out a now soggy dog treat. You would have thought the sun rose and set on the man according to my pup by the intensity of my dog’s whine of happiness. Mr. Grinch teased him, pulling the bone away then laughing. He repeated the action until Moose planted his huge front paws on Jake’s knees, pushing the man onto his ass.

His perfectly chiseled ass, the tight blue jeans showcasing all the goodies God had given him.

And all the while, the rugged man kept a huge smile on his face, a twinkle in his eyes. His expression was totally different than when he looked at me. If I had to admit it, which I

wouldn't, I was jealous. Of my dog. Jesus. What was wrong with me?

Moose finally snatched the treat from Jake's hand, trotting away with his tail wagging like a helicopter.

I sucked in my breath, trying to keep my cool as the huge man rose to his full height. And damn if my eyes didn't shift to the thick bulge between his legs. He wasn't even hard, yet it was obvious how well-endowed he was. Oh, I so needed to get my mind out of the gutter.

The few seconds of tension passing between us could have been cut with a knife.

"Do you want to come out in the rain and talk, Cinnamon Girl, or would you prefer I come in and leak all over your nice, chipped floor?"

There it was. The reason I couldn't stand the man. "I'll get you a towel. Come in." As I opened the door wide, I refused to watch him walk inside. If I did, I might say something I regretted. He took two long strides into the foyer, his body as tense as I felt.

My nipples tightened under his heated gaze, and it took everything I had not to cross my arms over my chest. That would provide him with far too much satisfaction.

I shivered visibly. While I'd been unable to get warm after coming home, the dampness something I wasn't used to, I had no doubt I wasn't trembling because of the chill in the air.

"You cold?" he asked, turning toward me and crowding my space. His voice was more like a rumbly growl, completely animalistic.

Now my legs were trembling, which was ridiculous.

"Yeah, I'll live. I'll be right back. I'll meet you in the kitchen." The edge in my tone remained as I closed the door behind him, retreating as if I'd lost a round in boxing. I couldn't remember when or if a man had affected me this badly. Even the day I'd met my ex while I was standing on the side of Interstate Sixty-six after my alternator had gone on the fritz. Cars had whizzed

by at eighty miles per hour, only Stephen stopping to come to my rescue.

I'd taken an instant dislike to him. It had taken me over a year to realize I should have followed my instincts and kicked the bastard to the curb, waiting until Triple A had arrived. Great. Now Mr. Grinch had forced me to relive the worst two years of my life.

Groaning, I headed upstairs to the hall linen closet, grabbing two of the fluffy towels purchased by my mother. One of the things I had to give her credit for was that she'd done everything in her power to make the place homey for what few guests she'd had over the last couple of years of her life. Every room was decorated with nice linens and soft pillows. There were bookshelves full of books, paperbacks and hardcovers of various genres.

The half dozen bathrooms had baskets of shampoos and conditioners, different scents of shower gels and even bubble bath in the two suites. She'd died so unexpectedly that the entire house reminded me of a time capsule. Other than dusting and vacuuming, freshening up the bathrooms, all the cleaning crew had really done to change anything was removing food from the refrigerator.

It seemed odd that I was thinking about details of the house. I'd yet to take the time to delve into the less tangible assets, trying to determine what needed to be tossed out versus kept. Now wasn't the time. I'd come to the conclusion I was still grieving, mourning a woman that it had become obvious in the last years of her life I barely knew.

As the echoes of rain pelted against the roof, I clutched the towels to my chest, curious whether Jake's work had stopped the leak. As I walked into the master bedroom, I was certain I'd find a flood yet was pleasantly surprised. I obviously hadn't given Jake's contracting skills enough credit. Okay, I hadn't given them any credibility, but he'd come on like a force of nature, acting as if he owned the place instead of me.

I backed out of the room, a sudden wave of sadness hitting me harder than when I'd walked into the house the night before.

Now that this was my home, the weight of everything needing to be done was a more significant burden than I'd anticipated.

Leaning against the wall, I closed my eyes briefly, uncertain of when the last phone call I'd had with her was. My guess was that I'd been in a hurry as always, racing from one meeting to another, refusing to give her more than a few minutes of my oh-so precious time. Gah. I was a terrible daughter.

I jogged down the stairs, trying to think about how I could tell Jake I didn't want him working on the house any longer. Was that really even the truth? Right. I'd ply him with chocolate then tell him to get out.

Good plan, girl. Really stupid.

By the time I reached the kitchen where I expected to find him, I was shivering to my core. He wasn't there. Why should he be? He wasn't the kind of man to take orders from a girl. Oh, hell, no. He was a rulebreaker. That much I could tell. Another disgusted huff pushed past my lips as I stared at the misshapen cupcakes. I needed the peace offering.

I continued to clutch the towels against my chest as I moved into the living room, holding a single cupcake out as if it was made of gold.

Jake was crouched in front of the lit fireplace. The way he was staring at the flames was mesmerizing, so much so that I found myself remaining just inside the doorway. Meanwhile, the poor guy was dripping on my floor. Moose was happily snoozing in one of the beds I'd unpacked from the boxes sent ahead, on his back with his legs open.

Not a care in the world.

I knew the old adage that dogs had an extraordinary ability to sniff out bad people. My pup was no exception, Moose hating Stephen from the bottom of his heart. He'd growled every time Stephen had come into the room, nipping at him once. To see my baby like this was impressive, yet I remained at a stalemate in my mind.

Maybe I'd just gotten off on a bad foot with Mr. Grinch.

As I walked closer, Jake finally turned his head in my direction. I'd be damned if his luminescent gaze didn't dart from my eyes to my lips. Instantly, my body reacted as it had done before, the treachery of desire sweeping through me like a tsunami. Explosive heat lanced my core and I had to look away for fear of bursting into flames.

He was the one who walked closer, the slight echo of his boots crowding my mental space.

"Towels and a cupcake. I must admit I can't remember the last time I was offered such a combination."

I slowly turned my head, realizing I'd been holding my breath. When I thrust the cupcake out with a stiff arm, his grin reminded me why the man annoyed the hell out of me.

"It's for you."

"Interesting. You do bake."

"We shall see." Another rumble of thunder made me wince.

"You'll get used to them," he said in a low and far too seductive tone.

"What?" Him? His voice? His good looks? His thick cock? What?

The slight curl of his lips was as if he could read my mind. If that was the case, I was in for a whole lot of trouble. "The storms here. They can seem violent but we're in a protected cove, rarely getting damage from any of them."

"Oh. Okay." My God. I'd lost my ability to speak rationally.

He took the towels from my hands first, tossing one of them onto the couch before taking his time to rub dampness from the back of his neck. All the while his eyes twinkled as they roamed over me.

"You made a fire. I wasn't certain they would work."

"You were cold. This old place can be drafty. All the fireplaces are working. I checked them out for Margaret a couple months ago."

“Is there anything you can’t do?” *Great, Cassie. Now you’re just egging him on.*

“I’m sure there’s a hell of a lot. I just haven’t found them yet.” He took a step closer and I could swear I was swooning like some love-struck chick. That wasn’t acceptable.

I took a purposeful step backward to try to regain some personal space. He immediately followed by moving closer once again. My spiteful glare returned, the arm holding the cupcake now shaking. The man reeked of testosterone and exotic spices, the rain only adding to his intoxicating scent. The fact he was all slabs of muscle only drove me to a crazy place in my mind. For a girl who hadn’t had sex in over a year and a half, he was far too tempting.

No. No. I had to stop thinking that way.

“I heard you liked chocolate and my mother’s cupcakes. I made her recipe.” I jutted out my arm, narrowly missing swiping his chest with the inch of icing. Shock tore through me as instead of grasping the offering, he raked his index finger down my cheek. “What the hell are you doing?”

Did his grin always need to be so mischievous, as if he’d eaten a canary? This time, his stunning eyes were flashing with both amusement and the kind of yearning that wasn’t acceptable. Not in my house.

His answer was in the form of sliding his icing-covered finger into his mouth, sucking in such a way that my mouth was suddenly Sahara dry. It was impossible to take my eyes off the lewd act. He even took his time thrusting his finger in and out and all I could do was think about having his cock buried deep inside.

The flush creeping across my jaw was humiliating and I forced myself to look away until I heard the popping sound as he removed his finger.

“You have icing in several places, Cinnamon Girl. If the cupcake is as delicious as the frosting, then it’ll be pure sinful heaven.” Why did his deep and husky voice have to slide across my skin like a soft down comforter on a cold winter’s

night? As he finally accepted the actual cupcake, our fingers touched and the sheer volume of electricity flowing from his arm into mine was mind blowing.

He obviously sensed it too, his nostrils flaring.

I backed away again, fighting with my lead feet to keep from stumbling. My reaction to him was nothing but turning into a silly teenager. My behavior was ridiculous.

“I’m curious. How did you know I liked chocolate and cupcakes?” he asked as he peeled away the paper muffin cup I’d used.

“Oh, I ran into Millie Tinslow at the local market. She went on and on about you.”

The admittance seemed to amuse him even more. “She did, did she?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry. Not the bad stuff.” God, slap me in the face for being so nervous around him.

While he chuckled, I could still sense a hint of relief. Whatever she’d not told me was the reason for the darkness crowding out everything else. “Be careful of that one. Millie is one of the local gossips in town. She’s good at what she does too. She’ll have you confessing sins you didn’t know you had. Then they’ll be all over town before you can bat a gorgeous eyelash.” His grin widened and I was blessed with dimples I hadn’t known he had making an appearance.

I had a feeling that was a onetime only thing.

“That much I figured out on my own. I’m not a little girl, you know.” There I went again, putting my foot into my mouth.

“No, you’re definitely not a little girl.” He took a deep breath then opened his mouth and by God, I couldn’t take my eyes off him. I sensed he knew I was ogling him, but I couldn’t help myself.

The man was drop dead gorgeous, so much so than any woman could easily make a fool out of herself.

As he took a bite, I found myself leaning forward. When he instantly choked, I was horrified. “Oh, God. Are you okay?”

What did I do? It's horrible, isn't it?" When he continued choking, I snatched the cupcake from his hand, immediately taking a bite. I was certain we were both going to die given the extreme level of salt. Oh, Jesus. I must have confused sugar and salt. Oh, my God. I managed to swallow the lump, my throat instantly burning.

He coughed again, wiping his mouth. His eyes were even watering. "Thank you for the gesture."

"I'm not a cook like my mom, even if I didn't know she was. Can I do anything?"

"How about a drink? Is that possible?"

Relief tore through me, but it only matched the horror of what I'd done. "Sure. I think I can manage that at least."

As I turned away, I could still feel the heat of his gaze.

That alone was enough to keep my panties damp and my heart racing.

CHAPTER 8



Cassandra

White-hot electricity continued drilling into every cell and muscle from the single touch, searing the nerve endings as if they'd been driven into a blazing fire. I was shocked how intense the immediate connection was.

My mother had told me that love and hate were two sides of the same coin, just handled differently under various circumstances. When I'd asked her what she'd meant, she'd said the passion was exactly the same, all the pain that came with the tension and desire to caress or kill. Even the heartache that occurred afterwards was no different.

She'd been describing her love to hate to love to utter loathing she'd had with my father. Fiery passion had turned into bitter anger and contempt, which should have been a red flag when in fact it hadn't been a deterrent when I'd needed it the most.

Here I was thinking with my throbbing pussy all over again instead of the rational and very sane woman I'd forced myself to become. Then again, what was wrong with wanting something more than work? I wasn't certain I could make decent decisions for myself any longer. I'd done a piss-poor job so far. Hopefully, that didn't include purchasing the B & B. I'd so wanted a new life far removed from the one I'd endured. The best thing to do was to continue fighting Jake. Eventually he'd hate me. Right? Yes, that was the best idea.

I was committed to my decision, even though I was fighting the strange urges pooling like butterflies in my stomach. Once he learned how fractured I was, he'd run far away anyway. I'd rather the distance be on my terms.

As I tried to catch my breath, I stared out the bay window, the light fog and heavy rain making it seem much darker than the time of day. When another flash of lightning caught my attention, a quick memory of the feeling of being watched rushed into my mind once again. Of course, that wasn't possible since only my boss and Jessica knew where I'd gone. It had seemed prudent to hide my lifestyle change for several reasons. Sure, if someone wanted to hire an attorney, they could easily trace my steps but that would take longer than a day. Wouldn't it?

I was obviously exhausted from my trip, which was the only reason I thought I'd fallen into the rush of fear from my previous life. I'd promised myself once I shifted into my new life, I wouldn't do that. Here I was ignoring all the simple rules I'd promised myself before jumping on the plane.

That had included the oath to stay away from men.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

The words came far too easily as I slunk into the kitchen, immediately pressing my back against the warm ovens, trying to catch my breath. I glared at the cupcake still in my hand as if the baked good was toxic, wanting to smash it against the wall. I couldn't do that because Moose would be very happy to clean it up for me and dogs couldn't tolerate chocolate. I wasn't certain the small town had a veterinarian let alone ready to hunt one down in the middle of a violent storm because of my stupidity.

“Shit,” I muttered, feeling more out of control than I had for a long time. I finally tossed the cupcake into the trash, glaring at the chocolate staining my fingers. My days of baking were over.

How many times had I cursed under my breath that day? Ten? Twenty? I wasn't certain but as I snatched the towel from the counter, furiously wiping my hands and face with such vigor I

could easily rub off particles of dead skin along with my makeup, I berated myself for being so stupid with the salt.

An honest mistake but he might think I'd tried to kill him. In addition to all the other stupid things I'd accomplished, I was setting myself up for a conspiracy theory? The day was just perfect. I thought about what to offer the man to drink. While I'd purchased vodka and orange juice for my preferred method of sin, I doubted he was a screwdriver kind of hunk.

A laugh bubbled to the surface since screwdrivers were obviously tools he'd used a thousand times. Hadn't I seen a bottle of whiskey or scotch somewhere? I was certain of it. I started throwing open cabinet doors, taking far too long trying to find something acceptable. When I finally found what I was looking for, I instinctively threw a look over my shoulder, half expecting Jake to be watching me. Thankful he wasn't, I grabbed two glasses, filling them with booze before plopping two ice cubes in each glass.

When I headed for the living room, only then did I realize that I had no clue what I was serving him. For all I knew, my mother had replaced whatever liquor used to be in the bottle with olive oil. The color was almost the same. Oh, God. I took a sniff the second before I stepped into the room.

I'd experienced moment of being awestruck before. I mean who hadn't? Like when I'd literally run into Jon Bon Jovi at a restaurant in northern Virginia. Or the time I'd gotten up the nerve to ask for Tom Selleck's autograph after my dad had taken me to the set of a movie being shot near our hometown.

But the sight of Jake standing without his shirt, the warm firelight highlighting every delicious muscle that God or a set of iron weights had given him was enough to steal my breath completely. The heat rushing to my core was more explosive than before, my pulse so rapid I could feel it thumping in my neck. I wasn't the kind of girl to gawk at a man, no matter how good looking, but dear God and all that was holy, he was without a doubt the sexiest man alive.

He stood with one hand resting on the thick stone mantel, one foot positioned on the hearth, the other on the plush rug. The

angle was perfect, allowing me to bask in his chiseled abs and a rounded butt that fit perfectly in his skintight jeans that left nothing to the imagination.

Even with the scars that flowed like a pattern of lava down his chest, the mottled skin didn't take away from his extreme and insanely good looks.

When I finally managed to take a single step, he twisted his head away from the fire, lifting his gaze slowly. His chest rose and fell from his labored breathing. As I walked closer, I sensed he knew the thoughts rumbling through my mind were improper, but he chose not to embarrass me, which I was grateful for.

Maybe there was some decency in the man after all.

I found myself moving slowly, so much so that I was certain time had stopped. When I was finally in front of him, I realized once again how tall he was, dwarfing me in my bare feet. There were no adequate words for the discomfiting feeling that refused to leave, only awkwardness remaining.

When I finally managed to hand him one of the glasses, I did so while making certain our fingers didn't touch again. The connection we shared was even more intense than before. He lifted his glass slowly, his eyes never leaving mine. He still had the towel wrapped around his neck and for some crazy reason, I almost reached up and snatched it away. I wanted to see every inch of him unfettered by a simple cloth.

Or his jeans.

Oh, God. I was going to burn in hell for thinking that way.

When he took a deep whiff, I laughed nervously. "I did the same thing. Since I tried to poison you, I thought I better made certain it wasn't olive oil or something."

"Do you intend on killing me? If so, I need to tell you I must have nine lives."

"Is that so?" My voice was little more than a husky whisper.

"Yes." The single word lingered as he took a gulp, closing his eyes as if in reverence of the liquid inside the glass.

His actions were far too seductive and I took a sip if for no other reason than to hide behind the drink, buying me some time. We were too close, but I couldn't seem to budge an inch. His presence had a crazy effect on me, one so unnerving that I wasn't certain I could remember how to breathe.

He held the glass into the air, nodding as if in reverence. "When I finished a job, your mother always offered me a glass of her favorite scotch, Macallan."

"She was always the consummate host," I said absently.

"She was a lovely woman."

"What did you mean when you said she offered you the shirt off her back?"

His eyes lit up, but not with happiness, yet it was impossible not to be mesmerized by them. "I was having a bad day and she kept me company, refusing to allow me to go home."

I sensed the memory was one he'd rather forget so I dropped it.

"I had no idea my mother even drank scotch." The admission was as tough as everything else had been.

"It sounds like you didn't know a lot about your mother."

"You're right," I told him. "I didn't. After my parents' divorce, she changed significantly. I think that bothered me for some crazy reason."

"It's understandable, Cassandra. We often want to think of our parents a certain way. When they change, we feel alienated."

"Yeah. I just don't know why she went to the extreme."

"Maybe because she was allowing herself to be happy. Sometimes that's tough." Why did I have the distinct feeling he knew that personally?

I hadn't realized he'd inched even closer, so much so that his scent seemed to paint my skin, lingering to the point I was swaying slightly from the musky fragrance. He wasn't wearing aftershave, the man all male. There was a hint of sweat mixing

with the fresh odor of unpolluted rain. The combination was irresistible.

Another moment of awkwardness settled in. I'd never been at a loss for words. I was quick on my feet, coming up with slogans in the blink of an eye to save an account. I'd done that dozens of times, but this man thwarted all my strengths, tossing them aside as if I was a damsel in distress.

I also wasn't a touchy-feely kind of girl but at that moment it would seem everything I'd known about myself was tossed out the window. Unable to resist, I fingered the scars on his arm, brushing the tip ever so gently down by a few inches. When he bristled, I pulled my hand away, laughing as nervously as before if not even more. He made me weak in the knees. "I'm sorry. That was rude. I didn't mean to hurt you."

"I'm ugly, Cassandra, but your touch doesn't hurt me. In fact, it does the opposite."

His chest rose and fell once again and as I lifted my gaze, I could see tremendous pain in his eyes. "You're not ugly, Jake. You're the most handsome man I've ever met." The words were easy to say. Even still, it surprised me that I'd said them. The strange precipice we were on was getting closer.

"Yet you think I'm bad at what I do, which is why you wanted to talk to me. Right?"

"Um, not bad. You're actually very good at what you do." Every sound leaving my mouth was ridiculously shallow, but it was the yin to his yang of heavy breathing.

"You think so," he mumbled, the heat of his body more explosive than before.

"Uh-huh. What else are you good at?"

He lifted a single eyebrow, and I knew the moment he accepted the challenge. "Putting out fires."

"Really?"

"Yep. Just ask any of my friends."

"Okay. Maybe I will. What else?" I wanted to touch him, to slide my fingertips across every inch of his body as he did

with mine. There was something deliriously filthy about not knowing much about him yet longing to experience every inch of him in the most biblical sense.

“Making women come for hours.”

“That’s not possible.” More than a subtle thrill coursed through me.

“You wanna try?”

“You’re a cocky son of a bitch. Aren’t you?”

“Guilty as charged.”

I was pulled into a dense fog, unable to take my eyes off him. He was doing the same. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“How am I looking at you?”

“As if you’re going to ravage me for hours.” I was caught in a surreal moment, fearful he’d say I was wrong. Terrified he’d say I was right.

His eyes were suddenly hooded, his nostrils flaring in a way that pulled at every synapse in my body. “Because that’s exactly what I’m going to do to you. And here’s the thing. You’re going to enjoy every second.”

I pressed my hand to my lips but there was no denying the moan or the throbbing between my legs.

“Now, answer the question, Cinnamon Girl. Do. You. Want. To. Try?”

I swallowed hard, my heart thudding so loudly I was certain the entire town could hear it and the answer was far too easy.

“Yes.”

The next few seconds were the longest of my life. Yet the moment he removed the glass from my hand, the same crackle of heat exploding down the length of my arm, there was no chance of avoiding or stopping the single, strangled whimper from leaving my mouth. I was certain my legs wouldn’t hold me any longer as he placed the glasses on the mantel. And as

he took my hand, placing it against the scars on his chest, I issued a series of strangled breaths.

I couldn't believe I was shaking, trembling to the point I could no longer feel my toes. This had to stop. I couldn't do this. Not now. Not when I was just ready to get control of my life again, free from the constant fear and worry, the kind of anxiety that had almost driven me to seeing a psychiatrist in hopes of getting a prescription for mind altering yet legal drugs.

A laugh threatened to bubble to the surface, the inner voice inside my big head reminding me of the promise I'd made to myself. The thought was jarring enough that I was able to break the intense connection, taking two steps backward and away from his dark and demanding aura.

What I wasn't expecting was for him to whip the towel from behind his head or for him to fling it around my neck, not hesitating for a second to drag me against his heated chest.

"Where do you think you're going, Cinnamon Girl?" he asked as he lowered his head, his actions forcing me onto my toes.

I pressed my palm against him as I'd done before, only this time the sensations were completely different. "Jake. This isn't a good idea. We're not compatible. There are rules for this kind of thing." Rules? Where in God's name had that come from, some textbook?

"There's only one way of finding out. And you should have figured out by now that I play by my own set of rules."

The energy, the raw electricity coursing through us matched what was outside, so pure and white-hot that I couldn't breathe any more than he could. He twisted the towel around my neck, forcing me even closer until I was on my tiptoes. As he fisted my hair, lifting my head, I accepted the fact I was now swooning utterly and completely.

He chose that moment to capture my mouth as he'd done before. Yet there was something entirely different, as if we'd both accepted that the desire coursing through us couldn't be stopped until it was satisfied.

Only I was quite certain that after tonight, it never would be.

CHAPTER 9



Jake

Yes, I had every intention of devouring her, stripping away her armor as well as her tight clothing. I'd never wanted a woman the way I did Cassandra. Everything about her was beguiling from her quirky actions to her sultry yet cautious flirtations. It was obvious she'd been hurt before. I knew a thing or two about that. I also sensed her nerves even though she was doing everything possible to keep her sassy, rebellious attitude in rare form.

While that had initially frustrated the fuck out of me, now I found her defiance adorable. Too much so.

Dear God. She'd broken through a barrier that I was certain had been built with two feet of concrete. She was a virtual stranger with a killer body and an attitude to match her caustic mouth.

And I wanted nothing more than to explore every inch of her body, making good on the crazy promise I'd made to her.

The moment defied all logic.

Just as when I'd kissed her before. At least that had been spur of the moment and done partially out of anger. I'd wanted to put a stop to her caustic mouth, to show her that she wouldn't be allowed to try to control me in any way.

I played with her, kissing her lips as I explored, toying with her in an entirely different manner than she'd done with me.

The woman was a powerful aphrodisiac, shoving every boundary that shouldn't be pushed. Not with me anyway.

After that single kiss I'd obviously lost my ever-fucking mind. Here I was, acting as if I'd laid claim to her. She was definitely a siren who'd called to me from the sea, tempting me with her raven hair and creamy white skin, her voluptuous figure and luscious lips.

And I'd fallen for it. Hook. Line. And sinker. Only I'd be the one sinking in the ocean depths. Her mouth and the kiss defied nature, the taste of her unlike any other woman I'd kissed before. I heard my groan of frustration through our locked lips, could feel the hard pulse pounding in the thick cords on my neck.

A part of me wanted the moment hot and dirty, nothing more than a quick romp, which would allow me to escape the feeling of guilt. But I knew that wasn't going to happen. I would sip from her nectar more than once, fucking her as often as my cock would allow, and start all over again after exploring every inch of her delicious body.

And for once, I didn't give a shit as to the consequences.

I kept my rough fingers tangled in her hair, nearly crushing her body with mine. I was twice her weight easily, yet she wasn't frail or skinny by any means. No, she was the perfect handful, a reminder of the way I'd felt when spanking her.

She was soft to the touch against my ruggedness, her skin unblemished where mine was destroyed. The way the beautiful Cassandra had looked at me only moments before hadn't been out of pity or even sarcasm, two expressions I'd had my fill of from the nosy folks in town. She'd acted as if she was looking at a creation of beauty.

That had broken the spell I'd tried to keep locked around me.

It would seem my best laid plans had been tossed out the window. I swept my tongue inside her mouth, the taste of scotch and chocolate icing igniting something deep inside. But the sweetness of the frosting was nothing in comparison to the woman's mouth as I drank in her essence.

The way she wiggled in my firm hold was incredible, her body molding against mine perfectly. I wasn't shocked how much I wanted her, but it wasn't just about my throbbing cock and aching balls doing the talking. As she slid one arm over my shoulder, I gathered another sense of her desire burning as brightly as mine. The kiss became unsettling, the need to drive my cock deep inside her tight pussy still able to catch me off guard.

In recent months, I'd thought of myself as asexual, but now I knew I'd done nothing more than shut down, waiting for the right jolt of electricity to come along. She had no idea how disturbing yet enthralling the single act was to a man like me. As the hunger spilled into the need to control her, I did what I could to shut down my emotions. This wasn't about the start of a relationship. That simply wasn't going to happen, now or ever.

This was about both of us needing intimacy, about satisfying a tense desire that had managed to thread around us like a noose.

Shit. Now I was trying to analyze the reason I was allowing my guard to fall. Fuck it. I was simply going to enjoy spending time with a beautiful woman.

I released my hold on the towel, easing my hand down her spine, daring to cup her bottom. She moaned into the kiss, the muffled sound more like a purr than a whimper. She was sweet putty in my rough hands, and I planned on molding her how I wanted.

There was that Neanderthal side of me that she'd already commented on. As she wrapped her leg around mine, I shifted my hold, sliding my fingers under her tight skirt until I was able to grasp her thigh. Her skin was far too soft, the longing I felt building to a breaking point. When I finally broke the satisfying kiss, I yanked on her head, exposing the long line of her neck.

Cassandra was gasping for air, her lower lip trembling as her long eyelashes floated across her shimmering cheeks. The firelight was a perfect backdrop, the only other light in the room doing little more than adding to the soft glow around her.

And just like that, another rumble of thunder was immediately followed by two flashes of neon blue lightning across the sky. The intensity of light was quickly cut short, including the power going out as if planned by the gods above.

She gasped, trembling in my arms, the firelight allowing me to catch a glimpse of fear. She'd tried to make herself fearless, but I sensed the cause for the instant hint of terror had little to do with the storm.

"It's okay, Cinnamon Girl. There isn't anyone in this town who will hurt you."

"What about you?"

I kept her head at an awkward angle, refusing to answer. She didn't need to know that in the town of several thousand, I could be the one to hurt her the most. I dragged my tongue from one side of her jaw to the other, taking my time to breathe in her shower gel and a hint of perfume. Whatever she was wearing had an exotic fragrance that had the effect of keeping my cock at full attention.

At that moment, I wondered what it would be like to bend her to my will. That wasn't like me, at least not normally, but I wasn't myself any longer, more of a shell than the gregarious playboy I'd been fifteen years before.

Yet I felt possessive about her, as if I couldn't manage to let her go. It was a ridiculous thought but as I dragged my tongue down the side of her neck, swirling it around her thudding pulse, I was struck by how much I wanted to protect her. The fact she felt right in my arms, as if she already belonged to me should trouble me more than excite me. That simply wasn't the case.

She undulated her hips once again before slipping her hands around my back, her cold fingers quickly warming from my heated skin. There was something so powerful about the way she touched me, tender yet forceful in an entirely different way. When she raked her nails up and down my back, a growl erupted from somewhere deep inside my system, from a very dark place. Yet the ragged sound didn't seem to bother her. Her breathing remained scattered, her eyelids still half closed.

When I finally eased her back, she seemed more nervous than the formidable woman who'd nearly brought me to my knees. Her eyes held a mysterious power that lured me in as much as her voluptuous body. She touched my chest again, the smile curling on her rosy lips turning her into a seductress.

The woman was scintillatingly beautiful and completely off limits. Which was why I had to taste her.

Fuck her.

Claim her.

There was the man I'd known all my life, the asshole breaking free of the self-imposed chains. It was at that moment I tore at her clothes, nearly ripping the buttons off her blouse as I tore it from her tight skirt. When one finally popped, she gasped as if from horror, immediately laughing in the nervous way she'd done before.

I wasn't in the mood to shower her with patience now that things had spiraled out of control between us. When I ripped off her blouse, tossing it aside, she shoved her hand against me as if attempting to get away. But I was too quick for her, snagging her wrist and tugging her forward. Another nervous laugh was my sweet reward, the lilting sound exactly what I needed to hear.

I'd used the momentum to be able to reach around her with ease, unbuttoning and unzipping her skirt. Goddamn, the woman was perfect, the way her lace-covered breasts crushed against my chest instantly driving me crazy.

"You're a bad man, aren't you?" She cooed the question and I had a feeling she'd already come to her own conclusion.

"You bet I am. Do I frighten you?"

"Nothing scares me."

"I'll keep that in mind." No one would ever say I was a talkative guy. I used to be, but that had been during the highlight of my hockey career when I'd had reporters of the female persuasion and women following me around like a perfect harem, eager and willing to do what I asked. I'd talked up a storm then. Now this woman had gotten more out of me

than ten people in several conversations. That's how powerful her odd hold was over me.

A siren.

The thought remained in the back of my mind as I yanked her skirt down her ample hips, allowing gravity to take it the rest of the way to the floor. At least I didn't need to tell her to step out of it, the luscious woman doing that without hesitation. When she stood in only a matching bra and panties, the realization I could bask in the moment of studying her figure for more than a few minutes hit me like a sledgehammer.

"What are you looking at, Mr. Grinch?"

"Something I crave. Something I need to have."

My words pleased her, the smile crossing her face in contrast to the redness creeping up on her cheeks. She had to know how beautiful she was. If not, she'd been with all the wrong men.

Not that I was the right one for her, but I certainly knew beauty when I saw it.

"You do, huh?"

"The only thing better would be to have you covered in chocolate frosting."

My Cinnamon Girl batted her eyelashes. "Does that mean you adore my baking?"

"Uh, no. I think you should stick to big business, which you're obviously good at."

"You know how to hurt a girl's feelings."

"Somehow, I doubt that." When she laughed, I really did have the need to cover her in frosting.

I reached around her rounded hip, shoving her thong aside and slipping my fingers into her wetness. She was as tight as I'd imagined, so wet and hot that my fingers felt as if they were on fire.

"Oh," she moaned, tossing her head as she arched her back, dragging that luscious tongue of hers across her bottom lip.

She had no idea what the subtle yet sensual move had done to me before.

The vixen immediately reached for my belt, constantly darting her eyes to mine. I wasn't certain if she was looking for affirmation or was merely letting me see the wild little tiger burning brightly inside of her. It didn't matter. I sensed she was about to set herself free.

Sweat beaded across my forehead as the unsatisfied desire shifted into something that could easily get out of control. I felt like nothing more than a predator and had she told me she didn't want this, I wasn't entirely certain I would have stopped. Fuck. I'd never wanted anyone the way I did her.

We tore at each other's clothes, the frantic need to have our naked skin pressed together one of the most powerful draws I'd had in a hell of a long time. As she peeled away the dense and soaked material of my jeans, fighting to free my cock, she groaned in frustration.

"Do you need help, my tasty cinnamon roll?"

"Not a chance, Mr. Grinch. I know exactly what I'm doing." But she continued to struggle, which amused me more than it should. However, she dropped to her knees, determined to follow through with her task at hand. Holy crap. How long had it been since a woman had been between my legs on her knees? I was so out of sorts and practice that my cock was instantly pinched against my zipper. If she didn't free it soon, I would fucking rip every inch of my clothing off myself.

You had to admire a tenacious woman, but I was finished with keeping my raging libido in check. If I wasn't able to drive my tongue into her tight channel soon, I would go mad.

She finally yanked my wet jeans over my hips, my underwear going with them. There was something so exhilarating about the way she sucked in her breath as my cock sprang free. "Holy crap. You're huge. You're... whew."

I hadn't had that kind of reaction in... forever. My cock now stood at full attention from the effect of her incredulous look and the words that she'd muttered.

She threw me a look, her face still flushed. The girl was adorable in her reactions. Somehow, I doubted she was a virgin but holy hell, the mood I was in, I wanted to rob her of whatever innocence she had left.

For some insane reason, something Bart had told me at the last poker game floated into my mind as she continued to yank on the dense material. What bothered me was that I said the words out loud.

“You only live once.”

Her reply was automatic. “So live life to the fullest.” When she dared breathe across my cockhead, I knew I was close to losing control. No woman, no matter how incredibly beautiful, should keep a hungry man waiting for his feast. If that made me a dickhead, then so be it.

The second she managed to untie then rip off my steel-toed boots, I start pushing my jeans to the floor.

She fought my desire to yank back control, the little vixen wrapping her hand around the base of my cock. I threw my head back, taking what sounded like my very last breaths before fading into oblivion. How long had it been since a woman had touched me, let alone allowed me to fuck her? Jesus. Even her fingers were scintillating. When she lifted my cock, blowing across my cockhead again, I was certain I would come on the spot. That’s how excited I was, my balls so swollen I was in complete pain.

I managed to kick out of the tight confines, half laughing as I gasped for air. She did that to me.

“Fuck, yes.” I tangled my fingers in her hair all over again, keeping her close as she darted her tongue across my sensitive slit. She did it twice more and that’s all it took for pre-cum to ooze to the surface, which she licked off hungrily. “Your mouth is so hot. So freaking wet.”

“Mmmm...”

I stared at the ceiling for a few seconds before lowering my head, trying to blink away the cobwebs if that was even possible. While the storm raged outside, the puppy

appropriately named Moose napping on a fluffy bed, I was indulging in pure sin with a woman I barely knew. What the hell in life could be better?

The thought brought another raging wave of desire shooting through every tense muscle. The way she dragged her tongue down the underside of my cock was just as filthy as the moment her mouth open wide and her tongue somehow managing to curl around a portion of my shaft. I hadn't been this hard or throbbing to this point in years either but as she wrapped her fingers around the base, stroking up to meet her mouth, I was fearful I'd lose my load.

That couldn't happen, at least not for the first time.

She shoved her hand between my legs, cupping and squeezing my balls.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." Now all I could do was curse, incapable of putting together a single sentence. I rubbed my face with my other hand, still keeping a firm hold on her hair with the other. The moment she pressed her hot, wet lips against my testicles, I was one hundred percent positive I was going to lose my load.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

There was nothing better I liked than having a woman deep-throat me. Well, almost. The truth was that I'd always enjoyed feasting on a woman's pretty pink pussy, making her feel like the queen she was. Most women didn't appreciate the time I enjoyed taking or the need to make her come more than once.

However, I had the distinct feeling no man had ever made this beauty feel spectacular and I was determined to be the first. After sucking on one she moved to the other and the tendons in my calves were ready to snap given my level of tension.

She pulled my ball out of her mouth, the exaggerated popping sound forcing a series of growls from my throat.

I was certain she giggled before licking in zigzags up the length of my shaft, instantly opening her mouth wide, taking me down by several inches. I took full control, even if I knew I would lose it soon enough in an entirely different way, fucking

her mouth like a beast would. I was thrusting so hard, the tip hit the back of her throat, the slight gagging sound filtering into my ears a reminder I was a damn brutal man.

Only a few seconds, I was so worried I'd erupt in her mouth that I pushed her back by the shoulders, wiping my arm across my mouth.

My sweet Cinnamon Girl remained sitting back on her haunches, looking up at me playfully, which was a far cry different than any look she'd given me before.

“What now, Mr. Grinch?”

I dropped to my knees with a heavy thud, forcing Moose to finally lift his head, thumping his tail as if excited to see what we were going to do.

“What now?” I repeated.

“Yep. I think I deserve to know.”

As I curled my finger around one of her long strands of hair, she shuddered audibly.

“Okay. Then I'll tell you. I'm going to feast on your sweet pussy. After that, I'm going to enjoy fucking you the way you deserve to be fucked. Long and hard and multiple times.”

CHAPTER 10



Cassandra

If two hours ago someone had told me I'd have the cock of the man I'd been determined to hate down the back of my throat, I would have called them a liar first followed by several expletives. Add on that this guy was a complete stranger, someone who could be a serial killer for all I knew, and the reality was that I was playing with fire.

But damn, his forceful touch had awakened something deep inside of me I hadn't even known existed. I was thrown by how much I wanted him, his filthy words sending another wave of electric current into every cell and muscle. I was more alive than I'd felt since... no, I wasn't going down that ugly road. I'd done that to myself far too many times over the last few months. I was finished living in the past.

The old adage that if I wanted to get over some asshole, all I needed to do was get under a sizzling hot man was truer than I'd ever wanted to believe.

Now with him on his knees, both of us in front of the fire, I allowed my gaze to fall to his thick cock all over again, licking my lips in appreciation. My jaws ached from what limited time he'd thrust his shaft into my mouth. I wasn't certain how the hell my pussy was going to handle his thick girth.

Jake's nostrils were flared, every sound he made as close to being barbaric as this girl had ever heard. So far, he'd said all the right things, making me feel like the most beautiful woman

in the world. Sadly, I was waiting for the other shoe to drop. Maybe he was impotent. Or maybe he was married. Oh, God. That couldn't be true. I was many things but not a homewrecker. I wanted to ask before thinking that Millie would have told me. Right?

Nope. I had to be sure.

As he rolled his hands over my shoulders, unclasping my bra, I stuttered twice before getting the question out. "Please tell me you're not married. Cause if you are, you're out of here."

He seemed amused more than anything, the quirky look on his face endearing. "Uh, does it seem like any woman could tolerate me for longer than a few hours? Maybe?"

"You have a good point." I bit back a laugh, the third or tenth one out of nervousness since he'd kissed me an hour or two before.

"No more talking."

"What if I do?"

There was something far too enticing about his lack of hesitation when he quickly slapped my bottom three times in rapid succession. There was such intense heat in his eyes that I wasn't certain they weren't lasers.

"Ouch," I muttered, even though all the cracks of his palm did was add to the level of excitement.

He yanked down the straps on my bra, pulling it off completely. I'd never felt so vulnerable yet so comfortable around a man and that was so strange to me. Of all the men I could hunger for, this was the single one who'd enticed me enough to lower my guard.

His chest heaved as he cupped my breasts, rubbing his thumbs back and forth across my already aching nipples. They were hard as pebbles and had been since our first kiss. My condition obviously thrilled him, every sound he made more guttural than the one before. When he lowered his head, I wrapped my arm around his neck, forced to take gasping breaths as he pulled one tender bud into his mouth.

He sucked forcefully, pulling the tender tissue between his teeth, switching to the other only seconds later. The way he swirled his tongue back and forth created more throbbing between my legs. Yet as he pulled away, his eyes glinting in the darkness even though the fire allowed a bright shimmer to shine, I was tossed into uncertainty.

His gaze fell to my thong, both his hands sliding down my waist to my hips. When he slipped his fingers underneath the string of elastic, I bit back a moan. I'd been called so many horrible names for months, told I wasn't good enough so often, that the agony of the past threatened to unravel my excitement. I bit my tongue as a reminder that I wasn't that girl any longer and this rugged, dominating man certainly wasn't Stephen.

As he peeled the thin lace down my legs as I'd done with the thick material of his jeans, a series of stars floated in front of my eyes. I was also slightly embarrassed, feeling more open and vulnerable than I had in a long time. When he swore under his breath, whistling his appreciation, I was elated, feeling stronger.

He lifted his head, his eyes darting back and forth as if looking for approval. I nodded and that's when he pushed me down to the rug, being more gentlemanly than I thought him capable of by guiding me with his hand pressed against the small of my back. Only when I was lying on the soft surface did he finish removing my thong. Once that was tossed aside, he rubbed the rough pads of his fingers up the length of my legs, staring down at me as if I was nothing more than a feast for the eyes.

However, I sensed he was growing impatient, his dark desire becoming a burden. When he bent my legs at the knee, lifting and pushing them to the sides, I closed my eyes. Now he could tell exactly how wet I was. The strong desire that only continued to build wafted between us and somewhere in the back of my mind I knew I should be mortified, but I wasn't.

Was it because of the hunky man or simply that I was finally ready to let go? Okay, so maybe a little of both.

The slight growl he issued forced me to lift my head. I could swear his eyes were dilated and the way he was looking at me, as if he meant to ravish every inch, pulled at what was left of my inhibitions. I'd never been an exhibitionist, preferring sex behind closed blinds and in darker rooms. While the lack of electricity should be something that suited me, I was thankful, even more excited that the firelight cast the rugged man in a powerful glow of bright orange.

As he lowered his head, blowing across my pussy, I pressed my hand to my mouth. I doubted there was anything that could mask the raspy moans already flowing from my mouth, but I was giving it a good college try.

Crazy thoughts continued to flow through my mind like being thankful that I'd painted my toenails flaming red the day before. That I'd worn decent, matching underwear. And that I'd shaved my legs. A laugh bubbled to the surface until he swirled his tongue around my clit. At that point, I fell into a sweet abyss of pleasure, ignoring the nutty thoughts, drifting into a moment that most would consider la-la land.

At least that's what my bestie would call it and had more than once when expounding on her sexual exploits. Why was it that I had a feeling I'd tease her, going 'na na, my sex life is better' the next time we talked?

Suddenly, it was as if Jake knew I didn't have my mind completely locked on what he was doing. He pressed down my inner thighs, digging his strong fingers into my soft flesh before pulling the tender bud into his mouth. The man was masterful in using his mouth and tongue to bring me to the very edge.

"Oh. Oh... You are... very good... at this." I no longer recognized my voice, the huskiness entirely different than normal.

"You think, Cinnamon Girl?" he breathed then nipped my clit before dragging his tongue up and down, languishing over my wetness. Everything about the man was scintillating including all the 'mmms' slipping from his mouth. He kept his head tilted, watching my reaction as I tossed my head back and

forth. I was even bucking in his hold, my body tingling all the way to my toes.

Jake took his time bringing me to the precipice where I was certain a climax would rush into me, then backing off. When he added his fingers to the teasing moments, I bucked hard against him, fighting with the vibrations skittering all throughout my body.

He rolled his index finger around my clit then thrust it past my swollen folds. "So tight. Jesus, you're tight."

I wanted to tell him that's what happened when your ex stopped wanting sex long before the bitter breakup. But I kept my mouth shut, doing nothing more than enjoying the moment.

"You're driving me... crazy," I managed when he added a second and third finger, flexing all three, stretching my pussy muscles even as they clenched around the thick invasion. At least it was thick to me. My sinful mind drifted to Jake's big cock, the taste of his sweet pre-cum lingering. I wondered just how amazing it would feel buried deep inside of me.

When he added a fourth finger, driving into me with savagery, sucking my clit at the same time, my body was filled with adrenaline only seconds before I felt the approaching orgasm.

It was as if a Mack truck had slammed into me going high speed. "Oh. My. God."

"You're a bad little girl. Aren't you?" His words were dripped in deep, sensual vibes, which only added to the incredible moment.

"Uh-huh. Yes, oh, yes." At that moment, I'd admit to just about anything. As the climax rolled up from my pointed toes, I rose from the rug, a slight scream pushing past my lips. Another fleeting moment of embarrassment rushed into me and I covered my face with my hands as he held tight, licking like a crazed man.

I'd never had multiple orgasms in my life but as he continued licking, still driving his flexed fingers deep inside, one climax rolled into a giant wave of pleasure. When I opened my mouth

to scream this time, nothing came out. This was what I'd heard was pure ecstasy.

I sensed my body was shaking violently, still bucking against his hold. It seemed like forever until I started to float down from the clouds, blinking yet not seeing anything clearly. I lolled my head to the side, studying the flickering flames, trying to learn how to breathe all over again.

He released his hold and I wanted to curl up in a tight little ball, relishing the moment. But the big man was having none of it. While he sat back, he grabbed my arms, yanking me with him. The man was so amazingly strong that I was pulled into his lap, straddling his big, fat cock.

"Oh, my," I muttered and threw my arms over his shoulders.

There was something filthy about his stare, the evil smile on his face and the mischief in his eyes.

"Are you ready for me to fuck you?" he asked, his voice dropping to the deepest baritone I'd ever heard.

"Would it matter if I said no?"

"Not in the least."

"Then yes. Fuck, yes."

He grinned, nipping my lower lip as he lifted me, pushing my legs on either side of him and holding me aloft. It was as if our bodies were meant to be together, molding as one. His cockhead instantly pressed against my slickness as he gripped my hips. He held me that way for an agonizing few seconds, teasing me as only he could do.

I tangled my fingers in his hair, fighting with the nerves that had returned. It had been so long, I was completely out of practice and even though he was in complete charge of both of us, I was still nervous. But the moment he brought me down, his cock filling me completely, I laughed to myself.

Maybe it was just like riding a bike. The sensations were incredible, so exciting that they brought out the animal in me, I started moving, riding him like a wild pony. Neither one of us

blinked as the blissful moments escalated, so in sync with each other's body that I knew we could do this endlessly.

"You feel so damn good," he muttered, finally allowing his gaze to fall to my breasts. "So fucking good."

"You're not so bad yourself." I was no longer shocked how incredible the man was at everything. He was huge, his cock throbbing as it continued to stretch my muscles. There was no discomfort, only blissful tingles and as he lifted me, yanking me down forcefully, I wanted to beg him to be rough with me.

I could swear the man was a mind reader, taking full control, powering into me as if this was our last moment on Earth. Yet in a shocking move that would always remain in my memory, he managed to rise to his feet while still holding me. I knew his thighs were muscular, but holy God, he was so strong.

I clenched my knees against him, laughing nervously all over again.

"You like this, baby?" he asked. Was he really asking me? How could any woman not like being taken by a big he-man?

"Oh, yes. Yes." I clung to his shoulders as he fucked me, the savage able to roll onto the balls of his feet, driving hard and fast. I threw my head back, staring up at the ceiling, wondering why I'd never believed sex could be this good before. I was a crazy woman to ignore my desires for so long.

