

IN HUNTER VALLEY,
IT'S OPEN SEASON ON MEN.

MAN SPREAD

on a manhunt



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

VANESSA VALE

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BOOK 7

VANESSA VALE

Man Spread by Vanessa Vale

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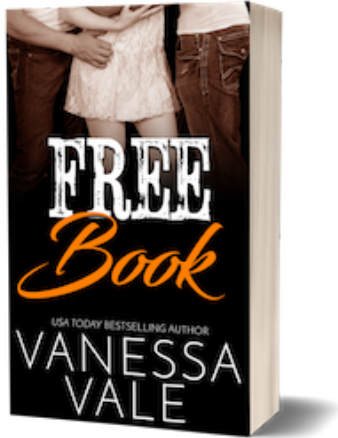
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About Vanessa Vale

**I'm a famous TV star—how hard can it be to pretend that
real love is fake?**

To women around the world, I'm Dr. Dark and Dangerous,
sexiest bachelor alive.

I meet the only one who has no idea who I am. To single mom
Aspen, I'm just the guy who rocked her world one night.
Nothing more.

With the tabloids out to destroy my career and a movie deal on
the line, I need help. I need a girlfriend to improve my image.
Since the only one I want won't do a real relationship, she
agrees to be my fake girlfriend. Except the more time we're
together, the more we blur the lines between what's real and
what's fake.

Because how I feel for her isn't pretend at all.

PROLOGUE



ASPEN

2 YEARS Ago

I HAD no idea how long I'd been hiking, but enough to make my way through half a bottle of wine. Because of that—the lost time and the wine—I stopped to catch my breath and look around. There was nothing but tall pine trees and quiet out here above Hunter Valley, only the gentle breeze cutting through the branches and an occasional bird caw interrupted my alone time with me and Malbec.

Yeah, I brought wine on my hike. Didn't everyone? It made the uphill climb out of town easier. Hell, it made everything easier. Except my need to pee.

That need was worse than ever, and I wasn't making it back to town before I burst. I looked around, like any prudish pee-er did, ensuring no one was going to witness me squatting bare-assed in the woods, then set the wine bottle on top of a nearby rock. Grabbing the napkins I stashed in the side pocket of my little backpack for just such a possible occasion—I'd

done this before, the hiking and peeing, but not the hiking and peeing *and* wine drinking—I pushed down my yoga pants, squatted and took care of business.

I sighed with relief, reveling in the feel of a happy bladder and the warm summer air on my exposed legs and butt. I also took a moment while relieving myself to know that this was the perfect spot for why I set out on the hike in the first place.

A sun-dappled hillside above Hunter Valley. It was quiet. I taught four-part breathing and the need to let go of mental burdens. I was taking the afternoon while Sierra was at a friend's house for a birthday party and sleepover to do just that. With wine as my helper. My ex, Duncan, was one hell of a mental burden and no amount of lower lung or spiritual cleansing rituals were going to clear him from my mind. That was why I was up here in the woods.

To bury him and my past bad behavior of falling for an asshole. After asshole. After asshole. To thinking someone would want me for me, not a connection to my mother, the senator.

Enough was enough.

I tilted my head toward the blue sky, took a breath and exhaled it with a loud sigh.

I was between the tall Ponderosa pine with the bent branch and a boulder that looked like a... bulldog? Was I that buzzed? No, it really did look like one. And that tree had a branch that had a full loop in it.

I finished peeing and pulled my pants back up, looked around to ensure I'd been right in my thinking while squatting.

“Yes, this is the perfect spot,” I said aloud. “If I can pee here, I can bury my stupid old life here as well. Duncan and

my bad choices can just fuck off.”

Shrugging the backpack from my shoulders, I set it on the bulldog rock beside the wine bottle, unzipped it and grabbed the tin my favorite green tea came in. Peeling back the lid, I peeked in and saw the ring box I put there earlier. It held the engagement ring Duncan gave me.

“You ask me to marry you and then want me to push your business agenda to my mother? Nope,” I muttered. “No way am I being used by a guy... by anyone, for politics again. I want love. Is that so wrong?”

Pausing, I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, let it out. At the time, I’d cluelessly thought he’d given me the ring because he wanted to spend his life with me and Sierra. Well, he had, but it would have been crowded in our marriage bed with him, me and senate appropriations bills he hoped to be included in.

The fact that I barely cried over him proved I never loved Duncan. Hell, the sex hadn’t even been that good. My mother had—

No. I didn’t want to poke into that emotional sore spot right now.

Yes, I’d been stupid thinking I had a man to help me with life. And raising Sierra. And the bills. And maybe some incredible sex.

I’d been blind. Desperate for love and affection. Just plain crazy. All the things I shouldn’t be.

Yet, here I was, drinking and hiking like a real crazy person. Burying my stupidity.

Kneeling in the dirt and pine needles—a few feet from the wet dirt—I grabbed a stick and used it to dig a hole. It hadn’t rained in a while because the ground was hard as hell. It took

me a few minutes, a hell of a lot of sweating and a few swigs of wine to get it deep enough for the tea tin. In it went, then I used my hands to move the dirt back into place. I patted it, then spread the pine needles back over the spot. As if staking a flag on the moon, I stuck the stick vertically in the loose soil.

I nodded my head in satisfaction. “There.” I looked around. “Fuck you, Duncan. Fuck you, old life. I’m starting over. Again.”

1



LUKE

TODAY

SHE WAS the prettiest thing I've seen in a long time and some asshole left her hanging. From my spot at the bar where I was watching the baseball game on one of the flatscreen TVs while I ate a burger and had a beer, it was obvious she'd been stood up.

It wasn't the bright yellow of her sundress that caught my eye. It was her blue eyes. No, the full lips with some kind of shiny gloss. No, her toned legs. No, the blonde hair pulled back in a low ponytail at the nape of her neck. Hell, it was her, the perfect package, that I instantly wanted to get my hands on. While her dress wasn't painted on, it fit every one of her slim curves to perfection. It was as if God knew every single thing that I craved in the perfect woman and made this one just for me.

My dick knew what it wanted.

I wasn't the only man in the place checking her out. I could read their thoughts. That a quarter could bounce off that ass. That her tits were small and high and had the creamiest, soft swells above the neckline of her dress.

I swiped my mouth with my napkin wondering which guy I was going to have to fight first. The bartender who winked when he took her order? The trio of cowboys with belt buckles bigger than their brains if they thought they had a shot? Fortunately, the place was busy for trivia night, with many distracted by the game on small tabletop screens.

One guy had the balls to approach, but she shook her head at whatever he was offering and he walked off. Smart man.

Sam, my agent, would be thrilled to know I didn't make a scene that would be caught on camera and end up on a social media site and go viral. I had enough problems with that already.

My friend, Mark, saw her, too. From beside me, he stood, ready to shoot his shot next. No fucking way.

I grabbed his arm, yanked him back onto his stool.

He glared at me. "What?"

"Not a chance," I snarled, having no issue with doing what it took to keep him away from her. "She's mine."

His eyes widened. "Really?"

"Oh yeah."

He shrugged, finished his beer in one swallow, then stood again. "Fine. You know what you're doing. I'll text you later."

I sighed when he left. I didn't want him anywhere near her.

She sat alone for five minutes. Ten. She was at a nearby high-top slowly working her way through a glass of wine watching the entrance.

Each time the door swung open, she sat up straighter, only for her to slump when it wasn't who she waited for. She checked her cell for either a message or the time or both.

I didn't know who the fucker was, but I wanted him to show up so I could drag him by the collar out back and beat the shit out of him for making the woman's shoulders slump even for a second. Then I wanted to slap him on the back and thank him for losing her before he ever had a chance. This woman needed a man who was going to be present. Who'd treat her like a fucking queen.

She stood and moved to the only open spot at the bar. Right next to me at the end. She raised her hand, and the bartender came right over. "I'll pay my tab."

He dropped the slip in front of her and before she could touch it, I tossed a twenty on top of it.

"The guy's an asshole," I told her. "Doesn't deserve you."

She looked to me. Blinked those pretty blue eyes. Shit, she had freckles I hadn't seen before. Her gaze met mine, then raked over me. I was used to people looking at me. Ogling. Being photographed. Hounded. Being famous meant I had eyes on me all the time.

Even here, wearing a ball cap and sitting in the corner, a few patrons recognized me, but thankfully no one approached. The perk of a small town in Montana. Around here, people left you the fuck alone when all you wanted a burger and a ballgame. Exactly why I was here for a few weeks. Peace and quiet and to let the media shit with Lacey die down. Despite

what she said, my co-star and I weren't in a relationship. We never had been. I never touched her other than how it was written in the script. Sure, on-screen sex scenes—even ones for TV—looked realistic, but they were totally fake. Thirty people were around us while filming and I had on gym shorts under the bed sheet, no matter how naked the camera made me look. I refused to put on that modesty wear shit that made you look naked. But Lacey had fed the relationship rumor to the press to raise her visibility.

The only woman I was interested in stood beside me. It was my new goal to make her lose every bit of self-doubt and have all the orgasms I could give her. If I had my way, she'd never question her value again.

“Excuse me?” she asked, her voice a soft whisper. Her eyes held confusion, not recognition.

“The guy you were waiting for,” I said. “He wasn't worth your time. Dump his ass.”

The bartender swiped up the tab and the twenty. “What he said,” he told her, then walked off to help another customer.

She took a deep breath, sighed. “How do you know I'm waiting for a man?” she wondered.

I raked my gaze down her body. “You wouldn't put on a dress like that for girl's night. You had plans that involved some guy taking it off of you. With his teeth.”

My mouth watered for the chance.

“God, I look that desperate?” she asked, a quaver in her voice. “I mean, maybe I am, but—”

Shit. No.

I reached out, took her hand to keep her from leaving. She looked back at me, then our joined hands.

“You look perfect,” I assured, sliding my thumb back and forth over her palm. “If you were trying to get that guy to wonder what you have on underneath that dress, it’s working.”

A pretty blush colored her cheeks. “Thanks for that, but I’m going home to wallow in chocolate and a romance book. At least then I know I’ll get lucky.”

My dick pulsed against the front of my jeans. “Stay. Forget about him, whatever his name is.”

“Ronald.”

“I’m Luke,” I said, using my real name. I set my free hand on my chest and held my breath, waiting for her to say *You’re not Luke. You’re Shep Barnes, Dr. Dark and Dangerous and I want you to fuck me like you did Priscilla Sancillo from season one before she died when the elevator plummeted ten floors in the finale.*

For the past five years, everyone on the planet knew me as Derek Dashwood, star of *NYC ER*, the hit TV show. No one knew my real name except my family, a few friends and anyone in Nebraska where I grew up. The name was a distinguisher for me, separating those who wanted to know *me* or Derek.

The one thing I wasn’t was Derek, whose image was controlled by my agent and a staff of public relations reps, or worse Shep Barnes, the oversexed neurosurgeon I played on TV, who wasn’t even real.

Neither were, in fact.

The show was so successful that people who saw me getting gas thought I was actually Dr. Barnes or Dr. Barnes

grabbing takeout or Dr. Barnes at the dentist.

I wasn't sure I was going to get anywhere with this gorgeous woman, but if I was going to fuck it up, I wanted to be struck down in a smoky blaze all by myself.

When she didn't say anything, I continued. "This is when you tell me your name."

A slow smile spread across her face. "Aspen. My name is Aspen."

"I'll buy you another glass of wine or chicken wings or we can talk. Tell me about your family." When she gave me a funny look, I reached out and grabbed the tabletop trivia device. "Or we can do trivia."

She studied me for a moment, and I mentally fist pumped when she sat on the empty stool beside me.

"You don't want to see me when I have more than one glass of wine. I don't eat wings because I'm a vegetarian and I don't talk to my family. Knowing that, you still want to be my blind date?"

"Gorgeous, I'll be anything you want." I leaned in even closer. I could smell her soft perfume. I definitely didn't want her drunk and I didn't care if she didn't eat meat as long as she loved dick. "And if the night goes the way I think, you won't need a romance book to get lucky."

I'd make sure she got whatever she needed. My face between her thighs? Done. Orgasms while riding my dick? Done. Whatever made her hot, I'd fulfill.

Her blue eyes met mine. Held.

I could see the various colors of gold in her hair, watched the thrum of her pulse in her neck, noticed the glow of her

skin. I wanted this woman like no one else. If I could throw her down on the bar and fuck her so every man in the place knew she was taken and taken well, I would.

“Muscat,” she said.

I blinked. For a second, I thought she sneezed, then I wondered if she was talking about the animal. “What?”

Her blue eyes met mine, tipping her head toward the trivia game. “C. The capital of Oman is Muscat. As my blind date, we have to play together.” She gave my fingers a squeeze. “You’re right. I think we might get lucky.”



ASPEN

LUKE KICKED his hotel room door shut with his foot, not taking his lips off mine. *Holy shit, could he kiss.*

Thank God the elevator from the lobby had been empty and same with the hallway to his room. He might not be from here and staying at the Hunter Valley Lodge, but I was a local. The problem with small town life was that I ran into people wherever I went. Grocery store. Gynecologist. It was one thing for others to know you bought extra strength deodorant or had a birth control prescription, it was another having someone I knew witness me all horny and desperate for dick.

Which I was. Horny and desperate for dick.

I was the last single girl among my friends who were getting some on the regular. They shared a *little* too much when it came to sex details. While I was happy for them, I knew exactly what I was missing. This kind of kissing. This *need*.

Bridget had fallen for a huge billionaire who was ridiculously obsessed with her. Maverick James was older and

knew that he wanted her the moment they met. Mallory had fallen for Mav's doctor brother, Theo. Lindy had fallen for Mav's hockey player brother, got married and had a beautiful baby together. Eve was married to Mav's *other* brother, the brilliant CEO of James Corp. Sadly, there were no more James brothers for me to claim.

Other girlfriends found their men as well. Melly Harwood fell for Daniel Pearson and while he had four lumberjack brothers—two of whom were ridiculously hot identical twins—none of them did it for me. And they'd met me more than once and showed no interest in me in return. Maybe because I was a single mom. Maybe because my boobs were too small or I didn't eat bacon. It was probably the bacon.

I wasn't expecting to fall in love like my friends did, but I'd be thrilled to end my sex drought. With an actual dick, not a dildo the size and shape of a porn star's like I had hidden in my dresser beneath my bras where Sierra wouldn't find it. When Mallory set me up on a blind date with Ronald the Radiologist Theo knew from the hospital, I agreed. Grudgingly.

I was jaded about dating. That meant I'd have to get to know the guy. Believe him when he told me about what he did for a living, how he drank his coffee, if he liked gel or mint toothpaste.

That took trust and I didn't trust anyone with that stuff. Not when it came to love. My parents used affection as a motivational tool. Or the lack of it as punishment. I had a string of loser exs, like the gaslighting liar who already had a wife or the one who didn't like kids even though he knew I was a single mom. My last ex had wanted me not for love, but for a political connection to my mother. Then there had been

dates, but one-offs that went nowhere. There was no doubt I attracted the worst men.

So a relationship with a guy? No way.

What a guy *could* be good for was sex. A man's main goal going on a date, especially one with a complete stranger, was to get laid, not get married. Since I had zero luck or skill at keeping a decent guy, I aimed for meaningless, wall-banging sex.

With that in mind, I went into the bar in the Hunter Valley Ski Resort's main lodge armed; I had on my sexiest dress and beneath, a pink bra and panty set that didn't leave much to the imagination. But as the minutes wore on and there was no sign of Ronald, all I could think of was getting into my comfiest yoga pants and ratty t-shirt and eating a bowlful of chia pudding with extra blueberries.

Getting myself off with a toy or my fingers night after night was fine. *Fine*, not amazing. But being stood up plain sucked.

Except being stood up tonight meant Luke took Ronald's place.

Luke. Hot, manly, virile, dirty talking Luke.

Not only did we win the first place fifty-dollar prize at trivia—the guy knew all kinds of random sports and entertainment factoids—but I was getting lucky.

Really lucky because Luke was... wow. At least six feet, broad shouldered, had a strong brow that made his blue eyes intense. Women must drool after his square jaw and his scruff looked intentional, although there was a little nick on the side of his neck proving he was a mortal man with a sharp razor. His dark hair was covered by a ballcap, but it curled beneath

the edge. At first, I thought maybe he wore it to hide male-patterned baldness, but when I pulled it off in the elevator, nope. He had thick locks that I tangled my fingers in.

Luke looked like a model, but his nose had a crook in it, indicating it had been broken at some time. It offset his perfection, making him seem less godlike and more... normal.

No, not *normal*. There was nothing normal about him because when I looked at him for the first time at the bar, my heart skipped a beat. Instant attraction. Immediate desire.

He was... pure, sweet eye candy.

When he told me Ronald wasn't worth it, I agreed. I didn't deserve to be stood up, even though my inner voice told me it was, for me, expected. I was mad, sure, but wasn't surprised I was ignored, that I wasn't valued enough for the guy to show up even for a drink.

But Luke? He saw me. Wanted me. He'd even offered me chicken wings. His mesmerizing blue eyes had met mine and it felt like... in some strange way, that he saw me. Only me.

His gaze didn't veer to prettier women, even when I felt their gazes on him. I didn't blame them for staring. He was the perfect specimen of a man. I had no doubt that his good looks were the destroyer of women's underwear everywhere he went because spending an hour playing a trivia game with him had mine drenched. Our thighs touched as we sat side by side. He constantly brushed my shoulder, the ends of my hair. My fingers. Little caresses that awakened my nerve endings.

I went with him to his room willingly. Easily. We made it to the elevator, the doors barely closed before we were kissing.

Now, oh my God! We were in his room. His hands cupped my butt as he devoured me, his tongue moving in ways that

made me think he could use it like that in other places just as well.

“Luke,” I breathed as he nibbled along my jaw and found a spot behind my ear that made me whimper. He settled his hand at the back of my neck, held me in place. His grip was gentle, but firm.

“Fuck, I love when you say my name like that.”

I was melting, hot beneath his touch. Then I went a little insane and tried to get his shirt up and off.

He made a funny sound, a cross between a growl and a laugh. “Easy, tiger. Need to hear you say what you want,” he murmured, his voice rough and deep as his hands stilled mine.

“What?” I said, looking up at him, his head tipped low. He was a few inches taller even with me in my heels. Broad shouldered and solid.

He pulled back just enough for our gazes to meet, then cupped the back of my neck again with his hand. “I don’t want there to be any confusion as to why you’re here. Whatever you want, I’ll give it to you. Just need to know you want this, too.”

He was asking for my consent. Even though my fingertips were brushing over his happy trail and his hand was possessive on my nape, he was checking in. While there was no way—even if the fire alarm got pulled—I was going to want to stop.

His blue gaze met mine, his pupils blown. His cheeks were ruddy and flushed and his lips glistened.

“Luke, I want you to fuck me.” I licked my bottom lip. “Is that clear enough?”

A growl escaped his chest and his eyes darkened. He lifted me and moved across the room to the bed. Spinning around, he dropped onto the edge so he sat and I stood between his parted knees. I was taller now and his gaze was affixed to my chest, right in front of his face.

His hands went to my back and roamed, then he frowned.

“How do I get this dress off you?”

I raised one arm and reached across with the other to the zipper on the side.

“Ah,” he said, as he took over.

With the fabric loosened, he gently nudged it off my shoulders, then lower until it pooled around my feet.

For a few seconds, only the sound of the air conditioner could be heard. Neither of us breathed.

“Holy fuck.”

His words whispered over my skin as he stared at my body almost reverently. With one finger, he slowly traced over my skin. Across my belly, down one thigh, up my arm, over the top edging of my bra. My nipples hardened as my nerve endings were awakened.

He'd barely done more than kiss me and I was dripping for him. I couldn't remember being this turned on before in my life.

“Turn around.” His voice was deeper, almost a growl.

Slowly, I did as he wanted until I faced away from him.

“Stop.”

I glanced over my shoulder and saw his eyes on my butt. I felt beautiful. Oddly powerful the way I made this guy have to

adjust his dick in his pants because I was affecting him so much. The good thing about being a yoga instructor was that I was toned. Hours of classes a day made my ass probably my best feature, especially in the pretty pink lace thong. My boobs were small, but the way he was practically licking his lips, it seemed he was an ass man.

“Touch your toes.”

Oh. My. God. *Touch my—*

His eyes lifted to meet mine. He didn't say any more. Just waited as the corner of his mouth tipped up. He was giving me an opportunity to say no, but also clearly showing me how this was going to go.

He was in charge and had very naughty plans. Based on the thick bulge in his jeans, he wanted to fuck me, but was in no rush to get there. This wasn't going to be quick missionary sex.

Taking a shaky breath, because fuck, this was hot... I slowly leaned down and set my hands on the tops of my feet which meant he could see—

“Ah!” I gasped when he growled, then took hold of my hips and put his mouth right over the gusset of my panties.

Oh my God.

“Fucking soaked,” he snarled. I felt his hot breath, the way my panties were practically glued to my sex.

“Luke!” I cried when his tongue slid right up the lace and over my clit.

I wobbled, because what woman could keep her balance in heels when a guy was eating her out in this position?

He was fully dressed, and I was practically naked. My thong was completely useless and my lacy, barely-there bra hid nothing.

He turned us so I was still leaning forward, but he placed my hands where he wanted them on the bed as he curved over me. “Don’t move, pretty girl,” he murmured in my ear. “You’re going to like this part.”

Luke dropped to his knees on the floor, and I could watch him—even upside down—slide my thong down. With big, gentle hands, he lifted my feet, one then the other, to remove the scrap of lace.

Then... then! Holy shit. Our eyes met as he sniffed the damp thong before sticking it in his pocket. “You smell so fucking good.”

I’d never, *ever*, had a guy tell me he liked my pussy’s scent.

“You ready, gorgeous?” His hands slid up the backs of my thighs, over my butt, then back, as if he couldn’t stop touching me. “I’m going to eat this perfect pussy until you come. Gonna get all that cream on my face because I want to smell you on me.”

Oh shit.

“If you’re a good girl while I do that, then I’m going to fuck you good and hard. Not sure if you’ll be able to take all of me, but you’ll open nice and wide and try. That work for you?”

That *totally* worked for me. Except—

“Um, Luke?”

His hands stilled.

“Yeah, tiger?”

I bit my lip, glanced away. Every bit of self-confidence slipped. I felt more bare admitting my problem than I did having him see my body. “I... um, I’ve never come from this before. From a guy going down on me.”

His eyes narrowed and his jaw clenched. He looked like a knight who’d just been forced to a duel. Or a modern-day man telling someone to hold his beer. “That’s not on you.” Suddenly, he grinned, looking very pleased about something. “That’s because you weren’t with me.”

Oh. Well then.

I didn’t want to call him cocky. Clearly, he was sure of himself and his skills, which based on how close to orgasm I already was, were pretty good, but I had my doubts. I’d never been good at sex. No guy I’d been with had the same foreplay game as Luke, that was for sure. No one was overly adventurous and never got me this hot. Because of that, I’d never come with a man before, having to use my fingers every time to make myself get there or get left behind.

But I shouldn’t have even thought that Luke couldn’t accomplish the task.

Because as soon as he said those words, he went after the task of making me come like it was his new mission in life.

Hands on my bottom, he clenched and held me in place, nice and open for him. His tongue licked me from top to bottom. When I said bottom, I meant *bottom*. And I groaned. Dropped to my forearms. Gripped the bedspread and held on.

Because he found my clit, sucked on it and flicked it in some magical way that had me close to coming. Then he got his fingers in on it. In my pussy and... “OH MY GOD!”

A thumb in my ass where a thumb had never been before.

THERE WAS A THUMB IN MY ASS AND IT WAS AMAZING.

So amazing that I was moaning and sobbing and begging and... yup.

Coming.

“Luke. Yes. Oh. OH!”



LUKE

THIS WOMAN HAD NEVER GOTTEN off from her pussy being eaten out before? Who were the fuckers she'd been with? If Ronald, the dick who stood her up was any indication, they were all self-centered assholes.

I had a new goal in life. Satisfying Aspen.

While my dick might not agree, uncomfortable and trapped in my jeans, it was my pleasure eating her out. Watching her bend over and reveal that panty clad pussy—yeah, she was a naughty thing—then taking in her scent... my dick spurted pre-cum.

I loved pussy and Aspen's was the sweetest, most perfect one. She was responsive and after her moment of self-doubt when I told her to bend over, unbelievably uninhibited. I wasn't going to say anything to her about how loud she got when she came because I loved hearing the way I satisfied her, but there was no question anyone staying on this floor also knew my girl was getting off and getting off really fucking well.

My inner caveman was fist pumping the air and my dick couldn't be any fucking harder.

Picking her up, I settled her on her back on the bed. Legs parted, thighs glistening with her sweet honey, she was fucking gorgeous. I took in every inch of her, memorizing her as I opened my jeans and freed my dick.

Her eyes widened and she licked her lips. That flick of her pink tongue had me grabbing my wallet and the condom there. My dick almost hurt as I worked it on.

She watched me as I stroked myself from root to tip. Once, then again.

“Still with me?” I asked, knowing I wasn't small. The guys she'd been with before lacked skill and probably only had pencil dicks. Worthless.

She nodded and bit her lip. Catching on that I wanted the words, she said, “More.” She also slid her feet up so her knees were bent and spread them nice and wide.

Fuuuuccck.

Reaching behind my neck, I shucked my shirt and flung it aside. I stripped bare in record time then dropped to my hands over her. Hovering, I took in her face. The flushed cheeks, the swollen lips, the bright eyes. I hadn't even gotten in her yet and I knew I wasn't going to get enough of her.

When I slid into her in one smooth stroke and settled deep, I watched her face.

Watched as her eyes widened as she tried to take all of me.

Grabbing her knee, I pushed it wide and back. Holy hell, she was flexible. I slid even deeper, and I almost came from the way she was clenching around me like a fucking fist.

Our breaths mingled. Our eyes held.

“Say my name,” I murmured.

I needed to hear it from her lips. *My* name.

“Luke,” she breathed.

Fuck, yes.

It was my name, my *real* name, that pushed me over. To her, I was just a guy. Not a famous actor. Not Dr. Dark and Dangerous.

This woman. Fuck. She was MINE. I began to move, to give her pleasure from my body. My hands. My mouth. From *me*.

I might have been fucking her, but she completely rocked my world.



ASPEN

“I AM NEVER DOING another blind date again,” I told Mallory.

I waited until after my last morning class to call her. With my studio on the second floor of the old building on Main Street, I stood at the top of the interior steps and waved down to the last woman from the prenatal class as she left. The little bell chimed behind her.

“That bad?” Mal asked.

“He never showed.”

I heard her groan through the phone. “Idiot. I’ll get Theo to text him and see what happened. I swear he’s a nice guy, but if his excuse is anything but food poisoning or being maimed by a bear while hiking, he’ll lose that status.”

“Don’t bother.” I went over to the shelf with the support blocks and tidied the pile. “Food poisoning or not, he’s not worth my time,” I said, repeating what Luke said to me at the bar.

“So you went home and ate kale chips or some kind of fruit smoothie with a power boost?”

She knew me well. “Kale chips are good.”

“Kale chips are an abomination,” she countered. “The only thing worse is that seaweed stuff. It gets caught in your teeth and tastes like rotting fish.”

“If being stood up had a taste, it would be like rotting fish.”

She sighed. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out.”

“It did actually.” I couldn’t help but smile. The same goofy one I had all morning. “I ended up having four orgasms and I think I’m walking a little funny this morning.”

I was *definitely* walking funny.

“You need to lay off that dildo,” she cautioned. “You’ll get a UTI from all the wear and tear.”

I laughed. “These orgasms were man-made. As in I didn’t have any part of it. I just bent over and he gave them to me all by himself.”

“Bent over? Is that a yoga thing?”

“Bent over as in *ah-mazing*.” Like kinky-dirty and bold and wild. There was no timid, first-time thing going on with Luke. No. He’d had *PLANS*.

“Holy shit. Who is this superhero?”

I grinned. “His name is Luke. I met him at the bar when Ronald was a no-show.”

“And?”

“And he’s really good at trivia, has the best oral skills in the state, and has a baby arm for a dick.” My pussy clenched in glee remembering. “Plus, he’s nice.”

“Nice *and* has a huge dick? Marry him.”

I sighed. “I doubt my very satisfied vagina and I will see him again.”

“What? Why?”

“Because he’s not from here. He had a room at the hotel. He’s probably already checked out.” I didn’t tell her I snuck out. She’d kill me.

“That sucks.”

Yeah, it totally did.

But gorgeous Luke probably wouldn’t like the real me. I didn’t usually wear clothes like the dress I had on the night before. That had been in my closet with the tags on it since I found it at a clearance sale last fall. My pretty pink lingerie set—the thong from which he kept—didn’t work with my yoga wear.

I was a mom. A yogini. I didn’t do sundresses and sex. I did athleisure-wear twenty-four/seven. Meditation and juice cleanses. I didn’t do baseball and wings.

But I got what I’d set out to do when I left my house the night before. A romp with orgasms.

“Totally sucks,” I told Mal. “Especially since I think he ruined me for all other men.”

“He was that good?” she asked, awe filling her voice.

I thought of the things we did before I snuck out. Ridiculously dirty. Unbelievably hot.

“Mal, I didn’t even know sex could be like that.”

We hung up and I gathered my things. I’d collect Sierra from the sleepover and then take her to the hockey store, as promised, before getting her packed for camp.

The bell on the door chimed again, followed by feet taking the steps two at a time.

A delivery man appeared holding an overnight envelope. He looked my way, then to the label. “Aspen Lane?”

“Yes.”

He held it out and I took it. He gave me a smile and a little wave, then tromped down the steps and left.

Ripping open the package, I scanned the single piece of paper.

“What the hell?”

It was from a lawyer in Boise representing Duncan Pounder. God, why couldn’t my stupid ex leave me alone? He tried calling last week and I ignored it. Deleted the message he left. Ignored the other few calls, then blocked him, the asshole.

I scanned the letter. It ordered me to return the engagement ring—oh shit, that ring—Duncan had given me by the end of the month, or I was going to be sued.

End of the month?

The jargon was very legalese so after three read throughs, I understood it to mean that Duncan gave me the ring as a conditional gift, dependent on marriage. Since the marriage didn’t happen—as fucking if—the ring was not mine to keep. Since I had yet to return it, I was liable for the value of the ring which was—

“Holy shit!”

Fifty thousand dollars.

I leaned against the wall. “NOW YOU WANT IT?” I shouted. So much for zen.

I buried a fifty thousand dollar ring in the woods two years ago and *now* he wanted it back?

Once I walked out of those woods with the intention of leaving my past behind, I did just that. Left Duncan and my old ways of choosing shitty men behind. I hadn't had a serious relationship since, regardless of my friends' attempts at matchmaking. Ronald had been yet another example of why.

I didn't have the ring. Hell, I didn't know where the ring exactly was. Shit. I'd buried it by a rock that looked like a bulldog. I had no idea if that was true or if my wine buzz had made me see things.

Fifty thousand dollars? I didn't have that kind of money!

That meant—I scanned the paper once more—they could get a civil judgment against me, and it would garnish my wages. But I owned my business. Could they take it away from me? Shut me down?

Sure, my family was rich, but I wasn't. My parents hadn't given me any money since I was twenty and made the stupid mistake of getting pregnant out of wedlock. Oh, and keeping the baby, which meant I gave up any chances of a ballet career that they'd pushed me toward since I was six. By pushed, I meant ballet boarding school in Canada at twelve and was given a soloist role in Spain when I graduated. I'd been good. Really good—because I'd loved it and there really hadn't been any other choice—but my life as they'd planned it ended with a broken condom one night with a guy I met at a bar. His name was Hans and he was Swiss, but that was all I knew of him. We'd had sex in a bathroom stall. Sexy, right? I had no idea how to track him down and never saw him again.

I'd quit, because one thing a pregnant woman couldn't do was perform for a world-class ballet company pregnant, and

moved to Hunter Valley, made my own little life working at the community center as a dance and fitness instructor. Sierra had gone into the babysitting center while I worked. After scrimping and saving and a solid business plan, I'd been able to get a loan for my yoga studio—since there was already a successful dance program in town—and I was doing well. I wasn't going to the Caribbean for vacation anytime soon, but I had a little rental that was perfect for me and Sierra. A quiet, politics-free life.

The only time my parents butted their heads into my life was if they needed me for a family first bill she was pushing in Congress or a photo op for reelection, but it wasn't either of them that contacted me, but her press secretary. Every time, I turned her down. Fortunately, election year was a while off.

Me going to them to say I'd been dumb enough to dump a guy who had enough money to give me a fifty thousand dollar ring, then bury the thing in the woods, wouldn't go over well. Mom and Dad were definitely out.

I was on my own. I was *fucked*. I didn't know how much money could be garnished or if they could shut down my studio, but I really wanted to pay my rent and eat. Sierra was growing like a weed and needed new hockey shin pads and those things were expensive.

Duncan Pounder. The guy had been a total fake, into me solely for access to my mother because of his family's business needing tax exemptions or a trade deal or something political and schemy. The guy was one hell of an actor. I'd believed his bullshit—sadly, for months—and that was what hurt the most. After being raised in the political spotlight, my every move under the microscope for optics and... gasp, voter approval, I should have known better. But wait, besides him

being a DC social climber, there was more! Yeah, he cheated, too.

After a night with Luke and an aching pussy to remind me of what we'd done, I realized Duncan had no clue when it came to sex or pleasing a woman. Whomever he cheated on me with deserved a medal and a thank you letter. I couldn't imagine being married to him. She could have him and his mediocre abilities in the bedroom.

I deserved sex like I had with Luke.

Every night.

Except a guy as amazing as Luke was surely a one time thing. Wham, bam, gone.

But an asshole like Duncan? He was back like a bad rash.

I laughed, which was better than crying.

Crumpling the paper in my fist, I shook my head. I had to find that ring. The one I buried in a stupid empty tea tin. I remembered the path I took up into the woods but I veered off-trail and I wandered with my wine. It had been two years!

I had no idea where the ring was. I would have to start traipsing through the forest to find it and a rock that looked like a bulldog. How long would that take? I had two weeks. GAH!

I took a deep breath, filled my back lungs, let it out. I did it again. Repeated my mantra.

I am brave and confident. Strong and resilient.

No. I was in big, big trouble.



LUKE

MY CELL RANG, waking me. I sat up, remembered where I was. Who I was with.

Aspen.

I looked around. The bedspread was on the floor, the sheets a mess, a reminder of what we'd done. Leaning over the edge of the bed... shit. Her dress was no longer on the floor. No shoes. The bathroom door was open.

Fuck. She was gone!

Orgasms and a soft, sated woman in my arms and I slept like a baby. Slept right through her sneaking out. I ran a hand over my face.

Glancing at the clock on the bedside table, it was after nine. How long ago had she left?

My phone rang again. Reaching out, I grabbed it off the bedside table. For a split second, I thought it might be Aspen, but we hadn't shared numbers. No one had mine but my family. Mark. And Sam.

The call cleared. I swiped through my texts. As expected, there was one from Mark.

Well? Do I want to talk to her next?

That was all he wrote. He didn't say more. I knew what he meant, and it made me pissed.

No. Not even the slightest possibility. She's mine.

My fingers jabbed at the keys, not wanting Mark anywhere near Aspen.

My cell started ringing again.

"What?" I snarled when I saw my agent's name on the screen.

"You haven't answered my texts," Sam replied.

I pulled my cell from my ear and stared at it. There were a bunch of messages from him, and I ignored them. "I was asleep," I told him, rubbing a hand over my head.

"Well, I'll tell you the good news then."

Good news would be Aspen coming through the door, naked and carrying a mega-sized box of condoms. Then tugging her into the shower to wash every inch of her so I could get her filthy all over again. *That* would be good.

"What?"

"Why do you sound like a grumpy asshole?"

"Because you woke me up." *And Aspen wasn't here to climb on my dick and ride me.* My dick could pound nails with how hard I was, and it wasn't morning wood. It was craving more of her perfect pussy. I gripped the base and gave it a pump. Fuck. After I got done with Sam, I was going to have to

rub one out in the shower. Alone. I wasn't thrilled with going back to my hand. Not when I'd found the perfect woman.

“They want you to test for the movie.”

The movie was Living Dangerously, an action-adventure that started filming soon. They were finalizing roles now, including the male lead that might go to me. It would be my breakout from TV and a chance to be something other than Shep Barnes, MD.

“Seriously?” This was a big deal. Something I'd hoped for for months. I couldn't help but smile.

He sighed. “You're the only person who doesn't check social media. It's all over the sites that you're going to be the lead.”

