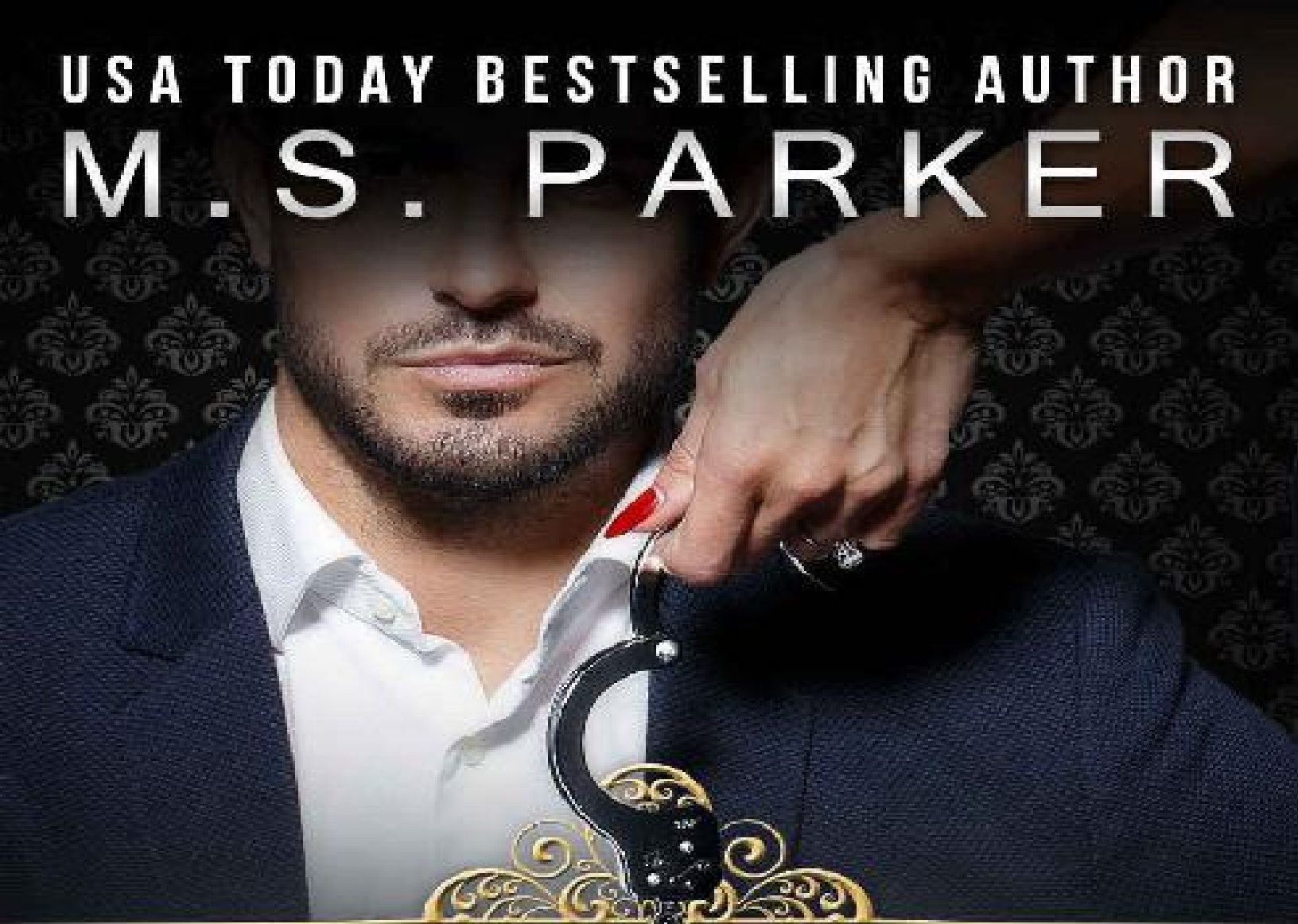


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
M.S. PARKER



MAKE ME
YOURS

*"I wasn't sure how it happened but accidentally
I became his Sub."*



MAKE ME YOURS

The Billionaire's Sub 2

M. S. PARKER

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MAKE ME YOURS

M. S. PARKER

Chapter One

HANNA

I heard him moving around the room but kept my eyes down, my hands clasped behind my back. The cool air caressed my bare skin, making my nipples tighten even harder than they already were. I'd been kneeling like this for only a few minutes, but in the playroom, time seemed to stretch and bend in all sorts of ways. There weren't any clocks in here because when it was time to play, Cross always made sure we didn't have anything else planned for the remainder of the day.

He liked to take his time.

It was hard to believe that we'd been together for nearly five months. I'd come to Hollywood to get some distance from my parents and to spend time with my older sister, Juliette, but I hadn't planned on staying. Not exactly, anyway. All I'd known was that I hadn't wanted to go back to Zanesville, Ohio to spend the rest of my life managing the family business and taking a backseat to my perfect brother, RJ.

Then I'd met Cross Phillips, the thirty-year-old billionaire who'd introduced me to the BDSM lifestyle and stolen my heart. I'd been attracted to him from the first time I met him, and his presence during my sister's abduction had only solidified my feelings for him. Four months ago, after my sister had been found safe and the people responsible were in jail, Cross had given me a collar.

Though I was still new to the lifestyle, I understood the level of commitment that came when a Dom gave a Sub a collar. It was a mark of ownership. Not like some freaky sex slave thing where he controlled every aspect of my life, but rather a way of letting others in that world know that I

was taken.

That collar, a delicate silver choker designed to look enough like a necklace that I could wear it in public, was the only thing I had on at the moment. I wore it as often as I could, even if it didn't always look right with what I was wearing. He hadn't asked me to keep it on all the time, but I loved watching his slate gray eyes light up when he saw me with it on, especially when he hadn't asked for it.

Today, however, he'd sent me a bouquet of irises – my favorite flower – with a card that had given me clear instructions. Well, clear to me anyway.

Put on my favorite outfit as soon as you get to my place. I have a special evening planned.

I'd spent the rest of the day at work completely distracted, my pussy throbbing in anticipation. I knew all too well the sorts of decadent things that awaited me in Cross's playroom.

Even though I still technically lived with my sister, I spent enough time at his house to have space for my own clothes. I also had my own key. I used it to let myself in after work, then I'd done as he'd asked.

His favorite “outfit” was my collar. Nothing more.

So when he'd arrived home, I'd been waiting in the middle of the living room, wearing only the thin chain.

There were times when Cross wanted me hard and fast, but tonight would be one of those times he dragged things out. We'd eaten dinner with him only removing his jacket, tie, and shoes. I was completely naked. When we'd finished, we cleaned up, and only then had he touched me. Barely a brush of his lips against mine, but it was my signal – we were about to begin.

That had been ten minutes ago, and I was starting to get impatient. Cross could be demanding at times, but when he decided he wanted to take things slow, nothing could change his mind. I'd tried in the past and had ended up getting spanked hard enough to make sitting at work the next day decidedly uncomfortable.

So I waited, listening to him moving around the room, getting things ready for whatever it was he had planned. I couldn't see him, but I could picture him clearly. His tall, muscular frame. Unruly white-blond hair. A classically handsome face that was a touch too rugged to be pretty. And a dimple that made me go weak in the knees when he smiled. Hell, just looking at him was enough to make my legs lose their strength.

I felt him before his feet entered my line of sight. When I saw his bare

legs, I knew he'd stripped, and my stomach clenched. As gorgeous as he looked in everything he wore, his nude form was the sort of thing artists would fight over. I desperately wanted to look up, to let my gaze travel up his muscular legs to that narrow waist and all the deliciousness in between, but I knew I had to wait for his permission.

“Look at me.”

I almost sighed in relief. For me, the anticipation was always the worst part. Well, that, and when he wouldn't let me touch him. I hated that.

When I raised my eyes, I took my time, savoring every inch of tanned skin, toned muscle. By the time I reached his face, my pulse had quickened, my breathing increased. When my gaze met his, I almost forgot to breathe.

“Open.” The command was ragged, telling me that this wouldn't be some gentle sensation play or a bit of bondage. Cross wanted more, and I wanted whatever he would give me.

I opened my mouth, clenching my hands as I fought the urge to touch him. When the head of his cock slipped between my parted lips, I shivered. He ran his fingers through my wild curls, fisting them as his heavy shaft slid across my tongue. My hair had grown a bit since we'd first been together, mostly because he liked holding it, pulling it. I liked it too.

“Put a hand on my hip,” he ordered.

I obeyed, keeping my other hand behind my back. I knew what was coming, but he said it anyway. That's how we did things. He'd tell me what he planned to do, giving me the chance to use my safe word. I hadn't used it yet, probably because he always prepared me, but he loved taking me to the edge of my comfort zone, and then giving the smallest of nudges.

I also loved listening to his voice describing all of the things he wanted to do, he was going to do.

“Two taps on my hip if you can't say your safe word,” he instructed. “Nod if you understand.”

It wasn't easy to nod with a mouthful of cock, but I managed. My tongue twitched against him, eager to explore.

“I'm going to fuck your mouth.” It sounded almost conversational, the way he said it. “Create some suction, but don't do anything else.”

I nodded again to show that I understood. Then his hand tightened in my hair, and he began to move. He started slow, gauging how far I could take him. I took slow breaths through my nose, then felt the urge to gag as the tip of him reached the back of my throat. My fingers curled into his hip, and he

paused. When I didn't tap out, he kept going, holding my head in place as I automatically struggled against him as he went deeper.

“Relax, baby,” he murmured. “You can do it, I know you can.”

Some part of my mind still wanted to argue when he said things like that, but I knew he had a sixth sense for this sort of thing, for knowing what I could handle, for just how much he could test my limits. So I let him fill me completely, let him hold me there for several seconds before pulling out. I coughed and gasped, feeling a burning in my throat, but when his cock brushed my lips again, I didn't even hesitate.

This time, he wasn't so easy, but he also didn't go as far. Instead, he held my head tight and rocked his hips, thrusting in my mouth with shallow, brisk strokes. I had no control, could do nothing but suck on him as he fucked my mouth, but I never once considered ending it. I trusted him. He was in control, but I had the power, and that dynamic was what made us work.

Without warning, he pulled out and took a step back. “Up.”

I stood, panting hard as I tried to calm my breathing. He handed me a towel to wipe my face and then gestured toward the bed.

“Bend over, hands on the bed, feet shoulder width apart.”

I obeyed, the cool air brushing the wet skin between my legs.

“I told you once that a skilled Dom could make a Sub come with a flogger.”

I closed my eyes. Shit. He had talked about it, but I'd never really paid much attention since the conversations usually took place during moments like these. The entire time we'd been together, he'd stuck to using his hand when he spanked me.

“Now I'll show you how it's done.”

I heard the sound of a drawer opening, closing, then a gentle swishing. I jumped when the strips of leather touched me, even though he was only running them up and down my spine, my ass. I gasped as he moved them up between my legs, rubbing against me until I was moaning deep in my chest.

Then it was gone. I barely had time to process it before he brought the flogger down again, with force this time. It didn't hurt, exactly, not even as much as his hand did, but a warm, tingling feeling spread across my skin. Three more strikes came down in quick succession, alternating cheeks.

I yelped as the fourth blow came up between my legs. It wasn't hard at all, but the sensation was different from anything I'd felt before. The next one made me shudder. The next stung. He switched to my ass, then back to my

pussy. Back and forth, he increased the intensity of the strikes until each one had a bite of pain with the pleasure.

“Spread your lips.”

I bit my bottom lip to hold in a whimper, but I moved one hand beneath me and used my fingers to hold myself open. My skin was hot under my fingers, more sensitive to my touch than it had ever been.

I closed my eyes and braced myself for what I knew was coming next.

The jolt of pain was immediately followed by a burst of white-hot pleasure. When the second one landed, I came. My head fell forward, my body tensing, shuddering through the bliss. A strong arm wrapped around my waist, holding me up for a moment before turning me over and sliding me back onto the bed. I whimpered as my ass rubbed against the expensive sheets. I was on fire.

Cross held my legs apart as he followed me onto the bed. My back arched, a cry coming from my lips as he ran his tongue over the sensitive, burning flesh between my legs. He tossed my thighs over his shoulders and began to use his mouth to soothe me. I writhed against him, dug my fingers into the sheets to keep from touching his head, from holding him against me while he drove me to a second, then third orgasm.

I was still shaking when he flipped me over. His hands, slick with a cool lotion, moved over my ass, easing the sting and burn. When he spread my cheeks, I waited for a probing finger, but what I felt teasing my hole was something else.

His tongue.

He'd talked to me about wanting to do this, but up until now, it'd only been talk. My eyelids fluttered as he worked his tongue over the rim of muscle, then past it. I moaned as a finger joined in, sliding in and out with a slow, steady rhythm. His free hand moved under me, pulling me up so that my ass was in the air and my head stayed on the sheets. After three orgasms, my muscles protested even the slightest effort, but I managed to hold myself up as he added a second finger.

“Where do you want me?” Cross asked as he ran his hand up my stomach to cup one of my breasts. He rolled my nipple between his thumb and forefinger, then gave it a sharp tug. “Do you want my cock in your ass or in your cunt?”

My brain could barely make sense of the words, much less give an answer. At this point, I didn't care. I just wanted to feel him inside me.

“Let me be more specific,” he said as he shoved a third finger into me. “One hole gets my cock. The other will be filled with a new toy. I'm giving you the choice of what you want where, but if you don't answer, I'll place a plug in your ass, a vibrator in your cunt, and they'll stay there all night while you suck me off every time I get hard.” He leaned over me, three fingers in my ass and his cock hard against my thigh. “So what's it going to be? Where do you want my cock?”

For one terrifying moment, I thought I wouldn't be able to answer, and I'd spend the rest of the night begging for relief. I finally managed to blurt out the first word that popped into my head. “Ass.”

“Good girl.” He pulled his fingers out, and a shudder ran through me at the sudden loss. “Let's get that new toy ready. And no peeking.”

Less than a minute later, cool, hard silicone slid along my slit, teasing my entrance before the head breached me, spreading me wide. A strangled sort of sound came out of me as Cross worked the toy inside. It wasn't smooth like the other toys he'd used. This one had bumps and ridges that rubbed and pressed against my walls as he pushed it into me. And it was big. Easily as big as Cross, and that was saying something. My legs shook as it filled me, one of the bumps pressing against my g-spot as it settled into place.

“How does that feel?” He ran his hand over my back.

All I could manage was a moan. He chuckled, that low, sensual sound that I loved so much.

“I'm going to fuck your ass,” he said matter-of-factly as he ran his hands over my hips. “Come as many times as you want, babe, but make sure you scream my name every time.”

Some people might've thought that was a joke, but I'd learned that if he said to scream his name, he meant it. If he felt me come and I didn't do what he said, I'd be punished later.

When he slowly pushed his way inside me, I didn't scream his name, but I did scream, pressing my face to the pillow to muffle the sound. He'd used his fingers and a thin butt plug at the same time as his cock before, but I'd never had two things that size inside me at the same time. I felt like I was being ripped apart, but it wasn't all pain. His movement made the toy inside me shift and rub against my g-spot, coaxing pleasure into my tortured nerves.

He stopped for a moment once he was completely inside, but I knew it was for his own benefit rather than mine. He wanted me to come, wanted to bring me pleasure, but he wanted it done his way. And tonight, that meant

rough.

As he began to move, each stroke moving the other shaft as well, I had a moment to remember that there'd been a time when I hadn't realized that I liked things rough, kinky, but now, I couldn't imagine my sex life without it.

Then Cross was pounding into me hard enough to drive the air from my lungs, and I didn't think about anything but the way he made me feel. The pressure inside me was building fast, and before I knew it, I was coming again. I didn't have enough breath to scream, but I managed to get his name out.

“That's my girl,” he said as he pinched my nipple.

I made a squeaking sound that made him laugh, and the vibrations went right through me, pushing me toward yet another climax. This one would be the end of me, I knew. I could barely move, barely breathe. I wondered if I passed out this time, if he'd excuse me for not being able to say a word.

He twisted my nipple hard enough to make my body jerk, jostling the shaft in my pussy. Then his fingers were on my swollen clit, the pressure and friction almost painful, and I came again. I managed a scream this time, repeating his name over and over as his fingers moved relentlessly over my clit, each pass in time with a thrust into my ass. I was still coming when I felt him jerk against me, felt the hot liquid of his cum, his cock pulsing as it emptied.

He curled around me as we both slumped down on the bed. For the moment, neither of us was willing, or able, to move, but I didn't mind. His arms were around me and that was all that mattered.

Chapter Two

HANNA

To say that I was sore from the prior night's activities would have been a massive understatement. Most of my body felt like I'd been involved in some sort of marathon. My pussy and ass both ached in that deep, throbbing way that only came with having had a good, hard fuck. I didn't regret any of it for a second, but it would definitely be distracting at work today.

The way my sister's light violet eyes were dancing as I walked into the apartment said that she knew not only how I felt, but what it had taken to get me there. It wasn't surprising considering Juliette was a much-sought-after Dominatrix, and she'd been doing it long enough to recognize how thoroughly I'd been fucked last night...and again in the shower this morning.

Though we were five years apart, Juliette and I almost looked like twins. We had the same eyes, nearly the same shade of black hair. We were both tall and curvy – though she had a few inches on me in height – and we both had our mother's fine features. When Juliette left Ohio eight years ago, I'd still been in that awkward stage of puberty, but by the time I'd come to California this past summer, the resemblance was enough that people often mistook me for her.

In fact, Cross had done just that. When he'd first approached me, he thought I was Juliette and wanted to know if I'd consider Subbing for him. That's how I'd discovered the lifestyle my sister was a part of. The mistaken identity had made things a bit awkward at first, but he'd quickly made it clear that once he knew who I was, my sister had never crossed his mind again.

“Damn,” Juliette said with a grin. “I hope you have enough time to

recover before you see Mom and Dad because if you show up looking like that, with Cross on your arm, Dad will have his head...or other body parts I'm sure you're equally fond of."

"Thanks." I let the sarcasm drip from the words. "That's exactly what I needed to hear to make myself less anxious about taking Cross home for Thanksgiving."

"You don't have to go, you know," Juliette said as she poured us both glasses of juice. "We could spend Thanksgiving together."

"Or you could come too," I suggested as I slid into the seat across from her. I picked up one of the cheese wedges she'd set out. "You haven't been home in years."

"This is home," Juliette said firmly. "Not Zanesville. That hasn't been home for me in a long time."

"Mom and Dad would love to see you," I said, hoping guilt would turn her to my side.

She gave me a skeptical look. "Come on, Hanna, we both know better than that. Mom and Dad love me, I know, but they've never forgiven me for leaving."

"Maybe with me moving out here too, they're realizing that it doesn't mean we don't love them," I suggested.

"Or maybe they'll be more upset with me because I corrupted you," she countered.

The sad thing was, she had a point. That did sound like the more likely response from our parents. The only one in the family who could never do any wrong was our brother, RJ. His favoritism had been clear enough growing up, and it had only gotten worse when he'd stayed in the area to go to trade school, then gone right into full-time employment in the family auto mechanics business. He'd married his high school sweetheart and even bought the house next door to where we'd grown up. It'd been hard on Juliette growing up with perfect Raymond Jr as a little brother, but being three years younger than him was even worse because I was always in his shadow. No matter how well I did in school, or what accomplishments I achieved, nothing was ever as good as what RJ did.

Then I'd done the unthinkable and joined Juliette on the West Coast. Our parents weren't some backward hicks who thought California was hedonism incarnate, but they did think that family should always come first, which to them meant staying in Ohio and working at the shop under Dad and RJ.

“You'll have to tell me how they react to Cross,” Juliette said as she pulled her ebony hair back from her face.

“Yeah, it should be interesting,” I said and looked down at my glass. Lunch at home on a Saturday meant I could've had a glass of wine and not felt guilty, but I'd drink what Juliette gave me. I could probably use the extra vitamins anyway.

“What's wrong?” She reached across the table and put her hand on my arm. “You guys didn't have a fight or anything, did you? I mean, you look like you enjoyed yourself last night.”

My face warmed. “I did. And I love him...” I let the sentence trail off.

“But?” she prompted.

“Nothing.” I shook my head.

“Hanna.”

She sounded like our mother when she said my name that way. Not that I'd ever tell her that.

“He never really talks about the future. I mean a week or two, maybe a month if there's something that needs long-term planning, but he never makes any comments that make me believe he's thinking about us long term.” I ran my hand through my hair. “Not even something off the cuff, like saying something about a trip in the spring or what he might want to do over some holiday in the future.”

“You're worried he doesn't want a traditional relationship.” She summed it up quite neatly.

I nodded and took another sip of my drink. “I mean, I have no problem with the sex stuff.” My face blazed with heat. “I like it. And we've both said 'I love you,' so I know he's not hung up on that.”

“But you want more.”

I sighed. “I just want to know that there's a possibility of more. There doesn't have to be a timetable, and it's not like I'm asking to move in with him tomorrow, but I want to know that he sees a future for us.”

My sister's face was uncharacteristically somber. “Then you need to talk to him, Hanna. One of the things that both Cross and I told you about the Dom / Sub relationship is true in any relationship. Communication. You have to tell him how you feel.”

“I just don't want him to think I'm coming on too strong, that I'm trying to get him to move fast.”

The side of Juliette's mouth twitched up in a partial smile. “Hanna,

sweetie, the two of you went from nothing to lovers in a matter of days. I think the ship for 'too fast' has already sailed.”

She had a point. Granted, the circumstances surrounding those first few days had been unique, but we hadn't backtracked.

“What if he doesn't want any of that?” My heart thudded painfully even as I asked the question.

“Isn't it better to know now?” she asked softly. “Just talk to him. I've seen the way he looks at you. I'm sure he's just assuming you two will be together, and that he didn't have to bother making any sort of statement. He is a man, after all, and we both know they don't always communicate well when it comes to things like that.”

I nodded and told myself that she was right. I needed to talk to Cross, and it would probably all just be some big misunderstanding. I'd feel silly, but we'd keep moving on with our relationship and everything would happen at the right time.

“You know,” I said, giving her my best little sister look. “It would make things a lot easier if Cross wasn't alone in the family crossfire all week.”

Juliette's eyes narrowed.

“Come on, Jul. You don't have to go early like me and Cross, but you could fly in Wednesday night, then back out on Friday or on the weekend. If we're both there, we can share all the shit Mom and Dad dish out.”

She glared at me, then stabbed viciously at a piece of cheese. “You can be such a brat sometimes.”

I grinned at her. “But you love me and you know it.”

She sighed. “I do, and I suppose that means I'm going home for Thanksgiving.”

I squealed and threw myself across the table to hug her. While not completely gone, knowing that Juliette would be there eased a lot of the anxiety in me. Now, if I just got things settled with Cross, everything would be perfect.

Chapter Three

CROSS

I was born into a family who still believed in the hard-working ideals that our immigrant ancestors had brought over with them when they'd first come to this country. My father had started showing me the ropes of the family business as soon as I was able to understand the concepts. I'd worked internships in all the various branches from the time I was twelve, and I was only paid what a regular employee at the same level would get. I knew what it was like to have to prove myself to people who only thought of me as a spoiled rich kid. When I was twenty-two, my parents were both killed in a plane crash and I had to take over the rest of the family business even though the board believed I was too young.

I knew what it was like to have to prove myself to people over and over again, knew what it was like to have people judge me by how I looked, who they thought I was. And I never cared about any of it. I knew who I was, knew that I'd worked my ass off to be where I was. That nothing had been handed to me. I'd earned everything. I wasn't worried about being liked or impressing anyone.

Until now.

Hanna and I were on my private jet, heading to Zanesville for Thanksgiving, and I'd never been more nervous in my life. I'd spoken in front of billionaire CEOs, negotiated deals with world-class assholes, and done business in some unsavory places. I'd bluffed my way in contract negotiations and dined with world leaders. All of it had been thrilling, just another form of an adrenaline rush. But the thought of meeting Hanna's family scared the shit out of me.

I'd never met the parents of any woman I'd ever been with. Well, except my high school girlfriend, but I'd technically known her parents before we'd gone on our first date. I hadn't done the whole holiday family thing with them though. Every woman after that, however, had been merely sexual partners. The only exception to that rule – until Hanna – had been the woman who'd introduced me to the BDSM world, but while she'd been more than a simple partner, she was a loner like me. No outside attachments. No “coming home to meet the folks.”

I wasn't even sure I knew how to act around a family anymore. It'd been eight years since my parents died, and my social skills in those sorts of situations were rusty. I'd met Juliette, of course, and had spent plenty of time with her in the past few months, but that was different. She was like me, so I understood how to talk to her. We knew a lot of the same people, both in the BDSM world and in Hollywood society.

Raymond and Caroline Breckenridge, however, were unknown entities. They were business people, but their family business and mine were completely different. Their lives were different. I didn't think I was better than them, or above them. I just had no idea how to interact with them.

“Cross.”

Judging by how Hanna was saying my name, she'd said it more than once. I forced a smile as I turned to look at her. “Sorry, babe, I was just thinking.”

She raised an eyebrow and put her hand on my arm. “You look like you're about to go to your execution. I know Ohio isn't exactly California, but it's not like it's the ninth circle of hell.”

That managed to get a partial smile out of me, but at least it was a real one this time. “Only the third, right?”

She laughed, and the sound went right through me. After my first girlfriend and I broke up, I'd only been with experienced women, ones who knew what they wanted and how they wanted it. Hanna, however, was a rare combination of innocence and an insatiable sexual appetite. When she smiled or laughed, her face lit up, and she didn't try to hide it.

“Look, I know Juliette and I don't always talk about our parents in the most glowing of terms, but they're good people.” Hanna reached up and ran her fingers through my hair.

My cock gave an interested twitch. Damn, I loved it when she did that.

“There's the usual difficulties that come with kids following their own path, but they've always wanted what's best for us.”

Now I wasn't sure who she was trying to convince, me or herself.

“They'll love you,” she said firmly. “I'm sure of it.”

She leaned over and kissed my cheek. My stomach clenched, and I knew what I needed to relax, to get my head back together. I grasped her chin and ran my thumb along her bottom lip. Her irises darkened to an even deeper shade of violet as I pressed my thumb into her mouth.

Arousal spiked in me as she sucked on my thumb, scraped the pad with her teeth. I gave her a hard look, and she nodded, acknowledging that she understood what I wanted. What I needed.

“On your knees.” My voice was hoarse. I was suddenly glad that I only had one steward on the plane and that he stayed in the cockpit with the captain unless I called for him.

She slid to the floor in front of me. Her hands rested on my knees, moving them apart as she settled between them. She knew where this would end up, but she still waited for me to give her instructions.

“Unbutton your shirt.”

She was wearing a nice but not overly dressy blouse, and underneath, her bra was simple white cotton. Still, the sight of her full breasts encased in the garment was sexier than expensive lingerie would've been on someone else.

“Unhook your bra.”

I swallowed a groan as she flicked open the front clasp, freeing her breasts. Her nipples were already starting to harden, the pale skin on her chest flushing.

“Now, undo my pants.”

I ran my fingers through her silky curls as her hands reached for the waist of my pants. By the time she had them undone and unzipped, my cock was straining against the black cotton of my boxer briefs. Her tongue darted out, wetting her bottom lip.

“You're going to make me come,” I instructed. “And you're going to swallow every last drop.” I gave her curls a tug. “After all, we don't want to leave a mess for the nice steward to have to clean up, do we?”

She shook her head.

“And if you do a good job, I'll let you get yourself off while I watch.”

Her eyes widened, and she swallowed hard. I knew, for her, it would be both a punishment and a reward. This wasn't exactly public, but she knew there was always a possibility that the steward would come back in the middle of whatever we were doing. Her only other option, however, would be

to suffer her arousal through the rest of the day, including meeting her parents. And I knew Hanna's appetite was such that it'd be difficult for her to just ignore it.

She reached for me, freeing my cock enough to get her mouth on it. I kept my hand on her head, but let her control the pace and depth. Sometimes I enjoyed pushing her physical limits, but right now was more about giving us both what we needed to relax and pushing her comfort limits. I wasn't into exhibitionism, and the thought of anyone getting to see Hanna in any sort of sexual manner pissed me off, but I did enjoy the thrill of the possibility.

When her mouth and tongue began to work over me, I didn't think about anything else. I closed my eyes and let my head rest against the chair. Before Hanna, I'd always thought that having a sexually experienced woman was preferable because she'd already know the best ways to give pleasure. Now, I understood the appeal of molding someone inexperienced but enthusiastic. I was the only man Hanna had ever gone down on, so I'd been able to teach her exactly what I liked.

And she was using it all now. The pressure of her tongue, the slight scrape of teeth. The amount of suction she used, and how she varied it. The way she moved her hand on the part that she couldn't take into her mouth.

It wasn't long until I was tapping her head, letting her know that I was close. I'd told her to swallow it all, but I wasn't rude enough to surprise her.

I opened my eyes as my balls tightened and the first spurt of semen raced for release. She was looking at me as I came, her gaze never leaving mine. The anxiety drained out of me as Hanna held me in her mouth, milking out every last drop, until I began to soften and the stimulation became too much.

“Your turn,” I said and jerked my chin toward the chair across from me.

Flushing a pretty pink, she sat down with her legs spread, hiking her skirt up high enough for me to see everything. Her panties were soaked, and as she slid them aside, I briefly considered getting myself hard again just so I could sink into that wet heat. I dismissed the thought almost immediately though. Watching her slip two fingers into her pussy as her thumb moved over her clit was definitely turning me on, and I was pretty sure I'd be at least half-hard before she finished, but I knew that we didn't have the time for anything more.

“That's it, baby,” I murmured as she arched against her hand, her breasts jutting out from her chest. “I want to see you come on your hand.”

Her free hand went to her breast, fingers tugging on her nipple the way I

knew she liked. She might blush, and even be a bit nervous when it came to new things, but she was never shy about enjoying sex. That was one of the things I loved the most about her. Her responses were always genuine. I never worried that she was faking or being overly enthusiastic. She let herself go when it came to sex, and she was glorious.

“Come on, baby. Let me see you come. I want those nipples hard and aching the rest of the day. I want you to feel your arousal on your thighs even as you remember the taste of me.”

She bit her bottom lip as her body stiffened. Her eyes closed, her expression going slack as she came. A shiver ran through her body as I tucked my half-erect cock back into my pants. When she was ready, I'd have her leave her panties in the bathroom with the towels. I'd be able to focus on being the perfect boyfriend if I knew my reward was having her bare underneath that skirt.

I took a slow breath. I could do this.

Chapter Four

HANNA

I'd told my parents that I was bringing my boyfriend, and I'd filled them in a bit about who he was, but that hadn't stopped them from being surprised when we pulled up to the house in our rental car. Cross had picked out one of the luxury cars, of course, so as soon as we parked, my dad and brother were checking it out. And if that wasn't enough, Mom had voiced her surprise over our timing since flights from California didn't generally get in until later. Her mouth had fallen open when Cross mentioned that we'd taken his private jet.

The rest of the night became all about grilling Cross over his family background and business practices, while still managing to slide in little digs about Juliette and me leaving the family business. And when it hadn't been those comments, it'd been about how my sister and I hadn't yet started having families, though they did congratulate me on at least having a boyfriend.

The next two days were full of similar events and conversations. Dad and RJ would take Cross to the shop and ask his opinion about various matters of business while Dad made a point of showing how skilled RJ was. Not that my brother wasn't good at his job. He'd always been mechanically inclined. I could check tire pressure, check the oil, and maybe point out a few important parts under the hood, but that was about it. I didn't look down on what my family did, but it always annoyed me when my parents felt the need to emphasize RJ's abilities while downplaying my own.

I didn't go into the shop, but rather stayed in the house with Mom and my sister-in-law as we prepared for Thanksgiving dinner. Abbie, of course, was a great cook. While she occasionally helped out with the phones and

scheduling part of the business, she'd always been a housewife with intentions of becoming a stay-at-home mom. She was another case of me appreciating and respecting her choices, but my parents wouldn't stop comparing the two of us so that she came out ahead.

For example, when I told them that Cross had been teaching me to cook so I could make a side dish, Mom had given me that patronizing laugh of hers and told me not to worry about it. "Stick to what you're good at. You'd be a huge help if you just cut the vegetables for the veggie tray and made sure we have all of the condiments we need." My usual job at family gatherings. "If you think you can do that without cutting yourself."

By the time Juliette texted me to say that her flight would arrive Wednesday evening, I was all too willing to volunteer to pick her up. My parents agreed immediately. Dad and RJ would be far too busy getting things finished up at the shop so they could stay closed through the long weekend while Mom and Abbie had to finish preparations for the big meal. Cross volunteered to go with me, but when my dad asked him to stay for his and RJ's traditional excursion to the liquor store to pick out wine for tomorrow, I insisted he stay behind. He had better taste in wine and would offer to pick up the tab as his contribution to the meal, both of which I hoped would get him points with my parents.

I wasn't planning on moving back to Ohio, but I didn't want to be like Juliette either, staying away for years at a time. I wanted both my life in California and my family in Ohio. I needed my family to know how important Cross was to me, and I needed him to feel comfortable around them.

Still, it didn't stop me from wishing he was with me as I waited in the long line of cars for pick-ups. Surprisingly, my parents had let Cross and me share a room, but I was so overly conscious of being in my old bedroom that we hadn't done anything more than fall asleep next to each other. Having some alone time would've been nice. I hadn't realized how spoiled I'd been in California. With Juliette and I working together in her catering business, I was able to spend most of my free time with Cross and not feel guilty about not seeing my sister. Here, I felt like we had to constantly be doing something with one family member or another.

It was exhausting, and I was starting to understand Juliette's decision to stay away for so long.

I rubbed my temples and shifted in the seat. I'd taken the rental car instead

of one of the family cars, and I had to admit that I liked the luxury. And it was nice not to feel obligated to my parents for gas or mileage or anything like that. They'd never ask me to pay for the gas, but I knew they'd hint about it in their usual passive-aggressive way.

Finally, I saw her. It wasn't until I pulled right up next to her that I realized she looked tired, and not just the kind of tired that came with a long day of travel. She looked...worn. The sort of bone-deep weariness that left lines etched on her face. Lines that hadn't been there earlier this week.

She shouldn't have changed so much in such a short period of time.

I opened my door and called her name. She looked up, her eyes wide as if I'd startled her. She grabbed her bag and came over to the car. I waited until we were heading back out of the airport before speaking.

"How was your flight?" I gave her a quick glance.

"Fine." She glanced in the visor mirror and swore. "Mom and Dad will have a field day if I show up looking like this."

She began to rummage through her purse.

"Are you okay?" I asked. "Did something happen over the last couple days?"

There was only the slightest hesitation before she shook her head. If I hadn't spent the last five months with her, I probably wouldn't have seen it. I also knew her well enough to know that she wouldn't tell me anything at the moment.

"Just the usual craziness of work," she said. "And some nerves about being here." She gave me a tight smile. "How're things going?"

I shrugged. "You know how Mom and Dad are. Asking questions about how things are going, then twisting it around so that it's all about RJ and Abbie."

Juliette sighed. "Nice to know that some things haven't changed."

"Abbie's looking good," I offered. "Two more months and the baby'll be here."

"Do they know what they're having?"

I shook my head. "They want to be surprised."

Juliette gave a sharp, brittle little laugh. "Most people would want to be prepared, you'd think."

"They did the nursery in sea foam green," I said. I was getting some weird vibes from her, but I didn't ask. If she wanted me to know, she'd tell me when she was ready.

“Mom and Dad must be thrilled that they're finally going to be grandparents,” Juliette said as she finished touching up her make-up.

“They are,” I said. “Hasn't stopped them from asking when I plan to finally settle down and have kids, so be prepared.”

Juliette turned to look out the window. “How's Cross handling all of it?”

“He's pretty much ignored most of it and been his usual charming self.” Cross was a safe subject. “They haven't exactly said whether they like him or not, but at least their jabs have been at me. Then again, it's not like they could really find much to complain about with him. He's gorgeous, rich, and intelligent.”

“You've got it bad,” Juliette teased.

When I glanced at her this time, she still looked pale, and I could tell there was still something wrong, but I'd respect her clear desire not to talk about it. For the rest of the drive back to the house, we made small talk about work, about things around the apartment, a new restaurant that was opening up and whether or not we thought they'd cater enough to be competition. By the time I parked the car in the driveway, she seemed more like herself again, and I felt a bit better about the holiday going smoothly.

“Did Juliette seem off to you tonight?” I asked Cross as I settled next to him. “I mean, I knew things would be tense between her and our parents, but it felt like more than that.”

He wrapped his arm around my waist as he pulled me back against him. He pressed his lips to my temple. “Think maybe she could just be airsick? I mean, she didn't eat much at dinner, did she?”

I thought for a moment and shook my head. “She didn't, and I know she loves Mom's spaghetti. I just hope she's not coming down with something. We have a couple clients coming in for meetings next week, and they specifically asked to meet with both of us.”

“I hope you don't have any plans for the first day we're back.” His hand slid up to cup my breast over my nightshirt. “Because I have plans for us both.”

I glanced over my shoulder at him, arousal tightening things low inside me. “Oh really? And what might those plans be?”

“I haven't narrowed down all the specifics,” he said, keeping his tone light, conversational. “So many options. Maybe I'll take you in every room,

starting with fucking you up against the front door.”

I shivered.

“Then maybe we'll move to the couch. Bend you over and take you from behind.”

I liked the sound of that, and judging by the erection I could feel pressing against my ass, he liked it too.

“What next?” I asked.

“How about a round in the shower?” His fingers found my nipple. “Bodies slick and wet. Then the playroom. I think I'll tie you up, play with you a bit.”

“Yes, please,” I whispered. “Then what?”

“What do you want me to do, Hanna?” He scraped his teeth over the top of my ear. “Do you want me to fuck your ass? Your cunt? Do you want me to take you so hard that you'll feel it the next day? Spank you until it hurts to sit down?”

I growled in frustration. “Dammit, Cross. How am I ever supposed to get to sleep tonight when all I can think about is hot, kinky sex with you?”

“If it makes you feel any better, I've got a serious case of blue balls.”

We both laughed, but I couldn't deny that it was a sound more of frustration than any real humor. My parents knew that Cross and I had sex. They were letting us stay in the same room. But I still couldn't bring myself to actually do anything more than cuddle and talk. No matter how badly I wanted it.

“The day we get back,” I promised, “you and me, in bed all day.”

“Sounds good to me,” he said as his arms tightened around me.

Chapter Five

CROSS

As the only child of two only children, holidays hadn't been about big family celebrations. We usually spend Thanksgivings at a local soup kitchen, and then went home to have our own meal before decorating the house for Christmas. Other families in our social circle hired people to come in and decorate for them, but doing it ourselves had been a tradition for as long as I could remember. We had similar traditions for other holidays too. None of them included large family gatherings.

So, when I woke on Thanksgiving morning to the smell of all sorts of wonderful things cooking, I knew I was in foreign territory. While there were only seven of us, the house somehow seemed fuller than it had before. A parade was on the television, and everyone seemed to be talking and doing stuff. Getting the meal ready. Snitching food here and there. Laughing and joking, talking about old traditions and family stories.

I heard about how, on Thanksgivings in the past, Mr. Breckenridge and the kids would play a few rounds of football before the meal and the games. They talked about a time when Mrs. Breckenridge had forgotten to get the instant mashed potatoes that everybody liked, and ended up driving to a store thirty minutes away to find them. RJ and Abbie told the story about their first Thanksgiving as a married couple and how they'd accidentally gotten things mixed up between when they were supposed to be eating with Abbie's family, so they ended up eating two meals just so no one would be upset.

It was a lot like I used to imagine holidays must've been for my friends. There had been times as a child when I wished to have what I thought of as a *normal* family, and there were a few times during the day that those feelings

returned. It wasn't until later that night when I thought back over the day that I realized that things weren't as perfect as I'd thought. While Hanna's parents weren't cruel or mean, their stories, their behavior, always focused on their son. They'd said little about Juliette's success, expressed little interest in their daughters' lives other than how they reflected back on RJ. The fact that neither woman said anything about it told me that they were used to it.

I went to sleep that night wondering if having a family was worth all that drama. My own solitary Thanksgivings suddenly seemed a bit more appealing.

The day after Thanksgiving was the traditional time for the Breckenridge family to do their Christmas decorating, so I spent the entire morning and early afternoon helping RJ and Mr. Breckenridge haul giant boxes down from the attic, assisting in putting up lights and hanging decorations in the house that the women were too short to reach.

Now, I was enjoying the solitude of an empty bathroom after having taken a shower. The lack of time to myself was starting to get to me, and I was glad this was our last day here. Hanna and I would be leaving tomorrow morning, and thanks to the time difference, we'd have the rest of the day to recuperate from jet lag, then spend Sunday making up for lost time before getting back to work on Monday. While things hadn't been as bad as I'd feared they'd be, I couldn't deny that I was grateful we lived far away from Hanna's family. I couldn't have dealt with this all the time.

I ran my hand over my chin as I looked in the mirror. I'd shaved yesterday morning, but hadn't bothered yet today. There was some stubble, but I didn't think I needed to be clean-shaven at the moment, so I could pack up the toiletries I'd left in the bathroom that Hanna and I were sharing with Juliette. As I reached for my razor, my hand bumped the toothpaste, sending it right into the trashcan. Sighing, I bent over to pick it up...

And froze.

I closed my eyes, then opened them again, telling myself that I had to be seeing things.

Except I wasn't.

Right there, laying under a few bits of toilet paper, was a pregnancy test.

A *positive* pregnancy test.

I sank down to sit on the edge of the tub. My legs were numb, my stomach churning and flipping. Blood rushed in my ears.

Why hadn't Hanna told me she was pregnant? She could've taken me

aside any time today. Or was she waiting until we got back to California because she didn't know how I'd react?

The questions ran circles in my head.

How had this happened? I mean, I wasn't an idiot. I knew how sex worked. But I also knew we'd always been careful. Sure, we weren't using condoms anymore, but she was on the pill and that was more effective anyway.

Or at least I'd thought it was. With other women, I'd always worn condoms because I didn't trust that they were clean or on the pill. Maybe that was my mistake. I'd trusted Hanna to take care of things. She was responsible, organized. I never worried about her forgetting, especially since she'd been on birth control for a while.

But maybe she hadn't forgotten.

The implication of that one simple statement nearly knocked me on my ass.

Was it possible that this hadn't been an accident? Had Hanna purposefully stopped taking birth control in the hopes of getting pregnant? Men like me were great targets for that sort of thing. Women who thought that getting pregnant by a rich guy would mean enough child support to live comfortably for the next eighteen years. Or, even worse, ones who thought that a baby would automatically mean an engagement, a wedding. Women who wanted to snag a rich husband pulled that sort of shit all the time.

I'd just never thought about Hanna that way.

We'd been happy how we were. Or at least I'd thought so. Maybe I didn't know her as well as I thought I did. Her parents were clearly all about marriage and family for their girls. Maybe the pressure had been too much for her, and she'd decided this was the best way to take care of it.

The shock had started to wear off and was being replaced by both panic and anger. I clung to the latter, not wanting to give in to the former. If I did, then I'd have to start thinking about all the ways my life was about to change.

I'd never been one to shirk my responsibilities, but this was different than if we'd both forgotten to use a condom one night, or if the condom had been faulty. This wasn't even as if she'd been on something that would've nullified the birth control. She had to have done it on purpose.

All of these ugly thoughts were at the surface when the door opened.

"There you are," Hanna said.

Her bright smile, which would usually send a bolt of desire through me,

just pissed me off even more.

“Mom and I—”

“When were you planning on telling me?” I cut her off, the words feeling like knives leaving my throat.

She stepped inside the bathroom and played dumb. “What are you talking about?”

“Come on, Hanna,” I snapped and stood up, but kept as much distance as possible between us. “You might as well admit it. I know.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I have no idea what you're talking about, and I really don't appreciate the way you're speaking to me.” Her words were precise, clipped. The way she spoke when she was keeping her temper in check.

I didn't care though. All I could think about was how she'd screwed up my life.

“You're pregnant!”

Her eyes widened, and I thought I saw guilt in her surprise. “What the hell are you talking about?”

I glared down at her. Was she seriously going to play innocent here? I leaned down and pulled the test from the garbage.

“I'm not an idiot, Hanna. I know how to read these fucking things.” I thrust it at her, and her eyes grew wide in horror. “When did you decide to do it? Back when we first met? After Juliette was rescued?”

“What are you talking about?” Frustration and anger and something else showed in Hanna's eyes as she folded her arms across her chest. “That isn't mine.”

“Like hell it's not.” I tossed it back into the trash can and washed my hands, scrubbing them as hard as possible. “You're going to tell me that it's your mom's? That it somehow magically appeared in here?” I dried my hands and crossed my own arms, not trusting myself not to hit the wall or mirror. “You really expect me to believe that you didn't purposefully get yourself pregnant so I'd marry you or so you could get money from me?”

Two spots of color appeared high on Hanna's cheeks. “Is that really what you think of me?” Her words were quiet but full of so much pain that it almost pushed away my anger.

Almost.

“Do you really think I'd do something like that? Trick you into knocking me up in the hopes you'd make a commitment? Do you think I'd actually want you that way? Forced into it?” Her eyes were shining with tears. “I'm

not pregnant, Cross.”

“You're lying.” I looked away, focusing on the wall behind her.

“She's not.”

The words came from behind me and I turned to see Juliette standing in the doorway between her room and the bathroom.

“Hanna isn't pregnant, you idiot.” She glared at me. “I am.”

Chapter Six

HANNA

I'd actually been enjoying the holiday, more or less. Mom and Dad were their usual selves when it came to making sure everything was done exactly how RJ liked it – the game he wanted to watch, the dishes he preferred – but that was typical for them. It was almost a Breckenridge family tradition. That they liked Cross was more important to me, and on that front, things were going well.

Then I'd stepped into the bathroom to ask Cross something, and it'd all fallen apart. He'd snapped at me, verbally attacked me, accused me not only of lying, but of trying to manipulate him by getting pregnant. I could barely believe what I was hearing, what I was seeing. This wasn't the man I'd fallen for, the man I loved. This was some angry, cruel imposter.

Then Juliette dropped the bombshell that she was pregnant.

I stepped past Cross without giving him a second look. I shoved aside all of the negative emotions I had toward him and focused on my sister. She was the one who mattered.

“Come on, Jul,” I said, keeping my eyes on her. “Let’s get out of here. You and me. We’ll go out, get something to eat, and you’re going to talk to me.”

“Hanna...”

I ignored him. I didn't want to talk to him. Didn't want to look at him. I was furious and hurt, in no position to have the sort of conversation we needed to have. I felt sick but made myself stay calm. Juliette needed my support.

And Cross could go fuck himself for all I cared at the moment.

Juliette's eyes flicked behind me, then back to me. She nodded, and I put my arm around her shoulders.

“Let's go.”

Neither one of us said a word as we made our way down the stairs. Fortunately, our parents were preoccupied, and we got to the car without having to explain ourselves to anyone. She waited until we were on the road before speaking.

“I'm sorry, Hanna.”

I shook my head. “Nothing to be sorry about.”

“It was my test.” Her voice was flat. “If I hadn't thrown it away in the bathroom, he couldn't have found it, and none of this would've happened.”

“I don't want to talk about him or what he thought.” I turned at the next road. “I want to talk about you.”

“Not yet,” Juliette said. “I need a couple minutes to get my head together.”

I flicked on the radio and let Christmas music fill the car. The local station always started off on Black Friday. The traffic was surprisingly light as I made my way toward the bar and grill I liked. Most of the people in the area had probably gone to the big department stores, the places that had the big sales today. I was heading toward the section of town that had the Mom and Pop stores, the small businesses, so there was no surprise that there were only a few people out and about, bundled against the chill in the air. I didn't have any difficulties finding a parking space, which was good. I wasn't sure my frayed nerves could take any additional frustration.

Juliette and I went to a booth in the back, placed our orders, and snacked on the breadsticks until our meals came. Only after we'd taken a few bites did I broach the subject again.

“I would ask what happened, but I'm pretty sure I'd get a smart-ass response.”

That earned a hint of a smile at least. “Damn straight.”

I reached across the table and put my hand over hers. Her eyes met mine, and I could see the dark circles she'd tried to hide. “Talk to me.”

She nodded, then took a slow breath. “I'd been getting sick in the mornings, so I suspected for a while. I just couldn't get up the nerve to take a test. But on the way to the airport, I stopped to pick up something – I don't even remember what – and bought one. I stuck it in my purse and ignored it until last night.” She paused to take a gulp of water. “When I saw it, I knew I

had to take it or I'd put it off forever.”

“And you're pregnant,” I stated the obvious.

“Looks like.” She stabbed at a crouton with exceptional viciousness. “There's a chance it was a false positive, of course, but I don't think so.”

“Are you late?” With our age difference, we hadn't talked a lot about personal things until I'd moved out to California. Once the whole Dominatrix thing had come out, there was very little that the two of us felt uncomfortable sharing.

“Not yet. I got one of those early detection tests when I remembered Mom had morning sickness for a couple weeks before she realized she was pregnant,” Juliette said. “I'll make a doctor's appointment when we get back to be sure, but I'll be shocked if I'm not.”

I leaned back in my chair and let myself absorb the fact that my sister was going to have a baby. Neither of us had ever talked about kids in specific terms, but she'd always talked about her future in the singular sense. She'd dated one guy, Michael, for two months after she'd been kidnapped, but since that'd ended, she made a point of one-night stands only.

“The father...is it Michael?”

She shook her head. “I haven't been with him since we broke up.”

I raised an eyebrow as I ate another fry, but I didn't ask. Now that Juliette had started, I knew she'd tell me everything.

“I'm not sure who the father is,” Juliette admitted, her cheeks flushing. “I hooked up with two guys within a couple days of each other around the time I would've gotten pregnant.”

“Anyone I know?”

“I doubt it,” she said. “But we didn't really exchange a lot of personal information.”

“What do you know about them?”

“They were Subs,” she said. “The first one, I hadn't intended to sleep with. We were just going to work off some steam. Do a scene together. Things just kinda got out of hand. We used a condom, of course, but you know those things aren't always reliable.”

“And the second?”

