

NICHOLE ROSE

CARMICHAEL
SECURITY
SERIES

Madly Yours

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A Curvy Girl Bodyguard Romance

Nichole Rose

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About Nichole Rose

To BOM. No matter how little you hear, you still never miss a word. I love
you.

About the Book



He's hot, bossy...and loves to snuggle?? How did hiring a bodyguard turn into the craziest adventure of this curvy girl's life?

Zion Carmichael

Guarding a social media model was not on my agenda.

Then again, neither was losing half my hearing in a bomb blast five years ago.

Fate has a way of doing what it wants in my life. I just roll with the punches.

But I did not expect it to hit me right in the heart with a fiery little influencer hellbent on turning my whole life upside down.

I'm supposed to be the level-headed brother, not the one who schemes his way into a woman's bed and flat-out refuses to leave it again.

But here we are anyway...with Makenzie Baird looking way too good in nothing but a smile and my shirt for me to start complaining now.

She thinks she can resist me.

I'm about to prove her wrong.

This little model is going down.

And I intend to ride her the whole way.

Kenzie Baird

Becoming Insta-famous wasn't on my bingo card this year.

Then again, neither was anything else that happened.

Like watching my best friend fall in love on social media.

Or being threatened by a former coworker.

Or hiring the hottest bodyguard known to womankind.

But here we are anyway.

Now, Zion Carmichael is breathing down my neck at every turn, telling me what to do.

And I am so unprepared to play house with the bossy giant.

Especially since his version of guarding me seems to require one bed...and a whole lot of snuggling.

I'm supposed to be forging my own destiny and making my own rules, but when he's growling at me, his rules sound a little too good.

Help. Me.

Chapter One



ZION

"I need a favor."

I scrub a hand down my face, trying to figure out a polite way to tell the hulking, silver-haired billionaire sitting across from my antique desk that we're not doing security for his sex club again. The one—and only—time my brothers and I agreed to that bullshit, we spent half the night fending off horny clubgoers. It wasn't a fun time for any of us. I'm allergic to latex. I had hives in places that a man just shouldn't have hives.

"No disrespect, but last time we did security for you, some old lady with a riding crop slipped her number in my pocket and tried to grab my ass," I tell

Madden Banks, deciding the direct route is best.

"It wasn't that bad," he says.

I stare at him levelly. "She was in her seventies, Madden."

"I don't judge." He shrugs, unperturbed. The fucker would be. God only knows what he's seen in his club. The one night I spent inside doing security guard duty was certainly fucking educational.

I did *not* know there were so many uses for a goddamn butt plug.

"She said I'd make a good pet."

He cracks a smile. "Lula Banks is harmless. She's a bored, rich old lady with a particular taste. You fit the bill."

"What the fuck is her bill? Unwilling and terrified?" I was both, looking at her with that riding crop. Until a hail of bullets ended that chapter of my life, taking half my hearing with it, I spent most of my adult life in war zones. Not a single enemy I ever faced made me want to turn tail and run for cover.

But a seventy-four-year-old in leather with a riding crop telling me I'd make a good pet? Shit. I was ready to get the fuck *O-U-T*. Lickety-split.

I'm not one to kink shame. More power to the old lady if she's getting her kicks at her age. God knows, I've never been laid at my age, let alone in half the ways I saw in *Dionysus* that night. But some things, a man will never be experienced enough to handle. Lula Banks with a riding crop is one of them.

Madden chuckles, trying to hide a smile behind his hand. "Can't say I blame you. The first time she came onto me, I damn near decided to sell the club," he mutters. "She is not subtle."

I snort my agreement.

"But I don't need you for security for the club."

"Thank God. We like you and your money well enough, but there isn't a chance in hell we're working your club again, man." To each his own, but

watching people fuck like rabbits all over the place isn't high on my list of things to do again anytime soon.

Madden's smile grows. I don't know the man well, but I know him well enough to know he doesn't stand on ceremony. He shoots it straight and appreciates when it's handed back the same way. He doesn't require kid gloves and a delicate touch. Thank fuck for that.

With my asshole brothers running amok, I do more than enough sugar-coating around here. Gideon is good at talking to people. He only makes my life difficult on principle. But Zayne? I'm pretty sure that big bastard was put on this earth just to stress me out.

I'm the youngest. It's supposed to be the other way around. But Zayne is who he is, and there's no changing him. He calls it like he sees it, regardless of who the fuck he's talking to. He wouldn't know subtle if it smacked him upside his big ass head.

That may have served him in the military. It doesn't when we're trying to run a business. If it requires a softer touch, he bounces it to me or Gideon to save us all a headache.

How the hell he thinks he's going to convince Emma Cooper to give him the time of day when she's too shy to even look at him, I don't know. But he's been chasing her ass since she walked in the doors on an errand for her boss, Camila Gomes. I fully intend on enjoying every minute of the fucker's misery.

He's caused me more than enough since we opened shop four years ago.

"If you don't need us for the club, what do you need?"

"My wife's best friend needs a bodyguard."

Madden and his wife, Olive, are both big social media stars. Madden runs some kink account that keeps horny housewives drooling. Olive is a

choreographer. I don't know the details of their relationship, but it was a big damn deal when the two of them got together. I couldn't scroll my fucking feed without someone talking about Mr. Dad Bod and Tiny Dancer.

"The best friend dances too?" I guess.

"Fuck no. She'll be the first to tell you she couldn't find the rhythm if her life depended on it. Let's just say Kenzie marches to the beat of her own drum."

Fuck my life. That's just what I need. Another pain in the ass client refusing to take orders or listen to reason. They hire us to do a job and then spend half the time making the job virtually impossible. You can't save someone who doesn't want to be saved. And you can't protect someone hellbent on putting themselves in danger at every turn.

A lot of clients thrive on it. They've had a close call or two, survived, and some part of them begins to think they're invincible. They take risks they shouldn't, all in a psychotic bid to recapture the adrenaline rush that comes with feeling as if they're untouchable.

They aren't. I'm a walking, talking example of what flying too close to the sun can do to a person. But far too often, they need to learn it the hard way for reality to sink in. Until they're knocked on their ass because they got a little too cocky, there's no getting through to them.

I was just like them until my world blew up in Syria five years ago. You couldn't tell me anything. I knew it all. And that arrogance damn near got me killed. It's the reason I'll wear a hearing aid for the rest of my life.

"What's the situation?" I ask, already knowing I won't turn Madden down, even if this chick is a pain in the ass. Call me old-fashioned—hell, call me a sucker if you want—but I've got a thing about a woman in trouble. I can't say

no. Ma would kick my ass if I even thought about it. And if Lula Banks with a riding crop is scary, Ma with an axe to grind is downright terrifying.

"When Olive and I got married, Kenzie got swept along for the ride. I don't think she intended to become Insta-famous, but it happened anyway since she's always with my wife." He grimaces as if he feels bad about it. "She's been doing some modeling for the last year."

"She has a stalker."

"Ex-partner who thinks she owes him more than she's willing to give," Madden says with a dark scowl. "She was partners with this talent scout fucker for a while. She handled social media management for some of his clients. Now that she's got her own thing going on, he's become a pushy son of a bitch. He thinks he made her or some bullshit. He wants his cut."

I snatch up a pen to jot a few quick notes. "What's his name?"

"Lyle Taggert."

I arch a brow. Lyle Taggert is a well-known talent scout in the area. He's also a prick. The bastard thinks he can bully whoever he wants because he's made a few bucks and a few friends. Sounds like he's decided to try the same thing with this girl.

"Judging by the look on your face, you already know why I'm sitting in front of you."

"He has a reputation."

"That's one way of putting it." Madden leans back in his chair, arms crossed over his broad chest. "The motherfucker is about as slimy as they come. I wouldn't put anything past him. He's already followed her home once."

"You want twenty-four-seven protection?"

"She rides hard for my wife. We're riding hard for her. We want you on her until he's handled."

"You handling him?"

Madden jerks his chin in a nod. "I've got people working on it. Shouldn't take more than a few days to dig up enough dirt to bury him under a nice little landslide of consequences."

"I'll call my brothers and get one of them on it." I pause, eyeing him across the desk. "She going to be pissed when we show up on her doorstep?"

"Shit, probably," he laughs loudly. "She's independent, likes to think she can handle everything herself. She'll probably be mad as hell when you show up at her door. But she'll be mad as hell at me, so at least there's that."

I grunt, knowing damn well it doesn't work that way. Doesn't matter who hires us on their behalf. They're always pissed at us when we show up to invade their lives without their input. We're convenient targets when lashing out at the universe isn't really a feasible option.

"Do me a favor?"

"Whatever you need."

"At least warn her that you hired us. Listening to my brothers bitch for the next few days when she throws a holy fucking fit is a headache I don't want."

Madden laughs like he thinks I'm joking, but I'm not. I really, *really* don't want to listen to them bitch for three days straight. A motherfucker can only turn his hearing aid off so many times before he gets caught.



"What are you doing?"

"Stalking Emma," Zayne answers without hesitation.

Jesus Christ.

"Why do I bother asking you questions when I know damn well you're going to tell me the truth?" I mutter into the phone, truly mystified why I do this to myself. It never ends well for me. "I refuse to be your accomplice, motherfucker."

"Don't worry, I'm not doing anything illegal."

"Except stalking," Gideon says.

"Fucking hell. You roped Gideon into helping you?" I growl, stomping in circles around my office. "What the fuck, Zayne?"

"I'm not helping him. I'm just enjoying the shitshow."

"Uh, fuck both of you," Zayne protests. "This isn't a shitshow. I don't need help. And it's only illegal if the stalking is unwanted."

"We have got to get you a law dictionary," Gideon says around a yawn. "Stalking is stalking. It's all illegal."

"You know what I mean."

Zayne has lost his ever-loving mind. Actually, I'm not sure he had one to begin with. But he's completely gone around the bend over Emma. It's fucking me up a little. I've never seen him like this. Hell, I've never even seen the man date.

Not that I have room to talk. I went into the military straight out of high school, and then came home broken five years ago. We started Carmichael Security the following year. I keep telling myself I'll get around to it eventually, but the truth is that I'm a fucking coward. The thought of jumping into the dating pool with hearing aids and scars all up and down my body isn't appealing to me.

"Hasn't she shot you down every time you've asked her out?" I ask Zayne, trying to reel him in before his big ass ends up in a jail cell, enjoying the three hots and a cot lifestyle. "I'm pretty sure that puts whatever the fuck you're doing in unwanted territory."

"She takes care of her grandma and her grandma's twin sister."

"Awesome. You're going to get your ass kicked by two old women when they find out. Gideon, please record this for my viewing pleasure." What? If he's going to lose his mind, it's my goddamn duty to ensure I have front row tickets to the shitshow.

Huh. Maybe Gideon is on to something.

"I'm not going to get caught. My point is that she's been turnin' me down because she's busy taking care of them."

"Or maybe she just doesn't like you," I suggest, though I'm fairly sure she does, in fact, like him. She had damn hearts in her eyes the day they met in the office. I felt like I was standing in the middle of a Hallmark movie.

"Plausible," Gideon agrees, making me grin.

"Does anyone like him? Or do we just tolerate him because Ma said we have to at least pretend we like him?"

"B. The answer is B."

Zayne completely ignores us, taking all the fun out of giving him shit.

"I called to tell you that you have a new client," I say after a moment.

"Can't take it. Busy."

I make a note to add a new rule to the employee handbook. *Stalking the woman who keeps turning you down isn't a valid excuse for refusing to take a client.* We started the handbook the day we started the company. It's mostly full of bullshit, like no cooking fish in the microwave. But it's sacrosanct.

Everything goes in it. Unfortunately, if it isn't in the fucking book, it doesn't count.

"You don't even know who it is."

"Don't care. I'm busy. You're going to have to handle this one."

"She's a model."

"Don't care," Zayne says. "She could be the fucking Pope and I wouldn't care. I'm busy. You handle it."

"Fuck, fine," I growl, giving up. There's no fucking way I'm dragging him away from Emma anytime soon. Until he's got his ring on her finger or she's got a restraining order on his crazy ass, there will be no talking him down. "But I'm telling Ma you're stalking Emma."

"I'll tell her that you're the one who set her shed on fire."

"That was ten years ago." It was also an accident. I was playing with fireworks I wasn't even supposed to have. She still thinks it was set by some random arsonist. I'm not telling her any differently. She'll kick my ass.

"She loved that shed," Gideon murmurs. "She could be ninety and still be pissed."

He's right, dammit.

"Fuck. You're both assholes," I growl.

"You're welcome for the model," Zayne says before I hang up on him. The dick.

I reluctantly stomp back to my desk to look up our new client. No, *my* new client.

Yay for me.

Chapter Two



KENZIE

"Please tell me that you're joking," I groan, flopping backward on my bed as dramatically as possible. A wayward shoe digs into my hip, gouging me. I quickly fish it out from beneath me and toss it to the floor. I don't even want to know how it ended up on the bed. Getting dressed this morning was a bit of a whirlwind...like usual. My alarm and I are mortal enemies. "He seriously hired a freaking bodyguard?"

"Before you get all worked up," my best friend, Olive Banks, says from across the room, "I think it's a good idea."

Of course, *she* does. Said bodyguard won't be following her around, trying to tell her how to live her life. That'll be my cross to bear, thanks to her overprotective husband. Seriously, I did not know her getting hitched meant I'd be overprotected too. But Madden is working overtime for the best Husband of the Year award because he does just as much for me as he does for my best friend.

Well...not exactly. He definitely doesn't do *that*. Gross.

But apparently, he does hire bodyguards.

I drag my phone out of my pocket and pull up my social media apps. I immediately scroll to his profile, ignoring the dozens of notifications waiting for my attention. I pretend not to see any of the photos or videos he's posted. He posts kink-positive content. He used to post thirst traps, but only does those now if they include Olive.

I hit the button to send him a private message, my fingers flying across my screen as I type it in.

"What are you doing?" Olive asks, amusement in her voice.

"Nothing," I lie. "Mind your business."

Dear Mr. Dad Bod, do you think my best friend will forgive me if I strangle her husband? Asking for a friend.

He responds immediately.

Mr. Dad Bod: Breath play should only be done with enthusiastic consent and with strict rules in place. I do not consent.

I respond with the middle finger emoji.

He sends back a crying laughing face.

Mr. Dad Bod: Sorry not sorry, Kenz. You're important to her. That makes you important to me.

I decide to ignore him. Mostly because he's being sweet, and I can't argue

with sweet. How do you yell at someone who worships the ground your best friend walks on and goes out of his way to make sure everything in her world works perfectly? You can't! It's impossible.

"You threatened to kill him, didn't you?" Olive asks, fighting a smile.

"Maybe," I mumble. "Maybe not." I shove my phone under my butt to keep her from getting her hands on it. She's faster than she looks. The girl has only spent her entire life dancing. She can move in ways that I didn't know were possible. "Seriously, Ol. What am I supposed to do with a freaking bodyguard?"

My whole life has become incredibly bizarre. This time last year, no one knew my name. I was just Olive's social media manager, the girl behind the scenes who dealt with trolls and perverts so she could keep dancing.

Now, my face is everywhere. The social media manager had to hire a social media manager to keep up. My former business associate, Lyle Taggart, hates my newfound notoriety. Actually, he hates that he had nothing to do with it and isn't getting paid for it. He keeps trying to strongarm me into paying him a large percentage of what I make from brand deals and modeling gigs, as if he made me or something.

Part of me wants to just pay him so he'll go away and leave me alone. The bigger part, however, is far too stubborn for that. I may be new to fame, but I wasn't born yesterday. And I don't back down easily. I'm not inclined to let him take advantage of me just because he thinks he can. He's not getting a dime from me.

"Let him watch your back?" she suggests, picking her way across my room to settle onto the bed beside me. She reaches for my hand, offering me comfort. That's supposed to be my job. I'm supposed to be the one telling her everything will be okay. This role reversal isn't particularly fun. "It won't be

nearly as bad as you think it will be. Besides, it'll only be for a few days. As soon as Madden's PI finds some dirt on Lyle, he'll crawl back into his hole and leave you alone."

A girl can only hope. Unfortunately, I know Lyle too well to have high hopes. He can be vicious. When he decides he wants something, he doesn't stop until he gets it. I never should have agreed to manage social media for any of his clients, but I wasn't in it for him. I was in it for them. They needed someone other than him in their corners, and I thought I could handle him.

That's my fatal flaw. I bite off more than I can chew and I'm too darn stubborn to admit it. Most of the time, I make it work. But sometimes, like now, it ends in disaster.

I'm my own worst enemy.

But we only have one life. I want to spend every moment of mine forging my own destiny...even if I mess it up a thousand times along the way.

"Who did he hire?" I ask, giving in as gracefully as possible. I appreciate Madden for caring, even if I don't want to be saddled with a bodyguard. I'll just have to do what I do best. Fake it until I make it...or until I drive the man so crazy he quits.

Huh. Now, that's a plan with merit.

"Um, I think someone from Carmichael Security," Olive says. "Zayne? Gideon? Zion? I don't know which brother it is, but one of them."

I don't know any of them, but Carmichael Security is one of the most highly respected firms in Nashville. They've guarded some of the most important people in the state. Which means they're probably going to be annoyingly professional. That's one thing I'm not. What you see is what you get, and my mouth *never* gets the memo.

This is going to go so well.

Yay for me.



My prison guard...I mean, bodyguard...puts in an appearance first thing the following morning. And by *puts in an appearance*, I mean I run face first into his stupid hard chest on my back porch. Precisely where no one is supposed to be at six in the morning.

"What the heck?" I jerk out of his arms before he gets them around me, my hands on my hips as I glare up and up and—seriously, how tall is this man?!—up at him. And then I gulp. The Bible left out the part about Goliath being hot as hell.

This man is gorgeous in a way that should be illegal in all fifty states. A prominent brow line slashes over piercing green eyes that bore into me. There's a haunted hardness there, as if he's seen things no one should and lived to talk about it. The stubble on his sharp jawline softens him a little. He can't be older than twenty-nine or thirty, but his eyes make him seem older.

