



Bad for Me

Lucky
CHARM

LINDSEY HART

Lucky Charm
BAD FOR ME

Lindsey Hart

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CHAPTER 1



Cass

“Please, Ayana? I don’t have to rub him for luck or anything. Just being in his presence would be enough. And food! I think food has something to do with it. Every single time, there’s been eating involved.”

“I can’t believe we’re having this conversation,” Ayana huffs. “Rubbing. That just sounds wrong.”

“No rubbing involved. Cross my heart—well, I’m going to leave it that because, knowing my luck, I should just cut that off right there.”

Ayana’s my bestie, the proud daughter of a dad who is scary as all get out because he’s the prez of a biker club, and she takes shit from no one but me. As her sister from a different mister since high school, I guess I’m entitled to a few strange requests.

Ayana’s boyfriend, Ransom, who is big, tattooed, and scarred in the face from a childhood mishap with a spork, of all things—yes, for real—is almost as scary as her dad. Until you get to know him, that is. Both of them. Or, if you’re Ayana, you find out he’s all teddy bear beneath his gruff exterior, soft as butter, and willing to do anything for her and their baby girl, Maya. The most beautiful little girl in the world is currently with the object of our

conversation, her deliciously gorgeous, sandy-haired, jacked, and stacked uncle, Lennox, who has a beard to beat both Vikings and Santa.

“My brother is bad news. Bearded bad news.”

Ransom wiggles his hips and bends lower, a driver in hand. He’s recently found golf to be quite therapeutic, and because Ayana loves him, she’s willing to do just about anything, even golfing. Because I need to get in touch with Lennox, I’m also here with a set of rented clubs, about to do my very worst to this par 3. Think major grass divots, errant golf balls, and perhaps even flying clubs. Yeah, and when I say worst, I mean worst. I’m a terrible golfer at best, and by terrible, I mean it’s a lucky thing I haven’t killed someone yet or broken my own leg.

“You love your brother,” I protest.

“I might,” Ransom agrees. “But this is also the same person who, before I met Ayana, told people that my biggest goal in life was to go as a puckered butthole for Halloween.”

“As opposed to a non-puckered butthole?” Ayana covers her mouth and laughs.

I try very hard not to, but it takes sucking my whole bottom lip into my mouth and biting it to keep myself focused. I need to stay focused—both on my quest and on what’s happening on the field. I mean on the green.

I've golfed all of once in my life, and that was during high school. Let's just say it didn't end well. As per usual, I was involved in a bit of a disaster. I swear, I didn't mean to let that club go. But go it did, and it smacked our gym teacher right in the face. He ended up having to go to the hospital for stitches, and there was so much blood that one girl in the class passed out, and another barfed.

Where I'm concerned, that's pretty much just par for the course. Ha. Oh god, that's too good right now. Look at me go.

I've never, ever, EVER met anyone as unlucky as I am. I have the kind of luck that is like a badly held-in fart. The kind of fart where you just can't hold it anymore, but you're in a crowded room, so you hope to let it go silently and that it will have zero smell, and no one will notice. But of course, your butt cheeks won't angle right, so it comes out as a ripper, and it's a real room clearer, to the point where gagging is a sure thing.

That hasn't actually happened to me, though. I'm just trying to make an illustrative point.

Ransom studies the ball carefully, adjusts his stance, swings, and sends the ball flying in a straight arc down the way from us and toward the flag deal at the end. I know enough about golf to realize that's our objective.

Ayana brushes her thick black mane of hair over her shoulder and claps

wildly. “Nice shot, my love.”

He turns and winks at her, making the scar that bisects his face become all puckered up, and I try very hard not to think about puckered buttoles. Ransom’s face looks nothing at all like that, though. He’s actually quite handsome, and he’s a truly good person besides. It’s just the thought of the word puckered that tips me off.

As if to prove my point about his goodness, he grins at Ayana, who is the love of his life. “You’re up.” He finishes that up with a kiss on her forehead.

Gah. If that doesn’t make me go all soft and mushy and get kind of grossed out all at once, I don’t know what does.

Ayana wiggles her brows at me. “Watch this. I’ve been practicing.”

For someone who just had a baby four months ago, Ayana is back to being her petite self. You can hardly tell, aside from the fact that she’s rocking some serious boobage now. Ransom quickly walks over and puts his hands on her hips as Ayana gets set up.

“I think we need to adjust your stance. Like this. Maybe a little bit like this too.” He kisses her, hard and long and lingering, and I’m sure there is tongue involved.

I clear my throat. “Ummm, kay, if you’re both done sucking face, can we

go back to talking about how I need to have lunch or dinner with Lennox because I need this? I seriously need this. I'm twenty-three, I don't have my license yet, and I need to be independent. I'm so tired of public transportation. Please, please, please."

"You're going to do fine," Ayana turns and says over her shoulder. "Just fine. You've been practicing for like a year. You've got this."

"Knowing me, I'm going to run the car up on the curb during the parallel park or go the wrong way down a one-way street or...I don't know. Freaking drive into the side of a building or something."

"Yarp!" Ransom grunts as he backs off so Ayana can actually focus on golfing instead of trying to score with him. "If that's a problem, maybe you don't need to get your driver's license."

"Ransom!" Ayana hisses. She'd been teeing up the ball, but now she turns, her hands on her hips, club and all. "No one is going to drive into buildings. Cass is a great driver. Yes?"

"I don't know," I admit. Self-doubt? I have plenty of that and a good reason for it. I've basically been a walking disaster since I could...well, walk. "The only times I've ever had any kind of decent luck, it's always been after I've been with Lennox. Last year, when he kidnapped me by mistake, thinking I was you, and his granny made him buy me fries and cherry pie to

make up for it, I won a hundred bucks on a scratch-off ticket a few days later. After we had that picnic and the swan boat ride with all of Ransom's brothers and his granny as a welcome to the family for you, and you brought me too? I finally got a freaking job, and it was actually the one I wanted!"

Now I'm a marketing master who can sell the shit out of any cookie cutters, and I swear it was good luck. The time after that? I called the radio station and won a gift basket. And the time after that, when we went for lunch with you and Ransom, and Lennox tagged along? I was in an elevator at work, and the thing got stuck, but instead of crashing to our doom, we were saved by some very nice firemen who extracted us just fine. I mean, not that it crashed or anything, but it could have. Elevators are serious shit. They are not to be messed with. Then, when we went to a movie that night, and Lennox tagged along, I got a bonus at work for designing that set of dinosaur cat mashup cookie cutters at work."

"Sounds like a lot of coincidences," Ransom cuts in.

"You don't know that!" I practically shout. "You don't know how unlucky I am! Nothing has gone right for me in life. Nothing!"

"Hey!" Ayana pouts. "You met me, didn't you?"

"Okay, nothing besides you. I swear you're the one thing that stands between me and the ultimate disaster most of the time. You know how

unlucky I am. Tell Ransom how my first serious boyfriend was only going out with me because he made a bet with his asshole friends that because I'm blonde and, uh, curvy and—”

“Insanely beautiful, a knockout, a total ten....” Ayana adds.

“That's too kind of you, but I don't know. They bet that because I looked like a bimbo, I was one and that I'd sleep with him by the end of the first date. I didn't, but then they kept making bets, and he kept dating me, and—”

“Sounds like a real asshole,” Ransom grouches as he cracks his knuckles. “Want me to destroy his life with my...uh, bare hands?”

Why do I get the feeling he was going to say considerable skills? Right, probably because I've been to his and Ayana's house many times, and I've seen their crazy security, the wild baby monitor they have going on, and one time, when I was going to the bathroom, I snuck down the hall and peeked into Ransom's office, and there was a crazy amount of tech stuff in there.

I don't really know much about what Ransom and his family do for a living because Ayana has been super evasive, bordering on secretive about that, but the whole home office that looked like a millionaire's techy playground leads me to believe they're into IT or something—some kind of tech. I haven't really asked, and Ayana hasn't volunteered. The one time I did ask what Ransom did, she said it was better that I didn't know, kind of in the

same way that I shouldn't ask questions about her dad's biker club because sometimes it's just better if you don't know things. Not that the club is into anything bad or anything like that. It's not. It's just...some people like their privacy, I guess, and I do respect that. Ayana's been my friend for a long time, so I understand boundaries and unconventional upbringings.

“No! No, need for that. Anyway, we were walking down the street together one day, and these movers were moving a piano, and it...uh, fell off the crane thing they were using and almost crushed us. I think that was justice enough. It was a smaller-sized piano, and it was painted all cool by some local artist, but still.”

“Argh, what?”

“Yeah, it's true.” Ayana nods. “For real.”

“Do I need to recount all the other incidents? The fact is, I'm unluckier than anyone I know. I've had so much crazy shit happen to me. And guys? Don't even get me started. I'm an asshole magnet. Those are the only people I attract. I'm pretty sure the universe hates me. Things only started to change after I was kidnapped—and by kidnapped, I mean lightly taken by mistake because they thought I was Ayana, and in the end, I understood I was in no real danger, so it for sure didn't mess me up psychologically one way or the other—and I met...uh...met Lennox.”

“He was gone for months before we had Maya,” Ransom protests. He doesn’t offer to fill me in on where Lennox, their granny, and their other brothers—the twins—had gone. I know they’re not doing shady stuff because Ayana would never stand for that. She’s the best person I know, and her moral compass is insanely on point. Whatever they’re doing, it has to be good.

I gather my sandy blonde mane and throw it over my shoulder before twisting one strand compulsively around my finger. “I...I know. I definitely wasn’t as lucky, and then when I saw him again when he was back, and we were in the hospital room with everyone else, but also kind of together, I brushed his shoulder just to kind of test my theory, and you know what? The next day, I shit you not...*the next day*, I got a call from the power company, and they’d screwed up my bill for the past six months, so I received this massive credit. That was followed up by Dad gifting me the family sedan because they got a newer one and telling me he was going to teach me how to drive. Right after that, I was walking during my lunch break, and I found that dresser that someone had thrown out on the curb—that amazing antique one—and the next day, right after that, I found twenty bucks on the sidewalk. See? It can’t be random. Lennox is good luck. For *me*. There’s something about him and...and I really, really need this.”

I put on my big eyes and my *I’m very sad, please have mercy on me* face,

and I can tell that Ayana is caving. She's forgotten all about her club, which is dangling from her hand, and all about the ball sitting on the pink golf tee in the grass. I stick my lip out and let it tremble a little. She snorts, but it turns into a giggle.

“Alright, alright! We haven't told you where Lennox is working because, honestly, I was scared you'd try and go there every day and inhale the same air or try and bump shoulders again....”

I let out a shriek of disbelief. *Don't call anyone a butthole. That would be inappropriate. Especially don't use the word puckered.* “He has a *business* here, and you didn't say anything?”

“Well, he's...” Ayana and Ransom share a look. One of those mushy, *I seriously get you because I'm your soulmate, and you're mine, and we have a dark and broody secret* kind of look. “Yeah, he just opened up a store a month ago.”

I have to say I'm speechless, and it takes me a long minute to recover. It's a good thing the golf course is virtually deserted right now because we're taking a good long time at hole six. “He's running his own store? That means he's staying here? In San Diego?”

I couldn't believe Lennox was back when Maya was born. I mean, I could, but I thought it was just for the birth, seeing as how the granny and the twins

were also there for Ransom, as well as his other brother, who I hadn't met, and his fiancée. I thought there was no way Lennox was going to be sticking around. The fact that he's been here for a *month* but Ayana and Ransom haven't said anything? Seriously? For real? I thought he was just back in town for the weekend, maybe a little longer, and was doing them a solid by babysitting because he's a good uncle.

I don't really know anything about anything. That's the most frustrating bit.

"A store?" I repeat. "What kind of store?"

Ayana lets out a cough and throttles the grippy handle of her golf club with both hands, even though she's nowhere near the tee or her ball. "Uhhhhhhhhh, it's a pawnshop, actually."

"A pawnshop? *Oh my god*, you know I love thrifting and antiquing! How could you not have told me?" The silence is so deadening that it could almost be labeled profound. Ransom and Ayana share another private look, and it's the kind of look that says they don't know how much to tell me. "Uh, fine. I get it. You all have some big secret going on. I'm not going to ask because I love you, Ayana, and I get that some things are private. I also get that you think I might turn into a raving, raging wildebeest and try and rub Lennox's shoulder for luck or...uh, I don't know."

Brushing is different than rubbing, okay! Rubbing just sounds wrong! There will be no rubbing involved. You're afraid I'll take things overboard and be a pest. But I won't. I just need this—just one meal. Food seems to be the most powerful. And okay, maybe just a *brush* of shoulders at the end. That's it. I promise it's the last time I'll ask. I just seriously need this. My dad gave me a car! *Gave* it to me. My sister is so jealous even though she got her license a hundred freaking years ago and already has a car. If I don't get my license, or I wreck the car, or...or...whatever. I just need this. Really. Plus, he owes me one. He did kidnap me and cause me all sorts of trauma....”

“Which he did pay for with pie and fries and apologies,” Ayana counters.

“And it wasn't just him,” Ransom points out. “The twins had something to do with it too.”

“Lennox was the brains behind the kidnapping. But behind all of it? Well, I'm not sure about whatever it is you all have going on, but I can tell your granny is the real brains behind all of it. She didn't order the kidnapping, and Lennox was being punished by having to do the swan boat ride sitting on the boat with me. If she didn't want him to be here, why would he be in San Diego?”

Again comes the guarded look that Ayana and Ransom try to quickly pass between each other such that it's too fast for me to notice, though I still

notice it, of course.

“Uh-huh, I thought so. Your granny is hoping that Lennox and I...that we...he’s here for a reason, isn’t he?”

“Um, well...we don’t know what the reason is. Honestly. Besides being close to us, helping out with Maya, and keeping an eye on us to make sure we’re adjusting okay and all that...” Ayana trails off and blushes. She’s obviously said too much. “It’s not because she wants Lennox to...she’s not a matchmaker.” There isn’t enough steam behind that, and I know Ayana too well. I can hear the doubt in her voice.

Whatever. Doubts are good. And even if Lennox’s granny does want to play matchmaker? Well, I’d be down for that. Lennox doesn’t look a thing like Ransom. I know they’re all adopted, and their granny isn’t their biological granny, but Lennox is big, like Ransom. He’s tall, muscly, bearded, and deliciously sandy with the most intense green eyes. He’s yum with a side of yum, and he’s funny. What’s not to like about someone funny? And the best part? He’s also brought me the only luck I’ve ever had in my entire life.

I flutter my eyelashes at Ayana, trying to be charming and persuasive. It’s okay if she sees me as super ultra pathetic and in need of lots of help and saving. I’m okay with that just this once. “Please? Just one lunch.

Pleaseeeee? Pretty please with pickles on top? I swear I'll owe you big time. I'll babysit Maya for you whenever you want for the next month. I'll...I'll sell my soul to you on a soul contract."

Ayana rolls her eyes. "Good lord. Keep your soul. That's just weird. I'll take you up on the babysitting offer, and Ransom will talk to Lennox, okay?"

I hesitate, wondering how far I can push things without going too far. "Can he talk to his granny instead?"

Ayana's nostrils flare. "Okayyyyy, let's golf!"

I don't know if that's a yes, but I think it is. I seriously freaking hope it is. Really. Because as much as I need good luck, I'm almost scared to think about the bad. It's been a while since something truly disastrous happened to me. I need to stave it off. This is about so much more than just passing my driver's test.

I don't need another piano incident.

Even if it was a very pretty, painted, artistic piano.

CHAPTER 2



Lennox

“I’m sorry to say, but we have another one.”

Sher is a sweet twenty-year-old girl working at the pawnshop part-time to pay for her college tuition, but when those clients, you know which ones I’m talking about, come in and try and test her because she’s blonde, petite, and sugar-sweet, she can turn into a werewolf, no full moon needed. After a few chew outs in which people got ripped—not just new assholes but new everything—I encouraged her to tell the customers that she needed to get the boss and just walk away from the situation.

So far, it is already round three today, and it’s only ten in the morning.

I have a small office at the back of the store, which is, as most pawnshops are, a small brick building set smack dab in the middle of a busy street with lots of foot traffic. The building isn’t new, and it was a pawnshop for a long time before Granny gave me my new mission.

I’m not on Operation Take Down Bad Guys and Kick Serious Ass. Right now, I’m on the mission of making sure my brother is adjusting well to life as a parent, a partner, and a semi-retired person. I wonder why Alden didn’t need us watching over his shoulder. Granny is more worried about Ransom,

but maybe it's because he's a parent now. Alden chose to remove himself from our lifestyle, whereas Ransom kind of had it forced on him by Granny, and she wants to make sure he's okay.

He's more than okay, as I keep telling her. He's doing great. He's not bored because he watches Maya while Ayana is taking her master's in business. It was a decision they made together. Thank goodness Ransom had tattooing skills. He runs his own shop here now, though he's had to hire a few artists to fill in for him until Maya is older. I used to imagine him working on something outside the family, and for some reason, I always thought about IT. I guess because it's the most natural thing to think about when you're good at hacking.

It always made me laugh to think of Ransom wearing a suit and fixing boring computer problems for people who use their CD drives as drink holders. I've heard about this. PEBCAK. I'll just leave it at that. I can't see Ransom having the patience to deal with PEBCAK—the problem exists between chair and keyboard, meaning people.

“Should I tell him to stick that banana where the sun doesn't shine?” Sher asks from the doorway of my office.

“No!” I stand up quickly, shaking my head. “No, sorry. I was in a fog. I'm coming.”

“Oh, a fog bog. A mind fog bog. I get those all the time. It’s early, and it’s Monday morning. I think there’s a full moon tonight. That would make a lot of sense. The hair is coming out early today, I tell you.”

I chuckle. “Have you ever considered a career in stand-up comedy? I think you’d be good at it.”

Sher beams at me and gives me a moony-eyed look that I quickly ignore. Not only will I not get involved with an employee, but I...well, I’m never going to get involved with anyone. I know Granny’s real reason for sending me here isn’t just to watch over Ransom and Ayana and Maya. She’s hoping I’ll fall madly and deeply in love with Ayana’s best friend, Cass. The whole kidnapping thing might have brought us together, and after that, Granny’s pretty much interfered, throwing me her way.

Granny knows everything about my past, and while she holds out hope that I can live a normal life and be happy doing all that with someone—a soulmate or whatever—I know the truth. I might be an easygoing, funny guy on the surface, but that doesn’t reach even so far as skin deep. Granny knows me. She should know that. She should know I’m wrecked for romance and that I’ll never, ever date or get married or do any of that stuff.

At the front, I found out Sher wasn’t kidding about the banana. Also, thankfully, the banana wasn’t a code for something else. There’s a young kid

standing behind one of the display counters with canvas shoes, baggy shorts, and an even baggier band T-shirt. He's sporting a man bun, and he has a banana set on the counter.

I walk over casually and paste on my best *I can do the whole PEBCAK deal* smile. I treat all customers the same, whether they bring treasures or junk, easy or difficult. I know a smile and kindness can disarm people, and it's always better to hide the lemony, scary side of myself and just be kind but firm. I guess that's basically my life philosophy.

"Can I help you?" I ask in a level tone.

The kid—because he's not much more than eighteen or nineteen, and to me, who's an ancient thirty-one, eighteen was a longggggg time ago—says, "Uh, yeah. Want to sell you this banana."

"Okay. Can you tell me what's special about it?"

You know, I don't really mind being here for the time being. San Diego is warm. Even the winters, which we're dead in the middle of, are warm. I don't mind not freezing my arse off for now. I've learned that nothing is permanent, and this, too, shall pass. I've been trained to have patience and bide my time. Unlike my brother, Ransom, I wear my scars on the inside, and that's where I'm scariest. Until then, fuck it. I can grin like I'm not the devil in a sandy blonde, slightly Viking-looking package and deal with all sorts of

banana-selling cheesewads.

“Uh, it’s art. Yeah, bananas just like this have been selling for millions, and I want my due. Paintings stuck to walls...you name it. Bananas are the next best thing. Thought I’d be a good soul and cut you in on the deal.”

“Right. So you’re asking for how much for this banana?” The banana in question is rather ordinary. Slightly curved, yellow with a brown bruise by the stem, a little squishy looking right there at the top, and a few dark freckles along the outer curve.

“I figured that it had to be worth at least ten grand.”

“Because it’s made of gold on the inside?”

“No, because it’s art!”

“It just looks like a banana to me.”

The kid shuffles his feet and clasps the banana. Hard. It makes a little squishy, farting sound, and he lets go of it in alarm. Nope. Definitely not made of gold inside.

“This banana could make you famous! Isn’t that the point? You could do what all those other guys are doing and get a head start!”

I barely manage not to roll my eyes, sigh, and go into a full beast mode where I tear off my shirt and gnash my teeth and...okay, whoa. Not letting

the demons out today. No way. And not just because it's a full moon, and I'm kind of on my own mission here, where staying undercover is a good thing.

“Tell you what? I am kind of hungry. I'll give you twenty-five cents for that banana.”

The kid looks behind him, shuffles his feet again, then sighs. “Alright. I'll take it.”

I point to the counter across from me, where Sher is waiting. She's biting her bottom lip, and it's either to hold in a torrent of bad language, which she's known to let fly if provoked, or to hold in laughter. Probably both.

“If you head over there, Sher can write you up. We have to do paperwork for all sales, no matter how big or small.”

The kid lumbers off, and I take the banana and return to my office. It's a solid room with a steel door that locks. I normally leave it open so everyone knows I'm not one of those creepy bosses who do questionable things. Right now, I take pleasure in locking it, plopping onto my chair, and letting out a big sigh.

Goddamn, Granny, you picked a fine establishment for me. I swear she's still punishing me for the whole unsanctioned kidnapping of Ayana's best friend. So, yeah, it could have ruined everything, jeopardizing the whole mission, but it didn't. Granny helped me set up my office here after proudly

announcing that she'd bought me a pawnshop to run for the next six months or until she found another mission for our family as a whole. We've never been without cases, so I didn't buy that, but I did know better than to argue with Granny, especially because her whole reason for helping me set up my office was to hide hollowed-out books with Glocks—her weapon of choice—stashed in them on the bookshelf.

I peel the banana and lean back, biting off the mushy bit and forcing myself to swallow. The subsequent bites are better.

The banana isn't even the worst of it, and that's considering the fact that this week alone, we've had someone bring in a jar with poop in it—we all had bets on the odds of it being human poop, but we never found out for sure—a bag of fingernail clippings that were supposed to be from an early saint, but when we had them expert dated, they turned out to be no more than five years old (yes, I shit you not, pun fully intended), and a parrot. We ended up buying the parrot because they're hard to care for as pets, and people often abandon them—how sad is that? Plus, one of my employees wanted it, and I wanted to give it a better life. I think all of us were just glad about anything that came in that wasn't excrement or a human body part.

Real or otherwise.

That's right. We get everything here from fake limbs, which are actually

super expensive, to the aforementioned poop in a jar (not super expensive, just super gross).

Suddenly, my cell goes off, vibrating my banana—the banana on my desk, I mean. My phone is right beside it. I grab it and slide my finger across, fully expecting the blocked number to be one of my brothers, so I'm surprised when Granny's voice blasts over the line.

“You're having lunch with Cassadina Platt today, end of story, so don't even try arguing with me. Pie and fries, Lennox. Pie and fries.”

“What? I...I have a meeting during lunch today. Can't do it. Sorry.” I seriously freaking knew this was the reason Granny wanted me here. So far, she's been subtle about it, but I guess that's at an end.

“You're doing it,” Granny insists firmly. “Don't make me fly all the way there, Lennox. Because if I do...”

“You'll what? Hug me and bake me a pie instead of making me hunt down a place that makes pies that aren't ever going to be as good as yours?”

Granny might be a Glock-toting, hacker badass of an older lady, but she's still our granny above all, and she loves us more than anything in the world. The five of us, who she adopted and gave a better life when we were cruising straight for incarceration or worse, are probably some of the only people who get to see her softer side. I guess that's what happens when the mafia murders

your husband, and you vow revenge on almost all organized crime, train as a hacker badass in order to take them down, and—

“Lennox? That’s exactly what I’ll do. I’ll smother you with so much love that you’ll wish you’d just taken the girl out for lunch. It’s just one lunch.”

“She thinks I’m her good luck charm. It’s weird. And untrue. Wait, let me guess. She has something big coming up, so she needs to brush my shoulder again while pretending she’s not doing it and then eat pie and fries because it’s a weird superstition she has?”

Granny huffs. “Just take her to lunch, please. She’s going to be coming to the pawnshop at noon. You’ll do it with a smile on your face because she’s a nice girl and the best friend of your brother’s girlfriend, and she’s had a run of it, let me tell you that. She truly does have shit luck, and yes, she needs a solid.”

I want to squeeze the banana until it turns into banana mush, which wouldn’t really be that far off from where it is now because aren’t all ripe bananas basically mush? I mean, have you ever tried to eat one quietly? Right, you can’t. Because they’re so mushy. You want to learn the art of torture? Tie someone up and bring a banana into a room with you. Then, slowly bite off a bit, lean in next to their ear, and chew. Chew, chew, chew. Mmmm, good bananas.

It would work. I keep telling Granny that, but since she's not in the business of face-to-face torture—she prefers the more subtle ruining empires of crime through online methods—she hasn't implemented it yet.

“If I take her to lunch,” I say carefully. “Can this be the last penance I pay for kidnapping her? And can this be the last matchmaking attempt? Because it's never, ever going to happen. Also, can I come back to Switzerland soon? I miss the twins.”

“Your mission is to protect your brother, Ayana, and Maya right now until they're settled into this thing called being a family.”

“They're more than settled. They're fine.”

Granny makes a displeased granny noise in her throat. “Take her to lunch, and we'll talk. Maybe I'm working on something for you close by. I can't tell you yet, but we'll probably be joining you soon. Stay put, stay tight, keep your whities tightie, and stay undercover.”

“As if you have to tell me that. And for the love of god, don't talk about underwear.”

“I know I don't, and fine. Just hang tight, okay, Len? I know this is a lot for you, but I really do appreciate it. And for lunch? Get gravy with the fries, and don't forget the cherry pie, of course. Eat a slice for me.”

I wish I could throttle my phone, but I kind of need it. I could buy another, but it's such a pain in the ass. I already own no less than twenty different ones, and it's hard to keep them straight. "I know what you're doing, Granny, I swear," I say with about as much cheerfulness as a goat getting poked in the arse with a stick by some banana-selling kid.

Humming. That's right. All I get is humming—Granny humming jovially into the phone.

"It's not going to happen."

More humming. "I absolutely don't know what you're referring to."

"Granny, just so you know, I'd rather have my ass hairs tweezed by industrious monkeys than go on something that's considered a date."

"Why on earth would you do that when waxing is so much easier and more effective?"

"Granny...."

"Love you. Bye now."

The line goes dead, and I'm left staring at the banana peel on my desk. I pluck it up and throw it in the trash can. Then I check my phone just because I want to see what time it is, and my email dings, so I check that too.

Awesome. Yup. Of course, it's from Granny. She's sent me a gift

certificate to a salon not far from here for waxing.

Despite the great amount of annoyance that I feel at having my life meddled in and trifled with like this, I do crack a smile. Then I check the time, and my smile fades. *Great.* I have roughly two hours to prepare for the strawberry blonde, blue-eyed tornado who is going to crash through here.

Maybe literally.

I don't know about unlucky, but Cassadina is often clumsy at best. She's a nice girl. The kind of misunderstood person who probably often gets mistaken for a bit of an ice queen because she's shy. Also, Ayana has told me that Cass is afraid to get to know people because she's scared her bad luck will rub off on them or that associating with her will get them killed. Yes, really. Apparently, there was an incident with her ex and a piano being moved, and it fell and just about took them out. Of course, Cass would take that personally because, by then, she had a track record of unfortunate accidents and whatnot.

I know very few things about Cass because it's not my business to learn. Ooey, gooey things, including romance and Granny's sappy plans, are not for me. What do I know about Cass? She's pretty, tall, and curvy, she works at some marketing job, and she likes those bubblegum-flavored bottle candies. I know because they happen to be my favorite too.

I've been adamant that I won't go there—there being anywhere near Cass in a getting-to-know and being interested even as friends kind of way, just because I know that whatever Granny says, that's her objective. Alden and Ransom found women who get them when we never thought a normal life was really possible for any of us, and all of a sudden, my badass granny has turned into a mushy banana, softie granny who believes in true love and great-grandchildren.

Fucking sigh.

At this point, if a piano dropped on me, it would probably be doing me a favor.

Especially if it was a nice, artsy-looking one painted with bananas because why the heck not? It would be no more ridiculous than this forced-upon-me lunch I'm about to embark on.

CHAPTER 3



Cass

I stare up at the big, blinking neon sign, a little surprised and a heck of a lot more amused. *Bottom Line Pawn*. How very inventive.

I pull open the door and enter the building. It's one of those bunker-type-looking buildings that is made of concrete block and has bars at the big windows. Okay, so maybe it's not a bunker, exactly. I think all concrete block just reminds me of that. This one has a tad bit more cheer than most, considering the blocks have been painted scarlet, and the flashing sign at the front is very retro.

"Hi, can I help you?" A younger woman flounces up to me, her thick, mahogany ponytail swinging behind her with every step. She's wearing a pawnshop T-shirt with the words *Bottom Line Pawn* in big letters, and then below that: *Where the bottom line is our specialty*.

I cover my mouth with my hand because I'm pretty sure that's a turd below the words, and it has a developed set of buns in jeans. I mean, I could be wrong. It could be a nuggety chocolate bar stripped of its wrapper, some kind of fig, or a very strange-looking cigar or something.

"Um, is that poo?" I blurt before I can make my mouth shut up and not say

embarrassing things. I have no choice but to point at the shirt after.

“No. It’s supposed to be a line. With a bottom. For the bottom line.”

“Oh, I see.”

The girl sighs. “I think it might be possible that people are getting confused by the logo. It would explain the poo in the jar that got brought in here a short while ago.”

“Poo in a jar? Someone wanted to pawn that?”

“No, they didn’t want it back. They were looking to sell it.”

“I can’t say I knew that was a thing.”

The girl huffs. “Believe me. I would rather not have known. Anyway, is there anything I can help you find?”

“Yes, actually. Lennox.”

“Sure. He’s in the back. I can go get him.”

“Thanks.”

She nods and walks off. I watch her round the counter and disappear into the back. I glance around, swaying lightly on the balls of my feet, then rocking down on my heels. I guess I do this when I’m nervous. I wore flats because heels would make this feel like something it’s not. I did it for that

reason alone and to remind myself this wasn't a date. It's only about getting lunch with an old friend who just happens to be not so old, and not so much a friend, just so I can have enough luck and maybe enough confidence to pass my driver's test, which is in two days. If I think about it, I'm going to ruin my appetite with nerves. Instead, I focus on the strange trove of treasures in the display case. There is everything from jewelry to old books, an ancient deck of cards, a silver flashlight, and a set of Victorian boots in that one case.

As I go to move on, looking up toward the wall, Lennox is suddenly there. I don't know how he snuck up on me, but he moved like a wraith. "Argh!" I jump back, straight into a display case.

My back hits the display hard, and my tailbone takes the brunt of it, the impact jarring up my spine, bone by bone. I wince and reach back to rub the sore spot. When I let my eyes travel over Lennox, taking in his six-foot-something form, I nearly wince again, but this time it's from twinges south of the border. Lennox is wearing a staff shirt, a long-sleeved one, but on him, let's just say his muscles could have their own zip code or star in their own adult...I mean, action film.

He has the whole broad chest, narrow waist, rock-hard abs, and long legs thing down to an art. Or maybe I should say down to a science. He looks more like a super sexy science fiction figure, and that's mostly compliments

of his beard. It's a sandy red like the very short layer of hair on his head, though that is more sand than rust.

I force my eyes to his face, where they belong because, you know, eye contact and all that, and suck in my breath again. Lennox's face is pretty. He's got the most beguiling green eyes, a straight nose, high cheekbones, and lips that are just a tad too rosy a shade for a guy. If he didn't sport a huge beard—think epic Viking style here—he'd almost be too good-looking for real life. Just so you know, the beard, on a scale of long and magical, fantastical, storybook magician plus mage plus wizard combining together to kick ass, it's definitely an ass-kicker. Aside from how awesome it is, the beard grounds him and makes him more human. Also, I think I might be the one woman on the planet who doesn't mind a man with a two-foot beard. Or any beard.

“Granny called me and demanded I have lunch with you,” Lennox deadpans.

I think he's deadpanning. That might just be straight-up rudeness. He doesn't look happy about it, but then suddenly, he smiles. A smile that doesn't reach his eyes. I imagine him calling Ransom a puckered butthole, and it's not so hard to smile back.

“She said pie and fries.” He gives me a very unimpressed look. “This is

the last time, Cass. I'm not your good luck charm. That whole notion is silly."