She gave me a grin this time, one that made her eyes sparkle. “Him, I definitely meant to sleep with. Again, condom. I guess the odds were against me.”

“I thought you were on the pill.”

She exhaled long and loud. “Remember that sinus infection I had?”

“Shit.” I got it. “Antibiotics.”

“Yup.” She nodded. “I just happened to hit the right percentages all at once. Or, I guess, the wrong ones.”

“Damn, Juliette.” I ran my hand through my hair. “This is...wow.”

“Tell me about it.” She barked out a laugh. “This is the last thing I expected.”

I finished my coffee, hesitated, and then asked the question I really wanted to know the answer to. “Do you know what you're going to do?”

She fell silent, her fingers moving restlessly over her utensils, then twisting her napkin.

“I don't know,” she finally said. “But I won't be impulsive about it. I want to make sure that whatever I decide to do, I've thought it through.”

“Will you try to find the father?”

She nodded. “I want to give him a chance to weigh in on the decision.”

I reached over and squeezed her hand. “Whatever you need, I'll be there. Even if it's three a.m. feedings.”

Her hand tightened around mine, and I watched her face fight for control. “Thank you.”

Before either of us could say anything else, a familiar voice interrupted us.

“Hanna?”

I stiffened. I had to be hearing wrong. There was no way that voice belonged to the person I thought was standing behind me. It couldn't be him.

“Hanna Breckenridge?”

Fuck me.

I turned, feeling Juliette's eyes on me as I did so. She would've heard me talk about him, but she'd moved before we'd started dating, so she wouldn't have known him by sight.

Me, on the other hand...it'd been nearly five years since we'd last seen each other, but I would've recognized Tucker Flannagan anywhere.

Hair a richer, deeper shade of blond. China blue eyes. He'd topped out at six feet tall and had put a bit more muscle on his athletic build since I'd seen him last. He'd always been good-looking and was even more so now that he'd matured a bit.

Still, I couldn't help but think that no matter how handsome Tucker was, he wasn't even close to being as attractive as Cross. His name made my heart

twist painfully, and I pushed thoughts of him away.

“It is you!” Tucker beamed as he came around the table. He engulfed me in a hug, leaving me wide-eyed and feeling awkward. Then he turned to Juliette. “You have to be Hanna's sister. I heard all about you. I'm Tucker.”

I saw the surprise flicker across Juliette's eyes and knew she recognized the name

“I hadn't realized you'd gotten back,” he said as he pulled up a chair. Same old Tucker.

“Juliette and I are visiting for Thanksgiving.” My brain was spinning. “We're going home this weekend.”

“Really?” He leaned forward, his gaze intent on me. “Where's home? I always thought you'd be at the family business, but whenever I went by, you weren't there. Your mom said you were visiting your sister.”

I snorted. Leave it to my parents to call half a year a *visit*. “I went out to California after graduation to help Juliette out with her catering business, but I ended up loving it, so I took the job permanently.”

“California? Wow, that's amazing!” He glanced at Juliette, then turned his attention back to me. “What is it you do?”

“We run a catering business in LA,” Juliette said. “Hanna's my business manager.”

“That's great, Hanna,” he said with a brilliant smile. “I always knew you could do anything you set your mind to.”

I gaped at him. Was this really the same man who'd slept with me right before he went away to college, then again right before he broke up with me a few months later because he couldn't handle the “long distance thing,” and I hadn't wanted to transfer to Texas? He hadn't been ignorant about it, but he'd made it clear that he didn't think my degree was as important as his. Now he was acting like he'd been behind me one hundred percent.

“Look, Hanna,” his tone shifted, “I know things between us ended a bit...abruptly.”

I raised my eyebrows. “That's an understatement.”

He had the good grace to look embarrassed. “We were kids. Let's put all that behind us, start new.”

“I'm not angry, Tucker,” I assured him. “I moved on a long time ago, and I'm happy.”

The memory of Cross's cruel words cut through me and I pushed him from my mind. No need to bring up a relationship that I was currently pissed

about.

“Besides, there's no need to be rehashing the past when we're not in town for long,” I continued.

“I'm not either, actually.” He moved his chair closer.

“So you don't live here?” I asked.

“I moved back after college. A lot of kids did. Finding a job isn't easy in this economy. I'm sure you understand.” He straightened. “I'm so excited to hear that you live in California now. It'll be great to know someone there. I'm moving to LA in a couple days.”

Chapter Seven

CROSS

The moment I heard Juliette say that the test was hers, I felt like an idiot. It was the most logical explanation, and I hadn't even thought of it. Then again, neither had Hanna, and Juliette was her sister. It made sense that I'd forgotten about her, forgotten that she was sharing the bathroom with us, but this was Hanna's childhood home. She'd shared this bathroom with Juliette for years. All she'd needed to do was tell me that it was probably her sister's test, and it would've diffused the entire situation.

Instead, she'd acted like I was behaving irrationally. Like I hadn't had every reason in the world to be freaking out. She knew I didn't want kids now. Maybe ever. I wasn't thinking that far ahead. I liked things the way they were. Liked how the two of us were together.

But as much as I kept telling myself that Hanna should've stopped all of this from happening, I couldn't stop the guilt that came when I saw the hurt on her face. She wasn't just angry with me. She was upset, and when I thought of some of the things I'd said to her, I couldn't really blame her. I had been a little harsh.

"Hanna."

She didn't even acknowledge me as she went to her sister. And then they were gone. It didn't hit me until they'd reached the stairs that I needed to go after Hanna. She couldn't just leave without us working it out. I couldn't have her upset with me the rest of the day.

I went after her then, but it was too late. Hanna had taken the car, and I had no idea where she and her sister had gone.

"Is something wrong?" The sister-in-law, Abbie, came up behind me.

I glanced over at her, my stomach twisting as I watched her run her hand over her stomach. Hanna said the baby was due next month. Maybe that was why I'd freaked out so badly. Seeing how Hanna's family had been about the upcoming baby, it must've made me think that was what she wanted. Once I explained that to Hanna, I was sure she'd understand.

"Hanna and Juliette left but didn't tell me where they were going." I kept my voice even.

Abbie was nice enough. Sweet, cute. Chestnut curls. Hazel eyes. She looked like the stereotypical Midwestern housewife. She fit here, with the Breckenridge family, with their auto business and holiday traditions. I could see, though, why Juliette didn't. Hanna, I wasn't so sure of. While she wasn't quite jaded enough for Hollywood, she didn't quite seem to fit here either.

"Do you think they might've gone shopping?" Abbie asked. "There are always some good Black Friday deals at the shopping mall."

"I don't think so," I muttered.

I looked down the driveway. Hanna had taken the rental, so if I planned to go after her, I would need to borrow another vehicle. I looked with distaste at the pair of ancient cars sitting there. I was sure they ran well. After all, that wouldn't have been very good for business. It didn't make them any more appealing though.

"What's everyone looking at?" RJ was suddenly there, grinning that wide grin of his. His hair was the same color as Juliette's, but his eyes were blue rather than violet, and his features were a bit harsher, but the resemblance was there.

"Hanna and Juliette went somewhere, and Cross was wondering if anyone knew where," Abbie supplied.

I wondered if she always sounded so cheery, and if she did, how in the world her husband stood it. I mean, I wouldn't want to be around someone who was a bitch all the time, but that constant bubbly personality would grate on my nerves after a while.

Then again, for all I knew, any woman would eventually get on my nerves. Being with Hanna was the longest I'd ever been in a relationship, and I had no idea how much longer it would last.

And I had a bad feeling that if I didn't make things right with Hanna sooner rather than later, what we had wouldn't be around much longer.

I looked up at RJ. I was tall, but he was at least six and a half feet. "Would you happen to know where Hanna and Juliette might be?"

RJ shrugged. “Whenever Hanna was home from college, she used to go to Hanson Bar and Grill off Main Street. Maybe they went there.”

That made sense. Hanna wanted to talk to Juliette, find out what was going on, and I was sure she wouldn't want her family accidentally overhearing. That sounded like the perfect place for a private conversation.

“Excuse me.” I left RJ and Abbie as I headed toward the kitchen where I could hear Mrs. Breckenridge singing. Despite how much I disliked how the Breckenridge parents put their daughters in the backseat, they were overall good people.

“Mrs. Breckenridge.”

She looked up. The first couple days, she and her husband had tried to get me to call them Raymond and Caroline, but I'd stuck with the more formal address. I said it was because I wanted to be polite, respectful, but I knew that a deep part of me felt like if I called them by their first names, it'd mean something more.

“Hi, Cross.” She smiled at me, the resemblance to her daughters making my heart give a painful thump. “Is there something I can do for you?”

“Actually, ma'am, I was wondering if I could borrow a car? Hanna and Juliette took the rental.”

“Of course.” She gestured toward a bowl next to the back door. “Grab a set of keys. Both cars should have full tanks.”

I fished out one and headed outside. The car door wasn't even locked. Some people might've liked the whole small town vibe they had going on, but I had a feeling I'd get stir-crazy before too long.

I pulled up my GPS and typed in the information to get the directions I needed. A few minutes later, I was on my way.

The entire drive, I thought about what I was going to say, how I could convince her that this was all just some vast misunderstanding. She had to know that sort of thing was a man's worst nightmare. Not a baby in and of itself. One that was planned for, a wanted part of a family, that was cause for celebration. A surprise after less than six months of dating – that was cause for freaking out. Any other man would've been just as pissed if they'd thought their girlfriend had tricked them.

I passed by a dozen little shops, then nearly slammed on my brakes when I saw the jewelry store. It wasn't some name brand place, but it looked nice enough to find what I wanted.

They were open, of course. After all, it was Black Friday. The

resemblance between the two gentlemen behind the counter left no doubt to their relation, though they were both of such an indiscriminate age that it was difficult to say if they were father and son or brothers.

“Good afternoon, sir.” The older of the two spoke first. “How may we help you?”

“I'm looking for something for my girlfriend.” I walked past the case of rings to the one holding the necklaces and bracelets. “Something, I think, in silver.”

I'd had Hanna's collar specially made. Before her, I'd never thought I'd want a woman enough to make that sort of commitment, but when I realized that I wanted to stake a claim on her, I'd been very particular. I wouldn't find anything of quite so fine a quality here, but I was hopeful I'd find something that could help smooth the way for me.

“We have a lovely selection.” The younger one moved to stand across from me. “Are you looking for anything with stones, or purely metal?”

I looked down at the bracelets, my gaze sliding from one with rubies to one with diamonds. Then I saw it. Amethyst. A couple were deep purple, but there was one with paler stones, almost the color of Hanna's eyes.

“That one.” I pointed at it.

The man reached inside and pulled out the bracelet I was looking at. “A lovely choice, sir. Very high quality.”

I lifted it, turning it this way and that. I wasn't a professional, but I considered myself to have a good eye. If I'd been home, I would've taken it to a jeweler friend of mine to ensure that I was seeing it correctly, but right now, I'd take the chance. Besides, these two didn't look like the kind to swindle anyone.

“I'll take it.” I handed the bracelet back to the young man. “Wrap it nicely, please.”

“Yes, sir.” The younger man handed the bracelet off to the older man and then took my card.

Five minutes later, I was back in the car, this time with a beautifully wrapped box sitting on the passenger's seat. I wasn't foolish enough to think I could actually buy Hanna's forgiveness, but a nice gift never hurt.

I resumed my drive, and as I turned into the parking lot, I spotted the rental. I pulled up next to it, but didn't get out yet. I still wasn't entirely sure what to say to Hanna, especially since her sister was with her. I could probably get Juliette to give us some privacy, but I also wasn't selfish enough

to think that Juliette needed Hanna right now less than I did. I considered Juliette a friend, so I did feel for her too.

Being there for Juliette would actually be a good way to show Hanna that I wasn't a complete ass, I realized. We'd be part of what Juliette was going through when we went back home, so I might as well start now.

With a plan solidly in place, I felt a bit more confident that I could handle the situation, and that was what I needed, to feel in control. I wasn't as much of a total control freak as some Dominants who had to have every single thing exactly perfect or they freaked out, but I was enough about control that I wanted a plan, a schedule, specific points to follow.

I put the box in my jacket pocket and then got out of the car. As I walked toward the door, I glanced in one of the large windows as I passed...just in time to see a good-looking blond man hug my girlfriend.

I stopped, watched, waited to see how Hanna would react.

But she didn't shove the man away. Instead, she smiled at him. Let him sit down next to her.

One little fight and she was acting like she wasn't mine. Like the collar I'd given her didn't mean anything. That the last five months and all we'd done together didn't mean anything.

The man looked too familiar with her, too comfortable being close to her. And she wasn't putting distance between them, not even when he leaned toward her. I couldn't watch to see what happened next.

As soon as I got in the car, I pulled out my phone. I'd hired this particular pilot to fly Hanna and me here because he had no plans for the holiday, and had been more than happy to accept the rather large bonus I'd offered for him to be on call. He answered right away, and I made a mental note to add a bit more to his bonus for actually doing what he was supposed to.

By the time I dropped off the car and called in a taxi, I received a text saying that the plane would be ready to take off by the time I arrived at the airfield. I made a vague excuse to the Breckenridges, then carried my bag out to the taxi. I gave the address and didn't look back as the car pulled away.

I didn't want to see this place ever again. In fact, I was pretty sure I didn't want to see anyone from this family either.

I was going home.

Chapter Eight

HANNA

*I*t was getting close to eight o'clock by the time Juliette and I arrived back at our parents' house. Tucker had hung around for at least an hour, talking about how he'd gotten a degree in finance but had decided that he didn't want to be an accountant. According to him, LA was the place to be for a fresh start. I hadn't really minded catching up with him, but between Juliette's announcement and my fight with Cross, I'd barely listened to anything Tucker had to say.

As I parked the car, Juliette asked, "Why didn't you tell Tucker that you were seeing someone?"

I looked over at her. "I didn't really think about it," I lied. "Besides, after the shit Cross said to me, I don't know how true that's going to be."

Even as I said it, I felt sick to my stomach. Every couple argued, but the things he'd said had been awful. For me, it was as bad as if he'd accused me of infidelity. It hadn't been a miscommunication. The fact that he'd thought I could be that devious spoke volumes. He clearly didn't know me as well as I thought he did, and he didn't trust me. That's what hurt the most. When I was at my most vulnerable, I'd put my life and well-being in his hands. I'd let him introduce me to a work where trust was key.

And he'd proven that it only went one way with us.

Juliette reached over and put her hand on my arm. "I've got your back, no matter what happens."

I gave her a weak smile. She was the one who needed support right now, not me, but I was grateful to have her. With our age difference, we hadn't been particularly close growing up. She'd been my babysitter, but she'd been

gone by the time I was a teenager. It'd only been over the last year that the two of us had truly become friends. More than ever, I was grateful I'd gone to California.

“Don't tell Mom and Dad,” Juliette said. “About the baby. We both know they'll assume I'm keeping it, and then try to convince me to move back here.”

She was right. While I was pretty sure she would at least have the baby, I knew the odds of her keeping it was about fifty-fifty. The one thing she'd never do, though, was come back to Ohio. At least with me in California with her, our parents couldn't say she had no family.

“I won't say anything,” I promised. “And I'll have your back whatever you decide to do.”

We stayed there in silence for a minute and then got out of the car. RJ and Abbie must've already gone home for the night because only our parents were sitting in the living room, watching the first of dozens of Christmas specials I knew they'd be watching over the next few weeks. Another Breckenridge family tradition.

“Where did you two run off to?” Mom asked, glancing away from the screen for a minute to look at us.

“Just wanted to see the town,” I said. “See if anything changed. We stopped by the bar and grill to get something to eat. Took a look at some of the shops.”

“You know, Hanna, The Honey Tree has been looking for a new manager,” Mom said. “I know you've never been interested in the auto business, but you always liked that little place. I'll bet Mrs. Franco would love to take you on.”

I forced a smile even as the muscles in my jaw clenched. “Thanks, Mom, but Juliette and I work well together. I really enjoy what I do.”

Both parents looked up this time, and I felt Juliette stiffen next to me. I resisted the urge to reach over and squeeze her hand. She didn't need me acting like she needed reassurance while our parents were right there.

“I know, sweetie,” Mom continued. “It's just when I think of the two of you scraping by, sharing an apartment...”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Juliette scowl, and something in me snapped. “Actually, Juliette's place is over twelve hundred square feet. We each have our own bedroom and bathroom, and the view is gorgeous. It's a lot less crowded than you'd think.” I gave my parents a saccharine sweet

smile. “As for us scraping by, I doubt Mrs. Franco would be able to match my salary and health benefits.”

Juliette covered a laugh with a cough.

“I appreciate you looking out for us,” I said. “I promise, if we're ever in trouble, we'll let you know.”

Juliette and I both knew that wasn't entirely true. When she was kidnapped over the summer, I'd waited until she been found before letting our parents know what happened, and even then, we'd given them a sanitized version, downplaying the danger Juliette had been in. And, of course, we hadn't said a word about how she'd known the male kidnapper. While the catering company did do well, our parents could never know that Juliette supplemented her income by being a Dominatrix at a local club.

“I'm tired,” Juliette said. “And my flight leaves fairly early, so I'm going to head up to bed.”

“Me too,” I said, following her as my stomach began to churn.

Cross and I hadn't decided yet when we were leaving, but now that I was back, I knew that he and I needed to talk. Since he wasn't with my parents, he was most likely in bed, still stewing over how we'd left things. Hopefully, he already realized how out of line he was and would apologize right away. It'd make things much easier to hash out once that was done, and I didn't want this to follow us back to California. If we were going to work this out, I wanted to do it here and forget about it.

If.

The word made my heart ache. I didn't want it to be *if*. I wanted it to be *when*. And I wanted that to be now.

But I wasn't going to just let him off without talking about what happened, what it meant. He'd been disrespectful and mean, and I couldn't let that go.

Juliette gave me a sympathetic look as she stopped at her bedroom door, and I took a deep breath.

As soon as I opened my old bedroom door, I frowned. Cross wasn't there. I walked over to the bathroom door, but didn't need to knock. It was partially open...and empty. I turned again to look at my room, a feeling of unease settling in my stomach. Something was wrong, and it took me a moment to figure out what it was.

The shorts he'd worn to bed were gone. I walked over to the closet and opened it. His suitcase, and all the clothes he'd hung in the closet were gone

as well. I didn't need to look in the dresser to confirm my suspicion, but I did it anyway. Empty.

Emotions came at me, one after the other. Shock that he'd left. Hurt that he hadn't called.

I pulled my phone from my pocket and confirmed that I hadn't missed any calls. Or texts. Or anything that indicated Cross had tried to contact me to tell me which emergency had sent him back to the West Coast so quickly.

With that realization, anger overcame the other emotions, and my hands shook.

He left. We had a fight, and instead of sticking around to work things out, he ran like a child. No note, no call.

"Cowardly bastard," I muttered and slammed the bathroom door. "Son of a bitch!"

"Hanna?" Juliette opened the door I'd just closed. "What's wrong?" She looked around. "Where's Cross?"

"That would be what's wrong." I took a shaky breath. "He's not here."

There was a moment of silence, and then Juliette shook her head and spoke again, "He has to be. I'm sure he's somewhere."

"His things are gone."

Juliette's mouth took on a familiar stubborn set. "Let's go see what our parents say."

Heat flooded my face. "I don't want to get them involved."

"Come on." She took my arm and the two of us went downstairs. Our parents looked up in surprise, but she spoke before they could. "Did Cross go somewhere? We can't seem to find him."

Dad shrugged and turned his attention back to the television even as he answered, "He said he was being called away. I'm surprised he didn't call you."

My nails dug into my palm. "He didn't. Thank you."

I turned and practically ran back up the stairs. I heard Juliette following, but I closed the door. I didn't want to talk to her at the moment. I wanted Cross. And that was the problem. When I was upset, he calmed me, soothed me. He was the one who'd taken care of me when Juliette had been kidnapped. He'd made sure I was safe, protected me.

I never thought I'd need to be protected from him.

I laid down on the bed, phone in hand, and debated about calling him. I was torn between wanting to hear his voice and not wanting to make the first

move. He'd been the one who'd done wrong. It shouldn't have been up to me to try to make things right.

But I had to respond. I couldn't let him think that I hadn't even noticed he was gone. I wouldn't do that to him. And, if I was being completely honest, I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing how badly he'd hurt me.

After forcing myself to think things through, I wrote out a text. Then re-read it to make sure I wasn't sending out some emotional shit that could come back to bite me in the ass. I had to be an adult about this. Communicate.

Call me when you land. I don't want to have this conversation over the phone, but I need to know you've arrived safely, and we need to set up a time to talk when I get back.

I didn't expect an immediate response if for no other reason than Cross was in the air now, but I couldn't stop looking at my phone. I forced myself into the bathroom, into the shower. I resisted the urge to hurry, to run back to my phone and see if he'd texted while I was gone. But by the time I was done, there was still no response. I didn't know exactly when he left, but I reminded myself it was highly possible he hadn't gotten back yet.

And I kept telling myself that until well past midnight. Even if Cross had left shortly before Juliette and I had gotten back, the plane should've landed. It was a four and a half hour flight. I then started to tell myself that he might not have checked his phone right away.

When I woke up just before dawn, however, I saw that my message hadn't only been delivered, but that it'd been read too. He was ignoring me. I squeezed my eyes closed even though I knew I wouldn't get back to sleep. I pressed my hands to my chest, trying to fight the rising nausea. He wasn't even going to give me the courtesy of a reply.

I could feel the tears coming and pressed my face into the pillow. I couldn't stop them, but I could keep anyone else from hearing them. When I finally stopped and raised my head, the sun still wasn't up, but there was a message on my phone.

It was from Juliette.

I managed to get you a seat on my flight if you're coming back to LA.

Right. Because I didn't have a return ticket. I hadn't thought I'd need one. I'd come on a private plane with Cross and planned on returning with him.

Now I had to decide if I wanted to return at all.

I put my hands over my eyes. I'd been there before, wondering if I should stay in LA or stay where it was safe and let my parents take care of me. They

would, I knew. I could go downstairs and tell them that I'd made a mistake, that I wanted to come home. They'd let me live here until I earned enough money to get my own place.

And they'd never let me forget how I'd screwed up, how I'd failed. They'd constantly be there, telling me how to live my life, how I was disappointing them.

I'd lose the freedom I found in LA, lose my friendships. I'd lose a job that I cared about and enjoyed. And I'd be leaving behind a sister who needed me now more than ever. No matter what happened with Cross, I couldn't leave Juliette.

I refused to let a man chase me from my home and my family.

I got up and headed for the closet. I'd need to get dressed and pack quickly if I was going to make the flight.

Home wasn't Zanesville, Ohio, not anymore. And LA wasn't home because of Cross. It was where I belonged.

And I was going home.

Chapter Nine

HANNA

I took an extra dose of Dramamine so I could sleep for the whole flight home. I did it as much for Juliette as for myself. I didn't want to talk about any of it and she had enough on her mind than to worry about what I was going through, but I knew she'd try to help anyway. So I slept, and she got to spend the trip thinking about whatever it was she needed to think about.

Thanks to the time difference, we got back to California when it was still morning, but I knew better than to try to find Cross right away. When I told Juliette that I was going back to the apartment with her, she told me that she thought it was a good idea.

"I'm surprised," I said as we went to the baggage claim to get my luggage. "I would've thought you'd be encouraging me to go fix things. I thought you liked Cross."

Juliette followed me to the taxi line. "I do," she said. "But I only like him for how the two of you are together. He fucked that up, so I'm with you."

I swallowed hard and spoke past the lump in my throat, "Thank you."

The next morning, I considered calling first, but since Cross hadn't answered any of my previous attempts at contact, I doubted today would be any different. I did send off a text so I wouldn't completely surprise him, but there wasn't any response.

I had a key, but I knocked on the door instead. After what happened, I wasn't so sure I'd be welcome coming in as if I had the right to be there. It

wasn't my home, no matter how much time I'd spent there over the last few months. When no one answered, I relented and used the key. If Cross wasn't there, I'd get some of my things and leave him a note telling him that I was done trying to reach out to him.

When I stepped into the living room, however, Cross was there.

He was sprawled out on the couch, wearing only a pair of sweatpants. His hair was a mess, and when his eyes flicked up to me, they were bloodshot. I didn't need to smell the reek of alcohol to know he was drunk. The half dozen empty bottles scattered around told me all I needed to know.

"Hanna." He slurred my name as he forced himself up into a sitting position. "You're here."

All of the things I'd thought about saying, the questions I wanted to ask, moved to the background as anger came forward.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" I snapped. "Seriously, Cross, have you lost your ever-fucking mind?!"

He frowned as he tried to stand, stumbled, then managed to get to his feet. "You don't need to yell. And I don't need to explain myself to you. This is my house and I'll get drunk if I want to."

I wanted to tell him he sounded like a petulant child, but I wasn't about to pick a new fight when we already had one we needed to resolve.

"I wanted to talk to you," I said. "But I can't when you're like this."

He snorted and grabbed a bottle from the floor. "Thought you would've gotten the hint by now. I don't want to talk to you."

My eyes burned, but I refused to give in to tears. Instead, I pulled my anger closer and used it to keep myself focused.

"I just wanted some time to myself. I mean, we just spent a week non-stop together. It was fucking claustrophobic." He took a drink from the bottle. "I don't think it's too much to ask to be left alone for a few days."

"That's what you want?" I curled my hands into fists. My entire body shook with anger. "You accuse me of being manipulative, among other things, and when you've been proven wrong, you run away."

He glared down at me. "What was I supposed to think?"

"What were you supposed to think?" I barked out a bitter laugh. "How about you were supposed to *trust* me?!"

He shrugged and staggered over to the window. "Trust you? That's a laugh."

"Excuse me?" I moved forward a few steps. "You were the one who told

me our entire relationship was based on trust. And I trusted you.”

He grimaced as he glanced over his shoulder. “Spare me the self-righteous shit.”

“I’m not pregnant, you asshole!” I’d never been a violent person, but right now, I wanted to slap him. “I never was! So I didn’t lie! I didn’t trick you or any of the other shit you accused me of! I didn’t do anything wrong!”

“Why didn’t you just tell me that it was Juliette’s?” he asked. “I mean, you’re so smart. You should’ve figured it out. It’s not like you forgot she was there.”

I stared at him, hardly believing what I was hearing. Was he seriously going to blame me for what happened? Sure, in the heat of the moment, I’d forgotten that Juliette was sharing a bathroom with us, but that was hardly reason to blame me. Just because I hadn’t been able to come up with a different person to blame, an explanation that made sense, didn’t mean his behavior was justified.

“It shouldn’t matter if there wasn’t another explanation. It shouldn’t matter if the evidence pointed to what you thought.” I took a step toward him. “You should’ve trusted me.”

He turned, his eyes blazing. “*Trusted* you? Sure, Hanna, I should’ve trusted you.”

His words were still blunted, but his anger seemed to be sobering him enough to get out what he needed to say.

“I went after you,” he continued. “That day. I went after you so we could talk.” He gestured toward a box sitting on the coffee table. “Bought you a gift, even.”

What was he talking about?

“I went to that restaurant. Saw you there, with that guy.”

For a moment, I had no clue who he was talking about. Then it hit me. Tucker.

“He looked like he knew you real well.”

I folded my arms. “Yes, he did. We grew up together.”

Cross’s laugh was brittle. “I’m sure you two were good friends. Did you have fun *catching up*?”

“Actually, we did, asshole. Unlike *some* people, Tucker can actually manage polite conversation without accusing me of being a horrible person.”

Cross’s eyes narrowed. “Tucker. As in your ex-boyfriend who fucked you then dumped you? No wonder he looked *familiar* with you. Did the two of

you get *reacquainted* now that you've gotten some experience under your belt?"

"You bastard."

He drained the last of the amber liquid from the bottle.

"I trusted you to take care of me." My voice trembled, but I forced myself to say it all. "I believed in you. Took you home to meet my family—"

"There was your first mistake," he cut me off, "thinking I wanted anything to do with your family. Or any family for that matter."

I flinched and hated myself for it. I couldn't help it though. Everything I thought we were moving toward, he didn't want, had never wanted. He'd called me his lover, his girlfriend, but I assumed that meant we would eventually become more, that we'd have a family together. I never once considered that my fears had been right, that he didn't want a future with me.

Now, however, I could see that I should've listened to my sister after all. She'd warned me to stay away from him. For the first time, I regretted that I hadn't.

"I wish I'd never met you."

I turned and walked away, half-hoping he'd come after me, tell me that he hadn't meant any of it, that he was just scared that he might lose me. All of the things the heroes in romance novels did when they realized their woman was walking away.

But he didn't.

I managed to hold back the tears until the taxi dropped me off in front of Juliette's apartment building, but they started to flow the moment I stepped inside. I could barely see or breathe when I walked into the apartment, and then Juliette's arms were around me, and she held me as my heart broke, as my world fell apart.

Chapter Ten

CROSS

I let the water beat down on me, and closed my eyes, knowing I would have a hell of a hangover once this was all done, but the pain that would come with sobriety, I knew, would be worse. I started drinking as soon as I'd gotten on the plane, and I hadn't stopped since. Whenever I felt the buzz fading, I found more to drink. By the time Hanna surprised me at home, I'd made my way through most of the alcohol I had in the place. The only thing I hadn't touched was the wine, and that was because it didn't do anything to help me forget. I needed something stronger for that.

Now, with Hanna's last words ringing in my head, I knew there wasn't enough booze in the world to make things better.

I wish I'd never met you.

The pain knifed through me each time I remembered the expression on her face, the venom in her words. I wished the alcohol could make me forget what I said to her. All those horrible, awful things that I never thought I could ever say to anyone, much less the woman I loved.

And that's what made this so much worse than anything I'd ever done before. I loved her. For a while I thought that was all that mattered. Then, when she'd asked me to meet her family, I'd thought it was just about making her happy. I'd been nervous, of course, but it wasn't until I'd seen that pregnancy test that it hit me all at once. It didn't matter how much I loved Hanna. I had my life, and I was happy with it. I didn't want anything else.

Except I didn't have Hanna now.

She walked out, said that she wished she'd never met me.

I didn't know how to handle this. In the past, I'd had sexual partners who'd

gotten too attached, and I'd had to make sure they understood I wasn't interested in anything long-term. It'd been so long since I'd cared about anyone for more than just sex that I'd forgotten what it was like to deal with real feelings.

“Fuck it all,” I muttered as I climbed out of the shower.

Hanna had left. She didn't want to see me again, wished that she'd never seen me in the first place. She hadn't given me a chance to really explain how panicked I'd been, why I'd acted the way I had. She hadn't even tried to understand what I'd been going through.

But that nagging little voice in the back of my head told me that no matter how much Hanna had yelled at me, no matter what she'd said, none of this was her fault. I was the one who overreacted, no matter my reasons. I'd left before we could talk, didn't let her explain what happened with the man at the bar and grill.

Tucker.

I ground my teeth together. She'd told me about him when we'd first gotten together. Before me, the only man she'd ever slept with had been her high school sweetheart, and they'd only done it twice. I hadn't really thought about him since then. He hadn't left much of an impression on her, and I'd believed the things we'd done together had long since made her forget that she'd ever been with anyone else.

I caught a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror and scowled. I smelled better now, but that was pretty much the lone improvement. I looked like shit.

I needed to get out of here, find something else to distract me from drinking myself into a stupor. Again. I had to go back to work tomorrow, and I was already going to have a hell of a hangover. I didn't need to do anything to make it worse. I needed to get out tonight.

There was one place I knew that would give me the distraction I needed. I hadn't been there without Hanna since we'd first gotten together, but it was the place I'd gone to relax for years, and if I ever needed that, it was now.

Sunday evenings at the club were fairly quiet, and the one after Thanksgiving was even more so. Still, there were always a handful of people who managed to make it in, so when I walked into the club, I wasn't alone. These were the people I'd always been the most open with, the ones who understood the sorts of things that most people didn't get.

The music seemed louder than usual, but I was glad. The pounding rhythm helped keep my mind from wandering, gave me something else to

focus on. I went to the bar and ordered Highland Park Scotch. One of the best things about this club was the wide selection of beverages to choose from. They had a stricter policy on liquor due to the nature of the club, but the quality more than made up for it.

“Cross!”

I looked over as a familiar couple came over. Miranda and Jason had been together for more than a year, both in and out of the club. She was a Dominatrix, and he was her Sub, but they were more than just that. I'd seen them together a few times in public, looking as normal as the next couple.

Miranda was short and slender, with honey-colored curls, and one of those perpetually youthful faces. She was a librarian at one of the area high schools. Jason barely looked old enough to be out of high school, but I knew he was a grad student working on his thesis. Some sort of biology or physics or something like that.

They were good together, in and out of the club. Part of me wanted to ask them how they did it, how they managed a balance between what they were here and who they were in the real world. Instead, I smiled and raised my glass.

“It's good to see you,” Miranda raised her voice to be heard over the music.

Jason simply nodded, but I hadn't expected him to answer. He was already wearing a gag.

“Nice to see you too,” I said. “You two look good together.”

They were wearing matching outfits of red leather that complemented their different colorings. Miranda's dress stopped just below her ass, and the neckline plunged to her navel. Jason was wearing a pair of leather pants that I was sure would be a bit uncomfortable by the end of the night if he didn't get any release. And with Miranda, it was fifty-fifty that he'd get it.

“Where's Hanna?” Miranda looked around, clearly expecting to see the other woman appear at my side.

There was a conversation I didn't want to have with anyone, especially not like this.

“Are you two performing today?” I asked as I set my glass on the counter.

Miranda smiled. “We are, actually. Are you and Hanna ever going to get up and show us what you've got?”

I shook my head, my jaw clenched so tight that it actually hurt. I hoped they'd see it as a possessive Dom not wanting to share his Sub, as someone

who wasn't fond of exhibitionism. I might enjoy some voyeurism, but even if Hanna had been here, my answer still would've been no. The thought of anyone else seeing Hanna naked, seeing her come, pissed me off.

Except if things between us were truly and fully broken, someone else would see her naked, see her come. Even if she didn't stay in the BDSM world, she'd find a boyfriend. No other man might get to know what it was like to see her submit, to know what it was like to have her complete surrender, but they would get to know the feel of her lips around their cock, the heat of her tight pussy.

The realization made me sick.

I didn't notice that Miranda and Jason had left until I heard them being announced. I looked up at the stage, a strange wave of déjà vu washing over me as I remembered that Miranda and Jason had performed the first night I brought Hanna here.

I pushed aside the memory and focused on the couple on stage. I'd wanted a distraction. Miranda and Paul were a good way to get it without having to try to muster up the energy to find a Sub. Hell, I wasn't even sure I could manage to get it up. Between the alcohol and my conflicting feelings about Hanna, my body probably wouldn't respond the way I'd want it to. Or maybe I didn't want to, and that's the reason I decided to stay on the bar stool and watch instead of going over to talk to one of the women who kept sending looks my way.

Miranda led Jason across the stage to where a padded bench had been set up. She moved with a brisk efficiency, slipping Jason's hands into the leather restraints on either side of the bench, then tightened them. Once they were in place, she removed the gag and gave Jason a sip of water from a bottle.

Sometimes the lead-up was almost as good as the scene itself. There were all sorts of ways things could go, and it was always fun to imagine what was coming next. I'd seen Miranda and Jason together enough to know that whatever they did would be good.

The music dropped to a low beat that kept the place from being silent, but would still allow us to hear every moan and cry.

Miranda moved in front of Jason and reached down to grab his hair. She used it to tilt his head back as she moved to stand over him.

“Make me come.” She didn't shout, but she'd performed enough to know how to perfectly project her voice so we could all hear her.

His face disappeared between her legs, and she began to moan. Blood

rushed to my cock, but it wasn't because of what I was seeing. It was because I was thinking of how Hanna sounded when I went down on her. The taste of her on my tongue.

I must've been lost in memories for a few minutes, because the next thing I knew, Miranda was crying out her pleasure as Jason completed the task she'd set before him. He panted as she stepped back, his shoulders heaving with each breath he took.

She walked around behind him, her skin flushed, but otherwise seemingly unaffected. She reached around and unfastened the front of Jason's pants, then tugged them down to his thighs. A shudder went through him when Miranda swung the cane she held, but I knew Jason well enough to know it was anticipation rather than dread. He liked a fair bit more pain than I was comfortable with, but that was why he was with Miranda. Subs found Dominants who matched them, who gave them what they needed. Most people thought that all Submissives, all Dominants, were the same, but the tastes were as varied among those in this lifestyle as there were in others.

The sharp sound of the cane on flesh echoed in the room, mingled with Jason's moans and cries. His skin reddened until I knew he would be bruised in the morning, no matter how well Miranda took care of him after, but he kept thanking her, begging for more.

The palm of my hand tingled as I thought of the times I'd spanked Hanna, felt her skin warm. I remembered how much she'd trusted me to let her do that, to show her how a little pain could intensify pleasure. My gut churned, and I forced my attention back to the scene playing out on stage.

Miranda had put the cane down, and was now standing behind Jason, her fingers between his cheeks. None of us had to see graphic details to know what she was doing. Her arm moved back and forth even as Jason rocked back against her hand, moaning, begging for her to touch his cock.

"No, baby," she said in a chiding voice. "You have to come just from my fingers in your ass."

I clenched my hand into a fist, remembering the first time I'd breached Hanna's ass with my fingers. She might not have been a virgin when we met, but she'd been almost as inexperienced as one, and I'd loved knowing that I was the first person to touch her there, the first one to fuck her that way.

And now, unless something changed, I'd never do it again. I'd gone with her to Ohio with every intention of keeping our relationship as solid as it had been these past few months. Instead, it had all fallen apart, and I didn't know

what to do to fix it.

If it could be fixed at all.

Chapter Eleven

HANNA

I blinked as a drop of liquid ran down my cheek, then turned the eye dropper to the other eye. When I lowered my head, I reached for a towel and wiped the drops from my cheeks before I faced my reflection. My eyes were still blood-shot, the skin around them swollen and red, but the eye drops had helped some. Still, nothing would completely wipe away the evidence of what happened yesterday.

I sighed and began to apply cover-up to the raw skin. I couldn't remember the last time I'd cried so much or so often. When Juliette had been kidnapped, I hadn't really cried that much, but yesterday, I hadn't been able to stop. Every hurtful thing Cross had said to me over the past couple days replayed over and over again, sparking a fresh round of tears each time. There was anger beneath the pain, and it was the anger that had given me the strength to get out of bed this morning.

I gave myself one last look to confirm that I'd done the best I could, and then walked out to join Juliette. Neither one of us said anything as we headed for the elevator. I hadn't wanted to tell her what happened, but she'd taken me to my room and refused to leave until I'd told her every last detail.

It'd actually felt better once I'd gotten it all out, though I believed it was due more to the fact that my sister had been furious on my behalf rather than any sort of catharsis that came with the retelling. Juliette had paced and cursed and threatened to castrate, then disembowel Cross for being such a jerk. I knew she wouldn't really resort to violence, but it was nice to have the support. It was also comforting to know that I wasn't overreacting. I hadn't admitted it until that moment that part of what was worrying me was fear that

I'd been blowing it all out of proportion, that any of the points Cross had made were valid. Juliette had assured me that wasn't the case.

"I ended up giving everyone Wednesday and Friday off too." Juliette broke the silence. "So there's only two days' worth of billing to go through."

I nodded, following her outside into the warm California sunshine. While Zanesville wasn't as snowy or cold as northern Ohio, this much sun definitely wasn't what I was used to in December. For once, I almost wished it was overcast and miserable so it would match the way I felt. Logically, I knew that the weather wouldn't make me feel any better, but that didn't stop me from feeling like the bright blue sky was mocking me.

"The Nelson luncheon on Thursday is minimal work," Juliette continued. "They ended up deciding that they only wanted the food brought in, so there aren't any logistics to worry about with wait staff."

"And the Breashears' brunch is Saturday, right?" I asked. I was pretty sure that was when it'd been scheduled, but talking over things helped me focus on the work ahead of me rather than everything else.

"At eleven," Juliette confirmed. "Missie asked that we be set up by ten forty-five and that you and I meet with her at ten."

A weird sensation of déjà vu washed over me. I'd been working a dinner for Missie Breashears the first time I met Cross, even though it wasn't the same sort of event. Juliette hadn't been able to make it to the party, thanks to her former assistant cutting her brake lines, so I'd played hostess. A few people had mistaken me for her, including Cross.

With the memory came a question I hadn't let myself consider since those first few days together. Cross had approached me, thinking I was Juliette, a Dominatrix who would challenge him in ways that no Sub ever would. He'd been bored. Now, I wondered if that's all I'd really been to him – a different kind of challenge. Had he seen my inexperience as something new and fresh, something that would relieve the boredom? He'd told me that once he'd seen me, he hadn't wanted Juliette, and I believed that was the truth. What I'd never asked him was if being his lover had come from a different side of the same desire.

"Earth to Hanna."

Juliette snapped her fingers in front of my face, and I realized that we'd arrived at work. The building wasn't very big, but it didn't need to be. We didn't host events here. The reception area where Juliette and I had offices was small with barely enough room in the lobby for a few chairs, but the

kitchen was easily four times that size, taking up the entire rest of the building. While Juliette did often handle first introductions to clients, she liked to involve herself in a little bit of everything, which was why she needed a business manager to make sure things weren't being overlooked in that department. I'd also taken on a lot of her assistant responsibilities since her last one had been arrested for kidnapping. Juliette hadn't decided yet if she wanted to hire a new one, and I couldn't really blame her. We were both bound to be wary of anyone new coming in.

"All of the details for Missie's brunch needs to be confirmed," Juliette said. "With Thanksgiving last week, I don't want to count on everyone making all of the notes they needed. It's too easy to get distracted when you're looking forward to time off."

I nodded my agreement as the two of us walked into the small but tastefully decorated lobby. Juliette didn't go in her office, however, but rather followed me into mine. I walked behind my desk and turned to see her standing on the other side.

"Are you going to be okay?" Juliette asked. Her expression was concerned, but there wasn't any pity in it, which I appreciated.

I nodded. "I need the distraction."

She came around the desk and put her hand on my arm. "If you want to talk..."

"I don't know what else to say," I admitted. "This wasn't some little squabble about not calling or arguing about who chose what we did last time. Even if it was only that one fight about the pregnancy test, it would've been bad enough, but the things he said yesterday..." My voice trailed off as my heart twisted painfully.

Juliette took my hand. "He'll realize how wrong he was, Hanna."

"Maybe." I squeezed her fingers and tried not to let my voice crack. "But I don't know what I'll do when that happens. *If* that happens."

"Do you still love him?"

My stomach twisted. "I'm furious with him, but I don't hate him. I can't." I swallowed hard. "I just don't know if I can be with him after seeing him this way. You warned me to stay away from him. I should've listened."

Juliette leaned back against my desk, her face somber. "I hoped I was wrong," she said. "I'd based it all on how he acted in the past, before he met you. I thought you'd changed him, and I still hope that's the case. If it's not, then he's the asshole I always thought he was."

Tears burned against my eyelids again. “I thought all of that was a front, that I saw the real man underneath, but what if I was wrong? What if this is who he really is? Cruel? Selfish?” I looked at her. “What if the man I love never really existed?”

She wrapped her arms around me, and I leaned into her. I hadn't meant to say it, hadn't intended to give voice to the thing I was most afraid of – that I'd fallen in love with an illusion – but I knew she wouldn't think badly of me for it.

I'd been sheltered as a child, but I'd never thought of myself as naive. Sure, the circumstances that brought Cross and me together were strange, but I hadn't wanted to consider that they'd given me a false read on the type of man Cross was.

“We'll get through this,” Juliette said. “No matter what happens, you and I will get through it together.”

It wasn't until then that I remembered that what I was going through was minor compared to what Juliette was dealing with. I was an adult dealing with a break-up. I'd survive. Juliette was dealing with so much more.

I took a step back. “Have you talked to either of those two men?”

I knew I didn't need to explain who I meant.

Juliette shook her head. “Not yet. I'm still not exactly sure what to tell them.”

I rubbed the back of my hands across my eyes. “Looks like the two of us both have conversations coming that we don't want to have.”

She chuckled. “We're a pair, aren't we?” She gave me a tight smile. “I'm glad you're here, Hanna. I wouldn't want to do this alone.”

I returned the smile with one of my own. “Me too.”

She straightened and nodded. “Right. Now, let's get to work. Maybe we can distract ourselves from our guy problems.”

I chuckled, feeling a bit more like myself than I had in days. This was what I needed. After Tucker and I broke up, I'd thrown myself into schoolwork and ended up graduating top of my class. If anything could divert me from Cross, this would be it.

I settled at my desk while Juliette went to her office. She'd be in and out all day, doing some paper work, some back in the kitchen. She often worked with the chefs on the menus, on making sure that all of the ingredients were included. I had calls to make, lists to check. It would've been a busy day even without all of this stuff going on with Cross and Juliette.

But it still wasn't enough.

I was scrolling through my checklist for the Nelson luncheon when I saw a familiar pair of names. Miranda Paulson and Jason Murphy. I didn't know their last names, but I was pretty sure they were the same people. The luncheon was to discuss fundraising for high school libraries, and I knew Miranda worked at one.

I'd always like the two of them. It was their performance that had given me my first taste of the BDSM world. But it wasn't only the erotic sensuality of the scene they'd performed but their relationship that I'd admired. They'd been a couple outside of the club, and from everything I'd seen, they were happy.

They were one of the reasons I thought it would be possible for Cross and me to do the same. I hadn't considered the fact that the reason the two of them worked so well together was because they wanted the same things. It appeared that Cross and I didn't.

Still, I couldn't stop thinking about how it felt to be in the club that night, the way it made me feel to watch Miranda dominating Jason. The way I felt when Cross dominated me. Safe. Protected.

Loved.

I took a shuddering breath and tried to push the thoughts from my mind. I didn't want to think about him, or what he meant to me. Most of all, I didn't want to remember how he could make my body sing, how the thought of his touch turned me on. How just the memory of what it felt like with him inside me forced me to press my thighs together in an attempt to ease the ache.

Sex and love weren't enough, no matter how much I wished they were.

Chapter Twelve

CROSS

Well, that was an idiotic move. Going to the club hadn't helped me get my mind off Hanna at all. In fact, all it made me do was think about all the things I wanted to do to her but couldn't. Which had only made me want to drink more.

So I had. I'd drank until I passed out on the couch.

I woke around noon with a raging headache, and a fucking erection hard enough to cut diamonds. I wrapped my hand around it without any real conscious thought, moaning as my fingers tightened.

It wasn't hard to imagine that it was a different hand moving over my cock. A smaller hand. I could almost hear the soft things she usually said when she was stroking me.

So hard, baby. Are you hard for me?

Look how big you are. Can barely get my fingers around you.

Can't wait to get you in my mouth. Taste you. Lick you. Suck you down until you're begging me to finish.

I'm so wet for you, baby. Can you feel how wet I am?

Hanna hadn't been much for dirty talk when we first met, but I'd encouraged her to say what she wanted, how she wanted it. I loved hearing her talk, loved knowing how she felt, how I made her feel.

My hand sped up, and my hips bucked up into my fist. Despite the pounding in my head, my balls tightened. I was close.

Most guys know how they like hand jobs by the time they reach their late teens because they've spent enough time with their hands on their dicks to know what they want. I'd always told women how to do things, including the

first time Hanna had touched me, but more and more, she'd been doing her own thing, and I had to admit that she could do it better.

“Fuck,” I muttered as I moved my hand faster. The friction was almost painful, but I embraced it. I deserved it.

I deserved a hell of a lot more...or less, I supposed, depending on how I looked at it. If I got what I deserved, I'd never have Hanna's hands on me again.

A vision of her flashed through my mind. Those beautiful eyes, darkened with pleasure. Lips slightly parted, ready for a kiss.

I groaned as I came, the hot liquid spilling over my hand and onto the sheets. It was a burst of pleasure, but it was a purely physical release. I felt no relief from the pain inside me. Nothing that made me feel any better. In fact...

I rolled out of bed, barely making it to the trash can before I lost whatever was in my stomach. The heaving made my head throb, the pressure so intense that I threw up again.

When I finally managed to get up without falling, I went to the bathroom and spent a half hour in the shower, trying to wash away the smell. It sobered me enough to be able to clean up my room as well. Unfortunately, even the handful of aspirin I took was barely taking the edge off the headache, which meant that every scent was heightened, every sight and sound magnified.

Once I finished cleaning up, I picked up my phone to make the call I was dreading. I cringed when I saw the twelve missed calls. This was not my day. My assistant picked up on the second ring.

“Mr. Phillips, I was getting worried.”

I winced at the sound of his voice, but that was due more to my still throbbing temples than anything on his part. “I'm sorry, Abraham, the holiday got away from me. I won't be in today. If you could make apologies for me and reschedule things, I'll be in first thing tomorrow.”

“Of course, sir.”

We ended the call, and I stared at my screen before scrolling through the missed calls to clear things up. None of them were from Hanna. That wasn't a surprise. After the way I treated her, I didn't blame her for not texting or calling. I wouldn't want to talk to me either.

I tossed my phone down on the couch and looked around. I loved my home, loved the memories that came with staying in the place where I'd grown up. But right now, it felt far more empty than it ever had before. Hanna might not officially live with me, but I could feel her presence, see her

everywhere.

We'd sat on this couch and talked, held each other while we watched movies. We'd made love here, sometimes soft and sweet, sometimes rough and fast. I could picture it with painful clarity. Her straddling my lap, skirt hitched up around her waist, breasts bared. Bending her over the arm of the couch, her panties hanging off one ankle.

The kitchen was just as bad. My mother and I had taken cooking classes together when I was twelve, and I'd always kept up my skills, especially after she was gone. It had always been my way of connecting with her. When I first brought Hanna here, I cooked for her. Then I started teaching her how to cook. We'd spent hours laughing and talking, tasting. I couldn't count how many times we'd gotten distracted, kissing, touching...more.

There wasn't a room in the entire house we hadn't christened. It wasn't even intentional. We just weren't able to keep our hands off each other. Sex had always been our way of reaching each other, comforting each other. Even when things had looked their bleakest, we could lose ourselves in each other.