He watches me intently, those eyes seemingly rooting all the way into my soul. He barely even breathes as he takes me apart and puts me back together from the inside out, but every little move he does make brings his muscles into screaming focus. The black suit encasing them hides nothing.

Does he live at the gym?

"Who are you, and what are you doing on my porch?" I gasp, trying to calm my racing heart. The questions are redundant, but I can't help but ask them anyway. Madden didn't send a bodyguard. He sent freaking Thor, God of my panties.

"Been here for half an hour already." His slow Southern drawl is sexy as hell. His eyes prowl down my body. Only then do I remember that I'm in a tiny pair of shorts, a tank top, and basically nothing else. He can see everything...and he doesn't seem to mind the show.

Embarrassment stains my cheeks, but I plant my feet, refusing to turn and flee back into the house. This is my porch, dang it.

Focus, Kenzie, Focus!

"You have not."

He points at the far side of the porch, where a new security camera now hangs. "Put that up already." His expression is completely level as it shifts back to my face. "Put one up around front too."

"That...does not answer any of my questions," I mutter, refusing to admit that I heard nothing. I doubt he'd be impressed by the admission, and I really don't want a lecture from Thor about safety when my ass is hanging out of my sleep shorts.

"Zion Carmichael. Upgrading your security. Yours is shit." He reaches for the camera overhead again, twisting it into place. He doesn't even have to extend his arm fully to reach it.

He says about as much as I'd expect a bodyguard to say...which isn't a whole lot, frankly. He gives me exactly the info I wanted and nothing more.

"Aren't you supposed to, oh, I don't know, introduce yourself or ask before you just start changing stuff?"

"Would you have said yes?"

"I don't know." Probably not. I rent this place. The landlord complains every time I do anything, even though the value of the property has only climbed since I moved in. I don't think he has an issue with money. I think it's an issue with smart-ass, independent women. Who would have thought?

"Then, no."

"I see Madden sent me the pain in the butt brother," I sigh, scraping my hair back into a messy bun so I can verbally kick his butt. "How do I request an exchange?"

"Sorry. All hires are final. No returns, refunds, or exchanges."

"Oh, so you *do* have a sense of humor."

"Mmhmm." He twists to look at me over his shoulder. The earpiece in his ear glints in the early morning sunlight. "But cracking jokes isn't easy when you can't fucking think straight, angel baby." The heat in his eyes as they climb down my body makes no secret of what he's talking about. I'm making it hard for him to think. *Me*.

I shiver, wrapping my arms around myself, though I'm not cold. I feel rooted to the ground, frozen like a frightened little deer as he stares at me. Only, I don't think *fear* has my stomach quivering with nervous excitement. Or my nipples hard enough to cut glass.

It's desire like I've never felt before now. I think I like the way he looks at me as if he's trying to decide if he wants to eat me for dinner or fuck me up against a wall. I may model now, but I can count on no hands the number of times someone has looked at me like he is right now. It just doesn't happen.

I'm plus size and spunky. I say what's on my mind and don't shrink myself to fit whatever box they think I should sit in. I prefer living life in jeans and flannel, but never miss an opportunity to put on a little makeup and dress up.

I don't fit a mold. I'm just Kenzie. According to my mother, that makes me intimidating. And men don't like intimidating women, also according to her.

I think this one might.

"You should go inside and let me finish up out here."

"Why?" I know exactly why, but I ask anyway.

"Because if you keep looking at me like that while wearing those fucking shorts, the only thing I'm going to be drilling into this wall is you. Get in the house, Makenzie."

Well...I guess I asked for that, didn't I?

Wait a minute.

"Did you just call me Makenzie?" I growl.

"It's your name, isn't it?"

"No one calls me Makenzie."

A slow smile spreads across his face, wicked intent plain as day in his eyes.

"Then I guess it's a good thing I'm not just anyone, isn't it, angel baby? Get in the house. We'll talk when I'm finished."

Any other day, I'd give him a piece of my mind for telling me what to do like he has the right. But apparently, today is not that day. He growls his order at me. And to my shock...I obey.

Chapter Three



ZION

Makenzie Baird is going to be a problem. Scratch that. Makenzie Baird is *already* a problem. Because the sun isn't even up yet, but my dick certainly is. He stood at attention and waved the white flag as soon as she opened her smart mouth.

Fuck me. I knew she was gorgeous. I spent half of last night scrolling her feed. But people online wear masks. They hide who they are behind filters and enough goddamn Photoshop to completely obscure the reality. Not Makenzie. The gorgeous little spitfire from her photos is precisely the same woman who tumbled out her back door and into my arms this morning.

There's an innocence to her beauty that's breathtaking. There's strength in it too. Both reflect in her bright green eyes and vivacious smile. And don't even get me started on that body. Sweet Christ.

I thought when Madden hired us to protect a model, she'd be some tiny, delicate little thing. Fuck no. This girl is a goddamn wet dream. She's stacked everywhere, with a round ass, thick thighs, and a soft little body I want to sink my teeth into.

I'm not ashamed to admit I jerked off to her feed last night. And then didn't sleep a wink, waiting for the sun to rise. I gave up about four and decided to get my shit together and get over here.

The fact that she didn't hear me out here concerns the hell out of me. I've been drilling holes and banging around for an hour. Her nearest neighbor is far enough away to be no help if anything were to happen out here. They wouldn't even hear her screaming.

The way I see it, she's lucky Madden hired me. Her security is complete shit. With Lyle Taggart on the loose, she needs me in her corner, handling business...which I fully intend to do as soon as humanly possible.

It takes another fifteen minutes to get the camera installed. Actually, it takes five to get the camera installed. It takes ten more for my dick to soften enough to make walking comfortable. I rap on the backdoor, even though she's been glaring at me out of it for the last five minutes.

Sadly, she's dressed. It's a damn shame, really.

"You might as well come in," she mumbles, throwing the door open for me with a huff that lets me know exactly how she feels about being saddled with my big ass. "Wait." She throws her arm out, blocking the door before I can cross over the threshold. "No cameras inside my house."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want people seeing things they shouldn't."

"People?"

"Those things get hacked all the time. And the next thing you know, some murderer is showing up on your doorstep to kidnap you because he's been watching you get naked on camera for a year."

"You're mixing your crimes."

"What?"

"Most murders don't involve kidnapping first. Too much work." I slip a hand around her waist, gently shifting her out of the way. Within seconds, I'm standing in her living room, looking around while she splutters behind me. Her house is cute. I don't know how the fuck women do it, but everything they touch turns to magic. Her place is an old farmhouse with an open floorplan, but the damn thing looks like a million bucks. Bright colors mix with soft fabrics and plush rugs giving it a welcoming, comforting vibe.

"You need an invitation before you just come inside, Zion."

"I'm your bodyguard, baby. Not a vampire."

She mumbles something that I don't catch.

"What was that?"

"I said I can't tell the difference," she repeats, batting her lashes at me as she pushes the back door closed. "No cameras in my house."

"No cameras in the house," I agree. I intend to fuck her on every flat surface in this place. There's no goddamn way I'm risking one of my brother's watching that footage. Aside from the fact that I don't want either of those assholes seeing her naked, we have a rule about dating clients. It's the first one in the handbook, matter of fact. I have every intention of breaking it six ways to Sunday. But I'd prefer they didn't know that just yet.

They can't bitch about what they don't know. By the time they find out, she

won't be a client anymore.

"Then please, Zion, come on in," she says with false enthusiasm, making me grin.

Fuck, I love her sarcastic little attitude.

I watch as she takes a big sip of coffee.

"Oh! Manners, Kenzie. Jeez. Do you want some?" She holds the mug out toward me to indicate what she means.

I know damn well that she isn't offering me her cup, but I take it anyway. She stares with wide eyes as I turn it, planting my lips in the same place hers just touched. I take a sip, my eyes locked with hers the whole time.

"Delicious," I state, gently placing the cup back in her hands.

"I'm not nearly..." Her voice fades out.

I pull my hearing aid out to adjust the volume before replacing it.

"That's a hearing aid."

I tense as soon as she utters the words. "I can do this job, angel baby."

"What?"

"I may wear a hearing aid, but I can do the job," I growl. This isn't the first time my hearing has been a problem for a client. Hell, if I'm being honest, it's a problem for me. I don't trust myself or my instincts the way I used to trust them. In this line of work, that can be dangerous. That's precisely why Zayne and Gideon do most of the heavy lifting while I handle shit behind the scenes. It's just easier for everyone that way. Doesn't mean I can't do the job, though. Just means it's more of a challenge for me than it is for most people in this line of work.

"What?" Her brows furrow, her expression morphing to one of confusion.

"You think I'm judging your abilities because you wear a hearing aid?"

"Wouldn't be the first time, Makenzie. It won't be the last, either. No one

wants a partially deaf bodyguard." I shrug.

"Well, first of all, I'm not any of your other clients. I don't want a bodyguard at all," she protests, making me smile despite myself. "Secondly, the fact that you wear a hearing aid isn't an issue for me, Zion. I was just surprised. I saw it outside and thought it was an earpiece." She gives me a sheepish grin. "I'm honestly a little relieved it's just a hearing aid. It's way too freaking early to deal with the level of professionalism that comes with you wearing an earpiece."

The tension slides from my shoulders. "You think an earpiece makes me a professional?"

"No, but it makes you way more of one than I'm prepared to deal with this early in the morning."

"So you aren't a morning person, your hearing is worse than mine, you don't want a bodyguard, and you make my cock hard enough to pound steel. Anything else I need to know about you?"

She chokes on her coffee.

I take a step toward her, invading her personal space. I want her off balance. I think rattling her is the only way to keep her from overthinking this shit and throwing up walls. I'll plow through them if I have to do it, but I'd rather not have to do it. Her honesty is refreshing, and turnabout is fair place. If she's going to say what's on her mind, I fully intend to give her the same in return.

"I'll hold the line no matter who or what comes at you. If they're looking for a target, it'll be on my back, not yours. But I have no intention of being a professional with you. If that's what you're looking for, you're going to be sorely disappointed." I tip her chin up with a crook of my finger. "But one thing you won't be is unsatisfied."

She gulps audibly.

"Just thought we should be on the same page," I say, stealing her cup from her hands to take another sip before I do something crazy and kiss that adorable look from her face. I'm already moving too goddamn fast for her. That truth is written all over her face. But I'm not slowing down.

I've got three days, four at most, to convince this woman that she wants me in her life when the job is done. I'll move as fast as I need to move to get her on the same page.

Shit. Maybe Zayne isn't completely out of his damn mind, after all. Because his balls-to-the-wall approach is starting to make a helluva lot more sense. Luckily for me, I don't have to stalk this beauty to keep track of her. I don't intend to leave her side at all.

"We are so not on the same page, Zion Carmichael," she whisper-hisses at me after a moment.

"No?" I grin, sipping her coffee. "That's all right. We will be soon enough."

"Why does that sound like a threat?"

"Because you have a suspicious mind?"

"Did Madden intentionally request the most annoying brother?"

I laugh loudly. "If you think I'm annoying, you'd kill Zayne."

"What about the other one?" she asks hopefully. "Surely he's not so bad."

Instead of answering, I drag my phone from my pocket to dial Gideon, deciding she needs a demonstration. I put it on speaker.

He answers on the second ring. "Why are you calling me so early? Did the model fire your big ass already?"

"Not quite."

"Can I do that?" she asks hopefully.

"Hell no," I growl.

"You already want to fire him?"

"He let himself into my house." She pauses to scowl at me. "And he's drinking my coffee."

"I didn't let myself in. You opened the door for me," I remind her. "And you offered me the cup. Shouldn't have done that if you didn't want me to take it."

"I wasn't offering you... I was offering coffee *in general*," she splutters. "Not my cup that I was drinking."

"So this is off to a great start, I see," Gideon says.

"I want to exchange him for another brother."

"Sorry. No returns, refunds, or exchanges."

Makenzie narrows her eyes at me. "Did you tell him to say that?"

"Fuck no," Gideon chuckles. "You've known his big ass for five minutes and want to return him. Zayne and I have been trying to get rid of him since he was born."

Makenzie cracks a smile, flashing two adorable dimples at me. "Did you try selling him to SHIELD? I'm pretty sure they're still looking for whoever left that hammer in the desert."

"No, but I did try selling him to an old lady for twenty bucks at our lemonade stand once. Ma was pissed." Gideon pauses. "I almost had a deal, too."

I scowl at the phone. "Gertrude was batshit crazy."

"You would have fit right in."

Makenzie laughs in delight, the sweet sound hitting me right in the fucking heart. Jesus. She's beautiful all the time, but when she's laughing? Pure radiance. It's no wonder the world fell at her feet. I've known her for half an

hour and I'm ready to do the same. This girl is magic...the kind that has me thinking things I damn well shouldn't.

"Don't even think about leavin' this bed, Songbird," Gideon says, making my brows climb. He's in bed with a woman? Scratch that. He's in bed with a woman he's calling Songbird?

Motherfucker. He's sleeping with our new client, the country musician!

"Don't tell me how to live my life, Gideon James Carmichael. I need to pee."

"Fine. Pee and come right back," he says, his voice muffled. And then he comes back on the line. "Why are you calling me? I've got shit to do."

"We're going to talk about this later."

"Yeah? Are we going to talk about your situation too?"

"I don't have a situation."

"Hey, Kenzie, is it?" he says, making every hair on my body stand upright.

"That's me."

"Zion was eleven before he could sleep without a—"

"Yes, we'll talk about it, you motherfucker," I growl, shutting that shit down now. I swear to Christ, Ma should have swallowed him. One brother is plenty.

"Thought you'd see it my way."

I can practically hear the smug bastard's smirk, so I do what any rational human being with an older brother would do. I hang up on his ass.

"That was Gideon?" Makenzie asks, trying—and failing—to contain her laughter.

"Ma dropped him on his head when he was a baby," I grouse.

"She did not."

"You're right. There's no excuse for him. He's just an idiot."

Makenzie cracks up. "He doesn't seem so annoying to me."

"Too bad. You're stuck with me."

"Fine." Her smile slips before it comes back even brighter than before. And that right there lets me know she's up to some bullshit I don't want to deal with. "Then I guess you get to come with me today."

"Where are we going?"

"How do you feel about parties?"

"Hate them."

"Excellent." She beams at me, clearly pleased with herself. And even though I want to tell her there's no fucking way we're going to a party that fucking smile knocks me flat on my ass and I swallow the denial.

I think I'd go just about anywhere if it meant going with her.

Shit. I think Gideon and I may need to have that talk sooner rather than later.

Chapter Four



KENZIE

The worst part of my job is the number of parties I'm expected to attend. I'm a homebody, far more in my comfort zone when I'm cuddled up on the couch, watching junk TV or reading a good book. I know how to socialize. I get along with people. But so much of it just seems so fake. I hate that part of it.

I don't like when people pretend to love me to my face, only to start gossiping the moment my back is turned. Fake friends are the worst kind of friends. In this world, there are a lot of those. Everyone wants to be seen supporting the curvy girl because body positivity is all the rage right now. But no one actually wants to give her a seat at the table.

At least not when *she is me*.

By the time we pull up outside the gates that afternoon, I'm a ball of stress. I just want to go home and spend a few more hours pretending to work from the kitchen table while Zion pretends he isn't staring at me. He did it all morning.

"You nervous, angel baby?" he rumbles from behind me as we stand at the bottom of the steps leading to Club Za's content house...which is a flashy mansion in one of the best neighborhoods in Nashville. His breath brushes my ear, lifting little hairs all over my body.

"Nope. Just trying to mentally prepare myself." That's a lie. I am nervous. I'm in nothing but a bikini under this dress and I've never worn one of those in public before today. I've especially never worn one with a gorgeous giant hovering over me.

"Want my advice?" he asks, his lips practically at my ear. All I'd have to do to melt into him would be to lean back a fraction of an inch. Would he pull me up against his chest? Would I feel his erection against my bottom?

I have a feeling the answer to both of those questions is yes.

"What's your advice?" My voice shakes slightly. It has nothing to do with nerves and everything to do with him. I like him far more than I should. Following his orders should piss me off. I didn't even follow orders when I was a kid. I don't need anyone barking them at me now. And yet...every time he tells me what to do, it only makes me burn hotter.

He's started a fire in me that I'm not sure I know how to quench. It's only growing bigger. Soon, I think it might rage out of control. And that's terrifying to me. Not being in control. Not deciding for myself what happens. It's a little exhilarating too.

"Fuck 'em," he growls, wrapping one arm around me. His hand splays

across my stomach, searing me all the way to my womb as his lips actually touch my ear this time. "They can't compete where they don't compare, and these motherfuckers won't *ever* compare, Makenzie. You've got something they'll never have."

"W-what do I have?"

"Fire, angel baby. You've got enough fire to set this whole goddamn world ablaze if you wanted to do it." He grazes his nose down the side of my neck, groaning faintly. "Goddamn, you smell good."

"Zion," I whimper. Yes, *whimper*. It's a sound I've never made, but it's the only one I can utter with his hands on my body.

His hand tightens on my stomach, his erection digging into my back as he plasters himself to my body. His teeth sink into the shell of my ear. He growls worldlessly and then mutters something that sounds like too fucking sexy before he reluctantly steps away from me.

I peel my eyes open, my cheeks blazing when I see half a dozen people climbing the stairs ahead of us. I never even heard them arrive, let alone go around us. They probably think I'm a trollop or something.

Screw it. Let them think what they want. They will anyway.

I suck in a breath, forcing my mind off of Zion and the desire churning through me like a tsunami. I can worry about that later. Right now, I have a job to do. I square my shoulders, lift my chin, and paste a bright smile on my face.

Zion grabs my hand before I make it even a step.

I glance over my shoulder at him to see him staring at me with this expression that's light and dark, heaven and hell. It's...Lord, if he doesn't belong in Asgard, no one does.

"Don't say my name like that again unless you're ready to give all these

people a show, Kenzie," he says, his voice a dark rumble. "Next time, I'll be fucking you over the railing while everyone sees just how much of a fucking good girl you can be when you're coming on command."

