



KEITH

The Hartwell Brothers

M.S. PARKER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KEITH

THE HARTWELL BROTHERS BOOK 1

M. S. PARKER

BELMONTE PUBLISHING, LLC

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Published by Belmonte Publishing LLC

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THE HARTWELL BROTHERS

Thank you for reading *KEITH*, the first book in my hot, new billionaire series: *The Hartwell Brothers*. Each book is about a different brother, yet I highly recommend reading the books in this order:

Book 1: KEITH (This book)

Book 2: MATT (Nov 22)

Book 3: JAMESON (Feb 2020)

Book 4: SHAWN (Mar 2020)

ONE

MATTHIAS

1950...

IF THERE WAS one thing I did *not* want to do today, it was to attend a birthday party/engagement celebration. I had no doubt I'd encounter any number of *important people*, but that was something I did on a regular basis.

Meet important people.

I definitely wasn't inclined to attend a party where one of the guests of honor was Lewis Van Horne. The son of a judge and a spoiled son of a bitch who'd never been told *no* in his life, Lewis got on my very last nerve just by breathing. And he wasn't happy to just breathe in my presence, either. My family name ensured that. He had a bullshit theory that he and I were alike.

The Hartwells were a well-known name, not just in Boston but Massachusetts and beyond. Money and influence were as much a part of my family as the name itself, which wasn't too dissimilar to the Van Horne family. Lewis and I differed on a very fundamental level, though, in ways he'd never understand.

I'd been raised to respect the privilege and power I'd been born with, to see it as the gift it was, rather than see it as my due.

Lewis seemed to think he was entitled to every damn thing in the universe, and if he *didn't* have it, he felt he had the right to take it.

The few times we'd talked had been more than enough for me to get his measure, and now, I had to spend an evening at this party, which would likely be a farcical celebration of his greatness.

I'd rather hook up with some friends and go to a local nightclub, listen to some jazz, maybe find a woman to keep me company for the night.

It wouldn't happen.

My parents had made it clear I was expected to go to the party. My mother had suggested I talk to some of the ladies there. "You never know..." she told me with a gleam in her eye, "maybe you'll find a girl you like, sweetheart.

It wasn't likely, but I'd agreed to go. In my bedroom, I gave my reflection a quick once-over and deemed the suit with its pale blue tie sufficient for the evening. My mother had suggested the tie, fondly telling me how it was almost the same color as my eyes. At least she hadn't tried to tousle my hair like she so often did.

On my way out, I swung by the living room where she sat watching television with my father. The *Ed Sullivan Show* was on, and I leaned against the frame of the door, smiling as Sullivan made a lighthearted quip that set my mother off into peals of laughter.

"You know, I could stay home and watch the show with you, Mom," I told her. "It sounds like more fun than going to a birthday party for a girl I don't know."

She glanced at me, an arch look in her eyes. "Don't start, Matthias. And you *do* know Lewis Van Horne and some of his friends, so it isn't like you'll be a wallflower, standing there with nobody to talk to, lost among strangers."

"Matthias has never *met* a stranger," my father said absently, glancing up from the crossword puzzle he'd been working to smile at me. "Nice tie."

"Mom picked it out."

He chuckled. "She still does that for me."

"I know." Going to her, I bent to kiss her cheek. Nodding to my father, I gave a last look to the television and Sullivan's familiar face before heading for the door.

Hopefully, the party wouldn't be too boring.

"IT'S NICE TO MEET YOU."

Accepting her hand, I looked into the deep blue eyes of the woman standing next to Lewis and finally understood the saying, *be careful what you*

wish for.

I'd wished the party wouldn't be too boring.

Now, as Alice Cormier held my hand and squeezed with surprising directness for a woman, I felt the earth shift under my feet. Or at least it seemed that way.

"The pleasure is all mine," I said as a weird constriction settled in my chest, making it hard to breathe.

I was surprised my voice came out sounding relatively normal.

Alice smiled, a dimple winking in her left cheek, and I had the insane urge to bend down and kiss that dimple, then slide my mouth over until I'd claimed her lips.

Lewis's nuisance of a voice cut in, jerking me back to earth.

"Matthias and his father run the Hartwell Foundation, Alice," he said in a condescending tone. "Your mother is always getting involved in charitable issues, so she's probably familiar with the family, although I doubt she's mentioned it to you."

"Actually, Mama has mentioned it, Lewis." She didn't even look at him as she spoke. "More than once. She chairs several charitable boards with your mother, if I recall correctly, Mr. Hartwell."

"Possibly." I smiled, struggling to keep it polite and casual for fear it would show some of the insane lightheaded, dizzying sensations still whirling through me.

Engaged, I reminded myself. *She's engaged*.

"Alice, I need to introduce you to Winston Taggert. He's a lawyer who works with my father. Hartwell, thanks for coming," Lewis said, giving me a broad smile. "We'll hook up in a bit for a scotch after I've made my rounds."

"Perhaps," I said, forcing myself to step aside. I didn't turn to watch them go, although it took more effort than I liked to admit.

LEAVE IT ALONE, *Matt*, I told myself when Lewis tugged Alice out on a night-darkened path off the terrace more than an hour later. I'd been standing in the shadows, sipping a bourbon and telling myself I needed to leave.

I hadn't been successful.

I wasn't having much luck now, either, although the last thing I needed to

be doing was thinking about the beautiful young woman with the wide, warm smile and bright laugh.

Engaged, I reminded myself. *Engaged*.

Yeah, to Lewis fucking Van Horne.

I couldn't wrap my mind around the idea of it. He was so...*wrong* for her. Cool arrogance and condescension at sharp odds to her humility and warmth. Worse, he'd made more than a few backhanded insults during the night that had made her withdraw into herself a little more each time until the warmth and laughter I'd first seen in her eyes had faded into nothingness.

Although minutes had passed since they'd disappeared down the path that led into the hedge maze, I continued to stare at the spot where I'd last seen them.

Hand tight around the cut crystal of the glass, I tossed the rest of the bourbon back and put it down on the stone balustrade.

It was time to get out of here before I did something stupid.

A flicker of movement from the corner of my eye made me look back just as I turned toward the house.

Lewis.

Alone.

He shot a look back over his shoulder, his entire back rigid. He didn't see me watching as he reached up and touched his cheek, then his mouth, face tightening in a scowl before he winced in what looked like pain.

Dread crept through me as he smoothed a hand down his tie, then adjusted his shirt, which I could now see had been more than a little askew. He tugged at his zipper, mouth curling in a smirk as he skimmed the area around him. When he saw me, he inclined his head, the condescending smile growing wider.

The bastard.

TWO

KEITH

BOSTON, PRESENT DAY...

“WE SHOULD GET *you* in front of the camera.”

I ignored the comment, keeping my focus on the women. This secluded, privately owned stretch of beach had been rented out to us but only for a few hours. We also only had another two, max, before the weather changed on us, and the pretty, fluffy clouds in the sky turned gray and thunderous.

As much as I loved thunderstorms, they weren't the idea backdrop for a swimsuit model photo session.

“I've got some *lovely* pieces for men. Imagine, going from Keith Hartwell, fashion photographer, to Keith Hartwell, *model*.”

“I'm more at home behind the camera, Ms. LeBeau,” I said, keeping my tone polite and professional, despite the fact that she was getting on my last nerve.

Frankie LeBeau was an upstart in the fashion world, her rich, playboy husband having paved the way for her with his money and contacts. I'd been advised that she had loose ideas when it came to respecting her marriage vows, but she wouldn't be the first woman I'd had to shut down, and I knew she wouldn't be the last.

To cut off further conversation, I called out the women lounging on the towels and various beach chairs that had been strewn with deliberate abandon. “Meriah, Josie...turn toward each other, like you're whispering secrets. Bethany, I want you to get behind Meriah and put some more oil on

her.”

As they moved to comply, I closed the distance, going on one knee to get close-ups. “Shoulders back, Meriah. We need to see the detail on the bikini top.”

“Sure, Keith.” Teasing, good-humored laughter lurked in her voice and tugged up the corners of her mouth in a smile. “It’s just the *detail* you want to showcase.”

“I wish I had *detail* like that, Meriah,” Bethany said as I snapped a few more images before walking backward on my knees to get a wider focus. I made it just in time to catch them as they all broke out into laughter.

Lowering the camera, I checked the image and grinned. “Beautiful, ladies. Alright, Jezebel, Alannah. I want you two on the lounge, looking at your phone.”

One of the assistants on hand ran up with a phone and turned it over to Alannah. She gave him a sweet smile that had him blushing and all but tripping over his feet as he hurried away.

“Stop that, ‘Lannah,” Jezebel said, laughing. Her flame-red curls spilling down from a high and tight ponytail, she nudged the tall, reed-slender woman next to her. “You’re going to tie him up in knots.”

“What did I do?” Alannah blinked, her long lashes drooping down low over large, doe-brown eyes.

“Ladies, giggle over a dirty meme on the phone,” I told them. “Jez, I want you leaning in toward Alannah.”

“It’s going to make my stomach pooch,” she complained. She and Bethany were the two-plus sized models out of the five-woman team, and while both were beautiful, curvy women, Jezebel had some body confidence issues she still worked to overcome.

“Don’t be silly,” Alannah said, curving an arm around the other woman’s shoulders and pressing her head against Jezebel’s vivid red hair. The contrast between her mocha skin and Jez’s pale flesh was striking. “You look lush and perfect. Like a fertility goddess.”

A half-smile curved Jezebel’s lips, and I caught that moment in time before retreating to my earlier spot to get more of the group as a whole.

“How am I supposed to promote a body positivity swimsuit campaign if one of my big-assed models isn’t *body positive*?” Frankie asked. She kept her voice low, but the words came out waspish and snide.

They rubbed like sandpaper over my skin, working deep. I hadn’t been

impressed by Frankie when I first met her, and if her designs—and the models she'd selected—hadn't been so appealing, I would have passed on the project.

"I don't think you quite get the idea of *body positive*, Frankie," I said as I snapped a few more shots. "It's about learning to accept your body, and from what I understand, it's an ongoing process." I went to a knee again. "And it's not isolated just to a certain body type or even gender. Jezebel is one of the most confident women I've ever worked with, but even confident women have moments."

There was a faint pause. I didn't bother looking at the designer, just kept working.

"No wonder you're in such high demand," Frankie murmured, her voice throaty now. "You've got good looks, brains, and a great big heart to go along with it, apparently."

"People just want me for my camera," I said, using casual humor to keep distance between us. "And that's the way I like it. Meriah! Can you turn toward...perfect, sweetheart. That's perfect."

I fired off a series of demands and moved away from Frankie at an angle, effectively ending her attempts to re-engage me in conversation for the next thirty minutes. By then, the wind had kicked up, and the light started changing, the clouds moving in.

"Looks like your internal weather system was a little off this time, hotshot," Meriah said, winking as she accepted a robe from one of the techs. "We're calling it quits early."

"Only by an hour." I smiled as she drew nearer, and when she leaned in, I let her brush her lips over mine.

Aware that Frankie was glaring a dagger at us, I cupped Meriah's chin and held her in place. "You'd be dead if looks could kill."

"I'm so scared," she teased, her rich brown eyes dancing with amusement.

If it was almost anybody else, I might have been worried, but Meriah Rix could fight her own battles. Not that too many people would attempt to go up against her, thanks to the star power behind her last name. Her father was one of the biggest names in Hollywood, and he doted on his only child.

I caught one of her braids, rubbing my thumb over the soft, pale gold strands. "Want some company for the rest of the day?"

She beamed at me. "I thought you'd never ask."

Chuckling, I covered her smiling mouth with mine for a quick kiss. “Go change. I’ve got to pack up my gear.”

She started walking backward, eyes laughing. “It’s a good thing you’re outside her sphere of influence. She’s looking at you like she’d like to peel the skin from your eyeballs.”

“Ouch.” I winced. “That’s a gruesome image, Mer.”

She winked and turned on her heel, striding for the trailer she shared with several other models.

Frankie caught up with me as I started packing up my main camera, a Canon 5D I’d been using for years. Friends kept hassling me to upgrade, but this baby and I had done things together, and as long as she worked, I was keeping her.

Sand flew up as I started to pack the lens away, and I looked up with a scowl. “Watch the equipment,” I said, not bothering to hide my irritation.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Frankie said with a simpering smile. She knelt down in front of me, brushing back her curly, platinum blonde hair.

Ignoring the patently false apology, I checked the lens and grabbed a cloth, carefully brushing sand from the body and giving it another once over. Another blast of wind kicked up, and I turned my back into it, using my body to protect the equipment.

“I didn’t know you and Meriah were a thing.” She managed to maneuver herself so that she was next to me once more, her shoulder brushing mine.

“Who said we were?” I quickly packed away the rest of the equipment, one eye on the sky. The clouds were piling up fast, an ominous dark gray.

“Oh, so you kiss all your models like that? Maybe I’m in the wrong line of work.” She leaned in even closer, bringing with her the heady scent of sex—the cool and calculating kind.

“Frankie, I think you’re in exactly the line of work you need to be in. According to that interview in *Vanity Fair*, your husband’s wedding gift was to help get you established with your design line because it was your lifelong dream.” Slanting a look at her, then down at her left hand, which was absent a wedding ring, I added, “Sounds like a great guy. I bet you appreciate having him.”

Hot flags of color appeared on her cheeks, and she shot upright. “I hope your photography skills are worth the price you charge,” she said coldly. “Otherwise, you’ll be doing this shoot over. *Free*.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.” I zipped up the last bag and stood, swinging it

over my shoulder. “This was a trial run for me as far as your line goes, Frankie. I don’t think we clicked.”

Her eyes widened, jaw dropping open. I didn’t bother saying anything else as I grabbed another case of equipment.

Meriah was leaving her trailer as I made the second trip to collect the rest of my gear. It was covered in sand, and I shook my head, dusting the two cases off with a mix of irritation and amusement. I’d met my share of spoiled, entitled people in this line of work, but Frankie was one hell of a diva.

“Need some help?” Meriah asked as I went to lift the second case.

“I’ve got it.” A quick look around showed Frankie to be nowhere in sight, and I made a judgment call. “I won’t be doing another shoot for Frankie. Just an FYI, you might want to let anybody you’re friendly with know she’s got a vindictive streak in her.”

Meriah opened her mouth to speak, then stopped and look down at my equipment with a pensive look. “She’s too new in this game to be able to cause anybody problems,” she said finally.

“Yeah, but she’s got talent and a rich husband. Give her a few years, and she’ll have the power to cause some people problems.”

“Like you?”

I laughed. “No, I’m not worried about me. However, she’s a pain in the ass who isn’t worth the time, and I don’t want anybody I like having problems with her.”

“You’re a sweetie.” Meriah took the keys from me and opened the back of the rented SUV, waiting as I stowed my gear. Then she slid her arms around my neck. “How about you and I head back to my hotel? We can order room service, watch while the storm rolls in...and fuck like rabbits.”

THANKS to the teasing play of her fingers on my thigh, and higher, during the thirty-minute drive to her hotel on the outskirts of Miami, by the time we were inside the private elevator that went straight to her penthouse suite, my cock was rigid and aching.

Lust and amusement had me corralling her up against the wall.

“That was playing dirty, Meriah,” I told her, pressing my lips to the curve of her neck as the elevator slid upward in a silent glide. “I should torment you

the same way you tormented me.”

To emphasize, I reached down and cupped her through the light, gauzy material of her sundress, grinding the heel of my hand against her sex. She gasped and arched up onto her toes, rocking against me.

“You wouldn’t make me wait, would you, Keith?” she asked.

The bell dinged, and cool air slid in as the doors to the elevator opened.

I backed away, my hands falling to my sides. “I’m debating.”

She poked her lip out in a good-natured pout. “Baby…”

The elevator opened directly into the penthouse’s private foyer, and I kept walking backward as she prowled closer, letting her cage me up against the door that opened into the main part of the penthouse suite.

“I think I’m hungry,” I murmured against her lips when she kissed me.

“For dessert?” She smiled wickedly, reaching down to stroke me through my jeans.

“Absolutely.” I covered her hand with mine and thrust into her palm, lids drifting down until I stared at her through my lashes. “But first…maybe a club sandwich.”

Swiping the keycard from her, I opened the door and stepped inside, grinning at her as she growled at me. “Not funny.”

But her eyes glinted with amusement.

“I told you about twenty minutes ago that you were playing with fire.” Spying the room service menu on the dining room table, I plucked it up and flipped through the pages. From the corner of my eye, I caught movement and turned to see Meriah slowly unbuttoning the tiny, pearl-like buttons that ran down the front of her sundress. Her nipples had stiffened into peaks that stabbed into the soft fabric, and my cock started to pulse in demand.

“Go ahead and order. You can get me…whatever,” she said sweetly as she rolled her shoulders, the movement utterly elegant and feminine. The straps of the sundress slid to the floor, leaving her naked, save for a lacy pair of panties. “I think I’ll step out onto the balcony for a few minutes before the storm hits. I love it when the air gets a little wild like this.”

She walked past me, hips swaying. Just before she stepped outside, she sent me a sultry smile.

I caught the door before she slid it closed and stepped out after her.

“Aren’t you go—”

Slamming my mouth down on hers, I caught the rest of her question in a rough kiss.

She moaned into my mouth and curled her arms around my neck. Grabbing the sides of her panties with both hands, I tore them off.

She shuddered as I broke the kiss and began to move down her body, leaving a stinging line of kisses, pausing to play and bite at her nipples before resuming my path downward. Kneeling in front of her, I caught one knee and lifted, pushing up and out until she was exposed and open.

She moaned as I licked her. She was already wet and swollen, ready. Tangling her fingers in my hair, she tugged. "Come here, Keith," she said, voice shaking.

"No...you had a good idea, going with dessert first."

She whimpered, bucking against me when I thrust two fingers into her heated core, her flesh tight and slick.

I worked her to the edge, then over it, easing her back down before starting all over again.

It wasn't until she'd climaxed a second time that I stood and caught her around the waist. She sagged against the smooth surface of the building, her eyes dazed. She wobbled, bracing her hands on my shoulders as I pulled a condom from my pocket.

The rain started while I was gloving up and was at a hard downpour by the time I boosted her up, the balcony's overhang protecting us.

"Keith..."

I thrust deep and her whimpering moan ended on a rising wail as I drove in a second time, her cunt slippery and hot even through the rubber. Gripping her ass in my hands, I rubbed my lips over hers. "Kiss me, Meriah."

She did, her nails sinking into my shoulders.

She came again, and still, I moved.

"You're a devil," she said on a moan.

"You love me that way." Skimming my lips down her neck, I found the rapid beat of her pulse and bit down gently before moving away. She had pale, delicate skin that bruised too easily, and she'd have my ass if I marked her. Still, she shivered at the touch, her hand clenching in my hair as if to hold me closer when I went to move away.

"Keith...!" She shuddered, her milking caresses and liquid heat clutching at me as I surged in.

Thunder boomed overhead, and a gale of wind drove a blast of rain onto the balcony, lashing at my back. The wildness of it, combined with Meriah's nails biting in my skin and the rhythmic pulses of yet another orgasm pushed

me over, and I slanted my mouth over hers as I came.

WE ATE lunch and had another bout in bed, slower this time, lazier, and after we were done, we dozed for a while until my phone's alarm went off. Still drowsy, I sat up and rubbed at my eyes, waiting for the fog to clear.

Outside, the sun was shining again, the sky so blue, it was hard to believe it had been thundering and pouring down rain just two hours earlier. "Florida weather," I murmured.

"Nothing like it." Meriah stroked a hand down my back. "You gotta go?"

"Yeah." I turned and dropped a quick kiss on her lips. "You heading back to California tomorrow?"

"No. I've got a job in Milan coming up and decided to head over a few days early, play tourist."

"Milan? Nice." I was genuinely pleased for her as I grabbed my pants from the floor. "Who's running the project?"

She named the photographer and designer.

"Very nice." I winked at her. "You'll forget all about me."

She snorted. "Not likely. You're one of the most laid-back photographers in the industry, Keith. Every model I know who has worked with you *adores* you." An amused grin curved her lips. "I've had more than a few give me jealous looks when they hear rumors that we've been known to go out from time to time."

I laughed.

"It boosts my ego when you laugh like that," she said dryly.

"Your ego doesn't need a boost."

"Neither does yours."

I went to rise, and she pinched my butt.

"Brat."

She grinned unrepentantly and made no attempt to hide how she watched me dress. "Damn, that body of yours."

My face heated a little as I tugged my shirt over my head, and I averted my face, making a show of straightening the shirt, then finger-combing my hair until the blush faded. I wasn't super self-conscious, but Meriah's obvious female appreciation as I stood there bare-ass naked could be unsettling—and

if she saw even a hint of embarrassment, she'd tease me endlessly.

"When do you head to Europe?" I asked as I looked around for my keys.

"Day after tomorrow. I wanted a day to unwind after finishing this project."

"Unwind from Frankie?"

"Yes." She huffed out a breath. "I probably should have warned you she'd be a pain in the ass. I had a bad feeling going in, but my agent asked me to do the job anyway, even though I'd heard some rumblings about her."

"Diva tantrum rumblings or worse?" I saw my shoes but held off grabbing them.

"Just diva shit, but it's annoying." She waved a dismissive hand. "She was nagging all of us for days... 'don't eat chocolate, don't gain weight... if you have a big meal, it won't hurt just this once if you puke it up'... blah, blah, blah."

"You're kidding me, right?" I growled, my face heating for another reason now.

Catching sight of my expression, she raised a brow. "Don't worry about it. We're big girls. We know how to handle people like her."

"I know that," I said, shoving my feet into my shoes. "Doesn't mean I have to like it."

"That's just one of the beautiful things about you." She gave me a beatific smile as I went to kiss her. "You have a safe trip home, gorgeous."

"And you stay safe while playing tourist."

She gave me a sleepy smile and rolled onto her side to watch me as I left, blowing me a kiss when I glanced back at her.

THREE

VERONICA

“VERY CUTE,” I SAID TO THE TALL GIRL STANDING IN FRONT OF MY DESK. SHE was flanked by two of her friends. All three of them smiled angelically as I pulled the little feline figurine from the gift box.

“Hmmm.”

Tapping the figurine with my finger, I gave them a quick look, then gave the little cat a critical once-over before looking over at my growing collection of Cheshires.

They frolicked across the windowsills of the classroom where I taught pre-algebra to a motley mix of seventh and eighth graders.

“I can’t imagine where you came up with such an unusual idea, Claire.”

The pretty girl grinned at me, all charm. “No idea, ma’am. The idea just came to us, didn’t it?”

The other two echoed her, although they didn’t quite have her smooth, laid-back humor. Claire had been a hard case when she’d first come to my class, bright as could be but struggling a great deal with math.

After corralling her and her father—a man who worked two jobs to take care of his only child—into a parent/teacher meeting, I managed to talk them into having her tested, and I hadn’t been at all surprised to discover she had dyscalculia and ADD as well. Science and reading came easily for her, but math was much more of a struggle. Or it had been.

Months of tutoring and some special tools designed to help with dyscalculia, plus medication for her ADD and regular exercise had turned the girl’s attitude completely around. She now had one of the highest GPAs in her grade and had been accepted into one of the best high schools in Boston.

The magnet school that employed me had an eclectic program, tailored to

the needs of individual students, although I still wasn't sure why nobody had seen how much Claire had struggled before she started eighth grade.

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" I asked as I studied the newest cat in my collection. It would go into storage with the rest of them until school started again in the fall.

"Yes, ma'am." Claire bumped shoulders with the cute blonde on her right, Lizzie Riddle, the girl I'd ended up pairing her with once she'd been ready to start working with a student tutor instead of one on one with me. The two had become fast friends, and I suspected it would be the kind of friendship that lasted a lifetime.

She whispered something to the other girl on her left, Ramona, a thin Latina who had joined my class halfway through the school year. Both of her friends smiled and waggled their fingers at me in a wave before heading back to their desks.

Just as I went to speak to Claire, one of the boys called out, "Fifteen more minutes to freedom!"

"Chase Conrad," I said, rubbing my left ear dramatically. "That foghorn you call a voice is a bit too loud for you to be yelling inside."

He didn't look at all abashed, slouching in his seat near the back. "Sorry, Ms. C!"

No, he wasn't, but I was more than a couple years in now, and I knew how bad summer fever could get to these kids. Exasperated, I just shook my head and looked back at Claire.

Lowering my voice, I said, "I just wanted to tell you again how proud I am of you. You worked so hard this year, and you're going to do *great* in high school."

A flush of pleasure and pride warmed her soft, coffee colored cheeks, and she rushed around the desk to grab me in a tight hug. "Thank you, Ms. C. I'm sorry I was so awful to you for a while. I mean, before we...well, you know."

"Honey, you have *nothing* to be sorry for." I hugged her back. The angry girl Claire had been had called to me, tugging at my heart in ways a lot of people wouldn't understand.

She squeezed me tighter. "I'm going to miss you so much."

"You've got my email. You know my number. You can come back and visit me." Rubbing my chin against the soft warmth of her curly hair, I whispered, "And I expect to be one of the *first* to know when you make it big out there as a writer."

She giggled, the sound a little embarrassed and wet. “You will be.”

The next fifteen minutes passed by in a rush, and before I knew it, my classroom was empty, just me and a collection of the sixteen Cheshire cats. Touching my fingers to the one Claire and her friends had given me, I smiled. It would be one of my favorites, no matter how long I taught and no matter how many I received.

My cellphone vibrated in my pocket, and I pulled it out, smiling as a familiar name flashed across the screen. “Hello, next queen of Broadway.”

My younger sister, Britney, laughed at the greeting. “Shit, sis. I’ve got a small part in *Fiddler on the Roof*. It’s not like I’m starring in *Swan Lake* or something.”

“Well, that’s just the next rung on the ladder. Hold up. Let me put you on the Bluetooth. I’ve gotta start packing up my cats.”

She laughed. “How many did you get this year?”

“Three. And don’t laugh,” I said primly. “My Cheshires are *adorable*.”

“Yeah, yeah. Put your Bluetooth on already.”

I took care of it, and we chatted for a while, Britney regaling me of her roommate’s exploits, a pretty brunette who seemed to have a new boyfriend every week.

“She *swears* this new guy, a fitness expert who does exercise videos on YouTube, is *the one*,” she said, her voice infused with laughter. “At least he’s not a creep like that so-called *producer*.”

“That guy.” I wrinkled my nose, remembering the phone call I’d gotten a few months earlier after Britney had managed to coax her roommate Toni into an ice cream induced sleep. “You *are* referring to the asshole who was trying to convince her and some of her friends to do a *special video* for him, right?”

“Yes.” She huffed out a breath. “You’d think she’d be a little more self-aware, having grown up in this life, but she’s about as green as some of the ones who show up from the Midwest, thinking New York is all fairytales and sparkles.”

“At least she’s got you looking out for her,” I said. “Maybe this YouTube fitness guru will be her true love, and he’ll sweep her off her feet and take care of her.”

“I *am* talking to my sister, right? Veronica Cheshire? The schoolteacher?” Amused cynicism underscored her words as she added in my date of birth and named our adoptive parents, who also happened to be our grandparents.

“I’m still not convinced it’s you. Maybe I should have Mom and Dad swing by and make sure you weren’t replaced by a pod person.”

“Oh, please.” I rolled my eyes. “Speaking of dating...what about that guy you were seeing. The paramedic?”

“We’re keeping it laid back.” Britney’s voice was as easy and casual as it usually was. “Right now, I don’t want to focus on much of anything beyond my career and family. Relationships take work, and I don’t need the distraction.”

I’d just paused to drink from the refillable water bottle I kept on my desk. With a sarcastic grin I knew she couldn’t see, I tipped the water bottle in a mock salute. “I’ll drink to that.”

“*You*, on the other hand, *should* get distracted,” Britney said in a huff. “You’ve done nothing but work and take care of us for as long as I can remember. Even G-mom is waiting for you to break loose.”

I thought of our grandmother—the woman we’d called Mom for most of our lives—and shook my head. “I doubt it. She’s dealt with having a child *break loose* before, Brit. That’s the last thing I plan on doing.”

“Veronica...”

“Don’t start,” I told her, using my big sister voice. It usually worked.

Britney hesitated, and I had to wonder if it would work this time. After a long pause, my younger sister sighed. “Okay, okay. So, what are you doing for the summer? I was kind of hoping you could come up and visit for a few weeks. Toni’s dad is taking her to Paris for a month after her show closes, so I’ll have room.”

“I can’t.” Regret tugged at me, but I banished it. It wasn’t like I hadn’t been to New York City before. And what would I do there...*for a month*? Twiddle my thumbs? “I’ve got a job lined up with Classically Yours again.”

I worked for the catering company last summer and had made a fair amount of money. When Sue Winston invited me back for this summer for the same position and with a slight increase in pay, I’d been delighted. It saved me the trouble of searching for another summer job and the money was fair.

I’d tried to pick up a job teaching summer school, but the magnet school that employed me only taught a few courses in the summer, and those jobs went to teachers with the most seniority. Being one of the newest teachers at a school with a very low turnover meant I was out of luck.

“You’re spending your break working *again*?” she asked. “Honey, you’re

going to work yourself into the ground.”

“No, I’m not.” Huffing out a laugh, I said, “I’ve got the next eight weeks off.”

“Today isn’t your last day.” Britney snorted. “And you go back earlier than students. So, actually, you only have about *six* weeks off, and you’re going to work *all* summer?”

“I like keeping busy,” I told her. The truth was, I wanted to have money saved to help our grandparents with the rest of the kids, and while I made a fair salary as a teacher, it wasn’t substantial enough to provide for the kids, put money in savings for them, and still take care of my own expenses.

I didn’t want my grandparents struggling and worrying about things at this point in their life. They’d sacrificed enough, taking care of all of us after our mother kept dumping us after the shine of having a new baby wore off.

Britney sighed. “Just don’t work yourself too hard, okay?”

FOUR

KEITH

STUDYING THE PICTURES WITH A CRITICAL EYE, I WENT THROUGH THEM ONE by one, discarding some right off the bat. No matter how much I practiced, and no matter how talented my models, there would always be some that never made it past my stringent judgment.

Others ended up in my personal file. With some assignments, I could share these extras with agents or the models, and there were a few in this portfolio that I'd love for others to see. Like the one of Jezebel talking with Meriah. Meriah had her cheeks puffed up with air and was looking skyward as if seeking divine help while Jezebel laughed, her hands over her mouth.

I could think of a number of clients that would love such a shot, but Frankie LeBeau was *not* one of them, and the contract wouldn't allow outside distribution, even to the models involved.

The light-blocking blinds were closed, and the blackout curtains drawn, but beyond my window, I could hear the chaos that was midday Boston. My stomach rumbled, and I shot a look at the clock, then made myself a promise. Another hour and I'd take a break, walk to one of the restaurants close by.

Considering where I lived, there were plenty to choose from.

I'd inherited a fair share of money a few years back, and I'd used half that money as a down payment on this building before banking and investing the rest. A friend whose father was in real estate had partnered with me on the renovations, and then we'd leased the other units out.

I owned the top floor and the bottom, living on the fourth level, while the bottom floor was my studio. I didn't use it often, but I liked having it available and had been known to lease the space out to friends in the field who needed a place when visiting the area.

Beacon Hill, the neighborhood where I'd decided to settle down, was far enough from the Hartwell Estate situated just outside Boston's city limits that I had plenty of privacy and didn't have to worry about my family dropping in while I was working or in town. At the same time, it was still close enough that I could visit for dinner during the week or go hang out with them on the weekends.

My share of the rental income, along with the money I made from my various contracts, allowed me to keep the rest of my inheritance in various accounts—or to invest. Over the past few years, the investments I'd made, thanks to advice from some friends, had built that money almost back up to its original sum, and lately, I'd been adding a significant portion of my income to it.

Two years earlier, I'd been awarded a large contract in Milan, and my career had taken off in ways I hadn't imagined—or maybe in ways I hadn't *let* myself imagine. Six months after that contract, I bought myself a Diamond DA62 twin-engine light aircraft and started flying between the east and west coasts for assignments, with stops in between to Yellowstone, the Grand Canyon and other places I hadn't had the chance to explore through the lens of my camera.

It had been a while since I'd taken off a trip just for me, and I was considering it as I finished editing another batch of files, then added them to the folder I'd send to my agent. By the time I finished, just over forty-five minutes later, I had a headache and hunger was gnawing a hole through my stomach. Or it felt that way, at least.

Saving everything, I tossed my phone and tablet into a messenger bag, then locked up and started down the steps. Halfway down, I had to stop and go back after remembering I needed my wallet.

My phone alerted me to a text just as I cleared the front door of the building, and I pulled it out to see a text from my oldest brother, Matthias. Out of the four of us, Matt and I were the closest, although I had a great relationship with all three of my brothers. I hadn't seen any of them since I'd gotten back in town, but we talked pretty often.

Veering into the nearby Thai restaurant, I let the hostess seat me and take my order—my usual, pad kee mao. Once I was alone, I pulled up the text from Matt.

Hey, wondering if you have plans tonight. If not, can you meet me for dinner? Want to talk to you about something.

I read the message through a second time, wondering what this could be about, and wondered if I should call him back right now. I decided against the call. Probably better in person.

Nothing much going on. Sure, we can meet. Is everything okay?

I wasn't expecting much response, although I had a feeling there was something bothering Matt and had been for a while. Out of all of us, he held more inside, kept more things to himself, even though he knew he could talk to me or any of us about anything. He knew it in *theory*, at least.

Logically, though, that was a different story. A typical oldest sibling, he seemed to think he was responsible for everything, including all of us.

Things are fine, just matters I want to discuss with you.

I snorted as another message popped up, then replied with a yes in response to his suggestion that we meet at a particular restaurant that was close to my place and on a route that wouldn't take him out of the way when he headed home from the office building that housed the foundation.

He didn't bother ending the conversation in the normal fashion, which was, again, typical for him.

Punching in a reminder on my phone, I considered calling my dad to see if he had any insight but ditched the idea within seconds. Out of the entire family, Matt was more likely to talk to me before anybody else if he had a problem.

"I'll make him tell me," I muttered to myself. Even if I had to get him drunk and get it out of him that way.

FROM THE OUTSIDE, the pub Matt had selected looked like a hole in the wall. When I first dragged him into it a few months earlier, he'd given me a distinct *Matthias* look, one that read, *you've got to be kidding*. But halfway through the chips and queso, he'd relaxed, and by the time the owner's wife, Maria, had come around to treat us to flan, he'd been smiling, albeit a faint curve of his mouth.

Matt was introverted as hell, although I couldn't exactly say he was shy, not anymore. He had been at one point, but he'd conquered it, deciding he had no other choice as the oldest brother. Still, being in the public eye left him on edge, and he was often put in that situation.

I figured the laid-back atmosphere of Paddy's Cantina would put him at ease, and I'd been right. Paddy's served an odd mash-up of Mexican and Irish fare, with traditional favorites from both cultures, a tribute to both Paddy and Maria. If Maria had ever met a stranger, I'd be surprised, and she'd managed to charm even Matt.

When we walked through the door, she caught sight of us from her usual position behind the polished old oak bar and greeted us with a beaming smile.

"Two of my favorite heartbreakers," she called out, her faint Spanish accent giving the words a lyrical note.

Matt's lips quirked even as his cheeks darkened while I moved to catch her in a hug. "Are you going to marry me, Maria? Dump that Irish bastard and run away with me?"

"Who are you calling an Irish bastard?" Paddy asked as he passed by, carrying a tray of food. Owner and manager, the man wasn't afraid to pitch in and help the staff. "You're nothing but a miserable English son of a bitch, and you know it."

"Hey, I'll have you know we Hartwells gave up our claim to being English before the Revolutionary War." I winked at the older man. "We're American, through and through."

"And you're still trying to steal my woman." Paddy managed to balance the enormous tray on one broad hand so he could reach over and stroke a hand down Maria's spine before getting back to work.

Under the dusky gold of her skin, Maria flushed, her dark eyes sparkling. "You're almost as bad a flirt as my Paddy, Keith Hartwell." She glanced at Matt with a shake of her head. "How do you keep him in line?"

"Usually with a baseball bat," Matt said with a straight face. "Sooner or later, I'll probably need it to keep some linebacker husband off him when he flirts with the wrong woman."

Maria laughed, the sound lyrical and filled with joy. "You just might. Come on, boys. Let's get you seated."

Ten minutes later, with two bottles of Modelo in front of us and a heaping pile of chips and queso, I pinned a look on my brother. "So...what's up?"

The light that had been in his eyes from chatting with Maria and Paddy faded. He blew out a hard breath, staring intently at the bottle he held for long, long moments.

Tension gathered in my shoulders, and I resisted the urge to push at him, demand an answer.

Finally, Matt looked up, his deep blue eyes connecting with the brighter, blue-green of mine. “There’s a problem with the foundation, Keith. A big one.”

I reached for the bottle of beer and took a deep drink. It didn’t do jackshit to relieve the dryness, but it gave me a few seconds to think.

“It’s the money, isn’t it?” I asked as I carefully put the bottle back on the scarred wooden surface of the table.

“Yes.” There was another long pause, and then he started to talk.

Each detail made the weight in my gut grow heavier while the promise of a headache went from *promise* to *reality*. By the time he stopped, I was done with my first beer and halfway through my second as I fought back the urge to snarl at him and demand to know why he’d kept this from us.

“I knew it was bad,” I said once I knew I could keep my voice level. “But I didn’t know it had gotten this bad, Matt. Why didn’t you tell any of us sooner?”

A deep flush stained his high cheekbones, and he looked away without answering.

Tightening my hand on the bottle, I said, “Damn it, Matt. You might run the foundation, but this is a family thing. It’s not just on *you*.”

“It’s not *your* name on all the legal documents,” he replied in a remote voice.

“Fuck that.” I drained the second bottle with three hard pulls and slammed it down on the table before pinning him with a hard look. “It’s *my* name on the foundation, just like it’s *your* name, our *father’s* name, our *grandfather’s* name, and our *brothers’* names. One day, one of our kids will take over, and *their* name will be on those documents, so don’t act like this doesn’t affect the whole damn family because you know flat out that you’re wrong.”

He gave me a cold look.

I flipped him off, unperturbed.

“If we eliminate our trusts, would that help?” I asked, mind spinning as I tried to figure out an answer. The foundation had been around too long. We did too much for the city, the entire region to just let it go away. This was more than just *money*, it was our heritage, and our family’s future. “I only used half of mine, and I’ve already earned back what I used to purchase my building. I can—”

“No.” His voice cool, Matt shook his head. “Legally, you’re not allowed

to return that money. None of us are.”

“It’s *our* money,” I argued. “We should be able to re-invest in the foundation if we so choose.”

“Tell that to the lawyers,” he said. “But it’s not an issue. I’ve come up with a solution, Keith. There’s an investor who is willing to back the foundation, a silent partner.”

He met my gaze for a brief moment before looking away.

Something in his eyes raised a silent warning, and I studied him, waiting for him to look back at me.

When he didn’t, I asked, “Who is the investor?”

“Clinton Ives.”

I almost choked. “Clinton *Ives*? That shark? He’s willing to be a silent partner? What did you offer him, your firstborn?”

“No.” But there was a world of tension in his response, and he sat so straight, I thought he might shatter. “We’ve reached an understanding. I’ll be marrying his daughter, Nikolette.”

Stunned, I gaped at him.

To his credit, he held my gaze without flinching.

I tried to speak but found I couldn’t. I grabbed his beer, not even half empty, and swigged, my throat parched. Putting it down, I leaned forward and glared. “You’re going to marry the piranha in Prada in order to get her daddy’s money. Am I getting that right?”

Matt’s nostrils flared. “She’s not a piranha.”

“Then you must be talking about *another* Nikolette Ives. Because the only one *I* know would eat her own young, her mate, *and* her parents if doing so suited her agenda.”

Lines bracketed Matt’s mouth. “Stop being so dramatic, little brother.”

“I’m *not*. This is a bad idea, man. You can’t do it.”

“It’s already done.” He checked his watch. “I need to be going. There’s a charity function tomorrow...it’s already on your schedule. Nikolette and I’ll be there. I’d like you to meet her. We’ll be announcing the engagement soon.”

“I...what...hell, Matt! Does Mom and Dad know? Shawn? Jameson?”

His eyes slid away from mine, and I had all the answer I needed.

“*Fuck*.” The urge to grab him and shake him was overpowering. “You can’t do this, Matt. You’ll be miserable.”

“And losing the foundation would be better?” he asked with a pragmatism

that told me he'd made up his mind.

Yeah, well, I was just as stubborn as he was, and I refused to see my brother suffer for the rest of his life. We all loved him too much. There had to be another answer. All I had to do was find it.

FIVE

VERONICA

“THESE ARE *DIVINE*.” TESSA DELGADO, THE HOSTESS FOR THE CHARITY dinner and auction I was lined up to help with, plucked another tiny tart from one of the trays, slipping me a guilty look. “You won’t tell on me, will you?”

“You sign the paychecks,” I said with a smile. “I think that means you’re entitled to a few extra tarts.”

She laughed, the sound full-throated and warm. “Oh, sweetie. Don’t tell me that. These hips don’t need that kind of encouragement.”

I pushed another tart in her direction. “Imagine *working* with all these yummy dishes around you.”

“Oh, heavens.” She winked. “You’re made of stronger stuff than me.”

Somebody called her name, and she sighed. “Duty calls.”

I wrapped the tart in a paper napkin, emblazoned with the name of her charitable foundation. “Here. Take one more for the road.”

“Oh, I think I like you, Veronica.” She gave me a quick grin and turned on her heel. By the time she’d left the kitchen of the banquet hall, she’d already popped the last tart into her mouth.

“You somehow manage to charm everybody you meet,” Ria Winston, the manager in charge of the event, commented. Ria was Sue’s sister-in-law and one of the creative geniuses behind many of the unique recipes that Classically Yours presented at these events. “Is it a gift, or are you secretly a witch?”

“I could tell you, but then I’d have to cast another spell tonight to make you forget.”

Ria laughed and shook her head before turning a checklist over to me. “Here. Run this out to Sue. I think she’s checking with the florist about the

set-up for the dessert table.”

Sue and I bumped into each other at the kitchen’s swinging double doors. She took the list and gave it a critical once over, then nodded. “I’ll talk to Ria. Is everything ready? We’re getting close on time.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t *ma’am* me, Veronica,” she said with a huff.

“Yes, ma’am.”

She rolled her eyes. “No wonder Katie loves you so much.”

Her daughter had been one of my students several years ago, and I’d ended up tutoring Katie for several months. The relationship had, eventually, opened the door to this job, and from time to time, I still saw the sweet girl when she pitched in to help wash dishes or other small jobs with the family catering business when she wanted some spending money.

I hadn’t seen her this summer yet, but I had no doubt I would. “How is Katie doing?”

“Amazing.” She grinned at me. “Pulled a B in Algebra 2, held it all year. She’s pretty pleased with herself.”

“Good for her, but I’m not surprised. I knew she could do it.”

Somebody called Sue’s name, and she sighed. “No rest for the wicked.”

I laughed as she headed off to put out whatever fire was blazing and returned to the kitchen, taking orders as Ria called them out while keeping an eye on the clock.

“You and the boss seem pretty friendly.”

The low voice came from my right—*very* close to my right. I looked over and spotted one of the other catering employees, a man who stood a few inches taller than my five foot nine, with blond hair and dark brown eyes. He was attractive enough, even if he was thicker through the middle and probably a good ten years older than me, at least.

But I didn’t like how close he stood.

He also made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end for reasons I couldn’t quite nail down. I didn’t need to, though. The instinct was enough.

“We’ve known each other for a while,” I said calmly. Under the guise of straightening out a stack of cocktail napkins that would go out with a trail of crudités, I shifted away from him.

A few seconds later, he’d closed that small distance back up.

“This gig is supposed to be over by eight or so. Early enough. Why don’t you have dinner with me afterwards?”

“Sorry. I’ve got plans.”

Dirk

gave a good-natured chuckle, and as I walked around the large metal table where others worked preparing endless trays of deliciousness, I was relieved to see him brace his hands on the gleaming surface and watch me, rather than follow. “It would figure, a beautiful woman like you. What about next week?”

“Afraid not.” Before he could continue the conversation, I shifted my attention to Hank, one of the most senior employees with the catering company. “What do you need me to do?”

He flicked me a look, and judging by the faint smile tugging at his lips, Hank read the message in my eyes loud and clear. Thank goodness. “I’ll soon need more of the filling for these, if you can get it. It’s in the walk-in back there.” He nodded in the direction, and as I turned to take care of it, I heard Hank address my stalker. “Dirk, instead of trying to flirt with any and every female, why don’t you gather up everything that needs to be washed so it’s out of the way?”

The brief respite only lasted ten minutes, Dirk seeking me out when I’d stepped outside for a quick break with a sandwich and a bottle of water. “Great minds,” he said, raising his own bottle. “Too bad they don’t let us snag a beer from the bar at these things.”

I didn’t respond.

“You don’t talk much, do you?”

“I do when there’s something to say.” I took another bite of my sandwich, giving the food my complete focus. Feeling his eyes on me, I shot him a look. “I’ve got less than ten minutes before I need to be back inside. I don’t have time to waste it chatting.”

He chuckled and reached out as if to touch me.

I frowned and shifted away.

Some of the amusement leached out of his eyes.

“Not very friendly, are you?” Dirk’s mouth drew into a hard, flat line.

“It depends on who you ask.”

“I guess you just don’t feel like extending the courtesy to me. Is that the problem, Veronica? I just wanted to get to know you, maybe take you out to dinner.”

My cheeks heated, and I wished I could will that sign of self-consciousness away. I couldn’t, but I was able to hold his eyes as I

responded, “I don’t date people I work with, so that’s not going to happen. I don’t think we have anything in common, either. You’d have better luck looking elsewhere.”

He grinned. “I hear you’re only working here for the summer, then you go back to teaching. In a few months, we won’t be working together.”

Pushing up from the bench where I’d been sitting, I shook my head. “It’s a non-issue. I’m not interested, Dirk, so let it go.”

Appetite gone, I dumped half of my sandwich in the trash near the entrance and finished the rest of my water as I headed to the employee’s restroom. After washing my hands and checking my hair, I slipped out and went in search of Sue to see if there were any last-minute details she needed me to attend to.

I caught sight of her across the banquet hall and started toward her, then slowed to a stop several yards away as she turned toward Tessa. They spoke quietly for a few minutes, Tessa’s laughter ringing out at one point. There was a lull in the conversation, and I started forward again, only to stop when Tessa lifted a hand and waved to somebody out of my line of vision.

A few seconds later, a man approached, a broad smile on his face.

The strangest damn thing happened at the sight of that smile. My heart stuttered.

Tessa pulled him down and placed a smacking kiss on both his cheeks, and when he lifted his head, the broad smile had turned into a charming grin, which made my heart kick up *again*.

