



Sometimes the line
between love and hate
is invisible

love hate
relationship

JESSICA PRINCE

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*To Jacob,
Because of the random things you say, Mommy will always have something
funny to put in her books. I love you with all of my heart!*

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prologue

Four Years Old

Navie

Navie sat on the dirty, trash-covered floor in the living room of the rundown apartment she lived in with her mother. Knees pulled tight to her chest, she rocked back and forth as she stared out the grime-covered window. The sun was slowly falling from the sky, making the room darker and darker with every passing minute. She'd tried flicking the switch that was supposed to turn on the ceiling light, but when she flipped it up, nothing happened.

None of the lights in her house would come on.

Tears streaked down her face as she kept her dark eyes trained on the window, hoping and praying her mother would return soon. It wasn't unusual for her to wander off with the man who stayed with them after they'd snorted that white stuff off the table, or poked their arms with those sharp needles. But she'd never stayed gone for so long. She knew Navie was scared of the dark. She wouldn't have left her all by herself when nighttime was falling. Something had to be wrong.

The darkness in the room turned to a deep black so heavy she couldn't see anything at all. It wasn't until she'd cried her tiny body into exhaustion that she'd finally managed to fall asleep.



Bang! Bang! Bang!

Navie jolted awake on the living room floor, her little body quaking in fear as the front door rattled on its rusty hinges.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

She tried her best to keep her sobs quiet, but she was so scared that it was the mean man who always came to see her mother. She hated the mean man. He always broke things and hit her mommy, yelling about money every time he came. She really hoped it wasn't him. He'd be so mad if he discovered Mommy wasn't home.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

"Police department," a deep voice called through the flimsy door. "Open up."

It wasn't the bad man. It was the police. Police were supposed to help you. They helped find people and arrested bad guys. With a desperate cry of excitement that she was no longer alone, Navie jumped up from the floor and rushed to open the front door.

"Have you found my mommy?" she shouted as soon as the door swung all the way open. The tall man in a dark blue uniform looked down at her. His smile was kind, but there was something behind his eyes that looked a little sad.

"Hey there, sweetheart," he spoke as he crouched down to Navie's level. "I'm Officer Michaels. What's your name?"

"N-Navie," she stuttered shyly.

"Navie, like the color?"

She gave a barely discernible nod as she looked at Officer Michaels through her lashes.

"Well that's a really pretty name."

"T-thank you. Mommy said it's 'cuz my eyes are dark, just like my daddy's."

"Is your daddy here, honey?" he asked.

"No. Mommy said he went away before I was born. Do you know where my mommy is? She left a long time ago. She should have come back, but she hasn't yet. It got dark and I'm scared of the dark, and none of the lights would turn on. Did you find her?"



Officer Michaels stood to his full height and scanned the room before him, his jaw ticking with concealed rage as he took in the disgusting condition of

the apartment the poor little girl was obviously living in. Chances were, if the mother had been there right at that moment, he'd have lost complete control of his anger.

What kind of woman raised a child in filth? Better yet, what kind of woman abandoned her child, leaving her scared and alone through the night? If they hadn't received a call from a concerned neighbor informing them that there was a kid alone in the apartment, who knew how long Navie would have been by herself?

"No, sweetheart," Officer Michaels spoke in a low, soothing voice. "We haven't found your mommy. But we're gonna take really good care of you, okay? You're not going to have to be alone anymore."

"Okay." Navie nodded, taking the big man's outstretched hand. "I don't like being alone. Especially in the dark."

Officer Michaels' fist clenched tighter around the little girl's tiny hand. If he could, he would have scooped her up and taken her home with him. That just wasn't feasible, though. He could only pray that CPS found a decent foster home for the child and that some loving family would come along in the near future to adopt her and give her the life she deserved. He also prayed he never crossed paths with her mother.

It was a good thing to pray for. Those hopes made it easier to hand her off to the social worker a few hours later. As the little girl with the big, navy blue eyes turned to look at him over her shoulder, fear evident in their dark depths as the worker led her away, he found himself rubbing at a dull, lingering ache in the center of his chest.

Closing his eyes after she rounded the corner out of his sight, he offered up his silent words as a lone tear trailed down his cheek.

Dear Lord, please give that little girl a beautiful life.

one

Present

Navie

“I look like a turd.”

My top lip slowly curled up in disgust as I stood in front of the full length mirror in my bedroom, taking in the boxy, ill-fitting skirt suit I was wearing. The ugly brown garment hung from my petite frame in the most unflattering way, making me look at least twenty pounds heavier than I actually was. I wanted to rip the damn suit off and burn it so no other poor, unsuspecting woman would ever have to fall victim to such a crime against fashion ever again.

“You do not!” Harlow insisted passionately from her spot on my bed. A quick glance at my best friend and roommate had me rolling my eyes. She hadn’t even bothered to glance up from her damn magazine long enough to actually *look* at the monstrosity I was wearing.

“You didn’t even look!” I whined. I even threw in a foot stomp for good measure.

“Oh, my God,” Harlow grumbled dramatically, rolling her eyes. “You look...” As soon as her eyes hit me and she clammed up, I knew it was bad. “Oh, sweet Jesus’s mother, Navie! What the hell is that?!”

“I knew it!” I shouted as I threw myself back onto the bed. “This is awful! I can’t go. I just can’t. There’s no way I can walk into that place dressed like this.”

“What the hell happened to your other outfit?”

As I thought about my sleek, black pencil skirt, I silently mourned its loss, trying my hardest not to openly weep at its demise. “I ripped it on the turnstile,” I sniffled.

I thought back to my first interview with Lauren Brown of Enterprise PR, and how wonderfully it had gone. I'd been on cloud nine the whole way home, when I went through the subway turnstile and ripped a massive hole in the side of my one and only interview outfit. When she called yesterday requesting a second interview, I spent ten minutes doing a happy dance before realizing I didn't have a single suitable article of clothing in my closet and spiraled into a full blown freak out.

"This was the only thing at the thrift store that even came close to fitting," I lamented as I stared up at the popcorn ceiling of my bedroom. The tiny Murray Hill apartment wasn't the best, but it was one of the only places Harlow and I had been able to afford after graduation. We'd been on cloud nine when we signed the lease, convinced we were about to take the world by storm.

Yeah, not so much.

Who'd have thought jobs didn't just fall into recent college grads' laps? It was mind boggling when I stopped to think about it. I'd earned a generic business degree for the simple fact that it made job hunting easier. I'd have loved to major in something more creative, but I wanted to ensure that I'd have a way to stand on my own two feet when I was finished. My foster brother, Carson, and his wife, Cassidy, have been fabulous throughout the past four years, but I refused to take another cent from either of them. Cassidy had come into their relationship with a toddler already, and they were expecting another baby in a matter of months. I knew Carson would offer up anything he could to help me out, but he had other things to worry about. I was determined to take that burden off his shoulders once and for all.

Harlow had landed an executive assistant job for some clothing franchise a week back, but had yet to get her first check, while I'd been spending every available hour *not* spent job hunting, waiting tables at the café I'd been working at since freshman year of college. Needless to say, tips weren't going to cover my half of the bills much longer.

Call me crazy, but I'd grown accustomed to having a roof over my head and four walls surrounding me. I kind of preferred electricity and running water. I felt pretty confident in admitting that I wouldn't fare well without it. I watched *Naked and Afraid*. I wasn't embarrassed to admit my limitations. And homelessness was *definitely* a limitation.

Why, oh why, did I have to fall in love with a city that was so damn expensive?

Harlow dropped the magazine onto the bed and stood to her full five feet, seven inches. When she propped her hands on her slender hips and appraised me with narrow, assessing eyes, I couldn't help but feel somewhat inferior. She was absolutely stunning, statuesque... basically any adjective you could come up with to describe tall, slim and gorgeous, that was Harlow.

Don't get me wrong, I wasn't fat at all, but being cursed to only stand three inches above five feet—all right, so I only stood one and a half inches above five feet, so sue me—made it much easier for a slice of pizza, (or the mac and cheese I just couldn't resist the night before) to show on my teeny-tiny frame. Not only was I a shorty, but I was curvy as well. It wasn't exactly *easy* to go shopping for new clothes with my body type. Being *poor*, short, and curvy, and having no option but to dress like the plain brown M&M no one ever wants to eat was just another one of God's cruel jokes.

"You know," she started, "if you'd just call—"

I cut her off with a wave of my hand. It was the same predictable conversation we'd been having for months. "Don't even start, Har. I already told you. I'm not calling Carson or Cassidy. They have enough on their plates as it is. I'm not asking them for more money."

"Jesus, you're stubborn," she huffed.

I lifted my head from the mattress and narrowed my eyes at her. "Four years of living together and you're only just *now* realizing this?"

"You know they're going to be pissed if they find out you've been keeping this from them. They're your family and they want to help you out. Hiding the fact that you're broke from them won't make the situation go away."

"You think I don't know that?" I asked sarcastically as I sat up to look at her. "I tapped the last of the savings Carson had for me to put up my half of the deposit on this place, and I've been so damn busy with school and work and looking for a stupid grownup job that I haven't been able to make any jewelry in months, so there's no income coming in from that, either. What I need is to nail this interview so I can start pulling my weight around here. You riding my ass about keeping things from my family isn't all that helpful at this point, Harlow."

"Okay..." she drew out, a look of determination skating across her stunning face. "Then let's make sure you nail this interview."

"Yay!" I shouted, hopping from the bed and holding my arms out. "So? Can you help me?" I asked, turning from side to side, hoping she could

somehow make the poo-suit work.

Her eyes scanned up and down my body for several seconds. “Why don’t you just wear something of mine,” she offered casually, earning herself an evil glare.

“Because anything of yours that even comes *remotely* close to fitting is either at the cleaners, insanely short, or uncomfortably tight.”

She looked me over again in silent contemplation. “It’s really not so bad.” I would have believed her if it weren’t for the small cringe she didn’t do a good enough job of masking. “We can totally make this work.” I couldn’t tell who she was trying to convince more, me or herself.

Thank God for best friends who had fabulous fashion sense. “Strip,” she demanded. Not questioning Harlow’s brilliance when it came to clothes, I quickly divested myself of the hideous outfit so she could work her magic. Ten minutes later—with the help of about a thousand safety pins and some double sided tape—she’d done the best she could do. The outfit was still hideous, but at least it fit a tad bit better. I mixed in a few pieces of gold jewelry I’d made, a chunky necklace and a matching bracelet, and I was set.

“That’s as good as it’s going to get, babe,” Harlow spoke apologetically.

I moved my gaze from my reflection in the mirror to where she was standing behind me. “You can only do so much, sweets. It’s not like you can work miracles.”

“Don’t worry about the outfit, babe. As soon as those people get to know you, you’re as good as in. Everyone who meets you falls in love with you. Just be your usual, charming self.”

“Easier said than done, Harlow,” I muttered as I gazed at my reflection in the mirror. “My usual, charming self doesn’t typically dress like a petrified Tootsie Roll that’s been under the car seat for the past year and a half.”

“You don’t look like a—you know what? I’m not even going to lie to you right now. You totally do. You look like shit... literally, and I mean that in the most loving, sincere way possible. Now, get your ass moving or you’re going to be late.”

“Best pep-talk ever, Harlow,” I deadpanned as she shoved me toward the front door.

“You know I’m always there for ya, babe. Now, go knock ‘em dead,” she said, giving me a hard slap on the ass. “I’ll have a pitcher of sangria ready for you when you get home.”

I turned to yell over my shoulder as I scurried down the hall. “And that,

right there, is why I love you. If va-jay-jays didn't scare the living hell outta me, I'd totally wife you."

"And if I wasn't terrified of suffocating to death in your cleavage, I'd totally wife you, too," she called back down the hall just as our neighbor, Donald, opened his front door.

"You know what's worse than living across the hall from two hot chicks?" he asked, his eyes bouncing back and forth between Harlow and me. "Living across the hall from two hot chicks who joke about having lesbian tendencies. It's wrong to toy with a man's emotions like that, ladies. Just plain wrong."

With a loud laugh and a wave over my shoulder, I bolted down the hall, bypassing the elevator, which had been broken since we moved in four months ago, and pushed open the door to the stairwell. A sense of excitement began to build in my chest as I made my way down the five flights of stairs toward the street below. Despite the fashion mishap, I had a good feeling about my interview. Maybe things were finally starting to look up for me. The past four years had been eye opening for me. The culture shock of New York City after living in BFE, Texas, had been overwhelming, to say the least. It had taken some serious adjusting, but with Carson and Cassidy's support, and the quick friendship I'd developed with Harlow, I'd managed to pave my way.

I'd changed since leaving Willow Ranch. I was a different person. The timid, frightened girl who used to be bullied and picked on in high school was gone. Cassidy had been instrumental in helping me find my self-confidence. Having someone so amazing at my back gave me strength. There was more steel in my spine than there had ever been before. Life had given me thick skin, but I'd managed to build up my self-confidence in a way that made me stronger than I'd ever been before. I was no longer afraid to stand up for myself and what I believed in. I'd grown up. I'd overcome all the bad in my past, and I was finally ready to take on the world.

And nothing was going to hold me back.

Two

Rowan

“This is bullshit,” I grumbled as I collapsed against the back of my chair.

“Well, too damn bad, Rowan,” Lauren said from across the wide expanse of her desk. If she hadn’t been the best goddamned publicist in New York, I swear to God, I’d fire her simply for being a raging pain in my ass. Lauren casually leaned back in her chair, twirling a pen back and forth through her fingers. She appeared almost bored as she looked over at me. “The last personal assistant you were in charge of hiring was gone within the first month. You’ve left me no choice. I can’t trust you with the hiring process, so now I get to take time out of my hectic schedule to babysit you through the interviews so I can guarantee we get a PA who’s worth what they’re being paid. And this time, he or she will be employed by Enterprise, not you. So you can’t fire them for no good reason.”

“I didn’t fire Veronica for no good reason,” I argued. “My reason was totally valid.”

“First of all,” Lauren said, sitting tall in her chair. “Her name was Victoria. And second, you fired her because you slept with her—”

“And she got clingy!” I interrupted. “She turned into a grade-A psycho, Lauren. The woman should have been committed, for Christ’s sake.”

“If you wouldn’t go around New York sticking your dick in every willing female then maybe you wouldn’t have this problem, Rowan. Ever think of that?!”

“Aww, baby,” I crooned, knowing I was risking the well-being of my nuts, but I was unable to control my desire to push her buttons. I’d worked with Lauren for nearly a decade, and her bark was most certainly as bad as her bite. The woman was a shark, and although teetering in her mid-fifties, she still looked good for her age... damn good. I respected the hell out of her as a publicist, but that didn’t mean I didn’t get a kick out of pissing her off every now and then. “You feeling left out? Just say the word and I’ll bend you over

that desk and fuck the tension right out of you.”

“Oh, for the love of God,” she huffed with a dramatic roll of her eyes. “This is *exactly* what I’m talking about. You’re a goddamned PR nightmare, Rowan!”

“I think that’s a bit of an exaggeration,” I muttered as I crossed my arms over my chest, feeling somewhat insulted.

“It’s not, Rowan, believe me. I wish I were exaggerating. You were photographed having sex in public with a married woman...”

“In my defense, I didn’t know she was married,” I responded.

“I saw the pictures, Rowan,” Lauran said dryly. “There isn’t enough brain bleach in the world to un-see what I saw. There was no missing the three-carat ring on her finger.”

“Hey, she came on to me. I was too distracted by her tongue down my throat to notice a wedding ring.”

Continuing on as though she hadn’t heard me, she said, “You got into a pissing match with one of your readers on Twitter that went viral!”

“Well, that reader was obviously a moron.”

“He gave you a bad review so you called him an ‘inbred, uneducated, backwoods hillbilly’. Christ, Rowan, you hashtagged ‘uncle fucker’. What were you thinking?”

I thought back to that particular incident and couldn’t help but cringe. “Okay, so that might not have been one of my finest moments...”

“You have *no* fine moments. You’ve shown a side of yourself on social media that your readers don’t like. And when your readers don’t like you as a person, they’re not going to buy your books. *Broken Shadows* was your worst release to date, which is a damn shame because it’s the best book you’ve ever written, but you’ve turned people off, Rowan. They don’t like you. Trademark is talking about dropping you at the end of your contract. And there’s not a publishing house in this state who will pick you up if that happens. Your agent is scrambling to keep them calm, but your image is shot to shit. If there’s the slightest possibility I can pull you out of the cesspool you’ve created, I need to make sure you don’t ruin it.

“You’re a self-centered, narcissistic asshole who needs an assistant who can put up with your bullshit without running away screaming, or spreading her legs. That’s why I’m in charge of hiring. The only reason you’re here is because I decided to grant you the courtesy of meeting the person I decided to hire, which is more than you deserve. So, I suggest you sit back, shut the

hell up, and let me do the job you pay me for, which, as of right now, is nowhere *near* enough money.”

I opened my mouth to throw back some smart-ass—undoubtedly witty—comeback, only to be interrupted by a faint knock on her office door.

“Okay, that’s her. Please, for the love of God, just behave.”

Throwing her my most winning smile, I replied, “No worries, Lauren. I’ll be my usual, charming self.”

“No! No, do *not* be yourself. Be *anyone* but yourself. You know what? Just don’t talk. That would be smart. Just sit there and play mute.”

Before I had a chance to act properly offended, she called for the person on the other side to come in. The door opened slowly and I caught my first glimpse of shining, honey blonde hair that had me holding out serious hope for the rest of what was hidden behind the door. I had a serious thing for blondes with mile-long legs that I could wrap around my waist—or shoulders—with ease. However, all my hopes were dashed as she stepped into the office, my visions of wrapping my fist in that long, thick mane of hair went up in a puff of smoke with the snick of the door closing behind her.

Don’t get me wrong, she was cute... but I didn’t do *cute*. I did hot, I did sexy, I did exotic. Never *cute*. Cute got clingy. Cute wore their hearts on their sleeves and could never differentiate between love and really good sex. Cute was a pain in my ass. And the woman—more aptly, the *girl*, because that’s exactly what she looked like—standing before me in an ill-fitting, shit colored suit didn’t have an exotic bone in her barely five-foot-tall body. For Christ’s sake, she looked like one of those damn china dolls. She might as well have hung a sign from her neck that read, *Warning, Extremely Fragile. Handle with Care.*

I hadn’t the first clue how to handle anything with care. And I certainly didn’t do anything in the bedroom *with care*. I couldn’t fathom what my publicist had been thinking when she brought this girl in for an interview. No way in hell would she last two seconds as my personal assistant. She’d probably break down in tears within the first week.

Yep, it was official. Lauren had just fucked me... and in none of the ways I enjoyed.



Navie

You got this. You got this. You got this.

The internal pep talk, along with the mental fist bump I was giving myself, went a long way in calming my nerves as I lifted my hand to knock on the heavy wooden door. When the feminine voice called out to come in, I shook out my slightly sweaty hands, squared my shoulders and lifted my chin.

I've so got this, I thought as I pushed the door open and stepped into the large, expensively decorated office of Lauren Brown at Enterprise PR.

My eyes quickly scanned the huge expanse of the office before landing on the most handsome man I'd ever seen up close. I took in his nearly jet black hair and penetrating ice blue eyes. *Oh, hell, I so don't got this.*

It took all of five seconds to scan the entirety of his face—full, dark brows tipped down; strong, defined jawline covered in a bit of scruff; full, deliciously pouty lips pulled down into a frown that did absolutely nothing to take away from his stunning good looks. Jesus Christ on a cracker, the man looked like he belonged on the cover of a magazine...*all of them*. As his chilly gaze trained on me, seeping through my skin and causing me to shiver, it took everything in me not to melt into a puddle of goo on the carpet. The man sitting before me was what every female fantasy was made of, and there was no doubt, whatsoever, he was going in my spunk bank.

But then, because luck was a fickle bitch who hated me for some apparent reason, he opened his mouth and all that hot, rugged, manly man-ness went right out the window.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, Lauren. You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“Excuse me?” I asked, my forehead creasing in confusion as my gaze bounced between Sir Hotness McPotty-Mouth and Lauren.

“Rowan, I’ll kindly ask that you keep your comments to yourself for the duration of this meeting,” Lauren told the man with a scowl so fierce it looked like it could melt paint off the walls. As she turned back to me her smile was genuine. “Ms. Collins, please come in and have a seat.”

I took the last few steps toward the empty chair next to the man, who was currently staring daggers at me for some unknown reason, and sat down, rubbing my damp palms on my skirt anxiously.

“Ms. Collins, this is Rowan Locklaine. I apologize in advance for his...

demeanor. I was just telling him what a valuable asset you're going to be as his personal assistant."

The sound of brakes screeching to a halt echoed through my head for more reasons than one.

"Personal assistant? But, I thought the position was for a senior administrative assistant with the company."

Rowan let out a rough, gravelly sound, something between a snort and a scoff, as Lauren fidgeted just slightly behind her desk. "Yes, well, that was the original position you applied for. However, after meeting with you, I was convinced you'd be a perfect fit as Mr. Locklaine's assistant. You'll still be employed by Enterprise as a part of my team, but you'll be working directly with Rowan as opposed to me."

"Wait..." I shook my head in an attempt to clear the cobwebs. I was having trouble keeping up. "So, I already have the job? I thought I was coming in today for my second interview."

"After our initial interview, I saw no need to drag out the process any further. I think you'll make a wonderful addition to the Enterprise team. And I feel confident that you're exactly what Mr. Locklaine needs."

While the words were complimentary, the narrow-eyed glare she shot to the man next to me as she spoke them caused my hackles to rise.

"Now, here is all the paperwork. You'll need to fill that out so we can get it to HR. Your salary and benefits package is enclosed, as well. This position pays more than we had originally discussed, so please take a chance to look that over. If you have any questions at all, please don't hesitate to call me. I'm here if you need anything at all."

I'd just walked into *The Twilight Zone*. I came prepared for a second interview, only to find out I'd already been given the job. Granted, it wasn't the job I'd originally applied for, but it was still a job, nonetheless. As I looked down at the packet in my hands, my eyes grew wide at the dollar amount listed on the page. That couldn't have been right. There was no way a personal assistant made that kind of money.

I felt like I was missing something really important. With the looks Lauren kept giving that Rowan guy, his obvious bad mood, and the dream salary, I couldn't help but think I was being left out of the loop on something important.

Quit your bitching, Navie. You need the job and the money!

Despite my reservations, there was no arguing with the pushy voice in my

head. No matter what hurdles came with the job, I was determined to be the best damn personal assistant who had ever existed.

“Thank you so much, Lauren. Mr. Locklaine,” I said with a nod to the frowning yet insanely handsome man. “I look forward to working with you.”

That comment earned me another snort/scoff, but Lauren was too quick to jump in before I could question whether or not something was wrong.

“The pleasure is all ours, I assure you,” she responded as I stood and came around the desk to shake my hand. “I’m sure Rowan is just as excited as you are...” *I doubt that*, I thought, but she wasn’t finished. “...and if you have any issues... any issues *at all*...” she continued with a side glance at Rowan. “You don’t hesitate to come to me.”

Well, that was rather cryptic. Before I could fully grasp the meaning behind her statement, I was being graciously, if not somewhat hastily, pushed from the office, the door clicking behind me with resounding finality.

“Well,” I said to myself as I headed toward the elevators, “a job’s a job. It can’t be that bad.”

Famous last words.

Three

Navie

“Hey!” Harlow said excitedly as she came through the front door after work, looking like a supermodel in a tight, cream-colored pencil skirt with a blush-colored sleeveless, tie-neck shirt. God, I envied her. She really was gorgeous, all long limbs and slim figure. She had flawless, olive-toned skin with long, glossy chocolate-colored locks, and what could only be described as cat eyes—a mixture of green and brown that almost appeared yellow depending on the color shirt she wore. If I didn’t love her with all my heart, I’d have no choice but to hate her for her perfection.

Luckily for me, she was as genuine and loving as they came. Freshman year at NYU, we’d been roomed together and Harlow, being the loud, boisterous person she is, gave me no choice but to be her best friend. The girl just wouldn’t have it any other way. Over the past four years, she’d really helped me to come out of my shell. I’d gone from meek and mild, the poor bullied girl, to someone who refused to let other people bring her down. I had to admit, I totally loved the new me.

“Hey, Har. How was work?” I asked as she kicked the door shut behind her and dropped her purse on the small bench next to it.

“Work was work,” she answered with a roll of her eyes as she kicked off her heels and came to join me on the couch. “They might as well take *executive assistant* off my nameplate and put *personal bitch* in its place.”

“Well, at least you’re working in the industry you love,” I placated.

“Blah, blah,” she grumbled. “I wanted to be a fashion *photographer*, and this is kinda the furthest thing I could get from that. Anyway, tell me about your day. How’d the interview go?”

I stood from the couch and headed into our tiny galley kitchen to pour us each a glass of wine. One thing Harlow and I had learned to appreciate was the taste of cheap red wine. Some of those bottom shelf bottles were just as good as the expensive stuff.

“It wasn’t really an interview,” I spoke across the bar that separated the kitchen from the living room. “Turns out I already had the job.”

“That’s great!” she exclaimed as she took one of the glasses from my hand. “Why don’t you seem more excited about it?”

I sat at the end of the couch, pulling my feet up underneath me, taking a hearty gulp before answering. “I am, don’t get me wrong. But the whole thing was just a little weird.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, the job isn’t for an administrative assistant. I got hired on as a personal assistant. And the pay is more than what I originally applied for. Like, a lot more.”

Harlow’s perfectly sculpted brows rose. “How much more are we talking?”

“Almost double.”

“Holy shit!” she shrieked, nearly spilling her wine on the sofa as she did a little happy dance. “Navie, that’s awesome! Whose personal assistant are you supposed to be? Is it someone rich? Oh, please, tell me they’re famous. Pretty, pretty please!”

“Some guy named Rowan Locklaine. He was there today and I gotta tell you, he didn’t give the best first impression. It was like he was pissed off about something. And Lauren kept giving him these weird looks...”

“What kind of looks?”

“Looks that said she’d murder him in his sleep if he so much as spoke a word. I walked out of there feeling like I was missing something.”

Harlow’s expression grew pensive as she spoke his name softly, “Rowan Locklaine... why does that name sound so familiar to me?”

“Don’t ask me,” I answered with a shrug. “I’ve never heard of the guy, but apparently he’s big enough to warrant having a personal assistant.”

“Well, let’s Google him and find out.” Harlow set her glass on the coffee table and jumped up to retrieve her laptop from her bedroom. Once she sat back down, we typed his name in and clicked 'search'. Page after page after page popped up on the guy.

“Sweet Lord in Heaven,” she breathed out. “Navie, that dude is seriously fine. I’m talking stupid fine. Jesus, girl, *that’s* your new boss?”

“All right, simmer down,” I grunted as I clicked on the first link.

“That’s where I know his name!” Harlow shouted. Good Lord, that woman didn’t do anything quietly when she was excited. Her exuberance

reminded me so much of my foster brother's adopted daughter, Willow. That little girl only had two volumes--loud and deafening shrill. "Rowan Locklaine is the author of the *Broken* series."

"The what series?"

She looked at me like I'd just admitted to hating *Sons of Anarchy* and thinking Charlie Hunnam was icky.

"Are you serious, right now? The *Broken* series is only *the best* murder/mystery series to be written ever, since the beginning of time." She ignored my little snort, laughed and continued on. "He's the number one New York Times best seller. The man is legen... wait for it... dary."

"First of all," I started, holding up one finger. "No more *How I Met Your Mother* marathons. And secondly, I've never heard of him. I'm not a big murder/mystery fan. Sorry." I gave her a shrug that said anything but *sorry*.

"Ugh!" she grunted in frustration, "Whatever. The guy's an icon, and hot as hell apparently. And you get to work for him," she squealed, bouncing up and down on the couch, causing me to nearly fall off.

"Cut it out. Look at this," I said, pointing to one of the most recent articles posted about Rowan Locklaine. "Apparently, he got into a Twitter fight with a reader who left him a bad review."

"What? Let me see?" Harlow snatched the laptop from my hands and began reading the article I'd pulled up. Her face scrunched up, her top lip curling as her eyes moved back and forth. "Oh...oh...ohhhhh, that's not good."

"What?" I asked anxiously. "What's not good?"

"Well, it looks like this guy's kind of a douche."

"Fantastic," I harrumphed, flopping back on the couch. "I get to work for an asshole. Just what I need."

"Jeez, Navie. There are pictures of this guy everywhere. Drunk in public, getting into a fight in public, having sex in public. Damn, doesn't the dude do anything in the privacy of his own home?" Her head tilted to the side, her eyes squinting as she studied a picture intently. "Wow, he's got some serious upper body strength."

I sat up and slapped the lid of the laptop shut so I wouldn't be subjected to a visual of my boss having sex. Serious upper body strength or not, that was just something I didn't need to see, even if he *was* fine as all get out.

"I don't know if I can do this," I admitted sullenly. "How the hell am I supposed to keep a job working for a man like that? I'll be fired within a

week!”

“Stop,” Harlow demanded, propping one leg up on the couch so she could face me full-on. “None of that. You’re awesome, and you’re going to kick ass at this job.”

“Harlow—”

Her hand shot out and slapped over my mouth. “Nope, none of your negativity. You’re going to be fantastic, and Rowan Locklaine isn’t going to know how he survived without you.”

I mumbled a question, her hand over my lips muffling each word.

“Huh?”

Shoving her hand from my mouth, I rolled my eyes and repeated the question. “What if he doesn’t like me?”

“Impossible,” she said confidently. “There’s no way anyone in the world can’t like you. You’re so tiny and adorable,” she finished in a baby voice while pinching my cheeks.

“Gah!” I laughed while batting her hands away. “Stop, asshole! That hurts.”

She wouldn’t give up. Her cheek-pinching quickly turned into tickling until I was rolling around, trying my hardest to get away as I laughed hysterically.

“Not until you admit you’re going to rock that shit!” she demanded, her fingers digging into my side, eliciting a high-pitched squeal from me.

“Stooooooooop!”

“Say it!”

“I-I’m gonna rock this s-shit!” I yelled through giggles.

Harlow finally stopped her attack with an enthusiastic, “Yeah, you are! Now, let’s go shopping in my closet for something to wear on your first day. You’re going to have that douche-y, sexy-as-sin exhibitionist eating out of the palm of your hand before the day’s over.”

Two more glasses of wine later, Harlow and I had managed to relocate every article of clothing from her closet onto her bed. It took a thousand and one failed attempts, but we finally managed to pull together a cute outfit that somehow fit me--a soft, swishy, pleated skirt the color of coral and a sheer aqua top with a matching lace camisole underneath. Matched with a pair of her tan peep-toed heels, it said sassy without coming across as unprofessional.

By the time I fell into my bed, slightly buzzed, I felt much more confident.

I was going to be the best damn personal assistant there ever was. And Rowan Locklaine wasn't going to know what hit him.

four

Navie

“Best assistant ever. Best assistant ever. Best assistant ever.” I repeated the mantra over and over, trying my best to psych myself up as I stared at the cream-colored, wooden door before me.

Sucking in a fortifying breath, I gave myself one last mental high-five and lifted my hand to knock. Then I waited... and waited... and waited some more. Pulling my phone from my purse, I opened the text Lauren had sent that morning, double checking that I’d gotten the address right. Sure enough, I was in the right place. I’d woken up an hour early that morning just so I could Google the directions and plan which route to take from Murray Hill to Rowan’s opulent building on the Upper East Side. I had the right address, the right apartment number, and a quick glance at my watch showed I was even a little early. Lauren said to be there at 8:30AM. It was only 8:20. I made great time.

I knocked again, a little louder that time, just in case he hadn’t heard the first one. I waited for a few seconds, my ear pressed to the cool, wooden surface, trying to hear any sounds of life on the other side, when a loud bang followed by a muffled curse caused me to jump back.

“What!” Rowan barked as he yanked the door open, looking absolutely edible in all his sleep-rumpled glory. I tried my hardest not to drool at the sight of his bare chest and all its chiseled perfection, but that proved to be a daunting task when all that warm skin was *right there* in my face.

“Uh... um...,” I stuttered, my mind having jumped ship the second the door swung open.

“Do you have any idea what time it is?” Rowan growled. At second glance, maybe he didn’t look all that yummy. That intense glower on his face knocked his handsomeness down a few points while spiking my anxiety at the same time.

“It’s 8:20. Well, technically 8:23, since it took you a while to answer the

door. But I can see now that was because you were sleeping,” I blurted, unable to stop the word vomit that nervously flowed from my mouth. “Lauren texted me to be here at 8:30. I’m a little early... sorry,” I added with a shrug that I hoped conveyed my apology.

“Oh, Christ,” he mumbled, lifting a hand to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Just... just stop talking, for the love of God.”

“Sorry,” I said again, making sure to whisper.

“Baby,” a feminine voice called from behind the door. I couldn’t see who had spoken, but judging by Rowan’s dramatic eye roll and under-his-breath ‘*fuck me*’, I was willing to bet he’d forgotten all about his overnight guest.

My eyes narrowed as I watched a red tipped, manicured hand snake over his bare shoulder and down his chest. “Baby, who’s here?”

At those words, the door pulled open all the way, revealing a statuesque blonde wearing nothing but a men’s button-down shirt, with only a few buttons done up, revealing an uncomfortable amount of skin.

“Well, this isn’t awkward or anything.” I laughed awkwardly.

“Who are you?” the woman asked snidely.

Jeez, the chick was so gorgeous she could have been a model... or maybe she *was*. Lord knew she had perfected the resting bitch face required in that industry. “Uh...” I mumbled, trying my best to formulate an educated response that didn’t involve a bunch of finger-twitching, hair-tossing, and ‘*oh, no, you didn’t’s*’.

“Time to go, Stephanie,” Rowan answered in my place.

“It’s *Bethany*,” she hissed furiously.

“Yeah, sure,” he responded drolly. “Last night was fun. I’ll call you.”

Oh, man, if she hadn’t been such a raging hemorrhoid, I might have felt a little bad at the epic brush-off she just received. *Bethany* stomped off into the apartment, her feet slapping against the hardwood floors as she went. Once she was out of sight, I heard the sound of something shattering, no doubt something expensive, and no doubt on purpose. My skin began to feel itchy from the discomfort of having to stand on the other side of the threshold, Rowan’s icy gaze boring into me while his one-night stand trashed his apartment.

It wasn’t until Bethany came back into sight, yanking her shirt over her flat-as-a-board stomach and too-perfect-to-be-natural breasts that our odd, one-sided staring contest finally ended.

“You’re an asshole,” she seethed as she hopped from foot to foot, sliding

on her undoubtedly expensive heels.

“So I’ve been told... many times,” Rowan replied drily.

With a shove past both of us, Bethany stormed down the hall toward the elevators, leaving us there, standing in silence.

“Sooo,” I drug out with another nervous laugh.

Rowan let out a huff and reached over, snatching something from what I could only assume was a table by the door... seeing as I was still standing *outside* of the apartment.

“I need you to pick up my suit from Sal’s Cleaner’s,” he said, slapping a dry cleaning receipt into my hand. “Then I’ll need you to get me a venti Americano with two raw sugars and a splash of skim milk, not half and half, *skim milk*.” He spoke slowly, like I was a mentally challenged eight-year-old. “And a low-fat blueberry scone from The Bean on 85th and Park. Not the one on Lexington, that place is shit.”

I stood in complete silence, my mouth hanging open as I tried to process what the hell was happening.

“You got all that, or you need me to write it down for you?” he asked snidely.

I snapped my mouth shut and narrowed my eyes into glaring slits, trying my damndest to set him on fire with my eyeballs. No such luck. “I got it,” I answered between clenched teeth.

“Great. Well, hop to it, then.”

With that, the door was rudely slammed shut in my face and I was left honing some newfound murderous tendencies.



It was official.

I *hated* my job.

By the time the subway pulled into the station closest to my house, I was a sweaty, disgusting mess. My hair had fallen out of its artfully styled chignon. My feet had blisters the size of pancakes from traipsing all around the city in the sweltering summer heat. Harlow’s pretty blouse had a coffee stain across the right boob where I’d tripped and spilled Rowan’s coffee down the front of myself—meaning I had to go back and wait in the long ass line at The Bean a *second* time. And I was pretty sure a panhandler shoved his hand up my skirt

on the subway ride home. The whipped, puss-y topping on the shit sundae that was my day were the million and one text messages I received from Rowan needing me to run yet *another* errand.

None of those messages were of him *asking*. Oh, no, they were rude and demanding in nature, and I had to stop myself on multiple occasions from hurling my beloved iPhone into oncoming traffic.

By the time I made it back to his apartment with all his requested items, the coffee had long since grown cold, mimicking his icy attitude.

As I limped up the steps to mine and Harlow's apartment, I kept thinking of all the reasons I wanted to quit, following closely with all the reasons I couldn't, i.e. my rent and other such necessities.

"Hello, pumpkin. How was your first day?" Harlow asked in an all too chipper voice once I came through the front door.

"I hate my boss!" I yelled like a crazy person before collapsing to the floor and spreading out on the cool, laminate wood, basking in the feel of it against my overly heated skin.

"What the hell? What happened?" Harlow asked as she took a seat on the floor next to me, brushing my sweat-slicked hair back from my face.

"You mean other than working for a twat-waffle who's the love child of Satan and that 'Mommy Dearest' lady?"

"You mean Joan Crawford?"

"That's the one."

"Was he really that bad?"

"Remember that asshole William Chandler from sophomore year?"

Her face scrunched up as she tried to recall who I was talking about. "You mean that dickhead football player, who used to bark at all the girls he thought were ugly?"

"Yep."

"Oh, shit. That bad?"

"Multiply that times a million and you'll have Rowan Locklaine."

Harlow's gaze grew sympathetic. "Aww, sweetie, I'm so sorry."

"And if that wasn't bad enough, I'm pretty sure I lost my no-no hole virginity to a hobo on the subway."

I was being completely serious. So when Harlow let out an indelicate snort and collapsed in a heap of hysterical laughter next to me, I couldn't find it in me to share with her in the humor of the situation.

"I'm glad you find my pain so hilarious," I deadpanned from my spread-

eagle position on the floor of our entryway.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” she sputtered, tears trailing down her face. “I know it’s not supposed to be funny, but you should see your face right now!”

I was just about to respond with something brilliantly snarky when my cell phone rang from inside my purse. With a groan of pain, I twisted sideways and retrieved it before going back to my original position.

“Shit,” I muttered as I looked at the screen.

“Who is it? Is it him?”

“No, it’s Lauren. Probably calling to tell me I’ve been fired.”

Harlow whacked me on the shoulder, eliciting a pout from me. “Stop being so negative. Answer the phone and I’ll go pour you a glass of wine.”

“In the big glass?” I asked hopefully, referring to the wineglass-shaped vase we found on clearance a year or so ago. It was what we considered our ‘emergency glass’.

“Yes, in the big glass, you big baby. Now, answer the damn phone already.”

Steeling my resolve, I slid my finger across the screen and held the phone up to my ear, prepared for the worst.

“Hello?”

“Navie, hello! How are you?”

“I’m, um...” I lifted my head enough to take in my prone position on the floor, only imagining how pathetic I looked. “I’m good?” I had no idea why I answered in the form of a question.

“I’m glad,” Lauren answered. “I was just calling to see how your first day went.”

“It was, uh... um... good?”

Silence came through the line so long I was afraid the call dropped. That was, until I heard her heavy sigh whoosh through the receiver. “What did he do?”

“No! No, it was... fine,” I spouted quickly. “He was fine. Everything was fine. Fine, fine, fine,” I added with a heaping of cheerfulness, hoping it didn’t sound as fake to her as it did to me.

“Navie, please speak freely. I want nothing more than for you to feel comfortable enough with me to tell me the truth.”

While her statement didn’t necessarily put me at ease, it did make me like her all that much more.

“No offense, Lauren. You’re fantastic, but I really need to keep this job.”

“Your job’s safe, sweetie, trust me.”

“Pinky promise?” I asked then quickly face-palmed.

“Swear,” she answered with a light laugh.

“Okay, then. He’s *horrible!* I can’t believe you’ve worked with him as long as you have and haven’t already been imprisoned for murder. I was seriously contemplating it a time or a thousand today. I can’t stand the guy, and I’m pretty sure he hates me, which doesn’t make sense because I’m a friggin’ ray of sunshine! But after the day I’ve had, I’m feeling rather violent. I’ve never felt that way before, and I was bullied in high school, so that’s really saying something!”

After my long-winded rant, I sucked in some much needed oxygen, praying that my mini freak-out hadn’t just cost me my job, but seriously doubting I was still gainfully employed.

“I’m fired, aren’t I?” I asked as I chewed anxiously on my thumbnail, waiting for Lauren to say something.

And what she said was completely unexpected.

“Do you know why I hired you for this position, Navie?”

“Uh... because you secretly hate me, too, and are trying to punish me?”

“No,” she laughed. “I hired you because I saw something in you during that first interview.”

“What did you see?” I asked curiously.

“A backbone,” she answered simply, shocking me into silence. “You’re tough, Navie. It’s not something you wear outwardly, but I could see it in your eyes the moment I met you. And seeing as you just admitted to being bullied, that strength makes sense now. I gave you this job because I had no doubt whatsoever that you could handle it.”

“I think you’re giving me a little too much credit,” I responded humorlessly.

“And I think you’re wrong. A weak person would have gone home and cried into a pint of ice cream. She wouldn’t have gone on a passionate tangent the way you just did. I think *you* don’t give yourself enough credit.”

“Thank you,” I said softly, truly touched by her impassioned words.

“Look, I know Rowan can be difficult at times—”

“Understatement of the century,” I snorted.

“*But,*” she continued, “he’s not all bad. I know it’s hard to see that now, but you’re right. I wouldn’t have been able to work with him going on ten years if he was a constant miserable prick. He’s got some demons in his past

that make it hard for him to trust anyone. You can't take it personally. His life made him hard."

I could understand that. *Boy*, could I understand that. The fact that Rowan and I shared messed-up childhoods resonated with me and made me a little more sympathetic toward the callous man.

"I'm going to be honest with you, Navie. My gut is telling me you can handle this job. But if you really feel like it's too much, we'll find you another position at Enterprise."