I couldn't go back to the way things were before I met her. I wanted things the way they were with her before the disaster of last week.

That meant I'd have to get off my ass and do something about it. She made the first move by coming to see me yesterday, and I'd fucked that up. It was my turn to go to her.

I made myself another cup of coffee and drank it as I changed into jeans and a fitted charcoal gray shirt that I knew Hanna loved. Feeling almost completely sober and functional, I brushed my teeth, studied my reflection, and then headed out the door.

It wasn't until I arrived at the building Juliette and Hanna worked out of that my nerves made themselves known. I was taking a risk coming here, I knew. Juliette would be here. Other employees too. There was a chance they'd have clients, people who knew me. I could easily be humiliated in front of them. The smarter move would've been to wait until she was done, go to the apartment and talk to her there. Juliette would give us privacy.

But I couldn't wait that long. If I went home, I'd only spend the time pacing around, letting the anxiety build until I was ready to explode. I could go to the gym and try to burn off the excess energy there since my usual method of relieving stress wasn't an option, but I doubted I could concentrate. Going to work was out of the question. Even if my head was in it, I couldn't go in looking like this. I'd cleaned myself up, but it was still pretty clear how

I'd spent the last couple days, and that wasn't something I wanted to show my employees.

No, I needed to get this taken care of right away. The risk of other people hearing us was worth it. I headed for the door before I could talk myself out of it.

“Hey, Elora.” I greeted the receptionist with a smile. “Is Hanna busy?”

In her mid-forties, Elora DeBola had been with Juliette for two years and was probably the best receptionist I'd met. Courteous and polite, she had a way of telling people to go to hell that made them want to smile and thank her for it.

“She doesn't have any appointments,” Elora said. “But I don't know if she's working on something. I'll ask.”

“Don't.” I managed to keep the smile on my face. “I'd like to surprise her.”

Elora smiled at me, and I breathed a sigh of relief that Hanna hadn't told her to keep me out. That might have been because Hanna didn't think I'd show up here, but I wouldn't complain, not if it let me get in to see her.

I gave a light knock on the door so I wouldn't completely shock her, then opened it. She raised her head, and I watched as the color drained from her face. She looked exhausted, and even the make-up she was wearing couldn't hide the fact that she'd been crying.

In that moment, I hated myself. I loved her, and I'd hurt her like this.

I closed the door and walked around the desk, squatting so we were closer to eye level.

“You shouldn't be here.” She finally found her voice.

“I know,” I said, “but I have to be. I screwed up, Hanna.”

She didn't say anything, but the expression on her face said that she agreed.

“I should never have left you in Ohio.” I wanted to reach out, take her hand, but I had a feeling that she wouldn't want me to touch her. Not yet, anyway. “I should have stayed and talked to you, worked things out instead of letting them fester. I was an idiot.”

“Yes,” she said. “You were.”

I counted it progress that she hadn't kicked me out yet, so I kept going. “I'm so sorry for the awful things I said. There's no excuse for any of it. I'm so sorry. Can you forgive me?”

Her eyes met mine, and I felt like she was searching for something. I

didn't know what it was, but I hoped she'd find it. Unable to stop myself, I reached out and grasped one of her hands. It stayed limp for a moment as I curled my fingers around it, but then she squeezed back.

"I forgive you."

I moved to my knees and cupped the side of her face with my free hand. "Thank you." I brushed my lips across hers, grateful to finally touch her. "I hate fighting with you. These last few days have been miserable."

Her hand slid around the back of my neck, fingers playing with the short hair there. I ran both hands up her legs to her knees. I kept my eyes on hers as I pushed her legs apart and moved between them.

"I missed you," I said as I slid my hands higher, pushing up her skirt as I went. "I missed you so much."

I took her mouth again, harder than before. All of the pent-up emotion, all of the desire and need came pouring out of me as I kissed her. My fingers dug into her thighs as my tongue plundered her mouth. I felt like I'd been given a reprieve. A dead man offered a second chance. I wasn't sure how close we'd come to breaking up, but I didn't even want to think about it. I had her back, and I planned to remind her how good we were together.

I kissed my way down her jaw, her neck, then lowered my head even as I slid my hands under her ass.

"Cross, not here."

I looked up at her even as I lifted her enough to remove her panties. "You know what to say if you really want me to stop."

Her eyes darkened as I tucked her underwear into my pants pocket, but she didn't say her safe word. My balls tightened. She wanted me as much as I wanted her.

I positioned her legs over my shoulders and gripped her hips tight to keep her in place. I wondered for a moment if the office was sound-proofed but then decided that I didn't care. If Hanna didn't want anyone else knowing what was going on, she'd have to keep herself quiet. Personally, I was hoping to make her scream.

The groan that escaped when I pressed my mouth against her made my cock harden. I held her in place as I slid my tongue between her folds. I loved going down on her, and not just because it meant that I'd eventually get to be inside her. I loved how wet she was, how she responded to my touch. Hell, I loved everything about this amazing body.

She buried a hand in my hair, tugging hard enough for it to hurt, but I

didn't mind. Neither of us were masochists, but we both knew a little pain could add to the pleasure. Right now, the little jolts were making my erection press against my zipper.

Still, I stayed focused on my task. I was going to make her come at least once before I fucked her. I rubbed the flat of my tongue over her clit, then slid two fingers inside.

“Cross,” she panted my name, and it was the most beautiful sound I'd ever heard. “Cross, please.”

Her grip on my hair tightened. I curled my fingers, searching for that spot inside her. It didn't take me long to find it. Her entire body jerked as I pressed against the rough patch that made her go wild. I twisted my fingers even as I continued to tease her clit with my tongue and felt her body begin to tense. She was close.

“Please, Cross, please, please,” she begged. She pulled my hair, moved her hips, trying to get whatever it was she needed to finally get off.

I looked up at her. “I've got you, baby.”

I twisted my fingers, letting my knuckles rub against her g-spot. Her head fell back against her chair, and she came. I licked her sensitive skin, easing her down from her climax. When I pulled my fingers out, she whimpered. I licked them clean as I stood.

“Desk or chair?” I asked.

Hanna gave me a blank look.

I put my hands on the armrests of her chair and leaned over her. Damn. She was gorgeous most of the time, but this was how I thought she looked her best. Skin flushed with arousal, pupils wide, chest heaving. Limp and relaxed from an orgasm.

I pitched my voice low as I leaned close enough to smell her shampoo. “Do you want to fuck on the desk, or on the chair?”

“Probably not the best idea.” She glanced at the door.

“Are you expecting someone?”

“Not until after lunch,” she said.

I could see the conviction wavering, and I made my voice as stern as possible. “Desk or chair?” We might not have been in the club or in the playroom, but she knew what I sounded like when I was in charge.

“Desk.”

I picked her up and turned, sitting her on the edge of her desk. She tilted her head up, the desire clear in her eyes, and I happily obliged her with a kiss.

Even as our mouths moved together, my hands were busy undoing my jeans. She gasped into my mouth as I pushed inside her.

Fuck, she was so tight and hot. I wouldn't last long.

I nipped at her bottom lip, then moaned as her pussy tightened around me. Yeah, this was going to be quick.

"Touch yourself," I ordered as I began to move. "I'm going to come fast, and I want you there with me."

I felt her hand between us, fingers rubbing against us both as I thrust into her with short, hard strokes. I pressed my face against her neck, sucked skin into my mouth, worked it with my teeth even as she shuddered against me. I was going to leave a mark, one that would show everyone that she was mine.

Mine.

The word reverberated through me, and I groaned out her name as I came. A moment later, she followed me, her body stiffening once more. I wrapped my arms around her, holding her to me, needing to feel her body against mine, needing to know that she was mine.

"I love you," I murmured against her skin.

"I love you too."

And there we were. Relief swept through me. Everything was back to normal.

Chapter Thirteen

HANNA

So, things were back to normal. After Cross left on Monday, he sent me a text asking to take me out to dinner. Then, yesterday, we met for lunch, and made plans for dinner tonight, with me staying over afterwards. It was like the whole thing over Thanksgiving never happened.

That should've made me happy. No more conflict, no wondering if the two of us were over. We were good together, able to enjoy sharing a meal...sharing a bed.

But I wasn't happy. Not really. I was glad that Cross had apologized, and that we weren't fighting anymore, but we hadn't talked about things. Not the things that caused the arguments. Cross hadn't said anything about why he'd freaked out so badly when he'd seen the pregnancy test, why he'd said the things he'd said. Saying that he was sorry and it'd all been blown out of proportion had been fine at the time, but I assumed we'd address the real issues at some point.

It didn't look like Cross planned on bringing it up, but if one of us didn't, then nothing would change. And someday, I needed things to move forward. Which meant I needed to know what had triggered the blow up.

It hadn't been Tucker because I was sure if Cross and I hadn't already been fighting, he never would've gone off about my ex. What we needed to talk about, I knew, was the whole baby / family freak out.

I was barely out of college, so it wasn't like I was asking for a ring and a baby right now, but I did want a family in the not-so-distant future. I wasn't like those girls back home whose entire life revolved around finding a husband and having children, but I also didn't want to be like Juliette, closing

in on thirty and suddenly finding myself alone and pregnant. I refused to compromise on what I wanted in a man just so I could have a family, but I also wasn't going to waste my time on someone who didn't eventually want those things too.

I'd thought Cross and I were on the same page. I wasn't sure exactly why I thought that since we'd never actually talked about it. Maybe it was naive of me, but I'd just assumed that he'd wanted a family. He'd always sounded so lonely and wistful when he talked about his parents and not having siblings that I thought it meant he wanted something more than that.

But now I felt sure I was wrong.

The issue, however, was that I didn't know for certain. Which was why we needed to talk. And I was thinking sooner rather than later. I didn't want to drag it out if there would never be anything more between us. I loved him, but I wasn't going to spend the rest of my life as a girlfriend who sometimes spent nights at her rich boyfriend's place.

Better to end it now than in a few years when I would be too full of resentment and bitterness to have any fond memories at all.

At least, that's what I kept telling myself.

A lump formed in my throat and I fought the urge to cry. There was no point in getting upset until I knew for sure what Cross was thinking.

Fortunately, I heard the door open, and I jumped at the distraction. Elora had gone to lunch, so I was covering the phones and greeting anyone who happened to come in. I hurried out into the lobby, a professional smile already on my face.

I had to admit, the man standing in front of me wasn't what I'd expected. Most people who came in to hire us were women, and the few men were generally older. This guy looked like he was about Cross's age, though not as expensively dressed. Hair the color of honey and an athletic body that his casual attire couldn't hide.

"Good morning," I said as I put out my hand. "I'm Hanna Breckenridge. How can I help you?"

"I'm Dalton Letlow." He smiled, but it didn't quite reach his dark blue-gray eyes.

Clearly, something was bothering him, but I doubted it was anything to do with food. "Are you looking to schedule an event?" I asked. "Or did you have questions regarding our menus? If you'd step into my office, we can discuss whatever it is that brought you here."

“Actually, I'm here to see Juliette.” He ran his hand through his hair when he said her name, as if she was the reason he was distracted.

I wondered if that was a nervous gesture or if he was trying to make himself more presentable. If so, it really wasn't necessary. He looked good.

“She's in the back with our chefs,” I said. “If you'll let me know what you're looking for, I might be able to assist you.”

“She actually called me and left a voicemail saying she wanted to talk to me,” Dalton said.

“I'll give her a call then.” I motioned toward the pair of chairs that sat against the wall. “If you'd like to have a seat, I'm sure she'll be with you shortly.”

Before I'd taken two steps toward my office, however, the door that led to the kitchen area opened and Juliette stepped out. I opened my mouth to tell her that she had a visitor, but when she looked up and saw Dalton, I knew I didn't need to say a word.

“Dalton? What are you doing here?”

That's when it hit me, and I realized that this was personal and not work related at all. I backed toward my office, hoping to avoid things becoming even more awkward, but I saw that I needn't have bothered. Neither one of them were even looking in my direction.

“You said you wanted to see me.”

I'd never seen Juliette flustered, but it was clear she was right now. She pointed at her office.

“Let's talk somewhere private.”

I was a little curious, but I knew if Juliette wanted to confirm who he was, she would. Meanwhile, I had work to do.

I went back into my office and pulled up the spreadsheet I needed to work on next. Things were ready for the Nelson luncheon, but I always liked to double-check. I methodically went through the list, letting the repetition turn into a rhythm that allowed me to focus on my work. With the completion of each task, I checked off things on the spreadsheet. When I finished with that, I emailed the completed file to Juliette letting her know that everything was on track for the luncheon.

I glanced out into the lobby to confirm that Elora was back, and then looked at Juliette's office. The door was closed, so I assumed she and Dalton were still talking. I went back to work and was in the middle of making up my final checklist for the Breashears brunch when Dalton walked past my

office. His face was blank, eyes staring straight ahead. I heard Elora say something to him, but he didn't even pause to acknowledge her.

What the hell happened in there?

I got up and walked over to Juliette's office. The door was partly open, but I still knocked.

"It's me."

"Come in."

Juliette's voice was shaky, which didn't make me feel any better. When I pushed open the door and stepped into her office, I saw that she was sitting behind her desk, head in her hands. I closed the door behind me and sat down across from her.

"Are you okay?"

She raised her head, and a flare of anger went through me at whatever Dalton had said. Her face was pale, hands shaking as she clasped them together in front of her.

"What happened?" I reached across the desk and grabbed her hand. "What did that bastard do to you?"

Her laugh was a half-sob, and she took a deep, shuddering breath before meeting my eyes. "That's a great choice of words at the moment, Hanna."

I gave her a puzzled look.

"Remember how I told you that one of two men could've gotten me pregnant?" She didn't wait for me to answer before continuing, "I contacted the first guy, and he told me he'd had a vasectomy five years ago, so that ruled him out."

"Unless he was lying," I offered.

"I doubt that," she said. "He had it done after learning that he was a carrier for some genetic disease and never wanted to run the risk of passing it on to a kid, so he goes in every year to make sure nothing's grown back. Trust me, he wasn't lying."

I'd already put the pieces together, but I was going to let her say it. "And Dalton?"

She nodded. "He was guy number two, the one I'd picked up with the intention of having sex. We hadn't exchanged last names, and he hadn't hired me to dominate him, so it took me a couple days to track him down. I didn't realize he'd come here."

Her voice was starting to crack, so I gave her hand a squeeze. "It's okay."

The words sounded weak, some sort of rote platitude given to people out

of obligation, but I couldn't think of anything else to say.

“I'd always prided myself on how careful I am,” she said. “On the pill and using condoms. Hell, most of the time, I even insist on condoms for oral sex.”

She leaned back in her chair, releasing my hand. She'd talked a bit about how the odds of this happening had been so low she'd never thought it possible, but I could tell that, now, the reality of it all had hit her.

“He was quite the gentleman about it. He didn't blame me,” she murmured. “Dalton, I mean. I told him about the antibiotics and how we must've had a faulty condom, and he didn't act like it was my fault at all. He didn't even ask if I was sure he was the father.”

“What did he say?” I asked.

“That he needed time to process and think,” she said. “I told him I completely understood. I mean, I've had almost a week to come to terms with it. I couldn't expect him to immediately know what he wants. He said he'd call me in a couple days, and we'd set up a time to talk in more detail.”

“He seems nice enough,” I offered.

Juliette shrugged. “I barely know him well enough to be able to agree with that. I mean, I know he's a Sub, and how he likes sex, but I don't know his middle name or his birthday.” She shook her head. “I don't know what to do, Hanna. I mean, can you imagine the looks on our parents' faces if they find out I got knocked up by some one-night stand?”

I got up and walked around the desk. I leaned down and wrapped my arms around her. She leaned into me as I kissed the top of her head. “It'll all work out, Juliette. You'll see. And whatever you decide to do, I'm with you. You won't go through this alone.”

“Thanks.” She put her arms around my waist. “I'm so glad you moved out here.”

“Me, too.”

I was, truly, but I also was a bit relieved that Juliette couldn't see my face and know that, even though I was grateful to be here to help her, a part of me wondered how things would've been different if I'd stayed at home, if I'd never met Cross. I loved my sister, and I loved Cross, but I couldn't help thinking that my life might've been a lot easier if I'd just listened to my parents and stayed in Zanesville.

Chapter Fourteen

CROSS

After last week, I'd been worried that everything was going to fall apart, but since I'd talked to Hanna on Monday, things had gone back to normal. We'd talked and texted just like always. We had dinner together, had lunch, made love. It was all perfect.

I'd even been able to concentrate at work all week, which was a good thing since my absence on Monday had left me with a completely packed schedule. I had meetings to run and business deals to look over, people to meet with. And my time with Hanna was exactly what it should have been – a much needed distraction with my wonderful girlfriend.

I leaned back in my seat. Today's schedule was easier than earlier in the week, which meant I didn't have anyone coming in until after lunch. I had a couple phone calls to return, but not much else for the next hour. Usually, I'd spend the time looking over other business possibilities, considering various charities to support, perhaps even new ones to found.

At the moment, however, I preferred to use the time to think about how well things had gone over the last couple days. The dinner we'd made side by side. One of the reasons I'd enjoyed cooking lessons with my mother had been that we'd spent time together, just the two of us. With Hanna, I appreciated not only the opportunity for us to do something together, but I liked teaching her things, and not only in the bedroom.

There was also the fact that, even in a kitchen as large as mine, cooking put us in close proximity to each other. One of the things I loved to do was build anticipation. The caress of a shoulder, the brush of a hip. It was a part of a relationship that I hadn't been able to take advantage of before. Usually,

the only way I got to work on anticipation was once the clothes were off, and sex was coming up fairly soon. This was different.

Well, sort of. I'd only been able to deal with not having my hands on bare skin for so long before I'd put Hanna on the counter and fucked her while our food was cooking. I could still hear her calling out my name as she came, feel her tightening around me. It'd made dinner so much more interesting knowing that her panties were soaked with my cum. As soon as we'd finished eating, I'd had her take them off and straddle my lap.

I reached down to adjust myself. Thinking about sex with Hanna was a sure-fire way to spend the rest of the day with a hard-on. Not exactly the condition I wanted to be in during my afternoon meetings. At least one of the guys would've thought it was funny, but I didn't want to be unprofessional.

So I made myself think about other things. Facts and figures from sales reports. Blueprints for buildings. Anything that was boring and didn't automatically make me think of Hanna or sex.

Once I'd calmed my libido, I reached for my keyboard, ready to get some work done. I hadn't gotten very far when Abraham buzzed me.

“Mr. Phillips, there's a young woman here to see you.”

I frowned. I didn't have any young women on my schedule for the day, and Abraham knew Hanna so he would've just said her name.

“She says it's important that she speak to you, sir,” Abraham continued. “Should I schedule her an appointment for next week?”

I looked at my computer and the list of details I had to go over, then thought about how nice a distraction would be. I leaned over and pressed the intercom button. “Send her in.”

The woman who walked in looked like she was a little younger than me but not quite as young as Hanna. She was pretty, but I was willing to wager that her curves drew more attention than her face. They were superb. Judging by the way she walked, she knew it too. Shoulder-length dark blonde hair and, as she drew closer, I noticed dark blue eyes.

I stood and held out a hand. “Good morning, Miss...?”

“Carver,” she said. Her voice was low and husky. “Taliyah Carver.”

She shook my hand, then dropped into the seat across from me. She crossed one leg over the other and gave me an expectant look. I sat down and took a moment to study her. I'd never seen her before, I was sure of that, but she looked like she knew me. Then again, that wasn't surprising. A lot of strangers knew me. I wasn't the kind of celebrity people thought of when they

thought of Hollywood, but anyone interested in the old money families who'd helped found this area could easily learn about me.

“How can I help you, Miss Carver?” I asked, breaking the silence.

“I have a story to tell you, Mr. Phillips,” she said with a smile.

Not what I was expecting, but I had to admit, it piqued my curiosity, and that hadn't happened in a long time. If I was honest about it, it was boredom that had first made me want to approach Juliette in the first place. Of course, it wasn't Juliette I'd met, but rather Hanna, and I was grateful for it, but it'd been a while since anything had surprised me.

“Go ahead.”

She gave me another one of those little smiles. “In Nashville, Tennessee, almost thirty years ago, there was a singer by the name of Layla. She came from a poor family but was determined to make something of herself. No one believed in her, no one encouraged her, but she worked hard, sang wherever she could, whenever she could.”

I wasn't entirely sure where she was going with this, but I wouldn't cut her off just yet. Something in my gut told me to hear her out.

“One day, she was singing in this little hole-in-the-wall club, the kind of place that people went to have private conversations, and a man catches her eye. He's handsome, and clearly far too rich for this place. She knows the man he's sitting with. He's the sort of talent scout who takes advantage of women, getting them to have sex with him for promises of movie and television roles. He'd been after her for years.”

I knew the type, unfortunately, but I'd done my best to make sure I never dealt with those sorts of people.

“Layla, of course, knew to avoid the talent scout, but when the other man came to see her, she couldn't resist. He made her promises that she believed but didn't follow through on. He wasn't the same as the talent scout, selling sex, but he did something so much worse. He told her that he loved her, that he wanted to marry her. But he was already married. Had a child, in fact. When she found out, she left him, vowing never to see him again. It wasn't until several weeks later that she realized she would always have a part of him with her. She was pregnant.”

I tried not to scowl. I'd been curious, but now I was just annoyed. I hoped she'd get to the point. And not the point I had a feeling she was heading to.

“The requisite number of months later, and I was born.” She smiled at me.

“That's a nice story,” I said. “But I'm not quite sure why you're telling me.”

“Aren't you?” She uncrossed her legs and leaned forward, her eyes glinting. “Your father never told you about my mother, or me, did he?”

The words didn't make sense. Couldn't make sense. “My father?” I was proud of myself for sounding nonchalant.

“Come now, Cross. Let's not play around like this.” She leaned back again and pulled a cigarette from her purse.

“You can't smoke in here,” I said firmly. “And I'd appreciate if you'd stop with the storytelling and speak plainly, Miss Carver.”

“All right,” she said. “You want me to speak plainly? How's this for plain: your father fucked my mother under false pretenses, and then ignored me, both when he was alive and even after he died.” She smiled, twirling the cigarette between her fingers. “I'm your half-sister.”

Chapter Fifteen

HANNA

I got off later than I'd expected, so Cross was already at his house when I got there. We'd planned on making dinner together, so I went to the kitchen first. On the counter was a note.

In the shower, babe. Go ahead and get started without me.

I flushed even though the note was totally innocent. Well, maybe not totally. It would be like Cross to have written about being in the shower because he wanted me thinking about him being naked and wet.

My entire body throbbed at the image of him standing under the shower head, letting the water trickle down over those broad shoulders, that firm torso, down...down...down...

"Fuck me," I muttered. He was damn lucky I was hungry because, otherwise, I would've *really* started without him.

Even now, my fingers itched to be under my skirt, under my panties, stroking myself, feeling my slick arousal, bringing myself to the edge of orgasm...then stopping just before I got there because I knew Cross would punish me if I came without him. A part of me almost wanted to do it, wanted him to punish me. As much as I enjoyed the gentle side of Cross, the tender love making we sometimes experienced, another part of me craved the more primal side of things.

We talked about it when he first introduced me into the BDSM world, and I'd understood it, even though I couldn't explain it. There was something inside me that wanted to be claimed, that wanted to feel him taking me hard and rough, as if his desire was too much for something slow.

No, not wanted. Needed. I needed it.

The intensity of the feeling still took me off-guard sometimes, how much I needed him. I could still function on my own, could still stand on my own two feet, but I knew, now that I'd opened myself up to this world, there would always be a part of me that needed what he gave me.

And that scared me, thinking about losing him when I knew how much he meant to me.

I pushed the speculations aside and walked over to the refrigerator. We'd planned on making a stir-fry, so I pulled out the vegetables we'd need. I'd finished slicing the tomatoes and peppers and was washing off my hands when I heard him behind me. I turned, mouth open to tell him what I'd done...and froze.

Damn.

He had a towel wrapped around his waist, but that was it. His chest glistened with the moisture he hadn't wiped away, and his hair was still wet enough to drip onto his shoulders. As my eyes trailed down over his chest to that thin line of hair, I forgot that I was hungry for anything other than him.

Without a word, he closed the distance between us and captured my mouth in a scorching kiss. His hands slid down my back to cup my ass, and then he was lifting me. The towel fell away as I wrapped my legs around his waist. The thought of how he must look, muscles flexing as he walked with us, made me moan into his mouth. I loved his body, the feel of it, the way it looked.

When my back was against the wall, Cross moved one hand between us. I felt my panties tear more than I heard them, but I couldn't manage the words to scold him. I'd probably care about the underwear tomorrow, but right now, I only cared about him.

I cried out as he shoved inside me. I was wet, but there'd been no foreplay, and he stretched me too fast, too much. He wrapped his hand in my hair, yanking my head to the side as he fucked me. His kisses on my throat were rough, nips with his teeth then soothed with his tongue. I squeezed my eyes closed and hung on, unable to do anything else but try to deal with the overwhelming sensations coursing through me.

When I came, it crashed over me without any warning. Cross swore as my body tightened around him, then he was pulling out, sending another ripple of pleasure through me as he rubbed against my g-spot on his way. I barely registered that we were moving again, and then I was bent over the table, my legs trembling as they struggled to hold me.

He shoved my skirt up around my waist, baring my shredded panties and the flesh they revealed. The first time his hand came down on my ass, I yelped, more from surprise than the sting. Three more cracks, two on either cheek and I was dripping. I propped myself up on my elbows as Cross slid his hands up my ribcage and then around to move underneath my shirt. His cock pressed against my hip, hot and hard, and I pushed back against him, wanting him inside me again.

“Be a good girl,” he whispered in my ear as he shoved my bra up over my breasts. “I’m not feeling very gentle at the moment.”

His words shouldn’t have sparked a flame of desire in me, but they did.

“What if I don’t want to be good?” I asked, looking over my shoulder to meet his eyes.

The heat that flared there made my mouth go dry. He squeezed my breasts hard enough to hurt, and I whimpered but didn’t protest. His fingers found my nipples, rolling and pinching until they were throbbing in time with my pussy.

He used his knee to nudge my legs apart as he straightened, and then his cock was pressing against me. My eyelids fluttered as he slid himself deep inside. It was easier than the prior time, but still enough to make us both groan.

“I’m going to fuck you now.” He leaned over me and pushed his thumb into my mouth. “And you’re going to come with my thumb in your ass.”

I scraped my teeth over the pad of his thumb, then worked my tongue around it, knowing that this was probably all of the lubrication I would get.

“Then, after dinner, we’ll spend some time in the playroom.”

I shivered and heard him curse as the movement caused me to tighten around him. Then his thumb was gone, and he was driving into me with enough force to make me see stars. Over and over, he filled me, the head of his cock rubbing against my g-spot until the friction was almost painful. When he started to work his thumb into my ass, I came again. My arms gave out and my breasts pressed against the cool tabletop. His thumb twisted even as he moved faster. Just when it started to become more than I could take, he went over the edge, his cock emptying inside me. His hips rocked against me, coaxing out the last drop of pleasure for both of us before pulling out. I gasped at the sudden loss, then flushed as his semen trickled down my thigh.

Cross smacked my still exposed ass and gave me a self-satisfied grin.

“Why don’t you go get cleaned up while I finish making dinner?”

And then he was walking back to the kitchen, whistling as he went.

I stayed there for a moment, still regaining my breath, and then straightened. I pulled my skirt down and adjusted my bra even though I planned to change out of them both. Cross might not have any qualms about walking around naked, but I wasn't quite that comfortable.

I went to the bathroom off the master bedroom and stripped out of my clothes. I scowled at my torn panties and tossed them in the trash. I didn't bother with a shower, settling instead for a quick clean-up and then slipped on the robe I kept here. If we were going to the playroom after we ate, there really wasn't a point in a shower or clothes. I wouldn't be surprised if Cross ate naked just so he'd have less to take off later.

When I stepped back into the kitchen, however, he was wearing a pair of sweatpants that he must've grabbed when I was in the bathroom. He looked over his shoulder at me and smiled.

“Just finishing up.”

A few minutes later, we settled at the table with our plates and began to eat.

“How'd the Nelson thing go?” Cross asked. “You guys weren't working it, right? Just bringing in the food.”

I nodded. “It went off without a hitch, which was good because Juliette's already freaking out about the brunch tomorrow.”

“Why?” he asked. “She's worked with Missie Breashears before. I thought they got along well.”

“They do,” I said. “But Juliette heard that there's supposed to be some bigwigs there, and she wants to make a good impression. She's decided that she wants to stop supplementing her income from being a dominatrix.”

“Yeah, that might be a bit hard to keep up once she starts showing,” Cross said as he reached for his glass of wine.

“Is it dangerous?” I asked, both curious and concerned. “I mean, I know it's safe to have sex for most of the duration of a pregnancy, but I don't know about any of this other stuff.”

“I'm not sure.” He shrugged. “I was thinking more along the lines of no one wanting to be dominated by a pregnant lady.”

I stared at him, a sick feeling forming in my stomach. Fortunately, he was looking down at his plate, and I managed to hide my expression by the time he looked up. I pushed the food around on my plate, suddenly not very hungry.

Was that it? Was that the real reason the pregnancy test had freaked him out? Why he said all that shit when he'd been drunk? I'd assumed a fear of commitment was the issue, or even that he was simply comfortable where we were and had no desire to change things.

I'd never once imagined that the reason he might not want to get married or have kids was something so fucking selfish and superficial as the way my appearance would change if I became pregnant. It wasn't like I expected any man to get turned on by a random pregnant woman, but I'd always assumed that a decent man would still want the partner who was carrying his child.

Then again, that was going with the assumption that Cross was a decent man. The events of the last couple weeks had begun to make me think differently.

When he said he loved me, I truly believed that was unconditional, that even if something happened to me, he'd still want to be at my side. I'd never been one of those women who feared that if they gained weight, started looking old, were diagnosed with some sort of disease, that their partner would leave them.

Even when Tucker had broken up with me, I'd never thought it was because of how I looked or anything like that. I'd completely understood it, even if it had hurt. He hadn't had the self-control needed to maintain a long-distance relationship, but that hadn't been because of me. He wouldn't have been able to make it with anyone that way.

As I sat across from Cross now, I was forced to admit how little I truly knew about him, and how much had just been things I'd assumed. I'd thought they were conclusions drawn from facts I'd observed, but now I could see that most had been because of what I wanted to be true.

At first, I'd worried that our relationship had taken off too quickly, that the circumstances under which we'd gotten together had prevented us from progressing naturally. But things had gone so well that I'd decided Cross and I were so perfect for each other that there was no point in us trying to take things slow.

I just hadn't stopped to think that part of what usually came as part of a normal relationship's progression was talking about things like this, about marriage and kids. Now, I saw the reality of who Cross was, and I didn't know if I could be with a man like that.

"I'm not feeling well," I blurted out, then pushed back my chair and stood. "I think I'll get dressed and go home."

“Hanna?”

I heard Cross stand as he said my name, but I was already heading back toward the bedroom. I couldn't look at him.

“Babe, are you okay? Do you need me to take you to the hospital?” He followed me.

“No.” I shook my head as I pulled out the first pair of pants and shirt I found.

“Was I too rough?”

His voice was so gentle, so caring, that I wanted to give in, to let him hold me and comfort me. But I couldn't, because that would lead to sex, and the way I was feeling right now, I didn't want to try to make that connection. Not that he'd ever force me, but when his hands were on me, I couldn't think straight.

“No,” I said again. “I'm just not feeling well, and with the brunch tomorrow, I can't afford to get sick.”

“At least let me call you a car to take you home,” he offered.

“I can make it on my own.” I brushed by him without looking up. “I'll text you when I get there so you won't worry.”

I felt his eyes on me as I left, but he didn't try to stop me, didn't come after me to insist on going with me. It was just like what happened before. He had no clue what he said wrong. Granted, this last comment hadn't sparked an argument, so I couldn't really expect him to get it, but considering how he'd behaved before, I had no reason to think he'd even think that what he said was hurtful.

Cross lived in his own little world. If things didn't affect him, they didn't matter. I didn't know why I hadn't seen it before, but it made me realize that I needed to rethink being a part of his world.

A part of me wished I'd never invited him back to Ohio for Thanksgiving, but I knew that it was better to find out now instead of wasting too much time on someone who didn't share the same values as I did.

I'd focus on the brunch, and then talk to Cross when he called tomorrow evening to discuss plans for the rest of the weekend. We'd hash things out between us, and then I could start looking at where I wanted to go in the future.

Chapter Sixteen

HANNA

I was pretty sure I looked like shit, but Juliette was nice enough not to mention it. I tried to cover the dark circles under my eyes, but they were still visible to anyone who cared enough to notice. I made sure to dress pristinely and to actually style my usually crazy curls, hoping that would take the attention from how tired I clearly was. Or, if anyone noticed, they'd assume I'd been working too hard.

Juliette knew the truth, though not all of it. I wasn't about to tell her what Cross had said about a pregnant dominatrix. I'd kept his comments vague, saying that he made a couple comments that had made me wonder if I needed to reconsider our relationship. Since she'd already known about the arguments we'd had recently, a further detailed explanation hadn't been needed.

“Juliette!” Missie Breashears came toward us, arms open. She gave my sister two of those air kisses that I always thought only happened in the movies, and then turned to me. “Hanna, darling.”

She leaned forward, and I let her greet me the same way. In her mid-fifties, Missie barely looked a day over forty-five, and unlike many women who used surgeries and shots that ended up making them look like plastic, Missie's youthful appearance was all natural. Her sepia brown curls were probably dyed but done so well that it was impossible to tell. The clothes she wore were expensively tailored, but not ostentatious like a lot of the people around here who thought they had to prove they had money.

“Everything looks wonderful,” Missie said. “The guests will probably be arriving shortly. Is there anything you need from me?”

Juliette shook her head. "Everything's right on schedule."

"Excellent." Missie headed back into the main room.

I glanced at Juliette. "You do remember that half of our wait staff is running late thanks to an accident downtown, right?"

She nodded. "Already have that covered."

I raised an eyebrow. "You do?"

"If they're not here on time, you and I will help cover the appetizers and drinks until they get here."

I frowned. I hadn't liked playing hostess at the last event we'd done for Missie, and this would be direct interaction with hundreds of people. Not exactly my favorite thing to do. I was fine with people if I had a specific purpose for talking to them, or if I was mingling for a specific reason. This sort of thing, however, tended to make me a little nervous.

And when I was nervous, I sometimes said things that I wouldn't have said otherwise.

"Have you talked to Dalton again?"

Juliette turned and gave me a hard look. "Not the time or place, Hanna." Her voice was flat. "We don't need to discuss personal matters right now. We have work to do."

"You're right," I said. "Sorry."

And she was right. Thinking about the crazy turns my own life had taken recently had made me think about the issues she was dealing with, but I shouldn't have brought them up here.

"I need to focus on work right now," she said. "We both do."

I nodded. We couldn't afford to get distracted, not with so much riding on this brunch. Even as I thought it, I realized that was why she wanted us to help serve. We could play it off as wanting to make sure the guests had everything they needed, assuring them that we were handling everything, but Juliette wanted it as much to make connections with new people.

Even if she wasn't admitting it, she was thinking about the baby. She said she hadn't made up her mind what she wanted to do, and I was sure if I asked her, she would've said she was preparing for all contingencies, or that she'd always intended to pull back from her dominatrix role. While that may have been partially true, I knew that she never would've done any of this if she wasn't at least seriously considering keeping the baby.

We'd never really talked about it, I realized. We'd discussed sex and relationships of that nature, but never whether or not she wanted a family. It

wasn't like she refused to discuss the subject, but rather more like it'd never been brought up. Our parents had always harped on getting married and having kids, and I was sure that Juliette had gotten it worse than me since she was the oldest, so it really wasn't surprising that she didn't want to talk about it.

She glanced at her watch. "I'll go check the progress on the appetizer trays. Can you call Patrick and see if they're still stuck in traffic?"

I nodded and went to retrieve my phone from my purse. After a brief conversation, I had an answer that Juliette wouldn't like. I headed back to the main preparation area where Juliette was shifting plates around on a tray to accommodate additional ones.

"This pattern lets you get almost half a dozen more plates onto each tray," she explained. "You just have to remember to balance things out as you remove the plates. Don't take all from the inside, and shift your fingers to compensate for the change in weight as you remove each plate."

She glanced up as I walked in, and I could see the frustration in her eyes. She wasn't taking it out on the poor server, but she was annoyed. Patrick was the head of the wait staff, and he was usually the one who made sure all of the trays were loaded correctly. He also had three of our most experienced servers with him, which meant we had to explain things that would normally just be taken care of.

"Did you talk to Patrick?"

I nodded as I moved to her side. I kept my voice down as I repeated what he'd told me. "The police were in the middle of setting up a detour when a water main burst. They're moving, but they have to go out and around. It'll be at least a half hour before they get here."

"In time for clean up and dessert, but not here to deliver main courses." Juliette sighed and closed her eyes for a moment.

I didn't say anything. She was thinking.

She opened her eyes again. "I need the server flow chart you made."

I opened the binder where I kept track of all the information needed to allow things to go smoothly. Juliette had one too. We each had our own files, as well as copies of the other's work to serve as back-ups as needed. I flipped to the correct section and pulled out the paper. I handed it to her and then joined her in studying it.

For an event of this size, to ensure that no one was missed and that there weren't any accidents involving servers running into each other, we had a

flow chart that showed where each server was working, as well as the path they were supposed to take. With four of them now absent, it had to be completely reworked.

“All right,” she said as she pulled a pen from her pocket. “Here's what we're going to do.”

I watched as she redrew the lines to compensate for the changes, then frowned when I saw the strange path she'd made for the two of us. I'd started making these charts myself recently, but I'd watched Juliette do it dozens of times first, listened to her explain how each path was specifically designed to make the best use of space, to make sure people's food wasn't the wrong temperature. This, however, didn't follow those guidelines.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

At least she didn't try to insult my intelligence by acting like she didn't know what I was talking about.

“I got the final seating chart from Missie,” she said. “If we're going to be serving, I want to take advantage of it and make sure it gives me the chance to introduce myself to the people I want to know.”

“Then why is mine so weird?” I asked.

She grinned at me. “I figured I'd take the most important people, but with you here, you could cover the people of secondary importance.”

I chuckled. Leave it to Juliette to figure out how to use something most caterers would consider a disaster as a way to boost her business. And to rate all of the guests in such a way that she could decide who she wanted to talk to, and who it was better to relegate to me.

These were one of those times where I could see how staying in Zanesville would've been a total waste of her talents. RJ was being groomed to take over the shop once our parents retired, and even if Juliette had taken over the management part of things, it always would've been RJ's business. I might've been okay with that. I didn't mind not being the owner of the business, but Juliette would've chafed under anyone else's authority, especially our brother's. I loved the guy, but he could be insanely bossy. It drove me nuts, but it would've been worse for Juliette since she was older.

“Is there anything specific you want me to say to any of them?” I asked.

“Introduce yourself, tell them you're the business manager, let them know that if there's anything you or I can do to help them, to just let us know.” Juliette took the altered chart and tacked it up on the board she'd brought with her. It covered the chart that was already on there. “Attention!” She raised her

voice so that everyone could hear her. “Patrick and the others are running late, so we need to change things around a bit. Here's how we'll do it until they get here. Hanna and I will take these two routes, everyone else, here's how the others are broken up.”

The other servers moved closer so that they could see how things had changed. They didn't even blink an eye at hearing that Juliette and I were going to help. I didn't know any of them well, but they were good people, hard workers.

“Everyone memorize the new routes, and we'll be back as soon as Mrs. Breashears is ready for us.”

Juliette motioned for me to follow her. We stood off to the side, watching as people came in.

“That's Harvey Dallas. He'll be at one of your tables, but not because I don't already know him.” She gestured toward a short, stocky man who was just coming in. “Make a point of telling him that you're dating Cross.”

“Just him?” My stomach squirmed at the mention of the man I loved.

She shrugged. “Might need to tell some other people, but him for certain. He's seen me at the clubs sometimes and has a little thing for me. As soon as he sees you, he'll know we're related. If you drop Cross's name, he'll leave you alone.”

“Thanks for the warning.” The words came out automatically, but I was having a hard time listening, focusing on anything except the name that she said.

Cross.

I didn't want to think about Cross right now. I needed to concentrate on work, on doing what Juliette needed me to do. Right now, I didn't know if Cross would ever be my family, but Juliette already was and always would be. She and work were my priority right now.

Cross would have to wait.

Chapter Seventeen

CROSS

*H*anna's name flashed across my screen for the second time, and for the second time, I let it go to voicemail. She called a couple hours ago to let me know that she'd finished up at the brunch. I was supposed to have called her back so we could talk about plans for this weekend, if she was coming over tonight or tomorrow.

Except I hadn't called her back that first time, and I didn't intend to call her back this time. Something was wrong, and I didn't know how to address it. Hell, I didn't even know what it was. Everything had been great last night. We'd had hot, fantastic sex, and dinner had been delicious. We'd planned on spending several quality hours in the playroom. Then, all of a sudden, without any warning, she said she wasn't feeling good and left.

I had no reason to doubt her, but as soon as she'd gone to get dressed, my stomach had twisted itself into knots. She hadn't stopped to talk to me, and by the time she was out the door, I'd had a bad feeling that things had gone wrong for some reason, though for the life of me, I couldn't figure out how.

When I woke up this morning – which wasn't really accurate since I hadn't exactly slept – I decided to keep myself busy until I decided what I wanted to do. It seemed like no matter how hard I tried to keep the two of us on track recently, things just kept getting worse.

And it was starting to piss me off.

It wasn't like I didn't have anything else going on in my life at the moment. I leaned back in my chair and ran my hand through my hair for what seemed like the millionth time today.

Taliyah Carver.

What was it with the fucking women in my life right now? First Hanna wanting me to meet her family, and that stirring up a whole shit storm, then some stranger coming in and telling me that she was my sister.

Half-sister, I clarified.

But that didn't make it any better. In a way, it was worse. Okay, not in a way. In every way.

Her whole story had been going round and round in my head from the moment she'd finished telling it. I'd spent every hour since then trying to distract myself, trying to keep my mind from going back to what she'd said and the implications of what that meant. But after Hanna left last night, my only choices regarding what I was going to brood about were Hanna or Taliyah, neither of which were really appealing. The problem was, they were the only two things vying for my attention.

This morning, I decided that Taliyah was the lesser of two evils. At least with her, I had a better idea of what I needed to deal with.

The first of which was the most obvious one.

If what she said was true, if she was indeed my half-sister, no matter how much truth there was to her story, it still meant that my father had slept with someone else while he was married to my mother.

I wasn't naive enough to think that my parents had been perfect. I was young when they died, but not a child. I didn't idealize or romanticize who they'd been. I knew they both had their faults, their weaknesses. I just never imagined that either of my parents had had affairs.

And I sure as hell hadn't imagined that either of them had a child somewhere out there. A child they'd ignored and abandoned.

I knew that there was a possibility she was lying. People in positions of power or with money often had people claiming to be relatives. Fortunately, the progression of science had done a lot to help keep people in my position from being taken advantage of. All I had to do was ask for a DNA sample, and I'd know the truth.

However, because most people were smart enough to know that, only those who were extremely confident in their manipulative ability were able to fake test results...or were flat-out crazy.

I had a bad feeling Taliyah wasn't any of those things. That she was telling the truth, and we shared the same father.

So I decided that I needed to get my head wrapped around that before anything else. If, for some reason, the test results came back negative – which

I supposed could still happen if Taliyah's mother had lied to her – I'd be okay, but I'd also be prepared if it was the truth.

Except I wasn't entirely sure how to process it. How to accept that I actually had a sister when I always thought I was an only child, that I had no family. A sister only three years younger than me. The way she'd talked, it sounded like she'd always known who her father was and that she'd assumed that he'd known about her, but hadn't wanted to be part of her life.

I couldn't see how that would be possible though. Even if my father hadn't wanted my mother to know that he'd had an affair, I couldn't see my father completely writing off a child of his. He might not have been a faithful husband, but he'd been a great father.

I spent the morning searching through the boxes of my parents' things that I kept in the house, but I hadn't found anything that hinted at Taliyah's existence. It was possible I'd gotten rid of something a few years ago when I'd cleaned out most of Mom and Dad's stuff, but there was nothing I could do about that.

I couldn't ask my parents' friends because there hadn't been anyone they were especially close to. Not close enough to talk about something like that.

Except there was someone Dad would've confided in, if only for legal reasons. I knew my father, and if he'd known about Taliyah, he would've made legal provisions for her.

I picked up my phone, but not to call Hanna back. Scott Vernon had been our family lawyer since I was a kid, had come to more than one of the holiday parties my parents had thrown. He'd handled their estate, helped me set up my own will after they were gone so that, if something happened to me, there'd be no doubt over where my assets would go.

Which meant I had his home number.

It was still early evening, so I tapped his contact information and let the phone ring.

Scott answered on the third. “Cross Phillips. How're you doing?”

“I'm doing well, Scott. How're you?”

“Good, good. Can't complain.” The noise in the background faded.

“Did I catch you at a bad time?” I asked. I wanted answers, but I wasn't going to be rude about it.

“Not at all,” he said. “My wife's book club is over. I'm actually glad for a chance to get out of there. Now, what can I do for you?”

I hadn't thought that far ahead. I closed my eyes. “I don't know of any

other way to say this, but to just come out and say it.”

“This sounds serious,” Scott said, his voice sobering.

“You were responsible for all of my father's legal affairs,” I said.

“Yes.”

“Did he ever ask for you to include any...private provisions?”

“Private provisions'?” he echoed. “Cross, what is it you suspect your father of needing to keep private?”

“Did he have another child?” I blurted out the question. “I mean, was there anything he had you set up for another woman or for another child?”

There was a long silence before he spoke again. “Is there a reason for this line of questioning?”

He was all business now.

“Does that mean you do know something?” An icy hand gripped my heart. If Scott had known all this time that I had a sister...

“Your father wasn't a perfect man,” he said slowly. “As I'm sure you know. He loved you and your mother very much and didn't let any of his errors in judgement influence how he felt about you.”

I felt sick. “So you know that he had affairs.” I made it a statement rather than a question.

Another pause. “I know that he had at least two. And you should know that he instructed me to be honest with you if you ever asked.”

I took a slow breath. “Did he have money set aside for those women?”

“No. And I wouldn't have even called them mistresses. Both were one-night stands. A weekend at the most.”

That fit with what Taliyah had told me. Now came the question I needed answered the most. “Did he have any other children?”

“Of course not!” Scott sounded insulted that I even asked, and that, more than anything, convinced me that he was telling the truth. “Your father would never have kept that from you.”

“Not even to keep Mom from finding out about his affairs?”

Another beat of silence. “Your parents told each other everything, Cross, including their indiscretions...on both parts.”

“So, my mom...”

“I considered your parents my friends,” Scott said. “So I might've known a little more about their personal lives than I do about my other clients. Their marriage was more solid than most people's, and they always said that was because they were honest about everything.”

“Did they—” I almost couldn't make myself say it. “Did they have an open marriage?”

“Not exactly. More like an agreement that they wouldn't fight about sleeping with someone once or twice, but that there'd be no long-term affairs, no divorcing to be with someone else.”

Which meant my father had either broken that agreement, lied to Taliyah's mother, or Taliyah's mother had lied to her. Any of them were possible.

“Not even if a kid was involved?”

“I can't say anything one hundred percent,” he admitted. “But I'd be willing to bet everything I have that if your father had another kid, he would've provided for him.”

“Okay.” I closed my eyes. “Thanks, Scott. I appreciate it.”

“Want to tell me what's going on?”

“Not really,” I admitted. “But if it turns out to be something, I'll come to you first.”

“Make sure you do,” he said. “Have a good night, kid.”

I ended the call and tossed my phone down on the seat next to me. So, now I had confirmation that my father had indeed had an affair. More than one. And that my mother had too, but that had nothing to do with Taliyah.

Someone was lying, but I still didn't know exactly who yet.

I leaned forward and opened my laptop. First thing Monday, I'd call Mars Roster, a private investigator I often used for background checks, among other things, and have him take a look. As for right now, I'd look at Taliyah Carter's social media sites. Maybe something there would give me a better idea of who I was dealing with.

That meant I had no time to deal with Hanna. She would just have to wait.

I ignored the implications that came with the sense of relief I felt at the thought.

Chapter Eighteen

HANNA

I really didn't want to become one of those women who demanded their boyfriends call them every day or got upset when they weren't in constant contact. I'd never been like that.

But I couldn't deny that I was beyond normal frustration that I hadn't heard from Cross since I left his place Friday night. I thought he intended to call me Saturday late afternoon after the brunch, but when he hadn't, I assumed he just hadn't known when I'd be done. So I called him.

Twice.

I left two voicemails and received no responses. No texts. And not just on Saturday. I had no communication at all from him on Sunday either.

I refused to call him again. I wasn't going to be the woman who chased after the man. This was supposed to be an equal partnership. The two of us working together. Most people thought a Dom / Sub relationship was all about one person being in charge and bossing the other one around, but it was actually more of a balance than most other relationships. Ours always had been that way...but now, I felt like something was shifting between us.

Like I was the one reaching for him, wanting him more than he wanted me.

Not sexually, because he'd made it clear on Friday night that he was eager to indulge in as much of that part of our relationship as possible.

It was everything else that seemed to be falling apart.

Back when we first met, he'd made the distinction between lovers and sexual partners and had told me that I was the former. I'd never doubted it...until now. He'd said that what made the difference was the relationship

beyond sex, and that had been true for us.

Except over the past couple weeks, things between us had been small talk and sex, nothing more. We seemed to be moving backwards, each day taking us further and further apart. The fact that he didn't want to talk to me this weekend only supported my fears.

I pushed myself back from my desk and stood. I leaned backward, wincing as my spine cracked and popped. For the past two hours, I'd been trying to concentrate on all of the notes I always made after an event, but I hadn't done much more than a few sentences. Every time I'd start to write, I'd find myself trailing off, staring at my screen, lost in some memory or another.

I wasn't sure which was worse, recalling the good times we'd had together, or remembering the fights. The worst, however, I knew without a doubt, was the current silence. The not knowing where we stood, what he was thinking or wanting.