“I don't look at that shit because everything that's said about me is a lie. I had to tell my mother to stop looking at the magazines at the grocery store checkout line after she saw I'd gotten married to a Polynesian dancer in Vegas and was mad I didn't invite her to the wedding.”

“It's good you don't look at it because now they're saying you're in rehab. Oh yeah, that's the bad news.”

I swiped the sheet off my lap, but my foot got tangled. I kicked at the cotton to free myself, I growled. “What the fuck? Rehab? For what?”

“Gossip sites are saying that since you weren't with Lacey at the premiere the other night that you'd checked yourself in.”

I stood and paced. Naked. Every bit of post-sex chill was gone.

“And where did they get that idea?”

“Unofficially?”

“Lacey,” I said. Of course, she’d say that.

Lacey Anderson played a physical therapist on *NYC ER*. Together, along with other members of the cast, we had to do interviews, attend awards shows, dinners, and media events. Whatever the show and the broadcasting channel wanted, we did. When the program took off, specifically my character, she latched right on. She stood beside me to ensure we were photographed together. Plus, other shit that had the gossip sites spinning stories about us being a couple.

“Rehab? WHAT THE FUCK?” I shouted.

“You know her,” he replied, as if that explained it all.

“Right,” I sighed. Why else would a man stand her up other than being in rehab? I hadn’t stood her up. I’d never planned to go to the premiere in the first place. I instantly thought of Aspen and how that asshat had ghosted her. “I’m on vacation. Just like everyone else in the cast with filming done. I’m in Montana to get away from Lacey because she’s a—”

“I know what she’s doing, saying you’re dating and all, making her star shine by attaching herself onto you.”

I didn’t like to think I was egotistical, but I was more famous than Lacey. Her being my girlfriend only brought her more visibility and fame.

“Like a pond scum sucking bottom feeder,” I said.

“That means you’re pond scum.”

I sighed, tore open the blinds. Winced at the bright sunshine. “This is your job to fix.”

“Come back to LA, do the test. Prove to everyone you’re not a druggie.”

I shook my head. I wasn't leaving Hunter Valley now. The one and only thing in my life that was one hundred percent real was what I had last night with Aspen. She did trivia with me, Luke. She fucked me, Luke. She didn't know who I was. Didn't come all over the dick of a celebrity. Hell, she didn't cling. She fled. The only woman I wanted to stay, left.

I wasn't walking away from a chance with her. One night wasn't enough. Now I had to go back to LA to shut down ridiculous rumors?

"I'm not a drug addict," I said through clenched teeth. "I don't do that shit. I don't have to prove myself to anyone."

"You have to prove yourself to the film producer, Chris Taylor. He doesn't want another problem actor. The lead on his last film was so high on set he did a stunt he shouldn't have and ended up in traction."

I remembered that. Hell, everyone in the world knew what happened to him. He flushed his career down the toilet, and he really was in rehab.

I shook my head. "No. I show up, Lacey will be all over me and spin some other bullshit."

After a night with Aspen, I didn't want Lacey Anderson anywhere near me. She was fake. Not only her personality, but her boobs. Her eyelashes. Probably other parts of her, too.

"Rehab shows you're bettering yourself. That you have focus and a new lease on life."

"Are you serious? I don't need to *better* myself. No fucking way. I pay you a shit-ton of money to deal with this and not lie while doing it. Tell them I'm on vacation. Is that so hard to believe?" I sighed. It didn't matter. Gossip sites didn't want the truth. That was boring and didn't sell papers or ad

space or whatever. “Deal with Lacey. Talk to her agent and fix this mess. I’m staying in Hunter Valley for the next few weeks. No Lacey. No rehab. No photographers.”

I hung up. Sam was a good agent. Negotiated smart contracts. Made me—and him—a lot of money. When the TV show somehow took off, I became an overnight celebrity. A fucking sex symbol. Magazines made me the sexiest bachelor alive. The bigger my star shined, the more it seemed Sam wanted.

Me? All I wanted was something real. Sure, I’d wanted to act. Wanted to be successful at it. But I had never expected the insanity that went with it. The acting didn’t stop when the director yelled, “Cut!” I just wanted to be Luke for a while, not Derek Dashwood.



ASPEN

“I DON’T KNOW why Ariel likes salt and vinegar chips. They taste disgusting. And she ate them with grape juice. Gross,” Sierra said with a shudder from the back seat.

That *was* gross.

“Did everyone like the kale chips?” I asked, glancing at her in the rearview mirror. I’d picked her up from the sleepover and went, as promised, to the hockey shop to pick out new shin guards. She was nine and growing like crazy, the old ones no longer fitting right.

We were on our way home in time for lunch. Since I spent the night with Luke, sneaking out around five to make it home long enough to change out of my walk-of-shame outfit and into yoga clothes and ready for the early morning class, I hadn’t been able to make my green smoothie. Or dance. I did it before and after hours alone in the studio, tucking my pointe shoes away in my office when done. Ballet was my first love, but I’d given it up professionally for Sierra. That didn’t mean I didn’t keep at it as best I could.

I didn't miss Sierra's eye roll. "I can't believe you made me bring *kale chips* to a sleepover. I left them in my bag. If I pulled them out, it would've been like going to practice in a figure skating leotard. I am *not* taking them to camp."

She started ice hockey when she was six when the family down the street turned their backyard into a mini-ice rink in the winter so their three boys could play. They'd had hand-me-down skates for her these past few years, but the gear they grew out of smelled too bad to be passed on. The germs on those things were insane. When I gave them rides home from practice, I often had to drive with the windows down, the odor was so bad, even in the winter. And they weren't even teenagers yet.

Now she was headed to hockey camp. Overnight. For a week. Without me. Gasp!

I peeked at her in the back seat, and I swallowed hard to keep from crying. *My baby!*

Sierra looked just like me with her blonde hair and blue eyes, but where I'd grown up in dresses with matching hair ribbons and knowing which fork to use at dinner, she was every bit a tomboy. She didn't own a dress. Or anything pink. Or sparkly. She wouldn't be caught dead in a—gasp!—figure skater's leotard, or eating kale chips.

She had posters of her favorite hockey players on her bedroom walls, and her idol was now Dex James, the Silvermines forward who'd married Lindy Beckett and often coached Sierra's peewee team now that it was the off season.

To say she was obsessed with the sport was taking it far too lightly. She had practice three times a week and games usually once a week, all year long. It wasn't a seasonal sport. Not only that, even the Under Ten group—her age bracket—

traveled for games, so she spent some weekends on the road with her team. And tomorrow, hockey camp!

Other than a friend's house sleepover, she hasn't been away from me for this long before. Sob.

"No problem on the kale chips," I said, clearing my throat. "You've got your snacks all picked out to take already. Did you finally decide on your outfit for the last night party?"

It wasn't a dance because no respectable hockey event would have a *dance*. But it was an end-of-camp party, and it was a boy/girl thing.

"Just my jeans and the blue top."

Mental fist pump. When I was a kid, all I did was ballet. So going *to* a dance wasn't that big of a deal. Having a senator mother, I always dressed up. In a dress. Hair styled. When old enough, makeup. Heels.

Sierra wouldn't be caught dead in a dress or skirt or tights. Or a barrette. Or ballet shoes. I was thrilled she was a tomboy and didn't care about any of the stuff that had been force-fed to me. It was kind of like karma for my mother, if she acknowledged us.

While Sierra loved hockey, I didn't push her to play. I rooted for her and told her I loved watching her skate, but if she wanted to give it up and play softball next, I'd buy her a mitt.

"If you're pretty much packed, should we go on a hike later?" I asked.

"A hike?" Her face lit up. "We're still making cookies with Granny Waddle and watching her TV?"

Granny Waddle was the woman whose house we lived in. When I first moved to Hunter Valley, pregnant and alone, I'd been directed to Mrs. Waddle by the senior center director. The older woman had been looking for someone to rent her upstairs apartment. She'd converted the house into two units after her husband died, wanting the extra income but also so she could remain in her home on the lower level where there weren't any stairs.

After all this time, I was still above her. She hadn't raised the rent and there was no question she undercharged me, but I made up for the difference in helping out by getting her groceries, snow shoveling, and anything else she might need. When I had my early morning yoga classes, she stayed with Sierra and made her breakfast. Sierra went downstairs and joined the woman in her kitchen. Sierra loved her because she was the grandmother she didn't have otherwise.

Mrs. Waddle had four grandsons—one of them being Daniel Pearson, Melly's hot lumberjack boyfriend—so she had lots of visitors and helpful handymen when something broke, but I was right there if something went wrong. She was like family to me and Sierra and I had no plan to move.

“Yes. Mrs. Waddle is going to miss you while you're gone as much as me.”

“I'm going to miss her, too,” she admitted softly.

Nine was a great age. Not too little that she needed me to do everything for her, but not too old where all she wanted was to be independent. And she loved her people, like Mrs. Waddle who gave her the unconditional love and affection she needed from more than just me.

Plus, she loved everything to do with the outdoors. Getting dirty didn't faze her. If I'd suggested a day of clothes shopping

and mani/pedis, she'd have fake gagged.

“So, the hike. I once found a boulder that looked like a bulldog and thought maybe we could search for it,” I told her. “I can't remember exactly where it is, but it would be fun if we could find it. Maybe take a picture with it.”

Or dig up a tea tin and an expensive ring. The only thing that was distracting me from the feel of a deliciously sore pussy was the threat of owing fifty thousand dollars to Duncan. I needed to get into the woods and find the ring right away and Sierra could help.

“A bulldog?” she asked, with her new shin guards on her lap. “Cool! Can Johnny and Jackson go?” They were two of the three boys down the street, and she loved hanging out with them. Johnny was two years older, but Jackson was in her class at school. They were going to camp with her as well.

I blinkered, then turned down our street. “You can go ask.” Four were better than one searching for, not a needle in a haystack, but a rock in the woods. Same difference.

We lived about a mile from downtown in a quiet neighborhood. I pulled into the driveway, all the way to the back and off to the side so I didn't block Granny Waddle's spot and shut off the car. The entrance to the second floor was on the side of the house, leading directly to an interior stairwell.

“Why is there a guy on our steps?” Sierra asked.

I whipped my head around to look.

“Holy shit,” I whispered.

“Fifty cents!” Sierra said.

We had a jar for whenever we said bad words. Sierra was learning them at school, and I found the best way to get her not to repeat them was to hit hard at her allowance. I was worse than she was and the fund to go to a Silvermines game in Denver was growing by the day.

This time though, *holy shit*. There wasn't anything else to say because it wasn't any man. It was Luke.

Sierra, never knowing a stranger—that was something we had to work on—undid her seatbelt and climbed out of the backseat, hugging her shin guards to her chest.

I hurried after her because I had no idea what to say. *Honey, this is the guy who ate me out and slid his thumb into my ass to make me come all over his face last night.*

Yeah, no.

Luke stood and waited for us to approach. He looked good. No, better than good. He had on jeans, a plain white t-shirt that seemed to be painted on, and a panty-melting smile.

“Luke,” I said. “What are you—”

“Oh my God!” Sierra stopped and her mouth dropped open and her eyes bugged wide. The last time I remembered her in shock like this was when Dex James showed up at the winter center the first time and filled in as her team's coach. “Mom. That's Shep Barnes!”

I frowned. Luke ran a hand through his dark hair, a flush creeping up his cheeks. Why did he look like he got caught with his hand in the cookie jar?

Shep Barnes?

Sierra came out of her trance and ran up to him, bouncing up and down. “You *are* Shep Barnes. I can't believe you did

that triple craniectomy with only a ballpoint pen and a Swiss army knife.”

Um... what was she talking about? Luke was a doctor? Luke was Shep?

“Sierra, go see if Johnny and Jackson want to go on the hike,” I said, my gaze fixed squarely and unwaveringly on the guy who rocked my world last night. And my vagina.

“Can you come with us?” Sierra asked him.

Luke... no, Shep, no... um, he looked to me. Sheepish. Shep was sheepish.

I was an idiot. I had a no-show blind date and then picked up a liar at a bar and slept with him. Could I ever get a break from losers?

Or was it me? The common theme in this, in everything in my life that went wrong, was me.

“That’s up to your mom,” he said. My body remembered that voice. My pussy clenched and my nipples went hard.

“Go on,” I said. “I want to talk with *Shep*.”

Sierra ran off, not before shoving her shin guards into my arms.

I stared at him.

He stared at me.

“Tiger, I can explain,” he began.

I can explain?

I’d heard that line before. “Don’t *tiger* me.” I walked up to him. “As for explaining? Explain to the hockey pad.” Then I whacked him right in the triple craniectomy.



LUKE

ASPEN MIGHT THROW down like a girl, but whatever she hit me with fucking hurt.

I raised my arms to block my head. “Ow! Shit, what is that?”

“It’s a shin pad. It’s supposed to deflect hockey pucks. It better fucking hurt!” she shouted and whacked me again.

This time, I was ready and stopped the swing with my hand to her wrist, gently grabbing it, then plucked the shin pad from her grip.

“I told you I can explain,” I breathed.

“*Shep Barnes?*”

I was a little surprised at how pissed she was. I never met someone who had no clue about my role in *NYC ER*. Even her daughter recognized me.

“A craniectomy?” she snapped. Yeah, seriously pissed. “How the hell has my daughter seen you perform that? And what the hell is a triple one?”

I glanced around. We were on the side of her house, but her neighbors were close. All I needed was to be seen in a fight with a woman. I may have been the one attacked, but it'd be spun into something else entirely. A druggie in rehab was one thing, but a woman having to defend herself from me with a kid's hockey shin guard was another.

Yet, I wasn't a drug addict. I wasn't an ER doctor. I wasn't Shep Barnes. Nothing anyone accused me of, including Aspen, was actually me.

"Look, if you calm down, we can talk about this," I said, trying to tone things down a bit. I even had my hands out in a placating gesture.

Her eyes narrowed and it was possible steam came out of her ears. Okay, that was a dumb thing to say because with a strong southpaw, she whacked me with the other shin pad.

"Calm down? Who the hell *are* you?"

Another bad move on my part, forgetting shin guards came in pairs. Fuck, that stung!

I had to laugh—which was pretty fucking dumb—but the one woman who knew the truth and *only* the truth was beating the shit out of me? She was furious that I'd been honest?

She stormed past me and to her door. The lock was a number pad and she entered it and threw the door open.

I followed because I had to make this right. "My name is Luke, just as I told you last night."

We stood in a small vestibule at the bottom of a flight of stairs. It appeared her place was on the second floor, as if the house had been split into two, up and down. The small space had a mirror, a row of hooks below it and a basket on the floor with shoes piled in it. The stairwell was wood with a navy

carpet runner. I pulled the door closed behind me so we were alone.

She spun around. Glared. “Right,” she said with every bit of sarcasm possible squeezed into the one word.

Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were a little wild. So was she. There was something wrong with me because I was hot for her even though she was angry. It was a good look on her, this fierce tiger, but there was no way in hell I was going to tell her that.

“Shep Barnes is a character I play on TV,” I explained. “I’m an actor. Haven’t you seen *NYC ER*?”

“Never heard of it. I don’t have a TV,” she replied.

I stared at her for a moment, trying to process those words. It was as if she said she didn’t have electricity or running water. “You don’t have a TV,” I repeated.

She shook her head. “No.”

“Your daughter recognized me,” I commented, meaning she had to have seen the show somehow. Later, I’d have to think about the fact that she had a daughter, and one who was around ten. While I knew better than to ask any woman her age, I guessed she was around thirty, so she’d had Sierra when she was really young. Where was the dad? If Aspen was at the bar for a blind date, then she was single.

“Obviously, she watches it at her friends’ houses or with Granny Waddle,” she explained.

“Look, I didn’t lie to you,” I said, reaching into my pants pocket and pulling out my wallet and grabbing my ID. It seemed she wasn’t going to believe my word alone. I held it up so she could read it if she wanted. “My real name is Luke Graham and besides the motor vehicle department of

Nebraska, you're one of the few people outside my family who knows that."

Now she looked more hurt than mad. "Why did you hide who you are to me last night?"

I shook my head. "I didn't." When she looked at me with skepticism, I pushed on. "Really, I didn't. I'm not Shep Barnes. I'm not Derek Dashwood."

"Who?"

"My actor name."

"Like a pen name?"

I nodded. "Yes. I work as Derek Dashwood, who plays the role of Dr. Shep Barnes on *NYC ER*. Your daughter—and the entire world—thinks I'm Shep. Or Derek. In fact, you're one of the only ones who doesn't recognize me from the show. And now you know who I really am."

That shut her up.

I shoved my ID and wallet back, then crowded Aspen, which wasn't hard to do with the area at the bottom of the stairs only being a few feet around.

"It's time for you to tell me why you snuck out."

It was time to switch this around.

She swallowed, her eyes darting to mine, then away. "It was a one-night stand. One time."

"If you'd stayed, it could've been more than once," I countered. Many more times than once.

Her gaze met mine and I saw her interest in that possibility, but then that faded. "You're an actor on..."

vacation? You really wanted more? I had no expectations, *Luke*. Besides, I had to teach a class first thing.”

I had to come across the only woman in the world who didn't want something from me. Had no expectations, as she said. *I* was the one pursuing her.

It was refreshing and... real.

Aspen intrigued me because I had a feeling her interest in only one night stemmed from something. Except she really had no plan of seeing me again and I wasn't sure if I should be hurt, thrilled, or motivated to change her mind.

Definitely the last. Because she'd been right there with me the night before and I wanted more. I wasn't ending this if I could help it.

I nodded. “Right, yoga.”

She blinked. “How did you—”

“Remember when I set your ankles on my shoulders and pretty much bent you in half while I fucked you?”

I remembered all too well. My dick had been buried deep and the angle change had me going impossibly deeper. The way her cheeks turned pink, she remembered, too.

“I commented on how flexible you were, and you said you were a yoga instructor.”

She blinked. “I said that?”

“I remember everything you said,” I admitted, but my inner caveman was thrilled I'd made her mind go blank with the power of my dick. I moved closer still so she was now backed against the wall and my forearm was braced by her head. “I admit, the caveman in me is pleased you don't remember anything but the feel of me inside you.”

“Luke.”

“Ah, there’s my name on those lips.” I glanced down at them, all plump and perfect. I had yet to see them wrapped around me, but it would happen. “Fuck, I love it when you say it.”

I put my hand behind the back of her neck, held her in place and kissed her. Thank fuck, she let me. With my knee, I nudged her legs apart and pressed close so her pussy was rubbing on my thigh. I could feel the heat of her through the fabric.

As we kissed, I ran a hand over her, cupping her tit and then lower, sliding beneath the fabric of her yoga pants to find her slick and wet.

Her head arched back at the touch, right into my hold.

“Like that?” I asked. Fuck, she was perfect. So passionate. So needy. So... *mine*.

“Luke,” she whined, her eyes falling closed.

I grinned against her neck because while I was circling her clit with my finger, I wasn’t getting her off. Oh, I could. After the night before, I knew her body.

“You want to come?”

She licked her lips, nodded.

“Too bad there’s not enough time before your daughter comes back.” My fingers stilled on her clit. “Besides, naughty girls who sneak out instead of getting a hard morning fuck don’t get to come.”

Her eyes flew open, and she stared at me, wide eyed.

“We’re going to talk, tiger, about why you didn’t trust me.”

“I... I’m going for a hike with Sierra and her friends.”

“Then it’s a good thing I like to hike. Lots of time to get to know each other.”

I kissed the tip of her nose and pulled my hand from her pussy.

She gasped. “You’re going to—”

“Mom!” Her daughter’s shout and heavy footfall carried through the closed door. “Jackson and Johnny will go unless you force kale chips on them.”

She watched as I licked my fingers of her sticky honey. Fuck, I was addicted to her sweetness. “Kale chips? Tiger, you’re the only snack I need.”



ASPEN

“ISN’T yoga supposed to help people be chill?” Luke asked.

I looked over my shoulder at him as we hiked the trail into the wooded hillside out of town. Sierra, Johnny, and Jackson had run ahead, only after slathering them in sunscreen and making sure they each had their water bottles.

It was the perfect summer day and it felt good to be outside. Except for the fact that I had a fifty thousand dollar ring to find. Or else.

“We do practice mindfulness through controlled and deliberate breathing,” I replied, wondering what he was getting at.

“Well, for a yoga person, you’re pretty ragey.”

WHAT? I stopped and spun around and set my hands on my hips. “Ragey?”

He reached across and rubbed his opposite arm. “You’re dangerous with shin guards,” he replied with a grin.

I rolled my eyes. “If you must know, I don’t like liars. Or someone pretending to be what they’re not.”

I’d grown up with that. Dated that.

“Tiger, my job is to pretend,” he countered.

I was well aware of that. *Now*.

“I also don’t like being left... unfulfilled,” I added grumpily. He’d had his hand on my clit teasing me and I’d been close. *So close*. I’d never had a guy get me off before, but it seemed my body knew Luke could satisfy it and I’d been right there on the edge when he stopped.

Sexy jerk.

“Unfulfilled. I understand that, especially since you left in the middle of the night,” he murmured, his voice tipped lower. Deeper. He glanced over my shoulder to see who was around, just in case. The kids were noisy, and we’d know they were coming well in advance. “I have a list, Aspen.” His eyes met mine. Held. “A long one. If you stayed in bed with me this morning, we could have crossed a few things off. You feel like I do.”

Horny? Was he feeling horny, too?

His cell chimed. With a look of annoyance, he pulled it from his pocket, read it, typed something, then put it away. I didn’t miss the way his jaw clenched before I glanced down, taking in the front of his jeans. They were well worn and cupped him in *all* the right places.

My pussy clenched remembering how big and hard he was, and I tried really, really hard not to whimper. I wanted more.

After Sierra returned from Johnny and Jackson's house—and I had been orgasm-teased—I did a quick search for Shep Barnes on my cell while she grilled him on his job. So much popped up. I skimmed about the hit show and Luke's role, proving what he said was true, but didn't delve deeper. There hadn't been time, but I also didn't want to learn about Luke from the Internet.

He looked good in scrubs and a white doctor's coat, but him in the flesh... and by flesh I meant completely naked, was *soooo* much better.

"I wasn't expecting anything, Luke," I replied. "Not more than a night. I'm not looking for anything. It's not like this is *real*. Let's just hike, okay?" I turned and started off again, kicking a small pebble with my shoe.

"I want more than a night," he said.

I froze.

"Luke," I almost begged because it was my pussy talking.

"Got burned by a guy, did you?" he asked.

I looked around, trying to recognize something as a way to put off his question. This was the trail I'd taken when I'd buried the ring. I didn't remember when I turned off the path and veered into the woods. Looking back, it may not have been the smartest move.

Okay, the entire outing had been stupid because here I was, two years later, with three kids and a famous actor looking for a bulldog rock that may not actually exist.

But it was all proof that I had, indeed, been burned by a man.

Instead of answering, I called to the kids. “Let’s turn into the woods here!”

Sierra and the boys were way ahead, but they turned back, saw which way I pointed and changed directions, whooping and hollering and scaring away any nearby wildlife.

Luke looked around, took in the dappled sunlight through the pines. “It’s pretty up here.”

“Can’t hike much with all the time you spend in the ER?” I asked, smirking.

He tipped his chin and eyed me in a way that made goosebumps rise on my arms. “Remember what I said about being naughty?”

Yes, I definitely did. My pussy ached because he’d left me close to coming back at the house, completely unfulfilled.

Stepping close, he cupped the back of my neck. His hold was firm. Commanding. I tilted my head into his possessive touch. He had on the same ball cap as the night before—then to hide his face from the bar and now to shield it from the sun—and sunglasses. I couldn’t see his eyes with the reflective lenses, but was still drawn in. He was insanely attractive and for a mega-star, down to earth. “You’re mad you didn’t recognize me.”

I glanced away. “I feel foolish.”

He shook his head and made me look at him again with a little squeeze to my nape. Then he kissed me. Soft. Gentle. At first. Then he tipped my head to the side, as if putting me into exactly the right position for him to kiss me deeper. As quickly as this started, he pulled away.

“Don’t,” he said, eyeing my lips and breathing hard. “I love that you didn’t know. Moral of the story? Get a TV.”

He grinned and I shook my head but didn't move because I liked the feel of his touch. Too much. I hoped he'd kiss me again. Maybe put his fingers back in my panties. What were we talking about? Oh yeah. "TV? No way. It's corrupting. It steals time. Studies show that kids—"

He shifted his thumb to cover my lips.

"Did you miss where I said I love that you didn't recognize me?" He dropped his hand. "Except for the part where you hit me with shin guards. Tiger, you have no idea how many people really think I'm a doctor or are interested in me because they want to sleep with a celebrity."

I studied him, considered the situation he was in, where random people recognized him as, and associated him with, a character on TV. They didn't even know his real name. I could understand how he didn't want to be known solely through perception.

"Based on Sierra's reaction, I have a pretty good idea," I said. "Must be tough."

"Speaking of Sierra, she gets plenty of TV time even though you don't have one."

He wasn't wrong. Her friends all had TVs and whenever she visited, she saw plenty. "I don't want one at home, but I can't tell her she can't watch it other places. I'm not that unrealistic of a mom. Besides, Granny Waddle has one downstairs, and they watch shows together. Just like eating meat. I don't make it, but she'll eat it if she wants at friends' houses or restaurants. Her favorite snack is beef jerky. Her entire hockey team loves it."

"Not kale chips?" he teased, obviously remembering what Sierra had shouted earlier.

I couldn't help but smile. "I think my days of getting her to eat them are long gone."

Realizing the kids were getting ahead, I started walking again. Now that we were off trail, it was harder going, having to keep my eyes down so I didn't trip over a rock or a tree root, which of course, I did right then.

Instead of falling, Luke grabbed me, wrapping an arm about my waist.

"Careful, tiger."

I took a breath, let it out, absorbed the feeling of his arm around me. Of his hard body pressed into mine from behind. I nodded, thankful I didn't get hurt. He released me and I started walking again. I had no idea a walk in the woods could be foreplay.

We were quiet for a few minutes, and I got used to walking with wet panties as I stewed on Luke's not-so-secret secret. He was a famous TV star. To me, he was just the hot guy who fucked really, *really* well.

"At the bar last night, were you in the corner so people didn't recognize you?" I wondered.

"Yeah," he replied, keeping pace behind me. "I wanted a burger, a beer, and the ballgame."

"You said you're on vacation?" It was a ridiculous question since I knew he didn't live here, and he had a room at the resort.

"Yeah. Filming is done and I have time off. I needed to get out of LA. That's why I'm in Hunter Valley. A break."

"Except for me, I'm sure people recognize you. If people react like Sierra did, it's not much of a break."

“Yeah, but here in Montana, they’re cool about it. Most of the time. The only way I could be left alone entirely would be off the grid, which doesn’t sound fun at all. Or I could head home to my parents’ place in Nebraska, but then I’d be up at dawn and herding cows. What about you?”

“Me? I’m far from famous.” My mother was, though. I avoided her spotlight because she didn’t want me in it now that I wasn’t perfect. I went from being a perfect ballerina to an unmarried single mother, which was bad for senatorial campaign slogans and photo ops, especially when my ballet career had been so promising. She didn’t even acknowledge she had a granddaughter.

“I know how you feel when you come all over my dick, but not much else. You’ve got secrets, too. How come you snuck out?” he asked, his dirty talk making me stumble over a stick. His hand cupped my elbow to steady me.

“I told you, I had to teach this morning.” It was the truth, but it was evasive.

“That might be the case, but you could’ve said goodbye. Would’ve made it easier to find you.”

I frowned. “Why would you want to find me?”

He reached out, ran a finger over my cheek in a simple gesture that indicated a certain level of intimacy. I liked it.

“I’d have missed out on hiking with a pretty girl and three short, noisy chaperones.” His slow smile pushed one from me. God, he didn’t need deep breathing exercises to be calm and easy going.

After the lawyer’s letter this morning, I was far from either.

“I went into last night looking for a one-night stand,” I explained. “Nothing more.” I might have sounded like a slut, but a woman had needs as much as any guy. There was nothing wrong with having them fulfilled without any kind of commitment.

“You don’t want a relationship?”

I stopped and he almost bumped into my back, having to set his hand on my shoulder. I spun around. “A relationship? No.”

What did I know about relationships? My parents had an open, loveless marriage. Any mental health counselor would say I mistook attention and emotional manipulation as caring. I didn’t need to pay anyone to tell me that. I had a history of losers, of shit guys who seemed to know I was screwed up. Or that I was drawn to assholes all on my own. The fact that plenty of them, even recently, wanted access to my mom only made the whole dating thing worse. I should’ve learned eons ago, but for some reason, it took Duncan for me to realize I was better off alone. Yeah, Mallory and others fixed me up, but none went beyond the first date. Jaded? Definitely. Besides, why did I need a man? Fine, besides legit orgasms. I’d made my own little family. I loved Sierra unconditionally and taught her that real love was that way. No strings attached.

“I want more, Aspen.”

My eyes widened. “What? Like boyfriend/girlfriend? Engagement? Marriage? You’re on *vacation*.”

“You can’t deny last night was amazing.”

I stayed quiet because he was right. Last night had been insane. I’d never had sex like that before. Never been with a bossy guy who knew what he wanted. A dirty talker. A

talented dick wielder. A guy who put me first. When I told him I'd never come from oral before, he'd made it his life goal to change that. He hadn't done anything else, not even taken off his pants, until he gave me that orgasm.

When it came to sex, Luke was the whole package.

“That list, tiger?” he asked. His gaze roved over my face. Eyes, lips. Eyes again. “I want to finish it with you. That’s why I tracked you down.”

“How did you find me?”

He shrugged. “Aspen the yoga instructor was all the clues I had. I did a search, found your yoga studio online. It’s the only one in Hunter Valley so it was pretty easy. I went there, but you were closed.”

“Then how did you—”

“Your studio web site lists your full name on the bio page. Your photo, too. I did another search. Your address is public.”

If he did enough searching, he'd find out I was Senator Bergstrom's daughter, even though I'd legally changed my name. Based on the fact that he hadn't commented on it—because everyone who made the connection did—he hadn't dug that deep.

“You should be a detective.”

He grinned, pulled off his sunglasses and hung them from the collar of his t-shirt. “I’ll play an investigator in an upcoming movie, if I get the part.”

My lips twitched. “Funny.”

He stared at me.

“Wait. Really?” Him in a movie? I was really, really boring in comparison.

He nodded. “How about it, tiger? You want more with me?”

Did I? Uh, yeah. I nodded. I would be stupid to deny it, especially since I’d pretty much dripped on his fingers back at the house. “You said I was naughty, before. What happens if I’m good?”

I watched as he swallowed. Hard. His gaze narrowed and dropped to my lips.

“If you’re a good girl, then—”

The kids’ voices got louder and cut off anything he was going to say. They ran toward us, hopping over logs and rocks.

“Later,” Luke said, with a playful tug on the end of my braid.

“Later,” I agreed, when the kids came skidding to a stop in front of us. They were flushed and happy, like puppies gallivanting about. Johnny had a branch he must’ve found and was using it as a walking stick. They always had so much energy that hopefully this outing would burn some of it off.

“How big is this bulldog rock anyway?” Sierra asked, her little face all sweaty.

From the house, I’d driven the five of us to the trailhead. It was weird to have Luke beside me, but I wasn’t given too much time to consider it because the kids grilled him from the back seat the whole way. They asked questions about his work, all things I wanted to know, so I stayed quiet. By the time we parked, they realized he actually knew nothing about medicine other than applying a Band-Aid, so they didn’t care that he was famous. He was, per Jackson, just a guy with a job.

And a boring one because Jackson proclaimed being a snowplow driver was a much better profession.

“Maybe four or five feet across,” I replied, thinking back. I’d been squatting in the dirt and peeing and the rock had been, well, a boulder. “Pretty big. It’ll only look like a bulldog from one side, so you may have to circle around the possibilities as you go.”

“Are we in the right area?” Johnny asked, glancing around. He and his brother looked alike, blond versions of Opie from the *Andy Griffith Show*, right down to the cowlicks on the back of their short hair.

I shrugged. “I don’t remember exactly. I came up that trail and then turned this way.” I pointed as I spoke. “I didn’t go too far.”

“What if we don’t find it?” Jackson asked, wiping his sweaty forehead with the back of his hand.

Then I’d have to come back up and search until I did. Or I came up with fifty thousand dollars.

“Then we search for it another day,” I replied.

“We’re going to hockey camp tomorrow,” Johnny reminded.

Sierra and Jackson nodded in sync, their eyes lighting up like they were waiting for Santa.

Right. They were off for a week to a hockey camp in Missoula. When I first heard about it in the winter, I didn’t think Sierra was old enough to be away that long. But I was assured that since it was the Silvermines off-season, Dex James would be going. Since he and Lindy had baby Jillian in the spring, the trio was inseparable. That meant Lindy would

be going to the camp as well. They knew Sierra and vowed to keep a close eye on her.

I hadn't been able to say no after that, especially since Jackson and Johnny—along with the rest of Sierra's team—were also going. Along with about ten parent chaperones and coaches.

“It's not going anywhere,” I said. “If I find it while you're gone, I'll bring you up and show it to you.”

“But what about today?” Sierra asked, unscrewing the lid on her water bottle. “I mean, we'll be sad if we don't find it.”

“How about we get ice cream.” Luke offered. “That always makes me less sad. Especially Rocky Road.” He looked to me, probably a little late to see if that was okay.

Their whoops and hollers let him know they liked his Plan B, and they ran off again to continue the search.

Ice cream wasn't *my* Plan B. I had none. I had to find that rock.



ASPEN

I WAS in the corner of the studio at the speaker system, picking the music for my afternoon Vinyasa class on my synced cell when Mallory tugged on my arm and stepped right up in my space.

“Psst.”

I turned my head. She was so close her blonde ponytail brushed my cheek. She wasn’t looking at me, but across the room.

“What?”

“Shep Barnes is in your class,” she whispered, still holding my bicep and now squeezing like she was testing my muscle tone. “He’s such a good actor.”

“Who?”

“*Who?*” she hissed.

“Shep—” Oh. My head whipped in that direction and there was Luke rolling out a yoga mat on the floor. He must’ve grabbed one from the selection in the supply corner.

Holy hell, was he hot. It was downright cruel. He wore sleeveless t-shirt and shorts, with the snug, black compression shorts beneath that peeked out from the bottom hem highlighting his muscular thighs. They were exactly what guys should wear doing yoga, keeping anyone from seeing glimpses of their junk when shorts crept up in various poses. It happened in the past and it was startling.

Luke must've felt the strength of our stares because he looked our way and winked.

Mallory spun away and faced my speaker. "He winked at me!"

I bit back my smile because she ran a hand over her hair as if trying to look good for Luke when Theo—who really was a doctor and not one played on TV—sat on his mat not fifteen feet away.

Oh my God, she was being a total idiot over a celebrity.

It wasn't because he was a star that had my heart beating out of my chest. I felt like I was a fifteen-year-old crushing over the attention of the star quarterback. It was my reaction that surprised me, although I should have some reaction to the man that railed me in his bed the other night.

After our unsuccessful hunt for the bulldog rock and ring, we'd taken the kids to ice cream as promised. They'd talked non-stop about hockey camp; the itinerary, what they heard about the cafeteria and how many hamburgers they can eat at one time, the dorm rooms they were staying in, whose parents were chaperoning and even mentioned Dex James. I wasn't sure how many tweens he'd been around, but Luke had been a good sport, giving them his full attention. Except when two giggling women came over to him and asked him for his autograph.

After returning home, he'd fist bumped the kids and told them to have an awesome time at camp. Then he'd turned to me, with that smoldering stare and wicked smile, and told me he'd see me later. No kiss, because kids, but a wink which was, I discovered with him, equally sexy, although not as fulfilling.

When he said *later*, I figured sometime this week, perhaps, but not the next afternoon and in my yoga class. This morning, Sierra and I had breakfast with Granny Waddle and then did the last bits of packing before I drove her to the winter sports complex for camp drop-off. I only cried after the buses had pulled out and I was back in the car. I'd been mopey since then and was glad for afternoon class to distract me.

"Wait, why would he wink at me?" Mallory eyed me. "Why did Shep Barnes, the sexiest bachelor alive, wink this way and why is he taking your class?"

"The sexiest bachelor alive?"

"Yeah, there's a whole spread on him in that magazine."

We turned our heads in sync back to eye Luke who was now standing on his mat, barefoot and reaching down and touching his toes to stretch. It was very much like the pose he'd put me in the other night when he'd eaten me out from behind.

Suddenly, it was hot in here. Shit. Yoga pants did little to hide a wet pussy, so I had to really hope my thong was sturdy and my thoughts didn't veer back to what we'd done the other night.

"Aspen," Mallory hissed, pulling my thoughts back to her. "He's not winking at me, is he?"