"You'd really do that?"

"Of course. I meant what I said about you being a valuable asset to the firm, but I'm not going to keep you in a position you hate. That wouldn't do anyone any good. But I think you're exactly what Rowan needs. He just doesn't know it yet."

Sitting up, I pulled a deep breath into my lungs and let it out. "I'm pretty sure he thinks I'm an incompetent moron."

"Then prove him wrong," Lauren responded. "But better yet, prove me right."

"Okay," I finally spoke after a few seconds. "I'll do that."

"Fantastic!" Lauren shouted through the line. "Oh, and Navie?"

"Yeah?"

"Don't take any of his shit. Show him that steel I saw in your eyes when we first met. Trust me when I say I won't hold anything you say or do against you. You put that man in his place if need be. I know you have it in you."

five

Navie

Lauren's words of encouragement did a lot to bolster my confidence as I made my way to Rowan's apartment the next day.

I hadn't made the same mistake as the day before, making sure to dress comfortably in a pair of jeans, a loose t-shirt, and flats. It wasn't the most professional ensemble, but I'd be damned if I was going to trek all over the damn city in heels and a skirt again.

Taking Lauren's words to heart, I tried my hardest to give Rowan the benefit of the doubt, telling myself that once he realized I was trustworthy, the chilly armor would crack, revealing the normal, pleasant man underneath.

Yeah, not so much.

I tried. I really, *really* did, but after thousands of thinly veiled insults, being bossed around by a rude, inconsiderate ass, and being talked down to, I'd finally had enough.

I lasted six days before I finally blew.

And I went up like a damned volcano.

Using the key I'd forced from an all-too-reluctant Rowan after quickly discovering he and I didn't function on the same schedule, I unlocked the front door and stepped into the apartment, trying to be as quiet as possible so as not to wake the hibernating bear too early.

I made a beeline for the kitchen to start a much needed pot of coffee. I'd grown hopeful that if I had it ready and waiting in the kitchen, he wouldn't require me to drag my butt down to The Bean day after day. It hadn't happened yet, but I still held out hope.

Rowan and I had managed to work out some semblance of a schedule over the past five days. I started work by checking his calendar to make sure his schedule was up to date before moving on to his hundreds and hundreds of emails. I trashed all the hate mail—of which there was a ton—and all the naked pictures sent in by female fans—of which, shockingly, there were

more—and typing up a generic thank you to those who weren't rude or wildly inappropriate. Those tasks alone took over two hours, and in the past week, I'd learned things about Rowan I'd never be able to unlearn.

After that, I went through the invites he received to different charity functions or galas. Who knew an author got invited to so many important black-tie events? I worked with Lauren to accept those he needed to attend and decline those he didn't. I handled any and all social media, seeing as how the 'uncle fucker' scenario was still fresh in people's minds. Then there were the errands that never seemed to end, keeping in contact with all the other players: his agent, a weasely, beady-eyed man I'd quickly grown to dislike; his personal stylist, a young, peppy girl only a year or two older than me I seemed to have a lot in common with; his housekeeper, an older Hispanic lady named Rosa, who I found to be quite intimidating after a run-in that involved a glass of spilled orange juice on my part; and the rest of the PR team at Enterprise.

I'd gotten a pretty good feel for Rowan's day-to-day life and I was feeling better about my position. He locked himself in his office, working on his next book, while I went about my ever-growing list of tasks. There was limited contact between the two of us, but what there was wasn't pleasant. So I tried my best to steer clear of him as much as possible.

Pushing through the swinging door into the kitchen, I closed my eyes on a yawn and stretched my arms over my head, completely innocent in my actions and unaware of what I'd just walked in on until I opened my eyes.

"Oh, my God!" I shrieked at the sight of Rowan's buck-naked body standing in front of the opened refrigerator, one hand holding a bottle of orange juice to his lips while the other hand was much... lower, scratching at a certain body part that no employee should *ever* see of her employer. No matter how... well-endowed said employer was.

Holy shit on a shingle, I did not need to see that before being properly caffeinated.

"What the hell!" Rowan bellowed, startling me from my momentary stupor.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," I spouted, frantically spinning in a circle, trying to make a split-second decision between shielding my eyes and getting a better look. A startled yelp escaped me at the brush of Rowan's naked flesh against my arm as he moved past me and into the living room. I couldn't help but notice just how perfectly sculpted his butt was as I followed behind, enjoying

the view a little too much. I had to bite down the sigh of displeasure as he snatched a pair of boxer briefs off the back of the couch and yanked them up his thick thighs, covering up what, in my opinion, should have been made available for all the world to see.

“Jesus Christ!” he shouted, pulling my eyes up from the decent-sized bulge behind the gray fabric of his underwear. “Do you have any sense of personal boundaries?” he asked sarcastically, running a hand through his messy black hair agitatedly. “How you managed to convince Lauren you were a professional is beyond me. From what I’ve seen since you started working here, you don’t know your goddamned ass from your elbow!”

And that’s when it happened. I snapped.

“That’s it!” I yelled at the top of my lungs. “I’ve had it with your narcissistic, self-centered ass! My work day starts at eight-thirty in the morning. Eight. Thirty! Not nine, not nine-thirty. Eight-thirty! It’s been that way for six days, so if you made the decision to wander around with your beans and franks hanging free when you *know* damn good and well I’ll be showing up at any minute, that’s your problem, not mine! I’m sick and tired of putting up with your whiny, bitchy attitude. And I lived in a dorm full of girls, all on the same damn menstrual schedule, so the fact that you’re worse than all of them combined speaks *volumes* about your character.

“I’ve given you six days to come to grips with this new arrangement and pull your head out of your ass and start acting like a normal human being, but seeing as that’s not going to happen any time soon, here’s how it’s going to be from here on out. I’m your personal *assistant*, not personal bitch, so starting now, you’re going to treat me with the level of respect I deserve, and in return, I’ll do the same. You want to keep acting like an asshole? Go for it, but believe me when I say I give just as good as I get. There will be no more insults. You are *never* to talk down to me ever again. I graduated summa cum laude from NYU. I’m not an idiot and won’t tolerate being treated like one. Any and all activity that requires you to be in *any* state of undress will be done on *your* time, not mine. Because believe it or not, I don’t get paid nearly enough to have to watch you scratch your balls.

“I am damn good at my job, whether you’re willing to admit that or not. And I’m tired of dealing with a petulant child masquerading as a grown man. This bullshit ends now. Do you understand me?”

By the time I was finished, my breathing had grown ragged, my chest rising and falling as though I’d just run a marathon. Rowan stood there

staring at me, mouth agape, hands planted on his sexy, tapered hips. *Damn it, Navie! Get your shit together. He's not attractive, he's an asshole!*

"Well?" I asked haughtily when the silence had grown too thick.

"You expect me to believe you graduated with honors and the best you could find was a job as my personal assistant?"

I wanted to stab him in the eye with a pen so bad. "Believe what you want," I seethed. "Not that I owe you an explanation, but the company I did my internship with had a hiring freeze, and the job market in New York isn't exactly stellar for recent graduates. Everyone wants someone with *experience*," I grumped sarcastically. "So I'm stuck with your cranky, narcissistic ass, because clearly, I'm being punished for something I did in a past life. Either that or karma's just a raging bitch who likes to pick on the innocent!"

"You finished?" he asked casually.

"You know what?" I fumed, "I'm not. From here on out, the only way I'm doing another damn coffee run for you is if you give me enough money to buy myself one as well. And if you aren't being a complete asshole, I *might* consider giving you back your change when I'm done."

"Now you finished?" was all he said.

"Yes," I bit out.

"Good. I need coffee."

And with that, he turned and headed back into the kitchen.

I was pretty sure my head exploded.

six

Rowan

Fuck me.

I shouldn't have gotten a semi from her smart little mouth, but damn if my shorts hadn't started feeling a bit tighter. And it had everything to do with the tiny spitfire standing in my living room, giving me a ration of shit like she owned the place.

I had to admit, seeing her all fiery and pissed off like that really did something for me. I didn't just want to press her buttons; I wanted to jab on those motherfuckers until they stuck in place. Getting a rise out of her got a definite rise out of me.

That was *not* good.

I wasn't the type of man to enjoy a woman beyond the one thing I truly needed her for, one thing that typically only lasted a few hours before we parted ways. Yes, I was aware that made me sound like an inconsiderate asshole, and yes, I also knew I lived up to that title spectacularly. But when the love of your life chewed you up and spit you out in the worst possible way, it had the power to leave a man seriously jaded about the opposite sex.

That was why I had desperately needed to escape the little minx, each angry inhalation causing those mouthwatering tits to rise and fall beautifully.

Christ, I hadn't even known the girl was built like that. Her wardrobe had left little to be desired over the past few days, but the t-shirt she was wearing that morning was much more form-fitting than anything she'd worn before. How had I not realized how hot she was until that very moment?

And her ass in those jeans.

Lord, help me.

I was in *serious* fucking trouble.

"Excuse me?"

I rolled my eyes at her biting tone when she pushed into the kitchen as I hit the switch on the coffee maker. "Look," I started, turning around to find

her with her hands propped on her curvier-than-expected hips and murder in her denim-colored eyes. I had to clear my throat and give my head a little shake to dislodge the thought of what she'd look like naked from my mind. The only reason I was looking at her with even the *slightest bit* of lust was because I hadn't gotten laid in the past five days.

That had to be it. There was no way I'd be attracted to a woman like her if I was in a rational frame of mind. No way at all.... right?

Her snapping voice pulled me back into reality. "What?"

"Huh?"

Her eyes narrowed as she regarded me like some sort of science experiment gone wrong. "You started saying something, but then you trailed off."

"Oh, yeah..." I tried to get my brain back on track, but with how full her breasts looked in that goddamned t-shirt, I couldn't think straight.

"Oh, for the love of God," she grumbled as she stomped in my direction, pushing past me to grab a mug and fill it with coffee. I followed suit, thinking lack of caffeine was just another reason for the major mental malfunction I seemed to be having in her presence.

"First off," she started after taking a gulp from her mug and setting it on the counter. "They're called breasts," she said, waving her hand in front of her chest. "They're something I'm willing to bet you see on a daily basis." I couldn't help the smug grin that pulled at my lips—that was, until she continued on. "Although, I don't see how you manage to pull in the kind of tail you do. Yeah, you're hot and all, but the moment that mouth of yours opens, all that good flies out the damn window."

"Pot, meet kettle," I deadpanned, more than slightly insulted, even though I couldn't understand why. I was more than aware of my reputation. And up until just then, other people's opinions of me hadn't mattered much. So, why was Navie's judgment rubbing me the wrong way?

"Look, it's more than obvious that we don't like each other, and that's fine. But I need this job, Rowan. Can we just... I don't know, call a truce or something?"

As I studied the woman in front of me, I was hit with an emotion I hadn't experienced in what felt like forever. An emotion I'd worked diligently over the years to tamp down whenever it started bubbling up inside of me—guilt.

Could I say with all honesty that I didn't like her as she'd claimed? The answer was no, I couldn't. For the past several days, I'd tried to convince

myself that was the case. That her being an annoyance was the reason for my bad behavior, but that wasn't the case. The longer I found myself in her presence, the more drawn to her I seemed to be. And that was a problem... a *huge* problem.

But I couldn't, in good conscience, deny her request for a truce when she looked so sincere, staring up at me with those unusual blue eyes.

Just as my lips parted to answer her, the loud trill of my cell phone broke through the moment. With a deep sigh, I stepped from the kitchen to where my phone lay charging in the living room. The name that flashed across the screen shot a bolt of anxiety through my body.

"Mom?" I answered nervously, and for good reason. My mother and I only talked once, maybe twice a month. There were no unscheduled phone calls between us, so the fact that she was calling me out of the blue didn't bode well.

"Rowan, sweetheart," she spoke through the line. "How are you, honey?"

"I'm good, Mom. Is everything okay?" I heard Navie's delicate footsteps coming into the room and I quickly retreated down the hall to my study, not willing to risk her overhearing my conversation. Just because I was willing to come to a grudging truce didn't mean I trusted her with the very personal aspects of my life. There were things about my past that I'd busted my ass to keep out of the media.

The lock clicked into place as silence resonated through the phone line. "Mom? You there?"

"Oh, yes. Sorry, dear."

"Something's wrong. What happened?"

A ball of dread lodged firmly in the pit of my stomach as my mother hesitated before finally saying, "It's Richard."

My jaw clenched as fear and anger coursed through my blood at just the mention of his name. In all the conversations I'd had with my mother over the years, there was one unspoken agreement we had. We never brought up his name.

"Is he hurt?" Just saying those three words caused nausea to roil in my stomach. I didn't want to worry about him. I didn't want to care.

"Oh, no. Richard's fine, honey."

In the same instance my chest loosened, the anxiety lessening its hold, frustration took its place. "Then can you please explain to me what the hell is going on?"

Once again, Mom remained silent on the other end for several seconds. I could only imagine her hand on her chest, twirling that ever-present strand of pearls. “Richard and Bree are getting a divorce.”

And with that, I saw red.

“And you’re calling to tell me this bullshit why?”

“He’s your brother, Rowan,” Mom spoke incredulously, as though she couldn’t understand the disdain I held for my brother, a brother I’d shared a womb with. Twins were supposed to be closer than any other two people on the planet, after all.

“Are you serious with this shit right now?” I bit out, the frustration in my veins quickly turning into rage as my vision clouded with red.

“Rowan Anderson Locklaine!” Mom chided. “You will watch your language when you’re speaking to me.”

Usually, a quick reprimand from Marie Locklaine was enough to put me in my place and leave me feeling like an insolent child, but not at that moment.

“You’ve got to be kidding!” I laughed sarcastically. “You call me up to inform me of my brother’s divorce from *Bree*, and you don’t think I have a right to be pissed off? Fuck that!”

“Rowan, please. He’s your brother. He’s hurting. Would it kill you to reach out to him? Be there for him when he needs you?”

“You’re asking if it would kill me to call the man who slept with the woman I loved, the woman who was *supposed* to be the mother of *my* child, the woman he then married after she crushed my fucking heart, and offer up my support? Is that what you’re asking?”

“Rowan,” she whispered through the line heartbreakingly. Hearing the tears in her voice only added to the burning sensation I felt at the wounds of my past being sliced back open.

“Yes, Mother. As a matter of fact, it *would* kill me. I couldn’t give two shits what happens to either of them, or how badly they’re hurting. And I can’t believe you’d even ask that of me.”

“Rowan, please,” she pleaded, but I was done.

“I have to go, Mom,” I said before disconnecting the call without letting her get another word in. My blood was boiling, my heart pounding in a rapid staccato. My chest heaved with each breath I pulled into my lungs. Before I could register what was happening, the phone in my hand flew through the air, smashing into the wall with a pleasurable crack as it shattered against the

drywall. I had no idea how long I stood there, staring down at my mangled phone, the broken pieces scattered across the dark hardwood floor. It wasn't until I heard a faint knock on the door to my office that I was pulled from my silent rage long enough to remember that Navie was there... in my house... invading my space when all I wanted was to be left the hell alone.

“What?” I spit as I yanked the door open.

She jolted back slightly in surprise, or it could have been fear, I wasn't sure. But I had no doubt I looked positively feral as I stared down at her across the threshold.

“Uh...” She looked up at me with uncertainty, a mug of warm coffee in her extended hand. “I-I brought you your coffee.”

I sidestepped her small frame and started toward my bedroom. “Don't want it,” I grunted. “And get me a new goddamned phone,” I barked at her from over my shoulder before slamming my bedroom door. I quickly changed into my workout clothes and headed for my home gym.

I knew the only way to expel the fury inside me was to beat it into submission by working out, taking my anger out on my body physically in the form of exercise.

My truce with Navie was long forgotten as I passed her in the hall without as much as a word in her direction. Fuck a truce. If she was going to work for me she'd just have to take me as I was. I'd already altered myself for one woman in my life, and look where that had gotten me. If she couldn't hack it, that was her own damn fault.

seven

Navie

“You know I hate you a whole lot right now, don’t you?” I ignored Harlow’s grumbling as I moved to the next vendor. New York street fairs were my crack. I was addicted to going from booth to booth, finding hidden gems I could turn into the most beautiful jewelry.

“Hey!” Harlow poked me in the side, drawing my gaze away from the beautiful ruby-red glass beads I’d been admiring. “Pay attention to me! I’m mad at you right now. You’re supposed to be apologizing profusely. Is it too much to ask that you grovel a little bit? I mean, you *did* rip me from my beauty sleep at the butt crack of dawn so I could help you scavenge for treasures in the middle of the summer.”

Turning in my friend’s direction, I propped my hands on my hips and glared from behind my sunglasses. “Stop being such a baby. I woke you up at nine-thirty. That’s hardly the butt crack of dawn.”

The hand that wasn’t holding her Starbucks cup came to rest on her trim waist, her hip jutting out as she took her bitch stance. “I have boob sweat, Navie. Boob sweat!”

The short, pudgy vendor we were standing in front of cleared his throat awkwardly, drawing my gaze away from Harlow just in time to see his beady little eyes hone in on her chest.

I let out an annoyed breath as I turned back to my friend. “If you’ll give me just one more half-hour without your constant bitching, I’ll make you a pretty necklace,” I cajoled.

I could almost see the wheels turning from behind her large sunglasses. “Throw in a matching bracelet and we’ve got a deal.”

“Fine.” I held out my hand and we shook on it briefly before wandering to another booth.

“Soooo,” she dragged out as we walked at a leisurely pace. “How’s it going working for Satan himself?”

I let out a disheartened groan as we continued to walk. “I swear to God. If the paycheck hadn’t looked so pretty deposited into my account, I’d have quit by now. The man is a freaking nightmare.” Two and a half weeks had passed since I started working for the famous Rowan Locklaine, and I was no closer to liking the man than I had been on day one. I thought I’d seen just a smidge of humanity in his startling blue eyes that day I’d stumbled in on him naked in the kitchen, but my hopes had gone up in a puff of smoke the instant he’d opened his office door. The asshole had returned after a brief reprieve, and it appeared he planned to stay.

“Is he really that bad?” Harlow asked, sucking down the last of her coffee and tossing the cup in a trashcan as we passed.

“Yes, he’s really that bad. I swear, whenever the man opens his mouth, I get all stabby. Amazing looks were wasted on Rowan Locklaine.”

“If only you were deaf,” Harlow joked with a nudge to my shoulder as we walked. “That way, you’d get to look at him all day long without having to actually *hear* him.”

I sighed deeply, lamenting my situation. “I’ve tried earbuds, but even they can’t drown out his incessant bitching completely. And since I’m not willing to poke my eardrums out, I’m screwed. It is what it is.”

Harlow tossed her arm over my shoulders, crooning sarcastically, “Aww, poor baby. Your life must be so hard.”

I playfully elbowed her in the ribs as we continued to wander. As the morning wore on, I was able to push all thoughts of my temperamental boss to the back of my mind and enjoy my day off, indulging myself as I thought of different designs for my jewelry while Harlow drooled over discounted designer handbags.

By the time we made it home, I was pleasantly calm and ready to throw myself into my creations. Jewelry making was my therapy, and I was all too happy to lose myself in my favorite hobby. I’d spent hours holed up in my room designing an intricate necklace and taking pictures to upload onto my website, *Navie’s Knickknacks*. Cassidy had created the name years ago when she used to take my jewelry to the local farmer’s market where she worked back in Texas. With her help, I’d been able to branch out from local markets and sell my own stuff online. Honestly, I’d have loved nothing more than to make jewelry for a living, but seeing as I had bills to pay, my dream wasn’t all that feasible. In college, I hadn’t had the time to fully immerse myself into creating, and as the years passed, it was harder and harder to find the time.

But I still held the same love for it that I did as a teenager.

Adult life just seemed to be getting in the way.

By the time my cell phone rang, pulling me back into the present, the sky outside my bedroom window had turned completely black. Standing with a groan, I arched my back to work out all the kinks from hours spent sitting, hunched over my desk. I was mid-stretch as I reached for my phone, too wrapped up in the give of my muscles to pay attention to the name on the display.

“Hello?”

“I need you over here right now.”

Temporarily stunned, I stood frozen in place until realization hit me. “Rowan?”

“Who else could it possibly be?” he asked in a detached, insulting tone that instantly got my hackles up.

“People call me!” I insisted childishly. I hated how my maturity nosedived whenever it came to my boss.

“If you say so. I need you to get over here ASAP.”

There was a strong possibility I let out a rather indelicate snort at his typical assholery. “Since you asked so nicely, I’ll be right there!” I answered, my voice heavy with sarcasm.

“Do you always have to be so damn difficult?” he grunted

“Do you always have to be such a raging hemorrhoid?” I fired back. I would have sworn I heard him choke on a laugh if I thought the man was capable of laughter. Rowan Locklaine was more likely to suck the souls from small children than to laugh.

“Did you really just call me a raging hemorrhoid?”

Was that humor in his voice? Couldn’t be. The Devil doesn’t have a sense of humor.

“If the shoe fits... or in your case, whatever Satan wears on his feet. It’s nine o’clock on a Saturday night, Rowan. Have your latest conquest run whatever bullshit errand you need taken care of. I’m off the clock and not required to be nice to you.”

“This is you being *nice*?” he asked indignantly, causing me to roll my eyes.

“Hanging up now.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” he hollered through the phone line just as I was about to disconnect. Reluctantly, I held the phone back up to my ear. “Look.” He

huffed out a loud breath. “I’m... I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean to insult you... Navie? You still there?” he asked when I remained silent for several seconds after his apology.

“The world is coming to an end, isn’t it? It’s the zombie apocalypse. I’m not prepared! I haven’t taken any crossbow lessons yet!”

“You’re friggin’ hilarious,” he deadpanned.

I didn’t bother to stifle my laughter. “I like to think so.”

I listened as he inhaled deeply. “Please, I really need your help. I know it’s your day off, but it’s an emergency. I’ll even make sure Lauren pays you time and a half. Can you just please get here as fast as you can?”

“Rowan.” I sighed in exasperation. “It’s at least a twenty-minute train ride to your place. It’s not like I can just snap my fingers and make myself appear on your doorstep. You’re on the Upper East Side and I’m in Murray Hill.”

“I’ll pay for a cab.”

“Fine,” I grumbled dramatically. “But I’m not changing out of my comfy clothes. And I want double-time, not time and a half.”

“Okay, okay. Whatever you want. Just get here.”

At the unease in his voice, I began to worry a little about what was so important that I had to rush over to his apartment on a Saturday night. Not wanting to hesitate in the event it was something major, I slipped on a pair of bright pink flip-flops, pulled a gray hoodie on over my ‘That’s what she said’ t-shirt, and headed for the door. The only change I was willing to make before walking out the door was trading in my yellow rubber ducky pajama pants for a pair of plain black leggings.

By the time my cab pulled up in front of Rowan’s building, he was already standing out front waiting for me. As I stepped out onto the sidewalk, he leaned in and paid the driver before rising to his full height and turning my way. His hair was standing on ends, as if he’d been running his hands through it anxiously, and I couldn’t help but notice how amazing his body looked in just a plain white tee and another pair of athletic shorts. Man, it really was a crying shame he was such a mega-douche. Women around the world would line up just for a chance to stare at him uninterrupted for five minutes.

“Navie,” Rowan’s rumbly voice called out, shaking me back into reality. When my vision came back into focus, I noticed Rowan was standing much closer than he had been just a second before. When had that happened?

“Huh?”

“I asked if you were coming.” His typically chilly blue gaze warmed just a bit as a cocky smirk spread over his lips. “You were just checking me out, weren’t you?”

Oh, hell, I thought with a huge roll of my eyes.

“You were, admit it. You didn’t hear what I was saying because you were too busy checking me out. It’s okay, everyone does it.”

“And then your mouth opens and the fantasy’s ruined,” I responded dryly with a roll of my eyes as I shoved past him. “Let’s get this over with. Too long in your presence and the desire to cause bodily harm becomes too overwhelming to ignore.”

“You know,” he started as we stepped into the elevator leading up to his floor. “I had no idea you were so... feisty. Gotta say, I’m pleasantly surprised.”

“Oh, goody. My purpose in life has been accomplished. I can die happy now.”

Luckily, the doors chose to open at that moment, saving me from whatever smartass comment Rowan had in return.

“All right,” I said as I reached his door and turned the knob. “What was so damn important you dragged me down here in the middle—?” As soon as the door to his apartment swung open, my ears were assaulted by the wretched warbling of what sounded like a cat being bludgeoned to death.

“What the hell is that?” I whisper-yelled as I stepped over the threshold.

“I can’t be certain, but I think it’s supposed to be Taylor Swift.”

I turned back, wide-eyed, to see Rowan still standing by the door. “You mean that’s a *person*? *Singing*?”

His only response was to nod warily.

My gaze darted from Rowan toward the kitchen and back to Rowan again. “I don’t—” I began, just as understanding took hold. “Oh, *hell* no!”

Rowan stepped in my path just as I started back for the front door, blocking my escape with his large, stupidly perfect body. *Damn him!*

“Please, just listen,” he rushed to say in a quiet voice, although I wasn’t sure why. The *person* butchering “Bad Blood” in the kitchen was more than likely all anyone on Rowan’s floor could hear. “I know this is so far beyond the scope of fucked-up, it’s not even funny, but she won’t leave! She just showed up here and I can’t get her out.”

“Nope. Nuh-uh. No freaking way, Rowan! Nowhere in my job description does it say I’m responsible for the removal of your booty calls. That’s low,

even for you.”

“I didn’t sleep with her!” he insisted vehemently. I looked at him like he was an idiot if he expected me to believe that. “I really didn’t, at least not this time. She said she wanted to make me dinner, but we finished *an hour and a half ago*! She began washing dishes and whenever I mention her possibly leaving, she starts washing one of the knives from the butcher block. She’s washed, like, *six knives*! And they were already clean! You have to help me. *Please.*”

And just like that, a light bulb went off in my head.

eight

Rowan

The way Navie's dark blue eyes narrowed menacingly should have been worrisome. However, I'd crossed the line from worried over an hour back and was firmly planted on the side of 'legitimately terrified for my life', thanks to the woman in my kitchen currently making noises akin to those an animal might make while being castrated.

"What's in it for me?" Navie asked, crossing her arms over her chest, drawing attention to the way her arms shoved her tits up. Sweet Lord in Heaven, thank God she hadn't zipped up that hoodie of hers. Why did it feel like I discovered something new about Navie every day that made my dick stand up and take notice? The woman had one of the best racks in New York. I was beginning to think there was something seriously wrong with me. I hadn't been lying when I told her I hadn't slept with the woman in my kitchen. Truth was I hadn't slept with anyone since that very first day she caught Bethany leaving my apartment. I was in the middle of the longest dry spell I'd had since freshman year of high school. I couldn't explain why. Maybe I was getting sick or something. That had to be it. That was the only reasonable explanation as to why I was allowing Navie's opinion of me to put a damper on my sex life.

"For fuck's sake, Navie," I hissed. "You're already getting double-time—okay, okay, *okay!*" I nearly shouted when she started for the door again. "You can have anything you want. Just get rid of her."

She eyed me skeptically. "Anything?"

"Jesus! Yes!"

Reaching into her purse, she pulled out her phone, tapped on the screen a few times and held it in the space between us. "Repeat after me," she said in a no-nonsense tone.

"You're recording this?" I asked in exasperation.

"Hell yeah, I am. I need proof to hold over your head if you ever try and

renege on our deal. Now, quit bitching and repeat after me. I, Rowan Locklaine, asshole extraordinaire...”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” I grumbled, earning myself a narrow-eyed glare. “Fine. I Rowan Locklaine, asshole extraordinaire...”

“Do solemnly swear from this point forward to never, *ever* be a flaming douchebag to my *lovely* personal assistant, Navie Collins.”

With a huff and a roll of my eyes, I repeated everything she’d just said and waited for her to continue

“And I hereby give her unfettered access to my cable television...”

“*What?*”

“Just say it!”

“Why do you need access to my cable?”

“Because I don’t have cable at my apartment and I need to take full advantage of your DVR so I can record all of the shows I’ve been missing.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling a migraine coming on strong. “For the love of God.”

“Hey, if you won’t agree to my demands, I can just leave.” She shrugged casually, like it was no concern to her one way or another.

“All right,” I ground out through clenched teeth. “You can use my DVR.”

“Deal,” she chirped, shutting off her phone and stuffing it back into her purse. “Okay, let’s do this.”

“What are you doing?” I asked as she shrugged off her sweatshirt and handed it to me, leaning back just slightly and sticking her stomach out so a small bump formed on her otherwise flat belly.

“Getting into character,” she said simply, tugging on the hem of her t-shirt. It wasn’t until that point that I noticed what her shirt said.

““That’s what she said”? Seriously?”

“Hey, don’t hate on my shirt. *The Office* was the best show in the history of television.”

Son of a bitch. The girl was just too adorable for her own damn good. I couldn’t help myself; I felt the smile begin to tug at my lips as I spoke. “Bears, beets, Battlestar Galactica.”

When Navie laughed at that, her entire face lit up. There was no missing the fact that she went from adorable to downright stunning whenever she laughed. My body’s reaction to the intoxicating sound was instantaneous, and I shifted awkwardly. Trying to hide a semi in a pair of basketball shorts was damn near impossible.

Once her laughter finally died down, she looked at me with those shimmery blue eyes and took a deep breath. “Okay. Showtime. You go in first, and I’ll be right behind you.”

I looked over my shoulder at her in bemusement as I reluctantly headed back into the kitchen where some god-awful bubblegum pop song was being butchered within an inch of its life. The moment I cleared the threshold, the tall, statuesque brunette at the sink spun around with a squeal.

“Baby, there you are!” She skipped around the island and threw her arms over my shoulders. “I was starting to get worried. You were in the bathroom for a really long time.”

“Oh, I... uh,” I stuttered, instantly regretting the good ole ‘I have to use the bathroom’ excuse. That excuse should never, ever be used on anything that takes longer than five minutes to accomplish. Luckily, I was saved from having to defend myself against possible Irritable Bowel Syndrome when Navie came busting into the kitchen like a miniature blonde tornado.

“How could you?!” Her screech was so high-pitched I cringed at the sound of it. All I could do was stand in shock as Navie’s eyes filled with tears while her hands caressed her inflated stomach. “I can’t believe you, Rowan! You *swore* to me there would be no more women when I told you about the baby!”

It was as though a record scraped to a sudden halt in my head. *Baby? What. The. Hell!* All of a sudden, those big, crocodile tears that had been welling up in her eyes fell free. I had to hand it to the girl—when she put her mind to something, she clearly went all out.

“Rowan? What is she talking about?” the woman with the anaconda arms coiled around my neck asked.

“Uh... um... look, Mindy—”

“My name’s Mandy.”

“Oh! That’s just great!” Navie shouted, throwing her hands up in the air. “I’m carrying your child, trying my best to deal with the stresses of a high-risk pregnancy, and you’re cheating with some *girl* whose name you don’t even know!? This is unbelievable.” She tacked a loud, gut-wrenching sob to the end of her tantrum for good measure.

“Oh, my God!” Mindy... Mandy... whatever it was, exclaimed with a shove at my chest. “You’re such a pig!”

“Uh...” I mumbled, dumbfounded. “I don’t know what’s happening right now.”

“Oh, no,” Navie breathed as she collapsed into one of the barstools at the island. “Oh, goodness,” she said dramatically with a hand to her chest.

“Are you okay?” Mandy/Mindy darted around to Navie and placed a hand on her back.

“I-I’m fine.” She sighed. “I think it’s just all the stress. I’ve had blood pressure problems. My doctor’s concerned that staying in this relationship isn’t healthy for the baby,” she lamented, big tears running down her cheeks. “I just... I just love him so much.” She sniffled. “I thought this baby would change him, you know... that he’d want to be there for me and his son? But I guess I was wrong.”

Mandy/Mindy pulled Navie into her arms as more of those fake sobs wracked her body, all the while shooting daggers my way.

“I’m so sorry,” Mandy/Mindy soothed. “I had no idea. I never would have —”

Navie sat up straight, wiping the tears from her eyes. “Oh, it’s not your fault. Trust me, you aren’t the first woman he’s fooled.”

“Is there anything I can do? Can I call you a cab or something? Do you have somewhere else you can stay?”

I had to turn my back on the two women to keep them from seeing me roll my eyes.

“I’ll be fine.” Navie sniffled again. “I have to pack my things, but I have a friend I can stay with. Please, don’t worry about me.”

I made the mistake of turning around when I heard the shuffling of feet. The slap Mandy/Mindy laid on my cheek stung so violently it almost brought tears to my eyes.

“You’re unbelievable! You have this beautiful, loving woman and you’re too much of a bastard to keep it in your pants! Shame on you.”

And with that, she stormed from the kitchen, leaving Navie and I listening as the front door opened seconds later, quickly followed by a loud, wall-rattling slam.

“Oh, wow.” Navie giggled. “That was a lot more fun than I thought it would be.”

Shooting her a scowl over my shoulder, I pulled open the freezer door and grabbed a bag of peas, pressing the cold plastic to my face to ease the burn. That only made her laugh even harder.

“I’m glad you find this so funny,” I said dryly. “And how the hell did you get your stomach to pop out like that? You’re like a freak of nature!”

“It’s amazing what substantial amounts of Mexican food can do.” She giggled again.

“I’m just thankful she wasn’t wearing any rings.”

I thought she was going to fall off the stool as she burst into a fit of uncontrollable giggles. “Oh, man.” She sighed once she finally gained a hold of herself, wiping at the tears of laughter that had run down her cheeks. “You should have seen your face when I said I was pregnant. I thought you were about to have a heart attack. No person’s face should turn that unnatural shade of red. I was really worried for a second.”

“I’m sure you were,” I deadpanned, switching out the bag of frozen peas for a bottle of vodka and slamming the door closed. “Rest assured, my heart’s just fine. It’ll take a lot more than a fake pregnancy scare to get me to keel over any time soon.” I pulled down two glasses from one of the cabinets, filling each with a little more than a shot’s worth before sliding one in her direction.

“You sure about that?” Her dark blue eyes narrowed as she studied me. I was lost in a daze as her full, puffy lips pressed against the glass as she took a drink. I was so focused on what those lips would look like wrapped around my dick that I almost missed her next dig... *almost*. “I mean, you’re not exactly *young*, are you?”

I choked on the vodka as it made its way down my throat. It took several seconds of wheezing and coughing before I could give her a proper glare. “I’m only thirty-three,” I grumbled, all of a sudden wondering if she felt that thirty-three was too old for her. I wasn’t exactly sure of her age, but I knew she’d only recently graduated from college, so that put her around twenty-two, twenty-three years old. Was that too much of an age difference in Navie’s eyes?

And why did I suddenly care?

“Whatever you say, boss man,” she replied before bringing the glass back to her lips and finishing off her drink. “Thanks for the drink and the show. I’ll see myself out.” As she stood from the barstool, I was hit with an unexpected pang of disappointment. I didn’t want her to leave. That was a reaction I’d never had before when it came to a woman in my personal space.

“Wait,” I called, following her out of the kitchen. “Let me get some cash for your cab.”

She smiled up at me as she slid her arms into her gray hoodie. The sight of that uninhibited smile nearly took my breath away. “Nah, that’s all right.

Your cheek's still pretty red, so I figure we're even."

"You sure?" I asked as she pulled the front door open, trying anything to prolong the moment.

"Yep. Have a good weekend. I'll see you Monday." With one last grin, she turned and began walking away.

"Yeah, see ya."

As I closed the door to my apartment, I couldn't stop myself from wishing it was already Monday.

Shit. I was so screwed.

nine

Navie

In the weeks that followed my acting debut, Rowan and I had seemed to come to a cease-fire. We still got our shots off when the desire grew too strong, but for the most part, our working relationship had been better. I couldn't say he'd become a decent person, but at least he was more tolerable. I'd been working as Rowan Locklaine's personal assistant for over a month and neither of us was dead or in jail. That was a win-win, as far as I was concerned. I could honestly say I was starting to like my job. There was only one problem. On top of beginning to like my job, I was also beginning to like my boss...a little too much. I didn't know if it was simply because I'd already seen him naked, but too much of my headspace was being taken up by the gruff, temperamental man.

Only the week prior, I'd woken up a panting, sweaty mess after having an all-too-vivid dream where he did things to me that would have been grounds for a *serious* sexual harassment suit had it not been a fantasy. The dream was so arousing that I'd started to look at him in a completely different light. I may have been caught a time—or a dozen—checking him out in a not-so-professional way ever since. And to my absolute dismay, I found I was really starting to *enjoy* the back and forth banter between the two of us.

Trying to push the inappropriate thoughts to the back of my mind, I began doing all my work from the comforts of my boss' massive couch, which felt like falling into a hug whenever you sat down. And the sixty-inch flat-screen TV that aired all my favorite shows playing in the background made it slightly easier to fill my mind with something other than what Rowan's naked body would feel like laying on top of me. I needed to get my shit together, and fast.

I had free reign of everything from the kitchen to the living room while Rowan holed himself up in his office, working on his next book. I was halfway through the first season of *Chrisley Knows Best* while updating

Rowan's calendar when the doorbell cut through the pleasantness of my afternoon. The first thought that entered my head as I stood from the couch—a couch I was working up a plan to steal—was, *If this is another booty call, I'm punching that asshole in the nards and demanding a raise.*

"Can I help you?" I asked with a huff and an eye-roll, already planning a way to get rid of whatever bimbo was at the door.

"Dear Lord, I really fuckin' hope so." The deep, *masculine* voice gave me a start as I jerked my attention to the person standing on the other side of the threshold.

Well, hello.

"Oh. H-hi," I stumbled as my eyes roamed over every inch of the gift from God in the form of a man standing before me. I was staring into the same, icy blue eyes as Rowan's, but the smile behind them was so much more carefree than the one I occasionally glimpsed from my moody boss. Where Rowan's hair was jet-black, this man's was a darker brown. The stranger stood an inch or two shorter than Rowan and his nose was just a little more crooked, like it had been broken a time or two, but other than that, the similarities were uncanny. He had all the sexy physical characteristics of Rowan with what appeared to be a nicer demeanor beneath it all. In other words, the absolute *perfect* man.

So, the question had to be asked. Why was my mind still going back to Rowan?

"Hey there," he rumbled, the corner of his mouth hooking up in a half-smile that could only be described as devastating to the female population. "I'm Griffin, and who might you be?"

"Oh, uh... I'm Navie," I responded pathetically. Griffin reached out to take my hand in his, bringing it up to his lips and pressing a light kiss to my knuckles. I swooned on the spot.

"Navie, huh? That's an interesting name. It fits its beautiful owner perfectly."

With Griffin still holding my hand, I broke out into a fit of embarrassingly loud giggles. We were both standing in silence with ridiculous grins on our faces when a throat cleared from behind me. Griffin's smile turned suddenly somewhat mischievous.

"Hey, cuz. How's it going?" he spoke, not letting go of my hand as I turned to find Rowan standing there with his arms crossed, an angry scowl marring his otherwise handsome face.

“It’d be going a lot better if you’d let go of my assistant, asshole.”

My gaze darted between the two men like a ping-pong ball. “Ah, where’s the fun in that?” Griffin chuckled.

“You think a broken hand is fun? Because that’s what’s going to happen in about five seconds if you. Don’t. Let. Go.”

Usually, I would have found such an exchange humorous, but from the way the muscle in Rowan’s jaw was ticking, I was almost certain he was dead serious about breaking Griffin’s hand. I tried pulling my fingers from his grasp but he only tightened his hold, taking a step closer to me.

“It’s amazing how that vein in my cousin’s forehead pulses when he’s about to blow, isn’t it?” he whispered in my ear, sending a chill down my spine. I could have sworn I heard a quiet growl coming from Rowan’s throat. “Ah, come on, man. I’m just messing with you.” Griffin laughed heartily, finally releasing me so I could move back a few steps out of the line of fire. With that, I watched in confusion as Rowan’s entire demeanor relaxed.

What the hell was that?

“Navie, I see you’ve met my cousin,” Rowan spoke with a roll of his eyes.

“I’m the good-looking one in the family,” Griffin answered as he stepped farther into the apartment and closed the door behind him.

“He’s the outcast in the family,” Rowan countered. “No one really likes him, but we’re nice out of familial obligation. We spend the rest of the time talking shit behind his back.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at the playful ribbing between the two men. Once the tension in the room lessened, it was easy to see the camaraderie between both of them. Griffin put his hand to his chest. “Ouch, man. You wound me.”

“Oh, please,” Rowan replied with a small chuckle. Just that hint of a tiny grin lit up his entire face. “Your ego’s too big to allow you to be offended.”

“This is true. But can you at least try not to make me look like a tool in front of Navie, here? I’m trying to make a good first impression.”

I laughed again as Rowan glared. “All right, guys. You can continue the pissing match once I’m out of the room. Griffin, can I get you something to drink?”

“No, thanks, sweetheart. I’m good.”

“What about me?” Rowan asked, sounding slightly offended.

“Get your own damn drink. It’s *your* kitchen. I have to get back to work. You boys enjoy yourselves.”

I left the foyer and headed into the living room, followed by the sound of

Griffin's raucous laughter. I tried to appear nonchalant, but the truth was I just had to get away from Rowan before I did something stupid, like kiss him or spontaneously combust into a pile of lusty goo. Jesus, I *really* needed to get my shit together!



Being left in peace while the men closed themselves off in Rowan's office, I had managed to check several tasks off my to-do list when the sound of the front door opening gave me a start.

"Hello, hello!" I heard from the entryway and a smile spread across my face. Pepper sauntered into the living room as she always had in the time I'd been working for Rowan, in a flurry of bright colors and saucy attitude. I absolutely *adored* Pepper. She was Rowan's personal stylist and even though I didn't understand what made Rowan important enough to warrant a personal stylist, I was just grateful it was someone as awesome as her. Her hair was an awesome shade of red that she always had fixed in a way that made her look like a modern-day Bettie Page. Her lips were always painted bright red, her eyes were constantly lined with perfect precision, and every time I saw her, she was dressed like a fifty's pinup model. She was all curves and fierce attitude.