Behave, I told the stupid thing. I’d never been one to let a pretty smile and dimples turn my head. It wasn’t going to start happening *now*.

I’d just go back to the kitchen and wait for Sue. She’d be around that way in a few minutes. She was reliable that way.

But I didn’t move. I felt oddly glued to the spot.

The good-looking guy with eyes that looked like a tropical sea stood chatting with Sue and Tessa, and I continued to study him, tidying up a table so I wouldn’t be so obvious.

There was something familiar about him. He said something about photographs, and Tessa clapped her hands in delight, looking over at Sue. “Keith is one of the *best* when it comes to photography, Sue. You have *no* idea.”

Keith. Photography. And that smile.

Shit. It was one of the Hartwell brothers.

There might be *some* people in Boston who didn't know who the Hartwells were, but I had yet to meet them.

His gaze flicked my way as I smoothed down the final napkin. Our eyes briefly connected.

I gave him a polite smile and turned away, pausing to check a couple other tables on my way out.

Pretty or not, talented or not, I wasn't going to stand around gaping at a *Hartwell*.

SIX

KEITH

CONCENTRATING ON THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN TESSA AND SUE HAD become almost impossible in the past few minutes. It had started when I caught a glimpse of a tall, sexy woman out of the corner of my eye. Beautiful women were a dime a dozen in my line of work, and while I wasn't jaded to them, a pretty face, a long, sexy pair of legs or sidelong glance from a pair of bedroom eyes wasn't going to knock me off stride.

She had, though.

Subtly shifting my position so I could watch her, I tried to figure out what it was about her that kept tugging at me. Lushly curved hips, full breasts, and long, long legs, even the simple uniform, embroidered with the logo of the catering company, couldn't hide that ripe figure.

But even after taking in those dangerously sexy curves and picturing what she'd look like naked—*delicious*—I knew it was something else.

Finally, I realized what it was.

Her eyes, a pale, cool gray, were mesmerizingly beautiful and there was a sharp, cutting intelligence behind them that spoke to me. If it wasn't for the sound of my name, I might have pulled away from the small group and gone to her.

"The pictures you took for the auction tonight are delightful, Keith," Tessa said. "I plan on buying all of them and gifting them to the parents of the children."

"You don't need to do that." I smiled at her. "I can make up copies for you."

"No." She gave me a long wink. "It's all about raising funds for the schools, so I'll buy them...and whatever copies you make, I'll make another

matching donation in kind.”

“Very generous of you, Tessa.” I smiled at her, even as I kept up with the gorgeous woman as she moved to another table. I was tempted to ask Sue, the woman in charge of the catering, about her, but bit the urge back. Still, when Tessa took my wrist and turned it toward her to check the time, I was almost grateful for the distraction. It was getting harder and harder not to look straight at the woman, harder and harder not to show my growing interest.

“Damn. Sue, we need to go check on the bar set up. That guy we hired still hasn’t messaged me back. Look at what time it is!”

Sue smiled and gave me a polite nod, even as she spoke reassuringly to Tessa.

We said our goodbyes, and I looked around for the woman again.

But this time, I couldn’t find her.

“Probably just as well,” I muttered. I needed to keep my focus on tonight—firmly on my brother and that piranha he was stupid enough to consider marrying.

NOT EVEN TWENTY minutes into the cocktail hour that preceded the dinner and auction, and I was already gritting my teeth.

Nikolette was as obnoxious and arrogant as I’d remembered, maybe even more so. She simpered and laughed girlishly at any man she spoke with, even as she clung to Matt’s arm, making sure to push inward with her arms so her tits were on full display. The second a woman came within spitting distance, she turned into a she-devil, hissing and snarling, claws out.

Matt played the buffer more than once, and as the evening wore on, I could see the fine lines of strain fanning out from his eyes. With just ten minutes left to go before we were to move into the banquet hall for dinner, Nikolette left to go to the ‘little girl’s room’—she actually fucking called it that—and I caught my brother’s arm and led him to the side of the room.

“You’ve got a headache,” I said pointedly. “I can tell by the way you’re holding yourself. You’re so stressed, you’ll probably lock yourself in your room for a good eighteen hours after this.”

Matt tugged at the sleeves of his suit and adjusted his cuffs. “I’m fine,” he said, not looking at me.

And I knew why he wouldn't look at me. He didn't want me seeing the truth in his eyes.

"The hell you are. She's annoying you as bad as she's annoying me. You do *not* want to marry that woman, do you?"

Finally, he lifted his head and our gazes locked. "It's done, Keith. I made a deal, and I'll honor it."

"You'll make yourself miserable the rest of your life for that ice-cold, vindictive bitch," I said, shaking my head. "Don't do this, Matt. We'll find another way."

He started to respond, but that annoying, falsetto laugh rang out, and we both looked over to see Nikolette making her way toward us. "*There* you two are," she said, drawing up next to my brother. She hooked her arm through his and kissed his cheek. "I thought my two handsome escorts had *abandoned* me."

She went to hook her arm through mine, but I deliberately stepped back.

Maybe my brother was going to play this game, but I sure as hell wasn't.

Nikolette's eyes flashed.

Dismissing her, I glanced at Matt. "I need a drink to get through the rest of this."

Saying nothing else, I turned on my heel and walked off.

I WAS HOLDING up a wall on the back part of the banquet hall when I saw her again.

The gorgeous gray-eyed woman with a sleek knot of hair that held hints of red, brown and copper, all mixed up together. I wanted to tug the pins that held the knot in place so the strands would spill free, just so I could see how long her hair was, whether it was straight, wavy or wildly curly. She moved through the crowd with gracious ease. I sipped my bourbon, unable to take my eyes off her.

She slid into a concealed door, and I blew out a breath, debating on the thought of staying where I was just to keep watching her, or joining my brother.

In the end, loyalty won out, and I found him and Nikolette at our assigned table just as the catering staff started making their rounds.

I was brooding into my bourbon, listening to the ebb and flow of conversation around me with little interest when I sensed somebody at my side. Glancing up as a prickle of awareness rolled over me, I knew who I'd find even before I saw her.

The conversation hit a lull, and the woman with the ice-gray eyes smiled politely. "Hello, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Veronica, and I'll be working with the rest of the staff to take care of you tonight. Would anybody care for a cocktail? Wine?"

Several requests went up, and she listened, nodding at each one, but not taking anything down.

Veronica, I thought. I liked it.

Her gaze fell on me, and I lifted my glass in her direction, naming the bourbon I'd been drinking.

"On the rocks or straight?"

Giving her a slow smile, I said, "Straight, Veronica. A good bourbon is too beautiful to ruin by watering it down."

Her lips twitched as though hiding a smile. "I'll keep that in mind, Mr. Hartwell."

Her gaze moved on to Matt's, and he echoed my order. Finally, she reached Nikolette, who recited a particularly complicated request for a dirty martini, including just *how* she wanted it prepared, the brand of vodka, which olives she preferred and how many, which olives they *weren't* to use, etc. When she finished, she paused and offered a sweet smile. "Do you think you can remember that?"

Without blinking an eye, Veronica recited back the request perfectly and then nodded at the table in general. "I'll have your drinks taken care of shortly. Let me know how else I can serve you tonight."

Once she was out of earshot, the kid across from me, Tyler Larson, a senior in college, groaned and clapped his hand to his heart. "Man, I love the idea of her serving me. Hell, I love the idea of just watching her walk back and forth all night."

His father gave him a cool look. "Tyler, manners."

"Sorry, Dad." But judging by his unrepentant grin, he didn't entirely mean it. "I can't help it. I mean...did you see her legs?"

I couldn't keep from smiling in shared appreciation, and when Tyler saw it, he grinned even wider at me.

Nikolette huffed. "It's not very professional of her to be *flirting* while

working, is it?”

Matt glanced at her with a frown. “I don’t believe she did any flirting, Nikolette.”

She started to respond, but I cut her off, irritation and anger still riding me. “Probably hard for you to tell the difference, but what she displayed was courtesy and general friendliness...not to be confused with flirting. Now, if she’d stood there and stroked her fingers over her cleavage every time she spoke to one of the men at the table while coolly dismissing every female, or spoke down to them—”

Matt kicked me under the table.

I locked my mouth shut. Not because of Nikolette, though. With a quick glance at Tyler and his father, Brent, I shrugged. “Sorry. It’s been a while since I’ve attended a function. Been at too many photoshoots, and I’ve forgotten my manners.”

Nikolette pinned me with an expectant look. I gave her a cool smile and shifted my attention to Matt. “Have you had a chance to check out any of the auction items?”

“I saw a few pieces. There’s a pottery piece that a freshman did. It’s rather impressive.”

“That thing?” Nikolette scoffed. “It looks like somebody with heavy hands and no imagination created it.”

Tightening my hand on the glass, I stared into Matt’s eyes.

Nikolette launched into a cutting critique of several other pieces, waving her hands emphatically as she spoke.

When Veronica appeared several minutes later, a server’s tray balanced skillfully on one hand, Nikolette had worked her way around to pointing out how she couldn’t *understand* why anybody would want to buy *finger paintings* from grade-schoolers.

Veronica’s gaze flicked to Nikolette as she paused behind the other woman, eyes lingering only a second but long enough that I saw the way Veronica’s mouth tightened slightly.

She seemed as impressed by Nikolette as most of the others at the table were.

“What do *you* think...Veronica, right?”

Veronica had just moved to give Matt his bourbon and paused, looking over at Nikolette. “Excuse me, Ms. Ives?”

“It’s *Miss*,” Nikolette corrected her with a giggle. Leaning over, she

rested her head on Matt's shoulder. He sat stiffly, staring ahead with discomfort written on his face. "For now, at least. Right, Matty?"

Matty?

I almost choked on the bourbon I'd been sipping.

Matt didn't respond to Nikolette, instead lifting his glass toward Veronica with a polite nod and a murmured, "Thank you."

Veronica just nodded and moved toward me.

"You didn't answer my question, Veronica." She gave the taller woman a simpering smile. "These...pieces of art...what's the appeal to anybody other than their parents? If you could afford to buy one, why would you bother?"

"If you have to ask the question," Veronica replied in a level tone. "Then you wouldn't understand the explanation."

"I'm thinking of buying the one over there," Blake Larson said, gesturing toward one of the displays. "Third from the right. Tyler, tell me your mother wouldn't love it."

Tyler winced when he looked at it. "Man. She'll have it framed and hanging next to that thing I did in third grade."

Blake smiled. "Exactly."

Nikolette didn't take well to being ignored...or having her argument so easily derailed. An ugly look in her eyes, she took a sip of her dirty martini. Gaze narrowing, she slammed her cocktail down hard enough that some of it splashed out onto the tablecloth. "You messed this *up*, girl."

I stiffened at the cold, cutting look Nikolette gave Veronica, sneering at the server down her nose.

Veronica straightened, the now empty tray held flat against her side. "If it isn't to your liking, ma'am, I can have it remade."

"You didn't get it right the *first* time." Nikolette spoke in an icy voice. "That's what happens when you don't write things *down*, you stupid girl."

"If I recall, you wanted a dirty martini with Grey Goose VX," Veronica replied, her tone neutral and calm. There was no emotion on her face as she continued to repeat, precisely, what Nikolette had requested.

"That is *not* what I ordered—"

"Yes, it is," I said, cutting her off. "If you don't like how it tastes, then either the bartender got it wrong, or you don't know what you're ordering." I loosened my grip on my glass so I wouldn't break it. "And for the record, Grey Goose, even the VX, is a mediocre vodka at best. It's popular because of successful marketing and people who've never bothered to explore and

learn about the better options, and it's a subpar choice for a dirty martini. But that *is* what you ordered."

Nikolette's eyes went wide, flags of color staining her cheeks. I had to give her credit, though. She recovered fast, giving me a sweet smile. "Maybe that's the problem. I requested the wrong vodka. I'm used to getting the best, of course, but sometimes, you need to make adjustments." She slanted her gaze toward Veronica. "You look like a girl who's been doing this a while. What would *you* recommend for a good dirty martini?"

"Mr. Hartwell is correct, in my opinion," Veronica replied, her voice calm. "Grey Goose VX has undertones that clash with the other notes in a well-prepared dirty martini. It may be marketed as a top luxury brand, but that doesn't translate to being the best. You'd do better with a more neutral choice when it comes to martinis. Stoli Elit, Belvedere, Russian Standard, all are better options."

"Fine." Nikolette gave the martini glass a rough push that made even more spill out. "Go with Stoli Elit, and get this mess taken care of."

"Of course." She kept that faint, polite smile in place and skimmed the table. "Will there be anything else?"

When nobody responded, I met her gaze. "No, Veronica. Thank you."

Veronica wasn't even out of earshot when Nikolette hissed, "The *nerve* of that girl, thinking she knows *anything* about *luxury* brands."

"You're the one who ordered a mediocre, overpriced vodka for your cocktail, hated how it turned out, then claimed you were *used to the best*," I said, parroting her words back to her.

"Dude, it's a drink," Tyler said, either unaware of the growing tension or unconcerned by it. "You're getting another one with a better vodka. It's not like she was rude or anything. No big deal."

Nikolette opened her mouth, but Blake shifted and put a hand on his son's shoulder. "She's very good at her job, isn't she? She's the sort of employee I'd likely train up for a managerial position if she worked for the company."

Blake was the CEO of a large chain of luxury steakhouses, and I'd seen the amusement he'd kept concealed from Nikolette by sipping from his own drink, but I wasn't surprised to see him speak when it looked like she was going to sharpen her claws on his son.

"I'll be surprised if you don't steal her out from the catering company," Tyler said with a laugh.

Determined to keep the conversation moving away from Veronica, I

asked, “Are you planning to follow in your father’s footsteps, Tyler?”

Several minutes passed before Nikolette received her new drink, but it wasn’t Veronica who brought it. The new server was a man, and he gave Nikolette a flirtatious smile as he put the drink in front of her. “I believe you wanted a dirty martini.”

When he walked away, Nikolette shifted in her seat, bringing her drink to her lips. A decidedly pleased smile curved her mouth as she said, “Now, *he* is much more efficient.”

I returned my attention to Blake and Tyler, not interested in talking to her. At all. A familiar form caught my eye, and I looked up, watched as Veronica smiled at the people sitting at a table several yards away. Something that was said made her laugh, and something unfamiliar moved inside me.

By contrast, the harsh, grating sound of Nikolette’s giggle was like an icepick in my ear.

I managed to smash down my temper and stay engaged in conversation with everybody at the table, although I deliberately kept my responses to Nikolette cool. Finally, she took the hint and stopped speaking to me, although once, she caught me watching Veronica.

And that ugliness returned to her gaze.

“That girl—”

“I need to stretch my legs,” I said, cutting her off. “Try not to buy all the good stuff before I get back, Tyler.”

He grinned at me, and I caught sight of the amusement lurking in his father’s eyes as I pushed away from the table.

I made no attempt to hide my destination as I cut through the tables, heading in the direction where the catering staff disappeared through a set of swinging double doors.

SEVEN

VERONICA

DIRK SMIRKED AT ME AS HE CAME THROUGH THE DOORS. “I DON’T KNOW what the problem was, Veronica. That blonde is amazing and sweet as can be.”

“I never said otherwise,” I told him coolly. “She just didn’t like me. It was for her benefit, not mine.”

The lines around his eyes deepened when I didn’t offer him anything more, but I pushed him out of my mind. He wasn’t worth the time it would take to bother being annoyed with him, although some part of me was irritated I’d even felt the urge to *ask* him to take over that table, much less give *in* to the urge.

I’d dealt with worse cows than the uptight blonde.

Nikolette, I told myself. Somebody had mentioned that her name was Nikolette. And apparently, she was hot and heavy with the oldest Hartwell. I scowled and immediately found myself frowning over the response, because why in the hell did *I* care if she was hot and heavy with one of Boston’s most well-known families?

Maybe it was because I’d expected better.

The family was well-known because they were so involved in the community. They sponsored back-to-school drives that the entire family, from the oldest member down to the youngest, participated in. They set up funding for the victims of domestic violence, had contributed heavily to rescue work following disasters, and were vocal advocates for vulnerable communities.

Yeah, it’s a good way to get PR, the cynical part of me said in a pithy voice.

It was hard to ignore that cynicism. I'd never really had the time or mindset to indulge in a more carefree mindset, not considering how my life had gone, almost from day one.

Still, some part of me—

“Hey. Ah, Veronica, right?”

At the sound of that low voice, I turned to find Keith Hartwell standing a few paces behind me. Without any conscious thought, I'd drifted down the narrow hallway that led from the kitchen to the banquet hall and had been looking outside over the manicured grounds surrounding the place. Now, I was caught between him and the kitchen, and I wondered how long I'd been standing there, brooding.

“Yes, it's Veronica,” I said in a neutral voice. Then, without even realizing I'd planned to say anything else, I heard myself asking, “You're a photographer, aren't you?”

His eyes widened slightly, and the right corner of his mouth kicked up in a half-smile. “Yeah, listen. About what happened.”

A dull flush chased over his cheekbones. Curious, I continued to watch him. If he expected me to go out there and apologize to that cow...

“I want to apologize for Nikolette,” he continued, the words coming out in a low, tight rush, like he couldn't get them out fast enough, although I got the distinct feeling it was more because of *her*, not me.

Frowning, I shook my head. “You don't need to apologize for her.”

“She was out of line and rude.”

When he paused, I cut in. “Yes, she was, but that's not your fault. She's an adult, responsible for her own actions.”

“Yeah, well, don't expect *her* to realize that,” he said, and a grimace twisted his lips to the side.

He had a ridiculously beautiful mouth, I noticed. Immediately, something hot flooded me, and I clenched my hands into fists. I didn't notice men. I didn't *let* myself. Clearing my throat, I went to excuse myself, but he was already speaking.

“Classically Yours has done quite a few events for my family. Have you worked with them long?”

“Off and on,” I said vaguely. “Please, if you'll excuse me, Mr. Hartwell. I need to get back to work.”

I eased around him and headed down the hall, acutely aware of his eyes on my back as I strode down the corridor to the kitchen.

I wanted the night over with, like now.

But it had just started.

Getting through the next few hours without crossing paths with either the Hartwell brothers *or* Nikolette might take some maneuvering, but I'd damn well do it.

Somehow.

EIGHT

KEITH

NIKOLETTE DIDN'T TAKE WELL TO BEING IGNORED, AND AS THE EVENING progressed, her mood went from that of a sulky child to a two-year-old having a tantrum because she'd been deprived her favorite toy—and in this instance, that toy was being the center of attention.

Blake and his son remained through dessert, but I could tell they were biding their time and waiting until it was *polite* before they left. I wanted to follow them, but I wasn't abandoning my brother to Nikolette's vitriol.

During the auction, when Blake went to bid on the piece he'd pointed out earlier, Nikolette grabbed Matt's arm and demanded, "Buy it for me."

Matt looked at her with no expression. "You didn't even like it."

"I've changed my mind. You simply *must* buy it."

Tiny lines fanned out from Matt's eyes, and I knew he was weighing the need to give in just to shut her up against his own innate sense of courtesy. The bidding was already up over two grand—Tyler and his dad were bidding *against* each other and enjoying every second.

"Go ahead, Matt," I said more out of a need to distract him and give the Larsons more time. "I'll join in too, though. Bet I can outbid you."

Nikolette's mouth tightened, and she glared daggers at me, but Matt gave me a thankful look over her head while she was distracted. "That's because you like to spend your money recklessly," he said.

"Is that what *you* think *I'm* doing?" Nikolette demanded, swiveling in her seat to glare at him.

"You didn't say *you* were going to buy it, Nikolette," I said, drawing her attention back to me just as the auctioneer started calling out, "Going once..."

“Excuse me?” she asked in a frosty voice.

“You’re asking *Matt* to spend *his* money recklessly.” I gave her a wide grin. “If you want to spend *your* money recklessly, knock yourself out.”

“And sold!” The auctioneer’s voice was a boom from the podium at the head of the stage.

If she’d been a cat, Nikolette would have been hissing and spitting at that moment. Giving her an unrepentant grin, I gestured to the stage. “Look, Nikolette. There’s another finger-painting. So many shades of green. It suits you. Want me to buy it for you?”

She shoved back from the table. “Take me home, Matty. I’m tired.”

ANY REASON *you were such an ass tonight?*

After reading Matt’s message, I sighed and pinched the bridge of my nose, debating the best way to answer. In the end, honesty seemed to be the only way to go, although I was under no illusion it would make any difference.

Matt, that woman was flirting with me from the get-go. She was flirting with every man that had a dick, including that poor kid, Tyler. Hell, I saw her flirting with one of the Healy boys, and he’s still in high school, and no, I’m not buying that she was just being friendly. She ices up as soon as she decides you’re not interested. On top of that, she’s rude to any female she thinks might cut in on the attention she wants. I’m not going out of my way to be nice to a total bitch, even if you are crazy enough to get involved with her.

He was quiet for so long, I started to wonder if he’d reply. But he did, and in typical Matt fashion.

I have to do something, K. You know that. I can’t just let the foundation collapse. It’s not in me.

The bitter truth was that I knew that. I understood.

Well, it’s not in me to see you doing something that I know you’ll regret for the rest of your life, something that I know will make you miserable.

The three little dots appeared on the bottom of the screen. Then they stopped. They appeared again. Disappeared. After a good five minutes, he finally responded.

I’ll be fine, K. I’m just doing what I do, taking care of the family. Have a

good night.

Knowing he wouldn't discuss it any further, I dropped my phone down on the couch and started to pace.

"Yeah, maybe you're doing what *you* do, but I'm going to do what *I* do," I muttered, coming to a stop at the large window looking out over the street. "I'm not going to watch you be miserable for the rest of your life."

I didn't have any idea what I planned to do to fix things, but I'd figure out something.

After a few more minutes contemplating the night, I turned away and got on my laptop, bringing up a popular photography forum and browsing images from other users, just to help my mind relax so I could think.

What Matt needed, I decided, was to see the sort of relationships he'd be missing out on if he got himself involved with somebody like Nikolette. She'd ruin him, make him so miserable and broken inside, he'd never want to get involved with anybody else.

So I had to show him what he'd be missing out *before* he took the next step.

"I can't believe I'm thinking about fixing up my brother," I muttered, pinching the bridge of my nose again as a headache edged its way into my skull.

On a whim, I searched for dating websites. The first one was a nightmare.

So I tried a second.

Then a third.

A fourth.

None of them were any better.

And how in the hell was I supposed to set my brother up with somebody if *I* set up a profile?

Did I have to put a picture up?

Fuck. All of us had faces that were easily recognizable thanks to our work with the foundation. Mine was even more so because of my career. Just the thought was enough to make me shudder. I couldn't even think of the ways *that* could go wrong.

It wasn't like I could pass Matt off as an average, workaholic businessman who just didn't have time to get out and meet a woman the normal way, could I?

Swearing, I shut down the laptop and dumped it on the table next to me once more.

Rubbing my face over my hands, I willed my mind to blank. I needed to shower, go to bed, and try to figure out a way through this once I'd had some sleep.

With that in mind, I headed into the bathroom and stripped, dumping the clothes into a bin inside the closet.

After showering, I made a half-hearted attempt to dry off and fell face down on the bed I hadn't bothered to make earlier. Tugging the blanket and sheet up over my waist, I told myself to shrug off the stress of the day and sleep.

I was tired enough that even worrying about Matt was going to keep me up.

But as I drifted off, a face danced through my mind.

Veronica.

Those deep gray eyes. Her sexy mouth. That body.

NINE

VERONICA

EVEN THOUGH I WAS WORN OUT, PHYSICALLY AND MENTALLY, BY THE TIME I got home, after I crashed, I didn't sleep more than six hours. The sun was already painting its way across the horizon when I dragged myself into the kitchen. Eyes gritty with fatigue, I started a pot of coffee and stood there, staring dully at the machine.

I wasn't even aware when it finished, my mind was so fogged and distracted.

"You going to drink any of that, baby? Or are you planning to absorb it through osmosis?"

The sound of Irene Cheshire's voice made me jump. Spinning around, I saw her standing there in a bathrobe, her hair already fixed and neat, despite the hour, her warm eyes smiling. At sixty-six, her brown hair had started to gray years ago, and she made no attempt to hide it. Irene was my maternal grandmother, but from the time I was a baby, she'd been the one to take care of me, mother me, teach me, care for me. She was the only mother I really knew, and her husband Clive, my maternal grandfather, was the only father I knew.

Their daughter Holly had gotten pregnant with me while still in high school, and although she'd told me over the years that she'd wanted me, that she'd wanted to be a mom, the reality was that she liked the *idea* of being a mom. She didn't like the *work* that came with it, or the sacrifice.

She left me with my grandparents when I was only a year old, visiting when she had another baby to leave behind.

"Good morning, Mom," I said, moving to hug her. I had long since made the decision to treat this woman as my mother in *all* ways. She deserved that,

my love, my loyalty, my respect. The other person who'd birthed me deserved nothing, not even my tears.

"Good morning to you too, baby. Now...about that coffee..."

I laughed. "Okay, you caffeine addict. I'll pour you a cup too."

"Lovely. I'll make us some breakfast."

I wasn't hungry, but I didn't tell her that. There was nothing that bothered her maternal instincts more than when one of her babies wouldn't eat. And we were all her babies, all seven of us, even if we were more than past the *baby* stage. That thought was all it took to make the knot settle in my throat.

My little brother Carson was leaving in the morning. He'd finally finished his advanced training in the Air Force—a translator. He was working in intelligence and would be stationed somewhere in the Middle East. That was all he was allowed to tell us.

I was almost sick with worry.

Warm, strong fingers brushed the back of my hand. Instinctively, I turned my hand and gripped Mom's. "I'm so worried something will happen."

"I know," Irene said softly. "But, honey, he's smart and driven, a survivor, just like you. He'll be fine."

I started to tell her that we couldn't know that, but I stopped. What good did it do to borrow trouble?

Sighing, I brushed my hair back from my face and finished pouring the coffee. After liberally lacing mine with cream and sugar, I sat at the table, putting the plain black coffee in front of the chair where Mom always sat.

"We've got time for French toast, if you're in the mood."

I didn't even try to tell her that she didn't need to fuss. One thing I knew by now, if she made the offer, it was because she was in the mood to do just that. Fuss.

Maybe she needed the distraction as much as I did.

"Need any help?" I offered.

She beamed at me. "I never say no to having one of my kids help out in the kitchen."

EIGHT HOURS later and the lack of sleep was catching up to me, but I brazened it through the barbecue my parents had decided to throw for Carson

as his going-away party.

He'd had a few short weeks of leave after finishing training, and we'd all spent as much time together as we could. He'd gone up to New York a week earlier and spent a few days with Britney before returning so he could hang out with friends from school and all of us, but even though I knew he'd miss us, it was obvious he was excited about the next chapter of his life.

I was happy for him, even though I was terrified.

"Stop worrying, sis." Carson dropped down next to me on the top step of the back porch and wrapped his arm around me, hugging me close.

"I'm the oldest," I informed him loftily. "*Worrying* is my job. It's in the job requirements. Check."

He laughed softly, and I couldn't help but notice that the sound was deeper than it had been just a year ago. He'd filled out more too, his once-narrow shoulders wider while lean muscle had filled out his formerly bean-pole form. "Yeah, well, you rock at it. Maybe dial it back a little, okay? I'm going to be fine."

"I know that," I said even as nerves gripped and tore at my insides.

"No, you don't." He squeezed my shoulders a little harder. "Look at me, Ronni."

"Don't call me that," I chided gently, but I gave in and looked at him.

While there were echoes of our birth mother's features in all of us, unless somebody knew to look for the family resemblance, it wasn't that easy to pin down. When it came to Andrew and Carson, it was even harder.

Holly, the woman who'd given birth to us, then walked away, time after time, had never given any details, but it was possible that Carson and Andrew had the same dad. Both of them were clearly biracial, and there were similarities in the shape of their eyes and their smiles, but it ended there.

Andrew was quieter, much more an intellectual, while Carson, easily as smart as Andrew, was an extrovert who enjoyed sports and physical activity almost as much as he enjoyed exercising his brain.

Now, those insightful hazel eyes were focused on me, and I couldn't avoid his gaze, couldn't keep him from seeing the nerves I didn't want to reveal to anybody.

"You know, I'd do almost anything for you, sis," he said quietly. "Right?"

Emotion clogged my throat.

"Yeah, I know."

“But the one thing I can’t do is stay here. Even taking the college route like Andrew is doing...that’s not me.”

There were a hundred unspoken things in his voice, and I covered his hand with mine. “I can’t tell you I won’t worry, Carson. But the last thing I want to do is clip your wings. I always knew you and Britney would take off and fly, travel...see the world and do things. And I’m *proud* of you.”

“Hell, you keep *that* up, and I’ll do something unmanly. Like cry.” He hugged me closer, and we pressed our foreheads together.

“Hey, Carson!” Austin, our youngest sibling, and the one who resembled me the most, came rushing up with an iPad in hand. “Britney is on Skype. Wants to talk to you.”

I lingered a few minutes to talk to my sister, then slid away to gather my frayed nerves.

I hadn’t lied when I told Carson I’d always known he’d want to take off, travel, do things. I had. He had wanderlust in his bones, and I wanted those things for him. It didn’t keep me from worrying, but that was my problem, not his. I didn’t need to make him worry for *me* because I worried over him.

So, for his sake, I’d hold it together.

THE CATERING EVENT in the middle of the week should have been a welcome change of pace.

It wasn’t.

I was an hour into a five-hour shift, and I was ready to go home—*now*.

I double-checked my hair to make sure it was still up in the chignon, taking a few seconds to enjoy the much cooler—and quieter—air in the restroom. Just a few, though, because it was a madhouse out in the private museum that had been rented out for the charity event.

Dirk had been being even more of a prick than he had over the weekend, and I wouldn’t have considered it possible.

I’d been going out of my way to avoid him and had mostly succeeded. If I could just keep that up—

He was waiting outside the restroom, thumbs hooked in the front of his white apron—one that had a set-in stain and was more than a little wrinkled—and he gave me a smooth smile as I met his gaze.

“I want to collect on that favor,” he told me, pushing off the wall and into my space. His gaze roamed over me, just barely avoiding being insulting.

I still wanted to take a bath just to wash it away.

Refusing to show him how annoyed I was, I cut around him and headed down the hall. “What table do you want me to cover?”

He caught my arm, tugging me to a stop.

I twisted inward and stepped closer, startling him into loosening his grip enough that I could break free.

He scowled but didn’t reach for me again.

“No table. We’re going out to dinner tonight. You and me.”

“No.” Smoothing my apron down, I gave him a dismissive look. “We’re not. I already told you, I don’t date coworkers and I’m not interested in you.”

“Now listen—”

Giving him an icy look that had set more than a few men back, I said again, “I’m *not* interested, Dirk. Period.”

Turning on my heel, I headed out through the swinging doors and grabbed a pitcher of water in one hand and iced tea in the other.

Hearing him behind me, I smoothed my features through sheer will alone but was relieved when he didn’t push any closer as I approached my tables. “Hello, ladies, gentleman. Does anybody want some more ice water? Iced tea?”

The man nearest me raised his hand, and I leaned in, thankful when he lifted the glass toward me. Expertly, I refilled the tea, then topped off the glass of the woman to his right.

I felt a hard, sharp jolt slam me in the middle of my back just as I went to back up. It shoved me forward. “Hey, you okay?”

But I lost my grip on the other pitcher as I struggled to remain upright because, at the same time, something slammed into me from the other side, hitting my hip. Hard.

Even as I tried to steady it, I could feel my grip on the pitchers tipping, slipping...and they spilled.

A shriek pierced the air, followed by a low, malicious voice. “You *stupid* bitch!”

Oh. Fuck. No.

TEN

KEITH

SHE WAS WEARING A SKIRT THIS TIME.

I'd noticed Veronica the minute I'd stepped in the reception hall of the museum owned by another big-time family in Boston. I knew of them and was on decent terms with their daughters, so the invitation hadn't been a surprise. But I hadn't planned on coming until Matt asked me, mentioning he'd be there with Nikolette.

Not that I *wanted* to spend more time with her, but I figured I'd have a better shot at convincing my brother how bad she was for him if I had more time around her.

So, I'd gone. But I'd deliberately waited until right before the dinner and presentation was scheduled to begin because the last thing I wanted was more of Nikolette's insane prattle in my ear, and her ridiculous jealousy every time she wasn't the center of attention.

Seeing Veronica made my heart kick up a bit, although it was sort of confusing.

Not that she wasn't pretty. She was. Gorgeous, really, in a retro, golden age of Hollywood sort of way, with those full, lush curves and a smile that made me think she hid all sorts of wicked secrets.

But she wasn't my type.

And something about her made me think she wasn't somebody who was out there just to date or find a casual hookup.

I didn't know why that thought crossed my mind. *I* wasn't looking for a relationship.

Still, I noticed her. And I kept noticing her as she took care of the tables just in front of ours.

Nikolette, of course, had seen her as well, her lips pursing, nose wrinkling as she muttered, “This caterer really *should* hire better help.”

But she let it go at that, apparently satisfied with the older, plump woman who had our table. She looked like she bounced babies on her knees. The lady had a twinkle in her eye, and while I had no doubt she was aware of Nikolette’s cutting remarks, they rolled off her back like water.

When Shanda Chastain, the hostess for the evening’s event, came by the table, Nikolette simpered and cooed over the other woman’s dress, even as she delivered backhanded comments that came out more like the insults Nikolette meant them to be. With each passing moment, I saw Matt’s jaw grow tighter and tighter.

Taking pity on him, I pushed my way into the conversation. “Shanda, I think you went and got more beautiful and more intelligent just in the past few months since I saw you. It was at that lecture at Harvard, right?”

“You, Keith, at a lecture?” She feigned dismay. “I don’t think I remember seeing you.”

“I was just there to look at the pictures,” I said soberly.

She burst out laughing. “Cute, Keith. Very cute. So...will the organization be able to count on a donation?”

“I’ll be making one before I leave,” I told her. “Also...” I offered a business card. “In case it comes in handy. I do some pro bono work for local charities. I’ve been lucky enough that Alzheimer’s has never hit our family, but from the material you presented at the lecture, and what I’ve read tonight...I can’t imagine how painful this must be for you and your family.”

“Thank you.” Shanda’s face had gone solemn, and she took the card.

Nikolette opened her mouth.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Matt curve his hand over her shoulder, then lean in to murmur something. She stiffened and turned her head to glare daggers at him.

During those fleeting seconds, Shanda excused herself and made her way over to the table behind us. She paused while Veronica served coffee, and I watched as the hostess of the event chatted easily with Veronica. A friendly, warm smile curved Veronica’s lips as she responded.

As an uncomfortable sensation settled inside my chest, I looked away.

“Aren’t *you* the giving soul, donating your free time to help out a bunch of old folks you don’t know?” Nikolette batted her lashes at me.

“Sometimes, I much prefer total strangers to the people I’m acquainted

with,” I replied, staring her down.

Hot color washed into her cheeks.

Matt tensed slightly, but it wasn't in response to anything I'd said or even Nikolette's cattiness. As I watched, he pulled a phone out from his suit jacket and glanced at it, then scowled.

“I need to step out and take this,” he said quietly before glancing around the table. “Please excuse me.”

Nikolette immediately directed her attention to the middle-aged banker at her other side, leaning over to pat his arm, tease and flirt while his wife, maybe a few years older than Nikolette, gave them both looks of annoyance that spoke more of apathy than anything else.

Since she wasn't causing any real trouble, I decided to ignore her and talk to the couple at my left. Recently transplanted from New York, the Chatterleys were relative newlyweds, and so sickly sweet in love, I thought I'd have a cavity within thirty minutes of talking to them. But they were cute and funny...and they looked to be as fond of Nikolette as I was.

More, it was amusing as hell, because while Nikolette Ives might be the daughter of Clive Ives, one of the richer families in Boston, Antionette—aka Toni—Kennedy Chatterley was a member of one of the richest families in the country. And unlike Nikolette and her father, Toni and her family came from *old* money, much like the Hartwells.

The Ives family was new money.

In cities like Boston, shit like that mattered.

If Toni had the desire, all she'd have to do was look at Nikolette wrong, and the woman's societal standing would plummet. The knowledge of the fact was obvious, written on Nikolette's face as she shot a strained look toward Toni, who'd decided to ignore her.

So, my possibly-soon-to-be sister-in-law spent much of the evening gritting her teeth and ignoring half the table. It was something that suited me immensely, and in the twenty minutes Matt was gone, I happily pretended Nikolette Ives didn't even exist.

But then Matt reappeared and settled down in his chair. Not comfortably, though. He stayed perched on the edge, eyes bouncing back and forth between me and the exit as I wrapped up my conversation with Toni.

Angling toward him subtly, I lowered my voice. “Is everything okay?”

“No.” He grimaced and went to shove his hair back, only to stop before completing the movement. “I'm getting some...unsettling information

relating to one of our long-term donors. I need to read through the reports my admin has put together and possibly start immediate damage control.”

The look in his eye had me grimacing in commiseration. The words *immediate damage control* didn't spell anything good for somebody who lived and breathed in the public eye, the way Matt did, even though he hated it.

“Anything I can do to help?” I offered as Nikolette finally swung her head around and managed to focus on her date.

“No.” Matt blew out a sigh. “Unless you can go back in time and duct tape somebody's mouth, then a bit farther back and offer some basic education on women's rights?”

“Afraid not.”

Matt skimmed something on his phone once more, then met my gaze again. “Can you make sure Nikolette gets home? Maybe it would do you both some good to spend some time together.”

Until that moment, Nikolette had been more focused on the man at her left than Matt, but suddenly, she was all ears. “Matty! Do you have to *leave*?”

The sound of her cooing voice was almost enough to make my eyes roll straight out of my skull, but I didn't let on. Instead, I met the amused but somewhat jaded gaze of Dev Chatterley, the scion of a New York real estate developer and Toni's new husband. He had a widow's peak and devilishly slanted brows. One of them arched up at my gaze, and he glanced deliberately toward Nikolette just as Matt spoke up once more.

“Nikolette, you'll be fine. I'm sure Keith won't mind staying on as your escort and making sure to get you home.”

I mouthed, *Fuck you*, in his direction, and he grinned at me.

Nikolette opened her mouth as Matt pushed back from the table.

I closed my hand around the butter knife, somehow refraining from the urge to grab it and thrust it toward my gut in a mockery of stabbing myself. *Not this...anything but this.*

“Why can't I just go *with* you, Matty?” Nikolette demanded as Matt finished buttoning his jacket. “We could go to your place afterward and...” She gave him a sultry look that made me almost gag.

Matt's cheeks heated a dull red, and I shot Nikolette an annoyed look. If she knew anything about my brother, she'd have already figured out that he was more than a little shy. But...no. That would require her looking at something beyond herself and that, as far as Nikolette Ives was concerned,

was impossible.

“I’ve got a feeling that Matt is going to be busy handling damage control for the foreseeable future,” I said into the silence while Matt fumbled and struggled for a response.

Nikolette gave me an annoyed look, but during her distraction, it was easy for Matt to pull back and put distance between them.

She rose from her chair, glaring at Matt.

Before she could speak, though, I moved to stand between them. “Don’t worry, Matt,” I told him cheerfully. “I’ll keep Nikolette entertained.”

Nikolette went stone-cold rigid at the sound of my voice.

I pretended not to notice, moving to rest my hand on her shoulder as Matt made his goodbyes.

The kiss Nikolette gave him was perfunctory, at best, and once he was out of sight, she spun on me and knocked my hand aside.

“What in the *hell* do you think you’re doing?” she hissed.

I gave her an easy smile. “Making sure that the Foundation’s reputation stays in order. Look...the bidding started.”

She spun around, still gaping.

I’d already made my first bid before she even managed to regain her control.

And every time she tried to buy something, I outbid her.

She sure as hell wasn’t using *Matt’s* money to buy something. Matt poured everything he had into the foundation. She wasn’t going to leech what he had left.

PISSING HER OFF WAS FUN.

She was steaming, glaring, seething by the time the first part of the auction came to a close, and the catering staff started serving dessert and cocktails. To give her credit, she did manage to give me an over bright smile as she asked, “Was there anything else you wanted to buy? Or are you ready to go?”

“Tired already?” Shrugging, I put my napkin down. “I guess we can go.”

I gave one more look around, hoping to see Veronica—and I did. Frowning, I saw her shoot a look back over her shoulder just as she drew

even with the table next to ours. A man loomed there, practically on her heels. Vaguely, I realized it was the same guy who'd taken her place at the dinner a few days earlier.

Her head swiveling back around, she focused on the two pitchers she held and fixed a smile on her face as she approached.

"It's about damn time," Nikolette said. "Let's—"

It could have been farcical, under the right circumstances. Even though I saw it all happening, I wasn't able to do jackshit to stop it. Nikolette shoved her chair back forcefully.

"Nikolette, wait," I said, but it was too late.

She hit Veronica at almost the exact same time as the man behind Veronica deliberately drove his elbow into her back. The contents of the pitchers went flying, drenching Nicolette and someone at the other table.

The blond bastard smirked as I shoved upright.

"Hey!" I shouted at him.

He jerked his head up and saw me glaring at him.

Nikolette started shrieking.

Dev had already moved to help Veronica. She had gone down hard. I paused and saw that he was helping her sit up, even as Nikolette shrieked and shrieked.

Dev's mouth was tight, and he glanced in the direction the other guy had gone before looking at me.

I gave him a nod and cut through the crowd, ignoring the attention coming our way. The man had disappeared through the doors already, and when I pushed through to check the kitchen, he wasn't in there either. I almost headed for the exit, but then I glanced back through the small window that faced out over the reception hall and saw Nikolette. Worse, I *heard* her, all but screaming as she pointed toward Veronica.

"Fuck," I muttered.

Shoving through the doors, I headed back to the table, getting madder and madder with every word that fell from Nikolette's lips.

"...*stupid* cow! Do you see...dress? It cost more money than you make in six months!" Nikolette glared at the woman standing in front of her—Sue Winston, I recognized—as I came to a halt near the table.

Sue's face was pale, but she remained composed while another woman wearing a shirt with the *CY* logo was standing by Veronica, talking to her urgently. Veronica still looked dazed, and when she started to move, it was

obvious something hurt.

“I *demand* you fire her right now!” Nikolette said, eyes blazing.

“Why?” I bit off, cutting in and placing my body between her and Veronica as a barrier. “Because *you* slammed your chair back without looking just as that blond guy with the catering company shoved his elbow into her back?”

Sue looked at me, but before she could speak, Nikolette whirled on me. “That *isn't* what happened—”

“Yes, it is.” Dev looked at his wife, who nodded in silent agreement before pinning a hard look on Nikolette. “You didn’t know she was behind you. She didn’t see you pushing out because she was taking care of the people at the other table. That’s not her fault. And that guy...”

“What guy?” Sue asked politely, turning her gaze toward Veronica.

Veronica averted her eyes.

“He was working an event Saturday,” I said, drawing Sue’s attention. “Took over our table. His name was Dirk, I think. I saw him shove her, driving his elbow right into Veronica’s back. Nobody would have been able to stay steady after getting slammed from two different directions.”

“She *ruined* a one-of-a-kind dress!” Nikolette hissed.

“It’s silk. You do realize water won’t ruin *silk*, right?” I snapped before looking back at the caterer.

Another man had joined us, ruefully patting his face and shirt with a towel one of the staff had offered him. The front of his white dress shirt was stained with tea. He glanced at Veronica and gave her a sympathetic smile before looking at her boss. “It wasn’t her fault. I didn’t see what happened, but she’d just finished serving my wife and me when I could tell somebody pushed her from behind, almost slammed into me. And I did see the other chair...” He flicked a look at Nikolette, his face red. “It hit her kind of hard.”

“That *is bullshit!*” Nikolette actually *stomped* one of her feet. Then she wobbled, and I hoped like hell she’d fall on her sorry ass.

“Sue,” Veronica said, her voice gentle and soft, but steady, nonetheless. “I don’t want to cause problems. I’ll quit. I can work out my shift or leave now.”

“Honey,” Sue started.

Nikolette sneered. “Why, so you can—”

“Shut the fuck up,” I said, closing the distance and speaking in a low voice that nonetheless caught her attention. “You spoiled, rotten brat, just

shut up.”

Sue had moved toward Veronica, but she was shaking her head. She went to take a step, and her face tightened.

“You need to go home,” the other woman said. “You’re hurt. I’ll call a Lyft, and we’ll talk about this later.”

As Veronica turned and walked away, Nikolette’s mouth curved in a catty smile as she looked at me.

Not looking away from her, I reached into my wallet and pulled out a few twenties. “That sounds like the ideal plan to me. Here, Nikolette. Call a Lyft,” I said, still speaking in a low voice so nobody overheard us. “Probably a good idea to do it now since you’re not wearing a bra.”

I gave her chest a pointed look as I backed away.

She hissed and looked down before slapping an arm over the ivory silk. It was double layered at her breasts, but even that wasn’t enough to conceal that she was most definitely bare under the silk.

Turning, I went after Veronica.

She’d already grabbed her purse and left, I was told by one of the wide-eyed catering staff who pointed me toward the back door.

I strode in that direction, infuriated.

The small lot there was full, a van with the CY logo, numerous cars, a couple of bikes.

But no Veronica.

Setting my jaw, I let the door shut behind me as I moved deeper into the falling darkness. A sound caught my ear—voices.

Veronica’s voice.

And a guy’s.

“...didn’t mean to...”

“If you touch me, I’m going to hit you so hard, you’ll be feeling it for the next month,” a cold female voice said.

Rounding the corner at a run, I shouted, “Let her go!”

The guy from earlier had his hand on Veronica’s arm, crowding her against the side of the building. I was going to break that hand at the wrist—

Veronica’s elbow snapped up, catching Dirk in his chin when he went to bend closer.

As his head flew back, she grabbed his shoulders and drove her knee up, hard.

Dirk howled, stumbling backward a few steps before going to his knees,

holding his crushed balls in his hands.

“Well.” Clearing my throat, I met Veronica’s startled eyes. “It looks like I’m not needed here.”

Her cheeks colored slightly, but she said nothing, turning on her heel to stride down the alley toward the street ahead.

Fuck.

I paused just long enough to bend down and catch his gaze. “You know who I am?”

“Hartwell,” he said hoarsely.

“Good.” Laying a hand on his shoulder, I squeezed. Hard. “You don’t want to go near her again, Dirk. I can make your life very, very difficult.”

His pained expression paled, and he gave a jerky nod.

I didn’t wait any longer, jogging to catch up with Veronica.

“Veronica, wait!”

She shot me a quick glance and shook her head. “I’m tired and sore, Mr. Hartwell. I want to go home, take a bath, and start looking for another damn job.”

“I...yeah, I get that. I just...I wanted to...”

