

THE BOOKWORM BOX PRESENTS

ONE
MORE
STEP

AN ANTHOLOGY

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THE BOOKWORM BOX PRESENTS

ONE

MORE

STEP

AN ANTHOLOGY

Edited by Lillian Schneider, Marissa Taylor, and [Murphy Rae](#)

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Formatting by Alyssa Garcia at [Uplifting Author Services](#)

Have you ever been curious how a writer's mind works?

The Bookworm Box is proud to present ONE MORE STEP, an exciting and unique reading experience. Each of the twenty-six authors featured in this anthology were given the same first sentence. Where they took that first sentence was completely up to them.

*Every story is different. No story is related.
demeaner*

The only thing these stories have in common is their starting point. Each author showcased in this anthology was featured in The Bookworm Box charity during 2019. Each author has graciously donated their story so that 100% of profits from this anthology will be going to all the various charities The Bookworm Box is able to support because of you, the readers.

Good deeds, great reads.

A NOTE FROM COLLEEN HOOVER

When I first started this charity with my sisters Lin Reynolds and Murphy Rae, we had no idea how far it would really go. The little purple boxes we were packing in our living rooms eventually turned into a bookstore, an annual convention and now an anthology.

We owe a huge thank you to every person who has supported our charity, whether you're new to us or you've been with us since day one. With your help and with your purchase of this anthology, we have been able to distribute well over a million dollars to hundreds of various charities.

The idea for this anthology came to me in 2015, before the charity had a team of people who could follow through with the necessary steps it would take to pull it off. Now that The Bookworm Box is staffed by people who are passionate about books and charity, we were finally able to put our heads together and bring this idea to fruition.

What's unique about this anthology is that each author was given the same first sentence. It was up to me to create the first sentence. I didn't think it would be that hard, but once I put pen to paper, I realized I didn't know how each author would want to tell their story. I tend to write primarily using first person present tense, but not every author does. It was a challenge to create a sentence that could then be turned into any tense, but once we had the sentence, the authors ran with it. And they ran in MANY different directions.

It was fascinating to see how one simple, short sentence could be turned into so many different things.

The authors who contributed to this anthology are some of the authors who were featured in our subscription boxes in 2019. We would love for this to become an annual tradition to showcase our contributors each year in different ways, while raising money for charity.

A huge thank you to each author who contributed their time and effort by donating a short story to our first Bookworm Box anthology. And a huge thank you to The Bookworm Box team for organizing this and getting it out into the world.

We hope you enjoy!

Sincerely,

Colleen Hoover

Good Deeds, Great Reads

A MEET CUTE AND OTHER NATURAL
DISASTERS

EMMA SCOTT

PROLOGUE

“ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.”

Asher, sitting beside me, snorted into his beer. “Please excuse Faith,” he said to our guests. “As I’m sure you’re aware, she has a slight tendency to exaggerate.”

I gave him a dark look but couldn’t conceal my smile. Asher Mackey’s ridiculous excess of charm and extreme hotness—especially that night, dressed up in a dark button-down and slacks—made it impossible to stay irritated with him.

That’s love for you, I thought, warmth flooding me. Turns you into a sap.

Asher was sitting on the lush carpet with his back to my chair, his long legs stretched out in front of him. He glanced up at me, and his dark eyes read the thoughts in mine. His own glance mellowed to something warm and soft. For me.

I wasn’t used to having a man look at me with his heart and soul naked and aight in his eyes. My pulse kicked up a notch every time he did it.

Which was frequently.

My ex-fake-fiancé-turned-BFF, Silas Marsh, (long story) and his husband, Max, exchanged knowing smiles from their side of the living room in my Queen Anne condo in Seattle. The city skyline rose up behind them through my bay windows, glittering in the gray light of dusk.

“Anyway,” I said. “I am not exaggerating. That hike was no picnic. There were many drop-offs where one wrong step would most certainly plummet the unwary hiker to her doom.”

Asher smirked. “It’s not *that* bad a hike. Unless you’re danger-prone and not wearing proper footwear.” He coughed into his fist.

I fixed my man with a hot look. “Who is telling this story? You or me?”

“It’s how we met,” Asher said. “I’m allowed some input. Otherwise,

you're likely to say that a dinosaur popped out of the ferns, or that you saw Big Foot."

I ignored him and sipped my wine. "Speaking of dinosaurs, this hike was one where they filmed *Jurassic Park*. Despite my *mishap*, I still maintain it's one of the most beautiful spots on earth."

Asher smiled appreciatively. He loved it when anyone said something complimentary about his adopted home, Hawaii.

"And it's where I met this big lug," I said, leaning down to kiss him on his stubbly cheek. "That helps."

Asher's hand slid up to my calf. "That makes it *my* favorite place on earth."

Damn him.

I wasn't a fan of things like "emotions" and "feelings" and "being vulnerable to another person because you love them so much you can hardly see straight."

But here I was.

Silas, ever impatient, shifted on the couch beside Max. "Well? Did you plummet to your doom or not?"

Sweet Max—dark-haired to Silas's gold; compassionate to Silas's grouchy—chuckled and sipped his seltzer water. "I'm going to guess *no*."

I huffed. "Obviously not. Now all of you hush up and let me tell you what happened."

ONE

I'VE ALWAYS HATED mud.

Unless I'm paying someone to smear it on my skin in an expensive spa while soaking in a hot bath while essential oils lace the New Age-music-laden air, no thank you. Now, my legs were covered to the knees, and my cute pre-Hawaii pedicure was ruined. Mud squelched between my toes, and I cursed the makers of the sandals I was wearing.

"All-terrain, my ass."

All along this two-mile hike through one of Kauai's lush forests, I'd spent more time slipping and sliding while climbing over rocks and tree roots than I had enjoying the scenery and finding my inner peace.

"Just breathe," I muttered to myself after nearly slipping for the hundredth time. "Almost there."

The sound of the second of two waterfalls on this trail could be heard rushing through the forest. I imagined sitting on the rocks in front of the falls—just like the picture in the brochure at my rented condo. I'd sit still for a change and quiet my mind. Try to find some mental equilibrium.

I'd come to Kauai alone, to escape the hustle and bustle of Seattle life, and my job at the ad agency. More than just city life, I needed a break from *my* life. I was stuck in a rut of cocktail parties, meaningless sex, and shopping, peppered with a few hours of work now and then.

And it was frequently wine o'clock.

I lived a perfect life of leisure, made easier by my multi-billionaire BFF, Silas Marsh, bankrolling said lifestyle.

It was time for a change. A revolution. Three solid weeks on the remotest island in Hawaii was just what I needed.

"But this was not in the brochure," I muttered as I used my walking stick to push my way over a slippery patch of slick, mud-covered rocks.

A few hikers passed me, all wearing better gear on their feet.

“I missed the memo,” I said, and then let out a squeal as my feet slipped in different directions like a newborn deer’s. I landed with a hard thud on my ass, mud splattering all over my tight designer athletic pants, a blue and purple flower print.

“Shit.”

I was about to call it quits, but from my lower vantage, I could see the waterfalls through a part in the trees. Quitting now would be silly. I’d still have the two mile return trip, and no waterfall selfies to show for it.

I hauled myself to my feet, hating the way the mud dampened my ass and the backs of my legs, and picked my way carefully down the trail. I was nearly there—I could see other hikers splashing in the water and taking photos on a plateau of dry rock in front of the falls under a clear blue sky. Spirits bolstered, I kept going.

Only one more hurdle awaited: a short drop, down from a rocky outcropping to the ground and the waterfall. I sat down on the ledge and scooted off. It was only a half-foot drop, but the rocks were slick, and my “hiking” sandals were coated with mud. I landed and then a yelp escaped me as my right foot slid out from under me. It bent sideways in a way a healthy ankle is not meant to bend.

Then I did more than yelp.

“Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit,” I panted as pain lanced up my leg and I landed on my ass—again.

Gingerly, I held my calf and examined my foot. My ankle, naked but for the Velcro sandal straps, already looked as if it were pregnant with a golf ball. The skin was stretched and shiny.

“No, no, no,” I breathed, mild shock constricting my lungs. For a few agonized moments, I could only sit and let the pain wash over me in waves, trying not to cry.

“Are you okay?” called a middle-aged dad who looked like Rob Reiner. He picked his way carefully over the rocks from where his two tween sons were splashing each other in front of the falls. “Oh dang,” he said, eyeing my ankle. “I’d say not. What can I do?”

“I have to get out of here. Help me up?” I said, reaching out my hand.

The guy looked dubious. “You sure?”

“I gotta get off the ground.”

The guy helped me to stand, and I let out a cry as I nearly slipped again. The man caught me, saving me from another tumble. I repaid him by covering his white shorts with mud as I crashed against him.

“Whoa, hey. I got you.”

I pressed my lips together, willing the tears to back down. My ankle throbbed, and I clutched the guy’s arm as I glanced up the way I had come. “Impossible.”

“Yeah, I think you should sit down. Is someone here with you? Someone you can call?”

“No,” I said, feeling unbearably lonely and stranded. “No one close.”

Rob Reiner 2.0 helped me hop painfully to a chair-level rock and I sat down. I wished longingly for Silas. I could call him. He’d jump in one of his private jets to rescue me—and be here in about six hours.

I pulled my phone out of my mud-splattered backpack. No reception.

The guy rubbed his beard. “You’re not going to have bars down here. I’ll climb up to a higher level and call emergency services.”

“No, you don’t have to.” I jabbed at my phone. “I’m sure I’ll get reception soon.”

He smiled kindly at me. “You need help. I’m going.”

I slumped on my rock chair. “Okay. Thank you.”

“No prob.”

The guy wrangled his sons and they all three went climbing back up the trail and out of sight. I sat for who-knew-how-long waiting, a second heartbeat throbbing in my ankle that now looked like it had swallowed a softball.

Other hikers picked their way around me, to and from the falls, some stopping to wince at my ankle on my behalf.

“That doesn’t look fun,” said one helpful commenter.

I bit back a smart-ass remark. My ankle ached, and I just wanted to get the hell out of here. But, holy shit, how?

Rob Reiner 2.0 returned (and introduced himself as Sam) saying that the

EMTs were on their way.

I smiled gratefully. “Thank you, Sam.”

“No problem, sweetheart.”

He and his sons resumed playing in the water. I suspected he and his family had seen their fill of the falls but were hanging around for my sake.

Finally, three men in combat boots, wearing dark blue uniforms with FIRE written in bright yellow across the front, surrounded me. The whirring sound of a helicopter sounded from above.

“How we doing, miss?”

“Never better.”

I brushed my blond hair out of my eyes to glance up at the guy nearest me. My eyes widened as his full magnificence fell over me like a ray of heavenly light.

Because, of course, I meet a guy who looks like the mold for the perfect man while I’m helpless and covered in mud.

Holy hell, this guy. At least six feet and three inches of sculpted muscle towered over me. A square jawline, cheekbones that could cut glass, beautiful dark eyes, lush brown hair... And the entire package wrapped in a uniform that announced *I save lives for a living*.

“You’re fucking kidding me.”

The guy blinked. “Come again?”

“Nothing. Uh, hi. Yes, I’m your problem child today.”

“Name?”

“Faith Benson. And you are?”

The EMT didn’t answer but squatted in front of my mud-splattered legs to examine my ankle. “Move your toes for me?”

I did as he said—ordered, really. He had a gruff voice, rough and low.

He laid two fingers on the top of my foot, feeling for a pulse. “These shoes aren’t appropriate for this trail.”

“I’m *painfully* aware.”

His eyes were dark as he rose from his crouch. “If I had a dollar for every tourist who traipsed in here without preparation...”

“You have a lovely bedside manner,” I said, ignoring how this guy’s uniform shirt clung to his chest in a way that made my ovaries stand up and take notice. “And you don’t look native, by the way, so maybe cool it on the dumb tourist talk? This hurts like a son of a bitch.”

He grunted in response and turned to his fellow EMTs. They powwowed for a moment about what to do with me. The whirring helicopter came into sight again—a red bug that flitted across the blue sky.

“Okay, time to get you out,” a second guy said.

“How?” I asked.

My EMT pointed a finger upward.

“That helicopter?” I shook my head. “Oh no, no, no. That’s not necessary.”

“We have to evacuate you from the area, ma’am—”

“Yes, please, but a helicopter? That’s ridiculously dramatic, don’t you think?”

Just the sort of drama I was trying to erase from my life.

Silas will never let me hear the end of this.

“It’s necessary for your safety and to ensure your ankle isn’t further injured.” The second guy turned to my new friend. “Ash, you ready?”

“Ready, Cap.”

So the Hottest EMT in the World is named Ash. Makes sense. He sets panties on fire.

Apparently, the pain in my ankle didn’t stop the inappropriate thoughts. Typically, I let them fly out of my mouth, but I managed to restrain myself that morning.

“Your name is Ash?”

“Asher. Only the guys call me Ash.”

“What do the girls call you?”

What name do they scream in your bed?

He smirked. “Come on. Let’s get you out of here.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I said, as Asher and the captain started to move to either side of me to lift me up. “Can’t you just piggyback me out?”

“For two miles?” Asher’s brows furrowed. “And on whose back?”
“You look more than capable.”

“As fun as that sounds, we’re using the chopper.”

“How are you going to land a helicopter on a waterfall?”

“We’re not,” Asher said. “Ready?”

Asher and the captain stood on either side of me, and I hooked my arms around their brawny shoulders. Gently, they lifted me. My ankle complained and I bit back a small whimper as they carefully picked their way over the dry rocks that fronted the waterfall and found an outcropping to sit me on.

Mortified, I waited while the EMTs talked into walkie talkies. Hikers gathered around, taking photos of me, the chopper, and the casket-shaped basket that was slowly making its way down on a cord, a guy in an orange uniform and white helmet coming down with it.

“You’re going to put me in that?”

“Don’t worry,” Asher said, crouching beside me to splint my foot. “Roy is the best in the business.”

My glance darted to the basket, the cables, and the dinky-looking helicopter hovering hundreds of yards in the air above us. I looked back to see Asher’s granite expression had softened a little.

“Is there someone I can call?” he asked.

“Question of the hour,” I said, willing the tears back.

I don’t cry. I never cried. I was allergic to being emotional, but suddenly I felt so helpless and stranded on an island thousands of miles away from anyone I knew, about to dangle in the sky in a basket.

Asher’s brows rose. “Well?”

“No. There isn’t anyone to call.”

“You’re on the island alone?”

“Yes, okay?” I spat. “I came here to find inner peace. That’s not exactly a team sport. If I’d brought a gaggle of girlfriends, we’d have spent all our time drinking wine and shopping. Which is exactly what I do in Seattle. I needed a change. This”—I indicated my ankle—“is not on the itinerary. *Obviously.*”

Asher wore a grudging look of...admiration? Understanding? Doubtful. I was just another dumb tourist. Even dumber for coming here by myself.

Roy and his Basket of Doom were brought over. My pulse kicked up another notch.

“You want me to lie down in that? On purpose?”

A hint of a smile touched Asher’s lips. “It’s safe, I swear.”

“I’ll bet you say that to all the girls about to fly through the air in nothing but a basket attached to a rope suspended from a helicopter.”

The guys helped me lie down flat on my back, and I clutched my muddy backpack to my chest. From inside his white helmet, Roy busily worked attaching various buckles and straps.

“Where are you taking me, Roy?”

“They’re going to land you on dry ground,” Asher said. “An ambulance is waiting to take you to Wilcox Hospital. Where are you staying on the island?”

“Kapa’a.”

“Then you’re near the hospital.”

A lot of good that would do me. I couldn’t drive. Couldn’t walk.

How did I get here? What the hell am I going to do?

I realized that, outside of Silas, there was no one I wanted to call to help me get through this. I wasn’t one for freaking out, but at that moment, it took all I had to not burst into tears.

Asher read my expression and frowned.

“You good?”

“Just peachy,” I managed, though my heart pounded like a gong. There was no way I was going to lose it in front of this guy. “Does it change anything if I say I’m afraid of heights?”

Asher’s expression softened with his voice. “You’re going to be okay. I promise.”

I flashed him my flirtiest covered-in-mud-sprained-ankle-scared-shitless smile. “Thanks.” I looked up at the helicopter above. “This is nuts. Do I have time for a photo?”

“Seriously?”

“When is this going to happen again?”

“Next week?” He nearly offered me a grin. “You strike me as catastrophe-prone.”

“And you still need to work on your bedside manner.”

I fished my phone out and took a shot. Then I whipped my phone to the right and grabbed a pic of Asher.

“To show the folks at home the hero who rescued the dumb tourist with the bad shoes.”

“That’s Roy. Not me.” His expression softened with his voice. “And you’re not dumb. Shit happens.”

Did I detect a twinge of remorse in his gruff, manly-man voice? I had no time to contemplate. Takeoff was imminent; I wasn’t going to see Asher ever again.

“Take care, Faith,” he said as he and the rest of the guys backed away. “And be more careful next time.”

“There is no next time. This trip is over.”

Before it even began. God, what a nightmare.

Roy made a circular arm motion, and the chopper rose higher, taking the basket off the ground. I caught sight of Sam with his sons, amid a bunch of gawking tourists. He waved at me. I waved back and mouthed *Thank you*.

Only a slender cord, swaying in the breeze, tethered Roy and I to the helicopter above us. Below, the earth—beautiful as it was—swept beneath us at a frightening distance.

I looked to Roy, somehow attached to the side of the basket by cords and buckles. “You do this often?”

He couldn’t hear me from inside his helmet. I squeezed my eyes shut and waited for the ordeal to be over. Three minutes later, it was. We landed the basket in the playground of an elementary school.

“So that happened,” I said to the sky.

As promised, an ambulance was waiting. Two more EMTs—neither of them Asher, of course—rushed out and disengaged us. I was put on a stretcher and rolled toward the ambulance.

“I think I’m fine, guys,” I said. “A hospital seems like overkill.”

“Might be broken,” one guy said. “Better to have an X-ray.”

I sighed. It wasn't like I had anywhere else to be.



For four hours, I waited on a gurney in the ER, shivering with cold. The thin blanket they'd given me was purely decorative, apparently, and the ice pack on my ankle felt like it weighed a hundred pounds. An X-ray was taken and determined nothing was broken. A young dark-haired doctor with a nametag that read *Akana* gave me the news.

"X-ray shows no broken bones. Ultrasound shows no ligament tears," she said. "Without an MRI we can't be one hundred percent certain, but in my experience, it looks like a bad sprain. You're lucky."

"Yep. That's me. Lucky." I brushed a tangle of hair out of my eyes. "What do I do now?"

The doctor smiled gently. "We'll give you a boot to stabilize your foot, a pair of crutches, more ice packs to take home. Is there someone we can call to come and get you?"

Tears pricked my eyes. "If I had a dollar..." I sniffed and sat straighter. "No. I'm here by myself."

Doctor Akana frowned, and we both looked at my mud-splattered legs. "I can have the nurses clean you up if you'd like."

"And wait another four hours in this Arctic hell? No, thanks. Someone less lucky probably needs this bed anyway. I'll call a cab. Or an Uber."

"Very well. I'll get the nurse to bring your paperwork."

The doc left, and a nurse appeared nearly thirty minutes later to wrap my ankle and put it in a little black boot that came to mid-shin. I signed some papers, and they rolled me in a wheelchair to the front of the hospital.

The orderly waited with me until the Uber arrived—a young guy with a small white Kia.

I hauled myself out of the wheelchair, and the orderly handed me crutches. I'd never used them before and struggled to find my balance. My ankle throbbed. I felt as if I were being cast out of the space station into the

unknown, alone.

Just get back to the condo.

And then what? I had no clue how I'd be able to maneuver into a bath to clean myself up. I could change my flight and get the hell out of here, but I had three pieces of luggage to somehow get to the airport. Just the thought of packing in my condition made me tired. And my rental car? How did I return it? I couldn't drive...

Just get back to the condo, I thought again. Do that first, figure out the rest later.

I crutched three steps to the Kia slowly, awkwardly. Exhausted and wanting to sit.

The Uber driver eyed my muddy clothes dubiously. "Wait, wait. Um, is there a towel we can put down?"

"Seriously?"

"For my back seat?" He looked to the orderly who was already taking the wheelchair back. "Hey, man. Hold up."

He ran after the orderly, leaving me standing on the curb. Alone.

The dam finally broke and I burst into tears.

TWO

THERE WAS ABSOLUTELY no reason for me to go Wilcox hospital after my shift. None. I had friends there, of course. Docs and nurses and other guys in my line of work whom I saw on the regular. But I had no plans with anyone that night, and didn't normally make a habit of hanging out at a hospital for shits and giggles. So why was I driving there like a bat out of hell, straight from the fire station, still in uniform no less?

You know why.

I cursed myself for being such a wuss but didn't turn my Jeep from its course to Wilcox. For her. For Faith Benson, the stunningly beautiful tourist who made bad choices in hiking shoes. Something she had said stuck with me.

I came here to find inner peace... I needed a change.

I'd heard variations on that song a hundred times from tourists I'd come in contact with in my five years on the island. But Faith sounded like she meant it. That her injury had ruined more than a vacation for her. It'd been...

"A reset," I muttered on the highway south to Lihue. "Like mine."

I liked to drive fast, and I drove faster, even though it was likely too late. She'd been admitted hours ago and was probably long gone by now.

I screeched my Jeep into the parking lot and was about to park when there she was. Faith stood propped up on crutches at the curb. And she was crying.

"The hell...?"

Tires squealing, I reversed course and pulled into the pick-up/drop-off drive behind a dinky white Kia.

"Hey," I said, climbing out of the Jeep and striding over to her. "You okay?"

"No, I am not okay!" she cried, then blinked tearfully at me in confusion. Her voice softened for a second and she looked almost glad to see me. "What

are you doing here?” Before I could answer, she stiffened her voice and hurriedly wiped her eyes. “Come to get a few more digs at the dumb tourist?”

I glanced around. “Is someone picking you up?”

“I have an Uber,” she said. “The driver’s trying to find a towel.”

“A towel?”

“He doesn’t want my muddy ass on his seat.” Faith broke down again, shoulders shaking, her blond hair blowing around her shoulders. Then shook her head defiantly. “No. Never mind. Not going to freak out. I’m fine.” But the tears started again and she gestured furiously at her muddy, bandaged leg. “How did this happen? I came here for personal growth. Does this look like personal growth to you? My entire trip is ruined.”

“How long are you here for?”

“Three weeks.”

“That’s not so bad—”

“I got here *yesterday*.”

“Oh.”

“What is so bad about shopping anyway?” she cried. “What’s so terrible about sleeping in and cocktail parties and meaningless sex?”

“Nothing,” I said, grinning despite myself. *This woman...*

“This was stupid. I should have stayed at home.” Faith huffed a steady breath.

“Feel better?”

“No.” She wiped her eyes, then glared at me. “Asher, right? Once again, why are you here?”

I started to answer, but then she winced as a flash of pain came over her. She didn’t need to be standing on a curb. She needed to get cleaned up, elevate her leg, get some ice on that ankle.

She needs someone to take care of her.

“Fuck the Uber,” I said, moving toward her. “I’ll take you.”

“What? No, I’m fine.”

“You want to wait for Towel Boy and then try to cram into the back of his car? Come on.”

She grimaced and I could see her struggle to keep the pain off of her face.

“Hurts, right?”

She nodded. “I thought you didn’t like me.”

“Maybe you’re growing on me.”

“I don’t need any help.”

“I strongly disagree.”

The Uber driver rushed over, waving a white towel. “Got it.” He beamed. “Ready, ma’am?”

“Ma’am?” Faith muttered. “I’m twenty-nine, for God’s sake.” She looked between me and Towel Boy, hesitating.

I took a step closer to her so that we were face to face. “I’ll get you home safe,” I said. “It’s what I do.”

Her green eyes—stunning and clear—widened. “Do you practice lines like that in the mirror?” she asked, though the breath in her voice betrayed her brassy words.

I didn’t answer but slipped my arm around her slender waist. Her lips parted, eyes locked on mine. I took the crutches out of her hands and thrust them at the Uber driver.

“Carry these,” I said, and then gently lifted Faith and strode toward my Jeep.

“My hero,” Faith said, trying to maintain her sarcasm, but I felt her melt into my arms with relief.

And my arms answered by holding her tighter. She tucked her head against my shoulder. Her hair was soft as it brushed my chin, and the scents of her flowery shampoo wafted to me. Carefully, I maneuvered her into the front seat, stowed her crutches in the back, and sent Towel Boy on his way.

“Where are you staying?”

“Pono Kai condos.” She watched me throw the car in drive and take off, wincing as I hit the gas. “You don’t need GPS?”

“I’ve lived here for five years,” I said. “And this island isn’t exactly huge.”

“True. Where are you from?”

“New York City.”

“Were you a fireman in New York too?”

“Nope. Hedge fund investment manager.”

Her eyes widened. “Wall Street?”

I nodded.

“You traded all that for island life? Permanently?”

“Never looked back.”

She whistled. “I could never. Especially since Kauai doesn’t seem to like me very much.” She winced as the Jeep jounced on a turn. “Easy, Mario Andretti.”

“Sorry.”

Faith yawned. “I want to know how a Wall Street hedge fund manager becomes a firefighter on a tiny little island half a planet away, but I’ve had a day. I’m going to take a little nap. If that’s possible with your stellar driving.”

I grinned. “That bad, eh?”

She settled herself against the window and closed her eyes. “The helicopter was less traumatic.”

I scoffed but couldn’t wipe that stupid grin off my face, while wondering what the hell it was about Faith Benson that was making me upend the rest of my day to put up with her. I’d made it a personal rule to never get involved with tourists for more than a night or two, but sex wasn’t on my mind.

Okay fine, it was lurking somewhere in the deepest recesses of my brain because she was a stunningly beautiful woman and I was a red-blooded male.

But she was injured, alone, and needed help. And I liked her. I liked her fire and her wit.

My gaze darted to Faith, where her face was relaxed and free of pain and worry for the first time since I’d met her.

I liked that I’d done that for her, too.

That’s a lot of liking.

As Faith dozed, I drove, warning myself against entangling myself with this woman any more than I already had.

I’ll just get her cleaned up and situated, make sure she has food, water, and a TV remote. Then I’m outta here.

That was the plan I made, anyway, as I pulled into the Pono Kai parking lot. I woke Faith up and carried her to her condo's front door, but my plan was crumbling already. My arms were growing used to holding her; she fit perfectly against me, and I could definitely get used to having her delicate arm draped around my shoulders.

Stop.

Faith keyed the door unlocked and turned the handle, and I kicked it open.

"Ooh, that felt very firefighter-y," she said, and she wiggled her ass a little in my arms.

Her face was inches from my mine and it took all I had to keep my gaze on her clear green eyes and not let it drop to her mouth. But her gaze was just as bad, glinting with humor but more than a little heat, too.

"Where?" I asked gruffly, tearing my gaze away.

"Couch."

The condo was huge, lush, modern. Sunlight streamed in from large windows, and the beach was steps away from her lanai.

See? Rich, spoiled tourist. The worst kind.

Or so I told myself as I pulled the coffee table over so that Faith could rest her foot on it.

"Now what do I do?" she asked.

"Ice." I went to the freezer in her chrome-and-marble kitchen.

"They just wrapped up my foot, all cozy-like."

"I can rewrap," I said, putting ice cubes in a Ziploc. "Besides, don't you want to get cleaned up?"

Faith arched a perfect eyebrow. "Are you heroically offering to bathe me?"

I brought the kitchen mallet hard on a bag of ice cubes to distract from the image her words wanted to conjure in my brain. "I'm a professional. I cut the clothes off of people every day."

She rolled her eyes. "I'll bet."

"I'll call a nurse friend," I said, returning to the couch. Carefully, I unwrapped the boot from her ankle and set the bag of crushed ice over it. The swelling was bad but had subsided since the waterfall.

“Hurts,” she whispered.

“Already looks better than earlier.”

Her gaze darted to me hopefully. “You think so?”

“Definitely. I’ll bet you’re walking by the end of the week.”

“A week.” She shook her head. “I’m not staying a week. I’m done.”

“Giving up already?”

“What can I do? Crutching over beach sand feels like a bad idea. And if I managed it, I’d be lopsided.”

“Lopsided?”

“I can’t sunbathe on my stomach. I’ll only have a tan on my front half.”

“I thought you were here for a reset?”

She frowned. “I don’t remember saying that.”

“Personal growth,” I amended quickly.

“I am, but need I remind you that I live in Seattle? We get that thing you call ‘sunshine’ for ten minutes every other June.”

I smiled, and she smiled back, and the air between us seemed to warm.

I jumped to my feet. “Water. You need to stay hydrated.”

“You’re a teddy bear, aren’t you? Tell me about Wall Street,” she said when I returned with a glass of water.

“It was chaos. Lots of booze, drugs, sex—”

“Where do I sign up?” She offered a brazen smile. This woman was anything but shy.

I chuckled. “It was high-pressure. The booze, drugs, and sex were to combat the stress, but it never worked. There was always more. I felt like stress was our main commodity. I never built anything. Nothing tangible, anyway. Just moved money around to make more money.” I shrugged. “It wasn’t enough.”

Faith settled back on the couch cushion. “Not enough how?”

“Mentally,” I said. “Spiritually, I guess, if you want to call it that.”

“So you came here for personal growth too.” Her smile was coy as she sipped her water. “A *reset*?”

I shrugged. “Hawaii’s a good place for that.”

“I knew there was something deeper going on with you behind your perfect manly physique and less-than-perfect bedside manner. We have a lot in common. Don’t we, Asher...?”

“Mackey,” I said. “And I wouldn’t go that far. I didn’t quit after one day.”

Faith’s arch look returned. “You also didn’t blow out your ankle and require a private helicopter tour to the hospital, now did you?”

“True.” I sniffed a laugh. “When I arrived, I had no job. I started island hopping and blowing through my 401k. Trying to find where I belonged.”

“And it was Kauai.”

I nodded. “It felt like where I needed to be. So, I went through EMT training in Oahu, applied here, and—”

“Now you spend your days rescuing damsels in distress.”

“Not a bad gig. Better than buying securities or building investment portfolios.”

Faith laughed and then winced.

“How’s the pain level?”

“Better now,” she said, a small smile on her lips. “I’ve kept you longer than I should. There are probably other damsels out there, waiting for you.”

I heard a twinge of disappointment in her voice that matched the twinge in my heart at the idea of leaving her.

“They can wait.”

“I’m glad,” she said, smiling softly now. “I have you all to myself for a little while longer.” She sighed. “It’s ironic, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“I came here to rescue myself.” She leaned her elbow on the back of the couch, her head on the back of her hand, watching me. “But I needed rescuing. Again. From another man.”

I frowned. “Another man?”

She set her water glass on the table. “In Seattle, I work for an advertising agency. In theory. I take a lot of time off because I can. Because I find guys who want to take care of me. They bankroll my life of leisure, and I take full advantage. Unapologetically. I hit the jackpot with one guy, literally. That was a wild ride, but...”

Faith caught my dark look and glanced away.

“I know. I get it. I’m a shallow gold digger, right? But that’s just the point. It’s why I’m here. Silas—the jackpot—he and I are best friends now, and I’m done taking his money. Now I’m just trying to figure out...”

“What?”

“Who I am without all... that.” She flapped her hand in the general geographical direction of Seattle. “But my voyage of self-discovery is over.”

I said nothing aloud while thoughts warred in my mind. *Don’t let her go* fought the hardest.

I have to.

Nothing was going to come of this. Not even sex, given Faith’s injury, though I realized I’d be happy just to sit on the couch with her and talk.

This is ridiculous. Get out of here before you lose your damn mind.

I got to my feet and fished for my phone out of my uniform back pocket. “You need to get cleaned up. I’ll call Paula. She’s a nurse friend.”

“Thanks, Asher. I appreciate it. Really.”

“Yep.”

I stepped out to call Paula, who lived in Kapa’a and arrived within fifteen minutes. I could have left while Paula helped bathe Faith and get her changed into clean clothes. But I got as far as my Jeep and then leaned against the hood, scrolling through my phone.

Paula came out forty-five minutes later. “That Faith is a hoot,” she said, beaming. “She’s got spunk. It’s a shame about her foot. She had her whole trip ahead of her.”

“Yeah, well, shit happens.”

“Indeed.” Paula was a mom of four teenage boys. Consequently, not much bullshit got past her. “But her ankle’s not all that bad, I think. Grade one, maybe. Give her a week and she’ll be hobbling around like a champ and can enjoy the rest of her trip.” She tapped a finger to her chin thoughtfully. “If only someone were around to help her get through it.”

I smirked. “Subtle.”

“Well?” She laughed and moved to her black Camry, parked next to my white Jeep. “Do I have to spell it out for you?”

“Goodbye, Paula.”

“See ya, you big lunkhead.”

She drove away, and I should’ve too. Instead, my brain went back to its Wall Street days, where I had to assess multiple pieces of information all at once to make split-second decisions.

I have four days off on my rotation starting today.

She’s sexy as hell.

She’s trying for a reset, like I did all those years ago.

Great sense of humor.

She’s sexy as hell.

“You said that already,” I muttered, and went up back to Faith’s place. I knocked then opened the door a crack. “You decent?”

“Never,” purred a voice from the couch. “I’m distinctly *indecent*.”

I’m a dead man.

Faith, dressed only in a bathrobe, lounged on the couch with her foot up. Her blond hair was slick from the shower and brushed off her face. No makeup, bronzed skin, green eyes like gems...

Stunning.

“You should lock your door,” I said.

“Then you wouldn’t be able to come back to me.”

I sat down on the chair opposite, rested my elbows on my knees. “Are you flirting with me, Miss Benson?”

“Of course I am. Have you seen you?”

I chuckled, but my blood heated at the sight of her in only a silky robe and nothing else.

“But unfortunately for both of us,” she continued, “part of my personal development is that I’ve sworn off men for the foreseeable future. Then you walked in to my life, Asher Mackey.” Her tongue touched the top of her parted lips and her eyes darkened as they grazed over every inch of me. “The universe is testing me. Hard.”

My groin tightened at the word *hard* coming out of her mouth, and the heated scrutiny of her gaze, drinking me in. Christ, everything about her

begged me to take her down on the couch, kiss her hard, rip the robe out of the way and slip my hand between her legs where I'd feel how badly she wanted me. Her eyes flared, as if she'd read my heated thoughts, and a faint pink touched her cheeks.

"It's testing the hell out of me too," I said, and dragged my gaze away from the bronzed skin of her thigh.

"Asher..."

"Go out to dinner with me."

"The state of my ankle thwarts me from going out."

"Then we'll order in."

She bit her lip. "I just told you—"

"I know," I said. "You're doing a lifestyle spring-cleaning. I get that. And it's not in my personal protocol to involve myself with tourists. But I'd like to help keep you from losing your entire time in Kauai."

"How?"

"I have a few days off. I'll show you around. Help you get to some of the places you want to see, then show you the places you *need* to see."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because you were right. I came here for the same reasons you did, only I wasn't immediately smacked down by a tough trail and poor choices in footwear."

Faith's brassy, nothing-fazes-me demeanor relaxed, and a real smile touched her scrubbed face.

"That's very sweet of you, Asher. But I was just about to call the airline and hire some people to pack me up."

"That doesn't seem like you."

She pursed her lips. "And you know this because...?"

"I don't," I said. "Something about you. I think you'd have crawled out of that trail if you had to."

She seemed genuinely surprised. "You do?"

"Am I wrong?"

Faith sat back against the couch. "No."

"Prove it."

Her eyebrows went up again. Thoughts flashed behind her green eyes.
“Fine. I’ll stick around for a few days. But I’m not going to sleep with you, firefighter.”

“I don’t expect you to,” I said, and added with a wink, “but let’s leave that door open.”

“Closed,” Faith corrected, with a sly smile. “But I’ll leave it unlocked.”

THREE

ASHER MACKEY MADE good on his promise to show me as much of Kauai in four days as my sprained ankle would allow.

He drove me to the Waimea canyons and carried me up the three flights of stairs to the top of the lookout.

He took me to Hanalei Bay for the best shave ice on the island, and when I grew tired of crutching around the cute little town, he ringed my arms around his neck and lifted me as if I were nothing and put me on his back. My breasts pressed against his hard muscles, my arms held him tight. More than once, I let my cheek rest on his shoulder, closed my eyes, and was inundated with his cologne, his soap, the masculine essence of him.

Like sunbathing on a warm rock...

And on the fourth day, when I was able to put weight on my foot for the first time, he took me snorkeling off a rocky beach in the south of the island. Wearing fins and swimming wasn't possible for me, so Asher rented a boogie board and I lay on top of it. He then swam for me, dragging me on the board so I could put my face in the water and experience the underwater world too.

Every night, he took me back to my place and took care of me, bringing me ice or food or anything I needed, and we talked. Oh my God, we talked for *hours*, over lunches and dinners, on boat rides, while waiting in line for smoothies. He told me about his life in NYC and his life now, and how before he left the Mainland, he'd made sure he made enough money on Wall Street to fund his parents' retirement, pay off their house in upstate New York, and give his brother the seed money he needed to start his own business.

And then he chose a new career, saving lives.

Asher Mackey was a goddamn saint compared to me. I gave him all the dirty details of my life in advertising and how I'd begun to leave the business

behind when it became obvious it was easier to let men take care of me instead of doing actual work.

“Kind of like how you’re doing now,” I muttered under my breath, as we sat in a cozy, dimly-lit restaurant in Hanalei, candles flickering in small cups between us on the tiny table.

“What did you say?” Asher asked.

“Nothing.”

I sipped my wine but drank him in instead. He looked devastating in a black T-shirt, his muscles straining against the material as he rested his large forearms on the table. Dark hair, dark eyes, his chin grazed with dark stubble...

Jesus, he’s a beautiful beast of a man. How have I not seen him naked?

Because Asher had been true to his word. We flirted as if it were an Olympic sport and we were honing our routine for the pairs event. But he respected my flimsy boundaries—boundaries that I was mentally tearing down every second I spent with him. Because depriving myself of his body wasn’t working—my stupid heart was stripping itself bare for Asher, whether I touched him or not.

And there was nothing I could do about it.

I muttered a curse into my glass and he looked up. “Talk to me, Faith. What’s up?”

“I was just thinking about how I came here to break my bad habits with men, and yet here I am, letting you take care of me, twenty-four seven.”

He shrugged over his pasta. “You don’t give yourself enough credit. You pay for more than half of our activities—despite my best efforts—and it’s not about money anyway.”

“Then what’s it about?”

“Give and take,” he said. “Sounds like when you were with those other guys, you did all the taking. That’s not the case here.”

“It’s not? We’re not even sleeping together. What are you getting out of this deal?”

“You.”

I sat back in my chair. “Me.”

“Yep.” His gaze grazed over me in my white sundress—light to his dark—and then met my eyes with an intensity that was full of depth and heat. “I get you.”

Damn him.

Worse than the no-sex, he was always saying stuff like that. Things that made my heart feel strange. As if I’d been starving it for years, and now it was gorging on Asher Mackey. It felt warm and satisfied in a way it hadn’t felt before.

This is bad. Real bad.

My fork clattered to my plate. “I can’t take it anymore.”

Asher blinked. “Sorry?”

“What are we doing? This. You. Me. What are we doing?”

“Having dinner.”

“Stop that,” I said. “Stop being so... unflappable. You can’t just say the incredible things you say to me and then eat your scampi as if we’re discussing the weather.”

“Faith—”

“I’m supposed to be here fixing myself, remember? Not falling—” I huffed a breath and took a sip of wine. “Never mind. Forget it. I’m fine. I’m just sugar-buzzed from all the shave ices we’ve been having.”

Calmly, Asher wiped his lips on a napkin and rested his elbows on the table, fingers laced together. “I’ve never spent this much time with a woman and not slept with her.”

“Same.”

“Spending time with you. Talking to you...” His eyes met mine over the table. “I don’t want to stop. I have two ten-hour shifts and a twelve coming up, and I’m already thinking about how I can see you as much as possible in between.” A soft smile I’d never seen him wear touched his lips and his hand reached across the table to hold mine. “I don’t know where this is going to end up, but the last fucking thing I want to think about is saying goodbye.”

Oh shit.

No man had ever said something like that to me before. No man had *looked* at me the way Asher Mackey looked at me, with fire in his eyes but

something deeper too. And I wanted to live in that reflection. Bask in it. Drown in it...

So I did the logical thing: I snatched my hand away, stood up, and limped out of the restaurant.

Outside, the air was warm and did nothing to snap me out of my emotional freefall. Asher emerged from inside, hands in his pockets, brows raised in cautious curiosity.

“Was that your subtle way of telling me it was my turn to get the check?”

“We need to sleep together.”

His eyes widened. “Right now?”

“Yes. Tonight. Bring the car around and let’s go.”

“I thought we had rules. No kissing, no getting naked...”

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“Faith—”

“This is ridiculous,” I hissed, flapping my arms and nearly losing my balance thanks to my bum ankle. “This... chaos I’m feeling? It’s just my body telling me that I’m about to combust if I don’t have you, isn’t it? Isn’t that why I can’t stop thinking about you every minute of my life? I wake up from dreaming about you, spend all day with you in a ridiculous bliss, then go to sleep every night hoping to dream of you some more.” I pushed a finger into his chest. “You have completely infiltrated every part of me.”

His brown eyes flared and became hooded. “Good.”

Asher’s hand snaked out to grip me by the back of the head, under my hair, in a delicious tingle of shivers mixed with a twinge of pain. He pulled me commandingly to him, and I had just enough time to release a little moan of want before he crushed his mouth to mine.

Holy hell.

That lone thought drowned in a sea of sensation that crashed over me with Asher’s kiss. God, his mouth; the taste of him. I was overwhelmed with sensations: the brush of his stubble on my skin, the heat of his mouth taking mine, devouring me as if he’d been starving too.

He wrenched his mouth away, sucking in air, and released me.

“Feel better?” Asher said thickly, his breath coming hard like mine.

I nodded. “Yes... um. Yes, thanks. Much better.”

He didn't let me go but pressed in closer. “Did you feel that?”

I nodded again.

“That's what it will be like when you're in my bed, Faith. Even while I'm fucking you, it's going to feel like that.”

“Like everything?” I breathed. “All of you?”

“Yes. You have all of me.” His thumb brushing over my lip. “We can't pretend we're something we're not.”

“What are we?”

“Don't know,” he said. “But it scares me too.”

Because I was leaving in two weeks.

Let's not think about that right now.

I didn't want to think at all. I just wanted him.

Asher bent his head and kissed me again, sucking on my lower lip, then moved down to my neck. Everywhere he touched me sent licks of heat skimming over my skin, down my back, between my legs. I could only cling to him, my body loosening like sand under his touch, and then moaning into his mouth as he captured me in another searing kiss.

Finally, I pushed at his chest with both hands. “Car. Go. Now.”

“Your condo is thirty minutes away.”

“And your house is...?”

“Less than that.”

“Then we go there.”

• • •

The ride to Asher's house went by in a blur. I'd never been to his place; I only had the vague idea he lived near Anini Beach. Night had fallen, and a panorama of diamonds smattered across the sky as he took the road east from Hanalei.

I could hardly look at Asher for wanting him so bad and took his hand that

was on the gearshift. I'd only intended to hold it, but instead, I hiked up my dress and laid it on my thigh.

"I don't think that's a good idea," he said, his voice rough with want.

I moved his rough palm over my smooth skin, higher.

"I'll miss my turn."

Now I pressed his fingers against the dampness of my panties and bit back a cry at how good it felt. How *right*.

"Jesus, Faith..."

"Eyes on the road, firefighter." I breathed, moving his fingers where I wanted them, and then he took over. His hand slipped under the silk of my underwear and I whimpered as his fingers found naked flesh.

Jaw clenched, eyes hard and facing straight ahead, Asher worked me over, his rough skin on my delicate, sensitive bud, moving in circles before plunging two fingers inside me.

"Ah, God, yes," I cried out, arching off the seat.

For a few, ecstatic moments he was inside me, but he tore his hand away too soon, breathing hard, and muttering, "Going to have an accident."

Thankfully, I only had to live in the torture for a few more minutes, as he turned onto Anini Street and a sign flashed by that said Private Drive.

My eyes widened as we drove through a small neighborhood of not-so-small houses tucked into Kauai's lush greenery. They all overlooked the ocean. Asher pulled into the drive of a very Hawaiian-looking two-story house, green with white trim, much of the ground floor elevated by wooden slats.

Asher caught my incredulous stare as he shut off the engine. "What?" he said with a knowing grin. "I left New York City. I never said I left all my money behind too."

"I thought you gave most of it up to your family," I said as he came around the passenger side.

"I did. I quit my job, but my investments didn't quit." He started to reach for me, then cocked his head. "Disappointed?"

"That you could live a life of leisure in early retirement and instead choose to work a grueling job, saving people's lives?" I ringed my arms around his

neck. “Everything you do and everything you are, Asher, just makes me want you more.”

He took my face in his hands and kissed me softly, then harder, and the flame that had been simmering flared hot again.

“Where was I?”

“Here,” I said and moved his hand between my legs.

A low sound issued deep in his chest. “I’m about ten seconds away from fucking you on the hood of my Jeep.”

“I can live with that.”

He shook his head, his eyes dark and hooded. “I want you in my bed. Now.”

Asher lifted me up and my legs went around his waist, and somehow, he managed to get us inside while kissing me, his hands cupping my ass. I was dimly aware of his house in the dark, lit only by moonlight. Tribal art that I didn’t recognize on the wall, a Maui hook carved from wood. Masculine décor that honored the place where he lived. I kissed him harder.

Finally, Asher brought me to his bedroom.

“Asher,” I whispered between kisses as he lay over me on the bed, our hips rising and falling together, frustrated by clothes. “Please...”

“Your ankle,” he said. “I should be careful.”

“Don’t you dare.”

Our kisses became frenzied then; releasing days’ worth of tension and pent-up need. I pushed him back so that I could sit up and get my dress off. Asher obliged by lifting it over my head, then tore off his own shirt and knelt in front of me.

His mouth moved over the bare skin of my chest, over my heart, his thick, soft hair brushing my chin. His hands unclasped my bra in the back, then slipped around to the front. My eyes nearly rolled back in my head to feel his rough hands caress my breasts, hefting their weight in his palms. He ran a calloused thumb over one nipple while his mouth found the other, biting and sucking. My hands sank into his hair, grazed over his scalp and then down his back, fingernails raking the smooth skin.

“We should have been doing this ages ago,” I whispered, and then cried

out as Asher took one nipple between his teeth and sucked.

“Then it wouldn’t be this fucking perfect,” he growled. His hands went to my hips and hauled me forward, sending me sprawling on my back. With another feral sound of want, he tore off my thong panties. He stared down at me, naked and exposed and ready for him. “But fuck yes, I’ve been dreaming about tasting you.”

“Oh, God...”

My hands flailed and then gripped the bedspread to cling for dear life as Asher put his mouth on me, tongued me, nipped and sucked me. I stared at the ceiling, incoherent sounds pouring out of me as Asher went at me like a wild animal, sending wave after wave of pure sensation coursing through me. Every cell in my body lit on fire and I arched off the bed, into him, wanting all of it. Even the twinge of pain in my ankle I relished and added to the tsunami of pleasure that took me higher, higher...and then Asher took my clit in his mouth the same way he had taken my nipple and sucked it between his teeth.

The wave crashed.

I clutched at the bed as if it could keep me from floating away or disintegrating into a million pieces. I screamed his name; it came pouring out of me on a tide of pleasure and heat that I’d never felt before with any man.

“Jesus Christ,” I panted. “How...did you? I can’t... move. Or think.”

“Don’t pass out on me.” Asher propped himself over me. “I’m not done with you yet.”

He kissed me, then stood and went to the nightstand for a condom. I hauled myself to sitting, watching him move—big, but graceful in the dark.

I wasn’t done with him, either. I hadn’t even started.

“Come here,” I said, when he had the condom in hand.

He stood in front of me while I sat on the edge of the bed. I undid the button on his jeans, then the zipper. I put my mouth on his stomach, kissed the warm skin, ran my tongue along the hard lines and ridges of his abdomen while I shoved his pants down. His erection strained against his boxer-briefs, and another flame of want began to burn in the center of me at the sight of it.

More. I need to see him.

I pushed his underwear off his hips, and the cut V of his abdomen led straight to his magnificent cock—huge and hard and perfect.

“Jesus, Asher...”

I stroked him once, experimentally, to feel the velvet of his skin over the hard length of him.

“Faith,” he said tightly. “Don’t fuck around.”

“Never,” I said. “Just getting acquainted.”

I took the condom packet from Asher, but instead of opening it, I sheathed his beautiful, huge cock with my mouth.

“Ah fuck,” Asher groaned, his hand landing heavily in my hair, gripping, and sending delicious licks down my spine.

Little sounds of want were issuing from my throat as I took him deep, then shallow, swirling my tongue and pumping him in my fist. Every sound he made, every muttered curse, every tightening of his hold on my hair spurred me on. He was holding himself back, trying not to fuck my mouth. I would have let him, except I needed him inside me so badly, I thought I’d die.

“Now,” I said, breathless, releasing him and rolling the condom down in record time. I scooted back on the bed and lay back, wanton and needy, my legs spread. “Right now, firefighter.”

He kicked off his jeans and underwear and moved swiftly over me, on top of me, his cock brushing against my warm wetness. He hooked one of my legs over the crook of his elbow, spreading me wider, and in one smooth, hard thrust, buried himself inside me.

Time stood still, allowing my delirious mind and body to savor the feel of him—heavy, thick, and so, so deep in me. A warm, aching pleasure was stoked at that first thrust, and grew heavier, stronger with every hard slam of Asher’s hips to mine.

I could not get enough of him, could not get him deep enough in me. I clawed his broad back, trying to keep him tight to me, to meld his body with mine. I lifted my hips in answer to his every move until he slipped one hand down to hold me into his thrusts.

All the while he kissed me when he could, when our frantic bodies allowed it—a wet mashing of teeth and tongue.

“I-I’m close...” I managed. “More.”

Asher released my hip and hooked my other leg on his elbow, bending me in half. He pressed himself up, palms flat on either side of me, over me, driving hard and fast. The sensation of him moving in me like this, so good and so *right*, sent me over the edge. I’d never had sex like this before—where I wanted the man as himself and not just his body. Where half of my pleasure came from his, which I was creating in him just as much as he was creating in me.

Give and take.

My orgasm erupted, wiping out all thought and leaving me tight and tensed as ribbons of white-hot pleasure coursed through me from my center where his cock still moved in me, drawing my release out longer, while taking him closer to his.

“Come, baby,” I breathed, my hands on his glorious forearms, nails digging in. “Come inside me, Asher.”

With a grunted cry and a last few earth-shattering thrusts, I felt his release rocket through him, abs tight, neck corded, his face a pained mask of ecstasy. Although he had on a condom, I imagined him spilling his release deep inside me, filling me with it, coating my insides with it.

Marking me as his.

This is new, I mused, examining my fevered thoughts, and a pang of unease lanced through the hot haze of my orgasm. *I can’t feel like this about him. I’m leaving.*

And then he was on top of me, skin to skin, warm and heavy, kissing me gently, thoroughly, reverently. So much so that tears sprang to my eyes, and that was definitely not allowed. I did not cry over men. Ever.

And yet, I kissed him back with just as much depth and care, not wanting to do anything else but hold him and kiss him and stay in this moment forever.

Finally, he broke away and gently pulled out of me to lie on his side beside me. “How’s your ankle?”

“I have ankles?” I said. “My entire body has become one pulsating orgasm.”

He grinned in the dimness. “Want some water? Food? A nap? But just a

short one.”

“Because you’re still not done with me?”

“Not even close.”

God, his smile—a gentle thing on his hard, granite features, made my pulse quicken even more than his words. The pang of unease turned dire. Sleeping with Asher hadn’t fixed anything. It had only made it worse. My body was satisfied—temporarily—but my heart was still clamoring for more.

“More,” I said, and fell into him, letting the sensations of him drown the unwanted thoughts.

I’ll just keep having sex with him until an hour before my flight leaves. A solid plan in the heated dark of the night, but one that I knew would burn away with the first slivers of morning light.

FOUR

A SLANT OF light fell over me and I peeked an eye open at the woman lying next to me. A slow grin spread over my lips which had been everywhere on her body last night.

It wasn't a fantasy. That happened.

Holy God, being with Faith—touching her, kissing her, being inside her all night... Fucking bliss. Waiting and getting to know her so well over the last few days had made every moment even more incredible. I felt as if she'd turned herself inside out for me, and I knew every inch of her, body and soul. And she knew me better than anyone. I never let anyone—not even my buddies at the station—get close to me.

I can't give her up.

Quietly, so as not to wake her, I padded in my underwear to the bathroom to brush my teeth and try to get a grip on myself. In the mirror I watched Faith approach, naked but for her barely-there thong. Her breasts pressed against my back as she wrapped her arms around my waist.

“Mmm,” she sighed, her cheek on my back. “So warm. Like sunning myself on a rock.”

I spat the toothpaste out, rinsed, and then turned around to hold her.

“My shift starts at noon and I'm off at midnight.”

“Come over then,” she said.

“What are you going to do all day?”

She peered up to shoot me a dry grin. “You mean, however will I survive without you?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Ha.” She slapped my ass and then went to the bathroom to pee, leaving the door open. “Don't look so scandalized, Mackey,” she said to my amused look. “I sat on your face last night. You can handle some pee.”

A laugh burst out of me, even as her words instantly conjured the image of her silky thighs on either side of me, my hands on her hips, my mouth latched onto her sweet pussy, sucking her nectar as if I were dying of thirst...

I splashed cold water on my face to quell my hard-on.

“But for real, I’ll be fine,” she said, and nudged me aside with her hip to wash her hands. “I’m going to head to the Hindu temple and maybe make a stab at meditating.” She looped her hands around my waist. “Will you be hungry after your shift?” she purred.

“Starved.” I bit the slope of her neck and then ran my tongue over it.

She moaned and sagged against me. “Then I’ll have dinner waiting for you.” She craned up to kiss me. “I’m going to take care of you for a change.”

I nearly told her not to bother; I’d been on my own for years. My parents were hands-off with my brother Sam and me. No one took care of me. I’d been working since I was fourteen. But the idea that Faith could give me as much as she was taking had caught hold in her.

I should’ve told her she gave me more just by being alive and in my life, but...

She’s leaving.

Faith, still distractingly topless, hopped up to perch on the sink.

“Be safe out there,” she said smoothing the front of my shirt, her smile dimmer than her usual million-watt beam.

I wondered if she was having second thoughts about last night. Or if she was feeling what I was feeling: that spending the night together had finally unleashed the unacknowledged feelings between us.

Because there’re so many.

And she was leaving.

“I’ll be safe,” I said, kissing her forehead. “You be safe. No hiking.”

“Nope. My hiking days are over. I told you, I have a whole bunch of personal growth-enhancing activities planned out.”

“Should I call you before I come over tonight?”

Because we need to talk about...us.

Faith’s expression dimmed again, and thoughts played behind her eyes. Then she shook her head and smiled brightly. “No. Just come over.”

And so that's how it went for the next few days. We didn't talk about how her departure date was fast approaching. Instead, we tried to cram as much as we could into the time we had left together, and spent the night in heated frenzies, driving out the need to talk.

Before we knew what hit us, the day before Faith was set to go back to Seattle arrived. I had plans to take her to a luau that night as a final Hawaiian party goodbye. I arrived at her condo to find her sitting on the lanai, staring at the ocean.

"Hey," I said.

She stiffened and then whipped her head at me. "So that's it? You just walk in the door without knocking? Like we live together or something?"

"No," I said in a low voice.

"Because we don't live together, Asher. Do we?"

I sighed. "No, we don't live together. But I always just walk in. Because you leave the door unlocked. For me."

"Well, that's...stupid," she said, her eyes filling. "And unsafe. To let anyone bust in and...and hurt me."

"I'm not anyone," I said. "And I'm hurting too."

Her eyes widened, and then she quickly looked away. I moved across the patio and sat beside her. I rested my elbows on my thighs and rubbed my face with both hands.

"We need to talk. We're overdue—"

"There's nothing to talk about."

"What are you doing, Faith? No, I know what you're doing. You're trying to push me away, and it won't work." I tried for a smile. "It's not even subtle."

Faith opened her mouth as if to snap back at me and then shut it again. She turned her green gaze back to the ocean. "Do you know what I did today?"

"Tell me."

"I meditated for the first time. Not just sitting there with my eyes closed, fidgeting and wishing I was doing anything else. I really mediated. I let my thoughts wander away and do what they wanted, and then everything felt so peaceful. Serene. Have you ever felt serene?"

Yes. The morning after we first slept together.

“I opened my eyes feeling so happy except my cheeks were wet,” she continued. “I’d been crying the entire time and hadn’t even known it.” She looked at me tearfully. “Because I’ve been so happy with you. And it’s ending.”

“We can figure something out,” I said. “I don’t want whatever is happening between us to end either, baby. I don’t.”

“What are we going to do?” she cried. “Because, to make things worse, it’s working. Being here...I feel different now. I don’t want to leave you, but I actually miss my job. I want to go back and do it better. I’m really good at advertising, you know.” She wiped her eyes. “I’m really good at making people want things.”

“I’m living proof.” I took her hands in mine. “Tonight is your last night. Let’s make it something incredible. And the rest...”

“The rest will just fall into place?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what’s going to happen next. But I know that I want to take you out tonight to that luau.”

She sniffed and smiled, her tears making her green eyes look like emeralds. “I think I would love that.”

• • •

I drove back to my place so I could shower and change into a short sleeve, linen button-down and dark jeans. I picked up Faith at her condo and my goddamn heart clenched like a fist at the sight of her. A bright blue sleeveless dress with white and yellow plumeria flowers over it draped her lithe body and accentuated her curves. She’d tucked a red hibiscus flower behind one ear as her only accessory.

“Thank you,” she said.

“I didn’t say anything.”

She smiled. “You didn’t have to.”

We drove to a plantation farm where people were filing into a huge

pavilion to the sounds of ukulele music and the scent of plumeria on the wind. We were signed in, and I helped Faith—still limping slightly—past wood carvers, jewelry makers, and dancers teaching hapless tourists to do the hula.

We joined a table with three other couples, all older, under the pavilion roof laced with lights and lush greenery. The emcee, a dark-haired Polynesian woman in a white dress, took the stage.

“Before you are called to the dinner, we’d like to invite all the lovebirds to come to the stage and dance while our lovely Miko sings ‘The Sand and the Sea.’”

Asher leaned in. “Dance with me.”

“What? Noooo. I can’t hobble up to the stage in front of everyone.”

“No stage. Right here.” I stood up and offered my hand.

The others at our table smiled and shared knowing looks as I helped Faith to her feet. I pulled her close, and she laid her cheek on my chest, her head tucked perfectly under my chin as we swayed to the Hawaiian love song.

“Do you know what she’s saying?” Faith asked.

“Yes,” I said. “She’s saying, stay in my arms for a moment more.”

Faith raised her head. “Really?” she asked, her voice quavering and her eyes filling.

I nodded, smiled, though my heart ached as a tear escaped and spilled down her cheek. “Now she’s saying, a tear rushes down to the sand.”

“She is not,” Faith said, sniffing.

“Scout’s honor.”

“And now?”

“Now she’s saying if she’s patient, the sea will bring her love to her.”

“You’re making this up.”

“It’s true.” I held her face with both hands. “I promise you, Faith. This is not our last night together.”

I leaned in and her eyes shut tight as I kissed her, as if she were making a wish. The deepest wish of her heart—and mine—and I vowed, then and there, I’d find a way to make it come true.

FIVE

“AND THAT,” I said with a flourish, “is how we met.”

Max and Silas, both being smart-asses, applauded.

“You’ve definitely got us beat,” Max said, laughing. He looked to Asher. “Silas and I met at a NA meeting. Not the stuff of romance.”

“Oh hush,” I said. “Your love story is epic. I’ve always envied it, but now...” My silly throat got choked up, and I leveled a finger at Silas. “Do not say a word.”

He held up his hands innocently, laughing. “I say nothing. I think it’s great. I’m so happy for you.” He held up his glass. “Congrats, Asher. The one man on the planet able to break through Faith’s unromantic outer shell to her mushy center.”

“Hypocrisy!” I cried, throwing a cashew from the bowl on the coffee table at Silas. “You just described you and Max to a T.”

Max chuckled. “Now that’s not fair, Faith.” He looked to Asher. “Silas is *very* romantic. He told all the major news outlets he was in love with me before finally getting around to telling me.”

“Shut up.” Silas rolled his eyes but couldn’t keep the smile off his face as he leaned in to kiss his husband.

They exchanged the kind of loving smiles that I used to envy. Now I had my own love to share little looks and touches with. I never thought those little things could mean so much. My gaze went to Asher.

But they’re everything.

Especially since they weren’t permanent.

“And so now you guys trade flights back and forth between Hawaii and Seattle?” Silas asked, as if reading my mind. He whistled. “That’s a lot of frequent flier miles.”

“Faith calls it our long-distance *relationshit*,” Asher said, grinning over his

beer.

“That’s because it sucks being apart. But we’re making it work,” I said. “It’s hard, but it’d be harder not to have him at all.”

My eyes threatened tears at the heaviness in my heart that seemed to grow heavier every time I had to say goodbye to Asher. Each time was harder than the last.

I glanced up to see the room had gone silent, and all three men were watching me with soft gazes.

“God, puppy-eyes overload. I’m fine, I’m fine, I’m fine,” I said, fanning my eyes and avoiding looking at Max’s sweet, compassionate face or else I’d lose it completely. “Let’s talk about something else. Quick, someone change the subject.”

Asher cleared his throat. “I’ll change the subject.”

I glanced over as his deep voice had a strange tremor to it. He set down his beer and moved off the floor, as if to stand up. But he got halfway and stayed there.

My heart nearly leapt out of my chest. “Oh my God. Wait. What? Are you down on one knee?”

Somewhere, behind the rushing of blood in my ears, I heard Max gasp and Silas mutter, “Holy shit.”

Asher cleared his throat and took my hand in his. “You’re right. The long distance is too fucking hard and I don’t want to do it anymore.” He reached into his slacks pocket and pulled out a black velvet box.

My heart was thumping so loud, I could hardly hear his next words.

“Faith.” He opened the box to reveal a square-cut solitaire diamond on a band of white gold. “Will you marry me?”

Max sniffed, and from the corner of my eye I saw him reach for Silas’s hand. Then my world telescoped to just Asher, a thousand thoughts clamoring for attention.

I’d have to move to Kauai?

I can’t leave my life here.

What about my job?

What about Silas and Max? I’d miss them so much.

I'd miss the city. I'd miss fancy restaurants and shopping and cocktail hour at the Four Seasons...

“Yes,” I whispered, because for every question in my heart, Asher was the only answer. “Yes. Yes, of course, I’ll marry you.”

The expression on his face—my stoic, brave man—nearly undid me. He slipped the ring on my finger, and I held his face as he kissed me, kissed my tears, because my own stoicism faded away in the face of the pure, naked love I had for him. I let them fall because I was brave too. I just hadn’t known it.

For a few seconds, forehead to forehead, we were alone in the world, smiling into our kisses. Asher held my face in his hands as if it were the most precious thing he’d ever touched.

“I’ll love you always, Faith. Always.”

I nodded, tears spilling. “I love you, Asher. So much. You have my heart. It’s yours. God, look at me. I’ve never even considered loaning it out to anyone and here I am giving it away to you, forever.”

He smiled and kissed me again, gently. “I’m honored, baby. And I swear to you, I’ll protect it with my life.”

My firefighter.

I cried and we kissed some more and then pure elation found me, making me a little hysterical with laughter. I pulled away to see Max and Silas had retreated to the kitchen to give us space.

“Did you hear?” I pointed at Asher. “I get to have sex with this man for the rest of my life!”

Max laughed and wiped his eyes while Silas inhaled stiffly through his nose and fixed Asher—my *fiancé*—with a stern look that barely masked the sadness. “Kauai, eh? That’s pretty far away.”

Max put his arm around his husband. “That’s Silas Speak for: I’m going to miss my best friend, don’t take her away from me.”

Asher moved to sit beside me on the couch. “She’s not going anywhere.”

My head whipped to him. “What do you mean?”

“I know you, Faith,” Asher said. “Taking you out of the city would be selfish and wrong.” He shot me a sly smile. “You can’t cut island life, and

you know it.”

My eyes widened even as my happiness expanded until I thought I’d burst. “That is so not true. I love Kauai.”

“But you don’t have to live there,” Asher said. “I’ll move here and apply at a firehouse in the city. We can spend summers and winters at my place.”

I stared. “You’d do that? For me?”

“I told you, baby. Give and take. You’ve given me more than I can ever repay.” Asher’s gaze softened as he cupped my cheek in his hand. “I’d move across a thousand oceans for you.”

Somewhere behind me, Max made a choking sound—or maybe it was Silas, that big softy—but all I knew at that moment was Asher’s beautiful eyes and the way they held mine.

And in them, I saw our future that stretched into forever.

THE END

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SOMETHING LIKE KISMET

GINGER SCOTT

ONE

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.

Okay, so not literal death. More like social death. But really, when you're seventeen and face-to-face with the boy whose last name you've practiced writing as if it were your own more times than you've written your *actual* last name, proximity can really hyperbolize the definition of death.

"Frankie, go!" My best friend Shay nudges my shoulder with what feels like her forearm. My feet stay glued to the gym floor, inches shy of the invisible line that defines the dancefloor from the safety of the folding chairs and tables littered with punch cups and cookie crumbs.

Everything I've done over the last two weeks has been for this moment. Caleb Walsh knows my name. He knows about the crush—*my crush*...on him. He knows that I'm here and that I'm not the shy girl in the background anymore. All those things balanced with the fact that he is not running for an exit right now meant I should take that step. The last dance of my senior year of high school.

"Fran!" Shay grits out the shortened version of my name, which I hate, and leans into me forcefully, trying to goad me into action. I dig in and push back.

"I'm going!" I growl out the lie. She calls me on it with the kind of laugh that accompanies rolling eyes. I don't need to see them to know her pupils dashed up under her eyelids.

As ready as I thought I was for this, now that I'm here, the foundation of this plan feels incredibly shaky. This entire thing is inspired by some cookie fortune I read on a Friday the thirteenth at my favorite Chinese restaurant, Lee's of Muncie.

TAKE YOUR SHOTS. P.S. HE LIKES YOU TOO.

I mean ... that's awfully prophetic and detailed for a fortune cookie. Shay

and I passed it back and forth, interpreting the meaning to the point of wearing away the last O printed on the small strip of paper. The end result was this plan I've followed religiously for the last two weeks—when I might normally say *no*, I say *yes* instead. There are safety exceptions, of course. Like, I won't take a hit off the joint at a party, but actually *going* to a party? That's a big change for me. And I did go—I went big, and I drank an entire Solo cup of beer. And I danced. And Caleb—he noticed. It may have been the blue streaks I let Shay bleach and dye in my dark brown hair at first, but he noticed the rest of me too. I felt his eyes on me.

My high school life up until now has been practically momentless. I'm not in a single photo in my yearbooks other than the small square headshots for each class. My senior bio is filled with academic stats, but my *Most likely to* line is just a set of ellipsis. That's who I am. I'm...

But I'm done stopping just before I do things. I'm going to ask Caleb to dance. I can do it!

I bounce on my toes and shake out my fingertips as if I'm about to head down the twelve feet of a high-dive board to plunge into a freezing cold pool. I'm suddenly glad I opted to wear jeans tonight. I feel more confident somehow in my Nike Airs and blue halter top. Shay pushed for the mini dress, but this is more me. I like to be prepared for battle. And I'm battling, alright—with my nerves.

"He's going to say yes," Shay encourages. She has no idea if that's true, but she's an optimist. It's easy for her to be one. She's had the same boyfriend since we were nine. She and Beckett will get married. They'll probably have three kids and a two-story house with a green yard and one of those doodle-type dogs. Meanwhile, I'll still be here, paralyzed by a life full of ellipsis.

One more deep breath is all I allow myself, and as if I've been shoved while rushing the stage at a BTS show, my feet stumble their way forward. I catch the short smirk that lifts the right side of Caleb's mouth as he sees me trip over my own size nines. Undeterred, I push ahead. The old me would have gone flush, then gone home. New me focuses on the butterflies in my tummy. That curve his mouth makes is so damn cute; parenthesis spread from cheek to cheek.

I've gone into my mental zone where every sound around me is muted.

It's a trick I've always used for test taking and started deploying it to my little social dares. Locked in, I brush the shoulder of a girl as I enter a circle of cool kids I would have run away from two weeks ago. These are the students at Woodcrest High who get all the attention—the girls who wear all the best clothes, who start trends and change them on whims. And the boys everyone pounds fists with in the hallways, the ones who make out with a different girl every week. Caleb doesn't do that, though. He's faithful. His lips have only been on Abby Summerland's for the last three years.

Until two weeks ago.

When they broke up.

And I got a fortune cookie.

Caleb's mouth straightens out as I near his personal space. Two seconds separate my *now* from a carefully plotted *after*. Less than two seconds. A breath--

And suddenly, Abby.

"Excuse me." The words sound indifferent as they slip from my mouth, and I'm not even sure I said them aloud. My body moves past Caleb, along with my gaze, and I'm momentarily drunk on the richness of his Gucci scent. His hand brushes back the dark blond hair that's fallen over his right eye, and I'm pretty sure I caught a glimpse of his arched and curious brow as I promenaded through the middle of the It crowd as if they were ghosts who were merely in my way.

What am I doing?

My feet are on autopilot, eyes acting as radars, scanning the darkened room around me, ruling out the row of chairs against the wall and the exit to the right. Sound starts to break through my muted barrier, and my pulse begins to race as the panic seeps in. I'm failing. This was a fail. Abby is here with him, which means ... well, who knows what that means really. It's too late to stick to the plan. I need a new plan. I need to turn left.

With a quick change of direction it takes my eyes a single blink to spot a haven. He's new and in my third hour as of Monday. I think his name is Devin, or maybe it's Kevin. It rhymes with heaven, that much I'm certain of, which is maybe why my brain and eyes are in cahoots right now in deciding to carry my body right into his. My hands fall into line next, one meeting the

right side of his jaw, which is warm and unshaven. My left presses against the other side of his face, taking in his green and so very wide eyes.

He's shocked.

Hell, I'm shocked!

This is freaking shocking!

My eyes close but his don't, and I bet they aren't going to. It's just a hunch. I'm doing this. My toes lift me up, my chin raises and my hands pull his face toward mine until my lips part and take in the soft warmth of his mouth.

"I'm so sorry." This, of course, is only being said in my head. He can't hear it. All he hears is the pounding in my chest and the puff of air that just left my nose as all breath was knocked out of my lungs. I'd breathe through my mouth, but it's busy kissing a boy whose name I just threw a mental dart at.

This plan has gone off the rails.

This is certain death.

But Devin Kevin sent from Heaven...he's kissing me back.

TWO

I'M NOT REALLY a runner. I'm the girl that speed-walked the mile in freshman PE just to come in under the ten-minute mark so I could maintain straight A's. But last night, when my heels came back down to earth and my eyes opened on the stunned—and probably traumatized—gaze of Devin Kevin, I busted out of that gym laying down times that would probably turn heads at the NFL combine.

I was too embarrassed to rehash every misstep with Shay when she showed up at my house a full thirty minutes later. Refusing to unravel myself from my favorite quilt, which I'd wrapped myself in like a burrito, I pretended to sleep long before I actually did. Shay knew I was faking, but she eventually gave up, or grew bored of trying and popped in her AirPods and drifted off for real.

It was naïve to think that burrito thing would work forever. When my eyes finally popped open the next day, Shay was waiting, and I've been trying to worm my face back into the cool sheets ever since.

“Did he like ... talk?” This is the hundredth question she's asked in the last four minutes.

“Gahhhh!” All I've been able to respond with are grunts and muffled groans.

She tugs at the corner of the blanket, exposing my eye. I strain my sight upward to watch as she runs the tip of her index finger along my eyebrow. She grimaces when my eye meets hers.

“Your brow was a little cray-cray.” She shrugs, and I purposely snake my hand up my body to mess it back up.

“I liked it that way.” I scowl with one screwed-up eye so she can see just how serious I am. I'm just being difficult, and the longer I stare at my best friend, the more my guard—and quilt tortilla—break down and I start to see

how absurd all of this is. I snort out a tiny laugh that ignites a real one from Shay, and soon we're both rolling with laughter and sliding until both of our heads fall backward off the end of my bed.

"Do you think he's British?" Shay asks.

I bunch my face at her question. Her golden hair is knotted as it hangs from her head, and the green eye shadow she wore last night has bled toward both temples. It's stark against her pale, freckled skin.

"I can honestly say that hasn't crossed my mind since I did what I did."

"Since you kissed a stranger, you mean?" Shay is loving this. She's always wanted me to color outside my lines. I'd say last night was akin to scribbling.

"Yeah, since I kissed a stranger. But why would he be British?"

I roll my head to the right, the rush of blood making the room tilt as my own tangles cascade across my eyes. I blow my field of vision clear.

"His hair is red ... like Prince Harry."

My lips pucker with repressed laughter.

"I don't think you can call Harry a prince anymore," I say, as if that's the biggest flaw in her logic.

"Oh, he's still a prince. I mean ... " Shay folds both of her hands over her heart and sighs.

I'm about to join her when a rapid knock against my half-opened bedroom door sends my feet over my head into a full somersault. I stick the landing but flop forward, dizzy from the maneuver.

"There's a boy here, Frankie." My dad is holding a bowl while he stabs at whatever is inside with a wooden fork.

"There's a boy here, Frankie." Shay's voice trails off with her teasing tone. My dad glares at her, unamused. When he leaves the room, I scowl next.

"Wait here," I order.

"Not a chance."

I figured it was a long shot.

Scurrying around my room, I find a questionably clean Harvard sweatshirt on the floor that I dive into to cover up the thin T-shirt I sleep in. It's so long

that it covers my sleep shorts, making it look as if it's all I have on,-- something I don't realize until I'm two steps down the stairs with my friend trailing me closely.

His shoes come into view first. Vans, plain ... white. Classic. I like classic.

A half-hearted rolled jeans cuff circles his sockless ankle, and the slim fit crawls up a pair of long legs. Up until this point I've convinced myself that these jeans, and the legs within, could be anyone. But when my eyes take in the emblem on the navy blue sweatshirt, I pause, just before I'm able to see his face. Shay crashes into my shoulder blades, and we both shout "Ouch!"

We're wearing the same damn sweatshirt!

"What is it?" Shay's whisper is hardly a whisper at all. It's one of her flaws, and the reason she's terrible with secrets. Her whisper betrays her every single time.

I swallow hard as the boy breathing about ten steps below me bends forward. A set of vivid green eyes and a wry smile greet me from underneath the angled first half of our stairs.

"Nice shirt." He tugs his out from the center of his chest, as if I need the visual.

"You, too." Shay laughs at my answer and I swing my elbow back, tagging her boob.

She whispers "Ouch" again; we all hear it.

A few awkward seconds pass and eventually my friend worms her way around me. My feet are suctioned in place, and all I can think about is how crazy-ass wild my eyebrows probably are right now.

"You don't have an accent." My friend stops in front of my mystery kisser, arms folded over her chest as she levels her pointless accusation. Somehow, she found the time to put on her glasses and twist her blonde hair up into a cute knot on top of her head. And she's in pants! *Where did she find pants?*

"I do not...unless you count Arizonan as one?" His right brow arches as his mouth tightens. The movement of his face draws my focus to his jawline, and I robotically begin to curl my hands at my sides from the memory of how that jaw felt.

“Hardly,” Shay huffs.

Her exaggerated disappointment must amuse him. He laughs, and it’s warm and raspy. I’m starting to get really hot in this stupid sweatshirt, but I don’t dare take it off.

“Sorry, we thought you were an exchange student.” I screw up my mouth and scrunch my eyes, wishing I didn’t lump myself in with Shay’s lame reasoning and assessment.

“Because I have red hair?” His furrowed brow begs for my response. I nod briefly, and my cheeks burn amber.

“Haha, that’s funny. There are redheads in America. Like...some of us are born here.” His eyes kind of dance when he talks, and he chews at his lip like he’s rethinking the words he just said. His tall body bounces where he stands as he pushes his hands deep into his pockets and looks down at his feet.

He’s adorable. And he’s nervous.

“I’m Frankie,” I begin, reaching my hand forward and forgetting move my feet. I’m reminded by the sloppy tumble I take down the steps, switching my outstretched palm for a full, double-fisted superhero dive. I’m caught in a pair of very warm—very strong—arms before I face plant. My nose is close enough to soak in the faint dash of cologne he bothered to splash on for this unannounced visit. The smell of wood and honey lulls me under a temporary spell, breaking the second I feel his index finger flatten out my disheveled eyebrow. Correction...*eyebrows*. He does them both.

Shay snorts out a laugh. I give her a sideways glance.

“Nice to meet you, *formally*, Frankie.” His left hand is still cupping my shoulder as I steady my feet and find my balance. The fingers on his right hand hover clumsily near my face, as if he’s searching for more things to straighten out like he did my eyebrows.

“Hudson,” he blurts out. The two syllables are so short that they blast by my ears. I don’t register his name at first, not until I’m tugging down my sweatshirt while searching for something clever to say to make him stick around. I might have missed it all together and gone on with my Devin Kevin Heaven rhyme if my dad—whose bowl mixing has not been out of earshot since he came to my room—didn’t invite himself into the conversation.

“Hudson, nice to meet you. I’m Frankie’s dad, Mike. Retired PD. You

new 'round here?" My dad continues to mix vigorously, even as Hudson—*that's not even close to Devin or Kevin, by the way*—reaches out to shake his hand. He waits a full five seconds before dropping the spoon in the bowl, matching Hudson's grip with a flexed forearm, showing his PD tattoo.

"My dad's about to retire from the force back home. It's just my mom and me here right now, but when he's done next month, he'll sell the house and join us."

I can practically taste the love affair as it unfolds before me. Mystery Hudson has quickly shot up to my dad's top prospect slot for suitors. If he drops a few stats about Pacers basketball or Ball State University, I'm as good as betrothed.

"What's his department?" my dad asks, handing me the bowl. The mixture is soupy, so I carry it to the kitchen to add more pancake powder. I need to busy myself while I eavesdrop and freak out over the fact that this is all literally happening right now.

"Arizona State Troopers. He put in twenty-four years, only got shot once." My eyes flutter closed. My dad's been shot twice. He's going to brag.

"That it, huh?" I don't even have to turn around to picture the tilt of my dad's mustache that marks his braggart grin. Mike Torres doesn't miss an opportunity to show off the scar tissue on each bicep. *Double Guns*—that's what the guys at the department called him. Six years working undercover gave him those scars.

"Lord graced you twice, huh?" Hudson says.

I glance over my shoulder just in time to see my dad's gaze fall to the bigger wound of the two. Hudson's words just resonated with him; I can tell by the slow breath he draws in through his nose as he lets his mouth relax its smile.

"You like pancakes, Hudson?" My dad's instant invite sends my best friend's elbow into my ribs and way too much pancake mix into the bowl. I pour more water in and continue mixing as everyone crowds into the kitchen. My mom is gardening at the side of the house, her Saturday morning ritual, and I kind of hope she somehow misses this entire thing, because at this point one more person in my present situation will send me running. My wish is too late, though, and before anyone can make introductions, my mom slaps

her gardening glove at my thigh and manages to find a way to make this stressful moment even more embarrassing.

“Frankie! Put some damn pants on!”

My mouth sours, the insides of my cheeks twitching as my salivary glands work overtime to drown me where I stand. My hands are shaking so much that I have no choice but to put the bowl down. I turn away from Hudson and tug down my sweatshirt on my way around the corner, defending myself a little before I go.

“I have shorts on, you just can’t see them. I wasn’t expecting company!” The silence left in my wake said a lot. I sounded crazy. *I am crazy!* I did a crazy thing, and now I must face the consequences. Of course, so far the consequence is a rather cute boy with strawberry hair and emerald eyes and a smile that might actually be better than the one I’ve had a crush on my entire life.

I dash up the stairs and grab black leggings from my drawer, slipping my shorts off and the more modest bottoms on as I hop out my door. The sound of Hudson’s laugh—that raspy one that hits me dead center in the chest—echoes around the corner and up the last few steps before I’m in front of my jury again. I pause to let myself breathe in deep, and with a clearer head, I rejoin the others and take the spatula over from my mom, ignoring the suspicious grin and squinted eyes on her face. It’s the same expression I make when I’m sure I’m right. My mom and I are nearly twins, just twenty-five years apart.

“So, if you aren’t an exchange student, where are you living?” I’m proud of myself for getting a reasonable question out of my mouth. I glance up mid pancake flip and catch his crooked smile. His dimples are delicious. I’m starting to think that might be my biggest weakness.

“We’re staying with my aunt and cousin for now. They’re just on the other side of Main, near the elementary. My cousin actually gave me your address. I borrowed his car.” Hudson barely finishes speaking before Shay casually excuses herself to move toward the front room so she can peer out the window. Meanwhile, I try to focus on not burning the hotcakes while my eyes squint and my mouth puckers. It’s a slight variation on the *I-know-I’m-right* look—the one I wear when I secretly hope like hell I’m wrong.

“It’s a great Mustang, isn’t it?” Shay drops the hint so she doesn’t have to come right out and say it. That’s Caleb’s car. Caleb Walsh—the boy I was *supposed* to ask to dance last night. I don’t want to lift my chin but I force myself to, sliding two cakes onto a plate and handing it across the island to Hudson.

Hudson *Walsh*, I presume.

Hudson Walsh, and his freaking magnetic—and *apparently genetic*—dimples.

THREE

BREAKFAST WAS AWKWARD. Actually, wait—I take that back. It was awkward *for me*. For everyone else that sat around our kitchen table, it was highly enjoyable. My dad pulled out his favorite stories from his time undercover, and my mom gave Hudson a tour of her vegetable garden while Shay and I rinsed dishes. Mom even sent him home with a bag of her homegrown tomatoes.

My best friend kept telling me this was kismet, which made me regret teaching her the definition last week when she questioned my use of it in Words With Friends.

Kismet. Fate. Fortune cookies.

I was still mulling over her theory when Hudson said his goodbyes. That's probably why I agreed to this date so quickly. I don't even really remember him asking, and I'm not sure where we're going. But I said yes, and Shay won't clue me in on the destination I flaked on hearing. She says it's better I don't know, so I can "feel how kismet this all is."

I told her she wasn't using the word quite right, to which she relied ... yeah—"kismet!" The only clue she let me have was that I needed to be comfortable, which doesn't narrow things down much. I settled on my dad's old Ball State fraternity shirt and my favorite cropped jeans with a pair of Vans, my shoe choice admittedly influenced by the ones Hudson wore the day before.

The visual of Caleb's Mustang rounding the corner and heading down my street is perfect irony. As it slows to a crawl right at the end of my driveway, I remind myself that it's not Caleb in the driver's seat. I've watched this car peel out of our high school lot with Abby in the passenger side so many times, and I've sat on the steps of my porch and imagined it pulling up to my house just as it is now.

Hudson steps from the driver's side and jogs around the front of the car to

open my door for me before I can reach the handle. It's sweet. I blush a little when he kicks the toe of his white Vans into the rubber edge of mine.

"Excellent taste in colleges *and* footwear. We have a lot in common," he says.

"Kismet," I blurt out, all wide eyes the moment my face is out of his view. *I cannot believe I said that!*

Hudson gets in while I buckle, and I let myself glance at him as he fastens his belt and shifts to drive. His faded light-blue jeans and white hoodie make him look as if he stepped straight out of the Abercrombie catalogue. He's wearing a Cardinals hat today, the wavy ends of his hair poking out of the back of his navy-blue cap. He isn't chewing gum, but I smell the wintergreen evidence he left behind. Gum was in that mouth recently.

I wonder if he's hoping to make out.

I look down at my tethered hands and pressed-together knees at that thought. I guess it wouldn't really be our first kiss sense I sort of got that out of the way already, but the thought seems so forward now.

My ears boom with my pulse as we idle up to the first of what could be many stoplights. I wish I knew where we were going. I search for clues in my immediate area, glancing to the console to my left and the cracks of the seat on both sides. I slide my feet around slowly, pretending to stretch, but I'm really feeling around for something. Kites, maybe? Though the trees are perfectly still outside. A billboard for a new community being built on the outskirts of town sparks an idea.

"You know where you're going? I mean...sense you're new around here and all?" I force a calm smile on my lips, but underneath it all, I'm begging for him to slip. A few seconds pass of Hudson staring into the intersection ahead, his eyes hazed as if he's thinking about it, but when the right side of his mouth begins to lift, I know I'm screwed.

"You don't know where we're going, do you?" He's spot on. I lie.

"No! I mean, of course I know. *Psh.*" This is the most obvious way to lie...ever. My mastery of deceit is basically the equivalent of a five-year-old's. The one thing I do know for sure is that if I look him in the eyes right now, I'll crack and give myself up completely. Why my head turns, I have no idea.

Damn it!

“I knew it! You weren’t even listening when I asked, were you?” He slaps the steering wheel a few times as his laugh grows louder. “It’s kinda flattering, actually.”

“Not really.” My head turtles into my shoulders. I would really like temporary narcolepsy right now so I could just nap in a blink.

“Oh, it is! I mean, you agreed to come hang out with me and you had no idea about the cool thing we’re about to do! That means you agreed because...”

Don’t. Say. It.

“Kismet!”

Shit!

I roll my eyes, but the strength of my blush pushes my cheeks up into round apple-like balls. I shift in my seat and scour the car for more distractions, turning to the glove box in hopes of finding an owner’s manual or registration I can snoop through. Just my luck—a red, lacy thong slips out and falls at my feet. I really don’t want to pick that up.

“That’s just great,” I mumble, staring at the tiny piece of lingerie nestled between my shoes.

“Probably Abby’s,” Hudson concludes. There’s no *probably* about it. A BIC pen pops into my field of vision. I glance to my left and meet Hudson’s stare.

“Make-shift tongs. You know ... for the ...”

“Thong,” I finish for him, mouth forming a wry smile.

He chuckles and shrugs. I take the pen as he pulls into the intersection, and I cringe as I scoop up the undies with the tip of the ballpoint and fling them back into the glovebox. I slam it shut and drop the pen into the cup holder between Hudson and me.

“Caleb and I used to be pretty tight,” he says. I get the sense that he’s trying to transition away from what just happened to make me more comfortable. It’s sweet.

“Oh yeah? Did he come visit you a lot over the summers or something?” Caleb has been in my grade and in most of my classes since kindergarten, so

I know he hasn't lived anywhere else.

"I spent a lot of summers here. Actually..." As if I can sense him looking at me, I turn to meet what looks a bit like a boy blushing.

"What?" I'm totally blushing too.

His head swivels to glance at me then the road a few times before tucking his full bottom lip under his front teeth.

"You know what? Never mind."

What he doesn't know is that I'm like a police canine, and what he's just done is the equivalent of dangling a bag of dope in front of my nose. You can't almost tell me things and then just ... not!

I slap at his arm, the first time we've touched since--well, we *seriously touched!*

"Ow!" He rubs his bicep for a moment and when our eyes meet, I give him my famous glare. "What? That hurt!"

"It so did not, and you cannot get away with that, Mr. Hudson Walsh!" My lecture draws out that laugh that's been clawing at my heart little by little.

He slows in the left turn lane at the next stoplight, and when we stop I shove at him lightly. His hand reaches over quickly and grabs mine before I can completely recoil and we both freeze to stare at the sloppy way our hands have become tangled, fingers flexing in battle as if this is a major thumb-wrestling bout.

His eyes flick to meet my gaze, and my body feels as if someone has poured glitter down my spine.

"Okay, well ... " He relaxes his grip, gently weaving his fingers around mine in a more natural and dizzying way. "I'm kind of surprised that you don't remember me."

Words fail me, so I offer a dented brow begging for an explanation. A green arrow draws his attention and my hand falls flat on the console where he abandons it.

"Do you remember the birthday party at Roll and Bowl?"

I sit back and conjure up the bits and flashes that I have from that day. Caleb turned ten, and it was the first time I really noticed that he was cute--that any boy was cute, really. I know Shay was there, and her and I spent

most of our time skating, trying to choreograph something to the Maroon 5 song we were obsessed with at the time.

“I can see you need a little help,” he says through a chuckle.

“I’m sorry. I remember it, but barely.” The blank spots are where he should be, I’m guessing, and I feel bad. I’m scanning my memory of the various faces but his just isn’t showing up. A seven-year difference for a guy is really like comparing two totally different people.

“I’ll give you a clue,” he says, just as the Mustang rocks over the pitted curb that leads into the Shoney Meadows Tennis Center. A glimmer tickles my gut as we pull in and park. A few older couples are volleying balls back and forth, but most of them pause and stare our direction when the Mustang roars. He kills the engine.

Hudson lifts his left knee up against the door and shifts so his elbow rests on the steering wheel. His smile is tight, maybe a little guilty. We came here after roller skating that day. The sun was going down, and it was warm out—the last few days of summer. I remember some hide-and-seek, a little tag, and...

“You!” I fold my arms over my chest and square off with him.

He squeezes his eyes shut so tightly that wrinkles pucker around them and his mouth shrinks into a sour form. There was a backward skating competition at that party. I’d practiced for it because I knew the skating rink always gave out prizes. Good ones. It came down to two of us, me and Caleb’s cousin who was visiting from out of town. When I won, his cousin pushed me onto my ass.

And the game of tag I remember playing out in this parking lot wasn’t really tag at all, it was Caleb and his cousin playing keep away with my prize: an enormous stuffed unicorn with a rainbow mane and tail—every pop-star loving pre-teen girl’s ultimate trophy.

“You threw it on the roof!” My head slowly falls to the side while I level him with a look of scorn.

“I did.” He winces. It’s a little adorable.

“I cried!” I tighten my jaw to look strong.

He lifts his right hand and covers his eyes, spacing his fingers just enough to peek at me.

“You did.” He holds his hand in place for a few seconds, just long enough for my stern expression to give in. When it does his hands fall to his lap, then the pocket of his hoodie. He pulls out something small enough to remain hidden completely in his palm.

“Frankie Torres, please accept my apology.” His fingers unfurl to reveal a tiny stuffed unicorn keychain. The head is too big for the body, and little threads from the fur are falling off in his hand—rainbow threads. It’s cheap and corny as hell, and I love it.

I pluck it from his hand and hold it up with my fingertips, rotating it slowly as I let my eyes lose focus on the pony and find their way to the incredible green ones sitting just one sportscar console away from me.

“It matches my hair,” I say, holding it close to the tips of my hair that have fallen over my shoulder. The blue is fading out a little, and I was thinking about dying it back to match my brown, but now I might just add to it.

Hudson doesn’t speak, but his eyes glow with hope.

“I love it,” I say, hugging it close to my chest. “You’re forgiven.”

“Yes!” His whispered celebration is accompanied with a tiny fist pump, and he turns back to face the wheel, stopping just before he turns the key.

“And no, this isn’t our date. It’s just part one.” The family dimple lights up the side of his face and his eyes hover on mine for a second or two more before checking the mirrors and firing up the car. I’m glad it’s not our date, because I would hate for this to be over already.

Keeping with the theme, Hudson heads south a few more blocks to Roll and Bowl. I don’t have the heart to tell him that it’s been shuttered, but it doesn’t seem to dash his spirits when he pulls into the vacant lot. He finds an abandoned shopping cart and convinces me to get in so he can push me around like it’s a chariot, and when the basket starts to tip over on a curb, he braces my fall and scoops me into his arms like a bride. I’m not sure what I’m crushing on more, the softness of his hoodie, the faint scent of spices and honey etching its way into my memory or the vibration in his chest when he laughs as he holds me.

It’s all going so incredibly, well...kismet. And then comes another word I taught Shay during the same game: Happenstance.

I'm cradled in his arms, my hair twirling in the breeze while he swings me around in half circles that are starting to slow more and more. I'm expecting the kiss. I'm ready for it, and the only thing my eyes can focus on is the way his teeth are grazing his bottom lip with both a sense of hesitation and urgency.

"You know, my cousin's always had a bit of a thing for you. He was kinda pissed when I told him I was taking you out today." The lightness in his eyes tells me that he doesn't have a clue how deep that little piece of information burrows. I'm a terrible bluffer, though, so all it takes is the slight flinch I feel touch at the sides of my mouth and eyes.

First, his chest stiffens with the deep intake of air. Then a tiny dent forms between his brows.

"That kiss..."

My heart stops, and there's no way he doesn't see the hard knot that's lodged in my throat. My eyes drift up until I meet his waiting stare. He doesn't ask right away, and his shifting focus from one eye to the other makes me feel as if he's reading me. There's really no way to explain what that kiss was and all that it meant or was supposed to mean. Thinking about it now, I don't think it was ever really about my crush on Caleb at all. It was about me finding a way to take chances before I missed them.

"You were aiming for my cousin." He holds his breath and so do I. We've known this version of one another for the equivalent of an afternoon, but I care enough about his opinion of me not to lie. The slow breath I draw in through my nose as my eyes slit in guilty admission gives him the truth he deserves. His lips wrinkle and he nods; I'm not getting kissed today. I guess I should be glad that I took the one I did when I did, but I'd trade it so fast for the one I was anticipating a heartbeat ago.

"I should get you home. Cop's daughter and all," he says, feigning an amused laugh. He lowers my feet to the ground and releases me before stuffing his hands in his pockets and spinning to walk around the front of the car to the driver's side. The passenger door is still wide open so I inside. When we both slam the doors shut, I give one more attempt to save whatever this was starting to become.

"You know, I'm a *retired* cop's daughter. Totally not the same."

An airy laugh ticks up his mouth, but the smile doesn't stick. He turns the car on and adjusts the mirror that doesn't need adjusting, then looks over his shoulder without making eye contact with me as his gaze passes by.

“He's still got a gun, so...” Hudson's joke is half-hearted.

Neither of us react, despite how funny and witty that was—*he is*—and the trip home is polite, but awfully quiet.

FOUR

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN my life on Friday afternoon before the dance and my life right this minute in the middle of the quad before first hour is lightyears. It's weird to feel both proud and regretful of being bold. A significant piece of my heart wishes I could erase the last few days of rash decision making and go back to being the girl with just a single photo in her senior yearbook.

I can't. And I probably shouldn't. But watching Hudson and Caleb walk in sync through the main campus doors and turn opposite directions sure does boil everything to the surface.

"I saw the Mustang pull up," Shay says as she stops beside me. I filled my friend in on my date last night. She's a good listener when I really need one. I usually wait for her in the parking lot so we can walk in together, but I didn't want to chance running into both Walsh boys at the same time, so we agreed that I'd get here early and wait somewhere out of the way.

"Yeah. I watched them both walk in, like a YA episode of the bachelor." Nobody got a rose.

My punishment awaits in the form of an A.P. English test I'm about to bomb in first hour. I didn't study, which is a first. And I didn't read Othello over the weekend, though I suppose on some basic level I rather lived it, minus the murder plot of the winning suiter. Okay, maybe I'm being dramatic.

With slumped shoulders, I slide my feet along the grass to the walkway with minutes to spare before the final bell rings. My heavy backpack, weighed down with an old-school tome of the complete works of Shakespeare, slips down my arm and I catch it on my wrist. The grunt I let out is more of a moan, and I guess my *woe-is-me* demeanor pushes my bestie to the breaking point. She tugs my bag away from my arm and holds it hostage on the other side of her body. I'm too exhausted to argue. I didn't

sleep last night. I sat up and replayed the almost kiss and thought about the little tip that Caleb has always *had a thing* for me. I came to one resolute conclusion—I don't care. I want Hudson to be the one who has a thing for me!

“Shay, I don't even care. Keep my backpack. I'm about to fail my first test ... ever.” A pathetic laugh bubbles from my lips and I'm on the verge of tearing up.

“I wrote the fortune.”

I'm not sure if her words didn't sink in right away or if I'm just too exhausted to lose my mind, but my initial reaction is flat.

“You wrote the fortune.” I don't know why I think repeating it will help. Maybe if I do it again?

“You wrote...”

“Yes, I wrote the damn fortune. I cut it out and swapped the real one for that one when you weren't looking. Your real fortune was something like *take solace in your health* or some shit like that.” She shoves my backpack into my chest and flings her hands dismissively, frustrated that I'm not reacting. I am, though...or I'm about to. I'm just processing.

“I wanted you to just try for once!”

I laugh out pathetically at her reasoning.

“With Caleb?” I shake my head, baffled.

“Yes, and ... with life! With being young! I just wanted you to see what it was like to feel something beyond your books and academic field trips.”

“I love my academic field trips!” I'm probably more fired up over her museum slur than I should be.

“Bullshit! You pretend to love them. What you really loved was that party we went to. And the dance. And you even loved the fact that you kissed someone totally unexpected. And he likes you!” Her hands have found her hips, and I'm so pumped with adrenaline, I could shove her off balance right now. Thing is though? She's right. I did like it all.

“Shay, I messed everything up. Hudson liked me for a blip, and that blip has sailed.” My heart is pounding despite the words I'm saying. I think renewed hope is beating in my chest. Or I'm about to be sick. Either or. I

can't tell the difference anymore.

"Blips don't sail, and like I said...all of this is kismet anyway." She has a point on blips, but she's still pushing the kismet thing.

"You wrote the fortune." I shake my head and meet her stare, challenging her. "It's not kismet if your best friend is the one writing the story for you."

"Yeah, but Hudson? He's not the story I wrote. You did that! You ... or ..."

"Kismet." I finish for her. I don't even say the word in the snarky tone I've been taking. My focus shifts to the front doors of the school, the bell just starting to ding, which means blue late slips will be coming out soon. If I run to my first hour right now, I'll slide in right before the door closes and BS my way through an essay

Or...

My shoulders start to rise and fall with purposeful breaths, nostrils flaring like a bull. My first hour is to the right. But Hudson went left.

"It isn't kismet, Shay. It's not kismet at all." The first syllable of her argument starts to pop out of her lips, but before she can speak, I skip backward on my heels and clap my hands a few times in an effort to buoy my confidence before facing the school doors. My jog turns into a sprint until I reach the entrance. Before I pull the handle, I look over my shoulder to catch my friend's wide eyes.

"It's carpe freaking diem!" I shout.

Without hesitation, I launch through the doorways and rip the blue slip from our hall monitor's hand. His name's Ethan, and he hadn't even finished writing it yet.

"Hey!" he protests.

I hold the slip over my head and wave it at him. "I'll mark myself tardy. I understand!"

With the crumpled note tucked in my right fist, I fly down the hallway corridors checking the windows in every door, scanning the rows of seats for familiar hair, perfect green eyes, and...exceptionally white Vans.

I find his feet four classrooms into my hunt. He's in the front row, which is both good and bad. It means I won't have to pass many people to get to

him. But it also means that I'm about to put on a show. So be it. This show must go on.

Pulling the door open with enough force to make it quickly ricochet closed again and causing it to slam against my shoulder, I stumble into the classroom while Señor Marisol is writing out today's date in Spanish on the white board. I was one of his favorite students, which plays to my advantage because rather than yelling at me, he welcomes me to his class.

"Qué pasa, Frankie?" He barely glances my way as I stroll to the front of his classroom, stopping just short of Hudson's desk.

Hudson's face is stark white and his mouth is stuck in this sort of O shape that matches the huge roundness of his eyes. He wasn't expecting this, but neither was I. I wasn't expecting him at all. And that's the point of everything—to embrace the unexpected.

"Hudson Walsh, I kinda have a thing for you. Maybe a big thing. Maybe small. I don't know, but all I know is ..." I swallow hard as I mistakenly glance around the room and notice a few phones out, filming. I'm about to go viral.

"Yes, I walked toward your cousin at Friday's dance. But I kissed you because of fate. And I love my stupid unicorn keychain, and our date was the best date I've ever had and I'm still sure I can beat you in a backward skate-off, but ..."

I took a breath, and in that time my rambling is cut off by the warmth of Hudson's lips against mine.

He places a palm on either side of my face and leans down enough to match my height, his kiss pulling me up on my toes as my hands wrap around his wrists. The faint echo of whistles and clapping breaks through my personal sound barrier, and I start to smile from embarrassment. This kind of smile though, against Hudson's? It's worth the painful blush.

His mouth breaks away, tugging one last time on my bottom lip as his forehead rests against mine. A nervous giggle slips from my lips and my cheeks ache from smiling.

"Pretty sure one of those photos is ending up in the yearbook," he says, chuckling.

I laugh with him and close my eyes, lifting back up on my toes to kiss him

again, just in case someone needs one more shot. From now on, I'm always taking mine.

THE END

ABOUT GINGER SCOTT

Ginger Scott is an Amazon-bestselling, Goodreads Choice and Rita Award-nominated author from Peoria, Arizona. She is the author of several young and new adult romances, including bestsellers *Cry Baby*, *The Hard Count*, *A Boy Like You*, *This Is Falling* and *Wild Reckless*.

A sucker for good romance, Ginger's other passion is sports, and she often blends the two in her stories. When she's not writing, she's somewhere near a baseball diamond, either watching her son swing for the fences or cheering on her favorite baseball team, the Arizona Diamondbacks. Ginger lives in Arizona and is married to her college sweetheart whom she met at ASU (fork 'em, Devils).

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Drummer Girl

BRED

Cry Baby

The Hard Count

Memphis

Hold My Breath

Blindness

How We Deal With Gravity

LOVE AT FIRST FIGHT

K.L. GRAYSON

ONE

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.

I suck in a breath. Damn, this author is good. I'm about to flip the page to see what happens next when my passenger door flies open. A tall man slides into the front seat and gives me a devastating smile.

Wow, he's sexy. But that doesn't excuse his behavior.

"Why are you in my car?" I ask, noticing his sharp navy blue suit.

It doesn't fit him. Okay, yes, it physically fits him—to a T, I might add—but the rest of him doesn't seem to match. Sexy Suit Man might fill out his dapper threads, but the scruff on his jaw and tattoos climbing his neck give a different vibe.

Mama always told me not to judge a book by its cover, but in this case I can't help it. This guy has heartbreaker written all over him.

I crane my neck to see what type of shoes he's wearing.

"What are you looking at?"

"Your shoes," I say. I set my book on the center console, fold my arms over my chest and scowl. "Don't change the subject. What are you doing in my car?"

The handsome stranger isn't deterred by my scowl and looks from me to his shoes and back. "What's wrong with my shoes?"

"Nothing. They're very nice." I curl my nose and give them another onceover. "And shiny."

He chuckles, and *oh, dear Lord* the deep, throaty sound shoots straight through me. "Do you have a problem with shiny?"

"No, of course not. I just took you for—you know what? Never mind. Why are you in my car?" I give him a little shove toward the passenger door, but the man doesn't budge. "Get out."

“We’re going to come back to the shoe thing later. But first, the guy in there”—he hooks a thumb toward the coffee shop—“told me you’re the town Uber.”

I’m going to kill Colin. He might be one of my oldest friends and my third grade ex-boyfriend, and give me a free coffee every morning, but he knows damn well that five to six pm is my designated reading time. And because there’s hardly ever anyone who actually needs an Uber in this podunk town before midnight, I end up going home at six and finishing said book until the first call comes through. So basically, Colin just ruined my night.

Damn him.

“I’m off the clock.” I reach across him to push open the door but stop short at the smell of his woodsy cologne.

Don’t do it, Jules. Don’t you dare do it.

My eyes close, and my traitorous nose breathes him in. The smell of a man can be wildly erotic. Some women like a nice butt or great arms—and don’t get me wrong, I’m an equal opportunity girl and the physical attraction has to be there—but nothing compares to the way a man smells.

“Are you sniffing me?”

I shoot up in my seat and shake my head. “No, that would be creepy.”

Sexy Suit lifts a brow.

“Okay, fine.” I cave. “I was sniffing you. But in my defense, you smell you really good. It’s hard not to sniff.”

The man once again flashes his pearly white teeth. He really needs to stop doing that. Doesn’t he know what kind of effect he could have on a woman when he does that? Particularly this woman.

With a shrug, he leans toward me, presses his nose to the crook of my neck, and draws in a deep breath. My brain screams at me to push him away. He could be a serial killer, for all I know, but my body doesn’t move. Instead, I find myself tipping my head to give him more room, and when he pulls back, I look up. His face is mere inches from mine.

Dark brown eyes sear into me. “You smell intoxicating.”

“Oh yeah?” I breathe, refusing—and failing—to fall for his fancy charm.

Our gaze holds. His eyes drop to my mouth, and my tongue darts out,

wetting my lips. His eyes darken, and for a split second I think he might actually kiss me.

And I'll let him—stranger status be damned—because sometimes you just know when a guy will be a good kisser, and there isn't a doubt in my mind that this guy's lips could rock my world.

A light tap on my driver's side window startles us both, and we yank apart. I take a second to collect myself before turning my head. Colin is standing outside with a knowing smile. He waits for me to roll the window down, and because I'm still mad at him, I shake my head.

"Come on, Jules. Don't be stubborn."

"Jules," the stranger echoes, as though he's trying my name on for size. "Is that short for something?"

"Juliette. But most of my friends call me Jules."

"I like Juliette better."

"Of course you do." Choosing to deal with the lesser of two evils, I roll the window down and frown at Colin. "What do you want?"

Colin's smile grows. "I see you've met Mason."

Mason. I like that name. It's strong and suits him much better than, well, his tailored suit.

"If the guy who highjacked my car is Mason, then yes, I did."

"I didn't highjack your car," Mason says with a touch of amusement.

Not literally, but the second he climbed into my vehicle, he highjacked every one of my senses, so that's basically the same thing. But I refuse to admit that. The guy has enough ammunition in his arsenal. The last thing he needs is to know I'm wildly attracted to him.

"It would seem that Juliette and I are having our first fight," Mason tells Colin.