"What's cookin', good lookin'?" she asked as she made her way to me, tossing the garment bags in her hands over the back of the couch before crouching to place a kiss on my cheek. I scanned her outfit, an adorable summer dress in black with large white polka dots and a halter neckline and mile-high red, peep-toe heels. No way in hell was I the good looking one in this particular scenario. I had nothing on her in my ratty t-shirt and jeans that should have been thrown out sixty washes ago. Where Pepper was all fabulous all the time, I was more of the 'dress for comfort' kind of girl.

"Look who's talking," I responded with a grin as she plopped down next to me, kicking her feet up on the coffee table and crossing her ankles like she didn't have a care in the world.

"Oh, please," she said with a wave of her hand. "You're like a sex-kitten Pollyanna. I'd totally do you if you had the required body parts."

"You sound just like my roommate, Harlow." I laughed as I mimic her relaxed position.

“So, what you’re saying is your roommate’s fabulous?”

“Yep, that’s exactly what I’m saying.” I giggled. “So, what’s in the garment bags?”

“His Royal Dickness needed a new suit for his photo shoot with *Modern Woman*.”

“Ah, that’s right. It’s in two weeks. Unless he manages to piss off the photographer before then and the damn thing gets pushed back for the third time.” The interview and photo shoot were supposed to have taken place before Rowan’s last release as a way to market the new book, but being the egomaniac he was, Rowan managed to find something to bitch about with every photographer hired to do the shoot. The interview had already taken place and the magazine was starting to get pissed. They didn’t want to run the story without a few new shots. And I was the lucky one who had the honors of reining him in so the shoot went off without a hitch. *Lucky* me.

“I don’t envy you your job, honey.” Pepper laughed. She’d started working with Rowan about two years before me, so she was able to commiserate about just how big a pain in the ass he was. Apparently, Pepper’s brother was one of his best friends, so when she moved to the city with plans to open up an upscale boutique, he had helped her raise her startup costs by working for him. Pepper’s boutique was up and running, but she still worked for Rowan on the side to supplement her income while the shop continued to make a name for itself.

“I also have his tux for the American Heart Association event. I need him to try it on so I can get the measurements straight.”

“Shit,” I hissed out with a cringe.

“What?”

“I still haven’t told him I RSVP’d yes to that event.”

Pepper’s head fell back against the couch as she burst into laughter. “Oh, man! You’re so screwed. He *hates* these stuffy black tie events. When he finds out you and Lauren went behind his back to get him there, he’s going to blow a fuse! Please, let me be there when you tell him. Pleasepleasepleaseplease!”

“You’re an asshole,” I groused.

“Aww, don’t be pouty,” she cooed, pulling me in for a sideways hug. “It’s gonna suck, but I have something you can look forward to after it’s done.”

“Oh, yeah? You have something that will make me feel better after getting fired?”

“Please,” Pepper harrumphed. “You know as well as I do that man isn’t getting rid of you. Besides, Lauren’s got your back. Way I see it, you two have him by the short hairs, he’s just not willing to admit it.”

“While you paint an intriguing picture, I’d prefer not to think about my boss’ short hairs, thank you very much.”

I didn’t add that I’d already seen everything there was to see. That was a can of worms I refused to open. Despite being besties with Harlow and my burgeoning friendship with Pepper, the fact that I had seen Rowan naked was something I was taking to my grave. Lord knew those two would analyze the hell out of that event.

“Well, it just so happens that yours truly was invited to the grand opening of The Neon Room tonight. VIP access and everything.”

“No shit?” I squealed excitedly. “How the hell did you manage that? Everyone and their dog has been trying to get invited to the opening!”

“Yeah, well, I guess I’m one of the cool people,” she joked. “What do you say? You up for a night of dancing and debauchery at New York City’s most popular night club? Well, at least until another one opens in a month.”

“Hell yeah! I need a night out like you wouldn’t believe.”

“Yay!” she exclaimed as she gave a cute little bounce. “Invite your roommate. We’ll make it a girls’ night out.”

“Oh, she’d love that! It’s going to be so much fun.”

“See? I told you I’d have something for you to look forward to after Rowan’s done chewing your ass out.”

I let out a dejected sigh and flopped back on the couch. It didn’t matter how hot Rowan was, or how attracted to him I was beginning to feel. Some days my job sucked worse than others.

Ten

Rowan

“So, what brings you by?” I asked as Griffin closed the door to my office behind him. “You know, other than just showing up to be a general pain in my ass.” Saving the most recent edits to my manuscript, I closed the lid on my laptop and took a seat across from my cousin as he made himself comfortable in one of the club chairs on the other side of my desk.

“Well, I was going to say I wanted to see your smiling face, but after seeing your hot-ass assistant, I’m gonna have to amend my answer.”

An unfamiliar feeling shot through my body. Red clouded my vision as blood began to thunder through my ears. I couldn’t for the life of me understand why I was having such a strong reaction; I just knew I was helpless to control it.

“Stay away from her,” I all but growled.

That asshole had the nerve to smile at me. “Oh, come on, help a man out. We’re blood, cuz. You could put in a good word for me.”

“There are no good words I can use to describe you. You’ll stick your dick in anything wet and willing.”

Griffin’s head fell back in laughter. “Hypocrite much? You’re a bigger whore than I am. And that’s really saying something.”

“Look,” I began, trying to take a safer route. “She’s my assistant. The last thing I need is for that shit to blow up in your face and fall back on me. You wanna bang half of New York, go for it. Just leave my employees out of it.”

The look on Griffin’s face told me everything I needed to know. He was buying my bullshit reasoning about as much as I was. “Oh, man. I knew it! You’re hot for her.” He laughed like it was the most hysterical thing he’d ever heard.

“She’s a good assistant and my... friend,” I added pathetically. “I’m not hot for her. I just don’t need the drama that would come with you two hooking up.”

“Bullshit, Row. I saw it the moment I walked in. You might as well have pissed a circle around the poor girl. Good for you, dude. She’s gorgeous. She’s got that southern sweetness thing going on.”

My head felt like it was about to explode. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sighed. “Can we not talk about my assistant and get back to the reason why you’re here?”

“Can’t a man stop in to say hey to a family member once in a while?”

“Not when that man lives to annoy the ever-living fuck out of me,” I answered.

“Fair enough,” he responded, the grin on his face slowly leaking away, turning Griffin’s usually carefree features into something much more serious. My hackles went up instantly. Griffin Locklaine rarely did serious, as he always said he had enough serious shit to deal with when it came to his job with the NYPD. He worked to keep his personal life as stress-free as possible.

“What’s up?”

“Man,” he huffed, running a hand through his shaggy brown hair. “You know I try my best to stay outta shit. I’m neutral all around, you know that. But I got a call from Aunt Marie a couple days ago.”

My head fell back on a groan. I knew my mother wasn’t giving up about getting me to reconcile with my brother, but to pull Griffin into our fucked up mess was just low. “Fuck,” I hissed out. All of a sudden, the dull headache I’d been feeling at the start of our conversation turned into a sharp, piercing pain.

“This isn’t something you’re going to be able to ignore, Row,” Griffin stated, causing anger to surge through me.

“I know you aren’t actually suggesting I talk to that motherfucker,” I gritted out.

He held up his hands in surrender. “Of course not! Look, I get your anger, man, I do. What Rich did was *beyond* fucked up, and I’d be the last person to tell you to kiss and make up. I didn’t come here to lecture you. I came to give you a heads up.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. “A heads-up about what?”

Griffin fell back in the chair with a heavy breath, running a hand through his hair in agitation. “Aunt Marie called me to try and talk some sense into you, but I told her it was your business and I wasn’t getting in the middle of it. She was pissed, no doubt about it, but she didn’t push.”

“Then why are we talking about this, Griff?”

“Because I got a call from Rich a few days later. He’s coming to the city, Row.”

It was like a band of screaming toddlers had taken up residence in my skull and were all beating on drums. “You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me!” Fury I hadn’t felt in years took root in my chest, setting everything aflame. I moved to New York to get the fuck *away* from Connecticut so I could escape them. And he had the nerve to invade my territory? *Fuck. That.*

“I’m just the messenger. Believe me, this is the last thing I wanted to come here to tell you. He claims he needed to get away after the split. Apparently, the divorce was less than amicable—”

“What a fucking shocker,” I interrupted sarcastically.

“He took a transfer to his firm’s New York office. He’ll be here within a month.”

My elbows hit the desktop, my head falling into my hands as I tried to grasp the fact that, once again, my brother and I would be sharing the same city... something I never wanted to do again. We’d shared everything growing up—toys, clothes, a bedroom. You name it, we shared it; the plight of being a twin. One thing I never expected us to share, however, was women. I never expected the woman I was head over heels for to crush my heart by betraying me with my own brother. But what hurt worse was that Richard, my flesh and blood, my *twin*, didn’t hesitate when Bree found her way into his bed.

I raised my head when I heard Griffin stand from his chair. “Look, I know it’s just another in a long line of fucked up situations, but think of it this way. New York isn’t small, Row. The odds of you ever running into him are slim to none. You don’t run in the same circles, your career paths don’t cross. You’re probably never even gonna see the guy.”

I knew Griff was trying to find the silver lining in the shit storm that was my life, and I appreciated the hell out of him for it, but I just couldn’t find it in me to look at things with the same optimism.

“Let’s get shitfaced tonight,” he offered. “I’ll call up Dex, see if he can join us, and we’ll make a night of it. What do ya say?”

Dex was my best friend from college and Griffin’s partner at the NYPD. The three of us were closer than my brother and I had ever been. A night out sounded like just the thing I needed to push all thoughts of Richard out of my head. “Yeah... yeah, that sounds great. Let’s do it. Call him and see if his

wife's willing to unshackle him for one night."

Griffin's carefree smile returned. "I'm telling Wendy you said that," he teased.

"You do that and I'll tell her about the strippers you hired for his bachelor party," I returned. We loved to give Dex a hard time about being the only one of us to be tied down, but the truth was we loved Wendy. She was exactly what he needed to keep him on the straight and narrow.

Griffin had just opened his mouth to respond when a husky, seductive laugh echoed from the living room.

Ah, hell.

I rolled my eyes as Griffin's head whipped toward to office door. "Pepper's here?" he asked, turning back to me, a gleam in his eye that could mean nothing but trouble. As a favor to Dex, I'd hired his sister, Pepper, to be my personal stylist when she first started trying to open her own store. Pepper lived and breathed clothing and was in desperate need of cash to get started. I didn't have the first fucking clue what to do with a personal stylist, but I had money to spend and Pepper was just as much family to me as Dex was. She wouldn't just take a check, so I did the only thing I could. I came up with a bullshit job for her to do so she wouldn't feel guilty about taking my money.

Turned out, the decision paid off pretty damn well. I never had to buy any of my own clothes, or suffer the torture that was retail shopping, and Pepper had a fantastic eye. It was the perfect arrangement. And it seriously helped that Pepper wasn't like most other women. There really wasn't any drama where she was concerned.

Unless it came to Griffin.

I had no idea what happened between the two of them, but for the past two years, it seemed like they were determined to do battle every time they were in the same room. Griff got a sick thrill out of fucking with her, and Pepper seemed to despise the ground he walked on. What made that strange was the fact that they'd been friends before. No telling what happened, but that was a mess I was staying the hell out of.

"Not in my apartment, man," I lamented. "I don't want to deal with the bloodstains when she claws your eyes out."

Griffin turned and headed for the door, grinning over his shoulder as he said, "I just want to say hi to an old friend. No harm in that."

I didn't even bother responding to that asinine comment as I followed him out of the office and down the hall to the living room. Just as we turned the

corner, something Pepper said piqued my curiosity.

“See? I told you I’d have something for you to look forward to after Rowan’s done chewing your ass out.”

“Chewing your ass out for what?” I asked as Griff and I stepped into the room. Pepper spun around, her eyes full of laughter—that was, until they set sight on Griffin.

“Ugh, what are *you* doing here?” she snarled, her red-painted lips curling up in disgust.

“I’m here to see your cheerful, smiling face, of course,” Griffin needled.

“What am I going to chew your ass out about?” I asked again, trying to diffuse the situation between the two people currently taking their corners for a fight.

Navie pulled her attention from the two of them and turned to me, a look of uncertainty in those big, blue eyes I was quickly finding myself addicted to.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Those denim-colored orbs rolled back in her head as Navie let out a huff and grabbed a garment bag from the back of the couch. Walking to me, she slapped the thing against my chest.

“Here. You need to try this on so Pepper can get your measurements right.”

With a quirked brow, I reached for the zipper and pulled it down. My confusion instantly morphed into displeasure. “Why does Pepper need my measurements for a tux?”

“Because you’re going to the AHA gala at the end of the month,” she mumbled quickly. Unfortunately, I heard her clearly.

“Oh, *come on!* You know I hate those fucking things. A bunch of rich pricks flaunting their money just so they can look like they give a shit about something when they’re really only thinking about how they can fuck one of the staff without their spouses catching on.”

“Wow,” Navie said with a tilt of her lips. “You aren’t cynical at all, are you?”

“I’m not going.”

She planted her hands on her hips and glared at me. “You’re going, and that’s final. You’re going to be one of those rich pricks for a night. Look on the bright side—maybe you can bang a waitress.” She smiled full-on, clearly pleased with her joke.

“You just *want* to be fired, don’t you?”

She shrugged casually. “You can’t fire me. Technically, I work for Lauren. And she likes me better than you.”

I was suddenly hit with a stroke of genius. “Pepper,” I spoke, not breaking the stare-off between Navie and myself.

“Yeah?” she asked over her laughter.

“I’m going to need you to find something suitable for Navie to wear to the event, since she’ll be coming along.”

“What? Are you out of your mind? I’m not going with you!”

“I’m assuming you RSVP’d plus one?” I asked, already knowing the answer to my question.

“Of course. Are you ever seen out in public without a bimbo on your arm?”

“Well...” an evil grin twisted my lips up, “...seeing as I’m not planning on looking for a date, and it’s a thousand-dollars-a-plate dinner, looks like you’ll be that bimbo for the night.”

Our standoff continued for several seconds before her shoulders fell in defeat. “Fine. But I don’t like you.”

“Works for me.” I shrugged.

Pepper stepped over to us and hooked her arm through Navie’s. “Go try the damn tux on,” she said before turning back to Navie. “Let’s go talk outfits for tonight. I’m thinking the Neon Room is going to be ripe for the picking, and Mama needs to get laid. VIP, baby!”

Griff and I stood side by side, staring as they headed into the kitchen and out of earshot.

“Hey, Row?”

“Yeah?”

“Think you can get us into the Neon Room?”

I had no doubt my smile was akin to the Cheshire Cat. “I’ll make some calls.”

eleven

Navie

As I'd expected, Harlow was ecstatic at the idea of a girls' night out. Before bills, jobs, and the rest of the general adult crap had been dumped upon us, dancing was something we always loved to do. So in preparation for a much needed night out, we spent well over two hours getting ready. The end result was something I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to replicate again.

"Girl, you look *hooooooooooot!*" Pepper whistled as Harlow and I stepped out of the back of our cab in front of the Neon Room. I looked down at my dress, feeling more exposed than I ever had in my life.

When I'd made it home and told Harlow about our plans, she'd immediately run to her room and come back with two dresses, tossing them down and declaring, "Pick one. I'll wear the other." One was a sleeveless dress with a cream, jersey-knit top and a shimmery dove gray skirt. It was cute, but the large triangle cutouts on both sides showed more skin than I was willing to show. I thought the silver sequined dress would have been a safer pick; it had short sleeves, and although it would only come to about mid-thigh, it had a modest neckline. The dress was fun, a little funky and, matched with a pair of nude platform heels, was right up my alley. That was until I picked it up and saw the back, or should I say lack thereof.

It scooped down the entire length of my back. Those little dimples at the base of my spine were in serious danger of being exposed, and I worried that if I bent the wrong way, I'd be flashing crack at some poor, innocent bystander. But when I tried to trade back with Harlow, she'd refused, telling me the dress was made for me.

I hated her.

My eyes traveled from my less than modest ensemble to what Pepper was wearing. It was an outfit I'd never have the lady balls to wear, but she absolutely rocked it. The black leather pants hugged her like a second skin. Her red corseted halter top lifted and cinched to make her figure look perfect.

And her leopard-print pumps were to die for.

Literally.

As I stood there, I conjured up different scenarios just so I could get my hands on those shoes. She had the sexy rockabilly look down pat.

“You, too,” I answered, leaning in to give her a hug, mindful not to bend too far forward. After quickly introducing Harlow and Pepper, we made our way to the front of the club, bypassing a line so long it snaked around the building. I wasn’t going to lie; jumping ahead of all those people desperate to get in was a heady experience. Pepper flashed our passes—along with a seductive wink—at the bouncer and just like that, we were in.

The instant we stepped inside, my senses went on overload. People packed the dance floor in the very middle of the space, moving and swaying to the beat that vibrated through the floors. Flashes of different colored lights shot in random intervals through the dimly lit building, bathing everything in temporary color before going dark again. The club was two levels, the first floor housing the dance floor and two long bars, one on the far back wall and one to the right when we first walked in. A curved, wrought iron set of stairs to my left led up to the second level. It was completely open, like a balcony wrapping around all four walls, overlooking the action down below. I was willing to bet that was the VIP area. The energy in the club was positively electric, and I felt my excitement build at the idea of getting out there and losing myself in the sea of people.

“Come on!” Pepper yelled over the music. “VIP has bottle service. We’ll get a drink then go dance.”

Standing between Harlow and Pepper, the three of us linked hands as Pepper led us up the stairs. I was so focused on not getting my heel caught and falling on my face that I ran smack into the back of Pepper when she came to an abrupt stop at the landing.

“Oh, hell no!”

“What is it?” Harlow asked. I looked at her over my shoulder and gave her a shrug before turning back to see what set Pepper off.

“Evening, ladies.” I knew that voice. Once I shoved Pepper out of the way enough to make it to the landing, my gaze settled on the man standing in front of her wearing a cocky grin.

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Unfazed by the fire in Pepper’s eyes, Griffin’s smile grew brighter as he took a step toward her. She tried to back up, but with Harlow and me

standing directly behind her, she had nowhere to go.

“Just having a night out with the guys.” He tilted his chin, dragging my attention to where Rowan and another guy sat on plush looking loveseats that surrounded a square table. From the looks of it, the entire VIP area was filled with small seating sections just like theirs.

My breath stalled at the sight of him sitting there. If there was one thing I’d been looking forward to, it was a chance to escape the constant thoughts of Rowan that had been plaguing me. Seeing him there, completely at ease, caused all those hopes of forgetting, at least temporarily, to burst into flames.

“You have *got* to be kidding me!” Pepper shouted as the other guys made eye contact with us.

“Sis!” the unfamiliar one called out excitedly. Pepper’s brother was most definitely not what I expected. The guy next to Rowan was the complete opposite of his fiery sister. He was most definitely attractive, but in a straight-laced, casual way and none of the flash of Pepper.

“I cannot believe you crashed our girls’ night!” she seethed at Griffin between clenched teeth. “And you brought my brother?!”

“Total coincidence,” he answered smoothly. “I don’t see cause for such hostility, sweetness. Can’t we all just get along?”

From the way her entire body grew rigid, I was willing to bet that was the absolute wrong thing to say. “No, we can’t. And there’s a perfectly good reason for the hostility.”

“Oh, please, enlighten me.”

“It’s simple. I can’t stand the sight of you.”

If the venom in Pepper’s voice hadn’t been enough to convince me what she was saying was true, the way Griffin’s laidback demeanor shifted as he flinched was enough to do it. I had no idea what had happened between those two, but whatever it was, it wasn’t pretty.

Just as quickly as the hurt appeared, it was gone and Griffin’s carefree mask was back in place. “Can I buy you lovely ladies a drink?” he offered to all three of us. “I can speak for the other guys when I say we’d be honored for you to join us.”

“It’s bottle service, party crasher,” Pepper bit before shoving him out of the way. “Move. I need a damn drink.”

As Pepper stormed toward Rowan and her brother, I caught a brief glance of Griffin watching her ass as she walked. Harlow’s elbow nudged my side, drawing my attention to her. From the grin on her face, I knew she’d seen it,

too.

“Tonight’s certainly going to be interesting,” she whispered.

“That’s one word for it,” I responded as we slowly made our way over to the table.

“So, that’s him, huh?” she asked with a tilt of her chin in Rowan’s direction. “Jesus H, he’s even hotter in person. And there’s two of them?” Her voice was laced with bewilderment as her focus bounced back and forth between Griffin and Rowan.

“They’re cousins,” I answered.

“Can I have one?”

I tried to sound as casual as possible, even though I was feeling anything but. “Go for it, but I’m pretty sure you wouldn’t be the only one either of them ended up with tonight. Hope you don’t mind sloppy seconds... or thirds.”

“You’re no fun,” she pouted. “What about the other guy?”

“Never met him before, but I’m pretty sure I’ve heard Pepper mention his wife and kid before.”

“Damn. Well, looks like I’ll have to broaden my search.”

I looked at her and shook my head, a smile on my face. “Go forth and conquer,” I teased. “But I need a drink.”

“Me, too. Drink then dance?”

“You’re on.”

Pepper was still pouting by the time we made it to the table, taking a seat on the couch across from Rowan and the guy whose name I still didn’t know. The moment Rowan’s eyes landed on me, I felt them like a physical touch. His icy blue gaze raked over me, sending a chill across my skin. The starkness of the black button-down shirt and slacks he was wearing, combined with his black hair, made his eyes even more prominent. My lungs constricted as I averted my eyes, unable to hold his stare. A myriad of emotions rioted inside me at that very moment—first and foremost, confusion as to why he affected me so greatly, followed by lust as a *very close* second.

“Wendy let you go to a club opening without her?” Pepper asked her brother before taking a large gulp of the drink in her hand.

“She thinks I’m at poker night,” he responded with a pleased chuckle.

“Not when I call her, *Dexter*.”

Huh. Dexter and Pepper. They must have really interesting parents.

“Aw, don’t be like that, sis. I didn’t know these two assholes were set on

crashing your night. I just wanted to get out of the house for a little while.”

“So, you *did* crash girls’ night out,” I said, looking back to my boss. The man was too good looking for his own good. *Damn it!* Rowan hardly ever smiled—at least from what I’d seen—but when he did, it was like a punch right to the gut. And the lazy grin that tugged at the corners of his mouth as he sat back casually, one arm thrown along the back of the couch, his other hand gripping a glass, was too disarming. I quickly looked away, my palms beginning to sweat as I scanned the table in front of me for something to drink. Spotting a bottle of tonic next to a bottle of vodka, I quickly went about making Harlow and myself a vodka tonic.

“Would you believe me if I said it was a coincidence?” Rowan asked in a low voice I hadn’t heard before. When I looked up, the way he was staring back at me had goose bumps breaking out across my skin. Was he... *flirting* with me? Surely not.

Deciding to let it go and act as normal as possible, I handed Harlow her drink and took a sip of my own. “Nope. Not one damn bit.” Thankfully, Pepper decided to chime in, cutting off our awkward exchange by starting introductions for everyone.

“Navie, huh?” Dex said. “And I thought our mom and dad were thinking outside of the box. How did your parents come up with that?”

My smile felt flat as I looked back at Dex. It was a question I was used to getting, but answering it never got any easier. Suddenly, Harlow’s hand touched my back, offering up encouragement when I needed it without drawing attention. Other than my self-made family at Willow Ranch, Harlow was the only one I ever talked to about my upbringing. I never hid the fact that I grew up in foster care, but I didn’t go around advertising it, either. And I certainly never talked about my mother with anyone I wasn’t extremely close to.

Relaxing a bit with Harlow’s touch, I answered, “My mom gave me that name because of my eyes. She said they were the same color as my dad’s.”

That was the truth. And also the extent to which I ever spoke about my mother. I breathed a sigh of relief and took a large gulp of my drink when my answer didn’t spur on any further questions.

Pepper downed her drink and shot to her feet.

“Let’s dance!”

Gladly.

Twelve

Rowan

I was losing my fucking mind. The wrought iron railing groaned under the force of my white-knuckled grip.

“Dude, you look like you’re about to have an aneurysm. Just step away from the damn railing already.” Griffin’s voice held far too much amusement as he gave me shit for the millionth time in the past three hours. Feeling a sense of guilt at being out without his wife, Dex had bailed about an hour before, so I was stuck with my asshole cousin as my only company while the women took to the dance floor.

“Shut the fuck up,” I ground out between clenched teeth, my eyes remaining stuck on Navie’s writhing form as she and her friends danced below us. I’d gotten a semi the moment she walked up in that tiny piece of fabric she was wearing as a dress. But the moment she turned around and I saw the damn thing had no back... *whatsoever*, I about lost my shit completely. I bounced between wanting to bend her over the closest available surface to wanting to gouge the eyes out of every fucking man who looked her way. Which was just about every motherfucker in the club.

It was official. I was going insane.

From my peripheral vision, I saw Griffin come up to me, resting his hip on the railing next to my hand as he joined me in staring down at the girls. The only reason I didn’t wring his neck for looking was because I knew damn good and well who his focus was on. And it wasn’t Navie.

“Then do us both a favor and make a move already, cuz. You’re a serious buzzkill tonight, you know that?”

I didn’t bother with a response as I trailed Navie’s every movement from below. Everything about the way she moved made me crave her. The sway of her hips, the move of her perfect legs, and good Lord, when she reached up to lift her heavy mass of hair from her neck, revealing that glistening skin... I wanted to mark every inch of her body. Watching her was so addictive I

physically *ached* to touch her. My cock throbbed from behind the zipper of my pants.

I was so enthralled by her that I barely noticed the waitress sauntering up to me. It wasn't until she pressed her big, fake tits against my arm that I pulled my attention away from Navie to look at the woman beside me.

"Can I get you anything?" she asked in a seductive voice that, in the past, would have had me laying on the charm in order to get her to go home with me. But looking at the waitress just then, with her overdone hair and caked-on makeup, for some reason I just felt... *empty*. And the only reason I could think of that would turn me off of meaningless sex with nameless women was currently shaking her ass with every man who approached her.

Pushing down the ball of fury that rose from the pit of my stomach at that thought, I offered up a smile to the woman giving me her best *come fuck me* eyes. "No, thanks." Her smile fell just slightly before she turned and walked away.

Laughter bellowed from Griffin as he punched me in the arm good-naturedly. "Jesus, man, you're whipped!"

Ah, hell. He wasn't wrong, and that realization scared the shit out of me. Navie made me feel things I never wanted to feel for another woman, things I swore I'd never feel again.

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about," I grumbled, but it sounded weak even to my own ears.

"You just turned down free pussy. That chick offered it up to you on a silver platter and you flat-out rejected her. You want my advice—?"

"I don't," I interrupted, but it was pointless.

"I say fuck the girl out of your system and move on."

I couldn't deny that he had a point. He'd also planted a bug in my head that there was no ignoring. Maybe that was exactly what I needed to do. Lord knew my body wanted her like crazy. Maybe one night would get my brain on board as well and I could get over this screwed up obsession that had been plaguing me.

When I didn't immediately respond, he continued. "Whatever, man. You want to sit up here all night pining away for your personal assistant, go for it. I'm gonna find me someone to warm my bed for the night."

Before he had a chance to walk away, I turned from the railing and looked at him. "Banging some random chick isn't going to make you want her any less."

I could tell from the look in his eyes that he knew exactly what I was talking about, even if we'd never discussed the screwed up relationship between him and Pepper.

Despite his casual shrug, I knew I'd struck a nerve. "That's the difference between me and you. I already know you don't always get everything you want."

With that, Griffin turned and left, undoubtedly on the hunt for another one-night stand. I, on the other hand, already knew who was going home with me. It was just a matter of convincing her.

I cast my gaze back to the dance floor and had to clench my fists at the onslaught of fury that invaded my body at the sight of another douchebag approaching Navie. I took the stairs at a quick pace, dead set on breaking the bastard's hands for touching what was mine. *What the fuck?* I gave my head a brisk shake. She wasn't mine. I didn't *want* her to be mine. I just needed one night, that's all. One fucking night and I could get her out of my head. The moment my feet hit the dance floor, the song changed. I didn't recognize it, but the beat was slower, the music more seductive. It couldn't have been a more perfect song if I'd requested it myself.

The crowd parted just slightly, giving me the perfect line of sight to the middle of the floor, just in time to see Navie smile sweetly at the guy with the soon to be broken hands. A possessive growl rumbled up in my chest at the sight of that smile and I had to swallow it down, biting the inside of my cheek until I tasted blood to keep myself in check.

I was only a few feet away when I saw her shake her head at the guy, the mass of blonde hair swishing across her shoulders. She was giving him the brush-off. I wanted to throw my hands up in victory as she turned and began walking away from him. Before she could get too far away, I snaked my arm around her slender waist, pulling her back to my chest. Just the feel of her body against mine had me groaning with need.

Leaning down, I brushed my nose against the shell of her ear, inhaling her mesmerizing scent, peaches and cream. God, I wanted to take a bite out of her more than I wanted my next breath. "Where do you think you're going?"

Her tiny frame went stiff against me, her chest rising on a sharp inhale. "Rowan?"

I slid one hand up, my fingers teasing the underside of her breast. I smiled triumphantly when she quivered against me. I had her.

"I've watched you dancing with every asshole in here all fucking night

long,” I growled. “Now, it’s my turn.”

Thirteen

Navie

“Rowan, stop.” My argument sounded weak even to my own ears. Tingles shot from the top of my head to the tips of my toes as Rowan pulled me harder against him. Warning bells were going off inside my head, but my body rebelled against the idea of moving away. My breathing stuttered on a sharp inhalation at the feel of his lips trailing against the sensitive flesh of my neck.

This is so wrong. But God, it feels so, so, so good.

“Rowan, please. This is a bad idea,” I panted.

Ignoring my lackluster pleas, he continued caressing me, his nose skimming across my shoulder and neck as he breathed me in. “Christ, Navie,” he hissed in my ear, causing my entire body to tremble. “You look so fucking sexy.” His hands slid to my hips, the pressure from his fingertips burning through my dress and singeing my skin as his grip tightened. His hold was so strong I had no choice but to move with him as his hips started a slow, seductive sway against mine. His presence surrounded me to the point where there was no one on that dance floor, no one in the entire club, but us. He was hypnotic.

“I’ve wanted to put my hands on you all night long. I got hard the moment you came up those stairs.”

My inner feminist should have been ranting at that. His words should have bothered me, made me feel objectified, used. But to my dismay, I found myself leaning back farther, a needy moan escaping my lips.

“Do you have any idea how much I want you?” he asked. From the way his hardness pressed into my back as he ground against me, I had a pretty good idea. All I could do was shake my head in response. My mouth grew dry, what remaining brain cells the alcohol hadn’t affected fried the moment Rowan put his hands on me. Forming a coherent sentence was hopeless just then. I didn’t even have it in me to utter anymore halfhearted refusals.

My buzz, combined with the lust I was feeling for Rowan, was a toxic combination. Even though my brain was screaming at me to move away, to put some necessary distance between us, all I could think as his hands skated down my thighs to the hem of my dress was how badly I wanted to feel them on my bare skin. As if he could hear my thoughts, he began to pull the skirt up oh so slowly, the rough pads of his fingertips creating goose bumps as they brushed the insides of thighs.

“All I’ve thought about for weeks is fucking you. It’s all I *can* think about.” I whimpered when his teeth sank into my ear lobe. “Come home with me.”

I shook my head, still unable to form words.

“Yes,” he insisted. “One night, Navie. That’s all I’m asking. I just need to fuck you out of my system.”

And that was all it took to yank me out of my stupor and straight back into reality. The fog lifted, the loud music beat against my eardrums and the throng of people continued to gyrate around us like nothing had happened. All the while, my world had shifted on its axis.

What the hell was I thinking? I mentally berated myself as I pulled from Rowan’s grasp, stepping out of the way when he reached for me again. I couldn’t let him touch me. His hands on me short-circuited my brain, and I couldn’t allow that to happen again.

“Navie.” He didn’t say my name with confusion or curiosity. It was more like a warning. When I looked into his blue eyes, my heart stalled at the way the icy color had darkened. He looked ready to pounce if I dared to take another step away from him. There was no doubt in my mind that he was the lion and I was his prey, but I couldn’t risk staying in place. I had too much self-respect, too much pride to allow myself to get wrapped up in a man who wanted nothing more than to use then toss me aside like all the other women in his life.

I didn’t say a word as I spun on my heels and pushed through the crowd. I didn’t register anything going on around me as I was bumped and jostled during my escape. My sole focus was on getting as far away from Rowan as possible. As soon as the last few people moved and my path cleared, I sucked in a much needed breath. I kept going, my body on autopilot, leading me down a dark hallway. I could have cried in relief when I hit a door marked ‘ladies room’.

Pushing through, I was shocked to see it was fairly empty, just two other

women giggling as they reapplied their lipstick in the mirrors above the sinks. Once they'd finished and left the restroom, I rested my palms on the cool, granite countertop and dropped my head as I tried to level out my erratic heartbeats. After I'd managed to pull myself together, I looked up into the mirror. "What the fuck just happened?" I asked the wide-eyed reflection staring back at me. I'd just let my boss—an infamous man-whore—practically feel me up on a crowded dance floor as he tried to convince me to let him fuck me.

"*Shit!*" I hissed. The lingering effects of all those vodka tonics weren't making it any easier for me to wrap my brain around the cluster-fuck that was my girls' night out. I needed to formulate a plan. Preferably one that included a time machine and/or some serum that could wipe a person's memory.

Also, I might need to stop watching sci-fi shows, since they gave me ridiculous ideas.

Brushing the hair back from my face, I wiped at the mascara that had smudged beneath my eyes and straightened my appearance as best I could, determined to act as though nothing had happened once I walked out of the bathroom. But then the door opened and my plans went straight to hell in a hand basket.

"What the hell? You can't be in here!" I proclaimed as Rowan turned the lock on the door and stalked toward me. The determination etched into his features sent a combination of panic and desire coursing through my blood. My backside bumped into the edge of the countertop as I attempted to move away from him. In just a few steps, he had me trapped between his large frame and the sink. "Rowan, no," I pleaded, my hands shoving at the hard wall that was his chest. He wouldn't budge.

"Stop running," he growled just before his mouth came crashing down on mine. And just like that, all thoughts of self-preservation fled from my mind and Rowan's tongue prodded my lips, demanding entry. Of its own volition, a moan rumbled up from deep in my chest at the first taste of his mouth. The combination of mint and alcohol was as intoxicating as taking an actual drink, and I found myself diving in for more.

The second my body went pliant in his arms, Rowan unleashed an intensity I hadn't known he was capable of. He gripped the cheeks of my ass roughly, jerking me even closer to him. I lost track of everything as his teeth sank into my bottom lip. Sparks shot through me and gathered between my legs as I whimpered, desperate for more. He kept our mouths melded together

as he lifted me, planting me on the countertop and pushing his way between my thighs, letting me feel exactly how hard he was for me as he pressed impossibly closer.

Ripping my mouth from his, I sucked in a ragged breath as he rocked against me, the rigid outline of his hard cock hitting me just perfectly. My eyes closed and my head fell back as Rowan attacked my neck, biting, sucking, and licking until I thought I might go up in flames. When I said his name on a loud moan, he went crazy, growling as he moved back to my mouth, his tongue mimicking the movement of his hips as he hiked the hem of my dress up for better access. I had no choice but to move against him as heat coiled low in my belly, my panties growing damper and damper with each thrust. I was seconds away from tumbling over the edge and all I could think was that I never wanted him to stop.

“Need inside you,” he panted against my lips. I managed to peel my eyes open at his words and saw the same raw, dark passion that was undoubtedly written all over my face reflected back at me in his icy gaze. He was just as lost for me as I was for him.

“Rowan,” I gasped, falling back on my hands, granting enough space between us for him to do whatever he wanted, because I was helpless to stop this from happening. I didn’t *want* to stop it.

“God, I need to fuck you,” he groaned as one of his hands left my hip, running up the inside of my thigh to my center.

This was it. Holy shit, this was really about to happen.

I’d just about accepted the fact that Rowan and I were going to have sex in the ladies room of a club when a sudden pounding on the locked door pulled me back down to earth, instantly snuffing out the passion in the room like a bucket of water being dumped on a camp fire.

“Hey!” a loud voice yelled. “Unlock the damn door! I gotta pee!”

“Oh, shit,” I gasped, sliding back from Rowan and covering my mouth with both hands. “*Ohshitohshitohshit!*”

“Navie, just calm down,” Rowan spoke, obviously grasping that I was about to have an epic freak-out. “Don’t run from me again. I’m getting fucking tired of chasing after you tonight.”

“*Then stop!*” I shrieked, decidedly un-calm. When I put my hands to his chest and shoved that time, he moved back several inches. “We can’t do this, Rowan,” I spoke as firmly as my quivering voice would allow. “*I can’t do this. Tonight was a huge mistake, and it’s never happening again.*”

“Don’t count on that,” he warned, the muscle in his jaw ticking as he made a move for me again.

Just as the woman with the tiny bladder started pounding on the door again, I hopped off the sink as quickly as possible and sidestepped Rowan.

“I’m serious,” I told him as I began backing toward the locked door. “Whatever... *this*... was, it’s done,” I said, waving my hand in the growing space between us. “I mean it.”

“You have two seconds to unlock this door or I’m getting security!” the woman yelled.

Rowan running a frustrated hand through his jet black hair did little to detract from his staggering good looks as he took one step toward me, then another, and another, until I could feel his breath whisper across my cheek. I stood, frozen by the fierce expression on his face, an expression I couldn’t possibly get a read on. “I finally got a taste of something I wanted, and there’s no fucking way I’m stopping with just that.”

“Rowan,” I whispered, hoping and praying he could read the earnestness in my eyes. “You’re my boss. You don’t do relationships. And I don’t do random bathroom hook-ups. You need to forget this ever happened, because I sure as hell am.”

I didn’t let him get another word in before I spun around, flipped the lock on the door and hauled ass out of the bathroom, muttering a half-hearted apology to the woman on the other side as I brushed past.

“Hey!” Harlow said excitedly as I stumbled up to where she and Pepper were still dancing. The bright smile on her face quickly disappeared as she took in my disheveled appearance. “You okay? You disappeared on us for a bit.”

“Yeah,” I lied. “I think I just drank a too much. I’m feeling a little sick. I’m gonna go ahead and catch a cab home.”

“Hold on,” Pepper started. “We’ll come with you.”

I waved off the offer as casually as possible, hoping Harlow didn’t see through the facade. “No, it’s fine. You guys stay, have fun. I’m just going to crash anyway. Don’t let VIP access go to waste.”

“You sure?” Harlow asked, the look on her face just as skeptical as the one on Pepper’s. “Did something happen?”

“Other than puking my guts out in the ladies room?” I laughed awkwardly. “Not much. Seriously, you guys stay here. I’ll see y’all tomorrow.”

“Okay, sweetie.” Harlow leaned in and squeezed me tightly before moving

back to give Pepper her turn. “But you text or call us if you need anything. Got it?”

“Promise.” I gave my friends a small smile before taking the stairs to the VIP area as quickly as my heels would allow. I offered Griffin a pathetic goodbye, refusing to spare a single glance in Rowan’s direction, and then I burned out of the Neon Room like my ass was on fire.

fourteen

Rowan

Where was she?

I paced the length of my entryway over and over, checking my watch for the fifteenth time in the past ten minutes. Navie was late. She was never late. Hell, if anything the girl was so prompt she typically started her work day early.

Bringing my cellphone to my ear, I hit re-dial for her number, a-fucking-gain. And just like the past three times, it went to voicemail after only two rings.

“Son of a bitch!”

I couldn’t believe it. She was blowing me off! I’d never been blown off before. And the fact that she hadn’t even bothered to show up to work without so much as a heads up really pissed me off. Despite everything that happened at the Neon Room three days ago, she still had a damned job to do.

Scrolling through my phone for the number I was looking for, I hit call.

“Rowan? What are you doing up at eight forty-five in the morning? Shouldn’t you be busy pushing your latest booty-call out the door?”

It was moments like this when I questioned why I hadn’t fired Lauren yet. Ignoring her dig, I pushed forward. “Where is she?”

“What? Who?”

It was too fucking early, I hadn’t had enough caffeine, and I was in serious need of getting laid. To say I had a low tolerance for my publicist’s bullshit was an understatement. “Don’t mess with me, Lauren, not today. Where the hell is Navie? She hasn’t shown up for work and her phone’s going to voicemail.”

“Jesus, Rowan,” Lauren huffed through the line. “Don’t you ever check your email?”

“Of course I don’t check my own email. I have a goddamned personal assistant for that! Why would I check my own email?”

Ignoring my attitude, she responded. “She sent a message that she’s sick and is going to be out today and tomorrow.”

Stomping back into my office, I pulled up my Outlook, and sure enough, there it was. Flu-like symptoms, my ass. She wasn’t sick, she was avoiding me. And that brought forth an entire slew of emotions I didn’t want to think about.

“What’s her address?”

“Oh, hell no,” Lauren spoke. “The poor girl’s sick. The last thing she needs is you giving her shit for missing a few days of work. That’s what paid time off is designated for, Rowan. Leave her alone.”

I was fuming. “For the love of... just give me her damn address, Lauren. I want to go check on her. Make sure she’s all right.”

“You want to...” she trailed off, her voice full of disbelief. “For God’s sake, Rowan! Please tell me you haven’t had sex with that girl!”

“Of course not!” I shot back, keeping it to myself that I had every intention of doing just that. Hooking up with another one of my assistants would go over about as well as a lead balloon as far as she was concerned.

“If you’re lying to me, so help me God—”

“I’m not lying!” *Yet.* “Just give me the address.”

By the time I got off the phone, I had a raging headache, but at least I had the address to Navie’s apartment in Murray Hill.

Time to pay her a surprise visit.



Navie

I’d been ignoring my phone all morning long. And by ignoring, I meant sending every single one of Rowan’s calls to voicemail. And to my shock, there had been tons of them. It had become apparent that the surly man was most definitely not accustomed to being ignored. After what happened at the Neon Room, I’d decided I needed a break from all things Rowan and took two days off work to get my mind straight. I needed to mentally prepare myself to see him again, and the only thing that helped clear my mind and

calm me down was making jewelry. When I'd woken up, I dove right in to a set I'd been picturing in my head for weeks. Unfortunately, even my jewelry wasn't doing much to help. I'd screwed the necklace up three times already—each time was after rejecting another call from Rowan. My hands just wouldn't work the way I needed them to, my fingers nowhere near as nimble as I needed them to be.