And my pride wouldn't let me make the next move. I'd already done that. Twice. If he wanted to talk to me, he could call me back like he should have yesterday or the day before.

A not-so-small part of me thought I sounded petty and immature, like I thought I was too good to try to make amends. I kept reminding myself that I hadn't done anything wrong, that Cross was the one who'd made everything weird, who was acting like a child.

I needed to get my mind off it, and work certainly wasn't cutting it. I walked around my desk and out into the lobby. Elora gave me a smile as I glanced in Juliette's office. No one was there, so I headed to the back. The chefs all had today off, so the only person back here was my sister.

"Taking inventory?" I asked as I walked toward her.

She nodded without turning toward me. "With everything that went crazy on Saturday, I didn't feel like doing it then. We didn't have anything on the schedule for today, so I figured it could wait until now."

Juliette trusted her employees, but we both knew that people sometimes forgot to write things down, or they used a little more of something than they thought. Which meant someone needed to do an inventory to count up everything on hand before our next event. Sometimes I did it, but sometimes she did. She said it relaxed her.

"How's it looking?" I asked.

"Pretty accurate," she said.

Not really a surprise. We were rarely off by too much.

I hadn't come back here to talk with her about the inventory though. Actually, I hadn't come back to talk to her about anything, really. She hadn't wanted to talk about Dalton or the baby even after the brunch was over, and I hadn't pushed. I didn't want her turning it on me and asking why I hadn't been with Cross.

I wasn't going to bring either subject up at the moment, so I simply went to stand by her side and watched her count. I had a feeling that she was feeling a lot of the same things I was. Confusion. Uncertainty. Neither of us had any idea of what our futures would hold, what decisions we were going to make about our current issues.

"I need an assistant," Juliette broke the silence. "You're doing great as the business manager, but right now, the two of us are picking up the slack that an assistant would usually deal with."

She didn't mention that, if she kept the baby, I'd need an assistant to help me keep things running while she was on maternity leave. I didn't say anything about it either.

"I put up some ads last week," she said. "And made a couple calls yesterday, so there are some people coming in to interview today and tomorrow. I sent you an email before I came in here."

"Why do you want me to do the interviews? It's for your assistant."

She glanced at me and raised an eyebrow.

Right. Stupid question.

Her last assistant had tried to kill her by cutting the brakes on one of the delivery vans, and when that failed, she'd arranged to have Juliette kidnapped. It made sense that my sister didn't trust her instincts when it came to that particular position.

"I'll take care of it."

She looked at me again. "You might want to go check that email."

I nodded and headed back toward my office. I was a little annoyed that she hadn't told me this last week, but there was no point in bringing it up now. Besides, neither one of us had been in the best frame of mind lately.

I'd taken half a dozen steps toward my office before I realized that Elora wasn't the only person in the lobby.

I was still staring when Tucker threw his arms around me in a massive hug. For one strange moment, I was transported back in time.

"It will be all right, Hanna. You'll see."

Tucker pressed me even closer to his body, and I flushed. We'd had sex

for the first time last night, and the feel of him made me remember every moment of it. I knew he hadn't been a virgin, but I'd been thankful for it when he'd taken my virginity without any of the awkward fumbling or pain I'd heard some of my classmates describe. I hadn't enjoyed it quite as much as I hoped I would, but I loved how close to him it made me feel.

And since he was heading off to Texas A&M while I was staying here in Ohio, I needed that reassurance. I'd started worrying about the long distance thing halfway through this year, and every time I heard someone talk about how high school sweethearts never stayed together, the sick feeling in my stomach had only gotten worse. I hadn't slept with him because I'd been worried that he'd find someone else to have sex with, and he hadn't pressured me to do it, but I would have been lying if I said the distance hadn't impacted my decision.

"You'll call me as soon as you get there?" I hated how weak my voice sounded.

He pulled back enough to look down at me. "I can't promise that. I don't know what time I'll get there, and then I have to get settled in my dorm."

"Text me at least then, so I know you got there safe."

He nodded. "I'll do that."

"Thank you."

He kissed my forehead. "Anything to make you happy."

I leaned into him, tightening my arms around his waist. We could do this. I knew we could. We could beat the odds. We'd see each other every break and over the summer. Get engaged probably Christmas of junior year, maybe just before senior year. Marriage shortly after graduation so that we could move to wherever the best job was. I was indifferent about staying in Zanesville, but Tucker was adamant. He wanted out.

Maybe that was what scared me so much. My older sister, Juliette, had wanted out of Ohio, and I hadn't seen her much since she'd gone to California. I didn't want that to happen to Tucker and me. I loved him.

I sucked in a breath and took a step back, freeing myself from his embrace as reality came crashing back in on me. I didn't love Tucker. Not anymore. I sometimes wondered if I really ever had.

"Hanna." Tucker beamed at me, completely oblivious to the shocked expression on Elora's face. "It's great to see you again. I'm sorry we didn't get to spend much time together when we saw each other over Thanksgiving."

"Um...uh..." Words seemed to have deserted me.

Elora came to my rescue. “Mr. Flannagan is here for his interview.”

“Interview?” I looked at her, my brain trying to process the statement she'd just made.

“For the position of Juliette's assistant,” she prompted.

I was going to kill my sister.

Why the *hell* had she thought it would be okay to bring in my ex-boyfriend to interview to be her assistant?

I was starting to suspect that her wanting me to take care of the interviews had less to do with my comfort level with her assistant, and more to do with the man standing in front of me.

“Didn't Juliette tell you I was coming in?” Tucker asked.

I forced a smile. “No, but that's all right.” I gestured toward my office. “Right this way.”

“I'm so glad she offered to let me apply for this job,” he said as he followed me into my office. “I was worried I'd show up here in LA and not know anyone, not have a job...”

“Did you bring your resumé?” I half-expected him to give a typical Tucker response. Something like how he didn't need a resumé because he was so charming. Instead, he held out a piece of paper.

I sat down and took a few minutes to gather myself before reading the paper I held. It was odd, I thought, how thoughtless Tucker was all those years ago, and how much he'd changed...and how Cross had changed for the worse in just a few weeks. At least, when Tucker had acted like an ass, he'd been an eighteen-year-old frat boy, not a thirty-year-old wealthy CEO.

The interview went better than I'd expected, but I was still waiting in Juliette's office, annoyed, when she came in to get her things for lunch.

“What the hell, Juliette?”

She folded her arms and raised an eyebrow. “I didn't see any reason not to help him.”

“The fact that he dumped me because he couldn't handle a long distance relationship wasn't good enough?”

“You said you were over it.”

Shit. I had said that. And I was over it.

“Besides,” Juliette continued with a smile. “I figured it might be a good idea for Cross to know that he better get his shit together because he's not the

only fish in the sea.”

I frowned. Well, damn. How was I supposed to be mad when she put it that way?

Chapter Nineteen

CROSS

I set down my phone and glared at it. I'd called Mars yesterday, and he'd agreed to look into Taliyah, but after checking in with him just now, he'd gotten nothing done. It'd taken almost all of my self-control not to snap at him when he'd reminded me that he had other clients he also had to answer to. Considering that my case wasn't exactly time sensitive, I couldn't be angry at him for not having results.

Or at least I shouldn't be.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and muttered a litany of curses under my breath. Part of me just wanted to call Taliyah and demand a DNA test, but I hadn't gotten to where I was by being impatient. I didn't rush into things. I thought things through. Planned. Weighed the pros and cons.

Was that, I wondered, the reason things with Hanna were so screwed up right now? Approaching her at the Breashears' event when I'd thought she was Juliette had been planned out. I'd considered all of the angles.

Well, all of them except for the one where I fell for the other sister.

No one could've planned for that.

Something about Hanna had made me abandon my usual caution so I could take care of her, so I could have her. If I'd been thinking with my head instead of other parts of my anatomy, I would've kept her at arm's length until I looked into her background, found out what type of person she was.

If I'd done that, however, I knew there was a good chance that I wouldn't have gotten involved with her at all. I would've thought she was too much of a risk. Too innocent. Too inexperienced. Nothing even close to what I was looking for.

I shook my head as a bitter laugh came out of me. That seemed to be my theme lately. Things I thought I wanted being turned completely on their head to become something I hadn't been looking for at all.

Hanna as a girlfriend.

Taliyah as a sister.

While I loved my parents, and I loved being the sole focus of their attention, after their deaths, I realized how much easier it would've been to have had someone else to go through it all with, to have someone who knew what I was going through. More importantly, if I had a sibling, I would still have a family.

Fate, it seemed, had a bit of a sharp sense of humor, giving me a sister in a way that made me see my parents in a new light, that made me question the life I'd experienced growing up.

More than anything, I wanted to talk to someone about this...no, that wasn't the truth. I didn't just want to talk to just anyone. I wanted to talk to Hanna. Wanted to confide in her, have her comfort me, give me advice. I wanted her to support me through this.

But I couldn't ask her to do that. Not when I'd balked at giving her that when I thought she was pregnant. I'd been there for her when we first met, but that was completely different. A situation I could control.

A situation that didn't really affect the direction I had planned for my life.

Those plans were starting to weigh on me now. I'd always assumed Hanna and I were on the same page, but I was starting to think that wasn't the case. I didn't want to talk about it yet though. I needed to get this thing with Taliyah settled first.

I hadn't been able to find out much about her on my own. She had social media sites but didn't include much personal information on them. At least not the kind I was looking for.

They confirmed that she was from Nashville, but I knew that was easily faked. People could put down whatever city of origin they wanted, and there was generally very little done to check it.

She had pictures of her and friends, but none of her mother. Not that a picture of her mother would prove anything. Liars came in all shapes and sizes. So did mistresses, one-night stands, and everything in-between. I wouldn't even be able to tell if she was my father's type. I knew from personal experience that a connection between two people had the power to override whatever someone may have thought of as their type.

My intercom buzzed.

“Mr. Phillips?”

“Yes?”

“You have a call on line two.”

My heart lurched painfully as I immediately thought of Hanna. Had she decided to call me at work so I'd have to make an effort to ignore her? I wasn't really a believer in fate or destiny of any of that, but a part of me wondered if one of those were at work, forcing my hand with Hanna.

“Thank you. I'll take it from here.” I took a moment to collect myself and then picked up the phone. “Hello?”

“Cross?”

A woman's voice, but not the one I wanted to hear.

“Taliyah.”

“Hi.” She sounded almost embarrassed. “Listen, I wanted to apologize for how everything went down on Friday. I came on really strong, and I had no right to do that. I don't want you to be angry with me for my mother having an affair with our father, so I never should've taken out on you how I felt about him.”

I wasn't sure I liked her saying *our father*, like there was definitive proof that we shared a parent, but I had to admit that I appreciated her apology for the way she introduced herself. It made me think better of her and made me feel like I might be able to believe her.

“Thank you,” I said. “You have to understand that this blind-sided me. I had absolutely no idea that you existed.”

“I know,” she said on a long sigh. “And I'm sure guys like you often have people claiming to be some long-lost relative.”

A little of the weight lifted from my shoulders. She understood why I was hesitating. “All the time,” I said. “Which is why we can never be too careful.”

“It's half past eleven,” she said, “and I'm shopping not too far from you. Would you like to have lunch?”

I didn't even have to think about it. “That sounds good.” Maybe a bit more time with her in a more relaxed, informal setting would get me some of the answers I was looking for. “Want to meet me at Ammo on North Highland in twenty?”

“That sounds perfect.” Relief was evident in each word. “I'll see you there.”

As the call ended, I buzzed Abraham. “Call Ammo and get me one of

their private booths. There'll be two of us for lunch today.”

“Yes, sir.”

I turned my attention back to my computer, thinking I'd be able to concentrate now that I had a plan set to talk with Taliyah. Before I'd gotten more than a couple sentences into the paragraph I was reading. However, my cell phone vibrated, letting me know I had a text message.

Want to meet for lunch today?

Hanna.

It was abrupt, without any endearments, which alone was enough to tell me that she was upset and that she most likely wanted this lunch so we could talk. Even if I hadn't already made plans with Taliyah, I wouldn't have been ready to talk to her. I wasn't sure when that would be.

I can't. Working through today. Maybe tomorrow.

A few seconds later, her reply came back.

Busy tomorrow. Let me know when you're free.

I winced at how abrupt it sounded but knew that the only way to fix the mess between us was to get things straightened out with Taliyah, so I could focus on Hanna. And the next step to that was lunch.

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me again,” Taliyah said as she slid into the seat across from me.

She looked different than she had before. Not that she'd changed her hair or anything. It was more in the way she carried herself. The arrogance she'd had when she'd come into my office was still there, but it was...dimmed. I didn't know if she was purposefully turning it down, or if she'd genuinely had some sort of epiphany, but it didn't really matter.

“We got off on the wrong foot,” she continued.

I gave a shrug. “It's not like there's a handbook on how to do this.”

“Maybe we should write one,” she joked. Her eyes danced with amusement. “*101 Ways to Tell Someone You're Their Sister.*”

I couldn't help but laugh. “Quite the niche market.”

“And there'd always be the possibility of sequels,” she continued. “It could be a whole series. Brother, father, mother, daughter, son.”

“I can see the marketing now. 'Do you need to tell someone that the two of you are related, but don't know how?'"

“They could be marketed to some of those talk shows that are always

playing the whole 'whose your daddy' game," she suggested.

If my parents were still alive, we most likely wouldn't have been joking like this, but at the moment, it seemed like the best way to diffuse the tension. And it worked. I felt more relaxed at the moment than I had in a while.

"Can I ask you a question?" I figured I might as well give it a shot. Her answer might not be the truth, but I could use it to measure against whatever Mars found to gauge how honest she was being with me.

"Sure." She took a drink of whatever fruity concoction she'd ordered.

On my way here, I considered what I'd ask her if I got the chance, which question would be the most important, the one I absolutely had to make sure I asked her in case she got angry at me for asking it. In the end, there was one that I felt like I had to know.

"Why now?" I asked. "It seems like you knew who our father was from a young age. I could see waiting until you were eighteen, or after college, or even right after he died. But why'd you come to me now?"

She considered the question. I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad one. She could be thinking about what lie to tell, or she could be actually thinking about how best to answer the question. Sometimes motives weren't so cut and dry as people wanted to believe.

"I thought about it all the time when I was younger," she said slowly. "Just showing up on his doorstep and announcing who I was. I knew you existed, and for a long time, I even hated you for getting to live the perfect, privileged life."

I didn't interrupt to argue with her. She was telling me what I wanted to know, not what I wanted to hear. I couldn't be upset if they weren't the same thing.

"By the time I was in college, I'd come to peace with it," she continued, a wry smile on her face. "Or at least I thought I had. I didn't think anything of it until I saw the article in the paper that he'd died."

I felt a faint stab of grief, but my sorrow over the death of my parents was no longer as sharp as it once had been. I missed them, but it wasn't the same.

"I thought about coming to see you then, telling you who I was." She locked her eyes with mine. "But I couldn't do that to you. As an adult, I understood that it wasn't your fault, none of it. And even though we'd both lost our father, you'd lost a person you had a relationship with. I'd only lost the idea of a father. A concept."

The negative emotions I'd felt toward Taliyah started to soften.

Everything that she was saying made sense.

“I tried to forget about it again,” she went on. “I told myself that it didn't matter because I'd never have a chance to meet him now, but I couldn't stop thinking about you.”

“It's been eight years since he passed,” I said. I didn't make it a question, but I knew she understood what I was asking.

She swallowed hard. “Eighteen months ago, my mother was diagnosed with cancer.”

My stomach sank. I was pretty sure I knew what was coming next, and it would explain everything, including the way she'd come across the first time we met.

“She never married,” Taliyah said. “Never had any other kids. So it was just me and her through all of it. My grandparents both died when I was still a kid, so when Mom passed a couple months ago...” She let her voice trail off, but I didn't need her to finish the sentence. I knew how it ended.

Alone.

Like I was.

Maybe she wasn't so different from me after all.

Chapter Twenty

HANNA

A full week, and the extent of the conversation between Cross and myself had been a series of back and forth texts about how neither of us had the time to meet for lunch or dinner. We were falling apart, and I didn't know how to stop it. Hell, I didn't even know if Cross wanted to stop it.

I supposed I'd find out tonight. We finally agreed to meet for dinner, which I hoped meant that we were finally going to discuss what was going on between us. I couldn't keep doing this indefinitely. Juliette would be making a lot of important decisions in the near future, and I couldn't let myself be distracted by whatever personal shit was going on in my life.

Juliette was more important than anything else. Her and that baby. Cross hadn't promised a future where he was more to me than what he was now. And while I loved him, he wasn't family. His words and actions were making that abundantly clear.

I didn't go straight from work. In fact, I took off an hour early after handing over the five most promising resumés to Juliette. I didn't want to see a smug smile when she saw that Tucker was one of them.

He really was one of the most qualified applicants I'd met with all week.

I told Juliette that I wanted some extra time to get ready for my date. She knew things were rocky with us, so she told me to go. Now I was standing in front of the full length mirror in my bedroom and double-checking the outfit I'd finally chosen for tonight.

I'd bought the dress before we'd gone to Ohio, but hadn't had the opportunity to wear it. Tonight seemed like the perfect night.

It was velvet, a deep, rich purple that made my eyes look darker, my skin

more translucent. It had three-quarters sleeves, but was off the shoulder and exposed the tops of my breasts. The hem was mid-thigh, modest enough for me to wear a thong without worrying about how much flesh I might flash.

My gaze fell on the box on my dresser. Cross hadn't asked me to wear my collar, but I reached for the box anyway. If tonight was about deciding where we were going in our relationship, then he needed a reminder of exactly what he'd promised me, of what we'd promised each other. If we were going to end this tonight, we would do it with our eyes open.

I squared my shoulders, shook out my curls, and then headed out the door. Cross often insisted that he provide me with a car when we were meeting places, but not today. I took a cab to our favorite restaurant and was shown to our usual quiet back booth. Cross was already there, completely absorbed in something on his phone. He didn't even look up until the hostess cleared her throat.

I wasn't a suspicious person by nature, not really, but alarm bells were going off as his head jerked up and he quickly shoved his phone into his pocket. Something that looked an awful lot like guilt flashed across his face, and then it was gone, smothered by appreciation and desire as he looked at me.

I slid into the booth and waited for him to meet me half-way. When he did, he leaned down to kiss my cheek. I told myself it was because he didn't want to risk smudging my lipstick, or wearing it, but I didn't think it boded well for the rest of the evening.

“You look lovely,” he said. “Is that a new dress?”

“It is,” I answered.

He reached over and ran his finger over my collar, and I shivered. It was an innocuous touch, nothing anyone would really think anything of, but I felt it go straight through me. He leaned closer so that his lips were pressed against my ear.

“You're wearing your collar.”

“Yes, Sir.” I kept my voice low.

Before he could say anything else, our wine arrived, and he was distracted by offering his approval. When he turned back to me, the moment had faded. I knew it was still there since his eyes would occasionally flick up to the collar, but he didn't mention it again. Instead, he turned the conversation to mundane things.

“You've been pretty busy at work this week,” he said. “What does Juliette

have you working on so hard.”

“Finding an assistant,” I answered honestly. “I narrowed down the pool of candidates by doing interviews all week.”

I didn't tell him that one of the finalists was my ex. No need to bring any of that up when things were already tense between us.

“Has she made any decisions about the pregnancy?” he asked without looking at me.

“Not yet. She did tell the father, and she wants him to be part of the decision making.”

Cross was quiet for a moment, and I wondered if he was thinking about his own reaction when he thought he was on that end of things. I knew we needed to talk about our problems, but I didn't want to bring that whole fiasco up right now.

The silence stretched between us, so I filled it with the first thing that came to mind. “Juliette wants us to go out with her and Dalton tomorrow night.”

“Dalton?”

With that one word, I realized just how long it'd been since we'd really talked. I hadn't told him about Dalton. “He's the father.”

“Oh.”

More uncomfortable silence.

“What about you?” I asked, following his conversational lead. “A whole week of working through lunches. Must be important.”

I was pleased that none of my negative emotions bled through. I wanted to know what was going on, but I didn't want him on the defensive.

“Nothing interesting,” he said. “Just a lot of tedious stuff that needed to get done.”

Another long break of silence. This wasn't going the way I'd hoped, and the rest of the dinner pretty much went the same way.

It wasn't until we were walking away from the table that he put his hand on the small of my back and leaned in close. “Come back to my place.” His fingers flexed. “I've missed you.”

My body tightened. I'd missed him too.

The collar Cross had made for me had unique twists that allowed for clips to be fastened to it for various forms of bondage. At the moment, I had two

chains connecting my collar to the sides of the padded bench I was currently bent over.

As soon as we'd gotten into the house, Cross had ordered me to strip to nothing but my strapless bra and the matching lavender thong. And my collar, of course. Then he'd kissed me the entire way to the playroom so that we were both breathless by the time we closed the door.

He'd taken off my bra then, licking and sucking on my nipples until they were hard and throbbing. Now, they were aching even more because he'd fastened his favorite pair of nipple clamps on them before binding me to the bench.

He ran his hand over my ass before bringing it down on my cheek hard enough to make me gasp. The movement of my ribs made the clamps on my nipples sway, sending new jolts of pain through my breasts. I closed my eyes, letting myself slip into that place where subs often went during a scene, where they gave themselves over with complete abandon. When the next few strikes landed on my ass, I absorbed the sting, the heat, drew it into myself, added it to the pain and pleasure.

I felt him draw aside my thong and trace along my slit. When he parted my folds and caressed the tip of my clit, I moaned. It was a brief touch, and then he was pushing two fingers inside me. Before I could adjust, his free hand was back on my ass, spanking me even as he twisted his fingers. Short, brutal thrusts matched in time with enough blows to make my skin tingle and burn.

At least I wouldn't have to worry about being embarrassed tomorrow night when it was difficult to sit. Juliette and Dalton would completely get it.

Cross's fingers pressed hard against my g-spot, and I saw stars. As he rubbed it, amping up the pressure building inside me, he reached beneath me and tugged on one of my nipple clamps.

I wailed as I came, long past any self-consciousness when it came to responding to him. Unless I'd been given specific instructions not to make a sound, I didn't hold back.

I whimpered as he pulled his fingers out, shudders still rolling through my body. I expected to feel his cock next, but I didn't. Instead, he disappeared for a moment, and when he returned, he ran the soft leather strips from his favorite flogger across my back. He didn't use it often, and even more rarely, after he'd spanked me. He flicked it against my back, moving across my shoulders and down my spine, no blow hard enough to hurt.

Then he moved to the side and brought the flogger up against my breasts. My entire body jerked, the chains holding me down tightened at my response. It hadn't been a cruel blow, but it'd jostled the clamps, and that had hurt. He did it two more times, and I flinched at each one.

"Let's get those off you," he said quietly as he reached down and removed one clamp, then the other.

I shivered at the pins and needles moving through my sensitive flesh as blood flow returned. The shivers became cries as Cross resumed the use of his flogger on my breasts.

"Please, Cross," I begged. A harder strike made me remember what I was supposed to call him. "Please, Sir."

"Please what?"

"Please, fuck me, Sir."

"Do your tits hurt, baby?" He reached down to squeeze one.

I strangled back a cry and managed. "Yes."

"Is that why you want me to stop?"

"No." I shook my head as much as I could with the collar locked in place. "I need you to fuck me."

When he moved behind me, I breathed a sigh of relief. Everything he'd been doing had me dancing the razor's edge of arousal, that nearly painful point that he loved to draw out as long as possible.

The sensation of something hard and unyielding pressing against my entrance snapped my thoughts back into place. I gasped, tensed, then relaxed as Cross put his hand on my lower back.

"Relax, baby. The handle isn't much bigger than I am. I know you can take it."

Handle? My eyes flew open as I realized what Cross was working deeper into me. The hard leather handle of his flogger. We'd used plugs and dildos in the past, but never this. It felt different, not necessarily bad, but as he said, it was bigger than him, and that was saying a lot.

I closed my eyes again and focused on the myriad feelings rippling out from where my pussy clung to leather. He made a few strokes with it, letting me adjust to the girth and length, then pushed it all the way inside. He left it there as he came around to stand in front of me.

He'd taken off his clothes at some point, so his thick erection was right in front of my mouth. He didn't even have to give the command, and I was parting my lips. The head slid across my tongue, leaving the salty taste of his

precum in its wake. He fisted his hands in my hair, letting me know that he wanted to do the work. If I needed to use my safe word while my mouth was full, I'd have to resort to the other signal we'd set up: me snapping my fingers.

I wasn't really thinking about any of that though. My mind was consumed with the way my pussy was pulsing around the handle in it, with the taste and weight of him as he fucked my mouth. He didn't push too far or try to force me to take him deeper than I usually did. I kept up the suction as best I could and tried to keep from wiggling around to see if I could get the friction I needed to go over the edge.

“Swallow it all,” he said, his voice rough. “And I'll let you come again.”

I glanced up at him to let him know I understood, and then he was coming. His hips jerked against my face, hands tightening painfully in my hair even as he pulsed and twitched in my mouth. I swallowed even as I used my tongue and lips to draw out every last drop, working over the sensitive flesh until he pulled away.

I drew in a harsh gasp of air and watched him disappear from sight. A moment later, the handle inside me twisted as it withdrew. I moaned as he repeated the action over and over until I was finally there, crying out his name and coming hard enough for things to go gray.

When I came to, I was on the bed in the playroom. I'd been cleaned up and tucked in, but Cross wasn't there. I heard the shower from the connecting bathroom and sat up, wincing as the fabric rubbed against my skin. Yeah, dinner tomorrow was going to be fun.

Now came the big decision. Did I stay the night, spend tomorrow with Cross before the double-date with Juliette and Dalton, or did I leave him a note and go home? We hadn't talked yet, but I wasn't sure I wanted to do that right after sex, or tomorrow right before the date. Neither one seemed like good options.

I was still debating what to do when I heard a phone buzz. I automatically reached for it, not realizing that I'd grabbed Cross's instead of mine until I saw an unfamiliar name on the screen.

Taliyah.

I've really enjoyed getting to know you over lunch this past week. Maybe we can do dinner sometime. I really hope that this relationship can move forward into something great.

What the fuck?

Chapter Twenty-One

CROSS

I was surprised when I came out of the shower and found the playroom empty, but I assumed she'd just decided to use one of the other showers instead of waiting for me to finish. Except she wasn't in any of them. Next, I tried the kitchen to see if she might have gotten hungry for some sort of dessert or needed something to drink. But she wasn't there either.

I went back upstairs and grabbed my phone. She answered on the second ring.

“Yes?”

Her voice was so cold that it caught me off guard. The questions I'd intended to ask, about where she was and why she'd left, died in my mouth.

“What time do you want me to pick you up tomorrow?”

There was a moment of silence before she answered, “Five-thirty. We're meeting Juliette and Dalton at six.”

And that was the end of the conversation. My sexual appetite was sated for the moment, but I was still restless. I'd gotten used to having Hanna with me most nights, and always over the weekend. Whether we were having plain, vanilla sex, or indulging in something a bit more kinky, we were together. Before I met her, I'd never spent more than a couple nights with the same woman. I hadn't seen the appeal. Now, I did, and it seemed like, unless something changed, I'd be heading back to my old habits soon.

It was that thought that kept me up all night, that kept my stomach in knots all day. I wanted to call her, ask her why she'd left so abruptly, but I couldn't deny that my pride was hurt. She clearly had something going on that she didn't want to talk to me about, something that she either felt she

couldn't trust me with or that she was too angry to speak about. And in a relationship that was supposed to be based on trust, her lack of it in me hurt.

It was almost lunch when I remembered that Taliyah had texted me yesterday, and I hadn't responded. Talking to her was as good a way as any to distract myself. It'd worked before.

So for the next few hours, I found a game on television and texted my sister. Or, my half-sister. If she was telling the truth. When I first met her, I wasn't sure if I'd wanted her to be lying or not. Now, I was leaning toward wanting it to be the truth. No matter if Taliyah was related to me or not, I knew that my father had cheated on my mother. I might as well get some family out of the deal.

I was so caught up in my conversation that I didn't notice the time until my calendar notification went off, reminding me that I had a date to get ready for. I told Taliyah that I had to go, turned off the game I'd only half been paying attention to, and headed to my bedroom to get dressed.

I went with a fitted shirt and nice pair of pants, ran a hand through my hair, and then headed down to decide which car to take. I was in the mood to drive tonight. And a bit recklessly, I realized as I started toward Vine Street.

Hanna looked as lovely as ever as she answered her door. She was wearing another new dress, this one dark blue. It clung to her breasts and hips. I leaned down and kissed her cheek even though every bone in my body wanted a different sort of kiss. Something deep and passionate, the sort of kiss that would take us to the bedroom and keep us there all night.

But this wasn't the time or place for it.

"Ready?" I asked.

She nodded but didn't look at me as she stepped past. Whatever I thought I felt from her last night wasn't in my head. She was pissed about something. I just couldn't figure out for the life of me what it was.

I followed her, got ahead to open the car door. Our drive to the restaurant was quiet, the tension between us thick, and it didn't ease when we arrived at our destination. Fortunately, Juliette was already there, sitting next to a man who looked about my age, and both looking as uncomfortable as I felt.

This was going to be a pleasant dinner.

As we sat down, Juliette introduced the man to me, and we ordered our drinks. The small talk was nearly painful, but we all kept it up. Juliette and I had become friends over the past few months, though judging by the way she looked at me, that friendship wouldn't last long if I didn't fix things with

Hanna.

“How long have the two of you been together?” Dalton asked as we waited for our appetizers.

“Almost six months,” Hanna answered. Her voice was easy enough, but she didn't look at me. “I'm surprised the two of you haven't met. What with everyone traveling in the same circles.”

Dalton glanced at me, and I watched as he placed my name. It wasn't a surprise that I'd never met him before. He was a straight, male Sub, and I was a straight, male Dom. We didn't exactly partner up with the same people, and when we went to a club looking for someone to spend time with, neither one of us would've been looking for the other.

“I've heard of you,” he said finally. “You have quite the reputation.”

I wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

“Yes, he does,” Hanna muttered.

That definitely sounded like a bad thing.

Before I could ask about it though, our party of four suddenly became a party of five when an unfortunately familiar person approached.

Tucker.

I ground my teeth together and resisted the urge to punch him on principle alone.

“Hanna, Juliette, it's great to see you both again.”

“Tucker.” Juliette's smile was warm. “This is Dalton and Cross.” She gestured toward me.

“Nice to meet you.” Dalton reached across the table to extend a hand.

I held out my own but didn't bother with a greeting.

“I'm not checking up on my interview,” Tucker said with a grin. “I promise. Just wanted to come over and say hi to the few friendly faces I know in the city.”

Interview. He was one of the people Hanna had interviewed for the position of Juliette's assistant.

And she hadn't told me a thing about it.

My temper started to bubble up.

“You look great, Hanna.”

I clenched my hands into fists as he leaned closer to her. If we were at the club, no one would've dared to approach her while she was with me. Actually, I didn't know many men with balls big enough to come near her when she was with me in any setting.

Except she hadn't said who I was to her.

And she wasn't pushing him away, wasn't making a point of letting him know that she was off-limits.

“Excuse me,” I muttered as I stood. I needed to leave, or I would do or say something I'd regret.

I walked toward the back without looking at anyone, but I felt her behind me. Hanna was following, but I didn't stop until we were in the small alcove near the restrooms. Only then did I turn and face her.

“Is there something you'd like to say?” I snapped.

“There are quite a few things I'd like to say,” she retorted, putting her hands on her hips. “But at the moment, I'd just like to know if you're going to spend the rest of the evening with a stick up your ass.”

I scowled down at her. “Maybe Tucker's more pleasant company.”

“Tucker?” Her eyes narrowed. “You're really going to play that card? Seriously?”

“He's your ex-boyfriend, and I didn't hear you telling him that you were seeing someone.”

“Did you tell Taliyah?”

I blinked in surprise. “What?” I hadn't expected that.

“Taliyah. Last night, I picked up your phone by mistake, and I saw a text from the woman you've been spending your lunches with. Lunches you told me you couldn't have with me because you were working through them. But you were actually with some other woman—”

My temper snapped. “She's my *sister*, Hanna.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

HANNA

Of all the possible responses I'd imagined Cross giving when I finally confronted him about Taliyah, this was definitely not one of them. He had no family, and certainly not a sister. He told me that himself not long after we met.

"Say that again?" I had an idea that I sounded like an idiot, but I needed to hear him say the words one more time so I could make sure I heard him correctly. Then I needed to know what the hell was going on here.

"Taliyah is my sister," he said it slower this time. "Half-sister, actually."

A thousand thoughts swirled through my head, but the one I knew I had to get out first was an apology. "I'm sorry. I didn't know. I should've given you the benefit of the doubt."

He nodded, then reached for my hand. He pulled me to him, raising my hand to his face so he could kiss my palm. "And I'm sorry for snapping about Tucker. I was jealous."

I let him wrap his arms around me, and as I pressed my face against his chest, I allowed myself to relax, to feel the same sense of safety I felt when I first met him. He'd taken care of me then, protected me. I'd known that nothing could touch me as long as he was there.

I wanted that back. I wanted to make this work.

"We should probably head back before Dalton thinks we don't like him." Cross's voice held a teasing note that I hadn't heard in a while. I'd missed it.

"And your sister?" I didn't want him to think that I'd forgotten or that I didn't care. I wanted to know what was going on with him. And why he hadn't come to me about her in the first place.

“Later,” he said. “I promise. Right now, I'd like to make sure Tucker knows that you're taken.”

He kept his arm around my waist as we walked back to the table, and I felt some of my anxiety ebb. It wasn't completely gone, and I knew it wouldn't be until Cross and I had a much longer discussion about our recent string of miscommunications, but I at least felt like we could proceed with dinner in a much more comfortable fashion.

Which I was sure we would...once Tucker left. He'd definitely noticed the possessive grip Cross had on me. He'd smiled at us, but I still knew him well enough to see that it hadn't reach his eyes.

“Are you here with someone, Tucker?” Cross asked as he pulled out my chair for me. “Because if the two of you would like to join us, I'm sure I could get us a bigger table.”

Something dark flashed across Tucker's face, and then it was gone, quick enough that I almost thought I imagined it.

“That's okay,” he said with a tight smile. “I just wanted to come over and say hi.” He looked at Juliette and then at me. “I'll see you around.”

As Tucker left, Dalton spoke up, “I feel like I came in in the middle of something.”

I glanced at Juliette, and she shrugged. Apparently, it was up to me to decide how much Dalton knew. “Tucker's my ex-boyfriend from back in Ohio. He just moved out here.”

Dalton's dark blue-gray eyes slid from me to Cross and back again. Then he changed the subject. “So, did you always want to go into business on your own?”

And with that, the conversation moved to easier topics. We discussed our childhood, the differences between Hollywood and Zanesville – of which there were many – and other various things that helped us get to know each other without venturing into anything particularly painful.

It didn't take me long to see what Juliette had seen in Dalton. I knew my sister well enough to know that it wasn't Dalton's pretty face that had attracted her to him. He was sweet and funny, with a confidence that some may have found off-putting in a Sub, but that I knew Juliette liked. In some ways, he even reminded me of myself, able to care for himself, but with a desire to be able to hand all of that control over to someone else.

I told Juliette that I'd support whatever decision she made, and I intended to stick to that, but I couldn't help hoping that she and Dalton would try to

make a go of it. She might not think about settling down, but I could see how good he could be for her. And the more I listened to him talk, the more I knew our parents would be thrilled to have him dating Juliette.

As long as they never found out exactly how they met.

“So if you were raised in Northern California and went to Vanderbilt, how'd you end up in LA?” Cross asked. “You don't want to be an actor or anything like that?”

Dalton shook his head as he swallowed the bite of cod he'd just taken. “I've always wanted to be a teacher, and while I was finishing up my Masters, one of my professors mentioned that his alma mater was in need of elementary level teachers. It sounded exactly like what I'd been looking for, so I asked him to make a call.”

“What about your family?” I asked. “Didn't they want you to move closer to home?”

He gave me an easy smile. “LA's closer to home than Nashville was.”

“Good point.” I chuckled. “I hadn't thought about it that way.”

“Besides,” he continued. “They understood why I was doing what I was doing, and they supported me.”

I glanced at Juliette and saw my own feelings mirrored in her eyes. It would have been nice to have family who was that understanding.

“I know you work with Juliette,” Dalton directed his question to me. “Was that always the plan?”

It wasn't until he asked the question that I realized I didn't truly have an answer. I'd gotten my MBA but hadn't really known what I wanted to do with it. I supposed a part of me always assumed I'd end up in the auto shop, no matter what protests I made, and I figured that a degree would at least give me some leverage over how things were run. Then I'd gotten the offer to help Juliette, and some time away had seemed like a good idea, a way to put my degree to practical use. Again, so I'd have something to reference back in Ohio if anyone tried to pull the inexperience card. I'd never considered what I actually wanted to do.

And, not surprisingly, Dalton was the first person who'd ever asked me. Juliette had left before I'd decided anything about college, and Cross had met me after I'd already been working for Juliette. Them not asking me anything made sense, I supposed, but my parents hadn't bothered to talk to me about it either. Even my guidance counselor in high school had assumed I was going into the family business.

I shrugged. “Actually, I didn't really have a plan beyond coming out here, but I think Juliette and I are working well together.”

“We are,” she agreed.

The glance Juliette threw me said we were thinking the same thing. That it was a good thing I was here since she would most likely be needing all the extra support she could get over the next few months.

Dalton looked between Juliette and myself. “Okay, I'm probably going to get slapped for this, but I have to ask, what's the age difference here?”

Juliette laughed. “Depends on how old you think we are.”

“Five years,” I answered. “And we'll all just assume that you thought Juliette was younger.”

Another laugh went around the table, and I felt a flash of hope. This could work. Dalton and Juliette together with their baby. Me working with her. Cross and I together. This could be our future.

“She found me the Monday after Thanksgiving.” Cross broke the silence that had been between us ever since we'd left the restaurant.

I didn't have to ask him who he was talking about. I just felt relief that he was telling me like he'd said he would, and without me having to prompt him.

“My dad had an affair with her mom,” he continued.

I didn't interrupt as he told me the whole story, including his meeting with her during the lunches he said he was working. I was still a little pissed that he hadn't told me about her before, and that he'd lied to me about why he couldn't meet me for lunch, but I knew that wasn't what was important right now. We'd deal with my issues later. Right now, he needed me to support him.

“And we talked most of the day today,” he said. “Mars is still looking into things, but I think I believe her.”

I wanted to ask if she'd asked him for anything yet, but I knew he wouldn't take it well. He considered himself a good judge of character, and I knew that most of the time, that was accurate, but I didn't think that ability translated quite as well when it came to family. I knew how much he missed his parents, and Taliyah was a connection to them, a piece of family that he never thought he'd have.

“I'd be interested in meeting her.”

It seemed like the safest thing to say at the moment. Besides, if I

supported him, and was polite to her, anything I questioned once I got the measure of her myself would have more weight. Or at least I hoped it would. I didn't want to see him get hurt.

At that thought, a flash of anger went through me, hotter and brighter than anything I'd felt since Juliette had been taken. I didn't care who Taliyah was, I promised myself, if she hurt Cross, I'd make sure she suffered.

He took my hand as we walked into the house, lacing our fingers together. I took comfort in the gesture, let it give me strength for what I knew was coming. I couldn't put it off any longer. I didn't want to. If there was any chance at all for us to have a future together, we needed to talk about the things that were still between us.

“Would you like some wine?” Cross asked as I closed the door behind us.

Alcohol sounded like a good way to start things off. We hadn't ordered any at dinner since Juliette couldn't drink, and I hadn't minded, but a bit of something to take the edge off at the moment would be nice.

“Yes, please.” I kicked off my shoes and followed him into the kitchen, watching as he poured us both glasses of something that I was sure was quite expensive.

He handed me a glass and then leaned down to kiss me. I let myself enjoy the connection for a moment, but before it could become anything more, I took a step back. Cross frowned, and I took a sip of wine to steady my nerves.

“We need to talk,” I said quietly. “We keep falling into bed together but never address any of the issues that have been building between us. We can't keep on going this way.”

For a moment, I was afraid that he might refuse, that he'd tell me to leave. But he gave a curt nod, and I knew that it was time to lay all our cards on the table.

Chapter Twenty-Three

HANNA

*H*e really didn't want to talk. There was no doubt in my mind about that.

“What's wrong with the way things were going?” he asked as he leaned back against the counter. “We were comfortable together, weren't we?”

I nodded. “We were, but it could never last that way.”

“Why not?” He at least sounded like he was asking an honest question rather than like a petulant child complaining. “Why can't we just go back to the way things used to be?”

“Because that's not what I want from our relationship,” I answered honestly. “And I think that's what we need to talk about.”

He sighed. “I think we should top off our glasses and have a seat in the living room.”

He was right. I doubted this would be a pleasant conversation.

Less than five minutes later, we were settled on opposite ends of the couch, turned toward each other, wine glasses in hand.

He raised his toward me. “You wanted us to talk. Let's get to it.”

I took another drink, then went back to the matter at hand. “When I asked you to go to Ohio with me for Thanksgiving, I thought we were on the same page. You meeting my family, spending a holiday with us. If you hadn't wanted to, if you hadn't felt like you were ready for that, you could've just told me.”

Cross's expression hardened. “I wanted to go with you. How could you think otherwise?”

“How?” I struggled to keep my voice even. “The fact that you completely

freaked out when you thought I was pregnant seems to be a pretty good reason.”

“There's a big difference between meeting your parents and thinking you're pregnant,” he countered. “You can't blame me for being upset.”

“That wasn't just upset.” I wouldn't let him downplay it again. “You admitted that the things you said were awful, but you never talked about why you said them.”

“I was upset.”

I shook my head. “Not good enough. Those were nasty accusations.” I swallowed hard, trying to push back the hurt so that I could think clearly.

“They didn't sound like the man I thought I knew.”

“You do know me.” He started to reach toward me but then dropped his hand. “People say all kinds of things when they're upset.”

“I didn't think you were that kind of man.”

He frowned. “Is that what this is really about? I don't live up to some perfected ideal that you have, and suddenly everything we've been to each other doesn't mean shit?”

I leaned forward. “We're not talking about me finding out that you leave the toilet seat up or throw your wet towels on the floor. You were...mean, Cross.” I blinked back the tears that wanted to form.

He moved so that he was kneeling in front of me. “I'm so sorry for that. Really, I am.”

“Then talk to me,” I said. “Tell me why.”

He took my hands as he moved up to the couch. “People like me, who have money and power, can be a target for manipulative people.”

Taliyah's name flashed across my mind, but I didn't say it. If I brought up my suspicions about her, it'd shift the conversation, and right now, this was more important.

“I never should've put that on you,” he continued. “It was unfair, and, yes, mean. There was absolutely no excuse for it.”

“Thank you.” We were getting somewhere, but I knew I still hadn't gotten quite to the bottom of things. There had to be more to it than just that. “Why did the pregnancy test set you off? Why that and not something else?”

He released my hands and moved away from me. “Just let it go, Hanna. Let's go back to the way things were before all of that happened. I'll never treat you like that again.”

Part of me wanted to give in, to take him at his word, but I knew that,

eventually, things would come to a head again. Better now than later.

“You said you didn't want anything to do with a family.” I watched his expression carefully. “Isn't that really what triggered it? Thinking that you would have to face what you wanted from the future.”

His eyes cut down, and I knew I'd gotten it right.

I pressed harder, needing to know how deep it went. If it was even worth trying to mend things. “Was it the thought of how things would have to change between us?” I forced myself to voice the newest fear. “That you wouldn't...want me when I started to put on weight. After I had a baby.”

His head jerked up, and he looked both startled and offended at the comments. “How could you think that?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Don't you remember what you said about Juliette? About how no one would want a pregnant dominatrix?” My voice cracked, and I flushed.

“No, no, baby, that's not it.” He put his hand on my knee. “I didn't mean it like that. I wasn't talking about people in a relationship. I was talking about her clients. It's a totally different thing.”

I felt a little better but still needed more reassurance. “So you weren't worried that you'd find me...unattractive if I were pregnant?”

He shook his head but took his hand off my knee. He was telling the truth, but I knew there was something he wasn't saying. Something I had to force myself to say.

“You just didn't like the idea of me being pregnant at all.” My voice was soft. “That's it, isn't it? The thought of having kids, having a family...”

I looked at him, but he wouldn't look at me. All of my fears came flooding forward as I forced myself to admit that I was probably right.

“Have you thought about what you want from the future?” I asked. “Not only with us but in anything? Or has it always been about maintaining the status quo?”

His silence spoke volumes. Excruciating, heart-wrenching volumes.

“I'm not asking for anything specific,” I continued even as my insides twisted and churned. “It's not that I think there's a place we're supposed to be at right now, or that I expect something to happen overnight, but...I need to know that we're going somewhere. That there will be more to this relationship than me keeping a few things here and staying over a couple nights a week.”

This time, I didn't try to fill the quiet. I waited. We'd had too many

assumptions between us, too many misunderstandings. Whatever happened now, I was determined that it would be done with both of us clearly understanding what was happening and why. I wouldn't let my fear of losing him keep me in a relationship that was going nowhere.

After a minute or two, he stood with a weary sigh. He walked over to the window without looking at me. "What do you want from me, Hanna?"

My knuckles turned white as I gripped my hands together. "I'm not putting anything on a timetable, but I want a family, Cross. I want marriage and kids someday."

"I thought you left Ohio to get away from those expectations."

I closed my eyes and let out a shaky breath. Everything was falling apart, and I knew there was nothing I could do to put it back together, but I had to be honest with him. We both deserved that. "I left so that I could be my own person, so I could decide for myself what I wanted."

"And a family is what you want." He didn't make it a question.

"Yes." I stood, unable to take sitting any longer. If things were ending, I'd face them on my feet. "And I'm sorry."

He glanced back at me. "For what?"

"For assuming that's what you wanted." I swallowed hard. "I should have let you know from moment one what I wanted and asked if we were on the same page. None of this would've happened if I'd just been upfront."

"What if I would've said that I didn't know what I wanted?" He turned around, his face pale and drawn. "What if I wanted to see how things went before I decided what I wanted from the future?"

I wanted to tell him that it was okay, that I would wait with him to see where things went.

But I couldn't do it.

"I'd ask you if it was marriage and family that you wanted, or if it was just me."

He took a step toward me. "Isn't wanting you enough?"

Tears pricked my eyes, and I forced them back. "Not enough to have a family. You'd end up resenting me, resenting our family, and I can't do that. I couldn't bear to think that I'd trapped you in a life you didn't want, that you'd hate me, leave me with a family you never wanted."

"But I might want those things," he said, his eyes boring into mine. "I need time to think about it."

I wanted to believe him, wanted to believe that in a couple hours, he'd tell

me that he wanted the same things, that he wanted us to move forward. I was honest when I said that I wasn't on a schedule. I didn't care if we didn't start talking marriage seriously for another couple years, but I had to know that it was on the table. I had to know that he wouldn't freak out if I talked about it like it was a relatively certain thing. I wasn't foolish enough to think that nothing would ever come between us, but I couldn't stay in a perpetual state of limbo, waiting for him to decide whether or not he wanted a family.

I loved him. There was no doubt in my mind about that. But I would end up hating him if I stayed with him and lost the family I wanted to have one day.

“Take all the time you need,” I said quietly. “I want you to be happy, Cross, and to be with someone who wants the same things as you. I just don't know if that's me. You need to figure that out.”

I turned to walk out, half expecting him to follow me, to beg me not to go. But he didn't. He stayed where he was, silent as I closed the door behind me.

I wasn't angry, not anymore. I wasn't even upset. I felt hollowed out, emptied of everything I'd ever felt. No love, no hate. Nothing. Nothing but the bleak darkness of a future without Cross. One day in the future, I would be absolutely certain that I was making the right decision. But now? Right now, I could only put one foot in front of the other and try not to think about what I'd just done.

Chapter Twenty-Four

CROSS

This couldn't be happening. I apologized for what I'd said. We'd rectified things when it came to Tucker. I'd told Hanna about Taliyah. Things should've been fixed between us. I should've been taking her to the playroom or to my bedroom for a night of sweaty, hot sex.

Instead, I was watching her walk out of my house...and possibly out of my life. I wanted to tell her to stop, to tell her that I didn't need time.

But I did.

When I was in college, I wasn't interested in settling down even though I'd been in relationships, but that wasn't abnormal for a man in his early twenties. Then I'd taken over the family business after my parents' deaths and my life became all about preserving their legacy. I hadn't given a single thought to anything besides the business. I certainly hadn't been looking for a girlfriend.

Then I met Hanna.

And I hadn't wanted anyone else from the moment I laid eyes on her. That hadn't changed. I didn't want another woman sharing my bed, sharing my life.

My bed. My life.

And that was the whole problem in a nutshell. *My. Not our.*

Part of me wanted to be angry at her for giving me what I saw as an ultimatum. She didn't understand what it was like to be in my position, to have been self-reliant and independent for eight years. No family. No one that I needed to share with, no one to make *my* into *our*. She'd never really been on her own. She'd gone from her family to a nearby college, and then to living with her sister.

Logically, however, I knew that wasn't fair. She hadn't given me a schedule of when she expected me to get on board her family plan. She hadn't demanded that I ask her to move in with me. She hadn't even acted like it was unreasonable for me not to want a family, or to want to keep things the same.

It just wasn't what she wanted.

She apologized for assuming that we wanted the same things, but I was guilty of it too. I hadn't considered that she might have aspirations for her life beyond what we had now. It wasn't that I thought I should be the only thing she wanted – needed – but rather that we had the same goals.

So I let her walk away because I knew nothing I could say would stop her. Nothing honest anyway. I could've lied, but I loved her too much for that.

I sank down on the couch, my stomach knotting. That's where it got complicated. I loved her. I wanted her. Only her. But I couldn't promise her a future because I'd never thought about marriage, about children. Not until that pregnancy scare.

It wasn't late, but I got up and headed for my room anyway. I wouldn't be able to sleep, I knew that, but I needed to think about so many things. About the real truth behind how I'd been behaving these last couple weeks, about why I'd been avoiding discussing our problems with Hanna. The reasons why I didn't want to look into the future for anything except work.