She blinked, her smoky gray eyes unreadable. “You wanted to...?”

My mind went blank. I couldn’t think of a damn thing to say.

She cocked a brow, impatience sliding across her features.

“You don’t have to,” I blurted out.

“Have to what?” Brows furrowing, she stared at me, perplexed.

Yeah, well, she wasn’t the only one. I was confused as hell, but I forged on. “Look for another damn job. I want to hire you.”

ELEVEN

VERONICA

CHECKING THE ADDRESS ON THE CARD KEITH HARTWELL HAD GIVEN ME THE night before, I chewed the inside of my cheek, an old childhood habit I'd never fully been able to break.

A photography studio.

What kind of job was he offering me that had to do with a *photography* studio? Yeah, I knew he was a photographer, but aside from the charitable work he did in the area, he focused on fashion photography in cities like New York, Milan, and Paris. I read a few articles on him. Okay, maybe more than a few.

“Just go back home,” I told myself. Sue had called me last night and told me, repeatedly, it wasn't necessary for me to quit, but when I wouldn't change my mind, she'd offered the name of several other caterers she knew, including several who focused on more casual, low-key events.

In other words, something too laid back for the ice bitch known as Nikolette to attend.

I could contact them and—

“Hey! You found it.”

Dread inside, I looked up and saw the ridiculously attractive face of Keith Hartwell peering down at me.

“Looks that way,” I said calmly, slipping the card back into my purse.

“Gimme sixty seconds,” he said. “I'll come unlock the door.”

True to his word, he had the door open in under a minute, and I tried not to notice the broad chest under the t-shirt emblazoned with a decal of a cartoon bird being chased by a coyote. My inner mischievous girl whispered, *Meep meep*.

I didn't let her out, though.

It had been a long time since I'd even had the time to consider relaxing enough to be mischievous.

The scent of coffee wafted through the air, along with something else... something yeasty and decadently sweet.

"Are you hungry?" Keith asked, leading me down a hallway with gleaming white walls and a smooth, highly polished wooden floor. The walls were decorated with black and white images, some were portraits, others of landscapes. Each was exquisite.

"Ah, no. I'm fine," I said, slowing to a halt in front of one image.

It was of a dancer, and the picture had been taken either at sunrise or sunset, the vivid light apparent even though the image was monochrome. She leaped across a field of tall grasses, and it was so lifelike, so perfect, I half expected to see the blades of grass waving in the wind, for her to take flight and disappear into the silvered clouds at her back.

"You took these," I said softly.

"Yeah." There was rueful amusement in his voice. "No point in advertising somebody else's art in my own studio, right?"

I didn't respond to that, just said, "You're amazingly gifted."

"Thanks." It was a simple statement, no prevaricating or false modesty, just simple acknowledgment.

Turning my head, I met his gaze. "You love it, don't you?"

"Hell, yes." He grinned, dimples carving deep grooves into his cheeks as he took a step closer. "Pictures can tell a story, you know. If you look at them right."

He nodded at the dancer. "Like hers. What do you think when you look at this?"

"That she's free," I said, not even thinking about my response. "She looks like she's ready to leap into the clouds and disappear."

Keith turned his head, smile fading a bit. "Yeah. That's exactly what I wanted to show people when I took the shot."

A taut, heavy moment of silence grew, then was shattered as he stepped down and nodded at another image. "This?"

"Youth. Mischief. Enjoy it while it lasts," I said, rubbing my hand over my belly, thrown by the warm, lazy heat that had settled there. Feeling his eyes on me, I kept mine on the picture of the little boy who ran across a wide-open space, glee on his features as he clutched a ball. A gangly puppy with

legs and ears too big for its body chased him.

“Yes.”

We continued down the line until we reached the last image, and that one made my heart slam into my throat. Angling my head until my hair shielded my flushed face, I took in the image of a man’s hand curving over a woman’s neck as he drew her back against him. It was dark, clearly taken within a studio, illumination spilling in to highlight part of the woman’s face and the line of her jaw, as well as the white wall at their backs.

“This one is a bit too obvious,” I said, surprised at how light and easy my voice sounded. “Beautiful, though.”

“Oh, come on.”

My breath locked in my lungs at the soft, husky sound of his laugh, then he leaned in a little closer, just enough that I caught the scent of aftershave, soap, shampoo...and delicious, delicious man.

“Chicken,” he teased before backing away. “Come on, Veronica. I need coffee like I need to breathe. And I hope you’ll change your mind about eating something. I called for donuts and croissants, planning to share with the two businesses down here and forgot that one wasn’t open on Thursdays and the other guy is gone on vacation for a few weeks.”

Before following him through the glass doors stamped with bold white letters that announced the name of the studio, I wiped my hands down the sides of my skirt.

What in the hell had *that* been?

“So...are you sure you don’t want a croissant?”

Keith’s teasing voice had me shooting him a baleful look over the delicious sweet before I could stop myself. To my surprise, he just chuckled and slumped more comfortably in the scoop-styled chair that mirrored mine. The seats were in front of two tall, floor-to-ceiling windows. Several other windows, identical in design, ran down the far length of the wall. After we came in, he pushed a button next to the light switch, and with a quiet hum, blinds swept down, then curtains across, cutting out much of the sun’s too-bright glare.

The studio itself was the very definition of *minimalist*, and while I hadn’t seen *everything*, the one thing that did strike me as...well, lacking?

A desk.

I’d thought maybe he was going to ask me if I could be a receptionist, and yes, I could, though I doubted he wanted somebody for just the summer.

Forcing myself not to grab another croissant—*they were so flaky and yummy*—I took a sip of my coffee and met his gaze over the table.

“So, what’s the job you mentioned?”

A boyishly charming grin lit his face. “I want you to model for me.”

I stared at him, waiting.

He didn’t say anything else.

“Is there a punchline here?” I asked tentatively.

“Why would there be?” He scowled and reached for the folder that had been lying on the table between us. “Here. Look. I’ve got a client...an old friend, really. Flexible. Let’s me find my own models a lot of the time because I know what I like and what works for me. Delaney has this new line of clothes...you’d be perfect.”

Stomach clenching nervously, I stared at him a moment longer, then looked down and found myself sucking in a startled breath.

“Oh. Wow.” Instinctively, I went to touch one of the images, then stopped, shooting him a look. “Can I look?”

“Hard for you to decide if you’re interested if you don’t.” That warm, engaging smile again.

I looked away quickly, focusing on the designs in front of me. “Are these artistic renderings or actual completed designs?”

“Completed designs. You know anything about fashion design?”

I shot him a look and shook my head. “No. My sister is a dancer in New York, though. She used to design her own costumes from time to time for local productions. I’d watch her work.”

One of the designs caught my eye and held it, making it almost impossible to look away.

It was a nightgown in a warm, golden champagne, the bodice designed to drape across the breasts rather than cling, while the rest fell in a sleek column. “This is lovely.”

“It would suit you. You’ve got the legs and curves for it. And this...” He nudged another one over toward me. It was a one-shoulder, one-pieced swimsuit in a cool, steely gray. “That would work great with your eyes and coloring.”

“One-pieces don’t always work with my torso,” I said.

“These would. Like I said, Delaney is specifically focusing on pieces for taller women, especially those who don’t fit into the typical haute couture pieces.”

He rolled his eyes, that grin still on his face.

“What?” I asked.

He chuckled. “She got mad as hell because she wanted to debut this line as a fashion show and was told nobody would be interested. Tall is fine, of course, but it’s still a battle for a lot of the bigwigs in fashion to accept that people want to see women who *aren’t* a size 0. Not that there’s anything wrong with it, but fashion needs to reflect real life, and the industry as a whole needs to stop projecting their idea of perfection to the women in our society. Delaney’s been pushing that for a long time, and everything she touches turns to gold. She’s determined to make it work. So...what do you say?” That grin grew wider. “She lets each model pick a piece or two from the styles they modeled.”

“That’s bribery.” I shot a covetous look at the nightgown.

“That’s being a smart businessman,” he said soberly, but his eyes glinted with humor. “So, are you interested?”

“I guess I can try...?” I started to elaborate, but he was already on his feet, smacking his hands together with a look of satisfaction.

“Perfect. I’m doing a shoot today. You got a few hours to spend out in the Cape Cod area with me this afternoon?”

“Today?”

“Yep. Look, here’s a contract. I’ll let you look it over, and you can ask me any questions. It stipulates the hourly fee you’ll receive. If you’ve got questions, I can give you contacts at several of the modeling agencies who’ve worked with me. they’re there for the models’ protection, not mine, but if you mention I’m trying to get you in today, somebody would be happy to talk...”

He put a contract down in front of me, and head spinning, I looked down and started to read.

THAT WAS how I found myself sitting in the seat next to him as we made the drive out to the cape.

I’d been to the resort area a couple of times with friends. We’d pool our money together, rent one of the cheaper beach houses, swim and have a few drinks. Some of them would hook up with some of the out-of-towners. One of them, a teacher who use to work with me at the school where I taught, had

fallen in love with her ‘summer lover,’ as she’d come to call him. They were getting married later this fall.

And I’d just sit on the deck and watch the ocean or read.

It hadn’t ever seemed like a lack or emptiness until the past few months, but now, making this same drive out with the sexy man in the seat next to me, I found myself wondering if maybe I was going too far out of my way to protect myself.

I wasn’t my mother, was I?

“You always this quiet?”

Glancing at him from under my lashes, I shrugged. “I talk when there’s something to talk about.”

“Ouch.” He slowed to a stop, and I looked up, recognizing the area.

We were on 6A, the Old King’s Highway, close to Sandy Neck Gate House and the marshes

“You make me sound boring, Veronica.”

Recognizing the gleam of amusement in his eyes, I laughed and shook my head. “Yeah, I bet. Something tells me the last thing I need to do is stroke your ego, Mr. Hartwell.”

“Keith,” he said patiently. “You can call dad and grandpa Mr. Hartwell, but I’m *Keith*.”

“Sure thing...Mr. Hartwell.”

This time, he laughed, and the sound of it was rich and full, utterly compelling. Shifting my attention back to the window, I tried to figure out just what in the hell was going on with me.

“So, Ms. Cheshire, have you been out this way before?”

“Yes.” Not bothering to hide the smile, I shook my head. “I guess you’ll keep calling me that unless I call you Keith.”

“You guessed right,” he said with a patient sigh. “Going to be weird. The other models will all be calling me Keith, but I’ll have to be *yes, ma’aming* you and *would you please try to give me a pouty smile, Ms. Cheshire* while I’m telling the rest of them to relax or cock a hip or look sexy. It’s going to be like trying to ask my fifth grade English teacher, Ms. Hostettler, to model nightgowns and swimsuits and sexy cocktail dresses.” He winced. “But a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do.”

I was not going to laugh. I wasn’t.

“Something tells me that Ms. Hostettler wasn’t your favorite teacher.”

He shot me another mischievous look. “You ever read *Harry Potter*?”

I snorted. “I *do* teach middle school kids.” He’d asked earlier, wanting my work history, and I’d told him, making sure he understood I only wanted a summer job. “I’ve also got younger brothers and sisters.”

“So, you know who Mrs. Umbridge is then.”

“Eek.” While I’d been lucky with my teachers, I think we’ve *all* had at least one who wasn’t worth the ink it took to *F*—. “So, you had a Delores Umbridge?”

“Oh, hell no.” Lips curved in a smirk, he said, “Ms. Hostettler was probably Delores’s role model. She was *worse*. So. Much. Worse. And you’re going to put me through that trauma.”

“Fine, fine.” Laughing at him, I shook my head and tried to make sense of the strange turn my life had recently taken. “I’ll call you Keith.”

“Excellent.”

He sounded so pleased, I had the urge to poke at him, but I managed to resist. Shifting in the luxuriously padded seat, I tried to ease the ache in my back. I’d used an ice pack last night, and it had helped, but the ibuprofen I’d taken had worn away, and I was hurting.

“Your back’s bothering you,” he said softly, taking the Mercedes around a sharp curve with such smooth precision, I almost forgot how fast he was going.

“Yes.” Frowning as something occurred to me, I said, “I hope you don’t need pictures of my back. I’ve got a bruise almost the size of my fist. There’s another on my hip, but it should be easier to hide with clothing.”

The easy atmosphere was gone in a blink, replaced by a hot tension that made me wish I hadn’t said anything.

“You should press charges against that fucker, Dirk. He did it on purpose. I watched him, and I saw him smirk over it.”

“No.” Crossing my arms over my chest, I averted my gaze and went back to looking out the window. “He’s not worth my time or attention or the headache it would cause.”

For several long moments, neither of us spoke. Then, “If you’re worried about trying to do the report, I could go with you, tell the cops what I saw.”

“I appreciate the offer, but no.”

“OKAY...NOW LET’S TRY THIS...” Keith told everybody what he wanted, and I focused on the three other models, trying to pick up on the lingo he used so I’d understand better if I stuck with this.

I was so focused, I didn’t even realize he was talking to me until he said, “Ms. Cheshire!”

Whipping my head around, I stared at him with a scowl.

He gave me an unrepentant grin.

“Yes, Mr. Hartwell?”

“Don’t make me say it,” he said with a hard sigh, looking us over and checking something on his camera, then some other device. One of the other models had told me it had to do with checking the light balance—or maybe it was white balance?

“Say what?” I wracked my brain, trying to uncover what I’d missed while watching the others.

He gave me a pained look, then, like he’d eaten a lemon, he said, “Would you please give me a pouty smile, Ms. Cheshire? There, you made me say it, and I’ve got images of Ms. Hostettler in my head now.”

A laugh gurgled out before I could stop it.

And Keith was snapping away on his camera again, hot, avid interest in his eyes as he moved around, calling out clipped orders. A few times, he or one of the other models had to stop and either vocally instruct me or demonstrate. Once he came over, a disgruntled look on his face and nudged me into the position he wanted.

The look wasn’t a *mad* one, and he wasn’t even grouchy, exactly.

It was almost like watching a mad scientist at work...and I was one of his experiments. Oddly, the idea wasn’t off-putting.

Neither was the feel of his hands on me, gliding over the silk nightgown as he nudged me closer to another woman, a model by the name of Jezebel, telling her to tilt her head toward mine.

The flame-red of her curls tangled with the richer, darker brown of mine as the wind kicked up. Keith backed away, eyes narrowed. “Perfect...that’s just perfect...don’t move. Both of you, close your eyes. Think of a lover you thought might be the one, then he left you.”

“So dramatic, isn’t he?” Jezebel teased. “Okay, here I am, pining away...”

Closing my eyes, I tried to summon the proper emotion, the proper expression. But how did I know what a lover leaving me felt like? Whether

he was the one or not?

Damn. A staggering sort of loneliness swept over me.

“Perfect. Both of you, Jez, Veronica. I think we’re done.”

Jezebel hugged me enthusiastically. “Veronica, you’re a natural at this.”

“Thanks.” I forced an awkward smile and shot a look at Keith, and found that he was watching me as well.

My heartbeat skipped. Then he looked away, his grin settling back into place as he started calling out to everybody, offering thanks and congrats.

What had I gotten myself into?

TWELVE

KEITH

“WHERE’S YOUR CHARMING FIANCÉE-TO-BE?”

Matt scowled at me over the beer in his hand. Dressed in a polo and khaki shorts, he could have passed for years younger than he was.

Could have. He didn’t.

People who met him or only knew of him would never guess it because he’d learned to handle it, but Matt was an introvert and had overcome an almost painful shyness that had plagued him for most of his childhood.

It wasn’t obvious unless you spent the time to get to know him. Most people just assumed he was reserved, and some just figured he was an uptight prick who didn’t bother to mingle with the masses.

I didn’t like knowing people had that image of him, because he had a huge heart, but it wasn’t like I could make him more comfortable with people. He’d found a good middle ground, and for the most part, he was content with it.

Or he had been, until the past year or two.

It was that fucking money.

I got it, really. But money or not, I wasn’t going to sit by while he did something that would make him miserable.

“She had a prior engagement.” Matt looked away. “She’ll be here later on, though.”

“Let me guess, she’s trying to avoid spending too much time with the common folk.”

“You know, you’re not making this any easier,” Matt said, sipping from the bottle before setting it on the table in front of him. The large community picnic, one of the biggest fundraisers for the foundation, was set to kick off in

under a half-hour, and the two of us were on hand to put out whatever fires cropped up in between now and then.

“She’s so charming, Matty.” I gave him a deadpan look. “It’s all I can do not to fall in love with her myself.”

His lips twitched, but he stopped the smile before it appeared. “What the hell happened after I left Wednesday? She still won’t tell me, only that you were a complete asshole, and she doesn’t understand why I left her with you.”

“Now, why am I not surprised she didn’t tell you the entire story?” I set my camera on the table and waved at one of the servers. After putting in a request for a beer, I looked at Matt.

“You remember that server from last weekend? Veronica?”

Matt’s lids flickered. “Yes.”

“Well, Classically Yours handled the catering for the thing on Wednesday too. Veronica was there. There was an incident.”

Still pissed about it, I explained how one of the servers had all but knocked her down, and Nikolette had made it worse by slamming her chair—on purpose or not was up for debate—back into Veronica, who’d already been off-balance.

“She got her dress wet. She acted like Veronica did it on purpose and started wailing like a banshee, demanding that Veronica be fired and all this bullshit. I’d seen what actually happened, and I told the boss or owner, whoever it was, that came out to address the issue. Nikolette was out of hand and out of line, Matt. In front of everybody. Wouldn’t calm down, wouldn’t lower her voice. Veronica finally told her boss she didn’t want to cause problems, and she resigned, then left. I gave Nikolette some cash and told her to call a Lyft, then went to check on Veronica and see if I could do anything to help.”

Matt had long since dropped his eyes to the table. A muscle pulsed in his cheek, but he didn’t say anything.

“She cost a woman her job. What if it was somebody who relied only on that job? Nikolette wouldn’t care. She only cares about herself.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Matt said, sounding tired. He grabbed the beer and drained it in a couple of hard pulls before setting it down with a thunk. “But we’re still in a bind, Keith. I’ve got to do something.”

“Matt—”

“Don’t, okay, Keith?” He shook his head. “I know you want to help. I

know Nikolette's a stone bitch. But what else am I supposed to do?"

Before I could say another word, he turned on his heel and walked away. I was left there, staring at his back, wondering what the hell I could do to fix this mess.

After a few seconds, I pulled out my phone and read the message I'd gotten from Veronica earlier.

I'd invited her to the picnic before dropping her off at her home after we finished up with the photo shoot the other day.

She'd texted me this morning to let me know she'd be there.

I blew out a long breath. All she had to do was show up before Nikolette did.

THE PICNIC HELD in June every summer by the Hartwell Foundation was one of *the* events—fun for kids, couples and families, spilling out over a huge piece of the waterfront.

It was a perfect day for the event, too, the weather balmy with the sun slipping in and out from behind fat, fluffy clouds.

I had my camera and had been keeping busy taking pictures, but I still kept an eye out, looking for her. I'd checked my phone probably three times in the past half hour, hoping she hadn't changed her mind.

It would have been unsettling, how on edge I was about seeing her, but talking with Matt had made me realize why I'd wanted her here in the first place.

Veronica was everything Nikolette wasn't. She was the kind of woman Matt should be marrying. She was funny and smart, and she definitely wasn't a pushover—that had been made clear the night Nikolette had gone and interfered with her job. And the way she'd put that asshole Dirk on the pavement? Yeah, she wouldn't need anybody around to hold her hand or cosset her.

Once she got here, I was going to introduce her to my brother and hope he'd come to his senses, hoped he'd realize there were other, better options out there than Nikolette. Sure, Veronica didn't have a rich dad wanting to help her find some poor bastard like my brother, but she was *real*.

A tall, curvy woman, hair pulled into a high, tight ponytail, appeared in

my line of sight and my heart gave one hard, instinctive kick against my ribs.
It was enough to make me wonder—

“No, Keith,” I told myself. No wondering. “You’re on *Operation Rescue Your Idiot Brother From Himself.*”

That in mind, I worked my way through the crowd and came up in front of her just as she cleared the gate with the VIP badge I’d given her.

“Say cheese,” I told her with a wide grin when she caught sight of me.

“What, I’m not supposed to make a pouty face?”

But she smiled and let me snap the picture, capturing that warm, easy curve of her lips with my camera, freezing it forever. Such a nice mouth—

Stop it, Keith.

Pushing aside thoughts I didn’t need in my head, I caught her hand and tugged her out of the flow of foot traffic. “Come on. The VIP section is over here. Not as crowded, out of the sun.”

Her fingers twined with mine.

“Are you taking pictures officially here or just for fun?” she asked.

Slanting a look at her, I said, “Both. I’m lucky enough to love what I do, so it’s always fun. But the foundation likes having shots of these events. And my services are free for stuff like this.”

“That makes sense.”

“Hey, there’s my brother,” I said and grinned inwardly because Nikolette still hadn’t arrived.

Veronica hesitated, and I looked over at her. “Problem?”

“Ah, yeah. The icy blonde one who cost me a job I really liked,” she said calmly. “If he’s here...”

“Nikolette won’t be here until later. Matt told me. Come on. You two never had a chance to really meet.”

She gave me a narrow-eyed look but shrugged. “Well, even if she shows up, at least she can’t get me fired or thrown out, right?”

“Nope. Come on.”

A few minutes later, I was making the introductions, and because I knew my brother well enough, I could see the subtle hints of warmth in his eyes when he offered an apology on behalf of Nikolette. After he did, Veronica told him exactly what she’d told me, albeit with a bit more charm.

“Maybe it worked out for the best,” she said ruefully. “Your brother had me do some modeling, and while it’s nothing I ever saw myself doing, it definitely pays well.”

“Plus, you got to keep that nightgown and a swimsuit,” I reminded her. Her cheeks colored. “Yes, there is that.”

“Modeling, huh?” Matt’s eyes warmed even more. “Keith’s never been able to pass the chance to get an interesting face in front of him. He and that camera are practically inseparable.”

Veronica laughed, and the sound was warm and bright. “I’m glad my face interested him, then.”

We ended up at one of the tables in the VIP section, and Matt was so caught up in talking to Veronica, he didn’t notice the message pop up on his phone. Sitting next to him, I saw it and picked it up just as he glanced over.

“Your beloved,” I said, somehow managing to be polite. “On her way. I’ve got to snap some pics. Maybe you can keep Veronica company, and I’ll keep an eye out for Nikolette while I’m out there?”

Matt gave me a narrow look.

“I’ll behave.” I held up three fingers. “Promise. You know Mom and Dad need you in here to help run interference with the press anyway.” I gave him a wicked grin. “Unless you’d rather *me* do it—”

“Go.” Matt scowled at me and shook his head. “Just don’t be a—” He stopped and glanced at Veronica.

“I’ve got numerous brothers and sisters,” she said easily. “There’s nothing you can say about siblings that I haven’t either said or thought a dozen times over.”

Slipping away with my camera, I headed to the private entrance where Nikolette had said her driver would bring her, snapping a few pictures along the way to add to the hundred or so I’d already taken.

It took a good twenty minutes for her to finally arrive, and when she saw me, her mouth pinched and a line formed between her brows. I was tempted to mention lines and wrinkles—she wouldn’t be a woman who’d see that such things added character, I didn’t think. But I’d told Matt I’d behave. And, if I was nice enough, I could keep her engaged with me and give Matt and Veronica more time together.

“Where’s Matty?” she asked in a sulky voice.

“He had to stay in the VIP area in case our parents needed an extra hand with the press or one of the guests. I told him I’d get you over there.” Being charming was easy enough for me to do when I needed to, so I flashed her an easy smile.

Nikolette eyed me with suspicion but didn’t say anything else about Matt.

“How long does he have to stay at this thing?” She had her arms wrapped around herself and looked in the direction of the kid’s area with something akin to distaste.

“Until it’s over. All of us do.” Offering a smile of commiseration, I said, “You showing up to support him is very sweet.”

“I adore Matty,” she said in a prim voice. “Of *course* I want to support him.”

A kid with a dripping cone of ice cream darted in front of us, and she went rigid like she thought he’d contaminate her, either with ice cream germs or toddlerism—I had no idea which. His harried mother shot us an apologetic look, and I waved it off.

“Why a *picnic*?” Nikolette muttered.

It was more to herself than anything else, but I answered anyway. “Family tradition. The Hartwells have been sponsoring this event for more than fifty years.”

Deliberately taking the longer route, and pausing several times over to snap some shots—including several of her because I figured she’d love the attention—I kept the two of us occupied for almost thirty minutes before we drew close enough to the cordoned-off VIP section.

“Thank *goodness*,” she muttered. “Something other than sugary soft drinks and cotton candy. There *is* wine, isn’t there?”

Before I could answer, a toddler crashed into me, his hands gripping a giant lemon shake-up. His mother cried out an apology, and at the same time, the boy began to cry.

“I think I’ll just find Matty myself,” Nikolette said, backing away.

Shit.

I shot a glance toward the area where Matt had been sitting with Veronica. They weren’t there. Okay. Breathing room.

So, I hunkered down in front of the kid and handed him his dropped cup as he wailed. “I spilled it all!”

He didn’t want to stop crying, and his exasperated mom finally scooped him up.

“Here. You can buy him another one,” I told her, handing her a ten.

“That’s not necessary—”

“I’d feel better,” I told her, pushing it into her hand and closing her fingers around it. Without waiting for a response, I cut around her and headed for the VIP section—and Nikolette. I just had to find her before she caught up

with Matt and Veronica.

THIRTEEN

VERONICA

I'D VACILLATED BETWEEN WHETHER OR NOT I WANTED TO ATTEND THE PICNIC.

I knew all about the annual event—the Hartwells had been doing it for as long as I'd been alive. I'd been before and had fun with friends, but if I went with Keith—not that it was a date or anything—I had no doubt we'd see his brother.

And that would mean we'd see the ice bitch of the universe.

That was what eventually decided it for me.

I was *not* going to let that cow keep me from doing something fun. I'd already given up a job I'd liked because of her. Nothing more.

And the good news? It wasn't like Keith was going to fire me for anything she might say or do. It was pretty clear he didn't like her very much.

Sitting across from Matt and chatting with him, I was glad I'd come. Keith had been gone for almost an hour, but Matt was easy to talk to, and as the minutes passed and he relaxed, I enjoyed myself even more.

“What's taking them so long?” I asked, hoping Matt wouldn't pick up on the nervousness that filled me at the idea of seeing Nikolette again.

Matt checked his phone.

“He had to wait on Nikolette. Plus, he said something about taking pictures. He tends to lose track of time when he's got the camera in front of him. Actually, before he gets back here with Nikolette...” Matt looked uncomfortable now. “I really am sorry about what happened Wednesday night. I'll make sure Nikolette realizes—”

He stopped and frowned, a line forming between his brows as he clearly tried to figure out just how to put his thoughts into words.

“It's okay, Matt. You're not responsible for what she did. I don't want to

cause problems, though. Once Keith gets here, I'll probably head home."

"You don't have to. Not because of Nikolette."

Cocking a brow at him, I said, "Do you really think she's suddenly going to take a liking to me?"

I was surprised when he finally gave a blunt, "No," as his answer, surprised enough that it startled a laugh out of me.

Matt stared at me.

The look was so intent, my skin heated, and my heart raced. Confusion pricked, but I somehow managed to find a smile. "You know what? I'm dying for one of the old-fashioned corn dogs out there. I think I'll go get one. Tell Keith for me, would you?"

Matt looked like he wanted to say something else, but he only nodded.

Slipping away from the VIP area, I swiped my hands down the sides of my capri pants, a pair I'd picked out because I'd been told, more than once, they made the most of my hips and butt, while the cut of the crepe top did amazing things for my boobs and still hid the swell of my belly.

I'd been thinking of Keith when I'd dressed, and we hadn't spent more than fifteen minutes alone before he introduced me to his brother, and an hour after that, he'd disappeared, supposedly to get Nikolette.

As if my thoughts alone had summoned them, I spotted Keith...and in front of him, posing prettily with a sweet smile?

It was Nikolette.

Scowling, I turned on my heel, even more confused. Had he invited me just he could flirt with Nikolette while I talked to his brother? That didn't make sense. I hadn't ignored the apathy in his eyes when he'd looked at the other woman, talked to her.

But what in the hell had I just seen?

I didn't know.

It wasn't the frustrated man who'd come after me the other day, nor was it the charming bastard I'd talked to at the studio or the one who'd teased me at the beach.

The smile I'd glimpsed had been...

"He was flirting with her," I muttered, annoyed with myself for not figuring it out sooner. What the hell?

FOURTEEN

KEITH

“MATTY, *THERE YOU ARE.*”

Matt rose from his chair as he saw us, and Nikolette wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling his head down so she could kiss him.

I looked around for Veronica.

“Oh, come on, baby...let me get a better one than that,” Nikolette teased.

From the corner of my eye, I could see Matt angle his face away, and I wondered if it was self-centeredness or stupidity that blinded Nikolette to the fact that Matt wasn't comfortable with that kind of public affection.

Throwing him a line, I asked, “Where'd she go?”

“She wanted a corn dog,” Matt said while Nikolette finally stopped nuzzling Matt's neck.

He pulled out a seat for her and asked if she wanted anything, and I took that chance to break away. “I think I'll go catch up with her,” I told Matt, slanting a quick glance toward Nikolette. “I'll be back around.”

Finding her took a hell of a lot longer than it should have. The picnic was crowded, but one thing I knew how to do was pick a person out of a crowd, especially when I was dead focused on doing that.

But it proved near impossible to find Veronica.

Annoyed, wondering if she'd gone and left without telling me, I started back to the VIP section.

And there she was, walking toward me.

We stood with several feet separating us, just on the outside of the VIP section. She cocked her head to the side.

“Hey. I've been looking for you.”

She lifted a brow. “Have you.”

It came out more as a comment than a question, and the words were far cooler than I'd expected.

"Ah...yeah." For some reason, I felt uncertain now. "You and Matt have a nice time talking?"

"I suppose." She blinked, the thick veil of her lashes shielding her eyes. "Did you ask me here to keep your brother occupied so you could spend time with Nikolette?"

That question, flying out of left field, had my jaw dropping open.

"Did I..." I almost started to laugh, but the somber expression on Veronica's face told me that would be a bad, bad idea, so I quelled it, staying silent for a few more seconds until I had the urge under control. "Nikolette is the *last* person I want to spend time with."

"So, what gives?" Suspicion in her eyes, she continued to give me that speculative look.

I had a gut-deep knowledge in that moment that, if I tried to lie my way through it, she'd know. "Man, I bet the kids you teach don't spend a lot of time trying to pull shit with you, not with that look in your arsenal."

"No. They don't. And you haven't answered."

Sighing, I skimmed a hand back over my hair and shifted to brace a hip on the railing. "The Hartwell Foundation's been having some issues. Matt's got this bullshit idea that he'll marry Nikolette—he's talked with her dad, and the guy will put a big influx of money into the company...*if* Matt marries his daughter."

Veronica pursed her lips. "You're telling me that Matt is marrying Nikolette for her money."

"Well, it sure as hell isn't for her personality."

That startled a laugh out of her, and she clapped a hand over her mouth to muffle it. "That's terrible," she said, shaking her head. "And I'm *still* wondering where I fit into the picture here."

"He's going to be miserable with her." I turned and looked into the VIP area, spotting my brother talking to my parents. "He's busted his ass, worked hard to get where he is. Yeah, the foundation needs some help, but this isn't the way to do it. I thought..." Blood crept up my neck as I looked back over at her. "You're an awesome woman, Veronica. Funny, intelligent, and attractive. You're the sort of woman Matt's always been attracted to, and you're the kind of woman he needs, the kind he deserves. You're both crazy about kids, and Matt's a big believer in education and trying to push that, not

just because it looks good in a PR light, either.”

A line appeared between her brows, and she braced her hands on her hips.

“Are you telling me you’re trying to hook me up with your brother?”

No—

Scowling at that instinctive response that tried to escape, I hitched up a shoulder and shrugged. “Why not?”

“Because he’s involved with somebody *else*?” she suggested.

“Not really. I mean, they haven’t announced anything yet, and it’s not like they’re really dating. They only decided on this a few weeks ago, and when it comes to my brothers, I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure they’re happy.”

“Keith...” Veronica sighed and reached up, brushing her fingers over my jaw. “That’s very sweet of you. And believe me, I understand. I’d hate to stand by and watch while one of my siblings did something I felt would be wrong for them. But that’s not our call to make.”

“Look, it’s not like I’m forcing them apart—or you two together.” Jamming my hands into my pockets, I dragged my eyes away from her, focusing on the large Ferris wheel in the center of the area. “I just wanted him to have something to consider. We can figure the money thing out. Him, being miserable? That will be harder to fix.”

She didn’t answer for such a long time, I didn’t know if she would.

Finally, she sighed. “Have you told him you feel so strongly about this?”

“Yeah.” I snorted. “You can’t tell Matt anything once he makes his mind up. That’s why I wanted to try it this way.”

She shot me a quick look and amusement tugged at the corners of her mouth. “Something tells me the two of you are equally as stubborn as the other.”

“Hell, I *had* to be stubborn to deal with him growing up.”

The smile widened. “Yeah, well, I know what that’s like. But—”

“*You!*”

“Aw, hell,” I muttered, shoving away from the picket-fence style barrier to watch Nikolette bearing down on us. Her eyes were locked on Veronica, like I wasn’t even there.

“What in the *hell* are you doing here?”

“Keith invited me,” Veronica said coolly.

“Oh. Did he now?” A snide smile curled her lips, and she shot me an ugly look. “I couldn’t figure out why he was being so *nice* to you, but I think I

understand now. *But* stay away from Matty!”

She reached up to jab a finger in Veronica’s shoulder. Pissed, I straightened, but before I could do anything, Veronica shot up a hand in a fluid movement, the kind that only came from practice and training. She deflected Nikolette’s touch by striking with controlled force at the other woman’s wrist, startling a yelp out of Nikolette with the speed of the movement.

“Don’t touch me,” Veronica said calmly.

Her eyes widened, fury painting red streaks over her cheeks. “You *bitch!*” Nikolette’s eyes narrowed, and she moved again, but this time, it was to bring up her drink. She flung the contents of her cocktail directly into Veronica’s face.

Next to me, Veronica hissed in a breath, and her eyes narrowed. Looking smug, Nikolette went to throw the cocktail glass at Veronica as well and found her wrist trapped.

“Damn, Veronica,” I said in appreciation. “You got some moves.”

Neither of them looked at me, or up at Matt’s voice as he called out to us from several yards away, striding in our direction. There was a quiet, intense fury on his face.

Nikolette jerked away from Veronica, still clinging to the cocktail glass. “Let me *go*.”

“You throw that at me, and we’re going to have a problem,” Veronica said in an icy voice.

“You *bitch*. You don’t know what a *problem* is,” Nikolette said. She brought up her other hand, but before she could say anything else, Matt caught her wrist.

“Enough,” he said in a low, angry voice. “That’s enough, Nikolette.”

Nikolette’s eyes widened, then immediately filled with tears. “Matty, you didn’t hear how she spoke—”

“Don’t,” I said, cutting her off as I reached over to take the cocktail glass from her. “You started it, and you gained one hell of an audience, screaming like a two-year-old having a tantrum.”

Veronica let go of Nikolette’s hand with a forceful sort of shove that sent the blonde woman’s arm arcing down, and while Nikolette tried to get her balance, Veronica stepped out of range.

“You—”

“That’s it.” Matt cut her off, his voice a blade. “Nikolette, I’m done with

this bullshit.”

She flinched at the sound of his voice while I didn't even bother to hide my smile. It might take a while for Matt to hit his limit, but it looked like Nikolette had pushed him far enough.

“Matty...” she said, voice beseechingly soft and low.

She reached for him, and he stepped back. “It's over. I'm not putting up with this sort of nonsense from you anymore. It's over, and you need to leave.”

Nikolette's face contorted with a mix of shock and anger. “You don't mean that.”

“Yes. I do. Unless you want security to escort you from the grounds, you should leave now.”

“Here.” I gave Nikolette a pleasant smile. “I'll make sure she gets to her car. Matt, can you help Veronica clean up a bit?”

Nikolette's eyes widened, but before she could say anything, I stepped in. “I saw about nine cameras, all pointed at you. I probably missed some. Please...keep it up. Give them more fodder to put up on Twitter about how you freaked out and assaulted a stranger.”

“You're a pig,” she spat.

But she didn't argue as I escorted her to the private gate, or the entire time we waited for her driver to return and pick her up.

She gave me an icy glare before disappearing into the car, and I breathed out a sigh of relief.

“Okay. That job's done.”

FIFTEEN

VERONICA

“HERE.”

Tearing my gaze from Keith and Nikolette’s retreating forms, I looked down to see Matt offering me a towel. He had an embarrassed expression on his face, but there was lingering anger blazing in his eyes too.

Taking the towel, I dried my face and went to work dealing with the slowly stiffening, sticky material of the crepe blouse. “Maybe Nikolette feels we’re even now,” I muttered. Although I had a feeling it was a heck of a lot easier for *her* to buy pretty clothes than me.

“I’m sorry,” Matthias Hartwell said, his voice stiff.

Lifting my gaze, I met his and saw the renewed flush of embarrassment. “Hey, you didn’t make her do it. It’s not your fault. At all.”

I was still trying to figure out just what in the world had happened, yeah, but it wasn’t anything I could blame on this guy.

He managed a small smile that struck me as sort of...shy. “Be that as it may, she was here as my guest, at a function my family’s foundation sponsors. I can’t be absolved of all guilt. Especially when I know how she is.”

Echoes of Keith’s words came back to whisper through my brain, and I told myself to mind my own business. I needed to just go home and forget this whole day ever happened. I’d been kind of...well, not *hopeful* exactly, but I’d almost thought Keith was interested in me. For *me*. It wasn’t that he’d said anything or done anything to encourage it, but I’d thought I caught a hint of something in his eyes.

But no.

He wanted me here for his brother.

I was having a hard time aligning this polite, reserved man with the shy smile attaching himself to that cow too. And try as I might, my nosiness got the best of me.

“If you know she’s like that, so ugly to people, then why spend time with her?” I asked. I wasn’t going to share what Keith had told me, but I still wanted to understand why somebody would make themselves so miserable.

Matt gave me an inscrutable look, and I wondered if he’d answer.

A hard sigh escaped him, tension draining from his shoulders. “Sometimes we do things that logically make sense, but when you try to put them into practice, it doesn’t work out as planned.”

“That’s a very vague answer,” I said, although it had been answer enough. He’d been ready to do as Keith had suggested, make himself miserable to help the family out. It was something I could understand, in a way. “But...let me guess, it’s the best I’m going to get?”

To my surprise, he gave me an oddly charming smile. “Well, for now at least. How about I get you a shirt?”

“Ah...” I hesitated, and he must have taken that for acceptance because he waved down one of the people I’d deduced must be an event volunteer.

The lithe, leggy blonde with a gamine grin and friendly smile approached. “What do you need, Mr. Hartwell?”

“Can you find Ms. Cheshire a shirt? We had a bit of an accident.”

“Absolutely.” She turned and looked at me critically, then nodded.

I flushed, half-holding my breath in anticipation of her asking what size I wore. But she just turned and disappeared.

When she returned several minutes later, it was with several different colored t-shirts and what looked like a couple of sizes. “I don’t know what sort of fit you like,” she said, turning them over to me. “But this should give you some options.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” That same friendly smile appeared. “Do you know where the restrooms are?”

I nodded and excused myself, trying to figure out the polite way to escape once I’d changed.

The restrooms were portable—actual *portable* restrooms, complete with running water, flushable toilets. As I took in my mussed appearance after changing the shirt and sponging off my sticky chest, I said, “No plain port-a-potties here.”

A bright laugh alerted me to the fact that I hadn't been alone in the facilities as I'd previously thought. A cute, plump brunette had just rounded the corner and grinned at me. "Not when you're in the VIP section of a Hartwell event." She looked me over. "You're that woman who had a run-in with Nikolette Ives. Can I have your autograph?"

A startled laugh escaped me. "Maybe? If you have a brush or something?"

"I do." She beamed and dumped a purse on the counter that would have made my mom weep with envy.

Irene Cheshire could have taught the Boy Scouts lessons on being prepared, but this cheerful woman could have given Irene Cheshire lessons.

"...friends with his parents...my little brother...school with Matt. He's such a great guy. And my sister had the *biggest* crush on Keith..." She chattered on and on as I smoothed the tangles from my hair, brought on by the heat of the day and the sugared sweetness of the cocktail.

"I mean, don't take it wrong, Veronica," she said, slowing down to look at me. "Not that I enjoyed seeing you get a drink tossed at you, especially since you're as nice as you can be, but I know Matt. That would have been the last draw for him. I just can't imagine..."

And on she went.

Finally, at a lull when she paused for breath, I pushed the brush back at her. "Thanks so much. I bet they're looking for me."

She waved cheerfully, and I disappeared through the door, my damp blouse crumpled into my bag, and the spare donated shirts clutched against my chest.

"Here," I said, putting them down next to Matt as he rose from his chair. "Thanks for getting me a non-alcoholic shirt."

"Well, I was pretty sure the shirt wasn't legal," he said, flashing me a smile with the faintest hint of dimples. "Here...why don't you sit with me while we wait for Keith? I'll have some food brought over. It's the least I can do."

"You don't..."

"Please." It came quiet and intense, a flicker of that discomfort returning. "I'm still..."

At his hesitation, I sat down. "You know, I usually don't let somebody talk me into something so easily," I told him lightly. "But I can see how Nikolette being..."

“Nikolette?” he supplied when I hesitated.

“Yes.”

And he laughed.

It was a warm, easy sound, and it made me smile back at him.

It was almost enough that I started to forget that I’d been excited about coming here to see Keith.

Almost.

But not quite.

Still, by the time Keith joined us nearly forty-five minutes later, I was grinning and laughing with Matt, the incident with Nikolette all but wiped from my mind. When Matt asked if we were dating, Keith having taken one of the chairs across the table instead of the vacant one next to me, the younger Hartwell shook his head. “No, we’re just friends.”

“Then maybe you’ll let me take you to lunch tomorrow,” Matt said, his dark blue gaze cutting my way even while Keith’s comment hit home.

I’d been unsettled by his reappearance, hoping to hide it as I took a casual drink from the cocktail Matt had brought me a few minutes earlier. I took another, slower sip, buying time before I answered.

“Won’t you be mourning over Nikolette?” I asked, striving for a lighthearted tone, even as I tried to figure out why it rubbed me wrong at how easily Keith had delivered that *no*. We were barely acquaintances, much less friends. And Matt had been being polite and showing...well, loyalty, I guess, asking his brother.

“I think I already went through the mourning period. It started at our first dinner together and ended earlier today,” Matt said, his dry sense of humor so subtle, I wouldn’t have realized he was joking if I hadn’t caught the glint in his eye. “Really, I’d like to take you out to lunch. To make up for how she acted.”

“I already told you that’s not your responsi—”

“And maybe I want to spend some more time with you,” he said in a matter of fact tone of voice that made it impossible to miss just *why*.

“Ah...well. Okay. That would be lovely.” And it would.

There was still a faint hint of...regret, maybe, that it hadn’t been Keith. But when I looked over at him, he was grinning at us both, looking delighted.

Clearly whatever I thought I’d sensed between us had been all one-sided.

Matt, on the other hand, really seemed interested in something beyond just a simple friendship.

And he was...sweet. Smart. That understated sense of humor was intriguing, especially when combined with that hint of seriousness that made me think he needed somebody to make him laugh a little more easily.

Mom's always wanting you to get out more, Veronica. So...take a chance already.

SIXTEEN

KEITH

“YOU DID THIS ON *PURPOSE*,” NIKOLETTE SAID, HER VOICE LOW AND ANGRY, but far more contained than it had been earlier.

Of course, that was probably because she’d noticed the looks she’d gotten as we made our way to the private pick-up area where her driver had dropped her off earlier. Something must have gotten through that pretty, venomous head of hers.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” I said, managing to keep a straight face. “I do hope you contacted your driver like I asked. If not, I’ll be asking one of the security guards to wait with you.”

She gave me a haughty look. “I don’t *need* a babysitter, Keith.”

“And if I give you half a chance, you’ll sashay back in there and cause even more hell.” Laughing, I shook my head. “Not happening. You might be able to curl some guys around your little finger, but I’m not one of them.”

“Please.” Curling her lip in a delicate sneer, she eyed me to my toes and back. “Like I’d waste my time with you. Your taste in women runs a little too low-brow, considering your choice in company.”

We slowed to a stop at the gate, and I was relieved to see the car from earlier waiting, the driver at its side. “What...oh, you mean Veronica?” I gave her a cheery smile. “I think she’s more Matt’s type than mine. He’s so serious, he needs somebody who can help him loosen up and have fun.”

Her eyes widened.

Not giving her a chance to say anything, I turned to one of the two security guards at the gate. “She’s not allowed back into the event. Pass the word. If she does attempt to re-enter, call the cops. Oh, and make sure the head of security for the foundation gets the word too. She’s no longer

welcome at the foundation or any of our facilities without express permission from Matt or me, and that's for *each* visit."

She was practically vibrating with rage. "You *bastard!*"

Her driver was at her side a second later. "Miss Nikolette."

She spun on him.

I almost felt sorry for the man, but not enough to linger.

Taking my time, I made my way through the event grounds, listening to kids laugh, parents talk and call after wayward toddlers who tried to run faster than their stocky legs could carry them.

The sun slanted through the Ferris wheel in a dazzling display of light and shadow, catching my eye. Taking a few pictures, I let work distract me for a little longer, but curiosity led me back to the VIP section.

The two of them were laughing together.

The sight made me smile.

I caught an image of them, their heads angled toward each other. Veronica's warm brown hair, shot through with fiery hints of red, lay in a silken wave down her back. A pink t-shirt brought hints of color to her cheeks.

Matt would have gotten her that pink shirt, something I'd thought of but decided to let my brother handle instead.

They looked good together.

Matt saw me first and looked up, a hint of guilt in his eyes before he smiled. "Any problems with Nikolette?"

"I'm not sure I could list all the problems with that woman if you gave me a ream of paper, ten computers, and ten talented transcriptionists," I said, circling the table. I realized I was gravitating toward the empty seat next to Veronica and made myself take a few more steps, to the two empty seats across from my brother and the still-smiling woman. "Now, if you want to know if her driver showed and if she's safely tucked away...yep."

Humor gleamed in Veronica's eyes, but she didn't say anything when I looked at her, her gaze shifting away as she reached for a cocktail in front of her.

"Are the two of you dating?"

The question from Matt surprised me. I'd been hoping he'd take an interest in Veronica, but I hadn't gotten my hopes up. Glancing at her, I shook my head before responding, "No, we're just friends."

And we were.

But for some reason, the words didn't *feel* right.

I frowned internally over that, confused, only to jerk my head up when Matt spoke again, this time to Veronica specifically. "Then maybe you'll let me take you to lunch tomorrow."