I dropped the mangled creation on the desk with a huff just as my cell phone rang again, cutting off my AWOLNATION playlist. I picked up the phone, prepared to send another call to voicemail, when I saw the name on the screen.

“Hey!” I answered excitedly.

“What's up, buttercup?” Cassidy chirped happily through the line.

“Oh, not much. How are you? Being pregnant in the heat of the Texas summer killing you yet?”

I loved Cassidy beyond words and thanked fate every single day for bringing her and her family into my life. Before them, the only real family I ever had was my foster bother, Carson. He had worked tirelessly for years to take care of me. He was my protector, my confidant, my saving grace. He did so much for me that I would never be able to pay him back, no matter how hard I tried. He deserved the absolute best, and that was Cassidy and her daughter, Willow. Not a day went by that I didn't miss them like crazy, but after leaning on Carson for so long, I needed a chance to prove to myself that I could make it on my own. New York was that chance for me.

“I still have four months left, and I'm already miserable,” she answered. “I'm sweating in crevices I didn't even know I had!”

I giggled into the phone, spinning my desk chair around in a slow circle, having given up on my attempt at jewelry making, at least for the time being. “Aww, poor baby. You should make that husband of yours bring you up here. It's hot, but nowhere near as bad as it is down there. He still being overprotective about every little thing?”

“You have no idea,” she replied blandly. “I thought he was gonna stroke out when I lifted Willow the other day. It's like I'm the first pregnant woman on the face of the earth. He keeps forgetting that I've done this before. This time around is a cake walk compared to my pregnancy with Willow.”

I couldn't help but laugh at Carson's behavior. He was so different from the man who had practically raised me. And even though there was a small part of me that envied what they had together, I was still thrilled for him and

Cassidy. “Then I doubt there’s any way he’d let you on a plane right now, huh?” I asked, feeling a pang of sadness. I really wanted to see them. With everything that was going on with Rowan, it felt like the foundation of my life was growing shakier and shakier. I needed my family to help me feel balanced again.

“I don’t know, I might be able to convince him. I know he misses you just as much as I do.”

“I miss y’all, too. See if you can work him. I know Harlow would love to meet you guys, and I’m sure we can manage to make room for y’all.”

I could hear the smile in her voice as she answered. “I’ll talk to him. We’ll make it happen, I promise. But you have to swear you’ll be down here as soon as this kid pops out of me.”

“I swear.” I laughed. “Wouldn’t miss that for the world.”

“You sure your slave driver boss will give you the time off for that?”

Looking at my lap, I picked at the hem of my t-shirt anxiously. All Cassidy knew about Rowan was how rocky things had been when I first started working for him. There was no way in hell I could tell her about the growing attraction I felt for him, so talking about what had happened at the club the other night was totally off-limits.

“Nah, he’s gotten a little better. It’s not so bad anymore.”

“You sure? Because you know Carson and I are more than willing to help you financially until you can find something else. We don’t want you stuck in a job you hate.”

That was exactly what I *didn’t* want. Those two had helped me too much already; I couldn’t take anything else from them. I needed to do it on my own. “I’m good, I promise.”

“Okay,” she spoke hesitantly. “But you tell me if something changes. We’re here for you, sweetheart. Even with the miles between us.”

“I know. And I love y’all for it.”

“We love you, too.”

The backs of my eyes began to burn with unshed tears, and my throat became hoarse with emotion. “You talk to Carson. Convince him to come up here.”

“I’ll do that, babe. Take care of yourself and we’ll talk soon, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I sniffled, needing to end the call before I turned into a sobbing mess and made Cassidy worry that something other than homesickness was the issue. “Bye, Cass. Give everyone my love.”

We hung up and I had to suck in a deep breath to stem off the rest of the tears that wanted to fall. I really hoped she could convince Carson to make the trip. I needed to see them, even if it was just for a weekend.

A loud knock came from my front door, startling me as I dashed away the rest of the wetness on my cheeks. Just as I stood to answer, a loud voice called through the battered wood.

“Open the damn door, Navie. I know you’re in there.”

My head fell and my shoulders slumped. I don’t know why I was so surprised that he’d tracked me down. After the way he’d blown up my phone earlier, I should have known his persistence knew no bounds.

“What do you want?” I asked through the door, feeling somewhat mollified by the protective barrier it created between us.

“I want you to open the damn door.” Just the sound of his rough voice sent shivers through me. Memories of his lips so close to my ear ran through my mind as desire assaulted my senses. No way in hell was I opening that door.

“I’m sick, Rowan. You should go. I bet I’m contagious.” I fake coughed for good measure.

“I’m willing to risk it. Open the door.”

Damn it. I tried a different approach. “How do you even know where I live? I never gave you my address.”

I could hear his frustrated sigh and hoped that was enough to get him to go away. Yeah, not so much. Karma seemed to hate me.

“Open up! I’m not leaving here until I see you.”

Okay, he wasn’t the only one starting to get pissed off. Every time that bossy attitude of his kicked in, it made me want to junk-punch him as hard as I could. I slid the chain lock into place—mainly because I knew it would make him even madder—and opened the door as far as it would allow.

“There, now you can see me. What do you want?”

“You don’t look sick.”

“And you don’t look like a doctor. Now, if you’ll kindly leave, I’m going back to bed.”

I moved to push the door closed, but he stuck his big, dumb foot in the way. “Let me in,” he demanded, making the urge to punch him even greater.

“No. Go away.”

“Come on, Navie. Just let me in for a second, okay? It won’t take long, then I’ll go.”

I raised a brow skeptically. “You promise?”

“Cross my heart.”

With a roll of my eyes, I let out a heavy breath. “Fine. Move your foot and I’ll unlock the door.”

Two seconds later, Rowan pushed his way in like he owned the place.

fifteen

Navie

“Why’d you skip work?” he asked, crossing his muscular arms over his broad chest as he stared me down.

Don’t look at his muscles. Don’t look at his muscles. Damn it! Why does he have to be so sexy all the time!

I tried to mimic his stance, but seriously doubted I looked anywhere near as intimidating in my Cookie Monster sleep shorts and ratty tank top. It wasn’t until his eyes narrowed on my chest that I realized I wasn’t wearing a bra... under my very *white* shirt!

Spinning around, I grabbed a zip-up hoodie from the back of the couch and threw it on before turning back to face him. “I didn’t skip work. I called in sick.”

“You’re not sick.”

“You don’t know that!”

“Yes, I do,” he replied, lowering his arms and taking a step closer. “You’re avoiding me. Which poses a serious problem, seeing as you’re my assistant and all.”

I wasn’t sure how to respond. I was equal parts turned on, pissed off, and freaked out. “Y-yeah... w-well...” I stuttered. “Maybe I wouldn’t have to avoid you if you’d quit trying to have sex with me! It makes for a rather hostile work environment, you know.”

He stepped even closer and I had to back away to keep the necessary space between us. “Name one time I’ve ever hit on you at work.”

I wracked my brain for an example to prove my point and came up empty—which only made me more mad and flustered. “Ugh! Stop being so damn logical!”

A devilish smirk spread across his stupid face as he slid his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall casually. The bastard knew he had me on the ropes. “Then explain what the problem is because I’m not seeing the issue

here.”

“The problem is you’re my boss!”

“And I’m willing to overlook that,” he answered nonchalantly.

I threw my arms out in exasperation. “Well, I’m not!”

“Bet I could convince you.” He grinned and I felt it all the way down in my lady parts. So not good.

I sucked in a deep breath, trying to calm my nerves. “You can’t do serious, Rowan. And I can’t be like all your other women. I can’t do casual like that. It’s just not how I work. I don’t do one-night stands.”

He studied me for a moment as if I were a specimen under a microscope. “Are you a virgin?”

“*What?* No! Jesus! You think just because I’ve never had a one-night stand, I have to be a virgin?”

“It would make more sense.”

“See, that’s exactly what I’m talking about!” I shouted. “You and I are on two totally different wave lengths. Hell, we might as well be on different planets.” I whipped my hand in between us. “This can never, *ever* happen.”

His growing silence as he stood there, watching me, only made me even more anxious. “You really feel strongly about this, don’t you?” he finally asked.

I breathed a sigh of relief. He was finally understanding. “Yes. I really, really do.”

Rowan came forward, backing me up until my butt hit the back of the couch. If not for his hands snaking around my waist and holding tight, I could have toppled over. “You want me, Navie. I felt it. The way you pressed against me, the way you kissed me—”

“*You kissed me!*”

“And you were with me every step of the way. You can’t deny that.”

I needed him to move. He was too close. I couldn’t think straight, couldn’t breathe correctly. Rowan’s presence snuffed out all rational thought, making me do and say things I’d soon regret. Reaching down to remove his hands from me, I sidestepped out of the way.

“Look,” I started, able to breathe again once there was space between us. “I can’t deny it, okay. I *am* attracted to you.” A shit-eating grin spread across his face. “*But...*” I continued, and that smile disappeared just as quickly as it had appeared, “...it doesn’t matter. Attracted or not, this can’t happen. Please, Rowan, I’m asking you, just let this go. If you don’t, I’m going to

have to quit, and I really don't want to do that. I'm *finally* starting to like my job," I ended on a joke, trying my best to defuse the tension in the room. Unfortunately, the joke fell flat.

With a defeated sigh, Rowan put his hands on his hips and dropped his head for several seconds before looking back up at me. "Okay," he finally said after what felt like an eternity of silence.

"Okay?"

"I'm not going to force myself on you," he insisted defensively.

"That's not what I meant."

"I get it," he said. "You're not comfortable. And honestly, I'd rather not lose you as my assistant if I can help it."

It almost felt too easy, and from the carefree way he simply gave up, I was having trouble taking what he said at face value. "Really?"

"Yeah." He shrugged. "But that being said, I expect you to be at work tomorrow."

"Okay, I can do that." I felt a sense of relief, despite that small niggling doubt in the back of my head. Deciding that was a bridge I'd cross if and when I got there, I pushed it to the back of my mind and took comfort in my world going back to normal, at least somewhat.

Instead of leaving like I expected, Rowan looked around my and Harlow's little apartment, taking everything in, and I suddenly wished I'd taken the time to clean. Our place wasn't dirty, but Harlow and I weren't all that great at putting things where they belonged.

"What's that?" he asked, walking over to my little work desk where I kept everything I needed to make jewelry.

"Oh, uh..." I stumbled, suddenly feeling exposed as he looked over the things that meant so much to me.

Rowan picked up the hammered metal cuff I'd been working on. I had spent long, tedious hours getting the copper leaves just right. I was extremely proud of the bracelet—it was one of my favorite pieces—but having him scrutinize my work made me feel itchy. "Um... yeah. I made all of that," I answered, waving my hand to encompass everything on the table.

My lungs stuttered painfully in my chest until he looked up at me in awe. "These are amazing. Why the hell are you working as my assistant?" He held the bracelet up in his left hand. "This is what you should be doing! I bet you could make a fortune off this stuff."

Despite my heart flipping with joy at his praise, I felt the familiar

discomfort that came with people examining my work. That was one of the things that held me back in pursuing a career in jewelry making. Despite having grown from the meek little girl, always in need of saving, that was the one area of my life I still let fear dictate. But still, that wasn't the main reason I held myself back, only selling a handful of pieces online occasionally. It was fear.

Shrugging, I answered honestly, pointing at the table. "There's no guarantee of success with that. I'd rather have a job where I could count on my next paycheck, you know? I guess I just need the security."

"Did your parents have money problems?"

Wringing my hands in front of me, I kept my eyes trained on the ground at my feet. "Nah, I didn't grow up with my parents."

"Other relatives?" he asked. When I looked back up, his head was tilted to the side in curiosity.

Sucking in a lungful of air, I tried my best to sound aloof. "I grew up in foster care."

Before I could blink, he was standing in front of me, his fingers brushing my cheek so softly it was just a whisper against my skin. "Shit, Navie. I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. It really wasn't a big deal," I lied. I was in desperate need of a change of subject. "So... are we good now? I'll be back at work tomorrow."

"Yeah." He smiled, taking a step back and tucking his hands into his pockets. "We're good."

"And no more overt sexual advances?"

"You have my word," he promised. "No more overt sexual advances."

I should have been relieved. I should have been happy that we'd come to an agreement I could live with. What I couldn't understand was why I was overcome with disappointment. Pushing it aside, I plastered a smile on my face and held out my hand for him to shake. The moment his large, rough palm touched mine, I shivered. "See you tomorrow, boss," I offered flippantly.

Rowan chuckled from deep in his chest. "See you tomorrow, Navie." Then he did something that stunned me. Using our clasped hands, he pulled me forward, closing the remaining inches between us, and placed a lingering kiss on my cheek. "Feel better," he murmured in my ear. He grinned as he stepped away and headed for the door. As soon as it closed behind him, I lifted my hand and pressed it against my cheek where he'd kissed me. I spent the

remainder of the night feeling that kiss on my skin as if it had just happened.
I was in a lot of trouble.



Rowan

Navie was in for a major surprise. As I took the stairs down from her apartment to the street, I made a decision. I'd promised no overt sexual advances. I hadn't said anything about wearing her down slowly... unknowingly. By the time I was done with her, she'd be begging for me to take her to bed.

She was going to be mine. She just didn't know it yet.

sixteen

Navie

I had walked into Rowan's home ready to work the day after he left my apartment, feeling like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. Yes, my longing for him was still there, but knowing he respected my boundaries and wouldn't push me gave me a sense of comfort.

What I hadn't realized when I made it to work was that sense of comfort was going to be extremely short-lived.

It had been two weeks since that conversation, and every single day since then had been nothing but one temptation after another. Rowan found any reason he could to be close to me, always touching, always caressing, always *near*. He did it as though it was second nature, casually resting his hand on the small of my back when we prepared our coffee in the morning, pressing himself against my back to reach up for a mug, twirling strands of my hair around his finger as he studied something on the laptop screen over my shoulder. It was always *something*. I wasn't sure he was even aware of what he was doing, but I'd occasionally glance in his direction to find him smiling to himself after 'accidentally' brushing against me. Those smiles had me thinking it wasn't all subconscious behavior.

My head was a mess. Each day, I went home, berating myself for letting his behavior continue, telling myself I'd say something to stop him the following day. Then I'd feel his fingertips casually brush the skin of my neck to "tuck the tag in the back of my shirt" and I'd crumble, needy for those illicit touches.

Two weeks of this.

Two weeks!

I was going insane. I'd never needed to get laid so badly in my entire life. But I could *not* allow myself to have the one man I wanted. There would be no coming back from that, I knew it deep down in my gut. There was no defense strong enough to handle what he was capable of doing if I caved

completely. Rowan Locklaine could wreck me, I just knew it.

“How does this look?” Rowan asked as he stepped into the kitchen, pulling me from my lust-filled musings. Turning from the coffee maker, I nearly swallowed my tongue at the sight of him. I’d seen Rowan casual, I’d seen him semi-dressed up—hell, I’d even seen the guy naked! But in a three-piece suit? I was pretty sure my panties just went up in flames.

“Navie?”

“Huh?” I shook my head to clear it of all the dirty thoughts and picked my jaw up off the floor. The way Rowan’s full lips tilted up in a smirk told me he knew where my head had just been.

“The suit. Does it look okay?”

Swallowing loudly, I gave a jerky nod. “Y-yeah. It looks fantastic... I mean good! It looks good.”

Jesus, Navie! Get your shit together!

“Just good?” That smirk of his turned into a full-blown, knowing smile. “You sure it’s just good?”

With a roll of my eyes, I turned back to doctor up my coffee and pour him a mug. “You already have a big enough ego, no need to fish for compliments.” I hoped my flippant comment would diffuse some of the tension in the room but when I spun back to face him, Rowan had managed to move from the doorway to right behind me without making a sound.

Like a sexy ninja.

I was practically caged against the counter. “I wouldn’t have to fish for compliments if you’d give them willingly,” he said in a low, seductive voice as his fingers came up to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear. “Here, follow my lead. Navie, you look beautiful today.”

I felt those words all the way down to my bones... right before they turned to mush. If I hadn’t been pressed against the counter, I was sure I’d have melted into a puddle on the floor.

“Now it’s your turn,” he coaxed, standing way too close for my own good.

“Y-you look very handsome,” I offered in an embarrassingly breathy voice.

“See?” He chuckled, finally taking a step back. “That wasn’t so hard, now was it?”

“I really don’t like you sometimes.”

“Ah, baby,” he crooned, picking up his mug and bringing it to his lips. “You like me all the time. You just won’t admit it.”

Snatching the mug from his hands, I dumped the rest of his coffee into the sink before gracing him with a smug grin of my own.

“Hey! I was drinking that!”

“Sorry.” I shrugged innocently. “I thought you were finished.” Stepping past him, I called over my shoulder as I left the kitchen. “The photographer will be here any minute. I just saved you from having coffee-stained teeth in front of all the readers of *Modern Woman* magazine. You’re welcome.”

With that, I left him grumbling as I headed for his office to make sure everything was set up for the shoot.



Rowan

So, it was pretty safe to say my plan to wear Navie down wasn’t going as quickly as I’d hoped. It had been two weeks, and despite the want shining back at me from those dark blue eyes, she was still holding strong to her resolve.

I was horny. And pissed. *Not* a good combination. Something needed to happen, and it needed to happen fast. Or my balls were liable to explode from too much build-up.

Then, like an answer from the gods, my solution came in the form of a buxom brunette photographer with no qualms about flirting in a professional setting. It couldn’t have been more perfectly timed, really. I’d been putting my best moves on Navie with no success, but the moment I saw her staring daggers at the photographer the magazine had hired for the shoot, a light bulb went off. I was going to make her jealous.

And if there was one thing I’d learned in my life, it was that a jealous woman always fought for what she wanted. I was a fucking genius.

We’d been at it for almost an hour. Annie (I think that was her name) posed me in a million and one different positions—in front of the window, leaning against my desk with my arms crossed, sitting behind my desk—there wasn’t a space of my office I hadn’t been photographed in. And she flirted the entire time, a suggestive comment here, a sultry look there. All the

while, Navie stood off to the side, watching the whole thing. The woman's desire for me was blatantly obvious, and I used it to my benefit.

"I have to say," Annie spoke as the camera continued to click, "you're a natural in front of the camera."

I gave her my signature sexy smile, making sure to watch Navie from the corner of my eye as I leaned back into my chair, my ankle resting on the opposite knee, my chin in the palm of my hand. "Is that right?"

She lowered the camera and grinned at me, licking her glossy lips. "Oh, most definitely. Your sex appeal is off the charts. Our readers are going to go crazy when they see this spread."

"Just the readers?" I flirted back, ignoring the gagging sounds coming from my assistant's direction.

"Mmm," Annie hummed seductively, running her eyes up and down my body. "Definitely not just the readers."

I ran my finger across my bottom lip as I regarded the brunette in front of me. I had absolutely no desire to fuck her, but Navie had spent the past hour fuming, so I needed to lay it on just a little thicker. "You know, I'm starving. What do you say we grab a bite to eat after this? That is, if you're not too busy."

"I'm not busy at all," Annie answered. "Just a few more shots and I think we can call it a day. We could go somewhere, or maybe... order in?" she finished with a wink, not so subtly letting me know she was a sure thing. Oh, she was just playing right into the palm of my hand. I was ecstatic—that was, until Navie cleared her throat.

"You know, if you're almost finished here, I think I'll head out a little early."

My gaze quickly darted from the woman I didn't want to the one I did. *What the ever loving hell?* "Early?" I asked dumbly, trying to understand what was happening. She was no longer staring at Annie like she wanted to gut her like a fish. Oh, no, all that hate in her eyes was focused solely on me, along with something else. Something that looked an awful lot like pain. My gut plummeted.

"Yeah. I mean, you obviously don't need me here, right?"

"I think we're good, just the two of us," Annie answered before I had a chance to speak.

I needed to fix things fast. "You're not joining us for dinner?" My question earned a confused look from Annie and a scowl from Navie. It was

at that very moment I realized my mistake... my *huge* fucking mistake. Navie wasn't like any other woman I'd ever been with. She didn't play games, didn't manipulate. She was honest to a fault. I was an idiot for thinking for one second that making her jealous would pull her closer to me. All I'd managed to do in the span of an hour was push her even further away.

Standing from my chair, I started in her direction, needing to touch her with a desperation I hadn't felt in years. A desperation I was so sure I'd never feel again after what Bree had put me through. But seeing my intentions, she quickly skittered toward the open door. "I'll pass on dinner," she sneered. "I'm sure you'll have your hands full anyway. You won't even notice I'm not there."

The meaning behind her words was a punch in the gut. Despite my intentions, as far as she was concerned, I'd just proven her right in thinking the worst of me.

"Have a good night, Nancy," Annie said as she stepped up next to me, curving her fingers around my bicep possessively.

Something flashed in those navy blue eyes, a sadness that stole the breath from my lungs. "You, too," she offered, not bothering to correct the leech who had just attached herself to my side like she belonged there. Navie's eyes flittered to where her hand was wrapped around my arm and the look on her face nearly broke me. It was entirely my fault. If it had been possible, I'd have kicked my own ass.

"Now, where were we?" Annie purred once we were alone, moving in front of me to wrap her arms around my neck. The heavy, suffocating scent of her perfume suddenly hit me like a punch to the face, and I wanted nothing more than to get her out of my apartment as fast as possible.

"You were just leaving," I answered shortly, reaching up to pull her arms from around me.

Her brows drew down in disbelief. "What?"

"My assistant's name is *Navie*. Not Nancy. You knew that already, seeing as you used her name to request something from her at least three times today."

"Yeah, so? What does it matter?" She laughed, running her fingers along my chest. "She's just your assistant."

I grabbed her wrists, holding tightly enough for her to get the hint that she needed to stop touching me. I was already pissed at myself, and her blatant disregard for Navie was doing nothing but fueling the fire. Using my hold on

her wrists to pull her closer, I hissed in her ear, “The only reason I paid you any attention today was to make that *assistant* jealous. If you had been lucky enough to get my cock, it would have been *her* face I was picturing as I fucked you. And I would have come, moaning Navie, not *Nancy*. Now, get the hell out.”

She yanked away from me, disgust distorting her features, features that required makeup for her to look attractive. Navie didn’t need anything to make her gorgeous. I’d seen her in sweats, her hair in a messy bun at the top of her head, and not a speck of makeup on her face. And I still got harder for her than I had for any other woman.

“You’re an asshole,” she seethed as she stuffed her camera inside its bag.

“Nice working with you,” I responded dismissively, not bothering to watch her storm out as I grabbed my phone and began dialing.

It was time to do something I hadn’t done in a very long time.

It was time to grovel.

seventeen

Navie

“Oh, my God,” Harlow gasped, grabbing my phone from the table. “He’s calling *again!*”

“Damn, I’ve never seen that boy act so needy before. This is hilarious!” Pepper giggled as I let out a drunken groan.

It took extreme effort not to slur my words as I said, “It’s not hilarious. He’s a jerk-face and I hate him.”

After everything that had gone down at Rowan’s place with that slutty photographer, I was in desperate need of a drunken pity-party. Fortunately for me, I had two of the best girlfriends a woman could ask for. *Unfortunately* for them, I had passed buzzed four drinks back and was well into shit-faced territory, meaning I had lost all control over my emotions and had spent the past two hours going from angry to mopey and right back to angry again. I was currently sitting at angry. And I was pretty certain the only reason Harlow and Pepper hadn’t ditched me yet was because they were both equally as drunk as me and found my mood swings utterly hysterical.

“I can’t believe he made plans to fuck that photographer right in front of your face!” Harlow shouted. Whereas I was an overly emotional drunk, Harlow was a loud drunk. I was pretty sure every single one of the bar patrons knew every sordid detail of what was going on with me and Rowan, starting from the night at the Neon Room, all the way up to my humiliation just hours ago. Add in Pepper being a giggling drunk and all three of us were *Urban Dictionary*’s living example of ‘White Girl Wasted’.

It wasn’t pretty.

Hysterical, yes. But not pretty.

“You know what you should do?” Pepper declared as I swayed from side to side in my chair. Damn thing was wobbly as hell. “You should have sex with someone else!”

There wasn’t a doubt in my mind that I’d never be able to go through with

Pepper's suggestion, but I was ashamed to admit that, in my alcohol-addled brain, I considered it for a few seconds. That was, until some skeevey guy with a rapist goatee sidled up to our table with a creepy grin.

"Ew, gross! Not you!" I all but shouted, shoving at the man who'd obviously overheard Pepper's idiotic suggestion. "Go away."

Taking my not-so-subtle hint that there was no way on God's green Earth he was getting his P anywhere near my V, he slinked away with a dejected expression on his pervy face. Reaching for my gin and tonic, I downed the last of it and slammed the glass on the table as Pepper and Harlow fell into peals of laughter. I didn't hesitate in waving over a waitress for a refill.

"Why's he have to be so friggin' pretty?" I pouted, my southern accent becoming stronger the drunker I got. "Stupid Rowan with his stupid pretty hair and his stupid abs and his stupid perfect penis and delicious man buns." I was so into my drunken rant that I hadn't even realized what I let slip until my friends suddenly went silent.

After several seconds of silence, Harlow asked, "Uh, babe? How did you see his penis?"

Fuck my life.

Pepper giggled into her drink. "Man buns?"

"Oh, God," I grumbled, dropping my forehead to the table and banging it against the wood a few times before Harlow slid a stack of napkins underneath to cushion the blows. "I walked in on him naked in the kitchen one morning," I answered, still in my slumped position. "The image is burned into my brain."

"And you got a good shot of his penis and... man buns?" Harlow asked, trying—and failing—to choke back a laugh.

"Yes," I answered as I sat up straight, pulling off one of the napkins that had stuck to my forehead. "And it's so hard to hate him when I know what he's rockin' in his jeans. And I really, *really* wanna hate him."

"Men suck," Harlow voiced, holding her drink up in solidarity. It was at that moment I realized I hadn't gotten that refill I desperately needed.

"Yes, they do," Pepper added, clinking her glass against Harlow's hard enough to spill most of its contents onto the table. "Locklaine men, in particular," she continued, unfazed by her party foul.

Had I been in my right mind, I would have jumped on that breadcrumb, demanding she give us all the dirty details of what was going on between her and Griffin. At that moment, though, I was too focused on getting as liquored

up as possible.

“Where the hell’s our waitress?” I asked no one in particular before finally spotting her across the crowded room. Waving—quite possibly flailing—my arms excitedly to get her attention, I yelled, “Hey! Can I get another drink?”

I could have been seeing things, especially considering everyone in the bar seemed to have a twin as the night progressed, but I could have sworn the waitress rolled her eyes before making her way over to us. *Well, there goes her tip.*

“Sorry, sweetheart. You’ve been cut off.”

“What? By who?” I demanded indignantly to the triplet waitresses standing in front of me—or were there four of them? It was so hard to tell with my chair being as wobbly as it was.

“Bartender’s orders. You three have had enough. You’re starting to make a scene.”

“Oh, that’s bullshit!” Harlow chimed in, downing the last of her drink before slamming the glass back down. Only she missed the table top by several inches, basically throwing the glass to the floor with a loud shatter that had the majority of the bar patrons glaring in our direction. She stared down at the broken glass with a surprised look on her face. “Whoops.”

“I’m gonna have to ask you ladies to leave,” the burly bouncer spoke up as he stopped at our table. His big, meaty arms were crossed over his chest in an intimidating stance that would have had me running scared had it not been for the fact that I was already fuming at the male population as a whole. And at that moment, the asshole with a Mr. Clean head was standing between me and my next gin and tonic. *Eff that!*

“Back off, cue ball,” I spit nastily, standing from my chair so we were chest to chest—well, chest to hips, actually, seeing as he towered over me by about a foot and a half. But I wasn’t backing down. I was pretty sure I could take him. “You don’t wanna piss me off. I’m two seconds away from getting a stepladder so I can kick your ass,” I said as I drilled my finger into his barrel chest.

“That’s it,” he grumbled, grabbing me by the arm and hauling me toward the door. “You’re outta here.”

I heard my friends shout in protest approximately three seconds before the shit hit the fan.



Rowan

She was avoiding me again. And what pissed me off the most was I had no one to blame but myself. I'd lost count of the number of times I called her after nearly shoving that pushy photographer out the door. Each and every call went unanswered.

Finally, deciding to put my inability to sleep to good use, I sat behind my desk and attempted to write. Unfortunately, the story I was contracted to write wasn't coming to me as easily as I'd hoped. The heroine was supposed to be broken and scarred, scared of her own shadow. But every time I sat down to write, a fire came out in her personality that wasn't supposed to be there. A fire very similar to the one I saw in Navie's denim colored eyes each time I looked at her.

Leaning back in frustration, I raked my hands through my hair, trying my damndest to get into the headspace I needed to be in to write. Just as my fingers landed on the keys, my cell vibrated on the desk next to me, the shrill ring echoing through the room like a siren. Not giving two shits how desperate I sounded, I snatched up the phone up without so much as looking at the screen.

"Navie?"

Griffin's rumble of laughter came through the line, sending a bolt of agitation through me. "No such luck, lover boy."

I didn't bother to hide my irritation. "What the fuck do you want? It's after midnight."

"I need you to come down to the station. I have something you want." Typically, hearing he needed me to come to the police station in the middle of the night would have worried me, but there was humor lacing his words together.

"Got news for you, cuz. There's nothing you got that could make me drag my ass down there right now."

"That so?" He chuckled.

"Yep."

“Have a good night then.” Just as he was about to hang up, I heard a familiar voice yelling, “Hey, asshole! Let me outta here!”

A red haze of jealousy clouded my vision. “What the fuck? What’s Navie doing with you?”

“Told you I had something you’d want. See you in a few.” And with that, he hung up.

I was pretty sure I broke the land speed record getting my ass down to Griffin’s station, which was damn near impossible to do when driving in New York, but never discount a determined man. Pulling up in front of the building, I slammed my car into park before coming to a complete stop, not caring in the slightest about fucking up the transmission on my Mercedes S550. The damn thing cost a mint, but at that very moment, I couldn’t care less. It only took a few minutes to clear the front desk and make my way back to Griffin’s. Being related to one of the detectives in the precinct had its advantages.

“What the hell’s going on?” I asked, not bothering with a friendly hello. Griffin was leaning back in his chair, his feet propped casually on his desk as he, Dex, and some of the other guys laughed. I hadn’t paid attention to where their eyes were trained until I heard the voice that made my blood run hot.

“You called my boss? God, you’re *such* a dick!”

Spinning around, I saw Navie with Pepper and her friend, Harlow. The sight of the bars surrounding them had me stunned silent for all of two seconds. “You threw them in the drunk tank, Griff? Seriously?”

His hands came up in surrender as he dropped his feet to the floor and stood up. “Hey, man, I’m not the asshole here. Dex threw his own sister in there.”

“And I’m telling Mom as soon as I get out of here, limp dick! Just wait until she finds out you locked up her baby girl. She and Wendy are gonna string you up by your balls!” Pepper hollered. Dex’s face paled as the guys standing around them burst into laughter.

“Someone wanna tell me what the hell is going on here?” I asked, looking back at Griff for answers.

He pointed at a young guy in full uniform. “O’Neill got a call for a drunk and disorderly. When he got to the bar, your girl and her friends were three sheets to the wind, trying to take on the bouncer for kicking them out. Gotta hand it to you, man, you got a little firecracker on your hands. They said Navie was clinging to the poor guy’s back like a goddamned spider monkey

when they pulled up.”

The retelling of the story sent the guys into another round of hysterics. But for the life of me, I couldn't imagine Navie getting into a bar fight. Let alone with another dude. “You've got to be shitting me. They press charges?”

“Nah, it's all good. O'Neill recognized Pepper's last name and called Dex. We saw an opportunity and took it. The night was pretty slow, so we have to get our shits and giggles from whatever's available. They've been in there for about an hour and already made best friends with the prostitutes.”

“Jesus Christ,” I grumbled, running a hand down my face as I turned to look at the three of them in the drunk tank. Sure enough, they were huddled around a few hookers, one of them obviously a tall black man in drag. *Fuck me*. “I'm taking Navie with me. You getting the other two home?”

“Yeah, I'll take care of it. Let's go get your girl before she starts taking makeup tips from LaWanda there,” he said with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Griff pulled a set of keys out of the pocket of his slacks and unlocked the metal door. “All right, you three. Let's go.” Pepper shoved past first, shoulder-checking Griff as hard as she could before making her way to her brother and smacking him in the back of the head. Harlow trailed behind her in a fit of giggles, still clearly drunk. My little blonde spit-fire pulled up the rear.

Holy fuck. When the hell did I start thinking of Navie as *mine*?

I tried my hardest to push those thoughts and the accompanying anxiety to the back of my mind as she turned and called over her shoulder. “Bye, girls! Good luck with your surgery, LaWanda!” I so didn't want to know what surgery she was talking about.

“Thanks, girl,” he/she answered in a scarily deep voice. “You take that luscious man home and treat him right, you hear?”

There was no fighting back the shiver that ran down my back. Even if the thought of Navie *treating me right* was appealing, hearing those words from a person who looked big enough to snap me like a twig, all while eyeing me like a juicy steak, was enough to deflate any man's dick.

Wrapping my fingers around her elbow, I pulled her close to my side as I began guiding her from the room. “Let's go.”

“Hell, no! I'm not goin' anywhere with you!” she shouted, drawing the attention of practically everyone in a one mile radius.

Stepping closer, I lowered my voice so only she could hear. “You're making a scene in the middle of a police station,” I hissed. “You have two

choices. You either come with me, or Griff locks your ass back up. Take it or leave it.”

I could almost see the wheels turning in her head. Her drunken brain was trying it’s hardest to create a third option. “Griff can take me with Pepper and Harlow.”

“Sorry, babe. Not an option.”

“That’s bullshit!” she snapped.

“It is what it is. He’s my cousin. Who do you think he’ll side with? Me or you? He locked you up, for Christ’s sake.” Those deep blue eyes narrowed and I knew I’d won.

Harlow and Pepper yelled out their goodbyes as I tried to lead a stumbling, slurring Navie from the room. “Love y’all!” she yelled back, her usually soft southern accent coming out stronger than I’d ever heard it before. “Call ya tomorrow!”

The remainder of the walk to my car was unbearably quiet as she did her best to ignore my presence next to her. Neither of us spoke a word as I deposited her in the passenger seat. Almost as soon as I had the car started, I heard the faint sound of her breathing evening out as she leaned her head against the window with her eyes closed. I could have taken her home. I *should* have taken her home. But as Griffin had said earlier, I saw an opportunity and I took it. It might have made me an asshole, but I wanted Navie with me, in my home, for a reason that didn’t involve work. With that decision made, I turned the car in the direction of my apartment, my eyes bouncing between the road and the sleeping woman next to me the entire way.

I gripped the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turned white, fighting against my twitching fingers and their desire to reach over and brush at those strands of hair that were blocking her face from my view. Being close to her was like taking a wrecking ball to the wall I’d built around myself. It terrified me, drove me mad, but my need to be in her presence was just too strong of a pull to deny.

Just as I turned into the parking garage, she stirred in her seat, never opening her eyes. “I don’t get you,” she mumbled, making it hard to understand her, but I concentrated hard as she continued to speak, somewhere between asleep and awake.

Yep, I was a real asshole, because I was going to try and get whatever I could out of her, drunken rambling be damned. I pulled into my spot and put

the car in park before turning to face her. “What don’t you get, sweetheart?” I asked softly.

Her brows furrowed as she adjusted her position, trying to get more comfortable. “Don’t call me that. You call all your women that.”

Was that true? I never stopped to think about what I called the women who had come before. I felt like the biggest jackass right then realizing that Navie had seen me that way.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, trying not to pull her completely from her sleep. My need to touch her finally won and I reached across the console, running my fingertips across her cheek, relishing the soft feel of her skin. She gave a little shiver as one of those deep blue eyes slit open just slightly.

“I really wanna hate you,” she slurred as that eye fell closed once again, like it took too much strength to keep it open. “But you make it so hard. That pisses me off.” Her words trailed off, followed by a delicate snore, and I couldn’t stop the smile that stretched across my lips. She didn’t hate me. I made her mad as hell, but she didn’t hate me.

I could work with that.

eighteen

Navie

I was dying.

There was no doubt about it.

If the marching band that had taken up residence in my skull was any indication, I was most certainly knocking on death's door. And I was pretty sure a small animal—maybe a raccoon or possum—had died in my mouth, if the taste was anything to go on. I was sure it didn't smell too pretty, either. I was miserable. My head had been cracked open, I had a dead rodent in my mouth, and it felt like I'd been sleeping with a million blankets on top of me, heavy and hot.

Somehow, I managed to pry my eyes open despite the crusty makeup that seemed to be holding my lashes together like glue. The moment my vision came into focus, I sucked in a sharp breath at the sight of the unfamiliar room. *What in the ever-loving hell did I do last night?*

Ignoring the throb in my head, I attempted to slide to the edge of the bed so I could figure out where the hell I was. Only, when I made my move, something wrapped around my waist impeded my escape. My fuzzy brain couldn't compute what was going on, but the moment a deep, sleep-graveled voice spoke from behind me, I realized exactly why I felt like I was sleeping next to a furnace.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Turning my head on the pillow, I went wide-eyed at the sight of Rowan's sleepy face next to mine. *As in right* next to mine. *As in* sharing the same damn pillow.

Panic, *intense* panic, took over, causing my lungs to beat against my ribcage with every shaky breath. That was, until the corners of Rowan's eyes crinkled and he gave me the sexiest, most unguarded smile I'd ever seen him wear. With just that one smile, the panic that had seized my chest turned into a gooey, liquid heat that pooled *low* in my belly.

“Good morning,” he spoke, leaning in the remaining inch or two between us in order to nuzzle his face into the crook of my neck.

“Uh... good morning?” Choosing to ignore the butterflies that had taken flight in my stomach, I focused solely on my confusion. “Rowan?” I kept my hand over my mouth as I spoke, not wanting to kill him with my gorilla breath.

“Hmm?” he moaned, all sleepy and sexy, and *gah!* I wasn’t equipped to deal with flirty Rowan! Not hungover, without coffee, and with stank breath.

“What... what happened last night?”

Lifting the arm that was around my waist, he brushed a piece of hair from my forehead, tucking it behind my ear. “Well, let’s see,” he said, his words strung together with humor. “From what I gathered, you and your girls got shitfaced, made a scene at a bar, went all *Fight Club* on the poor bouncer and got hauled in by the cops. Griff and Dex thought it would be funny to stick you in the drunk tank for a little while, where you quickly made friends with a transgender hooker.”

“LaWanda,” I whispered, memories of the night before coming back to me. “I remember her. She told me how to turn old eye shadow into lipstick. I really liked her.” Then I cringed. “So, we were arrested?”

“Nah.” He chuckled, still unbelievably close to me. The bastard’s breath didn’t smell the least bit bad. I hated him. “No one pressed charges. You triplet terrors are good.”

I breathed a sigh of relief against my palm before trying to pull back. His arm banded back around me and he tossed one of his large thighs over my legs, pinning me in place. “It’s early. Go back to sleep.”

“I can’t sleep here.”

“Why not?” he asked curiously, like he really didn’t understand why sharing a bed with him wrapped around me was a horrible idea. “And why are you covering your mouth like that?”

“Because I have Frankenstein breath,” I admitted without a care, suddenly remembering clearly why I got so drunk the night before in the first place. “And I can’t sleep here because I hate you,” I finished with a glare.

The stupid jerk’s grin grew even bigger. “You don’t hate me.”

Okay, that pissed me off so I uncovered my mouth, hoping my breath would make him pass out. “Yes, I do.”

“No, you don’t. You *want* to, but I make it too hard.”

My body froze as his words replayed in my achy head. I’d thought that

exact same statement countless times since last night. It was as if he'd read my mind.

"Get off me," I grunted as I shoved at him. It was like trying to shove at a brick wall.

"Navie..."

"I said get off!" I seethed. Then I blew in his face. It wasn't the most mature thing in the world—to be honest, it was quite disgusting—but Rowan had a gift for bringing out the worst in me.

"Oh, dear Lord," he choked as he jerked away. "That's awful." I took advantage of the distraction and hurried to scoot away. Unfortunately, I wasn't quick enough.

"Let go, Rowan!" I struggled through the pain radiating in my head. The need to escape was much stronger.

"Will you just listen?" he asked in exasperation as he pinned my back to the bed, hovering over me. I opened my mouth to give him another waft of awful, but his hand clamped over it, foiling my plan. "Please, Navie."

"Mmph mmmhmm phmmm phummfm," I mumbled against his palm.

"If I move my hand, you promise not to breathe on me?"

I glared.

"Ah, fuck it." He sighed, moving his hand anyway. "What did you say?"

"I said I don't want to hear your explanation," I spit out, masking the hurt in my chest with anger so he wouldn't know how deeply it had stung to see him with that woman.

"I wasn't going to explain. I wasn't going to make excuses. I just want to apologize."

I had no idea how to respond to that. All I could do was lie there silently as I stared up into his icy gaze, trying not to let my emotions sweep me away.

"I'm sorry," he said in a hushed voice.

"For what?" I croaked, needing to hear him admit to exactly what he'd done.

"For yesterday." That was a little too vague for my liking. I was about to say as much, but he continued. "I was an asshole. I wanted to make you jealous, and I used that photographer to try and do it."

If I hadn't been lying down—well, pinned down—you could have knocked me over with a feather. I never thought Rowan Locklaine would apologize for his bad behavior. It went against everything I'd thought of him when we first started working together. But there was the problem. I saw

different sides to the man I'd started off hating the longer I was around him. There were layers to Rowan that I never expected. It was those sides that made it impossible *not* to like him as I came to know him. It was those sides that had me scared to death, because I was feeling so much more for him than I should, than was safe. I was going to get hurt; there was no doubt about it, no matter how hard I fought to avoid it.