Oh. My. God. He did *not* just say that.

My entire body erupts in flames this time, desire flaring so hot and hard it's like a mini heatwave rolls through me. I stumble in my heels before I manage to right myself with a hand on the railing.

Madden didn't send me the annoying brother. He sent me the freaking Sex God brother.

Sweet baby Jesus.

There's only one sane option here.

Saying his name like that again, a little voice whispers.

I shove it down into a little corner and then slam a door on it. No way am I giving him what he wants. Hell no. If he wants to play dirty, then I'll play dirty too.

"My body, my choice, Zion."

"Say my name like that again and you'll have made your choice, angel baby."

I give him a haughty look, my chin in the air. "If you put your hands on me, I'll bite them off."

A slow, sexy smile spreads across his face. "I've got a whole list of things you can do with that smart mouth, baby. And biting ain't one of them."

I pointedly ignore him, choosing instead to march my butt up the stairs before I bite off more than I can chew. With him, I think I might just be outmatched for once in my life. This man isn't intimidated by me. Nothing I say rattles him. He's cool, calm, collected, and completely freaking filthy.

God help us both, I think I might love it.



"Oh my gosh. There you are!"

I barely make it through the front door before Olive has her arm looped through mine, dragging me deeper into the house. She's dressed in a cute little sundress, her hair up off her neck.

"I've been waiting for you for the last hour," she says. "What took you so long?"

"Ask your husband," I mumble, peeking over my shoulder to see Zion right behind us, standing like a wall of muscle at my back. The glower on his face grows every time he locks eyes with someone.

Is he uncomfortable?

He doesn't strike me as the socially awkward type.

Olive peeks over her shoulder at him too. "Holy crap," she whispers. "Madden left out the part about him being hot."

"Did he leave out the part about him being a giant pain in the butt too?" I ask.

Olive laughs. "So I guess I don't need to ask how it's going?"

"Great!" I enthuse. "Just two minutes ago, he threatened to fuck me over the railing in front of everyone."

Her sky-blue eyes practically bug out of her head. She looks at me and then at him and then back to me. "Um, I just have one question. If he's offering to

do that, why are you standing here with me right now? Are you insane?"

I groan, pulling her into a luxurious, gray-tiled bathroom as soon as the door opens.

Zion opens his mouth to say something, but I quickly shut the door, putting up a barrier between the two of us. I need a minute to think. Preferably before I let him do exactly what he threatened because Olive isn't asking me anything I'm not already asking myself.

I'm ungodly attracted to him. He's attracted to me. Why not scratch the itch?

Oh, right. Because I've never scratched an itch before. As in, ever. I'm a virgin, and Zion Carmichael looks like the kind of man who might itch deeply enough to leave scars if I start scratching now.

"You're freaking out a little bit, aren't you?" Olive guesses, leaning back against the door.

I hold my thumb and forefinger an inch apart.

"What's the problem?"

Where do I even start?

"I'm in a freaking bikini under this dress. Lyle Taggart is threatening me. Your meddling husband decided to send freaking Thor, God of my panties to watch my back." I press my hands to my overheated cheeks. "He's hot and bossy and he says the sweetest things." I exhale a sharp breath. "And I think I like him."

"Well, first of all, you look gorgeous in a bikini, so I don't know why you're freaking out about that," she says, looking at me like I've lost my mind. "Half of the women here may be thinner than us, but that doesn't mean they're more beautiful, more worthy, or any more deserving of success than you. *You* taught me that."

"Did I? I must have been off my game that day."

She sticks her tongue out at me, not buying my crap for a minute. Olive never does. She knows me too well.

"Secondly, Lyle Taggert can go kick rocks. Third, my meddling husband only hired Thor, God your panties—we're going to talk about that in a minute, by the way—because he cares and he's worried. Fourth...wait. What was next? Oh, right." She snaps her fingers. "Fourth, he wasn't looking at you like you're just a job. And you definitely didn't look at him like you're annoyed by him. So if you like him, good. There's no rule that says you aren't allowed to like the man protecting you."

"Yeah, but..."

"There's no rule saying you can't fall for him, either."

I gulp audibly. That's easy for her to say. She hit the lottery with Madden. And she didn't grow up with a mother who picked apart every little flaw, making sure she knew exactly how unattractive everything about her was to the opposite sex. I did. Everything about me was wrong to my mom. And for someone who thought she needed a man to survive this world, that meant there was something wrong with me in general in her eyes.

I grew up terrified of dating, terrified of becoming dependent on someone else. Terrified of becoming *her*. The funny thing about fear, though? No matter how loud it screams, it never silences the little voice in the back of your mind whispering that you still aren't enough. I've done everything in my power to ensure I'm nothing like my mother...and yet I'm still afraid I haven't done enough to guard against becoming the same sad caricature of femininity she became.

I've just never had to face that little voice until today. Until Zion Carmichael was standing in front of me, telling me what to do, and I didn't hate it.

"You aren't your mom, Kenz," Olive says softly, reading me like a book. She knows all my secrets, all my fears. They spill out between us and have since the day we met. "You're allowed to let yourself be loved."

She's right. I know she is. But where do I even freaking start when I'm starting with *him*? Zion. The man who set me on fire with a single touch.

I think I already know the answer to that question. I start with removing my dress and setting him ablaze too. Because what's underneath it is the only weapon in my arsenal at the moment. And I think I might be declaring war.



"Go get him, Kenz!" Olive hisses as I step out of the bathroom five minutes later dressed in nothing but my bikini, my heels, and a fresh coat of lip gloss. Surprisingly, Zion isn't standing outside the door.

I set off to find him, my cheeks blazing as I squeeze past small groups of people dressed the same way I am. Some smile at me. Others don't even look in my direction. I hear the whispers as I pass by, though. I make it all the way across the living room before a blonde pixie pops up in front of me.

"Damn, girl," Bianca Callaghan, a photographer who works a lot of the same events I attend, whistles, a giant smile on her face. Like Olive, she's one of the few people here I'd count as an actual friend. There's nothing fake about her. "You look stunning." She brings her camera up, waiting for me to

pose before she starts snapping photos. "These are going to look so good on your feed!"

My smile threatens to wobble at the thought of putting them up for everyone to see. It's one thing to wear a bikini to a pool party. But wearing one on social media for the whole world to stare at my body? I'm still not used to the fact that people pay me to wear their clothes or pose in their magazines or to be seen at their parties. I am nowhere near prepared to strip down on the 'Gram.

"Put those on your social media and I'll turn your gorgeous ass red, angel baby."

I jerk my gaze up to find Zion standing behind Bianca, glowering. His eyes lock on mine, possessive jealousy stamped across every line of his face. Oh, he's big mad.

Why do I like that so much?

"Um, who are you to tell her what she can and can't put on her social media?" Bianca lowers her camera, ready to wade into battle on my behalf. And then she catches sight of the giant looming over her shoulder. "Zion Carmichael."

"Bianca." He doesn't even look in her direction. His gaze doesn't deviate from mine an inch. "You didn't tell me this was a pool party, Makenzie."

"You didn't ask."

I purposefully left that part out. It was a brat move, but I wanted to watch him squirm a little. Except...now I'm the one squirming. Because he's looking at me like he wants to fuck me up against the wall again.

"You didn't mention that you'd be half naked either."

"It's a bikini, Zion." I roll my eyes.

His eyes climb down my body, taking in every dip and curve and roll. I

don't hide them. Two minutes ago, I wanted to flee back into the bathroom. But with his eyes on me, I don't feel awkward or out of place in the retro two-piece. I feel...powerful. Sexy.

Good Lord, this man is a deadly weapon.

"Believe me," he says wryly. "I'm well aware."

"She looks gorgeous in it," Bianca says, her voice firm, as if she's daring him to disagree. I don't know how they know each other, but she clearly knows enough about him to know he's a pain in the butt.

"Oh, absolutely. That fucking bikini is the sole reason I won't be able to walk out of here anytime soon," he growls.

"Oh." The stubborn lights in Bianca's eyes wink out, replaced by humor. "I guess I'll leave the two of you to sort that out then." She laughs quietly before dancing forward to kiss the air beside my cheek. "Good luck, girlfriend."

She disappears into the crowd, leaving me and Zion alone in a little bubble of space no one seems willing to fill. Is it just my imagination or is everyone here giving him a wide berth?

"You know Bianca?"

"Not well. Met her a few times on jobs."

"Oh." I bite my lip. "I guess you probably know quite a few people here. You've probably worked with a lot of them."

"Worked with a few."

Did he look at them the same way he looks at me? The possibility has jealousy crawling up my throat. I swallow it back, refusing to ask. His life isn't my business. If he slept with half the women in here, it wouldn't be my business.

But I hate the thought anyway.

"Like you far better than any of them, angel baby," he says, taking a step

toward me. "You look good enough to eat in that fucking bikini."

"I feel like a slab of meat on display," I admit.

"Who made you feel that way? Tell me."

"No one."

"Tell me."

"Why?" I ask, genuinely curious why he cares.

"Need to know what motherfucker's eyes I need to remove from his head first," he growls, eyes narrowed as he looks over the other influencers scattered around the room. "I already kicked Lyle's sorry ass out of here."

"You did what?" I gape at him, eyes wide.

"Kicked his ass out," he says it as if he's delivering the weather report.

"Lyle was here? And you made him leave?"

"Yep."

Oh, he's going to hate that. No one tells Lyle what to do. Except this giant, apparently.

"He actually left on his own?"

"More or less."

I press my hands to my cheeks, groaning. So that's why everyone is giving him so much space. "What did you do?"

"Nothing he didn't deserve."

"You aren't going to tell me, are you? Oh my gosh. It's that bad, isn't it?"

"I didn't lay a finger on him, angel baby," he promises, reaching out to wrap his hands around my wrists. He uses his grip on me to gently steer me closer to him. "I simply suggested that he not come anywhere near you ever again if he didn't want to find out what his own cock and balls taste like when I'm force feeding them to him covered in barbeque sauce."

"You...I..." I faceplant into his chest, laughing despite myself. That's

exactly what I needed to hear to get through the rest of this party.

Chapter Five



ZION

"You're burning, angel baby." I step in front of Makenzie's lounge, dropping a towel onto her lap. She isn't even remotely red, but we've been here for an hour, and if one more motherfucker looks at her like they want to know what she feels like wrapped around them, Lyle's manhood isn't the only one I'll be threatening today.

He seemed surprised when I appeared in front of him. But I had a feeling the bastard would be here. He's never far when he thinks there's a deal to be made. As soon as Makenzie was safely in the bathroom, I went looking.

I found him on the deck, schmoozing with some fucking D-List movie star.

"Zion Carmichael." A slick smile crosses Lyle's face. He would have made a helluva used car salesman. "Everyone's favorite security guard." He says it as if what I do places me below him on whatever scale he uses to measure people's worth. Unfortunately for him, it doesn't. We've protected some of the most important people in this state. They pay well for the services of two decorated ex-Marines and a former SEAL. "I didn't expect to see you or your brothers at this little party."

"Sucks for you because here I am." I shoulder my way in between him and the D-List star. "You've been harassing Makenzie Baird. It stops today."

"Is that what she told you? She's hysterical, Carmichael. They usually are when you end things on bad terms." He waggles his brows suggestively.

I take another step toward him, getting so close he has to lean backward to keep me out of his personal space. "We both know she wouldn't touch your dick with someone else's pussy, Taggart," I growl. "So how about you stop being a piece of shit and leave her alone before we both find out how far down your own throat you can fit your cock?"

"I'll take that as my cue to get the fuck out of here," D-Lister mutters, backing away from the conversation.

"D-did you just threaten me?"

"No. I made a suggestion. And now I'm making a promise. If you come anywhere near her again, you're going to be the first man in Nashville to eat his own dick covered in barbeque sauce. She doesn't owe you a goddamn thing. Keep pushing your luck, and you'll find out exactly how it feels when someone pushes back, motherfucker."

"What'd she do? Hire you to threaten me?" he sneers, though the confident gleam in his eyes winked out about thirty seconds ago. The thing about men like Lyle...they think they're big and tough until someone pushes back. A

bully hates karma. And I'm this motherfucker's karma. If he comes near my woman again, Madden won't have to destroy his world. I'll pluck it apart piece by piece, just to watch it collapse. And I'll do it with a fucking smile on my face.

No one threatens what belongs to me. No one touches what's mine. I may not be the same dangerous man I was when they put a gun in my hand and turned my loose on our enemies, but I'm not tame, either.

"She didn't have to hire me. Destroying you would be my fucking pleasure." I smile, a cold, lethal smile. It's the truth. She didn't hire me. Madden did. And there's not a single moment of destroying his world I wouldn't enjoy. "Get the fuck out of here before I decide to start right now."

I didn't have to tell him twice. He tucked tail and ran like the little bitch he is. I followed him out, just to make sure he didn't try any bullshit before he was off the property.

And made it back inside just in time to find my girl trying to give me a damn heart attack in that bikini. She looks like a goddess, and I'm not the only one who thinks so. I've been mean-mugging these little pricks for the last hour, trying to give her time to do her thing.

But her time is up. If she isn't in my truck, heading back to her house soon, I'm going to have my hands all over her in front of everyone at this party. They can listen while she screams my name. Maybe then they'll stop staring like they want what belongs to me.

"You're blocking the sun, Zion," she says sweetly, shielding her eyes with one hand to look up at me.

"I'm aware. But when you shine that bright, not even my shadow darkens it, Makenzie." I crook my finger. "It's time to go. You're burning."

"I'm not ready to go."

She's toying with me. She was ready to go as soon as we pulled up out front. I don't think this is her scene anymore than it's mine. But she had a job to do and a point to make and she was hell bent on doing both. Now, she's done. It's time to go.

"Either you come willingly, or I carry you out over my shoulder. Your choice."

"You wouldn't."

"Try me, baby."

She hesitates for a brief moment before practically launching herself out of the lounge. Her pretty little eyes spit fire at me as she wraps the towel around herself, bristling like a pissed off little kitten.

She hates being told what to do. Yet she does it anyway.

I shouldn't love that nearly as much as I do considering those goddamn heels are sharp enough to be fatal.

She brushes past me, muttering something I can't hear.

I hook my arm around her waist, dragging her up against my body before she can get far. My lips settle against her ear. "If you're going to insult me, at least speak loud enough for me to appreciate that smart mouth, beautiful."

I don't know if she does it on purpose, if she forgot my earlier threat, or if she's just as fucking turned on as I've been all day. But as soon as my hands land on her bare skin, she makes that sound again. The one that makes my dick hard enough to pound steel.

"Zion."

Christ, that whimper.

I scoop her into my arms with a low oath, ignoring the catcalls and whistles all around us. Fuck everyone here. If she's not coming for me in the next five minutes, I'll be making an entirely different kind of scene today.

I storm back inside the house, ignoring every look thrown our way. Let them look. Let them see my hands on her perfect body and the way she's clinging to me like she doesn't want to let me go.

She's mine, goddammit. All fucking mine.

I drag her into the nearest room with a door, slamming it closed behind us. Shelves line the walls with canned goods and nonperishables stacked up high. A pantry, then. It'll do.

"What—?"

I pin her against the door, claiming her mouth like I've wanted to do all fucking day. She tastes like sin and kisses like magic. Christ Almighty. She's going to have me on my knees, pleading for mercy. But I'll enjoy every filthy minute of it.

I lick inside her mouth, coaxing her tongue out to play with mine. She makes that damn sound again, so I do what any sane man would do. I drag her legs around my hips and dry hump her like my life depends on it.

Right now, I think it might.

"Zion," she moans, pulling the short strands of my hair. "Wh-what—?"

"What am I doing to you?" I finish for her when she can't. "Giving you what you've been asking for all day, angel baby." I grind my hips into hers, making sure I hit her sweet spot with the hard ridge of my erection. "You need to come. You'll do it on me."

"I...I..." She tries to deny that's what she's been after before she gives up, unable to tell me a lie. We both know that's precisely what's had her ready to crawl out of her skin all day. She's wanted me since she found me on her porch this morning. Except she's too modest to say it.

I'm not.

I slip my hand between us, flicking the tiny scrap of her bikini bottom to

the side. She's burning hot against my fingers, her bare pussy already dripping.

"Oh, baby," I breath, running my thumb up her slit. "Did wearing this little thing to piss me off make you this wet?"

"N-no." She grinds against my palm, panting.

"No?"

"Your smart mouth did."

I chuckle and bite her bottom lip. "You're lucky I'm a gentleman, or I'd be following through on my threat right now."

"Liar," she gasps. "You c-couldn't even stand that they saw me in a bikini."

She's got me pegged dead to rights. There's not a chance in hell I'd let anyone see what's currently dripping all over my hand. Never knew I was possessive until she slammed into me this morning. Turns out, I grew bigger, but I didn't grow up. I'm still the same wild little boy who didn't like to share his toys. And she's my new favorite.

"You're right." I press my thumb to her clit, not denying the truth. What's the point when we both know she's speaking facts? "Fifteen more minutes out there, and someone was going to lose their goddamn eyes for looking at what's mine, Makenzie."

"I'm not yours."

Oh. Hell. No.

This little model just declared war...and I've always been at home on the battlefield.

I replace my thumb with three fingers and get to work, not saying a word. Sometimes, demonstrations are far more effective anyway. This is one of those times.

"Zion!" she cries.

"Louder, angel baby," I growl. "I don't think they can hear you screaming my name outside yet." I place my mouth against her throat, attacking her with my lips and tongue as I rub her clit in a fast, circular motion, not showing her any mercy.

Maybe I'll take it easy on her when her little ass learns to behave.

"W-what's your name?" she gasps out, her nails raking down my back as she rocks against my hand. "I forgot it."

On second thought...

I sink my teeth into the little hollow where her neck meets her collarbone, turned the hell on by her fire and the way she yields it against me without hesitation.

She shouts my name, coming all over my hand in a warm, sticky rush. My balls churn, desperate for relief. But my dick has gone this many years without. It'll last a while longer.

"Damn, angel baby," I breathe against her lips, gently stroking her clit as she comes down in my arms. "That looked good."