I would examine myself, my motives as well as what I wanted, and if I couldn't give Hanna what she wanted, what she needed, I would let her go. The thought of losing her killed me, but I loved her too much to do anything else. She deserved to be happy, even if it wasn't with me.

It was the thought of her with someone else, smiling at another man, marrying him, having his child, that did it.

I barely made it to the bathroom in time. As I bent over the toilet, I knew it was going to be a long and awful night.

By dawn, I was still sick to my stomach and completely exhausted. Neither situation was one that would be likely remedied anytime soon, especially since I still had absolutely no clue what to do. I was torn between what I knew I wanted – Hanna – and what I always thought I didn't want – commitment beyond what I was willing to offer. Then there were the two things that I feared, both at such complete odds that I didn't know how I

could possibly deal with them both.

I was terrified of the prospect of a future without Hanna. Waking up alone and knowing that I might never wake up next to her again. Never hold her while we watched television together. I couldn't imagine a world where the scent of her would disappear from the pillows, the sheets, that we slept on. A world where holidays went back to the way they had been for years, me working from home, or maybe polishing off some expensive scotch.

But on the other side, I was scared of what it might mean if I did let myself picture a future with her. A marriage that would end when she realized how much better she could do than me, or when I did something as stupid as I had these past couple weeks. A child who would grow to hate me because I wasn't the parent I should be.

A family I could lose in one fell swoop.

Again.

That, I believed, was something Hanna didn't understand, that she might not be able to understand. When she looked at the future, she saw the wonderful possibilities that it held. Marriage. Children. A life together.

When I looked to the future, it was filled with all of the negative things that could – or most likely would – happen. Divorce. Infidelity. Death. Pain.

And I didn't fear it only for myself. I didn't want to leave an orphan or a widow.

I didn't know why any of this had come as a surprise to me. I'd explained to Hanna the difference between lovers and sexual partners, but I'd put her clearly in the former category, and I'd never given her any reason to think that it meant anything other than a relationship that would move forward to a logical conclusion.

I needed to talk with someone, go over what I was thinking, feeling. I needed a sounding board. Feedback. Except the person I'd turned to for that over the last several months was Hanna, and I couldn't talk to her until I'd come to a decision.

While Juliette and I had become friends, this wasn't a conversation I could have with her. Aside from the fact that it'd be awkward, she'd probably cut off my balls as soon as she saw me, especially when she found out how the conversation between her sister and I had gone.

I liked my balls where they were, so talking to Juliette was out.

I forced myself out of bed, but not because I had anywhere to go. I just didn't want to piss on my bed, so getting up was a necessity. After I was

done, I splashed some water on my face and headed back into the bedroom, unsure what to do next. It wasn't until I reached for my phone to see what time it was that I realized I did have someone I could talk to.

It made sense that she hadn't come to mind sooner since I'd only known about her a short while. I didn't know Taliyah well, and I wasn't entirely sure that she was being one hundred percent truthful, but I'd found her easy to talk to over the past couple days. And she was a woman, so she might have some idea how I could fix things, what I should do.

After I cleaned up and dressed, I called her, but she didn't answer. I left a message letting her know that I planned on stopping by and that I hoped we could go to breakfast together. A nice meal, some coffee, and maybe even an answer to my problem.

She'd told me where she was staying, and Mars had confirmed it, so I drove myself over. Even for December, the day was chilly and dreary. It was past sunrise, but there wasn't much sun coming from behind the clouds. Even as I made my way through the streets, it started to rain. Nothing heavy, but the way the horizon looked told me that it would most likely continue through the day.

Great. It matched my mood.

The desk clerk looked surprised when I walked past but didn't try to stop me. In the past, I'd frequently used hotels for my trysts, including this one, but it'd been a while since I was here. The desk clerk seemed to remember me, though I didn't know if that was because of how often I'd come here before or because he just knew who I was. Either one was possible, but neither one mattered.

I went up to the third floor and paused outside the elevator to try to remember the room number she'd given me. I'd taken two steps to the left when I saw a door down the hall open. I froze when I recognized the man who stepped out into the corridor.

Tucker Flannagan.

I gritted my teeth. What were the chances the little bastard was staying in the same hotel as my sister? Unless...fuck me.

Was it possible that he'd been spying on me and Hanna? That he'd found out about me seeing her and had followed her here. Did he intend to try to blackmail me? Or maybe sell me out to Hanna, to make himself look more appealing by telling her that I was cheating on her?

I was going to beat the shit out of him.

I took another step, then froze as Taliyah followed Tucker into the hallway. I swore under my breath. I couldn't risk Taliyah's safety. I didn't know if Tucker could be violent, but no way in hell would I take that chance with my sister.

And then I saw her lean forward and kiss him.

Confusion exploded over me. Had he seduced her to get to me? How had he found her, figured out who she was?

“How much longer, do you think?” Tucker asked as he pulled his mouth away from hers. “I don't mind flirting with Hanna to piss off your brother, but I'd rather be flirting with you.”

“I hope all you're doing with her is flirting.” Taliyah's eyes narrowed. “Because if you've fucked her—”

“Hey, you know you're the only one I want,” he cut her off. “Besides, I've had her, and trust me, she's not worth going back to.”

I really was going to kill him.

“How much longer until you get what we need from that brother of yours so we can get the hell out of here?”

Taliyah shook her head. “A while longer. He trusts me, but I still need some time to get him to make an offer. Don't worry though. He's so spun out over that girl, he won't be thinking straight for a while. I'm sure it'll be soon.”

Trembling with rage, I stepped back into the shadows before I could see or hear anything more. Or do something I'd regret later.

Chapter Twenty-Five

HANNA

When I got back to the apartment last night, I hadn't woken Juliette. I didn't want to talk to her about what happened between Cross and me. Not last night, and not this morning. I could tell that she knew something was wrong, but she didn't ask. She'd be there if I ever decided I wanted to share.

As we went through our usual weekend routine of laundry and cleaning, the only sound in the apartment was the music Juliette had turned on during breakfast. While I felt far from being at peace, there was something soothing about the mindlessness of the tasks I was doing.

By the time we sat down to lunch, I felt more open to having a conversation, though I still wasn't at the point where I wanted to talk about Cross.

"Did Dalton say anything about how he thought things went on Friday?" I broke the quiet first.

Juliette raised an eyebrow that told me she didn't believe for a moment that I wasn't deflecting...but she answered my question, "He liked you both."

"He seems like a good guy," I said truthfully and studied her for a moment. "Did the two of you talk?"

She raised an eyebrow as a flash of lightning shone through the window.

"Come on, Juliette. You know what I'm talking about." I glared at her without any malice. "You can't really dance around the subject for long. Sort of on a time table."

She leaned back and ran her hand over her stomach. It was still flat, but I knew it wouldn't remain so for long. If she terminated the pregnancy, she'd want to do it before she started to show. If not, she was enough like me that

she'd want to make sure that she had answers in place by the time anyone started to ask questions.

“We talked,” she admitted.

Finally, something that might distract me from the gnawing in my stomach that hadn't yet faded. “And?”

“I'm keeping the baby.”

Relief went through me. I would've supported her no matter what, but I was glad it'd be support given to a niece or nephew as well as a sister.

“And Dalton?” I hadn't been lying when I said I liked him. He and Juliette might not have known each other well, but I had a feeling that the two of them were a good fit.

“He wants to be involved,” she said. “And not just off and on. I told him I didn't want that. If he was going to be part of our child's life, he had to decide if he wanted to be a birth certificate and birthdays kind of dad, or involved completely. Doctor visits. Being there when the baby's born. Co-parenting.”

“And he's going to do all that?”

I couldn't stop the pang of jealousy that went through me. Juliette and Dalton had met once. Had no other connection except one night of sex. Cross and I had been together for months, had a relationship based on more than sex.

And yet it was Dalton who stepped up and accepted the responsibility of having a child he hadn't planned on. Dalton, who'd barely had the time to adjust to the idea of being a father but had made the choice to do what he knew was right for his son or daughter.

“And the two of you?” I asked.

She shrugged, looking away as her cheeks turned pink. “We haven't made any decisions about that.”

I folded my arms and leaned back in my chair. “And why not?”

She rolled her eyes. “Because neither one of us wants to jump into a relationship just because I'm pregnant.”

“But you won't completely write it off, right? Because that would be stupid.” I managed a smile that didn't feel completely fake. “He's gorgeous, you know.”

“I'm not blind.”

“I was starting to wonder.”

She threw a napkin across the table at me. “We're not saying it won't happen, okay? We'll spend time together, get to know each other. Even if

nothing romantic comes of it, we both agreed that we needed to know more about each other for our child's sake.”

“And if something more does come of it?” I asked.

“We'll let it,” she said simply. “We won't force anything one way or the other. If we happen to find that we want something more than a platonic relationship, then we'll see if it works, but we've already decided that our child comes first, before anything we might want.”

I reached across the table and took her hand. “Whatever you need, I'm here.”

“Thank you.” Her tone grew serious. “And you know I'm here for you, right?”

A lump formed in my throat, and I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. Maybe I'd confide in her at some point, but it wasn't now. I couldn't bear to repeat what happened between Cross and me. Not yet. It was too fresh, too raw.

A pounding at the door made both of us jump. We'd tuned out the storm outside almost automatically. Natives of LA might've had a difficult time doing it, but we were from Ohio. The weather changed so often there, we could have sun one minute and a storm the next.

“I'll get it,” Juliette said as she stood.

I got to my feet as well, intending to clear the table. I didn't get past picking up a single dish, however, because a haggard and wet Cross rushed into the room, followed by Juliette, who looked both pleased and pissed.

I completely understood the differing emotions because I felt them too. Part of me was happy to see him, knowing that it had to be something important that drew him from his house on a stormy Sunday when he could've just called or texted. This was something that merited face-to-face communication, and the fact that he came to me rather than set up a meeting gave me hope as to what he wanted to say.

“I'll give you two some privacy,” Juliette said as she left the kitchen.

We stood there a moment in awkward silence before he blurted out, “Tucker's using you to get to me.”

Not even anywhere close to what I thought he would say. I was pretty sure my mouth was hanging open as I stared at him, but I couldn't form the thought necessary to close it. I could barely think at all. He'd clearly been jealous of Tucker before, but that had at least made some semblance of sense. Tucker was my ex and the only other person I'd ever slept with. I could see

Cross not liking him just for that. But to claim that the only reason Tucker had come back into my life, the only reason he'd been flirting with me, was to get to Cross...it was beyond insulting.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I found my voice, even if the words didn't come out as strong as I'd intended.

“I'm serious.” He took a step toward me. “Please, listen to me.”

I would, but not for the reason I was sure he wanted. I would listen to whatever shitty reason he'd come up with as to why this accusation was the best way to either win me back or justify his actions, and then I'd tell him to get the hell out of my life and that I didn't want to see him ever again.

I'd been honest, opened myself up to him, and all I'd asked in return was that he be honest with me. Instead, he'd come up with some bullshit about Tucker.

“Say what you came to say.” I set my jaw and prepared to listen.

A look of relief crossed his face. “It's not just Tucker. It's Taliyah too.”

I frowned. His half-sister? What did she have to do with anything?

“I went to her hotel this morning to talk things over with her—”

“What things?” I interrupted. I wasn't sure which would be worse. If he'd wanted to talk to her about us, or if he'd completely pushed us aside so he could focus on her.

His eyes slid off to the side, then back to me. “I needed someone to talk to about what was going on, and since she's my sister...” His voice trailed off for a moment, and then he shook his head. “That's not the point.”

I planned on disagreeing with him on that as soon as he was done with the rest of his little speech.

“When I got there, Tucker was coming out of Taliyah's room.”

I was surprised, but in reality, all that told me was that the two of them knew each other. Not exactly damning evidence, but I kept my mouth shut.

“She kissed him and then they started talking about how she was supposed to get me to give her money, and how Tucker was supposed to keep coming between us so I'd be more distracted.”

My nails bit into my palms as the anger inside me rose from a simmer to a boil.

“She even said something about how she didn't want him sleeping with you, like she was calling the shots, and he said he wouldn't do that again—”

“Enough!” I snapped. “I thought you actually heard me when I told you how I felt, what I needed.”

“I did,” he protested.

“Clearly you didn't, because instead of talking about anything important, you're blaming all of it on Tucker and Taliyah, and acting like this is all some big conspiracy centered on you. Reality check, Cross.” I took a step toward him. “Life doesn't revolve around you.”

“That's not what...Hanna, please.” He reached for me, and I took a step back. “I came to warn you that Tucker is trying to manipulate you. You and Juliette both. He isn't the man you think he is.”

“Are you kidding me?” I laughed. “Tucker isn't the man I think he is? After everything, that's what you're going with? That I'm such a bad judge of character that you need to protect me from him?”

“That's not—”

“Maybe you should hear him out.”

Juliette's voice came from behind me, and I glared at her as I turned. “You're on his side now?”

She shook her head. “No. I'm on your side, but if what Cross says is true, we need to be careful.”

“I'm telling the truth.” He sounded almost desperate for me to believe him, but I wasn't sure I could trust the reasons behind it.

“It doesn't matter why Tucker's here.” I addressed Juliette, keeping my back to Cross. “He hasn't asked either of us for money, hasn't even asked me out on a date. All he's done is talk to us and apply for a job.” I paused, and then added, “It sounds more like someone's jealous of anyone else paying attention to me.”

Juliette's gaze flicked over my shoulder to where Cross stood. “Jealousy or not, if he's working with this woman to get to Cross, we need to take it seriously.” Off of my look, she added, “I wasn't eavesdropping. The two of you aren't exactly quiet, you know.”

My shoulders sagged as I realized that, no matter what she said, my sister wouldn't have my back in this. With Cross saying that Tucker was trying to use us, the application for a job came across as nefarious. Considering the issues Juliette had with her prior assistant, I could understand her desire for caution, but she could've done it without taking Cross's side.

“You know what,” I looked from one to the other, “why don't the two of you go ahead and discuss whatever you need to discuss since you seem to have it all figured out. I have some things of my own to work out, so I'll step out for a while.”

I didn't wait for a reply as I headed for the door. I slipped on a pair of sandals and hurried out, not even bothering to take an umbrella or jacket.

Which I regretted the moment I stepped outside and was soaked clean through. I gritted my teeth, wrapped my arms around my waist, and began to walk. I knew it was sheer stubborn pride that kept me from going back inside, but I clung to it anyway. At the moment, it was the only thing I had left, and I wouldn't give it up.

If I did, I was afraid I might break down completely, and I refused to give Cross – or anyone else – that satisfaction. I didn't know what my next move would be, but I did know that I was done getting yanked around. I knew what I wanted, and I wasn't about to settle for second best.

Chapter Twenty-Six

CROSS

I watched Hanna leave, barely able to believe that it was happening again. She was walking out on me for the second time – and from her own place, no less. I found myself as hopeless as I had been the day before, unable to find the words to get her to stay. I couldn't even tell her that the weather was too bad for her to go outside. Every word I thought became caught in my throat before I could get it out.

A sharp slap on my arm drew my attention from the door to Juliette. She glared up at me, her expression so much like her sister's that it made my heart hurt.

“What the hell, Cross?!”

“I'm not lying, Juliette,” I protested. “I really did see Tucker with my half-sister, and they really were talking about how they were using Hanna—”

“I believe you,” she cut me off. “But that's not the point.”

“I know,” I agreed. “She doesn't believe – ow!”

She'd hit my arm again, harder this time. “Not. The. Point.”

I scowled. “Then you'll have to tell me what the point is, because I have no clue.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, you are pretty clueless.”

I should've been insulted, but I didn't care about that at the moment. I needed to know what to do, and Juliette was apparently going to help me out rather than castrate me. My balls and I were grateful.

“I don't know what went down between the two of you yesterday, but I'll about guarantee that it wasn't because of Tucker or whoever that girl is.”

“Taliyah,” I supplied. “She claims she's my half-sister...”

Juliette raised an eyebrow.

“Right, sorry,” I apologized. “Go on.”

“Whatever it was, you came in here talking about something else,” she said. “You completely dismissed her concerns, the things that she felt were important just so you could tell her what you thought she needed to know.”

“I was looking out for her,” I argued.

“You were being an ass about it,” Juliette countered. “Your intentions may have been good, but you acted like what she cared about wasn't important.”

Dammit. She was right.

“You're a Dom, Cross. You should know better.”

Again, she was right, and it hurt. I did know better. I would've looked down on any Dom who'd treated his or her Sub the way I'd just treated Hanna.

I needed to fix this.

“What should I do?”

Another smack, but this one not quite so hard. “If you care about her even half as much as I think you do, you need to go after her. If you don't, then let her go.”

“Of course I care about her!” Indignation burned through my despair. “I love her, Juliette!”

“Then you need to tell her that.”

“I have.” I ran my hand through my wet hair, flicking droplets of water off my fingers.

“Well, obviously, there's something you haven't told her because she wouldn't have left otherwise. And if she really meant something to you, you wouldn't have let her go.”

“Dammit, Juliette!” I spun to face her. “She's everything to me! I don't care about Taliyah or Tucker or any of that shit! Only her!”

Even as I said the words, the reality of them sunk in. She was everything. My past, present, and future. She was the only woman I ever wanted, so why had I thought that I needed time to tell me that?

I didn't bother telling Juliette where I was going, but I doubted I needed to. I ran back out into the downpour, squinting as I looked both ways, trying to see where she'd gone. For a few terrifying seconds, I thought she'd left and that I wouldn't be able to find her, but then I saw her flagging down the lone taxi.

“Hanna!” I called her name as I ran, certain that, at some moment, I’d slip and fall. “Hanna!”

She stopped even as she reached for the door handle.

“Please, don't leave!” I was panting as I skidded to a stop in front of her. I grabbed her hands and pulled her toward me. “Please don't leave me, baby.”

Her eyes were wide as she looked up at me. I cupped her face and bent my head to kiss her. Her lips parted with a gasp, and I swept my tongue inside, claiming her mouth, claiming her. She stiffened for a moment but didn't pull away. I buried one hand in her hair, using the other one at the small of her back to keep her body flush against mine. The rush of having her in my arms came as much from the fact that I been terrified that it'd never happen again, as from her physical proximity.

“Cross,” she whispered my name as she broke our kiss. “It's raining.”

“It is.” I chuckled as I opened the taxi door. She climbed in, and I went after her. “Thanks for waiting,” I said to the driver. I gave him my address, then turned my attention back to Hanna.

“You came after me.” She looked at me as if she couldn't quite believe it.

“I'll always come after you,” I promised. I wrapped my arms around her again and pulled her to me. The cab had the heat on, but I knew we'd both be chilled before we got home.

“What—”

“I'm an idiot.” My admission stopped whatever she was about to say, and I didn't wait to let her start again. She needed to hear it all. “I shouldn't have needed to think about anything. You've been the only one for me from the first moment I met you, and I don't want anyone else. The only thing I want to see when I look in the future is you.”

She stirred in my arms, tilted her head back so that she could look at me.

“I don't need time. I just need you.” I brushed back the wet curls. “No matter what happens, it's only you.” I gave her a partial smile. “Even if something happened and we had no money, if we could never have sex again, I'd still want to be at your side.”

The way her eyes were shining, I could see that she understood exactly what I meant. She put her hand on my thigh, sending a bolt of heat through me. She leaned up and put her lips against my ear.

“I hope that doesn't mean that you don't want to fuck me.”

I sucked in a breath.

“Because I definitely want to fuck you.”

Her hand moved to my crotch, and I cursed the storm that kept us from being able to go faster.

Despite how turned on I was, I used the ride to my place to make sure Hanna understood that I would, one day, want marriage and family with her. I didn't want there to be any misunderstandings. Ever.

She kissed me then, and we barely came up for air even as we exited the taxi and made our way through the house, peeling off our wet clothes as we went. By the time we reached the bedroom, we were both deliciously naked, skin slick with rain as we fell onto the bed together.

I slid down her body, spreading her legs as I went. She whimpered the moment my tongue touched her, then cried out when I put my mouth on her. I felt like it'd been eons since I'd tasted her. My fingers dug into her hips, holding her as still as possible while I delved into her depths. I dipped my tongue into her, then moved up to tease her clit, reveling in the sounds she made. Knowing that I was the only man who'd ever get to hear her make those sounds made them so much sweeter. It was one thing to know it in some vague sort of way, but it was completely different to have said it, to know it with certainty.

As she came, I promised myself that I would do everything in my power to make sure she never regretted wanting a future with me. No matter what happened, she would always be my first priority.

I raised my head even as I slid two fingers inside her, loving the way her body arched, how her head fell back. On any given day, I'd swear she was the loveliest woman I'd ever seen, but when she was in the throes of passion, she was exquisite.

Not that I ever intended to let anyone see her this way. A little arousal in the privacy of the club, but never like this. I was the only one who got to see her like this. The only one who'd ever know what it was like to feel her tight, wet heat. To know what it was like to wake up beside her.

She was mine.

Mine.

I twisted my fingers almost roughly, and she gasped. I moved up over her body, taking a nipple between my lips even as I thrust my fingers back into her. She dug her nails into my shoulders, deep enough to make me bite down on her sensitive flesh. She swore, her body jerking.

“Cross,” she gasped. “Please, make me come again.”

Suddenly, I raised my head and stilled my hand. “Move in with me.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“Move in with me.”

She squirmed, trying to move on my hand, but I nipped at her breast, making her stop without a word.

“Not the best time to be asking.” Her voice was almost a whine, making me smile.

“I think it's the perfect time to ask,” I countered. A twist of my hand pressed my knuckles against her g-spot, and she swore again. “Now, what do you say, Hanna? Move in with me.”

“Let me come.”

I bit the side of her breast hard enough to leave a mark. Her yelp was only half-pain. We'd both quickly learned that she liked teeth.

A lot.

“Move in with me.”

She glared at me. “You're not going to let me come until I agree, are you?”

I grinned at her. “It makes sense.” I brushed my thumb over her clit, eliciting a gasp of pleasure. “And, besides, I don't want it to be my house, or my bedroom anymore. I want it to be ours.”

Another twist of my fingers and she whimpered.

“Come on, baby. Move in with me.”

Her body clenched as I made hard circles around her clit, and I knew she was close. With my free hand, I pinched and rolled her nipple.

“Hanna, love, move in with me.”

She cried out as she came, body shuddering and shaking. I leaned over her, let her come down as I watched. Only after her eyes opened did I make it a question.

“Will you move in with me?”

She ran her hand down my cheek, down my chest, fire burning across my skin. I'd never wanted someone as much as I wanted her. When her fingers wrapped around my erection, I let out a groan. She could undo me with a single touch.

“I will.”

I pulled her against me as I sat up. Her legs wrapped around my waist, and we both moaned as I pulled her down on me. I held her there for a moment, rested my forehead on hers. Our breath mingled, and I fancied I could almost feel our hearts beating together.

“I love you,” I said quietly. “With everything that's in me, Hanna. I love you.”

She took my mouth this time, claimed me even as her body rocked against mine. We would have time to play later, have time for me to dominate her. This wasn't about me or even her right now. It was about us. About who we were together.

Her head fell back, and I kissed my way across her jaw and down to her neck. She gasped my name when I scraped my teeth across her throat, and the tension in my stomach twisted into something hot and primal.

“I love that,” I said.

“What?” Her eyes were closed, nipples hard against my chest.

“The way you say my name when we make love.”

“Cross,” she moaned my name again.

“Like that.” I practically growled the words as I tightened my grip on her waist. I tugged on her hair, getting another one of those wonderful sounds from her.

Damn those were hot.

“Again,” I demanded.

“Cross.”

I closed my eyes.

“I love you.”

Pleasure crashed over me, and her body tightened as she followed me over the edge. This was it. Everything I ever needed, right here. I was crazy to think I would ever need anything else.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

HANNA

Last night had been amazing, not only physically so, but emotionally. I'd felt a real connection between us, different than anything we'd had before. Not that we hadn't loved each other, but this was what I'd been craving. Something more. It reminded me of how I'd felt the first time I understood the true relationship between a Dom and Sub.

We'd fallen asleep in his bed – *our* bed, if he truly meant what he said when he asked me to move in – and when I woke, I found myself still in his arms. He was sleeping, his breathing slow and steady, his heart a steady thudding against my ear. The sounds coaxed me to wakefulness, and I found myself snuggling closer to him, enjoying the feel of his arms around me.

Yet even in the warmth and safety of his embrace, my mind couldn't help but start going over everything that happened. Not only the good, not the pleasure, but the promises made. As much as I wanted to believe that he hadn't said any of those in the heat of the moment, but rather because he meant them, I knew that I wouldn't fully believe it until it had stood for longer than a few hours.

I loved him, and I trusted him with my body, to know my limits. I wasn't certain, however, that I completely trusted him with my heart again. Not until I saw that things weren't going to just go back to how they were.

When he stirred, I waited for him to say something about work and how he'd call me later today. Something to make sure things were at status quo.

“When did you want to do it?” His voice was still thick with sleep as he tightened his arms around me.

Puzzled, I rolled toward him so we were facing each other. “Do what?”

He never referred to sex as *it*, so I didn't think that was what he was asking.

If my brain had been working a little better, I would've also realized that if he'd wanted sex, he wouldn't have asked me a question. He would've kissed me, touched me, used his considerable talents to arouse me, until I was begging for him.

"When do you want to move in?" He clarified his statement, but it didn't make me any less confused. He smiled at me as he brushed curls back from my face. "You do remember that I asked you to move in with me, and after some prompting, you agreed."

I swallowed hard, a warm flush coming over me as I remembered exactly what sort of *prompting* Cross had done to convince me to agree. I hadn't hesitated because I didn't want to live with him. My hesitation had come from the fact that I wanted it so badly that I couldn't bear the thought that his offer hadn't been genuine.

"I did."

Cross's expression sobered, the look in his eyes telling me that he had an idea of what I was thinking.

"I won't hold you to anything you don't truly want," he said. "You know that, right?"

I knew if I wanted him to be honest with me, if I wanted the new, tenuous chapter of our relationship to last, I had to continue to show honesty myself.

"I want it," I said. "But only if it's what you really want. I don't want to pressure you into anything either. I never wanted that."

He sat up so quickly that it startled me. His hands came to my face, cupping my cheeks between them. "Listen to me, Hanna, my love. You didn't pressure me. You didn't make me do anything that I didn't want to do. Didn't make me say anything I didn't want to say. I meant every word, including asking you to move in with me."

The hope inside me was almost painful, and when he bent down to brush his lips across mine, it burst, flooding me.

"You are my future, Hanna." His fingers ran down my shoulders, danced across my collarbone. "And I'd be a fool to wait for it any longer."

I studied him, eyes narrowing. He was different. I wasn't sure how, exactly, or what specifically made me think that something had changed. He seemed more relaxed, more at ease with himself.

"You're sure?" I asked.

His answer came quickly, his words firm. "More sure than I've ever

been.”

I wanted to throw myself in his arms, tell him that I'd get my things from Juliette's today, but I held back. I wanted to make sure we did this right, and nothing would be right until we dealt with certain...issues.

“Then we'll discuss details later.” When he frowned, I reached up and kissed him. “First, we have some things to talk about.”

“Things?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Tucker and Taliyah.”

He sighed. “Right. Tucker and Taliyah.” He ran his eyes down my body and back up again. “I suppose that means we should get dressed.”

A quarter of an hour later, the two of us were seated at the table, a box of gourmet bagels between us. I almost laughed at that. Back in Ohio, I never would've thought about bagels as being something that could be gourmet, but I couldn't get enough of them. The coffee in our mugs was gourmet too. Pretty much everything in the kitchen was.

“You're going to be late,” I said as I glanced at the clock.

“I'm the CEO,” he reminded me with a grin.

“But you like to set a good example,” I reminded him this time.

“True.” His smile widened. “But sometimes that means taking some time out to do what needs to be done in my personal life.”

“You just have to win every argument, don't you?” I asked with a sigh.

The way his eyes danced made me want to kiss him and slap him at the same time. It was infuriating. *He* was infuriating.

But he was *mine*.

“So you're going to take the day off?”

He shook his head. “*We* are. The two of us will figure out what to do, and then we'll do it together.” He reached over and took my hand. “Everything from here on out is will be together.”

“I hope not everything,” I teased. “I do like some surprises.”

He chuckled as he released my hand and reached for his coffee. “I'll keep that in mind.” After a long swallow, he continued, “But first—”

“Tucker and Taliyah,” I finished.

He nodded. “What do you think we should do?”

Even though I knew he respected my opinion, I was surprised by the question. I also had absolutely no idea.

“Do they know you saw them?” I asked. I was pretty sure I knew the answer, but it was somewhere to start.

“No,” he said. “They have no idea that I know what they're up to.”

“And what, exactly, is that?” I asked. “You said they were talking about using me as a distraction to get money from you. Did they say how she planned to ask you for it? What she was going to say she needed it for?”

“Does it matter?” he asked. “I'm obviously won't do it.”

“True,” I agreed. “So do you just tell her to leave? You're pretty well-known. She may very well go public about who she is. She could tell the world that she came to you as your sister, and you turned her away. It won't look good for you.”

He growled low in his throat. “I don't care how it looks.”

“But we should,” I countered. “I don't want her to hurt you. I don't want Tucker to hurt you.”

“That little bastard can only hurt me if he hurts you.” Cross's eyes flashed. “And I'll beat the shit out of him if he tries.”

An idea popped into my head. “Then let's take them out at the knees.”

“How do we do that?”

The restaurant wasn't quite as fancy as some of the ones Cross and I had gone to, but it had a pair of private rooms in the back, which was what Cross and I wanted. A pair of rooms with the ability to have the wall separating them to be withdrawn with the press of a button.

I sat in one, while Cross waited in the other. We'd made our calls back at his – *our* – place, and set up our meetings for the same early lunch. Tucker had accepted my invitation within minutes, and Taliyah had accepted Cross's as well. Now all we had to do was wait until they arrived.

“Hanna.” Tucker was all smiles as he came into the room. “I'm hoping this is a celebratory lunch.”

I stayed where I was, not trusting myself to meet him. Punching him in his mouth wasn't part of the plan, even though I was starting to wish it was.

“I'm really looking forward to working with you.”

He was now just a couple feet from me, and I stuck my hands in my pockets to make it clear that I didn't want a hug.

“That's too bad, Tucker.”

His smile froze, and I saw uncertainty flicker across his face. Good.

“You know, even after we broke up, I didn't harbor any bad feelings toward you. If you would've come to Juliette and me honestly, we would've

helped you.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.” There was no smile now.

“You do, Tucker. You know exactly what I mean.” It was my turn to smile. “I know that you’ve been talking to Taliyah.”

His eye twitched. “I don’t know—”

“Cut the bullshit.” My voice was cold, flat. “What are the two of you up to?”

I’d always known that Tucker was a wimp, but the moment he cracked was the first time I’d ever felt disgust for him. He spilled it all. How he’d seen an article about me and Cross, started looking for all he could find about us both. How a chance encounter in some forum had led him to someone claiming to be Cross’s sister. How she’d manipulated him, convinced him that her brother owed her for the life she’d never had. How she’d used him.

It was all her fault, all her plan.

When he was finally finished, I nodded, then walked over to the switch on the wall. Without a word, I watched the wall between the two rooms pull back, revealing Cross and a pissed-off looking woman with dark blonde hair.

“All done?” I asked as Taliyah and Tucker stared at each other.

“I think so,” Cross said. “You?”

“He wouldn’t shut up.” I grinned at him. “Told me all about how this was her idea.”

“You fucking prick!” Taliyah snarled. “You’re the one who wanted to throw your ex into the mix! I was fine with just going after the money.”

“Come off it!” Tucker yelled back. “You loved the idea of fucking with his head! Said he deserved it!”

“While I’m enjoying the two of you fighting,” Cross raised his voice, “Hanna and I really don’t have the time for it.”

Two sets of eyes turned to glare at us.

“I’ll go to the press,” Taliyah threatened. “I’ll ruin you.”

“I figured you’d say that,” I countered. “In fact, I was counting on it.”

Cross and I pulled our phones from our pockets.

“We have both of your confessions recorded,” I said. “If either of you decide to make trouble for us, we’ll release it all.”

“We didn’t do anything illegal,” Taliyah said, her face twisted into a scowl.

“Maybe not,” Cross said, lifting a shoulder. “But it sure as hell won’t look good for you.”

“Hanna.” Tucker turned toward me. “You know—”

“Go back home,” I said and dug the knife deeper, “and pray I don't let your friends or family know what you did.”

The color leached from his face. Taliyah might not have had much by the way of family, but Tucker did. Family and friends in a town small enough that it'd be bad if word got around.

Cross looked at Taliyah and I was surprised to see the flash of hurt appear on his face. “Want to know something ironic?” he said to her. “After the initial surprise, I was happy to learn you were my sister and had been thinking of how best to compensate you for the years you didn't have with my father. With me.”

Taliyah's face didn't soften, she simply lifted her chin. Her expression hard as stone.

“I was thinking of the vacations we could have together. The home I would buy you. Holidays. Special occasions.” His voice broke and he coughed to clear his throat. “Things we will never have now.”

“Cross...” Taliyah took a step toward him, but he held up his hand, his face morphing from sad to furious.

“Get out of here.” Cross's voice rang with the kind of authority that made men and women listen.

Taliyah and Tucker were no different. They hurried out the door, and Cross turned to me.

“Now,” he said with a smile, “how about we get some lunch and start talking about how you're going to tell Juliette that you're moving out.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

CROSS

Christmas Eve. My second holiday with the woman I loved, and it wouldn't be the last. I just hoped it would have better memories than Thanksgiving did.

If things went my way, it definitely would.

It'd been a little over a week since Hanna and I had sent Tucker and Taliyah packing, and things hadn't gone back to normal. And I was grateful for it. I thought that I liked the routine, the knowledge that things were the same as they'd always been. But after a week of gradually bringing Hanna's things over, of turning it from *my* place into *our* place, I realized how much I would've missed if I'd insisted on never changing.

A strange sense of satisfaction went through me as I walked through the house. Hanna's clothes hung in our closet or were folded neatly in our dresser. Her pictures were now on the walls, on the mantel above the fireplace. The toiletries in the bathroom were no longer extras she brought over. She hadn't brought much, since most of the things at the apartment had been Juliette's, but it was enough to make a difference.

Another thing to get used to, I thought as I stepped into the living room. Hanna hadn't only been busy this week moving from the apartment to the house. She'd been appalled when I told her that I hadn't decorated for Christmas in years. I hadn't seen the point of doing it just for myself.

The entire house smelled like pine because she hadn't been satisfied with a fake tree. No, she'd managed to find a tree farm outside the city, and we'd gone out and picked a tree that was cut down right there. Last night, we decorated it, and I had to admit that it completed the look. I almost felt bad

that we wouldn't be able to enjoy it longer.

Next year, I reminded myself. Anything that the two of us hadn't gotten to do this year, we'd do next year. We'd make our own traditions and memories. We had all the time in the world to do it. This Christmas, we were staying in California and had already made plans with Juliette for tomorrow. Tonight, however, was all about Hanna and me.

While things had been good between us, they'd also been busy. Now that things were resolved, we were both looking forward to a quiet evening at home with just the two of us. No more sibling / ex drama.

I'd gotten my closure about Taliyah two days ago. My PI, Mars, had gotten back to me with an apology that it'd taken him so long. Some residents of Nashville hadn't been that receptive to his bribery attempts, so he'd been forced to rely on a few technical tricks to find the information I'd wanted.

Taliyah was my half-sister. She hadn't lied about that. Aside from a birth certificate with our father's name on it, Mars had found a paternity test...along with an unsent letter. While there was always a possibility that Taliyah's mother had contacted my father some other way or at some other time, the evidence Mars had found suggested that my father had never known about her.

And contrary to what Taliyah told me, she hadn't known who her father was until recently. Her mother had passed away from cancer like Taliyah had said, but it wasn't until then that she'd found her birth certificate and the paternity test. Mars had spoken with a friend of hers who'd filled in enough of the blanks to confirm that Taliyah had never known who her father was prior to her mother's death.

So while I was going into the new year knowing that my parents hadn't been faithful to each other, I wasn't burdened with thinking that my father had abandoned his child. I didn't know what arrangement my parents had regarding their sex lives, and from my own experiences, I knew that every relationship was different. I could accept that things might not have been as traditional as I always thought. That had been their business. However, I had been struggling with the idea that my father could've walked away from a child. Now, I knew that wasn't the case, and a weight felt like it'd been lifted from my shoulders.

The front door opened, interrupting my thoughts.

“Next time you forget something on Christmas Eve, you can go out and...”

Hanna's voice trailed off as she came into the living room and stopped. Her eyes widened when she saw what I'd done while she was gone.

Strawberries and oranges. A myriad of chocolate, both melted and solid accompanied more kinds of nuts than I'd known existed. Expensive cheeses and equally expensive crackers. The entire table in front of the couch was covered. Next to the table was a bottle of her favorite champagne.

Her eyes narrowed. "You didn't forget to buy wine for tomorrow, did you?"

I smiled at her, anticipation and anxiety twisted together in my stomach until I knew I wouldn't be able to eat.

"This is amazing, Cross." She wrapped her arms around my neck and gave me a firm kiss. It was mostly innocent but held the promise of less innocent things to come.

She went to the kitchen to drop off the wine we hadn't needed, and I poured us both glasses of champagne, then took a breath to try to steady my nerves.

It didn't work.

"Everything looks wonderful," she said as she came back into the room. She stopped in front of me and frowned. "Are you okay?"

I nodded and held out a hand. She took it and I led her over to the couch where we sat down. I handed her a glass and we each took a drink. I could see the confusion on her face when I set my glass down and took hers to do the same thing. I took both of her hands, warmth flowing through me as she wrapped her fingers around mine.

"You know that when I first approached you, I didn't know who you were," I began, "but I think – I *know* – that some part of me recognized who you were. While I've always believed that some people find love, I've never been the sort of man who believed in soulmates. Until I met you. I could see your strength, but I still wanted to protect you, take care of you."

She squeezed my hand, but I could tell she still didn't understand where I was headed.

"In my life, I've divided the women who shared my bed into lovers or sexual partners, and from moment one, you were the former. What I haven't allowed myself to admit until recently is that there's a third category, one that goes beyond anything I've had before."

I released one of her hands and reached over to retrieve the small box that I had hidden behind a plate of strawberries. Her grip suddenly tightened, and

I heard the sharp intake of breath as she realized what I was doing.

“I don't just want a sexual partner or even a lover.” I turned back to her and met her gaze. “I want a wife.”

I opened the box, but she didn't take her eyes off me.

“There's no point in sitting around and waiting for what I know is inevitable. We belong together, Hanna, and I want everyone to know it. A few months ago, you accepted my collar, knowing that it would tell everyone in our world that you were mine. Now, I'm asking for you to accept this ring so that everyone we meet, everyone who sees you, will know that I belong to you.”

“Oh, Cross.” Her voice trembled, and her eyes sparkled with unshed tears.

“Will you marry me?”

A tear made a trail down her cheek as she nodded. Her hand was shaking as I slipped the ring onto her finger. I had it custom made so that it matched her collar, but she wasn't looking at it. She was looking at me. As soon as the ring was in place, she kissed me, and I could feel everything she was feeling. Desire. Joy. Love. All of it came through the bruising force of her lips on mine.

I wrapped my arms around her as I took control of the kiss. One hand slipped under the back of her shirt, my palm skimming up her spine. The other hand moved over her hip and down her thigh until I reached the bottom of her skirt. Her fingers curled into my hair as she arched against me, her desperation fueling my own. If I didn't pull back now, I would take her like this, skirt up around her hips, panties pulled to the side. While the thought of something hard and fast appealed to me, I had plans for how this was going to go.

“Slow down,” I whispered against her lips. “I'll get you there, I promise, but I want to make this last.”

She made a noise of protest as I moved back, but didn't argue. I took a moment to appreciate the sight of her like this. Hair mussed, lips slightly swollen, pupils wide, skin flushed.

“Undress,” I said as I stood. By the time I had everything but my boxer-briefs off, she was completely naked.

Damn, she was gorgeous.

“Lay down.”

I'd spread a blanket over the couch, and as Hanna moved to do what I

asked, she noticed it for the first time. She gave me a questioning look but didn't say anything as I sat on the edge of the couch.

I reached over and picked up a strawberry. "White, milk, or dark?" Off of her confused expression, I clarified, "What type of chocolate?"

"Dark," she breathed.

I dipped the berry into the melted dark chocolate, and Hanna opened her mouth in anticipation. I didn't go there though. Instead, I used the strawberry to spread chocolate over her nipple. She gasped and squirmed at the combination of heat and friction. Her nipple puckered, making a hard little tip that begged for me to taste it.

I resisted as I took the strawberry back to the chocolate and dipped it again. This time, I offered her a bite. My stomach tightened as she let me feed her. This was an aspect of the Dom / Sub relationship that I hadn't explored before her, another way for me to take care of her.

The last bite of fruit went into her mouth, and I swore as her tongue darted out to lick the juice from my fingertips. If I'd been a man with less self-control, I would've been inside her in two seconds.

I selected an orange slice this time and used it to spread chocolate over her other nipple before feeding her the fruit. Only after it was gone did I lower my head to her breast and set to work cleaning off the chocolate. Her nails bit into my shoulders as I licked and sucked her soft skin, removing every last trace of chocolate from her breast, then turning to the other.

By the time I finished, she was panting, and my erection was throbbing. But I wasn't done yet.

I selected another strawberry but didn't put anything on it this time. I ran it around her nipples, then down between her breasts, over her stomach. I watched as her eyes widened and knew she'd just realized where I was going. Or, rather, where the strawberry was going.

Her body jerked when the tip of it touched her clit, and I rubbed the fruit around and over the sensitive nerve bundle until soft mewling sounds fell from between her lips. Only then did I drop lower, dragging the berry between her folds until I was sure it was coated in her arousal.

When I raised it to her lips, she didn't hesitate. Her eyes locked with mine as she ate the entire thing. As she finished, she ran her tongue over her lips, and it took everything I had not to push my cock inside. Instead, I bent my head to claim her mouth, allowing my tongue to do what I wanted my dick to do.

“On your side,” I ordered as I stood again.

She rolled onto her side as I pulled off my underwear, then I moved to stretch out behind her. I pressed a kiss to the side of her neck as I ran my hand across her stomach, then up to cup one of her breasts. I could never get enough of this body, of this woman. The glittering rock on her finger reminded me that I wouldn't have to worry about that.

I reached down to grasp her thigh, pulling her leg back enough for her to open to me. With one smooth thrust, I buried myself inside her, both of us groaning at how tight she was. A shudder ran through her, then another. I hadn't hurt her, but I knew she was feeling every inch of me right now.

I curled my fingers around her hip, holding her steady. My lips brushed the shell of Hanna's ear when I spoke, “Touch yourself. Come as much as you want. But once you start, you're not allowed to stop until I finish. Understood?”

Another shudder. “Yes, Sir.”

The couch didn't give us quite as much room to move as I would've liked, but it worked better for the food, and after watching her eat that last strawberry...I was already planning other ways to incorporate similar scenarios into our sex life.

When I began to move, I kept each stroke slow, drawing all the way back until only the tip of me remained inside, then pushing forward. It was the most exquisite torture, having her squeeze me tight, feeling her clenching around me, but not driving into her the way part of me wanted to.

I swore when I saw her hand moved down between her legs, felt her fingers brush against my cock as it moved in and out of her. She came almost instantly, crying out as her muscles seized. I closed my eyes and kept up my pace even as her pussy contracted around me. As I'd instructed, she didn't stop, turning one orgasm into another, each one making it harder for me not to completely lose control.

Only when her body was limp, her whimpers telling me that she'd reached her limit, that pleasure was close to turning into pain, did I let myself go. I wrapped my arms around her, held her in place as I slammed into her once, twice, then a third time. I groaned her name as I emptied inside her, my pleasure heightened by the feel of the cool metal and hard rock on her finger.

She was mine. Forever and always.

She was my future.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

HANNA

“Juliette! Juliette!”

My sister and I both turned toward our mother as she came into the small side room where the two of us were making last minute preparations.

“Dalton wants to know where you put the diaper bag. Anthony needs to be changed before the ceremony starts.”

Juliette sighed. “It's right where I left it, Mom, and you know it. You saw me set it out of the way.”

Her voice was even, but I could see the frustration on her face. Not frustration with Dalton, who was absolutely wonderful with their son, but rather with our mother. While things between our parents and I had gotten better, they hadn't gone so well with Juliette. As we'd predicted, they'd been scandalized when she'd told them she was pregnant, even more so when they learned she wasn't at least engaged to the father. Even now that she and Dalton were officially dating, our parents weren't happy.

Case in point, from the moment our parents had arrived in California, they'd been...*overly helpful* when it came to offering parenting advice. It didn't matter that Juliette and Dalton had been doing a fine job these past three months. Everything was about all the things RJ and Abbie were doing right with their little Susan, all the ways Juliette and Dalton weren't doing with Anthony.

“Mom,” I cut in. “Could you go get the bag and give it to Dalton? I need Juliette to help me finish doing up the back of my dress.”

“I can help you,” Mom offered. “Juliette should take care of her son.”

“Juliette is standing right here,” my sister muttered. She kept her voice low though. She promised me that she'd hold her tongue today.

I hadn't made any such promises.

“Well, I can assure you that his father is quite capable of taking care of him.” I gave Mom a wide smile. “And if you don't feel like you can find the bag and take it to Dalton, I'd be more than happy to do it for you.”

The expression on Mom's face turned brittle. “No, dear. It's your wedding day. I'll go.”

Juliette waited until the door closed before she laughed. “I hope you don't talk to Cross like that.”

I grinned at her. “Not unless I'm in the mood to get spanked.” I fell silent for a moment, my levity fading. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.” She finished the last two buttons, and I turned toward her.

“You and Dalton started dating before Anthony was born,” I began. “Was it...weird?”

“Was what weird?” Her expression suggested she had an idea of what I was asking but that she wanted to be sure.

I glanced back at the door, not because I was embarrassed by the subject matter, but rather because I didn't want to even think about what our mother would say if she walked in on this particular conversation.

“Sex. Did you being pregnant make sex weird between the two of you?”

“Like physically?” She turned toward the mirror and fixed a few loose strands of hair. “Not exactly. I mean, not every position is comfortable, and afterwards, intercourse is off the table for a while.”

“I figured that,” I said. “I meant more with the whole, you know, Dom / Sub thing. Was it strange, doing all that when you were pregnant? Or did you guys stick with vanilla sex?” I could feel the heat rising in my face. “I don't want to ask Cross because I don't want him to think I'm worried—”

“It varies from person to person,” she said, turning to face me now. “And it'll be different for the two of you since you're his submissive unlike Dalton and me. But, how far you want to go, you'll want to discuss with him.”

There was another moment of silence before I asked the question that had really been nagging at me on and off for the past couple days. “So it doesn't feel strange to be a parent and...”

She chuckled. “You mean the fact that Dalton and I could be in the middle of a scene where I'm flogging him, and then have to take a break to change Anthony's diaper?”

I laughed, the tension in me easing. “Exactly.”

She shrugged. “It's who I am. Both a dominant and a mother. I don't feel the need to define myself as only one or the other.”

I nodded, absorbing what she said. Of the four of us, Dalton may have been the newest one to the group, but I was still the newest to the lifestyle. I wasn't ashamed of what we did or who we were, but there were still times I struggled to balance it with the rest of my life.

A knock at the door, and then Abbie stuck her head in. “It's time.”

“Thank you.”

Abbie flashed a smile at me and then disappeared.

“You ready?” Juliette asked.

I looked at myself in the mirror, took in my reflection. My dress was simple enough, an off-white with very little busywork. It hugged my curves, showed off a modest amount of cleavage. Instead of a veil or some fancy crown, I'd had baby's breath arranged in my curls. The only jewelry I wore, aside from my ring, was my collar. No one attending the wedding, aside from three others, would know its true nature, but Cross would know why I wore it, and that was all that mattered.

“I think I was ready to marry him the day I woke up in his house, and he told me he was going to take care of me.”

I'd wanted a fall wedding, and wanted to give Juliette enough time to recover after Anthony's birth, so we'd set it for October. The weather was perfect. Not too hot, not too cold. The church had been my concession to my parents, who hadn't been happy that Cross and I had decided on only having Dalton and Juliette as our attendants. In their minds, RJ was the natural choice for best man, which of course meant that Abbie needed to be paired with him as my maid of honor.

Things could've gotten bad if Abbie hadn't shocked us all by speaking up. In a calm, matter-of-fact manner, she told my parents that she supported my choices because it was my wedding, not theirs. Then, to top it all off, she told RJ to stop being a selfish ass and stick up for his sisters.

I was pretty sure if it hadn't been for the fact that she'd just given birth less than forty-eight hours before, there might've been further disagreement, but no one in my family was crazy enough to argue with a woman who'd gone through twenty-two hours of labor.

After that, things had gotten a bit easier for me. It also helped that my parents had fallen in love with Cross the moment he put that ring on my finger. He talked business with my dad, charmed my mother, and often played mediator between us. We'd never be close, but I was at least able to have a wedding without drama.

An absolutely beautiful wedding and an even more beautiful reception. We'd decided to have at an outdoor venue that allowed for an indoor option if the weather was bad. It wasn't, so now I was dancing with my husband in a clearing surrounded by flowers. The scent was heady, a perfect combination of all the right plants. I didn't know how the wedding planner Cross had hired had found it, but I made a note to myself to give her a bonus when we got back from our honeymoon.

“What are you thinking about, Mrs. Phillips?” Cross asked as he spun me around.

I laughed. Mrs. Phillips. “Just thinking your wedding planner needs a bonus.”

He frowned.

“What's wrong?” I immediately looked around, trying to figure out what had caused the shift.

“Here I am, thinking you're counting down the minutes until you can ravish me, and you're thinking about our wedding planner.”

I leaned closer and put my mouth against his ear. “Maybe you should think about ways to punish me then?”

The hand on the small of my back flexed, the only physical indication I received that Cross had heard me.

“A toast!” RJ called.

Shit.

When Cross started to pull back, I tightened my grip around him. I'd hoped to do this on our honeymoon, but Cross was bound to notice if I asked for something other than champagne for the toast.