Say *no*, I thought. A split second later, I mentally kicked myself. What the hell?

"Aren't you going to be mourning over Nikolette?" Her eyes darted my way, but slid away almost as quickly, leaving me to try and figure out what the hell my problem was.

"I think I already went through the mourning period. It started at our first dinner together and ended earlier today." Matt's dry sense of humor shown through in that comment, but there was still a faint hint of color in his cheeks as he watched Veronica closely. "Really, I'd like to take you out to lunch. To make up for how she acted."

"I already told you that's not your responsi—"

"And maybe I want to spend some more time with you."

"Ah...well. Okay. That would be lovely." She glanced at me again.

I smiled, because what the hell else was I supposed to do?

This had been the plan, after all.

"SHE'S RATHER LOVELY."

The soft, serene sound of my grandmother's voice cut into my reverie—and the overly intense way I'd been watching Veronica. It had been a good hour since I'd made my excuses, claiming a need to get more pictures when I already had plenty.

"Hey, Grandma," I said, managing an easy smile because the love that always shone in her eyes made it hard *not* to smile. Nodding to the bucket of beer one of the waiters had delivered to this small table in the far corner of the VIP section, I asked, "Can I buy you a drink?"

In response, she sat down and lifted an eyebrow.

I grinned. Alice Hartwell could give the queen lessons on elegance and grace, even as she enjoyed a cold bottle from one of Boston's best craft breweries.

Passing a beer to her after I'd opened it, I started fidgeting with my

camera, leery of the look in her eyes.

For good reason too.

“As I was saying,” Alice said, her gaze moving back toward the table where Matt and Veronica sat. “She’s lovely. Smart too. Quite devoted to her job.”

“You talked to her much?”

“Of course.” She sniffed and smoothed a hand down her sleeve. “After one of the guests was so rude to her, how could I not?” She watched me through her lashes for several long moments before adding, “Nikolette is one of those people who can be easily handled, if you know the right buttons.”

Uncomfortable now, I shifted on the seat. “If I’d had any idea she would act like that, I—”

“You probably would have stepped in, so the drink hit *you* in the chest, but you still would have reacted as you did. You were determined to keep Matt from making a mistake.”

Knowledge gleamed in her eyes, but I didn’t take the bait. “They were just dating, Grandma. Matt wised up, the way I knew he would.”

“Hmmm.” She took another sip from the bottle in front of her, still watchful. “I might be getting old, my dear, but I’m not stupid. And Clinton Ives can’t seem to keep his mouth shut when it comes to things he thought might help him swim more easily in the waters of Boston high society.”

Tightening my grip on the beer, I said nothing.

“You boys have always been so loyal to each other,” she said with a long sigh. “And to the family. I approve, but at the same time, it shouldn’t handicap any of you. And it shouldn’t keep any of you from finding your own happiness.”

“Well, now that Matt’s not chasing after a piranha...?” I shrugged and met her gaze once more.

“I’m not talking about Matt at the moment.”

My heart jerked, and I thought about the weird way it had tugged at me when Matt asked Veronica out for lunch. *Stop it, Keith.* “Well, then you’ll have to help me out, Gran. I’m not following. After all, I wasn’t the one trying to make myself miserable all because of loyalty.”

Across from me, Alice Hartwell watched me with incisive, intelligent blue eyes. “Are you sure? Because I look at you and there are flickers of uncertainty in your eyes.” She brushed a finger down the strap of my camera and murmured, “If I were to look at these pictures, would I see something

else? Your heart on your sleeve, perhaps?”

“Gran...” Blood rushed up to heat my cheeks. She’d always told me that I communicated easier than photography than through words, and now I found myself wondering just what *I* would see if I looked at the pictures I’d taken of Veronica.

Just Veronica. Not Matt.

“You’d see *them*,” I said, because I needed to hear it. “Two people who look like they’re perfect for each other. I mean, just look.”

She did look, but not at my brother and the woman who kept invading my thoughts.

She looked at me.

“Do you know I was engaged before your grandfather and I found each other?”

The beer I’d been about to drain hung forgotten from my hand. “What?”

She laughed softly. “You sound so surprised.”

“*I am!*” Putting the bottle down, I gaped at her. “You and Grandpa, you’re like...”

“Perfect for each other?” she suggested. “Can you see Matt and your Veronica together in sixty years, like your grandfather and I?”

“N—” I swallowed the *no* before it could escape.

She leaned closer. “My father and mother wanted me to marry a man who apparently *looked* like he’d be perfect for me. And he wasn’t, Keith. He very much wasn’t. Granted, it was for far different reasons, but I wouldn’t have been happy with that man. I found love when I wasn’t looking for it, with a man who wasn’t the one who’d been manipulated into my life.”

“Some people need a little manipulation,” I said with a scowl. “Hell, if I’d just sat there, Matt would still be pretending he was okay with the mess between him and Nikolette!”

“Matt never pretended he was *okay* with it. Now, perhaps he was stubborn enough to go along with it, knowing he’d be miserable...or maybe he would have figured it out on his own. Who knows?” She lifted an elegantly plucked brow, her mouth curved in a smile. “But he was never *okay* with it.”

I started to respond, then stopped because I had absolutely no idea what I could say in rebuttal. She wasn’t *wrong*. Matt had known he was making a big-ass mistake, and he would have carried on, dealt with it, soldiered through just because it would benefit the family in some way or the other.

But he didn't need to make himself miserable. We'd find another way.

"It's better like this," I said, snagging my beer and draining it before I met my grandmother's gaze. "I know it is."

SEVENTEEN

VERONICA

I'D BEEN TORN BETWEEN RELIEF AND CONFUSED DREAD WHEN MATT TEXTED me a couple of hours before he planned to come to the house, letting me know where he was planning to take me.

It saved me the trouble of throwing every possible combination of clothing on the bed as I tried to decide just *what* a middle-class schoolteacher should wear on a lunch date with some rich guy who hailed from Boston's elite.

After doing a hurried Google, I saw that the restaurant was a nice, elegant seafood bistro along Boston's waterfront, but not so elegant that it was *white tablecloth* fancy. Checking a few social media sites devoted to restaurants and the foodie type, I studied my clothes for a quick minute, then pulled out a lightweight, black dress dotted with large white daisies and small yellow polka-dots. It was sleeveless, with a fitted bodice that flared out into a fuller skirt. With its cute collar that gave way to a sweetheart neckline and bright yellow buttons that echoed the polka dots, it was fun and summery and could work for anything from church to brunch to a wedding, depending on the accessories.

Knowing the waterfront as I did, I skipped the heels and went with a pair of black ballet flats. With the clothes on the bed, I dealt with my hair and brushed on a light application of makeup, humming absently.

It wasn't until I was buttoning up the final two, cheerful yellow circles that I glanced up to see how I looked.

And the damndest thought crossed my mind.

Keith would like the dress.

"It doesn't matter," I muttered, shaking my head. He'd only wanted to set

me up with his brother. And his brother was wonderful.

What I *needed* to think about was how *Matt* would like my appearance.

“YOU LOOK FANTASTIC.”

I’d ask him to text me when he was about ten minutes away so I could slip out of the house and avoid the chaos that came with the Cheshire clan, and Matt had done just that. I’d worried he might ask about it, but when he didn’t, I was more than a little relieved.

The last thing I wanted to deal with before we went out for lunch was introducing him to the ragtag clan of siblings and my parents, who clearly *weren’t* young enough to be my parents. Too often, that came with questions I didn’t want to answer on a first date.

It wasn’t that I was ashamed—I wasn’t. Not of *any* of them.

But anybody with eyes could see we were a few steps beyond the average motley crew. From my adoptive parents, who were actually my maternal grandparents, in their sixties and at the point to where they should be able to think about retiring and settling down, to my youngest sibling, sweet, shy Austin who had just turned ten and was happiest when he was either reading comic books or coming up with comic-style stories in his head before trying to capture them on a digital storyboard, thanks to the refurbished iPad our parents had given him this past Christmas.

It was a complicated explanation, should one choose to ask that seemingly innocent question...*tell me about your family.*

It also wasn’t a question I’d even consider tackling on a first date.

But Matt asked no questions about why I was waiting at the curb. He parked and climbed out, moving around the car to greet me with a warm smile. Before he could launch into any sort of conversation, I nodded at the car. “Shall we go?”

Behind me, one of my brothers called out.

Matt hesitated.

“Don’t,” I advised him. “Remember how I told you that I’ve got brothers of my own? That should tell you everything.”

He chuckled and opened the door. “We’ll just head out then.”

The thirty-minute drive through Sunday afternoon traffic passed easily,

Matt or I occasionally breaking the silence to talk, but comfortable enough during the quiet.

It was easy, being with him, talking to him.

I couldn't remember the last time I'd *had* a date who was easy to be with or talk to. But, if I was honest, the last date I actually remembered had been of the *not-easy* variety. More than a year ago, after smacking away a man's hands and feeling like I'd been grappling with an octopus, I'd called a moratorium on dating. I hadn't even missed the occasional evening out, a movie, drinks.

But I was having fun with Matt.

Over a plate of steaming mussels drenched in garlic and broth, I sipped my wine and asked, "Any regrets about Nikolette?"

"More than a few." A grin crooked his lips. "And those regrets start with meeting her, asking her out, then asking her out again. As to telling her it was over? No. That was probably the smartest thing I'd done in a while."

I thought about what Keith had said. Actually, I couldn't quit *thinking* about him.

"Can I be honest?"

The question caught me off guard. Meeting Matt's dark blue eyes, I said, "I'd much rather you be honest than lie."

He didn't say anything for several long seconds, then a warm smile curved his lips. "I think I like spending time with you, Veronica. You say exactly what you mean."

"It's easier that way." Popping the succulent piece of meat from the shell of the mussel, I closed my eyes and chewed, waiting for him to go on.

"I assume you know about the foundation my family runs...knowing Keith and all?"

I'd just reached for my wine but lowered my hand. "Yes. I've lived in Boston all my life. It would be hard not to know about the Hartwells or the foundation."

A strange look crossed his face, and I waited for another question.

It didn't come.

"It's in trouble." His voice was flat, and I could tell how much the admission hurt him, but he went on, a line creasing his forehead. "A couple of years of bad book-keeping, a couple of rough years when it came to donations, and bad returns on the investments we rely to keep the place going...and, well. Like I said, the foundation is in trouble."

“I’m so sorry.”

He took a drink of his water. “I’ve been trying to fix it for the past few years and nothing was working. Then a local business with the golden touch reached out to me. Guess the word got around. He offered a regular influx of money via donations and promised to help boost the idea of donating to a more local foundation to his friends, rather than a large, national one. He just wanted something in return.”

A dull flush spread over his cheeks, and he lapsed into silence for so long, I started to wonder if he planned to continue. That silence grew heavy, weighted and awkward, and I bit my lip, wondering if I should tell him he didn’t have to continue, that I already knew.

But Matt blew out a breath and started to speak once more. “His daughter was ready to get married. Nikolette wasn’t really looking to fall in love, she just wanted a decent-looking guy from...the *right kind of people*.” Cynical amusement twisted his lips as he glanced at me. “One thing I can say without a doubt, the Hartwells from Boston are *the right kind of people*. Ives suggested we come to an arrangement. I marry her. He helps me save the foundation. It seemed like the perfect solution.”

“Except Nikolette is a total train wreck,” I said when he lapsed into silence again.

“That’s an understatement. Train wrecks, after all, don’t set out to be disasters that attack at will.”

“True.” Feeling for him, I reached over and touched his hand again, letting it linger this time. “You don’t need to say anything else. Keith...well, he told me some of this.”

Matt’s eyes widened, but then he smiled ruefully and shook his head. “Of course he did. The annoying son of a bitch.” He winced. “I didn’t mean... well, you see—”

“Matt.” Leaning forward, I covered his hand more fully with mine. “I’ve told you I have brothers and sisters. I know how easy it is to love your siblings and still want to wring their necks.”

He turned his hand over and twined our fingers together, throwing me off balance. “So, you’re not thrown off by me being mercenary enough to marry for money?”

“But you weren’t.” With a faint smile, I said, “I mean, you’re not with Nikolette anymore, are you?”

His cheeks colored again, and I couldn’t help but find him slightly

adorable. “No. It was getting harder to put up with her anyway, but the way she treated people, the way Keith said she acted toward you...and then yesterday.” He shook his head. “I spent a lot of the day thinking yesterday, and I came to realize that she would have come between my family, and as important as the foundation is...”

“Family means more.”

“Yes.” He stroked his thumb over the back of my hand, his eyes holding mine.

WE WENT for a walk along the river, talking a little about everything, including charitable areas the foundation had focused on and how I’d ended up going into teaching.

By the time we circled back around and made our way to the car, more than four hours had passed since he’d picked me up. We made the drive back to the house where I lived with my family in easy silence.

“I’d like to do this again,” he said softly as he pulled into an empty space along the curb near my house.

“I’d like that.” I didn’t let myself think about anything else, including the lingering disappointment I’d continued to feel as I thought about Keith’s apparent lack of interest in me.

“Good.” He got out of the car before I could say anything else and circled around to open the door. A gleam appeared in his eyes at the sound of children at play echoed down the street. “I think I know why you wanted me to text you when I got here. Your siblings are younger, right?”

“All six of them,” I said with a heavy sigh, accepting the hand he offered. His eyes widened. “Did you say *six*?”

“Yeah.” I’d deliberately avoided letting conversation steer too deeply earlier, but if we were going to have a second date, he might as well get some clue about my family. “Three of them are out of the house now. One’s at college, one joined the military, and my sister is a dancer up in New York.”

Interest gleamed in his eyes. “Ballet?”

“Well, she *has* taken ballet, but she’s in an off-Broadway production right now. She prefers that sort of venue rather than just one particular style of dancing. And she’s good at it too.”

“You’re proud of her.”

The warmth in his voice made me smile. “Yes. I am. She’s worked so hard for this. I give her a couple of years, and she’ll be on Broadway production. She’s taking acting and voice lessons too. She’s already pretty good, but she won’t settle for *good*. She wants to be the best. Of course, I was always the same.”

“A perfectionist?” He slanted a look at me, a teasing grin flirting on his lips. “I’m not seeing that.”

“I hide it well.” I glanced down the street toward my house, biting my lip. “Don’t take this personally, but I’d rather not take you down there to meet anybody when the chaos is going on so loudly.”

“I’m hurt.” He laid a hand over his heart, fingers spread wide.

“No, you’re not.”

He moved closer, eliminating almost all the distance between us. “I am... but I think I could get over the trauma if I could kiss you.”

I hadn’t expected him to be so charming.

“Really?” Tipping my head back, I eyed his mouth before letting my gaze stroke up to meet his. “Maybe we can do something about that.”

He was still smiling when his mouth came down on mine.

His lips were firm and confident, and a nice buzz of heat was going when he lifted his head a few seconds later.

That was it, though. A nice buzz.

Mentally kicking myself, I kept smiling at him as he stroked a finger down my cheek. “So...dinner?”

“Yes.”

He named a day and time, and I nodded, curling one hand into a fist as he withdrew, trying to pin down just why I felt so...disappointed.

I absolutely refused to let myself think about his brother.

I mean, he’d been pretty obvious, right?

Besides, it was better this way. As Matt drove away, I told myself that several times over, and maybe I even almost believed it.

A nice buzz meant there was an attraction, but it wasn’t anything like the crazy ups-and-downs of my birth mother’s love life. She fell in love almost as often as I bought a new purse...and fell out of love *hard*. Up until a few years back, the fall had often come with a new baby she’d end up bringing back here to Boston where she’d lavish love and attention on all of us. For a while.

After Austin, though, she'd informed us she'd had her tubes tied, and she was *done trying to be a mother*.

We hadn't seen her since.

If that crazy, hard fall meant I'd lose my head like she had...

No. It was better to go for a nice, stable relationship. Having a bit of heat between me and the guy would just be a bonus.

Right?

EIGHTEEN

KEITH

I COULDN'T FOCUS.

I'd been trying all day and had wasted more than a few hours attempting to edit some of the shots I'd taken at the picnic before realizing my head wasn't where it needed to be for me to work.

Now, with my feet kicked up on the railing of the small balcony in the back of the penthouse, I sipped on a beer and flipped through one of my favorite books. I'd read it often enough that I practically knew it by heart, so it wasn't a big struggle to keep up with what was going on if I zoned out from time to time. Or every other page.

After what felt like hours, though, I finally somewhat fell into the story, and when my phone rang, I looked up to see that the sun had fallen behind a line of trees.

Matt's picture flashed across my screen as the phone rang again.

"Hey, Matt," I said, biting back the urge to ask how things had gone with Veronica.

I'd been thinking about *that* all day, part of the reason I hadn't been able to concentrate.

"Hey. Ah...listen." Tension in his voice, Matt said, "I've been thinking about what you were saying about Nikolette..."

I braced myself. Man, if he started talking like he was going to try and smooth things over—

"You were right. I was starting to see that, and if I'd been dumb enough to go through with the wedding, she would have caused problems between me and the rest of the family."

"Fuck that," I said, putting the book down and reaching for my beer only

to remember I'd finished it. Rising, I went to get another, pausing to toss the bottle in the recycling bin. After grabbing a fresh one, I headed back out to the balcony and leaned a hip against it, staring down into the small but beautiful garden down in the yard. "You can't get rid of us that easily. Now, Shawn, Jamie, and I might have kidnapped your ice queen and sold her to some Russian crime boss who wanted a pretty showpiece for a wife...she'd probably love that anyway. But you're not getting rid of us."

"Sold her to a Russian crime boss?"

"All right, I wouldn't have let the other two talk me into it, but I'd be tempted." At his low chuckle, I smiled. He already seemed a little less stressed. Matt hadn't done much laughing the past few months. Longer.

"You're a mess, Keith." Matt blew out a sigh. "Listen, I need to ask you something. Veronica...did you...?"

As he hesitated, sweat beaded at the nape of my neck just thinking about him and Veronica. I'd been thinking about the two of them all day. And not entirely in a smug, *see, I knew it would work* sort of way either.

Temper slicing through me, I clenched my jaw to keep from snapping at my brother.

"I was wondering if you brought her to the picnic so we'd meet," Matt finally said.

Tightening my hand on the beer, I said, "Yes."

I didn't like the fact that it felt somehow false now, telling Matt the reasons behind inviting Veronica to the picnic. It had worked, and that needed to be enough.

"Well, thanks..." Matt said, sounding sort of puzzled. "We had lunch earlier."

"Yeah, I remember you asking her out." I drained half the beer. "How did it go?"

"Really good, actually. We're going out again."

"Moving fast." I pressed the cold bottle to my forehead. "Guess you two hit it off. Of course, after an ice queen like Nikolette, a flesh and blood woman is exactly what you need. Veronica seemed to fit the bill. You two hit the sheets already?"

I had no idea where that came from, but as I tightened my hand on the bottle of beer, I realized I wanted a fucking answer. Blood rushed up my neck, heating my skin uncomfortably while my mind hazed over with the thought of another guy kissing Veronica. Even my brother—

Dumb ass, you wanted this. You made it happen.

“No, you asshole,” Matt said, annoyed. “I usually don’t jump into bed with somebody on a first date, even if I am that interested. We kissed. Nothing else.”

“Yeah, you tend to walk the straight and narrow.” Oddly enough, even though I was glad he hadn’t done anything more, even the thought of him kissing Veronica still made me see red. “Listen, I was in the middle of something. Glad things went well with you and Veronica.”

I ended the call and dumped the phone on the seat before turning to brace my hands on the railing, squeezing, squeezing...squeezing.

“Stop it,” I told myself.

I’d been told I had the will of a mule and could accomplish anything if I put my mind to it.

But damn it, I couldn’t stop thinking about my brother, lowering his head to kiss Veronica’s wide, sexy mouth.

“Find a way,” I said with a groan. My cock was rigid and aching because, while trying to wash away the image of my brother kissing the woman I suddenly wanted like hell, I’d imagined *myself* being the one who had her wrapped in his arms.

I wanted more than just that quicksilver fantasy. I wanted to hold her, touch her, taste her in reality.

“Get over it.”

But while I ached to do something about my newly realized problem, I wouldn’t be talking to Veronica. There were other ways to fix this problem. Not giving myself a chance to change my mind, I grabbed my phone and went through my contacts, hunting up a familiar number.

As the phone rang, I closed my eyes, not sure if I hoped she’d answer or not.

NINETEEN

VERONICA

“HEY.” IT WAS A LITTLE HARDER TO SMILE AT KEITH THAN I WOULD HAVE thought when he let me into the studio, although I tried to pretend it was simply from the past night’s sleeplessness.

Fragments of dreams had haunted me off and on until I’d finally gotten up and raided the stash of melatonin Mom kept on hand for my sister, Rosalie. Her brain, according to both her and the counselor who worked with her after she’d been diagnosed as having autism, just didn’t know how to shut down, and sometimes, the only way my youngest sister ever slept was with the help of the natural hormone supplement.

An hour after taking the pill, I’d finally drifted off, but I’d woken feeling logy, my brain fogged.

Keith gave me a critical look, mouth twisting in a scowl that darkened his features and made me aware of the shadows under his eyes. “You didn’t sleep.”

The curt tone caught me off guard after how easy going and friendly he’d been before. But he didn’t look any more rested than I felt. Besides, it was early, just a little after seven. Maybe he wasn’t a morning person.

“You don’t look like you slept all that great either.”

“Yeah, but there’s a difference. I’m not the one being paid to look pretty in front of the camera.” He looked me up and down and shook his head. “Head into the dressing area. I’ll grab the makeup kit, and we’ll see what we can do.”

“I can—”

“You’re not used to putting on makeup for this sort of work. It was one thing when we were doing beach shots, but the clothes you’re modeling today

call for a more intense appearance. I'll show you how to do it, and you can practice on your own time."

He spoke the last few words over his shoulder, and I was left to stare after him, carrying the small tote that had my hairbrush, some hairpins and clips, and other necessities in case we needed to scoop my hair up, as well as my own makeup.

Blowing out a sigh, I did as he instructed, taking a sip from the iced vanilla mocha with two extra shots of espresso I'd picked up on my way over. I'd also, very carefully, wedged a large black coffee for him and a deli bag with two flaky croissants inside the tote, used to juggling burdens of all shapes and sizes, thanks to both catering and teaching.

Maybe the coffee and sugar would help cheer him up.

Inside the dressing room, I put the flat-bottomed tote on a table tucked off to the side and pulled out his coffee, then the white bag with the croissants. I'd just pulled them out when he entered the room and came to a stop a few feet away.

"I picked you up some coffee too," I said, somehow finding a smile despite the hard set to his mouth.

The line softened a fraction, crooking up at the corner as he stepped close enough to take it. "Thanks."

"And this." Putting the croissant on a napkin, I offered it as well.

Before accepting, he put down a makeup kit that was bigger than some of the tackle boxes I'd seen. Dad loved fishing, and I'd been on endless trips to sporting goods stores with him.

"An entire chorus line could get by with that kit," I said lightly as I picked up my own croissant and picked off the corner, popping it into my mouth as he ate his, devouring the flaky pastry in four bites.

I'd only managed to take a second by the time he was done but put mine back into the bag for later.

"Go ahead and finish it," he said.

"My mom nagged me into eating an egg sandwich on the way out the door, so I'm fine. I mostly stopped for the caffeine and was seduced by the sight of the croissants. It will keep."

His lids drooped, and in that instant, the air in the room seemed tighter, hotter.

But then he looked away, and I wondered if it was just me. Had to be, right? Nervous now, and uncertain, I turned back to the tote and grabbed my

brush, scraping my hair back into a quick ponytail so it would be out of my face. When I was done, I tossed the brush back into the tote and turned.

“Okay, now...” My breath slammed up into my throat as our eyes met.

Keith turned away. “Go wash your face for me,” he said, sounding distracted. “It will be easier to start over again, I think. You did a decent job covering the shadows, but it will still show under the lights unless we use the right kind of makeup and base.”

Feeling more than a little off-balance by what I thought I’d seen, but apparently hadn’t, I just nodded, not thinking about the fact that he wasn’t looking at me until I’d already walked past him and out into the hall. Then, I decided to just keep walking, because now my face was flushed, and I didn’t want him to wonder why.

For a second there, just a second, I’d thought I’d glimpsed an echo of...*something*. I couldn’t quite explain it, but it had left my heart racing while my lungs attempted to squeeze all the air from my body.

Five minutes later, somewhat more settled after dousing my face with icy water from the tap, I sat down in the adjustable seat in front of the big, lighted mirror. Keith had been busy putting tubes, pots, and palettes out on some sort of colorful liner that covered the workstation. “It looks like you have people in here doing this on a regular basis with this set-up.”

“I don’t use this room too much, but it’s useful,” he said, turning to look at me. Dark brown hair tumbled into blue-green eyes as he studied me closely.

Curling my hands into fists, I shoved them under my thighs to keep from giving in to the urge to reach up and brush that silken hair back from his face. “I feel like a bug under a microscope.”

“You’ll get used to it.” The words were brusque. He reached out and touched his fingers to my chin, and in contrast to his actions, his words, it was a soft touch that did insane things to my heartrate, which was already misfiring and beating like the wings of a trapped butterfly. “You’ve got freckles. I hadn’t noticed.”

“I cover them,” I said as his gaze slid away from the coppery gold specks that dotted my nose and the sweep of my cheeks.

“Don’t see why. They suit you.” His thumb stroked over my cheek.

Squeezing my fists tighter now, so tight my nails sank into my skin, I stared straight ahead at the wall. “I used the cleanser and moisturizer that was in the restroom. Hope that’s okay. My skin’s sensitive, and if I don’t use

something..." I was rambling.

Keith just nodded as I kept on talking.

"I got the freckles from my mom. She gave them to all of us, except Austin and Carson. They escaped the freckles." I stopped to breathe, feeling a little lightheaded. Keith turned away, and I heard bottles clinking, plastic rattling. "I'm talking your ear off."

"You're fine. How many brothers and sisters do you have?"

"A lot." I named them, and the nerves had already lessened by the time he turned back to me. "I think I already told you that my sister Britney is in New York."

"Broadway." He nodded. "Close your eyes."

I did. "I'll be quiet now."

"You're fine. I'll tell you when you need to be still. You're the oldest?"

"Yes." I really *should* be quiet. It couldn't be easy to put makeup on somebody who was talking non-stop. But as the silence stretched out, that odd, uneasy tension returned. So did my nerves. "My brother Andrew is in college. He's a brainiac, got into Berkley on a full academic scholarship, and he's majoring in political science for some crazy reason. And Carson..." I hesitated, thinking about the grinning kid who'd hugged all of us so tight when we dropped him off at the airport, dressed in his uniform and looking like he was out on some new adventure.

He'd been excited.

And I'd been sick inside with worry. I still was, when I let myself think about it.

"What about Carson?" Keith asked, voice softer than I'd heard all day. Before I could answer, he spoke again, cupping my chin and lifting my face to his as he did so. "Wait a minute...you mentioned him during the drive to the cape. He's in the military, right? Air Force?"

"Yes. He's in intelligence. A translator, as far as I know, although it could be something totally different, and he wouldn't be able to tell us." Forcing a shaky smile, I shrugged. "Intelligence snapped him up fast after they discovered how good he was with languages. He taught himself to speak Italian, French, Spanish, and German all before he was a sophomore in high school. He learned Spanish just by watching TV and playing with a couple of kids who used to live down the street. He kind of fell in love with languages then. Since he joined up, they've been teaching him more, although I don't know all of them. I do know he's learned Arabic, Armenian and Russian. His

brain is like a sponge. It soaks up everything.”

“Where is he?” Keith asked, still holding my chin so I couldn’t look away.

“He flew out of the country early in the month on his first assignment. I don’t know exactly where, but he told us he’d be somewhere near the Middle East.”

“And you’re afraid for him.”

I didn’t bother answering.

“If he’s as smart as I’d think he has to be, learning all those languages, then I imagine he’s smart enough to stay out of trouble, Veronica. Have some faith...and know he wouldn’t want you worrying like this, not about a decision he made.”

His thumb swept across my cheek in a gentle caress.

Without realizing what I was going to do, I slid one of my hands free and started to reach for him.

Before I could, he turned away. When he spoke again, his voice was that same flat tone it had been. “You’re modeling formal wear today. The client wants the images mostly monochrome, although some color will be added. We’re going with dramatic shadows on the eyes, crimson for the lips. Now... watch, because if we need to do reshoots, I want you able to do this yourself if you can.”

And just like that, that fragile intimacy was gone.

THE INTIMACY MIGHT HAVE DISAPPEARED, but the odd, uncomfortable tension made another appearance, and this time, it didn’t seem to be in any hurry to fade. Two hours into the shoot, I was switching into the third dress, having just spent ten minutes twisting and coaxing my hair into a topknot that was supposed to look like it would *tumble down in a heartbeat*.

I wasn’t a fricking hairstylist. If his client wanted the images *that* specific, why wasn’t there somebody on hand to *help*?

“If he grumbles at me one more time, I’ll ask him that very thing,” I muttered as I stabbed a few more pins into my hair.

A quick rap on the door had me closing my eyes and taking a breath before I answered. “Yes?”

“The dress for the next one is hanging on the door.” Keith’s voice was muffled through the wood. “It’s strapless. The right undergarments came with the gown, and they should fit fine.”

My stomach fluttered at the thought of him looking or handling anything I’d wear so intimately, although, for him, it was clearly just a job. Earlier, we’d had to take a break when his agent came by the studio, carrying a huge leather portfolio and going on about a lingerie designer who was adamant that Keith be the photographer there to represent the line personally.

Jackie Wheaton, the agent, had been somewhat bemused to discover him in the middle of a session, but she hadn’t said anything. Or if she had, I amended, she waited until I stepped out to grab some water and rest my feet. These icepick heels some women wore...I didn’t know how they did it.

Wrapped in a thin robe that barely covered me, I hurried to the door and listened for any sign he was still nearby. Even if Keith *was* used to seeing women in next to nothing, *I* wasn’t used to being *seen* in next to nothing. Not hearing anything, I grabbed the dress from the hook, along with the attached garment bag, and shut myself back inside the safety of the room.

I held up the dress, and my breath caught in my throat at the sight of it.

“Wow.” The word was barely a breath.

My fingers shook as I touched it, the silk shimmering in the too-bright lights. The color, technically, could be called brown, but that didn’t describe the lush, deep shade of the garment in my hands. My hair, technically, could be called brown, but there were times the sun hit it that made hidden shades of red come to life.

This dress had those same shades of red, but they weren’t hidden. It was more like an undertone, and depending on how the light hit the material, the red became that much deeper.

Although I’d never been able to afford much in the way of new clothes growing up, I had been pretty good at finding the right cut and fit at consignment shops, and I’d become enough of a regular at one that the owner had helped me figure out the right colors for my complexion and hair, and I knew immediately that this shade would complement both.

Sighing, I held the dress up for a better inspection and almost swooned. It had a sweetheart neckline but not one that cut so low that I’d feel exposed, and the bodice looked like it would drape rather than cling while the ruching at the sides and down the hips would accentuate my curves while concealing the swell of my belly.

Greedy want twisted inside me, but I told myself to be happy with the fact that I could even wear something so lovely.

I almost succeeded.

Then I opened the attached garment bag, expecting to find a strapless bra, maybe some of those dreadful Spanx, although I'd worn mine, expecting that I'd need everything smoothed out.

My jaw dropped. Again.

There were two pieces in the bag...no, two pieces plus a pair of stockings still wrapped in the package. Stockings. As in the kind that went with garters. And...oh, hell.

The first piece was, in fact, a bra, but it was unlike any I'd ever seen outside of those luxury websites. It was a longline style, almost more of a corset than bra, and so beautifully sexy, I couldn't imagine *touching* it, much less putting it on. It was in the same rich, decadent shade as the dress.

The second piece...well, at first glance, it almost looked like a lace mini-skirt, but on closer inspection, I saw that the 'skirt' part covered what looked like boyshort-styled panties. The lace was delicate, too fine to catch or snag on anything and the garment was long enough to help smooth the thigh and hip areas, all without looking clunky or ugly like so many shapewear garments did.

Best of all...the garter hooks, skirt, and shorts were all attached. Once I had everything in place, I wouldn't have to worry about the skirt/short thing riding up.

"Veronica?"

The knock at the door made me jump.

"I'll be out in a few minutes," I called, feeling guilty. "My...my hair wasn't cooperating."

I told myself the little white lie would sound better than the truth, which was I was too busy drooling over all these sexy underthings.

And even as I thought it, I started to wonder if Keith would think—

"*Stop it,*" I told myself in a hushed whisper as I shrugged out of the robe and reached for the bra.

He wasn't even interested in me like that. He'd wanted me for his brother, that was all. Hell, the way it seemed now? He didn't even want to be friends.

I KEPT TELLING myself that as I slipped out of the dressing room.

Still, my heart hammered as I headed into the main part of the studio. He'd closed the blinds on the windows, adjusting the lights and changing out the backdrop while I was getting dressed.

I heard him grunt and swear and rounded the corner in time to see him wrestle a piece of furniture into place.

I hesitated, wanting to help, but while the garments I wore under the dress weren't all that restrictive, I wasn't really in the right clothing for *pushing* and *pulling* and *bending*.

He bent over the one-armed lounge—a *divan*, I told myself. *It's a divan*. With a low, muttered grunt, he shoved, his shirt stretching tight over his shoulders, the faded blue cotton riding up just a little to reveal the tanned, toned muscles of his lower back. And his butt...I curled my fingers into my fists as the urge to stroke my hand down that long back, then lower swept over me.

"Fuck," he muttered a few seconds later, breathing hard.

"I'd offer to help, but I think I'm overdressed," I said hesitantly.

He stiffened, then slowly, turned to look at me.

I waited for some sign that I looked...well, *amazing*, because, damn it, I did. I'd been stunned when I looked in the mirror and saw myself after I managed to work the zipper most of the way up. The dress fit exactly as I'd thought, but I looked even better than I would have imagined. I actually looked *beautiful*, beautiful like my mother had been when she was younger, like my sister Britney.

Keith cocked his head and ran his eyes over me.

Then he turned away. "Come on. We're already running over the time I'd scheduled for this."

I deflated.

For a few seconds, I couldn't even move. He shot a look at me, clearly impatient, and I pasted a brittle smile on my face.

Fine. So, we were all just business. Fine.

I crossed the floor, taking slow, measured steps, which was all I could do, thanks to the icpick heels and the fit of the shaper-skirt. Before moving in front of the camera, I stopped close to him. "I couldn't zip up all the way. Do you mind?"

Without looking at me, he put the camera down and circled me to stand at my back. The brush of his fingers made me shiver.

“You cold?” he asked brusquely.

“No.” Clearing my throat, I said, “Just a little ticklish. I’m fine.”

It wasn’t exactly a lie. But it wasn’t really the truth either. But he didn’t need to know that, did he?

“Good. This next set will probably take about an hour. Go over to the divan for now.”

SIX HOURS LATER, both the lovely dress I’d worn for the last set and the lingerie were stowed away in my bedroom. Keith had informed me as I was leaving to dress that they were mine as a bonus, one of a kind pieces that had been selected to go with the jewelry I’d been modeling. Lovely diamond collars, bracelets, rings, all of them set with the typical icy gemstone, but other colored stones as well, including chocolate diamonds, as Keith had described them to me.

As soon as I’d gotten home, I’d climbed into the shower, the water chilly, although I told myself it was because of my irritable temper and the heatwave that had dropped down on the Boston area as well as the rest of the eastern seaboard. The heat. My irritability due to lack of sleep.

It had nothing to do with a...different sort of irritation, the kind that came from the brush of rough fingertips over my skin as he fastened a diamond collar around my throat, or unclasped it, saying it was quicker to do it that way because he could see the tricky closures.

And really, what else could it be?

He’d barely spoken to me.

He’d set me up with his brother.

A brother who was picking me up for dinner in just under thirty minutes, I reminded myself.

I did *not* need to be thinking about Keith when I was about to go out to one of the most romantic restaurants in Boston with another man—*his brother*.

In a fit of self-pitying indignation, I looked at the bra I’d picked out to wear, then shot a look at the closet where I’d stashed the sexy little underthings I’d worn for the photoshoot.

I should wear them.

It wasn't like Keith had any interest in seeing me in them. Why shouldn't I wear them? I had no intention of sleeping with Matt tonight—or any time soon, but just *wearing* that bra and the sexy little skirt/shorts and garter set made me feel so sensual.

“All the more reason not to wear them,” I admitted with a sigh. Yeah, that kiss I'd shared with Matt had been...nice. Very nice. But I wasn't entirely convinced *nice* was what I should feel with the right guy, if such a thing existed.

So, I continued on with the little black dress with the nipped-in waist and full skirt, and heaven help me, the off-brand version of Spanx-like pantyhose, making sure to smooth down everything that needed smoothing.

As I did so, I tried not to think about the warm male light I must have imagined in Keith's eyes the day of the Cape Cod photoshoot when I'd been stressing out about how I'd looked in the swimsuit.

“Stop worrying, Veronica...you look ripe. Biteable. Like a round, delicious peach.”

It had seemed like he'd meant it, and maybe in a professional sense, he had.

It was my own damn fault for reading more into it.

“YOU'RE QUIET TONIGHT.”

We'd finished dessert a few minutes earlier, leaving the restaurant to walk along the harbor.

My belly and taste buds were in a fit of sheer sensory overload. I'd let Matt order for me, a new experience as far as dates went, and he'd selected the dulce de leche mousse.

After the first bite, I'd told him I'd died and gone to heaven.

“I think I'm in a food coma,” I told him, keeping my voice light.

He laughed softly. “Now I'm not sure if I did my job well...or *too well*.”

“Hmm.” Canting my head to the side, I studied him. “That depends. If you're weighing the mousse into the decision, then you did perfectly. You can't ever go wrong, or *too well* if that's in the equation.”

“Good to know.” He took my hand and twined our fingers, squeezing lightly before stroking his thumb along my skin.

What is wrong with me...

Here I was, walking along the waterfront with one of the most eligible guys in the state. He was funny, sweet, and absolutely gorgeous. And I couldn't keep my thoughts off the brooding, sullen photographer from earlier...and the way it had felt when his fingertips brushed across my face, my back.

I'm crazy, I told myself. It was the only logical answer.

"I THINK it's safe to walk you to the door," Matt said in a faux whisper, a smile teasing his lips. "It's late enough that your brothers and sisters are probably asleep."

It was after ten, and my younger siblings would have been chased into bed by now. Tipping my face up to his, I caught a look of the slow, sinful smile on his lips, and although I definitely appreciated the beauty of him, I had yet to feel that...*rush*.

I smiled back, though, determined to enjoy the night. There was no reason *not* to, was there?

"The little ones are, yes. But my parents?" I lifted a brow at him. "No, and you've yet to meet my parents...or Britney. She's the dangerous one. But she's a few hundred miles away so you only have to worry about Mom and Dad."

"I'm tough. I can handle it."

The smile he gave me was so charming, I couldn't help but laugh. "You have a little more time yet. They don't start the inquisition until the fourth or fifth date."

"Is that so?" He tucked my hand into the crook of his arm as we started up the sidewalk toward the house. "I would have thought they'd be fussing at you to bring all your dates in from the very first."

I shot him a rueful look. "That's assuming I'd go for it. We have a rather...unique family. Six siblings would have been enough to terrify almost anybody. Besides, most of the time, I barely get past a second date. I finally convinced them to hold off on the interrogation. If we don't make it past two dates, what's the point?"

We slowed at the gate, but before I could open the latch, Matt tugged me

to a stop, urging me to face him. A single line appeared between his brows as he studied me.

“Two dates?” Cocking a brow, he reached up to brush my hair back, fingers lingering on my jawline before gliding down to curve over my nape. “I’m finding that hard to believe. Unless you have some strange ritual that no mortal man can hold up to in order to progress to the third and fourth.”

Blood rushed to my face, and I was glad the streetlight was at my back, shadowing my face somewhat. “I don’t know if you’d call it a ritual...”

“Oh, so there *is* some sort of hurdle.” He stroked his thumb up, then down. “Do I have to find the golden fleece?”

“No.” Amused, I tipped my head back and smiled up at him. “After the guy in college died while trying, I gave up on mythological quests. You’re safe on that front.”

His gaze lowered.

My heart bumped once when I realized he was looking at my mouth.

“I think I want to kiss you again, Veronica,” he said. “Since you don’t require the golden fleece, would that be all right?”

I really didn’t know how to answer that. Usually, my dates just plowed on ahead. “Ah...okay.”

I almost licked my lips, but just as I went to do so, he lowered his head.

Then *he* was licking my lips, and I realized he’d been holding back on our last date.

This time, the heat that slid through me was a few steps *over* the ‘nice’ category, and I reached up, curling my hands into the lapels of his suit coat as I leaned closer.

The hand on the back of my nape tightened, and he angled my head more, deepening the contact.

He tasted...good. Like coffee and the dessert we’d shared.

A pleasant warmth rolled through me as he stroked a hand down my arm, then settled it on my waist.

Needing to breathe, I broke away. But when he sought my mouth a second time, I didn’t stop him. Instead, I curled my arms around his neck and rose onto my toes, closing the distance between us a bit more.

He stroked his hand lower, let it settle on my hip.

Then...he *tugged*.

I sucked in a breath as I felt the heated length of him against my belly, felt him throb. Clenching my hands into fists as an answering ache emanated

from between my thighs, I broke the kiss to gasp in a breath.

Matt wasn't deterred, skimming his lips along my jaw to nuzzle my ear.

I felt that pulsing sensation against my abdomen again, and this time, there was a warning.

Veronica...

I nudged at his shoulders.

He fell back instantly, stroking his hand up and down my side in gentle motions.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, pressing his lips to my temple. "You went to my head there."

Face heating, I pressed my brow to his chest and waited until I could breathe steadier before easing back.

"I guess I need to be upfront about something," I told him, meeting his eyes despite the embarrassment twisting through me.

"What is it?" Matt tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear.

"I'm..." *A virgin.* I managed not to just blurt it out, but only because I bit my tongue. "I'm *careful* about this sort of thing."

"I am too." His lips kicked up on one side.

"I doubt you're as careful as I am," I muttered, averting my gaze for a few seconds. I could feel him staring at me, curious. After taking a deep breath to brace myself, I looked at him again. "When I say *careful*, I mean it as in...I haven't yet found the right guy."

Several heartbeats passed as he continued to stare at me.

I saw exactly when he realized what I was talking about and his brows arched a fraction.

I waited for him to stiffen up and back away—or worse, get that *oh, a challenge* look in his eyes.

Neither happened.

Matt cupped my cheek, a familiar, pensive look in his eyes. "Why are you telling me?"

"Well...I guess that's *my golden fleece*," I said with a weak smile. "It's complicated, and I don't want to get into it...but you could say I have issues from my childhood. My birth mother changed beds more often than I change purses." I lifted a shoulder. "It got to me. Bad. I made a decision long ago that, when it happened, it would be with the right guy, for the right reason... and it wouldn't be on the first or second or even the third or fourth date."

He still hadn't shut down on me, so I forged onward. "I'm not saying I'm

holding out for marriage or my one true love, but I'm not interested in casual sex, either. I have to know, deep inside, that it's right...that I'm with the right kind of guy. One who matters to me, and who feels the same way about me. A lot of guys these days...well, they aren't all that patient when it comes to sex, I guess."

To my surprise, Matt kissed me again.

This time, it was softer. Slower. Sweeter.

"I think that just means you were right to wait," he murmured against my lips. "Any man who thinks he should rush you into making that sort of decision definitely *isn't* the right guy."

Then he rubbed his mouth over mine before angling my head back yet again.

And when he went to deepen the kiss once more, I fell into the warm, languid spell of it.

No, it wasn't a tempestuous heat that threatened to carry me away...but maybe that was a good thing.

TWENTY

KEITH

NOT EVEN A HALF HOUR INTO THE DATE WITH MERIAH AND I ALREADY KNEW a thing or two.

No, three.

I was wasting my time, and so was she.

I wasn't the only one aware of it, either.

"This isn't working, is it?" Meriah asked softly just as I made that silent acknowledgment.

I went to answer, but a loud burst of laughter from behind me had me going quiet. Digging into my pocket, I pulled out some bills, calculating the tab in my head. I added a few extra in case I was off, then I rose, holding out a hand to the lovely woman sitting across from me.

"Let's go someplace where we can hear ourselves think."

She gave a rueful smile just as the man behind me started laughing once more.

"His date must be a professional comedian," she said lightly, hooking her arm through mine.

"Maybe." We made our way through the crush, and once we were outside, I gestured to the sidewalk. "Can we walk for a bit?"

"Sure."

We hadn't gone ten feet when Meriah broke the silence.

"I'm ready to start looking for a serious commitment," she said softly.

I tensed, dreading what was coming next.

"Ouch," she said, giving me a playful nudge with her elbow. "It's a good thing I've got a healthy ego. Relax, sweetheart. Yeah, part of me hoped maybe it could be with you...I mean, you're gorgeous and funny and great in

bed. But...that's all we have, isn't it?"

"I like you, Meriah," I said, feeling more uncomfortable with her than I ever had.

"Yeah." She hugged my arm closer to her. "I like you too. And that's it. That's all I feel. Well, unless you're going down on me or filling me with that beautiful cock."

"Hell, Meriah." Grimacing, I rubbed my free hand over the back of my neck.

A bright laugh, clear as a bell, echoed around us. "What is it, baby? Haven't any of your other lovers told you that you have a beautiful cock? Ah, well. I guess it's a good thing I told you tonight since it appears we're ending it."

We came to a stop, almost as if we'd planned it.

"I do like you," I told her softly.

"I know. I like you too. And we're still friends. Not too many relationships can end like this." She rose onto her toes and pressed a kiss to my mouth. "We had fun, didn't we?"

"We did."

Something sad flashed through her eyes and guilt twisted inside me.

"Meriah..."

"Don't." She gave me a smile that was too bright, too cheerful. "I'm going to catch one of those cabs to my hotel."

"I can drive you."

"No." She shook her head and rose onto her toes, giving me another kiss, this one slow, lingering. It tasted like goodbye. And it was. She was the one who broke away and turned, striding in the opposite direction, walking briskly toward the line of taxis down the block.

Feeling vaguely hollow inside, I stood there and watched. As hollow as I felt, though, I had no regret.

We'd had fun. And now it was over.

Sighing, I turned and started back to the car, deliberately not allowing myself to think.

I'd go home.

Put on some brainless horror flick and pour myself a glass of whiskey, fall asleep early.

Tomorrow, I'd take another look at my life, although what good that would do me, I had no idea.

For now, I didn't want to think.

I even managed some level of success.

Up until a little after ten-thirty. I'd just let myself into my condo, the lights too bright for my tired eyes and a headache creeping up. I thought maybe I'd pass on the horror flick and the whiskey.