"That's Luke," I said.

She frowned. “Who?”

“Shep Barnes.”

“Right,” she said. “So who’s Luke?”

“Shep Barnes,” I repeated.

“Shep Barnes is Luke?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t get it. He... Wait. *No*, he’s—HOLY SHIT!”

It was my turn to grab Mallory’s arm and tug her back around to face away from the class where she just shouted an obscenity. Not the right mood for my lavender-scented, zen-filled space.

“Cut it out,” I whisper-hissed.

“That’s the guy you slept with the other night? You said his name was Luke. *You slept with Shep Barnes?*”

I shook my head. “I slept with *Luke*.”

Her eyes were wide, and her mouth opened and closed like a fish. “But—”

I held up my hand. She was going to make a scene if I didn’t shut her down. “Look, I have to start class. Can we talk about this later?”

She nodded vigorously. “Yes, we can absolutely talk about this later. In complete detail. With diagrams. In fact, we’re supposed to go downstairs for pizza anyway, right, since Sierra left for camp?”

I nodded and pouted.

She patted my arm. “Good. We’re having wine. Lots of wine and you’ll tell me *all* about it.”

“Lots of wine,” I confirmed with an eye roll as she returned to her mat, not so surreptitiously eyeing Luke. She even gave him a weird finger wave. *Total dork.*

There were about fifteen people in the class and while a few gave Luke not-so-subtle peeks, meaning they recognized him, they weren't behaving like a teenager in front of her favorite boy band like Mallory.

I quickly finished adjusting the volume of the soothing music and headed to the front of the class. Mallory had returned to her mat. Sitting cross legged, she leaned sideways and whispered to Theo beside her. He'd been coming to yoga with her once a week since they met back in the fall. His flexibility had gone from zero to a little better than zero in all these months. But he loved Mallory and I figured he loved seeing her in tight yoga pants doing various poses that showed off her ass so he kept at it.

She was totally telling him about Luke.

“Okay, everyone,” I began, tempering my voice to the soft, soothing tone I used for class. “Today we're going to begin on our backs.”

I settled onto my mat at the front, legs crossed, and my butt propped up on a folded blanket as everyone settled. Before Luke lay back, he gave me another wink.

Oh my.



LUKE

“I’M SUPPOSED to invite you out.”

I finished rolling up my mat and turned around. The only other guy in the class stood beside me, lifting a water bottle to his mouth and squirting in a stream before swallowing. He was dark haired and in his mid-thirties. While he gave yoga his best efforts for the hour-long class, he sucked. Not that I checked him out, but he had to be one of the least flexible people I’ve seen, and he sweated like he ran a marathon instead of attempting an hour of vinyasa flow.

“Oh?” I countered.

He didn’t sound thrilled to be offering this invitation.

He thumbed over his shoulder. “Mallory’s dying to meet you.” He scratched his sweaty head. “In fact, I think I’m going to have to be careful going down the stairs because she may take me out just to get to you. There was some kind of mention of a hall pass, but I have no clue what the fuck that means.”

I bit my lip because this guy was grumpy as hell, but when his gaze shifted to the woman, I assumed was Mallory—and very clearly his woman—his look heated and filled with blatant love.

“I think it’s when a woman has the hots for a famous guy she assumes she’ll never meet, but if she does, she’s got permission from her man to cheat with him.”

His brown eyes were back on mine and narrowed. I could be the one thrown down the stairs. I held up my hands. “I didn’t invent it. Women did, obviously. And I have no interest in being anyone’s hall pass.”

That meant some woman wanted to fuck Shep Barnes, not me. I didn’t fuck in character.

He sighed, then held out his hand. “Theo James.”

“I’m—”

“Shep Barnes. I know. I’m a trauma surgeon. *A real one.* I’ve learned a thing or two from you. Didn’t even know what a triple craniectomy was until Mallory made me watch the first season of *NYC ER* during a blizzard in February. Hell, a triple craniectomy and doing one with a ballpoint pen? Mad skills.”

His lips twitched and I assumed that was a smile.

I shook my head. “Glad I could help the medical community. Name’s actually Luke and yeah, the ballpoint pen technique took twenty takes to perfect. No med school needed.”

He grinned outright.

“Since you’ve been eyeing Aspen the way I eye my woman, I don’t feel like I need to pull out my scalpel to finish you off. Have you met Daniel yet?”

I shook my head.

“He and his brothers run the local landscape company. They have a woodchipper.”

I swallowed, because he was one serious, very possessive dude. Scalpel? Woodchipper? I believed that he’d finish me in an unpleasant way if I even *thought* about Mallory, which I assumed was the blonde currently talking to Aspen. I couldn’t help who had a celebrity crush. If his woman had the hots for a character I portrayed, that was his problem, not mine.

Theo didn’t know this happened to me all the time. I wasn’t going to tell him that since it only made me sound like a jackass. Plus, if I did, it made Mallory look like one in a million, which she definitely wasn’t.

A guy being possessive, I could understand. Even pissing a circle around his woman would be reasonable. But threatening me with a fucking woodchipper because I was famous? I didn’t need that shit.

“Look, like I said, my name’s Luke, not Shep,” I began. “I’m here for Aspen and since *she* hasn’t pushed me down the stairs, you’ve got to give me some credit for being a decent guy. Hell, at least not an asshole. If you can’t separate me from my job, then I’ll pass on the invite.”

I’d had enough of this scenario today. Sam called earlier and sent more screenshots of various gossip sites talking about me in rehab and the debate over whether it was alcohol or drugs I needed help with. Then it went on to show photos of me where I may have been high in the past few weeks, which were instead ridiculous—and horrible—candids taken of me in LA over the past few months.

He wanted me back in LA pronto to fix this shit, except there was nothing to fix. People were going to think what people were going to think.

Theo was like Sam. I wasn't going to stoop to perception. I crossed my arms over my sweaty chest and waited.

He studied me, then nodded. "You'll do."

I nodded back. "Good. Trust me, I've only got eyes for Aspen," I admitted. "Why do you think I took the class?"

"Because you *like* yoga?" he countered, shaking his head with man-shame. "It's clear you've done it before, and you even did that stupid Bird Of Paradise pose without snapping a joint. Another reason to hate you. I'm here to see my woman do bendy shit in tight pants. Nothing else."

"Exactly." I held up my hands. "I play a doctor on TV. I have no fucking clue what a craniectomy is. I'm an excellent memorizer and I have decent hair. Unlike you with advanced degrees and real lifesaving skills, that's all I've got going for me." He didn't look too convinced. "Plus, I live in LA. It's pretty much a law to live there that you have to do yoga."

"Good. Then join us for pizza. We're headed downstairs and others are meeting up with us. Since you're new in town, you've been adopted."

Pizza? Adopted?

My brows winged up. "By you?"

He huffed. "I know what it's like to be the new guy in Hunter Valley." Mallory and Aspen approached, and Theo's gaze was squarely on Mallory. I had a feeling after watching her bend and move he had something else in mind to do with her than get pizza. I knew just the feeling because the last thing I wanted to do was hang with the grumpy doctor.

Being hot for a yoga instructor had its perks: like Aspen wearing snug leggings *all* the time.

“Trust me, with the women in this town, you’re gonna need all the help you can get.”



ASPEN

I'D ALREADY HAD two glasses of wine. Or was it three? I had no idea since Mallory kept refilling it as we ate pizza at Otis' place directly beneath the studio. We'd taken over the back corner of the seating area. It was me, Luke, Mallory, Theo, Mac, Bridget, and Mav.

Bridget and Mav had been waiting for us. Bridget was a runner and only occasionally came to one of my classes, and then begrudgingly and only when Mallory made her, like on really rainy days or in the coldest and snowiest winter weather.

We'd split off into boys and girls since Mallory wanted me to recount *every* single thing Luke and I did the other night. I hadn't even had a chance to talk to Luke more than thanking him for taking my class. He'd given me a smile and I'd been tugged into the corner, and I had no doubt Mallory had sicced Theo on Luke.

I'd already given the two of them a rundown of the trivia game warmup—aka foreplay, to Mallory—and the highlights of the bendy, steamy sex in his hotel room after.

“Do you think he wants more?” Mallory asked, fanning her face.

It really had been that hot.

“Of course, he does,” Bridget replied, furtively glancing down the table in Luke’s direction. “He did yoga, right? A guy only does yoga to get sex.”

I sputtered, trying not to choke on the sip of wine I’d just taken. I’d had a few bites of pizza and tons of wine, so I was definitely buzzed. “That’s not true! Does Mav run with you only to get sex?” I countered, keeping my voice low.

“Yes,” she replied, pushing her glasses up. While she didn’t blush at that admission, the corner of her mouth turned up in a cat-got-the-cream smile. I had a feeling it was actually Mav who got the cream.

We looked down the joined tables to Mav who was at the far side of the group. His seat was at the end. He was just too big to be squeezed in anywhere else. The men had their heads close together and who the hell knew what they were talking about. Over the music from the vintage jukebox in the corner and a birthday party—based on the numbered candles on the cake for a ten-year old—I couldn’t hear a thing. But Mav must’ve had bat hearing, or he knew Bridget was eyeing him because his gaze went to hers and... holy hell.

The smolder that giant of a man gave her melted *my* panties.

“Does Theo do yoga with you to get sex?” I asked Mallory.

“The only reason.”

Mallory, Bridget, and I looked at each other again and burst out laughing.

So Luke wanted more sex with me? He had said as much. Did that whole sexy, neck holding thing. Put my hand in my panties. Even *told* me he wanted more. I squirmed on the hard chair with hope. He'd left me hanging yesterday—with seriously blue lady balls—and I was eager for more. But I was a realist and remembered my no expectations.

“What did he say?” Mallory asked.

“Who?” I wondered.

“Shep. I mean, Luke.”

“About what?”

“More. That he wants you to bend in other ways for him?” she asked.

I shrugged. “You pulled me over here so fast I haven't even talked with him yet.”

“Like Bridge said, he wants sex. He's here, isn't he?” Mallory added.

“He seems to be getting along with the guys,” Bridget pointed out, as if there was a possibility he wouldn't survive happy hour.

They had pints of beer and two baskets of demolished mozzarella sticks between them.

“He's a nice guy.”

“Nice? Who wants nice?” Mallory pushed.

I set my hand on my chest. After class, I threw on a pale blue zip-up hoodie over my yoga top and now I fiddled with the zipper. “I do. I'm sick of assholes.”

“Whatever happened to her blind date?” Bridget asked Mallory, giving her a pointed stare.

“Yeah, what happened with him?” I repeated. She never gave me an update.

Mallory rolled her eyes. “I texted Ronald. He said he lost track of time. Forgot.”

“See?” I said, pointing at her.

“He’s a radiologist and works in a dark room all day,” she countered, as if that was a good legitimate reason.

I shook my head. “That’s not an excuse.”

“It’s not,” Mallory confirmed. “At least you didn’t get engaged to him like that guy Duncan. At least Ronald showed how much of a lazy ass he was right at the start. I mean, how long were you with Duncan?”

Yeah, that was embarrassing. Shame, not wine, heated my cheeks. They knew about Duncan, but I’d left out the ring burial. I’d been mortified enough that I hadn’t seen the signs that I did the whole ring burial, cleansing thing solo.

“Anyway, I told Ronald he’s a dick and told Theo that he’s a dick. I feel really confident that when Theo sees him next at the hospital, he’s also going to tell him to his face he’s a dick.”

“No dicks for you,” Bridget said, then giggled. “Well, one dick, but the good kind.”

We turned to eye Luke as a collective female unit. Yeah, he had a really good kind of dick, and I wanted it again.

Mac stood and I looked over my shoulder to see why. In came Georgia and his son, Andy.

Georgia, who was so pretty in her pale pink dress, matching shoes, and accessories, went right to Mac and kissed him. Mac’s hand went right to her ass.

“Hi, Aspen!” Andy, probably used to them smooching a little in front of him, ignored them and came right over to me, his smile big. His two front teeth were starting to grow in, and they were all cockeyed and jack-o’-lantern like. I had a feeling he was going to need some serious orthodontics in a few years.

I couldn’t help but smile back because he was a sweet, happy boy. “Hi, sweetheart. How’s it going?”

“Good. Is Sierra here?” He looked around for her, as if she was hiding somewhere.

I pouted, suddenly missing my little girl all over again. “No, she’s at hockey sleepaway camp until next week.”

“Oh.” He pouted, too. While he was only six, he and Sierra hung out often enough to be buddies. “When I get big, I’m going to go to camp at the Kids Corp. But not hockey because I’m not doing no sleepaways. I’m gonna be a big brother and I have to stay and take care of my baby sister.” He puffed out his chest and patted it, so dang proud.

I looked to Georgia, who’d only shared she was expecting a few weeks earlier. When I was pregnant with Sierra, I’d had my head in the toilet bowl for the first trimester, but Georgia practically glowed. Or it could be the amazing foundation and moisturizer she used.

“It could be a boy,” Georgia said to Andy in a way that made me think they’d had this discussion before.

Andy shook his head. “Nah. It’s a girl. Boys look out for girls. Either way, GG’s going to feed the baby with her nipples.”

My eyes widened at his pronouncement and I bit my lip so I didn’t laugh.

“Andy,” Mac warned. “No nipple talk in public, remember?”

“You just said it!” he pointed out.

I glanced at Georgia who only shook her head. This wasn’t the first time, I assumed, she’d heard that from his precocious mouth.

“Hey, Andy!” Otis’s call had Andy whipping around. “Come help me make the pizzas Georgia wants to take home for dinner.”

He didn’t even say goodbye before he dashed around the counter and Otis pointed him toward the sink to wash his hands.

“Did you hear from the producer?” Mav asked Georgia.

She nodded. Mav was her new boss.

“Yes. The live show is next week,” she told him. “The Hansen ranch is the perfect backdrop for the stage. The crew will start tomorrow setting it up.”

“If I find out you’re standing and not delegating, I’ll sic your cousin on you,” Mav warned.

Georgia came to Hunter Valley in the spring to organize the fire department calendar fundraiser. Because of the success, she’d been hired on full-time with James Corp—Mav’s billion-dollar company—to be the local public relations director. Since then, she and Mac—*not Mav*—the fire chief, fell in love and they were having a baby.

Mac, who was a *very* protective guy, only nodded in agreement. “Right. Sit. Now.”

He pushed Georgia—gently—into his empty seat and snagged an unused one from a different table for himself. Then

he pushed a full glass of ice water in front of her.

“What’s this you’re working on?” I wondered.

She took a sip of the water and smiled. “*Cowboy Goes a Courtin’*. It’s a new TV show where—”

“I’ve seen it!” Mallory interrupted, hands waving as if she was trying to flag down a taxi. “The first season was so much fun.”

“I don’t have a TV,” I reminded, “so you’re going to tell me what it’s about.”

“It’s like the 70s version of that dating game show. There’s a bachelorette and three bachelors, but she can’t see them. The guys in this show are cowboys who want to—”

“Go a ‘courtin,’” Mallory finished for her.

Georgia nodded. “Exactly. She asks the guys questions and picks one.”

“That’s it?” I wondered. It didn’t sound that exciting to me.

Georgia looked at me with a twinkle in her eye. She glanced around. “The questions are pretty naughty, or as naughty as they can go for TV.” Ah, she was making sure Andy wasn’t around.

“Like sex naughty,” Mallory clarified. “But cowboy-style.”

I laughed. “I figured.”

“I’ve seen it. It’s usually filmed on the same lot as my show,” Luke called from the far end of the table.

Georgia looked his way and her eyes widened. “You’re Derek Dashwood.”

He nodded, then leaned forward to extend his hand to her. “Yeah, but I’m Luke, actually.”

“Nice to meet you,” Georgia said, clearly not as starstruck as Mallory had been.

“You’re organizing the whole thing?” Luke asked, clearly curious.

Georgia shook her head, but Mav spoke up from beside Luke, arms crossed over his chest. “It’s James Corp’s mission to help grow Hunter Valley’s visibility and economy. Having an episode of the show happen here brings both eyes and money to the town, so we coordinated with the PR team to host a live, one-time special.”

“All I’ve done is to help find a venue for it and maintain community relations,” Georgia said.

“While sitting down,” Mav added and Mac nodded his agreement.

“Sitting down,” she agreed, although Mav looked skeptical. “Ask the producer. She’s got an intern who literally walks around with a chair for me.”

“I don’t get someone carrying a chair around for me,” Luke said, sounding disappointed. “You must be very special.” He winked and offered her a smile, which I was recognizing as a patented Luke move. Or was it a Shep Barnes move? I hadn’t seen the show to know.

Mac grunted, seemingly satisfied Georgia wasn’t overdoing it. She was barely pregnant, not even out of the first trimester. I had to wonder what he—and the other men—were going to be like when she was about to pop.

Mac asked Theo if he was still attending the Saturday fire training this week, so Georgia turned toward us. She tucked

her hair behind her ear and leaned in. “Someone needs to explain why we’re sitting with Dr. Dark and Dangerous.”

“Aspen slept with him,” Mallory whisper-shared.

Georgia’s eyes widened and I took a gulp of wine. Oh, and my nipples hardened.

“If I could drink that, I would.” Georgia pointed at my half-full glass. “Have another sip for me.”

I did.

“I thought he was in a relationship with Lacey Anderson.”

“Who?” I wondered. Luke was in a—

“Gossip. I mean, he’s clearly not in rehab,” Mallory told Georgia.

Rehab?

I whipped my head around and stared at Luke.

“Aspen,” Georgia said with a nudge to my side.

I turned back to her. “Huh?”

“Tell me all about it,” she said.

“Who’s Lacey and what’s this with rehab? Maybe I need to get a TV.”

She shook her head. “No. It’s not TV you need, well, maybe that a little, but social media. It’s all fake.”

She waved her manicured hand through the air as if it was no big deal. To me it was. If he was with someone else—

“Rumor is he’s in rehab. We know the truth since he’s sitting right here. He’s not in rehab,” she stated.

“Right,” Mallory said with a snicker. “He’s *in* Aspen.”

She laughed at her own joke and Bridget had to cover her mouth so she didn't spit out her wine.

I rolled my eyes. "Then who's Lacey?"

"Supposedly his girlfriend but she's the one saying he's in rehab, so since he's here with you, it's all clearly made up."

I glanced down the table at Luke, whose gaze had been on me. He winked.

"If that doesn't butter your biscuit," Georgia breathed. "As us Southern girls say, spill the tea."

I sighed. "It was better than anything you're imagining right now," I said.

"She had orgasms from Shep Barnes—" Mallory began.

"Derek Dashwood—" Georgia corrected to his actor name.

"Luke Graham," I said, making sure she knew his real name.

"Luke," Georgia repeated. "I bet they were good ones."

"While you're taking home pizzas," Mallory told Georgia, "Aspen's taking home Luke. We know she's a vegetarian, but we have to wonder if she puts *some* meat in that mouth."

Georgia gasped.

"Mal!" I grabbed a napkin and threw it at her, laughing and embarrassed.

"You've got Sierra," Georgia said. "She can spend the night if you want some alone time." If anyone knew what it was like to be cockblocked by a kid, it was Georgia.

I shook my head, then took a huge gulp of wine. "She's at hockey camp. She left with the team and Dex and Lindy earlier."

“You’ve got a week off of kid duty, so you *have* to go for it,” Bridget reminded. “For womankind.”

“Right. Sierra’s at camp,” Georgia said, cocking her head to the side and eyeing me with motherly concern. “You doing okay? Did you cry at drop off? I couldn’t imagine Andy going away for a week like that.”

I shook my head. “Oh, I cried, but not until I got back in my car.” Looking over my shoulder, I called to Otis. “Another bottle!”

He nodded to me from behind the counter.

“She’s going to have the best time,” Bridget said, taking my hand and giving it a squeeze. “I don’t know a girl who likes hockey more than her.”

“I know.” Tears came to my eyes, and I grabbed a napkin from the dispenser and blotted them away. “My mother would lose her shit over how much of a tomboy Sierra is.”

“Doesn’t like sports?” Bridget asked.

Otis came over with an already-opened bottle of wine. He knew I needed it STAT, as if I was a doctor on TV and needed it for a triple craniectomy. I took it from him with a thanks and refilled all three of our glasses. I could feel the effects of the first finished bottle and was ready to get drunk. The reminder that Sierra—*my baby!*—was away and then adding my mother into the mix meant I needed more alcohol.

“The appropriate sports,” I clarified.

“That sounds posh. What’s an appropriate sport? Lacrosse? Squash?” Mallory asked.

“Ballet.”

“Ballet? You did ballet?” Bridget asked. She studied me while she filled her glass. “I can see it because you’re so flexible and I swear I’ve never seen you slouch.”

Otis returned with a basket of garlic knots and set it on the checked cloth between us. “You ladies need some carbs to go with those grapes.”

“Thanks, Otis!” Mallory called as he left, then snagged one and shoved half of it in her mouth and tried to chew. She looked like a squirrel with nuts shoved in her cheeks. “Ormygrd. S’grd.”

Georgia grabbed one along with a paper napkin.

“I did ballet,” I repeated, like it was no big deal. Like it didn’t consume my waking life for almost fifteen years.

“We’ve known you forever and you never told us this,” Bridget continued.

I shrugged, playing off that it had become my mother’s way to grade my worthiness of her attention and love. “I started when I was six and I was sent to ballet boarding school in Canada when I was eleven.”

“Boarding school?” Mal asked after she swallowed hard. “I didn’t even know there was such a thing for dance.”

I nodded. “Yeah. Ballet all the time. My parents had high expectations.” If my mother heard I was struggling with a skill or didn’t get the lead role in one of the performances, I didn’t come home for the summer. I stayed and practiced because she wouldn’t be seen with me unless I was the best.

Bergstroms are the best. What a family motto. Oh, and campaign slogan.

“I know what that’s like,” Georgia said. “Pageants require perfection. I didn’t have it.”

“Wow, you must be really good,” Mallory commented to me, not Georgia and her beauty pageant talents. “I can do the sprinkler or whatever that weird dance is called.”

Bridget covered her mouth with her hand and shook her head. “No, you totally can’t. You have zero rhythm.”

Mallory giggled. “It’s true. I actually can’t dance. Is it possible to be tempo blind? Like color blind but for any kind of musical beat?”

I shrugged. “I can probably pull off the sprinkler, but I doubt you do it on toe shoes. I was a soloist in Spain after I graduated.”

“A little girl’s dream of being a ballerina. Awesome.” Bridget smiled imagining. “I can see you in a tutu.”

“I wanted to be a ballerina when I was six and my mother wanted me to be one after that. I didn’t have much say or time to try something else. It was all I knew. But one night, I got pregnant by a hot and swarthy twenty-year old Swiss guy in the program. That ended it all. I moved here and switched to yoga because it paid the bills.”

Bills. Shit, I forgot about Duncan and the ring. GAH! I needed to be out hunting for that stupid bulldog rock or I wasn’t going to be able to pay *any* of my bills.

“We have to see you dance. Now that we know, we gotta see you in action,” Mallory prompted.

Bridget and Georgia nodded in agreement.

“I only do it now on my own. Usually early in the morning before my first class. I walked away from it all for Sierra.”

Bridget and Mallory sat side-by-side and had matching mopes. “But you got a sweet, rough and tumble girl out of it! She’s better than ballet.”

I wholeheartedly agreed. “You’re right, I don’t regret Sierra one bit. But I don’t like to talk about my past, even with you all. Duncan is a prime example of my shitty judgment, so I like to leave it there.”

My cell chimed with a text, and I pulled it from my sweatshirt pocket. “Oh, it’s her!”

I swiped and enlarged the photo of her with Dex. She couldn’t be smiling any bigger and Dex was giving a thumbs up, which I knew was for me that everything was fine.

My eyes filled with tears again as I passed the phone to Mallory for her to see. “She’s better than ballet and now she’s at camp for a week.”

I set my forehead in my palm and a wave of missing her overwhelmed me. God, I was a mess.

“Don’t cry!” Bridget said, patting my hand. “You need more wine. Wine makes everything better.”

“And sex,” Mallory added. “Sex makes everything even better-er than wine.”

“Since I can’t have wine for, well, ever, I agree with Mallory,” Georgia commented. “Sex makes *everything* better.”

I lifted my head, looked down the table to Luke. Mallory was definitely right. What I needed was a wine-and-Luke combo.



LUKE

ASPEN WAS DRUNK. A cute drunk, but still far from sober. And she was handsy.

Really fucking handsy because she kept putting her hand on my dick while I was driving, her wants made very clear. It was a good thing I knew how to get to her house, otherwise I'd have driven into a fire hydrant. Then I'd have had to explain to Mac and his fire truck full of colleagues why I couldn't focus.

Yeah, that kind of handsy.

I'd deflected her as much as possible with a few, "Easy, tiger."

"The girls said sex makes everything better," she said.

Did they?

"I agree, but not in the car." *And not while you're drunk.*

Thankfully, she'd settled like a good girl in the passenger seat until we got back to her house. I'd been half-hard ever since I walked into her class earlier and saw her in those snug-as-fuck purple leggings and matching snug top.

As I went from sun salutations to downward dog during the class, I'd thought about all the ways I was going to take her. From behind. Up against a wall. Hell, over any horizontal surface. The ideas even continued at the pizza place, although the guys had distracted me well enough.

For the first five minutes, they'd asked me about my work. I was used to being asked everything from whether I wore makeup on set to whether I really was naked in the sex scenes to if I really did operations. It seemed they didn't give a shit about any of that. Thank fuck. It had been the most non-probing interrogation I'd ever had, and after a prostate exam, that was saying something. It went like this:

Theo to Mav and Mac: Luke plays a doctor on TV.

Mav: I've seen the show, which means I'd trust you if I was hit by a manhole cover.

That ridiculousness happened in one episode, and I'd saved the patient's life.

Theo: I'm a real doctor. I could take a manhole cover out of your torso, but you'd still be dead.

Mav to Theo: Your hair wouldn't look as good as his while doing it and you have the bedside manner of a constipated whale.

This was when I found out they were brothers.

Mac: How's it feel to be famous?

Me: Annoying.

Theo: That why you're in Hunter Valley?

Me: You don't know from social media?

They looked at each other, then back at me.

Mav: Do we look like guys who use social media?

Me after studying the three of them: No, you definitely do not. Then the answer is vacation. I'm here for vacation.

I wasn't telling them about Lacey and the fact that I was supposedly in rehab. They didn't seem to care what I did, but guys didn't probe. Theo was a trauma surgeon turned small town doctor, Mac was the town fire chief, and Mav was the CEO of a billion-dollar company. I got paid to pretend to be something I wasn't while my hair looked good. In comparison, I was dull as fuck.

All they wanted was to kick back with a beer and eye their women. I couldn't blame them because it was impossible not to watch Aspen. Not that she was mine.

Yet.

I wanted her. Fiercely.

From the ice cream outing the day before, I knew Sierra and the neighbor boys were off to camp today. So I held off—barely—until Sierra was gone to see Aspen again. The way she led her class with calm confidence was impressive. It had been hard to keep moving instead of staring at her demonstrating the various poses, giving beginner and advanced options for each. She made them all look effortless, which I knew from years of yoga that they were hard as fuck. The way she bent and flexed reminded me how flexible she'd been in bed and gave me ideas on how I wanted to fuck her next.

I'd never once done yoga with a hard-on and I sure as hell tried not to have that problem, but Aspen made it really fucking difficult. Like sitting on the far side of the table and not being able to talk with her. Instead, I'd been just one of the

guys and watched how she smiled genuinely with her friends over too many glasses of wine. How she laughed and cried with them, probably talking about Sierra. The girl had been a fucking spitfire the day before on the hike. Funny, bright, active, and eager to go away to hockey camp.

I abandoned my car on Main Street and drove Aspen's to her place, parking it where she told me in her driveway.

She climbed out and I followed her to her door. I let her attempt to key in her door code but asked her what it was and did it for her. Then she grabbed the front of my shirt, spun me around with a surprising amount of strength for a woman her size, and pressed me into the wall. The same wall I had her against the day before.

Her mouth was on mine, her hands roaming over me.

My dick was all into this, but nope. Not happening. Taking her wrists, I raised both of them over her head.

She purred. Yeah, actually purred like a fucking tiger and grinned.

“I like it when you take control.”

FUCK!

I groaned and pressed my hard dick into her soft belly, then stepped back. “Tonight, me taking control means we're getting you some water and aspirin and tucking you in bed.”

“What?”

I released my grip, turned her toward the steps and gave her ass a little slap.

She looked over her shoulder as she made her way up the steps. I eyed her pert ass the entire way.

When we got to the top, she dropped her bag on a small table, and I looked around. The space wasn't big. In fact, it was downright tiny. There was one main room that served as her living room, kitchen, and dining area. The walls were a soft tan and the furniture eclectic. Framed photos were all over the place and what was probably Sierra's artwork hung on the walls and attached to the fridge with magnets.

Through one open door, I could see a bed. Through the other, there was white tile on the floor, which I assumed was the bathroom.

It was homey. Warm. Inviting.

"Let's get you to bed," I said, steering her toward the bedroom.

She pointed. "That's my bed."

In the corner, there was a divider and behind it, a day bed.

I went to the bedroom door, stuck my head in. Definitely Sierra's with the hockey posters on the walls and kid's clothes strewn about.

Her bed was in the main room?

I turned back around and found her heading into the kitchen. "Drink?" she asked, turning to face me.

"You need water, not me," I told her.

"Doctor's orders?" she asked with a grin.

"Yes, and some aspirin."

After all that, she skipped the water completely and flopped down on the couch.

I sighed and went to grab an upside-down glass from the drying rack and filled it from the tap.

“Here,” I offered when I sat down beside her. “Sit up.”

She lifted her head and like a floppy doll, sat up and gulped down the water.

“We should be having sex. I’m supposed to fuck you since Sierra’s away.”

My dick liked everything that she was saying. Too much. But it wasn’t hard to turn her down. I wanted Aspen. Fuck, did I want her. But not like this.

“That sounds good, tiger, and we can definitely do that when you haven’t had five glasses of wine.”

“Six. It’s only because I miss Sierra.” She sat up again and climbed into my lap.

Okay, this was nice. Warm, soft, pliant Aspen. But the scent of wine clung to her, and I had a feeling she was going to pass out at any time.

“What’s up with you and Sierra’s dad?” I asked, setting my hands on her hips—and not moving them. It was a probing question, but I was curious and now was probably the best time to ask probing questions.

She tucked her hair back. “A youthful fling in a Spanish bar bathroom with a guy named Hans. Never saw him again.”

“Sierra really loves hockey,” I commented.

She laughed. “Yeah. She wouldn’t wear pink even if it was hockey gear signed by Dex James himself.”

Sierra did seem like a tomboy. No pink. No sparkles or unicorns or rainbows. From the peek I saw in her bedroom, she liked blue and Dex—

“Wait. Are Theo and Mav his brothers?”

She nodded. “He’s married to Bridget’s sister.”

Wait. Mav was with Bridget. Check.

Bridget was best friends with Mallory who was with Theo. Check.

Bridget’s sister was married to Mav’s and Theo’s brother. Crazy.

“Did Sierra get into hockey because of Dex?” I wondered.

“No, from Jackson and Johnny,” she said. Turning, she flopped sideways so she sprawled across the couch, lifting her legs and extending them out so her calves rested on my thighs. “Their parents flood their backyard and make it into a skating rink every winter. First time she saw that, she was hooked.”

“They flood their backyard? That’s pretty awesome.” I’d have loved that as a kid.

“Awesome means it’s bitterly cold here.”

“It’s beautiful now,” I reminded. “Hunter Valley’s amazing. That hike we did yesterday was great.”

She huffed and ran her hands over her head as if she was frustrated. “God, I’ve got to go again tomorrow.”

“Where?”

“Bulldog rock.”

“It’s real?”

She shrugged her slim shoulders. “I think so. I was drunk.”

“Do you get drunk a lot?” Based on what I knew about her, she led a healthy lifestyle and drinking too much wine wasn’t a common occurrence.

She tipped her chin down and eyed me. Those blue eyes were hazy when they met mine. “When a man dumps you, you drink. When your daughter abandons you for her love of shin pads and skates, you drink.”

“What does a bulldog rock have to do with being dumped?”

She shook her head and covered her eyes as if she was hiding.

“I buried a ring.”

I blinked. Frowned. She didn’t move. This was a crazy conversation. I leaned toward her and pulled her hands from her face. This was actually a little amusing.

“You buried a ring?”

She made a sound that I took as a yes.

“When?”

“Two years ago.”

“Tiger, you buried a ring by a bulldog rock that long ago and now you have to... find it?”

With a surprising swiftness, she flung her arms away and I had to sit back to avoid being smacked across the face. “Yes! I have to find it, or I have to give Duncan the value of the ring!”

“Who’s Duncan?”

“An ex-fiancé who wanted my mother more than me.”

Now I really frowned. That was... gross. And creepy. No wonder she got drunk. I wanted to track him down and take him out with a manhole cover. “I can see why you’d want to bury the ring,” I muttered.

“I don’t want to talk about Duncan or my mother. In fact, I don’t want to talk at all. I want to—”

I stalled her hands again, which were now tugging up my shirt. “Bed.”

She grinned. “Yes, please.”

I shook my head. “No, you. Bed. Sleep.”

“But you’re hard.”

Even drunk, she couldn’t miss it in my workout shorts.

I groaned again, scooped her up and stood. I took her to her bed—only a few feet away—and set her on it.

“I am and I am eager for you to do something about it later.”

She popped up onto her knees and unzipped her sweatshirt and flung it off.

I set my hands on my hips as she moved on to her shirt.

“Aspen,” I groaned.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I was going to go to hell, but I had to watch her tug that stretchy, snug top off and fling it to the ground.

Shit, she was bare from the waist up. My dick pulsed and I put my hand over it. Squeezed hard. FUCK.

“Okay, bed,” I snapped.

She curled her finger, beckoning me. She was so fucking pretty with those pert tits and tight nipples. So horny.

So drunk.

“Nope. You. Bed. Alone.” When she tucked her fingers into the top of her leggings and started pushing them down, I

turned on my heel. “Fuck, tiger. I’ll get you some more water.”

I grabbed her glass from beside the sofa, filled it at the sink and thank fuck, she was sound asleep when I got back to her.



LUKE

I STOOD, holding the glass, staring at Aspen. Naked, half covered with her sheet.

FUCK! I ran a hand over my face.

I was a perv. I was going to hell. I was an asshole for even peeking at her.

I was also horny as fuck and Aspen was fucking gorgeous.

I set the glass down on her little bedside table—beside her alarm clock, hair ties, and photo of Sierra as a toddler.

I flung her top and leggings to the floor, snagged her tiny lace thong, and pulled her bedding up and over her. She mumbled, then rolled over, her hair fanning out on her pillow.

Turning again, I went to her bathroom, flicked on the light. Eyed myself in the mirror.

“What the hell are you doing, Graham?”

Reaching down, I went to grip my dick and realized I was still holding her thong.

I growled. It was damp and I brought it to my nose. Took a deep breath and shut my eyes. I knew the source of that scent. How it tasted. How it felt under my tongue. How it felt wrapped around me.

Pre-cum spurted from said dick. I pushed the elastic of both my shorts and underwear down and my dick sprang free.

Turning my head, I glanced into the other room, then quietly shut the door.

I was going to hell. No, I was being a good guy. I wasn't fucking Aspen. Hell, I'd barely touched her and not in a sexual way. A guy shouldn't get a medal for doing the right thing, but a man had his limits. So did my dick.

I was the guy who was going to rub one out all over a woman's panties.

If Sam only knew. If word of this got out...

I glanced at my reflection again.

I had Aspen's wet thong in my hand and my balls were aching with the need to be emptied. Gripping the base of my dick, I stroked it from root to tip, rubbing my thumb over the head. I hissed, began stroking faster thinking of Aspen and how she'd looked when I sank into her the other night. How her eyes had widened as she took all of me. As she clenched as she came. As she—

“Fuck!” I whisper-groaned, using Aspen's panties to catch my cum as it spurted from me.



LUKE

I SPENT the night on Aspen's too small couch. At dawn, I'd given up on getting any decent sleep, so I left and went back to the hotel, took a shower, and changed clothes.

I was in line at the coffee shop when Sam texted.

Your screen test is Tuesday at 10 but they said not to show if you're in rehab.

His accompanying screen shots—even more of them—from the gossip sites about were equal parts thrilling and fucking infuriating. I'd worked my ass off in my career doing all the right things. Showing up on time, knowing my lines, not fucking any of my co-workers—or their spouses. I met my contract obligations with a fucking smile. Like my parents had raised me, I put in a hard day's work for my pay. Sure, I made millions, but I didn't make trouble, either. My mother texted me yesterday, seeing the latest about me. She'd laughed off the Polynesian dancer marriage and the pet python story because she knew I hated snakes. But rehab? She didn't like people

talking shit about me. My momma was fierce when it came to her kids.