"There's a...a...p—place across the street," I say, faltering and tripping over the words. *Great. Now I talk like I often walk.* "It looks like a diner. We could go there. I...I know you're doing me a favor, and it's not out of the way. Plus, I'm paying."

"Sweet. Can I get a few things to go, then? I'm kidding. Of course, you're not paying. Uh, shall we? I have to be back here in an hour in case anyone brings in more poo in a jar."

"Hmm, for real? I thought that was a euphemism. I really did."

"Unfortunately, no."

"Okay, wow. That's disgusting."

"Just the kind of thing we need to talk about before lunch."

"Delicious."

Lennox gives me a funny look. He makes one of those hand gestures toward the door that loosely means, *after you*. His beard is so long that when he motions with his hand, it brushes the beard and makes it look like it's doing a magical beard thing and floating out to indicate the right path—the path of kickass beard goodness.

Too far. Too far, Cass, seriously.

I want to appear confident, breezy, carefree, and uh...not like this is a good luck lunch. I chose a flowy floral blouse, left my hair down, and picked jeans that are torn up and go down to above my ankles, then paired that with bright yellow flats. I hope my outfit screams more *I can be a lot of fun* than *I'm actually a walking disaster; steer clear or face possible death by piano or some other painful, unfortunate mishap.*

The day is bright and sunny. It's a perfect afternoon for a friendly, get-to-know-each-other lunch. I'm nervous now because I know for sure that Lennox doesn't want to do this. I guess I had kind of been hoping that maybe he would want to get to know each other, the whole luck thing aside. I feel stupid now. But, right. Why would he want to get to know me? Honestly, I'm the person who is kind of crazy, has only one good friend, and that's Ayana, and almost got her boyfriend flattened like a pancake because I have a terrible aura that refuses to be excised surrounding me.

Yeah, I probably wouldn't want to take any chances either if I were him.

I'm way busier thinking and worrying about Lennox, who is behind me by a few paces, than I am paying attention to the street which is in front of me. I step out blindly without actually checking for a walk light, and the sharp blare of a horn just about makes me jump out of my skin. Then, I'm hauled

back so roughly that my blouse chokes me at the collar, rips at my armpits, and tears violently somewhere else. I'm not sure where, but I heard the rip.

Big hands clasp my shoulders, the warm fingers digging in through the thin, gauzy fabric, and Lennox's red, angry face appears in my field of vision a second later. "Holy shit, Cassadina. You almost got run over! Have you ever considered it's not bad luck that plagues you but a lack of common sense?"

I grind my molars unhappily. I'm embarrassed about not looking both ways—because even a kid can do that—but to be fair, I was preoccupied. With thoughts of someone's bottom line, and it wasn't that weird squiggly thing on Lennox's shirt.

"I..."

"Come here."

Lennox propels my back, back, and I wonder why we're going backward at all, but then we hit the alley that runs past his shop, and he backs me up against the red concrete brick. His face is all serious, and god, I'd really like to see him smile. For the life of me, I can't think of a single thing to say to get us there. My heart is leaping like a jumping jalapeno in my chest. It's hot and just as spicy because Lennox's beautiful face is only an inch from mine. His beard blows in a gust of wind, and I swear the russet golden goodness

actually brushes my chin.

No, I'm not wondering about luck right now and if the beard touching me just did it for me.

I'm enthralled. Watching his beard flutter a little in the breeze, jostling just slightly at the bottom but not higher up, is kind of amusing. I can feel my cheeks heating up, and *frickle dickler do*, I know they're a bright shade of pink.

Lennox sighs hard enough to sway his own beard, and my eyes rocket back up to meet his deep green stare. "Look, Cass. You're Ayana's best friend, and Ayana is my brother's girl. I care about them both, and I'd do anything for Maya. For that reason alone, I agreed to this lunch, but this has to stop. The luck thing? It's all in your head. It's not real. It doesn't exist."

I cross my arms, and he takes a step back. "How do you know that? Are you the expert on all laws of the universe and science?"

"No. But I know that luck is just a stupid thing people believe in to make themselves feel better about all the things they can't control. There is no good luck or bad luck. Shit just happens. And sometimes it happens disproportionately, good or bad."

His lips purse, and my god, just seeing them do that, kind of defy gravity and put themselves out there, makes my own lips respond with the strangest

tingle.

“That’s not true! I mean, you don’t know that!”

“Well, maybe not, but I do know that kidnapping you didn’t make you win a hundred bucks on a scratch ticket and that brushing my shoulder didn’t...I don’t even know. If there were luck, I wouldn’t be here right now, and people would stop bringing in excrement in sealers into the shop.”

“You’re wrong because that sounds like bad luck.”

He huffs. “So, what should I do? Meditate? Clear my chakras? Set my intentions?”

“Yeah, that and a healthy dose of yoga would probably do wonders to alleviate the obvious stress you feel.” I flush further after putting that out there because now I’m thinking about Lennox wearing one of those strange male skin-tight exercise leotards in one of those old-school yoga DVD’s that I used to do at home, bending all wild and wonderful, his buns outlined in beautiful spandex sexual glory.

Sweet peach pie, I need a fan over here. Specifically pointed at my overheating ovaries.

“Yoga. Right. Uh, what I’m trying to say is that you don’t need lunch. You just need to believe in yourself, be more aware of your surroundings,

and let the rest go. So what if a piano nearly crushed your ex-boyfriend to death? That happens to the best of us.”

“No, it doesn’t!” I wail. “It does *not*! No one I know has ever had a run-in with a piano or wrecked their gym teacher’s face with a golf club. No one has ever stood on stage at their prom, slipped on their dress, and then grabbed a string of balloons that brought down the big number sign, which brought down the Class Of sign that crashed onto the stage and nearly toppled the entire thing.”

Lennox’s lips twitch, and now I think he’s trying not to laugh, which for some reason, amuses me instead of making me feel totally and utterly humiliated. It gives me another hot yoga flash, and oh my, now I’m having mental visions of stripping Lennox out of his pawnshop shirt and discovering the bottom line hidden beneath in the form of pecks and abs and shoulder muscles that are hot as sin.

Oh boy, we’re getting ourselves into a bit of a pickle here.

“Cassadina?”

“I—yes?” I do my best, innocent *I was not just thinking about licking you from head to toe* face.

“Let’s skip lunch.”

“I can’t skip lunch! I’m not going to pass my driver’s test if we don’t eat pie and fries together!”

He sighs patiently. “You do realize that there is zero correlation between the two. For one, that’s not luck. That’s superstition, which is utter nonsense. Your road test depends on your skill behind the wheel and your ability to take direction from the examiner, not from whatever we might eat or not eat today. I have absolutely nothing to do with it. It’s all about your own confidence.”

“I don’t believe that. I’ve had a run of good things happen to me like you wouldn’t believe since you came around. It all started with you. That’s not a coincidence. It can’t be.”

“It can, and it is.”

“No.”

“Yes.”

“I’ll call your granny and tattle on you!” Alright, so apparently, I’ve resorted to being a five-year-old brat—foot stomp and petulant lip-pursed pout not included.

Honestly, right now, I’m desperate enough that I don’t care. And maybe, just maybe, even though I’ve sworn off men, so they don’t get decapitated or

crushed, and also so they can't break my heart, I do want to spend an hour with Lennox because he's funny and witty and entertaining in his own way. And maybe, just maybe, it would be good to have one more person I could count as a friend in my life.

Lennox's eyes practically cross as he studies me by looking down his nose. I'm tall. Five nine. But he's a lot taller. He's tall enough that he has to look down on me, and a lot of people don't, so that's also kind of thrilling. You know what else is thrilling? The dangerous intent in those emerald eyes of his as he studies me.

A shiver goes zipping through me, and all my stomach muscles clench hard even before he cups my face in his big, manly hands and in palms that may or may not have handled poo in a jar. But you know what, I don't really give a shit. Ha. I'm already neck-deep in a poo patch, getting stormed on by the mother of all poo storms—oh right, that's just my life in general. As such, it makes sense that all I can do is stand here and blink up at him like a poor deer in headlights. I have no idea what he's doing, but *please, peaches and cream, can he do it more?*

I close my eyes and have visions that flicker quickly through my mind, as if my entire life was flashing before my eyes, of Lennox brushing those lush lips of his against mine, locking our mouths, and kissing me into bloody

oblivion right here in the alley. Of course, in my insta-fantasy, he also scoops me up in his strong, muscly arms with those movie star biceps, cups my bottom line in his meaty palms, and slams me up against the wall while he plunders my lips. I wrap my legs around his waist and rock against his massive—

“Cass?”

My eyes jerk open. I'm panting. Oh my god, I'm panting. And oh my god, he's still holding my face in his hands. His hands are warm, slightly calloused, and big. So, so big. Big hands, big—

“We’re skipping lunch. You’re going to go home and sit down and set an intention, or whatever it is, and tell yourself that you are not unlucky. You need to manifest yourself as passing your test. Now. This is all the luck you’re going to need.” Just like that, he leans forward and brushes his soft, soft man lips over my forehead.

It's not a kiss. It's not a kiss. It's not a kiss.

It's some kind of benediction. A manifesting of—of—oh god, how soft were those lips?

I’ve never considered myself to be an impulsive person, but right now, I’m hot in the jeans, my ovaries are raring to go, and it’s been a long time since I’ve seen any action. My biscuit became so used to being stone cold that,

right now, I don't know what to do with the sudden fire igniting me. It makes me reckless, and it also makes me feel like a woman—a regular woman, not an unlucky, cursed woman.

While Lennox cups my face, I cup his. I haul his face down a few inches until it's at the perfect angle, then I step onto my tiptoes and give him a proper kiss. Our lips lock the way I imagined, and then I whimper, and it's game on multiplied by like ten plus a piano and some turd in a jar. Lennox growls against my lips, and they part because, I mean, what growl isn't the proper code word for opening up the lips? His tongue thrusts into my mouth, and I lick at it, lapping him up because I'm starved, dying of thirst, and incredibly fucking horny as I've been celibate due to my bad luck for a good long while now, and Lennox is like an alien that fell from outer space. A super sexy, bearded alien.

I kiss him hard, scraping my fingers over his short hair, which isn't bristly at all. My other hand tangles itself in his beard and tugs him to me by those crinkly hairs. It's softer than I ever thought a beard could be. He doesn't have a mustache to go with it, so I don't have to eat a mouthful of hair, which is nice. The kiss is all just lips, lips, fantastical lips.

I suppose it might also be hips, hips, fantastical hips because I find myself rocking and curling my hips into him until they bang against his waist and a

bulge that's—*holy mother of pineapples, it's not a zucchini in there, is it? Right. It's most assuredly a zucchini because it was Bring Your Own Squash To Lunch Day.*

Lennox stumbles back, our lips come apart with a smack, and I let out a little squeak as I thrust my hand up to my tingling, aching lips. My mouth. Jesus, my mouth. I press my hand to my mouth as I pant hard. Lennox looks just as wild. Not because his hair is ruffled and out of place or because he's flushed. It's his eyes. The feral light in them is out of control.

“You should be good to go then,” he says with a grunt. “Take care. Good luck with your test.”

I watch him walk away, rounding the corner of the alley and disappearing from view all too soon. I do get a healthy view of his bottom line, though, and my god, seriously, I've never seen anyone's bottom line look better than his bottom line. It makes my bottom line—

That's seriously too far. Seriously. Too. Far. Yet. Again.

I take a moment in the alley to get my shit together and head screwed back on so that, this time, when I walk across the street, I don't nearly get run over. I skip the diner because I can't focus on lunch, and I'm not hungry for anything but another one of those wild kisses.

CHAPTER 4



Cass

“What are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here?”

We ask the question at the same time as soon as Lennox opens the door after I’ve rung the bell. At Ayana and Ransom’s house.

I cross my arms over my chest, doing my best to ward off the sexy gamma waves he sends through the air, but nope, it’s futile. They hit me like a hot lava eruption, making my body go full-on trembly volcano. To be fair, he does look like a god standing in the light of the open door, the golden beams treating his handsome face very kindly and outlining his massive, built body the way a golden gilt frame outlines a masterpiece. This masterpiece happens to be wearing a tight-fitting black long-sleeve shirt and jeans that hug thighs that I’d like to hug like—

Thighs you’d like to hug. Seriously now? We’re already going there? It’s been all of half a nano-second.

“Umm, I told Ayana I would babysit, so I’m here. For Maya.”

Lennox groans. “Looks like we’ve been set up then because they left hours ago. Maya is already asleep. If the doorbell didn’t wake her up, that is.”

“Oh. I...I should go then.”

His nostrils flare, and I don't know if it's because he's annoyed or because he's scenting the air. It shouldn't be sexy. It should be weird, like a snake's tongue flicking out, but it's hot. Yeah. Just. Hot.

“You should come in. Ayana said you haven't met her surprise yet.”

“She did say she had a surprise. But met? Is it living?”

In answer to that question, a tiny gray kitten comes charging at the door, and Lennox's arm snakes out, grabs my hand, and pulls me inside so he can quickly shut the door. He drops my fingers right away, but I'm left standing there and smoldering. I get it. He didn't want the kitten to get out. But still, my body doesn't get it. The only thing it's registering is the fact that Lennox just *touched* me.

Sad. Sad and pathetic, I know. I'm truly both of those things.

I can't help myself. I'm still playing that kiss from the alley a few days ago over and over in my head. I played it the night before my driver's test when I couldn't sleep because I was so steamed up. I *might* have even tried to work my magic button with my fingers just to banish the full-body burn keeping me awake, but that just made me think about the kiss more. I didn't realize it was possible for a climax to make me even hornier, but I guess now I know it can be a thing.

“Missy Pickle Poo.” Lennox stoops down and grabs the kitten. She’s a typical kitten, wild and fun, and she immediately swings around in his hands and bats at his nose. He pulls her away just in time and sets her down. She goes tearing through the house, leaping, spinning, and being a totally adorable kitten.

“Oh wow. Where did they get her?”

“Shelter.” Lennox’s eyes sweep over me. “If I don’t give you a glass of something, I’m never going to hear the end of it.” He turns and lumbers off to the kitchen, and holy shit, was that supposed to be sexy? Because it was.

No, that was definitely begrudging. He’s not happy about this. And me? I guess I kind of owe Ayana one. Big time. This was all her. I can see it. She’s doing me a solid. Because she knows I didn’t pass my test. Maybe Lennox isn’t a lucky charm, but it can’t hurt that we’re in the same room together again, can it?

Lennox walks back in and—gulp—he has two glasses of wine. They’re not full, though. Just a bit of wine. A few fingers of dark red wine. He sets them down on the coffee table in the living room next to a screen that I know is connected to the baby monitor.

“Thank goodness I didn’t wake Maya up.” I feel weird about walking in and taking a seat on the other end of the couch, but I do it anyway. By weird,

I mean strangely thrilled and tingly all over. I reach for the wine. That's what I need. A bit of wine to brace me.

Lennox smiles devilishly. "This is a special bottle. Found it in the wine chiller. It's expensive, and Ransom told me not to touch it before he left."

"Hmm, I see. It makes sense that we're drinking it then."

He shrugs. "All brothers are the same. Assholes who love each other."

Missy Pickle Poo—my god, I love her name—races through the house. She darts over the love seat and launches herself at the curtains to the side of the blinds. They're made of that sheer, satiny fabric, and she goes sliding down comically, leaving not-so-funny big, gaping tears in her wake.

"Shit." I nod at the kitten.

"She's a destruction machine, that's for sure."

"Shouldn't we stop her?"

Lennox raises a brow. "Yeah. Right. Good luck with that."

"I feel so sorry for Ayana's décor."

Said destruction machine, I mean kitten, goes racing across the living room again, a tiny ball of terror, her legs pumping. She leaps onto the back of the big plush cuddle chair this time and goes airborne. She aims for the living room light fixture, which is a modern and square dangly chandelier-looking

thing, misses by a mile, thankfully, then lands, tucks, rolls, and goes flying out of the room, no doubt off to hone her other ninja cat skills.

I grasp the glass of wine and let the chilled red slide down my throat. It's not dry or sweet, just somewhere perfectly in between. I don't think red is supposed to be chilled, but I like that this one is since I've always stuck it in the fridge. I thought I was alone in that.

"Explain the piano thing to me."

I nearly spit out the sip of wine, which would ruin the tan rug under my feet. I'm also wearing a yellow maxi dress, and wine wouldn't be a good look for it, so I'm glad I swallow and just choke-gag for a few seconds instead.

"You don't really want to hear it."

Lennox's sandy brow quirks up. "I do."

I struggle with that for a while. No, I'm struggling with myself, truth be told. But then, I open my mouth, and sounds happen. Articulate sounds. "I... it was...there was this restaurant." I really don't like talking about this. The near brush with death was so awful that it sucks having to think about it. Normally, I would shrug and say something token, but Lennox isn't the kind of person who deserves something uninspired. His calm and steady expression makes me want to be calm and steady enough to tell him the truth. "They...uh, they had a patio. A rooftop bar up there. Apparently, they wanted

a piano so they could have live music. They hired a moving company to get this pink piano—one of those upright ones—up there, but it wouldn't fit through the stairs going up, I guess, so they had to use some kind of a device with pulleys. I don't really know what happened, but I guess it failed, and the piano came crashing down, and we just happened to be walking past the place when it happened. What are the odds? Death by piano. Yeah, that's totally not a thing. Unless you're me. Or someone who gets too close to me."

"You should have sued."

"For what? Ayana only found out after the fact because it was on some online news site."

"For trauma. For near death and dismemberment."

"Well, it was actually my ex who nearly got piano pancaked, not me."

"Still. Could have sued them for trauma."

I sigh my usual gusty sigh. "I think what happened to them was bad enough."

Lennox rolls his eyes. "Not nearly."

"Well, my ex was a butt face anyway. If he sued, then he'd probably win and put someone out of business, and he'd reap the rewards, even though he honestly never did anything good enough to deserve it. But then, I guess

being rich isn't about being good."

Lennox's face gets shadowy, and so do his eyes. They get dark and mossy and heavy looking. "You're definitely right about that."

"On that note, I could use a snack to go with that glass of wine." I stand up quickly and get away fast because Lennox is so intense right now that he's practically radiating fiery jet beams off of him, and I'm the one about to be incinerated.

The kitchen offers me a brief reprieve. I really like the house Ayana and Ransom chose. It's an older one, built in the nineties, but some of it has been remodeled, including the kitchen. It's pretty state-of-the-art in here, something I could only dream of owning. There's a fridge big enough to stash a body or two—not that they ever would, obviously—a gas range, a matching stainless dishwasher, and even a wine chiller. Pretty fancy schmancy dancy.

I pull open the pantry—yes, there's literally a whole pantry that comes part and parcel with this already amazing kitchen—and stare at the shelves. I don't want to eat a bag of chips, and I'm not into making popcorn. I'm not actually hungry at all. I just want something I can keep my hands, mouth, and mind busy with that's not Lennox. Because, yes, he would make a fine snack, but I'm also sure he doesn't want me to feast on him. He made it pretty clear

to me that he's not into it. I mean, he did kiss me. On the forehead. And he did *kind* of kiss me back in the alley, but that was a one-off. For luck. Nothing more.

We might have been set up to be here at the same time by our well-meaning mutual friends and relations, but that doesn't mean—

“Oh, look there. A container of bubblegum-flavored bottle candies.”

“Argh!” I step, spin, and throw one hand over my heart and the other over my head. I don't know how a man could move so fast and silently—how anyone could, for that matter, including things like sneaky snakes, ninja cats, regular cats, aliens, and fog.

“Whoa, sorry. Didn't mean to sneak up on you.” Lennox smiles softly at me—the kind of smile one would give to an unpredictable animal, which is probably me, cursed by time and shit luck, but still. I can practically feel the heat radiating off his big manly body because he's so freaking close to me.

Yeah. Second heart attack, here I come.

Ovary attack, too, quite possibly. Is that a thing? Ovary attacks? They're twinging and shivering right now, so I think it might be a real thing.

“N—no. That's fine.” I step into the pantry just to get my body out of Lennox's heat zone, as a cool down is definitely in order. I misstep, duh,

obviously, since it's me here, and go careening into the pantry. I put my hands out just in time to catch myself on the wire shelves, but I end up banging my knee straight into one. "Mother plucker fucker," I curse under my breath.

I grasp the tin of candy, which is on the top shelf, expecting it to be full, but nope, it's mostly empty, and it flies out of my hand and hits me smack dab in the middle of the forehead.

To keep from cursing, I have to bite down hard enough on my bottom lip that I taste the warm salt of my own blood. Then I want to curse about biting my lip since that hurt too.

"Not a word," I huff as I exit the pantry, candy tin in hand. I storm off to the living room and plop down hard on the couch.

It would be so, so, SO freaking nice if I could just make it through one day without some kind of disaster happening.

Lennox sits down beside me. He leans in, and instead of mirth, all I see is concern in his eyes. "Let me see. How hard did that hit you?" He cups my jaw in his one hand—*oh my god, he cups my jaw*—and tilts my face down so he can examine my forehead.

I grunt. But not a sexy grunt. It's supposed to be an *I'll freaking well live* grunt. "It was mostly empty, so not that hard."

“You could have knocked yourself out.”

“It wouldn’t be my first concussion.”

“That’s not luck,” he says, suddenly nominating himself as the luck police.

“That’s just being clumsy.”

“Gee, thanks so much for clarifying that. I feel so much better.”

He sighs and lets go of my face. I immediately wish he’d put his hand back where it was and that he’d maybe kiss away the sting of the welt that is probably forming on my forehead. Finding candy can clearly be a very dangerous endeavor.

“Did you get your license?”

“Right. That.” I curl my hands under the lid of the container and pop it off. I do it cleanly without beaming myself in the face with the lid or having some other freak accident. That’s saying something as it’s not easy to be coordinated while my body is buzzing from Lennox’s proximity, the dark scent of cloves and sandalwood in my nose, and the lingering tingle from his hand to my jaw. “No.”

“I guess it didn’t work then. I told you that I’m not a lucky charm.”

“And if I had passed, would you have been then?”

“No, it would have been skill. But don’t worry. No one passes the first

time. I'm sure you just need to try again." He says that so softly and nicely that my heart aches a little.

"Thanks. My parents looked at each other when I told them. Just looked at each other. They didn't say a word, but that look... It was basically a look that said *oh gee, our hopelessly unlucky daughter, who has never had one thing go right for her in her entire life, failed her test. Are you surprised? Nope. We're not surprised.* And I'm not trying to be cynical. They really did look at each other like that."

Lennox huffs. He looks at me for just a second, then looks away, but I can see something in that look, and it isn't anything along the lines of what I just described. Was it...anger? Anger at my parents for knowing I'd fail and for not believing in me? I don't know. Now he's focused on the candy instead. I follow his gaze and groan.

"God, why? Why do I have to have the worst luck? Why can't something good just happen to me for once?"

There is only one bottle candy left in the tin, and it's broken off at the top, so it's not even a whole one. Someone literally stuck the tin back in there with one left.

Fuck my life with a side of fucking fuck fuckery do.

"You have it," Lennox says. "I insist."

“I’ll probably choke on it and die at this rate.”

“No, you won’t. You eat it. Right now. Prove to yourself that you can do it. There isn’t any such thing as luck. It’s just skill, circumstance, and—”

“Life isn’t always what we make it. Sometimes, there are things we can’t control against us.”

“You’re not going to choke on that bottle candy.”

“I might.”

“You’re going to rebook your driver’s test, and this time, you’re going to pass.”

“Doubtful at best. I’m a terrible driver, which is why I never got my license. My parents always hated being in the vehicle with me when I had to practice.”

Lennox’s countenance turns absolutely stormy. Somehow, that makes his face even hotter, which I would have bet money against because it already seems like he’s at peak hotness level. “You will indeed pass the next time because you’ll practice hard and be confident going into it. If you haven’t wrecked a vehicle yet, that makes you a better driver than three-quarters of drivers anywhere.”

“I…”

“Eat that bottle candy! Then tell me you’re going to pass your driver’s test.”

“No! I’m so unlucky that if Missy Pickle Poo came back in here, she’d probably do me down with her murder mittens just because she was in the mood to commit foul cat meow-der.”

“You just wanted to use the word meow-der. She’s so small that she’d be incapable of murdering you.”

“She might maim my face.”

“Then you and Ransom would have something in common.”

My jaw unhinges. “I can’t believe you just said that!” I glare at him. “Too far, Lennox. That’s way too far.”

He looks at me sheepishly. “I meant that to be said with love, sorry. You know I love Ransom. He’d joke about the scar the same way if he were here, but maybe he hasn’t done that with you. He’s my brother, and sometimes we’re too familiar. We bust each other’s balls. The scar...we all see it, but it’s just part of him, and we love him and would do anything for him—me and the rest of the guys and Granny.”

“I—I guess you’re right. Okay, I get that.”

He pauses, testing the waters to see if I’m going to chew his head off

again. “You know that it happened because some ten-year-old punk got him with the fork end of a spork, right?”

“I...what?”

“You think you have bad luck....” He shakes his head. “You grew up with parents who might be insensitive about some things, but they love you. They took care of you. You got a good education, you graduated from college, and you’re still whole. You haven’t been maimed with a spork, you have your health, and you’re a gorgeous, beyond beautiful woman. You have your own place and now a car of your own. You have a good job because you worked hard, you’re talented, and people believe in you. You probably even have houseplants at your apartment that you haven’t killed, and you didn’t get crushed by that piano. Bad things happen to everyone. That’s just life. So I wouldn’t say you’ve been any unluckier than anyone else.”

“I...” I don’t know what to say. It’s never been pointed out to me like that...just how very blessed I am. When I think about Ransom, who is like a brother to me now because Ayana is like a sister, and I think about his poor face, the life he led, the scars he accumulated because he had no parents, and the foster ‘parents’ who were supposed to be looking after him but didn’t even bother to feed him, I do feel like a whiner.

Lennox is right. I do have my health, and I have my family. I also have an

education, my own place, a job, and a small amount of savings in the bank. Not only that, but I have food at home that I can eat anytime I please, and I have health insurance. Maybe I only have one good friend, but so what? Ayana is worth at least a hundred only so-so friends, and now I have Ransom and Maya in my life too.

“Sorry.” I know it’s lame, but that word is sincere. “I know I’ve been and am privileged, but do you think it’s possible to be blessed and unlucky all at once?”

“No. I’d say most people would think you’re very, very lucky.”

I don’t hesitate to nod. He’s right. I guess maybe I should stop using the term luck and start using the term cursed or klutzy or consistently in the wrong place at the wrong time, as Lennox suggested.

I pick up the bottle candy and jam it into my mouth. The thing is freaking old and as hard as an ancient, well-used rubber boot, but I chew and chew, then I swallow. Lennox watches me the whole time with his eyes fixed on my lips, which is both incredibly sexy and entirely unnerving. He looks like he’s yearning for a taste. Of that candy. “Shit. I...I shouldn’t have listened to you. I should have bit it in half.”

“That’s okay.”

Lennox’s voice is deep and husky. He’s still looking at my lips, really

looking. He's looking at them like he wants to devour them, which obviously does wild things to my belly. And my hoo-ha. Just saying.

"It's not. I should have shared it with you. I'm obviously insensitive in so many ways."

"No. You can be a good person and still need a change of perspective. And if I want a taste, all I have to do is this."

He leans in, his spicy scent enveloping me as I gulp a quick breath of oxygen, and *oh my holy joe crow, he's going to kiss me*. I'm not prepared for the mind-bending awesomeness that is going to be this kiss. It's going to break my world apart, blow my mind, and set my panties on fire, epic dumpster style, but without the shitty connotation of that phrase.

But he doesn't. He stops shy of my lips, and I should have expected no less. With my luck or whatever it is I have going on, no one wants to take their chances by tempting fate. Plus, he's already made it clear that he's not interested. My stomach crashes, my heart burns, my brain goes into shut down, protective mode, and my hopes plummet straight into the abyss where dreams go to die.

And then.

There's an 'and then.'

Lennox's hand hovers near my chin, barely touching me, his finger angling my face up to meet his. He doesn't kiss me, no. Someone like Lennox doesn't just kiss. Am I mind blown? No way. Lennox is more of a mind-obliteration kind of guy. Instead of locking lips with me, his tongue traces my lower lip, licking off the vestiges of sour sugar from the candy.

Oh. My. God. Did it just get several thousand degrees hotter in here? Right, yes, it did. Because my lady bits just ignited into flames.

He hums low in his throat. Hums. A deep, lovely sound. With that, I am beyond done here. My panties? On fire. My ovaries? Close to exploding. My hoo-ha? Shivery with delight. My panties? Soaked. Oh wait, I went there already. Well, soaked or on fire, maybe they can be both.

And then.

There's another 'and then.'

Lennox's tongue moves to my top lip.

CHAPTER 5



Lennox

“Lennox, we should...talk.”

It’s not exactly what I thought Cass would say after I lick her bottom and top lip, which are utterly deliciously and maddeningly tempting even without the few grains of sugar that I spotted.

“Alright, your lips are divine.”

“No! Not that kind of talk.”

“I see. Dirtier?” She glances at the silent baby monitor on the table. “Those things are one-way communicators,” I assure her.

“Not dirtier.” She shudders. My stomach does a sloshing, cramping thing as I watch disgust roll through her. Right, why wouldn’t she find me disgusting? Sometimes I can barely handle myself. “It’s just...this isn’t... uh...my couch.”

I let out a sigh. I’m being too sensitive. Not exactly my forte. Sensitivity. That shudder just hit me in the wrong spot and stroked me the wrong way. Whatever it is that people say. It got me straight in the bits that are still a little raw, even though, most of the time, I give zero fucks what people think. I’ve had enough therapy, compliments of Granny always being worried about all

of us, that I've worked through most of those demons, but I guess a few still linger here and there, writhing under my skin occasionally. They probably always will, and honestly, I've really tried to make peace with that, along with everything else.

“And also, I'm basically the last person in the world anyone would want to hang out with besides Ayana because she's awesome and nice, and Ransom by extension, and maybe my family. Plus, there's the whole piano thing, and since I'm not convinced that the universe doesn't hate me, I can't let you talk dirty to me. I should probably go.”

She says that but doesn't move, and her eyes fill up with tears. *Fucking fuck nuts*. Lady tears. I don't know how to deal with lady tears. Watching Cass cry makes me feel like someone is scooping out my insides with a melon baller to make a really nasty fruit punch, the body parts kind.

“Whoa, there. No. I refuse to let you think about yourself as some bad luck charm. You are going to change your fate, your luck, and your...your whatever you want to call it. You're going to change your mind. That's what's going to happen. Right here, right now.”

She stares at me defiantly, the tears still in her eyes, making them sparkle like the ocean on a hot, sunny day. I don't know where it's coming from, but suddenly, it matters to me about changing her mind. Maybe because I know

what it's like to feel like you're going to spend the rest of your days alone, and it really, really sucks. Maybe I care that Cass is unhappy and hurting and that she truly believes if she touches someone or something, it's going to get piano-fied or turned to dust.

This time, when I kiss her, I lean in and do it slowly. I trace her lips again, memorizing the pattern of them, the feel of her, and the sweet bubblegum taste with the sour afterbite of tingly candy sugar. That taste of sugar ignites something in my gut, and all of a sudden, my jeans are getting tight-fitting in the crotch region, and my nuts kind of feel like they're burning a little. Cass is equally responsive, arching into me, threading her hands around my neck, and tugging me closer. She's all I can think about, and for me, that's a first.

A rather terrifying first.

I should hold on to all the reasons why this is a bad idea, but what do you know? Maybe I'm a little bit cursed, too, and Cass isn't the only one who needs to let that shit go. So, yeah, kissing her like my life depends on it? It's not so bad. I actually kind of like it. I guess she kind of likes it, too, because all of a sudden, we're doing a horizontal kind of kiss with her stretched out beneath me, trying to slam her pelvis up into the beastly bulge in my pants and scrambling to wrap her legs around my waist.

As much as I want this, this isn't about me getting my rocks off—my dick

protests this HARD. Haha. It's about making a point and getting Cass to believe she's not unlucky and that she's just a regular person. Wait, no, that's not true. She's so much *more* than a regular person.

"I'm going to prove you wrong," I rasp against her lips, breathing raggedly. "I'm going to give you the best orgasm of your life."

"No!" She still rocks against me, and we both gasp in pleasure when her hips collide with my hard-on. "You'll get squashed by a steam roller tomorrow or the next day. You might blow up, die, or get run over by a bus, or a rocket could drop from space right onto your head, and I would be responsible for it."

"Bad luck doesn't literally rub off. That's just an expression. And you're not that kind of unlucky. You. Are. Not. Cursed."

"You can't. We can't. It wouldn't be right."

"Screw being right. I want to touch you, Cass. I'm not afraid."

"I...I can't let you sacrifice yourself just to prove a point."

"That is the point."