"There will be many more to come with this one." Colin grins and looks past me. "But don't let her snarky tone deter you. She's really quite sweet." He looks at me, his smile faltering when I narrow my eyes. "When she's not mad at me. Speaking of..." Colin lifts his hands, revealing two steaming cups of what I know will undoubtedly be my favorite drink: caramel macchiato. "A peace offering for interrupting your reading time?"

“You’re forgiven,” I say, taking both cups. I double fist them and take a sip out of the one on the left. “Mmm... I swear this is liquid crack.”

“Uh, Jules, the other one is for Mason.”

“Excuse me?”

Colin nods and points to the cup in my right hand. “I felt bad for sending you a customer during your scheduled reading time, and then I felt bad that he had to be the one to actually interrupt your reading time, because we all know what a bear you can be when that happens. Anyway, when I saw you two still sitting here, I thought a nice, warm drink would smooth things over.” Colin smiles at Mason. “She doesn’t like her reading time to be interrupted.”

“I’ve gathered. What’re you reading?” Mason asks, reaching for the cup. I try to pull my arm back, but there’s only so far you can go in a tiny car.

“None of your business,” I say, releasing the cup with a huff. “You better drink all of that.”

TWO

Mason

SHE'S FEISTY, AND I love it.

"Oh, I will." I tilt the cup toward Colin. "Thanks, bro."

"Anytime."

Juliette looks at me over the rim of her drink. Her green eyes are filled with uncertainty, and if I'm not mistaken, a hint of curiosity.

The feeling is definitely mutual, sweetheart. You're the first girl in years to grab my attention, and I'm not sure what to think about that.

"You have beautiful eyes," I murmur, fighting the urge to brush a chunk of hair out of her face so I can get a better look.

Said eyes widen at the unexpected compliment.

Damn, hasn't anyone ever told her how beautiful she is? High cheekbones, big eyes surrounded by dark lashes. A smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose, and not a hint of makeup.

"Are you a serial killer?" she asks.

"Do I look like one?"

"No, but that doesn't mean anything. Ted Bundy was handsome too."

"I don't know whether to be offended that you compared me to Ted Bundy or flattered that you think I'm handsome."

Juliette snorts.

It's adorable.

She's adorable.

"I don't... I mean..." She shakes her head. "I never said..." She stumbles over her words and finally snaps her mouth shut.

I smile, because her breath catches every time I do it. I like knowing I

have that sort of effect on her. “So, I’m not handsome?”

“Quit putting words into my mouth.”

“Well, which one is it?”

I can tell by the look on her face that she knows there’s no way around this one. She either has to admit that she finds me attractive, or risk insinuating that I’m ugly.

Juliette rolls her eyes. I’m normally not a fan of the gesture, but on her, I find it cute. “You’re not really going to make me say it, are you?”

This time I can’t resist. I lean forward, brush my hand along the apple of her cheek, which now holds a beautiful shade of pink, and whisper, “Yes, I am.”

Her head tilts toward my hand. The movement is subtle—most observers probably wouldn’t notice. But I do.

“Yes,” she says softly. “You’re handsome. But you don’t need me to tell you that. I bet you have women falling at your feet.”

She’s right. I do, but I’ve never found that sort of behavior attractive in a woman. But this...this push and pull, her making me work for it, is really doing something to me.

I’ve spent the last several years working, building my clientele, and never had time for women, let alone a relationship. I never wanted to have time. But now I’m settled—at least I’m trying to settle, if I can ever get my little spitfire here to take me where I need to go—and maybe it’s time I open myself up to the possibility of something outside of work. Something along the lines of a date with a beautiful brunette.

“Wow. Is it getting hot in here, or is just me?” Colin’s voice breaks through our lusty fog.

Juliette closes her eyes. “It’s thirty degrees out,” she says.

I glance over her shoulder in time to see Colin loosen the bow tie around his neck. “Well, if the heat you two are producing is making *me* hot, you must be burning up.”

“Goodbye, Colin.”

“Goodbye, Jules. Mason...” He nods and turns to walk back inside.

I lift my hand in a wave, and as soon as Juliette rolls up her window, I say,

“You two are—”

“Just friends.”

“Friends with benefits?”

Her eyes widen. “No. Just friends. We’ve known each other since kindergarten—not that it’s any of your business.”

I plan to make her my business, but I don’t dare say it out loud. Not yet, at least. “You two have never dated?”

She opens her mouth, no doubt in preparation to tell me where to shove my questions, and then lifts a shoulder. “Maybe.”

Damn. I like Colin. Now I sort of want to punch him. “How do you maybe date someone?”

“We were in third grade,” she says with a smile and a twinkle in her eye.

“What happened? Did he cheat on you?”

Juliette’s easy smile falters. “He didn’t cheat on me.”

“But someone else did?” When she gives me a look, I shrug. “I could sort of hear it in your voice.”

“Yes, someone else did, but I don’t want to talk about him.”

“Fair enough. What would you like to talk about?”

“You getting out of my car.”

“There she is,” I say, smiling. “And stop pretending like you want to get rid of me. We both know you’re enjoying the company.”

“Okay, now I really need you to get out so I can finish reading my book.”

“You see, I can’t. This town doesn’t have a taxi service, and according to Colin and my trusty Uber app, you’re the only driver around.”

“I’m off the clock.”

“How is it that this tiny town even has an Uber driver?”

She shakes her head. “You’re not leaving, are you?”

“Nope.”

“Fine. Where are you going?”

“To the nearest hotel that won’t have bedbugs.”

Juliette laughs. “You’re joking, right?”

“I don’t joke about bedbugs.”

“You really don’t have a place lined up to stay?”

I shake my head.

We sit in silence for a few seconds and finally, Juliette pulls out her phone. “You probably don’t want to stay at the hotel in town. I’ve heard sketchy things. The closest nice hotel is in the city, about thirty miles away.”

“I don’t want to go that far.” I want to be close to my business so I can work on getting things set up.

“I might have another option for you.” She fires off a few texts, tucks her phone in her purse, and pulls onto the street. “I pick up drunks.”

“Huh?”

“You asked how a small town like Benton ended up with an Uber driver. I pick up drunks. Well, I’ll really pick up anyone who needs a lift and has the Uber app, but I mostly did it for the people who are too intoxicated to drive. I wanted them to know they don’t have to get behind the wheel, that there’s another option.”

Wow. I don’t know what I was expecting, but it wasn’t that. “That’s... really great of you.”

I watch her hands tighten on the steering wheel as she drags in a breath. “It’s the least I can do.”

“What do you mean?”

“You really want to know?”

“Sure.”

“If my sarcastic attitude didn’t run you off, this probably will.”

“Try me,” I say, relaxing in the seat.

She gives me a quick look and then makes another turn. “My dad was always a bit of a drinker, but for the most part he kept it under control. And then three years ago, we lost my mom to breast cancer, and in the process, I sort of lost my dad to the bottle. He drank every night to drown out the pain, and one night he got behind the wheel after a few too many shots of bourbon.”

She stops talking, takes in a staggering breath, and blows it out.

“Juliette, you don’t have to—”

“No, It’s okay. It’s good for me to talk about it.”

“Okay.”

“Long story short, he hit a car head on. Killed himself and the driver of the other car.” She takes another breath and looks at me. This time she looks a little lighter. “I don’t know that I’ve ever told anyone that out loud.”

“Really?”

She nods. “Of course everyone in town knew about it, but no one ever said a word. They just supported me and helped me pick up the pieces. The compassion this town showed me is the main reason I refuse to leave.”

“So you started being an Uber driver to help pay it forward?”

“Yeah, I guess. I mean, I’m also a nurse at the hospital, so I can only Uber on days I’m off, but I like to do what I can. I don’t want anyone else to have to go through what I went through.”

Juliette loosens her grip on the steering and moves a hand to her leg.

I reach across the car and place my hand on hers. “I’m sorry that happened.” She looks at my hand on hers and then at me. “I know you think I’m handsome, but eyes on the road, Juliette.”

She barks out a snort-laugh, and I find myself smiling at the endearing sound.

“I like you, Mason. What’s your last name?”

“Cavanaugh. Mason Cavanaugh. And you’re not so bad yourself, Juliette...”

“Pearson.”

“Juliette Pearson.” She doesn’t move her hand from under mine, but the moment passes, and I slowly pull my hand back. “Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see.”

“Fair enough. I like surprises. So, a nurse, huh?”

She smiles and shrugs. “It’s nothing.”

“It’s something. Nurses are great.”

“Oh yeah? You married to one?”

I laugh and raise my left hand to show my bare ring finger. “Nope.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Haven’t had time for one.”

“Pity.”

“But maybe now that I’m moving here, that’ll change.”

Juliette doesn’t respond, but a smile touches her lips and light shade of pink colors her cheeks. “Where are you from?”

“San Diego.”

“Wow.” She makes another turn. “Illinois is a far cry from California. What brought you here?”

“Do you want the long story or the short?”

THREE

Juliette

“WE HAVE ABOUT another four minutes in the car,” I tell him. “But I can take the long way. I’m a sucker for a good story.”

Mason seems to like my reply. Maybe he’s enjoying my company as much as I’m enjoying his.

“It’s nothing juicy,” he says. “So wipe the smirk off your face.”

I pretend to wipe the smirk off with the back of my hand and try for a serious face that only causes both of us to laugh.

“My father was a big corporate type. A high-end lawyer. Mom fed into the lifestyle. I was groomed to follow in his footsteps, and I did.”

“I figured. Your suit is very corporate.”

“This is who I was, not who I am,” he says, loosening his tie. He pulls it from his collar and drops it on top of my book still perched on the console. “I went to the college of his choosing and graduated law school at the top of my class. Right after graduation, I took a job at his firm. I lived the high life, and made more money than I knew what to do with. I rubbed elbows with influential people and built my clientele.”

Mason goes quiet, and I nudge him with my elbow. “I feel a but coming on.”

He rests his head on the seat and turns to look at me. It’s hard to concentrate on the road when all I want to do is pull over and give him my undivided attention.

“I wasn’t happy,” he finally says. “I thought I was, but it eventually caught up to me. Mom noticed, and one day when I took her out for lunch, she looked at me and asked what my favorite childhood memory was.”

“And? What is your favorite childhood memory?”

“Coming here, to Benton.”

I frown. “Really?”

“Uh-huh. Every summer we went to Chicago; Dad had a conference he had to attend. While he spent his time in the city, Mom would rent us a cabin down here on the lake, and we would spend a few days alone. We swam and rented paddle boats, and we walked into town to have ice cream at Millie’s diner.”

“They have the best ice cream,” I say.

His face lights up. “It’s still standing?”

“Oh yeah. Millie’s granddaughter runs it now.”

“I’ll have to go back there sometime soon.”

Maybe I could go with you, I think to myself, half hoping he’ll tack the question on to his statement.

He doesn’t.

“So your favorite memory is spending a week here every summer?”

He nods. “From the age of eight to sixteen. The best week of each year. I told Mom that was my best memory, and she told me I needed to find that happiness again. She could tell I was off, but honestly, I was shocked she said that to me. Mom’s always followed Dad’s lead, but now I’m wondering if maybe she wouldn’t be happier living a different lifestyle.”

“Interesting. You should ask her sometime.”

“I think I will. Anyway, a week later, I quit my job at Dad’s firm—”

“I bet he was pissed.”

“That’s an understatement. He was livid—threatened to disown me. I took off, came here, and spent a few weeks out on the lake. I found myself again and knew I couldn’t go back to the life I was living. It’s great for my dad, but it’s not the life I want.”

“What life do you want?”

“Honestly, I’m still trying to figure that out. But I know it’ll be here. I love this town.”

“It is pretty great. There are lots of fun shops and restaurants, and I’m sure you’ll fit right in.”

“I’m looking forward to it. In fact, I bought a building today.”

“You did?”

The contentment on Mason’s face tells me he’s happy with this decision. “Yup. That’s why I’m wearing this monkey suit. I had to pull it out of hiding. I met with the loan officer today and then the property owner. Well, ex-property owner. I bought the vacant building down on Third.”

“Old man Dave’s office? He was an accountant.”

“Yeah, I think that’s him.”

“He retired a few years ago. It’s a great location. What are you going to do with it?” I pull down the drive of Benton’s one and only bed and breakfast just as the sun starts to set. When I park in the driveway, Mason runs a hand through his hair, mussing it up.

“I’m still going to practice law, but no more of that big, corporate shit.”

“What will that look like?”

He chuckles. “Estate planning, contracts, and business law. I might do some criminal and adoption law too.”

“Mrs. Baker always said she wanted to divorce her husband, but she didn’t want to drive into the city to do it. Maybe you’ll get her business.”

“Maybe,” Mason says with a laugh. “See? That’s good news already.”

“Well, we’re here.”

We look out the front window to see a small elderly woman open the front door and hop down the steps.

“That’s Louise. You’re going to love her. She’s a fifty-year-old in an eighty-year-old body, and she’s the best damn cook.”

“I’ve never seen an eighty-year-old move that fast. I hope she doesn’t break a hip.”

I laugh and open my door to greet Louise.

“Come here, you sweet thing,” she says, pulling me into a warm hug.

Louise was a godsend after my father’s death. She’s one of the only reasons I ate halfway decent in the months following his funeral.

“Who is your handsome friend?” she asks, turning toward Mason as he climbs out of my car. When she stops in front of him and holds out her hand, he takes it and pulls it to his lips. Forever the charmer. “Oooh... a man hasn’t done that to me in years.”

Mason gives her the smile that makes me squirm. “My name is Mason.”

“Welcome, Mason. Jules texted me and told me you need a place to stay. She specifically said you wanted a room that wouldn’t have bedbugs.” We all laugh, and she continues. “I promise my inn doesn’t have bedbugs. How long will you be staying?”

“Just until I can find a place of my own.”

Louise’s face lights up. “You’re moving to Benton?”

“I am.”

“Welcome! We’re so glad to have you. Jules, will you show him around and I’ll grab his things out of the car?”

“Sure thing.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Mason insists. “I can get it.”

But Louise is having none of that. She takes Mason’s shoulders and directs him to the house. “Let Jules show you around. He’ll be in room three. Are you hungry?”

“Starved,” Mason says, following me toward the house.

“Great. Dinner will be ready in fifteen minutes. It’s almost done baking.”

As soon as we walk through the front door, Mason pulls in a deep breath. “It smells amazing in here.”

“You’re going to eat good. Louise is going to pamper the hell out of you. You probably won’t ever want to leave.”

Mason smiles and follows me through the house. I show him his room first, and then the kitchen, living room, office, and library area. Finally, I take him out back and show him my favorite part of the property.

A small lake sits at the back of Louise’s grounds. “It’s beautiful out here.”

Mason walks beside me toward the dock. “Gorgeous.”

When I look at him, he’s staring at me. “I meant the lake.”

Lifting a hand, he tucks my hair behind my ear. “The lake is beautiful too.”

We stand silently and watch the water lap against the dock. “I used to date Louise’s grandson. His name was Brandon. We were high school sweethearts and had our whole lives planned out. Right out of high school, I worked two

jobs to help put him through college.”

“What was he going to school for?”

“His MBA. He finished, and then it was my turn. He was going to work while I went to school.”

“But that didn’t happen, did it?” Mason’s fist clenches at his side.

“No, it didn’t. He decided small town life wasn’t for him. He wanted to move to the city and get a corporate job. He asked me to go with him, but my mom had just been diagnosed with cancer, and I didn’t want to leave her... And he wasn’t going to stay. Long story short, I took out a student loan and started nursing school, and he moved away. Haven’t seen or talked to him since.”

“Do you miss him?”

“No.” I shake my head. “That’s how I know we weren’t meant to be.”

“Juliette?”

“Yeah?”

“Brandon was an idiot. And an asshole.”

“All right,” Louise yells from the back porch. “Dinner is ready.”

We walk side by side to the house, neither one of us saying a thing.

It’s weird—we’ve only known each other for an hour, but I feel like I’ve known him for years. I can’t help wondering when I’ll see him again.

Will he want to see me again?

The thought shakes me to my core. I swore I wouldn’t put myself in a spot to have my heart broken again, and after an hour I already know Mason could have that power over me, if I gave him the chance.

“I better get going.”

“You’re not going to stay for dinner?” Louise asks. “There’s plenty for all of us.”

“Nah, I’ve got to get going. I still need to finish the book you interrupted,” I say, swatting Mason on the arm. “Thanks again, Louise. Mason, it was nice meeting you.”

He fidgets on his feet, seeming flustered that I’m about to walk away. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“Let him,” Louise says. “Never stop a man from being a gentleman.”

“Thank you, Louise,” Mason says.

She pats Mason’s cheek, and I jerk my head toward my car. “If you insist on being a gentleman, who am I to stop you?”

“Glad you see it my way.” He holds out his arm. I shake my head and tuck my hand in his elbow.

“So, when will I get to see you again?” he asks as we stop beside my car.

“I don’t know.”

“How about tomorrow night? We could go to the diner and get some ice cream.”

My eyes dance around Louise’s yard before falling on his. “I don’t know.”

“Are you scared?”

“No,” I scoff. “Why would I be scared?”

Hell yeah, I’m scared. I haven’t even looked at a guy since Brandon, and then Mason slides into my car and has my pulse racing, my body heating up, and my mind wondering what it would be like if he kissed me. And what if he does kiss me and I like it? No, scratch that, what if I love it? And then what if he leaves like Brandon did? The men in my life haven’t always had staying power.

“Just asking.” He studies me for a few seconds. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“Just wondering if your stay here is going to be permanent.” His knowing gaze penetrates mine, and I rush to explain. “It’s just... You’re just moving here. What if you change your mind in a week and decide small-town life isn’t for you?”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“It might.”

Mason grabs my hands. “Okay, how about this? I’ll meet you at the diner two weeks from today—six o’clock, because I don’t want to interrupt your reading time.” He smirks. “That gives you two weeks to warm up to the idea of me and gives me time to settle in.”

“I don’t know.”

“I do. Meet me there.” Mason takes a step back and then another and another, his smile growing as he moves away from me.

I ache to reach out to him, to continue whatever it is that’s building between us, but I don’t. My insecurities have me rooted to the driveway.

“Two weeks, Juliette.”

“Mason, wait. I—”

“Don’t stand me up.” He winks and disappears into the bed and breakfast before I have a chance to reply.

Dammit. This was completely unexpected. *He* was completely unexpected.

“Some of the best things in life are the things we don’t see coming.” Mom’s words ring loud in my head.

I open the car door and slide into the driver’s seat.

It isn’t until I pull into my driveway that I notice my book is gone.

FOUR

Mason

THIS HAS BEEN the longest two weeks of my life. I've looked for Juliette everywhere—on the street, in the coffee shop, and every other place through town I've explored—and each time I've come up empty.

Colin assured me she's not avoiding me, but that's all he would say. I know he's talked to her, but the fucker has tight-ass lips. I love that she has someone watching out for her, but soon, if I'm lucky, that someone might be me.

A chime dings above the door as I walk into Millie's diner. It looks the same now as it did when I was kid.

"Seat yourself," a waitress says from across the room.

I nod and move toward the back corner booth that Mom and I used to sit in. I have something with me, and as the waitress walks up, I set it on the booth beside me.

"What can I get ya?"

I look at the nametag on her shirt. *Brittany*. "Are you from around here?" I ask.

Her face brightens. "I am."

"Do you know Juliette Pearson?"

Her shoulders stiffen. "I do. If you've got a beef with Juliette, you need to take it elsewhere."

I hold up my hands. "No, it's nothing like that. She's meeting me here, and I was just going to ask if you know what she likes to order. I was going to surprise her, that's all."

Brittany's face relaxes. "Oh, in that case, hell yes, I'm from here, and I'll help you out. She likes a cookies and cream shake and a basket of fries."

“Perfect. Get me that, as well as a chocolate shake.”

“Coming right up.” Brittany turns to leave and then whirls back around and gets all up in my face. “We all love Juliette. She’s been through a lot in her life and deserves some stability. She also deserves a little fun. So if you can’t give her those things, you need to back off.”

“I’m not going to hurt her, and I happen to like having fun.”

She lifts two fingers and points from her eyes to mine and back to hers. “Good. I’m watching you.”

I blow out a breath when she walks away, and then I freeze when the door to the diner opens.

Juliette walks in and pauses. Her hair hangs loose over her shoulders, brushing against the tops of her breasts. She’s wearing a pair of skinny jeans, sandals, and a black blouse that hangs off of one shoulder. She looks absolutely stunning.

I stand from the booth. “I was hoping you would show up.”

She gives me a saucy grin and moves toward me. “You didn’t give me a choice.”

“Missed me that much, huh?”

Juliette shakes her head. “You have my book.”

“Ahhh, that.” I reach toward the booth where I set her book when I walked in. I pick it up, but I don’t give it to her. Not yet. “When I realized Louise grabbed it with my stuff, I thought maybe you’d come back for it.”

“I thought about it.” She reaches for the book and then laughs when I hold it out of her reach.

“But—”

“But I wasn’t in the mood to read.”

I frown and lower my hand. “Why not?”

“Because something else—or should I say *someone else*—was occupying all the space in my brain,” she says, snatching the book from my hand.

“Couldn’t concentrate even if I wanted to.”

I motion toward the booth. “Want to sit down and talk about it?”

“Nah, not yet,” she says, looking around the empty diner. She shifts on her feet before wiping her hands on her pants.

She's nervous. *Good*. So am I. "You know, if you couldn't stop thinking about me, you could've ended the torture and come to me sooner."

"I could've."

"But you were still convinced I wouldn't make it two weeks in a small town?"

She lifts a shoulder and lets it fall. It's clear Juliette has been hurt in her life, and I refuse to add to that.

"Do you want to know what I did to pass the time?" I ask her.

"What?"

"I read your book."

Her jaw drops. "You read my book that you stole?"

"Technically, I didn't steal it. Louise did. But don't worry, your bookmark is still on the page where you left it."

"*'One more step would mean certain death'*," she says, mimicking the last words she read—the words I interrupted.

"You really should finish the book. It's an amazing story."

Juliette looks flabbergasted.

"Go out with me," I say.

"You don't even know me."

That's where she's wrong. "I know your best friend Colin—who you've known since kindergarten—owns a coffee shop and feeds your addiction for caramel macchiatos. I know you love to read. I know every single person in this town admires you and loves you. I also know you've had your heart broken, and you're terrified to open yourself back up again—"

"Mason." Juliette lowers her head.

I lift her chin until she's looking at me. "And I'm selfish enough to ask you to give me a chance."

"A chance to what?"

"To prove to you that not all men are like your ex. There are some of us out there who are good, responsible, and trustworthy. I won't hurt you. I'm better than that."

Jules laughs and wipes away the wetness around her eyes. "You're really

full of yourself, aren't you?"

I shake my head. "Just hopeful."

Her eyes drift over my shoulder. I'm not sure what she's looking at or what she's thinking, but she takes a small step forward, and that has to be a good thing.

"There's something else I know," I add to drive the point home.

She pulls her eyes back to me. "What's that?"

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. I've looked for you around every corner, on every street, in every building I walked into over the last two weeks."

She draws in a shaky breath and takes my hand. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about you either."

"Go out with me?" I ask again.

"Okay," she says immediately.

I feel my heart rate spike. "Okay?"

She smiles and nods.

I smile.

And I swear someone in the back, maybe Brittany, gives a little *whoop*.

Juliette laughs and presses in closer. "Don't make me regret this."

"Because I could be a serial killer?" I say, hooking an arm around her waist, suddenly glad she didn't take my offer to sit down. If she had, I wouldn't be able to do this. I pull her forward until her body is snug against mine and curl my free hand around the back of her neck.

"Something like that."

"Juliette?"

"Yeah?" she breathes.

I brush my nose against hers. Her sweet, minty breath fans my face. "I'm going to kiss you now."

"Make it good."

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FIRST FLIGHT

JESSICA SORENSEN

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ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.

I could feel it in my bones.

“You cannot feel it in your bones,” my best friend, Trystan tells me as we stand on the ledge, peering out at the city below.

Way, way below.

“That’s not what I was thinking,” I lie. That’s exactly what I was thinking.

And it's creepy he knows that. But he has been my best friend forever. We were raised together. Went to school together. Are going to college together. We learned how to fly together.

Wait... did I not mention we were death angels?

Hmm... Maybe I should’ve.

But anyway, Trystan and I are death angels that live in a world full of all sorts of different magical creatures. We have wings and everything. Mine are lavender while his are silver and black. And despite contrary belief that probably stems from our species name, we can die. In fact, there have been many reported deaths among my kind.

“There haven’t been that many deaths,” Trystan says, the feathers of his wings moving against the wind along with wisps of his inky black hair.

“There’s been some, though.” I blast him a dirty look, knowing I’m being kind of ridiculous, but my fear is owning me right now. “And will you stop doing that?”

"Doing what?" he says innocently, but I can see all over his face that he knows exactly what I'm talking about.

Because I can read him as well as he can read me.

I put my hands on my hips, my violet hair dancing around. “You keep saying everything I’m thinking.”

He chuckles softly, squinting against the silver sunlight. “Yeah, well, it’s not my fault you’re so easy to read.”

“I’m not easy to read.”

“You are to me, little angel.”

My jaw ticks. “You know I hate it when you call me that. I’m not even little anymore.”

I was once, though. Like really small. In fact, the other angels at school called me a runt. I was teased relentlessly. And bullied. And there was one incident in particular that led to my phobia of heights.

I had been around eight years old when a group of angels I went to school with decided they didn’t really believe I was one of them. I was so small, and I rarely took my wings out, mostly because I’m the only angel with lavender wings. That made me seem like more of a freak and they believed that because of this, I must not really be one of them. After an argument, they decided the best way to find out if I was a death angel, would be to grab me, drag me up to a cliff, and toss me over the edge to see if I’d fly. They didn’t think about—or maybe they did and just didn’t care—that most death angels can’t fly until they’re sixteen. I had kicked, screamed and fought the entire way, but it did nothing. And eventually, they tossed me off the cliff.

I’d like to say it turned out I had a hidden badassery talent for flying, but that would mean I wouldn’t really be here right now, freaking out over flying for the first time. But obviously, I didn’t plummet to my death either. No, Trystan had been nearby and had heard me scream, and apparently, he did have a hidden badassery talent for flying since, you know, he was flying at the age of eight. He also had a kind heart, and not only did he save me, but he also kicked the asses of the angels that tossed me over that cliff. With my help, of course. I may be terrified of flying, but I can fight like a pro and refuse to be a damsel in distress.

But anyway...

Trystan and I have been best friends ever since then. Not that we haven’t had our fights. And if he keeps calling me little angel, we’re about to have another one.

“Which makes it more appealing,” he says, drawing me back to reality, the corners of his lips quirking. “Little angel.”

Irritation weaves through me.

"I think I'm done for the day." I tuck my wings away as I turn and start up the path that leads me to my home.

He follows after me. "Haven, wait. We need to get this done today. School starts tomorrow, and you won't pass the flight entry test if you can't fly."

"I know that," I mutter, quickening my pace, my anxiety skyrocketing. "I don't need to be reminded."

This happens every time I think of that stupid test. I panic. I've known for years this day would come, and I've also known there's a good chance I won't be able to pass the test.

I still have nightmares about that day I was pushed off the cliff, as I fell through the sky and let my wings come out. But they had done nothing when I'd tried to fly. They were weak. Or I was. I wasn't sure. What I was sure about was that I was going to die that day. I had even mentally said my goodbyes as I fell. Then I had shut my eyes, preparing for the pain and darkness. But instead, arms had enveloped around me, and I'd felt warmth. Trystan's warmth. And even now, when I'm in my darkest moments, I can still feel his warmth.

"Haven." He continues to walk behind me. "I'm not trying to freak you out. I just want you to understand how important it is that you do this—"

I whirl around so suddenly that he nearly runs into me. But he skids to a stop, his silver eyes are wide, and his wings are tucked away.

"I know it's important," I tell him. "But again, I don't need reminding."

"Don't you?" he questions. "Because you're walking away from your last chance to do it. We won't have time to practice tomorrow morning."

I take a deep breath and another, deep down knowing he's right. But I also know there's a good chance this won't happen for me.

So, I shrug, pretending to be more okay with what I'm about to say, even though I'm not. "Then I guess I won't be going to school."

The corners of his lips tug downward as he steps toward me. "Don't pretend like you don't care. I know you do. It's all you've talked about for years."

"Only because my parents made me think it's what I wanted to do," I lie.

While my parents have encouraged me to go, they've never pressured me. I know that. I'm just being a brat right now because I'm angry with myself.

Realizing this, my shoulders slump. "I'm going home. I'll see you in the morning."

His lips part, but I don't wait to hear what he has to say. I just turn around and walk away.

And for the first time, he lets me. Usually when we're arguing, he makes us hash it out. But this time he let me go. It's probably a good thing since tomorrow morning, he's going to leave for school, and more than likely, I won't.

• • •

My mom is reading a book when I arrive home and smiles up at me when I enter.

"So, how did it go?" she asks as she sets the book down.

"It didn't," I say flatly as I make my way into the kitchen to grab something to eat.

She gets up and follows me in. She doesn't say anything right away as I slam cupboards, looking for something to eat, even though I'm not hungry. She's probably trying to choose her words carefully. She's smart like that.

"Can I ask what happened?" she finally says as I snatch a box of cookies.

I start stuffing my face with cookies. "The same thing that always happens. I suck."

"You don't suck," she assures me as she leans against the counter with her arms crossed. "In fact, you're the least sucky death angel I know."

"And you're the weirdest mom ever," I tell her as I shovel more cookies into my mouth. "You're the only mom I know that uses words like sucky."

"Because I'm awesome."

"Yeah, you are."

She smiles at that, and I can't help smiling just a little.

But my smile fades as she asks cautiously, “What did Trystan have to say about all of this?”

I shrug. “That I needed to do it. That it was important. That if I didn’t, I wouldn’t pass my flying test tomorrow and wouldn’t get into school.” I sigh as I set the box of cookies down. “Like I didn’t already know of all that.”

“I’m sure he knows you know all of that,” she says. “He’s probably just worried.”

“I know,” I tell her. “And I get that he doesn’t want to go to college alone, but he can make new friends. He’s got one of those personalities that angels love.”

Not that I won't miss him. I will a freakin' ton to the point that my chest is actually hurting right now just thinking about it.

“I think there might be more to it than him worrying about going alone and making new friends,” she informs me.

My brows dip. “Like what?”

She smiles softly. “Like he’ll miss you.”

“I know that. And I’ll miss him too. But like I said, he’ll make new friends. Plus, it’s not like we won’t ever see each other. He’ll come home to visit on holidays.” Again, my chest aches thinking about those few times I’ll see him throughout the year.

“Hmm...” my mom studies me. “I still think there may be more to it than that.”

I arch a brow at her. “Like what?”

She just smiles, pushes away from the counter, and pats my head. “One day, you’ll see,” she says, leaving the room.

Yeah, she’s definitely the weirdest mom ever.

• • •

Late that night, I’m sprawled out on my bed, flipping through the college brochure. I’m wearing pajama shorts and a tank top, which basically is like admitting defeat since tonight is the last night for me to get over this fear of

trying to fly.

It's put me in a sour mood, which is probably why my family has been avoiding me. Eventually, though, someone knocks on my door; mom or dad, I assume.

"Come in," I call out as I turn the page.

On it are photos of the campus: sparkling trees covered with glittery flowers, the grass looks like crystal, and the building is very castle-esque. It also has photos of the inside of the classrooms, the massive library, the domed ceilings. As I look at everything, I admit to myself that I want to go. Badly. I want to walk around and breathe everything in. I want to read every book on the shelves of the library. I want to learn, fill my mind with knowledge.

But in order to do so, I have to fly.

Le sigh. Why, oh why did those angels have to throw me over the cliff that day?

Although if they hadn't, I might not have ended up becoming best friends with Trystan. And that leaves me wondering: will our friendship survive him going off to school? Or will I end up alone?

Speaking of being alone, why didn't the angel that knocked on my door ever come in?

I turn around and peer over my shoulder to find Trystan standing in the doorway with his arms crossed, watching me.

My initial instinct is to ask him why he's here. But then I remember what my mom said and remind myself that I'm not really mad at him—I'm mad at myself.

"Why are you just standing there watching me like a creeper?" My brow teases upward as I jokingly smile.

The corners of his lips tug upward. "I'm the creeper? Need I remind you of the lake incident."

I let out a groan as I sit up. "How many times do I have to tell you that I was not checking you out?" It's a total lie.

I was full-on checking him out.

We were sixteen at the time and had gone swimming down at the lake. He

had worn only his swimming shorts, and while I'd seen him shirtless before, it'd been a while. And during that while, he'd gotten a lot muscular. I couldn't help but stare, maybe more than I should've.

It was the first time I realized my BFF was sexy.

Not that I'd ever tell him that.

And not like he'd ever want to hear me tell him that either.

Trystan and I are just friends, and he's never shown any interest of being anything else.

“Liar,” he teases with a grin. But then he grows solemn. “I actually came here to apologize to you, not watch you. Although, that part does have its perks.” His gaze purposefully scrolls across my bare legs all the way up to my eyes.

I make a big show of rolling my eyes, but inside I feel a bit warm. Why is he looking at me like that? “Liar. Well, not about the apology part, but about the watching me. And what was that look in your eyes just barely...” I trail off as he smiles amusedly.

“You’re nervously rambling,” he remarks. “And blushing.”

My lips part with a lie, but the warmth spreading across my skin is an indicator that I’m blushing. “So, you wanted to apologize, huh?” I completely and noticeably change the subject. “For what?”

His amused smile fades a little. “Can I come in?”

“Into my room?” I question. “Um, yeah, you know you always can.”

“Yeah, but you’re mad at me right now.”

I sigh. “No, I’m not. I’m mad at myself.”

His expression is guarded as he pushes away from the doorframe, walks into my room, and shuts the door behind him. “Why are you mad at yourself?”

I shrug. “Because I’m a failure.” It’s the first time I’ve said the words aloud, and it makes me very aware how true they are, and that all this pretending I'm okay with not flying is fake. I want to be able to spread my wings and soar off, leaving the past behind me. I want to break free of that moment long ago when those angels tossed me over the ledge. I don’t want to let that moment control me anymore because it is. Even now, years later, that

single moment still controls me.

“You’re not a failure.” He sits down beside me. Then hesitantly, he reaches out and cups my face between his hands. “You succeed at so many things. You’re the best archer. The best potions maker. You’re one of the best hand-to-hand combat fighters.”

“And I’m the bestest friend,” I joke.

But he doesn’t even so much as crack a smile. “You’re definitely that too.”

“Not lately,” I say. “Lately, I’ve been mean to you.”

“You haven’t been mean. You’ve just been stressed out.”

“And taking it out on you. And I’m sorry for that.”

Now he cracks a smile. “Hey, I’m the one that came here to apologize. Way to steal my thunder, little angel.”

Instead of reaming into him for that nickname, I give him a pass. “Sorry.”

He smiles amusedly. “You’re letting me off the hook for that? You must really feel bad.”

“I do,” I say. “I should trust you when you say everything will be okay. You’ve saved me from dying before, so I should know you’ll do it again. I’m just... I’m afraid.”

“Afraid of what?” he asks. “Death?”

I start to nod but realize I’ll be lying.

I’m not afraid of death.

I’m afraid of failing.

Of not being able to finally leave my past behind.

I’m afraid of being left behind.

Of him leaving me.

Of him going off to college and me losing my best friend.

I realize all of this now.

Or maybe I’ve known for a while and have been too afraid to say it aloud.

I shake my head. “No, I’m afraid that I’ll try, and I’ll fail. That I’ll never be able to get past that stupid day when those angels threw me over the cliff.” I suck in a shaky breath. “And I’m afraid that you’ll go off to school and

we'll drift apart... I'm afraid that I'll lose you."

He searches my eyes while skimming the pad of his thumb along my cheekbone. "You'll never lose me. Even if you didn't go to college with me, you'd always be my..." He trails off, hesitancy written all over his face.

My head angles to the side. "What's the matter?"

"I... It's just that..." He struggles for words, which is super weird for him.

I mean, I once saw him give like a ten-minute speech about the pros and cons of asparagus. Not because he has some weird fetish with asparagus. It was for a speech class.

We had a really weird teacher.

When he continues to hesitate, I add, "Whatever it is, you can tell me. I can handle it. I swear." Although, if he says something like he doesn't want me to go to school with him, I might break apart on the inside. But that's something I keep to myself. "I'm your best friend, so just tell me."

He swallows audibly. "That's just it. I... I don't think I want you to be my best friend anymore."

Okay, so I know I said I'd break apart internally, but it's a lot more complicated to do when I actually have to do it.

He must see the crumbling on my face because he hurries and adds, "I worded that wrong. Shit, I'm messing this up." He scoots closer to me until our knees touch. "What I meant to say is that I don't want you to be just my best friend anymore."

At the risk of looking like a complete dumbass, I ask, "I don't... What do you want to be then?"

His lips part then shut. Then, muttering something under his breath, he starts to lean in.

At first, I'm confused.

But then it clicks.

He's going to kiss me.

Wait... What?

I lean back. "What're you doing?" I sputter, my heart racing inside my chest.

Not out of fear, though. No, my heart is pulsating out of excitement, which

is kind of scary.

He pauses, and I expect him to crack a joke like typical Trystan would. But not a single drop of humor is in his eyes.

"I... I want to kiss you," he says softly with a huge lack of confidence.

Honestly, this side of him is so foreign to me that I almost question if he's been body-snatched or something. But our world is protected from those.

He swallows audibly again. "Haven, can you please say something? I'm... getting really nervous."

He's right. I do need to say something.

"Why?" I sputter.

His brows knit. "Why what?"

"Why do you want to kiss me?" And why do I have to sound so spazzy?

"I..." Puzzled amusement creases his features. "You're asking me why I want to kiss you?"

I nod. "Yeah."

Honestly, I don't expect him to answer my silly question, so I'm a little surprised when he does.

"Because you're smart, beautiful, talented, and the bravest angel I know," he says, nervousness creeping into his tone. "And because I love you."

He's said those words to me before, but it was more in an I-love-my-best-friend sort of way. Right now, though, I think he means it in a very different way.

Silence stretches between us as my mind races with thoughts. I see all the moments we've spent together, starting with the day he saved me. As I reflect on every part of our history together, I realize that I do love him. That I have for a while but have been afraid to admit it.

Always afraid.

I could tell him that I love him, but as my mouth opens, all I say is, "You can kiss me."

Not quite an I-love-you, but it's as close as I can get at the moment.

I expect him to hesitate, but he doesn't. He leans in, moving slow, I think so I won't panic. But my heart is panicking, a fluttering mess inside my chest. When our lips connect, though, all that panic dissipates. And for the first time

in a long time, I feel it.

A calmness.

Like this is how things were supposed to be.

How could I not see it? Him—this—*us*, when it was right in front of me.

Because I was too afraid to see it. And if I don't let go of that fear, I'm going to lose him.

I jerk back.

His eyelids flutter open, and panic flashes across his face. "What's wrong? Was it... Did you not like it?"

I promptly shake my head. "No, I did." I kiss him again, so he knows I mean it, then I spring to my feet. "There's just something I need to do right now."

I slip on a pair of shoes, then grab his hand, and rush out of the house, holding onto the confidence stirring inside me the best I can.

He doesn't ask where we're going, but I'm sure he knows. He holds onto my hand the entire way.

By the time we reach the cliff that stretches above the city, I'm breathless and amped-up with energy.

Of course, when I reach the ledge some of my confidence fizzles.

I latch onto his hand, mentally telling myself that I can do this.

"It's so dark," I murmur as I peer down at the sleeping city, unsure if it's worse to try this at night or better because I can't see how far the fall is.

"If you want, we can wait until sunrise," he tells me, giving my hand a squeeze.

I nervously shake my head. "No, I can do this."

I can...

I think...

Sucking in a huge breath, I turn and let my wings snap out.

"You can do this. I know you can. You're the strongest angel I know." With his free hand, he reaches up and strokes my feathers, an intimate touch and something he's never done before

His words and touch are the boosts of motivation I need. I inhale deeply

and inch toward the cliffside.

This is it. I can live in fear forever. Or let go.

Let go of the past.

Before I jump, I spin around and kiss him one last time. “I love you,” I whisper then add, “And if I mess up, please don’t let me splatter against the ground.”

“Never,” he promises.

I hold onto that promise and inch up toward the ledge. Then shutting my eyes, I leap forward.

And for a blinding second, I start to fall.

Great, so much for not dying.

But then I feel it. This power.

My wings are flapping.

I’m flying.

“Holy crap,” I breathe out as I take in the night-kissed city below me. “I’m flying.”

I hear wings flapping as Trystan flies over to me. “I knew you could do it.”

He’s right. He always believed in me.

Smiling, I say, “Let’s fly.”

He grins and we take off, flying toward the future and letting go of the past.

ABOUT THE JESSICA SORENSEN

Jessica Sorensen is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author who lives in the snowy mountains of Wyoming. When she's not writing, she spends her time reading and hanging out with her family.

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SOMETHING WONDERFUL

LK FARLOW

ONE

Thea

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death. Not literally, of course. No, the only thing at risk of peril happens to be my pride. But Mama always said if you don't ask, you won't know and ever since I saw Dane Foster running across the quad last Tuesday, I've been itching to ask him a thing or two.

Like why he cut me out of his life with a dull spoon and why he's here, at Palm Bluff University of all places, especially since I'm ninety-nine percent positive he's not even a student here. Last I heard, he was out in Cali, living the dream, preparing to compete in the Rip Curl Pro in Portugal—which is less than two months away. He should be amping up his training, not back in Florida, less than ten feet away from me with a beer clutched in his hand while half-dressed beach bunnies compete for his attention.

Dane and I grew up next door to each other, and even though he went to the fancy-ass private school while I went to public, we were damn near inseparable, spending every afternoon, weekend, and summer together. Even when his school friends came around, Dane included me and threatened to beat up anyone who dared pick on me. Hell, we even exchanged vows in my backyard in second grade. So, yeah, when he quit talking to me out of nowhere the summer before high school, it broke something in my young, naïve heart.

Now that he's back, I want answers—I need them.

The years have been kind to him. Dane's once boyish and lanky physique is now built with sleek, compact muscles; all man. His skin is bronzed as if he's perpetually in the sun and his hair is a golden halo of curls highlighting his chiseled angular face. But the best part about Dane is his eyes. Deep cerulean framed with lashes that any woman would kill for. Even from my hidey-hole in the corner of the kitchen, I can see his piercing eyes, they're as

fathomless as the waves he surfs and I could easily drown in their depths.

My phone buzzes in the back pocket of my denim cut-off's. I slide it out, already knowing it's going to be a text from my best friend, Blue—and yes, that's her real name.

Blue: Have you talked to him yet or are you hiding like a sissy?

Me: I'm not hiding. I'm doing recon.

Blue: Lies! Ten bucks says you're in some dark corner or pressed against a wall doing your best to blend in. You probably haven't had a drink. Hell, you probably haven't even talked to anyone.

Me: Wrong again. I spoke to the guy manning the door.

Blue: Thea, Thea, Thea. What am I going to do with you?

Me: Uh...

Blue: Rhetorical question. Listen closely. You're going to leave your corner, chug some liquid courage, march up to your Golden God, and confront him. And then, you're going to find a hot, willing co-ed and dance until your feet hurt.

Me: No to the dancing. Yes to the rest.

Blue: 2 out of 3...I'll take it. I wish I was there!

Me: Yeah, yeah. Says the girl out on a date with her dream guy. Speaking of, WHY ARE YOU TEXTING ME?

Blue: Stop procrastinating.

Clearly, parties aren't my thing—along with crowds, and you know, just people in general—and Blue knows that. Gah! Sometimes I hate how well she knows me. But that's what happens when you've been best friends with someone for six years; they know your quirks and fears, your dreams and desires. Unfortunately for me, mine are all tied up in one boy—well, man now.

I'm not sure why I thought confronting him at a party was a good idea, but

it's too late to turn back now, because here I am. Blue is totally right, I'm procrastinating. The question is...why? What's the worst that could happen? You know, other than Dane, a God in his own right, not having a clue of who I am and laughing me straight out of this damn frat house.

Divine status or not, we have history. Admittedly it didn't end well, but surely, it's enough to grant me an audience with him.

So why are you making such a big deal out of talking to him? I ask myself. Maybe because he left you in his wake and never once looked back, my inner-asshole replies, trying to sabotage my budding confidence.

"Nope. Not today, asshole," I mutter to myself, steeling my resolve. "I've got this. I am a strong, independent woman. I fear no man. The only thing holding me back is... me."

I step out of the shadows, my eyes locked on my target, as I swipe a solo cup from the island and fill it with beer. I bring it to my lips and chug the lukewarm liquid. After tossing the cup, I wipe the foam from my lips with the back of my hand and set off toward my former best friend and lifelong crush, ready to demand answers.

TWO

Dane

“PLACE IS PACKED,” I mumble, sinking back into the ugly-ass chartreuse-colored couch, my legs spread wide and my beer clasped loosely in my hands.

“Hell yeah,” my right-hand man—literally and figuratively—Anton replies. “There’s not a better place to be tonight than the Zeta house.”

He’s wrong though. I’d rather be back in San Clemente, because if I was, it’d mean everything was fine, that my dad was healthy and not laid up in an ICU hospital room. I keep telling myself things could be worse, that he could have died. But he made it, and I’m here to help in any way I can. The drink in my hand, my friends by my side, the ocean at my back and a veritable buffet of hot, willing, and eager co-eds to choose from are just cherries on top. So, yeah, while I’m twenty-five-hundred miles away from where I want to be, I know I’m exactly where I need to be.

“Dawn patrol before class?” my friend Brooks asks from his spot next to me on the couch. The three of us are posted up on this oversized monstrosity in the middle of the room, observing the mayhem while sipping ice-cold beers stocked specially for us—because fuck drinking that warm keg swill.

All around us, bikini top and short-shorts clad women dance seductively, vying for our attention. I’m about to answer him when the sight of a blonde and a redhead locking lips while grinding on one another steals my attention away.

Brooks reaches out and smacks the backside of my head. “The fuck?”

“Bros before hoes,” he says, smirking.

“Yeah,” Anton echoes. “Boards before bitches.” My two friends lean forward and bump their fists together.

I roll my eyes but answer him all the same. “Never miss a day. I’m like the

fucking postal service—I always deliver; rain or shine, I’m down.”

“Good. ‘Cause it’s gonna pour.”

“Torrential,” Anton adds.

The song pumping through the speakers changes to an old Danger Mouse song. I drain my beer and drop my head to the back of the couch, letting both the music and the alcohol flow through me.

“Refills?” Brooks says, collecting our empties. I nod, letting my eyes slip shut for a moment as Jack White sings about mirrors, triggers, and guns.

Quick as fuck Brooks is back, drinks in hand—a major perk of being surf royalty in a beach town. “Dude,” he says, out of breath.

When neither Anton or I answer him, he digs his elbow into my shoulder. “Dude. Some chick was staring you down from the kitch. She’s headed this way and looks like she’s ready to tear you a new one.”

I pop my head up and take my cup from him, placing it on the couch between my knees.

Anton howls. “Don’t tell me you already banged and bailed? Dude, you’ve been home for like a week.”

Running my hands through my mop of curls, I grin. “Nah. You know I’ve been with my family.” I turn to Brooks. “She hot?”

“Only if you’re into petite, dark-haired bombshells.”

I rub my hands together. “I prefer ‘em blonde, but...” I trail off wagging my brows suggestively.

Not even two minutes later a knock-out with killer curves is walking my way. I start from the bottom, lazily working my way up her delectable body. She’s a short little thing with wide hips, a nipped-in waste, and tits I’d love to get intimately acquainted with. She’s easily hotter than every girl here and as she draws nearer, I become even more intrigued.

“Damn, she’s fine.” I run my tongue over my lower lip, admiring the way her dark hair is tied up into a knot on the top of her head. Thick bangs frame her face, giving way to a pair of Aviator-style glasses. She has a button nose and lush, full lips. Girl’s got the whole sexy-nerd thing on lock in a pair of daisy-duke overalls over a sports bra with a pair of shell-toe Adidas on her feet.

Finally, after what feels like the longest build up ever, my fun-sized goddess is before me. “Dane? Dane Foster?” she asks, her voice nothing more than a soft rasp. I grin and give the guys a nod, signaling for them to scam.

“I see my reputation proceeds me.” I pat my boardshort covered thigh. “Why don’t you have a seat and—”

“You’re joking,” she says. “Please, God, tell me you’re joking.”

“About a pretty little thing like you climbing onto my lap? Yeah, no. Definitely not joking.”

“Wow.” She huffs out a breath. “Just...wow.”

“Cat’s got your tongue?” I ask, amping up the charm with my best bikini-bottom-dropping smile.

“Nope. I’m just...wow.”

“Yeah, babe, you’ve said that three times.” I can tell she’s annoyed with me and absolutely not picking up what I’m putting down. But I’m committed at this point—and I want to see how far I can push her.

She shakes her head and drops her eyes to the floor for a minute before looking back to me. “You don’t have a clue of who I am, do you?”

Brooks and Anton are both dancing with some random girl sandwiched between them as they try to act like they’re not paying attention to what’s happening with us over here; but I know they’re both tuned in and loving every minute of this.

“Should I?” I drag my eyes over again, taking in all the details up close and personal. That is, until my gaze snags on a little cluster of freckles in the shape of a star just beneath her collarbone. I know those fucking freckles. Why do I know those—holy shit Dots Davis is...well...she grew up.

“No. I guess not.” She slides her hands into her back pockets and rocks back on her heels. “It’s just that...we used to be neighbors and...”

“And what babe? You want an autograph or something?” I know I’m being a Grade-A dick, but seeing her has me off kilter, but damn if I’m going to show it.

“Wow.”

“Mmm.” I lift my drink to her in a mock-toast. “There’s that word again.”

Behind the lens of her glasses, her big, expressive brown eyes show every ounce of frustration, fear, and sadness she's feeling because of my behavior.

I know it makes me a jackass, but I can't seem to stop.

"You know what? You're not...just forget it."

She turns and my eyes drop to her plump ass. Seriously, where did these curves come from, because my Dots was as flat as a pancake. As she stalks back the way she came, something tells me I won't be forgetting her anytime soon—not that I ever did to start with.

THREE

Thea

“I SWEAR TO God, he’s the most pig-headed, narcissistic asshole who ever lived!”

“Uh-huh,” Blue murmurs, not even bothering to look up from her tablet. “Tell me more about how much you hate Dane. It’s not like you’ve been ranting about him for the last two days. Please, I’d love to hear more.”

We meet up at the library every Tuesday to study. Blue’s majoring in graphic design whereas I want to be a surf photographer, so it’s a journalism degree for me. However, we do have some overlap in our courses.

“I know, I know. I sound like a broken record at this point. But how do you just...forget...someone you spent nearly every day with for almost nine years? It’s not like I’ve changed that much.”

Now Blue looks up. “You’re joking, right?” I quirk a brow; she shakes her head before continuing. “You literally glowed up. In eighth grade, you looked like a boy and now...you’re...” She waves her hands in the air, making the shape of an hourglass. “All curves and lip gloss and sex appeal.”

I snort out a loud laugh at her description of me, earning me looks of ire from nearby tables. Sure, I grew some D-cups and an ass and learned how to use a flatiron and apply makeup, but I’m still...me.

“Not recognizing me aside, who asks random women to sit on their lap? He’s a dog!”

“But you love puppies.” Blue grins, her eyes already back on her screen.

“Yeah, the kind with fur, not STD’s.”

“Judge much?” she asks, her soft tone not matching her hard words.

I sigh. “I’m just saying.”

She looks up again, pushing her blue hair—yes, her hair matches her name

—behind her ear. “Listen, I know you and you’re not gonna let this go without closure.”

“I know.” I cover my eyes and groan. “What do I do?”

Blue peels my hands away from my face. The megawatt smile she’s rocking tells me I’m not going to like whatever she suggests. “Simple: you try again.”

Ugh. Yup, called it. “I don’t know...that sounds like—”

“The best idea ever? I know. It’s like I’m a genius or something.”

“Or something,” I mutter and Blue laughs.

“Whine all you want, but we both know, as per usual, that I’m right. So do your little stalk-y thing and talk to him.”

“It’s not stalking, it’s—”

“Call it what you want, but find an in, talk to him, and move on. Simple as that.”

I nod, because as much as I don’t want to admit it, she’s right. I’m being a baby. I need to face this thing with Dane head on, so I can move on once and for all.

• • •

I spent the last two weeks agonizing over how to approach Dane again. The confidence—ahem, false bravado—I had the night of the party has long since vanished. Every time I even thought of talking to him again my gut churned. But for the sake of my own sanity, and to satiate my curiosity, I have to. It’s like Mama always says—you gotta buck up, buttercup.

However, two days ago, the tides finally turned in my favor and the perfect buck-up-opportunity fell into my lap while perusing the school’s website, in the form of private surf lessons with none other than my golden god. I don’t think I’ve ever filled out an online form so fast in all my life. Major props to my middle school computer lab teacher for getting me to 60 words a minute!

Today’s our first session and even though it doesn’t start until nine, I was

up before the sun, my body wired with nervous energy.

My inner-asshole whispers to me, telling me I should stay home and that I'm only going to make a fool of myself. But just like at the party, I shut her poisonous ass down. And plus, even if I do end up crashing and burning, at least I'll go down knowing I tried.

FOUR

Dane

LAST MONTH WHEN I told my agent Lance I needed to come home, he almost had a coronary. He went as far as straight up trying to forbid me from traveling, like I was a naughty child. I shut him down real quick though.

My family will always come first, and when my mom called and told me Dad suffered a major heart attack, I didn't hesitate to pack my bags.

I told Lance if it came down to it, I was prepared to walk away from it all. In the end, we compromised. In return for me being here while Dad recovers, I have to give surf lessons for a PR boost.

Which means instead of hitting up Dante's for a ham, egg, and cheese sandwich with my boys, I'm sprawled out on my back in the hot sand waiting on what's sure to be some grom that doesn't know a nug—a good wave—from mush.

Even worse than that scenario, I could be waiting on some superfan who wants to collect a lock of my hair or some shit. Then again, said fan could be a fangirl, which I am totally down with. Especially if she's down to fu—a shadow falls over me, abruptly ending my train of thought.

“Here for lessons?” I ask, looking up toward the interloper. The sun shines brightly behind them, making it impossible for me to really see them. Details, sure. Like it's a she—a short and curvy she with tits to rival a porn star. Huh—maybe that train of thought won't be derailed after all.

“Yup. So maybe quit staring and start teaching.”

Fuck. That voice. “Dots,” I say before I can stop myself. I straight up acted like I didn't remember her the other night and here I am calling her by her old childhood nickname.

“Oh, now you know me?” Her tone drips with indignation.

I shrug, trying to come off as careless, relaxed even. “Knew you then too,” I murmur fully prepared for her to yell.

What I’m not expecting is a face-full of sand. I’m so shocked when she kicks a mountain of it my way that I don’t even think to cover my head. “You piece of shit! Do you have any idea of how you made me feel?”

Blindly, I fumble for my towel. “Fuck!” I yell spitting out granules of sand. “What the fuck Dots?”

She waits until I’ve removed as much of the sand as possible before answering me. “It’s Thea now and let’s not act like you didn’t deserve it.”

I scrub a hand over my face and through my hair, finding even more sand there. “Yeah, you’re right. Shit.”

“Why?” she asks, tapping her foot, the movement drawing my gaze to her breasts.

Momentarily, I lose my words as I watch the twin mounds jiggle beneath the yellow rash guard she’s rocking like a second skin.

“Why?” she asks again, snapping her fingers in front of my face, freeing me from my titty-trance.

“Why what?”

Dots huffs and clenches her tiny fists at her sides. “Why did you pretend not to know me?”

“Honestly? At first, I really didn’t recognize you. I mean, you’re all grown up, if you catch my drift. By the time I realized you were you, I…” I shrug my shoulders, feeling helpless—which is a foreign feeling when talking to a woman.

“You what?” she asks, her hands on her hips. My Dots was never one to back down from a fight, and while it seems like a lot about her has changed, a lot has also stayed the same. “Because I can’t think of a single way to end that sentence that will justify your behavior.”

“Fuck Dots—”

“Thea.”

“—Dots. You want me to be honest, fine. I’ll be honest. I don’t know why I acted like an ass. At first you were just some girl, some crazy hot chick I wanted to take a spin on my dick. When I recognized you, it threw me for a

loop. I mean, you're *you* and even knowing that, I was still imagining sliding inside you and fucking you senseless. I didn't know how to handle it, so I slid into 'Douchey Dane'. It was shitty and I'm sorry. Okay?"

Dots stares blankly my way. Thanks to her reflective sunglasses, I can't tell if she's actually looking at me, much less what she's feeling. Finally, after eons have passed, she says, "Douchey Dane? What does that even mean?"

I sigh. "It's what my PR team calls my public persona. It's how I keep most people at an arm's length."

"Let me get this straight. You have a douchey alter ego you adopt to keep everyone at a distance and decided to try it out on me, because you were imagining fucking me and it made you uncomfortable?"

I shift on my feet. "Well, when you say it like that..."

She huffs out a breath. "There's no good way to put it. But whatever, you've always been a little bit of a d-bag, so I'm not really surprised."

Now I'm huffing, because what the fuck? "Me? How?"

Another stare down—I think, damn tinted lenses—ensues before she says, "Uh, does the summer before high school ring a bell?"

Well, shit. She's got me there. Now the question is how do I play this? I contemplate bullshitting her for about point-two seconds before dismissing the notion. Telling the truth has worked well so far, plus, Dots would call me on my shit faster than I can pop up on my board—which is pretty damn fast.

"I'm gonna be real with you Dots. You're not gonna like what's about to come out of my mouth."

"Because I've loved everything else you've said?" Is it wrong that her sass gets me hard?

"I was fourteen. I was noticing girls and they were noticing me. I wanted to..." I trail off, trying to think of the best way to phrase what I want to say. "...I'm just gonna say it. I wanted to round the bases, Dot, and I couldn't very well do that with you tagging along. Sounds harsh, but I was a shit then and I'm sorry."

She laughs, but I can't tell if it's in humor or spite. "You're a shit now, Dane Foster."

I shuffle a step closer. “But I’m a sorry shit.”

“You’ll hear no arguments from me there. Lord knows, only a sorry shit would ditch a lifelong friend to get his dick rubbed.”

“Wait, that’s not what I meant.”

She shrugs. “Your words, I’m just choosing to interpret them differently.”

“You’re impossible,” I tell her, all the other times I’ve said those exact words to her playing through my mind like a highlight reel. Like the time she wanted to scale the side of my house and jump from the roof onto the trampoline so that she could bounce into my pool. I tried like hell to talk her out of it, but she insisted. Spoiler alert: she broke her ankle and spent the entire summer in a cast.

Or the time she begged the neighbor on the other side to pull her behind his car on her rollerblades—thankfully he refused and told her parents. She was grounded for a week.

Oh, and I can’t forget the time she talked me into marrying her. We couldn’t have been older than seven. I came over like I did every weekend and instead of wearing her play clothes, she was dressed up in a white church dress with flowers plucked directly from her front yard, roots and all, clutched in her small hands. I asked her what the heck she was up to and she proudly announced to me that she was a woman now since she’d lost both her front teeth and that we were getting married. I told her guys usually did the asking. Dots shoved me down and told me that was stupid. I told her she was impossible. We exchanged vows and dandelion stem rings all the same.

“You mean amazing,” she retorts.

“I definitely meant impossible.”

She grins and my heart thumps a little harder in my chest. “I’ve heard it both ways.”

I groan. “You did not just quote Psych.”

“Shawn Spencer is a God.”

“Whatever.” I move another step closer. “So, we good?”

She doesn’t immediately reply, and the sweat dotting my brow is more from nerves than the heat. Finally, she says, “As long as you can rein in Douchey Dane, yeah, we’re good.”

“I think I can manage.”

“Then you’ve got yourself a deal.” She holds out her hand for me to shake. I clasp her hand in mine, pumping my arm once before yanking her toward me. The move is unexpected and her unchecked momentum sends her plowing into my chest.

She moves to push away from me, but I band my arms around her and hold her to me, secretly loving the way her small, soft body feels against mine.

Before I can think better of it, I’m mumbling into her hair how much I’ve missed her and how I’m glad she’s here. “For real, you were my ride or die and I left you. I’ve missed you like hell.”

“You could have called. Texted. Facebooked, anything Dane.” Her warm breath fans against my chest, but she still makes no move to pull out of my embrace.

“I know, Dots. I know.” After a few more quiet moments, we break apart. “You ready to surf?” I ask, knowing damn well she doesn’t need the lessons.

“Yup.” We grab our boards and head toward the water. The breaking waves rock us gently as we wade out. “Hey Dane,” Dots says once we’re knee deep.

I turn and look at her, only to find her belly down on her board, staring straight ahead. “Yeah?”

“I missed you too,” she calls over her shoulder as she paddles out.

FIVE

Thea

HE SLIDES HIS hand down my leg, his fingers brushing along the hem of my bikini bottom along the way, until he reaches the bend of my knee. It takes my all to focus on his words over his touch.

He grips me above the knee and pulls my leg into the position he wants it in. “See how your foot is planted and your knee is hanging over the side of the board?” I nod. “This is exactly how I want you.”

As loathe as I am to admit it, a million sexy fantasies of him saying those exact words play out in my mind. Only we’re both naked and not on a public beach. My cheeks heat as I imagine all of the filthy things he would do to me—and how much I’d like it.

“Got it.”

“You’re looking a little pink, Dots. Everything okay?”

The blush painting my cheeks burns its way down my chest. “Mmhmm, yup, fine.”

He drags his hand back up my leg, and this time the tips of his fingers brush the most sensitive part of my inner thigh. It’s a light touch, but packed with pleasure and I can’t help but squirm under it.

“You sure?” he asks, sounding smug. “Or maybe my hands on you is too distracting?”

“I’m not distracted,” I insist, pleased when my voice comes out steady.

“Show me.”

I grab the rails the first try instead of bringing my hands under my chest—a total grom move. Naturally, Dane catches me and smirks. “Thought you weren’t distracted Dots?” I glare at him, but my gaze snags on his firm pecs. His smirk turns to an all-out laugh. “Damn, do I need to put a shirt on too?”

What good would a shirt do? For the past three weeks, it seems like he's always finding a reason to touch me—and he's growing bolder each time. So, even if he covered his sinfully sculpted body, I'd still end up distracted.

I flip him the bird and get back to work, moving in and out of the position a few more times and once Dane is satisfied, we move onto the next step. “Now, push up and use your back foot to propel your front leg under your chin and then stand.”

We work through it a few more times before Dane's satisfied. “I know I said your pop-ups needed some work, but you look good Dots, really good.”

I beam, and even though I know he's only complimenting my form, I pretend he's telling me I look good. “Thanks! I learned from a pro.” I wink and we both laugh.

“Same time next week?” he asks as he begins packing away his stuff.

“Yup.” The sudden urge to ask him if he wants to meet up outside of our weekly lessons hits me like a bag of bricks to the chest. “So, um, what are you up to this weekend?”

“Oh, uh,” he looks down. “Just hangin’.”

I nod. “Right. Sure. Well, if you wanna maybe hang out or...” I trail off, feeling like an idiot for asking.

He doesn't answer right away, which only adds to my building embarrassment. “Uh, well, the thing is—”

I cut him off, not wanting to hear his rejection. Apparently, all the touching and flirting was a figment of my imagination. “It's fine. I'm sure you're busy. I'll catch you next week.” I grab my board under my arm and hoof it to my Jeep before he can reply.

• • •

Dane

I fucked up—again. Dots is barely back in my life and here I am watching helplessly as she runs from me. The thing is, my dad’s a prideful man, and he was adamant he didn’t want anyone knowing he was sick.

So, yeah...rock, meet hard place.

Do I hope it blows over or do I text?

Twenty minutes later, Anton and Brooks find me angry-baking in the kitchen, still hung up on whether or not I should reach out.

“What crawled up your ass?” Anton asks as he plops down onto a barstool at the island.

“Rough lesson with your mystery student?” Brooks adds, swiping his index finger through the batter remnants in the bottom of my mixing bowl.

“Something like that,” I mutter, as I smack his hand.

“Hey! Ouch!” He jerks his hand back and sucks the batter from his index finger. “Ooh, brownies.”

“Brownies?” Anton echoes. “What are you trying to decide?”

“What do you mean?”

“Brah,” Brooks drawls, going back for another swipe at the bottom of the bowl. “You only make brownies when you’re trying to figure shit out.”

“Nu-uh.”

“Yuh-huh. When Quicksilver and O’Neil wanted you to shoot an ad on the same day and you didn’t know who to pick, you made pecan fudge brownies.”

Anton snaps his fingers. “Oh! And when you were trying to decide if you wanted to take blonde Molly or brunette Molly to the SURFER Awards, you made blonde brownies with maca...maca-whatever they’re called nuts.”

I look at them both like they’re crazy.

“So, what’s the great debate?” Brooks asks, stealing the bowl once and for all.

“It’s a long story,” I say as I crack open the oven door to check on said brownies.

“Alexa, how long is left on the timer?” Anton asks.

“There are twenty-two minutes left on your timer,” comes her robotic reply.

The jackass smirks. “Sounds like you have plenty of time to sum shit up to me.”

“Ugh.” I tug on the ends of my too-long hair. “Fine.”

Turns out, it only takes ten minutes to catch them up—plus five after they finish ribbing on me. It also turns out I’m a dumbass and should definitely text her.

Dane: I was an ass today Dots.

Her reply is instantaneous.

Dots: Yeah, you were.

Dane: Let me take you out to make up for it.

Dots: Like on a date?

Shit. Is it a date? I think...I think I want it to be.

Dane: Yeah. A date.

Dots: Tell me when and where.

Dane: Nah. I’ll pick you up. Tomorrow night at 7. Say yes.

Dots: Yes.

SIX

Thea

“YOU’RE GOING ON a date with Dane!” Blue squeals for the fiftieth time as she rifles through my closet for an outfit. It seems I’m not capable of dressing myself for such a momentous occasion.

“Yup, I am,” I reply coolly, even though on the inside I’m every bit the bouncing, excited mess Blue thinks I should be.

She scoffs but continues flipping through my hangers. “Oh, wait! I think this is it!”

She emerges victorious with a black wrap-style maxi skirt that has a thigh-high slit and a black lace bralette. It’s one of those impulse-buy outfits you fall in love with but never wear because it’s so not you.

Which is exactly what I tell her. “Blue, I’ll look like a clown in this.”

She tilts her head, studying me. “If by clown you mean crazy hot, then yes. Quit your bitching and get dressed.”

Stripping down to my panties, I roll my eyes at my insufferable best friend. I step into the skirt and shimmy the soft fabric up my legs before tugging my underwear down—nobody likes panty lines—and slipping the lacy bra over my head. As much as I hate to admit it, she’s right...I look hot.

Blue quirks her brow in a way that says *told you so*.

I ignore her and finish getting ready. I don’t bother with my hair, it’s wild with a mind of its own and I learned to roll with its whims a long time ago. Thanks to good genes and a healthy tan, I don’t need much in the way of makeup; a little bronzer, a few swipes of mascara, and slick of peachy-tinted lip gloss and I’m good to go.

She gives me an appraising once over as she heads for the door. “My work here is done. Have fun, use condoms!”

“Why are we friends?” I mutter under my breath, not meaning it one bit. Blue’s been with me through it all and I fucking love her like a sister.

Fifteen minutes later, at seven on the dot, there’s a knock at my front door. My inner asshole tries sending a wave of nerves through me, but I lock her away. Not tonight, asshole.

“Holy shit,” Dane breathes out when I open the door. “You look... stunning.”

I can feel the burn of my blush but ignore it, opting instead to drink him in. He’s dressed in a turquoise and green plaid button-down that makes his eyes pop, a pair of light-wash, lived-in jeans, and leather flipflops. He’s basically every beach girl’s walking fantasy come to life—myself included.

“You look good too.”

He smirks. “You ready?”

I lock up and follow him out to his truck, where he opens the door for me and helps me into the lifted cab. “Where are we going?” I ask once he’s situated behind the wheel.

“Wait and see. Let me woo you, Dots.”

Laughing, I lay my head onto the seat back. “Okay, Dane. Get your woo on.”

He shoots me a cocky grin. “Trust me, gorgeous, I’m gonna woo the panties off of you.”

Butterflies—or maybe lust—swirl through me as I roll my head to look at him. “That’d be great if I had any on.”

• • •

Dane

I slam on the brakes as the full force of her words crash down on me like a gnarly wave—the kind that totally sends you tombstoning. “What did you say?”

Dots looks at me like I’ve lost my marbles—and maybe I have, but the thought of her sitting not even three feet away from me with no panties on is almost more than I can take. The temptation to slide my hand beneath the slit in her skirt and up her thigh to test for myself...fuuuuuck.

“Dane!” her small, soft hand comes down on my arm and I jolt like it’s a livewire. “Are you okay?”

I scrub a hand over my face. “Not even a little.”

“H-how can I help?” she asks, her voice breathy.

I pin her with a hard glare, that melts the second I meet her wide eyes. Her pupils are dilated, and her chest is rising and falling rapidly. She’s turned on, I think to myself. Ditto, Dots, fucking ditto.

Without fully thinking it through, I unbuckle her seatbelt, slide her across the bench and haul her onto my lap. Her luscious lips part on a gasp as I kiss her hard and hungrily.

Her hands grip the front of my shirt, urging me closer as mine tangle in her hair. Tugging, I tilt her head to the perfect angle to utterly devour her. Our lips, tongues, and hands move together in what feels like a well-practiced harmony. This is our first kiss, but it feels like a homecoming.

After countless minutes, we break apart. “Do you feel better?” Dots asks, tracing the pad of her index finger over her kiss-swollen lips.

“I feel fucking amazing.”

She tries to scoot back to the passenger seat, but I clamp my hand down onto her thigh. “Stay.”

Her lips tip up in a pleased grin as I adjust myself and shift the truck back into gear. Her head rests on my shoulder and my hand on her thigh as we drive a few more minutes down the narrow tree-lined road until it dead-ends in a small gravel parking lot.

“Let me get everything ready,” I tell her as I hop out of the truck.

SEVEN

Thea

I SIT IN a daze, replaying our kiss while Dane does...only God knows. Whatever it is, I trust him. Which is kind of crazy; then again, I'm pretty damn positive his kiss scrambled my brain. My lips are still tingling and my clit is pulsing with need. I've never been so turned on in my entire life.

I've always been a three-date kind of girl, but I swear on all that's holy, I'd have let him have his way with me on the side of the road back there, had he tried to—so yeah, totally scrambled.

I'm lost in my own lusty daydreams when the passenger door opens, scaring the life out of me. "Jesus, Dane!" I shout, clutching my hands to my chest.

He grins. "C'mon, Dots."

I allow him to help me down from his truck. He tucks my hand into his and leads me around to the tailgate. The sight laid out before me absolutely blows my mind.

SadGirl plays from a small Bluetooth speaker and the bed of his truck is loaded down with plush blankets and pillows. He has a cooler sitting on the tailgate and twinkling lights strung across the back window. This isn't a date—it's a proverbial paradise smack-dab in the middle of actual paradise.

"Dane," I whisper his name as he palms my hips and helps me up into the bed of the truck.

"You like it?" he asks, looking unsure.

"I love it."

His trademark cocky grin appears. "Good." He settles in next to me. "You hungry?"

"Starved."

He retrieves the cooler and pulls out an assortment of goodies: crackers, summer sausage, various cheeses, olives, fruit, and two bottles of water.

We talk as we eat, reminiscing about our childhood and all the shit we got into as kids. Story after story, I'm reminded both of how easy things are with him and how much it hurt when he left.

Though, since we cleared the air, it stings less. Don't get me wrong, I'm not excusing his bullshit behavior—he was a total jackass, but I have no plans of holding it against him.

“You remember when we played hide-and-seek with Danny and Nicky?” he asks as he cleans up the remnants of our dinner.

I nod, trying to hold back my laughter.

“Took them two hours to find us.”

A giggle breaks free. “That's because we went to your room and watched TV.”

We spend more time in the past before I finally gather the courage to ask what I really want to know. “Why are you back here Dane?”

He stiffens next to me and I worry I've somehow popped the magical, romantic bubble ensconcing us. After a long pause he says, “It's my dad.”

“What about him?”

“Shit.” Dane heaves out a sigh. I start to tell him not to worry about it when the words just spill out of him. “He's sick Dots.”

“Sick?” I ask, my voice quavering.

“He had a massive heart attack. Three arteries were blocked; they had to do a triple bypass.”

My eyes water. David Foster is one of the best men I've ever met—kind and always quick with a smile.

Noticing my tears, Dane wraps his arms around me and quickly adds, “He's okay Dots. At home and in cardiac rehab.”

A weight lifts from my chest. “Oh, thank God. W-would it be okay if I went to see him?”

“I'd have to ask. You know how he is—stubborn as a mule. He's determined to keep the whole thing a secret. But something tells me he'd make an exception for you.”

I smile at his words before twisting to press my lips to his. While this kiss is far less frenzied than our first, it affects me all the same. With every flick of Dane's tongue, my arousal swells within me like a great wave. He expertly licks and nips and pecks and nibbles my lips. He has me so turned on, I'm positive even the slightest touch would send me crashing to shore.

Much to my libido's dismay, Dane pulls back once things get too hot and heavy. "Fuck Dots, you get me so hot."

"Then why are you stopping?" I ask.

Dane grips my chin between his thumb and index finger. "There's something between us. I fucking feel it and I think you do too. I'm not gonna treat you like some beach bunny. You're so much more, Dots."

Holy swoon-city.

We spend the rest of the night alternating between getting to know each other again and stealing kisses until the sun rises.

EIGHT

Dane

“YOUR DAD LOOKED good last week when we went to visit. How is therapy?” Thea asks, as she snuggles into my side on the couch. Her hand rests on my thigh, so close to my dick I practically feel her wrapping her hand around it and pumping...

Thea uses the same hand I’m imagining jacking me off to smack me. “Dane, are you listening? I asked how your dad was.”

“Yeah, brah, how is he?” Anton echoes, wagging his brows my way knowingly.

I worried for a split second about the guys accepting her. We’ve always been hardcore with the whole boards before bitches thing, but she had them eating from the palm of her hand in five seconds flat.

Hell, I think they like hanging with her better than they do me.

“He’s getting there. He isn’t really loving the diet changes, but...” I shrug.

Anton grins. “Bet he loves your mama playing nurse though.”

“Dude!” Dots sits up and leans over me to smack him. “You’re talking about his parents!”

I tug her back into my side, loving the way her small body feels pressed into mine. “Thanks babe,” I murmur as I run my index finger back-and-forth over her hip bone beneath the waistline of her shorts. She shivers in my arms. “You cold?” I ask, even though I know she isn’t.

“No,” she whispers back, squirming beneath my teasing touch.

While the past three weeks with Dots have been nothing short of blue-balled-bliss—I think it’s safe to say we’re both ready to take things to the next level.

I meant it when I told her I wanted to treat her right, to do things right; but

I'm pretty sure if my dick could, he'd throat punch me. The only silver lining: Thea is every bit as hard up as me. We're both walking a wire's edge between taking it slow and jumping between the sheets.

"What are you two lovebirds up to tonight?" Brooks asks as he stands from his chair. "Y'all wanna come to a party?"

I look to Thea, who is shaking her head. "Thanks, but we have plans."

"We do?" I ask, wondering what they are and when we made them.

She leans in and kisses the corner of my mouth. "Mmhmm, we do."

"Guess we're out," I tell my boys as they both head toward the door. "Catch y'all later."

Once they're gone, I turn to my girl. "So, what are these plans?"

She shoots me a devilish grin before straddling me. "This," she says as she reaches behind her and unties her bikini top. My hands twitch at my sides and my mouth waters as the fabric falls away and her lush, full tits come into view. Her rose-colored nipples are hard and practically begging for my mouth; it takes my all to put the brakes on this thing.

Before I can question her further, her mouth is on mine, her tongue begging for entrance, as she tugs on my hair and grinds down onto my rapidly growing erection.

It takes Herculean effort to pull back from her, but I do. "Are you sure?" I ask, panting as my impossibly hard cock presses against her. I can feel her heat, but it's just a tease.

Nodding, she brings my hands up to palm her breasts. They feel like heaven as I massage and knead them, testing their weight before rubbing my thumbs across their tips.

She moans when I dip forward and suck one of the pebbled peaks into my mouth. "I want to feel you inside of me."

"Fuck Dots, you can't say shit like that." Because I want to be inside of her more than anything in the fucking world. Even more than I want to place in the Rip Curl Pro.

She moves off me and tugs on my arm so I'm standing up. "Why not? It's true. I want to feel you in me, around me, all over me. I want you to wring every drop of pleasure from my body, and then when we're done, I want you

to do it again.” A slight blush colors her cheeks. “Take me to your bedroom.” It’s a demand, not a question.

Her hair is mussed, and her lips swollen from our kisses—and while she’s always beautiful, she’s never been sexier than she is in this moment.

I guide her back to my room, pulling the door shut and turning the lock just in case. “You’re so damn sexy,” I murmur as I reach out and pop the button on her shorts. As she shimmies out of them, along with her swim bottoms, I shuck off my clothes as well.

I stand proud, letting Thea look her fill; I have a lot to be proud of and the way she’s looking at me has me hard enough to pound nails. She bites her lip as she watches me, and all too willing to put on a show, I give my hard length a slow tug and groan her name.

Boldly she grabs my hand and guides it to that sweet spot between her legs. “See what you do to me.”

“Fuuuuuck Dots,” I groan, when I feel how wet she is for me. Unable to resist, I flick my finger across her clit before sliding it right into her. She whimpers at the welcome invasion and rolls her hips. “That’s right, show me how good it feels when I touch you.”

I continue to touch and tease her, taking her to the brink of orgasm before retreating. Finally, when her legs are trembling and a fine sheen of sweat coats her naked body, she shoves me away and steps up to me until we’re toe-to-toe. “I need you to fuck me now. Please?”

If I thought I was turned on before, I was dead wrong, because Thea begging me to pleasure her has me feeling things I’ve never felt before.

Wordlessly, I fall back onto my bed, tugging her down onto me with a sense of urgency. I can’t wait another second to be inside her. “Ride me.”

I can’t stop myself from watching; she takes me in her hand before spreading her legs wide and slowly sliding down on me, every slow inch decimating my self-control. Watching her take me is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen in my life, and the feeling of her sinking down onto me is indescribable. It’s heaven and hell all at once. And when she starts working her hips, rolling them to a slow, sinuous beat only she can hear, I’m pretty sure I die.

We move together slow and gentle, like we’ve been doing it forever. “Oh,

God. I'm so close," she whimpers in my ear before pressing her lips to my neck and kissing her way up to my jaw.

"Let me get you there." I drop one hand between us, pressing my thumb to her clit. My touch is synced so perfectly with her grinding that she's moaning my name as she comes all over my dick. Her nails dig into my shoulders as she clings to me, her whole body trembling from the force of her orgasm.

She slumps against me as she comes down. "I think you broke me," she mumbles as I pump into her from below, turning our once languid pace fervent.

"We're just getting started," I growl out as my own climax rips through me. My lungs seize and my body shudders from the force of my orgasm as I pump the last of my release into her.

"You promise?" she asks as I grip the back of her thighs and stand, holding her body flush to mine as I carry her back to my bathroom so we can clean up.

"I fucking promise," I tell her meaning it with every fiber of my being, because while this thing between us is new, it feels like the start of something wonderful.

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OPENING UP

T.K. RAPP

ONE

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death. I had just rounded the corner, my bag slung over my shoulder, when I was greeted by a beautiful yet terrifying beast. Immediately I dropped my bag, only to have the dog's growl grow more sinister. I remained frozen near the elevators, watching as the massive German Shepherd looked at me like I was going to be the perfect snack.

As I tried to hold my breath, I wondered if, like a shark, it could smell fear.

“Don't move,” I muttered to myself over and over.

My body flinched a fraction and the dog moved closer, baring its teeth. No matter how hard I tried to calm my growing fear, the pounding of my heart reminded me that I was in trouble. The sweat began to bead at my hairline, and I knew that even if this animal didn't kill me, I would be maimed for certain.

The dog barked—a terrifying sound—and I lunged slightly, recoiling just as a strong male voice called out.

“Peggy! Settle!”

Almost instantly, the creature softened, its ears relaxing before it sat obediently as the man approached.

“Peggy?” I muttered as I exhaled a shaky breath. “I was almost mauled by a dog called Peggy?”

“I am so sorry, miss. Are you okay?”

I shook my head in disbelief, still staring at *Peggy*, wondering if she was about to disobey her owner and finish the job. I took a timid step back, only to find myself losing my balance, everything in my view tilting as I found myself staring at the ceiling.

“Oh shit,” I heard the man mutter just as two strong hands reached down

to touch me.

“Ouch,” I groaned.

As I was lifted to a seated position, I grabbed my head and waited for the throbbing to subside. The pounding was so harsh that I squeezed my eyes shut, hoping to alleviate the pain, but it ached more than a hangover. But at least a hangover was the indication of a fun night out. This was the end of an already annoying and terrifying exchange.

“I should report you,” I grumbled as I rubbed the ache at the base of my head. “Dogs are supposed to be on a leash.”

“I know. She just...”

“There are rules around here, ya know? If you can’t control your animal, perhaps you shouldn’t have one. And it definitely shouldn’t be running loose in the building.”

“She,” he said simply.

“Excuse me?”

“She. *She* shouldn’t be loose in the building,” the man corrected.

“What are you talking about?”

“Peggy isn’t an ‘it.’ She’s a pet—a part of my family.”

“Oh good lord,” I groaned, pulling myself to my feet. “I love dogs as much as the next person, but it’s still a dog.”

Peggy made a whiny noise as she lay down at her owner’s feet—an owner who I could only identify by his shoes because I was still looking down, trying to piece together how my morning had gone to shit so quickly. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath before fixing my eyes on him and he was... breathtaking.

It was the only word to come to mind. Striking green eyes. Light brown hair. Strong jawline that only paled in comparison to his muscular physique. What the hell was an underwear model doing in my building?

“A dog?” he repeated.

Peggy sat upright and he gently stroked her head as he leveled his eyes at me. I had done nothing wrong, only leave my apartment for work, yet I was being judged.

“Look, I can’t deal with this...with you,” I stammered. “I’m already late

and I really need to get to work, Mr.—?”

The man tentatively reached out a hand and I awkwardly accepted. His grip was strong, but warm and soft. I was never one to put stock in butterflies and tingles, but there was definitely something happening. Probably because for the better part of a year, I had been single. And I hadn't minded single life, but damn if he wasn't handsome enough to make me think I was crazy for settling for being alone.

“Wallace,” he said, still holding my hand. “But not Mr. It's just Evan.”

I cleared my throat, and to regain my composure, I pushed away the thoughts that had started creeping in and focused instead on my indignation at his dog running wild in the building. Looks and charm be damned, I was pissed that somehow *I* was the one being judged in all of this.

“Well, Mr. Wallace. Might I suggest that if you want people around here to leave you alone, keep, *Peggy*, on a leash.”

“I'll keep that in mind, Ms....?”

“Patterson.”

“Patterson? Rebecca? Apartment 302?”

A frisson of fear shot through my spine and I released myself from his grip, not having realized he was still holding my hand. I kept my eyes fixed on him as I reached down to grab my bag and took a step back. I had seen enough true crime shows to know how things like this ended.

The man began to lift his hand to stop me, but dropped it as he began to speak.

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you. I'm the new landlord,” he said quickly as explanation.

“Is that supposed to excuse you being a creepy stalker?” I shot back.

“I'm not a stalker.”

“Wallace,” I repeated the name.

Slowly started to piece it together. I'd heard the name before, most recently from the letter all the tenants had received a month prior. Evan Wallace was the middle son of Preston Wallace...owner of Wallace Properties. Owner of my apartment complex.

“Of course,” I muttered to myself as I started to turn around. “Just my

luck.”

“Ms. Patterson,” he said as I walked away. “Are you okay?”

“I’m going to be late for work,” I repeated absently as I rushed toward the stairwell, not wanting to risk being stuck in an elevator with him.

“But…”

I didn’t wait to hear what else he had to say because my new landlord was a beautiful animal-lover who had my brain completely jumbled. And he didn’t seem to care that rules should apply to everyone.

TWO

MY DAY AT the studio had been busy, thanks to a special promotion my assistant had set up a month earlier. Over the last several years, I had witnessed many photography studios come and go, but I had managed to make a name for myself and had no shortage of clients. My company had taken off early on, and my days were spent either booking new clients or photographing a scheduled session.

I absolutely loved what I did, because it was my creative outlet and I was damn good at it. A nice perk was that at the end of the day, I was able to do some of my work from home, editing images from earlier sessions. Sure, it made for exceptionally long days, but time was something I'd had a lot of since my breakup a year earlier. I was definitely married to my career, and I had an assistant that I had trained to be almost as good as me. That was enough.

Unfortunately, my workload had doubled since Hilarie, my assistant, had gone on maternity leave earlier than expected. She was in charge of confirming appointments and making sure everything was ready for sessions the next day. But more importantly, she was my partner at weddings and corporate parties—events I could not do alone—and I had a big one coming up that weekend.

Favors were called in, photographers were bribed, lots of begging was done—all to no avail. With every phone call, it became evident to me that I would be on my own for the upcoming wedding. I tried to tell myself that it was a doable task, but I found it hard to believe.

I had so much to do before the weekend while still doing my normal day-to-day sessions, and it was proving difficult with the added load of Hilarie's work. Regardless of the stress my job was bringing me, I needed some sort of normalcy, which included hitting the gym.

As I walked into my apartment, I set everything on the counter so I could

get ready to work out. Most tenants used the gym in the morning, so I usually had it all to myself, which meant my physical appearance was a non-issue.

I was in the middle of taking off my gold eyeshadow when I heard my phone buzz across the room. For a second I considered checking it, but went about taking off the rest of my makeup. As much as I enjoyed fixing myself up, I preferred the bare-faced reflection that stared back at me. My light brown eyes were in stark contrast to my olive complexion and my full lips, which I had inherited from my mother. There were times when I looked at myself and wondered which of my features I'd gotten from my dad.

"C'mon, you don't have time for this," I scolded, staring at myself.

I pulled my wavy brown hair into a messy ponytail and changed out of my fitted jeans and button-down shirt and into running shorts and a tank. I grabbed a bottle of water and was walking to the door when my cellphone buzzed in my hand. I looked down to see Shelby's name flashing on the screen as well as the text that she had sent while I was changing. I declined the call and walked out of my apartment, knowing our conversation would be lengthy.

The studio consumed so much of my time that having any sort of life outside of it was nearly impossible. Meanwhile, life went on for my friends, who were getting married and having babies. Even my best friend Shelby, who swore she would never settle down, was going to do exactly that. I had not delivered the news about Hilarie because Shelby was going to lose it when I finally told her that the photographer was going to be me—which meant that my maid of honor duties would be handed to someone else.

I opened the door to the gym and exhaled, ready to release all the stresses of my day, when I saw him—Evan Wallace—working out. He didn't see me at first, because he was on the treadmill reading something. I was about to leave when he looked up, and his eyes widened as he smiled at me.

He really had a beautiful smile.

"Ms. Patterson, how's your head?" he asked as he stopped the machine. "I went by your apartment this afternoon to check on you, but no one was there."

He looked for me?

"It's...fine. Thanks."

He stepped off the machine and walked toward me, stopping a short distance away. His smile was unsure, and I realized it was probably my cold demeanor. But considering our earlier encounter, I still wasn't sure my response was unwarranted.

"Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot. I really am sorry that Peggy scared you. She's really a sweet girl, but when she's scared, she reacts."

"*She* was scared?"

"I think she was looking for me. I was taking out the trash and didn't realize the door was open behind me."

"Ah, that explains the no-leash thing."

"It will never happen again," he said. "She's normally very calm. But when she gets anxious, she needs some reassurance."

"Maybe she picked up on my stress," I said half-jokingly.

"That's quite possible."

I scoffed playfully and pointed toward the treadmills. Evan moved aside and I set my water bottle on the holder before stepping onto the machine. He did the same and resumed his workout.

The room was silent except for the sound of the treadmill belts as our feet stomped in a soft cadence. I found myself wishing I had brought my headphones to tune out the deafening silence. I usually found quiet to be calming, giving me the ability to decompress, but this silence made me uneasy.

"When did you move into the building?" I asked, my focus on the door in front of me as I jogged.

"Last weekend. My dad asked me to take over the property. What about you?" he asked, breathing heavily as he ran.

"Me? When I did move in? You already knew my name and apartment number. Surely you know my history," I deadpanned.

"Ms.—"

"Becca. Please don't call me miss or Ms. Or ma'am or whatever title that comes to mind that makes me feel ancient," I pleaded with a timid smile.

"All right, Becca. Truthfully, I know every tenant's name and apartment number. But that's about it. And now I know you hate dogs."

I stopped my running and turned to face him. “Just so you know, I don’t hate dogs. I’m just moody when one sees me as a snack.”

Evan laughed and I stepped back onto the belt, increasing the speed as I resumed my jog, relaxing as some of the day’s frustration dissipated.

“Peggy is harmless,” he said.

“Okay, can we talk about this name? Peggy?”

“What about it?”

“Why Peggy?”

“What would be better? Cujo? Killer? Bruno?”

“Based on this morning, those are more appropriate than Peggy.”

“Peggy is disarming. You don’t feel scared when you hear the name Peggy,” he teased.

“Oh trust me, I will never hear that name the same again. If I see a little old lady and her name happens to be Peggy, I’m going to be prepared for her to beat and mug me, leaving me on the sidewalk for dead,” I joked.

Evan laughed and increased his speed on the treadmill. Never one to be outdone, I increased my speed and enjoyed the few minutes of silence that settled between us until he spoke again.

“So what do you do, Bec?”

“I’m a photographer,” I answered proudly as I started to pant from the increased speed.

“No kidding? I love photography. If I hadn’t been strong-armed into the family business, I would have done something fun like that.”

“Fun,” I repeated. “Yeah. Usually it is.”

“Usually?”

“Seems all fun and glamorous until your assistant takes a leave of absence just before your best friend’s wedding,” I said before turning to him. “And I think she is probably scarier than Peggy.”

“Your assistant or best friend?”

“Best friend. I haven’t told her yet that I’ll have to forgo one duty in order to fulfill the other.”

“Why’s that?”

“She’s pregnant.”

“Your friend?”

“No,” I laughed. “Okay, Shelby is my best friend and she’s getting married this weekend. I’m maid of honor...or was...and Hilarie, my assistant, was going to photograph until she was put on bedrest for the remainder of her pregnancy. I can’t be maid of honor *and* photograph the wedding...and why did I just tell you all of that?”

“Because I asked?” he questioned with a grin. “Don’t photographers help each other out?”

“Yeah, we do. But spring is a really busy time for weddings and we usually book a year in advance, so everyone’s weekends are tied up through fall.”

“So what are you going to tell your friend?”

“The truth. I just hope she doesn’t freak out because I really want her day to be special. And I’ll still be there, just not the way she was hoping.”

THREE

SLEEP DIDN'T COME easy and morning came too early.

Evan and I had talked until we were finished working out, and I had gone back to my apartment to make sure I had everything figured out for the next day. Shelby had called again but I'd sent her a text that I was up to my neck in edits and I'd call her the next day.

I'd had to buy myself some time to figure out how I was going to break the news about the situation my assistant's absence created. Shelby's wedding was supposed to be Hilarie's first mostly solo gig, and I would be there to help when she needed it. I hated the idea that I was going to let Shelby down, but the writing was on the wall.

My camera bag was packed, and I was ready to get to the studio to start my day, but I had to call Shelby first. I inhaled a deep breath, picked up my phone and was waiting for her to answer when I heard a knock at the door. I glanced through the peephole and saw Evan standing there, so I opened it.

"Can I help you?" I asked. He smiled and was starting to speak when Shelby answered the phone.

"Hey, Bec! It's about time you called me back," she said.

"Hey, Shel," I answered, holding my hand up to Evan. "Sorry. It's been crazy around here."

Evan waved his hand to get my attention and asked me to hang up. I was confused about what he was even doing at my apartment, but Shelby was going on and on about something and I was too distracted to pay attention.

"I'm sorry," I interrupted her. "Give me a sec."

"But..."

I muted the phone and looked at Evan. "Did you need something?"

"No. But you do."

"And that is?"

“Me,” he answered simply. “I mean, I can help you. With the wedding.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I thought about this all night. You need help, I happen to have a little free time on my hands for the next two weeks, until I officially take over.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Because my dog scared you? Because I don’t know anyone in the area besides you? Because I enjoyed your company last night...you pick.”

“Evan, that’s very sweet of you, but I can’t ask you to do that.”

“And you didn’t. From what you told me, you’re in a tight spot and I can help.”

“The wedding is five days away.”

“Then we don’t have much time to debate this.”

I looked at the phone in my hand and then up at Evan, knowing I wasn’t really in a position to argue. He was saving me from potentially ruining my best friend’s wedding and I had to accept.

“Hey Shel, sorry about that. I was just talking to my assistant.”

Evan flashed a grin and walked to the door. “I’ll be back in ten.”

And just like that, he was gone.

“So anyway,” she started, “I was saying that I have you and Hilarie sitting with Bianca and Kirk at the rehearsal dinner.”

“Hilarie went on maternity leave,” I said absently, before I thought the better of it.

“What?” The sound of pure terror was dripping from the single-word question. “Who’s going to photograph my wedding?”

“It’s taken care of,” I said answered quickly, trying my best to sound convincing. “I’ve already lined someone else up and it’s going to be great. I don’t want you to worry about a thing.”

Shelby exhaled loudly and I smacked my hand against my head. What in the world was I thinking? It took me months to train Hilarie, and with the wedding five days away, I only had four of them to get Evan up to speed.

“We’ll be there Friday night,” I said reassuringly. “But I need an extra room for him.”

“Him? Who is *him*? Is *him* good-looking?” she asked in rapid succession.

“Evan. He’s my assistant.”

“And?”

“And yes...he’s good-looking,” I said quickly, hanging up the phone with a laugh as I heard her squeal excitedly.

FOUR

“BECS!” SHELBY SCREAMED when she saw me in the lobby.

I turned to see my best friend happier than I had ever seen her in our eight years of friendship. She ran over to me and threw her arms around my neck, hugging me tightly. It had been months since we had been together, and this marked the end of our lives as singles. It would just be me...and *all* my married friends.

“Shel, you look amazing,” I gushed.

“Hey Bec,” Evan’s voice sounded from behind me, and I could tell from the wide-eyed look on Shelby’s face that she approved of the photographer I had subbed in for Hilarie. “I think I got everything. Where should I put it?”

“Evan, this is the bride, my best friend, Shelby. Shelby, this is...”

“My photographer,” she finished breathily. “I mean...hi.”

“Nice to meet you. Becca’s told me a lot about you.”

Shelby nudged my arm and grinned. “She’s left a few things out about you.”

“Okay. Anyway, I was just about to check us in,” I said before she could add anything else.

“Oh...about that.” Shelby winced. “There were no extra rooms. They said something might become available tomorrow, but we won’t know until the afternoon.”

“You mean, like, *while* you’re getting married?” I asked, unable to mask the shock in my tone.

She nodded and linked her arm with mine. “But your room does have a couch that folds out, so at least there’s that.”

“I’m going to kill you,” I muttered under my breath, and she squeezed my arm.

“Or maybe you’ll thank me,” she whispered with a wink.

“Thank you? I barely...” I stopped myself before I put her into full panic mode.

“Barely what?”

“He’s my assistant.”

She looked over her shoulder and I followed her gaze to see Evan picking up the bags, and she giggled. “You have the ass part right.”

I laughed at her ridiculous joke and shook my head. “You are impossible. Where’s Michael? I need to tell him you’re checking out other guys.”

“Not other guys...*your* guy.”

“He’s not *my* guy,” I argued.

“If you insist.”

She walked me and Evan to our room and sat on the couch as we unpacked the gear. Shelby went on and on about the wedding planner and the argument she’d had with her about the flowers. I would have been more invested in the conversation if I wasn’t so consumed with the fact that my landlord, who I had only just met days earlier, was going to be sharing a room with me.

“I think I left a bag in the car,” Evan said. “I’ll be back in a sec.”

He left the room and Shelby gave me her full attention, waiting for an explanation. I was in the middle of examining the equipment and making sure that everything was accounted for when I heard her clear her throat.

“You might want to take some medicine for that,” I said dismissively. “You don’t want to be sick for the honeymoon.”

“So...Evan’s sexy,” she said in her seductive tone, ignoring my warning.

“Assistant.”

“What’s going on with you two?”

“Assistant,” I repeated.

“Oh...yeah. He wants to assist you all right, and not with photography.”

I turned around and leaned against the table, crossing my arms over my chest. Shelby raised a brow and I mimicked the movement, knowing that I had accepted her challenge. She would purse her lips and I would do the same. She would cock her hip and I would repeat the movement. It was a

game we had long played; the one who initiated felt they had the upper hand on information, and I wasn't sure what Shelby thought she saw between Evan and me in the fifteen minutes she'd been around us.

"Have you seen the way he looks at you?" she gushed, breaking the silence. "Good lord! How do you keep it in your pants?"

"I'm a professional."

"I'm just saying, you're hot...he's hot...so, ya know..."

"Not gonna happen."

"C'mon, humor me. Tell me that you're going to make mad passionate love to the hunky photographer assistant."

"And why would I do that?"

"Because if you don't, James might think you're not over him," she said, any insinuating tone no longer present.

She had said the one name that I had pushed out of my mind since the breakup, and my blood ran cold. James and I had been together for a year, and everyone had thought we were perfect together. I suppose we were, until he decided to go out with his friends and cheat on me. I later learned that it wasn't the first time.

"I thought you said he wasn't coming."

"He wasn't. But then he called the other day and said his work travel had changed and he was going to be able to come," she said. "With his fiancée."

"Fian..." I started to say but couldn't manage to finish. I plopped onto the bed and stared at the camera in my hand before looking at her. "He's engaged?"

"I'm sorry, Becs. I didn't want to tell you, but I didn't want you to be surprised, either, when you see him tonight."

"He's going to the rehearsal dinner, too?" I asked, feeling deflated and hurt all at once.

"He flew in for the wedding. Michael thought it was the right thing to do."

"It's fine. I mean, we broke up a year ago, right? We've both moved on."

"But you haven't," she reminded me.

"Ow. That hurt," I said, glancing at her with a raised brow.

Shelby walked over and put her arm around me. "I wasn't trying to be

mean. You've put your career as a priority and there is nothing wrong with that."

"The way you say it, seems like you think there is."

"I just want you to be happy."

I hugged Shelby and smiled. "I can fake it till I make it."

Evan walked in with another bag in hand and stopped when he saw the two of us in serious conversation.

"Should I come back?"

As I looked from him to Shelby, I saw her eyes light up and I knew exactly what she was thinking. And, if I'm honest, I might have actually been on the same page.

FIVE

“ARE YOU SURE you don’t mind doing this?” I called out to Evan from the bathroom.

“Becs, please stop asking. We’re going to have fun,” he answered.

I liked that he called me Becs. Considering we were still getting to know each other, it flowed naturally from his lips.

I put the finishing touches on my makeup and stood back, looking at my reflection in the mirror. I had brought my favorite black spaghetti-strapped dress especially for the rehearsal dinner. Now, knowing my ex would be there with his fiancée, I was pleased with my choice. Shelby had convinced me to wear my wavy hair down, but my look still wasn’t complete.

“Where is it?” I muttered as I tried to find the piece of jewelry.

As I emerged from the bathroom I tried to keep a neutral demeanor, but that proved difficult when I saw him standing there in a black suit that was tailored to fit him perfectly. Until that moment, I had only seen him wearing T-shirts and running shorts, or jeans. But in that suit he looked like a model who’d stepped out of the pages of a magazine ad.

In the days we had spent together, his relaxed demeanor and willingness to learn had put me at ease. I had confidence that he would be able to fill in for Hilarie and give Shelby the images that would make her happy.

Evan turned to look at me and his jaw went slack. He took a deep breath and nodded once as he started to smile.

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” I said, walking toward him.

“You look amazing.” He grinned. “The ex is definitely going to notice.”

I held up the pendant and turned to face the mirror as he placed it around my neck. Evan’s fingers grazed my skin and I rubbed my arms as I tried to hide the goosebumps that I knew were forming. He was trying to secure the necklace and I couldn’t help but notice that we would actually make an

attractive couple. But this was just a favor and he was my landlord.

“Thank you again so much for doing this. I feel like such a weirdo asking you to pretend to be my date, but it beats showing up alone.”

“So what’s the plan?”

“Plan?” I repeated.

“Yeah. I mean, what’s our story? Have we been dating long? Am I a rival photographer that you have a love-hate relationship with?” he teased.

I hadn’t thought that far ahead when I propositioned Evan with the ruse of being my date for the wedding. James knew me so well that if we weren’t careful he would be able to see right through it.

“We just recently met,” I started.

“That part is true.”

I smiled and went on. “Truth. You might be onto something there. Maybe we should keep it as close to the truth as possible to make it easier for us.”

“Okay, so we ran into each other by the elevator,” he said.

“Yes, and your sweet dog Peggy tried to kill me,” I added with a laugh.

“She didn’t try to kill you,” he said, rolling his eyes.

“Details,” I scoffed. “We started talking and I learned you were my new landlord.”

“Sounds good, not too far off track. And you fell for me the moment we met.”

“Whoa...hold up. I fell for you?” I asked with a raised brow.

“Literally.” He nodded. “You fell.”

I started laughing and shook my head. “Absolutely not.”

“Look, I don’t think you’re in any position to argue,” he teased. “I mean, I am doing you *multiple* favors now. I should get some sort of perk out of this.”

“Fine,” I groaned. “I *fell* for you. Anything else?”

He was quiet for a moment before asking, “Are we serious?”

I turned around and paced the small hotel room and groaned. “Dammit, Evan, you’re right. This is ridiculous. I mean, what if he sees through this? A fake boyfriend? What were Shelby and I thinking? If James figures it out, I’ll be humiliated.”

When I turned to face Evan, his head was cocked to the side as he studied me. In the time we'd spent together, I had learned that he was not quick to speak; he was thoughtful in the words he chose. But the pauses while he figured it out were dreadfully awkward.

He closed his eyes briefly and then shook his head. "That's not what I mean. I meant, are we serious? Exclusive? Seeing other people? What's our status?"

It took a moment for my head to catch up and I exhaled, simultaneously relieved and intrigued.

"Exclusive?" My voice sounded shaky, even to me.

Evan walked toward me, placing his hands on my shoulders. "We got this. I promise."

I dropped my gaze from his eyes to the place where his hands were touching my arms. His grip was gentle and reassuring, which was odd, considering we barely knew each other. He must have thought I was uncomfortable because he lowered his hands and shoved them into his pockets.

"But there is one thing," he said.

"Yeah?"

"If we're dating, we hold hands and things like that, right?"

"I suppose."

"Okay, well, it's going to look weird if you get that freaked-out look on your face every time I touch you," he said, pointing at me.

"You're right." I smiled. "I'll work on it."

"Okay. So are we ready to do this?"

"No. But let's do it anyway."

We walked to the door and he held it open as I passed. I waited until the door closed and he was standing next to me. He held out his hand and threaded his fingers with mine, somehow comforting me with that single action. I had known him less than a week, but seeing his face every day, while I taught him about my business and how to use my equipment, made him easily familiar to me.

"Why are you doing this for me? I appreciate it and all, but I've just

sucked you into a whole world of crazy that you didn't sign up for.”

“If you knew my family, you'd realize that this really isn't that strange,” he said with a wink. “Now, are you ready for this, honey?”

“No. No honey,” I said as we started walking down the hallway.

“Sweetie?”

“Negative.”

“Baby?”

“I'll think about it.”

“Okay, babe,” he said, gently squeezing my hand. “Let's do this.”

SIX

EVAN AND I walked into the crowded banquet hall, where I introduced him to Bianca and Kirk. He and Kirk hit it off instantly, bonding over college football. Bianca excused us and dragged me over to the bar to get a drink, where we were met by Shelby.

“You look so happy, Shel,” I gushed, hugging her tightly. “I’m so happy for you and Michael.”

“I’m so glad you are both here with me. I can’t imagine tomorrow without you.”

“You know you couldn’t keep us away,” Bianca said. “And we’ll get back to you in a second, but I have question for Becs.”

“What did I do?” I asked innocently.

“Who is Evan and why have I not heard about him before?”

“Did you call me, babe?” Evan asked as he walked over, wrapping his arm around my waist. Kirk stood next to Bianca and kissed the top of her head.

I smiled up at Evan and shook my head. “I was just about to tell Bianca about us.”

“No offense, but my friend here has been very tight-lipped. I didn’t even know she was seeing anyone,” Bianca accused.

“Damn, Becs...are you ashamed of me?” he teased, and I wrapped my arms around him, hugging him tightly.

“Of course not! I just wanted you all to myself.”

“You two are so cute it’s disgusting,” Bianca said with a smirk. “Okay, so...how did you meet?”

I opened my mouth to speak but Evan beat me to it, spouting off the one lie that I knew she would see through.

“She fell for me the moment she saw me,” he said with a straight face.

I watched as Bianca processed the information, her face alternating from disbelief to annoyance almost in a flash.

“Like literally fell,” he said, and then laughed. “We were standing near the elevator arguing because she was annoyed that my dog had escaped from my apartment without her leash. She was so flustered that she tripped over her camera bag.”

“Now *that* sounds like Becs,” Bianca laughed. “Not an ounce of grace in that body.”

“Who needs grace when you look like her?” he asked, and my skin heated at his compliment.

Shelby grinned and nodded her approval. She was the only person who knew the real story about Evan, but I wouldn’t be shocked if she decided to tell Michael too. We just needed to get through the weekend without anyone else finding out.