“Are you okay?” he asked, concern on his face.

I nodded, then smiled, though there was a bit of nervousness to the smile. “Before we do that, I should mention something. I ordered sparkling grape juice for tonight.”

“Okay?” He sounded as confused as he looked.

“Because I can't have champagne.”

I waited, watched his eyes widen. He'd never given me any reason to

doubt any promises he'd made, but this was different. This was a strange near-repeat of what happened almost exactly a year ago.

Except with one critical difference. This time, it really was me who was pregnant.

"Hanna?" Cross stopped dancing and reached up to put his hand on my cheek. "I don't want to make an assumption here."

"I'm pregnant."

The words had barely left my mouth before he was kissing me. A deep, full kiss that I felt all the way to my toes. There was no hesitation, no doubt. I could feel the love, the acceptance. Words, I might doubt, but this...this I knew was the truth.

"I love you," he murmured against my lips. "So much."

I would've told him that I loved him too, but I was too busy trying to regain my breath.

"And I'm going to love starting a family with you."

"Come on, you two!" Juliette called out. "Plenty of time for that on the honeymoon!"

"She's right, you know. We do have the whole honeymoon for all of that."

"True." He turned us toward the others, wrapping his arm around my waist. "But I think we'll have to put in some extra time in the bedroom and the playroom over the next couple months. Once the little ones start coming, the opportunities for alone time goes down exponentially."

"Little *ones*?" I looked up at him in surprise. "As in plural?"

He kissed my temple. "What can I say? We're going to make beautiful babies."

Chapter Thirty

HANNA

I was putting forth maximum effort to smile and be supportive as my sister asked me for the thousandth time if her hair looked good. I didn't blame her for it. It was her wedding, after all. And I was excited for her. I loved Dalton. He was great for Juliette and a wonderful father to Anthony. I had no doubt that they'd be as happy together as Cross and I were.

But today's temperature was a record high, and I was a week overdue. Little Bethany Mae Phillips was procrastinating so much that I had an appointment tomorrow to have labor induced. The doctor had wanted to set it for yesterday, but I told him that only an act of God would make me miss my sister's wedding.

I didn't regret it. Not really.

But I was completely miserable, and it was getting harder not to show it. Both Juliette and Dalton had offered to postpone things, but I'd refused. Our family had flown out for the ceremony, and I knew it would be almost impossible for them to stay any longer than the weekend. Well, Mom was staying through the next week, she said it was to watch Anthony while his parents went on a short honeymoon, but we all knew that a good part of it was because she was certain Cross and I would need her expertise when the baby was born.

When Dalton had proposed to Juliette on Christmas Eve this past year, our parents' attitudes toward her had softened. Neither one of us were quite to RJ's level since we hadn't moved back to Ohio, but at least we'd conformed to marital expectations at last.

The thought made me laugh under my breath. Our parents would freak

out if they knew how nonconforming our relationships were, but we were fine with letting them think what they wanted.

I shifted in my seat and bit back a wince. Up until now, the pregnancy had been fairly easy. Abbie was already having a tough time with her second one, and she was only four months along. Between the two of us, at least Juliette would have a while before family started asking when she was going to have another one.

“Are you okay?” Juliette asked as she turned toward me. “There's still time to call things off.”

I shook my head. “I'm fine.”

The twinge in my back said that maybe I wanted to reconsider that statement, but I pushed it aside. I would get through the ceremony, and if I didn't think I could handle staying any longer, I'd excuse myself. Juliette and Dalton had asked to have the ceremony and reception here at Cross and my house since it was only immediate family, so I wouldn't have far to go to relax.

“Come on, Hanna.” Mom helped me to my feet. “Let's get you to your seat.”

Juliette and Dalton had opted not to have anyone standing with them during the ceremony – another thing I was grateful to them for – so my seat was next to Cross. I looked around as I settled next to him. The wedding planner had outdone herself. I hardly recognized the dining room. It looked like something out of a fairy tale, all gold and lavender. The French doors let in natural light while remaining closed so we could appreciate the air-conditioning.

Juliette's assistant peeked out from the connecting kitchen door and caught my eye. She smiled and gave me a thumb's up to let me know that things were all set for the reception. She'd been a real find. Both Juliette and I felt completely comfortable leaving her in charge while we were gone over the next week, and I knew I could trust her to fill my shoes while I was on maternity leave.

Cross took my hand, threading his fingers between mine before lifting them to kiss the back of my hand. “How are you doing?”

I nodded and gave him a tight smile. Then the music changed, and Dalton was taking his place next to the minister. Another muscle spasm went through my back as I turned to watch Juliette come forward.

I finally admitted that I was lying to myself even as the minister began

the ceremony. I knew what I was feeling wasn't muscle spasms. I'd been having them on and off all morning, but they'd started coming more consistently over the past hour or so. I wasn't going to ruin Juliette's wedding though. The contractions were still far enough apart that I wasn't worried. My water hadn't even broken yet. The ceremony was going to be short because of all of the young kids – Dalton had four nieces and nephews under the age of five – so I could power through it. Once everyone had gone home, then I'd have Cross take me to the hospital.

As Dalton kissed Juliette, I felt Cross watching me. It was no surprise that he was so aware of my body that he could tell something was wrong. I didn't look at him as he helped me to my feet so we could applaud, but even as I straightened, another contraction seized me, and I grabbed onto his arm.

“Hanna?” His voice was sharp enough to draw everyone's attention.

I was saved having to say it when my water broke. I looked up at him and saw concern and annoyance mingling in his eyes. He knew I'd waited. I gave him a sheepish smile that turned into a grimace as pain tightened my muscles.

His arm went around my waist, supporting me. “Juliette—”

“Go,” she said. “I'll take care of things here, and we'll meet you at the hospital.”

“No,” I said. “You enjoy your reception.”

Juliette's eyes narrowed.

“At least feed everyone so you're not eating hospital food while you're waiting.”

She looked like she was about ready to argue when Dalton put his hand on her arm. “We'll all eat and get things cleaned up, then come to the hospital.”

“Can someone grab my bag?”

“I'll get it.” To my surprise, my brother volunteered. “Where is it?”

“Up the stairs, second door on the left, in the closet,” Cross said. “It's a small black bag. Bring it out to the car.”

And just like that, I went from being induced tomorrow to being rushed to the hospital to deliver naturally.

When she finally arrived, I was beyond exhausted. Every muscle in my body ached, and I felt like I was fighting to keep my eyes open. Then they handed her to me and my entire world narrowed down to the tiny, perfect human being I held in my arms. She was red and wrinkled, nothing like the newborns they always showed on tv or in the movies, but she was still the

most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

I didn't realize Cross was there until I felt him kiss the top of my head. I tore my eyes away from our daughter long enough to look up at him and see my own emotions reflected back at me.

“Thank you,” he said softly.

“For what?”

“For everything. Marrying me. Giving me a daughter. A family.” He reached down to touch her cheek, an expression of wonder on his face.

I'd heard it said somewhere that some men fall in love, get married, and have children, while others get married, have children, and then fall in love. I wasn't so sure about that, but at that moment, when I saw how he looked at our daughter, I fell in love with him all over again. My husband. The father of my child. The man who protected me, cared for me, watched over me.

He was mine, and I knew I'd continue falling in love with him over and over again until the day I died. Then he turned and looked at me, and I knew he felt the same.

The End

BONUS: PURE LUST VOL. 1

M. S. PARKER & CASSIE WILD

CHAPTER ONE

Three steps into the white marble and glass lobby of the Bouvier building and I knew I was so out of my league. The skyscraper housed the largest fashion house in Manhattan and there I was, a tiny little country mouse, dressed in last year's fashions.

Appointment or not, I didn't belong here. The suited man behind the counter must have thought so too. I only had a few seconds inside the bright elegance of the lobby before he addressed me coolly, "All visitors must sign in. Name?"

"Gabriella Baine."

The few people milling about a large square of white leather couches in the cavernous lobby looked up at the sound of my voice. Had I really spoken that loud?

Two bored models sipped sparkling water while a man in a close-fitting, tailored suit strode over to the windows, looking outside, then glared at his watch. The fourth person, a young man with a bright purple shirt glowing from underneath his conservative suit studied me from under his lashes, the look on his face caught between boredom and hostility.

He was wearing the same silver visitor's pin the security guard handed to me. Was he here interviewing for the same job? Bouvier, the internationally known high-end fashion house, was looking for a new talent acquisitions assistant. I guess they could have been interviewing for several positions. I tried a polite smile as I moved to sit down in the sitting area.

The man in the bright purple shirt all but growled at me.

I'm in way over my head...

“Thanks, Kendra.” I muttered.

My roommate, native New Yorker and six feet of jaw-dropping natural beauty, was a model and while she hadn’t quite hit the big times—*yet*—she had a few connections. She’d set up this interview as if I was a shoe-in.

As if.

Speaking of shoes, I looked down at my patent leather heels. The sexy peekaboos had plenty of shine, but they weren’t designer shoes, and I was sure the people in the lobby had already noticed. Even the guy who’d opened the door for me had worn hand-cobbled loafers.

I took a deep breath and put on a fake pair of tortoise shell glasses. The stage fright trick I’d picked up studying improvisational theater in college was now a habit, though I liked to think of it more as a quirk.

It reminded me that what I really wanted out of life was to sit in a small room surrounded by other writers, arguing out the beats, hooks, and jokes of a new television show. Not trying to sell myself as being some sort of expert in acquiring new talent.

Wearing the glasses, I could make myself look at everything as possible fodder for my writing. This would be a typical fish-out-of-water scene. Maybe I could make it different—the heroine would bolt before it was too late. Take off running down the sidewalk in a fit of hysterical panic. Crash into Prince Charming.

I could use a Prince Charming, as well as a job.

Resisting the urge to huff out a dramatic sigh, I swept the room with another nervous glance. I should bolt, though, Prince Charming or not. But I needed the job. My current job was all about connections and experience, but the pay sucked and I *needed* the money.

“Ms. Baine?”

Too late to run now. I made myself smile as I stood.

It was time to teeter across a slick white marble minefield of possible embarrassments to interview for a job I knew nothing about. *You’re paying your dues*, I told myself. We all had to pay them. Kendra had paid hers and she was almost there. I had to pay mine.

“Gabriella?”

“That’s, ah, me.” I stumbled and tried to play it off as a quick dance shuffle in the doorway of what looked like a break room. The fake glasses slid down my nose and I hurriedly took them off. They might work to calm me, but I didn’t want to explain to people why I didn’t wear them all the

time. That would *really* convince people I had a few screws loose.

He stepped aside, allowing me to enter. I edged in through the doorway, looking around nervously.

It was indeed a break room.

“I’m Simon Hughes.” He spoke in a brisk, borderline rude voice as he came around the table and sat down. He held a file in his hand and he flipped it open, gesturing for me to sit.

I did, watching as he skimmed the information in the file.

“It says here you’re from Tennessee.”

“Yes.” I smiled.

“I don’t hear much of an accent.”

I was used to this by now. It had seemed obnoxious when I’d first moved here, but one thing I’d learned early on was that the slow twang of the south wasn’t going to open any doors in New York—and it might in fact slam them in my face.

“I’ve been gone from home a while. The accent only comes out when I’m riled.” I winked, trying to lighten the tension.

The young man with the thinning blond hair just studied me with the same cool expression for a long moment. Absently, he smoothed down a skinny tie, brushed invisible lint off his tan suit and adjusted his cufflinks. Something about those gestures seemed familiar, like the way I wore my glasses. A ritual. *Possible personality quirk*, I told myself. I had an entire mental file of them.

“I’m sorry for the location,” he said, glancing back down at the file.

“Bouvier is having a big launch meeting upstairs and the other conference room is covered in catalog work, but at least there’s coffee.”

He gestured toward the counter along the wall in what I assumed was an offer. “No, thank you.”

I was jittery enough.

He flipped through my application, the silence straining on my nerves until I found myself measuring the steps between me and the door, then *that* door and the main doors. Could I make a break for it in these heels?

“So, Ms. Baine.” He reshuffled the papers in front of them, neatly stacked them, aligning the edges in a way that struck me as borderline obsessive. Then he did the tie, lint, cufflink check again.

The dude had enough quirks going on for a whole cast of characters all by himself.

Abruptly, he jerked his head up and pinned me with a hard look.

“Exactly what do you bring to the world of talent acquisition?”

“A need for talent?” I flashed him a smile.

“I’ll rephrase.” He tapped a finger on the thin file. “What is your experience in the talent industry, Ms. Baine?”

Aw, hell...

The horrible interview continued to go downhill from there. When the door flew open nearly fifteen minutes in—had it *only* been fifteen minutes—I could have cried in relief.

Then I caught a look of the intruder.

Oh. Wow.

A jaw-dropping gorgeous intruder. He swept aside a pile of files so neatly organized, I knew they had to have been Simon Hughes’ handy work and I watched as the man across from me went red in the face.

Then I slid the sexy storm another covert look. He was flinging open cabinets and grumbling. Then finally, he grunted, grabbing something from one of them, slamming the door with a resounding *bang*. He had a fistful of sugar packets.

He turned, studying us as he ripped them all open at once. Sugar spilled across the counter, only half of it going into the cup.

Simon Hughes clenched his jaw and focused on me. “I’m sorry. Please continue.”

I guess we were going to pretend we were still alone.

“Aren’t you Lee’s assistant?” The man who wasn’t supposed to be there grabbed a stirring stick as he spoke. “What are you doing on the main floor? Isn’t there some kind of attic all you assistants hang in like bats?”

I laughed out loud and then had to pretend it was my ring tone. I made a good show of turning the phone off and apologizing to Simon. If he hadn’t been glaring at the coffee-swilling, sugar-slinging intruder, I don’t think it would have worked. As it was, neither one even glanced at me.

“I’m conducting an interview, Mr. McCreary,” Simon said stiffly.

“And you haven’t even introduced us. I’m Flynn.” The man turned cadet blue eyes on me. All the nerves jittering inside me seemed to coalesce and then explode, turning into something else entirely. Lust.

Plain and simple.

Those blue eyes drifted down, lingered on my mouth, then back up.

Heat suffused me and I managed, barely, not to lick my lips.

He was bossy and overconfident. I knew his type. He'd be flippant and arrogant through and through. He loomed over that snotty Simon Hughes just because he could and I almost felt bad for the poor guy conducting my lousy interview. But I still had a feeling if he decided to turn his ire my way, I'd be a molten mess.

Simon shifted nervously in his chair, clearing his throat as he started his tie, lint, cufflink check. "Mr. McCreary—"

"I'm here for a job interview," I said, hoping to salvage the situation. "We've only got a set amount of time, Mr. McCreary."

He cocked an eyebrow at me before he leaned over Simon to read the top file. "Gabriella Baine, from Tennessee." He cocked an eyebrow. "Too bad you lost the accent. Accents are sexy."

I pressed my palms down on the table and spread my fingers to stop from balling my hands into fists. I didn't find that eyebrow thing sexy. Nope. And I hated that he was flirting during an interview. Definitely.

Flynn's blue eyes lingered on me, a faint smile curling his mouth. It was a beautiful mouth, just full enough without being too much. One hundred percent kissable lips.

Simon looked like he wanted to disappear into the chair, or maybe turn into the invisible lint he was now fussing with.

This was getting out of control. Aggravated, I looked back at Simon. "I'm sorry, what was your question?"

Simon went to respond, but Flynn cut him off. "Lee's assistant, a word please. In private."

Flynn yanked Simon from his chair and hauled him out the glass door. I watched as Flynn gave clear instructions with a lot of cutting hand gestures and some head shaking. Somehow I'd lost the job in a matter of syllables and I didn't know why.

As he marched away, I could see one other thing. Flynn McCreary had a great ass. Which I supposed was fitting since he *was* an ass.

The interviewer's face was flushed as he came back into the room. "Ms. Baine? Our time is up. I'll call if we have any further questions."

Why am I not surprised? "Thank you."

This entire thing had been a disaster from moment one. Without bothering to say anything else, I pushed through the door. Standing in the lobby with its sparkling glass and elegant marble, I tipped my head back and stared up.

I didn't belong here and I wasn't going to pretend like I did.

Kicking off the borrowed heels, I picked them up and walked barefoot across the lobby. Just before I reached the door, the skin on the back of my neck prickled. Swinging my head around, I caught sight of the bastard who'd cut my interview short.

Flynn McCreary stood at the visitor's desk and he had a camera aimed my way. That infuriating smirk was still on his face.

What the hell?

I lifted my right hand and flipped him off. It wasn't like I'd ever be back here anyway.

"Perfect!" he called as he snapped my picture.

CHAPTER TWO

“*W*hy couldn’t you be one of those models who doesn’t eat? Then I wouldn’t feel bad about having a job that pays peanuts.”

“Great, now I’m hungry for peanuts,” Kendra said. “Did you really give Flynn McCreary the finger?”

“I flipped the bird to a rude guy who interrupted the interview my beautiful, talented, understanding roommate set up for me,” I countered.

We stood in our small apartment’s kitchen with the empty cupboard doors hanging open around us. There was one box of pasta left and I was about to get creative with the remaining cans in our pantry.

It wasn’t the first time we’d been in this situation and it wouldn’t be the last.

Despite the lack of food, our apartment was my favorite place. The hardwood floors glowed in the sunshine and the old-fashioned wall sconce lighting added a soft glow in the evening. Kendra walked around turning the lamps on as I added water to our one pot. There was a built-in window seat that overlooked our busy street and a typical New York City fire escape we had turned into a small, straggled garden.

Kendra watered two of the plants and then stretched out on the window seat. Her legs were so long she had to prop them up on the opposite wall and she smiled as she gazed outside.

We both loved it here.

Kendra had just been signed on to model for a swimwear line at Bouvier, but the money wouldn’t come in for a while.

I wrote for a small creative firm, but I might as well write for peanuts for

all the money I brought in. I kept hoping I'd luck out and land a serious job somehow, but for now, we were barely hanging on.

We'd been doing okay, but then our landlord had gotten sick.

He'd recovered, but it had hit home pretty hard, I guess. He was retiring to Florida and his son—the sleazoid from hell—was taking over.

“I'm telling you, we need to figure out who to call about this rent thing,” I told Kendra. My gut was in a twist over what was happening. “I really don't think he can jack the rent up like that. And we both know he's doing it because he's pissed off you won't sleep with him.”

The smile faded from Kendra's face and she turned her head. “What are you going to do? I keep calling the agency that's supposed to handle it and nobody is calling me back.” Her shoulders sagged as she looked around the apartment. “We've only got two weeks before the money is due and if we don't pay, he'll throw us out. My grandma lived here since she was my age. I don't want to lose this place.”

“I know.” Feeling terrible that I'd ruined her good mood, I turned back to the food. “Look...” Then I shook my head. “Never mind.”

Kendra would be fine once she started getting paid for her new modeling gig, but we needed money in the meantime. I'd still keep making phone calls to the agency though.

I stirred the water as she went back to the subject she wanted to discuss.

“I can't believe you flipped Flynn McCreary the bird.”

Tossing her a grin, I shrugged. “I don't see why not. He was a jerk.”

“That *jerk* is one of the most talented photographers at Bouvier.”

“I know.” I grinned at her. “It was all part of my grand scheme to become the world's next top hand model!”

“Oh, stop, Gabs.” Kendra laughed and shook her head. “Was it really that bad?”

“On a scale of one to ten, it was a two thousand.” I shuddered in mock terror as I reached for the pasta.

She beat me to it and put it back on the counter. “In that case, I owe you for your misery. How about a night out?”

“Did you miss the part where I didn't get the job?” I rolled my eyes. “I can't afford a night out.”

“What about an exclusive party with free food and drinks? Remember that swimwear gig I landed? They're having a launch party and I just happen to have two passes.”

“Please tell me I don’t have to wear a swimsuit,” I said, switching off the stove immediately. For the chance to eat for free and not have to attempt to make do with what we had, I would’ve worn a tutu.

The blue dress Kendra loaned me wasn’t hers.

I was above average height, but she had nearly six inches on me and while there were a few pieces of clothing we could swap out, anything that involved legs was pretty much a no-go. But the blue dress had been left over from a photo shoot and Kendra had a covetous love of clothes. If there was something left lying around and nobody took it, she did.

I’d come to love the habit, because it meant I could raid her closet and sometimes come out with pieces that would fit me. She wasn’t quite as curvy as me—I was little over average in the bust and hip department—but she at least had something of a figure.

The blue dress came just a few inches short of my ass, and showed off more cleavage than it would have on a skinny model, but I didn’t mind. The dance floor at the club was jammed and every time I looked around a new knot of men were orbiting us. After the rejection of the interview and how Flynn had behaved, the attention felt good and I soaked it up like a sponge. I’d also had more than a few drinks, but after that lousy day, I told myself I was entitled.

A new song came on and a thickly muscled blond danced over to me.

“Hey, beautiful,” he yelled over the music.

I shook my head at him and he took it as a sign to pull me close.

“You’ve got curves in all the right places. You two must be models, am I right?”

“She’s the model,” I said, still trying to be polite about it.

“Nuh, huh, baby, don’t lie to me. I bet you’re an underwear model. Much better than those skinny runway ones.”

I gave him a bit of a push, but he didn’t take the hint. He put about an inch between us, but kept dancing.

“Why do I have to be a model at all? Am I less attractive as a postal worker or a chef or a writer?” I asked, already knowing the answer.

“Models are hot,” he said simply.

I know I should have taken it as the compliment he’d intended. Most women would be happy to be mistaken for an underwear model, or any kind

of model. It wasn't easy hanging out with Kendra and keeping normal insecurities at bay. Maybe I didn't have my picture plastered on billboards, but I was a good looking woman. I was five-seven with good curves and I could eat what I liked—in moderation, of course—without worrying about hitting the treadmill the second I was done.

I pushed the blond guy away from me more forcefully this time and easily found another dance partner to bump against. This one just smiled down at my cleavage and didn't say anything.

Oh, well. Not like I expect to find Prince Charming here...

“You're a devil in that blue dress, honey.”

A shiver raced up my spine and I turned. My brain kicked in a few seconds after my mouth, but what popped out hadn't exactly been thought through. “Nope...not the prince. It's the toad.”

He cocked his head, familiar cadet blue eyes studying me. The free drinks I'd been imbibing had the room swirling under me and I started to regret them.

“The toad?” he asked, dark brown hair tumbling into his eyes. Stubble grazed his jaw. I tamped down the urge to rub my cheek against that sexy five o'clock shadow. Damn, he was hot.

“Yeah. The toad.” I swallowed, suddenly feeling more tongue-tied than I liked. “You know. As in *Not Prince Charming*.”

He chuckled and moved closer. “Were you really looking for him here?”

We stood still in the writhing sea of dancers and just faced each other.

Before I could say anything else—reject Flynn's compliment, berate him for not giving me a chance at Bouvier—the blond guy returned and gave me a flirty hip check that knocked me off balance. Without looking like he'd even had to think about it, Flynn caught me around the waist and for one brief moment, my body was pressed to his as he steadied me. Breasts to chest, my belly to the flat concave of his, our thighs aligned down to the knee.

Oh, shit...

He held me there; that cocky smirk curving his lips.

A moment later, he was gone.

“Flynn McCreary, the toad.” I muttered breathlessly. I told myself it was from the near-fall and not from the feel of Flynn's body so close to mine.

Kendra nodded in rhythm with the music before she twirled me around and waved at the bar. Flynn waved back and lifted a shot glass to me.

I scowled. “That’s it. I’m going to find out why he axed me. I needed that job.”

You weren’t going to get it anyway, a small voice chided. I told the voice to shut up.

A new throng of suitors swept Kendra out of the way before she could stop me. I dodged dancers as I made my way across the crowded dance floor, disgusted as I saw Flynn smiling at my thwarted efforts. I narrowed my eyes at him and let a black-haired dancer with his shirt unbuttoned to his navel sweep me into a grinding turn. Flynn’s smile slipped a little, but he gave me an appreciative nod as my oblivious dance partner presented my backside to him.

When I spun back around abruptly, it was to see his eyes still lingering where my ass had been.

Heat raced through me.

Breaking free of my dance partner, I marched up to Flynn and took the shot glass out of his hand, ignoring the surprised look on his face. I knocked back the stiff drink before bringing my still-wet lips to his ear.

“What’s your problem with me?”

He turned slightly so that my mouth was at the corner of his. “You’re not right for talent acquisition.”

“You cost me that job!” I put as much venom in my voice as I could manage. It wasn’t much. His aftershave flooded my head and I think it was potentially lethal. My knees were feeling weak already. Though that could’ve been the shot I’d just taken.

“Because I need you for a better one,” he said.

Flynn took me by the waist and swung me onto his bar stool before ordering another round. I could still feel the heat from his hands and shifted, uncomfortable with my growing attraction. He took the opening and pushed to stand between my legs under the pretense of tipping the bartender. Despite the smell of him making me want to taste his neck, I put my hands on his shoulders and pushed him back, determined not to be distracted.

“What job?”

“Hand model,” he said.

I almost snorted a laugh. “You’re kidding. Did Kendra put you up to this?”

He shook his head and an irresistible strand of dark brown hair fell over his eyes. Before I could stop myself, I reached out and smoothed it back. He

smiled down at me and I swiveled to grab the second whiskey shot he had ordered. He had to move back as I slammed back the shot and slid off the barstool.

He grabbed my hand before I could dive back into the crowd. As he raised it, for a moment, I thought he was going to kiss it, but he studied it instead, a serious expression on his face.

“You talk with your hands. I couldn’t help but notice.”

“Yeah, I’m not going to apologize about that,” I said, unable to completely stop my smile at the memory of flipping him off.

He laughed and kissed the back of my hand, sending a jolt of electricity through me. Fuck. How did he do that?

“I wouldn’t want you to. It’s a great picture. Too bad the exec I showed it to won’t let me use it in the new jewelry campaign.” His eyes were sparkling.

“Why are you messing with me?” I asked, rolling my eyes. He was charming, all right, but still a dick.

“Stop by tomorrow. No joke.”

Flynn gave me one more look and I felt every inch of it. He handed me an embossed card, clinked his whiskey shot against mine, drained it and then disappeared into the crowd.

I stared after him for a moment, not sure what had just happened. Then Kendra was there, dragging me back onto the dance floor.

He was odd. Egocentric. Pushy. Arrogant.

And hot.

But odd.

“You have to go!” Kendra insisted. I’d just finished telling her about my insane encounter with Mr. Photographer.

“He really is a talented photographer and he offered you a job. Best case scenario, you get paid for a few hours of standing around holding your hands still.”

“You know that’s really hard for me,” I started to argue despite the weakness of my point, then stopped. My eyes narrowed. “Wait, what’s the worst case scenario?”

“That he hits on you and you like it.” She gave me a devious grin and winked. “He’s a notorious womanizer, Gabs. But hey, if you’re curious... what’s the harm?”

“Curious?” I stared at her. “Are you...saying I...?”

She grinned for a moment and then went back to the ritual of her weekly manicure, ignoring the fact that I was still gaping at her.

Curious... that made me think about things I didn't need to think about.

That made me think about Flynn.

Made me think about *me* and *Flynn*.

The two of us. Together. Naked. Those long-fingered, elegant hands of his running over me. My mouth went dry just picturing it.

“No.” I lied through my teeth. “I'm not curious. Not about Flynn McCreary.”

Kendra's words echoed in my head Monday morning as I walked into the address printed on Flynn's business card. The warehouse space was divided into a chic boutique of pale fashionable clothes and an art gallery featuring sketches of designer handbags.

The bored receptionist pointed up the stairs when I told her who I was here to see. The photography studio stretched out the entire second floor with windows the entire length of the street view.

“Mr. McCreary?”

“I detect a little accent, Tennessee. Does that mean you're nervous?”

I gave him the finger and he laughed. “I've already got that pose. Come on. I've got other things in mind.”

Fighting the urge to fidget, I lowered my hand and stood there, feeling lost in the vast space. He crossed over to me and cupped the offending hand in both of his, using it to draw me towards the far corner where the windows were covered, creating a darkened—or darker—area.

There, a white pedestal waited in front of what looked like a giant white screen. A backdrop, I remembered. Dozens of lights aimed at the spot from what I guessed were strategic places.

“Please, let me make you more comfortable.”

“I'd be more comfortable knowing what the hell I'm doing here,” I said bluntly.

Without answering my question, he gently pulled both my hands onto the pedestal and began massaging them. The deep rub of his thumbs in the center of my palms released a pressure I hadn't realized was trapped there. The heat of the friction and the slow, deliberate circles soon uncoiled something else.

Heat flared in my stomach, quickly traveling south until it pooled between my legs.

I swallowed. Tensing, I tried to pull away as heat rushed to my face.

He didn't release my hands, keeping a light hold on them. "No, no. You can relax. You have to be relaxed for this job."

"What job?" I asked, as much to keep my attention from how good his hands felt around mine as anything else.

He answered without looking at me even as he released my hands. "A new jewelry line called Delicate. I can't have you cupping an eggshell if you're so tense."

He went over to the long table and picked up an egg, two egg shells, and a diamond tennis bracelet. Flynn then walked up behind me and reached around either side of me. He clasped the dazzling bracelet around my left wrist and carefully placed two broken halves of an eggshell in my fingertips. It seemed a bit strange, but he was the artist.

"Alright, put your other hand flat here. It'll help you stay steady and it'll add to the background. Your skin is perfect, almost translucent."

I tried to ignore the tickle of his breath on my neck as he leaned in closer and posed my right hand. He then smoothed the large diamonds along my wrist and the slight caress sent shivers up my arm. I steeled myself not to move and prayed goosebumps wouldn't give me away.

Don't screw this job up too, Gabs. Just because you haven't gotten any in a while...

He stepped back and picked up his camera. A few rapid-fire shots and he put it down. This time he ran his fingers down my arm in order to gently rearrange the angle of my wrist. His dark brown hair brushed my cheek and I decided to look out the window and pretend I was writing a scene, something that had nothing to do with attractive men and how good they smelled.

"You've got a soft touch, Ms. Baine. I think I may be jealous of an eggshell."

"The bracelet is part of my payment, right?" I asked. I'd just blurted it out, not really expecting an answer. I was finding it increasingly difficult to think around him.

He chuckled and added finely shredded pale blue tissue paper to one of the empty eggshell halves. He leaned over to delicately place a pair of diamond earrings on top of the paper and his fashionably unbuttoned shirt fell open. I couldn't help seeing his chiseled chest and that made me wonder what

a fashion photographer did to work out. My mind betrayed me and immediately imagined him doing push-ups over me. Dammit. I really needed to get laid.

“Relax a little. You’re doing beautifully, Gabriella.”

I liked the way my name sounded in that deep voice of his.

A few more rapid-fire shots and he removed all the props from my hands.

“Tedious work but, trust me, I’ll make your hands look good.”

“Good, otherwise I won’t be able to show my face around town,” I quipped as I began to stretch my fingers. My breath caught when Flynn took my hand between his and began to help. I kept talking to prevent me from thinking about the way his fingers were manipulating mine. “Does this mean I can’t do high-fives anymore? I mean, now that you’re going to make me a famous hand model?”

Flynn caught my eyes, his warm hands still caressing mine. “How about I get us something to drink?”

I shrugged, trying to be noncommittal, and he smiled at me as he walked away. I ignored the stab of disappointment and began to pace around, desperate to cool down the molten feeling in my muscles before he came back. He moved with a lean, powerful grace that had me itching to touch him.

He’s a notorious womanizer...

Kendra’s voice echoed in my ear and I had to swallow back a groan.

All I could think about was his hard body leaning into mine at the club the other night. Today, his dark brown hair was slicked back and his face was smooth. He smelled faintly of that amazing aftershave and it made the urge to rub my cheek along his jaw line even harder to resist.

I shook my head and distracted myself with a long white table of portfolio folders. Reaching for the nearest one, I flipped it open.

“Oh, you might not want to do that,” Flynn said from behind me.

“Do what?” I asked as I flipped open the first portfolio.

He smirked as he gestured to the table. “That.”

Confused, I looked down. As my brain registered what my eyes were seeing, my mouth fell open.

CHAPTER THREE

My cheeks turned red once I realized his warning had been more of a tease than anything else.

The portfolio was filled with black and white photographs of nude models. I flipped through a few, trying to cool my embarrassment. I wasn't some prude or naïve little girl to be freaked out over a couple of nude photographs, although...wow. This wasn't some nude portrait hanging in an art gallery. These were *hot*.

Flynn edged closer, so close I could feel his body heat.

"You like what you see?" Flynn's tone was half-mocking, half-seducing. "Want to take a few in the dark room for further study?"

"Don't be a child," I snapped.

"Oooh, there's that Southern drawl," he said.

He was teasing me, but I couldn't take my eyes off the photographs. They were not gratuitous, models posed for exploitation or just to please the lustful eye. They were beautiful studies of the female form, beautiful and sensual. One photograph conveyed such a sense of vulnerability I ached for her. Another such ferociousness that I wished it could be imprinted in my mind to banish any lingering insecurities. The angle said as much about the photographer as the nude pose revealed about the model. Despite myself, I was fascinated.

"Here, let me help." He dabbed my chin with a paper napkin. "You got a little drool there."

I slapped his hand away, but without any real malice. My cheeks were burning, but not from the pictures anymore. "You must be the photographer's

twelve year-old son.”

“Ouch.” Flynn smiled as he put his hand over his heart.

I collected myself, determined to show him that I could be more mature about this than he was. “So you take nude photos on the side. Just for fun or are you getting ready for a gallery show?”

He snorted in derision as he tugged the portfolio from me and flipped it open, bending over to study it closely. I could only see his face in profile, but it was clear that he was looking at his work with a far more critical eye than I thought they deserved. Even the more erotic ones that left me blushing were incredibly lovely.

“Why do you take them?” I asked again.

He looked over at me, a grin tugging up the corner of his lips. “Why the hell not?”

He flipped the portfolio closed and shrugged before cutting to go around me.

There was an abruptness to his movements that made me realize that somehow, I’d put a wall between us. Or he had. I wasn’t sure how I felt about that.

“How do you find models to pose nude?” I asked suddenly. Then I grimaced, realizing how naïve that sounded.

He gave a short mirthless laugh, but his expression changed when he realized I was serious. He jerked a shoulder in a shrug. “It pays better.”

I knew I’d hate myself for asking, but now I was curious. “How much is better?”

“How much is on the books for your hand modeling gig today, three hundred?” He cocked up a brow as he waited for me to nod. Then he angled his head toward the portfolio full of nudes. “Model for a nude? It can bring in three thousand or more.”

Shit. “That’s...” I cleared my throat. “That’s a lot of money.”

I turned to look out the windows so he couldn’t read on my face what was going on in my head. With Kendra not getting paid for a couple weeks and my current job not paying me much of anything, it was hard not to think about it. I told myself that I was already doing the hand model gig because I needed the cash, but the idea of ten times that amount kept running through my head.

Apparently, he didn’t need to see my face to know what I was thinking.

“Tempting, huh?” The sly arrogance came back into his voice. “Or maybe

now that you have the taste for modeling, you can't get enough?"

He came around, putting himself between me and the window, grinning at me. The attitude was confusing. Insulting. How could the sensitivity I'd seen in those images come from somebody so deliberately crass, someone almost cruel?

It had to be an act, but I couldn't see why. He was talented and didn't need to act like an ass. The biggest problem, however, was his words sounded like a challenge and I had never been able to turn down a dare. I wanted to strip off all my clothes and make him blush.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, his voice a low murmur.

"Go away." I turned back to stare out the window. He chuckled and I could hear him moving around behind me.

"You didn't answer. You know, it can be a bit of a rush—"

Spinning on my heel, I glared at him.

Flash—

Lights went off. He snapped another one as I folded my arms over my chest and leveled a glare on him.

He let out a low whistle. "Damn. You could burn someone with those nutmeg brown eyes, babe." He straightened and gave me a once over. "I'll pay you the three thousand if you show me what you've got."

Three thousand...

For a second, all I could do was stare at him.

Then, as the shock faded and the urge to tell him to kiss my ass faded, reason kicked in. Three thousand. That would keep us level until Kendra started seeing payments from her modeling contract. It would tide us over between my meager checks.

I thought of the beautiful images I'd seen in the portfolio and swallowed. My face heated and my heart started to pound.

It wasn't like he was asking me to sleep with him.

They are just pictures.

"Well?" His mouth curled up in a smile. Then he shrugged. "Didn't think so."

Jerk.

I curled my lip at him and leaned against the nearby table, steadying myself as I took off my boot. If he thought I was too shy and backward to do this, then I'd show him a thing or two.

Once I had my boot in hand, I threw it at him.

He dodged the boot, flashed me a blue-eyed dare and took more pictures. I could tell by the look on his face that he was enjoying himself. I didn't know if I wanted him to or not. I tossed the other boot over my shoulder, refusing to cringe as I heard it clatter across the table. I never claimed to have good aim.

He smirked from behind the lens. "That all you got, Tennessee?"

"Maybe that's all you deserve," I retorted. "Maybe I should have put one of those boots where the sun don't shine." I let my drawl come out on the last bit.

"What about all these buttons?" he asked. "Bet you could be cruel with those."

I stilled as he came towards me, unsure of what to expect. My entire body tensed as he fingered each of the small pearl buttons on my blouse before pushing back my hair and then standing back to snap another picture. I felt my face burning and couldn't deny that a not-so-small part of it was arousal.

He didn't think I could pull it off. How many women could do a slow strip tease in broad daylight, much less a sunlight-filled studio? I was willing to bet his skinny models simpered and giggled, more worried about flirting with him than anything else. Hell with that.

I walked towards him, seeing the scene unfold as though I were writing it. As I moved, I undid two buttons at the bottom of my shirt. He crouched down, angling the lens up and I stopped, slowly and deliberately popping the button on my jeans, exposing the pale skin of my stomach.

"So good," he muttered. "I love close-ups."

He reached out and photographed his own hand sliding up my inner thigh. It suddenly became hard to breathe as his touch burned through my jeans. He set the camera aside and, without coming out of his crouch, gripped my waistband and gave it a bit of a tug.

"Any chance you'll take these off?"

I realized the up-close of me trying to wriggle free of my skinny jeans wasn't going to do anything for his pictures or my ego so I backed away and regrouped.

I wasn't rail thin like a traditional model. I had curves, hips, boobs...I could play to my strengths, but those strengths didn't involve wiggling and shimmying out of my jeans right in front of that camera.

I turned back and pulled open the top buttons of my shirt. With the middle two buttons still holding, I slipped one arm out of my shirt and then

the other, clutching the remaining fabric to my almost fully exposed chest. The clutching only amplified my cleavage and I watched as his gaze zoomed in, right on target.

“Yes, great.” Flynn took a half dozen rapid-fire shots, then lowered the camera, silent for a moment as if he was trying to figure something out. “Lay down,” he finally said. When I didn’t immediately move, he added, “Trust me.”

My heart was racing, but I knew it would be foolish to stop at this point. After all, he was a professional photographer and I had seen his work. None of those women had looked coerced or bothered by what they were doing. And, if I was going to be completely honest with myself, I knew if I backed down now, he’d have won. I was competitive enough to hate that idea.

I lifted my chin and walked over to the pile of cushions and blankets he’d motioned to. They were the same ones that the other models had been on, but as I stretched out, I began to feel self-conscious.

That feeling only grew as he joined me and without a word, stood on the cushions, one foot on either side of my knees. Picture after picture, he changed the angle of the camera, bending down low, then straightening.

After a couple minutes, he put the camera down and dropped to his knees over me. His face was flushed. His eyes burned. He probably just got really into his work.

I tried to pretend it was because of me, though.

Why should I be the only one affected?

I caught my breath as he reached down and unzipped my jeans, then took hold of the waistband. His gaze lingered on my face a moment, giving me the chance to protest.

When I didn’t, he drew the jeans down, leaving me in a pair of simple lace panties.

Why hadn’t I put on something sexier?

I looked up to find his eyes lingering on the dip of my waist, the flare of my hip, roaming over me with a heat that left me feeling lightheaded. As he sat back on his heels, I levered myself up and let my shirt fall completely away.

Sitting there in a bra that matched my panties, I stared at him. My pulse raced so hard, it was a wonder he didn’t hear it.

He snapped a picture, then reached up and pushed my hair back over my shoulders, snapped several more, pausing here and there to adjust the angle of

my chin or to mutter a command. “Look toward the wall...now at me. Smile...no, not like that. Think about the first time you were kissed...that bad, huh? Okay, think about *me* kissing you...perfect...”

He lowered the camera while I was still breathing heavy from the thought of kissing him and he came closer, reached up and hooked his finger under my bra strap. After a moment, he slowly pulled it down.

My nipples were already tight, but at the feel of his skin against mine, I gasped. With the strap of my bra hanging down my shoulder, he eased back and lifted the camera.

“Take the bra off now. Slowly...”

Goosebumps broke out across my skin as I did it.

I wasn’t even thinking now.

Thought had left the building so long ago, it was insane.

I slid the straps over my shoulders, keeping one arm over my breasts as I tossed the bra off to the side.

“Good...perfect...look down...now, up at me.”

I did.

He lifted his eyes from behind his camera and stared.

Waited.

Without him saying a word, I knew what he wanted. He began snapping pictures as I slowly lowered my arm, revealing myself to him and his camera. I thought I saw his fingers tighten on the camera, but he didn’t say anything. My nipples drew tighter still, throbbing and aching and I couldn’t understand it, but I was more turned on than I’d ever been in my life.

“Will you lay back?” he asked.

There wasn’t even a hint of professionalism in his tone now—his voice was ragged, rough and for some reason, that made it easier to lie back, bracing my weight on my elbows.

“Bring up your knee.”

I did and when he next had me roll onto my side, I did that as well, following him with my eyes as he came around to crouch next to the bed.

“Pull your hair forward. Have it curling around your nipples. I want the contrast of auburn against your skin.”

My breath came out in a low, shaky sound as I did just that and I had to bite my inner cheek to keep from gasping as I smoothed my hair down.

“No. Here...”

He came closer.

I froze as he reached out.

His eyes held mine for the longest moment and then he started to stroke, smoothing my hair so my left nipple played peekaboo. He remained there a minute, adjusting the sheets, then me, his fingers lingering on my skin.

He snapped two or three shots and then lowered the camera. "Panties."

Slowly, I rolled to my back and slid them off, trying not to think of the ways I was exposing myself. I tossed them aside and put my legs back down.

The camera stopped and lowered. He chewed the inside of his cheek for a moment, his eyes roving over my body. Heat burned there, the kind of heat that somehow managed to banish any insecurities I should have had.

A thrill began to surge inside me and I wanted to stretch out before him, exhilarate in the headiness this was giving me. He moved closer. Firm hands took mine, guiding me. I stayed calm, or at least appeared calm as he posed me, arranging me how he wanted.

I twisted this way and that at his command as the camera fired away. I lost all sense of time and any inhibitions I'd had melted away under his careful instruction.

The sunlight moved across the warm studio and I lost all track of time. He took a few last photographs and took a step back as he set down his camera.

His eyes were sparkling as he spoke, "Now how about some fun?"

CHAPTER FOUR

He left me standing in the middle of the studio naked.
Okay...that's not exactly what I'd seen coming.

I'd assumed *fun* would entail sex. After all, he was supposed to be this big time flirt. A lady killer, right?

I was so worked up, if he'd decided to seduce me, I wouldn't have minded. Actually, I was on board with the idea. I was no virgin and I wasn't afraid of my own sexuality. After all, I had taken his dare and had actually enjoyed it.

Should I feel embarrassed now? Exploited or something?

I'd just posed naked for money.

Abruptly, I realized I *did* feel a little embarrassed, and out of place. Grabbing one of the blankets on the bed, I wrapped it around myself and started to pace. Drifting up and down the studio, I let my eyes wander to the framed prints on the wall. They were advertisements, some of them for small local places, but others were for national brands that I'd heard of even back in Tennessee.

It made me feel better. Flynn wasn't doing any of this to sell to some cheap skin magazine.

Bouvier was top-of-the-line fashion and the name itself was synonymous with elegance. If my naked body ended up in one of their advertisements, it would be tasteful.

Maybe I could get some shots worth putting into a portfolio. Kendra had been telling me I could be a catalog model. I'd always assumed that she was just being polite. Typically, women who looked like me ended up getting

hired as plus-sized models. In this society, anything over a size eight was considered plus-sized, but that's the fashion world for you. I refused to perpetuate that way of thinking.

I'd never thought much about it when she told me I should consider trying to find any agent, but maybe she was serious. I definitely wasn't cut out for *her* world, but there were other options.

Maybe modeling was a possibility. Apparently Flynn saw something in me.

As I was considering the drastic career change, Flynn returned with a crate and pulled out half a dozen small jars.

I gave him a curious look and he grinned.

"Body paint!"

The devilish look was back in his cadet blue eyes though now I could see he forced it. Something had happened during our intimate photo shoot and he wanted to put it out of his mind. He wanted to put me back in one of the regular places woman usually held in his life: easy fun or pure art.

I shook my head. "Nice try, sleazeball, but you're not turning me into cheap performance art."

He grinned. The blanket I'd wrapped around my torso and tucked in near my breasts chose that moment to loosen and gape, drooping down to my waist.

I caught it, but before I could cover back up, Flynn came over and tugged it away.

I wasn't about to get into a wrestling match after all the work I'd done to convince him of my nonchalant attitude so I gave it up with a bored sigh. "I'm not letting you put a bunch of paint all over me," I said again.

"Oh, come on, it won't hurt a bit." He lifted a brow as he added, "You want the three thousand, right?"

I swallowed down the urge to growl at him. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

He smiled.

A few moments later, I wish I had stuck by my *no*.

I held still as he lifted gloved hands, covered in brilliant red, toward my torso. "Don't move," he said. His eyes lingered on my face. "You don't want it to run."

I swallowed and held still.

He'd had me pull my hair up and now I stood in front of him, naked,

without even the illusion of modesty my long hair could provide. When he cupped my breasts in his paint-slicked hands, I gasped.

“There’s one.”

I didn’t breathe as he backed away and changed the gloves, pressing them into a vivid purple this time.

He pressed one palm to my neck. The other to my abdomen. But instead of stripping off the gloves, he dipped them back into the small pool of paint he’d poured out and, a moment later, I had a purple palm print on my right ass cheek and another one on my left hip.

The pattern continued. A blue palm above my pubis, along my right thigh. Orange on my right hip and left knee.

It didn’t take that long, but I was practically panting for a release that wouldn’t come when he backed away and started to take pictures. He stopped after only a couple and came back, releasing my hair from the ponytail. He stood so close his chest touched my nipples.

A weak whimper left my lips.

His eyes came to mine.

My heart stopped for a moment and we were both still.

The hand that had been smoothing my hair down tightened in it. “Gabriella,” he muttered, just before he caught my mouth in a searing kiss. I couldn’t stop the moan as his tongue turned delicious circles around my own.

Without breaking the kiss, he pulled off his shirt and I wondered if he purposefully wore ones that buttoned so he could take off his clothes while still managing a knee-weakening kiss. Flinging his shirt aside, he raised his head. We were both breathing heavily and his eyes darkened as he glanced down at my breasts, marked by the mostly-dried red paint he’d placed on me.

His mouth came back to mine, but he didn’t linger. Instead, he began to move in a line down my chin, my neck, along the midline of my chest.

When he went to his knees in front of me, I started to tremble. One hand gripped my left hip, almost exactly where he’d placed the palm print earlier. The other curved around my waist, again mirroring a painted palm print.

“I’ve been dying to touch you like this,” he said, his voice guttural. “I’ve wanted it from the first time I saw you.”

The fading light outside made our faint reflection appear in the nearby windows and I watched us, watched as his hands made my body burn. I knew I should put a stop to it. I was letting myself become a cliché, seduced by a known womanizer.

“They’re mirrored,” he said, misreading the expression on my face. “We can see out, but no one can see in.”

He stood back up, bringing my mouth to his with a forceful tug on my hair. As his tongue tangled around mine, my brain kept telling me to stop, to hold onto my self-respect.

His cock was hard, throbbing against me, but it didn’t matter if he wanted me and it didn’t matter how good it felt to have his hands stroking my back, my hips, my ass.

Stop, I told myself. *You need to stop...*

But even as I finally pulled up the strength to do it, he looked down at me, a puzzled look on his face. It was as though he didn’t know what was going on, as if he’d never touched a woman, kissed a woman. As if he didn’t know what to make of me.

And when he came back to kiss me again, I couldn’t bear to pull away.

When he lowered me onto the hardwood floor, I didn’t resist. I lay there, looking up at him as he finished what I’d attempted to start before. He stripped out of his pants with smooth expedience and in moments, he was coming down on top of me, naked and hard.

It was my turn to look, I thought as I greedily devoured the sight of him. Damn, he was beautiful. The v-grooves of his hips and the thin trail of dark curls that started at his bellybutton all pointed towards a thick, swollen shaft. It was perfectly shaped, curving up towards his belly. Long, but not too long. The right size to make me feel every inch, but not so big that he’d have to be careful. And thick...sinfully thick. The sight of him made me swallow and I squirmed a little, thinking of having him inside me.

He caught my knees and slowly pushed my thighs apart, his eyes on my face the entire time. My breath hitched as he cupped me, bold and blatant, using his middle finger to stroke the pulsing point of my clitoris.

I shivered. He smiled at my response. He came down over me and started to massage my clit even as he began to circle my entrance with another finger.

“You’re already wet,” he whispered. He watched me as he pushed inside and I sucked in a breath, pressing my palms flat to the floor.

He hissed in a breath as he began to stroke me with his finger, soft and shallow at first, then faster and deeper.

Arousal sparked sharply when he added a second finger and curled them, withdrawing completely so that I felt every single inch.

I started to rock up to meet his hand, panting, whimpering...and he stopped.

I heard the unmistakable sound of a condom wrapper ripping and opened my eyes, locking with his. Without looking away, he pushed his hands underneath my buttocks and opened me further. The tip of his erection teased me, slid back and forth along my clitoris and then, slowly, he pushed inside.

I stared into his eyes and tried not to beg. I needed more.

With one smooth stroke, he moved forward, filling me even as I cried out. He held himself still inside my body and I could feel him throbbing as he waited, either for his own control or my adjustment.