Her eyes squeeze shut, and then they fly open again. "I want you," she pants. "I want this. My god, I want you to touch me. I've thought about...I've thought about you before. You're the reason I failed my driver's test. I mean,

no, not you. I just...I couldn't sleep. I couldn't stop thinking about that kiss in the alley. I...I touched myself, and I thought about that kiss. I imagined it was you touching me. Then I imagined you eating out my pussy, and I... couldn't sleep."

"No, I imagine not." I somehow say that with a straight face, which is a minor miracle because my balls are the size of beach balls, and my dick is so hard that I could do not one but ten home runs." I nearly laugh when I imagine myself trying to wrangle my dick up and swinging it like a bat. Jesus. What a picture that creates in my head.

"It's not funny," she growls.

"No." I instantly sober up. "It's not. But I'm not going back on my promise either." Did she really touch herself while thinking of me? Nothing like slaying me right here with a single sentence. "I still want to give you the best orgasm of your life."

"I can't risk it!"

She's actually serious about his shit. That slays me for real because, my god, who could go through life thinking things like this? It's just...it's not right. It's extremely sad, and I'm not letting her go down like this. Not on my watch. I realize this is exactly what everyone wanted to happen, and I was adamantly against it because I don't believe in love, but you know what?

This isn't love. This is about bad luck, curses, and orgasms. I can do orgasms.

“You can, and you will. I'm going to prove to you that nothing will happen to me. And, just to up the ante, I'm going to do it all without touching you. I want you to show me how you touched yourself the other night. Show me what kept you awake. I want to see you stroke that pretty pussy of yours, and I want to see you make yourself come while I say the dirtiest things to you. You think luck or the universe would have a problem with that?”

Cass' pupils are more than blown. Her irises are now the thinnest circles of sapphire around those black holes. I can easily find the universe in *them*, and that blows my mind because right now, she's staring at *me*.

“Maybe it would let me get away with it just this one time,” she says huskily. “It might let you live.”

“Good.” I curl up, leveraging myself off the back of the couch until I'm standing. I inch away, then sit down on the edge of the arm at the end of the couch while Cass' head is near the other end. Her legs are propped up, her mouth swollen from my kisses, and her eyes focused on me. “I want you to pull up your dress. Let me see those long, silky legs.”

“Oh—oh god...” Her hands tremble. She closes her eyes, but she does what I say, pulling her dress up inch by inch.

My god, her legs. Her legs are the stuff men would kill, start wars, and

topple nations for. They're lovely and silky smooth, the calf muscles shapely. Her knees are even pretty. They're long—the kind of long I'd rather have around my waist, but if she's willing to give me this and also claim it for herself, then I'm willing to take one for the team and give my dick a pass for another day.

Besides, there's always the whole big and long explanation thing if I take off any clothes. I've never told anyone except Granny and my brothers about what happened, but Cass deserves the truth.

Yes, it's definitely safer for everyone—universe or otherwise—if we do it this way.

Cass keeps going with her dress, pulling up the hem until her peach lace panties are exposed.

Peach. Lace.

My mouth goes dry, and my dick is so hard in my jeans that I'm pretty sure I could bat an entire season with it or use it as a medieval-style weapon.

I realize I'm supposed to be giving instructions here, so I force my head back into the game. Cass' eyes are still closed, and her face is flushed. The pink in her cheeks makes my balls want to explode. I can see the pulse at her neck, fluttering there like the mad beat of a hummingbird's wings.

“I want you to touch yourself, Cass. Show me how you touched yourself. Show the universe that you can take what you want for yourself. You don’t have to rely on it to give it. You make your own luck.”

“I...I don’t know if I can believe that.”

“You make your own luck. Repeat it, Cass. I want to hear you say it.”

“I make my own luck.”

“Say it like you mean it!”

“I make my own luck!”

“That’s right.” Pretty sure my dick just got even harder right then. I practically can’t think, and I have no idea how I’m going to get out of this without doing something very nasty in my pants. I’m also not at my house, plus I’m supposed to be babysitting. Granted, I’m just watching to make sure Maya doesn’t wake up, but it’s not like I’d be able to swap my pants for Ransom’s pants and not have anyone notice.

Tantalizingly slowly, Cass’ finger tracks to that peach lace, and she lifts the edge. The breath sucks right out of my lungs. She’s perfectly shaved and totally smooth, and I can see how wet she is.

My dick is literally doing a countdown to accident-in-the-pants time. It’s going to be a reality here if I don’t get my shit together.

“Is that how you touched yourself, Cass? What did you think about? You thought about me kissing you?”

“I...”

“Kissing you with clothes on or without? Kissing you where?”

She bites down hard on her bottom lip. “I already said that I thought about you eating my pussy.”

Gulp. Just. Gulp.

Focus. Don't lose it now.

“Imagine that your finger is my mouth. Show me how you'd like me to eat that pretty pussy of yours.”

My dick wants to be the one calling the shots. It wants to rip off and walk away and leave me sitting here on the end of the couch for being stupid enough to ask her to use her finger instead of using my mouth. At the same time, it also very much appreciates the most spectacular show I've ever seen. Cass isn't like anyone on the planet. She's enchanting, beautiful, and a goddess in the flesh. And her pussy—oh my god.

Her pussy is the stuff of pure fantasy.

I know for a fact that if I had a driver's test tomorrow and the next day and the next day, I'd fail them all because I'm going to spend the next...no, *all*

the private moments I have jacking off in an attempt to alleviate the world's hardest hard-on and the bluest of blue balls.

“Push your panties aside. I want to see you touch yourself. I want to see all of it.”

“Oh god...” Cass does as I say, but she makes a snorting sound and then a croak that sounds a little bit like a frog mating call, and even that is sexy.

“What’s my tongue doing to you? Is it impaling you? Circling your clit? Sucking you into my mouth? Lapping up all your sweet honey?”

“Holy shit...”

Hold. The. Fuck. On. Don't. Listen. To. The. Pain. In. Your. Dick.

I think I've got a firm hold on holding back, but then Cass moves her fingers away from her pussy, and they're glistening, drenched, soaked in her juices. She brings them to her mouth and paints her bottom lip with her honey before she suckles them into her mouth, licking them clean.

It's official. I'm going to be cranking my dick for the next century to alleviate this hard-on. Cass is going to take up all my memory space from now on. I think she just broke my memory bank because she's taken up every spot in the spank bank. I'm going to turn into a prune, spending all that time stroking one after another out in the shower.

Cass isn't the least bit shy, and that blows my mind. Maybe she's just really horny. I could put on one hell of a show for her right now, too, and not mind in the least. But I'm no exhibitionist, so I get it. I won't. Because, as I said, I have no desire to go into very sad, very ugly explanations about my body tonight. Or ever. This is a one-time thing. This is for Cass, and this is about me sensing something wounded in her and wanting to do what I can to help her fix it.

Plus, I mean, if she stops believing in the whole luck thing, then she'll stop believing I'm her good luck charm, and she'll leave me alone. Which is what I want, isn't it?

“Oh my god...” Cass' whimper draws my eyes straight back to her hand, which is slowly circling her clit. She pinches herself gently, surprising me, and her hips ride up into her touch. And then, she dips two fingers straight to her entrance and plunges them inside. She throws her head back, and her whole body pulses as she thrusts with those fingers. Her other finger circles her clit, and my god, does she ever know how to touch herself.

This is going to fuel the rest of my jerking off for life. For. Life. It's always going to be Cass. I'm always going to think of her—her legs spread open, her sunshine dress rucked up around her hips, and her cheeks flushed, pleasuring the most beautiful pussy I've ever seen. She's as sensual as any

goddess, her dress flowing over her curves, her sandy hair like the tide lapping at the beach, except it's hugging the swells of her breasts beneath the dress, her skin creamy and flawless. She has more than rocked my world. She has completely obliterated it.

Her eyes are closed, her lips are parted, and my god, I want to do things with her that would make her know for sure she's the luckiest person in the world because I won't stop until she knows just how special she is. I want to dine at her mouth like it's a five-star establishment, and I want to dine at her pussy the same way. I want to be inside her, filling her up and making her come on my dick until she can't remember what the word luck even means.

It's official. I'm dead. Slayed.

“God, Lennox, I'm going to come....”

And she does. Without my instruction, which is more than alright. She takes it for herself, exactly as I wanted her to.

She comes hard, slapping a hand over her mouth to contain the sounds. Her hips rock into her touch, and she works herself, her legs trembling, the veins in her neck and forehead popping just a little, and her eyes fluttering like mad. Her fingers work her body harder, spilling her wetness down her thighs and onto the dress under her.

There's a good possibility that if it was my dick, and we were doing this

for real, there's no way I would recover from the amount of perfection Cass embodies. She's just...I know she's not perfect, not in that sense, but she's the most perfect, wonderful goddess of a woman I've ever seen.

It's a damn good thing I'm sitting because I don't think I'll be able to stand for a good long while after this.

Unfortunately, after Cass cools down, which takes a few minutes of wrecked breaths and then longer, deeper ones, she pulls her dress down, smoothing it over her thighs, and looks at me shyly. "Um, it's been so long since I kissed anyone, let alone did something like that."

"Was it the best orgasm you've ever had, knowing I was watching you come?"

"Oh god." She shivers. "Did I make a face? Please tell me I didn't look funny while coming."

"Not at all. You could never look funny. You looked perfect. You were perfect. You are perfect."

Her eyes grow heavy, her pupils getting even bigger as she studies me from beneath sandy lashes. "I want to...can I..." She reaches for me, and I do the dumbest thing ever.

I skirt off the edge of the couch, backing up a step. "I'm alright," I assure

her. “This was about you.” Then, because I’m an utter dumbass, I tack on, “I’m not looking to date anyone.”

Cass’ face falls, and she freezes. Her eyes narrow, and those lips that I want nothing more than to kiss until it’s swollen all over again pull into a thin, hard line. “Oh, I see. This is all just a game for you, then.” She sweeps off the couch, effortlessly graceful, adjusts her dress, then flips me the bird, also with effortless grace. “I guess you got what you wanted. Have a great night, douche canoe.”

She storms to the door, and I know I have to stop her. There is zero internal debate about it. If I’ve ruined what she just did for herself forever because I’m a coward and an ass, then I’ll never forgive myself.

I catch her as she goes to open the door. Before she can leave, I put my arm out and press it shut. She whirls around, baring her teeth at me, which is sexy as fuck, but it’s also super sad, and it fills me with recrimination. “I’m not trying to stop you from leaving,” I say quickly. “I just need you to hear me out. I’m sorry I said that. I’m not looking to date anyone, but I wasn’t playing a game with you. I...it’s complicated. For me. There’s...the past is... it’s fucked up. *I’m* fucked up.”

Cass snorts. “Oh, please. That’s what everyone says. They’re fucked up. Oh, it’s not you; it’s me. If you don’t want to date, that’s fine. I never thought

this was dating. I...it was just...it was what you said. Sticking it to the universe, which I did, so now I'd like to leave."

I don't let go of the door. I will right away, but not yet. I can't let her leave like this. I don't want to hurt her when it's so clear that everyone else, except maybe Ayana, has failed her in some way, making her feel like she's alone.

I do the only thing I can think to do to help her understand. I grasp my shirt sleeve and yank it up, pulling it over my forearm. The light is still on here in the entranceway, and it *perfectly* illuminates the scars left by years of abuse and cigarette burns. Cass gasps. She throws her hands over her mouth, and her eyes shoot to mine. Then, I yank my shirt up just enough to show her the lesser carnage on my abs. I've seen worse. Honestly, I have. I probably got away pretty lightly, all things considered. But it's the reason I wear long-sleeved shirts. Always did as a kid too. Bob and Linda, the biological scum some people call parents, made it a rule. They weren't stupid enough to punish me only where people couldn't see, and they weren't clever enough to think of anything past their hands, feet, and lit cigarettes. Since they were often fucked up on substances and even nastier when they were sober, it was often the cigarettes.

"Fucked, Cass," I say tightly. "Not like other people. I wear humor like a cloak of armor. I try to be funny, so that's all people see, but underneath, this

is me.” There’s no humor now. In the past, I’ve told people all sorts of stories. After years and years of therapy, I don’t mind being touched in good ways. I’ve even had a few very short relationships and more than a few that weren’t relationships over the years. Early on, I learned that women dig scars, especially if there’s a sob story behind them, and I hate to say that when I was younger and angrier, I made use of that. Now, I just make up shit, so a thousand and one questions don’t get immediately thrown my way.

But Cass? Something about her makes me want to tell her the truth, and I can see that she’s intrinsically kind and good. It’s not that I don’t want to soil her with it. It’s more like I don’t want to *break* her with it.

“How did...how did you get those scars?”

I shake my head, lower my shirt, and tug my sleeve down. This wasn’t such a good idea if I didn’t plan on following up with an explanation. Honestly, I wasn’t really planning or thinking. I just did it. “Not tonight. I don’t want to wreck what we did, what you did. Whenever you start thinking about luck, think about this. You tell the universe to fuck itself the same way you told me off. You show it your middle finger. You’re strong, Cass. And brave. No, not just brave. You’re fearless. You’re powerful. You can set your own path. Just remember that. And keep that bird flying when anyone tells you differently. Anyone. You hear me?”

“Lennox, I—”

“It’s not your fault. And I’m good. Been dealing with getting over this for a long time.”

“I want you to tell me. If you’re...if you can. Please don’t make me leave and then disappear yourself. If I never saw you again....” Her voice, all cut up and throaty, wrecks me a little. A little more than I already am. Her eyes sparkle with tears, and she swallows hard. “It’s not pity.” She dashes the tears away. “I’m just sad because...fuck. No, I’m not sad. I mean, I am, but I’m fucking angry too!”

I shrug. “Don’t be. As I said, whatever’s coming? It’s what we decide for ourselves.”

“Are you...are you going to disappear?” Her voice wobbles and shudders.

I shake my head slowly. “Granny wants me to stay. Plus, I have the pawnshop. And Ransom, Ayana, and Maya.”

Those cerulean blues darken a shade. “Those are the only reasons?”

I could be a total asshole and ensure Cass wouldn’t seek me out again, or I could do the one thing I told myself I wouldn’t do because I wasn’t looking for any sort of connection. Basically, the said connection has gobsmailed me hard in the face, and there’s no backing down now.

“No.”

Her throat works. I want to put my hand there and feel her swallow, trace the veins running there in the alabaster column, and feel her pulse beating under my fingertips. I want to put my lips there and kiss her life force. Kiss her until she’s moaning and melting against me. Until her hips are banging against mine and—

“Okay,” she whispers. “Have a good night, Lennox.”

I step back, allowing her to let herself out, and she does. I have no idea how she got here. Did she walk? Take a cab? She obviously didn’t drive because she doesn’t have a license yet. It’s dark. This neighborhood is a good one, but still.

I wrench open the door and stumble out onto the porch—that’s right, *stumble*. Because try walking with a hard-on this hard. I searched the street for Cass, but wherever she went, she was already gone. Unfortunately, I can’t just leave right away to go after her to make sure she’s safe because Maya is inside, sleeping.

Turning around, I very reluctantly reenter the house and close the door.

It takes me all of two seconds to get enough blood flow back to my brain to figure out what my next move is going to be. I have mad skills, duh, so I can make sure Cass gets home okay, even if it means tipping my hand just a

little. Whatever. It will be more than worth it.

I'm going to put my hacking skills to good use to get her number, or maybe I'll just look it up. But it's probably unlisted, so yeah, back to the hacking. And then, I'll say Ayana wrote it on the fridge for me as a secondary emergency contact. No tipping of the hand will be necessary for that.

What a wild fucking night.

What a wild fucking life.

We make our destiny. I firmly believe that. The crazy thing? I think I'm charging headlong into mine, and it happens to have sandy hair and sea-blue eyes.

CHAPTER 6



Cass

A few things Lennox said to me really hit me hard. The talk we had, combined with him showing me those scars, pretty much broke me in the kind of way people say the internet gets broken. Or maybe it's not the same. For someone who is just twenty-three and does marketing for a living, I should be more updated on my social media jargon. Anyway, I'll tell you what it did. It registered with me like I stuck my head inside a great big bell while it was being rung. The echoes of it, the memories of what I saw, rang through my head all night. I was thinking about what kind of a life Lennox must have lived instead of thinking about what I did with him on Ayana's couch.

Okay, I thought about that a few times, but then I thought about how it mattered to him that I believed what he was saying, and now I know why. Because before he was adopted, he wasn't lucky in any sense of the term. He lived a hard life. He probably didn't have any of those things he listed for me—a loving family, health, enough food, an education, and somewhere he could sleep at night and feel safe.

I'm starting to believe that maybe there isn't really a thing that makes us lucky or unlucky. Maybe I can be blessed and still be clumsy or have

unfortunate things happen to me back to back to back. Perhaps that's not luck. I was slowly wrapping my head around that, though it's hard to change my mind after living my whole life thinking one way about something.

It's Saturday today, and I only work Monday to Friday. I slept terribly, tossing and turning and thinking about everything that happened at Ayana's, but I got up early and did yoga to work out the kinks and try to focus my mind. That didn't work out—at least not with the mind thing—so I called Mom and asked if I could come over. She said my call was excellent timing because she had made coffee but then realized she was out of cream. So, on the way over, I went to pick some up. At the corner store, the guy rang in the two small containers of cream and said they were free. I was super confused until he said they were on sale at two for four bucks and then showed me the two-dollar-off sticker on each carton.

I thought to myself, *well, shit. Things are looking up.*

I decided to push it by buying a few scratch-off tickets, and what do you know, they were all winners. Yes. Every. Single. One. Of. Them. I only won a total of twenty-two dollars, but that was still eighteen dollars more than what I spent on them.

I was so excited, and I thought of Lennox right away. I did try and tell myself it wasn't him making me lucky, but thinking about him made me

think of pie because we ate pie and fries the first time we met after he kidnapped me.

So, before I reached my parents' place, I stopped by the bakery and chose a cherry pie. I actually ended up with two pies because it was a weekend special, buy one pie get one free.

Then, I had a great coffee and an even better chat with Mom, and she even told me that I would for sure get my license next time. She believed in me, and she really meant it. Dad was out golfing, but she made sure I knew he believed in me too.

And there I was, thinking they didn't.

I got back to my small condo right around one, and my phone dinged the second I walked in the door. Lennox had texted me the night before, asking if I got home okay. I was honestly quite touched. Aside from my mom, no one had ever done that. Apparently, Ayana left my number on the fridge for him as an extra emergency contact since she and Ransom were at a small concert last night and may not hear their phones.

Or Ayana just wanted him to have my number since she already knew I was going to be going over there because she set us up, which I totally don't mind. Actually, I'm insanely grateful to her. It was just about luck at first, but now...

Now it's not.

And since I still believe in falling pianos and the universe hating on me, I'm a little bit worried about it. The luck thing got tossed around when I was a kid. I'm not sure what age exactly, but I guess I've been thinking this way for a good long time. I need at least two weeks to change my mind. Isn't that what everyone says about forming a habit? That it takes two weeks?

Anyway, my phone buzzed, and it was a photo of the pawnshop. *Lennox's* pawnshop. Followed by a text saying he was thinking about grabbing a late lunch and then asking if I would like to join him. It was very un-Lennox-like, but me being me, I immediately jumped at the chance, thinking he wanted to talk.

So, I'm here now, standing outside the pawn shop with a cherry pie in my arms and a thing of cream wrapped up with an ice pack in a towel in a bag. Seriously, I need to invest in a cooler.

I glance at the pie, then in the direction of the retreating bus that I just got off of. I kind of half wish I hadn't brought pie. Do only crazy people bring pie when they get invited to lunch? Am I that person? The pie lady who comes in all bubbly and blonde and cheerful?

What would be so wrong with that?

It's not my voice in my head that I hear. It's Lennox's.

When I walk into the pawnshop, it's fairly busy, which is probably normal for a Saturday. I walk over to the far left side of the counter where two employees wearing the same turd—I mean line—T-shirts are standing and talking while studying a phone with their heads bent.

“Those are the cutest pussy toes I've ever seen.”

“Do you know they smell like tacos?”

“Really? Dude, that's awesome. I want a pussy of my own.”

I clear my throat. A little too loudly. I'm sure that I'm scarlet. The two guys, who are probably in their early twenties, if that, nearly leap out of their skin. I guess they didn't see me standing here.

The first grins sheepishly while the other, a red head whose pale skin flushes a neon red, slowly swivels the phone around.

“Pussy toes,” he explains. “I just got a cat. She has the most adorable toes. Pink with black speckles. See?”

“And they do smell like tacos,” the other guy explains. “Cat feet. Have you ever smelled them?”

“I can't say I have.”

“Catch them at a time when they're sleeping, not fresh out of the litter, and I swear you'll find that their feet are pure tacos. It's a well-known fact.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Hey, is that pie?” The redhead puts his phone down on the counter and gives me a big grin. He calls over to the girl I met before. “Hey, Sher, someone brought a pie for us!” He grins at me but then suddenly sobers. “Please tell me that you’re not here to pawn or sell that.”

“No.” I guess this is the reason the universe smiled favorably on me for a change. So I could share the love in the form of cherrylicious, golden-crusted pie. “It’s for all of you.” I take the cream out of the bag and set its sweaty ass on the counter. Yeah, it was a long bus ride. Thank goodness for the ice pack. “This is also for you.”

“Cream!” The redhead guy totally salivates.

“Oh, no way!” Sher joins the guys behind the counter. “I swear this place gets stranger and stranger every single day, but this is a good surprise!” Her eyes finally light up when she looks at me. “Oh! I know you. Are you here to see the boss?”

I flush immediately and get terribly flustered as soon as she says those two words. The. Boss. “I...I guess I am. We’re having lunch together.”

Sher frowns. “Oh really? He just took lunch, but I’ll go get him.”

Right away, I feel quite sick to my stomach. What if this is some kind of

joke? What if Lennox asked me here just to test how pathetic I could be? *Why would you even go there? Harsh. How about some self-love for a change? Let's try that. Oh. There. Doesn't it fit nicely? Yeah, it's all soft and warm and fuzzy like a fluffy pink sweater that's two sizes too big, so you can really wrap yourself up in it with a side of extra fluff.*

Sher disappears to the back, and I try and focus on the joy that I brought to the place in the form of pie. The guys also disappear with it quickly enough, all with huge smiles on their faces. I glance around nervously, wondering who is actually watching the shop, but none of the customers browsing around abscond with anything the moment the staff's backs are turned. Soon enough, Sher is back.

“Lennox says he's on his way out.” She goes back to her customers, and I twist my hands nervously in the skirt of my black maxi dress.

I couldn't decide what to wear, so I went with something that was breezy because it's made of organic cotton and bamboo and something that was both kinda fancy and really not fancy all at once. I'm sure a black dress works for any occasion, and this is my usual go-to when I have no idea what to wear.

“Cass?”

I spin around at the sound of Lennox's voice. “Hey! I...I'm here for lunch.”

He appears genuinely confused. “The guys got the pie. Is that what you mean?”

“No. Uh, I thought you asked me if I wanted to go for lunch?”

Twin lines appear on Lennox’s forehead, and two more entrench themselves on the bridge of his nose. “Can you show me your phone?”

This is just weird, but okay. I grab my phone out of my purse and flip to our texts. After looking at my phone, he shakes his head, and my stomach sinks.

“Granny,” he mutters.

“Your granny?” Now I’m extra confused. And concerned.

“Never mind. I already had lunch, but if you want to go for a walk, I’m game.” He plucks at his long-sleeved *Bottom Line Pawn* shirt. “I could write it off as advertising, right? Going for a walk in this general area?”

I giggle extremely girlishly, then glance around furtively to make sure no one heard that. Thankfully, no one is paying attention to me. “I...sure.” I’m so thrilled with the idea of going for a walk with Lennox, even if his amazing body will radiate heat on an already scorching day, that I nearly dance a jig. For the record, I suck at dancing, and I don’t know how to do any sort of jig. “Sure, yes, I think you could work that into your advertising plans.”

“Well, you have a degree in marketing, so you should know. I’ll take that as a solid *let’s make it happen.*”

Alright, it’s official. Lennox is definitely a fire hazard in those thigh-and-buttock-hugging jeans. He’s not just going to be emitting heat. He’s probably going to incinerate nearby bushes and trees and maybe even melt the asphalt. *Stay away from parks.*

“Thanks for bringing the pie. My staff is going to love you forever. That was very kind.”

“You’ll never believe how I got that pie and cream.”

His lips curl. “Let me guess. You’re going to tell me it was because something lucky happened. Because we *talked* last night.”

Oh my, I think I need to purchase a fan. But I don’t think they sell those here. Or maybe... *Don’t turn your head all owlsh and look all around you. Stop that. Just use your hands. No, not like that. Don’t flutter. The thing with my hands was a joke. There’s nothing you can do to quell the internal fire.*

I shrug innocently, ignoring the flames that are practically going all mother lovin’ dragon down *there*. “Something like that...”

CHAPTER 7



Lennox

“I have to ask, and I’m only going to ask because I really do care, not because I’m super nosy, and to prove it, you can feel free to say pass or nothing at all or tell me to mind my own business, but I...well, since we’re walking and talking, and we’re walking in the same direction, which means we can’t really look at each other all that much and saying things like this might be easier if you’re not watched while saying it, I was just...that is....”

“You want to know about the scars.”

“No. I want to know about your past.”

“So the scars.”

“Lennox!”

Cass pivots quickly, stepping in front of me so neatly that she cleanly avoids the parking meter that I was all set to save her from—things are indeed looking up for her when it comes to the whole *get taken out by inanimate objects* front. She stops, so I have to stop, and then she grasps my hands and looks at me right in the face, and okay, beyond that, straight into the feely area where I wasn’t sure I had a lot of feels or fucks to give, but I’m definitely feeling, and I’m giving them at the moment. She’s utterly

beguiling, entrancing, and beautiful, with her hair flowing over her shoulders in a big sandy mess of curls and wavy strands and baby hairs sticking out at the top of her head. She's a little flushed—I think from the heat, though I'm open to other suggestions—the dress she's wearing flows over her sexy curves like she's a goddess standing in the middle of a midnight fountain while the fabric is the water, and her eyes are shimmering with intensity.

Fuck me, but I'd really like to pull her into one of the alleys closest to us, preferably a dark, sketchy one without smelly dumpsters, security cameras, people gawping, or cars driving through, and get it on with her up against the wall until we're both senseless. But I would never do that. It's extremely crass and not my style. It's public, and it's...I don't know, just all-around kind of strange, but I suppose most kinky fantasies are, and this one has me harder than bloody stone. I could swing my dick around like a sword right about now. Ha. First, a bat, now a sword. Next...what? A wrench?

It's not appropriate to grin right now, but I let myself give in just a little. Cass is still clutching my hands, and maybe it's not the fantasy that's doing it for my dick. Maybe it's her touch alone.

“Alright. We can talk as we walk.”

“Are you sure? I don't want to pry. I don't want you to feel like you were forced or coerced into telling me, and I don't want to make anything worse

for you. I don't want to make you feel bad, or what do they call it? Triggered?"

"I'm good," I reassure her as I squeeze her hands back. That's the kind of thing people say, isn't it? But I actually feel it, though not good in the sense that I feel physically good. Because I don't. I always feel varying degrees of sick, mind-numbing horror when I think about the past, but right now? I know I can get through it because this isn't just for me. I'm not alone right now. I'm with Cass.

Watch out for flying pianos. Jesus. Very funny. Very. Very. Funny. Apparently, my internal voice is a douchebag. *No, that's all you, baby.*

It shouldn't feel right or natural, but when Cass drops one of my hands and keeps the other threaded through hers and starts walking beside me again, I don't have a meltdown about the contact. It feels good, actually, even if it is the first time I can ever recall not knowing what to do with the rest of myself. I'm so big all over, and while Cass is tall, she feels tiny compared to me, and that tininess extends all the way to her hand, from the fine bones of her knuckles to her slender fingers. Feminine fingers.

Okay, so this might be the first time I've ever held someone's hand. Like really held it. I'm not a mushy kind of guy, and for me, hand-holding is right up there with tickling a hairy spider. I don't like hairy spiders. I will never

admit to being afraid, but I seriously don't like them.

Cass doesn't ask me any more questions. She just walks, her pace matching mine because I've slowed down, and she has very long, shapely, wonderful legs that I would like to taste—what? She walks beside me. That's what she's doing. And it works. We work like this. Not saying anything more than that.

She doesn't feel the need to ask a thousand questions or try and fill the silence with words so that it feels less awkward and uncomfortable. We walk. And walk. We walk past the buildings and stores lining the street, most of them with bars at the window, past a daycare with kids racing around like crazy in the front yard, and past a string of houses that look a little shudder worthy, then past one that is well kept, with a pink door, pink shutters, and purple siding.

“The people who biologically had me—I don't use the word parents—were drug dealers.”

Cass squeezes my hand but says nothing. She's smart. She doesn't offer any condolences or pity, and so far, that's good and very much needed.

“They basically raised me because they found it advantageous to have a small person who most people wouldn't suspect of doing bad things. Not that I ever knew I was doing them. I was mostly an adolescent drug mule. My

sphincter wasn't nearly big enough, and they weren't very good with surgical implements, thank fucking goodness, so they had to get creative in other ways. They'd sew bags of drugs into stuffed animals and have me carry that. They'd also sew drugs into the lining of little backpacks or tiny, adorable suitcases and the seams of my clothes. Sometimes it was powder, sometimes pills.

“They were the kind of drug addicts who lived in an extremely nasty, run-down house in a bad neighborhood and sampled their own products. Way too often. They weren't into spanking when I displeased them. They were so much more creative. They smoked worse than twin chimneys, and one of them always had a lit cigarette. If I did anything wrong, even look at them, or exist, they'd feel free to burn me. They had a lighter in their piece of shit car, and they'd use it when they really wanted to get their point across. They never got more creative than that. They were too lazy and never picked up anything to beat me with, although they did smack me around fairly often, but not with objects. With their hands. They never hit me in the face and never burned me in a place where anyone could see. I always wore long-sleeved shirts and pants. My arms were the worst of it because they were the most easily accessible, but sometimes, when they were particularly nasty, they'd make me lift up my shirt and give them a fresh target.”

Cass inhales loudly. It's a hiccup and a sob she's trying to keep in, but I

don't look at her, and she doesn't say anything about it. She swallows, but the first few words still crackle and fizzle out of her tightly closed-up throat. "What set them off? Or did they do it because they were sick like that?"

I focus on a dog lunging at a chainlink fence, baring its teeth at us as we walk past. I feel like my insides—alright, maybe some of my outsides too—used to resemble that dog. The thing is a mutt, unsightly, dirty, and uncared for. It's got long hair, but the hair is falling out in clumps that haven't been brushed out. Spoiler alert: I'm the rescue dog that gets all shined up, pretty, and happy(ish) after it's adopted into a furrever family.

"They really got into it whenever they were high, which was pretty much all the time. Both of them were nasty and mean, but the drugs made them worse. They didn't just sit around and get all blissed out. They did the nastiest stuff, and it made them totally unpredictable. I knew that, even as a kid. I fucked up a lot too, but I was a five-year-old, then a six-year-old, then a seven-year-old kid running drugs. I didn't even realize it half the time, and they were too high to keep their shit straight. Of course, they liked to blame me, so the fuck-ups weren't their fault. They liked to make me pay."

"Please tell me the universe punishes people like that? Please tell me that, Lennox!" Cass drops my hand, races around in front of me, and grips my shoulders. Her teeth grinding together is so loud that it literally reverberates

through me. “Tell me that someone called social services, and you got out of there.”

I shake my head without emotion. “No, the universe didn’t punish them. They punished themselves. They owed a lot of money to the wrong kind of people and knew what was coming for them. I was ten at the time, and I knew what was coming. By then, I’d been skimming their cash for two years. I was a smart kid. I was saving up for the day I could get away, and that day came sooner than I thought. I had just over four grand stashed away, if you can believe that. I’d met some really shady people who thought it was cute that I was being used in the drug business at such a young age.

“I left those two, took the money I’d saved, and was gone. A few months later, I heard that my biological creators had overdosed, and no one thought it was accidental because they knew what was coming for them. Because all the money they owed would have been worse. After I left, I survived by going from one person to the next, getting work where I could. People use kids for the same reason I was being used before then. Because no one suspects a kid that young. Anyway, I did that for a few years, and by then, I was pretty hardened. I stole my first car at twelve. Thought I was hot shit. A couple of guys taught me what I needed to know, and I had a head and talent for the bad stuff that was born out of so much practice. I stole cars for a few guys for a long time.”

Cass' hands slowly leave my shoulders. They fall to my waist, oddly enough, and she reels herself in while I stand as still as a statue. I look past her and speak to the air because it's easier to admit your sins to nature than it is to another person. Especially a person with lovely blue eyes the color of a pristine sky, hair the color of wheat, and rosy lips that I would very much like to kiss again.

“And then your granny found you,” she says quietly.