I was almost ready to float away on a blissful cloud when he pulled one of my legs down then the other.

"What are you doing?" I asked, although the sound was more of a demand.

"You'll see. Good things come to obedient girls." He backed away, shaking his head slowly as he studied me. Seconds later, I was shocked he spun me around to face the fireplace, kicking my legs apart.

I planted my hands on the mantel, staring down at the flames as he rubbed his fingers down my spine to the crack of my ass. When he patted my bottom, I was certain he planned on spanking me. The second he pushed his thumb to my dark hole, I gasped.

“Not tonight, beautiful girl, but I will take you in your tightest hole one day. Mark my words.” The promise made, he thrust his cock back into my slickness and the angle was entirely different.

“Holy shit.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet.” He wrapped his hand around my throat, holding my head back as he started fucking me even more brutally.

I couldn’t think, had no way of breathing because I’d never felt anything so incredible in my life. The electricity we shared was exacerbated by the raging heat of the flames. Beads of perspiration trickled down both sides of my face and I was certain I’d combust. The sound of our hard fucking was incredible, indescribable.

“Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh. Uh.” I was stuttering my moans, stars floating in front of my eyes. I didn’t need to have his hand wrapped around my throat to know he was perhaps the most possessive man I’d ever known. Everything about him screamed of it from his stature to his snarly attitude. Even the way he had held a nail gun in his hand had suggested utter domination on his part. But strangely, his tight fingers wrapped around my neck were comforting instead of terrifying. If Stephen had ever done this to me, I would have punched him right in the face.

Instead, he just fucked your friend.

Yeah, there was that.

I closed my eyes, stretching out my arms and arching my back as the man fucked me relentlessly. Each plunge was harder than the one before. I found myself panting, the animalistic sound of his body slapping against mine more potent than I could have ever imagined.

The force he used pushed me onto my toes, the excitement building. I was thrown into a moment of utter rapture, shocked as I felt another orgasm tickling my toes. This had definitely never happened. Not once had I experienced an orgasm from having a man’s cock buried deep inside. Then again, this

wasn't any ordinary man. He was ruthless in his actions, taking what he wanted.

When he squeezed his hand around my throat, I issued a series of scattered whimpers. His response was several growls. A few seconds later, every nerve ending was on fire and I sensed his body tensing. There was no holding back, no ability to make the special moment last any longer.

As I fell into another vacuum, I heard his demanding words, ordering me to come. At this point, there was no way I could hold back. As the beautiful climax rushed into my system, another series of vibrant lights flashing in my periphery of vision, he erupted deep inside.

CHAPTER 11



Cassandra

“What in God’s name did you do?”

They’d been the first words out of my mouth regarding a storm named Jake that had stumbled into my life, sweeping me off my feet and stealing what was left of my sanity. Saying them had been too easy. Way too easy. I’d barely opened my eyes and the first thing in my mind had been being filled with regret? Gah. What was wrong with me? Was I simply too damaged from everything that had occurred?

About the only good thing going for the morning was that the storm had passed, the electricity restored. I knew that because the red numbers on my cheap alarm clock were blinking, the blinds left open again given Jake had chased me up the stairs, tossing me into the middle of the bed, wasting no time driving his cock into my pussy all over again.

Now I remained under the covers, almost terrified to face another day, full of regrets. And I couldn’t blame the scotch. That had come later. The lonely feeling had settled back into my system even though Jake couldn’t have been gone for more than four hours. Hell, what did I know? I couldn’t read the morning glow and the clock was certainly not showing the correct time. For all I knew, I’d slept until noon, although I doubted Moose would allow me to sleep that long.

There was no denying Jake was insatiable, his cock hard within minutes of erupting inside, his hunger like some alpha

hero in a romance novel, not a normal man. I shuddered as I thought about how savagely he'd fucked me. My pussy ached from being stretched, my inner thighs still sticky from a combination of our cum.

Even better, his timber-based masculine scent remained covering every inch of skin. Or maybe that was worse. No. I couldn't think of the night so badly. It was just one time. I didn't even have his number. Yet.

I'd awakened with a heavy weight covering me, certain after round three of hard fucking with Jake that I'd turn over to see his chiseled face. Instead, Moose had opened his eyes, dragging his wide tongue across my face in a morning greeting. It wasn't that my furry baby didn't have a place on my bed, it was that he'd made himself comfortable on Jake's pillow. Okay, my pillow, but the one Jake has laid his tousled head on.

And what was so sad was that I was happy Moose was the only other creature in the house. I turned my head, staring into my pup's big brown eyes, trying to draw comfort from them. Maybe answers as well. Jake. Jake. Why couldn't I get the blissful image of his face out of my mind?

There'd been no denying our attraction to each other. Maybe there was something to be said for hate-lust. Or whatever the right term was. Jessica would know it, but I was too embarrassed to call her and ask. And why was I ashamed of my actions? Ugh. Maybe because I'd sworn up and down that I had no intentions of looking at, kissing, or fucking another man for a very long time.

She'd have every right to tease me relentlessly for weeks. Months.

"Oh, baby. I don't know what I managed to get myself in the middle of."

Woof.

Moose's single bark was followed by a yawn as he rolled over on his back. My pup was certainly happy as could be and he hadn't even gotten dinner the night before. Neither had I,

unless I could consider finally being allowed to taste more of the hot man's cum food. I half laughed at the thought.

Seconds after rubbing Moose's belly, he was snoring. I yanked the covers up to my neck, surprised I was still tingling all over. What I'd shared with the man had been incredible, a real fantasy, but as expected, it wasn't meant to last either physically or in my mind.

I should have known the man wouldn't stay. He wasn't the romantic type, had even said as much, but as I'd finally allowed my heavy eyelids to close the night before, I'd hoped a little bit too much that I'd wake up with him lying next to me. As I stared out the window, the sun's golden rays shining into the room, I tried not to be melancholy.

I didn't even hear any hammering and there was no sight of his ladder outside my bedroom window. My fur baby opened his eyes, placing his paw on me. "Where did he go, Moose?" The question was rhetorical of course, the man living less than a mile down the road from me. While I'd yet to see his house, he'd told me purchasing the place had been a lesson in love and patience. That had meant it was a real fixer upper.

As I rolled over on my back, staring up at the ceiling, Moose placed his head on my arm, snuffling as he always did when he was comfortable. There was no reason for me to be torn up inside. Jake and I were adults. We'd made the decision to have sex and nothing more.

Jake hadn't said goodbye. He certainly hadn't mentioned getting together again, unless his promise to fuck me in the ass counted. I wiggled my bottom from the thought. Okay, so in my book it counted a little bit, but I had a sinking feeling that he was regretting allowing his guard to fall. Was I? Sadly, I wasn't entirely certain.

What I did know was that I felt a little empty inside, as if by being so close to someone even for only a few hours, I'd been filled. That wasn't possible, of course. Everything surrounding the end to my relationship with Stephen had been horrific, taking more out of me than anyone realized. At least I could admit that now. How long had it taken me?

Maybe if I was truly honest with myself, I'd be able to admit that the last few months spent with Stephen had taken such a tremendous toll that I'd wanted to feel beautiful again. And Jake had done that in spades. He'd managed to peel away the awful layers with his brusque demeanor and ruthless stares. I'd fallen hard for it, if only for a little while. But that was okay. As long as it didn't happen again. I truly needed to spend time getting the place renovated and making money again or my brilliant idea of forging an entirely new life would go up in flames quickly.

Even if that meant working with Jake. We could be professionals and nothing more. Of course we could. Right?

When I smashed my fists on the comforter, Moose jerked up, woofing several times. "I know, buddy. You're hungry. Mommy dog is hungry as well. There's a lot to do today. We'll unpack and we're getting a new truck. Would you like that?" I jerked up, hating the fact my head was spinning. Why had I indulged in scotch of all godforsaken liquors? How many glasses had I consumed?

Moose eyed me carefully, snorfling a few seconds later. At least my fur baby could make me laugh.

Moaning, I threw the covers back, determined not to let the day go by. I was still naked, my clothes located in the living room. Thank God, I'd taken the time to jerk my fluffy robe I'd packed in one of the boxes sent ahead. As I padded to the bathroom to brush my teeth, I realized that I wanted a do-over with the cupcakes. Although I doubted Jake would dare put one in his mouth if I made it.

Grabbing the robe, I furiously tied the sash, angry with myself. Angry with Stephen for betraying me. Angry with my mother for dying. And angry that I'd been such an idiot. I smacked myself in the forehead, groaning several times. I'd given myself so many pep talks after making the decision to quit my job and fly across the country that I had whiplash. Maybe I wanted to wallow in self-pity a little bit longer.

"Get a grip. You're here. A fresh start. You can return to being a droll girl." At least the personal insults made me feel a tad

better.

After washing my face, I knew I needed coffee before I could manage to step foot in the shower. Maybe that was a tiny white lie. The truth was that I wanted Jake's scent to remain on my skin for a little while longer. My reflection glared back at me as I did a silly girly thing of bringing my arm to my nose, taking a deep breath. It was the way the girl in the mirror laughed that was insulting.

I pointed my finger at her, making a sour face of my own. "Hey. At least I allowed myself to have a good time. What about you?" I'd taken to talking to myself in front of a mirror a year before when everything in my life had tumbled out of control. It had strangely calmed me, the reflection almost taking on a personality of her own. If I mentioned the new habit to anyone, they'd be certain I'd lost what was left of my marbles. The truth was that doing so had kept me sane. There were things that had gone on with Stephen that I hadn't been able to mention to anyone, including Jessica.

And including my own mother.

His desperate need to control DC had turned him into a different man. Yes, he was powerful. He knew everybody. He was glamorous and destined for great things. But I wasn't the kind of woman who could tolerate being under his thumb, which is exactly what he'd wanted.

I'd been far too embarrassed, ashamed that I'd allow myself to fall so low and to trust so deeply. That would never happen again. Maybe that's why I remained troubled at what I'd done with Jake. I'd come here to purposely shut down everything, enjoying the freedom of living away from the mess and the constant hounding of reporters. I hadn't been in town forty-eight hours and I'd allowed someone to get close to me.

"Okay, so you're a fool. I know it and can make that admittance."

My thoughts were all over the place. There was so much to do that I didn't have time to lament over the evening before. I'd stored it away for now as a pleasant memory and nothing else.

Maybe I just needed to prove to myself that I wasn't a horrible cook. If I didn't learn, I'd need to hire a chef for the B & B and that wasn't in the budget.

"What do you say, Moose? Do you want to help Mommy dog make some cookies later when she gets back?" Maybe I wouldn't kill them.

Otherwise the rugged man with the rough touch would clearly think I was hopeless.

Moose wagged his tail, remaining on the bed and all I could do was laugh.

At least my pup felt like this was home.

After grabbing the glasses from the night before, I walked toward the window. I could almost make out Jake's house from where I stood. Almost.

For some crazy reason, I searched for his truck, disappointed that it wasn't in my driveway. Maybe he was angry with me. Or maybe he was feeling as much guilt as I was. The odd feeling of being watched hit me all over again, only this time with so much force that my stomach churned. I scanned the yard, trying to determine why I would think such a thing.

Even the hair on the back of my neck was standing up. Maybe I was experiencing some crazy déjà vu or maybe the memories that had resurfaced given what had occurred with Jake were the reason.

Whatever the case, I was officially sick to my stomach.

As I shifted to the second window, Moose finally jumped off the bed. The growl he issued terrified me even more than the unsettling feeling.

"Shit, baby. I don't like this." The sun continued to rise, the bright light forcing me to squint then shield my eyes. There was nothing out there but my overactive imagination and my intangible fear of being alone.

Laughing, the sound hollow, I started to back away from the window when a glint caught my eye.

What the fuck?

There was someone in my driveway. Granted, from where I was standing, it appeared like a big blob, but I was certain of I wasn't just seeing things even though there were several tall trees lining the driveway. Squinting even more, I changed the angle of where I was standing, also swearing that whoever it was had lit a cigarette or cigar. That incensed me almost as much at being watched.

Not that he or she could see anything inside my window, but still. It was the principle.

Now a rush of anger smacked into my system. I headed to my closet, finding the boots I'd also unpacked. As I struggled to slide my feet into them, Moose continued growling. He'd jumped up on the windowsill, his tail all the way down indicating he was upset.

"It's okay, baby. Everything will be fine." Without bothering to tie the laces, I clomped down the stairs, racing toward the front door. Moose was on my heels, finally being the guard dog. However, I wasn't going to allow him to run free. "You stay right here. I'll be back in a jiffy."

He fought me to get out the door and almost won. As soon as I closed the door behind me, I took off taking long strides down the driveway. I was halfway to the end before I realized I was still in my robe. To hell with it. I refused to allow anyone to terrify me ever again. I was in charge of my life. Maybe I'd purchase a firearm as well as a new truck. Yeah, that would be just dandy.

Even if I didn't know how to fire a gun to save my life.

I picked up my speed, finally at a point I could tell that whatever I'd seen wasn't there. Had I seen a mirage? A tree? Was I really losing my mind? I folded my arms, taking deep breaths. I had to know for certain. I continued walking, although the creepy crawlies finally made an appearance. There was no reason to feel nervous, yet my heart had shifted into my throat.

Courage. Courage. Courage.

That had been my mantra, one of freedom from despair and hatred. Now I had a chance to prove it to myself.

When I made it to within ten feet of the street, I was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief. There was no one there. The sun had been playing tricks on me and nothing more. At least that's what I'd continued to tell myself so I could feel less like an idiot.

I spun around, hissing under my breath but something caught my eye. As I peered down, a series of cold shivers slammed into my spine.

Right there in the gravel was a crushed cigarette butt.

And it was still smoking.

CHAPTER 12



Jake

I was a card-carrying shithead. There was no other term for leaving Cassandra's house before the crack of dawn. I'd fallen asleep next to the stunning woman fully intending on waking up next to her. But when I'd jerked up, staring into the darkness of the pre-dawn hours, it had felt like I was having a heart attack. My ridiculous condition had nothing to do with the beautiful girl.

I was the one who was completely fucked up. I'd crept out of her house like a criminal, not even waking the sleeping dog. I'd slunk back to my house, jumping in the shower, allowing the hot water to remove the lingering sweet scent.

Now I hated myself for it.

I'd even jumped into the truck before she'd had a chance to wake up and realize what a jerk I was, driving around for a couple of hours aimlessly before heading to finish work on an odd job that I'd started two months before.

The craziest thing of all was that I'd driven into the parking lot of Millie's Diner and hadn't even realized it until the flashing neon 'open' sign had finally grabbed my attention. It was lunchtime and I was hungry but I wasn't certain I could stand the thought of eating. Yet I climbed out, rubbing my hands on my jeans, and shoved aside the nerves that always came with being criticized. I should be used to it by now, but some days it was tougher on me than others.

Maybe because I'd felt so exposed the night before, my nerves were on edge more than normal. Hell, I'd worked hard over the years to become rough around the edges, unfazed by nasty barbs and innuendoes. Today felt as if I was starting over and I didn't like it one bit.

For about a million reasons, heading into the place felt wrong. I hadn't stepped foot inside for almost two years. The local restaurant was the gossip zone of the entire town; everyone who was anyone ate at the diner at least once a week, but it wasn't for the food. Granted, what Millie and her daughter Becca served was comfort food, but there were other restaurants that put their food to shame.

The reason the place was always packed was because two women in town were always able to hunt down anything anyone wanted to know. Who was screwing around on whom? Done. There were no secrets when it came to the bedroom. Who'd cheated on their taxes? Easy. Who had a gambling problem? That was a piece of cake.

Maybe the reason I'd decided to break through another barrier and eat breakfast inside was to see if Jolene Baxter was sitting on her normal barstool, pumping the eager guests with the latest tidbits of information. If not, then Millie usually filled her shoes, although since allowing Becca to handle the management, Millie didn't show up as often as she once had.

That didn't mean the woman didn't have her finger on the pulse of Depoe Bay.

What I didn't want to happen was for anyone to get the wrong idea about Cassandra. Since Millie had run into her at the grocery store, there was more than a good chance of that happening. Maybe I could at least stop that shit before it got ugly. Why did I even care? I'd never given a shit about the gossip mill before. Or had I?

At least they'd grown tired of talking about me, or so Bart had told me.

I swaggered toward the door, taking a deep breath before walking inside. True to form, Jolene was sitting on her stool, the one that allowed her to talk to the most people without

interfering with service. The chatter was as loud as the country music coming from the old-fashioned jukebox and the clatter of utensils against plates. The place was crowded, every booth occupied. Fortunately for me, a single stool at the counter was being vacated by someone I didn't know.

The moment I slipped onto it, my arrival was noticed. Within seconds, everyone stopped talking altogether, almost everyone turning to stare at me. Or maybe the term was gawk at the freak.

Becca was at the end of the counter, filling a coffee cup for one of the regulars. How did I know he'd been coming to the diner for years? Because my mom used to bring me here after hockey practice a long time ago.

Before my life had started a downward spiral.

As Becca headed in my direction, a smile crossed her face and as stupid as it seemed to me, I was relieved.

"Hey ya, stranger. It's good to see you inside my happy little establishment."

"Yeah, I've just been busy."

"I heard you were the best contractor in town. I might need to talk to you about some work I need to have done."

"Any time. You know how to get ahold of me." I'd crushed on Becca a long time before. She'd been a senior while I'd been a lowly sophomore. She'd been the geek and I'd been the hockey jock, not a match made in heaven, but we'd become friends until I'd left for college while she'd stayed behind.

"Yeah, I do. Do you want some coffee?"

"I'd love some."

She grabbed a cup, pouring it full. "What brings you out?"

Chuckling, I reached for the cream. "I'm not a hermit."

"That's not what I hear. I also heard you're working on Tangerine Sunset." She gave me a sly look.

"He is." Millie had eyes in the back of her head, and better hearing than a dog. As she came bustling out from the back,

the look of joy on her face was just as I'd remembered when she'd gripped onto something juicy. I had a bad feeling she'd already made assumptions. The sad thing was that she'd be right.

Yeah, I'd fucked the new girl already. Way to go, buddy.

"Is that so?" Jolene asked. "That place needs a lot of work."

"Yeah, it does, but Ms. Dayne is determined to do whatever it takes to bring the place back to its original shine." I took a sip of coffee, trying to act as nonchalant as possible.

"The girl is in way over her head," Millie added. "I met her yesterday. Nice enough girl but she's a city slicker, the kind that won't be able to handle staying in a small town. She'll end up selling."

"Well, if Malcolm Robinson has his way she will," Becca huffed before replacing the coffeepot.

"What are you talking about?" As far as I was concerned, Malcolm was pure evil. He'd grown up here, close to my age. His parents had been the richest people in town, which had allowed the kid to get away with anything. While he'd been smart enough to get a scholarship to go to Harvard, I'd heard he'd nearly beaten a guy to death, almost landing in jail. Daddy had gotten him off.

Great. Now I was the one gossiping if only in the back of my mind. What I knew for certain was that Robinson Real Estate and Developers had bought up far too many properties, getting some of them through methods like extortion. Like father, like son.

"Margaret didn't tell you?" Millie asked coyly.

"I thought you two were buddies," Jolene quipped before I had a chance to answer.

"I was her contractor and we were friendly. That doesn't mean she confided her business acumen to me." I wouldn't put it past Malcolm to try to force Margaret to sell.

"He made an offer Margaret couldn't refuse," Millie said as she studied my eyes. "That's why I was surprised when I heard

the daughter was coming in taking it over. I think you know the entire town is relieved. Can you imagine what Robinson would do to the place? We'd have five hundred condos on that small piece of property."

She was right about that. Malcolm was ceremoniously buying up every decent piece of property he could get his hands on, something his father had started.

"I don't know what to tell you. We've barely said a few words to each other," I said casually enough Millie exchanged a knowing glance with Becca. Great. Another rumor started, exactly what I'd wanted to avoid.

"So you know, I heard she's single," Millie continued in a singsong voice. "And you have to admit she's very pretty."

"I wouldn't know." I wasn't the best liar and I could tell the second look shared between the women meant they were determined I'd told them a fib.

"Uh-huh. When have I ever known you to ignore a pretty girl?"

I resisted glaring at Millie. I wasn't irritated with her, not really. She meant no harm, once acting like a second mother to me when my own mother had all but turned her back, preferring antidepressants to talking with her own son.

"I don't have time for women, Millie. That's just the way it is."

"Such a shame," Jolene teased. "A fine stud muffin like yourself. Oh, speaking of stud muffins. I heard your brother is headed to the Vancouver Jackals. You must be proud."

Becca exhaled as she studied me. She knew how much I'd wanted to be a part of the team. "I don't think he wants to rekindle the world of hockey. Do you, Jake?"

"Nope. I sure don't. Riley is in charge of his own life. Becca, can I get a club sandwich and some chips, please?" I made a mental note to have a discussion with my brother. I'd give reasoning with him one last try. After that, I'd wash my hands of him. The least he could have done was find the decency to tell me so I wasn't forced to hear it from the town gossips. I

gritted my teeth before I said anything that would come back to bite me. I'd been doing a lot of that lately.

"Sure you can. Let the man have some peace, folks," Becca said loud enough for the entire diner to hear then glared at her own mother before heading to the computer to place the order.

I sucked in my breath, feeling angry that Margaret would have trusted a pig like Malcolm. At least he hadn't gotten his slimy hands on the place. However, at some point I'd warn Cassandra to stay away from him.

If she ever talked to me again. I couldn't be certain at this point. I felt the heat of additional stares but within a few seconds, the crowd went back to jabbering about others in town. I tried to listen in on the conversations but after a few minutes, my mind could only concentrate on Cassandra.

What I hadn't wanted to happen had been easy to allow. I'd broken the rules I'd set in motion. Even worse, I stood a chance of dragging Cinnamon Girl down with me. The best thing to do was stay away from her before things got of hand. The only way to do that was to hire another contractor myself. I knew of one I could trust. Maybe I'd give him a call.

Was it the chicken shit way out?

You bet it was. However, someone as beautiful and vulnerable as Cassandra didn't need my brand of crazy. Or the baggage that would always be with me. I pulled out my phone, checking to see if I had Garrett's number. As luck would have it, I did. I couldn't help myself, sliding my finger across the screen to Cassandra's number. The attorney who'd handled the probate had given it to me and I'd almost forgotten I had it. A part of me wanted to call or text her, but at this point I wasn't certain what I could say.

She deserved the truth even though we'd only shared one special moment together. Very slowly I scrolled away from the screen, shoving my phone back into my jacket.

Sighing, I allowed my mind to drift to the night I'd shared with the beautiful girl one last time before putting it to bed

permanently. Yeah, it was the right thing to do, even if the ache would remain for some time to come.

“Hey, Becca. I’ll take the food to go. A couple things just came up,” I said after making my decision.

“Sure, Jake. Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine. I just have some work to do.”

“Sure thing,” Becca answered. “It’ll just be a minute.”

As she slid the bill across the counter toward me, I yanked out my wallet. The decision was a tough one but it was best for both of us.

Whether my Cinnamon Girl knew accepted it or not. At some point, she’d learn that I was a terrible person and more.

After Becca handed me the bag, she followed me out to my truck. “You okay?”

“Peachy. Why?” I answered.

“Because I know that look.”

“What look is that?”

“The one where you’re about ready to blow a gasket. That’s the way you were just before heading to the ice. Maybe you need to do a little practicing like you used to.”

“I got a bum leg, Becca. I don’t play hockey any longer.”

“From what I can see, your leg is all healed.”

“Is that why you followed me out here?”

“No, stick in the mud. I followed you out here because I know you too well. What were you trying to learn by coming into the diner?” She folded her arms, giving me the same hard look she had all those years ago when I was still a human being.

Shrugging, I unlocked the door of my truck, placing the food inside. “Let it go, Becca.”

“You might have fooled everyone that you don’t think the new girl is pretty, but I could see the gleam in your eyes. It’s time you moved on. You know that.”

“Moved on from what?”

“Oh, let me count the ways. From grief. From anger. From self-hatred. Pick one. You’re not a spring chicken any longer.”

One of many things I liked about Becca was that she’d never hesitated in telling me the absolute truth even if it hurt like hell. I’d missed her openness and trust, as well as her caustic mouth. Maybe that’s why I’d been so entranced with Cassandra. “You don’t mince words, do ya?” At least I could grin.

“Nope. You need me to give you a kick in the ass every so often.” She inched closer. “I’m serious though. I have a feeling you like this girl.”

I stared up at the sky for a few seconds, hating the fact my pulse was racing. “It doesn’t matter if I like her. She doesn’t need an anchor around her neck. She’s going to have enough to deal with.”

“Why do you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Sell yourself short? You’re a wonderful man and a fabulous catch. Just because that bitch left you in the lurch doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to have something special.”

She’d refrained from saying my ex’s name ever since the puck bunny had walked out on me, even going as far as telling me she wanted to beat the crap out of the girl more than once. “I’m fine. Stop trying to fix me up.”

“I don’t even know the girl, other than what Mommy dearest had to say about her. I just know you and want you happy.”

“I am happy.”

“You are so bad at lying. But I won’t bug you about it except to say that you do deserve to have everything you want in your life. You’re paid a hefty price for caring.”

“It’s been justified penance.”

“Bullshit. Just think about what I said. You deserve happiness more than anyone I know of.” She rose onto her toes, pressing

her hand against my chest and leaning in. As she kissed me on the cheek, I did think about what she'd just said. Then I shoved it aside. I knew what was best, but not for me.

For the woman who'd made me feel alive.

CHAPTER 13



Cassandra

Another morning had dawned and Jake was nowhere to be seen. Well, bully for him. The shithead didn't have the nerve to show up to see if I was kidding about him working on the house.

That was probably because he was with his girlfriend.

I hissed, glaring out the window as I thought about what I'd seen while heading for the diner as recommended by Millie. I'd been excited about finding the perfect truck and one that I'd easily been able to afford. I'd thought a little celebration lunch was in order. Of course, I had to see a girl kissing him in the parking lot. They looked mighty cozy.

Don't jump to conclusions.

Yeah, well, it was pretty clear what I'd seen. However, when he finally showed up for work, I would give him the benefit of the doubt. I'd want someone to do that for me. Still, the ache I felt was unexpected. So why was I still baking for him? Was it all about proving to myself that I could?

Maybe.

Was it more about trying to pretend as if I didn't feel like I was a failure? You bet.

Damn it.

After I shoved the last batch of cookies into the oven, I paced the floor of my kitchen, trying to figure out why and how I

could have been so stupid. Okay, so that guy had told me he wasn't married, but he certainly hadn't been up front about seeing anyone else. Okay, so we weren't an item, but we did have sex. Normally, that meant some level of honesty. Shit. I'd been out of the dating scene for far too long.

The fact he hadn't returned to the house was starting to disturb me in several ways, including dragging unwanted anger to the forefront of my mind. I was irritated enough he'd just disappeared that I'd been tossing flour and sugar around as if it was going out of style. Every surface in my kitchen, as well as my jeans, was covered in white. What did I care? I'd even arranged for a cashier's check to take care of the debt my mother owed, including the brand spanking new iPhone.

At least I'd calmed down from the day before, using my frustration to unpack the boxes, finally adding touches of my own. I'd spent way too much money at a couple of local stores purchasing a few pictures and some linens so I could turn the bedroom into my own. Replacing the mattress would come later. And I'd treated myself to some new jeans and a couple of sweaters since Mr. Grinch had made fun of what I'd been wearing.

Oh, God. I wanted to hate the man. How had I allowed him to crawl under my skin?

Because he made you feel like a woman.

Yeah, there was that.

I'd wanted to ask him if he smoked, which I doubted, but it would give a plausible explanation for what I'd noticed on my driveway. It was funny that the anger I felt outweighed the fear that had trickled within me the morning before. If not Jake, it could easily have been someone coming to explore staying at the place, or a tourist looking for a place to stay. There was no indication the B & B was closed. Not one.

Grousing or worrying wasn't going to do me any good. Only the truth would ease the vixen inside of me.

I'd been determined to do something nice, but as usual, I was second guessing myself. Plus, right now, my intentions

weren't on the up and up. So, here I was, determined to finish the cookies as if I was Suzy Homemaker. Fuck that. Maybe I would hire a chef. Yep. That was more my style. So what if I wasn't a small-town girl? Huh? What of it?

Yeah. There was a hint of the girl I'd once been. I headed for the oven, turning on the light and staring inside. A moment of relief flooded me. They looked delicious.

After burning the first batch of chocolate chip cookies, the secret recipe I'd found in my mother's aging recipe box, I'd been successful in getting one pan out of the oven unscathed. Well, after burning my fingers on the heated surface not once but twice. Still, I considered my endeavor a partial success. As an added bonus, my trashcan smelled of chocolate and vanilla, two of my favorite scents.

Although fresh pine and rainwater were certainly right up there. I'd taken a tentative bite, shocked that the cookie was scrumptious. I couldn't believe the chick who tortured eggs when scrambling them had been able to bake such a delicacy. I'd even found a festive plate. Granted, it had Santa Claus and Rudolph in the center, but at least it was something attractive to place my cookies on. That might get his goat. Ha. I was indeed such a bad girl. I'd get the truth out of him.

When the oven dinged, I grabbed a potholder and breathed another sigh of relief as I removed the perfectly golden-brown treats, placing them on the counter to cool. I'd go freshen up then head to Jake's place. He damn well better be home.

Before I had a chance to leave the kitchen, the ring on my phone made my heart flutter. It was crazy but I was hopeful if was Jake calling, maybe asking me out on a date. Oh, my lord. Not only did he not have my phone number but two seconds before I'd been angry with him.

The number wasn't one I recognized although it was local. Tingles drifted down my spine as they'd done when Jake had touched me.

“Cassandra Dayne.”

“Uh, yeah, Ms. Dayne. This is Garrett Thompson. I’m a local contractor here in Depoe Bay. I was calling because I know you own the place now and you need some work done.”

I certainly wasn’t spiteful and wouldn’t allow what I’d seen to get in the way of business. I planned on remaining an adult even if my contractor had two-timed his girlfriend. “I’m sorry, Mr. Thompson, but I’m already working with a wonderful contractor. I appreciate your call though.”

“Jake Spencer?”

“Yes, that’s the man. If you’d like to text me your information, I’ll certainly keep it on file.”

“I think there’s been some kind of mistake. Jake called and mentioned he couldn’t finish the job. We’re old friends. I told him I’d be happy to step in.”

The sledgehammer effect was only matched by the gut-wrenching jab from an invisible and very dull knife. “I see.”

“Anyway, I have some free time tomorrow if you don’t mind me stopping by so I can see the scope of work.”

“That would be fine.” The ache only continued to grow.

“How about two-thirty? Will that work?”

“Sure, Mr. Thompson. That will work just fine. I’ll see you then.” As I ended the call, I took a deep breath, holding the phone to my forehead. After placing the phone on the counter, I grabbed the Santa plate, heading to the trash. It was funny how much better I felt as I grabbed one burnt cookie after another. By the time I’d filled the plate, I was feeling much better.

After wrapping plastic wrap around the treats, I stood back. I was even able to allow a wry smirk before glancing at the drawers, opening one after another until I found what I was looking for.

The meat tenderizer would be perfect. Humming softly, I returned to the plate, grateful it was made of melamine. Then I took out my aggressions on the cookies, smashing them to smithereens.

Yep, the girl I'd once been ages before was back. No longer would I allow any man to take advantage of me.

Ever.

* * *

I'd thought about bringing Moose with me, but I honestly didn't want him to get any more attached to Jake than absolutely necessary. Fortunately, the asshole wasn't home. I'd left the plate on his front porch along with the check in an envelope, wishing I'd had a little marijuana or even a laxative that I could have added to the cookies. Yes, that was horrible of me but at this point, I didn't care.

The fact I'd accepted such bullshit behavior from my ex should have allowed me to see right through the rugged man's façade. But I'd lost myself in Jake's sinfully blue eyes and chiseled jaw. To hell with that.

I'd soothe the ache in my heart by stopping by the diner as I'd intended the day before. If I ran into the man and his girlfriend, I'd do nothing but wave. But first, I was headed to the post office my mother had used. I'd almost forgotten that she had very little mail coming to the house. The drive to the other side of the small town had helped me understand why my mother was so in love with the location. Everything was quaint from the houses to the businesses. There were so many tree-lined streets and from several locations, you could catch a glimpse of the ocean.

I wanted this to feel like home but right now, I just felt empty and I hated that more than anything. Maybe Garrett Thompson would allow me to forget all about Jake. One could hope.

After parking the truck I jumped out, surprised when the three people who passed me waved as if they were old friends. There was something about small town vibes that I liked. It was entirely different than being in DC where everyone questioned everything.

I was surprised at the stack of mail in the box and took the time to go through the ads and other basic trash mail, tossing them into the bin inside the post office. There were several

bills, which I'd anticipated and another piece that caught my eye. It was from a real estate firm in town, but it didn't appear to be an advertisement.

As soon as I opened it, another wave of anger skidded into my system. It was a threatening letter addressed to my mother, the threat about suing her for breach of contract. What the hell? My mother hadn't been attempting to sell the place. She'd prepared her will years before. I stared at the name on the envelope but couldn't tell when it had been mailed.

The attorney had told me he'd had all her mail redirected to his office until only a week ago. Surely he would have known if she'd entered into a contract. Something didn't add up. While I wanted nothing more than to find the man's office and confront him, I figured it was in my best interest to find out who the guy was.

I could contact the attorney, but I had a feeling if all the regulars went to the diner, someone inside could tell me all about Mr. Robinson.

And I'd be able to kill two birds with one stone. I'd even buy my fur baby a beloved cheeseburger in celebration of my newfound independence. See. I was feeling better already.

I dumped the mail into the seat beside me, heading back to the other side of town, enjoying the scenery along the way. When I pulled into the diner, I was eager to grab a burger, maybe a glass of wine and a chat with the locals. It was time I took full control of my life.

As I headed inside, my mouth watered from the smells inside the place. It was adorable in atmosphere, pictures of all kinds of people covering the walls that didn't have windows. I even noticed a few celebrities as I walked by, heading to the counter. Almost immediately Millie came out from the back, a smile bursting on her face.

"Well, hey there, new neighbor. Grab a seat," Millie said.

"I think I will."

"What can I get you?"

“You wouldn’t happen to have a nice glass of wine, would you?”

Millie laughed. “Of course, honey. Would you like a glass from your mother’s vintage?”

“I think I would.”

“Red or white?”

“Red, the darker the better.”

“I’m so glad you stopped by. Your ears must have been burning.” As she pulled a bottle of wine into her hand, searching for a corkscrew, I narrowed my eyes.

“Why?”

“Because Jake was in here yesterday. I think he’s sweet on you.”

“Oh, I doubt that. We don’t really get along. Plus, he has a girlfriend.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because I saw him kissing a girl yesterday. I’m many things but not a homewrecker.”

“Hmmm... I think you’re wrong. He hasn’t been with anyone since that floozy walked out on him a few years ago after the tragedy.” She popped the cork and immediately grabbed a glass.

No wonder Jake was grumpy. He’d lost his fabulous hockey career and his girlfriend had dumped him. Maybe because he was a two-timing pig.

I had a feeling she was goading me into asking about the details, but I wasn’t interested. “Well, he even pushed another contractor off on me so that doesn’t put him in the endearing box in my life.”

“Oh, lord. You two must have gotten off on the wrong foot. Jake really can rub people the wrong way.”

As Millie placed the wine in front of me, images of his face popped into my mind. I had to stop acting like a love-struck

chick. “Thanks for this. Please tell me you have cheeseburgers.”

She laughed. “You bet. One?”

“Make that two. My furry baby gets one tonight.”

“Ah. I can’t wait to meet him. Are you settling in alright?”

“Yeah, but I did want to ask a question.”

“Anything.”

“Since you knew my mother so well. Was she considering selling the Tangerine Sunset?”

“I must admit that I heard a rumor to that effect, and it really shocked me. The bed and breakfast was her pride and joy. She loved the place, changing the name to reflect how she felt in her heart. What did you hear?”

“Sadly, I had no clue until I picked up mail from her PO box. I got letter from a local real estate agent threatening her with a lawsuit.”

“Hmmm. That wouldn’t be Malcolm Robinson, would it?”

“Yes, it would.”

Millie shook her head. “First of all, the man is a lying sack of shit and a disgrace to this town. But I would stay away from him if I were you.”

“Okay. I’ll bite. Why?”

She glanced toward the door as if the man was going to come walking in at any moment. “He’s a ruthless pig, buying up properties right and left. He’s also dangerous. From what I know, he killed a man with his bare hands.”

“That seems to be going around in this little town.” I wasn’t certain why I’d made the comment, but I was surprised when Millie reached over the counter, grasping my hand.

“Don’t believe all the garbage you’ve heard about Jake. He’s a good boy. He’s always been one. The shit he’s been through wasn’t his fault. The poor man went through a trifecta of tragedies, more than anyone should be forced to go through,

especially in just a few years. I won't put the bitch he dated in that category, but that added icing to the poisoned cake, if you know what I mean."

Ugh. Thoughts of the cupcakes swam into my mind.

There was something so sad about the way she spoke the words, and when she glanced out the window I was able to see a glimpse of her soul. Still, I sensed she wanted me to ask what she was talking about. I just couldn't do that to either myself or to Jake. He and I weren't friends. I doubt we'd ever be.

"I get it. We all have demons."

"I know, dear. There isn't any of us alive who doesn't. He likes you. I can tell that. He needs someone decent to care about."

I wasn't certain what to say. I liked him too, but I wasn't going down the road of wrecking anyone's life.

Including mine.

Again.

There was no way I could deal with that a second time.

"Anyway, your order won't take very long. I'll be right back. Don't forget. It's on the house."

"I couldn't do that."

"I insist." Millie winked.

"One more question."

"Of course, dear."

"Did my mother ever mention someone watching her house? Maybe following her?"

"No. Never. This isn't DC. We have very few crimes. Even Mr. Robinson did his ugly deed out of town. All we have are a few scuffles and the occasional drunk driver. You're safe here."

Safe.

The word had never seemed foreign to me before, but everything that had occurred over the last two months had taken that away from me. Maybe coming here had been all about finding that center once again, not feeling as if everything I did was under scrutiny.

“Are you okay, dear? You look a little pale,” Millie said, snagging me away from the bad memories.

“Just hungry.”

The older woman laughed. “I might not be able to solve all the problems of this world, but chasing hunger I can do. I’ll be right back.”

“If it doesn’t bother you, I think I want both cheeseburgers to go. I want to enjoy my first real Depoe Bay feast with my pup.”

“You’re a good soul. You know what they say, right? Never trust someone who doesn’t love animals. So you know, Jake adores dogs.” She winked and I shook my head. “And before I forget it. If you have any of your mother’s plum wine I’d like to purchase a couple cases. We’re running low.”

“That I think I can do.”

Millie clapped her hands.

As she walked away, I sensed her happiness. That’s what I wanted for me. Maybe coming to this town was exactly what I’d needed.

Even if there was no way I could be with a man like Jake.

* * *

Less than twenty minutes later I arrived home, the scent of the burgers wafting into my nostrils the entire time making me crazy with hunger. I headed to the door, finding it easier to smile more than before. I would turn this beautiful place into my home no matter how much work it took. I grabbed the to-go bags and my purse, leaving the mail for later. There was more spring to my step than usual and I bounded up the porch stairs, sliding the key into the lock. When it turned easily, I was reminded of Jake all over again.

Now I was thankful he'd replaced the lock.

I expected Moose to bound into the entrance foyer as soon as I came home. He was the happiest pup, eager to see his Mommy dog. When I stepped inside, everything seemed way too quiet. It was possible he was sleeping. His entire schedule had been off the last few days. Still, a strange feeling settled over me. "Moose!"

I'd never noticed how much sound echoed in the old place. I also hadn't paid attention to just how eerie everything was but my skin was crawling.

After closing the door, I moved into the living room where one of his beds had been placed. He wasn't there. "Moosie! Where are you, baby?"

When I didn't hear him racing down the stairs or his tail thumping against a wall, fear rushed into my system. What if something happened to him? What if he ran away? Worse. What if the asshole who'd been watching me had taken him?

I moved into the kitchen and my worst fears hit me hard. The back door was standing open. There was no way. I'd checked every door before I'd left, locking them. I barely placed the bags on the counter, almost dropping them to the floor. As I inched closer, I remembered the locking mechanism was another one I'd had trouble with.

And I'd yelled at Jake for changing the single lock. Oh, God. Moose was good with his paws. He'd opened doors before but only when the handle was a lever design, not a traditional knob.

Chills continued to course down my spine as I walked outside, staring at the wide expanse of grass, hearing the ocean slamming against the rocks. The huge body of water now seemed far too close. Tears formed, my heart racing. If something happened to my boy, I'd lose my mind.

"Moose. Moose!"

CHAPTER 14



Jake

A plate of broken cookies.

Wow. I certainly had an interesting effect on the girl. I could tell by the burnt pieces it was my Cinnamon Girl. Mine. Wasn't that a crock of shit? I fingered the check, shaking my head. I hadn't intended on her paying me so soon. Sighing, I rubbed my jaw, trying to figure out if I should call her. Yeah, and say what exactly?

"Fuckin' shithead," I muttered, hating the way things had gone down.

As I picked up the plate, I shook my head again. I'd been right. Leaving Cassandra's house without a decent explanation, not bothering to make any contact for two days and shoving off her work to another contractor had squarely placed me in the asshole category. I wasn't proud of my behavior, but I maintained that it was in her best interest.

I was additional baggage she didn't need.

I continued staring down at the plate as I headed inside, kicking the door shut behind me, heading to the kitchen. After tossing the plate and the check onto the counter, I yanked open the refrigerator, huffing at seeing no real food. I had plenty of beers, a jar of mayonnaise that had likely expired at least a year before, a few other condiments, and a lovely chunk of Colby cheese.

The contents were representative of my fucking life. Moldy.

I grabbed a Bud, yanking the opener off the side of the fridge and popping the top. Almost as soon as I took a swig, I felt my phone pulsing from my back pocket before I heard the ring. At this point, I wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone. After it rang the second time, I rolled my eyes, snagging it from my pocket. Seeing my old fire captain's number flash across the screen surprised me.

We'd been close when I'd been with the fire department. After putting the entire team in hot water with the fire investigator, we'd had a brutal argument that had almost led to blows. Every so often we talked, but usually when we ran into each other.

I was tentative about answering the call but did so anyway out of respect to the man. "Spencer."

"Jake Spencer. Long time no hear from," Shane said.

"Yeah, I've been busy."

"I get it but man, you're tough to get ahold of."

If he expected me to be much of a talker right now, he was wrong. I headed for the front door, already needing a little air. I could tell by his exaggerated breathing that he was exasperated. Once upon a time, we'd been able to talk about anything, laughing over stories of our youth, commiserating over fires.

"Why are you calling?" I finally asked as I sat down on the porch.

"You never liked bullshit."

"And I still don't, Shane. What is it?"

"To be frank with you, I lost a couple men. I'm short and as you might remember, it's not like I get too many people applying for the job of firefighter."

I shook my head, taking another gulp of beer. He'd asked me to consider returning once before. That had been only months after the tragedy. I'd made it clear then that I wasn't cut out for the job. Why was he pushing now? "So?"

“So, I’m asking you to consider coming back.”

“It’s been over three years, Shane. Even if I wanted to, neither my skills nor my physical condition are up to it. Besides, the goddamn fire inspector would stop at nothing to make certain that doesn’t happen.”

“He’s retiring, Jake. He won’t be an issue. And the city council I can handle.”

Snorting, I shook my head once again. He must be hurting to stoop so low as to ask me to come back. “As I told you before. Not my thing any longer.”

“What exactly is your thing, man? You need to talk to someone, Jake. You can’t go around hating and avoiding the world for the rest of your life.”

“I don’t hate the world and I’m certainly not avoiding it.” Both were lies, although I hated myself more than anything or anyone. The truth was that I was still in rough shape even if the nightmares no longer occurred every night. I still thought about what had happened on that dark night at least once every other day. Or what had happened to destroy my family. Both were pitch-black holes my mind fell into. Hey, it was improving. Before, I’d thought about the incident several times a day. A laugh threatened to leave my throat. I wasn’t certain who I was kidding or trying to prove my sanity to.

As I said, I was a terrible liar.

Just seeing the faces of several of the people in the diner had reminded me of the shit I’d heard them say for the first few months. The worst comments were always made when folks thought I was out of hearing range.

He really thought he was being a hero in that damn fire?

That likely cost the girl her life.

He’s to blame.

Just like what happened when he was younger.

Fuck. I couldn’t go down that road again. Why now? Because of his call? Somehow, I doubted it. I’d learned to ignore the

shit but that didn't mean the words hadn't found a place deep in my soul. Still, I deserved them.

The rumble of a vehicle engine caught my attention. I stared down the single lane road, ready to drive anyone who just stopped by for a visit away. When I noticed a truck flying down at a high rate of speed, I stood. "Living my life, Shane. My way. I wish you good luck in finding some folks, but I'm not your man. I gotta go. It was good talking to you."

"If you change your mind, you're welcome back with open arms."

"I won't."

I ended the call just as he was starting to refute my statement. Why was it that everyone seemed to know better about how I needed to live my life?

When the truck pulled up, hitting the brakes hard, gravel flew out from under the wheels, the dust preventing me from seeing who was behind the wheel. Whoever it was had a reckless streak in them. It kind of pissed me off. I moved off the porch, ready to give the visitor a piece of mind when the door was flung open, boots stepping out onto the gravel. Long dark hair was the second thing I noticed before one fired-up vixen stormed toward me, leaving the door to her truck open.

She stopped short a few feet away when she noticed me, her mouth twisting in frustration.

"Cinnamon Girl. What do you need?"

I sensed she was second guessing her stop but when I noticed a single tear trickling past her long lashes, an ache pulled at me, the need to protect her kicking in. Her mouth twisted, her eyes so glassy my heart thudded in my chest.

"What's going on, Cassandra? Talk to me."

"Is Moose here? I know at least he likes you and I thought maybe he came to find you."

"No. Why would Moose be here?" I moved down the stairs and I'll be damned if she didn't back away, another tear falling from her other eye.

“Because the back door was open when I got home. I don’t know how that happened. I swear I locked it and I checked. I always check. You have to do that in DC because we have idiots roaming the streets. It’s not a habit you can change. You know? I wasn’t that stupid.”

“Slow down. It’s going to be okay.”