Then my phone buzzed, signifying an incoming text.

One of my brothers. Out of habit, I checked, although if I'd been thinking, I wouldn't have, because most likely, it was Matt.

And he'd been out on a date with Veronica.

When I saw his name on the screen, I groaned and slammed my head back against the wall. That only made my headache worse, but I did it a second time, and after reading the text...I did it a third time too.

Hey, K. Just wanted to tell you thanks for introducing me to Veronica. She's something special. I really like her, and I never would have had the chance to find that out if you hadn't put the two of us on course to meet. GN.

I didn't even bother replying, and in a ridiculous surge of jealousy, I deleted the message and threw the phone across the room. It landed on the couch and bounced once, harmlessly, onto a throw pillow.

I'd just ended one of the longest relationships of my life. My brother had just escaped a toxic one and was now spending time with a woman who was perfect for him.

It was perfectly normal to feel a little off after such a shitty night.

That was it. That was *all*.

It had to be.

TWENTY-ONE

VERONICA

MOM HAD BEEN AWAKE WHEN I CAME IN, BUT I PLEADED EXHAUSTION AND all but ran upstairs so I wouldn't have to face her questions. And I knew she had them.

The problem was that I suspected I had even more questions than she did.

I *liked* Matt.

I really did.

But even though he'd asked me on another date, and I'd agreed, I was already asking myself *why*.

"Because he's a nice guy," I told myself as I went through my regular bedtime regimen of washing my face, moisturizing, brushing my hair and teeth.

I *liked* nice guys. Most of the guys I'd dated had been defined by that singular characteristic...*nice*. I could even proudly say that I'd never been drawn to the bad boy type. That had been my birth mother's domain, and I'd never be able to look myself in the mirror if I'd turned out to be like her.

All my *life*, I'd worked to avoid even the barest resemblance.

She'd barely limped along through school, eventually dropping out and nothing either of my adopted parents—her *own* parents—had said could convince her to go back.

I'd excelled. Although I loved school in general, even when I wasn't enamored of whatever course I was taking, I had made straight A's and had gone on to win a merit-based scholarship that paid my entire tuition.

My mother had always struggled to hold a job, relying instead on her flavor of the month to provide for her.

I had a fierce pride in being able to provide for myself *and* give money to

my grandparents—the people who’d stepped in after my birth mother had *stepped out*.

She’d dated bad boys, drug dealers, pimps and ex-cons with a history of violent offenses, often falling into bed within thirty minutes of meeting a partner. I knew, because up until she’d walked out of our lives forever, she’d enjoyed regaling me with tales of her new *man*, the one who was “really *it* this time.”

I had yet to fall into bed with a *single* lover.

Matt was *everything* I should want in a man, everything I’d told myself I was holding out for.

But as I lay in bed, my eyes closed, it wasn’t his face I saw behind my lids.

IT WAS his face when I dreamed, though.

At first.

Wearing the decadent corset of burnt umber, paired with the skirted shorts and garters, along with cream-colored silk stockings, I stood in his arms as we danced.

He was fully dressed.

I wasn’t, and I wasn’t embarrassed about it either.

“Am I dreaming?” I whispered, looking up at him.

“Do you want to be?” Matt dipped his head and ran his lips along my shoulder.

“That’s a nonsense sort of answer,” I said with a shake of my head. “If I’m dreaming about you, then, of course, I want to be dreaming about you. That’s how dreams work, isn’t it?”

He skimmed his lips up my ear, the hand at my waist tugging me in closer, so close I could feel his erection nudging at my belly. It felt...nice.

Nice? The witch buried inside me laughed. *You’re dancing half-naked with a sexy guy, and all you can come up with is nice?*

“It’s better than nice,” I said in response to that caustic voice.

Matt thought I was talking to him, and he lowered his head to kiss me. “You’re right. So much better.”

Determined not to listen to that annoying voice, I opened my mouth for

him while my eyes closed.

Fingers tangled in my hair as a warm mouth slanted over mine.

The first flick of his tongue against my lips was...nice.

It's better than nice, I told myself again. Determined to make that thought a reality, I rose onto my tiptoes and pressed against him, dipping my fingers into the short hair at the nape of his neck.

But...it wasn't short. Or at least, not as short as it should be.

And the kiss was suddenly...*so much more*.

I moaned, clinging to wide shoulders while a hand splayed out over my back.

He broke away to kiss a stinging path down my neck. Inside the smooth, supportive material of the longline bra, my nipples tightened to hard, almost painful points, rubbing against the silk lining.

"So much better than nice," I whispered.

He chuckled huskily but made no response.

I didn't care. As long as he didn't stop touching me. His mouth skimmed along my neck, stopping at the curve to nip and nibble until I was whimpering and rocking against him.

Desperate to feel skin, I tore at his shirt, searching for the buttons.

All I encountered was worn, faded cotton. But he'd been wearing a dress shirt...?

Who cares? It's a dream.

The shirt faded, giving way to the whims of dreams, while he freed the long line of hook and eye closures of my bra, letting it fall to the floor. But when I would have pressed against him, he stopped me, gripping my hips then spinning me around.

"I want to fuck you, Veronica," he said in a low, rasping growl of a voice. "Tell me I can."

My knees melted.

Dream Matt was very, *very* hot.

"You can," I said on a moan as he pressed his mouth to my nape, then started to trail lower. And lower. And lower.

When he bit the right cheek of my ass through the skirted shorts, I whimpered and fell forward, my hands braced on the practical double bed that fit into the corner of my small room.

My room. *I have to be quiet*, I thought.

"No, you don't," he rasped against my flesh as he reached between my

thighs. That strip of fabric was suddenly gone—the skirted shorts with their built-in panties now just a lacy little mini with garters. He speared two fingers through my curls and groaned. “Sweet fuck...you’re so wet. Do you want me, Veronica?”

“Yes,” I moaned, wiggling against him, so lost in lust I couldn’t think straight.

“Tell me, then. Tell me you want me. Tell me you want me to lick you up, eat this sweet pussy, then fill you with my cock.”

My cheeks flamed even as my belly clenched with need.

“Yes,” I whispered. “That. All of that.”

He chuckled and nudged me lower over the bed with his hand between my shoulder blades.

“That will work, baby. For now.”

Then he went to his knees...and went to work. *On me.*

I jolted as he pressed his mouth to my slick folds while kneeling behind me, his big hands holding my hips in place when I would have jerked away in surprise. Not that the bed provided much leeway.

“That’s it...sweet, sweet Veronica...let me have more...”

He groaned and pressed more fully against me, his tongue lapping at my folds, then circling my clitoris while the climax surged closer, and closer.

Then it was on me, slamming into me with ferocious intensity while he held me in place and licked and sucked and played.

“Perfect,” he muttered, pulling away.

“Ummm...”

It was all I could manage, and I was smiling, sated, and happy as he rolled me onto my back and bent over me.

“Keith...”

*Wait...*the logical part of me that wasn’t dazed by the amazing dream sex tried to rouse.

The rest of me just wanted to melt into him. I curled my arms around his neck and tugged him closer because it would be so much *easier* to melt into him if he was closer. And, really, of course, it was Keith.

“I want to take pictures of you looking like this,” he whispered against my lips, not letting me pull him onto the bed. “All sated and sexy...but ready to be fucked again.”

“Are you going to?” I asked as he pulled away and walked to his camera.

Keith was shirtless, and staring at him made my mouth go dry.

“Going to what?” He glanced at me as he adjusted and fiddled with his camera. The light shone in from the windows, and I realized we weren’t in my bedroom...but in his studio.

The blinds weren’t drawn for once, but instead of offering a view of the street outside from the front or the garden in the back, the windows faced out over the ocean...on all sides. Like we were isolated on our own little island.

And that, like Keith being the one stroking and teasing me in my dreams, made as much sense as anything else.

“Am I going to what, Veronica?” he asked again as he ran his teeth down my neck.

“Fuck me again. Are you?”

“Let me take the pictures and find out.”

Already enraptured, I rolled onto my back and gazed at him as he set up the camera.

He said nothing, but somehow, I knew what he wanted, and I didn’t blush, didn’t flinch as he photographed me with one hand cupping my breast while the other stroked down my belly.

A glint in his eyes appeared as that hand slid lower, toying with the waistband of the lacy skirt that no longer had the built-in panties.

“That’s it,” he said, his voice rough and raw. “Show me.”

And I did. Sliding my hand past the waistband, I found the slick heat between my thighs and whimpered.

“Don’t close your eyes. I want to see you.”

Somehow, I kept my lashes open and focused on him, despite the fog of lust laying so thick over me, it was a miracle I could even breathe.

“Spread your legs for me,” Keith said.

Holding his eyes, I licked my lips. “But you’ll see.”

He gave me a wicked grin. “That’s the whole point. I want to capture that with my camera, you sliding your fingers into your pussy. Fuck...do it, Ronni. Let me look, show me how pink and wet you are. How hot.”

And I couldn’t resist, not when he spoke in that whiskey-rough voice.

I did as ordered. Drawing my knees up and letting my thighs fall farther apart, I slid my hand down. The lace bunched and gathered higher on my hips, but I didn’t care. The silly excuse for a skirt didn’t cover me at all now, and both Keith and I breathed harder as I slid my fingers through my curls, then stroked myself.

He took shot after shot after shot. Then he was bending over me, the

camera gone. He cupped my hips in his hands and lifted me to his mouth.

I arched up with a scream as he licked me from bottom to top, opening me completely. “Delicious. So delicious.”

He caught my clit between his teeth and tugged, scoring it lightly with his teeth before he moved up my body and filled me with one hard, driving stroke.

With a cry, I twisted and shuddered, clinging to his shoulders as I begged for more.

“Keith. Keith...please, oh, oh, please.”

He whispered my name.

But it wasn't his voice.

The dream fell apart, and I jerked upright in bed, the sheets twisted around me. Sweat beading on my brow while lust and need vied within, I looked around in confusion.

When the hard, loud knock hit my bedroom door, I jumped.

“Veronica! Are you okay?” Rosalie demanded. “You're in there groaning and making all sorts of funny noises. Are you sick?”

Blood suffused my face, and I considered the idea of crawling underneath my bed and hiding.

Forever.

Since that wasn't an option, I cleared my throat and called out, “I'm not sick, honey. I was having a...” I grimaced and lied, “very bad dream.”

“Oh.” Her voice softened with sympathy. She'd had a lot of nightmares growing up, many of them about our birth mother. Sometimes, they still came back. “You wanna talk about it? We can make some hot chocolate.”

“No, baby. Now that I'm awake, I think I'll be okay.”

I might die of unrequited lust, but I'd be okay...ish.

“All right.” There was a tapping sound as she struck her nails against the door. “I love you. Sleep better.”

TWENTY-TWO

KEITH

TWO WEEKS OF SHITTY SLEEP WERE DOING MORE THAN CATCHING UP TO ME AT this point. They were about to kick my ass straight into a hole in the ground and just cover me up.

I felt like a dead man walking as I shuffled out of the coffee shop with a cup of coffee fortified with four shots of espresso in it.

With less than fifteen minutes before Veronica was supposed to show up for a rush special-order session that had come in through my website, I needed to get my ass into the studio and start setting things up.

I 'couldn't seem to get myself moving at anything quicker than my zombie-like shamble.

I definitely 'didn't want to be unoccupied when she showed up. The sooner we got to work, the better. Empty time that went unfilled with work or noise just opened itself up for conversation.

Talking was the absolute last thing I wanted to do around Veronica.

Okay, maybe not the *last*. Seeing her laughing with my brother was pretty damn high on my list of things I didn't enjoy doing around Veronica, but conversation ranked up there too.

I just 'didn't trust myself.

True to form, Veronica arrived at nine on the dot. After a smile and wave, she disappeared into the changing room with the garment bags that had been delivered the previous night.

It wasn't long before she reappeared back in the studio, a puzzled look on her face as she held up the construct of ribbons, leaves, and delicate flowers that had been placed in a protective plastic carrier before being attached to the first garment bag.

“What, exactly, am I doing with this?”

“Wearing it.” I tried *very* hard not to look at her and see how the pale, soft ivory of her gown, with its undertones of peach, draped over her skin. That shade made her skin glow, all warm and succulent, like the fruit that gave the gown its rich, subtle sheen.

She glowed like a ripe, fucking peach, and I wanted to take a giant bite out of her, feel her juices flood my mouth, and spill down my chin as I ate her up.

The image went straight to my cock, and I barely managed to swallow down a groan.

Aware she watched me, I said, “Did you see the picture for your hair?”

Instead of looking at her in the Grecian gown, I focused on the lights as if they were a puzzle that would take my full attention to solve.

“Yes.” A soft sigh escaped her before she continued. “It’s a little more complicated than I’m used to, so it might take me a few more minutes.”

“Fine.”

She hesitated, lingering.

I could feel her eyes on me, and I felt like an ass for ignoring her, but it was getting harder and harder to maintain some level of professionalism. I still had a hard-on, all from seeing her that lovely gown that made me think of licking her up and tasting every inch of her.

I’d set myself up for punishment when I asked her to model for me. There was no denying it anymore.

She had become a favorite among certain clientele who were looking for a model who didn’t fit the typical standard. I already had another six clients interested in sessions with her as either the sole or main model.

I ’hadn’t yet committed to them, but those jobs would take her through the rest of the summer if we did move forward.

Last night, I’d been trying to tell myself to look on the bright side—I wouldn’t be around her *too* much longer, right? She’d go back to teaching, and I’d get back to my life.

Except...Matt talked about her all the time.

Two weeks, I thought. They had been dating for *two weeks*. And each time I thought about them together, I got more and more pissed off.

My own damn fault. It was my own damn fault.

“Keith?”

“What?” I bit off.

A faint pause before she responded, and this time her response was almost as terse as mine. “You still haven’t told me what I’m supposed to do with this flower thing.”

“For ’fuck’s—” I snapped my mouth shut as the sound of my own voice hit me. Sucking in a breath, I squeezed my eyes shut and inhaled deeply.

What the hell was wrong with me?

But I knew the answer, and I could have kicked myself for letting my temper slip like that.

None of this was her fault. It wasn’t like she’d done anything to encourage me, other than be herself. Blowing out the breath, I shoved my hands through my hair and turned to look her square in the eye for the first time since her arrival.

“The client is a painter. Something of a recluse. Doesn’t like having people in his home, doesn’t like going out. He’s what you could call... eccentric.” I managed a smile that almost felt real. “But he’s crazy talented. Tends to work from imagination or photographs, although he sometimes Skypes with a few select models who’d do the model thing in front of a high def camera while he gets the prelim work done, using a computer and camera set-up. He saw some of your pics on my website’s portfolio and contacted me, saying he’d found his *muse*.” I waved a hand at her clothing and nodded to the flower-ribbon thing she still held. “He’s doing a series of Greek characters from mythology, and the muses are next. You’re going to be the base model for all of them. The flowers are one of the ways we’re to alter your looks so each ‘muse’ looks different.”

Her gaze fell dubiously to the flowers, and she lifted them in question.

“Just sweep your hair up, and when you’re done, come back out. If you’re not certain about the hair, we can work on it before we take the shots,” I told her. “I’ve already got a couple of ideas about how we can fix your hair to alter each look subtly from one to the next. “If you need help, I’ll help you.”

I told myself not to think about that right now. Hopefully, I wouldn’t have to stand there and help her twist that long, shining hair up into one of those fancy knots. It was hard enough taking pictures of her with a good five to ten feet between us.

Standing close enough to touch? Actually touching?

I needed that like I needed a hole in the head.

“Are you okay?” Veronica asked softly, her eyes solemn as she watched me.

“Fine.” Turning my back to her, I said, “Haven’t been sleeping too good lately. I get that way sometimes. Sorry I’m taking it out on you.”

I heard the soft whisper of fabric as she turned to leave. The second I was alone, I stalked to the small kitchenette and grabbed a bottle of water from the fridge, draining in under two minutes. It did nothing to cool the fire in my gut.

Get this job done, man. Only a few more weeks then she’s done with this and back to teaching her kids while you’re back to...whatever.

My chest went tight at the thought. While I needed space from her, the idea of her no longer coming around made me feel even worse than I already did.

“Shit, I’m fucked.”

THERE HAD BEEN four different gowns in the garment bags that had been provided by the client, and it took six solid hours to get enough shots that I knew the client would be satisfied. Although he would only end up using a handful of the dozens and dozens I had taken, Allister DeWalt took the idea of being *selective* to a whole new level.

I had to get shots of Veronica in every light imaginable, with some of the basic props I had that would work for a ‘Grecian’ setting and even more without nothing in the shot but her, in one lovely gown after another, shots of her standing, reclining, lying on her back, looking haughty and distant, warm and sweet, mischievous and playful, and hotly seductive.

Since I’d worked with DeWalt before and understood some of the manic genius that drove him, I always took more than double the number of shots I’d normally take for anything else—charging him for the time and making it clear that it was the only way I could guarantee to get him the variety he’d come to expect.

He happily paid and continued to hire me whenever the fancy struck him.

Three times in the past, I’d had to bring the model he’d hired for various projects back in for *specific* poses, but that wasn’t happening this time. I couldn’t handle seeing another gown part around her, baring her leg all the way to her hip as she gave the camera a look that promised her lover nothing but pure bliss.

Part of me was already formulating my response to him if he decided he wanted more shots. I just tell him 'I'd refund his deposit for failing to deliver satisfactory results as stipulated in the contract.

There was no way in hell I was subjecting myself that torment again. Even now, while Veronica was behind closed doors changing into her regular clothing, my hands itched to touch, and my cock pulsed.

Brooding about the state I was in, I 'didn't hear the door open behind me. "Hey, Keith."

Caught up in the mental snapshot I'd pulled to the front of my mind, Veronica in the final gown, one the color of beaten gold, I turned, caught off guard by the sound of my oldest brother's voice.

"Matt."

He gave me a crooked grin. "You sound surprised to see me. I guess Veronica 'didn't mention I was picking her up?"

"No." With a shrug that felt far too stiff, I turned back to the equipment and continued to break it down.

"Need any help?" he offered, drawing closer.

"I don't think so," I said, shaking my head harder than necessary. The last time one of my brothers had helped me with my equipment, a specialty lens that cost almost ten grand ended up damaged.

"Still pissed about that lens?"

Slanting a look at him, I narrowed my eyes. "Pissed? No. Willing to risk it again? Also no."

"Fair enough. How did it go today?" he asked, leaning against the wall to watch as I finished packing away several of the lenses I'd used during the shoot.

Maybe because I'd already had to mentally kick my ass about how I had been treating Veronica, I was able to catch myself just before snapping, *I took pictures, dumbass. How do you think?*

Not that Matt would blink over me calling him dumbass. We *were* brothers. But the tone of the question, the spite behind it?

Yeah, good thing I controlled that.

With a shrug as an answer, I clicked the padded case closed, ensuring the lenses inside were protected.

"Hey, you!" Veronica said from the doorway when she spied my brother.

I stayed bent over the case, fiddling with the lock so I didn't have to see her face light up when she looked at him. But even without looking at her, I

could hear the smile in her voice.

“Hello, beautiful. How did it go? Have fun? My brother is surprisingly close-lipped.”

“Today I got to pretend to be a Grecian muse,” she said in a playful voice. “Several of them, actually. It was kind of fun.”

Not particularly enthralled with the idea of listening to them flirt, I straightened and turned to ask Matt if he could lock up. All my brothers had keys to the place for emergencies, just like I had keys to their homes and the foundation as well as my younger brother Shawn’s company headquarters.

But my mind blanked at the sight in front of me.

Matt had wrapped an arm around Veronica’s waist, something I’d never seen him do with any other woman he’d dated. Public displays of affection always made him uncomfortable.

As I clenched my jaw, he lowered his head to kiss her, rubbing his mouth over hers before deepening the contact. Envy punched me right in the gut.

A snarl rose in my throat.

I wanted to grab her and pull her away from him, tell him he couldn’t touch her.

Except...I was the one who’d put them together.

Fuck, I was a mess.

And I couldn’t keep lying to myself. I’d been attracted to Veronica from the beginning, and for some fucking reason, I’d shoved her toward my brother.

Maybe because something about her scared me. Maybe because I was an idiot. Maybe because I was a glutton for punishment.

And none of it mattered because it was too late.

These thoughts ran through my head in mere seconds as I stood there, frozen.

Then Veronica went to stroke her fingers down Matt’s cheek, and I knew I had to get the hell out of there, get away from them—*now*—before I went and said or did something stupid.

Something stupid, like snarling, “You think maybe you could wait to suck face with my brother until you’re out of the studio? This is a fucking place of business, and I don’t need clients walking in here seeing this shit.”

They had already broken apart, and I was keenly aware of the hot blush of embarrassment on Veronica’s face—it made me hate myself a little.

Matt wasn’t too happy, either, glaring at me with a rare show of temper.

“What is your problem?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it, an apology trapped in my throat. I *knew* I owed them both one, but jealousy still tore chunks out of me, and I was battling that beast too hard to speak at the moment.

Before I could win that struggle, Veronica put her hand on Matt’s arm. “Can you wait outside?”

“No,” he said shortly, temper still simmering. “Keith, there was no call for that. You’re not even *open* for business now, and you work by appointment or contract only. The door was locked, so what’s the deal?”

Veronica pushed in front of him. “Please.”

“Fuck,” I muttered, turning away at the sound of her voice. I felt even worse now, and I knew I had to speak, had to say something.

“Look,” I managed to force out, turning back to them. Only it was just Veronica.

I heard the creak of the front door and swore, dragging my hands over my face. Fine. I’d make this apology first, then talk to Matt.

I could deal with this. I would apologize, smooth things over with my brother. There wasn’t really any other option.

Just like there wasn’t an option when it came to Veronica. I had to look at her, at this woman I couldn’t stop thinking about, dreaming about, *craving*... I’d have to look at her and tell her I was sorry for being an ass.

I *was* sorry.

I just had a piss-poor way of handling this envy inside me.

TWENTY-THREE

VERONICA

FACE STILL BURNING HOT WITH EMBARRASSMENT, I CHECKED BEHIND ME TO make sure Matt had slipped outside.

He was definitely mad, but I'd talk to him again after I dealt with this problem with Keith.

Mortified, I struggled to find the right way to apologize. Sure, he could have been more diplomatic in how he said it, but he wasn't wrong. Yes, I'd been done working for the day, but I was still in his studio—his place of business—and I didn't need to be kissing his brother.

Maybe he's jealous... that little voice had suggested such things several times over the past few weeks, but I silenced it without giving it any real thought. He hadn't wanted me. He'd made that clear enough.

And why the *hell* did that bother me so much? I was with Matt anyway, and he was a nice guy.

Approaching him, I stopped a couple feet away. "I'm sorry."

Keith put his hands on his hips as his brows dropped low over his eyes.

Twisting my hands together, I drew in a calming breath—or it was *supposed* to be calming. All it did was give me a head rush because it brought the scent of the man in front of me.

Why does he have to smell so damn good?

My belly went hot and tight, and a new rush of heat suffused me. For once, I was grateful it so easily showed when I was embarrassed. Now he wouldn't wonder why I was red in the face—I'd been that way for a couple of minutes.

"You're right," I told him. "That was unprofessional, and I am sorry. I can understand your irritation. I'll make sure Matt and I plan to meet

elsewhere in the future.”

It was quiet—*too* quiet.

Keith just stared at me, shadows under his beautiful blue-green eyes and stubble darkening his jaw.

That uncomfortable rush of heat increased, and I swallowed. “Like I said, I’m sorry. I’ll...never mind. Let me know when you want me in next. Bye.”

“Look, Veronica...”

At the sound of his voice, I paused, heart slamming in my ears.

Seconds passed, and he said nothing.

“I need to go. Matt and I...we’ve got...plans.”

Before he could say anything else, I turned and hurried out the door after Matt, grabbing my purse only because I saw it on the table near the door.

Behind me, I heard Keith swearing, but I didn’t look back.

“I ’DON’T CARE if he thinks he had the right or not,” Matt said later that night. He was still irritated, and it wasn’t helping my mood settle any. “There is no reason for him to talk to you that way.”

We’d opted to come to his place and watch a movie while we had pizza, but now I wished we’d gone out.

It was too...intimate, being there with him, and *that* was uncomfortable because my thoughts kept drifting to Keith.

Keith. Always Keith, even when I was here with Matt.

Tucking my legs up underneath me and twisting to face Matt, I reached over and laid a hand on his knee.

His eyes slid to mine, a shade darker than I was used to seeing.

I went to pull my hand back, but he covered it with his and lifted it, kissing the back before lowering it back down, this time with his hand on top, the back of mine pressed to his thigh.

It wasn’t terribly intimate, but I was still uncomfortable.

I didn’t pull away, though.

We’d been dating for two weeks. This was nothing, right?

Forcing myself to focus, I said, “Matt, please let me handle this. It’s my job, and how I conduct myself on any job is my responsibility. Just as how I respond to an employer is my job.”

“Even when that employer is being a jackass?” he responded, stroking his thumb over my hand.

“Well...yeah.” Crooking a grin at him, I said, “This isn’t the first time I’ve had somebody snap at me. And this time, well...I *was* being unprofessional.”

“Shit.” He blew out a breath. “The studio wasn’t *open*. And I kissed *you*.”

“Matt.” I gave him the same look I gave students who were trying to work around me. “I’ve been fighting my own battles for quite a while, and I’m pretty good at it. I can handle this.”

“Fine.” He withdrew his hand from mine, leaving mine where it fell... high on his thigh as he leaned in and kissed me gently. “But don’t let him be an ass. I don’t know what’s up but stand your ground. Okay?”

“I will.” Relieved, I squeezed my hand without thinking about it.

The muscle under my fingers tensed.

Matt’s eyes darkened, and he slid a hand up to curve around my neck. “Veronica...”

The low, husky sound of his voice had me swallowing.

I held still as he leaned in closer and pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth, tongue flicking over the lower curve of my lip as he shifted sideways to deepen the kiss.

Matt pulled me against his chest, falling back against the arm of the couch with me half-sprawled over him.

I curled an arm around his neck and kissed him back, closing my eyes and trying not to think.

His hand was warm, strong, confident as it stroked down my spine to rest at the small of my back, his fingers slipping under the hem of my blouse to stroke over my skin.

Shivering, I arched reflexively, and he responded by splaying his palm wide. His heat was startling, and I would have sucked in a breath, but he took advantage to steal into my mouth, tongue rubbing against mine seductively.

Matt *could* kiss, something I’d already learned. The hand on my back moved to grip my hip, shifting and tugging until he had me in the vee of his spread legs, his right knee drawn up and pressed to the cushions of the wide couch, the other stretched out on the floor.

“Veronica...” he muttered against my lips as he slid his hand farther down, grasping my butt and pulling me tight against him.

I went still, feeling the heat of his penis pulse against my belly.

“Matt.”

“Yes, baby?”

But I couldn't speak. His mouth moved from mine to the line of my jaw, then down my neck to where it curved into my shoulder. There, he bit me lightly.

I shivered, and he groaned, arching his hips upward.

“You feel so good,” he rasped, the hand on my hip sliding up until his fingers grazed the outer curve of my breast.

A jolt of pleasure streaked through me, even as something inside stiffened and withdrew.

This isn't right.

He shifted beneath me, and I took an unsteady breath as he reached for the top button on my blouse, eyes on mine as he slowly undid it, making it clear that he'd stop if I asked.

I wasn't even aware of making the decision consciously. But I curled my fingers around his wrist and shook my head.

“Moving too fast, baby?” he murmured, sliding the hand up to cup my cheek instead.

“No. It's not that.” Closing my eyes, I pressed my brow to his and closed my eyes.

I really *liked* him.

“We need to talk.”

TWENTY-FOUR

KEITH

SHIRTLESS AND STANDING IN FRONT OF THE MIRROR, I TOLD MYSELF TO GET my head together and finished getting dressed.

I had to get out of here.

Earlier, I had come to a decision. I'd spent far too much time the past few weeks jerking off to fantasies about Veronica or just trying to relieve my early morning hard-ons after yet another erotic dream about her.

Self-service wasn't doing the trick. And tonight, my head was all kinds of fucked up because I knew they were together.

Was Matt touching her? Sliding his fingers along the skin I ached to stroke? Taste?

"Fuck," I said, groaning. Pressing the flat of my hand against my cock, I blew out a breath and shoved away from the counter. I was going out. I was going to one of the bars in the area and finding a woman, then I was going to get laid.

It wouldn't take away the gut-deep need for my brother's woman, but maybe I could get some sleep if I spent the next few hours between a woman's thighs, and if I slept, I could control my temper better.

Regardless, I couldn't keep going this way.

Mind made up, I went to my closet and walked inside, eyeing the rows of shirts, slacks, and suits. Before I could pick anything out, a bell chimed, signaling the arrival of a guest.

Hell, maybe I'd luck out and it would be Meriah.

Yeah, we'd decided to call things off, but maybe she was having a rough night too. We knew each other's bodies, and I had no doubt we could keep each other occupied for a while.

Striding to the intercom by the front door, I depressed the button. “Yeah?”

There was a hesitant pause before the visitor spoke, her presence punctuated by the sound of nervous breathing.

There was nothing recognizable about that in and of itself. Even so, my gut went tight.

I knew. She didn’t have to say *anything*, and I knew who it was.

My dick came to red alert readiness.

“Keith, it’s Veronica. I...um can we talk?”

Is that code for ‘can we fuck?’

Choking off a laugh, I cleared my throat and answered. “I guess. Door will be unlocked, so come on in.”

My own voice sounded gritty, and I didn’t trust myself to say anything else. I hit the button that would unlock the doors downstairs. On a timer, they’d relock automatically behind her, so I fell against the door and sucked in a couple of raw, desperate breaths, then hit my head against the solid walnut of the door. Twice.

I was hoping for some sort of fugue state to strike, save me from myself.

It didn’t happen.

I hadn’t really expected it to, so I focused on breathing and shoring up what pathetic walls I could build in the scant minute or two I had before she reached my door. Belatedly, I remembered I’d told her to come on in and shoved away from the door, lingering only long enough to adjust the lights so they dimmed, now glowing at thirty percent. Maybe the dim light would camouflage the raging hard-on.

Fuck—a shirt.

I changed direction, veering for the hall that led to my bedroom.

The front door opened.

Spinning around, I stared at her as she came in.

She’s not yours, I reminded myself. *She belongs to your brother. They’re happy. You don’t fuck with that.*

Her gaze skimmed the room, settling on me where the shadows lay the heaviest near the hallway. From where I stood, I could see her tongue dart out, dampening her lower lip as she closed the door behind her.

Her eyes widened, lingering on my chest.

Something hotly primitive stirred within, and I shoved it down.

Not yours, I reminded myself.

Fuck, I needed that shirt. If her eyes went any lower, she'd see far more than I wanted.

"I need a minute," I said in a gritty voice. "I was getting dressed, need a shirt."

She said nothing.

The open sprawl of my condo was large, but it 'wasn't large enough. I could have used another half-mile walk, uphill, at a seven-mile run to get that shirt. All too soon, I was walking back into the living room, the button-down partially closed.

She stood by the window that looked out over the night-dark street, shoulders slumped, and I froze, the rest of the buttons forgotten at the sight of her.

She was so pretty, so perfect...and nervous, one hand rubbing her bare upper arm.

But was it nerves? Or something else?

I 'couldn't tell. Uneasy now, I closed the distance between us and brushed my fingers over her shoulder. "'What's wrong? Are you okay? Matt?'"

Her body tensed under my touch, and I pulled my hand back, curling my fingers into a fist.

"Matt's fine. I...hell, Keith. *I am a mess. I don't know how else to say it.*"

"You're not a mess," I said without thinking, the protectiveness I'd felt toward her from the beginning rising to the fore.

"But I am," she murmured, turning to look at me, her lashes lowered like a veil...but I could see the glitter of her gray irises.

And the look I saw there...

I sucked in a breath, my hands closing into fists.

The expression on her face hit me right in the gut. I felt like I had been waiting my whole life to have her look at me like that, cheeks flushed, mouth parted, and eyes hot with need.

But I couldn't be seeing what I thought.

She was with Matt.

Find out what's wrong. Help her...and get her the fuck out of here, I told myself.

"I'm probably about ready to totally humiliate myself," she said, her voice trembling. "But I have to know."

“Know what?” I asked, and my voice sounded like crushed rocks.

She licked her lips, and I couldn’t stop myself from tracing the damp silken path her tongue had taken.

A soft noise escaped her.

My dick jumped in response—in *demand*.

Steeling myself, I said, “Why are you here, Veronica? Where’s Matt?”

“He’s at home, I guess,” she whispered, still staring at me as if mesmerized. “I was with him, but...I couldn’t...I can’t...”

She groaned and dropped her head, rubbing her temple.

I fisted my hands to keep from reaching for her. “Veronica, what—”

“I have to know,” she said, cutting me off. “I get that you probably don’t think of me the same way, but I can’t keep pretending and I...I have to know.”

Heart racing, blood hot, cock pulsing, I fought not to grab her. I opened my mouth to ask, “Know what?”

But she was already moving, rising on her toes to press her mouth to mine.

Her tongue slid across my lower lip, hesitant and uncertain, while she pressed closer to me, one hand on my cheek, the other on my hip. The soft curves of her breasts went flat as she came closer—*so fucking female*.

A split second later, she pulled back, breathing hard and staring at me.

“I have to know,” she said again. “If you want to be with me even half as much as I want to be with you.”

My mind went blank while the need inside went super-nova.

Control burned away under the heat of it, and I grabbed her hips and spun, grabbing her under the thighs and lifting as I moved forward, spilling her onto the solid, sturdy length of the console table that ran the length of the wall just inside the entryway. She wore a floaty, flirty skirt the color of raspberries, and I shoved it up to the tops of her thighs so I could close my hands over her hips.

All of this happened in seconds. Veronica stared at me wide-eyed as I closed one hand over her throat and used my thumb to press down on her chin, opening her mouth.

A startled, *hungry* moan escaped her as I slammed my mouth down on hers, so greedy, so hungry that patience, tenderness, both of them were things of the past. Her mouth opened for me, but not enough, and I pressed more firmly on her chin while fisting my free hand in her hair and tugging until I

had her head and mouth exactly where I wanted.

Thrusting my tongue deep, I feasted, gorged, filled myself with the taste of her, something I'd been aching for from the time I'd laid eyes on her.

Veronica grabbed my hips, hands slipping under the material of the shirt so I felt the silken brush of her fingers against bare skin.

Not enough.

Tearing away, I grabbed my shirt and yanked.

Buttons popped and went flying.

Her eyes widened.

"Gimme," I demanded, pulling her mouth back to mine and biting her lower lip when she didn't open for me quick enough.

She jolted, then another hot, female moan escaped her, her lips parting.

Still not enough. "Kiss me back, Veronica. I want to feel your tongue in my mouth."

She shivered, but this time, when I slanted my lips over hers, she reacted, her tongue flicking over my lower lip, shyly, then more boldly as I grunted in approval.

She was delicious, sweet, and decadent and tart all at once. As intoxicating as the kisses were, they still weren't enough, and I reached between us, fumbling with the buttons of her shirt. They were small and slippery, resisting me. With a groan, I yanked. More buttons flew.

Pulling back, I watched as I peeled open the sides of her shirt, staring at those big, lush tits teasing me above the cups of her bra.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous. I knew you'd be...I've wanted to put my mouth on you, fill my hands with these gorgeous tits ever since you put on the fucking swimsuit."

"Keith..." Eyes wide, cheeks hotly red, she stared at me.

From under my lashes, I met her gaze. "Every time I saw you. Every time I caught the scent of your skin. My dick's been hard practically since I met you."

Her mouth fell open, and just like that, I needed it under mine again. Taking another deep, wet kiss, I cupped her right breast in my hand, squeezing firmly and feeling like a fucking king when she shuddered and moaned, arching closer while her nails bit into my flesh.

"More," I muttered against her mouth before ending the kiss to trace a line down her neck. At the fragile, sensitive spot where her pulse fluttered like a trapped butterfly, I bit down and sucked. She jerked, one hand coming

up to fist in my hair while a soft sob fell from her lips.

The sound of it made my cock swell even more. So sensitive. So reactive. How would she react when my dick was buried inside her?

I was desperate to find out, but first...

I kept on moving downward, shoving her shirt from her shoulders, then popping the front clasp of her bra so her breasts swung free.

Straightening, I stared at her, committing the swell of her breasts, the color of her nipples, a lush, dark pinkish-brown that drew even tighter and more flushed as I watched. She shifted, and I looked up, saw the self-consciousness forming. When she would have lifted her arms to cover herself, I slid the hand on her nape into her hair, fisted it. "Don't move."

Her eyes widened.

Licking my index finger, I lowered it, then traced it around the swollen areola of her nipple. She shuddered and jerked, a whimper falling from her lips.

"Fucking sexy," I muttered. I treated the other nipple to the same treatment, then flicked it, watching as her cheeks flushed and her mouth parted, ragged breaths leaving her. Pinching her right nipple lightly, I rolled it back and forth, tugging and toying until she was shifting restlessly. "I want to bite those pretty nipples. Can I?"

"Um." She shifted again on the table, pressing her knees together. The reason for it had pre-cum seeping from the head of my cock, and I covered the heavyweight of my erection with my free hand, pressing hard.

Her eyes widened. "If I say yes, can I touch you?"

"I'm hoping you'll do that anyway." But I didn't give her a chance to do so yet. Instead, I slid my free arm around her waist and pulled her snug against me while arching her back. Her breasts lifted, as if on display for me. "Delicious."

I bit the right nipple first, and she jerked against me, hard, shoving her hands into my hair. "*Keith!*"

She grew impossibly hotter, softer, and I wanted to sink my dick inside her *now*. Her legs were still clenched together, and I let go of her hair, eased her back down to the table so I could press my hands against her knees, pushing her thighs apart before shifting my attention to her left nipple.

She was wild in my arms by the time I stopped, the rich perfume of her hungry body filling my head, driving me mad.

"Keith...*please*..." It was a demand, an order, a plea all in one.

With a rough kiss, I muttered, "In a minute. I've got to taste you first."

As I pulled back, her lust-drunk eyes followed me, but there was no real comprehension. Even when I went to my knees in front of her and pulled her to the very edge of the table, she still stared at me.

But then I pushed the pretty, delicate material of her raspberry-colored skirt up and caught her panties in my fists, one hand on each side of her hips. "Up, Ronni," I ordered.

She did so, not even blinking at the shortened version of her name.

Stripping away the panties, I went to my knees in front of her.

She stiffened and went to close her thighs, but my presence there prevented it. "Keith...?"

"What kind of lovers have you had if this makes you nervous?" I said, pressing a kiss to the inside of her thigh.

"I...Keith!"

Dragging my tongue through her folds, liquid with lust and sweet as honey, I paused just long enough to say, "Later. Keith's busy."

"I..." The choked noise died in her throat, replaced a moment later by a strangled cry as she shoved her fingers into my hair, tightening to the point of pain, then she was pressing me against her more firmly as I licked my tongue deeper into the wetness of her.

Not enough. Nowhere near. Hand on the inside of her right knee, I shoved her open wide and leaned back, staring at the slick, pink folds...*so fucking wet.*

She whimpered, but I knew that shyness I'd sensed earlier had risen to the surface again by the way she wiggled and tried to close her thighs again. Leisurely, I let my gaze slide over her, the slick, wet, gleaming folds of her cunt, the skirt where it fell to shield her partly, her breasts big and heavy and beautiful, then her mouth, swollen and damp.

"You're a wet dream come to life," I said, my voice barely a rasp. "And I'm going to eat this pussy up and have you come against my mouth before I sink my dick inside you...unless you tell me to stop, Ronni. Do it now."

Her eyes looked all but blind.

One hand pressed against her belly, clenched into a tight fist.

"Yes or no, baby."

She licked her lips and whispered, "Yes."

I didn't wait another second. Pressing my mouth against her sex in a hot, open-mouthed kiss, I licked and tongued and tasted, eating her up just like I

said I would. When she was thrashing, all but bucking out of my hands as she worked herself against my mouth, I shifted, then slid my fingers along the side of her left thigh, once more using my grip on her right to keep her open.

I licked her again, bottom to top, then sucked on her clit.

She went stiff, a keening wail escaping her.

Just as it faded, I traced the sensitized tissues guarding her entrance. “I can’t decide if I want to give you my fingers or have you come around my cock this first time.”

But even as I said the words, I knew.

Surging upright, I hauled her off the table. “Come on.”

She stumbled, and I steadied her against me.

“Wha...?” She blinked at me, her entire body shuddering. She was so close to coming, one light touch would do it.

Not here, I told myself. Not here on the fucking table by the door.

Fingers twined tightly with hers, I led her through the condo.

In the dim hallway, I stroked my hand down her back, cupping her butt in my hand. She made another one of those hungry, husky moans. Control falling to shreds, I turned and pressed her into the wall, kissing her again. The skirt had fallen down past her hips, and I swore, taking a step back and fumbling with the button and zipper. It floated to her feet in a bright splash of color as I reached between us and cupped her, grinding the heel of my hand against her clit.

“Keith!”

“Fuck...the way you say my name, it makes my dick beg for you, baby,” I muttered against her mouth.

“I...really?”

Lifting my head, I found I could smile. Somehow. Taking her hand with my free one, I guided it to my cock, let her feel me as I took her mouth again. I figured out fast how much of a mistake that had been, because she jerked at the zipper, proving that she was *much* more dexterous one-handed than I’d been. In seconds, she’d freed the button before tugging the zipper down.

She halted before it had moved more than an inch.

Already blind with the need to have her hands on me, I took over the task, unzipping, then shoving my briefs out of the way enough to free my cock. Just the kiss of air on me hurt, but I guided her hand back to me and shuddered as she wrapped me in her fingers.

I covered her hand with mine, squeezing tighter. “Like that, Ronni.

Squeeze my cock...fuck, do you see what you're doing to me?"

TWENTY-FIVE

VERONICA

IF I COULD HAVE BREATHED PAST THE HEAT THREATENING TO BURN ME ALIVE, I would have pointed out something about what *he* was doing to *me*.

But I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, could only *feel*. The beautiful bliss as he rubbed against the sensitive knot of my clit, his mouth hungry on mine, and his penis—*his cock*—so hard and thick in my hand, the skin impossibly silken and soft.

I dragged my hand up, then down, moving faster and faster, driven by an urgency I never could have prepared for.

“Ronni...” He growled against my mouth and grabbed my wrist.

I resisted, tightening my hand.

“*Fuck!*” He wrenched my hand away, and then he grabbed the backs of my thighs and *lifted*, shoving me high on the wall before he stepped between my thighs. “Wrap your legs around me...open that sweet pussy, baby. I want you spread out and wide for me.”

The raw, filthy words had things inside me drawing tighter, hotter. I was helpless to do anything but obey, curling my legs awkwardly around him. He shifted me, one hand palming my left breast roughly and the other...

I gasped as the tip brushed over me, his thumb scraping over my clit. Arching my spine as the sensation tore through me, I cried out.

He thrust into me at that moment, grabbing my right hand again, twining our fingers and slamming my hand into the wall by my head.

“*Awww, fuck, yeah...*” he groaned, the words so raw and rough, it was like it came from the very depths of his soul. “You’re so damn tight.”

“I...”

That was all I could manage, pinned on him, feeling like he might split

me in two, even as the overwhelming pleasure had me arching closer, despite the pain. The sensation was too much, and I whimpered, curling in on myself—or trying to.

“I don’t think so,” Keith muttered, his lips muffled against my hair. He nuzzled my neck as I tilted my face away to avoid the kiss he tried to give me. “Give me your mouth, Ronni. Let me taste you again. You’re sweet as candy, all over.”

The pain still burned between my thighs and I was afraid, so afraid, that I’d cry. For some reason, I didn’t want him knowing. “My breasts...I want you there,” I whispered, despite the embarrassment it caused to say anything right now.

He laughed, the sound husky and male.

“They’re just as sweet, baby. And your nipples...they’re so sensitive.”

He proved his point a second later as he bit me again, teeth scoring my flesh in a way that had me arching, driving me farther down on his cock.

I felt the vibration of his moan against my breast right before he bit my nipple lightly. Shuddering, torn between pain and pleasure, I clapped a hand over my mouth to keep from screaming.

And yes...there were tear tracks.

But the pain wasn’t so much now, a deeper pulsing ache rather than a sharp, tearing one.

He rolled his hips against me the next time, the movement subtler, and I trembled, moaning. Mouth brushing over my throat, he sought my lips, and I couldn’t stop him, not when he cradled my skull in his hand and guided my mouth to his.

“You’re so tight,” he whispered again, flexing his hips and sinking deeper before retreating. Another subtle roll of his hips, and the rush of pleasure had me gasping. “You’re a fucking fist...so wet and tight. You feel like heaven, baby. Aww...fuck. It’s been a while for you, hasn’t it, Ronni?”

I couldn’t answer that. I could barely breathe, too full of sensations I didn’t know how to process.

He tilted my hips upward and did...*something*. Shuddering, I flung out a hand and grabbed his shoulder, arching closer in an effort to lessen the pressure—or maybe seek *more*.

“Fuck...Ronni...be still...”

I wanted to—*so much*—I didn’t know how to handle this, the way he stretched me, his big hand gripping the curve of my left buttock, fingers

digging into my flesh, so close to an area I'd never even considered to be sensitive...until he touched me there.

Groaning, I sucked in a breath just as he tipped my head back and rubbed his lips over mine.

“Ronni. Fuck, yes...like that...squeeze my dick like that again. And give me your mouth. I want your damn mouth.” It was a harsh demand spoken against my lips, his teeth nipping the lower one while one hand came up to cup my breast, plumping it in a firm hand, pinching my nipple to just this side of pain.

At the same time, he did another one of those twisting moves with his hips while changing the angle of his body. When he thrust into me, his pubis rubbed against my clit.

My muscles clenched down around the thick, hot pillar of his cock.

I could *feel* myself spasming around him, *feel* the tensing of my internal muscles, *feel* as the sensations rippled outward and outward, stretching my soul, my skin, my *everything*, because whatever was happening was just too damn big for my body alone.

“Fuck...Ronni...” He groaned against my mouth, one hand fisting tight in my hair. “Can you...”

He said nothing else, his entire body growing rigid, almost vibrating against mine. His head fell back, the veins standing out in stark relief. “You’ve got to be still. You’re so silky and wet. I’m about to lose it already.”

Another one of those deep, clenching spasms tightened inside me, and I moaned as his cock pulsed in answer.

He snarled, the hand in my hair tightening and yanking my head back only a fraction of a second before his mouth slammed down on mine. His other hand went to my right knee, lifting it high, then shoving it to the side.