“No, I found her. A couple of guys had been talking about this lady who had a classic car stored in her garage. Nothing special, really, but it would get a few grand. Classics are easy to jack, so it got me excited. I broke into the garage and stole the car in under two minutes flat. At that time, I was living in a ratty old house with four other guys, and it was the most disgusting place. The neighborhood was terrible. It was the kind of neighborhood where you could get shot or stabbed without provocation if you stepped a foot out of the house after a certain hour. I grew up with that shit, so I was never scared, but this lady...this old freaking lady. She comes all the way from a pretty decent part of the city. All. The. Way. And she knocks on the door. In the middle of the night. None of us could believe it. The guys thought it was hilarious, and then, well, you'll never get this. She pulls out a damn Glock and stands back. She's wearing shitkickers, all dressed in this fancy black pantsuit. None of us had noticed those boots before. And then, she winds up

and kicks the fucking door in. It wasn't much of a door, but it went in. The other guys ran and escaped through the back door. But not me. I was too impressed. People like that...they're the type you want as your boss. The kind who are so crazy fearless that death could be breathing down their necks, and they'd just tell the bastard to go fu...uh...farf himself."

"Are you for real?" We haven't moved, and Cass is still studying me from right in front of me, her hands at my waist.

Terror prickles the back of my neck. I'm not afraid of much. Never have been and probably never will be, compliments of my upbringing, or should I say survival methods. But this? What I just said? I said it all without even thinking. I got so lost in the story that I fucked up. I told Cass about Granny without even realizing it, and that shit can get her in real shit. Really dangerous shit. I don't want anything to happen to Cass. I want to protect her. Even if the things I do now are good things, they're still dangerous.

"I...uh...I'm kidding," I say, then laugh, but it sounds false to me, and I know Cass isn't buying it, though she doesn't let on. She's got a good poker face. She does hold my gaze, though, and now I feel like I can't look away, or she's going to know I'm lying. "I didn't make it out of her garage when I tried to steal the car. She came out holding a shotgun, and she told me I had two choices. Deal with the cops or deal with her. I told her I was a good kid

from the right side of the tracks who got off on doing bad things. I gave her a fake address and fake parents' names. We had some planned out, just in case. People who would vouch for us if we needed it. They were all basically drug dealers too. So, she called, and then she showed up at their house. Just about gave them a heart attack. She offered to send me to private school, pay for it all, and give me a full ride to college after that. She said the talent I had could be honed for so much more, and well, I made my choice. I think she knew I didn't have any parents. And when she said private school, she meant...uh, *private* school."

In attempting to try and cover my tracks, I just about slipped up again. Oh, I went to a private school, alright. The kind of school that had my brothers and me learning not only the shit we needed to get our GEDs but the kind of skills no one teaches. Both stories are kind of true. Granny did show up, and I was left in the house alone. She asked about my parents, so I took her to another trashy, run-down house. Those people, people I was working for, were only too happy to accept a few grand of cash to forget I existed. We tell people the whole parents and private school thing more as a cover story to protect not just all of us but to protect me. Only my brothers know the truth. I have to admit that we even watered down my story for my brother's girl, Azalea, and Ransom no doubt only told Ayana the bare minimum.

"Oh, I see."

“Granny was...she was amazing. After she adopted me, I had a lot of firsts. I had real brothers, a family who actually cared, and this amazing older person who didn’t want to use me for drugs or cash or stealing or anything. She truly cared about the big shit, the small shit. All my shit. And believe me, my shit stank as bad as my attitude. Or maybe that’s supposed to be a metaphor, and I just botched it. Before Granny, I’d never even tasted cake before.”

“Cake?”

“Yeah. Never had good food and was hungry more often than not. I trained myself out of caring whether my stomach was growling or not. I’d do something else so that I didn’t have to think about it. Anyway, I’m going to stop now. I’ve already painted a pretty grim picture, and it’s going to ruin your day. You clearly had a good morning. Didn’t mean to poop all over that like a poo raincloud raining poo rain.”

I’m glad I’m shutting up now. I definitely need to do that. I’ve messed up more than a few times in the delivery of that story, peppering in way too much truth, which I don’t do. I don’t tell the truth about myself or mess up. No, I’m normally flawless in my execution, so what is it about Cass that makes me stumble?

Oh, you know what it is.

Shut up before I dick-punch you.

That would be bagging yourself, FYI.

I'm not afraid to do it.

You should be. You need us. Nuts, balls, Lennox. We're a team. We've always been a team. Don't go senile on us now.

Senile? Hardly.

Penile?

I'm cutting this off now.

“I...I'm still processing everything. That was like a ten-course meal. It was a lot to digest. I think it's going to be a lot to digest for a good long while.”

“I promised you lunch, apparently.” *Technically, Granny's the one who promised you because she's a hacking master. She hacked my freaking phone and saw that I texted you to see if you made it home okay last night. Granny. Meddling. Crazy. Crime fighting, world-saving, my own ass saving Granny.* “I'd say there's a good chance that what I just told you put you off of it, though.”

“Uh, nope. If you want lunch, I'm down. Or not. I'm okay since I had pie with my mom this morning. But I could eat. If you want to eat.”

“God, no. I mean, I already had lunch. Sorry, the second part is probably a more appropriate response.”

Cass. This woman. This woman is something else entirely. She’s standing there studying me like I didn’t just tell her more than I’ve ever told anyone, basically the whole freaking truth, which is unheard of for me. I just didn’t tell her the parts about what went down after Granny. I told her about all the parts before I was even Lennox, which is a name I chose for myself. That was part of Granny’s thing. We all needed new names to keep ourselves safe, but also because we weren’t where we came from, and we got to decide where we were going.

That’s right. Granny one told me the same thing I told Cass last night.

Cass’s brows pull down, and *holy moly, sweet, tart, crisp, sugar-sprinkled cherry pies*, I want to take my thumb and smooth that wrinkle out of her brow like smoothing a crisp, freshly dried sheet. Yeah, I really like doing laundry. Nothing wrong with a little laundry. It’s a good way to pass the time, and it’s very therapeutic. Plus, who doesn’t like the scent of freshly cleaned fabrics?

“Coffee then?”

“You want to have coffee with me after all this?”

She grins, stands on her tiptoes, and grasps my shoulders in a foothold as her body, with all her sensual curves, cozy warmth, and lush *womanliness*,

brushes up against me, turning me from kind of only semi-hard to full-on raging. Now I'm back to having a sword in my pants that I could go full-on video games blaze of glory with. Then, incredibly enough, her lips press against mine, soft and lush and so freaking kissable.

I let myself revel in the kiss, cherishing every single second of it. It's a kiss that says *you just told me the worst, and I know there's more, and it's probably worse than you could even express, obviously, since I've seen the evidence. I know you can't tell me everything, and that's okay. We all have our secrets, and I'm going nowhere.*

She kisses me sweetly, just a brush of her lips against mine after that scalding, soul-shattering, mind-blowing, breath-obliterating, heart-pumping kiss.

"Are we getting that coffee?" *Can I see you again? Could we have a semi-proper date? Or I'd be okay with just hanging out too. Do you want to roll the dice and see if a piano falls on you, or possibly a satellite coming out of orbit, or an alien spaceship, or maybe just pigeon poo?* Her eyes ask all of that and more.

Coffee isn't just coffee.

I didn't think I wanted coffee in my life. I thought I was doing okay without coffee. That I could live without the kick of caffeine, but this coffee

isn't like any coffee I've ever had before, and now I'm a little bit...

“We're getting that coffee.”

Hooked.

CHAPTER 8



Cass

“Oh my god, how did you get my address?” I’m standing at my condo’s front door, and I’m shocked to see Lennox there, especially because he’s holding the cake I sent to the pawnshop—a triple-layer strawberry shortcake specialty, compliments of one of the best bakeries in the city—and the card that I dropped off to go with it before they couriered it over.

He braces the cake in one arm and holds the card in the other. “Smiles are contagious,” he reads off the front of the card, then opens it with a nifty move of his fingers and finishes with the words inside. “When you’re around them, you catch happiness.” He pauses, and his lovely green eyes sweep away from the card and land on my face.

I swear the look on his face is so simmering that I could orgasm on the spot. I can practically feel my clit pounding in my mom jeans. I’m wearing my oldest pair of jeans, a black ribbed cotton tank top, and a big headband wrapped around my messy bun because I was doing one of my least favorite tasks, which was cleaning my oven. I do it at least once a year, whether it needs it or not. Spoiler alert: It always needs it. I’m a messy baker and an even messier cook.

“You sent me a cake. And a card. But it’s not my birthday.”

Oh, shit, now I'm blushing.

“I...well, out of all the things you told me, I couldn't stop thinking about how you said that you never had a cake until you were what? Fifteen? Sixteen?”

“Uhhhh...” He shuffles his feet, and they're beyond sexy, into a realm of their own in those jeans and that pawnshop shirt he always wears. It's after five, so I guess he came right from work. I didn't realize he worked every day, but somehow, now that I know more about his earlier life, it makes sense. Keeping the hands busy keeps the mind occupied. Or maybe he's building a business, and delegating and taking days off isn't an option. “Something like that.”

“Did Ransom give you my address?”

“Yes. Yes, he did. I called him and asked for it so I could come by and thank you properly.”

He delivers that flawlessly, without so much as an eye twitch, but it's almost too perfect, and something inside me twinges. Kind of like how he back-peddled in his story yesterday. Obviously, he thought he'd said too much. I understood because he couldn't have been comfortable talking about any of it, and I appreciated his attempt to help me understand. He didn't have to, but he did. He shared his pain with me and let me in.

“So you’re here to thank me, then?” I glance at the cake. It looks bakery sealed. “You haven’t tried it?”

A perfectly devious expression crosses his face. His beard is braided again into one long braid, and it makes me think of beard jewelry, which makes me think about decorating it with Christmas balls and other things. Or maybe dying it with semi-permanent dye for the corresponding holiday and possibly sprinkling glitter in it?

Right. Because his beard is really your business. It’s not. Don’t go thinking you’ve got dibs. You’re not dating him. He’s here to say thanks, not SAY THANKS. As in, in the bedroom. Get your hoo-ha out of the gutter. I mean mind. Get your MIND out of the gutter.

“I thought we could eat it together.”

Oh god. He’s giving me that smoky, sultry, heavy-lidded eye expression. It’s hot enough to light my panties on fire and deadly enough to slay approximately twenty-two small dragons or one great big beast of a dragon. Or one hoo-ha. As in, mine. Or two ovaries, also mine. It’s enough to pucker two nipples belonging to me. Okay, you get it. Basically, my body just reached boss level turned on over here.

“Stop talking dirty,” I say coyly, trying my best to use humor to defuse my raging hormones.

His lips curl up into a positively wicked grin that is pro-level sex god, and my panties practically explode into an out-of-control inferno. Tempered, of course, by the fact that they're also sodden.

“Oh, when I was driving over here, I had this vision of me bringing in this cake and cutting the most perfect slice of that strawberry and cream goodness, all three levels of it, and setting it right on top of you. You would be spread out on the table, naked at this point. I would eat cake off your breasts, off your belly, then I would feast on your—”

“Oh my god.” I don't hesitate any longer.

I launch myself at Lennox, taking the cake out of his arms and whirling around. I pretty much run straight back inside, and because today is a good day, I don't run smack dab into the door. It's still open. Until Lennox steps through and shuts it, twisting the deadbolt and setting the door handle lock behind him, that is.

Bang, clunk, swish. Just like that, we're locked in here. Together.

I should press hard on the brakes because having sex with someone who I'm not dating isn't something I've ever done before, and Lennox has never said he wants to make a commitment. He's practically done way more than hint at the opposite.

Usually, I'd be worrying about my bad luck and whether it was going to

rub off on him and get him flattened or push him into meeting some other unfortunate end, but not right now. Right now, I'm only thinking about the cake, getting naked, and climbing up on my tiny ass kitchen table, which I'm not even sure is strong enough to support me, but I guess I'm going to find out.

I head straight to the kitchen and set the cake down on the counter. Lennox is behind me, a big shadow, a wall of muscle, a dream come to life. Now that my arms are not so encumbered, I launch myself at him again. He catches me mid-stride, scooping me up so easily into his arms that gymnasts and dancers everywhere would be jealous. I ball my hands into his pawnshop shirt. I don't care what anyone says. That line seriously looks like a turd. I wriggle my hips and lock my legs around his waist as I seal my mouth to his.

I don't care that I'm basically kissing him with the ferocity of a velociraptor. I need this. Now. Desperately. I rock my hips against his jeans, banging myself against his mountainous bulge, and holy shit, does he have a log of salami in there? Or a baseball bat? My hoo-ha is ultra pleased, so I rock against him again, grinding hard in my mom jeans, my clit hotter than a lit match about to light the rest of my body up.

Lennox kisses me back so hard that my lips feel bruised, and still, he doesn't come up for oxygen. He might be superhuman, have the lung

capacity of a dolphin, or maybe he's like a turtle, and he breathes through his tail—oh, wait, what? No tail. Even his lungs have to come up for air at some point. He steers me straight to the table, rips his mouth from mine, sends a chair flying out of the way, and sets me down.

The thing creaks ominously.

“Either your table is possessed, or we're going to break it.”

“Stop your dirty talk, or I'm going to come right here before you even get my pants off.”

He grins and strokes his hand down his beard thoughtfully. “That's alright. I like watching you come, Cass.”

Oh, lord. Oh, god. Oh, pineapples on pizza. That voice. Talking like that. All dark and sultry and husky. His fingers smooth down his beard again, slowly, almost sensually. At this point, I'm going to combust and take my table with me.

“I'd very much like to try that cake, but first, I think I'd like to have you and eat you too.”

Gah! “Did you just make a crazy cake pun, but instead of the cake, you're talking about my pussy?”

Lennox leans over me, his hands falling eagerly to my jeans. He undoes

the button, frees the zipper, and tugs. I squirm, and he tugs again, so I shift, lifting my butt off the table. High-waist jeans are no joke. They take just about as much wriggling and pulling to get out of as skin-tight jeans. One more tug, and they're off, sailing through the air like a denim kite, and Lennox is looking at me with a fierce glint in his eyes and a slight stain of red on his cheeks. His tongue licks slowly along his lower lip as if he's savoring me already.

For the love of cake, that tongue.

Oh god, he's going to put that tongue inside me.

Holy fuck, I might legitimately die right now.

“Going to taste that sweet puss now,” Lennox growls as he drops to his knees. “The sweetest pussy in the entire universe.”

“Oh-oh. I didn't realize that's what having me and eating me too meant.” I'm going for witty, but my words are more like gasps, half cut off and half rasped out.

Lennox makes sure I know what he meant. He spreads my legs wide enough to wrap around his huge shoulders, tucking them over his back, and then he takes my panties—a lacy thong that I kind of liked—and shreds them clean off my body with a single tug. My skin, thighs, stomach, and nipples burn, and my brain shuts down completely.

His tongue might be the undiscovered paradise my va-jay has been looking for its whole entire life. The first pass of his tongue makes my eyes blurry and unfocused, while the second makes me see stars. On the third, I give up on keeping my eyes open, even if it means missing out on watching the world's sexiest scene play out.

I moan and slam my hips up and down on the table, which makes it rock and sway beneath me. I don't want the damn thing to collapse and ruin the moment, so I try and stay still after that, which is literally an impossible task when Lennox is worshipping me with his tongue, licking me from my entrance all the way up to my clit. He spreads me open with his fingers, and I can smell my scent of arousal. Then, he eats me hard and loud, and just *fuck*, nope, there's no staying still. My hips buck up and down, forward and back. I'm doing a whole rodeo on his face, and honestly, *I'm sorry, my dear table, but I give zero fucks about your longevity right now.*

"Love this view," Lennox hums from between my legs. "Love the taste of you. You don't just have the sweetest pussy. You have the most beautiful one. So wet for me. You're soaking the table, Cass. Soaking my chin and beard. Soaking my hand." He curls his finger over my clit, then moves his hand, and suddenly, his fingers are at my entrance. "This okay?" he asks.

"Oh my god, yes!" I try to grasp his hair, but it's really too short to thread

my fingers through, so I end up basically giving him a scalp massage instead.

He pushes his fingers inside me, not one but two, and a wave of heat—sent all the way from the beginning of time itself—bursts over me. I slam my ass against the table and buck into Lennox’s hand as he fills me fully. He’s a miracle worker with his hands and tongue, and while he thrusts into me, he teases my tight, throbbing clit with his tongue of wonders. His fingers curl a little on the last stroke, and I know exactly where he’s going with that. It’s intense and white hot and also a little uncomfortable as he hits my inner walls and places I barely knew existed.

“Oh my god,” I pant. “Lennox...please. More!”

“You’re better than strawberry cake. Better than any cake.”

“Sweet, salty fries, yesssss.”

“Open your eyes, Cass. I want you to watch when I make you come, want you to watch your pussy coming all over my hand.”

The dirty talk thing is new for me. I would never have pegged myself as someone who would enjoy it, but here I am, half naked, splayed on my table, wanton and flushed, and begging for more, and I’m perfectly okay with that. This is Lennox, and I trust him. I. Trust. Him. I trust him with my body, I trust him with my thoughts, and I trust him enough to let him try and convince me to change my opinions about luck. And he pretty much did that,

all while watching me pleasure myself. I trust him enough to do that. I also trust him to do this, even though I feel like this climax could actually tear me in half.

I open my eyes and watch as he works me with his fingers, seeing how they're slick and glistening with my wetness. I watch as he watches me watch him, and it's the headiest thing in the entire world. My brain is just as on board with this as my hoo-ha is. I don't think I've ever had a full-body orgasm. Usually, I'm too busy working myself up to any climax. I'm just saying I might have, in the past, sometimes gone over chore lists, grocery lists, to-do lists—any lists in my brain before I realized that I was supposed to be dialed in—and then I would curse myself and work myself up to it with extreme fantasies. Or just fake it because I was getting dry, and everything was starting to chafe.

I can't imagine ever not being connected with Lennox, connected with every bit of my being, every molecule that makes me *me*, including my brain, which is a huge part that has never truly been into this before. Before Lennox. Because my brain was definitely into it the other night.

Now my brain is losing its mind as I watch Lennox slowly torture me. *This is what it means to die happy.*

“Say other dirty things,” I pant, my eyes barely staying open.

Lennox looks right at me, his pupils blown, his face on fire with shadowy desire. “When I taste that cake, I’m going to do it with the taste of you still on my lips.”

“For the love of big juicy watermelons.”

“No, peaches. Your peach is the juiciest, sweetest peach I have ever tasted. You’re the perfect ripeness. The perfect amount of firmness and smoothness and lush fruit inside.”

“Peaches are slightly token, but I like the look on your face right now. It’s all feral and full of concentration, and your eyes are dark and heavy-lidded.”

His fingers work me a little faster, and this time, one of his fingers circles my clit. My chest starts heaving as I struggle to breathe.

“I can feel you clenching around me. After you shatter on my fingers, I’m going to lick them clean, tasting every single bit of your sweet climax.”

“Lennox...” I can’t keep my eyes open anymore. I throw my head back and start to lose control. I’m panting so hard that the kitchen windows are probably fogging up like I’m cooking a big pot of pasta. Except I’m not. I’m cooking up something far, far better, and right now, there is hardly anything in the world better than pasta.

“That’s it, Cass. Come for me. Come while I watch you break apart, and

I'll know I did it to you. I helped you get there. I want to watch every second of pleasure play over your face while your pussy squeezes my fingers tighter than prunes.”

“That should not be hot,” I hear myself say, but my voice sounds like it’s coming from another room, somewhere far away. “But it is. It so freaking is.”

“You’re hot. You’re so beautiful. I love seeing you flushed and panting, and I love seeing you sweaty and aching for me. I love it more than I love bacon, and I really, really love bacon.”

“Bacon...tomato...sandwiches?” I choke the words out.

“Bacon, tomato, and peanut butter, baby.”

“Oh...oh...Lennox...I’m coming!”

“That’s it, baby. Just let go. Let go and come for me.”

I really don’t want this to end, but my body has other ideas. My va-jay wants to go all space and science, explosions and particles, planets and galaxies, Milky Way, and also other universes. And big, big planet-shaped dicks. I mean dick-shaped planets. The waves of my climax hit me hard, rocking through my head, jazzing up my body, and igniting every single part of me until I’m shaking and vibrating against the table, which I swear is barely holding itself together. But if it has a sex-tastrophe, I suppose that

would be the best reason ever for it to give up on life.

I think about floating through space, past those dick-shaped planets that my brain conjured up, and a fresh wave of pleasure rips through me. Okay, so I might have some strange fantasies I didn't know about.

“So beautiful,” Lennox says huskily, his strokes slowing down. “So, so beautiful. So magical. So out of this freaking world, otherworldly, goddess, gorgeous. That's you, Cass. And you know what? If luck is real, and I still don't think it is, but if it were a thing, you'd be my lucky *everything* because this...this was one of the *best* moments of my life.”

Gah, I need to kiss this man. I know what a shitty start to life he had, so for him to say that this was one of his best moments, and mean it, blows my mind back into my admittedly strange mental galaxy.

“I'm afraid,” I admit. “I'm afraid if we have sex, it will...uh...that the universe will implode or something. I feel like I'd be testing fate, daring chance to do its worst. But it would be doing it to you too, and that's not fair to you. I feel like I need to keep you safe.”

Lennox stands slowly, and as he promised, he drags his fingers across his lips, painting them with my arousal before he slowly pops them into his mouth and savors them like they're cherry cheesecake, which is even better than cherry pie and strawberry cake. He looks as though he can't get enough.

My head nearly lolls off my shoulders, my pussy clenches hard, and shockwaves of sensation go zinging and pinging and zapping through me like electric shocks bursting all over my body.

My nipples also feel like they're so electrified that they could shoot sparks out of them. Nipple sparks. *That also should not be hot, but it's kind of freaking awesome.*

"We can take our time," Lennox says in his deep, smooth voice as soon as he pops his fingers out of his mouth. "We don't have to rush anything. I'm not saying this because I believe the universe would do anything to me. I think I'm the lucky one to be doing any of this with you, to even know you. The night I kidnapped the wrong girl? That was a good night. A very, very good night."

"You didn't want to have anything to do with me! You took me out for pie and fries as punishment, and the swan boat ride we went on after that was like torture for you. Then you disappeared, and when you came back, you acted like I was the world's biggest inconvenience."

Lennox looks at me hard, his eyes boring into me, and I gulp. He offers his hand, holding it out until I take it. He helps me off the table and fetches me my pants somewhat shyly. "I was an idiot," he says simply, and I can accept that. "But you were too busy trying to gain some luck off me and at the same

time trying to protect me from yours rubbing off *on* me too. Sometimes things take a while to develop. The best ideas? They're always forever in development. The most delicious coffee takes a while to percolate, and the best meals take infinite patience and attention to detail to make. True genius is rarely recognized for what it is until it blossoms after a lifetime, and then, finally, the whole world gets it."

"Okay," I mutter with a giggle, slipping into my jeans commando, which makes me feel strange and tingly all over, not just down there, but mostly down there, where my sensitive bits are rubbing against the denim seams. "I get it."

"You do?" Lennox's eyes sparkle. "Great. Should we dip into that lovely cake then?"

I very nearly spontaneously orgasm again when he follows that extremely dirty but also delicious suggestion up with a wink, an arch of his eyebrow, and a smirk of his lips.

Shit, I think this might be about more than luck. So, so much more. Good luck or bad luck or any luck in between. I think I've already fallen—and not on my face this time, just metaphorically—for this wonderful guy in my kitchen with the turd-sporting buns on his shirt.

CHAPTER 9



Lennox

“What are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here?”

We ask the question at the same time again, then we both roll our eyes and grin.

“Let me guess. Ransom?”

“Actually, Ayana, but good guess. It was Ransom for you, wasn’t it?”

I shrug while trying not to let my lips wobble in a gesture of mirth because I’m supposed to be aggravated about this, not secretly pleased. I’m *not* secretly pleased. Not at all. First, my granny with her meddling, now Ransom and Ayana are getting into it full scale, which might be on Granny’s orders. I’m not sure. I’ll have to ask Ransom right after I remind him that he’s a puckered butthole and that I named my pawnshop after him. Secretly, of course, so the name wouldn’t get rejected for the business license.

When I pull my head out of my butt long enough to study Cass, I realize she’s not just radiant in a pale blue blouse with little flowers and her skinny jeans but actually glowing. She’s biting her lip and rocking on her toes to her heels and back again in the flip-flops she has on like she’s dying to tell me

something.

“What is it? Are you trying to contain the massive amounts of anger you have at getting duped by your best friend again and set up with a bearded rascalion like me?”

“No. I mean, yes. I mean, kind of. Yes, but I also have something else to tell you.”

“What’s that?” It’s been a few days since I last saw her. *A few days too many.* I didn’t know what to do in order to...uh, take her out. I didn’t feel like I could just show up on her doorstep again. Then there’s the whole thing about that word. *Date.* I don’t use it. At least, it never crossed my mind before her. But now? I could handle the word.

What is happening to me?

I could have called her. That’s how one usually goes about making an appointment to see another person. They pick up their phone, they text, and they call. They get in touch in some normal way and don’t rely on their meddling family to set them up. I could have taken her on a real date.

Yes, idiot. That’s what people do when they’re into each other. Into each other. What a terrible and slightly scintillating term if taken literally. I’m not just into her. That doesn’t even begin to describe it. So what does? Under my skin? No, she’s more like a nice glass of cold water sliding down my parched

throat, hydrating me on an unbearably hot day when I would pretty much do anything for that sip of cold liquid.

I *might* owe Ransom one for this. Just saying. But he's still a asshole. Also just saying.

“What is it?”

Cass is beaming so widely that she looks like a cloud of golden sunshine. She's that pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. She's also every rainbow sprinkled with extra glitter and a helping of pistachio pudding, which is honestly the best pudding. Hands down.

“I got my license! I retook the test yesterday, and I passed!”

My mouth drops open, but I quickly play with my beard in order to pretend like that was my intention all along. I truly did know she'd get it. I believed in her. I'm just pleasantly surprised. And awed. Mostly because Cass is so damn gorgeous right now that it's instantly jaw-dropping worthy. But when her face falls a little, I try and recover.

“That's great!” It falls further, and I'm not sure why that was the wrong thing to say. “It is great, isn't it?”

She toes the grass with the tip of her flip-flops. “The thing about being unlucky all the time is that you don't just know it. Everyone else knows it,

too, because it's a lifelong thing, and there have been way too many things added up, and it's impossible for them not to know. I feel...I feel like this is tempered by everyone just waiting to see what bad will set off the good."

"I have to admit that I'm not tracking."

She lifts her head, and the sadness in her eyes kills me. "Balance. It's a scientific law. You know, Newton's third law."

"That's total imbecilic nonsense. I mean, not you. Just that theory. That doesn't apply to superstitious poo turds shite shit shizzle. Is that really what you think, or is that what you've been trained to think by other people? I'm sure they're not all waiting for the other shoe—or piano—to drop."

She bites her lip hard and angles away from me before I can see her smile, but I catch sight of it anyway, and it makes my stomach clench and my heart freaking leap.

"Ayana? Ransom? You think they think nonsense things like that?"

"Uh, I hope not."

"That does it," I declare. "I'm going to banish this frick a frack fuck luck bull crap from your brain. I'm driving it out. With. Pie." She whips back around, her lapis lazuli eyes all huge. "Should have tried that the first time, but there I was, thinking I wouldn't have to resort to extreme measures."

“Is this one of those times when you do that thing with humor?”

“No. This is one of those times when I’m buying you a pie to celebrate. Right here and now. I’m buying you all the pies.”

“All the pies in the world?”

“Every. Single. One.”

“Oh boy. That would be complicated. You’d need dump trucks for that. Lots of them.”

“Fine. Just all the cherry pies then,” I amend.

“That would still require a massive amount of trucks to bring them in. And how exactly would we celebrate?” Then, she pauses, and I give her a smirk. “Oh,” she whispers and lets out a long exhale as her eyes turn stormy and dark. “It’s rather public here, don’t you think?”

She’s getting bold. Daring. Is she trying to wedge a burr into my butt on purpose? Because she’s succeeding. I have to admit the last two times when I wanted to prove something to her were rousingly spectacular, seared in my memory, and engrained in my being forevermore.

“Everyone is just so together,” she whispers. “So organized and so...so freaking just...perfect.”

“That’s what they want you to think. But inside, they’re all hot messes,

and they ask themselves every time they hear a thump in the house or the ice maker turning on if it's actually the devil doing it."

"Oh wow," Cass groans. "That's...wow. Just terrible. And it makes no sense." A swan boat floats past us on the sparkling blue stretch of water that wraps almost all the way around the park. "Let's get on one of these and start peddling. I think we need something to think about other than, uh...I don't know...how you're going to prove your point again."

"Now?"

"Why not? We're here."

"What about pie?"

A blush spills from her cheeks down the lovely column of her neck and straight to the hollow of her throat. I'd like to trace that pattern with my tongue, starting there and working my way up to claim her lips.

"We could save that for later," she whispers. She leans in, and I can barely hear her. "Or is that a euphemism for my lady parts?"

"I actually meant pie, but can I say yes? Because I'd like that so much more."

"Can you have pie and eat it too?"

Give the lady a prize. "And you say you're not together, not magical. You

have all the magic.”

“Technically, you’re the one with the fantasy-inspired wizard-of-the-century beard of infinitesimal wonders. Oooh, look!” She spins around and points. “There’s a free boat. Can we? Would you go on it for me?”

For you, anything. There’s no way I say that, but I do take her hand and guide her over. I pay the guy manning the boats the twenty-five dollars that a ten-minute ride around the park costs before helping Cass in. The giant swan is quite steady, and the seats are even large enough for me. Kind of. My knees are only in my face a little bit when I put my feet on the peddles. Then, we churn the water enough to get away from the dock. The swans might have been a romantic idea, but they’re also real calf burners too.

A line of boats passes us, and I wait until we’re all alone on the calm water before I stop peddling so we can just drift while I turn and face her. She’s so beautiful with her hair falling all over the place, her cheeks still a little flushed—though, this time, it’s probably because the boat is a real workout—and her eyes mirroring the lake that, for a second, I have nothing. No words. No snarky comebacks. Just a fuck ton of *feelings* that I’m not entirely sure I know what to do with.

Now that I think about the boat thing some more, I’m completely sure this was Granny’s meddling. I remember the first time we did this. I can still

smell how delicious Cass' perfume was when I leaned in a little too close because, back then, she was totally beguiling. She was sweet, like perfectly ripe apricots with a hint of lemon. And now I know she's all peaches and honey.

Well, shoot. My cock just underwent a not-so-astonishing transformation from flesh to iron. And she says I'm the one with all the magic.

"Everything in balance," I rush to say when I finally recall what it was. "That doesn't mean something bad will happen every single time something good happens."

Cass studies me. "How do you know that's the truth? I think it has more to do with universal laws than the belief that it may or may not be true."

"Because laws apply to science. Luck isn't science."

She thinks about that for a minute, her forehead creasing and her eyes narrowing in concentration. "I think you might actually be right about that."

"*May* be right?" I scoff, holding in the deep laugh that wants to escape because she's just so freaking *adorable*. "Here are the laws of Lennox. I'm always right about the things that matter." I laugh when she sticks her tongue out at me. "Nothing bad will happen. For example, a wasp will not come and land in your hair and get stuck, you won't freak out, and our boat won't tip."

“What?” Cass shrieks. She doesn’t take that as a joke—I wasn’t serious—and immediately starts batting and swatting at her hair.

I lean in and capture her hands before she can tip us over for real. The boat is rocking as it is. “Whoa. That was a joke.” I can’t resist brushing my lips over the end of her nose.

She shrieks, tears away from me, bends over, and scoops up a handful of water to throw right into my face. At least, I think that’s where she’s going to be aiming. The sides of the boat are obviously higher than she anticipated, and when she goes for that handful of water, she nearly topples over. She screams, and I grab her on instinct to steady her, but that means leaning back in the other direction, which I do. A *little* too hard. Despite my best efforts, I can feel myself going over. I let go of Cass’ waist, so I don’t pull her with me. I grab the boat with my hands after, but I’m worried about tipping it over like that, so I just let go.

And fall.

Straight into the water, butt first.

Shoes, jeans, wallet, phone, and all.

I come up spluttering, wiping water from my eyes. It tastes *salty*. God, *why* does it taste salty? I can’t touch the bottom, even though I thought this channel would be pretty shallow. I tread water while Cass anxiously peers at

me over the edge of the boat.

“Oh my god,” she breathes. “Oh my god. I knew it. I just freaking knew it.”

“Knew it?” I swim like a fish, moving onto my back and pretending to enjoy myself while I backstroke in the sun. “Knew what? This isn’t a bad thing. I needed a bath anyway. It was hot. This is a relief.”

“Can you please get back on the boat?”