"Mm," she moans, snuggling up against my chest. "That feel good, Thor."

Thor? Before I can ask, the sweetest little giggle escapes her lips, stealing an entire section of my heart.

"I guess you're God of my bikini instead of my panties, though, since I'm not wearing any of those."



By the time I put her back together and carry her out to the truck, the house has mostly emptied out. Everyone is out by the pool, settling in for a long evening of whatever it is they do here.

"What the fuck is Club Za?" I ask Makenzie as I buckle her into the truck.

"Creator House," she says. "It's a bunch of influencers in Nashville who all live here together to collaborate on content for their social media."

"This is an actual thing?"

"Yep."

"You're not a member?"

She wrinkles her nose, quickly shaking her head. "Olive was for a while before she left so I get invited to stuff here all the time. I only come when she makes me. But no, I'm not a member of Club Za."

"Why not? Hold that thought." I push the door closed before circling around to the driver's side to climb in. "Okay, now explain."

"Bossy," she mumbles.

"I heard that."

"You were supposed to hear that."

I grin, shaking my head. "Explain, baby."

"They have too many rules. I prefer to make my own," she says with a shrug. "Besides, I don't really fit in."

"Why the fuck not?"

"They're mostly dancers or performance artists. I'm not." She settles back against the seat, a furrow between her brows. "They also plan to do this long term."

"You don't?"

"Honestly?" She rolls her head to the side to look at me. "I don't know. I never set out to gain a lot of followers or start modeling or any of this. It just kind of happened." She shrugs helplessly. "I'm not sure I want to keep doing it."

"So why do it at all?"

"I want to start my own management company. I figure I should know what it's really like to live on this side of it so I can represent people the way they deserve to be represented. I don't want to be another Lyle, just in it for their money. I want to know exactly what goes into it and how I can best help them reach their goals. What better way than by living it firsthand?"

The little furrow stays firmly between her brows when she's talking about her life being Insta-famous. But it melts away now, replaced by a smile bright enough to light up any room. This is her passion, the thing that matters to her.

She has a big heart and a desire to see others succeed. I gathered as much from scrolling her social media. Snaps of her intersperse with more motivational content, like quotes and shoutouts made to inspire. She's happiest when she's talking about other people.

She may be a tough nut to crack, but underneath it, she's as sweet as they come.

"Can I ask a question?" I ask, backing out of our spot.

"You will anyway."

I shoot her a look, which only makes her smile.

"Ask your question, Zion."

"How the fuck did you get wrapped up with Lyle Taggart?"

"When Olive first blew up, he approached me to help manage social media for some of his clients." She grimaces, that furrow reappearing between her brows. "I wouldn't have said yes had I known what he was about then."

And I'm guessing she kept working with him after she found out what he was all about to help protect the people signed with him. She's the type to fall on the sword to keep others from tripping over it.

"Why does he think you owe him?"

"Because in his pea-brain, someone like me couldn't possibly gain a following without him." She rolls her eyes. "He's convinced himself that I'm using his connections to get ahead. It's not true. I've never used a single one of his connections and I wouldn't! The only reason people know my name is because of Olive and Madden."

I highly doubt that's true. People know her name because she's fucking beautiful and they see the same thing I do. Only an idiot looks at her and misses the fact that she's some kind of extraordinary.

"He's been after you for the last year?"

"Pretty much." She sighs heavily. "He was nicer about it at first, but the more I tell him no, the more unhinged he's become."

"Unhinged how?"

The way she rubs her wrist makes my blood boil. "He put his fucking hands on you?"

"He grabbed me the day he followed me home," she whispers. "I was trying to go inside, but he wasn't finished making accusations. I thought he was going to break my hand."

Oh, that motherfucker's days are numbered. He's lucky I didn't know that shit today, or I would have broken both of his fucking arms as a reminder not to touch what isn't his. The only way pricks like him learn to keep their hands to themselves is through painful lessons.

If I get my hands on him, his lesson will be real fucking painful.

"Did you two ever date?" I ask, just to make sure I don't need to kill him for

that too.

The way she recoils from the question is answer enough. She's never dated him or even considered it.

"Did you and Bianca date?" she demands.

"Jealous?"

"Hardly."

She's a beautiful little liar, but a liar, nonetheless. She's jealous as hell, thinking I dated her friend. I opt to shut that shit down now. I'm not interested in playing that game.

"I've never dated Bianca, angel baby," I say quietly, navigating back roads heading toward her place. "Matter of fact, I've never been on a date at all."

"Never? As in never ever?"

"Never," I confirm.

She's silent for a minute, processing. "That doesn't mean you didn't sleep with her."

"The thought is eating you alive, isn't it?"

Her nose wrinkles as she glances away from me. "No."

I chuckle quietly. She's the worst liar I've ever met. "I've never fucked her, Makenzie. Maybe in your world, every man you meet jumps into and out of bed with every woman he comes across. I don't. Bianca worked photoshoots for some of our clients. That's the only reason I know her." I pause for a minute, giving that time to sink in. "I've never fucked around, angel baby."

"Me either," she whispers after a moment, turning back to face me. "My mom does enough of it for the both of us."

"Your mom sleeps around?"

"You could say that." She snorts indelicately. "It's more like her entire world revolves around men and existing for them. In her opinion, if we're not

their ideal partner, we're defective."

Shit. That explains a whole hell of a lot. Unfortunately, none of it's good. Makenzie isn't stubborn and headstrong by choice. It's a necessity, one drilled into her from the time she was a little girl by a mother who tried to grind her spirit out of her.

"You weren't put on this earth to serve any man, angel baby," I growl, turning a hot look on her. "One of the sexiest things about you is your spirit and the fact that you've been giving me hell all fucking day. You think that's a turn-off? You're wrong. To a man like me, it's goddamn Kryptonite."

Those bright eyes lock on mine, wide and startled.

I hold her gaze for a long moment, letting her know I mean every word. She wasn't made to serve, but I was damn sure put on this earth to worship at her feet. And I fully intend to be the only disciple she ever needs.

Chapter Six



KENZIE

"You've been working all evening, angel baby. It's time for bed."

"I'm almost finished," I mutter, my hands flying across the keys as I caption the last of Olive's posts for next week. I finished mine earlier. I have two other clients who still need content sorted for next week, but it'll have to wait until tomorrow.

"No." Zion leans over me at the table, pushing my laptop closed.

I snatch my fingers off the keys, gaping up at him. "I was using that."

"You've been using it for the last four hours. And you worked all morning before the pool party, which was also work." His disapproval is loud and

clear.

"I have a lot to do."

"I noticed." He pulls me up from my chair. "You're done for the night."

"You don't make the rules, Zion. Not when it comes to my job."

"My job is to look out for you. That means ensuring you're taken care of, angel baby. If that means I have to drag you away from your computer, then I'll drag you away." His tone leaves no room for argument.

Except I'm me so I argue anyway.

"You aren't dragging me anywhere," I growl, though I'm not even sure why I'm pushing the issue. The truth is that I'm exhausted. My eyes are blurry from staring at the screen for so long. My butt hurts from sitting in the chair. People think my job is glamorous. Most of the time, it's this. Me dressed in sweats and a tank top, trying to figure out content for myself and the clients I refuse to drop just because I got popular.

When the shiny fades and everyone finds someone else to fawn over, I'll still have my business. Like I told Zion, it's the only reason I do any of this.

He eyes me critically for a long moment before his expression softens. "You make it damn hard to be mad about you being so fucking stubborn when you're as sweet as you are, angel baby. Come on." He dips, scooping me into his arms before I can say anything.

I grumble wordlessly anyway. What is it with this man carrying me around? He's supposed to be my bodyguard, not my own personal pack mule.

He strides from the kitchen, hitting the lights on his way out. The living room is already dark. I tried to convince him to sit in there and watch TV while I worked, but he refused. He sat at the table all night instead, pretending to play on his phone.

I think he spent most of the night with his eyes on me. Every time I looked

up, it was into his eyes.

He carries me down the hall, heading straight for my bedroom. I don't even want to know how he's figured out which is mine. My cheeks heat when he pauses in the doorway, taking it in. It's...a lot. Soft cream walls and pastel pink fabrics turn the small room into a little haven. But the clothes and shoes strewn indiscriminately across the floor and the jewelry spilling across the top of the dresser give it a chaotic vibe.

"I've been meaning to clean it," I mumble, embarrassed. I'm probably the only twenty-three-year-old on the planet with a room that looks like a tornado hit it. But time is something I don't have enough of most days. I work from sunup until I collapse, and then I get up and start again.

When you have a business to run, you get to pick your hours. You just have to pick the fourteen a day that works best.

"I like your room," he murmurs.

"Liar," I laugh quietly. "It's a disaster area."

"It's lived in." He picks his way across, planting his feet carefully to avoid stepping on any of the clothes or shoes littering the floor. Once we're beside the bed, he gently lowers me to the floor. "Get ready for bed, baby. I'm going to go get my shit."

"Okay." I turn toward the bathroom before his words register. "Wait a minute. Your stuff? What do you mean your stuff?"

"I'm spending the night." He says it casually, as if it's a foregone conclusion.

"What do you mean you're *spending the night*?" My voice is suddenly a full octave higher than it should be. I refuse to believe anyone can blame me for it. This crazy man just invited himself to spend the night with me.

He grabs the hem of my shirt, reeling me in until I'm pressed up against

him. "I mean," he says, his eyes locked on my face, "that I'm your bodyguard. That means I'm by your side twenty-four-seven until Madden deals with Lyle Taggart."

"B-by my side?"

"Yeah, baby. You heard me right. You'll be sleeping in that bed with me tonight." His wicked grin has me breaking out in a cold sweat as he lowers his head, placing his lips against my ear. "And I fucking love to cuddle."

Dear Mother of God, please send help. Seriously. Help. Me.

He brushes his lips across my temple before he releases me. "Get ready for bed, Makenzie. I'll be right back." He strides toward the bedroom door, only to pause on the threshold. "Don't even think about trying to lock me out."

Lock him out? Why would I do that when I can smother him with a pillow while he's asleep?

He disappears from view, leaving me standing in the middle of my bedroom, my mind spinning. Madden didn't hire a bodyguard. He hired a crazy man. And God help me, I think I love it.

I grab my pajamas and head to the bathroom, praying I'm dressed and in bed before he gets back inside. Maybe then I can hog all the covers. Wait. Am I seriously about to let this happen?

Yes. Yes, I think I am.

I don't know the first thing about playing house with a man like him. I don't know the first thing about men like him, period. But I do know one thing. I've spent far too much of my life running just because I didn't want to end up like my mom. Maybe it's time to stop running and find out once and for all.



When I step out of the bathroom ten minutes later, Zion's standing beside the bed in nothing but a pair of boxers with his shirt in his hands. I stumble to a stop, my eyes locked on his body. He's ripped from head to toe, every inch of him made of thick, corded muscle.

But the skin over that muscle? Brutal scars mottle his golden skin, standing in stark contrast to the perfection of the rest of him. Most are old, but they were obviously painful. Some are still red and angry, as if they never faded past that initial stage of healing.

"Zion," I whisper, my heart in my throat. "What happened to you?"

"Shit." He starts to pull the shirt on over his head, but I throw up a hand, halting him.

"Don't." I stumble across the floor to him, one hand outstretched.

He flinches, his body rigid with tension. His jaw locked tight. Something dark glitters in his eyes. Not malice or anger but grief, a yawning well of it. As if he knows loss on a level that I'll never be able to comprehend.

"Don't hide from me," I plead, not sure what I'm asking. I just know that I don't want him to put that shirt on right now and cover this part of his story. I don't want to be the person who flinches from what he carries. Whatever it is...I want to know.

He slowly lowers his hands, exhaling a long, slow breath. "War happened, angel baby," he says quietly.

"You were injured?" Tears spring to my eyes, unbidden.

"Shot," he says, his voice clipped, as if it still pains him to talk about it. "We got hemmed up in a little village in Syria. Command wanted us to pull out, but we were after a group of hostages. Mostly women and children." He exhales a breath. "I wasn't leaving without them."

"Zion."

"Don't go looking at me like the hero of this story, Makenzie. I'm not. All I managed to do was get myself shot all to hell. We didn't save the hostages. Barely managed to save ourselves." His eyes glitter with some emotion I don't have a name for. It's one I've never experienced. Because of men like him, I never had to experience it. "My team dragged me out, their fingers plugging bullet holes."

A tear drips down my cheek, grief for him pricking at my heart.

He reaches for my hand, lifting it toward his neck. "You feel that?" he asks, placing my fingers behind his ear. There's a small mass of scar tissue hidden in the hair behind his ear. He traces a line down his neck with my finger, stopping at a larger, angrier mass at his collarbone. "That's the bullet that should have killed me. Instead, it took most of my hearing."

"I'm so sorry, Zion."

"That's my story, angel baby. That's what I hide beneath my clothes." He releases my hand, cupping my cheeks in his to dry my eyes. "You're breaking my fucking heart crying for me."

"You're worth crying over, Zion Carmichael."

A little of the pain in his eyes washes away as a smile ticks up the corners of his lips. "Keep talking like that, and I might not ever let you go." He leans

forward, brushing his lips against mine before I can respond. "Come on, into bed."

I hesitate for a minute, earning a little tap on my hip.

"Bed, Makenzie. Now."

"Well, I understand one thing now," I mutter, scowling at him as I move toward the bed.

"Yeah? What's that?"

"Why you're such a bossy pain in my freaking a—"

My words die in a rush as he spins me around so fast my head spins. Before I can even process the fact that I'm falling, I'm against his chest, staring up into blazing green pools of eternity.

His hand plunges into my hair, his lips coming down on mine. His kiss is tinged with sweetness and steeped in sin, as if I set something loose inside him that he can't contain. I feel it growing inside of him. I feel it growing inside of me.

This man is going to change my entire freaking world. And I think I might just let him. I don't care how bossy he is. I don't care if he's a little bit broken. All I care about is the wild hunger screaming in my soul.

"Zion," I groan, clinging to his broad shoulders as if to root myself to reality.

"I know," he pants against my lips before coming back for more. "Fucking Christ, angel baby. I *know*."

He kisses me again and then again, pulling me deeper and deeper under his spell. Drowning me in desire and lighting me on fire with need. He walks us backward to the bed before gently pushing against my shoulders. I fall backward, bouncing against the soft pillowtop.

"You taste like peaches, angel baby," he drawls. The bed dips as he crawls

onto it with me. "I'm dying to know if you taste that good everywhere."

"I...I..." I can't seem to form a coherent sentence, so I give up trying and simply nod, giving him permission. I want the same thing he does. Maybe even more than he does. I've been a bundle of raw nerves all day, desperate for the next time he puts his hands on me.

He drags my shirt up, pressing his lips to my belly. It quivers beneath him, heat sinking deep into my womb. I grip his hair in my hands, trying to keep it together as he kisses his way up my body, taking my shirt with him.

"Fuck me," he growls once he's got it off over my head, leaving me half naked and sprawled out beneath him. "I knew these would be perfect when I saw them in that bikini, but this is..." He shakes his head, speechless.

"They're boobs, Zion."

"No, Makenzie. They're fucking perfect." He dips his head, his teeth closing around one hard nipple in a punishing bite. It's torment. It's heaven. Oh, my God. It's everything.

I cry out, my back bowing from the bed as a blast of pleasure rips through me.

"Make that fucking sound again," he growls against my skin, his eyes flicking to mine. "Louder this time." His teeth sink into my skin again as he drags my nipple through them.

"Zion!" I shout, thrashing beneath him.

He slips his hands around my waist, lifting me into his arms to get me closer to his mouth as he attacks my breasts, snarling like a beast. He's unruly and wild, lavishing me with punishing bites and sweet kisses. He sucks and curses and pants, leaving me sobbing his name.

He hasn't even touched my pussy, and I'm already a throbbing, aching mess of want and need and now, please. I need it. More than air or water or life. I

need him right there, solving the problem he's created.

If this is why my mother is the way she is, I understand the allure now. How much would I give up to have this potent pleasure every day? How much of my soul would I sell to keep Zion right here like this?

All of it. All of it.

He releases my breast, kissing down my body. His teeth rake across my abdomen. His tongue dips into my belly button. He lavishes attention on every dip and curve, not shying away from a single imperfection.

By the time he peels my shorts and panties down my legs, I'm a stuttering, shaking mess, too far gone to feel embarrassed. All I feel is him. Everywhere. He's consuming me, piece by piece.

"Mm," he moans, dragging his nose down the crevice of my thigh. "Peaches and pussy."

"Zion," I whimper, arousal flooding between my legs.

His eyes flash open, landing on mine. "What'd I tell you about saying my name like that, Makenzie? Didn't you learn your lesson today?"

"Teach me again. I forgot."

He growls, bending his head to sink his teeth into my inner thigh. "You like fucking with me, don't you?"

Do I? Or do I do it simply because it's who I am?

"Yes," I admit. I like pushing his buttons. I like knowing I don't intimidate him. I like knowing I can say whatever the hell I want to say and do whatever I want to do with him and he just continues on. I should hate how easily he handles me. The fact that he tells me what to do and doesn't even flinch when I'm giving him a piece of my mind should infuriate me. It's foreplay.

Maybe he isn't the only one who's a little bit broken here. But I like the way our pieces fit together.

"At least your ass is honest." He nips my thigh again, breathing deeply as if to keep my scent in his lungs. "You better hang on to something, angel baby. I'm about to punish the fuck out of this perfect little thing." His eyes glitter with wicked malice. "And I'm not going to quit until you're too exhausted for me to keep going."

I gulp, grabbing for the bed. My fingers don't even close around the bedsheets before he shoves my thighs apart, burying his face between them. He attacks me like I'm his favorite dessert, eating me with relish.

My eyes roll back in my head, my ass lifting from the bed as I instinctively try to get closer to the magic his mouth weaves on my body. I've never felt anything like it before. Oh, my God. What is he doing to me?

"Taking what I should have earlier today," he growls, alerting me to the fact that I'm speaking out loud, questions and praise and gibbering rolling from my lips in an unbroken flood. "I should have dropped to my fucking knees and ate you in that pantry."