His mouth found mine again as he rocked slowly against me. I clutched his shoulders as I slid my tongue between his lips. He began to thrust, long, deep strokes that made me whimper and moan.

He took each sound into his mouth, swallowing them down.

His teeth caught my bottom lip, worrying at it until I dug my nails into his shoulders. He kissed his way down my throat and the air was filled with the sounds of pleasure I couldn't control.

My climax came with a suddenness that took my breath away, my legs shaking, my entire body convulsing in one coil and release of ecstasy. It hit hard and fast, stealing my breath away and Flynn slowed, his movements easing for a moment.

I sucked in oxygen, my head spinning.

Once I was no longer seeing stars, he caught my thigh in his hand, lifting my leg as he started to surge against me, hard and fast. I cried up in surprise. He buried his face against my neck, his cock an iron brand throbbing inside me.

He muttered something that sounded like my name and then drove himself into me faster and harder than before. The wild rhythm brought me to another peak and we came together in a tight tangle of limbs and sweat and fire.

He slid down and dropped his head to rest between my breasts.

I tried to steady my breathing, dazed delight spinning through my head.

Whoa...

That was the only thought in my head.

Whoa...

I'd had sex before and I'd enjoyed it before. Or so I'd thought. But this...*whoa...*this had been *pure lust*.

I didn't dare to wonder how I stacked up against what must have been a considerable list of his previous partners, but I could say that the few other lovers in my past had been fumbling, awkward teenagers compared to him. I was about to say something when he pulled away and sat up, his face set in grim lines.

He flicked a glance at me and I caught sight of the anger there. My blood froze. I had the oddest feeling the anger was directed at himself, not me, but still, the sight of it made my belly churn.

He pushed himself to his feet, not looking at me. "I'll call down to the front desk and they'll have the cash for you."

He turned his back on me as he walked to a stack of towels sitting on a nearby table and tossed one my way.

"Shower's in there," he said coolly, jerking his head over his shoulder. "Make it fast."

"I..."

He lifted his head, staring at me with ice in his gaze.

I grabbed my clothes and ducked into the room I hadn't noticed until now. Shaking, I pressed my back to the wall and looked around. The bathroom was elegant and upscale and the toiletries would have probably blown my mind if I had been capable of thought. Instead, though, I was in a state of numbness as I washed up, the paint washing off easily under the spray of water.

When I came out, Flynn had already dragged on a pair of jeans and was on the phone.

He caught sight of me and turned his back.

Fury lit inside me—finally.

That *ass*.

As I continued to stand there, he looked back at me and I heard his sigh, listening to him say, "Hold on."

"I told you, money's down at the desk."

"I ought to just tell you to shove that money up your ass," I snapped. I had my pride.

Jerking up my chin, I strode past him. I should do it.

He was already talking to whoever when I slammed the door shut behind me.

The rent was due—*soon*.

I was flat broke. And Flynn probably wouldn't notice anyway, which

would make the whole statement a moot point.

I walked down the steps at war with myself.

I hesitated at the bottom of the steps and just as I started to head toward the door, a woman looked up, a smile on her face. “Ms. Baine?”

I froze.

She came out from behind the desk, an envelope in hand. “Your fee.”

Slowly, I took it.

Rent. Electricity. Groceries, I told myself. He’d offered me the money before we’d had sex. I was being paid for modeling. Not for what had happened after. They were two different things.

I pasted a fake smile on my face and left as quickly as I could. I didn’t plan on *ever* going back there.

CHAPTER FIVE

*M*y memory of the Flynn incident swung back and forth like a heavy pendulum of guilt and pride.

On one side, I was devastated that I had let myself be drawn in by such a cheap ploy. I thought I was smarter than that.

But on the other I could still feel the aftershocks from my climax.

Was I really just a naïve girl who let a manipulating bastard take advantage of her?

I was a free, adult woman who took her pleasure when the opportunity arose.

It was enough to give me a headache.

The one thing I couldn't do was let myself think about the look I'd seen in Flynn's eyes—that one brief flicker of something I'd thought was real. I didn't know if there had been any real emotion there or not, but whatever it had been, he'd buried it deep and I wasn't going to try to dig it out, no matter how good the sex had been.

The worst part was that I lied to Kendra that evening when I handed her the money.

“You sold a treatment for a new show? That is so great! I'm so proud of you.” She threw her arms around me.

“It's not really a big deal. I managed to do my job,” I said, grateful she couldn't see my face.

“It's going to be a hit, I know it. What's it about?” She released me, still beaming from ear to ear.

“A romantic comedy?” It came out like a question.

“You’re not sure?” Kendra asked, confused.

I sighed. “Because it’s not the truth. I lied.”

I collapsed against our kitchen counter. Kendra leaned against the opposite side and crossed her arms, the expression on her face saying she was waiting for an explanation.

I still couldn’t tell her the truth. “It was just the script for a commercial. Not even a good commercial. One of those awful acne cream ads where all the people talk about ugly ducklings and other fairytale bullshit.”

“Oh, who cares, Gabs.” She rolled her eyes. “You’re doing what you love and you’re making it work. We can pay rent!”

“And buy groceries,” I added.

More than the lie, I felt what Kendra said get under my skin.

She was proud of me for doing what I loved. Except I hadn’t done any of it.

“Yay to groceries,” I said, forcing myself to smile. “I’m going to splurge...I’m getting ice cream.”

I didn’t sleep worth crap. It wasn’t until the cool, quiet hours of early morning that I understood why I was so uneasy.

Kendra had been so excited for me because she thought I was making money doing something I loved.

Instead, I’d taken off my clothes, had some pictures taken, then had sex with a man who’d set my body on fire. That wasn’t what had me crashing though.

It was the look on his face after.

I should have stayed.

I should have pushed him, fought with him. Something.

Instead, I’d let the hurt inside me win.

I’d given up. Even though I felt something between us, I’d given up.

I thought about the look I’d seen in his eyes. The entire reason I’d let him pull me down to the floor when the voice of reason had told me to pull away. That intense, strange expression on his face as though he had no idea who I was or what he was doing there. It was as though he had been seeing *me* for the first time.

But when he’d freaked out, what had I done?

“I ran,” I muttered.

Here I was, still stuck in my dead-end job, not doing much of anything that I'd dreamed about. Then I end up having the kind of sex girls only can dream of and when it went to shit, did I do anything to find out why? No. *I fucking ran.*

It was like I was just giving up on everything I'd always expected to find in my life.

I was wallowing on the couch when Kendra burst through the door with a bag of colorful ribbons and tissue paper. My eyebrows shot up. It was a rare day when she was up before me, and an even rarer one when her chestnut brown curls weren't perfectly styled, but rather pulled back into a sloppy ponytail.

"My cousin's son turns two next week. Look! I got him finger paint."

I stared at the bright colors. The red, the blue, the orange...

"I lied!"

For a moment, Kendra just looked at me. Then she put the gift and trimmings down and went into the kitchen. I stayed where I was. After all, in the studio apartment we shared, the kitchen was just on the other side of the big, open room. Hugging my knees to my chest, I watched her.

Dramatic confessions were nothing new here.

We both had a penchant for drama. It was just my turn this time.

"So. Details," she said calmly.

"I did the whole hand modeling gig. That much was real," I said. "And I knew he probably flirted with everyone. It just felt good."

"It's okay to flirt and it's even okay to have sex. You're both consenting adults. Don't be so hard on yourself, Gabriella." Kendra smiled at me as she pulled two cups down out of the cabinet.

"Yeah, but I let him pay me to take naked photographs!" My face flamed at the admission.

She didn't even blink. "For Bouvier. If anything, you could make a career out of it. I told you, you're beautiful. It's possible you could hit it in modeling and if anybody can make it happen, it's Flynn McCreary."

"He didn't believe I would do it," I said sheepishly. "You know how I like a dare. And then he brought out body paint and, I don't know, it just escalated from there."

"And there's nothing wrong with that," Kendra said and then shook her head. "You're not going to forgive yourself, are you?"

"For doing exactly what I judged other women for doing? Nope."

“I’m so sorry, Gabs. I keep putting you in these awful situations,” Kendra said, pouring two cups of hot water and adding in tea bags.

I continued with my confession. “And then when I lied, you were so proud of me for my writing and I realized I was ignoring what I really want out of life. I mean...there’s the writing, which is going to shit. And there’s my love life...which doesn’t exist.”

Sighing, I braced my elbow on the back of the couch and stared outside. “I don’t want sexy little flings, no matter how blue the man’s eyes are. I want love, the whole romance and flowers and everything kind of love. Ugh. I’m so naïve!”

“It’s not naïve.” Kendra came down and sat beside me. Shoulder-bumping me, she said, “Love’s kind of the thing. We all want it. I’d even be willing to bet asshats like Flynn want love. They just don’t know how to get it. And that’s the difference. You do and you can.”

“Yeah?” I glowered into my tea cup. “Then where’s my Prince Charming?”

“Still waiting for you to find him, Cinderella.” She grinned at me. “Come on. You need to cheer up. There’s this party—”

I stopped her. “This sounds familiar. A lot like the last time where I came out with a hand modeling job at the studio of sin.”

“Yeah, it is an industry party.” She laughed. “They’re celebrating all the up-and-comers.”

“You mean you?” I asked.

“Well, yes.” She glowed. “Apparently, I’m finally an up-and-comer. Open bar, free food.”

“More like all I can eat because other models only peck at it.”

She grinned. “That’s my Gabs! Come on, it’ll be fun.”

My stomach twisted as something occurred to me. “What if he’s there?”

“No chance,” Kendra said. “Word has it he’s off to Europe. I heard the project director for the swimwear line complaining about how much he can get away with just because he’s Flynn McCreary.”

“Then count me in,” I said.

I was glad I’d agreed.

I’d never been to this sort of party before.

It was the kind people could see from miles away, thanks to laser light

shows and the spotlights bursting from neighboring buildings.

Then there was a red carpet. An actual red carpet. Kendra's agent had sent over a gigantic SUV with silver spinning rims and when it pulled up to the velvet ropes, Kendra grabbed my hand and pulled me out. I had no choice but to follow her down that red carpet, trying not to look too dazzled...and trying not to fall or stumble too much in the extra-high heels she'd loaned me.

Inside, still blinking from all the flashbulbs, I was left alone as Kendra was swept away by a flock of reed-thin models. I managed to snag a glass of champagne from a passing waiter and tell myself that I loved to play the part of the mysterious outsider. I was just working up a back-story for my fashion correspondent turned film producer when I was interrupted.

"I saw you on the red carpet with Kendra Facet, didn't I?"

I started to turn with a snarky comment since I was sure I was about to be asked to be a go-between. Ice blue eyes looked down on me from a handsome, chiseled face and I swallowed the snark.

"Yes, she's my roommate. She invited me. I'm not just making that up." I had the feeling I was starting to babble.

He laughed, the sound warm and inviting. He was tall, easily six-three, six-four, and dressed in a conservative, yet expensive suit. As good-looking as he was, he didn't look like a model or have the searching look of an agent finding an angle. That meant he was probably one of the countless executives that kept the fashion industry in the billions of dollars.

"My name's Edward." He held out his hand.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Gabriella." I took it, smiling at the little tingle of warmth that went through me.

"Kendra's roommate."

"That's me," I said.

He smiled again and sipped his drink though I could see his eyes traveling down the outfit Kendra had carefully chosen. It was one of the few things of hers that could actually fit me, though I filled it out quite a bit more than she did.

I waited, assuming he was trying to find a way to bring up Kendra again. I would've done it myself just to get it over with, but here he was, speaking to me and I wasn't certain I wanted to end that just yet—then I'd go back to playing the mysterious outsider.

"You come here often?" I asked.

He laughed, that deep sensual sound, and I felt it tangle in my stomach. Wow. That was some laugh.

“Yes, actually. It’s kind of a family obligation.” He looked down at me and I saw something in those blue eyes shift, as if making some sort of internal decision. “Would you like to dance, Gabriella?”

We passed our glasses off onto a passing server and moved onto the dance floor. Each step, each moment erased the Flynn incident a little more. Edward made comments about people I pointed out, never anything rude but always interesting. As people came up and tried to interrupt us, he introduced me and then waved them away, keeping his arms loosely around me the entire time.

He was something straight out of a fairytale. It was like I’d kissed the toad and here I was with Prince Charming. It was easier to believe in things like love...or at least romance again.

After a couple songs, he leaned over my hand and kissed the back of it. The feel of his lips on the back of my hand had warmth racing through me and I fought a dopey sigh.

“I apologize, Gabriella, but if I don’t mingle, people will start to talk.”

He winked at me and waited for me to let him go. I did so with a smile then watched as model after model deliberately threw herself in his path. When he walked up to Kendra, my smile faded and I told myself that was it. He had finally found the one he’d been looking for, and I’d be forgotten, just another dance. Then Kendra’s eyes caught mine and she smiled. They leaned towards each other and looked at me as they spoke. My stomach flipped. They were talking about me.

As the night waned on, I heard his name brought up over and over.

“He was just featured on the Forbes list again,” an agent said—I knew her vaguely. She’d tried to approach Kendra and when she saw me, she turned her back.

“Too bad he’s never listed as a most-eligible bachelor,” her friend added.

I covertly studied him and because I was doing so, it wasn’t hard to notice that I wasn’t the only one. A couple of Kendra’s friends, somebody I suspected was another agent, a few more models.

I tried not to listen to the idle gossip and add to it my own ideas. I heard nothing *but* gossip and when I finally caught up with Kendra, she didn’t know who he was, either. Then again, she was drunk enough I was surprised she remembered who I was.

The one thing I *did* know was that everywhere I went, his eyes always seemed to find me. Once or twice we'd raised our glasses and smiled, but he kept his distance.

At the end of the night, or more accurately, early morning, I was following Kendra into the town car when she mentioned him.

"He likes you."

"What?" I half fell attempting to get her into the car without falling. Once she collapsed inside, I paused outside the door to take off my—*her*—shoes.

"The gorgeous tall guy. The one you danced with. He couldn't take his eyes off you."

"Did too many glasses of wine turn you into a ten year old? Is this elementary school?" I asked, rolling my eyes. Kendra was always silly when she got drunk.

"No, I'm serious. He came right up and knew we were roommates and he wanted to know if you were single."

"Did you tell him I'm out with a new man every night?" I kept up the false humor. I didn't know how much of what she was saying was true or how much she'd remember. "I have a very busy, very elite and exclusive waiting list, you know. Maybe I can fit him into my calendar in a decade or so from now. I'll have my people call his people."

She laugh-giggle-snorted and spoke with the cheer of the very drunk. "Told him you were single, but picky. Lived like a nun... mostly." She snickered. "You weren't a nun last week."

Her head fell back, eyes drooping. For a second, I thought she'd fallen asleep, but then she cracked one eye open. "Oh. He's...I remember now. I've seen him before. He's..."

I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and my heart gave a funny little skip. "...Right behind me."

Edward grinned apologetically. "I didn't mean to sneak up on you like that, I just wanted to make sure I caught you before you left."

"Um, thanks. Have a good night." I realized I sounded rude, but I had no idea what to say. It was his fault for catching me off guard. I was a writer, not into improv. I needed time to edit or I said stupid shit. Case in point.

"See, I told you!" Kendra called from the interior of the SUV. "She's picky!"

I shot her a glare even though she couldn't see me. "Ignore her, please." He held out his hand. A small crowd of party guests went by and called

out goodbyes to him, but he just waved without taking his eyes off me. Nervously, feeling silly as I stood there holding my borrowed shoes, I went to step off the curb and then stopped, stepping back into them. I wobbled a bit and he was there to steady me.

“It always amazes me how women can make it look so easy to walk in those things.”

I shot him a look. “You clearly haven’t seen me walking then.”

“Oh, I have.” He smiled slowly. “I’m still amazed.”

Still holding onto my hand, he led me to the other side of the car and opened the door, helping me inside. He didn’t let go. Kendra’s eyes drifted closed and I sat there, not knowing what to do, sure I would screw everything up at any moment.

“I can’t let you leave without you giving me your number.” He finally released my hand, but he didn’t close the door.

“Really?” I asked.

“Please.” He gave me another charming smile. “I’ll call tomorrow.”

CHAPTER SIX

In the blinding morning light, I realized the end of the night was probably a champagne-fueled dream. It was entirely possible that my over-active imagination made up the pleasant story in place of reality. In real life, Kendra had gotten sick halfway home and there had been nothing of the entire ride that had smacked of a fairytale. She was going to be pissed when she got the bill from the car company. And when she saw her purse.

The driver had helped me get Kendra upstairs and dump her on the couch. I'd made sure she was on her side, put a wastebasket next to the couch, and draped a blanket over her. All I remembered after that was turning the volume all the way up on my phone and falling asleep with my make-up still on. I was pretty sure I'd managed to get my dress off.

Now, as I pried my sticky eyes open, squinting against the bright sunlight streaming in through the window, I was certain I had imagined Edward. There was a good possibility that, when she regained consciousness, Kendra would tell me I'd spent the night talking to a palm tree or other inanimate object. I hadn't thought I'd been that drunk, but I must have been. How else could I make up something like the scenario that was running through my head?

Why would Prince Charming want my number?

I made it up. Okay. I know that so I can cut the disappointment short here and now.

Since I'd made it up, it wasn't like I was really expecting him to call, right? Of course, even if he *was* real, guys never really followed through on that kind of thing.

“No wonder I’m losing faith in love.”

Of course, speaking out loud made me lose faith in life—it just about made my head fall off.

Oh, yeah. I’d had too much to drink last night.

Then my phone rang, proving that point yet again as the sound cut through my head like an icepick, an icepick driven through by a sledgehammer.

“Make it stop!” Kendra cried from the couch.

I rolled out of bed, ignored my churning stomach, and crawled across the floor, digging under the rejected outfits from last’s night party preparations. Push-up bras, sequin dresses, costume jewelry, and a feather boa, but no phone.

“Make it stop!”

“I can’t find it. It’s like a drag show dressing room in here.” I winced as the phone rang again. Why had I turned up the ringer volume?

Kendra knocked over a stack of bangle bracelets and grabbed my phone off the coffee table. She flung it towards my door and rolled over, groaning as she did so.

“Hello?” I said breathlessly, not bothering to look at the caller ID before answering.

“Good morning, Gabriella, this is Edward.”

“You’re kidding.” I closed my eyes. I was such an idiot.

“Kind of an odd joke, don’t you think?” He sounded amused.

“I thought I dreamt you. Not all of you, just the last part when you asked for my number.” *Oh, man...Gabs, just shut up!* I shot Kendra a look. Was she awake? Coherent? She needed to be so she could stop me from saying stupid things.

“It was pretty late.”

“Or early, depending on how you look at it,” I said. “It’s still early.”

“Depending on how you look at it, I suppose.”

Now I was sure he was trying not to laugh at me.

“It’s one in the afternoon.”

He let me take that in for a few seconds. I squinted at the clock, unable to read the time. *Oh, hell...I’m going blind!* I swatted a hand at the face of it and then fought a hysterical giggle when I realized there was a silk stocking covering it.

“One o’clock,” I mumbled.

“One o’clock.”

Head pounding, I crawled back to my bed and leaned against it.

“How about dinner tonight? Nothing fancy, just a local place I love. I’d like to spend more time with you.”

I thought about the hours of recovery time dinner afforded me, plus the time I would need to shower and pull myself back together. I didn’t let myself think about anything else. If I tried to figure out why he’d asked me out or what tonight meant, my head was going to explode. It felt like it might do that anyway.

“Dinner sounds great. Can we say eight o’clock?”

“Perfect,” he said cheerfully. “I’ll pick you up at eight.”

Carefully, I lowered the phone back down and then my head. I needed a few more minutes. Just a few.

I ended up taking thirty and then had to all but crawl into the bathroom in a desperate search for something to help the headache. That done, I started chugging water and braced myself.

Next, I had to get Kendra up, because if I was going to be presentable by eight, I needed her help.

According to Kendra, a ‘*nothing fancy*’ date was actually harder than finding something to wear to a clearly defined event. Kendra and I faced my closet for a good five minutes before either of us spoke.

“How many sport coats do you own?” she asked, a pained expression on her face.

“That was my Tina Fey phase.” I sighed. “It’s a good look though. Maybe I should go with that tonight?”

“Gabriella, it’s a date, not a business lunch. You have to show a little leg.”

I sat down on the edge of my bed as Kendra started searching through the closet. I knew better than to get in her way when she was like this. Her expression was a varying range of disgust as she examined and tossed things aside. Some of the colors made her wince, a few textures made her shake her hand as if a snake had bitten her, and one blouse had her snickering for a good minute before she tossed it down and went back to mocking my wardrobe.

Scowling, I asked, “Are my clothes really that funny?”

“Yes.” She smiled at me cheerfully as she pulled something out and studied it.

“That’s it.” I reached behind me and grabbed my phone. “I’m calling the date off.”

“No!” She came striding to me, all leg and smiles and dumped an armful of possibilities on my bed. “You’re going on your date and you’re going to look beautiful.”

“A date.” I sighed, still clutching my phone. “I’m still kind of trying to wrap my head around that this is a date. Doesn’t seem believable.”

“What I can’t believe is that I didn’t get to meet this guy. He sounds delicious. Are you sure he works in the industry?”

“You met him twice, party girl,” I said with a grin. “Man, were you really that drunk?”

She grimaced. “I didn’t eat much yesterday. Nervous, excited. That and the champagne...”

“Well, he seemed pretty popular at the party. A lot of people seemed to know who he was, but I’m not sure what he does.”

“Well,” said Kendra, “that’s the perfect topic for a first date.”

“You know I have been on dates before, right?”

She laughed and pulled me up to see the selection she’d laid out next to me on the bed. Somehow she’d found a black pencil skirt I’d forgotten I owned and she’d paired it with a bright green silk blouse and black sequined cardigan. My other choices included a blue sheath dress that made me look like someone’s secretary or a cream-colored strapless dress with a lace overlay that she’d layered with a cropped denim jacket.

“Oooh, wait!” She practically squealed. “I have the perfect boots!”

I was already in the cream-colored dress when she brought in a pair of calf-high leather boots. The satin and lace of the dress dressed up the denim coat and the snug boots gave me just the right amount of country style to feel exactly like myself.

“Oh, Gabs, you look fantastic.” She smiled at me in delight. Then she pointed a finger toward the bathroom. “Okay. Into the bathroom. Shower, hair, shave. You know the drill.”

I rolled my eyes even as I eyed the clock. It was almost four. Picking out an outfit had taken nearly an hour. “Again...I’ve *been* on dates before.”

But I followed the drill sergeant’s orders and marched on.

Three hours later, I was giving myself a manicure. My toes were done. I'd even taken a forty minute nap on Kendra's advice. *You need more water, some juice and get some more ibuprofen in your system—it will help with the hangover.*

She'd done the same and it seemed to have helped both of us.

She was painting her toenails lime green.

Mine were a more sedate shade of coral, the same color as the glossy sheen I was applying to my nails.

"So how did you run into this guy?" she asked.

"He found me." I grinned up at her as I went to get more polish. "I thought he was looking to get the goods on you, but he asked me to dance and when he was done, he went over and talked to you. Apparently, he was pumping *you* for information about me instead of the other way around."

Kendra frowned. "You act like you never have guys showing interest, Gabs. I've had plenty of guys approach me about you before, and you know it. You're just...picky?"

Remembering Flynn, I decided I really needed to focus on my nails. "Not picky enough," I muttered.

"Hey."

I just shook my head.

She came over to me and sat down, absently fanning a hand back and forth. Sighing, I looked up at her. "Everybody runs into a bastard now and then," she said quietly.

"I know." I forced a smile. "I'm done thinking about him. Not like I'm going to see him anymore, right?"

I was going to focus on Edward now.

It was seven-fifty and I was in the bathroom, looping a couple strands of freshwater pearls around my neck. They'd been Kendra's grandmother's. A critical study in the mirror didn't set my nerves at ease any.

"You ready?"

"I'm *dressed*," I told Kendra. "Am I ready? Not sure."

The buzzer sounded and I jumped.

"Too bad." She grinned at me and went off to hit the intercom. "She'll be right down."

Then she grinned at me. "Go get 'em, girl. If he's hot and you plan on

spending the night, just call me.”

“No.” I shook my head. “I did the whole get laid without strings thing, and I didn’t like it.” I didn’t add that it was just the afterwards part I didn’t like. The sex itself had been amazing. “From here on out, it’s about the romance.”

She rolled her eyes, but didn’t say anything as I left the apartment.

I’d already decided if Edward wasn’t up to the task of wooing me, then I would be home and in bed with a steamy romance novel by ten o’clock.

Better a fictional man I could count on than a real one I couldn’t. I wasn’t in the mood to play around.

A grin spread across my face when I found him waiting at the door, holding it open for me.

“Thank you,” I said.

Outside, his driver opened the town car door for us and I couldn’t resist the impulse to ask, “So your last name is Charming, right? Like the prince?”

“Exactly.” He said, grinning. “If my Cinderella likes Indian food. If not, then you’re in the wrong carriage.”

I smiled. “I love it.” A weird sense of giddiness welled up inside me and I had to fight not to let any of it show on my face. I made do with a smile that hopefully didn’t look too insanely happy.

The Lotus Chaat House was a narrow slot of a restaurant jammed in between an all-night bakery and a bodega that advertised the best churros in New York City. The town car slid up to the curve right in front of the jutting awning and the driver hopped out to open the door. I stepped out and looked up at the paint-peeling Taj Mahal sign with some trepidation. Not exactly what I’d expected, though it certainly wasn’t fancy.

“Don’t worry, just wait until you see inside,” he promised.

The windows were steamed up, so I had to take Edward at his word and let him escort me inside. As soon as I stepped through the door, I knew he was right. The restaurant was magic. Beyond the heavenly scent of warm naan, the small alley-like restaurant was criss-crossed with so many strings of twinkle lights it glowed. The tiny starry bulbs were so thick across the ceiling that no other lights were used except small red glass jars with flickering candles on each of the tables. The golden-yellow walls were covered in shelves chock full of shining statuettes and lotus flowers.

“And the food’s good too,” Edward said, leaning close so he could speak in a low voice.

A smiling woman in a pink sari greeted Edward like an old friend before shoing us over to a table and clapping her hands at two waiters. If she hadn't been old enough to be his mother, I might've been jealous.

"It is so nice to see you, Mr. Edward, and you brought someone!" She beamed at me. "He used to eat alone. I told him I have three nieces that would be happy to join him, but he always declined. Now I know why—you are so beautiful!"

I was pleased to see Edward blush slightly at the sweet teasing. It made me feel better about my own red cheeks. Even though the space between the tables was minuscule, he still managed to pull my chair out for me. I sat down and wondered how exactly he had made a perfect cozy and romantic restaurant appear out of thin air. I could practically hear the romantic comedy love theme starting to play in the background.

A plate of naan and three small dishes of different chutneys were on the table when I managed to break out of my inner movie. Another smiling waiter uncorked a bottle of chardonnay and poured us each a glass.

"I took the liberty of pre-ordering some of my favorites," Edward said. He didn't seem to have noticed my little space-out. "But please pick anything off the menu you want."

I smiled. "Did you happen to order coconut curry? Maybe some lamb vindaloo?"

"I did."

"Then I'm a happy girl."

We clinked our wine glasses together and each took a drink. The alcohol warmed me, helping me to relax.

"Try the mango chutney," he said. "It's the perfect mix of sweet and spice."

He tore off a piece of the still warm bread and dipped it in the first small dish before leaning over and holding it out to me. I savored the sting of spices mellowed by the bright sugary taste of mango, the flavors bursting across my taste buds as I took a bite of the bread he'd offered.

His eyes warmed as I licked the crumbs from my lips and my heart kicked up.

"Tell me what you do during the day, Prince Charming," I asked.

"I wear a suit and a tie and stand in an office wishing I was here with you."

I felt my cheeks turn pink and made a mental note to write that line down

when I got home. It should've made me roll my eyes, but there was no doubting his sincerity.

"So, do you love your work?" As much as I liked what he'd said, I wanted to know more about him.

"I do," he admitted. "It's the family business so it sort of runs itself. I'm actually more of a referee between the shareholders, but I'm happy. How about you?"

"Well, I'm leagues away from anything to do with shareholders," I said. "I'm an assistant to a screenwriter. Or, as I like to call it, a personal slave to a psycho." I laughed, but I was only half-joking. My boss was a nightmare.

"Exciting then?"

"Oh, yes," I agreed. "I never know if it's going to be a quiet day fetching coffee or I'll be spending an hour on the phone searching for double-chocolate strawberry expresso beans."

He laughed. "That does sound exciting. Are those even a real thing?"

I shrugged and took a drink. "I don't know. I'm still searching for them."

We both laughed and I realized I was seriously considering transitioning into a heavily censored version of my foray into hand modeling when a plate of samosas arrived and we both eyed them hungrily. I watched him crunch into the flaky crust and close his eyes as he chewed the mouth-watering mix of spiced ground beef and peas. With his eyes closed, I was able to get a good look at him without him knowing.

He was wearing a navy blue suit, but this time without a tie and, in the twinkling glow of the restaurant, he looked relaxed and happy. I noticed his light brown hair was sun-streaked and the open collar of his shirt showed a muscular and tan chest. His eyes opened and I turned my attention to my own plate.

"You seem like the sporty type. What do you do for fun?" I asked, trying to get my mind off of those broad shoulders.

"Promise not to judge?"

I grinned. "Only if you give me the last samosa."

"Deal." He pushed the small plate across the table. "Polo."

"You mean with the game thingy with the horses?"

"That's the one."

He sipped his wine and watched me, as if my reaction to his revelation was important. I liked that he cared what I thought, although I wasn't sure why he was concerned about what I'd think of a game.

“Sounds like fun,” I said and he relaxed.

The main dishes arrived, steaming up the small window above our table, and Edward ordered another bottle of wine. We skipped separate plates and shared bites from each savory dish, rolling our eyes and moaning at each tantalizing taste. Our conversation veered off into favorite books we read in childhood and we laughed over our shared secret love of science fiction.

“I thought I was the only one that carried a towel around my backyard and waited to hitchhike on passing spaceships,” I said.

“Are you kidding? I got a telescope just to look for rides out into the galaxy.”

When we finished, we both tipped back in our chairs. I looked down at the table, startled by the sheer volume of food we’d consumed. It was probably a good thing I’d skipped the narrow pencil skirt.

“Do you want to take a walk?” Edward asked.

“I’d better or you’ll have to roll me home.” I smiled.

He paid the bill without letting me argue about splitting it and we strolled down the block where he signaled to his driver to move on. The car slowly drifted away and we turned the corner. I saw Washington Square a few blocks away and Edward slipped an arm around my waist as we walked towards it. His hand rested on my hip, a warm brand. *We’re together*, that touch said. I liked it.

We passed several wide gallery windows where New York’s socialites were fawning over new artists. I stopped in front of one white-walled gallery displaying black and white photographs. They reminded me of Flynn. I tried to swallow the ache that rose in my chest as I remembered the look in his eyes as he’d aimed the camera held such passion, so focused, so intent.

Stop it.

I wanted to be there, leaning against Edward with his arm around my waist, but my mind suddenly fixed on Flynn, wondering where in the world he was at that moment.

Probably French-kissing some silly waitress in Paris or seducing a young senorita in Spain, I thought and tried to shake him from my head.

“Everything alright?” Edward asked, his tone concerned.

“I’m fine,” I said, dragging my thoughts away from the images. I put my head on his shoulder.

The farther we got from the gallery, the easier it was to put Flynn out of my head, the easier it was to focus on the man next to me. It was so easy

being with him. Just walking in the warmth of the night—everything felt easy. “Maybe you should pinch me. Is it just me or is this date going really well?”

Edward stopped me at the edge of the park and turned me so we were facing each other. When I didn’t look up, too focused on trying to remember how to breathe, he reached out and tipped my chin up. His pale eyes studied me for a moment before he leaned close and softly grazed his lips across mine. The caress left me sighing and I raised myself up on tiptoe to return the light kiss. He slid his hands down to the small of my back and pulled me close. This time, when his mouth came down on mine, the pressure made my lips part so he could deepen the kiss. He cradled my head with one hand and used the other to arch my back, lifting me up deeper into the kiss.

It was intense, sweet and poignantly romantic. My heart began to race as his mouth took mine. I felt like someone from a movie and a shiver of pleasure ran down my spine.

When he slowly broke away, my head was spinning and his hands gripped my waist almost convulsively, as if he was fighting the urge to kiss me—and more.

His eyes locked on mine, brighter blue from the heat of the moment. Still holding me around the waist, he signaled for the nearby town car with one hand. I held my breath, not sure how to respond to the invitation I assumed was coming next. I’d wanted romance and not just sex, but I couldn’t deny how much I wanted him right now.

“I’d say it went very well, Gabriella.” He lifted a hand and caressed my cheek. “Paul will take you home. I’m a little warm so I think I’ll walk.”

“Goodnight?” I whispered and stared at him. Was he serious?

He pulled me tightly to him again and we both melted into another kiss. Then I felt his arms tense and press me back, as if he didn’t trust himself to kiss me any longer.

“Can I see you tomorrow night?” he asked, his voice a bit breathless. “I have tickets to the theater. Please?”

“Sure thing, Mr. Charming,” I said as I climbed into the car. This date was going to keep me for a while.

When Kendra came home late Sunday morning, she stumbled over a wide box in our narrow hallway. “Oh, hey now...just *what* do we have here, Gabs?”

You picked up a secret admirer or what?”

“You’re one to talk.” I scowled at her. “Where have you been, Ms. Thing?”

“Obviously out with a lower class of guy. Where’s *my* giant post first date present?” she asked with a grin.

Before I could reach for it, she tore open the card and read it out loud.

“Darling Gabriella. Last night was a dream. My fairy godmother saw this and thought of you. I can’t wait to see you in it tonight. In anticipation, Prince Charming.”

She handed over the card as she gushed, “Damn, Gabs, seems you’ve cast a spell with all your talk of love and romance.”

I pushed Kendra out of the way and shimmied open the box lid. Inside was a long dress in the deepest lapis lazuli blue. The plunging neckline touched a satin empire waist before the dress undulated in soft waves to the floor.

“Wow,” Kendra breathed. “Wait! I have the perfect shoes to match!”

With my own fairy godmother providing me with pale gold, sparkling shoes, I felt like Cinderella that night as I carefully swept down our front steps in my elegant gown. Edward was waiting, a broad smile stretching across his face as he escorted me to the town car where Paul was waiting with the door open. I smiled at the driver and he tipped his hat in return.

“So where are we off to?” I asked as we settled into the back seat.

“I have two tickets to see the most popular show on Broadway,” he said.

I studied him for a moment. “You have no idea what the show is called, do you?”

“No.” He laughed. “Do you know what show everyone’s been talking about?”

“Sorry. Unless it’s reality TV, my friends have nothing to say, and I tend to stick with what’s on the small screen for work.”

“Well, luckily the marquee should be big enough for us to figure it out before we walk in,” he said. “And if we don’t, it’ll be a pleasant surprise.”

When Paul, our driver, pulled up in front of the theater, I looked up at the marquee and couldn’t help myself. “Oooh, I always wanted to see that!”

His gaze followed mine and he smiled. We were in for a spectacular rendition of Cleopatra’s love story.

It was everything I could've dreamed it would be. Completely enchanted by the spellbinding production, we held hands through the entire show. Despite the electricity flowing between us, neither of us looked away from the stage.

During intermission, Edward kept seeing people he knew. I half expected him to deposit me in the corner with a drink while he greeted his friends. After all, I wasn't one of them.

Instead, he kept my arm tucked in the crook of his elbow and introduced me to everyone we saw. I felt like I was walking in a dream.

"Edward, I didn't know you were seeing anyone." A white-haired woman in an oversized ruby necklace looked down her nose at me. "I thought perhaps you were seeing Talia's daughter."

"Allison, this is Gabriella."

Kendra often added phrases like "she's a really talented writer" in a way that made me feel uncomfortable. She'd never really read anything I'd written so the white lie made me feel like I was not enough on my own.

Edward, on the other hand, simply introduced me as me and left it at that, like I was enough to be a singular name. He then steered me away with a confidence that said any other information was none of the obvious gossip's business.

"People seem very interested in your dating life," I said once we were out of earshot of his admirers.

"My mother is a patron here. These are actually tickets she gave me."

I considered the question. "And were you supposed to bring Talia's daughter?"

"Perhaps," he said with a smile. "But then again I got lucky and you said yes."

The house lights blinked and we returned to our seat. The rest of the show was romantic and tragic, just as I'd known it would be. We held hands again despite the obvious disapproval of Mrs. Allison Whitehair who was watching from her private box.

"Do you think she's going to tattle on you?" I whispered, barely suppressing a laugh.

"Probably." His breath tickled my ear.

"Will your mother be angry?" I asked, honestly curious.

"She could be."

He turned to me with a mischievous smile. "If that's the case, I should

give her a reason to really be upset.” Then, without waiting another moment, he pulled me into a dramatic kiss. It started off theatrically and ended with a surprising amount of heat. When he set me back in my seat, an entire song had gone by and my heart felt like it was going to burst from my chest. I was breathless, my heart was racing and I had to consciously uncurl my hands from his arms.

The white-haired gossip might not have enjoyed the extra performance, but I didn’t care. The moment his lips had parted mine, I hadn’t been aware of anything but him. Not the people, the play, the music. Only the feel of his mouth moving against mine, the heat of his hands...

When the show was over, Paul was waiting outside with the door already open, as if he’d known we’d want to leave quickly. Once inside the car, Edward gathered me in close and three blocks went by before we surfaced from an even more thorough and intense kiss. My entire body was throbbing, my nipples hard and tight, aching against the strapless bra.

The pulsing between my legs was profound and it took all of my self-control to keep from grinding against him.

“We have reservations,” he said.

“Delicious.” I ran my fingers through his hair, wanting to see what it looked like mussed rather than professionally styled.

“Or we could send Paul for take-out.”

Hell, yes. I nodded and with a quick rap on the partition, Edward took us away from the glitz and glamour of downtown. When I looked out the window a few minutes later, my jaw dropped.

Living in New York City, it was easy to forget that some neighborhoods had trees. Not just the skinny little trees that sat in open circles in the concrete, but big trees with wide spreading branches. Trees that arched up and over the street. Streets that were lined with private homes bigger than my entire apartment building.

When we drove through tall wrought-iron gates to a palatial limestone mansion, I started to feel like a fairytale character again. I actually lost a golden heel on his expansive front steps. Running back to grab it, I realized I had not hallucinated. His house had not one but two turrets. I felt myself quickly going from feeling like I was in a fairytale to feeling completely out of place.

“You live in a castle?” I asked as he came back down to my side.

“It’s only temporary,” he said, his tone almost dismissive. “It’s a family

home. I stay here while my own place is being remodeled.”

Edward must have sensed my sudden hesitation as he gave my hand a slight squeeze. “Don’t worry. We are all alone. My family only uses this place as a vacation home in the summer.”

With that said, Edward pulled me through the echoing foyer and into the snug warmth of a side room. I didn’t see much of the house as we went, too caught up in the feel of his hands on me, but I didn’t care. If it was between the house and the man, I knew which one I was choosing.

“This is my favorite room in the house.” He wrapped his arms around me from behind and nuzzled the spot under my ear. “We can relax here unless you want a tour?”

I shook my head, reluctantly stepping away from him. I needed a brief moment to gather myself and I took it by settling down on the buttery tan leather couch. A small fire flickered on the stone hearth and I wondered if he’d had someone start it for him. While I was wondering, Edward poured two crystal cut glasses of whiskey and handed me one before stretching out on the Persian rug in front of me. I tousled his light brown hair and we watched the fire as we sipped.

Somewhere in the cavernous foyer, a grandfather clock chimed and I wondered when I was going to turn into a pumpkin. Surely this was too much of a dream to last long. But even as minutes ticked by, Edward was still the same easy conversationalist with a sweet smile and a bright sense of humor. The whiskey and fire started to warm me inside and out and I relaxed.

As we talked about *Cleopatra* and laughed about our kiss in the theater, the heat between us began to build again. With his eyes on my face, he wrapped his fingers around my ankle. I stretched out my leg and waited to see what he was going to do. My breathing quickened as he slid his hand up my calf. He sat up, shifting his weight so that he could move his hand under my skirt, leaving fire burning across my knee and thigh. The hem dragged up along with his exploring hand, and he leaned down, kissing the skin he exposed. His eyes met mine as he paused above my knee, wordlessly asking for permission. I answered by lying back on the couch.

He trailed his mouth up my inner thigh and grazed the heat between my legs. I moaned as I ran both my hands through his hair. My back arched when he wet the thin fabric of my lace underwear with a long heavy lick of his tongue and he chuckled, a deep, manly sound that made my insides twist. He leaned back, one long finger pulling aside the crotch of my panties to gain

better access.

“Ah!” I cried out as his tongue delved between my folds.

He worked over my clit before dancing down to my entrance, each pass making my legs tremble. When he took my clit between his teeth and lightly tugged, I keened, the sound coming from a place deep inside me. He slowly pushed one finger inside me, twisting his wrist as he did so and I tensed, feeling an orgasm building inside me.

He didn't push me immediately over, instead taking his time to bring up slowly and when I came, it was with a harsh, desperate cry. My fingers tightened in his hair and I gasped out his name as he gave my clit another gentle tug with his teeth.

I came down slowly, my body shuddering as he continued to tease me. Unable to take it, I pulled on his head, drawing him up onto the couch to kiss me. The deep, exploring thrusts of his tongue were mirrored by the rubbing press of his growing hardness, and I could taste myself on his lips and tongue.

“I need you,” he said roughly. “Can I...?”

“Do you even have to ask?” I arched myself closer, so desperate now that I might have cried if he'd tried to pull away.

Edward broke away and got to his feet. He made short work of his shirt and then held out his hand.

I took it and let him help me to my feet. His hands slid over my shoulders, taking the straps of my dress with them.

“You know,” he said quietly. “The first time I saw this dress, I knew I wanted to see you in it.” He reached around and slowly pulled down the zipper. “And then I wanted to take you out of it.”

The words left me trembling even more and I stared at him, blushing even as I smiled while the dress dropped to the floor. It pooled around my bare feet and for a moment, Edward just stared at me. I went to take my bra off, but he caught my hands, guiding them to my sides and then he took over the task, opening the front catch.

I moaned when he cupped my breasts in his hands, his thumbs circling around my nipples. They were aching and tight and each touch felt so good. Arching into his touch, I reached out and gripped his shoulders.

Skilled hands slid down my ribcage to my hips and he hooked his fingers in the waistband of my panties. With his eyes blazing, he went to his knees and took my panties with him. I stepped out of them, balancing myself with

my hands on his shoulders. He looked up at me and kissed the inside of my thigh before standing.

“My turn.” He took off his pants, the movements quick, but not rushed. I had a moment to admire the way his black boxer briefs hugged his body and then they were joining the pants.

His cock was rigid and my pussy throbbed, a clenching need settling deep inside at the sight of him. He drew me to him with both hands, running them down my bare back as we kissed and let our naked bodies touch. The slow tickling circles he traced on my ass made me moan. He answered with a deep guttural sigh before lowering me to the rug.

He took a brief moment to roll on a condom and then our bodies joined in one silky push and I curled my knees up on either side of his hips in pure pleasure. He moved slowly, circling before drawing out and then pressing back deep into the center of me. His lips and tongue made trails across my collarbone and breasts, little licks of fire before he fastened his mouth around my nipple. He sucked on it hard, sending an almost painful jolt straight through to my core. He waited as my climax came closer, my hands opening and closing on his back, urging him forward. I was right at the edge and I felt his body tighten.

“Are you ready?” he asked through gritted teeth. I could see the strain on his face.

I nodded. “Please.”

He shifted his hips as he thrust into me, hitting that spot inside me even as the base of his cock pressed against my clit. I called out his name, wrapping my legs around him to hold him as close as possible as his orgasm joined mine. Our bodies rocked together, drawing out every possible moment of exquisite pleasure.

Even after we came apart, we lay there in front of the fire until it was nothing but winking embers. I was curled up against him, both of us partially covered by a blanket he’d pulled from the couch.

The heat left me drowsy and languid, but I wouldn’t let myself sleep. I didn’t want to miss a moment of this. Every so often, he tipped the whiskey glass to my lips and we drank together in long, lingering kisses.

When the ivory-plated clock chimed two, I finally stood up. I needed to leave or I wouldn’t make myself leave at all.

He sent a quick message with his phone before pulling on his pants.

“You could stay if you wanted to,” he told me as I dressed.

I just shook my head as I picked up my shoes. We paused at the door and he kissed me again.

“Stay,” he murmured.

“Never before the third date.” I had to harden my reserve though.

He groaned, although it was a playful sound. He opened the door and escorted me down the steps. The town car was waiting with the door open. He must have sent Paul a message.

He caught my hand before I got into the car. “What are you doing Tuesday?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“*Y*ou’re going out with him again?”

I rolled my eyes at the disapproval in her voice. “I know it seems a little crazy, Kendra, but he’s wonderful. You’d like him.”

She slapped butter on the toast and left it on the counter untouched. Her light green eyes were flashing. “You don’t even know his last name and you’re seeing an awful lot of him.”

“You know,” I said mildly. “For someone who came home at three in the morning on a Monday night, wait, Tuesday morning, you sound awfully judgmental.”

Kendra gnashed into her slice of toast and tossed the other one down the counter at me. We ate in silence as the coffee finished brewing. I poured her a cup and turned to get the milk. I didn’t like arguing with her, but I was a little tired of her double standards. I’d never said anything about her dating habits.

“He’s totally distracted you from getting a job,” she said.

“That’s not true. He’s distracting me from the hell that is my job. I’m happy, K. Can I just be happy for a week?”

She took the coffee and kissed my cheek. “Fine. You can be happy until rent is due again.”

I was still a little annoyed, but I didn’t want to fight anymore. “You don’t know. Maybe Edward is just dating me because he can sense I’m the world’s next top hand model.” I said, trying to lighten the mood.

I knew she was stressing over the rent. I was, too. We’d put in another call about the landlord issue, but nobody had returned our call and if we didn’t hear from somebody soon, we were either going to have to pay the

insane amount that was being asked or leave. It pissed me off because we knew we were being jerked around, but unless we could get somebody to talk to us, what were we supposed to do?

She grumbled under her breath and left to go shower and pack up. She had a photo shoot that was supposed to last most of the day and I needed to get to work too.

Just a couple of hours and I'd see Edward again. After a crazy week, I needed it.

Psycho-boss was even more psycho than normal. Even the people who normally fawned over her and kissed her psycho-boss ass were steering clear of her and when she left for lunch, I took my shot at escape, more than happy to head to my lunch date with Edward.

Instead of a restaurant, however, he'd asked me to meet him at Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. I smiled as I saw him coming towards me. He'd left his tie and suit coat in the car, but it was obvious he was coming straight from work. He lifted me up into a joyous kiss before he rolled up his sleeves and threaded my arm through his. We weaved through the tourists taking pictures and wandered further into the park.

"How's work?" I asked.

"Same old. I have a big meeting this afternoon so I can't stay too long."

I tried not to feel too disappointed. "Then you better kiss me again." I dragged him off the path and leaned up against an oak tree, pulling him towards me. He leaned into me and I wrapped my arms around his neck before our lips met again. The kiss was far too brief for my taste.

"Mmm," he murmured against my neck. "I'm hungry."

Teasingly, I said, "But you said you don't have much time...and we can't do *that* here."

He chuckled and pulled away. "I meant food. Come on."

"Since we don't have much time, what do you suggest? Hot dog vendor?" I asked, looking around. The carts were everywhere.

"I have a better idea." He led me around the tree to a clearing I hadn't seen until that moment.

Paul waved to us from a blanket on an open spot on the grass. He'd spread out a perfect picnic lunch in view of the lake.

"Wow." I breathed out a happy sigh. "That's much better than a vendor."

Once we settled onto the wool blanket, he opened the wine, handed it to Edward, and left us alone.

“You don’t want to talk about work and you have a driver who also delivers picnics.” I sipped my wine for a moment and then looked up at Edward, lowering my voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Are you Batman?”

Edward chuckled. “More like Batman’s dutiful son who does all the boring work of keeping a family business afloat.”

“Ah, you’re right. The more you say ‘family business’ the more I know you must be in the mob.” I grinned at him.

“Again, far more exciting than what I do.”

He clinked his wine glass against mine and spread a bite of soft cheese on a chunk of baguette.

“Besides, I’d rather hear about your world.”

“You mean the glamorous world of writing pages for peanuts? The one where I once contemplated using toilet paper for a coffee filter because, after my rent was paid, I couldn’t afford to buy even the cheap ones?”

“Yes, that one,” Edward said with a smile. “The one where you love the actual work despite everything else. Including toilet paper coffee.”

He popped a bite of salami in my mouth and I sucked his fingers before savoring the salty bite. He licked his lips and moved in closer. Feeling something like Cleopatra, I took a taste of briny olive from his fingers. He rubbed the other half along my lower lip and then bent to kiss its taste from my mouth. I could get used to eating this way.

The next few minutes passed in a lazy, sensual silence and I felt the stress of the morning passing away.

“I have to go soon, but please say we can meet for dinner.” Edward brushed his fingers across my cheek as he spoke.

“Yes, please,” I said.

“This doesn’t bother you?”

“What?” I gave him a puzzled look.

“I know I’m moving us a little fast, but I can’t help it. If I didn’t have this meeting I would want to spend the whole day with you.” There wasn’t a trace of insincerity in his voice.

“I don’t understand why people think all relationships follow the same timeline,” I said. “Some start fast and some take years to develop.”

Without meaning to, my mind jumped to the firework blast of Flynn. I had to remind myself it was a fling, not a relationship. No matter how much I

tried to stop it, he kept coming to mind and the flash of him always made my heart thump. *Stop it*, I told myself, adding in a mental kick in the ass.

Those two were on total opposite ends of the spectrum.

On the good side was Edward, sitting next to me on the blanket. He whispered questions in my ear about the people we saw in the park and we sipped our wine and laughed as I made up back-stories. The good was us feeding each other creamy bites of Brie cheese and sweet red grapes in between shared smiles, and it would've been just as good if the food had been cheap cheddar and crackers.