“I think I should just swim to shore. If I try to get back on the boat, you might end up in here with me, and if we tip the boat, I think we’d get in trouble with the people frowning at us over there.” It’s true. The guys who run this thing don’t look pleased. “Can you peddle over there?”

Cass flexes her legs, tries the peddles, and the boat moves forward a little. “I think so.”

“Should I race you then?”

“You’re really not mad?” she asks in disbelief.

“Mad? No way. This is the most fun I’ve had in a very long time.” Despite the soaking my phone and wallet just got—one of the many of both of those that I own—I really mean that. “We might have been duped into ending up here, but I’m glad we did. Really, really glad.”

Seeing Cass' smile is worth taking a bath in this dubious water. It looks good, but why the salt? It's not salt water. Ugh. I'm a little bit frightened, actually. But it's all worth it. "I could go home and change, and we could get pie."

"I didn't drive myself here," Cass admits. "I was too scared to do it, so I took a cab. If you wanted to drive us, we could pick up some pie on the way?"

Driving my car while soaking wet through some drive-thru in search of cherry pie with Cass smiling and happy beside me? Sounds like heaven. "You bet."

I backstroke my way to the shore, and for the first time since I got to San Diego, I revel in how good the sun feels above me and how glad I am to be here right now instead of anywhere else in the world.

CHAPTER 10



Lennox

I should have known Granny wouldn't let sleeping dogs lie. Sleeping dogs meaning me, and lie being the whole *I'm not going to show up with your brothers and create a lot of super fun chaos and get super involved in your love life to make sure things work out because you're probably going to mess things up if left to your own devices* thing.

I'm up at five on Monday morning. It's been a bit of a challenge to get used to not being awake during the night and sleeping during the day, which was pretty much our normal routine before because Granny likes to keep strange hours. I've learned to enjoy getting up early so I have some time to myself before I have to open up the pawnshop at nine. I like to workout in the super small gym I have set up in the closet-like space of a spare bedroom in this place, savor a cup of coffee, then shower and head out.

This morning is like how most other Monday mornings have come to be, with one major addition. *Granny*. She happens to be sitting at the table in the kitchen while drinking a glass of water slowly, sip by methodical sip. She's as silent as a viper and as benign-looking as a fuzzy kitten. Well, no, she's no kitten. She's more like a sleek mother cat. Granny is always wearing some kind of black. Today, it's her favorite combo—the black power suit of

epicness. Her long white hair is twisted up into a knot, and her face is almost angular in the shadows cast by the light overtop the table. It's still pitch black out, but Granny wouldn't bother with opening the blinds even if there were a good amount of sunlight out there.

“Whoa. There's a granny in my kitchen.” I stop in my tracks. I'm wearing boxers...good fucking thing for that. Because I sometimes come down here for a glass of water in the nude before I head back to my room to get my workout clothes on.

“There is indeed a granny in your kitchen.” She sips her water slowly and sighs. “I bought you a station wagon with a big trunk area and an even bigger back seat. That bad boy seats eight.”

“Uh, please tell me you're kidding.” I blink into the pale golden glow of the overhead light. Maybe this is a dream. Or maybe I'm sleepwalking. But no. I already know it's real. Granny is just like that. She's kind of crazy, though we all use the term unpredictable. She doesn't like to be boring, that's for sure.

“You mean you think it's strange for me to leave Switzerland to come all the way here to buy you a station wagon and deliver it first thing in the morning?”

I scratch my head. “Uhhh, maybe a little.”

“And you think it’s strange that I hacked my way through all your security, disabling everything and slipping in seamlessly like a silent but violent gust of wind—”

“Otherwise known as a fart...and no, I’m not surprised about that. Hardly. You taught me everything I know, and you’re all about security, so it makes sense that you could disarm it. I’m guessing it took you all of twenty-two point seven seconds.”

Granny snorts. “Oh, sweetheart, you think I’m losing my touch? Try seven point six.”

“Seven seconds? You got in here in seven seconds?”

“Well, it wasn’t seven, but it was most definitely under eight.”

I applaud Granny, giving her a low whistle. I’m impressed. I knew what Granny was capable of, but still. “So the station wagon is real?”

“As real as real gets.”

“How very nineties of you.” I could use a glass of water. That’s what I came down here for. I help myself by picking up a glass, shoving it under the tap, then taking it over to the table, where I sit down across from the woman responsible for saving my life, giving me a family, teaching me what love is, and teaching me how to be a world-class hacker.

Yeah, about that...I know I need to either stay away from Cass or tell her the truth. There really isn't room for anything in the middle, and I do know that. I do. Really.

"Nineties?" Granny scoffs. "Station wagons never go out of style. Especially not the ones with wood paneling."

"That's the kind you got?"

"No. I got shit brown. That's all they had that was in running order within a hundred-mile radius. Can you believe that?"

"Honestly, yes." I do my best to look innocent as Granny stares me down. "So, I think we need to have a conversation about meddling. I'm pretty sure that your coming here isn't about the pawnshop or Ransom. Unless you have a mission that you want to discuss—a real mission—I'm assuming you're here because of Cassadina."

Granny bangs her glass of water down on the table. "Meddling? Pah! This is *helping*. This is your fairy godmother Granny granting your wishes and helping you charm the girl of your dreams."

"By suggesting that she bang me in the back of a station wagon?"

"No. By taking her antiquing or to a flea market or a community garage sale day. I have it on good authority from Ayana that Cassadina loves those

things more than just about anything. A good bargain is her favorite thing, and nothing beats vintage. You need a big vehicle to take those hauls back. Plus, her family had a station wagon growing up. She loved it.”

“You didn’t. Not really. You couldn’t have.”

Granny throws her head back and cackles. “Come outside and see.”

“I should probably put some pants on.”

“Pants schmants, just peek out the door.”

She’s so eager that I forget about the pants. I can’t believe she really did this. Really? I can’t believe it. No, I’m going to rephrase that. I *can* believe it. Granny is granny, and there is nothing I wouldn’t put past her. She’s done some wild things in the past. When she met Ayana for the first time, they went to the shooting range and shot some guns—Ayana is the daughter of a biker prez, and she enjoys going to the gun club. Except, Granny couldn’t just shoot guns. No. She had to whip out two Glocks and go double trouble on her target, which pretty much got them kicked out. And they totally would have been if it weren’t for Ayana being a popular member of the gun club because of her dad. So instead, they just got escorted out nicely. Then, Granny took Ayana for coffee and proceeded to grill her for information in a very sweet yet scary Granny way, but ended the morning with her approval and a welcome to the family.

Sometimes, I think it's a miracle any of us have significant others.

Given our lifestyle, I never saw it happening.

I never saw it happening for Alden or Ransom. I also never saw it coming for me. Is that what's happening here?

I pull open the door slightly and peek out of the crack. Sure as shit, there's a shit brown station wagon sitting parked beside my regular black sedan in front of the condo. The wagon is sporting double trouble. As soon as my brothers—the twins, Atlas and Orion—spot me, they crank down the windows and wave madly out of each side of the car. I quickly shut the door, leaning my back against it. Granny is right behind me, giving me a rather satisfied look. Oh yes, she's pleased as spiked punch with herself.

“Granny...” I rasp. “What are you trying to do here?”

“I already told you. I'm trying to help you woo the girl.”

“You know, I was doing okay on my own.”

“Well, maybe we just missed you. What's this I hear about people bringing in poo in a jar to pawn?”

“Actually, it was to sell. They didn't want it back. People get confused about that.”

Granny nods like that's a normal conversation to have. “Let's go for a

ride. I could use some cherry pie, and you need to tell me everything I haven't already read after I hacked into both of your phones."

I can feel my nostrils flexing as I breathe in sharply. "I knew that was you. You weren't even discreet about it."

"No, why would I bother? I wasn't trying to hide the fact that I was getting involved. You think the swan boat ride from last year was an accident? I asked Ayana to bring her friend along, and I sat you two together so you could get to know each other. I also made sure you came back here when Maya was born and that you were here to support Ransom. He really did need someone close by while he adjusted. It wasn't as easy for him as it was for Alden."

"He and Azalea were literally destined for each other from birth. It made sense that she was willing to pick up everything, including her parents, and leave. It also makes sense that they're super ridiculously happy together. They've had time to get used to the idea of everything, and they have a much slower pace living the lake life now. Out here, Ransom is right in the middle of it. He found out he was going to be a dad before he and Ayana even had an official date, and now he's the son-in-law of the prez of a band of bikers, living in a big city and not doing the whole hacking thing. Ayana is going to school, and he's trying to get his business running smoothly, which is hard

when he's not there. That's a lot to get used to."

"It is. So if you think this mission is just about your love life, you'd be wrong. It's a real mission, Lennox. I mean it, which is also why I'm here. To help you woo the girl, to check up on Ransom, and to see my great-granddaughter."

"So, no new mission?"

Granny shakes her head. "You sound disappointed." I shrug, and she shakes her head again. "Go put on some pants, darling. You're not escaping your poo-in-the-jar world yet. Right now, though, cherry pie. And information."

I roll my eyes. "Geez, I'm surprised you haven't bugged both our places yet. And Ransom's too. Alden's also, while you were at it."

Granny grins, and if anyone has ever called my grin devious, they've clearly never seen hers before. She can rock a right frightening smile that is somehow two parts sweet old lady and one part pure devilish devil. "Are you sure I didn't?"

I shudder. "Granny! Please!"

"What's that? Cherry pie is calling my name? You're absolutely right." She snaps her fingers, and I know I'm done. There isn't any chance of

resisting Granny when she's on a mission. A mission, not a Mission. There's a difference, but I suppose, either way, there's not much of a difference. She's a force that's always moving forward. In this case, toward cherry pie. "Pants. Now. Or you're coming like that."

"I think they'd have a problem with that, what with the no shirt, no service policy. Plus, they might call the cops over my appearance."

Granny's eyes sweep over my arms and then linger on my torso. "They'd be damn imbeciles. Anyone can see that you're the best of the best, Lennox. Always."

Well, gah. Doesn't that just melt the stone-cold cockles of my heart? That's actually ventricles for all you non-Latin-speaking people out there. I had to look that up once, and I was surprised to find they're a real thing. Yes, I know. Shocking and astounding.

The truth is always stranger than fiction.

Take, for example, my cherry-pie-craving, number-one-in-a-league-of-her-own hacker of a granny and the station wagon sitting just outside, waiting for me as I get my ass into pants.

#mylifeissomuchstrangerthanfiction.

CHAPTER 11



Cass

“Okay, this is kind of strange, isn’t it?”

I’m currently blindfolded and being led into Ayana’s house. Lennox picked me up in his new car—a station wagon that he said someone sold to him at the shop. It looked just like the car my parents had when I was a kid, and man, did I love that car. I never pictured Lennox as the kind to drive a shaggin’ wagon—okay, seriously, I have never used that term before, and it just sounds funny to me.

“I have a surprise waiting in there for you. I don’t want to wreck it.”

“Oh boy. Did you frame the couch where we, uh...yeah. Last time. You know? When we were supposed to be babysitting? Or did you cast it in gold?”

Lennox chuckles. He’s not slow to laugh, but lately, I’ve realized it’s probably not so much a forced thing as it is a rehearsed thing that he does to fit in and feel normal. *I use humor like a shield.* I can’t stop hearing him say that. But this laughter? It sounds totally real, and not only does it make my nipples shiver and my skin burst into happy goosebumps, but it also makes my lady bits burst into spontaneous happiness too.

It's only been a few days since the whole get-me-on-the-table-and-eat-me-like-I'm-dinner incident, but even if it had been a literal lifetime between now and then, there isn't a single chance in any hell that I would forget it.

"That's a great idea. I would have to explain to Ransom why I like the couch so much, though."

"You could just tell him that you really love it and want to buy it from him."

Lennox's hand tightens around mine as he leads me in. "Nah, he would never believe it. He'd want to know exactly what I did to it when he wasn't around. He knows me too well."

"It was actually me. You were innocent in the matter."

"That's not quite the way I remember it going down." Lennox's voice is thick and smoky right near my ear. I nearly jump out of my skin, and my hoo-ha and nipples jump into the *I'm so freaking ready for you to talk dirty to me again* mode.

I love his deep timbre. His voice threads its way through me like a beam of sunlight cutting through a cloudy sky. Those rich golden beams illuminate all the parts of me that have been ill to little used for so very long that they're practically covered in cobwebs. So. Many. Cobwebs.

“Watch your step,” he says suddenly.

I don't have to worry about tripping and falling when he's on watch. His huge arms wrap around me, one sliding behind my waist and the other bracketing my shoulders as he steps behind me to guide me, all without letting go of my hand. The proximity of his body next to mine makes mine undergo an inner tornado. My stomach turns in a series of loops and twists, and my heart slams out a rhythm that would put the best bongo drummer to shame.

I can feel the temperature change from hot and humid to cool and air-conditioned as soon as I step through the doorway. “The cloak and dagger would be utterly thrilling if we were stepping into your house,” I whisper into Lennox's ear.

Or what I hope is his ear. I might be talking to his foot. Or his rear. Or something else. Isn't that just thrilling? My nipples haven't gotten the memo that there are other people present, and when other people are present, they are supposed to be on their best behavior.

They're on their best behavior, alright—their best needy behavior because Lennox is still holding my hand, and the heat of his body is mingling with mine. I can smell his scent, which is becoming more and more familiar, to the point where I could probably pick it out in a room of overly-scented people.

Not that he's overly scented. He's perfectly scented, but if someone tried to fool me, my nose would get its olfactory senses on, and I'm sure it could pick Lennox out.

Okay, so that's not the only reason I'm still practically panting here. He's pressed up against my bottom, every hard inch of him, and by that, I mean every hard inch of him. The whole are-you-packing-a-salami-in-your-pants thing kind of applies right now.

I'm serious.

Then, I hear someone cough, another creak of the couch, Ayana's laugh, which sounds a little bit nervous, and a higher cackle. Nope, I'll never forget that cackle. I know perfectly well who that cackle belongs to.

My hand shoots to the blindfold before Lennox tells me I can take it off. I pause there, but then I feel his fingers cover mine. My hand slides away, and he takes over. I've never had someone blindfold me and then take it off, obviously. It's more than quite thrilling, to be honest.

I blink around the room as soon as the blindfold falls away. Ayana's living room is the same as before—the same beige walls, the same area rug under the coffee table, the same couch that I may or may not have tried to prove to myself that luck is what you make it, the same loveseat and big overstuffed chair, and the same art on the walls. But it all looks very different now that

there's one not-so-big body and a bunch of other bigger bodies taking up the spots.

I knew I'd recognize that cackle anywhere.

Lennox's granny. Plus, Ransom, Ayana, Maya, who's on Ayana's knee, his two brothers, and two cat beds—one in the shape of a burger and the other in the shape of a pickle.

The twins look a little bit guilty, but it's not the same kind of guilty as when I last saw them, fresh off of kidnapping the wrong person and still feeling guilty for it.

“We wanted to buy the cat a bed,” Atlas says. He's truthfully quite adorable when he blushes, which is saying a lot because the guy looks like he eats scrap metal with a side of bricks for breakfast. “But we couldn't pick out which one we wanted.”

Orion rolls his eyes and points to the bed. “The pickle obviously suits her. It goes best with her name, Missy Pickle Poo. I love it.”

“That's right. But the burger one is absolute awesomeress.”

“Awesomeress isn't a word.”

“Do you think I give a rat's behinds about the bounds of language? I'll make up and use my own words. Don't people on apps do that all the time?”

“Apps and the internet aren’t cool. People do bad things on there.”

The twins look at each other, sneak a sly look at their granny, and share a private grin. I have no idea what it means, and I’m almost a little bit scared to decode it. Lennox is still at my side, and his hand is still clenched in mine. That has to mean something. It has to because everyone in the room suddenly has eyes—I mean, they always have eyes, but they’re suddenly trained on that connection point like it could send light beams flying. Yes, light beams. Happy light beams. No one looks at it like it might let out stink fumes, so that has to be a good thing.

I lean in a fraction of an inch and direct my words to Lennox’s ear. “You blindfolded me to meet your family?” I whisper.

Lennox chuckles again. “I thought it might spark happy memories from the last time we blindfolded you and were all in the same room.”

“Ayana wasn’t in the room. And neither was Ransom or your granny. At least not at first.”

“Dang. I got pie and fries to recreate the whole thing too.”

“Oh, in that case, you bet it sparks all the happy memories.”

Lennox’s fingers clench up in mine. “This time, it’s going to be all happy, I promise. This time, you’re here, and it’s no mistake.”

That swells my heart up to gargantuan proportions. The kind of hugeness that makes my chest feel tight because it can barely contain all the heart and emotion. Lennox wanted me to meet his family. Okay, so maybe his granny showed up with his brothers and wanted a family thing, but they still included me. Even if Lennox didn't plan this on his own, I have no doubt that because it was him who brought me here and not his granny reaching out, it means he wants this as much as she does.

Maya coos away on Ayana's knees, and I walk over and extend my arms. Ayana hands her daughter over, sweeping her up in the air, and I take her, bouncing her on my hip. She immediately tries to grab my lips with both her hands, but I pull back and blow air at her empty grasping fingers, which makes her scream and shriek with laughter.

The cat is nowhere to be seen, and at least the twins seem, for the moment, to have settled down. There isn't going to be a competition to see who picked the better cat bed. Yet. But I have to say they're both pretty fantastic. The pickle bed is super sleek, which matches the cat perfectly at the moment, but if she ever turns into a super adorable chonky cat, the burger bed is nice and spacious. Or if Ransom and Ayana get a second cat, and it's an adorable chonky one, they're already set.

“Are you going to tell us about the pawnshop?” Atlas asks. He and Orion

are sitting on the loveseat together, dwarfing the thing. I have no doubt that Ayana chose strong furniture just for those reasons. They probably reinforced the bottom with plywood to keep people from falling through.

That makes me think about the couch and what we did here last time. I don't want to start blushing fiercely, so I force myself to think about granny panties, but that makes me think about my grandma, who is as sweet as peaches, and it makes me even more guilty. Plus, it also makes me sneak a look at Lennox's granny, who is wearing a power suit and sitting as regal as a queen in one of those big chairs by herself. I get the smallest inkling of fear.

Lennox's granny is no normal granny.

I heard from Ayana all about how Lennox's granny likes to shoot Glocks and how she's very blunt, bordering on scary. Of course, she also told me how that same granny could be the most fabulous, loving, welcoming, sweetest person in the entire world. With a side of ultra badass, obviously, but that's a good thing.

I believe both can be true.

I just would never want to get on her bad side.

Plus, there's the whole mystery about what she and her grandsons actually do. Ayana can't tell me, Ransom would never tell, and I wouldn't ask Lennox. I can feel it now, a slight undercurrent in the room, a relentless

energy that buzzes through the space like really dry air waiting to snap you silly with a good shock when you least expect it.

There aren't many chairs left in the room. There's a single beside Lennox's granny and a small spot by Ayana. Ransom notes this, and honestly, no one would take him for a sensitive guy, seeing as he looks quite scary with his size and those scars on his face, but he's a good one. I couldn't be happier for my best friend. Really, I couldn't. And Maya? She has one hell of a dad to keep her safe and love her and guide her.

Ransom grazes a kiss over Ayana's forehead and gets up to take the unoccupied chair so that I can sit beside my best friend, and Lennox can sit beside me. And it's not Granny mandated. He never once looked at her. I give him what I hope is a look that's all appreciation. I sometimes have bad facial control, though, so I hope he doesn't take it as constipation, gut cramps, or something it isn't.

“Pawnshop, pawnshop, pawnshop,” Orion chants.

“Tell us, tell us, tell us,” Atlas adds on.

Even Ransom looks amused. “You could tell us about the wilder things. The few you've told me about have been pure gold. Pure. Gold.”

Lennox shakes his head and groans, but he's smiling. He's wearing a set of jeans that are so delicious-looking on him that I wish they were made of

sugar so I could lick them off. But later. Not now. That would be totally inappropriate. Holy gosh, I think it just got hot in here. Maybe it's because I'm holding Maya. Doesn't holding a baby affect everyone who is single and likes children and wants them one day? I think it does. Honestly. Because babies make jeans hotter. Yeah, that's totally how it works.

He's also wearing a black button-down shirt with a collar, and now I understand why he doesn't have the sleeves rolled up. He looks different in it somehow, or maybe I'm too used to seeing him in his pawnshop shirt. His beard is braided into two, and it makes me fantasize about beard jewelry all over again. Alright, so it might be inappropriate to sit here and think about scaling his beard like in that fairy tale where the lady throws down her hair and lets the prince climb it right up into the tower to get to her.

"I'm not going into detail about the poo in the jar," Lennox sighs.

"Wash your mouth out," Lennox's granny mutters under her breath.

Maya giggles wildly on my lap, and from across the room, Lennox's granny cracks an instant grin. I guess poo is pretty hilarious for everyone, always. And poo in a jar? Well, who wouldn't smile over the absurdity of that?

"There was also this thing about a banana, but that's not the good stuff."

No granny can resist, especially not this one, who I'm starting to learn has

more than a devious sense of humor. “Wash your mouth out again with soap.”

The twins groan in unison. “Tell us!” they say at the same time. Literally, at the same time. I guess they’ve rehearsed this, or they’re channeling an inner twin telepathy thing so innate that it’s kind of scary.

“What other body parts have been brought in?” Atlas asks.

“An arm? A severed hand?”

“Gross.” Lennox shakes his head at his brothers while Ransom sighs. “The worst thing we had brought in, other than the poo in the jar, which I suppose kind of counts as a body part, is the eyeball in a jar. But it wasn’t a real eyeball. When I told the guy that we don’t take body parts of any kind, he admitted it was just vinegar, a bit of hair gel, and one of those squishy eyeball ball things you can get at the dollar store.”

“Why?” Ransom huffs. “Just why?”

Ayana giggles beside me. Maya reaches her hands out to her mom, and Ayana scoops her up and sets her on her knee, bouncing and wriggling to keep her happy. She’s truly the best mom. I know Maya was one heck of a surprise for her and Ransom—actually, Ayana got pregnant the first time they, uh, yeah, and they had a long road from there, but honestly, I’ve never seen two people more in love. And if there’s anyone who can make it, I know

they can.

“What other strange things?”

Atlas feeds off his brother and adds, “Or funny things?”

Lennox strokes his beard, running his fingers over the crinkly braided strands. I want to do the same thing, and I have to rearrange my legs discreetly as I’m sitting to try and ease the ache in my core.

“I don’t know. Let’s see. There have been some really old things. This guy brought in a boot from the eighteen hundreds that he claimed was haunted, not by a person, but by the stench of the foot of that person. I smelled it. It just smelled old and musty. It was a pretty cool boot, and he had a matching one that was not haunted. Go figure. So I gave him a few bucks, and he was happy. Then had another guy who brought in a collection of very elaborate wigs. It was so strange that I couldn’t not buy it.”

“Wigs?” Atlas grins. “I wouldn’t mind a few wigs. I’ve been trying to order a pink one online for a long time, but I don’t know. When they come, are they really like they look in the picture? Because I swear, they’re too nice looking for how cheap they are.”

“Why do you want a pink wig?” Orion asks his brother.

“Duh, for undercover stuff.”

“A pink wig would probably draw more attention than not.”

“But no one would think to look for me with pink hair, attention or not.”

“They would recognize your face, dorkus extreme.”

“Boys,” Lennox’s granny snaps. “That’s harsh. And enough. If your brother wants a pink wig, let him have a pink wig, but not for undercover work.”

“What undercover work?” I know it’s the last thing I should ask, but if they haven’t given me an opening now, I’m not sure what they’ve given me. An eerie silence falls over the room. Then Atlas gives me his most charming look.

“We were kidding. I was kidding. I meant Halloween.”

“No, no, I think we can talk safely here,” Lennox’s granny says. She has an intense look on her face. It’s borderline scary, and I imagine Ayana was pretty intimidated the first time they met, but maybe not because a Glock-toting granny would probably be more thrilling to Ayana than not. Slowly, Ayana’s hand creeps over my knee and grabs my wrist. I curl my hand into hers, and she squeezes.

Oh, I see. This is a real meet-the-family thing. Also, it’s more like an initiation.

Lennox stiffens beside me, and I know he knew about this, which was maybe why he blindfolded me coming in, although I think that was just for fun. The kidnapping wasn't fun a year or so ago, but it turned out alright in the end. I was only scared for a few minutes until I realized the whole thing was a big mistake and no one meant me any harm. Or Ayana—the real person they were supposed to kidnap.

I have a gut feeling that I should reach for Lennox's hand with my left, so I do. Now I'm holding Ayana and Lennox's hand, grounded by my best friend and the man who is coming to mean more to me than...than...I don't even know.

Than any guy ever has, even ones I've dated for months or a year.

Lennox's granny's expression softens just a little, and I exhale softly and melt into the couch. I don't want to appear intimidated, but who wouldn't be intimidated by a granny that I know for a fact packs heat and can scowl with the best of them? I saw her fierce granny look after I was kidnapped. I was in Ransom's basement, and their granny came down there and found out what her grandsons had done, and she was not pleased. She gave it to them all, but Lennox was the ringleader, so he took the brunt of it. She never raised her voice or looked displeased, but she didn't have to. She gave off some mega scary disappointed granny vibes, and of all the people you don't want to

disappoint in the world, grannies are at the top of the list.

“I want to say welcome to the family, Cassadina,” she says. “I know this might be coming a little soon, and Lennox was against it, seeing as he didn’t want to scare you or himself off, but I think it’s time you knew a little bit about us and what we do so you can make your choices accordingly. Lennox did assure us that you were more than trustworthy. He told me that you know some of his past, and if he trusted you with that information, it’s good enough for me.” She shifts her legs, unfolding one leg from on top of the other before she leans forward and gives me a solid staredown.

I’m not sure whether we’re having a staring competition or not, but if we are, I’m probably going to lose. Okay, I know I’m going to lose. Shit, I just lost.

You try staring down a fierce granny rocking a power suit. Or try staring down any granny. I dare you. It’s hard to do.

“You see, Cass, we’re not like any other family, and it’s not just because I have grandsons, and they were all adopted. I never had any kids of my own, so they’re more than just grandsons. They’re like my sons too. My boys. All five of them. My husband was taken from me in a brutal manner. He was working a job he shouldn’t have been doing, and when he knew too much, he was killed off in an accident that was no accident. I swore vengeance, and I

dedicated myself to reaching that objective. I breathed, ate, and slept it. I trained in the only way I could because a woman well past middle age couldn't go in and physically kick ass, although I dang well would have tried. However, that wouldn't have been smart. A person can only do so much damage with a weapon or their body, but they can do so, so much more with their mind. I would never have asked my boys to do what I do, but it kind of all came together, and they were happy to do it with me. Anyway, I'll get right to it. We fight crime. We right the major wrongs in the world and come up against some of the biggest crime bosses, drug lords, made men, and criminal organizations of all types. A huge portion of their business is conducted digitally now, lucky for us. All you need is the right skill set, and you can bring anyone down."

It all makes sense now. Oh my god. It. All. Makes. Sense. The inklings I had that Lennox and his family were a little too good with technology, the disappearing to different places all the time, the things Ayana could never tell me, and the things Lennox couldn't tell me because he wanted to keep me safe.

"Oh my god," I gasp. *Good gravy, why is the room getting dark, and what are those black things making strange swimming patterns in front of my eyes? "You're the mafia, aren't you?"*

Lennox's granny cackles so loud that I swear the laughter echoes off the walls in the room. "No, honey, we're not the mafia. We take the bad guys down."

"Cass?" Lennox's voice, coming from far away, calls out.

I see his eyes, green and swimming. Why are they swimming? He's looking at me like he truly cares, I realize. Truly. Cares. Is that why they look so intense? He's a good man. He's not one who just puts in the time, pretending to care. He's not looking for himself when he's looking at me. No, when he looks at me, he's not mentally skipping ahead to the beer he'd rather have with his friends or the sports he'd rather be watching than having a conversation with me. Okay, so maybe I'm a tad bit bitter in that area because I've dated one asshole too many. But when Lennox looks at me, he really does see me, and it doesn't take knowing a few assholes too many to know that.

Oh god, why are his eyes doing that now? I'm pretty sure they're not supposed to be detaching from his body and swimming for real. Arp! Out of his face. My eyes are doing funny things. I try and put out a hand in front of them because maybe it's my eyes that are swimming, but my hand feels like it weighs a thousand pounds. Oh, joy, am I walking through a tunnel now? Where did that come from?

“Oh shit!” Ayana’s face appears, looking even further away.

“Garble-diddle-do-goooo!” Maya’s happy exclamation sounds from even further.

Then everything goes dark.

CHAPTER 12



Lennox

I grab Cass and catch her before she can topple over the edge of the couch. She falls in my arms and slumps down, now a deadweight. It gives me a heart attack seeing her practically gray and unresponsive. Even though I know it was the shock of what we just told her, it is not okay. She just passed out after hearing about what we really do and who we really are. Seriously, why was there a single part of me that thought she would be okay with it? Was there even a fractional part of me that thought I could keep her safe?

We create our own luck. We make our own destiny.

I believed in that. I really, truly did.

“Whoa! Cass!” Ayana leans in, fanning her best friend’s pale face with one hand while holding Maya safely in her other arm. “Maybe we need to give her space,” she suggests as everyone starts anxiously crowding around.

Immediately, the surge of my brothers backs up as Granny leans over Cass’ still form. “What did I offer Alden when he passed out at his wedding? Whisky? Looks like we might have another taker here.”

“Granny!” I groan. “Whisky isn’t going to help.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “You think water or coffee is going to do the

trick? Whisky is the only thing that's going to help. It will put some fire back in her, and usually, that's all it takes to get someone back on their feet."

"I mean, help with this. Whisky isn't going to change what we do."

My brothers continue to hover anxiously while Ayana keeps fanning Cass' face. I hold onto her, one hand behind her neck to support it and the other wrapped around her shoulders. Thank goodness she was sitting down when it happened. She's so light in my arms, even at a deadweight. Her hair is silky on my fingertips, and her face is so freaking angelic, even if it is very pale. My heart stutters in my chest. Yes, stutters. It flaps funnily, and my ventricles fail and putter, then stick and slam back open. With just one hand, I can count the number of things that make my heart go boom, and most of them involve a computer of some sort and a dangerous scenario. Adrenaline is not usually produced for me like this.

"Food," Ransom mutters. "She needs food."

"The pie!" Atlas chimes in, and for once, he might be right. "We did bring it for the occasion."

"Not this occasion," Orion protests. "But maybe it will work. If Granny's whisky doesn't do the trick."

I shift Cass in my arms, bringing her face closer to mine. I lean in just because I need to feel the tickle of her breath against my cheek. Satisfied that

it's there and it's strong, I brush my lips over her forehead. I'm not a true love's first kiss kind of a guy, and this sure as shit isn't a fairy tale—not only do I not believe in luck, but I also sure as poo in a jar don't believe in fairy tales—so I can only blame my beard for tickling or brushing Cass' face all funny and bringing her around that way.

Yeah, I'm sure it was the beard that made her eyes flutter. Her lashes do the butterfly dance a few more times, then her lovely eyes make an appearance. Seeing those sky blues brings me instant relief. I back up an inch, but I can't keep myself from cupping her soft-as-peach-skin cheeks and brushing my fingers over them, even though my fingers are rough by comparison.

“I'm sorry,” I say thickly while Ayana watches us. My eyes dart to her, and she's giving me a look of death. Death times two.

“Hurt her,” she mouths, “and I'll chop your balls off, and they'll be the thing in the jar.”

“I'll never hurt her,” I mouth back.

“They'll never find your body,” Ayana continues mouthing. I didn't realize she was so schooled in silent verse. I'm a very, very good lip reader. At least, I'm sure she didn't say, ‘shells sever sore seer soddy.’ Not only because that wouldn't make sense but because it would be one hell of a

tongue twister, and I don't think right now is the time for that kind of competition.

To be clear, Ayana draws a line across her throat, makes her eyes roll up, and gives me a fake dead face. It's frightening, especially since I know who her dad is. He's a straight-up good guy who cares about the community and the guys he has in his club. He's a good man who Granny mistakenly targeted for us to take down because one of the guys in the club flipped her off after nearly running her over with his bike while she was crossing the street on a crosswalk. Turns out the guy was going through a rough patch, and he was just an asshole. The club wasn't up to anything that was even close to no good, and that's how Ransom met Ayana. He was doing undercover work, bartending at one of Ayana's dad's clubs. Either way, Ayana's threats are given that extra little bit of credence, like spice on a turd in a jar, and I nod solemnly.

I have no plans to hurt Cass. *Ever.*

Cass' eyes finally focus on my face, and I sigh in relief. "S—sorry," she whispers hoarsely. "I don't know why that just happened."

"Because we shocked you." I caress her cheeks with my thumbs again.

Her lips quiver. "I guess I was a tad bit surprised."

Granny is suddenly at our side, thrusting a glass of whisky at Cass.