Kinda like someone else I knew.

I texted Sam back.

If I show up to prove I'm not in rehab, will they believe me? With what Lacey's saying...

I'll find you a new girlfriend. Be seen with her. Prove you're not in rehab and Lacey's wrong.

Find a new girlfriend. As if that was easy and there was no way in hell I was having Sam *find* one for me. I hadn't dated anyone in years. Fine, dates, yes, but nothing more than a night out. Or in. But a relationship? No. I didn't trust a woman to want me for me because they couldn't separate fact from fiction. To not have some kind of agenda of their own which included me and my fame, especially one Sam *found*. Who only wanted me for—

Wait. There was one person who had no clue I was a star. Who wanted me—and my dick—for sex and sex alone. She had no agenda other than me getting her off. The one who'd had zero expectations or intentions of ever seeing me again. Not even on TV.

Aspen.



ASPEN

I ROLLED OVER. Groaned. God, what time was it? I opened my eyes. Winced. It was too bright.

“Morning, tiger. The night we met, when you said you shouldn’t have more than one glass of wine, you weren’t kidding.”

A face loomed over the bed. I blinked.

Luke.

I groaned again, covering my face with my hand because I could have sworn he was smiling.

“Here. Take these.”

When I didn’t move, he tried again. “Be a good girl and take the pills.”

I frowned, then pushed myself up to sitting, then realized I was naked when the blankets slipped to my waist. I tugged them up and my eyes opened. Why was I naked?

Luke winked. Grinned.

“I don’t like you right now.”

He took my hand, dropped the pills in it and waited for me to toss them back, then handed me a glass of water. “After these,” he began, then reached for a Steaming Hotties to-go cup he’d set on the bedside table. “And this, and a shower, you’ll feel human again. Trust me, I play a doctor on TV.”

I traded the water for the cup, not wanting to tell him I didn’t drink coffee. It was really sweet of him to go to Steaming Hotties and get it. Wait, had he spent the night? Had he gone back to his hotel and then returned? He must’ve because he was in a green t-shirt and tan shorts, his perfect hair neat as if it had been combed recently. Unlike mine which probably looked like it’d been snagged in a combine.

I sniffed.

“This isn’t coffee,” I said, confused.

He smiled. “I know. I didn’t see a coffee machine on your counter and this body needs caffeine. I went to Steaming Hotties. I assumed since Mav wore the t-shirt last night that it was a decent place. I met Eve and she told me you drink tea. This one, specifically.”

“How does Eve know you were with me last night?”

He arched his brow. “Exactly my question. This is an interesting small town, and the gossip here rivals any online site.”

“Ah. Right. Eve is married to Silas. The fourth James brother.”

“And I thought the guys didn’t gossip,” he commented.

I laughed. “They’re worse than the girls. Although I’m sure it was Mallory who called her after we left last night and filled her in.”

He tipped his head toward the bathroom. “Take that into the shower. When you get out, I’ve got a proposition for you.”

My eyes widened at his words, then I remembered everything from the night before like my brain was a computer and it finally stopped processing. My eyes fell closed in mortification. “Oh my God. I was all over you last night. I even felt you up in the car, didn’t I? And my little strip tease must’ve been really sexy.”

He grunted. “You have no idea.”

“God, you must think I’m the biggest ho—”

“No,” he said with enough emphasis to shut me up. I met his gaze and all I saw was sincerity and... heat. He wasn’t unaffected. “I don’t. Not at all. Now that you’re sober, tiger, you can put your hand on my dick anytime you want. Like after your shower. But I’ve got a different kind of proposition.”

Kill me now. “Why, Luke? Why?”

He cocked his head. “Why, what?”

“I’m a mess. Obviously. Why are you even here with me?”

“Because I want you to be my girlfriend.”



ASPEN

I BLINKED AT HIM.

“What?”

“I need a girlfriend.”

“I heard that,” I said. “Are you asking me to date exclusively or something?”

He shook his head. “No. Well, yes. I mean, I *need* you to be a girlfriend for me.”

He reached into his pocket, pulled out his cell and swiped at it. “Here.”

I took it and stared at the website header.

Can Derek Dashwood rehab his image? Beneath it, in bold, it said, *Actor checked himself into rehab for mental health crisis.*

Obviously, it was an online tabloid.

I glanced at Luke, then back at the article, which next showed a photo of Luke in a tuxedo standing beside a dark-

haired woman. She had sleek black hair and more curves than a dangerous mountain road.

“This is you.”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“It says you’re in rehab. I don’t understand.”

“Do you recognize the woman in the photo?”

I took another peek. “No.”

“Of course, you don’t.” He sighed. “Right, well, that’s Lacey Anderson. I work with her. She’s an actress on *NYC ER*. She says we’re dating, which everyone believes, but we’re not.”

“The girls mentioned her last night.”

“Since I came here instead of being in LA right now, she told the tabloids I’m in rehab.”

“What? Why?”

“Because she doesn’t want to be rejected and this is juicy gossip, and it keeps her in the headlines.”

“By lying?”

“I’m sure the words *supposedly* and *purported* and *sources say* are in the article. That means they don’t have to be the least bit accurate because it’s not fact.”

I licked my dry lips and suddenly felt really nauseated, and not from the wine. “I don’t understand. Are you dating her?”

He shook his head. “No. *NO*,” he said, very clearly. “On the show, we’ve slept together. The characters, Shep and Amy. The scene when edited is racy looking but really, there are like thirty people hovering around the set while I’m in bed in shorts and Lacey’s wrapped in a sheet. She’s got a strapless

bikini-thing on beneath. Sure, we kiss and roll around, but it's fake. *Really* fake.”

“Like her boobs?” I asked.

That made him smile. “Exactly. The tabloids played up that maybe we were dating in real life because our characters in the show are. But it's not true. I don't even like her. She's difficult on set, catty, annoying.”

“Then why are you photographed together?”

He pointed to his cell in my hand. “That was taken at an awards dinner last month. What you don't see is the other members of the cast standing with us. It was cropped. If you go to a different site that covered the event, you'll probably find the full photo. I've never been out with her one-on-one, or even worse, as a couple.”

I ran a hand over my hair, pushed it out of my face.

“Can't you just post a photo of yourself from Hunter Valley and say you're not in rehab?”

He shrugged. “Yes, I could, but that doesn't solve her saying we're dating. Who knows what Lacey will counter with. I need a girlfriend to replace Lacey, not that she ever *was* my girlfriend.”

He actually shuddered.

“I need to share that I'm with someone new, someone special, to knock Lacey out of all this. The tabloids will have to let go of the rehab concept—and I only showed you one article out of many—and Lacey will have to find her fifteen minutes of fame with someone else.”

“Why now? You said you didn't like all that insanity.”

“I don’t. But I told you about that movie part. They want me as the lead. I have a screen test next week. This is a big deal for me, and I can hopefully break out of the Shep Barnes persona.”

If the way Mallory behaved at yoga was any indication to how people acted around him, then I could see why he wanted to work on other projects.

“You don’t want to be Dr. Dark and Dangerous any longer?”

He grinned. “Been reading up on me?”

I shook my head. “Georgia called you that last night.”

“The producer of the movie isn’t interested in an actor in rehab. He had an issue with his last male lead and won’t go through that again.”

“You mean they won’t hire you because of what the tabloids are saying?”

“I’m not speaking up or clapping back on social media. In fact, I’m pretty much hiding here in Hunter Valley. Usually, I don’t care or pay it much attention, but my agent has been all over me about this one. I want this role. I’ve earned the chance and if I have to deal with the tabloids to get it, I will. It’s not fair, but I’ll do it.”

“By having me as a girlfriend.”

“Right. I need someone now. Right away. To share with the world, I’ve been quiet because I’ve fallen for someone. That it’s the real deal and not a fake LA thing. By doing that, it’ll make it obvious I’m not in rehab but having fun on my vacation with a beautiful woman. And that Lacey and I definitely aren’t an item.”

I shook my head. “This was supposed to be casual, Luke. I don’t do relationships. I told you I have no expectations from you, and I don’t want you to have any from me.”

“Why? We’re good together.” He grinned a little wickedly.

“You’re a movie star. I’m a small town, single mother, yoga instructor.”

“I like all of that about you,” he admitted.

The fool was endearing. “I’m a realist. This isn’t going to work.”

He sighed. “Fine. Then be my *fake* girlfriend.”

“What?” Why on earth would Luke need *fake* anything?
“Just find yourself a *real* girlfriend.”

“One, I’m not going to go find some other woman when you’re naked right now. I’m not an asshole.”

“How long is this supposed to last?”

“The screen test’s next week. I need to clear the rehab rumor and get Lacey out of the girlfriend role for good. Once I get the part, we can casually break up. Distance and all that. I know you don’t really want a relationship, so yeah.”

“Right.” I looked down at the cell. “I don’t really want to be in the media spotlight.” I knew what that was like. My mother loved it. But I knew what Luke was saying was true. Mother required everything about herself, my father, *me* to be perfect because anything less would be a flaw. An imperfection that the media would use as a weapon. Mother’s senatorial campaign couldn’t handle any kind of weakness.

And an opponent? They’d use anything they could get.

The last thing I wanted to do was be like my mother and fake something for the media, but this was what Luke was asking me to do. This wasn't about me; it was *for* him. Could I do the one thing I tried to avoid?

"I'm not perfect, Luke. I have—"

"I don't expect you to be perfect."

"What do I have to do?"

"Go to LA with me. Be my girlfriend."

I shook my head. "I can't go to California! I have Sierra."

"She's at camp."

I sighed. "I have my studio. Classes to teach."

"Can't someone fill in? Have you ever closed for a few days for vacation?"

No, I hadn't, but I didn't like the way he was shooting down every possible excuse I had for not going. Besides the obvious. Pretending to be his girlfriend? While I didn't know him all that well, I did like him. The chemistry between us was insane and I wanted more with him, but I knew better. He was a famous actor trying for a film role. A movie!

He had a larger-than-life life. He was fine with pretend? Of course, he was fine switching from real to fake girlfriend. It wasn't like a guy like him would want a legit relationship or anything real with someone like me.

Single mom, barely making ends meet. Stupid enough to bury an expensive ring in the woods.

"This was supposed to be one night," I reminded, protecting myself. Maybe him at the same time. "A fling. I

mean, I pretty much picked you up at a bar. That can't be good
visibili—”

“I'll pay you. Whatever Duncan's ring is worth. I'll pay
you that.”



LUKE

SHE STARED at me in horror, which wasn't what I expected. Of course, I hadn't expected to *pay* her for the girlfriend role, either. But I meant it. I needed her and maybe she needed me to help her as well. I'd thought about her drunken admission all night. Some fucker named Duncan who had a thing for her mother. If that was her last boyfriend... no, fiancé, then no wonder she didn't want anything serious.

I had trust issues because everyone in my world was fake. Literally fake, like Lacey and her boobs, and her cheekbones, probably her ass, too, if what I heard about implants there was legit.

But Aspen wasn't fake. Not her body. Not her personality. Not her friendships. Not her relationship with her daughter. Everything about her was so real.

Including her reaction.

And I wanted her. All of her. If the only way I could get more of her since she didn't want a *real* relationship was to start a *fake* one with her, then so be it.

“How did you—”

“You’re talkative when you have too much wine.”

She flopped back on the bed, flung the comforter over her head so only the lower portion of her leg stuck out. “Go away. I want to die of embarrassment in peace.”

Reaching out, I pulled the blanket down so her face showed. “Who’s Duncan?”

She rolled her eyes and huffed just like I imagined Sierra would do in a few years. “He’s my ex-fiancé.”

I knew that much. I broached my next question carefully because I was a little scared of the answer. “You mentioned something about your mother?”

She put a hand over her face, wiped her eyes. “God, what didn’t I tell you?”

I waited and I used my acting skills to appear patient.

“My mother has... an important job. She has a lot of connections that some find valuable. Turns out Duncan was one of them.”

“He dated you for what? Access to your mother?” It was better than the assumption I made the night before.

She nodded, her sloppy hair sliding over her pillow. “Pretty much. He was going to marry me for it. Stupid me thought he actually liked me. He was a good actor. Maybe there’s a part for him on your show? Dead body number one?”

I smiled, but it was fake. I wanted to find out Duncan’s last name and make him *really* a dead body. “He live here in Hunter Valley?”

“Idaho. I was stupidly going to relocate for him. You know, to be with him and his mistress.”

He cheated on her, too? What the fuck? I took a breath and tried to calm my rage. Doing that, I picked up on something else she said. That she thought he actually *liked* her. Not loved. Why would she be engaged to a guy she didn't love with all her heart?

What had happened to her? It had to be more than Duncan the Dick.

“So you dumped his ass.” I hoped.

“I did. And in some sort of life cleansing, I took the ring up into the hills and buried it. Buried my stupidity at thinking some guy would want me for a real relationship and moved on to being smarter and wiser.”

I winced because I didn't want her for a real relationship. Well, I did, but I *needed* her to play a role. To be my girlfriend. And I'd pay her to do it.

Oh shit. But I wasn't lying to her about it. I might want something from her, but she was getting something in return. We were walking into this arrangement with our eyes open. It would be fake. We were fake. Even knowing that, I was fiercely protective of her. How dare that fucker use her like that!

“There was wine involved.” She winced. “I swear I'm not a lush, but last night I missed Sierra and—”

I held up my hand. “You're not the only one who's had a few too many before.”

She brushed her hair back again. “Well, I remember the bulldog rock. There really is one, I think, and I buried the ring in a tea tin right in front of it. I just don't know where it is.”

“You said this was two years ago. He wants the ring back *now*?”

She sat up and held the blanket to her chest. She was so fucking pretty, and she had no idea. “I know, right? His lawyer sent me a letter. I have to give the ring back by the end of the month or I owe him the value of the ring.”

“Which is?”

It was her turn to wince. “Fifty thousand dollars.”

Shit, that was an expensive ring. No wonder she enlisted the kids to help her find it. But it was easily solvable. I could make this asshole and Aspen’s problem go away. Life cleansing? I’d give her toxic ex removal once and for all. “I’ll give you the money.”

Her eyes widened. “What? No. You will not.”

I shrugged. “I’m rich. This jerk doesn’t deserve—”

“No!” she countered, clearly adamant. “I will not take your money. I was the stupid one, burying it like that. It was my embarrassing mistake. *Duncan* was my mistake.” She was the only woman I knew who refused that kind of money and she wasn’t even going to keep it. I wasn’t sure if that was more telling about her integrity or the quality of the people who usually surrounded me. Perhaps both.

I held up my hand. “Fine. Then be my fake girlfriend in exchange for the money. You would really be helping me, and I think we can agree, liking each other won’t be too hard to fake.”

In fact, I wasn’t faking at all.

She pursed her lips. Huffed. Closed her eyes. It was as if an internal battle was playing out before my eyes.

“Or we can go hunt the woods again for the bulldog rock.”

“Fine! I’ll do it.”



ASPEN

“YOU’RE GOING TO *WHAT?*” Mallory screeched, then tugged me in her front door.

I almost tripped on the step with the force of her pull.

After I agreed to go to LA with Luke, he’d left to get things organized for our trip because he wanted to leave today. Really, I figured he was being kind because I knew I looked and felt a mess. When I saw myself in the bathroom mirror, I practically screamed. Hair crazy. Bags under my eyes. I was a bloated mess. And, fuck, I’d had the worst roadkill breath ever.

Even if I felt like fooling around with Luke, I had no doubt he’d have turned me down.

So I showered, drank a huge detox smoothie, and hoped the man would forget I ever looked like a hag.

No wonder he settled for me to be his fake girlfriend! No way a guy like Luke would want me for real.

So I’d do it for the money. I *needed* that money.

I wasn't an overly vain woman but being born a Bergstrom had taught me one thing. If I was going to play a role, I had to look the part. While Luke seemed to like I was a small-town yoga instructor, I wasn't too sure that was what he needed to convince the tabloids that we were dating. Another reason why I'd driven directly to Mallory's. Sometimes a girl needed a BFF to make sure she wasn't crazy.

“Be Luke's fake girlfriend.”

She frowned. “What happened to *real* girlfriend?”

I waved my hand in the air. “There never was going to be *real* anything with him.” Especially not after he saw me this morning. “We had sex and maybe we'll have it again this week, but that's it. He's going to get this movie role and go back to his life in LA while I do school drop off, hockey drop off, groceries, science fair projects, and yoga classes here in Hunter Valley. What kind of real can there possibly be?”

She looked more put out for *me* than I felt about it. Sure, maybe there was a hint of longing for a guy like Luke to want me as the real deal, but I needed to play it safe. I'd been burned before—which was why I was doing this in the first place—and I didn't want it again.

Duncan and his ring were one thing. A famous person whose life and career hung in the balance of the media? I knew all too well what was at stake. Being a senator, my mother's job was to woo the voters because if they didn't like her, they'd vote for someone else. So she had to be perfect, be exactly what they wanted and expected at all times. My pregnancy oopsie had been a liability for her. *I* was the liability. I'd been dumped by my parents because I wasn't perfect enough to be kept.

“The real kind where you fall in love,” she said.

My mouth fell open. “Um, Mal, I had a one-night stand with the guy. I’m going to be his *fake* girlfriend. Besides that night, we went on a hike and had ice cream with three kids. Then he took my yoga class where I couldn’t talk to him.”

“Yeah, only check out his fine ass in Downward Dog,” she countered with a grin.

“*Then*,” I continued, stressing the word. “We went for pizza, and he sat at the other end of the table. I literally haven’t talked to the man beyond doing trivia.”

She shrugged. “Who wants to talk when you could be doing other things?”

“If you want me to have a *real relationship* he and I need to talk.”

She flung up her hands, clearly frustrated. “But no one asks a woman to be a fake anything if there’s a chance of being something real. Why are you so okay with this?”

Because he was going to pay me fifty thousand dollars. Crazy? Yes. But I needed that money and I’d been a drunk idiot and blurted out way too much about my life to him. Now Luke knew my weak and shameful spot. No, he wasn’t using it against me. It was more like a dangling carrot. He was going to solve my Duncan problem. All I had to do was pretend to be into him for a week to turn his image around and get the film role.

Which was not hard to do.

“Because unlike Duncan, I know where I stand with him,” I explained, setting my hands on my hips. “I know it’s pretend.”

She sighed. “Right, but not all guys are like Duncan,” she reminded.

I agreed, but I hadn't met any of them. "It's short term. We're going to work together to get the tabloids to show him favorably so he can get the part. I guess—"

"In that action-adventure movie?" Her eyes widened and she clapped her hands together in glee. "Oh my God, I heard about that!"

"Right, well, his coworker Lacey something is feeding the rumors about him being in rehab."

Her eyes widened. "What? Lacey Anderson?" She spun around and ran into her kitchen. She had a little Victorian house so she only had to go about ten steps. I followed and watched as she swiped her screen and started reading. "Wow. Yeah. Rehab. Choosing alcohol and drugs over a solid relationship with... that bitch."

I blinked. "Wow, Mal, those are harsh words." Especially since she said things like *fudge* and *sugar* so she didn't let any bad words drop when she was teaching her first graders.

"My mother chose alcohol over me. I know how it can really be. I'd hate for someone to accuse me of that. He should sue!"

"He said they use words like *supposedly* to make it unofficial and not directly slanderous."

She looked down and laughed, then started reading aloud. "Derek Dashwood is said to be recovering from a drinking binge and has purportedly checked himself into rehab for substance abuse."

"The article he showed me earlier said he was in for a mental health crisis."

I felt for Luke because I knew what it was like to be cast in a harsh light. What people were saying about him were

complete lies. What my mother said about me had been lies, too. I'd been built up since birth to be something that wasn't achievable: perfection. Yes, I'd been made a very young soloist in a premiere ballet company. But I'd blown it by getting pregnant.

When I found out I was having Sierra, everything changed. I loved her before I was even showing. She was mine. *Mine!* I was fierce about my daughter, but it was fierce love. She was her own little person, not a prop, like I was for my mother.

My mother hadn't given a shit that I'd been—in her words—promiscuous. She cared that I had proof of it: Sierra. No senator could have a single mother for a child, especially with the father being a foreigner with zero intention of marriage. As if. God forbid she be called a grandmother.

But because I'd ruined her desired image of me as the *perfect* daughter, I was cast aside. Tossed out. Taken off the family narrative. I'd destroyed my entire life by having Sierra.

That's what my mother thought at least.

Me? I'd *saved* my life.

As for Luke, if he wasn't exactly as Lacey wanted, he was tarnished. The job he wanted—hell, the life he wanted—would be kept from him.

Fuck that shit.

“Okay, it makes sense now,” she said. “So you're going with him, being his girlfriend. That takes Loser Lacey out of the picture *and* he's obviously not in rehab.”

“Exactly.”

She cocked her head. “I saw the way he looked at you. He wants you. He's into you. Isn't there *any* chance you two could

be more? That you'll see that Duncan was a one-off?" She held her fingers up indicating a little bit.

I shrugged. "How could there be more when he's filming in India or Morocco or wherever? I want a man here, in Hunter Valley, who's in bed beside me at night. Who loves Sierra and we make a little life. No way could Luke do that."

She frowned, clearly more disappointed than me. "You're still going to have sex though, right? I mean, being a fake girlfriend doesn't mean you can't have real sex."

The idea of more sex with Luke made my nipples hard.

"Real sex. Fake boyfriend," I told her.

"Then go for it. With Sierra away, you've earned a little fun."



LUKE

“WHO MIGHT YOU BE?”

At the question, I spun around on Aspen’s stoop. There stood an older woman in denim overalls and rubber rain boots holding a small shovel. Her gray hair was chin length, her wrinkles plentiful, and her blue-eyed gaze piercing.

“Luke.”

She cocked her head to the side as if assessing me. Maybe considering if I was dangerous, but I was in jeans, sneakers, and a white t-shirt. If I wanted to break in, I wouldn’t have knocked. “You look more like Shep Barnes to me.”

Ah, another one. Obviously, she had a TV.

I scratched my head a little sheepishly. “That’s what people tell me.”

She glanced toward the second floor. “I’m Erma Waddle. This is my house.”

“It’s nice to meet you, ma’am. You have a lovely home.”

“Thank you. Making house calls?” With her brow arched, she had a mischievous look about her. I had a feeling she was talking about sex. But I couldn’t be sure.

“Um, I—” What the hell did I say?

“If you are, good. Just what Aspen needs.”

I frowned. Mrs. Waddle was pimping me out to Aspen?

The side door opened and there was Aspen in a black t-shirt dress. Thank fuck. Not only because I needed rescuing, but because the dress meant easy access. I had unrequited plans and a three-hour flight on a private plane.

She might have been my *fake* girlfriend, but what I felt for her was real. I meant that I’d pay her, too. She didn’t need to owe some cheating asshole fifty thousand dollars hanging over her head. If I had to tie it into this arrangement, then fine. I’d already sent the money through my banking app, finding her in it easily enough. I’d have sent it directly to Duncan the Dick’s lawyer so she didn’t have to do a thing, but I didn’t know who it was. Aspen was doing me a favor and I was getting to be with her, uninterrupted. I’d say it was an even trade.

“Hi, Granny,” she said to the older woman, a big smile on her face. “You’ve met Luke?”

“Yes. I’ve never seen a head of hair like his.”

Aspen couldn’t help but laugh and I tried not to roll my eyes. If I went bald, I would be in big trouble.

“I’m headed with Luke to California for a few days while Sierra’s away,” Aspen told her.

The older woman smiled. “That’s wonderful, dear. Did you hear from our girl?”

Aspen nodded. “This morning. She talked non-stop about the breakfast, but she wanted me to reassure you the pancakes weren’t as good as yours. Then she went on and on about the practice and the games and—well, I don’t think she breathed.”

It was good to hear Sierra was having fun. The little girl had been so excited the other day to go to camp. Same with the boys, Johnny and Jackson. But I’d been more worried about Aspen and her tender, mother’s heart. Hopefully, I could take her out of state and have her not worry. Well, if my own mother was any indication, she’d always worry, but maybe have some fun, too.

“Sounds like she’s having a good time. Now you go have one, too, with this young man.”

I liked Mrs. Waddle.

Aspen looked to me. I wasn’t sure if dealing with Lacey was going to be fun, but with Aspen at my side—and in my bed—it was looking a hell of a lot better.

“I’ll try,” Aspen told her.

Mrs. Waddle looked to me. “Be good, or my grandsons have a woodchipper.”

I frowned. What was up with the fucking woodchipper?
“I’m guessing your son’s name is Daniel.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “How did you know?”

“Good guess,” I muttered.

Mrs. Waddle and Aspen hugged, then the older woman disappeared around the front of the house. Aspen grabbed her bag for the trip and stepped out onto the landing.

“She probably told you, but this is her house. She split it into two right before I moved here. I’ve been her upstairs

tenant since before Sierra was born. She's my number one babysitter. That door goes into her apartment." Aspen thumbed over her shoulder. When I was here before, I didn't notice the door to the lower level, probably because I had her pressed up against it and my fingers in her pussy. "In the mornings when I teach class, I open it so it's kinda like one house again. Sierra comes down to have breakfast with her Granny Waddle."

Reaching down, I took her bag and set my hand on her back as we walked down the driveway to my rental car. "That's nice. A built-in babysitter."

She glanced at me. "She's got lots of family here, but I like to think we're her family, too. She's definitely ours. I have a feeling Sierra knows about your show because they watch it together eating popcorn and all kinds of hydrogenated fats."

"You don't have any family in town?" I asked, opening her door for her.

She shook her head. "Nope. I moved here when I was pregnant with Sierra. I'm... estranged from my parents."

I frowned. She said it so easily, as if this wasn't a new situation. As if she'd resigned herself to it or maybe even okay with not being close with them.

"That's too bad. I'm close with my mom and dad. Plus, I've got a brother and two sisters. All married with kids and living in my hometown. It's crazy when I go back to visit."

"Where's that?"

"Peckers Cutoff, Nebraska. My parents have a ranch."

Her eyes widened and then she burst out laughing. "Peckers—"

“Cutoff, yeah.” I grinned because what else was there to do?

“That’s a real place?” she asked while trying to catch her breath.

“You think I’d make that up?”

She bit her lip as if trying to keep from laughing further. Her hands slipped around my waist as she tipped her chin up to meet my gaze. Fuck, she was pretty. “A cowboy, then.”

She had on a bit of makeup. Mascara and tinted lip gloss. Nothing more. Her hair was half up, half down and I slid my hand over it and cupped the back of her neck.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“What’s the saying? Save a horse and ride a cowboy?”

I was outright grinning now. And I was hard. “You want to take me for a ride?”

“Not everything about this has to be fake,” she reminded.

Thank fuck.

“True. How about you do that while we join the mile high club?”

“Multitasking,” she murmured, pushing up to her tiptoes to kiss me. “I like it.”

Me, too. Me, fucking too.



LUKE

ASPEN DROPPED into the plane seat beside me. “When you said we were flying to LA, I thought it was going to be the commercial flight out of Bozeman.”

She looked around the interior of the private jet. It seated fourteen, but it was only the two of us as passengers.

“A perk of my job,” I said. I told her earlier I was rich, but she probably already made that assumption based on the fact that I was a TV star. But the jet solidified it.

“It’s a good thing because I snuck a full-sized bottle of shampoo in my bag.”

That’s what she had to say? That she was trying to break a liquids rule through security? Not a comment about my money or how I could get a private jet in a few hours’ notice or if they had champagne? Although, after her wine the night before, she probably had no interest in more alcohol.

Still...

Why was I surprised that she wasn’t in awe? She hadn’t recognized me. Didn’t care that I was a TV star. Hell, that was

probably what she liked about me the least. A private jet and she didn't bat an eyelash.

It was because I surrounded myself with so many fake people who wanted more. More money. More fame. More status. Working in the TV industry was filled with moochers and schemers who wanted *more*. Everyone pretended. Image was everything. LA, in general, was the same way.

I was the one who'd become jaded. Who'd lost track of what normal was. Aspen was being herself and reminding me of how much I needed a reality check.

I liked it.

"It's a good thing because I finally, *finally* have you to myself."

The flight attendant appeared and said, "We're ready for takeoff. Seat belts. If you need me, just push the call button, otherwise I'll be in the galley for the flight." With a smile, she returned to the front just as the engines turned on.

I looked to Aspen. "Not quite alone," she said with a smile.

"Seat belt, tiger." Instead of letting her do it, I reached across and connected the two ends for her. Then, being that close, I kissed her.

"Tell me something about you," I whispered when I pulled back. Eventually. The plane was taxiing to the end of the runway.

Her mouth was inches from mine, our breaths mingling.

"What do you want to know?" she asked, her eyes on my lips.

“You know the capital of North Dakota and the largest land bird.”

A smile pulled at her lips. “Those are important things. Especially if you want to win fifty dollars at trivia.”

“They are.”

“Favorite color?”

“Orange.”

I pulled back a little to meet her eyes so they didn’t merge into one on her forehead. “Orange?”

She nodded. “Yeah, but that color looks awful on me so it’s not like I wear it. I wished I liked pink. It would make it so easy, but it would probably make Sierra vomit in her mouth.”

I grinned. “She seems like a tomboy.”

She rolled her eyes. “Total. I like it. So much easier than being a girly-girl.”

“You know what that’s like?”

“Oh yeah. I know the right fork to use. I can match fabric on drapes with a nearby couch and I can make small talk about any topic.”

“Really?”

She nodded as the plane took off, pressing us back into our seats.

“That sounds useful. Especially the matching fabric. If I remember correctly, you don’t even have drapes on your windows. And now that I say the word again... drapes, *drapes*, drapes. It sounds weird. What exactly are drapes?”

I continued to whisper it a few times.

“Special curtains,” she said. “So no drapes in your house?”

“No. My house is... well, you’ll see it. We’re staying there.”

“Oh, right. I didn’t really think about that. What, um, do I need to do to be your fake girlfriend?”

“Keep kissing me, for one.”

She smiled and leaned in the few inches for our lips to meet again.

“What else?”

“People need to know we’re together. I need to start posting pictures of us. Can I take one?”

“Okay.”

I didn’t want to move away from her mouth, but if we were going to do this, we might as well start. I took out my phone and pulled up the photo app. Taking her hand, I set it on my thigh. I took the pic, then showed it to Aspen.

It was obvious I was with a woman on a private plane, with the luxurious leather seats, the view out the window of blue sky and clouds. The image was nothing fancy or complicated. Candid. I fiddled with the photo in the social media app, added some text and a few hashtags, then posted.

“There.” I dropped my phone onto the seat beside me. “Now we can go back to kissing.”



ASPEN

WE KISSED. And we kissed.

And I ended up in his lap, my knees on either side of his hips.

His hands were on my bare thighs slowly working their way higher.

“Luke, the flight attendant,” I reminded as I tilted my head to the side as he nibbled his way along my jaw and down my neck.

“She’s up front.”

“Let’s go in the bathroom.”

He let his head fall back against the seat. “Have you ever been in an airplane bathroom before?”

I rolled my eyes as I studied him. His cheeks were flushed, his lips all shiny from kissing. His eyes were heated. Needy. So were his hands as they crept up so the tips of his fingers brushed my panties.

I covered his hands with mine, the cotton of my dress between them.

“Yes.”

“Then you have to know we’d never fit. You’ll ride me just like this.”

I glanced over my shoulder, but the plane was empty. I hadn’t seen the flight attendant since before takeoff.

“She’ll stay in the galley.”

“How do you know?”

“Because she expressly said she’d stay there unless we pushed the button.”

He pointed over our heads.

“You think I want to share you with others?” he added.

I bit my lip, and he used his thumb to tug it free. “Everything about you is all mine. I don’t share, pretty girl. Your kisses. Those hard nipples poking against your dress.”

My head tipped down. Shit, they were poking out as if it was freezing instead of overly warm. Both of his hands were back on my thighs beneath my dress, his forearms sliding it up.

His gaze snared mine.

“Your whimpers and moans, too. You’re a noisy girl when you come for me. Think you can be quiet?”

When his fingers slid over my pussy, I stifled a whimper.

“Good girl.”

One more brush over my sensitive bits, and then his hands were on my hips and lifted me to stand between his parted

knees. “Panties. Off.”

Commanding Luke was hot. Did I want this? Oh yes, I did. My inner Mallory voice was saying *GO FOR IT!*

Reaching beneath my dress, I shimmied my panties down, then lifted one foot and then the other to remove them.

He took them from me and tucked them in his pocket as if I were a maiden offering a handkerchief as a token to a knight going to battle.

Only way sexier.

“Take me out.”

Setting one knee on the seat beside him, I was close enough to undo his jeans and slide the zipper down. He helped by lifting his hips to push the material down enough for him to spring free.

It had been dark in the hotel room and while I’d felt every naked inch of him, I hadn’t seen his dick all that clearly.

Now I did.

I saw every thick inch, every throbbing vein, the wide crown, the fluid that beaded at the tip. He must’ve grabbed his wallet because he pulled a condom out then tossed it aside.

He held it for me.

I ripped the foil open and gripped him at the base.

He hissed and his hips jerked.

I looked at him through my lashes. His lips were parted, his breathing ragged.

Then I worked the condom down. Down. *Down*. DOWN.

Holy hell, he was big.

Before I could gasp, he tugged me onto his lap, one hand on the back of my neck in a possessive gesture. It felt like he was barely leashed.

“Your pussy all wet for me?”

I nodded.

“Let’s find out.” His hands went to the hem of my t-shirt dress and lifted it. “Hold this up for me.”

I took it from him and held the cotton in my fingers.

“Higher. *Higher*. Show me that pussy. Yes, good girl.”

When his hand cupped me, I startled. When his fingers slipped inside, I writhed.

“So wet. Naughty girl.”

“Luke,” I whispered.

“Raise that dress up higher, tiger. Then I’ll fuck you.”

I pulled it right on up and he groaned.

He slipped from me and grasped my thighs, slick fingers smearing over my skin.

Then he settled me right down on him. One slow inch at a time.

“Oh my God,” I breathed, rolling my hips.

“Now ride your cowboy.”

I realized my eyes were closed. My lazy lids fluttered open.

I let go of the dress and set my hands on the top of Luke’s seat on either side of his head.

Then I started to move.



LUKE

ASPEN RIDING my dick was the prettiest fucking sight I'd ever seen. She was tight as fuck and dripping wet. And she was the least inhibited thing ever. Rolling her hips, working herself on me to find her pleasure. It was so fucking sexy.

Even with the condom, I wasn't going to last. She felt so fucking good. So perfect.

So I grabbed the bottom of her dress, pushed it up and over her head, then latched onto one of her nipples through the lace of her bra.

I thrust up into her, filling her. Making her mine as she came all over me. Her walls clenched and milked and squeezed as if it never wanted to let my dick go.

She thought this was fake? No fucking way. I'd never felt anything so real.

So... FUCK. I was going to c-I CAME.



ASPEN

LUKE'S PLACE WAS AMAZING. Built on one floor, it was expansive. Multiple bedrooms, fancy kitchen, huge deck. Set up in the Hollywood Hills, it had amazing views of LA through floor-to-ceiling windows. In fact, the entire back of his house was glass. It was late so the city lights twinkled like colored stars in an upside-down night sky.

But it was also depressing. He had a black leather couch and a TV and a freestanding lamp in his living room. That was it. No artwork. No carpets. No photos. Heck, no color. His bedroom wasn't much better. A king-sized bed, two nightstands, and a dresser. Nothing else.

"Did you just move in?" I asked, when he opened the master bath door and turned on the light as part of the tour.

"Um... three years ago."

"Three years and you don't have curtains."

He grinned at me. "Maybe I should get some drapes. Hungry?"

"I could eat," I said.

He held out his hand and led me back to the kitchen. Ever since we had sex on the plane, we'd hardly stopped touching each other. It was as if we needed the contact to breathe. I felt connected to him like I had no other. For something fake, it all felt really real. Like when he said he wanted a real relationship, and it might actually be a possibility. But this house was a reminder that our worlds were vastly different. While our chemistry was insane, nothing else intersected. He was a famous TV star, and I was the clueless woman who didn't have many cultural references. No wonder he'd been so good at that trivia topic.

I wasn't enough for him. I couldn't be. Not with Sierra and my yoga studio and my tiny apartment in Hunter Valley. He lived in the spotlight, and I ran from it. Literally and figuratively.

He opened a drawer by the massive fridge. "I've got takeout menus for every place around here. What do you feel like?"

"We can cook something," I offered, not wanting to wait for delivery and not interested in spending money when we could make it ourselves.