And I was so tired of being hurt. It sometimes felt like my entire life was just one painful thing after another. I wasn't sure I'd be able to handle anything else. I was so much stronger than I used to be, but that broken, sad girl still lay deep beneath my surface. She was always with me, just waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"You *wanted* to hurt me?" I asked against the lump forming in my throat.

"No! God, Navie, I'm so damn sorry. It was so fucking stupid. I thought if I used her to make you jealous, you'd get...I don't know, territorial or something."

"So, you wanted me to get pissed off and, what? Pee on you like a dog or something? Good Lord, Rowan. Do you have any idea how ridiculous you sound right now?"

"The moment you walked out the door, I knew I'd fucked up royally. I never had any interest in her—"

I didn't want to let myself believe him. It felt too much like throwing in the towel. "You really expect me to believe you didn't want to sleep with her? I'm not blind. I saw how gorgeous she was."

"You're gorgeous."

Angry butterflies rioted in my stomach. I felt myself growing weak and needed to do something to maintain the upper hand. With a snarky smile, I responded, "Nice line. Tell me, do you *always* feel the need to butter up the women you want to fuck with shallow compliments?" It was at that very moment I knew I'd gone too far.

His pale eyes grew dark and angry. The muscle in his jaw ticked as he stared me down. "Despite your flattering opinion of me, I don't just go around the city sticking my dick in every willing woman. I don't lie, I don't give false hopes. I'm honest with the women I take to bed. I let them know up front that I'm not looking for anything other than a quick fuck. That isn't what I want from you." Clenching his eyes shut, he pulled in a deep breath before opening them once again and staring down at me intensely, like he was searching for patience. "I'm not some asshole who's going to pursue one

woman while he's banging a handful of others. If I'm interested in a woman, whether it's only for one night or more, she's the *only* one I plan on fucking."

I inhaled a shaky breath. "B-but, you're not... we're not..." I couldn't finish that sentence for some reason.

"I'm well aware," he responded sarcastically. "And you can't imagine the pain a month and a half long case of blue balls can cause."

My eyes bugged out at his admission. He hadn't slept with anyone since... I did a quick calculation in my head. He hadn't had sex since I started working for him. That girl on my first day had to have been the last. And just like that, he'd revealed another layer of himself.

"You hurt my feelings," I whispered, speaking the words before giving them any thought.

His head lowered and he trailed his nose along my jaw. "I know. And you can't imagine how much I regret that I did. I'm an idiot, Navie, but I swear to God, if you give me a fucking shot, I'll make it right. I'll make it good between us."

Oh, the feels. Things were beginning to get too intense. The mood needed to be lightened. "You won't try and make me jealous again?" I asked with a forced laugh. "Well, that's good to know. I wouldn't want to have to kick you in the nuts."

He lifted his head and smiled at me. "No. I promise not to hurt you again."

My own smile vanished and I had to blink the back tears that suddenly burned the backs of my eyes. "You can't make that promise, Rowan. No one can. If I've learned anything in my life, it's that pain is inevitable."

His gaze warmed as it flicked over my face. The pity I saw in those ice-blue depths was like a punch to the throat. "I can't say that you're wrong," he said. "I'm just sorry you've ever had to deal with it."

I cleared my throat awkwardly and gave him a small shrug. "It's part of life, right?" The grin on my lips felt tight...fake. "Can we... can we maybe start over?"

"What do you mean?"

"Can we maybe... be friends?" I asked hesitantly, aware that it wasn't what he wanted, but knowing I wasn't capable of giving more. At least not with him.

Rowan's forehead fell to my shoulder as he let out a deep sigh. "You really want to be *friends*?" He said the word like it left a bad taste in his mouth.

“I really do,” I replied softly. “It’s all I can offer, Rowan. I’m sorry.”

Pulling a deep breath in through his nose, he sat up and ran a hand through his rumpled hair. It felt like an eternity passed before he finally spoke. “All right. I can do friends.”

I sucked in a breath of sweet relief as he stood to leave the room. It wasn’t until I caught sight of Rowan wearing nothing more than a black pair of boxer briefs that I realized I was wearing something completely different than I had been the previous night. Looking down, I noticed I was wearing a t-shirt so big I was swimming in it, my panties, and... nothing else.

“Uh, Rowan? What happened to my clothes?” He looked over his shoulder and gave me a devilish smirk before walking out the door. If that smirk hadn’t gotten me all hot and bothered, I totally would have chased after him so I could blow in his face again.



Rowan

Friends.

Fucking *friends*.

Well, if that wasn’t a kick in the balls, I didn’t know what was. Hell had frozen over. I’d officially been friend-zoned for the first time in my life. But I’d give her what she wanted. I’d be her friend. I’d be the best damn friend she ever had.

Then I’d go in for the kill.

Then I’d get what *I* wanted.

nineteen

Navie

Since that strange morning when I woke up in Rowan's bed, things seemed to have gone back to normal. Well, normal-ish. I didn't think anything about our interactions would be considered normal to the outside world, but it worked for us. He was still an unbending asshole most of the time. I was still a smartass whenever the opportunity arose. And with him being an unbending asshole, the opportunity arose *a lot*. But there was one major shift between us that I found myself enjoying more than I should have. We laughed. All the time. We made jokes, we teased, we pushed each other's buttons. And it was *fun*. I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed so much with a man. It was as if we understood each other on a deeper level, in a way I refused to let myself overanalyze.

He still touched me whenever there was a chance. Those touches could have still been considered less than professional, but I didn't have it in me to fight any longer. I didn't *want* to. I was skating a very slippery slope, craving those touches like a junky craved their next fix. My body reacted to everything about Rowan. His voice, his presence, his smell. There wasn't one thing about him that didn't turn me on in some way. I was in Hell, but damn if I wasn't absolutely loving every minute of it.

The only downside was, in the evenings when I had to go home and give myself *the talk*. I spent an hour every night, standing in front of my mirror, reminding myself not to look too hard, feel too much. I had to keep my guard up. I had to be strong, because when that hurt came... and it most definitely would, I needed to be prepared. My life had never been easy. And I'd have been the most stupid of fools to forget that. I went to bed every single night telling myself that Rowan Locklaine hurting me eventually would *not* break me. But the fear was always there, buried down deep where I could ignore it whenever I chose to.

But I was tough. I could handle it. If I just kept telling myself that, it

would eventually become the truth... *right?*

It had to.

“What are you doing?”

“Jesus, Rowan!” I yelped, my entire body jolting, nearly sending my laptop crashing onto the floor. He was *right there*, leaning over the arm of the couch behind me, his handsome face only an inch or two away from me. And I hadn’t heard him coming. “You scared the shit outta me!”

“Sorry.” He chuckled with a grin that said he was anything *but* sorry. Before standing to his full height and moving around the couch, he leaned in to plant a kiss on the tip of my nose. That was another development in the week that had followed waking up in his bed. Rowan’s lips seemed to find themselves on my body at least three times a week. For the most part, the pecks were somewhat platonic, but that didn’t stop my body from damn near overheating every single time he did it.

“So, what are you doing?” His large frame plopped down onto the other end of the couch, causing me to bounce. Before I had a chance to bend my knees to move my feet out of the way, his long fingers wrapped around my ankles, pulling my feet onto his lap like it was the most casual, normal thing in the world.

“What’s it look like I’m doing?” I responded snidely, trying to camouflage the fact that my heart felt like it was about to beat right out of my chest. A smart woman would have yanked her feet back, creating much-needed space. But *smart* flew right out the damn window when it came to Rowan. “I’m working. Something you should be doing. Or is your book going to write itself?”

“Needed to take a break. I wouldn’t want to exhaust my creative genius, now, would I?”

“Hmmm,” I mumbled noncommittally before adding in a sarcastic, “*Sure.*”

“You know, maybe you wouldn’t be such a smartass if you just *read* my books. Then you’d understand what all the hype’s about.”

Focusing my unseeing gaze on the computer screen, I tried my hardest to keep from giggling as I responded with a casual, “Not my taste, sorry.” It was so hard not to laugh every time we fell into that particular discussion. My unwillingness to read anything other than my go-to genres—romance, romance, and more romance—irked Rowan like you wouldn’t believe. And I loved mashing at those buttons, watching him briefly lose it. I’d lost count of

how many times we'd argued over my refusal to read his murder/mystery series.

"Jesus, you're such a girl," he said with an annoyed grumble.

"So kind of you to notice," I deadpanned, eyes still on my work.

"Oh, I definitely noticed," he said with a low, deep rasp.

Making the conscious effort to ignore the sultry tone of his voice, I pushed forth with my typical smartass attitude. The combination of his tone, the way he was still touching me, and the fluttering in my belly at the easy way we were with each other was sensory overload, and I needed to put a stop to it before I melted into his comfy sofa. "Besides," I started, switching gears in order to shift the mood in the room. "I heard those books were *sooo* boring. Why waste my time?"

Those crystal-clear, blue eyes narrowed on mine just as his agile fingers prodded at the soles of my feet. "Agh! Stop!" I screamed as he continued to tickle me, writhing around on the couch, trying to get away, holding on to my laptop the best I could. "Stop! Stop! I'm sorry!" I cackled and snorted, failing to break his hold on me.

"You take it back?"

"I take it back! I take it back!" I giggled maniacally. "I was just kidding!" Finally, thank God, he stopped and I was able to suck in a much needed breath as my laughter died down.

The minutes bled together as we fell into a comfortable silence, my eyes refocused on my work as Rowan's focus rested on the TV screen. I wasn't sure how long had passed before his deep voice broke through the silence.

"What the hell are you watching?"

I looked up at the TV and back to him. "*Chrisley Knows Best*."

He studied the show for a few more seconds, his midnight brows pulled together in a furrow. "Why's that gay dude feeling up on that woman?"

"Todd Chrisley's not gay!"

"Oh, babe," he laughed. "He's totally gay."

"He is not! That's his wife. And those are his kids. See?" I flailed my arm at the screen. "He's so not gay."

Rowan turned to me, his expression one a grown-up would use on a naïve child. "Any man who uses the term 'retweet' out loud is gay. Sorry to burst your bubble, but that woman's his beard."

"Stop ruining reality TV for me, ass-face! Don't you have a boring-ass book to write?"

He glared at me as I burrowed back behind my computer. “You really don’t want to stay employed, do you? First rule of being a personal assistant is you don’t shit on your boss’s work.”

I smiled sweetly. “I’d never shit on Lauren’s work. I think she’s fabulous.”

That earned me another chuckle as we fell back into our routine, me working, Rowan pointing out every single thing that could possibly prove the man on TV to be gay. I refused to believe it.

As I scrolled through Rowan’s emails, responding or deleting as necessary, something caught my eye. “Hey, who’s Bree Vincent?” The moment the question passed my lips, Rowan’s entire frame locked up tight.

All humor had fled his features as he looked at me, and I felt a chill race up my spine from the ice in his gaze. The warmth disappeared, replaced by the frigid cold I hadn’t seen since the first weeks of us working together.

“What did you say?”

“Uh... Bree Vincent?” I repeated hesitantly. “There’s, like, six emails from her in the past two days.” I tried for a lighthearted laugh as I asked, “She a crazy stalker fan or something?” but it fell flat.

“Or something,” he responded in a low, menacing voice as he removed my feet from his lap and stood from the couch. “Delete them,” he demanded as he started from the living room.

I couldn’t tell you why I insisted on pushing. Every fiber in my body rallied against it, but my curiosity forced me to push him further. “But don’t you want to know what they say? I mean, the woman’s pretty insistent. Maybe she’s a reporter or something—”

“I said fucking delete them!” he bellowed, startling me enough that I jerked back. A combination of emotions played out on his face as he raked both his hands through his hair in severe agitation and began a short, clipped pace. The anger, I recognized; it was the other one I was unsure of. Was it pain... sorrow? I couldn’t quite tell, and that ate at my insides. “Please, Navie. Just... just listen to me, okay. For once, don’t argue. Just do your fucking job.”

His words were harsh, cutting, and my normal reaction would have been to spit venom right back at him. But something stopped me. My gut told me there was a reason for his overreaction, that I shouldn’t take it personally, that this wasn’t a battle I should pick. So I went against my nature and gave him a quick nod. “Okay,” I whispered.

Without another word, he stormed from the room. I waited until I heard the slam of his office door before turning back to the computer sitting in my lap. My fingers didn't hesitate once as I highlighted each of the emails and did a hard delete, ensuring they disappeared completely.

Twenty

Navie

We didn't talk about it.

Other than a quick apology for his behavior, Rowan and I never mentioned the emails or Bree again. A week passed, and every time a new one showed up in his inbox, I did the same thing I'd done with all the others, deleted them. I never told him. He never asked. Despite how badly I wanted to know, I forced myself to push all thoughts of *Bree* to the back of my mind, telling myself it was none of my business. We carried on like it had never happened. And I tried to convince myself that everything was fine... even though I knew it wasn't.

That was how I ended up at Pepper's boutique two days before the American Heart Association event, with Rowan in tow, a smug grin tipping up his lips as we pushed through the front door.

"Ooh, girl!" I heard exclaimed the instant I stepped inside. The owner of that voice popped up in front of me, as if out of thin air. "Aren't you just delish! Mmm mm mmm." The man I'd never seen before in my life gave an exaggerated snap of his fingers before taking me by the shoulders and turning me in a circle. As I momentarily faced a laughing Rowan, I made sure to give him my best 'I hate you' glare, even though it had no effect. "You're like a sexy Pollyanna, baby girl. I'd like to stick you in my pocket and take you home with me. And those eyes! You're an absolute doll!"

"Uh... thanks?" It wasn't until he stepped back that I got a good look at the man in all his flamboyance. Salmon-colored, skin-tight skinny jeans hugged every inch of his thin, yet lean, legs. His teal polo shirt—equally as tight—should have clashed with the pants, yet somehow, it worked brilliantly. The dude wore the collar popped up with a tribal scarf in accenting colors wrapped around his neck. Everything from the trendy boat shoes on his feet to the fedora covering his chocolate-brown hair screamed fab-u-lous. The guy accessorized better than I did! But it was the Calvin

Klein model-esque face that did it for me. He was stunning, all sharp cheekbones and chiseled jawline. An absolute pretty boy. And had it not been for the amazing compliments he'd given me the moment I walked in, I would have hated him on the spot—for the simple fact that the guy was clearly competition when it came to landing a man.

“No thanks needed, sugar. I think you and I are going to be the best of friends.”

“And who exactly are you?” Rowan asked, pressing close against my back.

“Mmm,” the man hummed approvingly as he leaned to the side in order to run his eyes up and down Rowan’s frame the best he could.

“Give me an hour, big boy, and I’ll be whoever you want.”

I burst into a fit of laughter at the man in front of me at the same time Rowan pushed closer to me, as though I could shield him in some way from a guy who weighed about fifty pounds less and stood several inches shorter than him.

“You’re right,” I told him. “I think you and I are gonna be great friends.”

“What can I say?” He grinned at me before making sexy eyes in Rowan’s direction. “I’m *very* likable.” Rowan grunted uncomfortably, causing me to laugh once again. “I’m Tomas,” the man said, reaching out to shake my hand. “*Toe-mas*,” he announced, bringing my hand to his lips and pressing a kiss against my knuckles. “Like Thomas, but with a little... flair,” he finished, giving his shoulders a shake.

“Well, *Tomas*.” I giggled. “I’m Navie.”

“Ooh, I *love* it!” he exclaimed with an excitable clap. “That name fits you perfectly! So much better than Jennifer or Tiffany.” His lips curled up as if those names would be an insult to my very being.

“And this is Rowan,” I offered, stepping out of the way completely so Tomas had a perfect view. Who was I to deny a person their little piece of happiness?

“Traitor,” Rowan rumbled under his breath as Pepper came from the back of the shop.

“Yay! You’re here!” Done up in her typical Rockabilly fab, she rushed over to me and wrapped me in a big hug. “And you brought a babysitter?” she asked, giving Rowan a wink.

“You’re hilarious, Pep,” he shot back with an eye roll. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his cell and held it up. “You know, I could always call

Griffin to join us and make a little party of it?”

Her smile morphed into a fierce glare before she took hold of my hand and started leading me away. “Come on, Navie. Let’s go get you the most fabulous, expensive dress we can find.” She shot a smirk over her shoulder at Rowan. “I have Rowan’s card on file. Tomas, please make sure Mr. Locklaine is *very* comfortable.”

I shot a look over my shoulder as I giggled. Rowan’s face went surprisingly pale at the same time Tomas offered, “My pleasure, sweetheart. My pleasure indeed.”



It usually went without saying that I absolutely *hated* shopping. I was barely over five feet tall with more boobs and butt than I would have preferred. Finding clothes that fit my frame was next to impossible.

But watching Rowan coming out of his skin every time Tomas made a play made trying on countless dresses so worth it.

“So, what are your plans after this?” Tomas asked. “I’m thinking me, you, a bottle of tequila and a couple of neckties. Make an evening of it.”

From my place behind the dressing room curtain, I had to pause in pulling up the next gown as I leaned over in laughter, clutching my stomach as I wheezed in a breath.

“Oh, for the love of hell! Pepper, will you call off your dog, for fuck’s sake?”

I just finished pulling the dress up and securing the zipper when I heard, “Oh, baby,” Tomas purred. “I won’t bite... unless you want me to. But you feel free to use your teeth whenever you want. *Hard.*”

“Pepper!”

“Tomas, take it down a notch or a thousand, babe.”

“You got it, sweets.”

I stepped through the curtain just in time to watch Tomas hold his pinky and thumb up to his face, mouthing *call me* to Rowan as he walked away from him.

“All right, Pepper.” I laughed as I climbed the two steps onto the small podium in front of the three-way mirror. “This is the last one I’m trying on. It better damn well be good enough.”

She emitted a startling, ear-splitting screech that had me spinning around to look in her and Rowan's direction. She went all girly with a squealing, "It's so perfect!"

"Oh, sugar," Tomas breathed with his clasped hands tucked to his chest. "You're bringing a tear to my queer little eye." To prove the point, he sniffled and ran a finger across his cheek.

Turning back to the mirror, I gazed at my reflection and was inclined to agree. It was a gorgeous Grecian-style gown in a soft, cream-colored chiffon. It flowed from my ribs all the way down to my toes in four layers, the three top layers made sheer so it looked like water as I swayed from side to side. The A-line bust was designed with a shimmery gold appliqué that twisted all the way around and wove into the one and only strap on my left shoulder. It was classy without being overstated. It accentuated my body while still being unbelievably comfortable. But the main selling point was the fact that I *felt* beautiful in it.

"Oh, wow," I breathed as I ran my hands down my waist, my fingers skating over the smooth material, taking everything in with wide eyes.

"Rowan? What do you think?" Pepper asked, pulling my attention away from the mirror to look back. What I saw left me nearly breathless. The muscle in his jaw ticked like it did every time I saw him get angry. But the way his throat moved as he swallowed, the way his crystal-clear gaze darkened as his eyes raked back and forth over every inch of my frame, the way his fists clenched and unclenched over and over... well, something about all of that led me to believe that *anger* was the last thing he was feeling.

And because of that, I felt warmth pool in my belly, a tingle between my thighs that refused to go away. At that very moment, I was thankful for the gathered material around my breasts masking the fact that my nipples had hardened painfully under his stare.

"I'm thinking he might like it." Pepper's voice held joyous humor as she joined Tomas in clutching her hands to her chest.

"Oh, baby. He more than likes it," Tomas replied. "Judging by that python standing tall behind his fly, he *loves* it."

That did it. That pulled both Rowan and I out of the heat of the moment. My head fell back in hysterical laughter at the same time Rowan exclaimed, "Jesus, Mary, and motherfucking Joseph. Come on, Tomas!"

"What?" He shrugged innocently. "Just stating the facts, stud. If she wasn't so goddamned sweet, I may have to cut a bitch."

“Aww, thanks, Tomas.” I giggled as I turned back to my reflection.

“Anything for you, sweet tea.”

It was official. I was in love with Tomas. And I was so getting this dress.



Rowan

It was official. I was so fucked.

I tightened my fist around my aching cock as I tugged faster and harder. Those familiar tingles started at the base of my spine, my balls tightening as I got closer to blowing. And the one vision behind my lids as I pumped my dick at a furious pace, chasing after my orgasm, was Navie.

God, Navie.

That fucking dress was going to be the death of me.

But it wasn't imagining her in that dress that was going to push me over the edge. It was that dress, and the way she looked with her head thrown back in laughter, and that goddamned look on her face when she turned to me. I'd been hard just staring at her. Watching those navy-colored eyes dilate with want, like I was a lake in the middle of the desert and she hadn't had water in ages. That *look* was what had me grunting as I lay in my bed, in my dark room, shooting my load all over my hand and stomach.

Jesus Christ.

If an orgasm was that good just *thinking* about her, I couldn't imagine what it would have felt like if it had been her small hand wrapped around me. Or better yet, her tight pussy snug all around me as I pounded into her.

Yep, I was royally fucked.

Twenty-one

Navie

It felt like the night of the gala had snuck up on me unexpectedly. Yes, I had a fabulous dress and amazing high-heeled strappy sandals in the same shade of gold as the applique on my dress. My hair and makeup were both flawless, thanks to Pepper and Harlow's impeccable work. I'd managed to find the time to create chandelier earrings that looked like hammered gold leaves, plus a thin slave bracelet with matching leaves that ran from my wrist up the back of my hand where a thin chain looped around my middle finger. But mentally, I was freaking out.

Other than Rowan, I wasn't going to know anyone there. And to say I didn't fit in with the crowd that attended an event such as the AHA gala was an epic understatement. I hadn't felt so out of my element since I was a teenager.

"Stop fidgeting." Rowan reached across the seat and wrapped his long fingers around my hand that had been tugging at my bracelet.

His soft words and gentle touch pulled my attention from the passing buildings outside our limousine's window. "I can't help it."

His grip on my hand loosened as he flipped my palm over and looked down, the tips of his fingers whispering over the gold leaves wrapped around my wrist. "You keep yanking on this bracelet and you're going to break it." I turned my attention from his handsome face, his strong jaw covered in a day's worth of stubble. He still managed to look slightly rugged, even while wearing a designer tux, and my body had been tingling since the moment I climbed into the limo and first caught sight of him. "You make this?" he asked, jerking me back to reality.

"Yeah. And the earrings. I needed something to match my dress."

"Gorgeous," he said on a whispered breath. I thought he was talking about the bracelet, but when I looked up from our hands that crystal gaze was focused solely on my face. My breath hitched as his eyes roamed every inch

of my features. He leaned in closer, his hand on my wrist tightening as though he was afraid I'd pull away. I had absolutely no intention of pulling away. I didn't have it in me to fight any longer. Denying myself something I wanted so badly was exhausting, and I didn't want to do it anymore. Consequences be damned, I'd find a way to deal with the aftermath when that time came.

Which it undoubtedly would.

"Rowan..." That one word came out like a plea, soft and breathy, full of need. We were so close I could see his eyes flare at just the sound of me saying his name. He wanted me. I wanted him. It was undeniable.

Then the curtain came crashing down on our moment.

"Mr. Locklaine, we've arrived," the driver's voice called across the intercom.

"*Fuck*," he nearly growled as he pulled away, resting his back against the seat as he raked his hands through his hair. His words were mumbled, but I could understand them perfectly. "Fucking shit. Goddamn it." And I couldn't have agreed more.

His chest rose and fell on a deep breath as I tried to get my rapid heartbeat under control. I sucked in as much air as possible, coaxing myself with a silent *in through your nose, out through your mouth*. It took a few seconds, but I finally started to calm down. That was, until Rowan focused those darkened eyes on me.

"This isn't over. Goddamn, this is so not fucking over."

"I know." The surprise that flashed across his face told me he'd been expecting a fight. Well, I wasn't going to give him one.

"Tonight, after this is over. Come home with me." It wasn't a question. He wasn't giving me any room to change my mind.

"O-okay," I stuttered on a nod.

A slow, brain-shortening smile spread across his lips as he spoke a quiet, "Okay."

He held on to my hand firmly as he guided me out of the limo, letting go once I was on my feet to rest his palm at the small of my back. The touch provided a sense of comfort as we walked into the Plaza Hotel where the gala was being held.

"Whoa," I exhaled. "Talk about lifestyles of the rich and famous," I whispered for only Rowan's ears.

"This place will be packed with pretentious douchebags and narcissistic

bastards.”

I turned my face up toward him and gave him a quick smile. “So, what you’re saying is you’ll fit in perfectly.”

“She’s got jokes.” He grinned, giving my side a pinch that caused me to let out a small yelp. Both of us laughed at the few disapproving looks from the people around us.

“So, tell me what to expect tonight,” I said as we walked into the ornately decorated ballroom. Yep, so out of my element.

Rowan led me to the bar closest to us, one of two on either side of the room. “Well, it’s going to be boring,” he started. “Mind *numbingly* boring. Cocktails and a silent auction followed by a dinner, where we’ll undoubtedly be stuck in conversations so dull you’ll want to stab your eardrums out with a butter knife.” He turned to me and gave a crooked grin as I sat on one of the available barstools. “That’s frowned upon, by the way. You’ll be tempted, but I suggest you keep all cutlery away from your ears.”

“Noted,” I giggled.

“During the dinner, someone—most likely a limp-dick politician who doesn’t give a shit about the charity—will drone on about all the reasons we should open our checkbooks and ask each of us to donate an amount that would be enough to buy a private island, all while purposefully sliding in comments as to what he or she is running for and why they’re the best choice for New York’s blah blah blah. Then they’ll announce the winners of the auction items, making sure to give the exact dollar amount, down to the penny, hoping to emasculate the rest of us who weren’t willing to fork out that much. Sprinkle in a shit-ton of schmoozing in between, and there’s your night.”

“Wow, you make it sound so appealing,” I responded sarcastically.

“Well, now you know why I hate coming to these things.”

The bartender came over for our drink order, a scotch on the rocks for Rowan, a gin and tonic for myself.

“So,” I asked a few minutes later, taking a fortifying sip of my drink as I turned to scan the room, “Are you telling me you have enough money to buy your own personal island?”

Rowan rested his side against the bar next to me, his elbow propped up casually as he brought his glass to his lips. I was momentarily mesmerized by the way his lips wrapped around the edge, how his throat bobbed when he swallowed. I had to give my head a quick shake to pull me from my stupor.

“Maybe a *small* one,” he teased. “What? You thinking of becoming a gold digger?”

“Nah, not really my style.” I scanned the room once more, taking in all the money that was wandering around—an ideal scene for people watching, honestly. I gave Rowan a cheeky grin. “But I’m sure you’d have no problem finding one here if you’re in the market.”

It was like perfect comedic timing—only not funny whatsoever—when an elegant, French-tipped hand snaked over Rowan’s shoulder just seconds before a surgically enhanced blonde plastered herself to his side.

“Rowan,” she purred in an annoying nasally voice. From the strange look of her face, I could only assume the Botox had botched her attempt at a seductive expression. To Rowan’s credit, he at least appeared to be caught off guard, but that was more than likely because he’d forgotten the plastic woman’s name two minutes before she’d walked out his door—or he walked out of hers. None of that lessened the sharp sting I felt in the pit of my stomach as I watched the two of them.

“Uh... hi...” *Yep, he totally forgot her name.* His wide, icy eyes shot to me as if wanting me to step in and save him. Not a fucking chance in hell. He’d made his bed, had sex with the five-foot-nine Barbie Doll in it, he could very well lie in it.

“You don’t remember me?” she asked with what I was assuming was a pout. Hard to tell with all the collagen pumped into her lips. It took an act of God to prevent me from reaching for my phone and snapping a quick picture. I wanted to blast that baby all over Instagram as a warning to always seek a board-certified plastic surgeon.

Did she get that shit done in Tijuana or something?

When all he did was stand there like a dumbass mute, she continued. “Brandi... with an *i*?” She lowered her voice conspiratorially. “The bathtub at the Waldorf?” *Oh, gag!* “You called me sweetheart?” *You and every other available vagina this side of the Hudson.*

“Oh, of course!” Rowan lied through his teeth. “Brandi. Yes, I remember.”

She attempted a grin that couldn’t bust through the toxins she’d pumped into her skin. “I knew you would!” I wanted to gouge my eyes out. Or better yet, stick a fork in one of the airbags she called a boob and watch her fly away. “Are you here alone? We could leave a little early if you wanted, go back to my place...” She trailed a fingernail down the lapel of his jacket, lower and lower until Rowan grabbed her wrist, stopping her just inches from

being indecent.

I was pissed.

Or more aptly, I was jealous. And that itself was enough to piss me off even *more*. I didn't get jealous. *Ever*. I'd never been jealous in my life. Yet there I sat, fuming over the biggest man-whore on the eastern seaboard. Good Lord, how had things spun so out of control?

"Um, no. I'm actually—" he began to answer.

Clearing my throat loudly, I pasted on a saccharine-sweet smile as they turned to look at me. Boobzilla scanned me up and down, clearly finding me lacking. Rowan just looked downright uncomfortable, which was really saying something, considering nothing seemed to ruffle his feathers. Seeing his immense discomfort suddenly shifted something inside of me, tapering off the decent sized mad I'd been working on. He didn't want her pawing all over him. He'd even begun to tell her he was with someone before I interrupted. While I would have loved to throw a Texas sized hissy fit, he honestly hadn't done anything wrong. At least at that moment. For that reason, I decided to throw him a bone.

I extended my hand in the human blowup doll's direction. "Hi, I'm Navie." When her expression remained impassive, I continued. "Rowan's date."

She let out a less than feminine snort. "You *must* be joking."

"She's not, actually," Rowan answered, detaching himself from the she-bitch and moving to my side, snaking his hand around my waist. My heart did a little flip at his possessive gesture. My body liked that *way* more than it should have. "It was nice seeing you again. Enjoy your evening."

Just like that, he turned his back on her, stepping in front of me and effectively cutting her off. But I wasn't done.

Taking a page out of Rowan's playbook, I looked over his shoulder, smiling big as I said, "Lovely meeting you, Barbara."

"It's Brandi," she glowered.

"Whatever."

When I looked back at Rowan, his eyes danced with amusement and I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. "Something tells me I'm going to be very happy I brought you with me tonight."

I pursed my lips together and blew out a long puff of air, creating a less than ladylike sound. "*Pfft*, of course you are. I'm delightful."

"Come on then." He chuckled, pulling me from the barstool. "Let's go

have some fun.”

“As long as I don’t end up behind bars again, I’m down. If you’re in there with me, who’d bail me out?”

Twenty-Two

Navie

He hadn't been lying.

Holy hell, I was bored out of my ever loving mind. Sure, we'd had fun bidding people up on some ridiculous auction prizes, but that had been the highlight of the evening. There was schmoozing. Oh, dear Lord, was there schmoozing. My face ached from the fake smile I had to keep plastered in place as people came up to Rowan, droning on and on about the most trivial bullshit.

During dinner, it had taken Rowan pinching me on my knee several times just to keep me from falling asleep. I was pretty sure I was going to have a bruise tomorrow. And I might have dug my knuckles into the meaty part of his thigh in retaliation. Or just to liven up the mood. Whatever.

I was *never* doing a black tie event again. *Never!*

"So, this is what Hell's like?" I leaned over and whispered to Rowan just as dinner was wrapping up.

"I told you so," he chided.

Giving him a glare, I responded, "You know, a gentleman doesn't say *I told you so.*"

He looked at me with an *oh, you dear, sweet, simple girl* expression. "I think you know me better than that."

"Damn it, you're right," I conceded. "Fine. If I'm going to be stuck in Hell, might as well take advantage of the open bar. I'll be right back." Without a backwards glance, I took off in the direction of my salvation. I needed alcohol like I'd never needed it before.

Making my way through the crowd that had started to form, I stepped up to the bar and rested against it, more tired than I had felt in a long time. Who knew acting fake could be so exhausting. I placed my order and waited with my back to the room.

"You look like you're enjoying this event about as much as I am," a

familiar voice spoke from behind me.

I rolled my eyes as I began to turn. “Very funny, Row—,” I trailed off as I stared in shock at the man before me. It was Rowan, but it wasn’t. Same eyes, same build, same stature... hell, same damn face! But where Rowan’s face was marred only by the scruff on his jawline, the man in front of me had an inch-long, crescent-shaped scar on the side of his left eye.

“Holy shit,” I said on a whoosh of breath as my lungs deflated in shock.

One corner of his lips tipped up in a crooked smile so like Rowan’s, yet visibly different at the same time. “Well, hello to you, too. Can I get you a drink?”

“I—uh—you’re—holy *shit!*”

“I’ll take that as a yes.” He chuckled. Had my brain not been fried completely, I would have informed him I already had a drink. But at that point, I was incapable of rational thought. Rowan had a doppelganger! Or, at the very least, a twin. He stepped into the free space *right* next to me at the bar and ordered two glasses of champagne, which was so not something I’d ever drink, unless forced due to some sort of celebration.

“For you, beautiful.” He offered a smile full of perfectly straight, white teeth as he clinked his glass against mine. “To luck,” he toasted. “Seeing you across the room made this event much more tolerable.”

I squeezed my eyes shut and rubbed at the spot between my brows, trying to ward off the headache I felt coming on. “I’m sorry. I’m so confused right now.”

My eyes widened in surprise when I felt his fingers on mine, pulling my hand away so he could see my face. However, instead of letting go, he wrapped his grip around my hand more firmly, rubbing small circles over my pulse point with his thumb. “A woman as gorgeous as you should never frown. What has you so confused, beautiful?”

I felt him before I saw him. “Get your fucking hands off her before I break every bone in your goddamned body.”

My body went rigid. The air around us grew arctic as my gaze bounced back and forth between the two men who looked so much alike. I’d seen Rowan mad, plenty of times. But the pure, unadulterated hatred that was radiating off him had my heart thundering in my chest.

“Rowan,” the man spoke, sounding almost surprised. “I wasn’t expecting to see you here.”

“I’m not going to fucking tell you again,” Rowan growled in response, the

muscle in his jaw ticking double-time. “Get your goddamned hands off her, Richard.”

He released my hand and held both of his up in surrender. “Row, I had no clue—” but he didn’t get any further.

Rowan let out a laugh so callous it sent chills up my spine. “Like it would matter, *brother*. We already know you’ve got a hard-on for my sloppy seconds.” *Hold the hell up*. I was about to interrupt, angered by his implication, when he cut me off. “You get tired of the last one already, Rich? Was that it? You got done with Bree and shoved her to the side for a newer model?”

“*Bree?*” I nearly shouted. “Like the crazy stalker email chick? *That Bree?*” Neither of them acknowledged that I’d even spoken.

“Rowan,” I warned. Not only were we garnering some *very* unwanted attention, but I really didn’t like how he was demeaning me in the process of attacking his brother. Unfortunately, he was too far gone. And who in the ever loving hell was *Bree*?!

Right in Richard’s face, he hissed, “You stay the fuck away from Navie, you hear me? She’s mine.” *What the holy hell?* “You try the same bullshit on her that you did with Bree and they’ll never find your fucking body. You understand me?”

“Rowan, please,” Richard spoke. “Can we please just talk about this? *Privately?* There’s a lot that needs to be said. I didn’t know—”

“There’s a reason I haven’t talked to you in years, you sorry piece of shit. If you think we’re going to start now, you’ve lost your mind.”

“Rowan, please,” I whispered urgently, tugging on his arm in an attempt to get him to back off. As his assistant, I saw getting into a brawl at a charity event ending badly from a publicity standpoint—a hit Rowan couldn’t afford to take. But as someone who actually *cared* for him, I simply didn’t want to see him get hurt.

“How long are you planning on holding a grudge without knowing the full story, *brother?*” Richard asked, and I had to stifle my groan.

“Don’t poke the bear,” I hissed quietly. “For the love of God, man, don’t poke the fucking bear.”

Rowan stepped up to his brother, way too close for comfort. “What’d you just say to me?”

“Rowan, stop!” I nearly shouted, my tone firm, leaving no room for argument. That seemed to pull him out of his red-clouded daze.

“We’re leaving,” he informed me, grabbing me by the hand Richard had been holding, which had started the whole mess. He didn’t give me a chance to respond as he pulled me, none too gracefully, from the ballroom at a clip so fast I had to run to keep up. I barely had enough time to snatch my clutch from the table as we passed.

“Rowan, slow down. My legs are shorter than yours!”

“I can’t fucking *believe* that motherfucker!” he bellowed once we made it outside to the waiting limo.

“*Stop!*” I shouted, jerking my hand from his painfully rough grip. He came to a halt as soon as his hold on me detached. Standing in front of the Plaza, my chest rising and falling with each ragged pant, I propped my hands on my hips and scowled. “What the *hell* was that?!”

“Navie, don’t start. I’m not in the mood for your—”

Oh, no, I’d had just about all the insults I could handle for one night. “I don’t give a shit what you’re in the mood for, Rowan! I might not have a clue what just happened back there, but what I *do* know is that in your fit of rage, you managed to insult me in the process of verbally attacking your brother!” His shoulders slumped as my words seemed to sink in. “I didn’t do a damn thing to deserve you disrespecting me just because you were in the mood to prove who has the bigger dick. You need to get your shit together! I am *not* your personal *punching bag!*” I ended on a yell, my own anger having reached a boiling point.

Rowan stomped to me, eating up every inch of space between his body and mine. His eyes flashed maniacally with something I couldn’t put my finger on. I had to admit, for the first time since getting to know him, I wasn’t sure how to react. “Do you want him?” he clipped.

“*What?* Have you lost your damn mind?!”

He grabbed my forearms harshly, jerking me flush against his body. It was bizarre how much that action both scared and excited me. I’d long since given up trying to understand my body’s reaction to this infuriating man. It was never as it should have been.

“Answer the goddamned question, Navie! Do you want him?”

I tried to pull free, but it was pointless. “Jesus, Rowan, of course not! I didn’t say more than a handful of words to the man. I was too shocked at discovering there were *two* of you! I didn’t even know you had a brother until ten minutes ago. How could you even *think* I’d want him?”

At my words, the floodgates opened. And I had no choice but to go with

the flow or risk drowning.



Rowan

Something inside of me snapped and I couldn't have stopped myself if I wanted to. Slamming my lips against hers in a bruising, punishing kiss, I took her mouth with more force than I had that night at the club. My need to feel her, have her, mark her went from borderline obsessive to positively primal. Using my tongue, I forced my way between those lush lips, swallowing down her needy whimper as her taste exploded in my mouth, fueling me on.

I had to have her.

Right then.

There was no more waiting. If she denied me at that moment, I had no idea what I'd do—probably combust. Pulling back from her mouth, I trailed wet, openmouthed kisses down her neck to her collarbone. “*Rowan.*” She exhaled my name in that breathy, exotic way that ramped me up even further. “Rowan, we're in public.” She tried to push at my chest, but it was weak, and the second I latched onto her smooth, creamy skin, sinking my teeth into that flesh, her body softened even more.

“Get in the limo,” I growled my demand, pulling away to look into those dark blue eyes. The moment I saw them glazed over with lust, I knew I'd won. On shaky limbs, she stepped to the car. I pulled the door open for her and quickly followed her in, yanking her into my lap the instant my ass hit the seat so she straddled my thighs. I wasn't letting her get away this time. There would be no distance between us. The divider between us and the driver was already up, so there was nothing stopping me. No more obstacles. No more waiting.

“Oh, God.” Her head tipped back as I sucked on her neck again, trailing my hands up her tiny waist. My thumbs brushed across the rigid peaks of her nipples over her dress and I was overcome with the desire to taste them. Pulling the top of her dress down as low as I could, I latched onto a dusky-pink tip and took a long, slow pull. Navie ground her hips further into mine,

rubbing herself against my aching cock. Christ, I could feel her heat though the layers of clothing between us. I couldn't stand the barrier.

"Oh, shit," she whimpered as she circled her hips, chasing after the release she was just as desperate for as I was.

"You want me?" I asked, trailing one hand down between us, pushing her panties aside so I could get to what I wanted. "Shit, Navie. You're soaked."

"Don't stop," she panted as I circled her clit with my thumb before shoving two fingers deep inside her.

"Not stopping," I returned. I had to breathe deep to try and stave off coming in my pants. The feel of her grinding on my dick and the way she clamped around my fingers was almost too much to bear. "No fucking way I'm stopping. Not until I've fucked you."

Her head came up, a cascade of golden hair swishing across her shoulders as her hazy eyes landed on me. "Do it."

"Tell me you want me," I groaned, wrapping my free hand in all that gorgeous hair so I could guide her mouth back to mine. I couldn't explain it, couldn't understand it, but after seeing her with Richard, I needed to hear straight from her mouth that it was *me* she wanted, no one else. I hadn't needed that kind of validation in years. If I hadn't been so far gone, it would have scared the shit out of me.

"I want you," she whispered against my lips before sliding her tongue against mine.

I pulled back and demanded, "Tell me you want my cock."

"God, Rowan," she cried out as I pumped my fingers in and out of her tight heat even harder. "I want it. So bad. *Please.*"

The sound of her begging pushed me to my limit. I lifted us both up so I could reach my wallet in the pocket of my pants. Flipping it open quickly, I pulled out the condom I'd stored—just in case—and tossed the wallet aside, not caring where it landed. Navie rose up on her knees and reached for my fly, unbuttoning and unzipping with shaking fingers so she could free the rigid erection beneath.

"Dear God," she breathed as she stared with wide eyes. My cock swelled further under her attention.

"Not God, sweetheart." I chuckled. "But thanks for the compliment."

At that, her eyes flew up, her expression immediately sobering as she furrowed her brow. "Don't call me that," she said in a pained whisper and I remembered that night in my car on the way back from the police station,

when she'd first asked me never to call her that. The name I used for all *my women*.

"Hey," I spoke softly, taking her chin between my fingers and tilting her face to mine. "I won't call you that," I told her earnestly. "I swear. You believe me?"

She gave a jerky nod before taking the condom packet from my fingers and ripping it open. I watched in awe as she slid it down my length and aligned the head of my cock to her opening. I didn't give her any more room for thought. Taking her hips in my hands, I thrust up at the same time I shoved her down, filling her completely in one hard thrust. Her head flew back on a loud cry and I knew right then once wasn't going to be damn near enough.

"Perfect," I grunted as I hammered into her, drawing out every single moan, every breath, every sound I could force from her. "You feel so fucking perfect, baby."