“You’re not pregnant, are you?”

“Granny!” I admonish sharply as I watch Cass’ eyes get huge. If that wasn’t a dose of metaphorical smelling salts, I don’t know what was.

Granny glances at Ayana, who snorts and shakes her head. “Just have to be sure. It seems to happen around here.” Behind her, I can hear Ransom muttering, but Ayana shakes her head. She’s smiling softly at him, and I know she didn’t take offense to that, which is good, as Granny for sure meant none.

Granny purses her lips and holds out the glass, which has way more than two fingers in it. “Drink this, honey. It will fortify the old bones.”

Cass doesn’t look like she wants to, but she reaches for it anyway. I reluctantly let her face go, dropping my hands to her shoulders and letting them hover there just in case. She winces, tips the glass back, then winces again after she swallows everything like a champ.

“Ugh.” She shudders. “That’s so gross.”

“We should never have involved you,” I say on impulse, my voice angrier than I intended. Oh, look. All the protective instincts I didn’t know I had are now coming out in full force. No, scratch that. I knew I wanted to keep Cass safe. Always. And this? She can’t very well just hide behind my beard and not face it. This is my life. I knew I’d have to tell her sometime, and Granny

made it clear to me when she broke into my place and took me for breakfast that the time was now because things were getting serious with Cass, and even I couldn't deny that. Not to Granny. Not to my brothers. Not to myself.

Cass' cheeks go red, and I'm not sure if it was from what Granny asked, the whisky, or what I said. "No," she says softly. "I was just...shocked, I guess. I don't know what happened. I've never passed out before."

"Oxygen deprivation," Granny explains. "Makes the brain do funny things."

"Yeah," Cass whispers. "I got that."

I glance at my brothers, who all have worried looks on their faces. Granny's look is more certain, but then, she rarely ever doubts herself when she's made a decision, and it was her idea to tell Cass. "I'm going to take her home," I say roughly. I give Granny one of those *just try and stop me* looks.

Instead of arguing with me, she just shrugs and nods. She's always full of surprises.

"I'm good," Cass insists. "Really."

"We can talk more in the car. Or at your place," I say softly. "Without my brothers gawping at you."

The guys immediately break away and do some awkward, innocent foot

shuffling. Ransom huffs, and he goes straight to Ayana's elbow for support while the twins head to the kitchen. I know they have pie on the brain. Granny watches me from a few steps back like she already knows the outcome of the entire world, and she's not one bit worried about this not-so-minor setback.

Before Cass can argue, I scoop her up in my arms. Now that I'm holding her like this, I realize just how lightly built she actually is. She might be on the taller side for a woman and curvy to boot, but in my arms, she's as light as air, as delicate as a feather, and as tender as a peach. *Don't even go there. And stop grasping her bottom like that. This is supposed to be a sweet hold, though I kind of have to hold her bottom unless I want to drop her. Don't think about it, then. Just don't. Think about...think about Ayana threatening to put your balls in a jar.*

Cass leans her head against my chest, which makes everything in me constrict to the point where I feel like I'm in the middle of having a heart attack, but instead of pain, my chest turns to mush like mashed potatoes. A mashed potato heart attack.

I keep moving until I have Cass loaded into the station wagon, which is kind of cool, I have to admit, but it also drinks an absurd amount of fuel compared to my much newer, sleeker sedan. Even though my car is

reinforced, I think this thing might weigh twice as much.

“Lennox,” Cass whispers when we’re stopped at a red light a block from the house. “It’s okay, really. I always knew there was something and that it had to be pretty monumental. And by monumental, I mean badass.”

My heart is slamming so hard that I can barely breathe. I realize, a few blocks later, what it is.

Fear.

I learned a long time ago that being afraid gets you nowhere. I guess those parts of me became deadened or shut off when I was a kid in order to get me through everything I went through. But right now? Yeah, I’m terrified. I feel like I’m going to lose Cass. *Cass*. A wonderful, sensitive, sweet woman who thinks she’s cursed and has all the bad luck. I’m afraid I’m going to lose her before I even truly have her.

I was so against it. I wasted so much time being childish and petulant when she was always my match. My granny knew it long before I did. The luckiest thing that ever happened to me? Meeting her by mistake through Ayana and Ransom. I’m sorry. So, so sorry that I wasted so much time. I’m even more sorry that Granny was wrong. Cass isn’t ready for this. We shouldn’t drag her into our lives. Granny took me for breakfast after she showed up with the station wagon, and she insisted that if I was getting close

to Cass, then it was time to tell her. Granny said Cass had to decide for herself once she knew the truth. She wanted to know if Cass could be trusted with our secret. I told her that, of course, Cass could be trusted. I didn't and will never doubt that, but now I'm doubting everything else.

My lifestyle. Myself.

Does she think everything I told her was a lie? She knew there were things. She *knew* that. It wasn't like anyone was lying to her, but still. What we do is dangerous. If something happened to Cass, I would never forgive myself.

My palms flex and cramp against the wheel. We're almost at Cass' place and neither of us has said another word. I'm breaking apart inside. I have this feeling now, and it's telling me that I would do anything to protect Cass, but maybe that anything means leaving and not getting involved with her in the first place. Is it selfish to want to stay? I don't actually know, and that sucks so much more than any poo in a jar.

Cass' palm comes to rest on my shoulder as soon as I pull up in front of her place. She left a light on in the living room, and the golden glow looks homey and sweet behind the closed blinds at the tiny bay window.

"Hey," she whispers. "Don't black out on me too."

I know what she means. Don't fall into my being. Don't go into that abyss.

It kills me that she's the one reassuring me when I should be the one offering her comfort and all the explanations right now. If that were Granny telling me not to black out, it would be because she knows that sometimes I need to go off-grid, just take some time and disappear and get lost in myself to understand what the hell is going on in my own head, but Cass would never understand that. Sometimes I just need the silence in my own head.

"Do you want to come in?" Cass tries again. "I could make us some tea."

Can't honestly say I've ever had tea in my life, but I owe this to her. I owe it to her to answer her questions and give her a proper *goodbye* if that's what it takes. It might very well be because earlier, she freaking passed out. How did I ever think this could be a thing? Us? Cass is far, far too sweet for this life. On the flip side, I know I can't do this forever. It would feel like living worse than a lie. I like my *real* life. The life with Granny and my brothers. What I'm doing right now with the pawnshop and the condo? That's part of my mission, and that mission might not even be real. Cass was an unexpected loophole in that, but she's *real*, even if everything else is fake.

"Lennox?"

I shake my head, but then I nod quickly. "Yeah, sure. Tea. Great."

Cass' face is instantly worried, and I feel like the worst tool in the shed. Looking at her huge, perfect blue eyes, I feel like I could do this forever. Be

with her, be normal, live a regular life, and do what Alden did and get out of the game, or even what Ransom did and get out and start a family. I feel it, but at the same time, I know I can't. I can't do normal, and I can't get a nine-to-five job like everyone else. It would kill me. I'm not trained for that. I can't do it. And what would that mean for Cass?

I bail out of the car before I can self-destruct right there on the spot. I force a smile and follow Cass to the door. She unlocks it, and as soon as we step in, I'm immediately on the alert, just out of habit, for anything out of the ordinary. The condo is totally silent, the lights are on, and everything is as it should be—nice, homey, and cheerful.

“Um, kitchen?” Cass asks.

I nod. I'm being silent. Broody. I'm already shutting down, and she can tell. She tries to pretend she's okay with that, but I can see the sheen of moisture in her eyes before she tears them away from my face and walks toward the back of the condo to the small kitchen.

I follow, taking in all the details that scream Cass. The jar candles, the antique furniture, the vintage paintings on the walls, the knitted afghans. The place isn't sleek and modern. It's got a lived-in look, and all the things were chosen with care to add color and life and vibrancy.

“Cherry or gingerbread?” Cass is holding up two boxes of tea, one in each

hand. Her cheeks have a bit of their color back, and she looks like she's going to be okay.

Even so, I still can't breathe. "Gingerbread," I force out, even though I hate cinnamon-flavored anything. Cherry feels too much like the first night I met Cass when we had cherry pie and fries ordered from a drive-thru because I was scared that she'd bolt if we went in anywhere.

"Do you want to sit down?" She points at the table, which is a smaller antique deal that's been refinished with baby blue paint. The chairs, when I pull one out, have been reupholstered with pineapple fabric.

I slide in and sit and set my hands on the tabletop. Then I wait and rehearse what I want to say—no, what I *need* to say.

How can I do this to Cass? If I'm not able to do the whole normal life thing, it would mean she has to do my life. She has parents, a normal family, a sister, Ayana, Ransom, Maya, and a few other friends. She has people who love her, even if she sometimes doubts that. I can't bring myself to just rip her away from that and keep uprooting her over and over again. God, if she wants a family, how could I give her that? What does that mean for us? What does it mean for me if I stay? If I stay and try to do the regular life deal?

These are hard questions I never thought I'd have to answer because I didn't see Cass coming, even though she has already been in my life for a

year. I need that shot of whisky now. I need to breathe.

“Lennox?” Cass cups my face just like I cupped hers earlier. “Are you okay?”

She bends over me, and the sweet scent of her perfume tickles my nose. That sweet apricot scent, her touch warm and full of life, her fingers so freaking soft. She grounds me in a way I’ve never felt before.

In a way that not even Granny or my brothers have ever managed.

I clasp her palms and hold on while I nod, my face and her hands moving together. “I’m going to be fine.” I wish I could mean that fully. Cass studies my face, and I know what she sees, and I know what she knows. She knows I’m full of shit.

She frowns hard. “You’re thinking about bailing, aren’t you? You’re thinking it would be better for me because now I understand why you have to. You’re thinking I couldn’t do it and that I couldn’t possibly understand why you do what you do. Or anything about what your granny said back there. You think I couldn’t...that I need normal, that I...” She blinks rapidly, and shit, I think she’s trying to hold back tears. “Something’s wrong. If you’re worried about me, don’t be. I’m good. I’m sorry I fainted and scared everyone. It was silly and crazy, and I don’t even know why it happened. And now, something feels different. You’re quiet, too quiet. Please tell me

what you're thinking. Please tell me I'm wrong."

I'm saved by a bowl of peaches on the kitchen counter. "Peaches. Specifically, the fact that they go from rock hard to mushy and wrinkly in an hour, then moldy the next minute when it's this hot out. Accelerated molding."

Cass thrusts her hands on her hips and gives me a better stink eye than my granny has ever given. I swear that me just talking about peaches and the look on her face, the sheer and utter ease with which she can read straight down to my soul, is going to haunt me for the rest of my life. Also, peaches. They make me think about Cass' peach, and it makes me hard as stone.

Her nose starts to crinkle as her frown deepens. She knows I'm not telling the truth. Do I want to tell her the truth when she's so close? Close enough that I could wrap my hands around her curvy waist, pull her into me, and kiss the living tarnation out of her.

The ugly doubts I have aren't just going to go away, but I could bury them and myself in Cass, and wait...what was I saying? Something about her family? Something about her not being ready for this and me being a selfish bastard and anything but normal? Yeah, it was definitely something like that, but right now, I'm focused on something entirely different.

I push back the chair and stand. Cass stares me down, but it's no longer a

nose-crinkled stare, which is honestly too bad because I would have liked to kiss away those frown lines. She's just staring at me with those huge blue eyes, her lush lips pursed, her hands still on her hips, and her chest jutting out just a little.

Doubts? What doubts?

I've got nothing here.

Cass is a good expression reader, and I'm not even trying to mask anything I'm feeling at the moment. Her eyes light up, and she looks so visibly relieved that I feel like a shithead all over again. A shithead 2.0. I came here to end things with Cass, but I can't do it. She's the light in my world. She's truly one in a million. No, that's wrong. She's one in the whole world. That's Cass. I know if I were a good man, I'd do the right thing and walk out of her life right now. Honestly, I might do some solids for the general good of the world and its population now and then because I believe in what Granny does, but I would never classify myself as a truly good person. Certainly not selfless. I know caring about someone is wanting what's best for them, but right now, it's easy enough for me to tell myself that's me and make myself believe it.

I want to believe it.

Even if I shouldn't.

“Lennox, I...I know this changes a lot of stuff. I...your granny...I can’t believe what she said over at...I can’t believe she...that you...I promise I’ll never tell anyone, and it’s fine. I think it’s truly heroic that you do things like that. It’s amazing. The last thing in the world I would have thought was going down, but it’s truly, truly wonderful, and um....”

My hands connect with her waist, wrapping around her hips. Then, one hand palms the perfect peachy swell of her bottom and hauls her up against me. I cut off her words by kissing her like there isn’t going to be a tomorrow. I would never have said that I had a truly happy place before, but this is my happy place. Right here. Wherever Cass is. Doing this with her, laughing with her, talking with her, eating pie and fries with her, swan boat riding with her, driving in a station wagon with her in the passenger seat, being set up to babysit with her when only one semi-responsible adult—me—was more than enough because Maya can sleep through a bomb blast, and just being in the same space with her. Anywhere. Anyhow. Always.

Cass grasps my shoulders and breaks the kiss so she can leap up on me. She wraps her long legs around my waist, and pretty much every fantasy I’ve ever had is coming true right here. She claims my mouth again, kissing me like I’m her very reason for living.

“Bedroom,” she commands. “Bed.” Her tongue caresses my lower lip

before she sinks her teeth into it lightly, tasting me and humming low in her throat as she savors me. “Not the couch. Not the table. The bed.” I turn abruptly and walk straight into a wall. “Oomph!” Cass’ back takes the brunt of that contact.

“Shit! Oh my god! I’m sorry! Are you okay?”

She giggles and grins at me, and then she licks the end of my nose. Yes, the end of my nose. I’m not sure that should be sexy, but my cock is throbbing hard enough to shred through my metal zipper. Cass whimpers and grinds her sweet pussy against me. She’s wearing black leggings and a cherry red tunic thing that has ridden up, and my god, I love that color on her because, of course, it reminds me of cherry pie. And I also love those leggings. They’re practically the world’s best invention. Thin enough that I can feel every single detail, like the fact that I’m almost one hundred percent sure Cass isn’t wearing panties beneath them.

Cass isn’t wearing panties.

“Which way to the bedroom?” I ask with all the desperation of a man looking for water in the middle of a scorching desert.

Cass points over my shoulder. “That way.” All I see is the kitchen when I turn. “Through there. And down the hall.”

“Noted.”

I somehow stumble my way there between kisses and also Cass steering me and guiding me at the last minute before more walls are walked into, and more oomphs and ummphs happen. I've always been fairly athletic, and I have good reflexes and a fast recovery time. It's not a graceful stumble, but who cares about graceful when Cass is kissing the last little breath I have off my lips, thrusting her tongue into my mouth, pressing the hard little points of her nipples up against my chest, and grinding her sweet pussy against my dick. Graceful? I give zero fucks about graceful.

"We're here!" Cass grins at me like we just completed a triathlon together and won first place. She palms my cheeks, smushing my lips out comically, duckbill style. "Lennox?"

I struggle not to laugh through my duck lips. "Yes?" That comes out sounding more like *yahmuss*?

"Will you please take my clothes off and fuck me senseless?"

Oh god, oh god, oh god. My dick is raging hard, kicking in my jeans, and trying to do just that on the spot. Cass' hands relax on my cheeks so I can give her a straight, not-so-ducklike answer. "How much do you like your bed?"

She blinks at me, slightly confused. I don't bother flipping the light on in the room. I can just about make out the outline of something antique and

brass-looking in the near dark. The hall light isn't on either, but I'll find a lamp, a nightlight, a flashlight, or something. Although, finding my way by touch alone has a unique thrill to it too. Maybe for the first round, it would suit just fine. I can imagine the dark is a blindfold...

“Uh, I like it a lot. Why?”

“If we break it, would you accept my apologies and a new one?”

Cass giggles so loud that it's like a hurricane of laughter hits me. I love that sound. God, I love it more than I've ever loved almost anything. But I can think of a few things I do like better. Namely, Cass' bottom, Cass' pussy, and Cass' breasts.

My dick leaps against her, practically trying to high-five her pussy. *Fuck, did I bring a condom? Wallet? There's an old one in my wallet, I think. There had better be one in there. Check it discreetly. Now. Can't bail halfway through.*

“Lennox?”

“Sorry, I was just thinking about whether I have protection.”

“I have an IUD in. I didn't want to test my luck with this kind of thing. Because you know...obviously...testing my luck... uh, never mind. But if you have a condom, that's good too.”

“I’m not sure I do.”

“If you don’t, I could look up the stats on IUDs, but I think they’re very nearly bulletproof. But if you don’t want to, I totally understand. I...we could...we could take the station wagon out and buy a box and park in a secluded spot and—”

“That’s a good idea, a very good idea. An excellent idea. For after. Round two. Later. Tomorrow?”

She laughs again, and the sound is the sweetest music in my ears. “So you’re okay with going in bareback?”

“Holy shit, if you say things like that, we might need to hold that thought while I get my head on straight.”

“Which head would that be?”

“Argh. I’m going to have to start running through my list of horrible things to think about that will slow down the action.”

“Don’t slow down. Don’t slow down for anything. Although, that’s an interesting concept. If you want to share your list with me sometime, as in after this, when we both need something to laugh about because I’m sure it’s funny, I’d be down. Or maybe now. You could try me and see if it works. I could use a little cooling down myself.”

“What you could use is my mouth on your pussy because you’re a rare flower, and I want to collect all your nectar.”

“Or that,” Cass says breathily.

Cass grabs my shoulders and hauls me toward the bed. I stumble and nearly fall on her. My hands break their fall by grabbing her tunic a little too fiercely, and the fabric gives a mighty rip along the hem. We both freeze, then she laughs.

“Don’t worry. It’s old, anyway. If you could either tear the rest off or remove it in some other fashion, that would be excellent.”

I’ve always been good at following commands, and I prove it by neatly divesting Cass of her shirt. My hands move down her silky skin, tracing a path to the swell of her breasts. They’re overflowing in a red lace bra, which makes my balls hotter than spicy meatballs.

“Rip that off, too,” Cass pants hungrily.

“It’s pretty, though. I wouldn’t want to ruin it.” That’s a lie. I really want to ruin it.

“I don’t care.” Her hands scramble up and fumble, undoing the clasp at the back. “Okay, maybe you’re right. It was expensive, though it’s kind of ruined because we can’t see shit in here.” She backs up, and something goes thump

in the room. Then, a small lamp with a stained glass shade that resembles a blue, purple, and pink-hued mushroom turns on.

“That’s much better.” I realize I’m talking to Cass’ breasts, the perfect raspberry nipples begging for attention, but uh, what? It is so much better with the light on.

She launches herself at me, and this time, I’m ready for the full-scale takedown that occurs, collapsing us both onto the mattress. I make sure Cass ends up on top, so she doesn’t get crushed or hurt. Also? It’s a great angle having her on top of me, especially when she’s only wearing the thin black leggings that I’d like to rip off with my teeth. She straddles my hips and bends forward to kiss me.

She does more than just kiss me. Has a kiss between us ever been just a kiss? This kiss is sensational, bliss in a bottle, and life itself. I never want to stop kissing Cass. Never.

It is a problem I need to solve fast before we get in way too freaking deep to extract ourselves. That twinge in my stomach and chest? It’s telling me it might already be too late for that. Can I ask Cass to give up everything? Can I try the whole living like a normal person thing? Is there some way we can meet in the middle somewhere?

CHAPTER 13



Cass

The kiss is so hot that I can feel it to the tips of my toes. Okay, so I mostly feel it in my lady bits and nipples, which are so hard that they're literally redefining the term pebbles. My leggings are soaked, and since I'm here straddling Lennox's waist anyway, it's incredibly easy to rock my hips against the rock-hard bulge in his jeans.

"Oh my god, Lennox," I gasp against his mouth. "We still have our pants on, but I think I could come."

I was so worried in the kitchen. And on the drive over. I thought Lennox was going to say that this whole thing was a mistake or tell me that he couldn't be with me, and then I'd blame it on my luck because telling myself it was bad luck would be the easiest way to justify that kind of pain and hurt to myself.

I twine my hands into his shirt and grasp hard while I do my best to bruise his mouth with kisses so hard and hot that they could easily bruise me too. I have to come up for air sometime, and when I do, we're both panting heavily.

"Don't come yet," he commands in his lovely husky tone. "Save that for me. For my mouth, specifically. Then my fingers. And my cock."

I shudder. Hard. The whimper that comes out of my mouth doesn't sound human. It sounds like a sexed-up banshee, and it only increases in tempo when Lennox's fingers tuck under the waistband of my leggings and pull. Even though I'm the one on top, he manages to shift me and roll them down my legs, and I lift one leg and then the other.

He sighs hard. "I knew you weren't wearing panties under these."

"That would just be uncomfortable. And you'd see them."

"What's wrong with...never mind. Uh, I like leggings. All the leggings. Can you always wear leggings?"

I giggle at that. "But then I'd have a whole drawer full of really pretty panties that I would never get to wear."

"Okay, so maybe leggings ninety-eight percent of the time and the rest of the time just panties, as long as they have lace and bows or are crotchless."

I play smack him on the shoulder. "Good gravy, that's dirty. When I said they were pretty, I mean they're just cotton, granny style, and have a bit of lace edging along the waistband."

"Sounds hot, as long as you're wearing them, and I can make you soaking wet."

"Oh god. You and your dirty mouth."

“You have no idea what a dirty mouth I have.” He licks his lips slowly and deliberately. Why don’t you test it out and sit on it?”

“On it? Like on your face?”

“Absolutely.”

“Uhh, that’s very...ummm...intimate.”

“You could lie down if you prefer, and I could feast on your pussy that way too.”

“Oh my god. I...okay, but don’t laugh. I’ve never done this before.”

This time, he groans. “I’m happy to be your first face.”

I close my eyes as I crawl up his chest. I’m not overly shy about things. Everyone thinks I’m quiet and shy, but I’m just worried about the luck thing. I don’t want to do anything to curse anyone. I tell myself, as I get into position, and Lennox wraps his hands around my thighs to support me, guiding me until my hands wrap around the brass headboard, that there is no way this is going to make the universe angry at Lennox. He doesn’t believe in bad luck, so it can’t touch him.

We’ve done this twice—kind of—and nothing has happened.

Why worry about luck when you know what he does for a living now? Well, not for a living, but for social justice...for other people. And for the

world at large. He brings down really, really bad people. He makes his own luck, he creates his own destiny, and he's not worried about anything as trivial as bad luck when, for years, he's been living a life of danger and intrigue.

It's crazy to think about that, to think about things I can only imagine. This is the Lennox who is sighing and breathing hard beneath me. I don't even know the half of it, but I always just knew he was a good person. I mean, I've always known it—from about five minutes after he kidnapped me when his granny started laying a strip into him, and I realized nothing bad was going to happen.

Lennox inhales sharply as he guides me to him, and that in itself is so dirty that my mind pretty much takes a tropical vacation. Then his mouth is doing wicked things to me, his tongue worshipping me while he eats me with zero reticence and no hesitation. He's very enthusiastic about what he's doing, and I'm very enthusiastic about letting him.

It might make me blush scarlet to be sitting on his face right now, but I'm quickly getting over it. Lennox's tongue thrusts inside my entrance, and I throw my head back, arch my body, and surrender to the wicked hot pleasure coiling deep inside me.

“Touch your breasts,” he commands before his tongue flicks over my clit.

“I want to see you cup them for me.”

My hands tremble as I take my breasts in my palms. Lennox hisses from below me.

“You have the most gorgeous breasts. Roll your thumb over your nipple. How does that feel?”

It feels like heaven. I can literally smell my own arousal and...wow. I whimper, rock my hips into Lennox’s face, and roll my thumbs over my nipples, which are now as hard as diamonds.

“Taste so good,” Lennox growls. His hands grip my thighs, using just his mouth to pleasure me. I rock my hips a little harder, guiding him to the exact spot where I need him most, which is pretty much anywhere at the moment. “Do you have any idea how hard I am right now? I’m going through that list, big time.”

“Oh, sweet pink lemonade flamingos.”

“Which would no doubt not be half as delicious as you are or half as beautiful. You’re a goddess, Cass. A goddess from any angle, but especially this one. My heart is going to beat out of my chest.”

Those words are not dirty, but they are so, so thrilling. My clit throbs even before Lennox’s tongue pays homage to it again, and I roll my hips hard. I’m

soaking wet, probably drenching Lennox's face, but he doesn't complain. He has a perfect view of pretty much every angle of me, and I'm okay with that because I know for sure that what he said is true. That he thinks every bit of me is gorgeous. I have to swallow a major lump in my throat just so I can try to drag in a shaky breath.

I lower my head and watch as Lennox tastes me. I'm close, and I know it, so seeing him doing those things to me nearly detonates the crazy climax I know is coming. Lennox moves his mouth, suckles my clit, then plies it with his tongue as he presses on the tight nub.

“Come for me, Cass. Come apart for me.”

He doesn't stop with his tongue or mouth until I comply with his orders. I throw my head back again, grasp the headboard, and let my hips go wild. I come so hard that I don't see anything at all. No planets, no lights, just darkness. I think I've blacked out again, except this time, it's all pleasure, and I'm definitely conscious of it. The orgasmic waves make me shake, make my teeth chatter together, and make the bed rock back and forth as the headboard thumps against the wall.

I'm still coming down when Lennox lifts me off him, twists me around, and ends up on top, all in a series of swift movements. He kisses me, obliterating my mouth and thrusting his tongue against mine so I can taste my

climax too. My core clenches up hard, and I whimper against his lips.

“More. Need you...freaking inside me. Right. Now.” I rip at his shirt. “Take this off.” Then, I remember. I remember everything, and my hands freeze. My eyes fly open, and I look up at him. I expect his face to be blank or hard, but it’s not. It’s all warm, his eyes big and hazy.

“As you command.” He slips it off in a show of masculine grace that makes my core clench.

I look at him, at every inch of him. He’s perfect. His skin might be flawed by his scars—the small little round burn marks and the occasional white jagged pucker—but he was right. His arms were the worst of it. I drink him in, memorizing every detail cast by the golden light of the lamp. He’s totally carved and rock hard with muscles and muscles and more muscles. Also, with hard pecks, an eight-pack that makes me wet and hot *everywhere*, and a delicious male V leading straight down into his jeans.

His hands rest on the button of his jeans as I sweep my eyes over him. Just for a second, his eyes get that haunted look, but it’s more than enough, and I know he’s trying to hide it, so I know there is indeed some doubt going on in his head.

“I’ve told a thousand stories about those scars,” he breathes. “But never the truth. Never once.”

I get bold enough to reach up and run my hands over his shoulders before moving down and spreading my fingers to span as much of him as I can. His skin is warm, the scars smooth and barely raised. I'm struck with an instant feeling of sadness and pain, pain for him as a child and pain for him as an adult because he had to live through that, and he's always going to remember it.

"You're beautiful," I whisper. "And that's the truth. Not just the way I see it, but the actual freaking truth. Those scars? I'm not going to say they don't matter because they do. I can see and feel them. I can't say they're beautiful because you're beautiful either, as that's trite, garbage nonsense. They're awful. What you lived through was awful. I can't imagine it, and it breaks my heart. It makes me feel fierce and angry and hopeless and so horribly sad. It also makes me feel this crazy sense of triumph for you, this pride, and this... this, I don't know, this rush of *something*. You didn't just survive it. You came through the other side, and you're a *good* person. You're always going to be more than what happened, and *that's* what makes you beautiful." Lennox is absolutely silent above me, and it makes me borderline panicky. "That was a super long monologue. Was that really unsexy? Or unsettling? I'm sorry. It's probably not the time or place."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm pretty damn scared right now. Seeing is one thing. I've let lots of people see them. Honestly, it's ugly, but scars are

sometimes...well, everyone knows women dig scars. I've never had a problem in that area before. I...wait, that sounds horrible. It wasn't like that. It's just that no one ever meant anything because it was always going to be just that. I'd tell a sob story about the scars, like a fire, an accident, or how I used to work in a lab. One time, I seriously said it was because I fell into a pit of rattlesnakes and got bitten all over, yet I miraculously survived. I know, it's funny. It's okay. You can laugh."

I clamp a hand over my mouth. "No. You didn't say those things."

"Honestly, I did. It was bad. I was sometimes an ass. I had to protect myself, and I couldn't tell people the truth, so I went above and beyond, which was never right. It was actually extremely wrong. You're the first person to know the truth, and it makes me feel more naked than being stripped of all my clothes, which makes me terrified."

I suck in a burst of air. We've all done things we aren't proud of. If I had to make a list, it would be extremely long, and I wouldn't want to tell it to anyone, probably not even Ayana, and she's my best friend. Lennox might have told me in a depreciating way, but he did tell me, and that takes courage. It takes courage for him to even be here right now, peeling away so much more than just clothing, as he said.

"You know it would never...that I could never..."

“I know. I know that.” He cups my face gently.

My hand flutters up to this chest, and I place it on the wrong side before I start laughing. I laugh so hard that it turns into a snort-laugh, which makes Lennox grin back before he guides my hand to the left side, where his heart is.

“I think this is what you were looking for.”

I nod, so unbelievably touched. “I never thought I’d say this, but I’m more than lucky to be with you. I know you don’t believe in fate or destiny or luck. I know you just believe in circumstance and how one thing affects another—what do they call that? Causality? But this. Us. You. Me. If you proved to me before that luck wasn’t a thing, I’m going to prove to you tonight that destiny is. I can’t imagine anything more perfect in the entire world than us. Together. Now. Here.”

“I think that’s a pretty good cue to take my jeans off.”

I laugh again, so relieved we can talk like this and have all these things that are not easy to say or remember, yet we can still get past them. I’m so freaking proud of this man’s courage and bravery because it’s mostly all him, doing the remembering, the talking, and the getting past.

“I believe it is, yes.”

“Tell me what you’d like to do while I stand up and strip.”

“Oooh, are you going to put on a show?”

The bed practically bounces as Lennox gets off. He’s a huge person, but I didn’t even notice how badly we were straining the foundation of the bed until I bounced up a few inches.

“Only if you consider this a show.” He undoes his jeans in a matter-of-fact manner like he’s taking them off at home with no one watching. Alright, so seeing him slide them down his hips and remove one leg and the other, then watching him shed his boxer briefs, is so much hotter than anything in the realm of imagination.

I can’t help but make a tiny squeak of appreciation when my eyes fix on his V and travel lower. His cock is...well, I suppose it’s proportioned perfectly to his body. He’s a large person, and he’s quite large in every department.

“Tell me where you want me, Cass.”

“Can I give you a list?”

He grins. “That would be spectacular.”

I grin back. “Or you could tell me where you want *me*.”

He doesn’t miss a beat. “Riding me. I want you straddling my hips,

lowering yourself down on my cock, and taking all of me an inch at a time. I want to taste those sweet nipples while you dig your nails into my shoulders.”

“Holy cheese pizza. Okay, yes. I...yes. Please. Show me.”

“We can start like this.” He leaps onto the bed, sprawling out flat on his back as it creaks. He palms his cock as I watch, rolling his hand down the length of it and smearing moisture from the tip until he’s glistening wet.

My mouth goes dry as I stare at him. I’ve never met anyone who has such a crazy *large* presence, even spread out flat on his back. I straddle his hips, and watching him watch me do it is probably the hottest thing I’ve ever seen. His eyes turn midnight black, and he lets out a hiss of pleasure as I close my hand around his shaft. He’s so thick that when I say close, I mean barely get my palm halfway around him. When I stroke the silky skin, though, he lets out another hiss.

“Cass, yes. That feels so good. You have no idea how I’ve imagined you touching me.”

“So you’ve thought about me too?”

“Always. You think I could watch you on the couch that night, pleasuring your sweet pussy, taste your pussy too, and not go home and get in the shower and work my dick until I exploded?”

“Holy bananas, Lennox.”

“Holy bananas,” he echoes in agreement. I run my hand down his shaft, pumping him like he just described. His hips jack into my hand, and he swallows loudly. “Keep doing that to my banana, and I’m going to die, but at least I’ll die happy.”

“That’s the sexiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“I see I have a long way to go in upping my game.”

“Kidding. But really, that’s hot.”

I really can’t stand to wait for a second longer, so I position myself over Lennox, guiding him to me. I throw my head back when I feel him at my entrance. My chest juts out all on its own, my hair is everywhere, and my hips take over.

“Fuck,” Lennox hisses. “You’re so sexy. And my god, you feel so good.”

“So do you.” Okay, so maybe it might not exactly feel good at the moment because it’s been a good long time since I’ve done this, and Lennox’s dick is far, far thicker than his fingers, but it doesn’t feel bad. No way. Eventually, good? Good doesn’t begin to even halfway describe anything.

I breathe heavily as I take him carefully, giving my body time to acclimatize to what I’m doing. Lennox doesn’t seem to mind. He doesn’t

move a muscle. He's absolutely still as I lower myself down. His huge hands grip my hips, guiding me.