The bad was the burst of heat I felt when a man walked by with a camera. My cheeks flared as I remembered the teasing pressure of Flynn's fingers inside me, the flood of pleasure as he'd slowly pulled them out and rubbed me until I'd panted. How he'd felt filling me. The bad was the way he'd jerked his head to the bathroom, telling me I could clean up, collect my cash and get out, thanks, bye. The embarrassment of it *still* stung.

"Don't let the wine go to your head," Edward said, mistaking the pink in my cheeks for something else.

I wasn't about to correct him. "I'm not the one that has a meeting to go to." I reminded him.

"Speaking of that." He sighed. "I have to go. Dinner? Tonight?"

"Yes and yes."

"Meet me at The Lotus?" he asked. "I'll send Paul to pick you up."

I agreed and we went our separate ways. I picked up my pace, trying to outrun the remembered passion with Flynn.

I'd just had a lovely picnic with Edward and we'd spent the other night together, perfect, romantic and sexy. He'd walked me to the door, asked me, wistfully, if I could spend the night. Then he had kissed me until my toes curled.

Yet my body warmed at the thought of Flynn putting down his camera with lust bright in his dark blue eyes.

I shook my head and walked faster. For once, I hoped work could keep me too busy to think.

Later that night, Edward stepped out of a taxi and joined me under the Taj Mahal crowned awning. He looked rumpled and tired, still in the same suit from earlier. Still, he gave me a smile and a kiss.

“How about take out?” I asked.

He gave me a grateful look. “You are a dream come true.”

He had Paul take our order and we lounged in the town car while we waited.

“Work was that bad, huh?” I asked.

“Not work, family. Sometimes it’s like trapping wild dogs in a room. You’re trying to feed them, be nice to them, and all they do is snarl and nip.”

“Your meeting was with your family?” I asked.

“They’re board members so I have to include them. We even had to wait for one to conference call from Amsterdam. Impossible. Just one of the reasons no one else will take the job.” He craned his head on the back of the seat and gave me a tired smile. “Tell me about your day, Gabriella.”

I shrugged and said, “What do you want to hear? About psycho-boss’s latest rampage?”

His eyes lit with humor. “Yes.”

So I told him, happy to see some of the strain leaving his eyes.

We made small talk until we got to Edward’s house. Once there, I spread the Indian food out on the sideboard in his study while he started a fire. The air wasn’t cold, but we both enjoyed the cozy fireplace. I piled up two plates and he poured two glasses of wine. We sat side by side on the floor and dug in. I wanted to ask him more about work, but he sidestepped it and we ended up arguing about the best movies of the eighties.

“I love this,” he said suddenly.

“What?” I asked, surprised. “Debating bad movies?”

“No,” he said with a smile. “I love the fact that we can sit here for an entire meal without music, television, or other people and there’s never an awkward silence.”

I paused for as long as I could before I asked, “You mean like that one?”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m serious, Gabriella, I don’t think I’ve ever dated someone who was such a perfect match.”

He leaned over and kissed me, a soft kiss at first. A soft kiss that quickly became something filled with fire and passion. It wasn’t hurried though. This time, he slowly undressed me, leaving a trail of searing kisses after each removed article of clothing. When I was completely naked, he lifted me onto the couch to straddle his lap. With his arms around my waist, he rocked me up and down against his dress pants until we were both wet from my arousal and his cock was straining against his zipper. Teasing my nipples with his

tongue, he fumbled with his pants.

“Darling,” he gasped. “Wait, I need...”

“I’m on the pill.” I reached down to cup his hardness through his pants. “And I’m clean.” I locked eyes with him. “Are we good?”

He nodded wordlessly, then groaned as I freed his cock from its confines. I slipped down on him, turned on by the texture of his clothes against my bare body. It heightened the slick skin on skin where our bodies joined and his hands guided me. “That’s it,” he murmured, bringing one hand up to cup my breast. “Harder...faster...”

He threw his head back, the hand at my breasts almost painful.

His cock swelled and I shuddered, feeling myself locking down around him, tightening as my orgasm moved closer.

I whimpered and fell forward, the angle changing and now each movement had me rubbing my clitoris against him and it was so, so good. “Come for me, Gabriella,” he said against my neck, scraping his teeth against my skin.

His thumb circled my nipple and I tensed.

Inside me, the head of his cock passed over my G-spot and I broke, coming around him hard and fast. As though he’d been waiting for just that, he started to drive up into me, each movement quicker and rougher than before.

Three strokes later and he was right there with me, groaning out my name as he climaxed.

Long, breathless moments passed, his hands smoothing up and down my back. I smiled dreamily against his chest when I heard the ragged sound of his heartbeat, slamming in a rhythm that echoed mine.

“Please tell me you can stay tonight.”

“Hmmm...” I turned my face into his neck. “It is the third date.”

“That’s a yes?” His arm tightened around my waist.

“Yes.”

The next morning, I woke up in Edward’s upstairs master suite.

I was alone in the king-sized bed and for one panicked moment, I froze. Then I heard the shower running and the tension drained away.

Smiling that giddy smile that tried so often to overtake me, I stretched and turned my head, following the sound of splashing water until I saw the

closed door. We definitely weren't taking things slow, but everything felt so comfortable, so right.

We liked the same foods, laughed at the same television shows, loved the same bad science fiction, and had the same ideas of what constituted a perfect day. Though, as the sunlight streamed into his inner sanctum, I realized there was one giant divide between us. I shifted uneasily.

He was rich. Not just hard-working, the right kind of career rich, but family legacy money rich. I may not have known who his family was, but there was no doubt about it. The master suite not only had a fireplace, it had a family crest engraved above it.

The sound of water cut off and I sat up, looking around nervously for something to put on. I didn't quite manage to come up with anything before the bathroom door opened and Edward appeared in the opening, smiling at me.

"You're awake. Good morning, gorgeous."

"Hmmm. I was lazing about for a few more minutes." I glanced down and watched as a bead of water slid down his chest.

"Laze away." He smiled at me. "In fact, Paul's going to run me in to the office. I'll have breakfast sent up and by the time you've eaten, he'll be back. When you're ready, he'll drive you to work."

Ah yes, work. Slaving away for a menial wage while desperately hoping that my talent would one day be recognized. The perfect thing to remind me of how different our lives were.

He leaned down to kiss me as someone knocked on the door. His lips brushed against mine and then he called for whoever it was to enter. A moment later, a maid brought in a silver breakfast tray. She gave him a polite nod, but didn't even look at me as she left the tray on the dresser. He thanked her and followed her out, pausing to blow me a kiss at the door.

Poached eggs with salmon, fresh bread lightly toasted, and a French press of heavenly strong coffee all tempted me from the foot of the bed, but first I reached for my phone.

"Okay. This is killing me...I still can't get him to tell me his last name." I eyed the crest, something elegant and Old World looking and shook my head. "He says he's not Batman, but that's all I can get out of him."

"Are you calling me from his bed?"

Of course that would be her first question. "Yes. He's left me here with a luxury breakfast that was delivered by a maid. When I'm done, a car will take

me to work.”

“Think you can get some coffee filters while you have access to a chauffeur? We’re out. Have you ever tried the bodega’s coffee? I think it may actually be muddy water they warm up and throw sugar in.”

“You bought their coffee?”

“It was cheaper than the filters. So do you have a plan to figure out what he’s hiding?”

“I do,” I said, pouring fragrant coffee into a delicate China cup. “I’m going to call in late with some excuse and then tell the driver I’m supposed to meet Edward at his office. Boom, I find out what this family business is and why he’s hiding his last name.”

“Just the fact that he won’t tell you his last name should be a red flag,” Kendra said.

I sighed. “Yes, and then I think of the romantic dates, the great conversations, and the oh-so-sweet sex. Really, what’s in a name?”

“Seriously, Juliet? You do remember how that whole ‘what’s in a name’ thing worked for her and her boy?”

I scowled at the phone.

She continued, “Well, text me if your office surprise doesn’t work. Then bring him to Tony’s so I can meet him. Someone better assess if he’s a knight in shining armor or a thinly veiled psycho-killer.”

“Ah, Tony’s Pizza,” I said. “Always the perfect Plan B.”

Paul was dozing in the front seat of the town car when the maid opened the front door for me twenty minutes later. She coughed loudly and he jolted awake and jumped out to open the car door. I smiled, wondering how much sleep the poor guy had gotten in the past few days. Edward and I had to have been running him ragged.

“Where to, Ms. Gabriella?”

“Edward told me to meet him at his office.” I tried to sound breezy and casual. Whether or not he believed me, Paul nodded and started the car.

We headed straight into Manhattan. Paul had fierce driving skills. He could give any New York cabbie a run for his money. He navigated snarled lanes of traffic, using his Bluetooth to send messages on his cellphone.

By the time we made it to the curb outside a giant building, I was both terrified and impressed. Then I saw where we were and all of the blood drained from my face. It had to be a mistake.

“The Bouvier Building?” I asked faintly.

Before Paul could answer, the door opened and Edward leaned in.

“Going my way?” His smile said he wasn’t mad that I’d just showed up at his job unannounced. Paul must have sent him a message.

I swallowed and fought to keep from looking at the building behind him. “No fair...” I managed a weak smile. “I was just on my way to surprise you.”

“Well, it’s a little early for lunch, but I know a great place up the Hudson River that serves life-saving Bloody Marys. What do you say?”

Before I could answer, he got in the car and I had to swallow my frown. Paul screeched away from the curb before I even got to ask which gargantuan office building housed Edward’s mysterious family business. I hoped it wasn’t the same one where I’d met Flynn.

It was time for Plan B. Thinking quickly, I grinned up at him. “I’d say a Bloody Mary sounds delicious, but I already have a date.”

“I thought you said you were surprising me.” He sounded puzzled but not suspicious.

“Surprise!” I said weakly. “We’re having lunch with my roommate, Kendra. Tony’s Pizza, Paul.”

Before Edward could respond, I gave Paul the address and he swerved across two lanes to make the turn. I smiled brightly at Edward as I discreetly texted Kendra the words ‘Plan B’.

We rode in silence for a few minutes before Edward started asking about my childhood in Tennessee. His honest inquiries softened me up and by the time we reached Tony’s Pizza, I had almost forgotten what had me so concerned.

Kendra, however, hadn’t. She was waiting outside and strode up to Edward as soon as he got out of the car, a familiar expression on her face. She was in full-on mama bear mode, ready to protect me from anyone who might hurt me.

“Hello. I’m Gabriella’s roommate, Kendra. Kendra Facet.” She stuck out her hand.

He took it with a smile. “Nice to meet you, I’m Edward.”

“Sorry, Edward,” she said. “I didn’t catch your last name.”

“Don’t worry.” He smiled. “Just Edward is fine.”

Kendra gave me a dire glance over his shoulder before speaking to him again. “You know, you look very familiar to me.”

“That’s not surprising. We met at the big Bouvier party. The night I met Gabriella.”

He slipped an arm around my waist and kissed my temple.

“Come on, my darlings,” I said. Time to move from straight interrogation to polite lunch conversation. “Pizza’s on me.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I never thought eating a slice of pizza at Tony's could be awkward. It was home base for after-debauchery food and I had seen everything from a drunken cello performance to a bout of mistaken identity happen in that small sliver of a restaurant.

Nothing had left a bad taste in my mouth until lunch with Kendra and Edward.

He was secretive, deftly fielding questions to avoid having to answer, and she was understandably suspicious. Kendra was sure they had met before the party and she kept squinting at him as if recognition was just a hard stare away. Edward looked terribly out of place in the pizza-by-the-slice place and spent an almost rude amount of time dabbing the grease off his plain cheese, yet another glaring example of how far apart our worlds were.

Together, they made me so nervous I tried to pitch them some script material and chattered away about the foibles of subway-riders non-stop.

Needless to say, halfway through that, Edward told me he had to get back to work, which meant I had to pretend that I needed to go too. He kissed me awkwardly in front of Kendra and told me the next few days were full of meetings. I told him I had a sit-down with a producer interested in a pilot script and then had to make up a television show on the spot. I titled it *Slice of Life* and was pretty sure he realized I'd lied.

When he walked out the door, I was certain I'd never see him again, and the thought hurt me more than I'd thought possible.

“He still hasn’t called?” Kendra asked me three days later.

“Shh, I have two more pages to finish for a deadline.”

“Gabs, I can see that you’re writing a complaint about cereal.” She pulled my laptop away from me. “I didn’t mean to kill your whole relationship, I just wanted to make sure he was being honest with you.”

I wanted to snap at her that it was all her fault for making me doubt him, but had to bite my tongue because I knew she’d just been looking out for me. I knew there was something he wasn’t telling me about his family and, while I was hoping it was just that he seriously disliked them, his omissions were a little bothersome.

Sighing, I looked up at her. “He wasn’t being honest with me. But...” I shrugged. “We haven’t been dating long enough for me to know his address much less his life story.”

Although I did sleep with him...at his home. I slept with the guy. But I didn’t know his last name.

It was enough to leave me with a funny feeling in my gut and I knew Kendra hadn’t been entirely off-base. I had to set aside my frustration with her. I knew that.

I gave her a wan smile.

“Maybe it’s for the best, it was moving way too fast.” If I said it enough, I’d believe it, right? Besides, she was my friend and friendship came first.

“No, you were right,” she said, her face bleak. “It wasn’t moving too fast, it was moving exactly how you wanted it to. And I screwed it up.”

“I think all three of us did.” I went back to staring at my laptop. “If he’d just told me who he is...if I hadn’t stressed so much...”

“If I hadn’t stressed *you* so much,” Kendra added sourly.

I grinned at her. “Yeah, that. If he’s just going to let it go because he can’t understand why I wanted to know more about him...” I shrugged. “What can I do?”

“Still.” She bent down behind me and hugged me. “I’m sorry, Gabs.”

I was hoping her apology would turn into another invite out for free drinks and catered snacks since I could really use some alcohol, but my phone rang.

My heart flipped when I saw the name on the caller ID.

I sucked in a breath and showed it to Kendra.

Her eyes widened and a big smile lit up her face.

I took one more breath as it rang again and then, calmly, I answered.

“Well, if it’s not the elusive Mr. E. Hello.”

“Hello, gorgeous.”

Edward’s voice sent a shiver down my spine. Damn. I had it bad.

“I know this is last minute, but do you have plans this weekend? I got a lot done at work the past few days in the hopes I could take you out of the city.”

I locked myself in the bathroom so I could have some privacy and used the time to pretend to check the calendar on my phone. Not that I needed to check it—what would I put on it? Work? Period due? Work?

I quickly calculated all of the assignments my boss had given me before I answered, “I have a couple of deadlines to finish before Friday, but I think I can work it out. What did you have in mind?”

“I know a quaint little lodge in the Catskills. How do you feel about hiking?”

“Sore,” I said. “My legs already feel sore. I’m more a city sidewalks girl and I don’t remember the last time I climbed a hill.”

He laughed. “Well, luckily our room has a hot tub on the deck.”

I didn’t even hesitate. “Count me in.”

We hung up shortly after that and I sighed, clutching the phone to my chest and not even bothering to pretend I wasn’t relieved.

Late Friday afternoon, Edward picked me up in a silver BMW and I tried not to let my jaw drop. I don’t know why it surprised me. It would’ve been crazy to make Paul drive all that way, drop us off and drive back to the city.

And having him there would be awkward, I thought, still eyeing his gorgeous car.

“You’re driving? What will Paul say? Is he heartbroken?” I teased.

Edward winked at me. “I wanted you all to myself this weekend. Paul will get over it.”

He stowed my bag and we climbed in, the nerves already chattering inside me. We had a long drive and my head was already churning. I had the worst habit of blurting things out at the worst possible time. Things like...so, *why won’t you tell me who you are?* I wasn’t sure I could avoid it for the hours we’d be trapped in the car.

It came as a relief when he broached the subject first.

“I want to apologize for my reluctance to talk about my family.” He

glanced at me. “And for not giving you my last name. My family name is, ah, recognizable and I just want to know that you’re with me, not my name.”

Relief washed over me. That made sense. He was rich, which would already make him wary of the reasons why someone would want to be with him.

A well-known family name had to make it worse.

“Bad experiences?” I asked, hearing something in his voice.

He hesitated and then nodded. “One or two. I’m...” He blew out a slow, careful breath. “I try not to let it color my life, but I told myself I was going to make sure somebody cared about me the next time. I hope you understand.”

My heart ached and I found myself smiling. “I do. And thank you.”

“Why are you thanking me?”

I leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. “Because you trusted me enough to tell me. I love that you felt comfortable enough to tell me that.”

He caught my hand and lifted it to his lips, pressing a kiss to the back of it. When he pressed it to his thigh before putting his hand back on the wheel, I let myself breathe out a sigh of satisfaction.

“I do understand,” I said again. “But, just so you know...” When he flicked a look at me, I winked. “I want you to know that I’m with you, not your name, no matter what it is.” I squeezed his thigh and felt his muscles tighten. “And now we can relax.”

“No,” he said, pulling the car into a wooded turn out. “Not yet.”

The car was still shuddering from the speed with which he’d thrown it into park when he pulled me over the center console and sideways onto his lap. I bumped my head against his window, but didn’t care as he caught me in a searing kiss. His lips were hard and insistent against mine. Almost immediately, I was glad I’d dismissed Kendra’s advice and worn a dress because Edward’s hand quickly found the hem and slid underneath.

His mouth ate at mine, his tongue thrusting deep into my mouth as his palm slid up my thigh, pushing my skirt up. He cupped my hip and I felt the heat of his arousal burning against my skin. My own desire started to rise inside me and I whimpered hungrily, catching his tongue and sucking on it.

He shuddered and shifted me until I was straddling him, his fingers tracing me through my panties. “You’re already wet for me. Did you miss me?”

“Yes.” My eyelids fluttered as he rubbed slow teasing circles around my

clitoris, working with the material to create a delicious friction that had me moaning and writhing against his hand. He chuckled as he moved his hand up to my stomach and then slipped it down into my panties. Two fingers spread my folds apart as his middle finger slid inside.

“Fuck,” I whimpered. Wanting more, I put my knee up on the console, trying to open myself more completely.

A second finger thrust deep and I cried out. His mouth sucked on the place where my shoulder and neck met, teeth scraping over the soft skin as he worked his fingers in and out with a relentless rhythm, not stopping until I shuddered and came against his hand.

I was still trembling when he turned me so that I was leaning forward over the steering wheel, one leg on either side of his lap. I lifted up on shaky knees as he reached beneath me and unzipped his pants. I was glad we’d covered the condom thing before because there was no pause as he grasped my hips and pulled me down onto him.

He swore as he filled me, his arms wrapping around my waist to hold me in place.

“So tight,” he said, his voice muffled as he pressed his face against my back. “I’ve been wanting you so badly. I don’t know how long I can last.”

“Don’t then,” I said. My body was still tingling from my orgasm and the feel of him throbbing inside me was enough to start the pressure building again. I moved one hand under my dress. It wasn’t going to take much to get me off again.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded.

He gripped my hips and lifted me enough so he could move. My head brushed the ceiling and I leaned forward more as my fingers made their way to the place where our bodies joined.

There was so little room to move. He didn’t *thrust* within me—it was more like a hard, deep grinding that had me shuddering, shaking deep inside, pleasure jolting through me hard and fast as I manipulated my clit.

His cock pulsed and throbbed and I heard him mutter my name. I stroked myself harder, faster. His cock jerked and I arched, my climax slamming into me just as he started to come.

I slumped forward, my body quaking with its release.

His arms tightened around my waist as he pulled me back against him. I rested my head on his shoulder, enjoying the feel of him holding me, of our

bodies still intimately joined.

He kissed my cheek. "Now we can relax."

My breath was taken away as soon as I opened my eyes the next morning. We'd arrived ruffled sometime after sunset and I'd been so tired, I'd collapsed not long after a light dinner.

Now, with Edward kneeling next to the bed with a mimosa and a devilish smile, it was hard to take everything in. Through the window behind him, I could see the river valley and tumbling green hills stretched out endlessly. The view alone was staggering, but I was here with him.

I couldn't imagine anything more perfect.

"Good morning, gorgeous," he said. "Sorry if I woke you. Are you hungry?"

"Hmmm." I looked back out the window and then at him. "Are we really hiking?" I'd do it for him, but I wasn't exactly looking forward to it.

"Well." He gave me a sly smile that said he already knew what my answer would be. "There's also a couples spa package, if you would prefer."

After breakfast in bed, we surrendered our day to the capable hands of the spa staff. Or, at least, I did. Edward had no interest in pedicures by the pool, so he swam laps while I enjoyed one, and a massage. I wanted to close my eyes at the heavenly pressure of the foot rub, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from him.

Even wet, there were streaks of gold coming out in his light brown hair. His hands and neck were slightly darker due to his days out on the polo fields, but he looked golden.

I watched him, strong and lithe in the pool, not only because he was gorgeous, but because it was easier than taking in our surroundings. I'd never been in a hotel so luxurious and I felt out of place. I was sure the woman scrubbing at my neglected feet was shaking her head at the thought of another rich man dragging some pretty girl up from the gutter.

Could we ever really fit?

He was from a family with pedigree, a public image, and a clearly healthy empire. I was a country girl trying to make it in the big city, just barely scraping by day to day.

What exactly did he see in me?

When the spa attendant finished packing us into our mud baths and left us alone in the steamy Turkish tiled room, I had to blink back tears. Even here, the luxury followed us, reminding me of who he was versus who I was.

“Is yours too hot? Want me to ring for the attendant?” His voice was soft, tender with concern.

I shook my head. “No, no, that’s not it.” My throat tightened up. “I just don’t think I can handle all of this.”

“The pampering?” he asked, clearly confused.

“No,” I said. I couldn’t keep it inside anymore. “Edward, I’m out of place here. If it wasn’t for you, I’d never be able to afford so much as a glass of mineral water for the bar here. Doesn’t it bother you?”

Mud squelched as he sat up, but he ignored it. Face somber, he gazed at me. “Listen to me. I’m paying because I want you here with me. I don’t expect you to pay for any of this. I probably wouldn’t be able to either if it wasn’t for my family.”

“But you run their big company doing whatever it is you do,” I said.

“And you write and get coffee.” He laughed softly and reached out, trailing a hand down my mud-slicked arm. “I’m surprised you haven’t been pulled into modeling. Kendra’s one of the big up and comers and you’re so beautiful. I’m sure somebody has seen you, noticed you...”

My stomach dropped.

“I did,” I said slowly.

“Oh?” His brows shot up.

“I did a shoot. Once. I was never called back.”

“Sounds like it didn’t go well.” Concern darkened his eyes.

The sight of it had my belly twisted. “It’s not that. I just...”

“Tell me you didn’t end up with one of those slimy photographers who seduces every woman he gets in front of the camera,” he said, disgust thick in his voice.

And that clinched it. Shame a hot, heavy weight in me, I lied. “No. It just wasn’t my thing. When he didn’t call me back in, I was relieved.”

“It’s not for everybody.” Edward caught my hand and squeezed, swinging back onto the table. “I’m glad you’re here with me, Gabriella. I *want* you here with me.”

Face burning, I closed my eyes.

Between the guilt from the lie and the annoying sense that I wasn’t doing

anything to earn what I had going on, it was almost impossible to relax, but slowly, bit by bit, I did. Succumbing to the heat of the bath, the tension gave way and the guilt that sat like a stone in my belly began to dissolve.

I hadn't intended to sleep with Flynn.

I'd thought I'd sensed something with him, something real. But I hadn't. Maybe he was one of those sleazy photographers. I'd put it behind me. There was no reason for it to cloud things between Edward and me and it wasn't like it was going to ever haunt me again. I hadn't even signed a release for the pictures, so he couldn't use them. Photographers had to have a release—that was one thing I knew from working with Kendra. I had taken the money though.

As to the opulence of the lodge, and everything else that came from being with Edward...that was just as complicated.

Mentally groaning over the frustration, I told myself to let it go.

You're not trying to get anything out of him, Gabs. It's not like you've ever asked for anything from him.

Finally, the logic pierced me and the misery began to sink away. I hadn't asked for him to treat me to these extravagances. I didn't expect them. I was still working and struggling and paying my own way in life.

I just needed to relax and enjoy what he was giving me...right?

But still, the uneasiness lingered.

So did the weight of the lie. Even if I tried to pretend otherwise.

By the time we were done, both Edward and I were happy rag-dolls and I'd all but forgotten about the awkward exchange. As we headed back to our room, Flynn and the photo shoot were the furthest things from my mind. Edward was the most caring, considerate, and generous lover I had ever been with and I wanted to spend my time making him feel how much I appreciated him, not thinking about past mistakes.

As he lay on the bed, loose in a plush hotel robe, I dropped mine to the floor and slowly crawled up next to him. When I saw his sleepy grin, I gave him a long, thorough kiss before trailing my lips down his jaw to nuzzle underneath his ear.

The faint scent of lavender and bergamot was still on his skin from the massage oil and I tasted him with my tongue before trailing kisses down his chest. I could feel his heart thumping wildly as I pressed my mouth over it.

His robe parted easily and my breasts brushed against his erection as I slid down his body, a singular destination in mind.

He was already starting to harden, but still soft enough that I could take all of him. He smothered a cry when I took him between my lips and a thrill went through me. I loved knowing I could make him feel this way, make his cock stiffen and grow.

I held him as long as I could before he was too big and I had to settle for wrapping my hand around the base of him while I began to move my head up and down. The thick vein pulsed against my tongue and he started to move against my mouth, until I pressed down on his hipbones with my hands.

“Be still,” I said, lifting my head to smile at him.

“Witch.” He groaned, dropping his head back onto the pillow.

I slid my lips up, then down his length, loving the way the caress made him shudder. His hands fisted in the elegant brocade of the comforter below him. A raw noise left his throat as I sucked on him, taking him all the way to the back of my throat before changing to softer, slow licks up and down his cock.

His hands left the comforter to grip my shoulders, tugging on me and I lifted my head to smile at him.

“Dammit, Gabriella.”

Coming to my knees, I crawled up his body and hovered over him. I was so wet, so ready for him. The inside of my thighs were slick with my need as I straddled him. Edward gripped my waist, staring at me with hooded, hungry eyes. I caught his cock, still wet from my mouth and held him as I began to lower myself down.

He slid his hands up, cupping my breasts, plumping them together as his cock stretched me wide. The sensation was almost too much, too fast, and my legs trembled. Then he was fully sheathed inside me and I sighed at the way our bodies came together. I didn't stay still long though. His head arched off the pillow as I began to ride him.

His hands left my breasts to grip my hips, fingers digging into my flesh, his mouth open in soundless ecstasy. I felt him swell inside me and I cried out because it was too much. The head of his cock rubbed against my g-spot, sending waves of heat arcing through me. Edward started to arch up off the bed, rising to meet me until we were driving into his each other.

The intensity of it overwhelmed me. I went flying into orgasm and I thought I was spinning, flying—then I realized Edward had flipped me over,

planting me under him. He slammed into me and I cried out again. Harder, harder...he sent me into another climax just as he began to come.

My body ached in the most delicious way and I wouldn't have traded it for anything.

When I came out of my shower more than an hour later, Edward wasn't there, but I did find a luscious blue satin dress laid out on the bed. A thin black velvet box sat next to it and on the floor were a delicate pair of designer shoes. A note on the hotel's stationary was propped up like a sign:

*The gifts I give you are nothing compared
to your beauty, your time, and your love.
All of which I want always. –Edward*

My heart soared. All of my doubts and suspicions were erased with those words and I dressed in a whirl of fairytale thoughts.

CHAPTER NINE

The Catskills lodge was old-fashioned, with a two-story curving staircase leading down to a chandelier-lit foyer. As per instructions I received via text, I went down on my own. I was practically floating as I came down the stairs and found Edward waiting at the bottom with a single white rose.

He held it out to me. “You look like a dream come true.”

I touched the delicate sapphire and diamond necklace, tears stinging my eyes. I’d never had anyone treat me this way before. “Thank you.”

He leaned down and kissed me softly, a bare brush of lips but the contact was enough to send a rush of heat through me. He straightened, looked down at me for a moment, then tucked my hand in the crook of his elbow and led me down a candlelit corridor to the back porch.

The wide porch ran the entire back of the hotel and offered a seemingly endless choice of white sofas, softly cushioned rattan armchairs, and swings. The whole expanse was lit by hurricane lamps and lanterns casting a soft glow on the other guests enjoying a drink before dinner.

Edward and I each took a glass of champagne from a passing waiter before he took me down the stairs and onto a path winding through the great lawn. It swept gracefully away from the lodge and out to a breathtaking view of the Hudson River Valley. The sun was just past setting, the sky bleeding to a deep velvet glow. It would gradually give way to the inky darkness of night. Away from the soft lights of the porch, stars already twinkled in the cloudless sky.

“I don’t think this night could be any more perfect.” I sighed.

He clinked his champagne flute against mine and we paused to sip and stare up at the diamond glitter overhead. The silence between us was thick with tension, but it was a pleasant kind, the kind that promised something more to follow.

“I meant what I said in my note.” Edward broke the silence.

I kissed his cheek, not trusting myself to try anything chaste enough for public. “Always,” I said.

“I was hoping you’d say that.” He walked me along a narrow stone path down to the rose garden where a stone fountain splashed gently. The underwater lights made the water shimmer. In the undulating glow, he caught my eyes and held my gaze.

He brushed back a few strands of hair as he spoke, “I’ve never felt this way about any other woman. The time I spend with you is truly the best part of my life.”

Suddenly, he went down on one knee and caught my hands before I could smother my cry of surprise. This couldn’t be happening. It couldn’t be real.

“Gabriella, would you do the great honor of marrying me?”

The night sky spun above me and I hung on to Edward’s hands to keep myself grounded. I knew if I let go, I wouldn’t even be able to stand.

“Are you—are you serious?” My eyes were wide, heart racing.

He looked up at me with a pained smile. Clearly, that was not the reaction he’d been expecting.

“Yes!” He rolled his eyes. “How can I convince you?”

I let go of his hands and cupped his face before leaning down to kiss him. It was short but fierce. “Like this.” His eyes were shining as he looked up at me. “Yes, Edward. Yes, I’ll marry you!”

It was a little past three in the morning when I sat bolt upright in a cold sweat. The heavy diamond engagement ring winked at me in the dim room and I stared at it as my heart pounded. It was unreal, the flawless emerald cut diamond flashing at me like a star in the night. What had seemed like a fairytale dream now felt like the start of a nightmare.

“What’s the matter?” Edward asked sleepily as my sudden movement woke him.

“What if we’re rushing this?” My doubts came pouring out. There were a hundred of them and I couldn’t even begin to list them all. As he sat there

staring at me, befuddled, I raked a hand through my hair.

I still didn't know his last name.

I didn't know what he did for a living.

His family...oh, shit.

Clambering out of bed, I grabbed the robe that had been draped over a nearby chair. Shoving my arms into it, I started to pace. The doubts grew larger and larger and I could feel Edward watching me, feel his concern and his care. Turning, I stared at him.

"I haven't even met your family, Edward. What if they meet me and hate me? They'll convince you this was a huge mistake. *You'll* think I'm a huge mistake."

He pushed himself up on his elbows. His hair was mussed, making him look younger than usual. His expression was serious. "I'll never think that."

I shook my head. "You're already under enough pressure from them, running the family empire. I'm just going to make things worse for you."

"Only if you don't let me sleep." His voice held a teasing note as he sat up. He held out his hand and I went to him. He pulled me into his lap and I sat down. He tucked his chin into my shoulder and held me close, my body pressed to his.

When we were like this, any and all doubt faded. I felt certain. I felt safe and loved and right. But...

"They'll think I'm a gold-digger," I continued. "How could they not? I don't bring anything to the table. I don't even know what table I'm bringing it to."

"Gabriella, we're adults." He brushed my hair away from my neck. "I'm an adult and I'm not going to let my family tell me who I can love. I love you." His voice softened. "Don't you believe me?"

"I do," I said. "I want to believe you."

"I understand." His hands fell away from my shoulders.

Shit. I'd hurt his feelings. I turned towards him, needing him to understand. "I believe you. I love you. I do. I'm just scared. This feels like a dream."

His voice was soft as he reached for my hands. "What can I do to make you understand this is real, that we are really getting married and that I'm thrilled you said yes?"

I knew what I was going to say would hurt him, but I couldn't lie about it, not if we were going to have a life together. "It won't feel real, won't feel

possible, until I meet your family. I'm sorry, Edward, but I don't think I can marry you until I know the family I will be marrying into." The one thing I didn't add was that I also needed to see for myself how he'd behave when his parents discovered where I came from.

He flopped back on the pillows and heaved a big sigh. I'd known he wasn't going to like what I had to say. But could he blame me?

I picked up his arm and wrapped it around my shoulder, pulling it tight as I stretched out next to him, putting my head on his chest. For several minutes, neither of us spoke. I listened to his heartbeat and tried to ignore the sound of his teeth grinding.

I needed him to understand. "This is going to be for the rest of our lives, Edward. Always. I can't go into that thinking your family wishes it wasn't me."

He didn't say anything, but he kissed my head as his fingers made slow circles on my upper arm. It was comforting, but not enough. Minutes ticked by and I tried not to cry. Whatever happened now was going to decide if I got my happily ever after or not. The pure reflection of the perfect emerald cut diamond caught the slim moonlight from the window and I tipped it back and forth, wondering how long I'd be wearing it.

"This is ridiculous," Edward finally said.

He slipped out from under me and sat up. Before I could stop him, he tossed the covers aside and slapped his bare feet onto the floor. I watched his lean muscles ripple as he strode across the room naked. As hot as he was, I couldn't focus on that.

"What are you doing?" I asked, hating the way my voice shook.

"Calling my mother."

I stared at him. "But it's past three in the morning!"

"This is exciting news and it can't wait," he said as he dialed.

I held my breath as I listened to his half of the phone conversation.

"Mother, it's Edward. No, everything's fine." He paused for a moment and then continued, "Yes, I got your notes on the spring line. Mother, I have exciting news. I asked Gabriella to marry me and she said yes."

There was a long pause and I could feel my chest tightening as I waited.

"That's exactly what she said," he sounded amused. "Yes, perfect. Gabriella and I will meet you and Father tomorrow at the club. Thank you. Goodnight. Yes, right, good morning."

He padded back across the room and dove into the bed, wrapping his

arms around me. He pulled me close, pressing his mouth against my ear. “Now come here and tell me your answer again.”

“Yes,” I said with a smile. “Yes, I will marry you.”

Back to reality...or maybe not.

Instead of sleeping in and waking with slow, leisurely sex, followed by a slow, leisurely breakfast, we were up by seven, on the road by eight and back into the city about the same time I would have preferred to have been rolling out of bed.

We went by the apartment I shared with Kendra, my nerves singing as I opened the door. But she wasn't there and I was spared the tension of telling her what should have been happy news.

I was dreading her reaction. I thought she'd be happy for me, but still, Edward and I had only been dating a few weeks. It felt right, but even I knew this was fast and until I met his family, I'd have misgivings.

Kendra would sense those and I didn't want that.

I wanted to be certain when I faced her.

She'd understand it better if I was certain.

She'd know if I wasn't.

I hurriedly grabbed some clothes. Edward had convinced me to get ready at his place, so I just traded out the outfit I'd planned to wear for the clothes I'd packed for the lodge. I still had my toiletries. It took less than ten minutes and we were back on the road.

The drive to his place was silent.

It wasn't uncomfortable, but it was unsettling. Once we reached the staggering stone mansion, my nerves returned in triplicate. The home was impressive and now I was seeing it in a whole new light.

Soon, I would be part of this legacy.

The house was grand, but I had only ever felt comfortable in Edward's master suite or the study. The other rooms, the glimpses I'd gotten of them anyway, seemed hollow.

I buried myself in his bathroom. He'd offered to use one of the others and I was too grateful to argue. Now, as I blow-dried my hair, studied my reflection, applied my make-up only to wash it off and start again, I couldn't fight the rising tide of nerves.

Edward appeared in the mirror behind me, already dressed in a suit that

cost more than I made in a month, naked pictures included. I gulped.

“You look terrified.” Resting his hands on my shoulders, he pressed a kiss to my shoulder, bare save for the strap of my camisole. “Relax.”

“I can’t!” Panicked, I stared at my reflection. Simple, ordinary me, lost in the elegance of his white and gold bathroom. “We’re getting ready to meet your family. I feel so out of place.”

“First, we’ve got time. Second, you’re *not* out of place. You’re with me, right where I want you to be.” He slid a hand up and cupped my cheek, guiding my head back against his shoulder. “And I’m with you. Where you want me to be, right?”

The calm assurance of his voice did something to level me.

Taking a deep, slow breath, I forced myself to nod. “Yes.”

“Good.” He turned me around and his mouth closed over mine in a deep, slow kiss.

“Hmmm...”

He pressed his brow to mine and for a moment, we stood there like that. Then he lifted his head. “I’ve a few more calls to make. Why don’t you spend some time walking around, seeing more of the house? You hardly ever go outside my...” Then he grinned, the smile bright and open. “Soon it will be *our* room. At least until we find a place to make *ours*. But walk around the house. Get to know it better. Alright?”

I found Paul in what looked like the kitchen of a first class restaurant. He was chatting with a cute redhead, but when they saw me, it was like they both jerked to attention.

“Miss Gabriella.” Paul smiled warmly. “Do you need something? Are you lost?”

I winced. “Maybe.” Then, because kitchens, at least, were something I understood, I eased farther inside. “Edward said he had to get some work done before we left and I...” I shrugged. “I wanted to look around.”

They stood by while I wandered the kitchen and then Paul came to my side. “Why don’t I show you around, Miss Gabriella?”

Feeling more and more like an intruder, I nodded. The redhead looked nervous and I tried to give her a friendly smile, but she wouldn’t look at me.

As we left the kitchen, she busied herself at the counter. Once the door swung shut behind us, I blew out a breath. “Did I mess up?”

“Of course not.” Paul gave me a polite smile.

He’d say that even if I’d broken every dish in the place.

“You’ve worked for Edward a long time, haven’t you?”

“I have.” He glanced down a hall and then at me. “Do you enjoy gardens? There’s a greenhouse with lovely flowers. They bloom all year.”

“Sure.” Anything was fine as long as I wasn’t thinking—or lost. “Do you like your job?”

“Very much.” There was no doubting his sincerity.

“So how long have you worked for Edward?” I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought to ask him before.

“I’ve been with his family for twelve years now.”

“What are they like?” I asked.

Paul smiled, but it was tight-lipped and he said nothing. Apparently that was a line I couldn’t cross.

“Please.” I spread out of my hands to encompass everybody in the house—the servants who were mostly invisible, the redhead *I* had somehow made nervous, Edward, Paul. “None of ya’ll have any idea how nervous I’m getting over the idea of meeting his parents.” I groaned. “And look there. My Tennessee is showing.”

The crack made Paul chuckle and he sighed. After a moment, he relented. “They can be very stiff, very snobbish. They can be very set in their ways, but you must understand, they do love him. Edward’s mother would do anything for him. She wants what’s best for him.”

“And his father?”

Paul shook his head, like he’d said too much, but I didn’t give up.

“What about his siblings? Edward said everyone would be there today.” I stopped in the middle of the path and looked around, realizing we were in the middle of the greenhouse. I hadn’t even noticed. The heat started to sink into my bones and I felt lightheaded, although it wasn’t from the temperature. “I think I’m going to faint.”

Taking pity on me, he guided me over to a curved, wide bench. “His brothers are different; a little, ah, freer. They don’t have the same responsibilities as Edward. He’s the eldest son and he has a specific role to play in his family. He’s a good man, Miss. Gabriella.”

I agreed with that. “He’s the best man I’ve ever met.”

As if that was his cue, the doors to the greenhouse swung open and Edward came striding in. “I was hoping you would think to show her the

greenhouse. I swung by the kitchen looking for you, Gabriella. Hayley said Paul was giving you a tour.”

I smiled at him, determined not to let him see my nerves.

Cut straight from a high-priced catalog in perfectly pressed khakis, a white polo shirt, and a blue sports coat, he came toward me, so elegant and perfect...and mine. Paul quietly excused himself and I rose to meet Edward. I smoothed a hand down my linen dress.

“You look lovely,” Edward said, catching my hand and lifting it to his lips.

“Do I?” I glanced down at my dress. “The color...does it clash with my hair?”

He bent his head and kissed me. “You’re lovely,” he reiterated. He slid his hands up and down my arms. “You’re tense. What’s wrong?”

“I’m terrified.” Slowly, I lifted my eyes to his and shrugged. “Your family...I mean, you’ve said you’ve had a couple of rough relationships. What if they think I’m just some gold digger and they try to scare me away?”

“What if they do?” he countered. “Will you let them?”

I looked up at him and his eyes searched my face. He was honestly concerned and that chased away some of my own fear. I kissed his cheek and then scrubbed off the lipstick smudge.

“No,” I said firmly. “But what if my accent slips or I get mad and call them snobs?”

“Then we’ll laugh and they’ll get over it.”

As Paul drove, Edward kept me distracted with clever comments about people he’d met at various events at the club. I mentioned some of the plaids I’d seen men wearing on golf tournaments on TV which brought up a whole new conversation.

I ended up laughing away some of the tension, but as we pulled up to the security gate, an offhand comment he made brought up a whole new set of concerns.

“I’ll have you added to my membership,” he said, catching my hand and squeezing it. “I rarely come here, but you might enjoy it. Once you’re my wife, you might find yourself with more free time on your hands.”

Free time...?

I went to ask him what that meant, but the gates opened up and he nodded

ahead. "It's time, love."

Free time.

Time.

Shit. We hadn't talked about what things would be like when we were married. We hadn't discussed my writing, my job. Did he want me to quit the job I hated? Yeah, he could support me, but I didn't want to become one of those women who lived off of her husband. And what about kids? Did he want them?

Did *I*?

All of those questions and more were on the tip of my tongue.

But the car stopped.

A moment later, Paul was opening the door for us.

Time was up.

CHAPTER TEN

Mouth dry, pulse racing, I took Edward's arm and he steered me through the formal dining room and out onto a sun-drenched patio that overlooked a carefully pruned garden.

"A mimosa and a screwdriver, light on the orange juice," he told a passing waiter. He looked down at me, "Is that all right?"

I shrugged, not trusting myself to speak. What I really wanted though was whiskey. A double.

I felt like I had a million eyes staring at me and if an alarm had started blaring *INTRUDER ALERT, INTRUDER ALERT*, I wouldn't have been surprised.

Were people staring?

Was it that obvious I didn't belong?

"Are you okay?" Edward's voice low, so low I barely heard him.

I nodded. Off to the corner, a group of women, probably in their fifties or so, glanced our way. One of them eyed me, from the top of my head down to my shoes. Her nostrils flared as she sniffed and I felt the red rush to my cheeks.

Men were gathered in a group close by.

I didn't see any couples together. Everybody was grouped together by gender. And Edward thought I'd hang out here? Who would I talk to? The people bringing out the drinks? I'd certainly feel a lot more comfortable with them.

"Is that what we'll be like?" I asked suddenly. I gestured towards the groups. "Doing our own thing, you discussing business with the men while

I'm off with the women talking about parties and raising the kids?"

His mouth twitched in amusement. "I hope not. I don't want separate but connected lives. I want our life, Gabriella." He leaned in, brushed a kiss over my cheek. "You can have a career or do as my mother did, get involved in charities...or raise the kids." He gave me a mischievous smile. "You decide. One thing though. I'm not changing my name to Baine. But if you don't want to change yours, that's fine too."

While I was still nervous, I did feel a measure of relief at his words. Now I just had to keep myself distracted until it was time to meet the future in-laws.

"That reminds me, I'm about to find out your family name. Does that mean you're going to turn into a pumpkin? Or is it more of a Rumpelstiltskin thing where you'll have to grant me a wish?"

Edward laughed and I felt myself relax even more. I could do this as long as he was with me.

"I'll grant you a wish for every day that you're mine," he said.

"Well, my first wish is for one of those heavenly croissants. I'm starving."

I watched a basket of the buttery pastries bob by on a waiter's tray, but before I could snag one, the hostess came by.

"Mr. Edward? Your party is here."

We walked arm in arm into the formal dining room. In the doorway, we paused a moment and I had that split second to try and guess who Edward's parents were.

A half dozen couples could have been contenders. Several tall, distinguished men, several attractive women with brown hair. But nobody stuck out and then time was up, because Edward was already guiding me to a table occupied by a handsome man who appeared to be in his fifties, still robust and powerful looking. The woman was blonde and statuesque. The moment she looked up, I could see where Edward had gotten his ice blue eyes.

She stood, eyes only for her son. "Edward, darling, it's been too long."

Edward kissed her cheek and then nodded at the man I assumed was his father even though they didn't look anything alike. "Mother, this is Gabriella. Gabriella, this is my mother, Claire."

Claire shook my hand lightly and I could tell she thought about reaching for a napkin when I let go.

“And now I see what’s been keeping you away.” Her expression was tight.

Edward pulled out her chair and waited until she sat down to kiss her on the cheek again. She patted his cheek and then waved me to the chair next to her. I sat down without assistance and was glad to catch Edward’s wink as he circled the table to sit next to me.

“What a lovely necklace, Claire. May I call you Claire?” I asked.

Claire gave a faint smile and flagged down a waiter without answering my question. “We’ll need one more place setting, please. The three of you are always busy, but at least one of your brothers is able to join us, I hear.”

“I know. He texted me earlier. The more the merrier.” Edward smiled. “It’ll be nice for her to meet more of the family.”

“So, Gabriella, what do you do for a living?” Mr. Rumpelstiltskin or whatever their last name was gave me a pleasant smile.

“I’m an assistant for a writer for a television show, but I’m hoping to write my own someday.” I braced myself for the usual onslaught of comments that followed a pronouncement of a career in the arts.

“So you’re hoping to use Edward’s name to further your own career...?”

I interrupted before Edward was forced to say something to his mother that would make her hate me even more. “Actually, Claire, Edward hasn’t told me much about your family, only that he’s involved in the family business. My interest in him is purely him.”

“She makes it sound like we run a mom and pop shop.” Claire sipped a glass of champagne then dabbed her lips with a white linen napkin.

“Did he take over for you?” I asked the much more friendly face across from me.

“Me?” He looked surprised. “No. I’m actually Edward’s stepfather. You can call me Albert.”

“I’m so sorry! How rude of me,” Edward said. “Albert and my mother have been married for eons. I can’t believe I didn’t introduce you two.”

Albert smiled and waved a hand, like he was used to being forgotten. “Why don’t you tell us about the marriage proposal before you tire of telling the story?”

Edward pulled our joined hands up above the white tablecloth and held up my engagement ring. He squeezed my fingers. “Starlight, champagne, a fountain in the rose garden. I must have done it right because this beauty said ‘yes’.”

Claire shot my emerald cut diamond solitaire a begrudgingly impressed look.

“How did you and Albert meet?” I asked, determined to win her over.

“Albert was the headmaster at the boarding school I wished for my boys to attend. They were still young, of course, but one must be diligent if one wants only the best for their children.” She looked over at her husband. “Of course, once we decided to get married, he had to resign so as to avoid the appearance of favoritism.”

I decided to go with a question that had nothing to do with how odd I thought it was that her husband had to give up his job rather than just sending the kids to another school. “You went to an all-boys boarding school?” I asked Edward.

“One of the finest in the country,” Claire said it like there was no other option. “Where were you educated?”

Her attitude sucked. Arching a brow, I smiled coolly. “Tennessee public schools.”

Her gaze slid to Edward’s. He stared back, his face impassive. After a moment, she smiled a little and began to discuss work.

It took less than a minute to figure out that they were involved in the fashion industry. It took less than five to realize that they just might have a fair hand in controlling it. My heart started to race and under the table, I twisted my hands over and over around the heavy material of the napkin I’d put in my lap.

Kendra had told me about the executives who could make or break entire collections and countless careers with one phone call. That probably explained why she thought she recognized him, but couldn’t put a name to a face.

The sommelier brought champagne to the table. “Here you are, Mrs. Bouvier.”

My jaw dropped. “I’m sorry, did you just say Bouvier?”

*Bouvier...shit. Edward...Bouvier...*my heart was about to jump out of my chest. Lifting my gaze, I stared at him. “I...you...” Shaking my head, I looked around and then said, “Are y’all seriously the *Bouviers*?”

I heard the accent thickening my voice, but I couldn’t even think about that now.

From the corner of my eye, I could see his mother watching me, could see the sommelier fighting not to do the same.

Edward laughed, a sheepish smile on his face. “I told you my last name was quite recognizable.”

“You didn’t tell her your last name?” Claire raised an eyebrow.

Edward’s expression stiffened. “I thought you’d be pleased, Mother. We dated, fell in love, and she agreed to marry me all without knowing I’m a Bouvier.”

“I don’t believe this,” I said, pressing my hand to my forehead.

“Gabriella, are you well?”

The soft question came from the man across from me.

Weakly, I looked at him. “I’m fine, Mr. Bouvier—”

“Albert is *not* Mr. Bouvier. His name is Albert McCreary,” Claire said, her voice pure ice. She stared at me, clearly offended. “When I remarried, I kept my first married name because of the company and my sons.”

I barely heard the final words she said, though...

Coincidence?

Had to be.

McCreary...

No way.

“Hey there, big brother. I hear I’m getting a sister-in-law...”

The familiar voice trailed off as I lifted my head.

He moved around the table, all sexy grace and cadet blue eyes. My future brother-in-law. Flynn McCreary.

Shit.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M. S. Parker is a USA Today Bestselling author and the author of the Erotic Romance series, Club Privè and Chasing Perfection.

Living in Las Vegas, she enjoys sitting by the pool with her laptop writing on her next spicy romance.

Growing up all she wanted to be was a dancer, actor or author. So far only the latter has come true but M. S. Parker hasn't retired her dancing shoes just yet. She is still waiting for the call for her to appear on Dancing With The Stars.

When M. S. isn't writing, she can usually be found reading– oops, scratch that! She is always writing.

For more information:



[msparkerauthor](#)

www.msparker.com

msparkerbooks@gmail.com

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