“Don’t look now, but James just walked in,” Bianca said with a sneer. She was never a fan of my ex, but even less so after he cheated. When she’d found out he was invited to the wedding, she called me, irate, and I had to calm her down so she didn’t attack Shelby. Considering that Michael and James were friends, it wasn’t surprising that he would be there.

Evan dropped his lips near my ear and whispered, “You ready?”

I looked up into his eyes and smiled. “Wanna go find our seats?”

“Lead the way,” he said, taking my hand in his.

We walked toward one of the front tables and spotted our place markers. Evan pulled out my chair and then took a seat next to me, draping his arm lazily over the back of my chair. I was beginning to relax and took a sip of my wine when James walked over to our table.

“Looks like we’re sitting here,” he said, pointing to the chairs across the way.

My pulse began to race and I squirmed in my seat, but Evan began tracing lazy circles on my exposed arm. He leaned in and whispered something to me, but I couldn’t quite hear. When I turned to ask him to repeat the words, our faces were inches apart and he smiled before kissing the tip of my nose. I was momentarily shocked until I remembered that James was still looking at us.

“Clearly there was a mix-up,” Bianca said, glaring at James.

“Bianca,” he started with his sarcastic tone. “Always good to see you.”

“Wish I could say the same,” she nearly growled.

There was no love lost between Bianca and James; she’d practically hated him the moment she met him. Still, I tapped her foot under the table and she shot me an angry look. I ignored it, opting to lean in closer to Evan. He didn’t seem to mind as he held me a little closer.

“Hey Becca,” James said as he sat down.

“James,” I muttered evenly.

I didn’t miss the fact that he didn’t pull out his fiancée’s chair or even introduce her to any of us. I felt bad for her because she appeared to be very uneasy. She looked around the table, and I found myself smiling, hoping to ease the tension for her.

“I’m Bec, and this is my boyfriend, Evan.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Emily—”

“I’m sorry,” James interrupted. “This is Emily, my fiancée. Emily, this is my ex.”

Emily looked stunned, though she tried to hide it when she smiled again. Bianca introduced herself and Kirk, choosing to purposely ignore James.

“You okay?” Evan whispered into my ear.

“Yeah,” I said, looking up at him.

“Will you excuse us?” I announced to the table. “We’re going to see Shelby’s parents. I want them to meet Evan.”

We stood up and Evan placed his hand on the small of back as we walked away. The anxiety left my body as we got further from the table. I led us to the grand foyer of the banquet area and burst into laughter when we were safely away.

“You handled yourself well in there,” he said. “Gotta say though, the guy’s an ass.”

“He really is. I felt bad for Emily.”

“Me too. Did you really want to find Shelby’s parents or was that just an excuse?”

“I’ll see them later. I just needed to get away. Mind if we just sit out here

for a little?” I asked.

“Not at all.”

There was an elegant beige sofa on the far side of the foyer, so we walked over and took a seat. We were sitting closer than necessary, but I was okay with that, just in case someone walked out of the banquet room and saw us. At least that’s what I told myself. In reality, I liked the way my body came alive when he was near. I hadn’t realized the lack of that in my life until that moment.

I angled my body toward him and crossed my legs. “So now that you know more about me than you probably cared to, I feel like you should tell me something about you.”

“Like what?”

I thought for a moment and then got up the courage to ask the one thing that I had been wondering since we’d talked that night in the gym. “Why are you single?”

“The short answer—I’ve been too busy with the properties my dad owns to be good at a relationship.”

“Okay. Long answer?”

He shifted slightly, and though I knew I was asking something that made him uncomfortable, I didn’t take it back. He knew more details about me than I would like, so I wanted to level the field.

“I was with someone for a couple of years and it was serious. Or so I thought. But she decided that she didn’t want to be tied down and broke it off. I guess it’s a good thing I didn’t buy the ring.”

“You were going to propose?” I gasped. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It was a long time ago and I’m over it. I have my work. I’m good.”

“Yeah, I get that. But I’ve been reminded numerous times that work doesn’t cuddle up with you and keep you company at the dinner table,” I answered.

“You speak from experience.” He grinned.

“I do. But work also doesn’t cheat on you and break your heart.”

“That’s true. And it doesn’t look amazing in a little black dress,” he said,

glancing at my exposed thigh.

“Or make your stomach do flips because of the way it looks at you.”

I found myself leaning closer to Evan and wishing that we weren't faking anything because I wanted to kiss him so badly.

He's playing a part, I reminded myself, and my stomach dropped as I realized how true those words were. But before I could fully grasp the disappointment, he leaned toward me, grazing his hand against my cheek, and pressed his lips to mine.

It had been a long time since anyone had kissed me, but no one had ever made my toes curl. He deepened the kiss, his hand traveling to my waist, gripping me firmly. I held tight to his forearm, fighting the urge to wrap my arms around his neck. His kisses were urgent and set everything inside me on fire, so I was let down when he slowed the pace.

As we parted, I slowly opened my eyes and stared into his green eyes, wanting to kiss him all over again. His eyes darted off to the side and I spotted James's reflection in the mirror behind Evan's head. I realized the only reason he'd kissed me was because he saw my ex walk into the room and he was doing his part to sell the story.

James turned around and walked away, leaving me embarrassed that I had believed there was anything more behind the kiss. I started to sit back, but Evan kept his hand firmly on my waist and when my eyes met his, it took but a moment before his lips were back on mine.

THE EX-DYNAMIC

S.M. SOTO

ONE

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death. I knew coming here was a mistake, but the way Reeve Bennett is glaring daggers through me is far more hatred than I expected to run into when I took this job here.

See, I grew up with two of the NHL's most famous athletes. One plays for the Chicago Blackhawks and the other plays for the Pittsburgh Penguins. One just so happens to be my brother, and the other, well, that was the problem. I didn't know what Reeve and I were anymore, other than enemies. He avoided me at all costs, and I cursed his name at every turn. It was just how we worked.

Call it the ex-dynamic, if you will.

I knew coming here would be equivalent to me stepping on his toes. This is my first official job as a professional sports medicine massage therapist, and I took the job that granted me the best benefits. It was also the only team available. I wanted to work with my brother's team, on the Penguins, but they didn't *need* a massage therapist. Reeve's team did.

My brother, Crew, was the one who talked me into it. After applying to teams and not hearing back for months at a time, I'd almost given up. Until the Blackhawks. They were in a pickle because they needed someone for the start of their new season. I had planned on saying no because I knew who their star player was, and I just *knew* this would not go over well. But of course, I listened to my idiot brother. Crew made it clear that Reeve was over me, over everything in our past.

He was obviously wrong.

As the head coach introduces me to the team, Reeve glares at me like I've smeared shit on his favorite shoes.

So, yeah. One more step for me equates to certain death.

But that was what love did to people, wasn't it?

It was the death of all things good. In my eyes, at least.

“Camila will be here with us for the long haul, and I expect you all to treat her with the utmost respect. This is a big year for us. If you so much as feel a goddamn Charlie horse coming on, you give Camila a call. We were robbed of our trophy last year, and that *won't* happen again.”

After the head coach finishes his inspiring speech about winning this year's Stanley Cup, most of the teammates head back into the locker rooms after their successful practice. A few others linger, shaking hands and welcoming me aboard. Through the entire ordeal, I can feel his gaze incinerating me, damn-near flaying my skin off. Curling my hands into fists, I feel my hackles rise as I wait to hear what kind of bullshit he's going to spew at me.

From the second I walked into the Blackhawk's practice stadium, my eyes gravitated toward Reeve Bennett. That was just the effect he had on people. He made you want to look at him. Standing at a whopping six feet four, Reeve was all broad shoulders, corded muscles, and steel. His eyes were ice, but his voice was like melted butter, gliding through you. With shaggy brown curls and the beard to end all beards, he was the perfect combination of rugged and frighteningly gorgeous.

He dominated out there on the ice, even during practice. He had a gaggle of puck bunnies who were at every game, home or away, and he was every woman's wet dream. He was also my cheating ex-boyfriend. But that was neither here nor there. We all made mistakes, and I guess we were just kids, so I couldn't really hold a grudge.

That was the excuse I gave everyone else.

The truth? I *did* hold a grudge. I wanted to be here about as much as he wanted me to be here. But it was a job, and I wasn't going to let some asshole who'd already ruined my life once dictate what I could and couldn't do with my future.

I'm just wrapping my scarf around my neck to ward off the bone-deep chill in Chicago when I hear someone clear their throat behind me. I know who it is without turning. Hell, I can feel the tension crackling in the air around us.

“Of all the teams to choose from, you went with this one. Are you kidding

me?” His frustration is clear in his tone. Hiking the strap of my purse on my arm, I shoot a glare at him over my shoulder.

“If you think for one measly second that I followed you here instead of my brother’s team, you’re *dead* wrong. Just stay out of my way, and I’ll stay out of yours. We good?”

“Far from it, *princess*.” He snatches his duffel off the bench and storms away. Meanwhile, my heart is tripping over itself in my chest at the use of his old pet name for me.

TWO

IF I'D KNOWN working so closely with Reeve was going to be this hard and cause this much stress, I would've turned it down. He's a nightmare. The past two weeks have been absolute hell. If any of his teammates so much as talk to me or even look my way, Reeve is there, like the knight in shining armor that I certainly do not need. Then, he has the gall to get pissy at me as if *I* asked him to come to my aid.

He's driving me nuts. Point, blank, period.

I try to focus on the game, my craft, and any other players on the ice instead of him, but it's hard not to since he's in the middle of every play, every pivotal moment. Even with his helmet hiding most of his face, I can imagine the concentration there, written deep in those lines marring his features and the focus in his ice-blue eyes. I've never had the privilege of being this close to the ice, but being a part of the team changes that. Every time Crew invited me to his games, I sat in the suite with the families of the team. It's a great view, don't get me wrong, but nothing, and I truly mean nothing, can beat this.

Sitting on the bench with the rest of the second-string players, I have my bag of supplies on my lap in case I need it. The sounds of blades scraping against the ice and hearing the trash talk of the players are incredible. Hell, I can even feel the shaved ice spray my face during certain plays. It's thrilling.

I let out a gasp when one of the other team's players from the Calgary Flames crashes into the glass right next to me. I swallow. Hard. My eyes widen when I realize who it is.

Beau Crosby.

Three-time Stanley Cup winner.

Ice god.

Our eyes lock, and my breath catches as he grins at me. It only lasts a few

seconds, but it's long enough that the crowd notices. An over-the-top "ooh" reverberates around the stadium, and I feel my cheeks redden. When he skates off, diving back into the game, I'm left breathless. Glancing around, I suddenly feel feverish, even sitting next to the ice.

During the next play, when Beau gets slammed into the glass again, he doesn't immediately skate back on the ice and resume playing. Instead, he pounds his hand on the glass to get my attention.

"Dinner after the game?" That's what it sounds like he yells, and my mouth drops open in shock. He's not asking me this in the middle of a game, is he? Sure enough, he is. He skates away, to help out his teammates, but comes right back, waiting for an answer. My mouth is gaping as I fumble for an answer. I'm just about to do something crazy and respond when Beau is gripped from behind and dragged away by none other than Reeve Bennett. Reeve shoves him. Beau shoves back. And yup, that's how the first fight of the night breaks out.

Once both guys have served their timeouts, and they're back on the ice, the game is tied 2-2. But Beau is persistent. Whenever he gets the chance, he skids to a halt in front of me, awaiting my answer, and each time, Reeve looks murderous. So murderous and worried about Beau that he doesn't have his head in the game. He collides on the ice with an opposing player, and when he hits the ground, clutching at his knee, I shoot to my feet, my eyes growing wide.

Shit. If he's hurt, I'll never hear the end of it from him.

• • •

He's hurt.

That was the first thing out of the medic's mouth when they took the reigning MVP, Reeve Bennett, from the ice. He tore his ACL, which means I'm the one who has to put him back together, starting today. It's the first day of therapy for him, and I'm ashamed to admit I'm nervous. I can't see this ending well.

His injury could've been a lot worse, but luckily, the tear doesn't require

surgery like most ACL injuries do. I know my exact plan of action I'll need to take to help him on his road to recovery. I just hope he lets me.

When Reeve limps in on crutches five minutes late, I have a reprimand on the tip of my tongue, but when I get a good look at him, I let it go. I drop the items from my bag and run to his side to help.

He jerks away from me. "I don't need your help. Let's just get this shit over with."

I raise my hands in surrender and let him get situated. Once he's on the table, I roll up his sweatpants, warming his skin between my hands as I prepare for a massage. I try to ignore the way my hands vibrate on his skin. It feels so weird to be touching him like this again after so many years. I try to ignore the way fire slithers through my veins at such a small, innocent touch. He lets out a few hisses of pain, but for the most part, he seems to be handling it pretty well.

"Lie back for me."

He does as I say, surprisingly, and I get to work, stretching his leg just enough to keep his muscles trained but not enough to push him past his limits. At one point, I glance up at him to discern his level of discomfort only to have my eyes widen when I realize he's been watching me this whole time. At being caught, his face sours. Thick, silky, lustrous dark hair falls over blue eyes that are so cold; it feels like shards of ice are piercing my heart.

"This is your fault, Camila." He says my name with such venom; it slides inside my blood and burns. I try to refrain from flinching away from the truth that's there to be read in his eyes like the pages of a frayed book.

My eyes narrow with disbelief. "My fault? How is this hockey injury *my* fault?"

"Nothing like this ever happened to me before you got here. The second you walked through those doors, you've been screwing shit up."

"And what would you have me do, Reeve? Quit my well-paying job and be homeless?"

He rolls his eyes. "Always so fucking dramatic. You and I both know your brother would never let that happen."

"Crew has his own life to live. He's not responsible for me."

"Obviously."

I drop his leg a little too harshly than intended. I prop my hands on my hips and glare down at him. “That’s it. Just get it out. All the anger you have, whatever it is you have against me being here, get it out now. Because guess what? I’m not quitting this job. We’ll be seeing each other *very* frequently, so just deal with it.”

“You know what I think, Camila? I think this is all just a part of your plan to ruin my fucking life. You still haven’t forgiven me. You never have. I moved on—why can’t you?”

I scoff. “You’re damn right, I haven’t forgiven you, Reeve. I was in love with you, and you cheated on me. What did you expect, I’d go running back into your arms at the first sight of you? And who says I haven’t moved on? You’re not on my radar anymore.”

He frowns. I’m not sure what part of my rant has him making the face. “No, I expected you to want to stay far away from me. Why else would you take a job here where I am?”

“Crew said you were fine with it. That you were over the past. I didn’t think coming here would be a big deal for you.”

He pauses at the mention of my brother. We share a look, and he heaves a deep sigh. “Fucking Crew. The bastard never knows when to mind his own fucking business.”

My stomach knots. “So I take it you had no idea I was considering a job here, and you are not, in fact, okay with it.”

Reeve’s lips press together in a grim line. “That’s putting it mildly.”

“I’m not quitting,” I say, crossing my arms over my chest. “Let’s just get you better and back on the ice, and it’ll be like I’m invisible.”

He mutters something under his breath that sounds a lot like, “Impossible,” but I brush the thought off, knowing that can’t be the truth. I try to focus on my job, which usually is an escape for me, but working with Reeve is different. It’s taking all my willpower to focus. I have to will my hands to remain steady so he doesn’t see how much I’m shaking from just our proximity.

“How did this happen during the game again?” I ask, still trying to figure out how he didn’t avoid such an injury like this. It was a rookie mistake. He’s been in the hockey game for a long time, and Reeve Bennett has never been

injured. It's just strange.

"I don't know. I was distracted by you and lover boy quoting Shakespeare, all that fucking Joanie Loves Chachi, shit."

I freeze with my hand on his calf. Our gazes lock, and my throat works a thick swallow. "Why were you watching Beau and me, and not focusing on the game?"

If it was possible, his eyes would literally be shooting balls of fire at me right now. "You distracted the whole team, not just me. Don't let it get to your head," he all but growls, noticing the look on my face. He always did know me better than I knew myself.

I roll my eyes, deciding to let that one slide. We spend the rest of the session in silence even though I want to say so many things. Everything I know about Reeve's life now is only because I own a television, and he's still best friends with my older brother.

"I'll see you Thursday," I call out after him as he hobbles on his crutches out of the room.

"No, you won't," he grumbles, probably on his way to call the coach and beg for a different therapist.

Too bad, Reeve.

I was in for the long haul, whether he wanted me here or not.

THREE

I HIDE MY smirk when Reeve hobbles into another one of our sessions on Thursday afternoon, just as I knew he would. I guess his call to the head coach didn't work because I still had a job, and he was still here.

Deciding not to push my luck with him, I follow the same routine as Tuesday and focus on doing my actual job this time. I try to ignore the way my hands vibrate with electricity just at the feel of his skin beneath mine. His legs are muscular, his thighs large and powerful, and Christ, I'm sweating.

"Beau Crosby. You've got to be kidding me, right?"

I freeze with my hand mid-thigh. "What?"

"I talked to Crew last night. Found out you were going on a date with him before he leaves for his next game."

I clear my throat, dodging his eyes. "He was a gentleman if that's what you're asking."

"He is not a gentleman. He's a pansy motherfucker, and over my dead body will you date him."

My brows jump into my hairline. "So, you're forbidding me now? What gives you any right?"

"He's a professional athlete, Camila. He's not looking for a relationship. He's looking for someone to fuck. That just screams heartbreak for a girl like you."

As calmly as I can, I place my hands, palm down on the table on either side of him. "A girl like me? You don't even know me anymore, so how could you possibly know what I'm like? And heartbreak isn't an option. I've learned the hard way that not all guys are douchebags like you. There are decent men out there, and it just so happens that Beau is one of them."

His lips thin, fire brewing in his eyes. "You don't even know the half of it, Camila," he grits out.

I scoff, my nostrils flaring as I work to control my temper. “I know enough.”

“This conversation is over, and so is your relationship with Beau.”

“You know what? This session is over. Fix your damn leg on your own, you bastard,” I spew out in anger and whirl on my heels. I hear movement behind me as I stride away, and I gasp when his warm hand locks on my wrist, tugging me back toward the table.

He’s sitting up now, and we’re mere inches apart. The air shifts in the room, and it suddenly feels stifling in here, like breathing is a chore. My chest rises and falls as we stare at each other. Wills battling wills. I forgot how handsome Reeve is when he isn’t talking or being an asshole. His lips are plump, and I know firsthand just what wonders they can work on my body. A shiver rolls down my spine at the memories that suddenly accost my mind.

I find myself getting lost in his eyes. They’re the very hue of ice caps in the Arctic, rimmed coolly with a cornflower blue. The lightness there, the soft flecks remind me of summertime as kids. The way sunrays warmed our skin and glinted off our eyes as we sat outside with each other, basking in the warm glow.

“Don’t go.”

I look down at his hand still clamped around my wrist, and his grip eases, though he does it slowly. I can’t tell if it’s my imagination or wishful thinking, but he seems hesitant to let go. To sever the connection we haven’t shared in years.

“Fine,” I huff, steeling my spine. I turn my back on him, rifling through my bag that’s resting on the counter to make myself look busy. I just need a moment to gather myself and get my head back on straight. That was the problem with first loves; this is what being around them did to weak girls like me. I still felt like I couldn’t breathe like my heart belonged to him, because all it’s tried to do is rip its way out of my chest and into his feeble hands. I should hate this man, should be disgusted by his very presence for cheating on me all those years ago, but alas, here I am anyway.

There were a lot of things about the night I learned he was cheating on me that still didn’t make sense, but seeing as I was twenty-two and my heart was

broken, I wasn't exactly interested in digging any further into the greater details. All I knew was, the boy I'd been in love with most of my life, the one I had lost my virginity to and given my heart to, had broken it like I never meant anything to him. That was what I needed to remember during moments like these.

Not all the good times we shared, but the bad times.

And all the pain that came after.



The last few sessions with Reeve have gone well. He's already making great progress and should be better and back on the ice in no time. But even as his body gets better, I can't help but feel the pang in my heart. Once he's back to normal, that means his time with me will be over. And we'll go back to ignoring each other while pretending the other doesn't exist.

The tension since that day he touched me has only gotten worse. It's like that simple touch opened doors for us. Doors we both weren't sure we wanted to open. It was out of fear on my part, not so sure what his deal was. Every touch after that one has felt wrong, but oh, so right. My hands lingered a little longer on his skin, and the way he gazed at me wasn't just with a heat that was brewed from hatred. It was something else entirely. Something I was all too familiar with.

Each day felt like the tension grew in thickness. It was getting harder and harder to breathe in there with him. He made it hard to think. I could feel his gaze on me when I was working. He never looked away, and I hated that. I hated how he wanted to know more about me and what I've been up to for the past few years we've been apart. I thought for sure he would've confided in my brother or asked him about me over the years, but obviously, I was wrong. He knew nothing about what I was up to. And even though I was happy he was expressing interest, I was also hurt that he didn't care enough to ask about me before. It was like he didn't care at all. Honestly, I shouldn't have been too surprised since I was the empath between the two of us. I guess I just hoped that at some point, he'd regret ruining what we had.

We were good together. Not because I found him insanely attractive and the sex was incredible, but because we were friends before we were anything else. He knew me better than I knew myself sometimes, and that scared me.

When I took this job, I talked myself into believing I could do this—I could be around my first love and not be bothered—but I was wrong. I *was* bothered. Every breath we shared in that same room, I felt myself giving in to him more and more. I was falling back into old habits so easily.

And sometimes, when I looked in his eyes during those quiet moments, with my hands on his skin, I thought just maybe, he might be falling, too.

• • •

I took a little extra time while getting ready for our session today. Usually, I keep my hair pulled back in a sleek pony, so it's out of my way while I work, but today, I took the time to straighten it out so that it flows down my back. I even went as far as adding a little makeup. Normally, I prefer to be barefaced but not today. I tell myself it's because I have another date with Beau tonight, but deep down, I know that's not why I did it.

And I hate myself for it.

No longer needing the crutches, Reeve hobbles into the room, looking as handsome and as formidable as ever. He jerks to a stop when he sees me, a crease forming between his brows as he takes in the hair and the soft makeup.

“What's wrong?” I ask after he doesn't move or say anything. He's just standing there, frozen over the threshold, staring at me with a blank expression on his face. He shakes his head.

“Nothing. You look nice.”

I dip my head down, hiding the heat as it rises to my cheeks in embarrassment. Clearing my throat, I begin the session by patting the massage table, indicating for him to lie down.

“I have a date later. Figured I'd get ready now, so I won't have to rush to do it later.”

His body stiffens on the makeshift bed. “Please don't tell me it's with

Beau.” The coldness in his tone and the underlying warning there give me pause. Slowly, I glance up, and I’m taken aback by the rage I see there.

“Don’t start this again, Reeve,” I warn. “You’re not going to like my answer.”

He shoots off the table, stalking toward me. “He’s not good enough for you. Why are you so hell-bent on falling in love with guys who don’t deserve you?”

His words are a slap in the face. I press my lips together, frustration coursing through my veins. “You don’t know me anymore. And that’s so rich coming from you. You’re one of them!”

He crowds me into the wall, glaring down at me, his chest heaving. “You’re damn right. You were always too good for me. You were too good for everyone. But that didn’t stop me then, and that’s not going to stop me now,” he growls out just before his mouth descends on mine. A shocked gasp rips past my lips, leaving my mouth open to his ministrations, and he takes advantage, kissing me with an urgency like no other.

Tingles spread down my spine in awareness like no other. I moan into his mouth, my hands sliding around the back of his neck, tugging him to me. His plump lips work with mine in tandem, stirring lust and emotions inside me that I’ve long since buried.

Suddenly, he pulls back, our chests heaving, my breasts grazing his firm body as we stare at each other, our lips red and used from the aggressive kiss. Like two magnets snapping together, he kisses me again, and this time, he slides his hands under my backside, lifting me into his arms, and my legs lock around his waist. I draw him into me and gasp when I feel his erection digging into my center. He sets me on the table and continues kissing me.

I start stripping out of my shirt when it hits me. The reality of what we’re doing slams into me, and I freeze. Ice floods my veins as does shame, and I jerk back away from him.

“Oh, no. No, no,” I whisper. “This isn’t happening. This can’t happen.”

“Camila. Just let—”

My hand sails across his cheek, shocking us both at the sharp sting of contact. My hands fly to my mouth, covering my gasp, and my eyes widen. I didn’t mean to do that.

He rakes a frustrated hand through his hair. “Just let me explain. It’s not what you think. About that night.” My entire body goes rigid at the mention of that night. I push past him, trying to get away. “Camilla, Christ, just listen to me for once.”

I whirl on him, tears blurring my vision. “You cheated on me, Reeve! I don’t *have* to listen to *anything* you say. I loved you, and you broke my heart. I can’t let this happen again, don’t you understand?”

Reeve stops in his tracks, his lips thinning in a grim line when he sees the pain in my eyes. He hangs his head, resting his hands on his hips. I snatch my shirt, putting it back on, and I run. Far away from the mistake that is Reeve Bennett.

During dinner with Beau, my mind is elsewhere. I can’t think clearly, not after what happened with Reeve. He seems like a nice guy, but he’s just not what I need. And I hate that what I need is what’s bad for me. What I need is the same thing that destroyed me. My phone vibrates in my clutch, and when I dig it out, I frown at the unknown number.

Unknown: Talk to me, please.

My eyes slam shut. I know exactly who it is. Can’t he just leave me alone? Doesn’t he know the damage he’s caused already?

Me: Leave me alone.

After cutting my dinner with Beau short, I decide to head home. We make plans to meet up the next time he’s in Chicago, but I can tell it’s not really a top priority for either of us.

I shouldn’t be all that surprised when I find Reeve sitting on my doorstep, waiting for me when I get home. I blow out a sigh.

“Go home, Reeve.”

“No.”

I brush past him, unlocking the door to my condo. He follows me in, and I turn on him with my arms crossed over my chest, trying to hold onto the anger of our past. Because the truth of the matter is, he’s not a good guy. Reeve Bennett is a heartbreaker, and I know just how capable he is of destroying someone’s heart. I like to tell myself I’m over the past, but I’m not. I’m not over it. I’m not over him.

“Why are you here? I told you; what happened earlier was a mistake.”

He crowds into my space. “This, us, we’re not a mistake. You can say it a million times to get yourself to believe it, but it’s not the truth.”

“There is no us. And maybe we weren’t a mistake, but *you* made mistakes. Irreparable mistakes that can’t be undone. Now, please, just go. Find someone else’s heart to destroy. I’m sure there’s a long line of puck bunnies who are interested.”

Reeve steps into me, his scent infiltrating my senses, his warm body heat clouding my better judgment. His hand snakes around the back of my neck. My eyes widen, and I try to jerk away, but it’s a weak attempt without any strength put behind it.

“What are you doing?” I whisper as he leans in.

“There is no one else. Its always been you, Camila.” Before I can pull in a single breath, his lips are on mine. He kisses me soft and slow but with a finesse that tells of his skill, his prowess of women. I fight the kiss at first, trying to pull away, but in the end, I fall into him. I wrap my arms around him and kiss him back, soaking in the way he tastes. The way he feels and smells. I throw my inhibitions out the window, and I stupidly tell myself this is one night. One night to give in to my desires and fall back into bed with Reeve Bennett. It could be so much worse. I could be falling back in love with him. I’ll settle for the lesser of two evils.

Stumbling through my hallway, we strip out of our clothes, barely breaking our kiss to tear our shirts off. I tumble back onto the bed, Reeve hovering over me, his broad muscled body on full display. It’s been years since I’ve seen him shirtless, and he doesn’t disappoint. He’s only gotten more muscular over the years. His body is a complete work of art. I trail my fingers down his abs, enjoying the way they flex under my touch.

When Reeve begins sliding down my body and pulls my underwear down my legs, he settles between my legs and places a slow, torturous lick down my center. I let out a moan of pleasure, which only spurs him on. He circles my clit with his tongue, flicking and sucking. My hips writhe on the bed in time with the rhythm of his tongue. When he slips a finger inside me, I groan in pleasure, feeling my orgasm looming just on the horizon. He crooks his finger in a come-hither gesture that has me panting and my hips jerking

wildly. He's rubbing against something inside me that has me seeing stars. Something that hasn't happened since I last slept with him.

"That's it. You're almost there, aren't you? God, I've missed this."

I groan.

Christ, I've missed his dirty talk almost as much as I've missed him.

My orgasm barrels into me, and I cry out, my walls clamping around his finger. He slides up my body and seals his mouth over mine, swallowing my moans. I taste myself on his tongue, and it only makes my core clench with desire.

Reeve angles his cock against my entrance, and without much warning, he slides in, and we both groan at the pleasure that encapsulates us. He pauses there, his cock filling and stretching me in the best of ways.

"Fuck me, please," I moan, raking my nails down his back, needing him to move. He grunts in pleasure and pain, and his hips pull out, then slam into me. I grasp onto the sheets for support as he pounds into me. With his hands gripping my hips, Reeve pumps into me. He stares down at his cock disappearing in and out of me. His shaft is glistening, and I toss my head back and close my eyes when he changes the angle, stroking deeper. He's hitting that spot again, and when his thumb finds purchase on my clit, I feel on the verge of falling apart around him.

"Tell me you're mine," he grunts out between thrusts.

I shake my head, not wanting to say it. He knows it's the truth, just as much as I do, but saying it out, admitting that to him is admitting defeat, and I can't do that. I refuse to do that.

His thrusts quicken, and he strokes my clit faster now. Dipping down, he takes a nipple into his mouth, running his teeth over the sensitive flesh. My walls clench around him as my orgasm comes barreling into me, front and center, demanding to be recognized.

"Say it, Camila. Fucking say it."

I still refuse, and I cry out when he pulls out of me and drops back down my body, fluttering his tongue over my clit. I toss my head back and choke on the pleasure that's rolling through me in waves.

"Yes! God, yes!"

“Say it, Camila,” he grits, his voice on the verge of losing all control.

“I’m yours,” I groan in defeat. Those are the magic words because he slides back inside me, and this time, he takes no prisoners. Each thrust is expertly placed, and it’s not long before, I’m coming around him and falling apart beneath him. My walls squeeze his shaft, and I clutch onto him like he’s my lifeline, and I’m trying to stay afloat.

I feel his warmth inside me, and when he drops down on top of me, holding himself up so he doesn’t crush me, I allow myself this small moment of reprieve. Before the thoughts dissolve this moment. Dissolve my small bubble of happiness.

“Don’t do that,” he urges.

“This was a mistake,” I whisper, my bottom lip trembling. It’s come a lot sooner than I expected.

“It’s not, and you know it. Tell me the last time you’ve felt like this? Tell me.”

I look away because I can’t. I haven’t felt this way *since* him, but I can’t justify it either because he’s a cheater. I’ve become that girl who doesn’t know what’s good for her, and she’s fallen back into the arms of the man who broke her. The man who doesn’t deserve her.

Scrambling off the bed, I hurry to gather my clothes. I need to get away from him. I need to run. I need to—

I jerk to a halt once I have my panties and shirt on. My chest is heaving, my heart banging against the bones recklessly as I work to summon my strength. This is my place. I shouldn’t have to leave. I shouldn’t have to be the one running away from him. He needs to be the one leaving. Going far, far away because it’s blatantly obvious I cannot be trusted around this man.

“Get out.”

“Camila, wait. Just hear me out—”

“Please, Reeve. Please just go. If you ever felt anything for me at all, you’ll leave.”

His chest rises on a sharp inhale, and I swear I see pain flit across his face before it’s back to that blank mask. He nods, mostly to himself, then slowly rises from the bed. He dresses in silence, and I know I’m in too deep when I have the urge to reach out to him and make it better. I turn my back to him

and hide out in the bathroom until he's gone.

There is no possible or logical way I'll be able to face him at his next session. I'll have to quit and find a new job. I'll have to throw years of schooling and my hard work away just to steer clear of a man. A man who ruined my life.

FOUR

I DIDN'T QUIT, but I did let the head coach know that I had some personal problems to take care of for the next week or so, and that I wouldn't be able to make two of my sessions with Reeve.

"You look like shit," my brother comments the second I step over the threshold into his house. I shoot daggers at him. "I'm surprised the Blackhawks coach even gave you time off. Your job is to care for the injured players, and his best player is currently—"

"Are you done?" I snap, tossing my bag onto his leather couch. "I know what my job is. I just came here to shove my foot up your ass for lying to me."

"Me? When the hell did I lie?" he asks, tone affronted. As though he's actually innocent.

"You told me he didn't care that I was taking the job. I went into this thinking there wouldn't be any problems, and you know what happened instead? Problems, Crew. Huge problems."

My brother grows quiet and releases a heavy sigh. "What happened?"

Tears spring to my eyes as I think about what happened the other night. It was magical and hot, and everything it used to be. But we aren't the same. After kicking him out, I did what I've always done best. I ran.

"We slept together. And now...I can't have this, Crew. This is too complicated."

"What's the issue, Camila? Forgive him and move on. You both want to be with each other, but you're too stubborn, hanging onto the past the way you are."

My hackles raise, and I narrow my eyes threateningly. "He cheated on me, Crew. Your best friend fucking cheated on me and broke my damn heart! How can you possibly expect me to let that go?"

Crew makes a frustrated sound in the back of his throat and swipes a hand down his face irritably. “He never cheated on you!” he suddenly shouts. His words echo around us long after they’re spewed. I take a cautious step back, my heart seizing in my chest.

“He did. I caught him. How can you possibly try to defend him right now? Does your friendship mean that much to you that you’ll protect him instead of protecting me?”

Guilt flashes across Crew’s face, and he looks down at his polished oak wood floors. “He didn’t cheat on you, Camila. I’m telling the truth.”

I’m shaking my head. I refuse to believe it. “No. You’re lying to me. I caught him. I was with Maribel when I caught him and—”

“For fuck’s sake, Camila. He wasn’t the one cheating that night; it was me. I freaked out when you came in with Maribel. I was drunk, and the girl who was inside wasn’t there with Reeve, she was there with me. He took the fall for me.”

A choked sound tears from my chest as I take a shaky step back. My stomach drops and my heart clenches, painfully so. My hand flies to my mouth, and I press down, trying to hold in the impending sob.

“Why would he...? Why would he let me...?” I can’t even get the words out; my throat is so thick with emotions.

“I’m sorry, Cami. I really am. When it happened, I never thought it would turn into what it did. I never thought my one stupid decision would ruin your relationship.”

“You held me when I was brokenhearted, crying in your arms. You helped me move on and go to college and find my career, and not once, not once did you think to tell me the truth?”

He swallows. “I was still with Maribel. I didn’t want to risk her finding out.”

I scoff, an angry tear leaking out of the corner of my eye. “So you let your best friend take the blame for your mistake instead? You’re a goddamn coward, Crew. Mom and Dad would be so disappointed.”

“Don’t you think I know that!” he snaps. “I tried to fix things and make them right, but you wouldn’t listen. You were all, ‘fuck the world,’ and didn’t care about what I had to say. You did what you do best in a tough situation.

You ran. We tried telling you, Cam, but you didn't want the truth."

I swipe angrily at the tears on my face. "I can't even look at you right now."

I storm past my brother to his guest room he had made up for me. I fall onto the comfortable sheets, burying my face in the pillows and let the tears flow in torrents. Pain is rippling through my chest, sobs wracking my body.

I spent so many years hating Reeve. I spent so much time walking around feeling jaded, and they both let me. They let me believe the boy I'd loved most of my life had ruined us, when really, it wasn't him at all. It was my brother...and me.

• • •

I tense at the knocking on the door the next morning. I spent the night huddled under the sheets in the fetal position crying. I was upset with my brother, upset with Reeve. But mostly, I was upset with myself. Why hadn't I dug harder? There were things about that night that didn't make any sense, but now...now they do. I wish I would've taken a step back then and taken a closer look. Instead, I jumped the gun, pushed Reeve out of my life, and I ran away from him.

"Go away," I tell my brother.

He ignores me, pushing inside the guest room anyway. It's on the tip of my tongue to cuss him out for not listening, but the words die in my throat when I see who it is. Heat crawls up my neck to my cheeks, and my heart skids to an abrupt halt in my chest.

Reeve limps into the room, shutting the door behind him. He leans against the wood for support; his gaze incarnating me from head to toe.

"How did you get here so quick?" My voice doesn't even sound like my own. It's too vulnerable and weak. I don't know how to act around him anymore. For so long, he was the man I was in love with, then the man I hated. Now...he was an enigma. I couldn't help but feel like an adolescent teen, unsure of how to act around her crush.

“I booked a flight when Crew told me you were coming out here.”

“Bastard,” I hiss under my breath.

Reeve chuckles, taking a seat next to me on the other side of the bed. His presence fills the room, making it hard to breathe. We sit there in a tense silence until I can’t take it anymore.

“Why didn’t you tell me? You let me go years thinking that you cheated.”

He sighs. “I tried to tell you, but everything about that night spiraled out of control. One second, you were mine, and the next, you were on the first plane to a new college. You didn’t answer my calls or texts. I had already lost you.”

“That’s just the thing, Reeve. It doesn’t feel like you fought for me at all. I mean, how could you possibly be okay with ruining our relationship in order to protect my brother?”

“That wasn’t my intention. It just happened. Everything about that night got out of hand, and I couldn’t go back and make it right, no matter how badly I wanted to.”

My heart caves, a searing ache slithers down the center of my chest. “You ruined us. I’ve hated you for the past four years.”

Pain ripples across his face, and he swallows. “I know.”

Hot tears roll down my cheeks as I admit the truth I’ve been fighting every day since I walked away from him. “But I’ve loved you more.”

“I know,” Reeve whispers, pulling me into his arms. I fall into his embrace, soaking in the feel of his body around mine. His thick arms wrap around me, drawing me into him. We stay like that until I’m fresh out of tears.

When we pull away, he swipes under my eyes with the pad of his thumb and searches my gaze. “I’m sorry, Camila, for being a complete idiot and ruining what we had. I meant what I said, there’s never been anyone but you.”

Our lips collide in a kiss that I feel all the way down to the depths of my soul. It touches some part of me deep down that I haven’t felt in years. We stay like that, our mouths fused together, making up for lost time. I’ve never felt more at peace.

When my stomach growls, Reeve and I get dressed, leaving Crew’s house

in search of food. We stop at one of my brother's favorite dinner spots and grab two slices of pizza. Reeve and I settle next to each other on a rock in the park a few blocks down that overlooks the city below. There are people and families milling about, and a few stray paparazzi trying to snap a picture of the great Reeve Bennett while he's supposed to be recovering.

We sit on the edge, pizza in hand, the sun warming our skin, just like it's done so many times in the past when we've done this. Only now the scenery is different. We're different.

I let out a deep sigh, still feeling utterly unsettled. I don't know how to feel about everything. A part of me is happy that I know the truth, happy that Reeve isn't the cheater I thought he was, but I'm still angry. I still feel deeply betrayed. I've been lied to, cheated out of a relationship, and led to believe the worst of someone when it wasn't his fault at all.

As much as I want to place most of the blame on my brother—though, in fact, most of it does lie with him—I know Reeve holds a lot of the blame, too. He made a decision that night, four, almost five years ago, and decided to protect his friend instead of protecting me.

“So, where do we go from here?”

Reeve shifts, glancing at me, and my heart doubles over in my chest. I've missed this. I've missed him.

“We go wherever you want to go, princess.” He sets his plate down between us, and his hand slides around the back of my neck, drawing me to him. He presses his lips against mine softly. We both freeze when we hear the yelling followed by the snapping.

“Mr. Bennett!”

“Reeve!”

“Who is the mystery woman?”

“Are you really off the market?”

“Is she the reason your recovery is taking so long?”

Reeve and I pull apart from each other slowly, sharing a look. He's wearing that sexy crooked smirk that I've missed wholeheartedly over the past four years, and I can't contain the smile that takes over my face.

“So much for remaining under the radar.”

Reeve chuckles warmly against my lips, leaning into me. “I prefer it this way, anyway, Camila. Now the world knows you’re mine.”

THE END...FOR NOW.

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BOUND

A Fae Realm short story

CATHLIN SHAHRIARY

ONE

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death. She teetered forward, shifting her center of gravity. Her arms pinwheeled out, attempting to counteract her inevitable plunge. Thankfully, two strong arms wrapped around her stomach and yanked her backward, slamming her against his hard chest.

“Did you not hear me when I told you to slow down? Or were you under the impression that you know more about your budding powers than the one you got them from?” Evin hissed in her ear.

She panted, attempting to catch her breath despite the fact that she didn’t feel winded. He released his tight hold on her, and she stumbled forward until his arms caught her again, more gently this time. He moved to face her. Her chest still heaved from the adrenaline pumping through her veins. She’d had no idea she could move that quickly, and her misstep could have proven fatal.

Evin tipped her chin up and brushed back a lock of her auburn hair that had come loose from her ponytail, running his finger over the top of her ear, which had recently changed from rounded to slightly pointed.

“I’m sorry,” she huffed between gulps of air. “I didn’t know.”

“I know,” he soothed, the backs of his fingers brushing her cheek. Scolding her for a common mistake wasn’t helping, and her racing pulse told him how badly she had scared herself. Evin could remember a time or two when he had made mistakes while learning the boundaries of his own speed. Luckily, Reid had usually been there to save him.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead, smoothing out her breathing with his reassurance. As he pulled away, her hazel eyes stared up at him, shimmering with flecks that mirrored his own golden eyes.

“What?” Callie asked, reading the slight raise of his brow.

“Your eyes,” he whispered.

Her gaze widened, the golden specks fading back into hazel.

“There were glowing flecks of gold, like stars.” He marveled at her.

“Should I be worried?” She chewed on her bottom lip. So much had changed since she left for college. It wasn’t just starting her freshman year but also adjusting to his blood flowing through her veins; the magic that saved her from the brink of death and eternally linked the two of them. They weren’t sure what the magic would mean for her in the long run, only what Amina, the Djinn who’d bound them, had told them. He sometimes caught her eyeing him with that look in her gaze, the one that tried to apologize for shortening his life span. It didn’t matter how many times he told her he would gladly sacrifice more than those years for her to live, that the only life he wanted was one with her in it; he knew it still bothered her. These more recent developments had been a learning process for them both.

“I don’t think so. They’re back to normal now. Perhaps it was only because you were using your powers.”

“You mean *your* powers because that speed is definitely yours. I had no idea I could run that fast. How do you see where you’re going? I was terrified I was going to hit a tree, or worse.” She paused, glancing at the deep ravine into which she had almost tumbled head-first. “Everything was so blurry I had to stop, and it’s a good thing I did.” She shuddered, not wanting to think what one more step could have meant.

“You have to remember you’re part Fae now—that tumble probably wouldn’t have killed you.”

“*Probably?*” She arched her eyebrow.

“Let’s just say it’s best we don’t tempt fate. And the eyesight comes with time and training. It should develop with your speed.”

“You mean I could get faster?”

“There’s no knowing what your limits are until we reach them. For now, we’ll keep track of how quickly you move on campus... and don’t try out for a sports team any time soon,” he teased, his amber eyes tightening with concern against his caramel skin. His smile faded too quickly for her liking. “Seriously though, Callie—it’s imperative no one finds out what you are.”

“No one? You mean humans, right?” His silence made her heart drop. “Do you mean to keep me a secret forever?” She took a step back, putting space between them, and to Evin, the short distance felt like miles.

He yanked a hand through his coil of black hair and sighed. “No. I just ... It’s hard enough for me to trust two Unseelie with your secret even if they are your best friend and her boyfriend.”

“Ianthe would never—” she blurted.

“I know she would risk her own life to protect you and that’s enough for me. It is. I’m just ... I’m still figuring out the best way to handle having you over in Fae.” He sighed. “It would’ve been easier had Ianthe not used your name and pretended to be you when she was here last.” The last sentence was stated like an afterthought, but it struck her like a lightning bolt, igniting a spark of anger.

“Oh yes, let’s blame Ianthe for rescuing me from you.” She arched her eyebrow accusingly, knowing Evin didn’t like to be reminded of the huge mistakes he had made with her in the past, particularly the time he kidnapped her as a means to capture her best friend, Ianthe, and ultimately seek revenge on Casimir, the Fae who killed his brother.

“I’m not blaming her. I’m just saying I need to consult my father on how to introduce you to the Seelie king. By revealing who you truly are and how you came to be, we would basically be handing over Ianthe’s identity to her father’s greatest enemy.”

“Do you really think Lachlan would use her against the Unseelie king?” It wasn’t a secret to the Unseelie that Ianthe was their exiled princess, but Callie knew they had gone to great lengths to keep it from the Seelie king so Ianthe wouldn’t be used as a bargaining chip in a war she wanted no part of.

Evin sighed. It’s not as if he was close enough to King Lachlan to have a good read on him. “That’s why I need to talk to my father about it. He would be the one with the best idea of what Lachlan might do with the information.”

Callie stared down at the ground, unable to meet Evin’s gaze. “Does your father at least know?”

Evin’s lips tightened. He had hoped to avoid this conversation, knowing no good would come of it.

His silence pierced her heart like a fiery arrow, pain and heat spreading through her veins. She would not let him know how much this hurt her.

“Do you think it’s wise for us to be here then?” She threw her arm out, gesturing roughly to their otherworldly surroundings while taking a step

away from him.

“Probably not, but it’s safer than testing your abilities in the human realm.”

She sucked on her teeth, her tongue hitting one of the pointed tips as she did so. She gasped, raised her hand to her mouth, and traced her teeth with the pad of her thumb, panic flooding her body. “Evin! My teeth!”

He chuckled. “It seems your eyes aren’t the only thing changing.”

“But...but...how? What do I do? I can’t go back to school with pointed teeth. I’ll be labeled a freak! No one will want to study with me or invite me to parties. People will know something’s wrong,” she ranted, hardly taking a breath between each statement before plowing into the next.

When she finally stopped and glared at him, he knew he could speak. “It’s fine. You’ll be fine. It’s just part of the Fae thing, again, like your eyes. You know what I look like without my glamour and it hasn’t bothered you before.”

“Well, yeah, but that’s you, not me. I’m not—” She tried to pull the words back in, but it was too late—they had already escaped. It was the first time she had voiced any of her feelings about her transition to being part Fae. She normally kept those things for Ianthe, not wanting to add to the guilt she knew he already felt for determining her fate for her.

He opened his mouth to correct her, but then thought better of it. Her words struck a chord, pulling at his deepest fears and insecurities. “They may fade when we leave the realm. Does Ianthe have to glamour hers?” His voice was soft, but his golden eyes lacked their normal sparkle.

“I don’t think so,” she replied, knowing the second she was able to, she would call her bestie and ask.

“Okay, let’s get you home. It’s been a lot.” He reached out for her hand hesitantly, unsure if she would take it.

Knowing it would be best if he took her back instead of expending what little energy she had left, she took a deep breath and placed her hand in his. He lifted her without a word and started moving at the same insane speed she had been earlier. She closed her eyes against the blurring scenery, getting lost in her thoughts. She hadn’t meant to hurt him, but the truth was she didn’t know how she felt about any of this. Was she glad to still be alive? Certainly

—but at what cost? Sure, everything was new and exciting now, but what about when she watched her younger brother age and die while she still remained young?

Shivering as they passed through the closest portal, she knew they were back in Colorado. It felt like her senses dulled as they crossed back over, the air not nearly as rich and earthy. She shook her head slightly to clear the disappointment. Strange; that hadn't happened before. She wondered if it was another side effect of being part Fae considering this was the first time they'd crossed over since they were bound.

He placed her on the ground as they approached a hiking trail, and they walked back to her car hand in hand as if they were just another couple out for a midafternoon hike.

“I think I'll leave you here,” he said as she reached for her car door.

“Okay.” She was a mix of emotions, but the main ones were disappointment and regret. Usually he was adamant about taking as much time as he could with her when they had days off together, but now it seemed he was in a hurry to leave.

He lifted her chin and pressed a quick kiss to her mouth. Her lips buzzed with feeling, wanting more, but when she went to press them back to his, she only met air. He was gone.

TWO

“YOU’RE SUCH AN idiot,” Evin muttered. He’d been scolding himself all the way back to the Seelie palace.

“While normally I would agree with you, I am curious what you’ve done this time.” Maddock’s laughter echoed in the great hall.

Evin sighed. “I need to see my father. Do you know where he is?”

“Only if you’ll tell me what has your knickers all in a twist.” Maddock smirked.

Evin huffed. “I don’t have time for this, Maddock.”

He rubbed his hands together gleefully, his burnt orange eyes sparkling with mischief. “Oh, is it girl trouble? Has your little human finally decided to ditch you and find someone her own age?” Evin flinched, and Maddock’s teasing smile fell. “I know how much you care for her, but you know how it is with mortals.”

“You know nothing.” Evin hadn’t told anyone about Callie’s unique predicament, and he certainly wasn’t going to start with Maddock.

“Well, I’d like to think I know a thing or two about the ladies.”

“Really? When’s the last time you were in a relationship?” Evin retorted.

Maddock’s cheeks flushed, and he bit his lip to hide his expression. Evin sensed the self-proclaimed bachelor may have actually found someone to settle down with, but now was not the time for such things, especially considering Maddock’s penchant for burying the truth in innuendos and jokes.

“A man doesn’t kiss and tell,” Maddock replied, confirming exactly what Evin was thinking. However, Evin did know that with enough ambrosia, a certain blond guard would probably tell anyone who was willing to listen about what pretty girl he had conned into his bed.

“Never mind, forget I asked. Are you going to tell me where my father

is?”

Maddock pouted. “Oh fine—the last time I saw him, he was in the kitchen trying to filch some freshly baked bread.” As if to confirm his claim, he pulled a roll out of his pocket and took a large bite.

“It’s not filching if the cook gives it to you,” Evin fired back before spinning away from Maddock and striding toward the kitchen. He rounded the corner and bumped right into his dad, who fumbled a hot roll.

“Damnit,” his father growled as Evin quickly darted out and caught the warm bread before it hit the floor, then handed it back.

“Getting slow in your old age?” Evin joked.

“Oh, Evin. What are you doing here? I thought you were off today.”

“I am, but I need to speak with you.” His gaze darted around the hall, not wanting to be overheard. “Alone.”

“Okay, let’s head to my quarters.”

Torin, having lost his elder son Reid, had recently moved into the palace. Evin knew his childhood home held too many memories and was filled with more ghosts than his dad was willing to deal with at the moment, but he hoped his dad would eventually move back. It’d be a shame for his family home to go to waste. He’d stop by later and make sure it was being kept up.

They entered his dad’s apartment, and Evin sat down on the couch, noting that the blanket his mother had woven for his father as an anniversary present was draped across the back.

“So, is this where you confess you haven’t stopped seeing that human girl, the redhead who landed you in so much trouble before?” His father’s wizened gaze studied everything about his son’s reaction. He hadn’t become the king’s first in command without keen powers of observation. He could read people rather accurately based on the tiny ticks in their muscles and facial expressions, and his son was no exception.

“Not exactly,” Evin replied. “Why don’t you have a seat?” And from there he told his dad everything that had happened with the quanlier he had been sent to track, about Callie almost dying, the ancient ritual that now tied their life forces together, and the most recent developments with her blossoming abilities.

“Well, you never do anything half-assed, do you?” he asked when Evin

was finished.

Evin heaved a sigh of relief, glad to see his dad take it all in stride and not fuming. “So what now?”

“What do you mean what now? You have to train the girl, obviously. She can’t be dabbling in things she doesn’t know about or she’ll end up getting herself killed and you as well since you’re bound together.”

Evin stared up into the familiar amber eyes. “I couldn’t let her die, Dad. I just couldn’t. And worst of all, it’s not because I wanted her to live, which I did, but because I couldn’t imagine my life without her in it. It was completely selfish of me. I took away her choice in the matter and I’m not entirely sure she doesn’t resent me a little for it.”

Torin’s gaze softened. “I understand, son. I would have done anything to save your mother. If I’d known her pregnancy would lead...” He swallowed thickly, unable to finish the thought, but Evin could hear it echo loudly around them.

“She wanted a daughter so badly,” Evin soothed. “You know that. Being pregnant with a girl was the happiest I had seen her since Reid and I were babes ourselves. She always loved being a mother most of all and gladly paid the price knowing exactly the toll it could take on her.”

Torin nodded, blinking back the sadness that always threatened to overtake him when he thought about his sweet Indra.

“Besides, it’s best she wasn’t here for Reid’s...” He couldn’t say the word death. “She wouldn’t have survived that either.”

“You’re right. I just miss her, so believe me when I say I know what it’s like to feel guilty about choices you’ve made for others, but you’ve got to let it go. She’s here now, and that’s all that matters. Besides, if that girl of yours is like I remember from the brief time I met her, she’s got enough fire in her bones to give you a run for your money. Just be patient with her.”

“And what about the king?”

Torin scratched his chin thoughtfully. “I say you wait a bit. Let her get adjusted to being Fae before we bring her to Lachlan and tell the truth about how she came to be.”

“The truth would reveal Ianthe’s identity.”

“Yes, but I don’t think Lachlan will act on that bit of information. He still

harbors resentment for the Unseelie king after his sister's death, but not enough to take it out on an innocent girl. He may be cold, but he's not that cold. I know the rumors about his savagery suggest otherwise, but beneath his icy façade is a brokenhearted man who thinks love is a weakness a king can't afford. Besides, what's the alternative? Lying to him, which would mean treason and your head if it were discovered? Yeah, I'd take my chances with the truth."

THREE

CALLIE SAT IN her car, unable to turn the key in the ignition. She couldn't stand the way Evin had left and hated herself a little for letting slip the words that'd hurt him so much. It wasn't his fault she was now part Fae, not really. He'd only been trying to save her life. In her heart, she knew this was better than the alternative; it was just hard to adjust to so many changes. When she glanced in her rearview mirror, she didn't recognize her reflection. Her teeth were slightly pointed, and when she tucked a loose lock of hair behind her ear, she traced her finger over one of the now pointed tips. She sighed, closing her eyes and concentrating on her breathing.

Deep breath in.

Deep breath out.

In.

Out.

She opened her eyes and licked her lips, her tongue sliding across her now normal teeth. Evin was right—she was going to be okay, but now the force of her guilt about what she'd said slammed back into her. Maybe if she ran, she could catch up to him.

She climbed out of the car without a second thought and headed up the trail. When she was sure no one was in sight, she sprinted toward the gateway, this one marked by two large moss-covered boulders. She passed between them without hesitation, her only thought of reaching Evin—then she slammed into someone.

She bounced back off the hard body, hoping it was Evin but knowing if it were, his arms would have caught her before she landed on her backside with a painful thud.

“Watch it!” A redheaded Fae with blood-red eyes towered above her, smoothing out his cream-colored tunic.

Shit. She hadn't thought anyone else would be so close to the portal, she only thought of possibly catching up to Evin. *Why does trouble always seem to find me?* she asked herself as she stared up at the Fae, trying to figure out what to say to get her out of this mess. Based on the look of him, she decided she would much rather face off against goblins again. "Sorry. I didn't see you."

"Obviously not at the speed you were moving." His eyes narrowed on her before he thrust out his hand in what she thought was a nice gesture to help her up. Unfortunately she was proven wrong when his hand clamped painfully around hers, yanking her up and back against his body, her back to his front. He ran his nose along the column of her neck.

"Hey!" she protested as he sniffed her.

"You smell different. Not entirely Fae..." He inhaled again, his hot breath fanning out against her skin. "Not entirely human, not even half-blood... something...*else.*"

She shivered, his words freezing her blood. Goose bumps broke out along her arms as if the temperature around her had dropped. How could he tell she was different?

"I don't know what you're talking about," she replied, mustering as much courage as she could to calm the trembling of her voice. A breeze swirled through her ponytail as she attempted to wiggle away from him.

His grip tightened around her. "What's the rush? We're just getting to get to know each other." His nose pressed against her neck for another deep inhalation.

"Let go of me!" she muttered through clenched teeth, panic unfurling within her. She wasn't sure if it was the sky or her vision darkening as she fought his hold.

"What the—?" the Fae asked as a strong gust of cold wind struck them, almost pulling her from his grasp. The sky above them had turned a dark, stormy grey, and his eyes narrowed on her. "Stop!" he ordered.

Her breath came in short bursts, a foreign energy simmering under her skin. It wasn't like when she ran with Evin's speed and felt invincible. This was something else, something wild and untamed, matching her own emotions.

“No!” she yelled, attempting to jerk away from him again, assuming he wanted her to stop fighting him.

He spun her around to face him, moving to grip her shoulders in a painful, vise like grasp. She cried out as a flash of lightning struck a nearby tree, the crack loud enough to cover her own scream. He stared at her face, his red eyes swirling like molten lava, and she felt her energy draining from her as if his hands were pulling it out at their point of contact. He breathed in deeply, his chest filling, closing his eyes. When he opened them, pure fire glared down at her. “Sleep,” he commanded, and with her limbs pouring out what was left of her energy, she collapsed into his arms, sinking into oblivion.

• • •

She awoke in a strange room. It contained minimal furniture, but the quality of the décor still suggested wealth. The bed she was laid on was the softest she’d ever felt, and unless she was mistaken—based on the authentic, Baroque furniture dominating the room—she was still in the Fae realm.

“Crapola,” she whispered, slowly standing up. Her body felt sluggish and slow to follow her commands. She tiptoed to the door, not wanting anyone to know she was awake, then heard footsteps approaching. Quickly and quietly, she dove back into the bed and feigned sleep.

The door opened. “Seriously Angus? What is this?”

“I didn’t know what to do, Maddock! I was out by one of the gateways when she came barreling through and slammed into me at an inhuman speed. When I tried to question her, she gathered a storm around us—a storm! She could have cooked me alive with that lightning, so I pulled out some of her energy. I guess I must have taken too much, because instead of just becoming compliant, she collapsed. She’s different. I’ve never come across anyone who smelled like her.”

“Smelled like her? Excuse me if I don’t fully trust your sense of smell.”

“I don’t know how else to explain it. She looked human, smelled part human, part Fae, but not like Conall or any other half-blood I’ve come across. I figured the king would want to know about her since she was on our

land.”

Callie inhaled more sharply than she had intended when he mentioned the king. If he discovered who she was, it could ruin everything. She was in over her head, but she hoped Maddock might help her. They’d only met twice before, but she knew he had a soft spot for Ianthe and was willing to withhold information from his king if it meant avoiding a war. She stilled against the sudden silence filling the chamber.

“We know you’re awake over there, so you can stop pretending.” Maddock’s voice dripped with censure.

Callie rolled over and sat up, staring down the two Fae. Maddock’s eyes widened in recognition while the redhead—Angus, she assumed—glared at her like an equation that wasn’t adding up.

“Angus, get Torin,” Maddock ordered, steel lacing his words.

“What? Why? I brought her here—I should let the king know.”

“Don’t be an idiot. What if there’s nothing wrong with her? Do you want to be the one to explain to the king why you fed off an innocent girl’s energy to excess, abducted her, and brought her here?”

Angus blanched. “Fine. I’ll get Torin.” He turned and marched out the door.

“Hello, Callie. I’d like to say this is a pleasant surprise, but we both know everything that is in jeopardy with you here. Now, want to fill me in on what’s different about you and why a Lampir can’t figure out your scent?” Maddock pulled a chair over and sat down across from her.

“A Lampir?”

“My redheaded friend there.” He jerked his thumb toward the door. “He fed off your energy earlier, which is what caused you to pass out. You may still feel a little drowsy, but it will fade. I’m not sure how much time we have, so talk fast.”

“I don’t know anything about my scent, but remember the quanlier?” Callie carefully considered her words and all she had discussed with Evin, but her gut was telling her to trust Maddock. Ianthe trusted him, and he had helped them the last time she ran into him.

“Like I could forget the monster you two were tracking, especially after all that followed when I confronted Bronwen.” Callie knew there was more to

that story, but this was the time for her to share, not him.

“Well, even the best of plans have flaws, and unfortunately while we hunted the quanlier, it hunted me— only it was faster.”

Maddock pressed a hand over hers when she paused, the memory of that night flashing through her mind. His eyes glowed orange as he saw her memories.

“Gods, Callie. I’m sorry.”

She smiled at him sadly, sneaking her hand out from under his. While his comfort was kind, it wasn’t his touch she wanted. “Well, as I lay bleeding out, Evin took matters into his own hands and summoned a Djinn who owed him a favor.”

“He used a wish to heal you?”

“Not exactly…”

Of course, at that moment Torin threw the door open. “I’m going to kill Angus,” he growled, slamming and locking the door in one quick move before turning his attention to her. Looking at Torin was like seeing a future version of Evin. He had the same caramel skin with the otherworldly Seelie shimmer and black hair—although, his was longer, pulled back in a ponytail and greying around the temples. His amber eyes softened as they took her in. “Hello again, dear.”

“Don’t kill Angus. It was my fault. Evin and I had a little disagreement, and I was trying to catch up to him. I shouldn’t have crossed over into Fae. I just wanted to apologize, and I wasn’t thinking about what could happen, which was really stupid of me—”

“I know, it’s okay. We’ll figure it out. Evin was just here but then left, I believe to return to you.”

“Of course he did.” She rubbed her forehead.

“I take it you know what’s going on with her then?” Maddock inquired since her explanation had been interrupted.

“I do,” Torin confirmed, much to Callie’s shock.

“Can you explain how she has inhuman speed and managed to summon a storm?” Maddock asked.

“I knew about the speed, but a storm? Can you really summon a storm?”

His head whipped toward her, and his awed expression took her in with a whole new perspective, leaving her unsure how to answer.

“No!” she immediately retorted. *Is that even possible? I already have Evin’s speed...could I really have summoned that storm?* She remembered the wild magic coursing through her veins, echoing the heady feeling of the storm building around her. Her fingers itched, and her next words were barely above a whisper. “I don’t know.”

Torin turned back to Maddock. “Angus claimed she summoned a storm when he captured her, even had lightning strike a nearby tree. The only other Fae I know of that could control lightning was Reid,” Maddock stated, as if piecing it all together. “What did the Djinn do?”

Maddock’s question was a lifeline she clung to, pulling her from confusion into the known. “Now that I *can* answer. I was too far gone to use a wish, but she knew of an ancient spell to mix our blood and bind us together. She wasn’t sure of all the effects it would have on me. She knew it would extend my lifespan and that our lives would be bound, meaning if one of us is killed, the other will follow in death. Beyond that...it’s all guessing,” Callie explained. “But that’s not really the problem here. The problem is that if the Seelie king finds out who I am, it will blow Ianthe’s cover from when she was here last.”

“Aye, Evin and I also discussed that. However, I believe the Seelie king may already know more than any of us thinks he does. He’s not quite as aloof as he leads others to believe,” Torin replied. “Besides, our options may have run out. Angus may be many things, but he is not a great keeper of secrets. Even if we were to somehow get you out of here without anyone else knowing, I don’t believe he would keep anything from the king.”

“Great,” Callie muttered.

As if to confirm what Torin had just said, Angus slipped inside. His porcelain skin flushed a deep red. “The king requests all three of you to join him in the throne room.”

Callie gasped, and Torin shot Angus a dark look that had the color draining from the Lampir’s face. “I promise you, sir, I didn’t mean to say anything...I just...”

“It’s fine. You were only doing your duty, soldier.” Torin couldn’t really

argue with the young man's decision. They had been trained not to keep anything from their king. "Let's go, Maddock, Miss Callie."

Callie twisted her hands and rose on unsteady feet. Nervous energy racked her body, and a roll of thunder echoed in the distance.

"Where's Conall when you need him?" Maddock joked, gently guiding Callie with his hand on the small of her back in an effort to lend her some of his strength.

"I could—" Angus started to offer, but all three of them barked, "NO!" He wisely closed his lips and led the way to the throne room.

FOUR

A SECOND ROLL of thunder made Torin pause at the stairs. “Deep breaths, dear. The weather mimics your emotions when you’re not in control, and to master it, you have master your emotions. If ever I wished I had my dear Indra with me...” He shook his head briefly. “A century may have passed, but I’ll try to recall what she used to tell Reid when he was learning to master his skills.”

Callie was perplexed. Did he mean to say the thunder was her doing? Could she really control the weather? She took a deep breath in and out to calm her rising panic.

“If what Evin and Angus have both told us is true, it would appear that not only are you a Luas like Evin, you’re also a strong Aimsir, a Fae who can manipulate the weather.”

Aimsir? Laus? Her mind whirled. A Luas must be Evin’s type of Fae characterized by their preternatural speed. She rolled the word Aimsir around in her head. It almost sounded like *I’m shirt* without the T, which made her giggle, or perhaps it was the absurdity of how quickly everything in her life had changed. “I thought Fae were only one kind,” she said, squashing the giggles with her curiosity.

“Magic is an unpredictable mistress. When magical heritage is passed down from parents to children, usually one type is dominant. Some only exhibit the dominant magic while others may keep the recessive as well, but it’s weaker than their first.”

“And then there’s some magic that skips generations and pops up unexpectedly,” Maddock added in.

“So you only know which magic is dominant when you see the baby’s eye color?” she asked, trying to remember all she had learned from Ianthe about how to identify Fae.

“Well, eye color does often have something to do with a Fae’s dominant magic, but not always.” He scratched his chin. “What’s your normal eye color?”

“Hazel, but Evin said earlier when I was using my speed he could see flecks of gold like his eyes and yours. Why?”

Torin stared into her eyes, which were now fading from stormy grey back to hazel. It seemed their conversation had distracted her enough to calm her magic. “Well, after the roll of thunder, your eyes were grey, but now they’re back to your normal color. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

A throat was cleared, interrupting their exchange as Angus stood at the bottom of the stairs, impatiently awaiting their descent. The two Fae ushered her down, careful not to rush her and provoke another thunderstorm.

She hesitated at the grand doors, the breathtaking opulence of the palace overtaking her worry. It was surreal, like stepping onto a movie set or entering the Palace of Versailles. Before she knew it, they had entered a large room the size of a basketball court with high ceilings and ornate tapestries amidst beautiful wood accents on the walls. There was a raised platform with a golden throne in its center, and on the throne, studying them, sat the Seelie king.

He was an imposing figure with short black hair and tanned skin. He possessed the usual sharp, chiseled features of Fae, but what made him truly unique were his lavender eyes. They were lighter than her best friend Ianthe’s, but still the royal hue showed through. There was something about him that put her on edge yet calmed her at the same time. He didn’t seem like an aloof king, more like an expert poker player. But for a brief moment, there was a flicker of curiosity—then his carefully constructed mask slid back in place.

“You can imagine how surprised I was to bump into Angus in the hallway and hear we have a guest.” The king addressed them coolly, casually relaxing into his throne as if waiting for a long story to unfold. Maddock flinched while Torin merely rolled his eyes.

“I was just assessing the situation myself when we were told to come see you, my liege.” Torin explained.

“And what did you discover, Torin?” Lachlan’s lavender gaze drifted

down to his spotless doublet, which he scratched at with his fingernail.

“It seems my son has been quite busy.”

“Wasn’t our last unexpected visitor also due to *your* son?” His gaze cut back toward Torin, and there was a sharpness to his voice that sent Callie’s pulse skittering, though Torin remained unfazed.

“Yes, she was, and while you may feel differently knowing my part in all this, please consider that I always have your best interests at heart.”

Torin began explaining who Callie was and how she’d come to be. Callie studied the king while Torin spoke, watching the changing landscape of his face, how he arched an eyebrow or scowled slightly at different points. Once she even caught the brief flicker of an amused smile before he caught himself.

When Torin was done, the Seelie king rose from his throne and approached her. She swallowed roughly as he neared, and the sky darkened to mirror her uncertainty, causing his eyes to widen slightly.

He reached forward, tipping her chin up to see the light grey swirls in her eyes. “Her magic is strong...stronger than I would have thought knowing how she was made.” The king turned toward Angus, who was standing guard by the door. “Angus, you may leave us now. Thank you for bringing this matter to my attention.”

Angus straightened with the words of praise and left them alone.

“Now, about the other visitor...” The king withdrew his hands and crossed them over his chest.

Callie’s breath shortened, chest heaving, and a crack of lightning flashed outside. Maddock moved toward her, but Lachlan beat him to it.

He gently put his hands on her shoulders and stared into her eyes. “Take a deep breath, Callie. No one here is going to hurt you.” When that didn’t seem to have the effect he wanted, he added, “Or the girl you’re trying to protect. I won’t hurt her. I’m not mad at anyone here, not even Evin. In fact, I understand more than you think. She may have had those bloody contacts in the entire time, but heightened emotion tends to bring out our color more than we realize. When I last spoke to her, there was little she could do to hide the violet shining through.”

“So...you already know the truth about Ianthe?” Callie asked, her breaths

evening out.

“Is that her name?” he asked, and Callie nodded in reply. “Then yes, I already knew the truth about Ianthe—the exiled Unseelie princess—and contrary to what some may think of me, I have no desire for war. I remember what the last one cost.” His lavender eyes flashed with pain for a moment, and she understood what he’d meant about heightened emotions.

“I quite enjoyed her while she was here. Tell me, is she still with Conall? Is that why he left his post?” Callie nodded, her mouth opening slightly in shock. The Seelie king certainly did know more than he let anyone realize.

“I wasn’t sure after what she witnessed in the garden, but it does confirm parts of Bronwen’s confession.” He glanced back at Maddock. “Was she telling the truth about the Changeling then? I mean, it still doesn’t justify her behavior, but now I am curious.”

Maddock bowed slightly, eyes cast down to the ground as he responded. “Yes, sire. I apologize for not saying anything sooner. I felt it was—”

“The best way for us to avoid a war—yes, yes, I understand that. However, I wish you would give me more credit.” The king waved his hand dismissively. “I assure you all I’m quite content with things as they are, and if anything, I look forward to making the future Unseelie queen an ally.”

“But she’s not their future queen. She never will be,” Callie stammered.

Lachlan smiled at her sadly, knowingly. “Some fates cannot be avoided, no matter how hard we try.”

A commotion outside the door interrupted their conversation, and Evin burst through a moment later, a flash of movement before Callie was pulled behind him. He knelt before the king. “I humbly accept whatever punishment you see fit to give me, Your Majesty. Just please spare the girl. She had no choice in the matter. It was done against her will.”

“Rise, Evin. While I wish you had disclosed this information sooner, the situation is not as dire as you make it seem.” Lachlan suppressed an eye roll, wondering when everyone had started to think him so callous and savage.

Evin stood as Callie piped up from behind him. “I would also like to note that it was not done against my will.”

He swung toward her, grasping her hands. “What?”

Her gaze met his. “It wasn’t against my will, Evin. That’s what I stupidly

ran into the Fae realm to tell you. You have to stop blaming yourself. If I had been conscious, I would have told you to do it. I wouldn't have wanted to die and leave you. Sure, right now it's a lot of change, and I'm going to need your patience, especially with the whole Aimsir thing—"

She was silenced by the press of his lips, and his mouth swallowed whatever else she was about to say. She eagerly returned his kiss, wrapping her arms around him until a throat was cleared to their right. She pulled back and blushed, embarrassed to have kissed him so passionately in front of his own father. Evin, however, wasn't the least bit embarrassed. He looked relieved and smiled widely.

"So, we're okay?" he whispered, and she nodded before the king also answered his question.

"Everything will be fine. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have something else to attend to," he declared, effectively dismissing them all as he walked out of the room. He paused at the doorway and turned back. "Oh, and Callie, you're a Seelie now, so you're welcome at my court any time. In fact, Evin, the sooner you can bring her here and teach her some control, the better. I'm not sure if our villagers would appreciate another Aimsir ruining crops." He chuckled. "Or what the humans will make of the unpredictable weather in her area."

Evin turned toward her, looking her over with a raised brow. "Aimsir?"

"What can I say? I'm just full of surprises." She grinned up at him with a wink.

WANT MORE OF THE FAE REALM?

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Cathlin Shahriary lives in North Texas with her husband, cats, and dog. By day she is an elementary teacher, nurturing future book nerds and writers. By night (weekends and school breaks) she is an avid reader and writer. You can usually find her fangirling over books, authors, and TV shows (like *Supernatural*, *Dr. Who*, and *The Walking Dead*, to name a few). She still believes in the existence of magic and the power of love.

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SAVING AVA GRACE

JULIE SOLANO & TRACY JUSTICE

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This story is dedicated to our dear friend, Janett Gomez. She always gave us the confidence to continue writing. We could still feel her presence as we finished this story. Fly high, beautiful angel.

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death ... and now, it was no longer a choice. Time had run out. It was my last chance. My only chance. Tonight would be the night of The Obliteration. The night that anything and everything with breath in its lungs would meet its end. The mercy in the situation, for the few authorities who cared, was that two generations of vile prisoners inhabiting the island would never know what hit them. Murderers, rapists, child abusers, drug lords, all of those who had escaped the death penalty when it had been repealed at unification, would finally get their just reward. Death. The explosives had been strategically planted beneath the soil. The potent chemical cocktail loomed above the ceiling of grey clouds, waiting to descend upon activation. F-15's were stationed on a nearby carrier, ready to demolish any sign of survival. The Global Order had left no room for error in planning the destruction. No expense had been spared. Even the shoreline had been secured by the Global Sea Guard. In exactly two hours, Tabu Island would be nothing but a barren land of sand, cleansed of the sinners who once wreaked havoc on the planet.

There I stood, locked in fear, straining to see through the wetness rolling from my forehead. If not for my father, who at the inception of this island had been charged with engineering every facet of agriculture, I would not even know it existed. I wouldn't know of the lush green forests, the black sand beaches, the well-hidden pastures, or the secret underground maze of utility tunnels. Nor would I know of those babies who were born after the cleansing. The now young adults who, because of the sins of their exiled parents, had never known peaceful community life. Like the rest of the population, I would be oblivious to the fact that there was even an island off the southern coast of Old Mexico. I definitely wouldn't know about the holding chamber I was trying to break into. And I most certainly wouldn't know about her.

Rapidly working to disable the power to the security gate, my fingers raced, and my mind flashed back to the first time I ever saw her, the spicy, brown-haired, brown-eyed girl. It was my maiden trip to the island, the summer before my freshman year. Father had decided it was time to begin my Ag apprenticeship; though many years had passed, it seemed like yesterday.

I could still picture a dainty girl bobbing in the water trying to catch a wave on an old piece of driftwood. Curious to see another person my age on the island, I parted the tall grass behind which I was hiding and strained to get a closer look. Even amidst my current struggle to get to her, I worked to stifle my laughter, remembering how the old log popped through the back of her legs and thumped her upside the head. The stubborn look on her face as she picked it up and slammed it back into the water still ignited a thrill inside of me that I'd never known before her. Never known since. Yet at the same time the charge surged through me, I was haunted by the fact that if I didn't work fast enough, I would never feel that sensation again. Nor would I ever feel the warmth of her living body next to mine.

Shaking the memory, I refocused my sights on the grid before me. One wrong move and the laser would take my entire hand. I held my breath and steadied my hold as I clipped the final wire. Retreating from the tiny explosion, I dropped to the ground as sparks flew and the lights dimmed. The mud squishing between my fingers was a thankful reminder that I still had a hand at the end of my arm. The darkness of the chamber was intimidating, but there was no way I could've saved the lights and gotten through to her without being detected by the roboguards. It helped that I'd been there a hundred times. I knew the counts. I knew the turns. The dips. The rises. All that was left was to get through that gate. I could get to her. I could save her. I knew I could.

As I trudged through the sludge, my mind raced. With all the hype about shared global resources, lack of funding, and the New World Order, I knew this day would come. It was a secret pact of the top officials that those castoffs sentenced to Tabu and other such islands would be the first to go. Their escape from the islands and possible integration back into society was a moral burden and threat to the new peace. The security of these facilities was also a huge cost to bear and the secret was nearly impossible to keep. The

guards. The droids. Military. All of those resources could be put to better use in the Co-op. The top officials involved in The Obliteration couldn't have cared less about a generation of innocents born on the island, young adults who had never done anything to harm anyone. Guiltless offspring whose only sins were to be born of sinners. Girls like Ava Grace.

She was the reason I was here now risking my life. The reason I came back every summer, pretending I had an interest in learning my father's work. The reason I had studied every integral detail of the island's prison system, the secret entrances, exits, and holding chambers. She was the reason I had befriended the staff, doctors, agriculturalists, maintenance crew, or anyone who played a key role in the survival of the island's inhabitants. Anyone who could get me closer to her. The guards became part of my inner circle. Their schedules, hangouts, and personal lives were all at my disposal. I learned their strengths and especially their weaknesses.

The day I was working in the culvert and overheard their decision was the day I realized time was up. I'd always thought when Ava and I were old enough, I'd strike some kind of deal with the committee to get her off the island and bring her home with me, but now it was too late for that. I had to focus on the Order's plans of destruction and come up with a way to sneak her out before it was too late. There was no other way to save her.

My path had been chosen for me. Rather than working in agriculture like my father, I had negotiated a role in documentation and security at Tabu. Little did the officials know I was working with them so when the time came, I would stand a small chance against them. Lucky for me, my years of patience and plotting afforded me the knowledge and ability to create for her an identity outside of Tabu. One that she could take with her, if I was lucky enough to break her out in time. I just hoped my years of infiltrating the system would be enough to save her.

"Go," I grunted to myself after struggling to raise the gate high enough to squeeze through. My breathing was heavy and my legs were shaking and fatigued from battling the heavy barrier. As I struggled, I second-guessed cutting the electricity before trying to raise it, but that would have certainly set off more alarms. I couldn't afford the time it would've taken for an interrogation. The odds of me making it through were already slim to none. Exhausted wasn't a strong enough word for the weight of what I was feeling.

The only thing that kept me putting one foot in front of the other was the image of her sitting in the chamber, not knowing these were her final hours of life. The voices in my head were telling me to move quickly. Time was working against me. I had to get to my Ava Grace.

Panting my way through the dark corridor, my thoughts drifted back to the ocean. Even back then I came up with a plan after watching her with the driftwood that day. In my fifteen-year-old mind, it was brilliant. I would grab some baling twine from my father's Ag shop and bring it to her. We would use it to tie a bunch of logs together and make a small raft. Maybe, if I played my cards right, I could make a cute friend to spend those long, summer days with. Father was so busy every day that I often found myself sneaking out on solo adventures while he studied blueprints and did work that I didn't care to understand. It was boring and I wanted to have some fun. I knew I was there to learn, but that would come in time. If I gave him a couple of hours every morning, I could run off after lunch and explore.

When I first popped out from behind the tall grass, I hadn't thought much about the fact that to her I was a stranger. It wasn't until all five feet and 105 pounds of her took a leaping dive right into my chest that I understood the element of surprise and the power of adrenaline. Thinking back on it, maybe she had never seen a civilized boy her age.

"So, you think you can sneak up on an unsuspecting girl, do you?" a raspy voice pierced the side of my neck. Struggling to catch my breath, I tried to maneuver out from under her. The little ball of fire had a tight grip on my hair with one hand while pinning my neck beneath her strong forearm with the other. Stunned motionless by the feisty girl, she grabbed my wrists and easily forced them to the ground. Leaning in, she huffed quietly into my ear, "Who the hell are you, and why are you spying on me?"

Though the weight of her tiny frame barely registered, the pain of her fingernails digging into my skin left me wanting to toss her to the ground. It wouldn't have taken much to send her soaring, but for some reason, my instinct was to take it. Not to harm her, but to protect her. Protect both of us. For as brave as she tried to appear, the tremble of her body was a silent signal that the adrenaline was waning, and her toughness was only an act. I could tell she was about to scream. Maybe she thought I was one of the prisoners. I knew I only had seconds to make her realize that I wasn't a threat. If I didn't

get her off me quickly, her hollering could alert any number of felons to our whereabouts. Or even worse, the guards who stood watch just beyond the shoreline.

I had two choices. I could die at the hands of some convict, who had probably already murdered a half-dozen people. Or, I could be hauled off by the guards and taken back to my father, who would undoubtedly revoke my privileges. Though I had access to the officials' unrestricted zones, I wasn't allowed to cause trouble. Making one of the guard's daughters scream in fear would mean no more afternoon getaways, no secret coves to explore, and no getting to know the little firecracker who would most definitely be the ticket to an unforgettable summer.

Mustering a pleading face, I mouthed a silent, "Shhh," and a long-drawn, "pleeease." Then pinching my eyes closed, I manufactured a small grin. I whispered calmly, "I'll explain who I am as soon as you loosen your grip." Still hesitant to loosen her hold, I added, "I'm not one of them. Trust me." Her expression revealed that her trust was something to be earned, not given freely. It wasn't until I whispered again, "You've got to trust me. You scream and we're both dead," that she loosened her grip and slowly began to rise from my chest.

Knowing that I had just saved us both from certain detainment, I took a deep breath and released it slowly. Still pinned beneath her, I raised my head a bit and tipped it in the direction of the tall grass. It was a quiet signal that we needed to hurry up and get off the beach. I was free to be there, but after taking a closer look at her, it was obvious that she was no guard's daughter. Her long hair was everywhere, and her clothes were definitely not from any boutique my mom ever dragged me into. She had a more natural beauty to her. Her tan cheeks rosy from the sun, and a hint of plumeria scent wafted from her sun-kissed skin. It wasn't a strong perfume like the ones worn by the girls back home. It was more like she'd been playing in a bed of tropical flowers.

Staring up at her round, brown eyes, I couldn't help but wonder what her story was. How on Earth did a girl my age end up in a place like this? I knew one thing; I couldn't be seen talking to her. I was no fool. It wasn't hard to see our meeting could mean trouble for both of us. She was, without a doubt, trespassing on restricted land. I wanted to take her to a safe place where we

could talk without being overheard. With a little more coaxing and a few more promises that I wouldn't hurt her, she finally agreed to come with me.

As her cool, wet body lifted from mine, I was drawn from my wonderment. The feel of her weight pulling away from me was suddenly replaced by a little spike of heat that exploded deep within my belly. Maybe it was the scent of plumerias, or maybe it was just the new feeling of a girl straddling my hips. The dizzying sensation hit me with surprising force when she grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet. I'd never felt a zing like that before. Actually, I'd never really had a girl my age touch me in any way. I was surprised at what it did to my body. I had to think fast and come up with something to say. Something to distract her from the crazy reaction that was happening below my belly.

Feeling relief that I had somehow gotten through to her, I mumbled, "I could tell you were a smart one."

"Damn straight," she affirmed. That's when I felt something sharp poke at the small of my back. Leaning into my ear she warned, "Don't do anything stupid, and you might live to see tomorrow." The warmth from her body began to heat my arm as she pulled me in close. Then quickly, she nudged me to the meadow of tall grass. Still feeling the small stabbing pain of whatever she was holding against me, I walked in line with her until she was ready to release her hold.

Moments later we found a small clearing where she pushed me to the ground. Without breaking eye contact, she sat before me. That's when she revealed the roughly shaped spearhead she had been holding to my back. She had fashioned it into a dagger, and something told me if I made one false move, she wouldn't be afraid to use it. For what seemed like five minutes, we sat, staring in silence as the dagger tick-tocked in front of me. Finally she said, "You wanted to talk ... talk."

For some reason, the threat of the crude weapon waving in front of me had me tongue-tied. She must have sensed my distress because she eased it onto her lap and said, "Fine, I'll start. I'm Ava. Ava Grace. Haven't seen you around here before and I know everyone."

"I'm Noah," I held out my hand to shake hers.

As my hand moved toward her, she jumped back, simultaneously thrusting

the dagger toward my chest. “What’re you doing?” she demanded.

Holding both hands up, I tried to talk her down. “Look, I’m just trying to shake your hand.”

Her blank stare told me she was confused. If I didn’t know it already, now it was obvious this girl was one of the islanders. Of course she didn’t know what a handshake was. She was uncivilized. My father had told me all about the prisoners and how dangerous it was to cross into the high-security areas on the island. If I ever ran into a prisoner, it would mean certain death. I never dreamed someone my age could be one of them. But if she was a prisoner, what was she doing in a restricted area?

My body began to tremble when I realized the danger of the situation. Lord only knew what she had done to be exiled. Maybe she had killed one of her classmates. Or worse, she could be one of those teens who went crazy and murdered her entire family. I started to back away. In fact, I began to turn so I could bolt in the other direction.

“Wait!” she called out. “Don’t go!”

The desperation in her voice stopped me from racing back to my father. Slowly, I turned around and looked at her pleading eyes.

“You can’t tell on me. They’ll put me back in the holding chamber ... just like last time.”

“Holding chamber?”

“Yeah, where they put all the kids who mess up.”

“All of you? There are more of you?” I was shocked to think of all the teenagers who had committed the types of crimes that would exile them to Tabu Island. She must have read my troubled expression.

“I’m not a dangerous criminal, if that’s what you’re thinking.” She looked me up and down as though she was reading everything about me. My thoughts. My body language. My soul. “You’re one of those brainwashed official’s brats, aren’t you?”

I couldn’t help but stare, mesmerized by what I was seeing. Was this girl for real? She had her chance to let me go, and she called me back just to insult me? I was ready to give her a piece of my mind when she spoke again.

“I didn’t do anything wrong, you know. I was born here. An unfortunate side effect of exile. The Order’s plan never accounted for the kids who

weren't born yet. That's just one of the things they overlooked with their brilliant plan. So, are you gonna judge me? Or do you want to hear the real story?"

• • •

Ava Grace could tell a tale, that was for sure. I was captivated by her every word as she told me how her parents ended up on Tabu Island. Back in the early thirties, after the old constitution had been deemed unfit for global society, all amendments had been repealed. There were no more freedoms, including the right to bear arms. The streets were wild. There were riots. Looting. Mass pandemonium across the country. The new government hadn't yet gained complete control. That's when the home of Ava's parents was raided by the local police. They were conducting search and seizure of all illegal weapons. Apparently, one of the officers who'd had an attraction to Ava's mom, thought he would have his way with her during the chaos of the raid. As her mom struggled on the kitchen floor, pinned by the officer who thought she was there alone, her father quietly grabbed a gun he'd hidden in the freezer and shot him from behind. Her mother had stabbed him just seconds before, buying her father just enough time to get to the gun.

For obvious reasons, they weren't given a fair trial. They were barely given a trial at all. Weapons had been outlawed for all civilians. Anyone caught with a gun, knife, or explosive of any kind was automatically charged with a felony. The bottom line was, Ava's parents had used an illegal firearm to kill an officer. It was not judged as self-defense. It was murder. A capital felony. Automatic exile. That's how they had become prisoners of the island. Tossed out. Thrown away as though they never existed.

Life on the island sounded threatening for a young girl. Fourteen-year-old Ava Grace was constantly in danger from malicious criminals. There were those who eyed her when she walked by, waiting for the opportunity to get her alone. Her parents took every precaution to protect her, including teaching her self-defense and weapons handling. Not only did they strengthen her defenses, but her parents made it their mission to help the

island culture by bringing faith to anyone willing to listen. They would have morning prayer time and preach weekly sermons for all the guards and prisoners who were willing to show up. They were devoted to making a good life on the island. They helped the guards when they found themselves in compromising situations. For these reasons, the family had earned the respect and protection of several officials.

Over the years, the guards had grown fond of Ava Grace. They had watched the curly haired infant go from crawling around in diapers to climbing coconut trees. She was an adventurous and curious child who didn't seem to mind that she didn't have items a normal child might have to entertain themselves. She didn't know any different, but the guards did. They wanted her to have something of her own. Something that meant more than a bouncy ball or board game. They wanted her to have freedom.

That's when they came up with a plan to make her a secret passage down to the ocean so she could get away for a bit every day. They wanted her to see more than the circle of run-down tents and tumbleweeds blowing through her little prison camp. They also wanted her to escape the dangers that loomed outside her door. Though it was a risk, they were willing to do it for her. She had won their hearts and risking their jobs was the least they could do to give her somewhat of a life.

The gift of the ocean was what led me to Ava Grace. She had been let out for her daily break from the prison. That's when I found her splashing around, bobbing on that old piece of driftwood. It was her time to be a young adult, free of the dangers within the confines of the prison fence. Her time to let her guard down. The problem was, now I had taken that little sliver of peace from her and put her back on the defense. I could sense her new fear. It was no longer limited to the dangers inside the fence, but now what lurked on the outside too.

There we sat, in the clearing of the tall grass. After hearing her story I shook my head, feeling terrible that she was dealt such an awful fate. My first instinct was to take her away, to get her off the island and give her the normal life that she deserved. I thought of the girls back home having their shopping trips, pool parties, and giggling in the halls while they talked about boys. Maybe she didn't care about those things, or even know about them for that matter. But, I could see her wanting a real future. College. Career.

Family. She deserved that much. Those things weren't possible in a place like this. That's when I made myself a promise that someday, somehow, I would get her off the island.

Staring at her, and back out into the ocean, my mind raced. Maybe I could sneak her back to our quarters and beg my father to take her home with us. Sadly, I knew that would never work. I would be in so much trouble if he knew I'd even made contact with a prisoner. That's when I came up with the idea for the raft. Something we could make ourselves that would surely get her away from the island. I'd go home, gather the supplies I needed, and take her away myself. "Meet me here tomorrow. Same time." I smiled in anticipation. It would work. I just knew it would.

• • •

Ava was in every thought I had that day. And with every thought, a new spike of heat erupted inside of me. Once I saw her, I couldn't get her out of my mind. At the dinner table ... Ava's eyes. Loading the dishwasher ... Ava's smile. Mowing the lawn ... Ava's smell. I'd never thought so much about another human in my entire life.

When I was finally off the hook for completing chores, I rushed to the workshop to complete my mission. As I rummaged through my father's supplies, again I pictured her face. Butterflies swept through my chest as I imagined us spending the next several days building a raft together. The thought of seeing her again was exhilarating. I couldn't wait to get back to her. To hear her raspy giggle. Hear her stories. To get to know her more. Maybe I could even find a way to get her to tackle me again. Thinking back on it, the rush of her straddling me was delightfully rousing.

The next day, as I crept up to the grove of tall grass, I smiled as I reached into my backpack and felt the baling twine I'd procured from my father's supplies. She was there, standing off in the distance and I couldn't wait to talk to her about my surprise. When she heard the grass separate beneath my footsteps, she whipped around quickly to see me standing there. I pulled the twine from my backpack and held it up.

“What’s that?” she questioned.

“It’s your ticket out.”

• • •

That was the day we began building our raft. Every night as I lay in bed thinking of how I was going to surprise her, the anticipation built. Every afternoon when I got to her, her reaction didn’t disappoint. The way she looked at me set me on fire. I was enraptured by her disbelieving stare. It was always accompanied by a thankful grin. The way she leaned forward and ran to give me those bear hugs motivated me to come up with new surprises daily. It started with the twine. It cracked me up that she was excited over something so simple. I’d have thought I brought her a spool of gold the way she made such a huge deal over it. That’s what made me want to bring her a new treat every day. Something she couldn’t get within the confines of the prison fences. Something from the outside world.

That entire summer Ava Grace replayed in my thoughts over and over like an old movie reel that wouldn’t stop spinning. I’d never met anyone like her before. She didn’t act like the girls back home. The ones in their high dollar jeans, manicures, and name brand shoes. No, she was different. Exciting. I would never forget the time she dragged me through the pasture on the way home. We played frisbee with the cow pies. I hadn’t had that much fun in all the time I’d been on the island. She didn’t mind getting a little dirt under her nails or a little manure between her toes. My time with her became an addiction. I couldn’t wait to finish my morning assignments each day so I could rush back for more.

I wasn’t the only one who showed up with gifts. One afternoon, as I pulled a leftover cinnamon roll from my bag and handed it to her, I was surprised to find she had brought me a present too. “Take it,” she said as she held out a hand-sewn handkerchief. “I made it for you ... you got a little sweaty yesterday ... kind of gross.” She laughed as she shoved it into my hand. I was flattered by the time and thought she’d put into the intricate gift. It must’ve taken her days. I thanked her as I rolled it into a buff and tied it

around my head. The blush in her cheeks as the corners of her lips turned into a small grin didn't escape my notice. "Looks good on you," she winked as she lowered her eyes and went back to work.

My heart fluttered as I quickly knelt to the ground to grab my tools. I couldn't let her see the reaction she'd caused. That would've been embarrassing. We sat in silence a few moments before returning to our now easy banter. She held the small tree trunks as I delimbed them with my ax. She tied. I tied. And sometimes, we even found our hands a little more tangled than necessary as we worked together to tie those knots. We had become a strong team. As we made our final tie, the sun began to set. Testing the raft would have to wait another day. It was time for me to get back to my father. He wouldn't think to question my whereabouts unless I broke curfew, which I promised myself I would never do. Not as long as I could spend time with Ava Grace.

The last morning of our first summer, I raced to our spot. I knew I was early, but it was my last full day on the island before I had to return home for the school year. I didn't want to waste a second. If our raft was seaworthy, it could be our biggest day of adventure yet. I filled my backpack with some leftover fried chicken, a couple sodas, some chips, and a blanket.

After hopping the fence, I ran down the dirt path. Grabbing a small bunch of wildflowers from the meadow, I made my way to our raft. From the thicket of tall grass, I pulled the box of treasures we'd been collecting over the summer. I popped it open and checked the contents: A conch shell horn, a pair of puka shell necklaces we'd strung one afternoon while we were taking a break, the spearhead she'd held to my back the first time we'd met, along with many more treasures that had special meaning to us. Though our gifts were simple, they were ours. Each one had meaning. Today, we were off to find them a hiding place. And, if we were lucky, to find an escape for my sweet Ava Grace.

Time was of the essence. I wanted to surprise her by decorating the raft with the wildflowers and setting up a picnic before she arrived. For all I knew, I wouldn't see her again until the next summer ... if I got to see her again at all. I'd had a growing crush on Ms. Ava Grace. It was time I let her know, and I wanted to make the day special for her. For both of us.

With my grin spreading from ear to ear, she made her way toward me. I

knew I had done something pretty special when she covered her mouth and looked up at me. Astonishment grew in her eyes. “You did all this?” she half whispered as she dropped to her knees before the raft and began to pick up the wildflowers. Looking over her shoulder she grinned, “It’s amazing!”

“For you,” I gestured, moving my hand above the spread. “Shall we?”

We sat at our small clearing on the beach and ate our lunch on the raft before the maiden voyage. As we ate, we plotted on how to get to the other side of the peninsula, the side you could see from our spot on the beach but couldn’t get to by foot. When our picnic was done, we knew the time had come to find out if our raft would float. I had faith we had built a strong, sturdy vessel. We were excited to jump on and discover the adventure that was waiting for us offshore.

Gingerly, we pushed the raft to the edge of the water, easing it in until we were waist deep. It was a beauty, glistening in the sun, adorned with our treasures and colorful wildflowers. As Ava climbed on and turned to face me, I continued to push until I was brave enough to join her. When the time was right, I eased my way onto the raft beside her. We both took a deep breath as it plunged slightly and rocked her into me. Though it quickly popped back to the surface, the swift movement had left us touching. The slight pressure of her shoulder next to mine sent a shiver through my cold, wet skin. When she traced the goosebumps on my arm and looked up at me with a grin, I knew she was onto me. I couldn’t hide the way she made my body react.

We were so close now, I could feel her soft breath against my lips. Slowly, I scanned the outline of her face, her round, brown eyes, her dainty nose, the fullness of her lips. I had studied them before, all those days on the beach. I’d also studied them in my dreams. Sitting beside her now, they were like a magnet, pulling me in. I couldn’t help but lean into her. Her nervous glance tracked my face as I drew in closer. I paused for a moment, but she didn’t back away. Before I knew it, my forehead was resting against hers.

Taking a moment to gather my thoughts, I finally came up with the right words. “You ever kissed a boy?” I whispered.

The words didn’t leave her mouth, but the way her forehead turned against mine, I could tell she was answering me with a no.

Hesitating a moment, I added, “Do you want to?”

I could hear her swallow as her forehead moved up and down against mine. The tingling heat I had grown to know so well when we were together, found its way back to my chest, exploding as I tilted my head to take her lips into mine. In all honesty, I'd never kissed a girl before, and I wondered if I was even doing it right. It sure felt right. The soft brush of her sweet tongue against mine, the way our lips moved together like they were dancing to a sweet country song. Everything came together perfectly, only better than I could've imagined. It took everything in me to pull back and check to see if she was okay. Judging from the smile on her face, she was just fine.

As the water carried us past the reef, I took her hand in mine and pulled her in closer. With her now resting against my chest, we both looked toward the high afternoon sun and shyly back toward each other. We'd never been that quiet before, but our continuous ping-pong game of staring, looking away, and smiling said all it needed to. We were okay with what we'd done and I was sure we would do it again before I left in the morning. With a reassuring squeeze of my hand, she laid her head against me and drifted off to sleep on my shoulder.

• • •

After traveling for what must've been an hour, the rolling tide finally pushed us onto the opposite shoreline of the peninsula. Uncurling my fingers from hers, I nudged her awake. "We're here," I exclaimed. Excitedly, she crawled out of my arms. We slid from the raft and pulled it onto the sandy beach. Then, grabbing our treasures, we ventured toward what looked to be a rounded bluff.

I took Ava by the hand as we crossed the sandy beach and moved inland. Our eyes grew wide as we suspected from the geography of the rock, there might be a small cave tucked away behind one of the crevices. We ran the rest of the way, hoping we were right. When we reached the crevice, there looked to be a deep opening. I tugged back on her arm and asked her to wait outside. I knew she was tough. I'd been on the opposite end of her adrenaline. Nonetheless, I wanted to make sure it was safe before she went

in.

I grabbed the spear from our treasure chest. Inspecting the sandy ground, there was no sign that anyone had been there before us. I was more than eager to get Ava's hand back in mine. I didn't want to go one more step without her. Deeper into the cave, light shone from an opening overhead. It lit the small stream of water, trickling to a shallow pool below. It was the perfect getaway. More likely, an ideal escape for Ava Grace needed one.

Behind the waterfall, we placed our treasures. We were happy with our hiding spot. With huge smiles and a victorious hug, we found each other's lips once more. Standing in the beam of sunlight, tangled together, her racing heart pounded in sync with mine. We had done it. Our journey was a success. We had found our safe place on Tabu Island. A place that would become our time-capsule. Over the next few summers, we would continue to share our adventures at our special cavern. It would be in that cave, beside the flowing water, where Ava and I would completely lose ourselves to each other and she would steal my heart forever.

• • •

Each summer when I returned to the island, we would sail to the other side where Ava could escape the ever-growing danger of prison life and find refuge in my arms. There, we would reminisce, laugh, and confide about our struggles, until we could no longer keep our hands to ourselves. No matter how many days in a row I saw her, my heart raced each time. My body craved her in every way. She was no longer that cute soft island girl. She had blossomed into the most beautiful woman. A woman who had never lost her childlike innocence and appreciation for the simple things. My favorite part of each reunion was the look on her face when I brought her a special gift to add to our growing bounty of treasures.

The gifts were meant to show her that she'd never left my mind since the last time we were together. However, the more we talked, the more I realized that trinkets were no longer what she needed. What she needed was my presence. My protection. The first night I was back on the island, she had

shown up at our meeting spot partially hiding her face beneath her long hair. When I pulled it back to greet her with a kiss, I found a black eye in the last stages of healing. She was hesitant to let me know that she'd narrowly escaped one of the prisoners. She finally admitted that the men of the island were becoming more aggressive with her. I'd often worried this would happen.

She had such an innocence. The perfect prey for the heathens that surrounded her. It wasn't her fault. She did nothing to invite the attention, but with her natural beauty and radiant personality, she turned heads everywhere she went. The fact that Ava was the most gorgeous girl on the island meant life had gotten significantly more dangerous. As much as she could handle herself, some situations had made it impossible to leave her behind. That's when I decided to stay permanently. I would take on a position that would allow me to protect her. Documentation. It was perfect.

And I had protected her. That is until I couldn't anymore. It was no longer a matter of filthy, vile prisoners. Now the government had become her number one enemy. Only she didn't know it. Nobody did.

The night I was in the culvert was the night I'd overheard it all. The plans for obliteration had been set. They were no longer willing to maintain the island. The Order had finally overtaken the people. There was no stopping the destruction they had planned. If only more people knew about the island, it might have stood a chance. Now, the only hope was to save one. My Ava Grace.

I did everything I could to set up an escape. Her documents were in place. I'd arranged to meet one of the helmsmen down at the east dock. Thankfully, I spent some time figuring out how to access the computer program and put in an order from my father's desk. It simply stated that the Department of Documentation had a pick-up on the east dock at 1800 hours. My picture was the primary ID on the order. Since I had no access to a photo of Ava, I couldn't make her an authentic ID. Rather, I used a photo of the closest match I could find. A stock photo I'd found online. Hopefully nobody would recognize the face was not hers and deny us entry. At least I had the right prints. I had lifted them from a music box I'd given her on my last trip to the island.

If only it was as simple as taking the raft the way we had talked about so

many times as young teenagers. Such fools we were to think we could escape the security of the perimeter. Never once did it cross our minds that mines, explosives, and deadly gasses had been set in place. Not to mention, the aircraft carriers and countless weapons would be pointed at anyone who tried to flee the doomed island.

Seven years later, I was wise enough to internalize the reality of the situation. Sweat began to pour from my hands at the realization that every time we took that raft to the peninsula, we were just a half-mile away from termination. My time on the island had shown me that unless I made the proper connections and set every detail precisely, death was imminent not only for Ava Grace, but for both of us. I could only pray I hadn't overlooked anything. Now, it was a matter of time. Hopefully there was enough of it left.

• • •

There I was looking into the dark chamber trying to pull my mask over my suffocating face. If I didn't get to her soon, I'd be one of the lifeless bodies I was beginning to stumble over. The gas had begun to filter through the vents and into the passage, crawling its way up the dirt walls of the dark cave. Flashing the light of my phone, I searched the ground. Nothing resembled her. "Ava," I whispered as I moved along. Trying not to call attention to anyone who might still be moving, I whispered again, "Ava Grace!"

I was met with silence.

Kneeling down, I began to crawl through the bodies, lifting arms and legs. Sifting through the remains, panic began to overtake me. Maybe I was too late. Maybe she was already gone. "Ava," I whispered again.

Nothing.

My heart pounded as I checked my watch. There were only minutes left until the submarine would pull away from the dock without us. Frantically, I pushed and shoved bodies until at last, I saw what looked to be a shell necklace lying on the ground. It reminded me of the set we'd made years before on the beach. "Ava," I whispered with desperation. "Ava Grace!" I couldn't help the whimper in my voice as I continued to flip and turn bodies

to get to the one I was looking for. And there, buried beneath one of the men, I saw a dainty hand.

As I tugged him from her, I unfurled his arm from the long, brown hair. The girl was lying face down. I pulled her into my arms and rolled her sideways, gently brushing the hair away from her forehead. Her beauty was unmistakable. “Ava,” I shook her. There was no response. Quickly, I leaned into her to listen for breath. There was only stillness. Desperately, I pulled her face to mine and set my ear to her lips. Through the heat of my pounding face, I felt a cool wisp of air sweep down my cheek. She might not have been conscious, but she was breathing. It was indubitable. I felt Ava’s breath against my face.

With all my strength, I came to my feet and hoisted her over my shoulder. Then, taking a deep breath, I slipped my oxygen mask onto her. Gaining significant ground, I carried her toward the entrance until I could no longer hold my breath. I had to stop and take in some of the oxygen. Gently, I removed the mask and filled my lungs.

Again, I slipped the mask onto her as we moved through the darkness. It was only a few steps before I felt a sharp slicing pain rip through me. Paralyzed, I dropped Ava to the ground. My eyes began to sting and water, as I gasped for breath in the gassy tunnel. Searching for the cause of the intense pain, a metal prod came to my forehead. That’s when I realized we had been detected by a roboguard. Its sharp claw had pierced my side and was relentlessly drilling into me.

Now, dangling above the ground, my mind was beginning to fog. I had to think through the confusion of the gas and the searing pain in my side. I didn’t stand a chance against a robot. Nor did Ava. All I could do was kick and try to pry myself from its grip. I had no weapon. I couldn’t reach my pack. It had fallen from my back when I was viciously impaled. As I kicked at its head, I felt my side rip even more fiercely. I pushed myself from its chest until I had no strength left.

As my ears began to ring and darkness began to fill my vision, I dropped to the ground. Just like that, it had let me go. I lay there breathlessly, trying to find my sight. Frantically, I felt around for Ava. There was nothing but empty ground. Was it all for nothing? Had the roboguard dropped me in exchange for her?

That's when I heard her muffled voice. "Noah ... Noah come on."

As I regained my vision, I looked up to see her standing there with a handful of wires. Somehow in our struggle, she had gotten to my pack and grabbed my knife, disabling the robot. "The guards taught me what to do when they started malfunctioning last year," was all she said as she grabbed my hand. "What's going on, Noah? What the hell's happening?"

I didn't have time to explain, "Come with me. If we're lucky, I'll tell you later. We've got to get to the dock."

Once again, we trudged through the dark passage until the moonlit night opened before us. As the cool fresh air filled our lungs, we sprinted across the prison yard, through the open gate, and down the path. All the living beings on the island had now disappeared. I could hear the planes high above the clouds, letting me know that our time was up. I couldn't even take the time to check my watch. If we didn't get to the dock in the next few minutes, we would be obliterated along with everything else left on the island.

As we approached the dock, I saw the silhouette of a man peering out from behind the periscope. Urgently, he was waving us onward. It was the moment of reckoning. Either we would make it onto that sub, or this was the last time I'd ever see my girl. If it was, I wanted it to be a memorable goodbye. I took one last look at my girl and smiled. "I love you. I have loved you since the first summer I spent with you. You are my sweet Ava Grace." Then, running with her in my arms, I brought her lips to mine and kissed her like it was our last.

The shouting voice shook me from what might be our final goodbye. Pulling the documents from my bag, I waved them in the air hoping against hope that they would let her board with me. "We're here!" I shouted. "We're here!" With adrenaline coursing through me, I grabbed her by the hand and confidently presented her to the officer. Instantly, I recognized him as one of my father's friends. My father stepped out from behind him. "I took the liberty of going over the boarding papers with my friend, Peter. You know, I've watched you kids over the years. I was hoping someday Noah would finally be brave enough to introduce us. Nice to finally meet you, Ava."