He gave me a look I couldn't understand and opened his fridge. There was flavored seltzers, beer, and a jug of pulp orange juice. Nothing else. "I don't cook."

"Ever?" I asked, stunned.

He opened a cabinet. Empty.

Then another. Also, empty.

"Nope. I have a coffee maker." He pointed to the shiny machine on the counter. The only thing on the vast granite.

"Okay."

His house was bare. His kitchen was bare.

“How much are you here?”

“At my house?” He shrugged. “When we’re filming, not much. Only to sleep. We start before dawn and usually go all day. For months.”

“Don’t you get hungry for a snack or something?”

He patted his flat stomach. “Besides takeout, my dietician delivers meals that she’s coordinated with my personal trainer. Plus, they serve tons of food on set. I’m supposed to be in Montana, so we have to fend for ourselves.”

He grabbed the menus from the drawer and set them before me on the counter. “It drives my mother crazy, my inability to cook.”

“I bet.” I glanced around. “Do you have a photo of your family anywhere?”

He pulled his cell from his pocket and swiped so I could see his home screen. There was Luke and his family, piled together on a couch smiling and laughing. It was blatantly obvious they were all related, right down to the little nieces and nephews.

“I keep my pics in here,” he said, pointing to his phone that I held. “This house is just a place for me to crash.”

I nodded in understanding. My parents’ house, the one I lived in when I was little before they moved into the governor’s mansion, had been a showpiece. While it was fully furnished, it also had drapes in every window. Actual drapes. Not curtains or blinds, God forbid. There were rooms I hadn’t been allowed to enter. Furniture I wasn’t allowed to sit on. Even my bedroom had to be perfect. I remembered the walls had been pale pink with a canopy bed and a dollhouse. I had to

make my bed every morning, even though there was a housekeeper. My clothes had to be in my closet. There was no dirty laundry visible. No wet towels. No toys strewn about.

It wasn't as if their friends came to my room, but it had to be ready as if a photographer might *pop in* and capture my parents at leisure in their perfect home.

No. Not home. House.

Then I went to boarding school at eleven and that definitely wasn't home. I shared a room with three other girls for seven years, then stayed in the ballet company's housing when I was in Spain. Hotels when we traveled.

My first *home* was my Hunter Valley little apartment.

"It's a house, not your home," I said.

This huge mansion that was easily worth millions of dollars, was just a fancy place for him to crash. My apartment above Mrs. Waddle in Hunter Valley was tiny. The whole place wasn't much bigger than his master bedroom. I slept in the living room on a daybed. But it was my home. My little safe haven with Sierra. I didn't need big. I didn't need a view. In our little cozy spot, I had my own little world with my daughter.

Luke had everything. Success, fame, fortune. But he had to be... lonely.

He stared at me for a second, then nodded. "Yeah, sounds about right. The one thing I do have is a TV. What do you say we pick something to eat and watch Dr. Shep Barnes in action?"

"Will he perform a triple craniectomy?" I asked, grinning.

He shrugged, then grinned. “I’m not spoiling it, except for the fact that my hair always looks spectacular.”



LUKE

“I CAN’T BELIEVE Priscilla died in an elevator accident.”

We were on his huge couch watching the first season of *NYC ER*. Chinese to-go containers were on a tray on the floor, long forgotten. For someone who didn’t watch TV, she was really into it. I’d never watched the episodes from start to finish before and it was a little weird to see, knowing how they were filmed and what was happening behind the scenes. Even more so with Aspen who never watched TV and had never seen me act. Ever.

“Her contract was up,” I explained about the Priscilla character.

“But you couldn’t save her,” she said, shaking her head in shame. “I thought Shep Barnes didn’t let anyone die.”

“Can’t save them all, tiger.” I reached for her feet and tugged so they were over my lap, her dress sliding a little up her thighs. Her legs were bare and silky smooth. Toned and gorgeous. I’d had her this afternoon on the plane, and I wanted

her again. I loved having her to myself. No chaperones. No tabloids.

“You’re a pretty convincing doctor.”

“Only pretty convincing?”

She tore her eyes from the TV and Priscilla’s funeral to look at me. “Well, I know the real you.”

“I’m not cut out to be a real doctor, huh?” I asked, not put out.

“Mallory would push Theo in front of a bus if she thought she had a shot with you.”

“I’m aware, and so is Theo,” I grumbled.

“Women love you.”

“They love Shep.”

What about you, Aspen? Do you love me, the real me? Do you love Luke? Could you?

Seeing her watch the show made me wonder if I, Luke, was enough for someone like Aspen. She saw the plane. The house. The TV show. She said she knew the real me. But did she like him—Luke—or was she expecting more? Could I be enough?

“And your hair,” she added.

I couldn’t help but grin. I had good hair. Wavy. Curly. Dark. “I think it needs its own contract.”

She cocked her head, then shifted her feet off my lap, spun around and settled back against me. I moved so her back was to my front as she was tucked beneath my chin, my arm around her shoulder. Fuck, this was better. “How did you get into acting?” she asked.

I reached for my cell, swiped to photo mode, and took a picture of our entwined legs on the couch and the show on the TV across the room. I didn't plan to post this one—or all of the others I'd taken of us together so far—but took it for myself.

I'd never had a woman in my house before. Not my couch or my bed. Bed, yes, but not this one specifically. If I slept with a woman, it was at a hotel. Not here. I never brought a woman here because then she'd know where I lived. That said a lot about me because it meant I was a little afraid of crazy women and their knowing the secret location of the bat cave. It also showed that I never cared enough to even consider sharing this part of me. My house. How insane was that?

But Aspen was on my couch and later would be in my bed. We ate Chinese and binge watched TV. It was amusing to see the show from a newbie's eyes. Aspen was the only person I knew who'd never even heard of the program.

Or me.

Or my hair.

“It all started when I was door number two in the Nativity play at church when I was four.”

She tipped her chin to look up at me. I couldn't resist kissing her.

“Door number two?” she asked, bemused. “I wasn't aware that a door, let alone two of them, was a big part of that religious event.”

“Of course, it was. A manger in December would be awfully cold without doors. It was a pivotal part. My mother was thrilled because all she had to do was find me brown pants and a brown shirt. She didn't have to make a camel costume

like she did two years later for my brother. And I'll point out that he had no talent as a camel whatsoever."

She grinned. "That was how you got discovered then? As a door?"

I grinned. "Nah. That was my first and last church activity. I did plays in school like the theater geek I was."

"So you got discovered playing Danny in *Grease* or a salesman in *The Music Man*?"

"Nope."

"Came out here to LA and waited tables and got discovered?"

"I was working as a cashier at a grocery store in Omaha."

She blinked, probably debating whether I was joking. "Really?"

"A producer's mother-in-law lived in Omaha. He was there for a wedding. He told me it was the hair."

She reached up, messed with it. "It does show well on TV. Like the sex scenes. Very realistic."

I shifted and pulled her beneath me. "Really? As realistic as this?" I rolled my hips into her.

"I know the real Shep Barnes."

Settling over her, propped up on my forearms, I said, "You know the real Luke Graham. Only you, Aspen." Only her.

"I'm the best fake girlfriend you've ever had," she admitted with a proud smile.

"Well, better than Lacey and she really is a fake girlfriend. Which reminds me, you need to be careful if we ever meet her.

Hopefully you won't, but I need to warn you, someone like her will use and do anything to make herself look good."

Aspen shrugged as if she wasn't concerned. "I can handle her."

I was sure she could, but I now felt like shit for putting her in the position where she might have to. I didn't want to see her hurt. Not physically, unless you could be wounded by fake nails. The one thing I liked about Aspen was her heart. She felt deeply. For her daughter. For Mrs. Waddle. For her girlfriends. Even those in her yoga classes. She was genuine.

Nice.

I didn't want to taint that with Lacey or the LA/acting lifestyle. Maybe I already had.

Unlike Lacey, there wasn't anything fake about being here with Aspen other than the title *fake girlfriend*. To me, this was real, but I'd have to give her up and let her walk away. I'd get my movie role and she'd get Duncan the Dick off her back. Simple?

Absolutely not. Because the more I held her, the more I wanted to keep her. Permanently. She was that perfect.



ASPEN

LUKE'S CELL RANG. He reached down and grabbed it off the floor where he'd placed it earlier since he didn't have a coffee table. He looked at the screen.

"It's my mom."

I was snuggled in his arms, but at those words, I made to sit up. His mom? "I'll let you—"

"Stay," he murmured and swiped the screen. "Hey, Momma."

He didn't just take a phone call, he took a *video* call because there, front and center on his screen, was a woman who looked an awful lot like Luke, just like she did in the photo he showed me earlier.

"What's this I'm hearing about a girlfriend?" she asked.

I fought against his arm around me because the last thing I wanted to be as his *fake* girlfriend was to meet his mother. He let me up and I sat beside him, but not in range of being caught on the camera. Why? Because Luke held my hand, keeping me from going any further away.

“Lacey is *not* my girlfriend,” Luke said.

“Not Lacey,” a man’s voice said.

“Hey, Pops.”

“That woman’s the female version of a pond leech,” the man added.

I bit my lip because his dad was right, clinging to Luke and his fame for her own.

“I mean the woman on your social media.”

“Since when do you look at that?”

“We didn’t. Your sister called and said you met a woman in Montana.”

He glanced my way, smiled.

“Oh, she’s there, isn’t she?” his mom asked, sounding excited.

“She is.”

“Luke,” I whispered while shaking my head.

“So she’s real?”

Luke grinned at his mom. “Oh, she’s real. Come here, tiger. I want you to meet my parents.”

Meet his parents? Oh shit.

He pulled. I resisted.

“She’s shy,” Luke told them since I wouldn’t budge.

“Tell her we’re nice. We won’t bite. Although we will tell her the time you bit the dog.”

My mouth dropped open. *He bit a dog?*

Luke rolled his eyes. “I was three and Spud bit me first.”

“Spud?” I whispered.

“Don’t ask me, ask my parents why they named a dog Spud.”

He tugged one more time and I let him pull me back into his side. His arm went around my shoulder.

I raised my hand and gave a little finger wave. “Hi.”

“Hello!” the woman said, smiling big. “I’m Janet and this is Tom.”

Tom looked like an older version of Luke. He had a full head of hair, although his was mostly gray.

“This is Aspen,” Luke introduced.

“Aspen, what a pretty name. How did you two meet?” Janet asked.

Oh God. I could feel my blush creeping up my neck. Did I tell his mother I met her son at a bar, and he took me to his room and fucked my brains out? “Um...”

“Trivia night at a bar. She’s so smart that we won fifty bucks.”

I blushed further at Luke’s praise.

“Smart? Then what are you doing with our idiot son?” Tom asked.

“Hey!” Luke countered.

“Tell us about you, Aspen honey,” Janet nudged.

“Well, I live in Hunter Valley and I’m a yoga instructor.”

“She has her own studio,” Luke added.

Both of his parents were looking at me through the phone, smiling and nodding. They seemed quite eager to hear what I

had to say.

“Wow.”

“Impressive,” Janet said. “I tried yoga one time, but I fell asleep at the end. The woman I went with farted, too, but wouldn’t admit it.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “I wouldn’t admit it either. As for falling asleep, that happens all the time. Especially in the early morning class.”

“I won’t tell you it was at four in the afternoon then.”

“She also has an amazing daughter,” Luke added. “Sierra. She’s away at hockey camp this week.”

Luke told his parents about Sierra. For a second, I was a little shocked. This wasn’t real and he didn’t need to bring her up. But he had. Which meant he thought of her, knew she was a part of my life.

“Hockey?” Janet asked.

I nodded. “She’s a little tomboy.”

“How old is she?” Tom asked.

“Nine.”

“She needs to come here and help herd some cows then.”

I thought of Sierra in a field with cows.

“She’d probably love that, right?” Luke asked, looking to me.

I blinked up at him. “You want Sierra to go to Nebraska?”

He shrugged and I felt it against my back. “Sure.”

“You both must come. We’ll get all the kids together and have a picnic. We got one of those slippy-slidey things that

you connect to the hose for the grandkids. Sierra will fit right in. In fact, Missy might even take her home with her.”

“By kids, she means me and my siblings and their kids,” Luke clarified. “And Missy’s my sister.”

Farting. Picnics. Toddlers biting dogs. Sprinkler games for kids. His family was like an alternate universe where people weren’t perfect. They did normal things. They shared embarrassing stories. They had... fun. They *wanted* to meet Sierra and include her.

“I’m a vegetarian,” I blurted out. There had to be a reason why they wouldn’t like us. Once they learned more, surely they’d shake their heads and change their minds.

“More hamburgers for me then,” Tom said, patting his stomach.

“Do you know how many corn recipes I have?” Janet asked.

“Too many,” Luke groaned.

“Hush, you,” Janet scolded, yet it was softened with a smile. “Now I’ll have someone to try them on. There’s fritters and salads and even a pudding. I’m sure you’ve discovered my son can’t cook.”

I nodded.

“Then you and Sierra will come here, and we’ll take real good care of you. I’ll even pull out Luke’s baby book and you can see that he was bald until he was three.”

I wasn’t sure what my face was showing, but Luke looked to me, and his smile slipped. I didn’t remember a single photo of myself as a kid, none with my parents other than political photos. And a baby book?

“Momma, I think you’ve overwhelmed my girl.”

“All right. It was great meeting you. Let us know how your screen test goes.”

That was the first time they mentioned his job, which didn’t seem as important to them as, well, me. They were thrilled he had a *real* girlfriend. Except I wasn’t. I was the one he was paying because I was that desperate to get Duncan—the asshole ex who treated me like shit—out of my life.

“Will do,” Luke said. “Love you, both.”

“Love you, son.”

He ended the call and pulled me into his lap. “What’s the matter?” His eyes roved over my face.

I took a deep breath. “Nothing. They’re... amazing.”

His smile returned. “Yeah, they are.”

“I’m not really your girlfriend though.” I ran a hand over his t-shirt, feeling the hard play of bone and muscle beneath. “They’re going to be mad at me for hurting their dog-biting son.”

He playfully swatted my butt. “They invited you because you’re you, not because you’re my girlfriend.”

“I don’t understand.” I didn’t. Why would they invite me *and* Sierra to Nebraska for a picnic when I wasn’t anything to his son?

He frowned. “What don’t you understand? Didn’t your parents... oh. Right. You aren’t close.”

I shook my head. “My mother would *never* talk about farting. The closest she’s ever come to a cow is a steak on her dinner plate. And a picnic? I doubt she’s ever been to one.”

“And your father?”

“They have an... open marriage. He sleeps with any woman who will share him with his glass of whiskey.”

“Tiger, Momma and Pops probably like you more than me. I’m sure my mom’s on the phone right now with my sister telling her all about you.”

I shook my head. “That’s not good. This isn’t real, Luke,” I reminded.

He kissed me. Lightly. Gently. Sweetly.

“They like you because I like you. That’s as real as it gets.”



ASPEN

“WHAT KIND of tea would you like?” Luke asked, then kissed my temple. His hand was around my waist, holding me close. We were standing in line at the coffee shop down the street from his house.

While the bare fridge was proof enough, Luke really didn’t cook, just like he and his mother said. His state-of-the-art kitchen was pristine, not because he had a housekeeper or because he was a clean freak, but because he never used it.

He did have a coffee maker, but since he didn’t even have tea bags for me, we walked to this fun place. It wasn’t as nice as Steaming Hotties, but they did have a decent tea selection. Plus, smoothies. And acai bowls. And every grain and nut and gluten free possibility for breakfast. Perhaps it was the one thing I liked about LA.

After the call with his parents, he carried me to bed. There, I spent the night having Luke-made orgasms and being held in Luke-perfect arms. Being a fake girlfriend indicated I had to be in that role for other people, but alone, we acted like a couple. Slept—and not-slept—like one. The line had quickly

blurred between real and fake. His kisses were real. His touch was real. But I second guessed whether he was doing it as show, as if this was how he'd treat his girlfriend if I were his *real* girlfriend. As if my visit to California was one long movie role for the both of us.

It felt like it was real. God, I loved how attentive he was. How protective. How orgasm-talented. How he held me. Winked at me. Kissed my forehead.

I felt... special. And his parents? They were the real deal. Genuine, open, friendly. It was clear Luke had a close relationship with them. But it was confusing how I fit in. Real or fake? The lines were blurring.

“Hey, Derek! Can we get an autograph?”

Luke's hand slid around my back as he turned, keeping me close as he spoke with some fans. “I'm spending time with my girl right now,” he told them. “Thanks for understanding.”

I watched as he gave the two women his signature wink and smile.

They eyed me and nodded. “Right. Yeah, sorry.”

“What can I get you?” the barista asked.

Luke looked to me.

I told the woman my order, making sure I grabbed something extra to have in the house for later, then Luke gave his and paid.

We moved out of the way to wait.

I was looking at a woman with her little girl in matching pink outfits having breakfast together and felt a pang of longing for Sierra when Luke's hand on my back tensed. “Shit,” he muttered.

I looked around, wondering what the trouble was.



LUKE

LACEY.

She was here in the fucking coffee shop.

The determined look in her dark eyes indicated this wasn't a quick stop for some caffeine. This was planned. Probably even scripted on her part. No doubt she'd seen my latest social media posts and was figuring out the whole rehab thing didn't work.

Rehab. This bitch told people I was in fucking rehab. I hated her and I was looking forward to the film role so I didn't have to see her on set every day. Hopefully, with my contract coming to an end, Shep Barnes would be killed off with Dengue Fever or fall in front of a train or something and be written out of the show, instead of renewing.

I didn't want to face her again. Hell, the idea of having to film another sex scene with her made me nauseated.

Everything about Lacey was fake. Body parts, personality, everything. Time away had me seeing every flaw she had. The sweatsuit she wore had to be a thousand dollars so it looked

casual. The styled hair. The full face of makeup at nine in the morning. The nails. The diamonds in her ears. The tan. The overfilled lips that smirked as she approached.

Aspen, in comparison, was gorgeous. Natural. She was makeup free, her hair pulled back in a casual ponytail. The flip flops on her feet had to have come from a dollar store. She didn't need to spend a fortune to be confident because she knew her worth wasn't based on outward appearance.

Our relaxed morning was ruined. Not because I couldn't hold my own with the bitch, but she wasn't worth my time. I was with Aspen and—

Right. I was with Aspen to get Lacey out of my fucking life. Aspen was here posing as my girlfriend for a moment just like this one. This was her role.

Now that Lacey was crossing the shop to start shit, it felt even more wrong, our... arrangement. I wanted to protect Aspen from someone like her. She didn't deserve one second of her scheming aimed her way because of me. My protectiveness flared to life.

My fight was different now.

With my hand around Aspen's waist, I pulled her into me, as if I could shield her from what was to come. This was my fight. It was time to take this woman down.



ASPEN

I LOOKED AROUND, not sure what had bothered Luke.

“Hello, Derek.”

Oh. It was the woman approaching. She blended in with every other overly made up LA woman that I hadn’t paid her any special attention. Her using *Derek* indicated she only knew him as an actor.

“Lacey,” Luke said.

Lacey? This dark-haired Barbie doll lookalike was Lacey? She was the one who said she and Luke—no, Derek—were dating but when that didn’t work told the tabloids he was in rehab? *That* Lacey?

The one whose dark hair was surely half extensions. Her eyelashes looked like caterpillars had fallen from a tree and landed on her face. Her tan was... orange and it clashed with her pink sweatsuit. Her gaze raked over me like I was assessed, then deemed worthless.

But it was the smile she gave Luke that was fake—how white could teeth be?—and catty.

Oh, this bitch was going down.

“You’re looking good,” she told Luke.

“Thanks,” he replied, his voice deep and in a tone I’d never heard him use before. The way he was eyeing her was full of disdain, although I had to wonder if he was using his acting chops not to call her out in front of an entire coffee shop. “I was in Montana, in case you heard I might have been elsewhere.”

“I missed you at the premiere,” she replied, glossing over the veiled words.

“I’m Aspen,” I said, cutting in. “The girlfriend.”

This was what I was here to do, to make this woman go away. I could cause a scene, but since Luke hadn’t started one yet, it was probably best if I pulled a Bergstrom. I may have ditched the last name when I was pregnant with Sierra, but I’d been trained and trained well to live up to the family name, even though I’d failed.

Luke wasn’t the only one who could act.

“This is Lacey,” Luke told me, although he’d already said her name. Maybe he really thought I had no idea since I didn’t have a TV and she hadn’t been in the first season we saw the night before. “She works with me on *NYC ER*.”

“Nice to meet you. I’ve heard so much about you,” I said, my voice laced with sweetness. What was the saying, you could catch more flies with honey?

She looked my way, and the smile was gone. “You’re from Montana?”

“Yes.”

“How... quaint.”

I noticed a man come up behind Lacey. Not too close, perhaps three feet back. He had a phone in his hand, and he was filming this. He didn't look like they were together—he was dressed in jeans, Metallica t-shirt, and a ball cap—but I felt pretty confident this whole thing was a set up.

How she knew we were here, I couldn't say. Maybe they followed us from his house. Maybe she knew he stopped here often. It didn't matter. She was getting her opportunity to do... something. Poking at me was it. Most likely to make Luke react.

To get him to behave angrily or irrationally so it could be perceived he was on drugs or mean to her.

“Lacey,” Luke said, drawing out the name as a warning, but I turned into him so my chest was pressed into his side and I set my hand on his shirt. The possessive touch was pretty clear.

“A community is as rich as its people,” I commented, offering her a neutral smile.

Lacey frowned, or she tried to since her forehead seemed to be frozen, probably with Botox. My vague statement confused her.

Luke stilled beside me, then leaned in and whispered. “Tiger, what are you doing?”

“You know Derek was with me first,” Lacey said. “That you're just a country bumpkin he'll tire of.”

There was a distinct correlation between the volume of Lacey's voice and the amount of noise there was in the coffee shop. No one was talking. No one was making coffee. Not a hiss of steam could be heard. Everyone was watching this live scene play out.

I felt Luke's body tense.

"Lacey," he said again.

I wasn't falling for the drama trap. It was what Lacey wanted. Her aim wasn't Luke any longer. It was me. She wanted me to respond. Maybe I'd yell. Or cry. Or throw a croissant at her. Or to get Luke to do all of that.

Not happening. I'd learned from the expert, Senator Marsha Bergstrom, on how to handle myself in sticky social situations. I met the President when I was seven. I had to negotiate interactions with senators and members of Congress and CEOs and other boring people as a child. Could I have done that without coaching? No way. I'd had a social tutor starting at five.

Yeah, it was as awful as it sounded. But it was coming in handy right about now.

I patted Luke on his rock-hard abs. "It's okay, baby." Then I gave Lacey my megawatt senator's daughter smile. "Derek's fortunate to have such a great community surrounding him." I made sure to use Luke's actor name. Pen name? Stage name? "I know his working with you and the others on the show have made him the actor he is today. I'm so eager to see him in the movie role. Aren't you?"

Lacey blinked. "Well, yes."

"Oh, I'm so glad you stopped by and introduced yourself. When you're in Montana next, be sure to look me up."

I glanced up at Luke. He stared at me, and I wasn't sure if he was incredulous, amused, or angry.

"I think our drinks are ready," I said. "Shall we go?"

He nodded dumbly and I steered him toward the counter where our to-go cups were waiting.

“Oh, Lacey, wait,” I called.

She hadn’t moved.

“How about a photo of the three of us together? I know how much you like to share photos of you and Derek on social media. Your man there can take it for us, I’m sure. Oh wait, is he your boyfriend? Lucky you, he’s so handsome.”

Luke actually snickered as Lacey was caught out. She had no choice but to acknowledge the guy, who it turned out was *not* her boyfriend—surprise, surprise—and stand with us to take a photo. He probably already had a bunch, enough candids that could be sold to the tabloids. Several random people in the shop stood beside him to take photos of their own of the three of us together and I was sure Lacey picked up on that. This couldn’t be misconstrued as anything but what it was: co-workers meeting in a coffee shop.

Luke had his arm around me, and I turned my body into him so it was more than obvious we were an item.

I leaned across Luke so I could whisper to Lacey. “If you post shit about my man again, I won’t be so nice next time. You might think I’m a country bumpkin, but this tiger has claws.”

Luke growled as Lacey’s eyes narrowed.

“Good seeing you,” I said, my voice loud enough for everyone to hear, patting her on the surprisingly bony shoulder as Luke steered me toward the door.



LUKE

WHAT THE HELL JUST HAPPENED?

We were walking down the street, Aspen sipping her tea as if she didn't just diffuse a huge cat fight. No, there hadn't been one at all because she deflected it like a pro.

She'd defended me. Not the other way around. She also made Lacey look like a bitch through flattery.

I was hard as a fucking rock.

“What was that, tiger?” I asked, still a little bewildered.

She shrugged, acting if nothing happened. “It was nice meeting Lacey. I can see what you mean about the fake cheekbones. They're a little too much, don't you think?”

“A little too much? Her *cheekbones*? You know she was trying to start a fight.”

“Oh, I know.”

“Then how—”

“There are six phrases that can be used in any conversation.”

“Um... what?”

“I find a little time outdoors makes me reflect on the little things.”

I stopped because I had no idea what the fuck that meant. When the people walking behind us weaved around us in the middle of the sidewalk, I took Aspen’s arm and moved her closer to a bike rack out of the way.

“I don’t know what the hell that means,” I told her.

“Exactly. That’s phrase number one, but it didn’t apply with Lacey.”

I blinked. “Okay.”

“Phrase two. History has shown we’re only human.”

“I’m not sure Lacey is human,” I replied.

She pointed at me. “Exactly. I’m for girl power and all but what’s the deal with those eyelashes? We might have to get the animal activists in on it because I think she uses real caterpillars.”

A laugh escaped before I could even try to stop it. I glanced around. We were on a busy street in LA. No one was paying us any attention.

I scratched my head and couldn’t help but smile. I was bemused and befuddled and definitely in awe. “Phrase three?” I wondered, all of a sudden very interested in Aspen’s conversation strategy.

“The one I used on Lacey. A community is as rich as its people.”

“And the others?”

She shrugged. “Similar vague statements, but you get the idea.”

“She wanted drama,” I said. “To catch me angry or whatever.”

Aspen gave one decisive nod, then blew on her tea. “I know. The easiest way to diffuse a situation like that is to make the bad guy look like the good guy. They don’t know what hit them.”

“How on earth do you know this? Psych classes in college?”

“You learned to raise cows... wait, is it cows or corn in Nebraska?” she asked, her brow crinkling.

“Both,” I said, a smile pulling at my lips.

“Right. Cows and corn. Well, I learned from the best. My mother could give Sam a few pointers.”

“She’s in PR?”

She waved the question off. “Something like that. But I can hold my own at a dinner party with bigwigs. Lacey’s a piece of cake in comparison.”

“Dinner parties? Sounds like you had fun as a teenager.”

“Oh, no. I was six.”



ASPEN

“SIX?” he asked, staring at me wide eyed. “Did you even know what those phrases meant?”

I shook my head. “I had no idea. But that was the point. No one knows what they mean whether you’re six or sixty-six.”

He thought about it. “That’s true. You fucking stumped me. Lacey, too. Did you see her face?”

That bitch didn’t know what hit her.

I couldn’t help but smile. “I’m not sure what she’s going to post, but I’m sure it’ll be pretty obvious now that the two of you aren’t dating.”

“Well, history has shown we’re only human.”

I grinned at his well-timed phrase. “Well said.”

“I can see you at six, spouting bullshit to old people.”

“I had those phrases down.”

“What about when you were older? You didn’t peak at six, did you? I can only imagine the talent at thirteen with some

sass added in.”

I shook my head, then took a sip of tea. “Thirteen? I was in boarding school. Those phrases only work on, like you said, old people.”

He frowned. “Boarding school? Dinner parties at six? I don’t think I like your parents much.”

“I don’t like them very much either.” I shrugged, remembering my mother telling me I was going to boarding school. That I needed to focus more on my ballet, that I had to perform at the Bergstrom best. Then being shipped off and discovering that the best was me trying to grasp a new life on my own. A new country. Rigorous classes. Intense teachers.

I rarely went home because the phrases weren’t enough. I needed to be perfect, and I wasn’t that, no matter how hard I tried. No matter how *good* I was. It took me years to figure out that I didn’t actually have a *home*. Not until Hunter Valley. “No cows and corn for me, but I had those phrases down.”

“What about that little threat you whispered there at the end?”

I rolled my eyes. “She was a bitch.”

“Tiger,” he said, but this time in a completely different way. Full of concern. Comfort. Whatever. My youthful heart needed that sympathy and I turned into his arms, and I accepted his hug. For the first time, I felt like I wasn’t alone. That I had someone to lean on. To confide in, although I hadn’t told Luke the truth. Not that I was lying, but who wanted to hear all about my not-so-fun relationship with my parents?

I was a fake girlfriend, not a real one. I didn’t like to share my embarrassing past with my friends. I wasn’t sharing all of

it with a fake boyfriend. While his hug felt genuine, it was because Luke was a nice guy. Nothing more.



LUKE

“WHO THE HELL IS SHE?” Sam asked, eyeing Aspen out the floor to ceiling windows.

I’d been secretly watching her out on the deck for the past hour. She started with yoga and if I recognized it right, sun salutations. Then, for the past fifteen minutes, she’d been dancing. First, she warmed up using the railing for balance, then began to just... move. It was clearly ballet, but she did it in her bare feet and to music only she heard.

She was amazing at it, and I was in awe. The way she gracefully bent and moved was... beautiful. I pulled out my phone and recorded it, adding a short clip to my social media showing her off, making sure everyone knew she was mine.

My agent was eyeing her, but not in the reverent way I was. I knew the look of a man who was checking out a woman’s snug leggings and fitted t-shirt that rode up a few inches every time she bent forward.

My gaze narrowed at the way he was practically drooling. While I was allowed to appreciate the view, Sam wasn’t.

“Dude, stop eye fucking her,” I snapped.

He spun on his thousand dollar shoe and faced me, an unrepentant grin on his face. I was represented by a huge PR agency, and he was the agent they’d assigned me back in the day. Sam Weismann was forty, born and raised in LA. He wore expensive clothes, got an expensive haircut, drove an expensive car, and repped expensive clients.

Before the plane even landed, he’d texted me five times wondering about the photo I’d posted. Since then, I posted more—welcoming my girl to LA by posing us in front of a palm tree and another with her by my side with the Hollywood sign in the distance—and he’d driven into the hills to see me in person.

“Aspen.”

“Right. Perfect.” He nodded, gave her one last glance through the window before I moved in front of his *view*. “I told you I’d have found you a girlfriend. How much are you paying her? While I admit, she’s a stunner, they’re a dime a dozen around here. You’ll have to make sure she has her union card though because—”

“Shut up,” I told him. “She’s my girlfriend. She’s not a fucking actress.”

I left out that I paid her, but that was between me and Aspen. And I wasn’t giving her the money for the ring as a trade. Okay, in her eyes, I was, but there was no way in hell I was going to let her wander around in the woods alone finding some ridiculous bulldog rock and a buried ring, or let her go into debt for a loser like her ex. Once she found the money in her account, she could make him disappear from her life for good.

There was no question she had a tight budget. Her little apartment was too small for her and Sierra. Her car was far from new. It didn't sound like she had any family support, whatever the story was there. She didn't deserve to have an ex treat her like shit, then go after her like this. While legally the ring probably belonged to the fucker, but if he did the things she said, she'd earned it.

Sam held up his hands. "Whoa, okay. You met her in Montana?"

"Yeah. She's a yoga instructor."

"Yeah? She looks like a ballerina to me."

"She has a yoga studio in Hunter Valley."

"Ballet. Yoga. Twice as flexible." I didn't like his grin, or that he was right.

"Get your head out of the fucking gutter," I snapped. Even though I'd gotten inside her before we fell asleep the night before, that was between me and Aspen.

"Does it matter if I'm into her or not? You're talking like a total asshole."

He didn't look the least bit contrite. In fact, he looked as if he had no idea what I meant. "I've never seen you like this about a woman."

"I've never been like this about one. When they're sharks like Lacey, I have no interest."

"She doesn't want you for your money?"

"No."

"You sure? 'Cause it's one thing to hide your cash in Montana with a snap shirt and a pair of jeans, but even a

natural blonde like her can tell that a private plane and this house means a huge payout.”

The last thing I needed was to be seen on a commercial airplane. Trapped with fans was not a good idea. The cost of the chartered flight was worth it to stay out of the public’s eye. As for my house? It cost a fucking fortune but was a good investment. At least that was what my financial advisor told me. It had stunning views—including the one I had now of Aspen on my deck—but it was just a place to live. I worked all the time. I didn’t hang with my neighbors or do block parties. It was a house. My parents’ place in Nebraska was a home. With growth charts on the door frame of the kitchen, the burned hole in the living room carpet where my brothers and I set it on fire in fifth grade. The love. The family.

This was where I hid out and slept.

If a woman wanted this place, she could have it. What I was stingy with was my heart and I’d give it freely, to the right woman. So far, the only one I ever was willing to share it with was Aspen.

I pushed him toward the door. “Get out.”

He huffed as he stumbled. “What’s the problem? I have your back.”

“No, you have your percentage of my contract,” I countered, opening the door. “If you want to keep it—”

He stood in the entry. “You really do like her.”

He eyed me with surprise, as if the possibility never occurred to him. As if all he dealt with was fake and transactional arrangements between men and women for the purpose of furthering and advancing a career.

The sound of the sliding door had me turning. In came Aspen and she froze when she saw us. “Oh, hey. Sorry to interrupt.”

I held out my hand. “You didn’t, tiger. This is Sam, my agent.”

She smiled and came over. Held out her hand for him to shake. “Nice to meet you.”

“Same. You’ve got a good guy here.”

She looked to me, studied my face as if she were considering Sam’s words. “I think so.”

I couldn’t help but wrap my arm around her.

“Well, as your PR person, this relationship is a good thing. The posts you put up have a shit ton of views and likes. The comments are pouring in, especially of the ones of you two with Lacey. Everyone’s wondering who your new girlfriend is and it’s been made pretty fucking clear that you and Lacey aren’t an item. It’s starting to get traction on the tabloid sites, too.”

“Good,” I told him. It was working.

“Keep it up. Your screen test tomorrow is going to go great.”

Sam gave a little salute and let himself out. Keep it up? My dick was perpetually *up* around Aspen. No problem there. And he worded it as if we had to remember to like each other. That this was an arrangement. Well, it was, but I wasn’t pretending how I felt about Aspen.

“He seems... nice,” she said.

I huffed. “He’s jaded. All he sees is work and money.”

She nodded. "I know the type."

She was familiar with guys like Sam? She was up on workaholics, assholes, or at least an unintentional asshole, completely jaded when it came to women because all he ever came across were social climbers and schemers?

All her guy friends in Hunter Valley were decent. Maybe not Theo James since he had plans to chop me up as if he were Edward Scissorhands, but he did care about his woman. They all seemed to love fiercely. They clearly loved and were protective of it. None of them were like Sam.

"Oh yeah?" I asked.

She nodded. "I guess me being your fake girlfriend worked. I... um, well. My job here is done."

What? NO! Her job wasn't done. There was no *job*. She was here because I wanted her, not because of Lacey. Okay, because of Lacey *technically*, but no.

"No," I said.

She looked up at me with confusion. "No?"

"I need you," I admitted.

Her cheeks flushed. "I don't think you *need* me anymore."

"You're wrong, tiger. I still need you."

Since my arm was around her, I pulled her in close and kissed her. I loved kissing her. I loved her in my arms. Her skin was warm and a little sweaty from her workout. I nibbled at her neck, then licked her salty skin. Yeah, I fucking needed her.

"I'm gross. I need to shower," she said, making no move toward the bathroom.

“Mmm, good idea.” I lifted my head, then took her hand and led her down the hall. “We’ll take one together. Although I’m going to get you *very* dirty before I get you clean.”

In the bathroom, I ripped off her t-shirt and worked her leggings off. In a plain green athletic bra and matching thong, she looked strong and fit.

“What’s with the dancing?” I asked, reaching into the shower and turning on the spray. I did it without looking because I couldn’t stop staring at her, watching as she shucked her bra and panties. “Did you... fuck, do it as a kid or something?”

My mind went blank because all the blood in my body pumped to my dick. Her tits were small and high with large nipples. Her body was long and lean, and I stared at the juncture of her thighs and her pussy. Neatly trimmed pale hair graced that nirvana. My mouth watered for another taste.

Unlike Lacey—although I hadn’t seen her bare, thank fuck—and other women I knew, Aspen hadn’t had any work done. I loved that she was so uninhibited, so confident in herself. She didn’t want fake tits or a butt lift or lipo, not that she needed it.