She bucked against me, meeting me thrust for thrust, never one to just sit idly and expect someone else to do all the work. Her fingers dug into my hair as she mashed her lips against mine in a breathless, panting kiss. Moving my hands up to her waist, I dug my fingers in, desperate to hold on to her as tight as I could as we were forced from our kiss to suck in some much needed air.

"I'm close," she groaned. I could feel her tightening around me as I licked and nipped at every inch of exposed flesh I could reach, tasting the thin sheen of sweat that had broken out against her skin. Had sex ever felt so goddamned good before? As Navie rode me, I couldn't remember ever being with anyone else. Nothing from my past compared.

Moving my lips to her ear, I said, "Want to feel it, baby. Want to feel you come all over me." I bit down on the lobe and that was enough to send her over the edge, crying my name and a few other unintelligible words as her movements became uncoordinated. Navie's walls clamped tight around me as I continued to pump my hips, dragging out her orgasm as long as possible while chasing my own at the same time.

One, two, three more harsh thrusts and I came on a ragged groan, burying my face in her neck and biting down as I came so hard it was damn near painful. I lost all sense of time as spots clouded my vision. It could have been minutes or hours that passed as the sounds of heavy panting—hers and mine—filled the back of the limo. The smell of sex hung heavy in the air around us. That alone was almost enough to get me ready for round two.

“Wow,” she gasped as she pulled my head from the crook of her shoulder by my hair. When I looked into those denim colored eyes, I couldn’t help but return the smile that was shining back at me. “So *that’s* what angry sex is like,” she giggled.

That sound. That happy sound.

Good Lord, there was no way in hell once would be enough.

I needed her in a way that scared the living hell out of me.

Twenty-Three

Navie

Nerves coursed through me as I trailed closely behind Rowan into his apartment. It was ridiculous, really. We'd just had sex in the back of a limo only minutes before, yet walking into his home, aware that we were about to spend the night together, caused hummingbirds to riot in my belly.

Flipping on the lights as he walked, Rowan casually removed his jacket and tossed it onto the coatrack. I stood frozen in place just inside the foyer, watching in wonder as he pulled at his bowtie, leaving it dangling on either side of his neck before working the buttons of his sleeves and rolling them up to mid-forearm.

I'd been so focused on watching his fingers work the cuffs I hadn't realized he was watching me until his deep, rich voice, laced with humor, echoed through the space. "Planning on making a run for it?"

"Huh?" Shaking my head to clear away the fog, I looked up and met his eyes.

"You look like you're about to run."

"I'm—" I started to protest, until I realized I was actually considering it. I wondered how things had suddenly become so awkward. People were supposed to clam up and get all weird *before* sex, not after. Well, at least based on what I'd learned from my limited experience.

"You're not running," he spoke authoritatively as he walked back to me, hands firmly planted on his hips. My nerves began to diminish as my agitation rose. How the man still managed to piss me off right after giving me probably the best orgasm of my life was mind-boggling. I should have been in seventh heaven. But *no*, I was standing in the middle of Rowan's tiled entryway, copying his stance with my hands on my hips, eyes narrowed in angry slits.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me," he answered, stepping closer.

Reverting into moody-teenaged-girl mode, I responded, ever so eloquently, “You’re not the boss of me!”

“Oh, the irony of that statement,” he laughed.

“Are you *trying* to piss me off intentionally?”

He stepped even closer. Close enough to reach out and twirl a loose strand of my hair around his finger. “As much as I delight in watching you get riled up, picking a fight with you would more than likely put a damper on what I have planned for the rest of the evening.”

I wanted to get madder, I really did, but his words were a reminder of just how perfectly he worked my body over. Dampness flooded my core at the thought of having more than that.

“But I will admit, watching you get so heated is better than the shy, nervous thing you had going on the moment we walked through the door. So the answer is, if it’ll get you back to normal and give me back that fiery girl I’ve been craving for so long, then yeah, I guess I am trying to piss you off intentionally... on a subconscious level, at least,” he finished with a smile.

Give me back the fiery girl I’ve been craving for so long... Those were the only words playing back in my head as I lowered my arms and tossed my clutch onto the table by the door, taking in a deep breath to try and calm my rioting emotions. When I met his eyes once more, they were glittering with lust, darkened to a deeper blue than normal. He knew I’d just surrendered, that I wasn’t running. It was written all over him in the way his chest rose as he pulled in air, the way his pupils dilated, almost eclipsing the blue completely. But mostly, it was in the way he grabbed hold of me and pulled me into him just before melding our lips together in a hungry kiss.

“Want you again,” he groaned as his hands roamed to the back of my thighs so he could lift me up. On instinct, I wrapped my legs around his waist, locking my ankles together behind his back. I wanted him again, too. “Wanted you the minute we finished. You’re in my fucking head.”

I tried not to let his admission penetrate too deeply. I wouldn’t let this... thing between us mean more than it was supposed to. I *couldn’t*. It was just sex. Just hot, sweaty, blissful sex. It wasn’t anything more. Rowan wasn’t the type of guy to ever let it mean anything more. And if I didn’t want to have my heart trampled on, I needed to remember that.

But it was so damn hard when he said things like that.

“Kiss me,” I pleaded, wrapping my fingers in his hair to guide his lips back to mine. It was the only way I knew to make him stop talking, stop

saying things I was discovering I was desperate to hear. I couldn't imagine this ending well between us, but I was helpless to stop it.

I heard a door slam and jerked my head up to see we were in his bedroom. He'd kicked the door shut behind us as soon as we cleared the threshold. It wasn't until right then that I realized I'd never really paid much attention to what Rowan's bedroom looked like. And from the feral expression on his face, that wasn't going to change right then, either. From the brief glimpse I was able to get, it looked to be very much his style. Dark wood furniture, dark bedclothes, minimal decorations on his beige walls. But that was all I was able to take in before his lips on my skin distracted me from anything but the man I was currently wrapped around.

"This dress..." he mumbled as he slid me down the front of his body, resting my feet on the carpeted floor. "This fucking dress." It came out like a growl as his eyes trailed over every inch of me. "Jesus, you look beautiful in it, but I need it off you. Right *now*."

I couldn't formulate a single word as he reached behind me and lowered the zipper of my gown before sliding the strap from my shoulder. I stood, frozen as it slid down my body and pooled on the floor at my feet, leaving me in nothing but a white, lacey thong since the design of the gown wouldn't allow for a bra.

"Good Lord," he groaned, sounding almost pained. "Knew you'd be gorgeous. Fucking *knew it*." As he spoke, I tried not to fidget, forcing myself to keep my hands at my sides when I wanted nothing more than to cover myself from his blatant stare. "But never knew you'd be perfect."

My whole body heated at Rowan's confession, and suddenly, I was desperate to feel his hands on me, his skin against mine. I wanted every part of him touching every part of me. "You're wearing too many clothes."

His eyes came back to mine, an impish grin tilting the corner of his mouth as his fingers went to the buttons of his shirt, moving purposefully. "You want me?"

All I could do was nod as I licked at my dry lips.

"Say it."

"I want you," I answered, sounding hoarse as my mouth grew dry with every inch of solid, muscular skin he exposed.

"On the bed."

I never broke our stare as I stepped out of my shoes and moved backwards to the bed. Once the back of my knees hit the mattress, I sat down and

scooted to the very center, lying down against the mound of soft pillows.

Rowan dropped his shirt to the floor and said, “God, you look amazing there,” as he worked the button and zipper of his slacks. Then, just like that, he was completely naked. I sucked in a sharp breath. I didn’t know where to look first. Perfection, pure unadulterated perfection; that was the only way I could describe Rowan in all his bare glory. I couldn’t memorize every dip and curve fast enough.

“You have any idea how hard I get when you look at me like that?” he asked as his knees hit the bed.

“Show me.” *What the what?* My response shocked me. But just like Rowan brought out my serious attitude, it also seemed he brought out a part of me I’d only kept relegated to my fantasies. I had no doubt I could be as adventurous as I wanted with him. And that he’d encourage every second of it.

For just tonight, my brain whispered from out of nowhere. I had to bite my lip against the sting of that reminder. It was one night. Rowan didn’t do repeats.

At least I can live out some of my fantasies for tonight. It’s better than nothing.

It had to be, because it was all I was getting.

“Hey.” His breath wisped against my cheek, and I was stunned to find he’d moved to hover right over me as I was sucked into a murky haze. “What’s that face about?”

He sounded so sincere, so soft. The question in his eyes as he focused on me ripped at my chest.

“Nothing,” I lied, my voice gravelly from the lump that had formed.

Leaning closer, he trailed his nose along the side of mine. “You sure? You want me to stop?”

Gah! I really needed him to quit being so sweet!

I felt panicked at the thought of him stopping, at the idea of not having this one night. “No. Don’t stop. Please.”

He pressed soft, gentle kisses on my lips, down my neck, between my breasts as he traveled down my body, each one breaking something inside of me until I feared I might cry. I expected hard. I expected fast. I expected more of what we had in the back of the limo. I never would have guessed Rowan Locklaine was capable of soft and sweet. And that newly exposed layer he just revealed shredded me.

“Rowan, please,” I begged on a whimper. *Please what?* What was it I was asking for, exactly? I was so confused. I wanted him to stop, fearing I was moments away from a crushed heart, but another part of me was desperate for him to continue, wanting to take in as much as possible before it was all ripped away.

I felt the rough pads of his fingers as he slipped them into the thin straps at my hips and pulled my panties off. “What do you need, baby?”

“God, please... just... just hurry.”

He was back over me once again, resting on his forearm while his other hand reached out and opened the drawer to his nightstand. “Not hurrying this time. This time, we’re doing it slow. I want to feel you wrapped around my cock. I want to savor what it feels like when you come around me.”

My heart thundered in my chest as he ripped the condom open between his teeth, the heat of his body only leaving me long enough for him to slide it down his rock-hard length. Then he was back, pushing into me slowly, inch by torturous inch.

My head tilted back into the pillows as my lids fell shut. A deep moan rose up from my chest as I gloried at the way he filled me so completely.

“Look at me,” he commanded, one of his hands tangling in my hair as he pulled my face back to his. “Keep those eyes on me, baby. Don’t look away.” I gasped at what I saw when my eyelids slid open. I couldn’t understand what I was seeing in the depths of those crystal eyes as they stared back at me. It was something I’d never seen from him before.

The sounds that he pushed from my throat as he pumped in and out of me filled the room, mingled with the sounds of his panting and skin slapping against skin.

“So good,” he rasped. “So tight. Touch me, Navie. I want to feel your hands on me.”

Incapable of denying him anything at that point, I slid my hands over his ribs, up his defined chest, running my fingers over every rise and indentation I’d been craving to touch since the first time I saw him without a shirt. A tiny bead of sweat trailed from his temple down to the column of his throat, and I found myself leaning in to lick it off his warm skin. At the touch of my tongue, his chest rumbled against me with his deep growl.

A gasp caught in my throat when he pulled out and thrust back in harder, faster. “Again,” I pleaded.

“You like that?” he asked, offering me exactly what I asked for.

“Yes.”

Each hard pump of his hips pushed me closer. I was hanging from the precipice. “Close. So close. Need you harder.”

“No, just like this,” he insisted, never once speeding up or slowing down, keeping an infuriatingly perfect pace as I hungered for more. “You’ll come just like that. With your eyes on me.”

My insides coiled tight then snapped in a release that overtook my entire body. I writhed and moaned, chanting Rowan’s name over and over as he continued moving inside me, drawing out every single bit of my orgasm. Tears pricked the backs of my eyes at its intensity. I wasn’t sure how I managed, but somehow I kept my eyes open and on him the whole time.

“*Fuck,*” he hissed as he began moving faster, chasing after his own bliss. I felt him swell inside me and clamped down around, squeezing him as hard as I could, wanting to push him over the edge just as he had me. “Shit... *Navie!*” he shouted as he buried himself as deep as he could possibly go. Each twitch of him as he came inside me sent electric shocks over my sensitive skin, throwing me headlong into another blinding orgasm. By the time we were finished, I couldn’t speak. I could barely breathe.

I felt a feather light brush of his lips against mine as he pulled out and climbed from the bed to handle the condom, but before he even had a chance to return, my lids drooped with exhaustion and I was pulled into the darkness of sleep.

I could have sworn it was just a dream when I felt Rowan climb back into the bed, pulling my back flush to his chest as he draped the covers over us. And I was *positive* it was a dream when I heard his raspy voice say, “Never felt anything so good in all my life, Navie. Not once.”

Twenty-four

Navie

Muted sunlight flowed through the drapes as my eyes opened and took in my unfamiliar surroundings. It took a few disorienting seconds to remember where I was and what had happened the night before. I tried to shift my body, causing a small ache between my thighs that brought back memories of Rowan waking me in the middle of the night with his mouth. My skin flushed red as I recalled the toe-curling orgasms I'd received with perfect clarity.

Then it hit me like a sledgehammer.

Our night was over.

Turning my head on the pillow, I was surprised to see Rowan still asleep in the bed next to me. It was the sight of his relaxed, sleeping form that alerted me to the weight of his arm around my waist. He was *holding* me. Not only had we slept together, but it would appear that Rowan was a cuddler, as well. I couldn't help but wonder if he'd held the other women the way he was holding me. At that thought, a sharp, intense pain radiated through my chest.

I scolded myself. *Suck it up, Navie. You have no one to blame but yourself.*

Pulling myself from my melancholy, I slid from underneath Rowan's arm as carefully as I could, not wanting to wake him. If I was going to have to do the walk of shame, I wanted to do it without the humiliation of him putting me out on my ass like I'd seen him do the first day I came to work for him. No, I was going to leave of my own accord, not because he kicked me out. And I was going to come back to work on Monday like nothing ever happened.

Only I'll be dying a little bit on the inside.

Damn it!

I'd just escaped from under the covers when the familiar sound of my muffled ringtone sounded from somewhere in the apartment. I chanced a quick glance at the alarm clock on Rowan's nightstand and saw it was only a little after seven AM. That explained why he was still sawing logs. He was

barely able to drag himself from bed at 8:15 like a normal human being. Deciding I had enough time to take the call without waking him, I snatched his white button-down shirt from the floor and slid it on, not wanting to deal with the hassle of my gown until I absolutely had to. Quickly fastening the three middle buttons, I shuffled on silent feet from the room, following the sound of my ringing phone to where my purse lay on the table I'd dropped it on the night before.

The display lit up with a picture of Carson making a weird face at Willow, and I couldn't help but laugh at the memory of taking it the last time I was home. That had been a great day.

"Hey," I answered with a smile, conscious to keep my voice down so as not to wake Rowan.

"Hey there, little bit!"

My nose burned and my eyes flooded with tears at the use of his heartwarming nickname for me. God, I missed him. I missed all of my family back in Texas.

"A little early for you to be so chipper, don't you think?" I teased.

"I've been up since four. Cass's got Restless Leg Syndrome, or whatever the hell the doc called it. Kicked the shit outta me all night long. Couldn't sleep worth a damn."

"Aw." I giggled as I made my way into the living room and folded onto the couch, knees to chest with my free arm wrapped around my legs. "Pregnancy giving her trouble?"

"You'd think, but the woman's tough as all hell."

"Don't I know it. So, what warranted the early morning call?"

"Well," he started before trailing off, intentionally keeping me in suspense. The jerk.

"Spill it, Carson."

His chuckle resonated through the line, flooding my chest with warmth. "How do you feel about having a couple houseguests in two weeks?"

"*Are you kidding?*" I squealed excitedly before remembering to keep quiet. A quick glance over my shoulder showed an empty hall so I continued, softly. "Are you kidding? You're really coming?"

"We're really coming, little bit."

"I can't tell you how happy that makes me," I whispered, more than a little teary-eyed. "You're the best brother I never had," I told him, using the words we'd made up for each other years ago to let him know exactly how much he

meant to me.

“And you’re the best sister I never had,” he followed accordingly.

Talking to Carson was a reminder of how much I missed everyone at Willow Ranch. That, combined with the somberness of my situation with Rowan, sent a wave of sadness through me. “God, I miss you, Carson. You have no idea.”

I should have known he’d read my tone perfectly. The man had been in tune with my emotions since I met him when I was only eleven years old. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lied, making sure to put a smile in my voice to reassure him even though I wasn’t feeling it.

“You sure? You wouldn’t lie to me, would you?”

“I swear, Carson. Everything’s good. It’s just early. I’m not properly caffeinated yet.”

He remained silent for a few seconds. “If you say so,” he spoke skeptically. “But if something’s ever wrong, I’m only a phone call away, little bit. I’m always here for you, no matter what. Cass, too. Hell, every damn one of us at the ranch.”

I giggled again, feeling just a bit lighter. “I know.”

“I love you, you know that?”

“I do know, Carson. And I love you, too.” I smiled again, and that time it was genuine.

“Me and Cass will see you in a couple weeks, yeah?”

“I can’t wait,” I answered honestly.

“Talk soon, little bit. Have a good day.”

I had just enough time to reply with a, “You, too,” before the line disconnected.

I stared at the black screen of my phone for a few seconds when a throat cleared from behind me, giving me a start as I spun around on the couch. “Good Lord, Rowan.” I laughed. “You scared the hell out of me.”

“Who’s Carson?” His stony tone wiped the smile off my face and I took in his frigid demeanor as he rested his shoulder against the doorway, arms crossed over his bare chest. If it hadn’t been for the fury radiating off him, I might have had a chance to appreciate the way he looked in nothing but a pair of gray sweats, but that wasn’t in the cards for me.

“What?”

“I asked,” he ground out slowly as he pushed from the door and came

toward the couch, “who the *fuck* is Carson? And don’t lie to me. I heard you tell that asshole you loved him and missed him.”

Whereas any sane person would have cowered down in fright at Rowan’s murderous glare, I had a different reaction... mainly because he’d just referred to Carson as an asshole.

“He’s my brother!” I clipped as I shoved from the couch and came nose to nose with him, the best I could. Just as always, he had me flipping from cold to hot in a heartbeat, and my anger was enough to match his as we stared each other down. “And don’t you call him an asshole, you dick!”

“I told you not to lie to me,” he responded in a low, warning growl.

“I didn’t lie!”

That seemed to give him pause... for a nanosecond. “You said you grew up in foster care. You never said shit about having a brother.”

“Maybe because you never asked!” I shouted. “And, not that it’s any of your damn business, but he’s my *foster* brother. He basically raised me since I was eleven.”

A sarcastic snort worked its way from Rowan’s throat. “And you actually expect me to believe nothing’s happened between you two? Give me a break, Navie. I’m not an idiot.”

I wanted to slap him. No, I wanted to punch him, *really* hard.

Instead, I lifted my phone up and hit a few buttons, accessing my photo album. “Here.” I shoved the phone in his face for him to see. “That’s from last Christmas. That’s Carson, his *wife*, Cassidy, and their daughter, Willow.” He looked from the screen to me with a furrowed brow. “Keep scrolling,” I said sarcastically. “You’ll see more pictures of the three of them. I’m in some of them. Cassidy’s Aunt Milly and Uncle Kal are also in some, too. Oh!” I snatched the phone away and scrolled to one of my most recent pics. “And that’s a picture Cassidy texted me last week of her *pregnant* belly. Now, you wanna keep accusing me of stupid shit when it’s obvious I have a good relationship with Carson’s wife, or are you ready to pull your head out of your *ass*?” I finished on a shout.

“I—” he started, but I didn’t give him a chance to continue.

I snatched my cell phone from his hand. “Yeah, that’s what I thought. Just a warning. The next time you want to call my brother names, you better be prepared to have the ever-loving shit kicked out of you. There aren’t many people in my life I love, but the few I do, I love *fiercely*. I got thrown into the system when I was four and bounced around all alone until I met Carson. He

protected me, took care of me. And when my most recent foster family kicked me out the day I turned eighteen, he took me in. He worked two jobs, saving up as much money as he could so that when I came to New York, I didn't have to struggle.

"And when he met Cassidy and her family, none of them hesitated to welcome us into the fold with open arms. I'd die for each and every one of those people, so I better *never* hear you talk shit about any of them ever again. You understand me?"

"I'm sorry."

"And I—wait, what?"

He stepped into me and ran his fingers through my hair, locking them together at the base of my neck. "I said I'm sorry. I didn't know. I just heard you talking to some guy, telling him you loved him, and I got pissed. I should have asked you first, and I didn't. I jumped to conclusions, and for that, I'm sorry. Oh, and I'm also sorry for calling your brother an asshole. I'm sure he's a great guy."

"What's happening right now?" I whispered.

"Well," he chuckled, "I woke up this morning without you in my bed, which I wasn't happy about, FYI. I went looking for you, found you wearing nothing but my shirt, got hard enough to pound nails with my dick, heard you talking to another dude, stuck my foot in my mouth and made an ass out of myself, and now I'm trying to apologize. That about sum up our morning so far?"

"Uh..."

"But I'd much rather get back to the part about you wearing my shirt." His tongue snaked out and ran across my bottom lip, sending a shiver throughout my body. "Please, for the love of God, tell me you aren't wearing anything underneath."

As his face came closer, mine leaned further away. "Seriously, what's happening right now? Did I wake up in an alternate universe or something?"

He pulled back, looking as confused as I was feeling. "What are you talking about?"

I struggled against his hold until he finally let go. I needed space if we were going to talk about what happened between us. I couldn't think when he was touching me. I couldn't afford that kind of distraction.

"Rowan, it was just one night, right? I mean, you don't... I thought..."

"You thought what?" he asked agitatedly as he crossed his arms over his

chest.

“I thought...” Oh, God, there was no way to say what I had to say without coming off like a raging bitch. Sucking in a lungful of air, I pushed forth, the awkward tension in the room putting my nerves on high alert. “I thought you didn’t do repeats. I mean, I saw how you dismissed that woman on my first day and I just assumed... *Gah!* I planned on being gone before you woke up to avoid this very conversation! I’ve never had a one-night stand before. It’s not like I know proper procedure. Cut me some slack!”

His jaw ticked as he grew stiff. Oh, damn, he was pissed. “You thought this was a one-night stand?”

I shrugged. “Well... yeah.”

“Jesus Christ!” he boomed, and I immediately went on the defensive.

“Come on, Rowan! Your track record with women isn’t exactly classified. You can’t be mad at me for being confused. Put yourself in my shoes.”

He sucked in a deep breath and let it out slowly as he ran his hands through his sexy, sleep-rumpled hair. His abs bunched and I found myself licking my lips hungrily as I watched his muscles flex and release.

“You’re right. *Shit,*” he hissed. “I’m sorry.”

It was right then that something dawned on me. My heart began pumping at a frantic pace at just the thought. I didn’t want to be hopeful. I *knew* better than to hope. But, God, could he really...?

“Do you...” I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry as the desert. “Do you *want* this to be more?”

Oh, God, I thought pathetically, *please say yes.*

Twenty-five

Rowan

Did I want it to be more?

Fuck, I wasn't sure.

I knew I wanted more of her body; there was no doubt about that. I knew I loved her company. I couldn't remember laughing as hard as I had since I had met her in years. I knew I genuinely *liked* her. But the idea of *more*, the idea of turning what we had into something official, something serious, scared the shit out of me. I wanted Navie in my life. *That* much I knew for certain, but if my past was anything to go on, relationships imploded and things turned ugly and bitter. That love you thought you felt for a person turned sour, bitter, and hate took its place.

I didn't want *that*.

But the hope shining in the deep blue depths of her eyes knocked the wind from my lungs. I knew without a doubt that saying the wrong thing would send her away and I'd lose her completely. I was walking on egg shells as I tried to give her an answer that would accommodate what we both wanted... what I *needed*. Because the thought of her not being in my life, well, that was a pill I just couldn't swallow.

"I don't know," I answered honestly. The moment the last word left my mouth, I watched those shutters drop around her. The light in her eyes flickered out and I knew she was just seconds away from shutting me out. Grabbing her hands and pulling her to me, I continued. "I don't know what I'm doing, Navie. I want to be honest with you, you deserve that much. I don't want what we had to be just a one-time thing. But I'm out of my depth here. I don't want to make you any promises I can't keep, but I will tell you this. I want more of this. I want more of what we had last night—"

"So... you just want to keep having sex?" I was losing her.

"No! I mean, yes. *Fuck!*" I paused to suck in a much needed breath before I royally fucked everything up. "Not lying, baby, I *definitely* want your body

again. And again, and again, and again. But I also like spending time with you. Can we just... can we take this one day at a time and see where it leads us?"

I inhaled my first relieved breath when that shine came back and her body loosened against mine. "Yeah," she whispered. The smile that overtook her face made me want to kiss her all the more. "I think I can do that."

"Thank God," I sighed, earning myself the wonderful sound of her laughter. Then she lowered the boom.

"But I need to know one thing first."

"What's that, baby?"

"Who's Bree?"

You know how movies draw out a car wreck, in slow motion, amplifying the squeal of the tires as the brakes lock up? The loud, jarring boom of impact, metal screeching as it's twisted and mangled, glass shattering at an earsplitting level? Well, that was exactly what played out in my head after Navie asked who Bree was.

It was a goddamned car wreck.

"I'm going to need coffee for this conversation," I answered, lacing her fingers through mine and leading her into the kitchen. I measured the grounds and started the pot to brew before turning back to Navie. Christ, she looked good sitting on my barstool in nothing but my shirt. She rested her elbows on the countertop and had her chin propped in one of her hands, shifting the top of the shirt just enough to give me a tantalizing view of her luscious cleavage. Before I could talk myself out of it, I was picturing running my tongue along that valley, reveling in the taste of her skin. That visual quickly morphed into me thrusting my cock between those two mounds, her dusky pink nipples standing at attention as I fucked her tits.

Son of a bitch, I was hard. Having a conversation about *Bree* while sporting an erection was not an ideal situation. I sucked in several calming breaths, trying to tame my raging hard-on.

By the time the coffee finished, I had myself under control. I poured myself a cup and made one for Navie, sliding the mug across the counter to her. "Bree was my ex-girlfriend."

"What the *hell*? But I thought you didn't *do* relationships." The comment wasn't sarcastic or biting. Her face held nothing but genuine surprise.

"And I don't, not anymore. And I didn't do relationships before Bree either, so to say I'm a bit out of practice would be putting it lightly. She was

the only *serious* relationship I've ever had. And that fucker went up in flames."

"What happened? I mean, I can kind of piece together parts of the story based on what you said to your brother last night, but I'd rather hear it from you than jump to conclusions."

If I had the choice between reliving my past with Bree and shoving an icepick into my brain, I would have gladly taken the icepick. But considering what I had with Navie seemed to be at stake, I suffered through the pain and started from the beginning.

"I met Bree when I was twenty-five. I'd just signed my first book deal and had been out with some friends celebrating. She was at the bar that night with her friends and, well, one thing led to another and she went home with me." *Awkward* was the only word that adequately described talking about an ex with a woman I was currently sleeping with, or at least hoping to sleep with again in the very near future. "Things moved fast from there and before I knew it, we'd been together for three years. Or at least, that's what I thought," I added bitterly.

"What do you mean?" Navie asked softly, pulling me from the haze of the past.

"What I mean is it wasn't the most... *conventional* relationship. Yeah, we were together for a long time, and we spent a lot of time together, but we never did the typical shit that normal couples do. We never met each other's parents, we rarely went on dates. When we weren't together, most of our communication consisted of texting, not phone calls."

Navie's brows lowered into a deep V as she cocked her head to the side. "How is that even possible? I mean, when you're with someone for three years, I thought that stuff just *happened*, you know?"

I let out a derisive snort. "So did I. But I was young, and a fucking idiot, and she always had an excuse. She was working late, or had a meeting, or traveling for work. And I was the dumbass who never questioned her. I was at the beginning of my dream career, I had more money than I knew what to do with, and I was in love with the woman I planned on spending the rest of my life with. I felt ten feet tall and bulletproof. Nothing could touch me," I finished, my voice lowering as I stared down into my coffee cup, the hole in my chest just as black as the steaming liquid that filled the mug.

"You really loved her," Navie said quietly. It sounded almost like she was speaking more to herself than to me, and when I looked up I didn't like the

expression on her face. Contemplative combined with worry, and just a hint of sadness. Jesus, when had it become so painful to see that girl sad? It was killing me.

“I *thought* I did, at least,” I told her, wanting to wipe her face clean and paint the happiness back into her eyes. Because the truth was, looking back on what I had with Bree, I couldn’t be sure if it really had been love, or if it was just the idea that I had the perfect life. If I had been asked that same question months before, I would have answered with a definitive yes. But now... well, now I wasn’t so sure. “Like I said, I was young and stupid.”

She cleared her throat and gave her head a tiny shake, her mass of hair creating shiny, golden waves. “So, where does Richard play in all of this?”

A humorless laugh worked its way up my chest. “Well, there’s the *really* fucked-up part of my little story. You see, the reason she always had an excuse to never meet my family, or to avoid being seen with me in public was because she was fucking my brother behind my back.”

Her sharp gasp reverberated off the walls. “Are you kidding me?”

“Wish I was. The shittiest part of all of it, though? Just a week before I caught them together, she told me she was pregnant. There I was, the fucking moron who thought he was going to be a dad when really, it wasn’t even my kid.”

“Oh, my God, Rowan. I can’t believe... that’s just... oh, my *God!* What did he have to say about it?”

“Wouldn’t know,” I answered with a shrug, infusing my voice with a casualness I didn’t even come close to feeling. “I took off right after it happened. Packed my shit and hauled ass from Connecticut to New York. Griff and Dex had moved here after college to join the academy, and I crashed with them for a bit before finding my own place. I haven’t spoken to either of them since it all went down.”

“Holy shit,” she said on a sigh, coming off her stool and walking in my direction. “I just can’t believe that. Your own *brother*. That’s so...” Her face twisted in anger as her small hands pressed against my stomach. And instantly, with just one touch from her, my entire body went off like a live wire. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered as she looked up at me, genuine sympathy staring back at me. “I never had any siblings, not until Carson. But he’s not blood, you know? But I always wished for one. And I can’t imagine ever hurting them the way Richard hurt you.”

She completely undid me. I couldn’t help myself; leaning down, I took her

mouth with mine in a slow, languid kiss that had just as much of an impact as the brutal ones we'd shared the night before.

"It's okay. It was a long time ago."

"How long has it been since you talked to your brother?"

"Five years." A look of pain marred her beautiful face and I immediately wanted to console her, switching our places in the blink of an eye. "Hey, it's okay. I'm okay, Navie. I swear. I'm over it."

Her eyes focused on my chest, her fingers rubbing soft, lazy circles against my skin. "But that's your family." The devastation in her voice sliced at my insides. She'd been raised without a family, and hearing me talk about the rift between me and my brother actually *hurt* her.

"Don't be sad," I told her, pressing my fingers against her chin so I could see her eyes. Those beautiful, expressive, dark blue eyes were swimming with tears. "Christ, baby, you're killing me here. Don't cry for me."

"I'm not crying," she said as indignantly as a person could while sniffing back tears. I couldn't help but to laugh, which got me the smile I'd been craving. Just one smile from her and it felt like winning the lottery.

"So," she sniffled again and wiped at the wetness she'd just sworn wasn't in her eyes. "Why is she emailing you again? And what was Richard talking about last night when he said you didn't know the full story?"

"Well, I can only guess that Bree's emailing again because she and Richard are getting a divorce. As far as what Richard said..." I gave her a shrug. "Don't know, don't care."

"Messy," she answered.

"Yep. And I want nothing to do with it."

Navie took a deep breath in through her nose and let it back out. "I can't say I blame you. I'm sad for you, but I don't blame you."

"Well," I spoke, a salacious grin spreading across my lips. "We could go back to bed and you could try *really* hard to make me feel better."

I moved in for another kiss but her hands on my chest pressed harder, stopping me from my ultimate goal. "Hold on there, playboy. I didn't agree to that."

My smile fell. "Yes, you did," I argued, suddenly feeling rather grumpy. "You said yes. You said we could take it one day at a time. You aren't switching off on me again, Navie. So help me—"

She giggled that adorable giggle of hers that would have set me on fire if I wasn't getting mad. "Calm down. I'm not *switching off*," she mocked, voice

full of humor. “I just think we need a few ground rules.”

I so did not like the sound of that. “You’re joking, right?” I asked indignantly.

Her expression grew firm as she stepped back and popped her hands on her hips in the typical *don’t fuck with me* female pose. “No, I’m *not* joking. The fact of the matter is I still work for you. If we’re going to do this—”

I interrupted with a growl. “Oh, we’re so gonna do this.”

“Then we need to establish some boundaries to keep it from getting...” she waved one tiny hand in a circle while trying to come up with the right word, “...messy. Because this can get very messy, Rowan. You’re aware of that, right? Employee/boss relationships never end well.”

“That’s not true,” I objected, wanting to prove her wrong for the simple fact that I didn’t want her to have any valid reasons to put a stop to whatever it was we were starting.

One of her eyebrows quirked up. “Really? Name one person you know who it’s worked out for.”

I thought... and came up with nothing. “Damn it!”

“See?” she crowed, looking a little too victorious for my liking. “We need ground rules.”

“Fine,” I relented on a huff. “What are these *ground rules*?”

“No hanky-panky while I’m on the clock.”

“Oh, hell no! Fuck that. I’m not agreeing to that rule!”

“You have to!”

“Like hell I do. Nope, no way.” I crossed my arms over my chest in finality.

The little devil did the same. “Then this isn’t happening.”

I felt pretty certain at that point that my head was about to explode. I looked up at the ceiling on a long groan before finally caving to her demands. “Fine. What else?”

“No other women,” she replied without hesitation.

“Then no other men,” I added with a cocked brow.

“Deal.”

A corner of my mouth tipped up in a grin. “Anything else?”

She looked thoughtful for a second, her lips scrunched to the side, forehead wrinkled. “That’s all I got for now. But I’m sure I’ll think of something later.”

“Great!” I said a little too enthusiastically as I reached for her. “We can

start now. It's a Sunday. You're off the clock."

She sidestepped my hold. "Sorry, big boy, got stuff to do today. I need to head home."

"You know you're killing me, right?" I pouted dramatically as I dropped my head to the kitchen counter. All I heard as she left the kitchen was that sweet giggle trailing down the hallway.

I was such a sucker.

Twenty-six

Navie

I lied.

I didn't have anything to do; I just needed some space from Rowan. It felt like things were moving at warp speed, and I needed a chance to process everything without the risk of him twisting me into knots.

I'd put up a valiant effort to convince him I could take a cab home. It was New York, for Christ's sake; people cabbed it everywhere. But he wouldn't hear of it. When we pulled up in front of my building, he planted a bone-melting kiss on my lips before I even had the car door open. I was so hot and bothered by the time I finished the climb up the stairs to my apartment, it was a miracle I hadn't spontaneously combusted.

High-heeled sandals hanging from my fingers, I unlocked the front door of my apartment and crept in, trying my best not to wake Harlow. No such luck.

"And where have you been, missy?"

"Ah! Shit!" I yelled as I spun around, hand to my thundering heart. Harlow stood in the space between the entryway and living room, arms crossed over her chest, one hip popped out, a stern-mother expression on her face. "Crap on a freaking cracker, Har. You just scared a few years off my life! I thought you'd be asleep."

"Thought or hoped? Seeing as you never came home and are sneaking in wearing your gown from last night."

"Uh... hoped?"

A wicked smile spread across her lips as she rushed me and pulled me into a hug. "You dirty little ho! You're totally doing the walk of shame, aren't you? *Eeeeeeeeeeep!* I'm so happy for you! Tell me all about it. Who was the guy? How was he? Are you seeing him again? You totally have hump hair right now." She leaned in and sniffed. "And you still kinda smell like sex."

"Ewww, gross!" I shouted, swatting at her. "Get away from me, weirdo. I haven't had a chance to shower yet."

As I made my way to my room to change out of my dress and take that aforementioned shower, she followed behind, yapping like a month-old puppy with ADHD the entire time. “Sooooo? Are you gonna spill the beans on who you banged?”

I turned to look at her over my shoulder. She was propped against my door, obviously not planning on moving any time soon. “Don’t say ‘banged’,” I told her as I dropped the gown to the floor and reached for the plush, terrycloth robe I kept draped over my desk chair. I’d changed in front of Harlow so many times, it was nothing.

I received an exaggerated eye-roll. “Fine. Who’d you play hide the salami with? Stuff the chicken? Plow the field? Slob the sausage?”

I felt my cheeks heating as I slapped my hands over my face. “Oh, God! If I tell you, will you stop?”

“Yep.”

“Fine. Please, just... Stop. Talking.” She mimicked locking her lips together and throwing away the key. Taking a big breath, I spit my words out quickly. “It was Rowan.”

The atmosphere in the room shifted and when I uncovered my eyes, Harlow’s face was flooded with concern. “Oh, babe.” She sighed. “Are you sure this is a good idea?”

My body went stiff just as I finished tying the belt on my robe. “What do you mean? I thought you were all for this?”

“I was. I *am*. I’m just... worried. I know something has been going on between you two and I know I’ve been teasing you, I just didn’t think you’d give in.”

I tried not to be insulted, I really did, but I couldn’t help it. “So, you think I’m being stupid?” I asked, offended.

“No! No, I don’t think you’re being stupid. It’s just... you lead with your heart. I want to make sure you’ve thought about this. That you can handle whatever happens between you two. I don’t want you to get hurt.” The frown that marred her beautiful face melted some of the ice that had formed in my bones. But what she said next thawed it completely. “You’re important to me. You hurt, I hurt. I just want you safe.”

I wrapped Harlow in a tight hug, squeezing with all my strength. “I know, babe. And you’re just as important to me, too. But I walked into this thing with Rowan with my eyes wide open, I swear. I know his reputation, but I also know *him*. This may work out, it may not, but I’m prepared for whatever

the outcome may be.”

I was proud of how confident I sounded, because the truth was, I had no idea what I was doing. And that scared me. But I didn't want Harlow to know that. She'd known me when I was the shy introvert who hid away from everything in order to guard myself from more pain. I could see it in her eyes; she feared I'd revert back to that. I did, too, but I couldn't let myself think that far ahead.

One day at a time, that's what Rowan had said. That was what I had agreed to. I just hoped I wasn't crushed in the process.



The lid of my laptop slammed down, nearly taking off a couple of my fingertips in the process. “What the hell?” I snapped, lifting my gaze to find Rowan hovering over me, one hand on my computer, the other resting on the back of the couch by my head, caging me in. “I was working on that!”

“It's 5:30,” he said between clenched teeth.

“So?”

“So... it's quitting time.”

“Rowan,” I sighed. “I'm not done yet. Just give me another fifteen—”

“No,” he cut me off, pulling the computer from my lap and setting it on the coffee table. “I'm not giving you another *five* minutes. You said we couldn't do anything while you're on the clock, and I've held up my side of the bargain.” His hand wrapped around one of my ankles, using it to pull me down the length of the couch so I was lying on my back, his weight coming down on top of me so I had no other choice but to open my legs to him. “Now it's time for you to live up to yours.” I giggled as his lips came down, trailing whisper-light kisses against my neck. “Jesus, I need to be inside you, Navie,” he groaned as I wrapped my legs around his lean hips, reveling in the feel of him against me, already hard and ready.

I nipped at his lower lip, earning myself a growl. “I'm starting to think you have a problem.”

“I agree. You aren't naked. That's a huge fucking problem.”

Heat flooded me as he ground his hips against mine, drenching my panties as his hard-on rubbed against the perfect spot. “Rowan,” I moaned, my head falling back against the cushion. It had been five days of pure, unadulterated

sexual bliss. It was as if we couldn't get enough of each other. The moment the workday finished, we were on one another like animals, ripping clothes, ravishing each other. It was insanity. But the strangest part of all of it was that the sex hadn't changed the nature of our relationship. I'd expected things to be different between us once intimacy entered the picture, but we still joked, we still teased, we still laughed and argued. The only difference in our relationship was that we now had a detailed knowledge of what set the other person aflame.

"You have no idea what you do to me," he spoke softly as he pulled my earlobe into his mouth and bit down, drawing a sharp gasp from my lungs. "Drive me fucking crazy," he continued. "Can't think about anything else." His fingers dug into my hips impatiently, his demeanor turning somewhat manic in his desperation for me. It drove me wild. "Want you all the fucking time."

"I want you, too," I breathed, lifting my head, eager to feel his lips against mine as I circled my hips against his over and over.

"Can't get enough. Never get enough of you."

Something inside me snapped. I needed to feel him like I needed air. Sliding my hands between our bodies, I went for the button and zipper of his fly with quick efficiency. The moment my fingers wrapped around his cock, his forehead dropped to my shoulder. The power that coursed through me was a heady thing. I pumped my fist, circling the head of his erection with my thumb, spreading the beads of precum that had formed. I did that, *me*. I held Rowan in the palm of my hand, figuratively and literally, and I got off on the fact that I could make him react in such an animalistic way. My name came through his gritted teeth as he thrust into my fist.

"Fuck me, Rowan," I whispered against his lips.

With another growl, his weight was gone. Our clothes went flying and I barely had time to blink before he flipped me over, propping my belly over the arm of the couch. I braced myself, waiting, praying for him to pound into me. But he was in the mood to tease. I whimpered as he slid through my folds, drenching himself in my wetness. "Rowan," I cried.

"What, baby?"

"Please."

He kept his rhythm between my thighs, the head of his dick hitting my clit with every upward stroke. "Want me to fuck you?"

I couldn't speak; all I could do was nod.

“You want me hard, Navie?”

I nodded again.

“I want to feel you,” he spoke against my ear. My confusion must have come through with my lack of response so he continued. “Want to fuck you bare, baby. Nothing between us. Please tell me you’re covered. I’m losing my goddamned mind.”

“Rowan...” I trailed off, not sure how to answer. Part of me craved feeling him inside me with no barriers. But that small voice in the back of my head spoke up just then, warning me. It was too personal, too close. I was risking too much.

“Please,” he pleaded in a low, gravelly voice. “Tell me it’s okay, baby.”

How was I ever supposed to deny him anything when he spoke to me so lovingly, so reverently, like I was everything? I couldn’t. I knew it was a major blow to my protective armor. I knew the moment he slid into me with nothing between us that another piece of my heart was going to be lost to him. I just couldn’t say no.