“I can’t lose him, Jake. I just can’t. He was there for me during everything. He protected me and kept me from... He’s the only creature I can trust.” She finally either found the courage or additional anger kicked in and she glared me in the eyes. “Forget it. I’m sorry I bothered you.”

When she spun around, acting like she was going to leave, I lumbered forward, grabbing her arm. “Hold on, girl. You’re not making much sense. So Moose somehow got out the back door?”

“Yes. And don’t you dare tell me I should have allowed you to change all the locks. I know that now. I just...” She lifted her arms, dropping her head into her hands.

I sure wasn’t the best man to provide comfort to anyone, but the girl had a way of yanking on my heartstrings. I pulled her close, wrapping my other arm around her. I scanned the exterior, hoping I’d see him. I didn’t want to tell her that some of the rocks near the cliff gave way after the kind of rain we’d had. If Moose had gotten close, there was a chance he’d fallen to his death.

“Where could he go? Where? And why? He’s never run off. Never.” She pushed away but clung to me, darting her eyes back and forth across mine. “That’s not like him.”

It had been a long time since I’d had anyone look to me for answers. Or for help for that matter. I thought about where the pup might go. An idea popped into my mind. “I might know where he went. Why don’t you stay here. I’ll go look.”

“Not a chance, buster. This is my baby, my son, and I will help find him.” Her voice full of anger and defiance, she jerked away, taking long strides back to her truck.

“Goddamn it,” I hissed as I lunged for her, yanking her by the arm. “You’re not driving.”

“Like hell I’m not.”

“You don’t know the area, Cass, and you’re in no condition to drive.”

She glared at me with as much hatred as I’d often felt for myself. Her features relaxed but her body remained tense. The single sob coming from her throat almost destroyed me. “Okay. Let’s just find him. Please. Just please.”

The tension we’d felt between us had returned, which of course was my fault. At least she allowed me to guide her to my truck. I even opened the door but sensed she wanted none of it. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d ever opened the door for anyone. What crazy shit to be thinking about when her tears continued to fall. Every few seconds, she wiped them furiously, her mouth twisting when she did.

I knew that kind of feeling, as if letting go was the worst thing in the world. As if by doing so the truth of sadness or death claimed a portion of your soul. Yeah, it had taken all of mine. I jumped in, not wasting any additional time lamenting about a past I couldn’t change. If I was right about where Moose had gone, there were dangers existing in the woods that I wasn’t going to tell her about. Between bears, coyotes, and wolves, not to mention venomous snakes, it seemed rain brought the wildlife out in full force depending on the time of year.

The property bordered Tangerine Sunset, even though it was over a mile from the furthest edge of the property.

“Why would he disappear? Why? He’s never done that,” she said absently as I sped off down the road. She was sitting on the edge of her seat, yet to put on her seatbelt. I doubted chastising her at this point would win me any points.

“However he got out, if he noticed a rabbit or another creature, he might have run after it. There are lots of scents he’s not used to.”

“I guess it’s possible. But how did he get out? How, Jake? I swear I locked that door. You weren’t in my house. Were

you?”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“That’s right. You pawned me off on some other dude. I guess I was too much for you.”

I didn’t like hearing her insistence she’d locked the door, my thoughts drifting to the two recent murders. “I thought given the fact you hate me, it would be better if someone else worked on your house.”

“I guess you thought right. I have a lot of reasons to hate you.”

“I’ll check on it after we find him. Okay?” It was obvious she didn’t want me anywhere near her house, but she would deal with me checking things when we returned whether she liked it or not. I sped down the road until it ended, the boggy forest just ahead of us.

“Whatever.”

As soon as I’d thrown the gear into park, she shoved open the door. Once again, I grabbed her arm. “You need to listen to me, Cinnamon Girl. What you see up there is a natural area that when it rains becomes more like a marsh. There’s a whole bunch of debris from a building site not too far away so the area doesn’t drain very well. As you might imagine, it’s inhabited by several creatures.”

“I don’t give a shit if green aliens live there. I’m going in to try and find my baby. You notice I have jeans on.” She tried to jerk her arm away, but I held fast. I adored her conviction, but she had no clue what kind of dangers she could face.

“I’m talking several inches of water, a creek that floods and attracts wildlife. There’s also briars and snakes. Could be coyotes as well.”

“Are you trying to scare me because I don’t give a shit, Jake. And don’t you dare ever call me Cinnamon Girl again. Not ever.”

Exhaling, I cut the engine. “What I’m trying to do is let you know there are some dangers. Let me take the lead. I’ve done this kind of shit before. Have you?”

This time, she snatched her arm away with enough force, she smacked her elbow against the glass. But just as I would expect, she made certain she didn't make a squawk from pain. Yet the fact her eyes remained wet tore at me all over again. Even if her scowl was as pronounced as I could make mine.

"Fine. But we're not leaving until we find him." She jumped out, holding her arms as she stormed toward the forest.

Damn, the woman didn't make anything easy. Maybe that was one of a hundred reasons why I liked her. I needed that shit out of my system. I climbed out, grabbing my work gloves in case and shoving them into my back pocket. I followed behind, still scanning the area, hating the fact I had a bad feeling Moose hadn't gotten out on his own.

I moved directly into the forest, the stench of rotting leaves and stagnant water assaulting my senses. The sun was still bright in the sky, but with every step taken into the dense path of trees, the darker it got. While it was a natural barrier between Tangerine Sunset and the development, Margaret had always hated it. I couldn't say I blamed her.

"Moose! Moosie!" Cassandra called. She took careful steps forward into the slop, groaning after a few seconds. "This is awful."

"I told you it was." I glanced around the area, trying to detect any sign someone had recently crawled through. Unfortunately, there were broken limbs everywhere given the recent storm.

She took two longer strides forward and almost tripped. I managed to grab her before she went down, and I'll be damned if the girl didn't act as if she wanted nothing more than to free herself from me.

"I can do it," she snapped.

"Don't allow what happened between us to get in the way. Just stay calm. Okay? We need to continue searching."

"What if we don't find him?"

"Then we go to the pound. If he's not there, I'll search the entire goddamn town. I promise you."

She nodded. “Thank you.”

I put both my hands together over my mouth before calling out the pup’s name. “Moose!” We both heard noise to the left and she almost bolted in that direction. “Nope. Slow and easy.”

“What if he’s hurt? What if he’s unconscious?”

“Then we’ll deal with it.”

We continued trudging through the muck, calling him every few seconds. I could tell she was getting exasperated.

A hissing sound forced her to yelp. She gripped my arm, digging her nails into my skin. “What was that?”

“That sounds like a snake.”

“You weren’t kidding about the animals and... venomous creatures.”

“No, Cassandra. They’re real.”

“Including in human form,” she said dryly her body shivering as she scanned the murky water.

At least she hadn’t lost her sense of humor, although it was the human vermin that she needed to be the most concerned with.

She kept hold of my arm for a few seconds until she realized what she was doing, glancing at me in a spiteful way before curling her fingers.

The stench was getting worse, as if rotting flesh was buried under the muck. It also reminded me of the goddamn fire, the sprinklers coming on far too late in the process. All they’d done was make the burned furniture and parts of the building reek of death.

I stopped a few seconds later, horrible images popping into my mind.

“Where are you? Call out to me again?”

“Help... me.”

“Okay. I’m coming.” I’d yanked my mask off so she could hear my voice. My heart was racing, thudding to the point echoes were slamming my eardrums. Coughing, I was forced

to press the mask over my face, breathing in the clean air. I heard my name being called once again. There was no turning back now.

Crack! Boom!

The explosion sent rubble flying from several directions, a beam from the ceiling crashing down against my shoulders. "Fuck!" As I toppled to the floor, the wind knocked out of me, I could still hear her cry. I had to get to her. Oh, God. I fought my way, kicking out and shifting my body, groaning from the weight of the beam. When I finally managed to pitch it away, I was out of breath.

"Jake! Jake!" The voice was closer. It was the captain.

I yanked off my mask briefly. "Over here."

"Stay right where you are."

"No can do, Cap'n. We have a live one."

"Do not go further into the fire. Don't do it!"

Boom...

Hearing a yelp dragged me from the wretched vision. After blinking away the fog, I realized that what I'd heard wasn't coming from my mind. Jesus Christ. Cassandra had bolted.

Where the fuck had she gone? "Cassandra! Where the fuck are you?"

"Here. I'm here. He's hurt. Help. Please help."

Her cry sent a jolt of current through me. I took a deep breath, the ache in my chest more intense than it had been in a long time. "Keep calling out."

"Here. I'm here."

I took off stomping through the muck, angry with her for disobeying me. Furious with myself for sliding into my own private hell. I refused to allow anything to happen to them.

"Jake. Jake!"

I found them both less than two minutes later. Moose was obviously caught, whining as he struggled with whatever was

holding him down. Cassandra was covered in mud, her jeans soaked. She was on her knees in the water, struggling to get him out.

I dropped beside her, immediately rubbing Moose's head. She didn't see the freaking copperhead in the water. "Get out of the water. Cassandra. Now!"

"Not without my baby."

Hissing, I thumped toward her. When the damn thing disappeared under the water, I splashed the muck, trying to draw the creature's attention.

"What's happening?"

"We got company."

Without hesitation, I lunged toward it, managing to grab it just past the creature's head. When I smashed it into a tree then tossed it away, she screamed.

"What was that?"

"Just a snake that could have killed you. Is he okay?"

Moose woofed and I didn't like the sound. He struggled in the water, doing his best to free himself. All he was doing was tangling his body in the tether even more.

"I don't know. He's stuck," she exclaimed, still stroking his head as she turned toward him.

"Stop, buddy, or you're going to make this worse." Panting, I moved beside them. It appeared the only way to get him out was cutting the rope.

"Why the hell did you run away, baby?" Cass rubbed his face, her voice little more than a whisper.

"The question is why the hell did you run, Cassandra? I told you to stay right with me." The anger in my tone surprised even me.

"I told you I heard him. I told you. You ignored me."

Fuck. She was right.

“I was right there. You could have gotten yourself killed. Goddamn it, woman.” I raked my hand through my hair, furious with myself.

“I’m sorry. Okay? Get him out. Please. Please,” she begged.

“Let me do this. Okay?”

“The rope is wrapped around his leg. I can’t get it off him.”

“You could have gotten yourself killed. Why the hell did you run?” Repeating myself wasn’t going to help the situation.

She glared at me. “Because Moose is my baby. I’d run into a fire to save him.”

Her words stuck in my head and I felt lightheaded. “Get out of the water. Go stand over there. I will get him out.” When she hesitated, I threw a stern look in her direction.

“Okay. Okay.” She backed away, shivering from the dampness.

I yanked out my Swiss Army knife, crouching even closer. “Hey, buddy. I’m going to get you out. Okay?”

He issued a strange growl, glancing over my shoulder. The sound was menacing for a lab, which concerned the hell out of me. I stroked him behind his ear as I studied the rope. In my opinion, there was no chance in hell he could have gotten himself tangled up like this. Who the fuck would do this to an innocent animal?

The answer stuck in my mind as well as my craw. The kind of man who would murder innocent women. Had the asshole broken into her house, luring Moose out, knowing Cassandra would go looking for him? Did he hope to draw her here? Or was he fucking with her and nothing more?

As I started to cut the rope, I noticed the poor pup was covered in briars.

“Is he okay?” Cassandra asked, her tone no longer demanding.

“Yeah, I think so. He needs a bath.”

She half laughed, the sound turning into a mournful sob. “I think I can handle that. Just get him out. Please.”

As soon the blade had cut through the twisted strand, Moose fought to free himself from the mud, finally standing on shaky legs. Cassandra rushed forward, squealing after he shook himself hard, mud and water flying everywhere.

“Come on, buddy. Let’s get you out of here and back home.” The strange sensations remained, which I didn’t like at all. It was as if we were being watched.

“Oh, God. Baby.”

Woof!

“He looks fine. We’ll check him out and make certain,” I told her, studying the area to see if there were any strange clues or a definitive answer this hadn’t been an accident. At this point, I couldn’t find anything to indicate the rope had been purposely tied around the fallen log. However, red flags remained.

“Jake,” she said as she moved in front of me. “Thank you.” She pressed her hand on my chest, leaning in and managing to rise onto her toes. When she kissed my cheek, the same searing electricity we’d shared before jolted my system, my cock immediately twitching. She’d obviously felt it too, pulling away almost instantly.

Yet she didn’t move when I cupped her face, peering up at me the way she had two nights before. I rubbed my thumb across her cheek, trying to find the right words but I certainly wasn’t that kind of guy. “Come here. You have mud on your face.”

Sighing, she nodded and eased her head away, rubbing the same spot.

I watched her as she carefully walked away from me and the ache continued to build. Damn. I had it bad for this girl.

CHAPTER 15



Cassandra

Mud. Nasty water. Thorns.

Moose had been covered with all three, the bath taking both Jake and me trying to keep my fur baby from coating the walls with his adventure. I'd used at least eight towels in the process of getting him clean, more for the messy floor.

And still more for wiping mud from both Jake and me. Moose had been bathed, checked for injuries, and fed a treat, which included devouring both cold cheeseburgers in less than ten seconds. And still, I continued to worry about him. Fortunately, he was resting, obviously having dreams of rabbits and other critters during his terrifying adventure. I could tell by the way his tail was thumping against the wooden floor. Meanwhile, Jake had refused my offer of taking a shower, preferring to study the back door.

I continued to marvel at the way he'd grabbed the venomous snake, slamming it against a tree. The man was insane but I was so thankful he'd been there I still had a difficult time breathing. The tension remained between us, which was entirely my fault. I wasn't certain what to think any longer, except that butterflies remained swarming in my stomach. "Did you get the check?"

Jake barely acknowledged my question, only tipping his head.

"I just wanted to make certain you got it."

“Do you think that makes us square, Cassandra?”

“What do you mean?”

His laugh sounded bitter, the quick look in my direction full of heat as well as irritation. “In case you haven’t figured it out, I couldn’t care less about money.”

“Well, I do.”

“That’s the difference in you and me.”

He was still infuriating, but I had no energy to fight him. “Any idea what happened?”

“It appears the lock stuck,” he said, his tone entirely different. He’d removed both knobs, replacing them with a new set, which included an additional deadbolt. The man had worked quickly, almost finished with the job. I hadn’t argued, still unnerved I’d almost lost my baby.

“I don’t know how I didn’t see it.”

“These old locks are quirky.”

“I guess.” He’d remained very quiet since we returned, although Moose had managed to get more than one laugh out of him during the bath. “I’m sorry I accused you of being responsible.”

“Yeah. I guess you had your reasons.” He finished screwing the deadbolt in then tested it several times. When he stood, stretching his back, the sight of him took my breath away all over again.

“Look, I’m sorry I didn’t follow your orders.”

As he’d done before, Jake didn’t bother looking at me. He picked up the box holding the old doorknobs, tossing a few discarded screws into it. While I knew him to be a man of few words, the silent treatment meant he was pissed at me.

“Fine.”

“Fine?” I mimicked. “That’s all you have to say to me?”

“What else do you want me to tell you, Cassandra? That I’m angry that you didn’t follow my orders? Yep. You don’t know

what's out there that could hurt you. That snake was poised to strike and you paid no attention. You're obviously the kind of woman to run blindly into any situation. That's only going to get you hurt or killed, or your reckless behavior could get someone else killed in the process."

I was shocked at his vehemence when all I'd done was try to save my baby. My anger flared even though something inside of me said it had nothing to do with him and everything to do with Stephen. That didn't make what he'd just said right or acceptable. "What happened out there? Your mind was elsewhere."

"None of your business."

The moment I slapped my hands on my hips, he sucked in his breath. "It is my business when you criticize me for leaving your omnipotent side yet you didn't hear my calls."

"You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Fuck you. You don't know me at all. You waltzed into my life acting like you were taking control. The last time I checked, I could take pretty good care of myself."

Jake took two long strides toward me, narrowing his eyes as he glared at me. "Is that right?"

"Yeah, buddy. You're such an arrogant bastard. You acted as if what we'd shared had meant nothing to you." Great, now I was pulling the almost relationship card when we clearly didn't have one.

"It fucking did! It does."

"Bullshit. I was shocked when you left. Then I realized you were a two-timing pig."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"You didn't leave to return home to your girlfriend?"

He narrowed his eyes, staring at me for a few seconds. "What?"

"You heard me."

“You know where I live. You were just there. I don’t have a girlfriend. I already told you that. For the record, she left me a long time ago.”

“You fucking liar. I saw you kissing her.” Oh, my God. I couldn’t believe he’d gotten me this upset. I turned away from him quickly, taking several deep breaths, almost hyperventilating. What in the hell was wrong with me?

“What are you talking about?”

“Just go.”

“Not until you tell me what in the fuck you’re talking about.”

I’d never felt so stupid or embarrassed in my life. He didn’t owe me anything. I closed my eyes, trying to control my emotions. It would seem I sucked at it as of late. “You were at the diner. I’d just bought the truck and was going there to have some lunch. You were in the parking lot. She was beautiful, long red hair, hanging all over you and you weren’t upset.”

He snorted, inching closer. “That’s not my girlfriend.”

“Whatever, Jake. Thank you for what you did. I mean it, but just go. I know you want nothing to do with me and that’s fine.”

“Is that what you think?” Jake asked, his hot breath managing to find its way to my cheek.

“I’m a big girl. I know what we shared wasn’t about making love or starting anything, but I didn’t think you’d shut me out completely after that.” The air between us was thick, my nerves on edge.

“Do you want to know why I did?” he asked softly.

“Why bother?”

He yanked me around so fast I stumbled against him. When he fisted my hair, cocking his head, I could tell he had no intentions of releasing me until I listened to him. Fuck that. I wasn’t going to be humiliated any more than I had been.

“Stop acting this way,” he growled. “I have my reasons.”

“Uh-huh. Like another girlfriend and let me go.”

“I’m not going to let you go. I was trying to protect you by backing away. The woman you saw is nothing more than an old friend.”

“Please just don’t lie to me.” I was still exasperated, wanting to believe him but the ache from the past was preventing anything logical to pass through my brain.

“The woman you saw is Millie’s daughter, Becca. I grew up with her. She was like one of my best buddies. Okay? Nothing more.”

Becca. Oh, shit. Was it possible? “I know what I saw.” God, I hated the sound of my voice, like a pitiful child who’d had her lollypop taken away from her. Maybe it was all the anger from before bubbling up inside.

“You’re not going to calm down and listen to me, are you?”

I could swear his tone held a hint of amusement when nothing about this was funny to me. “No!”

“Well, then I’m going to give you exactly what you need to calm you down.” One of the kitchen chairs was in easy reach and he yanked it from underneath the table, forcing me back by a couple of feet.

When he sat down with a hard thump, releasing his hold, I almost managed to jerk away, but the man was too fast and too strong.

“Let go,” I snapped, trying to keep my hands free while he reached for them. Yet he managed to snag both wrists in one hand, using the other to fight with the button on my jeans. I wanted to scratch out his eyes as well as tell him good luck trying to yank the tight material down my legs.

But damned if the man didn’t accomplish that within a few seconds, the yank so hard I was pushed into him all over again.

“You’re going to learn that reckless behavior isn’t good for you. And you’re going to stop acting as if you know me when you don’t know shit.”

“I know enough.” He tossed me over his lap so fast I almost felt whiplash, yanking my panties down with that brute strength of his, the sound of seams ripping forcing a moan past my lips. “What are you doing?”

“This seems to be the only thing that gets through to you.” Jake didn’t hesitate to bring his hand down in rapid succession, moving from one side of my bottom to the other.

I was mortified, wiggling and bucking as I flailed my arms. Who in God’s name did that man think he was? My master? My keeper? He certainly wasn’t my boyfriend. “Ouch. That hurts, you Neanderthal.”

“Yeah? Well, naughty women who accuse men of fucking around on them and ignore rules of common sense deserve a spanking that hurts like hell. Now, take your punishment like a big girl.”

“To hell with you.”

“For that you’re getting more,” he barked, but I could swear he was loving every second of being in control, every smack of his huge palm harder than the one before.

I refused to stop fighting him, almost managing to dump off his lap. At first, he grabbed my arm, holding it behind my back at an awkward angle but I had agility that obviously confounded him by the series of growls he issued. After almost falling onto the floor a second time, he snaked one leg around mine, stopping me in motion altogether.

“Oh, I will get you for this.” Jesus. Now I was acting like some misbegotten child who deserved to be punished like a bad girl. I slapped my hands on the floor, noticing Moose had come in for water, studying us for a few seconds then walking out. I didn’t blame him. We were both acting like children.

When he stopped the spanking, I breathed a sigh of relief but the way he kept his hand pressed on the small of my back gave a clear indication that he wasn’t finished just yet.

“That woman you saw me with is one of my closest and oldest friends. She’s Millie’s daughter and I went to school with her. She’s like a sister to me.”

“That’s not what I saw.”

“What you saw was a woman concerned about me telling me I needed to move on.” He resumed the discipline, the swats raining down on me like wildfire.

I couldn’t believe there could be this much pain from the use of his hand or how much fire would tear through my system, rising across my bottom. I was hot and wet, which was just as disturbing as what he was doing. “I don’t believe you.”

“She heard you were pretty and told me I should go for it.”

The words sounded sincere, especially since they were being said in anger and frustration. “Why would she do that?” I was exhausted from fighting him, doing nothing more than trying to control my breathing at this point even as I slapped my hands on the floor again.

“Because she knows I’ve had a shit life as of late. She cares about me. She said you obviously sparked something deep inside.” He refused to stop, issuing another barrage.

I’ll be damned if his cock wasn’t rock hard and throbbing, pushing into my aching pussy. I was blinded by a series of stars, so lightheaded that I was shocked. “She said that?” I managed to say, although my voice sounded entirely different than before.

“Yeah. And you know what, lady? It’s true. Damn you.” He brought his hand down four more times then stopped altogether, his heavy breathing matching mine. For a few seconds, he didn’t move and neither did I, the hard pulse of his cock driving me crazy.

When he brushed the rough pads of his fingers under my shirt, lightly rubbing them up and down my spine, it was another moment where butterflies rushed into my stomach. I was almost giddy from the way he was touching me, the tender moment in direct contrast to the brutal spanking he’d just given me. There was something so intimate about what he was doing, even more so than when he’d been inside of me. I held my breath as he casually rolled his fingers down the crack of my ass. I was certain he was going to drive them into my

wetness and dear God, I wanted him to. Was it possible I'd been wrong? That the woman was just his friend?

More than a part of me wanted to believe that but it was so obvious we both had baggage that would keep us from being but so close. Yet I couldn't hold back finding out how he felt about me.

"Why damn me?"

He immediately pulled his fingers away but didn't attempt to ease me off his lap. "Because I can't want you."

"Why?"

"Because I'll hurt you." He removed his leg from over mine, letting go of my arm and I was certain he planned on walking out the front door as I'd demanded he do. Another shock tickled every one of my senses as he rolled me over, easing me into a sitting position. Still on his lap. Still holding me as if fearful that if he let me go, one or both of us would disappear.

His eyes were no longer the stunning ones I'd fallen hard for. They were much darker, anger and self-hatred shining in his heated gaze. "And I don't want to hurt you, Cinnamon Girl."

"Then don't."

"It's not that easy."

"Then make it that easy, Jake. I don't know what's happening between us and I didn't come here looking for anything but a new life. But what we shared was magical. I just... I don't what to think any longer."

"Yeah? Well, you don't want me as a part of that life." He started to stand, and I refused to allow him to get away from me as he'd done two nights before.

"No. Don't do that. Please." I pressed my palm against his chest, wrapping my fingers around his shirt. "I'm sorry for assuming. I'm bad with doing that."

"You're bad with a lot of things, lady."

"Oh, yeah?" I challenged, although I was turning into mush by being on his lap, my pulse racing.

“Yeah.” He took a deep breath as he curled his index finger, rolling it down my cheek. “You’re mouthy as fuck. You refuse to follow anyone’s orders. You act holier than thou when anyone challenges anything you say. You refuse to shut up long enough to listen to logic.”

“Well, you’re pigheaded and act as if your shit doesn’t stink. You don’t want compliments at all yet act as if you’re the best at what you do. You’re argumentative about everything and snarly. And you’re keeping secrets.”

“Some secrets are meant to be kept.”

“Not if they’re destroying you, which they are,” I insisted, biting my lower lip as his expression remained hard. When it slowly started to soften, only then could I breathe.

“Sounds like a match made in hell.” He lowered his head until our lips were only two inches apart.

Even though we’d been in a musty forest, mud and nasty water covering portions of our bodies, his fragrance was still powerful, driving my senses to an electric edge. “No. It sounds as if we were destined to meet, maybe more.” Wasn’t I daring all of a sudden?

“You don’t want my brand of crazy.” Even as he said the words, he lowered his head even more. We were so close I was stunned by the desire roaring between us.

“Don’t you think I have my own bottled and fermented brand?” My voice was now just a whisper. I lifted my head by a few degrees, our lips finally touching but we both held our stance as if fearful to move at all. God, I wanted this man. Even as grumpy as he was, as damaged as he seemed, as caustic as what we shared was, I didn’t care. I wanted him.

“Maybe so.”

I tilted my head, enjoying just being around him, the quiet comfort that I hadn’t expected as pleasurable as everything else. “Will you stay on as my contractor?”

“I don’t know. What kind of payment can I expect?” He offered what I considered now one of his infamous sly grins.

“You’re incorrigible. I’m serious though. I totally understand there’s a lot of work to be done and I’m not made of money, but I have enough savings to try and turn everything around. But I need someone I can count on. Someone I can trust.”

Jake exhaled. “Of course I’ll help you. I’ll let Garrett know in the morning. What about the winery?”

“I’m meeting with a wine expert tomorrow. Whatever the hell that is. She let all her workers go. While the vineyard appears to be in decent shape, I’m not certain about the winery.”

“I’ll think you’ll find everything in order.”

“You had a hand in providing assistance with that as well. Didn’t you?”

The way he held up his hand as if taking an oath made me laugh. “Yep. Scout’s Honor.”

“Were you ever a Boy Scout?”

“Nope. I was on the ice from the time I was three years old.”

“Wow. That’s young.”

“My father required it.”

I could tell it was a sore point. “Were you close with your dad?” I also sensed it was a topic he didn’t like talking about.

His hesitation confirmed it but at least he didn’t shut down, taking another sip of his scotch and staring at the flames. “Our relationship is complicated. He’s a tough man. I honestly don’t know how my mother puts up with him.”

“Women do what they feel they need to do sometimes. I think that’s why after my mother made her decision to divorce my dad, she wanted to rid her life of everything she was used to. Coming here was a new beginning. It was something I didn’t understand until recently.”

“Yeah, maybe that was why I was drawn to Margaret,” he said with reverence in his tone. “She was strong enough to get away from a toxic environment while my mother followed my father around like a puck bunny.”

“Your father played hockey?”

“Yep. For Vancouver.”

“Didn’t I hear that’s where you wanted to play?”

His laugh was as bitter as any sound I’d heard from him. “That was my father’s dream to be honest with you. Don’t get me wrong. I love the game of hockey. It’s in my blood. I just wanted to do it on my own.”

“Ah. I get it.”

“He managed to talk my brother into trying out for the team. Riley’s not ready for it. That much I know.”

“What about you? If you had a second chance to play again professionally, would you?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. That’s the truth.”

“What about firefighting?”

He laughed. “Not on my radar. I don’t know what I want to do when I grow up.”

“Facing the truth about ourselves can be the most difficult thing we have to do as adults.”

“What’s your truth, sweet lady?”

“My truth is that I allowed myself to fall into the same hopeless spiral by loving a man who could never love me that my mother did.” I was shocked the words came easily. “I won’t let that happen again.”

“Then you should stay away from me. I’m not the kind of man who knows how to love.”

The change in his tone was unnerving. “I think you’re wrong, Jake. You just don’t allow yourself to see what a fabulous guy you are.”

His smile was a sweet reward. When he wrapped his hand around the back of my neck, the hold possessive, I tingled all over. He had that kind of powerful effect on me. He leaned forward and I tilted my head. Only this time, he kissed me on the forehead, his fingers digging in. I wanted nothing more than to cling to him, to beg him not to shut down, but who was I to talk?

“What do you want, Cinnamon Girl?” He issued a slight growl.

“Kiss me. Touch me. Fuck me.”

“Are you sure? Cause I’m at the point if we do this, there’s no going back. None. After today you’ll be mine.”

“Are you sure you can handle me?” Sweet Jesus, if he didn’t kiss me I was going to go out of my mind.

“Don’t worry, baby. If I have to tie you to the bed I will.” As he crushed his lips over mine, I felt myself melting in his hold, my mind spinning with lurid fantasies and needs that I knew only he could fulfill.

The ugly little bird inside my head reminded me that I’d promised myself I wouldn’t do this again for fear of getting hurt. But the man was like a drug, and I wasn’t entirely certain I could stop the intoxicating need. Why would I want to?

He opened my mouth with his lips, holding them in place, capturing a moan as it erupted from my throat. Everything about the man was insanely amazing and I couldn’t seem to get enough of the way he made me tingle all over. The way he thrust his tongue inside was more demanding than before and he pulled me even closer, placing his hand on the back of my head. I could kiss the man for hours, languishing in the taste and feel of being in his arms.

As he swept his tongue back and forth, I felt growls rumbling up from his chest, the muffled sound driving red-hot flares into every cell throughout my body. I wrapped my arm other arm around his neck, adoring the way his hair felt sliding through my fingers. There was something so sublime about what we were doing, maybe a little crazy too.

My bottom ached and I was sitting on my almost stranger’s lap with my jeans and panties still wrapped around my knees. Maybe it was more than a little sinful as well, but I didn’t care. I rolled my fingers through his hair, undulating on his lap, certain that my wetness would leave a significant stain on his jeans.

I sensed he couldn't care less, his needs outweighing every bit of the common sense he'd accused me of not having earlier. We were wild together, primal in a way that suited both our needs. This wasn't about love, maybe the kind of lust that couldn't be denied, unbridled and more passionate than any two people could be used to experiencing. That was fine with me, perfect for my life. I sensed he was the same way.

He proved that by rising to his feet, cradling me in his arms. As he took purposeful steps forward, I felt light as a feather, the wafting scent of my raging desire the perfect aphrodisiac to the crazy moment.

He carried me out of the room, moving slowly while he kept our lips locked and his tongue planted firmly inside. Nothing else mattered at this moment but being in his arms, his possessiveness exactly what I hadn't known I needed.

Only when he headed into my bedroom did he break the kiss, pressing his forehead against mine. "I'm going to fuck you. You can't say no."

His statement made me laugh. "Why would you think I would?"

"Cause you're a woman. You change your minds a lot."

"Haven't you figured out I'm not just any woman?"

The sneer on his face was endearing, his throaty laugh sending another electric wave dancing down my spine. "Lady, you're right. You're unlike any other chick I've ever met. That makes you very special. A pain in the ass, but special."

He had me laughing although I punched him in the chest. "Such a bad man."

"Yeah, I am." The moment of sadness in his eyes was haunting. As I touched the side of his face, sliding my fingers down his neck, he stood over the edge of the bed as if I was going to change my mind.

"Maybe I like bad men. Did you ever think of that?"

"Just be careful what you ask for. I could be your worst nightmare."

“Oh, yeah? What are you going to do?”

He lowered me to the bed, raising a single eyebrow as he lifted one leg, yanking on my boot, repeating the move with the other. When he tossed them all the way across the room, each thudding against the wall, I burst into laughter. His expression was even more carnal than before, his eyes now hooded as he stared down at me.

As with the kiss, now he took his time yanking off my jeans and panties, easily maneuvering my shirt over my head. This time, I wasn't wearing a bra and that seemed to delight him by the number of husky growls he issued.

As he bent over, very slowly planting his hands one at a time beside me, the look on his face became explosive, bordering on obsessive. I sensed he wouldn't let me go even if I attempted to push him away.

“What am I going to do?” he asked with mischief laced in his voice.

“I don't know.” My words were defiant, but I was hopeful of his actions. That made me a very bad girl indeed.

“Listen to me, Cinnamon Girl. I'm going to devour you until the morning light dawns over the horizon. I'm going to enjoy spending quality time exploring every inch of your body, which means first I'm going to bathe you with my tongue, drilling my tongue into that wet pussy of yours second. After that I'll take every inch of you fucking you as you've never been fucked before, leaving you breathless and sweaty, every inch of your body aching, your pussy leaking and you begging for more. After I've heard you scream my name in ecstasy, I'll wait until you beg me to start all over again. And woman, you will beg me time and time again because you won't be able to get enough.”

CHAPTER 16



Cassandra

Stunning.

That's the only way I could describe the brutal man's words or the look in his eyes as he slowly rose to his full, magnificent height, yanking off his shirt by the back of his neck. The smirk crossing his face was positively evil, the man calculating exactly what he planned on doing to me. Why did he have such an incredible ability to make me feel free? I wasn't certain but as he backed away, his eyes never blinking, I rose onto my elbows.

When we'd fucked before, the hunger had been so great that I hadn't taken the appropriate time to enjoy his gorgeous physique or the fact he was so well endowed. I was determined to fix that little issue right now. I also planned on teasing him relentlessly and started by opening my legs wide, allowing him to catch a glimpse of how wet he made me. I shifted my hips back and forth, moaning just enough to keep his attention focused on my face for a few seconds longer.

But his hunger was evident by the way his cock pressed against his tight jeans, the bulge absolutely delicious.

He took a deep breath and held it. My God, his eyes were glowing in the waning sun. "Careful, little girl. I am a beast. In case you haven't figure that out."

I waited until he unfastened his belt before bending one leg at the knee, tossing my head back and rolling the tips of my

fingers down the length of my neck to my chest. I adored the sound of his heavy breathing, taking my time to lift my head as I rolled a single finger around one fully aroused nipple. “There’s nothing quite like a true savage, you know.”

His smile widened but I sensed a hint of danger by the glint in his eyes. “Mmmm... You are playing with fire.” He took his time unfastening and unzipping his jeans before peeling them aside, driving them down just an inch.

I dragged my tongue across my lower lip several times, every sound I issued more like a lioness in heat. As I shifted my leg back and forth, I moved my hand to my other breast, pinching my nipple between my thumb and forefinger. I narrowed my eyes, giving him the same kind of heated onceover he’d given me, allowing a natural moan to escape my lips from the flash of pain.

“I happen to like playing with fire.”

“That’s what makes you unique but dangerous.”

He chuckled more darkly than I’d heard before, his chest rising and falling in perfect sync to the rapid beating of my heart.

“I think I like hearing that. Now, take them off,” I told him.

“You’re not in charge. Maybe I won’t.”

“Then I guess I’ll be forced to walk away.” I shifted my hand to my other nipple, moaning more loudly than I’d done before, pinching and twisting as he stared at me with more desire than I’d ever seen in a man. When he started to shake his head, I shocked the hell out of him, scrambling to get off the other side of the bed. I almost made it until he snapped his huge hand around my ankle, dragging me back with ease.

“No, you don’t, Cinnamon Girl. You’re not going anywhere and you will do exactly as I say. Is that clear?”

“And what if I don’t?”

“I don’t think you really want to find out. Now, do you?” There was such a look of amusement in his eyes that I was more surprised than I could express.

Maybe we were good for each other in our badness, fulfilling the perfect needs, allowing two fractured people to come alive again.

“I don’t know.” I slipped my finger into my mouth, making exaggerated sucking sounds, now impatient for the man to rid himself of the rest of his clothing. At least he didn’t wait much longer, yanking off his boots, tossing them back with mine then rolling his jeans down his long, muscular legs.

I followed the trail, basking in his chiseled beauty, wanting nothing more than to laugh from the way my mouth was watering. I’d never had this kind of reaction to a man’s physique before. When he was completely undressed, he decided to tease me as I’d done to him, rolling the back of his hand down his chest while he craned his neck from one side to the other, stretching out the thick cords in his neck.

He stood with his legs spread open, his cock at full attention and his swollen balls hanging low. And dear God, I wanted to have them in my hot, wet mouth more than anything.

A sly grin drifted across his chiseled face as he very slowly moved his hand down to his carved abdomen, rolling onto the balls of his feet before wrapping his hand around the base of his cock. Even the dark hair surrounding his thick, throbbing shaft was attractive, creating images of me running my fingers through the coarseness.

I couldn’t seem to stop tingling all over as he stroked his cock, pumping up and down, still rubbing his chest with his other hand. Watching him was a sheer delight but as one minute turned into two, my patience was nearing the end. I rose to a sitting position, immediately reaching out.

He was quick to the draw, pushing me back, dropping to his knees and yanking my legs until my bottom was halfway off the bed. “Not so fast, little girl. As I already told you before. You’ll never be in charge. Get used to it or you’ll feel the effects of my belt every day.”

I wanted to think he was doing nothing more than teasing me, but at this point I wasn’t so certain. There was a look in his eyes that went beyond being a carnal beast, bordering on the

kind of obsession that any woman should be worried about. Only with him, it was simply another attractive trait.

Even after his proclamation, he was forced to push me down, not hesitating before lifting and spreading my legs. With a single very dark growl, he dropped his head, immediately swirling his tongue around my clit.

“Oh, lord.” Laughing softly, I clutched my hands around the comforter, closing my eyes as myriad dazzling sensations tore through me. He was a master in using his tongue and the bad girl inside of me wanted to question how much experience he had in tasting a woman. Somehow, I knew it wasn’t the question to ask, certainly not now.

He took his time, his sounds as exciting as the moment. I tried everything not to think, to process the yin and yang of this crazy experience, but he was such a take control kind of man that I was blown away by how I felt about him. Love and hate were certainly close kin, my ability to drift from one feeling to another a testament to his powerful prowess.

And the fact he could irritate me faster than any man had before, including Stephen. One of many things I adored about Jake was that what you saw, you got. He was rugged and honest to a fault, refusing to take anyone’s bullshit, including mine. That alone was refreshing enough to keep me interested.

Even if he’d pissed me off more than a few times.

I was still in the thinking process when a sharp pain tore through my pelvis and down my legs as he smacked my pussy several times with his thick fingers.

“Ouch!”

“Pay attention, little girl,” he commanded and I was so surprised that I was ready to follow his every command. That just wasn’t like me in the least. I rarely followed anyone’s rules, which had gotten me into hot water more than once. “I can see I’ll need to tame you.”

As he breathed a swath of hot air across my pussy, I was thrown into a perfect moment of ecstasy. He’d have his hands full if he really believed he could tame me. That wouldn’t be

an easy feat, not after everything I'd been through. But if I had to admit the truth to myself, I couldn't wait to see him try. Push and pull. Love and hate. I was up for the challenge.

Or so I thought.

He was famished, his needs spiraling out of control. I knew that the moment he picked up the pace, licking me furiously as he thrust several fingers into my tight channel. This wasn't about a tender moment. It certainly couldn't be considered making love. But my God, it felt unlike anything I'd ever experienced, raw ecstasy sweeping through me like fire consuming dry timber.

I tossed my head back and forth, bucking up from the bed. He was having none of it, but instead of pushing me down as he'd done before, he slid his hand up my stomach to my chest, pinching my already aching nipple between his thumb and forefinger.

"Oh, God." Stars were once again floating in front of my eyes, my breath stolen as the combination of pain and pleasure drifted into scintillating rapture. I kept my fingers wrapped around the bedding, jerking and pulling it as an orgasm quickly rushed up from my toes.

He took that moment to smack my pussy again, the incredible control he had keeping my mind spinning as the electric sensations seared every nerve ending.

"Oh. Oh. Yes. I..." There was no chance of issuing any coherent words, no possibility of doing anything but accepting his control, enjoying the moment. His rough actions remained, the man licking up and down my pussy furiously as he growled like the animal he was.

"Good girl," he breathed. How strange for me to want to be his good girl. That was so unlike me, but this man could turn me into mush any day of the week.

He already had.

The way his fingers dug into my thighs was as protective as it was possessive. I knew he'd never let anyone hurt me. The thought was terrifying as well as comforting.

As soon as I started to come down from the high, he released his hold. I studied him in my sensual fog, laughing from the way he dragged his tongue around his lips, gathering every bead of my cum. He was slow in his actions, taking his time to rise to his feet. God, I adored that way he towered over me, peering down as if I was the finest piece of rare filet, his eyes hooded, his chest heaving.

How could any man be this insanely gorgeous?

I noticed him grab his belt, yanking the thick strap from his trousers. I whimpered, trying to crawl off the other side of the bed, but I had no strength left.

“Not so fast, little girl.”

“I don’t want another spanking.”

“That’s not what you’re getting.”

He didn’t give me time to ask what he was doing before crawling onto the bed, not only yanking me into the middle but spinning me around so my legs were facing the head of the bed. He grinned as he yanked my arms over my head, straddling my waist then sliding the belt under my wrists.

“What are you doing?” I asked, the tone and clipped words more of a demand.

“Tying you to the bed, sweetheart, which is exactly what you deserve.”

“Wait a minute.”

“Nope.”

I struggled with him even though I knew there was no way I was going to win this round. Within seconds, he had me firmly secured to the iron post of the footboard. That didn’t stop me from continuing to struggle, moaning when all I managed to do was to tighten the strap.

“You’re terrible,” I hissed.

“Yep.” He climbed off the bed and I’ll be damned if he didn’t leave the room entirely.

“What are you doing?” I heard the strain in my voice and groaned all over again. If the man was trying to assert his authority, he’d done so brilliantly. Even I hadn’t thought he’d stoop to something this... I wanted to think the word ‘low’ but the truth was, I was tingling all over with additional excitement. It was crazy. The fact we’d fucked already and he had lips and a tongue that could make any girl beg or agree to anything the man wanted couldn’t matter. I still didn’t know him that well.

For all I knew, he was the crazed guy who’d stood outside my house, watching me like the possessive man he was. Granted, that was more than a little farfetched, my thoughts bordering on hysterical, but as I tossed and turned on the bed, the bad girl side of me took over once again.

“Damn you, asshole! I’ll get you for this.” All I heard was my voice slightly echoing and a single woof from my treacherous dog, who couldn’t care less that his Mommy dog was tied up like some convict. He’d found the rugged man who’d given me the best orgasms of my entire life more attractive than his own Mommy dog.

Calm down. This is just about a game of passion.

And the man’s determination to win.

After several deep breaths, murderous thoughts were no longer spiraling out of control. That didn’t mean I wouldn’t find a way to get him back for this.

I heard nothing else for what had to be ten minutes, enough time that my patience was shot. Kaput. I didn’t care he was the sexiest man alive. How dare he treat me this way!

Out of the blue, the hunk and a half cleared his throat, which prompted me to glance at him upside down in the doorway.

“Untie me.”

“Not a chance, Cinnamon Girl,” he growled. The waning sun allowed me to see just how mischievous he was being, including highlighting his dimples. He leered at me for a few seconds, which made me all hot and bothered all over again as

he sauntered into the room. His cock remained at full attention, standing out proud like a beacon of sin.

Why, oh, why did he have to be so damn attractive?

His hands were behind his back and when he walked closer, I could tell he was hiding something.

“What are you doing?” I repeated.

“Whatever I want, remember.” He pressed a single finger against my forehead as his wry smile grew. “You belong to me. How quickly you forget.”

The man had a way of befuddling me that wasn't normal, his extreme personality differences keeping me on edge. When he planted one hand on the comforter, leaning down and dragging his tongue across the seam of my pursed mouth, a series of shivers slipped down my spine. He took his time kissing my lips, my cheeks, and my nose.

That's the moment I realized he was being deceitful and coy, an icy series of sensations crashing into my system.

“What the...” It took a few seconds to realize what he had in his hand. Ice cubes. The asshole was taunting me with frozen liquid. I bucked and twisted, taking gasping breaths. That only made his savage sounds darker, more ominous.

He chuckled evilly as he rolled a single cube around one nipple then the other. “I noticed you needed to be cooled off.” After repeating the move, he bent over, placing his soft lips around my aching bud and the ice cube. The dichotomy of extreme heat and cold almost drove me to another orgasm.

“Oh, my... goodness.” I closed my eyes as I drifted into euphoria, at a total loss for words. Hearing his brutal sucking followed by a crunch of ice as he chewed the remnants was a fiery aphrodisiac.

Laughing softly, he repeated the move with my other nipple, the animalistic sounds adding to the heat of the moment. Okay, so I was being driven into a puddle of desire, unable to think clearly. What was wrong with that?

He knew exactly what he was doing as he took a third ice cube, rolling it between my breasts to my stomach, swirling it once around my belly button before thrusting it into my overheated pussy.

“Ah!” The scream escaping my mouth was so high-pitched, so loud that I was certain people heard my exclamation at Millie’s Diner. Oh, what did I care? They would just be jealous. The cube melted almost instantly given my entire body remained on fire.

I felt the weight on the bed change as he crawled onto it, moving far too slowly for my tastes. I tried to open my eyes, but they were heavier than they should be. When I was finally able to focus, the only thing I could do was smile.

“Ready for me to fuck you, bad girl?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Good, cause I wouldn’t have taken no for an answer.” He settled between my legs, lifting one over his shoulder then the other. “This is perfect.”

Perfect? I was totally helpless, putty in his hands. Even though I wiggled incessantly, the man was in full control. He rolled the rough pads of his fingers down my leg, positioning the tip of his cock against my wetness with the other hand.

“You’re so bad,” I whispered a split second before he plunged his cock inside. “Oh! Oh!”

I couldn’t believe how he filled me completely, stretching my muscles to the point they ached. It was as if I’d never experienced him before or that I’d never had sex before. No man should be this well-endowed.

Jake was like a man on a mission, driving hard and fast, keeping me at the awkward angle. I couldn’t breathe, nothing else mattering but the electric vibrations drilling through every cell and muscle, cascading to my toes. He never blinked and neither did I, both intent on staring the other one down. Or perhaps he was searching my soul as I’d already done with him.

I was immediately thrown into a beautiful moment where time and everything else seemed to stop. Between my thudding heart and the force he was using driving the headboard into the wall, the loud sounds drowned out everything else.

He planted kisses on my legs, one coming right after the other. Within seconds, the rush of energy mixed with the splattering of adrenaline and I couldn't believe an orgasm rushed into me so quickly.

“That’s it, baby girl. Come for me. Come.”

I opened my mouth, the scream strangled as the climax curled my toes. He continued powering into me, thrusting like the rugged hunk he was. I was exhausted after only a few seconds, shocked how powerful the euphoria had become.

As I'd experienced several times, the man surprised me by pulling all the way out, nipping one inner thigh before lowering my legs. He turned me over, twisting the belt around my shackled wrists, thrusting me onto my knees.

