



*Mess
With Me*

CLAIRE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

WILDER

Mess With Me

A MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE ROMANCE

CLAIRE WILDER

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I don't do feelings. So why do I have so many of them around her?

I shouldn't be attracted to Sasha Macklin. She's frilly and pretty. She talks too much. And she's into things I don't understand, like clothes and babies and... feelings.

But when her life is put in danger by the people who're supposed to be closest to her, I'm the first one by Sasha's side. And when it turns out the only way to truly keep her safe is to marry her, I don't hesitate—I drop everything to make it happen.

But the longer we hide out in my hometown together, the more I'm learning protecting Sasha from a dangerous criminal is the easy part. Protecting my heart? It's going to mess with me.

*The fifth book in USA Today Bestseller Claire Wilder's **Quince Valley Romance** series is a marriage of convenience small town romance with suspense elements. It can be read as a standalone.*

Contents

1. [Griffin](#)
2. [Griffin](#)
3. [Sasha](#)
4. [Sasha](#)
5. [Sasha](#)
6. [Griffin](#)
7. [Sasha](#)
8. [Griffin](#)
9. [Griffin](#)
10. [Sasha](#)
11. [Griffin](#)
12. [Sasha](#)
13. [Griffin](#)
14. [Sasha](#)
15. [Sasha](#)
16. [Griffin](#)
17. [Sasha](#)
18. [Sasha](#)
19. [Sasha](#)
20. [Griffin](#)
21. [Sasha](#)
22. [Griffin](#)
23. [Sasha](#)
24. [Sasha](#)
25. [Griffin](#)
26. [Griffin](#)
27. [Sasha](#)
28. [Griffin](#)
29. [Sasha](#)
30. [Griffin](#)
31. [Griffin](#)
32. [Sasha](#)

33. [Griffin](#)

34. [Sasha](#)

35. [Sasha](#)

36. [Griffin](#)

37. [Sasha](#)

38. [Sasha](#)

39. [Griffin](#)

40. [Sasha](#)

41. [Griffin](#)

42. [Sasha](#)

43. [Sasha](#)

44. [Griffin](#)

45. [Sasha](#)

46. [Griffin](#)

47. [Sasha](#)

48. [Griffin](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

To anyone who's ever felt a little alone, even in a crowd.

CHAPTER 1

I know a woman in trouble when I see one, and that's a woman in trouble.

The woman pulling up in the golf cart fifty yards away from me through the trees is none of my business. Still, I stop and lean against a tall, leafy alder, my phone propped under my chin, watching as the driver practically sprints around the cart to help her out and onto the footpath.

Strains of upbeat music and chatter from the crowd at the end of the path drown out most of the forest sounds.

“Griff?”

“Yeah, I’m here,” I say into my phone.

I straighten my tux’s lapels, trying to focus as my colleague and best friend Ford launches into an update of what I’ve missed since I left yesterday.

The woman’s holding herself stiffly, like she’s waiting for something—or someone—to jump out of the trees. To anyone else, I think it would look like she’s here to enjoy a wedding, just like me. Not that “enjoy” is a word I’d normally couple with “wedding.”

She smiles, saying something to the driver, who leans a little too casually against the roof of the cart, like he’s trying to be chill. I don’t blame him. This woman’s not just beautiful. She’s objectively stunning.

She looks around her person, then tucks the blond waves tumbling over her shoulders to one side as she reaches into the cart to grab something she must have forgotten. Whatever it is

she's looking for must be on the floor of the cart, because she leans way in, kicking up a bright pink heel that looks sharp enough to kill a man as she strains to reach. Her poofy pink dress barely reached mid-thigh when she was standing.

I grit my teeth as the driver gets an eyeful of whatever's under her skirt. Luckily he immediately does the right thing by shoving his hands in his pockets and looking up at the sky.

"Good man," I mutter.

"What?" Ford asks, pausing his reading.

"Nothing. Just wedding stuff."

Just a beautiful woman I think is worried she's being followed stuff.

Ford shuffles through papers on the other end of the line. "Okay, so like I say, at two-thirty, his goon leaves the building, heading south in the Escalade..."

It's shitty of me not to give Ford my full attention. But the scene before me has superseded work.

The woman emerges with a purse in hand. As she stands up straight again, her face angles this way for the first time. I can't see fine details, but I still clock high cheekbones and a heart-shaped face tinged pink from hanging practically upside down.

I also see the way she jerks at the sound of a twig snapping and how her fingers clutch the little purse so tightly it looks like she's going to snap it in half.

I'm not worried anyone's here. This wedding's nestled in the trees in the far corner of my family resort's golf course, well away from the public. I personally vetted the special security my sister, the hotel's CEO, hired for the event. It's a huge unit, and that's on top of the bride's personal detail. In fact, our regular resort staff were relieved from transport duty; that driver's security personnel. On top of all of that, the guests had to sign NDAs.

But except for that last point, she doesn't know all that.

Even from here, I can see the smile she gives him as she leaves is fucking dazzling. She gives him a little wave, and the driver—probably an ex-marine—grins and waves back like Forrest Gump as she takes off down the path on foot.

“Griff?”

Shit. Ford says my name in a way that I know means I missed something important.

“Sorry. A lot going on over here.”

I’m no better than the driver, who’s pulling away to head back to the resort, clearly reluctant to leave. His eyes dart one last time to the woman before he drives out of sight.

I run a hand over the back of my neck, turning away. It’s not like me to be distracted. Especially not when I want to hear what Ford has to say.

I picked up a bit, here and there. And as I return focus, one of those bits floats to the surface. “Wait, did you say something about Lionel?”

Lionel McCrae is the CEO of McCrae & Associates, the white-label protection firm Ford and I work for. Our boss.

There’s a long pause. Ford’s not used to me not paying attention.

“Yeah,” he says. “Hey, you okay?”

“Fine,” I bark.

He chuckles. “That’s more like it.” Then his voice turns sober. “Griff, I said that feeling you had the other day that something’s up with Lionel. I...don’t think you’re wrong.”

That’s enough to bring me fully back. “Tell me.”

“You said you thought he hadn’t been himself for a while.”

“He hasn’t.” It’s been a few months. The changes are subtle, but I know how to read people. I’ve worked for the man for a decade. I know him better than half my siblings, which says a lot—I’ve got four of them.

“I saw three more locked meetings on his calendar,” Ford says. “When I asked him about them, he gave me the brush-off.”

Something tickles along the length of my spine. Up until a few months ago, Ford and I had Lionel’s full confidence. As his seconds-in-command, he’d run everything by us for our professional opinions. Even meeting potential clients, many of whom were highly vulnerable political targets.

“He did the same for me, telling me the meetings were personal appointments.”

“I call bullshit,” Ford says.

I laugh, but there’s no humor in it. Ford didn’t believe me when I first brought it up. I don’t give a shit about credit, but on this matter particularly, I wish I didn’t feel vindicated. There was a time I would have called Lionel a second father. But I can’t reconcile that man with his recent behavior.

“I’m sorry I didn’t believe you at first,” Ford says. “But to be fair, you’re suspicious as fuck about pretty much everything. To hear you voicing that shit about Lionel—I didn’t want to see it. I half convinced myself it was just time for you to take a vacation.”

“I’m on vacation right now.”

“A day off is not a vacation.”

“I took the back roads.”

Ford scoffs. “Driving isn’t a vacation, either, even if you go the long route.”

“I’d beg to differ.” Driving here via the old winding highways of upstate New York and Vermont last night on my Bonneville—a bike I fully restored in my workshop this year—felt like a holiday. So did coming home to my cabin outside Quince Valley, where I hadn’t been in three weeks since we’d been on assignment in Queens.

“Is that all you noticed?” I ask, already knowing it won’t be. That sick feeling I first felt when I started noticing Lionel’s odd behavior spreads in my guts. Instinct tells me something’s

off, and not just a little bit. Inadvertently, I turn back to where the woman went, as if looking for an antidote. To my surprise, she's still there, only farther up at the end of the treed path that runs parallel to the one I'm on now. She's paused to look at her phone.

Her whole posture is stiff.

She looks the way I feel.

I force myself to turn away again and begin walking toward the wedding site, which I can see and hear through the trees up ahead—at least three hundred people are here, and they make a good amount of noise. If she's not my client and not in imminent danger—and I know she's not—then she's not my problem. I have problems all on my own without looking for more.

“No, that's not all I noticed,” Ford says.

I slow my pace.

There's a long pause again, like he's considering how to phrase something. “Lionel wants us to wind down the surveillance on Creelman.”

I freeze. The music's louder here, the din of the crowd only a dozen yards from where I stand. “I'm not sure I heard you right.”

“No, you heard me right,” Ford says grimly. “He's dismantled the team.”

“The *fuck*?” I can't believe what I'm hearing. We've been staking out Creelman for weeks, with guys watching his every move.

Our company isn't law enforcement, though several of our colleagues are ex-cops or military. McCrae & Associates protects good guys and helps push good ideas. Often, that means watching bad guys. Like in the case of our current client, an executive at a construction company whose company is doing deals with criminal organizations. Vincent Creelman's a higher-up in one of those organizations—one that's been the target of drug, extortion, and worst of all in my mind, sex-

trafficking allegations, though law enforcement has never been able to make anything stick.

“Creelman’s a thug, through and through,” I grit out into the phone. “This doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

“We all know Creelman’s a bad fucking guy of the first order,” Ford agrees. “And Lionel knows our surveillance proves he’s been blatantly bribing local politicians for years.”

It makes no sense he’d want us to back down. “He called the guy a scumbag, for chrissakes.”

“It’s not great,” Ford agrees.

I’m fucking dumbfounded. “Where’s the rest of the team?”

“Getting reassigned.”

“Attention beautiful people!” A voice cuts through the last of the trees between me and the open space where wedding-goers mill around rows of white chairs. A chic-looking Black woman with a shaved head and a pink blazer grips the mic at the podium. “The ceremony of the century will begin in fifteen minutes.”

“Fuck, I’ve gotta go,” I tell Ford, very much not wanting to go.

He chuckles. “The ceremony of the century, huh?”

“Fuck you.”

“Call me when you can. There’s more.”

“What do you mean, more?”

But Ford’s already ended the call.

“Sonofabitch,” I say out loud. I’d say it to his face if he were here. He knows if he said any more, he’d risk me jumping on my bike and heading back to the city.

But I can’t ditch my brother’s wedding with a clean conscience. I’m known for being inexplicably absent in this family. Hazard of the job. And my personality. But skipping out on my brother’s wedding would be a dick move, especially since I’m in the wedding party. I’m a lot of things, but I’m not

a dick. Family is always number one, even if I don't always tell them that in words.

I slip the phone into my breast pocket and pick up the pace down the last section of the path, setting work out of my mind for now. I'm good at compartmentalizing.

Of course the moment I shut the door in my brain on work, it goes straight back to the woman in pink.

"Fucking stop it, asshole," I mutter to myself oh-so-kindly as I step out into the back of the crowd. "It's time to act like weddings are my goddamned happy place, not scan the crowd for women in peril."

One particular woman in peril.

As I cross the back of the grassy area set up for the wedding, I attempt to shut the door on her, too. Only a shiny pink toe pokes into my mental doorframe right before I click it shut.

CHAPTER 2

“Hey!” Eli says, popping his head out of the flap of the groomsmen’s tent as I approach. “Where the hell have you been? We’re about to start!”

I ignore my brother’s question. “I’m here now.”

For our client’s protection, no one in my family knows much about what I do for work, so Eli doesn’t blink when I don’t offer more of an explanation. It’s out of the question that I would say anything about staring at a beautiful woman, either.

I follow Eli inside. Though he has three groomsmen, I suss out right away we’re the only ones in here, which is good. The less chit-chat the better.

“At least you’re dressed,” Eli says. “Jude showed up in sweatpants. We had to witness him changing right here in what’s supposed to be my sacred space.”

I roll my eyes, but he’s grinning as he fusses with something at his back.

“Fuck,” he says as his cummerbund falls off on one side. He yanks it back into place, pulling the band at the back too tight.

“You’re making it worse.”

“You think you can do better?”

I let out a long-suffering breath and go over to him.

“Take your jacket off.”

Eli huffs, but I don't miss the relief that crosses his face as he tosses it onto a chair.

"Hey, thanks for showing up," he says as I make a finger swirl in the air to get him to turn around.

"You think I wouldn't show up to your wedding?"

"No. But I know you do important shit, so thanks anyway."

I say nothing, just yank at the cummerbund's strap.

"Ow. Do I want to know why you know how to fix one of these things?"

"Nope."

"Course not."

His tone isn't annoyed so much as resigned. Even when we were kids, I preferred the company of an old radio I could take apart or my fishing rod and one-man tent to my rowdy family. It's pretty much true today, too. Not that I don't love the shit out of them. But now sharing isn't just something I prefer not to do.

Eli tugs at his bowtie. "This thing's too tight."

He's nervous. I cinch the band at his waist. "I know you're not nervous about getting married."

Eli lets out a frustrated sigh. "Obviously. It's just all the secrecy." Clearly he's relieved to get to talk about this. "I never thought I'd have to screen my wedding guests three times. I barely got her team to agree not to make everyone sign NDAs."

I grimace. He doesn't know I strongly suggested not waiving NDAs to her team lead after looking over the security plans. He'd agreed with me.

"So what are you worried about?" I ask, tucking the band in place.

The question's not flippant. People think I'm lucky when I correctly predict results—political campaigns, movies, relationships—with surprising accuracy. But it's not surprising, and it's not luck. It's paying attention. Sometimes

hunches turn out to be paranoia, but the seeds of problems can be found before the problems arise if you look hard enough.

“Honestly? I’m worried about the most important moment of my life being blown up by tabloids,” Eli says.

Done with the cummerbund, I hand him his jacket. “That it?”

“And Reese, being safe,” he admits. “But I’m always worried about that.”

Eli’s fiancée is a folk crossover singer, and her latest record recently went platinum.

“I don’t have much control over the tabloids,” I say. “But the second part’s under control today.”

My brother meets my eye with a grateful smile. “Thank you.”

Reese’s already got a good team, but he knows I’m the insurance policy. I won’t let anything happen to any of my loved ones or theirs.

“Heyooo!” A deeply annoying voice cuts through the tent. I have to fight to keep from rolling my eyes at our other brother Jude—the youngest of the three Kelly boys. I also have to fight the smile wanting to arrive on my lips at the sight of him. Despite his personality being my polar opposite—a.k.a. he’s a motormouth who’s never without a grin on his handsome face—I do love the little fucker.

“Come here, big guy,” Jude says, throwing his arms around me. I don’t bother hugging him back, but I’d never tell him I don’t mind his exuberant affection. To a degree. He finishes with a punishing clap on my back that nearly makes me wince. Jude used to play pro tennis, and that arm is still in good form.

“You done yet?” I grumble.

“I guess so. So you guys are friends again? Eli looked about ready to kick your ass a minute ago.”

“Untrue,” Eli says, shrugging his arms into his coat.

Jude laughs. “I told him you’d knock him on his ass before he even got started.”

“I wouldn’t do that.” I pour a glass of water from the icy jug on the side table. Jude reaches for an apple from a plate full of fruit. But of course he pulls one from the bottom so they all go rolling everywhere. I have to catch a couple before they roll off the table.

“Sure you would,” Jude says, not even noticing. “You kicked mine.”

I set the apples back in the dish. I did kick his ass last Christmas, sort of. He was being an oblivious tool about his now girlfriend. “Well, I wouldn’t do it on his wedding day.”

“Would you two quit talking about kicking my ass?” Eli says.

“You wanna role play?” Jude asks him. He snatches the paper Eli’s pulled out of his pocket from him.

“Hey, those are my vows!”

“Exactly!” Jude says. “Reese!” He makes his voice all passionate-sounding and claps his hand over his heart. “I knew you were the one for me the first time we had a clandestine affair after my messy-ass divorce!”

“Jesus, Jude,” I say, shoving at his shoulder. He stumbles sideways, and the apple goes flying. I swipe it out of the air and toss it directly into the trash.

“Hey!” Jude cries while Eli shakes his head.

“Don’t talk to our brother like that on his wedding day.”

“It’s not far from what I was going to say anyway,” Eli says. “Honestly I’m just surprised he knows what clandestine means.”

“You wouldn’t know clandestine if it whooped you in the ass,” Jude says. The two of them start their usual friendly bickering.

While they’re occupied, I wander back to the entrance, peering through the tent flap. Those two will still be going at it

in the seniors home over the backgammon table.

It takes me a minute to spot her. Everyone's wearing bright clothes for the summer wedding, so the pink of her's doesn't immediately stand out, and we're behind and slightly to the left of all the chairs, so everyone has their backs to us. But when I do, I frown. She's sitting next to my dad, chatting easily, her hands gesticulating wildly.

I can see her profile—she looks perfectly fine now. Like a regular social butterfly.

Then she turns, looking over her shoulder, almost directly at me.

I suck in a breath, nearly dropping the flap, even though I know she can't see me in the dark of the tent. Those high cheekbones complement a pointed nose and chin, and her pink lips, glossed to a sheen, are full and smile so easily, like it's the way her face would prefer to rest. There's a familiarity to her I didn't notice before. Is she a movie star or something? There are a few of those around.

I don't think so. I hate that I keep telling myself to look away, and I keep fucking staring. Pretty doesn't interest me. Interesting interests me. Strength interests me. The women I gravitate to are almost always either tough-as-shit professional law-enforcement types who know the no-strings-attached drill, or curvy diner waitresses who look at me for a bit of short-lived fun, knowing there's no staying over. This woman looks like she coined the term high maintenance. Her whole existence screams never worked a real job and "ew, dirt!"

But then Dad starts saying something, and she turns back to him. The smile, while still there, loses just a bit of its luster. Sure, he can be a bore and a half, but I can tell it's not him. There's a stiffness in the way she holds herself, like she's prepared for a surprise, and her eyes dart over her shoulder every so often, like she's expecting someone.

Someone she doesn't want to see.

That's all I'm interested in. Whatever deeper thing is going on.

Then Dad says something that makes her laugh.

She throws her head back, exposing her neck. Her perfectly manicured hand comes up to her chest. My stomach lurches as Dad grins, pleased as hell with himself.

I actually grumble out loud. “The fuck, Dad?” I want to storm right out of this tent and demand he sit six rows back. Better yet, I want to pick him up and reseal him myself.

Then I give my head a shake. When in the flying fuck have I ever been jealous of my father? Or anyone, for that matter? The feeling is as foreign as a knife in my side.

I’m about to turn away, but she reaches over Dad’s lap, and I feel steam rising up so fast I swear it’s going to shoot out my ears. But she’s just lifting a hand up to high-five Jude’s nine-year-old son. Cap blushes as she tucks his dark hair behind his ear. I don’t blame him.

“She’s pretty, right?” Jude says, appearing beside me. His mouth is full of a bite from a new apple.

Heat rises in my neck. I don’t ever let people sneak up on me like that.

I was caught out.

Pretty doesn’t begin to cover it. I grunt. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Her name’s Sasha,” Jude says, reaching the core of the apple. “I can introduce you if you want. Nora invited her because she’s obsessed with Reese’s music.”

Nora. Jude’s girlfriend.

Then it hits me. I met this woman. Sort of. That’s why she looks familiar. It was in a movie theater in London, where Nora was screening her documentary last year. She kept sashaying in and out of the aisle in front of me while I was trying to watch the movie. I had to physically move her out of my way. I wasn’t rough about it. I just lifted her up out of the chairs and set her down in the aisle so she could leave me in goddamned peace. Her indignant face had made me want to do it again.

It had also taken my breath away then.

“Nora’s friend,” I say.

“*Yeah*,” Jude says, speaking slowly like I’m a five-year-old.

Sweat springs to my palms. Sasha brings a hand to her mouth like she’s going to bite her nails, but instead she rests a couple of fingers on her lips for a second, causing me to stare at their pink plushness a moment too long. To my fucking horror, I feel my dick jump.

“What’s her deal?” I ask, looking at my brother to keep my shit in check.

“What do you mean?”

What *do* I mean? Am I wondering why she seems agitated under that bubbly demeanor? Or am I asking if she has a boyfriend or husband or something? I make the mistake of looking back right when she laughs. Her loose waves bounce around her cheeks in a way that makes me wonder what they’d feel like between my fingers.

It takes me a second to realize I haven’t answered Jude’s question, and he’s staring at me, his lips curling. “Wow, Griffy, you like a girl!”

I grunt. “It’s not—I’m not—” Shit. I turn away, grabbing the water jug and refilling my glass. It splashes on my hand. “Fuck me.”

“That’s what she said,” Jude says.

“Jesus, would you stop?”

He ignores me, tossing his core in the trash. “I’ve never seen you stare at a woman like that. Makes me think you have real human urges or something.”

I glower at my brother.

Jude strides over to a mirror standing up on a tallboy table next to a few grooming supplies. He tucks his long hair behind his ears, smiling at himself in the mirror. “I’m going to set you up,” he says self-satisfactorily.

“The fuck you are.”

“Why not?”

“Because you’re not.”

“Where’s your open mind, Griff? She just moved back stateside, and she’s smart as fuck—has a degree in English boinking—”

“What?”

“Like, porn for proper English people in the olden days.”

“The hell are you talking about?”

“Erotica,” Eli says, looking up from his vows.

“I never want to hear you say that word again,” I say.

Jude snickers. “Yeah, something like that. Anyway”—he inspects his teeth in the mirror—“Cap loves her as much as Nora, so you know she’s awesome.”

Jude goes a little swoony-eyed just mentioning his girlfriend. Then he frowns. “Just don’t meet her family.”

“What’s wrong with her family?” Eli asks, suddenly invested.

“They’re rich and snobby, apparently. They think she’s the black sheep being all normal and not a society girl or whatever. Which is fucked, considering who her brother is.”

“Who’s her brother?” I ask, almost not wanting to know.

“That Wall Street dude who dates supermodels. He just got elected as a...senator I think?”

My stomach drops, but I keep my face a stock-still mask.

“He’s all over the news right now,” Jude continues. “Apparently someone even connected him with some gangster guy with a shady criminal record. Eel or Eel Man or something.”

“Creelman,” Eli says from the other side of the tent.

“Wait,” I say, my voice feeling like it’s detached from my brain, which is going at a hundred miles an hour. “Are you telling me that’s Sasha Macklin?”

“You *do* know her!” Jude says, grinning.

The dossier on Sam Macklin that Ford did up last year indicated the councillor had a sister living in London. She’s ten years Sam’s junior and apparently far removed from any of his dealings. Macklin has two siblings closer in age to him. We wrote her off as a person of interest.

“No,” I say. The lie that comes next is easy. “I’ve never heard of her.”

Jude’s about to say something else, but he’s cut off by the tent flap opening and the woman with the blazer popping her head inside.

“Gentlemen? It’s go time!”



I can tell just from the angles that the photographer darting around in front of us as the officiant drones into the mic is minimizing the number of photos I’m in, per my request. Still, I keep my face pointed down as much as possible.

That part is a literal pain in the neck, but at least it forces me to keep from looking up at the woman.

Creelman. Her brother’s mixed up in some serious shit. For all I know—facts-wise—she could be part of it, too. My instincts immediately revolt at that suggestion, and my instincts are rarely wrong. Still, I never rule anything out until I’m positive.

I’m so preoccupied with my thoughts I don’t notice the ceremony’s over until the crowd is cheering uproariously and I look up to see Eli bending his fiancée—shit, his wife—backward to kiss her for a full minute longer than necessary.

Shit. I’m an ass. I do my best to focus my attention on the wedding photos that come next.

After they’ve cleared the rows of chairs away and we’ve posed in a few photos for the family’s use only, I scan the

crowd, now mingling around tallboy tables the staff have brought over from the hotel.

I spot Sasha Macklin standing with Reese and Eli. She's fawning over Reese's dress alongside Nora. I tell myself I'm being insane. Overly cautious. This is just a woman who was upset about being late for a VIP wedding.

I hear my name. "Griff!"

Jude's waving me over. I could ignore him—in fact, my job here's done. I already told Eli I wasn't going to be able to make it to the reception.

So why haven't I taken off?

Jude waves again.

Grimacing, I head over to the small group.

"Whatcha doing over there all by yourself?" Jude asks.

Near where I was standing a moment ago, a group of people are clicking together a floating floor. This whole operation is pretty smooth. It's impressive. But I only just now noticed them doing that.

"Watching them set up the dance floor," I lie. It's a ridiculous answer to a ridiculous question.

Jude's got his arm hooked around Nora's shoulder, his thumb brushing over her bare skin in an easy stroke. "Is that right?"

Nora smiles. "Nice to see you, Griff. Have you met my friend Sasha M—"

"Sasha's fine," Sasha says.

For the first time, I square my gaze on the woman, noticing how she's avoiding her last name.

But when I do, my breath falls away. Fuck. She's got an easy smile—bright and cheery, though there's a twist of something sassy in there, too. Or maybe that's the twinkle in her bright blue eyes. But she's hiding something. It's not just the nerves she's been showing, either. There's something under that confident, dressed-up exterior. And I'm suddenly

desperate to know what it is. Her plump, pillow-soft-looking lips curl up slightly, and I realize I haven't even responded with my name.

All I manage is a grunt.

Fucking hell.

"My brother's a big talker," Jude jokes.

I fold my arms, ignoring Jude. It's not hard to do. Plus... my ears have perked up. There's something in the air, some new sound. I try to focus on it.

"I find it hard to believe you were watching them set up the dance floor," Sasha says, distracting me.

The question surprises me. "Why?"

The single-word answer comes off as rude. I usually don't care about my tone, but now I just feel like more of an ass.

But Sasha's unbothered. "You don't look like you dance."

There's that fucking twinkle again.

"You're right. I don't."

"Not even when you've had a few too many?" Her nose has a tiny little crook in the middle. Maybe she fell off the swing as a kid or something.

"I never have too many."

"That's true," Jude says, watching us like we're a game of goddamned tennis.

I don't know why I was worried about her. She seems perfectly capable of looking after herself.

"Hey, we were just talking about how you helped us when we were in Switzerland," Nora says to me.

I raise a brow. "Did you find something new?"

Jude and Nora were in Switzerland last winter, following the story that got them together—and had Nora winning a documentary contest in London. They were investigating a century-old murder mystery that took place in our family's

hotel, and I happened to give them a little boost with some information I found.

“No, we haven’t had time to look any further into it since I had to focus on classes again this term,” Nora says.

Jude kisses her on the temple. “It’s not the same doing it on my own.”

“I need to know who murdered Eleanor Cleary, though!” Sasha says. “And what happened to her baby.”

The way she says baby, with those doe eyes, makes something weird tick inside me. Like she cares deeply about a baby who probably got lost in the system a hundred years ago.

But I don’t have time to unpack that, because that sound I swore I heard grows louder now, and recognition kicks in.

“Fuck me. Everyone into the trees,” I bark at the group.

Three sets of eyes go wide.

“Why?” Sasha asks. But she’s not testing me. Real alarm skitters across her features.

I point up just as the chopper rises above the trees in the distance.

The alarm I feel is real, but it’s not the stark adrenaline I’d feel if I knew there was real danger. I can see someone leaning out the side of the bird holding what looks to be a telephoto lens.

Sasha utters words I’m surprised to hear come out of a mouth so proper and pretty. She lifts her arm up not to see into the sky, but to shield herself from view.

“Over there,” I bark, pointing to a wide-limbed tree.

She blinks for a moment, as if not wanting to jump when I tell her to, then thinks better of it, whirling around and sprinting surprisingly fast in those spiky heels.

“That one,” I call, pointing to a thickly leafed limb.

I wait until she’s concealed before turning to my brother.

Eli's in the midst of the newly erupted chaos, his arm around Reese. Her team is running toward them, but they're not close enough to shield her from the wide-angle lens held by the person leaning out of the chopper. Eli's got his wife under his arm, looking livid as his eyes meet mine. I point my chin toward the catering tent, which is his closest form of visual protection, and he nods, running both of them inside.

Someone rushing by them knocks a table over, sending a bottle of champagne crashing onto the dance floor, exploding like a bomb. Someone screams. I watch as half the crowd scatters, while half of them stay where they are. Some of them look *happy*. One guy raises his drink in the air in a salute.

"Fucking showboaters," I curse, striding over to the tree Sasha's standing under, clutching the limb like it's a big arm holding on to her.

I have to fight the urge to try to trade places with the tree.

"You okay?" My voice is gruff.

"No."

I inspect her face. It's set hard, her jaw tight. "This was supposed to be a media-free event," she says. "What happened?"

"Someone wanted the media here."

Her eyes go wide. That's fear.

Heat burns in my chest. Her piece-of-shit brother's making her think irrationally. "Look at the crowd."

She scans the people still standing in the clearing, taking in the ones raising their glasses and laughing.

"Someone leaked the location of a celebrity wedding. Nothing more."

She meets my eye. "How can you be sure?"

On the one hand, it's annoying that she's challenging me. On the other, I like that she asks the right questions.

"It's the most logical explanation, and the logical explanation is usually the right one."

She breaks eye contact, looking up at the bird. But I don't miss the tiny softening of the muscle at her jaw, the slight drop of her shoulders. I've made her feel better. I don't know why this feels as good as knowing she's safe.

A loud voice blares from the center of the crowd, keeping me from questioning this strange thought. The woman in the blazer from earlier is yelling through a bullhorn at the people in the helicopter, her face pinched in anger.

"This is a private event! You'll be hearing from our lawyers!"

They can't hear her, but they must have either gotten what they came for or decided there aren't any more photos worth taking, because the person with the camera pulls back into the chopper. It angles around, and a moment later, it's gone.

Around us, people buzz with shocked conversation, several people shouting for their friends.

After a careful listen tells me the helicopter's not circling back, I turn to Sasha. "You have a ride out of here?"

Sasha nods. "I'm good."

"You don't look good."

She gapes and actually looks down at her dress like I was criticizing her outfit choice.

"You're wobbly," I clarify.

She huffs and lifts her chin as she steps out from behind the tree. "I'm *fine*. Seriously."

She doesn't look fine. She's trembling. Only slightly, but I can see it. But she doesn't want my help.

This is not your problem.

"Fine," I say. Then I do what feels like the hardest thing I've done in years. I give a quick nod goodbye and walk back to the path I came down on.

Once I'm in the trees, I pull out my phone, calling Ford and hammering out instructions to look into all connections between Creelman and Sam Macklin without even a hello.

“We’ve already done—”

“Do it again,” I bark.

“The fuck is into you?”

“Please,” I say begrudgingly.

Ford grumbles but acquiesces. He knows when I’m in a mood, there’s no point in insisting on civility. He’ll do the same to me another time. It works. I hang up the phone, watching Sam Macklin’s sister as she gets into a golf cart and heads to the hotel. I get into the one I stashed behind a utility shed and trail behind hers at a safe distance. I follow her all the way back, not letting her leave my sight until she goes through the door of my family’s resort.

Then I force myself to let it go. I tell myself this isn’t me being overly cautious. That it’s just an occupational hazard.

And I almost believe it.

CHAPTER 3

Sasha

TWO MONTHS LATER

This was a terrible idea. I knew it was a terrible idea—I told Sam it was a terrible idea. But he doesn't seem to give a shit about me right now.

Irritation burns in my chest, mixing with the hurt at Sam's complete dismissal of my feelings as I check my face in my pocket mirror. I shake off the bad feelings, using my nail to brush aside an errant eyelash on my cheek.

My brother and I may not be close these days, but he's done more for me over the years than anyone else in my family. Mostly because my parents only listen to him. He's still the only reason my mom didn't outright sabotage my escape to go to grad school in London.

"What's the point of more school, Sasha? You already went to college!" The subtext there was "who cares if you graduated? You were a complete failure at husband hunting!"

When she found out what I was planning to study, she nearly fainted. "Victorian *what?*" she'd asked, agog.

"Erotica." I took great pleasure in drawing out the syllables over the phone.

"What on earth is wrong with regular English?"

My mom was born in the wrong era. I wasn't particularly into English lit, even the horny kind, but the program had openings and looked interesting, and I was cashing in on an offer from Sam to quietly pay my tuition as an escape route from Mom.

"Almost there, honey," my Uber driver says in the mirror. She's a motherly looking woman with a thick Spanish accent and blue-rimmed glasses on a chain who introduced herself as Maria. There's a Puerto Rican flag decal proudly displayed on the back of the passenger seat.

I shove the mirror into my purse. "Maybe I can just hang out with you tonight instead?"

Maria cackles. She thinks I'm joking.

I know exactly what this guy is going to be like. All Sam's friends and acquaintances seem to be obnoxious dude-bros with eyes that seem to be stuck at boob-level. Actually, now that he's entered public office, he's widened his associate group to slimy businessmen who... No. They're about the same.

But no matter how much Sam has changed over the years, he's still my big brother. And I'm wearing my favorite Louboutins and a strapless Finchley dress, which I smooth my hands over now. At least I'll look impeccable while suffering through this.

My mother's voice echoes in my ear. "You never know, Sasha, you might enjoy yourself!" She always said that just before cinching the sash on whatever dress she'd chosen for me like she dearly wished it was a corset.

Maria angles her car behind the snaking lines of traffic toward *Sequoia*, a brand-spanking new California-inspired fine dining establishment in the heart of midtown Manhattan.

I watch its huge glowing sign grow closer through the window, though it's still a couple of blocks away. "Why do people in New York want to eat California-based food anyway?"

"Beats me, honey. I don't even know what California food is."

"Wheatgrass cocktails, probably."

She screws up her face in the mirror. "What the hell is a wheatgrass? Sounds like cow food."

I laugh out loud, even though, admittedly, I lived on wheatgrass after every late night in London.

My laughter dies as I glance down at my phone. My last text was from Sam, reminding me for the third time about this date.

My stomach churns, the annoyance about this date shifting into the worry I felt when he first texted, asking for the favor.

Sam's been making headlines again, and not the good kind. It was semi-amusing when he was *Wall Street's most eligible bachelor*, because mostly, it was salacious headlines about which supermodel's heart he'd broken this time.

Now that he's in politics, not so much. Last week, after yet another alleged scandal broke, this one about his assistant abruptly quitting with rumors of sexual harassment floating around, a reporter somehow snuck past my doorman and got all the way up to my apartment. I opened the door in my sweats, thinking it was my doorman with my kung pao chicken delivery. Then cameras snapped in my face and a ballsy-AF reporter demanded to know whether the harassment rumors were true.

"No!" was all I managed to get out before slamming the door. But he'd already gotten his photo op.

Do I honestly believe if I help Sam, everything will turn around? When I asked him about the harassment rumors, he swore up and down they weren't real. That he'd never do anything like that—I could ask any of his exes. It was true. He didn't have a track record of anything like that. I want so badly to believe him. But I think that just makes me a sucker.

"Sorry, honey, this is as close as I can get," Maria says, pulling to a stop. "Damn valet is hogging the whole street."

I gather up my purse, but I don't move to get out. "All good. I could use the fresh air." I grip my purse against my chest. "I hope your daughter gets that acceptance letter soon." Maria told me her daughter's trying to get into some elite esthetician college. It sounds way smarter to me than what I did. Not many career paths from historical book porn.

In the mirror, Maria's face beams with pride. "Me too."

The clear abundance of love for her daughter radiating from Maria's smile makes my chest hurt. It doesn't matter if her daughter gets into that school. I know Maria's expression won't falter. She'll just encourage her to keep going. If my mother had ever once looked at me like that, even for a fraction of a second, I'd be walking on sunshine for days.

A beat passes, then Maria eyes me over her glasses. “You know you gotta get out of the car if you want to go on this date, right?”

I finally force myself to bid a farewell to my driver and step out into the New York City evening. I make my way down the busy sidewalk, passing groups of friends laughing and couples with arms around each other. It reminds me of London. I miss being anonymous there. I miss Nora, too. Terribly. My friends here in New York all seem to have moved on to marriage and babies since I’ve been gone. Nora and I talked every day in London, but I haven’t seen her since that wedding.

God, that wedding. That paparazzo helicopter damn near sent me into a panic attack. I’d convinced myself they were there for me. I’d been looking over my shoulder for weeks. Sometimes they’d be there. Other times, I felt like people were watching me but there was no one there at all.

My heel slips on a grate, but I manage to catch myself, my heart skipping from nearly falling.

I’d been feeling so alone since returning from London, no matter how many friends I saw. The paparazzi situation just made everything worse.

But that day at the wedding, for the first time since I’d come home, there was one person who seemed to see me and get what was going on. One person who saw the panic in my eyes when the paparazzi appeared and wasn’t concerned for his own well-being.

It was Griffin Kelly. The most grumbly, cantankerous grump I’ve ever met. A man so starkly different from his brother, Nora’s boyfriend, Jude, that I would have been convinced they weren’t related if I hadn’t seen them side by side.

Griffin was this close to being an asshole, responding to my questions in grunts and barely acknowledging my presence while he stood around his brother’s wedding looking like he’d rather be anywhere else.

But the moment those rotors sounded and he saw the look on my face, he turned into someone completely different. His words may have been hard and commanding, but his tone screamed “I’ve got you.” And he tucked me behind him without a thought for himself. It made me feel like I was the most important person in the world. Like I needed to be protected at all costs.

Even now, I can’t help the little flutter of butterflies that reappears at the memory.

Then he reverted to grumbly dick again when the danger was over.

I’ve reached the restaurant. I stand outside, looking for any excuse not to open the giant glass door. But a couple leaving, chatting and holding hands, makes room for me. The man holds the door, his eyes on his wife in a way that makes my heart ache yet again.

I find myself saying thank you, which they don’t hear, and suddenly, I’m inside, whether I like it or not.

Please, Sash. I’ll owe you one.

Yeah, bro, you will.

The restaurant is minimalist, all white, with subtle lighting hidden behind the lines of the wall. Dozens of pale-wood tables dot the floor. It’s buzzing with people at nearly every table, but I don’t see any men on their own.

I move toward the small cluster of people waiting to be seated and pull out my phone.

SASHA: I’m here. I don’t see him.

Sam responds immediately.

SAM: Thank you. He’ll be there.

My stomach tightens. Thank you? That kind of quick gratitude doesn’t sound like my larger-than-life brother.

But this whole thing hasn’t been like him. There was something off about the way he sounded so desperate for me

to make this date. And honestly, that's the only reason I'm here.

"Can I help you?" the hostess asks, startling me. The people in front of me have been seated.

"Sorry, yes." I slip my phone back into my purse. "Actually," I say, leaning in and giving her my friendliest smile—the one that disarms even the iciest women, "I'm not sure. I'm meeting someone here. But I don't know what he looks like."

The woman returned my smile when I started talking. She looks nice, if not a little overly efficient.

But now she's gone stiff, her smile tightening. "Oh, yes. Of course. He's expecting you."

I frown. "I didn't say who I was meeting."

She laughs, almost nervously. "He told us what you looked like."

My stomach tightens further. How would he know what I look like? I've never met him. Then I remember that photo in the news. My *you're not my chicken!* Face.

I want to ask the hostess more questions, but she's already briskly moving through the restaurant, forcing me to rush after her as she threads through the tables. She doesn't stop at any of them. Instead, she leads me up a set of stairs to the second floor.

"Hey, uh, is this some kind of private seating area?" I ask. I should stop, but she won't be able to hear me. "I don't really want to be alone with someone I've never met."

I'm getting more and more concerned. My heart beats a warning against my chest. "Do you know this guy?"

"It's our VIP area," she says, not answering my second question. Her voice is sympathetic.

We've emerged into a second dining area. Here, there are several tables set, but no other diners.

My stomach drops.

On the far side of the room, there's a wide balcony dotted with giant potted plants and a half-dozen tables glowing with candles. It should feel pretty and private, but instead, it feels ominous. Over the balcony, the upper level of a two-story sushi restaurant across the street is bright and bustling with activity. God, how I wish I was there. With friends. Alone. Anything but this.

I pull out my phone, pulling up Sam's text again.

SASHA: Sam. What the fuck is going on? Who is this guy?? I'm going to go.

No response. I'm about to turn around, all my spidey-senses on red alert.

"Miss?" the hostess calls from the middle of the floor.

Just as I turn around, a text pops up.

SAM: Don't leave. Please. I wouldn't ask you to do this if it weren't life or death.

My stomach plunges.

"Miss Macklin."

I jerk my body back around at the deep, smooth voice.

A man stands in front of the table at the far end of the balcony. How did I not see him before?

I swallow as he crosses the floor toward me.

I've never seen this man before in my life. Yet the coolness crawling over my skin tells me things just went from bad to much worse.

CHAPTER 4

Sasha

My date looks to be in his early forties; tall and slim and wearing a black suit and shirt. His tie is wider than I'd consider fashionable, though it's expertly knotted. I recognize his suit's designer. If I'm right, that's a thirty-thousand-dollar garment he's wearing. My eyes dart back to his face. Slicked-back dark hair reveals ice-blue eyes set over a hawkish nose. He could be considered handsome, but his features come together in a way that makes me shiver, and not in a good way.

He looks *mean*.

"I've heard so much about you, Sasha."

My skin crawls at the sound of my name on his lips. How the hell does Sam know someone like this?

The fingers on the man's extended hand are smooth and long, with a bend in his right index finger, like it was broken and set incorrectly.

All my instincts tell me to run. My muscles even tense, preparing to do so.

But Sam's text flashes across my vision like a lonely motel sign.

Life or death. Life or death. Life or death.

"I guess you already know my name," I say brightly, keeping my grip firm and confident, even if I feel completely the opposite. I'll just be my bright and cheery self. Maybe this guy just comes across as creepy. Maybe he's actually a barrel of laughs.

“I’m Vince.”

Sam hadn’t named him. He only called him “a business associate.”

I nod. Despite forcing myself to think positively a second ago, I find myself unable to say *nice to meet you*.

Vince arches a slick black brow and smiles widely. I catch a glint of gold at the back of his teeth.

A sick feeling coils in my stomach. This man is not a barrel of laughs.

I expect him to ask me to sit, but he doesn’t say that. Instead, he says, “You’re sharp, aren’t you, Miss Macklin? Don’t miss a thing?”

I already dislike him based on what I’ve seen, but now my hackles go way up at the way he seems surprised about me being more than an inanimate object.

Even though I’ve got a master’s degree from a London college, apparently, I still can’t shake the old chip on my shoulder, borne of being the child of the beauty queen mistress-turned-second wife who was told to be quiet and look pretty from birth to...well, now.

I force myself to at least attempt to maintain my smile, strictly for Sam’s sake. I do know how to pretend to be coy. Thanks, Mom. “I don’t think you know me well enough to assess me like that,” I say, trying for a little friendly pushback. “But I can hold my own.”

Vince’s smile glints. “You look especially charming when you’re trying to work something out.”

I ignore the deeply patronizing tone and words, but my smile can’t hold on any longer. “I think I’ve got everything sorted, thank you,” I say. “Shall we sit?”

“There’s no rush. But you should know I don’t like distractions at dinner.” He glances at my phone, still gripped tightly in my left hand.

There’s no way in hell I’m putting away my safety net. “Sorry, I never keep my phone out of sight.” I try to force

another brief smile to let him know I mean what I say but I'm not being argumentative. But I can feel it coming out as a grimace. "You understand, right?"

He laughs. The sound makes my skin crawl. "Feisty, too."

Life or death.

There are two place settings at the table on the far end of the balcony.

I move past him before he can say anything more and before my feet can take me on a U-turn out of here.

I sit stiffly in the chair closest to the exit, making a point to set my phone on the tabletop next to my hand. One wrong move, and I'm fucking out of here.

Vince lowers himself into his seat. "I knew you were a little spitfire." He points a finger, grinning. "The moment I saw you, I knew."

My stomach does that little drop again. "When did you see me?"

But he doesn't answer that. He just looks over my head, tipping it slightly.

The slight man in a suit who appears next to the table holds a bottle of wine stiffly against him. He looks like a career server. The kind of person who'd bend over backward to ensure you had the best dining experience of your life. Only he must be forgetting his customer service training, because he doesn't meet either of our eyes as he upturns our wine glasses and fills them, then lays the menu cards before us.

"Madam, sir. I'll leave this with you to decide—"

"She'll decide now," Vincent says. "You can wait."

My skin prickles. I smile at the server. "I'll actually need a minute, thank you."

The man freezes, looking between Vince and me. It's only then I notice his forehead is beaded with sweat, the wine jiggling in the bottle.

Fuck.

I look to Vince, who's fixing the man with a stone-cold stare.

And suddenly, my blood runs cold. The hostess wasn't intimidated. She was nervous, like this server.

Just like Sam.

My date isn't just a creep. He's someone people are scared of.

"I won't be long," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. I pick up the menu, pretending to study it.

My mind races.

Those newspaper articles they keep printing about my brother—I don't ignore them like my parents, who act like the *New York Times* is some trashy tabloid. I've read them all. Thinly veiled allegations that Senator Macklin doesn't vote in an unbiased manner. Suggestions that he's accepting bribes. That he funded his campaign with dirty money.

I didn't want to believe that he's in deep with the wrong people. But how can I deny it anymore when he's associating with people like Vince?

I grab the glass of water next to my menu and slowly sip it, stalling. Off the balcony and across the street, the sushi place sparkles just out of reach. People there eat and laugh. They're going about their lives, having fun, unaware someone's in trouble only a hundred feet away.

I glance briefly at the man before me, my heart beating hard in my chest. The server clutches the wine bottle next to me like it's a life ring. He wants me to set him free.

Vince. Where do I know someone with that name? I try to run through the articles.

Vince.

Lines from the articles run across my mind like ticker tape. *Preferential deals...connections to criminal organizations...a man known to police, questioned for his involvement in sex-trafficking allegations—Vincent Creelman.*

Vincent.

Vince.

I choke, water threatening to slip out between my lips.

Vincent slides my napkin toward me.

Panic wraps a hand around my throat, but I take the cloth, dabbing at my mouth. “Just went down the wrong way.”

The server refills my water with a shaky hand.

My brother set me up with a criminal.

Sam knew what he was doing. Anger stokes a fire in my chest, distracting me from my breaking heart.

He knew.

I pick up the menu again, surprised it doesn't light on fire with how hard I'm staring at it. My only focus now has to be getting the fuck out of here. I just need to figure out how. Do I just drop everything and run? What if he runs after me? What if he has people downstairs? Criminals have entourages, don't they?

Think, Sasha.

This isn't my first encounter with a creep. Maybe never someone quite so dangerous, but I've slipped away from shady men before. Criminal or not, we're in a mostly public place. My phone is a half inch away from where my hand rests on the table.

I could try to make eyes with the server, but the server will barely look at me.

And Vincent won't look away.

A distraction. That's what I need.

“I think that's about enough time,” Vincent says, his words dripping with the tone of someone whose child is acting up. “She'll have—”

“I'll have the flank steak,” I blurt out. “And the lobster. And the pasta starter, too, please.”

Vincent's eyebrows raise, but he doesn't say anything, just cocks his head sideways and back again.

"Penne Vodka," he says without taking his eyes from mine.

The waiter nods and practically sprints away from us.

Time. I need to buy time while I figure out how to distract him.

"Vincent," I say, picking up my wineglass. But what if he's drugged it? I set it back down, willing my hand to keep steady as I set it on the table, my pinkie brushing my phone.

Vincent's eyes drop to where I'm casually trying to slide my whole hand over my phone.

I lower it back down next to it instead.

"So. How do you know my brother?"

What? Why would that be a good question? What can he answer to that?

We do crime together.

I grab my water, taking another gulp.

Vincent arches a brow as he sips his wine. "This is an 1842 Bordeaux. I was led to believe you enjoy Bordeaux?"

Of course he acts like I didn't say anything at all. Anger flares—the familiarity of being ignored sits like a flame in my chest. I grasp on to it. It feels much better than being scared.

Then I register what he said. How does he know what kind of wine I drink?

It doesn't matter. I set my water down. "You didn't answer my question."

Now I really do know what he'll say about him and Sam.

Vincent's lips quirk again, but there's a flash of something in his eye. Irritation. He's not used to being talked back to.

I mentally blow on the flame. Talking back to assholes hasn't been a problem for me yet.

Finally he sets his glass down. “Your brother and I do business together.”

“Really? What kind of business? I thought he was exempt from participating in business activities as an elected official.” I’m talking out of my butt—I don’t know if that’s true, but Vincent seems to buy it, because he evades the question.

“I’m surprised to see so much fire in you, Miss Macklin. Feisty’s one thing, but this is foolish. Of course, I’m quite enjoying watching you play this little game. I knew I would.”

“How would you know that? You don’t know me.”

“Oh, but I do.”

My skin crawls. “Why did you want to go out with me? Why not any other woman in Manhattan? I imagine you have your pick.”

“You flatter me, Miss Macklin.”

“Not on purpose.”

That tick in his jaw again. “You like being dominated, don’t you?”

The shock of those words—the distinctly sexual implications—has me suddenly stiff, wavering in my hold on my anger.

“Excuse me?” I ask. But my heart beats a staccato panic in my chest.

“It’s only natural as the youngest of the family. The one always seeking attention from siblings and parents who couldn’t be bothered with a lonely little girl. Three siblings, and none of them really played with you, did they? They were too old. Too busy handling the shame of their father marrying his mistress, even after she bore his child, a beautiful girl who takes after her mother in looks, but not in meekness.”

I’m so stunned as he lays out my childhood I don’t realize he’s delivered the upper hand back to himself until it’s too late. When I do, my stomach roils.

“Except maybe now. It’s not like you to be speechless, is it?”

I open my mouth, but he’s not done.

“Leila invested in travel to get away from it all. Cal the carpenter—his heart was too soft; he left to make things out of wood. Samuel, in a way, is the only honorable one, warts and all. He hasn’t tried to shirk that shame like the rest of you. He’s leaned in, knowing the Macklin name is irreparably tarnished.

“But you, Sasha—you couldn’t escape the shame if you tried. Not when you’re the bastard daughter—”

Finally, I regain control of my senses, the anger roaring back into a flame. I don’t care if he hurts me. He doesn’t get to condense my life and my family into a few sentences. No matter how well he’s hit the nail on the head.

“Are you done?”

I press my hand on the table to push myself to standing, but his hand lands on mine.

I try to pull it away, but his fingers wrap around it tight enough that I cry out.

I blink rapidly for a moment, not believing what I’m seeing—and feeling. He’s holding me down.

From somewhere in my periphery, over in the sushi restaurant, someone moves from their seat by the window. It’s all so surreal.

“What the hell are you doing?” I try to pull away, but he grips my hand tight. “Let go of me,” I say, my voice hard.

“Don’t fight it, Sasha. I saw the way you looked at me the moment you walked in.”

“What, like a predator?” The time for helping Sam is long over. Once more, I try to jerk my hand away, but Vincent’s stronger than me by a mile; his fingers are like a vise.

“You’re hurting me,” I manage, because he is, suddenly. A lot. My hand feels like it’s going to crack under the pressure of

his grip.

“I’ll let go. But first I need to tell you a little something about your brother.”

My heart thunders in my chest, my stomach roiling. This isn’t happening, is it? It can’t be.

“Sam’s stolen something from me. Something he promised to give me, which he says is now impossible to return.”

“I don’t know anything about my brother’s busin—”

He cuts me off. “Unfortunately, the man has avoided having any offspring, so you’re the next best thing. Someone who means something to him.”

Even with the imminent danger, with my pulse throbbing and every cell in my body screaming to run, some tiny part of me reacts to that statement—that I actually mean something to Sam. But anger quickly strikes that feeling from my chest, twining around the fear pumping adrenaline through me.

Sam *knew*. He knew how dangerous this man was—that he owed him something—and he let me walk right in like a lamb to the slaughter.

Well, I’m not a fucking lamb.

“I thought it might be a simple exchange,” Vincent continues, contemplative even as he tightens his grip, making my hand spasm with pain. “But my God, when I saw you in that photo—I think I’ve got the better end of the bargain.”

I give up trying to yank my hand free and stand up. It’ll be harder for him to hold me when I’ve got my whole body to use as leverage.

But Vincent stands, too. “That’s the Sasha I wanted to see. That’s the one I was promise—”

A shrill alarm cuts through his words, so loud it makes both of us wince.

But relief floods through me. An alarm means evacuation. People.

Freedom.

And the chance to get him off guard. I wrap my free hand around my wrist and grit my teeth, pulling hard and fast.

He's not prepared, and I slip from his grasp.

I should run, but I'm so bewildered at suddenly being freed—and then immediately furious at being held on to in the first place—that I do the first thing I can think of. I rear back, curl my fist, and punch the man square in the face.

Only, I've never punched a man before, and I used the hand he'd been holding. The pain is explosive, radiating in excruciating shockwaves up my arm.

But the satisfaction of seeing his head crack backward is delicious. I bite my tongue not to react to the screaming agony in my hand.

But when he turns his face back to me, his fingers at his lip, red with blood, his eyes are steely.

So are the eyes of the man that emerges from the foliage on the other side of the balcony. My heart lurches to my throat. My back was to him at the table, but how did I miss him when I came in? He's at least six and a half feet and built like a tank, with tiny eyes set in a giant, square face.

"She wants to do this the hard way," Vincent says over his shoulder, and the big man says nothing, just strides our way.

"No!"

Adrenaline screams through my body. *Run.*

I whirl around. But the hallway's not there. I crash head-on into a broad chest. At first, panic chokes me as I think it's another of Vincent's men. He's big and broad. But his coat is heavy under my splayed hands as I push myself away.

I look up. The man's face is in shadow, a helmet pulled low over his head. But the helmet is red and has a shield on it. Letters, too.

FDNY.

I let out a cry of relief. "Holy shit!" I throw myself back at the firefighter.

He catches me easily, pulling me against him. “Miss,” he shouts over my head. “We’re evacuating the building. You need to come with me.”

He didn’t see what just happened, clearly. Except his words sound tight. Angry, almost. Probably because we’re up here ignoring a fire alarm. “Great, sounds great,” I babble. “Let’s go.” I could sing, I’m so thrilled.

The firefighter, who’s a full head taller than me and feels like he’d be solidly built even without his heavy fire gear, grips me by the waist and tucks me around so I’m behind him.

I’m so surprised I let out a little squeak, though it’s drowned out by the alarm. But there’s something familiar about the way he did that. It was almost like—

“Downstairs. Now,” the firefighter barks over his shoulder. His voice is hard. Gruff.

That tingling familiarity grows to something like recognition.

Even though I should be running away, I lean around him, squinting at his face in the shadow of his helmet.

Then I suck in a breath. It’s not a fireman standing between me and the man who was going to hurt me.

It’s Griffin Kelly.

CHAPTER 5

“**W**hat the h—”

“Excuse me,” Vincent shouts. Even over the alarm, his words drip with ice, and I remember I was about to run.

“We were in the middle of a date,” Vincent says, his voice hard. “I’m perfectly capable of escorting the lady outside.”

A chill scrapes over my skin. I open my mouth to yell at him when I feel Griffin’s arm, which he’s reached behind him, press against the length of my side, keeping me away.

“I’m afraid the date’s over, sir,” I hear over his mountainous body.

I shove Griffin’s hand aside, leaning out again. “You call that a *date*?”

Vincent’s eyes land on mine, and I immediately regret having exposed myself to him again. And his goon, who looms over his side, his expression shifting around like he’s assessing which way I’m going to go.

“God dammit,” I hear Griffin utter. He goes to push me behind him again, except just then, water explodes all around us.

I’m glad I can still see Vincent, because I get to see the look on his face as his five-figure suit is immediately drenched. While this man barely seems to notice, Vincent sneers like an ugly, half-drowned rat.

“Go!” Griffin shouts in my ear. Water splatters audibly against his hat, and the alarm is still shrieking, but I can hear

the urgency in his voice.

I feel it when he practically shoves me toward the stairs.

“I’m going!” I grasp the banister to keep from tumbling down the stairs.

But Vincent’s voice cuts sharply across the cacophony. “We’re not finished, Sasha. You owe me the completion of this date.”

Something scrapes inside me, but I won’t let fear be the last thing he sees on me. I turn, my hand tight on the banister, and face the monster. “I don’t owe you anything!”

Then Griffin’s body shifts, blocking Vincent from view. Purposefully, I know.

Finally I do what I should have done the minute I saw that man.

I run.

Downstairs, I think I catch the scent of smoke, but I don’t see any. The restaurant’s already empty, half-finished plates flooded like little lakes; wineglasses diluted and plinking with the still-falling water. I run through the restaurant, squinting against the water. I’m completely soaked, my hair plastered to my face. I should be cold—the water’s freezing—but all I feel is the adrenaline pumping through my limbs. I burst outside into a massive crowd of onlookers and drenched diners.

It’s only then I realize what I’ve done. I’ve left Griffin with two likely dangerous men.

I recall the thick eyebrows protruding over the eyes of the big one, the way his huge hands looked like they’d make fists bigger than my head.

“Shit.” I turn, moving to go back inside.

But a hand wraps itself around my arm.

I whip around to see the server from upstairs. He’s harmless, I know. Shorter than me in my heels and slight. And his eyes are kind. Still, I yank my arm from his grip, rattled by the last man who tried to keep me from moving.

“Sorry,” he says, dropping his hand as if he hurt me. His expression is apologetic. But it’s laced with concern, too. “You can’t go back in there.”

“I have to. I left him.”

“No!” His voice is surprisingly firm. “You should leave. Please, miss, don’t see that man again.” He looks older out here, his hair thinly plastered to his scalp.

“I don’t mean him,” I say, understanding. “The fireman.”

“They’re coming!” the woman next to him says. She points upward, and I realize I can hear the wailing of sirens.

“See? They’re on their way,” the man reassures me.

“No, there’s one inside.”

The man frowns.

“I know him.”

Now he looks concerned, like I’m losing it. “Miss, you’re not going to help anyone by going back in there and putting yourself in danger.”

He’s right, but not in the way he thinks. Still, I look yearningly at the door. There are other staff there now, standing in front of it.

Still no sign of anyone coming down the stairs inside.

Before the miracle of gel nails, I was a nail biter. I still have the habit of bringing my nails to my mouth when I’m nervous. I do that now, tapping my nails on my bottom lip.

“Griff seems like the kind of guy who can handle himself, right? He got his hands on a firefighter outfit.”

The server frowns.

I’m not helping my case for looking sane, but I can’t stop. “He knew where I was. How did he know—”

I turn and look up into the window of the upstairs sushi restaurant across the street. There’s a crowd of people standing there, staring down at us.

I remember that flash of movement.

“He was there.”

The firetruck pulls up then, and firefighters jump off the truck in quick succession.

“Everyone back, please!” they bark.

I’m ushered back with the rest of the crowd.

“Is there anyone inside?” one of them shouts.

“Yes!” I shout. “Yes, there’s a man inside—” Men. But only one they need to help. I’m about to tell them to be careful, that the other two could be dangerous, but they’re already rushing inside.

Suddenly, I’m more terrified than I was upstairs.

What if something happens to these firefighters?

To Griffin?

There’s something unfairly awful about people getting hurt while trying to help.

I can’t let Griffin get hurt because of me. Or these firefighters.

I ignore the voice that says they know what they’re doing and step sideways, seeing if there’s a way I can get through the crowd somewhere less central. But as I do, I catch a glimpse of something down the street.

Vincent and his man, slipping into a car. They must have gone out a rear exit.

Even from here, I can see his jaw is red with blood. Is there more than there was before?

“Griffin,” I whisper, panicked.

“Right here,” a low voice growls.

I whip around to see Griffin, soaked but apparently unharmed. The firefighter gear is gone, and even as relief floods through me, hot and warm and throat-tightening all at once, I can’t help but notice I was right in remembering his size.

“You’re okay—” I begin, but he tips his head.

“Over here.” He doesn’t wait for me to respond. “Make way,” he barks at the crowd. Even without the uniform, he commands authority. People jump back, parting like the Red Sea.

Griffin presses a broad hand to my lower back, guiding me toward a narrow alcove at the side of the building.

There’s a warmth spreading over my back at his touch, but I shove it away, focusing on the irritation I feel when he ignores me and leads me away. “He’s gone!” I say. “I saw him leave.”

“Why are you still here?” he demands, ignoring me again.

Anger flares in my chest, but it battles with the electricity shooting over my skin at the feel of his breath and the low rumble of his voice in my ear.

What the hell is wrong with me? I’m getting turned on even now?

“Listen, I was making sure *you* were okay!” I snap as he tucks me into the alcove.

Griffin stands in front of me, his fingers at his hips. His jaw works hard. “*Me?*” He looks incredulous. “What would —” He grits his teeth. He’s not just his usual grumpy self.

He’s livid.

Anger shoots through me to match. I plant my hands on my hips. “Sorry for caring. You’re right. I should have left you.”

“He could have seen you again.”

“I was well hidden.”

“Were you? I found you just fine.”

I grit my teeth. “You know what? I’ve reached my limit of men who think they can grab me and tell me what to do.”

Griffin curses under his breath. “Let me see your hand.”

In all the excitement, I’d forgotten about my hand. Clearly so had he.

I hold it up, more for myself than for him.

There are angry welts forming where Vincent crushed me with that cruel grip.

“God dammit.” Griffin encircles my wrist with a tenderness that surprises me. Especially since his expression looks murderous. He holds my hand palm up and presses his fingers against my flesh.

Pain spasms through me with each soft press. “Ow!” I jerk my hand away.

He takes it back. “I’m not done.”

I let him prod, biting my cheek so I don’t cry out.

Finally he finishes, gently lowering my hand back down. “It’s not broken. But we still need to get you to a hospital. I’m going to call—”

“No!” I shake my head. “It’s not broken, so there’s nothing they can do. I was serious when I said I’ve reached my limit. Between you, Sam, and that fucking creep, I’m done for the year.”

I’m suddenly overwhelmed with a wave of exhaustion—the backside of all that adrenaline. I barely notice the dark cloud passing over Griffin’s face, presumably from being lumped in with the previous two. I slump against the wall of the alcove, but my ankle wobbles under me. I would go down, except Griffin’s got my arms in his hands.

Warm, big, rough hands that hold me up as easily as if I were a cardboard sign that’s toppling over.

“Creelman.”

“What?” I’m still distracted by his hands on my skin.

“His name is Vincent Creelman, and you need to stay away from him.” Griffin, obviously gauging me as able to stand on my own, lets go of my arms.

“Thanks for that. Didn’t notice he was a fucking criminal who attacked me.”

Griffin softens. “Sasha, I know you’re not going to go out with him again, I—”

“I didn’t go out with him. I was doing a favor for my brother.”

“Don’t do any more favors.”

I clench my jaw, pressing my hands to my temples. I forget about the hand again, though, and pain rips through me at the new angle.

“Fuck!”

“I’m taking you to the hospital.”

“I already said no, and I mean it, okay?”

He looks like he very much wants to ignore me. But his eyes don’t leave mine. I can tell he’s assessing me, seeing how stable I am.

I narrow my eyes. “I don’t need your permission. Would you please excuse me now? I just want to go home.”

To his credit, even though I can tell just from the way his whole body remains tense that he wants to throw me over his shoulder and haul me to the nearest ER, he gives me a begrudging. “Fine.”

But he doesn’t move out of my way.

That’s because he’s not finished. “You shouldn’t go home. Can you stay with your family?”

I briefly close my eyes. “Let’s see. I could take a train to Connecticut, where my parents will open their door to find me wet and bedraggled, thus fully realizing their theory that I’m a lost cause only ‘in want of a husband.’” I use my best *Pride and Prejudice* voice, because yes, I am losing it a little. “Sure, I could go there. Or I could ask to stay on the couch of my two normal siblings, who’ve moved across the country to get away from Sam and the shitstorm that seems to follow him everywhere. But wait, I’d have to go to the airport first. Oh, I know! I could stay at Sam’s place! The man who sent me into the fucking lion’s den to get murdered or kidnapped or...” I trail off, feeling hot tears brimming. He really did that to me.

I lift my chin and shake my head so hard my wet hair flaps around my face. “No. I’m going home. Not just because I have nowhere else to go, but because I refuse to let fear rule me.”

I spent enough time doing that. Over too many years.

“I’ve got a doorman and a security guard. There are cameras at the front of the building and alarms at the back. I’ve got three locks on my apartment door, a cell phone that I managed to hang on to that has this amazing feature called *numbers* that dial 911, and a fire escape if it comes to it.”

I skip over the part where that paparazzo managed to evade all of that and knock on my apartment door that time.

“I’ll be fine. Now, are you going to move out of my way?”

Griffin’s been silent this whole time, and I see something like real worry flash across his face. Is it for me? Or my sanity? Either way, as he stares at me with concern in his chocolate brown eyes, it’s like I’m seeing him for the first time. Or seeing...more to him. He’s not just the scruffy, rude, bossy-as-hell brother of my best friend’s boyfriend. He’s someone who showed up here for me.