"Holy shit, you're really big." I guess maybe I shouldn't state the obvious like that because Lennox laughs. I crack an eye and give him my fiercest look, which only makes him laugh again.

"Thanks. I mean it. Unless I'm too big. Because in that case, I apologize most profoundly."

"Most profoundly, eh?" He grins, making him even more handsome. "You know, I've never met anyone more perfect for me than you. I have to tell you. I have to because I just can't not tell you. I need you to know that."

His face softens, and even though his eyes are dark and his pupils totally blown, they soften too. "Thank you, Cass. That might be the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me because it's coming from you."

"I don't know much about your life, really, other than what I was told, but I'm serious. I'm good. I know what you were thinking in the car. That you wanted to bail because you think I can't hack it, no pun intended, but I can."

He shakes his head, which is basically thrashing it against the pillow. "That's not what I was thinking. You're brave, you're astounding, and you're so much more than you even realize. That was definitely not what I was thinking about."

“Well, then you were thinking you’re not normal enough—never going to be—but that’s not what I want. I need you to know that.”

His hands encircle my waist. I’m not that skinny. I’m actually way curvier than anything, but his hands are so big that they wrap right around me. He guides me gently the rest of the way until I’ve taken every inch of him. We both let out a growl when he’s seated deep inside me.

This is perfection. Utter. Perfection. I love the way he feels inside me, and I test it out by rocking just a little. His hips flex on instinct, and he groans.

“Perfect, Cass. So freaking amazing. Feels even better than before.”

He’s right. I can feel my muscles clenching tightly around him, and he might be big, but my body has adjusted now, and it feels perfect in every way. My lady bits are in absolute agreement with me on this one. My entire body is floating high on the straight-up pleasure I’m already getting over here. I lift up and slide back down, letting my body take control and letting all the heat and sensations build and build and build.

Lennox grasps my hips harder and thrusts gently at first, but as I get bolder with swaying, wriggling, and rocking my hips, he thrusts harder. My hips roll in perfect tandem with his thrusts, and I can feel my muscles clenching from my abs all the way down to my toes. I’m not breathing anymore. I’m panting—panting and rocking and swaying. My hands dig into

Lennox's shoulder muscles to keep myself upright, and when he jacks up a few inches and claims my nipple with his mouth, I make a sound like a toad croaking at the full moon because, you know, were-toads or whatever.

I rake my fingers through Lennox's short hair and claw at him to keep him there, to keep him doing what he's doing, and to keep his wonderful tongue rolling over my tight nipple, flooding me with tingling heat that shoots straight down to my stomach.

He thrusts harder, then pulls his head back an inch and groans. "Gonna come soon, Cass."

He bites down on my nipple and thrusts hard, making my own hips sway violently and grind down without any semblance of control, and suddenly, I'm coming too. I'm coming hard, the hot waves making me cry out. I can feel myself clench tightly around Lennox while he thrusts inside me. He pounds into me, even from beneath me, slamming our hips together, our skin wet and sticking together, and then he slams one last time deep inside me and pulses there. I feel his warmth flood through me as he groans out my name and shakes below me.

I honestly don't think I've ever had a climax like this in my life. It's still going, the heat washing through me such that I feel like my blood is boiling. My hips are still rolling gently now but grinding it out, wave after wave,

more heat, more pleasure, more goodness, more of everything.

I wait for a few minutes just to enjoy the aftershocks and afterglow. Then I start worrying about how long is too long to wait, am I really glowing, is afterglow a real thing, do guys get that—of course, guys get that—and would Lennox be willing to cuddle right now?

Before I can truly start worrying about it, he solves that question for me by grasping my waist and swinging me off of him right onto the bed beside him. He does a bridge thing with his heels on the comforter and lifts every other part except his shoulders, then untucks the quilt and has it wrapped around me in the next instant. He settles me against him and wriggles on the mattress.

“This is a pretty comfy bed.”

I can practically hear the springs getting ready to bust under our combined weight. “It’s alright. It was my parents’ old one. They gave it to me when I got my own place. Beds are expensive, and it’s the one thing I’m not really willing to buy antique or secondhand, at least not the mattress and box spring part, so I was super grateful, even though it is my parent’s old bed. And yeah, it might be kind of creepy, but I try not to think about it.”

Lennox’s smile is an instant wattage straight to my chest. “Did you have an exorcism for it?”

“I can’t say I did.”

“Never mind.” He runs his fingers through my hair. “I think we’ve christened it now, so that’s all that matters. You might have had to wait a good number of years for me, but I got here eventually.”

I bite my bottom lip, chewing on it too hard while I contemplate if he’s opening the door for us to talk about more or if I shouldn’t go there. I know if I don’t, I’m going to wish I did, but at the same time, I don’t want to rush things or make Lennox uncomfortable. I really don’t want him to clam up and become all silent again.

“So, uh, your granny is one of those badass people who fight crime unofficially. Like a superhero, but not. What do they call those people?”

“Vigilantes?”

“Right. That’s it.”

I swirl my finger over Lennox’s chest. I can see the scars dotting his skin like a strange roadmap, and while I can’t ignore them, I don’t fixate on them either. I was trying to tell him earlier that his past matters to me, but his present matters more, and he’s always going to be beautiful in my eyes. I don’t know if what I said came out right, though. The scars are never going to go away, and I can’t unsee them because of what they mean, but maybe in time, I can learn to make peace with what he told me the same way he did.

And by that, I mean come to terms with my anger over how he was treated as a child because children are innocent, and no one should ever have to live that sort of life.

“So your granny lost her husband—I’m very sorry to hear that—and she just vowed revenge and went for it? How did she go from being a regular older lady to a hacker vigilante senior citizen?”

“Well, that’s a long story. I guess the short version of it was that she went to college and took classes. This was during the infancy of the internet, and I think it actually made certain concepts easier to grasp. She made a lot of friends there who were into some shady stuff, real computer nerds who took things as far as they could take it, and they continued to learn and do so, and she was right there in the thick of it. I think people probably got a kick out of her. That’s the thing. No one ever expects that older people can do things like that.”

“I certainly wouldn’t expect it, but then, I did know your granny carries Glockes around and can shoot them both at the same time, western-shootout-style, which is quite abnormal. I didn’t think you would be involved in anything like that. Not to that extent, anyway. Did she...she didn’t adopt you all just because she was looking for partners in crime, did she?”

He shakes his head against my pillow, and goodness gracious gravy boats,

I don't think I'm ever going to wash that pillowcase again. I'd say the sheets too, but that might sound dicey. Although, we technically did what we did on top of the quilt, so maybe the sheets are good to go. I'm kidding. I'll wash them all. Gross.

“No. She adopted us because she has a huge heart. She never had kids of her own, and she always wanted them. By adopting a bunch of law-breaking, street kids with bad pasts, she was able to get kids and grandkids all in one bundle. We weren't old enough to be her biological kids, so I guess we're a bit of both. She saved us—straight up. If we didn't want to be involved in whatever she was doing, she would never have involved us. She gave us a choice, each of us. Kind of like how she showed up on my doorstep and told me that I had to give you a choice. You had to know what we did so you could decide whether you wanted to get more involved with us—I mean with me—or not.”

My heart skitters in my chest and comes to a crashing standstill. “Is that why you were so quiet earlier? Because you thought I wouldn't choose you?”

Lennox turns his face and looks up at the ceiling. “It's not really that. I kept wondering if it was fair to ask you to choose between your life now and what we do.”

“You think I can't have both?”

He slowly tilts his face back to look at me. “I don’t know if anyone can.”

I can feel all the heat gathering in my chest again, but this is a brand new heat so painful that I can barely breathe through it. It’s the kind of heat that signals loss, grief, and pain. It’s hot as freaking blue blazes, and the sting is echoed behind my eyes and in my sinuses. My nose is tingling like I’m going to sneeze, but I know it’s not a sneeze gathering there.

“So you don’t want to try? You don’t...you don’t think we could make it?” I’m not mad. I’m not going to leap to conclusions here about what Lennox is trying to say, and I’m not going to let my doubts get into the driver’s seat because they suck doubly as drivers and will farging steer me off the road every single time.

He does a grunt sigh thing that I can’t possibly decode. Grunt sighs can mean anything from *no, I don’t think so* to *one hundred percent we absolutely could*. “I just don’t know if you could live our lifestyle, I don’t know if I could keep going with the one I’m living, and I don’t know if we could have it both ways. We’ve never tried.”

I hate the shitstorm of doubt coming for us, at us, surrounding us. Yes, it’s shitstorming in the bedroom. The ceiling is opening up and raining poo. What? It could happen. I’ve heard of terrible things happening in apartments where the sewer backs up, and...never mind. I know this is a condo, and

there isn't anyone above me, fortunately for me. They're the thin, skinny kind of condos that are self-contained units with no one above or below. The shitstorm is of our own making.

"What about...what about Ransom and Ayana? And your other brother. I know you have another brother. In Canada..." I grasp onto anything I can think of at the moment to prove to him—to both of us—that we can do this.

"Ransom is learning how to be retired while my other brother, Alden, is fully retired. He and his lady brought her family with them, and they now live a pretty secluded life at the lake. Ransom couldn't just abscond with Ayana. Not with a baby, and not when she's so entrenched here. Azalea just had her parents, and they were willing to move with them."

"It's not that you couldn't. It's that you don't want to. To retire, that is. It's not that you don't want to choose me. Not that it's about choosing me. Is it about choosing me? I mean, I know we've only been...well, I don't even know if you could call it dating, but we've only been unofficially together for a little bit, so I'm not saying it to sound all butthurt and whatnot..."

"Hey." Lennox rolls onto his side and cups my chin. He's a good chin-cupper. His hands are the perfect shape for it. They're the perfect shape for a lot of things that have to do with my body, and my heart leaps with hope, even though I should do better at controlling my eagerness to believe in that

four-letter word. “It’s not about choosing you. And it’s not about how long or not long we’ve been together. Ransom and Ayana were only together for a few hours one night before they found out they were expecting a child. Alden and Azalea were actually engaged at birth—that’s a long story—but they knew each other for all of a few days before they chose their path.

“It’s about choosing something and sticking with it. I just...I want to make sure I can. You already know I didn’t have a normal childhood, and it might have fucked me up for life. I’ve loved this life that I live with my brothers and Granny. I love what we do, how we do it, who we do it for, and all of it. I love that I don’t have to do the nine-to-five thing, that I don’t need to own a house or have the dream life everyone wants. I’m free, but I feel like I’m living in a cage right now. *Not* because of you. It’s *not* you at all.”

Honestly, if I didn’t know the details of his past, and if I hadn’t seen the evidence of it for myself, written on his skin, I might not believe it, but I have, and I choose to believe what he’s saying, even if it is the whole it’s not you, it’s me line most people use.

“M—maybe it’s too much to decide for one night. Maybe we need to talk to everyone, have another family meeting that I don’t botch by passing out and—”

“I freaked out a little bit, too,” Lennox admits. “I’m sorry I went radio

silent on you. I was having a bit of a meltdown inside about what I just told you. About what to do now and where to go. I should have opened my mouth and flapped it around a bit so you'd understand what was going on in my head. I'm not very good at that—sharing with another person or opening myself up. I either tell jokes to get around it, evade it all together, or just... well, get real quiet or start flying solo for a little bit when I can't avoid it. Not going that path with you, Cass. I promise.”

“What if...what if we can't figure it out? Is that just it, then?”

He goes rigid beside me, and I hate that. I hate that I just said that. I wrap my arms over his chest as if by doing so, I could hold him and learn how to build a bridge between here and where we want to be, which pretty much feels like infinity from here. That bridge is going to be really freaking long.

“We'll figure it out,” he whispers, dipping his chin down, so his nose touches my hair. He inhales deeply. “Maybe there is a middle ground we haven't figured out yet. I just don't want to do anything that could put you in danger. I'd never forgive myself if that happened.”

I seriously didn't consider how dangerous that life might be. Duh, yes. Very. It has to be *very* dangerous. What would that mean for me? For my family? For the people I know I would always want to keep safe? Now I know why Ransom and Lennox's other brother, Alden, chose to stop doing

what they were doing before in order to live a different life and keep his loved ones safe.

But if Lennox can't do that?

And if I can't simply up and leave?

Then what?

CHAPTER 14



Lennox

I smell waffles, and at first, I think I've died and woken up back at Granny's, but then I open my eyes and realize I'm surrounded by brass, antiques, and a patchwork quilt. Not Granny's. Not dead, either. I'm at Cass' place. Because I spent the night.

I didn't mean to do that, but I didn't mean to not do that either. I guess I meant to...well, in short, I guess I'm hotter than a hot mess.

“Oh, you're awake.” Cass stops in the doorway. She's wearing my shirt and only my shirt, and I stare at her beautiful curves bathed in black, her long legs poking out from beneath the hem, and the swell of her breasts popping out from beneath the fabric where she has the first few buttons left undone. I much prefer my shirt on her. She smiles at me shyly. “Sorry, I was just coming in here to take your shirt off and put one of mine on. Then I was going to wake you up.” She grabs a strand of her sandy hair and twists it around her finger while she studies the floor. “I shouldn't have worn it, but I guess I wanted you wrapped around me for just a little bit longer this morning.”

Ouch.

That squelchy hole in my chest where I didn't think I had a heart that could be given to anyone just started hurting a little bit more.

"I have to go to work soon. It's freaking early, but I was awake at an ungodly hour, so I decided to make waffles. Do you like waffles?"

I swallow with difficulty, especially when Cass starts to slip my shirt up and over. She's wearing nothing at all under it. "I...I love waffles."

The shirt shimmies off, and she stands there in the nude. The hall light is on this time, so even though the sun is barely up yet, she's still illuminated in gold. I want to leap out of bed and grab her for an early morning not-so-quickie, but she moves to the door and pulls down a cherry red robe. That color on her somehow goes perfectly against her creamy skin without washing her out in the least. She slips it on and ties the belt, then sniffs the air comically.

"Shit on a stick, I think the waffles are burning. They're almost ready. I'll set the table. If you want to shower, go ahead. They'll be about ten minutes anyway."

I can't, for the life of me, articulate real words at the moment, so I just nod. Cass rushes off to the kitchen, and I slowly sit up. I could go for a shower, but honestly, I'd rather spend the time with her before she goes to work, so I pull on my clothes from last night instead.

By the time I make it to the small kitchen, the mouth-watering smell of cooking dough has been joined by the rich aroma of fresh coffee. Cass has everything laid out on the table—syrup in one of those glass pouring jars you see in restaurants, two plates, a plate piled high with heart-shaped waffles, peanut butter and jam, a jar of chocolate spread, caramel sauce, sprinkles, and bowls of cut-up fruit and berries.

“I don’t know how you take your coffee,” she says, whipping around from where the machine is dripping its last drips into the pot below. “I’m thinking black, but you could surprise me and be a four-teaspoons-of-sugar kind of a guy. You do really like pie, after all.”

“Uh, yeah.” I brush my hand over my short hair. “Two creams, one sugar.”

“Ahh, cream. Yes. Coffee shouldn’t be consumed without cream. It’s a real gut burner otherwise.” She smiles at me with so much warmth that my stomach starts to hurt again in a good way. “You can sit down. I’ll get the coffee.”

The table is completely filled with the feast Cass prepared. I’m not sure what time she got up, but she went full out. A steaming mug of coffee with just the right amount of cream in it—because Cass is somehow magic like that—is set in front of me before she sits down in the chair across the table

from me.

“I was thinking,” she says, still smiling. “I’m not going to let anything we talked about spoil our night. You’re the only one who has ever spent the night with me in this condo, so that’s a first, plus it was our first night together. That’s something to celebrate. Things don’t happen all at once. Baby steps, goals, tiny goals. We need to start building that bridge to infinity one freaking step at a time.”

I’m not sure what she means about the bridge, but I do know what she’s talking about. I heap three waffles onto the plate that has little daisies dotting the rim while I try and swallow the huge lump plugging up my throat.

She seemed kind of down after we talked about how dangerous my lifestyle really is, and it sucked. It really sucked. I’ve never met anyone like Cass before. Never met anyone I was so good with either. The semantics of it all, all the shit I was talking about last night and thinking about before that, it doubly sucks that it’s so complicated. We have so much to figure out, but we have to. I don’t want to lose Cass.

“Is that okay?” Cass sticks out her hand and grabs mine before it can make it halfway to the mug. She clasps it hard, and yeah, I’d much rather be holding her hand instead.

“More than.”

She smiles again instantaneously, and I make myself spread chocolate and syrup onto my waffles and add fruit even though my stomach is churning. I want to be hopeful, I really do, but this morning just proves to me that Cass is all rainbows and sweetness. She's sunshine and freaking roses and hearts, cats with unicorn horns and mermaid tails, and all the other cute stuff everyone loves. She's the kind of person who gets up early and makes waffles, but not just any waffles. Perfect, fluffy, delicious waffles. Could she handle a life on the run, a life of actual crime, a life without her loved ones? Would we be able to keep them safe even if she left? She'd miss them so much. All the doubts I had before come rushing back at me to choke me.

I cut into my waffles and take a bite, the sweet flavor making my mouth water before the dough even touches my tongue, even though I don't feel hungry now that I'm worrying about everything again.

I feel like a selfish turd, but I know myself. I've come pretty damn far in my journey, but my childhood left me with more than just external scars. It changed who I am and how I'm made up inside, and I'm just being real with myself because I know myself fully. I never saw it as a bad thing before because it always helped me in the life I was living with Granny and my brothers. I never thought I'd meet someone and settle down. That wasn't me.

"I was just thinking..." Cass says softly, and I pull myself out of the

vortex of my thoughts that I can't seem to escape. It's like flushing myself down the toilet again and again. "I mean, I was also just thinking because I'm aware I just said that. I guess I have a lot going on up here today." She taps her forehead. "We don't get many great things in life to truly, truly fight for. Sometimes, things seem so tangled up, but really, they're super simple. Maybe this is one of those things, and we just don't know it yet."

My eyes fall to Cass' plate. She spread her waffles with chocolate sauce and made a happy face with bananas.

How could I ever not fight for this woman? Maybe that's why I was so resistant to the idea. Because part of me recognized something in her that would break me and make me soar way up there in the stratosphere all at the same time.

"I know it might be a stretch, but we could fit."

"I...I couldn't imagine not...anyone would have to be crazy not to want to be with you."

Cass frowns. "I don't know about that."

"Don't you dare talk about your luck again."

"Argh!" She gives me a funny look, and it's only then that I realize I'm brandishing my fork at her like I want to use it on her.

I quickly set it down. “Sorry,” I say sheepishly. “If I wanted to have you for breakfast, it wouldn’t be that way. And I would. I would like to have you for breakfast. That sounds like an excellent idea, actually.”

Cass can’t be distracted, though her pupils do get a tiny bit bigger. “What if...what if we were together, and let’s just say—for the sake of saying it because it should be considered—luck is a real thing, then that would mean bad luck would also have to be real. What if I cursed you guys or something, and then something bad happened? What if I was a bad luck charm, and it wrecked everything? I know there’s probably zero room for error in anything you do and—”

“Cass!” I reach for her hand again, taking it in both of mine. “That’s nonsense. We don’t leave a margin for error. That would be sloppy, and that’s one thing we aren’t. Granny has always been super, super careful, and when there is a slim chance something could go wrong, that’s when we get out of the game. Like Ransom and Alden did.”

“But maybe you wouldn’t know something could go wrong if I were involved. I’d be an extra...I don’t know, dimension or something added in that wasn’t there before, and you wouldn’t know it would be okay or that it would work because no one has ever done anything like that. Alden and Ransom got out. They didn’t try and bring their significant others into it.”

“That might be true, but I know Granny. She’d adapt. She’d make changes. There would still be no room for error.”

“But the error would be human. You can’t control all the variables because you wouldn’t be able to control or account for me.”

“That’s definitely not true. There isn’t anything you could do that would... I’m just not going there. You aren’t bad luck, and you don’t bring that with you like a foul storm that’s going to rain turds down on everyone. Not happening.”

Cass remains quiet for a very long time. Too long. Finally, her hand flexes in mine, and then she pulls back and grabs her fork. She lifts a brow at me, and it’s half suggestive, half still a little bit sad. “Okay, I know it’s not something we can work out overnight. It will take a long time for my doubts to vanish completely, but I do get what you’re saying. It’s a big adjustment for everyone. And trying to figure it all out on the spot isn’t going to work.” She points at the waffles on my plate. “If we eat super fast, we might get a side cramp, but we could also hit the shower together before I have to leave for work. Or the bed. Then the shower. Or the kitchen counter. Or we could defile *my* couch. I’m pretty much up for any of that. Shit! I forgot the whipped cream. It’s in the fridge.”

“Is it aerosol?”

Her smile is back, thank all the berries on my waffles. Her eyes are back to glistening too. “What other way is there to have whipped cream?”

“If you get it, I can think of a few interesting things we can do with it.”

“That involves waffles?”

“That involves you.”

“Oh. In that case...” Cass leaps up and races to the fridge.

I push back from the table, my breakfast forgotten, as she playfully shakes the can. She lets out a squeal when I approach, tosses the can at me, and goes racing off in the other direction.

“If you want to use that, you’ll have to catch me first.”

Can I answer all the hard questions staring me in the face right now? No. Not at the moment. Do I still have a healthy amount of doubts that sit in my stomach like a pile of pebbles that can’t be digested because rocks don’t do the whole digestion thing well? Yes. Am I ready to just give up? No. I’m not someone who does that well. Never have been, never will be.

We don’t get many things in life to truly, truly fight for.

I shake the whipped cream can. I did give her a head start since I didn’t want to be accused of not playing fair. She’s worth fighting for. She’s so, so beyond worth fighting for. Just for good measure, I squirt some into my

mouth. Man, there really is no other way to eat whipped cream. Straight from the can, baby. That's how it's done.

I hear Cass' footsteps, and then she's back in the kitchen sans robe, her shoulders heaving from running without being chased. She raises a brow at me as she studies me. "Are you planning on finishing that off yourself?"

I casually shrug right before I sprint across the kitchen, gather a screaming Cass up in my arms, and toss her over my shoulder.

"No fair!" She mock-pounds her fists on my back. "You play dirty."

I spank her bottom lightly with my free hand. "You bet I do. And don't worry. I left lots of whipped cream for you."

CHAPTER 15



Cass

“Hey! I thought I’d surprise you.”

I am indeed surprised to find Ayana and Maya waiting outside for me after work. The building is a tall one, with other offices, and I wonder how long she was waiting out here. On the other hand, there’s a coffee shop nearby. They don’t look overheated, and Maya looks happy as ever. She waves her hands at me before grasping some of the lace that lines the world’s most adorable pink dress. It has little purple hearts and unicorns all over it. Man, I seriously wish little baby fashion could be big-grown woman fashion too, and I don’t feel like any less of an adult for admitting that.

“Where’s your diaper bag?” Ayana never goes anywhere without it. It’s a big black leather bag, and even though it was designed for babies, I absolutely love it too.

“Oh, uh...” Ayana is terrible at keeping secrets, and right now, she looks like she has a mouthful of frogs jumping around trying to get out. She squints her eyes, blows raspberries to Maya, and doesn’t answer my question at all.

I know when my bestie is being evasive. “Where’s your car?”

“Um, well, that’s the thing. The diaper bag is in the car, but the car isn’t

mine.” She smiles at me, but it’s a froggy smile for sure. “And Ransom’s granny might be waiting in it.”

“What? Shoot, is this one of those *kidnap me for a second time and threaten me the way she did to you to find out if I’m really trustworthy and nice* kinds of things?”

“No. She wants to take us shopping. Actually, she wants to take us antiquing or thrifting. Your choice.”

That makes me even more suspicious. Maya is smiling at me, but Ayana looks totally uncomfortable. She’s not a fan of shopping, but on most days, I can always convince her to do either of those happily enough.

“This is definitely the scenario where I get shoved in the trunk of a car. If that’s the case, just tell me, and I’ll get in willingly.”

“No trunks.” Ayana seems a tad bit amused at that. “I promise. You get the backseat with Maya if that’s okay?”

“I know all about how backseats make you car sick. I’m good with the back as long as I’m not being driven into some horrible scenario.”

“We have Maya with us.”

“I wouldn’t put it past that granny. Of course, she wouldn’t do anything to endanger us, but maybe just to scare me a little? Put me to the test a tad?”

Something that involves Glocks?”

Ayana grabs my arm above the elbow and starts walking down the sidewalk. “Forget about your car. We’ll swing around for it after. You have a parking pass for the lot, right?”

“Yeah. I won’t get a ticket, but—”

As if on cue, a black sedan with tinted windows rolls up to the curb. The front passenger window rolls down, and Lennox’s granny waves madly at me from the driver’s seat while grinning the kind of grin that says she definitely has something devious planned for us. As usual, she’s dressed all in black. It’s a strange, somber color for a granny to wear, but now I kind of get it. I mean, power suits are pretty cool, and she’s an extra special person with an extra unique skillset.

This woman saved the man that I’m coming to care for. Really, truly beyond care for. A man that I would give up a lot for if I could just stay by his side. A man that I would rearrange my whole life for, even if I essentially have the job of my dreams right now. She took Lennox off the street and gave him a home, a job, an education and a safe environment, a family of brothers who all love him, and the therapy he needed to get past what he went through. I owe her a lot.

I suppose I can get in the dang car and stop being so suspicious.

Even if the whole thing is mega, ultra, over-the-top suspicious.

I take the backseat behind Lennox's granny, and Ayana straps Maya into her car seat. It's rear-facing, so it's easy for me to peek over the side and check on her. She's such a happy baby. She's more than content to stick a fist in her mouth and nom on it or go for her shoes to try and do the same.

Lennox's granny takes off from the curb at the speed of light, and I'm glad I'm strapped into my seat. I grasp the living daylights out of the handle on the side while Maya screams in delight along with the screech of the engine.

Yeah, this granny drives like a bat out of H-E-double-hockey-sticks.

We stay speeding along at a good clip for a good long while, buildings flashing by. I keep watching to see where we're going since I know practically all the good spots for thrifting or antiquing close by, but we aren't heading in that direction. The granny doesn't appear to be following a GPS, so either she memorized the route, or we don't have a specific route, which means this is fishier than a tuna sandwich left out for hours on a ninety-nine-degree day. And that, my friends, would be disgustingly fishy.

Ayana turns in her seat and angles back around to face me. "Um..." she says while chewing her lip. "Please don't freak out, but Lennox might be kind of, ummm, MIA at the moment."

"What? No, I just saw him this morning." I glance at the window so

Ayana can't see how red my face is getting.

“That’s the thing. His granny tracked his phone to the airport, and then it shut off.”

Wow. Cue the sickening feeling in my stomach. It feels like I just consumed that fishy, overheated sandwich. Major stomach sloshing, major acid reflux, major pain in the chest. “The...the airport?” I gasp. “When?”

“This afternoon.”

“He wouldn’t have just left me. Not after...no, he wouldn’t do that.” He wouldn’t be that cruel. He wouldn’t make me believe there was hope and then just pull a fast one and get out of town. That would be the equivalent of doing an emotional hit-and-run. He would know how much that would hurt me, and he just...he wouldn’t do that.

Unless he thought it was for the best. Unless he thought he was doing the right thing—the thing that would hurt me the least in the end. The thing that would keep me safe.

I refuse to believe that.

Why not? You have terrible luck at the best of times. This is just par for the course, baby.

I ignore that bit of inner nonsense and focus on my best friend’s face. It

happens to be swimming all strangely. I swipe at my eyes, and yup, the eye leakage was the problem. Ayana doesn't literally have six noses and four heads.

"He's gone off the grid," Lennox's granny says without turning around or slowing down. "It was probably coming for a long time. He just disappears."

"He's done this before?" I hold my breath.

"You betcha he has."

I don't know why I sigh in relief. I should not be relieved. This should not be good news, but if he's done this before, then maybe it's not because he wants to leave for good, and maybe it doesn't have anything to do with me. Or maybe it does, and he's just gone off to think about how to move forward with me, not without me.

I wouldn't count on it. Remember, your luck is shit at the best of times. Or have you forgotten about the near-flattened ex-boyfriend already?

"He didn't go to Canada to see his brother the way Ransom did," Ayana says softly. "He did that when we were together, and I thought he'd left in the middle of the night. I was so mad when he got back, but he did it to get his head on straight. He didn't think I'd even notice he was gone. We're not sure if Lennox is doing the same thing because he's not in Canada. We already phoned Alden to check."

“I...I don’t know what to say.” I clench my hands between my knees so hard that my fingers lose their healthy pink color and turn a near white. “I wanted to think anything was possible, but maybe it’s not.”

“Pigs can’t learn how to fly, and cat-icornes aren’t real. Dogs don’t speak human language, and assholes are always going to be assholes, but I do know that most other things are indeed possible,” Lennox’s granny says with such conviction that I raise my head and feel almost instantly reassured. I feel like I can breathe again. “Anything is possible where I’m concerned, and I’ll find him. You can bet on that. Just because I haven’t yet doesn’t mean I won’t. He can only evade me for so long. He’ll give me a blip because he knows I’m looking and worrying, and then he’ll stay there. Either he’ll come back here on his own, or we’ll go and find him.”

“I’ll go!”

“What?” Ayana yelps. “Alone?”

“Gawmwahahhbrrrrrr,” Maya babbles, sounding about as serious as a baby can. Even she doesn’t think it’s a good idea.

“I’m going,” I state firmly, even though my insides are cramped and compressed like I’ve been shoved into a tiny little box that my long limbs don’t nearly fit in. “Alone if I can. I need to find him. I need to show him that he’s not alone. I’m a fighter too.”

“That’s the spirit,” Lennox’s granny chuckles. “I like pluck. You’re plucky too. Like Ayana and Azalea. My boys have chosen well.”

“You kind of interfered a little on a few of those fronts,” Ayana insists.

There’s a shrug from the driver’s seat. “I might have. But just look at how that turned out. Sometimes a person knows when a person close to them needs more than a shove in the right direction.”

“Except, in my case, it was sort of in the wrong direction,” I said dryly.

“Alright, so I might have shoved in one direction or another, but it all worked out.” Lennox’s granny’s eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. “Lennox sometimes needs to go off on his own. Usually, it’s when he has a decision to make or when he has to sort through things, but also because he’s not an impulsive person and doesn’t like to even think about saying things he can’t take back when he’s not sure he wants to say them in the first place, good or bad. You’re Lennox’s first real relationship, and whether he realizes it or not, his first real love.”

There it is. The L-bomb. Ayana chokes while I gasp, Maya gurgles, and Lennox’s granny cackles.

“Surprised?” she asks. “He’s falling harder than you’d ever believe. That’s where the trouble is coming from. The rest of us might have seen it coming, but Lennox’s heart has been blind for a long time. You two are perfect for

each other. I've known that since the swan boat ride. I've done a lot of subtle things to push you two together, and I'm glad we're here now. Lennox isn't like most people, though. He's stubborn, and he's still smarting on the inside over what happened to him as a child. He's always going to be smarting that way."

"He told me he could never live a normal life. That he could never just settle down and do what Ransom and Alden are doing. He doesn't want to retire, and he's afraid of asking me to join him in that. He's afraid he's going to tear me away from everything I know and love."

Lennox's granny doesn't look at all surprised. She keeps studying me in the rearview mirror, which is kind of scary because we're still driving. As if she can read my mind—and I wouldn't put it past her—she pulls over on the side of the road and shoves the gear shift to park. Then, she cranks her head around and studies me.

"And are you? Are you ready to give all that up? You wouldn't have to entirely, but it would be quite a change. You'd have to be one person for your family and the people who know you and another person entirely when you're with us. You'd have to tell your family you're moving to Europe for more schooling or to chase a dream job or something. They probably don't know about Lennox, and that's for the best. You could slowly introduce him

later. The point is, you wouldn't see much of the people you love from here on out until we either stop what we're doing or Lennox changes his mind about retiring. You could message them. I would set that up, even video chat. But in-person stuff? It would be much fewer and further between."

Right now, my throat clogs up, even though I spent most of the night thinking about just that and contemplating what Lennox and I talked about before he fell asleep in my bed. I didn't just get up long before him to make those waffles. I hardly slept.

"I love my family," I whisper. "But I'd be willing to travel around for as long as it takes. If that's a lifetime, then I'd miss them, but we're not that kind of close, not to the point where we can't love each other if we don't see each other in person. I know my parents would want me to be happy, and I think I could do that from a distance. I'd want to keep them safe." Ayana reaches out for me and I clasp her hand and say, "I'd miss you most of all. You've always been my sister from another mister."

"We'll still see each other, even if you leave. We'll still be close. Space won't change that. I promise. If you have with Lennox anything close to what I have with Ransom, you have to chase it, you have to fight for it, and you have to sacrifice for it. It's worth it. It's so, so worth it."