I pull the sheets from the bed, clawing at them. Gasping. He drags me closer to his mouth, spreading me wider. His tongue is everywhere, touching places I didn't know existed. He forces the tip of it into me, grinding his nose against my clit.

A surprised shout rips from my lips, exploding in the air around us as an orgasm blasts through me out of nowhere. It hits like a bomb, shattering me into a million little pieces.

Zion doesn't stop. He doesn't even slow.

He just grunts against my center, forcing his tongue deeper. He's a man possessed, driven over the edge by the need to take and claim and glut himself. And I'm his meal.

The second orgasm hits right on the heels of the first, leaving me shaking.

Every part of my body is overly sensitive. I feel every cool rush of air, and every scrape of his beard against my skin. It's the most exquisite torture.

"Please," I gasp. "Oh, God, please."

"Don't beg now, angel baby." He pulls one lip after the other into his mouth, licking them clean before releasing them with a loud pop. His eyes rise like suns over my belly, searing me with the wicked desire there. This man isn't a God. He's the devil. And he's after my soul.

God help me, but I'm going to give it to him. Every square inch.

"If you wanted mercy, you shouldn't have cried for me. You shouldn't have made my fucking heart beat again." He pulls my clit into his mouth, sucking hard.

I scream, fighting him and the orgasm this time. It's too big, too powerful. When it hits, it's going to destroy me. I know it is. I feel it creeping over me, threatening to unmake me down to the tiniest quark.

Will I survive? Do I want to?

I don't know how to answer either of those questions. All I know is that he's already slipping into place in my heart, stealing pieces of it that I didn't mean to give to him. And that scares the shit out of me.

So I fight. Harder than I've ever fought before. I scratch and hiss and claw. And come. I come so hard I black out for a moment, losing track of everything. The world, myself. Everything.

If death by orgasm is a possibility, this is the way I want to go.

When I come back to myself, he's still between my legs, still licking me like he doesn't plan to ever stop. Only, he's got one hand wrapped around his massive erection this time, pumping in rough pulls.

He rises up on his knees, roaring as his own orgasm rips through him. His seed splashes out, landing across my mound and thighs. It drips all over my

belly, hot and sticky.

And I know beyond a shadow of a doubt that I'm in serious, serious trouble here. Because I've never seen anything more beautiful than this warrior with his dick in his hand and his heart in his eyes, giving me every part of himself.

When it's over, he rubs his come into my skin, his eyes locked on mine. He doesn't speak. He doesn't explain. We both know exactly what he's doing. Marking me. Claiming me.

I let him.

He falls beside me a moment later, dragging me into his arms. He's breathing hard as he shifts us around, turning me onto my side to yank my ass right up against his still hard cock. His lips settle against the back of my neck.

"Sleep, Makenzie," he orders.

I close my eyes, obeying without argument for once today.

Chapter Seven



ZION

"Jesus," I rumble, scrubbing a hand down my face.

"Good morning to you too," Makenzie says, wearing nothing but my t-shirt and a smile as she leans against the doorjamb with a toothbrush in her hands.

"I thought you were going to sleep all day."

"You're supposed to be in this bed with me, angel baby." I'm pissed that I didn't hear her leaving it. She slept right up against me all night. I barely slept a wink. It was hard to do when I was busy falling in love with every adorable fucking sound she made. Every time she muttered my name, I felt like a god.

And every time she pushed that gorgeous ass back against me, I wanted to destroy kingdoms.

Does she realize yet how much power she holds over me? Will she use it to annihilate me? I don't know yet. I think she's on the verge of falling for me, but she's scared.

Can't say I blame her, not with the shit her mother put her through. She's built her whole life around that fear, using it to drive her. And I'm a bossy, autocratic motherfucker. I've always been that way. Zayne is the pain in the ass. Gideon's the peacekeeper. And I'm the one who craves control. I'd almost forgotten how much until I stood before her yesterday, staring at my future.

"I was sleeping," she says. "But you're basically a freaking furnace, and you were poking me." Her eyes drift down my body, letting me know exactly what she means.

I wrap my fist around my erection, letting her have a good look. "You could crawl back up in this bed and help me handle the problem."

"It looks like you have it *handled* well enough, Zion."

I growl at her, which only makes her smile grow.

"I thought I was cranky in the morning, but wow. You're really a grump."

"You're the one who kept me up all night."

"I did not."

"You were moaning my name and grinding that perfect ass all over me, Makenzie. How the fuck is a man supposed to sleep with a goddess all over his dick?"

She blushes bright red.

"Oh, so now you're shy?"

"No. I'm trying to remember why I decided not to smother you with a pillow last night," she says sweetly, batting her lashes at me.

"Because I wore your ass out letting you use my face as your own personal cum rag?"

"Oh, my God. You're filthy."

"You love it."

She huffs, flinging her toothbrush around like she's wielding a deadly weapon. "Get dressed. We have things to do today."

I sit upright, my hand falling from my cock. "If you think you're dragging me to another party today, think again, baby." One party a year is my limit. Especially if it means letting other motherfuckers gawk at her. Hell no. Been there, did that. Damn near murdered everyone.

"It's not a party."

"What is it?"

"You'll see." She beams at me. "Out of bed and on your feet, Marine. You've got orders." She ducks back into the bathroom, leaving me staring after her. Her quiet laughter floats back to me.

I drag my ass out of bed, leaving my hearing aid on the bedside table. I don't bother with clothes as I follow her into the bathroom. She's at the sink by the time I get there, putting way too much toothpaste—which she squeezes from the middle of the tube—on her toothbrush.

I pluck both from her hands.

"Hey! I was using that."

"Not anymore." I set them on the counter before stripping my shirt off over her head.

"If you wanted it back, all you had to do was ask," she huffs, slapping her wild hair out of her face to scowl at me.

"Don't want it back." I lace my hand through hers, pulling her across the small space to the walk-in shower. "We're showering."

"I'm not showering with you."

"Yeah, you are." I reach in to start the water, chuckling as she threatens to drown me. She must have slept well last night. She's feisty as hell this morning. But when I hold open the door for her to step into the shower, she steps right in. She grumbles under her breath the whole time, but she doesn't tell me no.

She hasn't used that word a single time with me. She's bitched and complained and threatened my life about eight different ways, but the only time she's flat out said no was when it came to putting cameras in the house. Every other time, she's danced around the word, carefully avoiding it.

She's more than capable of making her own decisions and taking care of herself. She's capable of standing up for herself and deciding what she will and won't allow. But she lets me order her around because on some level, she knows that I've got her. She knows that she's safe with me and that I won't make her do anything she doesn't truly want to do or take more than she's willing to give. She's desperate to put down the burden for a little while and just be Makenzie...and I'm the lucky motherfucker she trusts to hold it all up for her.

I have to duck to fit under the showerhead. It's too short, which brings her great pleasure. Every time I have to squat, her smile grows.

"We're getting a new showerhead," I growl.

"I like this one."

"Of course you do."

She squirts some fruity smelling bodywash all over me. "Oops. It slipped."

I back her up against the wall, earning a squeal. "That's cold, Zion!"

"You'll survive." I nip her throat and then her collarbone, slipping my hand between her legs. "If you wanted me to smell like you, all you had to do was

ask. I'd have hit my knees lickety-split, angel baby."

"I d-don't," she lies even as she spreads her legs, giving me room to work.

I use it to my advantage, working quickly to get her off. With the water beating down on us, her slippery folds, and the soap, it doesn't take long to drive her right over the edge. She comes with a soft cry that sets my teeth on edge.

How much longer can I keep my dick out of her? It's only been twenty-four hours and it already feels like a lifetime.

I need her to fall soon. Before I lose my fucking mind.



When we pull up in the parking lot of a row of shops a few miles from her house, I almost wish it were another fucking party. Anywhere is better than spending a day at a salon. I know because Ma works at one. Her and her coworkers spend all day doing hair, makeup, and gossiping about shit I'll never be old enough to hear middle-aged women discuss.

It's not my idea of a good time. Matter of fact, I'd rather be waterboarded.

"I'm not fucking going in there," I growl, putting my foot down.

"Well, I'm going in there," Makenzie says, undoing her seat belt. "I have a glam session."

"A what?"

A smile dances at her lips. "Hair, makeup, nails."

I eye her suspiciously. "Why you getting all dolled up, angel baby?"

"We've got somewhere to be tonight, Zion."

"Where?"

"A fundraiser."

"A party."

"I think you need to turn your hearing aid up, because I definitely said a fundraiser," she says. "It doesn't even sound like party."

"Will there be alcohol?"

"Yes?"

"And music?"

"Yes."

"And a lot of fucking people?"

"Yes," she says, drawing the word out like she isn't sure what I'm getting at.

"Will you be looking like a million bucks?"

"Obviously," she sniffs.

"Then it's a party, Makenzie."

"Well, this party is for a good cause and I'm one of their biggest fundraisers this year, so we're going," she says.

"What cause?"

"The Hope House Project. They provide housing for abused women and children. They have emergency shelters in Nashville, Knoxville, and Memphis."

"I'm familiar," I murmur, softening. If she wants to go, I won't tell her no. How the fuck can I when I'm pretty sure she could lead me into hell, and I'd follow with a smile on my face? Fundraisers and parties are the second closest thing to hell as far as I'm concerned, but they're part of her job. It's obvious this one means a lot to her. If she needs to be there, she'll be there.

And I'll be standing at her side, supporting and protecting her while she helps the people who need it most.

"Go on and get your hair and makeup done, beautiful. I'll wait out here."

"Okay, but you're going to be waiting a while. It's going to take a miracle to deal with this hair."

"Makenzie." I wait until she looks at me to say anything else. "If you think you need anything to be the most beautiful woman in the room tonight, you're wrong. You could go wrapped in a potato sack with your hair exactly like that, and you'd still have every man there wishing they were the lucky motherfucker taking you home."

Her expression softens, her lips parting.

"You're gorgeous exactly like you are. Every goddamn minute of the day."

She bobs her head, her expression full of some soft emotion I'm not sure I know how to name. Adoration? Devotion? The first inklings of love? I'm not sure, but it looks good there. Especially when she's looking at me.

"Get inside, baby. I'll be out here."

"Yes, sir," she says, putting that smart-ass attitude back together like armor.

I've got her number now, though. I know exactly what beats beneath it and why she guards it so fiercely. And there isn't a single part of that soft heart I haven't fallen in love with.

I watch carefully as she dashes inside the little salon, glancing over her shoulder at me before she disappears inside. As soon as she's over the threshold, I dial Madden's number.

"If you're calling to warn me that Taggart is on a rampage, I already know," he says by way of answer. "I've been on the phone with my PI all morning. If he follows through on his threats to press charges, I'll bury him."

My brows climb. "He's threatening to have me arrested?"

"You didn't know?"

"First I've heard of it."

"Ah, well. I guess I have bad news for you then," he says, earning a chuckle from me.

"Tell him to bring it on." I'm not afraid of the piece of shit. I'm not afraid of being arrested for what I said to him yesterday, either. If he wants to play that game, I'll lay all his shit bare in a courtroom. He can explain to a judge and jury exactly how he's been harassing Makenzie for the last year, following her home, threatening her. The son of a bitch put his hands on her.

He won't take that risk, though. We both know he doesn't want that smoke. He's just talking out of his ass because I embarrassed him. All people like him can do when men like me show up is talk. The only thing a bully hates worse than being called on their shit is someone who won't play their games.

"He's saying you threatened to kill him," Madden says.

"Of course he is," I snort, not in the least surprised. He's about as trustworthy as he is decent. "I didn't threaten to kill him. I threatened to feed him his own dick."

Madden's laughter booms down the line.

"Had I known he put his hands on Makenzie, I'd have done more than threatened his sorry ass," I growl. "You left that detail out, Banks."

"Hold the fuck on. He put his goddamn hands on her?"

"Grabbed her by the wrist the day he followed her home."

"That sorry motherfucker," Madden growls.

"You didn't know."

"She left that part out."

I'm not surprised. I'm not thrilled, but I'm not surprised. She's too used to handling everything on her own to willingly bring anyone else into her

problems, especially someone she cares about. Olive is her best friend. She wouldn't want to involve her or Madden when Lyle runs in the same circles and could complicate their lives.

"What's the play? I'm not inclined to give this prick another chance to get close to her," I murmur, two eyes on the salon. I can't see shit through the tinted front windows, but I watch anyway.

"Is she going to the fundraiser tonight?"

"Yep."

"Good. Then her name won't be involved," he says, smug satisfaction in his voice. "I'm not giving him another opportunity to come after her. I'm going for his throat. I assume you want in."

"Obviously. He should have kept his goddamn hands to himself."

"I don't suppose I need to tell you that I'll break your fucking arms if you break her heart?" Madden asks, slipping it into conversation casually.

If he were anyone else, I'd tell him to fuck off and mind his business. But he's the closest thing she has to a brother. I appreciate the hell out of him for looking out for her. She deserves that in her life. Especially since I know damn well her mother isn't stepping up to the plate to be the support system she deserves.

"You don't have to tell me," I murmur. "But I appreciate you for saying it anyway."

He falls silent for a minute and then laughs. "Well, son of a bitch. I guess that explains why she stopped texting me the middle finger emoji yesterday afternoon."

"She was texting you the middle finger emoji?"

"All morning long."

I throw my head back, laughing loudly.



"What do you want?" Zayne grumbles into the phone fifteen minutes later.
"I'm busy."

"Stalking Emma doesn't count as an item on a to do list, motherfucker."

"I'm not stalking her."

"Since when?" I lift a brow, surprised by this news. Last time we talked, he was sitting outside her house, losing his shit.

"Since Gideon hired me as her bodyguard." He sounds awfully chipper about the situation.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, suddenly wishing I hadn't asked. Or called. Or been born into my crazy ass family to begin with. "I've been gone for twenty-four hours. How the fuck are you two possibly dismantling the entire company already?"

"You have absolutely no faith in either of us, do you?"

"Nope."

"Prick," he says with a laugh. "What do you want? I have a wedding to plan."

"I need to talk to the Zayne who hasn't lost his mind. Can you let him out for five minutes?"

"I haven't lost my mind. I think I've only just found it," he mutters. "But yeah, whatever. What's up, brother?"

"Lyle Taggert is threatening to have me arrested."

"For fucking what?"

"Apparently, he didn't like it when I told him I'd feed him his own dick."

"You think he'd be used to the taste of his own bodily fluid by now. He's had his head up his own ass for long enough. You worried he's actually going to follow through?"

"After tonight? Maybe." I drum my hands on the steering wheel. "Madden and I are going to destroy his world. Madden's releasing all the dirt he dug up on him."

"He'll love that. What do you need?"

"If he has me arrested, I need your guarantee that you'll be on Makenzie's doorstep the second I'm in cuffs. He's already put his hands on her once."

"Jesus Christ," Zayne growls.

"If he touches her again, I'll kill him."

My older brother goes completely silent before muttering a low curse.

"So it's like that?" he asks.

"It's precisely like that. She's mine." I'm not going to deny it. I don't give a fuck about our rules or what we promised. This is bigger than that. She's more important than that. And right about now, I'm thinking Zayne and Gideon both know exactly how I feel. Zayne's lost it for Emma, and Gideon's already sleeping with Kenna. Not a single one of us can point the finger without pointing four others in our own faces.

"Ma is going to lose her mind."

That makes me smile. Ma is going to lose her mind. She's all but given up on us giving her grandbabies. Hell, I think she's given up on us ever giving her the daughters she always wanted. She got saddled with the three of us,

and Lord knows, we haven't made it easy. But she's going to love Makenzie. And Makenzie will love her. She deserves Ma in her life.

"Just promise you'll be on her doorstep the minute they put me in cuffs if he decides to lash out once the shit hits the fan."

"I'll be there," Zayne vows. He may be driving me up the fucking wall lately, but one thing Zayne doesn't do is break a promise. He'll protect my girl with his life if that's what it takes.

I just hope like hell the little voice whispering that this is necessary is wrong for once in my life. Because if Lyle comes after Makenzie again, I'm not sure I won't kill him anyway.

Chapter Eight



KENZIE

"Stop looking at me like that."

"If you didn't want me looking at you, you shouldn't have worn that fucking dress," Zion growls, watching me from between slit lids as we make our way into the ballroom at the Hilton. "I'm mad as hell it's not on the bedroom floor while I'm wearing you, angel baby."

My cheeks heat as a blush climbs up them. His mouth is going to be the death of me. He says the filthiest things, but in the sweetest way possible. And I don't have to ask to know he means every word. The truth is written all over his face.

"It's just a dress, Zion," I say, trying not to think about how badly I wish it were on the floor while he was wearing me. I got so used to him being in my space yesterday, spending the day away from him today felt...different. Even though he was right outside, I didn't like it.

I think I'm addicted to this man.

I also think I don't care.

I've had nothing but time to think all day. And every road led right back to him. It's terrifying how quickly he's become important to me. It defies logic how perfectly he fits into my life. I feel like the little warning voice in my head should be screaming at me to slow down. Going this fast can only end in disaster. Yet, everything about this feels right.

I've always believed that we forge our own fates. Our futures aren't predestined. There is no higher power and no magical beings weaving looms that decide how our lives will unfold. We're the only ones who decide that. What we choose to do every day—whether we fight or fold, whether we give up or get up—determines where we land in life.

But with Zion? He feels bigger than any decision I've ever made, as if somehow, he was meant to step into my path and help decide the course of my future. He was meant to change my life. I just had to find the courage to let him.

I think I found it somewhere inside the salon today.

"That's just a dress," he says, nodding to a middle-aged woman a few paces ahead of us in a royal purple ballgown. "You're in a goddamn Siren's lure."

I smile, glancing down at myself. The dress isn't at all racy or inappropriate, but it is beautiful. It's a teal, off-shoulder front-split gown with draped lace, tulle, and gorgeous beading. The bodice hugs my curves before the tulle skirt

flares out, floating around my legs like water. I fell in love with it the minute I laid eyes on it.

I feel a little like a princess in it, especially with Zion on my arm.