“What were you doing in that restaurant, Griffin?”

He doesn’t break eye contact. He doesn’t even blink. But his eyes seem to shift somehow, like the color’s changing. I feel it dance across my skin.

At first, I’m not sure he’s going to answer me. Then he says, “We’ve been keeping tabs on Creelman.”

“Who’s we?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“Are you a cop?”

“No.”

“A...spy?”

His lips twitch. “Not quite.”

“Was that a smile?”

“Not a chance.”

Heat sparks around us. That *was* a smile.

I guess there's a part of me operating on pure hormones right now. Because for the first time, I can see clearly that he's kind of hot.

No. I thought that before. This man is very hot.

He's not pretty like his brother Jude or classically handsome like their other brother, Eli. He's not the normal prep-school trust-fund country club type of man I've always seemed to end up with, either.

He's altogether different.

Handsome but rough around the edges. Rough hands, rough voice. Rough scruff across the chin I have to fight not to reach up and touch. Under that scowl, there's an aura of strength I've never felt before. But it's not just brute strength. It's tightly wound anger, honed into this powerful, taut frame, and under that, the most remarkable thing.

"You care," I whisper. I see the softness in his eyes, under all those layers of hard exterior.

He frowns even harder. "About what?"

About me.

But that's ridiculous. He doesn't know me. He cares about doing the right thing. Protecting the vulnerable. Rescuing stupid women who agree to go on dates with criminals as a favor to brothers who don't care.

I drop my gaze. "I have to go. Can you please move out of my way? I'm freezing and tired and I just want to go home."

He hesitates a moment longer, and I have the strangest thought: Griffin Kelly is a mistake. The kind of man you might remember years later as your favorite mistake.

"Fine," he says, his voice low. But he doesn't move out of my way. Instead, he reaches into his jacket and slips his hand into his breast pocket. He pulls out what looks like a business card. It's on thick card stock, only there's nothing on it except a single phone number. He holds it in two fingers, angling it at me.

I don't take it.

“Sasha,” he says, lifting up my good hand. There are those rough fingers again, the warm palm as it cradles the back of my hand. He presses the card into it, wrapping my fingers around it with a gentleness I would have thought impossible from a man like him.

He looks me in the eye once more. This time, there's no concern. There's only seriousness. “If you ever feel unsafe—for any reason at all—call this number. Even if it's just a feeling, call. You're not alone, Sasha. Wherever you are, I'll find you.”

I nod.

Finally, reluctantly, he steps aside. Then, before I move, I hesitate. Then I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss the rough stubble of his cheek. “Thank you,” I whisper, meaning it more than I've meant anything in my life.

When I walk toward the line of cabs across the street, I feel Griffin's eyes on my back. I also feel his tentative grip on my hips as I did that, their warmth seeping through my wet dress. But most of all, I feel his words wrapping around me the way his hand wrapped around mine.

You're not alone, Sasha. Wherever you are, I'll find you.

CHAPTER 6

“Councillor Macklin’s a grade-A piece of shit for letting his sister walk into a date with a goddamned criminal.”

Ford tosses the file on McCrae’s forty-second-floor boardroom table. The soft clap of the paper on wood punctuates his sentence.

He and Lionel are sitting at the giant table while I’m standing by the window, my back to the New York City skyline. This meeting’s been going on for a full hour already, and I can’t sit still that long. Especially when my boss suddenly has selective hearing. Ford’s only repeating what I’ve said a hundred fucking times since we got here.

Lionel’s nostrils flare, but otherwise, he keeps his expression bland. He’s turning sixty this year, and it’s starting to show. The big man has a weariness about him, and besides the leathery skin and thinning hair, the broken capillaries on his nose show he hasn’t been handling the stress of life well. Part of me wants to feel sorry for him. To give him the benefit of the doubt, knowing what he’s been through.

But I went through it, too. I clench and unclench my fists, willing myself to at least stay calm.

“You’ve made your feelings clear, Jason,” Lionel says.

I glance over at Ford. He hates being called by his first name. But by some miracle, he keeps his expression neutral. Like me, Ford’s been in surveillance mode for the past six weeks: shaggy hair, beard, jeans, and T-shirts. But also like me, he’s cleaned himself up for this meeting: his dark hair’s

neatly combed back, and he shaved. He looks neater than me, actually. I just took the clippers to my head, buzzing it short, and opted not to shave. Lionel was an army brat and has a thing about personal grooming. But it hasn't mattered—he's not budging.

"I agree with Ford," I say. "Councillor Macklin and Vincent Creelman are known associates, and it's likely both have funneled money into our client's company. There's no reason why we should stop watching them."

Lionel's eyes dart to mine as he leans back in his chair, his face tight with anger. "You weren't supposed to be watching Macklin in the first place."

Did he think I was going to take his side because of our history? Loyalty isn't a one and done. You have to keep proving you're worthy of it, and he hasn't.

"Why? Because his hands are clean?" I snap.

"It doesn't really matter what either of your personal opinions are on this." Lionel's voice is hard to match mine. "The point is, you were explicitly told not to tail the Councillor or Vincent Creelman."

"It's not a matter of opinion," I say, trying to keep my anger in check. "We've got fucking receipts, Lionel."

"Yes, and receipts are the reason we're here. Twenty thousand dollars-worth of them, Griffin."

I grit my teeth. "Jesus Christ."

It's been three weeks since the incident. But it's only now that the accounting's come back, which is why Lionel's called this painful-as-fuck meeting. My stunt at Sequoia—a little smoke in the kitchen to trigger the sprinklers, plus an early pull on the fire alarm by yours truly—was costly. Water remediation's no joke, and we used one of our preferred contractors, too.

But it was worth every penny.

"You know it was the right call," Ford says.

“Is it about the money, Lionel?” I ask, at a fucking loss. “I’ll cover the costs myself. Would that make you happy?”

Ford shakes his head. “That’s insane. It was my call, too. The damages are a legitimate business expense. McCrae should be covering the costs.”

I’m serious about covering it. I don’t give a shit if I have to do it. Cash isn’t an issue for me, not since the couple of patents I filed after my engineering degree, when I was doing R&D at a tech firm. Before I discovered I didn’t care about fixing broken mechanical systems and cared more about fixing corrupt systems that hurt people.

“I wouldn’t change a thing about what happened at that restaurant,” I say.

Except for getting the intel too late to prevent her from going to the date in the first place.

While Lionel and Ford get into it again, I look back out the window. Down below, people look so small as they cross the street, going about their lives. So vulnerable.

Kind of like how Sasha looked through that window when Creelman grabbed her hand.

I have to fight the rage from coming back by taking a long, deep breath and pinching my eyes shut. When I open them again, I force myself to look directly into the bright late-morning sky outside, keeping my eyes open.

They burn, and not just from the light. I’m wrecked with exhaustion. I haven’t slept more than a few hours a night since that night, and if I weren’t so on edge, I could sleep for a week.

But every time I close my eyes at night, I see a woman in a soaking wet dress, her skin raised with gooseflesh, her eyes filled with fear while an alarm screams around her.

That asshole looking at her like she belongs to him.

I’m doing a shit job of compartmentalizing these days.

“I know you told us to back down on Creelman,” Ford says behind me. “And we have. Especially now that we can’t

watch him in person.” That’s a direct dig at Lionel cutting our team. “But we happened to learn about this one because Griff knows the woman in question.”

I utter a silent curse in my head. I know what Ford’s doing—giving us good reason for having ignored our boss’s direct order. Keeping us from having to tell him we still have Creelman’s phone tapped. It’s smart, but I don’t like my personal life overlapping with work in any way. Shit gets complicated.

“How exactly do you know Sasha Macklin?” Lionel asks.

I knew I’d have to do this. I have an answer prepared. “Our connection is thin at best—she’s a friend of my brother’s girlfriend. I’ve only met her a couple of times, but I found out through the grapevine that she was going on a date with someone who matched Creelman’s description at the behest of her brother.”

“The grapevine?” Lionel asks, his brow furrowed.

Ford smirks behind Lionel’s head as I say something about small-town business. The truth is, it’s a euphemism for phone tap transcripts we’re not supposed to still be reading. Lionel got us permission from local law enforcement to scan their taps when we started looking at Creelman. He’d lose it if he knew our contacts were still slipping them to us.

“So you knew she was going to be there and you took it upon yourself to intervene?” Lionel asks. “May I ask why you couldn’t have spoken to this grapevine to nix the date before it happened?”

This is where it gets tricky. Until now, we’ve only gone over the transcripts every few days, since Creelman’s not the main focus of this job. Our whistleblower thinks there’s a stronger connection between his company and another criminal syndicate we’ve got our eyes on. It’s the one Lionel wants us to focus on. But Ford and I didn’t feel good taking eyes off Creelman, Macklin, or anyone this company had dealings with.

Unfortunately, due to our main focus on the other organization, I only found out about Sasha ten minutes before she was due to meet him, and only because my eyes landed on her name in Creelman's transcripts.

It wasn't enough time to keep her out of danger. But it was enough time to keep things from going much, much worse.

Luckily, the simple truth works best. "I found out about it too late."

For a second, I'm taken back to that terrible moment. While I tore through the city in our discreet company van toward the restaurant, Ford and I volleyed ideas back and forth for how to intervene. I wanted to storm the place and knock Creelman's teeth out. Ford had calmly reminded me that we can't show our faces—we're supposed to remain in the background. It's a speech I've given new recruits for years, but I was seeing red.

We finally came up with the idea for the fire alarm when we passed a fire station a block away. I dropped Ford off to sort out getting an outfit—still not quite sure how he pulled it off—while I ran up to the sushi restaurant to get eyes on the situation.

Seeing Sasha had sent relief coursing through me. That is, until I saw that piece of shit clamp down on her hand with his.

Once again, my stomach turns as I think of what might have been if we'd been there only a few minutes later.

"You should have consulted with me before taking action," Lionel says.

"There was no time. We don't leave people in danger." My voice is steely.

"And you don't go rogue just because you feel like it!" Lionel yells.

Ford and I exchange a look.

The Lionel we know never would have questioned this.

"Lionel," I say. "You need to tell us what's going on. You've built a career—a legacy—on protection. That's why

we're all here."

Lionel's jaw snaps shut. He knows I'm right.

Our company's motto is *You're safe with us*. He cares about protecting the innocent so much he even has the best family protection policy I've ever seen—employees and their families are given all the same protections as our clients should they ever need it: fail-safes, safe houses, special surveillance. The works.

But he meets my gaze.

And then my heart fucking sinks.

Because the look I see flash in Lionel's eyes is one of deep, heavy pain, and though I swear I can pack that pain in a box most days, it cracks open for the barest second now. The one person neither of us could protect is the albatross that stands between us now.

I don't know if Ford sees it or if he's just trying to get to the bottom of things, but he clears his throat and asks the question we should have asked from the beginning. "Are you in some kind of trouble, Lionel?"

For a moment, no one says anything.

I look back at my boss, the man I used to look up to. The one who now it sometimes takes all my strength just to look at. "If you're in trouble, we can help."

Lionel puts a hand to his jaw, then rethinks it, pulling his hand away and laying it on his lap. He shakes his head, uttering no words. Then, to my utter shock, he says grimly, "We're in a bad place, boys."

Ford shoots me a look. I give an imperceptible shake of my head. I don't know what this is about either.

I pull out a chair at the table and sit down next to him, across from Ford. "What are you talking about, Lionel?"

He sighs. "Some of our big-ticket clients haven't come through in quite the way we wanted over the last year. Our accounting team—" He squints at the file on the desk as if it'll give him the words he needs. "They say we can keep going on

the operating funding if we stick to domestic clients for the next few years to keep costs down. And if we trim down some of our biggest operations. Like All-Ways Construction.”

That’s the operation Ford and I are working on.

Money. It’s a money issue. It makes sense—it checks all the boxes for why he’s been telling us to tone down our surveillance on Creelman. Why he’s gone ballistic over what happened at the restaurant. Still, something about it doesn’t fit perfectly. But it could just be I’m still stuck on the issue of Sasha Macklin.

“Wait, so what if a client needs protecting outside the US?” Ford asks, his face lined with deep concern.

“If a client needs protecting outside our borders, we’ll connect them with our foreign partners.”

“For domestic operations, we could easily miss something if we’re not covering all the bases.” Ford leans back in his chair, clearly worried.

I know I should be, too. And he’s right. But I can’t quite put my finger on what feels off.

We’ve never had to worry about our bottom line. The whistleblowers we’ve protected have all given us information that ended up on front pages around the world. Lionel had the presence of mind early on to set up a literary and film agency to ensure the resulting tell-all books and blockbuster film deals are brokered by this arms-length corporation. Not to mention reward money for turning up missing and wanted individuals all over the world. There hasn’t been a single client we’ve worked for since Lionel founded the company that I’d consider unsuccessful.

“Now, I know I shouldn’t have said anything,” Lionel says, “but I wanted you two to know that if I’m telling you to back down on certain people of interest, it’s because I’m tightening our belts, nothing more. Some operations have bled us dry recently, so we’re going to be conscientious moving forward. Maintaining the reputation of McCrae & Associates to those who know about it is imperative—our credibility is the

cornerstone of our success, and we will not be sullyng it with anything that's not our best work. The only way to do our best work now is to pull back and focus on a few key clients so we can do the best job we can for them stateside. I'll need the cooperation of my best people during these difficult times. That's you two."

Ford and I look at each other, and I'm pretty sure a sense of dread is sitting cold in his belly like it is mine. Not because the company's in danger, but because I know Lionel McCrae is lying through his teeth.



"The fuck I'm stepping away," I say, folding my arms and leaning back in the booth of our favorite diner in New York. We headed straight here to debrief after that shit show of a meeting.

Ford dumps what I swear is a fifth little container of cream in his coffee while we wait for our sandwiches. "I'm just saying—it's what you always tell me when things get personal."

"Things are not personal."

Ford raises an eyebrow. "You telling me you would have come up with that fireman shit if the woman had been someone else?"

"Of course I would have."

Ford smirks and takes a sip of his coffee. He makes a face and adds another creamer.

"That shit's going to be butter if you keep that up."

He ignores me. "So what do you think about the money thing?"

"I think it's bullshit."

"Could be real."

“Maybe, but he didn’t seem to care when I volunteered to cover it. Something’s still up. I can feel it.”

He sighs. “I know. But I didn’t exactly let that idea about you paying for it sit long enough for him to consider it. Maybe it *is* the money and he’s leaking it somewhere he doesn’t want us to know about.”

“I like that better than the alternative.”

“Which is?”

“That something bigger’s at play.” I take a sip of my coffee, shoe-polish black. “Whatever it is, he’s not telling us the whole truth.”

“Agreed. We need to figure out what it is. I won’t work for an organization where there’s shit going on that compromises my values, and I know you won’t either.”

“It’s why I hired you.”

“Worst mistake you ever made, huh?”

“Not by a long shot. But”—I down the last of my coffee—“it’s got me thinking about that other idea.”

Ford sits back and folds his arms. “You really think we can make it on our own, without Lionel’s resources?”

“We might have to.”

Ford and I have joked over the years about what we’d do if we started our own protection agency. It’s appealing in a lot of ways. But not, too. “Seeing my sister run the Rolling Hills and growing up with my mom doing the same—there’s a shit ton of bureaucratic work that goes into running a business. Less time for doing the work.”

“So we hire someone to run that shit.”

I set my mug down. It was never something we’d seriously considered. But with everything going on, I think it might just be the time.

“Just food for thought,” Ford says when I don’t respond. “But I’m going to insist now that you take some time away. Creelman’s disappeared for the time being; Macklin’s not

making headlines. Our client says the executive meeting where we're going to get the intel that'll finally incriminate these assholes isn't for another couple of weeks."

I rub my eyes. They feel like I've got sandpaper in them.

"Go home, catch up on some sleep. Some...what do you call it, forest bathing?"

My mouth quirks. Not quite a smile, but it's funny hearing Ford say it. When I was in Japan last year, I learned there was a word for the thing I've been doing for years—escaping into the woods. They called it forest bathing—spending time in the trees as a form of therapy. It was even prescribed by doctors to overstressed city dwellers.

"I could do with some trees," I admit.

Ford smirks. "So you're saying I'm right."

I grunt. "Didn't say that."

The server comes back with our sandwiches.

Ford picks up half of his, rolling his shoulders as if eating a Reuben is going to be a full-contact sport. "You've got to show your face at your other business from time to time, don't you?" he asks before taking a giant bite.

He's talking about the Rolling Hills.

"They've got it covered. I just need to make an appearance for the occasional board meeting."

When Mom passed, she added an addendum to her will, saying she wanted all five of her kids to run the Rolling Hills resort together. We all rose to the challenge, though I've never taken on an on-site role. I oversaw maintenance for a while, but I now sit on the board to fulfill Mom's wishes. Only Cass—my oldest sister and CEO of the hotel—and Jude are still there full time.

Fuck, it would feel good to be home, even if it did mean dealing with a bit of resort stuff.

But the thought of leaving Sasha here in the city? I can't do it.

“Creelman’s not going to give up on her,” I say, tossing down my napkin. “I don’t care if he hasn’t mentioned her to anyone. When he thinks something’s his, he doesn’t give up.”

“I can look out for her for another week, Griff.” His voice is kind. “Besides,” he says gently, “Sasha might not want your round-the-clock surveillance.”

Her words come back to me. How she had all these men trying to control her—myself included.

I trust Ford with my life. He’s saved mine more than once and vice versa. But by the look on his face, I know he sees I’m still not considering leaving.

“What is it about her that has you so riled up, Griff? She’s not your usual type.”

I frown, running a hand over my newly shorn head. Ford’s the only person who knows my history. Knows I’m not a sucker for a pretty face and that I don’t get off on playing rescuer, either.

“I just get the feeling that there’s more to her than people give her credit for. Her family’s fucking AWOL. Jude and Nora—and hell, Cap—I feel like they’re the only people who really care about her. But they’ve got complicated shit going on with their long-distance family situation.”

Ford wipes his mouth with a napkin and tosses it on his cleaned off plate. “You’re not giving up on her by taking care of yourself.”

My eyes snap to his. That’s what she used to say, and he knows it. “Fuck you.”

“She was right, you know. Maybe if—”

“Don’t fucking say it, Ford.”

We’ve been over this before. I don’t make mistakes when I’m tired. I’ve learned how to exist on no sleep, no food, no everything. Ford knows that. But maybe if I’d taken better care of myself on that operation three years ago, Lionel and I wouldn’t be in the position we’re in now, where he still believes what happened on the darkest day of our lives could

have been prevented. Where he still blames me for not being able to protect the person most important to us both.

The thing is, sometimes, I don't think he's wrong.

In the end, I agree to the week off. What choice do I have? Ford's right about Sasha—she wouldn't want me following her around like she's some kind of inept child. She pretty much told me to fuck off outside the restaurant, even as I felt the gratitude in her arms as she held me at the end.

My insides shift around as I think about that moment again, heat spreading like it does every time I repeat it in my head.

I have to tie up several loose ends at work before heading out, and by the time I rip out of the parking garage at the apartments McCrae keeps for us in the city, it's after six.

Even taking the main highways, it'll be four hours before I get home. I should have eaten something before leaving, but my favorite café back home, Betsey's, stays open until midnight. I can already taste their late-night burger and a crisp beer on my tongue as I pull out onto the highway.

I only make it a couple of miles out of the city before my Bluetooth rings in my ear.

I can't tell who the call is from. Under normal circumstances, I'd ignore it. But it's not normal circumstances right now. I know Ford's been doing some digging on Lionel's money situation. Maybe he has news.

I tap my earpiece. "Yeah."

But it's not Ford.

"Griffin?" comes a female voice. "Shit. I should have known this was your number."

My stomach tightens, and I gear the bike down, pulling into the slow lane. It's Sasha. She called the emergency number on that card.

“What is it?” I demand, my heart already thumping harder than it was a second before.

“I...I think something’s wrong.”

CHAPTER 7

Sasha

I didn't realize how relieved I would be for the person on the other end of this call to be Griffin until right this moment. I want to give him shit for suggesting this was some kind of helpline. But now's not the time.

"Sasha, talk to me." He sounds concerned.

"It's probably nothing."

"It's not nothing if it feels wrong."

That relief surges, only this time, it's at being heard. He's taking me seriously right away. My default is to expect the opposite.

I look around my apartment—at the keys I just tossed on the counter, the sad, under-watered spider plant hanging from a DIY hanger I made for my sister that turned out too ugly to pass on.

The slinky red dress I wore last night hanging off the side of the easy chair in my living room, waiting to be taken to the cleaners.

As I look around, I wonder if I'm losing my mind. Everything looks normal.

Then that tingling at the back of my neck comes back, and I look at the front door.

"I don't know—I just got home, and something feels... off."

"Where are you?" His voice is strangely muffled.

“I’m at home. I just got back from seeing some friends.” It wasn’t a great afternoon, to be honest. The women at the table weren’t how I remembered. They spoke about their partners, who are all Wall Street or trust fund types. They showed off their engagement rings. And aside from my undergrad roommate Hillary asking me a cursory question about London before someone else interrupted with their recent London experience, most of them only seemed interested in whether any of the rumors about Sam were true.

I pretended I wasn’t feeling well and skipped out on our plans to go to a show.

Except now I suddenly wish I stuck with them.

I feel stupid now, explaining it. But I tell Griffin about the jittery feeling in my stomach that came on when I rounded the corner onto my block and how it got more acute when I walked into my building a minute ago. “It felt like someone was watching me, even though I looked back through the door to the street and no one was there.”

“No one?”

“I mean, just my doorman. He was on the phone with his wife. She’s eight months pregnant. He waved at me, but that was it. There wasn’t even anyone on the sidewalk outside. Oh, except Mrs. Bishop, but she lives on my floor. She was just taking her dog for a pee.”

“Sasha, I want you to listen to me carefully.”

My stomach drops. “Okay.”

“It’s probably nothing, but it might be something. And I’m not willing to risk the small chance that it is.”

Suddenly, having the strange feeling validated makes this feel real.

“I want you to grab whatever you need that’s within reaching distance.”

“What?”

“Grab your purse, your phone, your keys. That’s it.”

My stomach roils, my heart thudding so loud I can feel it in my throat. “Griffin—”

“Now, Sasha. I’m on my way to you, but I’m at least twenty minutes out.” I hear the faint rev of an engine. He’s on the road.

“Okay.” I swallow. I can do this. “Okay. Should I call you when—”

“No, don’t hang up. Tell me when you’re ready to leave.”

The only thing I’m not already carrying is my key ring, so I swipe it off the counter and move to the door. I hesitate. “One sec.”

I run to my bedroom and yank open the closet door. Reaching up on the top shelf, I pat around with my hand until I find the item I’m looking for. I stuff it into my pocket.

I run back out of the room, ignoring everything I should probably grab, like my passport and jewelry. “I’m ready.”

“Good. Look out your peephole. Is there anyone there?”

My throat is dry. I swallow, squinting into the hole. Nothing but the wallpaper on the opposite side of the hallway. “No. Fuck, Griffin, I wish I weren’t alone.”

“It’s okay. I’m here. Now, open the door slowly and look down the hallway toward the closest stairwell first, then the other direction.”

The door opens with a soft brushing sound across the entryway carpet. I do as he says. In either direction, the hallway is clear. Then the slightest movement catches my eye.

The elevator’s twenty feet away from me, in the middle of the building on the opposite wall. The lights are blinking up floor by floor.

My stomach drops. “There’s someone in the elevator,” I whisper, even though they’re several floors down and couldn’t possibly hear me.

“How many floors away?” His voice is urgent.

“Nine. No, eight.”

“Run for the far stairwell if you have time. If not, the close one.”

I gauge the distance, then sprint for the far door. “Okay,” I say, my voice choppy with each footstep.

“Get inside and out of sight immediately. Then close the door quietly and—”

“Shit,” I whisper.

The elevator dings. I miscalculated.

I jump into the nearest doorway. They’re set in a foot and a half from the hallway, but it’s enough space to conceal me.

The elevator doors swoosh open, and I sense more than hear footfalls on the thick carpet.

“Are you in the stairwell?” Griffin asks. He’s whispering.

“Yes. Almost.”

He curses. “If you’re out of sight, stay perfectly still. Don’t move.”

It’s probably just Mrs. Bishop. It has to be her—she was just outside with Percy, her happy poodle. But I can’t help but look. I need to know if I’m safe. I inch my face out past the edge of the wall.

When I see who’s there, standing in front of my apartment, my stomach turns to stone. “Griffin,” I whisper, pulling myself back into the indent. I’m barely breathing. “It’s Vincent’s guy.”

My throat constricts with panic. There was no mistaking him. Same hulking shape. Same thick, dark jacket, even though it’s only early September.

Vincent’s words echo in my brain. *You owe me, Sasha Macklin.*

A cold shimmy of panic threatens to overtake me, but I clench my jaw, refusing to let it. I breathe hard. *Okay. I’m okay.*

“Yes, Sasha, you’re going to be okay. But you need to listen very carefully. I need you to stay very, very still. Do not move.”

I didn’t realize I said that out loud.

But there’s a click from down the hall, and I know I need to look.

I’ve never been great at following instructions.

I sneak my head out again, knowing I’m probably risking my life, only to see my door closing behind him.

I don’t need Griffin to tell me what to do next.

I run.

I close the stairwell door behind me as softly as I can, telling Griffin what I’m doing. My shoes are off, and I’m skidding down the stairs, taking three at a time.

“Maybe I should go to John’s apartment; he’s on the fifth floor. I—”

“No. Keep going. Faster than you think you can, but don’t let go of that handrail unless you hear the door open overhead. If you do, I want you to press yourself up against the wall, you understand? Out of sight if someone looks down.” The engine revs again. “I’m ten minutes away. Once you get outside, you need to get around the corner, out of sight, and if you see a cab, you jump in it, okay? Tell them to take you to...Union Square. Say you’re late.”

I’m breathing hard, taking in everything he’s saying but also leaping down the stairs in threes, adrenaline carrying me faster than I think I’ve ever gone before. My purse slaps against my hip, impossibly loud.

“What if there’s no cab?” I ask. I’m on the fifth floor now—John’s apartment is right there. I could hide. The guy would never know—

A door opens overhead.

“Shit!” I land with a slap of feet on the third-floor landing and scramble backward against the wall. For a moment, there’s

no sound. I imagine the guy leaning out over the railing, looking down. I shift.

Then there's a loud clink as my keys fall out of my sweaty hand. I hadn't realized I was still holding them.

The door up top bangs against the wall.

A shuffle of feet.

"Oh fuck!" I whisper. I yank on the handle of the third-floor door before remembering it's passcode controlled. I scoop up my keys, the sound of them scraping on concrete impossibly loud.

I wave the fob in front of the mag lock, my hand shaking. The door clicks open, and I sprint down the carpeted stairwell.

"Where are you?" Griff practically growls.

"Stairs," I pant. "To the parkade. Third floor. I'm running down—can't talk." I'm running too hard to breathe, let alone narrate where I'm going. I lower my arms, using them to propel my body forward.

I jump in front of the stairwell door, swinging my keys once more. The light stays red for a sickening second. I do it again.

It flashes green.

I rip the door open. I take the stairs a half flight at a time, swinging on the railings. I hit the bottom with a crash. I race for the far door that leads up a flight of exterior stairs.

"Sash!" Griff is yelling, his voice tinny from my phone. I bring it up to my ear again.

"I'm here! I'm outside!" My bare feet slap against the asphalt.

He says something I can't hear, that maybe wasn't meant for me, then clearly into the phone, "Get out of sight! I'm close now, five blocks."

I round the corner onto the street. There's a cab, but its light isn't on. I race for it anyway, but it's too fast. It

disappears around the next corner. “No free cabs!” My voice is panicky now.

“Is there a shop nearby you can get into?”

I scan the street wildly. There’s a dollar store on the corner. “Yes.” I run. My foot lands on something sharp, and I cry out.

“Sasha!”

“I’m fine!” I keep going, only limping a little, shaking out whatever it was. I don’t think I’m cut.

“Don’t run when you get inside the store.”

I hurl myself up to the door but force myself to open the door calmly. I step inside, breathing slowly even as I’m desperate to catch my breath.

It’s an off-brand dollar store, the kind where nothing is remotely close to a dollar. The shelves are lined with cheap trinkets and plastic dinnerware. I smile at the woman behind the counter, but she doesn’t look up. She’s leaning back in her bar-stool chair. A laugh track sounds.

I don’t waste a second, just walk calmly but quickly toward the back of the shop. I glance back at the woman, but I can’t even see her from here.

I slip into the dingy hallway at the back. There’s a closed door on one side and another across from it. The one door is ajar. There’s a man on a computer in there, his face angled slightly away from me. I slip past, silent on my bare feet, and pull open the back door.

It clicks shut behind me a moment before I wonder if I should have propped it open.

What if the guy runs back here? To my left, the alley opens up onto a busy street. I don’t even know which one it is. I tuck myself around the other side of the dumpster next to me so I’m not visible from the street. The other end of the alley ends on a quieter side street.

“I’m in the back,” I whisper. It’s dingy and smells like trash. There’s a stained mattress propped up against the opposite wall.

I describe my location when Griffin asks, and he makes a small sound of affirmation.

Then, because I think I might pass out, I lower the phone, pressing it against my chest. I lean against the wall, my hair snagging on the brick. I close my eyes and see, out of nowhere, the trees in Vermont.

I was so jumpy at Eli and Reese's wedding—it was right after that paparazzo had gotten into my building. But it wasn't fear like I feel now. It was just nerves. Concern that the media was going to catch me out, and then what if I said something that hurt Sam?

I blink my eyes open. God, how could I have cared so much about protecting him?

Bitter tears blur my vision. I close my eyes again, picturing the twirling of the leaves on that walk to the wedding site. The dappled sunlight, the way the sun shone down and warmed my skin. The quiet peacefulness of the day with the murmur of the wedding still in the distance.

I was worried, but I was safe. That place—some version of that place—that's where I want to be. Away from the snapping cameras and gold-toothed criminals. Away from my family, whose minds I'm never on anyway.

A door slams open somewhere farther down the alley, making me jump.

A man with a garbage bag comes out. He does a double take when he sees me. "Miss?"

My heart thumps. But just then, a roaring engine sounds, a motorcycle skidding around the corner. It comes to a hard stop in front of me.

Griffin flips his visor open, his eyes meeting mine.

Relief crashes through me, and the tears spill like a waterfall. I sob. "Griff—Griffin—"

Griffin takes my hand, pulling me to him. "It's okay, Sasha. You're okay."

I want to melt into him—I try to, but he’s gently urging me around behind him. “We can’t stay here.” He reaches for the helmet strapped there, expertly flipping the strap open with his fingers and handing it to me.

I nod, my words gone now, and take it from him, pulling it over my head.

The world goes silent for a moment, then he does something to the bottom of my helmet, and his voice sounds in stereo. “Can you hear me?”

I nod.

He pulls off his jacket, hooking it over my shoulders. “Put your arms through.”

It’s hot out, but I’m shivering, and the jacket feels warm and like a second person holding on to me. Another Griffin.

“I need...” I croak, but I can’t form words. I’m trying to say shoes—I lost my shoes at some point—in the stairwell? On the street? I have no idea where. Instead, I clear my throat and say, “I need you to take me away.”

“That’s the plan, Angel,” he says. “Hold on.”

I snake my arms around him, resting my helmeted head against his back. Then we’re turning around, moving toward the road. A moment later, we explode out, joining the busy traffic.

We move fast, leaving all this behind.

CHAPTER 8

We pull into the roadside diner right after crossing the border into Vermont at around eight. I pass this place every time I take this back route home, but I've never stopped in it before.

"It might be shit," I apologize. I try not to look at the way Sasha shakes out her hair after removing her helmet.

I haven't seen her face since I pulled up next to her in that alley, and I have to turn away from it now, my chest tight. The relief I felt at seeing her there, after a thousand taut seconds of not knowing whether she'd be okay, hits me like a hammer even now. I've only felt that kind of relief a few times in my life: Once, when Jude fell into the Quince River as a little kid and Dad went in after him, pulling him out a full two minutes later, blue-lipped but sputtering weakly. Another time, when I was overseas and our baby sister Chelsea was in a brutal car wreck, but they told me she was going to be okay. When I found someone I thought I'd lost in the rubble of a factory explosion, her walkie still clutched in her hand.

That time, my relief was short-lived.

This time it won't be. When I pulled her onto my bike, I vowed to myself that I wasn't going to let Sasha Macklin out of my sight again. Not for a fucking second.

I know that's impossible, but I'm not worrying about that right now.

I hold the restaurant door open for her.

"God, I'm so hungry I could eat a cardboard box."

“I’d kind of like to see that,” I say, even as I scan the restaurant, checking out the exits and assessing any possible issues.

She laughs softly, and the sound is a balm to my ears.

The place is sparsely populated at this hour. An older couple sits at the row of booths on the far right of the room; a family with two tired-looking teenagers sits at a table in the middle. There’s a bar up front with a couple of truckers at it, a middle-aged blond server pouring coffee for one of them.

“Seat yourself,” she calls out to us, not looking up.

I relax just a little. This is fine. Better than fine. This is the middle of nowhere, off the main roads, halfway to Quince Valley.

“There’s no way he could have followed us, is there?” Sasha asks after we seat ourselves in a booth far from any of the other patrons.

“No.” I know because I made sure of it. Right after we got out of Sasha’s neighborhood, I pulled over and asked for her phone. After removing the SIM card and tossing it into a garbage bin, I dropped her phone onto the ground and crushed it under my heel. “I’ll get you a new one,” I promised. She just sat there, nodding, with that huge helmet on her head, still too shaken up to argue. I took us on several circuitous trips through side roads, as well as a gas station stop where I filled up and bought Sasha a pair of rain boots, which were the only footwear they had that fit her.

“He didn’t even follow us out of your neighborhood, Sasha. You made sure of it by losing him yourself.”

She meets my eye. “I wouldn’t have without your help. Thank you, Griffin. Sincerely. I...I promise to make it up to you once I figure out what to do.” Sasha’s eyes dart out the window to the road, where a lone car goes by, taillights glowing behind it. She brings her hand to her lips, then drops it again. I remember how she did that at the wedding, when I was watching her from afar. It’s a nervous tic.

“He’s not here,” I remind her. “But it doesn’t mean I’m going to let my guard down.”

Sasha drops her hand. “Thank you.”

Fuck, I want to scoop this woman up in my arms and hide her from the world. Instead, I pull out the laminated menu and hand it to Sasha.

She looks at it but doesn’t seem to see. “Can you just...get me a coffee for now? We’re going to be up for a while, right?”

“A couple hours more, yes.”

“Okay. I need to use the bathroom.”

“I need to check it.”

“Not if what you just said to me is true.”

My jaw ticks. She’s too clever for her own good. I relent, letting her get up without argument. She’s right. Besides, I’ve looked after people in her situation for years, and there’s a thin line between being overly cautious and freaking them out.

The only thing new here is my level of nerves. They’re through the fucking roof.

Take a fuckin’ breath, Griffin.

I do, and immediately feel like myself again. Or maybe that’s not having Sasha Macklin right next to me. Either way, the server comes over and I take two coffees, then hammer out a quick text to Ford, explaining in as few words as possible what happened.

Ford: She okay?

Griff: I’ll make sure she is. Going to take her home for the weekend to regroup.

Ford: I’ve got everything covered here. I’ll keep eyes on Creelman, too. I’m sorry we don’t have the resources for ground surveillance anymore.

Griff: There’s no way we could have seen this one coming.

They had to have talked about it offline. Did that mean Creelman knew he was being watched? Probably. He's not an idiot. I made sure to hide my face in the restaurant, but even he had to know a fire alarm at just that moment was more than coincidence.

But fuck Lionel for putting Sasha in serious danger again, even inadvertently.

Ford: Hey Griff?

Griff: ?

Ford: Be careful

The words feel heavy. I know he doesn't mean in the practical sense. I'm always careful. He means he knows I'm operating half on feelings now, which is never a good idea.

In fact, it's a very bad idea. I know it from personal experience. I think back to Lionel's face in that boardroom, how much it's changed in the decade since I met him.

How much I can still see her eyes in his.

Sasha comes out of the bathroom.

I pocket my phone, letting out the tense breath I've been holding having her out of my sight.

Her hair is pulled back, face washed off. She looks like she could use at least twelve hours of sleep. But she could be covered in mud and she'd still be so fucking beautiful I'd have a hard time looking directly at her.

I want very much not to care how bad an idea this whole thing is. I want to whisk her away to fucking Thailand or something, where maybe I could fucking relax knowing there's an ocean or two between us and Creelman.

But it is a bad idea. All of it. I need to put a damper on whatever personal feelings I've got going on and see this for what it is—an off the clock protection job, that's all. I've done them before. She needs protecting, and it's what I do.

Nothing more.

She slips back into the booth.

“So, you fight any bad guys while I was gone?”

“Only a couple.”

She smiles, but it drops away quickly. She reaches for the sugar, carefully pouring exactly one and a half teaspoons into her mug. Next she measures out three teaspoons of creamer. As in, she opens the individual creamers and pours them into the spoon before tipping the spoon into the coffee. “It’s the ratio,” she explains, like that helps make it make sense.

I sip my coffee, watching her stir it just so, then take a test sip. She nods and takes a sip from the cup directly. “You think I’m weird, right?”

“Yes.”

She grins. It’s a beautiful sight.

“So, I just wanted to tell you...” She hesitates. “I don’t normally need so much rescuing.”

She’s been thinking about this.

“I’m sure you don’t.”

“I just don’t want you to think I’m some damsel in distress. I backpacked around Southeast Asia by myself when I was twenty.”

So she’d be okay with Thailand.

“I moved to London without telling anyone I’d applied to grad school. Oh, and I ran my own business during college.”

“Doing what?”

She goes pink. It’s fucking adorable.

“A friend and I set up a matchmaking business.”

I raise my eyebrows.

“After we hooked up a few friends—who are both married now, I’ll add—we started running it by donation. She needed money to stay in school, and it was pretty fun to see the matches working out. I always know when a couple’s going to work out...”

I sit back and watch as Sasha talks animatedly about compatibility and personality traits and something called love languages. I don't know what the hell she's talking about, but I could listen to her talk about it all day.

"Anyway," she says, seeing the server coming our way. "I promise I can take care of myself. You should know that. It's just been a bad few weeks."

When the server comes, Sasha orders a full breakfast-for-dinner—pancakes, eggs, and sausage. She explains very carefully and almost apologetically how she likes her eggs and asks if she can please substitute one pancake for a piece of toast and if she could please have some honey, too.

The server's eyebrows draw closer together with each request, but Sasha gives her such a sweet smile that by the end, the older woman smiles indulgently.

She's difficult without being difficult. It's fascinating to watch, and it's endearing as fuck.

I opt for just a refill on my coffee. I'm not hungry when I'm on alert, and I'm not going to let my guard down until we're at my place in Quince Valley.

After we're alone again, I study her for a minute as she worries at the collar of her shirt. Then I set my coffee down. "I don't think you're a damsel in distress, Sasha. Most people don't have brothers involved in dangerous shit who drag their innocent sisters into it."

"No, I'm just an idiot. At least Leila and Cal were smart enough to move to the other side of the country this year to get away from him."

"You're not an idiot," I say, anger flaring in my chest. "None of this is on you. It's on your brother." I can barely get the word out without spitting it. It's a good thing Lionel's got me staying away from him. I don't know what I'd do if he was within reaching distance, but it would probably land me in a holding cell.

Sasha doesn't let go of her collar, just twists it in her fingers. Then she drops her hand, looking down. "I can't

believe all those articles about Sam were right.” Her voice wobbles slightly. I want to tell her not to shed a fucking tear for her piece of shit brother. But then she finally looks at me, and she must see the thought in my face, because she says, “He wasn’t always like this. I mean, he was always ambitious, always had to be the best at everything. But he didn’t cheat to get to where he is.”

Her eyes go watery, and she blinks fast, looking up.

Suddenly I see it. The little girl with the larger-than-life big brother. I’ve read the file. Sam Macklin was a football star, the lead in the high school play, and valedictorian of his high school and university class. It was hero worship, and even today, she wanted him to be the hero he was in her mind.

My hands clench. *No feelings*, I remind myself. *This is a job. Nothing personal.*

But the only thing I can think of is personal. It’s my own family and how I’d feel if one of them took a dark path. I sure as hell wouldn’t want to believe it until the evidence was right in my fucking face.

“I’m sorry, Sasha” is all I can think to say as a tear rolls down her cheek. She’s got something in her hands—I can’t quite tell what it is, but I see a spot of yellow in her palm.

But just then, the server appears with a giant platter of food. “Eggs over easy and...lightly fried? Plus all the rest as you wanted, hon.”

When Sasha looks up, she smiles, but it’s wobbly, and the server sets the plate down with a clunk, rounding on me.

Her eyes shoot daggers. “Is there a problem here?”

Jesus. She thinks I’ve made her cry.

But before I can say anything, Sasha says, “Oh!” Then reaches across the table and takes my hand.

I know I look stunned, because Sasha laughs again.

“It’s not him.” She wipes at her eyes with the heel of her other hand, that yellow thing still wrapped in her fingers. “I

swear. My brother's been an asshole lately, and he's... whisking me away from his assholery."

The woman looks between the two of us. "Is that right?"

"That's right," Sasha says, meeting my eyes. There's gratitude there. And strangely, something like hope. All I feel is inadequacy—like I'm in the presence of a goddamned angel who's dared to drop down from heaven to sit with me.

The woman instantly softens. "Would you look at you two? He's a regular hero, isn't he?"

"Yes," Sasha says at the same time I say, "No."

The woman lingers a moment, smiling, until I clear my throat. She titters before heading off.

The minute she's gone, Sasha shovels food into her mouth like it's her first meal in weeks. "Oh God," she says around a mouthful of eggs. "This is the best food I've ever eaten."

To my astonishment, she downs nearly the entire contents of her plate in what I'm pretty sure is under five minutes, then holds a hand over her mouth, presumably to hide a burp.

"You good?" I ask, working hard to hide the laughter in my voice.

"My mother would kill me if she saw me do that. She always wanted me to be a proper lady."

"Aren't you?" She looks pretty fucking ladylike to me. Well, maybe except the food-shoveling, but I liked that part.

Sasha breaks out into a kind of wicked grin. "I only look proper."

Well, fuck if that doesn't make my lower half stir to life. I clear my throat, downing the last of my coffee. We should get going, even though I want to sit in this anonymous greasy spoon for a year, learning everything there is to know about Sasha Macklin. Specifically how she turned out so night and day different from her brother.

But I don't need to know any of that right now. I check the time—we need to get going.

As we climb back on the bike ten minutes later, I try to ignore how good Sasha's arms feel around my waist and how much I love the little squeeze she gives me as I kick the starter and the bike roars to life.

"Your place is going to be safe, right?" Sasha asks through the speaker. Her voice is tentative, like she feels embarrassed to be asking that.

"Yes. The people after you don't know me, and that's on purpose. They won't be able to find me, so they won't be able to find you. It's the safest place for you right now."

I pull onto the highway, taking the bike up to speed.

"And after that?"

"After that, we'll make a plan. But I'm not leaving you alone until this is all done. I hope that's okay with you."

I think I hear the hitch of her breath or her voice through the speaker, but it's hard to tell with the rushing wind and roaring engine. "That's okay with me," she says softly.

CHAPTER 9

By the time we get to my place, it's close to midnight. My arm is cramped from holding hers against my chest—I spent the last hour panicking she was going to fall off the bike, and I kept having to ask her questions to keep her awake. I'm not a great conversationalist to begin with, so things got a little weird.

“What’s your favorite food?”

“Muffaletta.”

“Is that some kind of lady muffin?”

Soft laughter. “It’s a sandwich.”

“So it’s a euphemism.”

“Oh my God.”

“What’s your favorite, uh...emoji?”

“Do you even know what an emoji is?”

“Why would I ask the ques—”

“Kissy face.”

Wrong question. I cleared my throat.

“Uh... What do you like to sing at karaoke?”

“My heart will go on.”

“Really?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing. It’s ambitious.”

“What’s yours?”

“Do I look like I do karaoke?”

She laughed again at that. I wanted her to keep laughing, but I was only ever accidentally funny. My mom always used to tell me we needed the serious, thoughtful people in life to make great things happen. I’d leaned on that when things I wished I could take less seriously happened.

“You don’t seem funny, but you are, Griffin Kelly,” Sasha said sleepily.

For the first time in my life, I wished I had Jude’s easy affability. Then I thought about what a pain in the ass I’d be and unwished it quick. Luckily I managed to keep her awake long enough to stay on the bike.

My sturdy log cabin isn’t messy—it’s spartan clean. I don’t keep a lot of stuff, unless you count tools and a small selection of outdoor gear, which are all neatly organized in my shop.

But as I lead her in now and see her look around the space, I wish it were a little more homey for her.

I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone more out of place. I help her out of my coat, and she kicks off the rain boots. With her pink-toed bare feet, expensive-looking linen pantsuit, and diamond earrings, she fits in a log cabin about as well as a porcelain doll in a...well, in a log cabin.

“Probably a little basic for your taste,” I say.

I’ve owned this place for twenty years, ever since I moved back to Quince Valley after college and a few stints overseas, and I’ve never once considered how my house looks. Maybe I need more blankets or pictures on the wall. A cat? How do you make shit soft?

“I like it,” she says, drawing her fingers along the back of my big, worn-in couch as she walks by. “It’s rustic.” She makes her way through the living room, inspecting everything in the place like she’s walking through a museum, suddenly wide awake again. “Were you ever in the army?”

I frown. “No.” I did every kind of martial art under the sun—still do. I’ve done weapons training. I’ve extracted people from war zones. But I don’t think that’s why she’s asking. “Why?”

“There’s just a...precision about this place.” She glances over at me. “That’s complimentary. You should see my place. I like to try to make stuff, but I’m not very good at it. It’s kind of a graveyard of failed DIY I don’t have the heart to throw out. My mother’s always offering to ‘redo the entirety of the space.’” She says that in a slightly snobby-sounding accent. With just enough of a note of hurt I feel like I can see their whole relationship.

“Do you and your mother get along?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes I think I was born into the wrong family. I think I might have been happier in a place like this.”

I don’t know why that makes warmth spread in my chest.

“You should see my parents’ place. It looks like a freaking mausoleum. It’s just devoid of life, you know? Kind of like their marriage.”

She laughs, but I can tell she doesn’t think it’s funny.

Sasha gets to my bookshelf. “At least you can tell someone lives here.” She tilts her head at an angle to read the titles. “*Ship-Making in the Iron Age. Jiu-Jitsu: Form and Art.* Why are these books exactly what I’d expect you to have? You ever read for pleasure?”

“Those books please me.”

Sasha rolls her lips between her teeth. I can tell she’s trying not to laugh.

I scowl, heading for the closet, where I pull out two sets of clean sheets.

While Sasha’s exploring, I change my bed, giving the bedside table a swipe for dust and making room for her in one of the drawers. She doesn’t have anything to put in there, but I’ll go out and get her a change of clothes tomorrow. Maybe

I'll call one of my sisters to help. Although the fewer people who know she's here, the better. I don't need to decide now.

Back in the living room, I toss the second set of sheets on the couch, then pause. She's got a framed photo in her hand. Shit. "Hey, uh, that's—"

"Adorable?"

Awkward nerves I haven't felt in years crunch around in my belly as I come up behind her. The photo is of the five of us siblings with Mom and Dad when we were kids. Even though it's probably sat in that spot for a decade, I haven't looked at it closely since Cassandra gave it to me.

"How old are you here?"

I calculate. "Thirteen." In the photo, my eyebrows are bunched together, my teeth bared.

Sasha looks at me and grins. "Are you trying to smile?"

I frown. "I *am* smiling."

She presses her lips together. "Mm-hmm"

"Mom told the photographer not to let us go until we were all smiling."

"Not an easy feat to coordinate seven people's facial expressions, I bet. Though your brothers seem to have nailed it."

Eli, who would have been around fifteen, is giving Blue Steel, while Jude, I guess eleven, has his hands on his hips and his chin up like Superman, his sparkling fucking grin lighting up his face as usual.

"Cassandra seems to know what she's doing, too."

Eli's twin Cassandra has a perfect, polished smile on her face.

"She always did exactly what everyone expected of her."

"Sounds exhausting," she says, her voice sympathetic.

I'd never really thought of it that way.

Sasha points to the only other person besides me who looks like she's not happy about smiling—our baby sister, Chelsea. Her smile doesn't reach her eyes.

“I didn't get a chance to meet your younger sister at the wedding.”

I study her a moment. “You'd like her. She smiles more these days.”

Sasha throws me a curious look. I guess I don't know Sasha well enough to know if she'd like Chelsea. But I know my sister would love her. Both my sisters would.

But Sasha smiles. “I'd love to meet her. Maybe this weekend?”

I shake my head, moving for the kitchen, which is open to the living room. “Nope. You're not leaving this cabin.”

“What?” Her tone is kind of bristly. She doesn't like that. But she doesn't have to. All she needs to do is stay in my sight. Safe.

“You need to keep a low profile,” I say.

“You said Quince Valley was safe. No one knows me here.”

“Doesn't matter.” I inspect the fridge. Empty shelves and condiments; I'm going to have to grab a few things tomorrow. “I don't want to take any chances.”

“Griffin, do you really think Creelman's going to come up here looking for me?” Her tone isn't fearful. It's searching. Verifying facts.

The chances of Creelman showing up here, knowing Sasha has a connection to Quince Valley—or me—are slim to none. But I need to walk that thin line again. I shift to the cupboards. “No. I don't. But we don't know anything right now. Better to be safe than sorry.”

Sasha sets the photo down. Not hard enough to break it, but enough that I know she's upset. “Listen, I know you're very good at your job—whatever that is. Bodyguard? You never said.”

“I’m in Tech.” My standard answer.

“Sure.” She rolls her eyes. “I’m sure you’re a good...tech. But I don’t want to live my life scared if I don’t have to be.” She walks over to me. “Griffin, when that man showed up at my apartment, I’ve never been more scared. Vincent Creelman would be thrilled to know that. But I’m not going to let him dictate how my life is going to go.”

Clearly I’ve swung too far into the easygoing side of things.

I run my hand over my face. What would have happened if she hadn’t called me? I imagine her taken, her hands bound, gagged. Fury at the assholes who put her in harm’s way rises like an animal inside me. “Listen, Sasha, you’re safe here. I mean that. But we’re still in hiding. If Creelman finds out where you are—and he’s going to try his fucking hardest—you’re in serious danger.”

“I know the stakes,” she says, her voice steady.

“Do you? I’m not sure you know what a man like that is capable of.”

Sasha swallows.

Fuck me.

But she’s not falling back into fear. If anything, she looks more resolved.

“Griffin, I’ll be grateful for what you’ve done for me ’til the day I die. I am, right this second. But this is my life. I need to still live. If I’m safe, I can’t stay locked up. I spent too long trapped in a cage to let that man put me back in there.”

I see it suddenly, the childhood she must have had. The daughter of the beauty queen mistress who needed to fit into a judgmental, moneyed world she was accused of sleeping her way into. She sure as hell would have made sure her daughter fit into that world, whether she wanted it or not.

But this isn’t the same. And right now, I’m suddenly too tired to think of how to get through to her. “We should get some sleep.”

She blinks, anger flushing her cheeks. But I can see the weariness in her, too. “Fine,” she relents. “We’ll both think more clearly with some sleep.”

If she thinks I’m going to change my mind, I’m not. Her staying put in this cabin is nonnegotiable. But I just grunt. It’s the best I can do.

Sasha strides back to the living room and picks the sheet off the couch, shaking it out.

“What are you doing?”

“Setting up my bed.”

“You’re not sleeping there.”

Her nostrils flare. “I’m not taking your bed.”

“Of course you are.”

She shoots daggers at me. “I don’t like being told what to do, Griffin.”

I take a breath, trying to keep my voice at a tone that doesn’t sound demanding. “You’ll get a better night’s sleep in there. The window’s double insulated, and it’s got a blackout curtain. Out here, you’ll hear all the birds, and there’s those.” I point to the windows up in the arched ceiling where the sun pours in in the morning.

She still hasn’t moved, so I do what I never thought I’d do. I resort to pleading.

“Please, just take the bed, Sasha. I’ll sleep better if you do.”

I think it’s that part that finally has her shoulders sagging. Or maybe it’s the sight of the big, inviting shaker bed through the bedroom door. “Fine. But only because it’s just for a night.”

“Two nights.”

Maybe more.

She moves toward the bedroom. “I’ll make breakfast.”

I don't tell her she'll have a hell of a time doing that without any food, but I'm too busy being relieved she's finally giving in. I really will rest easier knowing there's only one door and I'm going to be two feet from it.

"So..." She yawns, stretching enough that a strip of skin shows where her shirt lifts from her pants.

I busy myself with the sheets.

"Do you have anything for me to sleep in? Or should I just go for bra and underwear?"

I cough, even though I have nothing to cough on.

She has the nerve to grin, the mood in the room suddenly shifting.

My ears burning, I stride past her into the bedroom, yanking open a drawer and finding a T-shirt.

She follows me.

My jaw ticks, but I hand her the neatly folded shirt. "You want pants?" The shirt is going to go down to her knees.

"Nah. How about a toothbrush?"

"I'll leave one on the counter for you." I need to get out of her vicinity. I go to move to the door, but there's not much room between the end of the bed and the dresser, and she's blocking the way.

"Oh...sorry," she says, moving only a little.

I edge past her, but I'm still close enough that I can smell the soft floral scent of her shampoo. Worse, she shifts at the last moment, trying to give me space, and the back of my hand brushes her hip.

"Sorry," I grunt as I pass. But just that simple touch sends heat spreading through my lower half. Dangerous heat I don't need, especially when I've been trying not to think about her in any way except for a job.

"Griffin?" She places a hand on my forearm, sending more heat shooting through my whole goddamned body.

“Yes,” I say as if confirming. I don’t meet her eye. I can’t. I’ll say something stupid.

Instead, I focus on a mole I never noticed before. It’s on her forehead, just below her hairline. I wonder, asinine, what it would feel like to kiss her there. To run my hands through that silky hair.

“Thank you.”

I grimace, forcing my eyes to meet hers.

When our eyes lock, my heart leaps to my throat. She looks contrite, but I still see that strength there. That defiance. It should be irritating—when clients don’t follow our recommendations, bad things happen. But I realize in that moment it’s what I like about her. That refusal to be boxed up. The dance of life in her eyes.

“Thank you for not tearing up that card.”

She laughs, the sound so unexpected it threatens to tug at the corner of my mouth. But I don’t let it. I move away from her so I can get my head back on straight.

After a quick shower, teeth brushed, I’m on the couch, extremely ready to knock off. But I’m not going to fall asleep until I’m sure Sasha has.

Meanwhile, she’s gone back and forth to the bathroom approximately twelve times, then to the kitchen to get herself a glass of water. I should have thought of that—it’s been a long time since I had someone over.

But holy hell, would the woman just go to sleep already?

It’s not until she closes the bedroom door—and promptly opens it again—that I sit up, irritation rumbling.

“Sasha. You okay?”

“Yes,” she whispers from the bedroom, the springs creaking as she gets back on the bed.

“What do you need?”

She hesitates. “I can’t sleep.”

My chest clenches. Fuck. She’s scared. Of course she’s scared. What a fucking day. “How can I help?”

“I just...I think I might sleep better if you were closer.”

My stomach flips like a teenager’s. *Calm the fuck down, boy.*

“Uh, I could sleep on the floor in there,” I offer. It wouldn’t be difficult—I’ve slept on worse.

“Seriously?”

I frown. “That wouldn’t work?”

“You could just be a grown-up and sleep in the bed.”

“Sasha, I—”

“I’m not going to come onto you, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I don’t worry.”

She makes a sound I can’t interpret. “You know what? It’s fine. I’ll be fine.” She disappears into the shadows of the room.

I don’t move.

Then I feel like an ass. I’m a grown man. And she’s been through hell.

I get up and walk over to the other side of the bed.

I can hardly see her in the dark, so I’m not sure if she knows I’m there. “Sasha?”

The bed shifts.

“I just want you to feel safe.”

“I know,” she whispers.

My heart beats a hair faster.

“It’s a big bed,” she says.

She’s right. It is. Before I can change my mind, I flip back the covers and lie down. It’s only after I grasp the sheet that I

realize I'm not wearing a shirt. I go to get up, but she whispers, "Thank you."

She says it as if this is some kind of hardship.

"You don't have to keep saying that," I say.

"I want to."

I relax slightly, trying to close my eyes.

But it's impossible to fully relax with her only inches from me now, knowing there's only the thin layer of cotton of her T-shirt between us.

I curse the hormones making my whole body tense. *Do not think about her like that, you fuck. Not after what she's been through.*

"This is better, right?" she whispers.

It does feel better having her within arm's reach for safety purposes. But it's doing a fucking number on that effort to keep my feelings out of this. "Yes," I manage, not convinced.

She's quiet so long I think she might have fallen asleep.

Eyes adjusted to the dark, I turn my head to see if her eyes are closed.

They are. She's curled on her side, her face toward me. I'm just trying to determine whether she's asleep when she whispers, "Griff?"

Shit. I look back at the ceiling. "Yes."

"Every time I close my eyes, I see him."

My heart twists, and, too concerned for her to think better of it, I turn all the way to face her. I don't know if she's talking about Creelman or the man who came for her. It doesn't matter. "It's normal."

"I should never have agreed to that date. He just—Sam said it was life or death. What if now—"

"Sasha. Did you talk to your brother after that...night?" I can't bring myself to say date.

Her eyes open, meeting mine. “Just by text. He heard about the fire. Not that he seemed all that concerned about my safety.”

“He’s alive.”

“What, my brother? Yes, he’s alive.”

“So it’s not life or death.” *At least not yet.* But I don’t say that last part out loud.

“I guess.”

“You’re alive, too.”

I hear the faint click of her mouth, like she’s swallowing. “Yes.”

There are any number of things I could say. Platitudes Lionel’s ex-wife had framed all over their house. Constructive ideas from the psych at McCrae I’ve heard a hundred times. Instead, I hesitate for only a second before reaching out and taking her hand from where it curls under her chin. I press it to my shoulder, setting aside all my own feelings. “I’m this far away. If you wake up in the night, I’m right here.”

“Can you stay here all night?”

“Yes.”

“You won’t leave me alone?”

It’s funny, with a family as big as ours, I always had people around me. And until this moment, I thought I always wanted to be alone. But I never really did. And I never really was. They were always there for me. Still are. What would it feel like not to have that? Not to be able to count on the ones you love the most?

“I won’t leave you alone,” I say, my voice rough.

I let her go but leave her hand where it is, giving her the option to retract it.

She drops her hand, and my shoulder aches with the loss of it.

But then her hand snakes out across the mattress, sliding under mine where it rests. “Goodnight, Griff.”

I close my hand around hers. It feels so small and soft, but it fits perfect under my palm.

“Goodnight, Angel,” I whisper, long after she’s fallen asleep.

CHAPTER 10

Sasha

I wake up to the bed jostling, and for a moment, I forget where I am. I forget everything and am deeply confused by the scent of cedar and fresh air.

And the heat of someone next to me.

But I'm not scared. I know, in my bones, it's someone good.

I open my eyes, though I'm half-sure I'm dreaming. It's dark, but I can see the walls are made of logs, and at my feet, there's a shaker footboard.

Then I remember—I'm at Griffin's place.

Everything crashes down on me all at once. I suck in a breath, my stomach lurching.

No. No panicking.

I'm safe. Far away from Vincent Creelman and his terrifying giant of a goon. Right next to Griffin.

I reach for him, but when I touch him, my hand glides across damp skin. He's sweating, though the sheet is down over his hips. The bed bounces again as he turns one way, then the other.

“Griffin?”

He mumbles something I don't catch.

He's dreaming.

A glance at the clock says it's four thirty in the morning. We've only been asleep for a few hours.

“No,” Griffin says, the word garbled. But I can hear the anguish in his voice.

It’s a strange tone from him.

It’s not a good dream.

“Griffin,” I say his name louder, placing my hand on his shoulder again. He feels hot. Is he sick? I’m not good with sickness. I have no idea what to do if someone gets ill. When I was sick as a kid, Mom used to just hand me a bunch of painkillers and pat my leg, keeping a scarf pulled up over her mouth so she wouldn’t get infected before leaving me alone in my room.

I touch my hand to Griffin’s forehead. It’s sweaty, but I don’t think it feels hotter than normal.

Just a nightmare. Night sweats. That’s a thing, right?

He mumbles again. Then, “No!” Louder than before. “Not there.”

He’s in distress, Sasha. I need to wake him up.

“Griffin.” I shake his shoulder.

He jerks sideways, away from me.

I get up on my knees, taking both his shoulders in my hands. I shake him hard. “Griffin. Wake up. You’re having a bad dream.”

He stills instantly. The light is so dim I can just make out the outline of his face.

Still, I can see his eyes are still closed and his brows slanting. “Laura...don’t go in there—”

He winces suddenly.

My stomach twists. *Who’s Laura?*

“Griffin,” I say softly, leaning down to whisper in his ear. “It’s not Laura. It’s Sasha.”

He jerks, then stills. When I pull back up, his eyes are open. Not just open, but wide. He studies me a moment, as if trying to remember who I am.

“Fuck. Sasha, I’m sorry.”

Then he closes his eyes, his hands reaching up to my sides as if reassuring himself I’m here. I don’t think he realizes he’s doing it. Maybe he’s still dreaming, but I don’t move, too overwhelmed by the feeling of his big, broad hands spreading across my ribs so gently.

His eyes pop open, and he drops his hands. “Sorry,” he says gruffly.

“It’s okay. Are you okay?”

His Adam’s apple bobs. He nods. “Fine.”

He doesn’t look fine. He looks rattled.

His eyes meet mine. “I didn’t say anything, did I? Ford says I talk in my sleep sometimes.”

“Ford?”

“Work guy. We do stakeouts together. Lot of forced proximity. It’s terrible. He snores.”

I laugh softly, the mood suddenly less tense, like danger has passed. Stakeouts? I file that one away. Then I realize he’s waiting for me to answer his question. “You talked but...it was nothing I could really understand.”

I don’t know why I lie. Maybe because it feels like that was private. Something I wasn’t supposed to hear. The man is like a closed book, and I somehow felt like I was snooping inside.

Griffin studies me long enough that I feel my cheeks grow hot. He knows I’m not telling him the truth. But he nods, accepting the lie. He closes his eyes again. “Sorry for waking you.”

“It’s all good.” I lie back down.

Who’s Laura?

Griffin sits up suddenly, swinging his legs out of bed and running his hand over his head. My stomach clenches. Is he going back out to the couch? I don’t want him to go, but I’ve got a small slice of pride still left. I won’t beg him to stay

twice. Especially not if it's making him have nightmares about some other woman.

Is she still in the picture? The barren state of his place says no. So has the fact that he hasn't mentioned anyone. But he's not exactly forthcoming—I know next to nothing about him.

Griffin speaks over his shoulder. "I'm just going to the bathroom. You need anything?"

He's coming back. I try not to let the extreme relief show in my voice as I pull the sheet back up over me. I don't miss how he made sure to tell me what he's doing. "I'm fine. Thank you."

I lie back after he leaves, my mind spinning.

I haven't had much time to think, given everything that's happened. But I'd be lying if I said I hadn't thought about Griffin a lot over the past few weeks since that terrible night with Vincent.

Except, *thought* is not a strong enough word.

I've spent almost every night lying awake, replaying that night, trying hard to only focus on the moment he showed up, his face hidden under that firefighter's hat.

At first it was only comfort. Imagining the feeling of total safety, because thinking about him was like a balm to the sharp, jagged fear of how that night could have gone. But then, just like how I pictured all the bad things that could have happened—or maybe to try to counteract that—I started picturing ways it could have gone after that.

First he'd punch the other two men out, or hold them so I could. That part felt good, the cracks of their noses, their screams of pain. A little too good.

But once I got that far, I started picturing other things.

Griffin picking me up, transporting me somehow back to my apartment and laying me down in bed. Reassuring me with that gruff voice spoken in the dark, his breath hot on my neck.

I should have stopped there, but it felt so good, imagining him staying with me. He'd lie with me, like he did tonight.

He'd hold me. Stroke my hair. Stroke my back as he held my body against his.

Then his hand would creep down farther, sliding over my ass. His lips would brush skin, and I'd tell him to make me forget.