There was another flare of biting pain as he finally, *finally* filled me completely, so completely, I knew nobody else would ever touch me the same way. Jerking in reaction and sobbing his name as the sharp edge of pain sliced through me again, but this time, it was mingled with such pleasure. I had no defense as he moved on me once more, the change in position letting him fill me deeper, over and over and over again. Sobbing, I scrabbled against him, needing him closer even as I tried to pull back.

“No,” Keith rasped, hauling me against him so my bare breasts scraped against his chest, the light dusting of chest hair teasing my nipples, another sensation in a storm of them. “Stay with me. *Stay.*”

He bit my lip and released my hair to skim his hand down my back, then palm my ass, once more sinking his fingers into the crease of my buttocks.

One blunt tip brushed over the fragile bit of skin between my anus and vagina. And he drove into me, over, and over, and over again.

I could no longer tell if it delighted or destroyed, if it pleased or pained, if it teased or tormented. It was too much and not enough, and I shattered, my vision graying out at the edges.

“Perfect,” he whispered against my mouth. His arms closed tight around me, holding me against him as he thrust up into me, again, and again, and again. “So fucking perfect...come around my dick, baby. Let me feel it...”

The world broke apart, and everything went black.

I ACHED. Deep inside, a pulsing sort of ache unlike anything I’d ever felt before.

At the same time, there was a bone-deep sense of *rightness*, one that left me feeling so warm and lax, I didn’t even want to open my eyes. Turning my face toward the warmth of Keith’s neck, I nuzzled him and murmured his name.

He didn’t react.

His heart pounded, hard and fast. I could feel it beating in time with my own, while his hands gripped my hips with near-bruising strength. His penis pulsed inside me, and I whimpered, unable to control how I contracted around him, unable to control the flare of pain, and this time, there was little pleasure to go along with it.

Owww...

There was no denying the pleasure he’d given me.

There was also no denying how very, *very* sore I now was, and I had no doubt it would only get worse.

Abruptly, he tensed and jerked away, and I couldn’t hold back that pained whimper that escaped any more than I could stop how my legs quivered, or how I reached for him. Tears blurred my eyes, and I had to blink them clear, rushing to hide them before he could see.

It took a good thirty seconds to realize that wasn’t going to be an issue.

Because Keith wasn’t looking at me.

He stood at the windows a good ten feet away, his jeans still hanging low on his hips as he slammed his hands against the glass.

I flinched, caught off guard by the violence of it.

“What the *fuck*, Veronica?” he bit off.

The sheer fury in his voice froze something inside me.

“Keith?” I whispered.

He spun around, and the eyes that had been so full of heat and passion were hard and cold.

“Get out.”

I flinched.

He swore and strode away, returning in a blink with my clothing and dumping the pieces into my arms. “What the *fuck*, Veronica?” he said again. “You’re dating my brother, and you came *here to me*?”

Tears burned my eyes, constricted my throat. “Keith, n—”

“Get *dressed*,” he snapped. He didn’t even look at me, his eyes on a point just past my shoulder.

And his voice.

It was so, so cold.

As he turned his back, I grabbed at the clothes he’d dumped into my arms. Fumbling with my bra for several seconds, I eventually gave up. My fingers wouldn’t cooperate, and the longer I stood there, the more numb they became. Pulling my shirt on, I went to button it only to discover that the buttons were missing.

I shot another look at my bra, but knew I’d never be able to get the damn thing on.

In desperation, I tied the tails into a knot halfway just under my breasts and knelt to grab my panties and skirt. The panties were shredded. Swallowing a half-hysterical sob, I jerked the skirt up and could only be thankful that the button and zipper of *that* piece of clothing were in one piece.

I had no idea where my shoes were. The sensible but cute heels with the moderate heel were nowhere to be seen, and as I looked around, I could feel Keith’s gaze slam into me.

I couldn’t stay here.

Shoving past him, I grabbed my purse from where I’d dropped it on the floor.

“Fuck.”

The low, angry snarl behind me made me flinch, but I didn’t slow, didn’t

stop walking. If anything, the sound made me move *faster*, especially once I heard movement behind me.

Managing to jerk the door open despite the trembling of my hands, I all but threw myself down the stairs, stumbling halfway down and only able to steady myself thanks to the death grip I had on the railing.

“Damn it, Veronica. Slow down,” Keith barked out from several feet behind me.

I didn’t dare.

I was about to fall apart and I couldn’t—*couldn’t*—do it here.

The door was locked, but I wrenched at the deadlock and jerked, throwing it and breaking outside. My chest was tight, and it hurt, and black dots swarmed before my eyes. I didn’t understand why until a harsh, jagged breath finally tore out of me. I’d been holding my breath, afraid to even breathe.

I didn’t have my shoes.

I had no underwear on, and my shirt barely covered my chest. My thighs were damp from what had just happened. I couldn’t think about it directly. I didn’t know if I could ever think about it again without falling apart.

I was less than half-dressed, and I probably would have fit right at home with some of the girls who turned tricks in the rougher parts of the city

But I couldn’t think about any of that.

Striding to the curb and ignoring the abrading surface of pavement against the tender soles of my feet, I waved at one of the passing cabs. Two drove past, but the third came to a stop at the curb, and just in time, because I heard Keith snapping my name behind me.

I stiffened but didn’t turn, grabbing the handle of the taxi door.

He caught my arm. “You’re half naked,” he bit off in my ear. “You can’t go into a car with a stranger like this.”

“I can’t?” I didn’t let myself look at him, knowing I was half hysterical. I had to get away from him. Far. *Far* away.

“Damn it, Veronica. I’ll drive you home. Just—”

“Please let me go,” I said. I didn’t even recognize the sound of my voice. Tugging at my arm, I tried to twist free. In some dim, distant part of my head, I tried to recall the training I’d received. I’d taken four years of karate, along with Britney and Carson, so I knew how to defend myself, how to protect myself, but all I could do in that moment was cringe and twist in a pitiful attempt to escape.

He didn't let go.

"Damn it, Veronica," he rasped.

I flinched because he sounded almost like he had when he...

No.

"Hey, buddy."

Keith went still.

The cabbie shoved the door of the taxi open and climbed out, his big body unfolding...and unfolding...and unfolding. His dark face tightening in a scowl, the huge man looked back and forth between Keith and me before focusing on me.

His features inexplicably gentled. "Sweetheart, are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I said woodenly. "I just need a ride home."

"I'll fucking take you," Keith growled.

"No." Again, I tried to break away from him, the need to escape becoming a desperation inside me, even though his grip wasn't painful. He held my arm firmly but gently, and his thumb swept over my arm in a caress that was far too soft considering the anger pulsing from him.

"Honey, you want him to take you home?" the big taxi driver asked, his voice a bass rumble in his chest.

Mutely, I shook my head. His eyes slid to Keith, but before he could speak, I said, "Let. Me. Go."

And I wrenched away, putting all my strength into it this time.

His hand tightened slightly, then fell away.

I dove into the cab, scrabbling to grab the door and slam it shut.

The big man climbed into the front seat, and we pulled away from the curb, drove for a good two minutes before he spoke. "Where are we going, sweetheart?"

His voice was inexplicably gentle.

I had to squeeze my eyes shut against the tears as I gave him my address.

"All right, honey. You just relax, and I'll get you there right quick. It will all be okay."

No, I thought. It wouldn't. It really, *really* wouldn't.

TWENTY-SIX

KEITH

HANDS AGAINST THE WALL, THE WATER SO HOT IT NEARLY BOILED, I STARED at the tiled floor despite the water that ran into my eyes.

If I closed them, I'd see Veronica and then I'd start to taste her, smell her, hear the soft, broken moans and desperate cries.

And *fuck*, I'd also see the stricken look in her eyes when I told her to get out—the blank expression on her face when I caught up with her on the street after I told her to leave. She'd walked out of my place *barefoot*. Without her panties, which were still laying on the floor because I couldn't risk touching them. If I did, I'd crush the fragile silk and either tear it...or stroke it between my fingers as I remembered the lush, soft wetness of her as she closed so fucking tight around my dick.

Tight.

Too tight—

“Don't go there, Keith,” I told myself, wrenching the shower off with a savage turn of my wrist.

I climbed out and toweled off, rubbing hard enough that it made my already stinging skin protest. I welcomed the small pain. It was the least I'd deserved. I'd fucked my brother's girlfriend.

It didn't matter that I'd been hiding how I felt from her since even before I'd introduced them. It didn't matter that she'd come to me.

And *fuck*, why had she?

The ghost of her voice whispered through my mind again.

I have to know if you want me even half as much as I want you.

Furious at us both, I threw the towel in the direction of the hamper and stormed out of the bathroom. In my bedroom, I found a pair of workout pants

and pulled them on, then started for my small home gym. I didn't make it halfway there before I stopped, mind still swimming with the memory of her climbing into the cab, and the look the taxi driver had given me.

It had been full of disgust—and I deserved it.

Still, I couldn't stop worrying.

“So fucking call her. Just make sure she got home okay.”

I found my phone and dialed her number, only to hear a ringing coming from within my own condo.

Dropping my hand to my side, I followed the sound. The light from the screen was visible across the dim, sprawling space of the condo's open floor plan. A headache started to pound at the base of my skull as I found the phone under the table where she must have placed her purse when she first came in.

I grabbed it and resisted the urge to throw the damn thing against the wall. Tucked snug into a case that also held a couple of credit cards, a small amount of cash, and her license, it was pretty damn obvious I couldn't just keep the damn thing here, but I had a twisting, sinking sensation in the pit of my stomach. One that told me she wasn't likely to contact me and ask if it was here.

Especially considering how she'd looked at me when I tried to convince her to wait until I could drive her home.

The guilt knotting my stomach intensified until I thought I'd puke my guts up from the pain of it.

Shoving the phone into the pocket of my athletic pants, I went to my room, grabbed a shirt, and shoved my feet into a pair of battered tennis shoes. I'd take her the fucking phone—it would kill two birds with one stone. My gut still crawled with unease, and I knew I wouldn't sleep without being certain she'd made it home.

Maybe she went to Matt, a sly voice suggested.

Maybe she had. If she had...well, whatever Matt wanted to do to me, I'd deserve it.

He'd be angry, but as broken as she'd looked when she left...hell, Matt wouldn't be able to turn his back on her.

“Your own fucking fault.”

It was, but I was still furious she'd even *come* here.

“Doesn't excuse how you treated her,” I told myself as I grabbed my keys. I'd treated her like some cheap whore I'd picked up off the streets, then

thrown her out when I was done.

An image of her face, the way she'd flinched flashed through my memory.

It's been a while. That's what I'd whispered to her.

"Stop it," I told myself, locking the door behind myself. What had happened earlier, it was all in the past. It wouldn't happen again—*couldn't*.

So, there wasn't any point in thinking about it, was there?

It was late enough in the day that Boston traffic was fairly light, and because of that, I arrived at Veronica's house way too soon. As I'd come to learn was typical over the past few weeks, parking was at a premium, and I had to snag a spot nearly a half block down, wedging my Dodge Mopar Challenger into the small space and turning off the ignition.

Then I sat there.

For a solid five minutes, I sat there, staring at the blank lights on the dash while heat crawled and licked up my neck and face, the idea of looking at Veronica after how I'd acted eating at my stomach like acid.

If she hadn't dropped her phone—

"But she did, you stupid fuck."

I forced myself out of the car, because more than anything, I had to see that she'd made it home okay. The blank way she'd stared at absolutely nothing when I caught up with her on the street had scared the shit out of me. Fuck, it was still scaring me.

Shoving my keys into my pocket, I jingled them and started toward the house.

All I had to do was knock, make sure she was there and turn over the phone. If I was lucky, she wouldn't even answer the door. Other people lived there. Her parents. Actually, her grandparents. She'd told me that after mentioning how her mom had abandoned her. And her sisters and brothers.

Her grandparents had adopted all of them, raised them. Her adopted parents were early birds, usually in bed by nine, and her mom still got up every morning at six to prepare breakfast for the whole crew.

We'd always talked...so easily.

Up until the past couple of weeks as things got more serious between her and Matt.

Now...

I clenched my hand into a fist. I couldn't even say I'd ruined everything. Not tonight, anyway. I'd been shitting on the fragile friendship growing

between us ever since she started dating my brother—the man *I'd* set her up with.

It was over, though. All of it.

Once I turned this phone over, the best thing I could do was get the fuck out of Dodge, stay the hell away until I got a better grip on my emotions *and* figured out how the hell I'd face my brother after this.

Leaving her to face the fire alone, coward?

I silenced the voice. I'd talk to Matt, work this out with him on my own—when *I* was ready. But she'd have to do the same fucking thing. I hadn't *made* her come to me, right?

Chickenshit, that same voice muttered.

Coming to a stop at an angle that offered me a view of the house, I took a deep breath. It had been almost an hour since that cab pulled away from the house. I couldn't stand here forever.

Hearing voices behind me, I sidestepped to give way to the group of the teens ambling down the street, but they'd all come to a halt on the crumbling sidewalk by my car.

They saw me watching them, and one of them grinned, his teeth flashing white and straight against his dark skin, save for the front right tooth on top that was chipped and slightly crooked, oddly charming. “Dude, this yours?”

“Yeah.”

“Nice...” He canted his head. “Mind if I take a closer look?”

“As long as it doesn't involve getting inside. Too many of you.”

They cackled and converged on the limited edition sportscar while I went back to staring at the house. I could see her silhouette in the second-story window. I had no doubt it was her, and I was grateful the streetlight just behind me was busted. The interior light shining through sheer curtains limned Veronica's lush body as she sat on what I assumed was a window seat, her back to me.

I tried to pretend I couldn't see her shoulders shaking.

After a couple of minutes, the boys glided closer, led by the tall, gangly kid who'd spoken to me first.

“You here for Miss Veronica?” he asked, taking a place next to me and shoving his hands in the front pockets of his baggy jeans, slouching in that way kids his age did.

“Sort of.” I slanted a look at him before going back to studying the house—the *window*. She moved, rising and moving out of sight, and I was

pathetically grateful.

“You ain’t the rich dude who been comin’ around,” he said pragmatically. I stiffened.

“She’s a nice lady,” he continued and either he’d noticed my reaction and chosen to ignore it or was blithely unaware.

I’d seen the cagey glint in his eyes earlier. I suspected there wasn’t much that slid past him.

When he didn’t elaborate, I reached into my pocket, pulling out my wallet and phone at once. “You want to make...” I glanced over at the other boys with him, all roughly the same age, probably between sixteen and eighteen, then checked the cash I had on me. A bunch of twenties and some tens, probably close to a hundred fifty. Without bothering to count it, I pulled it out. “This. I’ll give you this to split between you and your friends if you do me a favor.”

Suspicion immediately clouded his golden eyes. “Yeah? What kind of favor? I ain’t causing Miss Veronica or her folks problems. They good people.”

“I just need you to take this to her. Say you found it on the street or something. Just don’t tell her somebody asked you to give it to her.”

The suspicion was replaced by the same shrewd expression I’d seen earlier. “Why?”

“Because she won’t want to talk to me, even if I do have her phone, and I don’t want to upset her,” I said. It was, in part, the truth.

He blew out a breath, then shrugged. “I can do that. I don’t need the money, though.”

His friends groaned good-naturedly, protesting.

I gave him the phone, then shoved the bills into his hand too, refusing to take them back. “Make sure you all split it up. A group of kids having twenty or thirty bucks isn’t that big a deal, right?”

“Huh. You ain’t one of those *dumb* white dudes,” he said, smiling a little. “I’ll give you that.”

Instead of addressing that, I said, “If you can wait until I’m in the car, I’d appreciate it.”

“Figured you don’t want her seeing you, man.” He gave an expansive roll of his eyes and nodded to his friends, strolling over to them while I went in the opposite direction, heading for my car.

I pulled away from the curb and started down the street. The boy waved

at me before heading toward the gate and lifting the latch. I waited at the end of the street, watching as he approached the door and knocked. Light spilled out a few seconds later, the door opening.

I pulled away and told myself *that was it*.

It was done.

Over.

THREE DAYS LATER, the heat of a humid New Orleans summer all but choking me, I pulled my phone from my pocket, unable to ignore it anymore. I'd left Boston less than ten hours after Veronica had climbed into the cab, knowing that if I stayed in Boston, I'd do something stupid.

I also hadn't wanted to face Matt yet, and even now, days after it had happened, I was still sick with guilt over what I'd done.

But I couldn't keep avoiding my family, because if I did, one of them would hunt me down, and they'd take one look at me and figure out something was up.

I didn't need that shit right now.

I wasn't sleeping, could barely hold a thought in my head, and every time I closed my eyes, I saw Veronica's face.

My phone buzzed again, reminding me I had a call, and I sighed as my grandmother's name flashed over the screen.

"Hi, Grandma," I said, blanking my mind so I could talk to her without my fucked-up head interfering.

"Don't you 'hi, Grandma' me," she said tartly. "I've only called you *three times*."

"I've been busy," I hedged, even though I knew it wouldn't work.

I wasn't wrong.

"Busy," she said in a voice so sweet and polite, I winced. "Of course. Too busy to take a few minutes to call your mother and father and let them know where you are, that you're okay. Too busy to check in with your brothers. Too busy to send your grandpa or me a text. Living the high life of a fashion photographer takes it out of you, doesn't it, baby?"

"I'm sorry." Pinching the bridge of my nose, I swallowed the words I *wanted* to say. Words like...*How is Matt? I'm sorry, I had to get away. Gran,*

I should have listened to you.

She sighed and said, “Boy, I don’t know what to do with you.”

LATER THAT NIGHT, I sat on the edge of the bed in my hotel room, staring at nothing.

The phone call from my grandmother had been easy enough. She’d mentioned Matt, talked about his workaholic ways, and made a passing comment that he wasn’t dating “that pretty schoolteacher” anymore, but she hadn’t elaborated beyond that.

Such a simple comment. That pretty schoolteacher.

I should have made some sort of comment, asked how my brother was... or alluded to knowing. I had a bad feeling my grandmother had picked up on my lack of acknowledgment, and who knew what was going on in her canny mind?

But I couldn’t find it in me to care.

I was too caught up thinking about Veronica.

Once the shooting for the day was done, once I was alone in the comfort of the house where I was staying in the French Quarter—the home of a model I was friendly with who was currently out of the country—my thoughts went immediately back to that night.

Her voice, moaning my name.

Her hands, clinging to my shoulders...how tight and soft she’d been. How *tight*.

I’d been dancing around acknowledging it for days, but it was getting harder to do. Sagging back on the wide, soft king-size bed, I closed my eyes and relived those few stolen minutes with Veronica.

She’d been a virgin.

At the moment, I’d only been thinking about being inside her.

Then, after, I’d tried to avoid thinking about it, and when I couldn’t, I tried to convince myself I was imagining things. But I sucked at lying to myself. Her initial shyness, the way she’d tensed up, her hands shoving at my shoulders when I’d driven into her with all the finesse of a sweaty sixteen-year-old fucking his prom date in the back of the car. How she’d stayed stiff for long moments after, even as she clung to my shoulders and moaned, her

skin warming under my touch.

I still felt sick inside when I thought about the pained cry I'd heard when I pulled away so roughly, and how I'd seen her reflection in the window—how she'd swayed, one hand reaching for me.

Most damning of all had been what I'd seen after discarding my clothes to shower after I'd come back inside, minutes after seeing her climb into that cab, her face blank and empty as a doll's.

I'd stripped out of my jeans and boxers, left them to fall in a heap on the floor, the denim and pale gray cotton nothing I wanted to look until they'd been laundered, the scent of Veronica left nowhere but in my memory.

But I'd made the mistake of looking at the clothes after dumping them on the floor.

There'd been blood on the boxers.

Blood that had been on *me*—from her.

Because I'd fucked her up against a wall, hard and rough, despite the fact that she'd been so tight.

A fucking *virgin*.

Then I'd thrown her out onto the street.

Falling back onto the bed, I flung my arm over my eyes.

It didn't do any good.

Hiding from your brother and the woman you'd treated so roughly was one thing.

Hiding from yourself was a whole other thing entirely.

TWENTY-SEVEN

VERONICA

THE RESIGNATION LETTER GLARED AT ME FROM THE SCREEN OF MY LAPTOP, but I'd told myself I needed a few hours before I sent it off.

Not because I needed to reconsider quitting—that wasn't even an option.

I hadn't slept a wink, lying in bed throughout the night and hearing his voice as he told me to get out.

But as I woke early the next morning, listening to the quiet Sunday morning as the street slowly came to life outside my window, I knew several things.

I was quitting that job.

I was never going to see Keith Hartwell again.

And I was never going to open myself up to another man so completely.

I felt raw and broken inside, but my pride refused to let me *show* that, so I had to make sure my head was somewhat clear before I sent the resignation letter.

I'd be *damned* if I let him see how he had hurt me.

I'd be *damned* if I let him have any clue that I felt like he'd punched me straight in the heart, shattering the damn organ like it was made of tissue paper, cotton candy, and daydreams.

No more daydreams, I told myself. No more wishful thinking. No more.

Just...no more.

While the letter sat there, waiting for me to read it through once more, I combed through job postings with little to no hope of finding much. It was already the end of June, and I'd be back to work at the school before too much longer. Unless I wanted to take a job flipping burgers or ringing up groceries for six weeks or so, I might not be able to find anything.

I'd taken my turn at the fast-food thing *and* retail and had nothing but respect for those who did it, but I didn't really fancy going back to it, even for a short while.

A couple of catering jobs jumped out at me, and I remembered the offer from my old boss, her saying she could put in a good word for me with some of the caterers she knew through her own company.

Despondent, but knowing I needed to have a job, I sent Sue an email.

"Veronica?"

The soft knock at my door had me closing my eyes. "Yes, Mom?"

"You going to come out of that cave any time soon?"

Do I have to? Sighing, I pressed the tips of my fingers to my eyes and counted to five before responding, "I'll be down in time for lunch. What are we having?"

She answered, and I said, "Sounds good. Need any help?"

"No, baby. Rosalie and I have it."

Even without seeing her, I could tell she was worried. As the sound of her footsteps faded, I closed the laptop and took a deep breath.

On Sundays, we had lunch at one o'clock sharp. It was routine. I had thirty minutes to make myself presentable enough so that when my parents and siblings saw me, they wouldn't realize anything was wrong.

Piece of cake.

"HAVE A PIECE OF CAKE."

Putting the last dish away from lunch, I looked at Irene Cheshire, taking in the warm smile on her face, and the sweetly determined look in her eyes and knew I'd failed to convince my mom there wasn't anything wrong.

"I already had a piece," I told her, nudging the slice of red velvet cake with cream cheese frosting back toward her. "If I eat any more, my hips won't fit into these jeans."

"Oh, hush. Your hips are fine." But she took the cake and cut into it with a fork, her eyes resting on me. "You going to keep pretending everything is okay, or can we talk?"

"I'm fine, Mom." I gave her a smile and knew I hadn't changed her mind a bit. "I'm just tired. The past few weeks, this modeling thing has been more

exhausting than I thought it would be.”

“But it’s good money, right? You’re enjoying it?”

When I first took the job, I’d been skeptical, but then excited, and I’d talked with this woman who’d raised me, told her about some of the models I’d met. A couple of them seriously popular, and Mom’d gushed over a few of the pieces of clothing I’d brought home. She’d been happy, because I was.

I didn’t want to think about the reaction she’d have if she knew what had happened the previous night.

Shame twisted my belly, and I turned away, walking casually to the fridge to get the pitcher of tea. “Well,” I said, taking my time with my answer and letting her read whatever she wanted into it. Maybe she’d just think the shine had worn off, and I was tired from long hours I sometimes had to put in. “Not as much as I was, to be honest. Getting up before dawn some days, then staying up so some client can get the “*perfect*” sunset shot...only to do it all over again two days later because my hairstyle didn’t fit the “*image*”... never mind I’d done it exactly as requested. It can be tedious. But, yes...the money is nice. I’ve paid that last school loan down by almost two thousand.”

“You only have to do it for a few more weeks,” she said. “Although, really, you don’t *have* to do it at all. Your father and I...we appreciate the money you give us, but we can get by without it.”

“I want to help,” I said stubbornly. “But...well, I did turn in my notice.”

“Oh?”

That word carried weight. Blanking my face, I turned to her and nodded before taking a sip of my tea. “It just wasn’t working out the way I’d planned. Mr. Hartwell was getting very...demanding, and it was stressing me out. I’m already looking at a couple of new caterers.”

“Mr. Hartwell...as in Keith.”

“Who else?” I’d sent the resignation letter before coming downstairs. Had he read it yet? Didn’t matter. I was mailing him one tomorrow, requesting proof of delivery, and then he was out of my life. “Man, I’m tired. I’m going to go nap.”

“Veronica.”

I stilled at the quiet tone of command and looked at my mother.

“You’re certain you’re all right?”

“Of course.”

She sighed and nodded. “Okay. By the way, your phone is on the table in the front hallway. Darius Whaley brought it to the front door last night. Your

father was up because his knee was bothering him.”

“Why did Darius have my phone?” I asked, frowning. I’d been looking for it earlier, but assumed I’d put it down on the table where I kept my keys when I got in last night, as I did sometimes.

“He said it was on the sidewalk out front, guessed you dropped it when you were coming in.”

I stilled. “Oh. I guess I need to be more careful. Glad Darius found it.”

“He’s a sweet boy,” she murmured.

I barely heard her, striding out of the kitchen to the hall. My house keys were there, and my phone sat next to the little catch-all bowl.

But no matter what Darius had told my mother, I knew I hadn’t dropped it out front.

When the taxi driver had driven down the street, I’d asked him to go around to the narrow alley and let me out there so I could come in through the back. Mom and Dad had been sitting on the front porch when I got home, and I hadn’t wanted them seeing me in the shape I was in.

I’d come in through the backdoor that opened into the laundry room, and in there, I’d grabbed a pair of my pajamas from the folded stack on the utility table, changing in the dark, then bundling the clothes I’d been wearing into a tight ball so I could throw them away later on.

I’d felt like a robot as I moved through the house, focused on one thing, hiding in my room.

I hadn’t come *in* through the front door.

So, where had Darius found my phone?

The last time I remembered seeing it had been when I stood just outside Keith’s apartment, turning it onto silent after replying to a message from Matt.

I really am sorry, Matt. But it’s just not working out for me.

Then I’d dumped the phone into my purse and walked into Keith’s condo.

Grabbing the device, I hurried upstairs and locked myself in my room before looking back at the phone.

It didn’t hold any answers, save for a missed call from Keith, maybe a half-hour after I’d left his place.

I dropped it on the bed next to me before laying down and curling up into a ball. I still ached—not in a bad way, but the muscles in my thighs pulled, and I was vaguely sore inside.

Those small pains, though, were nothing compared to the bloody, gaping

wound in my chest.

I never should have gone to him.

And it was a mistake I'd *never* make again. No man was *ever* going to hurt me like this again.

TWENTY-EIGHT

KEITH

IT HAD BEEN A WEEK SINCE I WATCHED VERONICA CRYING THROUGH THE sheer curtains protecting her bedroom window.

It was a memory that ate at me like a psychic demon, chewing away at my sanity and temper while I tried to act normal.

There was an email from her in my inbox, and according to a notification from my USPS app, a letter with delivery confirmation had been in my mail two days ago.

The email was from an *R. Cheshire*. The subject line read *Resignation Letter*.

Fuck me, but I still hadn't opened it.

Behind me, the crew for the shoot was breaking everything down and talking about a trip into the nearest town for drinks.

Teo, the stunt driver who was handling the Bugatti in some of the shots, sauntered over, along with his lover Alessio, who everyone called Lexi, approached from the trailers set up for the models. Teo was Lexi's body double—I never saw them work apart.

A bright, sweet smile lit Lexi's face as he hunkered down across from me.

"You are coming out with us tonight, Keith," he announced, his grin infectious and charming. "Teo and I will protect you from the greedy clutches of Octopus Octavia, we swear."

"Octopus Octavia?" I laughed because the name was apt. The pretty young model from London couldn't greet without a kiss, couldn't kiss without tongue and strokes of her hands and couldn't stroke without veering south of the belt.

I'd seen it from a distance and wisely stayed away.

"Can you think of anything more appropriate?" That question came from the much more reserved Teo, his amusement a quiet thing.

"No, not really." Crooking a grin at the two men, I said, "I appreciate the offer, but I'm..." Hesitating, I tried to think of what I could say that wouldn't say *anything*. "I'm just dealing with some shit. My head's toxic, okay? I don't need to be around anybody."

Lexi tried to argue, and I put up with his good-natured ribbing as I tucked away the last of my equipment, a solidly built tripod that would hold my expensive cameras and the lenses that cost almost as much as the camera. As I turned to look at him, my phone buzzed, alerting me to a notification. Without thinking, I pulled it out and skimmed it, started to put it away only to stop and read it a second time.

It was a text from Jezabel.

Have you talked to Veronica?

Frowning, I looked up at the other men. "I have to go. Have fun in town and good work today."

Hitching up the tripod case, I started for the lot off in the distance as I skimmed the message a second, then a third time.

No. I'm in Arizona, doing a shoot for a guy I know that works with Bugatti. Last minute job, covering for the original photographer. Veronica resigned, though.

There. Nice, neat. Professional.

Using the key fob to unlock the back of the rented SUV, I added my tripod to the rest of the gear, then shut it, pretending I *wasn't* watching my phone, waiting to see what Jezabel was writing that was taking so long, those three little dots on the screen driving me crazy.

I know. That's why I wanted to check with you. We chatted in the room you set up for us, but I lost her phone number, and I wanted to check on her.

An uneasy feeling settled in my gut.

Why? Is something wrong?

The response took even longer this time, and every second seemed to take a lifetime.

I don't know if there is or isn't. If you've been on set all day, you probably missed the news report...remember when the three of us were talking on the pier for that one shoot in Boston? She mentioned her little brother was in the Air Force, doing intelligence work and had been heading

to the Middle East? There was some big accident at one of the big bases out there. Bagram Airbase. People died. I can't keep thinking about her telling us about her brother.

My gut went cold.

Another bubble with dots popped up. I shot her a message back.

I'll get a hold of her. Might take a while. Thanks for contacting me.

Then I headed for the front of the vehicle. I had to get to the hotel, grab my shit, and get to the airport, see how soon I could get the fuck back to Massachusetts.

“Hey, Keith!”

Biting back a snarl, I spun around to see Lexi jogging up to me, Teo at his side. They were both carrying some of my gear.

“You leaving these behind for the mountain lions and bears to play with?” Lexi asked, his face more somber than usual.

“There aren't any bears around here,” Teo said, looking around. “I don't think.”

Lexi waved him off. “Open the back door, Keith. We'll put these away.”

I did as he said and climbed in. A second later, I was turning the engine over.

It was a damn good thing the shooting had finished today.

COMBING through internet articles and news sites hadn't done me a damn bit of good because nobody knew anything about the accident in Afghanistan. And if they did, they weren't talking.

I almost called Veronica half a dozen times, but the first time I'd had the urge, it had been almost eleven in Arizona, putting it three hours later in Boston. So, I'd made myself wait.

By morning, after lucking into a spot on the first red-eye back home, I'd told myself I'd wait until at least eight to call her, but checking my gear took forever, and by the time I got to my gate, they were boarding.

As a ruffled-looking mother and a small baby sat in the seat next to me, I tucked away the idea of calling before the plane took off.

After, I told myself. After I landed.

But that didn't keep me from checking her Facebook page in hopes that

she'd posted...*something*.

There was nothing, though.

The page had been silent for just over a week.

When I finally landed in Boston after a long, miserable, sleepless night, I parked the SUV I used for larger photo shoots into a space that really wasn't big enough for it. I didn't care. It was right across the street from Veronica's house, and that was good enough for me.

I needed to see her—and I needed to see her *now*.

Fuck, was her brother one of the guys who'd been killed?

There'd been no new updates that I could find, even though the information about the deaths of several young airmen and two soldiers at Bagram Airbase still caught a significant amount of media attention. I was sick with the thought of Veronica left alone to worry and wonder.

That thought burning at the forefront of my mind, I lifted the latch on the gate and strode up the sidewalk toward the house. The place was old, faintly shabby around the edges, but it was clear the owners were doing their best to take care of it. The grass was cut, several cared-for flowerbeds in the front with more flowers spilling out of planters along the porch.

At one end, there was a big swing, swaying slightly in the breeze.

The slight creaking coming from the chains was the only noise for several seconds as I stood in front of the closed door.

Veronica had mentioned that her family was never quiet. There was music playing or kids laughing or arguing, noise of some kind.

But all I heard from the house was silence, save for the quiet creak of the swing.

Yet I knew there were people beyond the door—I could feel the trapped, pent-up tension.

Lifting my hand, I knocked.

Less than twenty seconds passed before the door opened to reveal a skinny kid with big, blue-gray eyes and a solemn expression on his face. One hand rested on the door while the other held a book. He looked at me for a long moment before asking politely, "Can I help you?"

"Ah, yeah. Yes. I'm here to speak to Veronica." The kid had to be Austin. She'd described her siblings to me, talked about them enough that I had no doubt in my mind that I was looking at the youngest, the one she described with a soft, affectionate smile as she told me about his love for books and comics.

“All right. You can wait here.” He closed the door without saying anything else.

Turning, I paced the porch, hands jammed into the back pockets of my jeans, head pounding while my heart thudded in the oddly empty cavern of my chest.

“Can I help...oh.”

My heart leaped at the sound of her voice, and I turned to look.

Apparently, seeing me didn't have the same effect on her that seeing her had me, although I couldn't say I was surprised. I'd been a fucking ass.

I was still pissed about how everything had gone down, and worried about facing my brother, but none of that excused how I'd treated her, or the fact that I'd missed her.

Veronica, obviously, didn't feel the same. She gave me a chilly look and folded her arms over her chest. “What do you want?”

“I...” Fuck. I hadn't thought it would be this hard to talk to her. It hadn't been before. Yeah, *before I'd been a fucking ass*. “Look, I was an asshole last week, and I'm sorry. But that's not why I'm here. I've been out of town on a job.”

“Bully for you. I'm going to assume there's no access to the internet since you haven't read my email, but since you're here, I'll save us the trouble. I resigned. Effective immediately. Have a lovely day.” With a sharp-edged smile, she turned on her heel.

“Wait,” I said, desperation rising inside.

She flicked me a cold look.

“That's not why I'm here.”

“Then out with it, Mr. Hartwell. I'm spending time with my family right now.” Slowly, she turned to face me, and I saw the signs of strain, faint lines around her eyes and mouth, shadows that were evidence of more than one sleepless night.

“I...your brother. Carson.”

Her lids flickered. Angling her head to the side, she lifted a brow and waited.

“I...ah, well, I heard about the...” *The what, Keith? Accident? Deaths?* “I heard about Bagram. Was he...is he...have you heard from him?”

“No.” Jaw tight, she added, “We've tried to call, but I think the base is on blackout or something until all families are notified. And no, I don't know if Carson...” Her voice hitched.

“Veronica.” I reached for her.

She smacked my hands, glaring even as she dashed a tear away. Disbelief shone in her eyes as she demanded, “Is *that* why you’re here?”

“Yes. I saw the news and remembered you talking about him, and there’s no information...fuck, Veronica.” Shoving a hand through my hair, I turned away. I didn’t like this feeling of helplessness, of uselessness. I didn’t like seeing the hurt in her eyes, hidden though it was, and knowing *I* had put it there. “I heard about the base, and all I could think about was getting here. Seeing you. Being here for you, however I could.”

“Being here for me,” she said. The words were hollow.

A sharp pain tore through me, and I knew I deserved it.

She said those words again, this time edged with anger, drawing my heart’s blood. “Being *here*...for *me*? Not even a *week* ago, you fucked me up against a wall, left me with my head spinning and my heart racing, then you threw me out of your condo while I was still wet from you, my legs so shaky I could barely stand, much less *walk*. I haven’t heard a *fucking thing* from you in all that time, now you show up here and say you want to *be here for me*?”

I wouldn’t have thought it was possible to feel worse.

But it was. It was possible to feel much, *much* worse.

“Veronica, I’m sorry. I know I fucked up. Just...” I reached out a hand, desperate. Desperate to touch her, to stroke away the pain that now filled her eyes, to hold her and promise her...anything. Everything.

But she flinched.

“Just what?” she said, her voice thick. “Let you throw me away again like I’m garbage? No. Leave, Keith. My family needs me. I need to be there for them, take care of them.”

“Who is going to take care of you?”

A stark look entered her eyes, and she looked away. “That’s hardly any of your concern now, is it?”

Even as the last words echoed around the porch, she disappeared inside the house.

As the door closed quietly behind her, I closed my eyes and rubbed my hands over my face.

Well, I’d gone and fucked that up spectacularly, hadn’t I?

TWENTY-NINE

VERONICA

“*DAMN HIM,*” I GROWLED UNDER MY BREATH AS I SLAMMED MY BEDROOM door shut behind me. At least, I *tried* to slam it. The damn thing needed to be fixed, but my bedroom was upstairs, and my dad’s knees were bothering him more and more, and I didn’t want to bother him about the stupid door when all I really needed to do to make sure it stayed shut was finesse it a little.

Slamming it was *not* finessing it.

I didn’t worry about not hearing the finality of the *bang* I wanted to hear, though, storming over to the window to glare outside.

Who in the hell did Keith think he was, coming over here like that?

“Asshole,” I muttered. “*Stupid, arrogant* asshole.”

“And just who are you talking about, honey?”

The sound of Irene Cheshire’s voice from the doorway had me going still. “Ah...” I fumbled for an answer, not turning to look at her. Instead, I kept staring outside. And that was when I saw Keith, still out on the street, pacing by his car, shoving his hands through his hair. He stopped once to kick his front tire before he took up pacing again, his long legs eating up the ground.

“He’s an attractive one,” my mother murmured.

I swallowed the spit that had pooled in my mouth as I watched him.

“He’s nobody.”

“That nobody looks an awful lot like Keith Hartwell.”

From the corner of my eye, I saw her watching me.

“Yeah.” I blew out a sigh and tore my gaze from Keith so I could look at her. “That’s him.”

“Was he here about your resignation?”

I opened my mouth, then closed it, uncertain what to say. Uncertain what

I *could* say. What I *should* say.

I settled on, “No. He wasn’t here about my resignation.”

“Hmm. Well, whatever brought him here, he doesn’t look very happy.”

Usually, I tried to keep things like this from her. Although she was my mother through both blood and adoption and in all the ways that counted, and although I trusted her with everything in me, there were some things I simply didn’t talk about with her—and it was because I didn’t want to hurt her. My birth mother had done enough of that, the way she’d acted out, the way she’d dumped all of us, one after the other here, then walked away.

My parents *loved* me, but they loved their daughter too, and each time Holly had abandoned us, each time she’d chosen some deadbeat over her children, it had hurt Irene and Clive Cheshire, making them wonder what they’d done wrong.

My mom hadn’t ever told me that, but I’d grown up seeing that quiet grief in her eyes, the doubts, the self-blame.

But she was a smart woman, and I could all but *hear* the wheels spinning in her head.

“You know I was going out with his brother,” I said slowly, guilt choking me.

“Yes.” Mom slid an arm around my shoulders, and I leaned into her, closing my eyes. “Let’s sit. I think you’ve held this in long enough.”

Without arguing, I let her nudge me down onto the window seat, arm still around my shoulders. “Keith set us up,” I told her, glancing out the window in time to see him climb into his car and drive away. “I told you how he tried to help me that night I quit my job with Sue. It turns out...” My voice hitched, but I made myself keep talking, and I didn’t stop.

When it came time to tell her what had happened that weekend, I was almost too ashamed to tell her, but I didn’t let myself hide. “I was falling for Keith all along, Mom. I just didn’t see it. But after that afternoon at the studio...I don’t know. Something woke me up, and I realized I shouldn’t be with Matt. I mean, even if Keith didn’t feel the same thing I did, I couldn’t be with Matt because he was more a friend than anything else, and I...”

It was harder now, and I looked away, staring out the window with heat burning its way into my face.

“I hadn’t slept with anybody before. I wanted...” A sob caught in my throat.

“You wanted the first time to be with somebody you loved, didn’t you?”

she asked, touching her fingers to mine.

“Yes.” It was barely a whisper. “And Matt was...he didn’t *push* me, Mom. He didn’t. But I wasn’t going to change how I felt for him, and I knew it. So why keep making him think I just needed more time?” Getting up, I started to pace, arms wrapped around myself. “So, I broke things off that Saturday, and I...” Groaning, I stopped in the middle of the floor and covered my face with my hands.

She simply waited.

“I went over to Keith’s. I wasn’t...I didn’t *plan* for anything to happen. I just wanted to tell him that I had feelings for him. There were times when he acted...I mean, I thought maybe he felt the same, and I wanted to know. Then he kissed me, and everything went a little crazy...” My voice cracked.

Mom got to her feet, alarmed. “Sweetheart, are you okay?”

“No!” I half-shouted it, feeling the foundation under my feet crumbling. “He kissed me, and it was like nothing else *mattered*. It didn’t matter that his brother had been kissing me not even an hour earlier, didn’t matter that I’d only wanted to talk, or that I’d told myself I’d wait until I could be with somebody who cared about *me*. *Really* cared. He touched me, and it was like the world just disappeared. Then when it was over...” Tears blurred my eyes, and I angrily dashed them away, staring into my mom’s gray eyes, eyes so like mine, but a few shades darker. “He threw me out. Like it was nothing. Like *I* was nothing. Now I feel like I’m not any better than Holly, and I still can’t stop thinking about him, and I—”

The sob that came from me sounded like nothing human. A wounded animal, maybe, but not like *me*—calm, contained, controlled *me*. Clapping my hands over my mouth, I tried to contain the tears.

Then my mother’s arms came around me, and the dam broke.

“Hush, baby,” she whispered, rocking me. “Hush. It’s all right.”

It *wasn’t* all right. How could it be?

Time passed. Minutes, hours? A whole day and night could have passed, and I wouldn’t have known. Finally, as the tears eased, as the fist around my throat let up, and I could breathe, she stood and tugged me to my feet as well. I didn’t even remember how we’d ended up on the floor.

“Go,” she said, nudging me to the bed. “Lay down.”

“I don’t want to,” I said wearily. “When I do, I dream about him.”

“Okay. Then sit.” She gestured to the window seat. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

The second the door shut behind her, I wanted to leap up and lock the door, even as tired as I felt. More humiliated than I'd ever felt in my life, I had to force myself to settle on the window seat, staring at my lap for fear I might look up and see Keith's car.

She returned just a few minutes later, and I stared numbly at the cup of tea she held.

"Here. You need it. Your throat is going to be hurting soon if it isn't already."

It was. I didn't want her to worry, so I took the tea and sipped, tasting honey and spices, and the faintest touch of whiskey. "It's kind of early for alcohol," I whispered.

"A hot toddy is medicinal." She winked at me and brushed my hair back. "Now listen, Veronica. Whatever happened between you and that boy..."

I cocked a brow.

"I'm sixty-six, young lady...and it doesn't sound like he handled things in the most mature fashion. So...yes, I'll call him a boy for the time being. Whatever happened, you need to understand one thing."

I braced myself for the recriminations, the warnings, everything I knew I needed to hear.

"You are *not* your mother, baby," she said gently. "You didn't sleep with Matthias, knowing you had feelings for his brother. Once you acknowledged those feelings, you did the hard thing, breaking it off with one man before going to the other. As to losing your head a bit..." She gave a surprisingly wicked smile. "Sweet girl, we *all* deserve to have a man who makes us forget ourselves."

I blushed again. I wouldn't have thought it was possible, but my cheeks were burning hot, and Mom looked at me with amusement sparkling in her eyes, even as sympathy softened her smile.

"You didn't deserve the way he treated you. I think you know that, and I'm sorry for it." She took my hands and squeezed. "But you're not *anything* like Holly. Holly has only ever worried about herself and her needs, and here you are, still living with us so you can help us out and help take care of your brothers and sisters. You, frankly, need to start putting *your* needs first, so I don't want to hear such a foolish thing from you again. Am I clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said obediently, and although her words, and the clear love she felt, soothed some of the ragged edges inside, the hurt was still there, pulsing strong and raw.

I wasn't *ever* going to make myself vulnerable to a man again.
Ever.

It just wasn't worth it.

"Veronica! Mom!" Kiley's voice bounced off the walls, and I heard her racing up the stairs, My second-youngest sister at age sixteen, the sweet-faced girl rushed into the bedroom, breathing hard, face glowing as she held out the portable phone. "It's Carson! He's okay!"

THIRTY

KEITH

YOU THREW ME OUT OF YOUR CONDO WHILE I WAS STILL WET FROM YOU, MY LEGS so shaky I could barely stand, much less walk.

Hours had passed, so many of them that the sun was casting long shadows from its position in the west, and my head still spun, and I didn't know what in the hell I was supposed to do.

I had to do *something*.

I had to fix things with Veronica, to be specific. I'd spent the past week hiding from the truth, and I couldn't keep doing it. I was falling for her. Hell, I had been almost from the time I'd laid eyes on her, and I'd been well and truly sunk when I rushed out into the night, thinking to save her only to find her kneeling that asshole, Dirk, before laying him flat.

I'd been running for a lot longer than a week when it came to her. Fixing this mess I'd made was my only option.

You fucked me up against the wall.

I flinched at the memory of her voice because the reality was worse than just me treating her with all the care of a man coming off a ten-year sexual fast. She'd been a virgin, and I'd rammed into her with no care—none.

Hindsight was a bitch, and I got to see it all play out in technicolor every time I slept, that flinch I hadn't realized was a flinch, her harsh breaths, how her nails had dug into my shoulders while the heels of her hands pressed against me—not to push me away, really. But to slow me down.

And I hadn't gotten it.

Let you throw me away again...like I'm garbage.

She had already eclipsed every woman I'd ever met, every intimate relationship I'd ever been in. And that was how I'd made her feel.

Guilt didn't even *touch* on how I felt.

I had to fix things.

Driving around, restless and with no destination, I stopped at a streetlight and looked around, realizing I was not even five minutes from Matt's place.

And it wasn't a coincidence, either.

Subconsciously, I'd intended to come here. To tell him. To talk to him. To apologize...something. I wasn't even sure.

The gleaming glass tower that housed his penthouse soon came into view, and I pulled into the valet area, tossing my keys to the guy in front. "Hey, Martin." Passing him a twenty, I debated on what to say, then finally said, "I might not be here too long, but if I'm not down in about twenty, just go ahead and park her, okay?"

"You got it, Mr. Hartwell." He gave me an easy smile and pocketed the bill.

On my way up, I kept my mind blank. If I tried to think about what I had to say, I'd fuck it up, no doubt about it. I was going to fuck it up anyway, but there was fucked up, and then there was *fucked up*. Since I'd already wrecked things with one person who mattered today, I wanted to proceed with caution.

I knocked, staring at the door and trying not to think about whether or not Matt had ever brought Veronica here, trying not to ask myself—*again*—why I'd ever set her up with him when *I* had wanted her to the point of obsession.