"I'll be sure to let the designer know you approve."

He hooks his arm around my waist as we approach the doors to the ballroom, pulling me up against his body. His mouth lands close to my ear. "I'll show you exactly how much I appreciate it as soon as I get it off of you tonight, angel baby."

My stomach quivers.

We reach the doors. Camera flashes light up from every direction, momentarily blinding me. I lean into Zion, my mind clouded with his scent, with his promise, *with him*.

I don't care who's watching. I don't care what they think.

I lift up on my toes, placing my lips at his ear. "Promises, promises," I breathe before nipping his skin like he does to mine.

He growls, reaching for me. I drop back down to my flat feet, slipping from his grasp. The bright smile pasted on my face feels triumphant as I face the cameras again, allowing them to take their photographs.

Zion gives me a moment in the spotlight before he presses up against my back, his erection digging into my hip. "Let's go, angel baby," he rumbles. "Before I turn you right back around and take you home."

That doesn't sound like a terrible plan to me. In fact, it sounds like heaven. But I surge forward anyway, pulling him deeper into the ballroom.



We're seated with a bunch of social media stars I don't know. They all rave over my dress and my makeup. One of them, Lexie, spends half the night looking at Zion in a way that makes me want to claw her eyes out like a jealous brat.

He doesn't notice her, though. Aside from periodic sweeps of the room, his eyes never leave me. They're locked on me, slowly driving me crazy. So are his hands. He keeps one on the small of my back. The other he slips onto my thigh.

It slips higher during dinner. And then higher again. By the time dessert lands in front of me, his pinky is brushing the seam of my panties. No one else notices.

They don't notice when he flicks the fabric aside to touch my bare pussy, either.

He toys with me, giving me just enough friction to make sure I feel him, but not nearly enough to make me come. I consider stabbing him with my fork but decide that would be too obvious.

By the time the lights dim and the first speech starts, I'm a sweating mess, ready to crack apart at the seams.

"You're going to come for me right here, and you aren't going to make a sound when you do it, Makenzie," he breathes in my ear.

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from sobbing my agreement. I'll do whatever he wants if it means I get to come.

Lorna launches into her speech, thanking everyone for coming. At least that's what I assume she says. I don't hear a word. All I hear is my own choppy breathing as Zion's thumb settles on my clit.

He works it in agonizingly slow circles.

I bite the inside of my cheek, trying like hell to stay still. Trying not to beg for more. Trying, desperately, not to get us caught.

"When I was telling you how perfect you look in that dress earlier, I forgot to mention something important," Zion says almost conversationally, his mouth against my ear and his free hand running up and down my back. His thumb grinds against my clit again. Slow, slow. So slow.

"W-what?" I whisper...at least I mean to whisper. It comes out loud enough for Lexie to glance across the table at me.

Zion falls still, his eyes on Lorna as if he's absorbed in her speech and not what he's doing to me.

Lexie eyes me oddly before turning back to the stage.

Zion doesn't move for a full minute, keeping his thumb pressed firmly to my clit. And then he pinches it. "I forgot to tell you that you snatched my fucking heart out my chest," he whispers. "You own me, angel baby."

Oh, God. Oh, God.

I bite my tongue, fighting back a cry as the orgasm washes over me, washes *through* me. It turns me inside out, leaving me a ruined, drooping mess right there at the table in front of three hundred witnesses.

Zion doesn't let them see me, though. He pulls me up against his chest, using his body to shield me. He protects me in this moment as carefully as he's protected me in every other that we've spent together.

And I know right then and there, that there is no coming back from this. Not for him. And not for me.

"Take me home," I whisper, pleading with him to get me out of there. "Please, Zion. Take me home."



I'm on him as soon as we're over the threshold, pushing him back against the door. He's been the one to lead so far, always taking the reins. Always deciding how things between us go. I think he craves that control as much as part of me craves giving it up.

But this time, I snatch it out of his hands, desperate to feel him. All of him. Everywhere.

Buttons fly from his shirt, landing against the tile floor as I rip through them. He doesn't stop me. He lets me do what I want, watching me from hooded, curious eyes.

I strip him from his jacket and tie and then pull the tattered remains of his shirt from his body. My lips land against the mass of scar tissue on his side.

"Fuck," he growls, his head thumping against the door.

I kiss my way down his abdomen, lavishing attention on every perfect ridge. His body is a marvel. It was made for war. No, that's not true. He was made for more than that. War is only part of his story. Peace is where it ends. That's what he deserves. Peace. I don't think he's had much of that in his life.

I tug his belt free of the loops, ripping it free.

"What are you doing, angel baby?" he drawls.

"Taking what's mine." I unzip his pants, reaching inside.

He growls a curse, his hips bucking into my hand.

I pull his cock out, fascinated by how hard he is. By how smooth the skin is. I can't even close my hand around him, but I work my fist up and down his shaft anyway, doing my best to set him ablaze like he does to me.

"Jesus Christ," he pants, his hands in fists against the door as he fights to let me have this moment. Every instinct he has demands he take over and take control, but he fights his nature just to give me what I want.

I sink to my knees in front of him, intent on taking something else.

"You want my dick in your mouth, Makenzie?"

"No. I want it down my throat."

Maybe I shouldn't talk like this. Maybe I should be a scared little virgin, too shy to ask for what I want. But that isn't me. It's never been me. I may not be experienced, but I know my own mind. I know my heart. And I want him with the ferocity he awoke in me when he touched me for the first time yesterday.

"Then open that smart ass mouth and take what you want, beautiful."

I could do that, but I don't. I toy with him first, teasing him the same way he did me tonight. I run my hands up and down his shaft, rub it against my face. I brush my closed lips back and forth over the head until he's the one writhing this time, his hips moving restlessly.

He grows more and more bossy by the minute.

"Get my fucking cock down your throat, Makenzie," he growls, plunging his hand into my hair. "Or you'll be wearing my—Fuck!"

I take him deep, plunging down on him in one quick move. He hits the back

of my throat, gagging me. I instinctively start to pull back, but he picks this moment to pay me back for toying with him. His hand tightens in my hair. He holds me in place, letting me choke on him.

I press my thighs together, so turned on I might not survive this.

"You wanted me down your throat, be a good girl and take it." He pumps his hips in shallow thrusts until my eyes water. Only then does he pull back, allowing me to breathe. "Is this what you had in mind, Makenzie?"

He knows it is, damn him. Somehow, he can read me like a book. He knows every dirty thought in my head as if he's thinking them too. Maybe he is. Maybe that's why we fit so well together.

He plunges into my mouth again, using his grip on my head to give me exactly what I wanted. He takes my mouth, claiming it as his own. I bob on his cock, my eyes watering, my heart pounding. Freer than I think I've ever been in my life.

I slip my hand between my thighs, dipping into my panties to touch myself.

"Fuck yeah. Play with that hard little clit while you ruin me with that smart mouth, Makenzie." He plunges forward again, grunting and cursing. I choke again, but I fight to take more, wanting as much of him in my mouth as possible.

My fingers dance across my clit without rhythm. I need to come too badly.

"I knew you'd make me fall the minute I set eyes on you," he says. "But I didn't know you'd wrap those lips around me and suck the soul from my body. Jesus, baby. I might not ever leave this perfect fucking mouth."

I shatter into pieces, choking on his cock.

It's the best orgasm of my life.

He roars, pulling out of my mouth. Before I can even miss the taste of him, he's got me in his arms, stalking toward the bedroom. Somehow, he gets his

hand down my panties while he goes. Two fingers plunge into me.

"Zion!"

He presses me up against the wall in the hallway, his mouth covering mine as he fingers me to the brink of another orgasm. As soon as my inner muscles start to flutter, he peels me away from the wall, finishing the short walk to the bedroom.

I'm flat on my back on the bed within seconds. And he's between my legs.

He doesn't give me time to prepare. He just rips the crotch out of my panties and attacks me with his mouth. Those same two fingers plunge into me again, working right alongside his magical mouth to drive me wild.

I claw and bite, feral in my need for him. I don't even feel like myself. I'm someone else—something else. So damn desperate to get him inside me, to embed him as deeply as I can get him. I didn't know love could feel like this.

So exhilarating. So terrifying. So damn good.

"Zion!" I cry, pissed when he leaves me tottering on the edge again. As soon as I'm about to tip over the side, he drags his mouth away from me. A yawning pit of despair opens in my stomach, growing bigger by the minute.

"You aren't coming again until I'm inside you," he growls, lifting me higher up the bed. "And you aren't doing that until this pretty little dress is on the floor where it belongs. Tell me how to get it off."

"Laces," I gasp. "Up the back."

He flips me over, quietly examining the laces before he gently pulls, unraveling them. The bodice falls forward, pinned between my body and the bed.

"Now, the skirt."

"Hooks at the waist."

It takes him a little bit longer this time, but he finds the hooks pinning the

skirt to the bodice and fumbles them loose, allowing him to slip the skirt down my body. Once it's gone, I expect him to roll me back over, but he crawls on top of me instead, seaming his body to mine.

His erection slips between my legs from behind, the head pressing against my clit. He holds me right there with a hand on my shoulder as he grinds against me, sliding his cock between my folds again and again.

His lips run all over the back of my neck, his breath pelting me.

"I should take you just like this," he mutters. "That way you can bite the pillow when I'm fucking my way into your soul."

"You're already there."

He goes completely still. For a five count, he doesn't even breathe. And then he flips me again. Those piercing green eyes come into focus, blazing with emotion.

"You shouldn't have told me that, angel baby," he says, his voice somber.

"W-why not?"

"Because you'll never get rid of me now."

"What if I don't want to get rid of you."

"Don't say it unless you mean it, Makenzie."

My heart races, fear threatening to close my throat. But I fight through it, refusing to run now. We've come this far. I'm seeing this through all the way to the end.

"I love you, Zion."

"Jesus."

"You made it impossible not to love you."

"Stop talking."

"I might mess it up. I probably will mess it up. But I want everything you'll give me." I swallow hard. "No returns, refunds, or exchanges."

He growls my name, falling on top of me. His mouth slants down over mine, his kiss punishing as he lines up at my entrance. I moan against his lips, tasting myself on him.

He surges forward, claiming what's his. He isn't gentle. I don't want him to be. I'm not delicate. I'm not fragile. And this man knows it. He knows me better than anyone ever has. He doesn't hurt me. He can't. There isn't a single part of him capable of it.

I claw down his back, shouting his name into the room as my barrier gives way, and I become his in every single way. There is no pain. There's only surrender.

He falls still anyway, kissing me again and again and again. As if he can't stop. As if he's breathing his soul into me. I take it, greedy for it. I want to consume him. I want to wreck and ruin and own him.

I want to love him too.

Only when he's sure I'm okay does he start to move. He pulls almost all the way out before snapping his hips forward. We shout together, our sounds mingling as we discover exactly what we were made for. This. Each other. Pleasure.

There's so much of it, I'm not sure I'll survive it as he pounds into him, grunting curses and praise in my ear.

You're such a good fucking girl.

Do you feel that, Makenzie? Do you feel how goddamn good you feel wrapped around me?

Goddamn, angel baby. This tight little pussy.

He growls the last like he's pissed. Like it's my fault he went and got himself addicted. That's his problem. I've got ninety-nine of my own.

I forget every single one of him when he rolls me on top of him and

demands that I ride him. Somehow, I work out the mechanics. I lift and drop, taking him deep. He growls and curses, his eyes on fire as he watches his dick disappearing only to reappear covered in me a moment later.

He bucks his hips each time I land on his lap, forcing himself deeper. I scratch down his thighs and stomach, sobbing his name as he pinches my nipples, adding a new level of rapture to my torment.

"You better fucking come," he orders, slipping one hand between our bodies. "I want you dripping all over me, Makenzie."

That's right, he did say he wanted to wear me.

I make every effort to give him exactly what he asked for, riding him harder and faster. Until I feel like I'm flying. He's writhing in torment beneath me, desperate to go over as he pinches my clit, rubbing it between his thumb and forefinger.

I lose the rhythm. I lose my mind.

"I love you," I cry, slamming myself down on him as the first waves crest and I break.

"Makenzie!" My name echoes in the corners as he holds me down on him, bucking his hips. He comes hard, his seed warming me as he spills into me and then trickles out, leaving us a sticky, sweaty mess.



"We didn't talk about birth control," he says a while later, running his fingers up and down my spine as we soak in the tub. He carried me here as soon as he could move, insisting I needed to soak so I wouldn't be sore. I didn't tell him that I'd be sore anyway. I have a feeling that news would only distress him. "Are you on anything, angel baby?"

"No," I whisper.

He grunts as if he's satisfied.

I turn my head to peek at him over my shoulder, confirming my suspicion.

"You want to get me pregnant."

"I want you tied to me in every way possible," he says, completely unrepentant. "The thought of watching you grow round with my kid makes my fucking cock ache."

"What if I don't want kids?" I ask, only teasing.

"Then I'll tell you it's a goddamn shame and make sure you're protected next time." He brushes damp strands of hair from my face. "You'd be an incredible mother, angel baby. This world deserves to know what that's like."

My heart flutters.

"I want kids," I confess, running my fingers through the rapidly dissolving bubbles. "I've always wanted them. I'm just terrified I'll damage them."

"Your mom really did a number on you, huh?"

"I spent my whole life listening to all the ways I didn't measure up." I shrug. "At some point, I started to believe it."

"What changed?"

"Her third husband."

He tenses. "Did he put his fucking hands on you?"

"No, nothing like that," I promise, allowing him to relax again. "He was actually pretty decent. But his sister was amazing. She was about ten years

older than him and never married. She owned her own business and had this great life that had nothing to do with men. She just lived on her terms. For the first time, I realized that I didn't have to live my life trying to live up to my mom's standards. I just had to live it."

"She sounds great. The sister, I mean. Not your mom."

I smile at the clarification. "She was. She treated me like who I was and what I wanted mattered. We still keep in touch."

"Are your mom and her brother still together?"

I laugh loudly. "God no. He divorced her like six months after they married. Honestly, he was way too good for her. I don't know how she managed to trap him."

"You and your mom still aren't on great terms."

It's not a question, but I answer anyway. "I see her at Christmas, and that's about it. It works better for both of us that way. She spends the whole time criticizing every aspect of my life."

"Not anymore," he says, a dark thread in his voice. "If she wants to keep seeing you on Christmas, she'll learn to treat you with respect."

"Fine by me. I'm much rather spend Christmas with Olive anyway."

"You'll be spending it with me now, angel baby. My Ma is going to love you. She always wanted daughters to dote on. She got stuck with heathen sons instead."

"Are you guys close?"

"We are. She's mean as hell to me and my brothers, but we love her anyway."

"She is not mean to you," I say with a laugh, not believing him for a second.

"She is," he protests, an indulgent smile in his voice that lets me know he

loves ever dang minute of it. "She terrorizes the shit out of us. She says it's payback for all the gray hair we gave her."

"You probably deserve it."

"Yeah, probably."

I giggle, unable to help myself. I bet he was a handful as a kid. He's a handful now. He and his brothers probably drove his poor mom crazy.

"What about your dad?"

"He tells us to keep our damn mouths shut and keep her happy. He coddles the hell out of her."

"That's where you get it from, then."

"What?"

"Your protectiveness."

"Maybe." He slips his hands around my waist, anchoring me to him. "Or maybe I just like being the man you lean on. Taking care of you is satisfying as hell."

"Says the man getting orgasms out of the deal."

"No." He turns me to face him, his expression suddenly serious. "The orgasms are fucking phenomenal. But taking care of you is a reward in and of itself, angel baby. You don't trust many people. I doubt you lean on anyone. Knowing you trust me with that part of you means something to me. Don't ever think it doesn't."

"I know," I whisper, cupping his cheek. "I was only teasing."

He turns his face, nipping at my palm. "I don't joke when it comes to you."

"I'm beginning to get that."

"Yeah?" He grins. "Well, it's about fucking time."

Chapter Nine



ZION

"Get your stupid phone," Makenzie groans, her finger jabbing me between the ribs. "It's too freaking early for it to keep ringing."

Her words pull me from sleep, plunking me down in reality. I fell asleep with my good ear against the pillow and didn't even hear it.

"Let me up, baby."

She grumbles a complaint I don't hear, then reluctantly shifts forward, allowing me to sit up to grab the phone from the nightstand. I grab my hearing aid, too, switching it on while I fumble the phone to my other ear.

"It's about fucking time," Madden growls as soon as I answer. "I've been blowing your phone up for the last hour."

Makenzie steals my pillow, snuggling in with an exaggerated sigh.

"What's wrong?" I ask, fully prepared for the likelihood that I'll be going to jail sometime real soon.

There isn't a single thing I'd change. Actually, that's not true. If I had it to do over, I'd break both of his arms and his jaw. Maybe with it wired shut, he'd learn some manners.

"You haven't seen the video."

"What video?" I growl, instantly fucking worried someone busted me getting her off at the table last night. If some sorry son of a bitch filmed and posted it...

My growl brings Makenzie fully awake. She drags my pillow away from her face, looking at me with wide eyes. I don't have to ask to know her mind is in the same place. It's written all over her face.

"I dropped every shred of evidence my PI dug up against him," Madden says. "The whole goddamn world knows he's been making shady deals for his clients and pocketing most of the money that should have gone to them. They know he's spent a small fortune on coke and has gotten violent with a few female clients. He's pissed."

"Good." I take a certain immense satisfaction knowing his world is falling apart. I take even more knowing he'll never get his hands on Makenzie again.

"Not good. He released a video statement this morning."

"Saying what? That he's a Nice Guy?" I snort. It's the same defense they always use.

Madden doesn't immediately respond, which sets my teeth on edge.

"What's he saying, Banks?" I growl.

"You need to check Makenzie's social media," he says quietly. "It's not good."

My heart sinks into my fucking stomach, settling like a stone. I put the phone on speaker so I can pull up the app. Her profile is already loaded. What? Zayne isn't the only one who knows how to do a little stalking.

I don't immediately see anything out of place. The last thing posted was a picture of her in that damn dress from last night, a playful smile on her face as she poses in front of the door.