Without even checking the documents, they escorted us aboard and closed the hatch. Within minutes of submerging deep into the ocean, shaking permeated the water. That's when I knew it was over. It was a terrible

realization that I was going to have to tell Ava about her home. About her parents. About the place she grew up. It was tragic. It would be a hard story to tell. But, my mind found peace in knowing that in the middle of it all, she was safe. She was with me and I would spend a lifetime taking care of my girl. My sweet Ava Grace.

THE END

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THE STORY

EVAN GRACE

ONE

Kara

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death, or at least that's what it felt like as I stood outside The Whiskey Bar. Why did I allow my mother to set me up on a blind date? Oh, I know—because for the hundredth time she told me I needed to get back on the horse, after my very short engagement.

Who sleeps with someone the night of their engagement party? Oh, that's right, Ben did, and with my best friend, no less. That was two years ago and last I heard she got pregnant, and he was already banging someone else—before she even pushed their baby out. I dodged a bullet there, and for her, I say what goes around comes around.

I swear I'm not bitter or unhappy with my life, but I haven't been very trusting of the opposite sex—which has made it hard to want to date. I honestly think I've had two, maybe three dates in the last two years. It's also been a little over two years since I've had sex.

I step inside and let my eyes adjust to the dim lighting. Walker is supposed to have blond hair that's a little long on top. He's got brown eyes and lightly tanned skin. He is also supposed to be tall and wearing a blue button-up shirt.

Mom met him during physical therapy for a knee injury. He's her physical therapist and she went on and on how good looking he was. She showed him pictures of me when she told him we should meet. He told her I was beautiful but maybe he just said it because he didn't want to hurt my mom's feelings. What if he's not even going to show up?

Fuck, this was a mistake. I should just turn around and walk out. Nope, I just need to get this over with. It'll be two hours tops and then I'll go back to my apartment and binge-watch *Schitt's Creek* for the fifth or sixth time.

I look around and don't see anyone matching Walker's description, so I make my way toward the back hallway to check myself in the mirror in the

bathroom one more time before he gets here—if he shows up.

I set my purse down on the bathroom counter and dig my makeup bag out of it. A couple of swipes of my neutral colored lip gloss, and some powder and I stuff them back in the bag. I run a hand over my sable colored locks—thankful my loose curls still look soft and bouncy. I chose a lavender wrap dress that accentuates my curves, and I love them. My tan wedges make my legs look longer than they are.

I pop a mint into my mouth, sucking it hard and then chewing it up and swallowing it. I take a deep breath and head out toward the hostess stand. He's not here yet—I glance around the bar area and don't see him.

My phone says he's five minutes late. I'll sit at the bar, drink a glass of wine, and if he's not here when I finish it, then I'll go home and pretend this didn't happen. I pull out a stool and sit down, setting my clutch down on the bar.

“Hey, what can I get you?” The bartender comes over to stand in front of me.

“Do you have Moscato?” He nods. “Okay, I'd like a glass, please.”

He disappears and I pick at my thumbnail; it's a bad habit, I know, but I'm anxious. The bartender sets my glass down in front of me. “Thank you.”

“Sure thing. Let me know if you need anything else.” He moves down the bar to help someone else.

I take a healthy swallow and set my glass down. I stare blindly at the TV because I don't want to keep looking at the entrance. No need to draw unnecessary attention to myself.

My glass is half gone when I feel someone come up beside me. “Kara?” His voice is velvet smooth and when I turn to face him, I swear my heart stops beating. In front of me is the most beautiful man I've ever seen. “I'm Walker.”

“Uh... hi.” Oh god, I'm speechless right now. Like an idiot, I hold out my hand for him to shake. He smiles and then places his large hand in mine. If this were a romcom, the music would be starting right about now. “It's nice meeting you.”

Walker doesn't let go of my hand, keeping it firmly in his. “Sorry I was late. My dog refused to come inside, and I spent ten minutes bribing her to

come in.” Oh, I love dogs. “Should we get a table?”

“Yeah, that’d be great.”

He helps me down from my stool and signals to the bartender. “Can you have her wine added to our dinner tab?”

“Sure thing,” the bartender says.

Walker knocks on the bar two times and then leads me to the hostess stand. “Hi, table for two, please.”

I don’t miss the way the hostess practically faints when she looks up at him. I kind of want to tell her I get it. He laces his fingers with mine as she leads us to a table by the fireplace. It’s definitely romantic.

Out of the corner of my eye, I check him out. His dress slacks are grey and hug what appears to be a very fine ass. His blue dress shirt is fitted and the sleeves are rolled up to his forearms. The cologne he’s wearing is spicy and woody—it wraps around me like a warm embrace.

We reach our table and he slides my chair out for me. I take my seat and he sits across from me.

“I’m sorry, but you’re really fucking beautiful.” My face immediately heats up. “The pictures your mom showed me did not do you justice.”

“Th-Thank you. Mom spoke very highly of you.”

Our waiter comes and tells us the specials and takes our drink order. When the waiter disappears, Walker smiles at me. I swear when he does my heart stutters in my chest. “What kind of dog do you have?”

He pulls out his phone, swipes across the screen and then hands me his phone. “Swipe left—that’s my girl, Chloe.”

“Chloe?” The boxer is adorable. She’s brown with a black face and a little bit of white on her nose.

“My niece insisted she looked like a Chloe.” Walker smiles.

I can’t help but smile at him before continuing to look at his photos. There are photos from her as a puppy to more recent ones. I turn to the last picture and want to drool. Walker isn’t wearing a shirt. God he’s a perfect male specimen. His tan, lean muscled chest is on display showcasing that definitely takes care of his body; he’s got an array of black and grey tattoos that go from his shoulder to his elbow in intricate patterns, and maybe

someday I'll get to look at them a little more closely.

He's covered in sweat and appears to be laughing as Chloe licks his face. I hand his phone back to him. "She's adorable."

"Thanks, she's my spoiled brat. So, your mom says you're a photographer. What kind of pictures do you take?"

Our waiter interrupts us, delivering our drinks, and then taking our orders. We both order steak and potatoes. We continue to talk after the waiter takes his leave.

"Tell me about your photography."

I take a sip of my wine. "I take any kind of photo, really. I do newborn babies, families, engagement, weddings, and senior portrait photography. I've been doing it for five years and love it. I try to keep up with the latest trends. I have a little studio downtown right across from Bentley's Bakery."

"That's great. I'd love to see your work. I'll tell my brother and sister-in-law if they need a photographer to look you up."

I smile. "Thank you, that'd be great. My studio is called Captured Moments and I have a Facebook page if you want to check it out or have your sister-in-law check."

He smiles and picks up his phone. Walker types away on it and then holds it out to me. "Is this yours?"

I lean in and nod. "Yeah, that's mine."

"Well, now you have another follower." He sets his phone down.

"Thank you. How do you like being a physical therapist?" I shake my head. "Gosh, that was a stupid question. Of course you like it, otherwise you wouldn't have gone to school for it."

Walker grabs my hand, stroking the back of it with his thumb. Every time he touches me, I swear I tingle all over. "It wasn't dumb. I do love it and honestly, I changed my major sophomore year from education to physical therapy. I played baseball until my sophomore year but tore my ACL. The therapist I had after my surgery was awesome and, I don't know, I just changed my mind."

"Well my mom says you beat her up, but it was worth it. She wanted to start hiking with her little posse again."

Our waiter brings our meals. I lean down, inhaling the delicious scent—when I look up, I find Walker smiling at me before cutting into his. Conversation halts as we both dig into our meals. “This is the best steak I’ve ever eaten,” I tell him.

“Yeah, I’ve never eaten here, but I heard good things,” he says before taking another bite.

When our plates are cleared away a while later, I drink the last little bit of wine and excuse myself to go to the bathroom. Like a gentleman, he stands up and pulls my chair out for me. “I’ll be right back.” Once I reach the bathroom I do my business, and then wash my hands. I pop another mint into my mouth and fix my lip gloss.

I hope he’ll say yes when I suggest going somewhere for coffee and dessert. I head back out to our table and see he’s already paid the bill. He stands up. “Do you want to grab coffee?”

I smile and shake my head. “I was going to ask you the same thing.”

Walker wraps an arm around my waist and leads me out of the restaurant. “Do you want to follow me or leave your car here?”

“Um... I actually took an Uber so, I’ll just grab another when we’re done.”

He squeezes my hip lightly. “I could give you a ride home too, if you want.”

“You wouldn’t mind?” Shit, he’s nice.

“Of course I wouldn’t.”

We reach a dark grey Ford Explorer and he opens my door for me. I climb in and he shuts the door. The inside smells just like him and again makes me tingly. It’s worse, but better when he climbs inside—he’s causing my brain to short circuit in the best possible way. Eminem comes through the speakers when he starts the ignition, but he turns it down.

“I’ve had a really great time so far,” Walker says as he starts driving us toward the coffee shop.

Is it crazy that I want to tell him that this is the best first date I’ve ever had? Instead of saying that and possibly scaring him off I just smile. “Me too.”

TWO

Kara

AFTER WE GRAB our coffees, we walk hand in hand over to a little loveseat in front of the window. I take a sip of my coffee and then turn toward Walker. “You said you have a brother. Is he older or younger?”

“Weston is older, he’s thirty—I’m twenty-eight, if you wanted to know how old I was.” He winks at me, making me smile. “He and Heather have been together nine years and married for six. Their oldest, Hope, is eight, and Wes is five.”

I smile. “I always wished I had siblings, but my dad passed away when I was two. Mom just never remarried.”

“I’m sorry about your dad. My parents are both still alive, divorced, which sucks, but they’re friends now, which makes it easier for them to be around each other. My stepdad, Allan, is a really cool guy. He’s a detective with the Moline Police Department.” He takes a drink of his coffee and stretches his arm across the back of the loveseat and begins playing with the ends of my hair.

“Do you want something sweet?” My eyes widen because I realized how that just sounded. “Oh god, I can’t believe I just said that.”

Walker throws his head back laughing and I can’t help it but to join in. We both stop laughing as tension builds between us — is it sexual, oh most definitely. He nods slowly, and gives me a smile that makes me feel tingly. “I could go for something sweet.”

“I’ll be right back.” I get up and go to the counter, ordering us a couple of cake pops.

I carry them back to the loveseat and sit down. I pull a pink one and chocolate one out of the bag. “Birthday cake or double chocolate?”

He pinches his chin like he’s thinking about it. “I’ll take chocolate.” I

hand it to him, and he looks at it. “What is it?”

“You’ve never had a cake pop? It’s basically cake and frosting mixed together and rolled into a ball dipped in frosting. Just pop the whole thing in your mouth.” I shake my head as, yet again, my cheeks heat up.

He holds his up. “To an amazing night.”

I tap mine to his. “To an amazing night.” I pop it into my mouth and moan as the sugary goodness melts on my tongue.

Walker follows suit and nods as he chews it. “That was really good.” He smiles and I laugh; he’s got chocolate all over his front teeth. “What? Do I have something on my teeth?”

“No, not at all.” I cover my mouth to stifle my laughter.

He turns to the two older ladies at the other table. “Excuse me, do I have something in my teeth?” Walker smiles wide and both ladies chuckle at him, shaking their heads. “I’ll be right back.”

I check out his ass as I watch him walk toward the bathroom. He’s got a great butt, his dress pants showcase it, making my mouth water. A minute later he comes out and sits back down next to me.

I turn toward him. “I’m just curious, why did you agree to a blind date?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Normally I’m not a fan of the blind date thing, but the way your mom talked about you...made me think you were someone worth meeting. I won’t lie: when she showed me your picture I knew right away that I wanted to meet you. Why did you agree?”

I shake my head. “I guess to appease my mom. I haven’t dated much in the past two years. I don’t know if she told you, but I was engaged and on the night of our engagement party, I caught my fiancé and my best friend having sex. I just didn’t trust my judgment anymore, so I kind of just gave up.”

“Holy shit, that’s terrible. Was it a one-time thing?”

I shake my head. “No, but I’m actually thankful I found out because he got her pregnant and last I heard, he’s been sleeping with everyone but her since. What about you?”

Walker turns so we’re face to face. “Nothing like that. I’ve had a couple relationships, but they just never went anywhere. School was tough and I tried getting serious once, but it’s hard to do when you’re busy studying all

the time. There just hasn't really been anyone that has piqued my interest until now." That last part he says quietly and I swear a shiver runs down my spine.

My teeth press into my bottom lip and I don't miss the way his eyes zero in on it. Fuck, I really want him to kiss me, but not in Starbucks. "Do you want to get out of here?" I can't believe I just said that.

He doesn't say anything. He just stands up, grabs my hand, and practically pulls me out of the store. We're both quiet as he leads me to his Explorer. We stop at my door and he leans in a little. "Can I kiss you right now?"

I only nod once before his lips slam down on mine. I swear to God, stars appear behind my closed lids as he controls the kiss. My mouth opens just enough to brush my tongue against his lips. Walker's fingers spear through my hair, holding me in place as his tongue duels with mine.

All too soon he slows down our kiss and then pulls away. "Wow," he whispers.

I can't even speak; all I know is I want to do more of that. I reach up, touching his lips ever so softly and then push up onto my tiptoes to kiss him again. This kiss is softer, sweeter, and I feel it all the way down to my toes.

"Come home with me?" Walker reaches out, stroking my cheek with his thumb. "We don't have to do anything, but I'm not ready to end this yet."

"Okay," I say on a sigh because I'm not ready to leave him either.

He helps me into the SUV and then walks around to his side. When he climbs in, he grabs my hand, lacing our fingers. I'm so glad I took an Uber to the restaurant, so I don't have to worry about my car. The tension inside the SUV is thick and I swear my breasts haven't stopped tingling since he kissed me.

We pull into the driveway of a two-story red brick house with white shutters and a huge porch. There's a light on and I see a little furry head pop up in the window and smile. That must be Chloe, waiting to greet her daddy.

Walker comes around helping me down. "I'm gonna warn you that she gets really excited around new people."

"No worries. I love dogs."

I'm not sure what to expect when I walk inside, but I'm pleasantly surprised to see that it's very homey. The entryway has a coat rack and a

wooden bench covered in a dark tan cushion and hardwood floors as far as the eye can see. I hear the click, click, click of toenails on the floor.

Chloe comes tearing around the corner and immediately barrels into me, her entire butt wagging as she greets me. I get down on my knees and scratch behind her ears. “Aren’t you a pretty girl.” She does a sneak attack and licks my face.

“Chloe, get back, crazy. I’ll let her out really quick.” Walker grabs Chloe by her collar and leads her toward the back of the house.

I step farther into his home and see that he’s got a huge flat screen above a beautiful red brick fireplace. A taupe colored couch with thick cushions and a thick navy blue fleece throw hangs over the back. On his bookshelf are photos, but before I can look too closely, I hear the fast click, click, click of dog nails. This time she just bumps into my legs.

“Hi baby,” I coo and scratch behind Chloe ears again—she really likes that.

Walker comes in and places his hand on the small of my back, tingles shoot up and down my spine. I try to focus on the pictures and not his hand, but it’s really, really hard. I pick up a photo of Walker and another guy.

“Is this your brother?” Of course it is because they look so much alike.

“Yep, that’s Weston.” He grabs another photo. “Here’s Heather and the kids.”

I smile. She and the kids are beautiful.

I grab a picture and grin. It’s Walker and his brother, covered in mud, wearing bandanas around their heads. “Did you do a Tough Mudder race?”

“We did. A bunch of our buddies got together and created a team. I couldn’t walk for two days after. I was so fucking sore, but it was so much fun. How about I give you a tour?” He grabs my hand and then leads me to the kitchen, which looks like he’s in the middle of renovating. Two French doors lead to a large deck, and down the stairs is a fire pit and huge yard.

Off the kitchen is a room with a treadmill and weights—I’m not surprised because look at him, he’s got a great body.

Up the stairs are three bedrooms and a full-sized bathroom. The master bedroom has a king-sized bed in it and the standard bedroom furniture, all dark stained wood, with a master bath and a walk-in closet I’d kill for.

I turn to smile up at him. “Your place is beautiful.”

Walker brushes my hair back and leans down, kissing me. I immediately open my mouth to his seeking tongue. I moan into his mouth as it brushes against mine. He pulls back. “You’re beautiful.” He kisses me and then pulls back until our lips are barely touching. “Tell me to take you home or I’m not going to let you leave.”

I don’t answer him. Instead, I take a step back and untie the ribbon that is keeping the soft material of my dress together and let the fabric slip from my body, pooling at my feet.

“Wow,” is all he says before I’m in his arms with his lips on mine.

• • •

“...and we lived happily ever after.” My babies all smile up at me when I finish telling them the story of how I met their dad. Of course, it’s the G-Rated version.

I, of course, don’t tell them that Walker and I spent the whole weekend in bed—only getting up to eat and to play with Chloe.

They do know, even though I don’t think they totally understand, that our relationship was a whirlwind. We moved in together three months after our first date, engaged after six months, and then we got married on the year anniversary of the day we met.

Our first date was seven years ago, and is still one of the best days of my life. Our daughter Bella was born nine months after we got married; we were not expecting it, but thrilled nonetheless. Our daughter Amelia was born two years later, and our youngest, Alex, named after my dad, was born a year and a half after her.

“Mommy?” Bella asks from her bed.

“Yes, baby?” I move and sit next to her, brushing her hair back—the way their daddy always does to me.

“Is Daddy your prince?”

I smile and shake my head. “Nope, he’s my king and I’m his queen. You

and your sister are our little princesses and that little stinker”—I point to Alex who is lying with Amelia and Chloe, who loves her sisters and brother—“is our prince. Give me a smooch.” I bend down and kiss my daughter before going to my other girl and kissing her.

I pick Alex up, who is fading fast in my arms and turn to leave the room, finding my gorgeous husband leaning against the doorframe. I stop next to him. “They wanted to hear the story again.”

Walker leans down and kisses me. “Of course they did. It’s a great story. I’ll tuck the girls in and meet you in bed.”

I smile. “It’s a deal.” He bends down and kisses Alex’s chubby little face and then disappears into the girls’ room.

I get our boy all tucked in. He likes his sleep, so it takes no time at all before his breathing deepens and I know he’s out.

When I step into our bedroom, I find my sexy beast lying on top of the covers in his boxer briefs. I shut our door and strut over to him, trying to be sexy, but failing—I start to giggle as I climb into bed with him.

Walker wraps his arms around me, hugging me to his side. “They eat that story up, don’t they?”

“Yeah, but it’s a good story, it’s our story.” I smile at him.

“You’re damn right, baby. I love you, you know that, right?” He bends down, kissing me sweetly on the lips.

I nod and he rolls us so he’s on top of me between my thighs. Walker then goes about showing me with his body how much he loves me.

This is our story, and each time a chapter ends, I can’t wait to see what the next chapter brings.

THE END

Check out more titles by Evan Grace
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ABOUT EVAN GRACE

A Midwesterner and a readaholic most of her life until one day an idea came into Evan's head and a writing career was born. She's a sucker for happily ever afters and loves creating fictional worlds that others can get lost in. She loves putting her characters through the ringer, but loves when they get to that satisfying, swoony ending.

When the voices in her head give it a rest, which isn't often, she can always be found with her e-reader in her hand. Some of her favorites include, Aurora Rose Reynolds, (the queen) Kristen Ashley, Kaylee Ryan, Natasha Madison, and Harper Sloan. Evan finds a lot of her inspiration in music, movies, TV shows and life.

She's a wife to Jim and a mom to Ethan and (the real)Evan, a weightlifter, a home healthcare scheduler, and a full-time author. How does she do it? She'll never tell.

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HAIL MARY

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ONE

Spider

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.

Naked, with my dick and balls held protectively in my hands, I stand eye-to-eye with the man who could end my life as I know it. I sway on my feet, dizzy from the combination of last night's tequila and middle of the night confusion.

"Coach?" My nuts retreat further into my body as I mutter the word. To some, it's just a title. To those of us on the Bear State University football team a more accurate translation would be "God."

"What the fuck are you doing in my house at two o'clock in the morning with your dick in your hands?" He's in a t-shirt and his shorts standing at the edge of his bed.

I left the warm cocoon of a woman's bed to take a piss. Stumbling down the dark hallway, I must've been turned around and walked into the wrong bedroom.

"I..." I swallow hard and feel the burn of last night's booze crawl up my throat.

"Never heard you struggle for words before, Spider. You have a stroke?" His voice shakes like it does when I throw an interception with thirty seconds left in a game.

"I think maybe I have, Coach." God's honest truth. Everything above the neck feels like I'm in a dream while everything below is reacting in a violent flight response.

He takes a calculated step forward making me flinch. "Emery."

"What?"

His glare widens and even in the dim light I see fire in his eyes. His jaw

clenches and unclenches.

I grip my junk a little tighter once I realize what I've done. I never did get her name. "Emily, yeah—"

"*Emery* you fucking scumbag!" He's on me before I can blink, his big-ass hand wraps around the back of my neck as he pushes me out of his room, down the hallway and into his daughter's bedroom. With a flip of a light switch the foggy details from last night are exposed under one-hundred-volt wattage.

Emery jerks upright in bed and the sheet falls to expose her breasts. I groan at the bright purple hickeys that mar her pale skin. "Oops." She makes no effort to cover herself and I wince as Coach's grip crushes my cervical vertebrae.

My jacket is on the floor, jeans in a heap at the foot of her bed, and my t-shirt hangs off her headboard. If I thought I could lie and say it was a team prank that sent me into Coach's bedroom naked in the middle of the night, the evidence blows my chances of escaping the truth out of the water.

"What did I say when I agreed to let you live with me?" He punctuates the question spoken to his daughter with a sharp squeeze to my neck. I never knew he had a daughter. I always assumed the guy was a life-long celibate because the pent-up sexual frustration made him more of an angry asshole and it's a fact that angry assholes win games. "I said no fuckin' around!"

Emery's glare tightens. "You don't get to dictate what I do with my body!"

"I sure as fuck can when that body is livin' under my roof!"

"No, you can't," I chime in. "It's still *her* body."

"Shut up, Theodore."

My muscles tense at the sound of his anger wrapped around every syllable of my full name, bringing me back to when I was a scrawny, helpless kid.

He gives me a shake. "You manipulated your way into my innocent daughter's bed?"

Innocent? Didn't seem so *innocent* when she had her tongue down my throat and her hand in my pants jacking me off on the dance floor.

I was at Henley's bar with my team doing shots to celebrate a winning

game. I thought she was just another jersey chaser. I stare at her now, all that blonde hair, pale blue eyes and creamy skin flushed from a night of sin. She's like a fallen angel, a corrupted soul wrapped in an armor of virtue.

"Put your clothes on and get the fuck out of my house." Coach shoves me forward and the forceful blow is so familiar it would usually trigger a violent response.

Instead, I smile at the conniving snake in the Barbie mask. "Touché."

Her gaze darts to mine and a flicker of a smile touches her lips.

"Don't fucking talk to her!" Coach is seething at the door watching my every move as I snag my clothes from around the room.

I don't bother covering up as I slide my jeans up my thighs, commando, just as I was last night. I figure I'm already dead why not give the woman one last look at—

Coach's left hook comes from nowhere and I stumble back holding my jaw. Emery is out of bed, her sheet wrapped around her as she rushes to my aid. "Are you okay?" She whirls around to her dad before I can answer. "Get out!"

"You'll have to drag my dead body out of here to get me to leave before *he* does!"

Emery drops her sheet giving her dad a full-frontal he'll never forget.

"Dammit, Em," he says scrambling to pick up the sheet and cover her with it.

She leaves her arms to her sides so the bed sheet falls again to her feet. "I'm naked and need privacy," she says with no inflection in her voice. "Leave right now or I'll call Uncle Steve and tell him how you insisted on watching me dress."

All six-foot-three, two-hundred and eighty-five pounds of Coach Brawley turns on a dime, storms from the room, and slams the door so hard I hear wood crack. I stare in awe at the fiery little blonde. I've never seen Coach bow to anyone. I think she could be the devil.

In one quick move she ties the sheet back around her and turns to me. "Are you hurt?" There's no tenderness in her voice, and for the first time, I see a little of her dad in her.

“No.” I rub my jaw feeling only a mild ache and grin. “I can take a punch.”

She snags my t-shirt and tosses it to me. “Sorry about my dad.” Again, not a lot of feeling in those four words.

“Are you?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

I shrug and shove my phone and wallet into my back pockets. “That I’m not stupid.” My gaze tightens on her. “You used me.”

“You used me too.”

I can’t argue that. One-night stands have their perks—no attachments, a hell of a lot of fun, and plenty of orgasms. “Why didn’t you tell me you were Coach Brawley’s daughter?”

She lifts a brow. “I thought you said you weren’t stupid.”

“Why me? There were twenty other football players in the bar last night.”

She eyes the colorful tattoos on my arms, the inked skull on my throat, and the piercing in my lip.

“Clean cut dude wouldn’t cause a big enough stink, huh?” I chuckle. “Smart. But you didn’t know I’d stumble into his bedroom by accident.”

“He wakes up at four-thirty every morning. I’d planned to seduce you at four-thirty-five and make sure he heard.”

“That’s some sick ass shit.” I’m strangely attracted to the idea of it. But then, I’ve always been attracted to the deranged.

With my hand on the doorknob, knowing Coach is standing on the other side like a bull ready to charge, I say, “For what it’s worth, that thing you do with your tongue—”

The door swings open and Coach roars, “*Out!*”

Emery bites her lips, but I catch the way the corners tip up on the ends.

This chick is a fucking psycho.

I kind of like it.

TWO

Spider

“HOW DID YOU do on the topology exam?” Rowan, my teammate Carey’s girlfriend, is a spunky little redhead with an insane IQ.

After getting bored of last year’s computer science major I switched to civil engineering and found myself in the same class as Rowan. Little did I know she’s as competitive in the classroom as her boyfriend is on the field.

“I got an A.” I open the classroom door and hold it for her to walk through. “You?” I hook her around the shoulder and pull her to one side of the busy breezeway to keep her from getting plowed over.

“B plus.” She groans and sets her jaw stubbornly. “Should’ve been an A. I studied so hard.” Her gaze darts to mine. “Did you even study? How does this stuff come so easy to you?”

My brain works in fucked up ways. I did well in school so my stepdad didn’t have another reason to smack me around. Not that he needed one. Or, maybe all those hits to the head opened up some part of my brain I wasn’t using that made me a goddamn genius.

“Get your paws off my woman.” Rowan’s boyfriend Carey shoves me playfully from behind. He lifts her off the ground like she weighs nothing and walks a few steps nuzzling her neck. “I missed you.”

She giggles and squirms. “It hasn’t even been two hours.”

Her frown from earlier is erased by Carey’s presence. I find it fascinating that two people can have that kind of effect on each other. Women have never provided me with more than a quick and temporary relief—more of a distraction than a remedy.

“Theodore!”

I freeze mid-step at the sound of my full name. And I’m not the only one.

Carey steps shoulder-to-shoulder with me, his big body radiating tension. The sun lights up a head of thick blonde hair as Emery closes in on us. She looks like a prep-school student body president in her khaki slacks and pale-yellow cardigan, complete with pearl buttons.

She stops in front of me, and eyes Carey and Rowan curiously.

“Don’t call me that.” I grip the straps of my backpack to keep from grabbing her and shaking her buttoned up look loose.

“Isn’t it your name?”

“Nobody calls him that,” Carey says with a heavy warning in his voice.

Most people find him intimidating, but she smiles at him as if he’s a puppy. As if his defensive response pleases her.

“What do you want?” I know she’s after something. She doesn’t strike me as the type of woman who’d waste her time with someone she couldn’t use to further her cause.

Her eyes come back to me. “You left in such a hurry we didn’t get a chance to exchange numbers.”

“Why would we do that?” The way we left things, with Coach breathing down my neck, made it obvious there wouldn’t be a repeat of our night together. “You’re hot, but football’s the only thing keeping me out of jail. There’s plenty of pussy that *won’t* get me kicked off the team.”

“*Spider!*” Rowan sounds worried, as if maybe I’ve insulted the woman, but she doesn’t know Emery like I do. She may be soft and delicious on the outside, but inside she’s forged steel and sharp edges.

Emery crosses her arms at her chest. “He has no power over you or me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. He has the power to make my life a living hell.”

She chews her pink-glossed lip as if thinking things over. “Okay.” She shrugs. “You’re not nearly as brave as I thought.”

I smile slowly, all teeth as I bite back the urge to give in to what she wants, to lose my temper and prove I’m the unstable loaded gun she can aim at her dad. “Safe to say, you’re not what I expected either.” I eye her from her pink headband to her leather top-siders, noting the contrast of her virginal look versus how she liked it when I pulled her hair and spanked her ass. She

bit and scratched and purred like a kitten.

She turns her attention to Rowan. "I'm Emery, by the way." They shake hands politely. "I like your shirt."

Rowan grins, clearly won over by the cat in preppy clothing. "Thanks. Most people don't get it."

"It's a physics pun. *Don't be a jerk*. The time derivative. It's funny." The pretty psycho grins.

"Exactly." Rowan's eyes light up as if she's seeing land after months lost at sea. "I haven't seen you around, are you a new student?" Rowan taking an interest in this chick is not good. Next thing, she'll be inviting her over for dinner and study dates and I need Emery to stay as far away from me as possible.

"I am. Just graduated from Pontus Academy in Massachusetts."

Mass? That explains why I didn't know Coach had a kid.

"Thrilling conversation," I say sounding bored. "But we need to be on the field in thirty."

Her blue eyes register no apology. "Of course. Don't let me hold you up."

"It was nice meeting you," Rowan says as Carey pulls her along. "I'll see you around sometime. We should grab a coffee!"

When we're far enough away that we can't be overheard, Carey asks the burning question. "Is that the chick you hooked up with after the game?"

"Yeah."

He chuckles. "You ghosted her pretty hard, man. What were you saying about the team?"

I bite the inside of my mouth, feeling the pinch and tasting the blood. "Brawley."

"What about him?"

"Emery is Coach's daughter."

Carey stops walking, the news seeming to slam him in the gut and still his progress. "Tell me you're joking!"

"I wish I were."

THREE

Spider

WE'RE HALFWAY THROUGH warm-ups with our strength and conditioning coach when Brawley stomps onto the field. I haven't seen him since I stood with my nuts in my hands waiting for him to beat me.

I'm not afraid of him. I've taken more beatings than I can count, both on and off the field. I am terrified about him taking away my only outlet—football. He could bench me for the season, for the rest of my career if he wanted to.

“Web!” He waves me over.

Carey lifts his chin. “Need a wingman?”

“Nah, I got it.” I jog to Coach and push my sweat soaked hair off my forehead. “What's up.”

“We need to talk.” He heads toward the benches expecting me to follow.

I do.

Once there he adjusts his BSU ball cap as if it's lined with spikes and he's trying to find the most comfortable position. “About Emery.”

“I didn't know she was your kid.”

He nods solemnly. “I believe you.” He looks around as if to gauge who might be listening, then mumbles, “I shouldn't have hit you.”

“I'm not gonna tell anyone if that's what you're worried about.” I'd be an idiot to dig myself any deeper than I already have by banging his daughter.

His expression pinches, as if he's not completely comfortable with whatever he's about to say. “Emery is pissed at me.” He breathes heavily, finally takes off his uncomfortable hat and takes the bench. He braces his elbows on his knees and runs a hand through his salt and pepper hair. “We lost her mom when she was eight. I was a mess and I didn't know how to

raise a little girl. I sent Emery to boarding school.”

I grit my teeth together at the thought of a young Emery being shipped across the country by her only living parent while mourning the loss of her mom.

“I was a shitty dad.” He pops his hat back on his head. “Emery’s angry. She’s trying to hurt me.”

“Can’t say I blame her.”

His face reddens and I prep for him to yell in my face, tell me to mind my own damn business, but like a popped balloon he deflates. “Yeah. I need you to stay away from her.”

In that we agree.

“Last time I saw her she was a fifteen-year-old kid and now she’s...” He blows out a breath. “We have a lot of work to do to repair our relationship; her using my players to hurt me is a complication we don’t need.”

I understand.

What I don’t understand is why I’m feeling strangely protective of her. I know the little kitten can take care of herself—she’s unapologetically vicious. But I also know what it’s like to be young and abandoned by a parent, to be handed over and forgotten. Emery was left to teachers and dorm supervisors to be raised. I was handed over to a stepdad who brought me up with a heavy fist and a bottle of malt liquor.

“We clear?”

I blink down at him seeing him through different eyes. The big intimidating man seems smaller, vulnerable, weak even—testimony to the lovely Emery’s power.

“Yeah, man. Crystal.”

He stands to his full height. “*Coach*. I’m not your man. Now get your ass back to your team for drills.”

FOUR

Emery

THE SUN IS barely up when I walk into Bean Madness, the campus coffee shop. I don't have any homework due, but I have to catch a ride with my dad to campus every day so that leaves me two hours before my first class. Usually I'd find a spot in the grass to read or listen to an audiobook, but the sun is coming up later and later and the chill in the early morning has me craving coffee.

"Emery, is that you?"

I turn around to see the redhead I met four days ago. "Rowan, right?"

She's wearing a Bean Madness apron and has her long hair pulled up and out of her face. "Yeah." She fidgets with a wet rag she uses, to wipe down tables. "What can I get for you?" She makes her way around the counter to the register.

"Coffee. Black, please."

She wrinkles her nose. "Black? You sure you don't want to try a triple fudge brownie mocha? Or a caramel drizzled vanilla latte?"

"Those sound like sundaes, not coffee."

She laughs and pours me a coffee in the biggest insulted paper cup. She hands me the cup and when I hand her my card, she waves me off. "It's on the house. Consider it your welcome to Bear State coffee."

Something warm and wholly unfamiliar expands in my chest.

"Are you enjoying BSU?" She follows me to a nearby table but doesn't sit.

"So far so good." If I'm not counting the fact that I can't get a certain rebel football player's attention. I admit Theodore's inked skin, piercings and perma-scowl caught my eye. He would be the perfect partner in my plan to

make my dad miserable. I didn't expect, given the explosive sexual chemistry between us, that he'd play hard to get. "I like my forensics classes."

"Forensics?"

I sip my coffee. "That surprises you?"

She takes in my tailored oxford shirt, the string of pearls on my neck and the satin scarf tied around my ponytail. "You strike me as a pre-law kind of girl."

"Nope. I'm mostly interested in how to kill people and get away with it." I wink, but it doesn't take away the look of horror in her eyes.

Some people are so easy.

"I'm kidding."

"I know!" She laughs uncomfortably. "Do you live on campus?"

"I wish." The inheritance my mom left was enough to pay for ten years of boarding school tuition, but left me with only a few thousand dollars in my bank account and is the reason I'm stuck living with my dad. I need a job so I can save money and get an apartment, which I was surprised to learn is actually cheaper than living on campus. "Is the coffee shop hiring?"

"We have a part time position, nights. It'll include weekends."

"That's fine, I don't have a social life." And it'll get me out of the house so I don't have to do the awkward dance of silence with my dad at the dinner table every night.

"Have you worked in food and beverage before?"

Heat of embarrassment makes a slow climb up my neck to make camp in my cheeks. "No, actually, I've never had a job before."

"Oh." She frowns, then shrugs and grins. "No biggie. I'll train you. It's not rocket science. I'll grab you an application."

I spend the next twenty minutes filling out the application forgoing all the questions about job experience, and adding my years of community service instead, which includes working in the dining hall of a retirement home. I turn the application in and by that time the coffee shop is slammed with college students and professors. I bury my nose in my *Anatomy of a Motive* textbook when I feel someone nearby staring at me.

Well I'll be damned.

Theodore Web.

His dark hair is a little overgrown and curls around his ears in a boyish way that takes the edge off his neck-to-toe tattoos. His body is covered in colorful ink that would take days to explore and discover all the pieces of art on his body. His green eyes are tight, and he uses his top teeth to toy with the ring on his lower lip. His knuckles are white on backpack straps pulled tightly over muscular shoulders and a wide chest.

He's every woman's dirty fantasy.

And every dad's nightmare.

I hold eye contact with him for an uncomfortably long time.

He finally gets restless and saunters to my table. He doesn't sit down.

"Are you stalking me?"

"Is my pursuing you in an obsessive manner upsetting?"

His gaze darts from my eyes to my lips, my hair and not so subtly to my breasts before making the trip back up. "Yes."

I close my textbook and fold my arms on the table, leaning into them and tilting my head to look up at his six-foot-something height. "Do you want me to stop?"

"We had this conversation yesterday," he growls.

"That's not an answer."

"Coach warned me to stay away from you."

I bet he did, controlling prick. "You don't strike me as the kind of man who does what he's told."

His eyes narrow. "How old are you?"

"How old do you want me to be?"

"Don't fuck with me," he says under his breath. "You told Ro you just graduated. But you were in the bar the night we—"

"I have a fake." I smile seductively at the thrill of seeing flickering dread behind his eyes. "I'm nineteen. Don't tell me you actually care."

He runs a hand through his hair and scratches at his jaw dusted in a day's worth of beard growth. I have an urge to rub up against it and feel the burn against my skin. Lick from his throat to his lips—

"Stop looking at me like that."

I uncross my legs under the table, feeling restless and hot. “Like what?”

“Stay away from me.”

Do I detect a quiver of unease in his voice?

“I’m serious, kitten.”

Kitten? *Meow.*

“Promise me.”

When I don’t answer he turns and storms out of the coffee shop.

I’ve got him right where I want him. The bad news for him? I *never* do what I’m told.

FIVE

Spider

OUR TEAM DRAGS ass to the showers after a killer training session. Emery's obviously getting to her dad in ways that don't include me because he was in a foul fucking mood. Practice went two hours over, and half the team ended up puking on the sideline.

The hot water is heaven on my fatigued muscles, and I plan to eat my weight in carbs as soon as the nausea wears off.

Carey stands at the spigot next to mine. "Rowan told me you ran into Emery at Bean Madness."

I drop my chin to my chest allowing the water pressure to pound against my neck.

"You need to leave her alone, man. If coach finds out—"

"I know." I'm fucking trying. Everywhere I look I see her. Between classes, in the commons, I swear she's following me. "I'm trying."

"What do you mean you're *trying*? Just do it."

If it were only that easy.

I wish I'd never met Emery Brawley. I wish the night she approached me in the bar wearing that conservative black dress that I'd have brushed her off as a basic, uptight bitch. I wish I never saw the flicker of danger in her eyes, never tasted the rebel that lives beneath her librarian exterior. I wish like hell I could erase the memory of the filthy things she whispered in my ear while I pounded her into her floral bed sheets.

But I can't.

She's bad for me—an immoral indulgence wrapped in Sunday school teacher's clothes. Her neurotic personality intrigues me. Am I too far gone, fallen too far that there's no going back? Am I drunk on her deviancy that

she's tattooed on my insides now?

I finish with the shower and wrap a towel around my waist. Once at my locker I use my towel to dry my hair when a tension fills the room with muttered *what the fucks*. I turn around and my gaze snags on the source of the disruption.

Emery strolls through the room filled with a couple dozen naked men as if she's leisurely browsing through Target.

"Whoa, sweetheart," Kaipō says, stepping in front of her in nothing but a white towel. His enormous body blocks her path; she takes a moment to openly appreciate his physique. "You can't be in here."

She tips up her chin defiantly. "Says who?"

"Says common sense. It's the men's locker room. Or did you not see the sign on the door." He's teasing her.

I don't like it.

"Oh, I saw it. I just don't care."

He stares at her for a silent moment before his booming laughter echoes through the concrete space. "All right then, honey." He steps aside with a dramatic sweep of his arm. "Come on in. If testicles make you squeamish, I'd keep your eyes high."

"I appreciate the warning." She sits on the bench in the middle of the room, all of us watching her with our towels held to our dicks. She takes a slow look around the space, not hiding her appreciation for the athletic bodies that surround her. Her gaze snags on mine and lingers until she eventually blinks away. "I don't suppose any of you fine looking gentlemen would be interested in a date, would you?"

At least a dozen men pipe up with some variation of "Yes, fucking, please." Some of them step closer to talk to her, clearly unaware she's Coach Brawley's daughter. My other roommate, Loren, holds his hand out to her. He's wearing nothing but a pair of jeans open at the fly. She takes his hand and smiles hungrily up at him. He pulls her to her feet and with his free hand reaches out and touches her hair.

"*Hands off.*" The menacing tone in my voice surprises even me.

Loren aims a worried glance at me, removes his hands from her, and takes a step back. "Sorry, Spider."

I ignore the punk, grab her by her elbow and drag her away from the group of drooling men into a sports medicine room with no windows. I slam the door, lock it, push her against the wall and cup her throat. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?”

She’s breathing heavy, her pulse rapid-fire against my palm, and a soft purr hums in her throat. “Getting your attention.”

I shove up into her space, pinning her to the wall with my terry-cloth-clad hips. “You got it. Now tell me what you want.”

She bites her lip and wiggles against me, drawing attention to my quickly hardening dick sandwiched between us. “I think you know.” Her gaze darts down and she smirks. “Feels like you want the same thing.”

“You want to fuck? Is that all this is?” I can feel her hot breath against my lips, her heaving breasts incased in starched cotton against my chest.

“Does there have to be more?” She smiles seeming to enjoy my reaction to her baiting.

“You want to use me to piss off your dad.”

She pushes my towel to the floor and grips my hard-on in a tight fist. “That’s not all I want to use you for.”

I hiss and roll my hips into her hand. “You want to play with me, kitten?”

“You want to play with me too. You won’t admit it, but your body screams it. I’m right, aren’t I, *Theodore*?”

Hearing that name from her lips is the ultimate pleasure-pain. I flex my fingers around her throat and a sigh falls from her parted lips. I rest my forehead against hers, breathing hard, pushing the filthy, demented sexual fantasies of the two of us together far from my head and yet they continue to flood my mind. “Yes.”

I don’t know who moved first, only that suddenly our mouths fuse together and her tongue slips eagerly against mine. She tastes of sin and peppermint, her lips promising redemption only to drag me further into damnation. A temptress, she licks into my mouth coaxing me to deepen the kiss while she rubs her soft body against me. The idea that I could’ve resisted her advances was nothing more than an illusion, a lie I told myself. I was helpless against her advances that first night in the bar, and I’m helpless against her now.

My breath catches when she bites hard on my lower lip. I rear back, grinning as the flavor of my own blood touches the tip of my tongue. “You’re dangerous.”

“You have no idea.”

“Coach is gonna have me shot.” I pant as she continues to stroke me.

“I’ll handle him.” She pushes up on her toes and kisses me gently. “Don’t you trust me?” Her tone is teasing.

“Not even a little.” This woman is unpredictable, and yet, her cunning has me aroused and captivated in the worst way.

“I should probably go.” She releases her hold on me and a frustrated growl bubbles up from my chest. She slips out from between me and the wall, moving to the door as I brace my weight and catch my breath. “I’ll see you tonight.”

“Tonight? Where—” The door closes behind her and I’m left alone, bare-ass naked with a nasty case of blue balls and my towel at my feet. After a series of deep breaths, I straighten up, wrap up as best I can, and storm out of the room.

Carey, Kaipō, and Loren are there waiting for me, eyes wide and obviously trying to avoid my not-so-quickly deflating hard-on.

“Dude.” Kaipō says. “You and Coach’s *daughter*?”

I’m already committed, my dick insisting to have it no other way. “Yeah, I guess so.”

He ignores my boner but keeps his distance to give me an awkward high-five. “You got brass balls. Coach’ll make you pay for slipping it to his little princess.”

Carey shakes his head in disapproval. “I can’t believe you’re going for it.”

“Why not?” Loren blurts. “She’s fucking hot. I’d take Coach’s bullshit any day to get a chance with pussy that pretty.”

“Watch your fuckin’ mouth.” I’m about to lunge when Carey’s shocked gasp derails me.

“Oh no,” Carey mutters with horror in his voice. “Don’t tell me…” He squints. “You’re actually falling for her.”

“No. It’s just sex.” And no matter what I’m feeling inside, it’ll always

only be just sex, because that's all I'm capable of.

SIX

Emery

FINDING OUT WHERE Theodore lives was easy. I asked a few cheerleaders in my psychology class and after they gave me a long hard look and dismissed me as a sexual threat, they spilled the address.

My Uber pulls up to the gigantic house just before nine o'clock at night. I was expecting an overgrown yard littered with beer bottles and rusty workout equipment, not something out of a Martha Stewart magazine.

I knock on the front door and smooth my pleated, tartan skirt that hits just above the knee. I check to make sure the silk scarf tied and bowed under my oxford collar is centered.

"Coming!" The door swings open to reveal a super-muscled guy with dark skin and a playful smile. "Emery, right?"

With my shoulders stiff and my spine straight, I nod. "Yes. Is Theodore available?"

"Theod—girl," he chuckles. "You're not gonna get anywhere with that man by calling him Theodore."

I don't smile outwardly, but he must see the grin in my eyes.

"Okay, Emery, I see you." He laughs and opens the door wide with a smile. "Come on in, then."

I step inside the entryway; it's so tall and wide my footsteps echo.

"Yo, Spider! You have company!" He waits with me at the foot of the staircase.

"Why do you call him Spider?"

"His last name's Web, and he throws a football like he's got eight arms."

"Spiders have eight legs. Not arms."

"Who's to say they're not arms?"

I shrug. “Science.”

“No one listens to that.” A mischievous grin tilts his lips. “Do you know sign language?”

“I know a little, yes.”

“You know...” He lifts a brow. “My dick can speak sign language.”

I crack a smile. “Really?”

“Oh yeah. Feel like having a conversation?” He braces his hands on hips and rolls them forward and backwards. “Right now, he’s telling you he likes your headband.”

“Your dick has great taste.”

He wiggles his hips again. “My dick says thank you—”

“Put it away.” The menacing growl comes from the top of the steps where Theodore stands gloriously topless scowling down at us.

“All right, all right,” Kaipo winks at me. “I’ll see you around, Coach’s daughter.”

“See ya.” I turn to look up at Theodore, who hasn’t moved to come down to meet me, so I guess that means I’m making the trip up. I stop two steps before the landing.

“How did you know where I live?”

“I’m not giving away my secrets.”

His glare tightens.

“May I?” I motion to the two steps still between us.

He stiffly nods—one quick jerk of his chin.

I tentatively wrap my fingers around his tattooed hand. Two breaths later and his fingers curl around mine. “See, that’s not so hard is it?”

He doesn’t answer in words, but his expression softens in resignation. He shows me to his bedroom, closing the door behind me. Once again I’m surprised by how clean it is.

“Have a seat.” He motions to one of the two chairs in his room.

I ignore the chairs and sit at the edge of his bed. He watches with a voyeuristic heat in his gaze as I untie the bow at my neck. I pop the top button of my blouse, then the next and one more until the cleavage and white

lace of my bra show. I kick off my flats, put my heel to the bed and scoot back to the middle, knees bent allowing my skirt to slip open and bunch at my hips.

He bites his lip and an animalistic growl rumbles up his throat. “You have something against underwear?”

“Unnecessary obstacle.” I unbutton the rest of my shirt, peeling the two sides apart. “You said you wanted to play with me.” I take the black silk that was around my neck and use it as a blindfold, tying it tightly over my eyes. “Let me be your playground.” I lie down on the bed, completely exposed and vulnerable. My heart races with excitement because a man like Theodore won’t be able to hold back his baser instincts when I offer myself as prey to his predator.

His desk chair creaks and his bare feet pad against the wood floor, growing louder as he draws closer. I tremble with anticipation, the memories of our first night together still fresh in my mind, my body desperate to relive it.

Fingers bite into the skin at my knees as he grips hard and presses them into the mattress. Exposing me to the cold air in the room, I gasp when his hot, wet tongue licks up my inner thigh. “You taste like forgiveness,” he mumbles against my skin.

“What does—”

“*Quiet, kitten.*”

My pulse pounds at his display of dominance. I had a taste of it our first night together, but I sensed he held back. He bought the image—pearl earrings, sweater sets, and slacks. He thought I was delicate, that he had to go easy on me, treat me as if I’m breakable.

No one in my life has ever gone easy on me, and he can’t break what’s already broken.

SEVEN

Spider

I WASN'T SOBER the first time I hooked up with Emery. If I had been, I would've paid closer attention to the way my touch affected her. Learned all the ways to make her moan, catch her breath, bite her lip and squirm restlessly under my mouth.

Like now, as I run my teeth along her inner thigh to the warm and welcoming apex of her thighs, she sucks in a stuttered breath.

Even wasted, I remember loving her taste and sober she tastes even better.

Savory, rich, and so fucking pure—she's out of my league and yet here I am, eager to contaminate her with sin and debauchery.

I lick into her body, poisoning her with ugly thoughts of ruining her for every man who comes after me. With a bruising grip on her thighs, I pin her knees to the bed and drown myself in her taste and her needy sounds. She buries her hands in my hair, gripping the strands and pulling until it hurts.

I sit up and hold both her wrists with one hand. "Don't touch me."

"You let me touch you before."

I bring her hands to my sweatpants and press them to my hard-on. "Only here."

A wicked smile tilts her lips. "Works for me."

I reach into my bedside table and hand her a condom. Still blindfolded she manages to open it and roll it on like she's done it a million times before. I wonder what kind of rich, boarding-school assholes she's let inside her body. I'll kill every fucking one of them.

I fall over her, bracing my weight on my elbows while kissing the white lace over her full breasts. Her nipples tighten between my lips, perfect pink beneath virginal white. She arches her back, lifts her hips, her body begging

me to put out the fire I'd barely begun to stoke.

The urge to fuck with her, bring her close only to leave her wanting, rides me hard. She sought me out, hunted me, and refused to listen when I told her to back off until I couldn't resist her. She made me weak. Denial of pleasure would be the ultimate payback. Pain would be even better.

My nostrils flare as I fight against my baser instincts. Her hands remain at her sides gripping the fabric of my comforter. I calm at the sign of her obedience. She wants to please me.

I run a finger along her jaw and whisper, "It hurts you to be good, doesn't it."

"Yes," she breathes.

"We have that in common." I grit my teeth together and slowly sink inside her. My muscles shake with the effort it takes to keep from slamming my hips forward.

Seated inside her, we're both breathing heavy. Her lips part to accommodate her breath as I move inside her. She licks her lips, her mouth calling to be filled. I run my lip along hers in a brutal tease.

"Kiss me," she whispers.

"No." I use my tongue, my lip ring, and my teeth until she's growling in frustration and trying to chase down my mouth. "How do you like it when you're not heard, kitten? When your desires are left unmet?"

Her jaw gets hard, her pretty mouth closes in a tight, defiant line.

I dig my elbows into the bed and pick up my pace determined to wipe that look off her face. I kiss her throat, pull the tender skin between my lips and suck. Hard.

Her thighs quake and the soft sounds falling from her lips spur me on until I'm lost to my need for release. I close my eyes, bite down, and send her soaring over the edge. My mind scatters, my heart pounds and I follow right after her with a primal growl against her throat.

Seconds pass as I catch my breath and wait for awareness to return. I pull myself off her, toss the condom in the trash, and tuck myself back into my sweatpants. She looks like an erotic painting, sprawled out on my bed with her open shirt, rumpled skirt, and the angry red mark I left behind on her neck.

She sits up, pulls off her blindfold and meets my eyes boldly. “Even better than I thought it would be.”

“Happy to be of service,” I say through clenched teeth. I hate how easily I gave in. I hate myself for not being able to resist her. Lucky for me, self-hatred is something I’ve spent my life perfecting. “Anything else I can do for you, Miss Brawley?”

She fixes her shirt, buttoning up to the top and covering my mark. I have an unreasonable desire to rip her collar open.

She ties the black scarf around her neck and straightens her skirt. “Yes, Mr. Web.” She smooths her hair, easily putting herself back together as if she’d never been dirtied by me. “We’re just getting started.” She slips on her shoes and moves toward the door, stopping at my shoulder, she looks up at me with flushed cheeks and bright eyes. “We’re not so different, you know.”

“How would you know?” I look her up and down making sure she sees disgust on my face rather than the awe-struck attraction I can’t seem to fight. “You don’t even know me.”

“I see it in your eyes, Theodore.”

“Oh yeah, and what do you think you see?”

“The same thing you see when you look in mine. *Nothing.*” She walks out of my room without another word, and there’s one thing I know without a doubt.

This isn’t the last I’ll see of Emery Brawley.

Spider and Emery’s story continues in *Hail Mary* releasing Fall 2020.

ABOUT JB SALSBUARY

JB Salsbury is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author. She lives in Phoenix, Arizona with her husband and two kids.

Her love of good storytelling led her to earn a degree in Media Communications. With her journalistic background, writing has always been at the forefront, and her love of romance propelled her career as an author.

She spends the majority of her day behind the computer where a world of battling alphas, budding romance, and impossible obstacles claws away at her subconscious and begs to be released to the page.

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WHATEVER IT TAKES

GIANNA GABRIELA

ARI COLE

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.

Okay, maybe I'm exaggerating, but that's how it feels right now.

"Jump!" I hear someone yell.

"You wouldn't dare," someone else adds.

"She's got no balls!!!" An idiot says, and I want nothing more than to turn around and find him so I can punch him in the face.

The thing is... if I turn around, I'll walk away. I know I'll chicken out, so I refuse to turn around. I need to stay focused.

If I do this wrong, if I take one wrong step, I could die.

Honestly, I probably could die. I mean, I'm standing on top of the highest rock in Forest Pines Lake, with a drink in my hand, my underwear riding up my butt, and my jeans and T-shirt pooled at my feet, getting ready to jump off.

I look down at the water beneath me and take a deep breath as I try to muster up the courage.

The wind picks up speed and I shiver. *Who thought this was a good idea?*

"Are you going to do it? Or are you just going to stand there all night?" someone asks.

"Shouldn't write a check your ass can't cash," someone else yells. Who even says that?

"I could've been inside partying right now!" another complains and all the voices mesh together in the background of what might be the biggest mistake I have ever made, if I end up making it.

I shouldn't have said I could do this... but once the guys questioned my ability to do so, I had to prove them wrong. It's their fault really, they started

it. The baseball guys...it's always the baseball guys.

We were at a party at Stevenson's house to kick off the long weekend when I somehow found myself in the middle of an argument I had no business being part of.

Well, *I* may have inserted myself into *their* conversation.

But that's beside the point. The point is they said I wouldn't jump.

I said I would. That I'd do it anytime, anywhere. Those were my exact words. Words they took advantage of.

They suggested I do it tonight. Well, suggested is putting it lightly. They put money on it.

I had to win the bet, not only for the money but for the respect that comes with it. If I jump, they won't doubt me anymore.

News of the bet spread with most people joining to bet against me. My classmates couldn't believe I had said yes to jumping off a rock, and they would take any chance they could to make some extra cash, not that any of them needed it. People at Bragan Prep didn't need money. Still, they all craved excitement.

Conveniently for all of us, and I say this sarcastically, Stevenson's house happens to be near this damn rock, so here we are.

All the party-guests are here as well.

Standing behind me, shouting random things at me while I'm here in my underwear in the freezing cold, with the rock I'm standing on serving as the only thing stopping me from plunging to my death.

Right now, I wish I were more than tipsy so I can just get this over with. The water is going to be very cold; I just know it. I can't believe I put myself in this predicament all because of a bet. A challenge. A dare. One I couldn't back down from.

I guess the entire baseball team, and I, aren't entirely to blame for my current predicament.

The person who deserves all the blame is always the same.

Kayden Harrison.

It's not like he said anything—he actually didn't talk at all—but the way he stood there all smug, with his arms crossed, said all I needed to hear.

Kayden's been pushing my buttons since elementary school. He's the reason I got sent to the principal's office when I kicked him for pushing me and making me kill a ladybug.

I got stuck with him in middle school with only a year's reprieve, since he's a year ahead of me. I would say he followed me, but I'm a year below him, so I bet he says it's the other way around.

I ended up with him in high school too. Despite the fact that I didn't go to Bragan High School, where my dad coaches the football team. I chose Bragan Prep instead and found him here. So, long story short, I'm stuck with him for one more year.

Still, he's the reason I'm standing here half naked in the freaking cold in the first place.

I saw his face when the guys dared me to jump.

I saw the way he shook his head like he knew it was something I'd never do.

His silence was a gauntlet. He was challenging me. I could tell. I've known him my whole life.

So, it's his fault I said yes.

Because my life has been all about proving him wrong.

Speaking of the devil, I turn to my right and watch as Kayden takes his place a few feet from me. He stands there with a red cup to his lips as he takes a sip of his beer.

Looking away from him, I clutch my cup and do the same. It tastes stale. Warm. Not at all refreshing or encouraging.

I can't believe I'm really contemplating jumping off this rock. I've been here numerous times before, usually in the summer, and have always been too afraid to do it. I've always been at the bottom, watching the daring people jump off. I've seen Kayden do it numerous times. I was too scared to try.

Yet here I am in the middle of the night with an audience daring me to jump.

I should back down, but I'm hardheaded and will do anything in my power to show I'm right and he's wrong. Because Kayden is always wrong.

"Alright Ari, you can stop now," he says, and all the shouting voices

instantly stop. That's Kayden for you. He only needs to say a word for people to quiet down and listen up.

I roll my eyes. "You think I can't do it," I tell him, my words a little slurred. Maybe I'm a bit tipsier than I thought.

"You need to back away and put your clothes on," he orders, like he has any authority over me.

My hate for Kayden runs so deep that even though putting my clothes on and leaving is exactly what I want to do, when he tells me to do it I instantly don't want to anymore.

"You don't tell me what to do!" I fire back.

"Just jump," someone shouts, breaking through the silence.

"Shut it," Kayden barks back and when I turn to look at him, I find his eyes focused on me. He's not smiling, there's no smugness. Instead, there's almost, like, a dark cloud looming over him. Is he pissed? Why would he be mad right now? "Put your clothes on and go home, Ari," he adds.

My eyes shift from him to the darkness in front of me. Defiantly, I take a step forward.

"Ari," he warns, but I don't acknowledge him.

Despite how much my fear tells me to back down, I can't. I take yet another step forward. "I'm not scared," I turn to him and say, but I think it's more me trying to convince myself.

"You should be," he replies. "You're drunk, standing naked on top of a rock, ready to plunge into freezing water."

"I'm not naked and you guys do it all the time, what's the big deal?" I ask. If they can do it, why can't I?

"We do it during the day and in the summer. This is not that. Stop acting up, back up." I swear he almost sounds like he cares about me and my wellbeing. But I know he doesn't. Kayden only cares about himself. Always has. Well, he cares about making my life a living hell, too.

"A little cold water never killed anybody," I say, stepping forward again. Either my steps are really small, or the edge of this rock is really far.

"Stop," he says, and I bring my attention to him once more. He starts walking toward me. The closer he gets the less I feel I can breathe.

Something about him always makes me feel like there's not enough air around me. Like I'm suffocating. Like he sucks it all up.

"Leave me alone," I tell him, waving him off.

"I'm trying to," he says, inches from me, and that's when I realize he's been taking steps too, except his are in my direction.

"Clearly not," I tell him, pointing at his proximity.

The silence would make anyone think that there're only two people out here. Him and me. No one dares to say anything else. We've become the show they're all too interested in watching.

Kayden's always the center of attention.

"Ari Cole, you're being stupid. This is dangerous. Stop," he tells me as he finally reaches me. He bends over and picks up my shirt and pants from the floor. "Here, let's go. I'll take you home. You're drunk and about to do something really stupid."

Stupid. That's what he thinks of me. "I'm not drunk."

"Yes, you are," he replies.

I look up at him in challenge. "How would you know?" I ask.

"I know you," he replies, his words uttered low enough that only I can hear.

"No you don't," I shout back.

"Yes I do. That's why I know you'll regret doing this in the morning if you do."

Kayden doesn't know me. "That's not true," I reply, facing away from him and toward the water again.

"Stop this," he yells.

"No."

"Why are you acting like a child?" He shouts, exasperated.

"Why are you acting like a parent?" I fire back.

"Because you clearly need one. I thought you were smart."

I look back at him. "I am."

"This is dumb."

"You're dumb," I reply then turn away again, mostly because I want to

smack myself for my weak comeback. That's something elementary-school me would've replied with. High-school me should have better insults.

He places his hand on my shoulder and spins me around to face him once again. "Let's go."

"Leave me alone," I reply, using my arms to push him back. Except, Kayden is an athlete. His body is covered in muscles. And so my push has no effect on him. It only affects me.

Somehow, the edge that felt so far away is a lot closer than I expected. "Ari!" I hear him shout, just as I lose my footing and stumble back. Too far back. With nothing to stop me from falling.

KAYDEN HARRISON

Dammit.

Why is she fighting me? Well, I guess she always fights me. She's been arguing with me since the first time I met her. Partly my fault. I didn't know how else to get her attention that day, ten years ago. so I pushed her. That was wrong of me. And yet, I didn't learn.

I picked on her after that.

Never truly in a mean way.

Mostly dares. Challenges. Words that weren't meant to hurt her but rile her up. For some reason, I liked it when she got mad at me. I enjoyed that she didn't act like everyone else did. She repulsed at the thought of being around me, which just made me want to be around her even more.

I think she's hated me since the day I unintentionally made her kill her precious little ladybug. I think I've loved her since the moment she kicked me in the shin in response.

"Let's go," I tell her, spinning her around to face me, hoping the serious look in my eyes shakes some sense into her. Jumping off this rock is ridiculously dangerous, especially in the nighttime while drunk and the water is freezing. No sane person would do this.

“Leave me alone!” she replies. I watch intently as she places her hands on my chest and before I know it, she’s pushing me away.

I get lost briefly in the way her hands feel on my chest, even through my shirt, but I’m broken out of that when I see her stumbling back, going farther and farther than she expected.

I see it in her eyes the moment she realizes what’s going to happen next. “Ari,” I shout and try to get a hold of her, but it’s too late.

She falls off the rock and before anyone can even react, I’m jumping in after her.

ARI COLE

You know that feeling you get when you’re on a rollercoaster? The adrenaline you feel as you climb to the top? The scream you let out the moment you find yourself descending... well that’s nothing at all like what it feels like when you’re falling to your eventual death.

I don’t scream. I feel every second like a movie on slow motion.

Knives. Being stabbed on the back. That’s what it feels like the moment my body hits the water. It’s so deep that I never touch the ground.

Cold is not the right word.

Even freezing wouldn’t describe how it feels to be in this water right now.

I’ve never felt this before.

Panicking, I inhale gulps of water and feel like I’m going to drown. Eventually, my body comes back up to the top and I begin coughing.

Water is coming out of my nose and I still I can’t breathe. That causes me to panic even more.

I scream the moment I feel something touch my back.

“Calm down, it’s just me,” Kayden’s voice says. Wait, Kayden?

I turn around instantly and right before I can ask what he’s doing here, the cough returns.

“You’re okay, just breathe,” Kayden says, and I can’t help but feel weird at the thought of him caring for me.

I manage to get my breathing in order. “What are you doing?” I ask when I feel like I won’t cough again.

“What do you mean, what am I doing here?” he replies, the moon shining enough light for me to see his wet locks.

“Were you jealous I jumped and had to jump too?” I ask, trying to pretend my jumping was totally intentional.

“Are you kidding me right now?” he asks, his tone harsh.

I look at him confused. “Of course not. Why’d you jump?” I ask, continuing to tread water.

“Let’s get out of this water,” he says, his tone resigned as he starts swimming away.

I follow behind him. He looks back every so often to make sure I’m following, and I fight the urge to roll my eyes. Why did he jump after me? Could it be that he actually cares about my safety? I shake those thoughts out of my head; it’s Kayden we’re talking about here.

After what feels like an eternity later, I watch Kayden pull himself out of the water. Unlike me, he’s fully clothed and the realization that I’m only wearing my underwear makes me feel embarrassed.

Maybe the fall took away my buzz because, at this moment, I’m having sober thoughts. Before I start overthinking, I see Kayden’s hand extended toward me. I think about smacking it away, but then the wind picks up again and I honestly can’t be bothered to fight him right now. I need to get the hell out of this water.

Taking his hand, I immediately notice how small mine feels in his. I’ve never held his hand before, never really held hands with anyone.

He pulls me out of the water like I’m weightless and then we both just stand there, with the moon as our light, staring at each other in silence for far too long.

“I’m going to head back up to grab my clothes,” I tell him, suddenly feeling a weird energy in the air.

“About that,” he says, his hand coming to the hem of his shirt as he lifts it

over his body. This is not helping the weird energy right now, but I can't help letting my eyes roam every bit of skin he reveals as he takes it off. My eyes run the length of his upper body, not missing the six pack. As I take him in, my eyes land on his mouth and I find him smiling. I immediately look back down again, feeling embarrassed that I'd let my mind wander.

I clear my throat. "About what?" I ask, bringing my eyes to his when I feel my thoughts are no longer painted on my face.

He squeezes the water out of his shirt then flings it over his shoulder. "Remember how I picked up your clothes from the ground and tried to hand them to you?"

"Yes..."

"And how you tried to push me but ended up pushing yourself off the rock?" he adds.

I nod slowly, wondering where he's going with this.

"I had your clothes in my hand then too... and I may have jumped after you with them still in my hands. I may have also lost them while I tried to find you."

"So, you're saying my clothes are somewhere in this lake?" I ask, looking back at the water like I'll see my pants and shirt floating over it.

He nods. "Sorry," he says with a smile.

Of course he would make my clothes disappear! Any opportunity he has to tease me or play a prank, he'll take. That's the Kayden way. "Are you though? Because the smile on your face doesn't tell me so," I reply, crossing my arms in front of myself.

"I don't know why you're mad at me."

"Well, maybe because you couldn't help but jump into the water with my clothes in your hand and now, I'm cold and have no clothes!" I yell back.

"Wait, are you finally admitting you're naked?"

"That's not the point!"

"You act like I wanted to jump off. I could think of a million better things to do during the

break."

"Then, why did you!?" I ask again.

“I don’t know, Ari. Maybe because I wanted to make sure you survived. That you could

swim. That you didn’t die the moment you unintentionally plunged into ice-cold water. Forgive me for trying to be a decent person and not like the assholes at the top of the rock who haven’t even looked down to see if you’re okay!”

I look up at the place we just jumped from but don’t see anyone there. When he puts it that way...I can’t help but believe him a little.

“Thank you,” I mumble the words because I can’t even believe I’m saying them in the first place.

“What?” he asks, his hand coming to his ear as he pretends he didn’t hear me.

“I’m not saying it again,” I tell him.

“It’s okay, I heard it. I’ll remember this moment forever,” he replies with an even wider smile.

I shake my head. Then the wind assaults us again and I shiver. “Alright, well, I’m cold, so how do we get back?”

“I actually parked my car down here, so we can just go straight to it.”

“Why’d you park your car down here if you knew we were all going to be up there?”

He taps his temple with his index finger. “Because I think ahead. Follow me,” he says, taking my hand and leading me toward the parking lot. Now we’ve held hands two times in one day.

We reach his car a few minutes later, both drenched in water. “Do you mind giving me a ride home?” I ask.

“Oh, so now you want to go home? Not when I told you to earlier?” he asks, opening the driver side door.

I nod. “You should know when you demand I do things it makes me want to do the opposite.”

“Duly noted.”

“So, since you offered earlier, I assume you’re cool with giving me a ride home now?”

“Hell no,” he replies, and the moment of sweetness I thought I saw from him is instantly ruined.

“Well, thanks,” I reply, turning around and getting ready to make the trek up the hill to my friends... or the people I came to this party with. I don’t know that I should call them friends anymore as they didn’t even check to see if I was still alive.

“Where are you going?” he asks.

I turn to face him. “Well, I gotta get home somehow and you refuse to drive me there.”

“Your mom is an elementary school principal. Your dad is the football coach at Bragan High. I think both of them would kill me if I dropped their naked daughter off at their doorstep.”

I laugh at the fear in his eyes. My dad would kill him though, he’s right.

“You may be right. So what do I do?” I ask, standing there.

“You can stay with me.”

“Err...um,” I struggle to put words together. Mostly because a proposal to spend the night at his house is something I never expected from him.

“Just tell your parents you’re staying at a friend’s house or something. We can figure out your clothes in the morning.”

I shiver when a gust of wind whips across my exposed body. I don’t get why spring break is in March when it’s still freaking cold out.

“Get in the car, we can make a plan there while it’s warm,” he tells me and for once I don’t fight him on it. I round the corner to the passenger side and hop in.

“Sorry your seat will be wet,” I tell him. It’s the least I can do.

“It’s just water. A little water never killed anybody,” he jokes, using my earlier words.

I smile. “So, I just stay the night at your place and we worry about clothes tomorrow?” I ask.

He nods. “Then I can drop you off at whatever friend’s house you lied about staying at.”

“I could also just sleep at my friend’s house instead of lying,” I tell him.

“I’m sure your friends aren’t going to want to leave the party early.”

They're probably drunk out of their minds right now too, that's the only reason a real friend wouldn't check in to make sure you were okay."

"No one checked to make sure you were okay either," I tell him, feeling like he's trying to make me feel bad and wanting to do the same to him.

"Those people aren't my friends."

"No?" I ask. With how much time they spend together, I figured they were the best of friends.

"They're my teammates. They've got my back on the field, and I have theirs. But we're not friends."

"Ahhh, got it. You have no friends."

"So, I can take you up there and you can chill in your underwear until you can convince your friends to go home, which they probably shouldn't anyway, since they'd be driving drunk. Or, you could just come to my house where it'll be warm. I'll even let you borrow some of my clothes," he says, ignoring my comment.

"Aren't you drunk?" I ask. I mean, he must be because Kayden being nice to me isn't a thing that I expect to happen while he's sober.

"I had one beer in the last two hours. Not many before then."

"How come?"

"I guess part of me knew you were going to do something stupid the moment you started betting you could jump."

"I call bull," I tell him.

He puts the car in drive and pulls out of the parking lot. "Really? Why'd you think I took my time getting to the top of the rock? I know you realized I wasn't there when the others were."

"I don't pay attention to your whereabouts," I tell him as he starts driving in the direction of his house. That's a lie though. The moment I felt him on my right earlier, I looked in his direction. The air always changes. I can always tell.

"Remember when I said I think ahead?" he asks.

"Are you telling me you thought I was going to jump off the rock and you'd jump after me and then you'd be giving me a ride to your house?"

"I figured you were too much of a hardheaded person to not jump. I would

never just let you plummet on your own without being there... the whole sleeping at my house thing, that wasn't part of my analysis, but hey, two for three."

I bring my hands to the vents and let the air start to warm me. Kayden extends his arm toward the back seat then places a blanket on my lap. "Wow, you really do think of everything," I tell him.

"I always keep a blanket in the car, so don't think I had that all ready for you."

"Wouldn't dream of it, Harrison."

"Good, Cole. Don't want you thinking I'm a good guy now."

"Not a chance. You've spent many years being a jerk, one night doesn't make up for all that," I reply with a smile then make myself comfortable for the rest of the ride.

KAYDEN HARRISON

I park the car in the garage and shut it off. Removing the key from the ignition, I step out and close the door slowly. Then, I head over to the passenger side and open the door.

Ari stirs in her sleep, the blanket I'd given her wrapped around her while her hair covers most of her face.

She looks beautiful... and calm. If anyone else saw her now, they'd believe she's a sweetheart, but I know that's not true. At least not when it comes to me. And you know what, I like her just as she is.

I place one of my arms under her knees and the other comes around her waist as I lift her from the car seat.

"What the hell?" she screams, opening her eyes widely as she shifts her body unexpectedly.

I drop her. I don't mean to, but I wasn't expecting her to wake up, let alone start fighting me. "Oh damn, I'm so sorry," I tell her, feeling like the worst person in the world while extending my hand to help her up.

Her eyes have that fire that have always drawn me to her. "Are you

okay?” I ask when she doesn’t say anything. “Did that hurt? I’m so sorry,” I tell her again. I can’t believe I dropped her. “I swear to you it wasn’t intentional. I thought you were asleep.”

She bats my hand away and gets up from the floor with the blanket in tow. She brings it around her body, covering herself once again. “You couldn’t have just woken me up?” she asks, like that was the more simple solution. I guess it was.

I run my fingers through my hair. “I was trying to be nice.”

“So nice you dropped me,” she replies, making me feel even worse.

“I swear on everything that I did not mean to,” I tell her, hoping she sees the sincerity in my eyes. I’ve always given her a hard time, but I’d never want her to get hurt. I would never want to hurt her.

She stares back at me and I swear she’s going to kick me in the balls or something. That she’ll exact some plan to get even. I’m surprised when her frown is replaced by a smile. I find that even more unsettling despite how much more beautiful it makes her look standing in my parking garage, wrapped in my blanket, with her curls framing her face.

“The look on your face was priceless,” she says, her smile turning into a full-fledged laughter.

I shake my head. “Are you serious? I thought you got hurt badly. I thought you were going to kill me.”

She shrugs. “I could tell you didn’t mean to.”

“How so?”

“You’re not the only one who pays attention,” she says and I crack a smile. “When I fell, you looked like you’d seen a ghost.”

“So, you knew it was an accident?”

She nods. “Yup. But I wanted to see you suffer a little anyway. It’s rare to see The Kayden Harrison,” she says, her arm pointing from the top of my head to the bottom of my feet, “look genuinely apologetic.”

“I’ve been nothing but kind to you tonight!” I tell her.

“Yeah... I still don’t know what that’s about,” she says, looking at me quizzically.

I press the button to close the garage door. “Well, while you try and figure

that out, do you mind if we go inside? You may have a blanket covering you, but my pants are still wet. And let me tell you, wet jeans are not the best for ___”

“Alright! Let’s go in. But please, stop it with the too much information.” I chuckle. “I was going to say for lounging around... I didn’t know you had a dirty mind. I’ll

store that bit of information.”

Her eyes open wide and I know she’s embarrassed. It’s cute. “No, that’s not what...” my

laughter makes her stop talking. “Jerk!”

“You made me sweat earlier.”

“Yeah yeah...”

“Let’s go inside,” I tell her, walking past her and toward the door.

I feel her hand touch my shoulder and I instantly turn around, which causes her to run into me. “Wow there,” I tell her, not stepping away but looking at her diamond-shaped eyes looking up at me.

“Sorry,” she replies, her voice low. “Are your parents’ home?” she asks.

“Why? What’d you have in mind?” I tell her and wink. She tries to push me back for the second time tonight, without any success. “I thought you had learned your lesson... pushing me is pointless.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to see that.”

“So, why’d you want to know if my parents are home?”

“Maybe because you’re walking in shirtless, and I’m wearing underwear and your blanket.”

“My blanket looks good on you,” I tell her, wishing it were my arms wrapped around her instead.

“Be serious!” she yells and then lowers her voice when she remembers she’s trying to figure out if someone is home.

I smile at her. “No one is home. My dad is away for work this weekend.”

ARI COLE

“And your mom?” I ask, and the moment the question leaves my mouth I realized I messed up. I can see it in the way his smile vanishes. The light in his eyes disappear.

“She’s not here either,” he says, then turns around and opens a door.

I stay behind, not knowing whether I should be following or turning around and heading home.

“What are you doing?” he asks when he notices.

I rock back and forth. “I put my foot in my mouth.”

“Why do you think that?” he asks.

“Because, the moment I mentioned your mom... I saw the light in your eyes disappear.”

He nods, leaning against the door. “So what, now you’re just going to stand in my garage?”

“I’m debating my options.”

He crosses his arms. “And what are your options?”

“Well, I could stand here.”

“Interesting.”

“Or, I could turn around and go home.”

“And would you be taking my blanket with you or walking home in your underwear?” he asks then cracks a smile, which makes me feel so relieved. I hated the thought of hurting his feelings. The fact that I feel better knowing he’s okay is unsettling though.

“Smartass,” I tell him.

“Have you made up your mind?”

“Why are you making this harder than it should be?!”

He steps closer to me. “What do you want to do, Ari?”

“Well, I don’t want to go home in my underwear,” I tell him, crossing my arms.

“So, I guess you’re stuck with me, huh?”

“Only if you’re still okay with me staying.”

“Why wouldn’t I be okay with that? I brought you here, right?” he takes

another step toward me.

“Because,” I start but am afraid of screwing it up again.

He extends his hand to me once again and I grab it. I’m shocked at how natural it feels. “Just come inside. If you don’t annoy me, maybe I’ll tell you about my mom.” He says jokingly, but there’s still no light in his eyes. I hope that he does talk to me about it. There’s clearly something there.

“Wait, I think I left my phone in your car. I need to call my mom!” I tell him, turning toward the car.

He pulls me toward him. “Did you have your phone on you when you jumped off the rock?” he asks.

I shake my head then a realization hits me. “It was in the pocket of my pants!” I shout.

“That’s my bad,” he says, looking sheepish.

“You’re the worst! Literally the worst!”

“I was trying to save your life,” he says, leading me inside his house.

“Well, the only thing that drowned was my phone,” I tell him.

“That’s a good thing,” he says, his smile finally reaching his eyes. I can’t be mad at him for ruining my phone, at least not tonight.

We reach the living room. “Wait, did your phone also end up in the lake?” I ask, feeling terrible that his phone could be messed up too all because he felt he needed to jump in after me.

He laughs. “I told you I plan ahead. I left my phone in the car.”

“Of course you did. Well, can I borrow it to call home? If I don’t, my parents will be searching everywhere for me.”

“We don’t want that,” he says, his hand still holding on to my own as he leads me past his living room and up the stairs. “I’ll give it to you upstairs after I get you some clothes.”

“Worried I’ll get sick?” I ask jokingly.

He nods. “Despite what you think, I actually care about you,” he says, his words so sincere they catch me off guard again.

KAYDEN HARRISON

I probably shouldn't have said that. But I couldn't help it. Seeing Ari in my house is a foreign vision and it's throwing me off.

Earlier, I didn't expect her to ask about my mom. And then, I wanted to tell her all about it. I still may, even though I haven't told anyone else. For some reason, I want to tell her.

I can already tell she's overthinking my words. The shocked look in her eyes tells me so. She probably doubts they're true; I mean, I would if I were her.

We reach the top of the stairs and I open the first door on the left to my room. "Come in," I tell her. She lets go of my hand and walks in ahead of me. I stare down at my hand for a second, missing hers.

"Are you just going to stand there?" She asks, always the smart-ass.

I shake my head. On my way to the dresser, I turn around and head to my closet instead. From the very top of the closet I grab something I know will get her to smile.

"Hey, Ari! Catch!" I tell her, tossing it her way.

She catches it with one hand, securing the blanket around her body with the other. "What the—" she starts.

I cut her off. "Great reflexes."

"You're not the only one who can catch things," she says, and while I know she's referring to the fact that I play baseball, I can't help but tease.

"Hmm, you're saying you catch things too... like what? Feelings?" I joke.

She rolls her eyes. "Your ridiculous. Wait, is this a onesie?" She asks, finally unrolling the pajamas I threw her way.

I nod.

"You're kidding, you are kidding!" she says, inspecting it. "You own a superman onesie!" She says, laughing.

"I do," I tell her, matching her smile with one of my own.

"Why?" she just stares at it in shock.

"We had a costume party freshman year. We were all superheroes, but instead of capes we wore onesies," I tell her. It was a baseball bonding thing, apparently.

“This one has a cape too!” She says, flipping it around.

I shrug. “Heroes need capes. I refused to wear one without it.”

“And you’ve kept it this whole time?” she asks, and I love that pulling out this old thing moved us away from the awkwardness we had started to enter.

“I sleep with it every day,” I tell her.

She throws it back my way. “Then, here you go.”

“I’m kidding. I haven’t worn this since the party. You can wear it tonight,” I throw it back her way.

This time, she extends both hands to catch it and the blanket falls to the ground. “Oops!” she says, picking the blanket up almost instantly and covering her body once again.

“Nothing I haven’t seen before,” I tell her then realize when her smile is replaced by a frown that she’s getting the wrong idea. “I did see you stand on top of the rock wearing exactly this... then we walked to my car,” I add.

I don’t want her to misinterpret my words and when I see her cheeks redden I know she hasn’t. “Right. Really shouldn’t have done that,” she replies. “Anyway, where’s your bathroom?”

“Just across the hall,” I tell her.

“Can I borrow your phone? I can call my mom while I’m changing to let her know I won’t be making it home tonight,” she tells me.

“Just don’t tell her you’re staying with me,” I tell her.

Her parents would kill me if they knew their daughter was spending the night at my place. That alone should stop me from doing this, but it certainly won’t. I walk out into the hall, grab the house phone we never use, and hand it to her. “Here you go. There’s a towel in the bathroom. Go ahead and take a quick shower so you can wash away the lake water. I’ll do the same.”

“You are not showering with me!” she screeches.

I roll my eyes and pretend that’s the craziest idea she could come up with. “Not at all what I was saying. There’s more than one shower in this place. I’d rather shower outside than join you.”

“Wow. Well, great!” she says, taking the phone from my hand. Her fingers brush my own and I wish I could hold it for longer. But I can’t because this is Ari. I don’t want to make things awkward again. I don’t want her to shut me

out when she's finally letting me in.

She walks out the door and I stand there for a second taking it all in. Ari Cole is here. The girl I've always wanted but never knew how to get is in my house about to put on my pajamas. And I'm hoping this is just the beginning.

ARI COLE

I hang up on Mom then check myself in the mirror a second time. The pajamas are a little big on me but they're warm, which makes them instantly better than what I was wearing. I didn't realize how cold I was until the soft fabric enveloped me.

It's strange how comfortable I feel here. My whole life, Kayden has been a pain in my ass, but right now, I'm enjoying spending time with him. Enjoying being here in his home. Wearing his ridiculous onesie while hanging out in his bathroom.

"You lost in there?" Kayden asks, knocking on the door. Of course he would interrupt any positive thought I have about him.

I open the door, "Maybe I just didn't want to see you," I joke. Then I take in his appearance. He's wearing checkered sweatpants and a hoodie. He looks comfortable and ready for bed. His hair, which had dried, is wet again and sticking to his forehead.

He shakes his head. "More like you didn't want me to see you wearing my onesie."

"Are you saying I'd be embarrassed to let you see me wearing this?" I ask, posing like a superhero. "No shame here whatsoever," I tell him.

He smiles and that puts butterflies in my stomach. It shouldn't, but it does. "You can save me anytime you want."

"I guess I owe you one," I tell him.

He leans on the doorframe. "Are you finally admitting I saved you?"

"I mean, you tried. But I kind of saved myself," I reply shrugging.

"Tell that to the girl who would've been walking around in her underwear the rest of the night."

“Again, I blame you for that,” I say pointing at him.

“Let’s go downstairs and watch a movie. I made some hot chocolate for you.”

I look at him surprised. “Wait, did you just say you made hot chocolate?”

He nods.

“For me?”

“For us, don’t get all weird now,” he says with a chuckle.

He walks out of the bathroom and I do the same. “I’m sorry. It’s just strange.”

“What is?” he asks, heading down the stairs as I follow behind him.

“You being nice to me.”

“I’ve been nice to you before.”

“Yeah right,” I reply.

“I have been! I don’t hate you,” he says, turning to face me before we’ve fully descended.

“Could’ve fooled me. I swear you’ve hated me since the day I kicked you.”

He turns away and takes the last three steps. “I didn’t hate you.”

“Well, I hated you,” I tell him, speaking to his back.

“I know you did.”

“You deserved it.”

We reach the landing. “I killed your ladybug,” he says, going to the source of our problem.

“Yes, you did. That was mean.”

We head to the living room where the TV is on and two cups of hot cocoa rest on top of the coffee table. How much time did I spend in the bathroom? He got a lot done while I was there. “Smells delicious!” I tell him, gravitating toward the cups. “Can I just grab whichever?” I ask, ready to feel the warm liquid. It’s been a cold evening.

“Thank you!” I grab the hot chocolate and it tastes delicious.

“This is the best hot chocolate I’ve ever had.”

“Wow, big praise coming from you!” he says.

“Shut up,” I tell him, sitting down. I try to not let my mind read too much into tonight.

KAYDEN HARRISON

I grab my own cup of hot chocolate and take a seat next to her. I leave some space between us because I feel I need a barrier to keep my emotions at bay.

I’ve always liked her; I’ve always known that.

However, the more I get to know her—the more I see her argue with me—the more I realize that there’s more to it. More than just an attraction to her. It was a crush which spiraled into something stronger.

She’s always thought we were enemies, but they say the line between love and hate is pretty thin. I wish nothing more than to cross over to the other side with her.

Like we are tonight.

“Are you going to pick a movie or what?” she asks, interrupting my thoughts.

I start scrolling through the options.

“I can’t really pick right now. Do you have an idea?” I ask, setting down my drink on the coffee table and turning to face her.

She sets her cup down too then her eyes find mine. “Seriously, best hot chocolate I have ever tasted,” she praises once more.

“My mom used to make it for me all the time,” I tell her.

Her hand finds my knee and she rests it there. “That was sweet of her.”

I nod.

“Do you want to talk about her?” she asks, her eyes fixed on mine.

I shake my head. I don’t want to ruin this night.

“Give me the remote, then!” Ari says, extending her hand toward me with a smile on her face. I can tell she wants to lighten the mood.

“I changed my mind. I don’t think you should have the remote. I don’t know what you like; I’m scared.”

“Pass it over, don’t be a hog! You had the remote in your hands and didn’t pick anything,” she exclaims.

I shake my head and back up. “If you want it, you’re going to have to take it from me.”

“Is that a challenge?” she asks, and I know I’ve got her. Ari can’t turn down a challenge.

I nod. “One you will lose.”

“I’m on a streak tonight, I’m not about to change that,” she says then lunges at me.

I start laughing when she begins tickling me. “Stop, stop!” I tell her, laughing so hard my sides hurt.

“Oh wow, you’re ticklish, who would’ve thought,” she replies, not stopping.

I hold the remote farther back so it’s out of her reach. “It’s not fair when you tickle,” I tell her.

“All’s fair...”

“In love and war?” I add then instantly drop the remote on the floor and bring my hands to her hips. I pick her up and then put her on her back so it’s me over her instead of the other way around.

“Woah! What the—” she starts.

I bring my hands in the air as I pin her with my thighs. “You said all is fair right, does that mean I get to tickle you?” I ask, lowering my hands toward her hips slowly.

She rises up quickly to try and stop me. Her movements result in us getting closer than either of us expected and we find ourselves face to face, with barely any space left between us.

“Please don’t tickle me,” she says, her words coming out breathy, and I can’t tell if it’s because of how much she laughed while tickling me or because she’s feeling the tension I’m feeling.

“Okay. Can I do something else instead?” I ask, my eyes focused on her lips. I know I shouldn’t ask, but I can’t help it right now.

She bites her lips. “It depends on what it is.”

“I think you know,” I tell her.

Her eyes instantly go to my lips, confirming we're both on the same page. She nods. So slightly I almost miss it, but I don't. And I don't miss my opportunity to crash my lips to hers for the first time.

ARI COLE

A knock at the door startles us and causes us to pull away. "I'll be right back," Kayden says, and it looks like the thought of walking away from this pains him.

I sit there on the couch a little lost, confused, and oddly satisfied. I never imagined what kissing Kayden would be like, and honestly I'm glad I didn't because nothing would have added up.

I can't believe I gave Kayden Harrison my first kiss.

What does this mean for us? What's going to happen when he comes back?

"Hey, Ari," Kayden says, and I get up from the couch and walk toward the front door.

"Yes," I reply taking slower steps than he did to give myself the chance to wipe the I've-just-been-kissed smile off my face.

"Your dad is here," he replies and before I have a second to process what he's saying, I see my dad standing in front of Kayden with his arms crossed and my mom standing behind him.

Oh shit.

MAGICAL SHOW DOWN

A Demon Days, Vampire Nights Short

K.F. BREENE

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death. And if he took it, I'd kill him again.

I put my hand out. "Look, all I want to do is have a conversation. No biggie."

The guy in his late forties, wearing a tight leather body suit around a loose body, turned slowly, standing in front of a man-sized hole in a crumbling stone wall from yesteryear, the structure's other walls barely standing and the roof long since rotted away. There was no telling what the small building once was, but it had to be magical in some way, and I wasn't talking about the spell stretching across that hole, ready to kill anyone that walked through. Even now, when tourists should've been gathered around to marvel at something plucked right out of history, no one ambled by, preferring the winery's gardens up the hill a ways. Even though there was no swirling magic traveling over the walls, clearly non-magical people still couldn't see the dank, moss-covered stone in bright and sunny Northern California.

"You're not the kind of girl who only wants a conversation," the man said, and his hip slowly popped out in a suggestive way.

"You've pegged me." I shrugged. "Usually I'd prefer to bust your head open just to prove it was hollow, but for you, I'll make an exception."

"What've we got here?" Emery said as he paused on my left, able to see into the regular space through the crumbling doorway, parts of it twice the size it should be.

"This place feels...wrong," Penny said, on my other side. The two of them were the strongest mages in the world, able to take care of all things spell related. They'd have to get to work because I'd never seen the kind of spell draped across the opening at the back, but from what I could feel, it was a doozy. Whoever put it there had no shortage of power.

Usually only Penny accompanied me on the bounty hunter gigs, picking up the slack and giving me a little comic relief when she got into mischief and then blasted her way out. But given the nature of the situation, I thought

the dual-mage team might be needed. Now I was glad for it.

“What’s the story with that spell he’s about to swan-dive through? Can you take it down?” I asked, resting my hand on my beat-up leather pouch encircling my waist. It was where I kept my odds and ends, like spell-filled casings, or their empty counterparts for when I had to pretend to do magic, a few throwing stars for when I wanted to up my cool factor, and a random stink bomb I would definitely use someday.

“Oh, this?” The man lazily lifted his hand to the side as though about to model the magic behind him. His hips, seemingly with a will of their own, slowly drifted to the other side. I wondered how he didn’t pull something. “This is just a centuries-old death trap that’ll free me from this luscious body and allow me to seek out my master in the underworld. I have some *juicy* gossip for him.” He winked at me, his thin lips pulling wide in a sickly smile. “Those children won’t be able to tear it down—it was constructed when people in this world actually knew how to weave spells. You, however...”

Warning flared through me. He knew more than he should, that was clear. He could unravel all the secrets I was desperately trying to keep under wraps. The gossip he had clearly involved me.

“Okay, first...” I ran my gaze down his bulbous stomach, fighting for freedom in that shiny cheap leather—or maybe it was pleather?—with hair sticking out of the low neckline, crawling up his chest and reaching for his jaw. There was no doubt it curled around to his back, probably ran his length, and collected on his butt. The bulge of his thighs dwarfed the bulge between them, and there was simply no reason for the gangly toes to be exposed in a pair of pink, sparkly flip-flops.

“That body isn’t the sex machine you clearly hoped it was. Don’t incubi generally go for a body that’ll actually get laid?”

“I’ve gotten a lot of mileage out of this body.” He ran his thick fingers through his matted chest hair. “You have to know what to say, that’s all, and be open to the types of people who want to climb aboard.”

“Did you say you’ll wax for them? Because other than that, there really are no words.”

“Let me take you for a spin. You’ll change your mind.”

I grimaced. “You don’t have the equipment for the job, bub. Let’s talk

about that gossip. What do you know?”

Wisps of magic curled through the air from behind me; the mages moved closer together, trying to come up with something that might take the spell down. I could rip it down in a minute, my magic able to dissolve it away, but no way would this demon-possessed man allow me to get that close. He’d know I could control him physically even though I was failing to control him magically right now.

As if reading my mind, he said, “I can feel your grasp sliding right off me. Frustrated, are you?” His fingers made small circles around his belly button.

“Gross. Would you stop that?”

“Am I distracting you?”

“Yes, and not in a good way. About my not being able to control you—why is that?” I asked, hooking my thumb into the pocket of my scuffed leather pants, much duller and clearly thicker than this guy’s.

He giggled and put his hands out. “Because my human host invited me in. He *implored me*. We have a partnership. When you try to take control, he blocks it. You can’t control humans, just demons...”

His voice trailed away, as if that had been a question.

I didn’t comment. He was fishing for information. He might have a hunch of what I was, but clearly didn’t have all the info. Good. Best I didn’t reveal my hand.

“Usually a human host won’t allow their possessor free rein like that, not if they have any kind of say,” I said, seeing magic curl beyond me as the mages’ spell weaving changed potency. They weren’t even applying it to the spell yet. They were just brainstorming, trying to come up with the right recipe that would counteract the centuries-old spell. If it was taking them this long, that spell was exactly as good as this succubus said.

“This human gets to take over when things are hot and sticky, if you know what I mean.” He threaded his fingers through his thick mat of chest hair, getting tangled and pulling some hair free.

“Ugh, I think I just threw up in my mouth a little,” Penny mumbled.

“I’m trying not to look at him,” Emery replied.

“Fine. Well?” I reached into my pouch for one of the throwing stars. If I

plastered my magic over it, surely I could make a nice little hole in that spell. Unraveling shouldn't be too hard after that. "What's the gossip? I can pay you for it."

"We got company," Emery said, and I could hear the annoyance in his voice.

There was just one faction of people that seemed to annoy him like that. The thorn in all our sides.

I groaned and turned, finding exactly who I thought I would.

"Charity, Devon, lovely to see you." I gave them a placid smile.

Charity was the type of fae known for their battle prowess and fantastic ability to stick their noses in everyone's business. Since she and her kind joined the shifters in the Brink—the human lands—they'd become an incredibly effective unit at finding "wrongdoers" and bringing them in. They were like some sort of super cop patrol that constantly tried to move in on my bounty gigs. Usually I'd just let it go because I didn't really need the money—I was deft at stealing funds from my rich elder vampire companion—but this time...

This time it was *on*.

"What brings you to this lovely winery? Finally letting down your hair?" I moved between Emery and Penny. I murmured, "Get that spell torn down and then secure him. After that, if I'm rumbling with these busybodies, t join in and help end it. We take this mark. There won't be a compromise this time."

"Don't kill anyone. We don't want Roger on our asses," Emery said.

Roger was the pack leader of the entire North American territory and respected the world over. He was incredibly organized and powerful and had a standing hatred for vampires. Usually that hatred extended to those fornicating with said vampires—me, for example—but given I'd known Roger for years at this point, before I'd even met the vampire I was currently shackled up with, and given Roger and I had helped each other through the years, we maintained a shaky sort of truce.

Might just need to end that truce.

Charity, a fit brunette with a wicked sword, stopped about twenty feet away, giving me plenty of space. She wasn't a fool. Devon, the large black

wolf beside her, stopped at her side. The others fanned out, a few fae and a few animals, one being an enormous were-yeti that I didn't get along with. Randomly setting him on fire every time I saw him at the bars apparently got on his nerves. What a party pooper.

"How'd you get here so fast?" Charity asked, annoyance in her voice to match Emery's.

I noticed the werelion padding out to the side, lazy and blasé about the whole affair. "Steve, how are you and that big dong these days? I haven't seen you around the hood. Still slumming it with this crew, huh?"

His purr made me smile. I knew he'd throw me a sexual innuendo if he could speak.

I spread my hands for a much-too-serious Charity. "Early bird catches the worm. I got here first, and so, he's mine. Sorry, Charlie."

"You know how it works," Charity said. "A bounty hunter is the last option. If Roger's organization can't bring in the perpetrator, then they'll put out a contract."

"The perpetrator?" I lifted an eyebrow at her. "Good Lord, nerd. At least shorten it to perp. You're really ruining my high with this gig, you know? You're too stiff, that's the problem. That's got to really interfere with your daily calisthenics. Is that why you're in such a piss poor mood?"

Charity's lips tightened and her brow pinched. She must hate dealing with me. If she'd loosen up a little, and just take life as it came at her, she'd have so much more fun. Why did she never believe me when I mentioned that?

"Nearly there," Penny murmured. "He's listening for all he is worth, but he's still a flight risk."

That demon was a busybody. Whatever rumors he heard didn't just come to him. Or maybe the first did, and he'd been actively seeking out more to piece everything together. Either way, it meant he was interested in advancement within the underworld legions, and *that* meant he was dangerous.

"Who initiated this contract?" Charity asked.

The breeze worried the hair on the shifters; all but Steve were tense and ready. They did not plan to back down.

Damn.

The large winery sprawled up to the top of the property. Picnic tables and lunch spots kept people loitering outside. If any of them decided to take a walk, they would see this altercation. We needed the mages to put up a magical screening so the humans couldn't see us. I needed the mages to secure that mark, though. Decisions, decisions.

"Classified, I'm afraid. What did he get called in for, anyway? Is there a rule against guys that hairy having orgies?" I asked, taking a few steps toward them, my pouch open and casings at the ready. Some of the shifters knew the type of power I had at my disposal, but not all, and now I wondered if even that succubus did. Best keep my more unique powers under wraps, which would make this fight that much harder.

"Word is he helped set up some rituals to try to bring in his friends," Charity said. "He hasn't been able to yet, but it's only a matter of time."

"Who, him?" I gestured back his way, stepping closer again. "Nah, his kind are all about the sex. They are the life of the party. You don't have to worry about this kind of demon bringing up a crew. He's low power and usually pretty harmless." I edged a little closer and dropped my voice.

"Look, why don't you just take today off? He's not going anywhere. Either he kills the host and heads back to the underworld, or I kill him. Either way, he's out of your hair. Go check out the winery. Or, hell, you're still in school, aren't you? Head back to Seattle and hit those books. This is beneath you."

Devon bristled, and a low growl rumbled through his throat. Apparently, that was a no. I rolled my eyes.

"A little longer," Emery murmured, and I couldn't tell who he was talking to.

Didn't matter, though—I needed these insufferable shifters and fae to scatter. I wanted the secrets in that demon's head. Then I wanted him erased from life.

"Right, fine, how's this going to go?" I pulled my blade from its holster on my back, the steel sliding against the leather. "All you against me? We maiming or killing?"

Charity braced, uncertainty flashing in her eyes. Only Cole, the were-yeti, edged forward in anticipation. He'd wanted an excuse to ring my bell, and

now he did.

I grinned. “I’m not letting you have this one.” I pulled my gun from the holster on my upper thigh. “If you want to tango, I want to be the lady.”

“You’re not making any sense,” Charity said, and she looked down at Devon, the alpha of this sub-pack in Roger’s jurisdiction. He wasn’t as good as Roger, though. Not yet, anyway.

Devon huffed, then lowered his head at me. That was a *go*.

“You sure?” I flipped off the gun’s safety. “All this for a hairy nympho? Is this some kind of fetish you’re into?”

Charity pulled her sword, sparkly and new and probably worth a pretty penny. Light flickered in the sky and a little thread of lightning zinged up the blade.

“You able to do hellfire yet?” I asked, taking in their loose formation. I knew they’d tighten up as soon as I ran at them. One or two would probably peel away and go for the mark. Hopefully the mages would be free to combat them by then.

“Why?” Charity said. She licked her lips. “Nervous this battle will end before it starts?”

“So that’s a no, then. You have to work on your poker face. I’ll let Darius know. He did say it was a hard skill to learn and usually needed more mature power. He’ll be glad that he only needs to worry about your royal pappy.”

Charity’s expression darkened, and I grinned. I’d learned a little thing from hanging around with vampires—you had to grab all the information you could, when they least expected.

I ran forward, lifting my gun and firing as I did so. The blast made a couple shifters flinch. Steve jerked and lowered to the ground, wounded but not out of the fight. I’d gotten him in the side. That would hurt, and more importantly, it would slow him down. That guy was frightful when he really got going.

Charity braced and lightning rained down over me, a really neat freaking trick. It was still magic, though, and I could dissipate most of that as easily as breathing. I dissipated those incredibly tight and intricate weaves, cutting the distance between us, my gun still up and swinging to the other side. One bolt got through, striking me, filling up my world with electrified pain.

I'd live.

I squeezed the trigger several times in quick succession, riddling Charity's fae friends and a white wolf standing too close with bullets until the magazine was empty. I jammed the gun back into place as Devon lurched forward.

I snatched a spell-filled casing out of my pouch, the magic stuffed in there potent but not deadly. I cracked it opened between my fingers and threw it to the side, landing at the feet of a big, brawny gray wolf that stood in front of Cole.

Cole was going to be so pissed with what came out of that casing in five... four...

I stepped to the side and threw an uppercut, landing on the underside of Devon. The breath exited his muzzle. I pivoted and brought my sword down onto his head, inconspicuously backing it up with my air magic, slamming him down to the ground and hopefully knocking him out.

...three...

Charity was already swinging, fast and agile, just like her kind. But new at all of this.

I arched out of the way. She followed through, spun, and stuck out a hand to blast me with her electrical fireball...thing.

"Damn it, just gotta grab..." I snatched out an empty casing, the magic used up, but no one else knew that. I slapped it onto my blade as her ball of fire reached me. It kissed my face, kept at bay by my ice magic, and even if it wasn't, the only thing I'd suffer would've been a loss of eyebrows. But that demon might see, and so I needed to go through with the ruse.

...two...

I slashed my sword through the fire, whispering expletives that they'd hopefully think were spell words. I was out of practice at pretending to use fabricated magic instead of my own.

The fire dried up, but Charity was already on the move, her sword slashing down at me.

Good Lord, the woman was fast!

I twisted, barely missed by the blade, and punched out, clocking her right

in the jaw. Devon struggled to his feet, and Steve at the end stayed down, definitely not that hurt but saw a way out of fighting me. I'd remember that. He was an okay guy, that Steve.

The casing I'd thrown coughed spikes within a balloon of magical pink powder, spraying the gray, brawny wolf and white-furred Cole behind him. The spikes lodged into their flesh, shallow wounds that wouldn't keep them down for very long. That pink powder would stick to them for *months*, though. Their coats would be stained, no matter how many times they changed. Very disco.

"Good luck with people taking you seriously after this, snow tits," I yelled at Cole.

One of the fae, a guy with a handsome face, though pinched in an expression a teacher's pet might wear, struggled through the obvious pain and flanked me as Charity's strike barely missed. I punched her in the throat, stepped to the side, and kicked him in a bleeding spot on his chest.

He grunted and staggered back. More of the fae struggled up, those bastards too hardy for their own good.

"How's it going?" I yelled behind me. Charity's sword found purchase out of the blue, that throat punch not doing as much as I'd hoped. The blade sliced down my hip, searing heat. "Satan's thong!" I ran my hand through the air without meaning to, my magic unleashed.

A wall of air slammed into them, knocking them back and sending them tumbling across the ground.

I paused for a moment. Looking behind me, I saw the grinning face of that middle-aged man hosting a sex demon between Penny and Emery working their spell.

"I was right!" The man turned and ran at the back of that small stone building, wanting to shed his human body and go down to the underworld. If he'd had any doubts about me, I'd just given him a payday. Mages or Elementals could create gusts and bursts of wind, updrafts and surges, but not a wall of air like that, especially not one that could also control demons.

"Donkey balls. Catch him!" I ran, forgetting about the fae and shifters jumping to their feet and heading back into the fray. "Stop him!"

Emery surged forward, his hand out to grab the man.

I reached the hole that acted as a doorway as Emery latched on to the man by the scruff of his hairy neck. The bodysuit ripped, exposing a hairy back.

“Ugh, he’s slimy,” Emery said, holding on.

The top part of the body suit continued to rip down the seam, and the man shot forward, headfirst. His head went through the spell two seconds before it winked out.

“It’s down. It’s down!” Penny shouted. “That death wall is down.”

The man crumpled to the ground, and a thin little creature with a leather body and bony fingers hopped up in its place before spinning and running for the trees. I magically grabbed it easily, the human host no longer giving me interference.

“No!” The demon turned and slapped at my hold. “No! That wall has been there for centuries. It can’t be torn down. That’s our emergency exit into the underworld!”

“Guess people actually know how to weave spells in this day and age, too, huh?” Emery said smugly.

“*Burn*,” I said, waving Emery away. “I got him.”

“Great balls in banana hammocks, Emery, hurry. The shifters are pissed.” Penny’s arms were moving at the door, facing outward. She was getting a spell ready to keep them at bay.

“You got this?” Emery pointed at me.

“Yeah, yeah. Keep the others out of here.” I returned my attention to the demon. “So.” I stepped through the hole and around a few stones. “That spell they just tore down—that would’ve killed your host *and* sent you to the underworld? I didn’t know that was possible.”

It closed its bony mouth, no lips, just jaw and fang, refusing to answer me.

“I could make you respond,” I said.

A naked form around the far corner made me start until I realized it was Steve, blood running down his side and over his defined thigh. He put up his hand in truce and winced before sitting down. “Gunshot wounds hurt. I might hold a grudge for this one. I’ll have to treat you rough when you finally leave your vampire boyfriend and come for that ride on my cock.”

“Don’t feel like continuing to fight?” I asked him, deciding what I wanted

to do with this creature.

“With those mages? God no. You never know with that cute little Penny. Sometimes she gets crazy when she doesn’t mean to. That shit hurts. What’ve you got there?” He gestured at the demon. “Ugly bastard.”

“The lower-powered ones can’t change their forms. Not unless they’re in the underworld.” I put my hands on my hips, fine with Steve listening in—we’d fought together, and he knew a lot more of my situation than I really liked. “How’d you know about me?” I asked the demon.

“Okay.” The demon cowered a little and put out his hands. “Okay, we can work out a deal. I’ll talk if you—”

I forced its hand, its lower power incredibly easy to manipulate. It was the higher-powered ones that would give me a real problem. They weren’t stupid enough to get caught most of the time. Whenever one popped up on the radar, it was gone before Darius’s people could investigate.

“There are rumors. Many, many rumors.” Words ripped from its toothy mouth. “All one has to do is put them all together.” The demon made a rather unsavory hissing sound.

“Is that why you came up here, to look around?” I asked.

“I was called for the pleasure I could bring,” it said.

“Uh...” Steve shivered. “No, now...that just ain’t right. Banging that thing? No, that puts me off entirely.”

I didn’t bother to explain the particulars to Steve. “So why did you feel inclined to put all the rumors together then scamper off down to the underworld?”