Okay, so I've spent a lot of time picturing this man naked, which is probably not healthy. But damn, it feels good.

I hear the steady beat of Griffin's bare feet on the floor now, and a moment later, his giant form fills the doorway. Heat jolts through me. I shouldn't have thought about all my ridiculous fantasies knowing he'd be getting back into bed with me.

I notice as he climbs into bed that his hair is slicked back. He's splashed water on his face.

The heat inside me cools. God, I'm selfish. He's going through his own shit right now, and I'm picturing him naked.

Griffin lies down next to me. I want desperately to reach out and touch him again, but I'm not sure if it's the right thing.

"You okay?" he asks, surprising me.

I hesitate. "I'm fine," I say. I'm not fine. But I'm not the only one with feelings here.

He's silent a moment, then he turns so he's facing away from me. I get the sense he's still there, in that dream.

I lie there a moment, hesitating. Then I scoot myself over so I'm right up behind him. I slip my arm up over his side, resting my hand against his chest. Not for me, I tell myself, but for him.

For a moment, Griffin doesn't move. Clearly I've overstepped.

But then his arm shifts, and he holds my hand against his chest the way he did on the bike. My insides swirl with all the feelings I've tried to tamp down.

I can feel the beat of his heart against my palm. "Are you okay?" I whisper.

“Yes.” His voice is gruff and low, but with only that one little word, I soften against him. Our breathing matches. A long inhale; a full exhale. Repeat.

As my eyes grow droopy, my last thought before sleep comes is that part of my fantasy has come true. For the first time in days, I feel completely, totally safe.

CHAPTER 11

When I open my eyes, dawn slants bright and yellow through the open door of the bedroom.

I feel good. Too good, considering yesterday. I should be exhausted, headachy from the tension. Instead, I feel a warmth, not just in my chest but against my back. Sasha's there. Not the way she was last night, but with her back to me, her butt pressed up against the small of my back.

It feels cozy and close and so fucking good I can hardly take it.

But it feels wrong, too. Especially because my morning wood is raging.

I slip out of bed, adjusting myself in my shorts before looking back at her.

She's so fucking beautiful my heart catches in my throat. Her hand is curled on the pillow next to her face, her lips parted in sleep, her hair spread in soft waves.

I have to look away fast. Everything bumping around in my heart and chest is too confusing for the logical part of my brain.

I need to burn it off.

I pull out my workout clothes as quietly as I can, then scrawl out a quick note for Sasha in case she wakes up. I'm not going far—just the drive and the road it leads to. The backside of the property slopes steeply down all the way to the Quince River—it's almost impossible for anything but a mountain goat to venture up over there.

I take off at a clip up the long drive that grades toward the road. I sprint to my only neighbor's drive a half mile east of my property. Chester Brown's a seventy-nine-year-old off-grid enthusiast who brings me eggs from his hens when I'm in town and fresh trout during fishing season. When I reach the sign on his gate warning trespassers about his nonexistent guard dogs, I turn around and run in the opposite direction, toward Quince Valley. The closest neighbor on that side is miles away, down at the edge of town.

Running is some of my best thinking time, and right now, I find myself inevitably thinking back to yesterday and how I could have prevented what happened to Sasha. The only way would be if we'd had eyes on Creelman's goon. Or Sasha. But we still had our client to look after, and with Lionel removing the ground surveillance, it was impossible for Ford and me to be in multiple places at once. I try my best not to beat myself up about what happened, focusing instead on the fact that Sasha's safe.

And that there's no way I'm letting anything happen to her again, especially now that I know Creelman hasn't moved on from her since that night at the restaurant. As I sprint back toward Chester's place, I wrestle with the most important question of all. How the fuck do I keep Sasha safe with the limited resources I have?

You can't keep everyone safe.

My mind goes back to the nightmare I woke Sasha up with last night. It wasn't an unfamiliar one. I had it on repeat for a full year.

It's me, arriving a moment too late. Running through the warehouse door to the sound of shots fired.

Laura, on the ground, blood trailing from her open mouth, her eyes fixed on me, filled with that knowledge that she should have listened. The sorrow that it's too late to change anything now.

Fuck. I pump my legs harder.

I can't change the past. But maybe I can change the future. As I pass my own drive, I eye my house, which I can barely make out down the hill and through the trees. Of course it's just as I left it. Door securely shut. Bike next to the garage.

I run hard, but I'm unable to escape the memory of Sasha, clinging to my waist on the bike. Sasha, wrapped around me in my bed, her sweet floral scent swirling around me like she went to bed wearing a wreath of flowers. Sasha, worried about me in the middle of the night, when it needs to be the other way around.

I thought I could keep my feelings out of this, but the very fact that I've created this job for myself makes it clear I'm failing hard at it.

I concentrate on running so hard my mind clears of any thoughts at all. I repeat my loop several times, pushing myself harder and faster each round. By the time I finally feel like I've had enough, I slow to a walk down my drive, pulling my phone out of my arm holder to glance at the stats. I don't know if I should be surprised to see I beat my personal speed record.

I see there's a message from Ford, too.

He saw Creelman and the goon at their usual breakfast place in Queens just now, and Creelman's texted Sam Macklin about business in a way Ford feels confident indicates neither knows where she is.

Relief washes over me. I knew the goon hadn't tailed us. I suspected Sasha might have lost him before I even got there, though I knew it was too much to hope he didn't know Sasha had run from him at all. But knowing they're completely in the dark, I finally allow myself to fully relax.

For now.

He's not giving up. I know that much. And he'll know something's up when she doesn't come home. I still don't know what the fuck comes next, but for now, we're good.

And I know I can't go back to work for a bit.

I pause halfway down the drive, tapping out a call.

“Griffin. Where are you?” Lionel’s voice is groggy.

I’ve woken him up. I don’t care. I never tell him what I’m doing. It’s never been a problem, keeping my own hours, especially since I give all my hours to McCrae & Associates.

But Lionel’s been watching us more closely.

“I’m taking some time off,” I say, in a way that’s clear I’m not asking for permission.

There’s a long pause. “What are you doing?”

I need to keep things high level, at least until I have a plan. “I need time to think over a few things.”

“Everything okay?”

He thinks it’s about him, that awkward as fuck meeting.

“Not really. But it will be. I always figure it out.”

Pause. “That you do, son.”

My stomach lurches. It’s been a minute since he’s called me that.

I shake my head of the latent feelings that brings up. “Lionel, I need to tell you one more time how important it is that we continue to monitor Vincent Creelman. Especially while I’m away.”

I practically hear what little warmth that’s gathered up between us frost over. “I thought I made myself clear on that matter.”

“There’ve been new developments.”

“What new developments? Related to Smith?” Smith is our client—the construction exec who’s going to make quite a few heavy hitters very upset once we help him go public.

“Maybe. I don’t know yet. But someone tried to go after Sasha Macklin last night.”

Silence on the other end of the line. Then, “What happened?”

“One of Creelman’s men came by her apartment.”

“Fuck.” I’m relieved to hear some of the old McCrae anger come out. I’m more relieved that the worst of my theories—that Lionel’s somehow in bed with Creelman, which is ridiculous considering how much Lionel’s previously expressed his disdain for the man—doesn’t appear to hold water. Whatever’s going on with Lionel, he hasn’t suddenly started palling around with scumbags like Creelman.

“I gave her a white card after that incident at the restaurant.” I hold my breath. We rarely give out those cards. Those cards come with McCrae’s full protection.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“You weren’t exactly receptive to new information the last time we talked.”

I can practically hear him gritting his teeth.

“That’s not all.”

“The fuck?”

“She’s with me now.”

A pause. Then, “Have you lost your fucking mind?”

Anger heats up in my chest. “She’s a friend, Lionel. And I assumed after our last meeting you wouldn’t want me using company resources by placing her in a McCrae safe house. You know the cost of—”

“I’m perfectly aware.”

There’s silence on the other end of the line, and I can tell he’s twisting this over in his mind. He may be keeping his cards close to his chest these days, but I still know Lionel McCrae. I still know he’s smart, and in his heart, even with the money issue, he wouldn’t want harm to come to an innocent person.

Still, he takes longer than I would have thought he needed. I have to prod him. “Lionel?”

“I’m here.” He curses under his breath. “Okay, listen to me. You do what you need to in order to keep her safe for right

now. But I do not want you adding back surveillance on Creelman or Macklin. Do you hear me? We can't afford it."

I knew he'd say that. Still, my chest burns. It makes me doubly glad we haven't cut off the electronic surveillance. "I think that's a bad idea. And I think Smith would think so, too."

Smith hasn't actually connected Creelman's organization to his construction company recently. But he thinks we're keeping tabs on all the players.

"He doesn't need to know how we run our business."

He kind of should. But I don't say that. I change tack. "Lionel, I'd like to access some resources to keep Sasha safe, at least until we know what's happening."

"She's not our client."

I grit my teeth. "Nobody's in the safe house in Brooklyn right now."

"She's not our client. And you know as well as anyone it's not just the house. It's the costs that come with it. Food. Utilities. You. I can't spare you right now, Kelly. You know that."

I hold the phone away from me for a full five seconds, trying to calm the fuck down. "If I don't get her in a safe house, I have to keep her with me. And if I keep her with me, I can't keep doing my job for you."

And as long as she's with me, I can't keep my goddamned feelings in check.

"You could turn her over to me."

A chill goes over me. "What?"

"Bring her to me, and I'll ensure she's kept safe until we figure out what's wrong."

This is wrong. Very wrong. "So you'll use McCrae resources to keep her safe but I can't?" That makes no sense at all.

"That's right. Your personal connection means you're not thinking clearly about this. And when you get personal, you

mess up.”

The chill deepens, because I know he’s not just talking about this case anymore.

“I can’t trust you not to rack up a twenty-thousand-dollar invoice for a single night’s work again. You hear me, Kelly? So yes, I think the best solution is to turn her over to me.”

“Not a fucking chance,” I say, my voice cool. I’ve walked all the way over to the west side of my property—I need to get back before Sasha wakes up. Things aren’t just bad with Lionel. They’re so much worse than I thought.

“In that case, you have until Monday to be back in the office, with either a new plan for this girl or your letter of resignation.”

That gives me only the weekend to come up with a plan.

“And Kelly?”

I don’t answer. I’m still processing this new information. He continues, taking it for understanding.

“We’re canceling protection on Smith. When you come back in, you and Ford are getting reassigned to a new case. This one’s in Houston.”

I want to laugh. He has to be joking.

But the extended silence tells me he isn’t.

“Lionel, what the fuck? We’ve put eight months of our lives into this client. We’re this close to blowing it open.”

But I don’t even care about that right now. If we’re relocated, it won’t matter if we’re keeping tabs on Creelman. We’ll be too far away to do anything about it. I’m so filled with rage I feel like my ribs are melting. I don’t *get* pissed like my brother Eli does. And I don’t make rash decisions like Jude. I look at the facts and the evidence, and I come up with the best plan for the best possible outcome.

This is all new to me.

Remain fucking calm.

As Lionel gives me some bullshit about why he doesn't think Smith's company is a big enough target, I run through my options as fast as I fucking can.

I could go on the run with her. Move to fucking Aruba until shit calms down.

But I can't just upturn her life and disappear forever on mine.

I need to be able to keep tabs on Creelman, and Sam Macklin, too. And I need McCrae's resources to do that.

I just need a plan. And I can't fucking think of one right now.

Lionel's right—my feelings are clouding my judgment. I press my hand against the tree next to me, glancing back to my house, where Sasha's sleeping. Except the window in view is the one in my room, and the curtains are open. Shit, she's up.

“Kelly?”

Forty-eight hours to come up with a plan.

“I'll need until Tuesday.”

A pause. Then, “If I don't see you by one o'clock Tuesday afternoon, you're gone.”

I hang up before he can. Petty, sure, but I can't let him think he's got me with his bluff. Because he wouldn't let me go, would he? He told me himself that Ford and I are the backbone of McCrae, and I know if I left, Ford would, too.

I pinch the bridge of my nose between my fingers. I'll think of something. I'm good at thinking of shit, and I've done it more on the fly than I'm doing now.

I just need to figure out how to take my goddamned feelings for Sasha out of the mix. It's a complication making everything a thousand times worse.

I can do that. I just have to figure out how.

Coffee would help.

I begin crossing the yard to the house, taking my time in case anything brilliant comes to me on the fifty-yard walk.

But I'm not even halfway there before my going-nowhere thoughts are interrupted by the unmistakable sound of a gun firing. Then a flock of birds is fluttering from the trees on the backside of the house.

And Sasha is shrieking.

Then I don't think. I run.

CHAPTER 12

Sasha

I look up from under the hand perched over my eyes to see Griffin tearing around the side of his house faster than I ever thought a man of his size could move.

“Hot damn!” the bearded, five-foot-nothing septuagenarian next to me hollers. He pulls off his straw hat and presses it against his chest. “Look at ’im go!”

Griffin stutters to a stop in front of us, then his face washes over in relief. And anger. He drops his hands onto his knees. “For fuck’s sake, Chester, seriously?”

I want to laugh. But I’m too touched by Griffin racing over here like I was in mortal danger. And too distracted by the sight of him in a pair of running shorts and not much else. I didn’t get to admire it last night. His body is thickly muscled, and I can’t help but follow the deep V dipping into his shorts.

I slept next to that all night and didn’t jump his bones?

Griffin’s neighbor plops his hat back on his white-haired head and gives me a wink big enough that his bushy white eyebrows fall and rise a full inch on his red, wrinkly face. “Miss Sasha and I here are talkin’ about havin’ a shotgun weddin’. And it ain’t a shotgun wedding if you don’t bring a shotgun, is it?”

I feel a little giddy. I’m not sure whether it’s from shooting a gun for the first time in my life or ogling Griffin. I turn my attention back to Chester, who’s my new favorite person in the world. “It sure ain’t,” I agree in my best Dolly Parton twang.

Chester howls with laughter, revealing a set of teeth at least three short of full. His mirth is contagious. I laugh, too, which feels so, so good after the twenty-four hours I've had.

Griffin, meanwhile, scowls at both of us, then walks up and takes the shotgun from the older man by the barrel and skillfully clicks it open, shaking the second shell out onto the ground before handing both to the older man. He comes over and stands next to me, looking me up and down.

I'm still wearing only his T-shirt. "You checking for bullet holes?" I ask, even as my stomach flutters with his presence. The man is so *big*. I only come up to his shoulder.

Griff places his fingers at his hips, glowering at me. Then to Chester, he says, "You're unbelievable. Didn't I ask you to leave Louise at home when you come over here? You can't just go shooting a gun anytime you like."

"Actually it wasn't Chester who shot Louise," I say. "By the way, did you know Chester named his gun after his mother? Isn't that sweet?"

Griff looks like he's seeing red. "You let Sasha shoot your gun?"

Chester beams. "She's a regular Annie Oakley, just like this sweetheart's namesake." He hugs the shotgun to his chest.

I have to bite back my laughter. But Griff looks like he's barely holding it together, so I arrange my features into soberness.

"Hey, it's okay." I lay a hand on his forearm and suddenly wish I hadn't. I touched it last night, but somehow forgot how thick and corded with muscle it would be against my skin. I take it away again. "I said I'd never shot a gun before, and Chester said he'd go back home and get Louise for me to try. Just one shot."

Griff shakes his head. "This is all kinds of unsafe."

"But it felt all kinds of good." It did. I felt powerful for the first time in ages. "I finally see why people enjoy shooting guns."

“Big galoots like Griff wouldn’t understand,” Chester says to me out the side of his mouth. “Ya don’t need help to feel intimidatin’ when you’re eight feet tall.”

Griffin shoots a murderous look at Chester, and now I do laugh.

“Don’t worry,” I say to Griffin. “One shot’s enough for me.”

“Never say never, girlie,” Chester says. “Ma learned how to shoot from her Pop, who lived in that very cabin I call home.” He points through the woods.

“Really?”

“Really. I’m a third-generation hermit. It’s a miracle my family line made it this far.”

I want to ask him about how his parents met. How his grandfather met his grandmother. Why a flash of sadness passes over the old man’s face when he talks about his family.

“Why are you here, anyway?” Griff asks. He’s just this side of rude.

I frown. “Chester came to bring us eggs. Isn’t that nice?”

Chester’s unbothered. “Saw you bustin’ your ugly butt out on the road this morning—you never told me you were comin’ home like you usually do, let alone bringin’ a lady. I woulda shot you a bird. You bring my muffins?”

“Shit, I’m sorry, Ches. We left the city kind of quick.”

I guess that’s their relationship—rude and sweet all at the same time.

“That’s all right.” Chester waves a hand. “Betsey’ll bring some up soon enough. I’ve almost perfected my own blueberry recipe anyway.” He sighs. “Too bad I donated today’s eggs to the raccoons, though.”

Griff follows his gaze to the mess of broken eggs at the tree line.

“What happened, anyway?” Griffin asks.

“We were just surprised to see each other, that’s all,” I say, sparing Chester the need to explain how when he came out and saw me stretched out on one of the Adirondacks on the porch, he’d jumped so high he’d upended his whole hatful of eggs. I thought I’d given the poor man a heart attack the way he’d clutched his chest right after.

“But now we’re real good friends.” Chester winks. “She said we can get married here in your backyard.”

I laugh, explaining to a bewildered Griffin how after scaring the poor man half to death, I’d run out and dropped to my knees to see if any of the eggs were salvageable. He’d looked down at me and quipped, “Yes, I do.”

“He made a joke about a shotgun wedding, which led to me telling him I’d never seen a shotgun, and here we are,” I say.

“I was gone under an hour.” Griff says.

“Your whole life can change in under an hour,” I say.

But my mind immediately goes to yesterday. The time between me coming home and Griffin meeting me in that alley couldn’t have been more than twenty minutes.

Griffin shifts almost imperceptibly so he’s slightly closer to me, his body angled just a hair more toward mine, like he’s thinking the same thing. It’s so subtle no one else would have noticed it—Chester certainly doesn’t as he goes off about how one of his chickens “ain’t layin’ right.” But the gesture sends warmth flooding through me.

“You okay?” Griff asks, the words so quiet under his breath Chester doesn’t even stop talking.

The way he’s looking at me, I get the sense that if I said no, he’d pick me up and carry me inside, then hop on his bike and head to New York to potentially murder a very dangerous man. For me.

“I’m more than all right,” I promise.

He fixes me with that intense gaze a moment longer before turning his attention back to Chester, staying within an inch of

me.

I should find his protectiveness oppressive. I should find a lot about this man oppressive. I hated when my exes took over or got jealous or tried to tell me what to do.

But this man can do all of those things. Because for Griffin, it's not about his feelings. It's all about keeping me safe, and almost more importantly, making me *feel* safe.

After only a few days of knowing him, I'm fairly convinced that the man who appears to be the most ornery man on the planet might in fact be one of the most selfless people I've ever met.

Well, except maybe for Chester.

It's only after Chester says, "Did y'all lovebirds hear a damn thing I said?" that I realize Griffin's hand is at my back and I'm leaning in against his chest.

How did that happen?

I step back, my cheeks burning.

"Well, thanks for coming by, I guess," Griff says to Chester. To me he says, "Come on, we need to go get some food."

Chester lights up. "You goin' for waffles? If y'are, tell Betsey I'm almost out of muffins."

My stomach grumbles audibly. "Waffles sound amazing."

Griffin shakes his head. "We're not going for waffles."

"Why not?" I ask. Now that they're in my head, I can't think of anything else.

Chester frowns and leans forward, whispering loudly, "Is it the money, son? I know you've been wearing the same clothes for a while. I got my pension check last week. I can spot ya."

I hide the little snort that comes out of me with a cough.

Griffin sighs wearily but places his big hands on the back of Chester's shoulders and guides him toward the path. "Very kind of you, Ches, but we'll sort it out."

“You sure?” Chester asks as he lets himself be led toward the trees.

“Bye!” I call, blowing Chester a kiss.

He grins dopily, looking up at Griffin. “Did you see that?”

Griff grunts, turning him around again. “I didn’t see anything.”

I laugh, then run inside.

I wish dearly that I had some new clothes, but I’d wear a potato sack right now for waffles. I’m not taking no for an answer on that. Still, except for a few streaks of dirt, my pantsuit is in surprisingly decent shape. Besides, a waffle place isn’t going to have a dress code.

I’m just tucking my shirt in as I head for the front entry when Griffin comes in the back.

“I know you don’t want to,” I say, “but I’m desperate for waffles. I’ll buy.”

He frowns. “What are you doing?”

“Getting dressed. You know, in clothes. I’m wearing the same ones as yesterday, but that’s out of necessity, not because I’m struggling for money.”

“I’m not—” He looks down. “Okay, listen, Chester thinks I’m wearing the same clothes as the last time he saw me because I only have one kind of clothes.”

“Oh I know. You left your closet door open this morning.”

He glowers. “I was asking why you’re heading for those boots.”

I want to be a smartass and say it’s because I don’t have any shoes yet, but he already looks a little steamy. Instead I smile sweetly. “Because we’re going out for waffles.”

“I didn’t say we were going for waffles.”

“You’re right. Chester did, and I think it’s a great idea.”

Griffin folds his arms.

I'm getting irritated now. "Sorry, do you have plans or something?"

Griffin looks exasperated. "We can't just go wandering around in public, Sasha. Did you forget everything that happened yesterday?"

Just like that, the warm feelings I had about him a moment ago cool over like ice. My irritation turns to anger. "I can't believe you just asked me that."

"And I can't believe you're ready to go gallivanting out in the world when a fucking criminal appears to be stalking you."

My stomach goes swirly. I think I'm going to be sick. "Stalking?"

Griffin pales. "Fuck. No. We don't know that. I shouldn't have used that word."

"No? Just a pet theory you're working on?" I swallow, sitting down on the little bench in his entryway. It's a nice bench. "Did you make this?" I ask, running my hand along the seat next to me. "I wonder if I could make something like this."

He only said the words I was thinking. Why am I suddenly so physically affected?

Griffin gets up, returning a few seconds later with a glass of water.

I try to push it away, but the damn bossy asshole shoves it in my face. "Drink. It'll ground you."

I *am* thirsty, though I greatly dislike how he seems to be right about everything. I take a big gulp, then another, and finally drain the glass.

Griffin stands up, taking the glass from me. He cups it in both hands. It looks tiny. "You *are* safe here."

"So why don't you want to go for waffles?"

"Nothing's ever 100 percent."

"Do you think he followed us here?"

“No.”

“Do you think you’d be able to intercept him if he turned up?”

“Yes. I—yes.”

“I saw your cupboards. It’s like Old Man Hubbard’s house over here.”

Griffin does that face-scrubby thing again. I’m coming to know this is the move he makes when he’s either trying to find the right thing to say or trying not to say something at all.

“You’re not a man who loves words, are you?”

“What?”

“I love crosswords. The *New York Times* crossword specifically. I like doing them over long brunches on the weekend. I like how there’s a theme to them, and I like not looking anything up on my phone because a) it’s cheating and b) Saturday is phone-off day.”

Griffin leans against the wall, looking half like he’s worried about my sanity and half like he’s enjoying it.

“You know what else I like? Taking my time with stuff and enjoying life and spending time with people I love, and if this bullshit with Sam and that asshole comes in between me and that life, we need to find a way to put a stop to it. But right now, all I want is some goddamned waffles.”

I hadn’t meant to go there, but they’re all the words that were clearly needing spilling.

To my utter surprise, Griffin nods. “Okay.”

“Okay, like, okay, we’re going for waffles?”

“Whatever you want, Sasha.”

I grin, jumping up from the bench. “Fantastic, I’m starving.”

He mumbles something I don’t catch under his breath but pulls open the door, holding it for me. I run under his arm and

out into freedom, and I swear when I look back, I see the slightest twitch of a smile under those wary chocolate eyes.

CHAPTER 13

I knew this was a bad idea the minute I saw her slipping on those ridiculous boots. But I didn't consider how today's Saturday—the busiest day of the week at Betsey's Cafe. When I open the door, the little bell is like a clarion call for every single patron in there to turn and stare. Dozens of eyeballs land on us at once. A few people call out my name and wave, while several others murmur among themselves. It makes sense—it's not like I've ever shown up anywhere with a woman. Especially not one who looks like Sasha.

It only gets worse when I see a man with a blond bun on the top of his head stand up and say, "*What the—*"

I just about grab Sasha by the waist and haul her right out of there, but it's too late. Sasha's laughing and crossing the floor at a run toward my brother Jude while he looks back and forth between me and Sasha as if his head is exploding.

She throws her arms around him. I feel ill seeing her throw her beautiful self against my admittedly beautiful brother. The whole restaurant is staring like this is some kind of attractive person reunion.

"How—what—" Jude sputters. Thankfully he's head over heels in love with Sasha's best friend back in London. Though I don't know why I'm thankful about this or why I even care.

My nephew Cap pops up from where he was hidden behind the back of his bench. "Uncle Griff!"

"Thank Christ," I mutter. At least I'll have someone to hang out with.

But Sasha's not done. "Oh my God—Cap!" She runs over to the booth, picking the boy up and swinging him around in a hug.

She sets him down. "Oh my gosh, you're huge! I didn't know they made nine-year-olds this big!"

He looks embarrassed, smoothing down his hair, but he grins all the same. "I'm the second tallest in my class."

"This couldn't have gone any worse," I grumble.

"Nice to see you, too," Jude says, clapping me on the back.

I throw a glare at him, but he's looking at Sasha. Now I am, too. She's chatting with Cap, asking him about school and skateboarding and admiring his cool new jean jacket.

Everything could be a lot worse, all things considered. And she was right, of course—as much as I would have felt better keeping her at home, the risk of her being out in Quince Valley is low. We talked on the way over about how she shouldn't use her last name when introducing herself to anyone, even though not a lot of people here pay attention to big city politics.

I should be able to relax, but I can't stop thinking about my conversation with Lionel and the rock and the very hard place he's put me between.

But when Cap looks up at me, saying something about us sitting with them, I force myself to come back to the present. I have a couple of days to figure this out, and for now, Sasha's safe with me.

I can tell Jude's dying to ask me what the hell I'm doing with his girlfriend's friend—a woman he caught me staring at back at our brother's wedding, I remember now.

"So we were just leaving," he begins.

I eye the bill on the table, a credit card lying on top of it. "Great." I look to my nephew. "No offense, Cap. Just want a little alone time."

"Alone time?" Cap asks. "Like to—"

“Happy to take your table,” I tell his dad before he can finish his thought.

“Actually, now that you’re here, I think Cap could probably go for a milkshake.”

“Sounds good to me!” Cap says enthusiastically.

I narrow my eyes at my nephew.

He shrugs sheepishly. “Uncle Griff,” he whispers, “Betsey’s isn’t exactly the best place to come for alone time.”

He’s right. Plus, I can’t fault a growing kid for tossing loyalty aside to snag a milkshake.

“Have a seat,” Jude says.

Nothing much I can do now that Sasha slides into the booth, saying, “This is such a nice surprise!”

Is it? I clench my jaw and sit next to Cap. But as soon as I’m seated, I offer him a below-the-table fist bump. We both look straight ahead as he returns it. Sneaky fist bumps are our cool uncle-nephew thing we try not to share with anyone.

But that jealousy I never asked for comes back hot when I look up to see my brother—who still graces billboards from time to time thanks to his stint in pro tennis—whisper something in Sasha’s ear. She laughs heartily, throwing her head back.

I lean down to my nephew. “Don’t suppose you’d take twenty bucks to *not* have a milkshake?”

“Twenty bucks?”

“That not enough? Forty? That’d keep you in milkshakes for a few weeks.”

Cap rubs his jaw thoughtfully.

Meanwhile my brother folds his arms. “Are you trying to buy us off?”

My brother could work on my surveillance team, he’s got such sharp hearing.

Jude shakes his head. “No dice. Cap, you’re getting a milkshake. And Griff, you’re telling me what you’re doing with my girlfriend’s best friend, who, as far as I know, lives in New York City?”

Sasha opens her mouth, then closes it again.

I feel like an idiot, which is not a familiar feeling for me. But we didn’t cover this scenario on the drive over. I was too distracted by her sitting next to me in my truck, which we took instead of the bike so we can pick up groceries on the way back. I could barely concentrate on the road having her in there, her delicate, pretty form filling a spot that would usually be empty.

I open my mouth, ready to divert the question with another question—a favorite technique of mine when answering won’t benefit me—when Sasha speaks up.

“Actually, I ran into Griff at a restaurant in Midtown a few weeks ago.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Jude looks incredulous. “Griff? In a restaurant in *Manhattan*? I’m going to have to organize my questions.”

Sasha holds up a hand. “Can I try to guess them?” She wiggles her fingers.

Jude laughs. “Please.”

Sasha folds one of her perfect digits down. “I was at the restaurant and just happened to spot Griff out the window. We ended up chatting outside on the sidewalk. It was funny that I recognized him really, having only seen him at the wedding and that time at Nora’s film release back in London.”

So she does remember the movie theatre.

Sasha smiles, her perfectly beautiful lashes fluttering, and folds down a second finger. “One thing led to another and... well, we’re hanging out.” She smiles demurely.

Good God. First Chester calls us lovebirds, then Sasha basically implies the two of us are having some kind of romantic relationship.

Before Jude can comment, another finger goes down. “Griff wanted to show me Quince Valley—and I’m sorry, I would have let you know, but the trip was a bit of a whirlwind, and I know Nora’s still in London, so…” She trails off.

Jude gapes, a goofy-ass grin spreading across his goofy-ass handsome face. “Holy shit. I thought Griffin was allergic to relationships. Like I know he’s broken a few hearts here—*Ow!*”

I slide my boot back to my side of the booth. He’s about as subtle as fireworks. “Could you not?”

“Holy shit, my brother is *blushing*.” He turns to his son. “Sorry for swearing, Cap.”

“I am not fu—” I glance over at Cap—I’m as bad as his dad. “I’m not *blushing*. I don’t *blush*.”

“Then why are your cheeks all pink?” Cap asks.

Jude howls with laughter.

“Also, I swear all the time at school, Dad,” Cap says. “FYI.”

“You what?” Jude asks his son, sobering.

Now Sasha’s falling over herself laughing. The whole thing is extremely chaotic, and I want to storm out of here with Sasha over my shoulder. But that would put her ass very close to my face and—*shit*. I grab a menu, holding it in front of my face.

“Hey, doll!” A sing-song voice rescues me from this torture a moment later.

I want badly to wipe the sweat off my brow. Instead, I turn my full attention on our server, relaxing as I see one of my favorites.

“Hey, darlin’,” I say. “How are you?”

Darlin’? Since when do I say darlin’?

Luckily Amanda eats it up. “Well, I’m just fine, honey. You’re looking mighty handsome today. Almost holding a

candle to pretty boy over here.” She winks at Jude. “Though no one’s a match for Mr. Cap.”

Cap blushes furiously.

I like Amanda. We all do. Jude grins widely. “You’re looking gorgeous, Amanda. That a new haircut?”

She giggles but turns to me when she says, “I was waiting for you to notice.”

I once helped her deal with a tricky ex-boyfriend situation, and ever since, she always brings me a slice of apple pie when I come in, even if I’m eating scrambled eggs. Once she told me I was her favorite Kelly brother, and I wonder if now’s the time to bring that up to Jude.

“How’s Tina?” I ask as Amanda pours our coffee.

“Oh you know, teenage girl drama is at an all-time high.”

“Does she still babysit?” Cap asks. He’s got his arm over the back of the bench, clearly trying to sound and look casual, but the bench is too high for his arm, and his cheeks are still a fading pink.

“Yes, honey. You two had fun together that one time, didn’t you?”

Cap shrugs, but his cheeks flame a second time.

I lean in and whisper, “Now whose cheeks are pink?”

Cap clears his throat, elbowing me hard. Now it’s his turn to pick up a menu and stare intently at the salad list.

After we order—a peanut butter milkshake for Cap, a full plate of waffles with sausage and bacon for Sasha, *with crispy bacon, please, and waffles soft with a crispy edge, if possible*, a basic bacon and egg breakfast for me, and a fruit plate for Jude, because of course—Amanda leaves, and fortunately, we settle into a new topic of conversation. Mostly we talk about Nora and how she’s coming home for good in December when she graduates.

“Now, don’t tell anyone, but I’ve got big plans over Christmas,” Jude says, his grin spreading from ear to ear.

“He’s going to ask Nora to marry him!” Cap says, mirroring his dad’s expression.

The cockles of my ice-cold heart warm up at this news, but I don’t show any of them that as I sip my coffee.

Sasha, meanwhile, gasps, her hands at her mouth, tears filling her eyes. “Oh my God, that’s the best news I’ve ever heard!”

While they gush, I find myself examining Sasha’s reaction. Does she dream about getting married? Of course she does, looking like that. Coming from the family she’s in. She’ll probably have a big society wedding in one of those giant halls, with a huge dress that drags on the ground like a princess.

I picture her like that now, on some steps, looking over her shoulder and smiling at me. Then I picture watching her walk down the aisle, and my stomach does a little flip. The fuck why, I don’t know. She’s going to marry some Yale asshole named Cedric or Percy or some shit, whose family has an estate. Multiple estates.

I watch her now, laughing, her hair thrown over her shoulder, the soft skin of her neck exposed, her hand with its long fingers wrapped around the big, chunky coffee mug.

Then I remember the way Vincent Creelman gripped that perfect hand. How he held her so tight I saw the bruises beginning outside on the sidewalk, while her body still shook with adrenaline. She looked so small, her eyes so big.

And even though she basically told me to fuck off, I left her alone just like her family had. I put her in danger.

My chest goes so tight I have to rub a hand there. Just a subtle touch that I hide with a scratch.

Sasha laughs again, playing some game with Cap involving a quarter on the table. Jude and Cap are always playing, like life’s some kind of game. Sometimes, like right now, I wish I could be carefree like that. But there’s just too much in this world for me to fix to be carefree.

I look at Jude, who picks up his buzzing phone from the tabletop. I know it's Nora, because he's got that dreamy fucking look on his face whenever he talks about her.

He's going to marry her.

I think about Lionel denying me the protection the company could offer her.

Then of all things, Chester, having Sasha fire Louise for a shotgun wedding.

Then it hits me, like a ton of bricks.

Maintaining the reputation of McCrae & Associates is imperative—our credibility is the cornerstone of our success.

Those were Lionel's own words back at that meeting.

Amanda comes back with the plates of food, setting our dishes on the table. "So, what are y'all up to after this?"

I look at Sasha. "We're getting married."

CHAPTER 14

Sasha

I've got the syrup open over my waffles, and for a moment, I don't move. I just hold it there, syrup pouring like a waterfall, before the server gasps and gently tips it back up. "Honey, I think that's sweet enough," she whispers.

I set the bottle down. Though the restaurant around us is alight with conversation, silence fills the bubble around our table. No, the bubble includes the tables around us where several people are staring, clearly having heard what Griffin just said.

The joke he just made. It was a joke. It had to be. I laugh, nervously. It comes out in a weird shrill giggle. "That's funny, Griffin." It's not, really. But maybe he's trying.

"My brother doesn't really joke," Jude says.

"Sounds like you folks are doing, uh, I'm just going to come back in a bit," Amanda says, moving to the next table. She keeps her eyes on us, though.

Griffin shakes his head. "It wasn't a joke."

I press my hands to the table, confusion whirling. Then I lean over and whisper, "Are you on drugs?"

Cap gasps. "Oh no." He puts on a serious face. "Uncle Griff, we watched a movie about that at school. Did someone peer pressure you?"

Griffin curses under his breath. "I'm not on drugs." He stands up and gets out of the booth. "Can I talk to you? Maybe in private?"

“Why would you want to do that when you just proposed oh so romantically?” Heat’s rushing through me now that I know he’s serious.

“Please, Sasha.”

I look down at my waffles, but my appetite seems to have gone sideways. I can feel eyes on me. Dozens of eyes. Maybe tens of dozens. How big is this place anyway? “Fine. Yes, let’s talk.”

He holds his hand out, but I ignore it, getting out myself and walking past him with my fists clenched, my chin high. The whole restaurant seems to have gone quiet.

The door jingles as I shove it open and storm out onto the sidewalk.

Griffin’s so close behind me he catches the door. “Sasha —”

I whirl on him. “What the hell is going on?” There are a bunch of staring people out here, too, but I’m too upset to move somewhere private.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said it like that. It just makes the most sense.”

“How does marrying someone you barely know make sense?”

“It’s my best shot at keeping you safe, Sasha.” His voice is low to keep our conversation private, though the looky-loos don’t seem to notice. One older woman’s full-on stopped—she might as well have pulled out a bucket of popcorn.

I throw up my hands in exasperation. “I know that’s your whole thing, but at some point, you’ve got to have a better answer than that.”

He smiles at the woman standing next to us and seems to do a quick assessment of where we are before holding his hand out to me.

I stare at it like it’s a code I can’t decipher, and he jerks his chin toward the corner.

Right. Though I'm still a freak-out in human form, I let him guide me around the corner to a smaller street where, miraculously for this adorable but nosy small town, there are no people.

He doesn't let go once we're clear of people, and for a moment, I let myself lean into how good his big, warm hand feels wrapped around mine.

Then I pull it away for pride's sake, stuffing my hands in my pants pockets.

"The company I work for has strict policies in place about employee family safety," Griffin says, answering my question at last.

My fingers brush against something in my pocket. It's the little canary. I curl it into my palm. How ironic that it was this I took with me from home. The one thing that made me feel like I wasn't an inconvenience.

"What company do you work for?"

He does that face-scrubby thing.

I grab his forearm, instantly flashing back to this morning when I did this when he was shirtless next to me.

I shake off the sensation. "No face rubbing for you. Answer the question, Griffin."

"I can't tell you."

"Really? You can't tell the person you want to be your fiancée?" I know I sound a little delirious, but that's because I *am* a little delirious. This proposal—this *literal* proposal—is off-the-wall insane.

He goes to lift his arm again, but I'm still holding on to it.

"Sasha, my family doesn't even know who I work for."

I blink. "Seriously?"

He meets my eye. "Seriously. It's for..."

I sigh. "Safety." I consider. "What is it, the secret service? FBI?" I know he won't answer me, but my tension slips, just a

little. He's not paranoid. He's a professional. "What do you tell your family?"

"Nothing."

"So what are you going to tell them about suddenly wanting to marry me?"

"I'm going to repeat the brilliant story you told in there. Except I'll tell them I've fallen in love with you."

Even though they're just words, just things he's saying to bolster an idea that's not going to happen, a warmth tingles in my stomach.

But it quickly turns to something more painful.

"No one's ever said that about me," I say.

I'm instantly mortified. I didn't mean to say that out loud.

His expression is half-shock, half...what? Pity?

The same doesn't hold true for him, obviously.

Laura.

"They've missed out," he says, looking down toward the end of the street. It ends a couple of blocks from here on a promenade by the river. We start to walk, slowly.

I swallow. Have they? "Much to my mom's chagrin, most men don't really find me the marrying type."

"I do."

I laugh drily. "Fake marriage doesn't count."

"I'm not talking about fake marriage. There are men out there who'd fall over themselves to be married to you, Sasha." He glances my way, then looks away again.

"Well, I'll never know if I marry you, will I?" The words are harsh. But maybe they're meant to be harsh because of the hurt I feel knowing he's said that as a man who doesn't actually want to marry me.

"I know it's crazy," he says. "But I'm serious when I say that us marrying is the best way to keep you safe. The place I work for specializes in looking after people. It would be

extremely bad for business if an employee's wife was harmed by a person we were at one point keeping tabs on."

"At one point?"

"It's—don't worry about that. We're still keeping tabs on Creelman. But I need you to at least consider this as an option. The best option. Not only because you'll be protected, but because once Creelman finds out you're married—after you tell your brother—there's a chance he'll back off."

I was going to demand he tell me everything. But just the mention of that name has that chill spreading further. Maybe there are things I don't want to know about him. Things that would only serve to make me more terrified than I already am. I don't want to bury my head in the sand, but I know what it's like to obsess over things, too. Spin them into a frenzy in my head and fall into a bad place.

I look at the treed hills on the other side in the distance. A few houses are visible, tucked into the woods like Griffin's.

Could a fake marriage to Griffin actually work to keep Creelman away? I have to admit, the idea of having not just Griffin but a whole company behind me is appealing. And Creelman losing interest would be a best-case scenario. I let out a breath. "How would it work?"

"We'd go to Quince Valley Town Hall on Monday, get a marriage license. I'll call my boss, let him know what's going on."

"Then what? Where would we live?"

"Here."

I turn back around. "What about your work? Mine? My apartment?" I work in a clothing boutique. It's not exactly a stable career, but I do have a life in New York. Sort of. I think of my barely-friends. My lonely apartment.

My parents on the rare times they visit me, not uttering a single word to each other, but my mother with plenty of words for me.

“You’d need to move in with me, Sasha. I can...put a bed in the shop or something for me. But I’ll take on desk work. Do it from home. We’d probably have to stick it out for a couple of months.”

Griffin’s so close I could touch him. I’m safe with him. I know I am. And I know this plan makes perfect sense, logically speaking. But I still can’t help the knot of uncertainty in my chest. The thought that things are running away from me, that I’m not in control of my own life.

I squeeze the little bird in my hand, feeling the sharpness of its inner un-workings. Once, this was the thing that reminded me that someone was looking out for me.

But Griffin’s the only one actually looking out for me.

“This isn’t what I had planned for myself, you know,” I say, my voice tight in my throat. “I always thought I’d fall in love, have a big, beautiful wedding. I vowed it would be that way. I’d have a real family, where everyone loved and looked out for each other. Do you like babies, Griffin?”

Griffin runs a hand over the back of his neck. “I don’t know.”

I have to laugh at that. “Who doesn’t love babies?”

“I just don’t know what to do with them. They’re so... breakable.”

“So you don’t want kids?”

Griffin scrubs his face. This time I let him. “This isn’t for life, Sasha. It’s only for right now. Just to get Creelman to back off.”

It’s pathetic how that feels like a little kick to the gut. “I know it’s not real. I’m just curious if you want kids someday. I feel like that’s something you should know about the person you’re marrying.” I don’t know why I can’t just let this go and give him an answer. But I’m suddenly very keen to know this about him.

Griffin examines me a moment, then looks down. “I never thought I’d have kids, no.”

Disappointment twists my stomach for no reason at all. It doesn't matter what either of us wants for the future; we're not each other's future.

There's a couple down on the promenade walking a brown lab. They're holding hands, laughing as they look at each other, the dog bounding happily along beside them. Going the other way, a woman walks with a little girl who's skipping as she holds her mom's hand.

My chest aches. "I always wanted kids." I shrug. "But maybe it's just not in the cards for me." Now why am I fighting off tears?

"Sasha, this isn't forever. You've got plenty of time to have a normal life after...me."

I don't know why, but the thought makes me inexplicably sad. "What will you do after me?"

He meets my eye. "I don't want to think about that, Sasha."

Maybe it's his tone, or the way he doesn't waver as he meets my gaze, but my stomach does a little flip.

"You know, if we still had an audience, people might call that romantic."

He looks at me a moment too long, then looks away. "I need to be back at my HQ in New York next week with you under my protection. Which means we either need to get to the town hall by next Monday, or we need to come up with a different plan."

"Forget what I said about you sounding romantic."

I swear he laughs under his breath.

"What would a different plan look like?"

Griffin grimaces. "How does Siberia sound?"

"That bad, huh?"

A buzz sounds, and Griffin pulls out his phone. He grumbles and shoves it back into his pocket.

“What is it?”

“Jude’s asking if I want pointers.”

I can’t help but laugh. It turns into hysterics, and even Griffin smiles, though his brow stays furrowed as he tries not to.

After a moment, I press the heels of my hands to my eyes, wiping away the tears. “Can I give you an answer tomorrow, Griffin?”

“We don’t need to decide until Sunday night. How about we just give you a normal weekend? Hang out in town or out at my place? There’s a swimming spot nearby.”

I nod, my eyes filling with fresh tears. Nothing’s ever sounded better.

CHAPTER 15

Sasha

After breakfast, I demand Griffin let us spend the morning in Quince Valley. Sweetly, of course.

We need to get groceries, and almost more importantly, clothes. “I desperately need something new to wear,” I lament as we leave the grocery store. “I don’t think I’ve ever worn the same outfit two days in a row.”

Griffin looks down at his own clothes—a black T-shirt and khakis—and I remember Chester’s words about him wearing the same thing every day.

“You probably think I’m shallow, don’t you?”

He’s thoughtful as he loads items into the truck. “Why would I think that? I assume picking out clothes makes you feel the same way I do taking an engine apart.”

I laugh, but it’s refreshing that he doesn’t take what I love at face value. “Clothes can change a person’s whole self-image,” I say, thinking of my mom, who I emailed this morning to let know I was out of town for a bit but would check in soon. She hasn’t written back yet.

I shrug. “Maybe it was her desperate need to fit in when she made the shift to rich man’s wife, but whenever she put on something she liked, it was like the sun coming out after the rain. She was kind, for a little while.”

He watches me for a moment. “I’m sorry she wasn’t kind all the time.”

I shrug. “It’s fine.”

“It’s not.”

I swallow. “Don’t get all serious on me, Griffin.”

“I don’t really know how not to be.”

“Liar.”

He smirks, and somehow that’s better than the biggest smile.

“Can we walk? I want you to show me around town.”

Griffin holds a hand out in an “after you” gesture.

We head out on foot toward a boutique Griff says will have the closest stock of the kinds of clothes I like wearing. This I’m curious about seeing. How closely has he been observing my outfits?

I peel an orange I snagged from the bags as we go down a street lined with adorable shops with brightly colored awnings and potted plants lining their fronts. But instead of letting Griffin tell me about each of them, I realize I’m in a unique position to know more about him.

“So I was thinking, if I’m going to consider marrying you, I need to know a little more about you, don’t you think?”

Griffin looks deeply uncomfortable. “What do you want to know?”

I pop a section of orange into my mouth, considering. “What kind of music do you like to listen to?”

Relief flows over his features. I think he thought I was going to ask him about his thoughts on mortality or religion or something.

But then he says, “I don’t listen to music.”

My jaw drops. “What? Ever? What if it comes on the radio?”

He shrugs. “Some jazz, I guess. Nothing frilly. Only the classics.”

“Okay, first of all, what the heck is frilly jazz? And next, if you know the classics, it means you like the genre. Who are the classic artists you like?”

“Basie. Munk.” He glares at me. “Next question.”

I laugh, breaking off another section of orange. “Ever heard the saying ‘slow down and listen to the music’?”

“It’s ‘smell the roses.’”

“Same difference. What’s the point of barging through life fixing everything if you don’t slow down and enjoy it a bit, too?”

He gives me a look like he’s actually considering that. But I’m still holding the piece of orange in front of me. Maybe it’s that.

“Do you like oranges?”

“They’re fine.”

“Here.” I hold it out to him. “It’s really sweet. Juicy.”

“I’m fine.”

“So you don’t like oranges?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“The saying could be slow down and taste the oranges, too.” I pop the section into my mouth. “Okay,” I say around the sweet citrus. “Favorite movie?” I swallow the orange. “And you can’t say you don’t watch movies. You grew up in a pretty normal family, as far as I know. You have to have seen at least one or two.”

He frowns. But I see he’s actually considering the question.

“*Casablanca*,” he says finally.

I roll my eyes. “Of course you would pick the first movie ever made.”

“It wasn’t the first movie—”

I wave his facts away with my hand. “You know what I mean. But I don’t think that was your first answer, Mr. Kelly.”

He gives me a sharp look. “Why?”

“I saw you thinking about it. You always have an answer ready. Or a nonanswer. But you thought about this one. You kept your hands in your pockets so you didn’t do that face-scrubby thing, but I know.”

“What’s that face-scrubby thing?”

I explain my theory.

He scoffs. “I don’t do that.”

“Yes you do.”

His hand lifts, but he catches it.

“Ha! See?”

“I wasn’t going to do it.”

“Were too.” God, he’s fun to tease. Easy to tease. I try not to analyze just how good this makes me feel. “So what is it? What’s your favorite movie? *Rambo*? No, one of the James Bond movies. Maybe *Mission: Impossible*.”

“I gave you my answer.”

I roll my eyes. “Mm-hmm.” I pull off another section of orange. “You sure you don’t want some?”

“You’re annoying, you know that? I—”

“You don’t know annoying,” I say mischievously. Then I jump in front of him, forcing him to stop. “What’s the movie?”

“I’m not telling.”

I grin. “So you do have one.”

He realizes his mistake and folds his arms.

“You know what I think, Griffin Kelly?”

He meets my gaze. “What, Sasha Macklin?”

The way he says my name, with that deep rumble of his, makes something go melty inside me, and for a moment, I almost chicken out. He’s intimidating. His eyes bore into mine. But that’s just what he’s trying to do—get me to chicken out. So I don’t. I take a step closer, lowering my voice. “I may be annoying, but I think you like it.”

For a moment, neither of us says anything. But I swear I see a flame flicker in his eyes. I can almost feel its heat.

“You think so?” he asks. Then, before I even see movement, his big, rough hand gently wraps itself around my wrist. That sensation I felt a moment ago pales in comparison to the snapping electricity shooting down my arm, spreading heat throughout my whole body.

He’s so strong. So much bigger than me.

I swallow. “Yes.”

He grunts. “Yes what, Sasha?”

Yes, I’ll marry you.

“Yes, I think you like it when I give you a hard time,” I whisper.

His eyes don’t leave mine as he brings my hand toward his mouth. I’m still holding the orange piece. He opens his lips and takes the whole section in at once. My fingertips brush against the rough bristle of his mustache and the surprising contrast of the softness of his lips as he closes them around the orange.

I can’t move. I’m frozen to the spot, my eyes locked to his as he chews the orange, still holding my hand at his mouth.

He takes his time, but finally swallows. “You’re right,” he says. He licks his lips, his tongue barely missing my fingertips. “That was a good orange.”

CHAPTER 16

The minute the sign for Bijou comes into view, I feel a cold sweat break out on my palms. “I can just wait outside,” I say.

“Are you scared, big man?” Sasha teases.

I scowl. “Maybe.”

“I strongly believe Vivian is the evil queen in a fairytale come to life,” Cassandra said recently.

I warned Sasha on our way here, but she just smiled. “Please. I work in the snootiest boutique in the West Village. At least, I used to. I was supposed to show up for a shift today...”

She shrugged, not seeming too bothered about it.

Now, as she walks in with her chin high, I suddenly feel like I must look like the inverse of how Sasha looked in my cabin. There’s classical music streaming from the speakers, and the whole place smells subtly like expensive perfume. Frilly clothes hang off faceless mannequins throughout the shop, and a huge bouquet of flowers sits on a podium in the middle of the room among all the racks of clothes. Meanwhile I’m wearing work boots and have grease on my knuckles.

“Fuck me,” I say.

Sasha giggles.

“You love this, don’t you?”

She looks back at me and winks, and the surge of heat I felt in my lower half when I ate that orange returns.

I don't know what possessed me to do that. I think it's because when she jumped in front of me, that little twinkle in her eyes, all I could think about was how much I would have loved that little repartee in bed. Her thinking she had control over me.

Me taking it back in one easy move.

My dick decides now's a great time to get stiff, so I make like I'm interested in a rack of pants next to me.

Out of nowhere, an Asian woman with a black bob materializes beside us.

Her hair has a single streak of silver in the front, and with the red lipstick, she's giving off real Cruella de Vil vibes.

"Mr. Kelly," she says snippily.

I'm shocked she knows who I am. "I—"

"I know who you are. Griffin." She says my name with deep disdain. "The most mysterious of the Kelly brood."

I frown.

"And you brought a friend?"

"I'm Sasha M—" Sasha says, but cuts herself off. "Mm-hmm, nice to meet you." She extends a hand.

I bite my cheek. I'll have to give her a hard time about that later, *mm-hmm*.

Vivian inspects Sasha's hand for a full second before taking it in hers. "Vivian Lau. That's a Ferretti pant, if I'm not mistaken."

I'm not sure why she only named half her pants, but I don't pretend to understand fashion.

"You're not," Sasha says, smiling affably. "He was my favorite in Milan last year."

Vivian's eyes flare. Is that her way of showing respect? "Mmm," she says noncommittally.

I pull a shirt out from among its mates just for something to occupy my hands. Then I choke when I see the price tag. "Is

this a misprint?" I whisper to Sasha.

Sasha comes over and peers at the tag. "Oh no, pretty standard for a *Mayumi* blouse."

"This shirt cost more than my first car." I drop the shirt like it's on fire. "You know there's a Bargain Betty down the street, right?"

"Good lord," Vivian says. If she had pearls, I'm sure she'd be clutching them. She turns her attention to Sasha. "Tell me, what are you doing down from New York?"

Sasha frowns. "How did you—"

"No one wears designer labels here unless they purchase them from me," Vivian says. "That blouse is atrocious, mind you. Did you put it through a *machine*?"

I'm pretty sure she means washing machine, and she's somehow made the word derogatory. I feel badly like I'm starting to sweat through my shirt.

Sasha, meanwhile, doesn't miss a beat. "Day from hell yesterday. You know what it's like."

"I'm quite sure I don't."

"Anyway, I'm going to look around for a bit," Sasha says breezily.

Vivian sniffs, but I see her crane her neck to see which items Sasha pulls out as she passes. When she sees me looking, she huffs, then walks briskly back up to the front, snapping perfectly fine-looking leaves from the bouquet and tossing them in the trash.

I clear my throat for Sasha. "I'm, uh—"

"Yeah, you can wait outside," Sasha says, not even looking up. She looks right at home, going through obscenely priced clothes the same way she did with oranges in the grocery store, prodding at them gently, holding them up to the light.

As I stare at her a moment, though, her cheeks pinken ever so slightly.

She pulls out a hanger containing a black lingerie set that seems to be entirely made of string. She holds it up against her body, that wicked smile back on her face. “I thought you were going?”

My dick once again acts like I’m not in a terrible place for a boner. “I’m going,” I manage, before practically slamming straight through the delicate glass door.

I don’t know why I ever thought I had the upper hand.

CHAPTER 17

Sasha

After getting home, I find myself overwhelmed by exhaustion. Griffin insists I lie down, which is disappointing, considering all I want to do is go through the bags of clothes I bought at the store. Except it wasn't me who bought them. I was just handing Vivian my credit card when Griffin came rushing in from outside, practically slapping it out of my hand.

"Is there a problem?" Vivian had asked coolly.

"I'm buying," Griffin said, leaving no room for argument.

I understood then. A credit card could be traced. I swallowed hard at the thought of Creelman having access to something as personal as my bank account.

Vivian had started folding all the clothes, but when Griffin saw the tissue paper, he grabbed the whole pile off the counter.

"I'm not finished!" Vivian protested.

"I am," he said from behind the mound of clothes.

I told him on the way home I'd pay him back when this was all over—especially considering the bill came to the GDP of a small country.

"It's fine," he said. "I need to see a guy about a pension check anyway."

I gasped. "Griffin Kelly, was that a joke?"

He only grunted, but I know I saw a facsimile of a smile under that frown.



I wake from my nap completely disoriented, my back aching from a lump under my ribs. I roll over to see a blazer bunched up under me, now riddled with wrinkles.

Shit. I rub the sleep from my eyes, squinting to where I know the window should be. I get up, pulling open the curtains, shocked to see a speckling of stars in the night sky.

The house is dark, and for a moment, my chest tightens. Am I alone? Did Griffin have to go somewhere? I'm surprised he'd leave me alone, given how caveman he was being about looking after me.

There's no way.

I cross the living room, crying out as I stub my toe on the coffee table next to the couch. I curse out loud—this place needs serious help. If I were to stay here, I'd do a full redecoration of the main room. No, the whole house.

I swallow. I'm getting ahead of myself.

My eyes go to the only light shining in the big open space—there's an under-cabinet light on in the kitchen, and on the counter under it, a note with a phone next to it.

I pick it up. The note says simply:

Sasha—for you.

-G

I smile and slide the phone on. The background is an image of the sun setting over a field of wildflowers. I run my finger over the ray of light slicing across the screen.

There's an alert—six, actually.

GRIFFIN: Call whoever you like except your brother for now. There's a block on here so no one can see your number. Please don't tell anyone where you are until I figure things out.

GRIFFIN: There's a credit card loaded on here so you can order whatever you need. The address is saved in the Notes app.

GRIFFIN: There's a casserole thing in the oven my sister dropped off. Help yourself.

GRIFFIN: I'm in the workshop.

I look up: there's a hallway next to me lined with several doors. The one at the end has a line of light under it.

GRIFFIN: You should sleep more. I'll be around when you wake up.

My chest tightens. He's really thought of everything.

I check the time on the phone, shocked to see it's almost eleven. I yawn. Even though I slept all day, all I want to do is crawl back into bed again. But my stomach feels raw and empty.

SASHA: I guess you ate already?

A few seconds pass, then three dots pop up on the screen.

GRIFFIN: Eat whenever you want.

That's not really an answer.

I tell him I'm going to shower and ask if it's okay to borrow some sweats.

He thumbs-up the message, and I fight off the little push of disappointment that he's staying out there. I could go see him, but suddenly all I want is to be rid of these clothes. I strip them off, not bothering to wait until I'm fully in the bathroom. I want to burn them, to burn all traces of that day in New York.

Hell, I want to burn away my existence in that city.

I flick on all the lights as I pass, not caring that there are windows everywhere. The only person out there is Chester,

and I don't think the house is visible from his. Even if it is, I don't even care about giving the old guy a show. He did ask me to marry him, after all.

The smile on my lips dies as I remember the second proposal I got this weekend. I still haven't answered Griffin.

Somehow I can't. Not yet. Even if it's not real. It's still *marriage*.

In the bathroom, I step into the old clawfoot tub, turning on the shower extension. I close the curtain, then suddenly feel claustrophobic. Would it be weird to ask Griffin to come back into the main house while I'm in here?

I resist the urge to get out and text him. I'm a grown woman. Instead, I soap up, using the toiletries I was delighted to find Vivian carried on her little cosmetics table.

After I'm done, I step out and towel off, humming a song to myself.

When I open the bathroom door, towel wrapped around my body, I realize the bedroom door is open, and Griffin is frozen in the doorframe.

"Shit, I thought—"

He's wearing a mechanic's outfit with the top pulled off and tied around his hips. The white tank top he's got on underneath is streaked with grease; it spreads onto his thick arms, too, which are holding something gray.

I don't miss the way his eyes rake over my body for the briefest moment before he averts them.

He steps aside, holding something gray out to me. "Sorry. Here."

What would he do if I dropped this towel?

The thought comes to me unbidden, but I have to bite my cheek to keep from laughing at what his reaction might be. Before breakfast, I would have thought he'd clap a hand over his eyes and snap at me to put some clothes on.

But after that moment with the orange?

I swallow as a feeling like something warm and liquid spreads through me. I walk toward the bedroom, which, of course, brings me to within a foot of him. He seems to have realized that a moment too late.

His hand gets tighter on the bundle in his arms. “I—” he begins. “These were in the laundry.”

His voice is rough. Strained.

A rush of something hits me, bolstering and amplifying that heat inside me. It’s the sense that right now, just for this tiny moment, I’ve got the power. He may be taking the lead outside, where we exist together in the wide world, but right in this moment, he’s at my mercy.

“Thank you,” I say softly, taking the clothes from him. Our fingers brush, and I don’t miss the way his eyes flame.

I linger just a moment too long. Even though we’ve only spent days together, I feel like those days have been amplified, given everything we’ve been through. So I know the war going on behind his eyes. And even though it’s probably the wrong thing to do, when I pass him, I lower the towel just enough to flash a good portion of my ass at him before shutting the door with my foot.

CHAPTER 18

Sasha

On Sunday morning, I yawn and stagger out of the room in the pair of sweats Griffin lent me. The pants are comically baggy. Only the tie at the waist keeps them from falling down around my ankles.

The kitchen smells deliciously of bacon, and I can see from here there's a full plate of breakfast on the table. Last night, after I was sure Griffin was back in his workshop, I pulled out that casserole and very indelicately ate a full quarter of it right out of the dish. It was heavenly. I'm not sure how this will top that.

Movement outside catches my eye. Griffin's out there with Chester. The back of his arm rests on one of the Adirondacks on the back porch, while Chester sits on the rail across from him. I can't hear what either of them is saying, though it looks like Chester's doing most of the talking.

Griffin's big hand curls around a mug of steaming coffee resting on the wide arm of the chair, and somehow, it's that I fixate on as I head through the patio door.

“Good morning, boys.”

As I step outside, both men stand up.

Or Chester tries to. He stumbles as he slides off the rail, and I move for him, forgetting my hands are full. “Chester!”

Griffin deftly takes both my coffee mug and plate before they topple out of my hands.

“Whoopsie!” Chester rights himself easily enough. Just a harmless stumble. “Good mornin' sunshine!”

Then, of all things, he drops to his knee. It cracks loudly. He visibly winces, but his smile doesn't falter.

"Chester, what are you doing?"

But Chester doesn't answer. He just takes my hand and says, "A beautiful woman such as yourself deserves absolute deference, I've always said."

He gets a wistful kind of look in his eyes, and for a moment, I swear I see a flash of real pain there, like I saw when he mentioned his family. Then, in a blink, it's gone and the bearded mountain man is back up on his feet with a subtle boost from Griffin at his back.

Over the old man's shoulder, Griffin shocks me by giving me a smile along with a little wink.

A burst of butterflies flutters against my insides.

Is that why he's so conservative with his smiles? Because of their untold power?

"I could get used to that," I say to Chester, even though my eyes are on Griffin, that fluttering going even harder as his gaze doesn't leave mine.

I may not be coming onto him, but I'm still enjoying flirting. Just to see how he'll react.

"But Chester." I turn to the older man. "Please, no need to get down on your knees next time. You can show your deference to me while standing."

Chester grins dopily as I plop myself down in the chair next to Griffin's.

I only realize he's bent down and lifted my coffee out of the way a moment later when I gasp, remembering it, and look for where I had to have knocked it over.

"You want to just toss it on the porch boards and get it over with?" he says.

Chester hoots. "Listen to Mr. Neat 'n Tidy over here."

"Right?" I say. "Mr. Perfect's probably never spilled a thing in his life."

“You should see him inside my place. Last time he came over to patch up my ceiling, I swear he grew a new ulcer.”

“I keep telling you that you need to let me redo your roof, Chester.”

“It’s on the list. After the deck you gone and wrecked with your big clodhopper.”

“I nearly broke my leg!” To me, Griffin says, “His back deck’s rotted through.” He points a finger at Chester. “You’re banned from going back there, remember?”

Chester waves a hand dismissively. “There are plenty of good boards. Anyhow, home repair is not the reason for my visit. Neither was shootin’ the breeze with our friend Griffin here, but a lady needs her beauty sleep.”

“Do tell,” I say, sipping my coffee.

“Well, I know it’s customary to ask how you slept in the morning, but my most pressing concern is letting you know I’ve given some thought to your offer of marriage.”

I freeze with the coffee cup halfway back to the chair. “Oh?”

“While it gives me great pains to admit it, I’m afraid to say my heart belongs to another.”

“Really?” I’m rapt, dying to know who this other party is.

“Another few, if I’m being perfectly honest.”

I screw up my face as I glance at Griffin, confused.

Chester sighs dreamily. “Yep. Lucille, Ball, Celine, Dion, Nina, Simone, Patsy, and Cline. Oh, and Bilbo Baggins.”

I throw back my head and laugh. He’s talking about his chickens.

“They’re awful jealous,” Chester sighs. Then he breaks out in a cackle.

Even Griffin lowers his face. His shoulders shake slightly.

God, I thought a little smile from him sent me—but to see him laugh?

“It’s a real shame,” Chester says. “Anyhow, I think you and Griffin ought to get hitched.”

Next to me, Griffin has just taken a sip of coffee, and he coughs, barely managing not to choke.

“Is that right?” I ask, reaching over and clapping Griffin’s back.

“Yep. Two of you look pretty cute together. I’m a mite jealous.”

My stomach does a little swirl. What does Chester see between us? We haven’t pretended to be together with him the way we did with Jude.

I pick up my toast, then set it down again.

Griffin abruptly gets up and goes inside.

“Somethin’ I said?” Chester asks.

“I don’t really know,” I say honestly, digging back into my eggs. “But I’ve stopped trying to figure him out.”

Chester settles back down on the railing. “All I figure is he’s a good man, Griffin Kelly. Did you know he saved my life.”

I set my fork down. “Really?” Seems to be a theme for Griffin Kelly. “What happened? If you don’t mind sharing.”