"What am I looking for?"

"What's going on?" Makenzie asks.

I hold up a finger, asking for a minute. She doesn't know that Madden and I agreed to publicly release everything his PI dug up on Taggert. Last night was about her and about us, not about him. I wasn't giving him a fucking place in her mind or in our bed. He's stressed her out and worried her for long enough.

"Check her tagged videos."

I tap the icon to take me to her tagged videos. His ugly mug immediately pops up on my screen in half a dozen different videos. What the fuck? I click the first one, and his face fills the screen. It's a repost of his video, along with a caption that's nothing more than a steaming tea cup.

"Why the fuck is he tagging her, Banks?" I demand to know, pissed and suspicious as hell. This isn't how things were supposed to play out. We didn't plan for this.

Makenzie gives up getting an answer from me and scurries to a seating position, peering at the phone over my shoulder. "Why is he tagging me?" she demands. "What's going on?"

"I've had a PI looking into him," Madden says gently. "Yesterday, Zion and

I agreed to make the information he uncovered public. I released it last night."

"What?" she whispers, turning wide, startled eyes in my direction. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Didn't want you worrying about some piece of shit who isn't worth your time."

"So why is he tagging me now?"

"He's claiming that the two of you were sleeping together, Kenz," Madden tells her. "When he found out you were stealing content, he broke up with you. You've been harassing him for the last year, so he threatened to expose you. In retaliation, you fabricated a bunch of evidence against him, trying to discredit him."

"What?" she cries, jumping to her feet. "That's not true! None of it!"

"I know. Everyone who knows you knows it isn't true."

Her expression falls. "But people who don't know me believe it."

"Some of them."

She gets quiet. Too quiet, seeming to fold in on herself.

"This wasn't supposed to happen, angel baby," I swear to her. "He was supposed to come after me. That's what he was threatening to do." That's what we thought he'd do, retaliate by following through on his threat to press charges. With his business already out there, there was nothing stopping him.

"He was threatening you? How?"

I hesitate, reluctant to answer.

"How, Zion?"

"He was threatening to press charges, claiming I threatened his life."

"He was going to have you arrested?" she growls. "And you were going to *let* him?"

"I've been in worse places than a jail cell, Makenzie."

She stares at me for a long moment as if she doesn't know what to say to that. It's the truth, though. I've been to hell and back, and for less reason than this. A night in a jail cell wouldn't even rate on the list of the worst places I've been. Was I looking forward to it? Of course not. But I wouldn't have regretted it either.

There's not a single fucking moment of protecting her that I'll regret. When someone comes for her, their targets are supposed to find my back. That's how this shit works. I stand in front of her so everything hits me instead of her. Not because I'm her bodyguard. Not because it's my job. But because my life only started making sense the minute she burst into it like a comet.

She owns me, heart, mind, body, and soul.

"I want to see the video."

"That's not a good idea," Madden says. "You don't want to see him spewing that bullshit."

"You're right. I don't want to see it, but I need to see it. It's the only way I'll be prepared for whatever is coming at me next," she argues, her voice soft. There's a thread of steel in it, though. This woman has more courage in her pinky finger than most men I know.

"We'll watch it together."

Madden curses but doesn't try to interfere. "I've already got my lawyers working on it," he says. "The video will be down soon. And he'll be slapped with a restraining order by the end of the day."

"Thanks, brother."

"Thanks, Madden," Makenzie whispers.

I disconnect, dropping the phone onto the bed to drag her into my arms.

"I want to see the video, Zion."

"We will, not we're not watching in our bed. Wrap around me, angel baby." I wait until she hooks her arms around my neck, and then scoop up the phone, depositing it on her belly. I stand in one fluid move, carrying her into the bathroom. It's not the most comfortable place to watch the video, but I can't think of a more fitting place to deal with a piece of shit like Lyle Taggart.



His fucking video makes my blood boil. He plays the earnest little schoolboy well, staring into the camera with his hands folded. He pretends as if he's blindsided and deeply hurt that she'd do this to him as he rattles on about how much he tried to help her.

It's all a fucking show. One that makes two things crystal clear. The first? This motherfucker wants the world to think he made her. The second? I've never wanted to kill anyone with my bare hands as badly as I want to kill this motherfucker.

When it's over, I drop the phone to the counter, pulling her into my arms. She hasn't said a word through the entire six-minute production. She's barely even moved. I know this has to be killing her, but she faces it with her head high, not speaking.

The fact that she isn't saying anything worries the hell out of me. Makenzie isn't a quiet woman. She's the kind who tells you exactly what she thinks

about any given subject. She knows her own mind and isn't afraid to speak it. She isn't speaking it now.

"Talk to me," I whisper, chaffing her arms with my hands.

"And say what? That he's lying about all of it? He is. I never slept with him. I never touched him."

She doesn't have to tell me that. Her innocence still stains the bedsheets in tiny drops.

"He's a liar, Zion. It's what he does. It's who he is." She shrugs in my arms. "I can't change his nature, just like I can't force people to believe the truth. They'll believe what they want to believe, regardless of whether it's true or not. What can I possibly say to change that?"

"Fuck," I growl, burying her face in my throat as my heart threatens to break for her. She shouldn't have to know so much about how the world really works...and yet she does. It's as sad as it is infuriating. Fuck her mother and every other person who taught her those lessons. She shouldn't have had to learn them. It kills me that she did.

"What do you want to do, angel baby?" I ask after a moment, leaving the ball in her court. I've fucked up once already, trying to do it my way. This time, it's her decision to make. This is her life. The choice should be hers.

"What do I want to do? Shower," she sighs. "Olive and I have a photoshoot in a few hours."

Chapter Ten



ZION

Two hours later, we pull up outside of Club Za's content house. The driveway isn't as packed as last time, but there are multiple SUVs and flashy sportscars in the driveway.

"How big is this shoot, beautiful?"

"Um, I think there are six of us," she says. "It's for a women's magazine. Some article about rising stars in Nashville outside of the music industry."

"And you're one of them? Damn, angel baby," I say, proud as hell of her.

"It's just an article, Zion."

I kill the engine, climbing from the truck without a word. She's got her seatbelt off by the time I circle around to her side, but I don't help her out yet. I trap her in her seat, leaning over her.

"Stop doing that shit."

"What?" She blinks at me, her brows furrowed as if she doesn't know what I'm talking about.

"Stop downplaying your accomplishments and brushing shit off like it's no big deal, Makenzie. You've been doing it since day one. I tell you that your tits are gorgeous; you say they're just tits. I say you look like a goddess; you say it's just a dress." I cup her cheeks between my palms, forcing her to look at me. "You're fucking perfect. You deserve every ounce of success you find. Don't downplay who you are or what you've created for yourself. It's fucking extraordinary, and so are you."

She watches me with wide, startled eyes. Does she even know she's been doing it? I doubt it. It's just one more scar her fucking mother left her with. She doesn't know how incredible she is because she's never had anyone to tell her. Fuck that noise. I'll tell her. Every damn day until she believes it as fully as I do.

"Okay," she whispers.

I brush my lips across hers, helping her down from the truck.

It's overcast today, the sun playing hide and seek behind thick clouds. Her pretty dress still sparkles in the light, shimmering as if it's made of diamonds. She looks as beautiful as ever.

I lead her up the stairs and inside the mansion, blinking at the transformation. The furniture in the living room has been pushed to the edges of the room, leaving the rest of it open. A massive backdrop and photography

lights dominate the far wall. Natural light filters in from the glass wall on the opposite side, creating a mosaic of color across the tiled floor.

I spot Bianca messing with the photography lights. One of the chicks from the fundraiser is here too, Lucy or Lexie or some fucking thing. I didn't pay attention when she introduced herself. I was too busy staring at Makenzie's tits in her pretty little dress.

Everyone turns in our direction as we step into the room. It goes eerily quiet.

Fucking hell. They've all seen Taggert's video.

Makenzie doesn't shrink from their stares. She doesn't react at all. She simply points at Olive and Madden across the room. "There's Olive."

I lead her in that direction, grateful as hell that they're here.

They meet us halfway. Olive immediately throws her arms around Makenzie, pulling her into a big hug. She whispers something to my girl, who nods, hugging her hard. It's the first chink in her armor I've seen all day.

"Carmichael," Madden says, extending his hand to shake mine.

"Banks."

We step aside, giving the girls a little space.

"How's she doing?"

"Still standing," I mutter, watching as she and Olive whisper back and forth. Everyone else in the room has gone back to what they were doing, but their eyes drift toward Mackenzie every few seconds. Everyone except Bianca, anyway. She doesn't gawk at my girl. She simply smiles at her and goes back to work, making it clear with one look that she's firmly on Team Makenzie.

"The video came down about an hour ago." Madden rubs his jaw. "Getting the reposts down is going to be a helluva lot harder. She needs to issue a

response of her own."

"She won't." That's not who she is. She won't give him a single inch of real estate in her life that he doesn't steal from beneath her feet. I don't know if she genuinely doesn't care if people believe him, or if she's just that tired of dealing with him. Either way, she won't be convinced to issue a response. I know her. And I know she meant it when she said she didn't care this morning.

She won't fight back, not because she doesn't believe she's worth it, but because she doesn't view him as an enemy worth fighting. And I'm going to ask her to bend on this one. She doesn't have to fight back. She doesn't have to say a goddamn word. I'm here. And I've been spoiling for a fight since I found out he put his hands on her.

"What are you going to do?" Madden asks. I don't know if he sees something on my face, or if he knows where my mind is at because he'd do the same fucking thing in my shoes. But he knows I'm not going to let this ride. Not today or any other day.

"I'm going to do what I should have done two days ago. Find him and kill him."

"Need help?" he offers, a savage grin on his face.

"I've got this one, but I do need a favor."

"Name it."

"Keep an eye on her for me. I can already tell these bitches are going to be catty today. Make sure she isn't facing their bullshit alone."

"We've got her," Madden promises, glancing at his wife and my girl, who still have their heads together, whispering. "Just do me one favor."

"What?"

"Break his fucking hands for me."

"Already planned on it."

Madden holds his hand out for me to bump his fist.

I stalk back to Makenzie, placing my hand on the small of her back. "Angel baby."

She and Olive break apart, her bright eyes coming to my face. "What is it?"

"I need to take care of something," I murmur, leaning down to brush my lips across hers. "Don't even think about leaving this house until I get back."

Her face falls. "You're leaving?"

"Only for a little while. I have some business to take care of." I nod at Olive and Madden. "They're going to keep you company for me."

"You're going after him, aren't you?"

"Who?"

"Zion," she says, narrowing her eyes on me. "Don't treat me like I'm stupid, and don't act like you are, either. You know exactly who I'm talking about."

"I do." I press my lips to her forehead, careful not to smudge her makeup. "And I'm not answering that question, angel baby. All you need to worry about is looking like the goddess you are."

She huffs at me, making me smile.

"Behave, beautiful. I'll be back soon."

"Maybe I will, maybe I won't," she mutters.

I hook my arm around her waist, toppling her against my chest. "You better fucking behave," I growl in her ear. "Otherwise, the only thing I'll be feeding you when you're finished is my cock."

She moans quietly, shivering in my arms.

"I love you." I drop a kiss to her crown and pry myself away from her before I find a reason not to go at all.



I call Zayne and Gideon from the truck, rallying the troops.

Zayne answers on the first ring, as if he's been waiting for my call. He probably has. He may be a pain in my ass, but he's the pain in my ass who always has my back, no matter what. When I was languishing in the hospital overseas, waiting for them to ship me home, he's the one who raised hell until they allowed him in to see me. He's the one who kept me alive when I wasn't sure I wanted to survive.

He didn't leave my fucking side until I was home. That's the brother I know. He goes hard for everyone in his life, refusing to quit even when we do. I need that single-minded focus in my corner now.

"You in cuffs yet?"

"No. Plans have changed."

"Damn. Guess I'll call Gideon and tell him we're letting Taggart live."

"Actually, we're not. I need the two of you to meet me at the house. We're going to find the sorry son of a bitch."

"Why?"

I quickly fill him in on the situation.

"Be there in fifteen," he says when I'm done, not asking a single question.

I disconnect with him and dial Gideon.

"You in cuffs yet?"

"Jesus Christ. Are you two taking bets or something?"

"Possibly. Did I win?"

"No. Pry yourself off Kenna and get your ass to my house. We have something to do."

"What?"

"We're going to hunt the sorry son of a bitch down and make him regret the day he was born."

"You saw the video."

My brows climb toward my hairline. "*You* saw the video?"

"It came up on Kenna's feed this morning. Apparently, Taggert knows her manager. What a fucking prick."

"Nothing he said was remotely true."

"Obviously not. Which is precisely why I'm looking forward to helping you kill him. Be there in ten minutes." He hangs up on me.

I start the truck, preparing to pull off. And then I hesitate, reaching for my phone again. I pull up Makenzie's number, sending her a single line.

You're marrying me.

It's not a question. I'm not asking. When this is over, she's marrying me.

Chapter Eleven



KENZIE

I turn to the left, flowing through one movement after another as Bianca snaps photo after photo. My mind is a million miles away, but I keep a smile on my face, pretending this is the best day of my life.

It feels a little like hell to me. Every time I lift my gaze, it's to find somewhere whispering about me. They've been doing it all damn day. It's turned the photoshoot into a disaster. I'm tense and distracted, and it shows in the photos.

I keep picture Lyle sitting at that desk in his video, his hands clasped, a fake, sympathetic look on his face. As if he regrets the words coming out of

his mouth, as if he truly believed them. We both know he didn't. Every word he said was a lie.

I've never wanted to run someone over with a tractor as much as I want to run him over. I hate that he's reduced me to that. He's winning without even realizing it. He probably thinks turning people against me is the true victory. It isn't. This is. Making me hate him is how he wins.

It's something I swore I'd never do, let someone harden my heart to point of hatred. Yet I feel it right now. And I feel it for him.

Lexie Colbert meets my gaze when I glance to the right, sneering at me. She's the same one who kept looking at Zion as if he should have been on her arm instead of mine at the fundraiser. She's been the worst today. Every time I look at her, she's giving me dirty looks.

This time, it shatters my already tenuous hold on professionalism. I trip over my own feet, nearly falling in a heap.

"Let's take five," Bianca suggests, her eyes full of empathy as she smiles at me. She's one of the only people here aside from Olive and Madden not treating me like I have a contagious disease.

"Thank you," I whisper, quickly stepping out from beneath the bright lights.

I no more make it to the sidelines before Olive and Madden are breathing down my neck again. I love them so much for caring. I know they're worried. But they've been hovering all day like they expect me to crack. It's stressing me out.

"I'll be right back," I mutter, slipping around them to hurry down the hall to the bathroom. As soon as I'm inside, I lean back against the door, inhaling a deep breath.

Tears well in my eyes, threatening to trickle over.

Keep it together, Makenzie. Keep it together.

I push away from the door, running cool water in sink. I splash a little on my neck, hoping that'll help. It doesn't. My mind and heart are still at war. Zion is out there somewhere right now, fighting my battles for me.

He shouldn't have to do that. Yet, he is.

What have I ever done to deserve him? I can't think of a single thing.

I give myself five minutes to wallow before I force myself to get my shit together again. I touch up my hair and blot oil from my face. Once I'm more or less put back together, I pull my phone out to check for messages from Zion. There's only one, sent right after he left.

Zion: You're marrying me.

A smile stretches across my face, laughter burbling from my lips. Somehow, he isn't even here, and he's still managed to find a way to make this day a million times better.

I quickly type a response before replacing the phone in my bra and stepping out of the bathroom, my burden lighter than it's been all day. I fully expect to find Olive waiting on the other side of the door.

She isn't.

I step out into the living room to find her under the lights in an arabesque as Bianca's assistant shifts her into place. Everyone else is on their phones, buzzing about something. God only knows what this time. Probably me again.

Madden crosses to me, taking up a position at my side.

"You stopped sending me the middle finger emoji. I almost sent the police to perform a welfare check on Zion."

I laugh quietly. He really is like an annoying older brother. Only, he makes my best friend glow. She's glowing now, dancing from one pose to the next,

as graceful as ever. She's always been beautiful, but since falling for Madden, she's lit from within.

Do people see the same thing when they look at me now?

I snort at the question, doubting it. All they see at the moment is the thieving trollop Lyle painted me to be.

"Ignore them, Kenz. Everyone who matters knows the truth."

He's not wrong, but that doesn't mean he's right either. My integrity is everything. People don't hire who they don't trust. And I'll never get where I'm trying to go if everyone believes Lyle's version of events.

I think he knows it, too. I think that's exactly why he decided to pos that video. He couldn't force me to pay him, so he'll force me out of business instead. That's what all of this is really about, isn't it? His greed. He sees me as a threat. And the more popular I become, the bigger of a threat he thinks I am to his bottom line.

The buzzing grows louder around us. I practically feel their gazes on me, boring into my back. God, I wish Zion were here. It doesn't matter how hard people stare when he's standing beside me. I don't notice anything but him. How can I when he consumes every thought in my mind?

"Oh, my God," someone blurts, loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Madden's phone rings at the same time, piercing through the room. He curses under his breath, yanking it from his pocket. Whatever he sees on the screen has him answering with a furrow between his brows instead of silencing it.

"What?" he says.

Someone behind me asks the same question.

"Lyle Taggert shot someone. It's all over social media."

I'm watching Madden's face as the girl behind me answers. I see what no

one else does—the split second of horror that flashes in his eyes before he's able to school it. And I know without even asking that Lyle didn't shoot someone.

He shot Zion.

The world goes dark, even ounce of light and warmth sucked out of it at once. I stumble, a broken cry tumbling from my lips as the ground rushes up to meet me.



"Move out of the fucking way," Madden growls, whipping around cars on the interstate as he rushes toward the hospital, trying to get me to Zion. I'm in the backseat with Olive, her hand clutched in mine so tightly I know it has to hurt.

I can't let her go, though. She's the only thing keeping me from falling to pieces right now. Zion's been shot, and I can't think. I can't breathe. All I see is the scars littering his body. All I hear are his words echoing in my mind.