The door swung open.

"Hey, Keith. I thought you were out of town," Matt said, giving me a tired smile as he stepped aside.

I entered, glancing around the elegantly stylish penthouse without really seeing anything. "Came back today. I...had things to take care of and the shoot was about over anyway."

"Ah. The way Mom talked, it sounded like you'd be gone a couple of weeks. Have to say, I'm glad to see you back. Wouldn't mind sitting down and having a drink...or five."

That nagging sense of guilt rose up, but I forced it down. "Something wrong?"

"Besides the usual?" he asked sourly. "Yeah, you could say that. Whiskey?"

"Sure. Whatever you're having." I took one of the armchairs and watched him as he moved to the beverage service. He looked tired, dress shirt ruffled and untucked, sleeves rolled up. The jacket and tie he'd worn that day were

tossed on the couch, an uncharacteristic sign of disorder for my older brother. “What’s going on? More problems with the foundation?”

“No.” He hitched up a shoulder as he turned to me, two high balls half-full of a rich, amber liquid. “Not any more than normal, at least. There was actually a couple of anonymous donations over the past few weeks...not enough to stabilize us, but enough to help for a while. It’s...Veronica.”

I tensed, my hand tightening on the glass. My voice sounded alien as I said, “Yeah?”

“Did she...” He cleared his throat and tried again. “Well, she might not have mentioned it, but we broke up. I mean, she broke up with me.”

Broke up.

Suddenly, I saw Veronica again, the way she’d looked when she first came into my condo, eyes wide and nervous.

“You broke up,” I said in a rasping voice. “When?”

But I already knew.

“Last Saturday.” He gave me a sharp-edged grin. “I was planning on having a profanity-laced talk with you about how you should stop being such a dick to her next time I saw you. Then she tells me she doesn’t feel for me how she thinks she should feel and there’s somebody else she can’t stop thinking about, and it would be better...hell. Fuck it, right?”

I tossed back my whiskey, the expensive booze gliding down my throat like fiery, liquid velvet. It didn’t do a damn thing to ease the chill inside.

Rising, I went to the beverage service and poured another serving, then figuring I’d need it in a second, I poured more. After downing half the glass, I turned to face my brother.

He was still staring into his own whiskey. It didn’t look like he’d touched it.

“She came to see me Saturday,” I said in a flat voice.

Matt tensed.

As he lifted his head to stare at me, I tossed the rest of the booze back, then refilled it. Again.

“For the record, before I tell you anything else, I really thought when I was introducing you that I was doing the right thing. You deserved...*deserve* better than that bitch, Nikolette. I don’t know why I thought that pushing Veronica at you was the right thing to do, but I was crazy about her from the first night I met her.”

Glass clinked against wood as Matt put his glass down.

As he rose, I thought I should be feeling a bit of trepidation. The slow rush of color up his neck was a sure sign of temper. It took a while to piss him off, but once he hit his limit...

I kept talking.

“She came to see me and told me that she wanted to know if I felt anything.” I sipped the whiskey this time, staring at Matt’s stiff profile, waiting. “Instead of answering, I kissed her, then I fucked her, and because I wasn’t thinking straight, I threw her out. The next day—”

Glass crashed to the floor as his fist slammed into me.

I saw it coming, but I didn’t even try to move.

His sledge-hammer fist driving into my face was the least I deserved. I slammed into the wall and waited for another, head spinning. That could have been because of the booze—or the punch. I had no idea.

“You son of a bitch,” Matt said, voice cold and sharp.

“I know.” Blood pooled in my mouth, thanks to a gash along the inside of my cheek from where my teeth had made contact. I checked with my tongue and didn’t think he’d knocked any of them loose.

Yet.

But he had moved away, a good ten feet, staring out the floor-to-ceiling windows that faced over the city.

“What, are you done already?” I demanded, frustrated.

He glanced at me over his shoulder. “What’s the fucking point? We’ve both lost her now.”

Something about the way he said that froze something inside me.

“Matt...I care about her. A lot. I know I hurt you, and I’m sorry, but she matters to me, and I’m not going to let that slip away—”

A harsh bark of laughter left him as he turned to me. Face half in shadow, he crossed his arms over his chest as he studied me. “Let me see if I remember right. You did say she came to see you, wanting to know how you felt. And you...tell me if I’m wrong, but your words, *exactly*, were, ‘I kissed her, then I fucked her, and because I wasn’t thinking straight, I threw her out.’ Did I leave anything out?”

“No,” I said, that sick feeling inside spreading.

Matt shoved off the wall. “You spent a lot of time talking to her. She ever mention that she had issues from childhood? About her mom?”

Her mom...clearing my throat, I said, “I know her birth mother ran out on them, that her grandparents adopted her and her brothers and sisters.”

“Her six brothers and sisters, right? Ever met them? Seen pictures? It’s kind of obvious they don’t all share the same dad.”

“What are you getting at?” I demanded.

Instead of answering, he said, “I don’t suppose you noticed she was a virgin when *you fucked her* before you *threw her out*, did you?”

“I...fuck.” Looking away, I said, “I didn’t let myself think about it, but... yeah. I figured it out. After.”

“After. Don’t suppose you stopped to wonder why she was still a virgin at twenty-five, did you?”

“I’ve been a little too busy kicking my own ass or choking on guilt,” I snapped. “And it’s none of my fucking business.”

“None of your business? Fuck, you’re a moron sometimes, Keith.” His mouth tight with frustration, Matt just shook his head. “Yeah, I think it’s safe to say we *both* lost her. Although, fuck me if I know why I lost her to somebody as oblivious as you. She was a *virgin* at *twenty-five* because of her mother, little brother. Her mother had a revolving door on her bedroom, and Veronica didn’t want to *be* like her. She wanted her first time to be with somebody who mattered. That guy, I suspect, was probably going to be *you*, seeing as how *you* are the guy she went to after dumping me. The one she couldn’t stop thinking about. And you can bet your ass she’ll think about you for a good long time, so congrats, man. You *fucked her* and *threw her out*. Way to make an impression.”

I felt sick as I stared at him.

Matt didn’t show any sign of sympathy. He went to the beverage service, grabbed an unopened bottle of Macallan scotch, and gestured to the door. “This probably won’t have nowhere near the impact as when you kicked her out, but I feel it’s the least I can do. Get the fuck out, Keith. I’m done talking to you.”

“YOU LOOK WORSE than you did when that old dog of yours died.”

Slumped on a padded bench in the somewhat secluded privacy of a covered portico off the main garden, I glanced over at the sound of my grandfather’s voice, then went back to staring at the fountain that bubbled and danced a few yards away.

“I want to be alone.”

“We don’t always get what we want in life, do we, son?” At eighty-eight, Matthias Hartwell Sr. still stood tall and proud, shoulders straight, although his formerly lean frame was running more toward the skinny end of the spectrum these years. He didn’t look frail by any means. But he wasn’t the giant of my youth, either.

At least not physically.

But when he sat down across from me, I couldn’t do anything but remain in silent respect.

Maybe this was why I’d come, needing advice.

Long, long minutes passed with neither of us speaking.

Matthias Sr sighed. “It’s going to be a lovely evening. I might ask my Alice on a date.”

“Still taking Grandma out on dates, Grandpa?” I asked, somehow dredging up a smile.

“I’ll be taking her on dates as long as there is breath in me, boy.” He pointed a finger at me. “And once you find the right woman, you best do the same.”

The fist around my heart tightened.

“So. Your grandmother was right.”

I didn’t even have to ask what in the hell he meant. Of course Grandma had mentioned Veronica to him. They told each other everything.

“I fucked up, Pops,” I said quietly.

“Then go fix it.”

“It’s not that simple. I fucked up *bad*.” I was disgusted with myself, disgusted, furious...ashamed.

“Seeing as how you kept pushing the girl you wanted at your brother, I’d say so.”

“It’s worse than that,” I said. Blowing out a breath, I gave him a condensed version, including how I’d slept with Veronica, then kicked her out, still thinking she’d been with Matt. I also told him the worst of it, that she’d been a virgin, waiting for the guy who mattered to her...and I’d been careless during, and cruel after. “I was so fucking cruel to her. I can’t blame her for not wanting to talk to me.”

Matthias Sr. stood at the entrance to the portico, rubbing the back of his neck. “Boy, I won’t lie. I’m disappointed.”

It hurt, but as bruised as I felt then, it probably didn’t hurt as much as I

deserved. “I’m disappointed in myself.”

“You should be. Now...you need to get off your ass and go find that woman, apologize. As for your brother...well, he’ll come around. He wasn’t in love with her, anyway.”

I frowned at him.

He caught sight of it and laughed, the sound rusty. “When that boy falls, we’ll all know it. He doesn’t do anything in half-measures. He liked Veronica, probably still does, and that’s likely why he was so pissed off at you. Hell, he might even *think* he loves her. But he doesn’t. Now...you better get off your ass and go fight for her. Because you...” He pointed at me. “You *do* love her.”

THIRTY-ONE

VERONICA

THE TENSION THAT HAD LINGERED OVER THE FAMILY HAD FINALLY LIFTED, BUT we were all edgy.

Earlier, Mom had roped sixteen-year-old Kiley into helping her drag the younger kids to the neighborhood pool, and they'd spent the entire afternoon there. Before she'd left, my mother had told me to call one of my friends and find somebody to have lunch with or hook up with for a movie or shopping. "Just get out of the house, sweetheart. Your dad is going fishing with some friends from work. You need to relax too."

She wasn't wrong, but the first person my thoughts had gone to when I'd considered who to call had been Keith.

And that had pissed me off. It had pissed me off so much that I'd almost flung myself down on the bed for a good, long pity session, but I decided that wouldn't help me get over him.

And I *needed* to get over him.

So I did what Mom suggested and called a friend.

Keziah Wilson was a fellow teacher who'd started at the school the same year I had, and we often hung out together during the school year, going to wine tastings and being part of the same book club. She was much more up on the pulse of the city, and when I messaged her, she told me she was hitting a new wine bar with her cousins and invited me along.

Since I'd met several of her cousins at various wine tastings, I knew for a fact that it was just what the doctor—or what my mother—had ordered so I got ready in a flash and called for a Lyft, meeting them just in time for us to take the last few available seats.

From there, we went to dinner at an open-air café along the harbor and

split several more bottles of wine, me happily spending some of the money I'd earned from the bastard I refused to name.

By the time night was sliding in, I was slightly tipsy, more relaxed, and no longer even attempting to act like I wasn't hurt over how Keith had acted.

The Lyft driver, Lyndon, a sweet-faced woman in her mid-twenties who did pick-ups on weekends to help supplement her family income, listened as I ranted about Keith—without naming him—and assured me that he was most definitely a first-class bastard.

Traffic and a car wreck turned the normally twenty-five-minute drive into one that almost lasted an hour, and she apologized profusely, but I told her it wasn't a problem.

And it wasn't. It gave me some time to sober up, although by the time we turned onto my street, my lids were heavy, and I wanted nothing more than to slip into bed and sleep for a week.

My brother was safe.

My mom had made me feel a little better about myself.

And both my girlfriend, Keziah, and the lovely Lyft driver, Lyndon, had assured me that the asshole photographer had done me wrong. Sometimes, wine and bitching to friends—or a total stranger—could be very therapeutic.

But when I caught sight of the lipstick red Dodge Challenger parked a few spaces down from my house, I swore.

“Son of a fucking bitch!”

Lyndon burst out laughing and glanced at me in the mirror, then followed my gaze to see me glaring at the car in question.

“Let me guess. That's the sexy sumbitch photographer you told me about.”

“Yes.” I barely recognized the low, angry voice as mine.

“Want me to circle around and drop you off in the back or something?”

“No. I want to tell him off.”

And I *did*. I was angry with him, so angry. Even when Lyndon slowed to a stop in front of my house, I didn't feel any sort of hesitancy or reluctance. I should have told him off when he came by earlier. It would have been the least he deserved.

Lyndon gave me a lingering look as I went to get out of the car. “Be careful, ma'am, okay?”

“Huh?”

A faint smile crooked her lips up. “Just...be careful. I've given more than

a few women a ride to the emergency room or their mama's house, or a friend's after a fight with a boyfriend."

"Oh." A bittersweet smile came and went. "He's an asshole but not that kind. I really..."

A knot settled in my throat, and I shook my head. "Thanks, Lyndon. You have a good night."

That bittersweet ache had somehow managed to push the anger down. It hadn't eliminated it. I didn't think *that* was possible. But as I strode up the sidewalk, eyes clashing with those of the man who'd just stepped from the shadows, I realized the hurt still overshadowed everything.

I'd spent so much time protecting myself, refusing to give in when cute guys flirted with me in high school, in college. I hadn't gone out and done the clubbing thing, I hadn't gone to parties, I hadn't let friends hook me up.

Something I hadn't confided earlier when I talked to my mother, but that I couldn't hide from myself, was that I'd *seen* the loneliness in Holly's eyes. Each time she came home with another baby but without the father, alone again, save for the child, she'd been alone.

We hadn't ever been enough for her. I knew I'd never be like that, but some part of me had picked up on that loneliness, that hurt, and held onto it. Men had never made her feel better about herself. Each successive lover, each successive abandonment had only made her hurt worse. And I didn't want to know that pain.

So, I'd shied away from relationships, protected myself.

I'd even succeeded, until Keith.

Now, slowing to a stop at the edge of the street, just in front of the sidewalk where he stood, I wished I'd just kept walking that night I'd quit my job. Hell, screw walking. I wished I'd *ran*, far, far away from him, and never stopped.

His eyes searched my face, pale and washed of color by the harshness of the overhead streetlight.

"What are you doing here?" I asked brusquely, cutting around him when he didn't step aside.

"I want to talk to you."

"You already did." I opened the gate and stepped through, closing it behind me with him on the other side.

He didn't take the hint.

Of course he didn't.

Metal groaned as he came through, and I rubbed my temple.

How did I get rid of him without drawing the attention of my family just yards away?

Because I didn't *want* my family noticing him. At all.

"I...fuck, Ronni. Will you let me apologize?"

Turning on my heel, I glared at him. "My *name* is *Veronica*. You understand? *Veronica*."

"Fine." His expression was shuttered. "Veronica. Please. Give me a few minutes."

A shadow fell across the pale yellow square of light that came from the living room window, and I groaned, glancing over my shoulder. With a curse, I spun around and cut toward the far side of the house. There was a narrow, sectioned-off area where my dad kept garden tools and the lawnmower. We used to keep them in a shed in the back, but the small building had been broken into too many times, so he'd made use of this little area, and it had turned out to be more effective.

Without looking at Keith, I pulled my keys out and found the small one that fit the padlock, fitting it to the keyhole and unlocking it.

I left the padlock hanging as I stepped inside, waiting for Keith to follow before I turned and looked at him.

He closed the tall, wooden gate, enclosing us in a small, secluded area of relative privacy. A hedge ran between our house and the neighbor's side of the tall privacy fence, and the wall behind me had no windows.

Still, I kept my voice low as I said, "You need to leave. I don't want you here. There's no reason to *be* here. So...just...say whatever and *go*."

Faint light from the moon overhead filtered down on us, but the houses and hedge blocked out the streetlights, so his face was in shadow. Barely able to make it out as he lifted a hand to rub the back of his neck, I folded my arms over my chest.

I still felt exposed, the narrow straps of the sundress I'd worn to the wine bar seeming to reveal a lot more than just my shoulders now.

"I'm sorry," Keith said, his voice hollow.

"So you've said. Fine. You're sorry." I was chilled to the bone, although it had nothing to do with the temperature. We were caught in a miserable heatwave, and even though it was a little after nine, the sun already a memory, the air was humid and hot. Yet I shivered. "Look, we heard from Carson earlier. He's fine. He couldn't tell us much, but he wasn't involved

in...whatever it was. He's safe. So, whatever your reasons are for feeling like you needed to check on me, you can consider your responsibility there done. He's safe."

I went to go around him.

He caught my arm, and the shock of his bare skin on mine had my breath trapping in my throat.

Face hot, I stared at the wooden slats of the fence while my heart lurched up into my throat.

"Veronica, wait," he said in a low, urgent voice. "Please...just...look, I fucked up, all right? I *know* that, and as mad as you are at me—and you've got every right to be mad—but as mad as you are, it's nowhere near as angry as I am with myself. I've been mentally kicking my ass since the second the door closed behind you and—"

I laughed, the sound shrill and sharp, slicing at the air. Snapping my jaw together to silence it before we caught attention, I spun to face him. "Since the second the door closed behind me?" I parroted back at him. "For the record, that door was *slammed* behind me. But you want me to buy that you're feeling guilty over all of it and *that* is the reason it took you *days* to reach out to me? To tell me you were sorry for kicking me out of the house while I was still weak from climax?"

"Ronni..." His face was twisted, eyes haunted.

I *almost* believed him. Almost.

"*Veronica*," I bit off. "You told me to get the fuck out, and guess what? I did. I don't know why you're so bothered about that *now*."

I tried to pull away from him but found myself pinned up against the wall instead, trapped between him and the rough brick, his arms caging me in. "You don't know *why*?" he demanded, bending down to glare at me. "I'll tell you fucking why."

He kissed me.

I was so shocked, at first, that I let him.

I was so shocked, at first, that I reached for him, my fingers curling into his shirt while I arched up and pressed closer.

His arm came around my waist, and he yanked me closer while he shoved his free hand into the loose knot of my hair, sending the strands falling to my shoulders.

"This is why," he said on a growl. "Because I'm crazy about you. Because I have been since the beginning. Because I can't stop thinking about

you, the way you laugh and smile, the way you taste, the way you smell...”

His mouth burned a stinging line down my neck, and my head fell back.

When he gathered the material of my dress’s narrow skirt in his hand and worked it up, I froze, telling myself I needed to move, to stop him.

But then he shoved his hand between my thighs, past the barrier of my panties, and sanity went flying along the same route as my self-control.

“Because now, on top of everything else, I’ve got the taste of you inside my blood. Because I know how good it is when your cunt goes tight around me and how perfect your pussy tastes when I spread you wide and lick you from top to bottom.” He pushed two fingers inside me and twisted them.

I cried out, the sound muffled against his lips.

“Now I know how close you are to orgasm when you make a noise like *that...*” He bit my lip and twisted his wrist again, circling my clit with his thumb, and then I was coming, shuddering and rocking against his hand, riding it, riding him.

When his mouth came down on mine, I didn’t have the strength to push him away.

“Open for me, Ronni,” he whispered against my lips, urging me back against the wall once more. “Let me taste you...let me have you...so fucking sweet.”

His tongue thrust deep.

At the same time, he stroked his hands down my hips, my thighs.

Vaguely, I realized my panties were gone, and he was reaching between us.

“Keith...” I blinked, head spinning and my blood pumping hot and thick, like molasses in my veins.

“Shh...I just want...let me show you it can be better,” he whispered against my lips as he stroked his hand down, then between my thighs, cupping me.

It was the wine, I told myself. It had to be. Although I knew that wasn’t the case. I was sober, or sober enough, sober enough to think that I was being stupid and should push him away. I just didn’t *want* to. The feel of his fingers circling my entrance while his thumb did the same against my clit, it was too much of a temptation to resist.

Sagging against the wall, I clung to his arms and moaned, my strength gone.

“So pretty, Ronni,” he murmured against my mouth. “So sweet.”

He pushed inside me then, two fingers thrusting inside me, and I was incapable of any rational thought as he pumped and twisted, as he toyed with my clitoris until it was swollen and aching.

His mouth covered mine when I would have cried out his name.

“That’s it,” he muttered as I jerked in his arms, the pleasure so intense, I couldn’t breathe. “You’re so fucking hot, baby. So tight...fuck, I want to feel you wrapped around my dick and melting all over me...”

“Please,” I moaned, my ability to think gone. All I could do was feel. Sliding a hand down, I cupped him through his jeans. I hadn’t been able to touch him before—

Reality started to intrude.

Keith caught my wrist and shoved it up over my head. “No. Let me...no.”

I reacted to both, being restrained, and his refusal.

It wasn’t a sane reaction, wasn’t a logical one.

It was a reaction driven by the anger still pulsing inside, and I wanted to do *exactly* what he told me not to do. So I used my free hand and stroked him again, bolder this time, harder.

He snarled and tried to pull away, but I bit his lower lip.

Keith tensed.

“What’s the matter?” I said in a dare. “Don’t want me unless I’m all nervous, shaking, and shy?”

He broke away, glaring down at me, his eyes glittering. “I didn’t come here for this.”

“I didn’t come for this when I went to your apartment, and I got it anyway.”

Something slid through his gaze—acknowledgment. Guilt. Desire. Darkness.

“All the more reason for us to stop now.” He tried again to pull away.

“Maybe I don’t want to.”

He gripped my hip, eyes locked on my face even as he involuntarily thrust his cock into the cradle of my thighs.

Veronica, a small quiet voice whispered. *What are you doing?*

I didn’t know the answer to that, but a madness lived inside me, one that demanded I do this anyway. Maybe it was just a need to end things on *my* terms, I didn’t know.

Grinding the heel of my hand against him lightly, I held his gaze. “What’s it going to be?” I said in bold challenge. “Of course, I suppose I can always

find somebody else if you don't want me—”

He kissed me so hard and rough I felt the edge of teeth. And I knew I'd pushed him too far.

Half-expecting him to boost me up against the wall like he'd done the last time, I was somewhat stunned when he spun me around and turned, bending me. “Hands in front,” he growled.

The faint, silvery moonlight showed the outline of an outdoor storage chest. I knew it to be the place where my father stored his garden tools, but in that moment, I was only aware that it came to just above my knees in height, and when Keith bent me over, it held strong under my weight.

Then he was pushing my skirt completely up over my hips and thrusting inside me. One hand tangled in my hair. “Does it feel like I don't want you, Ronni?” he demanded in a low, hushed voice. “Does it?”

His cock swelled inside me, thick and demanding, hard and unforgiving. I clenched around him, desperate.

But he wanted more than surrender—he wanted a response.

He tangled a hand in my hair and pulled, dragging me upright, then thrust again, but slowly...so damn slowly. I moaned, the new position alien and unfamiliar, his cock so thick and heavy inside me, I couldn't breathe.

Keith slid his free hand around my hip and toyed with my clit. I gasped, shaken to the core at how sensitive I was.

“Tell me, Ronni...do I want you?”

I whimpered and grabbed at his hand when he started to pull back. “Please don't stop.”

He didn't, seemingly satisfied enough with that, and I gasped as he began to strum my clitoris as if he was a master playing his favorite instrument.

I came, hard.

He kept moving, rolling his hips and driving up into me, until he tore a second, then a third climax out of me. With those, he had his hand over my mouth, smothering the cries.

I felt the hard pulse of his cock, then a hot, wet rush inside me as he came. His voice was a raw, rough velvet stroke against my senses, against my soul as he murmured, “Ronni...”

And the sound broke past the fog of lust. The ragged sound of my name on his lips, exactly like it had the last time. Just minutes before he'd thrown me out.

“I've lost my mind,” I whispered, heart still pounding, body trembling.

“I’ve fucking lost my mind.”

“Veronica...” Keith kissed my shoulder.

“Let me go,” I said, trying to twist away. He was still inside me, half hard, and when he pulsed, it made things inside me clench. I wanted to sink back against him, let him make me forget. He could. I had no doubt. But it would only last so long. “Let me go. I need to get inside.”

“Baby, please.”

“Don’t call me baby!” I said it louder than anticipated and twisted away savagely, succeeding this time.

Half stumbling away, I turned to glare at him, all the while trying to fix my skirt.

“You threw me out like I was trash, Keith. I broke up with your brother. I *hurt* him, but I couldn’t keep it up, not once I realized that *you* were the one I felt things for. I broke it off with him and came to you, then you fucked me like I was some cheap whore and kicked me out. I’m *not* your baby. I’m nothing to you.”

“That’s not true.” He’d already dragged his jeans up and fixed them. One push of his hand through his hair and he looked normal, save for the savage expression on his face. But even that...even that wasn’t real. I didn’t see how it could be. If he felt things that could inspire that sort of emotion, then he couldn’t have treated me so badly.

He wouldn’t have left me feeling so shattered, so devastated.

And then he just made it worse.

“You’re *everything* to me,” he said, drawing closer to me. “I’m falling in love with you.”

A few days ago, I would have done anything to hear those words.

Even now, I had to clench my hands into tight fists to keep from reaching for him. Steeling myself, I gave him a cold look. “Please don’t. I might not have the experience you do, but I’m not stupid, either.”

Pushing past him, I headed for the gate and the safety of my house.

“What are you doing?” he demanded, voice raw.

“Going inside, taking a shower, going to bed,” I said succinctly. “I hope I can convince myself this never happened, but you can damn well bet it will *never* happen again.”

He started to reach for me.

I flinched away.

Keith stilled, his eyes intense. “You think it will be that easy?”

“I don’t expect *anything* to be easy,” I said with a short laugh. “Nothing in my life ever has been. But I don’t need easy. I just need possible.” Wrapping my arms around myself, I stared at him. “I’ve seen too many toxic relationships, Keith. I’m not about to get caught up in one myself. I’ve got too much respect for myself, and too many people who need me. Now please...just go.”

THIRTY-TWO

KEITH

“YOU LOOK ABSOLUTELY AWFUL, DARLING.”

I glanced up as my grandmother took the seat next to mine and immediately wished I hadn't, because it gave the sun a chance to shine straight into my face, blinding me and singeing my retinas.

At least it felt that way. I'd stayed up way too late, drinking and brooding, then drinking some more.

I didn't know which relationship I'd fucked up more—the one between my brother and me, or the one with Veronica. I knew I'd be able to fix things with Matt, given time and a suitable amount of apologizing on my part. He wasn't the sort to hold grudges, and once he understood that I really was falling in love with her...well, assuming Grandpa was right and Matt wasn't in the same shape as me, things would be okay.

I thought so, at least.

I hoped.

But Veronica...

“I fucked up, Gran.”

I was too hungover and too tired, too miserable to think about my language. Besides, I knew my grandmother. When she was of a mind, she had a mouth like a sailor.

Alice leaned back against the padded cushions of her chair and sighed heavily. “I gathered as much, seeing as how you came over here and without so much as a *how do you do*, parked yourself at your favorite spot in the garden and proceeded to glare a hole through my roses for a good hour. You didn't even say *hello*,” she said chidingly.

I pressed my fingertips against my temples. “Sorry.”

“Well, you have other things on your mind.” She waved a dismissive hand. “Should I say ‘I told you so,’ or would it be a bit too smug?”

I didn’t say anything, but the look I gave her left her chuckling, and that just made me feel shitty. She must have seen it too, because she sighed and gave my hand a quick pat. “I’m sorry, Keith. I know you’re hurting. So, I’ll hold off on telling you ‘*I told you so*’ and ask you what happened.”

“Didn’t Grandpa tell you?” I asked morosely.

“He made a few allusions.”

The tone in her voice had me groaning. “Isn’t that enough, then? I already told you I fucked up.”

“You haven’t told me what *happened*, baby. There are a million mistakes we can make in our relationships. Most are fixable. Some...” She winced and shifted in her seat. “Some, not so much. Now, tell me what sort of mistake you made so we can figure out how to fix it.”

“What if it’s one of the ones that can’t be fixed?”

She brushed her fingers over my hand. “Usually, those happen because a man or woman is a total asshole, the kind who cares for nothing but himself. You can be selfish at times. We all can. But at heart, you’re not a selfish man.”

I wasn’t so certain.

But I wanted to believe I could fix things, make them right. So I started to talk.

And she listened.

I dodged around the more personal details, but when it came to how we’d had sex and all that happened afterward, I didn’t shy away from the truth, and the disappointment in her eyes was cutting.

By the time I finished, I was even more disgusted with myself than I had been and felt even more despondent.

“I don’t know if this is one of those fixable things, Grandma,” I said softly, hands hooked behind my neck as I stared out over the elegantly landscaped gardens. “I screwed up big time.”

“Oh, yes. Yes, you did, darling.” She leaned back and blew out a breath. “You very much did. Tell me something. How important is she to you?”

“I...” My mouth went dry just trying to find the words.

They didn’t want to come.

Clearing my throat, I tipped my head back to the sky, not surprised to discover that the sun had slipped from the high point in the sky and taken

refuge behind a bank of clouds. “She could be everything, Gran. I just didn’t see it until it was too late.”

“Well, if you get to thinking like that, then I might be wasting my time.” Tapping a finger on the arm of the chair, she studied me. “You’ve always flitted from one woman to another, never breaking hearts, but never having your heart broken. What makes Veronica any different?”

“Everything.”

Her face softened somewhat as she leaned forward. “Then you have to stop treating her like all the other women you’ve known.”

“She’s not *like* the other women.”

“Then you need to stop thinking she’s like them, stop acting as if she’s like them, and figure this mess out.”

I managed not to glare at her, but my expression was far from friendly as I replied, “That’s what I’m trying to do. I’ve already apologized, but she didn’t want to hear it.” Not that I could blame her. I was sick inside thinking about how I’d treated her, and not just *after*, but from the time I’d opened my door to her.

Her first time, and I’d ...

“Aw, *fuck*.” Shoving upright, I paced over to the edge of the stone pavers surrounding the fountain and stopped. Grabbing fistfuls of my hair, I pulled hard, but the sharp pain that went through me wasn’t enough. *Nothing* would satisfy my need to punish myself. “I’m a fucking ass.”

“Keith?”

At the sound of my grandmother’s voice, I turned to face her, and this time, I didn’t even attempt to soften the reality of what had happened. “I went to see her at her house, Gran. Again. I told myself I was going to make her understand how sorry I was, but...I kissed her. She kissed me back, even though she was pissed, and I lost my mind. I had sex with her. Again. Outside, up against her house, behind a fence. And to make matters worse, that was only her second time. She’d been...Matt told me she’d never been with anybody before that night when she came to see me. Her real mom apparently had a thing for guys, slept around all the time. It affected Veronica. And I just went and...I’m an *idiot*.”

“Well.” Gran’s voice sounded faint, and I looked at her, blood roaring in my head.

“What do I do?” I asked, feeling lost. “How do I fix this?”

THIRTY-THREE

VERONICA

THREE INTERVIEWS IN AS MANY DAYS, AND I HAD A GOOD FEELING ABOUT THE last one. As I let myself out of the small but meticulously clean renovated house that now housed an up-and-coming catering service with a focus on young adults who hovered between middle-class and well-off and tended toward the geekier side of life, I couldn't keep from crossing my fingers.

The husband and wife team who ran Catering By Design had gotten started after they hadn't been able to find the right fit to cater their own wedding almost twenty years earlier. The *Star Wars* themed event had happened, but only because they'd conned their parents and friends into helping them pull off the wedding of their dreams.

Now, they specialized in themed weddings, everything from *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* to *Pokemon* and *Avengers* to *Lord of the Rings*.

I'd looked at a photo album they kept on hand for prospective clients, and the shots of the *LOTR* wedding had taken my breath away. I'd never really considered having such a wedding, but the sight of the gown, styled after the one worn by Liv Tyler as Arwen in the film had made an ache settle in my chest.

Of course, *then* I'd stupidly imagined Keith wearing a get-up similar to what Aragorn had worn.

Not that he ever would.

Not that I ever planned on seeing him again.

Not that I was doing myself *any* good thinking of all of that *now*. I was a glutton for punishment, apparently.

Determined to get my mind off him, I headed north on the street instead of swinging south toward the bus stop. The money from the last photoshoot

had hit my bank account. I'd been tempted to call Keith and tell him to shove it up his ass but had decided not to let anger control me. I'd earned that money, damn it.

And now I was going to do something completely frivolous. Shopping.

Heading to a pretty boutique that I'd normally avoid because of the price, I tried to push thoughts of Keith from my mind. It got easier as I stepped inside the little shop and breathed in lavender-scented air. Music played softly in the background while several women browsed the artfully displayed clothes. A short woman with the curves of a fifties pinup model came from behind the counter and walked toward me. The retro, fifties-style dress she wore, with its nipped-in waist and full skirt displayed her lush body.

"Can I help you?" she asked with a warm, friendly smile.

"I don't know. Do you sell dresses like that here?" I asked, giving in to impulse.

"Yes." Her smile deepened as she gave me a critical once over before nodding. "And I can already tell you, you will *love* how you look in this style. Come with me."

MORE THAN AN HOUR LATER, and I'd narrowed my choices down to three different dresses. Standing in front of the mirror wearing a petticoat and a demi-up bra with a deep plunge that allowed for the sweetheart neckline of two of the dresses, I debated.

One was a vivid red with tiny white polka dots with cap sleeves, bright and cheerful.

The second and third were nearly identical in style with skinny straps and sweetheart necklines, the bodices gathered and skimming close to the torso before flaring out into a wide circle skirt.

One was a pale, delicate yellow that almost looked white. The other was a silvery gray gingham, the white checks subtle. Red roses provided an unexpected splash of color. The salesclerk had brought in a red bolero with that one, and I picked up the gingham dress, trying it on once more, this time, topping it with the fitted, short red jacket.

My phone buzzed, signaling an incoming message. With a half-smile at my reflection, I picked up the phone and glanced down, saw it was my mom.

I took a few more seconds to study the way I looked before sliding my thumb over the screen.

Hi, baby. Hope the interview went well. What are you doing?

As an answer, I snapped a picture as I posed in the dress, just the faintest curve to my lips.

Sending the picture, I tapped in a question.

What do you think? The red patent leather shoes Britney left behind or my black heels?

Her response came back in seconds.

The red. Buy the dress. Wear it home. We've got something going on tonight. Can you be here within the next hour?

Frowning, I tried to remember if she'd mentioned any plans, but I came up blank.

I can be there. I'm still debating on the dress, though.

I wasn't really. I *did* want it. Granted, it cost more than three times what I normally spent, and I had to buy the petticoat. But I *wanted* it.

Almost as if she'd read my mind, my mom texted again.

Do you want it?

Sighing, I answered in the affirmative.

Then buy it, baby. You never treat yourself, and you deserve it. Wear it home. See you soon.

I blew out another breath and looked at my reflection, wondering what she was up to.

"How are you doing in there?"

The salesclerk's voice startled me, and I jumped guiltily, drawing back the curtain to peer around at her. "Sorry, I was texting somebody...asking what she thought of the dress."

"And...?" She arched a pierced brow.

"She told me to buy it," I admitted.

"I think you should take the advice. You look quite delicious in it." She winked at me playfully.

I laughed. "All right."

Mom was right, anyway. I never did treat myself.

CARRYING the pantsuit I'd worn to the interview in a shopping bag, I headed up the sidewalk. The low-heeled black dress shoes didn't exactly work as well with the dress as the other two pair I'd mentioned to my mom, but at least I'd decided against the brown ankle boots today.

As I climbed the steps, something struck me as being off, although I couldn't immediately identify it. It wasn't until I opened the door that I realized what it was—the quiet.

Somebody almost always had the TV blaring just a little too loud from the living room, while somebody else was usually playing music.

As I stepped inside, the only noises I heard was the soft murmur of voices.

“Geez, why is everybody so quiet?” I asked, rounding the corner and stepping into the living room.

The words left my mouth, and I was still grinning as I took a look around. But not even a second later, the smile died.

Keith stood by the big window that faced out over the yard, my family in various seats—even my father, who normally wouldn't be home from work for another two hours.

But I didn't have room in my head to wonder about that, because I was too focused on the man across the room. The one who hadn't blinked once.

Clenching my jaw, I glanced around at my family and fought the urge to close my hands into fists.

“What in the hell is going on?” I asked, my patience shot. The sight of Keith had seen to that. “Didn't I tell you I didn't want to see you again?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw—a jaw that bore the signs of a deep, fresh bruise.

“You did. I just need a few minutes. If you...” He stopped and cleared his throat before continuing. “If you want me to leave after that, I will, and I won't bother you again.”

With a disbelieving laugh, I dropped the shopping bag on the floor, then reached up to rub my tired eyes. I hadn't slept well since the night I'd gone to his loft, and since he'd shown up here, it had gotten worse.

Now, he was here *again*.

I wondered what he'd say if I told him that he bothered me no matter what.

Crossing my arms over my chest, chilled despite the bolero I wore over my pretty new dress, I scanned the room again and tried to piece together just

what was going on, and why my family was watching everything with the same, avid intensity Mom and Rosalie always had on their faces when they watched *The Bachelor*.

Only Austin looked uninterested, his nose in one of his books, as always, and for some reason, that amused me. At least he wasn't taken in by whatever Keith had said to lull my mother into letting him come inside after what I'd told her.

A tug of betrayal pulled at me as I thought of that, because she knew. Not everything, but she knew enough, and even though just looking at him hurt, she sat next to my father and watched me.

Jerking my gaze from her, I focused on Keith and fanned the embers of humiliation and resentment still simmering inside. It didn't take much for them to flare to vibrant life.

"I think I've given you enough time, Keith. First, you shove me at your brother, then you throw me away, so I don't think there's any reason to give you *more* of my time."

Keith's shoulders slumped for a fraction of a second, but then he squared them once more, taking a breath.

Why won't you just leave me alone? I wanted to shout it at him, but not here. Not in front of my family.

"Veronica."

The sound of my mom's voice barely penetrated the weight of misery and confusion. I shifted my gaze to her because she was much easier to look at than he was.

"Give him a few minutes, baby," she said gently. "That's all he wants. When he's done, if you want him to leave, your father will walk him right out the door, I promise you."

Jerking my gaze to the silent figure of my father, I *finally* saw some sign of support.

Clive Cheshire was a quiet, gentle man, slow to anger, but he was most definitely angry now. It was in the set of his jaw, in the hot glitter of his eyes. He didn't look at Keith, and if it wasn't for Mom's hand on his shoulder, I don't think he'd even be in the room.

I noticed something else too. He had an ice pack on his hand. Slowly, I crossed the room and lifted the ice pack. His knuckles were red and swollen, and when I met Dad's gaze, the hard set of his features softened faintly. "I can't let somebody hurt my girl and get away with it, can I?"

“Daddy...” Sighing, I replaced the ice pack and gave my mother one last look.

I knew them too well not to realize one crucial thing.

A great deal must have happened for them to be in here with Keith and my siblings, just...waiting.

Hugging my arms to my chest, I turned to Keith.

“Whatever it is you want to say, say it.” If I sounded more than a little unfriendly, well...I wasn’t feeling very friendly.

“I want to apologize again.” His words were formal, but his tone was rough, as if speaking had become difficult. “Not just for how I treated you. Not just yesterday and last week, but almost from the beginning. I felt something for you the very first night we met. I just didn’t want to admit it, and because of that, I caused trouble for both of us, and I hurt you and my brother. While I can’t expect your forgiveness, I do want you to know how sorry I am.”

Averting my gaze, I looked out the window. “Fine,” I said hollowly. “Although I don’t see why we needed an audience for this.”

“The audience isn’t for the apology.”

His voice was closer. Whipping my head around, I saw that he’d taken a couple of steps forward when I looked away.

I went rigid.

He stilled.

“I came here a couple of hours ago, after calling your mother and introducing myself, then asking if I could come by.”

“Why?” I glared at him.

“Because I want to be with you,” he said bluntly. “I want to be a part of your life, and I want you to be a part of mine. And that won’t happen unless I understand how important your family is to you. I can’t be in a relationship with you without accepting them, and them accepting me.”

I don’t think *surprised* touched on what I felt.

Stunned didn’t really do it, either.

My mouth fell open. Keenly aware everybody was waiting for me to say something, I turned on my heel and strode out of the living room, down the hall and out the front door.

On the porch, I rested my hands on the railing and clutched at it, trying to ground myself.

Not even fifteen seconds later, the front door opened and then closed with

a quiet click.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I focused on steadying my breathing.

“Should I leave?” Keith asked softly.

Yes.

I didn't voice the scream that came from the angry, hurt girl inside me. Dragging in another calm, steady breath, I waited until the tightness in my chest eased before speaking. “What are you doing, Keith? Why are you here?”

It seemed a lifetime passed before he answered. “I'm here because I love you, Veronica. I'm here because I don't want to spend my life without you... but if you tell me to go, I will. And I won't come back this time. I've done you enough harm.”

Squeezing the railing tighter, I closed my eyes again, the tears threatening. I fought them back and turned to look at him.

“What do you want from me?” I asked.

A fine line appeared between his brows while more fanned out from his eyes, his expression quietly pained. A taut moment passed between us, but it lasted only a few seconds before his face smoothed. “I want to take you somewhere. Will you let me?”

My instinctive response was to say no.

I opened my mouth to do just that, but his mouth went tight, and again, his shoulders slumped, as if he already knew what I'd say. There was something in his eyes too, something so vulnerable, my already bruised heart cracked wide open and started to bleed all over again.

“All right,” I said softly. “All right.”

I DIDN'T ASK him where we were going at first. I didn't think to ask, too busy questioning my sanity, too busy trying not to let my body react to the nearness of his.

But when he left Boston behind and pulled into a small, private airport nearly twenty minutes outside of the city, my curiosity got the better of me. “Just where is it you're taking me?”

“New York.”

It was the last answer I'd expected.

“What?”

He glanced at me as he slowed in front of a hanger, and I saw the nervous yet excited smile form, then spread over his face. “New York. Specifically New York City. I have tickets for us to see your sister’s show, then we’re going out to a late dinner with her.”

This time, I couldn’t keep from gaping at him, and the nervous grin took on a downright smug aspect. He was pleased with himself, and to be honest, I couldn’t blame him.

Once I finally found my voice, I said, “I’ve wanted to get up there to see this show for months.”

“I know.” The words were quiet. “Britney told me.”

THE CURTAIN WENT DOWN for the third and final time, and I still couldn’t stop clapping. My hands were numb, and I was grinning so hard, my face hurt. Next to me, Keith was pounding his palms together just as hard as me, and the frenetic energy coming from the crowd had my skin buzzing.

That thrill of excitement had my heart pounding, adrenaline crashing through me, and when a tuxedoed gentleman stepped in front of me, blocking my view, I sidestepped to keep my eyes on the stage, although I knew the cast wasn’t likely to come back out.

All around us, the audience was laughing and talking as they started to make their way to the exits.

I didn’t want to move.

The magic of seeing the show live, and of seeing my sister perform so well, still held me in a spell.

“Ms. Cheshire. Mr. Hartwell.”

The sound of our names managed to pierce that spell. Slowly, I started to drift back down to earth.

“Yes?” I asked, admirably managing to hide my disappointment.

Keith’s hand came to rest on my back, and through the thin gingham material of my dress, I could feel his heat. Inside the lined silk of my new demi-cup bra, my nipples tightened. Between my thighs, a damning wet warmth gathered. All from his hand on my spine. Damn it. How could he *do* this to me? How could just a light touch make me feel like this?

Fortunately, the guy in the tux started to speak, giving me something else to focus on.

“If you’re ready, I’ll escort you backstage.”

I blinked. “Backstage?”

“Of course. Your sister made the arrangements earlier.” A small smile graced his face as he stepped to the side. “This way.”

THIRTY-FOUR

KEITH

“YOU ARRANGED THIS.”

Veronica’s hand gripped mine as we followed the guy in the tuxedo.

“Yes.”

“How?” She slanted a look up at me, and for the first time, the shuttered, guarded expression was gone.

“I called Britney,” I admitted. “I told her pretty much what I told your parents and the rest of your family, and that I wanted to make it up to you, that I wanted to do something for you. When I said I was thinking about bringing you to New York to see the show, she said she’d make sure we got backstage...although she did tell me she was holding off judgment until she met me, and that she couldn’t guarantee she wouldn’t smack me.”

“My dad hit you.”

There was a faintly smug tone to her voice, and when I glanced back at her, she was smiling.

“Yeah. You wouldn’t think it to look at him, but the man packs some serious firepower in those fists of his. And he never let on how pissed he was. The entire time I was talking, his expression was smooth as glass.”

“My birth mother, their daughter, taught them pretty early on that showing anger only made her react worst. After about twenty years of it, it’s hard to unlearn that lesson.”

It felt...weird to discuss this with him, but the words slipped out anyway. We entered a narrow hall, the man in the tuxedo slowing in front of a door that read *Cast and Crew Only*.

After entering, Veronica shot me a quick, nervous look. “What did you say that made Dad hit you?”

The man in the tux gestured to a small, empty room with a single couch. “If you’d please wait...?”

Using those few seconds to gather my thoughts, I let her enter, closing the door behind us to give us some privacy. But while she went to the couch and sat down, crossing her legs and smoothing the skirt of that sexy-as-fuck dress, I went to the far wall and leaned against it, jamming my hands into my pockets.

“Without going into a lot of detail, I told him and your mom that you came to me after breaking things off with my brother, and that I was a total bastard. They filled in the blanks—or already knew—because your dad asked if I’d taken advantage of you.” Face reddening, I fought the urge to look away.

Veronica did avert her eyes. “I’m not some naïve girl from an eighteenth-century gothic romance. I could have told you no. You would have stopped.”

“Yeah. But I could tell you didn’t have a lot of experience and I...” Blowing out a breath, I lifted my gaze to the ceiling. “Fuck, Veronica. I want to think that if I’d known you were a virgin, I would have handled it differently. I do think I would have reacted better afterward, and I know I wouldn’t have been so rough, but I don’t know if I can say I would have walked away from you, either. I just...I wanted you too bad. I have from the first. But I was an asshole. So, I told your dad I had, and I told him I was a complete bastard afterward. Then he hit me.”

My jaw still hurt too. It was still sore from the hit I’d taken from Matt, and I couldn’t decide if I was glad both of them had gone for the jaw or if I wished one of them had decided to try and break my nose.

“He might have gone for another swing, but your mom told him he’d done enough, and that they needed to hear me out, seeing as how I’d let him punch me.”

I felt her gaze return to me, so I looked back at her as well.

“You let him?” Her eyes widened.

Jerking a shoulder in a shrug, I said, “I figured he was entitled.”

“I’m the one you treated like shit. Maybe *I* should be the one to punch you.”

“Do you want to?” Shoving off the wall, I angled my chin up slightly. “Go for it.”

She simply stared. After a few seconds, she said, “You’ve got a bruise. It’s new, but it’s more than just a few hours old.”

“Yeah...that’s courtesy of Matt.”

“*Matt* hit you?”

Before I could respond, the door burst open and a tall, slim woman rushed in, still in costume. As the two sisters flung themselves into each other’s arms, I retreated back to my spot by the wall and waited.

“I’VE DECIDED I’m not going to hit you,” Britney announced as she cut into the huge dessert she was sharing with Veronica.

Death by Chocolate, they’d both declared, was the way to go.

“Because Dad did?” Veronica asked. She’d filled her sister in on the limo ride to the restaurant.

“No.” Britney took a bite of the decadent dish and moaned. “Oh, man... this is better than sex. Anyway, no. That’s not why. I’m not going to hit him because of the way he looks at you, honey.”