“My furnace went out last winter. I had a bit too much of my summer hootch to keep warm and, well, I fell asleep next to the fire in the living room. Almost didn’t wake up. Griff came by to check on me, though, thank the heavens. Found me near froze to death.”

My throat goes tight, thinking of this poor man all on his own.

Thank God for Griffin.

“He’s a good man to have around.”

Chester smiles kind of sadly. “That he is.”

We’re both silent for a moment as I take another sip of coffee. Then I set my mug down. “Hey, Chester?”

“Yes, sweetheart?”

“Did you ever want to get married?”

“You mean besides to my girls?”

“Yeah,” I laugh. “To a human. Or...humans, I guess.”

He shrugs. “Us Browns—we never had much luck in love.”

I laugh, dryly. “Sounds like my family.”

Chester gives me a sympathetic look. “Your parents ain’t together?”

“They’re together. They just kind of...greatly dislike each other.”

He nods sagely. “They got married for the wrong reasons.”

That’s putting it mildly. “They got married after some newspaper discovered my father was hiding a secret lovechild.”

Chester whistles. “Almost as bad as my grandpop getting his heart broke and swearing off society. Always said nature couldn’t hold a candle to his true love, but it sure tried.”

The sentiment is so sweet I want to write it down.

But I still can’t figure out how a hermit produced grandchildren. “How’d you come to fruition if he was living out here, Chester? Out of curiosity.”

“Me personally? My pa knocked up his housekeeper.”

If I was drinking my coffee, I’d be the one to choke this time.

Chester thinks this is hilarious, of course, and laughs hard enough I’m worried he’s going to lose a lung.

I’m still confused, though—if his dad and his grandpa were both recluses, did they live here together? When he calms down, I ask him.

He studies me a moment, then looks down. “My parents’ story don’t end happy, I’m sad to say. They passed when I was still a child. I ended up here with granddad ’til he went, too.”

The way he looks out into the smattering of clouds makes something twist in my chest. “I’m so sorry, Chester.”

Chester waves my sympathy away. “Now listen, if it weren’t for the very particular course of events that occurred, I wouldn’t know this big ole galoot, and I wouldn’t have had the pleasure of meeting you neither.”

I turn to follow his gaze and find Griffin standing in the doorway. How long has he been standing there?

“Everything all right over here?” he grumbles.

“I think so,” I say.

It’s then I notice he’s got a little ceramic pot in his hand. Somehow, amid all the chaos of that first night in the diner, Griffin remembered my weird thing about toast and honey.

“Not to interrupt your life story,” Griffin says to Chester, handing me the little pot, “but I still don’t believe you came here to tell us about your undying love for your hens.”

“You’re right,” he says, holding up a finger. “I’m not sure how I forgot. Too much distraction over here.”

With that, I get my second wink of the day, this one from Chester.

I’m spoiled.

“I came to see if Sasha wants to come see my swimming hole.”

“Um,” I say, my mouth half-stuffed with toast.

“That’s not an in-your-end-o,” Chester assures me. “There aren’t too many swimming days left in the summer, and I thought maybe you all could use some stress relief.”

Now I’m trying hard not to laugh. But we haven’t done anything in nature since I’ve been here. I think Griffin’s worried I’m going to break in the great outdoors or something.

“You know what?” I say. “That’s exactly what I’d like to do.”

CHAPTER 19

Sasha

Half an hour later, the three of us—the motliest crew there ever was—are hiking through the late summer.

Mid-morning sun shimmers down through the last of the green leaves.

Chester’s singing a tune in front of me, and Griffin’s footsteps crunch a reassuring beat behind me. I think if I could just stay like this, I might be the happiest I’ve ever been.

Then the rush of water sounds as we crest a small hill, and when we emerge from the trees a moment later, my jaw drops. Not a twenty-minute hike up and over the hill behind Chester and Griffin’s place is a spot that looks like some kind of tropical lagoon.

I suck in a breath. “Are you serious?” A small waterfall plummets off a rise up ahead onto a rock, which drains into an oval-shaped crevasse filled with crystal clear water. The water funnels into a babbling brook on the other side, just to our left, winding its way through the woods. Trees rise up on all sides, casting dappled shade onto the space, except for an area to our right where the sun shines brightly onto a giant flat rock perfect for sunbathing.

“Ain’t it beautiful?” Chester says. He hefts himself down on a thigh-high rock off to the side of the water, breathing hard.

Concern ripples through me. “Do you need some water?”

He waves me away. It’s then I notice his forearm—he’s got his sleeve rolled up, and a long ripple of scars covers the top of his pale, scrawny arm.

“I’m fine. Just need a minute to catch my breath.”

Chester sees me staring and chuckles, pulling his sleeve down. “Fell in a fire pit years ago. Damn near turned into a roasted hot dog.”

He breathes in on a wheeze.

I glance at Griffin, who’s eyeing Chester carefully.

Griffin pulls out the water bottle he stuffed in a backpack along with our towels and holds it out to the older man. “Drink.”

Chester sighs wearily, unhooking a tin cup from his belt.

Only once I see he’s breathing normally do I slip off my shoes and pull the sundress I put on over my head. I still need some more casual clothes. I love the dress—it’s silky and pale yellow—but it’s not the casual jean shorts and T-shirt that would have been appropriate for a trip like this.

Probably neither is the black string bikini Vivian sold me—the only bathing suit she still had, though she’d warned with disdain that, like the sundress, it was woefully out of season already.

When Chester lowers his cup, he makes a strange choking sound and stands up, whirling around. “My goodness, I—I don’t believe it’s proper for me to see a lady in their underthings, even at a swimming hole. I do apologize, Ms. Sasha.”

“Oh.” I look down. The suit is definitely on the skimpy side. “I could wear a T-shirt?”

“Nope,” Chester shouts to the trees. “I’m going to look over here for a while. I believe I saw a squirrel nest I ought to investigate.”

“What about swimming?”

Chester waves a hand, tromping into the brush.

I look over at Griffin, but he’s in the midst of pulling his shirt over his head via a hand clasped on his back collar.

Good lord. My mouth goes dry as it slides off. Once more, I'm treated to the sight of Griffin's planed chest and ridged stomach. Not to mention his bulging shoulders and—

I clear my throat as he looks over at me, hopefully turning in time so he doesn't see me staring.

"He sure took off fast," Griff says, a bemused note in his voice.

"I didn't even think about this bathing suit bothering Chester."

"It doesn't bother him. He's just not used to seeing a woman up close, clothed or unclothed."

"Does it bother you?"

"No, Sasha. It doesn't bother me."

The lazy ease of his voice sends a tingling through my lower half. I stare at him a moment too long as he stretches his arms left and right.

I need to get in the water before I do something rash.

Like show him my bare ass again.

The heat spreads lower, along with a jolt in my stomach. I bite my lip, knowing how much it turned me on to do that. I was just playing with him, but damn it felt good.

"Okay," I say, more to myself than Griffin. I feel naughty again—must be how little clothing I'm wearing and how alone we suddenly are. I stride toward the edge of the water, putting Griffin at my back.

I slide my fingers under the hip strings of my suit to straighten it out, letting them go with a little snap.

Griffin's silent, but I swear I feel his eyes on me.

I try to hide the smile in my voice. "I'm going in."

"I recommend jumping in rather than wading."

I was about to do the latter. "Why's that?"

"Because it's cold."

“You scared of a little cold?” I tease.

Griffin comes up next to me, carefully averting his eyes. “It’s not just a little cold, Angel.”

Somewhere in the brush, there’s a loud snap, followed by Chester shouting “I’m okay!”

I laugh. Griffin’s lips curl up on one side, too, and now I have to look away. God damn that man’s spare smiles.

Griffin stands with his toes sticking out over the edge of the rock next to the deepest part of the water and takes a few bracing breaths.

“I could just push you,” I say. “If you’re scared.”

“You would not be able to push me.” He barely interrupts his weird breathing exercise to lob that one at me.

“No?”

“No. And if you try, be prepared to get wet.” He meets my eye. “You can swim, right?”

That sounds distinctly like a challenge. “I got a lifeguard certificate once upon a time.” Not that my mother let me do any lifeguarding. We also had a pool in the backyard, but I don’t mention that part. “Prepare to get dunked, buddy.”

“Buddy?”

“You heard me.” I begin tiptoeing backward into the dirt. The only way I’m going to get him to lose his balance is by getting a running start.

Once I get far enough back, I gear up, knowing he hasn’t jumped in yet because of me. He widens his stance.

Gotcha, buddy. He thinks I’m going to shoulder check him at the hips—that’s about how high I’m going to come bending over. I hold out my hands as if preparing to do just that.

I start running. But instead of pushing forward, I leap off my feet.

But just as I do, so does he, except he dives sideways, to the left. With too much momentum to stop, I shriek

ungracefully as the ground disappears below my feet and I fly through the air, limbs windmilling. I arc over him just as he pops his head out of the water to watch, flipping his hair out of his eyes and grinning—actually grinning—as I land in the water with the world’s most ungraceful splash.

For a moment, I freeze. Like literally freeze—this water is so. Freaking. Cold. Then I remember my arms and legs and propel my upper half out of the water.

“THISISTHECOLDESTWATERI’VE EVEROHMYFUCKINGGOD!” I scream in one continuous shriek, madly front crawling back to the ledge. I leap out of the water just in time to see Chester burst back out of the trees, his eyes covered with his hand.

“Miss Sasha! Are you okay?”

I’m barely able to catch my breath. I stand there with my hands on my thighs, breathing hard.

I don’t feel cold at all, not out in the warm air. If anything, I feel exhilarated. Though I’m still trying to grapple with the shock. “Chester. You could have warned me this water’s a barely melted glacier!”

“Why d’ya think I’m not in it?” His eyes are still covered. I crawl over to Griffin’s pack and pull out a towel, wrapping it around myself.

“Coast is clear, Chester. I’m decent.”

“Miss, you’re always decent. It’s these old eyes that just aren’t accustomed to young people’s ideas of fashion. If it’s all the same to you, I’m going to let Griffin take you home. I found a squirrel nest I need to add to my map.”

I don’t pretend to understand that, just smile. “Okay.”

Chester waves and narrowly misses smacking into a tree. A moment later, he disappears into the woods.

I look back at Griffin, who’s hunched over the rock ledge, still half-submerged in the water. “Griffin, what’s wr—” I cut myself off as I see his shoulders shaking. He’s laughing.

At me.

“Oh, I see. The second time I see you laugh, and it’s at me.”

“It was...the legs,” Griffin says, his words coming out kind of choked. He waves his hand around, not looking up. “The arms.”

I drop the towel, fisting my hands on my hips. “I looked funny, did I? Guess who’s gonna look funny when he’s dunked?”

Griffin looks up just in time to see those same arms and legs running toward him. He attempts to dive sideways, but I adjust. I leap into the water, landing next to him in a perfectly positioned cannonball, whooping like a banshee.

It’s cold again, of course, but not the shock it was the first time, and now I have a mission. Griffin drops underwater, swimming away.

But I go after him with stealth precision, my eyes open in the clear water.

Even warped with the water, he looks sexy. His big, strong body looks naturally streamlined underwater as he moves with easy strokes.

He doesn’t know I would have been a varsity swimmer had Mom not insisted the schedule would have overlapped with the social calendar she made for me.

I catch up to him easily, bursting out of the water next to him and wrapping myself around his head like a half-naked attack squid. Not a flattering comparison, and all squids are naked, but I’m trying my best.

“You’re like a damned tree!” I say as I try to force his head underwater with my upper body, my legs wrapped ungracefully around his shoulders.

“Are you done?” he asks under me.

I twist so I’m sitting on one of his shoulders, then freeze. I’m suddenly aware of how close his face is to my...other parts.

For a moment, the only sound is water lapping against my ass. I feel it there, just like I feel the prickle of his beard against the top of my thigh. If he turned even a little bit to the side, his face would be pressed right up against the part of my body covered with a single thin swath of black spandex.

When I look down, I'm breathing hard, and not just from the exertion.

"Sasha," he says, his breath hot on my inner thigh.

Move. Get off his face!

"Sorry, I—"

I slide down and sideways, just a little, slipping my legs over his shoulders and around his ribs. His hands naturally go down with me, his long forearms extending along my thighs, his fingers wrapping themselves around my mostly bare ass.

Our eyes meet, and heat surges between my legs. I don't even notice the cold anymore. All I feel is the brush of his abs against the apex of my thighs.

My thinly veiled pussy, if I'm being frank.

I drop lower, stopping when my arms rest on top of his shoulders, my breasts above the water.

Inches from his face.

"Sasha," he says. His voice is a warning. But there's something in there. A thick thrum of desire. His eyes drop down to my nipples, already hardened points with the cold, tenting the thin fabric of my swimsuit.

Then the man licks his lips.

He actually licks his lips.

I suck in a breath, my nipples aching as if they're the most sensitive part of my body. Just a brush of his thumb, and the fabric would be gone.

He makes a growling sound like he's mad at himself. But he grips my hips underwater, lowering me farther.

I don't think he means to keep us pressed together, but when my legs lock around his hips and his obvious arousal brushes against my pussy, I can't help the little whimper that escapes my lips.

"Fuck me," he breathes, so quietly I almost miss it.

"You want to?" I ask.

His eyes snap to mine.

I tighten my legs so his full length notches between my pussy lips.

Griffin's pupils dilate right before my eyes, his cock twitching against me. "It doesn't matter what I want."

I squeeze against him, and he makes a low sound in his throat.

Abruptly, he closes his eyes and pushes my hips off him. My body aches where it was touching him.

He holds me a whole arm's length away in the water. "Enough."

"Why?"

"I can't think when you're..."

"When I'm what, Griffin?" I ask as I wrap my hands around his arms, not taking my eyes from his. I'm challenging him. Openly.

Griffin's jaw pops, and a moment later, he's walking forward. I don't even have time to react before he lifts me up onto the ledge, my ass landing on the flat rock with a wet slap.

He closes his eyes.

I laugh softly.

As Griffin moves away from me, I lean back on my extended arms. But I keep my legs open, my calves swirling in the water.

I should stop. But I don't think he wants me to, not really. His eyes look ravenous as they rake down my body. I can

practically see him warring with himself when his eyes drop between my legs, where everything is clearly visible.

I really, *really* enjoy fucking with this unfuckable man.

Finally he makes a sound of frustration and drops under the water.

I watch his shadow under the surface as he swims over the deepest part of the swimming hole.

Once he's put enough distance between us, he says, "I can't do this with you, Sasha." He's treading water. "I won't be able to keep you safe if my head's not in the right place."

"What did I tell you about the 'keeping you safe' thing? It's getting old." I close my legs, pulling them up so my heels rest on the rock. "I don't believe that, Griffin. I think you know how to think under duress. I think maybe you need to let off a little steam. I know I could."

"I don't get involved with clients. It gets messy."

I get to my feet. "Is that all I am?" It's true, I *am* just a client. Actually, I'm not even that. I'm some lost cause he's taken under his wing. But he's full of shit if he thinks that's all we are. "You let all your clients sleep in your bed? You remember what they like on their toast?"

Griffin glowers.

"No one's saying it would be anything long term." I'm not sure why I'm pressing the issue when I'm not even sure I could handle fooling around with Griffin. Because it's not just sexual attraction with him, is it? If we took how my body reacts to him out of the equation, I'd still want him to stay close to me, wouldn't I?

That thought is sobering enough that it should make me want to stop trying to tease him into submission.

I reach for the towel and snap it out flat, laying it on the sunny part of the rock.

But my words carry on without me, part of the corporeal part of me that wants him so badly it does things like what I'm doing right now.

“What would happen if you just let yourself relax, Griffin Kelly? Just for a little while? Do you think the whole world would fall apart?”

When I peer over my shoulder, his face is just above the water. His scowl has turned to something darker. He *does* think that. He thinks he can control things so long as he’s got his wits about him.

I know I’ve probably gone too far. But so long as he really wants to do this thing for me—marry me to keep me safe—maybe I should make it my job to take some of his wits away. We’re safe here.

And I need a win.

I reach behind me, tugging at the string holding my bikini top on. When it falls loose, I pull the scrap of fabric off my body and drop it to the ground. Then I hike my already skimpy bottoms up so they wedge between my ass cheeks and make a show of getting down on my hands and knees, crawling onto the towel, then lowering slowly onto my stomach.

There’s a splash in the water behind me, and I have to fight to keep the smirk off my face. I don’t think he’ll bite, but at least I’ve riled him up.

For a moment, the only sound is the chirp of birds in the trees, the only sensation the warm rock under my towel and the sun on my mostly bare backside.

Then there’s another little splash—closer—and the soft slap of bare feet on rock.

My stomach flips. Will he really give in to me right here? It doesn’t seem like his style.

Not that I’d say no.

Cold water drips across my legs, moving up my ass and lower back. I gasp at the sensation, but force myself to stay where I am, lying down with my eyes closed, even as my skin rushes with heat as I sense him drawing closer.

Then I realize what he’s doing. He’s holding his whole body over me. I feel him everywhere, like his entire length

grazing my back. I open my eyes to see his arm braced beside mine.

This is what it would look like if he took me like this.

Suddenly, every sassy word I was racking up to tease him with lodges in my throat. Blood rushes from my brain to the tiniest parts of my skin that are almost making contact with him.

“I don’t think the world would fall apart if I relaxed, Sasha.” Griffin’s voice is an electric rumble at my ear. “But if I let myself do what I want with you, I might. And I don’t like falling apart.”

Then, as quickly as I felt him over me, he’s gone. A moment later, there’s the plunking sound—the sound an Olympic diver makes—so little splash that when I peer over my shoulder, the water’s barely rippling. I sense more than see the dark shape under the water as he cuts across to the other side, toward the soft water tumbling over the edge of the rocks.

I want to beg him to come back. I want him to turn around and slide that one little piece of cloth between us away so he can do whatever he wants to my body. So he can make me forget everything else that’s happening and I can melt into the one person who doesn’t just make me feel completely safe but makes me feel everything at full fucking throttle.

But I don’t turn around; I just watch his back, slick with water and edged with muscle, pop from the water as he deftly leaps out and stands under the spattering waterfall, his back to me.

Then I grip the towel in my fists, trying to swallow the fact that the one place I had control; the one place I had the upper hand over Griffin Kelly, I just lost.

And I don’t even care.

CHAPTER 20

I make up the couch again for bed. Last night it was easy, as she passed out right away, taking more of the sleep she so desperately needed.

Though she's hinted all day that she's fine with me sleeping in the bedroom with her, I practically swan dive onto the sofa the minute we're done with dinner.

There's no fucking chance I'm going near that bedroom.

Ever since I got the idea in my head to fake marry her, it's been pure torture trying to exist in Sasha's presence. First it was knowing she'll finally have the additional layer of protection I need to give her—and her not immediately jumping at that opportunity. I know it's not real, but fuck if my ego isn't a bruised-up, pulpy mess.

But now? Jesus.

Now that nagging knowledge that I like this woman and find her deeply fucking attractive has risen to the forefront like an oversized ocean buoy. I was barely able to keep a handle on my feelings before, but since spending the weekend with her?

Fuck me straight to hell. She's smart and funny, and yes, she's goddamned beautiful.

And she knows I'm attracted to her. I've done a poor-ass job of hiding it. I've never not been able to keep that shit together before. Never. I don't show people what I want. This is a skill that I've honed to a razor-sharp point. But Sasha Macklin has me blowing my walls down like a hurricane on a straw house.

But she still hasn't given me an answer about getting married, and I haven't asked. I've decided to let her sleep, knowing marriage is the best option, but also knowing now that for her, specifically, it's not as easy as heading over to city hall and signing up.

I watch her just like that first night, buzzing around my place in the dark for "just one more thing" as I lie on the couch, the sheet pulled up to my chin, my eyes screwed shut like my life depends on it.

Seeing her braless and in my T-shirt, which barely covers her ass, has me on my last shred of self-control.

Finally her footfalls stop, and I dare open my eyes a crack. Her door is closed, and I'm pissed at myself for how that sparks a tiny pang of disappointment in me.

All right, not a tiny pang.

I flip over on my side and stare out into the dark living room. It's good. It's what I wanted. But some idiot part of me obviously likes the torture of being able to see her only a few feet away from me.

A bang sounds from inside the room. I sit up. There's a thin line of light under the door—she's still awake. I grumble, flopping back down and throwing a pillow over my head.

"Griff?"

Her voice is muffled under the pillow. But my stomach jolts just the same.

I lift the pillow. "What is it, Sasha?"

I act annoyed, like my name on her tongue—not the whole name, but the diminutive people who know me use—isn't making something swell painfully in my ribs.

Like I've been fighting swelling elsewhere all day because of her.

Sasha comes around to the side of the couch.

I keep my eyes closed. I know she's squatted down beside me, not just because I can sense her there, but because my

nostrils are suddenly filled with her scent—a floral breeze so pretty and feminine and such a contrast to the hard machinery and wood scents of this house.

It takes every ounce of self-control I have left not to reach out for her.

“You don’t have to answer, but I wanted to ask before I say yes.”

This has my attention. I open my eyes.

Her beautiful face fills my vision, and for a moment, I can’t breathe. It’s not just how she looks, or how she smells, or *her*, but it’s the earnestness of her expression. The determination laced with worry, like she thinks I’m going to flip out at whatever she’s got on her mind but wants to ask anyway.

“Spit it out, Sasha. I can handle it.”

“Who’s Laura?”

Now *that* I wasn’t expecting.

I try my hardest not to frown, because I knew it took some nerve to ask me that, given how I am.

I close my eyes, choosing my words carefully.

“Like I said, you don’t have to answer,” she says quickly. “Just, if we’re getting married, even fake-married, I feel like maybe I should know if you’re having sad dreams about another woman—”

“She was a colleague. She was killed in action four years ago.”

Sasha waits a beat. “Were you there?”

Fuck. “Yes.”

A beat passes. “You were more than colleagues.”

“Yes.”

“You loved her.”

“I cared about her.”

I meet her eyes again. She knows I'm not telling her the whole truth.

"Yes, I loved her." The words hurt to say. Pain spasms through me. Do I tell her how pissed I still am at her, too? That no matter how many sessions I've had with McCrae's psych, I remain pissed at myself for not figuring out how to go back in time to fix what happened? It's not even to have her back—she would have ended things with me eventually anyway—it's just to have her fucking alive.

Sasha reaches out and pries my hand from where I've tucked it under my ribs.

I try to pull my hand away, but she holds firm.

"I'm sorry, Griffin."

There's a burning in my sinuses; in my throat, too. I could shrug, say it was a while ago, because it's true; it was. But it's not just the old grief I'm feeling. It's that double-whammy of self-blame. *Of you could have stopped it.*

"Would you have married her if she lived?"

I sit up, which allows me to pull my hand away. "I don't fucking know, Sasha." I'm reaching my limit of personal questions.

I rub my forehead with my hand. Then I laugh, ruefully. It surprises us both, I think. "No. I do know. She would have said no. But I never would have asked her. It wasn't like that between us."

Laura didn't believe in marriage, or kids, or tradition of any kind. It wasn't really a sticking point, because I didn't either. Or at least I didn't think I did. Besides, I could never picture that fierce, no-bullshit, gun-wielding woman in a wedding gown, though I would have married her if that's what she wanted.

Sasha's still looking at me earnestly, and I realize right in this moment how fucking brave this woman before me is.

"She wasn't sweet, Sasha." *Not like you.* "She was serious. Hard. She could kick my ass."

“I like her already.”

I let out a wry laugh that twists my chest. “We were well matched for what it was.” I meet Sasha’s eyes. She looks inexorably sad.

“Hey, it’s fine,” I say.

“It’s not fine.” Tears brim her eyes. “You should have married for love.”

“It doesn’t matter, Sasha.”

“Yes it does. When we’re done—divorced, or whatever we have to do—I want you to marry for love.”

I don’t move, examining her. “Does that mean it’s a yes?”

She nods. “Let’s get married. Tomorrow.”

I open my mouth like a fucking fish.

“Okay,” I say, frowning like my heart isn’t now galloping in my chest. “Good.”

She lets out this soft little laugh that makes me feel like bubbles are going off inside of me. It’s effervescence. I want to bottle the feeling.

Sasha presses a thumb to the spot between my eyebrows I know is bunched up, smoothing the space down. “Why am I happy about agreeing to a fake marriage?”

I relax into her touch, closing my eyes. I want to hold her hand there. To kiss her palm. Instead, I keep my elbows on my knees, my hands hanging between them. “Because it’s the right thing to do.”

She drops her hand. “Why are you doing this for me?”

I open my eyes again. “Because keeping you safe is my job.”

“No it isn’t.”

“I’ve made it my job.”

She smiles, and I return it.

Sasha laughs softly. “You should smile more, Griff. You’re so handsome when you smile.”

“I’m not handsome.”

“Who told you that?”

I lie back down, lacing my hands together and laying them across my stomach to keep them in line. “We should go to sleep. Big day tomorrow.” I close my eyes. I don’t want to talk anymore. I don’t trust myself not to blubber some bullshit I’m going to regret sharing.

“There’s just one more thing,” Sasha says, her voice coming out soft. Almost nervous. “Actually, two things.”

I groan inwardly but open my eyes, gripping my hands tight together.

Sasha tucks a lock of her loose waves behind her ear. “The first is, I want your family there.”

“What?”

“I know this isn’t real, but we should make it look real. Plus...I want to get to know them. I only know Jude. He’s so great, funny and so kind and—”

“I get the picture.”

She laughs softly. “I know there’s no notice, but if even one of them could come, I’d be honored. I really want to get to know them. Maybe we could throw a party here or something to thank them.”

“Let’s not go overboard.”

“We’re going to have a party here at some point, Griffin, mark my words.”

I groan, but my heart’s fucking singing. This woman.

“And what about Chester?” she asks.

“He won’t come.”

“You sure?”

“The man hides when the mail delivery comes. He’d sooner publish his social security number online than go to a

wedding in town.”

Sasha gives me the side eye but reluctantly agrees we’ll leave poor Chester out of it. She forces me to land on a time—four o’clock—to give everyone a chance to rearrange their days if they can. I don’t tell her I know all four of my siblings would quit their jobs if it meant seeing me get married. The only one who might not make it is Eli, who’s visiting Reese right now on tour somewhere in California.

“I’m sorry we can’t have your family here, too,” I say, seeing the sadness pass over her expression.

“It’s fine. I know it’s too risky.”

I feel like an asshole. I could get her whole family here. I have the resources, even if they need persuading. But I don’t want Sam Macklin anywhere near here, even if this marriage does make Creelman back off. Not until I learn just how closely the two of them are tied.

“You said there were two things,” I remind her.

“Oh. Right.” She stands up, and that’s when I see what she’s wearing. I hadn’t noticed before—I was too absorbed in her face. She’s got on a form-fitting white blazer, a lacy, silky top underneath, and trim white pants that hug every gorgeous curve. The pants end just above her ankles, and when I look to her feet, I see glossy white high-heel sandals that show off her bright red toes. That must have been what she was doing when she was in the bathroom all afternoon.

My throat goes strangely thick when she doesn’t say anything, just looks at me expectantly, and I realize she bought it minutes after I asked her to marry me.

“You look beautiful,” I manage, my words coming out stiffer than I want.

She smiles, looking almost bashful. “I was never going to say no, Griffin.” Then she goes back to my bedroom, the door clicking softly behind her.

CHAPTER 21

Sasha

“**A** *hh!* You’re here!” Chelsea Reilly, Griffin’s little sister and the baby of the Kelly clan, practically drags me inside her house. “She’s here!” Chelsea shouts over her shoulder.

This morning, approximately five minutes after sending a group text to his family letting them know he was getting married—today—Chelsea called Griffin demanding to speak to me. She very sweetly asked if I wanted help getting ready.

I really hadn’t thought everyone would be available to come to the quick wedding, let alone help me get ready.

“Hi,” I say, feeling a little shy. I’m not used to feeling shy.

Chelsea embraces me, hard. I’m not expecting it, but I can’t say I don’t love it. Her arms are tight, and she keeps making this little squealing sound.

“Sasha. We’re so, so, *so* happy for you.” She holds me at arm’s length, her eyes wet.

“*Oh,*” I say, my throat growing tight. If only I were really getting married. I mean, I am, but for real. Chelsea’s acting the way I would have wanted Leila to if she knew I was getting married. And if she hadn’t fled from home when I was only eight years old.

“Well, if I’m being honest, I’m mostly happy for Griff,” she says, finally letting me go. “From what Nora tells us, he’s the luckiest man alive for having scooped you up. I still can’t believe he never said a word until now! Actually, never mind. I can believe it. Anyway. You look amazing.”

Chelsea's clearly full of nervous excitement, which I absolutely get.

"I'm not even dressed yet," I say with a grin. I'm freshly showered, but still in sweats, with my hair in a messy bun and no makeup on.

"Me next!" comes another voice from behind Chelsea. Cassandra, the oldest of the family—by only minutes over her twin, Eli—wraps me in a second hug. She's taller than Chelsea, and my face squishes against her collarbone.

She releases me suddenly. "Sorry, do you like hugs?"

"I do! I'm just a little...well, I didn't want this all to go down like this," I confess.

The two sisters look at me as if on pins and needles.

"I'm not pregnant, if that's what you're wondering."

"Oh," Cassandra laughs. "Okay. We were, frankly. Which would be amazing."

"I'd love Imogen to have a cousin the same age as her," Chelsea says, choking up again. She waves a hand in front of her face. "But no, that's good. We'd love to get to know you first."

As Chelsea tells me Seamus took their daughter out for her nap a while ago and we migrate to Chelsea's bedroom, I can't help but get the feeling that Griffin put his family under strict orders not to grill me on the rush wedding. Either that or they're just extremely cool with surprises. I learn after a few minutes it's probably a little of both, because they tell me that even though they never know what to expect from Griffin, they've learned to roll with it.

"Remember that time he told me he needed to use that vacant room in the staff apartments?" Cass asks after she sets me up at the vanity. There's a whole mini beauty salon here, with hair stuff and makeup and a chair layered in a soft, plush towel.

"Oh my God, yes," Chelsea says, handing me something pink and bubbly in a champagne flute. "And the next day, I

rode the elevator with that woman who took down that whole baseball team.”

“Football,” Cass clarifies.

I take a sip of my drink. It’s delicious—grapefruit-flavored with a hint of champagne in it. Then I register who they’re talking about. “Wait, was that Grabby-Hands-Gate?”

“Yes!” Cass says.

I remember the story—a woman who broke open a scandal on an NFL team.

“She got the league to change the rules around sexual harassment,” I recall now. She was a hero in some circles, a pariah in others. “My dad and I got into a fight about it.” I explain how dad thought she should have minded her own business and taken the payout. “He said it wasn’t real assault.”

Anger tightens Cass’s features. “No, he didn’t!”

“He did. I told him her harassers needed to face justice.”

The two of them are silent for a moment, looking awkward. They had to have seen my father in the news alongside pictures of Sam. It’s the most I’ve seen of him this year.

“Well, evidently your fiancé agreed with you,” Chelsea says, saving me from thinking about my family.

Fiancé. I haven’t even had time to register that.

“But now you know the kinds of things Griffin springs on us,” she adds. “Him getting married is a shock, but I can’t say I’m surprised he kept you from us.”

We ease into relaxed, neutral conversation while Cassandra takes out my hair tie and runs her fingers through my messy locks. She asks what I’m envisioning like she’s a hair stylist and not the CEO of their family’s massive hotel who’s taking the day off to attend to her future sister-in-law.

I chatter like I do when I’m nervous, giving them the same modified version of the story I told Jude when they ask about how Griffin and I met. Not the whole truth, but not a lie either.

I don't like having to hide the truth from them. Unlike Griffin, I've mostly always been an open book. But all this fun doesn't preclude the fact that Vincent Creelman sent someone to... what, kidnap me? I don't actually know.

"Are you close to your siblings?" Cass asks when my family comes up.

I have to swallow down the old hurt that comes up with that. While Leila and Cal both check in on me when they can, mostly, I've always been an afterthought to them.

"Not really," I say. Because how do I say the worst one was always the kindest to me? I reach into my pocket, but of course the bird isn't there. It's stuffed in my bag back at Griffin's place.

I realize both women are looking at me expectantly.

"We're not really close," I say honestly. I can't exactly say I wish they were here, either, not when I didn't invite them. My mom wrote me back yesterday, barely acknowledging my email about being gone, telling me only that she was worried about Sam. I closed the email without responding, not ready to process either her ignoring my concerns as usual or the fact that, for the first time, she didn't sound like she was in denial about Sam.

"It's fine. My brothers and sister were way older than me growing up, so we never really had a chance to get close."

I picture Sam hoisting me on his back, my fancy dress-up shoes soaked as he chased me through the sprinklers while the media shot pictures on the other side of the house.

I can't think about that. I can't think about him now, either, or my heart might break right in half.

Griffin's sisters look at me with concern. "You okay?" Cass asks.

I nod, though I'm not okay. Not really. "I do wish they were here," I say, my voice cracking.

Cass squeezes my hand. "I'm sorry."

“It’ll be hard for Griffin not having Mom here,” Chelsea says.

I know the family lost their matriarch only a few years ago.

Chelsea brushes eye shadow onto my eyelids. “Mom was the funniest combo of all of us. A planner like Cass, but when she got mad at injustice, she was like Eli.”

“She’d lose it,” Cass agreed. “But she was also playful, like Jude.”

“She loved the card game Hearts,” Chelsea says. “Can you play?”

“I’m not bad,” I say. I’m actually decent at it. My mom’s mother used to love it. It’s the one thing my family still does on occasion that has my parents letting their guards down.

“Our mom also drew pictures, like Chelsea,” Cass says.

I know Chelsea’s an accomplished artist. Griffin has one of her paintings hanging in his living room.

That’s all the siblings they’ve counted off. Except Griffin.

Cass sees me waiting expectantly and smiles as she curls my hair with an iron. “Honestly, in some ways, Mom was most like Griffin. She was private about some things, especially her own childhood.”

“We don’t actually know a lot about that side of the family.” Chelsea agrees. “Her parents passed when she was young, and she was raised by our great-aunt. She never talked about what that was like for her.”

“I bet she had the same heart as Griffin, though,” I say before realizing I’ve opened my mouth.

Chelsea smiles. “She did. She was fiercely loyal to her family, even as she ran the business. Just like Griffin. And she always looked out for the little guy like him, too.”

Cass has curled my already natural waves a little tighter and begins piling part of it on my head. “One time someone

left their child at the hotel when they took separate flights to Europe.”

“Oh my God, I forgot about that,” Chelsea says. “It was crazy, like a *Home Alone* situation where each parent thought the other had him.”

Cass adds a pin to my hair. “He was nine, from France. Barely spoke any English. Completely distraught, obviously. But Mom brought him home while she tried to reach the parents. He stayed with us for two nights, and the only people he’d talk to was Mom and Griffin.”

“I swear Griff taught himself French overnight,” Chelsea laughs. “He acted like the kid’s bodyguard at dinner when everyone was trying to talk to him. Ushered him away when he saw he was getting upset.”

“Griff was only twelve,” Cass says. “He slept on the floor so Charles could have his bed.”

I want to keep hearing stories about little Griffin, but I happen to glance at my phone on the vanity and swear. “Oh my God, I have to be downtown in twenty minutes!”

Chelsea gives an excited little noise. “It’s finally happening.”

“I guess I’m done, then,” Cass says, placing her hands on my shoulders. “Do you like it?”

My stomach plunges as I’m brought back to what we’re doing here. I’m getting married. To a man who, by all accounts, would probably make an incredible real husband. Except it’s all for show.

“You okay?” Chelsea asks. Both sisters are heading for the door to leave me to change.

“I’m fine,” I say. “Nervous, maybe, a little.”

Chelsea’s eyes glisten again. “I understand. But we’ll be right there with you.”

My heart hurts as they leave the room. The thought of having normal family gatherings to go to—with all the joking and bickering and love—it’s something I always wanted.

How am I going to tell them none of this is real?

CHAPTER 22

I shouldn't be nervous. This is just a technical operation, that's all. But as I shake my friend's hand, a manager at the town hall, thanking him again for squeezing us in, I can't help the nerves rattling through me.

"You okay, buddy?" Jude asks when he leaves.

"Why wouldn't I be okay?" I bark.

I finger the rings in my pocket. This morning, while my sisters absconded with Sasha, I headed down to Quince River Jewelers, where I picked up a couple of basic bands.

I can see Jude hiding his stupid smile. "Only a few minutes 'til she's here and you become a married man."

"I need to take care of something," I say tersely, striding out of the room. Jude's the only one here right now, and he's pissing me off. Even though he seems like the most clueless of my siblings, I swear to God he's the most emotionally insightful. I don't usually worry about him reading me, because normally, I manage not to emote at all around him.

It's impossible right now—I'm like a goddamned open book I can't keep closed.

The town hall lobby is busy, with people coming in and out the main doors, lining up at the counter to pay parking tickets and ask for directions to various departments.

I pull my phone out of my suit pocket.

I let Ford know what was happening this morning, but I haven't told Lionel. A big part of me wants to show up there

tomorrow and flash him my ring. I want to see his face when he knows I've locked in Sasha's protection.

Except for that other thing.

This will be a knife in my boss's heart. As bad as things are with him right now, I don't wish that pain on him.

I tap his number.

I wait for three rings, then four. "Shit." He's not going to pick up.

Then the ringing stops and he's there. "Kelly."

No sense beating around the bush. "I wanted you to know I'm getting married today, Lionel." I tense, waiting for his response.

There's a long pause. "I see."

"To Sasha Macklin."

There's a longer pause where I swear I hear the absence of his breath.

"We've been seeing each other and I decided to make it offi—"

"Bullshit."

"Excuse me?"

"You don't care about Sasha Macklin. You're doing this to get back at me."

No, he's reading this all wrong.

"I care about Sasha. It's why I'm marrying her."

A beat passes, then Lionel says, "You think I could have prevented what happened to Laura." His voice cracks on her name.

I clench my jaw so tight I'm sure I'm going to break a tooth.

I unclench long enough to speak. "I've never blamed you for what happened, Lionel. How could I? You weren't there. It's my fault. Not yours."

“That’s exactly it, isn’t it? I wasn’t there for my baby girl.”

I lower the phone for a moment. This was not where I expected this call to go.

There’s a long stretch of silence where I think both of us try to get our feelings under control.

Finally I say, “Laura never would have married me, Lionel, and you know it.”

Lionel laughs, but there isn’t an ounce of humor in it. He knows I’m right. Laura didn’t want to make our relationship known. Neither of us ever articulated our love for each other. But she never hid it from her father. It was all the proof I needed that she cared.

“I never thought you’d care for another woman again, Griffin. But I’m glad you do. Even if this fucks us both in more ways than you know.”

We’re back to the bad side of things, stepping out of the part where we used to care about each other like a pair of old shoes I don’t think we’re ever going to put back on.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say.

“Did you hear that part about you fucking me with this?”

“Yes, sir.”

“You always did keep your word, at least,” Lionel says tightly.

Then the call ends.

I pocket my phone, running my hand over my face. This marriage is a mistake, but only on the side of my feelings. Logically, marrying Sasha is the right thing to do. I need to set my feelings aside, that’s all.

“Who’s Laura?” a voice asks.

So fucking much for that.

My dad sits on a bench a few feet away from me.

I didn’t see him come in. It’s not like me not to be aware of my surroundings. That’s what feelings do to me. They make

me make mistakes.

I keep my expression neutral. “Hello, Dad.”

Dad looks awkward in his suit. He normally prefers plaid button-downs and khakis, and the suit looks kind of misshapen on him. He’s showing his age these days; his once dark hair all silver now; the lines around his eyes etched deep.

“You know, you’re the second person to ask me about her in the last twenty-four hours,” I say.

He should tell me congratulations. Or at least say hello back. Instead, he says, “You never told me there was someone else.”

My dad and I were never close. I love him, but we’re too dissimilar to be close. He’s all about feelings, where Mom understood logic. She understood feelings, too, but she got me more than Dad ever did.

I sit down beside him, keeping a few feet between us. “If it makes you feel any better, I didn’t tell anyone about her.”

Dad nods, his hair flopping onto his forehead. He needs a haircut. He stopped taking care of himself after Mom died. At least he isn’t running away like he did at first, spending a whole year overseas trying to pretend Mom wasn’t gone.

“What happened?” he asks.

I consider not answering. But I’ll just be putting off the inevitable. Dad never knows how to drop things we don’t need to discuss.

“She’s someone I was with for a while,” I say. “And I lost her,”

It’s the simplest explanation. A version of the truth.

“I’m sorry.”

My stomach twists. Dad does know about losing the love of your life.

Was Laura the love of my life? I always thought so. But now...

Dad reaches into his pocket. When he pulls his hand out, he's holding a dark blue jewelry box.

I blink, shoving those confusing thoughts away.

“Open,” he says.

I hold my hand out, and he sets the box on my palm. I lift the top. Inside is a ring. Delicate and antique-looking, with a swirl of diamonds and something pale in the center. An opal, I think.

I can't take it. Not for a fake wedding. “Dad—”

“It wasn't your mother's.”

I loosen up, just a little. I should have known that. Mom was buried with hers.

“Grandma's?”

“Yes, but not my mother. It belonged to your mom's mom.”

“You knew her?”

“No. But your mother told me years ago she wanted to give it to one of you kids. She didn't know how to choose. Thank God none of you got married before she went.”

I laugh at his morbid joke, and so does he.

He looks at me, then down at the ring again.

“I could have given it to any one of you, but I didn't. It was indescribably special to her. One of only a few things she had of her mother's.”

Dad clears his throat.

“Anyway. You hang on to it. I know you already have rings, so keep it and give it to your kids.”

Out of nowhere, I think of Sasha's face when I told her I wasn't planning on having kids. How she'd looked almost hurt, like it mattered what my plans were.

“Why me?” I ask Dad, closing the lid to the ring box.

“You always know the right thing to do, better than any of us. So I trust you to do the best thing with it, Griffin.”

I feel like a fucking fraud. If he knew this marriage was for convenience only, he’d never entrust me with this. I want to tell him it’s a mistake to give it to me.

But I don’t have time. Dad stands up abruptly, his eyes going over my shoulder.

Sasha stands in the doorway to the town hall, wearing the suit she had on last night. Except now her hair is all brushed back in curls. She smiles when she sees us, and I swear to God I hear my dad gulp.

Her expression’s nervous. But with the way her eyes are pinned on me, I can hardly breathe.

“I almost forgot,” Dad whispers.

“Forgot what?” I ask, slightly dazed.

“That your mother used to look at me just like that.”

My mouth goes dry.

“I know it’s supposed to be bad luck to see me before the wedding,” Sasha says, coming to a stop in front of us, “but this isn’t exactly conventional.”

She thrusts a hand out to my dad. “Mr. Kelly—Dad—it’s so nice to see you again.”

Dad? Something new tightens around my chest. Panic, maybe? The feeling that everything is too real when it’s not real at all.

Dad’s eyes go red-rimmed. “Welcome to the family, Sasha. I know if my son picked you, then you’re the best thing to ever happen to him.”

“Jesus, Dad,” I say, almost a plea.

Sasha meets my eyes, her expression mirroring what I feel, but only for a flash. “Well, he has been known to be right from time to time,” she says, recovering quickly. Then she reaches up, wrapping her arms around my neck. “Hello.”

She smells so good it fucking hurts. I grasp her around the waist.

A voice tells me Dad's watching—I should pretend this is real.

Except I don't need to pretend this feels good. She fits against me like she was meant to be there. That tightening increases. It *is* panic.

I can't move. I just splay my hands against her back, breathing her in. "Sasha," I say, my voice gruff.

"Yeah?" Her fingers dance along the back of my neck, and I have to fight not to react to the delicious feeling of it.

We've never hugged before, not unless you count that time in the restaurant when she practically jumped on me to get away from Creelman.

"Last chance to back out," I say, hardly able to believe the words are coming out of my mouth. My chest rages hot at the thought of Creelman, and I'm giving her the option to not be as protected as possible against him.

I don't care. Right now, I'm prepared to drop everything. To go to Siberia and live in a fucking yurt, so long as it's with Sasha.

"I don't want out," she whispers.

The grin that spreads across my face is enough to rival my little brother's, and he gets paid to smile.

"I'm...uh...I'll meet you two inside," Dad says.

I'd completely forgotten he was there, lost in the feeling of Sasha against me.

I let go abruptly, only to see the back of Dad's head as he disappears around the corner.

"He's looking a bit like Chester right now," I say.

Sasha laughs. "With a few more teeth." Then, as if remembering, she says, "Hey, can I see the rings you bought?"

I keep my face neutral, fishing the biggest band out first.

“Basic. I like it.”

“I don’t do frills.”

“I’m all the frill you need, right?”

I almost say yes.

“What about mine?”

“You’ll be wearing it in a minute.”

“I know. I just want to see it.”

“It’s not special. I just got it this morning.”

I’m holding on to a ring, tight in my pocket. But it’s not the one I bought this morning. “Hold your damn horses, Sasha.”

She looks up at me, laughing, and the sound is so beautiful I have to set my jaw to keep from grinning like a fool again.

“Fine,” she says finally. “But only because we’re going to be late for our own wedding.”



The woman performing the ceremony is in her sixties, with pale skin and slate-gray hair, her thick glasses so pointed they’re almost horn-rimmed.

“Are we ready?” she asks, glancing at the clock.

“They were too busy staring into each other’s eyes,” Chelsea says, practically sighing. “Lost track of time.”

Everyone laughs, except me and the officiant. We both grumble. If I didn’t look so much like Dad, I’d have thought I was switched at birth.

There are a dozen chairs in the room, mostly filled with my family. Almost everyone is here: Dad. Cassandra and her husband Blake. Jude and Cap, with Nora on the tablet Cap’s holding. It’s midnight in London, but she still got dressed up to watch, her glasses fogging with tears already.

Sasha waves and she waves back.

Chelsea and Seamus are in the back, Seamus bouncing a babbling baby Imogen in the baby carrier.

I wanted to do this just the two of us. But seeing everyone here—everyone except Eli, Reese, and, of course, Mom—fills me with unexpected happiness. They're here for me, no matter how many times I couldn't be there for them because I was on the other side of the world or knee-deep in some dangerous assignment.

“We're ready—” I begin, but just then, the doors burst open, and Eli and Reese appear, a crowd of people calling out behind them, phones raised high.

Eli slams the door closed behind them, looking sheepish. “Sorry we're late.”

I frown, trying to cover up that warmth turning to an explosion of happiness in my chest that they dropped everything to fly here from California for this.

Sasha makes a little sound of excitement, her hands squeezing on mine.

“You're just marrying me for Reese, aren't you?” I whisper.

“You're just now figuring that out?” she whispers back.

My lips tug up in a smile, which Cassandra takes a goddamned picture of.

The officiant clears her throat loudly, and everyone takes a seat.

“We're gathered here today in the presence of witnesses to unite”—she looks down at the paper in her hand—“Griffin and Sasha...” She looks confused. Probably because I got my friend to make sure no surnames were mentioned.

She looks up, clearing her throat. She doesn't like surprises. Okay, maybe she's a long-lost great-aunt.

“The contract of marriage is not to be taken lightly. It is a commitment between two partners in life...”

I should be sweating with these words, but at that moment, Sasha turns to me, sliding both her hands into mine. She's smiling wide, looking perfectly comfortable, like she's made peace with this situation.

Like she's happy to be here.

"Do you, Griffin, take Sasha to be your lawfully wedded wife?" the officiant asks. "To have and to hold from this day forward, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, and to love and cherish as long as you both shall live?"

For a moment, Laura flashes before my eyes, her face so different from Sasha's. The image threatens to shift to the last time I saw her, her eyes on me as she left the world, blood on her lips.

But I shove the image aside.

"I do," I say, my voice hard.

I feel the room—my family—let out a collective sigh.

Sasha says *I do* after her part, then the officiant asks for the rings.

As the woman recites words about constant faith and abiding love, Sasha slides the ring onto my finger, hesitating only for a moment.

I put my hand in my pocket and slip hers onto her finger next.

Sasha stares at it a moment, then looks up at me, eyes wide. "You said it wasn't special."

I've given her my grandmother's ring. I knew what I was doing, but it still doesn't make perfect sense. There's a division between feelings and logic that's still murky to me.

"Just keeping you on your toes," I whisper.

"You have now joined in this commitment of love and devotion..."

The officiant says her piece, but I don't hear it, because now I'm looking into Sasha's eyes, locked on to this woman like this is more than what we're here for.

Part of me screams I need to wake up. But that voice is growing smaller as I bring my hand up to cup her jaw. I watch my thumb brush over her cheek as if this woman belongs to me.

“You may now kiss the bride.”

We talked about this part when I dropped Sasha off at Chelsea’s.

“I’ll just give you a peck,” I said. “Make it look real.”

“On the lips?” she teased. “What happens if I open my mouth just a little?”

I’d glowered at her. “Now’s not the time for this shit, Sasha,” I said, shifting in my seat.

But now my eyes go to her full lips.

The room is silent. Even Imogen is quiet. It’s like the whole world is holding its breath for us.

Open for me, baby.

And they do, like a blossom unfurling.

I lean in, pausing just before our lips meet. “Is this okay?” My whisper comes out rough.

“I don’t know,” she whispers. Her tongue darts out briefly, making heat curl in my belly. “I mean, it is for me, but is it okay for you? It’s not what we talked about, I just—”

I press my lips to hers, cutting her off.

The room erupts with cheers.

But it’s nothing compared to the explosion of nerve-endings firing as I take her mouth with mine.

Nothing has ever felt so right. Not once, not ever.

Somewhere, as my tongue brushes against hers, as her fingers twine in my hair, tugging me closer, I try to remind myself this isn’t real.

But all I know is the woman before me, Sasha Macklin.

The woman I just made my wife.

CHAPTER 23

Sasha

“**T**hree cheers for the grumpiest butthead this side of the Quince!”

Griffin’s family cheers. At least, half of them do. Griffin’s dad gives Eli a whack upside the head, and Cassandra rolls her eyes, but everyone joins in, smiling as they raise their glasses to us.

Even Griffin, though it’s hardly more than a curl of lips.

We’re in the backyard at Griffin’s dad’s place, a cute little house on the outskirts of Quince Valley with a big yard that backs up to the forest. The first stars are starting to come out. We’ve been here all evening, when Griff’s dad—John—invited us back to his place after we signed all the paperwork at the town hall. After dinner, Reese played a song for us on her acoustic guitar, followed by a few new songs she’s been working on that no one’s ever heard before.

“I think I’m going to faint,” I whispered to Griffin, who just squeezed my hand and kissed my temple.

It was for show, I know, but I sighed anyway, leaning against his shoulder.

Then Reese came over, and we had this amazing conversation about our favorite restaurants in the West Village, and she told me about how she used to manage the restaurant at the Rolling Hills before hitting it big.

It was amazing.

I’ve met celebrities before. It’s exciting, but they’re just people.

What I haven't done before is get married.

I still can't believe we actually went through with this. Yet from the moment I woke up this morning, I knew it was the right thing to do. I was practically walking on sunshine all day, and even though I kept reminding myself during the ceremony that it wasn't real, damn if it didn't feel like the realest thing ever.

As Griffin's dad tells several of us a sweet but slightly long-winded story about hiking a trail in Spain last year, I sneak a look down at my ring for the hundredth time tonight. It's beautiful. Handcrafted. There's no way Griffin just picked it up from the store. I steal a glance at him on the other side of the grass now, where he's standing with his legs wide, arms folded, listening to something Eli's saying.

As if he feels my eyes on him, he looks over, his gaze locking on mine.

I'm not sure when the switch flipped. Was it back in the city on the way here? Or on his porch with Chester? Maybe at the swimming hole? Whenever it was, he doesn't look like he used to. He's not the overbearing, grumpy man from that day at the movie theatre, and he doesn't look at me like I'm the flighty pain in the ass I was that day.

Well, maybe he still thinks I'm a pain in the ass.

But each time our eyes have met tonight, it's sent shivers all over me, just like it's doing now. It's been happening all night. I'll look over at him, and he gives this small frown, like he's checking to see if I'm okay. But sometimes he's already watching me. Then, cue the butterflies.

"What do you think the expiration date is on pepperoni?" Cap asks, and I realize everyone else has wandered away. It's just me and Cap. Did Jude come over to grab his dad to look for something? Between everyone wanting to talk to me and obsessively looking at my ring finger and Griffin, the whole night has been a happy blur.

I give my head a shake. "I'm sorry, what?"

"Pepperoni. Do you think it goes bad fast?"

“I don’t think the amount you eat affects the expiration date.” Cap’s already eaten the better part of a whole pie by himself.

“I’m just seeing if there’s enough to last me until the end of the month if I ate it every day for lunch.”

“Kids are weird,” Eli warns me as he passes with an armful of wood for the fire.

Cap grins. “You’re weirder, Uncle Eli.”

Eli sticks his tongue out at his nephew.

“You really love pizza, huh?” I ask.

“Love isn’t a big enough word. It’s my favorite food in the whole world.”

I smile. I love the way Cap chats with me like we’re friends. We did kind of bond when he visited London with Jude last year.

“Hey, thanks for coming on your first day of school.”

Cap shrugs. “It was fun playing football with Uncle Griffin.”

The two of them tossed the ball back and forth in the yard when we first got here.

“I still can’t believe you tackled him like that.”

“I’m pretty strong,” he says proudly.

I laugh. “Well, thanks again for being here. I hope it wasn’t too boring.”

“I’ve been to a lot of weddings. They’re totally boring, but this one was okay. Except the stuff in the town hall; that was a little bit boring.”

I grin. I think okay is pretty great as far as nine-year-old boy wedding reviews go.

“It was pretty gross when they were all lovey-dovey, though,” Chelsea says, coming up beside us with Cass.

“Ugh, love,” Cass says.

“Kissing is seriously gross,” Cap agrees.

“What are you going to do when you get married?” Cass asks Cap. “High fives?”

Cap looks horrified. “I’m *never* getting married.”

We all laugh as Cap backs away slowly, then makes a run for the dog, who’s already stretching, ready for round seventeen of catch with Cap.

“Honestly, that kiss *was* gross, but only because it’s weird to swoon over a kiss when it’s your brother,” Chelsea says.

“But if it wasn’t Griff,” Cass says, “I think I speak for everyone when I say objectively that that kiss was...damn.”

Cass sighs.

My cheeks heat up as I recall the feeling of him taking me like that. “It wasn’t what we talked about,” I squeak.

Cass rolls her eyes. “Why am I not surprised Griff set expectations for his wedding kiss?”

“I’m only surprised he broke them,” Chelsea says. “But I guess feelings be feeling.”

We all laugh, though mine is strained. Not because it’s not funny, but because Griff and I are not supposed to be having feelings. That’s not what this is about.

Sure, I crossed the line a few times, but that was just hormones.

I bring my hand up to gnaw on my nails, then lower it again.

“So,” Chelsea says. “What’s next now that the fun is over?”

“I guess I need to figure out what to do.”

“You’ve always got a place at the Rolling Hills if you want it,” Cass says.

I’m touched. “That’s so nice, thank you. I don’t know if I’ve got the kind of experience you’re looking for.” Which is to say, not much of anything.

“Well, Griffin would never have married someone who wasn’t self-sufficient, so I’m sure whatever you choose to do, you’ll be amazing at it.”

“Vivian Lau offered me a job at Bijou. I’m kind of considering taking it.”

“Seriously?” Cass asks, her eyes wide. “I’ve spent a small fortune in that place, and that woman barely tolerates charging my card.”

“I can crack her.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Chelsea says. “You seem like the type of person who knows how to handle closed-off personalities.”

We all look over at Griffin, who’s rolling his eyes at something Eli’s saying with wild gesticulation.

Just then there’s a crackle, and a baby wails. Chelsea jumps, pulling a baby monitor out of her purse. “I think that’s time for us.”

She waves it at Seamus, who excuses himself from the cluster of guys next to Griffin and disappears around the side of the house.

Disappointment snags at me. I don’t want this night to end. I haven’t had such a good time in forever. But also, going home means being alone with Griffin after all of this. I have a feeling Griffin’s going to clam up and insist on going to bed, and that’s the last thing I want to do. Marrying for strategic reasons is one thing, but spending my wedding night alone?

Cass grabs Chelsea’s diaper bag for her, but Chelsea’s still juggling the monitor and her purse. “The baby never sleeps well when she’s not in her own bed,” she laments.

“Do you need help?” I ask hopefully when I realize Seamus went to pull the car around.

“Sure—actually, do you want to come with me? I might need to change her.”

I nearly jump with excitement. “Yes, please.”

Cass laughs. “You’re the first person I’ve ever met who looks excited about diaper changes.”

“It’s more seeing the baby. It’s really the only reason I stay in touch with half my friends from college—I get to hold their babies.”

Cass smiles. “I’ll come, too.”

We head into the house, and a moment later, the three of us are crowded around the fold-up crib set up in their dad’s office.

Chelsea picks her daughter up, giving her a plethora of kisses all over her cheeks. The baby fusses, and Cass hands her a diaper and wipes.

When everything’s taken care of, Imogen coos happily.

“Here, want to hold her?” Chelsea must see my eyes light up, because she thrusts the baby at me.

When I feel the warm weight of her in my arms, feel the jerky movements of her fists, something goes tight in my chest. “I don’t know what it is,” I say, sitting down in the office chair. “But there’s just something about holding a baby that makes everything feel right with the world.”

Chelsea laughs, looking truly touched. “You’re right. Although I’ll be hard-pressed to remember that at two a.m. when she’s waking me up for the hundredth time.”

We all laugh. Then I pull out my phone. “Do you mind if I take a picture?”

“Of course not,” Chelsea says. Cass offers to take it, but I shake my head.

“It’s okay. It’s just to mess with your brother.”

Now both women laugh hard along with me. “I’ve never seen a man so big and tough more scared of something so adorable and helpless,” Chelsea says.

I snap a few pictures, trying to make sure I’m not laughing so hard my eyes are closed. Imogen, meanwhile, looks at us like we’ve lost our minds.

Chelsea lets me carry the baby back outside to meet Seamus. I give her one last nuzzle before handing her back to her mom. When Chelsea and Seamus leave, Chelsea slips her arm around Seamus's back as he holds their daughter against his chest.

I try hard not to look wistful.

"We better head out, too." Cass fends off a yawn. "I'm going to have a helluva day tomorrow, seeing as I happily bailed on approximately eight thousand meetings to come to an impromptu wedding."

I start to apologize, but Cass holds up a hand. "Don't you dare. This might have been my favorite family wedding yet. But I think Griffin's going to have a hernia if you don't go home with him right now."

I'm surprised by this. "He never said anything."

He's standing with his brothers, and now that they've said something, I see the way his fingers drum on his arm. How he scratches the back of his head and glances over here. He's fidgeting.

"I've never once seen him stay more than twenty minutes at any family function. An hour if it's Christmas. I think he gets actual hives at social functions of any kind."

Something tingles across my skin. "Even with his family?"

"We're the only reason he shows up at all."

I look over at Griffin. His eyes immediately draw up to meet mine. "Well, it is his wedding," I say tentatively.

"His wedding's not the reason he's still here, Sasha," Cass says gently. "It's you."

CHAPTER 24

Sasha

When I tell Griff we should go a few minutes later, he takes me by the hand and mutters something like *thank Christ*. We're gone in what feels like thirty seconds flat.

His sisters weren't kidding.

He helps me into his truck. While he's walking around the other side, I look through the photos of me holding Imogen. I send him one where we're both smiling, our faces tipped together. She looks so freaking cute.

Griff pauses outside his door, pulling out his phone.

His face lights up, and for a moment, I wonder if my joke's gone awry. Then he scowls and shoves the phone back in his pocket before getting in.

"You like it?"

"Very cute."

"Thought you might. Seeing as you love babies so much."

He glowers at me.

"You could have told me you wanted to go," I say as he buckles up and starts the truck.

"You were having fun."

"Weren't you?"

Griffin makes his signature sound; the one that could mean yes *or* no. I still don't know which.

I pinch my lips together, hiding the smile on my face as he shifts the truck into reverse.

He throws his hand over the back of my seat but pauses, narrowing his eyes when he sees my face. “What?”

“You’re really sweet, Griffin Kelly. You know that?”

Another grunting sound as he twists around and backs us out of the driveway. Why is seeing Griffin back up a truck so sexy? It shouldn’t be sexy.

He turns the truck with his palm on the wheel. Damn it, that’s sexy, too.

As he pulls into the road, I recross my legs and look out the window, surprised I’m not finding this man’s freaking *breathing* sexy right now.

Griffin stretches his neck and lets out a low breath.

“God dammit, Griffin.”

He looks completely confused.

A few minutes later, I sigh, turning toward him on the seat. “Cap really got you with that side tackle.”

Picturing Griffin playing with kids is sweet. Far from sexy.

He grumbles. “I’m going to be bruised for a week.”

“You loved it.”

This time I get the tiny lip curl. Paired with the darting of his eyes to meet mine. It’s sweet and sexy all at once.

Which, unfortunately, turns out to be my kryptonite, because suddenly all I want to do is jump him, right here in the truck.

I’d probably make him careen off the road.

It’d be worth it.

When we pull up to the cabin a few minutes later, the sky’s completely dark. Solar lights line the path, and under normal circumstances, I’d already be envisioning how the walkway would look with new landscaping—rosebushes and hydrangea maybe, with string lights on the porch.

But these aren't normal circumstances. We were quiet for the rest of the drive home, and now that Griffin kills the engine, the silence envelops us.

Except there's no silence inside me. I can hear the sound of my heart beating, the crashing of my pulse against my ears.

The soft pull of Griffin's breath as he releases his seat belt.

This is the part we didn't talk about, maybe because there's nothing to talk about. This is a fake wedding, and fake wedding nights should just be like any other night.

Griffin jumps out, coming around to my side and holding the door open for me. After only a few days together, I know now that's what he likes to do. Just like I know he likes to walk behind me when we're walking single file to keep me in his line of sight.

Usually I jump out of the truck without his assistance, skipping past him to wherever we're going.

But this time, he stands by my door, holding his hand out for me.

I meet his eye and take it.

A scorching heat burns through me as our hands connect, and when his other hand grazes against my hip as I jump the rest of the way to the ground, landing nearly pressed up against him, I can't help the shiver that runs through me.

Not a real wedding night, I remind myself. *Not a real wedding*.

Still, I smile coyly. We're only shadows in the dark, but I can see his face well enough. I see the way his eyes drop to my mouth.

I think of the way he kissed me at the altar—the urgency and gentleness rolled into one soul-scorching kiss—and for a moment, I'm sure he's going to do it again. I pray for it.

But Griffin abruptly lets go of my hand, reaching into the cab to grab the presents people brought for us. There isn't much—a few bags—and guilt surged through me even taking them home with us.

Not a real wedding.

Maybe if I say it enough times, I'll believe it.

"You need help?" I ask.

"I'm good."

Not a real wedding.

Tell that to the twinge of hurt that spreads where the butterflies were.

I decide right then that I'm not going to tease him.

I'm not going to make him go along with what I want. Not tonight. I'm going to make this his call. I want him to want me as badly as I want him, because let's face it—I want this man. If it were up to me, I'd strip my clothes off right here in the garden and tell him we might as well enjoy our time shacking up.

But I don't want him just going along with me trying to corrupt him.

So I lift my chin up and stride toward the house.

I'm almost at the door when he calls out my name.

"Sasha."

I whirl around, my heart in my throat.

"Yes?" I wait for him to come to me on the porch. I won't give him any reason to think this wasn't his idea. My heart beats wildly in my chest as he walks up the path. He looks so handsome with his bowed head and broad shoulders.

I tilt my face up as he jogs up the steps.

I want Griffin Kelly to kiss me so badly I might just explode. My fingers twitch, wanting to reach for him. But when he gets to me and pauses, he stops a whole foot away from me and hands me something he's got in his hand instead.

"I thought you should have this."

I look down. It's a key, on a plain strap of a key ring.

I have to swallow down my disappointment. "Thanks."

“You okay?”

I let out a little laugh. “Yeah. I’m fine. I think.”

Gripping it too hard, I try my key out in the door. It slides smoothly open, because of course Griffin Kelly wouldn’t have anything that didn’t work perfectly. He wouldn’t suffer a sticky door lock or a book out of place on a shelf.

He wouldn’t sleep with a woman who’s so lonely she just fake-married a near stranger.

It’s not about being lonely, I remind myself. The threat of Vincent Creelman is very real. But I’d be lying if I didn’t say I love the idea of being married.

The domesticity. The close family. The cozy small town and the cabin I’m brimming with ideas about, ones that’ll probably make Griff’s head pop off.