She was perfect, every fucking inch of her. It was really hard to concentrate, waving my fingers blindly through the spray to ensure the right temperature.

I pushed down my shorts because I needed in her. Now.

“Yes. I studied ballet for—”

Was she talking? I couldn’t process as I cupped her tits, squeezed them, pinched the nipples, and watched her eyes fall closed and practically melt for me. “Like that?” I asked on a growl.

She squirmed. “God, yes.”

Sliding my hands down her body, I cupped her taut ass and picked her up. She wrapped her legs around my waist, and I carried her into the shower, pressing her against the tile. “I can’t get enough of you.”

Leaning down, I took her nipple in my mouth. Sucked hard.

Her back arched and her fingers tangled in my hair. “Me, too. Don’t stop.”

“Never,” I murmured, latching onto her other nipple next.

I meant it. I wanted this with Aspen. Being with her was simple. Easy. There was no work here. Just want.



LUKE

“HOW DID IT GO?” Aspen asked when I came through the front door.

She climbed off the couch and ran to me, wrapped her arms around me. Usually, when I had big news to share, I called my parents. They were my biggest cheerleaders and they helped me share in my successes. This time, when I came out of the studio lot, all I wanted to do was tell Aspen. To be with her and share my happiness.

I lifted her up and kissed her. “Not sure, but I think I got it.”

Her eyes widened and she grinned. “Yeah?”

I nodded. Fuck, I wanted that role. It would change the trajectory of my career, pull me out of the Dr. Dark and Dangerous moniker and I would hopefully be seen for my acting skills instead of my hair or the ability to perform emergency surgery with a pen.

“They’ve seen me act, so this was a little bit of a formality.”

“Did they ask about rehab?” She looked a little worried because that was the clincher... and the reason she was here. Shit. I broke every speed law between Burbank and here to share my good news with my *fake* girlfriend. I set her back on her feet and took a small step back.

I huffed, ran a hand through my hair. “Yeah, and I told them the truth, that the tabloids like a good story.”

“That’s it?”

It did seem a little anticlimactic. There’d been no drama like on TV. I showed up, I read some lines from a scene. They took some photos. They asked me about rehab, and I even got a back slap for finding love outside of the LA rat race.

Except I fed them one lie to negate another. Was I any better than Lacey, who used me to get what she wanted? I’d used Aspen.

“They saw the photos of us I posted, even saw the one with Lacey. The timeline’s there to prove I wasn’t in rehab. They’ll negotiate with Sam, and I’ll hear back. In the meantime, we have a party to go to tonight.”

“We?”

“Yeah. It’s at some mansion in Beverly Hills. The producer will be there, and it’ll give me one more networking opportunity. Lots of industry people, community activists.”

“And you’re going because...”

“*We’re* going because they—hopefully—want to show off their new star. Your boyfriend’s gonna be a movie star. What do you think about that?” I winked.

She studied me, then shrugged. “I’m proud of you. But to me, you’re just Luke.”

My smile slipped and I leaned in and kissed her to hide it. I was just Luke? I didn't know what that meant. Who *just Luke* was. Could that be enough or someone as amazing as Aspen?

"I didn't really pack anything for a party," she said, pulling me from my thoughts.

That was her concern? "I'll call my stylist."

She stared at me. "Stylist? You?"

"I'm a hick from Nebraska. Of course, I have a stylist."

"Fine." She cocked her head and bit her lip. "Until then, I think we should celebrate."

"Oh yeah?"

She set her hand on my chest and slid it down. Lower and lower until she got to the button of my dark pants. Between that sexy gleam in her eye and how close her fingers were getting to my dick, I got hard.

When she got the zipper down and reached into my boxers to grip my length, I growled.

"You want something, tiger?"

She nodded, then leaned in close, tipped her head up and nibbled my jaw. "So bad."

Fuck. Me.

"Where?" My eyes fell closed at one hard stroke.

"My mouth."

Pre-cum spurted onto her hand and I grabbed her wrist. "You do that, and this will be over way too fast."

"But—"

I leaned down and tossed her over my shoulder.

Aspen laughed as I carried her toward my bedroom.
“Luke!”

I spanked her upturned ass. She was in another pair of her snug leggings, and I started to tug them down as I went. By the time I tossed her onto my bed, all I had to do was yank the stretchy fabric the rest of the way from her knees.

I could see how wet her pussy was.

My dick was hard.

What we shared wasn't fake.

Her orgasms I brought her to, first on my mouth and then around my dick, weren't fake.

When I came buried deep, going blind for a few seconds... that wasn't fake either.

When I tucked her into my arms and held her after, running my fingers over her soft skin, I knew that asking her to be my fake anything was wrong.

Because how I felt for her was real. All of it. I couldn't let it go on any further without her knowing. “Aspen,” I murmured. “This... us. It's real. There's nothing fake about how I feel for you.”

She didn't respond. Didn't move. Because she was asleep.



ASPEN

“WHO’S HOUSE IS THIS?” I asked as we walked through the front doors. The ones that were glass and wrought iron and two stories tall. The place was a mega-mansion that looked like it had been professionally styled for an architectural magazine.

“No idea,” he murmured, leaning in close so I could feel his breath fanning my ear. “Did I tell you how gorgeous you look?”

I couldn’t help but smile. The dress his stylist, Franco, picked for me was amazing. It was one shouldered and fit through the torso, but it flowed long down to my ankles. In a bright grass green, it was simple, but elegant. I chose to put my hair up in a loose bun at the nape of my neck with tendrils hanging down. I skipped jewelry and put on the minimal makeup I brought in my suitcase.

“About five times.”

“That’s all?” With pressure on my waist, he stopped me. I looked into his eyes. He’d cleaned up too, in tan pants, a pale

blue button up shirt that was left untucked. His hair, his *infamous* locks, were combed, but still unruly. He'd shaved and looked sexy and glamorous but not over the top. And he was with me.

“Then I'll have to keep telling you because that's not enough.”

I couldn't help it. I kissed him. Right in the fancy mansion's foyer.

“There you two are.”

I pulled away, a little embarrassed at being caught. But it was Sam and since he was a little bit of a creep—or that was the vibe I got off him when we met at the house—I didn't really care. He knew we were dating. Or fake dating. Or he knew I was here to support Luke. Gah. Whatever.

The guys shook hands. “I saw Chris but didn't get a chance to talk to him. Gonna have to work it, buddy.”

Luke's eyes took on a determined gleam, very much like that first night we were together, and I told him a man had never made me come. “On it.”

“Just gotta schmooze tonight. Pull out those acting chops.”

Luke took my hand, looked to me. “I can do that.”

“Aspen, too,” Sam said. “For a yoga instructor, you're gonna need to be a talented actress. Lacey's out and the whole rehab debacle is forgotten news.”

Oh fuck. From one second to the next, I remembered. I was here for a job. A role. A purpose. Luke squeezed my fingers and led me away and toward the bar. Yeah, I needed a drink.



LUKE

SAM WAS AN ASSHOLE. While he'd been honest, he didn't have a diplomatic bone in his fucking body. I felt the second Aspen tensed at his comments about her being an actress. We'd been kissing, which wasn't fake at all, and then he reminded both of us that all she was here for was to make me look good.

Aspen was more than arm candy. She was stunning in that dress, but she was stunning completely bare. Or hiking in the woods with a couple kids. Or leading one of her yoga classes. Hell, even hungover. Besides my parents, she was the only one I met who grounded me, who made me see how fucked up and shallow everyone around me was. If someone needed to change, it wasn't Aspen.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked.

I looked to Aspen. “White wine, please.”

If I got this part, and fuck, I hoped I did, there was eight months of travel and filming. For the first time, I caught on to the fact that I would be away, far fucking away, from Aspen.

That her standing beside me wasn't fake. That I wanted her at my side.

But this movie was epic action/adventure, not a simple TV show that was filmed on a movie set in one location. The hours were brutal, but everyone went home at the end of the day. And I went to my barely furnished real estate investment. Either way, Aspen wasn't going to be there.

As I told the bartender what I wanted, someone called Aspen's name. While I expected to make small talk with people I knew, I wasn't expecting her to know anyone.

Beside me, she went still. Her fingers clenched mine and I whipped my gaze to hers. Her eyes were wide in surprise... and something else. Who'd called for her? I turned, found a man walking our way.

"Shit," she whispered, staring at the approaching man.

I leaned down. "You okay?"

She nodded, swallowed hard. "Not really."

Whoever the man was, she knew. And didn't like. I'd never seen him before. Sixties, salt and pepper hair, navy suit.

"This is unexpected," he said. His dark gaze was on Aspen.

She didn't say anything until he was directly before her. "Hello, Father."

Father? What. The. Hell? Oh shit.



ASPEN

I DIDN'T KNOW what to say. I hadn't seen my father in years. He looked older, a few more gray hairs, but otherwise exactly the same. Same expensive suit. Same haircut. Same whiskey glass in hand.

My heart had been hardened to him years ago but seeing him was a shock. California was his turf, but the state was huge and never imagined I'd run into him. What were the chances?

"I thought you were in Wyoming."

I cleared my throat. "Montana. I find a little time outdoors makes me reflect on the little things."

He tipped his head back and laughed. "Ah, you were always so bright using those phrases. Seems like old times."

"Yes, I learned to use them for when I had nothing to say to someone," I said, hoping he'd get the hint and leave.

"Hi, I'm Derek Dashwood."

I'd completely forgotten Luke was beside me. Of course, he'd use his stage name at the party. Father shook Luke's hand. "Richard Bergstrom. What do you do, Derek?"

"I'm an actor."

Father studied Luke, as if wondering if he recognized him. "Been in anything I'd have seen?"

Luke offered a noncommittal shrug. "Just a little TV. I'm actually between jobs at the moment."

His eyebrows went up. "Ah, an out of work actor. Well, Aspen does have wealthy parents so I can see why you would be with her."

I wasn't sure if he was poking at Luke looking for a sugar momma or me because I couldn't get a man like Luke for any other reason than greed on his part.

"Oh?" Luke asked. "Not because she's smart and beautiful?"

"Connections, obviously."

"Right. Actually, Dick, I'm not with Aspen for them, although you seem like a very *connected* man."

I bit my lip at the nickname. Richard was often shortened to Dick, or at least it used to be, and Luke used it just right.

Father's chest puffed as he took a sip of his drink, missing the barb.

"Actually, I'm here with Aspen because the condom broke, and she's stuck with me until we know if there's going to be a little Dashwood running around."

I choked on a sip of wine. Luke's hand rubbed up and down my back until I stopped.

“That wouldn’t be the first time, would it, Aspen?” Father asked.

Yeah, my father was a total dick.



LUKE

WHAT THE ACTUAL fuck was that? I watched as Richard Bergstrom walked away from us, headed straight toward the bar.

“That was your father?” I asked, stunned. It was almost out of a soap opera script. “I thought your last name was Lane.”

“It is. I changed it when Sierra was born. What the hell was all that about?”

“What? The condom joke?”

“Yes.”

I studied her. “Are you mad at me for that? The guy’s got a very apt name. Your father is—”

“I know. A dick.”

“Is that why you’re estranged?”

“One of many reasons.”

It had been clear they weren’t close. No hugs. No smiles. No affection whatsoever. Only being an asshole on his part.

He'd walked off without even saying goodbye. To his own daughter!

I recognized her using one of those *useful phrases* she had. With her father.

“And no, I'm not mad. I thought it was hilarious. And you, the out of work actor.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Ten years ago.”

“*Ten?*” I didn't even know what to say to that. “What's he doing here?” I looked around, not understanding. What was he doing at a LA film industry party?

“I assume for my mother. If he's here, then she is.” She glanced around, as if we were swimming in murky waters just waiting to see a shark fin appear. “He often tags along at these kinds of events to try to sleep with any woman who will have him. At least that's the way it used to be.”

What? “She knows?”

With a nod, she answered, “Yes. As long as he's discreet.”

“What did he mean it wouldn't be the first time the condom broke?”

“Sierra.”

So Aspen had Sierra because of a birth control mishap?

“That's how he thinks of his granddaughter? As the *condom breaking incident?*”

Aspen shrugged. “They've never met her. Sierra doesn't even know who they are.”

I kissed her forehead. “Jesus, tiger. Are you closer with your mom?”

She looked up at me, those blue eyes a touch haunted. But also determined. “No. She’s a hell of a lot worse.”



ASPEN

FOR A MANSION as big as this one, it didn't take long to run into my mother. If my father was here, then I knew she would be. All I had to do was turn around and look across the room. Seeing my father had been a surprise. I was caught off guard and my emotions were raw. I felt vulnerable and young again. But I'd had a few minutes to prepare myself to see my mother. It wasn't enough.

"That's her," I told Luke, lifting my chin in the direction where my mother stood, an entourage surrounding her. She was speaking and they were listening in awe, as if she were a cult leader and she was telling them to drink the juice.

"Where?" Luke asked, eyes searching.

"The blonde with the crowd."

I knew the second Luke saw her. His eyes widened.

"That's... *that's* your mother?"

Mother saw me and she stopped speaking for a moment. Then she smiled and excused herself from the group.

Shit, she was coming this way.

“Yes.”

“Fuck.”



LUKE

HOLY SHIT. Aspen was Senator Bergstrom's daughter? What the fuck?

It was obvious they looked alike. Similar tall and slim physiques. Same long blonde hair, although her mother's was clearly dyed, but done well. She'd had work, although it was more subtle than most. Probably an eyelid lift. Definitely Botox based on the way she didn't have one hint of reaction or emotion on her face as she came our way. Especially not for a woman who hadn't seen her child in a decade.

She was in a crisp navy dress, a red scarf artfully arranged around her neck. She looked patriotic and professional, the perfect outward appearance of one of our nation's representatives.

But I never, in a million years, would have ever imagined them to be related.

"Aspen, this is a surprise." She stood before her daughter, hands clasped together in front of her. She was smiling at

Aspen as if she needed her vote. Then she looked to me. “And with Derek Dashwood no less.”



ASPEN

MOTHER RECOGNIZED LUKE. Or him as Derek.

“Good to see you again, Senator,” Luke said.

Mother blinked, but her smile didn’t falter. She *recognized* Luke but didn’t remember meeting him.

“You two know each other?” I asked, probably giving my mother an out for being caught off guard.

“Yes, we met at a party a few months ago,” Luke said. “We sat next to each other at dinner.”

“Oh yes, that’s right,” Mother replied. “The woman across the table from us went into anaphylactic shock from the seafood.”

“Yes.”

“I hope she’s doing well.”

“From what I heard from my producer, she is fine, although steering clear of any kind of shellfish.”

“Yes, Chris. You mentioned then you wanted the role. Has he made a decision yet?”

“Chris?” I asked.

“The producer,” Luke said. “And no.”

That was why we were here. To hopefully clinch the deal.

Mother smiled, but this one was patronizing as she set her hand on Luke’s forearm. “I put in a good word, just as we talked.” She gave him one more pat, then looked my way. Studied me with the same close scrutiny as ever. “Aspen, you’ve put on weight.”

Luke went rigid beside me.

“Yes, I find an appropriate body mass is better for my health,” I said, but even after all this time, I slid right back into the role of Disappointing Daughter. But I was stuck on what she said about Luke. She put in a good word for him when they– “You two talked?”

They spoke of him getting the part? When? Why?

He was eyeing my mother with a clenched jaw. “Yes. As she said, we met at a party.”

“Where someone almost died from eating seafood. To talk about your movie role.”

“I know the producer, of course,” Mother said, setting a hand on her chest as if giving herself a pat for knowing everyone. “He’s a big donor to my campaign.”

That’s why she was here. Money.

“As Derek said, we sat next to each other at dinner. It’s impossible to forget someone you bond with over a near death experience. Don’t worry, I’ll talk with him tonight and put in another good word. You’re so talented as that doctor on TV.”

Her gaze raked over him in a way that made me vomit a little in my mouth. She was eyeing him like he was a piece of meat she wanted to devour.

Or maybe the nausea was because Luke and my mother had met before. And talked about the movie. And... was he needing her help to close the deal?

“Thank you,” Luke said.

“You’re here with Aspen, why?” Mother asked, eyeing me like I’d snuck in with the catering help.

“We’re dating,” I told her.

She glanced between the two of us, her eyebrow going up, or it would have if it could move. “Well, well, Aspen, you’ve certainly set your sights high.”

I wanted to laugh. My father thought Luke was an out of work deadbeat and my mother thought he was a sugar daddy.

“Again,” she continued. “Whatever happened with Duncan Pounder? He was quite the catch.”

“Senator,” Luke began. It was my turn to set my hand on Luke’s arm.

Oh my God. My mother knew about Duncan. About our relationship. That I dumped him, although probably didn’t understand that it was his desire to connect with her that ended it. I was standing here with another man, and she tossed Duncan’s name out there. To embarrass me? To warn Luke?

Why wouldn’t she? She knew Luke. Made a connection for him with the film producer. And now he was trying to clinch the deal and she was here.

And so was he. With me.

OH MY GOD.

Oh my God.

Was Luke using me, just like Duncan had?

Had he planned this? Found me in Hunter Valley, connected with me, got me to be his *fake* girlfriend so he'd have a better chance of meeting my mother again?

Was he *using* me, too?

I swallowed hard. "She's right. I have set my sights high. I'm just a small-town yoga instructor. Why is it that you're here with me?"

My heart was pounding, and I was about to lose my shit. Duncan was one thing. This was another. What was the saying, *Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me?*

Luke took my hand in his, brought it to his lips. "Because I want you beside me."

I frowned. "Because you want my mother to put in a good word with the producer?"

"Of course, I will," Mother cut in. "I always help my friends. And it's always so nice to see family."

"Yes, isn't it?" Luke asked. "Sierra is amazing."

Mother's smile didn't slip when she asked, "Sierra?"

"Your granddaughter," I told her. I hated her. Loathed her. "It was lovely to see you, Mother. I know you want to keep up with your constituents."

"Yes, a community is as rich as its people," she said.

And off she went as if I was just another constituent. Actually, less, because I lived in Montana, and she didn't have my vote.



LUKE

“ARE you sure you weren’t adopted?” I asked, my teeth clenched. I wanted to smack that woman for having zero sense. Senator Bergstrom had her *daughter* right in front of her. Her smart, funny, sassy, wise, loving child, and she’d pulled the six phrases bullshit.

She didn’t even know her granddaughter’s name!

“Does it matter?” Aspen asked, turning and leaving the room. I followed. No, she was leaving the party.

“Aspen,” I called.

She stopped in the empty foyer, spun back. “I think my job here is done.”

I looked over my shoulder. “Your mother’s a bitch. I don’t blame you for wanting to go.”

“I know what my mother is like. I thought I knew you. You’re really are a good actor.”

I blinked at her. “What?”

“How long have you planned this? Was Sam in on it?”

I frowned. “What are you talking about?”

She waved her hand. “This. Me. Using me to get to my mother.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because the deal to be in the film isn’t closed. She’s friends with *Chris* and is going to put in another good word for you.”

I frowned. “I don’t care about your mother or her word.”

“Don’t you? Come on, I’m nothing. No one. You found me in a small town and hoped I’d go to LA to be your *fake* girlfriend.”

“Exactly. But you’re not *nothing* and I should spank your ass for saying that about yourself.”

“Well, at least you’re honest now.”

I took a step closer. “What are you talking about?”

“You could’ve just told me that you needed access to my mother. You didn’t have to fuck me and—”

I set my hands on her shoulders. “I didn’t fuck you for your mother.” The idea was ridiculous. And gross.

She shook her head. “You fucked me for the movie role. You fucked me over, Luke. Oscar performance. God, I want to hit you with a shin pad right now.”

“You think I used you to make a connection with your mom?”

“I know it.”

I ran a hand through my hair. “This is insane. I didn’t—”

“Why else would you pick me? Why else would you tell me you *need* me after dealing with Lacey? Even Sam said my job was done.”

I stared at her wide eyed. Why else? Because she was everything I ever wanted in a woman. I *needed* her because I fucking **NEEDED** her. Not for anything else. “I could’ve come to this and chatted up your mom without you being here. I didn’t *need* you to talk to her.”

“Good thing the woman almost died the last time you met so she’d remember. Couldn’t risk this opportunity, right?”

“Aspen, you need to calm down and think clearly. You’re being ridiculous.”

She laughed, but tears filled her eyes. “Maybe. Definitely. It’s all on me. The one who always messes up. Who blew up her own life. Made her family hate her. You have *everything*. Everything in your life goes right. It’s perfect. Perfect family. Perfect job with money and fame. I’m not even smart enough to keep my heart out of it. You said it was fake after all.”

“It’s not fake,” I admitted.

“Tell me the truth. Did you plan this? Our meeting at that bar in Hunter Valley?”

I blinked at her. Shit. *SHIT!*

Her eyes brimmed, her gaze a mix of hope and newfound awareness of how she’d been used.

“It’s not what you think,” I said, trying to reach for her.

She shook her head, stepped back.

“Yes or no? Did you know who I was when we met at the bar?”

“It’s not—”

“DID YOU?”

I sighed.

“Yes.”



LUKE

“DEREK, THERE YOU ARE,” Chris, the producer, called.

I stared at Aspen. Her mouth hung open and tears slid down her cheeks. She wiped at them and took a breath.

Shit. Now? Now Chris wanted to talk to me? When I had to explain to Aspen what I’d done and why, but I couldn’t. I had no choice but to turn around, paste on a smile, all the while I was angry and hurt and every fucking emotion at once. I shook Chris’s hand.

This was why I was here. This was the moment.

I took Aspen’s shaking hand and introduced her.

“It’s great to meet you,” he told her, then gave me his full attention. “It’s official, the gossip about you was wrong.”

“It usually is,” I replied, through gritted teeth.

“The senator told me you were here.” He smiled, slapped me on the shoulder. “Let’s talk *Living Dangerously* and your role in it. Since your stint in rehab was gossip, filming starts in India. Got your passport handy?”

I squeezed Aspen's fingers. Holy shit. I got it. I got exactly what I wanted. The film role.

She pulled free. I looked to her, wanting to explain. To tell her the truth. She smiled brightly. "Congratulations. You got exactly what you wanted."

"Let's get a drink and talk logistics and malaria shots 'cause I need you on a plane in forty-eight hours," Chris said, completely unaware of the undercurrent of emotion between me and Aspen. She took the opportunity to leave, fleeing out the open front doors. As Chris led me back into the party, I watched Aspen disappear.

She'd fulfilled her role. Her part was over. As she said, I got exactly what I wanted. Then why did it feel like I lost everything?



ASPEN

AS THE CAR I requested sped through LA to the airport, I pulled up my banking app in my phone. I swiped away my tears. I'd been all-out crying by the time I was picked up down the road from the party.

I had no idea how much a one-way ticket back to Montana was, but it was going to make a dent in my savings. Which was already pretty small. But I couldn't stay here. Not with Luke.

Not with what I just figured out about him. About what he admitted.

He planned our meeting at the bar in Hunter Valley.

Planned it!

He used me to get access to my mother, just like everyone else. God, I changed my name. Hadn't talked to them in a decade and she *still* was the reason men wanted me.

I thought Luke was different.

I thought I'd changed. I thought I'd cleansed myself of my stupidity when I buried that ring. But no. That in itself was just another dumb Aspen move.

My banking summary came up. I blinked, wiped the tears because I thought I read it wrong.

No, I hadn't. Holy shit. I'd never seen that much money in my account.

At some point, Luke had deposited fifty thousand dollars through a mobile payment service. The one I used for the studio. The one that listed it as a payment option on my business website.

As Luke promised, I had the money to pay Duncan.

The huge sum of money that he gave me for the "in" with my mother. For the film role he just got. It was nothing to him. Chump change, and I was the chump.

I felt cheap. Used. Bartered.

Dumb.

Mallory was right. He was an amazing actor.



LUKE

AS SOON AS I walked in the front door of my house, my cell rang.

“Tell me my people are wrong that you and Aspen Lane met her parents tonight,” Mark said, sounding pissed.

Mark was a friend. *Was*, because after this shitshow, I hated his guts. We’d met two years ago when he was a consultant on *NYC ER*, helping make the law enforcement and legal scenes more realistic. For my role, there was a medical consultant, too, but the writers still stretched reality. There was no such thing as a triple craniectomy, and it was impossible to accomplish a regular one with a pen.

We’d had a few beers here and there, but he somehow found out I was spending my break in Hunter Valley. I didn’t even want to know how he knew. He showed up out of the blue to hang with me. Not hang, but with a specific purpose. To approach a woman who lived there. She was tied to a case he was running and hoped to use his famous friend—me—as an in to chat her up. He asked for my help. Dumbest ‘yes’ I ever

said. It was only supposed to be beer and baseball while he talked to a woman in a bar.

“You told me she was a senator’s daughter who might be caught up in shit,” I reminded.

“She is.”

“Aspen!” I called, my voice echoing through the house. No answer. “You said she was a princess. That like her parents she was shallow, vapid, and fake. Those were your *exact* words when you showed up in Hunter Valley asking for my help.”

“Yeah.” Why did he sound so mad at me? I was so fucking pissed at him.

“You didn’t tell me she was Senator Bergstrom’s daughter!”

I hadn’t liked the politician the one time I met her, more concerned about appearances than the woman across from us at dinner dying from anaphylaxis. I assumed her daughter had to have been just as obnoxious. That I’d eat some wings and watch baseball while Mark got the info he wanted out of the woman, then get back to my regularly scheduled vacation. Right?

Wrong.

So fucking wrong. One look at Aspen in the bar and I’d been instantly drawn in. Hooked. Possessive. No way was I letting Mark anywhere near her. So I told him to fuck off and I claimed her as mine. Over trivia and a night of amazing sex, I knew there was no way she was involved in any shady shit. My girl wasn’t a princess or egotistical. Vain. Pretentious. She was *nothing* like her mother.

The next morning when I’d been hiking with Aspen and the kids, he’d texted wanting an update. I responded back that

she wasn't involved. Then I forgot about the whole fucking thing, completely and totally invested in making Aspen mine.

Until we ran into her parents earlier.

"Yeah, well, Aspen Lane *is* Senator Bergstrom's daughter."

"I know that *now*," I snapped. I ran my hand through my hair. "You told me her name. Aspen Lane. That you were investigating her connections to possible political bribes and kickbacks."

"Right."

"You didn't tell me any important shit." I was walking around my house, hoping Aspen was here, even though I knew she wasn't. Then where was she?

"That's because you're not in the FBI. I couldn't give you all the details. You're not part of the case."

"I had no idea she was related to Senator Bergstrom," I admitted. "They don't even have the same name."

"So you two did meet her parents?"

"Yeah, we met them." That had been a fucking hot mess.

Aspen's clothes were still here. She'd taken a little purse with her to the party, so she probably had her wallet and phone. I already texted her at least ten times. Called and left messages. Nothing.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" he asked. "You said she wasn't involved. This means she—"

"*She's not involved*," I said through gritted teeth. "I told you she wasn't up to anything shady."

"Did you outright ask her?"

“What? If she was doing illegal political shit? No! We were a little busy.” He could read between the lines on that answer.

“So how did you know she was innocent?”

“Because I know her!”

“Dude, you had sex after meeting her in a bar. How could you *know* her?”

I squeezed my phone, wanting to throw it across the room. “What the FUCK is going on?”

“Why are you so fucking angry?”

“Because I met her mother before. I sat next to her at a dinner.”

“At a *dinner*? That sounds hoity-toity.”

“We sat at a table and food was served,” I replied. “It was a fucking dinner. Because of that, now Aspen thinks I used her for access to her mother.”

“That’s bullshit.”

I stared at the ceiling, frustrated I had to explain all this to him. “I know that. You know that. Not Aspen.”

He sighed. “Her mother is shady, Luke. We have the evidence we need to arrest her. It’ll happen in the next few days.”

I was too angry to think clearly. The senator was being arrested. Great.

But I couldn’t focus on that. I felt tricked by Mark even though he’d been the one who was supposed to talk with Aspen at the bar, not me.

I'd pushed him away. Told him to fuck off. He'd given me the shot to get the info from her he wanted. As soon as he left, I forgot all about him and his stupid line of questioning until he texted me on the hike.

“Aspen has no part in whatever shady shit her mother's up to.”

“She met her parents!”

“Because she went with me to an industry party, and they were there.”

I felt like Godzilla, ready to rip the city apart. I needed to tell Aspen the truth because what she was thinking was wrong. It didn't matter though. I hurt her. After seeing how her parents treated her, I understood why she'd cut everything off with them. They weren't fit to be parents. Who pointed out a ten year old mistake like a condom breaking in a conversation? Sure, it had led to a pregnancy, but what kind of reunion chit chat was that? And the fact that neither parent knew how cool Sierra was? Their fucking loss.

They didn't like Aspen. In fact, they seemed downright disappointed in her. No wonder she had self-esteem issues. No wonder she looked like I crushed her. She trusted me and I fucked her over.

“Planned, you think?”

“What did I just tell you? We were there for me, and Aspen thinks it was planned. So them meeting up being planned? Fuck, no. She wouldn't even be in California if not for me,” I replied, remembering how she reacted when she saw them. And how they responded to her, each in a different way. “It was totally random. If the producer wasn't there, we'd

have stayed in bed. Trust me, it would have been a lot more fun.”

“I don’t want to hear about all the sex you’re having. What about the Bergstroms?”

“They’re a piece of work. Worst parents ever. I’m talking total assholes. They don’t even know their granddaughter’s name.”

“They could be acting.”

I huffed. Why couldn’t he leave Aspen the fuck alone? “Not a chance. They pretty much took her off the family tree when she got pregnant by mistake. You can’t fake not knowing your nine-year old grandchild.”

“Duncan Pounder has reached out to Aspen multiple times recently.”

What the hell? “That loser? She dumped his ass two years ago.”

“He’s got an illegal arrangement with her mother that will put them both away for ten years, but I need to know if the daughter’s complicit.”

“Are you serious? Aspen told me he was with her for access to her mother and she dumped his ass. Trust me, she hates the guy. Now she hates me for the exact same reason.”

“Hate or not, they’re talking again.”

I scratched my head. “Who’s talking? Him or her?”

“Phone records say he’s contacted her.”

“Jesus Christ, Mark, it’s not because she’s working with them, it’s because he wants the engagement ring back. Or the financial equivalent.”

He was quiet for a moment. “She still has his ring? Huh. He’s desperate for any cash he can get his hands on. Anything he gets from Aspen will be dirty money. He uses it for the scheme he’s got going with Senator Bergstrom, Aspen’s guilty right along with them. There’ll be a financial trail linking her to it all.”

I froze. “WHAT?”

“You heard me. If she’s part of this, we’ll know if she pays him.”

“*She’s not part of this,*” I ground out. How many times did I have to say it?

“Then she can give his ring back.”

I ran a hand over my face, suddenly exhausted. Fuck. She buried the stupid thing.

“She lost it. I gave her the money to pay him off.”

“Excuse me?”

“She lost the ring.” I wasn’t telling him about the bulldog rock. “She has zero money. You should see her tiny apartment. No way is rich Mommy and Daddy footing her lifestyle. She’s making it on her own just fine, but doesn’t have fifty K to throw at a loser ex. I asked Aspen to come with me to LA to fix the rehab gossip that was spreading about me. The film role was at stake. She refused, not wanting anything real.”

“I bet you hated that.”

“Yeah. I proposed she be my fake girlfriend instead. And I paid her.”

“You’re supposed to be an investigator or something in the new movie, right?”

Why was he asking about the film? “Yeah.”

“Well, you suck. I can’t believe you did all this.”

“How was I to know? You didn’t tell me shit.”

“She must be a fantastic lay.”

A growl rumbled in my chest. “Watch it, asshole.”

“You care about her.”

From my pocket, I pulled the thong I took off her the first night we met. Weird that I carried them around? Hell, yeah. But I didn’t give a shit.

“Of course, I care. One look, Mark. One fucking look was all it took. I *told* you she wasn’t involved and to leave her the fuck alone.”

“I did until her ex reached out to her. And *you* should’ve walked away, too. That family’s trouble.”

“Walk away from Aspen? Not possible.”

“Well, I’ll be able to keep your ass clean, but if she gives him that money and he uses it as I imagine, she’s going to jail.”

“She can’t go to jail because of me.”

Holy fuck. She’d done nothing wrong. The FBI had been sniffing around her because of her dick ex and his connection to her mother. I told Mark he was way off with Aspen. Warned him away.

Did it matter? No. Because of some random meeting with her parents because of *me* put her right back in front of the FBI. And the money *I* gave her to help her out? That would put her in jail?

“She can,” he told me.

Maybe he was right. If I'd left her alone, she wouldn't be in the situation she was in. And didn't even know it. I had to help her.

"FUCK!" I shouted, the sound echoing off the walls of my empty house. I had to be on a plane to India in two days.

What the fuck was I going to do?



ASPEN

“LET ME GET THIS STRAIGHT,” Mallory said.

I was at Mallory and Theo’s house, and I was being interrogated about the past few days. Years, actually. She should have skipped teaching and gone and joined the police force with our friend, Hunter. They’d listened as I explained the bulk of my life.

“Luke gave you fifty thousand dollars to pay off that dumbass ex, Duncan, because you buried his engagement ring in the woods and have to give it back but can’t find it so you were Luke’s fake girlfriend so you could fix Luke’s social media image so he could get a film role by having you connect him to your mother who is a senator.”

I nodded at her concise, but run-on sentence. “Plus, he intentionally came to Hunter Valley and that bar to meet up with me specifically to gain access to my mother,” I added.

That was what kept me awake all night. Had anything we’d done been real? His dick had been hard for me, no question. A guy couldn’t fake that. But men weren’t very

discriminate where they stuck their dicks, so I had to wonder if seducing me was part of it all.

I had witnessed a number of his sex scenes in that first season of *NYC ER* we'd binged.

Mallory and Theo were on their sofa, and I sat across from them. Their little house didn't have room for a ton of furniture, but what they did have was really comfortable. I'd gotten the last flight into Bozeman the night before and had bummed a ride to Hunter Valley off of a couple on the plane who were spending a week at the resort to downhill mountain bike. Maybe a dumb idea, but what was one more?

Luke had texted and called a bunch of times, but I ignored all of them, then blocked his number.

"I can't believe your mother is a senator," she said, shaking her head. "I've known you all these years and I never knew. You don't even have the same last name."

I felt contrite and it was hard to look my good friend in the eye. "I'm sorry for not telling you. I really am, Mal, but my parents and I don't talk," I explained. "They're not just a sore spot, but pretty much the basis for all the reasons I'm so fucked up."

She reached out, took my hand. "You're not fucked up."

I sighed. "Yeah, I am. Yes, having a mother who is a senator is a big deal. To me, it's not. To me, it's what makes her a total bitch. Then with Duncan..." I sighed. "I didn't tell you about burying the ring because I was embarrassed, I fell for a guy who wanted my mother."

"Okay, that's creepy as fuck," Theo mentioned.

"Yeah, well, it's the truth, but not in *that* way," I admitted. "Well, maybe. Who knows. My mother expected me to be

perfect in order to get praise and affection. So when I messed up, I was shamed. So I kept my mistakes to myself. Duncan just became something I didn't talk about because I felt... still feel, stupid over falling for him and his lies. Me keeping secrets has nothing to do with you, or Bridget or our friendship."

"Who is this guy?" Theo asked. I forgot he hadn't been here back then to remember like Mallory had.

"Duncan Pounder. A guy I dated two years ago," I explained.

"You dated a guy named *Pounder*?"

That made my lips twitch. "Yeah. I thought I'd spend my life with him. He asked me to marry him, and I said yes. Then I found out he wanted me for access to my mother. So I dumped him."

"You do realize your name would have been Aspen Pounder. If you were a middle school boy, it would be shortened to Ass Pounder."

Mallory stared at Theo, eyes wide, mouth open. They she burst out laughing.

I couldn't help it either because I never thought of it.

"You dumped him and buried his ring in the woods," Mallory added, when she caught her breath. "Devious. I'd have gone with you."

"I saw it as cleansing, something I had to do for myself... and a bottle of wine."

"You didn't love that guy," Mallory told me. "I don't even think you cried. You were angry, but now I know why. Your parents are assholes," Mallory said, frowning.

I laughed again. “They really are. I saw them last night at this party. The first time in ten years.”

“My father cheated on my mother with any woman who would have him. The younger, the better. He was an asshole. Top that,” Theo said, as if making it a challenge.

“My father, too, but my mother is fine with it. It keeps him busy and out of her way. My mother expects perfection.”

“Says the woman whose husband cheats,” Mallory muttered.