“The master will greatly reward anyone with information about the woman and vampire who disturbed his empire. But behold, I have found something so much more, haven’t I?” It hissed again, sending chills racing down my back. Steve shivered again. “I have found...”

I squeezed my hand, the air around the demon crushing it into pulp. Steve knew a lot about my magic, but he didn’t know all. He didn’t know a few very important clues about my very precarious situation.

“Crap,” I said softly, crouching down. “The rumors used to mix up Charity and me, but with Roger sending her all over, *without* a vampire, collecting evildoers or whatever it is you people do, she’s dispelling the

possibility of the rumors being about her. Which puts the heat on me.”

“Where does that leave you?” Steve asked.

I shook my head, standing. “Darius thinks I should go back into hiding.”

Steve stood with me and led me around the stone building to a scene that made me smile. The fae and shifters sat in a cluster, bleeding and pissed, wrapped in invisible magical rope. The mages had essentially tied them up, their magic too powerful for the shifter and fae to break out of.

Penny shrugged. “We didn’t know what else to do. I didn’t want to actually fight them. What’s the status?”

I sighed. “Either I hide, or I get ready for a showdown. It’s only a matter of time before news of me gets to the right ears.”

“You’ve been too exposed to slink back into the shadows now,” Emery said. “Trust me, I know how that works. People will look, and eventually they’ll find you. You best be getting ready for a showdown *as* you hide, so when you come out, you come out swinging.”

I let my gaze drift toward the winery. “Probably time to take that druid up on his offer to train me.”

“Probably,” Emery said.

“Probably also time to drink half the wine in that winery.”

“Probably.” Emery grinned this time.

I nodded and headed off in that direction.

“What about the mark?” Charity called.

“He’s all yours. Won’t be much good to you, but you’re welcome to have what’s left. Wear gloves, though. I hear he’s slimy.”

THE END

ABOUT K.F. BREENE

K.F. Breene is a *USA Today* Bestselling author of fantasy, paranormal romance, and paranormal women's fiction works.

Check out more Demon Days, Vampires Nights World, starting with Born in Fire -

<https://www.kfbreene.com/books/fire-and-ice-trilogy/born-in-fire/>

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RENDEZVOUS DOT COM

A prequel to Love Dot Com

LILLY WILDE

Rendezvous Dot Com
A Prequel to Love Dot Com
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To those of you who lie in bed with the one who's supposed to love you, yet never touches you.

To those of you who cry each night for the love you deserve, but don't have.

To those of you who feel alone, even when you're mere inches away from the one who vowed to love you for life.

To those of you who no longer have the energy to try with the wrong person.

To those of you who desperately seek your other half.

To those of you who've finally said, "Fuck it—I'm doing me."

A NOTE FROM LILLY

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoy **Rendezvous Dot Com**, the prequel to the jaw-dropping novel **Love Dot Com**. This story is not your typical romance, by any means. It is, however, a story that most of you can relate to—whether you want to or not. It's my hope that you take from this story a lesson that you will apply to your life. We all deserve happiness. Circumstance may push us to go about it in ways we didn't plan or expect, but we all deserve it.

ONE

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death. It could very well be the end. The end of my life, of my story, of a love that never really had the chance to start. Never would I have imagined an invitation from him would take shape as a threat to my existence.

As I stare down the barrel of a stainless-steel firearm, I feel the floor beneath me caving in. Fear courses through me like a carp through a river, paralyzing me and grounding me to this spot. I can't move a single muscle—not even to scream. My mind can't process what's happening, but I know I have to remain calm. No sudden moves, no loud voices. No signs of resistance.

When my emotions resume a semi-normal state, I take a few paces back and then lift my palms—my gaze adhered to the weapon pointing directly at me.

“Well, well, well,” she starts.

I look up at the petite dark-haired woman—instantly recognizing who she is.

“We finally meet,” she says.

She looks older in person—much older. The Instagram filters enhanced her appearance, erasing all signs of her age. I suppose I would describe her as nice-looking but nothing to write home about. Her hair is cocoa brown and hangs down past her shoulders, bangs frame small brown eyes, and she's even skinnier now than on her last post. Small boobs, no curves—just straight up and down. So not sexy.

“Hmph,” she murmurs as she orbits me.

Despite repeated warnings from my friend Josh, I never considered Maricel Caballero a threat. Not really. Based on what I knew of her, why would I? She was a weak, shallow person whose only concern was for

herself. Well, herself and that Yorkshire Terrier of hers. What's its name? Chloe? Yeah, that's it. Those were the only posts she ever made—those of herself, her dog, pricey clothes and flashy junk she wasted money on. Everything was all about *her*—something that became increasingly evident with each of her Instagram posts. There were never any photos of Gil. Well, there was that one from several years ago, but other than that, it was the Maricel Caballero show—all day, every day.

I suddenly realize I hate her. Women like Maricel think women like me are the problem, but no. It's women like *her* who neglect their husbands for years and still expect love and loyalty. *They* are the fucking problem. If she wasn't holding that gun, I'd kick her skinny ass all over this apartment.

Given the circumstances, I can't show the slightest sign of hostility. And it's equally important that she not see the fear her volatility evokes. But my breathing accelerates, eliminating any chance of achieving that goal. Failing to reach the desired level of calm, panic sets in and my heart does quite the number in my chest—thumping so loudly it threatens to escape my breastbone. I tell myself to keep at it, to take deep, cleansing breaths—that although I'm scared shitless, I must display a perfectly composed demeanor. Yes, I know it's crazy to think that's possible, but remaining calm in this situation is key to my getting the upper hand.

As we appraise each other, I expect her to say more, but she doesn't. She simply continues to circle me, getting closer with each round. Is this supposed to be an intimidation tactic? To stalk me like her prey? Slowly approaching to decrease chase distance and time? There's no need for that. I may have been crazy enough to get involved with Gil, but that stupidity stopped when a whack job waved a gun at me. No way will I move from this spot, regardless of how loud the fight-or-flight instinct screams I should.

“Nia, right?” she asks and finally comes to a stop in front of me.

As if this bitch doesn't know my name. She knew enough to be here waiting on me, so she certainly knows who I am.

“Nothing to say?” she asks. “You sure had a lot to say when you were texting *my* husband. You know—the man who claims to love you more than he's ever loved me.”

I lock eyes with the wife of the man I've fallen for in a way I can't

explain. Then I shift my attention to the weapon—to the shiny silver metal she’s holding in the cusp of a nervous hand, and then to the manicured finger curved over the trigger.

In a normal situation, I would challenge her—tell her she’s a joke of a woman. And that she deserves every worry my presence has added to her life. But this is not a normal situation. One wrong word, one mistaken glance, and my life could be over.

“I think you have me mistaken with someone else because I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

She cocks her head. “Is that so?”

“Yes, it is so.”

“So your name isn’t Nia Fitson?” she asks.

“It is, but one thing doesn’t necessarily equate the other.”

“And you have no recollection of communication with Gildardo Botelho?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Not very smart to lie when someone is holding a gun to your chest.”

“I’m not lying. You’ve got the wrong person. I don’t recall communicating with anyone by that name.”

“Well, maybe I can refresh your memory.”

She pulls her phone from her back pocket and slides a finger over the screen. “Ah, here we go—a conversation between you and my husband on February 6th.” She runs her gaze over me again before she starts to read.

Nia: Bom dia, Papi.

Gil: Bom dia, Mami. How are you?

Nia: I’m good. How are you?

Gil: I’m good.

Nia: Did you go to bed thinking about me?

Gil: Of course I did.

Nia: Were you thinking about how badly you want to give all of your

come to me?

Gil: Oh, yes, Mami! And how much I want to come in all of your holes.

Nia: Omg!! I love my dirty Brazilian!! My pussy is clenching after reading that.

Gil: I want your pussy clenching with my hard cock inside it.

Nia: You drive me crazy, baby!

Gil: I wanna drive you crazy when I slide my cock inside your mouth and then pull your head against it.

Nia: Omg! What are you trying to do?

Gil: Nothing. I'm an angel.

Nia: Omg. You're no angel.

Gil: Lol. I wanna drive you crazy when I bend you over, spit in your ass, slide my hard cock inside your tight little hole, grab a handful of your hair, and then lean down to kiss your back.

Nia: Omg, Gil!!!! You have no idea what you are doing to me!

Gil: Okay. I'm gonna stop. Lol.

Nia: No, you aren't. Besides, why would you? I know you love it as much as I do.

Gil: But before I stop, I wanna finish rubbing my cock against your clit and then move up to your boobs and have you stroke me until I come on them.

Nia: You want to come on my breasts?

Gil: Yes, I do. And then in your mouth. And then in your pussy. And then in your ass.

Nia: That's a lot of come, Papi. Sounds as if you're going to be fucking me for hours...

Gil: Yes, I am.

Nia: You promise?

Gil: Yes, I do. I wanna fuck you until your pussy is numb.

“Does any of that sound familiar?” Maricel asks, looking up from the screen.

How the fuck did she get those texts? Gil swore he'd been extra careful. And hell yes, it sounded familiar. Even amid this terrifying scenario, Gil's words have an effect that resonates between my thighs. But instead of a confirmation, I try my hand at denial. “No, it doesn't.”

“Sticking with the lie, huh? Where's your phone? Maybe we can take a look at the dick pics he's sent or the video he sent jerking himself off for you.”

“I have nothing to do with you and your relationship with your husband. If you have a problem with him, I suggest you take it up with *him*.”

“No, bitch,” she says and takes a step toward me. “I'm taking it up with both of you.”

“He made vows to you, not me.”

“Oh, so, you think that makes what you did okay? Because it fucking doesn't. Every day since finding out about you, I've been living with his betrayal. Knowing that he'd rather be with you than me. That he wakes up with you on his mind. Messaging you when he's at home, when he's in our bed, when he's in the shower, when he's at work, even when he's out with me—it's you who's on his mind. Do you know what that has done to me? And the things he's said to you—I can recite a few of his messages by heart. Wanna know why?”

I don't answer her question—not because I think it's rhetorical, but because I don't give a fuck. It's not my fault she became nothing more than a roommate to her husband.

“Ask me why,” she demands as she lifts the weapon to my face.

“Why?” I ask, my voice small as the tip of the gun presses into my forehead.

“Because I read them every night, memorizing every syllable as I cry myself to sleep.”

Angry tears roll down her cheeks as she presses closer.

“Nothing to say now?” she asks. “No words about how I’m a horrible selfish bitch who doesn’t deserve Gildardo’s love?”

Realizing there’s no point in lying to someone who clearly knows the truth, I try a different approach. “Can we talk without the gun pointing in my face? I think if we sit down and have a conversation woman to woman, that we can—”

“That we can what? That we can talk about how I don’t deserve Gil? That you can convince me you’re better for him than I am? That you can tell me I’m a piece of shit wife? Isn’t that what you’ve spent the last several months convincing him of?”

“No. I want to tell you about myself. About my story. About how I got here.”

TWO

MARICEL SCOFFS. “DO you think I give a fuck about you? And I think it’s pretty clear why you’re here—to steal what doesn’t belong to you.”

“That’s not true.”

“Shut up. Do you take me for an idiot?” she asks, stepping backward and gripping the gun with both hands. “You’re the reason my husband looks at me like he hates breathing the same air as me. You’re the reason my marriage is over. You’re the reason these landed on my desk today.” She reaches in her jacket pocket and pulls out a thick wad of papers and tosses them at me.

The document lands at my feet, face up. I steal a quick glance at the paperwork, and my eyes widen. I can’t believe it. He’s divorcing her. But if that were the case, why did he end things with me?

“Isn’t that what you wanted?” she asks. “To get him away from me?”

My eyes dart from her face to the revolver. “I had no idea he was doing this.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?”

I don’t reply.

“Answer me. Do you?”

“No. I don’t. But I swear I didn’t know anything about this.”

“And I should believe you? The lying whore who’s been fucking my husband?”

“It’s true,” I say, hoping she’ll consider the possibility that I’m being honest; Gil never said a word about divorce.

She closes her eyes and shakes her head. “Stop lying.”

“I’m not ly—”

“I said stop before I put a bullet in your head!”

Her threat forces me to swallow the mix of bravado and adrenaline that

kick in each time she says something that pushes a button. I fall quiet and try to come up with a different approach, yet nothing comes to mind. At least nothing that will get me out of this predicament.

“You so willingly commit adultery, yet you’re being *honest* with me now? Yeah, right. I don’t believe a word that comes out of your mouth. You’re a filthy, lying whore.”

I instinctively react to her words, taking an involuntary step toward her.

“Go ahead. I dare you,” she prods. “I’d like nothing better than one more reason to make you suffer.”

I grit my teeth and take a step back.

“Or maybe I should just get this over with. Maybe I should make you strip down to nothing,” she says, stepping close enough for the barrel of the gun to touch my chest. “And since you like hard things between your legs, maybe I should slide this gun into your dirty little pussy,” she adds, as she drags the metal over my shirt and then circles my nipple with it. “Then pull the trigger and let you see what an explosion really feels like.”

This bitch is really crazy. “I’m telling you the truth. I swear.”

“Just a little advice—this will go down better if you stop with the lies.”

“What will go down better?” I ask. “What do you intend to do?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out. Now have a seat,” she says, gesturing toward the corner of the room.

Whatever Maricel has planned, she won’t do it quickly—she’s going to play this out. She wants me to feel fear. Of that much, I’m certain. I follow her gaze to a chair positioned beside a small table in the rear of the living room. On the tabletop are rolls of tape and several lines of rope. She’s out of her fucking mind if she thinks I’m going to let her tie me up.

“I’m fine right where I am.”

She lifts the gun and flashes a smile that sends a chill down my spine. “You’re fine when I say you’re fine. Now move,” she orders.

I stare at her, reluctant to do as she says. I swear, if she didn’t have that gun, I’d show her exactly what I thought of her and that smart mouth. I hesitantly turn toward the far side of the room and move to the corner. She follows closely behind as I scan the space in front of me, looking for an

escape, or at least a way to get to my phone and dial 911.

“Sit down,” she says when I come to a stop in front of the chair.

“Look, I understand you’re angry... and hurt, but holding me here isn’t going to solve anything. Before things get too far out of hand, why don’t you step back and let me walk away.”

She pokes the gun into my back. “I said, sit down.”

Slowly, I spin around to face her and continue my plea.

“I’ll disappear, and you and Gil can get back to whatever it was you had before I came into the picture. Doesn’t that sound better than—”

“Better than what? Than blowing your brains out?”

I glance at the revolver and then back at her. “Think about it. I’ll be out of the picture. I was the problem, right? Everything was fine before I came along.”

“So you *do* admit it was you my husband was texting?”

“Yes. We both know it was me, but if I’m no longer an issue, the two of you can get back to the happy marriage you brag about on Instagram. Isn’t that what you want?”

“Shut up and sit down,” she yells, her hand trembling as she shoves the gun in my face. “I won’t repeat it again.”

I take a few paces back and then sit in the chair.

She steps to the side and uses the gun to point at the items on the table. “Grab the rope and tie it around your ankles.”

“I’m not doing that.”

A flash of anger crosses her face. “You damn well will do it,” she says, her voice raised. “Or I’ll splatter your brains all over that fucking wall.”

I don’t know how far she’s planning to take this, so I do the only thing that makes sense. I grab two pieces of rope and bend over to tie my ankles, all the while looking for an opportunity—for some way to get out of this mess.

“Now what?” I ask when I’ve secured both ankles to the legs of the chair.

She steps to the table and snags the longer piece of rope and then moves behind me. “Place your hands on the back of the chair.”

I think about what I could do with my hands while they’re still free—reach for the gun, grab her by the throat, push her to the floor. Each of those

maneuvers could result in a gunshot. I settle into the hope that Gil will be here soon, and I tell myself it's best to play along until he arrives. I resign to becoming her prisoner as she ties my hands behind my back and tapes my mouth shut.

Maricel walks around to the front of the chair and stares down at me.

“Do you have any idea how it feels to see the man you love pull away from you more and more with every passing day? Or to see messages on his phone to a woman that he says he loves more than he loves you. To read the words that he has never felt for any woman the way he feels for you? Do you have any idea what goes through a woman's head when she sees shit like that? Do you?”

Sensing she expects some type of response, I shake my head.

“There's one particular message that literally makes me sick to my stomach. Gil sent it to you on October 29th.

If you and I were married, I would never look for anyone outside my marriage. I think we are the missing parts to each other. Thank you for coming into my life and for making my days brighter and happier. I really meant it when I said I wish I'd met you years ago, before meeting my wife. I truly wish that we'd belonged to each other back then. We would be tremendously happier than we are in our current situations.

I remember that message just as clearly as she does. My heart was in my throat when I'd read it, so I can only imagine how she must have felt when she saw it. I watch as the pain plays out on her face, and as much as I feel she doesn't deserve Gil, I can't help but pity her.

But like my husband, this is Maricel's doing. *She* stopped caring about anyone other than herself, and in doing so she turned the marriage into a roommate situation. For years, she neglected her husband's physical and emotional needs. Why would anyone expect a happy marriage if it's void of sex, love, and intimacy?

With her sleeve, she wipes the trail of tears from her cheeks. “Why? Why couldn't you have just made things work with your own damned husband?”

Before she can say more, the apartment door opens and closes then a voice rings through the space. “Nia, sorry I’m running late. Where are you, babe?”

Thank goodness—Gil’s finally here. When he’d asked me to meet him at his place to talk, I didn’t consider anything that could be awaiting me other than him. He’d arranged everything—the first-class flight to Boston, the chauffeur, and the key to his apartment that had been left for me at the concierge. Was his plan to tell me about the divorce? To tell me he wanted to follow his heart after all?

Maricel rips the tape off my mouth and leans in. “Answer him,” she whispers. “And don’t try anything unless you want me to pull the trigger.”

“I’m... uh... in here. I’m in here,” I call out.

“I’m so glad you made it, Mami,” Gil says as he steps into my line of vision.

Gildardo Botelho. In the flesh. This is the guy I’ve been pining over. The guy whose words alone brought me to multiple successive orgasms. His eyes dart to mine, and for mere seconds, I see the delight in his expression.

“Hello, Gil,” Maricel says. “I was starting to think you wouldn’t make it in time.”

His gaze shifts to the image stepping from the shadows. “What the hell are you doing here?”

She raises the gun to his eye-level. “I’m righting a wrong. And sense you’re the central piece to this threesome, I want you to have a front-row seat to the last seconds of your whore’s life.”

“Have you lost your mind? Give me that.” He hurries toward her, his hand outstretched as he reaches for the weapon.

“Stop,” she warns, her hand quivering as she points the firearm at him. “Don’t come any closer, or I swear I’ll shoot.”

Gil stops in his tracks and reassesses the situation, glancing at me and then back at his wife. This is my first time seeing him face-to-face, so I’m not privy to his expressions, but in this case, I don’t have to be. His eyes reflect the fear I feel in the pit of my stomach—we’re both in danger, and there isn’t anything he can do about it.

THREE

“YOU DON’T WANT to do this,” Gil says, his tone pleading.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” Maricel replies. “I’ve pictured this moment for months. This is exactly what I want to do. It’s exactly what the two of you deserve.”

I look at Gil and think of our communication, of how I initially disliked him, and of how I’d wanted to blow him off... but his persistence didn’t let me. I sit in the chair, restrained and frightened as I study the two of them, as I watch him attempt to talk her down. He’s smooth, just as smooth now as he’d been when we were 800 miles apart. The Portuguese accent always did me in, and even now, it does crazy things to me. Tack on the light brown eyes, strong jaw, and the full lips I’d imagined gliding over my body, and I’ll dissolve into a puddle right here. How fucked in the head am I to think of my desires when my only concern should be getting out of here alive? That’s what happens to a woman who’s been neglected by her husband for over a decade. A woman who’s starved for love and affection. A woman who’s damaged and broken from a marriage that always made her feel less than.

As I continue to study Gil—his demeanor, his bravery, his persistence—I see the man I’d once wanted. The man I still want. I notice how his tone softens as he speaks to Maricel, and how she reacts almost immediately, readjusting her position and lowering the gun. It’s just a smidge, but it’s better than aiming it directly at me... or at Gil.

I continue to study him, how he’s dressed, the way his clothes bolster the swagger I’d fallen for. I could even smell his cologne—the two-hundred-dollar bottle of Mr. Wonderful. As was typical for him, he was wearing a baseball cap—Boston Red Sox. And as was also typical for him, he didn’t wear it right. It sat too far back on his head but that didn’t matter. He was still the hot and sexy Brazilian I couldn’t get enough of, and I could see why Maricel lost her shit at the thought of anyone else having him, even if in

essence she really doesn't have him herself. At least not in the way a wife should—and not in the way Gil needs.

I inconspicuously wrestle with the ropes at my wrist as I keep my eyes on the two of them. Maricel shows no signs of relenting her position, yet Gil speaks with her as though he can convince her to. He's soft... gentle. The same way he'd been with me when I was dealing with problems in my marriage. I could see his words were causing her to take pause, even if she hadn't intended to. I could also see how much she loved him—I was sure it was because she had no one else, and I was just as sure it was because she didn't want to lose her meal ticket.

I free myself from one of the ropes and then move frantically to the other, hoping Gil can keep his crazy bitch-of-a wife occupied long enough for me to make an escape. I still can't believe I've gotten myself caught up in this. And over what? Dick? No dick is worth my life. Okay, if I'm being honest, I have to admit it's more than that. It's for the promise of everything I never had. That's how I ended up here. In Boston. In an apartment that isn't mine. In a position I've only seen in the movies. There's only one reason for it all—Gil. He was the lure, the promise of everything missing in my life. And he was the hope of a future that apparently I would never see.

I manage to release my other hand and then, with trembling fingers, I go for my ankles, easily untying the haphazard knot on the left, but struggling with the other. *Dammit*. I'd tied the knot at my right ankle tighter than I should have, and my fingers were not cooperating. I lift my head to determine Gil and Maricel's proximity, hoping my presence has fallen to the background of their thoughts. When I'm confident I've been temporarily forgotten, I go back to fidgeting with the rope and cursing myself for being in this fucked situation. I never considered myself naive or gullible. I was always one step ahead; always analyzing and questioning things others wouldn't think to. I was the one who advised other women on maintaining strength and clarity; not the one who fell prey to the games men played. At least that's what I'd thought... until him.

I try to maintain focus on the two of them, and more importantly, on the gun. When it appears Maricel has relaxed enough to see reason, Gil reaches for the weapon. And, to my surprise, she releases it. I let out an audible breath, and then she glances my way. Hurriedly, I sit upright and place my

hands behind me as though I'm still tied to the chair.

"Look at me," Gil says to her.

Maricel slowly turns away and meets his gaze.

"I'm sorry," he says. "This is not Nia's fault. It's mine. Take this out on me. Not her."

"You'd give your life for hers?" she asks, the stench of betrayal coating her words. "You really do love her, don't you?"

The incredulity of her tone was irrefutable—she found it unfathomable that her husband could feel something for me that he'd never feel for her.

"I'm doing this for you—for us," Gil says. "Do you realize what will happen if you do anything to hurt her? You go to jail—for the rest of your life. I don't want that for you. I want you to be happy."

A vulnerable expression flashes over Maricel's face, but she quickly recovers, replacing it with the rage she's displayed since my arrival. "You're just saying these things so I can let her go. You don't give a damn about me. All you care about is *her!*" She lunges for the gun in Gil's pocket, shoving her hand inside.

"Don't do this," he says.

"Those are words you should have said to yourself," she replies as she scrambles for the weapon.

I somehow finally loosen the knot and free myself, and then scan the place for my purse, remembering I'd placed it on the table in the entrance to the apartment. As I stand, a loud noise sounds, and I look over to see Gil and Maricel on the floor wrestling for the gun. I take their rumble as my chance to get the hell out of here. I make it as far as the door when the unimaginable happens. The gun sounds and something hits the floor with a loud thud.

Seconds pass. Quietness rings out. Everything dissolves into blackness.

Maybe Maricel was right. If I'd applied the same time and effort to my marriage as I'd applied to Gil, perhaps I wouldn't be here. As quickly as that thought enters my head, I shoot it down. My marriage was over long before I ever met Gil, and any efforts to revive it would have met the same end as all my efforts in the past. I'd tried everything—threatening to leave, talking until I was out of words, crying until my head hurt, and counseling that never seemed to stick. I'd done it all—for years, and nothing changed. If anything,

our relationship worsened with each anniversary.
Yes, it was a sham of a marriage—but at least I was still among the living.

• • •

Are you curious as to how Nia's search for love started? What about the conclusion of her tempestuous journey? Get the entire story as

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INTERCEPTION

SANTANA BLAIR

ONE

Kenadi

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.

It wouldn't come from the Spanx she wore or the stupidly expensive, gorgeous pair of shoes currently cutting off the circulation to her toes.

No, one more step would put her face-to-pecs with the sexiest man alive and the object of all her fantasies over the past two years.

Caleb Kennedy.

With her brother's recent trade to Caleb's team, it seemed like everything in the universe was finally aligning towards the moment Caleb would notice her and subsequently fall madly in love.

Tossing her waist-length braids over her shoulder, she tried to shake off her nerves. Unlike her brother, she hadn't inherited the confidence gene.

She never resented him for it, though.

She'd dealt with mean girls targeting her for the extra weight she'd carried around through high school and the nearly constant diet suggestions from her mother based off whatever TV doctor she'd decided to listen at the moment. If it hadn't been for Quentin, both things would have probably broken her.

College had been her escape. The distance had given her the space and ability to figure out how to start liking the girl she saw in the mirror every day. When she'd graduated recently, she'd walked across the stage as a forty-pounds-lighter, slightly more confident version of Kenadi Russell.

But now was her chance to be Mrs. Kenadi Kennedy.

Kenadi forced her eyes to stop gawking at him and took a nervous final step.

It was now or never. *Carpe hottie.*

"Hi, Caleb—" The words barely left her mouth before the impact. Her

shriek lodged in her throat as the pool water engulfed her.

She broke the surface, looking for her assailant, her vision half-blurred by the loss of a contact lens.

Cash Latham.

He was tall, tatted, and bearded. Not as beautiful as her Caleb, but handsome—and the reason she wasn't on her way to becoming Mrs. Kennedy right now. *Freaking Cash.*

She slapped the water, doing her best to aim it straight at the stupidly obnoxious grin he wore. Then, turning her back on him and the rest of the party, she awkwardly moved toward the pool steps, the embarrassment clinging to her skin tighter than her now-soaked dress.

CASH

Growing up, he had always been told there was never a bad time to play football. But his dad was probably at home tonight, polishing his Super Bowl rings while Caleb was standing in the middle of a pool wearing a custom Tom Ford suit.

It wouldn't be the first or last time listening to his dad's advice had gotten him into trouble.

Between the tequila and his teammates goading him, Cash decided it would be fun to find a football and relive one of his career-best catches. The moment he saw the ball's terrible wobble as it went airborne was when he should have backed off the attempt, but his ego told him otherwise. Already committed to the sprint when she stepped into his path, it had been too late for him to do anything other than try his best to soften the blow.

One look at those dark, angry eyes told him it was going to take one heck of an apology to smooth things over. She'd stormed off before he could pull it together enough to speak.

He pushed himself up and out of the pool.

“How are you going to sweet-talk your way out of this one?”

The amused chuckle came from his best friend and teammate, Caleb. The

two of them had come to this party with the intention to kick back. One of them had succeeded; the other was him.

“I keep Jacoby on call for these situations.”

“You have an on-call jeweler?”

“You don’t?” He grinned easily.

Caleb shook his head in amusement. “Tread lightly with this one. The girl you just sacked and nearly drowned is Quentin’s baby sister.”

Great.

Quentin Russell might have been recently traded to their team, but he had veteran playing experience and a field reputation Cash couldn’t wait to witness in person. More importantly, he was the host of the evening’s party. Cash would guess he wouldn’t be too happy if his sister got to him before Cash had a chance to explain it was a simple accident caused by Asher’s drunken aim.

He had to find her.

For the most part, he just followed the trail of water. Once inside the house, he asked the first friendly face he met where she’d dripped off to.

He ended up in a quiet hallway. While the party raged outside, he caught his first real look at her through the partially open door of the laundry room. The lights were low, but enough. Braids covered most of her face as she bent over and unstrapped the shoes from around her ankles before carelessly throwing them across the room with a guttural grunt.

She stood, making quick work of capturing her braids into a bun.

Before he could blink, the black dress she wore had been peeled off, laying in a soggy heap around her feet. He couldn’t seem to pry his eyes off her body, even though he knew looking was wrong.

All of her caught his attention. She was softness and curves. Her thick thighs and curvy hips were accentuated by the black bodysuit clinging to her like a second skin.

And her breasts...

A muttered curse slipped out beneath the harsh breath he finally released.

Her eyes were on his in an instant, narrowing just as quickly as they had widened in alarm.

“Now you’re spying on me?”

“I wasn’t spying. I was trying to apologize.” He held up his hands in an attempt to look innocent.

“Telepathically?”

Cash shook his head. His brain was stuck on stupid as she drew closer. “I didn’t mean to stare. I just didn’t expect all of this—all of you...” He waved his hand over her body.

Her squinting brown eyes turned furious.

“That sounded wrong...” His attempted explanation fell on closed-off ears as she advanced on him, jamming a finger into his left pectoral.

“You made me look like a complete loser in front of *the* Caleb Kennedy. Then, instead of apologizing, you come after me to tell me I’m fat?”

“Whoa, I didn’t—”

She shoved a hand in his face. “Stop talking!”

He was still in shock when the door slammed in his face.

TWO

Kenadi

KENADI WINCED AS she pulled the big t-shirt over her head, last night's embarrassing fail replaying in her mind for the umpteenth time. She'd barely slept, fearing that the moment she closed her eyes, someone would upload a video of her in a pool looking like a mess next to Cash "screw up Kenadi's life plan" Latham.

She should sue him.

Her foul mood hung around as she ate her bowl of oatmeal with a side of ibuprofen. She was attempting to get ready for the gym when she finally saw the missed message on her phone.

Unknown: Is this Kenadi?

Kenadi: Who is this?

Unknown: Cash Latham...from the party last night.

She rolled her eyes at the unnecessary explanation. Who didn't know who Cash Latham was? If he wasn't splashed over the gossip blogs with a girl, she still had to see his face on nearly every sports channel, right next to her beloved Caleb.

Unknown: I didn't get a chance to apologize.

Kenadi: How did you get my number?

Unknown: Candice. I told her it was important.

Candice was her brother's fiancée. Kenadi rolled her eyes as she struggled to pull her sports bra over her head.

Unknown: Can I apologize over a cup of coffee?

Her plan to ignore him for the rest of her life was failing. A post-workout

caffeine fix did sound good, and no apology was truly complete without a scone.

Her stomach rumbled in agreement.

Kenadi: I'll meet you at the coffee shop on Rosser and Ivy at 10. I have spin class across the street. I'll be there after. I'll take an iced coffee with almond milk and a raspberry scone.

Unknown: See you soon.

Her hand paused on the door handle as she caught sight of her reflection in the glass of the coffee shop. All the gumption she had left in her body released in a heavy sigh at the sight of her oversized, well-worn t-shirt and exercise spandex. She'd forgotten to factor in how completely sweaty and gross she would be when she met with him.

She wondered if she was ever going to pull it together enough to make a good first impression on a football player she wasn't related to.

Finally entering the café, she scanned the room in search of him, fully prepared to add his tardiness as fuel for her attitude, when a hand shot up.

He actually came.

His eyes were fixed on her as she walked over and slid into the empty seat across from him, letting her gym bag slip from her shoulder.

"Hope you don't mind sitting all the way back here. The paparazzi have been pretty relentless lately."

Kenadi shrugged as she applied a healthy glob of sanitizer to her hands. "Right. God forbid someone sees you with me."

"It's not that—"

She loudly stirred the ice cubes in her drink. It was weird to have a desire to hear what he had to say while also not wanting to talk to him.

"You said something about an apology."

"Right. I really didn't see you until it was too late. I shouldn't have been acting like an idiot at your brother's house. Are you okay?"

"Not even close."

His remorseful face punctured the bitter grudge bubble she had been walking around in.

“I took some ibuprofen. I’ll survive.”

“Good.” There was a hint of relief in his smile. He folded his hands before he continued. “I...uh, spent some time thinking about how you like C.K.—I mean, Caleb...”

Her cheeks flamed.

How could she have let her most important secret slip? And to *Cash*, of all people.

“If it’s all right with you, I’d really appreciate it if you would delete that information from your mind and never tell Caleb.”

“Why haven’t you told him yourself?”

“It’s not so easy.”

“But it is.”

“It may be easy for you and the kind of girls y’all are used to. But me?”

Kenadi shook her head emphatically, picking at the corner of her scone before putting a crumb on her tongue. “Caleb is beautiful. You saw me last night—heck, you see me now! I’m not his type. No matter how hard I try or how badly I want to be.”

Cash barely blinked as he looked at her.

CASH

“What if I helped you?”

The way she swung from sassy to a heap of insecurity baffled him. The question was out of his mouth before he could stop himself.

“Helped me?” She stopped stirring the straw of her drink long enough to look him in the eyes again. Those dark eyes and long lashes of hers were intense.

“You like Caleb—”

“Shhh!” She shot forward in her chair, clasping her hand over his mouth. Cash rolled his eyes and waited for her hand to fall away.

“He is *my* best friend. I could help you shoot your shot with him. You’d

have a major advantage.”

“For normal people, maybe, but I’m not good at dating. I have no experience. The idea of going from zero to Caleb is unlikely, even if I wish otherwise. I blamed last night on you, but it was probably my fault. It usually is.”

He held up his hand.

“No. Last night was my screw-up, and I need to make it right. I’ll help you get your do-over. I’ll be your dating coach. You can’t swim with the sharks until you swim with guppies, right? Bryce throws his annual black and white party in a few weeks. We’ll go, and I guarantee C.K. will be begging to take you out on a date by the end of the night.”

Skepticism etched into every part of her face.

“Why do you want to help me?”

Her questioning brown eyes watched him closely as he ran his hand over the fresh fade of his haircut. He shrugged.

“It’s the off-season. I have the time, and you need the help. Come on, what do you have to lose?”

Her eyes seemed to take in every bit of his face as she weighed the sincerity of his offer. For the first time since he’d met her, her gaze didn’t unnerve him. He knew there was no ulterior motive behind his suggestion. He was simply a good guy trying to do a good deed. Still, he didn’t exhale until she spoke.

“You can’t breathe a word about this to anyone. Not Quentin—and especially not Caleb.”

“You have my word.”

THREE

Kenadi

IF SOMEONE WOULD have told her twenty-four hours ago that she'd spend a Saturday night setting up dating app profiles with Cash Latham, she would have laughed in their face. But here she was, sitting on her couch in her baggy sweatpants and a tank top, with Cash beside her eating his body weight in slices of extra cheese pizza.

“How about this one?”

She tossed her phone in his lap as she lifted her half empty bottle of beer to her lips. She'd barely gotten a taste before he was shaking his head.

“You want a date, Kenadi. Not a job. Try again.”

“Seriously? You've literally hated every picture I've suggested.”

“Because you keep suggesting the wrong ones. Here...”

Cash leaned forward, pulled the hairband from her haphazard bun, causing her braids to fall over her nearly bare shoulder, then removed her glasses, setting them aside gently.

“This is it. No manufactured posing. No filters. Just you.”

She started to argue her case for a little face-tuning assistance, but stopped as he held up the phone.

“Just trust me.”

And for some reason, she did.

He was different outside of the parties and away from media clips. Tonight, she saw a softness she hadn't expected from someone who literally made a career out of smashing into guys when needed.

His jaw flexed under the reddish-brown hair of his beard as he swallowed the rest of his beer. Shifting his weight forward to place the bottle on the coaster she'd insisted he use, his large hand landed on her thigh.

His thumb twitched against her leg, hitting a switch in her brain. Insecurities buzzed in the back of her mind, and she found herself wondering if he was thinking about the softness of her thighs compared to the ones he was used to.

She straightened her legs, pulling them out from under his touch.

He ran a hand carelessly through the longer top section of his hair, letting it fall over his forehead as he leaned back into her couch and looked over at her.

“Did you always know you wanted to play football?”

“For the most part. I don’t think my father would have taken it very well if I wanted to be a gym teacher.”

“Is that what you would’ve chosen for yourself—teaching kids?”

“Maybe. I like kids, and I got my degree, but college was just a formality. My heart belonged to football, so it was the league or bust. Was it the same for Quentin?”

Kenadi shook her head. “No. Quentin only started playing in middle school. Then it pretty much exploded into this crazy life.”

“And you? What is it that you do?”

She laughed easily. “I’m a software developer. All those apps on your phone were made by people like me. My dream is to create my own game, but I’ve got to pay the bills, so I develop and maintain code on a couple app teams.”

He stared at her blankly.

“Geeky, I know. But being a tech nerd is the only place in my life where I’m confident in myself.”

“Geeky? You can make your own video game! You have like the coolest job in the history of jobs!”

Startled by his enthusiasm, Kenadi could only blink as he took hold of her shoulders and shook her. She wondered if he had suddenly forgotten he was paid millions of dollars to play football.

“Oh, can I be in your game?”

“I can’t afford you.”

Cash released her. “We’re friends now. I can give you a discount.”

He leaned forward and grabbed the last slice of pizza from the box. Right before he took a bite, he looked over and gave her his annoyingly charming grin.

To her surprise, it didn't bother her so much anymore.

CASH

It had taken three attempts before Kenadi actually picked up his Facetime call. Seeing her in a gray t-shirt, baggy cardigan, and glasses with her braids tied back in a colorful scarf was not the image he had anticipated.

“Why aren't you dressed?”

“I'm dressed! I worked from home today.” She gestured to her unicorn print pajama pants.

“You have a date tonight, remember? You're meeting him in an hour for drinks.”

She rolled her eyes before scrunching up her nose in displeasure. “Do I have to?”

“Guppies before sharks.” He dangled the reminder like a proverbial carrot. “Unless you changed your mind about C.K.”

“Fine. I'll throw on some jeans and a clean t-shirt.”

Cash ran a hand over his face. “Can you at least pretend to try, Kenadi?”

She pulled the glasses from her face reluctantly. “You'll get what you get. Text me the address.”

He could have sworn he heard her mutter something about a dating dictator just before the screen went black.

Cash slid his valet ticket into his pocket, eager to get inside and set up date surveillance. He walked in and stopped short, immediately spotting her at the bar laughing and having what appeared to be an in-depth conversation. Seeing as how he'd had to remind of her date, he hadn't expected her to be on time.

He also hadn't expected her to look the way she did.

The girl who was just wearing pajama pants and a coffee-stained t-shirt was now perched on the barstool in tight jeans, heels revealing a perfect pedicure, and a knotted crop top that hugged her full chest.

The hidden memory of her changing out of her wet dress instantly shot to the forefront of his mind. He quickly banished the thought in an attempt to focus on the present.

The self-proclaimed bad dater looked like she was having the time of her life. She didn't even move away when dating-app-Danny touched her elbow as he leaned in to speak.

It was the oldest trick in the book. Cash used it regularly.

Cash: Meet me by the bathrooms.

He spied her surreptitious glance at her phone.

Kenadi: Why?

Cash: Just hurry.

He watched as she tucked her bag under her arm and excused herself. Her scowl grew with every step she took toward him. She was coming in hot. He quickly found himself doing something he didn't often do on the field: fumbling. A good reason or explanation would be needed to extinguish her fiery glare—and he had neither.

“What is so important, huh? Things were going good...I think.”

“It went fine. Now, it's over. Come on, let's get out of here.”

Cash smiled softly as he took her by the elbow, stopping short only when he realized she wasn't moving.

“You're the one who made me get all dressed up and now you're telling me to run out on him?”

“Trust me. I'm doing you a favor. You're doing just fine, but the guy is a dud. He just keeps looking at you.”

She blinked in confusion.

“Look! It's not what he did, it's how he was doing it.”

Kenadi huffed, crossing her arms over her chest. Cash did his best to ignore the way it pushed up her breasts and bared a bit more of her flat midriff. He refocused his eyes on her face where her full lips twisted to the

side in frustration.

“Do you know how much I had to pay for valet? And I didn’t even get to finish my drink.”

“I’ll make it up to you. Hey, we can go bowling!”

“Bowling?”

“I know a really nice alley not too far from here. We can hang out and re-strategize for date number two. What do you say?”

• • •

“Another strike for me!”

Kenadi punched the air in victory as she did a little dance around him. He didn’t know why she’d agreed to date-ditch poor old Danny, but he was grateful. It was a relief not to go back to his big empty house.

“You don’t have to announce it every time, you know.”

She pouted in derision. “Oh, is someone a poor sport? You don’t like getting spanked by a girl?”

“Don’t tempt me, girl. Sit down and stop distracting me.”

Kenadi’s laughter was full, rich, and came in contagious waves. He couldn’t stop smiling even as the bowling ball left his hand and immediately veered left into the gutter.

She laughed even harder, causing him to join her.

It felt like an eternity before they were able to look at one another again without dissolving into another fit.

“Is Caleb this bad at bowling too?”

Cash cleared his throat. “I don’t know anything C.K isn’t good at. He’s one of the lucky ones. It’s your turn, by the way.”

Ignoring the waiting frame, she wrapped one of her braids around her finger in thought. “How did you two get to be such good friends?”

He took a long pull of beer. “We were rookies together. Most guys get the first few checks and run out to start buying houses, cars, and jewelry. But

Caleb came to me and asked if I wanted to be roommates for the season. We were both new to the state with no family nearby. I'm an only child, and he became like the brother I never had. It was the beginning of our great bromance."

Kenadi sighed. "He's great, isn't he?"

He ran a hand over his beard. "Why do you like him so much?"

"What's not to like? He's handsome. Kind. Oh, and humble. I remember seeing an interview where he talked about the relationship he had with his sister, Everleigh. It was so sweet. It made me think about my bond with Quentin and made me like him so much more."

She turned to face him again. The only thing capable of competing with her long lashes and chocolate drop eyes was her smile. After a long moment, she bumped him with her shoulder.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"How am I looking at you?"

She shrugged. "Like I'm a crazy person telling you things you already know about your best friend."

Right. His best friend. The guy who deserved the best in life. Cash was becoming increasingly certain it didn't get much better than Kenadi Russell.

"You know something? This would have been a really great date if we were actually attracted to each other."

Her eyes were warm and genuine. The way she looked at him filled him with an empty ache he'd never felt before.

"If only."

If only...

FOUR

Kenadi

“I CAN SEE my house from here.”

Kenadi marveled at the view from the massive windows lining one side of Cash’s living room. She had jumped at his dinner invitation, eager to see his bachelor pad and give her own couch a break.

Cash walked up and handed her a drink. “Food should be here soon.”

The setting sun poured through the windows, washing the entire space in a golden glow—including Cash. His auburn hair looked even redder in the light. Her fingers twitched as she resisted the urge to reach up and push the locks falling onto his forehead out of the way. She wondered how soft his beard was.

“So, we have time to watch some more of our favorite show. You know, for research purposes...”

As she pulled him toward his ginormous couch, he groaned in complaint, though she knew it was mostly an act. The last time he complained about watching the reality dating show, he’d made her pause it so he didn’t miss anything while he’d gone on a snack run.

Barely ten minutes into the newest episode, she interrupted.

“Am I his type?”

Cash didn’t take his eyes off the television. “How would I know? I’ve never met him, Kenadi.”

“Not him. Caleb!”

Cash paused the television and rolled his eyes. “You’ve been thinking again...”

She scrunched up her nose. “Yes, I have. And I’ve never seen him date black girls.”

“Nobody has seen him date *anyone*.”

She put her beer on the coaster before turning to face him. “But if he did...”

Cash’s confusion filled his eyes as he regarded her. “His sister is half-black.”

“His sister’s identity has no correlation to his dating preferences. Not everyone wants the challenges of an interracial relationship.”

Cash shrugged. “It’s never bothered me.”

Kenadi immediately sat up in her seat. “Wait, you’ve dated a black girl before?”

He stood up. “I’ve dated a few.”

Her brain couldn’t properly process what he was saying because he stretched his arms over his head, distracting her with the low-hanging waistband of his athletic shorts. Those abs...

“You thirsty?”

Parched. “Huh?”

“I asked if you wanted another drink.”

She shook her head, but followed him into the kitchen anyway. “How many is a few?”

“My girlfriend in high school, a couple in college, and a few more recently.”

She wondered just how recently as she leaned against the countertop, picking at her thumbnail. “Any serious relationships?”

“I’ve always tried not to get too attached to anyone. Credit for that bit of baggage goes to my dear old dad.”

Kenadi looked at him. “Care to share?”

Cash opened the bottle and took a swig. “He just could never figure out how to actually be a dad. He had this major career taking up all his time, so there wasn’t really any room in his life for a kid.”

“What about your mom?”

“Cancer.”

Cash didn’t elaborate, and he didn’t need to. She moved closer and

touched his arm. “I’m sorry.”

His barely-there smile didn’t cover the hurt in his eyes.

“Anyway, Dad loves two things: football and women. When he wasn’t playing, he was *playing*. I had a lot of nannies and stepmoms...and nannies who became stepmoms. But none of them stayed. The only way to get his attention was football. The more I made him look good, the more he showed up for games. He got to have his legacy, and I got to pretend I had a dad.”

All Kenadi could picture was a young Cash with a broken heart having to earn love and attention. She wanted to punch Cash’s dad in the face.

She grabbed his beer bottle from him and took a sip before handing it back. “Your dad didn’t give you enough attention, and my mom gave me way too much.”

“Meaning?”

“I think my mom decided who she wanted me to be before I was even born. But despite all her efforts, I turned out to be everything she never wanted in a daughter.”

Cash draped his arm around her and pulled her into a side hug.

“Look at us, functioning despite our dysfunctional parents.”

“Except your functioning has a lot more zeros in the bank account than mine.”

Cash’s genuine grin took over his face just as the buzz of the intercom interrupted.

“Food’s here. Be right back.”

She watched him walk away in a strange sense of awe. Forget a heart of gold, his heart had to be made of diamond—unique and only beautiful through enduring pressure. She decided she was grateful he’d tackled her.

FIVE

Kenadi

“I HAVEN’T HAD a chance to really talk to you since the other night. What’s been going on?” Quentin questioned, crossing his arms as he leaned against the massive refrigerator.

Glancing out her brother’s massive kitchen window, she caught a glimpse of the pool. Cash’s face instantly popped into her mind. Dinner with Quentin and her future sister-in-law was usually something she looked forward to, but tonight, she was regretting turning down Cash’s offer to go to a concert instead.

“Oh, you know me...”

When it became clear she wasn’t going to elaborate, he chuckled.

“Sounds pleasantly vague.”

“And you sound like my big brother trying to be all up in my business.”

He held up his hands.

“I’m just a concerned sibling making sure my baby sis is actually getting out and having some fun.”

She was getting out all right. Her budding dating life, however, was not on the list of topics she wanted to discuss with him.

“I am. How about you?”

“Candice had a shoot out of town for a couple days, so I occupied my time by working out with a few of the guys this week.”

“How was it?”

Kenadi accepted the glass of sparkling water from Candice, watching the way Candice’s hand squeezed Quentin’s bicep as she passed. The tenderness between them made her heart ache a little.

Ugh. She wanted a man.

“Caleb is awesome to work with and an all-around nice guy anyone would want on their team. I’m hoping we find our rhythm and sync before the preseason.”

She made sure to keep her eyes focused on the bubbling water as she feigned nonchalance.

A change of subject would be good.

“And Cash?”

Quentin’s countenance shifted. “Cash has good instinct. But he walks around under this cloud of unearned hype because of his last name. He’s a bit too cocky if you ask me.”

Her head shot up. “You don’t even know him, Quentin!”

“And you do?”

Her brother stared at her in question. Candice stared at her in suspicion. Kenadi swallowed hard. She had never wanted an escape button as badly as she did right then.

“I’m just saying. I’ve never met a football player who wasn’t a little too cocky when it comes to playing...you included. Give him a chance or you might screw yourself out of a championship season before it even starts.”

“Cheers to that!” Candice raised her glass.

Questions still danced in Quentin’s eyes as he met his glass with theirs, but she was grateful to be done talking about Cash and Caleb.

“By the way, Mom said you’ve been avoiding her calls again.”

The mention of their mom popped the bubbles of gratitude.

“Of course I am. I don’t need the reminders of everything I’m doing wrong”

“So, is this a bad time to mention she and Dad are on their way?”

It was an ambush.

“What the heck, Quentin? Now I have to try to lose ten pounds in fifteen minutes in order to avoid a dinner-long inquisition about my carb intake.”

“You look fantastic, Kenadi.”

“Mom will disagree. I can already hear her now. *‘How do you expect to find a man if you don’t put in a little effort, Kenadi?’*”

Candice grinned sympathetically. “I’d kill for some of your curves!”
Some. Not all.

She managed to smile at them both, but deep down, she was already feeling her stress levels rising. She needed a distraction.

Kenadi reached for her phone.

CASH

Cash: Want to come over later? I scored an advanced screening copy of the new Marvel movie. I remember you saying you’re a fan.

Kenadi: I really wish I could, but...I have a date tonight.

Cash: I don’t remember setting up another one.

Kenadi: I did this one on my own. He messaged me through the app and asked me out to dinner.

Cash: And you’re going?

Kenadi: Guppies before sharks, right? ;)

Cash: Right.

• • •

Cash: Hey. How’s the date?

Cash: Let me know if you need me to call with an excuse to ditch him.

Cash: Kenadi, are you there?

He wasn’t sure how he was supposed to feel, but he knew it wasn’t this. The first time she turned down his invitation was understandable. This second time was a little bothersome. But now, she wasn’t answering his texts, and it was starting to feel personal.

Caleb dropped the game controller on the couch beside him. “What’s up with you, bro? You called me to hang out, but every five minutes, you’re on your phone.”

Cash avoided his eyes. “I haven’t—”

“You have. Where have you been? I’ve barely seen you outside of workouts, and even then, you get there right before we start and you’re out the door the minute the session is over.”

“I’ve just been helping out a friend.”

Disbelief was all over his friend’s face. “A friend?”

“Don’t be jealous, you’re still my number one.”

Caleb’s eyes narrowed. “So, you’ll probably have this ‘friend’ on your arm at the party then?”

“Not that type of friend.”

“I know you, Cash. Something’s going on with you.”

Cash scratched his beard. From the moment he’d met Caleb, he’d been able to talk to him about everything. Until now.

“You know, if you took a fraction of this misplaced energy, maybe you’d find your own date for the party and stop pestering me.”

Caleb stretched his arms over his head, yawning loudly in the process. “I don’t need a date.”

“You’re wasting all your prime years. Nobody wants to see a seventy-year-old asking people to accept his rose.”

“You do enough dating for the both of us. When the right one comes along, I promise I’ll ask her out.”

Cash’s phone chimed. Caleb laughed as Cash leapt for it and snatched it from the coffee table.

“I’m gonna head out so you can talk to your secret girlfriend in private.”

Kenadi wasn’t his girlfriend...

Cash opened his mouth to argue, but shut it quickly knowing he couldn’t explain Caleb’s suspicions away. Besides, he was too eager to figure out what was going on with Kenadi.

Kenadi: All good!

Kenadi: I think I'm ready for the Caleb portion of date training now.

To make her point, she'd added a bunch of smiling and thumbs-up emojis.

Kenadi wasn't his girlfriend.

SIX

Kenadi

CASH WAS ALWAYS on time, so it didn't surprise her when the knock on her door came precisely as scheduled.

"It's unlocked!"

He was barely through the door when he took one look and frowned at her in boxers and a sweatshirt that hung off her bare shoulders.

"You don't look like you're ready to go out."

She looked over the rim of her glasses at him. "I cancelled the date. You have the night off."

"The party is in two days. I don't want the night off, Kenadi."

"Well, I do!"

The harshness in her voice startled them both.

Ever since dinner with her parents, her nerves had been on edge. Despite her brother's best efforts, she'd left Quentin's house feeling raw and picked apart. Kenadi even found herself avoiding Cash by telling him she was on a date. In truth, she'd spent the night in bed, crying, trying not to eat her emotional weight in Oreos.

"Ken—"

"I had to sit through dinner with my mother and be reminded of all the ways I disappoint her. I can't bear to listen to you point out everything wrong with me too."

She did her best not to make any more eye contact as she attempted to stand up. Cash quickly moved to block her way.

She couldn't look at him. If she did, his sympathetic hazel eyes would see through the facade of togetherness she was barely holding onto.

"Look at me, Kenadi."

Tenderness woven through every syllable. He wrapped her in his arms, lacing his fingers across the small of her back, securely locking her to him. She rested her forehead against his strong chest.

“I need you to look at me so when I tell you there’s nothing wrong with you, you believe it at least half as much as I do.”

She still couldn’t bring herself to lift her chin. Being stuck in the middle of an emotional meltdown with Cash Latham holding her was not how she’d anticipated spending her Friday night. Her skin burned with embarrassment.

“I don’t know if I can do this anymore. Caleb won’t want me anyway.”

“Anyone who doesn’t want you, Kenadi Russell, hasn’t seen you. And if they can’t see you and how beautiful, smart, sexy, funny, and completely amazing you are, then they never deserved you to begin with.”

Cash’s voice was raw and rough, leaving little doubt to his sincerity, giving her just enough confidence to look him in the eye again. Cash’s hand moved from her back to push a few braids behind her ear, but his eyes never left her face. His lips were pressed into a thin line as she watched him clench and unclench his jaw. She knew she looked a mess with her red eyes and puffy face, but he didn’t say anything, nor did he let her move away.

“You’re so beautiful.”

The soft kiss he placed on her forehead made her feel more than she had in a lifetime. She leaned into him fully. Resting the side of her face over his heartbeat, she sniffled and listened to the rhythm. It was strong, steady, and constant—just like him.

“You’re making me feel better, but I still want to be grumpy.”

Cash’s chuckle was soft as he released her from his embrace just enough to pull her onto the couch alongside him. She tucked herself into his side.

“You can be grumpy all night so long as you let me stay.”

SEVEN

Cash

“WELL, WELL, WELL...the kid cleans up pretty nicely.”

“Thanks, Max.”

Cash ran his hand over the lapels of his tux. The all black ensemble, along with his fresh cut and beard trim, should have made him feel amazing. But since the moment he arrived at the party, all he'd felt was nerves as he watched for Kenadi to arrive.

“How are things? Everleigh doing well?”

His agent beamed at the mere mention of his wife. “Yeah. She's amazing. She's in the house talking, but I wanted to check in and see how the off-season has been treating you. Everything cool?”

He looked over Max's shoulder to scan the crowd, but came up short.

“Oh, yeah. You know me...”

Cash wished he'd been able to convince her to ride with him to Bryce's, but it had taken a lot just to convince her to come. She'd been thrown completely off her axis of confidence by her mother. Having issues with people who were supposed to love you unconditionally was a beast he knew too well.

His twisted feelings had begun to knot up.

Football was the only thing in life that gave him people who finally stuck. Now, it had led to Kenadi...

And he really wanted Kenadi to stick.

He thought about the other night. She had curled into his side while they spent hours talking about their childhoods and eventually falling asleep on her small sofa. Caleb had woken up with a crick in his neck, a cramp in his leg, and an arm that had fallen asleep hours before.

It had been the best sleep he'd had in years.

Cash vaguely heard Max say something about calling next week about a big deal in the works. Normally, he would've been pumped to hear those words coming out of his agent's mouth, but he barely cared because Kenadi was here.

In a sea of females wearing all white, she was the only one he saw. Instead of a white dress, she'd changed it up with a white tux of her own. The jacket was unbuttoned to reveal a lace bodysuit. Her body was stunning. He didn't know how she could look in the mirror and believe otherwise.

And her face...

Under the soft lights strung across the yard, her eyes looked even more captivating set against her flawless brown skin. The braids were gone, replaced with her natural curly coils pinned back on one side by gold pins.

It took him a minute to realize she was smiling at him. Without hesitating, he closed the gap between them. Once she was in reach, he wrapped his arms around her, lifting her off her feet for a second and whispering in her ear.

"You are a knockout, Kenadi Russell."

He felt her smile against his cheek. "A huge turnaround from the crying mess I was yesterday, right?"

"Nah, you're always a knockout."

She drew back to face him. She was so pretty, it hurt.

He cleared his throat as he returned her sparkly, open-toed shoes to Earth. "But since we're talking about yesterday...I never told you why I didn't want you to cancel our hangout."

Kenadi shook her head. "It doesn't matter anymore."

"It does." He ran his thumb over her knuckles. "I knew you were going to walk into this party and everything was going to change."

She started to shake her head, but he stopped her gently.

"Kenadi, Caleb is going to take one look at you, and you're going to get the guy you've always wanted...and I..."

His throat tightened around his admission. He could tell her the truth he'd been bottling up and steal his best friend's girl before his best friend had a chance, or he could do something he was good at and take one for the team.

“Cash?”

The sides of her smile fell in concern.

“I’m just going to miss hanging out with you.”

She placed a hand on his chest. “You ditching me or something?”

Her touch grounded him. He wanted to put his hand over hers and hold it there for as long as he could. “No, but relationships change people. I’m just being realistic.”

“I’m *not* in a relationship. Even if someone did ask me out—”

“Yo, Latham!” Both of them were jolted out of their intimate moment by the booming voice of Marlon Myers, one of the team’s fullbacks. “We’re taking pics!”

“I’m talking right now!”

“C’mon!”

Cash did his best to ignore him, but soon, several other teammates joined in chanting his name.

Kenadi smiled. “Go. I’m not going anywhere.”

“I’ll keep Kenadi company while you’re gone.”

They spun around at the sound of Caleb’s voice.

Cash gave his friend the evil eye, but Caleb was too busy grinning at Kenadi to notice.

Kenadi stepped closer to Caleb. “You know who I am?”

“Of course!”

She smiled at Cash with twinkling eyes.

She was happy. This was a good thing. He repeated those two things to himself as he walked away knowing Kenadi’s happiness was enough to keep him from tackling his best friend.

He watched them from afar.

Cash knew watching Caleb flirt with Kenadi would be awful, but he didn’t anticipate how much worse it would be when it was genuine interest he saw between them. He knew how it felt to be on the other side of her gaze, and once Caleb realized how good it felt to make her smile, to hear her laugh... he’d be addicted to the feeling. Cash knew what it was like to want to be the

center of her attention...and he also knew he never would be.

Kenadi: Hey, where'd you go? Did you fall into another pool or something?

Kenadi: I've got something to tell you.

He could only imagine what it was. He was going to need either a shot or more time before he had to sit through her gushing about how romantic Caleb was. He was closer to the exit than the bar.

Cash: I've got a killer headache. I'm going to get out of here. Call you tomorrow.

He was almost to the valet station when it hit him—it being the football that bounced off his shoulder and onto the pavement ahead of him. Someone had purposely hit him. The same someone looked both hurt and angry as she walked over.

“Where'd you get a football from?”

She ignored the question. “Why are you leaving?”

He rubbed his arm. “I guess I'm not in a party mood.”

Kenadi shook her head. “Bull. You had a conniption yesterday when I didn't want to come. Now, I'm here, and you're bailing.”

“I did what I promised. I helped you get the guy of your dreams.”

“Yeah.” She stepped closer. “You did.”

“Why are you out here, Kenadi?”

“Because the guy of my dreams is out here.”

He stared at her blankly.

“For clarity...it's you.”

Cash wanted to punch the air and kiss the earth.

“I thought you wanted Caleb.”

“I thought I did too. Turns out, I wanted the idea of him.” She took his hand in hers, interlocking their fingers purposely. The missing pieces of his life were slowly being pushed into place.

“But I want the reality of you more than anything. Even though I'm not your type...”

His mouth slammed into hers as he kissed her furiously. His hands reached under her jacket, taking hold of her waist and pulling her into him. When it came to Kenadi, his self-restraint had been stretched impossibly thin. He no longer cared about onlookers, agents, or older brothers. She was in his arms, kissing him back, telling him she wanted him for keeps.

Without breaking their kiss, he reached down and cupped the back of her thighs, lifting her off the ground with ease. Cash relished the moment her legs locked around his waist. He pulled away from her lips.

“I *never* said you weren’t my type, and I don’t want you ever saying it or thinking it again. Kenadi, you are everything I want, something I need, and more than I deserve. From the first time I saw you, I knew I needed more of you. Knocking you in the pool was the best thing I’ve ever done because I met you. I only endured watching you attempt to date or talk about my best friend because it gave me time with you.”

She cupped her hands around his face and kissed him again. Softly and tenderly. “And you were about to walk away from me?”

“Only because I thought you were happy, babe. I would do anything to make you happy.”

“You make me happiest.”

He kissed her until she giggled.

“Your beard is ticklish.”

“I’ll shave it off.”

“Don’t you dare! It wasn’t a complaint.” Another kiss. Another knot undone.

“Do you know what Caleb and I talked about the whole time?”

“How to give me a brain aneurysm?”

“Close. He told me some of his thoughts about this suspected secret girlfriend of yours, and I guess he took one look at us at the party and decided he was right. Apparently, I’m totally your type.”

“See!”

She laughed one of her big, whole-heart laughs he loved so much. “Let’s go back to the party. I got all dressed up for you, and I need to get my money’s worth.”

“About that...” He slowly spun her around by the hand. It was the first time he could unabashedly admire everything he could see and let his imagination take over for things he couldn’t.

She grinned knowingly. “At least buy me a drink first.”

“It’s an open bar. I’ll buy you two.”

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “By the way, can I take you on a date?”

Kenadi’s eyes were watery with happiness. She wrapped her arms around his waist. “It’s about time you asked me out, Cash Latham.”

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THE BRIDE

DEVNEY PERRY

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ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.

“I hate you for making me do this,” Everly hissed.

“Me?” I whisper-yelled. “This was your idea, remember? I wanted to spend a weekend glamping. But no. You thought a hike would be a more memorable experience.”

Not that she was wrong. We’d definitely remember this trip.

If we survived.

Her entire body trembled by my side. “Do you think they’ll come closer?”

“I don’t know.” I gripped her hand, clutching it as we huddled together on the trail.

Across from us, about fifty feet down the trail, stood a bison the size of a tank. He’d been farther away five minutes ago, but with every passing second, he inched closer, nuzzling the grass with his snout before taking another step in our direction. His charcoal horns tapered to piercing points, and his black, beady eyes seemed glued to our every move.

The bull snorted, causing both of us to flinch.

The minute we’d come upon the herd in this meadow, we’d nonchalantly retreated on the trail, but for every step we took, the animals—this one in particular—advanced three.

Everly unclipped the canister holstered to her belt. “Does bear spray work on bison?”

“I don’t know.” But if that thing came within firing range, we’d both unleash until either he killed us, or we turned him into bison jerky—pepper spray flavored. “Come on.”

We eased backward a foot, this time not drawing any movement from the beast. One foot became ten, then twenty. When the animal turned, whipping his tail over his ass in a silent *fuck off*, Everly and I leaned into each other in

relief.

We were standing in the middle of an open plain in Yellowstone National Park. The path we were on was bordered by tall green grasses that stood above our knees and swayed in the slight summer breeze.

We'd been hiking since sunrise and had enjoyed seeing the park's wildlife from a safe distance. Deer and elk had stared at us cautiously before bounding away in the opposite direction. Birds squawked as they flew overhead. They'd given us a wide berth and we'd returned the favor.

That was, until we'd rounded a bend in the trail, emerging from behind one of the trail's many plateaus, and found ourselves much, much too close to the bison.

"At least it wasn't a bear," I said, doing a quick sweep of the area and sighing when there wasn't a grizzly in sight. "So what do we do? They're blocking the trail."

The only way forward was through the bison, and one close encounter was enough for my lifetime.

"Should we turn around? Head back to the trailhead?"

"We'll never make it back to the car before dark."

We'd hiked almost seventeen miles today if my watch was correct. On this twenty-mile trail, we only had three to go until we'd reach the end. Three puny miles. Easy, if not for the blockade.

"Remember what I said about bison being majestic?" I asked rhetorically. "I changed my mind."

Until thirty minutes ago, I'd loved bison. I'd bought a bison stuffy at the gift shop at Old Faithful yesterday. But faced with their sheer size and the fact that if one of the ogres decided to play *chase the human*, we'd be trampled and stomped to death in seconds, I'd changed my mind.

"I don't want one of those faces to be the last thing I see," I told Everly.

"What about bears? I don't want to be bear food either. At least in the daytime, we can see them coming. I don't want to be stranded out here in the middle of the night."

"Shit," I hissed.

Though the bison had taken us by surprise, we'd been prepared for bears.

Everly and I were both packing three cans of bear spray, and we'd been hyper bear-aware with every mile.

I'd take my chances with the bison. "We have to wait for them to move off the trail."

We could try to walk around them, but neither of us knew the area, and the last thing we needed was to get lost. Like the park ranger had reminded us three times yesterday when we'd told him we were hiking Mary Mountain—stay on the trail.

So here we were. Stuck.

Everly and I had spent hours and hours doing research on trails after she'd convinced me to hike. This particular path wound through the Hayden Valley, and the online descriptions had promised the Yellowstone Plateau's unique experience. If you wanted to see the heart of the park, this was a famed hike.

Beyond us, the grasslands spread for miles, eventually meeting the mountain foothills. We'd traversed plateaus, lunched by a small lake and had passed wide sections of pinewoods. Through it all, we'd been out in the open wilderness with lots of space to run.

But not a damn place to hide.

Today's journey had been one of the most exhilarating and terrifying experiences of my life.

Maybe fate had intervened and brought us here. I was about to embark on a new phase in my life and remembering this hike would help me keep things in perspective. If I could face down a one-ton bison and not pee my pants, I could move across the country and build a new life, no sweat.

We stood there, watching the animals meander through the meadow with no care for our urgency. The sun was beginning to dip lower in the sky, and though we were hours from sunset, eventually the light would fade, and we'd become a tasty temptation for a passing grizzly bear.

Or a pack of wolves.

My stomach turned.

"They aren't leaving," Everly said.

"Nope."

The bison herd clustered along the stretch of trail ahead, eating and leaving their shit pies where we'd planned to walk. I'd almost stepped in a ripe one earlier, which should have been my first warning to turn back, but I'd been too busy appreciating the landscape and keeping an eye out for carnivores.

"How fast do you think we can walk slash run seventeen miles?" I asked.

"Fast." Everly nodded. "Really, really fast."

"Good. Let's get the hell out of here."

"Amen." We both spun around, ready to bolt, but froze when we saw something else blocking our path.

Not a bear—thank God—but a man.

"Uh . . . how long has he been behind us?"

"This is the first time I've noticed him," Everly said. "I glanced back to look for bears but that was a while ago."

"Maybe he's a park ranger."

"Or a serial killer following two idiot women from Nashville and he's going to drag us back to his lair and turn us into human stew."

"Eww." I cringed. "Thanks for the visual."

"Sorry. I've been watching a lot of Criminal Minds."

The man approached quickly, his long legs eating up the distance between us. His thighs bulged beneath his faded jeans with every stride. If he'd hiked the past seventeen miles at that speed, it was no wonder we hadn't noticed him behind us.

He wore a backpack like ours, but the straps seemed tiny on his broad shoulders, and they stretched the navy cotton of his T-shirt tight across his muscled chest and flat stomach. The baseball cap on his head shaded his eyes from view, though even from a distance, you could see the strong line of his jaw and the straight bridge of his nose.

Neither Everly nor I spoke as we watched the man get closer, his features becoming clearer with every step.

Everly clutched her can of spray in a fist as he lifted an arm to wave.

I fought to keep my mouth from falling open at this unexpected and devastatingly handsome surprise.

Everly jammed her elbow into my side, forcing me to close my gaping mouth. “You’re drooling. Potential murderer, remember?”

I blinked, dropping my eyes to my feet for a long moment as I composed myself. When I lifted my chin, the guy was standing before us.

“Ladies.” He kept his voice low as he looked over our heads. “Roadblock, huh?”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “And they aren’t moving any time soon. We were just going to hustle back to the trailhead.”

“Seventeen miles?” He shook his head. “No offense, but you’ll never make it before dark. And this is not the place you want to be after nightfall.”

Everly and I shared a look. She shook her head, knowing what I was about to say.

I said it anyway.

“Any chance we can tag along with you until the end of the trail?”

“Not a problem.” He nodded, his gravelly voice sending a zing down my spine, before he took a step into the tall grass.

“But the trail . . .” I pointed to the narrow dirt path.

“That’s not the hiking trail. That’s a bison path. They knock down trail markers a lot.” He lifted a hand and pointed toward the mountains in the distance. “The trail is over there. But you two looked lost so . . .”

He’d come to rescue us.

Which meant the reason we were standing in the middle of a bison herd was because they’d lured us to them.

Sadistic creatures, buffalo.

“Come on.” He jerked his chin and took another step. “I won’t get you lost. Promise.”

“Sir,” Everly held up a hand, stopping him. “I really hope you don’t take this the wrong way, but how do we know you’re not leading us to your serial killer hideaway?”

A slow grin spread across his face, and he shrugged off his pack, setting it down and dropping to a knee as he unzipped the front pocket.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Everly aimed her bear spray at his face.

“Easy.” He held up his hands. “I’m a cop. I was going to show you my

badge.”

Everly’s eyes narrowed. We really needed to find her another show to binge on Netflix.

“She’s just a little on edge.” I placed my hand on her wrist, pushing her arm down as I gave her a scowl. “Nature stresses us out.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “Yet you’re in the middle of Yellowstone National Park.”

“We all make mistakes, Officer.”

He chuckled, flashing me a smile of straight, white teeth before he rifled through his backpack.

I fanned my face.

“Seriously,” Everly mouthed.

“What?” I mouthed back.

She rolled her eyes.

In a different setting, Everly would be shoving me into this guy’s arms. He was exactly my type, tall and built with an unpolished and rugged edge that had always been my weakness.

He stood and handed me a wallet, opening the front flap to reveal a gleaming silver and gold badge. “Sheriff Duke Evans.”

Sweet lord, I nearly swooned.

He had a *great* name.

I’d always been a sucker for a great name.

Everly hovered over my shoulder, studying the badge. When she deemed it real, she relaxed and holstered her spray.

“What’s your name?” Duke asked, taking the badge and putting it away.

“L—Jade.”

“Lajade?”

“No, sorry.” I blushed. One gorgeous man saving my life, and my tongue felt twelve sizes too big for my mouth. “Jade. My name is Jade Morgan. This is my best friend Everly Sanchez.”

“Nice to meet you.” He rezipped his pack and shrugged it on. “Ready?”

“Definitely.” I nodded and stepped off the trail.

Then I blew a kiss goodbye to the bison as Everly gave them the finger.

• • •

“Are you guys camping out?” Duke asked as we walked.

We were on the real trail now, the bison encounter forgotten as we crossed an open meadow toward a cluster of trees in the distance. The only animals in sight were the birds soaring above in the big, blue sky.

“We’re staying at the Madison Campground. You?”

He shook his head. “I’m just here for the day. I had a buddy drop me off at the trailhead this morning. My rig is parked up ahead and waiting.”

“He didn’t hike with you?”

“I, uh . . . didn’t invite him. I like to hike alone.”

Which he had been until he’d rescued us. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. I’m glad to help.”

I smiled at his profile, then turned my attention back to the trail so I didn’t trip over a rock.

Duke had navigated us through the grasses to the trail without any trouble. For the past mile, we’d had to walk in a single-file line and hadn’t spoken much. I’d stayed behind him, doing my best not to stare at his ass even though it was completely stare worthy, while Everly followed behind me. When the trail had widened, Duke had hung back a step so I could move up to his side.

Everly, my beautiful friend, stopped to tie her already tied boot and give us a little space.

“Where are you from, Jade?”

“Tennessee.”

“No accent.”

I shook my head. “I grew up in upstate New York. What about you?”

“Wyoming. I grew up in a little town about an hour from here.”

“Do you come here often?”

“Not as much as I’d like.” He pulled in a deep breath, his chest expanding as he drew in the clean air and held it in his lungs.

“This is my first trip.”

“No,” he feigned surprise.

“Shocking, right?” I laughed, taking in the view. “We got in a little over our heads today, but this is truly a magnificent place.”

“Pure beauty.”

I looked up, expecting his eyes to be on the mountains, but his gaze was aimed at me.

A flush crept into my cheeks.

I was the furthest thing from a beauty today. My black hair was a wreck because I hadn’t washed it in days, not since Everly had helped me dye it in our bathroom before we’d left Nashville. The thick locks were roped in a sloppy braid that hung down the middle of my back and my red cap covered the greasy roots. The only makeup I’d put on my face this morning had been tinted sunscreen.

Maybe Duke was just flirting or being nice, but it was still the best compliment I’d had from a man in years.

Because it came honestly and without expectation.

We walked for a while without talking. Duke’s strides were longer than mine, but he held back, slowing so Everly and I could keep up.

I sneaked a glance at his profile every few steps, studying the color of his eyes and how perfectly it matched the blue, cloudless sky. His toffee-colored hair curled at the nape of his neck where it escaped the confines of his hat.

“So you’re a sheriff,” I said. “I don’t know if I’ve ever met a sheriff before. Do you enjoy it?”

“For the most part. I’m not crazy about the politics, but I’m lucky. Most people in my county think I’m doing a good job, which means I get to keep doing it.”

“How long have you been a cop?”

“Since I was eighteen. I hired on as a deputy for my predecessor. Then was elected sheriff two years ago.”

“Impressive.”

Duke shrugged. “At the time, there were some who thought I was too young for the job, but no one else would step up to take it. We’ll see if they re-elect me when my term is up. I’m only thirty-three and sheriffs in larger counties are generally older and have more experience. But I live in a small community.”

“Something tells me you prefer it that way.”

“You’d be right.”

“Do you want to be re-elected?”

“Yes and no,” he admitted. “Some days, I love my job. Others, it’s a pain in the ass. Guess you could say that about any job though, right?”

“Yes.” I’d had the job most girls could only dream of. But dreams weren’t always what you imagined them to be, and when there were more bad days than good, it was time to walk away. “What would you do if you weren’t a cop?”

“Be a cop.” He laughed. “I can’t imagine doing anything else.”

For his sake, I hoped that didn’t change.

Because turning your back on your dream, giving it up, was heartbreaking.

We rounded a curve and the trail narrowed, forcing us closer. I slowed to get behind him, but Duke slowed too, keeping by my side. The roped muscles of his arm brushed against my bare skin. The back of his hand grazed mine and I forgot to breathe.

When I looked up, those blue eyes were waiting.

Damn it, I should have picked Wyoming for my new home.

There was a spark between us. A connection to a man I hadn’t felt in ages. Duke might just be that something unexpected I’d been wishing for.

But our time together was up.

Before I was ready to part ways with this handsome and kind stranger, a wooden sign greeted us on the trail with an arrow pointing toward the parking lot where we’d left my car—a black Range Rover I’d purchased the day Everly and I had arrived in Jackson, Wyoming.

I’d driven it through Yellowstone while she’d followed in her rental car. We’d left the rental car at the trailhead where we’d started today’s adventure. Our plan was to camp out tonight and cross into Montana tomorrow.

Then Everly would head to the airport in Bozeman where she'd catch a flight home to Nashville.

And I'd continue on to Calamity, Montana and start this next chapter of my life.

There were only a few vehicles in the parking lot as we emerged from the trail. The moment Everly spotted my SUV, she sighed. "We made it. Let's never hike again. Though I am kind of sad I didn't get to use my bear spray."

Duke chuckled. "I've been pepper sprayed twice, once at the police academy and another time for a training exercise. Trust me when I say you don't want to use those cans unless absolutely necessary."

"Thanks for not being a serial killer." Everly held out her hand to shake Duke's. "And thanks for rescuing us."

"No problem." He waved as she turned and walked toward the SUV, fishing out the keys we'd put in her backpack.

I scanned the parking lot, taking note of the trees and the signs, looking anywhere but at Duke until it was time for the inevitable goodbye.

"Pleasure to meet you, Jade Morgan." He extended his hand, and I slipped mine into his grip.

Tingles raced across my skin as the rough callouses on his palm scraped lightly against my fingers. I met his gaze, soaking up the azure blue. "Take care, Duke."

He inched closer, not letting go as I'd expected. Instead, he held my hand, tugging me in as his focus dropped to my lips. Like maybe he'd kiss me.

Maybe I wanted him to.

But then he blinked, the moment broken, and the heat of his hand disappeared.

I plastered on a smile to mask the disappointment.

It was better this way, right? Cops asked questions and I doubted Duke would be satisfied with partial answers. For me to truly start over at twenty-eight-years old, the smartest thing was for me to avoid men and attention and that included hot sheriffs who were in the spotlight.

Still, I'd wonder about Duke. I'd wonder what might have been.

"Drive safe." With a tip of his hat, he turned and walked toward a large

white truck parked beneath a towering evergreen.

I stood, rooted in place, as he climbed in and drove away.

“Goodbye, Duke Evans.”

That really was a great name.

• • •

“I can’t believe when I get home you won’t be there.” Everly sniffled. “This weekend went way too fast.”

“But I’m glad we did it.”

She wiped away a tear. “Me too.”

The two of us looked human again after long showers and sleeping in an actual bed. While camping out two nights with a long hike in between had been an experience neither of us would forget, I wasn’t in a hurry to see the inside of a tent again soon.

When we’d arrived at the Madison Campground after the hike, we’d been exhausted. Everly and I had barely mustered the energy to set up our tent and sleeping bags before we’d collapsed.

The next morning, we’d woken up early, packed our things and hit the road. After collecting her rental car from the trailhead, we’d driven to West Yellowstone, where a hotel room and spa appointment had been waiting.

I’d soaked up one last day and night with my best friend before we’d trudged outside to say goodbye.

Everly was driving to the airport.

I was heading to Calamity.

“Call me when you get home?” I asked.

She nodded. “I will. If you need anything at all, I’m just a plane ride away.”

I hugged her, squeezing tight. “I’m going to miss you.”

“I’m going to miss you too.”

My entire life, Everly had lived less than one block away from me. We’d

lived together in Nashville for the past ten years. And now she'd be across the country, chasing her dream.

While I was moving to a new town, a new state, and a new home, hoping to find a new dream.

Hoping to find that elusive peace.

"Thanks for this," I said. "For the weekend. For coming out here with me. For keeping this a secret."

"I hope it stays that way." Her brown eyes filled with worry. "Are you sure about this?"

"No, but I have to try."

"You know your secret is safe with me, but Lu . . . at some point, someone is going to figure it out."

"I know." I sighed. "I know I can't hide here forever."

That wasn't going to stop me from trying.

"Just take care of yourself, okay?" She hugged me again. "Love you."

"Love you too." I stood beside my car, watching her drive away. It wasn't until her taillights disappeared down the highway that I finally unglued my feet.

And started a new chapter.

• • •

"Oh, hell." I glanced at my watch and abandoned my lazy pace.

Maybe tomorrow I'd learn how not to be perpetually late. Today was clearly not that day.

As I scurried down the sidewalk, I sent my realtor a text, apologizing for being late and promising to be there soon. Then I tucked my phone away, pinned my purse beneath an elbow, and ran toward my car.

Mom had always teased me for getting lost in my own head and misplacing time. Dad had been the same way.

Except I hadn't been lost in my head.

I'd been lost in Calamity.

Located in the heart of Southwest Montana, my new hometown had charmed me instantly. Calamity was nestled in a mountain valley, surrounded in all directions by towering indigo peaks. There wasn't much to the town itself, as my realtor had promised—I'd driven from one end to the other in less than five minutes.

But I didn't need a sprawling metropolis. After an hour of walking up and down Main Street, I'd realized that quaint rural setting suited me fine.

I'd instantly fallen in love with the easy pace. No one rushed down the sidewalks. People smiled as you passed. In every store I'd explored today, the clerks had welcomed me to town and asked for my name.

My realtor had promised Calamity was a friendly place. She'd boasted about the stunning, short summers and sunny, albeit, cold winters. How everyone would be so happy to have a young, fresh face in their community. I'd thought she'd been blowing smoke up my ass, just trying to earn a commission.

As it was, Calamity was everything she'd pledged and more.

Which was why I'd spent much too long exploring instead of meeting her on time to pick up the keys to my house.

Sweat beaded at my temples by the time I reached my car and hopped inside, rolling down the windows in favor of the air conditioning. Then I reversed out of my spot like my wheels were on fire and raced down the road.

The air whipped through my hair. The sun warmed my face. And the smile that tugged on my lips was of sheer excitement.

This is going to work. I felt it in my bones.

Calamity was located two hours from the nearest town of any size. It would be easy for me to hide here, living as Jade Morgan. In all my wandering, I hadn't seen a flicker of recognition on anyone's face.

According to my internet research, there were roughly a thousand people living in Calamity and the surrounding area. I could convince a thousand people that I was a nobody. That I was just a single woman, new to Calamity, who'd bought a two-bedroom home on the outskirts of town. I didn't have to find a job because I was planning on telling everyone I worked from home. I'd pay cash whenever possible and simply blend in.

My foot pressed into the accelerator as I glanced between the road and my GPS. In one mile, I'd take a left and in less than three minutes I'd be—

The wail of a siren filled my ears. Blue and red lights greeted me in the rearview mirror. My foot lifted off the gas pedal, but it was too late. As I slowed and veered for the shoulder, so did the imposing police truck behind me.

“Shit. Why am I so stupid?”

This was bad. This was really, really bad.

My heart pounded as I came to a stop, shoving the Rover into park. With trembling hands, I reached for my purse in the passenger seat and rifled through it until I found my wallet.

Why couldn't I have just been on time for once in my life? A speeding ticket my first day in Calamity was not blending in. If my name ended up in the local police report, my stay here would be much, much shorter than planned.

The officer's footsteps approached my door cautiously. Through the side mirror, I couldn't get a good look at his face, but I didn't miss the black gun on one hip and shining badge on the other.

“I'm sorry,” I blurted the second he was close enough to my open window to hear. “I was late and—”

The words disappeared as I looked up and saw blue.

“Jade?”

I blinked. “Duke? What are you doing here? I thought you were from Wyoming.”

“I grew up in Wyoming, but I live in Calamity.” He shook his head, clearing the disbelief from his expression. Then his gaze narrowed and intensified. “License, registration and insurance, please.”

“Right.” I pretended like the sharp, impassive edge to his voice didn't sting.

Maybe I'd misread that parting moment in the park. Maybe he'd just been a nice guy, helping two tourists to their car, and the attraction here was one-sided.

My fingers fumbled with the plastic as I yanked my license out of my

wallet, and I nearly dropped it as I handed it over.

“I’m sorry I was speeding.” *Please, please don’t notice.* I gave him my most innocent eyes, silently pleading for him to hand me back my driver’s license and forget this whole thing.

No such luck.

Duke studied my license, his eyes flickering between me and the plastic card. Then his jaw ticked and he put both of his hands on the windowsill. “Ms. Morgan. Lajade, right? Or should I call you Lucy Ross? As in the famous country singer, Lucy Ross.”

I cringed. “I can explain.”

“Yeah. I think you’d better start talking.”

“Sheriff Evans.” I gave him my sweetest smile. “What would you say to a bribe?”

• • •

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LEAP OF FAITH

JACI WHEELER

ONE

“ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.”

Elliot jumps, startled by the deep voice behind him, causing the ground to break and crumble beneath his feet. He thought he was alone up here and about craps his pants at the intrusion. Watching the stones tumble down the mountain to their demise, he can't help the anger that boils within, knowing that should be him scattered on the ground.

He turns his head slowly to see a tall, broad man leaning against a nearby tree, looking completely relaxed and at ease. No, this can't be happening, not again. *I was actually going to go through with it this time*, Elliot screams inside his head. It's like some cosmic plan to keep him from his ultimate goal. Too bad Elliot doesn't believe in a higher power. If he did, he might actually believe there was someone out there who wanted him alive.

Elliot stares at the man in disbelief for a few moments. He hasn't seen a single soul for his entire six-hour climb. He purposely waited until midafternoon to even start his trek, choosing a route off the beaten path so he didn't have to worry about this very thing happening.

How dare this man interrupt this moment? He didn't drain his entire bank account to fly across country, taking two buses and a six-hour hike to get to the top of this mountain, just to back out now.

Elliot takes a deep breath and clears his mind of all fear and rationalization. With one last breath, he shifts his weight to the balls of his feet, bends at the knees, and jumps.

Well, that was supposed to be what happened. In reality, what happens is he clears his mind, bends his knees, and just about leaps when he is grabbed from behind and flung backward, away from the ledge. He lands, limbs akimbo, hoodie half over his face, and his glasses hanging off the end of his nose as he glares up at the menace.

“What the hell, man?” Elliot screams at the stranger, who is back to looking relaxed again, like he didn’t just foil months of planning. “You need to mind your own damn business.” Elliot tries for bravado, but the crack in his voice, along with the tremor in his hands, completely give him away. He’s such a failure he can’t even do this right.

He tries to take a calming breath, quickly glancing over the edge. It’s such a high drop-off, with nothing but sharp rocks and trees to break his fall. All he needs to do is run and fling himself off. The stranger must have read his mind, because he casually steps right in front of Elliot, blocking his view.

“Look, man, I don’t know who you are, and frankly, I don’t care. But I need you to leave me alone right now,” he says with as much bluster as he can force. Who’s he kidding, though? He eyes the hulk of a man who stands before him. He could eat Elliot for lunch. He’s got at least half a foot and a hundred pounds of muscle on him.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“Why not? You’ve got some sort of God complex or something? This isn’t up to you. It’s my choice.”

“It may be your choice to take your own life, but it’s my choice not to sit by and let you. Navy SEALs never leave a man behind.”

Of course, the guy is a freaking Navy SEAL, because that makes perfect sense on the top of a damn mountain with no water in sight. Elliot is so close to tears he doesn’t know what to do. He finds himself collapsing against a tree, trying to swallow the scream that is firmly lodged in his throat. He made sure his plan was foolproof this time. There is no turning back; he has nothing left.

• • •

(48 hours earlier)

Elliot stands in his empty apartment and looks around at the white walls. Even when it was full of his things, it felt empty. The emptiness now just happens to be valid. It only took about an hour for the Salvation Army to erase his entire life from this small, depressing place. He removes his

checklist from his pocket and checks off number two—Salvation pick-up.

His last attempt was thwarted by the neighbor's dog, Brownie. He was just about to swallow a bottle of pills when there was a knock at his door. He ignored it until the incessant sound finally got to him, and he put the open bottle on the coffee table and went to answer it. It was his elderly neighbor, Rose, asking him to watch her precious Brownie while she went to her doctor's appointment. The dog was all she had, and she hated to leave him alone, so Elliot, like always, agreed.

Brownie came bounding into the room and knocked the bottle over with his tail, sending the pills flying. Terrified the dog would consume any of them, he quickly got the vacuum and cleaned them up, watching as his relief literally went down the tube.

It's almost funny how inept Elliot is. It's ironic, really, that he fails at everything so splendidly that he can't even succeed at ending his life. After the second failed attempt, he decided enough was enough. He would give away every single thing he had, spend every dime left to his name, and fly across the country so there was no backup plan left. This time it had to work.

TWO

SNAPPING OUT OF his musings, Elliot takes in his current situation. He doesn't believe in fate or karma or any of that nonsense. Yet, looking over at the large Navy SEAL to his right, he has to wonder if some superior being is just messing with him now. No way could a third failed attempt be coincidence.

If it wasn't for the fact that he had nothing left, he might even think of this as a sign. *No*. He pushes that thought out of his head as soon as it enters. Somehow, he must go through with this. He can't fail at this too. Life can't be that cruel, can it?

The tightness in his chest returns fiercely. His breathing is shallow and piercing. Of course he would have a panic attack at this moment, sitting next to the strongest man he's ever encountered. As if he didn't already know what a weakling he was.

"Come on, now, take a deep breath. Put your head between your legs and copy my breathing."

The stranger has such confidence in his voice. Elliot is positive this man has never had a panic attack in his life.

"Good, that's good. Just breathe slow and steady. You're doing great. Have some water." The man offers him a bottle of water, which Elliot reluctantly takes.

"Why are you doing this? You don't even know me."

"I don't know most of the people I've saved, but that doesn't matter, because all lives have value."

Elliot scoffs out a bitter laugh. "Maybe for someone like you. My life has never held any value...to anyone at all."

“That’s just the depression talking, son. Everyone has value. There is always something to do to help others. If only people took their eyes off their own problems, they could see how much they’re needed.”

Elliot glares at the man. How dare he judge him, especially today of all days? The only value that could ever come from Elliot’s life is being an organ donor. He taps his front pocket, making sure the donor card is still where he placed it.

It’s not like Elliott came up with this plan rashly. He’s been planning it for the last three months. He’s already failed two other times, and he’s determined that this time it will be different. He knew he wouldn’t be able to back down if he drained his bank accounts and gave away everything he had. There is no turning back now; this has to be it. He has zero dignity left, so he pleads with this stranger who has a major savior complex.

“Please, mister. I just need some privacy. You have no clue about my life.”

“You’re right about that. I don’t. So, tell me about it.” The infuriating man pops a squat right next to Elliot and smiles over at him like he doesn’t have a care in the world.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

Elliot says nothing for several minutes. He leans against the tree, eyes closed, trying not to sob. They sit like that for an hour, neither saying a word, neither moving. This small gesture brings Elliot to tears. Not once in his life has anyone ever shown up or been there for him. And here is this stranger who is doing exactly that, just being there for him.

Elliot lets the tears flow, not caring that he doesn’t have even a small scrap of dignity left. There’s so much he wants to say, but the words are all caught beneath the sobs.

“I’ve failed my son. I wasn’t there when he needed me most.” The stranger surprises Elliot when he breathes out the confession. His voice is so low and quiet, it’s like the words float on the wind.

“It’s why I can’t leave you now, even though I know it’s what you want. No man left behind. SEALs live and die by that rule.”

No wonder the man has so much confidence. He actually did something

with his life, something that brings pride and honor. He's a true hero. Just when Elliot thought he couldn't feel any worse...

"I've no one to leave behind," Elliot finds himself confessing in just as low of a voice.

"There's time to change that. You are still young. You can't be over twenty."

"I'm twenty-eight. I was supposed to be a doctor, but I got kicked out of my residency program in my last year. No hospital around will take me after that. There's nothing for me now. Nothing."

He expects the man to say something, offer some useless words of comfort or bullshit about tomorrow being better. Surprisingly, he doesn't do any of those things.

"My name is Leo. Leo Franklin."

"Elliot Walker."

"It's nice to meet you, Elliot."

The man has a sparkle in his eye, knowing Elliot can't say it back. If it wasn't for Leo, Elliot's plan would have been fulfilled by now. Jovial brown eyes turn so serious it's as if they've changed colors between one blink and the next.

"Since we're sharing our failures and all, I guess it's my turn." Elliot wants to turn his head and ignore what this stranger has to say. He knows exactly what he's trying to do—turn it on himself to show everyone struggles and tomorrow is a new day, or whatever the hell that stupid saying is.

Elliot sighs and looks up to tell the man to go away and sees the man's now horribly grave eyes, so brown they are almost black, fill with tears. The tears in the eyes of this war hero stop any thought process Elliot might have had. He is rooted to the spot and listening intently.

"I had a decision to make, one that ended up costing me everything. At the time, it felt like it wasn't an option. When called, you go, and you never leave a man behind. That's your job, and you do it without question." Leo's voice breaks on the last word, and he clears his throat while he takes a moment to regain his composure.

"My wife begged me to stay home, said my son was acting weird, wasn't himself. I knew the job was important. *She* knew the job was important. So, I

went...and I lost them both.”

Elliot wishes he knew what to say, but he was always crap at offering words of comfort. Facts, that’s what he is good at. But spouting off the divorce rate and how common it is right now probably isn’t the best idea, so he stays quiet.

“It’s easy to get caught up in ‘the job.’” Leo uses air quotes to make his point. “But in the end, the job doesn’t matter. It’s why you were doing it in the first place. You can still save lives without being a doctor, Elliot.”

“That’s what I was trying to do, but they didn’t care...”

“Tell me.”

Elliott looks over and can see Leo looks like he really wants to know. This giant of a man, a stranger who has taken on the world and all its problems, actually cares about Elliot’s. Something about that breaks him enough to talk about the one subject he swore he would never even think of again.

“I grew up in the system and had to claw my way out of it. You don’t have to guess that someone of my stature didn’t fare well, but I was smart, and I kept my head down, and I studied. I rocked the SATs and ended up with a full ride. Med school was hard, but I excelled at it. Then I got cocky. I was the top of my class, and all the attending doctors listened when I spoke...”

“Britches got too big?” Leo asks with a smirk, and Elliot just shrugs.

“Something like that. I lived in a less desirable area, I guess you could call it. Residents get paid next to nothing, and I came from nothing. Anyway, there are several refugees and illegals who live in my complex with no insurance and terrified of getting sent back. The first time I helped, it was a little girl who cut herself so bad she needed stitches. I always carried sutures on me to practice at home, so it didn’t seem of much consequence.”

“But I’m guessing it didn’t stop there?”

“No, it didn’t. I started ‘borrowing’ supplies from the hospital, and somehow the hospital found out what I’d been doing, and I basically lost my license before I ever well and truly started. So, you see, I can’t save lives. I can’t do what I’ve trained and studied for my entire life. No matter how hard I worked to become someone, I’m still that nothing kid who grew up to be an unworthy adult, just like everyone said I would.”

“If you try to find your worth in others, Elliot, you’ll come up short every

single time. Your worth is in you. It's in the things you do when nobody is around. It's in how you treat those who have less than you. It's putting others before yourself and the goals you had planned out. The man I'm looking at has far more worth than most, and I've been all over the world and encountered all kinds of men."

"Where were you when they passed out dads?" Elliot tries to joke, to lessen the confusion Leo's words caused him.

"For you? Probably elementary school." Leo chuckles. "What do you say we head back down and get a beer, huh? There's this little dive bar a few miles down the road."

Leo looks so hopeful that Elliot finds his resolve waning. He takes a breath then sighs, knowing he can't do anything but agree. Leo seems like the type of guy who would sit here all night if that's what it takes to keep Elliot from his final goal.

"Oh, all right." Elliot finally gives in. "I have a feeling I won't shake you otherwise," he admits, causing Leo to chuckle again at the truth behind his words.

"Let's go, then. We have a trek ahead of us if we want to make it down the mountain before dark."

Elliot follows the man down the trail that he was hardly able to climb in the first place. He was never one for physical activity, always preferring a textbook over the outdoors. He knows he should feel grateful that this man cares, but he can't help but feel annoyed, knowing he's going to have to climb the damn thing all over again tomorrow once he finally shakes him.

THREE

LEO SETS THE fastest pace he can without killing the poor kid. On the outside, he makes sure he portrays a calm demeanor, but inside, Leo feels anything but. His life as a SEAL meant a lot of rescue missions, but never has a mission had such high personal stakes for him before. He wipes the sweat from his brow with his shirt sleeve, hoping Elliot thinks it's from exertion, even though he could do this trek in his sleep.

“You all right?” He checks in with Elliot, who is huffing and puffing so loudly Leo can hardly hear his response. “We’re almost there now. Just a bit farther and we’ll be at my truck.”

Elliot nods in understanding and keeps up the best he can, stumbling as he goes. Living in a war zone for part of his life taught Leo how to recognize desperation and defeat with just one glance. The minute he saw the kid’s face, he knew he had his work cut out for him.

Leo’s not naïve. He knows the chances of Elliot still going through with his plan is a high possibility. But it’s not one he’s willing to let happen if he has any say at all. He’s seen a lot of hurting people in his life. There’s no question this guy is alone and in pain. Leo might not be able to change the latter, but he might be able to help with the first.

Leo looks at the rapidly setting sun and passes Elliot the water bottle, slowing down enough for him to hydrate. The faster they get off this mountain, the better he will feel. Sure, the kid could turn around and go right back...but he’s hoping after the workout he just gave him, that won’t be possible.

After what feels like an eternity, the trail finally ends with the parking lot in sight.

“Thank God. I didn’t think I’d make it,” Elliot wheezes when he spots a

single truck in the distance. “Funny, I don’t remember seeing it there when I set out on my trek, even though that feels like a lifetime ago now.”

“You also probably weren’t in the best mental state to take notice of things. Look, we made it. You did good, kid.”

Leo can tell Elliot doesn’t feel well. The fact that he feels like he failed is written all over him...yet hiking that mountain up and back must feel like he accomplished a great feat at the same time. Even though Leo doesn’t know him personally, he can tell just in the short time they’ve spent together that he has conflicting emotions as they near his truck.

“Hop on in,” Leo invites as he pushes a button on his keychain.

Without another word, both men climb into the truck, and Leo starts the engine. The bar is only a few miles away, so Leo takes his time getting there, as he sets a slow pace.

“You know, sometimes the best way to get over your problems is to get under someone else’s,” he offers, knowing he has very little time left to make an impact on this guy.

Elliot, however, doesn’t look impressed at his insight.

“Isn’t the saying the best way to get over a girl is to get under another?” Elliot’s voice is heavy with sarcasm.

“Well, both apply, I guess,” Leo responds, sending him a cheeky grin.

“You know it’s not about a girl. I’m not just having a bad day. There’s no relief in sight for me.”

“Bad life, huh?”

“Something like that.”

“From what I saw, you put a lot of energy into ending your life...so why not put the same amount into starting over?”

Elliot glares at him then turns his eyes to the door handle of the truck. Seeing that one movement, Leo can’t help but put himself in Elliot’s mind. If he flings himself out and lands just right on his neck, then maybe, just maybe he could end it all right now. With that horrible thought, Leo slows down even more than before, and that’s saying something since he’s pretty sure they were passed by a little old lady flipping him the bird.

“Here we are,” Leo declares as he pulls into the lot of a dive bar that has

seen better days. Elliot winces when the truck's tires crunch on the gravel in the lot. Poor kid's nerves are clearly shot.

Leo puts the car in park but doesn't pull into a space. He looks down at the dash clock and swears, feeling truly torn.

"Sorry, bud. I'd love to go in and have a beer with you. You have no idea how much...but I have somewhere I need to be. Here, take this and go buy yourself a beer." He tucks a bill into Elliot's pocket.

"Uh, okay...thanks, I guess," Elliot lamely responds, appearing confused what the appropriate parting should be to someone who saved your life.

"You're welcome."

Elliot sighs and jumps out of the truck, looking happy to be away from the man who knows and seems to see too much.

Just before Elliot reaches the door, Leo rolls down the passenger window and yells to him, "Remember, kid, today is a good day to be alive. You were put on this Earth for a purpose...maybe try to figure out what that might be." Elliot doesn't say a word in response.

FOUR

ELLIOT WALKS INTO the dimly lit bar, which has a bit more charm than the outside might suggest. He bypasses the bar and goes straight to the men's room where he splashes his face with water as he tries to regroup.

The amount and range of emotions that stranger has gotten out of him is seriously pissing him off, which is surprisingly hard to do. Elliot hasn't felt any emotion in as long as he can remember, and now he seems to be feeling all of them at the same time.

His plan was so foolproof that he didn't even bother coming up with a backup plan. He checked off every number on his list, and yet he is still standing here. Why?

He stares at the unimpressive face that looks back at him in the mirror. Mousy, limp brown hair, dead brown eyes half hidden by his glasses, and a small, lanky body...evidence he's been hungry for more than half his life.

An old biker walks in and heads to the urinal, ending Elliot's inner musings. Leaving the bathroom feeling no better, he approaches the bar and figures he might as well order a drink while he decides what his next step will be. He doesn't even have anywhere to sleep or go until the sun comes up in the morning.

When he'd started following Leo down the mountain, he had originally planned to turn around and hike right back up it again once Leo left. With his luck, however, he would probably trip over something in the dark, injuring himself enough that he would be screwed but not dead.

He also hadn't planned on the long hike down giving him pause. Or maybe it was just the thought-provoking questions from his companion.

A lady walks out of the back room with an armful of glasses, which she sets on the bar top then smiles over at him.

“I’ll be right with you, hun.”

Elliot nods and pulls the bill that Leo gave him out of his pocket...then he immediately chokes as he looks down at the hundred-dollar bill. *Savior complex much?* Elliot quickly puts the money back in his pocket. It’s hard not to feel grateful to the man. Even though he ruined his plans, he showed more concern today than anyone else ever has in the span of Elliot’s life.

“Sorry about that. Now, what can I getcha to drink? Wait, no, don’t tell me. An old fashioned, right? Coming right up.”

Elliot stares at the pretty brunette, wondering if she ever lets someone get a word in edgewise. She’s older than he is by about ten years or so, based on the lines that crease her smiling mouth. The bags under her eyes hint at a hard life, but there’s a lightness to her that almost brings you comfort. He can see how she could be good at her job.

“Here ya go, hun. Enjoy.”

She places an amber colored drink with an orange and cherry in front of him, which he quickly takes a drink of...then spits back into the glass. He takes back his previous thought; she’s horrible at her job. It’s got to be the worst thing he’s ever put in his mouth. That’s hard to accomplish, given most items he used to have in his kitchen had long lived past their expiration date.

A man Elliot hadn’t noticed at first comes over, smiling, and places a beer in front of him, winks, then walks away. *What an odd bar.* Although this day has been downright baffling, so why should this place be any different? He nurses his beer as the female bartender makes drink guesses for one patron after the other. He watches in amusement as each one chokes, coughs, or spits the drink back out. Then the quiet man behind the bar comes over with a different drink and a wink. Each time, the woman is completely unaware.

“How ya doing, hun? Another old fashioned?” the bartender asks, even though his is clearly sitting in front of him untouched.

“I’ll just have a beer, please...in the bottle,” he quickly adds, not trusting she wouldn’t mess it up.

“Coming right up, although I would have sworn you were an old fashioned kind of man.”

“Do you guess drinks often?”

“Every day. It’s one of my hidden talents.”

“How often are you right?” he asks, not bothering to hide his skepticism.

“Well, never...but just based on odds alone, I’m bound to be right one of these days,” she replies with a wide grin before she takes his untouched drink to the back.

“Strange one, isn’t she?” he asks the man behind the bar, who chuckles.

“She’s different, but not a soul around her is unaffected by her charms. Can’t mix a drink to save her life, but she brings in more business than any other bartender I’ve got.”

Elliot drinks his beer and contemplates what the hell he’s going to do now. Glancing around at the crowd, he almost laughs at the sorry lot of them. Looks like he’ll fit right in.

FIVE

ELLE BRINGS OUT two plates of food and sets them in front of her regulars. She glances over at the new customer with the sad eyes and wonders what could be plaguing someone so young, who has so much life yet to live. She could see the hopelessness in him the moment he sat down. It's not hard to read when it's the same look staring back at you from the mirror every day.

"Can I getcha something to eat to go with your beers?" she asks the young man.

"Why not?" he says, not bothering to look up from where he is peeling off the label on his beer.

"Burger and fries sound good?"

"Sure."

She throws Lyle a look over her shoulder, and he shrugs. She gives the guy one last look then goes to put his order in. *You have enough problems of your own. You don't need to be taking on any more*, Elle chides herself, but it does nothing to ease her worry. The mother in her will always worry.

When the burger is ready, she takes the plate from the cook and heads back to the bar. "Here ya go. Can I getcha anything else?" she asks once she places his food in front of him.

Saying nothing, he shakes his head and then stares at his food, like it just might hold all the answers.

"Helvetica and Times New Roman walk into a bar," she says to the stranger with a smile. He doesn't smile back, so she continues with her joke. "The bartender shouts, 'Get out of here! We don't serve your type!'"

He stares at her without blinking.

"Get it? Your *type*?"

The guy says nothing but raises an eyebrow, either in concern or

confusion, she isn't sure.

"No? How about this one? Why do we tell actors to break a leg?" When she can tell he's not at all amused or going to even try to guess, she soldiers on. "Because every play has a cast." She chuckles at her own joke. "Dang, rough crowd."

"Do people normally laugh at those jokes?"

"Well, my seven-year-old thinks I'm hilarious."

"Elle, phone call," Lyle calls, holding up the bar phone.

There's very little cell reception out here, so they have to use the land line. Nobody would call her here except one place. Her laughter dies instantly, freezing her to the spot.

"Elle, it's the hospital." Lyle snaps, breaking her trance. He walks over, placing the phone in her hand, and all she can do is hold it to her ear as she breathes out three words.

"This is Brielle."

She listens to the doctor on the other end of the phone. She swears she can feel the blood stop pumping to her heart as it begins to break. This is the call she knew was coming. It was bound to happen—everyone knew it—but she still wasn't prepared for it. The phone slips from her hand and bounces off the counter, yet she can't manage to do anything but stand there.

"What's wrong with her?" she hears the stranger ask Lyle, but she is too busy replaying the doctor's words over in her head to hear Lyle's response. All she feels is the numb truth wash over her. She hasn't felt it since that horrible day, three years ago, when two officers showed up on her porch with news of her husband's death.

She barely feels Lyle put a supportive hand on her back and give her a glass of water. She takes a slow sip and tells herself this isn't the end. That the doctor is mistaken. It hits her that it's the very same lie she told herself when those officers showed up at her door. *It's a mistake. It isn't my husband.* It wasn't a mistake then, just like it isn't now. Her precious boy is dying.

"What did he say, Elle? How's little Leo?" Lyle asks with concern dripping from every word.

SIX

ELLIOT'S HEAD SNAPS up at the name as he takes in the woman and man on the other side of the bar. She can't manage even a single word in response. She just nods, clearly affected by whatever was said on her phone call.

"Talk to me, Elle. What did he say?"

"It's no use, Lyle. His blood...they can't find a donor, and...and...it's too late. I'm going to lose my boy." She sobs in the man's shirt.

"I knew you shouldn't have come in today," the man breathes out as he pulls her in for a hug.

"He seemed like he was feeling better, and I need the money," she whispers.

"Don't be so prideful, Elle. I'll give you the damn money, and you know it. Isn't he on the donor list? You never know when they'll get a match." Lyle tries unsuccessfully to calm her down.