“You hungry?” Griffin asks inside the door.

“Not at all.”

“Right.”

It’s weird that he’s asking me that. He saw me stuff my face earlier.

I slip off my sandals, setting them carefully on the shoe rack. Then I stand in the foyer a moment, spinning the ring on my finger.

“Well, I guess I’ll go to bed then,” I say when he doesn’t say anything.

“Sasha, I...I don’t really know what I’m doing.”

I laugh, short and too loud. “You think I do?”

He runs a hand over the back of his neck. “I know the wedding night is a big deal when it’s real. But...” He makes a frustrated sound.

Oh God. Now that he’s said it out loud, it feels so awkward. “I know. It’s not real. So don’t worry about it, okay? I’m not going to try to seduce you.”

Griffin looks down, shifting his hand over his jaw. “It’s not that I don’t think you’re...fuck. I just can’t get involved like that. Feelings...they don’t work in this job.”

Now that stings. “So you’ve said.” I know my words sound bitter, but they’re out there, and my feelings are, too. “Since we’re saying what’s on our minds, though, I’ll say it’s funny, because that kiss today—it didn’t feel like a chore. Unless it did to you?”

He gives me a heated look. “No.”

“It didn’t to me either. Because this isn’t a job over on this side. This is my life. I think it’s normal to have some feelings.”

“I’m not saying you shouldn’t have feelings.”

I laugh. It’s a little unhinged sounding. “No, just *you* shouldn’t. It’s only me we need to worry about.”

Griffin doesn’t say anything to that. And why should he? It’s crazy. He’s right; this is not about feelings. This is for protection only. But I can’t stop being mad about it. “You know what? Don’t worry about it. Your whole life, you’ve done a great job of tamping down feelings and operating on logic, so why stop now?”

“Sasha—”

“You know what I think, Griffin? I think you’re afraid of what might happen if you let yourself feel anything. That’s what I think. I think the last time you let yourself feel something, someone got hurt, and you haven’t stopped blaming yourself.”

Griff bristles. I see it happen. He goes from frustration to stone. “Are you done?”

His words are hard. Maybe they should scare me. But he doesn’t scare me. Instead, anger shimmies over me. “No, I’m not done. I think you like me, Griffin Kelly.”

The only reaction I get is a muscle popping in his jaw.

“Maybe I annoy the hell out of you, but I think you care about me, at least a little more than a job. I know you want me. You told me yourself. And I don’t see what’s so wrong with us

indulging in that so long as we're pretending to be husband and wife. There's nothing really permanent about what's happening here."

That last sentence scrapes at something painful, but it's easy enough to ignore it with the furious standoff going on between us.

Griffin takes a step closer to me, making my stomach drop. Did I go too far? Is he going to pick me up and set me in his room? Slam the door in my face?

"I'm going to ask again. Are you done talking?"

"Why?"

"Because you talk too much."

"That's because there's so much fucking space to fill."

Griffin lets out a low growl. A warning. "Stop talking, Sasha."

"Why?"

"Because if you don't, I'm going to have to do something to get you to shut up."

My stomach flips so hard and fast I have to press a hand to the wall to keep myself steady. "Like what?"

Griffin's hand clasps itself around my throat—gently enough that I can breathe, but hard enough I can't move. "Like this."

He crushes his lips to mine.

At the altar, the kiss was electric. New. Shocking.

But there, we had an audience. Now, we're all alone.

Griffin walks me backward as he slips his tongue into my mouth, his teeth scraping against my lips, clicking against mine. He's hard and soft all at once; needy and giving. I cling to his shoulders as he presses me up against the wall, sliding his hand down to my clavicle and pinning me in place.

Then, just like that, he pulls away. For a moment, we just look each other in the eye, both of our chests heaving.

My heart pounds so hard I swear it's thundering through the room.

He opens his mouth, and I hold my rapid breath. I'll say yes to anything right now.

"I'm going to the shop," he says. "I'll be back in an hour so I'm out of your way when you're doing that thing you do."

My heart drops. Are you fucking kidding me? Also—"What thing do I do?"

"Walking back and forth in that T-shirt." He lets me go and waves his hand around in the air as if to demonstrate.

Then he makes a final choked kind of angry sound and spins on his heel, ripping his tie out of his collar as he goes.

He doesn't hang anything up. I watch as he tosses the tie on the couch, then veers to the kitchen, stripping off his jacket and throwing it hard over a chair. He practically rips open the fridge, pulling out a bottle of beer, which he cracks against the edge of the counter with a deft chop of his hand, tossing the cap in the sink. "There are more if you want them," he grunts out. "Bottle opener...there." He waves his hand at the drawers. Then he's gone, down the hallway and through the door to his shop, which I've still never ventured into.

I watch the whole thing with an enraptured kind of awe.

I should be furious. But victory spreads through me even as I nurse the sting of rejection in my chest.

At the very least, I got to him. He may have walked away, but I won that one in spades.



After he's gone, I slump against the wall. Then I ball my hands into fists. He's right on one thing—there's no point talking right now, not while feelings are running high. And fuck him if he doesn't think his are. Emotionally stunted asshole.

I grab a beer from the fridge myself, hesitate, then try the trick he did on the countertop.

I lean the bottle against the edge and karate chop the top with my hand.

All I manage to do is send a jolt of pain searing through my hand. “Ow!” I hiss in pain, my other hand nearly dropping the bottle.

I use the bottle opener like a lady, and the moment the bottle is open, I take a long swig.

This will do. I’ll numb my feelings with a beer, which I haven’t really drunk since college. Very healthy.

But it’s not enough. My body is still zinging from the intensity of what just happened.

I strip my clothes off right there in the kitchen, just as a little fuck-you to Griffin. Let him see them later so he knows I got naked in the middle of this room. Let him use them as jerk-off fodder later when he’s trying to satisfy something he could walk into the next room to take.

Asshole.

I set the beer down on the counter, then get in the shower, blasting it on cold. I don’t want to stay wanting him tonight.

But the moment icy water hits my skin, I shriek.

“Oh, hell no.”

I scramble for the faucet, cranking it so it warms up.

I’ve just gotten it to lukewarm when I hear the knock on the door. It’s not tentative.

I freeze. I squat down in the tub; covered, sort of.

“Sasha.” It’s not a question.

“What do you want?” I’m not willing to be especially kind.

“Can I talk to you?”

I wrap my arms around my knees. “You want to talk? Go ahead.”

“I’m opening the door.”

I jerk the shower curtain open wide. “You heard what I said.”

Griffin opens the door.

I want to stay mad. I want to yell at him to get lost and mean it.

But all I can do is stare.

He’s stripped off his socks, but otherwise, he’s still fully clothed. His white dress shirt’s still tucked into his pants, but it’s unbuttoned at the top, his carved chest visible. His sleeves are rolled up, revealing those thick, corded forearms, currently flexing as he stretches his hands beside him.

“So you finally want to talk?” I ask.

“No.” His voice is raised so I can hear him over the splatter of water, but I can still hear the rasp in it.

My stomach does a little barrel roll, my heart tapping against my ribs. “Then why are you here?”

There’s so much heat in his gaze I nearly come undone.

“I don’t know,” he rasps.

I press my hands on the side of the tub, knowing I’m revealing my breasts to him.

“Jesus,” he growls, his eyes on my bare tits.

I stand up then, revealing all of me. Lukewarm water hammers down on my shoulder, doing nothing to cool the heat burning inside me.

His eyes rake over my body, his hands flexing at his sides. “Do you know what it’s like being me?” He takes a step toward me. “Having to be close to the most beautiful woman I’ve ever known, one who drives me fucking insane? Who sleeps in my clothes in my bed?”

“Tell me,” I say, my voice barely audible over the sound of the water. I can feel my nipples hardening into stiff peaks for him, plucking forward, aching as his eyes dance over me.

“It’s impossible.” He reaches me, gently sliding his hands over my hips, his working hands rough against the smooth slickness of my wet skin. “I thought I was strong, but you make me fucking weak, Sasha.”

His voice is anything but weak. It’s deep and hard and makes my whole body react, like every nerve ending is on fire.

From this close, I can see the bulge at his crotch. It’s huge, jumping visibly right before he drops to his knees before me. His big hands grip my hips so hard I know I’m going to be close to bruised there tomorrow.

He seems to realize it too and softens his grip, his thumbs sliding over my skin.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers, pressing his forehead against my stomach. Water runs over both of us.

“What do you have to be sorry for?”

I can tell he’s trying to keep what little shred of control he’s got left. But his breathing is hard, just like the rest of him.

“Because,” he growls, “I’m done pretending, Sasha.” He lifts my leg up and hooks it over his shoulder. “Now give me what I want.”

Then Griffin Kelly, as efficient as a well-oiled machine, goes right for the heart of me.

CHAPTER 25

Sasha cries out as my mouth hits her pussy. I don't waste a fucking second. I draw my tongue directly over her clit.

Water sluices off her body, soaking my shirt.

I don't notice any of it. I'm solely focused on one thing, and that's the feel of her against my tongue. Fuck what I said I wouldn't do. Fuck me keeping feelings out of this—this isn't feelings. It's just need. White-hot, blinding need.

I hook my tongue against her clit while I suck with my lips, knowing somewhere that I'm lying to myself when I deny I have any feelings.

Knowing here that I'm taking her with pure, selfish greed.

Her hands slide into my hair, tilting my head back as she rocks against me. She tastes like honey. Or flowers. Or something I can't describe that drives me this close to letting myself go right here in my suit as I fuck her with my tongue.

"Griffin," Sasha moans.

My name coming out of those perfect, delicate lips while I devour her is indescribable. Better than all the fantasies I tried so hard to shove aside.

All I want is to see her come. It's all I pictured every time I stood in this shower, stroking my cock, her name on my lips. It's the engineer in me, I think, needing to see exactly how she works; needing to know precisely what she needs to take her breath away.

But looking up at Sasha, I'm the one losing my breath. I wasn't lying when I said she was the most beautiful woman

I've ever seen. But from here? Fuck me. The slick wet slope of her stomach, the two oval moons of her tits above. Her face tipped back so all I can see is the long column of her throat and the tip of her chin.

Sasha cries out again, rocking her hips against my face. I reach up and clasp her jaw gently in my hand. It's so small, so delicate under the brute width of my spread fingers.

She's not there yet. I won't let her come so easily. I pop off her clit long enough to tip her face down and say, "Look at me, Sasha."

Her expression is a contortion of desire. My cock throbs painfully.

"You want me to make you come?" I ask as I draw my other hand up her wet thigh, slipping two fingers inside her.

"Yes," she gasps. Her pussy squeezes hard against me, and I have to fight not to growl like an animal.

I stroke my tongue against her clit again, tugging at her G-spot at the same time.

She makes a guttural sound, her hands slapping low against the wall behind her.

I stroke again.

Then pull away. "No."

She looks aghast. "*No?*"

A flare of heat runs through me—it could be the last dredges of my anger at myself for succumbing to this when I swore I wouldn't, or it could just be how badly I need her. But part of needing to see her come is needing to see how far I can hold her over the edge, on the brink, before the only thing she feels is the blinding need for release.

Plus, I'm feeling more than a little deliciously petty about this particular thing.

"I'm going to tease you like you teased me, Sasha. Make you feel just a taste of the torture I've felt."

Her jaw hangs open, but she laughs. She knows what she did. She fucking loved it.

So did I, though I'm not about to tell her that.

I suction my mouth around her clit again, tugging with my lips and stroking with my tongue in a coordinated movement until her breathing goes ragged and choked, her fingertips scraping against my scalp. "Griffin, what *is* that? I didn't know I could...feel..."

She's losing words. Her breaths take on a tone that's creeping higher and higher, and I know I've got her on the very edge of the precipice. Just as she makes the sound I know means she's about to fall, I pull my mouth away.

Sasha cries out, gripping my head in her hands. "No! Please."

I stand up. "Impossible, isn't it? To get that close and not be able to do anything about it?"

"You asshole," she says, slapping a wet hand against my shoulder.

Then her arms are hooked around my neck and she's tugging me to her. Our lips crash together brutally, our tongues ravenous. If the last kiss tried to tear me apart, this one nearly destroys me. The sensation of having her like this, her breasts slick and wet against my chest, my fingers still inside of her—I know my aching cock is dripping with its own wetness under my soaked clothes. It doesn't matter. All I want is to see her lose it.

I tug her toward me with my fingers inside her, firm but gentle, needing to regain some semblance of control.

She breaks the kiss, letting out that guttural sound again. On the next breath, she says, "I could come like this, you know."

"I won't let you."

"So, what, you're just going to stop touching me?"

I curve my fingers inside her, putting variable pressure on the sensitive flesh inside. Press. *Release*. Press. *Release*.

She's breathing hard, her eyes desperate on mine.

“Remember when we were swimming, Sasha? When you took your top off and I knew these gorgeous tits were out there just out of my line of sight?”

I take one of her breasts in my hand now, clenching my jaw to hide my pleasure at the feel of its perfect weight in my hand. I lean into her, nipping at her ear. “I was jealous of the fucking trees, Sasha. Of the wind. Jealous of nature getting to see you when I couldn't.”

I run kisses down her throat, all the way down her chest until I'm close enough to take the pink peak of her breast in my mouth.

“You could have,” she breathes as I fuck her pussy with my fingers in perfect cadence with my tongue on her nipple. She's getting close again, I can tell, even without me touching her clit.

“You could have fucked me then, Griffin. I would have let you. God, I”—she gasps as I sink my teeth onto her nipple—“I would have begged for it if you'd told me there was a chance.”

I grit my teeth, my own need threatening to distract me. “I know what you're doing,” I grit out.

I grip her breast with my hand, tightening a warning with my fingers.

She whimpers, but she's smiling now. “I can get you, can't I? With my words?” She licks her lips. “You hold yourself together so tightly, Griffin, hanging on to that control, but I can undo you just by making my mouth move.”

She licks her lips, looking pointedly down at my bulging crotch.

I bring a hand up to her jaw again, covering her lips with my finger.

“You think I want to fuck those words out of your mouth, don't you?”

She moans as I slide my fingers out of her pussy and thrust back in, grazing my thumb against her clit.

She whimpers—she’s close to coming again. “Yes. I think you...do.”

I pull my hands away from her just before it happens once again, and she lets out a frustrated growl. “God, Griffin!”

“You’re going to come when I tell you to,” I growl.

She shudders under me. “Please. I can’t take it. Please, Griffin.”

Is this my limit? I think this is my limit. I need her as badly as she needs me now. I grip her hips, pulling her against the rough wet of my pants. “Sasha.”

She takes my face in her hands, kissing me under the splatter of water. It’s soft this time. Gentle. “Griffin,” she whispers as she pulls away.

My hands move as if on their own, working the buckle off my belt.

I can’t play anymore. I can’t pretend.

My thoughts are *I’m not supposed to be doing this. I’m not supposed to feel this way.* But my words betray me, coming from somewhere deep inside me.

“So fucking beautiful.” I grip her hip with one hand while I pull my cock out of my shorts with the other. “You’re so fucking beautiful, Sasha.”

I’m not even talking about how she looks, even though she’s so perfect it almost hurts to look at her. I’m talking about everything. Every part of her, inside and out. She’s too good for me. Too sweet, too kind, too fiery, too funny. Too perfect for a man who sometimes doesn’t know how to be a real person. But her leg is up on the edge of the tub now, and I’m so hard I know I’m close to exploding all over her. I don’t bother taking anything else off, just reach behind me to pull open the drawer.

“You win, Angel,” I say through gritted teeth. As I rip a condom open with my teeth and hand, I hear her whimper, and I don’t fucking care about anything but her. Being inside her. *Inhabiting* her.

I release her only long enough to get the condom on. Then I notch my cock against her hot slit. “You win every time,” I breathe. I wrap my arm around her back.

As I plunge myself all the way into the most perfect woman I’ve ever known, I groan, long and low. I feel like a feral animal, a beast, claiming my woman.

She lets out a guttural sound, her eyelids fluttering as she tilts her head back. “Griffin, fuck—”

I pull out, dropping my teeth down on her shoulder as I drive into her again.

She cries out, gripping my shoulders so hard I know I’ll have marks.

I don’t care. She slides her hands up my neck, hooking them against the back of my head, her wet cheek next to mine.

I bring my hand down between us, my thumb on her clit, wishing I could be in two places at once. In all the places at once, all over her, everywhere.

She cries out at my touch.

“That’s right,” I rasp. I kiss her neck as I thrust into her over and over again, my thumb brushing featherlight against her clit.

She comes a moment later, a huge, racking climax that nearly knocks me off my feet. Sasha cries out my name, her pussy clenching so hard on my cock.

When she wraps her legs around me, I can’t hold back anymore. I’m still standing on the floor, so I turn, pressing her wet back against the wall next to the shower. In only a few thrusts—hard enough to shake the drywall—I let loose inside her, my balls clenching tight as I come so hard I can’t breathe.

I press myself against her while we ride it out together, the crest, the peak, the flow, the ebb.

“Sasha,” I grit out when I can suck in a breath again. I meet her eyes, brushing her wet hair from her face. “Sasha. My fucking God.”

CHAPTER 26

Griffin

I wanted this from the beginning. It's the only explanation I can come up with for why I put myself in this position I knew would mean failure.

I stroke the hair from Sasha's cheek as she slowly rises and falls, her eyes fluttering.

She's naked on top of me, on my bed. She works herself slowly up and down on my cock, which was ready again in what felt like minutes. Then again.

"Griffin," Sasha whispers, cupping my hand to her face.

"Yes, baby," I whisper back, even though we're all alone, miles from anyone, nestled in the safety of my cabin.

"I feel...complete." She laughs softly. "It's so corny, I know." She leans forward so her hands bracket my neck, her breasts grazing my chest.

I want to close my eyes, to relish the pleasure of how she feels on top of me, but I don't break eye contact. I want to hear every word Sasha says.

"When I'm with you," she moans as she rests on my cock, "it feels like...like you're holding on to every part of me. Like there's nothing out of place."

She works herself on me again, up and down, soft and warm and perfect.

"You complete me," she says, then bursts into laughter. "I told you it was corny."

I love how she's like this. Chatty when we're doing it slowly. Laughing while she's riding me.

I grip her ass now, helping her move. "That was a good movie."

She kisses me, her lips soft and pliant, her tongue dancing against my teeth.

"Hey!" she exclaims suddenly, lifting her face away. "You never did tell me what your favorite movie is."

I laugh softly, then, without warning, cup my arm around her lower back and flip us around so she's on her back, her hair fanned out around her face.

I kiss her neck. "I'm still not going to tell you."

"Not fair," she says, arching her back as I bend down, capturing her nipple with my mouth. I thrust into her, tugging at her with my tongue and teeth.

"You never told me yours."

"It's not sexy," she breathes.

"You're all the sexy I need."

She moans. She's close again, and this time I'm not going to stop her from coming. I rise up onto my knees, gripping her hips as I pull her bottom half onto my lap. I soak in the sight of her as she throws her arms over her head.

"It's *Witness*," she says.

I pause. "The '80s movie?"

She laughs. It's like bells tinkling. "Yeah. About the Amish kid who witnesses a murder—"

I release her hip from my hand and press a finger to her lips. "No. You were right; it's not sexy. None of those words should be coming out of your mouth while I'm fucking you."

She laughs, grasping my wrist to try to pull my hand from her mouth. "Amish men are so sexy," she manages before I cover it again. She wrenches it off. "I mean it. They build barns with their bare hands."

“You want a barn? I’ll build you a barn, Angel.”

“Oh God, yes. Have you seen baby horses? Colts and fillies?”

I can’t help the laugh building in my chest. “Enough,” I grunt, leaning over her and covering her mouth with mine. I stay that way as I work us both to the end.



We lie across from each other in the bed, finally spent—or at least Sasha seems that way—as the sky begins to lighten outside.

“You okay, old man?” Sasha asks, smiling. She’s got my hand in both of hers, curled up against her chest.

“No. I’m not sure how I’m going to walk again in a few hours, let alone get out of this bed to head to New York.”

Her eyes, which had been going droopy, flick open. “I forgot you were leaving. How long will you be gone?”

“I could probably come back the day after tomorrow.” I want to come back the same day, but I know Lionel will need a little more time. I also have to wrap things up with the project I abandoned Ford with.

“Won’t that be rushing things?”

She says it like she can see the thoughts running across my face. I’m not used to that. I don’t know if it’s her being extra insightful or me loosening up around her. Maybe both.

“Two nights would be better,” I admit. A week would be ideal, but there’s no way in hell I’m leaving her for that long.

“Last night I asked my sisters if you could stay with them. They both said of course.”

Sasha smiles, looking touched, then yawns. “Thank you. But I’ll be good here, right?”

“You don’t have to decide right now.”

“Good,” she says, still yawning. How is it that she looks beautiful even with her face scrunched up and her mouth open wide enough to see her tonsils? Can someone have perfect tonsils?

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I wait until she’s breathing softly before I let myself rest.

I sleep like a rock with her next to me. I don’t know for how long, just that I wake with a ping to a soft banging sound.

The clock says it’s nine a.m. Despite only a few hours of sleep, I’m instantly alert, my heart thumping.

But really, there’s only one person it could be.

I slip to the door, opening it just a crack.

Sure enough, a tooth-optional man with white hair and a straw hat has his hands cupped around my patio door.

I let out a breath—and a curse. Fuck.

A few minutes later, I’m sliding the door open, slipping out and closing it behind me. “Chester, what are you doing?”

“I knew you were still here. Thought you might be sick or something. Never once seen you not up with the sun.”

He’s holding out a mason jar filled with a cloudy yellow liquid. Chicken noodle soup.

I smile, then scowl, taking the jar and setting it down on the arm of the Adirondack. “Chester, you don’t need to be giving away food. Besides, I’m not sick. Just had a late night.”

Chester’s eyebrows dance, and he leans back, hands on his hips. “So you finally worked up the nerve, didja?”

I set my jaw. “Don’t start.”

“I oughtta sock you, you know. Spendin’ a night of sin with my betrothed.”

I lean back against the railing. “You gave her up for your hens, remember? Also,” I glance over at him, “she’s actually

my betrothed. We got married yesterday.”

I don’t know what I was expecting Chester’s reaction to be, but it’s not this. He deflates before my eyes, looking genuinely hurt.

“Chester, I didn’t think—”

“That you’d invite me? That so strange?”

I’m a little stunned. “You haven’t been to town in years.” Except for coming over here whenever he damn pleases, Chester lives only at his place and in the woods around us. Whatever he can’t fish, hunt, or grow, he has me or one of the servers from Betsey’s bring up for him.

Chester looks out into the trees, down at the Quince, sparkling in the morning sun. He looks older suddenly, and I see the way he winces subtly when he tilts back on his heels. “Chill in the air this morning. Fall’s comin’.”

“I’m sorry, Chester. For the record, Sasha wanted to invite you. I said no—I had no idea you’d want to come.”

“Maybe I wouldn’ta come, but I’d sure appreciate the invite. Seeing as you’re my best friend and all.”

I feel that like a knife in the chest. “I promise I’ll always listen to Sasha about people stuff from now on. How’s that?”

“You listen to her on everything, boy. You think you’re smart, but you got a lot to learn from a woman like her.”

“You’re right.”

He nods, then heads abruptly for the stairs.

“Chester, wait.”

He halts but doesn’t turn around.

I call after him. “I’m leaving town for a few days, but Sasha’s staying here. I’ve offered to have her stay at one of my sisters’ places, but I think she’ll want to stay here. Will you keep an eye out for me? You’re the only one I trust for the job.”

Chester's shoulders pull back, and when he turns around, his chest is puffed out slightly. "Course I will."

"Give her some space, though, too, would you?"

"I'll do right by you, Griff. You don't need to worry a bit."

I give him a nod.

"Griffin?"

I was already heading back inside, but I turn now.

Chester's got his hat over his chest. "You're a lucky bastard. I wish you all the congratulations in the world."

My chest knots. When I came up with this plan, I didn't think very carefully about how it would affect other people. So many people have given us their heartfelt congratulations or teared up because they were so happy for me—for us.

And it's all a lie.

Except for that part where you've caught feelings for this woman.

There is that.

"I'll pass your congratulations on to Sasha."

"You do that." Chester plops his hat back on his head, and a moment later, he's gone, into the trees.

CHAPTER 27

Sasha

I hit the brakes, and Griff's truck rumbles to a stop outside Bijou. Pulling down the visor, I check my makeup in the mirror. Not bad for five hours of sleep and considerable exertion last night.

My stomach does a little dance as I step out of the truck—followed by a twinge of pain from my nether regions. The second time Griffin and I did it last night, I teased him about not having the stamina to go hard.

“I'm just trying to make sure you can walk tomorrow, Angel,” he rasped in my ear.

I tighten my purse against me, forcing myself to get thoughts of Griffin out of my head.

This is not where my mind needs to be right now. I'm here because if I'm going to be living in Quince Valley for the next few months, I don't want to be solely reliant on Griffin for entertainment or be a freeloader. Most of all, I don't want to sit at home wondering if, despite the safety Griffin's business is affording us, Creelman might know where I am. I refuse to live scared. I'm getting on with my life. And that means moving ahead with the three-step plan I devised yesterday at Griffin's dad's place.

The doorbell dings as I step inside, inhaling the familiar scent of high-end clothes and the small selection of perfumes at the counter.

“Hello.” A woman who's not Vivian Lau calls to me from over at the winter coats, which look to have newly arrived.

She's taller than me by a couple of inches, and she's my age or maybe a few years older. She's very pretty, in a girl-next-door way, with her below-shoulder-length dark hair and pink cheeks. A smattering of freckles across her nose.

She reminds me a little of my older sister.

My heart tightens at that. Except for a few texts, I haven't spoken to Leila since she visited me in London with our parents last year. It was the last time we all pretended to be a family, even though both my brothers were back stateside, dealing with yet another mess Sam was in.

I shove thoughts about my family aside—it's easier than getting Griffin out of my head.

Then I notice that the woman has a pen tucked behind her ear and a stack of tags in one hand. She works here.

"Oh, hi," I say. I hope the disappointment doesn't show on my face. Looks like Vivian found the help she was looking for.

It's fine. There are a hundred other places I could work around here. Okay, maybe a dozen, and none where I know the ins and outs of the business like this one.

The woman smiles warmly. She looks so nice, and it's not her fault Vivian didn't wait for me. It's entirely mine. "Is there anything I can help you look for?" she asks.

"I'm just looking," I say. "But thank you."

"No problem." She hesitates. Then she says, "It's my second day on the job, if I'm being honest, so I might not be able to answer all your questions, but Vivian—"

"Ms. Kelly, is it now?" Vivian's voice cuts across the room like a high note on a violin. An electric violin, if there is such a thing. I didn't see her back there.

"Wow. News travels fast," I say. I'm not doing any legal name-changing, but that's what I'm going by for as long as we're fake-married. As strange as it feels, it's nice not to have to pretend I don't have a last name.

"Your sister-in-law was in here yesterday," Vivian says by way of explanation. "She chose an absolutely *gauche* blouse

for your ceremony.”

A phone rings shrilly then, and Vivian huffs, turning to grab it.

“I’m sorry.” The woman’s eyes are wide when I look back at her. “I thought the blouse was lovely.”

“It was,” I laugh. “And Vivian didn’t hate it enough to not carry it in the store.”

The woman laughs, too. “Good point. And congratulations.”

“Thank you.” I smile, feeling a warmth I shouldn’t spread over me. I try to douse it with the constant *it-isn’t-real* mantra. “Don’t worry about Vivian, by the way,” I say. “I’ve been told she’s like this with everyone.”

“I’m beginning to see that. By the end of the day yesterday, I honestly had no idea why she hired me. I was stunned when she told me to come back today.”

I smile. “I’m sure you’re doing great.”

I suddenly realize how desperate I am to make new friends. Nora’s not due back from London until Christmas, and I would love to talk to someone not related to my fake husband—not that I don’t love Griffin’s sisters.

I thrust out my hand. “Sasha...Kelly.”

“Gloria. I go by Glo, though.”

We shake warmly.

Then Vivian’s voice cuts across the room. “I told you; you don’t like the brown one,” she snaps at the phone. “It makes your neck itch, remember? Put on the yellow one. You’ll feel better.”

Glo and I exchange a glance.

“Who is that?” I ask. I can’t picture Vivian with family members, and I didn’t notice a ring on her finger.

“I have no idea.”

“Ms. Kelly,” Vivian barks. “Come here, please.”

I stand up straight like I've been caught passing notes at school. I raise my eyebrows at Gloria but head to the front of the store.

Vivian's still holding the phone. The screen says *LAU2*.

I don't notice her glaring at me until she clears her throat.

"Oh, uh, don't you want to hang that up?"

"She's fine." She leans in, peering over my shoulder. "Did you come here to shop or about the job?"

"Oh, well, I actually came here about the job, but it looks like you've hired someone wonderful. I—"

"She's terrible. I'll fire her today if you'd like to start now."

I gape. "What?" I look over my shoulder, but Glo's gone to the far side of the store, picking up what she was doing when I came in. I don't think she can hear us from here. "Why is she terrible?"

Vivian waves a hand vaguely. "I don't know. Nothing specific."

I frown. "There's nothing wrong with her, is there?"

Vivian narrows her eyes. "Do you want the job or not?"

"Not if it means firing her. Is she full time?"

"No."

"Because I'd only be looking for part time. Maybe we could both help you out."

Vivian's nostrils flare. She picks up the phone again, turning around and murmuring something I can't hear. It sounds suspiciously like she's consulting with the person on the other end of the line.

After a long pause, she turns around again. "Fine. I'll take you both if you promise to imbue some style into her."

"Vivian." I fold my arms. She knows I don't need the job, and I know I've got the upper hand here. "I'll join you if you

promise to give Glo a chance. Do not just let her go because of ‘vibes.’”

Vivian taps a finger on the glass-top counter. “Fine.”

“And be nice to her.”

“Do you want this job or not?”

I raise an eyebrow.

She grits her perfect little white teeth. “I’ll be civil.”

I smile. “Okay, then. I can start tomorrow.”

Vivian pinches her lips together. I know this look. It’s the same one Griff gives when he’s trying not to smile, except he doesn’t purse his lips so much as frown heavily.

“Nine a.m. sharp,” Vivian says. “Wait. Show me.”

It takes me a minute to understand. She wants to see my wedding ring. I hold it out for her, waiting for a word of criticism. It’s funny, Chester did the same thing this morning, though when I asked him if he was a fan of jewelry or something, he just shook his head, quiet. “It’s very nice,” he said before moving on to talk about his hens.

Now, Vivian says the same thing. Or half of it. “It’s nice.” Then she turns away, picking up the phone again.

I can’t believe it—a compliment from the ice queen. I head straight for Glo, buzzing with excitement now. “So, are you here tomorrow?”

She nods, smiling. “Yes.”

“Looks like we’ll be working together—if that’s okay with you.”

Her whole face brightens. “Are you kidding? Maybe I’ll stay after all.”

I leave the store practically skipping.

I send a quick text to Griffin to let him know I’m officially starting work tomorrow, then see I’ve missed a text from Nora, begging to hear how everything went last night.

I owe her more info, but I've hesitated to call her because we've always told each other everything. I don't know how I'll be able to keep this big secret from her.

I swallow down the strange feeling of pain that comes on the heels of my ridiculous happiness about being with Griffin and slide back into the truck without turning it on.

Nora answers on the second ring. "Oh my God, it's Mrs. Kelly!"

For a moment I panic and almost slip, but we immediately launch into a long back and forth about everything. Nora grills me about everything from the day with his sisters to the sex.

At least so far I can answer her completely honestly. "Nora, it's hands-down the best I've ever had."

"There must be something in the genes of these boys," Nora says, sighing.

But after we get all the updates out of the way, I lean back in the seat of the truck, feeling melancholy.

"I miss you, Nor. It's weird being in your hometown without you."

"I know. Not too long now, though. But hey, I've been meaning to ask you. Since you're there, would you want to pick the Eleanor mystery back up?"

I perk up. "Really?"

Eleanor Cleary had been murdered in the Rolling Hills resort six decades before the Kelly family took it over. She'd been married to an oil baron with a bad reputation and mistresses on the side. Ironically, she was said to have been murdered by a jealous lover, and that she now haunted the Rolling Hills. Whether or not Jude and Nora believed the ghost story part, they'd taken it upon themselves to get to the bottom of the story and had tracked Eleanor to Switzerland, where they'd discovered she and her lover—her husband's chauffeur, James—had had a lovechild while on a trip there.

That was where the story had gone cold.

I just couldn't believe James had murdered her. Not when he was so hopelessly devoted to her. It wasn't the weird kind of obsession, either. James was a prolific diarist, and Nora and Jude had found more than one of his journals. It was hard to reconcile the way he loved her and cared for her with that of someone who'd murder her in cold blood once they got back home to Vermont.

"I thought you might be done with the story since your documentary."

"I am. I may have archival and library research skills, but even I can't trace people where there are no records. Or classified records, like at the orphanage in the states the convent sent its children to. But Sash, you're married to a man with considerable data resources."

"You're a nerd."

"True. But so is your husband. As well as being a big, sexy protector man."

He is that. "I'd be happy to see what I can find. No promises, though."

"No pressure, either. There might not be anything left to find. The convent that took Eleanor's baby in Switzerland had hardly any useful records there, but I'll send them anyway."

I sign off, promising to be in touch if we find anything.

Then I immediately text Jude and Griffin with a shared calendar invite for the end of this week called ELEANOR: WE'RE ON, BABY.

I laugh as Jude immediately accepts.

Griffin sends me a private text.

GRIFFIN: I don't even want to know.

SASHA: Aw, you miss me already?

Three dots pop up, then disappear. He's just going to leave me on read?

Then the text pops up.

GRIFFIN: It's unhealthy how much I can't stop thinking about you.

My stomach flips. It's a good thing he's away for a few days and that I'll only be working part time. Otherwise I think I'd be willing to throw all my steps out the window just to exist carnally with this man.

But he's not, and I've still got step two to attend to. I pull onto the road, humming a song and laughing to myself like I've lost my mind thanks to the best sex of my life.

Maybe I have. But I'm good with it.

CHAPTER 28

“**Y**ou’ve lost your damned mind, you know that?” Ford’s pacing the room, one arm folded, the other rubbing his jaw.

“I’m well aware.” I set down the tablet I’ve been reading the last transcripts of Creelman’s conversations on, yawning. They’re the last transcripts we’re ever going to get, seeing as Lionel is really going through with his plan to relocate us, which means our contact in law enforcement won’t have any reasonable rationale for why they’re still sending them to us. They’re already risking their job for us; we can’t have them risk getting arrested, too.

“I’ve never once seen you in anything remotely resembling a normal, committed relationship, and now you’re wearing a ring.”

“It’s not—”

“It’s not real. You said that. Still, we’ve looked after several vulnerable women before and you never once offered to marry any of them.”

I run a hand over my head, glancing down at my phone.

He’s right. It makes no sense at all. But here I am, after only one night away from her and I’m asking her to send me photos of what she made for dinner last night.

“Why the hell do you have pictures of a hot dog on your phone, Griff? Some kind of sex thing?”

I clap my phone face down on the table. “You’ve got fucking spy’s eyes, you know that?”

It's a long-standing joke with us—Ford's got the sharpest eyes I've ever seen. And a photographic memory. It makes him irritatingly impossible to bullshit.

“Seriously, why is she sending you hot dogs?”

“Forget about it.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Right,” he says. “Sounds pretty not fucking real.”

I shove my phone into my pocket, tapping my fingers on the table. Ford's in a fucking mood, and it's not about Sasha and me.

“If you don't want to put the surveillance on Macklin, I told you to just show me how and I won't bother you again.”

My best friend leans back in his chair, massaging his temples.

“What?”

“Right. I'm going to let my best friend get arrested because you don't know how to run a wire properly.”

Now that I'm losing surveillance on Creelman, I want to at least check in on what Macklin's been up to, not least of all because there have been some worrying exchanges between Macklin and Creelman about Sasha. But tapping someone without a warrant is not only risky, it's illegal.

“I told you I didn't want you to risk jail time for me!” I shout. When I told Ford what I wanted to do, I said there was no way he was getting involved. He said there was no way he wasn't.

I force myself to calm down. “You know I could figure it out.”

“You could. But you'd fuck it up.”

“You know I wouldn't.”

He gets to his feet. “You're right. You wouldn't. But I can do it in a quarter of the time.”

After studying criminology and working for a private protection firm, Ford did a brief stint on the tech side of the FBI, running stings on drug dealers. He was the agency's preeminent expert on digital surveillance and still consults for them.

I grit my teeth. Ford's a stubborn asshole. But so am I.

"Illegal or not, I still think this is a shit idea," Ford says after a moment. "Isn't the Family Protection Policy enough?"

After this week, Sasha's family will know she's married, which means the news will get to both Sam Macklin and Vincent Creelman. Macklin will hopefully know what's good for him, while Creelman will be officially approached by Lionel's law enforcement connections, warning him to back off. That's if her new status as a married woman doesn't deter him first. Law enforcement assistance comes as an off-book part of the Family Protection Policy.

If he doesn't back up, the policy says we move to level two—manned surveillance.

"What would you say if your sister was being stalked by Vincent Creelman?"

"Fuck you," Ford says. His younger sister who gives him headaches. I wish he had a girlfriend or wife I could use for more emphasis, but Ford is the definition of no attachments—even more than me.

I don't say anything, just fold my arms.

Ford goes back to the pile of computer equipment on the floor and begins tossing stuff into the boxes.

"That a yes?"

"Of course it's a yes."

"You still think it's overkill?"

"No, actually. I don't. I'm just sick to death of Lionel breathing down my neck, and if he finds out about this—"

"I know you're risking your job."

“No. I don’t give a shit about this job, not anymore. I just don’t want Lionel to have a reason to fire me, not when I’ve given my life to this company for way too long.”

He tosses a box onto the desk. We’ve given up our lives for this job. Not because we’re suckers, but because we believed in what Lionel was doing. If I wasn’t so wrapped up in Sasha, I’d share his feelings exactly.

I do—I just have other things going on.

Guilt slides over me as I get back to helping him pack up.

“So what’s the plan long term? You coming to Texas?”

“I’m asking Lionel for desk work for a bit.”

“Great, so I’m going to get paired up with Meechum. Or Yang.”

Two great guys, but neither of us like being with other people. We both prefer working alone if we’re not on a job together. Hell, we barely tolerate each other on some of those longer jobs.

“Only for as long as it takes for me to know Sasha’s safe,” I say. “Creelman has to get tired of chasing an invisible woman at some point.”

Ford doesn’t say anything, which I know means we’re both thinking the same thing. The only way Creelman’s going to back off is if he finds another obsession, which means another woman in danger.

“Listen, I don’t feel good about it either,” I say.

“But we can’t save the whole fucking world, can we?” Ford says. It’s not the first time we’ve had this discussion. It’s depressing as fuck when we do.

He grabs another flat document box and folds it into shape. “Well, hopefully a tap on Macklin will prove more useful than Creelman. Except for a couple of key moments, he’s never given us much info anyway.”

“Guy keeps his cards close to his chest.”

Ford smirks. “Sounds like someone else I know.”

I glower at him as I dump a load of files into the box in front of me. He's right, though. Creelman and I have some things in common. We don't talk when we don't need to, we're loyal to our organizations to a fucking fault, and we both have eyes only for Sasha Macklin. There's one big difference, though: Creelman's a fucking psychopath.

And he's never laying another finger on Sasha. I'll die making sure of that.

When we're finished, Ford calls transport to come get all our materials, and we walk out onto the street together.

"You heading to Houston soon?" I ask as I get on my bike.

"Job doesn't start for a bit."

"So what? Bahamas?"

Ford gives me the side-eye. Then he says, "Nah. Maybe head out into the woods for a bit. Catch some bass."

"I keep telling you we've got the best fishing on the Quince."

"I'm not staying at your love nest."

"No need. I've got a neighbor you might like with an extra room. Could be you in the future."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing. A confirmed bachelor."

Ford would either kick my ass if he sees I've compared him to Chester or be honored I've called him a future mountain man.

"I'm good," Ford says. "There's a fishing lodge up in Greenville I've got my eye on."

A light rain starts to prick at us. It's September next week, and already, it feels like fall. The sense of time passing only makes me want to get back to Sasha as fast as I can. I don't know how long I have with her, and I want to soak up every second.

I unsnap my helmet, ready to pull it on.

“You heading back now?” Ford asks.

I shake my head. “Got an errand to run first.”

Ford nods grimly. He knows what it is. “I’ll get eyes on Macklin tomorrow.”

I don’t miss the concern in his expression as he looks out into the street. But there’s no arguing with him on this point anymore.

“I appreciate it,” I tell him as I pull on my helmet. “Oh, and Ford?” I ask, flipping my visor up. “Will you check out Sasha’s apartment? I’d do it myself, but—”

“You don’t need to explain. I’ll take care of it.”

Ford knows I don’t need to be connected to Sasha in any way.

It looks almost like he’s going to say something important, then decides against it. Instead, he says, “I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

Me, too, buddy.

Me fucking too.



When I text Lionel, he says he’s on his way to Queens and he’ll send me a pin to let me know exactly where to meet him. He loves sending fucking pins. My dad’s the same way. He sends pins when he’s at the grocery store.

I don’t like the way this makes me think of Lionel in a fatherly capacity again, though, so I remind myself about his part in putting Sasha at risk just to get my head back into the right place.

I hear the telltale ding of Lionel’s pin dropping in my GPS.

McCrae & Associates uses a military-type program that lets me do everything between apps by voice, and I tell my phone to take me there through the speaker in my helmet.

It's not until I take the highway exit that I realize where he's taking me.

Fucking asshole.

Fifteen minutes later, as I enter the grounds, I say it out loud.

Laura's plot is at the top of the cemetery, down by the long stone fence running along the western slope. It's on a small rise, and if you're facing her marker, you get a good view of downtown Manhattan.

Lionel's standing a few feet back, his hands clasped behind him. He's still a big man, nearly as tall as me, but he looks older than I've ever seen him. His back is slightly hunched, and his hair is thin in the dull gray light of late afternoon.

I know he heard me come up—the Bonneville's not quiet—but he doesn't turn.

Unlike the last time I was here, when we put Laura in the ground four years ago, the pain in my chest isn't just for me and what I lost. It's not even that blame that still hovers in the background.

It's for Lionel.

I wonder if meeting here is part of his plan, if he's doing it to make me feel guilty. But as I stop beside him, I get a glimpse of his expression.

I don't think it is. Lionel just doesn't have anyone who knew Laura the way I did. Not even his wife, Laura's mom. She didn't know what we did all day. After she raised Laura, she didn't see her even a fraction as much as her dad did.

I read the etching on the gravestone. Laura was only twenty-eight when she passed.

"I don't fucking come out here for a reason," I say.

"That's why we're here."

"It's not easy."

“It’s hell, is what it is.” Lionel shifts, and I see he’s got something in his hand. It’s a trinket. A charm bracelet—the kind my sisters used to wear when they were kids.

It was Laura’s.

“Did you buy that for her?” I ask, my throat tight.

“I did. On her tenth birthday.” He holds it out. The light’s dull today, the sky an overcast white, but I picture it glittering in the sun.

“It had nothing on it at first. She wasn’t all that impressed. She didn’t get what it was. But then I got her the first charm... it was this one.” He turns the thing over until he’s holding a bell with a deliberate crack in it. “This one wasn’t far. It was where my office was back then, in Philly.”

He examines the bracelet, switching to a charm of the Eiffel Tower. “But this was the next one. I missed her Karate belt ceremony that time.”

He lowers the bracelet, still clutching it in his hand. “Her mother said I was away too much. She was right. This bracelet—it was a guilt present. But she loved it.” He gives a humorless laugh.

This was not what I was expecting when I asked to see him. I thought we’d be in his office, that I’d tell him I wanted desk work through to the new year, and if he wouldn’t give it to me? Well, I knew he’d give it to me. He always said I could take that whenever I wasn’t feeling sharp in the field.

But this? I didn’t come here to talk about Laura. I buried Laura.

I feel a little short of breath. “Lionel,” I begin, but he holds up a finger.

One on the hand holding the bracelet. It peeks out of his fist as he shakes it at me.

“I was so fucking pissed at you, Kelly, for not telling me how it went down. I wanted every detail. I wanted to replay it in my mind, look for cracks. See where you could have done

something different and...saved my little girl.” His voice cracks on *girl*, and my heart fucking cracks along with it.

For a moment, I feel like I’m going to drown. Or maybe pass out. I shift on my feet just to make sure my legs still work.

I open my mouth to tell him I’m sorry, but he speaks first.

“But it’s not like that anymore,” he says.

I meet his eye, even though I feel like shit doing it.

“You know what I’ve realized since then?”

I work my jaw, trying to stay calm and collected for him. “What’s that?” I ask, my voice a dry rasp.

“I realized that it doesn’t matter what you would have done. You would have done everything exactly the way I would have. You were the best, and that’s why I hired you. I wanted someone to blame, and you were the easiest. So for that, I’m sorry.”

I’m so taken aback I don’t know what to say. “That’s not necessary, Lionel.”

“My wife would keel over if she knew I was apologizing to you. If she hadn’t left me.”

It’s a bad joke and we both know it.

Lionel drops the bracelet into his pocket. “Creelman is a piece of shit. I don’t like having to pull away from him. But I don’t have a choice right now. There are bigger things at play, things I don’t want you getting involved in.”

“Thought I’d been with you long enough to be trusted.”

McCrae & Associates is not old—I joined on the ground floor. We were more of a grassroots kind of place working ad hoc back then, hoping we might get a few dollars thrown our way for the next mission.

“You helped make this organization what it is. And I trusted you with my daughter’s life.”

There's a gap there, where the bitter truth sits like something ugly and raw.

"I still trust you with my own life," he says, as if trying to mitigate it. "But I need you to trust me on this one. It's better that you don't know what's going on, for your own sake."

He walks up to Laura's plot. When he kneels, his knees pop. For a minute I think he's going to pray. Or maybe break down. But he only reaches out and rearranges the fresh flowers he clearly put in the vase before I got here.

My mind spins as I try to guess what the fuck he's gotten himself into. Is it something political? Or is it higher up the chain? Creelman has a boss. His boss has a boss. Creelman may have power, but he's still a mid-level thug.

Lionel stands up again with little effort. His knees are damp. "You've forced my hand by bringing Ms. Macklin into the fold, which makes me think you must care about her. Shit, of course you do if you fucking married her."

"You know it was for her own protection."

"No. You wouldn't have offered just any woman that kind of protection and you know it."

Fuck him and Fuck Ford for both seeing right through me.

"I won't be able to use the employee defense forever," he says. "My resources are limited more than they were before. The financials—"

"I understand. I won't ask you to keep the wolves at bay forever."

"I don't even know if I can keep them at bay, period. Creelman's asking questions Macklin can't answer."

I go still. How does he know that? Ford wouldn't have shared that we were still keeping tabs on Creelman. Somehow, Lionel's got insider information.

"Creelman hasn't cooled off on her," he continues. "I think he believes her brother doesn't know where she is for now, but if he thinks Macklin's keeping her from him, he won't let him

stand in his way. We're involved in this now—you've made sure of that—and if something happens to Macklin..."

He looks at me, and I read exactly what he's telling me. We can't afford to have anyone get hurt because of us. Aside from it being against our very values, the harm or even death of a public figure—one related to an employee of the firm—would be suicide for our business. No one would be able to believe we could protect them if we were at the center of something so messy.

I think of how messy things have already gotten, thanks to my fucking feelings for Sasha.

"You keep that girl safe, Griffin. But most of all, keep your head clear. You can't afford any mistakes."

"I'll keep the lines of communication open," I say stiffly. "I'd appreciate it if you would, too. If you hear of anything—"

"You'll be the first to know if Creelman rears his ugly fucking mug."

"Thank you, Lionel."

It's weird for us to be so polite with each other. But as the man who's gotten us into this mess—one who could lose everything to one who already has—my thanks is all I have to give him.

"So, Lionel," I start, shifting my helmet to my other arm.

But Lionel waves a hand at me. "We'll send you your new project in a couple weeks. I'm hooking Ford up with Yang in Texas, and we'll check in next month to see if Creelman's moved on."

I swallow. I need to say thank you again, but Lionel only meets my eye and says, "Stay close to her, son."

I nod.

Lionel and I shake hands, and I get the strangest, most ominous feeling that I'm not going to see him again.

It's illogical—I'll be back down here soon enough. He'll probably video call me by this time next week. But I can't

shake it.

But maybe it's not that. Maybe it's the guilt of knowing I've pivoted so easily from feeling the pain of losing the last person I cared about to being completely consumed by another woman.

To falling for her.

Guilt squeezes my chest as I think about losing Sasha. I'll die before seeing her name on a stone like this one.

I can't forget about what that was like with Laura. I can't lose my fucking head before I've even made sure Sasha's safe.

"Hey, Lionel?" I ask before heading back down the hill toward my bike.

He grunts.

I pause, my eyes dancing over Laura's marker. "I won't forget about her."

Lionel's lips seem to vibrate slightly as he presses them together. Then he nods and turns back to his daughter's grave.

CHAPTER 29

Sasha

It's the middle of the night when I hear the rumble of Griffin's motorcycle. I check the clock—I only went to bed an hour ago. My head is still foggy, my muscles sore from hauling giant boxes of clothes around the store yesterday.

My heart lifts.

He came back early.

The soft sound of the lock turning into place echoes through to the open bedroom door as Griffin comes into the cabin. I smile to myself, suddenly wide awake and practically giddy.

I want to run out there to greet him. I'm fully naked—I've been sleeping that way since he's been gone, loving the thrill of being naked in his bed. Would my lack of clothes combined with my excitement be a little over the top?

I don't care about playing it cool, but I don't want to be a manic banshee flying out of the room and scaring the shit out of him, either.

The bathroom door sounds a moment later, followed by the rush and splatter of the shower. I lie back, forcing myself to stay put. The anticipation of waiting for him to slip into bed will be better anyway.

His shower feels like it takes forever, and by the time he comes in a few minutes later, I'm zinging with anticipation.

I rise up on my elbows, the sheet draped over me.

Griffin's wearing nothing but a towel.

Heat rushes between my legs at the sight of his narrow hips, the towel hanging low.

“Hey,” I say as he heads for the dresser.

Griffin pauses but doesn't turn around. “I didn't mean to wake you.”

“I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow.”

He gives this weird curt nod, then turns back to the dresser.

The tiniest prick of confusion twinges in me, but I banish it instantly. He probably thinks I want to go right back to sleep.

He pulls pajama bottoms out of the drawer and closes it softly.

I tsk. “You don't need those.” Unable to wait any longer, I flip back the blanket and crawl over the bed to him.

He must have heard the creak of the springs, but he still hasn't turned around.

I press myself against his back, slipping my arms up over his ribs.

The cool dampness of his back against my bare breasts and toweled ass firm against my stomach feel so good I let out a whimpery little breath.

“I had to work hard not to touch myself while you were gone,” I whisper. “I wanted to save it for you.” I slide my hand down his front and grin. Either I've made him very close to ready or my words have.

I move to slip my hand under the fold of his towel, but Griffin takes my wrist and presses my palm against his stomach. “Sasha, it's late.” His voice sounds slightly tight.

I go still, surprised. “What's wrong?”

Griffin lets go of my wrist and turns around, taking me in. There's a clear rush of desire on his face as his eyes rake over my naked body.

He curses softly to himself. I hear a *fuck*. But then he runs a hand over his face and says, “I was going to sleep out on the

couch tonight so I didn't wake you."

My stomach was already tightening, but now it clenches into a knot. What the hell is he doing?

"Well, I'm awake now." I know I sound defensive, but I can't stop myself.

"You should go back to sleep."

"You're too tired?"

A beat passes just a moment too long, so I know he's not being truthful when he says, "Yes."

I pull back. "If you don't want to fuck me, Griffin, just say so." I get back onto the bed, feeling wounded. I don't care about how petulant I sound. This about-face is bullshit.

I pull the sheet up tight around my breasts.

"Jesus, Sasha. It's not that."

"Then what's the problem?" I'm being obtuse now, I know it. But I don't care.

"The problem is I need to keep my fucking wits about me. It's like I've told you from the beginning. I'm letting... *feelings* get involved, and it's not good for either of us."

I sit up. "Who said anything about feelings? I'm just throwing myself at you for pure physical pleasure." I wonder if he knows I'm the one lying now. I've missed him so fucking much, and it hasn't been only physical. I missed his brooding presence. His calm and thoughtful responses to my questions. His eye on everything I'm doing like he's pretending he's not watching. That little curl of his lips when I've made him laugh that he tries to frown away. "You're just a source of pleasure to me, Griffin."

"Bullshit."

"Exactly. And you're full of it, too. It's not a crime to have feelings, Griffin. You could let yourself like me."

"I do like you." He sounds like he's getting pissed now.

"See, I don't understand the problem then."

“The problem is I need to keep you fucking *safe*.”

“Ugh!” I exclaim. My mother would have a hernia if she heard how unladylike that sound was. “When are you going to let yourself realize caring about me isn’t going to keep me any less safe? And don’t even start with that ‘cloudy head’ bullshit. What about...like...” I grasp for an example. “Parents? Parents care about their children more than any other humans care about anyone and they love the shit out of their kids. It doesn’t make any sense to me that you would want to pull back, thinking that’ll keep harm from coming to me.”

“Sasha—” Griffin sounds slightly bewildered on top of angry now.

“No. You know what? You’re right. You sleep out there—it’ll give you time to get what I said through your thick fucking head.”

Griffin’s tense, his hands tight at his sides, and I don’t miss the way his eyes drop down to my naked body again. Good. Let him look. Let him see what he’s missing.

He grits his teeth when he realizes I’ve caught him looking and makes his own angry grunt. “Fine. Exactly what I planned.”

He yanks his drawer open, pulling out what must be a T-shirt before jerking it closed again. Then he’s gone, slamming the door behind him.

I let out a sound of barely contained fury.

Then I flop back on the bed, taking no small bit of petty satisfaction in that *he* didn’t get the satisfaction of the door slamming properly. It bounced off the frame so he didn’t get his final slam in.

Outside, I hear him snap open a sheet and throw a pillow down on the couch. The whine of the springs comes next as he slams himself down on the cushions.

For a moment, there’s nothing except my own angry breathing. That obtuse fucking asshole.

“You’re so stupid,” I whisper, even as I feel the prick of tears. I wipe them away angrily. I’m right. I know I’m right, and he knows I’m right.

I pull the sheet under my chin, tossing and turning.

I’m still naked. I’m pissed about that now, too. How I’ve been lying here every night thinking about him and resisting touching myself, wanting to replicate that delicious tease he gave me—not allowing me to come so when I did it was explosive.

I know he loved it as much as I did. Maybe more.

I stop suddenly, a devious thought occurring to me as my anger still simmers.

Because of his failed slam, the door’s slightly open. I can just see the edge of the couch.

A ripple of heat goes through me. He’s right there. Fine. If he doesn’t want this, I’ll take it myself. Except, I’ll do better than taking myself away from him—I’ll make him suffer.

I slip the sheet off my body so I’m fully naked on the bed. Then I prop the pillows up behind me so I can see outside, making a little throne for myself.

Satisfied and sure there’s no movement out there—this won’t work if he’s gone to the kitchen or his shop—I run my hands over my bare body.

I focus on going slow, enhancing my own pleasure.

And making noise.

It’s easy—I’m already turned on to a thousand knowing he’s out there and hopefully wide awake, stewing his stupid head off.

I breathe hard as I slide my hands over my stomach and breasts. As my palms glide over my nipples and they pucker under my touch, I let out a whimper. I remember the way he came to me on our wedding night, the raw need in his eyes when he walked in on me.

I think about the way he went straight for my pussy, knowing exactly what he wanted and taking it.

I gasp as my hand slips between my legs, to the slick heat of my center. I didn't know I was into voyeurism. Or is it being voyeured? Whatever it is, I'm so wet already my own touch makes me moan. I graze my clit with my fingers, gasping as pleasure shoots through me at only the softest touch.

There's a sound outside. Was it the creak of the couch springs?

I widen my legs to allow more access. My pussy is bared right now. I'm fully exposed, and he's only a few feet away. I pinch my nipple with my other hand as I dip my fingers inside my entrance. I moan again, a little louder than necessary. This time, I definitely hear the couch.

I pinch my nipple hard enough for pain to pluck through me, and I gasp, rolling my hips on the bed as I run my fingers over my clit.

"Yes," I breathe to myself as I move my hand faster, tugging at my nipple as I stroke my clit with increasing speed. "*Fuck.*"

I forget myself then, arching my back as I run circles round my clit with my fingers, grasping my breast fully, kneading the nipple between my fingers. "Oh God," I moan. Some part of me is aware I'm making enough noise that if the sound of the couch moving before was a coincidence, it isn't now.

Neither is the sound of Griffin's feet padding across the floor or the soft creak of the door as it swings open.

Griffin's standing in the doorway, his chest heaving. He's still in his towel, but I can see it's hanging on for dear life with the size of his erection. He grips the sides of the doorframe with both hands.

"Sasha," he says, his voice a low rasp. His eyes are on my pussy, watching as I flick my clit. His eyes on me amps my arousal up by a factor of approximately a million.

“What?” I ask, sliding my other hand down. I dip my fingers inside myself, arching my back once more, only this time it’s for him.

“What the fuck are you doing?”

I plunge my fingers inside myself, groaning at the sensation and at the thrill of him watching.

“I’m having sex with me,” I say, pulling them back out again. “Because someone else didn’t want to.”

I sit up, my knees spread. I feel lewd. And hot. And dirty.

I love it.

I get onto my hands and knees. “You going to do something about it?” I reach between my legs. “Oh God,” I cry out as my fingers hit my swollen clit.

“Jesus, Sasha.” He strokes his length through the towel.

I moan again, and this time I see something snap. He comes over to the side of the bed and grasps a handful of my hair, tugging my head back. Then he reaches down with his other hand and wraps his fingers around my wrist, bringing the hand I was using to pleasure myself to his face. He opens his mouth, and my fingers disappear between his lips.

He makes a low, carnal, animalistic sound as he swirls his tongue around each finger. I know my taste turns him on—even with my head tilted back, I see how his cock surges.

He drops my hand, and I use it to keep my body balanced. The towel’s fully tented over his hardness, only inches from my face.

“I know you want to fuck me,” I say. “So why don’t you just do it?”

“Sasha,” he growls. “You’re going to stop talking.”

“How do you know that?” I gasp, licking my lips.

“Because my cock’s about to be stuffed so far down your throat you won’t be able to do anything but gag for me.”

Before I can say anything, he makes good on his promise. He drops the towel, and, fisting his beautiful length, he presses my jaw down with his fat head and slides into my mouth. He doesn't stop, either. He slides all the way in.

I take my opportunity to grab on to his ass, greedily pulling him toward me.

"*Fuck,*" he groans as I angle myself to take as much of him as I possibly can. He's hot and hard and he fills my mouth completely.

I moan around his cock, my whole body on fire at the feeling of him owning me like this. I watch as he unravels before my eyes, this rigid, demanding man falling apart for me until all that's left is his raw, molten core.

He thought he could be around me without feelings? If he's feeling half of what I am now, the thought is laughable. Because right now, everything about me is all about him.

The way his hard touch softens as he sinks to his hilt inside me, then tightens again as he slides out. He does it over and over again, my mouth slippery over his head, my tongue toying with him as best I can before he plunges in once more.

Finally, with a grunt, he pulls out. "No."

I shimmy up his body, clinging to him and forcing him down so his face hovers over mine. "No what? You can't stop now, Griffin." It's not so much a command as a plea. I rock my pussy against his slick cock. "Please, Griffin. I don't want to stop, I—"

"I'm not stopping, Angel," he says, his hand gripping the back of my neck. He plunges his tongue into my mouth, kissing me with an urgent need, like he's been away for years. He breaks the kiss just long enough to rasp, "How could I ever stop with you?"

He gets onto the bed, gently easing me onto my back.

His cock hovers over my lower half now, hot on my abdomen. I open my legs, wrapping them around his hips, needing him so badly I don't care if we do it just like this. No care, no thought. No safety whatsoever.

“I missed you, Griffin. I don’t like it when you’re gone.”

“Do you think I can stand to be apart from you for more than a fucking second?”

I smile. “You’re getting sappy on me.”

He grunts, closing his eyes as I reach down and draw his length along my opening. “I don’t know what’s happening to me, Sasha.”

His vulnerability makes my chest ache.

I know this feeling. I’ve been here before, but not like this. This feels bigger. Wider. More dangerous.

Like if I fell, I’d be gone forever.

“Come here,” he says, seeing something on my face. He rolls over, taking me with him. I lie on top of him, feeling the beat of his heart under my ear. “You okay?”

I nod against his chest. “I am now. I’m better than okay, Griffin.”

I sit up.

Will you take care of me, even when the danger is gone?

I don’t say the words, but I wonder if he sees them in my eyes, because his expression shifts to something so tender it makes my breath catch.

“Do you care about me?” I ask. The words are pathetic, but I need to hear him tell me. I need them like a balm on a wound.

“Sasha,” he says, his thumb stroking my cheek. “Christ, you’re the only thing I care about right now.”

“That’s not true.”

“It’s true.”

I rise up onto my knees, soaking up this open version of him, knowing tomorrow he’ll be a vault again. Only maybe, hopefully, a vault with the door cracked open just a little.

I smile, blinking away the tears that were threatening to come. That maybe already came and I was too wrapped up to

notice. “Show me, then,” I whisper. I’m straddling him now, and I rise up on my knees.

Griffin makes a feral sound then. “I thought you’d never fucking ask.”

He slides down, hooks his hands over my hips, and pulls me down onto his face.

I cry out as his tongue hits my slit, toying with the place I had my fingers moments ago, thinking only of him.

I let myself fall into him, grabbing on to the headboard and holding on for dear life as he devours me. He may be a man of few words, but he knows exactly what to do with his mouth.

I come hard almost immediately, the pleasure so intense I go ramrod straight. I’m so loud he reaches a hand up to press his fingers against my mouth.

I can see the smile in his eyes, though, as I come down off my fall, shaking into a heap over him.

“Chester’s going to think you’re in trouble,” he says, laughing softly against me.

“I am in trouble,” I say, unable to fully form a thought just yet, except that I’m not ready to be done. “And so are you if you don’t fuck me properly, Griffin Kelly.”

Those words clearly test his restraint, which already looks to be on the thinnest tether. “You can’t talk to me like that, Angel.”

“Why not? I need to be fucked.” I push back, nipping at his bottom lip. “By you.”

“Jesus,” he practically growls. “I think you want me to destroy this pussy, don’t you?”

I grin wickedly. “Make me walk funny for a week.”

He grunts as he presses my thighs up against my ribs, spreading me wide for him. “This is what you wanted, baby. Remember that.”

I nod enthusiastically. I’ve never been more ready. “Now, Griffin.”

He slams into me with a force just shy of violence.

I cry out, and his face is so stricken I almost laugh. I'd sound crazy if I did.

"No." Desire runs through me even hotter than a moment ago, which I didn't think was possible. "Don't apologize. Do it again."

He pops his jaw. "I can't...control myself right now."

"Then don't," I say, tugging him down to me. I dig my nails into his back, hard enough for him to suck in a breath. "Don't stop again."

The last of that control vanishes, burned up like a piece of paper dropped on a roaring fire.

"Baby," he says as he slams into me, his face to the side of mine. He grips the headboard, and I marvel at the beauty of his body—the muscles flexed along his side, his arms, his front.

"Sweet baby girl..." He pulls out and thrusts again, sliding me across the bed, over and over again. He fucks me so hard this seemingly solid bed thuds against the wall.

I cry out as he ravages me. I cling to him like I'm drowning and he's the only thing keeping me afloat. Like he's the only thing in the world that matters. That my whole life depends on him.

It's too much, I know. Too much and too fast. But I finally understand what he means by trying to keep his head clear. It's hard to think rationally when all I want to do is stay wrapped up in this man.

It's not real, it's not real, it's not real.

I say it in my head as I come, but the words lose all meaning, because this—*this*—is the realest I've ever felt.

CHAPTER 30

“**T**he trick is going to be the element of surprise,” Sasha says as she pops a piece of toast and honey into her mouth. She runs her finger down her little clipboard, reading through her list for the hundredth time. I sit across from her, sipping my coffee, wondering how feasible it would be to appoint a full security team to my place.

“It’s the only way he won’t turn us away,” she says.

She’s talking about Chester.