“You’re crazy,” I told him.

“Yep. The perfect position.”

“For what?” I knew as soon as I'd asked the question what his answer would be.

“For fucking this ass of yours.”

CHAPTER 17



Jake

I couldn't remember the last time I'd fucked a woman in the ass. The truth was that most women weren't fond of the kinky move, the tightness and discomfort. However, this wasn't just any woman, and I couldn't seem to control myself around the sinful girl. I was making good on my promise, needing to claim every inch of her like I required air to breathe. It was crazy hungering for her so intensely.

But I refused to allow myself to be denied. We'd both crossed a line that couldn't be uncrossed. That was dandy with me at this point. I smacked her bottom just once as a reminder to continue behaving. Not that she could get out of my possessive hold at this point, but I knew little Miss Cassandra would try.

"Maybe I'll keep you like this," I told her as I rolled my fingers down her spine.

"You wouldn't dare."

"You should know how that kind of talk turns me on." It was tough not to have a smile riding my face as I pressed my thumb between her ass cheeks, pushing against her asshole.

She stiffened, her breathing coming in short gasps. "This is... filthy."

"Which is what makes it so damn hot." As I pushed my thumb into her dark hole, I also returned my cock to her wetness,

pumping several times. The way her sweet pussy pulled me deeply inside kept my muscles tense.

“Oh, my.”

I grinned hearing her soft purrs, adoring the way her body responded to me. She continued to yank on the belt holding her in position as she tossed her hair back and forth. After making her asshole as prepared as possible, I replaced my thumb with the tip of my shaft. She immediately sucked in her breath, ceasing any movement altogether.

“Relax, Cinnamon Girl. I’ll make you feel so good.” As I pressed my cock inside, she moaned both her resistance and pleasure, the tightness and heat incredible. Beads of sweat had already formed on the back of my neck, my muscles tight as drums from trying to keep control with her. It would be far too easy to lose myself in the fiery woman, the need for her building at a crazy pace. I pressed my cock in slowly, allowing her muscles to become accustomed to the wide girth.

With her, my cock seemed to expand more than normal, the hunger becoming insatiable. I did what I could to hold back, slipping into her an inch at a time. “God, so tight.”

“Uh-huh. So big. You’re just so big.”

It was impossible not to grin around her. She had a way of disarming me, pushing all my savage needs to the surface. When I was finally seated inside, she shuddered underneath, twisting her hands to the point I knew the thick strap encircling them had to hurt. I pulled out, driving into her again. It took no time to realize that the way her muscles were clenching around the tight invasion wouldn’t allow me to wait as long as I wanted before erupting deep inside.

I closed my eyes, trying to concentrate, pressing one hand on the small of her back, gripping her hip with the other. I remained tense, the savage sounds I was making overtaking her ragged moans. Thank God we didn’t have close neighbors, or they’d likely call the sheriff. I grinned once again thinking about Bart’s twisted expression if he was called to the property for excessive noise.

“Oh. My. God. I...” She writhed and whimpered underneath me, still trying her best to get out of my control. How long would it take her to learn there wasn’t a chance of that happening? And I’d meant what I said. Taming her seemed like the only option. I continued plunging, finally lifting my head toward the ceiling as beads of sweat fell into my eyes.

When there was no chance of holding back any longer, I cracked my hand against her bottom twice more, grinning like some deranged man as she cried out. And when I finally erupted deep inside of her, I’d never felt so much satisfaction in my life. I had to ask myself: what the fuck did that make me?

* * *

Cassandra

He was still a man of few words.

We’d shifted downstairs not long after twilight had settled in, the move allowing me to check Moose while Jake made a fire. The fur baby remained exhausted, not moving from the spot for over two hours. The quiet in the house was unnerving. I was so used to noise even while in my secure, expensive condo that the eeriness of the house kept me chilled.

Jake had returned to being quiet as well, reflective in a way that had drawn me to him in the first place. I could sense he had far too many things on his mind, likely his continued attraction part of the obvious discontentment. Hell, neither one of us could figure out how oil and water managed to fuse together. It was a scientific marvel and an explosion waiting to happen.

I’d finally brought a tray into the living room holding drinks and snacks, placing them on the carpet in front of the fire. Red wine for me, scotch for him. I’d taken far too much time wondering whether he drank anything other than scotch, like beer. The typical guy thing. Or maybe a beer with a whiskey shooter. After that I’d tried to imagine him drinking something crazy like a piña colada.

The intimate time together had obviously killed some of my brain cells if after everything I'd been through since my arrival and all the shit before, I'd spent a solid thirty minutes on the debate in my head. Maybe I was just trying to think of innocuous questions to ask him when all I really wanted to know was who his bitchy ex was, what had happened to make him lose his hockey career, and what tragedy during firefighting had he endured to end that career as well.

Granted, being a carpenter had to mean less pain and stress, unless he fell off a roof, but he certainly didn't seem happy with the decisions he'd made. Maybe nobody was, often forced into situations we hated.

As I nibbled on a fresh strawberry, I found it next to impossible not to steal a glance or five of his half-hardened cock. How could any man remain so enlarged for such a long period of time? He had his fingers wrapped around his glass, his arm hung low as he stared at the flames licking against the fake wood. He remained devoid of a stitch of clothing while I'd insisted on grabbing a robe. The fact there were only a few blinds on the downstairs windows was something I wanted to fix quickly.

The thought of being on display, especially after being certain someone had been watching the house kept me partially on edge. However, he seemed completely comfortable in his skin, ignoring the scars. They drew me in like a moth to a flame, the literal interpretation weighing on my mind.

I shifted so I could face him, trying to draw his attention. It appeared from where I was sitting his eyes were dilated, the man deep in thought. When I playfully teased him by sliding a strawberry across his lips, he didn't move at all.

Until he growled, snapping his teeth down on the oversized berry, narrowly missing my fingers.

As I burst into laughter, he remained stoic, munching the fruit while finally shifting his eyes to mine. After swallowing, he tossed back half the liquid from his glass, still staring at me. The man was so intense in everything he did that this was unnerving, more so than I wanted to admit.

“Just ask, Cassandra,” he told me in a much quieter voice than normal.

“Ask what?”

“Whatever it is that you can barely contain. Just know that the answers might not be ones you want to hear.”

I pulled my knees up, resting my head on them, the angle allowing me to gaze into his eyes. What I’d realized was that there was nothing fake about the man. If he smiled, he meant it. Sadly, I sensed the many reasons he ached inside prevented him from enjoying the majority of most days. “You were lost a little in those woods. Weren’t you?”

Sighing, he took a few seconds before nodding. “Yeah, and I’m sorry about that. I’ve had nightmares for years based on the work I did with the local fire department. Lately, the visions have been crowding into the daylight hours.”

“Any reason why?”

“Lots of them. It’s just something I don’t talk about.”

“Talking can ease the pain.”

One side of his mouth curled and he flitted his eyes toward me. The firelight was making them shimmer, his pupils little more than dark pools. “Not for me. I was forced to try that mechanism, the psychiatrists giving up.”

“Oh, Jake. I wish I could help.”

“You know what? You have. You’ve allowed me to feel alive again. That’s amazing in itself.” He took a sip of his drink, returning to his reflecting mode, another full two minutes of quiet settling between us.

“Who was she?” I asked, breaking the silence once again.

“Who?”

“The girl who’s been on your mind.”

“You mean the girl who broke my heart?”

“The one Millie called a bitch.”

He snorted, swirling the liquor in his glass. “Millie always had a soft spot for me but keep in mind she can embellish the truth. Besides, it doesn’t really matter at this point.”

“Sure it does. Love, light, and loss shape everyone’s personality.”

“For me, you mean the loss jaded it.”

“I try to remain positive,” I told him. “I’m not always good at it, but I do try.” Why was the conversation so right yet so awkward? Maybe because I was tired of worrying, frustrated over what couldn’t be changed.

“Which is the real reason you moved here. To get away from your ex, right?”

Now I was the one glancing at the fire. “We all have our crosses to bear.”

“Uh-huh. Yet you want me to spill my guts while you can’t trust me.”

“Do you trust me?”

The way he laughed was telling of how intensely hurt he’d been. “Sweetheart, I’ve learned not to trust anyone, including myself. At least not one hundred percent. However, if I didn’t trust you to some degree, I wouldn’t have fucked you.”

“Oh, so you’ve had a one-night stand before.”

“Plenty,” Jake snorted. “Are you asking me to measure you against the voluptuous blondes who threw themselves at me?”

His sarcastic mode was about to drive me crazy. It was all I could do not to toss my wine in his face. “Why do you do that?”

He polished off his drink before answering, immediately reaching across me, grabbing the bottle. “Do what exactly?”

Just a light brush of his arm against mine and I was tingling all over again. It was impossible to remain irritated with him even if I’d wanted to try.

“Act like you want to get close then pull away? Do you think that’s an endearing quality?”

“Up until now I haven’t given a shit.” He powered back more of his drink, his anger for whatever he’d endured in his past vibrating on his skin. I could feel the intensity as much as I’d felt the heat of our passion before. We were both ripped apart then stitched back together. It was entirely possible we’d never be able to fully trust anyone again.

“No wonder you’re considered the town grump.”

“Yeah? I assure you I’ve been called worse.” When I started to get up to move as far away from his grumpy ass as possible, he clamped his hand down on my arm. I tried to jerk it away, but he glared at me. “Don’t walk away, Cass. I’m not good with talking about my feelings. It’s not who I am.”

I blinked back another embarrassing sting of tears. There was no reason to feel so emotional, at least not right now. “You know the experts say that bad things come in threes.”

He snorted, releasing his hold on my arm but not before rubbing his thumb across my skin. “Maybe you’re right.”

“What is it, Jake? What’s holding you back in life to the point you can’t feel much of anything but anger?” His muscles were coiled tightly, including those in his neck. Maybe it was from being irritated with me, although I sensed his mind had spiraled into the past. Was I the cause of his concern?

“As I told you, Cass. You won’t like the answers. Just drop it.”

“You know what? I was stupid enough to think we could talk like adults, maybe even getting a little bit closer. But that would take you caring about me and I’m not certain you’re capable of anything but hatred and rage. I hate that more than you could understand.”

He laughed. God, how bitter the sound. “I’d have agreed with you even two days ago.”

“Okay. What changed that?” I asked, uncertain I wanted a truthful answer. When he turned his head toward me, his expression softening, he allowed me to see an entirely different side of him, one that was hopeful. But it was fleeting like his moods.

“You did when you crashed into my life.”

I was surprised by his words. So much so that I had a difficult time trying to think of a comeback. “The truth is that I think you crashed into mine.”

“Semantics, baby,” he said, finally grinning like he had while tormenting me with the ice cubes. “What do you really want, Cinnamon Girl? If it’s the perfect man or relationship, I ain’t that guy.”

“Don’t you date?”

Shrugging, he gave me a wistful look. “Dating is for all those idiots who need their egos to be stroked in their lives.”

“You are the most jaded person I’ve ever met. Do you know that?”

“I asked you a question. What do you want?”

“I learned a while ago that what I want is impossible. With you, I just want you to be honest with me. I’m a big girl. I can handle almost anything but lies. I’ve had far too many of those.”

He gripped my chin with his thumb and forefinger. “What did he do to you?”

Why was it that the sincerity in his voice almost made me tear up? My stomach continued to churn from the frank conversation. “Nothing I couldn’t handle, but I won’t tolerate infidelity. Life is too short. You know?”

“Yeah, baby. That much I understand. I’m sorry.”

“All the red flags were there. I just chose not to see them. But to answer your question, coming here felt right, as if all the stars had aligned in the sky. I know it sounds crazy, like a pipe dream.”

“It sounds like a beautiful dream from a stunning woman who needed to find solace in the place her mother loved.”

“You’re right.” It was so strange that even though Jake and I barely knew anything about each other, being with him forced me to feel things I’d locked tightly away. I suspected that’s exactly what he was going through. We were a catalyst to the

other, upending the protection we'd woven tightly around us for fear of getting hurt again.

“Do I need to head to DC and kick his ass?”

“God, you have no idea how much I'd love to see you do that, but no. I managed to break the chains, something I'm proud of.”

“Who was he, childhood sweetheart?”

“Hardly. He was someone I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with. In truth, Stephen turned out to be a big mistake, a selfish monster in expensive attire. I should have known we weren't compatible.”

“Not all men are assholes.”

I shot him the same kind of look he'd given me. “I know that no matter how badly I behaved when we met. I entered the relationship of my own accord. What bothers me is that I'd always thought that bad men were easy to spot. You know. They wore leather and rode a Harley or drove a pickup truck with guns positioned on the back window. I never thought the ones who made hundreds of thousands of dollars and knew how to organize a romantic evening were the ones to watch out for. Now, I know better.” I shook my head, taking a gulp of my wine. It was funny how just thinking about Stephen could still take away from my life.

“I guess I won't tell you I own a Harley then.”

At least we were both able to laugh. “Maybe I need for you to take me on a ride.”

“Anytime, Cinnamon Girl.”

“So, what about you, cowboy?”

Jake lifted both his bushy eyebrows, shaking his head. “You won't stop until I tell you all the gory details of my life. Will ya?”

“That's my current plan and I'm a big planner.” I gave him a mischievous smile even though I knew how difficult it was for him to open the wounds to anyone.

The larger-than-life man returned his gaze to the fire, his hand slowly falling away. “She was a puck bunny.”

“A what?”

He laughed. “You don’t know shit about hockey, do you?”

“Sticks used on ice with really huge aggressive guys trying to get a tiny round disc into a net?” I batted my eyelashes on purpose.

“Good enough,” he chuckled. “But just the tip of the iceberg. Just like with rockstars, there are woman who follow hockey teams because of sexual motivation. They couldn’t give a shit about the game.”

“Ah. Let me guess. You were the most popular, sexiest guy in the game of hockey.”

“Something like that. Anyway, Barbie was part of a group of six girls that came to every game, including a few that were hundreds of miles away.”

“Please do not tell me her name was Barbie or I might vomit a little in my mouth.”

“That’s one of the things I adore about you, Cinnamon Girl. You have a mouth on you. To answer your question, that’s what I started calling her in spite after everything that happened. Tammy is a pediatric nurse, very intelligent. Back then she had friends who liked the sport, so she went with them to games, hanging out at the after parties. She seemed different, not nearly as enamored with the players as the others.”

I lifted one of my eyebrows, something taught to me by my mother. “Let me guess. She had no interest in you so that attracted you more.”

“Yep. You know my type far too well. We gotta have the forbidden.”

“Is that what I am?”

“Yep. That’s why I’ve already claimed possession.” He threw me a sideways grin, but I could tell he wasn’t proud of his past behaviors. “Even though I threw the full court press with her,

she wanted nothing to do with me for months. When I finally convinced her to go out on a date, we did nothing but talk the entire time. That wasn't like me at all. Something clicked that night and we became a couple, our passion fierce. I had no desire for other women, only her."

"Uh-oh. I feel a bad romance novel coming on."

"Do you compare all romances to the novels you read?"

I hid behind my glass, half laughing. "Pretty much as of late."

"I'll keep that in mind. You're right though. We were together for almost two years, including both during and after I was injured on the ice. She stood by me, taking care of me through surgery and the months of physical rehab. After it was obvious my beloved first career was over and I had an opportunity to join the fire department, she encouraged me. At least at first."

"Let me venture a guess that she liked being arm candy of a hockey star, which made her a celebrity in her own right. Normal life was suddenly too bland."

He lifted his glass in a toast. "Bingo. Of course I was too blind to realize that until I found her in bed with an old friend and now a prized member of the team I'd helped win two Stanley Cups."

"Ouch."

"Yep. I was devastated. I'd believed I was in love. Now I know I was trying to create something that wasn't there after all."

"I think you're still devastated about it," I told him. "I do understand but I'm not her."

He slowly turned his head, his eyes now as full of heat and desire as they'd been before. "You're definitely nothing like her, Cass. If you think I'm trying to replace or still in love with her then you're wrong. You cured that."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Oh. Yes." His nostrils flared after making the statement. "In spades."

For a grumpy son of a bitch and one I knew would never be romantic, he knew how to cut through the bullshit, making me feel more special than I had in my entire life. A warm flush crept up my cheeks. “You know when to say the right things.”

“I don’t lie, Cassandra. You might not like what I have to say, but I won’t lie to you and I don’t cheat. Maybe I am one of those bad guys from your romance novels, but I’ve never been abusive to a woman and never will be. I have a mama who would beat my ass if I did.”

“I think I might need to meet her one day.”

“Yeah, well, we’re not really talkin’ much these days.”

“Why?”

“Because she sides with my dad and he thinks I’m a failure,” he said, half laughing afterwards.

“Families are complicated. What about hockey?”

“What about it?”

“You’re damn infuriating. It doesn’t appear the injury bothers you any longer. Why aren’t you still playing?”

“One reason is that I’m too old for the sport,” he admitted. “And too out of shape.”

“Uh, no. You’re built like a machine, a very sexy one.”

“You think so, Cinnamon Girl?” He grinned and winked, which added another layer of butterflies to my tummy. He had a way of making me feel like I was slip-sliding. I only hoped I wouldn’t crash at the end of our glorious and very passionate tryst. I knew that’s all it was.

“I know so. In the biblical sense too.”

Seeing his dimples against was a sweet reward. “A compliment from you. I think I like it.” Another swig was consumed before he continued. “My Achilles tendon was severed by an opposing player’s skate. It was enough to knock me out for good. The surgery and rehab repaired it, but my ankle will never be strong enough to play professionally again.

It's quite possible if I do, I could lose the ability to put weight on my right leg."

"But you're not certain of that, are you?" I could tell there was more behind the reason why.

"It doesn't matter any longer. I'm considered washed up. That's fine by me."

Why did I have a feeling he'd give his right arm if he could play again? "Do you ever practice just for fun, for the love of a sport that consumed you a long time ago?"

His eyes flashed a slight hint of anger, as they always did when I got just a little too close. The push and pull was killing me. "Don't push it, Cassie. I'm not that guy any longer. Okay?"

"Sure. I'm sorry."

"Yeah, don't be sorry. It was just one thing in a line of shit I've been forced to deal with. I've adjusted." He glanced at me and sighed. "You have a way of dragging information out of a man. The guy I found Tammy in bed with was a guy from the team. He's a friend of my brother's. It's funny. A group from the team I used to play for is in town for practice before the season starts in a couple weeks. I ran into him at a bar."

"Oh, boy. How did that go?"

"As you might think but I didn't kill him."

When he laughed, so did I. "I'm glad to hear that. I don't think bailing you out of jail is on the agenda. That's right. You're buddies with the sheriff. Never mind."

"Ha. My brother asked me to practice with my old team."

"Do it."

"I don't know if that's a good idea."

"You're right in that I don't know anything about the game, but what I know about you so far is that if you don't fight the demons, they'll eventually destroy you."

"It might be too late."

“Nope. I don’t buy it. My mother once told me it’s never too late to begin a new chapter in life.”

“And my mother told me that you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.”

“You’re incorrigible,” I teased. This time our laughs were easier, the tension passing.

I wanted to offer something more appropriate, but I didn’t have a chance before my phone rang from the kitchen, the interruption unnerving. I hated the cold shiver but after the two earlier phone calls from unknown parties, the line dead both times, I was at the point of changing numbers. I should have done that anyway after leaving DC, but it had been one of those details that fell way down on the list. Now I was regretting it.

When I didn’t budge, Jake narrowed his eyes. “Aren’t you going to get that?”

“Why should I?”

“Because the call might be something important.”

Why I didn’t share my concerns with him I wasn’t certain, but I hesitated long enough it stopped ringing. I breathed a sigh of relief but that was short-lived, the second ring coming just ten seconds later.

He cocked his head, still staring at me. When it became apparent the caller wasn’t going to hang up this time and my voicemail was determined to betray me, he rose to his feet, heading for the kitchen. He was staring at the phone as he brought it back.

“It seems Jessica is dying to get ahold of you.” As he tossed me the phone, he winked. “Something you’re not telling me?”

“Very funny, tough guy.” As I pressed my finger across the screen, I hoped he didn’t see the relief crossing my face. “Hey, girl.”

“You worried me. You didn’t call me back,” Jessica huffed.

“I didn’t get a message.” Which was a little white lie. I hadn’t answered because I knew she’d grill me about Jake. I wanted

to keep him in my private black box for a little while longer, including from the gossipy town folk.

“Right. Tell me another lie. How are things?”

“Good, girlfriend, but not a good time. Can I call you back?” The look of amusement on his face was cute but annoying.

“Does that mean you’re with that hunky contractor guy? How is he anyway?”

“He’s delicious but I gotta run. I have company.” Her question and the way he was studying me caused another warm flush along my cheeks.

“Oh, girl. You work fast. I love it. You know what they say. The way you get over someone is to get under someone else. Please tell me that’s what you’ve done.”

“Mmm... Maybe.” The way he was looking at me was hysterical. I didn’t know a person could have that many frown lines.

Her squeal was loud enough even Jake lifted his eyebrows. “You rock, girl. You need to tell me everything. Then you can shove it in Stephen’s face.”

“I will tell you everything,” I teased, making faces at him. “Eventually.” It was fun to tease him.

“Maybe I can’t wait to slip it to Stephen,” Jessica cooed.

“You are one bad girl but I’d enjoy watching.”

Jessica snorted. “So would I. Talk to you later. Don’t forget about me or I will hunt you down in that tiny town of yours.”

“Never, girlfriend.” I ended the call and gave him a sweet look. “I’m sorry. You were saying?”

“You were talking about me to a girlfriend?” he asked, his tone lighter than before, the shadows leaving his angular face.

“No, I was telling her about another hot guy I met.”

“You need another spanking.” When he reached for me, I scooted backwards.

“That’s not going to happen.”

He laughed, the husky sound keeping the fire burning hot deep inside. “It’s good to laugh, lady. I can’t remember the last time I did so.”

“You look good when you smile. It alleviates all those little frown lines you have.”

The way he wrinkled his face on purpose sent another swell of desire into me. I liked the guy more than I should, but I’d been feeling sorry for myself for far too long.

When my phone rang again, I answered it without thinking. “I will call you back, Jess. I promise.”

I didn’t need to look at the screen to realize Jessica hadn’t called back. I expected there to be nothing but dead air, not the dark laugh that assaulted my eardrums. “What do you want? Why are you doing this?” I asked without thinking. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to know I wasn’t talking to my friend, the change in my tone significant.

Whoever was on the other end of the phone continued to laugh. Yet when the unknown male spoke, I started shaking.

“Everything. And I will get it.”

I ended the call, immediately trying to shut off my phone. One big hand stopped me.

“Who was that?”

“Nobody.”

“Uh-huh. Terrible liar.” Jake snagged my phone from my hand before he’d need the code.

“Give that back to me.” I reached for it, almost sloshing my wine.

He held it over his head, glaring at me as he did seconds before indulging in calling me a bad girl or worse.

“Fine.”

He held the look of amusement until he shifted to my call history. When he lifted his head, his look was entirely different. While the call had scared me, his expression went way beyond that.

It terrified me to death.

CHAPTER 18



Jake

The asshole had broken into her house. That much I believed. Cassandra hadn't left the door open by accident. That's not who she was. And the phone call was meant as a warning. The reason why was something I needed to find out.

Everything.

The caller hadn't threatened Cassandra outright, but she'd remained quiet the rest of the night, consumed in a fear that I couldn't conquer. But I was damn well going to try. I had had a sense the two of us were embroiled in something that was capable of destroying what little joy either one of us had been able to experience over the past couple of years.

I took a deep breath as I walked down the stark corridor toward Bart's office, furious that I'd been accosted in the parking lot.

Goddamn reporters.

I'd even worn a ballcap and sunglasses, but a female newscaster had recognized me, all but chasing me down in the parking lot of the sheriff's office. That was enough to put me in an even worse mood, enough so I'd turned around and gave them an example of why people stayed away from me before storming inside.

Okay, so riling them wasn't good for anyone, but I was sick and tired of being hounded. The truth was uglier than that. I

was finished with being me, the memory of who I'd been crushing down on me like a heavy weight. I'd allowed that to happen, had groveled in the 'woe is me' attitude until I was ready to choke on it. Those hounding me had been an excuse to remain locked in a bubble. But it was past ready to pop.

"Come in."

Bart's voice was heard as I was already opening the door to his small office, refusing to take no for an answer from him. He and I needed to have a nice chat.

"Hey, buddy," he said more casually than I thought he would, given the case he was working on. "You comin' here to issue a formal complaint against that sexy woman you live close to? Did she piss in your Wheaties? I've heard from several sources she's got your number."

I sat down in the single chair opposite his shitty nineteen-eighties desk, glaring at the commendations he had framed on his wall. In a town full of hockey heroes, I'd been one of a handful of people to really sing his praises. Even his father hadn't cared, acting as if his own son was nothing but a failure. Bart had grown up with a star hockey player for a father, a beauty queen for a mother. That had set the poor kid up for failure.

In my mind, he was more successful than all of us put together. I don't know why that bothered me today more than usual other than I'd been thinking far too much about the past. "That's not why I'm here." I glanced out his dingy window into a portion of the parking lot. His job certainly was no more glamorous than mine was. At least it was honest.

"What's going on, Jake? You look haggard."

"That's what happens when you chase a misbegotten dog into the danger zone."

Bart narrowed his eyes the same way he had in the past when expressing his concerns about my mental health. "Danger zone? Buddy, you're not making any sense."

"The marshy forest near Tangerine Sunset."

"That's right. Ms. Dayne has a dog."

“Not much goes down you don’t know about.”

“Is there a point to why you’re here, cause I’m pretty busy.”

The goddamn phone call had unnerved the fuck out of me, especially after Cassandra had finally told me what the asshole had said to her. I’d kept pressing until she’d mentioned the feeling of being watched, seeing someone on her driveway. And the cigarette butt. That had taken me some time to find and I doubted there’d be any DNA left, but I’d brought it with me.

She’d also begrudgingly told me about the basic threat from Malcolm Robinson, which had corroborated what I’d heard at the diner. I’d had more than one run-in with the man, the asshole slimy in the worst way. Did I think him capable of the heinous murders? I wasn’t certain enough he had it in him to go down that rabbit hole. The man was a douchebag, a real bully and always had been, but I didn’t see him as psychotic. Still, I had plans on ruffling his feathers just to get him off her case anyway.

Maybe then I’d determine whether he’d had anything to do with Margaret’s death.

I’d only left her alone because she had a meeting with a wine consultant, someone who could easily guide her on what she could hope for in the future. However, my skin continued to crawl at the thought of leaving her alone.

“What’s going on with the murder case?” When I asked the question, I sensed his mood changing.

Bart narrowed his eyes, the amusement leaving them. “You know I can’t talk about the case.”

“Well, you need to.” I leaned forward, giving him a hard look. “Maybe you need to look outside the box.”

“Do you know something that might prove helpful, cause I’ve got shit right now. No evidence, no connection to the women that I can find. No DNA. I’m shitting bricks because the mayor is all over my ass on this one.”

“I think Cassandra has been targeted.”

“Oh, you’re on a first name basis now, huh?” Bart jerked up from his desk, heading to the old Mr. Coffee machine he kept on his credenza. He didn’t bother asking me if I wanted a cup. He never did when I annoyed the hell out of him. I seemed to be doing that with everyone lately.

“Cut the crap, Bart. She’s in danger and I ain’t gonna let anything happen to her.”

“Let me repeat. Do you have something that will help or are you just barking up a tree? I’m down a deputy at this point, which means I’m working eighteen-hour days. That doesn’t bode well for the homelife.”

“I think the killer has been watching her house, including standing in her driveway. She noticed him from her window in the bedroom a couple mornings ago. He also called her last night. And he left this as a souvenir.”

My buddy cocked his head over his shoulder as I slid the baggie across the surface of his desk. He almost spilled the coffee by pouring too much, a few drips making him hiss. “Where did you get that?”

“The end of her driveway.”

He threw me a look before walking closer, yanking the bag into his hand. “Ah, fuck, man. That could have been left there by anyone.”

“Only Cassie saw him smoking it when he was standing in her driveway.”

“And she’s certain the guy she thinks she saw is the same dude who called her?”

“She’s pretty certain whoever is watching her has also been doing so when she’s run errands in town.”

“Uh-huh.” His look remaining incredulous, he tossed the bag aside and sat down, planting his feet on his desk and leaning back. “Look. You forget how many times I’ve been inside the main house at Tangerine Sunset. I know the driveway. If she told you this mystery person was standing at the end, then you need to go look for yourself. There’s no way she could have seen whether it was a man or woman from that distance. She

could have thought one of the of the big maple trees was some dude. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know given the work you've done on the place."

Sadly, he was right, but Cass was convinced and I had to believe her.

"Now, what about this phone call?" he pressed.

"There's more."

"Fine. What?" I could tell the man didn't believe me.

"Someone went into her house and purposely left the door open, coaxing her dog outside. Either Moose was lured to the swamp or was taken there."

Bart rubbed his eyes. "Hold on. You're losing me. Her house was broken into?"

I had to shake my head. "No sign of that."

"Then what? I appreciate that you like this girl but you're jumping to some pretty big conclusions."

Leaning forward, I dropped my head. "Yeah, I know. Look. Margaret left a spare key underneath one of the flowerpots out back. I lifted the pot. The key had been moved."

"You're certain of that."

"With all the rains we've had this year, the deck was damp underneath leaving a dark spot except where the key had been."

He tilted his head. "O-kay. So someone let the dog out. It's entirely possible the pup wandered over to the swamp based on smells."

"That's what I originally thought but when we found Moose, he was tangled in rope. It had been purposely tied around the dog's leg."

Snorting, he took another sip of coffee before placing the mug on his desk. "You do know this sounds farfetched as fuck."

"Maybe so but the phone call she had last night wasn't the first. She's had several unknown callers since she arrived."

He stared at the cigarette butt. “This isn’t much to go on. The folks in the lab are working overtime like I am.”

“That’s your job. Right? You’re going to check the butt out for DNA, right?”

He laughed. “You must really like this girl.”

“I don’t want to see her hurt. She’s being targeted like Margaret was. Malcolm will stop at nothing to get her property, including trying to scare Cassandra into leaving.”

“Whoa. Hold the fuck on and stop jumping to these kinds of ridiculous conclusions. Margaret died of cancer. You know that as well as everyone else who knew her.”

“She was in remission, Bart. You didn’t know how alive she was, how healthy she appeared. Up to the last goddamn day.”

“You seem to forget my sister died of cancer. She was also in remission, the relapse sudden and unexpected. She was dead less than two weeks later.”

Yeah, I knew everything I was saying sounded farfetched. Still, I believed Cass was in danger. “That’s not what happened. I know it. There was no autopsy done.”

“Because she died of cancer. I’m telling you. What is going on with you?”

“Nothin’. Just check the butt. If I’m wrong, I’m wrong.”

“Fine, I’ll have it checked but given the condition it’s in, I doubt I’ll get shit off it.”

“Just fuckin’ do it!”

Bart shrank back hearing my raised voice, a smirk slowly crossing his face. “Wow. I think you’ve fallen hard and it’s been what...” He glanced at his watch for dramatic effect. “All of three days?”

“To hell with you. You’re the one who has nothing on this goddamn case.”

He took a sip, studying me for a few seconds. “Just so you know. Malcolm is insistent that the contract for Tangerine Sunset was signed.”

I had no idea what to say. “How would you hear something like that?”

“Because I was at the courthouse and overheard a conversation he had with his attorney. I don’t know what to tell you other than what I heard.”

“That can’t be right. Did you check land records?”

“Well, I actually did and no, the paperwork hasn’t been filed. But if what he’s saying is true, the woman you seem to like so much might not have a leg to stand on other than she’ll be the recipient of the proceeds from the sale of course, which is hefty. To the tune of a couple million, which is more than generous.”

A couple million could easily allow her to start a new life. Somewhere else. My chest tightened from the thought.

“Jesus. I don’t buy it, Bart. You know Malcolm is shady as they come.”

“I know that,” he said. “I’m just warning you of the possibility that the deal is legit. I know that’s not what you want to hear, but a contract is a contract.”

“I’ll buy the contract back.”

“You can’t be fucking serious.”

“Maybe I am. I didn’t spend the money I earned from my hockey contract.”

Bart shook his head. “Two million?”

“I have more than that.”

“Whew. You must really like this girl.”

Exhaling, I nodded. “I do.

“So, what about the call?” he asked.

“As I said, she’s had several unknown callers with no one on the other end of the line. The last time he lingered. She asked what he wanted and he told her everything. I don’t mind telling you Cass was freaked out.”

“Did Ms. Dayne recognize the voice?”

“No.”

“O-kay. I assume you tried the number.”

“You bet I did. The number is no longer in operation. And yeah, I know that means it’s likely a burner phone.”

Bart shook his head. “Then I don’t have shit to go on, Jake. Come on, you know that.” He yanked the cup into his hand, his brow furrowing.

“I’m telling you, Robinson is up to no good. If I were you, I’d be looking at him for the murders.”

He coughed, spitting out the gulp he’d taken, glaring at me when the liquid landed on some of his paperwork. “Robinson? He’s a fucking loser but he’s no killer. Did you fall off that roof you were working on and hit your head? And that girl of yours has really gotten around since arriving. I find it interesting that you’ve developed conspiracy theories when before the entire town could have burned down, and you wouldn’t have cared.”

When I lifted my head, his eyes opened wide.

“Shit, man. That was shitty of me. I’m sorry,” he said.

“She’s not my girl and her mother was the recipient of the threat. Cass picked up some paperwork from Margaret’s post office.” A look crossed his face that troubled me. While Cass had shown me the document, the man had been careful in what he’d said. I couldn’t believe Margaret would have agreed to do business with him.

“Interesting.” He glanced away, tapping his pen. “Very interesting.”

“How so?”

“When you’re adamant about something, the truth is usually just the opposite. This time, I’m not so sure. However, I am surprised Malcolm would say anything nasty to Margaret. Everyone loved her. Granted. I know his company has been experiencing some financial issues.”

“There you go. He’ll do anything to make a buck.”

“Maybe, but Malcolm isn’t stupid either. You know that.”

“Yeah, well, business is business. Right?”

He shrugged. “What about Cassandra? What do you really know about her?”

I threw my hand out. “Whoa. She’s not to blame here. You have a dead body on your hands. I’m trying to make certain that Cassandra isn’t next on the list. Did you check out if that girl has any connection to Malcolm?”

“Stop playing detective, bud. You don’t know anything about Ms. Dayne, other than what you heard from Margaret. The last time I checked, Margaret barely knew her daughter any longer. They’d been estranged for years. I think that might be the reason Margaret agreed to the sale. She knew she was dying and wanted to leave something to her daughter.”

The worst thing about his words was that they were plausible. Margaret had wanted to leave something special for her daughter.

“Not estranged. Cass was busy with building her career.”

“Tell me what you know about her. Maybe that will help me figure out who could be threatening her. That is, if you’re that worried about these threats.”

“You’re an asshole sometimes. You know that?”

He chuckled. “Just humor me.”

Bart was right. I knew far too little about her. “She had some powerful boyfriend in DC. I don’t know shit about the man, but I think she’s really here because of him. That’s just my instinct, not something she told me. What I do know is that she was some bigwig in a marketing firm and up and quit her job after her mom died. That’s not like her.” I noticed he grabbed a pen and notepad, scribbling down the info. “Maybe guilt brought her here.”

“That could mean her mom didn’t tell her about her plans. And you certainly know something about guilt.”

“Which could mean Malcolm is a lying sack of shit.” I ignored the other comment. He knew the pain I’d experienced far too

well.

Bart eyed me as if I was going to go off on a violent tantrum. Even I knew it wouldn't do any good. "Do you have this boyfriend's name? Might as well check him out too."

"Only his first. Stephen. I don't think they're in contact any longer."

"Again, not much to go on but let me see what I can find."

"Fuck, Bart. This doesn't have anything to do with a guy all the way across the country. Malcolm and his family have been terrorizing this town for years."

"You don't know the lengths some people will go to and that includes Malcolm. What I know is that the casino would have brought a lot of revenue into this town."

"Whoa. You're on his side."

"Not in the least. It would bring a lot of crime into the city as well. I have my hands full as it is."

"But those hands are also tied."

All he did was shrug. Damn the system.

I shook my head out of irritation. "Cass is not to blame. She's trying to rebuild her mother's legacy. She wants a new home."

"Yeah, and you want her here."

"So what if I do?"

"You know I'm glad to hear you admit that." He rubbed his eyes, taking several deep breaths. "Look, I'm going to give you a piece of advice. Take it or leave it. The last thing you need is to get involved with anyone who will shove you further into the depths of hell so be careful. If you really like this girl, then I'm all for it. But if so, you need to tell her about all your baggage."

"Thanks for the advice," I said through clenched teeth.

"You deserve to be happy."

"So I keep hearing. I thought you didn't have time to give a shit about anything but the case."

He tossed the pen halfway across the desk. “You’re determined to fuck up your entire life, aren’t you?”

“To hell with you,” I snapped. “I’ll do my own investigation. I think I’ll have a chat with Malcolm and clear the air.”

Sighing, he yanked the bag off his desk again. “For the love of God, Jake, don’t do that. Don’t push every button with me. I’m one of the last friends you have in this town. You come on like a bulldozer, but you know what you’ve given me just doesn’t add up. I can’t just go arresting Malcolm because you don’t like him.”

We glared at each other and I huffed under my breath. We’d been this way since we were kids, sparring one minute, ready to beat the shit out of anyone who dared cross the other the next. However, the tension between us was unusual. He was obviously under a lot of stress because of the case.

“I will do what it takes to protect her, Bart. I owe Margaret that if nothing else.”

“Right. Fine, Jake. I’ll run the cigarette butt through the system. I shouldn’t tell you this.”

“What? Tell me.”

He eyed me warily, the strain on his face evident. “There were a couple different cigarette butts outside one of the victims’ motel rooms, but the girl smoked. What you found might mean nothing. You know that.”

“Yeah, I got it.”

“Where did you find Moose?”

“What does it matter?”

“Because,” Bart said as he leaned forward, “if your half-baked idea is true, maybe the perpetrator left some DNA evidence. I’ll send a deputy to check it out.”

“I thought you were short.”

“Yeah, I am, but I trust your judgment.”

We locked eyes and I wasn’t certain if he was yanking my chain. “The front side nearest the Dayne property. Maybe

thirty feet.”

“That fucking swamp needs to be cleaned out or filled in.”

“Yeah, it does.”

He made a few more notes, lifting his gaze after doing so. “Don’t go off halfcocked about this shit. You’re right. That’s the last thing I need right now. I’ve got reporters already tipped off to the newscast that I can’t seem to put a lid on calling me every hour. Between that and the grief the mayor is giving me, I don’t need to be called to haul your ass off to jail.”

“Not a worry, buddy.” I jerked up, immediately heading to the door. I could see I’d need to provide my own level of protection for my Cinnamon Girl.

“I mean it, Jake. I don’t have time for your bullshit any longer.”

The moment I placed my hand on the doorknob of his office door, I shook my head. “You’re right. You have more important things to accomplish.”

“I’m fucking dead serious. Where the hell are you going?”

Today seemed to be the day of reckoning all the way around.

Including for myself.

“Don’t worry, Bart. I won’t create any additional dead bodies today. Oh, so you know, the reporters are waiting for you outside.”

“Fuck. Days like this I wish I was a goddamn hockey player instead.”

“Yeah, me too.”

I left without telling him where I was going. The day of changes continued. Cassandra’s advice, her words had lingered long into the night. Maybe it was time to let go of the past. In doing so, perhaps I’d have a chance at developing a future.

Or maybe I was kidding myself.

I was headed to see my brother as well as the man who'd betrayed me.

CHAPTER 19



Jake
Dating.

Neanderthals didn't date or at least they shouldn't in my mind.

The woman I cared about wanted to be taken on an actual date. I'd acted more like a primal barbarian, fucking her first. Okay, so it wasn't my finest hour, but our physical attraction was off the charts. Maybe Cass deserved going out on the town. The thought made me cringe. I'd been alone for so long that I was set in stone in many ways.

I wasn't certain if I knew how to carry on a decent conversation on a date anyway. In my mind the concept had been developed by those who knew how to torture normal human beings. I'd never been good at it, no matter the persona of a playboy that had once come across on the small screen. Sure, I was an alpha guy, preferring to be the one to purchase dinner and open doors for women, but I was so far out of practice I wasn't entirely certain if I'd be labeled a failure.

Besides, Cassandra wasn't my girlfriend, merely a partial enemy with benefits. The thought almost made me laugh, which was as surprising as everything else that had occurred over the last few days. How the girl had convinced me to consider slapping on my hockey skates again was beyond me, but here I was about to walk into the aging rink.

It was funny how the thought of playing hockey again had never been far from my mind. I'd lived and breathed the sport

for so long that it had taken me years before I'd shoved my skates into a brown box, hiding them away. The reality was that I'd used the injury as an excuse not to face what Bruno and Tammy had done.

Because of what Cassandra had suggested, I'd retrieved them from the attic, taking some time to polish the blades. The exercise had been cathartic, allowing my mind to revisit the raw experience before shoving it aside permanently. If I'd looked into a mirror and been honest with myself before this, I'd have been forced to admit that my relationship with Tammy had been easy but not what I'd needed. I hadn't been the girl's knight in shining armor either. My cockiness had kept me from facing demons even then.

She'd deserved to be happy, which is what I wanted for Cassandra. I'd also told myself I wasn't capable of caring about anyone. The way my Cinnamon Girl had awakened the sleeping lion was by all accounts a miracle. Still, I wasn't certain I wouldn't end up hurting her.

Maybe what I needed was some time on the ice to clear my head. Even if only for myself. Maybe the fact Riley had cajoled me remained fermenting in my brain. Whatever the case, I'd tossed the skates on the floor of the passenger seat.

Just being outside the rink where I'd honed my skills created a pit in my stomach. I'd done everything to avoid the street the building was on, doing everything in my power to ignore the lure that would be there until the day I died or moved out of the city.

As soon as I pulled into the parking lot, I noticed my brother's vehicle along with several others. Including Bruno's. He was still driving the same Jeep Cherokee. I pulled into a parking place, keeping the engine idling. A part of me wanted to turn around but if I did, I'd return my emotions to the big black box, shutting out everyone. I cut the engine, taking a few deep breaths. What the hell? This was something I needed to do. Maybe having Cassandra in my life was good for me, better than I'd wanted to admit.

After climbing out, I stared at the skates for almost a full minute before reaching over, yanking them into my hand. As I'd done a million times before, I tossed them over my shoulder and headed to the door. I'd ignored the desire to skate for far too long.

The moment I entered the building, far too many memories popped into my mind. I wanted to hate them, to push them down in the dark reaches of my ugly world, but it was impossible to do while being inside close to the rink.

The noise was everything I remembered, the smell and the frigid cold, which had never bothered me before. I'd been the stupid kid who'd skated on the ice without my shirt on, acting as if that would make me tougher. The memories were bittersweet.

I walked closer, sucking in my breath and heading toward one of the penalty boxes to watch the activity on the ice. The same six guys who'd been at the bar were practicing, avoiding the Zamboni that was parked off to the side. The owner had given Riley a key, just as he'd done with me all those years ago, the man far too trusting in my opinion.

The group was laughing and grunting as they skated around the ice, one man acting as goalie while the others took wild and random shots. It wasn't unlike the way I'd taught Riley to play all those years ago.

As I sat down, I concentrated on the game, ignoring everything but critiquing my brother's skills. When he'd started playing, he used to listen to me, doing his best to follow in my footsteps. As we'd grown apart, he'd started hotdogging it, becoming more of a showman than a decent player. If his professional plays were as bad as what I was seeing on the ice, then I was surprised the rumors were true about Vancouver. They were the toughest team in the NHL, the coach refusing to allow any 'stars.'

It was true the cameras loved Riley even more than they had with me. He was the All-American boy with dimples and blond hair, the same blue eyes dazzling the girls. Still, seeing him on the ice with his buddies exacerbated the ache in my

system. When he made a stupid move, I headed toward the fencing, unable to stop myself from being vocal.

There were terms for the player he'd become.

Now the guys were just goofing off, taking random shots and congratulating themselves as if the training was doing them any good.

"Hey, grinder, why don't you go back to training camp."

My booming voice powered over the ice, all six players lifting their heads as they continued spinning on the ice.

I could tell the moment Riley noticed me in the stands, his entire demeanor changing. He skated closer, skidding to a stop, spewing ice in my direction on purpose. "Yeah? Why don't you come down here and give me a few pointers then, bro?"

The other guys whistled, three of them my former teammates. Bruno skated off to the side and I was certain he was planning on walking off the ice. When he spun around, daring to skate close to the fence, I sensed the man was daring me to do what my brother suggested. The testosterone in the room was thick.

Saying nothing, I held my heated gaze on my brother. One of the last comments my father had made after I'd officially retired was that I had obviously been jealous of my brother's talent. Maybe I was, but there was more than just hating the fact Riley had become even more famous than I had or that he was still able to play the sport I loved. He was headed down a bad path, one that could eventually destroy him.

The tabloids hadn't been kind over the years, Riley compared to me far too many times. That had prompted him to become crazier on the ice.

I noticed the other members of the team were skating in formation, glaring at me as if I was the enemy.

"You're off your game, Riley, and you know it."

He rubbed his gloved hand across his nose, looking away from me as he shook his head. "Like I said, Jake. Why don't you

come down here and give me some pointers? Huh? Are you too afraid I'll show you up?"

Maybe I'd egged on the moment, but the nastiness in his tone was enough to spur me on. I'd come here to skate. That's what I planned on doing.

"Don't have my twig with me." Even though the hockey sticks were no longer made of wood, a lot of players still used the term.

"Hey, Bruno. Sit this one out so my bro here can use your stick. Will ya?"

Bruno skated closer, the true grinder of the Sabers glaring at me as he'd done from the day he'd stepped foot on the ice. "Sure thing. I'll like to see if the old man can still play." Bruno all but threw the stick in my direction, daring me to catch it.

Which I did.

I grinned in response before moving to one of the benches, yanking the skates closer, still able to feel the heat of my brother's intense gaze. I fingered the stick, the ache of missing the sport more intense than I'd thought it would be after all this time.

"Aren't you going to change?" Riley asked as he watched me shove my feet into the skates.

I was wearing jeans while the others were wearing sweats, the constriction of denim not uniform material. "Not necessary."

"You've got a chip on that shoulder of yours larger than a boulder. You know that?"