My face was flushed from Britney’s earlier comment.

Veronica’s face was equally flushed, but I wasn’t sure why.

Her eyes met mine for a brief second before she looked away, but she did offer a hesitant smile.

She’d seemed to soften, to warm to me throughout the evening, and for the past hour, it was like we’d been before I’d become such an asshole. I tried not to let myself get my hopes up, but it was getting hard.

Other things were too, especially when she slid out of the short, snug jacket, baring her shoulders and upper arms and the smooth, delicious curves of her chest almost halfway down the sweet swell of her breasts. My fingers itched to touch, and I reminded myself that I wasn’t going to rush things again. She deserved somebody who loved her enough, respected her enough to honor her wishes to take things slowly, and damn it, I was going to prove I could do that.

“All right, folks. I’m worn out. Tonight had so much energy...” Britney huffed out a breath and leaned back in her chair after one last bite of the dessert. “But I’m starting to crash. I’m going to catch a Lyft and—”

“No, we’ll take you,” I said, lifting a hand to flag down the hovering server. “I think Veronica would feel better if we saw you to your place.”

Britney huffed and rolled her eyes, directing her gaze at her big sister.

“I’ve been living here for quite a while. I think I’m okay to get a Lyft.” Then she winked. “Besides, I’m not going to *my* place. I’m heading to a friend’s place. And *no*, I’m not introducing you yet.”

Without waiting for either of us to respond, she stood and came around to kiss her sister on the cheek. Veronica wrapped her arms around Britney and squeezed. As they separated, Britney looked squarely at me. “If you hurt her again, I’m going to hurt *you*—and before you question whether I can...I know big, burly stagehands who’d *love* to show me just how strong and sexy they are.”

Lifting my hands in surrender, I sat there.

As she walked away, I cleared my throat. I’d planned to address this part later on, but now I didn’t have much choice.

“I...ah...I’ve got rooms booked at the Plaza Hotel,” I said softly. “Two rooms. And your mom packed an overnight bag for you.”

Surprise flickered over her face.

“I can still take you home, but I wanted to give you a special night, maybe show you around New York tomorrow.” The nerves inside were clanging so loud, I couldn’t think straight, but I forged on. “Like I said, it’s two hotel rooms. I’m not rushing you again. You matter too much. If you’re willing to give me a second chance, I swear to you, I won’t fuck it up this time.”

THE RIDE to the hotel seemed to take a lifetime and seconds, all at once. The limo came to a stop, and a uniformed valet attendant opened the door immediately. The driver came around and unlocked the trunk, taking out both bags that had been stowed inside at the airport, turning them over to the waiting staff before leaving, all without speaking.

Less than a minute after we’d exited the limo, I escorted Veronica into the elegant lobby of the stately Plaza Hotel.

“I took care of checking us in earlier, and my driver picked up the keycards while we were at the show,” I said, withdrawing the cards from my pocket. They’d been left in the backseat for my convenience, and I’d stowed them while Britney and Veronica chatted, unaware.

“Okay.” Veronica looked around, taking in the iconic lobby and the

Champagne Bar as we passed on our way to the bank of elevators.

My skin felt tight and itchy, and I wanted to reach over and touch her, stroke my fingers over the slope of her shoulders, toy with the ends of her hair. Because I didn't trust myself not to do either, I slid my hands into my pockets once we were inside the elevator.

"Will you have breakfast with me tomorrow before I take you back home?" I asked.

She didn't say anything for several long seconds. The elevator doors started to open when she finally spoke, and I had to goad my numb legs into motion because the raw pain in her voice left me breathless.

"You hurt me, Keith," she said as she stepped out of the elevator.

I watched as she wrapped her arms around herself and paced a few steps away before turning around to make the return trip. "You seriously hurt me."

"I know. I'm so sorry for it, Veronica. I know it doesn't mean much and I know I can't undo it...I can't even expect you to forgive me—"

"I do." Another pivot, another five steps, then she turned to face me, arms still crossed at her middle, hugging herself. "I do forgive you. Maybe that makes me an idiot. But I forgive you."

I didn't remember moving or lifting my hands to touch her, but I'd done because now I stood in front of her, cupping her face in my hands as I stared down into her big, intense gray eyes. "Veronica...?"

She closed her hands around my wrists, but instead of saying anything, she rose onto the tips of her toes and pressed her lips to mine.

It took teeth-gritting control not to deepen the kiss, even more to break away when she went to push closer.

But she wasn't easily deterred. She slid her hands from my wrists to my hips and stared at me. "You've gotten inside my head, Keith. Inside my head, inside my soul. You're in me all the time. I figure I can try to walk away and forget about you...or take a chance and see where this leads us." Rubbing her cheek against one of the hands I still had pressed to her soft skin, she added, "Although if you ever make me feel like..." She paused, her eyes clouding.

"I won't. I promise." Unable to stop myself from doing it, I leaned in and kissed her again. "I'm not going to mess this up again, baby. I promise."

"Good." She swayed closer and open her mouth against mine, teasing my lips with her tongue.

Groaning, I half-turned and sagged against the nearby wall, glad it was late enough that nobody else was in the hall. I snaked an arm around her

waist and pulled her in close.

The soft swell of her breasts went flat against my chest. I wanted to tug at the skinny straps holding the dress up, peel the fabric away. But I kept my right arm at her waist and cupped her nape in my left hand.

Do it right this time. Do it right. Do it right. Do it right.

She moaned in her throat and inched closer, her belly cuddling against my cock. Even through the layers of our clothes, she felt it when the damn thing pulsed and jumped in reaction, throbbing with the need to be inside her.

Gripping her upper arms, I held her still as I broke the kiss. “You go to my head, Ronni.”

Blood roared loud in my ears, and I pressed my face to her neck, struggling to level my breathing.

It wasn’t easy because she turned her face into my neck and kissed me, her tongue flicking against my skin.

“Ronni.” Groaning, I wrapped my fist around the high, tight tail of her hair and tugged her back. “Stop, baby.”

She let me pull her away and looked up at me. “Why?”

“Because I’m not rushing this again.” Nuzzling her neck, I pressed a kiss to the soft hollow, I whispered, “Let me show you to your room, okay?”

She didn’t back away, though.

“I’d rather you show me to yours.” She curled fingers into the front of my shirt and gave me a level, determined look.

Wrapping my hands around her wrists, I tugged, but she didn’t let go. It was getting harder and harder to keep my focus—*do it right, do it right...*

“Veronica, I’ve been a bastard—”

She pressed her lips to mine again, and her hand...*fuck*. She slid it down my chest and cupped me through my trousers, rubbing me, stroking me, molding her fingers to my shape and stroking me through the material. “Maybe so—okay, definitely so,” she said against my mouth. “Neither of us handled things the way we should have. But I don’t want to think about any of that. I just want to be with you. Please don’t make me wait.”

My resolve melted.

I set her back from me again.

Veronica’s eyes widened, then fell away but I didn’t say anything. At this point, I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to do more than grunt and growl anything more than one-syllable words.

I pulled the keycards out and checked the numbers around us, taking her

hand. Her room was the closest—it was also the largest and more luxurious. Not even ten feet down the corridor, the door waited, and I swiped the keycard, then nudged her inside, following behind her.

I dropped the keycard and picked her up.

She kissed my neck.

“Stop.”

“Why?” she asked, lips still moving against my skin.

“Because if you don’t, I’m going to forget I told myself I wouldn’t fuck you again until we were in a bed.”

Her mouth stilled, then I’d swear it curved up in a smile.

“Why’d you get a room where the bed was a mile from the door?” she asked.

“Beats the fuck out of me.” Shouldering the door to the bedroom open, I carried her to the massive king size mattress that stood on an elegant fourposter frame. The urge to drop her down and crawl on top of her was overwhelming. But I held back and eased her down, nudging her backward until the backs of her thighs hit the mattress.

“Let me kiss you again, Ronni,” I said, cupping her face in my hands.

Her sigh was shaky and soft against my lips, her mouth already open when I rubbed mine against it.

Dipping my tongue inside, I found the sweet, lush taste of her and groaned. Hands itching to haul her skirt up and tear away her panties, I focused on her jacket instead, stroking it down her arms and tossing it aside. “Your skin is so soft,” I murmured against her mouth, skimming my palms down her biceps and feeling her shiver in response. “Soft and warm and so damn perfect.”

A weak whimper escaped her, and she arched closer, fisting her fingers in the hair at my nape. “Keith, please.”

“Shhh...” The hollow of her throat beckoned me, and I kissed her there while cupping her breasts in my hands and plumping them together. The deep cleavage had me groaning, and I buried my face against the soft skin, stroking the curves through her dress. “Your body is dangerous, baby. So damn dangerous. I want to strip you naked and lick every last inch of you.”

She quaked.

Finding the zipper on the pretty, deceptively simple and oh so sexy dress, I tugged it down, then reached for the neck of the halter, seeking how to free it. There was a hidden hook. After I dealt with it, the bodice gaped around

her. I pulled back to watch as I peeled the material away, unwilling to miss seeing even an inch of her body.

I'd been buried inside her twice, felt her sweet pussy clench in climax, and her body shudder against mine, but I'd never had the chance to fully appreciate the lush beauty of her naked body.

"I'm a fucking moron," I said softly, stroking down with my hands and dragging the material with me as I went, kneeling in front of her after smoothing it over the swell of her hips. "I've seen you in that sexy lingerie, in that bathing suit I wanted to peel off you, and I still didn't take the time to learn and love and kiss this beautiful body when I had you. I won't be making that mistake again."

A soft sound escaped her when I leaned in and rubbed my mouth over the faint swell of her belly. Tipping my head back to look at her, I saw her flushed cheeks, watched her teeth sink into her lower lip as her head fell forward, her ponytail falling over her shoulder.

"Take your hair down," I said.

She blinked slowly, a dazed expression on her face.

I nipped the soft skin of her tummy. "Ronni."

She jolted. "What?"

"Take your hair down for me."

She lifted her hands and started to pull the tie from her ponytail, and I groaned, sinking back onto my heels to appreciate the view.

"Fuck...those tits, baby."

Her cheeks went hotly red, and her hands stilled. "Keith, you're embarrassing me."

"And you're making my dick so hard, it feels like it's going to break off...with your arms like that, it lifts your pretty tits up and makes me want to bite them. Fuck, you're delicious. Take your hair down, then take off that bra for me, baby."

Slowly, she tugged the band from her hair, but instead of reaching for the bra, she bit her lip and looked me over, gaze dipping to my chest. "Why am I doing everything?"

"If you want me to do something, just ask."

"Take off your shirt then." She licked her lips, eyes darting down to my chest once more.

I rose, already undoing the buttons.

A breath shuddered out of her, making her breasts rise beguilingly against

the shimmery red satin of her bra.

“Once you take that off, I’m going to bury my face between your breasts, then kiss my way down until I reach your pussy. I want to eat you up,” I told her.

Her breathing came harder, faster, the slippery strands of her hair spilling over her shoulders to toy with her breasts. I groaned as she reached behind her to free the clasp of her bra, shoulders rounding forward in that female way before the bra straps fell forward and she peeled the garment away and let it fall to the floor.

“Fuuuccckkkk...” I breathed it out, moving forward to cup her hips, the lace of her panties the only thing separating her skin from the palms of my hands. “You’re beautiful, so fucking beautiful.”

Stroking my hands up her sides, I cupped her hips in my hands and tugged her closer before cupping the lush weight of her tits in my hands again. Dipping my head, I pressed kisses to the slopes of her breasts, the scent of her rising to fill my nostrils, flooding my head, driving me insane.

I could have devoted an hour to her tits alone, sucking on the large, rosy nipples and listening to her voice break as she moaned my name, while her fingers clutched and tangled in my hair. But other urges drove me, the need to see her completely naked first and foremost at the top of the list. Going to my knees in front of her, I caught the side panels of her panties and dragged them down, nuzzling her navel, then lower, and lower.

“Keith.” Her hands slammed into my shoulders, nails digging in as she swayed against me.

“Lay down for me,” I told her, pushing her backward the last final inch until she bumped into the bed. She obeyed, and I caught her thighs, wedging my shoulders between until I could guide her legs up and over.

She instinctively tightened her thighs as if she wanted to pull back.

“No,” I said, pressing a kiss to the soft, delicate skin on the inside of her upper leg, only an inch away from the place I wanted to be. “Let me, baby. Just let me.”

Her resistance faded, slowly, the hands in my hair easing as I stroked her thighs and rubbed my cheek against her, murmuring to her until she relaxed. Bit by bit, it happened, and I spread her legs wider. Sliding a look up at her, I slid my hands under her butt and lifted her. “Good girl,” I said softly, pressing my mouth to her sex.

She jolted, but my grip on her hips kept her in place. Her fingers twisted

in my hair and she cried out when I slid my tongue along her opening, then found her clitoris. Circling it, I reveled in the way she rocked upward, thrusting against me even as she tugged at my hair as if to pull me away. I flicked my tongue against her clit again before lifting my head. “Want me to stop, Ronni?”

A low hungry moan, one that spoke of agony and ecstasy combined, escaped her, but she didn’t speak.

Lowering my head despite the iron grip she had on my hair, I licked her again, then scored the hard, tiny nub with my teeth and sucked. Hard. She shuddered and thrust upward, attempting to follow my mouth with her hips when I pulled away.

“Do I stop?”

“No...” It was barely a whisper, but the fingers tangled in my hair stopped trying to pull me away. Now, she urged me closer—not that I needed it. I could have spent the rest of the night kneeling in front of her, licking that sweet pussy, dining on her the way I’d wanted to do almost from the minute I saw her, the way I should have done the first time I had the pleasure to touch her.

Shifting, sliding a hand up her thigh, I pushed two fingers inside her cunt and twisted, then curled them inside her. The sound of her sobbing my name was the sweetest fucking sound I’d ever heard, and it gave me the strength to ignore the demanding pulse of my cock and its eager demand that I bury myself deep, deep, deep inside her.

Her body clenched, her thighs tightening. I caught her knee and pushed it up and out, opened her wider, and kissed the open folds deeper, harder.

“Keith!”

“That’s it, Ronni,” I muttered without lifting my head. “Come for me... break for me. Give it to me, baby.”

She moaned mindlessly, her hands curving around the back of my head, pulling me in tighter, harder. “Please...please...”

Pumping my wrist harder, faster, I sucked on her clitoris, then bit down. She shattered.

Rising, one hand braced at her side, I continued to thrust my fingers inside her pussy, watching the pleasure continue to twist and tangle, her eyes blind with it. As the spasms started to fade, I straightened and reached for my belt, undid it and slid it free, letting it drop to the floor. Moving on to my trousers, I freed the button and dragged down the zipper. By that time, her

eyes had started to clear, and she was watching me with flushed cheeks and lips swollen. As I looked on, she bit the lower one, making it clear just why her mouth looked so ripe.

“I want to do that,” I told her, stripping out of my pants.

“Do what?” she whispered.

I let the pants fall to the floor and climbed onto the bed before answering. “This.”

I bent lower and sank my teeth into the plump, sensitive curve of her lower lip.

She groaned, reaching up to tangle her fingers in the light mat of my chest hair. The light tug she gave was sheer erotic bliss, and I felt it arrow-straight down to my cock and balls.

Wrapping one arm around her waist, I hoisted her higher up in the bed and settled between her thighs. With one elbow braced by her head, I brushed her hair back from her face. “We keep forgetting to talk about something,” I murmured against her lips. “This is the third time...or about to be. And we haven’t once talked about birth control.” I stroked my thumb over the curve of her lower lip. “There are other issues, but...there’s nothing to worry about. I mean, you don’t need to worry about anything from me. I’m clean. But...”

She cleared her throat. “I’m on the pill. Girl stuff.”

“Good. I’ll take care of you, do things right this time.” Nuzzling her neck, I whispered against her ear, “I can wear a condom if you want.”

“No. You don’t have to.”

“Thank fuck.” Settling between her thighs, I rubbed against her, using the head of my cock to tease her clit as I covered her mouth.

I swallowed down a greedy, hungry moan and shuddered as she shoved her fingers into my hair, kissing me with furious need.

Thrusting against her wet heat, I gripped her hip with my free hand and lifted her up, sliding over her again, and again. “Fuck,” I moaned against her hips. “You’re so wet.”

“Keith, please...I can’t...I need...”

The desperation in her voice sank into me, fueling the burning greed inside me.

“Shhh,” I murmured as I changed the angle of my hips. This time, when I passed over her, I pushed inside, and the tight, silky heat closed around me. Teeth clenched, I withdrew, then surged back in, deeper this time, although she was still so tight. Sliding my hand from her hip down to her knee, I

pulled her leg up, then pushed down, opening her more fully for the next thrust.

She rolled her hips toward me and moaned, shuddering.

Her hands slid down my chest, then to my hips and lower back to clutch at my ass. “Keith...more...oh...*more*...”

“Yes, fuck, yes.” I thrust deep, again, and again, but I didn’t let the savage hunger take over. Not this time. Catching one of her hands, I dragged it up and twined our fingers together. “I love you, Ronni.”

She cried out, the sound swallowed by my mouth as I stole another kiss, then another, her body tightening, clenching, as she neared the edge. I moved higher on her, riding her and moved, so I rubbed against her clitoris with every stroke. Soon she was twisting and jerking under me, arching up to meet each thrust until she came with a cry.

My own climax came out of nowhere as her nails sank into the flesh of my buttocks, and I shouted her name as I broke apart.

THIRTY-FIVE

ALICE

1951...

I lived for Saturdays. They meant freedom. And Matthias. Sometimes I was able to see him during the week, but not as often. Saturdays, though, they were for him.

If the weather was tolerable, I drove from the small apartment near campus out to Cape Cod, to the cabin my grandparents had left me in their will. They'd left all of the grandchildren a piece of property, and I'd been delighted with the cabin, even as I grieved the death of my beloved grandmother. Legally, it wasn't *mine* until I turned eighteen, but then it *would* be mine.

Only mine.

Lewis had made noises about selling it one evening while having dinner with my parents at the family home and my mother had quite firmly stated the home would remain in the family—it had been left to me, and it was mine to do with as I chose. Lewis, of course, had attempted a patronizing *of course, of course*, but my father had reiterated my mother's words, adding that if need be, his name would be added to the deed. He intended to make sure his grandchildren were able to enjoy the cabin as I had.

Several days after that, our engagement had been announced at the party. And the events after...

Just thinking about my fiancé and that night darkened my mood, so I pushed all of it out of my mind.

Although no date had been set, our wedding loomed ahead of us, a dark cloud on the horizon of my life.

But for now, for today, I had happy things to consider.

It was Saturday, bright, sunny, and cold, and Mattias was coming to see me.

He'd first come to visit me two days after the party.

I knew why.

He was checking on me, worrying about me.

I don't know how much he knew, but he *did* know something had happened the night of the party.

At first, I thought he was just being sweet, and maybe that was how it had started, but it had become more.

Now, though, we seemed to be caught in some sort of odd waiting game. Lewis had left just a few days after the New Year for an extended trip to Europe. He was going to take over the family business his paternal grandfather still ran sometime after our marriage, he'd told me, but for now, they were still 'showing him the ropes'. That involved frequent out of town trips.

Both relief and guilt chased me at all hours. Relief, because Lewis wasn't there. Guilt, because even though I knew I *shouldn't*, evenings and my Saturday afternoons were spent with Matthew before I drove back to Boston to spend the rest of the weekend with my family.

My parents had been somewhat dismayed when I'd told them I was going to stay in school—I'd graduated a year early and enrolled in Wellesley College, only a half hour or so from Boston, one of the best colleges for women in the country. They'd expected me to stop because of the engagement, but I'd pointed out we hadn't even set a date yet, and Lewis was going to be gone for several months.

None of that had anything to do with my decision to stay in school, of course.

I simply had no desire to give up something I'd spent so much of my life working toward. Besides, staying in the big house with my family, listening to my mother talk about *wedding plans*...it left me nauseated.

Attending college meant I could stay in a small apartment near campus. I'd managed to talk my parents into that instead of traveling back and forth every day, and that I'd be frequently visiting. Living on my own it would give me a chance to learn how to start taking care of a home on my own since I was expected to marry and therefore have to do that soon enough anyway.

It wasn't entirely a lie, of course. I'd grown up in a home with a full housekeeping staff and a cook. I had no doubt that Lewis would want a

household staff along those lines, but I wasn't sure if we'd have one right off and I wasn't going into that new life unequipped or uninformed.

That had been my plan...before.

Before.

Now the apartment was just another escape, getting out of the house so I didn't have to listen when visitors came calling and asked about the wedding, if we'd set a date, how happy I must be to have landed such a wonderful man.

A knock at the cabin door pulled me from my thoughts, and I smoothed a hand down the slim-fitting ankle-length pants I wore with a heavy sweater. It was too cold for a dress and Matthias didn't seem to mind if I wore such casual clothes. Hurrying to the door, I opened it just as a blast of wind blew in over the water.

Shivering, I stepped back, smiling up at him.

His lovely blue eyes swept over me, cheeks flushed from the cold, hair tousled from the wind. "Hello, Alice."

Just the sound of my name on his lips left me feeling warm and flustered. Absently, I pressed my hand against my belly to soothe the butterflies there.

"Come in, come in," I said.

His lean, wiry frame passed by me and I closed the door, struggling not to drag in a deeper breath just so I could have his scent fill my lungs. We'd managed to see each other for coffee on Tuesday, but only for a few minutes and the week had stretched on endlessly.

But he was here now.

"THE PIE WAS DELICIOUS. Thank you for bringing it," I told him.

A slow smile curved his lips, that familiar one that reached his eyes and made them darken just a little.

"I've told you a hundred times, Alice. It's my pleasure." He brushed his fingers across the back of my hand before rising from the table and carrying the dishes we'd used to the sink. We'd fallen into a routine by now, and we worked together in silence to clean up the small mess from our lunch before retreating the glassed-in back porch so we could look out over the cold waters of the cape.

The sun angled in through the windows, giving it a pleasant warmth

despite the chill outside.

“This is a lovely cabin,” he said softly as he sipped his coffee. “I can see why you love it here so much.”

“There were seals playing near the beach earlier. By the time I got down there to try and take some pictures, though, they were gone. Walking in that bitter cold, all for nothing.” Still smiling at the memory, how silly and cute and funny the creatures were, I looked over to find Matt watching me, an intensity in his eyes that stole my breath away. I tried to smile, but it wobbled and fell. “Is everything okay?”

“Of course.” He smiled, but this time, it didn’t reach his eyes. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“I...” Clearing my throat, I rose from the chair and moved to the railing that ran the length of the deck. “Nothing. I wish I could have gotten those pictures. They would have been lovely.”

“You’ll get them.”

“Yes, I will.” Tension filled me, and I rose, unable to stay still. Moving to the thick, solid glass that made up the back wall, I looked out over the water. “I love Boston, you know. But this cabin...I love this place so much. It’s so peaceful here. So beautiful.”

His voice was closer, and I turned to look at him, found him standing just a few feet away. “Very beautiful.”

He wasn’t looking at the skyline or the water, though.

He was staring at me.

Nerves choked my throat.

“Matt, I...” I had no idea what I’d planned to say, my mind going blank as the heated look in his eyes got to me. But then he blinked and moved to take position next to me.

“Have you heard from Lewis?” he asked, voice neutral.

“No, thank God,” I responded without thinking. Blood rushed to my face, and I shot him a look, wincing. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Why not?”

Feeling his gaze and unable to resist the silent command I sensed coming from him, I turned and looked at him, arms wrapped around my middle. “I’m engaged to him, Matt,” I said quietly.

He held out a hand.

Uncertainly, I offered mine, but he shook his head. The flush on my cheeks deepened as I realized what he wanted. My left hand fisted. He waited

and slowly, I held my hand out, but didn't uncurl the fingers.

He didn't seem to care, stroking his thumb over my fist, lingering over my naked ring finger before lifting my hand.

He dipped his head at the same time.

I gasped as his lips brushed my skin.

"You don't wear the ring, Alice. I've seen it on your hand maybe three times since we met. You don't love him. You don't want to marry him."

It was a statement, not a question.

"None of that matters," I whispered tightly.

"Doesn't it?" Matthias brushed his lips over my fingers again.

His touch went through me like lightning. Sucking in a breath, I closed my eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said softly, slowly releasing my hand.

Angling my head to look at him, I shook my head. "Why are you sorry?"

"I didn't mean to scare you. And I'm being far too forward."

"You didn't." Bothered by the idea, I closed the distance and reached up to touch his cheek. "I couldn't ever be afraid of you."

His eyes darkened again, hand coming up to close over my wrist. My pulse rabbitied at his touch, and he squeezed lightly. "Alice..."

My heart lurched as his gaze dipped, lowering to my mouth.

But then his eyes cleared and he went to step back, letting go of my hand. Before my hand could lose contact with his cheek, I slid my hand down to his shoulder and curled my fingers into the soft, fine fabric of his dress shirt.

Perhaps if he hadn't touched me as he had, pressed his lips to my skin in such a gentle way, perhaps I wouldn't have done it. Perhaps if he hadn't looked at me the way he did, I would have moved away.

But awareness stretched taut between us and instead of moving *away*, I moved *closer*, rising on my toes to press my lips to the corner of his mouth. He sucked in a breath, one hand coming to rest on my hip. His fingers tightened, and I thought his body shuddered.

I started to pull back, but then he moved, his hand pushing into my hair, twisting in the strands and holding my head still. "Alice," he whispered, before his lips moved over mine, so gently, so slowly, so...tenderly.

Everything inside me warmed and within my chest, my heart shifted, tightened. Then he pulled me closer, my body aligning to his while he skimmed a hand down my back.

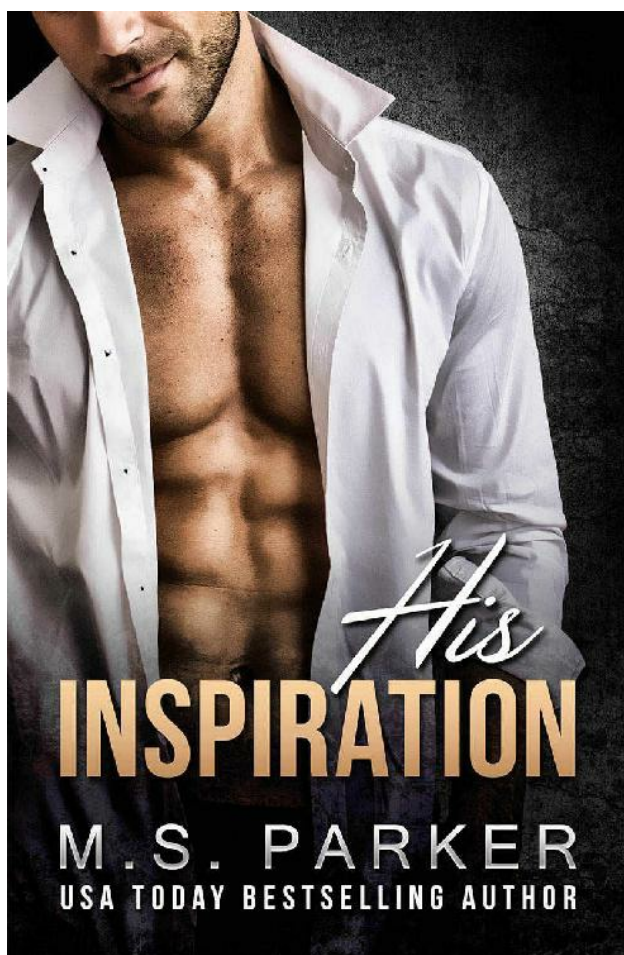
His mouth opened against mine...and my entire world trembled beneath

my feet.

THE END

The Hartwell Brothers continues in *MATT*, the second book in The Hartwell Brother series, coming November 22nd.

HIS INSPIRATION: PREVIEW



ONE

TRISSA

“I DON’T KNOW WHY THIS SURPRISES YOU. YOU’VE KNOWN ME FOR, WHAT, ten years now?”

I raised an eyebrow at Bevy Kelly, my roommate and best friend. She had one of those poker faces that made it virtually impossible for me to tell if she was joking or serious. The fact that she was one of the smartest people I knew didn’t even factor into the equation since I’d once watched her search for her phone while holding a conversation on said phone.

“Five, Bevy,” I said finally. “Ten years ago, we were both fifteen and living on opposite sides of the country.”

She frowned, a slight crease appearing between her eyebrows. “Huh. I guess you’re right.”

“I have to ask. Were you forgetting how long it’d been since we were in college, making us older than we actually are, or were you forgetting that we’d met in college?”

“I’m not sure.” She smiled, her pewter gray eyes lighting up. “But at least we’re at an age where it’s always nice to remember we’re not as old as we think we are.”

One of the things I loved the most about her was her inability to stay down for more than a few minutes before her naturally bubbly personality chased the darkness away. It wasn’t that she didn’t know how to take things seriously, but rather that she always looked for the silver lining. She was so genuine about it that I never managed to stay annoyed when she did it to me.

“I always assumed that you didn’t know how to drive because a lot of native New Yorkers don’t bother learning since there’s so many public transportation options.” I stood as the timer on the washer reached one

minute. It was all too easy to get distracted when talking to Bevy, and I didn't want to spend the entire night at the laundromat.

Bevy reached for a strand of hair to twist around her finger, then scowled when she remembered that she'd cut her dark blonde locks short to break this exact habit. I would've thought it was a bit drastic a move simply to prevent playing with hair, but I was the one who'd had to help her two weeks ago when she'd cut off circulation in her finger and hadn't been able to free herself.

"My parents wanted me to learn how to drive, even if I didn't need to." She hopped off the out-of-order dryer and came over to join me. We folded our clothes as she continued her story. "I told them I didn't think it was a good idea, but Mom said I needed to know how to drive, in case I was ever kidnapped."

I wished I could say that particular bit of information shocked me, but I'd met Bevy's parents. Francie Kelly had come from the sort of old money, high society family where kidnapping had been an actual threat. Add in the fact that Bevy's father was one of the top television producers in New York and neither of the Kellys was overreacting when it came to their daughter's safety.

"Anyway, she and Dad hired this bodyguard to teach me defensive driving. The kind you'd use when being chased, all that."

Bevy's voice, as usual, carried, and I watched the two older women at the far end of the washer row turn in our direction. I gave them a sheepish, embarrassed smile, but didn't bother trying to quiet my friend. It wouldn't do any good. At least this way, everyone got to hear what was sure to be an entertaining story.

"No one bothered to tell Harris that I also needed to know basic driving skills. I'd never been behind a wheel until I went for my first lesson, and I spent almost two months with Harris teaching me all these maneuvers and tricks." Bevy held up my black cotton bra, a disapproving expression on her face. "This should be hand-washed and hung to dry."

It wasn't the first time she'd told me that. I snatched the bra from her and dropped it in the basket with the other clean clothes. "I would do that if there was a space anywhere in our apartment that wasn't already being used for your lingerie."

She grinned at me and went back to her story. "Anyway, my parents sent me out to take my driver's test without bothering to ask if any of the hours

I'd put in had been regular driving. So the license person got into the car and told me to pull out of the parking space." She shrugged. "Let's just say I'd never heard the phrase 'flunked with flying colors' before."

"How have I never heard that story before?" I asked. "I mean, you'd think it would've come up at some point."

"And when, exactly, would it have come up?" she countered. "When we were being chased by assassins through Beverly Hills?"

I pointed at her. "Your sarcasm, my friend, is much appreciated."

"You'll appreciate my driving if we're ever caught in a car chase."

"I'm sure I will."

The bell over the door dinged as the two older women carried their baskets out. For a moment, I wondered if that would be me and Bevyan in the future. Then I remembered that she and her boyfriend, CB, had been talking about moving in together. And that wasn't even considering the fact that she might just decide to go back to New York and leave both me and CB behind.

I pushed those thoughts aside. Planning for the future was one thing. Worrying about what things may or may not happen due to circumstances I had absolutely no control over was pointless. I'd learned that as a kid.

"Does this mean you're going to teach me to drive?" Bevyan picked up one of her shirts and folded it in half before dropping it into our basket.

I watched it fall and then looked at her. "Will me teaching you to drive have better results than when I tried to teach you how to fold your clothes?"

"I already knew how to fold my clothes," Bevyan countered. "I've just always sucked at it."

"Your parents didn't hire someone to teach you how to properly fold garments?" I laughed as I said it, but I wasn't entirely joking.

She shook her head. "We had a housekeeper who did the laundry, but I had to fold and put away my own since I was a kid. That and cleaning my room were always my responsibilities. I had other chores growing up, but those two things were always mine."

"Is that why your room is such a disaster?" I asked. "You had to spend your childhood cleaning up after yourself, so now you don't want to?"

"Exactly."

My phone buzzed with a text alert, and I fished it out of my pocket.

Thank you for the model heart. It was exactly what I wanted. Love Meg.

I smiled as I hit reply. *I'm glad to hear it, but I can't take all the credit. Kevin told me you'd asked for it.*

“Meg?” Bevyan asked.

I nodded. “I have to remember to give Kevin something extra nice for his birthday. He was exactly right.”

“Meg’s a little scientist,” Bevyan said. “Not surprising. You said she was smart.”

“She is.” I sent off a good night text and put my phone back in my pocket. “Is it weird that I hate what my dad did to my mom and our family, but I love Meg and Madison to pieces?”

“Not weird at all,” Bevyan said. “Meg and Madison are awesome.”

“You’ve never met either of them,” I pointed out.

“Not true.”

“FaceTime does not count.”

“It does too count. FaceTime introductions are just as valid as face-to-face ones,” she informed me. “But I still want to meet the munchkins for real. I’ve met everyone else in your family.”

“Maybe I’ll take them for a weekend in the summer,” I said. “Three days and two nights with an eight-year-old and a five-year-old should cure you of ever wanting to spend time with anyone else in my family ever again.”

“If your teenage brother shooting spit-balls down my shirt during dinner wasn’t enough to chase me away, then I don’t think two little girls would do it.”

“You never did much babysitting, did you?” I asked with a laugh.

“Only child, remember?” She stuck her entire head and shoulders into the dryer and emerged with a single sock. “Dammit.”

“Another deposit for the lone sock drawer,” I said, plucking it from her hand. “Didn’t any of your friends growing up have younger brothers or sisters?”

“Yes, but those families had nannies.”

“Ah, yes, of course. Nannies. Why didn’t I think of that?”

Bevyan threw a wet sock at me. I caught it and tossed it into the dryer. “We’ll get pizza and ice cream and watch Disney movies.”

“Meg’s a vegetarian and Madison is lactose intolerant.”

“Not a problem,” Bevyan said. “I know how to make lactose free, vegetarian pizza.”

“Bevy, I love you,” I closed the dryer door, “but I’ve seen you try to cook. You lost the security deposit because you blew up the microwave a month after we moved in.”

“In my defense, it was the fork’s fault the microwave blew up.” Bevyan pointed at me. “And you’ve never seen me make pizza.”

“True, but you did leave the fork in the popcorn bowl.”

She planted her hands on her hips. “That’s it. We’re stopping at Whole Foods, and I’m making pizza for a late-night snack.”

I was too busy explaining to her the reasons why we couldn’t stop for pizza making supplies that I didn’t notice a third person entering the laundromat until he grabbed my purse off the counter and ran.

“Shit!” I nearly twisted my ankle turning so fast. Bevyan shouted after me, but I was already heading to the door. She’d call the cops, but by then, the thief would be long gone with my purse.

I didn’t have much cash, but it was all in there. I’d worked my ass off for every penny of it, and I’d be damned if I was going to let some jerk run off with it.

I hit the bar on the door with both my palms and it flew open. The sun had already set, but the street lights in this area were surprisingly good. I assumed that because I’d seen him turn right, I’d be able to spot him running away.

And that might have been the case if I hadn’t run into something large and hard before I’d gone more than a couple steps.

I bounced off and landed on my ass, hard enough to jar my spine and clank my teeth together. I’d put my hands out too, and I knew I was going to feel it all in the morning, but I couldn’t let myself feel it now. I didn’t have the time. I let out a string of curses as I tried to pull my feet underneath me, but as soon as I did, white-hot pain shot through my ankle, and it buckled.

“Fuck!”

“Let me—”

I looked up at what I’d hit and found a huge man leaning over me. “What the fuck were you thinking?!”

TWO

JOSHUA

I DIDN'T REALIZE SOMEONE HAD RUN INTO ME UNTIL I'D TAKEN TWO STEPS back and she started cursing at me from the sidewalk. I wasn't the most social of people, but I'd always assumed that I had basic conversational skills for situations such as this. Knock someone down, help them up and apologize.

I stared at her, completely at a loss for words. I couldn't tell how tall she was, but she looked delicate from where I was standing. Shoulder-length jet-black hair and porcelain skin made me think of Snow White, but her mouth was definitely not Disney-rated.

To my embarrassment, my mind instantly went to other non-Disney things she could do with her mouth, and blood rushed south. I clamped down on those wayward thoughts and started mentally singing the Fluffy Bottom jingle. No better way to kill an erection than singing about toilet paper.

She tried to stand before I could offer her a hand but swore again as her leg buckled. A new wave of guilt washed over me as I realized she was hurt. Not just guilt, I realized. An unfamiliar wave of protectiveness hit me too.

"Let me—"

"What the fuck were you thinking?!" she snapped, her dark eyes angry.

My eyebrows shot up. I had no problem taking part of the blame for the collision, but she hadn't been paying attention to where she was going any more than I had been.

"I didn't see you," I said as I held out my hand.

"Are you blind as well as rude?" She glared at my hand. "I was right behind the thief who stole my purse. You managed to not run into him."

I remembered seeing a guy running across the street about half a minute before she hit me, and I turned to look, but he was already gone. He could've

been anywhere. I knew of at least half a dozen alleyways he could've used to get to the next street over where he had too many escape possibilities to count.

"I would've caught him if you hadn't gotten in my way."

I turned my attention back to the girl who was now gingerly touching her ankle. I'd first put her age around nineteen or twenty, but now that I studied her a bit more closely, I added a few years to put her closer to twenty-five than twenty.

And I noticed something else. She wasn't being bitchy because she was some self-absorbed teenager. She was angry at the situation, including the fact that she was hurt and vulnerable in front of a stranger.

"He went across the street," I said as I leaned down to put a hand under her elbow. "I didn't see where he went from there. It's too easy to disappear in this damned city."

She jerked her arm away the moment we made contact, and I mentally smacked myself as I realized that my previous statement wasn't very supportive.

I took in a deep breath and tried again. "My name's Joshua Lexington. I just want to help you up, I swear."

Her eyes narrowed, but she let me set her on her feet, her hand tightening on my arm momentarily as she tested her injured ankle. When she released me, I felt the strangest urge to tell her she could lean on me as long as she wanted.

"Let's go inside, and I'll call the cops while you get off that ankle."

The look she sent my way said that my suggestion wasn't a welcome one.

"I have my phone," she said, her voice softening a little. "Besides, my friend should have called them all ready."

I was surprised at how curious I was about this 'friend' of hers. Was she saying that as a protective measure, something to chase me away if I'd been looking to prey on a lone woman? Or did she have an actual friend waiting for her? A guy who might want something more? A girlfriend, maybe?

What the hell was I thinking?

I shook my head as she turned back the way she'd come. The laundromat she'd come out of was only a couple yards away, but I'd seen the pain on her face when she tried to put down her full weight. A part of me doubted she'd be able to make it even that far without help, but a larger part thought that she'd do it just to prove she could. Whether she'd be proving it to me or to

herself, I hadn't yet figured out.

I followed a few steps behind her, wondering if at any time she'd turn around and tell me to get lost or she'd be calling the cops on me too, but she didn't. She stayed focused on her goal, and the reflection in the glass front of the laundromat showed me the determined look on her face.

I had to admit, I was impressed. She'd charged after a thief, but even after she knew she wouldn't be able to continue giving chase, she hadn't called for help. She said she had her phone still, so she could have called her friend. No one would have thought any less of her.

"Trissa!" A slender blonde came running the moment the girl – Trissa – stepped inside. "What happened?"

"Ask him." Trissa jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Gigantor back there got in my way."

"Gigantor? Really?" I wanted to laugh, but this didn't seem like the best time or place.

She turned toward me as she leaned against a washer, and I saw that her eyes weren't brown or black like I'd assumed, but rather a deep purplish-blue that I'd never seen before. Not in someone's eyes anyway. Her fingers snapped in front of my eyes, and I realized I'd been staring again.

"I said you can go. Bevyan already called the cops so we'll wait for them here."

"What if he comes back?" I countered. No decent guy would've let two young women wait alone in a laundromat after they'd been robbed. I could be a jerk sometimes, but I was close enough to my mother to hate thinking about what sort of guy would do that to her.

"Why would he?" Bevyan asked. "He knows that Trissa was chasing him and that we'd call the cops. If he got away free and clear with one of our purses, why would he risk getting caught?"

Logically, that made sense, but I knew criminals didn't always think logically. "Maybe he'll think that if he gets to you, he can keep you from pressing charges."

"Shit." Trissa's eyes went wide. "My license and my key were in there."

"That settles it," I said. "You two can stay at my place tonight."

"Excuse me?" Trissa's expressive face told me exactly what she was about to say. "You're just a stranger I *literally* just ran into. Why are you any safer than the punk who took my purse?"

I opened my mouth to give her a list of reasons and then realized that

those reasons didn't mean anything if she didn't know that they were true. For all these two knew, I was working with the thief, or I was someone worse than a purse snatcher.

"You're right," I said. When both girls tensed, I quickly clarified. "You don't know me. *I* know I'm trustworthy, but you don't know that. But you two shouldn't be alone tonight."

Why was I pushing this so hard? I didn't know these women. Sure, one of them had run into me, and as a result, had lost the person she was chasing, but I didn't owe her anything for that. I might not have been paying as much attention as I should have been, but neither had she. The only reason she'd been the one of us to get knocked down was the difference in our sizes.

"We won't be," Bevyan said, putting her arm around her friend's shoulders. "We'll stay with my boyfriend."

If I hadn't been looking at Trissa, I might've missed the annoyance crossing her face. Something told me that Trissa wasn't a fan of Bevyan's boyfriend, and Bevyan didn't know it.

"Is he on his way?" As soon as I asked it, I wanted to take it back. Everything I said was coming out wrong, making me seem like I was one of those creepy stalkers or serial killers who lurked in the dark, searching for single women to assault or kill.

"He's working, actually," Bevyan said. She yelped as Trissa dug an elbow into her side. "What? If this guy was going to turn us into lampshades, he would've done it by now."

Fortunately for both Trissa and me, the sound of police sirens filled the laundromat, and we all turned toward the door to watch the blue and red lights flash as a cop car pulled up front. I stepped back, my hands hanging open at my side. I didn't want to get mistaken for a criminal simply because I was a big guy in a room with two women more than a foot shorter than me.

The first cop rushed through the door, eyes wide in a way that made me think this was his first crime-in-progress. The way his hand hovered over his gun worried me as much as the fact that the kid nearly tripped over his own feet as he skidded to a stop. Then his gaze zeroed in on me, and he swallowed hard.

"What...who...I mean..."

The door opened again, and the other police officer came in. I wondered if the exhaustion on his face was from all the nervous energy his partner was putting out or something else.

“I called,” Bevyann announced. “Some guy stole my friend’s purse.”

“Wait, a purse?” The younger guy’s eyes darted from me to the girls and then back again. “I thought it was a robbery in progress.”

Bevyann put her hands on her hips and sighed. “It was when I called. This guy came in here, grabbed my friend’s purse and ran with it. She chased him but had a little...accident.”

“He’s not a little accident,” Trissa muttered, glaring at me. But I didn’t feel the heat of anger in the look this time. When her gaze met mine, pink crept into her cheeks.

No, not anger. Maybe interest? Something else?

“What did you do to her?” The younger cop stepped between me and the girls, cutting off my crazy thoughts. The action made me respect him a little more since I was several inches taller and definitely outweighed him.

I held up my hands, palms out. “I was out running, and when she ran out to follow the thief, we collided.”

“And then you followed her?” Now, the older cop was giving me funny looks.

“She hurt her ankle,” I explained, trying to keep the exasperation from my voice, “and I didn’t think it was safe for the two of them to wait here alone. In case the guy came back.”

“If we take you in, are they going to say the same story?”

How had I ended up a suspect? I’d just been trying to help.

“He didn’t steal my purse,” Trissa cut in. “He’s annoying, but not a thief.”

I huffed out a breath. “Thank you?” I turned my attention from Trissa back to the older cop. “Before she and I ran into each other, I saw someone in a hoodie run across the street. I didn’t get a good look, but he was probably a little under six feet tall and skinny. Fast.”

“Are you sure it was a man?”

“I’m sure,” Bevyann interjected. “I looked over when he first came in. The hoodie was dark gray, and he was wearing blue jeans and sneakers.”

“I saw his hands when he grabbed my purse. He had light brown skin,” Trissa said. “Like a really good summer tan.”

“Anything else? Identifying features?” The younger guy jotted down notes as we answered the questions he and his partner asked.

Now that I’d given them all that I had to offer and they knew I wasn’t involved in the theft, it’d be easy to leave. The cops wouldn’t keep me here,

and the women were safe.

Once they were done here, they'd go to Bevy's boyfriend's house for the night and then deal with changing the locks and canceling credit cards... and why was I even going through a mental checklist of the things they'd need to do? I'd already made this too much of a thing. I had my own life and my own problems. I needed to get back to them.

"Do you need me for anything else?" I asked during a pause in the interview. "I only wanted to make sure that the ladies were safe."

"Can you give me a number where you can be reached if we think of any additional questions?" the older cop asked.

I rattled off my cell number and then headed for the door. I could feel eyes on me as I left, but I didn't turn around. I just wanted to finish my run and go home. It wasn't late, but I'd had a long day already.

I'd cooled down while waiting, so I walked a few feet down the sidewalk and stretched my muscles back out, then bounced on my toes...but didn't take the next step and start jogging.

Dammit.

I couldn't do it. I couldn't walk away and not know they at least made it safely from here to where they'd go next. The cops probably wouldn't escort the pair home unless they asked, and my gut said that they'd tell the cops they needed to finish their laundry or something like that.

Mind made up, I jogged up and down the sidewalk, never going far enough that I couldn't keep an eye on the doors. When I saw the cops drive away after another five minutes, and no sign of the girls, I knew I'd been right.

How had those two survived in LA as naïve as they were? Maybe I was misjudging them, and maybe I was being a little chauvinistic, wanting to protect two young women, but I wasn't going to apologize for it. Not when all I wanted to do was keep them safe. I couldn't explain why I felt so strongly that I needed to do it, but I did. Once I knew they were safe in the boyfriend's place, then I'd go home.

END OF PREVIEW

The story continues in *His Inspiration*, coming on Amazon at the end of the year. But you can read it now! Become a M.S. Parker VIP.

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