"He's been on the list for a year, and his blood, it's too rare. Only six percent have AB negative like my son, and if that wasn't rare enough, he needs a certain antibody that is rarely produced. He's taken a rapid turn, and the doctor said they don't think there's a chance he will make it through the week." She sobs.

It can't be. There's no freaking way. Elliot must be losing his mind. The words 'six percent' and 'AB negative' roll around in his mind, flashing him back to his first year of med school.

Elliot winces when Jenny pokes at his vein like she's stabbing an orange.

"Jesus Christ, Jenny. Easy, will ya?"

"Oh, calm down, Elliot. It's not my fault your veins keep rolling. Sit still. I've almost...there. Got it."

He watches as the blood fills the tube. Then she removes the needle and places a cotton ball secured with tape on his arm.

“Not bad, if I do say so myself.” She preens as she puts a drop of his blood on the slide and places it under the microscope.

“What the hell?”

“What?” He worries as she frowns down at the sample.

“There’s something off about your blood, Elliot.”

“What to do mean, off?”

“Well, just what I said, off. There’s something different about yours compared to the others...”

Lyle shouting at everyone to leave so he can close the bar pulls Elliot from his flashback.

“Come on, buddy. I’m sorry, but you’ve got to go,” Lyle is saying to him.

Leo’s parting words come back to Elliot now, and he laughs with disbelief, repeating them.

“Never leave a man behind. It’s a good day to be alive.”

“What did you say?” the now frail-looking female bartender snaps at him, looking like she’s seen a ghost.

“Huh?”

“What did you just say?” Elle repeats.

“Oh, I was just remembering something someone said to me earlier...It’s a good day to be alive.”

She stares at him with disbelief and so much grief it almost cripples him. He assumes she’s upset due to his lack of feeling at her declaration that her son is dying, and he’s about to set her straight when her words stop him dead in his tracks.

“That’s the last thing my husband said to me before he was...” She swallows hard and takes a deep breath, like it hurts her to even say it out loud. “Before he was killed overseas,” she finally manages to get out. ““Don’t you worry about me, Elle girl, I can’t leave a man behind, so I’m going to go in and save him. It’s a good day to be alive,”” she repeats as tears flood her eyes. “That’s the last thing Leo ever said before they shipped him home in a body bag.”

“Leo?” Elliot feels his veins turn to ice as his dinner creeps back up his throat. “No way! No freaking way in hell,” he murmurs to himself as the very

same words come back to him from just hours earlier. *“I’m a Navy SEAL. We never leave a man behind.”*

Both Elle and Lyle stare at him as if he has grown a second head. At this point, it wouldn’t surprise him if he had.

“Do you have a picture of Leo...your husband?” Elliott finally manages to ask through his disbelief.

“Come on, dude. We gotta go. Her kid is sick,” Lyle reasons. But it’s almost as if Elle can feel it too, the bond, the strange feeling that has Elliot breaking out in sweat and questioning his sanity.

“Hold on, Lyle,” she says as she grips her necklace and flicks open the locket. “He’s right here, and the one next to it is my son, Leo Junior.” Her voice breaks on the last word.

Tears fill Elliot’s eyes as none other than Leo the freaking Navy SEAL’s sparkling brown eyes stare back at him. The same eyes that sat next to him and listened without judgment.

“You said he died. When was this?” he is finally able to choke out.

“Three years ago. It was right before our son was diagnosed with Severe Aplastic Anemia. He had just gotten stateside when they discovered one of their guys got captured behind enemy lines.”

“You didn’t want him to go back.” Elliot doesn’t phrase it as a question, because he just heard the story that very morning, but it’s lost on Elle.

“No, I didn’t. Our son had been acting strange, lethargic for the last few months, and I was worried about him...” She trails off, leaving the obvious left unsaid.

Elliott quickly runs through everything he knows about Severe Aplastic Anemia, or SAA, as it’s commonly known.

“So, his bone marrow doesn’t make enough blood cells for his body,” Elliott says, knowing exactly what is wrong with her son. He lost a patient to this very disease his first year of residency, and it crushed him.

“That’s right,” she says, making a face that shows how clearly shocked she is that he know’s what she’s talking about.

“He needs a bone marrow and blood transplant?” Elliott asks, already knowing the answer.

“He does. But his blood type is so rare, and he needs a certain—”

“Antigen.” Elliot finishes her sentence for her.

“Yes, that’s right...but how do you know that?”

Elliot shakes his head, trying to clear it of the *Twilight Zone* vibes he’s had ever since he got off the plane yesterday.

“Because I have a rare blood type also, and I’d bet my life—and your son’s—that I’m a match and have the antigen he needs.” The awe and shock Elliot feels punctuate every word he says.

Elle stands frozen, staring at him, her eyes alighting in hope, yet he can still see the skepticism in them as well.

“I can see your heart and head are fighting right now. Everything I’ve said is the truth.” He reassures her with what he hopes is a comforting smile, even though he feels just as off-balanced as she looks.

“The doctor told me unless there was a miracle, my son wouldn’t make it. Could you be his miracle?” Elliot senses she’s asking herself more than him, so he doesn’t respond. He can only imagine what she sees as she looks at him, taking in his haunted eyes that have lived through too much, and his face that looks deceptively young enough not to have actually lived half of what he has.

“Bu-but...how?” This time the question is directed to him, so he answers with the only truth he is absolutely certain about, words she can’t possibly understand, but he hopes she will know to be true.

“Because your husband couldn’t leave a man behind.”

EPILOGUE

(One year later)

LEO MADE IT through BUDS, the hardest training of his life, to become a Navy SEAL. He then spent two months in captivity before finally succumbing, so he is no stranger to torture. However, standing here across the street, leaning against a tree and watching his family from a distance is probably the worst torture he's ever experienced. The very sweetest kind of torture.

He takes in everything about his sweet boy, cataloging every last detail to store up for an eternity. He watches as little Leo throws his head back in laughter while he plays with his friends, his cheeks looking full and rosy for the first time in a very long time.

He moves his gaze to his wife, who smiles sweetly as she takes a present from a woman's hands and places it over at the gift table. Her cheeks are also rosy, but what brings him the most joy is that the worry lines and deep bags under her eyes have faded.

Leo feels him before he sees him, swallowing the chuckle when he hears him stumble, almost dropping the gift he holds. When Elliot whispers a curse and takes a deep breath, Leo lets out the laugh.

"No, you're not crazy, Elliot...or dead. I'm just saying my goodbyes."

"To them or me?" Elliot asks as he finds his bearings then joins Leo against the tree. That small act alone brings a massive amount of déjà vu along with it.

"Both, in a way, but you're the only one who will ever know I was here."

• • •

“Why me?” Elliot asks on an exhale, so softly the untrained ear would have missed it. It’s the question that has been burning in the back of his mind for a full year now. He told himself if it wasn’t for his rare blood, Leo never would have chosen him...but there was a small voice in the back of his head that told him he was wrong. That Leo cared. The way he sat with Elliot for hours in silence then listened to his burden. Those lost hours were crucial to his son, yet he spent them with a stranger anyway.

Leo tears his gaze away from his family, even though Elliot can tell it costs him greatly to do so. But when his soft brown eyes reach Elliot’s, it brings a calming effect better than any drug.

“Because you needed me. Maybe even more than my son did.”

The eye contact was hard enough, but when Leo places a steady hand on Elliot’s shoulder, he about crumbles. *He’s real, he’s here...he cares.*

“My time is just about up, Elliot, and I won’t...I can’t come back.”

Leo gives it a beat while Elliot process that information. Even though he thought Leo had been gone all along, maybe even a figment of his imagination, he feels the loss greatly.

“I’m proud of you, not just for what you did for my Leo, for that...well, I’ll never have enough words or gratitude for what you gave him.” Leo pauses, and Elliot watches him as he pulls himself together. “But for what you have made of your life.”

“I’m not a doctor,” Elliot needlessly points out.

“I’ve told you before, doctors aren’t the only ones who save lives. Researchers can be argued to be even more important. It’s their information doctors use to save lives, isn’t it?”

Elliot tries to shrug, but the pride he feels at Leo’s words fills his heart. Saving Leo’s son’s life brought purpose and passion into Elliot’s life again. It also gave him something he’s never had before...family.

As if Leo read his mind again, a wide grin spreads across his face. “Once Elle adopts someone, they’re hers for life. You’ve brought just as much happiness to them as they have to you. Keep one eye on that boss of hers for me, though, will ya? Make sure he treats her well?” It’s a joke, but as it leaves his lips, Elliot can see Leo still feels a pain in his heart at the idea of her ending up with someone else.

“She doesn’t know it yet, but letting you into their lives was only her first step to healing. Letting Lyle into her life and heart romantically will finish the process.” The pain written across Leo’s brow is evident, so Elliot offers him the only reassurance he can.

“I’ll watch over them for you. They’re all I have,” Elliot vows, and Leo nods.

“Thank you for not taking that final leap,” Leo croaks out finally. “I’m going to be gone soon. I’ve felt the pull for the last few hours, but it’s increasing now. I just wanted you to know how grateful I am before I left.”

“Thanks for taking yours...on me, I mean. I know what leap of faith you had to take, to trust your family to someone so broken.”

“That’s the funny thing about brokenness, Elliot. The pieces can be used to make amazing things. In welding, when you solder two broken pieces together, it is stronger than ever before.”

Elliot turns his gaze back from the birthday party to reply when he is met with only empty space and chills all over his body.

“Goodbye, Leo. I’ll watch over them,” he whispers into the void, drying his eyes on his sweater before he joins his new family and the rest of the festivities.

THE END

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SPY'S HEART

A Fantasy & Fairytale Story

M. LYNN

ONE

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.

The sunlight pouring through the windows of Eirik Anger's home glinted off the broadside of his sword as he pointed it at the woman standing half naked across the room, never letting the tip of the blade dip down.

Ara Caron flicked her gaze to the door, wondering how quickly she could escape the man she'd kissed only hours ago, the one who'd been her mission.

One more step would bring about her end. The words were an endless loop through her mind. Because she knew Eirik would kill her without a second thought.

"Why are you in Cana?" As Eirik's growled words wound through her head, she realized he'd been repeating the same question.

Why had she come to a kingdom full of warlords and assassins when she could be safe with her people in Bela?

Only moments before, she'd rolled over in bed, thinking Eirik was sound asleep, and whispered words she hadn't wanted him to hear.

"Meet me behind the tavern."

The person receiving her words hadn't been in the room, and that was how Eirik knew. He'd awakened to hear her using her magic to throw her words into the world, knowing they'd reach across town.

"Rik." Ara stepped forward, her hands lifted. "I don't know what you mean. I belong here."

His lips pulled back to reveal his teeth, lips she'd loved pressing hers against, tasting him.

Yes, loved.

Because Ara Caron was a spy, and she'd fallen in love with the man her queen sent her to watch.

Taking another tentative step toward him, she stopped at the tip of his blade. “Are you going to kill me, Rik?” She pushed wild silver hair over her bare shoulders and lifted her eyes to stare into his sparkling emerald depths that now swirled with anger. “You can’t.” She smiled, taunting him into doing something, anything to show this hurt him as much as her.

As she stood facing certain death, she realized it might not be so certain after all.

The tip of his blade dug into her chest, sending a bead of blood arching over her breasts. And still, she didn’t move.

His eyes studied her as the muscles of his chest rose and fell with harsh breaths. “You’re a spy.” He said it with such certainty, as if it was the only explanation. Two types of foreigners came to Cana: assassins looking for training and spies from the other five kingdoms who were just now putting themselves back together after centuries of war.

Cana was the one kingdom that hadn’t fallen apart, but then, they’d never been together in the first place.

Ara tilted her chin, knowing the pain her answer would cause them both. “I am.”

As if her words took the air from his lungs, his entire body deflated, and he lowered the sword. “Tell your queen she’ll have to work harder to make sure Cana leaves her shores alone.” He turned, his long ashy hair falling across his shoulders. He kept his back to her as he set his sword against the wall and spoke again. “You are no longer welcome in Cana. Leave this place and return to your home. If you do not, my men will hunt you down.”

The coldness of the words sent a chill racing through Ara, and an apology rolled to the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t let it free.

Spies didn’t apologize for doing their job.

The days when those with magic bowed to those without were over.

Ara wiped the blood from her chest and scrambled for the clothing she’d discarded in their passion the night before. Pulling on leather-kneed trousers and a worn woolen tunic, she yanked on her boots and reached for her ever-present sword.

“Stop.”

Eirik’s command halted her movements.

A hope she wished she didn't feel rose in her. Falling into bed with a Canan warlord was not allowed. Falling into love with one... she'd let her entire people down.

Yet, all she wanted was Eirik's forgiveness, for him to tell her he understood the duty she had to Bela.

"You cannot take your weapon." His words echoed through her heart, widening the chasm inside. "I won't have armed spies in my town. I am sparing your life, Ara. Do not make me regret it."

Laying her palm against the crack in the wooden door of Eirik's one-room house, she paused, letting her breathing even. "I have not been the only one keeping secrets, Eirik."

She pushed through the door, releasing a ragged breath as it closed behind her, cutting her off from the one man who'd made her feel safe in a foreign kingdom where people killed for sport.

At least now she could go home.

That thought broke something inside her, releasing the tears she'd held back. As she hurried down the bright street, shoving through crowds at the marketplace, she couldn't stop the wrenching agony.

My men will hunt you down.

She pressed a hand to her chest where the blade had made its mark, feeling the warm blood stick to her shirt. The months of standing by Eirik's side flashed through her mind. Every time they fought, they made up, passionately. Nothing had come easy for them. Their connection built slowly, like a trickling stream that opened up into a rushing river.

And now...they'd spread out into the fathomless sea with an unsurmountable distance between them.

"I need you," she whispered. "Now."

Like her people in Bela, Ara's magic allowed her one power. She could speak to people at great distances. It had no use in hand to hand combat, but it made her the perfect spy, relaying her messages to the queen directly rather than sending information on journeys across the sea.

And now? It brought her closer to the one ally she had left.

TWO

NEVER TRUST A warlord.

That was the advice Ara's brothers gave her before she accepted this mission. Their father died of illness, leaving her brothers his estate in Gaule, the army she'd once led as their general.

Because she wasn't one of them. She never had been. Unlike their mother, her own mother wasn't of Gaule. She came from Bela, the land of magic, and had the ancient power in her blood, transferring it to Ara and marking her for persecution by the people of Gaule.

All that was in the past, but did one ever truly escape their old lives? Would she ever stop missing the safety her father created for her as a child?

Cana was the opposite of safe, but the queen had told her if she stuck to her mission, she'd survive the savage land. No one could know what she was.

Cana's unforgiving warriors would stop at nothing to destroy their enemies. They couldn't be trusted to keep their allegiances, but their skill, that was never in doubt.

Never trust a warlord.

Wasn't that what she'd done? She'd told herself that by keeping her secrets from Eirik, she was safe from him.

Now, as the pieces of her scattered along the dusty road at her back, she knew safety for what it was: an illusion, a lie.

The searing heat of the sun beat down on the stones underneath her feet. She wiped sweat, or maybe tears, from her face as she wound her way through the small town that served as the capital of the plains province of Cana.

Cana had no king. Instead, the land was carved and divided between the six warlords who controlled the assassin academies.

In a way, it was a much more primitive land than the surrounding

kingdoms. They did not build large palaces or great cities.

Instead, small towns of stone and wood dotted the landscape all the way to the mountains.

Ara ducked out of the way as the tavern door slammed open, and the petite Astrid stepped through, broom in hand. Astrid was the only woman in Cana who didn't look to Ara and her peculiar silver hair with scorn and suspicion.

But this wasn't the day for idle chatter, so she stepped into the alleyway between the tavern and butcher shop. It ran the length of the buildings before pouring out onto a mostly deserted street behind the town center.

Ara glanced both ways before pressing herself up against the building and sliding down to sit on the ground, pulling her knees into her chest as her back shook.

She didn't know how long she sat there before another voice entered her sanctuary.

"This doesn't look like the Ara I know."

She lifted her face to find Edmund Kent staring down at her, and something in her chest eased. "I screwed up."

He gave her a slow smile and sat next to her. "I'm not going to like this, am I?"

Her shoulders dropped, and she buried her face in her hands. "I've been so alone here, Edmund."

Until the delegation arrived from Bela a week ago, she'd been on her own in Cana with no allies, no one who'd have her back if it came to a fight. Such was the life of a spy.

And then Edmund appeared like an angel out of her darkness. He led a delegation comprising of both Belaens and Madrans who wished to broker a peace treaty for all the Six Kingdoms. It was the wish of the queen of Bela as well as the queen of Madra.

"Just tell me, Ara, is this mistake you made going to get all of us killed?"

She lifted her face to meet his kind gaze, far kinder than she deserved. "When I spoke to you with my magic this morning, Eirik heard me."

His jaw ticked, but he otherwise showed no reaction. "You mean the warlord you're supposed to be watching? And how, dearest Ara, did he hear

you use your power?”

Her face heated as he nodded, understanding without words.

A sigh rattled through his chest. “I know a little something of falling in love with someone I’m not supposed to get closed to.”

“I didn’t say I loved him.”

Edmund raised a brow. “What else would make Ara Caron cry?” He stood and extended a hand down to her. “Come. It seems you will be joining us on the road tomorrow when we set off for Madra and eventually sail home to Bela.”

“You’re not angry?”

“I’ll leave the anger to our lovely queen. Soon, I’ll be home with my husband. Getting there is all that matters right now. Our talks with the warlords have already failed, and I’m ready to face the consequences of that, but I’d really like to get you out of Cana alive.”

She slid her hand into his and let him pull her up. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“If you were going to reveal your betrayal to the most dangerous man in Cana, at least you did it when we were here.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders. “Come. Let’s get you somewhere safe.”

With Edmund by her side, Ara’s tears dried. Soon, she’d return home where she wouldn’t risk her life every single day, where the people wouldn’t look to her with suspicion in their eyes.

Bela, with its rolling green hills, white-faced cliffs, and beautiful sandy beaches had been like a dream for four years as she fought for everything she’d gained in the harsher Cana.

Now, that dream would become her life once more.

It should have brought her joy. It should have stolen the grief from her mind.

But she couldn’t shake the feeling that the dream had changed, and now she wasn’t running toward it.

She was leaving it behind.

• • •

The mood in the small home where the delegation gathered could only be described as somber. Over the last few days, the Madrans and Belaens who traveled to towns controlled by other warlords returned with similar reports. Talks were getting nowhere. In Cana, the leaders wouldn't even ally themselves with each other, let alone foreign rulers.

"Well." Edmund leaned back in his chair. "There's some good knowledge that has come of this. Cana will not attack surrounding kingdoms if they're fractured."

Ara sighed. "A fact I told the queen months before she sent you."

Prince Quinn drummed his fingers on the table. He'd come to represent Madran interests along with a few of his people. "Who is this?" He gestured to Ara. The Madra prince wasn't unkind, only exhausted, as were they all.

Still, she bristled at his insinuation that she didn't belong. Ara stood and approached the long wooden table the delegation surrounded. "My name is Ara Caron. Who the hell are you?" She knew the answer, but still, she enjoyed seeing the surprise flash across his face.

Edmund chuckled. "Back down. Both of you. Quinn, Ara has been stationed in this town for four years."

"A spy?" He narrowed his eyes. "What is she doing here?"

Before Ara could answer, Edmund's words had her stepping back. "She blew her cover. Eirik Anger now wants her dead, and I very much don't want him to get his wish. She will leave with us." He pinned her with a stare. "And until then, she will not leave this house."

A grimace flashed across her face, but she knew he was right.

Edmund surveyed the table. "If Eirik knows there was a spy in his midst, there's a chance he wants us all dead. I am the only one who will go speak to him."

"You can't." Fear stole the air from Ara's lungs. If something happened to Edmund because of her, she'd never forgive herself. He was the most beloved man in Bela, the best among them.

His brow scrunched. "I will do as I please, Ara." He stood and looked to Quinn. "Make sure she stays here."

Without another word, he walked from the room. Most of the delegates trickled out until Ara sat alone with Quinn.

“You aren’t really going to keep me here, are you?” She crossed her arms over her chest.

He didn’t meet her eyes. “Edmund is right. It’s too dangerous for you out there. Eirik has probably sent his warriors looking for you.”

She dropped into a chair. He was wrong, but she couldn’t explain that. Eirik would give her time to leave before hunting her down. He didn’t truly want to kill her, she had to believe that, to believe in the words he’d spoken each night as they wrapped around each other, taking comfort in this comfortless kingdom.

But she’d fooled herself into thinking it wouldn’t end like this. The moment he realized she had magic, he’d known her for what she was.

His betrayer.

“Eirik won’t hesitate to kill him.” Ara used her magic to wrap the words around the room, echoing off every surface. “Edmund is in danger.”

Quinn sent her a cutting look, but there was something more behind it. Worry. If the Madrans and Belaens didn’t leave Cana safely, the two hot-headed queens wouldn’t hesitate to come in after them, setting off a war unlike any the Six Kingdoms had ever seen.

This wouldn’t be Bela fighting Dracon or civil war in Madra. No, this time, every kingdom would be forced to pick a side.

Cana’s next actions would decide its fate.

“He told us to stay here.” Quinn sighed and dropped his elbows to the table.

“And you always do as he says? I thought you were a prince...sure, Madra is a second-rate kingdom compared to Bela, but don’t royal titles give you more authority than a queen’s errand boy?”

She knew exactly what she was doing as red crept up Quinn’s neck, so she didn’t stop.

“Or has the Madran queen, your sister, stripped you of all your power? Is that why you were sent with this delegation on a futile mission?”

“Watch your words, girl.”

“Cana was never going to join the rest of the Six Kingdoms in this treaty.”

“I don’t need to listen to a spy.” The scorn in his voice hit her as it sank in.

She knew what people thought of those like her. After the war with Dracon, she no longer had warriors to lead or a mission she desperately needed. Being sent to Cana was a lifeline she'd gripped with both hands.

And now, it would end her life. But not only hers.

"Let me go after him." She turned to face Quinn. "Please. He needs my help." She didn't mention that if Eirik saw her again, he'd likely kill her. That didn't matter when Edmund was walking into his darkness.

She knew Eirik. If he felt a half of what she was feeling, he'd want someone to run his sword through, consequences be damned.

Before Quinn could give her an answer, the door slammed open, and a red-faced Madran ran in, thick black curls bouncing with her steps.

"Your highness," she panted. "I...I..."

Quinn stood and approached her. "Ekho." He put a hand on her shoulder. "What happened?"

"We need to get out of this town before it explodes."

"What are you talking about?" Ara rounded the table to join them.

Ekho looked from her to Quinn. "There are men... Audun Orr."

The name struck fear in most citizens of Cana, but Ara had never let Audun intimidate her. He was Eirik's right-hand man, the leader of his armies. "What did Audun do?"

She knew what the man was capable of.

Ekho sucked in a breath. "It's what he's going to do. I was in the tavern. I'd gone to speak with Astrid since she's been feeding us information. She said Audun is planning something, some kind of betrayal, and that it's bound to throw the entire region into chaos."

A betrayal.

A string of curses flew from Ara's mouth. Betrayal usually meant one thing in the land of assassins. Death.

Audun already had the loyalty of Eirik's warriors, all he needed was the warlord's death to take complete control.

"We can't let this happen." Ara ran across the room to where the delegation's belongings rested against the wall. She rummaged through them, looking for discarded weapons, but finding none.

“We need to intercept Edmund.” Quinn crossed the room and grabbed Ara’s arm to slow her movements. “And then we must leave. I need your magic. Get word to each of our delegates. We’ll meet on the road outside town before dusk and make our way to the Madran border where those from Bela can take ship.”

Ara shook her head and ripped her arm free. “You just want to leave?” And let Eirik’s own men kill him.

She no longer cared that he wanted her dead or that his sense of betrayal overrode anything he might have felt for her. She couldn’t live in a world where he didn’t exist. Someone had to warn him.

“The affairs of Cana aren’t our business. Our duty is to our people.”

Her eyes caught on the sword hanging at his waist. She pulled it free before he could stop her and held it angled between her and Quinn. “I’m not leaving him to die.” She shouldered past Ekho on her way out the door.

As she burst out into the blasted sun, she whispered words into the atmosphere. “Meet on the road outside town at dusk.” Her power directed her voice to the Madrans and Belaens in town, but she didn’t know if she’d be with them at dusk.

Because in that moment she wasn’t a spy for Bela.

She had a new mission.

Keep the man she loved, the man who hated her, alive.

THREE

CANA HAD NONE of the beauty most sought. Instead of springy green grass and blossoming flowers, the land held only dirt and rock. Instead of the beautiful arching architecture of Madra or the simpler clean lines of Bela, squat buildings of wood and shale lined the narrow roads, looking like they'd crumble into dust with the approaching storm.

The weather, much harsher and more volatile than any in the Six Kingdoms could change quickly, violently. Just like today.

Ara searched the skies for the brilliant blue she'd woken to that morning before she knew the heartbreak this day would bring. She needed to feel the sun beating its searing heat down against her skin.

Instead, all she found was gloom. Dark clouds moved in, cutting Cana off from the light and casting deeper shadows into the already desperate streets. There was a reason many Canans trained as assassins, warriors sent to the far reaches of the Six Kingdoms. There was little else for them.

And yet, in her years among the resilient people, fighting the land that tried to defeat her again and again, she'd fallen in love with Cana. Not in the way one fell in love with Bela and its magic, its beauty. Nor in the way one respected Madra and everything its leaders had accomplished in recent years.

No, this love was about the strength it took not to run home. The will she'd found in her mission for the queen. She'd given up everything to come here, her family, her former life. In the process, she'd found herself.

But her time in Cana was at an end now that Eirik knew of her magic.

Once she made sure he'd live to see the back of her.

She crept along an alleyway as the first raindrop hit her cheek. And then another. Before long, the skies unleashed their fervor after gracing them with the sun only hours before.

Ara's stomach growled, and she realized she hadn't eaten anything this

morning. But there were worse things than hunger.

Rain streamed through the silver threads of her hair, and she flipped it out of her face as she crept onto the street. She had yet to see Edmund, but he'd have heard her message. If she was lucky, he'd already be heading out of town.

But who was she kidding? Edmund Kent wasn't a man to leave before trying to complete his task one last time. Failure wouldn't sit well with the man who'd been by the queen's side since she was nothing more than an outlaw.

She searched the road in front of Eirik's home, finding it deserted. A single candle flickered inside, its tiny light a beacon drawing her forth. She wasn't too late. Her chest inflated as she could breathe fully again.

Eirik was still alive.

She lifted a hand to push open the door, ready to face whatever consequences there were for showing up again after he'd almost killed her.

As she gathered courage within herself, a hand clamped down on her mouth, so tightly her scream only echoed in the spaces of her mind.

• • •

Ara bucked against her captor as she tried to clamp her teeth down on his hand. Still, he didn't release her. He lifted her off her feet and carried her backward around the side of the small house.

If only she could get to her sword...

As if reading her thoughts, the man holding her ripped the sword from the scabbard at her waist and held it in one hand while keeping the other around her to drag her back.

"Let me go," she growled. "You don't know who I am. Lord Eirik will kill you if you harm me." She didn't know if that was true, not anymore.

Lips grazed her ear. "Are you so sure he cares what happens to you?"

Ara would have recognized that voice anywhere. When his grip on her loosened, she turned in his arms, lifting her eyes to his. "Let me go."

He cocked his head, dangerous eyes flashing. “I told you to leave Cana, that I’d send my men to hunt you if you didn’t.”

“That was only hours ago, Eirik. Give a girl some time.”

“Yes.” His eyes darkened. “But why have you come back to my door?”

She couldn’t think with her chest pressed against his, with his fingers splayed against her back. “Eirik...”

“I should kill you, spy.”

“I came to save your life.”

His grip on her loosened until he stepped back and lowered the sword. “I do not need a Belaen witch to save me from my enemies.”

A crash sounded as the front door opened. Eirik pulled Ara against the side of the house and put a finger to his lips. They listened until heavy steps faded away and the door slammed shut.

“Audun is already here,” Ara whispered. “You know.”

“Of course, I know.” He peered around her into the street. “I made a mistake the day I put him in charge of my warriors. A warlord is nothing without the loyalty of his men.” His body sagged against the wall. “It seems I am now nothing.”

“He wants you dead.” It wasn’t a question.

Eirik nodded. “That is not a new development. There is a reason peace talks between Cana and the rest of the Six Kingdoms fail every time, no matter how many Edmund Kents they send. Those of us who touch power do not hold it for long. We all think we can be different, that our men will be the ones whose loyalty does not shift like the sands of Madra. When a kingdom only breeds assassins and warriors, there can be no other life but war.”

In all the time Ara had been with Eirik, he’d never explained Cana in such a way, a way that put vulnerability in his eyes. He’d deny it until his last breath, but she’d forever remember how he’d looked to her when everything he’d built crumbled away.

“Just because one man wants you dead, doesn’t mean you’ve lost your power.”

His intensity burned into her. “Audun would not move unless he was assured of victory, unless he had the support of my warriors.”

“Fight him.”

“What?”

Ara pointed to the sword. “Run that through his belly and see who the men are loyal to then.”

His fingers grazed her cheek. “Who are you, Ara?”

Before she could answer, yelling erupted from inside as something crashed.

Eirik moved away from Ara, still holding her sword. “They’re waiting for me. I have to get in there.”

“That’s what they want.” If he faced Audun and his men, she worried he wouldn’t make it out.

“I don’t have a choice.” He met her gaze once more. “Not if you want the Belaen to live.”

The Belaen. Edmund was inside.

A smile curved Ara’s lips. She’d seen Edmund’s magic in a fight. Audun didn’t know what he was messing with.

“I’m here, Edmund.” Ara whispered the words, knowing they’d reach Edmund inside the house and let him know he wasn’t alone, that Belaens stuck together.

If anything happened to Edmund Kent, Cana would have two kingdoms to fend off. He meant different things to the queens of Bela and Madra, important things. They both loved him like family.

And Ara wouldn’t let them down.

“Where are you going?” Eirik hissed as Ara backed away from him, stepping from the shadows.

She didn’t have an answer he’d like, so she refused to answer at all. The moment he took Edmund, Audun became more than an enemy of Eirik’s.

Ara’s eyes softened for just a moment as she stared at the man she’d spent the past year falling in love with. How many times had she watched his face as he slept, skimming the pads of her fingers along his skin? How often had she melted into his arms, the only safe place in Cana?

Or so she’d thought.

But she was not one of them, and she never would be. She’d betrayed him,

lied to him. They'd never had a future, but now, in this moment, they stood on the same side. "I don't trust you," she whispered.

Pain flashed across his face, but he didn't respond as the rain pounded against them.

"But I need you." A plan formed in her mind, one that could get them all killed. Yet, when she held out a hand to Eirik, he took it, letting her risk both their lives.

She pried the sword from his grasp and squeezed his hand once before releasing him and leading him around the side of the house. Wasting no time, she hammered the hilt of the sword against the door.

When it flew open, a broad-shouldered man she'd met many times before towered over her, his lips curled into a smile. He glanced from Ara to Eirik, his teeth flashing. "The lord and his lady." A chortling sounded behind him from the warriors crowded into the room, a single candle between them. A trap. They'd been waiting for Eirik, but he was too smart for them.

Ara lifted her chin. "I am no one's lady." She jerked her arm back, slamming the hilt of the sword into Eirik's stomach. He grunted in pain. She hit him again, driving him to his knees.

With rain falling in a sheet between her and Audun, Ara narrowed her eyes. "I've come to make a deal."

Audun studied her for a moment, his eyes keen. His smile dropped, and he nodded, gesturing to his men. Two warriors lifted Eirik under the arms and carried him in out of the rain.

"Tie him up," Audun ordered as he stepped aside for Ara to enter.

Water trailed her steps, and she stopped at a table where two warriors had Edmund tied to a chair. Jerking her head to one of the men, she channeled her inner general. "Start a fire in the hearth. It's freezing in here."

The man looked to Audun, who only nodded.

Ara dropped into his vacated seat as he kneeled in front of the hearth. She met Edmund's curious gaze. No fear shone in his eyes. That wasn't who this man was.

If they were to get out of this, she needed his magic. Hers was practically useless in a fight, but throwing sounds wasn't her only skill.

Ara set her sword at her feet and leaned back, wringing water from her hair. “Congratulations on your transfer of power, Lord Orr.” She said the title with a sneer. He’d stolen Eirik’s power without a fight, yes, but also without earning it. One was only as powerful in Cana as the warriors who supported them. Audun, it seemed, had much support.

Audun sat across from her. “I never thought I’d share a table with the fabled Edmund Kent, but I do not know who you are other than the woman who shares Eirik’s bed. Why should I make a deal with you?”

Ara crossed her arms over her chest. “Ask him.” She nodded toward Eirik.

Eirik thrashed against the ropes tying him to his own bed. “She’s a Belaen spy.”

Understanding dawned on Audun’s face. “A spy.” He laughed. “We like spies in Cana.”

“No, you like assassins.” She lifted a brow. “If you’d like, I can be that too.”

“The woman has bite.” His face sobered, and he leaned forward. “But I assure you it is not as strong as mine. Tell me what it is you want.”

“Safe passage for the delegation. That includes Edmund here.”

“And what of Eirik? Do you wish to beg me to spare his life as well? Do not forget, girl, I now have a host of warriors supporting my claim. What do you have to bargain with?”

She shrugged, ignoring the nerves building in her gut. “Your life.”

A laugh boomed out of him as his eyes surveyed the room. “You are surrounded, Ara of Bela. My life is not yours to give.”

“Are you so sure about that?” She met Edmund’s gaze with a nod.

It was faint at first, the buzzing of magic filtering through the air. A breeze blew through the room, bringing with it rain through the open window. One of Audun’s men jumped to close it, but he was too late.

Air tunneled through the window and under the door, lifting the wet hair from Ara’s neck. A chill raced through her as she watched every Canan in the room jump from their seats in panic as Eirik’s belongings flew at them.

Four years. That was how long Ara had gone without seeing magic other than her own.

Four long years of pretending hers didn't exist, of hiding it like she'd done most of her childhood.

She laughed into the wind as it picked up speed, circling the outer edges of the room and throwing the warriors against the walls. Eirik held onto the bed, his ropes keeping him in place.

Yet there was Edmund, sitting with his hands tied behind his back and his face serene, showing no signs of the effort this magic cost him. Wind was his power, much more useful than voice.

Ara used the distraction to take her sword and cut through Edmund's ropes, freeing his hands.

Audun yelled orders to his men. The wind didn't touch him.

Ara grinned. "He's mine." Audun stood in the center of the room, the eye of a storm where everything was calm.

When he saw Ara approaching, he growled. "You!"

She flexed her fingers around the sword hilt. "You wondered who I am." Her eyes flicked to Eirik, who'd asked the same question.

Because Ara was not the spy she'd played for years. She was so much more.

"My name is Ara Caron." She stepped closer. "Bastard daughter of a Duke of Gaule. The once-general of the largest Gaulean force. I've fought in two wars, faced the greatest dark sorceress to ever live. There is magic in my blood." She closed the remaining distance between them. "I am not the woman who warmed Lord Eirick's bed. He warmed mine. Do you wish to fight me?"

"A woman?" he scoffed, fear shining in his eyes.

"Yes." She lifted her sword. "A woman."

She saw his attack before it happened. He yanked a knife from the belt at his waist and lunged for her. Ara sidestepped him easily, careful to avoid the force of Edmund's wind that continued to keep Audun's soldiers pinned to the walls.

She twisted on her heel to avoid another attack, kicking her leg out to drive him back. He stumbled away from her, and she readied to strike again. Audun would not leave this room alive.

“Ara,” Edmund called. “I can’t redirect it.”

She tried to figure out what Edmund meant, but it all cleared when she caught sight of one of Audun’s men advancing on Eirick. Edmund used all his strength to keep the rest of the men pinned to the walls. There was none left to protect the man she’d come to save.

Audun advanced, his knife held out in front of him. Ara batted it away, and he slammed into her arm, forcing her to drop her sword. She looked from the sword to the helpless Eirick and tore herself away from Audun, sprinting toward the bed and throwing her entire weight into the other warrior.

He went down hard, his head smashing into the bed frame. As she landed on top of him, he didn’t move.

“Ara!” Eirick called.

She rolled off the dead man and jumped to her feet, ignoring the pain in her side to face Audun once again. But as she whirled around, she didn’t see him.

Audun Orr had run.

Ara heaved a sigh and retrieved her sword. “Edmund, release them.”

Edmund’s magic receded as he pulled it back inside himself.

Audun’s warriors dropped to the floor before scrambling to their feet and out the door.

Ara closed her eyes for a brief moment before turning to the bed and sawing through Eirick’s ropes.

They were safe for now, but Audun Orr still lived, and he’d return.

FOUR

THERE WAS NO time to revel in the simple fact that they still lived. Once Ara freed Eirick of his bonds, she turned back to the table where Edmund sat slumped. Magic came at a cost. It drained the user, leaving them vulnerable.

“Come on, Edmund.” Ara pulled one of his arms over her shoulder and tried to hoist him from the chair. “We have to leave. He’ll be back.” With reinforcements. She looked back over her shoulder at the man who had yet to move from the bed. “Eirick, we have to go. Now!”

He shook his head. “I can’t leave.”

“No choice.” Edmund’s voice was weak.

Eirick stood and crossed the room to tower over them. “I am a warlord. I can’t just leave. These are my people.”

Ara’s face softened. “Not anymore.”

She saw it, the moment her words broke something inside him. His shoulders hunched forward and realization washed over his face. In a single day, he’d lost every bit of power he possessed.

But that was the thing. This couldn’t have happened over a single day. Audun must have courted Eirick’s people for weeks, months. He’d turned them little by little until the day came that their lord had to die.

That day was today.

His eyes scanned his home, a forlorn look on his face.

Ara dropped Edmund’s arm and reached for Eirick’s hand, threading her fingers through his. “Nowhere in Cana will be safe for you, not while you’re a threat to Audun’s newly-won power. He won’t stop until you’re dead.”

“I don’t have anywhere else to go.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “This place...it’s all I’ve known.”

She looked to Edmund, who nodded in agreement with the thoughts he read in her gaze. Their queen would welcome anyone without a place in this

world into Bela. It was a land of the misfits, the persecuted. A kingdom free of the prejudices those with magic had experienced their entire lives.

Ara had never imagined she'd return home so soon, that her life as a spy would end in such a fashion.

A smile curved her lips. "What if I told you there's a kingdom that will welcome you without questions? A land across the sea where rolling green hills provide hope for the hopeless. You've never seen anything as beautiful as Bela." She could almost smell the clean, salty air.

"I'd say I didn't believe such a place existed."

"And what would you say if I wanted you to come there with me? This morning, you wanted to kill me, and this evening I'm hoping you want to love me. Eirick, I am a spy for Bela, but I betrayed my mission the day I fell in love with you." She could never have imagined saying those words as he yelled at her hours before. But now, everything was different.

Eirick didn't say anything for a long moment as he considered her words. When he met her eyes once more, a new sort of desperation shone in their depths. "I very much want to believe in this place you speak of."

"And me?"

"You betrayed me, Ara. Repeatedly. And you saved me. I'm having trouble reconciling the person you are with the one I thought I knew."

Her chest deflated, and she stepped back.

He refused to let go of her hand as he bent to stare at her. "But I'd like to try." He pressed a kiss to the corner of her lips. "Because I fell in love with you too."

A tear tracked down her cheek. In a single day, she'd both lost and gained everything.

Coughing interrupted their professions of love, and they both looked to Edmund.

"This is touching and all, but we don't want to be here when Audun returns."

All emotion faded from Eirick's face, and he became the warlord Ara had first met. Cold, logical. "We're only a day's ride to the Madran border from here. Once we cross, we'll be safe."

He helped Ara lift Edmund to his feet and steadied him on the way out the back door, bringing none of his belongings. They'd find everything they needed across the border. She caught Eirick's eye as they crossed the narrow alleyway to the barn behind his house. Maybe everything they needed was right here.

Eirick owned only two horses, neither of them particularly young. They pushed Edmund up onto a grey stallion, and Ara climbed up behind him.

Once Eirick mounted his white steed, they took off through the back alleyways of the Canan town, barreling past surprised citizens and warriors yelling their names.

Ara grew up in Gaule, where all those with magic were little more than prisoners. She'd lived her life in enemy territory, so as they found the road that would take them away from town, a grin formed on her lips.

Four years as a spy undone in a single day.

And she'd never felt more alive.

Flashing Eirick a grin, she gripped Edmund's waist and urged the horse into a full gallop.

Once the town was out of sight, as dusk fell upon them, a rider rode into the middle of the road, lifting his arms to make them slow.

Ara pulled back on the reins as soon as she recognized Prince Quinn.

"You made it!" he yelled.

"Where are the others?" Edmund asked.

"I sent them on ahead."

Ara's brow furrowed. "Then why are you here?"

He narrowed his eyes like he didn't understand the question. "I couldn't leave anyone behind."

A new appreciation for the annoying prince bloomed in Ara as she nodded. "Well, come on then. We need to get to the border."

As night descended, the three horses didn't slow.

Resting only once, they reached the border the next day with a brilliant blue sky replacing the stormy clouds of the day before, a sign that they'd left the darkness behind.

FIVE

ARA HAD ONLY seen Madra once before, when she first took on her mission as a spy. This time, she didn't marvel at the extravagant palace or the sheer size of the capital. All she had eyes for was the ocean spanning the distance between Madra and Bela.

Three days later, they boarded a ship with Edmund and the other delegates for the two-day journey.

Eirick didn't speak much on the trip. He stayed mostly below deck.

Ara stood at the rail listening to sailors shout their orders as the white cliffs she'd dreamed about came into view, looming over the ocean as its protector.

She imagined Bela beyond the cliffs, stretching into the distance, a patchwork of green fields and forests. There was no more peaceful place in all the Six Kingdoms.

Edmund rested his elbows on the rail at her side. "Home."

She closed her eyes, letting herself soak in the simple fact she was returning to Bela, so different from the rocky Cana, a kingdom constantly at war, where even the simplest life was a struggle every day.

She hadn't realized Edmund had left until a new voice replaced his.

"I believe you now." Eirick lifted his gaze to the shore as it neared. "In Cana we hear stories of Bela and the magic wielders, but I didn't know they were true. It's like I can feel a heart beating in this place. I left everything behind to save my own life. Some would call me a coward to not fight for my power, my position, but..."

Ara reached up, running her fingers over his cheek. "You would have been a coward to stay." Her thumb tapped his lips. "To fight for something you'd already lost. There's more to this world than power, Eirick."

"That's easy for someone with magic in their veins to say."

She pulled her hand back. “In Bela, we don’t use our magic to be powerful. All we’ve ever wanted is peace. It’s why our queen has tried so hard to broker an agreement with Cana, why she has devoted herself to her alliances. We could live in Bela, surrounding ourselves in bliss while ignoring the rest of the Six Kingdoms. But we want everyone to experience what we’ve found.”

She looked back out at the high cliffs. “It isn’t about power. It’s about love.”

He pressed a kiss to the side of her head. “Thank you for sharing this with me, for saving my life.”

She drew him in for a deeper kiss, breaking away long enough to whisper against his lips. “Don’t worry, Lord Eirick, I’ll always be here to save you.”

A chuckle rumbled low in his chest. “I don’t doubt that.”

As they watched their future in Bela near, Ara realized she was ready for her fight to end. She’d served as a general, leading her father’s men, and then as a spy. She’d seen multiple wars and killed too many warriors.

Fighting was her duty, her job.

But it didn’t have to be, not anymore.

Now, she prepared for a different kind of life. One with a certain warlord by her side.

Who was she kidding?

There’d always be another battle.

And she’d answer the call.

Chapter Five

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Thank you for reading Spy's Heart. This novella ties to the Fantasy and Fairytales series where you can find out who these queens pulling the strings are and how they secured their thrones – one of them with Ara's help.

Learn more about book 1, Golden Curse, at MichelleLynnAuthor.com

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8°F

DEBRA ANASTASIA

ONE

Her

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death. I was willingly walking into the viper pit of assassins I used to work for. There was no quitting, of course. Only death. And I was done running. They were looking everywhere for me and here I was, sashaying onto their private beach, sarong dragging behind me, swishing away my footprints in the sand. I walked over to my lounge on the beach, ready for them to find me. See me. Kill me. The aqua water and the salty smell of the sea were a lovely addition to a last view. If you got to pick one.

Today I did.

The legs of the chair were firmly tucked into the white sand as I set my beach bag down. The waiter lined up the three margaritas I'd ordered from my phone earlier on the glass table beside me as I settled in. I murmured my thanks in his language. I was hoping to get through two before I was shot in the back of the head. That's why I was here. Instead of hiding, I came straight to them. A sacrifice on a European beach.

The plush towel under my bum was as soft as a bunny. My skin glistened as I rubbed in my suntan lotion instead of sunblock. Screw worrying about skin cancer anymore. The coconut smell wafted up when I shifted my legs.

Everything was in hyper focus. The thin dusting of sand on the sole of my foot looked like the sugar on a Christmas cookie.

I'd never see another holiday season. I'd made my peace with it. My soul was ready.

In a moment like this, every deep breath was a gift. My hands weren't shaking as I grabbed my glass and sipped the drink again. I licked the salt from my lips. This drink was a perfect balance between tart citrus, sweet syrup and the distinctive flavor of premium gold tequila. I noticed the exact

part of my tongue that experienced the addictive tang from the salt. I loved salt.

Kids were playing in the distance. Not too close, as this beach was private and blocked off. But I could hear them above the breaking of the gentle waves of the surf.

I was grateful to them when whatever they were doing forced them into fits of laughter. What a way to go. I had no pain. At twenty-seven, I was healthy. In my bikini, I was strong. And lovely. I looked at myself kindly, finally.

I toasted the sea with my lifted glass. “To finally seeing the beauty in the moment. God, forgive me for not figuring it out sooner than this.”

Another deep gulp. This margarita was made of angels’ blood because there was nothing quite as good.

I licked off the salt on the rim of my second glass before finishing my first. Every second counted.

I had no illusions of going to heaven, if there was such a place. People like me were in for eternal torment if sentences like that were carried out spiritually. I’d become an assassin as a means to an end. My sister and I were fifteen and thirteen when she was kidnapped by masked men as we walked down our street together. Fear made me bolt, while hers made her freeze. I was left behind with sadness and confusion that turned to determination and viciousness as I grew older without her.

I set the glasses down and glanced at my bikini top. The hum of the beautiful foreign language filtered through the air from a distance. I didn’t translate it. Instead, I stuck to English in my thoughts. But it did remind me that here, in this country, a lot of women went to the beach topless.

After pulling on the end of the string that had been in a bow behind my neck, I tugged my red top off, shaking my shoulders a little and smiling at the freeness of my breasts. This beach belonged to the Syndicate, the company that had a need for assassins and secrecy. They ran a very exclusive hotel here as well, so they could carry out their business in private. It was a good front, because it was real. By catering to the rich, famous, and infamous, they were able to demand privacy for their guests. And they could do so, so much more under the cover of protecting the reputations of their patrons. They

could move bodies, bury henchmen, and store victims. And they could make wicked margaritas. I had used their vast information of the underworld to my advantage. I played them and found the men who had taken my sister in this very city.

They'd barely remembered her when I had them tied to chairs in a warehouse. Until the tallest recalled that they'd killed her—he was pretty sure, anyway. I wasn't proud of what I did to them next. It was efficient. It was punishing. And it ended in their deaths, of course.

But what was there now? Nothing. I had nothing left to fight for. My beautiful sister, whom I'd fought for everyday since I'd last laid eyes on her, was truly gone.

I tilted the lounge chair back a bit and reclined with it. I closed my eyes and let the sun turn my lids red. It was toasting me like a snake on a rock. I pulled my sunglasses from the top of my head and shielded my eyes. No matter what type of life you'd lived, or how badass you thought you were, knowing that a gun was trained on you was a bone rattler. I slowed my heartbeat when I noticed it was elevated.

I would die calmly.

I would die beautiful.

I would die in peace.

I was about to die young.

TWO

Him

I FELT LIKE the tourist I was. I was even wearing Crocs, for crap's sake. But this was where I needed to be. Despite the gorgeous setting, this tropical beach in Europe, I was staring at my phone, waiting for an update.

Lexa's test results were due in. My whole extended family was waiting for the group text that would tell us if there was any good news.

Pediatric cancer was a force to be reckoned with. My niece, Lexa, was only seven. What had started as a cold turned into a diagnosis that stopped us all in our tracks.

When a child's life is in danger, we all want to be Superman. Nothing like having her enemy be her own body. I pictured her red hair and green eyes, so much like her mother.

My brother's wife was clearly the dominant gene provider. The only thing about Lexa that was Paul's was her tendency for risk-taking. She'd be the first one in any haunted house, down any waterslide, and couldn't wait to be tall enough to ride the loopy roller coasters.

And I adored her. From the second I laid eyes on my niece, I was a puddle.

When Paul and Manda sat me down to explain their predicament, I knew they were in trouble. The kind of trouble they prayed to never be in.

Paul had lost his job three months before Lexa's diagnosis. Lost his health care benefits. Manda had part-time work making crafts that she sold on Etsy. She made decent money, but not enough to cover the supplemental insurance while Paul looked for a job. It was also not necessarily steady money.

I pitched in, of course. Paying for the supplemental insurance was my solution. As a teacher, it was a stretch. I sold my Nissan and got a beater, then wrote checks to my brother every month.

And then things went from bad to worse. This time the meeting was just Paul and I at a bar. He was clearly sloshed. While I was paying for their insurance, Paul explained, he was using credit cards to buy the supplemental instead. And his idea of a second job had been online gambling with the money I'd contributed. He'd wanted to flip a quick profit. When he looked at me with broken eyes, I realized that my big brother had made a massive error in judgment.

When I asked him how much he'd lost, he told me that he was two grand in the hole. That wasn't counting the credit cards. It was like I could feel fate wrapping her hands around my neck. He was miserable and sorry and, well... destroyed.

My whole life, Paul was the strong one. I went to him for advice so many times. And now he was off the rails. Maybe the grief and worry had driven him insane. Not that I blamed him. Shit, I'd even contemplated robbing a bank when I found out that Lexa's best shot at survival was a treatment that was expensive and far away.

Traveling to New York every weekend, the car services, airline tickets, hotels – the expense was crazy.

Between the car services, airline tickets, and hotels? It was crazy.

But things went from worse to absolute shit, because Paul had paid for the treatment up front. When I questioned him how—with a maxed-out credit card and gambling debts—he'd managed it, he confessed that he found a shady loan company. They'd given him seventy thousand dollars.

He cried for a little while after revealing the amount.

“What would you pay to save your little girl's life?” In between sobs he told me the insane interest rate. And that he'd been unable to scrape together even a single payment to them. I couldn't fight with him. We had to do something.

And then he told me he had a plane ticket to Europe to meet with the owners of the company. Now he had no idea what to do. I didn't have time to even see if I could borrow the money legit, because the plane to Europe left in the morning.

I took his ticket. I took his passport. The men in our family are like carbon copies of each other. I took his ID. I took my brother's place on that plane.

He was my brother. I had to protect him. And more importantly, I had to save Lexa.

So, I was here to hopefully meet a dangerous dude to plead my case in this fancy hotel. I did not fit in at all. I was here to beg for empathy. To hope that these men would understand that teachers don't make a lot of money. That I would pay back my brother's bill. Somehow. Even if I had to work three jobs.

I'd been instructed to sit in a lounge chair on the beach and wait. I slugged over to a white one that was sort of next to a woman. The sand flooded my Crocs.

I'd met my brother in the bar after going on a bike ride. I stole his identity when he went to the bathroom. I always just wore my Crocs to drive my car home from my favorite trail, because my bike shoes had clips to snap into the pedals of my mountain bike. I'd had no time to change. Or go home. Or feed my fish. I was wearing a yellow bike jersey and bike shorts. And Crocs. I got on the plane as I was. It didn't matter. Until it did.

I was obviously out of my element. This private beach was clearly frequented by rich people. Designer labels seemed to be on everything.

I flopped down in the lounge chair, leaving my Crocs in the sand. They were going to call me. Both Manda and Paul and the loan sharks. I kept my phone gripped in my left hand even though I had the volume up. I didn't want to miss a thing, and the sun was interfering with my screen. I knew it would vibrate if I had a message. I looked around. The woman one chair over shifted and I noticed she was completely topless.

My dick and my man brain were immediately happy. My rational brain realized that it was probably creepy for her to have me sit so close. I started to apologize then stopped because I didn't speak the language.

She rolled her head in my direction and pushed her sunglasses down to look over them. "Don't say anything."

"Oh. You're American?" I looked at my screen again. I accidentally flashed the sun into my eyes.

"When I want to be. Go somewhere else. I want to be left in peace." She pushed her sunglasses up and turned her face forward.

"I have to wait here. They told me I have to. So, sorry, I won't bother

you.”

She huffed and settled back. “Your funeral.”

I didn’t have time for gorgeous, sizzling hot bitches with exquisite racks. I was an American (full-time) teacher here to deal with the big dogs to save my niece.

My phone rang. It was my brother. I had a moment of concern that it wouldn’t connect, because I was out of the country, but it did. I would worry about the extra costs later. What was a few extra bucks when I was about to bargain for 70K plus interest?

“How is she?”

Paul was sobbing. “The program is working. They think it shows a lot of promise.”

I exhaled from the bottom of my feet to my balls and then out of my mouth. Man, we needed good news.

“She wants to talk to you.” I heard the rustling as the phone was passed to her.

“Uncle Case! Did you hear? Daddy says that I’m doing great.” Her voice carried over my phone, but I didn’t care. Hearing joy from her was everything.

“Great job, Princess Puddles. I knew you could do it. You’re my fighter.” I rubbed under my eyes as tears started to form. A chance. That’s all she needed. Give her an inch and she’d take a mile, even if we were dealing in miracles.

“Cancer’s a jerk. But I can beat it. When are you coming back?”

“I’ve got to do some things for your dad, but I should be back soon. I love you and I’m so proud of you.” I waited until I heard the click of the phone. That was good. When my brother called back not even one minute later, I sent him to voicemail. I didn’t have any news for him and I also didn’t want to be sitting here yapping on the phone instead of waiting like I was supposed to be.

I looked around nervously. I began tapping my fingers on my phone. There was going to be a man soon. At least that’s what the last text said. Sit on the beach, wait. As Paul, of course.

Minutes felt like hours.

THREE

Her

I WAS TRYING to pretend I hadn't heard the young voice on the other end of the phone, but I had. Crystal clear. Proclaiming that she was going to beat cancer. I put it together quickly. Jumpy American tourist man was here because he must have borrowed money from the Syndicate. They would act like the amount was a big problem. That's how they hooked people in for life. How I got involved so long ago, too.

But the Syndicate had money to burn. A million was nothing. Chump change. They would light a fire with it. They moved in billions of dollars. Sometimes trillions.

I'd made peace with my death, and now this ripped nerd was sucking me into his drama. Or maybe I was getting sucked into it willingly.

"Who are you supposed to meet?" I slid my sunglasses down my nose.

"Deal? I guess a guy named Deal? Or are we supposed to do a deal?" He swung his legs around and set them between our lounge chairs, flinging sand on my torso in the process.

He reached over and brushed it off quickly, his fingertips dancing on my skin. It was pointless because the sand stuck to the lotion.

"I'm sorry. I'm touching you. I should stop touching you." He held up his hands like I had a gun on him.

"It's okay." I knew he wasn't being a creeper. He was just frazzled as hell.

"Thanks." His head was on a swivel.

"Sit back." I leaned up and pushed on his chest with my hand.

"Is it you? Are you Deal?"

He had one of those sharp jaws and a dimple that got deeper when he talked. His deep brown eyes were fringed by thick black lashes. He had a

scratchy looking five o'clock shadow.

I moved quickly because I needed to see behind us. “No. I’m not Deal, but I know who he is. Just go with me here.”

I straddled his lap and eased myself slowly onto him. I leaned close to his ear, and my breasts touched his satiny bike jersey.

Someone watching would assume I was whispering sweet nothings into my lover’s ear. Instead, I was taking stock. How many we had on us. No Deal yet. He was impossible to miss, all six feet and nine inches of him. I spotted a few undercover agents, one on top of the hotel roof with a sniper rifle.

“You’re very nice and everything. Honestly, I’m very flattered, but I’m here to try to save my brother and, in turn, my niece. She has—”

I interrupted him and put my hands on his neck.

“She’s beating cancer. I heard.”

I didn’t say that his niece and his very predicament were a message from my dead sister.

She and I were all we had. We grew up in a foster home that was fairly industrial. We weren’t allowed to have details on our parents until we were at least eighteen. Losing her took my will to live until I became a fighter to find her. But she *would* send me the most obvious sign in the world that I wasn’t supposed to go down as easy as target practice on a beach: my sister’s name was Lexa, too.

“We owe this group so much money and we can’t pay it. I think they might kill me. I’m going to try to offer them something...anything. Lexa’s going to make it.” His words came out as a flood, drenching his worries to a complete stranger straddling him topless.

Then I saw Deal come out of the door closest to the fire exit. He was packing heat, though he could’ve gotten a gun from any of the places they were tucked in around the property.

I put my attention on the man underneath me. “Do as I say and you’ll live.”

“Okay. One hundred percent.” He nodded with his eager words.

A breeze slipped across the beach. A white scrap of fabric came free from the beach bar and twirled in the air. I grabbed it as it flew in front of me. I

snatched out of the air and gave it a sniff. Vanilla and orange Creamsicles. I almost rolled my eyes. After all these years, all this silence as I'd begged for a sign that she was still alive, today, right now, I get pummeled with her name and her scent. I let the fabric fly free.

My Lexa had never been a subtle one.

Deal stopped to speak to the undercover agent who was pretending to drink at the bar. We made eye contact and a slow smile slid across his face.

He had a scar from his eyebrow to the center of his chest. I put it there. Our history thrummed between us. Deal was the one they'd sent out to kill me, of that I was sure. They couldn't trust me. And I bet me showing up in the lobby had rung every alarm bell they had. Because it couldn't be this simple, could it? The most wanted woman in the world strolling into the very headquarters that demanded her head on a pike? I would assume an ambush if I were them.

Deal seemed to get impossibly taller as he blocked the sun for my scared dude friend and me.

"You've got a great big set of balls."

"I always have had a bigger set than you."

His sharp bark of laughter had emotion in it if you knew him. And I knew him better than anyone.

"I heard you tore up some guys in Spain."

"I heard you like to wear women's panties at night."

Deal's eyes narrowed while my muscle-bound nerd breathed heavily between my boobs.

"So how do you know Paul here?" Deal shifted his weight and let his shirt mold to his firearm. It was an unnecessary threat. I knew he was armed.

And he assumed I would be armed, even if I was a tiny bit suicidal.

"I meet people all the time, baby." I bit my tongue after my words. To swing from sitting and waiting for it all to end to having hope that I might have something to fight for was dizzying. But I dealt in the sudden. I adapted. That's how I'd gotten here anyway. Not sure if it was right or healthy, but it was where I was.

Uncle Case put his hands in the air. "You guys know each other? I mean,

I'm not hitting on her. I know that's how it looks right now, but—"

I covered his mouth with my hand. "Shh. You'll make it worse."

Deal reached out and touched my cheek. I leaned into his hand. "Still so beautiful. And unpredictable."

"They sent you out here to do it? They're setting you up for something. Testing you. With me."

Deal had sunglasses on, but I watched his jaw tighten, realizing I was right.

"It's not just me. They brought an army down when they saw you on the camera." He tilted his head in the direction of the snipers that I'd already spotted.

"I'm half-naked on a beach with no cover. What the hell will they do with me after they eliminate me?" I leaned back and felt Uncle Case's body tighten as he registered my words.

"I'm supposed to trust you and they're getting ready to kill you?" Case's hands were still in the air.

"Am I dead yet?" I changed my full attention to the man between my legs.

"No?" His answer was hesitant.

"Then trust me until I'm dead. Then trust him." I looked back at Deal.

Deal put it together immediately. "No. You're not cashing that favor in now. I mean, you can do it now, but I'm not putting him before you."

Deal owed me. I had a favor I could cash in. Even if I was dead, he would grant me the one thing I asked for. I'd never intended to use it. I was going to let that enormous debt he owed me expire with my last breath, showing him that I'd helped him years ago out of the kindness of my heart.

"He makes it out alive, no matter what." I laid the demand in the sand.

"Shit. Dammit, Eight. Why? Of all places? This is impossible. Goddamn impossible." He rubbed his forehead, squeezing the skin there until it was red.

"I'm still very confused." Uncle Case tried to see Deal, but I kept his hips pinned with my thighs.

"Just do as I say. And then do as Deal says. You're going to reap the benefits of an ancient favor I did for Deal when we were just pups." I caught

the scruffy jaw of the nervous man in my hand.

“I would tip a government into power or out of it for you. You can have anything.” Deal wasn’t kidding. He could do those things, and would if I asked.

“I found my sister.” The sentence I longed to hear myself say aloud was in the exact opposite tone it should have been. An obituary announcement instead of a party invitation.

“I’m so, so sorry.” Deal’s voice cracked. He looked at his feet and fisted one hand. “I wanted it to be different.”

“Did you? Did you really?” I slid back to Uncle Case’s aka Paul’s thighs. Suspicion, then guilt, had an ombre effect on Deal’s facial features.

“Did you think I wouldn’t find out you were involved? That you at least knew some of it?” My years of research and clandestine hunting for my Lexa had never hinted Deal was in on what happened to her.

“I didn’t know it was her. Not for sure. I was just a wheelman. You know how that goes.”

“You should’ve said something. Just a hint of something was all I needed.” I slowly got to my feet, standing between the chairs. My feet sank into the white sand. Soothing, even though everything about this moment was wrong.

“Can you blame me? Eight, you’re here, ready to die because you lost her? Why would I hasten that moment in your life? I want to keep you alive, okay? So hate me for that if you have to. I was selfish enough to want you to live.” He ripped his sunglasses off his face. His deep brown eyes were tortured. “I still want you to live.”

Uncle Case tried to stand up.

“Listen, I’m just here to work a deal out—maybe a payment system with the company? I can do contract work for them if anyone’s kid is having trouble with math or anything.”

I put up a hand and prevented him from moving.

Deal reached over and pressed his fingers into Case’s shoulder. “Math tutoring isn’t going to get you out of this, pretty boy.”

Despite our intense conversation, I covered my smile. This whole scenario

was bonkers.

“Let me save you. You know I can get us both out of this.” Deal reached for my wrist with his other hand. I glanced at the snipers. They were refocusing their scopes.

“Him. Not me.” I pulled my hand away from Case when he seemed to be staying put.

“I love you.” Deal gently brought my wrist to his mouth and kissed my pulse there.

“You don’t. But thanks for the gesture.” I lifted an eyebrow.

I watched the bombs of rejection explode in his eyes.

“I’m getting him off this beach. You’re going to fix his family’s debt.” I stepped into Deal’s personal space, pressing my chest against his, tipping up my face to look at him.

“You’re impossible. And your instincts are shit.” He let out a deep sigh, but I knew he was resigning himself to the idea of what we were about to unleash. “Do you want a shirt or something there?” He pointed at my boobs with his index finger and pinkie, pointedly looking over my shoulder.

“Nope. I’m letting them run free for my last job. They’re distracting.” I shook my shoulders, letting them do a little dance.

“You’re wrong about a lot of things. That this man is worth saving. That those tits are going to be enough to save you. That I don’t love you. But we’ll do this anyway.”

“Thanks, Deal.” I went to my tiptoes and gave him a kiss on the cheek. I held out my hand to Case. “Stand up. We’re going to make them think we’re gonna have a threesome.”

I watched Case’s eyes go wide. “What the fu—?”

I leaned forward and kissed Case on the lips mid-curse. Deal put his hand on my hip and kissed the top of my head. Case mostly stood there until I told him to kiss my neck. Deal and I had pretended to be into one another on so many jobs, his moves were super familiar. I watched as the snipers eased back from their guns, turning their heads to talk to each other.

I grabbed Deal’s and Case’s hands, pulling them behind me toward the bar. The bartender/hitman had a surprised look on his face.

When Deal got to the bar, he opened with, “One last roll, you know?” And then he winked.

I ordered three more margaritas and then leaned into Case, whispering, “When he places the drinks onto the coasters here, you’re going to hop over the bar. No matter what. Got it?”

I waited to see if he comprehended how important this was, if he could keep up. I wasn’t sure a teacher could keep up with the subtleties of the dangerous maneuver we were about to pull.

FOUR

Him

WELL, THESE TWO were crazy. Deal was insane and in love with Eight here. And her name was really Eight? And he killed her sister but was still going to do her a solid and save my family? I read third grade creative essays about dragons that made more sense than these two, who were trying to rub their random logic together.

And now I was clearly involved in a Netflix original story about a threesome. Because none of this made sense. If Lexa's cancer wasn't as real as the day is long, I'd think this was an elaborate joke. I waited and glanced around me as the bartender mixed our drinks. Eight took my hand and put it on her leg. Her skin was hot and had a touch of sand on it. Deal and Eight barely said anything to each other, but I watched as they gave each other hand signals.

As the bartender walked the margaritas carefully over, I tensed. Was this the worst move possible? Was siding with these lunatics really the right way to save my niece? They knew where my brother's house was. Who he was. How far could I really get, realistically? I was wearing bike clothes.

I watched as the drink intended for me sweated a cool drop that landed on the napkin the bartender had slid underneath.

I had to make a choice. And maybe I was influenced by the free-bouncing boobs, but I was going with Eight.

The second the drink touched the paper napkin, I let go of Eight's leg and used my upper body to launch myself over the top of the bar. As I hit the freezer, I knew I had pushed too hard. I knocked the wind right out of my lungs and slid the rest of the way to the floor like a boneless pile.

The cacophony of limbs and violence were proof that Eight and Deal had also jumped behind the bar. From my crumpled ball position, I watched as

Deal knifed the bartender. Well, I hadn't even known what had taken the burly man down until I saw the blade glisten in the sun, blood giving it a thin stain of red.

Eight rolled under the bar and sat up enough so she could yank a machine gun free from where it was mounted.

We made eye contact.

She half-smiled in a way I think she assumed was comforting. "They have guns everywhere here. Very unsafe."

I didn't get a second to process before the freezer above me began ping-pong and vibrating. Eight motioned for me to stay low and crawl toward her. I had to twist my torso so I was shaped like an actual person again, and then I began my crawl. She pulled me in close, her breasts touching my arm, chest, and at times my neck. This was a great way to die. I mean, I wasn't advocating for that to happen, but I loved boobs so much. These in particular were real showstoppers.

I didn't see how we could get out of this. The snipers on top of the hotel had a far superior position. I'd played enough first-person shooter video games to know we were done. The place was surrounded by all kinds of staff who I was guessing were experts with the type of gun that Eight had freed from under the bar. It was disarming to smell the ocean and suntan lotion—hallmarks of vacation—and be scared for my life.

Deal was busy concocting something under the bar. I didn't think now was the time to take a 101 class in cocktail makings, but okay. Eight was heedless to her nudity, eyes darting from one place to another. She seemed to be tracking something. She glanced at me and offered an explanation, "Tracking the trajectory and watching their reflection in the freezer."

Hot damn.

Now was not the time to introduce my private general to a life of violence. He needed to stand down.

Deal turned, holding a crazy looking bottle with napkins sticking out of it. It felt like a surreal dream. I had no idea what he was planning until he grabbed a lighter from the glass station.

"I want you to run the second he throws it, okay? Head behind the bar—it's round and jump over the backside and find the first cover you can. Don't

move until I grab you.”

I had a list of questions that should have been met with multiple part answers and maybe a diagram, but then Eight and Deal locked eyes while nodding.

I watched Deal light the fuse and cock his arm back. My lovely boob safehouse gave me a swift push toward the freezer. I ducked low out of instinct and shimmied around the equipment that cluttered the center of the round beach bar. Everything turned orange as a huge bang shook the ground.

What happened next was a hail of gunfire and then me being dragged by my arm by Eight. She was a machine. The way she scanned the environment and pulled us from one cover to another. By the time we made it to the road, I was sure I had been hit by bullets at least five times. As I did a self-assessment, the only issues I seemed to have were a very increased heart rate and what had to be the makings of my first panic attack.

Eight looked in my eyes and slapped me in the face. “Not now. Focus. Deal will be here in just a moment. Do you know how to shoot a gun?”

“I used to do target practice with my air soft on pumpkins in the backyard.” I’d never seen someone’s expression disregard something so quickly as I did on her face at that moment.

“Here we go.” She held my bicep and tipped her chin toward the huge bus careening at us.

Deal was driving with one hand and holding a pistol with another. Behind us, running feet and gunfire increased.

The bus screeched to a stop and Eight let go of me so she could use her fingers to peel open the door’s seal.

Four women tumbled out of the bus in a panic. The open door seemed to be an invitation for the passengers on the bus to try to escape. Some streamed out of the emergency exit in the back.

Eight pushed me into a huge dude who was trying to leave the bus while Deal screamed for him to get out of the way.

I felt my shin scrape against the first step as I tried to catch myself with my hands. I managed to avoid hitting my face. The sensation of a huge European dude using my prone body as a doormat was not my favorite. I looked over my shoulder as Eight punched the dude with one hand and aimed

her gun over her shoulder to return fire.

I did a pushup to throw the guy off balance. He tumbled out of the bus. The few remaining passengers backed up when they saw the topless woman with the gun.

This must have been terrifying for them. It was terrifying for me. I mean, at least I knew I was heading for a sketchy situation from the jump. They were just trying to get from point A to point B.

Eight leaped over me and Deal closed the door. I was able to pull my feet in at the last second. And we were off.

“Todo mundo desce! Everybody get down!” The gunfire lit up the bus, the windows exploding around us.

Eight grabbed the back of my shirt and pulled on me until I crawled in the first seat behind Deal.

“We gotta get these people off the bus,” Eight yelled at Deal while looking out the windows.

“I have to get us away first, lady pants.”

Deal was driving like an insane person. The passengers yelped and screamed as we rounded corners on two wheels. I slid my bike shirt off my back. I was barefoot and clad in only my bike shorts and a sleeveless t-shirt. I held the shirt out to Eight.

“For the boobs!” I hollered over the commotion.

She ignored my offer, so I set the shirt on the seat next to me. Maybe that was offensive here. I wasn't trying to be a prude dick, I just wanted to be a gentleman. And that was hard to do with the boobs. My eyes kept going to her chest.

Eight gave Deal directions from time to time. It felt like a million years before Deal screeched to a halt.

“Saia! Out now!” Eight projected.

The passengers didn't hesitate and scurried off the bus, launching some words at her that I didn't understand, but I could tell they were pissed.

Eight grabbed my bike jersey and slipped it over her head. Somehow the thin yellow material made her boobs even more obvious. My hard-on was doomed. He was scared, but also doomed.

Deal took off again. Eight told him she had a car in a parking garage a few blocks away.

“This is what you want?” Deal asked.

That they could have a conversation while we were running from murderers blew my mind. Or maybe they were murderers, too, and this was their regular commute to work?

“I want him safe. And his niece. And his brother’s family.” She was standing near Deal, gripping a metal handrail for stability. “I didn’t know asking for my favor involved convincing you I knew what I wanted.”

Deal took two hard turns, tipping the huge bus one way and then another. He came to another squealing stop, the rubber from the tires smoking and instantly smelling toxic.

“Your wish is my command, Camber.”

Her face softened briefly before she swung toward me and pulled on my arm. “Take his gun.”

Deal held his pistol out to me, grip side offered up. I took it from him and let myself get tugged down the stairs.

We ran flat out to a parking garage as Deal took off.

“He’s going to lead them away from us.” Eight made her way through the garage like she had lived in the building for ten years. She moved next to a red Puma GTE, crouched to free a key from the undercarriage, and unlocked the car door.

I got in on the other side. The car was in mint condition and roared to life with a purr. We both put on our seatbelts. She took a second to pull her hair up and tuck it into a bun, revealing the nape of her neck which I really wanted to trail a beautiful set of kisses down. Her eyes were waiting for mine as she held out a black ball cap. “Wear this and slump down.”

I did as she said.

“Is Camber your real name?” I think it was the way her earlobes looked so biteable that prompted me to ask her.

Her mouth slid into an amused smirk. “You pay attention when there’s gunfire?”

She took the Puma out of the garage carefully, like she was a mom on the

way to a soccer game with the whole team in the car.

“I guess. You drive much better than Deal.” I felt instantly more comfortable as she put on her blinker to turn left.

“You’ve gotten yourself into a heap of trouble, Case.” We waited at the lights, following the rules of the road. The dark tint on the windows gave me another layer of comfort.

I gazed out the window and, sure enough, I saw one of the resort's transport vans trolling through a cross street. Eight turned right slowly, like we might even be window shopping.

“Were you really trying to end your life on the beach?” I unslumped and turned in my seat to face her.

Her eyes clouded. “I’d found what I’d been looking for. And it wasn’t a happy ending.”

“So you decided to live to try to give me one?”

When we finally cleared the city, a nice highway lay out in front of us.

She faced me now while dropping the Puma into fifth gear.

“I got a sign that this was what I needed to do.” The car hesitated for a beat before having the hammer drop. Eight/Camber hit the gas. We flared onto the road, eating it up at easily ninety-five miles per hour. Or well, 152.888 km/h...

“Thank you.” It didn’t seem like enough, two simple words, but it would have to do.

“No problem. And yeah, my name is Camber. Nice to meet you, Case.”

KESS



TIJAN

ONE

Kess

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.

The words were scribbled on a piece of paper, taped to a bathroom stall, and I was about out of patience. I ripped it off, balled it up, and tossed it into the garbage. I knew why they put the note up, because this was the druggie stall.

Asshats.

There were three other stalls open, which wasn't normal, but we were in the end run of the school year. Graduation was in two days. It was our last official day of school, though most seniors stopped coming a long time ago. Not me. I was here because of *detention*.

Detention.

I growled under my breath.

I was about to head inside the stall, find the drugs I knew were stashed somewhere, and I was going to mess with them. I was going to hide them somewhere else in the bathroom, but just as I hit the door to open, the main door to the bathroom swung wide.

In walked Tasmin Shaw.

“Hey, Kess.”

I paused, trying to stomp down some of my irritation. It wasn't her fault I was here for detention, but it was her brother's and his whole group's fault. There was a situation they brought about that ended with me getting detention. It was a whole round-about thing, and it didn't really matter in the long run. But, I couldn't be mean to Tasmin Shaw, or Taz as she was called by her friends. There were a few different reasons why I wanted to, but none really had to do with Taz as a person.

One, Taz was nice. Like actually nice.

Two, she was connected. Taz was not only popular, but she was well connected with the toughest crew still going strong in our school. We have a system, or *had* a system. There used to be a whole chain of groups that weren't gangs, but we weren't all friends either. We were in the medium between those extremes, and tended to look down on those who weren't in a crew. That meant you weren't loyal, and if you were crew, loyalty was like blood to us.

You needed it to be crew, or you were simply 'less than.'

Or I used to think so.

And three, there was a respect issue here because Taz's brother's woman was now the *only* female in a crew. There'd been one other girl, but no more, and I can say that because it was me. I used to be in a crew. We weren't big or even tough, but we were a crew and I loved my crew.

Now we were nothing.

"Hey, Taz."

She stopped before going into her own stall, noted where I was standing, and raised her eyebrows. "You okay?"

I'd forgotten what I was going to do.

"Yeah. I'm good."

Taz gave me another smile and went into her stall.

I moved inside mine, and a second later, her voice came through the room. "Do you have any plans for the weekend?"

The weekend. Shit. I usually did, but that was before my crew broke up.

Now, "Not really. You?"

Her toilet flushed—when had she even pissed? A beat later, her door opened, and she went out to the sink. Me, I was still standing just inside my door. I hadn't even closed it behind me, so here we go I guess. I nudged it back open, edging farther out as she washed her hands. Her eyes found mine in the mirror.

An emotion flickered in them, and oh no.

I was already readying myself, because whatever that was, I didn't like it. My gut was tightening up.

“You know, I heard that Zeke Allen from Fallen Crest Academy is probably going to throw a rager. They party almost every night over there.”

I wanted to snort in disgust, or at least disdain. I didn't.

“Yeah?”

She nodded, finishing up drying her hands, and stepped back from the sink. “Where are your guys? Usually they'd be out in the hall if you're in here.”

There was the whole gut tightening again. Right there.

I jerked a shoulder up. “They're out doing their thing. I'll catch up with them later.”

“Are you dating one of them? Monica mentioned that one time.”

“Monica doesn't know anything.”

She was referring to one of her friends, who truly didn't know shit.

“Oh.”

Those eyes of hers. Tawny and hazel, and there's a reason she and her brother were some of the most ridiculously good-looking people in our school. It wasn't fair. But the kindness and concern were what was really setting my teeth on edge.

I didn't need her pity.

“Anyways,” I blasted her with a bright, but dismissive smile, “I gotta go to the bathroom. So...” Enough said. I moved inside my stall, shut the door, and sat. Then I waited.

That was rude.

I was feeling like an asshole, but a moment later she was edging for the door. She was going slow, and that tugged at me because Taz Shaw wasn't known for moving at a slow pace. She bounced. She hurried. She darted. She didn't move slow, and she wasn't my friend.

The door swished open and closed, and I cursed under my breath.

But, what? Go and attend a rich asshole's party tonight as a tagalong? I wasn't a tagalong. I'd never been a tagalong, and fuck if I was going to become one.

But because my day was still in the toilet (lame humor), that didn't mean I couldn't mess someone else's day up, too.

I found the drugs, but I didn't hide them. I flushed them.

Then I went to my last detention of my high school career, and that sucked too.

I wished I hadn't flushed the drugs.

TWO

Kess

I WAS WALKING to the parking lot when I heard the bike's engine roar. A moment later, he parked on the clear opposite end of the lot, right next to my own motorbike. He did that on purpose. His head turned, his helmet still on, but I already knew the cockiest smirk of all smirks was on his face as he was watching me come toward him.

Christopher.

How I knew this guy was beyond me.

He transferred in the beginning of the year, and he was barely around. In fact, people really didn't know he was even at our school and I could get why. He showed up for first period, ducked out, and who knew where he disappeared to until seventh period.

I didn't know his story. I didn't know why he was only around for those two classes, how he got exempt from class projects, speeches, anything that might've drawn attention to him. But somehow it worked. The teachers never called his name for roll call. They literally skipped over him as if he wasn't in the classroom, and after a month of whispering from the girls and weird looks from the guys, they all accepted it.

It helped that he didn't say anything.

It also helped that he didn't linger after class. I'd never seen him talk to anyone. He showed up in the morning, went to class, left, and repeated the process at the end of the day. Did he have a locker? I hadn't a clue.

But I did know he was gorgeous.

Dark hair that he liked to run a hand through and pull on so the ends were a sexy mess. Then there was the square jawline. It always looked as if he'd done just a quick buzz over his jaw for the whiskers, and he let it go until the night again. And his face, nice and hella smoldering.

Seriously. It wasn't fair.

But he had the clearest blue eyes, and that's what gave him away. He didn't know I knew where he got those blue eyes, and that little fact kept my mouth shut. I didn't say one word about the secret I *did* know about Christopher Raith, besides his name and how him just waiting on his motorcycle gave off this intense pulse in the air.

He was sizzling.

He was also Red Demons royalty.

Red Demons. The fast-growing motorcycle club that was starting to take over not just California, but Nevada, New Mexico, Colorado, and all the way north from Montana to the south where rumors were circulating they were going to start moving into Texas.

Yes. This gossip I *did* listen to, mostly because my uncle was a Red Demon, and he'd stayed with my mom and me earlier in the year for a month. He hadn't said why he was here, but him showing up, then Christopher Raith popping up in class the next day seemed too much of a coincidence to not be connected.

My uncle never said a word, and I knew he wouldn't. He just grunted he was there on 'MC business' and that's all we got.

The other thing I knew was that Christopher knew I knew who he was.

But we'd never spoken a word to each other.

I was almost to my bike when he turned his engine off.

He stood up, and I stopped about ten feet back.

I guess the whole 'no talking' thing was about to end.

THREE

Kess

HE SAT BACK down on his bike, stretching his legs out. One hand rested on his thigh and the other on his handlebar. He was still wearing his helmet. He sat there, staring at me.

I stood there, staring back.

Neither said a word.

We were in a standoff, but yet we were speaking a whole lot. I was feeling the *vibes* in the air. They were strong, rippling back and forth between us, and my whole body was heated from the inside out. I felt feverish, and the strength it was taking to not break was a strain. A big strain.

I was going to break soon.

But, man. He had a helmet. That wasn't fair.

Finally, I flicked my eyes up. "Can I see your helmet?"

He stalled. I guess that's not what he expected from me, but he reached up and took it off.

Gooooood, those eyes. That face. That mouth.

I didn't have words. No guy who was MC royalty should be as pretty as him. A model, yes. Actor, yes. Even a punk preppy, and I had to admit, some of those looked decent. They weren't my cup of tea, but a girl could appreciate a nice face, nice physique, and what was promised to be a six-pack underneath a certain shirt.

My mouth was dry just wondering what was underneath his faded and ripped jeans, his riding boots, and his grey shirt shredded on the side. I saw it because his leather jacket was unzipped and hanging to the side.

He handed the helmet over, his face stony.

I took it, making sure our hands did not touch, and he noticed. The corner

of his mouth lifted for a split second, then he went back to being a wall.

I didn't wait. I gathered my hair up and pulled the helmet down. When it was in place, I stood back, crossed my arms over my chest, and cocked my head to the side. Then I waited.

He frowned, his own head tilting to the side. "You trying to be funny?"

"Just wondering what it's like on this side of the helmet."

His eyes narrowed, those gorgeous blues, but he didn't say anything further.

Neither did I. That was the whole point of this.

After another few seconds, he shook his head slowly. "What are you doing?"

Maybe the gig was up, and it hadn't put him on edge. That'd been the hope.

I sighed, taking the helmet off, but I didn't hand it over. I held it, resting it just on the back of my thigh, and I nodded at his bike. "Since when do you guys wear these, anyway? I thought you needed open-face helmets?"

He leaned forward, plucking the helmet away from me, and moved back. "Easier for cameras not to spot me."

I looked at his bike's plate, but it was smudged over.

Who *was* this guy?

Fine. I'd try a different tactic, and what the tactic was for, I couldn't answer. I was going with it, feeling my way because there was a weird ebb and flow between him and me.

He probably wasn't here for me. Right?

I don't know.

He might've needed to hand something in, or... I had no clue, but my gut was telling me he was here for me. That he knew I had detention today. That he knew the exact time I'd be let out, and I'd even be let out early.

He had it all worked out to be here when I would be walking to my bike.

"What do you want?"

He didn't wait a beat. "You know me."

"Your name is Christopher Raith."

His eyes narrowed. "You know where I come from."

Now I shifted, rolling to the back of my heels. "I know whose blue eyes you inherited yours from, yes."

One nod from him. "He's my uncle."

His uncle was the president of the entire Red Demons MC. Max Raith. Royalty.

I noted, "And you know my uncle."

A second nod. "I do."

Mine was not. He was a member, but I knew he was important to the original charter.

So I knew his uncle.

He knew my uncle.

We knew each other, but we didn't know each other, and still standing, staring, I knew we both wanted to *know* each other.

FOUR

Christopher

KESS FOSTER.

They never told me how gorgeous she was going to be, but she was. My dick had been hard for an entire year straight, and she was standing here, done with high school, and she never had a clue she'd been in danger.

'Club business.' That's what her uncle said he told her.

Club business, my ass. She had a right to know her life had been threatened and that she was the reason I was even here. All year. Her uncle was at the house until I got situated. We had a security system put in place, and I holed up close in the house next door. She never knew. Ever. When I rode my bike up, I went into the backyard. I asked Heckler, her uncle, if she wondered about the bike sounds. His response was she didn't. There were other bikes riding up and down their street but none of them were MC bikers.

I guess it worked.

As for the other reason *I* was here, I'd been the one chosen. A year older than her, I'd already graduated, and Max had been adamant I get my degree. Then this situation came up where there'd been rumors of someone trying to push in on a territory that wasn't quite ours, but we also didn't want to let anyone else in. Mix that with a few whispers that came down the pipeline one of ours had a niece in Roussou, California and how pretty her head might be as a trophy.

Max hadn't waited.

I got the order to head out immediately.

Word was worked out with local law enforcement. There were other players in town, a whole 'crew' system in the school so I hadn't needed to be around during the day. Not much. Not until the last semester. Things got dicey, and she had no clue, so I started hanging out a bit more than she

realized.

But I was there, watching, and feeling like a creeper.

The threat was recently eliminated, so I got the call to head back to headquarters.

I waited, wanting to actually talk to her for once.

And I was back to this: Kess Foster. Beautiful and she was the kind that didn't know it. And what was more, she wasn't a common beauty; she was unique. Her hair was so blonde, it was almost white. It looked like she dyed it with some dark roots, but that was just her hair.

Heckler had the same hair, and it was weird.

If we were told that aliens came down and had been walking among us, I would've instantly thought Heckler and Kess were from them. That was in addition to their eyes. I had clear blue eyes. I knew this, and it was something I got a fuck-ton of attention from. They were my weapon. I could yield them how I wanted, but in her school, I kept my head down and my mouth shut. No one messed with me, but that was a testament to the school itself. The dynamics had been interesting here.

But my eyes weren't like hers.

Hers were an ice blue. Almost gray, almost just white too. I'd never seen eyes like hers.

One woman giggled over Heckler, saying his eyes were like a vanilla chai latte with a dash of light blue in them. Eerie.

But Kess didn't know.

She'd been in a crew, and those five guys had been protective of her. That was, until a storm went down and their crew disbanded. I watched it happen.

I watched as each guy left and were now already doing their own thing. One guy remained, but he'd shunned her, and I had no idea why.

She was alone, and she just graduated high school.

She shouldn't be alone.

This was the summer she was supposed to have a last hoorah with her friends before heading to college. That was one thing I *had* been proud of, because she was smart. She was going to school. Some in our life, my life, didn't do academic institutions. They were looked at as weapons for the

‘other’ way of life.

Max didn’t view them that way, and I was glad that Heckler said his niece didn’t either.

She was going to a fancy sounding school.

I was happy. I was proud.

She was smart. She was self-reliant. She wasn’t a big fighter, but if push came to shove, she’d pick up a gun. She had good aim. I’d watched her at the gun range.

She’d be just fine, but she was alone, and I didn’t like her being alone.

I also didn’t like that she wasn’t prepared for what kind of attention she was going to get moving forward. That made me worried, and my dick grew, calling me an asshole, because yeah, I was one of those guys.

I wanted to give her a whole bunch of attention.

FIVE

Kess

HE WAS STILL staring.

I hated to admit this, but it was just making me hotter and *more* bothered.

What was wrong with me?

I'd never been this girl. Ever. It's not that guys hadn't been interested, but once I joined my crew, those guys went away. There'd been a time I had dated one of my crew members, but it would've gone bad fast so that stopped immediately. After that, we'd been a no-dating crew. I loved my guys, or had loved them. They were my brothers. My family. We joined our freshman year, and our crew name had been Shane's Crew. Nothing fancy and named after Shane Lorenzo. He'd been our leader, but the rest of us all got along. There'd been problems, which was why I felt so blindsided.

They'd been my security blanket, and now, nothing.

Shane went to Alaska. Kemp and Gorrup were on their backpacking trip together. Johnny was still here, but not speaking to me. I had no clue why. And Curtis was probably face first in his girlfriend's pussy since we'd disbanded. She'd been eager for the end of us and now that it happened, I guess she was his new crew in the whole girlfriend/boyfriend thing.

Mostly we liked to drink beer and laugh together. We did pranks sometimes, mostly on teachers or the principal, or anyone who messed with us. But we weren't a fighting crew. We weren't known for that. We were just there in the background.

Christ.

They were me.

I was them.

That was me.

I was 'the background' and it was hitting me how stupid I'd been.

There had been conversations over the last year about the summer and next year. The guys had even said they were looking into going backpacking, but I thought they'd talk about it with the rest of us. And Shane had mentioned Alaska. I told them I was going to college. Johnny was doing the same.

But... just to disband? It hurt. It hurt a lot.

"Wanna get a burger?"

His gravelly voice pulled me out of my thoughts, and I tuned back in. His head had remained to the side, those eyes on me, piercing through me, and I was getting all flushed having different thoughts instead. Thoughts like something other than his eyes checking me out.

"Sure."

SIX

Kess

WE WENT ON his bike.

It was glorious.

It was freeing.

Barely any words all year, just the awareness of each other, and here I was, feeling like I was meant to be on the back of his bike. My hands were wrapped around his tight chest, my body against his, and I could feel his strength. This guy—whatever the real reason he'd been here—he'd not been a normal student. He just felt more.

He drove to a small burger café, backing his bike up at the front door. The place wasn't full, and I wasn't surprised. Everyone was partying and as I got off his bike first, handing him the helmet, his hand grazed mine.

A tingle shot up my arm, but I'd been tingling the entire ride.

I'd been like this since I saw him waiting for me.

It's a surreal feeling, your body taking charge and not letting your mind catch up. Because I *should* stop and question things, but the only question that came to my mind was why did it feel so right when he took my hand and led the way inside?

He shifted, walking behind me. A gentle hand on my back as we took the booth in the far corner. No one was inside except the staff, but it was a small place. There were only five booths available.

I slid inside, and Chris sat next to me.

I raised an eyebrow, but his mouth twitched as he leaned around me to snag the menus. He slid one in front of me. "You need that?"

I pushed it aside. "I've lived in Roussou all my life, been here probably six dozen times."

He chuckled. "What are you getting then?"

"A deluxe cheeseburger with fries and a soda."

He nodded. "Maybe I'll have the same."

After we gave our orders, Chris seemed to relax beside me, but he wasn't. His entire side was pressed against mine, and I felt how tight he was.

"What's going on?" I waited until our drinks were served before asking.

He raised an eyebrow at me, picking his drink up and taking a sip. "What do you mean?"

"I know you're not going to tell me why you were really at my school, but you're tense. And you waited an entire year to approach me."

His eyes lit up. "You're cocky."

I grinned slowly. "Maybe. Maybe not."

He gave another dry chuckle. "Let's talk about you. You're going to college next year?"

I nodded and told him my plans. It was a good school, and I wanted to get a nursing degree. "My mom's a nurse. When my dad left, she was pregnant with me."

"You two are close?"

"Yeah."

"That's Heckler's sister, right?"

Whoa. He acknowledged knowing my uncle. "Yeah..."

He caught my reaction. "What?"

"Just," a shrug, "I never thought you'd talk about, you know."

I was getting flustered. I never got flustered. This was weird.

He laughed, noting my reaction. "What is this now?"

Why? Why now? Why today? Why at the end of the school year?

Screw it.

I tried to ignore how inflamed my face must have been. "Why were you at my school this year?"

His grin faltered; his voice got quiet. "I can't talk about that."

Okay. Another push. "Were you even a student?"

He was studying me, but then a reluctant shake of his head. "No. I wasn't,

but your school's administration knew I was there and why I was there."

I sucked in my breath. That was huge. Huge! And what did it mean?

The food came, but neither of us moved to start eating.

He waited until the server had moved from hearing distance before saying, "Let's just say some people in high positions have a certain fear and debt to the MC."

And my last question. "Are you a member of the Red Demons?"

He wasn't as forthcoming, waiting a few beats before lounging back. His arm came up to rest behind me, and he moved so he was facing me. "That's a complicated answer."

"Why?"

MCs didn't like you asking questions about them, and certainly not someone who'd be Red Demon royalty. I was going for broke here.

I was holding my breath until I heard, "I graduated high school last year."

I was doing the math. "So, you would've prospected for the summer, then you were sent here?" That was a whole year, and most of it was spent away from his club.

"We'll see how it goes when I head back."

So, he *was* leaving.

My heart sank.

"Got it. Yeah."

He paused, then leaned forward. "Hey." His voice, so soft there.

It wasn't fair.

"Hey." Not as soft. He touched my shoulder, hooking his finger under my tank top strap. He moved it down, his finger balling it up.

Sensations were exploding down my body, inflaming every inch, and I was super aware of his body right next to me. So seriously aware. There was a whole throbbing situation starting, and that was making me all sorts of flushed.

"Look, I'm going to level with you."

That didn't sound good.

My throat was spasming as I waited, looking over and holding his gaze.

His eyes were all stormy looking, focusing on my lips before looking back up. “I asked for the day. I don’t know what orders I’ll get. I will probably get called back to headquarters, but I don’t really know.”

My tongue felt heavy. “So, you’re saying you have the night?”

Regret flared over his face, tightening his expression. His eyes flared again in sympathy.

I hated that look.

“Yeah. I have tonight.”

One night.

His finger started rubbing over my shoulder, moving under my strap. The food was long-forgotten, and he was watching me, waiting for something. I didn’t know what, but did it really matter? One night. The rest of today.

This sucked.

I asked, my throat hoarse, “Why’d you wait all year?”

He cursed under his breath. “I couldn’t.”

I knew. I mean, I knew. That’s how MCs were, especially if they sent a guy for a long-term mission. That meant he was someone. I already knew that, but he was so young and to be sent away for a nine-month assignment. Those didn’t get handed out lightly. No matter who his uncle was, Chris was meant for big things with the Red Demons.

One night. Damn.

I knew my answer to what he hadn’t asked.

“Got a place we can hang?”

His eyes dipped to my mouth. “Oh yeah.”

SEVEN

Kess

“REALLY?”

I gaped at the house when he pulled into a driveway, then turned my head to the house next to it. My house. And I looked back to his house.

“You were my neighbor this whole time?”

A low chuckle reverberated from him as he turned the engine off and stood from his bike. “Yep.”

I was even angrier, but one night. Dammit! I glared at him. “So not cool.”

He ignored that, taking my helmet off and hanging it on his handle. He took my hand, giving me a tug. “Come on.”

His eyes were wolfish. His gaze was lingering on my mouth, and just like that, the momentary anger was starting to subside. He hadn’t even touched me.

Walking to the house, he lifted his arm around my shoulders. I reached up for his hand so they dangled together just off the side of me. This felt nice.

I was melting against his side.

Once inside, he stepped to the kitchen. “You want something to drink?”

You.

My throat went dry.

I croaked out, “No.”

His eyes darkened, and he said softly, “Okay.”

He took my hand again, leading me down the hallway.

Were we really going to do this? Was I really going to do this? Just get right down to business? I mean, he had bought me food, but yeah.

I was nervous.

I didn't date. It's not that I didn't want to, but there weren't a lot of guys I was interested in. I had a few hookups, but not many. A girl had needs. That was, until Christopher showed up. Once he did, it was him.

Only him. All him.

All year, and I was an idiot for not approaching him.

His room was sparse. A bed. A chair. A dresser. A laundry basket in the corner. That's all I noticed before he moved toward me.

One step.

He was right in front of me, close enough I could touch him.

Heat rose in me.

I was aching to touch him, and he was right there.

Another step.

His head folded down. His forehead rested on mine, and I reached out. My hands touched his stomach.

He was so strong, tight. There was no softness there, and both our chests rose at the same time.

I slid my hand up, pushing up his shirt, feeling the texture and contour of his muscles until I paused, right over his heart. It was speeding, just like mine, and biting down on my lip, I kept moving. His shirt was ripped off, his hand curling around my waist at the same time his head dipped.

His mouth found mine—and ooooh!

I was gone.

Done.

He was kissing me. I was kissing him.

I'd never been kissed like this.

He was commanding.

There was no soft, subtle seduction here. We both knew what we wanted. The whole year had been our foreplay, and his mouth opened over mine. I was helpless to do anything except respond. Hell, I was helpless to do *anything* except what my body wanted. And my body wanted a lot.

I wanted to crawl up him like he was a pole, and I wanted to feel him slide home.

Bending as his tongue swept against mine, he grabbed under my leg with one hand and his other hand on my ass. He lifted me. Oomph! He walked us backwards, lowering me gently onto the bed. He came down with me.

He moved down, his mouth trailing a path south until he lingered over my jeans.

He looked up, waiting.

I bit into my cheek and nodded. Yes, please. So many yeses.

My jeans were unbuckled, lowered, and his mouth moved there. He touched me, kissed me, and I lifted off the bed.

I was *inflamed*.

He explored me, every single inch of me.

He made me explode, then waited and brought me to the pinnacle again, and right before, he paused. A second. I heard the crinkle of a condom, and then he was back.

He had undressed me. I had done the same.

I relished in the feel of him, and then he moved between my legs. His eyes met mine, held me captive, and he slid inside.

So good. Sooo good.

As he began moving inside of me, and I was rolling with him, in the back of my mind, I knew it wasn't usually like this. There should've been clumsy fumbling. An awkward maneuver to unsnap my bra. I should've been embarrassed at how his fingers slid inside, and then gasped at how good that felt, but none of that happened.

The good part had happened, then happened again, and continued to happen, but this wasn't normal. We weren't normal.

He and I, we were made from the same fabric. It was *that* life, where I wasn't the cheerleader or the book nerd. He wasn't the jock or the frat preppy. He'd been born into a world outside the norm, and all my life, that's where I kept finding myself migrating toward.

Thrust.

Harder.

I wanted more.

Deeper.

Please.

Oh, *please*.

I didn't realize I was panting until he skimmed a hand up my throat, and his mouth leaned to capture mine once more.

God.

Yes. This was so out of the ordinary, but one night of this? It was better than no nights of nothing.

He groaned, pushing into me and holding there. "Come, baby. Come."

I didn't want to. I started to shake my head, trying to hold on, but then his hand dipped, and he found me right there. Oh-OH! I surged right over the edge, and I just kept right on going. My body was trembling, more waves were hitting me, and as he slid out and back in once more, I was clutching onto him, holding him to me.

One. More. Push.

He tensed, then I felt him jerking.

His body trembled just as mine had. He rested on me, a lazy kiss to my shoulder. "Fuck, woman." He grinned against my skin, moving to lay on his side.

I smiled, that same lazy feeling starting to course through me.

That was good. That was really good.

I said as much, trailing a hand up his arm and chest.

He lifted his head, dropping another kiss to my throat before finding my gaze. "Hell yeah, it was." His words were raspy. His eyes were molten. They were on my mouth again, and his hand moved down between my legs.

"*Jesus*. I could go again."

"What?" I started to laugh, then was groaning as his mouth dipped down.

And he found me right where his fingers had been.

Oh, dear--oooooh.

I raked my hands through his hair and held on. I had a feeling the night had just started.

EIGHT

Christopher

“ARE YOU KIDDING me?”

The buzzing had woken me, and when I saw who was calling, I wanted to roll right back and pull Kess into my arms. We’d gone at it all night long. It’d been amazing, and now this?

I grabbed my phone and headed outside.

My uncle said, “I need you back.”

I bit back a growl. “In the morning.”

“Now. We’re headed to Texas. I need you with me.”

“In the morning.”

“Now!”

He was our MC president, but he was my uncle.

Silence. Then, “What am I missing? You asked for a night to hang with friends—”

“Her. I wanted a night...”

“With Heckler’s *niece*?”

He didn’t sound happy about that. I gripped the phone tighter. “Yeah.”

“Are you kidding me? Tell me this is a joke. Tell me I don’t have to hang up, and when her uncle asks me what’s going on, I don’t have to choose to either lie to him or tell him the truth, that my nephew just banged his niece? Tell me I don’t have to do any of that.”

“She’s not a one-night thing.”

“What?”

I felt raw saying this, but to hell with it. “I held off all year. All year. I couldn’t leave without—I protected her for nine months, Uncle Max. She’s

not a one-night thing.”

There was more silence.

Another beat of it.

Then a gruff, “Well, that changes things.”

I sighed, exhaling a little easier. “Does it change things enough?”

“Maybe. Let me make a few calls.”

“Thank you, Uncle Max.” I was about to hang up when he called my name again. “Yeah?”

“You did good this year. I’m proud of you.”

My chest swelled up.

My uncle was the smartest and most dangerous man I knew. He could hire the killings of hundreds if he wanted. He had the men. He had the power. He had the connections, and he got there by being ruthless and brilliant at the same time. Words like that were not normal from him.

Yeah. My chest swelled up.

“Thank you.”

“I’ll be in touch. Go hold your girl again.”

I hung up, turning to go back into the house, then stopped.

Kess was there, a bed sheet wrapped around her.

The moonlight was lit over her, casting half her body in shadows. I couldn’t see her face or her eyes. I needed to see her eyes.

I began to move toward her, but she tightened her grip on the sheet in front of her and stepped forward. I saw her eyes.

I wished I almost hadn’t.

Those eyes were fierce.

“You protected me for nine months?!”

Yeah. She *really* wasn’t happy.

NINE

Kess

NINE MONTHS!

I'd been under threat for nine months, and from the little Chris said, I knew there was a whole ton more he wasn't saying.

There was a threat. He was young, so he'd been assigned to me. He watched me, and that was the gist of it. That was all he could tell me.

I wanted to rip him a new one, but I didn't want to harm him. Fillet him with my words, maybe, but not real filleting.

Nine months and I had no idea.

Its why Heckler came in the first place, and he'd been so vague when I asked why he was here.

“Just tell me who it was from?”

We were sitting in his living room. He was standing, leaning against the wall. I was on the edge of the couch, my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands.

“I can't. The rumors were higher up so we couldn't risk it. That's seriously all I can say.”

I knew he couldn't, but it was driving me crazy.

In danger. Nine months. My mind couldn't wrap around that.

“That's why you moved next door.”

He hesitated but nodded. “I installed a security system in your house. I could monitor you if something happened.”

“And school?”

“Your crew wasn't in your first and seventh periods.” He shrugged. “So I was.”

He was right. They were in all my others. They were with me every other moment of the day, too. Lunch. After school. Except when I was home, and he was ‘monitoring’ me.

“How?”

He flinched at my tone. It was dull, grating.

He smoothed his hand through his hair. “I’d rather not tell you.”

“Christopher!”

He flinched a second time.

Wait. I narrowed my eyes. “What’s your club name?”

His jaw clenched. “Wraith.”

Wraith.

I screwed a Wraith.

I didn’t even want to know why he got that name.

“Oh my God!” I shoved to my feet, starting to pace. I slept with him, and I wanted to do it again. Who was I? I didn’t even recognize myself with him. One meeting, our food unfinished, and we’d gone at it four times. Four. Times.

I couldn’t. I just couldn’t.

This was...this was ridiculous!

Heckler. My own uncle. I growled, “I’m going to murder my uncle.”

Christopher or Wraith jumped in front of me, his hands up. “You can’t. They can’t know I told you. I don’t—I might’ve gotten more time. I don’t know, but if you call him, then that’s all done for and I don’t know what they’ll want me to do next.”

“Are you kidding me? You want more time?” I hissed.

“Well.” He dropped his hands, frowning. “Yeah.”

“Agh!” I screamed and shoved past him, going to his room and starting to dress.

“Babe.”

“Don’t!” I whipped back to him, one hand in the air and the other holding the sheet in front of me. “You are not my man or my boyfriend. You don’t get to ‘babe’ me.”

I dropped the sheet.

He groaned, raking his hand over his hair. “*Fuck.*”

I grabbed my clothes, shoving my arms into my top and my legs into my jeans.

I didn’t even remember where any of my stuff went

My phone.

My purse.

I stomped back to the front door,;there were my sandals. I didn’t remember toeing them off, but I must’ve.

“Come on, Kess. Please.”

I was so not listening to him.

Even if he was gorgeous...

And had protected me all year long...

Not happening.

Hell to the no.

But, oh man. How he felt in bed.

How he kissed me.

Slid inside of me.

He’d made me shatter in his arms, and not once or twice. Four times.

That was so not the norm.

I wrenched open the door—

His phone rang, peeling through the air.

I hesitated.

I hated that I hesitated.

He glanced down, then hit accept. “Max.”

I froze.

On the other end of the phone was someone seriously powerful. It shouldn’t have the power to impress me, but I couldn’t help it. I was impressed, and I found myself waiting. I didn’t know why. So yeah, I should go.

I was going.

Now.

Right now.

I was so going.

Damn. I was still here.

And I heard Chris saying, "I might have a situation here." A pause. "Okay. I'll take her."

He hung up, and now I really needed to go.

This time, I was going to do it. Go. Move forward.

Then he said, "Your friend Johnny..."

I frowned. "Yeah?"

He finished, "He's in trouble."

TEN

Wraith

WE WENT ON my bike, heading out of Roussou toward Calypso.

I didn't really know these guys well. They were a local chapter, and there'd been a new setup put in charge. Things got messy a bit ago, so some restructuring was needed. That was before my uncle began to move south. When we rode in, I didn't stop and plan for Kess. Or for her reaction.

She was off the bike and across the lot, heading toward Johnny in a flash. "You're an asshole!"

One of the guys caught her, an arm wrapped around her waist. She had enough momentum so she was lifted in the air as her feet kept pedaling. She didn't care. She was seeing red.

Sauce came over, his jaw hard. "Couldn't leave your girl behind?"

"She's Heckler's niece."

He turned back. His eyes were now hard. "And you brought her *here*?"

Yeah. I knew.

I sighed, nodding at her ex-crew member. "So, he knew the old group?"

"Looks like. He approached us, said he had money and a party he could unload everything at four times the normal rate. Some rich kid in Fallen Crest."

"Is this relationship new?"

"With us, yes. We've never worked with him before. I'm assuming his usual supplier was pinched or dried up."

He was a potential problem. I didn't like potential problems.

Sauce went back to watching the show.

Johnny was trying to hide in the back of a cage, and Kess kept trying to get free from Rampant, her holder. Her nails were going into his arm, and I

barked, “Kess! Hands off my guy.”

Rampant shot me a grin as Kess lifted her hands away, but she went back to screaming at Johnny.

“And why’d you bring her again?”

I was asking myself the same thing. “What’s the plan with him?”