Sasha told me yesterday when she got home from work that she hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Chester and his porch since she walked him home the other day. “Maybe that’s why he’s always over here. Not that I mind. I just think we should be able to go visit him on his porch sometimes.”

I nod. I’m listening to her, but my mind is still ticking over something else, too.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” I say. I get up to pour more coffee while Sasha wonders out loud whether brown or beige stain would be better for Chester’s porch. She’s not talking to me, so I allow my mind to linger on the call I got from Ford last night.

It was midnight when my phone buzzed on the bedside table. Sasha was already asleep, wrapped up in my arms. I hated slipping away from her, but Ford wouldn’t have called at that hour if he didn’t have something important to say.

I slipped into my workshop to answer it.

“He was at her place,” Ford said. No preamble, which I normally appreciated. But right then, it felt like a fucking gut punch.

“Tell me.”

“The lock was intact,” Ford said. “It all looked good on the surface, but I got a bad feeling. Plus I saw the marks.”

Evidence that the lock had been tampered with.

I paced the grease-stained concrete floor while Ford explained how the drawers in the dresser were opened.

“Some of her underwear was scattered on top.”

I balled my fists so tight my knuckles cracked.

“Seemed weird that only that was fucked with,” Ford continued.

“What else?” I practically snarled.

“The doorman didn’t remember anyone strange going up, but when I got our tech guys to get into the camera feed just now, I saw what went down.”

I tell him not to leave out a single fucking detail.

“It was them. That big-ass ugly fucker was posing as a delivery guy.”

The guy from the restaurant.

“Started freaking out about a box. Pretty good acting, honestly. I’d have bought it if I hadn’t seen photos of the guy driving a van full of underage girls over the Ohio turnpike last year.”

I starting seeing spots. “Keep going.”

“The distraction was all it took.” While the doorman’s back was turned, Ford said, Creelman himself had slipped inside.

My stomach felt like it had been turned inside out. But it paled in intensity compared to the rage coursing through my veins.

“So yeah, you were right to do what you needed to, Griff.”

He meant marrying Sasha. He'd used fake credentials generated by McCrae to get into her building, McCrae technical support to make a key to her unit, and the McCrae data team to hack into the building's security cameras. Access to all of those company resources was only possible because of Sasha falling under Lionel's Family Protection Program.

"Seems like a good idea to lay low up there a while longer," Ford said.

I agreed. But it took a long time to fall asleep.

Now, with a full night's sleep behind me—well, five hours, but good enough—and Sasha safe beside me, I feel less like I want to hunt Creelman down and more like it's a good fucking thing we're sequestered up here in Quince Valley.

I know the feeling won't last, but while it's here, I force myself to relax. To focus on being here, living a normal, happy life of domesticity with my wife.

Fake wife, but fuck if we're acting like that right now. I can't stop thinking about what Sasha said that night I came back from the city. How caring about someone doesn't have any bearing on how well you can *take* care of someone. Logically, I know that. But I can't let myself feel everything, can I?

I shove these thoughts aside for now, reminding myself about that relaxing I was trying to do.

"Chester had some tools and wood out on the porch," Sasha's saying, "but it all looked like it'd been there a while. There's a tarp over some of the wood that has puddles and moss growing on it."

Guilt runs through me. "I should have pushed back when he said no to me fixing it."

"You already fixed his roof for him."

I grimace. "Yeah, but I put the hole through it." I'd laid plywood down for Chester after I busted his porch so he could still cross over it to get to his chickens until I could come back to fix it, but Chester put up a huge stink. He insisted he'd do

the repairs himself. Didn't want me messing around on his porch.

I didn't push it at the time, mostly because I'd just finished doing his roof. It had been a painful experience. It was half doing the job, which would have been fine. But the other half was Chester control. He kept trying to come up the ladder to help me, no matter how many times I told him I was good and that I needed him to stay on the ground. He's not steady on his feet, and I didn't want to spend my time up there worrying he was going to fall off the roof.

Sasha sighs. "Must be so hard being self-sufficient your whole life and suddenly not being able to do things on your own."

She circles something on her list—which I know is all the materials we're going to need to fix his porch—then taps her pen against her plump bottom lip. I'm getting to know that when Sasha gets something on her mind, she gets laser focused. I love that about her, even if I don't want it to be true right now, because God help me, even her checking off lists is sexy.

She stands up, coming over to the coffeepot beside me with her empty mug. It's still brewing, so she sets her mug on the counter next to mine. I can tell she's still thinking about Chester. "Getting old must be hard." She looks at me. "What's it like?"

I grumble, then hook my arm around her waist and pull her toward me.

It feels good to forget about everything hard in the world.

She feels like a good way to forget.

I lift her up off her feet. "I'm barely six years older than you, woman."

She giggles, wrapping her legs around my waist. "Exactly. A whole child."

I open my mouth to give her a piece of my mind, but my phone buzzes in my pocket.

I groan, hating that I'm going to have to let go of her to get it. "I wish I was in a line of work where I could ignore calls."

"That's okay," she says. Then, before I can process what she's doing, she reaches under her leg and slips her hand into my pocket. "Got it," she says, handing it over.

Or at least, she aims it at me, but she doesn't let go.

I spot it at the same time Sasha does. She's got the phone facing her. It's Cass calling, which should make me relieved, since it's not Ford again.

But it's not the name that has Sasha going silent. There on my lock screen is that photo she sent me of her and my niece.

Heat rushes up my neck, right into my cheeks.

"You saved it?"

I try to set her down, but she clings tight, still staring at the photo.

"Why not?" I say defensively. "It's cute."

"You don't like babies."

"I like *that* baby."

"So that's why you have our picture on your phone?"

My eyes meet hers, my mouth suddenly dry. The phone stops buzzing. One missed call from Cass, it says in a little box on the screen.

"Give me that," I grumble, taking the phone away from her as I lower her onto her feet.

She's smirking at me, and I want to kiss it right off her face.

But the coffee sounds stop and she looks toward the machine.

"Do you have any travel mugs?" she asks softly.

I turn around to the cupboard. But my hand's almost shaking as I pull the mugs down.

Because I know now it's impossible for me to keep my feelings out of what Sasha and I have. It's no longer possible to be around her and pretend I don't care about her more than any other client. That night when I came home from the city, I tried my very fucking best to stay away from her. Then I folded like a fucking cheap lawn chair.

So a few minutes later, as we put on our shoes and walk along the forest path over to Chester's place, coffee in hand, I watch the way Sasha's hair dances across her back as she laughs. I let myself fall into the joy of her happy teasing.

I let myself feel. I let myself, for the first time without resistance, imagine a future with Sasha, as terrifying as having that kind of hope is.

Because getting wrapped up in Sasha is the only thing that mostly keeps my mind off the danger outside this town.

The danger I can't help but feel is creeping ever closer to us.



The old stone house Chester inherited from his grandfather—a small two-bedroom bungalow—looks slightly forlorn in the overcast day.

“Chester?” I call as we cross the yard.

Only his chickens respond from the back, clucking excitedly.

While Sasha goes around to the front to knock on the door, I check out the back porch. It's not big, and because Sasha's insisting on doing it with me, it'll probably only take a couple of days. We'll need to go to Greenville to get lumber, though. That's next on Sasha's list after the measurements we're here to take now.

“I don't think he's home,” Sasha says when she comes back.

“He must be out hunting,” I say. But when I check around the side of the house where he parks his ancient Buick—the one I come over and run every time I’m back home to make sure it still works—I’m surprised to see it’s gone.

“He didn’t answer.”

The concern in Sasha’s voice has me turning around. Her hand comes to her mouth in that nervous gesture, but she lowers it again. Her nails are perfectly shaped, and somehow they’ve changed color since yesterday.

She sees me looking. “Like it? I’d probably do better at this kind of work with shorter nails, but these make me happy. And it’s either these or nails bitten down to the quick, which doesn’t go so well with all my nice clothes.”

She’s babbling. She does that when she’s nervous. “I’m doing that talking a lot thing, aren’t I?” She taps her nails to her lips again.

“I like it,” I say. But then again, I like everything about her.

Her face is etched with concern as she walks over to look into the darkened windows at the back of the house.

“He’s not here, Angel.”

I tell her how his car’s missing, and she relaxes slightly.

“Do you think he’s going to be okay?” She sees my eyebrow lift and says, “I mean generally. He seems more tired than usual. And last time I saw him, he was breathing funny.”

I frown. “What do you mean, funny?”

“It just seemed a little shallow.”

Worry threatens to poke itself into my mind, but I stare it down. “He’s slowed down a lot since I first met him,” I say.

Sasha does the finger thing, and I beckon her over to me, opening my arms.

She meets me in a hug that feels so good my own breathing goes shallow.

Why does she have to find someone new to worry about when she's got enough to worry about herself?

"I'll check in with him next time I see him," I promise. "If he's not feeling well, I'll get the clinic to send someone up here to check on him. They've done it before."

She tips her face up to me, locking her arms around my waist.

I stroke her hair back from her forehead. Fuck, she's so beautiful. When she looks all concerned like this, it makes me want to break my leg so she'll shine all that affection and worry on me. I kiss her forehead. "I bet he'll feel better when he can sit out on his porch aiming his shotgun at squirrels again."

She laughs softly. "Does he ever actually catch any of them?"

"I don't think he really wants to."

Eventually we pull apart and Sasha goes over to her clipboard. I pull out my measuring tape and walk around to the side to get started.

Something feels off with my neighbor, but I don't dwell on it. Chester may be a hermit, but he's been known to enter town when things get desperate and I'm not around to do errand runs for him. Plus, he's getting old. He'll be eighty next year, if I recall correctly.

There are a lot of people getting on in my life. Chester. Dad. Lionel.

But there's no use in dwelling on any of that right now. Like I always tell my sister Cass, a chronic overthinker, worrying never made anything better.

Instead, we take measurements, Sasha writing them down on her little notepad while I try not to look disrespectfully at her ass as she bends over with the measuring tape.

When we're done, Chester's still not home.

CHAPTER 31

The next town over from Quince Valley isn't as pretty as home, but it's only a half hour away and boasts a plethora of big box stores, including a lumber depot.

Sasha insists on driving. "I'm going to forget how to do stuff if you're always the one doing it," she says.

I don't know what she's talking about, given she's driven into town plenty of times while I've been working at home, both for errands and to her shifts at Bijou.

But I hand the keys over to her, and she skips over to the driver's side. I try to ignore how she's the most adorable fucking thing I've ever seen. I try to ignore the bigger feeling that comes on the heels of that thought as she cranks up the radio when she discovers they're playing a Reese Franco song. It feels like my heart's stuck in a fist. The worst part is, it isn't mine. I have no control over how hard it squeezes.

Ford calls me as we're on the highway, and I let out a breath, glad for the distraction. I lean forward to turn the music down a little, and Sasha seamlessly takes her solo down to miming.

"What's up?" I ask Ford.

"I got the tap in place."

I shift in my seat. "Okay." I haven't told Sasha I'm going to be monitoring her brother. I will, I just haven't yet. "That's great, thanks."

"You're with Sasha, aren't you?"

"Of course."

He sighs. “Well, try to pay attention. I was thinking about taking a little trip over your way.”

“Oh.” Not what I was expecting. “Are you okay?”

“I’m not dying or something, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“I was.”

“Nah, I just miss you.”

“Fuck you.”

Ford chuckles. “I’m heading out to Houston after I wrap up here, and it’ll be a while before we’re in the same room for a bit. I just want to chat a bit about what we talked about back in Bern.”

I blink. Bern. That was a couple of years ago. Back when...

“Oh.”

We were out at a pub after successfully handing a client over to one of our safe houses. Our client had gone public with her information, and we were on our way to landing fat bonuses from Lionel for how well the whole mission had gone.

But we’d both struggled with that project. Our feelings about how things should have gone had diverged from Lionel’s. It wasn’t the first time, but it was the most significant. We’d helped a woman who’d uncovered a web of sexual harassment at her Fortune 500 company that went far, wide, and ugly. Lionel had wanted to focus on the company breaking its policies. We wanted to blow the lid off this kind of behavior in the whole industry, and in response, Lionel had told us to keep our dicks in our pants.

Ironic, given the news story we’d just helped break.

Ford and I had both been pissed. We were both most passionate about the cases like these, where asshole men were thinking with their dicks and not their brains, throwing their female employees under the bus while touting equality out the other side of their mouths.

“Yeah,” Ford says now, bringing me back. “I think it’s time we had this conversation again, especially considering how things have been going.”

“You know I’m up for it.”

I hang up the phone feeling energized about work for the first time in a long time. And guilty as fuck for thinking about abandoning Lionel, no matter how bad things have gone.

“Everything good?” Sasha asks. We’re just pulling into the parking lot of the Lumber Depot.

“My friend Ford’s coming to Quince Valley. He wants to meet you.”

I grin.

“This is Ford from work? I can’t wait. He sounds handsome.”

“He *what?*”

“You know. That time I picked up your phone when you had grease all over your hands.”

I grimace. “It was supposed to be Chelsea.”

“*I’ve heard a lot about you, Sasha.*”

Her mimicking of Ford’s voice would make me laugh if it weren’t for the spike of jealousy running through me. “You know what? I’ll just tell him I’ll meet him in the city next time I’m there.”

“No way.” She throws the truck into park. “He can come out to the bar with us. We’ll be there to talk ghosts anyway.”

I groan. I’d forgotten about that meeting she’d set up. Jude had rescheduled it twice, first due to something going on with the non-profit he ran and the next because of back-to-school teacher interviews. We were locked in for next week, though, he promised.

“Let’s just get this wood and get back home so I can show you exactly how much I don’t care about you thinking Ford sounds sexy.”

Sasha hops out of the truck before I can go over and open the door for her. I scowl, even as she kisses my cheek and especially when she whispers, “I like you a little jealous.” Even though she makes me blush.

The trip inside is quick—we know exactly what we’re there for, and we end up buying the longest lengths of lumber the store’s got. Sasha also insists on getting three brand-new rocking chairs with padded seats we see on a “last chance” display of outdoor furniture.

“One for each of us,” she says, smiling. I have to look away. The rocking chairs have a permanent kind of feel that belies our shorter-term arrangement.

“These are going to stick out of the bed, Angel.” I warn her about the lengths of wood as we load them onto the flatbed cart. “By a lot.” Luckily the rockers come flattened so everything should still fit.

“I’m still driving home.”

I’m not sure if she’s still convinced that’s the best idea once we reach the parking lot. She moves the smaller pieces of lumber herself, but I have to get up onto the tailgate to strap on the big pieces.

Sasha huffs as she throws the next smaller piece on the load a shade too hard. It’s only then I notice there’s a woman nearby looking quickly away. Was she looking at me?

I pay attention after that and see Sasha puff herself up every time a woman passes by, whether she’s looking at me or not.

I have to try hard not to smile. “You all right?” I ask when I hop down off the back once it’s all secure.

“I’m fine,” she says as I strap the red flag to the back.

“You sure? You looked a little jeal—”

“I said I’m fine. You look a little sweaty. Your arms are all glisteny.”

“Is that a word?”

“You stink, too.”

I clench my jaw to keep myself from laughing. “You’re cute when you’re jealous, Angel,” I say, kissing her forehead.

“I’m not—ugh, *so* sweaty!”

“You sure you want to drive?”

“I said I did, didn’t I?”

Now it’s my turn to practically whistle as I head around to the passenger side of the truck.

Sasha does a good job of pulling out of the parking stall slowly, making sure no one’s around as she navigates our extra-long load.

My cheery mood continues...until the blast of a horn startles Sasha into slamming on the brakes. The horn sounds again. Not once, but three times. Long, hard honks.

I glare in the side mirror.

The truck tries to edge around us, but Sasha’s blocking their way. “What the hell!” she says. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, you’re doing everything right, sweetheart. Ignore him.”

“I’m in his way—”

“That’s how parking lots work.”

I need to heed my own advice, though, because when he lays on the horn again, anger flares in my chest.

The other people in the parking lot are starting to stare, pausing in their loading of trunks and trucks.

I can see him angling his head out the driver’s side window. He’s young. Cocky. “Learn how to drive!” he hollers.

“Jesus,” Sasha says. But her hands tremble as she works the gearshift, trying to get the truck back into reverse.

The asshole lays on the horn again.

“Put it into park.”

“What?”

I kiss her on the cheek as I undo my belt. “Please.” I do a bang-up job of keeping my voice steady, given the anger rolling through my veins.

She pushes the stick up.

“Stay here,” I say before calmly opening my door and jumping out.

The guy didn’t see me in the passenger-side mirror. All he could see was a beautiful blond woman trying her hardest to move an oversized load around a tight fucking parking lot and decided to be an asshole.

He realizes his mistake as I round the front of my truck and appear on the driver’s side. Maybe it’s my size or maybe it’s my ugly mug. Maybe it’s the way I’m not exuding the irritation he was expecting. I’m a calm fucking rock.

A rock with red-hot lava bubbling underneath.

“Hey man, I...”

He trails off as I come right up to his open window.

I lay my hand on the roof of his car and lean in. “Hey, buddy.” I pause, as if searching for just the right words. “I’m just wondering—where’s the fire?”

“What?” He screws up his cocky little face.

“I said, where’s the fucking fire?”

“Fire? I just want to—”

“If you were fleeing a fire, I’d understand this kind of impatience. I’d move the hell out of your way. But there’s no fire.” I raise my voice. “My wife is trying to back up a load of lumber without sending it through your front windshield, *Final Destination* style. So first, count yourself lucky she’s looking out for you. But second, if you lay on this horn one more fucking time, I’m going to come back, flip up this flimsy-ass little hood, and rip that horn right out of your truck. Then I’m going to get back into my truck and ask her kindly to move over so I can gun it in reverse at just the right spot so that

wood narrowly misses your head. I've got good aim. I'll do it. I'll probably go to prison for a little while, but I've got a few connections. I'll be out on bail in a year, and then I'll look you up and make your life a living hell for as long as I feel like it, because I'm patient like that. Unlike some assholes. Do you understand me?"

The man's face has gone pale, but he can't seem to find his words. Finally, he says, "You're fuckin' crazy, man." Then he shoves his truck into reverse, and with a peal of tires, backs all the way out and screeches through another exit, making another car swerve and honk.

A smattering of applause sounds from around the parking lot, and a woman passes with her husband. I catch her hissing, "I could use even half that kind of support when I'm parallel parking, Brian!"

When I get back in the truck, I'm still breathing hard, but not as hard as Sasha.

"What the hell was that?" she demands.

I open my mouth, but not fast enough to speak before Sasha throws herself on me, her arms tangling around my neck, her lips kissing my mouth and nose and cheeks in a flurry.

"I should be mad at you," she says when she finally releases me. "Pulling that caveman shit."

Then she kisses me again.

I can't stop my hands from holding her close, letting the last of my anger drain out of me. Honestly, half of that anger wasn't even for the little shit behind us. It was at Creelman. At Sasha's brother.

At the masked man who shot Laura all those years ago, leaving her to bleed out on the floor while I showed up too late.

But right now, that anger's gone, and all I know is the intensity of my feelings for the woman in my arms.

“It was overboard,” she says when she pulls far enough away to speak. She grips my head in her hands. “But you went overboard for me.”

“Assholes need to be called out sometimes. That’s all.”

I pull her back into me and kiss the shit out of her for so long that I can tell the person behind us wants to honk but doesn’t dare.

A minute later, as she puts the truck into drive, calmly turning us in the right direction, she says, “Thank you, Griffin.”

I brush her hair off her cheek, swallowing down the words threatening to spill out of my mouth. Instead, all I say is “I love being your apeshit caveman.”

Which also happens to be true.

CHAPTER 32

Sasha

The next couple of weeks pass surprisingly quickly. I keep myself busy with work, spending time with Griff, Glo, and of course, Chester and his deck. There's a lot more to do than just replace the boards, and I learn more than I ever wanted to know about concrete foundations. I come to the belated realization that not all DIY is for me.

As Griff suspected, the most difficult aspect of this project is dealing with Chester, who just about lost it when we came over with the lumber after that day at the store.

"I told that hammerhead I'm fine to do the deck myself," he said when we pulled up in the truck with the wood that first day. He wore himself out cursing at Griffin about it, overlooking the fact that it was me spearheading the mission, no matter how many times I told him.

Griffin threatened him with the doctor, which sent Chester into a new fit.

We stayed away for a couple of days, during which time the doctor apparently came by and told Chester he needed to rest. "Hogwash," he told us when we came by next.

But he didn't stand in our way as we began prying up the old boards.

Then several days of rain came, and while we were waylaid, I read up on all things Eleanor Cleary and did minor beautification projects around the cabin. Griffin, meanwhile, spent whole days at his desk in his shop, breaking only to eat and check in on me, and once, to run me a bubble bath and give me a foot massage because I said Vivian had run me off

my feet that day. Watching that big man work his big hands on my feet had me swooning almost as much as I did when I thought about that moment in the parking lot.

Griffin's been amazing, and not just at standing up for me at lumber stores, either. He helps when I need him and stays out of my way when he gets itchy about something I'm doing. Despite the way he keeps his cabin orderly, he's not particular about it. He lets me rearrange items and bring in new art and potted plants and throw pillows. He never criticizes like my mom used to do about literally everything I ever tried. If he's concerned about what I'm doing, he just retreats to his shop.

It's almost like I'm not hiding out in his small town, fake-married to this man because I'm on the run from a terrifying situation created by my own brother.

The longer I stay here, the longer I can go almost forgetting these facts. But they're always there, thrumming in the back of my mind, no matter how perfect this life is looking from the outside.

Or feeling from the inside.

But today the sun is out, the air cool and crisp, and the leaves already beginning to turn from green to yellow and orange as I pour my coffee in Griffin's kitchen. He's already at his desk, but an hour ago, when I woke up breathing hard from a bad dream about being back in the city—I've been having a lot of those—he calmed me down with his sleep-gruff voice in my ear, his hand stroking my hair as I curled into him.

That led to some incredibly delicious morning sex in the shower, where Griffin had me up against the wall losing it as he gently thrust his big length into me, still whispering those sweet reassurances into my ear.

Now, after I run to the shop to give him a lingering kiss goodbye before heading out to the truck, I think about how it would be a great day to work on the deck. But I'm off to a shift at Bijou. I work at the shop two afternoons a week and one morning. I'm not upset about it—I like spending time around my favorite mode of artistic expression. Best of all, most of my shifts cross over with Glo. Behind her hand,

Vivian says it's because Glo needs more training. But I'm not sure what Vivian's smoking, because Glo is amazing. She works hard, and we work well together, restocking and reorganizing the store for the winter season while helping customers as they come in.

On our first shift together, I learned she used to be the CEO for some marketing firm in San Francisco.

"What on earth are you doing way over here working in a clothing store?" I asked, slightly incredulous, when she told me that.

She hadn't looked me in the eye. She just gave a quick smile and said, "I needed a change of pace."

There has to be more to her story. But I don't press it, because I have my secrets, too. But I'm grateful for Glo. Our friendship might be in its infancy, but my first instincts about her were on point. She's an amazing person. She's smart and funny, and unlike lots of people I've worked with at high-end clothing shops, she's down to earth, too.

While we've only been friends for a few weeks, we mesh so easily it feels like we've known each other for years. We talk through our whole shifts as we work, pausing only when customers come in or Vivian stops by on her way to see her sister. We've been out for drinks a couple of times, and she's been over for dinner twice now, too.

It's not until we meet for coffee like we have been and stumble into the topic of what our plans are for the future—and we both kind of trail off—that I decide if there's anyone I can open up to besides Griff, it's Glo. And I've been desperate to open up to a friend.

Surprisingly Betsey's is almost empty. It's nearly unheard of, even on a late weekday morning.

I decide, spontaneously, to tell a version of the truth.

"Well, the truth is, I can't make any plans right now. I'm kind of hiding out here."

Glo's shapely brown eyebrows go up, but her expression is encouraging. So, heart pattering, I forge ahead with something

close enough to the truth that my feelings are honest.

“I had an...overzealous ex-boyfriend who wouldn’t take no for an answer,” I tell her. While it makes me ill to call Vincent an ex, even if it’s a lie, it’s a bit less alarming than “criminal stalker.”

“Griffin and I were...seeing each other,” I say, trying to remember the wording I used with Griff’s family. “He suggested we come back here for a bit to put some distance between me and my ex.”

Of course, I don’t go into the fact that we fled New York City. But I try to describe how scared I was and say we left quickly enough that I walked out on everything there.

It’s only when I finish talking, feeling like a huge weight has been lifted off my chest, that I notice Glo looks kind of wobbly. She’s holding her banana bread wrapper so tightly her knuckles are white.

“Sasha,” she says. “I’m so sorry.”

Regret hits me instantly. I said too much. “It’s fine,” I say, even though it’s not fine.

But to my surprise, she chews her lip, then says, “Can I tell you something?”

“Of course.” I haven’t scared her off at least.

“I’m hiding, too.”

I’m shocked, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t relieved to have someone who understands. Then concern overtakes everything else. I wouldn’t wish this kind of anxiety on anyone.

She looks over my shoulder toward the window behind me, as if the danger is still out there. Then back at me, her voice lowered. “It’s my ex-husband. I found out he was into some stuff he shouldn’t have been while we were together. Some really bad stuff.”

I lean forward, taking her hand.

Glo waves, her eyes welling. “It’s fine. But I can’t really talk about it yet.”

“I understand.”

She shrugs. “I just feel kind of rootless, you know? This town, it’s so pretty, but it feels like I didn’t get far enough away from him. From everything.”

“Do you think you’ll settle here or keep going?”

She sips her coffee. “I don’t know. What about you? I guess that’s a discussion between you and Griffin.”

I swallow, looking down. It is. Or it might not be. Maybe we’ll just shake hands at the end of all this and speak to each other through lawyers and divorce papers. The thought is so depressing I ask for a piece of Glo’s banana bread.

She slides the whole thing over to me. “What about career-wise, Sash? Do you ever think about what you want to do long term?”

I have. I’d love to do something with fashion, but I have no idea what. The industry itself doesn’t really appeal to me, but the clothes do, so I don’t know where that leaves me except retail. Plus, I’m not sure how to align my desire to do good with fancy clothes.

But I don’t say all that. I try to shrug it off with a joke like I always do when thinking about my future. “What, you mean you’re not going to work in Vivian’s shop until you retire?” I ask.

Glo snorts. “I mean...if you do.”

We both laugh. But I can still hear that nagging voice in my head that this can’t be it for me.

Glo sighs. “I liked my job. I was honestly almost as pissed at my husband for having to leave it than about what he did.” Then she blanches. “That’s not true at all. But I do miss it.”

“Could you get a marketing job here?”

“Not like I had there. I got to call all the shots. The only way I could really do that would be to start my own firm. And

I just can't even think of how much energy it would take to go out on my own."

I get the sense she doesn't love being on her own, just like me.

"So Bijou it is."

She laughs. "Exactly, and actually, we better get going. Vivian will have a field day if we're both late."

Viv likes nothing more than to have a real crime to snap at us for.

On our way to the shop, I glance over at Glo, an idea occurring to me. "Hey, what do you think about coming out with Griff and me tomorrow night?" I explain how we're meeting his brother to talk ghosts at the Rolling Hills.

Glo lights up. "Hey, I stayed there when I first got to town. There's *a ghost?*"

"Sort of," I laugh. I fill her in on everything as we walk to Bijou.

When we come through the doors, Vivian's looking at her watch, her face snippy, which isn't unusual.

"Just in the nick of time, ladies. I was beginning to wonder if I should call the fire department."

"That would be fun," I say. "I've seen those guys around town."

Glo snorts, turning back to the rack she was working on before our break.

But when I look up at Viv again, I can see she isn't laughing. She's looking at us with a kind of...sadness. Or maybe a yearning.

My heart twists.

Over the past couple of weeks, I've learned Vivian's not the evil ice queen everyone says she is. She's taking care of someone on the other end of that phone—I hear her tender words between her sharp barks. I wonder if she's ever had a

friendship like the one Glo and I have—instant and close. Or if she'd even want that.

But then the bell jingles, and the spell is broken. As another woman comes into the shop, I vow to invite Vivian over to my place once things calm down. I know she'll give me an earful about all the things I've done wrong in decorating, but I suspect inviting her somewhere just for her might warm her icy heart just a little, too.

My attention goes to the woman who's come in. She looks young—younger than me. She's thin and pale and tucks her hair behind her ear. She looks around nervously, like she doesn't know where to start.

“Hey,” I say, coming up to her and smiling.

She startles when I speak to her—I'm off to the side, and Glo's fully hidden as she rearranges shoes on a low shelf. She clears her throat tentatively, as if building up the nerve to speak.

She's painfully shy. She reminds me of Nora when we first met in London.

I give her a warm smile. “Can I help you find anything?”

“Yes. I, um, I have a job interview. A really important one.” Her smile comes out then, but it quickly disappears. Clearly this is a hard-won interview, because if I wasn't mistaken, I'd swear that was the tiniest glimmer of pride. “But I have no idea what to wear.”

“Can you tell me about where the job is?”

The woman explains it's in the administrative office of the hospital. Glo stands up and smiles encouragingly, and we come to learn it's the woman's first big office job. She just finished her office administration training at Greenville College. She shifts, and it's then I notice a fast-food uniform under her coat. “I don't have much time,” she says. “I have to pick my son up at school soon, but I thought maybe I could try something on and, um, put some money down for it? Do you...have layaway? My interview is next week, but I could pay you after—”

“No,” Vivian says. I hadn’t noticed her coming up behind us. “We don’t do *layaway* here, and certainly not after a customer leaves the shop with our clothing. You can’t leave the store without paying for items in full.”

“Vivian,” Glo says. Her anger’s showing. “We can let her try something on.”

“Are you joking?” Vivian sniffs. “Our blouses cost more than this girl is paid in a month at Burger Barn or whatever place whose employ she’s in.”

The girl’s eyes have gone wide, and I can see her swallowing hard, her eyes rimmed red. She’s holding back tears.

Now *my* anger flares, all charitable thoughts about my boss from a moment ago vanished. “Glo, why don’t you and—what’s your name, honey?”

“Melissa,” the woman squeaks.

“Why don’t you and Melissa check out the *Going Soon* rack?” The fall clothes are on sale, though the discount only brings them down from atrocious to insulting.

Glo nods, immediately understanding what I’m about to do. “Come on, Melissa. I bet we can find something amazing over here.”

“Excuse me,” Vivian says, but I hook my arm through hers like we’re going for a stroll.

“Come with me a minute,” I say, tugging her none too gently in the opposite direction.

I’ve surprised her enough that she claps her mouth shut and comes with me to the front desk, far away from *Going Soon*.

“Vivian,” I whisper once I’ve tugged her behind it. “What do you have against someone trying on clothes—someone who could use a little confidence boost?”

“She’s never going to buy anything from this store. Don’t you know that? I thought you were a smart girl.”

“Right. That’s why you hired me, right? You think I’m smart?”

“Not anymore, I don’t.”

I fold my arms. “Tell me why you like me so much, Vivian.”

She huffs, narrowing her eyes. “I don’t like you right now.”

“Tell me.”

She lets out a breath. “This is ridiculous. But fine. You speak your mind.”

“And?”

She lifts her chin and presses her lips together, which I know means she’s got an answer.

“I think you like me because I’m not afraid of you.”

Vivian looks indignant. But I see the way she won’t meet my eyes. I’m right.

“Listen,” I say. “I’ve known plenty of nasty women in my life”—Vivian’s eyes grow wide—“And you’re not one of them.”

Now her brows furrow in confusion.

“You act like you’re all mean and tough, but I know you’ve got a sweet, soft heart in there.” I point to her chest. “Not many can see past those walls you’ve put up, but I can. I know you’re hiding because it’s safer if people don’t see you. It’s better if they don’t see how hard it is for you, how much you give. Because if they did, you’d see it, too, and you might just collapse under the weight of it all.”

The words come out so clearly I know I’ve been thinking them about someone else, too. Someone who acts like he doesn’t care about anything but cares more about people than anyone I’ve ever known.

“Now. Why did you open this store?”

She juts out her chin once more.

“Come on, tell me.”

“Because I love beautiful things, just like you.”

“That’s right, and this is *your* place that *you* created. You brought luxury to this sweet little town. So why not let people see it? Don’t you want more beauty around you?”

“You’re forgetting the part where that woman can’t afford to purchase anything.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’ve got piles of cash at home.” I suspect Vivian does, too. It’s the only way this place stays afloat when only about five people actually buy anything here, myself, Glo, and Cassandra included. “If Melissa wants an outfit for her job interview, I’m going to buy it for her, and you’re not going to say a damn thing. She’s taking care of someone just like you, and everyone deserves a little generosity sometimes. Just like you.”

I didn’t know it was possible for Vivian to pinch her lips harder, but she does. Finally her shoulders sag. “Fine. You buy, but you need to show her how to wear it, too. I’m not going to see some slouch walking around putting a Gucci suit to shame.”

I smile, then wrap my arms around the stiff little woman. She softens, just the tiniest bit, before shoving me off her.

“Thank you, Vivian.”

“Your funeral, Smart Girl.”

CHAPTER 33

I can see through the plate-glass window of O'Malley's—Quince Valley's local sports bar—that the place is busy, but not packed. There are a couple of people hanging around outside the front doors, one of whom is a guy I went to high school with, who's trying to light a smoke in the cool breeze. It's the end of September, but there's a definite chill in the air now. Last night at Chester's, when we finally started cutting pieces for the deck, he greeted us with the wool cap he wears the other half of the year, which is always symbolic of the changing of the seasons around here. "I'll be able to sit outside just in time for winter," he quipped. At least he'd leaned in to us doing the work.

Though he refused to tell us more about his doctor's latest house call.

"I still don't understand why we couldn't have just met them back at our place," I grumble as we step inside. The music's thumping too loud, and everyone looks so damned chipper.

Sasha squeezes my hand. "We need a change of scenery."

"Jude's place would have worked fine. It's big. Quiet."

"I do love things that are big and quiet." She smirks over her shoulder as she drags me inside.

She looks so cute I can't help but swing her back to me right there on our way to the bar, grasping her jaw and kissing her thoroughly.

She blinks when I break the kiss, her cheeks going pink. “On second thought...home sounds okay.”

“We’re here now,” I grumble. Still, my inner caveman does an inner high five that I rattled her.

We’re the first ones here, and after ordering drinks, we take a table near the back, where it’ll at least be a little quieter.

That is, aside from a rowdy group of guys over by the pool table. A couple of them are openly appraising Sasha in her snug jeans and clingy green sweater as she sits down in her chair.

I hook my fingers around the chair’s legs, pulling her right up between my knees. “Better.”

Sasha laughs but snuggles in next to me. She hasn’t noticed the oglers. She rarely does, which is saying something, since they’re a near constant. Sasha loves clothes and makeup and shoes, but for her, it’s never about getting attention, or at least, she doesn’t care about that. The way she talks about clothes and designers is the same way Chelsea talks about art and artists. Like they’re beautiful objects. Plus she’s taught me a lot. “Did you know the skirt is the second-oldest piece of clothing in the world?” she asked me once when twirling in a frilly gold one. I’d been so mesmerized I hadn’t realized she’d asked me a question until she stopped spinning.

“What’s the first?”

She’d grinned. “The loincloth. Want me to get you one?”

The server comes by a few minutes later, smiling broadly as she sets a beer in front of me and a bubbly pink drink in front of Sasha.

“Will that be all for you two lovebirds?” she asks.

Sasha smiles back. “Yes, thank you so much, Alyssa.”

She’s read the server’s name tag, but I have no doubt they’ll be buddies by the end of the night. Sasha’s been on a friend-making tear around town—everywhere we go, people are starting to know her by name. It makes me feel guilty for keeping her all to myself.

Back at the bar, the server looks over at us as she whispers to her coworker. Her hands are clasped against her chest like she's having a heart attack.

"There a lost kitten beside us or something?"

Sasha glances the servers' way and smiles.

"No. Just you."

"Why me?"

"Because you're the walking definition of big, strong boyfriend, and you're practically holding me on your lap."

"Husband."

"Right," she says, her eyes going soft.

Fuck, I really want to kiss her right now. But those women are still staring at us.

"I don't know how to keep away from you," I say.

"Then don't," she whispers. She leans in, brushing her pillow-soft lips against mine. I don't care who's looking now. She tastes so fucking good.

"I want to go home," I say against her mouth, tucking my finger into the top of her jeans and tugging her even closer.

"Too late," she laughs. "That your friend?"

I glance over. Ford's just walked into the bar, his eyes scanning the space. Not just for us, I know, but for possible threats. It's what I'd do if it wasn't my hometown and I wasn't wrapped up in Sasha Macklin.

"How could you tell?"

"Tall, handsome, dresses exactly like my husband. Looks like he could knock a guy out just by looking at him. You two could be brothers."

I clear my throat, my insides unsure whether to linger on the "my husband" part of what she said or go back and get irritated by the "handsome."

I lift up a hand even though he's already seen us. Then I slide Sasha's chair back in place. I think better of it a second

later and bring her back halfway to where she was before.

“You done?” she whispers. “Oh my gosh. You must be Ford!” she says exuberantly before I can respond, practically leaping up out of her chair to greet him.

Ford smiles appreciatively and holds out a hand. Sasha ignores it, throwing her arms around his shoulders. He blinks but hugs her back, giving me a raised eyebrow over her head.

I’m about ready to crack my beer glass in half now, but I manage to keep from yelling at him to sit down, preferably at the far end of the table.

“Ford,” I grit out instead.

“Griffin.”

Sasha looks between us as Ford takes a seat on the opposite side of the table, thank God, her lips rolled between her teeth.

He’s still too close to her, but at least there’s a slab of wood between us.

“Do you guys always keep it to one syllable, or do you branch out into two sometimes?” she asks.

I frown, but Ford laughs. He’s got one of those big, deep laughs, and just like his smile, it tends to make women fluttery.

I clap my arm down over the back of Sasha’s chair, wondering how I’m going to make it through the night.

“I just follow the big guy’s lead, mostly,” Ford says.

When they’re done laughing at me, Sasha glances at her watch.

“Glo’s going to be another ten minutes or so. She had to close up the shop.” She turns to me. “What about Jude?”

“I’m not sure that guy knows how to tell time.”

“He seemed to do okay on the tennis court,” Ford says.

I frown. “Didn’t know you were a fan.” I should be annoyed, and I try to make like I am, but the truth is, I was my

little brother's biggest fan when he was playing pro ball. I've never been into sports as a rule, but I know more about the game of tennis than the average referee, thanks to Jude's career.

Even if the affectations he developed as he grew more and more famous did make him mildly insufferable for a time.

The two of them chat amiably about tennis, then about fashion, of all things. These two are getting along like a fucking house on fire while I tap my hand on the chair, wanting nothing more than to throw Sasha over my shoulder and take her home. Luckily, watching her talking animatedly is my second favorite pastime, so even though I'd normally rather eat glass than hang out at a bar for this long, being entertained by my good-looking friend no less, I manage.

Finally Jude walks in. I know because half the bar cheers while he waves like a royal, soaking it all in.

I roll my eyes. "Only an hour fucking late."

"Is it always like this with him?" Ford asks, slightly agog at the ovation they're giving him.

"You get used to it."

Sasha fades slightly, and I suddenly realize this is probably what it's like with her brother, too. For someone who doesn't notice attention, I know the spotlight's burned her before, given it's usually shining in tandem with nasty words about her family.

But Sasha brightens when Jude jogs up to our table. She laughs when he makes her stand up so he can envelop her in a big, brotherly hug. He enthusiastically greets Ford, and when the server comes back to take their orders, he gives her a wink and a grin.

Sasha pulls her phone out of her pocket after the server leaves. "Oh, she's here!" she exclaims, hopefully about Gloria. If anyone else decides to join this party, I'm going to have to wait for Sasha outside on the bike.

"We're...at...the...back," she sounds out as she texts.

I love it when she does that.

O'Malley's has grown crowded over the past hour, so it's a minute before Sasha's friend appears, weaving her way through the cluster of people standing by the bar.

I like Gloria. She's no nonsense and insisted she was fine if I snuck off to my workshop after dinner the other night rather than hang around and socialize.

"Hey!" she says as she approaches, smiling but clearly a little overwhelmed by being the last one here.

"Yay!" Sasha cries. She squeezes her hand. "I'm so glad you came." She goes around the table, introducing Gloria.

It's only when Ford says his name weird that I look at him again. He's gotten to his feet so fast his own chair is still tottering behind him, almost falling over.

"Scrape your jaw off the floor and pull out a chair, asshole," I say while Jude asks Gloria a question.

Sasha shoves a gentle elbow into my ribs, laughing under her breath.

"Thank you," Gloria says as she comes over and sits in the proffered chair. The only one free happens to be right next to his, and as he sits, his eyes never leave her.

"No problem," he says.

I swear the man looks as dopey as he did that time I saw him wake up from being punched in the face.

After she sits down and Jude asks her a question, I kick Ford under the table.

He's still staring at her, but with the boot to the shin, he snaps his gaze to me. "The fuck?"

"No problem," I only slightly mock.

"What?"

"You going to be okay?"

Ford kicks me back.

“Okay, so now that everyone’s here,” Sasha begins, laying her hand on my thigh under the table, “who wants to talk ghosts?”

She offers to hand the floor to Jude, who lived and breathed the Eleanor Cleary mystery last year, but Jude insists she take it away. I’m shocked Jude’s given up an opportunity to grandstand, but that’s before I notice him grinning at his phone. He must be giving Nora the play-by-play, even though it’s the middle of the night in London. I’m not surprised. Jude’s said before that neither of them sleeps well without the other.

For the next while, everyone listens, rapt, while Sasha talks about the story so far.

“So,” she finishes ten minutes later, “we know Eleanor and James spent a year hiding out in Switzerland while Eleanor’s husband disappeared to several of his mining operations around the Middle East and Africa—fathering several illegitimate children, I should add—then came back stateside after Eleanor gave birth to her baby.”

“And gave baby Clea up for adoption,” Jude says.

“Clea’s short for Cleary, right?” Glo asks.

The whole table falls silent.

“What?” she asks. “It isn’t?”

“Damn,” says Jude. “Even Nora didn’t pick that one up.”

“See? This is why I invited you,” Sasha says. “I don’t know if it is, but it would make sense, especially since she might suspect she’d have no way of finding her again later.”

I lean over to Ford, who’s closer to me now that he’s made room for Glo. “Beautiful *and* smart. Out of your league, buddy.”

“You can go ahead and shut the hell up,” Ford says through his teeth as Gloria turns around and they smile at each other.

“Although why would Eleanor want her baby to keep her shithead husband’s name?” Sasha asks.

“Right. Also, why didn’t she just leave him?” Gloria asks.

She and Sasha exchange a look I’m not quite sure how to read. They did a lot of that back at my place, too. I don’t know how she managed it, but it’s like the two of them are sisters already.

“I don’t think it was easy to do back then,” Jude says.

“Yeah. Especially when her husband would have made her life a living hell,” Ford adds. “Her husband would have had all the money and all the power. He could have found a way to take James away from her, leaving her fending for herself and her baby alone. Scorned, no doubt.”

There’s a bitter edge to his voice. Ford was raised by a single mom who died when he was a teenager, leaving him to care for his little sister.

“Even though he was a serial adulterer?” Gloria says to him, looking at Ford as if seeing him for the first time.

“Yeah, he would have changed the narrative,” he says. “Happened all the time back then.”

Gloria shakes her head. It sounds like she’s got experience with something like this, too.

Sasha squeezes my hand under the table, her eyes on her friend. I guess she knows how I feel about assholes.

“So how soon after they got back to the states was Eleanor murdered?” Gloria asks.

We can all hear the emotion in her voice.

The funny thing about this Eleanor Cleary ghost story is that it seems to touch everyone who’s been a part of it in a different way.

“Within a month,” I say, wishing I could go back in time and kick a certain oil baron’s ugly ass.

We’re all silent then. Sasha leans into me, and I curl an arm around her, stroking her arm with my thumb. “It’s all so fucking tragic,” I say.

“Hear, hear,” Ford says, lifting up his beer.

“To Eleanor,” Sasha says.

As we’re getting ready to leave a short while later, Ford tips his head sideways. Good. He’s got news for me, hopefully about the tap on Sasha’s brother. The two of us step a few feet away from the rest of them while everyone says their goodbyes.

“Well?” I ask. “Is it somehow good news?” I know it can’t be that bad or he wouldn’t have waited to tell me.

“What do you think?”

I fix him with a *cut the shit* look.

“I can’t tell yet. Macklin sent his parents an email, said to be prepared for some more bad news to hit the press.”

“Hardly new.”

“Yeah, but by the sounds of it, he’s never given them that kind of warning before. Could be big.”

I grunt slightly, running through possibilities in my mind.

“There’s something else, though.”

My stomach jumps. “Creelman?”

“No, he’s fucking AWOL. You might be good on that front. Too soon to tell. He hasn’t made an appearance yet.”

That hits me strangely. I should be glad about this news. I am. But I don’t trust he’d give up on her that easily. Sasha’s not exactly easy to forget.

But that’s not what Ford was going to say.

He runs a thumb over his chin. “Now, it might be nothing, but have you heard from Lionel?”

This I wasn’t expecting.

“Yeah. We texted a few days ago.”

“Have you heard from him since, though? Any emails?”

My stomach shifts. “No.” Fuck. I’ve been far from observant these past few weeks. “I’ve been working, but not on anything that I needed to reach out to him about.”

“It’s probably nothing.”

I don’t say anything.

“Still, let’s let each other know if we hear anything.”

On the way home, Sasha slides her arms around my waist on the back of the bike. Between the talk about Eleanor and the gnawing feeling in my gut that something’s brewing, all I want to do is get her straight home and lock up my doors.

But as I’m putting my helmet on, she says, “I don’t want to go home yet.”

My stomach clenches. I consider just telling her no and heading home with her pissed, but I let that shit go. I can’t protect her from assholes by turning into one. “Where do you want to go, Angel?”

Her voice is soft through the speaker. “Take me to where she died.”

My chest squeezes painfully tight.

I kick the starter and turn us around, heading over the bridge to the other side of the Quince River, up the hill to my family’s hotel.

Despite it being in the same town as me, I haven’t been here in a couple of months. I haven’t been able to make the last few board meetings, and other than that, I don’t have occasion to go. But it’s funny how much it feels like home.

Both wings of the resort are now fully up and running after the east wing, where Eleanor was murdered, sat unused for decades. Cassandra and her husband Blake turned our family business around after it fell into serious risk of failing after Mom passed.

The resort, nestled high on the hill overlooking Quince Valley, is a favorite among heavy players from all over the east

coast and beyond.

But to me and my siblings, it was always home. I pull around to the private road off to the side that leads to the staff apartments where I grew up—and where Cass, Eli, and Chelsea lived up until a couple of years ago.

I lead Sasha through the trees, where a path strung with fairy lights leads us to a side entrance of the resort reserved for staff. On the other side of the trees, past the property line, there's an abandoned shed Eli and I used to play in when we were kids, pretending we were explorers. It's the only time I remember playing make believe.

Yet here I am pretending to be married and utterly failing at it.

I use the fob I keep on me and hold the door for Sasha. She's never been here before, so I lead her around the front lobby, which is the hotel's crowning glory—aside from the expansive European-style spa and steam rooms downstairs.

"It's stunning," Sasha says, her eyes twinkling in the light of the enormous chandelier. It's quiet at this time of night, with only a few guests milling around the giant white-marble lobby. She's impressed, but not starstruck like most. I remember she grew up around money—at least once her parents married. "I never wanted for anything when I was a kid," she confessed to me the other night as we lay in bed. "Except for everything."

My own childhood was noisy and chaotic, with the seven of us crammed into the apartment next door, but we had no lack of togetherness. No shortage of love and affection and laughter.

Sasha said she knew she was lucky and would never complain about her upbringing, but I could see how that loneliness weighed on her. It wasn't nearly the same as suffering in poverty, but that didn't mean it was the best way to grow up.

The night clerk and I exchange a wave as I pass through the doors to the newly renovated east wing. "We won't be able to see her room," I say.

“I know. This place is fully booked year-round, isn’t it?”

“Not just that, but the room doesn’t exist anymore.”

Sasha knows from Nora’s documentary and all the notes she’s been reading that the previous owners of the hotel plastered over the room Eleanor was murdered in shortly after her death.

“But we changed the floor plan after the renovation,” I said. “We didn’t want people coming here to stay in her room like her death was the feature of some kind of amusement park.”

We come to a stop where the old room 114 would have been. Now it’s a long expanse of wall. “We put a photo of her inside,” I say, running my hand over the wall.

When Sasha looks at me, she’s got tears in her eyes. “It’s just not fair what was done to her. She finally found happiness, and he stole it from her. It’s like he stole her from her own life.”

My phone buzzes then, but I ignore it, running a thumb under Sasha’s eye.

“Sorry,” she says.

“Don’t be sorry, Angel.”

“I just wish Eleanor’d had someone like you in her life, Griffin.”

I don’t know what to say to that. So instead of responding, I lead her outside into the crisp night air. Only once we’re outside under the stars do I tuck her under my arm and say, “She didn’t, Sasha. But you do.”

CHAPTER 34

Sasha

“‘**B**out time you layabouts got back here,” Chester says when I knock on the door the following week. It’s the first of October, and even though leaves dance and scrape across his front porch in the wind, the sky, for once, is a brilliant blue.

He’s only got the door open a crack, poking his head through the gap.

“Sometimes you have to wait for perfection,” I say, pulling down my sunglasses and winking. “Or for the weather to cooperate.”

Chester chortles.

Over the leaves, I can hear the chickens cluck good-naturedly as Griffin hauls material to the back.

It’s strange Chester doesn’t open the door. It is crisp outside, I guess.

“Well, the good news is we should be able to get everything done but the stain today,” I say cheerfully.

“Listen, I’m happy to see you two,” Chester says, “but I told you the deck is fine as is.”

I prop my hands on my hips. “With a giant hole in it?”

“Doesn’t matter to me.”

I have to work hard not to roll my eyes. “Okay, well, you going to invite me in so I can show you what we’re doing? You can yell at us from back there. Easier if we cut through the house, I think.”

“No!” He puts a hand up as I take a step toward him. “I can go around.” He reaches behind him to pull the door closed but stumbles, losing his balance.

“Chester!” I catch him by the arm, keeping him upright.

“I’m fine,” he says, pulling his arm away. “God dammit.”

I know that’s not directed at me, but I’m still surprised by his tone—I’ve never heard him short like this before. I watch his hands as he grips the door and doorframe to balance, ready to catch him if he falls again.

When he looks up again, he curses, rubbing his forehead with his thumb and forefinger. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’m just tired. Haven’t been sleeping well.”

I remove my sunglasses, and when I do, I get a better look at him. His eyes are shadowed with dark circles; the lines in his face look deeper than they did just the other day. He looks skinnier, too, and he was skinny to begin with.

“Chester, have you been sleeping at all?”

“I’m fine,” he says, waving his hand. “Just old. Gettin’ up to whizz every other minute at night takes a toll, is all.”

“When’s the last time you ate?”

“For goodness’ sake, Sasha, I’m doing fine.”

He doesn’t look me in the eye when he says that, though.

And he sounds exactly the way I did writing my mom back after I made the mistake of checking my email the other night. “I had plans for you,” she wrote. “Lots of charity events filled with more eligible bach—”

I’d snapped the laptop Griffin gave me shut after that.

I shake my head, grasping the front door handle. “All right, Ches. I’m making you some breakfast.”

“Listen, I—”

“I’m not taking no for an answer.”

I think I finally understand why Griffin likes being so bossy. When you know what needs to be done, you don’t have

patience for excuses.

Finally, Chester sighs wearily and steps aside.

When I finally see past him, I have to forcibly clamp my mouth shut. I've been here before, and it was always a little cluttered. But more of a cozy lived-in cluttered with books stacked here and there on surfaces and some of the eclectic paintings and antler sets on the walls looking like they needed a good dusting.

But nothing like this. The place is a mess. The floor's lined with dirt and dust bunnies, and there's junk on every surface. Mugs line with dark, long-evaporated coffee-covered the coffee table, along with a few plates, spoons, and newspapers. Tissues and candy wrappers lie in a ring around the armchair facing the TV.

"Haven't had much energy for housework lately," Chester admits.

I smile. "It's tough when you're not feeling up for it," I say. "Sometimes—"

But when I poke my head into the kitchen, I can't finish my sentence. There's so much crap on the counters they're barely visible. The sink is filled to the brim with dishes, and there's a terrible smell coming from under the sink.

"Chester—"

"I'm ashamed of myself, if I'm being honest," Chester says, looking down. "All I need is a good sleep, though, and I'll be fine."

"There's no need to be ashamed. Sometimes it...gets away from you."

He doesn't look convinced.

"Hey, you should have seen me the other night when I was looking through all those old adoption records. I fell asleep in a pile of paper. I woke up and I was wearing them like a blanket. I even drooled on some that might have been important."

That's supposed to make him laugh, but instead, Chester screws up his face. "Adoption records?"

"Oh, uh..." I want to get him sitting down, but he looks so curious, I tell him about the Eleanor project. "It's an old legend at Griffin's family hotel. Supposedly the ghost of someone murdered there used to haunt the east wing. You've heard of it, right?"

"I have not."

"Well, a real woman was murdered there, over a hundred years ago." I can't help the note of impassioned energy that gets into my voice as I speak. Then I remember I'm supposed to be taking care of him.

"Is that so?" he asks, leaning his hand on the counter.

"Chester—"

"What were their names?"

I sigh. Stubborn man. "Come on. Sit down and I'll tell you."

Once I've got him seated at the table in the dining room, which is covered with what looks like three puzzles in progress, I explain more, sticking to the very high highlights—Eleanor and James had a lovechild in Switzerland. We're trying to find out what happened to the baby and James, and, most of all, who really murdered Eleanor.

As he listens, Chester's expression turns contemplative.

Or maybe he's just exhausted.

"Anyway," I say, wishing I hadn't brought it up. "What did the doctor say? Any tips for sleeping better?"

He blinks, as if remembering where he is. "Doctor? Oh. Well, not much the doctor can do about gettin' old, is there, sweetheart?"

"Maybe—"

"Listen, Sasha. I'm fine. I am hungry, though. I'm feeling energetic enough to holler at your husband to go get me some eggs, so why don't I do that while you pop a piece of bread in

the toaster for me? I got some loaves in the freezer I made up last week.”

I frown, inspecting him, but he does appear to look a little more energized. And if he was making loaves of bread last week, he has to be okay, right? I realize he’s actually letting me help him, so I smile. “Okay, Ches. You go make Griff get some eggs and I’ll take care of the rest.”

The minute he’s gone, I pull open the cupboard under the sink, wincing as the smell of the overstuffed garbage hits me square in the face. I find a pair of gloves down there, and after putting them on, get to work cleaning up. Chester’s gone a long time—I was counting on him getting distracted, and sure enough, when I peek out the kitchen doorway, I see him sitting outside on the stack of wood by the back door, gabbing with Griffin.

Griffin, who’s straightening out a long board on the frame, laughs at something Chester says, and my chest swells. He looks gorgeous, with his pen behind his ear and his plaid jacket, smiling wide, thinking no one but Chester can see him.

I think back to the men I dated before Griffin. None of them were particularly kind, unless they were talking to people they considered peers. None of them were outright mean like my father, but they never went out of their way to talk to any of the people who served them coffee or trimmed the hedges at their parents’ estates, either.

I realize right then that up until this moment, I’d been worried that the reason I feel so much for Griffin is because he saved me from Vincent Creelman. But that’s not really what he did, is it? He saved me from a boring, soulless future. One where I never would have met Chester Brown.

And where I don’t think I’d ever feel about a man the way I do about him.

But it’s not permanent, is it?

I pull back into the kitchen, busying myself with opening a new trash bag and stuffing items from the counter into it. My heart suddenly aches at the thought of going our separate ways

after all this is over. Because even with trash in my hand in an old man's kitchen, this life Griffin's given me is a thousand times better than the life I had before.

My life without Griffin.

An hour later, after Chester's stuffed full of scrambled eggs, toast, and a glass of grapefruit juice I found from a jug that passed the sniff test, I tell him I'm going to walk him down the hall to his bedroom.

He yawns, and for once, he doesn't argue.

"Gotta make a pit stop, though," he says, taking a sharp left into the bathroom as we move slowly down the hall.

"I'll wait right out here."

"If you insist," he says, rolling his eyes.

At least he still has the energy to be sassy.

While Chester bangs around in the bathroom, echoing Griff's hammering outside, I peer at the lone framed photo hanging on the wall. It's a black and white shot of an older man standing on the banks of what looks to be the Quince River, holding a fishing rod.

He's too far away to see his face, but even if he wasn't, his hat's pulled down low, obscuring most of it. That must be Chester's grandfather. I squint at the photo, but he looks to be alone. It's too bad—I would have liked to see Chester as a boy. It's strange, actually, that there aren't more photos of him or his grandpa, seeing as he grew up in this house.

"Son of a bitch," Chester mutters through the door.

Instantly I'm outside it. "You okay?"

"You still there?"

Relief runs through me. It doesn't sound like he's injured. "Should I get Griff?"

"Hell no you shouldn't. I still know how to use my damn willy."

I grimace. “Ew, Chester!”

“Scram, girlie. Go find something to do.”

I look toward the end of the hall, feeling curious now. “Can I look around?”

“So long as you don’t come in here.”

I roll my eyes. “So crabby.”

The hallway has two doors in it besides the bathroom. One I can tell is Chester’s bedroom, because the door’s ajar and there’s a single mussed-up bed with a bedside table stacked with books and a couple of bottles of pills.

I resist the urge to get downright nosy.

The second door’s at the end of the hall. But when I try it, the handle’s locked. I shake it, and something rattles up top: A corroded padlock that looks like it’s been there for years.

The door bangs open behind me, making me jump right off the ground.

I spin around. “Holy shit, Chester.”

He looks at me a moment, then over my shoulder.

“That was my grandfather’s room,” he says as he shuffles over to his bedroom.

I follow him to the entrance. “Why’s there a padlock on it?”

“It’s full of his stuff.”

I lean against his doorframe as he lies down in bed, looking impossibly frail. How is it possible that he was so sprightly just a few weeks ago?

“Have you ever been through his things?”

Chester plumps up his pillow under his head. “No reason to.”

I wonder for a moment if I’m being insensitive, then decide it’d be better to be rebuffed than not ask.

“I can do it with you sometime, if you like. Along with the rest of your house. You can decide what you want to keep and what—”

“No.”

His voice is surprisingly firm, his head even lifting off the pillow briefly.

“It might feel—”

“I said no, darling. My grandfather never wanted anyone touching his stuff. Made me swear never to go near the attic or the boxes in his room when I first got here.”

“I think you get to make the decisions now, though,” I say gently.

“For someone who wants me to sleep, you sure talk a lot.”

I smile. “Okay. I’m going to tell Griffin to call it quits with the hammering. We’ll be back here tonight with some groceries, okay?”

But he’s already closed his eyes.

CHAPTER 35

Sasha

That night, we come back with groceries as planned, along with a carton of fried rice and sweet and sour chicken we ordered for Chester at the end of our dinner. Turns out Griffin has a key.

“The animals’ll get the food if we leave it out here,” he says. He has no qualms about walking right in.

But inside, it’s not just the hallway light that’s off. The whole house is dark. The hallway and kitchen, both of which Griffin helped me tidy up after Chester fell asleep, are just as we left them hours ago.

Panic grips my chest. “I don’t think he got up again.”

But Griffin sticks his finger up against his lips, then uses it to point to a lump on the couch. The light’s dim in the living room, but I see now that Chester migrated out there at some point. A paperback lies open on the table I cleared, along with his reading glasses.

I should be relieved, but I whisper, “Can you check on him?”

Griffin squeezes my hand, then goes over to him and crouches down. A beat passes, then he gets back up again. “He’s fine. Just sleeping.”

Relief floods over me.

“It feels weird not locking it,” I say, still whispering as we walk away a few minutes later.

“It’s a small-town thing,” Griff says.

“What about your place?”

Griffin has a half-dozen locks on his front door alone.

“Occupational hazard.”

We reach the end of the yard. He points his flashlight down the path. A breeze glances over my bare legs under the marigold dress I changed into this afternoon when we went into town for dinner.

I put a hand on Griffin’s forearm, too distracted with worry to dwell on how good it feels under my fingers. I look back at Chester’s dark bungalow. “You think he’s going to be okay?”

“I think you shouldn’t worry about him.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Griffin takes a moment to answer. “I’ll get the doctor to come back. And I’ll see about getting him a housekeeper. At least then there’ll be eyes on him when we’re not around.”

I can’t help but notice his use of the word *we*. Like this is my home too. Something soft and warm spreads through my chest.

“You know he’ll say no to all that,” I say as we walk along the darkened path.

“He won’t get the opportunity if someone just shows up. That’s how I got him doing grocery delivery.”

“Okay.” Satisfied, I lean into Griffin as we walk, enjoying the big, hard warmth of him next to me. This time last year, if you’d told me that I’d be walking through the woods at night in the country right now, I’d have told you that you were crazy. But with Griffin’s easy stride and absolute lack of worry, I don’t even think about it.

I’ve come a long way for a city girl.

We’re coming through the back door of the cabin when I remember to tell him about the locked room. “He doesn’t want anyone near it. Says his grandfather never wanted anyone to touch his stuff.”

Griffin opens the fridge and holds a beer up at me. I nod as I come over, and he does his sexy lid-pop-off thing before handing me one.

“You said the lock looked old?”

“It was all corroded. Like it was put on there years ago and never touched. You think there’s, like, a time capsule of a room in there?”

“Maybe.” Griff grins. “Maybe there’s a door to a secret bunker.”

“You’re making fun of me.”

“Only a little. You never know with a man who lived in the woods all by himself for so long.”

I lean with my butt against the counter. “Right?”

He hesitates, then runs his hand over his jaw.

I smile. “Uh-oh. You have something to say.”

He scowls and takes a swig of beer. His throat bobs, and I follow the motion down his scruff to the collar of his shirt, which stretches over his thickly muscled chest.

He looks so damn sexy I suddenly forget all about mysterious rooms and old locks.

I hook my finger in the top of his shirt and try to pull him down for a kiss.

For a moment he acts like he’s not going to give it to me. But just as I start to huff, he dips down and claims my mouth with his.

For a moment I’m lost in the sensation of his lips gliding across mine, his tongue lightly brushing against mine. His mouth has the tiniest chill from the beer, and I can taste it on him, too. Just a little.

I’m just wondering what a chilled tongue would feel like in other places when Griffin pulls away. “Hey, Sasha?”

“Yeah?” I say, still trying to press my body against his. I can feel a thickness at his crotch.

But he angles away from me and doesn't notice me pouting about it.

"Since we're talking about special things..." He meets my eye. "What's that little bird about?"

I freeze, confusion drawing my brows together. "Bird?"

"The little yellow bird you brought from home," he says softly.

My cheeks grow hot. I didn't know he knew about that.

"I saw you holding it that first night in the diner."

I pull away from him, not because I'm upset, but because it's embarrassing. "It's stupid," I whisper, taking a swig of beer.

"Bet it's not."

I fidget with the hem of my jacket, suddenly feeling like the girl I was when that bird was given to me. Scared. Lonely.

Unwanted.

"Hey," Griff says when I stay quiet. "You don't need to tell me. It just seems special to you. And you're special to me, so. You know."

Finally I look up, meeting Griffin's eyes.

He's looking at me so intently my stomach swirls.

"You know what I like about you, Griffin?" I whisper.

He frowns.

"Besides that frown." I press my thumb gently between his brows.

I rest my hand on his cheek, and he reaches up and eclipses it with his. "What, Angel?"

I swallow. "You care. You don't just ask questions for the sake of conversation or even just because it's interesting to you. When you ask questions, it's because you care about the answer. What it means to me."

He lowers my hand but doesn't let it go. Just rests it against his collar like he doesn't want to break contact. Then he looks away, taking another swig of beer.

"I know you don't like compliments. Or you don't know how to take them. But you're a good listener, Griff. The best I've ever met, actually. And take it from me. I've known a lot of people who don't listen."

Griffin looks down, but he squeezes my hand still resting on him. He looks the way he does when he rubs a hand over his jaw, except both of his are occupied.

"What is it, Griffin?" I ask softly, teasingly. "You going to say something self-deprecating?"

"No," he says, meeting my eyes again. His voice is a low rasp.

"Then wha—"

"I love you."

I pause, whatever words I was going to say dying on my lips as my pulse leaps in my throat. "What?" I whisper.