There was no reason to answer. When I didn't, he pushed away from the fence, returning to the ice. But not before cursing under his breath. I took my sweet time, which likely pissed him off even more, before grabbing the stick and heading for the ice. I wasn't stupid enough to think the guys would take it easy on me.

Just getting my feet back on the ice was strange, enough so that I was stiffer than I thought I'd be. It had been a while since I'd worked out but I was still in decent shape. At least

according to my Cinnamon Girl. The name sure fit her and as had been the case for the last few days, it was tough to get her out of my mind.

I took a few turns around the ice, getting used to the feeling. I could tell all six guys were watching me intently, Bruno from the side as he leaned against the fence. When one of them slapped a puck in my direction, I could tell the player didn't think my reflexes would be quick enough to snap it back in his direction. There was nothing wrong with my reaction times or the anger behind the shot, which ended up being a bardown that shocked the hell out of every man, especially my brother. The shot was one of those that oohed and ahhed the audience because the puck hit the crossbar, immediately going right into the net.

I spun around in a full circle, grinning when I came to a quick stop only a couple of feet in front of my brother, ice from the deep cuts of my skate's sharp edges flying in his face.

While he grinned, the other boys teased him relentlessly.

"Whoa, dude. Your brother might be a better player than you."

"Watch out, Widow Maker. Your days are numbered." The nickname was one my brother had been gifted with after knocking an opposing team's player out cold with a hard shot. The coach had insisted on the Intimidator, which had stuck in the press.

Riley wiped ice from his face, giving me a playful look in deference to my actions. "Game on, buddy. You better bring it or I'm going to beat your ass."

"You got it. Bring it on." I spun around again, immediately able to snag the puck. The glorious feeling of skating freely was something that couldn't be described to anyone but those who'd stepped foot in the rink competitively. Whether speed skating, ice skating, or playing hockey, the high was something few people ever got a chance to experience.

The effect was just as powerful as it had been all those years ago, maybe even more so given my time spent off the ice. Only then I'd been the risk taker, landing my ass in the penalty

box more times than I could count. My brother had fallen into my footsteps whether he wanted to believe it or not. The golden boy of hockey wasn't going to be able to wear the halo for long. That was the way of things.

But for now, this was nothing but a friendly practice game.

Except we were all brutal with our shocks, which including more body checking than would ever be allowed in a real game. Bruno refused to stay on the sidelines, ripping the hockey stick out of another player's hands. When he interrupted the game, stealing the puck, I could tell Riley was afraid I'd retaliate.

Instead, I continued playing the game. Hard. Within seconds, my over-exerted muscles ached. Even my lungs burned given I wasn't used to this much exercise. Swinging a hammer was physical, but nothing like this. I'd need a shot of scotch and a handful of Tylenol, but I continued to push harder. That was the kind of man I'd become, nothing more than a machine.

The players grunted every time I managed to out flank them, several swearing me up and down for managing to show them up.

Minutes ticked into almost an hour, and I was sweating my ass off but the truth was I hadn't enjoyed something this much in a long time.

I was dumped on my ass twice, which amused Riley and his buddies. To hell with them. That only made me work even harder, pushing my body in ways it hadn't been driven in far too long. I knew I'd be sore in the morning, but I honestly didn't give a shit.

When I managed to make another score, the puck going between Bruno's legs, he was immediately knocked down by one of the other players on purpose.

"Hey! That shit doesn't fly in here," I yelled before being forced to get in the middle of three guys.

Seconds later, they were laughing, ready to head off the ice. Bruno hesitated before heading in my direction. Without saying anything, he threw out his hand. I glanced down at the

gesture before accepting it. But I didn't stop there, punching the man hard in the face.

"Whoa," two of the players said at the same time.

Bruno was pitched backward, immediately cupping his face.

"Hey. Don't," Riley huffed. "What was that for?"

"Now, we're even," I told the entire crowd. Sweat had beaded over my forehead and it felt good.

"You're a bastard, but one damn good player," Bruno told me, giving me a nod. "We could use talent like yours."

I laughed and handed him his stick, shaking my head. "I think I'll stick to contracting." The other guys waved me off, headed to change. My brother remained on the ice.

Riley skated around me in a full circle, eyeing me carefully. "You did good with Bruno."

"You mean not beating him senseless?"

Chuckling, he shook his head. "Something like that. It's good because I'm sure the gossip mill will be active soon."

"Why?"

He blew out as if whatever he was preparing to tell me was the last thing he'd wanted to do. "I hate being the bearer of bad news, but Bruno and Tammy are getting married. Don't shoot the messenger." Wincing, he skated backwards, making a sign of the cross.

"You know what? Four days ago, I would have spent the night downing shots. Not anymore. Time to let bygones be bygones."

"What alien crawled into my brother's body?" He grinned and skated closer. "Whoa, you're serious."

"Yep."

"What happened?" He studied me as if dissecting a frog. "You met someone."

"Maybe."

"Hot damn. Who is she?"

I shrugged and he punched me in the arm. “Fine. Don’t you say a goddamn word. She’s Margaret Dayne’s daughter.”

“Really? I heard Margaret had left the place to somebody. Who would have guessed? How much do you like her?”

“Enough that I should leave her alone, do everything I can not to see her again.”

“That’s going to be tough since you live down the road. I can tell she’s good for you.”

“How so?”

“You’re here, aren’t ya?”

Smirking, I rubbed my jaw, the aches and pains already starting. The moment of awkward silence was like a heavy weight. I’d wanted him to volunteer about heading to Vancouver, but I could see that wasn’t going to happen.

“Okay, so what are you really doing here, brother?”

“Practicing like you suggested.” And yeah, Cassandra encouraged me as well.

“Right. You don’t do anything without an ulterior motive, and you know it.”

“Fine. When were you going to tell me about Vancouver?”

His expression didn’t change but he looked away as if embarrassed. “Shit. I meant to tell you the other night.”

“But you didn’t.”

“Cause I knew what you’d say.”

“Yeah? And what was that?”

“That I’m not ready.”

I took a deep breath, holding the frigid air in my lungs. “You’re not. You’re hotheaded and a boozier. The coach won’t stand for it.”

“Fuck you, Jake. You come out on the ice once in six years and think you can give me advice? That’s bullshit.”

“It’s the truth, Riley. You asked me to face my demons and you know what? You’ve been right all along. I allowed my anger and hatred to turn into self-pity. That’s been my crutch. Booze is yours.”

“Damn you.” Riley’s jaw was clenched and he looked away. I hated the awkwardness more than ever, the toxic situation created by our father’s expectations something that had remained like a dark shadow over us our entire life.

“Did Pops put you up to this?” When all he did was exhale, I bristled. I’d tried so hard over the years to protect my brother, to ensure the kid was allowed to grow up and be whoever he wanted to be, but I’d turned my back on him like I had everyone else. “You don’t have to do this, dude. This is your life.”

“Yeah? Well, since you dropped out of the world, I’m required to take your place.”

Goddamn my father and his bullshit. “Don’t destroy your life, Riley, like I did mine. You deserve to be happy.”

“I am happy. Can’t you tell?”

“That’s why you’re trying to self-medicate. Right?”

His answer was to shove me with enough force I was pitched onto my butt once again. “Leave me alone, Jake. Live your fucking life the way you want and let me live mine the way I’m forced to.”

As I slid several feet, he raked his hand through his hair before skating toward me.

When he offered me a hand, I waited before accepting, using the momentum to punch him in the face only once.

“What the hell was that for?” he asked, immediately slapping his hand across his cheek.

“That’s for wasting your goddamn talent. Do you know what I’d give to be in your shoes, to have the kind of talent you do?”

When he didn’t say anything, I half laughed and headed back toward the penalty box.

“Maybe that woman will be the best thing for you,” he threw out.

“Maybe you don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t get it, do you, Jake?” he asked in a voice I hadn’t heard in a long time.

“Get what?”

“All I’ve ever wanted to be is you.”

CHAPTER 20



Cassandra

Who the fuck gargled wine?

The asshole standing in front of me, that's who. I think my mouth was slack, enough so that it was a good thing there weren't any insects in the barn turned winery. If there had been, I'd be crunching down on gnats right about now. Why? Because he'd tossed back a small glass of wine from one of the barrels decorating an entire wall, tilting his head back as if he was wearing a medal stating he was sommelier of the year.

Okay, so maybe I was jaded since I knew nothing about growing grapes, but that didn't mean I wasn't incensed by the sneer the great wine expert had on his face the moment he'd walked into the facility. The instant dislike had been on both sides, his expression of disdain quickly turning into a leer.

When the bastard spit the entire amount into an empty glass, pulling out a perfectly white handkerchief from one of his pockets, my fuse was about to blow.

"You don't like the wine, Mr. Stocker?"

"On a scale of one to ten, I'd give it a one point five if that tells you anything." He even placed the original glass on the service bar's surface as if he was terrified of getting cooties. As he'd done before, he used a thick black marker on a piece of paper on a clipboard, grinning like an evil warlock as he took his time jotting down notes.

It had been the longest two hours of my life, although watching him trod through muddy terrain in his Gucci crocodile loafers had been the highlight of my day. If I had to guess, I'd say he'd toss them into the trash since he had thirty more pairs exactly like the shoes he was wearing.

Now it was my turn to snicker. Maybe I was the evil one in the room. Too bad I hadn't allowed Moose to come with us. The thought of seeing muddy paws all over the man's suit would have been the maraschino cherry on top of the fabulous dessert.

After two minutes passed, I grew impatient, tossing back my nearly half full glass of wine. Something told me I was going to need more as well as a hot shower to rid myself of the man's stench after he left. When I drummed my fingers on the bar's surface, he lifted his gaze, finally returning the cap to his marker, sliding it into an interior pocket of his jacket before releasing the single piece of paper from the clipboard.

"My best advice to you is to sell, Ms. Dayne. The winery isn't going to be profitable no matter what you do." His words were icy as he handed me his report. "You have few grapes, sour stock, and only a couple hundred bottles of wine. Given all your help left, and employment numbers are low in the city, I doubt you'll find grunt workers to do your bidding."

My imagination had always been vitriolic and vibrant, two words that went together perfectly in my mind. The flash of colorful images had the bastard placed completely naked on an ancient torture device used to stretch people in all four directions until their limbs were torn from them. Maybe it was a little extreme but given the threatening phone call, I'd had my fill of assholes and alligators.

I barely glanced at the documentation, but what I saw infuriated me even more. Contrary to the crucifying black ink he'd used in scoring below average or poor on just about every category, I was seeing red.

My anger flared and I sucked in my breath before facing the pompous asshole. Since he was dressed in a four-thousand-dollar suit with a high dollar manicure including clear nail

polish, I'd wondered the entire time whether or not he'd ever gotten dirt under his nails. "Why, Mr. Stocker? Because I'm a woman? Because you don't think I can handle a little bit of hard work?"

His snort brought the irrational side of me to the surface.

"Because you'll never make a profit. It's just not possible and the wine isn't award-winning material. More like what you'd find inside a 7-Eleven."

Hold up. The jerk was comparing the wine my mother had painstakingly nurtured to MD 20/20? Oh, now I wanted to knock him out cold. Even my fingers were itching to do so. "I beg your pardon?"

"I call it as I see it, Ms. Dayne. It's my understanding that your mother realized that and had accepted an offer, which was a smart business decision."

"Not according to my mother's attorney. And since I'm the new owner, I'll make my own choices."

He gathered his briefcase from the top of the serving bar, which he'd only opened to jerk out the ebony-colored clipboard, just like he hadn't offered any real advice. "I'm afraid you'll regret your decision. The town is close-knit, and people talk. They don't like outsiders, Ms. Dayne, which is why your mother wasn't welcome here."

What the hell was that supposed to mean? I honestly didn't care at this point. If I had to guess, I'd say slick boy was friends with Malcolm Robison. I'd just had a crash course in learning that it didn't matter the size of the town, venomous snakes still lived in the shadows.

I was close to allowing my itchy fingers to do exactly what they wanted but thought better of it. For now. But if he dared show his face again, I wouldn't hesitate to knock his block off.

"I think we're finished here, Mr. Stocker. For good. Rest assured, I heard every word you said, but this is my legacy now and no one is ever going to convince me to sell. The wine isn't cheap or pungent and if you notice, there's plenty of delicious stock to keep me in business for a long time. I plan

on reopening with a kickoff party that will knock the socks off this town. We'll see how well liked my mother was."

He huffed, staring at me with actual hate in his eyes. "Very well, Ms. Dayne. Have it your way. But with every month that passes, you'll lose the ability to sell at all."

"Why does that sound like a threat?"

"I don't threaten anyone, Cassandra. I'm a businessman by trade, one who's made various wineries a lot of money. I'm just telling you like it is. You will fail."

Oh, yes, they did threaten. Along with the contract sent to my mother, I'd found notes she'd written detailing strange calls received during the months prior to her death. There'd even been mention of her workers being on the receiving end as well. No wonder they'd all quit within two weeks of each other.

If the bastards thought they were going to run me out of town that easily, they were wrong.

"Only my friends are allowed to call me by my first name." I held my stern look as I folded my arms, cocking my hip. The man dressed to the nines had been late, rude, and even said my mother hadn't understood anything about business, which is why it had failed so miserably. I could handle almost anything, but no one could ever say anything horrible about the people I cared about.

"Fine, Ms. Dayne. Mark my words. You'll be in bankruptcy within six months."

"Get out before I throw you out."

My, oh my, the bastard actually looked incensed before spinning around on his expensive heels, taking long strides toward the open door.

With that, he left the winery.

Meanwhile, I sucked in my breath before fisting my hands, pretending I was issuing several brutal jabs into his face and gut. Maybe getting a punching bag would be a good idea. I'd never been so furious in my life. Okay, so I really didn't know

what I was doing and the amount of people I'd need to hire to get the winery up and running might break my budget given the repairs and updates needed, but that didn't give the asshole the right to treat me like some idiot.

I spun around away from the door, staring up at the oak barrels, wondering how much wine had been left inside and if that was the case, if the liquid was rancid. The facility was incredible. I didn't care what the supposed expert had said. It wasn't too countrified, not by a long shot. To me, the room was rustic but cozy, the gorgeous bar for the tastings an exquisite piece of furniture.

All I needed to do was add festive lighting around the serving area, maybe a little music and some female touches and it would be good to go for a sinful wine tasting. Complete with baked goods and some yummy appetizers. A Halloween event sounded perfect. I could bake. I could invite everyone in town. I could... Have a nervous breakdown.

I leaned against the bar, dropping my head into my hands. What was I doing? I had no clue. I was in over my head to the point I was already drowning, and I'd been here all of what, four days? "Damn it!" I'd found several boxes inside the winery storage room before he'd arrived. While I'd found the contract from Malcolm, the copy I had wasn't signed. It was very lucrative, so much so that I'd almost considered it for about two seconds. I yanked it from the box, ripping it in half then half again.

No one was going to take this away from me. I'd meant what I'd said. No one.

Seconds later, I felt a presence, the stench of Mr. Stocker's offensive cologne lingering in my nostrils.

"Ms. Dayne. May I have a word with you?"

Who was the asshole kidding? He'd returned?

I reacted without thinking.

"I told you to leave my property. I meant what I said." I spun around, driving my fist against a hard jaw. I had no idea I had

the strength to pitch a muscular giant to the floor. But I could and I did.

And it wasn't the clown I'd spent two hours with but the man I was falling hard for even if Mr. Grinch didn't want me to.

I'd attacked the wrong man, punching him hard enough I was certain I'd broke his nose. Jake had fallen onto his butt on the floor, the thud hard enough I gasped. Then he acted as if he'd passed out from the force used. Oh, no. No. This wasn't happening.

When he remained still on his back, his head lolled to the side, my heart fluttered. What had I done?

"Oh, no. Oh, my God. I'm so sorry." I scrambled forward, dropping to my knees. "Jake. Are you okay? I didn't know it was you." When he didn't say anything, I pressed my hand against his face first, shifting two fingers to his neck. Thank God, he had a pulse. Was it thready? No. No. No. "Jake. Come on. Wake up for me." I leaned over even further.

Jake didn't bother opening his eyes before tossing me over onto my back, pressing the full weight of his body on top of mine. Without hesitation, he dragged my arms over my head, wrapping his huge hand around both wrists. "Whoa. Who were you expecting, baby? The devil himself? Don't you know attacking people isn't in your best interest? Do I need to give you another spanking as a reminder?"

"Maybe I was after the shit I just went through."

"What do you think you're doing, Cinnamon Girl? Trying to kill me?"

"No, just the wine expert."

"Tsk. Tsk. Nice girls don't beat up wine consultants."

"Who said I was a nice girl?" I asked, fighting his hold again. When I managed to get an arm free, I tried to push him off, but he was having none of it, yanking my arm back over my head. This time, he dug his fingers into my skin.

"You know. I was already almost beaten to death today."

"Oh, yeah. By whom?"

“My brother and his buddies. Ouch.”

“Poor baby,” I cooed. “Wait a minute. You played hockey today?” I was surprised I was so excited.

“Yeah, if you can call it that. Did anyone ever tell you that you have an incredible right jab?”

“Oh, all the time. You see what I do to guys I can’t stand.”

“I thought I was included in that bunch.”

“Eh, you’re growing on me.” The laugh that bubbled to the surface felt good and seeing the twinkle in his eyes, my heart fluttered as it had done after he’d left early that morning. “What the hell were you doing disguising your voice? I could have really done some damage.”

“Sweetheart, you’re a girl. You couldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Them’s fighting words.”

He grinned like a kid and I had to believe his change in demeanor had everything to do with returning to the rink. “I was trying to make you smile.”

“You always make me smile, even if you’re a pain in the ass. And why do I have a feeling there’s more?”

“Hmmm... You’re the one who’s incorrigible. I came here to ask you on a date but if you’re too busy...”

“A date? You? Someone stole your body,” I teased then undulated even more, fighting his possessive hold even harder.

“If they did, it was some feisty brunette.”

There was something so provocative about the way he held me that I was momentarily left breathless. As he lowered his head, I was thrown into a sweet vacuum. Everything else in the world faded to black. When he captured my mouth, my body responded without hesitation, my pussy throbbing and my nipples fully aroused. His scent of sandalwood, spices, and dried sweat became a powerful aphrodisiac. Stars skittered into my periphery of vision as he thrust his tongue inside.

As he dominated my tongue, exploring as if he’d never kissed me before, I wiggled underneath him, fighting his hold yet

adoring every second of the passion we shared. He was the most intense kisser I'd ever experienced, his soft lips and rough actions keeping me on edge, my muscles quivering.

When he pulled away seconds later, he nipped my lower lip. "You were saying?"

"Attacking people is in my best interest if they are the devil or the one who threatened me." I didn't recognize my voice. "And the jerk also told me the winery and my mother's wine sucked."

He jerked his head back, his breathing instantly labored. "What?"

"Can you believe that?"

"The guy I passed coming in here said that shit?"

"Yeah, the wine expert dressed in Armani. He was a jerk. He advised me to sell. He told me my mother was hated and that I'd go bankrupt and no one would ever work for me and..."

"Calm down."

"I can't calm down. I feel like I'm drowning."

Jake bristled and I could tell he was changing gears in being my protector. "Hmmm... What a jerk. Maybe I should give him a piece of my mind."

I knew what that meant from Jake. He'd land his ass in jail, friend or no friend of the sheriff.

"He's not worth it. I'm just going to prove him wrong." I placed my hand on his cheek and at least some tension eased. He pressed his face against it, his eyes still full of fire.

"You're the one who's worth it and you're right, we'll prove him wrong. Bastard." He pulled away, helping me to my feet. "We can make this work, Cass. I know we can."

"We, huh?" His conviction pulled away all the shadows, allowing me to smile.

"Well, you did ask for my help. Right?"

“I did.” I rubbed my hands down my jeans, glancing at the shredded paperwork as well as the horrible scoring the man had used. “Would you look at this?” I tossed the piece of paper across the bar’s surface, immediately taking two glasses toward the spigot where I’d gotten the wine from before. I poured enough for us to enjoy, still grinding my teeth from everything I’d been told.

“Just an opinion, Cinnamon Girl. You need to remember that it’s possible he’s buddies with Mr. Robinson.”

“That’s what I was thinking. Taste this. Tell me if you think it’s sour.”

He lifted the clear plastic glass, studying the color in the pendant lighting. When he took a deep whiff, I punched him playfully in the gut. “What?”

“You remind me of Mr. Stocker.”

“Jeremy Stocker?” He took a sip then drained the glass.

“One and the same. Do you know him?”

“Unfortunately, he’s on the city council.”

“Uh-oh. Meaning he could have the place shut down.”

“He has enough influence, but we’re not going to allow that to happen.”

“You can’t fight all my battles, Jake.”

“Maybe not all, but some of them. The wine is delicious. Stop worrying. Things have a funny way of working out.”

“I can’t. I feel like I’m being railroaded to sell.”

“That’s because the land itself is more valuable than the property.”

I nodded. “As I suspected. Is it true what I heard about Malcolm?”

“What did you hear?”

“That he killed a man?” When Jake didn’t answer, another shiver curled my toes. “He really is dangerous.”

“He’s an opportunist, Cassandra. I don’t know whether the stories I’ve heard are true, but he is a ruthless businessman just like his father. He’s stooped to methods of blackmail and extortion to get what he wants. What I do know is that he targets people then makes their lives miserable.”

“He’s behind the threats.”

“Possibly.”

“I’m not going to let him drive me away.”

Jake moved closer, eyeing the torn contract. “I’m glad to hear that.”

“We need to get to work. I have to put together a marketing plan and I want to have a huge party in October. A kickoff of sorts. You can get the work done by then. Right? I’d like to have plenty of guests, including for the holidays. If I can have the wine win some awards by spring, then I’ll be set. Yeah, I can do this. I’ll call some of the people I know who can help.”

“Not so fast, Cinnamon Girl.”

He grabbed my hand, spinning me around to face him. “What are you doing?”

“Tangerine Sunset can wait. We’re going out tonight.”

I don’t think anything could have shocked me more. “Are we celebrating something?”

“Wasn’t it you who reminded me that we needed to enjoy our lives?” He took the cheap glass from my hand, placing both on the bar.

“Yeah, but that was before—”

Jake placed his finger across my lips, cocking his head as he gave me a stern look. When I refused to stop talking, he did the only thing he could to shut me up. He captured my mouth all over again.

If it was possible to melt in someone’s arms, then that’s exactly what I was doing. The feel of being so close to him created vibrations that were sweeping through every cell, heading directly to my toes. The kiss made me lightheaded,

the taste of peppermint reigniting all the filthy thoughts I'd had before about him.

He lifted me off my feet and immediately, I wrapped my legs around him. In his arms I felt tiny, something I'd never felt before. I stroked the back of his neck as the kiss went from being passionate to needy, the hunger we shared creating a wave of electricity. I swept my tongue across his, refusing to allow him to dominate me.

But Jake wasn't the kind of man to be toyed with, smacking my bottom several times with his huge palm, adding to the ache that was already there. When he finally eased me to my feet, breaking the contact, he slipped his index finger under my chin, lifting it. "I'm a famished man."

"You feasted this morning," I purred.

"Don't you know I'm a growing boy?"

For a man who'd perfected the ability to scowl, he was certainly doing his best to entice me with his hooded eyes.

"Yes, but I'll be the responsible one. Time is ticking."

"Nope. You're going to change and we're going out to dinner. My treat."

"Hmmm... Is this a date?"

"I don't date, Cinnamon Girl. I already told you that."

"Yes, you did. Pray tell, what do you do?" I asked coyly.

"I make things happen and take what I want."

Why was it that I shuddered at the thought?

CHAPTER 21



Jake

“All I’ve ever wanted to be is you.”

For some reason, even though I was sitting with a gorgeous woman on a beautiful late afternoon, what Riley had said had stuck in the forefront of my brain.

“Earth to the big man,” Cassandra said quietly.

“What?”

“That’s what I wanted to know.”

“Just thinking about my brother.”

“You’re angry with him about leaving you here, taking your spot on the team?”

“Nah, it wasn’t my spot to begin with. It was what my father wanted,” I said, lifting the glass and sucking on the ice cubes. Where the hell was the waiter? The Tylenol I’d popped wasn’t doing a damn thing. “He’s trying to please our father and it’s making him do stupid things.”

“Did you talk to him?”

“Yep, and it didn’t end well.”

“Talk, not bark, Mr. Grinch.” Her eyes twinkled in the dim lighting.

“You’re a psychiatrist too? I don’t need another one.”

“Nope. Just someone who cares about you, although you’re tough to like.” When I reached for her face, she giggled and pulled away.

“You are one bad woman. Do you know that?”

“That’s why we get along so well.”

Maybe so. I sat back, glancing at the view she’d been staring at, constantly moving her upper body to the light jazz music.

Depoe Bay had a few decent restaurants, fewer still that had live music, which is what I wanted. Tidal Raves would do for the night. At least the weather was warm enough to enjoy the outdoor seating, which happened to appear only feet away from the jagged cliffs leading to the Pacific Ocean.

The sun was setting magnificently against the shoreline, the vibrant colors more intense than I’d seen in a long time. But I only had eyes for the woman sitting in front of me. She was stunning in a body-hugging crimson dress, which even in the candlelight on the table brought out the color in her eyes. I had filthy thoughts running through my mind, enough that I wanted dinner to be over with.

While she appeared more relaxed than before, holding her wine in her hand while staring into the waning sun, I could tell the news that had finally broken about the murder in Depoe Bay was weighing heavily on her mind. The two women had been identified, which I was certain had Bart in a tizzy.

“Remember, family is important, Jake. You never know when someone is going to be ripped away from you. Take those two girls for example.”

“I thought we were trying to have a nice dinner and not talk business or murder.”

She dragged her tongue across her lower lip then took another sip of wine. “I know, but I can’t get them out of my mind. I just can’t imagine what those two women went through,” she said, which confirmed her mind was far removed from the seafood we’d just enjoyed. “There are some horrible people in this world.”

“Yeah, but there are some amazing people as well.”

“Coming from the Grinch, that’s good to hear.” She threw me a playful look, but I sensed she was nervous, even frightened.

That made me angry as fuck. Whoever was trying to terrify her would end up facing me in a dark forest one day. Maybe I’d tie the asshole to a tree like had happened with Moose and throw in some bloody meat to entice the wildlife. “You can’t worry all day about what you heard on the news.”

“It’s hard not to, Jake. What if I’m next? What if the threat I received has nothing to do with Malcolm Robinson and his determination to buy my place?”

I’d thought about that more than a couple of times, but the last thing I wanted to do was to scare her. “I talked to my buddy at the sheriff’s office, including dropping off the cigarette butt for him to see if he could get any DNA.”

“And?”

“And it’s going to take time.”

“What if we don’t have time? I feel like whoever threatened me is watching all the time. It’s like having creepy crawlies that will never leave.”

I reached across the table, taking her hand into mine. “Hey, stop worrying. I’ll keep you safe.”

“You will, huh?”

“Yeah, I plan on it.”

“That means you’ll need to camp out at my place.”

Her playful side kept my cock twitching, so much so I was thrown by the sensations. Maybe I’d drag her into the bathroom, fucking her brains out. Oh, great. The vision of doing that reminded me how bad I was at this kind of thing.

“I was only teasing, Jake. I’m not trying to push anything. While I’ve enjoyed seeing another side of Mr. Grinch, I have no illusions of grandeur about what we’re sharing.”

I pulled my hand away, placing my palm against my chest. “Ouch. That hurt.”

“Very funny. I’m serious. After the last two years, I’m not certain I want to be seriously involved with anyone. Maybe we should change the subject. I just hope your friend can catch the killer.”

“He will.” Or so I hoped. Annoyance at the entire situation tightened my chest, so much so that with every breath I took, another ache formed.

“Tell me about your brother.”

“He’s a good guy, although we don’t always see eye to eye. I hate that my father has influenced him to this degree.”

“Ah, there’s the guilt I know and love, Mr. Grinch. How old is your brother?”

“A couple years younger than me.”

“And what are you, fifty?” She laughed again, pressing the back of her hand across her lips.

“You are so funny tonight. I’m thirty-two.”

“Not so old. What I’m trying to say is that he’s old enough to make his own decisions. You can’t hold his hand any longer or it will keep a rift between the two of you.”

She had a way of putting things into perspective. “How’d you get so smart?”

“Born with brains and beauty, I guess.”

“Tell me more about Stephen,” I said after the waiter finally brought another scotch.

“Let’s see. I might not be good at dating either but that’s what you want to talk about? My ex? I’m not grilling you about Barbie,” Cassandra teased as she turned her head in my direction.

“I told you I wasn’t good at dating. I’m out of practice.”

“I don’t know. From where I sit, you clean up pretty good and you happen to be a wonderful conversationalist.”

“You really are a bad liar.” I’d said maybe five sentences since arriving, merely prompting her to tell me more about herself.

“No, you do look hot in those black jeans.” She laughed but I sensed her thoughts were as muddled about her past as mine. “Why do you want to know?”

“Because he treated you badly and I don’t like it. In fact, I won’t tolerate it.”

“I’m here now, Jake. He’s across the country. It’s over and being here with you is like a breath of fresh air.”

I snarled, which seemed to catch her by surprise. “I still don’t like it.”

“You don’t need to be my champion. I can take care of myself.”

“You don’t understand. No one will ever touch you again.” Great. I’d really turned into a barbarian. It almost surprised me how possessive I felt about her, but the feeling was something I couldn’t ignore. “So tell me about him and what happened.”

“Only if you promise not to catch a flight to DC and kill him.”

“I ain’t promising anything, sweetheart.” I smiled, but my statement wasn’t necessarily far from the truth.

She sighed, scrunching up her face. “Stephen was a womanizer and a bully, which was something I didn’t see at first. He enjoyed wining and dining me, which I fell for like an idiot. When I realized his true personality, I was in too deep to the relationship. We were living together by that point in his place. When he asked me to marry him, I said yes. After we were engaged, things started to get dicey. Relationships aren’t easy and I know that but when it turned out I was the only one willing to work on it, I became bitchy in his opinion. That led him into infidelity, which he blamed me for of course. On the night I found him in bed with a friend of mine, I’d also learned about my mother’s death. Things got ugly between us so I called off the engagement and left, which meant I had nowhere to go. Jessica was a godsend. Two days later after a conversation with my mother’s attorney, I made plans on coming here. Peachy, huh?”

“Jesus. What a fucking asshole. Maybe I should catch a flight.”

“Oh, he can be and no, you aren’t. He’s very powerful in DC, the kind of guy who usually gets what he wants.”

“Do you think that scares me?”

“Jake. Stop it. You wanted to hear the story so I’m telling you. He was happy the relationship ended. He has a stunning blonde on his arm at all times, someone who will kowtow to his needs. That’s dandy with me. I wasn’t interested in being his arm candy and that was part of the problem for him. After I learned what he did, I ended the relationship.”

“But you’re fine with being my arm candy.” In gazing into her eyes, I could tell she was ready to move on with her life. I only hoped I was.

“That remains to be seen.” She blew me a kiss, still swaying to the music. “Enough about him. Do you have any night clubs in Depoe Bay?”

“Why?”

“Because I love to go dancing.”

“I have two left feet. I don’t think two pool halls and a family friendly bar count, huh?”

“Ugh.” Cass wrinkled her nose. “I guess I’ll have to put in a dance floor at the winery.”

I took another sip of my drink, enjoying just watching her. When she slid from the chair, heading toward the railing overlooking the ocean, she continued dancing, lost in the music. It was impossible to keep my eyes off her, the way she commanded the entire patio. There wasn’t a single man who wasn’t hungering to take what belonged to me.

Whether she truly could belong to me wasn’t something I was willing to think about tonight. I’d move into her place, even on a temporary basis, until the killer was found, or I managed to hunt down the asshole responsible for threatening her. My money was on Malcolm, whether he made the phone calls or hired someone. With everything she’d told me about Jeremy’s less than stellar visit, I’d win the bet I made to myself easily.

I took another sip of my drink. The small band playing inside switched the music from jazz to something even softer, a song I knew. When one of the guys started to sing, Cassandra swayed her hips more seductively. My cock pressed tightly against my jeans, enough so I my chest was tight. I rose to a standing position, moving behind her. When I placed my hands on her hips, she took a deep and very audible breath.

“The Lady in Red,” she cooed. “One of my favorite songs.”

“You just happen to be my lady in red.”

“You’re very possessive.”

“You have no idea.”

I moved with her, sliding my hands down her hips to her thighs, digging my fingers in. Everything about her was seductive, a beautiful reminder of everything I’d ignored for far too long. I nuzzled my face into the nape of her neck, drinking in her incredible exotic perfume. My balls were aching, the need to feel her naked body against mine becoming a powerful aphrodisiac.

She pushed herself away from the railing, turning around to face me. The moon was already making an appearance as if rising from the ocean waters, the backdrop everything that romance was made of. Having her in my arms could make a hardcore man like me believe in love.

As she slipped her arms around my neck, she tried to take the lead. I lifted a single eyebrow and she purred in response. When I pressed one hand against the small of her back, guiding her away from the railing, she shimmied her hips back and forth. Together we were able to block out the rest of the world, only the music and the moment mattering. I’d never been one for this kind of thing, but with her, everything and anything was possible.

Her breathing remained ragged, her eyes never blinking and in those moments as the beautiful song continued, I allowed myself to be lost in the moment and the woman. She tangled her fingers in my hair, pursing her lips as I lowered my head.

There were no words to say, no need for any. At least not right now. Having her in my arms felt right, as if I'd been waiting for my Cinnamon Girl to come along my entire life. The moment the song ended, she rose onto her tiptoes and I brushed my lips across hers.

Within seconds, several people outside clapped in appreciation.

She laughed softly and I didn't need any light to know her cheeks were turning red. "I thought you had two left feet."

"I do. Trust me."

"I do trust you. More than you know." She backed away but I took her hand, leading her to the table. "I'm going to freshen up."

"Dessert?"

"Something chocolate."

As she backed away, she kept her eyes on me until forced to spin around. As she faded into the crowd heading inside, I took a deep breath. I didn't just have it bad for this girl. I was falling hard for her.

Fuck me.

CHAPTER 22



Cassandra

By the time I made it into the bathroom, goosebumps had popped down both arms. I stood in front of the long counter in front of the mirror, staring at my reflection. Dinner and wine then dancing with the hottest man in the restaurant. What more could a girl ask for?

As I stared into my reflection, I was forced to face the fact I liked Jake a little too much. In fact, it was entirely possible that I was falling in love with him. Nope. That wasn't going to happen. Going from enemies to insta-lust then love in the blink of an eye? This wasn't some ridiculous romance novel like I read every so often. While Jake was all alpha male, I wasn't even entirely certain that's what I wanted.

"Girl. You need to get a grip."

I also wasn't certain talking to myself at this point was in my best interest either. I certainly didn't want to be labeled a crazy person. For about a million reasons, my legs felt like noodles, which wasn't like me. The dance had been the reason. *You go, girl. Blame the dance and not the man you were with.*

Everything about Jake surprised me and that wasn't an easy feat. I'd seen far too many idiots, selfish and difficult people in DC while carrying out my work as vice president of the company. I'd had my share of dates before hooking up with my ex and in comparison to the selfish jerks I'd come into contact with, Jake's grumpiness was child's play. He had

layers like everyone else. It was all about peeling them back carefully, allowing him to believe that he was the one doing it.

He was also kind even if he didn't want anyone to know. I eased my fingers to my lips, inhaling at the same time. He was wearing cologne tonight, returning to his house to change while I'd freshened up. His scent had permeated my skin, creating the most incredible feeling of being wanted. Laughing, I glanced at my reflection again, eager to curl up in front of another fire and just be for the night.

Maybe coming here was a good decision after all.

I used the bathroom, taking my time to wash my hands. I had a feeling his patience was running out by now. As I tossed the paper towel into the trash, the quiet flutter of my heart could be felt in the pulse in my neck. I opened the door, not paying much attention to where I was going.

When I felt a presence standing right in front of me, I expected it to be Jake showcasing his lack of patience. The moment I lifted my head, I held my breath.

"Ms. Dayne. How amazing to run into you at my favorite restaurant."

"Malcolm Robinson. I've heard a lot about you and none of it is good."

He laughed, but the sound drove a series of shivers down my spine. "Now, why would you say that? I'm a simple businessman."

"How interesting, Mr. Robinson, since you threatened my mother." He seemed surprised I knew. "You see, I get her mail. You sent her a very nasty letter."

"Ah. Margaret. Such a lovely person. What I sent her was a reminder of the contract she entered into."

"I found the unsigned contract in her things. She wouldn't go into business with a troll like you."

"Tsk, tsk. And here I thought we were having a polite conversation. It was such a shame how she died."

“Yes, cancer is a bitch.” I didn’t need bright lights to know he was using her death to continue trying his extortion tactics.

“She was a remarkable lady as well as a shrewd businesswoman.”

“Why? Because she refused to sell to the likes of you?” There went my caustic mouth again, but my hackles were already raised. What the hell was he really doing here? Had he followed me?

“Quite the contrary. I offered her a decent deal, which she accepted. She drove a hard bargain. For that, she got top dollar. Now, I guess the proceeds will go to you.”

The man had a screw loose or was hoping I was that gullible.

“No, she didn’t, Malcolm. As I said, I found the original contract you sent to her. It was unsigned. It will remain that way. Period. That’s why you threatened her because she realized you were nothing but a smarmy businessman.”

“I don’t make threats, Ms. Dayne. And I didn’t take you for the type of woman to indulge in insults.”

“Well, you don’t know anything about me, Malcolm.”

“I know you’re running from your life in DC. I know you have an abusive boyfriend who will stop at nothing to get you back. I’d certain he’d love to know where you landed.”

The fucker was trying to get under my skin. I fisted my hands but managed to keep my smile. “Then you know my ex-boyfriend is not in my life any longer, Malcolm. His choice. Now, scuttle off to your rathole. I have a dinner date to return to.”

I stepped aside from the man, determined not to let him bother me.

“Ms. Dayne. I’d be very careful about getting on my bad side.”

I stopped short but I refused to turn around, merely tipping my head. “And here I thought you didn’t make threats. Ah, yes, you get your minions to do that for you. Don’t you?”

When he walked closer, I bristled but managed to keep from racing away. “As I said. Be very careful. There are some bad things going on in this town, heinous acts that I would hate for you to become involved in. I would hate to see you get hurt or worse, end up like your mother.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” I couldn’t help myself, spinning around and confronting him. He continued to wear the sneer on his face, the horrible lighting giving him an ominous glow. “What. Are. You. Talking. About?”

He took a deep breath, daring to step closer. The stench of his cologne made me nauseous. “All I’m saying is that I wouldn’t want you to end up like your mother.”

“Did you do something to her?” He was now enjoying that he’d managed to get under my skin.

“I protect my business at all costs, Ms. Dayne. That’s something you will learn as have the others in this town. You can either fall into line or I’ll make certain that I destroy you.”

Fuck the asshole. I almost said the words but thought better of it. I did everything I could to plant a smile on my face. He was a master of intimidation and it was obvious he did have at least some people in this town wrapped around his little finger. Well, that wasn’t going to include me.

“You obviously don’t know me very well, Malcolm. Not only am I a tough girl but I don’t scare easily.”

“You’ve been warned, Ms. Dayne.”

Oh my God. “I appreciate the warning, Malcolm, but I have my own personal bodyguard.” I gave him the same nasty onceover before turning around and forcing myself to walk away.

He chuckled. “You mean Jake Spencer? What a pity. He’s a man who cracks under pressure. Why don’t you ask him about the girl he allowed to die? Then you tell me if he can protect you against any evils in this world.”

I’d had it. “You fucking...” The moment I spun around, I fisted my mouth, furious that I’d allowed the asshole to get to me.

“By the way, how is that gorgeous dog of your?” He laughed and I was frozen to the spot. Oh, my God. I’d been right.

After smiling, he walked away into the shadows, and I didn’t try to stop him. Only then did I realize I was holding my breath all over again. I was numb inside, sick to my stomach. Every inch of my skin was crawling. This couldn’t be happening.

His words lingered in the back of my mind while I tried to maintain some sense of rationality. The jerk was doing nothing more than trying to get under my skin, using pressure to have me question everything including my worth. What was he talking about with my mother? Had I missed something? I was sick inside, hating myself for falling into his trap.

I’d dealt with more powerful jerks than him. In fact, his threat only strengthened my resolve. What I didn’t like was that he was continuing to spread rumors about Jake. When I reached the door leading to the patio, I turned to see if Malcolm had followed me. After scanning the crowd, I was satisfied he’d moved on, but for how long?

I had to control my anger and the remaining fear. The last thing I wanted was for Jake to know anything was wrong. The evening was perfect. I refused to allow Malcolm to destroy it.

Get it together, girl. He wants you on edge.

I took another deep breath, shoring my resolve.

The moment I walked outside, I was pulled into another vacuum of just how stunning the rugged man was. I allowed that to take me away from the moment before, taking a few additional deep breaths. Jake seemed more relaxed than I was used to seeing him and I was determined not to ruin the evening. He’d pushed back his chair, one leg crossed over the other. The light breeze tousling his hair was as sexy as the rest of him. I’d obviously spent way too much time dating pretty boys who preferred manicures versus getting their hands dirty.

I moved to the table, placing my hands on his shoulders, massaging the tightness even though my entire body ached

from tension. I glanced around me, scanning the crowd, the creepy crawlies remaining.

“Mmm... That feels good,” he said. “I could allow you to do that all night.”

“Only if you’re a good boy.”

“Ha. That’s never going to happen.”

I laughed but the sound was fake. I heard it. He heard it, the man tensing even more.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, of course not,” I managed, but my words came a little too quickly. “Muscles aching from all that he-man exercise?”

“Very funny and yes. It’s been a long time since I’ve used certain tendons.”

“Maybe you need a hot shower.” I squeezed my fingers around his muscles, moving one hand to his neck, sliding the other over his shoulder. The sick feeling remained in my stomach. So did the questions.

He wrapped his hand around mine, pulling it to his lips. There was such a tenderness in the man that his subtle gestures were what took my breath away. The explosion of heat alone was enough to keep me tingling.

“I think a shower is exactly what I need,” he answered, the husky sound entirely too thrilling.

I lifted my head, taking a deep breath as the tingles became more intense. The sight of Malcolm staring at us was enough to rile me, but this time his glare was malevolent.

“Why don’t we just go?” I suggested, trying to keep my tone light. If I didn’t, I had a feeling there’d be an altercation inside the restaurant and that’s the last thing either one of us needed.

“I ordered dessert.”

“We can take it to go. I’d really like to get in that shower.”

He turned his head, his expression questioning. “O-kay. That’s fine with me if you’re certain.”

“Oh, I’m certain.” When I looked again, Malcolm had disappeared, but I knew he remained lurking in the shadows. What was his point? Just to terrify me? It wasn’t going to work, at least not completely. However, maybe I’d need to do a little investigation into the man myself. Why was it that a hint of fear remained?

“Okay. What’s going on?” He pulled me around to face him.

“Why would anything be wrong?”

“Did something happen?” He kept one hand on mine, using the other to try to flag the waiter.

“No, of course not.”

He immediately stood, turning slightly so he could see the main restaurant. “What is it? Do not lie to me, Cass. Did someone bother you?”

I chewed on my lower lip. “I’ll tell you later.”

The waiter suddenly appeared. “What can I get for you, sir?”

“The check.”

“I have it right here.” The young man handed the bill to Jake and within seconds, he’d pulled out several bills.

“Keep the change,” Jake all but snarled.

“Thank you, sir. Have a good evening.”

The dessert was all but forgotten and I couldn’t care less. A lump had formed in my throat. Jake pulled me closer. “You will tell me now.”

“No. Come on. Let’s just go.” I managed to break away from him, moving quickly toward the door leading into the restaurant. Only when I felt Jake’s hand on my back did I feel a little bit at ease. There were so many people inside, the music louder than before, or maybe I was drowning in fear that I’d tried to shove aside. By the time we made it to the door heading to the parking lot, I was close to panicking.

Jake said nothing as he walked us through the several rows of cars to his truck. I continually scanned the parking lot, the same eerie feeling keeping me on edge.

He stopped me only a few feet away from his Ram, pulling me around to face him. “What is going on, Cass? You’re shivering.”

I shook my head. “Malcolm was in the restaurant.”

“What?”

“Yeah, he threatened me. He said crazy things like my mother’s death hadn’t been from cancer. He mentioned Moose. He did that to my baby. I know it. God.” I hated the terrified sound of my voice.

“What did you say?” He wrapped his hand around the back of my neck, his entire face like stone.

“He knows things about me, including about Stephen and my life in DC. He also said that you killed someone in a fire. I know he was just trying to get under my skin. Unfortunately, he did. What does he want other than the winery?”

I’d never seen the expression on Jake’s face before. It was at that moment I knew he was capable of killing Malcolm just for threatening me.

“Stay right here,” he said. “Take the keys and lock yourself inside.”

“Oh, no, you don’t. He’s not worth it.”

“You have no idea how much power he holds in this town. I’ll protect you, but he won’t stop at threatening you inside a restaurant. This shit will escalate. He should have been taken off his pedestal years ago.”

“Don’t let him have that power over you, Jake.”

He remained bristled, scanning the parking lot in his attempt to protect me. “He’s not going to do this to you.”

“Is there any truth to the fact my mother didn’t die from the horrible disease?”

The tension remained in the man and after he took a deep breath, he peered down at me, cupping my face. “I don’t know, Cinnamon Girl. I’m not going to lie to you that I had suspicions.”

I clung to his arm, my heart aching more than it did the day I learned of her death. “Why? And why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t tell you because there isn’t a single person in town who would believe me, and you didn’t need that baggage. The reason I don’t buy her sudden death was that we were together the day before. She was fine. She made me lunch. We shared a scotch after I was finished with work. She had plans for the future. Hell, she was going to try and get you to come out for a week or so. But there was something she was holding back from me. I could sense it. She was tense, constantly looking out the window.”

“Maybe he’d already threatened her.” I looked down, struggling so much with the fact I’d allowed distance to get between us.

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’ve had this nagging since she died but even my buddy the sheriff thinks I’ve lost it.”

“Given what he just said to me, I would buy it. What am I going to do?”

“What you’ve been doing. Building her legacy, the one she wanted you to have. She adored you, Cass. You need to know that.” Jake’s words and the tone of his voice were comforting, but I remained sick inside, furious with myself for wasting so much time. He leaned down, pressing and keeping his lips against my forehead. I kept my fingers tightly woven around his long-sleeve shirt, fighting the hatred and guilt.