“When I was six, I took a ballet class and liked it. So I took it all the time. When I didn’t get cast in the *Nutcracker* that first winter, I had a ballet tutor and went to class twice as much. When I got the starring role the next year, at least for a seven-year-old, I got praised. So I practiced harder to get more. When I was eleven, I was shipped to dance boarding school in Canada.”

“That sounds... intense,” Theo commented.

“It was. If I didn’t do well enough to please my mother, I didn’t come home. See? Perfection and affection went hand-in-hand. I practiced twice as hard. When I graduated, I ended up being hired in Spain as a soloist.”

Mallory and Theo looked at each other. “That’s amazing.”

“Yeah, until I blew it and got pregnant by mistake. I had to quit. My parents cut me off. Cut me out of their lives because a single mother in the family? A failure at ballet? They couldn’t have it.”

“Jesus,” Mallory said.

“I came here. Started over. Legally changed my last name because I didn’t want Sierra to have any connection to the

Bergstroms.”

“Why not keep at ballet after Sierra was born?”

“I lost my spot, and the lifestyle isn’t for a single parent with a baby. The schedule was grueling and there was a lot of travel. I walked away for her.”

“Why not keep doing it? I mean, a *soloist*? You must be so talented. Why haven’t we heard of you? Oh yeah, you changed your name.”

I shrugged. “I practice on my own, but that’s not my life now. I look back on it and it’s tainted. While I love to dance, I became really good because I wanted my parents’ affection.”

“Which never came.”

“Theo,” Mallory scolded, elbowing him.

“My father never loved me no matter what I did,” he said, looking to Mallory, then me. “I became a trauma surgeon and saved lives and he was disappointed I didn’t go into the family business. You have to let that shit go.”

I shrugged. “I did. Well, I thought I did.”

“Until the Duncan ring debacle,” Mallory said.

“Yeah, and now I owe him a shit ton of money.”

“You said Luke gave you the money to pay him off.”

“He did, but I’d rather wander the woods in Hunter Valley looking for a bulldog rock that probably didn’t exist and go into epic debt than to take Luke’s—no, Derek Dashwood’s—money.” I laughed. “That’s why this morning, first thing, I went to the bank and got a cashier’s check for it and took it right to the winter sports complex and donated it to the hockey

program for scholarships.” Sighing, I admitted, “I messed up. Not only with Duncan, but with Luke.”

“Because he also wanted you for access to your mother,” Theo said.

I shrugged, feeling that usual embarrassment all over again. “I know, right? I was stupid with Duncan, but you’re right, I never loved him. I just wanted the security I thought he would offer. But Luke? I fell for him. Just him. I really, *really* like him. Probably even love him if I knew what the hell that was. I’m used to being used and I knew going in this was fake. Until it wasn’t. Turns out, it hadn’t been fake, but planned all along.”

“I think he fell for you, too.” When I gave her a look, she pushed on. “I’ve been watching his social media. Have you seen what he posted of you two?”

I shook my head. “I don’t look at that stuff.”

“Well, it’s all really romantic and sexy and the guy was into you.”

Waving my hand, I shook my head. “It’s all fake.”

“Well, he had me fooled. You need to steer clear of shitty people,” Mallory said, as if it was simple. “We know your worth and value. It’s not transactional.”

“She’s right. Love doesn’t keep score or have value. Trust me on this,” Theo advised.

“Because you’re a doctor?”

“Because I was an idiot.”

“He bought me this house,” Mallory explained, leaning in and kissing Theo’s cheek. “Instead of giving me his heart.”

Wow. Okay.

“I pulled my head out of my ass eventually,” Theo said, pulling Mallory into his side and kissing the top of her head. “I told Luke if he fucked up, I’d kill him and put him through the Pearson Tree Service’s woodchipper.”

“Evil. I like it,” Mallory said, grinning.

“He comes back, he’ll answer to me.” This grumpy guy was protective. And it made me smile.

“He got what he wanted. I’m sure he’s already on the movie set somewhere,” I said, sad and wistful. And pissed. The woodchipper idea sounded like a good one though.

“Then let’s get this Pounder asshole out of your life, too. Sounds like we need to organize a hike in the woods,” Theo said. “I hear there’s a bulldog rock that’s worth finding.”

Mallory’s cell rang and she grabbed it off the coffee table. “It’s Georgia.”

Theo and I listened as Mallory replied to whatever Georgia was saying. “Oh no. Really? Tomorrow?”

“Is she okay?” Theo asked her and I remembered she was pregnant.

Mallory pulled the phone from her ear. “The *Cowboy Goes A Courtin’* live show is tomorrow night and the bachelorette has appendicitis and is having emergency surgery right now. Georgia’s new in town and doesn’t know people like I do. She needs my help to find a single woman to take her place.”

Theo and Mallory stared at each other for a second, then turned to look at me.

I blinked. “What? Me?”

No way.



ASPEN

MALLORY PUT the call on speaker. “Aspen’s here with us. She’s single.”

“No way,” I said aloud, shaking my head at what she was suggesting.

“What happened with Dr. Dark and Dangerous?” Georgia asked through the phone.

“It’s over.” I wasn’t going through it all again. Ever. “And Sierra comes back tomorrow.”

“I’m sure she’ll be thrilled to watch the show on set,” Georgia said, which was probably true. I had a night of movies and popcorn planned, which couldn’t compete. “I’m sorry to hear about you and Derek Dashwood, but if you want to get back on the horse, so to speak, you can have three hot bachelors vying for you tomorrow night on live TV,” she offered, as if the opportunity was tantalizing. It sounded awful.

“Just what I need, more fake boyfriends,” I muttered.

“I saw the commercial,” Mallory replied, her eyes alight with eagerness. “The guys are cute. They’re cowboys. Like

real ones. And the saying is, spare a horse, ride a cowboy.”

I was not amused. “It’s a *TV show*. It’s not real,” I reminded.

“You’ll be given the questions to ask the men, but they don’t know them in advance. Their responses will be genuine. At the end, you pick your favorite. You get a free trip to Hawaii with the guy.”

“Hawaii? The last thing I want to do is go to Hawaii with a strange man.”

“Take Sierra,” Georgia tossed in. “I’ll make the production company pay. I’m really desperate and Mac will have a stroke if I start wandering around town to find someone *in my condition*.”

The way she said the last, I imagined her using her fingers to make little air quotes.

Mallory raised an eyebrow. “A Hawaiian vacation with Sierra? Since when have you two gone anywhere on vacation besides that hot springs down by Yellowstone? I’d say that’s not bad for a night’s work.”

“With a strange cowboy,” I reminded. “I think I’ve learned my lesson about going places with strange men.”

“You’d have a nine-year-old chaperone,” Mallory reminded.

I glanced at Theo who hadn’t said a word. He only shrugged, and that wasn’t much help.

“It pays seventy-five thousand dollars,” Georgia said, sweetening the pot.

“Holy shit,” Mallory whispered. “That would—”

“I know,” I groaned.

Fuck. FUCK!

I closed my eyes, took a cleansing breath. I needed that money to pay off Duncan for the ring. While Theo was being amazing and organizing a group to go on the search for it, I didn't have much hope we'd find it.

This show? The money was a guarantee. I could do it. Right?

Maybe. Ugh.

“Fine,” I groaned. “*Fine!* I'll do it.”

Now I was going to be the one who was acting.

What the hell happened to my life?



LUKE

I WASN'T sure if coming to Theo James at work was my smartest move. Okay, it was really fucking stupid. I made a lot of dumb ones lately, so what was one more? I felt like an idiot sitting on the exam table waiting for him. I gave a fake name to the receptionist, but she recognized me. Gave me a wink when she left me in here to wait. The paper under my ass crinkled as I turned when the exam room door opened. Fucking finally.

Yeah, based on the look on his face, this might not go well.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” he asked, glaring. He had on khakis, button-up shirt, and his white doctor coat. A stethoscope slung around his neck. It was pretty much what I wore on set, but he was the real deal.

I was a fucking fraud.

“Just because we did yoga together doesn't make us best friends,” he said.

“This was the only way I could think of seeing you,” I admitted.

“By being my patient? Is there anything wrong with you besides being an asshole?”

“Aspen’s blocked my calls. Mrs. Waddle gave me a glare when I went up the front walk and shooed me away with a broom.”

“I’ll give you a lollipop and you can leave here, too.”

“She won’t respond to me. I need to know she’s okay. I figured Mallory would have heard from her.”

He nodded.

I sighed in relief, imagining her in a fucking ditch somewhere. “Thank fuck. Look, you need to help Aspen,” I told him.

“Because of your mess.”

“Because if she gives the money I gave her to her ex, she’ll be arrested for collusion or being an accomplice to money laundering and a few other federal offenses.”

He blinked. “What the fuck are you talking about? The money you paid her to be your fake girlfriend?”

I nodded. “The money I gave her to pay off her ex. She wouldn’t take it as a gift so I had to think of some way for her to accept it.”

He grunted and circled his finger in the air for me to continue.

“Her mother and Aspen’s ex have been laundering campaign funds or using them for something shady. Other stuff I don’t understand or really give a shit about. But the ex came after the ring because he needs cash. If Aspen gives it to him and he uses it for shady shit with her mother, it’ll lead back to Aspen. The FBI will make it a family affair.”

“She hates her mother.”

“I know. Look, she can’t give him that money. If she won’t listen to me, then I need you to help her. Make sure she doesn’t do it.”

He moved, leaned a hip against the counter where there was a sink and pamphlets about birth control, STDs, and the shingles vaccine.

“You knew about this and let her get sucked in?”

“Hell, no.” I hopped off the table and began to pace, trying to steer clear of Theo as much as possible, which was hard in the small room. “I found out about it the other night. I need to make sure she’s safe. Protected from her mother. From being put in jail.”

I held out a scrap of paper with Mark’s name and number on it. Theo took it, stared at it. “Who’s this?”

“The guy at the FBI who’s running the case on Senator Bergstrom. Have her call him.”

He sighed, rubbed a hand over his face. “Why don’t you start at the beginning.”

So I did. I told him about Mark. How he’d showed up on my vacation. Asked me to be his wingman at the bar to approach Aspen. That I saw her and wanted her as my own. And everything that followed. That I fell in love with her.

“You love her?” Theo asked, surprised.

“Yes. Crazy, I know.”

I stared at him as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Did you know Aspen is actually a famous ballerina?” he asked. “Infamous actually. A soloist at nineteen. A prodigy,

she was called. The best of her generation. Then she mysteriously walked away and disappeared. It's because she got pregnant with Sierra. Her parents cut her off entirely and she moved here. Legally changed her last name to Lane."

"Why are you telling me this? I know her parents are assholes. I've met them and saw how they treat her firsthand."

"I don't give a shit about them," he snapped. "If you love Aspen, it needs to be about her, not you."

"What are you talking about? She didn't want a relationship, so I said we could be fake. I offered her money to pay off her ex, but she wouldn't take it. So I made it part of the fake relationship."

Slowly, he shook his head. "It was all about you. You saw her. You wanted her. You needed her for your stupid tabloid bullshit and when she said no, you dangled a carrot in front of her. A big one you knew she needed. How could she refuse?"

"It wasn't like that."

"It was *exactly* like that. You have fame. Money. The film deal. You have everything. All the power."

I swiped my hand through the air. "No. That's not true. She has me by the balls."

"Yeah, balls. Not heart. Why didn't you tell her about the FBI guy?"

"I told him she wasn't involved and figured that was the end of it."

"You're charismatic, attractive. You have that stupid hair." He pointed at it and frowned as if it was a bad thing. "Women fawn all over your ass. You didn't have to work hard with her. I assume she fell right into your bed."

I glared at him, not liking the way he was talking about Aspen. He made what we did that night in my hotel room sound cheap.

“I’m here, aren’t I? I could be on a plane to India right now. I turned down the film to make this right.”

His eyes widened making it clear he wasn’t expecting that.

“You think I’m an asshole, fine.” I didn’t give a shit what Theo thought of me. “But I’m here because I don’t want her to go to jail for something I knew from the second I saw her she had no part in. Somehow, in some fucked-up sense of fate or karma or whatever, we ran into her parents the other night. Aspen thought I used her to get to her mother because of the ‘in’ she has with the producer. Not true.”

“The last guy she *really* dated did the same thing. And he was going to marry her for it.”

I’d wanted to think myself better than that douche canoe Duncan, but I hadn’t. Not at all.

“Look, I had access to Chris Conroy, the producer, without the senator. That’s why I was at the party in the first place. Hell, I had no idea Senator Bergstrom would even be there. Sure, I needed that bullshit tabloid mess cleaned up, yeah. But my agent was going to hire someone to be my girlfriend and that would’ve taken care of it.”

I took a deep breath, pushed on.

“I wanted to be with Aspen. *Needed* to be with her. I couldn’t walk away from her, so I brought her to LA with me. If she wanted to name what we had as fake, I’d call it that even though it was... no, *is* real for me. I hoped to make her see that, too.”

He cocked his head to the side. “Why do you think she’s so upset?”

“Because I fucked up and thinks I’m just like every other person who’s used her for her mother.”

He shook his head. “No, like every other person who was supposed to care for her and used love as a tool for their own gain.”

I swallowed hard. “Fuck.” I ran a hand over my face. He was right.

“You’ve only known each other for a short time. Days. I can see how you won’t know everything about the woman.”

“She didn’t tell me she danced. I saw her one morning on my deck and it was incredible, but I can see now why she keeps her past on lockdown. The only thing she told me about her parents was that they were estranged and that her mother was powerful.”

“You have to see why she’s so wary, so jaded. When she found out the whole thing was planned, you were just like the others.”

“It wasn’t planned! Especially my instant reaction to her. But I never, not once, used her for access to her mother. I didn’t even know who she was. I want to kill Mark for making this all fucked up, but I guess I owe him a favor because I never would have met her otherwise.”

“I think Aspen would rather kill him. And you.”

“Don’t say shit about a woodchipper,” I muttered.

“She’s upset because she’s in love with you, too.”

My eyes widened and hope filled the spot in my chest where my heart was ripped out. “She said that?”

“Didn’t have to. You hurt her and I have a feeling she doesn’t let herself get hurt very often anymore. That means she let you in, she trusted you and you let her down.”

I groaned. “Fuck, this is a nightmare.”

“Did you tell her you loved *her*?”

I thought of the time I told her I’d fallen for her, but she’d been asleep. I’d said the words, but she didn’t know. I shook my head.

“She’s in love with Luke,” Theo added. “Not Derek Dashwood or Shep whatever on the show.”

“I never lied to her. Not once. And when she asked me if meeting her in the bar had been planned, I told her the truth, even though it’s not what she thinks.”

“You didn’t tell her about the FBI guy. That’s lying by omission.”

I looked up at the ceiling. Groaned again. “Fine, but not about who I was. *Never*. She didn’t even know I was a TV star when we met.”

“But you used her like you were Derek Dashwood. For your career. Be Luke. Only Luke. That’s the man she wants.”

“No one cares about Luke,” I admitted. “No one even knows Luke.” I flung up my arms. “Everyone is crazy for Derek. For Shep Barnes. Luke isn’t anything special.” I swallowed thickly, my mouth so fucking dry. “What if she doesn’t like him? What if he’s... what if *I’m* not enough?”

“You’ll never find out until you strip all those roles, all those characters you play, ditch all the people who want something from you and just be yourself. You said it, she

didn't know you were famous. She wants *you*. Until then, steer fucking clear of Aspen, or I *will* get that woodchipper.”

He went to the exam room door, opened it and left. “Verna, what's the charge code for gonorrhoea? I need to add it to this patient's chart.”



LUKE

“CONGRATS! We’re so proud of you!” Mom said through the video chat. I’d texted with them but hadn’t had a chance to talk pseudo face-to-face since I got the movie role.

“Thanks,” I said, running a hand through my hair.

It was exactly what I wanted. No more Dr. Dark and Dangerous. No more Shep Barnes.

“This is what you’ve wanted,” Dad said.

I nodded. “Yeah. It’s great.”

Except I turned it down.

“You can celebrate with Aspen.”

“Yeah, um, about that. She, well, we broke up.”

I wasn’t telling them about our arrangement. Or that I’d hurt her, and she’d run off into the night by herself. They’d kick my ass through the video call from Nebraska if they knew about the FBI’s investigation and my part in it. I was pissed enough at myself.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I really liked her,” Mom said.

“Yeah, me too.”

“Then go fix whatever you did wrong, son. Go get that girl.”

I huffed. “What makes you think I did something wrong?”

“Because you’re a man and men are idiots,” Mom said.

“Son, listen to your mother,” Dad added, using his serious tone, and look. “You’re a man. You did something wrong.”

I thought about that. About how right they were. About what Theo had said. That Aspen might be in love with me. *Me*. Luke. But that scared the shit out of me because I barely knew who I was any longer. So many people recognized me and adored me as Shep Barnes. Others chased after me for photos thinking I was Derek Dashwood. Hell, there were even social media groups about my stupid hair. But none about Luke Graham. The only fan group I had were my parents. My siblings.

“Then I think I need your help.”

If I needed Aspen to know the real me, then she would.

“Oh?” Mom asked.

“I need you to come to Hunter Valley.”

Mom’s eyes widened. “What about the movie?”

“I have something more important to do.”

“In Hunter Valley?” Dad asked.

I nodded. “Yeah. And when you come, bring my baby book.”



ASPEN

“—WITH three seconds left. The goalie didn’t even see it. We celebrated by making ice cream sundaes from the soft serve machines in the cafeteria and Dex bought gummy bears to add to everyone’s bowl. Even the losing teams because he’s nice like that. We’re going to work on the zone-to-zone passing in practice this week.”

“Wow, it sounds like you had an amazing time,” Mallory said, going over to Sierra and giving her a high five.

We were in a portable trailer on the Hansen ranch where the dating show was happening. A hairdresser had just finished with a flatiron and was now curling my hair. The combination didn’t make any sense, but I’d kept my mouth shut about it all since I showed up. Including the outfit I was wearing.

It was a pretty sundress, pale blue with cap sleeves and buttons down the front. It was accompanied with a pair of brown cowgirl boots and chunky turquoise jewelry. With my hair and makeup done, they definitely had me looking like a

small-town girl primped to prairie perfection for three possible cowboy suitors.

“Think you can do me a favor?” Mallory asked her.

Sierra nodded.

“I don’t think Theo knows where I am. If he’s out there by himself, I’m afraid the producers will make him one of the bachelors. Can you bring him here so I can protect him?”

Sierra rolled her eyes. “On it. But you need to marry that man. Like I wanted Mom to marry Luke ‘cause he was cool.”

She stormed out of the trailer, and I sighed. Mallory laughed.

“She’s right. You need to marry Theo,” I told her.

“Yeah, I do.” Her eyes dropped to her cell, and we were quiet for a minute. I was doing my nose breathing to stay calm, but it wasn’t working very well.

I was going on live TV. I had to flirt and be excited about the possibility of love with one of the three cowboy bachelors. Then go to Hawaii with him... and Sierra.

Mallory looked up. “I’ve been thinking about what you said.”

I frowned. “About what?”

The hairdresser spritzed me with hairspray.

“Luke and everything being fake,” she added.

I’d tried hard... really, *really* hard, not to be sad or mad or both about him. I shouldn’t have been surprised by what he did. Not after all the times I’d been used and tossed aside. I was a little mad at myself. Okay, a lot.

And sad. And mad.

“Oh?”

“Have you seen Luke’s social media posts?”

I shook my head, but the stylist was using the curling iron again and it was clamped down around a section of my hair.

“Here.” She handed me her phone. “Swipe through.”

I looked down at the screen, at the grid of images on the social media app. The page was called Derek Dashwood Official, and it had over five million followers. I picked on the first image to enlarge it.

It was me in the green dress. I was walking away from Luke and the flowy skirt split showing the long line of my left leg. My face was turned away, but my hand looked as if I was reaching back for Luke to follow. I hadn’t even known he took the photo. The text Luke wrote with it said, *Where she goes, I follow.*

The date and time stamp showed it was posted before the party. Before everything fell apart.

I scrolled.

The next image was of me in Luke’s bed in California. Asleep. My face wasn’t showing, only my blonde hair strewn over my bare shoulder. I recognized the little mole on my deltoid and the gray sheets. Luke wrote: *Perfection. Mine.*

I didn’t remember him taking it, obviously again without me knowing. How long had Luke been awake looking at me?

I scrolled again.

This photo was of me in full jeté. My arms were flung wide, my back arched, legs in a full split in the air as I leapt across his back deck. That had been right before I met Sam, but I hadn’t known Luke had been watching.

Luke's photo comment: *Can you believe she's with me?*

Another swipe.

There was a fifteen second video clip of me dancing. *Oh my God.*

I started to sweat, and it wasn't from the hot curling iron.

I flipped again and again. Photo after photo. Our hands linked together. My head turned, catching the corner of my smile. Me, silhouetted at the beach with the sun setting behind me. A picture of my ass in my leggings, which made me laugh. The two of us on the plane.

"I wish some guy saw me like that," the hairdresser commented from over my shoulder. Her name was Rose, and she sighed wistfully.

"Right?" Mallory asked, taking her phone back. "What do you think this means?"

Rose set the curling iron down. "That guy is in *love*."

"He is *not*," I countered, putting my hand to my hair. "It's to make it clear to those millions of followers and the tabloid websites that he's not dating Lacey."

"I call bull hockey," Mallory said, going back to not using swear words. "What do you know of him? And I mean not what everyone else in the world knows."

I looked at Mallory in the mirror. "He's got amazing parents who live on a ranch. He's from this weirdly named town in Nebraska. He likes chicken wings. His house in the Hollywood Hills has no furniture. He can't cook. Like at all."

"What does he know about you?"

"What do you mean?"

“He knows about Sierra.”

“Yes.”

“They obviously hit it off if she gave him the kid green light for marriage.”

I rolled my eyes like Sierra. “Whatever.”

“Did he know who your parents were?”

I gave her a look.

“I mean, did you tell him?”

“No.”

“Did you tell him you used to dance?”

“No. But you didn’t know that either.”

Mallory flung her arms up. “Exactly!”

“What are you getting at?”

“When are you going to let someone in all the way?”

I blinked at her. “Why would I talk about my parents when they want nothing to do with me?”

She leaned against the vanity and stared at me. “You don’t, but Luke didn’t stand a chance, did he?”

I looked to Rose in the mirror, not wanting to have this conversation in front of her. “My hair looks amazing. Are we all done?”

She smiled. “Lookin’ good.”

“Thank you so much,” I said.

Rose left and held the door open for Georgia to come in. “Well butter my biscuit, look at you!” she said excitedly when she stopped beside me.

I rolled my eyes.

“I feel like a pageant queen,” I admitted. “I don’t think my hair’s ever been this big.”

Georgia waved her hand through the air. Of course her hair and makeup were perfect. “It’s not pageant hair unless you use an entire can of hairspray. I came to make sure you’re ready. It’s almost show time.”

I took a deep breath. Let it out. I couldn’t believe I was doing this. When I picked Sierra up at the winter sports center this morning and told her about being on the show, she’d been beside herself with excitement that her mother was picking a random cowboy on live television. She didn’t see it as insane. She saw it as cool.

“Here,” Mallory said, pushing her phone into Georgia’s hand. “Tell me what you see.”

Georgia frowned and scrolled through the photos. “Oh my.” Then more scrolling. “Look at you dance! Good lord above, you’re amazing!”

“See!” Mallory said, throwing up her arms.

“See what?” I yelled. “I walked away from dance!”

“You can’t keep something this amazing a secret!” Mallory snapped back. “Everything about you is a secret. You need to let people in.”

I shook my head, the curls bouncing. “People *hurt* me, Mallory. All people do is take, take, take.”

“Not everyone.”

Georgia was staring at us, wide eyed. She’d never heard us argue before.

“Did Luke really take from you?” Mallory asked.

“Yes!”

“Really? Because what I see here”—she pointed at her phone Georgia still held—“is a guy who’s all in with a girl.”

“Who wanted me for access to my mother.”

Mallory waved her hand. “Please. Your mother isn’t that special. She’s a senator, not Steven Spielberg!”

“Your mother’s a senator?” Georgia asked.

I nodded but kept my eyes on Mallory. “What do you want me to do, let Luke in and let him destroy me? I’ve had that happen and I *really* don’t like the feeling.”

“Not everyone is like your parents.”

“Everyone wants me for something, Mallory.”

She shook her head. “Not me.”

“Not me,” Georgia added.

“Not Bridget. Or Lindy. Or Melly. Or Eve. Or any of the guys. Not Mrs. Waddle.”

“But—”

“No buts,” she snapped. “Georgia and I both saw Luke at the pizza place that night. He was *into* you for you.”

“Oh yeah,” Georgia added with her southern twang.

“You kept him at arm’s distance. Refused to be anything but fake with him. Besides all the orgasms.”

“It wasn’t real! Besides the orgasms,” I muttered the last.

Mallory barked out a laugh. “Liar! You wouldn’t be so upset if it was fake. Your feelings are real. They are valid. It’s

okay to fall in love with someone. It's okay to be reckless and wild with your emotions."

I shook my head, knowing doing that was when it hurt.

"You need to dance for the world just because you love it. You need to let yourself love Luke and show the world how much, because that kind of love is rare and amazing. You have to do it for *you*."

"He's in India or Ireland or some other country for the *Living Dangerously* film. He got what he wanted. Besides, you're telling me all this now? I'm all primed to be a bachelorette on a TV show, remember? I've got to pick one of the three bachelors. I'm going to Hawaii with him."

The trailer door swung open and Sierra stormed in. "Um, Mom, there's a guy here to see you."

I flicked my gaze to Mallory, and I knew she was thinking the same as me.

Luke?

But no. The man who came in was in his early thirties, six feet tall, sandy blond hair, and an equally sandy blond beard. He wore navy pants and a white dress shirt, as if he'd recently removed a suit coat and tie.

He looked to Georgia, then Mallory, then me. "Aspen Lane?"

I nodded.

"Mark Rasche with the FBI."



LUKE

I KNOCKED on Aspen's door, my parents behind me. My heart was in my throat, my palms sweating. This was it. I needed to make sure she was okay. That Theo had talked to her about the money. That I was wrong. That I was standing on her doorstep as Luke so I could try to get her to know me. Me, with my parents as backup. I couldn't be any more *Luke* than with my mother holding my baby book.

"Hello, there!" Mrs. Waddle stuck her head around the corner from the front porch.

Oh boy. I hoped she wouldn't send me packing a second time. I *needed* Aspen.

"Hi, Mrs. Waddle," I called. "These are my parents."

She disappeared. I looked to my parents who stared at me with amusement. Then Mrs. Waddle came around the corner of the house to greet us. No broom, thank fuck.

"Welcome to Hunter Valley. You must be very proud of your son," she said.

I frowned, not sure why she was being so nice. Besides the broom, the last time she almost whacked me in the nose with her front door when she shut it in my face.

“I’m Janet and this is my husband, Tom,” Momma said.

Dad took Mrs. Waddle’s hand. “Beautiful home you have here.”

“Thank you. You’re here to see Aspen,” Mrs. Waddle replied.

“Yes,” I said, sighing. Finally!

She narrowed her eyes at me. “Did you tell your parents what you did, young man?”

Three sets of parents eyed me like I’d burned the carpet again. I wanted to kick the dirt and tuck my head. But I didn’t. “Yes, ma’am. I did.”

Not every detail, of course, but that I had fucked up and I wanted to make things right.

“That’s why they’re here. I want Aspen to get to know me and my family’s an important part of my life.”

She eyed my parents skeptically. “Are these your real parents or are they on the show?”

Pops laughed. “Real parents. I don’t know where Luke got his acting skills from.”

Mrs. Waddle eyed us some more. “You all do look alike. I was impressed they’d find actors who look so similar.”

“Is Aspen here?” I asked, anxious.

She shook her head. “No. You’re too late.”

Oh shit. What the hell did that mean?

“Too late?” I asked, a little afraid of the answer.

“She’s gone on TV to find herself a new man. It’s happening right now.”



ASPEN

MARK RASCHE PULLED a wallet from his back pocket and flipped it open just like it was done on TV. Yeah, I didn't have a TV but that didn't mean I hadn't seen some shows.

Sierra came over and I wrapped an arm around her.

"I'm here to talk with you about your involvement with Senator Bergstrom and Duncan Pounder."

I frowned. Sierra looked to me.

"This is my daughter," I said, not only as an introduction, but to remind him that there was a child present, and he shouldn't say things not meant for little ears.

"Sierra, right?"

She nodded to the man. She may have noticed my hesitancy and felt it herself. I didn't like that he knew her name because that meant he'd been studying up.

"These are my friends, Mallory Mornay and Georgia Gantry-MacKenzie," I added.

He nodded at them but didn't give them much attention. It was clear he was only interested in talking to me.

So I told him what he wanted to know.

"I have no involvement with Senator Bergstrom or Duncan Pounder."

"You saw the senator the other night in California and Mr. Pounder is after you for a ring. Or money, correct?"

Why was he asking me this? And how did he know these details?

"Yes, I saw the senator the other night for the first time in ten years."

"No birthday calls or holiday cards?" he asked me, but eyed Sierra.

"No."

"And Mr. Pounder?"

The trailer door opened again, and Theo entered. With him was another man I hadn't met before. It was getting really crowded in here.

"Hey, Aspen," Theo said to me. "Sierra, how was camp?"

If he recognized how freaked I was, he didn't say anything.

"Awesome," Sierra said. "Your brother is sooooo cool."

"I'm cooler," he countered, although he probably knew it was impossible with her infatuation with hockey and Dex being a pro player. And a nice guy.

I was all for them chatting, but he was here with a stranger for a reason. So was Mark Rasche.

“This man is with the FBI,” I told Theo.

“Right, well, this moves things along.” Theo stuck his hand out to Mark. “I’m Theo James and this is Nathan Banks, James Corp’s lead attorney. And Ms. Lane’s attorney.”

My what?

I looked to the man, my attorney I didn’t know I had or needed. I figured he was a mid-fifties golfer with the outfit he had on. I wondered if Theo had pulled him off the back nine to come here.

“Mom, what’s going on?” Sierra asked. I had a feeling everyone here knew but us. By the looks on Mallory’s and Georgia’s faces, they were in the dark, too.

“I think we’re about to find out,” I said, a little bewildered. I gave her a squeeze.

“I was just asking Ms. Lane about her involvement with her mother and Duncan Pounder,” Mark said.

“What about them?” the lawyer asked.

“The senator and Mr. Pounder were arrested this morning for money laundering, campaign finance tampering, and other federal crimes,” Mark said.

Oh. Wow.

WOW.

“I have a grandmother who is a senator?” Sierra asked, looking up at me.

I smiled at her, while freaking out inside. I was stunned that my mother had done something illegal. Evil, definitely, but breaking the law? She *made* them. “Yes. She’s not a nice woman.”

“Obviously,” Sierra commented, rolling her eyes. “If she was arrested, then she’s definitely not nice.”

“I was just telling him that I haven’t seen or spoken to my mother for ten years until the other night,” I said, updating my new attorney.

“Are you investigating my client?” Nathan Banks asked. He didn’t even look my way.

“We are investigating two people who are close to her,” Mark replied.

“I’m not close to either of them,” I offered.

“One is your mother, and the other is your ex-fiancé,” Mark said, as if I needed that reminder.

“I’m not aware that being related is a crime in itself and she did state the man was her ex,” the lawyer added.

Why was he here and why did Theo bring him? Did he know the FBI would show up to question me? Was I in trouble?

“Did you give Duncan Pounder fifty thousand dollars?” Mark asked.

I blinked.

Mallory gasped.

“No,” I said.

“Do you have a record of the transaction?” Nathan Banks prodded.

“No,” Mark told him.

“What is going on?” Sierra asked.

I stared at Mark pointedly hoping he could answer that.

I had to agree with her and Theo bit his lip trying not to smile.

“What do their crimes have to do with my client?” my new-to-me lawyer asked.

“We have records of Duncan Pounder contacting Ms. Lane recently. Since they were... *close* in the past, we had to ensure our investigation was thorough and she wasn't involved.”

“He wanted his engagement ring back. You think I'm working with them because Duncan contacted me about the stupid ring?”

“If you have it still, why not give it back to him?” Mark wondered.

“Because I lost it!”

The lawyer cut in. “What Ms. Lane does or doesn't have that belongs to Mr. Pounder is irrelevant.”

“True. And an unreturned engagement ring is the least of his worries.” Mark looked to me. “Derek... I mean, Luke, said you weren't involved, but I had to follow up.”

I frowned. “What does Luke have to do with this?”

“I was supposed to chat with you at the bar last week about all this, but Luke saw you and pretty much claimed you.”

My mouth fell open. I looked to Theo, then the lawyer, then up at the ceiling, hoping to get my thoughts organized. My mother was a criminal and probably not a senator for much longer. And she didn't want me to be in the family because I had a kid and it was bad family values?

She was *such* a bitch!

Besides that, she was in cahoots—or whatever other word the *Scooby Doo* gang would use—with Duncan? Why try to marry me if he got to her on his own?

Then there was Luke. Mark knew him? “You know Luke?”

Mark nodded. “We’ve been friends for a few years. Worked on set together a few times.”

At the party, Luke admitted our bar connection had been planned. I thought he meant he’d orchestrated it so that he could ultimately connect him with my mother. Not because he was friends with an investigating FBI agent wanting to talk with me.

“*You* put together the meeting at the bar?”

He nodded.

“*Why?*”

“I had to know if you were an accomplice with the others.”

“But Luke saw me and—”

I flushed, remembering what we did in his hotel room after trivia was over.

“Wanted you for himself,” Mark continued. “I never thought love at first sight existed, but I was wrong.”

“What about at the party in LA and my mother? Was that part of it?”

“I don’t know anything about what happened at the party, and I never told Luke who your mother was. Sharing her name with him would have compromised the case.”

He didn’t—WHAT?

That meant Luke didn’t know my mother was... my mother?

“Do you have any further questions for my client?” the lawyer asked, crossing his arms over his chest.

“There are no connections that the FBI can find between Ms. Lane and her parents in the past decade,” Mark said. “As for Mr. Pounder, the communications have all been one way. Since she never gave any money to him, there is no collusion.”

“I donated Luke’s money to the Hunter Valley hockey program.”

Oh God. What would have happened if I hadn’t? What if I’d given it to Mark as I originally planned?

Mark grinned. “I can see why Luke fell for you.” The lawyer cleared his throat, prompting Mark to continue. “Unless new information comes to light, we have no further need for Ms. Lane’s time.”

Nathan the Lawyer nodded. Theo nodded. Sierra nodded. Mallory and Georgia nodded.

The trailer door swung open. Someone stuck her head in. “There you are. Time to go! We’re live in five minutes.”

Mark gave a weird salute and left, having to squeeze around the others to get out the door.

When the door was shut behind him, I looked to Theo. “What the hell is going on?”

“Swear jar!” Sierra called.

“What’s going on is that you need to be out on the set right now,” Georgia said.

“I just got questioned by the FBI, found out Luke didn’t do what I thought, and you want me to go on the show to meet three bachelor cowboys? Now? My head’s about to explode.”

Georgia nodded her head. She might have been a southern belle, but she had the strength of a pack mule when she yanked me out of the chair and pushed me toward the door. The men had to move to let us by or be mowed down. “The show must go on... *now* and she’s the big star.”



LUKE

FOR ONCE, it was great to be famous. I wasn't turned away at the ranch entrance by someone hired to keep people—just like me and my parents—out. All it took was a big smile, an autograph on a napkin my mother found in her purse, and we were in. I parked my rental car on an unplowed field with all the others.

The set had been built on an open field so the property's barn, an old cottonwood tree and a pond beyond it was the backdrop. While it was all out in the open—the weather Gods were working with the show today—the raised platform where the bachelorette and bachelors were placed was in the shade. Someone obviously planned it so the contestants weren't sweating in the hot sun on live TV.

I ensured my parents had a seat before I went backstage, using my famous face and hair to get me through.

I needed to talk to Aspen, and I needed to do it now. Mrs. Waddle had filled me in—she didn't want to be left behind—on the show as we drove to the ranch.

No way was Aspen picking one of the three men who were chatting backstage. Shit, the producers had chosen well. If I were a woman, I'd be thrilled with the bachelor options. All were fit, muscular, and attractive. I wasn't sure if they usually sported jeans, big belt buckles, snap shirts, and cowboy hats in their everyday wardrobe or not, but they matched the show's title perfectly.

"Hey, guys," I said, offering them a big smile.

Their eyes widened and they smiled back.

"Wow, hey. Nice to meet you," one said.

I shook their hands and they introduced themselves.

"They didn't tell us you were part of the program," another added.

"Yeah," I said, scratching my neck. I totally wasn't. "You guys seen Aspen?"