Some part of me thinks he's joking, because Griffin Kelly doesn't do feelings. And if he does, he doesn't say them out loud.

But Griffin Kelly meets my eye. "I'm in love with you, Sasha. Hopelessly fucking ass-over-feet in love with you."

He drops his eyes, and it's then I notice his hand has stopped moving against mine. That it's trembling slightly.

"Griffin," I whisper.

"You don't have to say it back," he says. "In fact, I'd prefer you didn't. I wouldn't know what the fuck to do with it. I don't know if you do, but it's out there now, so—"

I interrupt him by pressing my lips to his.

I'm flooded with so many intense endorphins that for a moment, I'm fairly certain I'm going to faint.

He's in love with me.

No one's ever said that to me before. Well, men have said it, but they didn't mean it. Not the way Griffin does. Those men, they were in love with the idea of me. The girl they wanted to look at and touch, but none who actually looked at me the way Griffin does when I opened my mouth. None of them cared what I had to say.

They didn't love me.

Griffin pulls away. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have put that on you."

"Never be sorry, Griffin. Not for that."

He lowers his beer, cupping his hand around the back of my neck, his rough thumb scraping a curve across the sensitive flesh behind my ear.

But even knowing he means it, some part of me still doesn't want to believe it. That part of me that clung to that little bird—the one who needed to hear the reasons why.

"Tell me," I whisper, as he presses his forehead against mine. "Tell me what it is about me."

He knows I'm not fishing for compliments. He can hear the pain in my voice. I can tell just by looking at him.

Griffin laughs softly, but his face is instantly serious again. "Where do I start, Sasha?"

He brushes his thumb along my ear. "I love the way you look when you have a new idea. Your face lights up, like the sun's shining on you."

He kisses me, soft and gentle.

"I love how your mind can't rest until you've figured out the best way to help someone." His thumb moves to my cheek. "I love how you somehow got my old coot of a neighbor to spill his life story to you the first day you met him, when it took him five years to tell me a single thing."

He swallows. "Then there's the fact that everyone *I* love has fallen in love with you, too, Sasha."

My eyes are already wet, but at that, the tears spill over. I cup a hand over my mouth, because I've never had that before. Not even close.

"Your family loves you," I whisper through my fingers. "They want you to be happy."

"It's not just that. They see what I see. They see a woman who's more beautiful on the inside than outside, and that's saying a fucking lot because you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

I laugh, but it comes out a half sob. "Griffin..." But the words lodge in my throat. "I—"

He shakes his head. "Don't."

"But—"

"Sasha, don't. Please." His hands cup my jaw, his eyes meeting mine. "I don't need you to do or say anything. I just couldn't hold that inside anymore. That's all. I don't need anything back from you."

I want to give him something back. So badly. But the last dregs of that old, hard-etched fear cling to me. But then Griffin kisses me, and I don't need to push it away. A warmth spreads over me at his touch, one that flames to heat in the stroke of his tongue against mine.

I pull my face back, catching my breath.

"Griffin?"

"Yes, Angel."

I lean in, my lips at his ear. "I think I want you to fuck me like this."

I feel his muscles tense against me. "Like what?"

"Like a man who loves me."

He pulls away from me, shaking his head slightly. "What do you think I've been doing, Angel?"

My stomach does a full barrel roll at that. Then again, when he slides our beer bottles off the counter and into the

sink, where they crash and clunk and fizz. I don't remember putting mine down.

"But for you?" he says, low and rumbly. "I'll do it again." In one easy move, he hoists me up on the counter, setting me down hard enough I gasp.

"Here?" We haven't done it anywhere except the shower and the bed. Oh, and once on the back porch late at night in one of the Adirondacks. That wasn't easy, but we figured it out.

Heat rips down my body as his hands slide my dress up my thighs. "You have a better suggestion?"

"No," I say. "Actually, this is perfect. I want to dream about you railing me every time I make a sandwich."

His laugh is a low chuckle, and while every nerve ending is focused on his fingers curling over the top of my underwear, I can't help but think how much I love that I can make him laugh.

"You know, I had a boyfriend once," I breathe into his ear as he tugs the elastic down.

He freezes, meeting my eye. "Sasha."

I laugh. "I have an important point." I curl my arms around his head, resting my elbows on his big shoulders, my eyes on his. But still, my hips inch forward on the counter toward him. "That guy, he didn't think I should be funny."

Griffin screws up his face. "What?"

"He said women are supposed to laugh at men's jokes, not make them."

"But not all of us are good at making jokes."

"Exactly. Though you do make me laugh."

His hands are still bunching up the top of my underwear, his thumbs circling the sensitive flesh on my lower belly. "All I'm saying," I continue, a little breathy now, "is when you laugh, Griffin, it turns me on. When you smile, it turns me on. Hell, when you do your little grunt thing, it turns me on."

“What grunt?” he grunts.

I laugh, tipping my head back involuntarily, and he descends on my neck with hot kisses. “Okay, I see why that asshole wanted to make you laugh.”

I groan as he reaches my ear, breathing warm air into the sensitive shell, but I’m still smiling. I suddenly understand what people mean when they say they’re deliriously happy. That’s what I am right now.

Griff’s hands, still at my thin cotton underwear, slide around to the sides, working the elasticized fabric down my hips. I lift myself off the counter to help, and he slides them down my thighs.

My dress is still pulled up high.

I groan as he grabs my ass and slides me fast to the edge of the counter, and I cry out when his fingers find my wet heat.

“Fuck, baby. You feel so good.”

“I want you like this,” I breathe, already melting under his touch. “I want you inside me first.”

He works my clit, and I moan, bucking my hips.

“I need to get a condom,” he rasps.

I shake my head. “Don’t.”

Griffin’s eyes snap up to meet mine. He pulls his hands away, gripping my thighs.

“I’m protected,” I say. “And tested...”

I hesitate, disappointment at the ready. I know his past relationships were short and to the point. But we’ve never talked about it.

“I’m clear,” he grunts. “I never have sex without a condom. It’s not a risk I’m willing to take.”

I shouldn’t be hurt. But I get it. “Then go get a condom,” I breathe as his hands bring my dress up around my hips. Now I really am bare-assed on the counter. We’ll have to sanitize it later, I think asininely.

“No,” he grunts.

“I don’t mind waiting, Griff.”

“No, I mean I’ve been having sex since I was a teenager, and I’ve never fucked anyone without a condom. I’ve never wanted to. But now, with this fucking beautiful pussy ready for me”—he brings a hand over my center and strokes his thumb against me once more—“your beautiful pussy, so ready for me, Sasha.”

I whimper as he presses circles into my clit with his thumb, shockwaves of pleasure jolting through me.

“I want to feel you,” he says. “I want to know how you feel bare against my cock.”

I thought I was weak with pleasure. That I was dialed all the way up. But when he says those words, a liquid heat spreads hot all over my lower abdomen.

Griffin makes a groaning sound, almost like he’s in pain. “Did you just fucking squirt for me, Sasha?”

“I don’t know.” All I know is I’m losing it with him talking like this while administering those soft wet circles on my swollen clit. All I can manage is little pants until he takes his hand away, dipping his thumb into his mouth. “*Fuck*,” he groans.

I shrug out of my jacket, then slide the thin straps of my dress down over my shoulders. I free my tits for him, arching my back. “Put your mouth on me.”

He obliges, bending down and pulling my nipple into his mouth. He teases me, toying at the tight bud with his tongue. First one, then the other. Then back again. He dips his fingers into me, tugging at my G-spot, and after a moment of increasing pressure, I feel myself teetering at the edge. “Coming!”

This time I feel the release of liquid onto his hand as I cry out.

Griffin lets out a loud groan as I writhe under his touch. “Fuck yes, Sasha. That’s so fucking hot.”

Waves of pleasure have me rocking on his hand, greedy before I've even finished for more. I slide my legs wide. "Fuck me right now. Just like this."

"You're sure?" His voice is a low, perforated rumble.

"I'm sure," I breathe.

I close my eyes, wanting only to feel.

I hear the zip of his pants and sense his heat as he leans over me.

For a moment, there's only air glancing off my wet nipples, the sound of his breathing intertwined with mine.

"Beautiful," he says. His hot tip brushes against my wetness, and I inch myself forward. I run my hand up over my breast with one hand, bracing myself against the cupboards with the other.

Griffin teases me, his tip stroking my entrance. "Say you want it."

This is the only place he loves talking, and I eat it up. "I want it. I fucking want it so bad."

His hand clamps around my hip, and a moment later, he fills me up in one smooth, jaw-dropping movement. "*Fuck,*" he breathes.

He doesn't move for a moment, just pulses inside me. "Fucking magic," he breathes.

I whimper against him, and he starts to move.

"More," I insist.

He doesn't hesitate. He begins to thrust with the urgency I need, harder and faster each time, until he has to cup his hand behind my head to protect it from hitting the cupboards.

"I can't—I'm sorry," he says, like he wants to slow but can't.

"Keep going," I grit, feeling heat building once more.

He doesn't slow down. He brings a hand between us, touching my sensitive clit once more.

It's like a tiny push over the edge. Just a few quick strokes along with his thrusts, and I'm tumbling, toppling, falling into open space as his body tightens.

“Jesus, Sasha, you feel like—” But he can't continue. I feel him emptying himself inside me, and it's so sexy I can hardly breathe. For a moment we stay clinging to each other, our breathing short and shallow. Finally he brings his lips to my ear, kissing my lobe with infinite tenderness, before whispering, “You feel like everything.”

CHAPTER 36

I jolt to sitting in the middle of the night, my heart pounding. My muscles are tense, the feeling of running still spasming through them.

Sasha murmurs beside me.

Relief rushes through me. A dream. It was just a dream.

I lie back down, reaching out for Sasha, needing to feel her warm skin under my hand.

It was the dream again, the one in the warehouse.

Only this time, it was Sasha lying on the ground, blood running from her open mouth, the yellow dress she was wearing last night drenched crimson.

Shame takes over, heavy as lead. I replaced Laura in the nightmare that has consumed my life for a year. That has still lingered up until now, or at least so I'd thought.

My words to Lionel echo in my head.

I won't forget about her.

Yet here I fucking am.

I extract myself as quietly as I can from the bed, stepping into a pair of sweats as I go.

In my workshop, I check my email. I've sent five emails to Lionel over the past four days. I've also called him twice and texted him another half-dozen times. Worry ties a knot in my stomach.

I pull out my phone to text Ford, in case he's heard anything. But I pause, staring at the image of Sasha and Imogen on the screen. Sometimes people are so sweet and pure the thought of them existing in this world feels like a mistake. Like there's no way to protect them from the cruelty that exists.

I jam my finger onto the phone to clear the picture and shoot a text off to Ford.

Just as the *whoosh* of the send sounds, there's a creak behind me.

I turn around on my chair. A sleepy-haired Sasha's in the doorway to my shop. She's pulled on one of my button-downs from the closet, and it's misbuttoned, which only makes her look more perfect somehow.

"Hey," I say, the terror of the dream flashing back for a moment. I shake it off. "What are you doing up?"

"I was worried about you," she says, padding over in her bare feet.

Of course she was.

"It's not clean in here," I say.

"It's okay. We could probably both use a shower."

I smile, and the worry in my chest loosens just a little. She looks around. There's a stool she could sit on by the bike, but it's too far away. "Come here," I say, beckoning her over with a cupped hand.

Sasha sits on me, curling up into my lap. For a moment I let myself live in the comfort I feel having her right here. There's nothing that can happen to her when I'm physically holding her in my arms.

But she's only up because of me.

"It's late," I say.

"I'll go back to bed in a minute."

As I inhale the scent of her, feeling the tickle of her hair against my cheek, I face the truth that I'm going to have to

leave again. Soon. Worry for Lionel enters the knot in my stomach. I try to memorize the feel of her against my body. Then I remember what happened earlier. What I said.

I'm in love with you.

I want to tell her to forget it. I was caught up in the moment and the words just came out. But when I open my eyes, I see a flash of yellow in her hand.

She's holding the little bird.

My throat feels tight, and I can't quite explain why. I think it's because this little object feels like it's...the essence of her vulnerability. Or something.

“Can I see?”

She hands it to me.

I lean sideways so I can feel with both hands. The thing is small, no bigger than a tennis ball from beak to tail.

“It used to sing,” she says.

I run my thumb along its belly. There's a seam there, and a little dip where a screw should be. “Want me to take a look?”

She nods.

I press my forehead against her arm. “I might need some tools.”

“Oh!” she gets up, laughing softly.

I lead her over to my workbench, which runs along the whole far wall. Cubbies are filled with tools and parts of all sizes, with bigger tools hanging on the wall next to some of the bigger machinery I've acquired over the years.

Sasha peers at the wall to where all the external cords for things like my soldering iron and drill mount run together along the base of the counter, fixed with plastic ties every few feet.

“You really thought of everything, didn't you?”

I grumble as I pull out the box of tiny instruments I use for smaller jobs, flicking on the under-counter lights.

“What happens if you need to get rid of one of these?” She pokes at the cords. “Do you have to tear them all apart?”

“What, is it extra to have them so neat?”

Sasha snorts. “Extra? Have you been watching my favorite shows, big man?”

“Once or twice.” I may or may not have checked out the reality makeover shows I know she watches on the old laptop I gave her. “I don’t know how you deal with all those... conflicting personalities.”

She laughs, throwing her head back.

I have to look away. She’s so beautiful.

“Actually,” I say, considering, “that’s putting it kindly. Those people are all insane. Over pants. Or pant, as you call them.” I flip open the lid of the box of small tools.

Sasha shakes her head at me, her lips pulled into the most beautiful grin I’ve ever seen. “I can’t even with you, Griffin Kelly.”

“Even what?”

Her mouth snaps open, then shut again. “Never mind.”

“To answer your question,” I say, pulling out a tiny screwdriver, “it’s easy to take a cord out of that bundle if I need to.” I stick the screwdriver into the seal of the plastic tie, depressing the tongue. The plastic strap slips off with a satisfying little *zip* sound.

“Wow. You bring that trick out at parties?”

I scowl. “I don’t like messy shit in my workshop.”

“So I can see.” She looks over more of my neurotically organized shelves. It’s a good thing she likely doesn’t know her screw types. She’d have a field day if she knew they were alphabetized.

I force myself to quit staring at her and examine the bird. I’m going to need to see better. Already knowing she’s going to give me shit for it, I reach for a pair of glasses with a series of lenses on one side.

“Don’t even start,” I say, watching her face light up as I pull on the glasses.

The frames are old, with the kind of arms that curl around the ears instead of resting on top of them. I modified the device with a tiny light on one side, which I switch on before I pull the contraption onto my head.

When I look at Sasha, she presses her manicured hands to her lips.

I narrow my eyes. “Say it. I dare you. I know these things are nerdy as hell.”

She rolls her lips between her teeth, then pops them out again. I can tell she’s trying extremely hard not to laugh. “One of your eyes looks really big.”

I go to pull them off, but she stops me. “No. Don’t take them off.” She smiles, no mockery in it now. “I love it, Griff. I love how you know how you have the perfect tool for everything in here. And how you know how to do... everything.”

I think she might be talking about sex right now, or at least I allow my nerdy-glasses-wearing ass to think that.

I peer down at the bird, adjusting the lens over my eye. I don’t use these glasses for watchmaking or bird fixing, but I can do both.

I pick up the tiny screwdriver again and insert it under a thatch of feathers, removing the miniature screw. I carefully remove the covering plate, then angle the bird to get a better look inside.

“Actually I take it all back,” she says, watching me with rapt attention. “Those goggles are sexy as hell. So is knowing your way around a mechanical bird.”

I fight the urge to preen like one.

“It’s a nice bird,” I say.

She wants to laugh again.

“Well made,” I clarify, grinning. “Usually these things are plastic.” I reach for a penlight and snap it on for her. “See that? That’s where the sound mechanism should be.”

“I broke it.” It sounds like a confession.

“It happens.”

She leans her head in her hand as she watches me, her hair falling over her shoulders.

I try not to look at her as I find the parts I need.

She’s silent for a moment as she watches me work. “You asked me what the bird is for,” she says finally.

I look at her over the glasses.

“Well, the truth is...Sam gave it to me.”

I pause for a moment. I’m surprised by this.

“It was my parents’ wedding. I was five. I knew something bad was happening, but I couldn’t figure out what. It was a wedding, and all the guests seemed happy. But my parents were fighting.”

I keep my eyes on my work, letting her continue.

“I liked to hide in the kitchen—the people there always seemed more...alive than anyone on our side of the doors.” She picks up a little spring lying on the table and squeezes it gently between her fingers. “I overheard one of them saying she’d never seen two people who hate each other so much getting married. It was a sham marriage, they said, done because of the girl.”

My chest aches. She blamed herself. Her child’s mind thought it was her fault two people hated each other and were stuck together.

“Sam found me under there. It must have been hours later. The big lights were out, and everyone was outside. He was eighteen. Too old and busy with his own life to be looking for a lost little girl. But I think he was the only one who noticed I was gone. He said if I came out, he’d let me play with one of these. It wasn’t special—they were in the wedding favors. But

he'd seen me playing with them earlier, before my mother slapped them out of my hand.”

She laughs humorlessly. “After he pulled me out, he carried me around on his back for a bit. Said I could stay with him awhile. I guess I fell asleep, because the next thing I remember, I was in bed with the blankets pulled up, and Sam was setting the bird on my bedside table. He said it was mine to keep, and that I should make it sing whenever I felt alone.”

I'm just placing a tiny battery in place, so the timing works out well as I tip the bird.

“Like this?” I ask. It gives off a little chirp.

Sasha nods, her eyes springing with tears. “Like that,” she says softly.

I imagine Sam left shortly after he gave her that. Left her all alone in that house. Not that it was his responsibility to parent her.

I come up to Sasha, bracketing her back in my arms. “There's a little switch here,” I say, poking between the feathers. “You can turn it off if you don't want it to make noise.”

Sasha turns and wraps her arms around my neck. I unhook the glasses from my ears, setting them down on the counter.

She rests her head against my chest, and a moment later, I feel the soft shake of her body as she cries.

I don't know how to feel about Sam Macklin. The fact that he was the only one looking out for her back then should put him up a notch. But he put her in so much danger, too. He handed her over to Creelman like a fucking gift.

But I brush those ugly thoughts aside for now.

“Come on,” I whisper into her hair after she takes a long breath. “Let's go to bed.”

An hour later, just as Sasha's finally falling asleep in my arms, my phone buzzes. I carefully extract my arm from under her

and grab it off the bedside table.

FORD: No sign from Lionel or Creelman. Lost comms on Macklin.

My stomach jolts. Fuck.

GRIFFIN: Are you at risk?

FORD: No. He just ditched his stuff.

I hold the phone still so long the backlight goes off. None of this is good news. Not just because something's clearly going down.

Because I'm going to have to leave again.

If Sasha wasn't here, I'd be on my bike right now.

But she is, and I won't leave her in the middle of the night, especially not after tonight. She said she couldn't fall asleep unless I was holding her.

Ford's in Texas now, anyway.

I tap my phone awake again.

GRIFFIN: Book a flight. I'll meet you tomorrow afternoon.

Ford responds in the affirmative.

Whether or not Sam Macklin took care of his sister back then, he's not taking care of her now. Which means I need to do it, once and for all.

CHAPTER 37

Sasha

“Sasha!” Cass exclaims, setting down her phone as I walk through the door at Liberty, a new restaurant on Maple Street in downtown Quince Valley. “So glad you could make it.”

“Thanks for inviting me,” I say, sliding into a chair at the long table next to the picture window overlooking the street.

I smile as Cass talks about how good the menu is here. But there’s an ache in my chest. My whole body, actually. It’s still missing Griffin, even though he’s only been gone a few hours. He woke me up before dawn today, whispering that he had to go again, but that he wanted me to stay with Cass tonight. He wouldn’t tell me why, just that I was safe, but he’d feel better if I wasn’t on my own.

Part of me wanted to tell him if he was fine leaving me alone, then I should be fine staying on my own. But there was something in the urgency of his voice that had me skipping the petulance. “Okay,” I said.

I had a message from Cass before I even woke up saying she was *so* excited to have me over—Blake was out of town on business, so we could hang out and watch rom-coms and do girlie stuff. Normally, I’d love all of that.

But I couldn’t shake the worry that hung over me like a cloud. Not just for me, but for Griffin. The way he’d hugged me when he left—it was like he was going off to war. It felt like a farewell. I was so upset when the last sound of his bike disappeared over the hill that I went back into the house and

shook that stupid canary over and over again before switching it off and sticking it in my pocket.

“Dad’s just washing up,” Cass says now, “and Chelsea’s going to be a few minutes late, but she’s on her way.”

“Okay,” I say brightly, hoping I don’t sound fake. I really am happy to be here. It’s Sunday morning, and Cass arranged for us all to have brunch together. I’m not working at Bijou until this afternoon. I was touched she’d asked me to join.

“What?” she asks incredulously when I tell her that now. “You’re part of the family.”

My stomach churns. If only that were true. Something’s happening back in New York, but I can’t share that, so I smile and nod, taking a sip of the ice water sitting on the table.

It reminds me of that night at Sequoia with Vincent Creelman.

“Is he coming?” I’d asked Griffin as he got onto his bike.

He’d gone stiff, then walked back to me and wrapped me in his arms. “No.”

“How do you know?”

He’d hesitated, then said, “I don’t want to count any chickens before they’re hatched.” After that, he’d kick-started his bike, ending the conversation.

Aggravating man.

I try to find some small bit of relief in that now.

John Kelly comes back to the table and gives me a fatherly hug that nearly makes me cry. After that, I finally start to relax. When Chelsea arrives, she lets me hold baby Imogen until the food comes. I order eggs Benedict, and we talk about everything from Imogen’s sleep schedule to Chester, who I checked on this morning. He seems to be doing better than the last time we saw him. He was out on his new porch when I arrived, throwing scraps at the chickens. He even gave me a grin.

“No one knows much about him,” John says, leaning back and sipping his coffee. “Not even Griffin.”

I glance between the sisters, but none of them says anything, and I realize Griffin hasn’t made his friendship with Chester known. Even though it seems to me like he holds his cards close to his chest, he tells me so much more.

“Does Chester ever talk about his grandfather?” John asks.

“Not much. Why?”

“He was always a bit of a mystery to us growing up here. He rarely came into town, refused to go on the power grid when they strung lines up that way. People say he guarded his place with a shotgun, but my pop did some work for him and said he wasn’t mean so much as...lonely.”

I feel a sudden affinity for the old man.

“You never told us this,” Cass says.

He shrugs. “Haven’t thought about Joseph Brown in years. I always thought he must have a sad story, to live up there alone. No one at his funeral but Chester, and he’d only been living with him a few years when he passed.”

I frown. “I thought Chester grew up in that house.”

“I suppose we wouldn’t have seen much of him if his grandfather kept him from town.”

I try to remember what Griffin told me about the timing of Chester’s history. But just thinking about Griffin has me feeling that strange emptiness inside again.

“Sasha?” Chelsea asks.

I blink. They’ve asked me a question.

“Sorry,” I say. “I’m a little distracted.”

“It’s hard on us when Griffin takes off without telling any of us,” Chelsea says softly. “Must be really hard on you—he does tell you he’s going, doesn’t he?”

I swallow down the dryness in my throat. “Yes. He tells me.” Just not where. And for what.

This would be what life with Griffin would be like if this were real. Him constantly leaving, not telling anyone where he's gone. Not even me, the person he's supposedly been telling everything.

“Well, you've got us,” Cass says after a moment. “Me, specifically. We're going to have an amazing time over the next few days, I promise.”

I smile, grateful for her kindness, for all of their kindness, and for taking me in like this.

“But I do want to know about Eleanor,” John says. “Any movement on that front?”

I brighten at the change of subject, though I don't have much more information for him.

“Nora gave me all the census records from around that time,” I say, “and I've narrowed down the results a little, but there are still so many to go through.”

John nods, looking like he's trying to hide his disappointment.

My stomach does a roll. Nora and Jude made leaps and bounds, and I haven't done anything yet except go through information they already found. For them it's family business—part of their legacy. For me it's just my own curiosity.

Maybe it was a terrible idea to jump into this search. Not when I'm not really a part of this family.

John must see the embarrassment on my face, because he smiles. “I'm just glad to see someone picking up the thread while Nora and Jude are waylaid by life.”

Chelsea nods. “Yeah, none of us have dedicated any time to the project recently either. We all kind of gave up when it got hard. You're awesome for wanting to keep it going.”

“To be honest,” Cass says, “I wasn't much of a fan of digging around when everyone started getting into it. Besides being nonsense, the ghost rumors were bad for business. But since Nora's documentary came out, people are more

interested in the story of the people behind the ridiculous rumors.”

I know they’re saying all this to make me feel better. But it works, at least a little.

“Everyone’s touched by the dedication they saw in the movie to seeing Eleanor get justice,” Chelsea says.

“And to getting James’s name cleared,” I say.

“Even just found,” John says. “Though I sometimes fear that’s never going to happen.”

Except for Imogen cooing, we’re quiet for a bit. Then I say what’s on my mind, even though they’ll probably think I’m overly sentimental.

“You know, even though there’s no world where I think this could happen, I like to think James found Clea. That he raised her and got to love her the way Eleanor would have wanted.”

“Oh, that would be the perfect end to a tragic love story,” Chelsea says. I can see she’s got the same emotions going on as me, and suddenly, I’m once again glad I picked this up. It’s not just for me.

We move on to talking about Jude and Cap being in London for the next two weeks and when they think he’s going to propose.

But when I glance at John, he’s staring into the distance, working his thumbs on his napkin on the table. He’s clearly still thinking about the Eleanor project. It makes me wonder if anyone’s asked him what he knows. He’s a history buff. Plus, his wife ran the hotel for thirty years. He was the one who first got his kids interested in the story.

I’m just wondering if I should ask him when there’s a screech of tires outside, cutting Cass off mid-sentence.

“What the hell?” she says.

We all look out the window to see a gold Bentley cutting across traffic. It noses into an open parking spot thirty feet

from where we sit. Cars honk, pausing before going around the Bentley's rear, which sticks out into the road.

"It's okay, honey," John says, holding Chelsea's hand.

Chelsea grips a babbling Imogen tight across her chest, her eyes wide. Chelsea was in a car accident a few years ago—she still bears a scar across her face.

I shift my body to get a better look and also to block her view in case someone's hurt. But someone's moving inside the tinted windows.

A passerby stops and stands in front of the window, obviously checking if the person's all right. The door opens, and the man rears back. Whoever it is must say something nasty to the man, because he huffs and storms off.

Something tickles inside me. Some spidey-sense that this isn't just a terrible driver snagging a parking spot.

"Looks like everyone's okay," I say for Chelsea's sake.

Other restaurant patrons murmur behind me, most returning to their meals.

But I don't.

Because as the door opens farther, my stomach tightens. A pair of long legs clad in an expensive suit unfolds quickly from the driver's seat.

The person getting out doesn't even close the door. They just stand in the street.

Staring at me through the restaurant window.

My mouth goes dry. There's no mistaking the handsome face. No mistaking the square jaw and salt and pepper hair, the eyebrows like slashes over angry, thick-lashed eyes.

"Is that—" John says, his brows furrowed.

"My brother Sam," I say.

CHAPTER 38

Sasha

I don't think. "Would you excuse me, please?" is all I manage, calmly spoken.

I storm out of the restaurant, stalking toward Sam.

"Sasha."

"How did you find me?" The words aren't curious. They're filled with anger.

Sam puts his hands up, and I see the look in his eyes wasn't anger.

It was concern. His eyes dart left, right, over my shoulder. Like he's scanning for danger.

Griffin does the same thing.

"Sasha, you have to come with me," Sam says, his tone urgent.

My heart twists at the sound of his voice. I haven't seen him in person in a long time. He's been too busy for me.

"How did you find me?" I repeat, enunciating my words.

An older couple walks by on the street, openly staring. I smile at them in a slightly unhinged way, willing them to move along. I love that everyone looks out for each other in small towns, but not right now. "We're all good," I assure them.

"It doesn't matter," Sam says, taking a step toward me.

The couple moves along, hopefully not recognizing my brother.

Frustration that he won't tell me how he found me threatens to make me lose my composure. But I take a breath. "Fine. Why are you here?"

"There's trouble back in the city. And I think there's a chance it's coming here."

My heart thuds as his words echo around me. "Creelman?" My voice sounds suddenly weak.

"Sort of."

"Is he *here*?"

"No."

I let out the breath caught in my throat. "Where is he?"

"Nobody knows. He's ghosted."

That information stuns me. It should make me happy. But somehow, a sick, cold feeling of dread washes over me. How can Sam know he's not here? What if here's where he's ghosted to? I look around wildly, as if Creelman's going to walk out from behind a corner, his eyes filled with bloodlust for me.

"Please, Sasha. I can explain everything. But you need to come with me. It's for your own safety."

Panic starts to flutter in my chest. *Griffin*. He told me he didn't want me staying at home by myself. But he also said I was safe...

And Sam hasn't seemed to care for my safety in the past. I will myself to calm down. What if this is another scare tactic? Him trying to pull me into his shit to get *him* out of trouble?

"Did you know I got married?" I blurt out.

Sam's eyes flick down. "I heard."

"From who?"

"Your mom. I'm glad. If your mom's not happy about it, that means you probably are."

So he doesn't know who Griffin is. That's a good thing. I think.

“But you need to come with me. I’ve been looking for you for days.”

“You just happened to see me in that restaurant?”

“Yes, thank Christ.”

He’s antsy. But I believe him. He’s always been determined to get what he wants. He holds out his hand.

I almost reach mine out before remembering myself.

“I’m not going with you.”

“Sasha, don’t be stupid.” He drops his hand. “I know I haven’t been looking out for you in the last—”

“Haven’t been looking out for me? That’s the understatement of the year, Sam. You sent me into the fucking fire!”

Sam looks genuinely anguished. I see the pain in his face. Maybe the outstretched hand wasn’t cockiness. Maybe it was desperation.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. If I had any idea the chain of events...” He shakes his head. “It doesn’t matter now. There’s no excuse for how I’ve hurt you. But I’m begging you. Please.” He steps toward me. I step back.

“Hey!” a voice shouts from behind me. I spin around.

John is striding over. He stops by my side, puffing his chest out. “What’s going on here?”

My heart swells about three sizes.

Sam frowns. “Is this—”

“My father-in-law,” I say, folding my arms and stepping closer to John. “Looking out for me like family members should.”

Sam looks wounded enough that I know that stung.

“Then maybe you can help make Sasha understand,” he says, turning to John. “She needs to come with me. Now.”

“Sasha’s not going anywhere.” Cass has appeared next to her father.

Even Chelsea's coming outside, Imogen on her arm, looking as upset as the rest of them.

Sam eyes Cass a moment longer than the others, and I remember then that Cass used to work in finance in New York before she took over the hotel here. She was a big deal like him; they probably crossed paths before.

Cass gives him a disgusted look, and once again, I see the pain in his eyes. But this time, there's a bitterness in it. Sam moves on, looking back at me. "I don't think you understand." Sam's pleading with me now. "You're in danger, Sasha."

Cass frowns. "How on earth would Sasha be in danger?"

But John looks at me as if checking to see if it's true.

They don't know the real reason I'm here.

I smile, hoping my rattling nerves aren't showing. "It's okay. He just means...political exposure."

"I don't—" Sam begins, but I cut him off.

"I'll be fine, guys. Thank you so much for coming outside, but Sam's not a risk to me. Are you Sam?"

Sam looks incredulous. "What? Jesus, I would never hurt you."

The funny thing is, after all that's happened, I think he still believes that's true.

"I'll just be a sec," I tell my family. When they don't move, I take John's hand and meet all of their eyes. "I promise. It's just family stuff."

"Come on," Cass says, urging them back. They don't go inside, though, just stand outside the restaurant, at the ready.

My throat swells. They really are looking out for me.

When they're out of hearing distance, Sam sinks onto the hood of his car, pressing his hands to his forehead. "Sasha, I'm serious."

"I know you are. So tell me what you think is happening."

“I think if I found you, there’s a distinct possibility they will, too. Creelman—he doesn’t work alone.”

“Why do you think they want me so badly?”

“To get to me. It’s one of the reasons I’ve resigned my position, effective immediately.”

My jaw drops. Then I register what he said and realization dawns. He’s doing damage control. “So let me get this straight. You took public office. You fucked up. And now you’re worried everything’s going to get out if they find me?”

“It’s not—I’m not the only reason Creelman wanted you.”

“You know what he said when you sent me in on that date? He said you owed him something. That you took something of his. Is that what you’re worried he’s going to come for me for?”

“Sasha—”

“Do you think I’m in immediate danger right now? Answer me honestly, Sam.”

He hesitates. “I don’t know. I just have a bad feeling—”

“Then I don’t care.” This is not about him being worried for me. This is about him needing to cover his own ass. “This is your mess, Sam. I’m going to bet you only resigned so more of your mistakes wouldn’t come to light. You need to fix your shit yourself, and you need to find a way to make me not a part of it.”

“You don’t understand. I never wanted to hurt you.”

“There was a time I would have believed that, Sam. But you should know you already broke my heart.”

Then I remember—I reach into my pocket. I take Sam’s hand and drop the canary in it. “Keep that. And don’t contact me again.”

CHAPTER 39

Ford and I meet outside Lionel's place just before six.
"Anything?" I ask.

Ford gives a grim shake of his head. He went straight to the office after his plane landed while I've spent all day driving around to everywhere I can think that Lionel might be. I even stopped by his ex-wife's place. And Laura's marker.

"No one there at all."

It's Sunday afternoon, but that's still not a good sign. I can't shake the feeling that something bigger than just Lionel going AWOL is happening. "Security?"

Ford grimaces. That's a negative.

"Seriously?"

"You find anything?"

I shake my head.

Where the fuck are you, Lionel?

We look up at his building, neither of us, I think, feeling especially hopeful.

Lionel's apartment is in a nondescript six-story building in Queens. It looks like it was specifically built to house lonely, divorced men. As though proving the point, as we walk up to the front door, a man with thinning gray-brown hair and sagging shoulders comes through, his eyes only briefly glancing over us. He throws the door open behind him, though, which solves our need to discreetly jimmy the lock.

“This place is depressing as fuck.” Ford states the obvious as we get in the elevator. The walls are paneled in cheap vinyl-covered pressboard and the fluorescent light over our heads buzzes loudly, casting an almost greenish tint.

The fifth-floor hallway’s not much better.

I can’t help but notice how the dingy carpets and scuffed beige paint are such a far cry from the family home Laura grew up in. Her mom made “cozy home” her whole personality, with bright throw pillows on every couch and a constant rotation of baked goods in the oven.

“Did his ex-wife have any info?” Ford asks, clearly thinking the same thing.

“She hasn’t heard from him in over a year.”

I saw the pain on Laura’s mother’s worn face when she saw me and the concern when I said we couldn’t locate her ex-husband. But she quickly replaced it with stony indifference. “I don’t really care where he is,” she said. “I’m sure he’ll turn up in a dive bar somewhere.”

I didn’t tell her he’d quit drinking. It didn’t matter. He didn’t handle the loss of his daughter well—though who would? At least he’s been sober the last couple of years.

She reached out and gave my hand a squeeze before she slammed the door in my face, a nod to the happy times we’d once shared, before everything went so terribly dark.

I focus on the matter at hand. Lionel’s apartment is at the end of the hall. Halfway there, my phone buzzes.

It’s Sasha. The dim hallway seems to brighten just by me picturing her face.

SASHA: Hey, you!

GRIFFIN: Hey, sweetheart.

SASHA: You busy?

I don’t ever want to answer her yes to that question, but I stopped when I saw her name, and Ford’s already almost up at

Lionel's door.

GRIFFIN: A little. You okay?

Three dots pop up. Then a new text appears. But it's not Sasha.

FORD: Signs of forced entry.

I whip my head up. He's standing with his back up against the wall next to Lionel's door, his elbows bent, weapon pulled. He's looking pointedly at me.

"Fuck."

I shove my phone into my pocket. If she's not texting me *911*, it'll have to wait.

I sprint up the hallway as quietly as I can.

Ford glares, pocketing his phone. "Way to pay attention, lover boy."

I grunt, glancing at the door. He knows I'm sorry.

The door's closed, but the frame is bent out of shape.

"You hear anything?" I whisper.

Ford shakes his head. "Think it's clear."

I nod. We'll still go in on the assumption that someone's inside. Better safe than sorry. I move to the other side of the door.

"Ready?" I ask.

Ford nods.

I bang on the door. "Lionel."

I tip my ear toward the wood. No sound at all. Then a little pattering and a scratch.

"Chipps," I whisper.

Ford nods.

Lionel adopted an old tabby a couple of years ago after his wife left him. Probably the only reason he kept his life

together even a little bit over the past few years.

“Lionel.” I try again, banging harder but not aggressively enough to get the neighbors out.

I tip my head.

Ford’s got the gun, so I let him slip past me while I play backup.

Ford carries; I don’t. Personal choice. We’re not cops, so we don’t do this often, but we’ve trained well enough. I try the handle. It doesn’t twist, but the door latch is broken, so I yank it open.

Ford moves in with his gun high. I follow.

The hallway’s clear. To the right is the tiny kitchen.

Ford freezes, his jaw clenching, before moving on. I glance in as I go by, and my stomach churns. There’s a chair in the cramped space, with cut ties on the legs and back. On the floor, splatters of blood.

Lionel.

The combined living and dining room is empty. I point my head to the hallway.

Chipps meows loudly, snaking around my leg.

The bathroom and lone bedroom are clear, too. Closets are empty.

“No one here,” Ford says, holstering his weapon.

I’m already headed for the kitchen.

Ford comes up next to me a moment later. “Tortured.”

I scan the blood splatters. There are a lot, but no big puddles like you’d see with more lethal injuries. “Not for long.”

“Not here, anyway,” Ford says.

Chipps meows again. His bowls are empty—food and water. I pick him up and head to the bathroom. The toilet’s empty, too. I return to the kitchen where I know Lionel keeps the food. “He’s been on his own a couple days.”

I stroke the cat behind the ears before dropping him to the ground and grabbing the bag under the sink. The garbage under there is festering. I hold my breath, grateful it's nothing worse I'm trying not to smell.

But when I shut the door, I grimace. Because there, in the sink, are more blood splatters. Three, to be exact, and in the middle of each, a white molar tooth.

“Jesus,” Ford says.

I top up Chipps's water, even though we're not leaving him here.

“What do you think?” he asks me.

“I think I'm glad Chipps is out of food.”

What they say about cats is true—they'll eat whatever's available if they're desperate. I know we both feared the worst when we saw that broken doorframe.

Ford gives me a grim nod. “Agreed.” Ford pops his jaw. “So if Lionel's not here, where the hell is he?”

I walk around the apartment, taking it all in. The place is trashed: the mattress and couch cushions are slashed, drawers have been pulled open, and shit's been emptied onto the floor. Except for the mess, there's still not much here. Compared to Chester's place the other day, there's not much evidence someone even lives here. The sadness of that makes me bring my fingers to my chest, rubbing like there's a wound there.

Except...the dining room is messier than the rest of the place. Giant rolls of paper lay strewn on the tabletop and floor.

I walk over and open one up.

“What are they?” Ford asks.

“Design plans.”

“What for?”

I show them to Ford. “Some kind of institutional building it looks like.”

Both of us frown at the paper, trying to make sense of it. It's McCrae & Associates. It looks almost like a library or a school. The hell did he have drawings like these for?

Ford crouches down, picking up a wad of paper off the ground. It looks like it's mostly opened mail. Bills, stamped *past due*. Dozens of them. He hands me one. It's not addressed here, but to the office.

"He never brought anything home," I say. "Said it was too risky."

Yet here's a huge pile of mail calling me a liar.

"He wasn't lying about the money thing," Ford says, picking up some of the bills. Then he goes still as he reads one of them. It's on nicer paper than the bills, cream colored and thick.

"Fuck me," Ford says after a minute.

He hands it to me. There's an embossed logo at the top that says the letter's from a law office. The subject line reads *Corporate Insolvency Support*.

We meet each other's eyes.

"Guess I'm not going back to Texas," Ford says.

McCrae & Associates is bankrupt.

I'm so stunned that it's not until I'm back outside and Ford's left with Chipps that I remember my phone. When I pull it out, still half-dazed at this news, I see only one missed text from Sasha, from half an hour ago.

SASHA: My brother found me. Don't worry, I'm okay. He's gone.

CHAPTER 40

Sasha

I head from that jarring brunch straight to work on Sunday. Luckily my shift is four hours where I get to pretend my brother didn't just track me down to try to use me as an out for whatever political mess he's gotten himself into. The best part is chatting with Glo about a hypothetical business idea I have, where we dress up women like that single mom who came in for interview clothes, getting designers to provide donations so they're free or low cost for the women.

"We could do it, you know," Glo says as I'm leaving. I laugh but see she's serious. Fired up.

I don't have time to think about that, though, because I have to run home and throw some clothes of my own into a bag for my stay at Cass's, and check on Chester one more time before I'm gone for a few days.

But the minute I walk in the door, I spot my laptop on the coffee table.

I vowed I wouldn't think about Sam; that I wouldn't get involved in his messes ever again.

But I can't help that sliver of worry that maybe he was right. Maybe I should be worried, even if he thinks Creelman's gone.

The results are mostly in the news section of the search engine.

Sam didn't just resign—he took off. He didn't show up to any of his meetings at the end of last week. Reports say very little information is being made public. All anyone knows is he

left a letter on his desk, resigning his post. He hasn't been heard from in—I tally the time—four days.

And police want him for questioning.

My hand's at my mouth, but I make myself lower it.

No. This is a mess, but it's not mine. I meant what I said about him needing to fix it himself. But I can't help that nagging feeling that won't go away that maybe Sam's not just trying to protect his own ass.

I hesitate, then I do what I haven't done since I got to Quince Valley—I text my mom.

SASHA: Hi, Mom. It's Sasha. New number. Have you heard anything from Sam?

She answers only a few seconds later.

MOM: No, have you?

I shouldn't have done this. I'm in the process of writing back to tell her never mind, but it takes a while on the old flip phone. Another text comes before I finish.

MOM: It's atrocious. Just atrocious.

MOM: Where are you? Isn't it time you come home?

MOM: Anyway, I saw Celina Moore the other day...

I lower the phone. I can't believe it. Celina Moore is the mother of Robert Moore, a boring-as-hell hedge fund manager who my mother will not stop trying to set me up with.

She doesn't even care about Sam anymore.

More texts come from her, and exactly none of them are about him or about me. Nothing about how she misses me or hopes I'm well.

As my phone keeps buzzing, I have the sudden liberating thought: I'm done.

I'm done trying to pretend we have a good relationship. I'm done trying to seek validation or approval from her.

Things may not be perfect here, but since I've been in Quince Valley, I've felt more accepted and loved and cared for than I ever did at home. Griffin has shown me more love than I knew for even a moment with my family. Feeling my chest swell, I ignore the texts from my mom and send one to Griffin. I wasn't going to tell him about Sam until he got back, but I do now just in case, reasoning he'll respond when he's not so busy.

A few minutes later, I'm bringing my overnight bag outside to drop in the truck before heading over to Chester's when my phone rings.

I'm surprised to see Vivian's name on my screen amid all the text notifications.

"Hey, Viv," I say congenially, only because I know she doesn't like pesky things like friendly greetings.

I'm sure she's going to tell me I messed something up during my shift, which she usually does when she just wants to chat. But to my surprise, she says, "Do you know a Mr. Chester Brown?"

My stomach flips. "Yes. I'm actually on my way over to see him. Why?"

"Well, you're not going to find him at home. He's here at Greenville General."

I drop my bag. "What? Is he okay?"

"Not really. He's making a very big fuss because they won't let him leave by himself."

"Viv, is he okay?"

"Okay enough to act like that cartoon cowboy with the guns."

Yosemite Sam. I'd laugh if this was remotely funny. "How did you know to call me?"

“I thought this is the neighbor you talk about with his... tooth situation.”

Now I do laugh, though it's quick and humorless. I pick up my bag, setting it on the hood of the truck as I pat my pockets for my keys. They're not there. “So does he need a ride? I can be there in fifteen.”

“No, no, I'm already here with my sister. We'll bring him home. Just meet us at his place. Give me the address.”

I try to argue, but she threatens to hang up on me if I don't tell her where to go. I give her the information, then run back inside to find my keys. It takes me a good five minutes of frustration to find them, emptying my pockets and tearing up the place before spotting them on the couch where I sat with the laptop earlier.

When I get to Chester's, I pace his front walkway, questions flying through my head. What's he doing at the hospital? Is he going to be okay? It's only when I peer around the side of his house that I see his old car. There's a huge dent in the front bumper.

This time my fingers actually make it into my mouth.

It occurs to me while I'm waiting that I should text Cass to let her know I'm going to be late—and might not make it at all—but when I pat my pockets and find them empty, I realize I must have left my phone back at Griffin's when looking for my keys. I'm annoyed with myself for getting distracted by that search for Sam, then flustered when Viv called. But I don't want to miss Chester, so I continue pacing instead.

A few minutes later, a shiny dark green Jaguar comes tearing down the drive. Vivian drives like a maniac. I rush to the car's back door, but Chester's already getting out, cussing at me to get out of the way. He's wearing a hospital gown and robe and doesn't have any shoes on.

I don't even have time to be shocked at his appearance or how grumpy he's being, because Vivian starts pulling away before I've even got his door closed.

“Wait!” I yell, chasing after her. She brakes, rolling down her window a crack, as if I’m going to try to sell her something.

I see why a moment later. Her sister, who I’ve never met, sits in the passenger seat. She’s ghostly pale and thin, her eyes closed. She looks like a sickly version of Vivian, and I realize with a shock that I had no idea how sick she was. I’m ashamed to say this only makes me think of Chester, who’s currently hobbling to the front door with a white plastic bag in his hand marked *Personal Belongings*.

“What?” Vivian snaps.

She’s never told us about her sister. She hides her.

I tear my eyes from the woman in the passenger seat.

“Vivian, what happened?”

“Don’t you know? I thought you were his friend?”

Guilt rocks me. “No! I mean yes, but he hasn’t told me about...any of this.”

Vivian looks exasperated, but also like she pities me. She shoves her stick into reverse but doesn’t move. “He said he wasn’t getting ‘poked and prodded’ anymore and he started making a big stink. Then they said he needed to be accompanied home. He said the taxi driver would be his ‘goddamned chaperone,’ but they didn’t like that.” She huffs, then shakes her head. “Guess he’s your problem now.”

She rolls up the window before I can respond, backing up too fast and narrowly missing a tree before peeling away.

When I look up at Chester, he’s only made it to the bench on his porch. He’s looking at me, his hands curled in his lap, his pale, skinny legs sticking out of the patterned hospital gown.

He looks painfully small.

I walk toward him, my heart in my throat.

“What did she tell you?” Chester asks.

All other worries have vanished in the face of this new development. A lump the size of a goose egg lodges in my throat. “Not much. But I’m putting the pieces together.”

Chester sighs, his small chest rising up and then down again. He slides over, making room for me.

It’s freezing out here, the bench cold and hard.

“It’s already humiliating not driving myself down to somewhere I don’t even want to go,” Chester says after a while.

I think of the big dip in his bumper. “Is your car not working anymore?”

“It works. I just hit a damn tree. People already think I’m unfit to drive. They see me driving in town with a tree shaped dent in the front? That’s a ticket to lose the old gal altogether. I took a taxi down there, thinking I was bein’ so clever. Just look at me now.”

He folds his scrawny arms over his chest. When he rubs his upper arms, I realize it’s not just because he’s frustrated.

“May I?” I indicate the bag.

He nods, and I open it, pulling open his coat. He lets me lay it over his shoulders.

We sit in silence a moment. Then I ask, “How long have you known?”

“What, that I’m on my way out?”

I laugh, like this is a joke. But it’s not. The laugh gets stuck in a sob. “Chester—”

“It’s only been a couple weeks. I didn’t even want to go back there, but the doctor looked so sad I told her I would. Then they brought all these needles out.” He waves his hand in the air. “I ain’t goin’ back. What’s the point?”

The point is you have people who care about you. Who want you around a little longer.

But I don’t say any of that. Tears well in my eyes. I blink them away, knowing Chester will just start worrying about me

if he sees me crying. “Why didn’t you tell us?” I ask. “We could have helped you. Taken you to your appointments. Gotten you more help—”

“I don’t need any help. There’s nothing to be done about it now.”

I swallow hard on that goose egg. Again and again. But it’s no use. The tears come, and they don’t stop coming. I reach for Chester’s hand. “I’m sorry,” I whisper.

Chester shakes his head. His eyes are wet, too. “Don’t be sorry, sweetheart.” He takes my hand, resting it on the bench between us. His hand is thin but warm. “There’s plenty to cry about in this world.”

We stay like that for a long time. Long enough that the light starts growing dim and, despite everything, my stomach starts to rumble.

“We should get some food into you,” I tell him.

“You, too, by the sounds of it. Good lord, girlie.”

I laugh at that, a teary-eyed laugh that breaks my heart and soothes it—if only for a moment—all at once.



While we’re waiting for the casserole to heat up in the oven—thank God I remembered to bring that—I pick up some of the papers Chester pulled out of the pocket of his gown.

The flyers have titles like *Pain Control* and *We’re Here to Help*. Words like *progressive illness* and *managing your comfort* float through the air after I’ve put them down.

“They want to move me to a home in Greenville,” he says. “But this is home.”

I excuse myself and head to the kitchen, mumbling something about setting the table. I refuse to break down while he’s only a few feet away from me. I take a few big, deep breaths that only sort of work at calming me down.

I so desperately want to talk to Griffin, but I don't have my phone, and I refuse to leave Chester's side.

When I come back out with plates and utensils, smiling brightly, Chester's still seated at the table where I left him. Only now, he's staring down the hallway.

"You okay?" I ask, then feel stupid for asking.

He smiles at me, making my heart splinter. If this is how I feel, having only known Chester for such a short time, I can't imagine how it's going to affect Griffin, who's lived next door to him for a decade.

I'm suddenly glad Griff isn't here.

"I'm not gonna go," Chester says.

"What?"

"To the home. I think I'll stay right here. But maybe if you're not too busy..." He trails off.

"Anything," I say, trying to fight off tears again. I want to argue with him. To tell him to listen to the doctors and go back to the clinic and stay with us as long as he can. But all that can wait. Right now, I'll do anything this sweet man wants.

"Maybe if you're not too busy, you can stay with me tonight."

In the kitchen, the oven's buzzer goes off.

"I'm here, Chester," I manage to get out. "I'm not going anywhere. I'll sleep on your couch tonight. And tomorrow we'll get someone here who can help you look after things." I dry my eyes. It feels good to think about practical matters. A nurse. A housekeeper. I know Griffin will move a whole team in here if that's what it takes.

But Chester shakes his head. "None of that right now, sweetheart. Let's just worry about tonight. And gettin' some food in ya."

I smile. "Okay, Chester."

But as I head to the kitchen, I can't help following where his gaze has returned: down the hallway. Because there, in the

dim light cast from the dining room, I see what he's looking at.

The door to the spare bedroom at the end of the hall is no longer closed.

CHAPTER 41

My bike's not fast enough. A chopper would be faster, but arranging it, getting it here on time...

I ramp up my speed. I'm pushing it. The speedometer says I'm well over one hundred. I angle impatiently around cars on the freeway.

In my ears, there's the tinny sound of a phone ringing, then Sasha's voicemail message again. "The caller you are trying to reach—"

"*Fuck!*" I shout into my Bluetooth. I tap the button on my helmet to disconnect the call.

My phone rings a split second later.

"Slow the fuck down," Ford yells when I pick up. He's in a rental car somewhere behind me.

Ford doesn't yell.

"I can't."

"You can."

"My wife is in fucking danger!" I shout.

"And you're no use to her dead." Ford matches my volume.

He's scared. I've never heard him scared before. That's because I'm acting like a fucking maniac. Right after I saw that text from Sasha, I knew she was in danger. I knew, somehow, that what happened to Lionel was connected to Creelman, to Macklin.

To my girl.

“We’re close, Griff.” His voice is still hard and loud, but I can hear him forcing calm into it. “We’ll be there in under an hour.”

Ford’s right. I need to slow down. As if to prove it, a pair of red taillights appears in front of me, coming at me way too fast. I squeal around the back of the bus, nearly fishtailing.

Adrenaline rockets through me at the near miss.

“Fuck me.” I slow down. Just a little.

“I never should have let you drive,” Ford says.

This isn’t like me. Ford knows it, and I know it. I never let feelings control me. But the gloves came off when Sasha came into my life.

“Did you get through to Cass?” I ask once my heart rate steadies a little.

“Yeah. No sign of Sasha at your place. Lights off.”

“Chester’s?” Cass said that was where Sasha said she was going tonight before her place.

A pause.

“Ford, fucking talk to me.” I feel the bike picking up speed again, and I let it come back down, breathing as calmly as I can.

“Not sure if she made it over there.”

“Well, fucking find out!”

“Take a fucking breath, Griffin. I’ve got a text into her. I’ll call when we hang up.” His voice is calm again. I veer into the fast lane to pass a semi-trailer, but I do it at a reasonable speed. Sort of.

I can tell he’s debating whether to tell me something.

“I’m okay, Ford,” I say. I’m not really, but I’m not going to kill myself on this highway. Not before I get to her.

“I heard back from Yang. He says security footage shows an unmarked van parking in the garage under the office. Guys

went up dressed like pest control.”

If I could spare the loss of vision, I’d pinch the bridge of my nose. “We have the tightest security in Manhattan, and yet the front desk downstairs lets up guys in fucking bug spray suits?”

“Security’s not much use when the intruders have a top clearance badge.”

Whoever took Lionel took his access cards, too.

I grimace. “Makes sense how they got it to go up so fast.”

In the five hours since we left the city, McCrae & Associates isn’t just bankrupt; it’s gone. Someone—soldiers in Creelman’s organization, we’re pretty sure—got into what looks like every corner of the office with blowtorches disguised as insecticide canisters. They used Lionel’s security badges to breeze past security. Everything’s encrypted at McCrae, no paperwork left unscanned or unshredded, but whoever did this didn’t want to take any chances.

It was sheer luck that Ford was out of there before they came in. We were already en route to Quince Valley when it happened, because of that text Sasha sent. And much worse, because she hasn’t responded since.

I still don’t know where she is, and that fact makes me feel like someone’s scraped out my insides with a rusty spoon.

There are only two reasons Sam Macklin would have tracked his sister down: either he and Creelman’s people need her for leverage or something worse, or he knows what’s going down and he’s genuinely concerned for her well-being.

I can only pray, knowing he cared for her once, that it’s the second. But with her missing, I’m too much of a pragmatist to think it’s anything but the first.

CHAPTER 42

Sasha

After we eat, Chester says he wants to go out on the porch to look at the stars. There must be a new moon, because I can't see it, but the stars are brilliant and bright on their own, casting a bluish light on us as we sit down in the rockers we bought for just this purpose. It's crisp outside, but beautiful. I bundle myself up in my coat and bring out a blanket for Chester, tucking it around his legs.

He tsks when I tuck it in, but I can tell he likes being fussed over.

I didn't bring up his grandfather's things during dinner. I shouldn't bring them up now, either. But it's been gnawing at me. Now, as we rock in easy silence on the yet-to-be stained boards, the chickens bedded down in their coop, I badly want to bring him up.

I also look over at the third chair, wishing badly Griffin was here with us.

A snap in the woods makes me glance into the darkness. We're surrounded on all sides, with the patch of open grass between here and the path to Griffin's behind me.

"Plenty of raccoons around here this time of night," Chester says reassuringly when he sees me peering over my shoulder.

Then I hear the flick of a lighter.

I whip around to see Chester's face lit up as he lights a giant cigar.

"What the hell, Chester?"

“Don’t you even think about telling me to put this out,” he says. Then he hoots like the Chester I first met, and all I can do is shake my head and laugh along with him.

We’re silent for a few minutes, and I relax into the creaking of the rockers under us, along with the soft puff and crackle of Chester inhaling his cigar smoke. I really should text Cass—I told her I was going to Chester’s for dinner, but it’s half past nine now. She’s bound to be worried, especially after what happened with Sam today.

“Did you remember to charge your phone?” I ask him now. He was supposed to go and do that after dinner, not dig up an old stogie.

“What do you take me for?”

“Did you?”

“Yeah, I did. It’s in my room. Didn’t know I had to charge the damn thing when I don’t ever use it.”

He’s got the same flip phone as me, but when I asked to borrow it, it was dead.

I roll my eyes, a smile on my lips. But it falls as I think of Sam. Despite my vow not to think about him, the longer the night’s gone on, the more I’ve started to worry.

He looked genuinely concerned for me.

But I can’t tell what’s real or fake with him anymore.

“You feel like sharing with the class, honey?” Chester asks.

I laugh softly. “Just family stuff.”

Then guilt twists my gut. Chester doesn’t have family. Not anymore.

All the more reason he should go through his grandfather’s things before it’s too late.

I clear my throat, opening my mouth to tell him I saw the open door, when he speaks first.

“I suppose if I’m not long for this world, I ought to make my confessions now.”

I blink at him in the dark. “You want to see a priest, Chester?”

That makes him hoot again, and despite the fact that he’s laughing at me, I love the sound too much to interrupt.

“A priest wouldn’t know what to do with me,” he says finally, knuckling his eyes. “Nah, to you and Griffin. But seeing as he’s not here, it’ll just have to be to you.”

I angle the chair his way. Behind him, the woods are a black mass, the tops of the trees cut against the starry night sky. Behind me, Griffin’s house is quiet and locked up without me. I feel all alone in the world right now with Chester, but just like when it’s only Griffin and me, it doesn’t feel like it used to. I feel like that one other person is all I need.

And even sometimes, that just being me is okay, too.

Chester taps his fingers on the chair. “I never knew my dad.”

I stop my rocking. “What?”

“I glorified the story a bit when I first met you. ’Cause the real one’s too blue for a ray of sunshine like you.”

“I’ve known my share of clouds, Chester,” I say softly.

I remember what Griffin said that day I met Chester. How he took forever to open up to him. I’m so touched I feel my throat grow thick. But I swallow it down. “I’d be honored to know the truth, Chester.”

“There ain’t much to it. I was born in a motel off the freeway in Northern California. I think I told you my mother was a housekeeper—she was, for the motel. But she didn’t pass with my dad.” He looks down. “I’m sorry I lied to you, Sasha.”

I place a hand on his. It’s trembling slightly. “You don’t have to talk, Chester. If it’s too hard.”

He takes his hand out from under mine and pats the top of mine, then grips his knee.

“Well, I guess if it’s the first and last time I tell someone the truth about it, it ought to be you.”

My heart twists. I keep quiet to let him talk.

“Mama got knocked up by an older man she worked for when she was a teenager. A traveling salesman, she always said.”

“Joseph’s son.”

He looks at me with guilt-stricken eyes, though I’m not sure why. “She didn’t know who he was. Didn’t even know his last name, and he was gone before she knew about her little problem.”

Did he grow up thinking about himself this way?

Chester brings his cigar to his mouth, flapping his bottom lip a few times on it before looking at it like a foreign object. He rests it in his hand on the arm of his chair. “She took care of me best she could, but the boyfriends she found—they didn’t much like her having a little kid around.” He looks down at his arm. It’s covered by his shirtsleeve and coat, but I remember the scarring there from that day by the swimming hole.

“Anyway. I wasn’t a welcome addition to the equation.”

My stomach roils at the thought of what must have made those scars.

He must see the anger in my eyes, even in the dark. “Hey now, it don’t matter anymore. It was a long time ago.”

“It matters to me.”

“Anyway, she was young, and she left me when I was around seven years old. I just woke up one day with a note next to the little bedroll I slept on that said *I’m sorry*. Manager took me to an orphanage, just like the daughter of your Eleanor Cleary.”

Tears stream down my cheeks. “Oh, Chester.” Still, I’m surprised he remembered the detail about Clea when he was so out of it that day I told him.

“I never got adopted, so when I was old enough, I just left. Thumbed my way across the country. I thought I was a musician back then—had a guitar and all, but I was never much good at it. I came this way ’cause the fishin’ was good. In the summer, I could sleep in the woods and not bother anyone. One day I stumbled across this place, purely by accident. There wasn’t even a road up here back then. I’d been fishing along the river and hiked up on a deer trail through the trees. I thought I was far enough out of town not to come across no one, but ho-lee shit, here was a little cabin. I knew there was someone here, ’cause there was wood on the back porch. But when I stepped outta the trees to look closer, Joseph nearly shot me off his lawn.” He chuckles again. “I was a stubborn kid, though. I thought he was livin’ the Shangri-la lifestyle out here all by himself. I slept out in the woods and tried again the next day. Told him I was good with the chickens, stuff around the yard. Said I didn’t even need a paycheck, just a place to lay my head.”

He rocks again. “Joseph let me stay one night, then two. After that, he stopped mentioning me leavin’, and I just never left.”

Chester’s contemplative for a bit. He stares out at the stars.

“Joseph was a quiet old guy. Though he was in his sixties when I met him, so younger than me now.” He guffaws, then coughs hard. When he recovers, he says, “He barely talked to me for the first whole year I was here. I thought he was just a run-of-the-mill hermit. But after a while, I started to think maybe he didn’t really want to be alone the way he ended up.”

He puffs on his cigar again, and for a moment, there’s a lull in the crickets. His cigar smoke permeates the air around me, smelling almost woody.

“He loved it when I brought him a newspaper from town. Read it front to back. Looked especially hard at the pages about local goings-on.”

I think about what Chester told me about his father that first day.

“It was Joseph who had his heart broken, wasn’t it?”

Chester meets my eye. “That’s exactly it, sweetheart.”

He looks like he’s waiting for me to get something, but I’m still trying to process everything he’s told me.

After a moment, he puffs on his cigar. Then he goes stiff, his eyes squinting at something over my shoulder.

It’s then I see the flicker in his eyes. Not something internal, but a flash of light. It’s a reflection...

I turn around, and what I see makes my blood run cold. “Chester,” I say. “Is that—”

“Fire!” he hollers.

At first I think it’s a forest fire. Then I realize it’s contained to a single point.

“Oh my God!” I leap up. It’s Griffin’s cabin.

I take off at a sprint.

“Sasha! No!” Chester yells after me.

“Call 911!” I yell over my shoulder at him. Then I tear across the grass and onto the path.

Except I didn’t account for how dark it would be. The last time I came through here at night, it was with Griffin, and we had a flashlight.

And Griffin.

“No,” I whisper. “No, no, no...” There’s a glow in the distance, but where I am, it’s pitch-black. I should have taken the truck. I reach for my pocket, but I don’t have my phone to light my way. My toe hooks on a root, and I nearly fall. I hold my hands up after that, waving them in front of me so I don’t smash into trees. It’s a fifteen-minute walk between the two properties. Running, I could probably make it in a third of that. But I can’t run. I trip every other step, on roots and stones and who knows what. At one point, I trip hard and can’t stop

myself from falling flat on my face, pain zinging up from my knees and hands. My chin whacks the ground, too, and I bite my tongue. Blood fills my mouth, but I hardly notice.

I don't know what I'm going to be able to do showing up there. Maybe I can get the hose on—and what, put a house fire out with a garden hose? The light grows bigger, and now I can hear it. It's loud, roaring and crackling and popping.

Finally I emerge from the path into the yard and gasp out loud.

Flames fully consume the cabin, so bright and hot as I stumble toward it I have to hold my hands up in front of my face.

But my hands up are why I don't see the hulking figure step from the shadows behind me until I catch movement from the corner of my eye. I don't even have time to scream before something hits the side of my head so hard I'm knocked sideways, stars obscuring my vision before everything falls into blackness.

CHAPTER 43

Sasha

Someone's screaming in my ear.

I turn my head left and right, then cry out. It's not screaming; it's a ringing in my ears. My head throbs. So does my shoulder. And my wrists and ankles.

God, that ringing.

I blink my eyes open. It's dark, but I can make out some shapes in front of me. A window, with a curtain drawn. Cheap wood paneling. A couch with a tuft of filling spilling out from a tear in its arm. There's a rank smell filling my nostrils, too. Rot and mold. Dampness.

I lift my arms to cover my mouth—or at least I try to. Pain screams from my wrist. My arms don't move.

I'm stuck.

I look down. I'm sitting on a chair. My ankles are strapped to the legs.

Panic shoots through me.

"Help!" I scream, before realizing that's a stupid thing to do. It makes my head throb, too.

"Sasha!" a voice whispers.

I look up, searching for whoever that was.