“Yes. *God!*” He filled me so perfectly, so completely, in one quick thrust I nearly went over the edge.

“Oh, Jesus!” he ground out as he picked up the pace, pulling out quickly just to slam back in. “You feel so good, Navie.”

Each slam of his hips pushed the air from my lungs. I was a panting, writhing bundle of nerves ready to shatter. Just when I thought it couldn’t get any better, Rowan proved me wrong. Twisting my hair around his fist, he pulled me up, his strong, sweat-slicked chest pressed firmly against my back. “Is that good?” he rasped in my ear as he licked and bit at my neck.

“S-so good,” I responded, tilting my head further to the side for better access as I pushed my ass back into him, my body setting a perfect rhythm with his.

“You love it when I’m inside you, baby? When I’m fucking you so deep, so hard, I’m all you’ll be able to feel for days?”

“Row—” I choked on a near sob building up in my throat. It was so fantastic, so blissful that I became overwhelmed by the sensation of everything. I was frantically pushing toward release at the same time I feared the intensity of what was about to happen.

“Only me,” he continued. Using the hand that wasn’t tangled in my hair, Rowan pried my fingers from the death grip I had on the arm of the sofa, leading our joined hands down my stomach, not stopping until we could each

feel where his body connected with mine. “This pussy’s mine, Navie. All mine. Everything about you is mine.”

I dropped my head forward, lost in what he was doing to me, only to have him jerk my hair back, the sting in my scalp a perfect combination of pleasure and pain. “Say it. I want to hear you admit it.”

“*Please,*” I whimpered, too far gone.

“Tell me everything about you belongs to me, and I’ll give you what you want.”

I remained silent, my body at war with my head. One screaming at me to say the words while the other fought to keep me guarded.

“You’re so close. I can feel you squeezing around my cock, baby. You need to come, don’t you?”

I nodded, tears prickling the backs of my eyes.

“Just say it. Tell me and I’ll let you come. I’ll make it so good for you, Navie. You can trust me.”

“Yes!” I screamed, barreling closer and closer to the edge, needing nothing more than to fall over.

“Yes, what?”

“I belong to you!”

With that, he moved, guiding our interlocked fingers to my clit and applying just enough pressure to send me hurtling into the abyss, yelling his name over and over like a plea. He followed after me only seconds later.

And just like that, I’d given over that last little shred of my heart I had left, placing it in the palm of his hand, all the while praying I hadn’t just made the biggest mistake of my life.

Twenty-seven

Rowan

It had been three days since I took Navie on my couch. Three days since something significant changed between us. It was a shift I knew she felt just as well as I did, despite the fact that she refused to acknowledge it. My head was muddled, but I was bound and determined not to fuck this up, consciously pushing the concerns and lingering anxiety to the deepest, darkest recesses of my mind and locking them in a steel, reinforced box. Things were good between us, I'd be a fool not to acknowledge that, and I was determined to do exactly what I told her I would—take things one day at a time. And so far, everything had been great.

Except for one little thing.

Like every night for the past week and a half, Navie climbed from my bed and began getting dressed. And like every night for the past week and a half, it pissed me off. It was completely foreign to me, wanting a woman to stay the night in my bed with me. Yes, my past one-night stands had sometimes stayed the night, but that was mainly because I was so exhausted afterwards, I passed out before I had a chance to send them packing—something I rectified early the following morning. But I *wanted* Navie to stay. And not only because I wanted her over and over again, but also just because I wanted her *there*.

I'd finally had enough.

“Where are you going?”

She was in the middle of pulling up her jeans when her head turned and those dark blues hit me. “Home,” she answered mid-yank, her voice coming out bewildered, as though she couldn't understand why I'd even asked. That just pissed me off more.

Pulling my hands out from behind my head, I pushed up on my elbows to see her better. The movement caught her attention, and I couldn't help but grin at the dazed look in her eyes as she stared at my abs like she wanted to

lick every inch of them, something I was *totally* okay with. “You know, you don’t have to run out of here like your ass is on fire the moment I’m done fucking you.”

Her head jerked back in surprise, I just wasn’t sure if that surprise came from what I’d said, or the hint of agitation in my tone.

“I don’t run out of here like my ass is on fire,” she objected as she finished with her jeans.

I scoffed. “Bullshit.”

“What the hell’s your problem?” she snapped, her hands propped on her hips, all fired up and sexy as hell wearing nothing but her jeans and a white lace bra. My dick twitched under the sheet as I took in every sinfully sweet curve.

“I don’t have a problem,” I argued just for the sake of arguing. There was no denying I loved getting her riled up.

“You have to be the only man on Earth who can be in a *bad* mood after sex.”

“You could always stay and try to put me in a better mood,” I added with a smirk.

Navie let out a small laugh and looked at the clock on my nightstand. “It’s already after nine. I hate taking the subway home at night, and I’m not a fan of paying the fare it costs to get from here to my place. You offering to pay for my cab?” she challenged, and I knew she expected me to either pony up the dough or tell her goodnight.

“Or you could always just stay the night.” She just stared in slack-jawed silence. Obviously, I’d just shocked the hell out of her. Using that to my advantage, I sprung up and wrapped my hand around her wrist, jerking her back into my bed. “Stay the night,” I said against her lips as I reached for the clasp of her bra. I wasn’t above using sex to get my way. Every time I touched Navie, she melted into me, and I was planning on taking full advantage of that. The girl heated up for me in a way that had me in a constant state of arousal. I *loved* it.

“I don’t think—”

I cut her off with a deep kiss. “Don’t think, just stay. I want to be able to slide into that warm pussy in the middle of the night.” Her eyes glazed over and she licked her lips. I just about had her. “Just think about me waking you up with my fingers or my tongue, playing with you, getting you wet before you’re even fully awake so I can fuck you when you’re all sweet and sleepy.”

“Mmm,” she hummed.

“Stay the night with me,” I demanded softly, knowing I had her.

“Okay.”

With a shit-eating grin, I took her mouth, silently communicating what was soon to come.



Navie

Rowan and I had fallen into a routine over the past four nights. He'd yank me from my work at 5:30 sharp. Some evenings, he'd pounce on me like a mad man, but sometimes it was slow and sweet. It was impossible to pick which was my favorite. We'd clean up, eat dinner—usually something already prepared by Rosa—then we'd spend a few hours lounging around before going to bed, spending the next several hours *not* sleeping before finally passing out from exhaustion.

I'd stayed the night with Rowan four times, *four times*, and not once did things grow awkward once we woke up. I would wake up before him and try to climb out of the bed to no avail. He'd pull me back to him, either grumbling that it was too early, or in the mood to go again—usually the latter. I'd fight him off, climb into the shower, and by the time I was done, he'd be passed out once more, sometimes emitting the most adorable tiny snore as he slept. I'd go about my morning prep before heading to the kitchen to make coffee. The smell of caffeine usually woke him up and he'd come trudging into the kitchen, sleep-mussed and sexy as all get out. Then we'd get into another argument when I informed him my workday started approximately five minutes before he'd pulled his ass out of bed.

Needless to say, I was beyond elated with the way things were progressing. Day after day, my fears lessened with each sweet kiss or heated look Rowan gave me. After a lifetime of not being good enough, of being tossed aside, I finally felt like I had someone in my life who wanted *me*. And not in the way a man seeks to protect a woman he feels needs it, but in the way a red-blooded man *wants* a woman. It was something I'd never

experienced before. Rowan liked me for me. I was finally good enough.

And if I hadn't already been head over heels in love with the man, that most certainly would have done it.

As it had quickly become our 'thing' after a heated, hard round of kitchen sex the moment the clock hit 5:30, Rowan and I were currently in his living room. He was engulfed in some game on TV—I couldn't tell you what it was—while I was stretched out, feet in his lap, having changed into a pair of comfy lounge pants and a t-shirt from my overnight bag, with my e-reader in hand, feeding my romance habit. I was just getting to a good part—as in a *reeeeeeeeally* good part—when Rowan decided he wanted my attention since his game was on a commercial break.

“What are you doing?”

“Reading,” I answered shortly, not wanting to take my eyes away from the screen and risk losing my place.

“What are you reading?”

I huffed out an annoyed breath, slightly irritated at the interruption. “A book.”

“What book?”

Seriously?

“The Fall Up.”

“Who's it by?”

“Aly Martinez.”

“Never heard of her.”

“Your loss. She's fantastic.”

“Is it any good?”

“Jesus, Rowan!” I shouted, plopping my e-reader on my lap and glaring in his direction. “I didn't interrupt you when you were watching basketball.”

“It's baseball.”

“Whatever,” I harrumphed with a roll of my eyes. “Can you please be quiet so I can read?”

He didn't say another word, so I went back to where I'd left off, eager to see what was happening between Sam and Levee. Just as it was getting really good, the tablet was snatched out of my hands.

“Hey!”

Rowan began reading out loud.

“Levee began a frenzied task of undressing me, not even glancing back up into my eyes until she was satisfied with my jeans, boxers, and socks all

laying on the floor at her feet.

“Jesus, Sam,” she breathed, dropping to her knees and once again gripping my impossibly hard cock.

“Wait,” I sat up and tried to pull her back to her feet. “I go first. I mean, you go... Son of a... fuck!” I lost all conscious thought as she dipped her head and circled her tongue around the tip.

“Your dick’s pierced.” Her hand stroked a relentless rhythm from base to tip.

“I... fuck... Ugh.” My muscles tensed as I glided through her hand. “Is it? I thought they all looked like that.”

“So fucking thick.” She went back down for another lick. Collapsing back on the bed, I gave up on my objections.”

“Holy fuck, woman!” he exclaimed. “What the hell are you reading?”

“Shut up!” I squealed, climbing to my knees in an attempt to get my tablet back. “Give it back, Rowan!”

The asshole just kept reading in a poor impression of a phone-sex operator voice.

“Her fingers continuously circled her clit and I dropped my hand to join it. She was soaked and couldn’t help bringing it to my lips for a taste. “Mmmm.” I purred as she lifted her wet fingers to my mouth offering me a second course that I was more than willing to accept.

“I fuck you. Then we’re taking a shower. Then I’m eating you until I get hard again.” I glided my cock through her folds. Her head pressed back into the pillow as she arched off the bed. Bending down, I grazed my teeth roughly over her nipple. “Then we’ll start the cycle over again.”

He was so engrossed in mocking me that he’d left himself open to retaliation. Lucky for me, he’d decided on basketball shorts instead of jeans. Going for the tiny hairs on his legs, I grabbed hold of as many as I could and yanked.

“Oww! Mother fuck! Son of a bitch!”

I snatched my tablet out of the air just as it fell from his hands and jumped from the couch, hoping to escape before he fully recovered. No such luck.

I let out an *oof* as his arm caught my waist and jerked me back. I sailed through the air before landing with my back to the cushions of the couch, Rowan’s large body hovering over me, pressing into me.

“You’ll read that but you won’t read my book?” His voice held humor, letting me know he wasn’t really upset.

“Well.” I grinned, loving the idea of pushing his buttons. “If you’d write something *interesting*, maybe I’d read it.”

Rowan’s fingers dug into my sides. I fought against him as hard as I could, in peals of laughter so loud I was sure the neighbors could hear us.

“So, that’s the kind of shit you like?” he asked once he was finished tickling.

I was breathing heavy as I looked into his icy blue eyes. Shrugging nonchalantly, I replied, “Maybe you should consider piercing your...” I trailed off, shooting a knowing look at his crotch. “It could spice things up. You know, make it less *vanilla*.”

“Oh, I got your vanilla,” he growled, taking the bait perfectly.

I latched my limbs around his body as he pushed up, hefting me off the couch. “Where are we going?”

“Bedroom. I’m about to show you shit you’ve never even *imagined*. Then we’ll see who’s talking about vanilla.”

I let out a sharp yelp when his palm came down hard on my ass. The moment the sting subsided, all I could think was, *Yay, me!*

Twenty-eight

Rowan

Me: Come over

Navie: Can't. I have plans.

Me: Then come over after. You can stay the night. We have a weekend full of non-work hours.

Navie: Sorry. I have company this weekend. I can't come over. See you Monday.

Me: What company? You didn't tell me you were having company.

My last text was an hour and a half old, and without a response. I started off curious, but after the first fifteen minutes, that curiosity turned into concern. At the forty-five-minute mark, that concern morphed into agitation. At an hour fifteen, I was just straight up pissed. My mind was all over the place, wondering who the hell she was with and why she hadn't told me. I felt like I was reliving the past with Bree all over again, only this time, the tension in my chest was almost unbearable.

It was over a twenty-minute cab ride to Navie's place in Murray Hill and by the time I got there, I was ready to kick whoever's ass was encroaching on my territory. I took the stairs up to her apartment like a raging bull preparing to gore the motherfucker standing in front of me.

I made it to her landing and pounded on her front door, just itching for a fight. And that was exactly what I got. The moment the front door swung open and I was hit with an eyeful of naked chest—naked *male* chest—my vision went red and I lunged.

“Motherfucker!” I shouted as I barreled into the guy standing in front of me, slamming my shoulder into his stomach with a satisfying grunt. “I’m

gonna kill you!” We went down in a heap onto Navie’s entryway floor. I had to hand it to the dude; I might have caught him off guard, but he rallied quickly, twisting around and landing a right hook that had me seeing stars with a shocked, “What the hell?”

While we wrestled around on the floor, each of us landing blows, I vaguely registered the sound of feminine screams. I was pretty sure my lip was split, and my eye was hurting like a son of a bitch, but I wasn’t giving up. The guy pinned me in a headlock as he rose to his feet, and I took the opportunity to land a few well-placed punches to his kidney and ribs. And the bastard *still* didn’t let go.

“You fuck my girl, I fuck you up!” I voiced in a painful wheeze as he squeezed my neck tighter. At that point, it had become clear I was losing, but I’d be damned if I tapped out before that asshole did.

I was just two seconds away from taking a cheap shot to his nuts when Navie’s voice cut through the rush of blood raging through my ears.

“Carson, Rowan, *STOP!*”

Carson? Oh, shit!

“Carson?” I coughed, unable to breathe with the guy’s arm threatening to crush my windpipe. I could only speculate, but I was pretty sure my face was turning purple.

“Let him go!” another woman yelled, and the arm around my throat instantly loosened. Gulping down air like a man, well, choking, I tilted my head the best I could while still in a headlock to find Navie and a very pregnant woman standing in the middle of the living room, looking like they were about to murder someone.

“Carson Langford,” the pregnant woman scolded. “I said let him go. Right. Now.”

“This shithead started it,” the guy—apparently named Carson—said as he released me with a less than friendly shove. I stood straight and turned to see that his face hadn’t fared much better than mine. It shouldn’t have sent a spike of male pride through me, considering I’d just jumped Navie’s fucking *brother*, but what could I do?

“Rowan!” Navie screeched, stomping up to me, the look on her face so furious I had to keep myself from cowering. “What the fuck were you *thinking*? I cannot *believe* you!”

“Who the hell is this dickhead?” Carson bit from across the living room where the pregnant lady—his wife Cassidy, I assumed—was examining the

cut on his lip.

“Jesus, I’m sorry, man,” I started, running a hand through my hair as my gaze darted back and forth between him and Navie. “You opened the door without a shirt, and I just... I didn’t realize who you were. I just thought... hell, I don’t know what I thought.”

“This guy? Seriously?” Carson asked Navie incredulously, and she turned her glare from me to him.

“For the love of God, will you just please put a damn shirt on!” Looking back at me, she sucked in a deep breath, exhaling slowly as though she were trying to get herself centered. “Rowan—”

“*Rowan!*” Carson cut in. “Your douchebag boss, Rowan—?”

“Carson!” both Navie and Cassidy yelled at the same time. The sting from knowing how she’d once described me to the people she loved settled in the pit of my stomach like rancid meat as Carson continued his tirade.

“And what the hell’d he mean by *my girl*? Wait—are you bangin’ your boss?”

“Carson Langford!” Cassidy scolded loudly. Navie began twisting her hands in front of her in discomfort, unable to meet anyone’s eyes. The sudden shift in her demeanor didn’t sit well with me. I wanted these people to know what Navie meant to me, but based on Carson’s reaction, Navie had been quite upfront about her dislike of me at the start of our working relationship.

Well, shit. It looked like I was going to have my work cut out for me. But I’d already managed to sway Navie. It was going to take a little more effort, but I was sure I could get Carson and Cassidy to come around to my side eventually, too.

“Holy fuck!” Carson boomed.

Or maybe not.

“What are you *thinking*, little bit? And you...” He swung a murderous look in my direction. “I’m gonna kick your ass, little boy.”

“Oh, for the love of—” Navie paused, pinching the bridge of her nose in obvious agitation. “No one is kicking anyone’s ass. And you can’t call him *little boy*, Carson. For Christ’s sake, he’s taller than you. And older!”

That gave Carson pause before he asked, “How old?”

“Thirty-three,” I answered.

“Thirty-*three*?” he shouted then pushed against his wife’s hold, speaking in a low, menacing voice. “I’m gonna kill you.”

My body stiffened, preparing for another throw-down as Navie blocked

Carson's path to me. But it was Cassidy who brought the impending fight to a halt. "Everybody *stop!* So help me God, Carson, if you do not calm the hell down right now, I swear, this morning will be the last time you ever see me naked again!"

"Oh, sweet, merciful, Lord," Navie prayed, looking up at the ceiling in an attempt to find divine intervention.

I couldn't help but chuckle. "Well, that would explain his lack of a shirt."

Navie let out an adorable growl. "You don't talk! Cassidy, will you get some ice for these two idiots' faces? Rowan and I need to have a little chat."

"You got it, sweetie," she replied as Navie grabbed my hand and started pulling me toward what I could only assume was her bedroom. Under different circumstances, I would have gotten hard from the walk to her room alone, but seeing as I was undoubtedly about to get my ass handed to me, I wasn't feeling the excitement.

When she turned to face me after slamming the door, I was overwhelmed by my sudden and intense desire to touch her. Even with her face scrunched in anger and her hands planted on her hips in a *don't fuck with me* pose, she was the most gorgeous thing I'd ever seen. Maybe I needed to have my head examined, because at that very moment, with her standing there pissed to high hell and my face beginning to throb, I couldn't remember ever wanting her more.

Yep.

I was crazy.



Navie

I was furious.

I was *beyond* furious.

Carson was already a pain in my ass when it came to who I dated. No one was ever good enough in his opinion. And having the guy I was currently seeing—the guy I was head over heels in love with, even though I wouldn't admit it to him—sock my overprotective brother in the face upon meeting

him most certainly didn't scream *stellar first impression*.

"You want to tell me what that was all about?"

"You didn't return my text," he answered simply, like that was supposed to explain everything.

"What text?"

"The one I sent right after you told me you had company."

Walking past him, I snatched my phone off my nightstand and scrolled through our message exchange. Sure enough, there it was.

"I was in the shower, Rowan. I didn't see this. If I had, I would have responded." I felt my level of frustration rising at the knowledge that he clearly didn't trust me. "So, what? You convinced yourself I was shacked up with some other guy and came over here to prove a point? Was that it?"

"No. Yes. Shit! I don't know. I just..." He raked both his hands through his shiny black hair and plopped down on the side of my bed, elbows to his knees as he hunched over and looked up at me. "I was going out of my mind," he admitted, embarrassment shining in his clear, icy gaze. "You didn't respond and I lost it. I jumped to conclusions and didn't think." I couldn't help myself. He just looked so... lost. While I hated that he hadn't trusted me, I hated the fact he was so torn up over the 'what if's' of our situation even more. "I may have over reacted," he finished.

"You think?" I laughed, coming to stand close to him. When I moved within reach, his hands went to my hips, pulling me between his knees so he could rest his forehead against my stomach. "I'm not her," I spoke softly as I ran my fingers through his hair.

He exhaled heavily, his breath leaking through the cotton of my shirt and caressing my skin. "I know."

"I don't think you do," I responded. Holding tighter to his hair, I used it to tilt his head back so I could see his handsome face. "I'm not her," I repeated emphatically. "I'm not a cheater. I'm not a manipulator. I would never do that to someone I care about. You have to trust me, Rowan. If you can't do that then we might as well call this off right now."

"No." His tone held so much vehemence as he spoke that one word through gritted teeth.

"Then no more jealous, Neanderthal bullshit. You got me?" I grinned down at him and his lips tilted up in response.

"I got you." As soon as the tension bled away, Rowan's hands slid from my hips around my back, pulling me even tighter against him. My pulse

picked up speed and my body heated. It was the same reaction every time he touched me. I couldn't get enough of it. "So," his grin turned wicked, "you care about me, huh?"

I did. I really, really did. But I refused to admit anything beyond that.

"Maybe," I teased, holding my thumb and index finger less than an inch apart as I squinted. "About *this* much." I squeaked and tried to squirm away when he gave my hip a hard pinch in retaliation. "Keep that up and I'm telling Carson." I laughed. That got him to stop.

"So, what now?"

"Well, we're going back out there and you're going to kiss ass like you've never kissed ass before."

One corner of his mouth tilted up in a grin. "You really think that'll work?"

"Oh, hell no," I answered with brutal honesty. "Carson's going to hate you until the end of time now. But at least sucking up will keep him from trying to kill you in your sleep."

"Fucking brilliant," he grumbled toward the ceiling, causing me to giggle.

"Pucker up, baby."

Twenty-nine

Navie

For the first time in my life, things were perfect. I was enjoying my job, I had amazing friends, and I had been seeing a guy for over a month who I was one hundred percent completely in love with. And that relationship was going surprisingly well.

But when you live a life where it's guaranteed that the other shoe is going to drop sooner or later, it's hard to sit back and relax. It's impossible to bask in the joy of all the good because you're constantly worrying, waiting for the day to come when it all blows up in your face.

I wanted to believe that I'd reached a turning point in my life where the good outweighed the bad. I wanted to believe that things with Rowan had nowhere to go but up. I wanted to trust that I was finally getting the happy I deserved. I just couldn't stop looking over my shoulder, nervously waiting for the inevitable to happen.

I lowered my guard. I'd handed my heart over willingly so when that boom was lowered, it hurt so much worse than I had anticipated. I should have known better. I never should have gotten my hopes up. Because that just made the crash back down to rock bottom all the more painful.



“Ouch, Harlow! You’re about to rip my damn hair out!” I whined from my place in front of the bathroom mirror.

“If you’d sit still, it wouldn’t hurt so much!”

“You’re pulling too hard!”

“Just take a deep breath. I almost got it.”

“Ow!”

Pepper’s voice spoke up from behind us and we both turned to see her

leaning against the bathroom door. “You know, if I were a guy and had no clue what was happening back here, I’d probably be sporting a chubby right about now.”

I rolled my eyes just before slamming them shut in pain as Harlow ripped the comb through my hair once more. “She’s trying to scalp me!”

“Stop being such a baby,” Harlow complained. “It’s just a tangle. Ha! Got it!” she crowed triumphantly as the comb finally slid through my strands of hair unimpeded.

“I hate you,” I grumbled, reaching up to touch the tender section of my scalp.

“You love me. Now, shut up and let’s get you beautified.”

Crossing my arms over my chest, I glowered at my reflection in the mirror. “I don’t understand why we have to go through all of this anyway.”

“Uh, maybe because one of the hottest guys who’s ever graced our planet told you he wanted to take you out on a date?” Pepper asked sarcastically.

“We’re already sleeping together,” I insisted. “And I’ve stayed the night with him, so he knows what I look like first thing in the morning.”

“Doesn’t get much worse than that,” Harlow said under her breath, then, “Ouch! Damn it!” when I reached back to pinch the hell out of her arm.

“What’s up with you?” Pepper asked as she studied me with a narrow-eyed stare. “It’s not like this is the first time we’ve made you over, and you’ve never been this bitchy about it. You’re going on a date tonight with one of New York’s most eligible bachelors. You should be excited! Women would literally kick your ass to be in your shoes.”

I inhaled deeply through my nose before blowing out a deep breath. “I’m nervous,” I begrudgingly admitted. “I feel like I’m out of my element here. This whole thing has gotten so much bigger than I planned for, you know? I mean, first we hated each other. We went from enemies to friends, then to friends with benefits to dating so damn fast my head’s spinning. I feel like I’m not prepared.”

“Ah.” Harlow grinned, leaning down to pull me into a hug. “Young love, it’s a beautiful thing.”

I shoved her face away. “Shut it, whore.”

“Just go with the flow, Navie,” Pepper advised. “Don’t overthink things. Just take each moment as it comes.”

Pulling in another fortifying breath, I focused on my reflection in the mirror and willed myself to believe everything my girlfriends were saying.

I could totally do this.



Rowan

I couldn't do this.

What the hell was I thinking, trying to set up a romantic date for Navie? I wouldn't have recognized romance if it walked up to me and kicked me in the nuts. The longer I thought about everything I'd set up for our evening, the more I felt like a douche. I wasn't really a romance type of guy. Navie wasn't the typical hearts and flowers kind of woman. And the evening I'd arranged for us was a total cliché, right out of a poorly scripted chick-flick.

"You're taking me on a horse drawn carriage ride?"

I could see the humor swimming in her smiling eyes as I looked down at her. Then it hit me.

Son of a bitch! Why the hell did I think a fucking horse and buggy would impress her? She lived on a ranch in Texas, for Christ's sake. I'm sure she rode horses all the damn time.

"Uh..." I stumbled, feeling like an asshole.

"It's sweet!" She giggled, but I got the distinct impression she was just humoring me as we climbed into the carriage. "This is fun. I've never done this before."

"I feel like an idiot," I groaned, dropping my head against the back of the red-velvet cushioned seat.

"What? Why?"

"Because this is stupid." I waved my arm around, indicating the carriage ride. "It's like I stole every dumbass date from every cheesy movie ever created."

Navie's head fell back in laughter as her hand rested against my thigh, the melodic sound combined with the heat of her touch warming me from the inside out. I was quickly becoming addicted to her laughter. Playfulness strung her words together as she asked, "Well, what else did you plan for tonight?"

I glared at her from the corner of my eyes. “You can’t laugh.”

She pretended to lock her lips together and throw away the key. “No laughing, I promise.”

I hesitated before finally admitting, “A picnic in Central Park then a trip to the top of the Empire State Building. That’s it!” I harrumphed when she burst into a fit of laughter. “The date’s officially canceled. Get the hell out of my carriage.”

“No, no, no.” She giggled hysterically. “I’m not... I’m not making fun of you.”

“Could have fooled me,” I muttered, arms crossed over my chest as I glared out at the pedestrians we passed.

“Aw, I’m sorry,” she cooed, reaching up to place her soft palm against my cheek so she could turn my face to hers. “I’m sorry, Rowan. I’m really not making fun of you, I swear. I can see how much effort went into putting this together, and I can’t tell you how much I appreciate that. It’s just...”

“What?”

“This doesn’t really feel like... *us*, does it?” It was as if she’d just read my mind. I felt awkward and out of place. “Can I tell you something?” she asked with a conspiratorial gleam in her eye. “I was really nervous before you picked me up.”

“What? Why?”

She shrugged and gave me a self-deprecating grin. It was then that I realized that no matter what we were doing or where we were, as long as I was with Navie, it was impossible for me not to enjoy myself.

“Things feel... different with us. I always have so much fun when we’re together and you’re not being a giant ass-face—”

“Wow,” I deadpanned. “You really know how to make a man feel good about himself.”

“You love it.” She winked, and Lord help me, but I was pretty sure I did. “Anyway,” she continued, “I guess what I mean is that this date kind of feels like the next level, you know? At least to me. I got worried that I’d somehow screw this up.”

I was in awe of her honesty. Just when I thought I knew every aspect there was to this girl, she hit me with something else that had me even more spellbound. I had never experienced such a strong connection with another person before, where we seemed to connect on levels I hadn’t even known existed.

“I feel the same way,” I told her in a low voice, reaching for her and pulling her flush against my side. After her confession, there was no way I was getting through the rest of our date without touching her in some way. Feeling her became necessary.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Griffin gave me shit when I told him what I’d planned for tonight. Believe me, I’m never going to hear the end of this. I guess I was worried about screwing it up, too, so I might have overcompensated.”

“Just a little bit,” she teased. Unable to help myself, I leaned in for a taste of plump, berry-colored lips. Once I ended the kiss, she let out a dreamy sigh. “How about this? We’ll do everything you planned for this date, but we do it as ourselves. That means heckling and jokes, you occasionally saying something asshole-ish, and me relentlessly teasing you for your sudden and unexpected romantic streak.”

“Deal,” I grinned then added, “and asshole-ish isn’t a real word. Maybe if you read something other than your porn books, you could broaden your vocabulary.”

“There he is!” She laughed, giving me another kiss.

The evening turned out to be more perfect than I could have imagined. We were us, no false pretenses, no need to put on a show and be someone other than who we were. I couldn’t remember ever having been on a better date. Navie was the perfect companion... even when she kind of lost her shit upon discovering that the guys from the cable show *Impractical Jokers* were filming in the park, insisting we do anything possible to get on TV.

By the end of the night, there wasn’t a doubt in my mind that I could seriously fall for her. And the knowledge of that didn’t scare me the way it normally would have. I found that I was actually excited about the prospect of a future with Navie.

It was unexpected.

She was unexpected.

My life was brighter just by having her in it.

Thirty

Navie

“Oh, fuck,” Rowan groaned, his head thrown back against the pillow. “Yeah, just like that. Ride my cock, baby.”

Lifting up on my knees, I slammed back down onto him harder, each thrust pushing the air from my lungs as I drew closer and closer to that blissful edge. I clenched around him as I moved, loving each grunt that rumbled from his chest, knowing it was all because of me.

“Rowan,” I gasped, my pace stuttering as I became lost in the sensation of him filling me over and over. Already in tune with my body, Rowan took over for me, one hand on my hip, guiding me back and forth, up and down, his long fingers spread wide, thumb pressing on my clit in a way that sent blood rushing through my ears. His other hand slid up my stomach so he could toy with my nipple, squeezing with the perfect amount of pressure. I was catapulted head first into sheer ecstasy.

As soon as Rowan felt me come apart, his body shot up into sitting position. He moved his hand from my breast and tangled it in my loose hair, yanking my head back so he could take my mouth in a forceful kiss as he pumped his hips off the bed, driving into me and dragging out my orgasm until there was nothing left.

“*Shit*. Oh, Christ. I’m coming, baby. So fucking hard.” With his lips still mashed against mine, he grunted and groaned his release. His cock twitched inside me as he came for what seemed like an eternity. When he finished, we collapsed onto his bed in a sweaty, panting heap of entwined limbs.

“That was...” I heaved, still trying to catch my breath.

“Holy shit,” he exclaimed and I looked over to see his forearm thrown over his eyes. “I think I blacked out.”

I giggled as I rolled over, pulling the sheet from under me and wrapping it across my naked body so I could climb out of the bed, only to have Rowan’s muscled arm wrap around my waist and jerk me back.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Pinning my back to the bed, he leaned over me, his side pressed into mine.

“I need coffee,” I replied. “You woke me up early for some nookie, so I need my fix.”

“Mmm,” he moaned, lowering himself for a kiss. “Don’t act like you didn’t love it.” He grinned against my mouth.

I grinned back. “Oh, I totally did. But I still need my java. I was thinking of hitting up The Bean. It’s early enough to beat the crowd. You want something?”

He pulled back and stared down at me, unspeaking. The grin was gone from his lips, but there was something in his eyes, something I had never seen before when he looked at me that made my heart beat just a bit faster.

When he spoke, it was low, soft, reverent. “You’re amazing. You know that, right?”

Oh, God. *OhGodohGodohGod*. I’d never had a man look at me the way he did just then. His eyes held a combination of appreciation and awe. It was the most stunning thing I’d ever seen. It was... exactly the way Carson looked at Cassidy. My heart lodged in my throat as tears burned the backs of my eyes. My gut reaction was to say something flippant, to try and make a joke. I bit my lip to keep that reaction at bay. I didn’t know what was happening between us in that moment, but it felt important and I didn’t want to do anything to ruin it.

“Thank you,” I whispered, reaching up to trace his bottom lip with my thumb.

He placed a kiss to the pad of my finger before saying, “I’m serious. You’re the most amazing person I’ve ever met. You just...”

I lifted up and kissed him when he trailed off, clearly at a loss for words. “I know,” I told him. “I feel the same way about you, Rowan.”

Something flashed across his face, something primal, something so fierce the air in my lungs escaped with an audible *whoosh*. As his face lowered toward mine, I had the distinct feeling that something epic was about to happen. It felt like we’d just crossed a crucial line in our relationship and there was no turning back.

I was giddy with anticipation as his lips pressed against mine, when all of a sudden, the alarm clock on his nightstand let out a loud, piercing blare, announcing the start of the day and breaking through our special moment. I couldn’t do anything but laugh as Rowan let out a dejected sigh and buried

his face in the crook of my neck.

“Time to start our day,” he grunted unhappily.

“You shower, I’ll get coffee.” I grinned, unwilling to let one tiny interruption ruin the mood I was in.

He pulled away and raised one brow. “And a muffin?”

“And a muffin.” I giggled.

Begrudgingly, we climbed from the warmth of his bed and fell into our morning routine. The only difference was I couldn’t remember ever being happier.

There was no possible way for me to know that in just a short amount of time, it would all come crumbling down around me.



It was a gorgeous day outside so instead of taking a cab, I decided to walk to The Bean and back. I had just stepped off the curb and was crossing the street to Rowan’s apartment building when I saw a familiar figure pacing back and forth on the sidewalk.

“Rowan, what are you doing—” I laughed, that was, until he turned to face me and I realized it wasn’t Rowan at all. “Richard,” I breathed.

He gave me an unsure smile and ran a hand through his hair. “Hi. Navie, right?”

“Yeah,” I answered, feeling as hesitant as he appeared. The insecurity on his face didn’t seem to fit at all with the designer, three-piece suit he was wearing. It was a power suit in every way, a stark contrast to his visible nerves. “What are you doing out here?”

“Oh, you know.” He chuckled awkwardly. “Just trying to get the nerve up to go talk to my brother.”

I certainly hadn’t been expecting that. “Have you been out here long?”

“No. Just a few minutes. I’ve been trying to figure out what I wanted to say and I keep coming up short. Jesus, I’m a fucking prosecutor, for Christ’s sake.” His demeanor shifted, his nerves giving way to agitation. “You’d think if I could stand in front of a packed courthouse and speak eloquently, I could figure out what to say to my own goddamned brother.” He laughed humorlessly as he continued to pace. “It’s pathetic.”

I lifted one shoulder in a tiny shrug. “I’m not really sure what you want

me to say.”

“Did he tell you?” He changed subjects so quickly, my head started to spin. “I mean, did he tell you what happened with... why he cut me out of his life?”

I refused to answer that question, feeling as though an admission would be a betrayal to Rowan. “Richard, it’s not my place—”

“Can you just... *fuck*, I don’t know. Can you maybe convince him to talk to me? I know it’s a shitty thing to ask of you, but I’m at a loss here, Navie.” His brows dipped into a V, his expression morphing into one of pain. “Please. I don’t know what else to do. I just want to talk to him.”

He looked so heartbroken, so beaten down, that I felt for the guy. I really did. Despite what he’d put his own brother through, I felt genuinely sorry for him. “Look,” I started, “I can’t make you any promises...”

Suddenly, a smile spread across his lips. “That’s okay! I know he’s hard-headed—hell, I know better than anyone. All I’m asking is for you to try and get him to talk to me.”

“I’ll try. But... don’t get your hopes up, okay? Just... wait down here. I’ll go see what I can do.”

Richard’s entire body slumped in relief. “Thank you, Navie. God, thank you so much.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Just give me a few minutes.”

“Yeah. Okay. I can do that.”

My stomach twisted into knots as I took the elevator up to Rowan’s floor. I had no idea what I was supposed to say to him or how he’d react to finding out his brother was downstairs, desperate to talk to him.

Shooting up a quick prayer, I balanced the tray of drinks in one hand, holding the bag of muffins between my teeth, and pushed the front door open. “Rowan,” I called as I took the bag in my free hand and moved into the apartment. “You aren’t going to believe this but—” I let out a started gasp at what I saw, barely registering the items in my hand crashing to the floor as devastation rocked my entire body.

Standing in the living room was Rowan, wearing nothing but a pair of black basketball shorts resting loose on his hips. But the thing that crushed me completely was the tall, insanely beautiful woman standing in front of him, her body pressed against the entire length of his, their lips locked together in a kiss. Her hands cupped his cheeks, his long fingers holding on to her delicate wrists.

“Oh, God,” I choked on the lump that had formed in my throat. The vision of the two of them standing locked in an embrace blurred from the tears forming in my eyes.

“Navie,” Rowan gasped, quickly untangling himself from the brunette standing before him. In a blink, he was moving. “Oh, shit, Navie. It’s not—”

“No!” I shouted, taking a huge step back. “Don’t come near me. Don’t *touch* me.”

“Rowan,” the woman, who looked like she’d just stepped off a runway, spoke from behind him. “Honey, who’s this?”

At the sound of her calling him ‘honey’, I wanted the floor to open up and swallow me whole.

“Jesus *fucking* Christ,” he spit out, his hands raking over his face before he turned to look over his shoulder. “Not now, Bree. Just—”

I took another step back. “Bree?” I wheezed as my lungs deflated. “Oh, God. This is *Bree*?”

I watched as his icy blue eyes widened as what he just said registered. “No! No, no, no, no. Baby, don’t think that...”

And with that, I shattered completely. “You were just fucking kissing *Bree*!” I shouted so loud my throat hurt.

“Navie, just listen to me!”

“*Fuck you!*” I yelled. My world turned upside-down. I had given my heart to this man completely and he’d just ruined me. A devastation like no other wound its way through my chest, squeezing my heart and choking out every bit of free space. Those familiar memories from my childhood filled my head so completely, they were all I could think about.

No one would ever want me. I’d never have a family because I wasn’t worthy of anyone’s love. One person after another cast me out without a care in the world because I was just a sad, lonely little girl. I was so pathetic, my own mother didn’t even want to keep me.

I would never, *ever* be good enough.

Rowan’s arms pulling me against his body jerked me back into the present. “Navie, please.”

“Let go of me,” I spoke in a low, heartbroken voice.

“No,” he insisted stubbornly.

“Rowan.” The sound of Bree’s voice pulled me from my anguished haze. Yanking myself from his hold, I stumbled backwards, tripping over my own feet and nearly falling to the ground.

He came forward quickly, trying to steady me with his hands, but I slapped them away before he could touch me again. “I hate you,” I said through gritted teeth, speaking the three words I’d never said to anyone before.

The way his face crumbled in agony would have killed me, had I not already been bleeding out.

“Rowan!” Bree said again, her grating voice demanding attention.

“Fucking *hell!*” Rowan shouted. “Just get the fuck out, Bree! Get out!”

Her spine went stiff and her chin lifted into the air. “We have things to discuss.” She responded so calmly that I couldn’t help it. Something inside of me had snapped and I began laughing, the sound manic to my own ears.

“Oh, please, don’t let me keep you, then. I was just leaving.”

Spinning on my heels, I rushed for the front door as tears spilled down my cheeks.

“You’re not fucking leaving!” Rowan snapped. I could hear his steps coming up behind me, but then there was a slip and a loud crash, followed by a booming, “*God damn it!*”

Just as I cleared the threshold, I looked over my shoulder to see Rowan trying to climb off the floor, having slipped and fallen in the spilled coffee I’d dropped just minutes earlier. It granted me the short reprieve I needed to run to the elevator before he could catch up.

I’d just cleared the landing of the building when a voice called out from behind me. “Navie?” I spun around to see Richard exactly where I’d left him what felt like a lifetime ago. “Shit. Are you okay? What happened?”

That hysterical laughter started again of its own accord. “What is *with* you two, huh?”

Confusion etched into his features. “What are you talking about?”

I didn’t stop to answer him. I was on a roll. “I mean, seriously! Does she have a golden vagina or something? I’ve never heard of two grown men destroying their family over one woman the way the two of you have! The fact that y’all have such a disregard for your own blood disgusts me. Do you have any idea what some people would give to have a family? A brother? And you just ripped it apart. Over a fucking woman!”

“Are you talking about Bree?”

I felt an overwhelming sense of anger at the sound of her name. “Yes! She’s up there right now. Hurry along before she sinks her claws into your brother again. Wouldn’t want to be the loser this time around, would you?” I

asked callously, not caring in the slightest that I sounded like a raging bitch.

He looked from me, to the building, and back again, the indecision written all over his face. But I was done. Without so much as a backwards glance, I walked away. Trying my best to hold on to what very little pride I had left.

I needed to get home. I needed to call Lauren and request a new job and an indefinite amount of time off. I prayed she understood because what I needed the most at that very moment was over a thousand miles away in Texas.

I needed my family.

Thirty-one

Rowan

Her face.

God. All I could see was her ravaged expression as tears ran down her cheeks. I'd never seen such heartbreak in another person's eyes before. I couldn't understand the severity of her reaction. If she would have just let me *explain*, if she would have just listened to me, I could have taken that look away. Why wouldn't she just hear me out?

My knuckles stung from where I'd just put them through the sheetrock in the wall next to the elevator doors. She'd gotten away. I needed to go after her. But first, I needed to get that goddamned succubus out of my apartment and my life.

"Fuck!"

Storming back into my apartment, I found Bree standing in the entryway, arms crossed over her chest, hip cocked, a put-out expression on her painted-on face. Pointing at her as I rushed to my bedroom to find a t-shirt, I hissed through gritted teeth, "Get the fuck out."

"Rowan, we need to talk," she insisted, following after me.

That was exactly what she had said when she showed up at my front door. And because I was the world's biggest goddamned idiot, I'd let her in, thinking I could finally get the closure I ignorantly believed I'd needed.

"There's nothing to talk about! You're the fucking devil, you know that?"

I lost sight of her when I pulled my shirt over my head. It was just long enough for her to move in closer. "Baby, please. I know you felt the same thing I did when you kissed me."