“We were waiting for orders from your uncle. We’re too new. Things are too delicate right now. We don’t want to off someone, have it blow back on another charter, and we knew you were in town.”

He was right. It could get back to me.

I was his age, in his school and the authorities already knew I was here. Well. Damn.

Sauce read my expression and grunted. “Pretty much.”

“What’d my uncle say?”

“He said to do what you decided.”

I frowned. Why would he do that?

I nodded, taking my phone out. “I gotta make a call.”

• • •

That call didn’t help.

“You clean it up how you want. Nothing can come back on us.” That’d been his response, and I didn’t like thinking I needed to be judge, executioner, and cleanup so early into my MC career. I thought I’d have a bit more time, but I was Maxwell Raith’s nephew.

I was named Wraith for a reason too.

Shit.

Shit!

I was eyeing Kess, who had quieted. Rampant wasn’t holding her anymore, but he and another were standing between her and Johnny.

This was my problem.

Johnny was her crew. That meant he'd had her back since they formed, and there was love there. Friendship love. Loyalty love. Family love. Love that was ride or die. But seeing him now, I knew he didn't feel the same. He was a weasel, and he was on the product. My guess was that he'd been doing it for a while, and so the love that Kess felt for him, not only did he not return it, but he didn't deserve it.

But he didn't have anything on us.

I walked over to him. "Who'd you work with before?"

He sneered at me. "Some pig."

Okay then. That helped with the decision.

I glanced back at Sauce. "Rough him up. Put him in the hospital for an extended stay, and you," I leaned down and got in his face, "if I get word you're dealing in Roussou, Fallen Crest, Frisco, or Calypso, they will end you. Got it? I don't like you. You're a piece of shit."

His face was getting redder and redder. He opened his mouth—I shut it, with a fist.

He toppled out of the truck, and for good measure, he got a boot to the ribs. Then a second.

He lay there, moaning, but my message wasn't done.

"You don't seem to know what you are." I squatted down, my arms resting over my knee. "You're a future snitch."

He paled, his eyes then darting to the others.

"And what's worse, you're a junkie future snitch. Those types only die, so if you want to stay in town, you clean up. If you don't, these guys will relocate you, six feet under. Got it?"

His eyes went to Kess.

I growled, shifting to block his view. "And you *really* want to stay away from her. You go near her, you get me to deal with. You don't want to deal with me."

He didn't like it but he had no choice.

The guys hauled him out, given orders to drop him off in front of a hospital.

Kess went to wait by my bike, and I had another word with Sauce.

Then it was time to go back. I still had a few hours and I needed to make them memorable.

ELEVEN

Kess

I WAS ANGRY at Johnny, but I was more hurt.

It wasn't just him. I was hurt by our entire crew, because we weren't a crew. We'd just been pretending to be. And I was angry at myself for not figuring that out earlier than now. They all left, and they had gone quickly. I was hugging the back of Chris, and we were going back to his place. I didn't know when or even if I'd see him again. And yet, all of that aside, I felt like he was more crew than Johnny ever had been.

I pressed my forehead to Chris' back, tightening my arms.

He reached down, his hand running over my leg and then stayed there.

It felt nice. *Right.*

I would be sadder about when we'd have to say goodbye than my crew. That told me everything.

I was such a fool.

When we pulled back into his house, he led me by the hand, and we went back to his room.

We didn't sleep the rest of the night.

It was early. The clock said it was six in the morning when we'd collapsed after our last round.

I was resting half on his chest, drawing a circle over his stomach.

Both of us were sweaty and had no desire to move, not another inch. My body had no bones. I was a melting mess, and it was wonderful.

But still. The clenching in the stomach. It was there because his uncle was supposed to call. He'd shared that part when I asked when he needed to go, though I'd been dreading even speaking the words.

"Those guys are going to kill Johnny."

His body stiffened.

I lifted my head up. I wanted him to see that I knew. “I heard what you said to him, about doing drugs. You’re right.” Another thing I was kicking myself for not seeing. “I actually think I flushed his drugs today.”

He moved his arm from behind his head and took my hand in his. Sliding his fingers through mine, he cocked his head to the side. “Good.”

That note. I grinned, remembering it.

“What?”

I shook my head. “Nothing. There was a stupid note on the door. It was kinda funny.” But thinking on it, “Johnny couldn’t stash drugs in the girls’ bathroom. Someone else must’ve done that.”

Chris didn’t respond, not that my statement even warranted a reply. It was done.

I sighed, laying my cheek back down on his chest. His free hand went through my hair, smoothing it down my back and up again. It was soothing and caressing at the same time.

“So, your uncle is going to call you to join their group?”

He tensed again.

I learned he did that anytime the Red Demons were brought up.

His voice was low. “Yeah. More than likely.”

That meant I needed to deal with it, start getting over him.

Was it sad that I needed to get over a guy with whom I only had one night? Or maybe that was a beautiful thing?

I didn’t know. Beautiful things didn’t survive in my world.

I looked up.

That made sense too, because Chris was beautiful.

He looked down, his hand coming to cup the side of my face. “What’s in your head?” His thumb ran over my cheek, so soft and tender. It matched his tone.

I wasn’t going to tell him that, so I said something else, “Thank you for being here to protect me this year.” My heart skipped a beat. “That’s the nicest thing anyone’s done for me.”

“Oh, baby.” He sat up, curling over me, and his mouth dropped to mine.

But there were no words that could be said.

He was going.

I was staying.

It was what it was.

We had the morning still.

Then his mouth was moving over mine, and before long, we’d shifted. I was straddling him, and his hands were on my hips.

The sun was spreading through the room, inch by inch, but I wasn’t seeing it.

I was just feeling, and in a way, I felt like I was *feeling* for the first time.

TWELVE

Christopher

MY PHONE RANG.

We'd both been waiting.

It was almost noon, so my uncle gave us half of another day. I wondered if that was part of his gift to me for handling the problem last night.

Taking my phone outside, I answered, "Hey."

"I have good and bad news. Which do you want?"

I sighed.

"The bad first."

Max chuckled low over the phone. "Pack up. I want your ass on your bike in thirty minutes. I'll send you the coordinates where to go."

I gripped my phone tight, hating this, hating everything about this.

"Okay." I was forcing air out through my nose, trying to keep my teeth from grinding. "And the good news?"

"Got a guy in the admissions office. Turns out, we need a college boy for our club. Guess where you're going to school?"

Wait.

"What?" I started to turn around.

Kess was sitting at the table, her knee pulled up. She was hugging her leg, and her head was cocked to the side. She was trying to figure out a puzzle in a magazine I had lying around. Jesus, she was stunning. A breeze was going through the room, and I was noticing every detail about how it was lifting some of her hair strands, making them wave in the air.

Goddamn romantic crap here.

My heartbeat was drumming thick in my ear.

There's no way I'd heard him right.

He laughed, though. "You heard me. You're coming here for three months, and then returning for your girl. Heckler told us where she's going to college. I need a future college degree guy in the club."

I swallowed. "What degree?"

"We'll get into that later. Go and break the news to your girl, and then get down here. Heckler's got something to say to you."

I was sure he did.

My uncle said thirty minutes, but he was going to have to wait.

I went and told Kess the news, and I didn't leave on my bike until later in the day.

Much, much later.

THE END

If you'd like to read more about Taz and Roussou's crew system, read the
Crew Series!

Crew

Crew Princess

Always Crew (August 2020)

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SET FIRE TO THE SKY

A.L. JACKSON

ONE

Derrick

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.

But I didn't hesitate. It was part of my job. What I'd been trained to do. Most of all, I guessed, it was who I was.

My protective gear might have protected my flesh from the flames, but that didn't mean I didn't feel like I was getting burned alive.

The world a thousand degrees.

But I was working on gut and desperation and hope. Holding the limp body in my arms and praying we'd gotten to her in time.

"Right. To the right," the crackle in my ear instructed. "And make it fast, because the whole goddamn place is about to go up."

Billows of black smoke eclipsed the light, my only sight coming from the flashlight of my partner leading the way out in front of me.

We worked our way back to the hole we'd cut in the side of the house, since the far wall was engulfed in flames. I knew we were only a few seconds from everything being consumed.

The fire howled, no sound but the roar that dulled my senses. Every step disorienting.

Adrenaline sloshed and spun and raced through my veins.

I had to get her out. I had to get her out.

A crash to my left sent a bolt of panic surging through my veins.

Part of the ceiling gave and crashed to the ground. Sparks flickered and leapt into the space. Air from my mask wheezing into my lungs, I increased my pace and angled to the side.

Undeterred.

There was too much at stake.

I had to get her out. I had to get her out.

Jordan was at the opening, his arm outstretched. “Hurry. You’re there, man. You’re there. Just a couple more feet.”

I shifted to the side so I could squeeze through, and this feeling came over me unlike anything I’d experienced before.

The raw need to make this right.

We broke through the hole and out into the night. Red and blue lights flashed against the blackened sky. I dropped to my knees as the other firefighters rushed us, taking the woman from my arms and rushing her to the paramedics waiting twenty feet away.

I felt stripped.

Bare.

I was grabbed by both arms and hauled away from the house that was quickly going up.

Incinerated. Consumed.

On my knees, I tried to get it together. To focus. But my mind was spinning.

It was too close. Too close. God.

My mask was ripped off, and I gasped for air.

“Hey, man, can you hear me?”

I could barely nod. “Yes. I hear you.”

“Are you injured?”

“No. I’m fine. I’m fine.”

The last thing I was concerned about right then was my well-being. The only thing that mattered was the woman. The woman who was surrounded by paramedics. Four of them bustled around her where she was laid out on the ground. They worked frantically. A stretcher was brought over, and she was lifted and placed on it.

I was on my feet. Moving that way. Drawn. I felt desperate to see her. To make sure she was really going to be okay.

The closer I got, the more frantically my heart pounded. Each step sent me

into some kind of frenzy that I didn't quite understand. They started to wheel her toward the ambulance. I got up to the side of them, my gaze taking her in where she was strapped to the board, oxygen covering her mouth and nose, her face blackened with soot and ash.

But her eyes were open.

A striking green.

Wild and full of fear and brimming with something else that twisted through me like a drug.

Shock and hope.

Alive and real.

Relief slammed me.

Overpowering.

Our gazes tangled, the woman staring up at me as they wheeled her for the ambulance. The connection riding through the air made me stumble back a step, and my guts twisted in this feeling that this was where I'd been purposed to be.

What the fuck?

But I guessed that's what happened when you were in a life and death situation. All senses were heightened. Her life in my hands, like her spirit had known it.

It was terrifying and gratifying. Horrifying and beautiful.

With a lump in my throat, I watched as they wheeled her the rest of the way to the ambulance, its lights flashing through the night as the team continued to work on the fire that ravaged the house.

They loaded her and shut the doors.

Breaking the connection.

I slumped back, my head spinning, not sure what to make of this feeling that tugged at the middle of me.

The siren blipped as the ambulance started down the quaint neighborhood street. Onlookers had gathered, some with nothing but more than morbid interest and others who had shed tears of genuine concern.

I scrubbed a palm over my face like it could break up the intensity. This wired sensation that buzzed through my blood and hammered my heart.

I felt something nudge at my legs, and I looked down to find a tiny puppy whining and doing circles at my feet. She was grey and white. Probably some kind of pit mix. Blue eyes turned to stare up at me.

I gulped, knelt down, and petted her head. She snuggled closer.

“Hey, sweet girl. Who do you belong to?”

Except I already knew, didn't I? I had no idea how she'd gotten out.

Escaped.

I looked around. No one was there to claim her or take care of her.

I scooped her up and pressed her soft fur to my nose, the tiny thing sooty and smelling like smoke.

She gave me a tiny bark and licked my face.

My chest tightened.

“It's okay. I've got you. I'll get you back to your momma.”

As I watched the ambulance disappear into the night, the buzz in my blood grew louder.

And I knew I was far too eager to see her again.

TWO

Derrick

“SHH...IT’S OKAY, sweet girl. Just a couple more minutes.” Gigi whimpered, pawing at me and nuzzling her nose into my arm. I sat in my truck outside the hospital. Nerves rattled through me like the coming of an earthquake.

She was being released today. Three days later. I’d been assured she would make a full recovery.

Yeah. I’d kept tabs on her. Mostly for Gigi.

“Right, girl?” I said aloud as I scratched behind her ears.

She whined. Clearly calling bullshit.

“Okay. Fine.”

I had to admit a little bit of that was for me, but I’d been unable to slough the nagging need to check up on her and make sure she was fine. I felt responsible for someone in a way I hadn’t in a long, long time.

I’d passed along my number and told her to text me whenever she was ready to take care of her dog. She’d texted back and asked me to meet her here.

My chest tightened when I saw an orderly pushing a woman through the double doors in a wheelchair. Brown hair in the messiest knot I’d ever seen, and she was obviously wearing clothes that weren’t hers, because the sweatshirt swallowed her whole.

But her face—I would recognize it anywhere, even if it was no longer covered in ash.

That feeling I’d been fighting for the last three days intensified.

Something so confusing I couldn’t process what it meant.

Intense relief at knowing she was fine. That we’d gotten to her in time.

All mixed up with it were these sparks of excitement. Something that propelled me forward. Made me itch. Like I was standing on the cusp of change.

Didn't help things that she was fucking stunning.

Gorgeous.

I took her in from across the lot.

I'd been fighting the images my mind had been conjuring for days, and then she had to turn around and be even more beautiful than my fucked-up brain had hoped to imagine.

Just looking at her, my dick stirred.

Fuck.

Guilt chased off that feeling. The lust currently twisting my guts into a thousand knots was the last damned thing I should be feeling.

Thoughts crossing a boundary that was off-limits. I did my duty and it ended there.

She slowly stood from the wheelchair, saying something to the orderly before he left her there. Shifting, she warily scanned the parking lot, hugging her arms over her middle and looking anxious as fuck.

Shaking myself out of the stupor, I curled Gigi in my arm and slipped out. I started that direction.

Like instinct, she looked my way. Green eyes collided with mine. Swore to God, she heaved for a breath, and that lust was making a rebound.

Coming on stronger.

Every muscle in my body going tight.

Gigi went nuts in my hold, and there was nothing I could do but set her on the sidewalk, keeping a tight grip on her leash as she pulled and struggled to run for her, barking like mad.

Pure excitement.

Tessa's face split with joy.

Yeah.

Tessa.

And I was ambling that way, trying to play it cool and act like I wasn't

wanting to touch her everywhere. Ensure she was whole. That she'd actually made it. Unease rumbled at the thought—the idea of what would have happened if we hadn't gotten to her when we did. How quickly this story could have ended up with a different ending.

When we were a couple feet away, she knelt, and I let go of the leash. Gigi ran the rest of the way and jumped into Tessa's arms.

Tessa hugged her and kissed her. "Oh, my sweet girl. I missed you. I'm so thankful you're fine. Oh."

Gigi licked her face, and I was rubbing at that spot in the middle of my chest. Trying not to feel awkward because I was just standing there, staring at their reunion and finding far too much joy in it.

But that's why I did this job. It was what I could offer. Serving people. Willing to sacrifice. To pay it all if it meant someone else would be saved.

She finally stood with her dog in her arms. Her teeth clamped down on her bottom lip, and her head listed to the side as those eyes swept over me.

"Thank you so much," she said, her words barely a breath. Filled with so much emotion I didn't know how to process them all. "I didn't know if I would ever see her again."

I shook my head. "There is nothing to thank me for."

Those eyes widened. "Are you kidding? You...you saved my life and then you took in my dog. I don't even know how to start to repay you."

"It's my job."

She blanched, like me saying it hurt her feelings.

Well, shit.

I roughed a hand through my hair, and my mouth pulled up at one side. "I mean, except for the dog thing. I have to admit that was a first."

The smallest smile graced her mouth, and she was looking at me like I was the single thing that had been missing in her life. "I hope she wasn't any trouble."

"None at all. Have to admit, I've gotten kinda used to having her around. Think I'll miss her."

Tessa squeezed her dog. "She's pretty great."

"Yeah."

Uneasiness billowed around us. I was just...stalling. Didn't know how to walk away.

"So, how are you feeling?" I asked. It gave me a good excuse to let my gaze wander. Her tiny frame was eclipsed by the heavy clothes she wore, but I remembered exactly the way she'd felt in my arms. A memory I couldn't seem to scrape from my consciousness.

She laughed, a brittle sound, sincerity rolling out on her words. "I was lucky, really lucky, thanks to you. A minute or two longer, and I don't think I'd be here."

A lump grew thick in my throat. "Do you have burns?"

She was back to chewing at her lip, the girl all kinds of wary and unsure. I guessed that's what a trauma could do to you.

"Very minor. Nothing that really even needed treatment."

"That's good. And your lungs?"

"Clear. I'm fine. Perfectly fine."

Okay, so this was getting awkward. Because I just kept asking her personal shit that was none of my business, and I really needed to get the hell out of there before I said something I couldn't take back.

"What do you do now?"

You know, like that.

Because I'd learned she lived alone, and my friend working her floor said no one had come in to visit her the entire time she'd been there. It'd taken all my willpower not to come here sooner, show up with goddamn flowers and balloons and a teddy bear.

Sadness billowed through her features. "I start again."

Nodding, I took a step back. "Well, then I guess I'd better let you go. But please, call me if you need anything. Anything at all. You have my number."

"Thank you."

Could tell by the way she said it that there was no chance of that happening.

I eased forward and gave Gigi a scratch. "Bye, girl."

Yeah. I was going to miss her.

Forcing myself to move, I gave Tessa a curt smile, strode to my truck, and

jumped in the driver's seat. I was unable to stop myself from watching her as she finally started to walk down the sidewalk. Except she didn't get far. She just went and sat down on a bench, her dog on her lap, the girl mindlessly petting her for close to an hour.

Yeah. I knew how long she'd been sitting there because I hadn't been able to drive away. I felt compelled.

Hooked.

Watching her through the tiniest break in the cars in front of me.

The girl was just...lost.

Could feel it from across the space.

I started my truck, backed out, and tried to convince myself to drive away.

I got to the T that led out of the parking lot.

To the right—my house.

To the left—her.

I squeezed the steering wheel and tried to talk some sense into myself.

“Shit,” I muttered before I turned left and came to a stop at the curb in front of her.

No sense found except for the one telling me I had to help this girl.

She jolted when she realized it was me. Green eyes widened in shock as I jumped out of the driver's side and rounded the front. “What are you doing, Tessa? Where are you going?”

She blinked, and I realized she was fighting tears.

Had to resist the urge to rush her so I could wipe them away.

She laughed out an uneasy sound. “A hotel, I guess. I don't know.”

Fuck.

Her house was destroyed. That was the second I realized this girl had nothing. No one was here to pick her up. No one had visited.

She was utterly alone.

What had I been thinking?

“Get in the truck.”

Surprise twisted her face before she frowned. “I...no. I couldn't do that. You've already done too much.”

“Just get in the truck.”

She sniffled, shook her head, looked down.

In a second flat, I was kneeling in front of her, angling down so I could look at her face. I found her full-on crying, the girl choking back tears.

My heart fisted, doing crazy, manic things. “Get in the truck, Tessa. Please. You know I can’t leave you here. You think you’re doing me a favor by refusing? Believe me when I tell you I won’t be able to sleep until I’m sure you have a roof over your head. A safe place to stay.”

She looked up, pleading in her voice. “You don’t want my mess.”

“Try me.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I know everything I need to.”

Disbelief puffed from her nose, but in it was surrender, too. Satisfaction pulsed, and I wound her dog out of her arms and into mine. I extended my hand. She hesitated, glancing between my face and my hand, before she took it.

Intensity boomed. That same feeling buzzing through my veins as it had the first time I’d touched her. This connection I didn’t get.

It rushed, feeding the need which I’d tried to shun that night.

Her throat wobbled as she swallowed, and I knew she felt it, too.

She pulled her hand away. “Okay...just for a night—until I find another place to stay. As long as it’s not an imposition. I-I...do you have a family? A wife? Kids? I can’t just barge into your life.”

“The only thing I have at home is an empty guest room. It’s yours for as long as you want it.”

Bleary eyes gazed up at me. “Why would you do this for me?”

“Because it feels like what I’m supposed to do.”

Purpose resonating. Boiling in my blood.

She nodded, then ducked her head and moved over to my truck. She opened the door and climbed inside, and I handed over Gigi, who wagged her tail and licked her face and seemed really damned keen on the idea of the two of them coming to my place.

Me, too, Gigi. Me, too.

Contentment burned as I rushed back around to the driver's side and got in, this feeling like I was edging up on the cusp of something significant.

Something that was meant to be.

I didn't drive straight home. I detoured to the nearest Target so she could pick up some necessities.

I pulled into a parking spot. "Come on, let's get you some things that you might need."

"I can't take your charity. You've already done too much," she said, refusing to budge.

Surprise, surprise.

"I'm not leaving this store until you have the things you need."

"Why are you so stubborn?" Exasperated, she stared across at me.

"Not the type to give up on what I want."

The statement flooded the cab.

Underlying meaning blatant.

Couldn't help it.

She finally tore her attention away from the severity of my gaze. "I will find a way to pay you back. I promise."

Couldn't help the smile.

Yeah. I was definitely not one to give up on what I wanted.

An hour later, we pulled into the driveway of my small house. Was probably about the same size as hers had been except on the opposite side of town. I killed the engine, and she just sat there, staring through the windshield.

"This isn't right," she whispered again. I could feel the rumble of her nerves.

Uncertainty and questions and unease.

Still holding onto the steering wheel, I swung my attention fully to her.

Gripping her with the want I could feel radiating from my stare. "I'm not sure I've ever done anything that felt so right."

THREE

Tessa

WATER BOILED ON the stove, and I added the pasta to the pot while I glanced at the clock for what had to have been the thousandth time in the last ten minutes.

Three more minutes.

Nerves scattered, excitement slithering across my flesh and tickling my mind.

Oh man, I was getting carried away. Swept up. But it seemed impossible not to do with a man like Derrick invading my life the way that he had. Filling my spirit with his concerned, overprotective smiles and the unending sweet gestures that continually knocked the breath from my lungs.

Okay. Fine.

It didn't hurt that he looked like he could be one of those firemen in the yearly calendars my grandmother used to keep hidden in her kitchen pantry.

God. The man was gorgeous. But he was so much more than a muscled body and a pretty face. He was too beautiful and too kind. Too generous and too right. My mind kept warning me that a man like him couldn't be real.

Maybe I'd died in that fire after all and he was my afterlife. A gift I didn't deserve.

Gigi and I had been here for the last three weeks. Held within the walls of his home that sang of safety and warmth.

I wanted to tap into it. Hold it for myself. Let it soothe away the fear that I couldn't shake.

Worst of all? It was the attachment that kept coming on stronger, growing each day.

I should know better.

Apparently, I didn't, because excitement went blazing when I heard a truck engine echo up the street. Headlights blazed through the living room window as he pulled into the drive.

Butterflies swarmed, and my blood burned hot at the thought of seeing him walk through the door after his 24-hour shift.

Missing him like crazy which was insanity itself.

Gigi's ears perked up, and she trotted across the room, her nails clicking on the hardwood floor and tail wagging like crazy as she headed for the door.

She did circles on the rug and whined at the wood.

Anxious for him to return.

I understood the affliction.

"Don't get too used to it, Gigi," I mumbled under my breath. The warning was really for myself, considering I was just setting myself up to get my heart broken. I'd known it that night, when I'd come to consciousness and the first thing I'd seen were those concerned, dark eyes staring down at me—filled with something I felt all the way down to my soul.

Something indescribable.

As if the man had been written in the fabric of my being.

A thread that had been missing and now was perfectly sewn through the middle of me.

A key slipped into the lock, and my breaths were turning shallow, and I was doing my best to pull myself together but failing miserably when he stepped through the door and sent me this smile that left me nothing but a sticky, messy puddle.

God, he was beautiful. Full lips stretched in joy. Eyes dark and kind and taking me in like there was a possibility that he'd missed me as much as I'd missed him.

"You really are tryin' to wreck me, aren't you, Tessa?"

He scooped Gigi up into his arms where she'd been pawing at his leg.

"Wreck you?"

"It smells delicious in here."

"Oh, um...well...it's nothing. Just spaghetti. It's the least I can do."

His smile widened, and he started my way, roughing his hands over Gigi's

needy head. My stomach tightened. So maybe I wanted a little of that petting for myself.

Each step he took sent a tsunami of energy crashing through the space. Something potent and secure. Warm and fierce.

A shiver raced down my spine, and I had to avert my attention to heaping noodles onto a plate to keep him from seeing the need I was sure was written all over my face.

He just kept coming closer, until he was right behind me, leaning over to murmur in my ear, “Spaghetti made by you. For me. Like I said, wrecking me.”

Sparks flew.

I wondered if he could see them crackling in the air.

I gulped and tried to keep my cool. “Well, I would go crazy if I didn’t do something. I need to get back to work and find a place to live.”

I really must have been hallucinating because I thought I felt a pulse of disappointment vibrate from that beautiful body that towered over me from behind.

“You can stay here as long as you like, Tessa. You don’t need to rush into anything.”

“Aren’t you sick of me yet?” I tried to tease as I turned around, only to stumble with how close he was.

Dark eyes flaring, he touched my chin. “Not even close. Not sure that’s even a possibility when it comes to you.”

Oh, my poor heart. If I stayed here much longer, I was going to be done for. And I knew this was only this man doing his duty. Generosity overflowing. Offering everything he had was just who he was.

Swallowing hard, I grabbed our plates. “Let’s eat.”

Nothing like a distraction.

He grinned. “Put me out of my misery, woman.”

Oh yeah, he needed to stop that, too.

He sat down and started scarfing down his food. “Oh God...so good... Tessa...wrecked,” he mumbled around the food he was stuffing into his mouth.

A giggle slipped free, satisfaction riding through my veins. “You’re ridiculous.”

“You’re a savior.”

I didn’t even try to keep the sincerity out of my voice. “No, Derrick. You’re the savior.”

Sobering, he lifted his head to fully look at me where I sat across the small table from him. Something hard flashed through his kind eyes, his lips slanting down at the side. He wiped his mouth with his napkin and set it down.

The mood shifted in a flash.

“Need to tell you something, Tessa.”

Dread bottled in my chest. “What is it?”

He hesitated, roughing a frustrated hand through his hair before he forced out, “Got word from the Captain today. It was confirmed the fire at your house was arson. It was probably teens or some punks out being stupid and not thinking about the conse—”

The words sliding off my tongue silenced the logic he was trying to find. “He always said I was nothing without him. I guess now we know exactly what he meant.”

Anger surged. In an instant, the man was a vat of rage.

Boiling.

Churning.

But I wasn’t afraid. Not of him.

“What does that mean?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Like hell, it doesn’t matter. Tell me, Tessa.”

Anguish gusted through me, and moisture clouded my eyes. “I thought I could get away, but I should have known better.”

I should have known he would hunt me down.

I had to get out of here before I put Derrick in danger. I’d warned him he didn’t want my mess, that he didn’t deserve it.

“Who?” he demanded.

“I...I need to go.”

I stood from the table, intending to pack my things and leave. Before I could make it a step, Derrick was on his feet. He flew around the table and boxed me in. “Tell me who you’re talking about.”

Tears fell, and I wanted to give it to him. Let him hold it. But how was that fair? “Just let me go, Derrick. I told you this wasn’t your concern.”

He inched forward, blocking me in. “No.”

I pushed his chest. “Please.”

He grabbed me by both wrists, hauling me close, his nose brushing mine. “No, Tessa. Not until you tell me what the hell is happening.”

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“And I *won’t* let anyone hurt you.”

It was a promise.

A promise carved in stone.

And I was having the hardest time breathing, my lungs heaving in my chest, filled with the strength of this man.

Dizziness spun my head, and my knees felt weak.

“Derrick.” It was a whimper.

He wrapped me up, his mouth at my cheek. “Tell me. Let me take care of you.”

There was nothing I could do...nothing but trust him with my truth.

“My ex. I...I left three months ago. In the middle of the night. I just wanted to start a new life. Get out from under his hand. I should have known he would find me.”

Memories flashed. The five years I’d spent little more than a servant and a prisoner. I’d refused to live it a day longer.

“He hurt you?” Derrick’s voice was gravel, scraping across my flesh.

Hostility vibrated his bones.

“In every way that didn’t leave a physical scar,” I whispered back.

His big hands spread out across my back, and he was growling a low sound of restraint, the man’s forehead rocking against mine in his own agony.

“I won’t let him get near you.”

He pulled back and splayed his hand out on my cheek. “I want to protect you, Tessa. I want to take care of you. I...I don’t know what this is. I just know I can’t let it go.”

Emotion throbbed. Overwhelming. Coming at me in waves. “I can’t, either, Derrick. I know I should walk away, but I don’t know how to do it. Not when you make me feel this way.”

He groaned, and his mouth was on mine in a desperate, possessive kiss.

Need spiraled.

Bliss sped.

His tongue tangled with mine, one hand coming to the back of my head to control the angle, his promises whispered through the connection. “I found you, Tessa. I knew something was missing, and I found you.”

FOUR

Derrick

I SHOVED THE plate to the side and hoisted her onto the table. Pulse raging, dick hard, the same way it'd been since the second she'd started staying with me.

This woman who'd driven me mad.

Stolen my heart and my soul with each passing second. With each timid smile. With each hopeful glance.

I was hers.

Now she was going to be mine.

“You are so beautiful,” I told her.

Tessa panted as she leaned back on the table with her legs wrapped around my waist.

I ran my hands up and down her thighs. The girl wore these skimpy sleep shorts that she'd basically been living in and which had steadily driven me out of my mind with need.

Shivers raced across her flesh.

Tentatively, she reached out and ran a trembling hand down my chest. “You are the most beautiful man I have ever seen. Too good to be real.”

I took her hand and pressed it over the thunder of my heart. “I'm real, baby. So real. I'm about to prove it to you.”

A blush spread over her chest and up to her cheeks, and I couldn't help the chuckle that bled free.

She had no idea—no idea what she did to me.

And the fucker that made her believe that she was less was going to pay. The piece of shit who would set fire to her home. Hurt her.

Rage bristled, and I shoved it down where it could fester and grow, so it'd

be ready for the moment I got up tomorrow and hunted him down.

“If you’re ready for that?” I quirked a brow, and she was surging forward, pushing my shirt up as a rush of words left her mouth. “Yes. Please. Now. I need you...I need to feel you. Show me, Derrick. Show me what it’s like to be adored by you.”

I was all too happy to oblige.

I dragged my shirt the rest of the way over my head, and Tessa gasped, her eyes raking over me.

Desire.

Hope.

Delight.

I was going to spend the rest of my life proving to her that she deserved it.

I dove in, kissing her sweet, sweet mouth before I wandered, my mouth roving across her jaw and down her throat that trembled and shook.

I kept moving south, kissing across the rampage going down in her chest, her heart beating for me. She whimpered when I dragged the neckline of her shirt down.

Girl wearing no bra.

Exposing one perfect, pebbled nipple.

I swirled my tongue around it, groan riding free, lust taking me hostage.

Her hands fisted in my hair. “Derrick. Please. God...I need you.”

She writhed on the table, and I knew there was no taking this slow.

This girl needed to know and she needed to know right then.

I curled my fingers in the waistband of her shorts and dragged them down, taking her underwear with them. I edged back, holding onto her knees, searching for some kind of restraint.

None.

When it came to her, there was none.

I leaned down and feasted on her pussy as I held on to the outside of her thighs.

She moaned and whimpered and cried my name, and poor Gigi was whining at my feet.

Laughing against Tessa's clit, I gave her one last lick before I scooped her up into my arms, kissing her while I muttered, "We're going to give poor Gigi a complex."

I carried her into my room and shut the door to keep Gigi out, and I tossed Tessa to my bed.

She bounced on the mattress. Giggles rippled free, and this woman was grinning up at me like the shroud had been ripped from her spirit.

Joy.

It streaked between us.

Filling the room.

Banging against the walls.

"Take your shirt off, baby. Want to see you."

She didn't hesitate. She tore the tank off and tossed it to the floor.

And there was my perfection—my completion—laid out on my bed.

Naked.

Bare.

Trusting me.

"I never thought I would find someone like you," she said.

I kicked off my shoes and ticked through the buttons of my jeans. I shoved them down and kicked them off my ankles.

She trembled.

Slowly, I crawled onto the bed. Hovering an inch over her, I cradled her face in my hands. "And you are exactly what I was waiting for. I knew you were out there—somewhere. I refused to give up faith believing in you. And here you are...right where you belong. Not goin' to let you go, Tessa. As long as you'll have me, I will be right here, protecting you like the treasure you are."

Those eyes roved over my face. Searching. Pleading. "You hardly even know me."

I splayed my hand over the battering at her chest. "And this tells me everything I need to know."

She turned and did the same to me, her delicate hand laid across the

beating of my heart. “You feel me the same way as I feel you?”

“Yeah. I think I knew it the second I got you into my arms in that fire. It was something different than I’d ever experienced. Like something came alive in me in that moment.”

“Are we fools to believe in it?”

“I think we’d be fools not to.”

She smiled. Smiled this smile that cut through the middle of me and found the spot that had always been meant for her.

I leaned down and kissed her. Kissed her slow. With devotion. With a promise.

I grabbed a condom from the nightstand and I had it rolled on in a flash. I tucked her closer, my hand set on the small of her back and the other behind her neck.

“Do you want me, Tessa?”

“I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life.”

So I gave myself to her.

Drove deep, a grunt pulling up my throat as I seated myself in the tight clutch of her body.

Perfection.

I heaved out a breath. “Fuck. You are the best thing I’ve ever felt.”

She gazed up at me. “You are everything.”

I gathered her up, drove into her again and again.

Deep.

Possessive.

Her pants rose into the air, this girl letting herself go.

Getting lost.

Taking me with her.

I murmured every truth that I had.

“I won’t let you go.”

“I will cherish you.”

“I promise I will never let anyone hurt you.”

Got the feeling this was the purpose I’d always been called to.

Never letting go of her gaze, I edged back a fraction so I could touch her, this girl's body wound so tight I knew she was getting ready to blow.

I swirled my fingers over her clit.

She lit.

Going off.

She screamed my name, and her walls clutched my dick, and I was following her into bliss.

Flames consuming.

A heat unlike I'd ever known.

Obliterating.

A fire set to the sky.

Nothing left but the two of us.

I clutched her as I came.

Swore to God, every question I'd ever had became clear in that moment.

Both of us searching for breath, I rolled onto my side and took her with me.

Tessa sighed and set her cheek on my chest. I kissed the top of her head.

I didn't think I'd ever been happier than in that second.

"We'll find him, Tessa. I promise you that. You aren't going anywhere."

I'd die before I let that happen.

She exhaled. So deep. The sound of it nothing but trust. "Okay."

FIVE

Derrick

I JOLTED AWAKE to the shrieking of the alarm, the high-pitched beep, beep, beep, deafening.

I'd been woken enough to the sound of an alarm when I was sleeping at the station that my guts were already in tune to an emergency. Though this time, it was different.

Darkness penetrated.

Disorienting.

Smoke filled the air and burned my lungs.

Tessa bolted upright beside me.

A scream tore up her throat.

Terror radiating from her body and ricocheting from the walls.

Adrenaline surged through my veins, shooting me into action. She was in my arms in a second flat.

I had to focus.

I squeezed my eyes closed, and I counted the steps from my bed to the window that I'd memorized when I'd first moved in.

Training taking hold.

Act fast.

Don't panic.

Follow the plan.

I fumbled around and slid the window open as the smoke swirled and thickened. It filled my throat. I hurried to slip over the windowsill, getting my girl to clear air.

Her arms were around me, trusting me the way I told her that she could. I

ran with her across the yard, and I set her in the grass at the far side where she would be safe.

Sobs juttred from her chest, and I edged back, brushing back the hair matted to her face. “You’re okay. You’re okay. I’ve got you. I’ve got you. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Her eyes were wild, and I pressed a kiss to her forehead, hearing the sirens coming in the distance. “I’ll be right back.”

I had to get to Gigi. My mind calculated the time, sure she wouldn’t make it out if I waited for the crew to get here.

“Oh, God, Derrick.” Tessa’s voice was torn. Her love for me and our love for this dog that had brought us together.

I gave her a look that promised it would be okay, and I raced back across the yard. I dove through the window and onto the floor. I crawled through the dense smoke, grabbing a piece of whatever clothing we’d left on the ground and covering my nose to make it back to where Gigi had curled up in front of my door for the night.

A rush of relief slammed me when I found her in the same spot, and she was in my arms in less than thirty seconds, and I was crawling back for the window, eyes squeezed closed but the path clear in my mind.

I heaved us over the windowsill, thanking God as I did, Gigi squirming in my hold. Lights flashed through the night, coming closer, and I started to race in the direction of where I’d left Tessa.

My heart rate kicked.

She was gone.

What the fuck?

The panic I’d kept at bay swelled through my being.

“Tessa!” I shouted. My gaze raced across the yard.

Frantic. Frenzied.

I caught sight of a shadow in the distance. A tussling of movement.

Realization slammed me in a heartbeat.

I set Gigi down and sprinted that way.

Knowing someone was going to die.

Rage burning.

Violence lashing.

I pushed myself as hard as I could, chest squeezed tight.

“Tessa!” I shouted.

She screamed. “No. Help. Please.”

My teeth gritted as my feet pounded on the concrete, and I made the turn at the corner they’d just disappeared around.

He was dragging her by the arm, and she was shrieking and fighting and kicking her feet.

Good girl.

Fight that bastard, my brave, beautiful girl.

And that purpose just became clearer.

Tessa. Tessa.

Thanks to her fighting him, it took me two seconds to close the distance.

Refusing to let the monster win.

He was tall and a little thin, and the scrawny piece-of-shit could be sure he was going down.

I dove right over the top of her, nailing the motherfucker in the side. Making him lose hold.

We tumbled to the ground. Nothing but an instant flurry of fists and hatred.

Only mine was greater.

I got him onto his back and started whaling on him.

Fist after fist.

Blow after blow.

Bone crunched under my knuckles.

It became so clear.

All the love I had for this girl filling me with the need to end any threat.

Sirens blared, and shouts rode through the air, and a minute later a stampede of footsteps surrounded us. Hands pulling me off.

I let them. Let them descend and put him in cuffs.

I didn’t even stay to watch. I turned and went right to my girl who was on

her knees. I dropped down onto mine, sagging down and hauling her into my lap.

“Oh, God. Derrick. Derrick.”

I wrapped my arms around her, and she tightened hers around my neck.

The girl sobbed.

Terrified but freed.

“It’s okay. I’ve got you. I’ve got you.”

“I’m so sorry,” she cried into my neck. “I’m so sorry.”

I held her tighter, murmured in her ear. “We all have a purpose in this life, Tessa. You are mine. Do you understand that? I will do anything for you. Live or die. Fight and will never settle for defeat.”

I pulled back and framed her precious face in my hands.

I’d always known I was meant to serve. Called to go into the academy. I was thankful for every person I’d ever helped in some small way. But, I knew, I was always supposed to be right here, in this moment.

“I love you. Do you understand? You are it for me. You are my end.”

Tears blurred her eyes and streaked down her cheeks. “And you...you are my new beginning. I love you. I love you so much.”

And I kissed her.

Kissed her mad while activity moved around us.

A wet nose nuzzled my arm, and I pulled back just enough to gather up Gigi so I could hold her in the middle of us.

Tessa giggled through her tears.

“Forever,” I whispered at her lips.

“Forever,” she whispered back.

I was her beginning and she was my end.

A circle.

Endless.

And it was time for us to begin.

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The Harris Family Beginnings

AMY DAWS

VAUGHN HARRIS

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death, I think as I stare at the striking woman sitting in a dingy East London pub. She's a diamond in the rough of the strange assortment of people from all walks of life in here. My teammates and I usually try to find a local pub like this whenever we're traveling for matches so we can drink without any fans disturbing us.

But right now, it's not the football fans bothering me.

It's this woman.

I've been watching her for the better part of three hours, and every time I consider approaching, I psych myself out. Which is ridiculous, because I'm a professional footballer—I've played in the most intense matches, against world-class athletes. On top of that, I've slept with countless women while traveling the world, and while they sweeten the night, they never linger in my thoughts.

But as I stare at this woman across this particular pub, the feeling building in my chest is like nothing I've ever experienced before.

Certain death.

However, I'm quite certain that my internal debate will be halting soon, because ten minutes ago, some drunken arsehole slithered his way up to her, and I've had a death grip on my pint glass ever since.

The woman doesn't look happy. But she doesn't look like she needs saving, either...which only makes her more gorgeous. She's tall with an elegant body that looks like it was made for dancing. However, her stance is strong and athletic. I imagine she can hold her own with some drunken arsehole.

Christ, she's beautiful.

"Have you found your next conquest, Harris?" my teammate, Arthur, drunkenly croaks while ruffling my dark hair and slopping beer on the floor

in front of us. His half-hooded eyes are glazed over as he stares at the blonde. “She looks like a rough tart in need of a hard shag.”

“Shut up, you,” I bark, and shove him into the rest of my teammates who are drinking behind us.

They look at me with confusion as Arthur straightens and licks the spilled beer off his hand. “Oi, no need to get your knickers in a twist. I’m just taking the piss.”

My nostrils flare. “You could be talking about my future wife.” I turn away from him and glance back at the blonde, my eyes narrowing with intensity when I see that same drunken idiot has now wrapped his arm around her shoulders, and she does not look pleased.

The woman and I make eye contact for the hundredth time, and I decide then and there that death or not, I can’t stay away a moment longer.

I barrel across the pub, ignoring the cackling of my teammates behind me as I watch the man attempt to whisper in the woman’s ear. She folds in on herself and tries to politely pull out of his embrace. Her uncomfortable demeanour causes my blood pressure to skyrocket while the drum of my heartbeat echoes in my ears. This twat must be a complete imbecile, because he doesn’t take the hint.

I briefly consider how bad it could be for a professional footballer to assault a pub patron. Surely, that will end with me paying this arsehole a lot of money. But when I see his hand dip lower on her hip...I don’t give a fucking toss.

When I reach him, I clamp down on his shoulder, and when he turns to look at me, he jolts as if I’ve struck him, and his face contorts into pure agony. I glance down to see the woman’s knee has landed smartly in the arsehole’s crown jewels. I try to yank the man away from her, but before I can, he crumples to the filthy pub floor and begins to howl like an injured animal.

I swallow hard, barely stopping myself from cupping my own balls for comfort. I then shake that thought away and make a move to drag him off, but the blonde shoves me out of her way. She stands between his legs and kicks him in the balls one more time for good measure.

“Touch me ever again, and my next kick will render you a eunuch,” she

growls in a thick Scandinavian accent as the bloke looks like he's going to pass out from the pain. He crawls away with his knackered cock, and my gaze turns to the beauty before me.

"Christ," I croak, my jaw dropping as my body remains paralysed in shock.

Her chest heaves as she turns her fierce blue eyes on me. "What do you want?" she snaps, clearly ready for another brawl. "Do you have a problem with me eliminating this man's cock?"

"Not at all," I stammer, my throat suddenly dry as her voice resonates through my entire body. I glance down, taking in her wide stance and fierce, no-bullshit expression. She flips her long, golden locks over her shoulders and eyes me with a warning that causes an ache in my chest. The ache is so intense it feels like a bloody truck has just run straight through me. I clear my throat, and add, "My only problem is that I think I might be in love with you."

The woman blinks, her intense sapphire gaze unrelenting on mine. "Emasculating a man is cause for love? Are you sick in the mind?"

I nod and shake my head at the same time because bloody hell, maybe I am. "Probably," I reply and then mentally try to get control of myself. "Can I buy you a drink? I promise to keep my hands to myself."

Her eyes narrow as she looks me up and down and reaches to the nearby pub table to retrieve her glass of wine. She takes a fortifying sip and lifts it to me. "I don't need you to buy me a drink."

"Then let me give you a life," I reply quickly, recovering the boldness that left me for a moment.

The corner of her mouth quirks up. "Are you assuming I have no life?"

"Not at all." My eyes roam down her pale blonde hair, glowing in the dim pub lighting. "But my life didn't start until I met you, so I figured it was only polite of me to return the favour."

She laughs, and it sounds like a fucking angel. I decide right then and there that I want to make this woman laugh forever.

Moments later, we're huddled over a small pub table by the front window. The yellow street light basks her in a golden light; it feels similar to gazing into a sunset. She's like an elegant dream with a strength I've never seen in a

woman. She's enchanting.

"What's your name?" I ask hesitantly because she throws me off my game like no other.

She stares back at me with a blank, unreadable expression. "Vilma Nyström."

I lick my lips and tilt my head. "Is that Swedish?"

She nods, impressed. "How did you know?"

"There was a famous footballer I loved who was Swedish and had the same last name. I'm sure it's a common one up there."

She gets a peculiar look on her face and then takes a sip of her wine. "What is your name?"

"I'm Vaughn Harris," I reply smugly, expecting her to react because I don't come across many people who haven't heard my name.

She doesn't react.

I have to fight back my smile.

"Do you like the name Harris?" I ask, eyeing her cheekily.

She shrugs as if bored while looking to the bar where her friends are busy taking shots. "It's a fine name, I guess. Why do you ask?"

I need her attention back on me so I quickly reply, "Because if we get married someday, I'd quite like you to take my name." I smirk and lift my drink to my lips as she whips her eyes back to me in surprise.

She tries to hide her smile.

She fails.

I fucking love it.

"Are you from London?" she asks, clearly not ready to discuss our future nuptials quite yet.

This is a good sign. She wants to know more about me. The feeling is mutual, Vilma. I want to know everything about you. "Originally, I'm from here, but I currently live in Manchester." I lower my pint to the table and casually add, "I play football for United."

I watch her carefully, expecting the reaction that most women have when they find out what I do for a living. When she stares blankly at me, I realise I should have known that Vilma...isn't like most women.

“I don’t understand football,” she says with a heavy sigh while propping her elbows on the table. “It’s so much running, and the scoring is so low. It’s a very dull sport, yes?”

I blink.

And blink.

And blink some more.

Clearing my throat, I lean forward. “I’m sorry...I must not have heard you correctly because it almost sounded like you called *football* dull?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, football is dull.”

That ache in my chest returns, but it’s not the same sensation as before. This is the feeling I get when I miss a penalty kick, or like the kick in the nuts she executed only moments earlier.

The love of my life cannot hate football.

“Darling, how good is your English?” I ask, sending a prayer up to the heavens that this is some horrible language barrier.

“My English is perfect,” she snaps defensively and narrows her eyes at me. “I’m at the University of London on a scholarship.”

“So, you’re clearly very bright,” I reply, running a hand through my dark hair and biting my lip nervously. “Then how in the bloody hell can you call football dull?” I splay my hands out on the table and stare her straight in the eyes. “It’s a widely known fact that football is the most magnificent game in the entire world.”

“Clearly not widely known,” she retorts with a shrug and then takes a sip of her wine without breaking eye contact with me. “If I don’t know it, it’s not wide.”

I slow blink once more, wondering if I can truly allow myself to be in love with a woman who can so easily desecrate my religion. “You must let me change your mind.”

She shakes her head. “How would you do that?”

“I’ll...bring you to one of my matches,” I reply quickly. “We play in Manchester at Old Trafford in a couple of weeks. You have not lived if

you've not attended a football game there. Let me fly you there."

"Fly me there?" She laughs with wide eyes. "You hardly know me. Why would you go to such an expense?"

I reach across the table and grab her hand, a spark running through my veins at the skin-on-skin contact. "Because this night...this moment...this *feeling* I get when I look at you...can't be for nothing."

The silence grows as our eyes lock, and our breaths quicken. Christ, what is it about this woman that makes me feel so...alive? I've lived my whole life playing the world's greatest sport, and I've never, not once, felt as I do when I look into Vilma's eyes.

She breaks our heated stare and runs her finger around the edge of her wine glass, allowing me to continue to hold her other hand. "And you think if I watch you play football, I will be a changed woman?"

I weave my fingers through hers and feel a hum of electricity roll through my body. "I know you will be." Because bloody hell if I'm not already a changed man just talking to her.

"Why?" she whispers, rubbing together her lush, pink lips that are damp from her wine as her eyes glance down at mine.

"Because football gives me life. It feeds my soul. Without it, I can't breathe, I can't function...I can't even *fuck*."

She inhales sharply, her eyes hooding with desire. "You speak with intense passion."

My cock instantly springs to life with her heated reaction. A reaction I want to see over and fucking over again. "Only because football has fed my soul for most of my life." I lift her hand and press my lips to her knuckles. I feel a shiver run through her as goosebumps crawl up her arm. "What are you passionate about, darling?"

She pulls her hand back and takes a deep breath, clearly trying to regain control of herself so she can speak. She eyes me seriously. "I am passionate about family."

The corner of my mouth lifts as I take the moment to adjust myself more comfortably. She has no idea the effect she has on me...and I'm not just talking about my cock. "Excellent, me too."

She laughs that gorgeous, rich laugh that *dominates* my attention, making

me want to *surrender* to her right here, right now. “You cannot be passionate about two things, footballer.”

“I can *because* I am a footballer. Football means that I have passion in excess.” I sit back and wait for her to challenge me more.

She narrows her eyes wickedly. “Do you want children someday?”

“Of course,” I reply, knowing that she probably thought talking about kids would scare me away, but she’s wrong. Admittedly, I haven’t given them much thought, but the image of her as a mother would be a fearsome sight to behold.

“How many?” she asks, lifting her chin to look down at me.

“As many as you want,” I reply boldly, and can’t help the smug grin that spreads across my face.

She crosses her arms over her chest, and a small frown ghosts her lips as if a sad memory runs through her. “I grew up an only child and watched my mum try to have more children and fail over and over again. She was clinically depressed and withdrawn, even from me, the one thing she was desperate to have. A child. Her child. Me. Therefore, I’ve always known my whole life that a big family means a happy mummy. So, I want lots of children, footballer. What do you say to that?” she asks quietly.

Her eyes look a little insecure, like she fears she’s shared too much. I don’t want her to withdraw, so I choose to defuse the situation by attempting to make a heavy conversation a little lighter. “As it happens, I have a lot of super sperm that are ready to find a loving home in a woman’s womb...so lots of children are all right by me.”

Her shoulders shake with silent laughter, and a lightness resembling appreciation creeps into her features. But she furrows her brow and continues to soldier on. “I want at least four. An even number—that way, all my children have a mate.”

“Perfect,” I quip. It’s obvious she has thought a lot about her future. But I wonder if she’s ever shared her ideas in such detail with anyone, let alone a bloke she just met. “That’s the exact number of children I want as well.”

She presses her lips together and tries not to smile. “But I want one set to be twins so I don’t have to give birth so many times.”

She’s giving me every chance to back down in this conversation, but

bloody hell if I'm not more attracted to her tenacity with each new admission she shares.

"Excellent." I prop my arms on the table. "Twins run in my family on account of our super sperm, so I'll have no problem fulfilling this request for you. In fact, our similarities are getting a bit creepy now, don't you think?"

She pins me with an unamused look. "It was creepy when me kicking another man in the balls caused you to profess your love for me."

I smile victoriously. "What can I say? I'm a man who knows what I want. And you were very agile the way you floored him like that...very sexy. I bet you'd make an excellent footballer." I can't decide what I want to see her as more: pregnant with a child, or playing football on a pitch. *Christ, who the hell am I ever right now?*

She laughs, and her hair falls into her face, so I reach forward to tuck a strand behind her ear. Before I can retreat a safe distance, she grabs my hand and turns it over to inspect my palm, dragging her delicate fingertips over all my calluses. "You are a professional footballer, and you want me to take your name and give you children even though I called one of your biggest passions in life dull? How is this possible?"

I can only shrug. How has any part of this night been possible? How have I gone from a lonely professional footballer to meeting the woman of my dreams in a dreary pub? It doesn't matter. Everything in my body tells me that this woman is a *keeper*.

"If you loved football, then you'd be too good to be true...and Vilma, there is no way what I feel when I look into your eyes can be a lie." My answer is chock full of brutal honesty and I can only pray she feels the same way.

• • •

Two hours later, I'm walking down a London street, holding Vilma's hand. I haven't been able to stop touching her. Her skin is soft, like a memory. As though I've held her a million times, and we were lovers in another life or something. I know it sounds utterly mad, but it's the only thing I can come up

with for why I'm so easily breaking the team curfew. Football is important to me, my top priority even, and staying out late will certainly result in a hefty fine. But when you meet the love of your life, money is no object.

Her hands have continually taken adventures of their own up my arm—exploring my muscles and making me burn from within as she plays with the hem of my shirt. Her skin tingling against mine. The sexual tension is off the charts, but she's content to continue talking. Therefore, so am I. I want to know everything she wants to tell me.

"I am doing all the talking. You should do more," she's saying, resting her head on my arm like she's done it a thousand times before.

"What do you want to know?" I ask, and attempt to casually smell her hair like the total creep I am right now.

She thinks for a moment and then replies, "Tell me your saddest memory." Her eyes soften around the edges as she stares up at me.

"How about a happy one instead?" I retort, facing forward and offering an easy smile. "I have loads of those."

"No," she quips, squeezing me tighter. "Sadness shows the truth. I want some truth from you."

I inhale deeply, because with one simple statement, she has struck a nerve that I don't often allow myself to strike. A sharp pain builds in my chest as the memory assaults me. "I guess it would have to be the day my parents died."

She stops midstride and pulls me backwards so I'm forced to face her. Her brows knit together with concern. "What happened to them?"

I look away, wishing I didn't care about this woman so much because then I wouldn't have to be so honest with her right now.

The truth is, I don't discuss my parents' accident. Not with the media, not with my teammates, and not with my brother or friends. Not with anyone. It's a darkness I don't often stoke because it doesn't take much for it to turn to fire. But telling Vilma feels important. It makes her and this evening all the more real.

I meet her gaze and squeeze her hand tightly. "They died in a car accident when I was seventeen. I was training with United at the time, so I wasn't close when it happened, and I didn't get to the hospital in time to say

goodbye. My father died before I was even out of Manchester, and my mum died just as I arrived in London. They were on their way to Manchester to see me when they crashed.”

A silence descends for a long, painfully awkward moment until Vilma reaches up and brushes the hair off my forehead, cradling my cheek in her palm. “Vaughn, I’m so sorry,” she says sincerely.

For a moment, I close my eyes and lean into her touch, letting her warmth seep in. When I open my eyes, I see the glimmer of tears reflecting in her gaze and it’s hard to look at. I turn away, pulling out of her embrace and letting the coolness of the night replace it. “It’s all right. I’m over it now.”

“Of course you’re not over it,” she snaps, grabbing my chin and forcing me to look at her. “You experienced a great loss.”

“It was five years ago,” I argue, trying to soothe her so we can move on from this horrible conversation.

“What is five years when it comes to grief?” Her lips thin with anger as her eyes dart back and forth between mine. I’m amazed at how fiercely she sees through my façade. “Grief has no timeline and no expiration date. It lives here forever.”

She presses her hand to my chest, over my heart, and a warmth once again runs through me at her touch. I cover her hand with mine and nod. “You’re right. It’s still there.”

Her eyes rove over my face knowingly. “Do not tell people you’re over it. To say those words minimises the memory of your parents.”

I swallow the painful knot in my throat because she’s right. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just be honest with me.”

Her blue eyes hit me with such intensity that it’s difficult to breathe. Christ, who is this woman? Where did she come from? What was my life before I felt her in it?

I reach up and touch her cheek, gliding my thumb along the curve of her jaw. “I think I’m falling in love with you, Vilma Nyström.”

Her eyes narrow as though she’s trying to catch me in a lie but can’t. She licks her lips, and replies, “Then you should kiss me to change the thinking into the knowing.”

The corner of my mouth quirks up. I've imagined how this woman would kiss since the moment I laid eyes on her. Would she be soft and delicate like her body? Or fierce and confrontational like her mind? The truth is, it wouldn't matter. I'd take her anyway, anyhow, and anywhere in between as long as it meant I could kiss her. Have her.

I dip my head and pause before our lips touch. "Don't ever change that part of you."

"What part?" she asks breathlessly as she anticipates my contact.

"The part that always challenges me." I bite my lip and move my nose to her neck to breathe in her scent, causing my body to buzz with anticipation. I inhale deeply, committing the sugary aroma to memory. "Your challenging side is quite possibly what I love most about you."

I softly brush my lips against hers, and a tingling sensation erupts inside me. She tastes sweet and sinful, and I savour the feel of her silky lips against mine. Her hands reach up and fist my shirt as she pulls me flush against her body, morphing this gentle teasing of lips into full-on contact.

Her breasts rise and fall against my chest as I cradle her face in my hands and swirl my tongue deep into her mouth, ravishing her with deep, drugging kisses. She moans softly, and my cock thickens at the sound of her desire.

Christ, I want her. I want her so bad I can hardly stand it.

Suddenly, she pushes me away. "I have to tell you something."

"Anything," I reply with a heavy breath, pulling her back to my lips so I can taste her again.

She kisses me for a long moment and then pulls away, sucking in big gulps of air. "My grandfather played football for Sweden."

"What?" I croak and try to kiss her again until suddenly, her words hit me, stopping me short. "What did you just say?"

She chews her lip nervously. "His name was Erik Nyström."

My eyes flare. "That's the name of the famous player I was talking about earlier."

Her head lowers with a sheepish look. "I figured this much."

"He singlehandedly kicked England out of the World Cup and won five league titles and five Swedish Cups!"

She nods slowly. "I am aware."

"And he's your grandfather?" I ask for confirmation again because...holy bloody hell.

"Yes," she replies, watching me hesitantly.

I run my hands through my hair, trying to clear my lust-fogged brain to understand what this all means. "Why didn't you say anything earlier?"

She pulls away and pushes her hair back, her strong bravado faltering for a moment. "Because you were already coming on so strong. If I told you who my grandfather was, it would have been too confusing."

"Confusing how?"

She exhales heavily, closing her eyes before replying. "I...wanted you to like me for me...not because I love football more than breathing."

My entire body feels pummeled with that one comment. "Wait, so you don't hate football?"

"Hate it?" She laughs and shakes her head. "I love it more than I love sex."

"Jesus fuck...you *are* too good to be true." I pull her flush against me, ravaging her mouth, unable to get enough of her in this moment in time.

In a blind flurry, we find ourselves against an unknown building, kissing with so much fire, we could burn this city to the ground. She hooks her leg around my hip, grinding herself against me as my hands greedily explore her curves. When she groans into my mouth I think I might have sex with her right here...right now.

Suddenly, she pulls back, her lips wet and swollen and begging to be kissed again. "Wait, wait. This isn't right," she says breathlessly while looking up and down the street that is thankfully abandoned this time of night.

Fighting every part of my sexually charged body, I nod and help her find her footing before backing off and mourning the loss of her heat already. Fuck me, I lose my mind around this woman. Vilma deserves much more than being fucked against a bloody building.

She straightens herself and then grabs my hand, attempting to drag me down the street. "Come."

“Where are we going?” I ask, watching her curiously, seeing her in a whole new light now.

“My flat,” she states through clenched teeth, her entire body tense with a sense of desperation. “Somewhere private.”

“Why private?” I ask stupidly while my eyes zero in on her frantic expression.

She turns on her heel and shoves her mused hair out of her face. “Because we need to have sex,” she rushes out and stares at my chest nervously.

The sexual fog in my brain clears at her very specific words. “What are you talking about, Vilma?”

“This,” she says, pointing back and forth between the two of us as her eyes blink rapidly. “It’s too intense. It’s not sensible. I can’t fully believe it. But if we have sex, if we lay with each other...then we’ll know for certain.”

My brows lift. “You think having sex will be telling?”

“Yes!” she exclaims, looking up, her eyes wide and fiery on mine. “You are a footballer, and you speak of passion. No better test for love than sex. I need to see you, Vaughn. All of you. Then I will know my heart completely.”

My pulse races in my veins as it dawns on me what she’s fully saying. “Are you saying you might love me too, Vilma?” I ask, the hopefulness in my voice loud and clear.

“I’m not sure. I just...need you to stay with me tonight. We’ll figure out the rest tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” I narrow my eyes and cross my arms over my chest. “As long as tomorrow includes forever.”

“God, you cocky, arrogant footballer...” She begins what I believe to be a slur of expletives in Swedish, and good Christ, it makes my cock even harder than before. “Are you coming back to my flat or not, footballer?”

I smile victoriously. “Lead the way, future Mrs. Harris.”

• • •

Vaughn Harris – Fifteen Years Later

I knew the night I met my wife that it would mean certain death, but I just assumed it would be the death of life as I knew it. I never once considered it could be the actual death of my wife.

Not my darling Vilma.

I stare into the rundown East London cemetery as the freezing December rain pelts me in the face. I haven't been here since we buried Vilma. And even though she's been gone for years, I still think that if I walk into this cemetery, if I look at my wife's gravestone, if I touch that grass that covers her body...I'll be dead too.

And I've been dead for seven fucking years already.

If Vilma were here, she'd snap me out of this. She was my sunshine and strength, my passion and love. She was everything I ever wanted out of life and more than I ever could have imagined.

The first time she saw me play football in Manchester, I proposed to her. It was after she said yes in the stands of Old Trafford Stadium that she told me she was pregnant from our first night together in London.

I was terrified.

But not Vilma.

She was ready.

She was ready to love me, marry me, and make me a father. Motherhood didn't scare her a bit. She charged after it as though it was her destiny.

And that was just the beginning.

After that, our life became a carousel of babies and football. She traveled with me with a toddler on her hip and another baby in her belly. Then we had those twins we spoke of the first night we met, and just when we thought we were done creating life together, another surprise baby turned us into a family of seven, with four boys and one girl.

Vilma was happy.

Which was incredible because it was utter chaos in our small Manchester flat. At one point, we had four children under the age of five, and not a night went by when we didn't have a little one sleeping in our bed.

Bloody hell, we were happy.

Until cancer came into our lives and slowly sucked all the vibrant sunlight

from my beautiful wife's body and all the passion for football out of mine.

Since her death, I've been a shell of a human trapped in agony and pain, darkness and destruction. Seven years of being an absent, angry father. I've been so horrible to all my children that my young Vi had to become a fill-in mummy at the age of five. She's so much like her mum that it's hard to look at her sometimes. Blonde and strong and challenging, she is the epitome of her namesake. She's not even the oldest of the lot, but the boys all look to her for guidance. And bloody hell, I'm middle-aged and so do I.

The twins, Tanner and Camden, are all right, all things considered. They're a lot like their mum too. They see life through rose-tinted glasses despite the fact they lost their mum as toddlers. They're growing up to be joyful little troublemakers, no thanks to me.

Then there's Booker, our baby boy, who's now as old as Gareth was when Vilma died. He's a quiet, sensitive little eight-year-old who was only one when we lost Vilma. He probably won't even have a single memory of her, and that kills me. He deserves to remember her. He deserves a life with a mother.

And our eldest, Gareth, the surprise Vilma and I didn't expect but welcomed with open arms. He was our first and started our family. He grew our love exponentially. He was eight when Vilma died, and he's now turned into an angry teenager who resents me for how I treated his mum before she died. He looks at me with so much hatred that I fear he'll just run away one day.

And he's right to resent me. I resent myself. I hate that I've abandoned this family that I created with the love of my life. Things need to change.

I reach into my pocket and pull out the letter that Vilma wrote to me. The letter that I've not touched in the seven years she's been gone. Honestly, I haven't wanted to read it. I don't want to read her last words to me because then she truly will be gone.

But today I received a job offer to manage Bethnal Green Football Club. And as much as I've not missed the world of football since I left it after Vilma got sick, I find myself wavering on my answer.

Maybe this letter will be like getting help from my wife—hearing her voice again. Maybe this letter can give me the answers I so desperately need.

Or maybe this letter will mean *certain death*...

I unfold the worn paper, and my eyes well at the sight of Vilma's handwriting. I run my fingers over the letters, feeling the warmth of her through the paper. She touched this paper. She poured out her heart on this paper. This...is my wife.

I lift it to my face and blink away the tears to read.

My Dearest Vaughn,

The night I met you, you told me about losing your parents. You told me that you were over that pain. And what did I tell you? That grief has no timeline and no expiration date. It lives forever.

I hate that I said those words to you, my love, because I do not want this pain to live forever in you. I want you to find joy again. Happiness. Love. I want you to have more children with that super sperm that gave me my five beautiful little ones. The world needs more Harrises, my love. And our Harrises need you. Our children need their father.

Please be gentle with Gareth. He is a strong, stoic little boy who has not left my bedside since I became sick. He acts tough, but he has a pain inside of him that I believe only a father can help mend.

And don't let Vi waste her whole life taking care of her brothers. She is a giver, but she needs to be selfish from time to time. The boys will make it hard for her to find love, but you must instill some boundaries, or they will truly occupy her whole life.

Funnily enough, I do not worry about the twins. Tanner and Camden are cheeky little sods who will get everything they want in life and probably more than they should have. It will take strong, intelligent women to tame them, and for that, I am grateful because that means they'll have a piece of me with them as they grow old. You recall that it was my challenging strength and endurance you loved most about me?

My baby Booker. My sweet, precious boy that I can still feel the warmth and weight of against my breast. Watch him closely, Vaughn. I did not get enough time with him, and I fear he will struggle quietly because of this. He will look up to his brothers and you...be there for him, please.

I do not know how much time will have passed before you open this letter,

but I know that despite your pain and despite your grief, you need to hold onto your passion. Teach our children passion, Vaughn.

Teach them football.

You always said you fell in love with me at the pub. Well, I fell in love with you on the pitch. Watching you play with such passion was the single most inspiring moment of my life. Let our children experience that love. Let football heal our family.

Your Eternally Loving Wife,

Vilma

I exhale heavily, choking back the sobs that are wracking my entire body. I should have read this years ago. I should have given football to my children all these years they've been begging me for it. I should have known that Vilma would know just what to do...even in her death.

"It's time for a change," I say, folding the now-damp paper and tucking it safely in my pocket. I turn and walk away from the cemetery.

Grief will likely live with me forever because my passion for Vilma is the most profound experience of my life.

But another passion burns inside me. And if my children are anything like their mother, they will feel that passion too.

I will teach the Harrises how to play football. And we will heal. It won't be easy, and it won't be immediate. But I truly believe that in time...football will bring our family back together. It has to.

THE END

Actually...this is the beginning!

Vaughn and Vilma's love story began in the 1980s and their ending is the beginning of the bestselling [Harris Brothers Series](#). Check out this complete series to see how the world of British football put this beautiful, broken family back together. Book 1 is [Challenge!](#)

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BB EASTON



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ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death, sure, but this woman is *not* going to jump.

I should know. I'm her therapist.

Or I *was*, up until yesterday.

I pull my eyes away from my infuriating former client, standing on the roof of my Midtown office building in three-inch stilettos, and force myself to unclench my teeth so that I can speak to the police officer standing next to me.

"This is a ploy for attention, and you are playing right into her hands. Please, take your men and go back to the station. This is exactly what she wants."

The uniformed officer folds his arms across his chest. "I can't do that, sir."

I let out an exasperated sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose, where I can feel a vein beginning to bulge. I do not need this shit today. "You're negotiating with a terrorist."

"I'm negotiating with an emotionally unstable citizen who has threatened to splatter herself all over *my* jurisdiction if *you* don't go up there and talk her down. Now, go. We don't have all day, *Doctor*." He says the word *Doctor* with such disdain that he might as well have substituted it with *Dickhead*.

"With all due respect, *Officer*, this is only going to reinforce her behavior. As her therapist—"

"As *her therapist*, you should know that I could have your goddamn license revoked for this. What the hell is wrong with you, man? Get up there and get your client!"

I crack my knuckles one by one as I march up the concrete stairs and shove my way through the heavy glass doors of the Atlanta Center for Behavioral Health. I've been a therapist here since 2013, and never have I

had a client as maddening as this one. I should have cut her loose months ago when I realized what she truly was, but I didn't.

And now, I'm paying the price.

I storm past the reception desk and security guard station, earning sympathetic looks from my helpless coworkers as I mash my finger into the glowing button next to the elevator.

One of the security guards clears his throat just before the doors open. "We're here if you need us, Dr. Keaton."

I snort under my breath as I enter the metal box that's going to deliver me to the beast. The doors shut, and I press the button for the top floor.

"*She won't speak to anyone, Doctor,*" the police officer told me when I finally came outside. "*She wrote on a piece of paper that she'll only talk to her therapist, Dr. Sterling Keaton. It says that if anyone else goes up there, she'll jump.*"

I watch my reflection shake its head in the mirrored elevator doors as I replay his words to me.

This is what I get.

I've devoted my entire adult life to helping people with mental health challenges. I spent almost all of my twenties in college. While my buddies were out getting drunk and chasing girls, I was holed up in the university library. I took every unpaid practicum, internship, and residency I could get my hands on for additional experience. And within five years of earning my doctorate in psychology, I became one of the most sought-after, well-respected cognitive behavioral therapists in the metro Atlanta area.

There isn't a single disorder in the DSM-5 that I can't treat.

Except hers.

The doors open on the fifth floor, and my hard-soled shoes make a satisfying racket as I stomp across the polished tiled floor and down a hallway painted a color we in the mental health world refer to as "agreeable gray." At the end of the hall, I yank open a metal door marked *EMERGENCY EXIT*. The concrete stairwell is meant to take people down to the street in case of a fire, but it will also lead you up to the roof in the event that you've been *playing* with fire—or in my case, a certain fiery redhead who is now making a spectacle of herself and forcing me to dance for her like a

marionette.

When I get to the top of the stairs, I take a steadying breath and choose my thoughts carefully.

She is not going to jump. Therefore, she has no power over you. You are calm. You are concerned. You are in control.

With a deep breath, I assume my neutral therapist expression and push the roof access door wide open. It's overcast today, and windy, but the threat of rain has done nothing to cool the humid spring air swirling across the hot black roof.

Avery is standing on the raised ledge directly in front of me with a triumphant smirk on her full pink lips. She's dressed in her usual "oversexualized lawyer" attire—as I've come to conceptualize it. Her crisp navy-blue dress clings to every curve of her hourglass figure and ends a few inches higher than any judge would consider appropriate. The three-inch heels on her nude pumps make the legs she's showing off look an extra mile long. Her coppery auburn hair, which usually falls around her shoulders in salon-perfect waves, now ripples in the breeze behind her like a villainous cape. She is cunning, confident, manipulative, and remorseless.

A classic psychopath.

I didn't see it right away, simply because Avery didn't want me to see it. She came in claiming to have symptoms of borderline personality disorder, and insisted that she was ready to do the deep work needed to make progress. She said she sought me out after seeing my interview on *60 Minutes* about the disorder. She came in every week, right on time. She flattered me. She flirted with me. She pretended to have the disorder, pretended to be improving when, really, all she was doing was seducing me.

That's what psychopaths do. Their brains are completely incapable of feeling empathy, and thus, the only thing they learn through therapy is how to be better psychopaths. Avery sees people as objects that will give her what she wants if she plays them the right way, pushes the right buttons. And what she wants, what she's wanted since the moment she saw my piece on *60 Minutes*, is me.

I wish I could say the feeling wasn't mutual. But I am a man, after all. And Avery is...Avery is a goddamn bombshell. And I'm not just referring to

her body, which she takes great pride in dangling in front of me like a juicy steak, but also her razor-sharp mind. Her megawatt smile. Her self-confident charisma. Her sexy, throaty laugh.

I knew by our second session that she was malingering as something she wasn't, but I kept seeing her week after week. I played along, acting like I didn't know exactly what she was because I'm attracted to her. Plain and simple. I enjoyed having my ego stroked by a beautiful, powerful woman, and yesterday, that careless indulgence blew up in my face.

Avery arrived to her appointment five minutes early, wearing a form-fitting gray suit and a provocative smile. I found out why a few moments later when she hung her purse and blazer on a hook by the door and took her seat in the armchair across from me.

Avery wasn't wearing a bra.

Her perky, peaked nipples strained against the silky blush-colored fabric of her blouse as she lazily arched her back and tossed her thick auburn hair over her shoulder. I became aroused immediately, and she knew it. Avery watched me with amused, hooded eyes as I crossed my legs and hid my erection behind my notepad. But I maintained my professionalism and began our session as planned. It was attention-seeking behavior, so I knew the worst thing I could do was reinforce it with a reaction.

But that's the thing about attention-seeking behavior. It tends to escalate until you can no longer ignore it. Which is exactly what happened approximately ten minutes later when Avery began to slowly unbutton her blouse.

At the time, I told myself that I'd let it go on as long as I did because I was being a good behaviorist. I was ignoring the behavior no matter how extreme the escalation, but we both know the truth.

I didn't want her to stop.

What I *wanted* was to jerk her infuriating ass out of her seat by the shoulders, slam her against the nearest wall, and give her exactly what she'd been begging for all these months.

But instead, I reached behind me to my desk phone, hit the speaker button, and dialed security.

Once Avery Oliver was escorted, kicking and screaming, out of my office,

I told my secretary not to schedule any future appointments with her. Then I locked myself in my office and angrily masturbated into a wad of tissues.

Twice.

“Dr. Keaton, you *came*.” Avery smirks, her tone on that last word suggestive, as if she can read my thoughts.

“You didn’t give me much of a choice.”

Her predatory eyes, rimmed with perfectly applied makeup that she didn’t even have the decency to fake-cry off, flare at my response.

“You didn’t give *me* any choice at all. Cheryl won’t book me another appointment. You refuse to take my calls. All I want is to apologize, but—”

“Apology accepted,” I snap. “Now, if you’ll excuse me...” I turn to go, knowing that every second of attention I give her is only reinforcing her behavior more.

A blood-curdling scream paralyzes me as I reach for the door handle, and the crowd below gasps so loud I can hear them, even over the hum of the industrial-sized air conditioners on the roof.

I turn to find Avery exactly where I left her, lips pursed in delight.

I take a deep breath and place my hands on my hips, staring down the length of my tie at my polished wingtips. It’s too damn hot to be out here in a tie. I loosen it slightly and try to compose myself before addressing the drama queen on the ledge.

She is not going to jump. Therefore, she has no power over you. You are calm. You are concerned. You are in control.

“Ms. Oliver—” I begin to scold.

“Call me Heather, and I’ll sit.” She tilts her head and raises her eyebrows innocently.

“That’s not your name,” I grind out between clenched teeth.

“Do you whisper it when you make love to her, or do you growl it?” She narrows her eyes at me, scorned. “Or do you keep your mouth shut while you thrust into her because you’re afraid you’ll say my name instead?”

“Ms. Oliver, please, just get down from there.”

I reach out an emphatic hand, and Avery takes one deliberate half-step back. The spike of her heel lands mere inches from the edge. The onlookers

gasp again, and her amber eyes flicker like twin flames.

“Fine. *Heather*. Just sit down. Please.” I can almost see the shiver of pleasure my authoritative tone gives her.

Avery sits on the ledge, facing me instead of the crowd below, which is a relief—until she spreads her legs, revealing the blush-pink silk of her panties.

The same color as the blouse she tried to remove in front of me yesterday.

My cock twitches, and I force myself to meet her searing gaze.

“I can’t stop thinking about you,” she says, dropping her eyes as her hands slide down her smooth, exposed thighs. “About the way you spoke to me yesterday. I’ll bet you’re a dominant lover. All that repressed anger. Your wife doesn’t like it rough, does she? Spanking. Choking. You could do those things to me, Dr. Keaton. You could do anything you want.”

I swallow the saliva pooling in my mouth. “You don’t know anything about my wife.”

“Oh, but I do. She goes to a spin class at Atlanta Fitness on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays before grabbing a coffee at The Dogwood Café on her way to work. Americano with a splash of almond milk. So sophisticated. I know which barista she likes to flirt with, too. The scruffy one with the man bun. His name tag says Neo, but his real name is Antonio. I know where she gets her nails done, her roots bleached, and how long it’s been since her last Botox injections.”

“Heather doesn’t get Botox.”

Avery arches an eyebrow at me. “She did eleven days ago.”

I feel my pulse pounding in my jugular, but I resist the urge to tug at my collar. “How do you know all of this?”

“I pay attention. That’s what you do when you love something, Dr. Keaton. You pay attention to it.”

“So, you’re in love with my wife?” I’m being obtuse. I’m being petty and obtuse and completely unprofessional.

Stop it. You are calm. You are concerned. You are in control.

“I think you know who I’m in love with.” Avery dips her chin and looks at me with wide, innocent eyes.

They’re the same eyes porn stars make while they’re sucking someone’s

dick. Wide and eager to please. I would know because I've been watching a hell of a lot of it lately—usually featuring redheads, for some mysterious reason.

“My point is that you *aren't* in love with Heather.”

“My marriage is none of your business.”

Avery assesses me with the subtle tilt of her perfect face. Clinical. Calculating. She might be the one threatening to jump, but somehow, I'm the one who's being analyzed.

“You didn't even ask where she goes on Tuesdays and Thursdays.” Avery arches an eyebrow.

My stomach churns with dread, but I refuse to ask. I refuse to participate in this line of questioning.

“You know, don't you?” Avery sneers.

“This is ridiculous. I'm calling the police.” I reach into my pocket for my cell phone.

“She's fucking the barista.”

I still, my fist curling around my iPhone tight enough to crack the screen.

Heather and I have had our fair share of problems lately, a complete lack of intimacy being one of them, but we're both just stressed out from work.

“What's her excuse for not fucking you, Dr. Keaton? Headaches? Exhaustion?”

“Migraines.”

I don't even realize I mumbled it out loud until the woman with her legs spread before me tosses her head back and cackles.

“She's not fucking you because she's getting it somewhere else. She only wants you for your money, Doctor. She doesn't care about you. Not like I do.”

I clench my jaw, trying to hide the nausea and rage I feel over the thought of Heather having an affair. Sadly, I'm not even upset about the betrayal. It became pretty obvious after we got married last year that she wasn't interested in much more than my money. It's the forced celibacy I'm pissed off about. It's been months since we've been intimate, and all the while, I've been nothing but patient and understanding. Never pressuring. Never guilt-

tripping or pouty. Yet the whole time—

No. Stop it. She's manipulating you. This is just another one of her tactics. Shut it down. Now.

“Ms. Oliver—” I warn, but the second Avery hears her own name on my lips, her eyes flare in anger and her legs clamp shut.

She spins around so that her feet are now hanging over the edge.

The crowd below screams as the phone in my hand begins to ring.

“Hello?” I grind out, immediately recognizing the number on the screen.

“What the hell is going on up there, Doc? Do I need to call in the crisis negotiator?”

Avery leans forward, glaring at the police chief down below. “I won’t speak to anyone but my therapist, do you hear me?” She yells so loud I can hear it echo on the other end of the phone. “If you send anyone else up here, I’ll jump!”

She kicks the shoe off her right foot, and the crowd shrieks as it bounces off the asphalt a second later.

“You’ve got thirty minutes before we send somebody up, *Doctor*. Handle it. Now,” the lead officer barks before hanging up.

I stuff my phone into my pocket and loosen my tie another inch so that I can rub the back of my neck.

Fuck, it's hot up here.

“I told you to call me Heather.” Avery glances at me over her shoulder in sheer delight, her other shoe dangling from her big toe.

“You have my attention. Now, what do you want?”

“The same thing as you,” Avery coos, tossing another four-hundred-dollar shoe into the abyss before turning around to face me again.

The bottom of her tight dress is hiked up over her ample hips, and I’m having a hard time remembering why touching her is a bad idea.

“It doesn’t matter what I want.” I clear my throat, hoping it will help clear my head. “I took an oath...I took vows.”

And you're certifiably psychopathic.

“Those vows are already broken, Dr. Keaton. Call your wife. Tell her you know about the affair.”

“Sorry, Ms. Oliver. You might be able to manipulate the cops, but it’s not going to work on me.”

Avery’s face darkens at my use of her name. She holds my stare as she reaches into the expensive-looking handbag next to her on the ledge and pulls out a cell phone in a rose-gold case. With no more than three or four taps, she holds the device up to reveal the words *Heather Keaton* and *dialing ...* on the screen. Then, she presses the speaker button.

I can barely hear the ringing, so I move closer, stopping a mere foot in front of the psychopath on the ledge.

Like a good little puppet.

“Hello?” my wife answers, and my guts twist.

“Heather! Good afternoon! It’s Avery Oliver. I hate to bother you, but I was just looking over the prenuptial agreement you sent over, and there’s a little adultery clause I need to touch base with you about. It says here that in the event of an extramarital affair you get nothing, so I want to be extra sure that your husband won’t find evidence of any kind of...*indiscretion*...on your part.”

“Oh.” Heather goes silent. “What, um...what kind of evidence?”

I feel like I’m going to be sick.

Avery watches me with a look of triumph as I struggle to process this information. “You know, cell phone records, text messages, emails ...”

“What about Snapchat?”

Oh my fucking God. Heather really is having an affair.

I should be horrified. I should be livid. But all I feel is a slippery, buttery warmth seeping through my veins as Avery reaches out and laces her fingers through mine.

“Snapchat is a lawyer’s best friend.” She laughs. “The messages disappear after they’re viewed, so you should be good. Just don’t use the text feature.”

“Okay.” Heather sighs. “Thanks for the heads-up.”

“No problem. Talk soon.” Avery drops the phone back into her designer handbag. Then, she leans forward and wraps her plump lips around the tip of my middle finger where our hands are joined. She does it slowly, giving me those big, round, dick-sucking eyes as she takes my third digit deeper into her

mouth.

Fuck me.

“You’re her divorce attorney?” I hiss, my cock swelling as her warm, wet tongue slides along the underside of my finger.

“Mmhmm.” Avery smirks as she releases my finger with a pop. “I sent a flyer and a few e-mails to her office as soon as I figured out that she was screwing the barista, and she took the bait. We just had our initial consultation last week. Once I was sure that she was actually going to leave you, I couldn’t hold back anymore. I had to let you know how I feel.”

“By attempting to seduce me during a therapy session?” I try to sound stern, but it’s kind of hard to remain professional when your client is unfastening your belt.

“You ignored all my other attempts to get your attention.”

“So now you’re threatening to kill yourself?” I swallow. Hard.

“What else could I do? You weren’t taking my calls.” Avery blinks up at me as she slides the zipper of my slacks down tooth by tooth with her left hand, the right one still entwined with mine.

“I...I took an oath,” I stammer. “I could lose my job over this.”

“I’m not your client anymore.”

With a steamy gust of air, three feet of auburn waves swirl around us. Unruly. Out of control. Begging to be tamed. Just like the woman sitting on the ledge before me. Unable to stop myself, I gather her coppery tresses at the nape of her neck and twist them around my fist, desperately trying to remember why this is a bad idea.

Vows?

Broken.

Oath?

She’s not my client anymore.

Psychopathy?

“Wait,” I bark as Avery’s fingertips curl around the waistband of my boxer briefs. “You said you didn’t come on to me until you were sure that Heather was going to divorce me. Why?”

Avery rubs her thumb over the swollen head of my cock where it’s

peeking out of my waistband, and my knees almost buckle from the sensation.

“I didn’t want to have that on my conscience. I’m in love with you, Dr. Keaton, but I would hate myself if I were the reason your marriage ended.”

My eyes roll up in the back of my head as her tongue follows the path her thumb just made. “So, you’re saying you would feel...remorse?”

“Mmhmm...” she mumbles, tightening the grip she has on my hand while inching my briefs down even farther so that she can lick her way up my shaft. “I’d never forgive myself.”

I laugh. I actually fucking laugh.

Remorse. Empathy. Avery’s not a psychopath at all. She’s just a stalker!

I pull this force of nature to her feet by her hair and kiss her surprised mouth. It’s like kissing a bolt of lightning. If you can harness its power, you’re king of the world. If not, you’re a fucking dead man.

Avery wraps my tie around her fist the same way that her hair is wrapped around mine. Then, she presses up onto her toes to kiss me deeper. She’s shorter without those sky-high shoes on. I like it.

As much as I hate to admit it, I like everything about this woman.

Letting go of my hand, Avery reaches between us and takes my length in her fist.

I moan into her mouth as she works me slowly. The sensation of finally kissing this woman, of being worshipped by her to the point that she would defy all social boundaries to get close to me, is an ecstasy I can’t describe. I’ve been a slave to my professionalism, my ambitions since I was old enough to fuck.

I want to let go.

And I want to do it with her.

Still gripping her hair, I slide my other hand up the back of her bare thigh and give her full, round ass a rough squeeze. Avery arches her spine and presses her backside into my hand. Remembering what she said earlier, I yank her head back, kissing her deeper as I knead her smooth, warm flesh. Then, without warning, I spank her. Hard.

Avery’s lips spread into a wide grin where they’re pressed against mine,

and she begins to work me faster.

I spank her again and feel a sense of euphoria wash over me. I relish this gift. I can't remember the last time I allowed myself to express my emotions physically. My anger, my frustrations, my worries, my hurt. Psychologists are taught to talk about such things calmly. We don't raise our fists. We don't even raise our voices. But when my palm connects with Avery's plump fucking ass, I feel a kind of release I've never experienced in my life.

Sliding my fingers along the seam of her silky thong, I feel how wet she is for me. How badly she wants this too. I dip my middle finger—the one she had in her mouth a few minutes ago—under the fabric and tease her from behind until she's panting with every breath I let her take.

"You could do those things to me, Dr. Keaton. You could do anything you want."

I plunge that finger inside of her before shoving it back into her mouth. Avery closes her eyes and sucks appreciatively, pumping me with both hands now.

Fuck.

"Turn around and put your hands on the ledge." My words come out more ragged than confident as I struggle to keep myself from coming all over her dress.

Avery does as I said, and the sight of her—ass up with my palm print on one cheek—makes me want to pound my chest like a fucking primate.

Ripping my tie off, I kneel behind her and grab two handfuls of buttery flesh. I slap her ass again before tracing the thin, silky strip of material between her legs with my tongue.

"Can they see you?" I ask, hooking the fabric with my finger and pulling it to one side.

"I...I don't think so." Her voice wavers.

Despite spending at least a dozen therapy sessions together, this is the first time I've seen Avery Oliver truly vulnerable. And I fucking love it.

"Good."

Without warning, I spread her with my thumbs and assault her with my mouth. Avery screams as I punish her, lapping and sucking with the feral

passion of a man possessed.

Not more than five seconds after the sound leaves her lungs, the phone in my pocket begins to ring again.

Goddamn it.

I hand the vibrating device to Avery, knowing who it is without even looking at the screen. “It’s Officer Parnell,” I growl. “Tell him you’re fine. Tell him you’re going to come down.”

Avery accepts the phone with shaky fingers as I lavish her with more *attention* than she bargained for.

“Mmhmm,” she mewls, arching her back as I palm her ass with both hands and plunge into her with my tongue.

“Yessssss.” Her knees buckle. “God, I am feeling so much better. Dr. Keaton knew exactly what I needed.”

I smirk as I swirl my tongue around her tight little hole.

“No, that won’t be necessary. Ahh! Thank you, Officer. We’ll be down soon.”

Avery drops my phone to the ground and reaches into the front pocket of her purse. Pulling out a square foil packet, she rips it open with her teeth and hands a condom back to me. When she glances at me over her shoulder, a curtain of auburn hair frames her disarmingly beautiful face, and the expression I see there isn’t the one I expect. It’s not manic or manipulative or carnal or even regretful. It’s simply open and honest. Hopeful and...happy.

And for the first time in years, I feel the same way.

I sheath myself, but I don’t fuck her. Not like this. I sit back on my heels, cock at full attention, and wait for her to come to me.

When she looks over her shoulder again, Avery’s smile fills me with joy. Shimmying out of her ruined panties, my favorite ex-client pads over to me on bare feet and straddles my lap with her dress up around her waist.

I claim her mouth as she sinks down onto me, reveling in the feeling of this woman in my arms.

“I really am in love with you,” she murmurs, thrusting her hands into my disheveled hair.

I guide her body up and down my shaft, filling her with every single inch

of me. I don't tell her I'm in love with her too—I make her *feel* it.

I'm sick of words.

Of vows.

Of oaths.

Of self-restraint.

I want to be wild. I want to be free. And as much as I've tried to deny it, I want this crazy fucking woman.

“Sterling,” she breathes against my mouth. The sound of my first name on her parted lips has me twisting her hair around my fist and clutching her to me even tighter. “Sterling...I...”

Avery buries her face in my neck as her legs begin to shake and her breaths turn into whimpers and her body milks my cock until I finally let go too. My muscles flex violently as all of my stress, my repressed needs, and my pent-up frustrations pour out of me in hot spurts of pure, unbridled pleasure.

Once I regain the use of my limbs, I release her tangled hair, smoothing a hand over it as I whisper her name in a hushed, loving tone. “Avery...”

Pulling away from me—just far enough to give me an unhinged sideways glance—the redhead on my lap grabs my jaw and snaps, “I told you not to call me that.”

I swallow, questioning everything I just deduced about her mental state, but when her sex-swollen lips curl up on one side in a mischievous grin, it sets my mind and heart at ease.

“Call me...*Mrs. Keaton.*”

BOOKS BY BB EASTON

SEXY STAND-ALONE COMEDIC MEMOIR

The inspiration for Sex/Life, a steamy dramedy series coming soon to
Netflix!

44 Chapters About 4 Men

The 44 Chapters SPIN-OFF Series

Darkly funny. Deeply emotional. Shockingly sexy.

SKIN (Knight's backstory, Book 1)

SPEED (Harley's backstory, Book 2)

STAR (Hans's backstory, Book 3)

SUIT (Ken's backstory, Book 4)

The RAIN TRILOGY

A gritty, suspenseful, dystopian love story.

Praying for Rain

Fighting for Rain

Dying for Rain

ABOUT THE BB EASTON

BB Easton lives in the suburbs of Atlanta, Georgia, with her long-suffering husband, Ken, and two adorable children. She recently quit her job as a school psychologist to write books about her punk rock past and deviant sexual history full-time. Ken is suuuper excited about that.

BB's memoir, *44 Chapters About 4 Men*, and the spin-off *44 Chapters* novels are being adapted into a steamy, female-centered dramedy series for Netflix called *Sex/Life*. Coming late 2020.

The Rain Trilogy is her first work of fiction. The idea, fittingly, came to her in a dream.

If that sounds like the kind of person you want to go around being friends with, then by all means, feel free to drop her a line. You can find her procrastinating at all of the following places:

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www.facebook.com/groups/BBEaston

And giving away a free e-book from one of her author friends each month in her newsletter: www.artbyeaston.com/subscribe

THE DEAL

A dark romance short story

ALEATHA ROMIG

ONE

“...ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.”

My blue eyes opened wide. Goose bumps prickled my skin, and my stomach churned with the wine I'd recently consumed.

I reached for the back of the chair, my legs unsteady, and contemplated my next move as past uncertainties came to sudden light.

Was I facing my new life, or was I doomed to die?

TWO

Earlier

SUCH A VAGUE time frame—earlier.

An hour?

A week?

A month?

How far back would I need to go to see clues or traps that had been laid, leading to this undeniable precipice in my life?

How could I determine what was wrong or right?

Was correctness something one learned in infancy or perhaps early childhood?

Who were the teachers?

What if the teachers who imparted wisdom to a young mind were deceitful in their mission?

As a young girl, my family would vacation along the sandy white beaches of Florida's west coast. My not-much-older brother and I would build sandcastles, complete with towers and moats, running to and from the shore to collect buckets of water before our hard work seeped into the sand, leaving our moat less of a water deterrent and more of a wet sand trap.

For years we ran into the warm, salty water without hesitation, and then one day while turning channels on our television in the North Carolina mountains, we heard the daunting music and watched as a giant shark maliciously hunted three men on a boat that was too small.

The next vacation, the two of us stood, hand in hand, peering out over the once-fun crystal-blue water, certain that within its depths a predator lurked. It was then that our mother pointed to the buoys spaced what seemed like yards apart, creating a straight line. We'd seen them before but never thought much about them.

“What you can’t see,” she said as she pointed from one to the other, connecting the dots, “are the nets beneath the water. Big nets. They keep the sharks away.”

“But,” my brother—the older and wiser one—said, “there have been dolphins on this side.”

“Yes,” she replied, “they can jump over. Sharks can’t.”

Suddenly, the water was again welcoming.

It wasn’t until years later when we were much better swimmers that we learned of her deceit. The water was warm as we raced to the sandbar and beyond. Our finish line was the mysterious buoys in the distance.

Seconds ahead of me, Kyle’s hand reached the white metal of the buoy.

I too reached out, my breathing labored as we both laughed until we didn’t...the same thought occurring in each of our minds simultaneously.

Our feet kicked, keeping us afloat as we circled. The floating object was attached to a chain with large links. In the clear gulf water, we saw the large anchor below. What we didn’t see was the net.

It didn’t exist.

When confronted, our mother claimed to not recall telling us such a far-fetched tale.

That was the way it was with false truths—they were difficult to remember and maintain unless you lived them day in and day out.

So where to begin this story...the day I was adopted into a family that I was raised to believe was my own, when my family was tragically lost, or maybe the day I learned that they weren’t my family at all? Or perhaps that was history, and I should start with more recent events...

THREE

Earlier in the evening

TOURISTS SIPPED COLORFUL drinks and swayed to the sound of jazz as white lights twinkled above the courtyard. This wasn't my scene. I was only here because of the man across the table from me. He wasn't my date or even my friend but my business partner. There was a time we may have been friends, but that was before. Ross Underwood and I met our junior year at the University of Pittsburgh, both majoring in English literature. We believed in the promise for our future.

Handsome and determined, Ross was the kind of guy who caught every woman's eye. In our department, the two of us were constantly at odds, both vying for valedictorian. Ross was going to be a famous editor, sought after by a big New York publisher. Me, my plans included writing. I walked into libraries and bookstores, inhaling the scent of paper and books, imagining my name upon the covers. I didn't want to be just present on a shelf near the back of the store but front and center on the round table near the entry, showcased for the world to see.

It seemed that as much as Ross and I claimed our differences, we shared the same dream—New York. We weren't alone; it was also the goal of every other literature major in the country.

Finally graduated and still living in Pittsburgh, Ross and I came to the conclusion that success could be best met if we combined our strengths.

It should be said that at no time were either of us romantically interested in one another. It wasn't that Ross wasn't handsome—he was—or that I wasn't what some consider pretty, I was. It was that Ross had a problem. There were other women I knew who made the mistake of dating him. Ross was many things when it came to business—determined, intelligent, and resourceful.

As a boyfriend, he was shit.

Perhaps due to his infidelity in relationships, I shouldn't have trusted him as a business partner. Then again, he was honest about his lack of monogamy, truthful not only with me but also with each woman he dated.

His honesty didn't matter. Each woman went into the relationship with stars in her eyes, determined to be the one to change his ways.

Ross wasn't going to change.

He would conquer the world and reach incredible heights in business, not in a personal relationship. The only thing he was true to was securing success. In that I believed.

Sipping a hurricane cocktail as Ross rambled on about the possibility of our newest creation, my mind was on anyone and anything except him. The air was sweltering as more bodies made their way into the courtyard. The tall walls surrounding us on all sides obstructed any possibility of a breeze as the live band played their New Orleans sound.

It wasn't that I didn't care about what Ross was saying. I did. It was that we'd picked at this subject to death. Over and over we'd worked. For months at home, hours on the airplane...I was done.

The premise we'd created brought our knowledge and skills to the common writer for a cost. The world of big publishing houses was on life support, the ice caps melting and forests burning. Even some of the biggest names in fiction were turning their backs on the very publishers who years and decades ago had made them household names. The news outlets were bubbling with stories as renowned authors secured multimillion-dollar deals, working directly with the biggest online distributor of—well, everything. Self-publishing was on the rise in exponential terms, and Ross and I were poised to break into that market.

Our editing program would revolutionize self-publishing. It was unlike any other available...

I swirled the straw in the last few sips of the peach-colored liquid. The ice cubes rattled as Ross's monologue reached its crescendo, and my body swayed to the alluring sound of jazz.

"...this could be it, our answer." Ross reached across the table. "Emma, are you even listening?"

"Yes, and I've heard it all..." *a million times*. I didn't say the last part.

“Save it for this mysterious Mr. Ramses.” I shivered as the name left my lips—Everett Ramses. Maybe it wasn’t his name that caused my reaction but just being in New Orleans where ghost stories abounded, or perhaps it was the alcohol coursing through my bloodstream minus food I should have eaten.

“Em,” Ross said, “the man has more capital than you or I could ever imagine.”

“I looked him up—researched him,” I said, voicing a concern I’d been harboring. “There’s nothing—no Wikipedia, LinkedIn, or website. Christ...” my voice rose over the low trumpet solo. “...he doesn’t even have a Twitter.”

“He’s private.”

“Is he old? Ramses was an Egyptian king...right?”

Ross shrugged. “We’re not in Egypt and they called them pharaohs. Besides, he’s not that old.”

My head shook. “Then why is he so secretive? Is he a criminal?”

Ross sat back and stretched his arms over the small table. “I don’t give a rat’s ass where his money comes from. He reached out to me.”

The whole thing gave me the creeps. I looked at my watch, seeing that it was after nine p.m. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know, but when someone like Mr. Ramses makes an appointment, we’re damn well waiting.”

“Fine,” I said, standing, my balance a bit off. “I need to order something to eat, or I won’t make this meeting.”

From the look on Ross’s face, he was getting annoyed with me. I didn’t care. I was annoyed too. The flight, including a two-hour layover, and a mix-up at the hotel were only a few of my day’s highlights. Steadying my footing and wishing I’d not worn a fitted white sleeveless top that showed a small strip of my midriff, a long flowing skirt, and high-heeled sleek sandals, but instead something more practical, I pushed between bodies, making my way to the bar near the rear of the courtyard.

Placing a food order was my immediate goal.

My head buzzed with the sounds as I did my best to avoid the growing number of patrons.

“Excuse me...pardon me.”

What legitimate businessman would ask to meet in the courtyard of a dark bar off Canal Street in the French Quarter?

I wedged my way through up to the bar. “Hey,” I yelled to one of the bartenders.

“Just a minute.”

Turning, my hand upon the sticky surface, I waited. Blowing my bangs away from my face in the sweltering humidity, I imagined a cool bath back at the hotel. My attention went to the crowd as my skin prickled with that odd sensation of being watched, of wanting to see a familiar face while all the time not wanting to see one.

This was my first trip to New Orleans—other than recently learning this city was where I was born.

I wasn’t the daughter of Oliver and Marcella O’Brien. It was after their passing and that of my only brother that I learned I’d been adopted—we both had. It was a tremendous jolt to not only lose your parents and sibling, but to learn they were never truly your family.

That didn’t mean they hadn’t done a good job of raising me and making me feel a part of a family. I only wish they’d told me when I was younger.

Instead of the parentage I’d been led to believe I had, I was in reality the daughter of a woman from New Orleans. Her name was Jezebel North—and from what I’d learned, the name fit. The birth certificate I was shown didn’t list a name in the space for father. From what I’d pieced together, the woman who gave birth to me worked in the French Quarter at a private club that was frequented by the dark, dangerous, and powerful people of Louisiana.

To read the speculative tales from thirty years ago, you’d believe in the crime stories of lore.

Jezebel disappeared after giving birth and taking me to the fire station.

The O’Briens raised me in Ashville, within the mountains of North Carolina.

According to those storytellers, New Orleans had changed hands since the men my mother knew were in power. I wasn’t referring to elected officials but the men who took power by force.

To be honest, the story seemed too far-fetched. There were few people in whom I’d confided this information. I turned back to the table, seeing Ross’s

blond hair.

He was one who knew.

With a shiver, I turned back to the crowd.

From the side of the courtyard, leaning against a stone archway, a strikingly handsome tall man with a dark gaze stared unblinkingly my direction. I turned from side to side, wondering if I was truly who he was looking at.

With broad shoulders that tugged at the seams of his white shirt, he remained still, a statue immune to the influx of patrons. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled up near his elbows, revealing powerful forearms. The top buttons were undone, showing a thick neck. His skin was dark, either tanned from Louisiana sun or perhaps his natural pigment. His dark hair was longer than short and shorter than long. It was combed back in soft waves. Unlike most of the men wearing shorts or blue jeans, this man's long legs were covered with gray dress pants, as if he'd made his way from the business district directly to the happenings of the French Quarter.

“Yeah?” a voice came from the bar.

I spun back, my heartbeat unexpectedly racing and my lips dry. “I'd like to order some food.”

The bartender nodded, reaching for a pad of paper.

“I'd like an order of—”

Two large tanned hands and muscular forearms came to either side of me, gripping the bar and caging me. I was trapped between the sticky surface and a solid chest. Heat rose from the ground upward, warming my already-heated skin. The deep voice vibrated his chest as his timbre rumbled through me.

“The lady is mistaken. She's dining with me.”

FOUR

I DIDN'T NEED visual confirmation that the owner of the deep voice was the man from moments ago, the one near the archway. I felt him around me—his presence—as well as within me, confirmed by the way my pulse raced.

I spun within the cage he'd created with his muscular arms.

This man, the one I didn't know, surrounded me, his height dwarfing me and his body electrifying me. The spicy aroma of his cologne mixed with the whiskey on his breath created a concoction that blended perfectly with the hurricane's rum in my system.

He was so close that at first, my eyes met his broad chest. Slowly, I brought my chin higher and higher. His wide neck came into view as his Adam's apple bobbed. Finally, my gaze met his. "I believe you have the wrong—"

The rest of my sentence disappeared into the black hole of his stare.

Such as a true region in space exhibiting gravitational acceleration so strong that nothing can escape from it, I felt myself drawn into the depth of his nearly black eyes. In the crowded courtyard filled with stagnantly hot, humid New Orleans air, a chill covered my skin, bringing goose bumps to life and drawing my nipples taut.

Why hadn't I worn an outfit with a bra?

What would it feel like to fall into this mountain of a man?

Just another inch forward and my breasts and his chest would collide.

"Our table is waiting, Emma."

Releasing his grip of the bar, the man's large hand came to the small of my back.

My forehead furrowed as I tried to make sense of what made no sense. His touch seemed too intimate and his presumption without merit. "Perhaps I'm the wrong Emma?"

He'd now directed me away from the bar. In his presence, there was no pushing or shoving to get around bodies of other patrons. Instead, the sea of people parted as we walked toward the archway where I'd first seen him.

"No." His deep voice resonated beyond the melancholy music, twisting my insides.

Once out of the courtyard, we entered a dimly lit hallway with flame-like sconces upon the walls. I stopped. "This is ridiculous. I'm not leaving here with you. I don't know you."

His lips quirked as if he found my opposition amusing. "You're quite right, Miss North. We aren't leaving. The owner has graciously provided a private dining room for our enjoyment. And soon we will be well acquainted."

North.

North was not my last name. It was Jezebel's, the woman I'd recently learned gave birth to me.

My neck stiffened. "Sir, you have the wrong Emma. My name is Emma O'Brien."

His strikingly handsome face tilted. "My mistake. I was made aware of the change."

My head shook. "Change? O'Brien isn't a change." I took a step back. "Who are you?"

He reached for my hand, turning my knuckles upward and bending gallantly at the waist, his firm lips brushing over the surface of my skin. Like a match to flint, my hand tingled with the heat brought by his touch. "Please, Emma, call me Rett."

I retrieved my hand. "Rett, your attention is flattering, but I really must go. My friend is waiting."

"No, my dear, Mr. Underwood has gone." He shrugged. "Presumably back to the hotel. Of that I can't be certain. He found...shall we say, a friend?"

My head moved from side to side as I peered over my shoulder toward the courtyard. Down the empty hallway, the music filtered our way as the growing crowd obstructed my view of where Ross had been seated. "He left me?" I turned back to Rett. "Ross wouldn't leave. We had a business meeting."

“About that, let’s be seated, and I will fill you in on the particulars.”

My feet were still not moving, my high-heel sandals seemingly rooted to the rough tile of the corridor. “You know about our business deal?”

“Emma, I have done my best to learn everything I could about you.” His hand again came to my lower back. His fingers splayed warmly upon my skin, between the top and skirt. “Come, let’s talk.”

“This...it doesn’t feel—”

He turned, his one hand skirting my waist, while his other still upon my back applied pressure. “Come now...” His deep tone echoed through the corridor as his eyes simmered. “Admit to yourself what this does feel like.” His possessive hold tightened, bringing me closer. “Admit it is exhilarating and stimulating. Admit that you’re curious to hear what I have to say. Admit that you’re intrigued and even turned on. When you do, I’ll admit my thoughts.”

I tried to step away. “You have no right—”

His chin rose, silencing my protest. I thought back on his last statement as I stared up into his dark orbs. “Your thoughts...about what?”

“Why, about you, of course.”

“What about me?”

“Dinner first.”

Without provocation, I began to walk in step as Rett led me down the hallway. As he pulled open a heavy wooden door, the floor changed from rough to smooth marble, and we were met with a swoosh of cool air. A smiling woman in a long red gown nodded our way.

Peering down at the top and gauze skirt I’d worn, I suddenly felt significantly underdressed.

“Sir,” the lady in red said, “your table is waiting.”

As if reading my mind, Rett leaned down, his lips close to my ear as his warm breath teased the sensitive skin of my neck. “You’re absolutely spectacular. Your outfit is perfect.”

“I-I didn’t know...”

Again he led me as we followed the woman in red.

She opened one of two large wooden doors to an intimate dining room.

The chandelier above acted as a prism, creating golden light that danced upon the ceiling as the crystals swayed. The walls were covered in rich oak paneling, trimmed in intricate carvings. The one and only table was set with a white linen tablecloth and red linen napkins. A single red rose in a silver vase with two tall candles in silver holders glowed from the center. Releasing his touch of my back, Rett moved forward and pulled one of the large high-backed chairs away from the table for me to sit.

Once again, I hesitated.

My gaze went to the woman in red. Her equally red lips were curved into a smile, and her eyes were set on me.

Okay. She knew I was here.

That should mean it's safe?

Right?

“Emma.”

My name rolled off Rett's tongue with the slightest of accents, deep and commanding, as if giving me little choice but to take the chair he offered.