Honestly, I love my parents. I do. I love my sister too, but my mom and

sister have never been in my corner like these women are right now. They've never been behind me like this. They've never been the kind of strong women examples that I needed in my life. I don't blame them for it since not everyone can be built like Lennox's granny and Ayana. I'm just so, so thankful it's these women I'm with in the car right now. I glance at Maya. She's smiling at me, and I smile back, my heart warming up so completely that I can feel my eyes misting over again.

“Sweet baby girl, you have one amazing mama and great-grandma. You're going to be a warrior, just like them.”

Maya giggles at that, and Ayana wipes tears from her cheeks while Lennox's granny shifts in her seat and whips out a pair of Glocks. “You might need these where you're going.”

I choke back a scream. So far, I'd only heard about the infamous Glocks. It's kind of funny and yet terrifying to find out that the rumors about this granny packing heat are true. No wonder she's partial to suit jackets. She needs somewhere to stash those things.

“Oh, uh, I really hope I won't need those.”

Lennox's granny stashes them back in her jacket—yup, she must have a holster in there—and turns back to me. “Lennox doesn't do anything halfway. He's a great guy. A wonderful, wounded, torn-apart soul with a

wealth of love that he doesn't even know he's capable of. He's not meant to live the life that most people dream of. He gave all that up just to be a part of something bigger than himself."

"He makes his own destiny," I whisper. I clear my throat. Hard. "I want to do that too. I want to decide for myself. I can make my own luck. Nothing I ever tried to do worked out until I met Lennox, and I'm not letting him go because of superstition or bullshit or pianos. I'm going to find him, and then I'm not letting him go."

Lennox's granny nods emphatically. "Good. Good. That's what I like to hear. Now, we just have to wait for him to slip up, which he'll no doubt do on purpose in short order to tip me off. When that happens, I'll figure it out, and we'll send you on your way in the station wagon."

"The station wagon?"

"What else? It would make for a great road trip. You have a newly minted license, so it's time to use it, honey. I'll even give you the ten thousand dollars you need for gas. Kidding, but seriously. That thing is hard on fuel. I'll pay for everything you need to bring Lennox back to us."

"That's going to be one heck of a road trip." Ayana looks at me like she couldn't be prouder, and her support means everything.

"On the way there and the way back," I agree, hoping I mean that in a

positive way. I swallow hard.

No, I do mean it in a positive way. I'm not going to accept anything less. Nothing less than success. And in this case, success is finding the man I care about and telling him that I care, that I care now, and I'll keep caring more and more and freaking more, and letting him know that I'm coming with him. No. Matter. What.

CHAPTER 16



Lennox

I'm usually able to go so deep inside myself that everything is tuned out. It's a skill that served me well as a kid and one I've never lost. The irony of it doesn't escape me. I came out here so I could think things through and be alone in my head, yet that's the last place I want to be.

My head isn't a safe place. It's full of happy memories and traitorous thoughts.

It's freezing, but then, winters in Chicago usually are. For February, the city was still in an icy grip up until this afternoon when it thawed and became warm, but now the stone-gray skies have solidified. The sky is pitch black with the night now, but the clouds are still there, wet and heavy. The sleet has been falling for a few hours now, on and off, but I'm still sitting out here.

Out here is what feels like the edge of the world, back in the city where my life started. I purposely chose not to go straight into the center of it. I wanted to stay on the outskirts. I had a cab take me from the airport to some shit motel where no one ever stays at the edge of the city. It's the perfect place for someone who wants to be alone. Depressing and cold. Actually, it's wretchedly cold for someone who has grown a little too accustomed to the nice San Diego days.

Normally, I can tuck inside myself into that black hole of nothingness where I think and feel nothing. Not the cold, not the turmoil of my thoughts, not happiness, and not pain. The whole theory of what it takes to be absolutely adept at something is to keep practicing—practice your whole life, basically. This is one skill I've perfected, but this time, it's not working.

Instead of cutting out and cutting straight through to a rational decision, all I see is Cass. I can hear her laughter, smell her sweet peaches and cream scent, and feel the silkiness of her skin, the heaviness of her limbs twisted up in mine, and the fine satin of her golden hair. I keep falling into the sea blue of her eyes, and she's not even here.

The sound of the sleet striking through the more-than-drenched thin jacket I have on and pelting both the sidewalk and the concrete blocks of the motel walls can't drown out the soft whisper of Cass' voice in my head. She cuts through me like a knife and ties me up like a ribbon. There isn't any escaping, and there isn't any going into that place where I feel nothing.

Cass has undone me. I don't think I'm ever going to be able to get back to that place again. She's filled up all the hollow spots inside me. She's entrenched herself into the very fabric of my being, sewing herself in like the stitches of a quilt.

When Granny adopted me and gave me a new life and when I got to know

my brothers and found out that there were people in the world who were just like me—a little bit broken, a little bit hopeful, somehow still able to smile sometimes, and people who could still see the good even after the shit mountain they had to plow through—I learned there was another side to living that I hadn't experienced before.

This is a brand new side I've never known, and man, it's harder than a rock and rockier than rocks, and half the time, it feels like I've swallowed rocks or have rocks bouncing around in my skull. Somehow, it's not a totally terrible feeling, and maybe that's the scariest part. I've felt alive before, but this? This is a brand new way of living.

Cutting through the darkness in the middle of nowhere and down a road that's more holes and pits than actual asphalt is a wide swatch of bright golden headlights.

I sit up a little straighter in the plastic lawn chair outside the motel door. The tiny overhang above does little to shelter me from the sleet, and I'm aware that I'm beyond drenched. I didn't feel cold until right this moment, and I've been sitting out here for hours, so maybe the whole inhabiting my own self and ignoring everything else thing worked a little bit.

I shiver as I'm momentarily blinded by the headlights, annoyed that someone else would choose this shit box place that's as out of the way as you

can get to spend the night. *This is my sorrowful dump. Go find another rundown, nineteen-dollar-a-night motel to drown your sorrows in.*

The car stops right in front of me. Literally. It parks right in the spot in front of my room. The headlights cut off, and I move to stand, ready to give someone a chewing out about finding a different spot to park in at the very least, but my legs, frozen from sitting so long, give way, and my ass hits the chair so hard that it gives out, the plastic legs splintering like toothpicks. I land on my ass on the wet, crumbling sidewalk, and my back hits the concrete bricks hard. There is probably going to be a wicked bruise there come morning. I tilt my head up, my watery eyes finally adjusting and focusing enough to take in the shape of a large, long car. A station wagon?

A figure slides out from behind the wheel, and this time, my eyes have got to be shitting me. I nearly laugh, deciding I must be hallucinating the whole thing. Maybe I'm colder than I thought. Maybe it's time to drag my ass inside before hypothermia becomes a very real possibility. As it is, I'm already seeing things now.

Because that goddess walking toward me—her blonde hair unbound and whipping in the chill wind, her hands hugging along her arms—looks a heck of a lot like...well, like Cass.

“Oh my god, Lennox...”

Sure sounds a lot like Cass too.

When a set of soft, small hands cup my face, the fingertips warm and lingering on my frozen cheeks, I think they feel like hers too. It's hard to tell because my skin feels like a giant ice clump. She does smell like fresh peaches, though.

“Thirty-one hours,” she whispers. “That’s how long the internet said it would take to get here, but I guess they didn’t factor in shitty wintry roads and the fact that I’d have to stop and buy winter tires because that car is like a boat on the road. They also didn’t account for poor visibility or the fact that when I had to spend nights alone in shitty motels along the road, my heart felt like it was going to ache right out of my chest. I’ve never driven for so many hours straight before, considering I just got my driver’s license, and I guess I didn’t really account for that either.

“Thirty-one hours actually meant four days, and so, so many stops. So many bad gas station coffees, a few doughnuts, one burger, which I have to say was pretty damn good, and a cherry pie to go. That’s sitting in the front seat. I couldn’t eat it without you. Well, okay, so I got it at a diner a few hours down the road when I knew I was getting close. I planned on bringing it to the door and knocking to surprise you. I also had this massive speech planned to tell you how you couldn’t get rid of me, not like this, not easily,

not ever. But then I pulled up and saw you crush that lawn chair like it was made of sticks, and I forgot about my plan and speech.” Her hands move anxiously down my face, past my beard, to my coat. “My god, you’re soaking wet, and you’re freezing. Holy shit, your beard has icicles in it.” She catches the water that beads off the ends of my beard. It’s hard to believe I’m this soaked, yet I hardly noticed.

“I...” My teeth chatter, knocking against each other fiercely and obliterating whatever it is—and I’m literally not sure what it is because I’m insanely shocked to see Cass here—I wanted to say.

“No. Don’t say anything until we get you inside and get you warmed up. Were you trying to make yourself sick out here?”

“Just came out...t—to...t—think.” It’s hard to talk when my jaw keeps clenching up with shivers.

She wraps her arms around me and sighs. It’s more a hug than anything, and I curl into it, drinking in the sweet, fresh scent of her hair, her skin, her *realness*. Her arms lock around my waist.

“Okay, I can’t do this by myself because you’re bigger than that big boat of a car right there.”

I save her the trouble and push myself to my feet. My legs are practically useless stumps of frozen wood, but they get me there, wobbling toward the

door. I can't feel my feet, but I guess my brain is stronger than the elements, and it does the trick well enough.

Cass doesn't let me go. The door isn't locked, and when I twist the handle and push, we both tumble in together. She steers me straight to the bed, and I sit down hard. The heat from the room, which isn't much because the heating in this place is as sketchy as the brown shag carpet, the peeling pink paper on the walls, and the dubious, hard-as-a-rock, lumpy bed I'm sitting on, still attacks me, making my face burn and my extremities tingle in a hell of an unpleasant way.

“Pie. You need pie.”

Cass rushes out before I can stop her. She's gone for a minute, and then she appears again with the world's largest cherry pie. She also has a little packet containing a plastic knife and fork in the other hand. She sets the pie down on the bed, rips the packet, and pulls out a fork with enough desperation that it seems like she's trying to breathe warmth back into me with that cutlery alone.

She digs the plastic fork into the pie and, with a great amount of effort, extricates a crusty, gooey piece. “Here.” She brings it to my mouth. “Open and eat this.”

“Pie isn't going to...mrpfh!” I grunt when she pushes the pie past my lips.

Then I groan as the sweet, sugary, tart cherries burst over my tongue, followed by the buttery, flaky pie crust. *This is heaven on a fork.*

“Here, the sugar should help. Calories maybe. I don’t know. What were you doing out there?” Cass feeds me another forkful of pie.

“T—thinking.” I’m still shivering. Shaking, actually. I want to groan at the tingling and burning as every bit of me starts to thaw out.

“You didn’t have a proper jacket on for thinking. And you’re completely soaked.” She feeds me two more forkfuls of pie. “I’m just glad your granny was able to find you. Thank you. Thank you for turning on your phone for a second to let her know you’re here.”

“I wasn’t letting her know. I was trying to get something off of it before I threw it in the toilet. I didn’t think ahead, so I panicked. Kind of. It was just this feeling inside me and under my skin. Relentless, eating away at me. A beast that told me to come here. Alone. To think. Think about how to make things right. And how to protect you and not hurt you. Didn’t want to hurt you, Cass. Not ever.”

Her eyes practically cross. She feeds me another forkful of pie, slightly too big a helping this time. Cherry sauce smears across my lower lip, and her eyes focus and darken as she reaches out and wipes it away with her thumb before bringing it to her own mouth to lick clean.

Just like that, my entire body heats up from the inside out, and I can practically feel the icicles sliding off my beard, turning into a melted puddle.

“Does the beast like cherry pie?”

I shake my head. “Honestly, I don’t know. I just get this feeling sometimes. It’s so...so restless. It tells me that I need to get away. Be away, be on my own, come back here. It’s not about hurting myself. It’s not about torture or going back to that place, and it’s not this dark, nasty thing under my skin, either. It’s just...I don’t know. I just need space to breathe sometimes.”

The fork pauses with another scoop of pie on it, mid-air, a few inches from my face. I lean forward and slide it off using my teeth. Cass’ hand trembles, and this time, she lets the fork rest right in the middle of the pie without digging in for another scoop.

“Okay.”

“What?”

“Okay. I understand that.”

“But you just drove across the country. I left without telling you anything. I was...I knew my granny would be there for you and that she’d keep you safe no matter what. I was going out of my mind, out of my skin. I don’t

know. I just...it just kept pounding around in my head. Need space. Need space. Need space. Need air. Need air. Need air. Can't breathe. Can't breathe. Can't breathe. Don't hurt Cass. Don't hurt Cass. Don't hurt Cass. Leave. Leave. Leave. I was going to come back."

Cass' face softens, and it's like a knife to my chest. I can see how much I hurt her, even though I was trying to do the exact opposite. "Your granny told me you would be back. I was just worried. Not that you were gone for good. Not that you didn't tell me. I mean, yes, I was sad and anxious about that, but I did trust you. I was worried that you were...that this was a lot for you. It is a lot. We've known each other for more than a year, but it hasn't really been *knowing*. I'm scared too. This is all very...um, I don't know. I'm trying to remember what I wanted to say in the car, but I can't now because I'm just so freaking glad you're okay."

"You drove across the country." I'm so amazed that I have to say it again. "I'm more than fucking glad you're okay." I want to reach for her, kiss her senselessly, tear her clothes off, and make her mine, but I have zero right to do that. Not right now. Not after I left without an explanation—one I hoped Granny would give to everyone because she's the one who is good with words, and at the time, I had nothing. I still basically have nothing.

I still feel so, so unworthy of Cass' light, her kindness, her loyalty, her

anything. “I never thought you’d come for me. I thought you’d just hang tight until I had a solution.”

Cass’ nostrils flare. “You don’t need a solution, Lennox. We both could... you know what? All this time, I’ve gone on and on about luck, but screw luck. Screw it right out the door. Maybe even screw being a fighter. Perhaps it’s not about that at all. Maybe it’s about listening to this.” She rests her hand over her heart. “Which is actually this.” She points at her head. “Specifically, the limbic system in the brain. Yeah, I went there. It’s the part that feels emotion. Little known fact, before I switched to business and was a marketing major, I was a psychology major. I thought I knew what I wanted, and it was fascinating, but then I took a marketing class as an elective, and I just knew it was what I’d rather be doing, so I switched. I made that decision and stuck with it, and I’m happy I did.”

My heart, now fully thawed out, clenches up painfully in my chest. I think it’s the heart. Or maybe it’s the limbic system. Shit, that’s complicated. “This isn’t like that, Cass. This could be life or death.”

Her throat works hard as she swallows. “I was more so getting at the fact that if I hadn’t switched over, I never would have met you because I would probably be doing my schooling in another state. I would have missed out on Ayana falling in love with Ransom, I would hardly know Maya, and I would

never have had the opportunity to be kidnapped by you. Or eat pie and fries with you, get to know you, and test my luck with you. You probably wouldn't be in my life at all, and on a scale of one to ten, that would be a perfect ten of a tragedy with a side of serious tragicness the likes of which the world has never seen before. And the world has some super serious tragedies, so that's really saying something."

"But if we do this, there isn't any going back." *I need to touch her. I need to kiss her. I need to tell her how fucking sorry I am.* For this. For the year that I spent being a complete goober globber, avoiding her whenever I could because I was afraid I'd be so, so out of my depth if I just stopped and let down my walls for a single second. I want to tell her I'm sorry for all the stupid things I'll undoubtedly do and say in the future because I'm me, and I'm so far from knowing how to navigate any of this.

I'm scared to touch her, but Cass does it for me. She takes my hand—which is still cold compared to the fire of her skin—and clenches it tight.

"I don't know if that's true. That's a hard thing to say. I think your granny can make anything work. She can take the pressure off of us. We don't have to fail or succeed. We can just make a decision and stick with it and work freaking hard to keep sticking with it, but if it doesn't work out, we can both be better people for it. That's my goal. I'm kidding. My real goal is to fall so

farging deep in love with you that it would be like diving headfirst into a pool of peanut butter. There would be no getting out of it because peanut butter is really, really sticky. That's my goal."

"Cass..."

"Wait!" She holds up a hand. "This is the good part! Here it comes...the ultimate goal. Are you ready for it?"

Suddenly, I'm trying really hard not to smile. "I guess I'm going to have to be."

"That's not good enough. Let me hear you say it. Are you ready for it?"

"I'm ready!" I shout like I'm one of those people in a big arena listening to a motivational speaker tell me how to get my life together. Except this is Cass. I'll give her all the credence in the world, and I'll believe in the things she tells me because she's Cass, and I know, beyond a doubt, that she's it for me.

She laughs, and it's the sweetest sound I've heard since I left San Diego. "That's more like it. So, anyway, my goal. I want to fall in love with you and keep loving you more and more. And if we kick some bad guys' asses along the way, that's a huge bonus for me. For me, it's more than enough just to see you smile and know you're happy. It's enough for me to learn something new every single day, and it's more than enough to meet new people and see new

places. I've always dreamed of traveling, and okay, so this is more like traveling 2.0 with elements of wild danger and thrilling, daring acts I would never have seen coming, but it's still going to be incredible."

"But all the things you have to give up...."

"I'm not giving anything up to be with you. Well, maybe a few things, but it's not for good, and your granny and I have already thought of some workarounds. I'll still have my family, just in an altered way. I'll always have my education and skillset, even if that's put on hold for a while. I'm sure I won't get bored. Lots of people start new lives when they meet their partner. Also, lots of people move around to experience new things. Even if lots of people don't do those things, I'm not like lots of people, and I'm doing it. I'm me, and I'm doing it because I want to do it. I'm hecking scared like you wouldn't believe, and it's not easy. Nopers. But I trust my limbic system and frontal lobe, and they're both telling me this is the right thing to do."

Kiss her. Kiss her because she's wonderful, she drove all this way, she's not giving up on you, and because you're falling for her so freaking badly.

"What about this? Does this have any impact on your decision?"

When I touch Cass' shoulder, she trembles, and it's more than just the cold emanating from my body. Even just that touch scorches me, and I forget all about what it is to be cold. I cup her face next, and she leans in, her eyes

closing and her head tipping back, waiting. My mouth finds hers, our lips crush together, and it's game over for any lingering doubts I might have had. At least about this working out. I know it's going to work because I'm going to do everything in my power to make it work. I still have doubts about other things, but it's more the usual fears most people have. Just because I'm decidedly not normal doesn't mean they don't affect me too.

Cass groans as I bite her bottom lip playfully. Her hands twine around my neck, and she arches against me, even though I'm still soaked from sitting outside in the cold.

"Lennox," she pants, threading her fingers through my short hair and tugging as her body curls against mine. "It's always been this. Ever since the moment you kidnapped me. The wrong woman."

"You were the right one all along. And it was kind of a mock kidnapping. We thought we were bringing Ayana back to talk. So, uh, not the kind of evil kidnapping people talk about. Never that."

"I know. I knew it a few seconds in, and I've always known it. Just like I always knew you'd come back to San Diego, and this would work. Not because you're leaving or coming back, but because, this time, I'm going with you. I'm yours, Lennox. And you're mine. Maybe that's too much. Sorry, it sounded romantic in my head but a little creepy out loud."

I smother a grin while my heart beats louder than a thunderstorm gone haywire in my chest. “It isn’t creepy. It’s what I always said all along. Everything is what we make it, minus a few potholes along the way and other things we can’t control. So maybe I should say it’s mostly what we make it.”

She grins at me and starts to unzip my sodden jacket. “I think we should get you out of these wet clothes. *All* of them.”

“Honestly, I could go for that.”

“Honestly, that’s good. Because so could I. It’s been a long, long drive. Can I tell you something?”

“Always.”

“When I woke up next to you, I loved seeing you in my bed. You were denting the mattress down to the springs, but you were somehow still comfortable. I loved that your skin was smooth and you didn’t wear all those cares when you slept. I loved the intimacy of being the first one up and moving around, knowing I wasn’t alone. That one normal thing we did together—falling asleep and waking up—was so comforting. It made me feel totally thrilled, thrilled to have you there in my bed. You looked so massive in it. It was like it could barely hold you up, and I realized just how massive you had come to be in my life too. I always thought I was too unlucky to meet my soulmate, but you’re it. I believe you. Truly. I’m not unlucky. I’m

not unlucky!” she shouts.

She throws both hands up, and fist bumps the air, then she tears the zipper down on my jacket and leaps on top of me to straddle my waist before tearing the coat open, lifting up my shirt, and thrusting her warm hands straight onto my cold chest.

“You know what the best part of long drives is?”

She blinks at me. “What?”

I encircle her waist and tug her down to me to make sure I kiss her for so long that we both nearly forget our names and what day it is, let alone what I was about to say. I don’t remember for a few minutes, and then, when my clothes are nearly off, it comes back to me.

“The getting there,” I say with a laugh. “The end of the road. This.”

Cass stands up so she can tug at my jeans. If getting wet denim off was a skillset comparable to spice, it would be a full five out of five blazing hot spicy peppers. “You’re right,” she says, breathing hard with the effort it took to get my jeans into a sopping wet pile on the floor. A beautiful blush stains her neck and cheeks as she looks me right in the eye. “The end of the journey really was the best. Because you were here waiting for me.”

EPILOGUE



Cass

I'm leaving. Not for good, but for a good long while. My parents think I'm going to be pursuing the job of a lifetime in the beautiful city of Paris. Yeah, that might have been a little over the top, and I know my mom is going to want to visit eventually. Maybe even my dad and sister too, but that's okay. We can make it happen. Lennox's granny pretty much planned for everything.

We're currently about an hour behind them on the interstate. After quite a few months of sitting around in San Diego, Lennox's granny knew the twins were getting stir-crazy, so she decided to give them their own opportunity. Lennox sold his pawnshop last month, and their new cover is going to be a family-run computer repair shop. It's obviously right up their alley, and since they were promised that they'd only be in Bloomington, Indiana, for no more than three to four months at most, I think they're all excited. After that, we'll probably end up somewhere in Europe for real. That way, until we make our next move, the twins and Lennox will have something they truly love doing. I'll be running the reception and marketing parts of the shop, and I have to say, this might be a cover job, but I'm pretty darn excited about it.

I know it would drive most people crazy, not knowing where they're

heading from one month to the next or not knowing where they're going to end up, but I'm excited. I'm so pumped for this opportunity Lennox and I have to really start our lives together.

In San Diego, we kept our places until they were sold. We spent the past months going on real dates, spending nights at each other's places, and getting all the loose ends taken care of. I couldn't just up and leave overnight, and Lennox wouldn't go ahead of me and leave me behind. I never asked him to stay. He made that decision all on his own, and I'm always going to be grateful to his granny, whose real name is Scarlet—I guess now that I'm part of the family in a big way, I'm privy to more and more formerly classified information—for setting a plan that included me into motion.

“How did your granny choose Indiana exactly?”

Lennox shrugs from the driver's seat of our massive station wagon. Yes, it's the same old beast, now packed with the things I couldn't bear to part with. My furniture, all the antiques I love so much, is in a storage unit, and Ayana has promised to check in on it for me from time to time to make sure—oh, I don't know—mice or whatever aren't gnawing away at it. In the car, I just have a few boxes and suitcases. Even those, I have plans on paring down. I know the most important thing, the one thing I could never be parted from, is sitting right next to me. Erm, I mean, he's not a thing, but you know.

“I don’t know. She’ll never tell us her secret ways because then they wouldn’t be so mysterious. She probably just rolled a die or set out a map and threw knives, and wherever one landed, that’s where she chose. I’m dang glad it landed somewhere nice, like Bloomington.”

“She throws knives too?”

“What can’t she do?” Lennox quips.

“Fair enough. That’s totally fair. I’m pretty sure there isn’t anything she can’t do.”

“If there is something, I don’t know it.”

Lennox grabs my hand, and then, a few miles later, he looks over his shoulder and pulls off the interstate at the next exit. I glance behind me too, but there’s nothing back there. For a second, I thought we were being followed, but my heart rate slowed down when he pulled into a gas station. After pumping gas into the monstrous beast that I swear eats like ten thousand gallons a minute, we’re back on the road. Except it’s not the road that we were supposed to be heading down. I didn’t even realize he went in the opposite direction from the interstate until our paved road turned to gravel, and there were just fields and trees and the occasional farmhouse and setback driveway. Mailboxes flash by, the kind you see in cartoons with the perfect box on a stake at the end, all colorful with people’s names on it.

“Umm, are we taking a backroad?”

Lennox doesn't answer me. My skin prickles a little, but when he turns off down yet another gravel road—this one even more deserted—and pulls over, I relax. I trust this man with everything I have. I'm basically following him into the complete unknown. I've more than given up on the notion of luck. I say blessed now, not cursed, not unlucky. I guess sometimes shit just happens, and sometimes that shit is shitter than other times. Sometimes, that shit mounds up, and sometimes, it rains shit. Sometimes, we step in shit, and sometimes, shit stinks. That's just how life is.

But here I am. Blessed beyond measure to be at this new stage in my life, about to move in with the man I love and officially start our lives *together* for real. Cohabiting. Yes, it's scary, but also, yes, we've spent the past few months getting ready for this—getting to know each other properly and preparing for this. I'm good. I'm so, so good. With all of it.

Lennox kills the engine right on the shoulder of a gravel road, pulling over halfway onto the grass. To the right is a ditch filled with wildflowers and then a field with some kind of crop. It's still green, and it just looks plant-ish at the moment.

“Did you plan a picnic?” I joke, hoping he'll tell me what we're doing soon before I have to worry that this is a part of the crazy plan I wasn't let in

on.

“I did, but it’s a one-course meal, and I plan on feasting on it until I’ve had my fill. It’s divine and delicious. Sweet, lush peaches and succulent honey.”

“Oh.” My cheeks turn scarlet as my face burns hot. “You’re going to what? Rip off my clothes and do those things to me right here in the front seat in broad daylight?”

“Nope.” His lips turn up in the most wicked, panty-melting, extra sinful with a side of sin smile. “I thought we could do that in the backseat.”

I glance behind me, even though I know full well the boxes and suitcases we packed didn’t even take up half the trunk space, and the backseat is free.

“You’ve had a backseat fantasy about this thing ever since you got it.”

His eyes turn smoky, and the thrill of doing something naughty permeates through me when he nods. “And today, it’s about to come true.”

I glance behind us at the empty stretch of road. The sun is beating down. Indiana in late June is quite warm. It’s as warm as San Diego, or at least it seems that way from inside the car. The point is, it’s very, very bright out here. I nervously grasp the window handle and crank it down a few inches. The scent of fresh air, wildflowers, and wet earth comes through the crack, and I drink it in, unused to such smells because I’m a city girl through and

through. The buzz of insects and a higher-pitched whine filter in through the crack as well. I hope they don't come in. I'm okay with their noise, but if a spider ends up in here with me, there's going to be a shit fit. I'm equipped to deal with taking down really bad guys or at least helping Lennox and his family do it, but I'm not so well prepared to deal with arachnids.

I cross my arms and take in Lennox, who is breathing a little bit faster. He's wearing his usual black long-sleeved shirt and jeans, and as per usual, he looks beyond fabulous. Yeah, so he's quite possibly the world's hottest man, and he's all mine. If that's not blessed—that's right, not lucky—I don't know what is.

I have my seatbelt unbuckled in an instant, and I flip myself around and over the middle plastic part. I mean to leap into the backseat, but being blessed hasn't cured my clumsy tendencies, so I end up catching my foot and sprawling out into the backseat face first. I get my hands up to break my fall just as Lennox opens the passenger door, takes in my disheveled state with a wide grin, and climbs inside. I scramble up, already peeling off my shirt and tugging at my jeans before he can so much as get his hands under his.

I know I might have kind of, a little half-heartedly, protested this, but I do want it. And I know it's the middle of the day, and anyone could come along and see us because while the station wagon windows might be tinted, it

would still be seriously embarrassing if anyone saw anything, so I have to make this quick. Quick but enjoyable.

“Alright, I’m waiting.” I peel off my jeans and hold out my arms in invitation. “Come here.”

“Right away.” Lennox whips his shirt over his head, and his hands deftly peel his jeans off. I’m impressed. This might be one hell of a big backseat, but it’s still a pretty tiny space back here. “Give me five seconds, and I’ll be ready to rock your world.”

“One. Two. Three. Four. Five.” I count off the seconds on my fingers while Lennox kicks off the rest of his jeans, removes his shoes and socks, and tears off his boxers.

He grasps my panties and is no more gentle with them than he was with his. Mine, however, aren’t built as industriously as boxers, and the lace tears cleanly at both sides. I gasp but lock my legs around his waist and wrap my arms around his neck.

“That’s very naughty of you. I only brought so many pairs.”

“Don’t worry. I plan on not replacing them when we get to where we’re going. It’s so much better to go commando. I think it might even be better for your health. I’m sure I read that somewhere.”

I laugh so hard that I hiccup, but Lennox puts a quick stop to that with a punishing kiss. I kiss him back before panting out what I really want to tell him since we pulled out of his granny's driveway this morning. We were all staying there for the past week after our condos sold. "I'm so ready to do this."

Lennox ducks his head and claims my breast, suckling the hard bead of my nipple. "I'm glad to hear it."

"Not this," I mutter with a raspy giggle. "Well, yes, this too, but I meant Bloomington. Life. Indiana. You."

"And also this."

"And also this. Living our best life, even if other people won't understand it, even if it's all top secret and sort of dangerous, and even if it means not seeing the people we love for a few months. I'll still be Cass to them. Always. I'm somewhat going to be like a double agent now, which is super badass, and I've never thought of myself as a badass. I've always seen Ayana that way, seeing as her dad is a biker, and she was super cool and had the whole goth vibe pretty much down in high school. I like that ever since you came back to San Diego and we...well, got together for real, I feel like I've been carving out my own path. I chose you then, and I'm choosing you now. I'll always choose you."

Lennox looks up at me, his eyes shining. He kisses me softly and buries his hands in my hair while I wrap mine around his shoulders, holding on tightly to him. “I never want this to end, Cass. Not ever.”

“This? Like the backseat thing or us? Because the backseat thing can be repeated. And us? We won’t ever end, I’m certain of it. I love you. I freaking love you more than...more than...I don’t know. More than the earth is heavy. Is it heavy? I’m pretty sure it weighs a lot.”

“I’m sure it’s heavy. There probably isn’t even a number that high,” Lennox replies.

“Like it probably has a lot of zeroes.”

“Too many to make sense of.”

“But it still works and turns,” I add.

“It does. And so do we. Or were we actually talking about us all along?”

I trace his bottom lip with my index finger. I feel as warm as the sun out there and just as bright. “We’re a family. A real family. I’ve been welcomed into it. You might have had a shit family at the beginning, but then you got a real one, and real families never abandon each other. You’re not normal, and that’s okay. I’m not normal, either. I never wanted normal. Normal sucks.”

“Well, I’m glad to hear it, my love. Now can I please do what I promised

and eat my picnic?”

I pretend to sigh, but it’s hard when I’m this turned on. Turned on enough that my ovaries could seriously explode. “If you must.”

“Oh, I must. It’s a matter of life or death.”

“If it’s that serious, then by all means.”

“I love you, Cassadina. Thanks for coming all the way to Chicago to find me, and thanks for bringing me back. Thank you, too, for being wonderful every single day. For being you, for being willing to journey with me wherever we might end up, for giving up a lot of stuff, and for being brave enough to gain a lot too.”

“Jeez, Lennox. You’re going to make me cry over here.” I wipe away an ominous bit of moisture from my eye.

“On that note, one super fabulous backseat orgasm that would make our raunchy high school selves—granted, we never were raunchy, so I guess this will make those unlived parts of us proud—coming right up.”

“Our unlived high school selves. Sounds good. But you know what? Being our regular selves right now is also excellent. All the good and all the bad. We’re still here right now, and that’s what counts.”

Lennox wraps his hands around my waist and positions me right where he

wants me, which is kind of jammed up against the window, somewhat contorted in the seat, and really freaking excited and tingly everywhere else.

“Remind me to crack a beer and toast to that when we get to Bloomington,” he says cheerfully.

“I will.” I wipe away a few more errant tears, sniffle, then jam my back against the window. “Right now, you have two minutes before we probably get arrested or someone comes out with a shotgun to see what we’re doing parked on their land. Let’s make the most of it.”

“Oh, I most certainly plan on it. I can set a timer if you want. To start now and continue on forever into oblivion.”

I kiss him hard, nipping at the corners of his lips and tasting his beautiful smile right from the source. “Set it then. Where? In your head?”

“As corny as it sounds, probably more like in my heart. Although, I know you’re going to say something about my brain being responsible for that.”

I set my hand right over his beating heart. “Oh no,” I whisper, my heart swelling and increasing in response to the rapid beat drumming against my fingers. “What you said is absolutely correct and astoundingly perfect. No brain needed.”

“Maybe just a little?”

“Alright.” I kiss my fingertips and put them right back overtop his heart, anointing it with my love. “Maybe. Just. A. Little.”

The End.



AUTHOR'S NOTE



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