"Who?" the dark haired one asked.

Who? WHO?

"The bachelorette," I said, trying not to grit my teeth.

"Nah, man," the third commented. "Haven't seen her yet. They're keeping her away from us. Heard she's beautiful. Can't wait to get her to Hawaii."

I wanted to rip his head off for complimenting her, but that would be stupid.

"If she picks you. She's gonna pick me," the first one said.

"Nah, me." The second guy patted his chest.

Not any of them, if I had my way.

"Know which trailer's hers?" I asked.

A small man with a headset on came over and pointed to the large gap in the set which would take them to their seats in front of the cameras and the audience. “Places guys,” he whispered.

I could hear the host talking, meaning we were already live. I had no idea what he was saying until he said “Aspen!” and the audience began to clap and cheer.

Shit. I’d missed her. She was on TV. Now.

Ready to pick one of these three cowboys to be hers.

Not fucking happening.

I didn’t care if it was a game show. If it was fake or silly or whatever. No way in hell was she going with any one of them to Hawaii.

They turned as one to make their way on stage.

Fuck. FUCK! I ran a hand through my hair in frustration.

No way could I let this happen.

I reached out, grabbed one guy’s arm. “Wait.”

He turned, giving me an easy smile. “Yeah?”

“Sorry, dude, but Aspen’s my girl.”

“What?” he asked, frowning.

I didn’t answer but ran onto the stage behind the other two bachelors. One down, two to go.



ASPEN

“TELL EVERYONE, Aspen, what you’re looking for in a man.”

Jax Johnson, the game show’s host, held the microphone in front of my face, smiling at me bigger than a used car salesman after being told a customer had no budget.

I was perched on a stool, the only thing on this side of the stage. A big stack of hay bales divided me from where the bachelors were so I couldn’t see them.

I blinked, suddenly nervous. Okay, I’d already been nervous, but my mind went blank. He was skilled enough to catch on and laughed. “Pretty nerve wracking being on live TV, isn’t it?” he asked, trying to be reassuring.

As if reminding me this was broadcasting around the dang world made me calmer.

I nodded dumbly.

“Like ‘em tall?”

I cleared my throat. “Yes.”

“Dark?”

A ripple of amusement ran through the audience, catching on.

“Yes, and handsome, too,” I said, pasting on a big smile.

In the front row I saw Sierra, who waved. Beside her was Georgia and Mac, who had Andy in his lap. Then there was Mallory, Bridget, Lindy and baby Jillian, Eve, and the four James brothers. Plus, Nathan, the lawyer who’d been with Theo, on the very end. I didn’t see the FBI guy, but I knew he was out there.

This reminded me of being on stage for a ballet performance. The audience expected something from me, and I had to deliver. But I wasn’t in a tutu, and I had three men vying for me.

I wouldn’t have expected this, not in a million years. Why had I agreed to do this? Right, Georgia was desperate, Mallory was an insane friend, and they were paying me a lot of money.

“You’re in for a treat then,” Jax added. “I’ve seen the bachelors, and all three are a catch.”

He didn’t ask a question, so I wasn’t sure what to say. So I said nothing.

“But first, let’s tell the viewers about you.” He pulled a little card from the inside pocket of his jacket. “Aspen is thirty, a single mom, a yoga instructor, and... well, this is impressive.” He glanced at me. “It says here you were a ballet prodigy. The youngest dancer to be promoted to soloist at the...” He glanced back at the card and named the Spanish company. “Ever.”

How did he know that? I peeked at Georgia, who put her finger under her chin and pretended to lift it up, then gave me a huge pageant smile.

Right. SMILE.

I did.

Then I glanced at Mallory, who had to have been the one to spill the beans about my background and Georgia to add it to the host's card. They were proud of me for what I'd accomplished. They wanted it out there for everyone to hear about, not keeping it a secret that I did it in hiding in my studio.

"Yes, that's right," I said.

"In fact, here's a clip of one of her performances." He looked to me and whispered, "Very impressive. We have fifteen seconds. Take a deep breath. Good, one more. Smile and have fun with the guys. You don't have to marry any of them."

I met his gaze, and I nodded.

He must've gotten some kind of signal because his smile was back, and he looked at one of the cameras again. "Incredible, right? This beautiful small town has amazing talent."

The audience clapped and Sierra let out a super loud "whoop, whoop!" and a "that's my mom!" which had me laughing, and relaxing.

"Here's how this game works, everyone. Aspen, our lovely bachelorette, has a series of questions she will pose to each bachelor to get to know them. Then she will make her choice, hopefully, a cowboy who might be The One."

He looked over his shoulder at me. "Ready to hear about the bachelor cowboys?"

“Sure am!” I said, with so much more enthusiasm than I felt.

The bachelors must’ve come out because the audience’s gaze was on the other side of the stage and they were clapping. Then they clapped even louder and were whispering to each other.

“Sounds like the audience likes the bachelors,” Jax said, cutting across the very front of the stage and disappearing around the hay bales so I couldn’t see him any longer.

“Well, yes, folks. I see now why everyone’s so excited. I can’t say more because our lovely bachelorette needs to pick her favorite cowboy blind.”

I looked to Mallory for any kind of guidance. She looked a little freaked, but she was smiling and holding Theo’s hand, who was frowning, but he always frowned. Georgia was smiling, too. It wasn’t as if the FBI guy was one of the contestants waiting to arrest me.

Right?

“Bachelor number one, please introduce yourself to Aspen,” Jax said.

“Hey, Aspen, I’m Brayden. I run a ranch out by Billings and I’ve got some beef to show you, and I don’t mean my herd of cattle.”

The audience clapped and laughed. I blushed at how inappropriate that was but caught on to what Jax meant by have fun with it.

“Bachelor number two, please introduce yourself to Aspen,” Jax repeated.

“Aspen, hello. I’m Clay and I’m a champion bronc rider. I hope you like it when a guy breaks a filly in.”

This time, I couldn’t help but laugh and pretended to fan myself with the question cards the producer gave me.

“Bachelor number three, please introduce yourself to Aspen.”

“I’m Luke and I’m all yours. If you’ll have me.”

My heart lurched and I gave Mallory a panicked look.

Was that... could it be... WHAT THE HELL?



LUKE

IF BRAYDEN and Clay weren't vying for my girl's attention, I'd have really liked them. They were laid back and seemed like decent guys. Except with Brayden's dark skin and chiseled jaw, he looked like he might have to flick the women off him like flies from the backside of a horse. And his beef joke? Hilarious, except he was offering it to Aspen. If anyone was going to give her some Grade-A beefcake, it was me.

Then there was Clay. A champion bronc rider? That meant he had balls. Maybe not a lot of sense, but women found that shit hot. And I already knew how Aspen could ride a cowboy. Firsthand.

I wanted to punch both their lights out, storm across the stage, past the stupid hay barrier, and claim my woman. Grovel first, but then claim her.

But no.

NO. This was live TV.

She had to ask us stupid questions.

“Bachelor number one,” she said. “What’s your favorite cowboy accessory? Rope, spurs, or belt buckle, and why?”

What kind of dumb question was that? Oh yeah, a cowboy dating show question.

Brandon grinned and wiped his palms on his jean-clad thighs. “Rope because, well... I can’t say on TV.”

I glared at him as the audience tittered with faux embarrassment. What the hell was he thinking of doing with Aspen and some rope?

“Bachelor number two?” Aspen asked.

“Belt buckle, especially when a lady’s undoing it.”

The audience laughed while my hands clenched into fists.

“Bachelor number three?”

What was the question again? I ran my hand through my hair.

“It seems bachelor number three isn’t sure what to say,” Jax said, laughing at me.

Yeah, literally laughing *at* me. The fucker.

It was time to act, not kill him. I smiled. “Sorry, Jax. I find a little time outdoors makes me reflect on the little things.”

Jax’s smile froze, and he blinked at me.

“Oh, um... I don’t know what that means, but... well, I think we can all agree with that,” Jax said, and the audience agreed. In the sea of faces, I found my parents. My mother gave me an amused, and a little confused, look.

“Next question, Aspen,” Jax prompted.

“Bachelor number two. If you were going to cook me dinner, what would you feed me?”

“I’m not sure if I have to remind you or bachelor number one of this,” Jax began. “But a big piece of meat isn’t an answer.”

I growled. The audience chuckled. What the actual fuck?

Clay opened his mouth to answer, but that was it. I was done. I didn’t want to hear any more innuendo or witty banter. Aspen was mine and she didn’t need to hear anything else about the way they made their beef jerky or whether they liked butter on their cobs of corn or any other twisted shit.

“Do not answer that if you want to keep breathing,” I said to Clay as I hopped from my stool. I strode across the stage.

“Um, bachelor number three, what are you—”

I had no idea what else Jax said after that because I was around the bales of hay and in front of Aspen.

“Fucking finally,” I muttered, tossing her over my shoulder.



ASPEN

ALL HELL BROKE LOOSE, and I was upside down.

One second, I was asking a ridiculous question, the next Luke came around the hay bales and tossed me over his shoulder. I'd thought it was him, especially based on his responses, but it was official.

Luke was here. Had Georgia known about this? Was this what live TV was like?

“Well, this makes for interesting live TV, that’s for sure, folks,” Jax said. “I think I can say now that bachelor number three is none other than Derek Dashwood from *NYC ER*.”

Great. Just fucking great. Derek, not Luke.

I felt Luke exhale, then carefully lower me to the stage, keeping an arm around me so I didn't fall. “Actually, my name’s Luke Graham.”

“Oh, ho! Going incognito? We can stick with bachelor number three if you want, but...” Jax looked to the audience with his huge grin. “I think the secret’s out.”

Luke shook his head. “No, my real name is Luke Graham.”

“Luke, I’m not sure if you know how this game is played, but Aspen picks the cowboy.”

“As long as it’s me,” he said. His gaze roved over my face as if memorizing it. It’d been two days and I missed him. I hated him. I... what?

“Why should our lovely bachelorette pick you?” Jax asked, doing a pretty good job of winging it since Luke had fucked up the show and there was plenty of airtime left.

“Because I love her.”

The whole audience erupted. I freaked. I stared at Georgia, who looked horrified and Mallory who had her hands over her mouth, clearly stunned.

Jax turned toward the camera. “Ladies and gentleman, it seems this show has taken an interesting twist. Derek—”

“Luke.”

“Luke,” Jax corrected. “Is in love with our bachelorette! Tell me, how do you know Aspen?”

Luke looked to me. Ignored Jax. The audience. Everything. “We met last week while I was here on vacation. Fell in love with her the second I saw her.”

He... WHAT?

I was still trying to process what I learned about Luke from the FBI agent, although there hadn’t been any time to think since I was on a fucking stage on live TV. That while he had known meeting me at the bar was planned, it hadn’t been because of my mother.

He hadn’t lied to me. Not once.

But I'd lied to myself, hadn't I? I'd told myself and the girls and even Luke that what I felt for him wasn't real. That all we could ever be was fake.

I'd been the one acting. Pretending that my feelings weren't real. I'd held back and he'd put it all out there.

I glanced at my friends in the audience. They were here because they liked me. ME. Aspen. They didn't care if my last name was Lane or Bergstrom. They didn't care that I was a ballerina or a yoga instructor. They just liked me for me. No strings. No expectations when it came to their friendship.

I was the one who'd held back, just like Mallory had said.

And those photos Luke posted on his social media? It had been a glimpse into how he really saw me. Pretty. Feminine. Sexy. Strong. Loved.

What had I given him besides a fake girlfriend to trick his producer?

"She must've loved you right back, a famous TV star with spectacular hair," Jax commented.

He shook his head. "No, she didn't."

Yeah, he was right. I hadn't loved him right back. Because I didn't trust him, or anyone else, with my heart.

"She had no idea who I was," Luke said.

The producers must've been scrambling, because someone carried a stool onto the stage. Jax waved us over for us to take seats. Luke grabbed me by the waist and plopped me down on one, then moved his so it was so close that when he sat, our thighs touched.

"I'm sure the audience and everyone watching at home want to hear more about this," Jax said. "What do you mean

she didn't know who you were? How is that possible? You're the one of the sexiest men alive."

Luke huffed. "I fell for the one woman who doesn't have a TV."

Jax stared at me, confused. "You don't have a TV?"

I shook my head.

"What did you think of Luke when you first met him then?" Jax asked me.

I blinked, looked to Luke. At his handsome face, but past that. His eyes looked to me with hope. Earnestness. Honesty. He was out here admitting to the world who he really was. He wasn't hiding behind his stage name or his character. "I... I—"

"I think you've stunned her!" Jax said, laughing. "Probably every woman out there would be tongue tied too if you tossed her over your shoulder."

"I'm here for another shot with Aspen," Luke said. "I blew it. Like my mother told me, men are idiots and I'm one of them."

The audience laughed.

"I forgot who I was," he admitted.

"You do have a lot of names," Jax admitted. "What's the character name in the new film you're starring in? We'll have to add that to the list."

Luke shook his head. "While the film is going to be amazing, I declined the role."

The ripple of surprise ran through the audience. I gasped.

"Why? The whole world wants to know," Jax said.

“I’m going to try being Luke Graham for a while. The out-of-work actor dating a famous ballerina, hopefully eating kale chips with her as we watch her daughter kick ass with her hockey team.”

WHAT?

That was what I was thinking and what the entire audience pretty much said out loud.

“Mom, Dad, back me up here?” Luke asked, his gaze roving over the audience.

I whipped my head toward the crowd and an older couple stood. They waved. Oh my God, I recognized them from the video call Luke and I had with them. What were they doing here?

“Those are your folks?” Jax asked.

“That’s right. Janet and Tom. Aspen, instead of Hawaii, come with me to Nebraska for that picnic. Sierra, too. I want you to know me. *Me*. Luke. Just Luke.”

The audience was silent.

Jax was silent.

Luke stared at me.

The audience stared at me.

Jax stared at me.

The entire world, through the camera, stared at me.

Did I give Luke a chance? Did I give love a chance? Did I give *ME* a chance?



LUKE

ASPEN WASN'T SAYING ANYTHING. My heart was in my throat. Did she think I was faking for the cameras? Maybe this was a bad idea. Maybe—

“Yes,” she said.

I stared at her for a second. “Yes?” I repeated. *Did that mean...*

“She said yes!” Jax shouted, seeming more thrilled than me.

The audience cheered.

“Yes?” I repeated, staring into Aspen’s blue eyes.

She nodded. I hopped from my stool and cupped the back of her neck. Jax was saying something, but I wasn’t paying him or anyone else any attention.

“Say it, tiger. I need to hear the words,” I murmured.

“Yes. I will come with you to Nebraska. I love you, to—”

I didn’t let her finish because my mouth was on hers. Sweet, soft.

MINE.

Thank fuck.



LUKE

“WELL, folks, it seems our bachelorette has chosen bachelor number three! It didn’t go quite as planned, but this is the Wild Wild West after all! A special thanks to Hunter Valley, Montana for hosting this episode. I’m Jax Johnson and I’ll see you next time with more *Cowboy Goes A Courtin’!*”

I didn’t stop kissing Aspen while the host wrapped up the show. I didn’t stop kissing her when he said, “Show’s over. You can come up for air now.”

I didn’t stop kissing her until a young voice said, “Mom, everyone’s staring.”

I felt Aspen smile against my lips before we pulled back. Her eyes held mine for just a moment before she looked away.

Yeah, everyone *was* staring.

Sierra, my parents with Mrs. Waddle, Mallory, Georgia, Theo, even Clay and Brandon.

I couldn’t help but grin and wrapped my arm around Aspen’s shoulder.

“I should say I’m sorry, but I’m not,” I admitted. I looked to Clay and Brandon. “No hard feelings?”

Fortunately, they were smiling, not ready to punch me in the face. I deserved it and I’d take it because I wasn’t giving Aspen up.

“Nah, congrats,” Clay said.

Brandon came over, shook my hand and smacked me on the shoulder. When he winked at Aspen, I growled, making him laugh.

Sierra launched herself at her mother, wrapping her in a hug. Aspen leaned down, kissed the top of her head.

“Hey Champ,” I said to her. “How was hockey camp?”

Her little face lit up as she answered. “Awesome. I’ve got to tell you all about the zone defense drills.”

“It’s nice to meet you, honey,” Momma said, coming up and squeezing Aspen’s shoulder. “I brought Luke’s baby book so when you’re ready, I’ll show you those photos.”

“Maybe we’ll save them for when she and Sierra come to visit,” Dad said.

Theo stepped close and gave me a look I couldn’t interpret. Did he have his scalpels in his pocket? “When you make things right, you don’t skimp,” he commented, shaking his head.

“Oh my God, that was insane!” Mallory said, her hands waving about. “I can’t believe you did that. I mean, when I said open yourself up to love, Aspen, I didn’t mean on live TV!”

Aspen blushed.

“I’m not sure if the producers are going to ever come back to Montana. But my job is done. The Hunter Valley show will not be something anyone forgets!” Georgia said with a laugh.

“Let’s go celebrate,” Mallory said.

I looked to Aspen, who was still smiling but a little shell shocked.

“I think the lovebirds might want to celebrate by themselves for a little bit,” Mrs. Waddle commented. “Sierra, you can come with me and help me make dinner for our new friends, Mr. and Mrs. Graham.”

“Okay, but did you find the bulldog rock without me, Mom?” Sierra asked. “I wanna go see it.”

Aspen cocked her head. “No, we didn’t go look for it again.”

“We can go this week,” I added, making it clear I was sticking around.

“Bulldog rock?” Mrs. Waddle asked.

Sierra looked up at the older woman and nodded. “Yeah, Granny Waddle. Mom found it and lost it and now I want to see it.”

“Oh, I know that rock. It looks just like a bulldog, too,” Mrs. Waddle commented.

Aspen’s eyes widened. “*You* know the bulldog rock?”

Mrs. Waddle looked surprised. “Of course! Mr. Waddle and I picnicked at that rock. I think our first child was conceived on top of it. That’s how a cowboy courted back in my day.”

My mouth fell open, then I laughed because... wow.

“Where is it?” Sierra asked, thankfully not asking what conceived meant. “Can we go see it together?”

“Anytime you want,” Mrs. Waddle told her. “I know exactly where it is.”

Aspen looked to me, biting her lip so she didn’t laugh. Her landlady, her adopted grandmother, and dear friend, had known its location all along.

“I want to see this rock, too,” Mallory added. “I’ve lived here my whole life and never heard of it.”

A group discussion began about the rock, and I had enough. I needed Aspen to myself. I may have declared myself and my intentions on live TV, but I had to tell her how I felt. What I wanted. Alone. Taking her hand, I tugged her off the stage and away from the crazy group of people we called family and friends.



ASPEN

“WHAT I SAID on the show was the truth. I’ve never lied to you, tiger.”

We were sitting on the floor in my yoga studio, our backs against the mirrored wall. We hadn’t talked as Luke drove us back to town. Somehow, we ended up here. But it made sense. It was the only quiet place to be alone. Mrs. Waddle would entertain Sierra and Luke’s parents, so there was no way we’d have any privacy in my apartment upstairs. Or maybe they were off in the woods to see the bulldog rock Mrs. Waddle knew about.

I couldn’t believe she knew about it and knew exactly where it was. All of this could have been averted entirely if I was aware of that from the start.

“I know,” I murmured to Luke.

His hand was on the back of my neck, as usual. It was as if that was his spot to hold me. To comfort me. To know I was his.

“You know?” He gazed at me with openness and a hint of worry or fear. His eyes flicked to my lips.

I nodded, wanting him to kiss me. “Your FBI friend stopped by.”

His eyes widened and his fingers tightened a touch. “What? When? Shit.”

“Before the show started,” I admitted.

“Please tell me you didn’t give money to your ex.” A hint of desperation tinged his voice.

“What? No.”

“Thank fuck.” He sighed. “I told Theo to make sure—”

“You talked to Theo?”

He huffed. “Yeah. I made an appointment as a patient at the clinic. Figured it was the safest way to see him without the chance of him bringing a woodchipper. I told him about the possible money trail from you to Duncan to your mother. I swear I knew nothing about it until after the party the other night. Mark called and... well, shit. It was my fault you had that money, and I couldn’t get in touch with you to warn you. I had to protect you.”

“That’s why he brought the lawyer,” I muttered. “Theo knew I didn’t give the money though so he must’ve expected the FBI guy to show.”

He sighed. “Good. He’s... I can’t believe I’m saying this since he told everyone in the clinic I have gonorrhea, but he’s a nice guy.”

“I hope that generosity extends to me because you’ll probably be getting a call from the hockey organization thanking you for your huge scholarship donation,” I said.

His eyes widened, then he laughed. “Best donation I ever made. God, tiger.” He kissed me, as if he couldn’t hold back any longer. “I had no idea it would all get so fucked up. I thought I was helping you and then it turned out I made everything worse.”

“I wasn’t keeping that money. Not when I thought you did it to get closer to my mother.”

He shook his head vehemently. “No, that’s not it. I—”

“I know. *Now*. You met my parents, and you can see why I’m so fucked up. I’ve been so jaded about love I just expect everyone to use it against me.”

“Ah, baby. No.”

“I couldn’t imagine why you’d really want to be with me. So it was easier to make it a fake relationship. Then I could keep you at arm’s length. It didn’t matter what I felt for you because I expected you to do something to hurt me. Then you did.”

His eyes closed and his fingers squeezed my neck once again.

“I’m so fucking sorry. I did it all wrong. I should’ve told you that first night that I’d fallen for you. That I never felt anything like it before. I should’ve told you about Mark, but honestly, as soon as I saw you, I told him to fuck off because you were mine. He texted the next day and asked what I thought about you. Told him you weren’t involved because even though we didn’t do much talking besides answering trivia questions, I knew you were a good girl.” He grabbed his phone. “Here. You can see the texts.”

I shook my head and set my hand over his. “I believe you.”

“After that, I forgot about him and the investigation. I swear, I didn’t know you were related to your mom. Not until the party.”

“I know.”

“You do?”

I nodded. “Mark told me. But I shouldn’t have doubted you. I kept my life a secret, not just from you, but from my friends. Mallory didn’t know about my mother being a senator or my dancing either. She got pretty mad at me.”

“I’ve fallen for you, Aspen Lane. Hard. I love you. I do, but I think we need a redo.”

“A redo?” I wondered. Was he telling me this was over? That—

He nodded. “Yeah.” He held out his hand and I stared at it. Confused.

“I’m Luke Graham. I’m an out of work actor visiting Hunter Valley with my parents. I think you’re the prettiest fucking thing I’ve ever seen, and I want to get to know you better. Tell me some things?”

Tears filled my eyes and I swallowed hard and shook his hand. Then he turned it over and brought it to his lips so he could kiss my inner wrist.

“I’m Aspen Lane. I have shitty parents who aren’t a part of my life and one of them might be in jail for a long time. I have a daughter who *is* my life. I’m a yoga instructor and…” I took a deep breath. “A ballet dancer.”

“Good girl,” he murmured. “Dance for me.”

I didn’t say anything, and he ran his thumb over my cheek.

“Dance for me,” he said again, then kissed my forehead.

I stood, went to my office and got my pointe shoes.
Swapped them for the cowgirl boots.

Then, in front of an audience of one, I danced.



LUKE

ASPEN AMAZED ME. In her pretty blue dress, she danced. Spun. Twirled. Leapt. Bent and turned so fucking gracefully I was in awe. She hid this amazing talent from the world. Walked away from it because she never had a support system. Her parents didn't value her as anything more than a commodity. They cut her off because she'd gotten pregnant with Sierra, who was another amazing thing Aspen brought to the world.

She wouldn't hide this any longer. She wouldn't hide herself.

She couldn't. It would be impossibly cruel to the world not to know her talent.

Aspen stopped, posed as if the music only she heard in her head came to an end.

She looked my way.

I crooked my finger.

She came to me. I took her hand, pulled her down and onto my lap so she straddled me.

“You’re so incredibly talented.”

“Says the famous TV star.”

I shook my head. “It’s all fake, tiger. All I am is fake. Your ability is carved from hard work and genius. I can’t believe you’re mine.”

She was breathing hard, and her cheeks were flushed. Whatever the crew did to her hair, it was wild and curly, falling over her shoulders.

“Please say you’re mine,” I murmured. Or pretty much begged.

“You’re not fake, Luke,” she replied. “You never were to me.”

“No. Not to you.”

“I’m yours,” she vowed.

“Yeah?” I asked, wanting to make sure. I *needed* to be hers. To know she was in *my* lap. With me. Only me. Luke Graham.

“Yeah. Will you kiss me now?”

I grinned, slid my hand around the back of her neck, pulled her in and put my mouth to hers. After an hour, a minute, a day, I pulled back, started on the buttons down the front of her dress. I laughed when there were so fucking many of them keeping me from her body.

Finally, fucking finally, the dress parted. I pushed it off her shoulders, leaving her in a pale pink bra and matching panties.

“Mine,” I said, leaning forward and latching onto her nipple through the cotton.

“Luke!” she cried, her fingers tangling in my hair.

Fuck, I missed her. Her body. Her scent. Knowing I could give her pleasure. That I was the one to see to this need. To make her scream.

“More,” she said, pulling my head away from her chest.

She reached for my belt, started undoing it.

“Got a greedy pussy, tiger?”

“Yes,” she said boldly, not shy in the slightest.

When I was free, she stroked me from root to tip. I hissed at the incredible feel.

“Up,” I said.

She looked to me, and I waited for her to do as I said.

Slowly, she pushed up onto her knees.

“Slide those panties over and show me that perfect pussy.”

She did and... fuck, she was wet for me.

“Slide down on me. Take your time. You know it’s a snug fit.” She did, slowly working herself onto my dick.

“Easy, tiger. Take your time,” I said, through gritted teeth. She wasn’t taking her time at all. She was fucking herself on me, using me to get herself off. I was more than fine with that, but I was close to coming. She was taking me bare, and I’d never felt anything so incredible. So tight. So hot. So wet.

“Aspen, there’s no condom,” I said. All the other times, we’d used protection. We hadn’t talked about other birth control. Maybe we should’ve done it before I was balls deep inside her, but there were consequences, and she was more aware of them than anyone.

She stilled, her inner walls clenching me. FUCK!

“I’m on the pill,” she said.

“Thank fuck,” I replied, then gripped her hips and lifted and lowered her, filling her hard and deep each time she dropped down.

“Yes. Fuck, such a good girl. Come for me. Come and I’ll fill you up.”

“Luke!” she cried, clenching around me as she came, milking me fucking dry.

Her head was thrown back as she rode me, and I came so hard I saw stars.

I saw my future and it was with Aspen. We may have done things a little backwards and a hell of a lot fucked up, but we’d make this work.

If we could fake it so good, then we could make it for real.



ASPEN

I WORKED the tea tin from the hole I dug two years ago. As I held it aloft, everyone cheered. When I put the ring in the ground, I'd been alone with a bottle of wine.

Now, I was with friends. And family.

God, I couldn't believe it. I turned my head and smiled at everyone. Mrs. Waddle was in a folding camp chair beside the bulldog rock she led us to. Sierra, Jackson, and Johnny stood on top of it. Mallory and Theo sat on the ground next to Mrs. Waddle. Janet and Tom were a few feet away staring out at the view of Hunter Valley through the trees. From what they said, there weren't many pines or hills in Peckers Cutoff, where Sierra and I were headed the next day. With Luke. To spend a week and have a picnic with his siblings and nieces and nephews. For Sierra to herd cattle and become a cowgirl and play in a sprinkler. Where Luke and I could just... be.

First, I had to get this ring. Luke knelt beside me, watched as I opened the tin and pulled out the ring box. Cracking it open, I showed him the diamond ring.

“I don’t blame you for burying it. It’s pretty ugly,” he deadpanned, then cracked a smile.

I swatted him and laughed.

“I know just the ring I’m going to give you.”

My smile fell. “What?”

“When I ask you to marry me. Don’t give me that look. It’s not happening today.” He leaned in and kissed me. “Momma, you got Nana’s ring ready?” he called.

“Whenever you are!” she called back.

“See? Whenever we’re ready,” he murmured. “Later.”

“Kissing. Gross!” Jackson said.

“Later,” I agreed. I wanted to marry him, but someday. I needed to get used to loving. To being loved. To allowing it into my life. Accepting that I deserve it. That there were people around me who deserved it from me in return.

“I did a lot more than kissing on that rock, young man,” Granny Waddle said.

I put the ring away, closed the lid on the tea tin, then stood.

“I’ll give it to Nathan to pass on to your ex’s lawyer,” Theo said, holding his hand out. I passed it to him. Gratefully. “Not that he’ll need the ring anytime soon. I doubt he’s marrying anyone from behind bars. Too bad he and your mother won’t be housed together.”

From what I was told—since I didn’t have a TV and refused to watch one to hear about my mother—she’d resigned from the Senate. She and Duncan were in jail and would most likely take plea deals that involved jail time.

What did that have to do with me?

Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

I'd been done with my parents years ago, but seeing them again, knowing Luke met them and knew my past, brought closure to that part of my life. Finding the ring, I was now officially done with Duncan, too.

I came full circle in front of the bulldog rock.

"It really does look like a bulldog," Luke said, pulling me into his arms and staring at the boulder. "Let's get a picture of everyone in front of it."

"You putting it on your social media?" Mallory asked. "Everyone will want to find it."

"Then we'll have to keep the location a secret," Luke countered. "Sierra, can you keep this place a secret? Johnny? Jackson?"

"What bulldog rock?" Sierra asked, grinning.

"That's my girl," Luke said, putting his arm up so she could lean down from atop the boulder and give him a fist bump.

My cell rang and I pulled it from my shorts pocket. "It's Georgia," I told everyone.

"I know you're going to some penis-named place in Nebraska tomorrow," she said. "I think you're going to want to hold off."

"What? Why?"

"Because I just got a call from your ballet company in Spain. They saw Luke's social media clip of you dancing and recognized you. Then I guess they saw the show and figured out you have a new name. Anyway, they want you to come dance with them. A special performance."

Luke must've seen the surprise on my face. "What's the matter?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. Um... my old ballet company wants me to do a special performance, Georgia said."

Mallory hopped up from the ground, came over and threw her arms around me. "That's amazing! You're doing it!"

I looked at Luke over Mallory's shoulder. "You're doing it, tiger."

I nodded. I was doing it. I thanked Georgia and ended the call, promising to get details later.

Life. Friends. Love. I had it all.

"Let's get a picture with the superstar," Tom said, taking Luke's phone from him.

"That's right. Luke, get in the middle," I said.

"Not Luke," Tom corrected.

"Yeah, Mom," Sierra said. "You."

"You're the superstar, honey," Mrs. Waddle said, patting my arm.

Luke kissed me, not caring that Johnny and Jackson were making fake gagging sounds. "They're right. YOU are the superstar."

"And yours?" I asked.

"And mine."



LUKE

“IT’S ALL PLANNED OUT,” Momma said, coming out the back door with a huge serving bowl. She set it on the center of the table. Potato salad. My fucking favorite.

Aspen followed behind with a platter of steaming corn on the cob.

The kids were screaming and shouting, playing under the sprinkler and using the Slip and Slide. We’d been here two days and Sierra was having a ball. My nieces and nephews had quickly pulled her into their brood.

We’d driven to Peckers Cutoff the day after my parents returned. Aspen had been able to delay our trip to Spain by a week so we could come here first.

Yeah, *our* trip to Spain. As if I’d miss out on watching her practice and perform with her old ballet company. Sierra was coming with us. I couldn’t wait.

I was at the picnic table with Pops, and my brother and sisters plus their spouses. The sun was setting. The scent of barbecue and summer grass filled the air.

I loved it here. This was home. But as Aspen set the platter down and smiled, I knew *she* was my home.

“What’s planned out?” I asked.

“You’ll go next week to Spain and we’ll catch up to make the performance,” Momma told me as she settled onto the picnic bench across from me.

I flicked my gaze to Aspen, who picked up her glass of iced tea and took a sip. She didn’t seem bothered that my mother was doing some master planning.

“I thought that was the plan,” I said.

Momma nodded. “Yes, but Sierra is going to stay here with us. We’ll bring her to Spain with us.”

My eyes widened and I looked again at Aspen. “You’re okay with this?”

She looked to where the kids were playing. “She wants to stay. She asked... begged even, so I couldn’t tell her no because I selfishly want her with me at all times.”

I knew that feeling. I selfishly wanted Aspen all to myself.

“She’ll be fine,” my sister, Audrey offered. “She’s already planned a sleepover with the girls. They’re planning on sleeping on the trampoline in the back yard.”

That did sound like something Aspen would love to do.

Momma gave me a look. I realized she was offering me this time. A week with only Aspen. In Spain. No kids. No parents. Just us. And her practicing the hell out of her ballet.

Sounded fucking perfect.

“Now we just need to get you a job, son,” Pops said.

“You could be a hair model,” Matt, my brother, piped in as he stood to reach and grab a corn.

“You’re just jealous,” I tossed out.

“Damned straight,” he added with a grin. He had a receding hairline and kept his hair shorn close to the scalp. “But my face is so handsome it makes up for my going bald.”

“That’s right, baby,” Nicky, his wife, said, patting him on the shoulder and then leaning over to kiss his cheek.

“Actually,” I began. I looked to Aspen again. I couldn’t stop. She was mine. She was here in Nebraska with me. With my family. She was one of us now, blending in just as well as Sierra. “I was offered a job.”

Her eyes widened. “You were?”

Maybe I should’ve told her this first before announcing it to everyone, but I got the call while Aspen and Sierra were in the barn with Pops and the horses.

I nodded.

Everyone stopped eating and stared.

“Well?” Audrey asked.

“Another movie deal?” Matt asked.

I shook my head. “TV.”

“You’ll stay as Shep Barnes?” Aspen asked.

That meant I would need to be in LA for filming and that lasted most of the year.

“No. I have to finish out my contract, but that’s only for a few more episodes. Then they’ll kill me off.”

Natalie, my other sister, gasped. “No! Shep Barnes can’t die!”

I shrugged. “I haven’t seen the script yet. Maybe I’ll get married to that candy striper who I was stuck in the elevator with for two days and we’ll drive off into the sunset.”

“Then what are you doing? A new show? Does that mean you have to stay in LA?” Momma asked. I knew she wanted to know, but was asking so Aspen didn’t have to.

“No. It’s being filmed in Hunter Valley.”

Everyone was silent for a moment, then everyone piped up at once. I stood, went around the table to Aspen. Squatted beside her. She turned a little to face me. I could see she was nervous. Worried. People left her. That was what she was used to, but no longer. I’d prove to her that I was going to stick. Starting now.

“Georgia called me.” Aspen’s eyes widened. “She’s the PR woman in Hunter Valley,” I added for my siblings who hadn’t met her. “The producers of *Cowboy Goes a Courtin’* want me to be the new show host.”

“What?” Aspen said on an exhale.

I nodded. “Jax Johnson is going to start some new game show and they want me to take his place.”

“In Hunter Valley?” she asked.

“I guess between my little stunt and the fact that it really was filmed in cowboy country went over with the audience. They’re going to film the rest of the season there. With me.”

“My brother, the game show host!” Audrey shouted into the air. “That’ll go over well at your high school reunion.”

I rolled my eyes. I didn't give a shit about that. Only what Aspen thought. "You okay with being with a game show host?"

She took my hands. "Don't you want to be in a movie? A game show host can't be all that—"

"It's exactly what I want."

"*A game show host?*" she repeated.

"No. Being near you. I'll have Sam work on other roles for me, but I'll pick and choose what works for us. I want to be with *you*, tiger. We'll figure it out from there."

Tears filled her eyes.

"Shit, don't cry."

She shook her head. "I'm not sad. I'm... happy."

I grinned. Sighed. "Good. Fuck, that's good."

"The ballerina and the game show host. That should be a romance book," Natalie tossed out.

"My friend Lindy writes romance. I'll pitch the idea to her," Aspen said.

"As long as it's a happily ever after," I added, then leaned close to kiss her. Remind her that she was mine.

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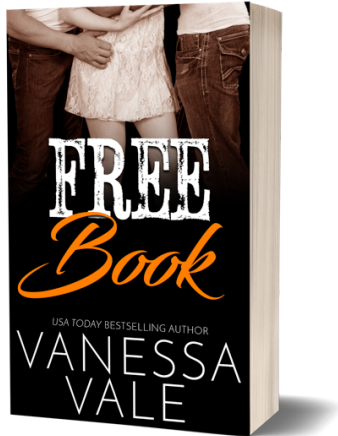
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ABOUT VANESSA VALE

A USA Today bestseller, Vanessa Vale writes tempting romance with unapologetic bad boys who don't just fall in love, they fall hard. Her books have sold over one million copies. She lives in the American West where she's always finding inspiration for her next story.

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