But my attention's drawn to a tromping sound outside. A moment later, a door I didn't know was there bangs open. A hulking figure fills the doorframe. "You're awake," the voice says. It's low and rumbly, but so far from the way Griffin's low and rumbly voice sounds. It makes me want to vomit.

“Fucking finally,” he tacks on, spitting a glob of saliva onto the filthy linoleum floor.

A light flicks on. I’m momentarily blinded. I squint, ducking my head.

Boots sound around me. When I blink and look up, my stomach drops.

There, in a chair across from me, sits Sam. He’s bound like I am. His face is half covered with blood, his hair hanging over his eyes, one of which is swollen shut and purple.

My heart pounds heavily in my chest as the man tromps across the floor toward me.

“No!” Sam cries from behind him. I can hear the scrape and thud of his chair.

“Stay still!” the man shouts. “I already told you what would happen if you moved again.”

Sam’s chair doesn’t move. “Don’t fucking touch her.”

The man ignores Sam. He takes another step toward me until he’s right in my face.

The shock of recognition hits me then. “It’s you,” I croak.

Creelman’s goon from the restaurant. He smiles at me. It’s grotesque. His beady eyes pin themselves to mine. “Only I don’t see your little fireman anywhere, sweetheart.”

My stomach roils. “Don’t you dare fucking call me that.”

The beast’s eyebrows rise up. “I see why Vince liked you so much.”

I glare at him, my whole body shaking. “I don’t know what you want from me, but I’ve got nothing for you. I don’t know anything about…” I was going to say my brother’s business, but I still can’t throw Sam under the bus, even when my life is clearly at risk. “I don’t have anything you want.”

“Oh, I know that. But our friend over here does. And you’re going to be his persuasion.”

“I’m surprised someone like you knows a word so big,” I spit out.

I’m being beyond foolish. But he’s going to kill me no matter what. I know that now. And going down on my knees is not going to happen. Like Chester said, this might be my last chance to tell the truth. And the truth is, I’m done with being scared.

The man stands up. Then he shocks me by tossing his head back and laughing. If his smile is terrifying, his laugh is more so. It’s unhinged. I suddenly don’t feel so brave.

“Sasha,” Sam says behind him.

The man abruptly stops laughing. He turns around, tromps toward Sam, and rears his arm back.

There’s a sickeningly wet thud as his fist connects with Sam’s face, followed by the splatter of blood on the floor.

“No!” I cry, wrenching myself against my ties.

“So you do care about your piece of shit brother,” the man says. “Vincent never thought you did. But he was wrong about a lot of things.”

I crane my neck around the man, but I can only see Sam’s shoulder where it’s twisted behind him and the top of his head where it hangs.

Sam. My feelings don’t make any sense.

But I have no time to parse them, because the man’s in my face again, looming over me. “Macklin.”

He says it loud enough that I know he’s not talking to me.

My brother makes a gurgling noise behind him.

“I’m all about equality. That means it’s time to tell me where the money is, or I’m going to mess up this pretty girl’s face just like yours.”

Sam makes a grunting sound.

The man cracks his knuckles. I look around, panicked. But there’s nothing I can do. I’m tied to this chair. I make a

whimpering sound but bite my tongue quickly. I can't let him see I'm scared. I begin to squeeze my eyes shut as he pulls his arm back.

No!

I sit up straight, chin up, even as my lip's trembling. "You want to hit me? Hit me," I spit.

"My fuckin' pleasure," the man says.

He swings, but Sam shouts, "Stop! I'll tell you."

The man's fist is inches from my face. He smiles again, and I can't help shuddering.

Then he turns his back on me.

Sam gives him an address. "Thirty minutes. Maybe less. There's a loose panel in the closet..."

The man stands there a moment, then slips his hand under his coat and pulls out something black and shiny.

My stomach turns when I see what it is.

A gun.

I tighten my fists. I have the insane thought that I can somehow wrestle it away from him. Point it at him and call the cops. I've shot a gun before. It wouldn't be my first time.

Chester.

He must be losing his mind right now.

Everyone must be. Cass would have called Griffin because I never showed up at her place. Or maybe Chester's called him.

Either way, I can almost see Griffin now, speeding toward me on the freeway, too many hours away.

I picture him finding me right here on the floor, a bullet between my eyes just like the woman he lost before.

Did he love her too? He had to have.

Griffin. My heart hurts so badly it's hard to breathe.

The man is saying something to my brother. I focus, needing to hear.

“If I don’t find the money exactly where you say it’s going to be, you’re fucking dead, Macklin. So is your pretty sister—and her fireman, too.”

My stomach turns again. He was more observant than Vincent Creelman. He knew I knew who Griffin was that day. He just didn’t know *who* he was. Does he know now?

I swallow down the sob caught in my throat. Or is it a scream? I can’t tell. Terror and rage are at war inside of me.

Please be telling him the truth, Sam. Please.

“You’ll find it,” Sam snarls. I can hear the rage in his voice, too.

The man’s still a minute longer, then he shoves the gun back in his waistband and disappears through the door.

For a moment, everything is still. Then I can’t help it, a sob chokes out of my chest.

“Sasha—”

“No!” I yell, turning all my anger on Sam. The pain of yelling makes my eyes burn with tears. I look away. I don’t want him to think I’m shedding tears for him. He got us into this. “Don’t talk to me.”

“There’s no money, Sasha.”

My breath catches.

Then my stomach sinks to the floor. Of course. He was lying. He’s killing us both. “You’ll never stop, will you?” I whisper. “It’s always about you—”

“God dammit, Sasha. Would you give me a chance to explain?” Sam yells.

He spits a dark glob onto the floor, wincing.

For a moment, I can’t speak. All I can think of is Griffin, back in the city. Maybe on his way here. Hours, miles, years away from me.

And I never got to tell him I love him.

“We have time,” he says, “but not much. He’ll be back in under an hour.”

“Then we need to find a way to get out of here.”

I look around wildly. This is less a cabin than a shack—maybe an old hunting shack or something. There’s a hollowed-out space where it looks like there used to be cupboards. An overturned bucket lies in the corner, along with a pile of rags. And there’s the couch—an ugly, stained love seat that looks like an animal’s nested in.

There’s nothing sharp. Nothing to even rub these ties against.

Hopelessness threatens to settle in, but I refuse to let it. I wriggle once more in my ties, each bit of movement sending pain ricocheting through my skull.

There has to be a way out.

“I’ve been here all day,” Sam says, his voice resigned. “There’s nothing. All I can do is tell you my side of things before Brick gets back.”

“Brick?”

“That’s what they call him. Please, Sasha. I can’t—we can’t—” His voice cracks. “I need you to know the truth.”

His voice is so full of pain I stop wiggling and meet his eyes.

No, his one working eye. He’s a mess. Besides his face, I notice his right shoulder bulges strangely.

“What’s wrong with your arm?”

“My shoulder’s dislocated,” he says.

I swallow. The pain must be indescribable. To be contorted that way, his shoulder out of his socket. “When?”

“When he tied me up. I only managed one hit before he knocked me out. A hard blow to the temple. I’m guessing the same thing he did to you.”

I nod, pain rattling through my head once more at the movement. I remember the fist flying at my head. I glance toward the door, as if the man's going to come bursting back in at any moment. It's still. I let out a breath, willing myself to settle. "Fine," I say, resigned for a moment. Using up my strength isn't doing anything useful right now anyway.

Sam clears his throat. "A few months ago, Vincent Creelman found out I was working with Lionel McCrae."

He sees my confusion and nods, wincing. "Good. It's smart he didn't tell you."

"Vincent?"

"Your husband. Lionel McCrae is your husband's boss. Or was."

I feel completely out of the loop. But I know Griffin wouldn't keep me in the dark because he didn't trust me. "You'll need to explain that to me."

"I never worked with Creelman, despite what the headlines said. I never even met him until McCrae came to me." He pauses, as if still rolling it over in his mind. "I don't know how Creelman knew we were working together. The only thing I can figure is one of his men must have seen us meeting somewhere. They keep tabs on local politics just like they keep tabs on cops. They're smart. It's how they keep two steps ahead of everyone else."

So Sam was a way to get to Griffin's boss? I'm not sure I buy it, though I can't help the tiny flame of hope that there's some small possibility Sam might not be the dirty politician everyone makes him out to be. "What were you doing for Lionel McCrae?"

Sam must see the suspicion on my face, because he shakes his head.

"It's not what you think. It wasn't illegal. It was regular city business. It was *good* business. McCrae had gone all in on this piece of property. A huge building in midtown. It cost him millions. He had this idea for a school for training troubled kids to get into his line of work. Personal security. Pre-law

enforcement training. That kind of thing. I guess he had a daughter who worked with him who was killed—your husband must have known her, too. It was something she'd talked about. He was doing it for her.”

I swallow hard, my throat stinging as the pieces fall into place. *Laura.*

“McCrae needed city approvals. He said he came to me specifically because of something I'd said offhand at some press conference. Not about schools but...” Sam looks up. “The guy knew I was trying to be someone respectable.”

“Bit tough when you sleep your way through your thirties,” I say. “You were like a walking caricature of a Wall Street bro.”

Sam grimaces. “You don't have to tell me about my mistakes, Sasha. I'm well aware. And I never treated the women I dated badly.”

“Except treating them like they were disposable.”

Sam says nothing, though his mangled jaw pulses. “I never said I was a good man then, Sasha,” he grits out.

“Keep going,” I tell him. I don't have time to focus on his feelings. I wriggle my arms. Maybe I can at least loosen the ties.

“The point was, Lionel trusted me.”

He works his jaw. I can see his thinking: *He trusted me, and I fucked it up.* “He wasn't public about the work he did. But those guys knew about it. He was a problem for them.” He pauses. “It got messy from there, Sash.”

I don't move. I just meet Sam's one functioning eye, waiting for him to continue.

“Creelman was clever. He had a woman pose as someone working for my office. Had my phone diverted—even sent calls through to my office that were supposed to go there. Until the next time Lionel called. I didn't know they were watching me yet. I would have warned him.”

There's a loud snap outside. We both turn to the door. I hold my breath, but no one comes.

“Lionel saw through the fake call right away. He told me to shred any record of us working together. Not to share any details about our meetings or who he was or where he worked. He told me when we first started working together how critical keeping his business confidential was. I had to sign an NDA.”

“Did you even know any details of his business?”

“I knew where his office was. We had it on record for the formal applications. It was listed as a numbered company, but I knew. I knew he had people working for him all over the world and that they'd saved thousands of people from harm by protecting people who spoke up against injustice.”

Sam looks away. “But once Lionel cut off contact, Creelman got in touch with me directly. Told me he knew I was working with this ‘white label firm’ and that I had to tell him where it was and share any information I had on them. He said if I didn't...that's when he threatened my family, Sasha. That's when he found out about you.”

I swallow. “Vincent told me he saw my picture in the paper on that date.”

“Yes. And it got personal then. He became obsessed with you. He wanted me to set you up. I told him to fuck off. He... he threatened my assistant to scare me.”

My skin prickles with the realization. “The harassment rumors—they weren't true.”

He shakes his head.

Though I don't want to feel it, vindication runs through me. I was right not to believe the rumors, even though everything said he'd done it.

Then I realize there's more. “You came up with that story, didn't you? It was the only way to get the heat off her, even though you knew it would make you look like shit.”

“My political career was over the minute Creelman walked into my life.” He laughs, but there's no humor in it. “It's

funny. I got rich on Wall Street because I wanted to see if I could do it on my own. I was sick of people thinking I was some coddled trust-fund kid when Dad treated me like I only existed when I checked off the boxes he wanted. But that didn't make me feel any better. So I got into politics. I thought I could make a difference. It's why I wanted to work with Lionel. To champion a project that would help people. But I fucked that up, too."

Sam looks sideways. His normally perfectly coiffed hair falls across his face. Even though my brother's deep into his forties, he looks suddenly like the boy I once knew. The hero.

"But I didn't give a shit, not once he mixed you up in it."

"What did he say would happen if you set me up on that date?"

"It wasn't what he said would happen. It was what he said wouldn't." He looks up, meeting my eye.

My stomach drops. "He was going to kill you."

"And take you. He said all he wanted was a single date to let you decide. He promised he wouldn't do anything against your will. But if he didn't get that date, he'd 'incorporate you into his business' without my assistance."

Maybe that's what he thought, but if Griffin hadn't come to that restaurant...he would have taken me with him right then.

My mouth waters with the need to vomit.

But when I look at Sam, I can see his jaw clenched hard, even under the blood and swelling. His expression is dark with self-loathing. He doesn't even care that Creelman would have killed him, too. He hates himself for what he did to me.

"Once he got his sights set on you," he says, "I don't think he even cared about the info Lionel's company had on him. All he cared about was you."

I remember the flash of Vincent's teeth. The way he tried to set everything up like a date.

Then he laughs again. “There’s no silver lining to this. But if there was, I think his obsession is the reason he’s not here.”

“What do you mean?”

“I think his bosses knew he was putting their interests at risk.”

“So you think he’s...dead?”

“He hasn’t been seen in weeks.”

“So why’s his guy holding us hostage? What’s the money he’s talking about?”

“I think his guy is trying to save his ass. I think Creelman told him he’d pay him off if he stuck with him. It’s the only reason this asshole stayed with him.”

My mind spins with all this information. I know, theoretically, that Sam could be spinning all of this. That he really did steal money from gangsters and now he’s trying to cover it up. But what’s the point when a beast called Brick is going to kill us anyway?

“What’s *Brick* going to do if he can’t find the money?”

“You mean when he doesn’t find the money. I don’t have suitcases of cash lying around. I wasn’t staying at the motel I told him about. I just sent him on a wild goose chase to buy us time.”

“Where were you staying?”

“Only a few minutes from here. The Rolling Hills.”

I want to laugh. Or cry—I’m not sure which. “That’s Griffin’s family’s hotel,” I say, my voice breaking.

Griffin. Oh Griffin, what I wouldn’t do for you to burst in here in a firefighter’s turnout gear. My hero.

“My husband’s hotel,” I say, my voice wobbly with tears. “I love him. Did you know that? No, how could you? I haven’t even said it to him yet.”

I smile, tears on my cheeks. “I haven’t said it to myself. But I love that man. I love his broody grumpiness. I love the

way he pays attention to everything and pretends he doesn't. I love his inner nerd and his workshop." I choke out a sob. "It was this guy who burned down Griffin's cabin, wasn't it?"

"Was he inside?" Sam's voice is choked.

I shake my head. "No, he's..."

My mind flickers back to where it was a moment ago. The workshop.

I glance down at Sam's ankles, leaning forward as far as my bound hands will allow. "Those are plastic ties," I say, my skin tingling.

"What?"

"Around our legs. And our hands." I laugh deliriously, my mind suddenly filled with something new.

Hope.

"Sam," I say, my voice suddenly filled with tight urgency. "Can you get over here?"

"What?"

"On your chair! Can you come close, and...turn around so our hands line up?"

"I think—why?"

"Because I know a little party trick that might just save our lives. That and my ridiculous manicure."

Then, from outside, there's the distinct sound of gravel popping under tires.

Sam looks to the door. "He's back."

"Then we have to hurry."

CHAPTER 44

My first stop in Quince Valley is my house, which is no longer a house.

It's also swarmed by firefighters. I storm through the crowd of them, shoving them out of my way, ready to run right into the wet, still-smoldering structure.

But the chief runs out in front of me, his hands spread wide. He catches me on the chest.

"Is she inside?" I shout, pushing forward. "*Is my wife inside?*"

"We don't know—"

I shoulder-check him out of my way and run.

I almost make it there, too. But three giant firefighters tackle me to the ground. "You can't go in there," one of them shouts at me. Even in my tortured state, I can hear he's not being an asshole. I know, somewhere, that it's incredibly unwise to go into a burned-out building, especially since parts of it are still glowing orange.

But all I can see is Sasha. All I can hear is her crying my name.

"*Get off me!*" I yell. I manage to send one of them flying before two new ones jump on me.

"It's not safe," one of the new ones yells in my face. This one's a woman.

I don't know if it was having a mother who took charge of everything or my bossy sister or what, but I stop fighting. My

throat's choked. "Please," I croak. "Tell me if she's in there."

"It doesn't look like there was anyone home," she says calmly. She's strong. Her elbow is on my chest, next to someone else's knee. "But we won't know for sure until—"

"Griff," a voice from somewhere behind them calls out.

Ford. "Let him go!" Ford shouts. "Griff, she wasn't in the house!"

Relief clogs my throat, my heart pounding harder than it did racing over here.

The crowd around us clears, and a few of the guys who were holding me down get me onto my feet.

"I went to your friend's next door," Ford's breathing hard. "The old guy you told me about. Griff, your truck's there, with her stuff in it. It's the only vehicle there."

My mind blurs with questions. Did they leave together? Why would they take Chester's car?

But I only ask one. "Where are they now?"

"Come on."

I mumble an apology to the firefighters as we run back toward the road. Ford leads me through the mess of trucks to where he's parked his rental. "He said he drove here after her, but she wasn't there when he got here. Then his phone crapped out."

My phone rings then, and I grab it out of my pocket, my heart in my throat. It's Cass.

"Anything?"

"I haven't heard from her. But Griff, my staff just informed me about something you might want to know about. There was an altercation in the parking lot. Someone said they saw someone get taken in a van tonight."

"Sasha?"

"No, a man. A guest. The witness had been drinking. They thought they were making it up. But I checked our registration.

Got security to run all the cards and license plates—Griff, it was her brother. He’s staying here, under a pseudonym. Sam McLain.”

She explains what happened this morning with Sasha’s brother. How he came to warn her that something was happening.

He’s got them both. Creelman—or someone working with him—has both of them. I know it in my bones.

“Did they get the plates?”

“Partials.”

I point my chin at Ford. He pulls out his phone, tapping out the digits I give him.

“If you hear anything, tell me right away,” I say.

Ford’s already racing back to his car, where he pulls his laptop out of his bag.

“Ford!”

“Checking local PD.”

I run my hands through my hair, feeling completely defeated. We already alerted my contacts at the department to watch the highways. Nothing’s been reported yet.

Fucking think, Griffin.

Where would someone take two people they wanted information from? Because that has to be what they’re after. Either that or a reward for bringing them in. They’d want to keep them close until the heat died down. Wouldn’t they?

I look back at my place—or what’s left of it. Then down the road toward Chester’s.

They’d want to hide.

Suddenly my eyes go wide. I smack Ford’s window with my hands hard enough he looks like he’s going to pull his weapon. Then I jump on my bike.

CHAPTER 45

Sasha

It worked. I can't believe it actually worked. I say a little—no, a huge prayer of gratitude for Griffin—then get Sam's hands free. I have to tell him what to do so he can do mine. Even with his nonexistent nails, he manages to manipulate my thumb back and the tie forward to get my hands free.

Outside, a car door slams. Boots tromp on the gravel. From the footfalls alone, I can tell the guy's pissed. More than that. Murderous.

I'm still working on my legs when the door to the cabin slams open.

His eyes land on me. "What the f—" But Brick only gets half the word out before Sam clocks him hard in the head with his chair.

The sound echoes through the room. The giant falls to his knees. Sam hits him again from the back, using the full force of his body. He screams as he does it. His arm flops to the side as he drops the chair.

"Run!" I yell the moment I get myself free of my leg ties.

They're still in my hand as we stumble from the cabin.

Brick's not knocked out. I know that. Sam's ability to swing was impeded by only having the use of his left arm. But he bought us time.

Not that much, as it turns out.

A deafening bang sounds, and in front of us, a chip of bark flies off a tree.

“Get down!” Sam yells. We dive for cover behind a fallen log.

“No point running!” Brick yells. “I can see your asses.”

Another shot.

I yelp and cover my mouth. In the distance, I hear the roar of an engine.

More than one.

The log in front of us explodes. Both Sam and I stumble back behind two separate trees. Sam lands on his bad arm.

He hisses in a breath, burying his face in his shoulder to hide the scream.

“Sam,” I hiss across the space between us.

He lowers his good arm from his face. “Run,” he manages through gritted teeth.

“I’m not leaving you.”

“Fucking run, Sasha. I’m begging you!”

“No!”

Footsteps crash through the brush from the direction of the cabin.

He shakes his head. For a moment, he looks impossibly sad. Then he makes a grunting sound and gets himself up onto his knees. Too high. Too careless as he staggers to his feet.

“He’s going to see you,” I say, my tone pleading.

“That’s the point,” Sam says. Then he steps out from behind the tree.

“No!” I scream, reaching for him.

But the gun goes off again.

Sam staggers back, clutching at his front.

“Sam!” I scream.

Sam looks down. He’s covered in blood. But he was already bloody. And he shakes his head. “It’s not—”

A crash sounds from Brick's direction, then another.

I dare to poke my head out. The engine sounds are loud now, and lights shine through the trees by the cabin.

But I'm not looking at those. I'm looking at a beast of a man, who's lying flat on his face in the brush.

"What—" I croak out.

"Sasha!" a voice yells from the direction of the cabin.

More cracks of twigs, this time softer and coming from behind us.

Sam and I whirl around, our hands up.

But there's no danger there. Only an old man missing several teeth, breathing hard, a shotgun called Louise gripped in his shaking hand.

"Guess I still got it," Chester says. Then he collapses.

CHAPTER 46

I hold my breath as I watch Sasha's eyelids flutter. I sit up in the chair next to her bed. Outside her room, two women in scrubs walk by, chatting softly, their shoes squeaking on the floor.

The plastic clamp on Sasha's finger glows red. Numbers tick on the monitor next to her. They've kept her here for observation due to the massive bruise on the side of her head. I want very badly to give a hundred of these to the man who did this to her, but I need to at least wait until he's out of surgery.

When her eyes open, they immediately lock on me.

She smiles, and my breath catches in my throat.

"Hey, Angel." I bring her knuckles to my lips. For a moment I just close my eyes, my whole body completely awash with emotion.

"Hey," she says. "You okay? Is it Chester?"

My guts roll inside me. I shake my head. "They still won't let me see him."

He got taken away in a separate ambulance. I couldn't be in two places at once, so I asked Ford to go with him while I rode with Sasha.

"Ford says they're keeping him sedated for now. He just overexerted himself. That's all."

"He saved my life," she says, her voice cracking.

I nod. He did. And I'll forever be in his debt.

Chester must have known he couldn't run all the way to my place on the path, so he'd gotten in his car. Ford and I figure he must have seen the man called Brick pulling out of my driveway and followed him to the old hunting cabin behind the Rolling Hills.

He was a fair distance away from where he'd parked, though. Yet somehow, in his condition, he still managed to hike through all that rough brush to save Sasha's life.

And her brother's.

"Is he going to wake up?" Sasha asks me, her voice barely a whisper.

"Yes," I say confidently. I stand up and pull her against my chest, cradling her head against my heart.

He has to.

I'm not sure who I'm trying to convince. Everything I've been running through my head all night circles round again. Guilt at not getting to Sasha in time. Chester saving the day.

Chester being so sick and none of us knowing it, not even him, and now it's too late to do anything about it.

My eyes are wet when I pull away from her. I knuckle the tears away and lower myself back down in the chair. "Jesus. I don't remember the last time I cried."

Sasha takes my hand. It looks huge and brutish in hers. And I notice the polish on a few of her nails is chipped.

Last night, she told me how she got out of the ties. That was after I ran to her faster than I'd ever run to anything or one in my life. I tore through that brush, my heart pounding, Sasha's name the only word I knew. She was safe. Christ Almighty, after all of it, she was somehow okay. I picked her up and held her so tight she had to tap my cheek so I'd let her breathe. She kissed me then, with a tenderness I didn't deserve.

Right. That was the last time I cried.

"Fuck," I mutter, shouldering the last of the wetness away. I reach into the drawer beside her bed.

Sasha's eyebrows go up when she sees what I pull out. "How'd you pick such a close shade?"

"How can you tell it's not the right one?" I hold the little bottle of nail polish up against her nails.

"That's a compliment! It's very close."

"I asked my sisters," I say to the question still on her face. "Cass told me it wasn't going to match, that you did jelly polish or something, but I can try it anyway." I shake the bottle.

Sasha rolls her lips between her teeth and nods, her cheeks still wet. "How'd you know to shake it like that?"

I unscrew the top. "I'm assuming it's the same configuration as most paints and solvents."

Sasha closes her eyes, nodding, and I can tell she's trying not to laugh. But maybe that's exactly what she needs right now.

"Do you want a touch-up or not?"

"Yes," she says. "Sorry."

I wedge the bottle in my palm and take hold one of her delicate fingers. One by one, I stroke the color over her nails, doing a pretty fucking good job if you ask me. I'm good with precision tasks. But I'm a little nervous, so I flub up her pinkie, getting the tiniest blob on the tip of her finger.

"Fuck."

"It's fine," she whispers, using her opposite thumb to scrape it off. "Too bad you don't have your goggles."

I grumble. "They're not *goggles*."

Now she snort-laughs, and I have to shush her. "It's too early to be snorting."

But I feel the smile creeping on my own lips. I guess I was right—it feels good to grasp at whatever happiness we can find right now.

Finished, I blow on each of the nails I painted. Cass was right. It's not an exact match. But it'll have to do.

"You done?" she asks softly after I stop blowing. I haven't let her hands go.

"No." I glance at the ring on her fingers, then meet her eyes. "Sasha, I want to get married for real. I mean, I want to stay married. I want you to be my wife."

I cringe at how fast the words come out.

But Sasha's eyes well up. "Griffin—"

"Wait," I say. "Before you say anything, I have to tell you a few things."

She smiles, her face so bright.

My heart aches. Because I know what I'm about to tell her might make her say no to what I'm going to ask. But I have to lay everything on the table for her. No more holding back.

"I want you to know I love you," I begin. "I've already told you this, but I want to say it again. I love you. More than anything. And I'll give up everything to have you in my life if you tell me to."

I look down as I rub my thumbs over the backs of her hands. "But there are some things I need to do, and I don't think I'll be the man you know—and the man you deserve—if I don't do them."

When I look back up, she's looking questioningly at me.

"I no longer have a job now, or a home. But I love the work I do. I...*am* the work I do, and I need to keep doing it."

Sasha told me in the ambulance over here last night that she knew about my business. She also passed on everything her brother had told her about how things went down.

"Ford doesn't know this yet, but we've talked about it before, so I hope he's going to go for it. And if he doesn't, I'm going to do it on my own. I want to start up our own organization, bring all the talent who want to come with us

from McCrae. But we're going to run it differently than Lionel did."

I have to take a second to focus, because talking about Lionel hurts in a way I'm not ready to address yet.

Ford told me they found his car last night at the bottom of a ravine off a highway in New Jersey. His wallet was in the glove box, but there was no sign of him. We know it's just a matter of time before his body turns up.

I meet Sasha's eyes. "I won't keep things secret from you unless it's safer for you not to know. And not if you don't want to hear it." I hesitate. "It won't always be easy, though. Because we want to focus on a specific area, which isn't a pretty one."

"I can handle it."

I hold her gaze. When I met Sasha, I don't think I would have believed her. I would have thought she only wanted it to be true. But now I know how strong she is.

"It's human trafficking, Sash. It's what Creelman's organization specializes in. Ford and I—we want to do what law enforcement can't."

Ford and I have talked about it at length in the past. We want to expose the assholes who work in the dark shadows; to protect the innocent people they harm, in ways that might walk the line between what's legal and what's just.

"We're not going to be vigilantes, but we won't shy away from giving voice to the voiceless when it makes people uncomfortable."

Sasha squeezes my hand. "Griffin, there's no way I'd ask you to stop making the world a better place. I trust completely that you know what's right."

I look down, my stomach churning. "That's not the hard part, Angel. This work—it's better if we can be where they are. So we can act fast." I meet her gaze again. "There's a town called North Road, Ohio. It's in the middle of nowhere. Pretty country, and I think you'll love the town, but the closest cities are hours away."

Sasha's face shifts to understanding, then trepidation. "You want me to move to a smaller town than Quince Valley?"

Ford and I agreed this was where we needed to be. "Eight highways converge nearby. It's a favored hand-off location. But it'll work because we're not cops. We won't let anyone know we're there."

We won't be doing raids. But that doesn't mean we won't be stopping what's happening. We'll focus on saving lives in ways that'll leave them not knowing who hit them. We'll destroy their operations from their rotten cores.

"Last night," I continue, "I thought about this every time I found myself dropping into the oblivion of what-ifs about what had happened. It made me feel like I had control over something. That I could still do something good after how much I've fucked up. But I won't do it without you, Sasha."

I watch her throat bob as she swallows.

"I know you're a big city girl. I understand the position I've put you in, and if you don't want to do this with me, that's okay. I just want you to think about it. There are a lot of people there—mostly young women and girls—that need help that's different from what I can provide them. I was thinking maybe..." I feel embarrassed saying this part when I might get it all wrong. "That thing you and Glo talked about. Getting them nice clothes. Helping them make a fresh start."

She smiles softly. "You remembered me talking about that?"

"I remember everything you talk about."

She's still a moment, then she opens her arms. I lean in, and she brings my head to her chest.

We sit like this for a moment, me trying to fight off these fucking tears, while she strokes my hair. I wonder, in some sick, desperate part of me, if this is her way of saying goodbye before she says no.

If it is goodbye, I need to get everything out.

I wrap my hands around her ribs, pressing my thumbs up above where they meet in the middle, just under her heart. “I’m sorry I didn’t get to you in time,” I whisper.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes it does.” I pull my face back, meeting her eyes. “You should never forgive me for not getting there in time.”

Sasha smiles again, her eyes watering. It’s a smile so beautiful my chest feels cracked in half.

It’s a smile I don’t deserve.

But Sasha shakes her head. “Chester’s a part of you, Griffin. Don’t you know that? We have him because of you. He saved me because of you.”

I take in a ragged breath. I’m going to fuckin sob like a baby if she keeps this up.

“Besides,” she continues. “You did the biggest thing anyone’s ever done for me. You cared.”

I want to laugh that off, but Sasha shakes her head. “I’m serious.”

Maybe it’s her words, or maybe it’s the way she doesn’t let me look away, but for the first time, I let the words sink in. Could it be possible that, after trying everything else and failing, caring is still something precious?

I may never forgive myself for letting Sasha almost die, but there’s no arguing I didn’t care. I cared about Laura, too. It wasn’t anything like it is with Sasha, but I cared. And maybe if I care so damn much, I might think about one day believing that sometimes, after trying everything else, it’s enough.

“Fuck,” I say finally, pulling away and scrubbing my hand over my face. “Is this what it’s going to be like if you decide to stay with me? All these *feelings* all the time?”

She nods. “Probably.”

Once I can breathe again, I pull her toward me, right out of the bed and onto my lap. “Your brother looked out for you, too,” I whisper, even though it pains me to say it.

“He did,” she says. “But I helped a little.”

Now I laugh, a low chuckle that has me tipping my head down and kissing her shoulder. “More than a little.”

“You made that happen, too,” she says. “It was your trick with the ties.”

But this time I get to be right when I shake my head. “No, Angel. That was all you.”

Sasha goes to wrap her arms around my neck, but she’s restrained by the clip on her thumb. She pops the monitor off, making the machine beep and flash.

She wraps her arms around me. “I love you, Griffin. Did you know that?”

“I wasn’t sure,” I whisper. “I hoped.” I fucking prayed, honestly.

I hold her jaw in my hand, then take her mouth with mine. I kiss her as if it’s the first time. Soft. Urgent. A dance of lips and tongue. Heat surges, running through my body like a runaway flame.

“You’re supposed to keep that monitor on, young lady.”

Sasha breaks the kiss, giggling.

The nurse, a retirement-aged woman with a kind smile who’s been in and out all night, stands in the door like your friendly neighborhood cock-blocker.

Her hands are planted on her hips, but I can tell she’s trying not to smile, too.

“You don’t want to know what my heart rate’s doing right now, Lisa,” Sasha says.

The nurse rolls her eyes but laughs as she bustles in. “Well, I’d be smiling too if my husband looked at me the way this one does at you. All mine cares about these days is his fantasy football league.” She sighs, walking briskly over to Sasha’s bed and switching the monitor off. “We’re just waiting for the shift change to get you discharged anyway.” Nurse Lisa pulls open the curtains, where dawn is just breaking. “It’s been quite

a night between all of you. I don't know about you, but I'm ready to fantasize about my bed."

The older woman looks at us, her cheeks pinkening. "Poor choice of words around y'all. You two are newlyweds, right?"

Sasha and I look at each other, and instantly that electricity snaps between us.

"Goodness. No need to tell me, it's obvious." She refills Sasha's cup at the sink. "We've been placing bets down at the nurse's station though." She presses the lid down on the table. Shelly thinks you're a football player," she says to me, then turns to Sasha. "And you're his manager. But do football players even have managers?"

She sets the little table by the bed and eyes Sasha. "My guess is you're a pop star, and he's your bodyguard."

Sasha laughs. "I like the sound of that."

"That's one of my favorite movies, you know," the nurse says with a dreamy sigh as she heads for the door. "Anyhoo, I'll send the doctor in to clear you just as soon as I see her. Toodeloo, lovebirds!"

The moment she's out of the room, Sasha presses her forehead against mine. "She knows you're going to take me to a fancy hotel room and fuck me silly, doesn't she?"

I answer her by tipping my face up and taking Sasha's lips against mine again. Softly, delicately, but greedily all the same. I'm not going near her until she's 100% healed. But a man can dream.

I break off a moment later. "Nurse Lisa and I have a lot in common, you know."

Sasha lets out a little sigh, her eyes opening slowly. "Oh really? I've never heard you say *toodeloo*."

"Toodeloo." I grumble, making to set her back up on the bed.

Sasha laughs. "No, tell me."

"We have the same favorite movie."

It takes Sasha only a second. She gasps. “Wait, are you talking about *The Bodyguard*? Is *The Bodyguard* your favorite movie?”

“Don’t you dare tell anyone.”

“Why not? Cass would have a field day with that one. Chelsea, too.”

I groan, pulling her down for another kiss.

My crotch jumps, and I know Sasha feels it. “Soon, my love,” she whispers in my ear.

She wiggles her butt in my lap, and I have to grab her hips and lift her back up into her bed before things get very awkward.

She stretches out, looking pleased with herself. Looking sexy as hell even in a hospital gown and robe, too. Then she sits up on her elbow again, her face going serious. “Hey, what were the other things you were going to tell me?”

She twists the ring on her finger.

But the doctor walks in then, coffee and clipboard in hand. “Good morning. I hear someone wants to go home.”

I smile at Sasha. “They can wait.”

CHAPTER 47

Sasha

“I could get used to this,” I say, rolling onto my back as Griffin sets a latte on the bedside table.

He grumbles. I can tell he’s trying not to look at me. He woke up this morning in our suite at the Rolling Hills with a hard-on to end all hard-ons. I know because it was pressed up against my back when I woke up—before him for once in my life.

“I think we’ve waited long enough,” I whispered into his ear.

He’d mumbled something in his sleep and woke up enough to pull me closer and kiss the back of my head. When I rolled onto my back I slipped my hand under the sheet, drawing my fingers over the thin cloth of his shorts. He groaned, tilting his hips into me. Then his eyes blinked open. Even in his half-asleep state, he managed to open his eyes enough to narrow them. “Nice try, you harlot,” he mumbled before rolling away from me.

I huffed. He still hasn’t given up on his *won’t give the D until we get the all-clear* thing. It’s been three weeks, and my injuries are mostly healed.

On the outside.

I went back to sleep grumpy. But waking up now, I don’t know why I’m surprised he’s going to such lengths to take care of me. He wouldn’t be my Griffin if he wasn’t. His insistence that I speak with a trauma therapist he seemed to have on speed dial and talk to every few days has kept me

functional, even in a place where I'm able to consider the future.

I still wake up in a panic some days, but Griffin's always there, reminding me that we're still counting time in days since it happened.

But the no sex thing? I've about had it.

When I woke up for the second time this morning, I was ready to tell him how perfectly fine my head feels. It does. But Griff was gone. He'd left a little note scrawled on the hotel notepad on the bedside table, letting me know he was getting coffees downstairs at the Rolling Hills' gorgeous restaurant, L'Aubergine.

Thoughtful jerk.

But now is definitely the time. I take a sip of my coffee now, closing my eyes to enjoy the rush of caffeine and piping hot milk.

Then I set my phone down and mentally rub my hands together.

Griffin's gotten up to check his phone, so he hasn't yet noticed that I took my clothes off while he was gone.

"Ford's offer went through," he says, his back to me. Last week, Ford put an offer on a house in North Road, Ohio, sight unseen.

His partner's wasted no time since they decided to start their business, even though it's still up in the air whether Griffin will join him in Ohio. At least it is for Griff. I've told him that no matter what, I'm not standing in the way of his dreams.

"Pending conditions," Griff adds.

"Pending what?" I've risen up onto my elbows. The sheet's clinging for dear life to the very tips of my breasts.

I will Griffin to turn around.

"Conditions of sale," he says over his shoulder. "The agent said—"

Then Griffin does a double take and he turns around, his words trailing off.

“I told you I’m ready,” I say, rising up a little higher, daring the sheet to slip. “I think you are, too.”

He closes his eyes. “Lord, give me strength to control... Actually, never mind. I’m going to do some work.”

Eyes still closed, he heads out of the bedroom, his hands out in front of him. He disappears into the suite’s second bedroom, which he’s set up as a little office.

Seriously?

I scowl. I’m learning how to do that from the best. “Fine!” I call out, getting out of bed. I head to the bathroom with my latte and nothing else, but of course he can’t see me.

I step into the shower, thinking of all the times Griffin’s joined me. I bite my lip, soaping my ass for a good ten minutes, my eyes on the bathroom door.

But eventually I have to acknowledge he’s standing firm.

Once he gets into that room, working on things related to his business, he’s nearly impossible to distract. I really shouldn’t be such a brat. This business is everything to him, next to me.

I have to give him my answer soon. But Griffin won’t leave Quince Valley so long as Chester is still here. Neither will I.

We’ve visited Chester every day since the night he saved my life. His doctors didn’t want us to see him at first, but Chester—and Griffin—put up such a stink, they quickly gave up.

The good news is he went home last week. Just as I knew would happen, Griffin pulled out all the stops. He hired round-the-clock nursing staff for his friend, as well as an additional care aide. Plus a housekeeper who comes every day—an efficient and flamboyant man called Lucas, who texts us with all the updates when we’re not there in person.

Yesterday we were there at the same time as the doctor. He told us in a hushed voice on the front porch that Chester could have a few weeks left—or he could go any day.

Most nights I can handle it. But last night I couldn't stop the tears from coming, and when Griffin held me close while I soaked his shirt, I felt him breaking apart a little, too.

I told Griffin what Chester told me that night on his back porch when everything went so terribly wrong—at least, the part about Joseph not really being his grandfather. But I didn't tell him Chester's personal story—it's not mine to tell. Likewise, I'm withholding my theories on who Joseph is, too, until I know more.

I know Lucas is helping Chester organize Joseph's things. I've caught glimpses into that back room; there are boxes everywhere. When I've asked Chester if I can help, he keeps saying not yet.

I don't want to remind either of us that the yet can't be pushed off forever.

But yesterday, while the nurse helped Chester with his soup, I'd grabbed Lucas by the collar and asked him what was going on in that back room. Lucas had finally relented and told me Chester's spending all his waking hours going through Joseph's belongings.

"It's mostly diaries," Lucas said. "He's been reading each one cover to cover. Then he gets me to code them by year and put them in these special boxes." Lucas shook his head. "For a guy who likes straw hats, he's hella particular."

After that conversation, I caught Chester crooking his finger at me from his chair in the living room.

"Hey," I said, coming up beside him and crouching down.

"Wanna help me sneak outside?" he asked.

"Chester, it's freezing out there."

"Where's your sense of adventure, Sasha?"

Griff was chatting with Lucas in the kitchen, and the nurse was on the phone in Chester's room. We were all alone.

I bit my lip, then bent down and gently looped his arm around my shoulder. I guided him out the back door and sat him in his favorite of the three rocking chairs. He weighed next to nothing. Then I snuck back inside and gathered all the blankets and tucked them around him.

I sat in the seat next to him. It occurred to me later that I probably should have worried about being triggered by being in the same position as I had been that night. But I wasn't. Chester looked out on his chickens, who were pattering around, pecking at the ground like our whole world wasn't going to come crashing down sometime in the near future.

"You'll take care of my girls, won't you?" Chester asked me.

My chest tightened so hard it hurt. "Of course," I said. "Actually, do you remember Vivian? She said her sister won't stop talking about chickens." Vivian tore me a new one a few days before at her place. I'd gone in to resign my position at Bijou. I thought she'd put up a stink, but to my surprise, she'd not only just said "okay," but asked if I wanted to come over for tea. It was really nice. Except for her snapping, "I guess I'm going to have to get chickens now."

"You must have painted a pretty picture about the chicken life that time they drove you home."

Chester chuckles. "I was a real pain in the ass that day, wasn't I?"

"No comment." I smile. But I follow his gaze to his girls. "I think Vivian would be happy to give these beautiful ladies a fine home in her backyard."

"That sounds good to me, honey," Chester said.



I step out of the shower now, toweling off in front of the mirror. The bruising on my body from that night is completely gone, though I know it'll take a lot longer to heal from the emotional trauma. I'm also not looking forward to the day

when I have to decide whether I'll testify against the man named Brick—and relive not just that night, but the one back in New York, with Vincent Creelman.

But none of that needs to be decided right now. Right now, I've got about an hour before I'm meeting Glo for coffee, and Chester after that.

I should try to seduce Griffin again. But as much as I miss him, my heart isn't in it. And as I pull on my clothes—clothes Vivian brought me the day I got home from the hospital (they're last season cast-offs, she told me, though one look told me they were all current)—I get the strangest tingling sensation before Griffin's phone rings in the other room.

I hear a few words, then Griffin's next to me, phone still in hand, gathering me to his chest.

“He's gone, Angel,” he says.

We hold each other like that for a long time.

CHAPTER 48

Lucas dabs at his eyes. “It was a nice service.” He says it like he’s been to a lot, which, maybe he has in his line of work.

I nod, not willing myself to speak. It’s a crisp, sunny day, the first after a week of rain so cold it’d be snow in a week or two. Only the three of us—Lucas, Sasha, and I—remain next to the yawning hole in the ground at Quince Valley Memorial Gardens. Though it wasn’t a crowd to begin with. Betsey was here earlier, along with the officiant.

And one more person. I saw Sasha’s brother way out by the cluster of cedars a hundred feet away, too.

I know he’s still at the Rolling Hills, though I haven’t seen him at all. I asked Cass to have her staff keep an eye on him, but she says he rarely leaves his room.

He left it today, though. Sam never knew Chester, but he knows the man saved his life. And his baby sister’s.

I still haven’t forgiven him for getting Sasha into all of this in the first place, but I can begrudgingly acknowledge that it was decent of him to show up here. I didn’t make note of his presence, but I didn’t yell at him to get lost either. I might have if he tried talking to Sasha, but he disappeared before she even noticed he was here.

Now, Sasha takes a shaking breath. “What happens next?”

I swallow past the dryness in my throat. At some point, we have to talk about us. Soon, now that Chester’s gone.

But I know she’s not talking about that.

I glance over at the cemetery workers, who're standing next to a digger, chatting like this is just another day. Next, they'll come and fill this hole. In a few days, when the marker arrives, they'll install it at the head of his plot. Then they'll lay the sod, time will pass, and life will carry on.

She's not talking about that, either.

I'm about to say something about heading home, but Lucas clears his throat. "Actually, I've got something back at Chester's place for you. He told me I had to wait until he was 'in the ground' to give it to you."

Lucas is off the clock. He was relieved from his work the day after Chester passed. But he's here now. He only knew Chester a couple of weeks, but he proves what I know would be the truth if Chester hadn't been such a recluse: that the old man had a way of getting you to love him just by existing. Whether he was cracking jokes or snapping grumpily at you like he did more and more of toward the end, he won't be easy to forget.

Sasha looks quizzically up at Lucas. "What is it?"

"It's easier to show you than to explain."

Being back at Chester's house is rough. I have to excuse myself, saying I'm going to check on the chickens, before remembering the chickens are already gone. When I come back inside, I can tell Sasha's been crying, too. I wrap my arms around her, kissing the top of her head.

"I love you" is the only thing my addled brain can think of to say.

"This way," Lucas says. He brings us back to the bedroom at the rear of the house. It's surprisingly bright, the big window gleaming in the late afternoon sun. Boxes line the walls, each of them neatly labeled. Some of them say things like *Personal Items* and *Newspaper Clippings & Memorabilia*. But most of them have date ranges on them. Those ones are in order: 1921-1930 all the way up to 1959-1965 (*Final*).

Something tickles at the back of my neck. Why do they start in that particular year?

Lucas hands us a clipboard. “This is the legend for the books.”

I hold it in my hand, tipping it for Sasha so she can see it properly, too.

The clipboard holds a few sheets of paper stapled together—a printout of a simple spreadsheet, with the heading *Joseph’s Diaries - 1921-1965*.

Lucas points to the first column. “That’s the diary,” he says. “We numbered them all for easy reference.” A date range in the next column. “Those are the dates from the first entry to the last in each book. And those—” He points to the notes in the last cell. “Those are the high points so Chester could remember which one was which.”

The notes say things like *J.’s feelings on the woodshed fire*. *A. starts first grade*. Another says *J. invited to wedding, milk delivery, letters from war*.

There are lots of mentions of *J.*, which I assume stands for Joseph.

But something about seeing them all makes that tingling grow stronger.

“Have you read all of these?”

“Oh no,” Lucas says. “Chester wouldn’t let me. Said he was saving them for you two. He also said once we finished them, John Kelly should read them.”

Lucas looks at me. “Is that a relative of yours?”

My stomach jolts. “That’s my father.”

“Really. That’s interesting.”

Lucas says he has to get going. He’s got a job over in Greenville starting tomorrow and needs to start prepping.

We say goodbye, and then it’s just Sasha and me staring at all these rows of boxes.

Except I can’t help but notice Sasha’s expression doesn’t mirror mine—that this is an incredible trove of history. She’s

got her fingers at her lips, and when she looks at me, her expression is one of nervous anticipation.

“What is it?” I ask. I realize then that she was quiet the whole time Lucas was here with us.

She holds my hand. “I have a theory. I have ever since Chester told me about Joseph. But we should look at some of these.”

“Why did he say my dad should have these?” I ask.

She smiles. “Let’s just read.”

Alarm bells should be going off. But the excitement on her face is contagious. And it’s a hell of a lot better than the pain I keep seeing there.

It doesn’t even take five minutes of reading the very first journal for me to snap my eyes to Sasha’s.

She laughs.

“Chester knew exactly what he was doing, making us wait.”

“Let’s call them.”

“Who?”

“All of them.”



Sasha taps her fork on her glass. It’s a Tuesday night, and L’Aubergine is full but not packed. Several heads from adjoining tables turn our way at the sound.

The Rolling Hills resort’s flagship restaurant is big and too fancy for my tastes, though the food is admittedly delicious. It’s got beautiful views of the Quince River and the town across it.

But the most beautiful view I see is the one next to me: my wife—at least for a while longer—standing up to make an announcement in front of a good portion of my family. The

only ones missing are Eli, who's with Reese as she wraps up the end of her tour; Nora in the home stretch before graduation; and the kids, who're home with sitters.

Otherwise we've got everyone, including Dad. Gloria's on her way, too, which I make sure to text Ford about. He sends me a middle finger emoji in return.

"Not an engagement, folks, sorry," Sasha says. She turns to Jude. "I mean, unless you're going to ask Nora over the phone right now."

"Should I?" Jude quips.

A few people at the other tables chuckle. Someone cheers. They turn back to their meals when he gives a wave and turns back to us. He leans in, his voice lowered. "I'm waiting for Christmas Day."

Sasha does a little happy dance. Then she clears her throat. "Okay. I really do have something to say. Thank you all for coming on such short notice."

The server's taken our orders, and everyone's got a drink in hand. We're all buzzing with nervous energy, most of all Sasha, who looks for a moment like the Cheshire Cat.

She sobers quickly, though, and I can see her try to center herself to speak.

I wrap my hand around her calf, just under the hem of her velvet blue dress, which hugs her curves so beautifully I told her when we left our room that I needed to wear horse blinders so I don't have to watch other men staring. She just giggled and sashayed out the door.

Now, that seems a million miles away as she wraps her hand around the back of my head, her fingers gripping the side of my neck as if she needs to hold on to say this.

"You all know Griffin and I have lost a lot in the past few weeks."

She swallows.

Both my sisters grow teary-eyed. Jude and Dad look on the verge, too.

“But the loss of precious belongings doesn’t hold a candle to the loss of a dear friend.”

She talks about Chester and the friendship we all had. I have a feeling these were the words she was too choked up to say at his service earlier.

She talks about the impact he made on our lives.

Then she talks about the treasure he was hiding in his house.

“There were diaries in that room, belonging to the man Chester called his grandfather.”

“He wasn’t?” Dad asks, aghast.

“He wasn’t,” Sasha says. “He was, as it turns out, someone we are all deeply familiar with. Though we never met him ourselves.”

A buzz goes across the table. Jude leans in. Dad sets his water down.

Blake frowns like this is a business conundrum. “Who was he?”

“Rather than tell you, I’m going to read a passage from the first diary entry we read today. I think it’ll become clear very quickly.”

She clears her throat, pulling up her phone, where we transcribed the paragraph we read this afternoon. Now that I’m hearing it for the second time, I’m surprised I needed to read more than the first sentence to figure it out.

“Life is so bereft,” she begins, “that I ask myself with every passing breath why I continue living it at all.”

Jude sits back in his chair, his hand clapping over his heart.

“If I had anyone I could speak to now—and I do not—I would ask myself why I have taken such a great risk and settled so close to where the most unthinkable moment in my life occurred. Worse yet than the day we left the symbol of our love with women an ocean away.”

“My God,” Dad says.

Jude lays a hand on Dad's. "Keep reading."

"But it is that very beating heart that keeps mine still alive. Her existence on this earthly plane gives me hope that God forgives us for what we did; that my love resides in Heaven, safe, happy, and waiting for me one day. While I don't want to breathe a breath of air if she doesn't, I must. And I will, for the child we share, though she shall never know my name."

Sasha lowers her phone. "The entry is signed *J.E.Q.*"

Everyone around the room lets out a different sound at the revelation that Chester's Joseph was our *JEQ*; Eleanor's James, residing under a secret identity in the very town where he lost her. Gasps. Amazed words. A sob from Chelsea.

"He stayed here," Jude says, his voice astonished. "Why?"

"Because he found Clea," Chelsea says, her eyes wet with tears. "Somehow, he found her. Was she here with him? Why else would he stay in Quince Valley where the police wanted him for murder?"

"Does he talk about the murder?" Jude asks.

"We read that and called this meeting," Sasha says. "Then we read the rest of that book. He talks about what really happened that day. And how he came back to the room to find the love of his life already gone."

Dad looks at none of us when he says, "He can be exonerated."

"There are more diaries," Sasha says. "Boxes and boxes more. I think all the answers we might ever want will be in those books."

Then Jude says the one thing I think is the most true out of all of this. "This was James' story, this whole time, wasn't it? Eleanor was the one the world lost, but James was the one who made sure she was never forgotten."

There's hardly a dry eye at the table as we all look around at the people we love. Separate conversations, some teary, break out across the table.

Except for Dad. He must be processing everything, because he sits quietly, his hands tight on the table.

But then Sasha glances down at me, and my attention's back on her in an instant. She clinks her glass, and everyone quiets, their eyes back on her.

Nerves suddenly dance across my skin. She never told me about anything else.

Sasha smiles. "Not to take away from this moment, but I hope while I still have the floor you'll all indulge me by letting me share a little more news."

I have no idea what she's going to say. My mind goes everywhere all at once, from she's going to tell them our marriage was fake and she's moving back to New York to—

"Griffin and I are moving out of state."

Dad knocks his water over. "*What?*" He sounds truly devastated, hardly noticing Cass coming over to mop up the puddle.

I see it all happening, but it's like it's in slow motion, because my attention has fully turned to Sasha, whose eyes are on mine. I'm on my feet without knowing how I got there, my heart beating hard.

"In case anyone didn't know," Sasha says to the group without turning from me, "I'm in love with your brother and son...and brother-in-law, and uncle—I'm in love with Griffin Kelly."

Chelsea's hands are at her mouth. Cass smiles, tipping her head to Dad's shoulder.

"Reading that diary entry," Sasha continues, "made me realize just how much." She clears her throat. "Griffin, *I don't want to breathe a breath of air that you don't.*" She takes a soft breath, like she's proving the line she just spoke. "I want to make our life together, Griffin. Wherever that is."

"What about you?" I croak, trying to grab hold of my runaway heart. "You'll get bored in a small town."

"I didn't get bored here, did I?"

“You had a job. Friends. A mystery to get involved in.”

“Who says I can’t find those things there?” She smiles. “Griff, it doesn’t matter where I am. The most important thing is with you, I’m not alone. I’ve never felt less alone than since knowing you. And I know I’ll always feel that way so long as you bring me with you wherever you go.”

Her eyes are on mine, and I know she’s not talking about revealing my company secrets or bringing her along into dangerous situations. She’s talking about me opening up to her. Talking to her the way I do with no one else.

Letting myself feel, the way I can about no one else.

I grasp her face, thumbing a strand of hair off her perfect cheek. “I promise, Angel,” I whisper. “For you, I’m an open book.”

Sasha lets out something like a laugh and a sob together. Then she buries her face in my neck.

“I love you,” she whispers against my shirt.

I tilt her face up to mine and kiss her, longer and more deeply than I feel like we ever have before.

That is, until Cass says, “Not again!”

Cheering erupts around the table, though I think my family doesn’t quite know why we’re celebrating, when, by all accounts, we already have everything we could ever ask for.

I break the kiss. “I love you too,” I whisper.

Sasha’s eyes brim with tears, but she’s smiling. Then she rises up and whispers in my ear, “And you’re going to fuck me tonight, right?”

I grin, sliding my hand as far as I dare down her back in front of my family. “That’s a fucking promise.”

Epilogue

GRIFFIN

SIX MONTHS LATER

“I do,” Sasha says as I squeeze her hand.

She does the same, and I’m there before the celebrant even tells us to kiss, claspng her against me and pressing my lips to hers.

The small crowd around us cheers. Seeing as we don’t know most of them quite as well as my family, I spare them too much tongue.

“You look beautiful, Sash,” Leila says.

Sasha’s older sister, a tall, dark-haired woman in her early forties, embraces her as soon as we come down from the gazebo. Her other brother Cal follows and does the same after shaking my hand.

This one was supposed to be just the two of us, but once word got out to our local friends, Sasha made a point of inviting the two siblings she didn’t know as well as Sam growing up. They were both honored enough to fly into Columbus and drive here to the tiny town of North Road for the small event.

None of them talk about the absence of their oldest brother. Probably because Sam is on trial, looking at time for his connections to Creelman’s criminal organization.

Creelman, meanwhile, hasn’t been found. Just like Lionel. But I’m the executor to Lionel’s estate—along with Chester’s. Between their estates—which they both left to me—and my savings left over from financing this new operation with Ford, I still hope to see Lionel’s vision for Laura’s school realized in some form.

Along with other plans Chester dreamed of.

In her expensive-looking suit and pearls, Leila sticks out like a sore thumb outside the city, but then again, Sasha used to as well. Now, as Sasha chats jovially with the few guests at our second wedding—the real one she made me promise we’d

have the minute the weather warmed up—she looks like a natural. She invited several town fixtures to the wedding, including, quite literally, the butcher and the local baker. I wouldn't be surprised if she already knew the local candlestick maker. Ford's here, too, of course, and Gloria, who followed us here a few months after we moved, saying there was nothing keeping her in Quince Valley, beautiful as it was, after we left. Last night she told us over dinner that she'd heard from Vivian—her sister had gone into remission and appeared to be doing well even now, several months after she was given only weeks to live.

I can't help thinking about Chester and how arbitrary life can be when she tells me that.

We're meeting up with them again at our new place. But not before I take my wife home after our vow renewal—disguised-as a wedding and do what I did that night she told me she was moving here with me.

I'm going to tell her she's made me the happiest man in the damn world.

And then I'm going to fuck her silly.

She laughs as I take her hand and tell everyone we can't wait to take all their blessings at six o'clock tonight at our brand-new house right here in town.

“Until then, we've got things to do,” I say.

“What kind of things?” Ford asks loud enough that everyone laughs.

I glower at him, but now Sasha does the pulling toward where my Bonneville sits on its kickstand on the edge of the park.

It's the only thing I still have from Quince Valley—that and my truck. Everything else went up in flames. Losing the workshop was the biggest blow. But I don't care about it or the bike even an iota as much as the woman holding on to me now. In my rearview, I see her dress flying in the wind. She looks like an angel.

But she always looks that way to me.



When we get home, I'm surprised to find the door to our new place unlocked.

"Oh shit," Sasha says. "I think I might have left it unlocked when I rushed out of here earlier."

"That right?" I ask. I'm not upset. I'm so rarely upset when it comes to Sasha.

And in this town, no one knows who we are. They don't know what we do. No one's got any reason to target us or our idyllic little house.

I pray I can keep it that way.

Ford and I are already working on some troubling cases, but we're going to be saving lives, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

I pull off my suit jacket, tossing it onto a pile of unassembled furniture boxes. We took possession a few days ago, and our furniture arrived yesterday on pallets.

"Listen, planning a wedding and moving all in one week? I was a little distracted!"

She sighs, twirling around. She loves this house. I love it, too. Almost as much as I love her walking around it sighing happily, which she's been doing between all her running around.

She was surprised when I brought her to see this place. "Isn't it a little big for just the two of us?" she asked. Most of the houses we looked at were tiny—two bedrooms or a bedroom and a den.

"Maybe," I said casually, though my palms were sweating as we walked inside.

From the moment I saw it, it felt like home—and it had nothing to do with the huge workshop out back. But that was the moment of truth. "But maybe it doesn't always have to be the two of us."

She paused in the entryway, not getting it at first. When she did, she clapped a hand over her mouth. “Wait...you mean...?” she let out a little laugh. “I thought you didn’t like babies.”

“I never said that. They just scare me.”

Her eyes were big and beautiful. Filled with possibility. “We could always start with a puppy.”

“Or an older kid?” I already knew we were going to encounter lots of those needing a loving home in my line of work.

We talked all night about the ways to fill this house, even if one of those was just us two making it ours.

“So, husband.” Sasha says now. She’s done her little happy sigh, and now she’s grinning wickedly at me as she reaches behind her back to unzip her dress. “Where shall we christen this marriage?”

“How’s right here?” I ask, taking over and pulling the zipper down.

“We could make it more fun.” She steps neatly out of the dress.

“Goddamn,” I say, sucking in a breath as I take in my stunning wife. She’s wearing a strapless black lace bra and panty set, along with garters and thigh-high pantyhose.

She turns around and flashes me her ass, most of which is bare under the cut of those underwear.

I growl, reaching for her, but she jumps out of the way.

“No way. You have to catch me first.” She kicks off her heels. “Wherever you do, that’s where you can take me.”

I shake my head. “You won’t make it two—”

She sprints, feinting left.

But I’m right, of course. She doesn’t make it even one second, because I catch her easily, spinning her around. “Something you maybe didn’t know about me, sweetheart,” I

say as I throw her over my shoulder. “Is that I’m faster than I look.”

She squeals as I stalk around the house; louder when I give her ass a smack.

But she’s laughing so hard I can tell she’s having trouble breathing. Or is that because she’s upside down? “Oh my God, you brute, put me down!”

“Hmm,” I say, peering down the hallway at my choices. None of the furniture is in place yet—the apartment we were staying in until we found this place was fully furnished.

We’ve been sleeping on an air mattress in the main bedroom. “This’ll do,” I say.

I swing her off my shoulder and toss her onto the mattress, where she bounces very fucking appealingly.

“Hey!” she cries.

But I shrug out of my shirt, then pull my belt out of my pants with a swift snapping sound.

“Oh God,” she says, her eyes falling to half-mast. “That sound.”

I drop the belt on the ground with a clunk, then jump on the bed beside her.

This, of course, makes her go flying, and she shrieks, legs kicking in the air. I have to jump under her to catch her in time.

She beats me on the chest, laughing. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“You look a lot like you do trying to shove me into swimming holes.”

“How dare you?” She knocks her little fists against my chest some more, but she’s laughing, looking more beautiful than I’ve ever seen her.

“You done?” I ask.

I don't wait for her to answer. I flip her onto her back, pinning her arms over her head. "That's enough goofing off," I say. "I'm hungry."

Sasha laughs hard, but it's gone a moment later when I let her go, pulling her panties aside and taking her with my tongue.

I don't make her wait. I bring her straight to her first orgasm, and then I don't wait either. I pull myself out of my shorts and slide into her wet, still-clenching center, making her open her mouth and do a little gasping moan.

"That's my girl," I groan into her ear as I thrust myself into her. She wraps her legs around me, giving everything to me.

"Griffin," she breathes in my ear right as I'm teetering on the edge.

"Yes?"

"You may have caught me, but I think I win."

"No way, baby," I say, kissing her long and hard. I break away long enough to reach my hand down between us, touching her in just the right spot. "I win. I got the most incredible woman in the world to marry me."

I increase the pressure with my thumb and my hips. As she tumbles over the edge, I say, "Twice."



Gloria's the first to arrive that night, an hour before everyone else.

We've shoved all the boxes to the side and set up enough beer and wine in the kitchen for an army. Glo's brought pizza. So long as I can disappear outside every so often, I think I'm going to be okay.

"You look amazing," Sasha says, holding her friend at arm's length. She's wearing a dress—she looks pretty for sure, but all I can see is Sasha. I head to the kitchen, punching out a text to Ford.

“Guess who’s here?”

It’s fun to tease him about his little crush, especially since he hasn’t made a move yet—and maybe never will.

“I’ll be there in ten” is his quick reply.

I chuckle to myself, cracking open a beer. I might just hide in here for a bit to give the two women time to gush about wedding stuff, but I can’t help overhearing Gloria as she crosses the floor and says, “Wow, that’s so weird.”

Something about the way she says that—like something’s not just weird but veering into eerie.

I shift to the doorway where I can see them.

Gloria’s standing with her back to us in front of the mantel, looking at something.

Sasha frowns, throwing a glance at me.

“That night at the Rolling Hills,” Gloria said. “When I came late and you guys just told Griff’s family you were moving here,” she pauses. “I ran into someone.”

I cross over to Sasha, on some kind of instinct, a chill threatening to rise up my back.

“He was moving fast to leave, had a suitcase and everything, and he nearly crashed into me. Scared the shit out of me, actually.”

Sasha’s hand slips into mine, squeezing me tight enough that I know she’s scared.

“He was handsome. Like really handsome. Older than me, though. But the reason he didn’t see me was because he was staring at you two. I was sure you knew him.”

She turns around, and my mouth goes dry. “He looked at me so intensely—I can still feel it.” The last part of her words is almost breathless. “It was like he was...touching me with a look, if that makes sense.”

Gloria’s cheeks suddenly flush pink. “Sorry. It doesn’t make sense at all. It was strange. But the funniest thing was—he was holding one of these.”

In her hand is a spot of bright yellow. A little bird I fixed
in a workshop turned to ash.

A little bird Sasha told me she'd given back to her brother.

A little bird someone placed in our new home, right here
for us to find.



I hope you loved reading Griffin and Sasha's story as much as
I loved writing it! Not quite ready to say goodbye? I wasn't
either, so I wrote a little bonus scene—a sneak peek into their
happily ever! It's available instantly when you sign up to my

Wilder Women newsletter. Get it here:

clairewilder.com/subscribe.

Have burning questions about the Eleanor Cleary mystery and
what the future holds for the Kelly family? A very special
Quince Valley holiday novella is coming soon that just might
provide the answers you're looking for. Plus, a new small-
town suspense series set in North Road, Ohio, will also launch
in 2024. Claire's Wilder Women newsletter is where all the
details for both will drop first—be sure you're signed up at the
link above.

Did you know you can also follow me on Amazon to receive a
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you know!

About the Author



Claire Wilder first discovered romance books as a preteen: while staying with family friends, she uncovered a giant stash of old Harlequins languishing in a basement. A ho-hum trip suddenly wasn't long enough! As an author, she writes for both the traditional and indie market. She loves being on a boat in calm water, a good thin-crust Margherita pizza, and tearjerker movies. She lives with her husband and three kids on the west coast of Canada.

Claire loves hearing from readers. The easiest way to reach her is through her through her mailing list (clairewilder.com/subscribe).