“Well. Well. If it isn’t the happy couple.”

I knew instantly it was the sound of Malcolm’s voice. So did Jake. Before I had a chance to prevent Jake from doing something stupid, he pulled away from me, charging the man who’d accosted me with complete rage.

“Jake!” I yelled, but it was too late, his brutal swing connecting, Malcolm going down hard against the pavement. “No. No!”

Jake jerked the man up by fisting his shirt, yanking him to his feet. “You motherfucker. You threatened her.” He issued two

savage punches, one to the jaw and one to the man's gut. After another punch, he tossed Malcolm onto the ground.

"No. Jake. Stop!" My screech was heard by other people leaving the restaurant, several customers running in our direction. I tugged his arm, using all my upper body strength to keep him from killing the asshole. "You can't do this."

Malcolm lay moaning on the ground, both hands surrounding his nose.

"Get up, you fuck!" Jake roared, not paying any attention to what I was saying.

"Jake. Don't. Stop it," someone from the crowd yelled as he raced toward us.

"You broke my nose!" Malcolm shouted for effect, the bastard. I'd seen shit like this before and it never ended well. "You'll pay for this."

"Yeah? You keep threatening me. Go ahead. But you won't threaten Cassandra ever again!"

When Jake started to reach for Malcolm once again, the unknown man kept him from doing so.

"Jake. Listen to me. That's what Mr. Robinson wants," the customer said quietly in Jake's ear.

Jake's chest was heaving, his jaw clenched. "Yeah? Well, the fucker deserves it and a lot more."

Two other customers helped Malcolm to his feet while the first man remained between the two.

"Stop it. Just stop it!" I snapped. "Don't you see? That's what he wanted."

Malcolm dropped his hands, the evil look I'd seen on his face punctuated by a sneer. While blood dripped from his nose and I had no doubt the man's lip would swell, he wasn't worse for the wear. "I'm calling the sheriff. You're going to prison for assault."

"Fuck you, Malcolm. If you dare come near Tangerine Sunset or bother Cassandra ever again, I will kill you myself."

“Stop,” I said under my breath even though I knew Jake wouldn’t listen to me.

Malcolm kept the grin on his face, immediately pulling out his phone.

“Just go, Jake,” the first man said under his breath. “Get out of here. Okay?”

Jake flitted his eyes at the man, nodding only once. “Sure, Wally.” He took ahold of my elbow, leading me around the truck to the passenger side, using the fob to unlock it. His tension remained, the anger more intense than I’d experienced with the man.

I glanced at Malcolm again and shook my head. “Do you really think he’s calling the sheriff?”

“I’ll deal with it if he is.”

“You can’t solve everything with violence.”

“Try and stop me, Cass.” Jake didn’t take his eyes off Malcolm as he pushed me to climb in.

While I did, another series of shivers coursed down my spine. We’d played into whatever treachery Malcolm was attempting.

As soon as Jake jumped in, he started the engine, revving it for a full thirty seconds before throwing the gear into drive, able to pull forward. When he floored it leaving the restaurant’s parking lot, I placed my hand on his arm once again to try to calm him.

“Please. Just stop it. He didn’t do anything but try and intimidate me.”

“He needs to be stopped!”

“I know that but it’s not going to happen this way. Just slow down. Please?”

He shot me a look and said nothing but eased his foot off the gas. “Did he hurt you in any way?”

“If you mean physically, no. But what he said bothers me.”

“There was no suspicion raised with your mother’s death.”

“Which means there was no autopsy. I get it.”

“You could exhume her body.”

I closed my eyes, leaning my head back. “I don’t know, Jake. What good would that do? It’s been over a month.”

“If she was poisoned, there would be traces left.”

God. The thought of doing something so extreme would be torturous. “I’ll think about it. I believe he was using that to frighten me.”

“Maybe.” Jake glared into the rearview mirror, his fingers firmly planted around the steering wheel.

The darkness of the evening seemed more oppressive as he continued driving. Most businesses were already closed, only a few cars on the street. The quiet settling between us was as unnerving if not more so than what had just occurred. In trying to make sense of Malcolm’s point, my mind drifted from what I’d heard about the murders to the accusation the jerk had leveled against Jake.

“You mentioned the fire before. What happened, Jake? Why would that man think you had anything to do with a girl’s death?” I slowly turned my head to watch his reaction. “That’s what has really been eating you alive. Right?”

He didn’t say anything at first, his eyes remaining locked on the road. But as he slowed down for a red light, he lowered his gaze to the console then slowly to my face. “Because it’s true. A little girl is dead because of me.”

CHAPTER 23



*J*ake

I'd always known the past would collide with the present. I just hadn't intended it to happen this way. Still, it was something I needed to deal with, especially since I'd promised her the truth. She deserved no less.

I remained with the engine idling for a few seconds after the light turned green. I wasn't entirely certain what to say to her. The fact Malcolm had used the excuse of the fire to try to intimidate her was about the worst thing the man had done over the years and he'd done plenty to alienate folks in town. His father had far too much control, Malcolm doing everything to follow in the man's footsteps.

It was obvious Malcolm would stop at nothing to get his hands on the B & B. I'd heard through the grapevine the man was attempting to have a casino approved, but he also had other irons in the fire. Now I believed he was capable of bodily harm to get what he wanted.

"What does that mean, Jake?" Cassandra asked a few seconds later. Her quiet calm was almost as unnerving as the events a few moments before.

"It's complicated."

"Everything is at this point. You shouldn't have punched him. You just gave him fuel and he'll use it. I know men like him. Hell, I lived with a man who took advantage of people for two years. I know what I'm talking about."

“Maybe I made a mistake, but no one threatens you.”

“Jesus. I can take care of myself. I know that’s foreign to you but a man like Malcolm Robinson isn’t going to get the better of me. That’s my mother’s property and he can’t have it.”

“While I admire your conviction, as I told you before, the man has far too much influence and power in this town.”

“Then we fight it the only way we can, with laws.”

I couldn’t help laughing, glancing in the rearview mirror to ensure we weren’t being followed. At this point, I wouldn’t put anything past Malcolm or the men he had working for him. “The entire Robinson family flies under the radar and always have. They break laws at will, bending them to their needs.”

“And your sheriff buddy won’t help?”

“He can’t, Cass. His hands are tied. He’s tried and almost lost his job attempting to bring the Robinsons down. The people on the city council really run the town, but they’re paid well for their assistance and their silence.”

“Like Jeremy.”

“Exactly. They are closely knit, a tight little bond.”

“They’re taking kickbacks,” she said, half laughing.

“It happens everywhere but in a small town, there’s no chance of beating it. They feed off each other. Snakes in the water.”

“So you’re telling me I should give up? Just sell the Tangerine Sunset?”

“No. I’m telling you that we’re in for a fight. I’ll do what I can to help you but it’s an uphill battle.”

“One that’s worth it to me. If we find evidence of what you’ve told me, we will win.”

I wanted to tell her there was no chance, but I knew the girl well enough to realize that would only spur her on.

“What about this fire? I need to know,” she said, the tremor in her voice keeping my anger fresh. The memories evoked were ones that I could no longer ignore.

“It means I couldn’t save the little girl. The fire burned hot at the school. There were propane tanks located near where the fire originated. I knew the risks and ignored all the safety precautions, determined to save her. I tried to get to her but there were several small explosions, parts of the roof collapsing all around me. If I’d have allowed my captain to handle the situation the way he was trained to do, maybe she would have remained alive.” I finally pressed his foot on the accelerator after hearing a horn blast.

As I rolled through the intersection, the touch of her hand on my arm had a calming effect. She was the one who deserved comfort at this point. She also deserved to have a hero taking care of her. If only I could be that man.

“My God, Jake. It was an accident.”

“That’s not the way the fire inspector saw it or my captain for that matter. I risked the lives of every firefighter who was there that day in their effort to save me.”

“That’s how you received your scars.”

I pounded my fist on the steering wheel. “I deserved to die. That little girl perished because I hesitated. I couldn’t go through a wall of flames.” The hatred I’d felt for myself came rushing to the surface all over again. I knew that’s what Malcolm had wanted, to shut me down so I wouldn’t be there to protect Cass. The bastard thought he knew me so well. He knew nothing about me or my strengths. If he wanted a fight, that’s exactly what he’d get.

She took several deep breaths, squeezing me with her fingers. “You need to forgive yourself.”

“Yeah, well, the entire town doesn’t think so.”

“That’s not true and you know it.”

“What I know is that I tried to be a hero and failed. I deserved to be the one who died in that fire.”

“That’s just not true. You’re my hero and you deserve to live your life.”

“No, baby. I’m no one’s hero. The sooner you get that out of your mind the better. However, you’re right in that we won’t allow Malcolm to win.”

“Then what do we do?”

I thought about her question as I made the turn down the street where the winery was located. “We fight fire with fire.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning we’ll try and gather the evidence you talked about. One step at a time. It’s not something I’m good at but I’ll try.”

Cassandra exhaled as if relieved. “Good. We’ll lay out a plan just like we talked about. My friend from DC might be able to help. Her father is with the FBI. I don’t know if he can do anything but it’s worth a try.”

“That’ll be tough but exactly what’s needed. They’ve had the town in such a stranglehold it’s pathetic. I’ll get you what I know on Malcolm’s organization.”

“I wish my mother would have told me what was going on. Maybe she left some other boxes that I haven’t found. Maybe she found something on him.”

I threw her a look as I pulled down the long driveway. “Maybe. She didn’t tell you because she didn’t want to worry you. She knew you were busy.”

“Busy. Something I’ll never forgive myself for. What else did my mother say, anything about Malcolm?”

“Your mother was private. She also had pride and didn’t want to appear as if she needed anything from anyone.”

“I thought you two were friends.”

“We were to a point, Cass. However, she was motherly, including to me. She spent more time trying to drag me out of my shell. She was that kind of person.”

“Yeah, she was. Is there anything your friend can do help with Malcolm?”

“I doubt it. Besides, he’s got his hands full with the recent murder.” As soon as I threw the gear into park, she opened the

door then hesitated. “What is it?”

She shifted uncomfortably in the seat. “The school where the fire occurred. What did it turn into?”

“Several businesses. The school was rebuilt but on another location.”

“Are these businesses owned by Malcolm?”

“No, even though the fire was suspicious, it was ruled an accident. However, I checked on that at the time. The way the fire burned bothered me. A group of investors bought the property from the owner. They’re from out of town with no connection to the Robinson organization.”

“Are you sure about that?” She tipped her head, a smile on her face. “Haven’t you ever heard of dummy corporations? If there is a dummy company, they might have it locked down but maybe they got sloppy since they believe no one can break the thick veil they have wrapped around their power.”

“Whatever you do, just be careful and you’re not doing a single thing without my involvement. Do you hear me?”

“Why, yes, sir.”

Chuckling, I studied the main house, the lights shining on the darkened windows. We’d left a light on for Moose, the warm glow barely peeking through the open blinds on one window. “Still, I wasn’t born yesterday. I traced the lineage of the company as far as it would go.”

“I’m sure you did. It can’t hurt to have another pair of eyes or two on it. Make sure and provide all the information you have. I’m going to have my friend check it out herself. Can’t hurt. And the murders. What if the two girls are connected by properties somehow?”

“What are you getting at?” I cut the engine, yanking the keys from the ignition.

“I don’t know what I’m thinking other than there must be a connection. There are too many coincidences.”

“We’re not going to solve anything tonight. I’m going to take you up on that shower.” I grinned before opening the door,

trying to make light out of the situation. If Malcolm had resorted to murder, then it meant he was desperate. But for what reason? Nothing added up. As soon as I climbed out, the sound of crunching gravel assaulted my senses. Moose started barking right after that, which drowned out the noise, but I had no doubt Malcolm had made good on his threat.

“He called the cops,” Cassandra said from beside me.

“That’s my guess.”

“Don’t do anything rash.”

“Me? Rash?” I shoved my hands into my pockets, leaning against my truck. Seeing Bart’s car, I felt a sense of relief. He knew how Malcolm was. I only hoped he wouldn’t feel pressured into carting me off to jail, if only for one night. I would need to control my temper.

Bart slowly pulled the car to a stop, taking his time to get out. He even made his visit official by placing the hat on his head. As he walked closer, he glanced from Cass back to me. “Good evening, folks.”

“Cut the crap, Bart. I know Malcolm called you.”

“Yep, but he wasn’t the only one. Two more calls right after it. It seems you were disturbing the peace. The word assault was used as well.” Bart folded his arms, glancing at the house.

“If anyone assaulted anyone, it was that pompous jerk,” Cassandra said as she glared at him.

“We haven’t met. You must be Cassandra Dayne. It’s good to meet you. I’m sorry it’s under these circumstances. Do you want to tell me your version, cause Malcolm acted as if the attack came out of nowhere.”

“That’s bullshit,” Cassandra snapped. “He threatened me then followed up into the parking lot.”

Bart shifted his eyes to me briefly. “He threatened you?”

“Yep.”

“What did he say?”

“That I should watch out in that there were some evil things happening in this town. That Jake wasn’t a good man. That he would manage to get the property out from under me. He asked me how my dog was. He was the one who broke into my house. I know it.”

Bart studied her for a few seconds, then glanced in my direction. “Unfortunately, if that’s what he said to you, then it’s really not a threat. Margaret was in discussions with him regarding selling the property.”

“But she pulled out. I have an unsigned contract,” she insisted. “I also have a threatening letter he sent to my mother as well as notes in her handwriting that she was receiving strange phone calls, just like I’ve been receiving.”

Bart appeared uncomfortable. “Jake mentioned that, but the calls likely came from a burner phone.”

“Meaning there’s no chance of pinning anything on him,” she continued. “This bastard does have you by the balls. What a shame. I’m not falling into that trap. That’s not who my mother raised.”

Bart sighed, appearing more exhausted than before. “I hate to tell you this, but your mother did sign the contract with Malcolm. I couldn’t believe it either, but she did.”

Cassandra gasped, shaking her head. “No way. I don’t believe it. Why wouldn’t she tell me? Her notes indicated she couldn’t stand the man.”

“That’s not possible,” I intervened, remembering what he’d told me before. I couldn’t fathom Margaret getting into business with the man. Unless her death was indeed imminent.

“Look, I don’t know the particulars, Ms. Dayne, other than the paperwork was filed at the courthouse just this morning.”

“You saw the contract?” she countered.

“Yeah, I did. I’m going to guess you’ll be served with eviction papers within ten days, although the systems are slow right now. Maybe your mom knew that you wouldn’t return and didn’t want to worry you,” Bart explained. “Or maybe she was trying to ensure that she’d get top dollar, which she did.”

I remained livid, wishing I'd done more than just punch Malcolm in the face a couple of times. "That's crazy, Bart, and you know it. Margaret loved this place. I think she was murdered and her signature forged."

"Whoa," Bart cautioned. "I don't think it's in your best interest to throw out accusations of that nature. I've got my hands full right now and the last thing I need is to be forced to come here to arrest your sorry ass."

I could see the look of amusement on my buddy's face the moment Cassandra stepped in front of him. "You will not take him away to jail. If you do that, I will file a complaint with the city. And I won't stop there. I'll have a discussion with the press. And I'll be filing charges against Mr. Robinson as well." She planted her hands on her hips, glaring at him as if Bart was the enemy.

"It's okay, Cass. He's just pressured by the mayor," I intervened.

Bart scratched his head. "You did say she was one tough lady."

"Yep," I mused. "I did. This is tame."

"I'm not taking him in, Ms. Dayne. But I can't make any promises given Malcolm is buddies with one of the judges in town. I'd lay low if I were you. Don't go spitting off accusations. Your best bet is getting a copy of that signed contract. You can always head to the county and make that happen."

"Trust me," she said. "I will do that."

Bart nodded. "Stay out of trouble. This is the last thing you need."

"Always."

"I'm heading inside," she said. "Don't be too long."

There was no doubt she was absorbed in the news, upset with what Bart had told her. After she'd gone inside, I confronted him. "What the hell was that about?"

"I had to let her know what I found. You know it wouldn't be fair otherwise."

“You’re not telling me something.” I knew the man far too well. He was definitely holding something back intentionally.

“You know I’ve been trying to secure evidence on Robinson for years. I don’t need any interference.”

“You do think he has something to do with the murders.”

He shook his head. “Let it go.”

I shook my head. “I can’t just let it go, Bart. Whatever the hell is going on, she’s in the middle of it. His threats scared her tonight, which is what he’s trying to do. My guess is that he didn’t expect the daughter to arrive in town, which foiled his easy plan. Right? She won’t say it, but I know her well enough by now. She’s rattled.”

“That’s how he gets people to sell. Just try not to aggravate the situation. Let me do my job. I’m telling you, not asking you.”

“Goddamn you. Let me in on this.”

“You’re right in that Malcolm is dangerous. I’m sorry that Cassandra is in the middle of the ugliness. I don’t trust Malcolm any more than you do, but he has a team of attorneys at his beck and call.”

“Yeah, I know. Slimy attorneys. Don’t underestimate her or me for that matter. She’s tough but I’m a son of a bitch.”

“Damn it, Jake.”

“You’re onto something with Malcolm. Aren’t you?”

“How many times do I need to tell you that I can’t talk about the case?”

“Fine. She’s special and I will not allow anything to happen to her. I’ll handle this my way.”

He hissed. “It’s good to see you happy but if I need to toss your ass in jail to keep you out of it, I will. I’m dead serious.”

I shoved my hands into my pockets. Whatever he was doing was bigger than the both of us. “What about the cigarette butt?”

“Nothing on it yet. I told you the lab is backed up. Even if it has Malcolm’s DNA on it, that’s not a smoking gun.”

“I know. Did you dig into her past?”

“She’s squeaky clean and had an incredible reputation in her industry.”

“Just like I told you. The boyfriend?”

“He’s got a powerful family and a strong constituent list. He’s an attorney with connections and the rumor mill is that he’ll win the Senate election in a landslide. But there’s nothing there with him either, at least that I could find.”

That all but eliminated her ex as a suspect. “Keep digging. What about the murder Malcolm supposedly committed years ago?”

“Stop playing detective. Go take care of her and enjoy. I need to get back to work. No fighting.”

As he walked toward his car, I remained where I was.

“Incidentally,” he said as he opened his door, “I heard you hit the ice.”

“Goddamn this town.”

He laughed and climbed inside. What in God’s name was he hiding from me? Whatever it was had the potential to blow up at any time.

I waited until he pulled out before heading inside. Moose had stopped barking and didn’t greet me when I came in, which was unusual. I walked into the kitchen, finding it empty as well. She had to be upstairs.

As soon as I made it to the landing, I noticed the light was on in the master bedroom. By the time I walked into the room, my cock was already throbbing. The woman had a way of doing that do me.

Her shoes were on the floor, her sexy red dress as well, both leaving a trail to the open door of the bathroom. Moose was on the bed, lifting his head as I peered down at him.

“What do you think, boy? Should I walk in?”

His whine was my affirmation.

“That’s what I think.” I quickly undressed, leaving my clothes at the end of the bed. As soon as I walked inside, I could tell she sensed my presence. When I opened the shower door, she turned around to face me, her eyes slowly drifting down the length of my body.

“I’ve missed you. I need you. I can’t wait another minute.”

“Impatient.”

“You have no idea.”

She was already wet, her long hair hanging in wet curls. As she beckoned me with a single finger, I shook my head. She enticed me even more, rolling the tips of her index fingers around her taut nipples.

“Be careful, little girl. You already figured out I’m a very bad man.”

“Yes, you do own a Harley. I like big, bad men. Didn’t you figure that out already?” She rubbed her palm to her smooth pussy and I couldn’t take my eyes off her. The moment she slipped her hand between her legs, I whistled.

“You’re going to give me a heart attack.”

“You’re a big strapping man. I doubt that.” She thrust two fingers inside her tight channel and I remained standing like some big lug, mesmerized not only by her beauty but by the salacious act she was performing. As her teeth stretched over her plump bottom lip, ragged moans erupting from her throat, I wrapped my hand around my cock, stroking up and down roughly.

“Don’t tease me,” I told her.

“What. This?” She slipped another finger inside, pumping hard and fast.

I stepped inside, closing the door behind me. When the feisty vixen offered me her fingers, I grabbed her wrist, the hunger rushing to the surface. I opened my mouth wide, taking my time to slip her fingers inside.

Her chest rose and fell as her desire increased. I licked and sucked, cleaning every finger thoroughly. The taste of her was exactly what I needed. When I pulled her hand free, she gave me the kind of look that could burn buildings to the ground.

When I crowded her space, she tilted her head. "Alright. Then tell me what you want." The way she dragged her tongue across her bottom lip could easily make a man do very bad things.

She pursed her lips and rolled her arms over my shoulders. "Everything."

CHAPTER 24



Cassandra

“I’m going to fuck you, Cinnamon Girl. But it’s not going to be gentle. I can’t wait. I need to be inside of you.”

Jake’s voice was dipped lower than normal, the husky tone exactly what I’d wanted to hear. I needed this man.

His touch.

His kiss.

His domination.

And most of all his hard cock fucking me like some wild animal.

My chest was heaving from the rush of desire, and I purred loudly on purpose, tempting him even more. “Then fuck me. Hard. Fast. I want to come.”

“Such a bad girl.”

“Yes.”

“My bad girl. Now, I’ll give you everything.”

Everything.

The word lingered in my mind as Jake crushed my mouth with his. I’d always heard that home was where the heart was and he was already laying claim to it. As he swept his tongue inside, I tried to ignore the fear and worry about losing the

property. At least for tonight, I wanted nothing more than to escape.

The taste of him was delicious, the carnal look he'd given me moments before the kind of expression that could make any girl swoon. The feel of his throbbing cock pressed into my stomach kept me lightheaded, my breath stolen as he did every time he walked into a room.

Tonight, having him with me, protecting me and acting as if he'd burn the world down for me if necessary was so unexpected my heart continually fluttered. His kiss was more forceful, both our needs increasing with every passing second. I rolled my arms over his shoulders, squeezing his muscular arms as he dominated my tongue.

His hunger knew no bounds and within seconds, he lifted me off the tile floor, positioning his cock against my throbbing pussy. I wrapped my legs around his chiseled hips, pressing my knees into him. When he pulled me down ever so slowly, the tingling sensations increased.

I moaned into the kiss, which he captured as always. There was nothing like the feel of being in his arms, feeling as if we could face any adversity as long as we were doing it together. Even though the ugliness of what we were facing continued to try to cloud my brain, I refused to allow it.

As he rolled onto the balls of his feet, pulling out then plunging inside, I closed my eyes, allowing the man to take full control. It was something I never thought I'd consider but with him, everything seemed new and entirely different. Exciting. I was already drifting into a beautiful place of bliss, relaxing in his arms in a way I hadn't before.

I continued caressing his skin, marveling in the feel of his thick muscles, the strength in them utter perfection. I could do nothing more than kiss him for hours. Seconds later, he pulled back, his breathing becoming heavier.

"You're wet," he told me.

"You do that to me. You're hard as a rock."

“You do that to me. I’m going to fuck you savagely now. Like it or not.”

“Please do.” I dragged my tongue from one side of his jaw to the other, shuddering to my core.

He planted his hands on either side of me, his eyes shimmering as he continued his hard fucking.

“Oh, God. I’ll fall.”

“I’ll be there to catch you, baby. I promise you.” He issued a series of growls, the sound echoing even in the humidity.

“Oh, so good.”

The need we shared was increasing, the longing something I’d never experienced before. With him, the aspect of letting go felt right, as if I was always destined to be with him. I squeezed my knees against him, wrapping one arm around his neck. The friction kept me aloft, but I held onto him tightly, neither one of us blinking.

As the tingling sensations increased, my pussy muscles clenching tightly around his thick cock, I sensed an orgasm was close.

“Harder,” I murmured.

“That’s the way you like it.”

“Oh, yes.”

The steam rising in the shower adding to the moment, the passion soaring as it hadn’t done before. He was my drug and I was his, and together we were both becoming intoxicated.

Jake refused to slow down, fucking me savagely, the hard pounding driving me into the tile. I couldn’t care less. I wanted it to be brutal in every way, leaving me aching inside for hours. Days. I needed to feel alive and he was the only person who could do that.

In those beautiful moments, I knew I would end up falling helplessly in love with him. As another jolt of white-hot heat erupted deep inside, an orgasm shattered my system, tearing through me like a tidal wave.

“Oh. Oh. Oh. Oh.”

“That’s it, baby. You’re so damn beautiful when you come.”

I struggled to hold back, wanting this to last forever, but the electricity was too powerful. I was lost in the beautiful moment, falling into the sweet abyss as the climax rolled through me. I heard my slight scream, but the sound was as surreal as the man. He picked up the intensity, driving the single orgasm into something more spectacular.

I could tell there would be no holding back. The man needed me as much as I needed him.

As his body started to tense, I closed my eyes all over again, squeezing my muscles just seconds before he erupted deep inside.

The heat was oppressive, the weight of his body incredible, and as he brushed his lips across mine, I realized that home was indeed where the heart was, and the man had already stolen mine.

* * *

“I have good news and bad news,” Jessica said by way of starting the conversation.

Sighing, I pulled into the driveway, taking my time rolling down the long path. The trees lining the way were swaying in the light breeze, yet even on this beautiful sunny afternoon, they appeared ominous. I half expected someone to jump out of the shadows created by the thick foliage, trying to terrify me all over again.

It was funny that when that didn’t happen, I was almost disappointed. Perhaps it’s because that would solidify my certainty that Malcolm was behind the atrocities the entire city had endured over the last several years. I’d learned more about his misguided attempt at owning this portion of Oregon, which had started with his grandfather decades before.

The family truly believed they should own the majority of the land, turning the area into one big resort full of casinos and expensive condominiums. Greed and the hunger for power had

prevented any Robinson from valuing the beautiful landscape, the friendly people and small-town atmosphere. I'd never thought I'd be able to call such a tiny town my home, but that's exactly what I wanted.

And I was prepared for a battle.

I'd developed marketing plans, some of the best I'd ever done in the almost four days since the initial confrontation with Malcolm. I'd waited patiently until the county offices had opened on Monday, Jake accompanying me while attempting to get a copy of the contract in question. I'd contacted Jessica, begging her to talk to her father about the Robinson family, helping to determine if any of the rumors regarding other city councilmembers were true.

"Okay," I told her as I pulled in front of the house.

"Which do you want to hear first?"

I sensed hesitation in her voice, the tone I knew far too well when something terrible was about to happen. "The good news. I could use it right about now."

"Well, you were right. There are several dummy corporations with links to bank accounts in the Caribbean and other foreign countries. They are locked down tight, the financials hidden away but there are billions of dollars in them. In addition, the land owned by these corporations stretched all the way south into California and north into Canada."

"You're kidding me." Excitement tore through me.

"It's not something to joke about. While some of the actions are legitimate, or least they appear to be, my dad mentioned that at least a half dozen interstate and foreign laws have been broken, including wire fraud." Jessica was more excited than before, as if she'd just handed me the golden goose.

But I knew a shoe was about ready to drop.

"Is the FBI going to arrest them?"

"Because another country is part of this, the CIA is going to need to be involved, likely officials from Canada as well to make a solid case that will stick."

I threw the gear into park, rubbing my eyes. I'd slept very little, partially because of worry and partially because Jake had become insatiable. "Let me guess. That's going to take a long time."

"Yep. You know how the system works."

Unfortunately, I did. "That means they can continue operating business as usual."

"Unless one or more members are caught red-handed in a crime, then you're right."

"By then they will likely have bought up half the town."

"Convince people not to sell."

I half laughed. Millie and Jolene had opened up to both Jake and me, providing stories that could curdle anyone's mind about how low the Robinsons had gone to get people to sell. I was more repulsed than ever but there was little I could do about it. "Yeah, easier said than done. The bad news?"

"The contract on Tangerine Sunset appears legit. There is nothing odd or unlawful about it." Jessica groaned. "I'm sorry."

"It's not her signature. I'm positive of that. Plus, I swear to you she had some kind of evidence on what Robinson was doing."

"Have you found anything proving that?"

"No. That's the thing. I haven't."

"Then I don't know what to tell you, girl. I'm so sorry."

"You did a lot. Tell your father I appreciate all he's doing."

"How's life with that hunky man of yours?"

At least I could laugh. I noticed he was standing at the window. Uh-oh. The expression on his face wasn't one of happiness and joy, more like aggravation. Granted, I'd left him sleeping in bed, disobeying his orders of not going anywhere without him, but I'd wanted to grab a copy of all the buildings owned by the Robinsons. And I'd dropped off flyers I'd created for the Halloween event to Millie.

I had a feeling I was in some kind of trouble. “He’s everything I said I didn’t want yet exactly what I need.”

“A match made in heaven. Maybe I’ll have to take a leave of absence and see if I can find myself a sexy hunk.”

“Oh, no. Does that mean you and Mike broke up?”

“Let’s just say we aren’t going to be exchanging Christmas presents this year,” Jessica said, her tone exactly like mine had been when finding out about Stephen’s antics.

“I’m sorry. You are always welcome here.”

“I might take you up on that. No kidding. I’m glad you found someone.”

“We’ll see what happens. I really don’t want to lose the B & B. I love it here.”

“Then fight for it, girl. If this has become your dream, then maybe you can find an investor to buy out the contract.”

“Yeah, right. I have a feeling Malcolm owns everyone in this town.”

“You never know.”

She exhaled, the exaggerated sound also something I knew far too well. “What haven’t you told me?”

“Ugh.”

“Spill it. You’re my best friend.”

“After this I doubt I will be.”

“Come on, girl. If there’s something else, I need to know.”

“I talked with Stephen.”

There was a quiet storm on the horizon. I could feel it in my bones. “Meaning what?”

“I had to get his help. I’m so sorry. Please, please forgive me.”

“What do you mean you had to get his help?”

“He’s a corporate attorney and at first, my dad wasn’t available and I knew you needed assistance. I ran into him at a coffee shop and he asked about you. He seemed so

conciliatory, upset with himself at what happened and I just blurted it out.”

Fuck me.

“So he knows where I am?”

“Yes. Do you hate me?”

I’d always said that I wouldn’t run and hide but this was... challenging. “Always and forever. No, I don’t hate you, but I wish you’d called me before you said anything to him.”

“I knew time was of the essence. He dropped everything to help, to try and make amends. I just... I wanted everything to work out for you.”

“Well, I’m glad he offered something other than his dick in the middle of this, but I don’t want to have anything else to do with him. Okay?”

“Um, that might be a little bit of a problem.”

“Why is that?” Jesus. Jake was still standing exactly where he was, glaring at me. My heart fluttered from his rigid stance. When he turned away suddenly, I had a feeling it was out of disgust. Damn it.

“Because he’s headed your way.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“He knows you need an attorney and he’s going to offer advice.”

“Number one, he’s not licensed to practice in the state of Oregon. Number two, I never want to see his treacherous face again.”

“Well, he’s due in tonight on a flight.”

“And you’re just telling me this?” Yes, I’d raised my voice. A lot. But she deserved my fury.

“He left me a voicemail saying he was jumping a plane. Okay? I’m sorry. I didn’t think this was going to happen or I never would have said anything to him. I just want you happy.”

“I am happy, Jess. Happier than I’ve ever been. This gorgeous little town is starting to feel like home. I don’t need any memories of the past. I don’t want to relive the pain all over again. I just want peace.”

“Then send him away.”

“I plan on it. I gotta go. I really do appreciate all you’ve done but don’t interfere again.” With that, I ended the call. I’d never hung up on my best friend in my life. We were buddies and I missed her, but this was... My heart ached and I pulled the phone to my head, trying to think about how to tell Jake. No. I couldn’t right now. Not yet.

As soon as I climbed out, I heard Moose barking, announcing my arrival. As if Jake didn’t know. My hands were sweaty as I grabbed the file, moving toward the house very slowly. I’d been positive that either my mother’s signature had been forged or there’d be an obvious loophole in the contract I could use. I’d been prepared to hire my own attorney, pressing suit against Mr. Robinson, but I knew the fight wasn’t over. It was just beginning.

I couldn’t allow the place to be torn down. I just couldn’t.

Even if I went to the press with limited accusations, Malcolm would hire a team of experts who would counter my discovery, convincing a judge that he was right and I was wrong. And they’d sue me for defamation of character.

As soon as I opened the door, Moose bounded toward me, jumping up on me since I’d been gone for almost two hours. Jake had retreated, likely to what we’d started calling the war zone. We’d turned the kitchen into a marketing mecca, white boards temporarily secured on one wall, computers set up on the kitchen table. We’d worked tirelessly together, just him and me, coming up with so many plans for the future.

Now they might all be lost.

When I headed into the kitchen, he was standing staring out the window toward the ocean. I could tell by the electricity ebbing through him just how angry he was with me.

“Hi,” I said quietly, moving toward the island but keeping my distance. “I’m sorry. I got a few things from the county and dropped off the flyers we created.”

He said nothing for a few minutes.

“You’re angry with me.”

“You left the house without me,” he said, his husky tone dipping dangerously lower than normal. But as always, the sound thrilled me.

“You were sleeping soundly. I didn’t want to disturb you.”

He tilted his head to the side and I could tell the fury was building. “You could have been hurt or killed. You disobeyed me.”

I wanted to tell him I was a big girl and was perfectly capable of taking care of myself, but somehow, I knew that wouldn’t go over too well.

“I’m sorry.”

“Sorry?” He turned around, staring at me with the kind of intensity that sent a wave of electricity through me. “Do you know how devastated I’d be if anything happened to you?”

I walked closer, uncertain I could ever find the right words for how he made me feel, the care and time he’d taken the most special thing anyone had ever done for me. “I know.”

“Do you? Do you really? Do you understand the depths of how I feel about you?”

“I just... I think so.”

“You think so?” he repeated. “You brought me back to life, Cass. You reminded me that family is the most important thing; that living isn’t about hiding behind shit that occurred in the past but about the possibilities for the future. You gave me the will to break out of a terrible shell I’d placed around myself. Through your eyes, everything had more color. The skies were bluer, the ocean a perfect cerulean, so vibrant that even standing this far away, I felt as if I could reach out and touch it, harness the beautiful energy. Because of you,

anything is possible. If something happens to you, I won't be able to survive. And do you know why?"

I was so taken aback I had no idea what to say. He was a man of few words, keeping his emotions closed off, rarely telling me how he felt or what he wanted. "No. I..." Me, unable to put a coherent sentence together? What was wrong with me? "Tell me."

He closed the distance very slowly, sliding one hand around the back of my neck, cupping my chin with the other. "Damn it, woman. You really don't see it? You don't feel what's happening?"

"Maybe not." I was breathless, tingling all over.

As he lowered his head, I pressed my palms against his chest, my mind spinning with possibilities. And with something else.

Love.

"I'm falling in love with you," he whispered before capturing my mouth.

CHAPTER 25



Jake

I'd had no understanding that I could care about anyone as much as I did with Miss Cinnamon Girl until I'd awakened to find an empty house. I'd made calls, only finding out she was alive when speaking to Millie. The relief had almost knocked me on my ass, but that had allowed my disappointment and irritation to grow. Yet seeing her walking through the door had opened my eyes as well as the ugly black box where I'd stored all my feelings.

We'd known each other barely a week yet I'd never felt so strongly about anyone. Holding her in my arms, kissing her with all the passion I thought I'd lost was the best feeling in the world.

It was also the most terrifying.

I couldn't lose her. I couldn't allow Malcolm to hurt her ever again. I swept my tongue inside, the taste of her mouth as if I'd never kissed her before. Every muscle was tense, every tendon so tight I was certain they'd snap. And the myriad emotions were killing me.

Yes, I was falling in love with her.

The sight of her as I stood staring out the window had been gut-wrenching. I'd even left a message for Bart, worried enough I'd been ready to hunt her down myself. She was breathtaking, more so today given I thought I might lose her.

Instead of jeans, which had become her normal attire the past few days, she was wearing an adorable jean skirt and soft red sweater highlighting her hourglass figure. Even better, she'd elected to wear cowboy boots, which I hadn't known she owned. To me, she was the most beautiful girl in the world.

Yeah, I had it bad for her.

Cassandra eased her hands around my shoulders, clinging to me, her body shaking. I wanted to rip off her clothes right here, indulging in the passion that had been the catalyst, lust turning into something more powerful, but the woman needed to fully understand that she was in danger. I firmly believed Malcolm had threatened her and would do again, especially if the contract wasn't legitimate.

She needed to embrace the reality of the situation and there was only one way I knew of to help her learn that lesson.

When I broke the kiss, she issued a single moan, tilting her head. Her eyes were dilated, her breath skipping. My God. She was the most beautiful creature I'd ever set my eyes on.

And the most mischievous.

"You're a bad girl," I told her, although the last thing I wanted to do was to make light of the situation. Everything about what we were doing, our attempts in discovering illegal activities had a trail a mile wide that Malcolm and his cronies could easily follow if we weren't very careful. The two murders also continued to weigh heavily on my mind.

"I really am sorry."

"That's not good enough."

"Meaning what?"

"Meaning you deserve punishment." I backed away, lifting a single eyebrow.

"I was only gone two hours."

I shook my head. "You still don't get it. Malcolm has power that extends past this city."

"I know that, Jake. Into California and Canada."

The news was something I didn't know. "Then you do understand. Come here."

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to teach you a lesson and hopefully one you won't forget."

"Oh, no. You're not going to spank me."

"Oh, yes, I am. You need to accept responsibility." I could tell by the look on her face that she was debating fleeing. If she only understood how much I cared about her.

She glanced out the window at the ocean water. "I can't lose this place, Jake. My mother wouldn't want me to. I think she knew what I needed better than I did."

"Then we continue fighting. But first things first." She shifted her attention in my direction, frowning as I walked toward the cabinets.

"What are you doing?"

"Finding the right implement. I suggest you drop that sexy skirt of yours, your thong as well and plant your hands against the window over there."

"How do you know I'm wearing a thong?" she cooed, giving me a mischievous look as if I'd allow her to get away with being disobedient.

"Hmm... How do I know?" I slid my hand under her skirt, tugging on the G-string nestled between her luscious butt cheeks. "That's how."

"You're the bad one."

"Let's get this over with. We do have a winery to save."

We locked eyes for a few seconds, the weight of what we were facing never far from our minds, but she nodded and turned away from me. I sucked in my breath, watching as she lowered her head while unfastening her skirt.

Everything about spending time with her was unexpected, including not only the possessive but dominating side she'd managed to pull out of me. I wanted to protect her as much as

I craved everything else. Time held no meaning around her, the future what we made it.

Now I was being philosophical, which wasn't like me in the least. Exhaling, I returned my attention to finding an implement, opening one drawer then another until I found the perfect object. As I lifted the oversized spatula in front of me, it was impossible not to grin. When I tilted my head, the way the warm afternoon sun filtered in through the windows highlighted her perfectly, adding a golden glow. Almost like a halo.

She did remind me of an angel, even if there would always be a naughty side to her matching her caustic mouth. In truth, they were two attributes I adored more than most others. She was strong willed, refusing to back down to anyone, including me.

I spun the spatula in my fingers as I walked toward her, my balls tightening from the sight of her skirt and lace panties wrapped around her legs. She'd followed my orders, her palms planted against the cool glass. Hearing my approach, she glanced over her shoulder, the slyest of smiles crossing her face.

She had no idea how beguiling she was.

As I moved closer, I inhaled her perfume, which did little more than entice me to the point I almost forgot about the task at hand. When I pressed my hand against the small of her back, she rubbed the tip of her tongue across her bottom lip. She'd figured out the subtle yet seductive action fueled the embers deep inside.

I held out the spatula, grinning from seeing her eyes open wide. "Thirty will be sufficient. Unless you give me a reason to add more."

"You are not a nice man."

"That's sir to you."

"Why, yes, sir."

Every word out of her mouth dripped sarcasm. I didn't waste any time, smacking her bottom four times, moving from one

side to the other. While I knew the hard cracks hurt, she whimpered as if I was fucking her.

That would come later.

There was nothing like having my thick cock buried inside of her.

After delivering six more strikes, her breathing shifted into ragged pants, the slight redness building on her bottom further enticing the savage in me. I sucked in my breath, doing what I could to control the raging testosterone.

“You will learn to follow my rules,” I told her, cracking the spatula against her buttocks once again.

“Ouch. And if I don’t?”

“Well, then I’ll give you regular spankings, as in every day.” I brought the implement down twice more and she kicked her leg out, pressing her face against the glass and closing her eyes.

“I didn’t mean to worry you.”

Her soft whisper grabbed at my heartstrings. “I know.” I wanted to be angry with her, but her love of the winery, her insistence that she would find a way to save the place no matter what happened had been another reminder of all the time I’d lost. No more. I would do what it took to ensure Malcolm and his criminal friends were put away.

Even if it meant losing everything I owned.

I smacked her bottom brutally, losing count, finally forced to take a deep breath. She whimpered softly as I caressed her bottom, the scent of her desire becoming a powerful aphrodisiac.

“Six more,” I managed to say.

She kept her eyes closed as I doled them out, undulating her hips back and forth but to her credit, remaining in position. When I was finished, I backed away, noticing Moose was watching us intently.

Maybe it was the crisis we were facing or the way the pup had accepted me into his sheltered world, but I knew at that moment I wanted to spend my life with her.

Nothing and no one would stop me from doing so.

Even if...

* * *

“That’s what we’re facing,” Cassandra said after explaining everything she’d heard from her friend. “I don’t know what else we can do. I still think my mother’s signature was forged on the contract, but without proof, Jessica doesn’t seem to think there’s a lot I can do.”

“Malcolm is a cunning fuck,” I told her. “Always has been.”

“Here’s something interesting I found.”

She handed me a document I hadn’t seen before. While I studied it, I wasn’t entirely certain what I was looking at. “What is this?”

“That’s really why I went out today. I wanted to check on properties the man owned. This was a bonus, although I don’t know where those properties are. However, it appears that one of the dummy corporations owned by Malcolm, Mr. Stocker the asshole wine consultant, and some guy named Darcy Lee has its sights set on purchasing it.”

“Shit. This is a housing location designed for low income. It was a special project that the city council didn’t want to approve but given public pressure, they had no choice.”

“Is it prime real estate?”

“Yeah. The best in the city, the views even better than what you have. If Malcolm can manage to get his hands on that property, he’d tear the houses down. Those families have nowhere else to go. Not with the real estate prices. They’ll need to move out of the city. Shit. This might be the smoking gun.”

“But it appears it’s already in front of the city council.”

“Who is this other guy?”

I shook my head. “A judge.” But not the one I thought Malcolm had in his pocket.

“He’s covered all his bases.”

“Maybe. Do you really think your mother was working with someone to bring Malcolm down?” I took a sip of coffee then shoved the mug aside. We’d been going over everything for almost three hours, the afternoon fading into darkness.

“I think so, although I don’t know what it could be. I keep going over her last phone call.”

“When was that?”

She rubbed her chin, lifting her gaze from the papers. “Maybe a week before she died. It wasn’t what she said as much as the lamenting she was doing. At the time, I didn’t think much of it since it was close to her wedding anniversary, which bothered her to the end. She’d believed she lived a fairytale for a long time.” She had a faraway look in her eyes for a few seconds before laughing. “I’m sorry. There are no such things as fairytales.”

“I believe there are.” I grinned when she made a face.

“You’re Mr. Grinch. What would you know?”

“I take exception to that, little Cinnamon Girl.”

She laughed but I could see continued pain in her eyes.

“What else do you remember?”

“She said she had a remarkable hero. That was you.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You’re my hero.”

I pushed the coffee mug further away, a bitter taste forming in my mouth. “I definitely know better. Seriously. Can you remember anything else?”

“The bad thing was I was preparing a marketing campaign when she called and didn’t pay close enough attention to what she was telling me. I do remember her inviting me out. She

said it was important. I pushed her off. How does a daughter do that to her own mother?"

"You had a life and she understood that."

"Yeah, well, I don't. If only I could go back a few months."

"Stop beating yourself up. Try and remember. Maybe you're right in that she was working with someone." The someone was Bart. I felt it in my gut. Now I had to convince him to tell me what the hell he was looking into. He'd need help, which likely meant another law enforcement agency. There were too many moving parts.

"I will. Anyway, I'm not sure how I'm going to save this place. Even if I can sell my condo, I won't have enough proceeds to make a difference so I can buy it back. Two million dollars is a tough cookie."

"You know what? I might know some people."

She moved closer, rising onto her tiptoes. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. Let's go over everything one more time. After that, we'd going to put it away."

Nodding, she glanced at me. "I'm very glad I came here."

"Me too." As soon as I heard my phone, I bristled. Who the hell could be calling me so late? I snagged it before the second ring, exhaling when I noticed the caller. Shane Biddle. "Shane. What's up?"

"I need you, buddy," he said. "I have a disaster on my hands and one of my guys was in a terrible car accident."

Cassandra narrowed her eyes when I hissed.

"I can't, bud," I told him.

"We're going to lose Breaker Ridge if you don't."

"Breaker Ridge?" Shit. The location Malcolm wanted to get his hands on. This wasn't a coincidence. There would still be too much red tape involved with tearing the houses down, the bad press difficult for him. "How many are burning?"

“Two at this point,” Shane answered. “But the fire is burning fast. I have every available man on the job and I’ve called two counties to come help but I need manpower now.”

“A fire?” she asked.

I closed my eyes, nodding. What the hell was I supposed to do? When I felt her touch, a cold chill drifted down my spine.

“You need to go, Jake. Fight the demons. You’re needed.”

Her words drilled into me. I opened my eyes, finding hers imploring.

“I’ll be safe. Okay?” she added.

“Jake. Please. Families with children need you,” Shane continued, adding to the ache in my gut.

“Fine. I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

“Thank God.”

By the time I ended the call, my nerves were on edge. “I want you to listen to me, Cass. And don’t fuck with me on this.”

“Okay. What?”

“After I leave, I want you to head to Millie’s Diner with Moose. Okay?”

“Why? What’s going on?” Cass asked, her eyes widening.

“Just do what I ask. You’ll be safe there.”

“You’re scaring me.”

“Good. That’s what will keep you safe. Promise me you’ll go.”

She nodded. “I promise. Just please call me when you’re safe. I don’t want you to die on me.”

I pulled her against me, kissing her forehead. “Don’t worry, baby. I’ll be back.”

“Fight the demons, Jake.”

“Yeah, I will.”

I only prayed to God I could.

CHAPTER 26



Jake

Taking a break.

I'd been ordered to do so along with four other firefighters by Captain Biddle, something I loathed. The others were sitting on the soaked ground, all of us exhausted from fighting the blaze.