That's the bullet that should have killed me. Instead, it took most of my hearing.

He survived once when he shouldn't have. What if...what if...

That question battles in my mind in an endless litany. What if he doesn't this time? What if Lyle killed him? What if I never see his face again or feel

his arms around me? What if my life ended in a mansion, surrounded by people who think the worst of me?

If he's gone, that's precisely when it happened. The moment I lost him.

There is no future for me without him in it. At least not one I want.

I realize right then and there, that I'm nothing like my mother, willing to sacrifice everything for any man who will have me. I'm not. But I'd give up every inch of my soul for one singular man, the only one capable of owning any part of me. It's impossible for me to be like her when there's nothing in this world I want more than *his* arms around me, his voice at my ear.

This isn't temporary or easily replaced. This is forever.

If he's gone...

"Please," I pray, tears leaking down my cheeks. "Please, God."

Olive sobs quietly beside me.

Madden blows through a yellow light outside the entrance to the hospital, taking the turn at breakneck speed. He drives right up to the doors at the ER.

I don't even wait for him to come to a complete stop before I'm jumping out. I rush inside with Olive right behind me, my heart in my throat.

"Zion Carmichael," I say, my voice shaking. "I n-need to see Zion Carmichael."

The receptionist—a middle aged woman with burnished copper hair, looks at me over the rim of her glasses. "You need to sign in."

"I need to see Zion."

Someone steps up beside me, casting a shadow over the desk. "Take her back," he growls, his voice so familiar it's eerie. I look up at him and know immediately that he's one of Zion's brothers. They look too much alike not to be related.

"Gideon?"

"Zayne," he says, his expression softening as he looks me over. "You're Kenzie?"

I nod, tears still spilling down my cheeks. I can't stop them. "Is...is he...?"

"Alive," Zayne says. "Though, fair warnin', I may kill him later."

The receptionist recoils.

"He's my little brother. I'm allowed," Zayne growls at her. "Let Kenzie back before he rips your entire ER apart."

"He's awake?"

Zayne nods. "Awake and mad as hell." His jaw tightens. "Taggart's right across the hall from him. Some genius thought bringing him here was a good idea."

The icicles growing in my veins begin to thaw, allowing me to draw a breath. Zion's alive. He's safe.

I won't believe it until I see him for myself.

"Go on back then," the receptionist mutters, clearly annoyed that we're not following her rules. The door to the back buzzes before slowly opening.

I glance at Olive.

"Go!" she cries.

I don't stop to ask directions. I run. I don't need the directions anyway. Between the police officers stationed outside his door and his booming voice, I have a roadmap leading right to him.

"I swear to Christ, if you don't get back in this bed right this instant, Zion Alaric Carmichael, I'm telling your father you growled at me."

"I don't need to be in the fucking bed, Ma. I want out of here."

"Don't curse at me."

I follow their voices, stumbling to a stop at the door to a trauma room. Zion's standing beside the bed without a shirt, weaving on his feet. Bandages

cover his left shoulder, streaking with blood. His mom's across from him, her hands planted on her hips as she glares at him. His other brother—Gideon—is sitting in a chair off to the side, watching the show.

I don't know if I make a sound or if Zion simply feels me there, but he looks up, those piercing green eyes locking on my face.

"Angel baby," he breathes.

I sink to my knees, sobbing.

"Ah, baby." Within moments, he's in front of me, pulling me onto his lap. His right arm comes around me, anchoring me to his body as he buries his face in my hair, holding me right there on the floor. "I'm here. I'm right here."

"I'm s-s-so mad at you!" I cry. "I thought you were dead, Zion. You c-can't ask me to m-marry you and then die!"

"I didn't ask, Makenzie. It wasn't a question. You're marrying me."

"Oh, dear," his mom whispers.

"Jesus Christ," his brother laughs.

"I thought I lost you." I press my face to his skin, breathing him in. Allowing him to absorb my tears and the weight of my emotions.

"Never," he growls. "Not for Lyle Taggart. Not for any goddamn reason. You're mine, angel baby. I love you."

"I love you too. So much, Zion. So much."

"Well, it's time for me to get the fuck out before this gets awkward," Gideon mutters.

"Take Ma with you."

"Your brother isn't taking me anywhere, Zion Alaric."

"Ma, please give me five minutes with my girl," he pleads quietly, not even lifting his face from my hair. "You can bug the shit out of her when I'm done."

"Fine. But I'm not doing it for you," his mom sniffs. "I'm only going because you need to get that sweet girl off the floor and apologize for making her cry."

"Yes, ma'am," Zion says immediately.

His mom huffs and then she and Gideon step around us, leaving us alone.

Zayne tucks a finger beneath my chin, tipping my head back to examine my face. "You're too beautiful to be crying over me, angel baby."

"Then you should have thought about that before you got yourself shot." My bottom lip quivers, more tears welling in my eyes. "I thought you were dead, Zion."

Pain flashes in his eyes, vast and bright. "You think anything on this earth could drag me away from you? Hell no, beautiful. I didn't fight to get you to fall for me just so I could leave you for some other motherfucker to scoop up. You're stuck with me." He runs the fingers of his right hand under my eyes, drying my tears. "You've cried enough because of that prick, Makenzie."

"Did you...?" I can't bring myself to ask if Zion shot him. I don't think I'm ready to face whatever consequences something like that brings screaming into reality.

"No," he says, allowing me to pull in a breath. "I didn't shoot him, and I left him breathing. Figured you'd want it that way."

"Good, then I can finish the job myself," I growl, trying to climb from his lap.

He drags me right back down onto him. "He was at your place again. I found him lurking in the backyard. I don't know what the fuck he was planning, but he came with a gun. You aren't going anywhere near him, not today or any other day."

"W-what did you do to him?"

"Taught him what it feels like to have someone put their hands on you against your will. The fucker shot me when I was walking away."

"And you didn't kill him?" I confirm, just to be sure.

"No, but it'll be a while before he's able to use either of his arms." A savage grin overtakes his face. "Or breathe through his nose. Or see out of his right eye." He brushes tendrils of hair away from my face. "I don't think he'll be a problem for anyone again. Not unless he shoves a phone up his ass to Tweet from a prison cell."

"Zion!"

"Just speaking facts, angel baby," he says with a shrug before hauling me closer to his chest. I bump his shoulder and he hisses through his teeth.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, my gaze falling to the bandages wrapped around him.

"Don't apologize to me, Makenzie. The bullet went straight through, and you weren't the one who shot me. Besides, it doesn't hurt nearly as much as my fucking cock right now." He lifts his hips slightly, pressing his erection against my ass. "Having you on my lap and not being able to do anything about it is the ninth circle of hell, beautiful."

I groan, falling forward to bury my face in his good shoulder. He catches me to him with a wicked laugh, holding me close to his heart as my own settles into a rhythm to match, feeling stronger than it's ever been.

We sit like that for several long moments before I remember the text I sent him.

"Oh!" I bound off his lap, looking for his phone. I give up after about two seconds. His room is a mess. Did he run the staff out of here before they were able to clean up? Why am I even asking that question? Of course he did.

"Where's your phone?"

"Ma has it. Why?"

I fish mine out of my dress. "You really should check your texts more," I say, handing it over to him. "I sent you one while you were getting shot."

"Damn." He snaps his fingers. "Next time, I'll ask for a time out so I can read it."

"Next time?"

He grins at me, taking the phone from my outstretched hands.

I stand silently, waiting for him to pull it up.

As soon as he does, he drops the phone, a growl rumbling in his throat.

Zion: You're marrying me.

Me: Make me.

"Oh, angel baby," he breathes, climbing to his feet with the devil in his eyes and a wicked smile on his lips. "You *really* shouldn't have sent that. This whole fucking hospital is about to hear me make you."

I shiver in anticipation as he pushes the door closed and stalks toward me, licking his lips.

"We can't have sex in here, Zion."

"I'm aware." He hooks his arm around me, hauling me up against his body. "But that doesn't mean I can't bend you over the side of this bed and make you come all over my fucking fingers, Makenzie. We both know how much you love when I take what I want, where I want. So be a good fucking girl and get that gorgeous ass in the air."

"Zion."

"Now, angel baby."

I don't tell him no. I never do.

Epilogue



ZION

Five Years Later

"Which one of you assholes drank my coffee?" I growl, stomping into the lobby where Zayne and Gideon are trying to hang our new sign.

"Was it the one with the cinnamon and whipped cream and caramel?" Zayne asks.

"Yes."

"No idea," he lies through his teeth. "Haven't even seen it."

Gideon's laughter booms through the lobby.

"Son of a bitch." I scowl at Zayne's back. "I was going to drink that."

"Don't know what you're talking about."

"Why the fuck can't you bring your own coffee? You pass four different shops on the way here every morning. Is it really that hard to pull in at one of them and place an order?"

"Apparently so," Gideon says. "He keeps drinking yours."

"It tastes better when it's his."

"That's called victory.

"It's called theft, you asshole."

"Oh, my God!" Makenzie cries. "Will the three of you please shut up about coffee already?" She jabs me in the ribs. "Especially you since it's your fault I can't have any."

"She's cranky," Zayne whispers to Gideon.

"You would be too if you had to wake up next to his ugly mug every morning."

"Good point."

I growl at my brothers, contemplating kicking the ladder out from beneath Zayne. It probably wouldn't kill him. I doubt the sign falling on Gideon's hard ass head would kill him either.

I decide not to do it just in case I'm wrong. Ma will kick my ass if I break either of their pea brains. They don't have brain cells to waste.

"I need your help in your office." Makenzie grabs my hand, practically dragging me out of the lobby.

"Fucking in the office isn't help, baby sister!" Gideon shouts after us. "It's precisely why you can't have coffee right now."

"Shut up! We're not having sex in the office!" she yells back, fighting a smile. She and my brothers get along incredibly well. They've treated her like part of the family since day one. I think they both decided they were keeping

her the minute they saw how distraught she was over me getting shot. She pretends she hates it when they call her baby sister, but we both know how much it means to her. We all do.

I think Ma would shiv me for her. No lie. She absolutely adores my girl, and my girl feels the same way about my mom. They're thick as thieves. Which means I don't get away with anything. Makenzie will absolutely run to my mom to tattle just to see Ma giving me nine kinds of hell.

I drive her up the fucking wall intentionally some days, just so she can tell on me. Nothing makes me happier than seeing my wife happy. She deserves every fucking minute of it. I'll do whatever I have to do to give it to her. I'm shameless when it comes to her. I always have been, and I always will be.

Her mother isn't part of our lives. I put an end to that shit the first time she came to visit. Makenzie was a nervous wreck for an entire week leading up to the visit. She couldn't sleep. She barely ate. I already disliked the woman, but the minute she opened her mouth and asked my wife if she'd gained weight, it was over with.

I don't owe respect to people who can't respect my wife. I don't give a fuck if the woman did give birth to her. It's the only thing she ever did right by my girl. I dropped her off at a hotel and told her she wasn't welcome in our home until she learned some fucking manners.

Makenzie doesn't miss her. I think she grieved her relationship with her mom a long time ago. She's happier without that annual visit hanging over her head. Now, Christmas is something she looks forward to, a time when she's surrounded by people who love her exactly the way she is.

Her life is full of people like that now. Not just me and my family, but Olive and Madden, and the friends she's made along the way. If people initially didn't know who to believe, they sided with her as soon as Lyle shot

me. I think most were already inclined to believe her. She is who she is, and he was who he was.

He didn't survive prison. Surprisingly, he didn't die in a prison brawl, either. He choked to death in his cell on a can of sausages. The irony wasn't lost on me. It was precisely the way he deserved to go.

No one grieved him, and no one misses him?

But Makenzie? If anything were to happen to her, she'd leave a crater of devastation behind. My life doesn't work without her in it. She's the sun around which me and our twin boys revolve. I can't even fucking think about a life without her in it without wanting to rip my own damn skin off.

I need her to survive. It's really that simple. I need her.

She pulls me into the office, slamming the door behind her.

"If we aren't having sex in here, what the fuck are we doing, angel baby?" I ask, eyeing her curiously.

"I lied." She rips her shirt off over her head. "We're totally having sex in here. You owe me orgasms. It's the least you can do for knocking me up again." She glances at the clock hanging over my desk. "And you better hurry. I have to pick up the twins in thirty minutes."

"Call Emma and tell her you're going to be late."

"I'm not going to be late."

"Yeah, you are. Because we both know one orgasm isn't going to satisfy you." I work my belt free with one hand, my cock already hard. "If I give you one, you're going to want another. And if I give you two, you know damn well I'm going to keep going. Pick up the phone, angel baby."

"Fine," she huffs, spinning to grab it from my desk.

I strip her naked while she's dialing. Before Emma even answers, I've got my mouth on her. What? I left her mouth free so she could talk. That's all she

needs for a phone call.

"Late!" she squeaks to our sister-in-law. "I'm going to be late!"

"Are you okay?"

"F-f-fine. I'm fine!"

I pry her cheeks apart, allowing me to get closer to heaven. Her head thumps against the desk.

"Oh, my God. I'm going to be so late!" She slams the phone down before Emma can say anything else, the waves of her first orgasm already breaking over her.

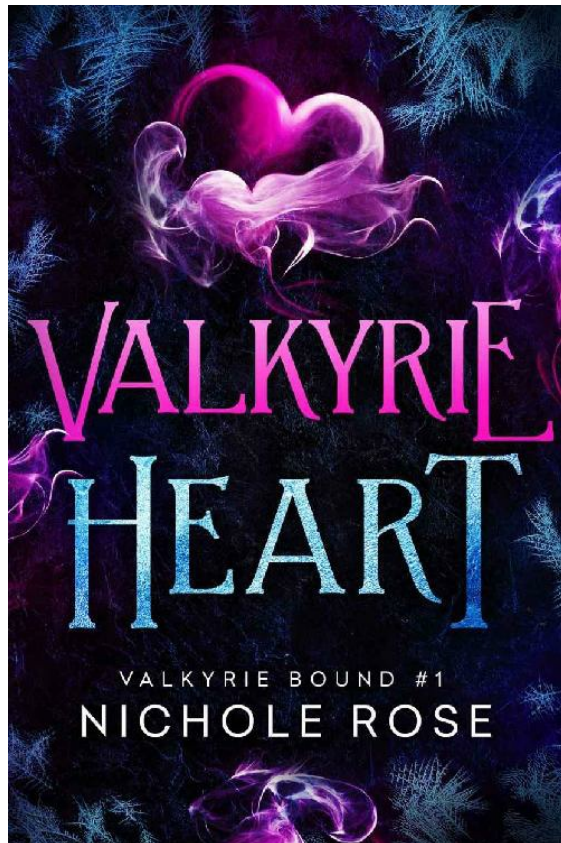
I smile against her folds and set to work.

Author's Note

Ready to watch the final brother fall for his Songbird? Gideon and Kenna's story releases in February. You can pre-order it [here!](#)

Madden and Olive's steamy story. Dear Mr. Dad Bod, is now available!

Valkyrie Heart



Valhalla is rising...and so are its enemies. Luckily, this Valkyrie is bound to an ancient Fae warrior.

Rissa

My entire life, I've been different. I've felt things I shouldn't. Heard things that weren't there. But those whispers never led me astray until my twenty-first birthday. The handsome stranger I met at the bar seemed innocent enough...until I woke up in his bed with no recollection of how I got there.

He says I'm not who I think I am, and that I'm in danger. The craziest part? The more time I spend with him, the more I want to believe it when he says he belongs to me. But my life isn't a fairytale, and places like Valhalla, mate bonds, and ancient Fae warriors don't exist...do they?

Dax

I've been mostly dead for millennia and still can't stand the sound of silence. It's too peaceful. Too still. I was born for war. But when Rissa's soul calls to mine, I realize that maybe peace isn't so bad after all. If it means keeping her safe, I'll lay my weapons down in a heartbeat.

But fate has other plans. Now, I'll do whatever it takes to protect the woman who owns my soul. Even if it means letting Valhalla fall forever.

Valkyrie Heart is the first book in the Valkyrie Bound series of interconnected standalones. Each book features a new couple. If you enjoy scorching paranormal romance, fierce protective Fae warriors, and strong, curvy heroines, you'll love the Valkyrie Bound series.

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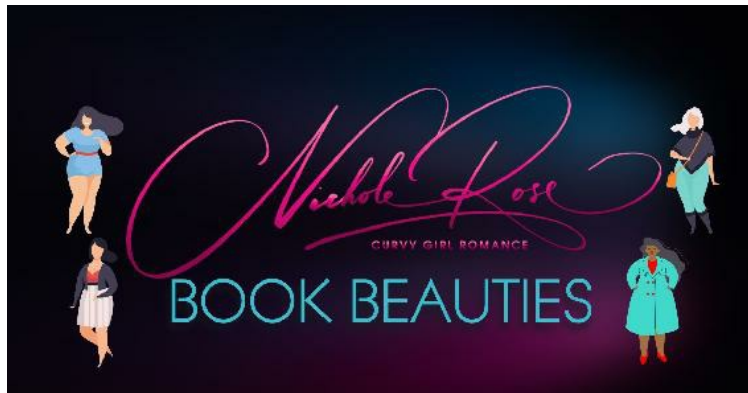


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Snow's Prince

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writing with Loni Ree as Loni Nichole

Dillon's Heart

Razor's Flame

Ryker's Reward

Zane's Rebel

Oral Arguments

Grizz's Passion

Garrett's Obsession

About Nichole Rose



Three-time award-winning author Nichole Rose writes filthy romance for curvy readers. Her books feature headstrong, sassy women and the alpha males who consume them. From grumpy detectives to country boys with attitude to instalove and over-the-top declarations, nothing is off-limits.

Nichole is sure to have a steamy, sweet story just right for everyone. She fully believes the world is ugly enough without trying to fit falling in love into a one-size-fits-all box.

When not writing, Nichole enjoys fine wine, cute shoes, and everything supernatural. She is happily married to the love of her life and is a proud

mama to the world's most ridiculous fur-babies. She and her husband live in Arkansas.

You can learn more about Nichole and her books at authornicholeroose.com.