With a deep breath, I moved forward and sat. Rett pushed the chair toward the table and took the other seat. Seductive music infiltrated the air, unlike the loud notes out in the courtyard; this melody was softer and teamed with the melancholy twang of blues. Even without words, it sounded like poetry floating through the air.

Rett lifted a bottle of wine, presenting the label. “My research showed that you're a connoisseur of red wines, the drier the better.”

I didn't speak.

What kind of research had he done?

“This cabernet sauvignon is extremely rare. It's a members-only selection from a quaint vineyard in northern Michigan. I specifically requested it for this evening.” Before I could speak, he continued, “The grapes in 2011 were threatened by an early frost. The harvest was expedited, resulting in fewer than one hundred bottles to be corked. As you can imagine, acquiring a bottle is not easy.”

His dark eyes gleamed with something I couldn't determine.

He continued, “I enjoy the hunt almost as much as the acquisition.”

Apparently, the cork had already been removed. Rett poured a small portion into a glass, swirled the contents, and inhaled. “But, my dear Emma, once the target is obtained, rareness alone no longer gives it value. For once it’s obtained, the sense of rarity is lost. That is when the true value is tested. That worth comes from the combination of quality, uniqueness, and taste.” He passed the glass my way. “Please, have the first sip.”

I took the glass. “I already drank a hurricane. I’m not sure if I should drink any more, especially before food. That was what I was about to do—”

“Only a sip,” he interrupted, “and you will understand what I’m saying.”

I did as he had, taking the stem in my fingertips and swirling the contents. The aroma filled the globe of the glass, and as the deep ruby liquid stilled, the scents of plum, blackberry, pine, and violets filled my senses. I tipped the glass, allowing the wine to tease my lips. The earlier aromas came to life on my tongue. It truly was unlike any wine I’d ever tasted.

“Well?” he asked.

“It’s delicious and you were right, unique.”

Rett poured himself a glass and sat back, his button-down white shirt stretching over his wide chest. Against the wide girth of the chair, he appeared almost regal, as if instead of a chair, we were seated in thrones.

“I chose this wine,” Rett began, “because of its similarity to you, Emma. Unique, highest quality...” He leaned forward and lifted the glass toward the candlelight. “See how the liquid shimmers?” His dark stare met mine. “It’s beautiful like you.” He took a sip, his Adam’s apple bobbing and the muscles in his neck pulling tight, an involuntary response to the tartness. A grin returned to his full lips. “Pursuing you has been fascinating. I’m aware of your quality and unique nature. Now that you’re here, the only parameter yet to decide is taste. However, I have no doubt that you too will taste delicious.”

My lungs burned with my caught breath as heat radiated from my cheeks. “That...it’s...inappropriate.”

His smile returned, this time gleaming from the black holes of his orbs. “No, Emma. It’s a perfectly appropriate thing to say to you, the woman who is about to be my wife.”

FIVE

MY PULSE KICKED up as Rett's words registered.

Yet how could such a statement truly register?

It was a proclamation with no basis in reality.

Lowering my glass of wine to the linen tablecloth, I laid my hands upon the table's edge, preparing to push my chair away.

"Rett, this—"

The door opened and a second later, a parade of servers entered, thwarting my escape.

Once again, Rett's full lips quirked in amusement, recognizing my failed attempt to flee. Within his dark stare, the reflection of the candles' flames flickered.

"Mr. Ramses," the oldest gentleman in the parade of servers said with a dramatic bow, "we have prepared your meal to your specifications. We do hope that you and your companion will enjoy."

Ramses?

Rett...Everett Ramses.

The connection was made, yet I couldn't speak.

I could—I was capable—it was that Rett was still speaking to the man.

"...thank you, Elijah. I'm sure it will be delicious as usual."

Elijah turned my way and poured more wine into my glass. The other waiters placed plates before us and uncovered dishes of some of New Orleans' traditional delicacies: barbecued shrimp, charbroiled oysters, and golden curry. Their unmistakable aromas swirled through the air, reminding me of my earlier hunger.

"Miss North," Elijah said, "Mr. Ramses said it had been a while since you visited your home. Please let us know if we can bring you anything that isn't

offered.”

I inhaled, looking from Elijah to Rett.

I wanted to say that I could be offered my real name—O’Brien. I wanted to say that New Orleans wasn’t my home. Pittsburgh was where I’d called home since graduating from college.

However, it was clear that to do so would prolong this conversation. Therefore, I simply said, “Thank you, Elijah.”

By the time Rett and I were once again alone, the servers had heaped generous portions of each dish upon our plates. As close as I’d been to making an escape, the delicious aromas were making my stomach growl.

After the door closed, Rett looked my way. “Eat, Emma. You yourself said you were famished.”

“I was expecting French fries or onion rings, not a seafood smorgasbord.” I lay the spoon down that I had just lifted. “You’re Everett Ramses.”

He nodded. “I am.”

“Why do you keep referring to me as North when my name is O’Brien?”

“We will get to that.”

My head shook. “Okay, so you’re Everett Ramses, and that’s how you knew about the business meeting.”

“Correct,” he said, drizzling lemon juice over an oyster before sliding it from its shell onto a thin cracker and eating it.

I stared for a minute, my gaze volleying between the man at the end of the table and my still-untouched food.

How did I get here, to a private dining room, with him, the man Ross has been talking about nonstop?

The only one who could answer my question was Ross.

I pushed my chair away from the table and stood. “Thank you for the invitation. I must bid you goodbye, Mr. Ramses. This has been...interesting; however, I believe—”

Before I could finish my sentence, Rett was out of his seat and in front of me.

Perhaps it was the length of his legs or maybe he had been a track star in an earlier life. I wasn’t certain how he’d moved as quickly and yet as

gracefully as he did. Much like a panther threatening its prey, Rett had me blocked. The door was beyond him.

I took a step to the side and then another in the other direction. Forward wasn't an option.

I sucked in a breath as my neck and shoulders straightened.

Instead of toward the door, I stepped backward—the two of us moving in sync—away from my escape. Our unchoreographed dance continued until my shoulders collided with the wall, and I was sandwiched between the carved-wood paneling and over six feet of solid man.

“Emma, you don't understand.”

My breathing quickened, yet I wasn't inhaling, not in a way that brought the needed oxygen to my rushing bloodstream. The result was a tingling in my extremities.

Rett—no, Mr. Ramses—was so close.

I inhaled the mix of garlic and wine on his warm breath, as well as his rich, spicy cologne. Warmth radiated from his solid body. I placed my palms against his chest, feeling the rhythm of his heart beneath. My head shook. “I don't. You're right. I don't understand—any of this.”

Reaching for my hands before a protest came to my lips, he lifted both of them over my head, pinning them to the wall. The move caused my back to arch, pushing my breasts forward. He stared, scanning me down and back up. No longer did the candles flicker in the dark orbs, but something more unnerving. As his gaze lingered, physical changes occurred within me. My insides twisted, no longer from hunger for food, but with an appetite for something I shouldn't want.

What is it about this man that speaks to me, not with his voice but with his mere presence?

Never in my life had I felt such an attraction, as if I wasn't in control of my body's reactions. I'd turned down men like him in the past, men who oozed power and dominance. I'd walked away with my head held high. And yet with Rett, in a matter of maybe an hour, I was putty in his hands.

It was more than the way he commanded the situation; it was also the lustful desire in his eyes. I saw it in his stare, the way the dark now swirled with more. The throbbing of my core caused my high heels to shift upon the

floor as my desire grew.

As he leaned closer, I knew for sure that it wasn't just me.

A hardening erection against my tummy alerted me that he wanted me as much as I wanted him.

Holding my hands in place above my head with one hand, Rett teased a stray strand of my golden hair away from my cheek with his other. He then traced my lower lip with his thumb. A tug and my mouth opened with a soft *pop*. Without instruction, I allowed his thumb to enter. Closing my lips, I sucked, tasting the saltiness of his oyster.

My eyes fluttered shut as a moan bubbled within me. It was as I opened my eyes that I saw it. Similar to a spark to dry kindling, what had previously been flickers in his eyes had combusted to a raging fire.

Rett removed his thumb, again tracing my lip. "Emma, the business deal is complete. Your little project is funded."

His proximity and the way he was touching me had me distracted, but I knew what he was saying deserved my attention. "It is? You agreed to partner—"

He held my lips with the pressure of his finger, stopping my question and interrupting, "I didn't agree to be a partner."

My breasts heaved as he leaned closer, his rigid, toned body pressing me tighter against the wall. The pressure painfully stretched my upheld arms, while at the same time, Rett wordlessly informed me by the rock hardness of his erection that I was truly desired.

"I agreed to a deal," he said definitively.

SIX

RETT'S DEEP VOICE had my full attention. "I was contacted a while ago, informed of your true identity."

My head shook. "I'm who I am. Emma O'Brien is my identity."

"You are correct. However, Miss North, you are more important than that. Your biological father was my father's greatest adversary. They were each involved in the other's demise. New Orleans is now mine, and who better to be at my side than the daughter of Isaiah Boudreau?"

Isaiah Boudreau.

I'd never heard that name.

My head shook. "I don't know him or you."

Again Rett traced my lips as his chest flattened my breasts, and his hips pushed closer. "Fight me, Emma. Tell me you don't want me."

I pulled against his grip, yet I didn't have the strength to break it. The undeniable truth, evident by the warmth pooling between my thighs and dampening my panties, tightening my nipples, and making my breasts heavy with need was that I didn't want to fight.

I wanted him too. Instead of replying, I asked, "Rett, what deal did you make?"

His stare bore into me, heating me from within. The tepid coolness of the air conditioning disappeared as the temperature rose.

"I traded the investment for something I desired more than a piece of an insignificant software program."

This time I gave it effort, fighting his grip. "Our work is *not* insignificant."

Rett's grin returned, a bit more sinister than before. "Easy, tiger. Do not take offense. You see..." He was still holding my wrists. "...everything is insignificant in comparison."

“What is this thing of great value that you want?”

“Who.” He leaned down, bringing his firm lips to mine.

I didn't fight, not to get away.

Maybe I'd been drugged, or perhaps it was Everett Ramses who had me intoxicated. Whatever the case, in his presence, I wasn't thinking straight. As his kiss deepened, the air filled with moans and whimpers.

Were they from me?

I pulled at his grip, wanting my hands free. I needed to touch him as his free hand was touching me, fingers splayed over my back, coming forward and caressing my breasts. Under my top, he tweaked my diamond-hard nipples as energy zapped from his touch to my twisting core.

Multitalented, he was competent in more than caresses as he held me captive. Simultaneously, his tongue teased the seam of my lips. I'd lost the will to protest, opening and welcoming his unique taste, like that of the wine.

Rett pulled away as I gasped for breath. His dark stare focused on mine. “Are you wet, Emma?”

His question seemed too personal, but then again, if I was, he was the cause. “Yes,” I panted.

Releasing my hands, he grinned, taking a step back. “Lift your skirt. I want to see for myself.”

I couldn't move my gaze away from his even if I wanted it to. “Rett, please.”

His large hand reached for my chin. “Listen carefully, sweet Emma. The deal is done. You're now mine. As mine, you will be pampered beyond your wildest imagination. The world is yours. I will lay the heads of your enemies at your feet and indulge your every desire. Your one task is to be mine, ready for me and willing to obey whatever I ask.”

My eyes opened wider and my breathing quickened as he continued.

Obey.

Who used words like that in today's world?

“What...?”

“You will fall to your knees or spread your sexy legs when I command. You will submit to me when and where I want. That is nonnegotiable. And

you will do whatever I demand willingly because when you do, you will be rewarded with earthshaking orgasms, the greatest of your life—because I promise that with me, you will come over and over.”

He was wrong. I wasn't a multiple-orgasm woman. One and done.

“Rett—”

His finger upon my lips again stopped my words.

“There is one more nonnegotiable requirement: you will take my name, marry me.”

My skirt was in my grasp. With each of his declarations, I'd balled the material higher and higher until it was a soft roll above my waist, showing my black lace panties, bare legs, and high heels.

Rett took a step back, scanning the lace. “Touch yourself.”

Heat slid up my neck to my cheeks, no doubt bringing a glow of pink to my skin.

“Oh, my little Emma, now is not the time to be bashful. Did you not hear what I just said?”

Biting my lip, I nodded and peered about.

This dining room was private, but how private?

Before I could voice my concern, Rett continued, his deep voice commanding my attention. “My request is not the issue. It could have been for you to bend over the table, flatten your breasts, and bare your perfect round ass to me. No matter the request, what matters is your immediate obedience. Quite simply put, you will do as I say and be rewarded or hesitate and be punished. I'm not a man who repeats himself.”

I couldn't describe what had come over me since meeting this man, other than an overwhelming mixture of shock, yearning, and desire. The idea of punishment at his hands didn't deter me. I wasn't afraid of him, and yet I had an unmistakable desire to please him.

My hand slid under the waistband of my panties as my legs parted. A small whimper escaped my lips as I found my own damp core.

“Show me.” His tenor had dropped from moments ago, now laden with the huskiness of lust.

I pulled my hand out of the confines of my panties.

Rett reached for it, lifting my fingers to his lips and sucking. His cheeks rose and a grin formed. “Delicious, as I suspected.”

Before I could form a response, he was kneeling before me, removing my panties as his warm breath skirted my sensitive skin. My gaze darted to the door, afraid the servers would return, when all at once, his mouth covered my core, his teeth nipping my swollen clit and tongue delving within me.

“Oh,” I cried out, my hands going to his dark hair, weaving my fingers through his mane for support as more sounds and indistinguishable words filled the air. I let out a gust of air as an orgasm threatened to double me forward. Such as a freight train barreling through a dark night, the overwhelming explosion came over me suddenly and without warning.

Though I’d come, Rett didn’t stop. It was clear that he too had been starving, and I was his feast. My mind remembered I didn’t have multiple orgasms, but my body was a different story. Ravenously he nibbled and sucked. His hands held to my behind, pulling me closer.

The second orgasm was stronger than the first.

I called out his name—Rett—this man I barely knew.

My body trembled with the aftershocks as I struggled for breath on weakened knees. Rett stood, allowing my skirt to cascade to my ankles before scooping me into his arms, cradling me against his solid chest, and taking me back to the chair where I had been seated. When our eyes met, I bashfully asked, “My panties?”

“No. I want you bare and available to me at all times.”

I nodded.

It wasn’t a confirmation of my acceptance as much as my acknowledgment that he’d spoken.

With a chaste kiss, one that left my own essence on my lips, Rett pushed the chair back to the table and returned to his seat.

My hands shook as I reached for my glass of wine. The red liquid quivered as I brought the glass to my lips. After consuming a generous portion, I stared beyond the candles to the man now casually dining upon his meal. A forkful of shrimp and an oyster on a cracker—it was as if we hadn’t just...My head shook as I found my voice. “Let me get this straight. Ross made you a deal regarding me?”

“No.”

“No?”

Rett dabbed the napkin at the corner of his lips, the same lips that had just brought me to ecstasy—twice.

“After an in-depth conversation with your friend and diligent research, I contacted Mr. Underwood again and made him a deal he couldn’t refuse.”

My head shook. “You can’t make deals regarding people. It doesn’t work like that.”

Amusement again danced in his dark orbs. “My dear, the deal is done.”

“Why do you think I’d go along with this?”

Lowering his fork to the plate before him, Rett sat taller and took a breath. “You are a marked woman.”

I had to wonder if he was referring to what we’d just done.

Everett Ramses went on. “Your brother wants you dead.”

I sat straighter. “Kyle died in the accident with our parents. He’s been gone for over four years.”

“No, my dear, Kyle O’Brien is very much alive. He’s bided his time, and now believes he can claim New Orleans. However, to achieve his goal, he must overcome two obstacles.”

“Two?”

“Me,” Rett said, leaning back in his throne-like chair and reaching for the arms. “And you.”

“What do I have to do with any of this?”

“Kyle, your adopted brother, is claiming that his stake to the city rests on the notion that he is the child Jezebel North gave up. You see, he’s proclaiming that he is the true heir of Isaiah Boudreau.”

The reality of Rett’s words settled around me in a fog.

“My brother is alive and wants me dead?”

“He knows you’re here, in New Orleans.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means you will stay with me. I will protect you, and once you’re legally Emma Ramses, you will be untouchable.”

I stood, no longer able to sit still. Cool air flowed under my skirt, a reminder I was nude beneath.

“This is ludicrous. I should just go back to Pittsburgh.”

“No,” Rett said definitively. “I have had you under protection there since I first learned.”

“There were people watching me?”

“That is done. Your home is in New Orleans.”

My hands went out, coming back to slap my thighs. “And do what, Rett? My life is in Pittsburgh.”

“Your education and dream is to be a writer. There is no better place in the world than here, but most importantly, you will be my wife.” When I didn’t respond, he went on, “I have men waiting to escort us away from this restaurant.”

“Away, to where?” I asked.

“To my home. It’s very safe.”

My gaze darted to the door and back. “And if I say no? If I just leave?”

Rett gestured toward the door. “You won’t, but as my future wife, I prefer not to hold you captive against your will.” He shrugged. “I will, but I’d prefer you cooperate.”

I tugged at my lip with my teeth as I contemplated all that had been said. “What will happen if I leave?”

“If you walk through that door alone, you will be vulnerable, not only to Kyle but also to his men. You may succeed in making it to the courtyard or possibly the sidewalk beyond; however, I can unequivocally say that...one more step would mean certain death.”

• • •

Thank you for reading *THE DEAL* by Aleatha Romig. She enjoyed writing this sexy, dark, romantic short story as a showcase for her writing style.

ABOUT ALEATHA ROMIG

New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today bestselling author of the Consequences series, Infidelity series, and Sparrow Webs: Web of Sin, Tangled Web, Web of Desire, and coming soon, Dangerous Web

Aleatha specializes in dark romance, layered in intrigue, mystery, suspense, and of course, sexiness. She loves to create strong, sassy heroines and domineering alphas, ones you want to hate but end up loving. Her tales are best told in series form, adding depth to each story, giving the readers more time to get to know the characters and allowing them the opportunity to lose themselves in her dangerous worlds.

Check out her bestselling novels at aleatharomig.com

SAINT

COLLEEN HOOVER

ONE

ONE MORE STEP would mean certain death.

Maybe not in the sense of Reya's mortality, but it would absolutely mean the death of her morals, her values...her marriage.

Knowing all of this, Reya still makes the decision to step forward, into Cam's arms.

Into the arms of certain death.

I stare at the sentences I just typed, knowing I'll likely delete them as soon as I wake up tomorrow. That's how this entire book has gone so far. Everything I write one day is deleted the next.

I'm never going to finish this. I'll be stuck in this cabin for an entire month at this rate. Not that being stuck in this cabin is torture in any way. I like the solitude. Always have. It's why I rent it several times a year—so I can escape to the private lakeside in the country and shed the skin of Sacramento. It keeps me from succumbing to the guilt of trading the country life I grew up with for the city.

I down the rest of my wine and decide to call it a night, but my computer begins chiming. I glance at the incoming call and am relieved to see it's Candice, my critique partner. My best friend. We both got into this writing career at the same time about five years ago. And for five years now, we've saved each other from walking away from the career no less than a dozen times.

I answer her video chat, and even though I've only been holed up in this cabin for three days, it's a relief to see a familiar face. I'm in California and she's in New York. It's almost midnight here, but she looks wide awake on my screen.

“Everything okay?” I ask her. “It’s the middle of the night.”

“All good,” she says, her voice way too chipper for the time. “Just wrote *The End*. Needed someone to congratulate me.”

“Congratulations!” I say, understanding her excitement now. She’s been working on this book for six months, so I really am happy for her. A little envious, but happy.

“Thanks,” she says. “Do you want to take this conversation live?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “How bad do I look?”

“You couldn’t look bad if you tried,” Candice says. “Okay, I’m merging our screens and going live in ten seconds.”

I run my fingers under my eyes to wipe away any leftover mascara residue. Our readers are used to us going live together in the middle of the night, so they’re used to seeing us at our worst. Candice and I were both terrible at social media when we started out, but once we began having our discussions about our writing process over live videos, it’s really made a big impact on our numbers of followers. Writers like to watch us because the things we say validate the struggles they go through, but readers also like our live discussions because they get tidbits of our books long before they release. I guess in a way, it’s insider access to those who don’t mind a spoiler or two.

“Live in three seconds,” Candice says.

I jump up and flip on the kitchen light so my screen won’t be so dark. Right when I sit back down, we’re live. When we first started doing these, it felt a little awkward. But we go live so often now—sometimes twice a week—that it’s second nature. Most of the time I forget people are watching us. I just feel like I’m talking to Candice one-on-one.

“How’s the writing going?” Candice asks.

I shrug. “I’m getting nowhere. I’ve been at the lake cabin three days so far and have one page.”

“You need to talk through it?”

“I was about to go to bed when you called. Already shut my brain off for the night.”

Candice groans. “I was hoping for a chapter or two. I want to read about

the hot cop before I go to bed.”

I smile. “You’re sweet. But you and I both know the book is completely unrealistic so far.”

“You’re way too hard on yourself, Megan.”

“I’m my own worst critic.”

She rolls her eyes. “Did you at least decide on character names yet?”

“I got that far. Cameron is the hot cop. He goes by Cam. The girl will be Reya.”

“Cam and Reya,” she says. “I like those. Is it still a love triangle?”

“So far. I don’t know. I might change it.”

“No, no, no,” she says, leaning forward toward the camera. “You promised me a love triangle. You’ve *never* written a love triangle.”

“It’s hard to write something you’ve never experienced.”

“Bullshit,” she says. “Your last book was about a woman who fell in love with her dog’s veterinarian and you don’t even have a dog.”

“Exactly,” I say. “And several reviewers said it was unrealistic.”

Candice shakes her head. “First of all, stop reading your negative reviews. Second...every negative review calls the book unrealistic. It’s a go-to term for negative reviews. I personally thought it was very realistic.”

“You don’t have a dog, either,” I point out.

Candice laughs. “Touché.”

I wish I believed the numerous five-star reviews over the negative ones, but sadly, I seem to focus on the negative way more than Candice does.

“Maybe you should have an affair so you can really nail the emotions of your characters in this book,” Candice says teasingly. “Find a married man who reminds you of Hot Cop Cam and sleep with him.”

I laugh, but I also cringe a little that she just said that in front of no telling how many readers. “Where am I going to find a hot cop while I’m secluded in the middle of nowhere?”

Candice grins. “Maybe you should go somewhere a little less secluded. Start writing at Starbucks. Cops love coffee.”

“Maybe you should go to sleep,” I suggest. “It’s late in New York.”

“There are two hundred people firing off questions at us,” she says. “I’ll sleep after we answer a few.” She scrolls through the questions popping up on our screens. Her eyes light up when she sees one that grabs her attention. “Here’s a good one,” she says. “This person says, ‘*Do you believe a writer needs to personally experience a situation before they’re able to capture how a character would truly respond?*’”

Candice looks at the camera expectantly, indicating she wants me to respond to this one. I lean back in my seat and fold my arms over my chest while I think about the question.

“I would hope not,” I say with a sigh. “But as the saying goes, ‘*Write what you know.*’ I do question whether I could describe emotions and reactions better if I had lived through the things I was writing about. I think every writer questions that part of themselves.”

“I don’t question it,” Candice says. She reads off another question. “*If given the chance, would either of you willingly experience the things your characters are going through in the books you’re currently writing?*”

Candice immediately nods. “Hell yes. I just finished a book about a Hockey player falling in love with his agent. Sign me up. What about you, Megan?”

I nod, too. A sordid affair with a hot guy doesn’t sound so bad. “Of course. I’d do anything to be a better writer.”

Candice moves on to the next question. We answer four or five more, but she cuts them short. I think she can tell I’m not into this right now. We normally have easy-flowing banter back and forth, but tonight she keeps repeating stuff for me because my attention span isn’t cooperating.

I don’t know if I’m exhausted or just not in the mood for this right now, but I can’t focus on the live video. I keep thinking about our conversation and wondering what it would be like to actually experience the things I’m writing about.

In my last book, my main character’s dog of twelve years died. I tried my best to put myself in the shoes of the character—to describe the emotions a person would feel in that situation—but I’m not a huge dog-lover. It was hard to empathize with a character being devastated over the loss of a pet. And since it was a romance novel, I skimmed over the grief over the pet and dove

head-first into the character's relationship with the vet she met.

I was reamed in the reviews by dog-lovers. Several of them said it was obvious I wasn't a pet owner.

If I make this current book a love triangle, is the same thing going to happen? Are readers going to say it's obvious I've never had an affair?

These thoughts are still at the forefront of my mind when Candice wraps up the video. I tell the readers goodnight, then her. I close my laptop and turn out the lights. I double-check the locks on the doors and head to my bedroom.

I hope tomorrow will be a more productive day, but I have a feeling my inner critic is going to make sure it isn't.

TWO

Two nights later

I SIT UP straight in bed and slip the facemask off my eyes.

My heart is hammering loud and wild.

I'm not sure what woke me, but it was loud enough to jolt me straight out of a deep sleep.

I'm trying to regain my bearings when I notice the lights. They're flashing through the windows of my bedroom, red and blue, splashing across the walls.

There's a window directly behind my headboard, so I look out of it, trying to get a sense of what's happening outside the cabin, but the lights are coming from the front yard. My bedroom is on the side of the house, so the lights are all I can see.

A loud knock at the door makes me flinch and propels me off the bed.

I slip on my robe and grab my phone. The pounding is coming from the front door.

I look at the time on my phone. It's only midnight. I've only been asleep for two hours. I don't normally go to bed that early, especially when I'm here in the cabin, but it's been two days since I did the live video with Candice and I haven't been able to write at all since then. I've been sleeping more than I've been writing.

I flip on the front porch light and peer through the peephole. There's a police officer standing a couple of feet from my door. His neck is craned and he's looking over his shoulder, back toward his patrol car.

His car is parked out in the road, right in front of the cabin. The lights are so bright behind him, I can't make out anything beyond his silhouette.

What in the world is going on?

I release the deadbolt, but I leave the chain lock latched and open the door

a few inches.

Being a writer comes with a constant sense of distrust, no matter what uniform a person might be wearing. Too many plot twists go through my head for me not to assume the worst in every situation. For all I know, this guy could be posing as a cop just so I'll open the door to him.

When the cop hears the front door open, he brings his gaze to mine. I can't make out his features very well with all the lights flashing behind him and the sleep still in my eyes, but I can tell he's not the kind of cop who eats donuts and coffee for breakfast every morning. He's tall and muscular and I suddenly feel underdressed in my nightgown.

I have no idea why he's here, but part of me is thankful, because if I had to put a face to Hot Cop Cam, this would be it.

The cop holds up a badge and I glance at it long enough to notice the wedding ring on his ring finger.

"Sorry to disturb you, ma'am. I'm officer Nathaniel Saint."

I stare at his badge long enough to read his name. I bring my hand up to my throat as he puts his badge away. I can feel my heart thumping against my palm. I don't know if it's the scratchy baritone of his voice that made my heart rate pick up even more, or if it's the realization that this isn't a dream. There is actually a cop at my door in the middle of the night, which can only mean something bad has happened.

My thoughts immediately go to my family. Did something happen to someone? Is he here to bring me bad news?

As if he can sense my unease, the edges of his voice smooth over when he says, "There's nothing to worry about. There was an incident that occurred up the street about an hour ago. I just have a couple of questions if you don't mind. Protocol."

I blow out a breath of relief knowing everyone is safe. I nod and unlatch the lock on my front door.

I realize after opening the door and being met with a cool breeze that I am, in fact, underdressed. I wrap my arms over myself and nod toward the kitchen, inviting the officer inside. He stands at least five inches taller than me.

"What kind of incident?" I ask. I stand a few feet from the door. He takes

a step into the house but remains near the doorway. I can't help but wonder how old he is. I'm twenty-nine and I look all of twenty-nine, give or take a couple of years. But it's hard to tell with him. He could be younger than me. He could be ten years older. He has the gentleness in his eyes of someone who hasn't been exposed to too much harshness, but that could also be a trained expression for someone in his profession.

I take a few mental notes because I am definitely using him as inspiration for Cam. It's like the heavens opened up and dropped this cop on my front porch.

I haven't felt like writing in two days, but seeing this guy in the flesh makes me want to get this interaction over with so I can go straight to my laptop.

The officer's eyes scan the room for a moment before they land back on me. "Do you know a man by the name of Don William Puttman?"

I shake my head. The name doesn't ring a bell.

He looks a bit relieved when I say that. His posture relaxes and he leans against the frame of my door. "There was a police pursuit that ended about fifty yards from your driveway." He nudges his head toward the road. "We've secured the scene, but we're going to have officers nearby—possibly on your property—for the next hour or so. I just wanted to come by and let you know there's nothing to be concerned about. And of course to see if there's a reason the victim was heading in this direction. But since you don't know him—"

"Victim?" I ask.

The officer nods. "Yes, ma'am. It was self-inflicted."

I wrap my hand around my stomach and blow out a breath.

Someone just killed themselves fifty yards from my driveway?

"I may need a statement," he says. "But we don't have to get that tonight. I can send an officer by to retrieve that tomorrow if you don't mind. It's protocol—we're asking all three occupants on this road for the same information."

"Yeah," I say, nodding. "That's fine. I'll be here all day."

"Thank you, ma'am." The officer tips his hat and begins to turn. But then he pauses and looks back at me. "Are you here alone?"

I hate that question.

There's no good way to answer it. He may be a cop, but he's also a man. A complete stranger.

I would lie and say I have a husband in the bedroom, but I'm not sure lying to a cop when there's a dead body fifty feet from my front door is very smart. But admitting I'm alone to a complete stranger isn't smart, either.

He must see the concern on my face because he speaks up before I can answer. "Not that I'm assuming you can't take care of yourself. But...just be cautious. If you have conversations with people in the town, make sure to give the impression you aren't out here alone. Wear a wedding ring when you're out and about."

This town has always seemed so inviting to me. The way this guy is talking, it's anything but.

"Should I be worried? Is this a bad area?"

He looks out into the yard—at the flashing lights—then back at me. "No area is perfect." He tips his hat again. "Sorry to interrupt your night. We'll be in touch tomorrow." He heads for the stairs, but I find myself rushing after him.

"Wait," I say.

He turns around when he reaches the bottom step and looks back at me. I don't know why I rushed after him. I just feel...scared. This man shows up to tell me a guy killed himself, and now he's leaving, and I'm supposed to just go back to sleep?

"There's not much else I can do here," he says. "I'm needed back at the scene. I'll make sure there are extra eyes on your place tonight. You'll be fine."

A slow gust of wind circles me. I wrap my arms even tighter around myself to hide the chill. I don't like the feeling building in my stomach. I've always felt safe here, but the last several minutes have left me scared to be alone.

"Okay," I whisper with a nod. It's completely unconvincing. The cop can see right through my concern.

He walks back up the stairs and pulls something out of his pocket. He

hands me his business card. It says *Detective Nathaniel Saint* at the top, and it has an email address and two phone numbers at the bottom.

“I didn’t mean to worry you. The top number is my cell. If you need anything at all, don’t hesitate to call me.”

“Thank you,” I say, clutching the card to my chest.

“How long are you here for?” he asks. “I’ll make sure an officer drives by a couple times a night.”

“I’m here for a couple of weeks.”

He stares at me for a moment, his eyes searching mine for more of an explanation as to why a woman my age would be holed up in a cabin alone for that long.

“I’m a writer,” I say. “I stay here a couple times a year. Usually in the month leading up to a deadline.”

He raises an eyebrow, impressed. “A writer,” he says. “What kind of books do you write?”

“Romantic suspense.”

“What’s your name?”

I want to tell him my name is Reya. The urge is so strong to pretend I’m my character right now, but I give him my actual name instead. “Megan Andrews.”

I can see the twitch of his lip when he smiles. “I’ll be in touch tomorrow, Megan Andrews.”

I watch him walk down the length of my driveway until he’s swallowed up by the bright patrol lights.

I close the door and lock it, then lean against it. I look down at the business card in my hand. *Nathaniel Saint*. Even his name is sexy.

He could definitely be Cam.

Despite the time, I go straight to my laptop and open my document. I recall everything about Detective Nathaniel Saint that I can.

I end up writing for two solid hours.

THREE

I WOKE UP today wondering about Detective Nathaniel Saint.

Does he go by a nickname or do people call him Nathaniel?

Do they call him Nathan?

Nate?

Detective?

Whatever they call him, I've been anxiously waiting on him all day, hoping he would show back up to get my statement. But it's almost six o'clock in the evening and I haven't heard from him or any other officer he works with.

Maybe they decided against asking the residents for a statement. Maybe they realized it was a waste of time when the case seemed to be open and shut.

That thought disappoints me because I have several research questions I'd like to ask him. I figured if I was going to have a cop to myself for a few minutes, I might as well utilize that and get first-hand answers to some of the questions my book has posed since last night.

Maybe I should text him—see if someone is still planning to come by.

I pull out the business card and shoot a text to his cell.

Hi. It's Megan. Do you guys still need a statement from me?

He texts back immediately.

Sorry about that. We've been short-handed today. If it's not too late, I

can swing by on my way home.

Sounds good. If you have a few minutes while you're here, I have a few questions about some scenes in the book I'm writing. I could really benefit from picking the brain of a police officer.

I'm all yours. Be there in an hour.

Excitement rolls through me when I read that last text. *I'm all yours.*

I immediately rush to my bedroom to change clothes. I'm ashamed to admit I've changed clothes three times today already in anticipation that he might come back. I don't usually bring anything cute when I hole up in a cabin. The only thing I have that doesn't scream *TRYING TO BE CUTE* is a sundress that could pass as something I would lounge around in.

I slip it on and choose to go barefoot. I pull my hair up in a messy bun and put on just enough makeup to give me a shine, but not enough to make it look like I've put on makeup. I spend the rest of the hour at the kitchen table, forming questions I can ask him so it doesn't look like I made up an excuse to get him back here.

But in all honesty, I'd give anything to see him again, simply for selfish reasons. I wrote several chapters last night after he left. I had no idea that putting a real-life face to a character could be so motivating.

The knowledge that Cam is now based on someone who actually exists helps minimize my fear that people will call this book unrealistic. It can't be unrealistic if I'm writing Reya's reactions to Cam based on *my* reactions to Detective Nathaniel Saint.

When he finally knocks on the door, I stand on the other side of it and count to thirty. I want it to seem like I'm preoccupied.

I try to keep a straight face when I open the door, but I'm shocked to see him out of uniform. I do exactly what I told myself I wouldn't do.

I check him out.

My eyes scan him from head to toe and then back up again. Surprisingly,

he looks even better out of uniform. He's wearing faded jeans with a few paint splatters on them, and a t-shirt that has a fist up in the air and the word *Gonzo* printed across it.

A Hunter S. Thompson t-shirt. I wonder if that was deliberate.

"Nice shirt," I say, holding the door open.

He grins but doesn't reveal if the literary shirt was intentional.

His age is easier to pin down in the daytime than it was last night. He's definitely older than me, but not by much. Maybe four or five years, which would put him in his early thirties.

"Did you get any sleep after I left?" he asks, walking into the cabin.

"Not much, but I'm okay. You?"

"Not any, but I'm okay," he says.

I don't know if the smile he speaks with is intentional, but it seems seductive. I don't know what to do with that. Normally, I can hold my own when it comes to flirtation, but this man is wearing a wedding ring. I don't flirt with other women's men.

But my character would. Reya.

That's how her affair with Cam begins in the book. She latches on to every flirtatious smile he gives her.

Part of me wonders how much writing I could get done tonight if I would just step out of my own skin for a little while and try to become Reya. If I allowed myself to become my character, I might become inspired and meet my deadline.

Detective Nathaniel Saint is making a slow spin in the kitchen, admiring the high ceilings of the cabin. "I've always wondered what the inside of this place looks like," he says. "It's the nicest cabin on this whole lake."

"That's why I stay here," I say. "It has the best views."

"Is it not two-story? It looks multi-level from the outside."

"Nope. Just the one. All the rooms have ceilings this high."

He brings his eyes back to mine. "It's nice."

I nod.

Neither of us speaks for a moment. The silence between us becomes thick. "What name do you go by?" I ask him. "Nathaniel? Nate?"

“Saint, actually.”

“Saint,” I say in a whisper. That would make a better character name than Cam. I would change the name in my book, but that might be too weird. Cam is already turning out to look just like this guy. I can’t make his name the same, too.

“So,” I say. “You need a statement from me?”

Saint stares at me quietly for a moment. “Not anymore. They closed the case already. It’s all on camera—nothing to dispute.” He leans against my kitchen island and crosses his legs at the ankles. He’s so effortlessly breathtaking, I feel out of my element.

But would Reya feel out of her element?

“If you don’t need a statement, why are you here?” I ask him.

“You said you needed to pick my brain.”

Oh, yeah. I did say that.

I nod and swallow the thick lump in my throat. I can’t remember a single question I wanted to ask him now that he’s standing right in front of me, and I don’t want to look at my list like an amateur.

I make up a question, just so I don’t seem so pathetic.

“Why do you wear a uniform if you’re a detective?”

“It’s a small town. I only do detective work when it’s needed of me. Most of the time I patrol and have to be in uniform.”

I nod but have no other questions to follow that up with. I chew on my lip for an uncomfortable moment as I try to think of another.

“I have a confession,” he says.

“You do?”

He nods. “I didn’t sleep last night, but it had nothing to do with my job.”

I have no idea where he’s going with this. “Why couldn’t you sleep?”

“I Googled you,” he says, matter-of-fact. “Watched a lot of your live videos.”

I cover my face with my hand. “Oh, God. Not those.”

He laughs. “You and your friend...what’s her name...”

“Candice.”

“Yeah. Very entertaining.”

I bring my hand to my flushed chest. “Did you see the one from a few nights ago?”

He nods slowly. “Yep. You said you’re writing a book about a cop.”

“Yep.”

“A *hot* cop if I remember correctly.”

I can feel the heat climb up my neck and to my cheeks. “Yep,” I say. “But to be fair, that video was recorded two nights before I even met you.”

He grins, and I can feel that smile slide right into my stomach. “Do you really think experience would make you a better writer?”

I can’t believe he saw that video. I’m mortified. But also...a little intrigued that he’s here asking me about it. “Maybe,” I say. “It makes sense. I’m sure the more experience you have as a cop, it eventually molds you into a better cop.”

“True.”

“I don’t know why writing would be any different,” I say. “If I actually lived through something, I could probably make it more realistic when I put it into words on paper.”

Saint breaks our stare and looks down at his arms that are folded across his chest. He’s staring at his left hand. At his wedding ring, specifically. He begins to twirl it with his thumb.

I wonder if that’s an absentminded move or if he’s thinking about what Candice and I talked about in the live video. About how maybe I should sleep with a married cop to make my writing more realistic.

Maybe that’s why he’s here...

“This book you’re working on,” he says, bringing his eyes back to mine. “You said the main characters’ names were Cam and Reya?”

I love that he paid that much attention to the video. “Yes.”

“What things happen to Reya in the book that you’ve never experienced?”

Holy shit. This conversation is really going there.

I need a drink.

I walk around him and take a glass out of the cabinet. “I need wine for this conversation,” I say. I turn and face him. “Want some?”

He shrugs. "I'll take a glass."

I grab an open bottle of wine from the refrigerator and pour us both half a glass. I turn and hand him his. We're closer now—facing each other. I'm leaning against the sink and he's still leaning against the kitchen island, but our feet are just inches apart now. He sips from his glass of wine, keeping his gaze locked on mine the whole time.

I don't sip as delicately from mine. I take a huge gulp and then set the glass on the counter next to me. I stare at the glass rather than at Saint. "Reya is young," I say. "Twenty-three. She's inexperienced. Cam is a cop, as you know." I finally bring my eyes back to his. "When Reya and Cam meet—the attraction between them is intense. But he's married."

Saint nods slowly. He sips from his wine again, then brings the glass against his chest. "How does that make Reya feel?"

"Jealous," I say immediately. "Disappointed."

"Do they know each other very well?" he asks.

"Not at all."

"So this attraction...it's just physical?"

"At this point...yes."

I have no idea what's happening here.

Are we talking about us? Or is he genuinely interested in the story?

Now that I've been picturing Cam as Saint in my head, it's hard to separate the two. As a writer, that's a strange feeling. To be standing so close to a real-life version of your character.

I take another drink. I'm breathing so hard, I can hear it. I'm sure Saint can hear it, too.

"How does their affair begin?" he asks.

I swallow noticeably this time. "A kiss," I say. "The attraction is too much for Cam. He loves his wife, but he's never felt such a strong physical attraction to anyone like he does to Reya. So one night...when he's at Reya's house on business...he kisses her. But in the middle of the kiss, he feels guilty, so he pulls away from her and storms out of the house."

"He storms out?"

I nod. "Cam is a tortured soul."

Saint nods in thought. “And that’s never happened to you? You’ve never been kissed by a married man?”

I shake my head. “No,” I say quietly. “And now I feel stuck when I try to write Reya’s reaction.” I take a sip of my wine and then continue. “How would Reya react after that? Would she get angry at Cam for kissing her, even though she wanted it? Would she cry because he stormed out? Or would she feel triumphant—like she won?”

Saint tilts his head, his eyes narrowed on me. “That does sound like something you would have to experience before you could really nail the emotions.”

“Exactly,” I say.

We stare at each other for a quiet moment. My heart might be beating faster in this moment than it was when I was woken in the middle of the night to police lights.

Saint pulls his bottom lip in and chews on it for a moment. I want to laugh because that is such a classic move in the novels I write. I wonder if he realizes that.

There’s a sudden, intrusive buzzing sound that makes Saint stand up straight. He pulls his phone out of his pocket and stares down at the screen. He looks directly at me. “It’s my wife,” he says.

I try not to let the disappointment show. I set down my wine glass. “You should probably answer it.”

Saint also sets his wine glass on the counter beside him. “You’re right. I should answer it.”

But he doesn’t.

Instead, he tosses the phone on the counter and then closes the gap between us. He slips a hand behind my head and presses his mouth to mine.

It happens so suddenly and unexpectedly, I suck in a gasp.

His tongue slides into my mouth and it causes instant chills to roll over me. I press myself against him, just as his lips close over mine. He tastes like mint and Merlot, and I immediately know that’s how I’ll describe Cam’s mouth when I describe this kiss in the book.

His phone is still buzzing away on the counter and I love that he chose this

kiss over answering her phone call. I was right about *that* feeling, at least. Reya would feel a little triumphant.

Maybe I was right about all the feelings, because I also feel guilty right now.

The phone stops buzzing, and when it does, the only sound in the cabin is Saint's mouth on mine and the moan his kiss pulls out of me. He slips a hand to the small of my back, and as soon as I press my palms against the sides of his neck, his phone begins buzzing again.

He pulls away from me and presses his forehead to mine with a sigh. I gasp for air because no kiss has ever left me this breathless. *This affected.* I open my eyes, but his eyes are still closed.

His phone is still buzzing.

He moves his head to the side of my head so that his mouth is right over my ear.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

He pulls away. Grabs his phone.

Leaves.

The door slams behind him and I have never felt more alone in this cabin than I do right now. He filled me with so many feelings just now, only to rip them away in almost the same moment.

I ache. I don't know what for. More of that kiss. More of his flirtation. More of that triumphant feeling.

I hear the gravel crunch beneath his tires as he pulls away from the house, and even after he's been gone several minutes, I'm still standing in the same spot, touching my lips with my fingertips.

The reaction that surprises me the most right now is my smile. If I were to have written Reya and Cam's first kiss last night, I never would have thought she would smile after he left the way he did.

But I'm smiling.

I walk straight to my computer and open it. For the second night in a row, I write more than I normally write in a week.

FOUR

IT'S BEEN THREE days since Saint kissed me.

The day after the kiss, writing went great. I wrote several chapters, and even rewrote some of the beginning of the book to make Cam more like Saint.

But yesterday was a slow writing day, and it looks like today is going to be another day just like yesterday.

I talked to Candice last night, but I didn't tell her about the kiss. I'm never telling anyone. That is definitely something I want to keep extremely private. I've always been a private person. I write under my real name, but it's a common name, so I've never worried too much about my personal life being revealed to my readers. They know very little about me. I have the version of myself I portray to the readers, but none of them know if I'm dating or married or single or a mother. I don't put anything out there beyond my writing and I want to keep it that way.

Which is why—as much as I trust Candice—I would never tell her about my kiss with Saint.

But as much as what we did felt like cheating—it also felt like research in a way. Like maybe Saint was merely helping me get over a roadblock.

Obviously, kissing someone else would never be forgiven by a spouse based on the excuse that it's *research*, but it sure as hell makes it easier to forgive *myself* with that excuse. I feel very little guilt. I don't know what that says about me.

In fact, I feel so little guilt, I'm starting to wonder how far I can take this thing with Saint. Cam and Reya have kissed in the book, but I'm having trouble writing about the relationship they develop because I've never had feelings for a married man. I've never felt like the other woman. There are so

many ways a relationship with a married man would differ from a more traditional relationship. Not only would you not be able to go public with it, even to your closest friends, but you would have to go to great lengths to keep it private.

What would that feel like? To love a man who can only love you part-time?

I've been staring at my screen for an hour. Saint's business card is sitting on the table next to my computer. I've been at war with myself over whether or not to call him.

I settle on a compromise with myself.

I'll text him.

I keep in mind that his wife might see this message, so I keep it professional.

This is Megan. I have a research question if you have time for it.

He doesn't text me back as quickly as he did the last time I texted him. I watch the phone for a moment...waiting for the dots to appear. They don't.

I stare at my computer for several minutes, wondering if I shouldn't have sent the text. I know I shouldn't have sent the text. But I feel more disappointment that he didn't answer right away than I do guilt from sending it.

I need to busy myself, so I go to the kitchen to cook dinner and leave my phone on the table. I make a salad and grill a chicken breast. I eat my entire meal while staring pathetically at my phone.

I guess he really does regret that kiss.

I take my plate to the sink and begin rinsing it, but I almost drop it when I hear my phone buzz. I turn off the water and rush to my phone. I can feel a swirl of excitement roll through my entire body when I see it's a response from Saint.

Are you having writer's block again? More than happy to help. ;)

Holy shit. He even added a wink.

I wasn't expecting that. I wasn't even really expecting him to respond, but that reply proves that we're both on the same page after that kiss a couple of days ago.

Yeah, I guess you could say that. After you left the other night, I wrote several chapters. But today I'm stuck.

What's tripping you up?

I'm not sure I know how it feels to be the other woman. I have no idea how to describe things between Cam and Reya because I have no idea how often she would be thinking about his wife or the future of their relationship when they're together.

Are Cam and Reya in love?

Yes. Very much in love.

So you're wondering how two people who are in love would navigate a normal night together, when one of those characters is married?

Yes. Exactly that.

It sounds like you would need to experience that firsthand. Research can only go so far, I'm assuming.

Experience has definitely proven helpful in the recent past.

It would be rude of me not to help you. I can be there in an hour.

I would appreciate that.

I calmly set my phone back down on the table, but my reaction is anything but calm right now. I want to scream. This entire situation is insane. I can't even believe I've gotten myself involved with this guy, but again—*it's for research.*

That's all. Research.

How long can I keep telling myself that?

I only have one hour before he gets here. One hour to shower, dry my hair, brush my teeth, make my bed, and clean up two days' worth of complete laziness.

I spend the better part of the next hour worrying more about how I look than the state of the cabin. By the time I get the dishes finished, Saint is pulling into the driveway. I down the glass of wine I've been nursing for the past hour, and then I wait until I hear his knock before I head to the door.

He's back in uniform this time, but he's holding a change of clothes in his hands. I'm staring at the clothes when he says, "I didn't have time to run back to the station to change. Mind if I change here?"

I shake my head and point behind me. "Bathroom is through that door."

He doesn't even wait to be invited inside. He just grins that devilish grin and then steps forward, slipping a hand around my neck. His lips meet mine and I'm greeted with a kiss, as if this kind of greeting is perfectly familiar between us. He keeps his mouth on mine as he backs me up two steps, then he kicks the door shut behind him.

"I can only stay an hour," he says against my mouth.

I have no idea if he's in character right now. I'm starting to get confused. He just greeted me like Cam would greet Reya at this point in their relationship. Like a kiss is completely expected. That wasn't a greeting Saint

would give me under normal circumstances—I'm almost positive of that.

He sets his clothes on the counter and walks to my refrigerator and pulls out a bottle of wine. He takes the glass I was just drinking and fills it, then slides it across the island toward me. Then he pulls a glass out of the cabinet and fills it for himself.

“How was your day, Reya?” he asks, using the name of my character rather than my real name. I try to bite back my smile as I realize for certain that he is completely in character right now. I bring the glass to my mouth and grin.

“It was good,” I say. “How was yours, Cam?”

He walks over to me and he's so tall, I have to tilt my head back when he reaches me. He touches my chin with his finger. “I haven't stopped thinking about you,” he whispers, right before he brings his mouth down on mine.

Good God. My knees feel like they might buckle under this kiss. When he pulls away, he says, “I'll be right back.”

He heads for the bathroom to change clothes, and I can do nothing while I wait. I'm actually nervous for this. Does he expect me to pretend I'm in love with him? Is he going to pretend he's in love with me?

I have no idea what happens next, but I'm full of anticipation. Especially knowing he can only stay for an hour. He's only been here a few minutes and I already feel like I've got enough material to write several more chapters.

When he walks out of the bathroom, he lays his uniform and his gun on my table. I'm staring at it as he walks toward me. He wraps his arms around me and lifts me effortlessly until I'm seated on the island in front of him. He stands between my legs and slides his hands down my arms as he brings his mouth to my neck.

He's making me dizzy.

I close my eyes and lean my neck to the side when his lips meet my skin. I'm covered in chills and full of curiosity.

Is Saint always this way? This...*in control*?

Is this how he is with his wife?

I try to push that thought out of my mind because he's here right now. His mouth is on my neck right now. I focus on that.

I focus on how slowly his tongue slides against my skin.

I focus on his left hand, and how it's snaking around my thigh as he pulls my leg up around his waist.

"Tell me something," he whispers.

"Mhmm," I mutter.

"What kind of guy is Cam?"

I open my eyes, but Saint is still kissing my neck. If he's asking about Cam...does that mean he's kissing me as *Saint* right now?

God, I hope so.

"He's..." I sigh when Saint's tongue comes close to my ear. I can barely form a thought with the way he's making me feel. "He's good, but rough around the edges. He's controlling. Jealous. Has a temper."

Saint pulls back just enough so he can look me in the eyes. "He wouldn't hurt Reya, would he?"

"Never. He's madly in love with her. Tries his best to protect her."

"Tries?" he asks, his eyebrows furrowed. "Does that mean he doesn't always succeed?"

I shake my head. "Not always."

Saint rubs his thumb over my bottom lip while he stares at my mouth. I love how he looks at me. I want to get out my laptop and describe it right now. I'm afraid I won't remember the complete fullness I feel under his gaze if I wait to write it until after he's gone.

"Does anything bad happen to Reya in your book?"

"Yes," I whisper. I don't normally like to ruin the plots of my books, but I doubt Saint is going to read it.

"What happens to her?"

"A man breaks into her house in the middle of the night."

Saint's eyes narrow in concern. "Does he hurt Reya?"

"Almost," I admit. "He pulls her out of bed. Ties her up. She's terrified because she doesn't know what's going to happen."

"Does she know the man?"

"She doesn't know. It's too dark in her house for her to see his features."

“Why does he break into the house? Is it specifically for Reya?”

“No. Reya is a lawyer. She has evidence at her house that this character is trying to locate.”

Saint runs the backs of his fingers over my cheek as I speak. He seems so interested in my answers, it makes me wonder if he’s planning to act this scene out. *Is that why I’m telling him about it? Because part of me hopes he does?*

That would be taking things a little too far. I’m not so sure I’m willing to go that deep for research.

“What happens next?” he asks.

“The guy finds the papers. He leaves Reya tied up. But Cam shows up and finds her an hour later.”

Saint leans forward, feathering my lips with his. “This book sounds intriguing.”

“I’m hoping that’s exactly what it turns out to be.”

He grins, and then kisses me. And just like during our first kiss, his phone begins to vibrate. He doesn’t even flinch. He just kisses me even deeper, ignoring the incoming call.

With every vibration of his phone, he pulls me tighter against him as if he’s trying to drown out the noise with my touch.

“You should get that,” I whisper, pulling away.

We both know it’s his wife.

He reluctantly steps away from me and pulls his phone out of his pocket. He carries it to the front door and takes the call outside.

I watch him through the window. He’s gripping the back of his neck as he speaks to whoever is on the other end of that call.

I wonder what her name is. How long they’ve been together. Does he have children?

The call doesn’t last long.

He heads back toward the house, so I walk away from the window. When he’s back inside, his expression is regretful. He walks past me and scoops up his uniform. He doesn’t say a word. He just grips my face with one hand and kisses me, almost possessively.

Then he leaves.

I'm left speechless, standing alone in the kitchen.

I don't know what just happened, it occurred so fast.

Was that part of his act? I'm getting reality and fiction confused. Was he doing what he thought Cam would do in that situation?

Or did Saint really feel guilty enough after that phone call that he just left without a word?

I have no idea what was going through his head, so all I can do is focus on what's going through mine. I take my computer to the bedroom with me, full of new ideas and new feelings and new thoughts.

I write until I fall asleep.

FIVE

I FELL ASLEEP with my laptop on my chest. I can feel it when I try to roll over, so I push it away from me, to the other side of the bed.

I pull my pillow to my chest and try to fall back to sleep, but something feels off. The house is too quiet. *Too dark.*

I open my eyes and my focus is automatically pulled to the bedroom door. There's a shadow filling the doorway, and as soon as I see it, anxiety weighs down on my chest.

I have never been so terrified. I open my mouth, but it's like the nightmares where nothing comes out.

I immediately reach for my phone.

The figure lunges forward and I force out a scream as I quickly scramble to the other side of the bed.

I'm not quick enough.

A firm hand wraps around my ankle and pulls. I slide across the bed and lose my grip on my phone.

Tears fill my eyes.

My body is wracked with adrenaline like I've never felt before.

I try to recall everything I learned in self-defense class, but I don't have time to think before I'm being dragged off the bed. A hand wraps around my mouth to cover my screams.

Please be Saint. Please be Saint.

I don't know why I'm hoping Saint is the one doing this to me. Even if he took our little game too far by showing up here to scare me in the middle of the night—his actions would still be terrifying to me. And completely inexcusable.

I'm kicking my feet against the floor as he drags me, trying to get a grip on something so I can stand up. He's moving too fast and he's way too strong for me to pull away.

The house is so dark—darker than normal. I can tell the power has been cut as I'm dragged into the kitchen and can see that none of the appliance lights are illuminated. All the shades have been drawn.

Whoever is behind me removes their hand and I take the opportunity to try to figure out what's happening.

“Saint?” My voice is trembling as a sob rips through me. Two arms are wrapped around me now, holding my arms in place. “Saint, *please*.” I attempt to turn my head to look at him, but whoever is doing this to me pushes my face forward with force. His hand remains on my jaw as he brings his mouth to my ear.

“Don't. Fucking. Move.”

I'm placed down hard into a chair. I can't even tell if that was Saint's voice, which makes me even more terrified. I try to jump up out of the chair, but I'm not fast enough. Hands are around my wrists.

Tape is placed over my mouth.

My arms are pulled behind me, and not gently. A pain sears through my arm and shoulder. I cry out, but the tape muffles any noises I try to make as my hands are tied around the back of the chair.

The rope is digging into my wrists so hard, I can feel my skin burning.

I get a couple of good kicks in before he can secure my feet long enough to tie them to the chair. Tears spill out of my eyes the longer this goes on and the less control I have.

This is actually happening.

There's no way Saint would let this game go this far. I am in actual pain.

For the first time since waking up just minutes ago, I feel like my life is in danger.

My body grows still and I try to stop the tears, because whoever he is, he's no longer restraining me. I need to calm down so I can think of how to get out of this. The rope and the knots are enough restraint to render me useless. I'm tied so tight to the chair, I can't even move my hands or feet without the

rope digging into my skin.

I hear things crashing behind me. I don't know what he's doing. I hear drawers slamming and I pray he isn't looking for a knife.

After several minutes of trying to listen to the noises he's making so I can anticipate what move he's about to make next—the front door opens.

It doesn't close.

I can feel the outside breeze making its way into the house behind me.

I hear nothing but small gusts of wind and my own quiet hysterics for several minutes.

I squeeze my eyes shut and I pray. I haven't been to church in a long, long time, but I pray enough to make up for all the services I've missed. I pray that he's gone and that he isn't coming back. I pray that I'm able to free myself.

I pray that I'll survive this.

I pray for what seems like hours, but I'm sure has only been a fraction of an hour. I start to wiggle my wrists to see if there's any way I can free myself when I hear footsteps returning. My heart rate, which just recently started to calm down, immediately picks up again.

“Megan?”

I open my eyes at the sound of Saint's voice. There was concern in the way he said my name. I hear the front door swing open even further and Saint is immediately by my side. He sees that I'm tied up, so he rushes to a drawer for a knife. He comes back and rips through the rope, and just the sight of him here has me crying harder than I was when I was being dragged through the house.

There's no reason he would show up here at this time of night. None at all.

He did this.

When my hands are untied, Saint starts working on the rope around my feet. I tear the tape away from my mouth, and then I immediately slap my hands over my mouth and sob even harder.

“Megan, it's okay,” he says reassuringly. “I'm here. You're safe.” I feel the rope give from around my ankles. I start kicking at it to get it away from me.

Saint helps me stand up, but right when he goes to wrap me in his arms, I

push away from him. I push him hard. I don't want him to touch me.

I can't believe he thought I would be okay with this.

I rush to my bedroom and then slam the door to the bathroom once I'm inside. I flip the light switch, but the power doesn't come on.

He cut the power to the house.

I turn on the water to the shower, trying to calm down, but I feel like I might be having a panic attack. I take off my clothes and step into the shower, gasping for breath. I let the hot water beat down on me for a minute, hoping it will calm me, but it doesn't.

Then, when the lights miraculously turn back on, that doesn't calm me either. It just proves Saint is the one who turned them off in the first place.

Several seconds after the power comes back on, Saint knocks gently on the bathroom door.

"Get...out," I say between sobs. I try to sound angry, but my voice is nothing but scared right now.

I hear the bathroom door open and my legs begin to tremble.

"Megan," he says, his voice soothing. It does very little to ease the fear in me or the pain in my wrists. "Megan, I'm sorry. I thought—"

"You thought I wanted you to *attack* me?" I yell through my tears. "Are you out of your fucking *mind*?"

I hear him sigh heavily.

I squeeze my eyes shut. *Did I ask him to do this?*

No. I didn't.

All I did was tell him about the book. It wasn't an invitation to break into my fucking cabin.

But did he *assume* that's what it was? An invitation?

Did I confuse him?

I don't even know what to think.

I don't even know if I have the right to be angry at him for doing this. Did I subconsciously want this to happen?

I lean against the shower wall, completely confused and still crying.

Did I even lock my front door last night?

I didn't.

Right after Saint left, I took my laptop to my bedroom and wrote until I fell asleep.

In all the nights I've stayed in this cabin, I've never once not locked my doors.

My hands are covering my face when I hear the shower curtain pull back. I can't even look at him. I'm angry. Embarrassed. Still a little bit terrified.

"*God, Megan,*" he says, his voice full of remorse. "I am so sorry."

I keep my hands over my face because I'm still crying, but I'm shocked when I feel him step into the shower. I'm even more shocked when his arms wrap gently around me and I can feel that he's still wearing his clothes. He's standing in the water with me, getting soaking wet, but he's holding me against his chest.

As much as I want to punch him right now, I want to be held by him even more.

Maybe this was nothing more than a terrible miscommunication.

"Last night," he says, "I thought you were asking me to—"

I shake my head to interrupt him. "I know," I whisper. I remove my hands from my face and wrap them around him, pressing my cheek against his wet shirt. "I don't know if that's what I was asking you. What we've been doing—it's confusing. I barely know you, and then this..."

He presses a kiss against the top of my head, and then he just holds me quietly for several minutes.

After my tears have subsided, I finally pull away from his chest and look up at him. His eyes are full of remorse. He lifts a hand to my face and rubs his thumb under my eye, wiping away mascara that's been smeared from all the crying.

"I'm sorry," he says sincerely.

I nod. "Okay. Just...make sure I'm actually asking you to do something before you do it from now on."

"Okay. I promise." He cups my cheek and asks, "Do you want me to leave?"

I immediately shake my head. I know I was terrified of him a few minutes

ago, but it wasn't him, per se. It was the character he was playing. The scene I more or less asked him to act out. I can't fault him for that.

"Don't go," I say. "But can we just...I don't want to pretend tonight."

Saint nods, and then pulls me back to his chest. "Okay. Let's just be us."

After what just happened, that sentence shouldn't make me feel good, but it does. Those words send a warmth through me that I didn't expect he could make me feel again after that.

I just can't bring myself to be remain mad at him for something I inadvertently suggested he do.

The lights are on, and other than a few kisses, I'm not sure I've experienced enough with this man to feel comfortable being completely exposed to him. I have no idea how to get out of this shower without his eyes being fully on me.

It's as if he can read the situation with complete clarity. He lifts his eyes away from me and reaches out of the shower for a towel that's resting on a nearby hook. He wraps it around me and then kisses me gently before he steps out of the shower.

He takes off his soaking wet shirt and looks at me like he doesn't know what to do with it.

I step out of the shower and reach into the cabinet to grab him a towel. "I'll dry your clothes. A towel is the closest thing I have to something that'll fit you."

I slip out of the bathroom and wait for him to open the door and hand me his clothes. When he does, I take them to the laundry room and throw his clothes in the dryer.

In a way, I feel like I have the control right now. He can't leave before his clothes are dry, so at least I know he'll have to stay longer than he's stayed the last two times he's been here.

Saint is in the kitchen when I exit the laundry room, wearing the towel tied around his waist. He's setting a teapot on the stove. "Want some hot tea?" he asks, his back to me.

"I'd love some." I'm also still wearing nothing but a towel, but unlike Saint, I have things I can change into.

I slip into the robe I was wearing the night he first showed up here. I felt exposed in front of him then, but now that he's wearing nothing but a towel, I feel like putting on too much would make me feel overdressed.

I go to my bathroom and take a few minutes to regroup. I look in the mirror, and my hair is a frightening wet mess. I blow dry it and then pull it up into a knot on top of my head. When I go to put the blow dryer back in the drawer, I see my bottle of Xanax. I sigh with relief and open the bottle and swallow one.

When I walk out of the bedroom to rejoin Saint in the kitchen, he's pouring two cups of tea.

Saint without a shirt is exactly how I described Cam to look like in the book. Rippled muscles across his back; a narrow waist; tanned, smooth skin.

I'm going to need to go back and rewrite how I described his arms, though. Now that I know the astounding strength in them, I'm aware what I have written does not do them justice. I fought with everything I had earlier, and he reacted like I wasn't even trying. Knowing he would use that strength to protect me feels comforting.

Saint slides my cup of tea toward me. I take a sip and close my eyes because I'm finally feeling calm. The Xanax is kicking in and it's exactly what I needed after what happened.

When I open my eyes, Saint is watching me while he takes a slow sip of his tea.

I want to ask him so many questions, but part of me prefers the mystery that surrounds him. I know very little about him other than his name and his occupation. But if I ask too many questions, the answers might contradict all the ways I've built his character up in my mind.

Saint sets his tea on the counter and then takes my cup from my hands and does the same. He slides his hands down my back until both of his hands are gripping my ass, then he lifts me and sets me on the counter next to the stove.

He takes my hand and looks at my wrist, then lifts my other hand and does the same. He runs his thumbs back and forth over my wrists. They're red where the rope dug into them.

"Did I hurt you?"

I shake my head. "I'm fine."

He tilts his head, narrowing his eyes as if he doesn't believe me. "Be honest."

I shake my head. "I'm fine. I'll be fine."

My answer seems to convince him enough. I'm being honest. I might have bruises on my wrists and ankles tomorrow, but it's nothing serious. I've been bruised worse during sex before. It's not like he was intentionally trying to hurt me. He was just doing his best to follow through with the role-play I started.

At least I *think* I started it.

I'm not even sure who started this.

Either way, I don't want to stop. I want more of this—more of him. I have so many things I want to write now that he's here. And even though I absolutely do not want to repeat what happened earlier, I'm starting to appreciate that it happened. I feel like anything I write in the book will be absolutely accurate thanks to Saint.

I can see the heat behind his eyes when he looks at me, but I like that he's not pushing things. I'm sure he's leaving whatever happens next up to me.

I lift a hand and drag my thumb over his bottom lip, then I lean forward and kiss him. Even his kiss is hesitant. He lets me decide what direction I want this kiss to take, so I slip my tongue into his mouth.

He's standing between my legs now, and his towel leaves very little barrier between us, so I feel him harden almost instantly.

I wrap my legs around him and that's when he takes my control of the kiss away from me. He cradles my head with his hand and deepens the kiss, pulling me to the edge of the counter so that I'm mostly being held up by him.

I let my head fall back as he drags his mouth down my throat. I close my eyes, dizzy beneath his touch. I feel his fingers on the hem of my robe.

"Can I?" he whispers.

I lift my head and look at him, then nod quietly.

His eyes fall to my chest, and I then he unties my robe. I lift up a little as removes it and pulls it away. He tosses it over his shoulder, sucking in a small gasp of air as he looks at me, then runs his fingers down the center of

my chest.

I can't help but stare at his wedding ring as his hand moves to cup my breast.

Are my breasts prettier than his wife's?

Am *I* prettier than his wife?

He takes my nipple in his mouth and I fist my hand into his hair, pressing his lips against me even harder. He sucks at my breast without a trace of the gentleness he's been displaying since I got out of the shower.

The hungry side of him has taken over, and his mouth is suddenly all over me—on both breasts, then my neck, then back to my mouth. I can barely keep up with the parts of me he's focused so intently on before he moves on to another part of me.

He lifts me off the counter and holds me against him, one hand wrapped around my lower back and the other cupping my ass while his tongue is deep in my mouth.

I'm glad he's carrying me right now because I think I'm too dizzy to walk.

He drops me on the sofa, rips his towel away, and then lowers himself on top of me. It happens so fast, I don't get a good enough look at him to determine whether or not this is going to hurt.

I've never had that before—the kind of sex women have in the books I write. Every man I've ever been with has been of average size, so I've always had to imagine what it would be like to be fucked by a man who is so big, it actually hurts.

As soon as I wrap my legs around him, it's clear that I won't have to imagine it any longer. I can feel the intimidating length of him rubbing against my thigh.

When he repositions himself so that he can start to slide into me, I wince.

"Relax," he whispers, his mouth feathering mine. "You'll forget about the pain soon. I promise." The gentleness in his voice coupled with the reassuring look in his eyes makes me putty beneath him.

He begins to push the rest of himself into me, and I close my eyes, savoring every second of this. I pay attention to the pain, to the pleasure, to the noises we're both making. I imagine how I'm going to describe this when

I write it all down.

Painful, yet satiating.

Sensual, yet animalistic.

We find our rhythm almost instantly, and I stop thinking about how I'll describe this. All I can think about is how good this feels. Those thoughts are occasionally mixed with worry about the current state of my morals, but that worry is easy to pack away when Saint kisses me.

I could get used to this.

So used to this.

That thought terrifies me.

SIX

SAINT LEFT THE cabin at four in the morning.

Before he left, he fucked me again, on my bed.

I don't know where he told his wife he was last night—possibly working a night shift—but he said he'd be back again this afternoon.

Which is why I'm confused by the knock at my front door. There's no way it can be afternoon—I never sleep that late. But he's knocking loud and the sun is bright. I force my eyes open wide enough to look at my phone. It's a little after nine in the morning.

Why is he already back?

I toss the covers away from me and grab my nightgown. I shuffle to my bedroom door and open it, shielding my eyes from the brightness of the living room. I glance toward the window overlooking the front yard and immediately stop walking.

That's not Saint's car.

That's *Michael's* car.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

What is he doing here? Did he bring the girls?

I can't even believe this.

They *never* come here when I'm writing.

Just as I'm turning toward my bedroom to make sure nothing of Saint's was left behind, Chloe cups her little hands around her eyes and presses her face against the window. "Mommy!" she squeals. She backs away from the window, pointing inside at me. "Daddy, I see Mommy!"

Michael is looking through the window now. He waves at me. "Surprise!" he yells.

I walk as slow as I can get away with toward the door. I glance around me, hoping there's nothing here that would reveal to Michael that I've spent the past week pretending I'm not married.

What have I done?

Saint is supposed to come back today. I need to text him as soon as possible and let him know not to show up here.

My hands are shaking as I reach for the lock on the door. When I open it, Chloe and Andi push past their father and they both wrap their arms around me. I hug them back, because these weeks I spend at the cabin are honestly the toughest weeks of the year for me, being away from them. But it allows me to write my books much faster so I can spend more time with my girls when I'm at home.

I kneel down and pull them in for an even better hug. "We came to surprise you!" Andi says, jumping up and down.

I glance up at Michael and force a smile. "I see that."

He slips around us, just as I stand back up. He leans in for a kiss. "Sorry," he mutters. "They insisted I not tell you."

"It's fine," I say, hoping my reaction is convincing. "I needed the break."

Michael is holding two bags of groceries. He sets them on the counter and heads back to the front door. "We're going to cook dinner for you," he says. "I'll grab the rest of the groceries." He walks back outside and I pry the girls away from me.

"Mommy needs to change out of her nightgown," I say. "You two start putting away the groceries."

They're too young to know how to put away groceries. Andi is four and Chloe is five. Michael and I had them back to back, hoping it would be easier on us to go through the toughest years all at once.

Andi pulls a chair up to the counter because she's not as tall as Chloe. They start digging through the sacks. I glance out the kitchen window and watch as Michael reaches his trunk. I rush to the bedroom and grab my phone.

I open my texts to Saint. I shoot him off a quick text.

Whatever you do, please do not come back here today.

I toss my phone on my bed and slip out of my nightgown. I hear the buzz of his reply come through just as I'm pulling a shirt over my head. I grab my phone and read the text.

Is everything okay?

I don't want to lie to him. He's never asked me if I'm married, so there's really nothing for him to be upset about. Besides, he's married, too. He'll understand. He'll probably even be relieved.

My husband and kids just showed up.

I delete all my texts from him and finish getting dressed. I slide my phone in my back pocket so Michael won't be tempted to look at it. I walk out of the bedroom, just as Michael is walking into the kitchen with the rest of the groceries.

Chloe rushes over to me and holds her tiny hands beneath her chin.
"Mommy, can we get in the hot tub?"

"Please?" Andi begs.

I nod and look over at Michael. "We're getting in the hot tub. You want to join us?"

I'll do anything to pretend I'm a good wife and mother, and not the terrible human being I've been this past week.

SEVEN

MICHAEL IS STANDING at the stove cooking dinner. He sees the car before I do.

I'm seated at the table, putting together a puzzle with the girls.

I stiffen when I see it. A black, unmarked car. Very similar to what a detective's car would look like, I imagine.

The blood feels like it drains from my body when I see Saint step out of the vehicle.

What is he doing here?

I start to panic internally. I can feel blood rushing to my ears. Michael heads to the door and I want to scream at him to stop him from answering it, but my voice is stuck in my throat.

I slide Andi off my lap as soon as Michael says, "There's a police officer outside."

I walk to the door with Michael and glance out the window. Saint is walking slowly around Michael's car. I keep my distance from Michael because I'm scared he'll hear the thumping of my heart.

Michael opens the door and it's as if I can see my entire marriage crumbling around me.

Why else would Saint be here?

Michael steps out onto the porch. I remain frozen in the doorway.

Saint glances at Michael, then me. He's in full uniform right now. His jaw is hard, his expression zeroed in on me. "Sorry to bother you folks," Saint says, slowly bringing his gaze to Michael. Saint stops at the bottom step. "I'm just doing a standard patrol of the area and noticed you don't have a visitor tag."

Michael tilts his head. "Visitor tag?"

Saint nods. “All vehicles traveling in and out of the area now require a visitor tag.”

Michael laughs at the absurdity of needing a tag to be here, but I’m too scared to even fake a smile right now. I know Saint is lying. This area has never required a visitor tag. It’s a risky lie, because he has no idea how much Michael does or doesn’t know about the laws around here.

“I didn’t realize,” Michael says. He turns around and looks at me. “Did you know this?”

Saint is staring at me, hard.

I nod. Clear my throat. “Yeah. It’s a new law. I forgot to tell you.”

Michael tosses a hand toward me and looks back at Saint. “She forgot to tell me,” Michael says with a laugh, hoping to get a smile out of Saint. He gets nothing, because Saint is still staring at me.

“I’m only here for the night,” Michael says. “My car will be gone by eight tomorrow morning. Can we let it slide this time?”

Saint finally looks back at Michael. He gives him a tight nod. “I’ll be back in the morning to make sure the car’s gone,” Saint says, almost as if it’s a warning.

Michael looks at me like this guy is crazy.

He might be. I can’t tell.

Is this Saint just playing the jealous, possessive role of Cam right now? I have no idea.

Saint tips his hat toward me. “You two have a lovely night.” He grins ever so slightly when he says that. Then he walks back toward his car and gets inside.

I immediately walk back inside the cabin. I go straight for the wine. Michael returns to the stove and says, “That was weird. Wonder why they’re getting so strict around here?”

“I don’t know,” I mutter.

Michael walks over to me and wraps his arms around me. “I guess it’s a good thing with you being out here all alone.”

I force a tight smile. “Yeah. It’s...comforting.” I say that in my most convincing voice, but it isn’t comforting at all.

It's disturbing.

• • •

The rest of the night passes by without incident.

The girls are out by nine. Michael and I are together on the couch while he catches up on work—his laptop in front of him. I have the television on, but I can't pay attention to it. I'm drowning in too much guilt to pay attention to it.

I've never cheated on Michael before. I've never even had the urge. We have a good marriage, and I never thought I'd be the type to have an affair, but I also don't quite feel like I'm me when I'm here in this cabin alone. I sometimes get so immersed in my writing, I become the character I'm creating. Some call it method writing, and I suppose I can blame my actions on that, but it doesn't excuse them.

I cheated on my husband, and all I can do is hope to hell he never finds out.

Michael closes his laptop. He slides it off his lap and onto the couch beside him. I can feel him looking at me, but I pretend I'm watching whatever is on the television.

"I didn't expect this," he says.

I immediately turn to him. "Didn't expect what?"

"You aren't happy we're here."

"What? Of course I am."

He smiles knowingly. "You were in the groove. I can tell. It's like we sucked you out of a dream."

"Or a nightmare," I mutter.

He laughs. "You've always been way too hard on yourself, but it works out. Every time you come here, you leave with the bones of a brand new book."

He's right. But I also feel like he thinks this is a vacation for me. He doesn't truly realize the blood, sweat, and tears that go into every book I write. I don't fault him for that. No one can really understand how

emotionally draining it is unless they've written a book themselves.

I'm seated on the couch with my legs tucked beneath me. Michael grabs one of my ankles and pulls my leg until I'm lying down. He crawls on top of me, and I feel an insatiable amount of guilt knowing I had sex with another man on this very couch last night.

Michael kisses me, but I know the kiss won't last long. He'll take it to the bedroom before things get too heated. He's a bedroom kind of lover. I don't know that we've ever had spontaneous sex on a couch before.

"Let's go to bed," he says, predictably.

"Okay," I say. "I'll be right there. I have some emails I need to send first."

"Take your time. I need a shower, anyway." He pulls away from me and helps me up. I walk over to retrieve my laptop while he heads for the shower. I wait until I hear the water running, then I step outside and immediately dial Saint's number.

He answers on the third ring. "I figured I'd hear from you before you went to bed." There's a playfulness in his voice, and it pisses me off.

"What the fuck was that?" I snap.

"You're *married*," he snaps back, his voice devoid of humor now.

"So are you."

"I never lied about it," he says.

I glance in the window to make sure Michael is still in the bathroom. "I technically didn't lie about it either. You never asked."

There's a long pause. His voice is lower when he says, "Are you going to fuck him tonight?"

"He's my goddamn husband. What do you think?"

"So that's a no?" The playfulness is back in his voice, and I realize what he's doing. He's being exactly what I asked him to be. Controlling. Possessive. Jealous.

But I can also tell by his voice that he's smiling right now.

He isn't mad at all. This is part of the game to him.

Showing up at my house today was just him pushing the limits of my experience. He wanted me to know what it felt like to be scared my affair was about to be found out, but he had no desire for Michael to actually find out.

“You’re making me insane,” I whisper. “I didn’t expect you to take things this far.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

I think about that for a minute. I think about Michael. I think about what it would do to him if he found out what I’ve done. What I’m *doing*.

“Just say the word, Megan. You’ll never see me again if that’s what you need.”

A knot forms in my throat. “No,” I whisper. “I don’t want you to stop.”

“Good,” Saint says. “But if we’re going to continue this, then I need a favor from you.”

I close my eyes and whisper, “What do you need?”

“When your husband fucks you tonight, get on top and pretend you’re fucking me.”

The call ends after he says that.

I pull my phone from my ear and stare at it.

I can’t ignore the heat pooling in my stomach. Hearing him talk like that—just like Cam would talk to Reya—makes me want to go straight to my laptop and write another scene.

But it also makes me want to crawl in bed with Michael and do exactly what Saint said.

When I go back inside, I lock the doors and turn out the lights.

I’m crawling into bed at the same time Michael walks out of the bathroom. He tosses his phone on the nightstand and pulls back the covers. We don’t speak. Sex is something that’s quietly assumed between us. We always know when both of us are on the same page somehow.

Michael starts out kissing me. Touching me. Then he moves on top of me and inside of me. It’s predictable with us. I’ve always feared it was, but being with Saint has proved it.

I wait a couple of minutes before I roll Michael over and do what Saint told me to do. I straddle Michael, and he groans when I take him inside of me. He grips my thighs with his hands and I begin to move up and down. I lean my head back and close my eyes, imagining it isn’t Michael beneath me right now.

When Michael's hand finds its way between my legs and he begins to rub me, I pretend it's Saint's hand there.

I move with him, and just before I'm about to come, I open my eyes.

I immediately gasp and can feel all the color rush from my face.

Saint is standing outside our bedroom window.

The light from the full moon shines bright around him, and part of his shadow falls over Michael's face.

I'm so startled by his presence, I stop moving.

Michael assumes it's because he's about to make me come, so I do my best to convince him that's what has me reacting this way. The last thing I need is for Michael to lift his head and look behind him, out the window.

I keep my eyes trained on Saint, nervous he's about to do something. He's staring at me with a fierce intensity, and I can't tell if it's because he's turned on or angry or jealous.

Saint raises an eyebrow when he notices I've frozen in place—on top of my husband—unmoving. He grins a little, then lifts an intimidating brow, indicating I should resume what I was doing before I noticed him standing there.

My lips begin to quiver, but it's not because of how Michael is touching me. It's because I'm scared. And as fucked up as this is—I'm a little bit turned on by it all.

I start moving on top of Michael again—slowly.

Saint's gaze scrolls longingly over my body, and seeing that need in his eyes makes me move on top of Michael even faster.

I don't want Michael touching me, so I remove his hand from between my legs and I press it against my hip. When I come, I want it to be because of Saint's stare. Not because of Michael's hand.

I glance away from Saint and down at Michael. His eyes are closed, so I lock eyes with Saint again and slide my hand up my stomach, to my breast. Saint pulls his bottom lip in and bites it. That move sends a rush of heat through me, and it proves harder to keep my gaze locked on his. Michael is groaning beneath me, indicating he's about to finish, so I put my own hand between my legs so I can finish with him.

Almost immediately, I let out a scream because the feeling that slides over me is like nothing I've ever felt from Michael alone. I can't keep my eyes open a second longer. I continue to move on top of Michael with my hand between my legs, even after I know he's finished. My legs tremble as the sensation rolls through me. It lasts so long and it's so intense, I can't hold myself up any longer. I collapse on top of Michael in a whimper.

He slides his hands up my back and kisses my shoulder.

I roll onto my side and inconspicuously lift my head to look out the window.

Saint is gone.

I close my eyes and tuck my head against my husband's. I can feel tears attempting to form, and I'm not even sure why. I feel guilty, but not sad.

This is so fucked up.

That was probably the most fucked up thing I've ever done.

But what's worse is I would probably do it all over again if given the chance. It felt *that* good.

"You've been deprived," Michael says. "That was...mind-blowing."

I want to laugh at the word deprived, but I don't. I try to say something an innocent wife and mother would say in this moment. "I think I was too loud. I hope I didn't wake the girls."

"They're heavy sleepers." Michael kisses me and then I roll off of him.

He grabs a towel and wipes it between my legs.

That's something I've always appreciated about him—that he cleans me after sex. But last night when I was with Saint, he didn't clean me at all. We were sticky and messy and he seemed to like that. Surprisingly, I liked it, too.

Saint is everything Michael isn't, and that's both good and bad.

Michael climbs back into bed and rolls over. "Love you."

I roll away from him and hug my pillow. "I love you, too."

EIGHT

I STRAP THE girls into their car seats and kiss them both goodbye. “I’ll be home in one week,” I say.

“How long is a week?” Andi asks.

“It’s only thirty days,” Chloe says.

“Seven, actually,” I correct.

“No, it’s thirty,” Chloe says. “Sometimes thirty-one. My teacher said.”

I don’t bother fighting this battle. I just smile and say, “Okay. Thirty days.” Either way, they don’t really have a concept of how long a day is, or a week or a month.

I close their car door and Michael pulls me in for a goodbye hug. He kisses my cheek. “I’m glad we came,” he says. “Maybe last night was the inspiration you needed.”

He has no idea.

“I’m glad you came too,” I say. I give him a quick peck and watch as he gets in the car and backs it out of the driveway. I wave at the girls until I can no longer see their car.

When I’m certain they’re gone, I head back into the house to grab my phone. I need to call Saint. He’s all I’ve been able to think about since last night.

I don’t get far. As soon as I open the door front door to the cabin and walk inside, Saint is somehow standing right in front of me.

A shiver of terror slides over me.

How did he get inside?

How long has he been here?

Saint closes the front door and locks it, shoving me against it. He grips my jaw with a firm hand and then kisses me, hard.

I don't know what it is about this game we're playing that I love so much, but rather than push him away like I should, I moan and pull him to me.

I think it's the careless danger surrounding Saint's actions that draws me to him. He takes risks that Michael never would. He puts me in uncomfortable situations.

And he enjoys every second of it.

Saint pulls back and presses his forehead to mine. "Get in the shower and wash him off."

I find that command surprisingly insulting. "Fuck you."

He grabs my wrist and pulls me in the direction of my bedroom. "Not until you wash him off."

He gets me all the way to the bathroom door before I try to defend myself. Part of me wants to run from him, but most of me is curious where this will lead. I pull my wrist from his grasp. "You're insane."

He pulls me into the bathroom and then grips the back of my head. "And you fucking *love* it," he says, right before his mouth comes down on mine. He's unbuttoning my jeans while he kisses me. When he gets them unzipped, he tears his mouth from mine and kneels in front of me, removing my jeans and my panties, urging me to step out of them. Then he's pulling my shirt over my head.

He turns on the shower and looks at me expectantly. "Get in, Megan."

I love that he doesn't call me Reya in this moment. When he says my real name, it makes it seem like he really is jealous. I step into the shower, just as he starts to remove his own clothes.

I know he locked the front door, but Michael could come back. If he forgot something and came back...

My thoughts are broken when Saint steps into the shower with me. He grabs the shower head and pulls it off the holder. He places it between my legs, and I gasp because the water is still cold.

"What are you doing?"

He presses his mouth to my ear. "Washing him off your cunt so I can eat it."

His words make me physically shudder. I lean my head against the shower

wall and forget all about Michael.

NINE

THINGS HAVE BEEN relatively calm since Michael and the girls left. Saint has spent most of those nights with me but said he couldn't stay with me last night.

I didn't ask him why. I *know* why.

Saint works day shift as a detective, but he can be called in at any time. I assume that's how he can get away with not being with his wife some nights, because she believes he's out working calls.

I don't ask. Not because I'm not curious, but because I have no room to pry. He doesn't ask me about Michael and the girls, so I don't ask him about his wife.

When we're together, we're Cam and Reya.

Saint and I have spent several nights together in complete character. We pretend we're in love, and we make love. Then he leaves in the mornings and I spend the entire days writing.

He's good at this. So good, I'm dreading having to leave the day after tomorrow. I suppose I could extend my stay, but I'm not sure that's a good idea. When a person starts to form an addiction, it's easier to get over that addiction if they quit it cold turkey. That's what I plan to do with Saint. When I go home, I don't plan on interacting with him again. Ever.

I've gotten most of the book loosely written, anyway, so there's no need to stay. It's a shitty first draft, but they usually are. This book has guts, though. A soul. Maybe even a heartbeat. I can feel myself in this book, and it might be the first one I've ever written that I'm excited to release.

I write so much when Saint isn't here, I haven't even had time to answer Candice's calls. She's fine with it, though. We both have days when we don't want to be interrupted. Those are good days. It means we're being productive, so it's actually a positive thing when we don't answer each

other's calls.

I don't know if I'm going to tell her about Saint. She's my best friend, but sometimes even a best friend can't look past a betrayal that has nothing to do with them. She knows how much I love Michael, and if I could betray Michael like this, she'll wonder if I would be able to betray her in some equally terrible way.

I don't think I'll tell a single soul what I've done. I want what happened in this cabin to stay between me and Saint.

He's supposed to come over this afternoon—after his shift ends. I don't know if he'll be spending the night, but I hope he does. We only have two nights left to spend together and I selfishly want him here for both.

I'm cooking for him tonight. I just left the grocery store with all the ingredients I'll need to bake lasagna.

Michael hates lasagna. Maybe that's why I'm making it. I tend to dig for all the ways Saint and Michael are different.

I'm a few miles from the turn for the cabin when I pass a gas station. I've been wanting a local newspaper and should probably fill up on gas before my drive back to Sacramento.

I go inside the store before getting gas so I can check to see if they even sell newspapers here. I've been wanting to read about the incident that occurred the night Saint showed up to my cabin. I thought about adding it to my book. I tend to change a lot of scenes during the rewrite phase, and I'm tempted to rework the scene where Cam and Reya meet.

At this point, I think Saint might actually read this book. I'm sure he'd like it if I included some of what happened between us. Of course, I'd never admit any of the scenes were inspired by true events. That will be mine and Saint's secret.

I flip through the only choice of newspaper on the stand, but this town is so small, they only put out one paper a week. I can't find anything about the police chase that ended in a suicide. It's been two weeks since the guy shot himself near my cabin, and the new paper comes out tomorrow, but it should be in this one.

Maybe they didn't write about it. Or maybe I skimmed over it.

I take the newspaper to the counter and hand it to the clerk. He's a bald

man who looks to be in his fifties. His belly is so round, it's resting on the counter.

"What time does the new paper come out tomorrow?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Lennie delivers them, so there's no telling. Sometimes he gets here when I open up. Sometimes when I close." He says that like I should know who Lennie is. "Why? You gonna be in the paper or something?"

"No. Just looking for more information on the suicide from two weeks ago."

The man punches some buttons on the cash register. "That'll be one dollar and twenty-five cents." He looks at me and adds, "What suicide?"

I hand him five quarters. "I can't remember the guy's name. It was a police chase that ended in a suicide on my road."

"What road?"

"Hunter Trail."

The man chuckles. "If there was a police chase and a suicide on Hunter trail, I woulda heard about it."

The door to the store chimes and we both look to see another customer entering the store. The customer sees I'm about to leave, so he holds open the door. The clerk speaks to the man holding the door for me. "Louie, you heard of any police chase or suicide in the last couple weeks?"

I pause and stare at the man he just called Louie.

Louie looks from me to the clerk and laughs. "Not around these parts. We haven't had a self-inflicted death since 2014. Been even longer than that since we had a police chase."

I feel my insides begin to buzz with anxiety. I shake my head. "But... something happened on my road. In the middle of the night. A detective came to my door..."

Louie looks me up and down. "A *detective*? We don't have a detective, ma'am. You from Los Angeles or something? You a reporter?"

"No. I'm a writer...fiction. Not a reporter." I reach into my purse and pull out my phone. My fingers are trembling. I scroll quickly through my screen until I find my private folder. Two nights ago, I took a selfie of me and Saint and hid it in my phone. I wanted to remember what he looked like.

I hold the phone up to Louie and show him the picture of Saint. “Is this guy a police officer in this town?” I ask.

Louie takes the phone from me. He stares at Saint’s picture and then laughs. “Honey, we got two policemen who patrol this area, and both of them only *wish* they could look like this man.”

This can’t be right.

Louie looks at the clerk and waves me over to him. “Ask Bill. He’s the only gas station around, so the man has probably been here to the store for gas or what-not. Unless he drives a *Tesla*,” he mutters.

I walk back to the register and hold the phone for Bill, the clerk. “Do you know who this is?”

Bill shakes his head. “Don’t know him. But I’ve seen him. That’s a face that’s hard to forget. Tall guy. Drives a black car.”

I grasp on to that morsel of information. “Where did you see him? Here?”

Bill nods. “Yeah. He’s come in a couple times in the past week. I reckon he’s staying in one of the rentals because I’ve never seen him before last week.”

“Maybe he’s new to the area,” I say, trying to rationalize all of this. “Maybe he just started working here as a detective.”

Louie can sense I’m starting to panic. His eyebrows draw closer together and he steps forward, letting the door fall shut behind him. He folds his hands over his belly when he says, “Ma’am. I don’t know who this man is to you... but I can assure you he is *not* from around here. And he definitely don’t work around here. Me and Bill know everything about everyone in this town, unless they’re here on vacation in one of the cabins.”

I shake my head, refusing to believe Saint isn’t a detective in this town.

If he isn’t a detective, what is he?

Where did he come from?

How do these two not know who he is?

Why was the police chase not written about in the paper?

I feel like I might be sick from all the unanswered questions. I push open the door and rush outside. I can hear Louie calling after me, but I walk straight to my car. I don’t bother getting gas. I drive as fast as I can to the

cabin because I need to get there before Saint shows up.

I need my computer.

I need to figure out who he is before he figures out I know who he *isn't*.

• • •

When I searched the name Nathaniel Saint, I came up with nothing. A few dead ends, but no social media presence, no birth records or marriage licenses. At least not for a Nathaniel Saint younger than eighty years old.

He lied about his name. I know that much.

My leg is bouncing wildly under the table. I'm on edge, so I stand up and begin to pace. To focus.

If Nathaniel Saint isn't his name, how am I supposed to figure out what his real name is? I have nothing to go on. No information. I've never even asked him what his wife's name is.

The picture!

I have the selfie I took with him. Maybe I can do an image search on Google.

I sit back down to my laptop and email the image to myself. I open it up on my laptop, download it, then upload it to a Google image search.

Several images are returned to me. I begin to scroll through them, but none are of Saint. They're all men who vaguely resemble him. I keep scrolling and scrolling and then I see a picture that makes my heart drop.

It looks just like him.

Please be him.

I click on the picture and it takes me to a Facebook page. The page is private, but the name isn't. *Eric Kingston*. The only thing available to the public is profile pictures. I scroll through them and there's no doubt that this is Saint.

Saint is Eric Kingston.

Who is Eric Kingston?

I close my eyes and blow out a shaky breath.

I close out the private Facebook page and open up Google. I type in the new name and several hits come back.

I scroll through them until I find a link for Instagram. I click on it, but that page is private, too. *Fuck.*

I notice the display name on Instagram does list a middle name of Merrell. *Eric Merrell Kingston.*

My hands are shaking as I reach for my wallet. I take out my credit card and open up a background check website. I enter my payment information and the name Eric Merrell Kingston. I wait for the results to come back.

There are so many Eric Kingstons. I scroll through them, looking at all the Eric Kingstons that could possibly be a match. Only one of them has the middle name of Merrell. I click on it so hard, I'm afraid I just broke my trackpad.

I click on a link for his LinkedIn page and find Eric's résumé. I read through it, learning more about him in one minute than I've learned in two weeks.

Eric is a screenwriter. He's worked on several film projects—even ones I've heard of. Under interests, he states that he's a reader. The site hasn't been updated this year, but everything seems recent. Nothing on this page reveals he's a detective.

Maybe he's undercover?

Maybe he gave me a fake name because he's not allowed to give me his real one. And maybe there was nothing about the suicide and police chase in the paper because it's not something he wanted revealed to the public.

I realize I'm grasping at straws, here. But as long as there are straws to grasp, I'm going to hoard them.

I open up on the screen that lists a phone number for Eric Kingston. I compare the phone number to the number I have in my phone for Saint.

It's a perfect match.

I drop my phone and stand up, backing two steps away from my computer as if it's going to hurt me.

Why would he lie to me about who he is?

It makes no sense.

I scan the screen and see that his address is listed in Los Angeles. That's hours away from here. *Why would he pretend to live here?*

At this point, I don't care. I just want to leave.

I grab my phone and slip it into my pocket. I rush to my bedroom and pull my suitcase out from under the bed. I don't bother folding anything. I toss everything from the closet and the dresser into the suitcase, and then pile my toiletries on top of that.

The whole time I'm packing, I'm crying. Shaking. Praying. Trying not to think about everything I've done in the past two weeks.

How could I be so careless?

I pull my charger out of the wall, zip my suitcase, and grab my car keys off the dresser. I know I'm leaving half of my stuff lying out around the cabin, but I don't care. I need to get out of here.

I walk into the kitchen and scream.

Saint doesn't even turn around at the sound of my voice. He's standing at the table...staring down at my laptop screen.

I take a step back into my bedroom. I try to map out escape routes, but unless I can somehow climb out of the bedroom window before he reaches me, the only way out of this cabin is through the front and back doors.

And I'd have to pass Saint to get to either.

I bring my hands up to my mouth to stifle my cry. Saint reaches a hand out to my laptop and slowly shuts it.

When he begins to turn around to look at me, I take another step back. His eyes land on my suitcase first. He clenches his jaw. Shakes his head. "You're leaving?"

I bring my hand down to my stomach and clench my shirt. My whole body is shaking now. "You aren't a detective," I whisper.

He doesn't say anything. His eyes move from the suitcase to my face. He just stares at me, and I'm certain I'd much rather him be talking than quietly staring. It's terrifying—the way he's looking at me.

"Are you..." I swallow. "Are you going to hurt me?"

He shakes his head. "What? No." He answers me as if that's a ridiculous

question.

How could he possibly think my reaction right now is ridiculous? I have no idea who he is. *None.*

I slide my hand in my back pocket and pray I can unlock my phone without him knowing what I'm doing.

I take another step back. "Why did you lie to me?"

He takes a step forward. "It's what you wanted, Megan."

I can't help but grow angry at that answer. "It's what I *wanted*? I didn't even know you existed before you showed up here pretending to be a detective! Was anyone even shot that night? Was there even a police chase?"

He tilts his head a little, narrowing his eyes in my direction. "Do you not remember your words two nights before I showed up here?"

My words? What is he talking about?

"Your live video," he says, taking another step toward me. "You said you wished you could experience the things you write about. You said your character was a cop. I *brought* that to you."

This makes no sense. If he showed up here pretending to be a cop because of the live video...that means he knew who I was before he showed up here.

He was watching the video as it was live...two days before I even met him.

Which means he follows me online.

My hand is still in my back pocket, trying to figure out how to dial 9-1-1 on my phone without looking at it. I keep talking, hoping he won't focus too much on the arm behind my back.

"How long have you been watching my live videos?" I ask. My voice is a whisper.

He shrugs. "A while. A couple of years, maybe."

I cover my gasp with my hand, then I bring my hand to my chest. "Are you even married?"

He shakes his head. "Marriage isn't really my thing."

I see it the second it happens. He tilts his head as he drops his gaze to my arm. The arm I've been hiding behind my back.

I spin around and rush toward the bathroom, hoping to be able to lock

myself inside long enough to get the call made.

I don't make it.

He reaches me, just as I reach the bathroom door. He grabs my arm and yanks me back, then rips my cell phone out of my hand. He looks down at it and sees that I was trying to call the police.

"I haven't done anything wrong, Megan!" He tosses my phone angrily behind him, then pushes me toward the bed. I fall onto it, then crawl to the headboard, attempting to get as far from him as I can. "What would you even tell them when they showed up here? That I role-played too well?"

"You've been impersonating a cop!" I say through clenched teeth.

He throws a frustrated hand up in the air. "Oh, *come* on! You wanted this! Your online Q&As are like an open invitation into your life. You tell your readers where your writing retreat is, you let the whole world know when you're here alone. You even answered my question in your last video when I asked if you would be willing to do something like this. You said, and I quote, '*I would do anything.*'"

Oh, my God. *He's* the one who asked that question?

He thinks I was asking for this?

"That wasn't an invitation to show up here and lie to me."

"We've both been lying," he says. "You aren't innocent in this."

"You attacked me in the middle of the night!"

"You *asked* me to, Megan!"

I shake my head adamantly. He's not turning this around on me. I didn't ask for this. Just because I said I wanted experience in a live video does not mean that was an invitation for him to actually locate me and act out some sick fantasy of his.

"You pretended to be someone you're not."

"So did you," he says flatly.

"Stop saying that! It's different!"

"Is it?"

"I never lied to you, Saint! You knew who I was before you showed up here."

He grips the back of his neck as if he's frustrated. "You're fucking

married!” he yells, walking over to me. I scoot to the other side of the bed. “You’re a wife and a mother and none of your readers know that. You pretend to be someone you’re not every day of your life!”

I slide off the bed and put my feet on the floor. We’re on opposite sides of the bed now. “Can you blame me for trying to keep my life private? Look what happened with what little information I *did* put out there!”

He begins to walk around the bed, and I realize I have nowhere to go. The only thing behind me is a wall. I back all the way up to it until he’s directly in front of me. My heart is pounding so hard. My mouth is dry. He’s already proved I’m no match for him physically.

“We’re no different, Megan,” he says, his voice quieter now. He’s towering over me, making me feel completely helpless. “You needed inspiration. I gave that to you in more ways than you could have possibly contrived inside that head of yours.” He leans forward, bringing his mouth to my ear. “And you *loved* it. You’re welcome.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. I can tell he hasn’t backed up because I can feel his breath against my cheek. A tear falls out of my eye and slowly trickles down to my jawline. I flinch when he wipes it away with his finger.

I’m not convinced I’m safe, but I’m also not convinced he has plans to hurt me in any way. At least physically. But knowing he’s not actually married puts an entirely different spin on our situation. He has nothing to lose if our affair were to come to light.

I have *everything* to lose.

I swallow, and then lift my eyes to his. “Are you going to tell my husband?”

He looks offended when I ask that. “Do you really think I’d do that to you?”

“I have no idea what you’re capable of.”

He’s quiet for a moment—standing inches from me—his eyes scrolling my face. He focuses on my mouth and leans forward a little. He brings a hand up and touches my trembling bottom lip with his fingers, as if he’s longing to kiss me again. “I’m capable of a lot of things. But hurting you isn’t one of them.”

I’m trying to maintain control of my reactions. I don’t want him to see

how scared I am... but I also don't want him to see that a small sick part of me is devastated it's over.

“Do me a favor, Megan,” he says, his voice low. “When you finish this book, dedicate it to Saint, because he fucked that story out of you.”

I gasp when he says that, but not because I'm scared. I gasp because I shouldn't be feeling what I'm feeling right now. I shouldn't want him to touch me, to kiss me, to fuck me.

“I want to leave,” I whisper.

He's still staring at my mouth, grazing my lips with his finger. His eyes lock with mine, and he completely ignores my request by closing the small gap between us and kissing me. His tongue dives into my mouth and sweeps across mine, blending the heat of our mouths together. I don't want to kiss him back, but I'm afraid my mouth might betray me if I don't push him away from me.

As soon as I press my hands against his chest, he pulls away from me and takes a huge deliberate step back, leaving a gap between me and the bedroom door.

For a split second, I see something in his eyes I haven't seen before. It's like a flash of honest vulnerability—like he doesn't want me to leave. He's hoping I change my mind and stay.

He's fucking insane.

I don't waste a single second.

I immediately push off the wall, grabbing my phone, my suitcase, and then my laptop. I don't look behind me to see if he's about to stop me. I take everything straight out the front door and to my car. I toss the suitcase and the laptop in the backseat.

I open the front door, and after I climb inside my car, I lock all the doors. I start the car. I put it in reverse.

Only then do I dare look up.

Saint is leaning against the front door of the cabin, watching me leave. I keep my eyes locked on him as I back down the driveway. I want to make sure he isn't coming after me.

Right before I turn the wheel to back onto the road, he lifts a hand and

waves, as if our parting is just a casual goodbye and I'm not running for my life.

I slam on the gas and get the fuck away from that cabin as fast as I can. The farther I drive, the harder I cry.

I can't wrap my mind around what happened.

I don't even try to. I just think about Michael and my girls and about how much they mean to me and how my selfish actions could have put them in danger.

I'm not even sure they're safe from Saint, but I can only hope his twisted game is over. I can only pray he won't take it further in the future.

I scream when a shrieking sound tears me out of my thoughts.

It's just my phone.

It's just my phone.

I blow out a calming breath and look in the passenger seat. Michael's name is flashing across the screen.

I grab the phone and answer it, trying to keep the tears in my voice at bay. "Hey," I say, my voice choking between what feels like a whisper and a scream.

"You okay?" Michael asks.

"Yes. Yeah. I just—I'm not feeling well so I'm on my way home early."

"Oh. Okay, I'll tell the girls. They'll be happy, but I'm sorry you're sick. Want me to make you some soup?"

Another tear spills out of my eye when he asks that. *How could I have done something so terrible to a man who is so good to me?*

"Yeah. Soup would be nice. I'll be home in a couple hours."

"Be careful."

"Okay. I love you, Michael."

"I love you, too."

I hang up. When I come to a stop sign, I look behind me to check for cars. There are none, so I unlock my phone screen, pull up Saint's contact and block his number.

I hope to hell that will be the end of him.

EPILOGUE

“FINISHED,” MICHAEL SAYS, closing the book.

We’re both on the bed. I’ve been focusing on my laptop, pretending not to care how many pages he had left, but it’s all I’ve been able to think about.

Michael used to read my books before I even turned them in to the publisher, but after the fifth or sixth one, he realized he enjoyed reading them on release day even more. The first draft and the final product are always vastly different.

“And?” I ask nervously. If there’s one thing about Michael I admire, it’s his honesty. I’ve grown to appreciate it even more since leaving Saint standing in the doorway of that cabin all those months ago.

“It was...” Michael faces me, pausing his words as he tries to come up with the right ones. “It was fucking brilliant, Megan. By *far* your best book yet.”

I feel that compliment all the way to my soul. “Really?”

He leans forward and closes my laptop, then puts it on the table behind him. Then he’s moving toward me on the bed. He climbs on top of me and leans onto his elbow while he uses his other hand to push hair from my face. He kisses my forehead. “I don’t know what made this one different, but it felt...I don’t know. I can’t put it into words without insulting your other books. But it felt *authentic*.” He kisses me. “Kinda turned me on, honestly,” he says with a grin. Michael’s lips meet the spot just below my ear. He kisses me there, then whispers, “Who is Saint?”

I can feel my heart rate as it instantly goes from a gentle thump to a threatening pound. “Who?” I ask, the word barely sliding up my throat.

He lifts his head and looks down at me. I study his eyes for signs of betrayal or anger, but there’s only curiosity in them. “You dedicated the book to someone named Saint.”

I close my eyes, having momentarily forgotten about that. It's been six months since I turned in the book and even longer since I wrote the dedication.

I only followed through with Saint's final request because I was afraid of what he might do if I didn't. I didn't want to risk making him angry. Or worse...giving him a reason to show up here. I have no idea if he knows my actual address, but based on what little I know about him, I wouldn't put it past him.

"I don't know who Saint is," I say, hoping I sound convincing. "I held a contest for my readers. I chose someone at random to dedicate the book to."

I'm squeezing my eyes shut as I spit out yet another lie to Michael. He buys it, because he laughs and says, "That's cool. I bet it made that person's year."

I bet it did.

Michael's hand moves to my breast, so I part my thighs to give him what I know he wants. Within seconds, he's inside of me.

We have more sex now than we did before Saint came into my life. I think part of it has to do with the fact that I feel like I've betrayed Michael in so many ways, that making love to him is my Hail Mary. If I give Michael his favorite thing, maybe it'll erase some of the terrible things I've done.

But I also make love to Michael more often now because when he's inside me, I like to close my eyes and pretend I'm being fucked by Saint.

No matter how hard I try not to...I'm *always* thinking about Saint.

• • •

An hour later, Michael is next to me in bed, snoring lightly.

I've pulled my laptop back out and am going through all the reviews that were left today. I don't normally do this on release day, but this book is different. I need to read every review written about it because so much of this book was written from experience. Something I've never had before.

I can't help but wonder if Saint bought a copy when it hit shelves today.

Has he read it yet? Would he even leave a review?

Would he leave a hint in his review so that I would know it's him?

Just when I'm about to close my laptop and call it a night, I get an email notification. I click on it and as soon as I read the subject line, I feel that familiar heat sliding down my chest and into my stomach.

The email isn't from Saint. It's from the rental company I use to book the cabin. The cabin I swore I'd never return to.

The subject line reads *Reservation Confirmation*.

I'm confused, because I absolutely did not and *would* not make a reservation at that cabin again. I open the email, and it's their standard confirmation email. The cabin has been reserved in my name for fourteen days, starting next Friday.

It's marked as *prepaid*.

I'm staring at my screen in shock when another email comes through from an address I don't recognize.

I immediately open it, but the email is short. All it says is, "Time to start writing your next book, Megan."

THE END

ABOUT COLLEEN HOOVER

Colleen Hoover is the #1 New York Times bestselling author of over twenty novels and novellas. To read more of her work, visit her website at colleenhoover.com.