As I wiped smoke and sweat from my face as well as taking a deep breath, I stared at the night sky. It was still lit up in orange even though all three fire departments from three different counties had made a solid push to get the fire under control.

I powered back part of a bottle of water, hating the fact I was still. Shane was giving orders to two of the crew, doing his best to maintain control. There were more than two dozen bystanders, mostly homeowners already displaced from their homes. I was sick inside from hearing the small cries of the children terrified at the horrible sight. Reporters had also swarmed the area, determined to get the scoop on what was happening.

Anger remained just below the surface, my mind fucking with me as murderous thoughts regarding Malcolm remained fresh in my mind.

I tossed the water bottle, grabbing my helmet and racing back toward the flames. Three houses were a total loss, two more

receiving significant damage. But so far, no lives had been lost.

As I made my way to Shane, I could tell the toll the fire had taken on him as well. He glanced in my direction, taking several gasping breaths. "This was arson."

"You gotta leave that to the fire inspector," he told me.

"Yeah, well, my guess is the man is in Malcolm's pocket just like everyone else."

"It's a she, by the way. She came from San Francisco. I highly doubt she gives a rat's ass about the Robinson family."

"I don't any longer, Shane."

"Let's just keep going. Glad to have you here, buddy. You haven't lost your touch."

I didn't buy that but at least I'd been a warm body to the new recruits that were far too green to know what to do by instinct. The shortage of skilled firefighters didn't help the situation in the least.

"Head over to help unit ninety-six. Let's get the last fires out," Shane directed.

"You got it. Is everyone accounted for?" I asked.

"From what I've been told, yes."

Nodding, relief pounded my system. Buildings and furniture could be replaced, new memories made from the ash, but lives couldn't. I raced toward the sister fire department, waiting to yank on my helmet until I got closer.

The unit's captain was in the process of barking orders. "Jones. Shephard. Go around to the backside. Darby and Wallace, attack the side," the man directed before noticing my arrival. "Spencer. Stay with Porter in the front. We need to attack this one from all sides. One last push. Don't let the roof catch fire or we'll lose it."

"You got it," one of the men said as I nodded.

"No hot-dogging. By the book," the captain added.

All the firefighters moved out and I noticed the other team had almost put the fire out at the other house still in flames. We were finally making headway. As I started to don the helmet, I glanced at the second floor. What the fuck? I could swear I noticed a light flashing in one of the windows. “Hey. Did anyone see that?”

None of the other firefighters heard me, the noise too intense. I shielded my eyes, moving a few feet away to try to get a better look.

As embers pitched from the roof, I was certain I noticed flames licking out from one of the eaves. Ah, shit. The attic was on fire. The roof would be next.

I moved to grab the hose, another flash of light catching my attention. “What the fuck?” There was no doubt someone was inside the house, trying desperately to get the window open. It appeared they were using a flashlight to beat against the glass.

“Shit.”

I spun around, rushing toward a firefighter I didn’t know. “There’s someone inside.”

“There can’t be. We swept the place.”

“Then what the fuck is that?” I pointed toward the second floor, noticing the flames encroaching in my periphery of vision. The entire second floor would be consumed within minutes. My instinct kicked in and I took off running toward the front door, ignoring the immediate cries I heard, directing me to stop. I secured my helmet, turning on the light positioned front and center then bolted forward.

As soon as I reached the threshold, a surreal moment encapsulated my system, pulling me into a quiet moment of silence. The only sound was the hard thumping of my heart. Everything had shifted into slow motion, visions of the past ready to derail my actions.

I pushed myself, uncertain I was even moving forward. Yet as the light pierced the darkness, I could hear Cassandra’s voice inside my head.

Fight your demons...

That's exactly what needed to happen, or another innocent person would end up dying. Not tonight and not on my watch.

Smoke billowed everywhere, just as black and foreboding as I'd experienced on that fateful night years before, but this time nothing would stop me. I fought my way through the darkness up the stairs. Once on the landing, I had to stop to get my bearings, fighting the disorientation. There was no time to waste, one side of the house in flames.

I rushed forward, fighting falling debris as I headed for the room where I was certain I'd seen the light. Without hesitation, I kicked open the closed door, swinging my head from side to side, hoping the light could show me where the person was located.

"Is anyone here?" I yelled, taking two long strides into the room. A piece of the ceiling fell down, narrowly avoiding me. The situation was already getting dire. Other than creaks, I heard nothing. I lifted my head, scanning the ceiling. The flames had already shifted to a blue, more powerful intensity, crawling across the ceiling quickly.

Fuck. This couldn't happen again.

"Is anyone here?" Maybe I'd been seeing things. Another cracking sound meant the ceiling was ready to go. I moved forward, trying one last time. There was nothing here. Nothing. Goddamn it, I'd been seeing things. I had to get the fuck out or I'd be trapped.

I spun around, ready to bolt when I heard a strangled cry.

"Help. Us."

Us. As in plural. Time slowed again just as it had done during the worst night of my life. As I spun around, the light captured the woman holding a child, on the floor against the wall. There was no time to think about what I was doing. I simply reacted, lunging for her, gathering her into my arms.

"Hold onto me and don't let go. Do you hear me?"

The woman nodded. As I headed for the door, I grabbed a blanket, tossing it over both of them. We had one chance at

getting out alive and if God was willing, he'd allow me to save their lives.

* * *

Cassandra

“We need to go, baby,” I told Moose.

Woof. My pup rubbed his face against my leg, doing his best to try to push me toward the door as if he knew what Jake had commanded.

“I know. I took too long.” I'd only intended on searching the attic for a few minutes, trying to see if my mother had hidden any other boxes. There'd been so many trunks and boxes to look through that it had taken far longer than I'd anticipated.

Now I stood in front of the television, watching the horror unfold in vivid color. I grabbed my jacket, putting it on, still mesmerized by the reporter going on and on about the tragedy. Folding my arms, I moved closer to the television, horrified at the sight. So many houses torched, so many families losing everything. There were firetrucks seemingly everywhere, so many men and women trying to put out the fire. Thank God, at least they were making headway.

Woof.

“Okay. We're going.” I'd also heard on the news that Millie's Diner had established themselves as a refuge. At least I could provide some form of assistance. I was about ready to turn it off when I noticed a breaking news bulletin. I turned up the volume instead, desperate to catch any sight of Jake if possible. No news wasn't always good news. I hated not knowing and loathed worrying. Being on edge left me feeling nauseous.

“Take a look behind me. From what I understand, one of the firefighters from Engine Company Fifty-Seven from right here in Depoe Bay went into that burning home insistent that he witnessed the possibility of someone being left inside even after a sweep was made. Unfortunately, as you can see, the fire is ready to consume the house, although the firefighters are working diligently to try and save it.”

“Oh, God,” I managed before I pressed my hand over my mouth. I’d told him to fight his demons. I knew it was Jake. There was no doubt in my mind he was determined to relive the past, righting what he believed was a mistake. Tears formed in my eyes, fear crowding out everything else.

Moose whined, realizing instinctively something was wrong. As I reached down, touching his head, I couldn’t take my eyes off the screen. Hope. I had to have hope.

The reporter continued to do a play by play but with every passing second, the hope had begun to fade, a portion of the roof caving in. When a loud boom could be heard even though every reporter had been kept far away from the activity, there were several screams.

Including one coming from me.

I fell to my knees, pressing my hand against the screen, doing something I couldn’t remember ever doing before. I said a silent prayer.

As the seconds turned into minutes, everyone seemed to fade into silence. I wrapped my arm around Moose, allowing the tears to fall in the same silent reverence.

A shout was followed by collective applause, cameras from every angle panning in on the front of the burned house. Massive lights cut through the haze, all of them pointed at the front door.

Suddenly, out of the smoke and shadows came a lone firefighter, a blanket wrapped around a portion of his body. Within seconds, other firefighters rushed forward, blocking out the view. I took a deep breath, half laughing even as the tears continued to fall. I had no way of knowing whether the savior was Jake, but my instinct told me I was right. He was a hero.

My hero.

The man I loved.

“He’s okay, baby. He’s coming back to us.”

The reporter was obviously listening to something being said in her earpiece. When she turned back to the cameras, a smile had lit up her face. “I’m happy to report the firefighter managed to save two lives, a woman and a child. While I’ve yet to confirm, it appears the hero firefighter is Jake Spencer...”

The rest of what she was saying was drowned out by my thoughts, the swell of emotions almost overwhelming.

The hard knock on the door forced a rush of air into my lungs. Fuck. I’d forgotten Stephen had been on his way. Was it possible he’d made it here that quickly?

Moose was immediately barking, growling as he used to do when my ex was anywhere nearby. Hissing, I kept the television on, slowly rising to my feet. I wiped the tears with both hands, refusing to allow him to see anything but a smile on my face. Maybe I’d let Moose attack him. I didn’t give a shit if the man had provided his expertise or that he’d mentioned how sorry he was for his behavior. That didn’t win him any points with me. Not a chance.

I took long strides toward the door, unlocking and throwing it open, ready to give the man a piece of my mind.

As soon as the man turned around, I opened my eyes wide seconds before...

* * *

Jake

“You’re a crazy asshole. You know that?” Shane asked as he swatted me on the back.

I poured water over my head, grinning from the twinkle in the man’s eyes. “Yeah, you know me too well.”

“You almost got yourself killed.”

“But I didn’t. I knew what I was doing.”

Shane shook his head. “Yeah, you did. You’re welcome back any time, my friend.”

“I’ll think about it.” I tossed the gear I’d worn to one of the firefighters, immediately heading toward my truck, ignoring the reporters who wanted an exclusive. I knew they’d continue hounding me until I gave them a few juicy details, but that would have to wait until after I’d had a chance to talk with Cassandra.

No doubt Millie would have the four television sets on inside the diner, keeping a close eye on the unfolding tragedy. Cass would be worried. Hell, I’d been worried. I grinned as I opened the door, grabbing my phone. At least I’d managed to fight my demons and it felt damn good. Damn good.

I dialed her number as two of my old engine company team members walked toward me.

“You did good, Jake,” Mark said.

“You’re a hot-dogger, but damn, you saved two lives. Good work.” Ralph patted me on the arm before both men walked away.

A grin remained on my face until I heard Cass’s voicemail click in. Maybe it was too loud at the diner to hear her phone. Ending the call, I immediately called the diner. It rang three times before someone answered.

“Millie’s.”

“Becca?”

“Yeah. Jake?”

It was loud, as if half the town had converged on the place.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“You’re a goddamn hero. You’re all over the news.”

“Hey. I was just doing my job. Can you grab Cassandra for me?”

“Who?”

“You know, Margaret’s daughter? She’s not answering her phone.”

“Jake, I’ve been here all night. She’s not here.”

“You’re certain.” Hairs had risen on the back of my neck.

“Yeah, I’m positive. Do you want me to call you if she comes in?”

I jumped into the truck, immediately turning over the engine. “Yeah, please do. Thanks.” I slammed the gear into drive, pressing down on the accelerator, and was forced almost immediately to hit the horn several times to get people to move out of my way.

There was no doubt in my mind that Malcolm had used the fire to get to her. I grabbed my phone, immediately dialing Bart. I didn’t expect to get anything but his voicemail since he’d been called to the fire to control the crowds.

“I was just about to call you. You’re a goddamn fool even if you are the big hero. Everyone is talking about you,” Bart said immediately after answering on the first ring.

“Yeah? Well, it might be at the cost of Cassandra’s life.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“She’s not answering her phone and she’d not at Millie’s where I told her to go. I’m headed back to the winery now. I think Malcolm made good on his threat.”

“Whoa. Just hold on. You need to hear something.”

I powered through a yellow light, moving in excess of sixty miles per hour in a thirty-five zone. I refused to allow anything to happen to her. “What? Just say it.”

“Did you know her ex was in town?”

“What?”

“Yeah, and the man has a violent background.”

CHAPTER 27



Jake

I threw open the door, listening for any sounds.

The voices I heard were eerie and it took me a few seconds to realize the sound was coming from the television. I moved into the living room, turning it off and scanning the area. Nothing seemed out of place, no indication that anything out of the ordinary had occurred, but her truck was sitting outside, which confirmed something was terribly wrong.

I headed into the kitchen, flicking on the light. Then I moved from room to room, including racing upstairs.

There was also no sign of Moose anywhere.

I returned to the living room. Given the fact nothing had been turned over, no obvious signs of a fight, it was possible that she'd opened the door to Stephen. However, I doubted the conversation had been friendly. How could it be, given the way their relationship had ended? I turned in a full circle, ready to leave when a strange noise caused me to pause. What the hell?

Remaining silent, only a few seconds later I heard it again. Where the hell was it coming from? The basement. I'd forgotten there was a basement in the main house. I rushed into the kitchen toward the door leading downstairs. I'd been in the dark enclosure once when Margaret had asked me to get something for her.

As soon as I was close, I had no doubt what I was hearing. Moose scratching at the door. I flung it open and he bounded out, knocking me into the kitchen island. “Whoa, boy. Are you okay?”

He licked my face a couple of times before I was able to get a good look at him. “Thank God, you’re not hurt. Stay here.” I should have known that he’d follow me. I flicked on the light, heading to the basement, fearing the worst.

She wasn’t downstairs. I breathed a sigh of relief and jogged back to the main floor.

“Come on, buddy. You’re coming with me. Let’s go find your mom.”

He jumped into the truck without hesitation. Given I’d come down one road and hadn’t seen a single suspicious vehicle passing, there was only one other location the bastard could have gone. As I barreled down the driveway, I twisted my hands around the steering wheel. If Stephen had done anything to her, the man would regret stepping on that plane. Violence would be the least of his worries.

I floored in, heading down a less traveled road leading out of town. That would make sense, the bastard wanting to get her away from the city Cassandra had grown to love.

Moose whined from the passenger seat, the sound pitiful.

“Don’t worry, baby. We’re going to get her back.”

Woof. Woof.

I only hoped I wasn’t making a promise I couldn’t keep. I spun around curve after curve, almost losing control. At that moment, it seemed like I’d been living my entire life in fog, a walking, talking representation of what my father had wanted. I’d been on the ice with a hockey stick in my hand at three, every summer spent at hockey camp instead of playing with my friends.

He’d been a tough taskmaster, requiring me to go to games when I was so tired I couldn’t keep my eyes open. If I wasn’t in attendance at whatever ice rink he and my mother carted me around to, I was stuck in front of the television. There was no

dating, no homecoming dances or proms. I was the athlete not allowed to have a girlfriend for fear she'd get me off track.

I'd endured countless lectures, learning early on that if I didn't do exactly what my father wanted, his anger would escalate.

When Riley had been born, I'd been jealous because he'd been allowed to live his life like a kid, like the way I'd wanted to. The day I'd been signed with the Seattle Sabers had been both the best and worst in my life.

I'd thought Pops would finally get off my back, leaving me alone.

The truth was that when I'd gotten injured, I'd been secretly grateful because it had taken the pressure off me, placing it squarely on Riley's shoulders. That made me a very bad man, someone who'd forgotten what family meant. I wasn't proud of it, but at least I'd finally been able to recognize my failure and my successes.

All because of a dark-haired vixen who'd crashed into my life like a bull in a china shop. Even firefighting had been competitive enough my father had pushed me harder, trying to make me a local hero instead of the failure that he'd called me so many times.

I couldn't believe I'd fallen into the darkness of despair for so long. Without Cassandra's light and her adoration, I never would have escaped the shadows or the depression. Now her life was in danger and I'd allowed that to happen. Jesus. Christ. What kind of a man had I turned into?

I'd driven twelve miles, maybe more, time seeming to stand still. When I rounded another series of curves, coming to a flat but very dark location, my headlights flashed across a vehicle on the side of the road. There was no such thing as a coincidence. He'd taken her here to dump her body, to act out a moment of revenge. Dear God. Was I too late?

I pressed down on the accelerator again, pushing the truck hard. When I got within a couple hundred yards, I noticed the passenger door had been left open, the dome light still on.

What the hell? The SUV was one I didn't recognize, but the plates were local.

Another cold chill drifted down my spine. A rental car or was it Malcolm after all?

As soon as I was fifty yards out, I slammed on the brakes, rolling to a stop only a few feet away from the rear bumper of the SUV. Grabbing my phone, I dialed Bart. Thankfully, he answered on the first ring.

"She wasn't at the house," I told him.

"Where are you?"

"On state route forty-nine. There's a dark SUV on the side of the road. I'm about fourteen miles from the winery. I'm going to investigate."

"I'm on my way. Maybe two miles out. Don't do anything stupid, Jake," Bart said. "There's a hell of a lot I need to tell you."

"Yeah? Well, there's a hell of a lot I need to tell you too. Just get here." Ending the call, I tossed the phone onto the dashboard.

While I didn't have my gun with me, I did have a shovel. I grabbed my flashlight from the center console then threw open the door, allowing Moose to jump out. "You're going to help me find her, buddy." After grabbing the shovel from the back, I moved to the edge of the pavement, listening for any sounds. Hearing nothing, I raced down the slight incline, Moose trailing behind me.

I swung the flashlight into the darkness, the thick line of trees preventing me from seeing much of anything. "Let's go, buddy. Help me find her. Find your Mommy dog."

Woof. Woof. Woof. Woof.

We both took off running further into the trees. Only seconds later, I heard a scream, the sound penetrating the darkness, shrill and full of terror.

And easily recognizable.

Cassandra.

She must have jumped out of the moving vehicle. Or the bastard was killing her in the woods.

There was no stopping us, Moose determined to get to her. He led the way, stopping only once to sniff. When she screamed again, I lunged forward, jumping over fallen limbs, racing in the direction of the sound. The flashlight finally caught something only twenty yards out.

Moose raced in front of me, now barking continuously. When I clear a bank of trees, my rage roared to the surface. She was down, crawling through the muck and dirt as she tried to get away from the asshole who'd captured her.

He was holding a gun on her, prepared to shoot. "You think you can get away from me, you bitch?"

Moose lunged forward, sailing through the air. The moment he landed on the assailant, knocking him to the ground, the gun went off.

I jumped over a patch of debris, raising the shovel in the air, quickly placing the flashlight on the ground, the beam aimed at the commotion.

Moose yelped as the son of bitch kicked him hard.

"No!" Cassandra screamed, struggling to get up.

I powered forward as the man raised his weapon, prepared to shoot Moose first. With a brutal swing, I knocked him to the ground. However, it had only been a glancing blow, the assailant jumping to his feet again. I hit him with everything I had, delighted as he was pitched forward by several feet, the weapon flying from his hand.

"Jake. Jake!" she screamed.

"Stay down." I flew off my feet, landing on the weapon just as the son of a bitch rose to a standing position, his body swaying back and forth.

I was too quick for him, making it to my feet, aiming the weapon at his head. In the dim light, I could just make out his

face. It wasn't Malcolm nor did it resemble the picture of Stephen I'd seen. It was none other than Jeremy Stocker.

"You fucking asshole." With both hands on the weapon, the anger I felt was raw and fresh and I was ready to pull the trigger.

"No! Don't. Please, Jake," Cassandra said from behind me. "He's not worth it."

"No, baby. He deserves to die." I walked closer, now within a few inches. "Are you ready to meet your maker, fuckhead?"

"Jake. She's right," Bart said from a few feet away. "Put the gun down, buddy. We got him. We got the bastard."

I cocked my head, the rush of adrenaline clouding my vision and my thoughts. Bart had two deputies with him but I wasn't certain I gave a damn. I lifted the gun a little higher. Then I felt the touch of her hand as she'd done so many times before.

"Don't, baby. I need you. Moose needs you. Put the weapon down."

There were moments of regret that would always remain with me. Perhaps this was one of them, but the woman I'd fallen hard for was right.

The future was all that mattered.

As I lowered the weapon, Bart charged forward, giving me a nod of respect.

"Jeremy Stocker, you have the right to remain silent."

I turned around, grabbing her into my arms, the sound of Moose as he pressed his face against our legs almost the best sound in the world.

"You saved me. You found me. You are my hero."

"No, baby. I'm no one's hero, just a man who intends on protecting the woman he loves."

* * *

Four weeks later

"I'm proud of you," Cassandra said from beside me.

She had her head resting against my arm, staring intently at the rink. The seats were some of the best in the house, the trip made to Portland a getaway of sorts, which was something we'd needed after the grueling weeks we'd had since her rescue.

I still seethed from the fact Jeremy had drugged her, but most of continued rage stemmed from the fact the investigation into the Robinson Empire was ongoing. However, with the evidence found on the rope used to take Moose from the house as well as the DNA on the cigarette butt that belonged to Jeremy, he'd been notified he was going away for a long time.

The recommendation from the prosecutors had been for him to go state's evidence against Malcolm, which would add another layer of charges that I'd heard numerous agencies were considering for a list of the people involved.

Including arson, not only of the beautiful housing development that I was helping get rebuilt, but also the school from years before. How far they'd gone to get what they wanted was still difficult to comprehend.

Unfortunately, the game was tied. And from the looks of things, it would need to go into overtime.

The crowd roared and booed when the opposing team almost scored. Thankfully, the puck was blocked. My blood pressure was off the charts. I was surprised a timeout hadn't been called. Maybe the coach was saving that for this period.

"Why? Because I didn't kill the bastards?" I asked, trying to keep my tone light. I could tell Riley was on edge, peering up in the stands every so often.

She punched me on the arm and laughed, the sound one of the most beautiful things I'd heard in a long time. "That too. No, goofy. For coming here today."

Shrugging, I watched Riley as he moved around the ice, realizing just how proud of him I was. After the near tragedies, we'd sat down and talked, really talked for the first time, the man making a promise that he was going to decide what he wanted in his life, not because of what our father wanted.

Since then he'd all but stopped drinking, working out almost every day as he'd thought about the offer Vancouver had given him. We'd celebrated after he'd accepted and I couldn't be happier for him, even if I'd miss his sorry ass hanging around town.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world."

"You know what?" she asked. "I don't think Jessica would either."

I glanced toward the fence, which was only a few feet in front of us, shaking my head. "Are those two gonna hook up?" They had spent almost two full weeks together, my brother's only distraction, but in my mind, it had been a welcome one.

"Well, Jess did comment she wanted to stay in town for a little while."

"He'll be on the road a lot. How will she handle that?"

Jessica turned around, giving us both a hard look, heading in our direction. "Are you guys talking about me?"

"Muah, talk about you?" Cass said. "Why would I do that?"

"Because you're still angry with me about Stephen." Jessica sat down in her seat beside Cass and I could tell she was holding her breath.

"I'm not angry, Jess. The truth is that I made peace with Stephen and with what happened."

She was kinder than I was, although given the man was doing me a solid, I couldn't say anything bad about him. We had a few more hurdles to go through, but I had faith in the man, which shocked the hell out of me.

"Wow. And you're sitting there with a Mr. Hottie Hero of the year saying that," Jessica teased.

Cassandra shrugged. "With any luck, he might be able to break the contract."

"Maybe," I cautioned.

"I know. Don't get my hopes up," she said, shaking her head.

“But you’re still going through with the party?” Jess glanced in my eyes after asking the question.

“I haven’t been issued an eviction notice yet. It ain’t over until it’s over. Besides, I have tons of wine to sell. Thanks here to my hunky hero.” Cass squeezed my arm and I rolled my eyes.

“I am invited. Right? I mean, I think I’m Riley’s date.” Jessica flushed then laughed. “Did I just invite myself?”

“Of course you’re invited. Date, huh? Are you two getting serious?” Cassandra leaned against me with more of her body weight and my mind drifted to all the filthy things I wanted to do to her.

Jessica fanned her face. “Well, he did ask if I wanted to come on the road with him.”

“What? You didn’t tell me that.”

“Yep. Isn’t it awesome?”

I shook my head again. “Do I need to leave you girls alone to talk?”

“Nonsense,” Cassandra said.

There was some commotion on the ice, a fight almost breaking out. I stood with just about everyone else in the arena, watching the replay. It was obvious the other player was guilty of cross-checking Riley, purposefully hitting him with his hockey stick. The fucker had almost knocked my brother to the ice.

“Shit. That’s Riley.” When a timeout was called, I shook my head. When Riley headed in my direction, I was surprised. There was no doubt he was coming to talk to me. “Don’t you move. I’ll be right back.”

The way Cassandra squeezed my arm would never get old. I headed to the fence, leaning over as he skated toward me.

“I don’t have much time, bro. I need your advice on how to make the winning shot. Maybe that signature move of yours. You know, the one you always used to win the game.” Riley grinned as he looked up, shocking the hell out of me.

For all the years that he'd stopped asking for advice, to do so now meant more than he knew. I scanned the ice, then happily gave him my secret.

"You got it?" I asked just as the buzzer sounded in the arena.

"Got it. I'll make you proud."

"Riley. I already am." I stood where I was as he returned to the game, able to smile about his decision. When the two women flanked my sides, I sucked in my breath.

"Trade secrets?" Cassandra asked.

"Family secrets." The truth was it was the only move my father had suggested that I'd accepted over the years. Maybe I was more like my father than I wanted to believe.

As shots were made, I found myself holding my breath.

The clock ticked down, leaving less than twenty seconds with no additional score.

Riley powered forward, skating as if his life depended on it. As he grabbed the puck with his stick, the crowd was on their feet.

With only two seconds to spare, he took a shot.

"Goal!"

EPILOGUE



Cassandra

The fall day was gorgeous, not a cloud in the sky. The temperature was chilly, but with the sun against my skin, I didn't need a jacket. There were hundreds of people in attendance, everyone enjoying themselves.

Everything was perfect from the food catered by Millie's Diner to the music by the quartet I'd secured. Everyone loved the wine and bottles and cases were flying off the shelves.

Yet the day was bittersweet since the contract couldn't be broken. The news had been delivered the day before, Stephen being the bearer of bad tidings.

I'd resigned myself to losing the facility but hated the reason behind it. Still, home was where the heart was and it was firmly placed in Jake's capable hands.

I'd walked away from the party, heading toward the cliffs. The ocean was beautiful today, the light breeze tossing the water against the rocks more gently than normal. I couldn't help but bask in the moment, trying to remind myself that I was a lucky woman all the way around.

Still, my heart was heavy.

I'd discovered the information I'd hoped I'd find in a closet in the winery, my mother keeping a journal of her discussions with Malcolm, including several recorded conversations with the man. She'd managed to draw out some of his nefarious

plans, but it still hadn't been enough to have the man arrested even after all this time. The wheels of justice were turning very slowly.

There would never be a time when Jake drew near that I didn't feel his presence. My skin always tingled, my breath always skipping and my heart racing when he was in close proximity. I adored the man. No, I'd fallen head over heels in love with him. There was no doubt. Not only had he saved my life, he'd saved my heart and soul as well.

He placed his hands on my shoulders, pulling me against him. "Penny for your thoughts."

"Not rich enough, buddy. That will be two million dollars if you want to hear what I'm thinking."

He faked choking. "You're one of those high maintenance girls, I see."

"First of all, I'm a woman. And more important, that's the going rate I hear." I shifted to face him, wrapping my arms around his waist as I tilted my head.

"Hmmm... Expensive."

"I'm worth it."

"Yes, you are and you're all woman, baby." He lowered his head slowly and I rose onto my tiptoes. The kiss was tender, as if he was giving me his heart and soul in return.

As he lifted me off my feet, another moment of swooning rushed into me. I hoped I would always feel the same burning need, the electricity crackling between us white hot. He was every girl's fantasy and he was all mine.

The sound of someone clearing their throat seconds later caught us both off guard.

Jake eased me down and I peered around him at Bart, who was in his official uniform.

"Hey, buddy," Jake said. "I thought you were off today."

"Oh, I am now and I'll change in a little while. But I wanted you to be the first to know before it hit the press." Bart

grinned, glancing from one of us to the other.

“What is it?” Jake folded his arms, tenser than normal.

“I was just told that more than three dozen indictments are rolling down the pike against Malcolm Robinson, his father and brother, and about a half dozen other people in town, including Judge Lee. It’s going to be a messy situation around here for a while.” His grin remained.

I couldn’t help myself, squealing as I clapped my hands. When I rushed forward, kissing Bart on the cheek, I embarrassed the hell out of him, his face turning red.

“Wow. I’ve never gotten that kind of reaction before.” Bart cupped his face, his grin widening.

“Don’t get used to it, buddy. Or I might have to kill ya,” Jake said.

“You do know threatening an officer of the law is a bad thing to do. Right?”

We laughed but I sensed we were all relieved. “What about the two girls who were killed?”

“Well, one was an undercover officer, which is why I couldn’t find out anything about her,” Bart said. “The other was the daughter of someone who’d already provided information to the FBI.”

“Who murdered them?”

“It’s not clear yet, but there is no doubt Malcolm initiated it. Then he used that as a mechanism of threatening you, Cassandra.”

“What was the final straw in having him arrested?” Jake asked.

“The cherry on top was the information Margaret gathered.”

“Which you knew about,” I said to him.

Bart shrugged. “I suspected given a conversation I’d had, but she died too soon.”

Jake pulled me tightly against him, the move comforting.
“What about her death? Can you pin it on him?”

“Not unless you’re willing to exhume the body.” Bart looked at me.

“No. She deserves to rest in peace.” I’d talked about it with Jake, realizing that what little I’d accomplish by doing that would also dredge up the same feelings and sadness. I was ready to move on and that’s what my mother would want.

Bart nodded. “Anyway, I’m sure the authorities will still need to talk to both of you so don’t leave town.”

“Neither one of us plan on it even if we’re not living here,” Jake said quietly.

“Yeah, I’m sorry about that.”

Movement caught my attention and I took a deep breath, pressing my arm against Jake. He usually bristled when Stephen was anywhere close. At least this time he did nothing more but keep his arm wrapped around me.

Bart backed away but stayed as Stephen closed the distance. I’d invited him as a last gesture of being almost friends, grateful for what he’d tried to do.

In his hand was a file and I was certain it was the eviction notice.

“Shit,” Jake said under his breath.

“It’s okay. I’m ready. Stephen. Welcome to the last hurrah.”

“Thank you for inviting me. Jake. Bart. Good to see both of you. I just wanted to say how sorry I am that I couldn’t break the contract. I did everything I could do,” Stephen stated and I believed him.

“It’s okay.”

“However, I do have some news.” He glanced at Jake and I lifted my head, noticing a slight smirk had appeared on my lover’s face.

“What’s going on?” I asked, stepping away from Jake so I could pay close attention to both of them. Even Stephen had a

difficult time keeping a smile off his face.

“Well, I scoured the earth and found an investor.”

I shifted my full attention to Stephen. “Okay. Who is this person?”

“First, I will tell you that he wants to make some significant changes, but you are part of the deal. You’ll stay on as manager of the property. Now, it’s up to you entirely what you want to do but you only had one bite from anyone. The buyout was just too high.”

“Changes. What kind of changes? There is no reason to do anything to this gorgeous facility except for continuing on with the refurbishments. My mother knew what she was doing. She put all her love into this place and if some two-bit asshole is going to think they can buy this place and make significant changes then they can kiss my ass.”

I realized as soon as I’d made the heated statement how ridiculous it sounded given the choices were either watching the wonderful winery and bed and breakfast get bulldozed, the facilities left to rot or someone else requiring alterations while I watched. The lesser of the evils was obvious but I still hated it.

“I have all the details here for you.” Stephen lifted the file in my direction. I stared at it for a few seconds before snatching it from his hand.

“I hate everything about this.”

“Just take a look so we can go and enjoy the party,” Jake advised.

I was ready to spew off a string of expletives, but he was right. After taking a deep breath, I opened the file, flipping the pages until I found the name of the investor. Shock tore through me. “It can’t be.”

“It is,” Stephen said, allowing a smile to cross his face.

I spun around, jumping into his arms. “Jake. You did this. How? Why?”

“Because this beautiful place and you are the only things that matter. I love you, baby girl. No one will ever try and take this place away from you again. Oh, and by the way, you belong to me.”

There were times when I'd wanted to believe that men like I'd read in passionate romance novels existed, but as with all fantasies, they weren't real. But this time, something magical had happened. I'd found my own personal hero, a rugged alpha who had made it his mission to tame, protect, and love me with all his heart.

The End

AFTERWORD

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BOOKS OF THE SAVAGE EMPIRE SERIES

The Kingpin

When I caught her sneaking into my home, I thought Raven was just a girl doing a silly sorority dare, so I set her bare ass on fire with my belt and then taught her a much more shameful lesson.

My seed was already dripping down her thighs before I learned she's my enemy's daughter.

That's when I decided I would be keeping her.

And that I'd be making her my bride.

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The Capo

By the time I knew the beautiful little firecracker who snuck into one of my clubs was my best friend's daughter, I'd already reddened her bare ass with my belt and ravaged her thoroughly.

But now that I've claimed her, I'm keeping her.

Forbidden fruit just tastes sweeter...

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The Wiseguy

When we last spoke, Zoe Thibodeaux was a schoolgirl with a crush. But now the daughter of the most powerful mafia boss in New Orleans is all grown up... and in desperate need of my belt across her bare ass before I grip her hair in my fist and teach her what it means to be mine.

Her father trusted me to keep her safe, but I'm going to do much more than that.

I'm going to keep her forever.

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BOOKS OF THE RUTHLESS EMPIRE SERIES

The Don

Maxwell Powers swept into my life after my father was gunned down, but the moment those piercing blue eyes caught mine I knew he would be doing more than just avenging his old friend.

I haven't seen him since I was a little girl, but that won't keep him from bending me over and belting my bare backside... or from making me scream his name as he claims my virgin body.

He's twice my age, and he's my godfather.

But I know I'll be soaking wet and ready for him tonight...

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The Consigliere

As consigliere of New York's most ruthless crime syndicate, Daniel Briggs rules with an iron fist. But here in Los Angeles, he's just my big brother's best friend, forbidden in every way.

This stunningly handsome billionaire may be the most eligible bachelor on the West Coast, but to him I'm still just a little girl in need of protection from men who would ravage her brutally.

Men like him.

But he'll soon realize I'm all grown up, and then it won't be long before my teenage crush finally shows me the side of him he's kept hidden from me—the savage side that will blister my bare ass for talking back and then take what has always been his with my hair gripped in his fist.

I don't know what comes after that. I just know everything he does to me will be utterly sinful...

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The Underboss

When Francesco Arturo helped me escape an unwanted arranged marriage three years ago, I didn't know he was the underboss of the most powerful mafia organization in New York.

I was just an eighteen-year-old virgin on the run, and he was the handsome savior mesmerizing me with eyes the color of the Aegean Sea before carrying me off to his bed to make me his.

He could have taken my innocence that day, but he didn't.

I gave it to him.

But this isn't a fairy tale. When that perfect night came to an end, I was still the daughter of a Chicago crime boss with a father set on marrying her off to whatever vile man paid the most.

Now he's finally found a suitor for me, but there is something the brutal bastard doesn't know.

I already belong to someone else, and he's coming to take me back.

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BOOKS OF THE TAINTED REGIME SERIES

Cruellest Vow

D'Artagnan Conti was born into poverty, raised to be a soldier in my father's savage regime. I grew up in luxury, longing to escape my family's cruel machinations, and the young man with sapphire eyes and the voice of an angel became not just my forbidden crush but my everything.

Then he was taken from me, killed in a brutal attack by our enemies. Or so I was led to believe...

For twenty years I did my best to forget him, until a devilishly handsome stranger awakened my desire in a way that I hadn't thought possible, baring my body and soul and setting them both ablaze with passion so intense it burns hotter than the lash of leather across my naked backside.

Every taste of his lips, every whisper in my ear, and every quivering climax pulled me deeper into this dark, twisted rapture, and only when I was already under his spell did I learn the truth.

The man I thought I'd lost is the one who has made me his.

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Twisted Embrace

Enzo Lazaro is my best friend's brother, yet the fact that it was taboo only left me even more desperate for him to undress me with those piercing eyes and then strip me bare and ravage me.

But until he found out a secret I hadn't even known myself, I never thought I'd be screaming his name in bed with my belted ass still burning because he decided I needed a lesson in obedience.

...or that he'd be claiming me as his bride.

It turns out I'm the daughter of a Russian mobster, and even though my adopted parents never told me, that means I have dangerous enemies. He says he's making me his wife to protect me.

But we both know he would have taken what he wanted eventually anyway.

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Captured Innocence

When Mattia DeLuca paid my father handsomely for the right to claim me as his bride, it didn't matter that I wanted nothing to do with my own Cosa Nostra family, let alone someone else's. Long before he put a ring on my finger, my own screams of climax told me I was his forever.

Even when I ran away, hoping to leave my family's mafia world behind, I always knew Mattia would track me down one day and take his belt to my bare ass before taking me to his bed again.

But when he came for me, it wasn't just to punish, ravage, and then wed me.

It was to rescue me.

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BOOKS OF THE CARNAL SINS SERIES

Required Surrender

My first mistake was agreeing to participate in a charity auction. My second was believing I could walk away from the commanding billionaire with a brogue accent and dazzling green eyes.

It was supposed to be one date, but a man like Lachlan McKenzie plays by his own set of rules.

As the owner of Carnal Sins, DC's exclusive kink club, his reputation is as dark and demanding as his desires, and before I knew it I ended up his to enjoy not for just one night but a full week.

I fought his control, but I knew I wouldn't win... and in my heart I don't think I even wanted to. Not after he called me his good girl, stripped me bare and spanked me with his belt, and then made me blush and beg and come so hard I forgot all about being his only for a few more days.

That didn't matter anyway. We both know he's keeping me forever.

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Demanded Submission

When he came to my aid after a head-on collision that seemed not to have been an accident, Jameson Stark offered me a ride, help with my car, and a job at the most exclusive club in town.

He also bared me, spanked me until I knew better than to argue with him again, and then showed me what it means to be in the debt of a billionaire who isn't afraid to take everything he's owed.

But as the owner of the Miami branch of Carnal Sins, it isn't just Jameson's wealth and good looks that draw attention, and I knew a man like him must have enemies. I just didn't care.

Not when his every smoldering glance all but demanded my submission...

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Compelled Obedience

Grant Wilde is as arrogant as he is rich and powerful, and if I didn't need his help so desperately I'd tell him exactly where he ought to shove his money, his exclusive club, and his cocky smirk.

But I do need his help, and it will come at a price...

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BOOKS OF THE KINGS OF CORRUPTION SERIES

King of Wrath

After a car wreck on an icy winter morning, I had no idea the man who saved my life would turn out to be the heir to a powerful mafia family... let alone that I'd be forced into marrying him.

When this mysterious stranger sought to seduce me, I should have ignored the dark passion he ignited. Instead, I begged him to claim me as he stripped me bare and whipped me with his belt.

He was as savage as I was innocent, but it was only after he made me his that I learned the truth.

He's the head of the New York Cosa Nostra, and I belong to him now...

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King of Cruelty

Constantine Thorn has been after me since I saw him kill a man nine years ago, and when he finally caught me he made me an offer I couldn't refuse. Marry him and he will protect me.

Only then did I learn that the man who made me his bride was the same monster I'd feared.

He's a brutal, heartless mafia boss and I wanted to hate the bastard, but with every stinging lash of his belt and every moment of helplessly intense passion, I fell deeper into the dark abyss.

He's the king of cruelty, and now I'm his queen.

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King of Pain

Diego Santos may be wealthy, powerful, and sinfully gorgeous, but his slick veneer doesn't fool me. I know his true nature, and I had planned to end this arranged marriage before it even began.

But it wasn't Diego waiting for me at the altar.

By all appearances the man who laid claim to me was the mafia heir to whom I'd been promised, but I sensed an entirely different personality, one so electrifying I was swept up by his passion.

A part of me still wanted to escape, but then he took me in his arms and over his knee, laying my deepest, darkest needs bare and then fulfilling them in the most shameful ways imaginable.

Now I'm not just his bride. I'm his completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King of Depravity

When Brogan Callahan swept me off my feet, I didn't know he was heir to a powerful Irish mafia family. I didn't find that out until after he'd taken me in his arms... and over his knee.

By the time I learned the truth, I was already his.

I went on the run to escape my father's plans to marry me off, but it turns out the ruthless mob boss he had in mind is the same sinfully sexy bastard who just stripped me bare and claimed me savagely.

He demands my absolute obedience, and yet with each brutal kiss and stinging lash of his belt I feel myself falling ever deeper into the dark abyss of shameful need he's created within me.

At first I wondered if there were bounds to his depravity. Now I hope there aren't...

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King of Savagery

I knew Maxim Nikitin was a man to be reckoned with when I went undercover to help the FBI bring him down, but nothing could have prepared me for his raw power... or his icy blue eyes.

He caught me, and now he's determined not just to punish me, but to tame me completely.

Every kiss is brutal, every touch possessive, every fiery lash of his belt more intense than the last, yet with every cry of pain and every scream of climax the truth becomes more obvious.

He doesn't need to break me. I belong to him already.

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King of Malice

When I met Phoenix Diamonds, I didn't know anything about him except that he had a body carved from stone and a voice that left me hoping he'd order me to strip just so I could obey.

By the time I learned he's the head of a Greek crime syndicate intent on making me pay for the sins of my father, he'd already mastered me with his touch alone, belted my bare ass for daring to come without permission, and ravaged me thoroughly both that night and the next morning.

All I can do is try to pretend he isn't everything I've always fantasized about...

But I think he knows already.

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BOOKS OF THE SINNERS AND SAINTS SERIES

Beautiful Villain

When I knocked on Kirill Sabatin's door, I didn't know he was the Kozlov Bratva's most feared enforcer. I didn't expect him to be the most terrifyingly sexy man I've ever laid eyes on either...

I told him off for making so much noise in the middle of the night, but if the crack of his palm against my bare bottom didn't wake everyone in the building my screams of climax certainly did.

I shouldn't have let him spank me, let alone seduce me. He's a dangerous man and I could easily end up in way over my head. But the moment I set eyes on those rippling, sweat-slicked muscles I knew I needed that beautiful villain to take me long and hard and savagely right then and there.

And he did.

Now I just have to hope him claiming me doesn't start a mob war...

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Beautiful Sinner

When I first screamed his name in shameful surrender, Sevastian Kozlov was the enemy, the heir of a rival family who had just finished spanking me into submission after I dared to defy him.

Though he'd already claimed my body by the time he claimed me as his bride, no matter how desperately I long for his touch I vowed this beautiful sinner would never conquer my heart.

But it wasn't up to me...

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Beautiful Seduction

In my late-night hunt for the perfect pastry, I never expected to be the victim of a brutal attack... or for a brooding, blue-eyed stranger to become my savior, tending to my wounds while easing my fears. The electricity exploded between us, turning into a night of incredible passion.

Only later did I learn that Valentin Vincheti is the heir to the New York Italian mafia empire.

Then he came to take me, and this time he wasn't gentle. I shouldn't have surrendered, but with each savage kiss and stinging stroke of his belt his beautiful seduction became more difficult to resist. But when one of his enemies sets his sights on me, will my secrets put our lives at risk?

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Beautiful Obsession

After I was left at the altar, I turned what was meant to be the reception into an epic party. But when a handsome stranger asked me to dance, I wasn't prepared for the passion he ignited.

He told me he was a very bad man, but that only made my heart race faster as I lay bare and bound, my dress discarded and my bottom sore from a spanking, waiting for him to ravage me.

It was supposed to be just one night. No strings. Nothing to entangle me in his dangerous world.

But that was before I became his beautiful obsession...

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Beautiful Devil

Kostya Baranov is an infamous assassin, a man capable of incredible savagery, but when I witnessed a mafia hit he didn't silence me with a bullet. He decided to make me his instead.

Taken prisoner and forced to obey or feel the sting of his belt, shameful lust for my captor soon wars with fury at what he has done to me... and what he keeps doing to me with every touch.

But though he may be a beautiful devil, it is my own family's secret which may damn us both.

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BOOKS OF THE BENEDETTI EMPIRE SERIES

Cruel Prince

Catherine's father conspired to have my father killed, and that debt to the Benedetti family must be settled. Just as he took something from me, I will take something from him.

His daughter.

She will be mine to punish and ravage, but when she suffers it will not be for his sins.

It will be for my pleasure.

She will beg, but it will be for me to claim her in the most shameful ways imaginable.

She will scream, but it will be because she doesn't think she can bear another climax.

But when she surrenders at last, it will not be to her captor.

It will be to her husband.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Prince

Alexandra is a senator's daughter, used to mingling in the company of the rich and powerful, but tonight she will learn that there are men who play by different rules.

Men like me.

I could romance her. I could seduce her and then carry her gently to my bed.

But that can wait. Tonight I'm going to wring one ruthless climax after another from her quivering body with her bottom burning from my belt and her throat sore from screaming.

She will know she is mine before she even knows she is my bride.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Savage Prince

Gillian's father may be a powerful Irish mob boss, but he owes a blood debt to my family, and when I came to collect I didn't ask permission before taking his daughter as payment.

It was not up to him... or to her.

I will make her my bride, but I am not the kind of man who will wait until our wedding night to bare her and claim what belongs to me. She will walk down the aisle wet, well-used, and sore.

Her dress will hide the marks from my belt that taught her the consequences of disobeying her husband, but nothing will hide her blushes as her arousal drips down her thighs with each step.

By the time she says her vows she will already be mine.

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BOOKS OF THE MERCILESS KINGS SERIES

King's Captive

Emily Porter saw me kill a man who betrayed my family and she helped put me behind bars. But someone with my connections doesn't stay in prison long, and she is about to learn the hard way that there is a price to pay for crossing the boss of the King dynasty. A very, very painful price...

She's going to cry for me as I blister that beautiful bottom, then she's going to scream for me as I ravage her over and over again, taking her in the most shameful ways she can imagine. But leaving her well-punished and well-used is just the beginning of what I have in store for Emily.

I'm going to make her my bride, and then I'm going to make her mine completely.

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King's Hostage

When my life was threatened, Michael King didn't just take matters into his own hands.

He took me.

When he carried me off it was partly to protect me, but mostly it was because he wanted me.

I didn't choose to go with him, but it wasn't up to me. That's why I'm naked, wet, and sore in an opulent Swiss chalet with my bottom still burning from the belt of the infuriatingly sexy mafia boss who brought me here, punished me when I fought him, and then savagely made me his.

We'll return when things are safe in New Orleans, but I won't be going back to my old home.

I belong to him now, and he plans to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Possession

Her father had to be taught what happens when you cross a King, but that isn't why Genevieve Rossi is sore, well-used, and waiting for me to claim her in the only way I haven't already.

She's sore because she thought she could embarrass me in public without being punished.