She reached for me, placing her hands on my chest, and I cringed away from her touch. "I didn't kiss you!" I shouted. "You kissed me and I can assure you, I didn't feel a goddamned thing. You need to leave now, before I do something I regret. Do not make me repeat myself." Shoving past her, I started for the front door, coming to a screeching halt when I caught sight of

yet another nightmare. “You’ve got to be *kidding me!*” I shouted skyward, desperate to know what I’d done to God to piss him off so badly. “I don’t have time for this shit.”

Richard’s hands were held up, palms out. “Row, just give me two minutes. That’s all I’m asking.”

“I don’t have two minutes! I need to get to Navie. *Christ!*”

“Richard?” I spun around to find Bree standing behind me, staring at my brother with a soft, dreamy expression on her face. “What are you doing here?”

Richard had always been the calmer, soft-spoken twin. When we were growing up, I was the one who acted before thinking. Richard was the one who always tried to do the right thing. And whenever I came up with some harebrained idea that would have either landed me in jail or the hospital, he was the one who had my back, either saving me beforehand or rescuing me after the fact. That was probably one of the reasons his betrayal crushed me as badly as it did. So seeing him standing there, looking like he was just seconds away from going Hulk in the middle of my apartment was unexpected, to say the least. And what he had to say was even more shocking.

“I’m here to keep my brother from making the same mistake I did and ruining his fucking life.”

Bree looked like someone had just slapped her.

“Richard,” she whispered, tears forming in her eyes. In the past, just the sight of those tears would have slayed me, but as I stood watching her just then I realized something. I didn’t care. Bree hurting, clearly in pain, had no effect on me whatsoever. It was as though I was standing in front of a stranger, disengaged as I watched the scene unfold. It was nothing like the gut-wrenching pain I felt when I’d seen Navie so heartbroken.

My gaze bounced back and forth between the two of them in confusion. “What the hell’s going on here?”

Richard’s glare was full of hate as he focused on the woman behind me. “Do you want to tell him, lovely wife, or should I?” he asked caustically.

“Tell me what?”

“Rich,” she choked on a sob, her voice desperate and pleading.

“Bree and I dated briefly while I was in law school. It wasn’t serious—hell, I never even brought her home to meet you guys. I was young and ambitious, and didn’t want to be tied down. It was just sex, at least for me.”

“Jesus Christ,” I grumbled, squeezing my eyes closed and pinching the bridge of my nose. I had the distinct impression that shit was about to get a thousand times more complicated than it already was.

“I was focused on finishing law school and starting my career. I wasn’t even thinking about a wife and kids. I broke it off with her when I realized she wanted more but for the next couple of years, I was stupid enough to hook up with her occasionally.”

“Can someone please explain what the fuck that has to do with me?” I cursed, looking from Richard to Bree, who’d suddenly gone an unhealthy shade of white.

“Well, brother, as it turns out, Bree here deserves a gold medal in being a manipulative bitch. I had no fucking clue you two were together when we were hooking up. She never once told me she was seeing my *twin brother*,” he spit at her, his voice laced with disgust. “If I had known that, I wouldn’t have touched her.”

“You loved me!” Bree shouted through her tears. “I know you did!”

Richard pushed on like he hadn’t even heard her. “You can imagine my fucking shock when she came to me one day saying she was pregnant and the baby was mine.” All of a sudden, it was as if all the air had been sucked out of the room. There wasn’t enough oxygen and I couldn’t take a proper breath as he continued his story. “It wasn’t what I wanted, but I couldn’t just ignore the fact that I was having a kid. That wasn’t me, I always—”

“Did the right thing,” I finished for him, unconsciously knowing exactly what he was planning on saying. “Fuck, Richard. You always had to be such a goddamned boy scout.”

His smile was small and pained as those identical eyes matched my own. “If I was going to be a father, I was going to do right by her and my baby.”

“So, you married her.”

“So, I married her,” he repeated. “It wasn’t an ideal situation, and I wasn’t happy, but I tried my best to make it work. I tried to be a good husband. For five years of my life, I did my best. I suffered the loss of my brother, not understanding why the one person I was closest to my entire life suddenly hated me so goddamned much he refused to even speak to me. Five miserable years, trapped in a hell where every word out of your mouth was a fucking *lie*! There was never any baby.”

Everything was moving too fast, my world was spinning out of control. I couldn’t keep up. In the span of a few short minutes, everything I’d believed

to be the truth for the past five years was deteriorating around me. “What?”

“Yeah.” He laughed humorlessly. “I heard her on the phone one night with one of her bitch girlfriends. When I confronted her, I finally got the whole twisted, fucked up truth from her. She knew I had a brother. She knew I was always too careful to get her pregnant. She saw an opportunity to trap me and managed to destroy both of us in the process. If she got pregnant by my *twin*, no one would ever question whether or not the baby was mine.” He looked back at Bree, his eyes cold and callous. “Isn’t that right, Bree? At least that’s what I overheard you admitting to on the phone.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I spoke quietly before rage finally took over, then I boomed, “Is this some kind of sick fucking *joke*?”

“Believe me,” Richard continued, “I wish it was.”

“I only did it because I love you!” Bree shouted, her whole body shaking and unnaturally pale.

There was no sting, no ache in my chest at her declaration of love for my brother. And it was at that very moment that realization came crashing down on me. I never really loved this woman. I’d been young and stupid. I was in love with the *idea* of being in love. It was never about her. What I felt for Navie completely eclipsed the memory of what I once *thought* I felt for Bree. I was completely, madly in love with her. What I had with her was something I had never experienced before. And I currently had two people standing in my apartment blocking my path to the woman I needed to get to more than I needed my next breath.

I was officially done.

Turning back to face the woman I once thought was everything to me, I felt nothing but hatred. “You’re a twisted fucking bitch,” I spit. “I’ve never hit a woman in my life, but if you don’t get the fuck out of my apartment in two seconds, I’ll be tempted to reconsider my stance on that.” Fear blanketed her face as she took a step away from me. “And you better *pray* I never see your face again, or so help me God, I’ll make you wish you’d never been born.”

Richard didn’t so much as spare her a glance as she stormed by him and out the door, his eyes trained firmly on me the entire time. I didn’t know what to say. My brain was muddled and weighed down by everything I’d just heard. I couldn’t gain a firm grasp on anything. “There’s a lot we need to discuss, Row.”

“Yeah.” I nodded. “I know, I just... I don’t have a clue where to start.”

“Well, first, I’m thinking you need to go find your girl and work shit out, yeah? Everything we have to say to each other will keep until then.”

Guilt and regret seeped into my bones as I stared into my brother’s face. Awareness of just how much I missed him enveloped me, leaving me chilled to the very core. I’d lost five years with the person I’d always been the closest to, all because I had been too prideful and stubborn.

As if sensing where my head was, Richard stepped forward and put a hand on my shoulder. “You’re my brother, Row. Nothing ever has or ever will change that. Go make it right with Navie. Then we’ll work on our shit. *Go.*”

Pulling him in to me, I held on tightly, slapping his back in a firm hug before stepping back and rushing out the door. He was right; what we had to discuss would keep. I needed to deal with getting Navie back *now*. Then I could work on repairing my relationship with my brother.

Thirty-Two

Rowan

I hadn't slept for shit. The image of Navie crying was pinned to the backs of my eyelids every time I closed my eyes. I called her phone too many times to count. I showed up at her apartment and sat outside her door before being removed by security with the threat of the cops being called. Normally, that wouldn't have scared me, but running the risk of being locked up would have put a major snag in my plan to get Navie to talk to me. So begrudgingly, I left. But not before yelling through the door that I wasn't giving up.

I texted, I called, I left voicemail after voicemail. All of which had gone unanswered. Rolling over onto my back, I scrubbed my hands along my face, trying to wipe away the dregs of exhaustion, which were clinging to me. Sunlight poured through my bedroom windows, painting everything in a beautiful golden glow that was a complete contradiction to my dark, gray mood. The clock on my bedside table glowed red, the numbers telling me it was just after seven in the morning. Would she come in to work today? Would she call in and attempt to avoid me? The only relief I felt was knowing that she'd eventually have to turn up in order to do her job.

Shoving from the bed, I walked into my bathroom to splash water on my face. The reflection staring back at me was almost unrecognizable. My skin was pale. Dark circles shadowed beneath my eyes, muting their icy blue color and making them appear dull. Stress carved every crease and line of my skin even deeper, making it look like I'd aged years overnight.

The shrill sound of my phone ringing from my bedroom brought me out of my stupor and I ran to where it lay on the nightstand, hope causing my heart to thunder in my chest.

"Navie?" I asked, not bothering to look at the screen.

"That would be a no," the voice on the other end spoke.

My entire body slumped in defeat as I sat on the bed, rubbing my forehead with my free hand. "Lauren." The disappointment in my voice was evident.

“Well, good morning to you, too, sunshine.”

I didn't have the energy for our usual back and forth. I needed to shower and get dressed on the off-chance Navie came in to work. If not, I needed to prepare for hours of stalking. I had a full day ahead of me.

“Look, Lauren, I'm not in the mood right now. I need to—”

“What you need to do is shut up and listen to me, Rowan.” Her tone left no room for argument. “I have no idea what the hell happened between you and Navie, and if I'm being honest, I don't want to know. What I *want* is for you to have your ass here bright and early tomorrow morning at nine a.m. so we can interview new assistants. And I know asking for sunshine and rainbows to blow out of your ass is asking for the end of world hunger, but can you at least *try* to come off somewhat pleasant?”

I didn't hear a damn word she had to say after *interview new assistants*. Icy dread filled my veins as black began clouding the edges of my vision. “What the hell are you talking about, Lauren? I don't need a new assistant. I already have one.”

“Seeing as Navie called me yesterday and resigned from that position, I'd say you don't.”

“She did *what*?”

“Rowan, I'm just the messenger here. Navie called requesting to be moved somewhere else within the company. Considering she's one of the best workers I've seen in years, I didn't want to run the risk of losing her, so I found her another position.”

Rage and anguish coursed through my body, the toxic combination threatening to destroy me as I tried to wrap my mind around what I'd just been told.

“Where is she?” I gritted.

“Now, Rowan, you need to calm down—”

“Fuck calm! Tell me where she is!”

Silence trickled through the line for several seconds before she finally responded softly. “She's not here, Row. We worked out the details of her new position, but she requested some time off. She refused to tell me what happened between the two of you, just said she needed to get away for a while. I gave her two weeks' vacation.”

I couldn't breathe. I was suffocating. “Lauren, I have to go.”

“But... tomorrow—”

“I have to go,” I cut her off. “Don't worry about a fucking personal

assistant right now. I'll discuss it with you when I get back."

"Wait. What? Where are you going?"

"Don't know yet," I answered as I pulled a suitcase from my closet. "Wherever the hell she went. I just need to find out where that is."

A resigned sigh came through the phone. "All right. I'm not going to try and talk you out of this, but please, promise me you won't turn this into a PR nightmare. We're just starting to get your image cleaned up."

"I'll do my best," I offered un reassuringly.

"Oh, sweet Lord. Why me?"



Navie

"You can't be mad at me! The man practically slept out on our stoop for three nights! What did you want me to do?"

"I don't know, Harlow," I replied sarcastically. "Maybe call security, or the cops? Or how about *not* tell the asshole who broke my heart exactly where I was when I left to get away from him?" I knew I was being unfair. I wasn't mad at Harlow, but trying to get a handle on the emotions that had been flowing through me for the past four days was proving to be a harder task than I would have thought.

"Okay, first of all, I'm going to excuse the bitchy attitude because I love you and I know you're under stress. Secondly, you called security on the guy the first night he refused to leave and it obviously didn't do shit. I didn't know what else to do."

I let out a huff of air and fell back onto the bed. Since arriving at Willow Ranch three days before, I'd been holed up in one of the guest rooms in the main house, barely coming out to eat, let alone spend time with my family. It was clear that Carson and Cassidy were both worried about me, but so far, they'd given me space. I had a feeling that wasn't going to last too much longer.

Silence leaked through the line for one uncomfortable minute before she spoke again. "Are you done being mad at me now?" That was yet another

reason I loved my best friend so much. Harlow and I rarely fought, but like most women, when we did, we could have a tendency to be a little bit nasty. But once the dust had settled and our anger cooled, we didn't hold grudges. We apologized and moved on, refusing to let it ruin our friendship.

"I'm sorry," I said in a quiet voice. "I was never mad at you. I'm just confused and... sad."

"I know, honey," she soothed. "I'm going to say something right now that might piss you off, but you're going to listen because you know I'm wise beyond my years and always right."

That earned her a small laugh. "All right. Hit me with it."

"I think you need to talk to him." She didn't pause to let what she said sink in, or give me an opportunity to object. "I know what you told me about his history with that bitch, but a man doesn't sleep on the stoop of a woman's building if he still has feelings for someone else."

"I know what I saw, Harlow! He was kissing her!"

"Is that really what you saw?" she asked cautiously. "Can you honestly tell me that you're a hundred percent positive there isn't a reasonable explanation for what you saw?"

"You think there's a reasonable explanation for why his mouth was on hers and they were pressed together so tightly not even sunlight could get through?"

"I don't know," she insisted. "That's what I'm trying to get you to understand. You ran out of there without listening to anything he had to say. Don't you think you owe it to yourself to find out the truth? You deserve to be happy, babe. And I've never seen you happier than when you were with Rowan. I just don't want you to regret not hearing him out."

"So, you're on his side?" I asked unreasonably.

"I'm on your side and you know that. But I'm not going to stand by and watch you ruin your chances at something great because you're scared. You had a raw deal growing up, babe. I can't imagine how hard it must have been. One person should never have to handle that much disappointment. But you're out of your mind if you think I'm just going to sit back and let you rebuild those damned walls you've lived behind all your life. You've worked too hard to become the person you are today to cower away and hide when shit gets rough. I love you too much to let you do that, even if I run the risk of you hating me for it."

"I could never hate you," I whispered.

“Then please promise me you won’t let go of the woman you’ve become. Do whatever it is you need to in order to be happy. You have people in your corner now. I can’t promise that everything with Rowan will work out, but what I *can* promise is that, no matter what, there are too many hands holding on to you to let the fall be as painful as it’s been in the past.”

I sniffled and wiped at the lone tear that broke free and made its way down my cheek. “Stop being so smart. It’s giving me a complex.”

Her laughter rang through the line. “Then stop being so damn hard-headed.”

“I love you.”

“I love you, too, honey. And I’ll be here no matter what.”

“You promise?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Okay.” We hung up and I sat up on a loud inhale to find Carson standing at my bedroom door, shoulder resting against the frame, a concerned smile on his face. “Hey,” I offered with a weak smile of my own.

“Hey, yourself.”

“How long have you been standing there?”

Pushing from the door, he walked into the room and sat beside me. “Long enough. You ready to join the land of the living again?”

Toying with a loose thread on the hem of my shirt, I shrugged. “I guess.”

He blew out a deep breath and stared at the wall ahead of him. I had just begun to wonder if we were going to sit in uncomfortable silence when he spoke. “You know, if there’s one guarantee in life, it’s that all guys are stupid assholes.”

“O-kay...?” I dragged out, my brows tipping in confusion at his random statement.

“I mean, seeing as I *am* a guy, I know that to be a fact. And because we’re stupid assholes, we have a tendency to do stupid shit. Take me for instance.” He turned to face me, his grassy green eyes holding a sincere grin. “I almost lost Cassidy once because I was a stubborn jackass. But lucky for me, I have this little sister who wanted nothing but the best for me. So when she saw how badly I was fuckin’ up, she called me out on my shit. She told me how much I’d changed when Cass came into my life, how much she wanted nothing more than to see me happy. She understood what it felt like to be beaten down over and over again, but she made me promise not to let my past dictate my future.”

“She sounds brilliant.” I giggled through my tears.

“Oh, she is. Smartest girl I’ve ever met. She’s the best sister I never had.”

Brushing the wet from my cheeks I smiled brightly up at him. “And you’re the best brother she’s never had.”

Wrapping an arm around my shoulders, Carson pulled me in for a hug and placed a kiss on the top of my head. “I’m not gonna like him,” he spoke. I laughed into his chest, knowing he was talking about Rowan. “I’d never like any guy you ended up with. But even though I hardly know the guy, and his first impression was shit, I can honestly say you had a glow when we visited that I’d never seen before. Cass saw it, too. So all I’m gonna say is if you can work out your issues, and he’s the guy who can make you that happy for the rest of your life, well, I’ll try really, *really* hard not to kill him.”

“I love you.” I laughed loudly before placing a kiss on his scruffy cheek.

“Love you, too, little bit. Now, let’s go eat. Anymore of this lovey-dovey shit and my balls are gonna shrivel up into raisins.”

Thirty-Three

Rowan

I was running on fumes by the time I saw the sign for Willow Ranch. I was functioning on maybe six hours of sleep combined over the past four days. I couldn't even remember the last time I'd eaten anything. And I was pretty sure that rank odor I was smelling was myself.

But I refused to stop. The moment I'd gotten what I needed out of Harlow, I was on the first flight from New York to Texas. I hadn't bathed or changed clothes since the last night I slept out on their goddamned stoop. I was fucking miserable, but if I didn't get to Navie within the next five minutes, what was left of my sanity was likely to evaporate.

The minute a large white house with a wide wraparound porch came into view, I breathed a sigh of relief. It was exactly how Harlow had described. I threw the car into park and jumped out, running up the steps like an Olympic hurdler.

"Navie!" I yelled at the top of my lungs as I beat on the rickety screen door. "Navie! I know you're in there! Open the goddamned do—"

The front door shot open. Carson pushed through the screen door and stepped onto the porch, letting it slam closed behind him with a loud bang. "Have you lost your fuckin' mind? You can't just run up on someone's house, beating on their door like a crazy person. This is Texas, man. You know we shoot people for that shit, right?"

His thinly veiled threat and the murderous glare in his eyes didn't even register. "I don't care. I need to see her."

Crossing his arms over his chest, he stared me down. "What makes you think she's got any desire to see you?"

"I don't know!" I raked my hands through my tangled hair. "She probably never wants to see me again, but I don't give a shit. I'm in love with her! I've been going out of my fucking mind for four goddamned days, and I'm not leaving here until I see her."

Something about everything I'd just said loosened Carson's stance and made him smile. The adrenaline I'd been running on finally started to fade, and fear that he was actually going to shoot me took hold. Slapping me on the back, he pulled me to his side with a boisterous, "Well, why didn't you say that? Come on in, we're just about to have dinner."

Yep, I was about to die. I had no doubt he was leading me to some sort of kill room with floor drains and plastic-covered walls, but if I got at least a glimpse of Navie before the end came, I could die a happy man.

Fortunately, to my surprise, he actually led me into a dining room filled with people. I recognized Cassidy right away. Next to her was a little girl who was her spitting image. I recalled Navie talking about her family a few times and if memory served, that was her daughter, Willow. There was an older man and woman I could only assume were Milly and Kal, Cassidy's aunt and uncle, and another man and woman, who looked to be in their mid-twenties. I tried to remember if Navie had ever mentioned them, but everything around me suddenly faded away when the door from the kitchen pushed open and the woman I'd been going crazy over walked into the room holding a large bowl of green beans.

She came to a sudden halt when she saw me, those beautiful, dark blue eyes widening, her jaw dropping slightly in surprise. I was so focused on her, soaking in every single thing I could, trying to memorize her beauty in that moment, that I hadn't noticed the room had grown eerily quiet.

"H-hi," she stuttered uncomfortably, her gaze darting around my face like she was trying to memorize me, as well.

"Hi."

We didn't say anything else. Carson, however, took that as an opportunity to break up the silence. "Guys, this is Rowan Locklaine, Navie's boss. He's here to grovel and beg for forgiveness. Rowan, you know Cassidy. This is our daughter, Willow." He pointed at the little girl. "That's Kal and Milly," he said, indicating the older couple. "And these are our friends, Lana and Zeke." He waved a hand at the last two people at the table.

Like it wasn't the most awkward introduction in the history of existence, Carson pulled out a chair on the other side of his wife and took a seat. Looking around uncomfortably, I noticed the only available chair was one directly across from where Navie was standing. Not wanting to risk losing sight of her, I ignored the stares from everyone and sat down, watching as she nervously tucked a loose strand of hair behind her ear and lowered into her

own chair, placing the bowl on the table without lifting her eyes.

“Hi,” I repeated, like a fucking moron. I just needed her to lift those eyes back up to me. The instant she did, my heart flipped in my chest.

She blushed red as she gazed at me through her lashes. “Hi.”

“You think that’s all these two’ll say for the rest of dinner?” the guy introduced as Zeke asked.

“Shh,” Milly scolded. “I’m tryin’ to listen.”

“You look beautiful,” I continued, ignoring everyone around us.

She offered me a tiny, one-sided grin and a quiet, “Thanks.”

“This has got to be the most uncomfortable fuckin’ meal I ever been to,” Kal grumbled from the other end of the table.

“Shh!” Milly, along with Cassidy and Lana that time, chided.

I sucked at small talk. Richard had always been the smooth one, whereas I choked when it had to do with simple, mundane conversation. Deciding to bypass all pleasantries, I went for broke. “I miss you, Navie. I’m so sorry for hurting you. Please, take me back.”

She didn’t say anything. No one did. And I could have sworn everyone around me was holding their breath, just waiting to see how this little show played out. Tossing her napkin on the table, Navie stood from her chair and faced me full-on. “Let’s talk in private,” she said with a tilt of her chin in the direction of the kitchen. Standing up, I followed after her like a lost puppy as the dining room erupted in shouts of objections. I could have sworn I heard Kal grumble something about it being better than a soap-opera.

Hyper-awareness took over the moment the door shut firmly behind me, and all I could think about was how close I finally was to her, how badly I needed to touch her. But the way she stood at the far end of the room, pressed against the counter like she needed every available inch of space between us, kept me rooted in place.

“So…” I started, “that’s your family?”

“Yep.”

The one-word answers were killing me. I wanted her to yell at me, scream and cuss and rant—whatever she needed to do to get it all out. I just needed to hear her voice and not the monosyllabic bullshit I was getting. With a sigh, I ran a hand through my disheveled hair. “Navie—”

“Why’d you do it?” she asked, cutting me off and momentarily confusing me.

“Why did I do what?”

Those denim eyes glistened with unshed tears, knocking the wind out of me. “Why did you kiss her?”

“Oh, baby.” Her tears broke free and each one was like a punch in the gut. I couldn’t stay away from her any longer. I was across the kitchen in a flash, my hands cupping her cheeks, my thumbs trying to brush away her sadness. “I didn’t kiss her, Navie, I swear. *She* kissed *me*. She showed up at the apartment after you left to get coffee and pushed her way in, saying she needed to talk. She threw herself at me.”

“But... y-you were holding her like... just like this,” she stuttered, reaching up and wrapping her hands around my wrists where I held her face in my palms.

“I was trying to get her off me. She caught me off-guard for a moment, but I never kissed her back. Please, believe me. I would never do that to you.”

She lowered her head, taking her eyes from me and gave it a shake. “I thought...”

“Thought what?” I prompted.

When she spoke again, her voice was so quiet I almost couldn’t hear, but once what she said registered, a part of me wished I hadn’t. “I’ve never been good enough for anyone.”

“That’s not true,” I ground out, using her hair to tip her head back up so I could see her. “Baby, you can’t believe that—”

“None of my foster families kept me,” she continued, each word gutting me. “My own mom didn’t want me. The boy who asked me to prom only did it as a prank so he and his friends could make fun of me. I hardly had any friends growing up, and until I met Carson, I never had a family. When I saw you kissing her, I just thought—”

“That I was just like everyone else,” I finished for her, even though it killed me.

She nodded on a muffled sob and tried to drop her head again, but I wasn’t having it.

“Look at me,” I demanded. When her heartbroken gaze finally met mine, I spoke the words I knew were the God’s honest truth. “I’m in love with you.” Her mouth dropped open on a gasp, but I wasn’t finished. “When you ran away from me? That was the worst moment of my life.”

“But—”

“No buts. Nothing compared to the pain I felt when I thought I had lost you. Not what happened with Bree, not losing my brother, *nothing*. It hurt in

a way I'm not sure I could survive. I have never, *ever* loved someone the way I love you. What I felt for Bree isn't even a shadow of what I feel for you. Do you get that? For the first time in my life, I am completely in love with someone else. I can't lose you, Navie. I can't."

"You love me?"

"My life didn't start until I met you, and it can't continue if you're not in it. *That's* how much I love you."

Her voice broke on a sob, but when she responded with, "I love you, too," I thought I had to be dreaming.

"Really?"

"Yeah," she sniffled. "I love you, too. I have for a while, but I was just too terrified that I'd get hurt again to admit it."

I pulled her to me for a tight hug, wanting to feel every inch of her against me. I'd never been hungry for someone's touch the way I was for hers. I held on for dear life, afraid that if I let go, she'd disappear. I could have spent the rest of my life that way, but when she let out a wheeze and a, "Honey. Can't. Breathe," I forced myself to loosen my grip.

"I'll never hurt you like that, baby. I'm sure there will be countless times in our life together when I'll piss you off beyond belief, but if you'll let me, I'll spend the rest of my life making up for all the heartache you've ever felt."

"That's a really good promise." She giggled.

Leaning down toward her upturned face, I pressed my lips against hers. "I thought so, too."

"I could have done without the whole *pissing me off beyond belief* part, but other than that, it was a pretty damn good speech."

I pulled back just enough to see her eyes as I chuckled. "You're seriously criticizing my *I love you* speech right now?"

"I'm just saying." She shrugged with a knowing smirk. "It could have been better. Maybe next time write something out ahead of time."

"I flew my ass all the way to Texas, risked life and limb with your trigger-happy brother to profess my love to you, and you're giving me shit about not writing out a heartfelt declaration beforehand?" Tipping my head to the ceiling, I lamented loudly, "Why me, Lord? Seriously!"

Navie's happy laughter pulled my attention back down. "Just got lucky, I guess."

"I'm ignoring you right now because I'm just so goddamned happy to see you again. It's like I can finally fucking breathe."

Navie snuggled into me, her arms wrapped around my waist tightly as we stood there, simply living in the moment. “Rowan?” she asked quietly.

I pressed my lips against her cheek. “Hmm?”

“You really stink.”

I planted another kiss against her lips and spoke, “You’re a pain in my ass, you know that?”

“What can I say?” she responded with a teasing grin. “You bring out the best in me.”

Thirty-four

Navie

“For the love of God, will you stop that?” I smacked Rowan’s hand away from the jar of jam he was reaching for. He had already managed to pilfer two other jars from the table when I wasn’t looking and had devoured them both, eating ten dollars’ worth of potential profit.

If you had told me a few months back that I would be in a serious, committed relationship with Rowan Locklaine, I would have laughed in your face. If you’d have told me I would eventually be head over heels, crazy in love with the man, I would have suggested you get medical help.

But there I was, sitting at the farmer’s market in the town I’d grown up in, with him at my side, selling homemade preserves and breads to give Cassidy and Carson a break from work so they could spend time with their new son, Kallum, named after Cassidy’s Uncle Kal.

For the second time in less than six months, I was back in Texas, only this time, it was for a good reason. And my boyfriend had tagged along happily as opposed to chasing me down and winning me back. Things were going great. Each morning, I woke up wrapped in the arms of the man I loved, even happier than the day before. I had a new nephew that I got to spoil and cuddle for the next few weeks, and I was surrounded by a whole slew of people who loved me unconditionally.

I wasn’t sure if life could get any better.

“But it’s so good,” he groaned, licking up the last of the mulberry jam from the jar he stole. “Next time we visit, I’m bringing an empty suitcase with me so I can load it up with this shit. Swear to God, Navie, if you’d learn to make this stuff from Milly or Cassidy, I’d marry you and leave everything to you in my will.”

My heart fluttered at the thought of marrying this man at the same time I rolled my eyes in mock frustration. “If that’s your idea of a proposal, you’re going to be single for the rest of your life.”

Resting his elbows on the table in our booth, Rowan reached forward and toyed with the necklace hanging from the stand I'd set out. "You say no *when* I propose and I'm telling Pepper you're selling *Navie's Knickknacks* for half-price at some rinky-dink market in po-dunk Texas."

That was yet another change that had taken place in the past months. When we returned to New York after my 'temporary bout of insanity', as he so lovingly referred to it, I didn't go back to being Rowan's personal assistant. That position was currently available after the third person Lauren hired quit due to a 'hostile work environment'.

Rowan had taken it upon himself to show my jewelry to Pepper, and after threat of physical violence and possible death if I didn't agree, I went into business with her, partnering up to sell my handmade creations in her shop. Business had been shockingly good, and I was finally making a career out of something I loved to do. And even though I wouldn't say it out loud, for fear of overinflating his ego, I had Rowan to thank for it.

"You tell her I'm selling a few pieces here and I'll tell Carson you so lovingly referred to his wife's business as some rinky-dink market in po-dunk Texas."

He paled slightly at my threat and I couldn't help but laugh. Even though things were great between us, saying Carson was *warming up* to my boyfriend was a stretch. I didn't think he'd ever stop threatening to shoot him.

"Oh, Henry, look," an older woman exclaimed as she leaned in to look at my jewelry, pulling Rowan and I out of our millionth spat of the day. "Aren't these just beautiful?"

"That they are, sweetheart," an older man, who I assumed was Henry, replied as he came to stand next to the woman while she browsed the different bracelets and necklaces I had put out. My head tilted to the side as I watched the man with his wife. There was something so familiar about him, but I just couldn't put my finger on it. An inch or two over six feet tall, salt-and-pepper hair, and a stomach that attested to the fact that he ate well but still tried to keep in shape the best he could at this age. Something in the back of my mind told me I should know this man, I just couldn't figure out why.

"How much for this set, dear?" the woman asked, her gaze coming to me as her husband looked around the market, casually people-watching. "Dear?" the woman asked again, a hint of concern wrapped around that one word.

I felt Rowan's hand press against the small of my back and gave my head

a firm shake as he came to stand next to me. “I’m sorry, it’s uh... twenty-five for the set.”

As she rifled through her purse, I could only focus on the man beside her.

“And what a clever name,” she continued, pulling her wallet from her bag. “I’m assuming you’re the *Navie* from *Navie’s Knickknacks*?”

“That’s me,” I replied with a smile at the woman just as the man’s head shot around in my direction. The instant our eyes connected, that wave of familiarity I felt when he walked up came rushing back, crashing into me with so much strength I lost my breath.

“My Lord,” the man spoke on an inhale as his own kind eyes grew wide.

“I know you,” I said in a hushed voice. “How do I know you?”

“Navie?” Rowan asked from my side. “You all right, baby?”

“I met you when you were just a little girl.” His voice was filled with a combination of sorrow and wonder. “I’m Off—”

“Officer Michaels,” I gasped as memories of that day bombarded me one after another.

“Not a day’s passed where I haven’t thought about that scared girl in that apartment,” he choked, emotion growing thick with each word. His wife’s hand flew to her mouth as tears began to stream down her face. He’d told her about me.

“You remember me?” I asked, feeling a lump forming in my throat.

“Of course. I could never forget. A little girl named Navie because of the color of her eyes ...” He paused to clear his throat before being able to continue. I watched in awe as his wife’s hands came around his arm in silent support. “Did... everything work out for you? Do you have a good life?”

In the blink of an eye, I was around the table, both my hands wrapped around his. “I have a *great* life,” I replied vehemently. Because it was true. Even with all the hardships, all the pain and disappointment, I couldn’t look back with any regrets because it led me to where I was right then. I had love. I had family. I had everything a person could ever hope for.

Officer Michaels’ eyes closed tightly and I watched one lone tear slip free. When he opened them again and looked back at me, I saw that my answer had lifted a weight he’d been carrying for nearly twenty years. “Good. I’m so glad.” The relief that melted through him and his wife was almost tangible. “I can’t tell you how happy that makes me, sweetheart.”

I gave his hand one last squeeze before releasing it and going back to where Rowan stood.

“Well,” the woman spoke, brushing at her cheeks before extending her hand in my direction, two twenty dollar bills held out to me. “This has most certainly been a blessed day. We’ve received the answer to our prayer *and* I get this beautiful jewelry for a steal!”

I let out a light giggle as I gently pushed her hand back. “You get this jewelry for free.”

“Oh, no,” Officer Michaels sputtered. “We couldn’t...”

“You can,” I insisted. “Consider it a gift.”

“A gift for what?”

“For offering a scared little girl the kindness she needed to get her through a hard time.” One more tear broke free from his eyes as he gave me a jerky nod.

“You okay?” Rowan asked a few minutes later, once the older couple had blended into the mass of shoppers.

“Yeah.” I sighed, reaching to wrap both my arms around his waist. I rested my head on his strong, sturdy chest as I silently counted my blessings. “I’m great, actually.”

His fingers came to my chin, tilting my face up so he could place a soft kiss on my lips. “You know I love you, right?”

“I love you, too.” I smiled sincerely.

“You better say yes when I propose,” he warned playfully, and my smile grew even bigger.

“Then you better make it a damn good proposal.”

Rowan winked and I felt my body melt further into him. “Don’t you worry about that. When I do, it’ll be epic.”

As I stared up into Rowan’s icy blue eyes, there was no fear, no uncertainty. The walls I’d built around myself to protect my heart were long gone.

“I can’t wait.”

epilogue

Navie

“This is so *boring*,” Carson groaned at the ceiling dramatically, making a scene and causing the people near us to turn and stare.

“Will you please shut up?” Cassidy whisper-yelled. “It’s almost over.”

I shot a look at my brother, hoping to melt the skin off his face before looking back at Rowan and giving him a thumbs-up just as the last person in line placed their book on the table for him to sign.

I couldn’t have been prouder of him. His latest book, *Love Hate Relationship*, released to astounding numbers, still sitting at the number one spot on the New York Times, as well as every other bestseller list, for the fourth week in a row. To say he was more than a little shocked would have been putting it lightly. The book was a step outside of the box for him. He’d never written anything but murder mysteries his entire career, so releasing a book that was eerily similar to our own personal story opened him up to a whole new audience... one that included me.

While he vehemently denied that his book fell into the genre, I got off on giving him shit for writing his first ever romance novel, telling him how excited I was that he’d finally written something interesting. That had led to *many* fights. Not that I cared really; the only thing better than sex with Rowan was *makeup* sex with Rowan.

In celebration of his success, we’d flown my entire family up from Texas so they could spend the holidays in New York, as well as see Rowan in his element. I thought it would be good fun for Carson and Cassidy to join me, Rowan’s mom and brother, along with Griffin and Pepper, at one of Rowan’s readings while Kal and Milly took Willow and Kallum to Central Park. The only thing I hadn’t realized was that our little hodge-podge group should have never been allowed out in public. If it wasn’t Carson showing his ass, it was Griffin intentionally setting Pepper off on a tangent. The whole day had been one drama after another. I really could have used Harlow there to keep

me sane, but she'd gone back home to Jackson Hole a week ago for a family emergency.

"Thank God," he grunted loudly.

Ignoring the weird looks from the people who had crammed into The Strand for Rowan's latest book signing, I turned to Carson and issued my fifth threat of the day. "I swear to God, if you don't *shut up*, I'm going to murder you in your sleep," I hissed as quietly as possible. "Then I'm going to raise Kallum to be a Yankee Democrat!"

"You wouldn't," he gasped.

"Watch me."

Carson leaned against the wall, arms crossed angrily across his chest as he pouted. "This is so stupid. Why do I have to be here?"

"Because you're supporting the man I love," I countered.

"I'm never even gonna read the damn book," he shot back. "Real men don't read that girly, chick shit."

"Amen," Richard added in solidarity, raising his hand to high-five Carson. I was surrounded by toddlers.

"Hey!" I pointed at Richard. "You're supposed to be the supportive brother."

He grinned at me. It was still somewhat disconcerting to see the same characteristics Rowan had in someone else, but I was slowly getting used to it. Richard and Rowan were working on rebuilding their relationship, so I was bound to see him often. "Just because I'm not willing to read the book doesn't mean I'm not supportive."

"It's not *girly, chick shit*," Cassidy interjected. "It's a beautiful story he wrote based on his relationship with Navie."

"Wait... is there sex in this book?"

Uh-oh.

"Oh, dear," Rowan's mother, Marie, mumbled from behind her hand, clearly trying to stifle her laughter at the same time everyone else—well, except for Carson—broke into loud, raucous laughter.

"Everything okay over here?" Rowan asked as he joined our group of misfits, having finished with the last reader. He leaned in to give his mother a quick kiss before wrapping his arm around my shoulder and holding me against him.

"You mean besides the fact you're a pervert?" Carson snipped.

"Why me?" I lamented, staring up at the heavens as Marie lost the battle

against her giggles and joined in along with everyone else.

“Oh, sweet girl,” she offered, patting my arm. “You knew what you were getting into when you picked this one, here,” she told me, throwing her thumb in Rowan’s direction.

“What am I missing?” Rowan whispered in my ear.

I reached up and patted his cheek. “I love you. Let’s run away to Bermuda for the holidays.”

His lips turned up in a knowing smirk. “Getting the families together for the holidays was your idea, baby.”

“For the very first time in my life, I was wrong.”

I felt Rowan chuckle against my body as his lips touched the skin at my neck. “Besides, it’ll make proposing so much easier with everyone here. Get it all out of the way in one fell swoop.”

I pulled my head back on a sharp inhale, excitement coursing through my veins. “Wait... are you... really... right *now*?”

“No, not *right now*. But soon.”

Just as I stood on my tip-toes to press my lips against Rowan’s, my cell phone rang from inside of my purse. Pulling it out, I looked down at the screen, my brows furrowing in worry.

“Who is it?” Rowan asked.

“It’s Harlow.” At the sound of her name, everyone in our circle grew quiet. They all knew about Harlow’s unexpected trip back to the town she grew up in. She and her brother had been raised by their grandparents. Their grandfather had passed years back, and with her grandmother’s health suddenly taking a turn for the worse, she needed to go take care of her little brother. We were all concerned, but it was the lack of communication between Harlow and me that was bothering me the most. Every time I tried calling, she either didn’t answer or kept the conversations short. It was evident in her voice that she wasn’t doing well.

I feared the worst. She never really talked about her past, and I never felt right pushing her, but from what I gathered, she’d left something behind in Jackson Hole that had changed her.

“You think everything’s okay?” he asked, rubbing his thumb along my jaw and holding me tighter, offering me comfort when I needed it most.

“God, I hope so.”

The end

Be on the lookout for Harlow's story,

Wildflower

coming January 2016

acknowledgments

As always, first and foremost, my never ending thanks and love goes to my husband for always being my rock. I have no doubt in my mind that I wouldn't be able to do this without you.

To Jennifer Wolfel, Jenn Van Wyk, and Aly Martinez ~ Your help has been instrumental in bringing Navie and Rowan's story to life and making it the best it could possibly be. Aly, your "NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO" probably saved me from being attacked by countless readers. LOL.

To the lovely ladies of F*ck That Noise ~ Seriously, when a group of women menstruate together, you know they're close! I love you bitches!!

And as always, to my readers ~ This is for YOU!

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BE SURE TO FOLLOW ALL OF THE COLORS NOVELS!

Scattered Colors

The use of the phrase life is hard has become so diluted, so overstated through the years that when someone hears it the words go in one ear and out the other. The impact is no longer there. The meaning, the importance of that phrase no longer holds any water with those it's spoken to.

Freya Linden's life became hard at the age of seventeen, the summer before her senior year of high school. The bright colors of her life faded into black and white, a colorless shell full of loneliness.

Until she met him.

Parker Owens breathed life back into her world. With him she began to heal. But happiness isn't a guarantee. Sometimes opening yourself up only leads to more heartbreak. The person she thought to be her saving grace shattered her completely.

Her story isn't a pretty one. The bumps in the road were monumental and infinite. But it's her story. And the one thing that holds true is this: despite the hardships, she made it through to the other side.

Shrinking Violet

Forgiveness

From the time we're old enough to understand the word, we're taught to forgive those who wrong us, so what do you do when the one person you can't forgive is yourself?

For Cassidy Ashworth, it's a question that haunts her. Forgiveness has become a foreign concept. Self-loathing is something she's much more familiar with. Convinced that she doesn't deserve happiness, Cassidy is determined to spend every day trying to make up for the wrong she's done. But no amount of repenting for the past will ever convince her that she's worthy of a future with Carson Langford.

Raised in the foster system, Carson has always been a throwaway kid. He knows firsthand just how cruel life can be, how easy it is for people to prey on the weak, and there's nothing Carson detests more than a bully. So focused on his self-imposed role of protector, he never counted on the beautiful blonde with the haunted eyes to stumble into his life and shake up his world.

Despite her reluctance, Carson is determined to have Cassidy in his life, but once the truth of her past comes to light, the question is...will he still want to keep her?

Love Hate Relationship

People say that sometimes the line between love and hate is thin. What they don't tell you is that sometimes it's invisible.

Rowan Locklaine gave his heart to one woman a long time ago and has no desire to go through that kind of torture ever again. His painful past has turned him cold and heartless. Women serve only one purpose as far as he's concerned, and relationships are nothing but a waste of time and energy. When the mouthy little blonde, Navie Collins, is hired as his personal assistant, he finds his world turned upside down. And against his better judgment, he can't seem to stop thinking about her.

Navie Collins has spent years convinced she's not good enough, that no one could possibly want her. Growing up the way she did helped to thicken her skin, so when she walks into a job interview and meets the temperamental, foul-mouthed, best-selling author, Rowan Locklaine, she's all too happy to put him in his place.

Rowan and Navie are convinced they hate each other. But as time passes and the attraction between them begins to grow, these two stubborn, strong-willed people have a life changing decision to make. Can they move beyond their pain for a chance at something better, or are they destined to let their pasts dictate their future?

Wildflower (coming January 2016)

At sixteen, Harlow Prewitt thought she'd found the love of her life. At seventeen, that love was put to the ultimate test. And at eighteen, it failed completely, shattering her beyond repair.

Leaving behind everything she had ever known, Harlow was determined to start over some place different, some place where memories of the past couldn't follow. And she was never going back.

Or so she thought.

Noah Murphy has lived a life full of regrets. But Harlow's unexpected return has given him another chance, and he's determined to make this one count. Because a love like theirs isn't something people find more than once in a lifetime. This time he won't let her go. This time he'll fight with everything he has. He might have lost her before, but he'll be damned if he loses her the second time around.