She's well-used because after I spanked her I wanted more, and I take what I want.

She's waiting for me in my bed because she's my bride, and tonight is our wedding night.

I'm not going to be gentle with her, but when she wakes up tomorrow morning wet and blushing her cheeks won't be crimson because of the shameful things I did to her naked, quivering body.

It will be because she begged for all of them.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Toy

Vincenzo King thought I knew something about a man who betrayed him, but that isn't why I'm on my way to New Orleans well-used and sore with my backside still burning from his belt.

When he bared and punished me maybe it was just business, but what came after was not.

It was savage, it was shameful, and it was very, very personal.

I'm his toy now, and not the kind you keep in its box on the shelf.

He's going to play rough with me.

He's going to get me all wet and dirty.

Then he's going to do it all again tomorrow.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Demands

Julieta Morales hoped to escape an unwanted marriage, but the moment she got into my car her fate was sealed. She will have a husband, but it won't be the cartel boss her father chose for her.

It will be me.

But I'm not the kind of man who takes his bride gently amid rose petals on her wedding night. She'll learn to satisfy her King's demands with her bottom burning and her hair held in my fist.

She'll promise obedience when she speaks her vows, but she'll be mastered long before then.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

King's Temptation

I didn't think I needed Dimitri Kristoff's protection, but it wasn't up to me. With a kingpin from a rival family coming after me, he took charge, took off his belt, and then took what he wanted.

He knows I'm not used to doing as I'm told. He just doesn't care.

The stripes seared across my bare bottom left me sore and sorry, but it was what came after that truly left me shaken. The princess of the King family shouldn't be on her knees for anyone, let alone this Bratva brute who has decided to claim for himself what he was meant to safeguard.

Nobody gave me to him, but I'm his anyway.

Now he's going to make sure I know it.

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BOOKS OF THE MAFIA MASTERS SERIES

His as Payment

Caroline Hargrove thinks she is mine because her father owed me a debt, but that isn't why she is sitting in my car beside me with her bottom sore inside and out. She's wet, well-used, and coming with me whether she likes it or not because I decided I want her, and I take what I want.

As a senator's daughter, she probably thought no man would dare lay a hand on her, let alone spank her thoroughly and then claim her beautiful body in the most shameful ways possible.

She was wrong. Very, very wrong. She's going to be mastered, and I won't be gentle about it.

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Taken as Collateral

Francesca Alessandro was just meant to be collateral, held captive as a warning to her father, but then she tried to fight me. She ended up sore and soaked as I taught her a lesson with my belt and then screaming with every savage climax as I taught her to obey in a much more shameful way.

She's mine now. Mine to keep. Mine to protect. Mine to use as hard and as often as I please.

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Forced to Cooperate

Willow Church is not the first person who tried to put a bullet in me. She's just the first I let live. Now she will pay the price in the most shameful way imaginable. The stripes from my belt will teach her to obey, but what happens to her sore, red bottom after that will teach the real lesson.

She will be used mercilessly, over and over, and every brutal climax will remind her of the humiliating truth: she never even had a chance against me. Her body always knew its master.

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Claimed as Revenge

Valencia Rivera became mine the moment her father broke the agreement he made with me. She thought she had a say in the matter, but my belt across her beautiful bottom taught her otherwise and a night spent screaming her surrender into the sheets left her in no doubt she belongs to me.

Using her hard and often will not be all it takes to tame her properly, but it will be a good start...

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Made to Beg

Sierra Fox showed up at my door to ask for my protection, and I gave it to her... for a price. She belongs to me now, and I'm going to use her beautiful body as

thoroughly as I please. The only thing for her to decide is how sore her cute little bottom will be when I'm through claiming her.

She came to me begging for help, but as her moans and screams grow louder with every brutal climax, we both know it won't be long before she begs me for something far more shameful.

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BOOKS OF THE EDGE OF DARKNESS SERIES

Dark Stranger

**On a dark, rainy night, I received a phone call. I shouldn't have answered it...
but I did.**

The things he says he'll do to me are far from sweet, this man I know only by his
voice.

They're so filthy I blush crimson just hearing them... and yet still I answer, my
panties always soaked the moment the phone rings. But this isn't going to end when
I decide it's gone too far...

I can tell him to leave me alone, but I know it won't keep him away. He's coming
for me, and when he does he's going to make me his in all the rough, shameful
ways he promised he would.

And I'll be wet and ready for him... whether I want to be or not.

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Dark Predator

**She thinks I'm seducing her, but this isn't romance. It's something much more
shameful.**

Eden tried to leave the mafia behind, but someone far more dangerous has set his
sights on her.

Me.

She was meant to be my revenge against an old enemy, but I decided to make her
mine instead.

She'll moan as my belt lashes her quivering bottom and writhe as I claim her in the
filthiest of ways, but that's just the beginning. When I'm done, it won't be just her
body that belongs to me.

I'll own her heart and soul too.

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BOOKS OF THE DARK OVERTURE SERIES

Indecent Invitation

I shouldn't be here.

My clothes shouldn't be scattered around the room, my bottom shouldn't be sore, and I certainly shouldn't be screaming into the sheets as a ruthless tycoon takes everything he wants from me.

I shouldn't even know Houston Powers at all, but I was in a bad spot and I was made an offer.

A shameful, indecent offer I couldn't refuse.

I was desperate, I needed the money, and I didn't have a choice. Not a real one, anyway.

I'm here because I signed a contract, but I'm his because he made me his.

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Illicit Proposition

I should have known better.

His proposition was shameful. So shameful I threw my drink in his face when I heard it.

Then I saw the look in his eyes, and I knew I'd made a mistake.

I fought as he bared me and begged as he spanked me, but it didn't matter. All I could do was moan, scream, and climax helplessly for him as he took everything he wanted from me.

By the time I signed the contract, I was already his.

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Unseemly Entanglement

I was warned about Frederick Duvall. I was told he was dangerous. But I never suspected that meeting the billionaire advertising mogul to discuss a business proposition would end with me bent over a table with my dress up and my panties down for a shameful lesson in obedience.

That should have been it. I should have told him what he could do with his offer and his money.

But I didn't.

I could say it was because two million dollars is a lot of cash, but as I stand before him naked, bound, and awaiting the sting of his cane for daring to displease him, I know that's not the truth.

I'm not here because he pays me. I'm here because he owns me.

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BOOKS OF THE CLUB DARKNESS SERIES

Bent to His Will

Even the most powerful men in the world know better than to cross me, but Autumn Sutherland thought she could spy on me in my own club and get away with it. Now she must be punished.

She tried to expose me, so she will be exposed. Bare, bound, and helplessly on display, she'll beg for mercy as my strap lashes her quivering bottom and my crop leaves its burning welts on her most intimate spots. Then she'll scream my name as she takes every inch of me, long and hard.

When I am done with her, she won't just be sore and shamefully broken. She will be mine.

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Broken by His Hand

Sophia Russo tried to keep away from me, but just thinking about what I would do to her left her panties drenched. She tried to hide it, but I didn't let her. I tore those soaked panties off, spanked her bare little bottom until she had no doubt who owns her, and then took her long and hard.

She begged and screamed as she came for me over and over, but she didn't learn her lesson...

She didn't just come back for more. She thought she could disobey me and get away with it.

This time I'm not just going to punish her. I'm going to break her.

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Bound by His Command

Willow danced for the rich and powerful at the world's most exclusive club... until tonight.

Tonight I told her she belongs to me now, and no other man will touch her again. Tonight I ripped her soaked panties from her beautiful body and taught her to obey with my belt.

Tonight I took her as mine, and I won't be giving her up.

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MORE MAFIA AND BILLIONAIRE ROMANCES BY PIPER STONE

Caught

If you're forced to come to an arrangement with someone as dangerous as Jagger Calduchi, it means he's about to take what he wants, and you'll give it to him... even if it's your body.

I got caught snooping where I didn't belong, and Jagger made me an offer I couldn't refuse. A week with him where his rules are the only rules, or his bought and paid for cops take me to jail.

He's going to punish me, train me, and master me completely. When he's used me so shamefully I blush just to think about it, maybe he'll let me go home... or maybe he'll decide to keep me.

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Ruthless

Treating a mobster shot by a rival's goons isn't really my forte, but when a man is powerful enough to have a whole wing of a hospital cleared out for his protection, you do as you're told.

To make matters worse, this isn't first time I've met Giovanni Calduchi. It turns out my newest patient is the stern, sexy brute who all but dragged me back to his hotel room a couple of nights ago so he could use my body as he pleased, then showed up at my house the next day, stripped me bare, and spanked me until I was begging him to take me even more roughly and shamefully.

Now, with his enemies likely to be coming after me in order to get to him, all I can do is hope he's as good at keeping me safe as he is at keeping me blushing, sore, and thoroughly satisfied.

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Prey

Within moments of setting eyes on Sophia Waters, I was certain of two things. She was going to learn what happens to bad girls who cheat at cards, and I was going to be the one to teach her.

But there was one thing I didn't know as I reddened that cute little bottom and then took her long and hard and oh so shamefully: I wasn't the only one who didn't come here for a game of cards.

I came to kill a man. It turns out she came to protect him.

Nobody keeps me from my target, but I'm in no rush. Not when I'm enjoying this game of cat and mouse so much. I'll even let her catch me one day, and as she screams my name with each brutal climax she'll finally realize the truth. She was never the hunter. She was always the prey.

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Given

Stephanie Michaelson was given to me, and she is mine. The sooner she learns that, the less often her cute little bottom will end up well-punished and sore as she is reminded of her place.

But even as she promises obedience with tears running down her cheeks, I know it isn't the sting of my belt that will truly tame her. It is what comes next that will leave her in no doubt she belongs to me. That part will be long, hard, and shameful... and I will make her beg for all of it.

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Dangerous Stranger

I came to Spain hoping to start a new life away from dangerous men, but then I met Rafael Santiago. Now I'm not just caught up in the affairs of a mafia boss, I'm being forced into his car.

When I saw something I shouldn't have, Rafael took me captive, stripped me bare, and punished me until he felt certain I'd told him everything I knew about his organization... which was nothing at all. Then he offered me his protection in return for the right to use me as he pleases.

Now that I belong to him, his plans for me are more shameful than I could have ever imagined.

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Indebted

After her father stole from me, I could have left Alessandra Toro in jail for a crime she didn't commit. But I have plans for her. A deal with the judge—the kind only a man like me can arrange—made her my captive, and she will pay her father's debt with her beautiful body.

She will try to run, of course, but it won't be the law that comes after her. It will be me.

The sting of my belt across her quivering bare bottom will teach Alessandra the price of defiance, but it is the far more shameful penance that follows which will truly tame her.

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Taken

When Winter O'Brien was given to me, she thought she had a say in the matter. She was wrong.

She is my bride. Mine to claim, mine to punish, and mine to use as shamefully as I please. The sting of my belt on her bare bottom will teach her to obey, but obedience is just the beginning.

I will demand so much more.

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Bratva's Captive

I told Chloe Kingstrom that getting close to me would be dangerous, and she should keep her distance. The moment she disobeyed and followed me into that bar, she became mine.

Now my enemies are after her, but it's not what they would do to her she should worry about.

It's what I'm going to do to her.

My belt across her bare backside will teach her obedience, but what comes after will be different.

She's going to blush, beg, and scream with every climax as she's ravaged more thoroughly than she can imagine. Then I'm going to flip her over and claim her in an even more shameful way.

If she's a good girl, I might even let her enjoy it.

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Hunted

Hope Gracen was just another target to be tracked down... until I caught her.

When I discovered I'd been lied to, I carried her off.

She'll tell me the truth with her bottom still burning from my belt, but that isn't why she's here.

I took her to protect her. I'm keeping her because she's mine.

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Theirs as Payment

Until mere moments ago, I was a doctor heading home after my shift at the hospital. But that was before I was forced into the back seat of an SUV, then bared and spanked for trying to escape.

Now I'm just leverage for the Cabello brothers to use against my father, but it isn't the thought of being held hostage by these brutes that has my heart racing and my whole body quivering.

It is the way they're looking at me...

Like they're about to tear my clothes off and take turns mounting me like wild beasts.

Like they're going to share me, using me in ways more shameful than I can even imagine.

Like they own me.

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Ruthless Acquisition

I knew the shameful stakes when I bet against these bastards. I just didn't expect to lose.

Now they've come to collect their winnings.

But they aren't just planning to take a belt to my bare bottom for trying to run and then claim everything they're owed from my naked, helpless body as I blush, beg, and scream for them.

They've acquired me, and they plan to keep me.

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Bound by Contract

I knew I was in trouble the moment Gregory Steele called me into his office, but I wasn't expecting to end up stripped bare and bent over his desk for a painful lesson from his belt.

Taking a little bit of money here and there might have gone unnoticed in another organization, but stealing from one of the most powerful mafia bosses on the West Coast has consequences.

It doesn't matter why I did it. The only thing that matters now is what he's going to do to me.

I have no doubt he will use me shamefully, but he didn't make me sign that contract just to show me off with my cheeks blushing and my bottom sore under the scandalous outfit he chose for me.

Now that I'm his, he plans to keep me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Dangerous Addiction

I went looking for a man working with my enemies. When I found only her instead, I should have just left her alone... or maybe taken what I wanted from her and then left... but I didn't.

I couldn't.

So I carried her off to keep for myself.

She didn't make it easy for me, and that earned her a lesson in obedience. A shameful one.

But as her bare bottom reddens under my punishing hand I can see her arousal dripping down her quivering thighs, and no matter how much she squirms and sobs and begs we both know exactly what she needs, and we both know as soon as this spanking is over I'm going to give it to her.

Hard.

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Auction House

When I went undercover to investigate a series of murders with links to Steele Franklin's auction house operation, I expected to be sold for the humiliating use of one of his fellow billionaires.

But he wanted me for himself.

No contract. No agreed upon terms. No say in the matter at all except whether to surrender to his shameful demands without a fight or make him strip me bare and spank me into submission first.

I chose the second option, but as one devastating climax after another is forced from my naked, quivering body, what scares me isn't the thought of him keeping me locked up in a cage forever.

It's knowing he won't need to.

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Interrogated

As Liam McGinty's belt lashes my bare backside, it isn't the burning sting or the humiliating awareness that my body's surrender is on full display for this ruthless mobster that shocks me.

It's the fact that this isn't a scene from one of my books.

I almost can't process the fact that I'm really riding in the back of a luxury SUV belonging to the most powerful Irish mafia boss in New York—the man I've

written so much about—with my cheeks blushing, my bottom sore inside and out,
and my arousal soaking the seat beneath me.

But whether I can process it or not, I'm his captive now.

Maybe he'll let me go when he's gotten the answers he needs and he's used me as
he pleases.

Or maybe he'll keep me...

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Vow of Seduction

Alexander Durante, Brogan Lancaster, and Daniel Norwood are powerful,
dangerous men, but that won't keep them safe from me. Not after they let my
brother take the fall for their crimes.

I spent years preparing for my chance at revenge. But things didn't go as planned...

Now I'm naked, bound, and helpless, waiting to be used and punished as these
brutes see fit, and yet what's on my mind isn't how to escape all of the shameful
things they're going to do to me.

It's whether I even want to...

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Brutal Heir

When I went to an author convention, I didn't expect to find myself enjoying a
rooftop meal with the sexiest cover model in the business, let alone screaming his
name in bed later that night.

I didn't plan to be targeted by assassins, rushed to a helicopter under cover of
armed men, and then spirited away to his home country with my bottom still
burning from a spanking either, but it turns out there are some really important
things I didn't know about Diavolo Montoya...

Like the fact that he's the heir to a notorious crime syndicate.

I should hate him, but even as his prisoner our connection is too intense to ignore,
and I'm beginning to realize that what began as a moment of passion is going to
end with me as his.

Forever.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bed of Thorns

Hardened by years spent in prison for a crime he didn't commit, Edmond Montego
is no longer the gentle man I remember. When he came for me, he didn't just take
me for the very first time.

He claimed my virgin body with a savagery that left me screaming... and he made
me beg for it.

I should have run when I had the chance, but with every lash of his belt, every
passionate kiss, and every brutal climax, I fell more and more under his spell.

But he has a dark secret, and if we're not careful, we'll lose everything... including
our lives.

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Morally Gray

Saxon Thornburg is known to the world as a reputable businessman, but I knew his true nature even before he kidnapped me, bared, bound, and punished me, and then shamefully ravaged me.

He is not just the billionaire boss of a powerful crime family. He is the Patriarch. Women drop to their knees on command for him, but he chose me because I didn't surrender.

Until he took off his belt...

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Vicious Intentions

Cain, Hunter, and Cristiano were heirs to some of the richest and most powerful families in the world, men who might as well have been kings. Ten years ago they caught me eavesdropping, and when they were done setting my bare ass on fire with a belt they claimed and ravaged me.

Or at least that's what happens in the fleeting memories I still have left after the car accident...

Though I'm a successful musician now, wealthy and famous myself, in my heart I know if one of those brutes—let alone all three—ordered me to strip and surrender to them in the most shameful of ways, I wouldn't even need the threat of another humiliating punishment to obey immediately.

I never expected to see them again, of course... or to find myself naked, wet, and blushing as a ruthless Chicago crime boss takes his time enjoying me along with two of his closest friends.

But even before the memory of their faces returned, my body remembered its masters.

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Scandalous Liaison

Recently divorced from my cheating ex, the last thing I needed on the flight home for my brother's wedding was a too-hot-for-his-own-good asshole sitting by me in first class.

But when I escaped to the bathroom to hyperventilate in peace, Mr. Tall, Dark, and Surly followed me. Then he made me forget all about the turbulence with a punishing kiss, a hard spanking, and a series of screaming climaxes loud enough for everyone on the plane to hear.

It wasn't until after our deliciously shameful tryst that I learned the truth.

The man who ravaged me is my father's greatest enemy... and he's willing to help me take control of the company my father has used for his ruthless schemes for far too long already.

All it will cost is my complete surrender.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthlessly Mine

She was on the run from bastards like me, desperate to leave the brutal world of assassins and mob bosses behind. But she was drawn to me like a moth to a flame, and I'm a bad, bad man...

That's why she's not just wet, well-used, and sore from my belt and what came after.

She's mine.

Ruthlessly mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Scandal

When a mysterious, dangerously sexy stranger led me back to his hotel room for a night of no-strings-attached passion, I didn't expect to end up with my bare ass thoroughly spanked.

But the real shock came the next day. That's when I discovered that the gorgeous, violet-eyed brute who made me scream in bed last night is one of the most powerful mafia bosses in the city.

...and as the future district attorney, I've just been tasked with putting him behind bars for life.

Caught in a web of lust and scandal, I know only one thing for certain.

I belong to him now.

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BOOKS OF THE MISSOULA BAD BOYS SERIES

Phoenix

As a single dad, a battle-scarred Marine, and a smokejumper, my life was complicated enough. Then Wren Tillman showed up in town, full of sass and all but begging for my belt, and what began as a passionate night after I rescued her from a snowstorm quickly became much more.

Her father plans to marry her off for his own gain, but I've claimed her, and I plan to keep her.

She can fight it if she wants, but in her heart she knows she's already mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Snake

I left Missoula to serve my country and came back a bitter, broken man. But when Chastity Garrington made my recovery her personal crusade, I decided I had a mission of my own.

Mastering her.

Her task won't be easy, and the fire in her eyes tells me mine won't either. Yet the spark between us is instant, and we both know she'll be wet, sore, and screaming my name soon enough.

But I want more than that.

By the time my body has healed, I plan to have claimed her heart.

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Maverick

When I found her trapped in a ravine, I thought Lily Sanborn was just another lost tourist. Then she tried to steal my truck, and I realized she was on the run... and in need of a dose of my belt.

Holed up in my cabin with her bottom burning and a snowstorm raging outside, there's no denying the spark between us, and we both know she'll soon be screaming my name as I take her in the most shameful of ways.

But when her past catches up to her, the men who come after her will learn a hard lesson.

She's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

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BOOKS OF THE MONTANA BAD BOYS SERIES

Hawk

He's a big, angry Marine, and I'm going to be sore when he's done with me.

Hawk Travers is not a man to be trifled with. I learned that lesson in the hardest way possible, first with a painful, humiliating public spanking and then much more shamefully in private.

She came looking for trouble. She got a taste of my belt instead.

Bryce Myers pushed me too far and she ended up with her bottom welted. But as satisfying as it is to hear this feisty little reporter scream my name as I put her in her place, I get the feeling she isn't going to stop snooping around no matter how well-used and sore I leave her cute backside.

She's gotten herself in way over her head, but she's mine now, and I protect what's mine.

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Scorpion

He didn't ask if I like it rough. It wasn't up to me.

I thought I could get away with pissing off a big, tough Marine. I ended up with my face planted in the sheets, my burning bottom raised high, and my hair held tightly in his fist as he took me long and hard and taught me the kind of shameful lesson only a man like Scorpion could teach.

She was begging for a taste of my belt. She got much more than that.

Getting so tipsy she thought she could be sassy with me in my own bar earned Caroline a spanking, but it was trying to make off with my truck that sealed the deal. She'll feel my belt across her bare backside, then she'll scream my name as she takes every single inch of me.

This naughty girl needs to be put in her place, and I'm going to enjoy every moment of it.

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Mustang

I tried to tell him how to run his ranch. Then he took off his belt.

When I heard a rumor about his ranch, I confronted Mustang about it. I thought I could go toe to toe with the big, tough former Marine, but I ended up blushing, sore, and very thoroughly used.

I told her it was going to hurt. I meant it.

Danni Brexton is a hot little number with a sharp tongue and a chip on her shoulder. She's the kind of trouble that needs to be ridden hard and put away wet, but only after a taste of my belt.

It will take more than just a firm hand and a burning bottom to tame this sassy spitfire, but I plan to keep her safe, sound, and screaming my name in bed whether she likes it or not. By the time I'm through with her, there won't be a shadow of a doubt in her mind that she belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Nash

When he caught me on his property, he didn't call the police. He just took off his belt.

Nash caught me breaking into his shed while on the run from the mob, and when he demanded answers and obedience I gave him neither. Then he took off his belt and taught me in the most shameful way possible what happens to naughty girls who play games with a big, rough Marine.

She's mine to protect. That doesn't mean I'm going to be gentle with her.

Michelle doesn't just need a place to hide out. She needs a man who will bare her bottom and spank her until she is sore and sobbing whenever she puts herself at risk with reckless defiance, then shove her face into the sheets and make her scream his name with every savage climax.

She'll get all of that from me, and much, much more.

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Austin

I offered this brute a ride. I ended up the one being ridden.

The first time I saw Austin, he was hitchhiking. I stopped to give him a lift, but I didn't end up taking this big, rough former Marine wherever he was heading. He was far too busy taking me.

She thought she was in charge. Then I took off my belt.

When Francesca Montgomery pulled up beside me, I didn't know who she was, but I knew what she needed and I gave it to her. Long, hard, and thoroughly, until she was screaming my name as she climaxed over and over with her quivering bare bottom still sporting the marks from my belt.

But someone wants to hurt her, and when someone tries to hurt what's mine, I take it personally.

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BOOKS OF THE EAGLE FORCE SERIES

Debt of Honor

Isabella Adams is a brilliant scientist, but her latest discovery has made her a target of Russian assassins. I've been assigned to protect her, and when her reckless behavior puts her in danger she'll learn in the most shameful of ways what it means to be under the command of a Marine.

She can beg and plead as my belt lashes her bare backside, but the only mercy she'll receive is the chance to scream as she climaxes over and over with her well-spanked bottom still burning.

As my past returns to haunt me, it'll take every skill I've mastered to keep her alive.

She may be a national treasure, but she belongs to me now.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Debt of Loyalty

After she was kidnapped in broad daylight, I was hired to bring Willow Cavanaugh home, but as the daughter of a wealthy family she's used to getting what she wants rather than taking orders.

Too bad.

She'll do as she's told or she'll earn herself a stern, shameful reminder of who is in charge, but it will take more than just a well-spanked bare bottom to truly tame this feisty little rich girl.

She'll learn her place over my knee, but it's in my bed that I'll make her mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Debt of Sacrifice

When she witnessed a murder, it put Greer McDuff on a brutal cartel's radar... and on mine.

As a former Navy SEAL now serving with the elite Eagle Force, my assignment is to protect her by any means necessary. If that requires a stern reminder of who is in charge with her bottom bare over my knee and then an even more shameful lesson in my bed, then that's what she'll get.

There's just one problem.

The only place I know I can keep her safe is the ranch I left behind and vowed never to return.

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BOOKS OF THE DANGEROUS BUSINESS SERIES

Persuasion

Her father stole something from the mob and they hired me to get it back, but that's not the real reason Giliana Worthington is locked naked in a cage with her bottom well-used and sore.

I brought her here so I could take my time punishing her, mastering her, and ravaging her helpless, quivering body over and over again as she screams and moans and begs for more.

I didn't take her as a hostage. I took her because she is mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bad Men

I thought I could run away from the marriage the mafia arranged for me, but I ended up held prisoner in a foreign country by someone far more dangerous than the man I tried to escape.

Then Jack and Diego came for me.

They didn't ask if I wanted to be theirs. They just took me.

I ran, but they caught me, stripped me bare, and punished me in the most shameful way possible.

Now they're going to share me, and they're not going to be gentle about it.

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BOOKS OF THE DARK WOLVES SERIES

His to Claim

For centuries my kind have hidden our feral nature, our brute strength, and our carnal instincts. But this human female is my mate, and nothing will keep me from claiming and ravaging her.

She is mine to tame and protect, and if my belt doesn't teach her to obey then she'll learn in a much more shameful fashion. Either way, her surrender will be as complete as it is inevitable.

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His to Possess

Stone Keeler is a six-foot-four hunk who could win any girl's heart and then make her scream in bed, but as he claimed my quivering body for the first time the look in his eyes was terrifying.

It was dark and savage, as if at any moment he might lose control completely and take me like a beast takes his mate, mounting and rutting me and marking me as his with every brutal climax.

I ran from him... but I couldn't stay away for long.

Not when I belong to him already.

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BOOKS OF THE ALPHA DYNASTY SERIES

Unchained Beast

As the firstborn of the Dupree family, I have spent my life building the wealth and power of our mafia empire while keeping our dark secret hidden and my savage hunger at bay. But the beast within me cannot be chained forever, and I must claim a mate before I lose control completely...

That is why Coraline LeBlanc is mine.

When I mount and ravage her, it won't be because I want her. It will be because I need her.

But that doesn't mean I won't enjoy stripping her bare and spanking her until she surrenders, then making her beg and scream with every desperate climax as I take what belongs to me.

The beast will claim her, but I will keep her.

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Savage Brute

It wasn't his mafia birthright that made Dax Dupree a monster. Years behind bars and a brutal war with a rival organization made him hard as steel, but the beast he can barely control was always there, and without a mate to mark and claim it would soon take hold of him completely.

I didn't know that when he showed up at my bar after closing and spanked me until I was wet and shamefully ready for him to mount and ravage me, or even when I woke the next morning with my throat sore from screaming and his seed still drying on my thighs. But I know it now.

Because I'm his mate.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ruthless Monster

When Esme Rawlings looks at me, she sees many things. A ruthless mob boss. A key witness to the latest murder in an ongoing turf war. A guardian angel who saved her from a hitman's bullet.

But when I look at her, I see just one thing.

My mate.

She can investigate me as thoroughly as she feels necessary, prying into every aspect of my family's vast mafia empire, but the only truth she really needs to know about me she will learn tonight with her bare bottom burning and her protests drowned out by her screams of climax.

I take what belongs to me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Ravenous Predator

Suzette Barker thought she could steal from the most powerful mafia boss in Philadelphia. My belt across her naked backside taught her otherwise, but as tears

run down her cheeks and her arousal glistens on her bare thighs, there is something more important she will understand soon.

Kneeling at my feet and demonstrating her remorseful surrender in the most shameful way possible won't bring an end to this, nor will her screams of climax as I take her long and hard. She'll be coming with me and I'll be mounting and savagely rutting her as often as I please.

Not just because she owes me.

Because she's my mate.

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Merciless Savage

Christoff Dupree doesn't strike me as the kind of man who woos a woman gently, so when I saw the flowers on my kitchen table I knew it wasn't just a gesture of appreciation for saving his life.

This ruthless mafia boss wasn't seducing me. Those roses mean that I belong to him now.

That I'm his to spank into shameful submission before he mounts me and claims me savagely.

That I'm his mate.

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BOOKS OF THE ALPHA BEASTS SERIES

King's Mate

Her scent drew me to her, but something deeper and more powerful told me she was mine. Something that would not be denied. Something that demanded I claim her then and there.

I took her the way a beast takes his mate. Roughly. Savagely. Without mercy or remorse.

She will run, and when she does she will be punished, but it is not me that she fears. Every quivering, desperate climax reminds her that her body knows its master, and that terrifies her.

She knows I am not a gentle king, and she will scream for me as she learns her place.

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Beast's Claim

Raven is not one of my kind, but the moment I caught her scent I knew she belonged to me.

She is my mate, and when I claim her it will not be gentle. She can fight me, but her pleas for mercy as she is punished will soon give way to screams of climax as she is mounted and rutted.

By the time I am finished with her, the evidence of her body's surrender will be mingled with my seed as it drips down her bare thighs. But she will be more than just sore and utterly spent.

She will be mine.

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Alpha's Mate

I didn't ask Nicolina to be my mate. It was not up to her. An alpha takes what belongs to him.

She will plead for mercy as she is bared and punished for daring to run from me, but her screams as she is claimed and rutted will be those of helpless climax as her body surrenders to its master.

She is mine, and I'm going to make sure she knows it.

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MORE STORMY NIGHT BOOKS BY PIPER STONE

Claimed by the Beasts

Though she has done her best to run from it, Scarlet Dumane cannot escape what is in store for her. She has known for years that she is destined to belong not just to one savage beast, but to three, and now the time has come for her to be claimed. Soon her mates will own every inch of her beautiful body, and she will be shared and used as roughly and as often as they please.

Scarlet hid from the disturbing truth about herself, her family, and her town for as long as she could, but now her grandmother's death has finally brought her back home to the bayous of Louisiana and at last she must face her fate, no matter how shameful and terrifying.

She will be a queen, but her mates will be her masters, and defiance will be thoroughly punished. Yet even when she is stripped bare and spanked until she is sobbing, her need for them only grows, and every blush, moan, and quivering climax binds her to them more tightly. But with enemies lurking in the shadows, can she trust her mates to protect her from both man and beast?

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Millionaire Daddy

Dominick Asbury is not just a handsome millionaire whose deep voice makes Jenna's tummy flutter whenever they are together, nor is he merely the first man bold enough to strip her bare and spank her hard and thoroughly whenever she has been naughty. He is much more than that.

He is her daddy.

He is the one who punishes her when she's been a bad girl, and he is the one who takes her in his arms afterwards and brings her to one climax after another until she is utterly spent and satisfied.

But something shady is going on behind the scenes at Dominick's company, and when Jenna draws the wrong conclusion from a poorly written article about him and creates an embarrassing public scene, will she end up not only costing them both their jobs but losing her daddy as well?

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Conquering Their Mate

For years the Cenzans have cast a menacing eye on Earth, but it still came as a shock to be captured, stripped bare, and claimed as a mate by their leader and his most trusted warriors.

It infuriates me to be punished for the slightest defiance and forced to submit to these alien brutes, but as I'm led naked through the corridors of their ship, my well-punished bare bottom and my helpless arousal both fully on display, I cannot help wondering how long it will be until I'm kneeling at the feet of my mates and begging them take me as shamefully as they please.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Captured and Kept

Since her career was knocked off track in retaliation for her efforts to expose a sinister plot by high-ranking government officials, reporter Danielle Carver has been stuck writing puff pieces in a small town in Oregon. Desperate for a serious story, she sets out to investigate the rumors she's been hearing about mysterious men living in the mountains nearby. But when she secretly follows them back to their remote cabin, the ruggedly handsome beasts don't take kindly to her snooping around, and Dani soon finds herself stripped bare for a painful, humiliating spanking.

Their rough dominance arouses her deeply, and before long she is blushing crimson as they take turns using her beautiful body as thoroughly and shamefully as they please. But when Dani uncovers the true reason for their presence in the area, will more than just her career be at risk?

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Taming His Brat

It's been years since Cooper Dawson left her small Texas hometown, but after her stubborn defiance gets her fired from two jobs in a row, she knows something definitely needs to change. What she doesn't expect, however, is for her sharp tongue and arrogant attitude to land her over the knee of a stern, ruggedly sexy cowboy for a painful, embarrassing, and very public spanking.

Rex Sullivan cannot deny being smitten by Cooper, and the fact that she is in desperate need of his belt across her bare backside only makes the war-hardened ex-Marine more determined to tame the beautiful, fiery redhead. It isn't long before she's screaming his name as he shows her just how hard and roughly a cowboy can ride a headstrong filly. But Rex and Cooper both have secrets, and when the demons of their past rear their ugly heads, will their romance be torn apart?

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Capturing Their Mate

I thought the Cenzan invaders could never find me here, but I was wrong. Three of the alien brutes came to take me, and before I ever set foot aboard their ship I had already been stripped bare, spanked thoroughly, and claimed more shamefully than I would have ever thought possible.

They have decided that a public example must be made of me, and I will be punished and used in the most humiliating ways imaginable as a warning to anyone who might dare to defy them. But I am no ordinary breeder, and the secrets hidden in my past could change their world... or end it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Rogue

Tracking down cyborgs is my job, but this time I'm the one being hunted. This rogue machine has spent most of his life locked up, and now that he's on the loose he has plans for me...

He isn't just going to strip me, punish me, and use me. He will take me longer and harder than any human ever could, claiming me so thoroughly that I will be left in no doubt who owns me.

No matter how shamefully I beg and plead, my body will be ravaged again and again with pleasure so intense it terrifies me to even imagine, because that is what he was built to do.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Roughneck

When I took a job on an oil rig to escape my scheming stepfather's efforts to set me up with one of his business cronies, I knew I'd be working with rugged men. What I didn't expect is to find myself bent over a desk, my cheeks soaked with tears and my bare thighs wet for a very different reason, as my well-punished bottom is thoroughly used by a stern, infuriatingly sexy roughneck.

Even though I should have known better than to get sassy with a firm-handed cowboy, let alone a tough-as-nails former Marine, there's no denying that learning the hard way was every bit as hot as it was shameful. But a sore, welted backside is just the start of his plans for me, and no matter how much I blush to admit it, I know I'm going to take everything he gives me and beg for more.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Hunting Their Mate

As far as I'm concerned, the Cenzans will always be the enemy, and there can be no peace while they remain on our planet. I planned to make them pay for invading our world, but I was hunted down and captured by two of their warriors with the help of a battle-hardened former Marine. Now I'm the one who is going to pay, as the three of them punish me, shame me, and share me.

Though the thought of a fellow human taking the side of these alien brutes enrages me, that is far from the worst of it. With every searing stroke of the strap that lands across my bare bottom, with every savage thrust as I am claimed over and over, and with every screaming climax, it is made more clear that it is my own quivering, thoroughly used body which has truly betrayed me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Primitive

I was sent to this world to help build a new Earth, but I was shocked by what I found here. The men of this planet are not just primitive savages. They are predators, and I am now their prey...

The government lied to all of us. Not all of the creatures who hunted and captured me are aliens. Some of them were human once, specimens transformed in labs into little more than feral beasts.

I fought, but I was thrown over a shoulder and carried off. I ran, but I was caught and punished. Now they are going to claim me, share me, and use me so roughly that when the last screaming climax has been wrung from my naked, helpless body, I wonder if I'll still know my own name.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Harvest

The Centurions conquered Earth long before I was born, but they did not come for our land or our resources. They came for mates, women deemed suitable for breeding. Women like me.

Three of the alien brutes decided to claim me, and when I defied them, they made a public example of me, punishing me so thoroughly and shamefully I might never stop blushing.

But now, as my virgin body is used in every way possible, I'm not sure I want them to stop...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Torched

I work alongside firefighters, so I know how to handle musclebound roughnecks, but Blaise Tompkins is in a league of his own. The night we met, I threw a glass of wine in his face, then ended up shoved against the wall with my panties on the floor and my arousal dripping down my thighs, screaming out climax after shameful climax with my well-punished bottom still burning.

I've got a series of arsons to get to the bottom of, and finding out that the infuriatingly sexy brute who spanked me like a naughty little girl will be helping me with the investigation seemed like the last thing I needed, until somebody hurled a rock through my window in an effort to scare me away from the case. Now having a big, strong man around doesn't seem like such a bad idea...

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Fertile

The men who hunt me were always brutes, but now lust makes them barely more than beasts.

When they catch me, I know what comes next.

I will fight, but my need to be bred is just as strong as theirs is to breed. When they strip me, punish me, and use me the way I'm meant to be used, my screams will be the screams of climax.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Hostage

I knew going after one of the most powerful mafia bosses in the world would be dangerous, but I didn't anticipate being dragged from my apartment already sore, sorry, and shamefully used.

My captors don't just plan to teach me a lesson and then let me go. They plan to share me, punish me, and claim me so ruthlessly I'll be screaming my submission into the sheets long before they're through with me. They took me as a hostage, but they'll keep me as theirs.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Defiled

I was born to rule, but for her sake I am banished, forced to wander the Earth among mortals. Her virgin body will pay the price for my protection, and it will be a shameful price indeed.

Stripped, punished, and ravaged over and over, she will scream with every savage climax.

She will be defiled, but before I am done with her she will beg to be mine.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Kept

On the run from corrupt men determined to silence me, I sought refuge in his cabin.

I ate his food, drank his whiskey, and slept in his bed. But then the big bad bear came home and I learned the hard way that sometimes Goldilocks ends up with her cute little bottom well-used and sore.

He stripped me, spanked me, and ravaged me in the most shameful way possible, but then this rugged brute did something no one else ever has before. He made it clear he plans to keep me...

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Auctioned

Twenty years ago the Malzeons saved us when we were at the brink of self-annihilation, but there was a price for their intervention. They demanded humans as servants... and as pets.

Only criminals were supposed to be offered to the aliens for their use, but when I defied Earth's government, asking questions that no one else would dare to ask, I was sold to them at auction.

I was bought by two of their most powerful commanders, rivals who nonetheless plan to share me. I am their property now, and they intend to tame me, train me, and enjoy me thoroughly.

But I have information they need, a secret guarded so zealously that discovering it cost me my freedom, and if they do not act quickly enough both of our worlds will soon be in grave danger.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Hard Ride

When I snuck into Montana Cobalt's house, I was looking for help learning to ride like him, but what I got was his belt across my bare backside. Then with tears still running down my cheeks and arousal dripping onto my thighs, the big brute taught me a much more shameful lesson.

Montana has agreed to train me, but not just for the rodeo. He's going to break me in and put me through my paces, and then he's going to show me what it means to be ridden rough and dirty.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Bounty

After I went undercover to take down a mob boss and ended up betrayed, framed, and on the run, Harper Rollins tried to bring me in. But instead of collecting a bounty, she earned herself a hard spanking and then an even rougher lesson that left her cute bottom sore in a very different way.

She's not one to give up without a fight, but that's fine by me. It just means I'll have plenty more chances to welt her beautiful backside and then make her scream her surrender into the sheets.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Beast

Primitive, irresistible need compelled him to claim me, but it was more than mere instinct that drove this alien beast to punish me for my defiance and then ravage me thoroughly and savagely. Every screaming climax was a brand marking me as his, ensuring I never forget who I belong to.

He's strong enough to take what he wants from me, but that's not why I surrendered so easily as he stripped me bare, pushed me up against the wall, and made me his so roughly and shamefully.

It wasn't fear that forced me to submit. It was need.

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Gladiator

Xander didn't just win me in the arena. The alien brute claimed me there too, with my punished bottom still burning and my screams of climax almost drowned out by the roar of the crowd.

Almost...

Victory earned him freedom and the right to take me as his mate, but making me truly his will mean more than just spanking me into shameful surrender and then rutting me like a wild beast. Before he carries me off as his prize, the dark truth that brought me here must be exposed at last.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Big Rig

Alexis Harding is used to telling men exactly what she thinks, but she's never had a roughneck like me as a boss before. On my rig, I make the rules and sassy little girls get stripped bare, bent over my desk, and taught their place, first with my belt and then in a much more shameful way.

She'll be sore and sorry long before I'm done with her, but the arousal glistening on her thighs reveals the truth she would rather keep hidden. She needs it rough, and that's how she'll get it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Warriors

I knew this was a primitive planet when I landed, but nothing could have prepared me for the rough beasts who inhabit it. The sting of their prince's firm hand on my bare bottom taught me my place in his world, but it was what came after that truly demonstrated his mastery over me.

This alien brute has granted me his protection and his help with my mission, but the price was my total submission to both his shameful demands and those of his second in command as well.

But it isn't the savage way they make use of my quivering body that terrifies me the most. What leaves me trembling is the thought that I may never leave this place... because I won't want to.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Owned

With a ruthless, corrupt billionaire after me, Crockett, Dylan, and Wade are just the men I need. Rough men who know how to keep a woman safe... and how to make her scream their names.

But the Hell's Fury MC doesn't do charity work, and their help will come at a price.

A shameful price...

They aren't just going to bare me, punish me, and then do whatever they want with me.

They're going to make me beg for it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Seized

Delaney Archer got herself mixed up with someone who crossed us, and now she's going to find out just how roughly and shamefully three bad men like us can make use of her beautiful body.

She can plead for mercy, but it won't stop us from stripping her bare and spanking her until she's sore, sobbing, and soaking wet. Our feisty little captive is going to take everything we give her, and she'll be screaming our names with every savage climax long before we're done with her.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Cruel Masters

I thought I understood the risks of going undercover to report on billionaires flaunting their power, but these men didn't send lawyers after me. They're going to deal with me themselves.

Now I'm naked aboard their private plane, my backside already burning from one of their belts, and these three infuriatingly sexy bastards have only just gotten started teaching me my place.

I'm not just going to be punished, shamed, and shared. I'm going to be mastered.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Hard Men

My father's will left his company to me, but the three roughnecks who ran it for him have other ideas. They're owed a debt and they mean to collect on it, but it's not money these brutes want.

It's me.

In return for protection from my father's enemies, I will be theirs to share. But these are hard men, and they don't just intend to punish my defiance and use me as shamefully as they please.

They plan to master me completely.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Rough Ride

As I hear the leather slide through the loops of his pants, I know what comes next. Jake Travers is going to blister my backside. Then he's going to ride me the way only a rodeo champion can.

Plenty of men who thought they could put me in my place have learned the hard way that I was more than they could handle, and when Jake showed up I was sure he would be no different.

I was wrong.

When I pushed him, he bared and spanked me in front of a bar full of people.

I should have let it go at that, but I couldn't.

That's why he's taking off his belt...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Primal Instinct

Ruger Jameson can buy anything he wants, but that's not the reason I'm his to use as he pleases.

He's a former Army Ranger accustomed to having his orders followed, but that's not why I obey him.

He saved my life after our plane crashed, but I'm not on my knees just to thank him properly.

I'm his because my body knows its master.

I do as I'm told because he blisters my bare backside every time I dare to do otherwise.

I'm at his feet because I belong to him and I plan to show it in the most shameful way possible.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Captor

I was supposed to be safe from the lottery. Set apart for a man who would treat me with dignity.

But as I'm probed and examined in the most intimate, shameful ways imaginable while the hulking alien king who just spanked me looks on approvingly, I know one thing for certain.

This brute didn't end up with me by chance. He wanted me, so he found a way to take me.

He'll savor every blush as I stand bare and on display for him, every plea for mercy as he punishes my defiance, and every quivering climax as he slowly masters my virgin body.

I'll be his before he even claims me.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Rough and Dirty

Wrecking my cheating ex's truck with a bat might have made me feel better... if the one I went after had actually belonged to him, instead of to the burly roughneck currently taking off his belt.

Now I'm bent over in a parking lot with my bottom burning as this ruggedly sexy bastard and his two equally brutish friends take turns reddening my ass, and I can tell they're just getting started.

That thought shouldn't excite me, and I certainly shouldn't be imagining all the shameful things these men might do to me. But what I should or shouldn't be thinking doesn't matter anyway.

They can see the arousal glistening on my thighs, and they know I need it rough and dirty...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

His to Take

When Zadok Vakan caught me trying to escape his planet with priceless stolen technology, he didn't have me sent to the mines. He made sure I was stripped bare and sold at auction instead.

Then he bought me for himself.

Even as he punishes me for the slightest hint of defiance and then claims me like a beast, indulging every filthy desire his savage nature can conceive, I swear I'll never surrender.

But it doesn't matter.

I'm already his, and we both know it.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Tyrant

When I accepted a lucrative marketing position at his vineyard, Montgomery Wolfe made the terms of my employment clear right from the start. Follow his rules or face the consequences.

That's why I'm bent over his desk, doing my best to hate him as his belt lashes my bare bottom.

I shouldn't give in to this tyrant. I shouldn't yield to his shameful demands.

Yet I can't resist the passion he sets ablaze with every word, every touch, and every brutally possessive kiss, and I know before long my body will surrender to even his darkest needs...

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Filthy Rogue

Losing my job to a woman who slept her way to the top was bad enough, and that was before my car broke down as I drove cross country to start over. Having to be rescued by an infuriatingly sexy biker who promptly bared and spanked me for sassing him was just icing on the cake.

After sharing a passionate night, I might have made a teensy mistake in taking cash from his wallet in order to pay the auto mechanic, but I hadn't thought I'd ever see him again...

Then on the first day at my new job, guess who swaggered in with payback on his mind?

He's living proof that the universe really is out to get me... and he's my new boss.

[Buy on Amazon](#)

Captive Mate

When the fearsome alien warrior who invaded my dreams came for me in the flesh, he did more than just spank my bare ass and then make me scream his name as he mounted and rutted me.

He marked me as his.

Then, with the imprint of his teeth still red on my skin, he carried me off with him.

Because he isn't just my fantasy. He's my mate.

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ABOUT PIPER STONE

Amazon Top 150 Internationally Best-Selling Author, Kindle Unlimited All Star Piper Stone writes in several genres. From her worlds of dark mafia, cowboys, and marines to contemporary reverse harem, shifter romance, and science fiction, she attempts to delight readers with a foray into darkness, sensuality, suspense, and always a romantic HEA. When she's not writing, you can find her sipping merlot while she enjoys spending time with her three Golden Retrievers (Indiana Jones, Magnum PI, and Remington Steele) and a husband who relishes creating fabulous food.

Dangerous is Delicious.

* * *

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